



THE PINK MARINE

Foreword by **Norman Lear**

GREG COPE WHITE

“A great story beautifully told—surprising, funny, courageous and inspiring.”

—David Hyde Pierce

“This is the story of how, through pure gumption, a most unlikely Marine candidate rises to the occasion to show his (rainbow flag of) true colors! This guy has lived a life! Greg’s hilarious and amazingly insightful re-telling is so much fun to read.”

—Jane Lynch

“Marine Corps boot camp was the toughest thing I ever did. I had to cope with being skinny, weak, and timid in a place that demanded strength, confidence, and fearlessness. But I didn’t have to cope with being gay or having to hide who I actually was. I don’t know that I could have survived the ordeal if I’d had to carry that secret along with my pack and rifle. Greg Cope White is well named, for he managed to endure more than most Marines, and he came out of it with a rich, enlightening, and affecting tale of endurance. The Pink Marine is a wonderful book and I’m proud to be Greg White’s fellow jarhead.”

—Jim Beaver, actor (Justified, Deadwood)/U.S. Marine

“For five years, on a television show called Covert Affairs, I had the privilege of pretending to be a member of the U.S. military. For six years, in the United States Marines, my friend Greg pretended to be straight. He wins. The Pink Marine will inspire you, make you laugh, and remind you of what’s important in this life.”

—Christopher Gorham, actor (Popular, Ugly Betty)

“If I were stuck on a deserted island, like in Blue Lagoon, the one book I’d take is The Pink Marine.”

—Christopher Atkins, actor (The Blue Lagoon)

“Greg Cope White takes on the universal tragedy of human isolation and the fear of exposure with such humor and grace that it becomes a triumphant comedy.”

—Dylan Brody, writer/comedian

“Author Greg Cope White nails it with this interesting and important memoir. Hysterical, witty yet serious, Greg, shares a very personal look into

the life of military service where you once were shunned for being gay. He comes through with this honest and funny book, one that all should read!”

—Randy Gardner, five-time U.S. figure skating champion

“Authentic, inspiring and lots of giggle moments! The Pink Marine is a page turner and should absolutely be made into a feature film, it’s that good!”

—Tai Babilonia, five-time U.S. figure skating champion

“Private Benjamin meets Full Metal Jacket. As fascinating as that description sounds, The Pink Marine goes way beyond that. A beautiful, frank, gripping, and funny memoir, Greg Cope White punches you in the gut one moment and makes you bust a gut in the next. Truly one of the most honest and harrowing depictions of boot camp I’ve ever read or seen in film. And the fact that White can make you laugh at it all makes this book a true original. Wow.”

—Sean Dwyer, writer/film producer (Jean of the Joneses, Zoe Gone)

“If you’re searching for the next great memoir, it’s arrived. Greg Cope White’s The Pink Marine is both funny and relentlessly honest. If we have any reason to celebrate the imposed silence of President Clinton’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, The Pink Marine is it. If Greg had talked back then, we wouldn’t have this book now. The Marines got a great soldier out of it. And we civilians got a great author.”

—Peter MacNichol, actor (Numb3rs, Ally McBeal)



The Pink Marine

One Boy's Journey Through Boot Camp to Manhood

Greg Cope White



AboutFace Books

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The Pink Marine is a work of nonfiction. The names of people in it have been changed in the interest of the privacy of individuals.

Printed in the United States of America.

First Edition: February 2016

978-0-9972857-1-0 (paperback)

978-0-9972857-2-7 (hardcover)

Distributed by Ingram/Lightning Source

978-0-9972857-0-3 (e-book)

www.thepinkmarine.com

To Dale for holding my hand. And Bob for holding my heart.

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Foreword

A reader could wonder how it happens that a ninety-three-year-old man is writing a foreword for a story about a young gay man who lied about his sexuality to enlist and serve for six years in the United States Marines. While I served in the military myself and have been a staunch supporter of LGBT rights, the U.S. Air Force was a social club compared to the United States Marines—and no man who didn't himself suffer "coming out" in the '70s can know what it felt like. And so I feel I have little license to understand as I would wish the tale I am introducing. I've taken this on because I've known Greg Cope White for some thirty years, relied on him for ten, and have admired him every minute throughout. That he could write as straightforward, intriguing, and honest a book as *The Pink Marine* is no surprise.

—Norman Lear

Author's Note

I wrote this book to chronicle the adventures I've enjoyed sharing with my friends over the years. At first glance, you may think me the inveterate bon vivant I am, or a well-dressed man with loads of style and a nerdy swagger who knows which fork to use, and not the man in camouflage who can command troops and hit a target five hundred yards away with an M16. I may not fit the military mold, but I don't know how to be anyone but myself—and being myself hasn't always been comfortable, or even safe.

When stories of people bullying LGBT youth started gaining attention in recent years, and some of those tortured people chose to end their own lives, I wished they'd had a moment of hope long enough to get past that hateful experience and survive. I wrote this book not just for me, but also for those struggling with acceptance of any difference they may have in the military and elsewhere. I wanted to show that if I can make it through boot camp, anyone can. If I can overcome my insecurities in a hostile environment, so can others.

I entered boot camp in 1979—fifteen years before “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” was put into law—feeling less masculine than everyone else and burdened by the secret of being gay. Midway through the thirteen weeks of boot camp, the struggle to survive and become a Marine trumped my fear of exposure (though it remained on my mind daily). I learned that everyone came in with some feeling of being different. I served with young men who had been pre-judged for the color of their skin, for their weight, for their poverty. The battle for acceptance is waged on many fronts. There were even guys who chose boot camp over jail.

The Marines taught me skills I carry with me every day. I learned that no matter how exhausted I felt, I could always take one more step, then another. And being gay can't limit me in any way. I wish everyone could hang on for a moment past any self-doubt. It does get better.

Prologue

All I heard was “summer” and “camp.”

My arm was numb from being tethered to the Slimline handset for an hour-long call with my best friend, Dale. We’d finished our freshman year of college and needed to catch up. I lay on the sofa twisting the phone cord as I brought him up to speed on my slow year at a junior college in Dallas. I lived there but met Dale in high school, when we both lived in New Orleans.

He then surprised me by saying, “I’m leaving the Academy.” It didn’t make sense; he had been named top cadet at the Air Force Academy. “I’m heading off to Marine Corps boot camp.”

This was big news and I begged for details. His eyesight was perfect before the Academy; however, it was downgraded by first-year stress. He told me his vision had gotten too bad for him to fly. He was joining the Marines instead, with no goal to fly jets for them. Dale usually won at everything. Just getting an appointment to the Academy was rare—cadets are personally chosen by Senators. One of the most attractive aspects Dale offered to me when we were getting to know each other was his room stuffed with hundreds of trophies and medals from years of winning. So far I’d never won anything. I looked at them in amazement, silently hoping to add a wining ability to my life that I lacked.

His father, a career Marine, wasn’t thrilled his son might be an Air Force “FLY BOY.” No matter how high an Air Force person soars, Marines knock them down with a bit of contempt. So Dale, loving the concept of military service but wanting to honor his father, would finish his service in the U.S.M.C. His entire summer—thirteen weeks—would be spent at Parris Island, South Carolina, in boot camp.

I sat up. I liked boots. I loved the idea of summer camp. My life was dull. I wasn’t raised in a military family, but my family moved so often, it was as if we were. My current lack of purpose matched my transitory past. I announced that I’d go with him.

Dale thought I was joking. I insisted I join him.

He always got a kick out of my enthusiasm, but he built a case against this idea.

“You’ve never run a mile.”

“You don’t know the first thing about the military.”

“They’ll eat you alive.”

The best argument of all went unspoken: You’re gay.

Dale was right. I knew nothing about the military. My life had not prepared me for any serious commitment, much less one that could end with physical injury, mental breakdown, or dishonorable discharge for homosexuality.

Maybe this is a great way for me to jumpstart a much-needed physical fitness program, I quipped to myself. Get an awesome tan, sharpen my archery skills, maybe end up with one of those hand-laced wallets. . . .

“If you can do it, I can do it,” I said. Humor had always come easily to me. But to be honest, I was going nowhere in Dallas, and slowly. I’d set no goals for my future and was going to junior college only because it took no effort. My head was full of dreams about living in New York City as a working actor and a writer, yet I’d not woken up enough to make them come true. In reality, I was eighteen, living at home with my mom and brothers.

Of course I didn’t know what enlisting meant, or what the commitment was; but I had total faith in Dale. It amazed me that he never looked at me as less than any of his other friends. I could actually tell that he appreciated me, especially my sense of humor. Maybe I was a fascinating opposite. But with little else in my life, a summer with Dale was the best plan I could imagine. I felt confident that he would stand by me in any event. I was flighty enough to jump into this abyss, but only with him. I’m impulsive, not insane.

It was a lot to ask, but who better to join with than the most winning person I knew?

In the pre-“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” era, could I keep my secret? Would I even survive?

1. Battle For The Bulge

“Unfit for recruit training.”

I tried to react stoically, like how a soldier would, at the doctor as he said what he also scribbled as his pronouncement in my chart. “I’m sorry. You’re fourteen pounds underweight.”

“But I’ve always been skinny,” I said. “It’s not a problem. My entire family’s thin.”

“If anything happened to you during training, son, they’d hold me responsible. I’d lose my license.”

Didn’t they need people? The Vietnam War had ended four years ago. The draft had ended a year before that. As the stream of recruits dried up, the military wasn’t just fishing for volunteers, it was breaking out the trawlers. Recruiters were dangling bait—signing bonuses and G.I. Bill contribution-matching for those saving for college. I got netted without even knowing of these incentives—I had signed my enlistment contract that morning. But here was the doctor, holding me up to the light, scrutinizing me to assess whether I was big enough to keep, then throwing me back.

They needed people I guessed. Just not me.

I walked back to the lobby, where Dale and our recruiting officer, Sergeant Jack Evans, were waiting. I tried to shrug casually but the expression on my face told them I had been rejected; I filled in the details, if not my pants.

“You gave it your best shot, kid,” I expected Evans to say. He would slug me on the shoulder and traipse off happily with the athletic Dale.

Instead, Evans gave me my first military order—unless you count the doctor, who had ordered me to drop my pants.

“Eat,” he commanded. “You have eight days before Dale ships out for Parris Island. Go home and eat, and we can re-weigh you the day he leaves. You can do it. Pack on the pounds.”

“But—” I said. He was already gone.

Earlier that day, I had met Evans in his drab, monochromatic recruitment office in New Orleans to formally enlist. When Dale and I walked in, Evans jumped up and strode across the room to meet us. Bolstered by the good

manners instilled in me by my mother, I extended my hand and said my first and last name as if he wanted to hear it.

He was the best-looking man I'd ever seen in person. The uniform helped: tight pants painted on his well-muscled legs, short sleeves practically bursting with biceps. He worked a gleaming smile from a square jaw; he looked as if he had hopped off one of the posters that lined the walls—I was meeting the model for The Few, the Proud, the Marines.

I didn't find out until much later that, as soon as I wasn't looking, Evans had cocked his head at Dale as if to ask, What the fuck is with this guy? You expect him to be a Marine?

Once we were all seated around a cheap melamine desk, I listened as Evans droned on about how impressive my time in his Corps would look on my future résumé. Writing a résumé seemed about as real to me as joining the Marines—which still hadn't sunk in, despite the fact that I was sitting in the recruitment office. Although Dale had suspected that I might be motivated less by abstract incentives and more by the concrete prospect of showering with bunches of naked men—and I was—he had warned me that, both here in the recruitment office and in actual boot camp, I would need to keep my shit together. And keep that shit to myself.

I kept it together and to myself as Evans outlined my options for enlistment. He referred to anything cool as his, as in “my Corps” and “my rifle.” I read the boastful slogans on the banners that were hanging in the office. I didn't look like the men on the posters, but maybe I would by the time boot camp was over.

I was afraid of what I looked like. It's no wonder I had always been thin. Family meals at my house were sporadic, chaotic. My mom was always either working or going to college, so every meal was tossed together with little care—or by little hands.

When I was four, I had no idea what caused breakfast. According to television it was a mom. And so I gaped as my six-year-old brother Brad stood in front of the stove. He was a dwarf orchestra conductor, reaching his arms up high to stir the scrambled eggs in a skillet he couldn't see.

It wasn't unusual for all of us to have to pitch in. With four sons, my mother imagined she had a little labor force. She made a chore wheel and hung it on the kitchen wall. Each week, our chores rotated. It was a good plan, in theory. In practice, my ten-year-old self had a hard time pushing a loaded grocery store cart around corners. I compared milk prices because I

saw women shopping do that, but in the end I just picked two gallons and added them to the cart already burdened with groceries for six.

When we were both thirteen, Dale and I met. I saw his family was different. Dale's family ran like a well-oiled machine. His dad was a retired Marine who flew a helicopter on drug busts for U.S. Customs. When he pounded into the house from a trip, we hid so as not to be splashed by any leftover discipline.

Dale's mom was Japanese, and met her U.S. Marine husband when he was stationed in Japan. She cooked dinner every night, but didn't sit with us. She stayed busy and worked in the kitchen, tossing over her shoulder, "Gleg, eat more. You too skinny. What your mama feed you, water?" as she stirred the rice.

I walked the half-mile to his house daily. We did our homework. We ran vocabulary words. Crony: "a close friend or companion." He tried to drill algebra into my head, but I broke the bit. We lay on the floor, listening to Richard Pryor and Cheech and Chong albums. We could recite our vocabulary words and Pryor's "Have you ever seen \$1.50 worth of cocaine?" routine perfectly.

We were best friends. I don't know why, but Dale accepted me. The last thing I was going to do was fuck with why. As close as we were, we were completely different. I was a gawky gay white boy whose only strength was my solid level of insecurity. He was a confident scholar and an outstanding athlete with a permanent tan.

Dale and I enlisted on the Buddy System. This program sounded safe, with best-friend support built in. We stayed together—guaranteed—as long as neither of us broke the law and both of us kept up with the challenges of boot camp. Since I was in college, I opted to commit to six years in the reserves. I didn't really understand it all, or even care—I just knew I couldn't let Dale out of my comfort zone, which was about a foot. First, Evans informed me, I'd attend the thirteen-week boot camp. Next, a six-week training course in a military occupational specialty: I chose one randomly from a list.

I'd picked my own middle name in much the same way. When I was four, my mother divorced my father and demanded that he relinquish all parental rights. When I was six, she went to court to transfer parental rights to her new husband. To complete the genealogical whitewash, she legally changed the paternal family names that my brother and I had been given at birth.

Once we were in front of the judge, she read us a list of replacement names she deemed acceptable; we had to pick one on the spot. I chose Christopher the same way I'd order from a restaurant menu.

Once you place that order, you're stuck with it.

After completing these training courses, I'd report one weekend a month to a base in Dallas, where I'd return to after training to resume college, plus spend two weeks at another base in the summer. Marine Corps Lite. It felt like something I would dabble in, like skiing or polo. My rash decision to enlist was actually typical for me. I'd moved so much as a kid that I felt like I never had both feet anywhere for very long. Before I ever got too comfortable in a town, my parents would announce we were moving. We weren't on the run from the law, but each time we moved, I wished the uprooting had been illegal.

I hopped from school to school like a checker across a board, but without the strategy. I was always the new guy. When I was six, my mother remarried. The first order of family business—after transferring parental rights to our new stepfather—was to yank me and my three brothers up from our Lubbock, Texas, roots and transplant us three hundred miles away to Fort Worth. There I went to first, second, and third grade.

The following spring, my parents discovered Mormonism. We floated up to Salt Lake City and stayed for my entire fourth grade. We then slid out to the Salt Lake City suburb of Holladay. For one semester.

I want to believe these decisions took weeks or months—but my parents delivered the news of each move as a sudden and jarring headline. Halfway through my fifth grade year, we packed up and moved back to Texas. This was the first time we pulled up stakes in the middle of a school year. I completed fifth grade, managed to stay at the same school for sixth, and then transitioned to middle school. I got comfortable. I joined the debate team and fell in love with acting classes. I was good at not being me.

My entire family put down roots this time, or as close as we got to that. My mother went back to college and finished her Bachelor's and Master's degrees. I got cocky, seeing all of seventh grade in the same school, and didn't anticipate the interruption that slammed into me in the middle of my eighth-grade year.

We were moving to New Orleans.

I screamed and cried, but I felt rarely listened to as a child. This time was no different. We settled into a suburb on the east bank of the Mississippi

River. I finished eighth grade.

I don't know why, but that summer we moved an entire mile to the west bank of the same river. At least I was situated somewhere before fall, when I would start high school—I wouldn't have to jump off a moving truck right into class. I liked to prepare for school like any normal kid—and most normal kids don't prepare by unpacking boxes, arranging furniture, or setting up utilities.

At my intimidating urban New Orleans high school, I noticed the same guy in three of my classes—algebra, English, and French. I was too shy to say hello. As I boarded the bus to return home, I saw that same boy on board. My balls dropped enough to give me the courage to sit next to him. I introduced myself. His name was Dale. He could relate to moving often. Their frequent moves as a military family seemed legit. Mine sounded sketchy.

We've been best friends since that day in 1974.

I was at that school one year before we moved again. Dale and I worked hard to stay close.

In the tenth grade, my schooling finally got crazy. We moved back across the Mississippi to mid-city New Orleans—but when I say we, I don't mean all six of us. My mother had finished her master's degree in New Orleans, and now she wanted a PhD. The best program was at Brigham Young University back in Utah. We were Mormons, so it made sense. Again, I wasn't in the meetings—perhaps there were charts and graphs with statistics to support the choices—but the plan was for her to take two boys with her and leave two behind in New Orleans with my stepfather.

I was one of the children not taken. A child not taken—that's difficult.

I spent the first six weeks of school that year in a holding pattern, attending the regular high school while I waited on a late decision to get into Ben Franklin High School. Students must pass a test to attend Franklin, a super-challenging scholastic program where you earn an extra grade point for each class—every class is AP. Earn a B at Franklin, and it transfers as an A anywhere else.

I made it into Franklin. I'd started schools in the middle of the year, but never in the middle of a semester. At Franklin I jumped into the deepest ocean with hungry sharks—I'm a good swimmer, but I faced a very strong current. As sophomores, my classmates were studying Faust. In German.

Meanwhile, back in Not Paradise, my parents filed for divorce. Long-distance. They had moved apart, figuratively and literally. Among the obvious contributing factors was the fact that my stepfather had a mistress. At winter break, I joined our mother and two brothers in Orem, Utah, where I finished the world's most interrupted tenth grade.

As odd as I find the Mormon sect, I made some terrific friends. Then, at year's end, it was decided that I would go back to live with my mother's ex-husband, who was still legally my father. For a fun twist, I didn't go back to my familiar New Orleans, but to Little Rock, Arkansas, where my stepfather now lived. The school seemed suitable enough. I'd built up an asbestos attitude. By now I could walk into a burning building, sit down, and open a book, then pass a test on whatever page I landed.

One day the principal summoned me to his office. He looked puzzled as he read my student file. He tilted his head to the side, trying to figure out something—maybe all of the transfers. He scratched his head and gave me shockingly great news.

That school, Ben Franklin, where I'd spent two-thirds of a semester, had yielded me enough credits, when placed against the current Arkansan scale, to make me eligible to graduate after finishing eleventh grade. At the end of the school year, I ran across the stage, snatched my diploma, and kept running in case they discovered it was a mistake.

I was sixteen.

After graduation, without help or advice or probably adequate postage, I applied to Harvard. And just Harvard. I didn't get in. I imagine the baffled admissions clerk opening my application and turning the page over and over, trying to make sense of the chicken-scratch-filled form.

My lackluster elementary educational experience didn't result in an uplifting movie montage of me plowing the fields all day, reading books in the barn by flashlight all night. I was not roused by a strict but good-hearted farmer's wife who sent me to school with a lunch pail. No mentor pushed me. There was no crescendo.

I had made nothing happen college-wise, so I headed to Dallas, where my mother had moved after finishing her doctoral work. I got a part-time job and enrolled in a local college. By the time I turned eighteen, I didn't feel connected to any one place or loyal to anyone. Except Dale. He remained the one constant in my life.

So when he called to share his news, my decision to meet him in New Orleans to join the Marine Corps wasn't difficult. I knew no one at home, belonged to nothing, but wanted desperately to belong to something. I sat at Sgt. Evans's desk, calmly looking him in the eyes.

Evans didn't mention the fundamental, all-important principle that would later be hammered into us at Parris Island: Marines are trained to fight and possibly die in war. I'm not a salesman, but even I know that "People will try to kill you" is not an effective closer. He stressed, "you'll train" and "you'll get in the best shape of your life"—you know, up things. That whole "you'll get blown to bits in battle" part waits until long after you've signed on the non-dotted line.

I couldn't possibly really be sent off to war. Surely our nation learned to work things out diplomatically. To me, the Vietnam War was a television show. When a battle being broadcast was interrupted by a ketchup commercial with a catchy jingle, it didn't feel real. The gory images I saw were terrible, but not terrorizing.

Evans pulled out the contract. Dale and I looked over at each other and smiled as Evans asked my full name, my parents' names, my general state of health, and if I was a homosexual.

"No."

I answered the last question with what I prayed was the same banal tone I had used when answering the question about my mother's maiden name. If I faltered, I hoped any pause would go unnoticed or be taken as discomfort at the notion of homosexuality. I'd breezed into this man's office thinking that I was doing him a favor and that he was going to be thrilled I had agreed to join his club.

He then took it further. "Have you practiced or supported homosexual activities?" he asked.

"No."

Actually, I had practiced in high school with Casey, the quarterback. I did support him in the shower once.

"Have you had homosexual thoughts?"

"No."

I was having one right then.

My mind raced, but I kept my eyes locked in front of me so they wouldn't dart around and be misperceived as gay delight, alerting Evans to my deception. If I didn't admit to being gay, was there any way that the

government could find out? My brief teenage sexual history flashed before my eyes, and although it's fun to take a drive down memory lane, this trip ended in a fiery crash. I hadn't been planning on having this discussion ever, and definitely not now, in this ambush. In 1979, out was not in.

"Do you condone homosexual behavior?"

"No."

Did he mean my homosexual behavior, or any such behavior in all of society? Was the Marine Corps asking me to condemn other people as well as myself? Every response from me was monotone, in case Evans was trained to detect changes in vocal inflection.

I lied on the paperwork and to Evans's face. I lied to America. I continued my spree as a baby-faced liar for the next six years for this employer, so I was technically not just a lawbreaker but a bad employee. I had to lie, and I had to keep lying; I wanted to serve in the Marine Corps. Granted, at this point I had no idea what I was doing, but I suddenly wanted to finish something for once in my life. What did I have to lose? Nothing. Because that's what I'd accomplished up to now. To have someone tell me I couldn't do something—when I was finally trying to do something—was inconceivable. So I lied with conviction I didn't yet understand. The immediate consequence of telling the truth at this point—not getting in to the Corps—was a real fear and a powerful motivator. Over time, the threat of jail I faced if I were found out—not to mention the threat of being beaten to a pulp by real live Marines who abhorred gay men as much as the Marine Corps enlistment contract did—scared me into acting straight.

Evans quickly extended his hand, and we shook. As nervous as I was about lying on the contract, I made sure he got a manly grip, with one—and only one—added shake from me.

Somehow during that enlistment process, Evans had gone from What the fuck? to Maybe he can make it. Perhaps he just wanted to meet his quota. I had no idea. He had told me to gain weight. If I wanted to join Dale at boot camp, that's what I would do.

Dale pledged to help me, to motivate me; together we would make it. I was not optimistic. When you have never been able to gain a single pound, fourteen sounds like forty. Dale had been on the high school wrestling team. During season, he often had to gain or lose five pounds in a few days to fit in a specific weight class. He assured me it could be done.

I was staying with Dale's family those days until (and if) I shipped out with him to boot camp. In Dale's kitchen, we ate all of the chips in one of those huge metal drums of Charles potato chips. We then filled the tin with Nutter Butters and Oreos, and nabbed the entire jar of peanut butter and all of the bread. I know Dale's mother wondered why her food was disappearing so fast. She had food in her pantry that was forbidden food in my family, like cola. I was raised Mormon. Caffeine products aren't merely banned, they're also scorned. I yanked the yolk of Mormonism off my neck when I was sixteen. So I'd met Coke, liked it, and agreed to continue our relationship. Plus I needed the caffeine to keep me awake so that I could eat more.

Dale and I packed that potato chip can until it was full of cookies, sandwiches, bananas, and cake—anything heavy, dense, and calorie-rich. I carried that tin around with me wherever we went. As we talked in the dark, late at night, you could hear the rustling of a Snicker's candy bar wrapper.

"You know this is some serious shit, right?" Dale asked me.

"I know." In fact, I didn't, but in the dark, Dale couldn't read that on my face.

"They aren't supposed to hit us, but they might. Training is hard. You ready for some pain?"

"I've had pain, remember?" I had once worn braces with full headgear, but between frequent family moves in high school, my need for a new orthodontist had been overlooked. After a while, my braces started to hurt. The pain became so excruciating that I snapped the braces off my teeth with pliers, chiseled off the cement with a screwdriver, and brushed my teeth with Comet to remove the residue, being super careful not to swallow any Comet—I'm not crazy.

I told Dale that story, then rolled over to go to sleep. "Point is, I was in pain, and I handled it."

Every morning we'd restock the food can. We drove around New Orleans, hanging out and visiting friends from our one year of high school together in the Crescent City. I rode shotgun with the huge tin in my lap. Every few minutes, Dale would insist that I eat. He'd stop at a light and challenge me to eat something before the light turned green. For every protest, Dale was ready. If I told him I was too full, he reminded me that my stomach would stretch. "No matter how fat a person becomes," he told me, "they never pop."

Dale became a doctor.

Dale's mother made dinner each night—heavy dishes, like pork chops and mashed potatoes. After dinner, I'd carry the bucket of snacks to the den as we watched Mork and Mindy and Happy Days. Commercial break—cue snack. Grabbing a handful of cookies became automatic. To this day, if I hear Henry Winkler's voice, I automatically reach for Cracker Barrel extra sharp cheddar cheese.

For eight days, I ate. I ate all the time. I woke up still stuffed from the day before but piled on breakfast. I breathed deep, as if I were making extra space, then shoved in more food. Up to this point, I'd only eaten when I was hungry, so to eat when I was full was not normal. It was actually difficult; but I pushed through it. Mind over matter. I felt fat. Or fatter.

The last morning was pretty somber. If I passed, we'd leave from the enlistment station immediately after my physical and fly to Parris Island. If I failed, I failed my mission of joining Dale on this adventure.

Both Dale's Marine father and Evans lowered their voices respectfully when telling me of Parris Island, as if they were in church, warning me of something evil. "The training you'll get carries over into civilian life," they'd say, right before quietly rasping out, "Parris Island changes you." No shit. I was already changing.

Dale and Evans accompanied me to the enlistment-processing center, where swarms of uniformed personnel buzzed through the hallways. A dozen different colors of tape striped the floor, marking paths to various areas of the building. I already knew to follow the yellow.

As I sat in the doctor's waiting room, I felt a wave of apprehension. Eight days ago, I'd sat right here without any suspicion that the appointment would go against me. I'd filled out forms, checking off boxes asking about prior illnesses. Some of the choices were exotic and rare, like polio, rheumatic fever, scoliosis, and bubonic plague. I felt a twinge of guilt when I checked only "sinus problems." I scribbled "hay fever" in the comments section. I could be honest—here, at least. I thought again and added "deviated septum repair," hoping that this wouldn't lead to further investigation. I could just imagine some committee debating over slide projector images of my pre- and post-surgery profiles.

I'd inherited a large nose from an ancestor. Sometime around 1840, a Native American woman named Ishopnarta had married into my Sons of the American Revolution family. She gave us mad trapping skills, peaceful

negotiating tactics, and a nose resembling the Teton Mountains. The skills were great, but the nose was too big. At seventeen, I returned mine and received a bonus cosmetic change. I could breathe better and suddenly felt better about my nose.

Once I was in the military examining room, the doctor instructed me to remove my shirt and trousers. I hesitated. On the outside, I looked small and weak. Inside, my confidence matched.

I folded my shirt over the chair, careful not to take too long or make the shirt look too neat.

“I hope you have a sense of humor,” I joked.

The doctor’s face remained stethoscope-cold. “And your trousers,” he reminded me.

I dropped my pants and my pride and stood there like a man. A man talking himself through the exam with a steady patter of interior monologue: *I know. My body isn’t impressive. It takes a strong man to expose a weak-looking physique, don’t you think? Welcome to my greatest vulnerability. I hate the genetics fairy for ruling I don’t get a hairy chest. Do you think it’s a medical condition? Go ahead, laugh. My friends call me “Cambodia Legs.”*

“Step on the scale,” said the doctor. He was old enough to appear fatherly, young enough to be sexy.

He sees hundreds of guys. I’m nothing special, I thought.

He jotted a note on my chart, checked the scale again, and made another note. He told me to dress as he moved to his desk.

Before I had my shirt buttoned, he’d stamped and closed my chart.

I knew I was painfully thin. My entire life was one stretched-out avoidance of gym class. My recurring nightmare had me in the shower next to some classmate with underarm hair and a huge pubic bush—which, ironically, would be fashionably hacked back in the manscaping decade.

When I got the “Cambodia Legs” nickname, I had to laugh as hard as everyone else, but being skinny was my Kryptonite. It was a visible manifestation that I was weak, feminine, and powerless over my body. Clothes were hard to find, and just seeing my naked body in the mirror was disappointing. I didn’t want to be built like me; I wanted to be big and strong and therefore—I thought—manly.

I also thought that my gayness might be accepted if I were a strapping specimen of a man.

That day, in the second weigh-in, my immediate future hinged on my being at least slightly more strapping.

My heart was racing. I stood in the exam room, the doctor opening my chart as I undressed. I stepped on the scale and watched the red needle swing back and forth over the 115 range, settling on 112.

The doctor said it as I thought it: “Three pounds short.”

He wouldn’t sign a waiver for the three pounds. I tried to argue, but he’d heard every story before. I didn’t want to throw a fit about it—what if my extended conversation made him realize other problems? “Hey, wait a minute,” he’d say, his accusing gaze cutting through the metallic dusty smell of the office’s dated, cheap furniture. “Aren’t you maybe a little bit light in the loafers?”

I dressed and once again followed the yellow tape to the lobby to deliver the bad news to Dale and Evans.

“Follow me,” Evans said as he walked out of the building. He drove us a few blocks to a hardware store. He walked straight to the plumbing aisle and grabbed a heavy industrial U joint—a section of metal pipe shaped like a giant piece of elbow macaroni—then made a beeline to the hammer aisle, where he snatched a sledgehammer off the wall. He put the pipe on the floor and hammered it until it was a relatively thin, flat U.

Evans picked up the pipe, winked at me as he replaced the hammer, and took off down the aisle. He ran his hand along the wall that displayed all of the different tapes. He grabbed the tan strapping tape, the kind with strings running through it for support. He laid the flattened pipe on the checkout counter with the tape, paid, and asked the cashier, “Where’s the head—I mean, restroom?”

I figured he needed to pee, but he took Dale and me in with him. He told me to lower my trousers and my underwear. Pulling my briefs down and exposing my young, unimpressive penis to one of the sexiest men I had ever seen sent it inching in the exact opposite direction it would have if the scene had the benefit of more time and better lighting. I stood still, staring past Evans. Evans didn’t speak. He just slapped the lead chunk against my pelvis. I flinched from the cold metal and wished I hadn’t.

I sent my eyes in Dale’s direction, and we telegraphed *This is crazy!* to each other as Evans held the lead pipe against my skin just above my penis. He tore off a length of tape with his other hand, then securely taped the pipe to my skin. For once in my life I was thankful not to be hairy. Mission

accomplished, Evans slapped me on the butt and we hurried back to the Naval station. I had just seen my first Marine in action.

We strode into the building and down the hall. Fuck the yellow tape, I thought as I tried to walk like I didn't have a lead weight taped to my crotch. We headed to the cafeteria, but only I ate. Dale, though he never complained, had gained eighteen pounds during my eating binge and was worried about going into training that heavy. He planned on becoming Honor Man—the top man in the entire platoon.

I ate a chicken-fried steak with gravy and drank a milkshake. The second I was finished, Evans yanked me up from the table and practically threw me straight into the doctor's office. This time, he went in with me.

I had been nervous before, but now I was terrified. I'd lied and was cheating to get into the Marines. A thumping heart and shaking legs made it harder to walk with the lead pipe taped to my pubic bone. Undressed, I was now a skinny kid with an amazingly large bulge in my tighty-whities. I thought I looked ridiculous. The scales settled on 114.5 pounds. All the frantic running around had shaken half a pound off me. My head jerked over to Evans.

The doctor looked at me, trying to use his medical mind to do military math and determine if I was up to training. Perhaps he was also guessing how I had gained the necessary weight in just an hour. I prayed that his eyes didn't linger on my telltale crotch. He closed his lips tight and started to write on his clipboard.

Evans eased the doctor away from the scales and me.

"It's half a pound. Come on, look at this kid. He wants in, and he's tougher than he looks. Better than some fatbody trying to get in, right?"

I held my arms away from my body a bit to appear wider, then smiled at the doctor like I was a pet-store puppy who desperately wanted to go home with him. He hastily signed my chart.

Dale knew as soon as I walked out of the office. He gave me a huge smile. There wasn't time to celebrate and, technically, nothing to celebrate—I'd done what was necessary to accomplish my goal.

Our last stop was an office decorated with a row of flags hanging from poles, arranged behind a wooden desk. I laid my hand on a Bible, and Evans swore Dale and me into the United States Marine Corps. I paid attention to the words and felt the severity of the pledge. I promised to uphold the Constitution and defend my country. I stared ahead, looking at

the large, framed photograph of President Carter that hung directly behind the desk. I didn't yet know that the President was also the Commander in Chief of the military. I hadn't yet been forced to march in the rain, repeating the chain of command as my boots sloshed in a muddy puddle.

Evans's hand flew up, met the edge of his face, and executed a perfect, crisp salute.

2. Getting There Is All The Fun

We left directly from the recruiting office to catch our flight to Savannah—but first, we were patted down. Dale had ripped the lead pipe off of me right after the weigh-in, leaving a raw stripe as a reminder of my enlistment ordeal. Now free of the three-pound weight that had rendered me fit for the U.S. military, I was confident that the only things concealed by my underwear were my original body parts.

“Someone will meet you at the airport.” That’s all Sgt. Evans told us. An escort from Savannah to South Carolina seemed normal and very civilized—a match for the relaxed pace of the South. Today, when I arrive at a resort, I love their offer of a cool welcome cocktail. As much as I wanted to be met cordially at the Savannah airport, I’d seen the Corps’ recruitment video. I was reasonably certain there would be no tropical libation waiting for me at Parris Island to ease me into this summer camp experience.

We landed at midnight in Savannah. Sgt. Evans had marked the trail to our deployment date with breadcrumbs of inside information: our late-night arrival was deliberate, designed to leave us tired, vulnerable, easily alienated from the civilian world. I had hung on his every word. But I didn’t feel tired when I got off the plane. I felt empty-handed. Let me explain.

When I had informed my mother of my decision to join the Marines, she didn’t want me to go. To her it seemed that I was doing something irresponsible, like running off to join the circus. However, since no one in our immediate family had served in the military, she didn’t have the facts to present a strong argument against the idea.

The more people told me that I couldn’t do it or wouldn’t like it, the more I wanted to go. At eighteen, I’d practically raised myself, and I’d gotten a few adult decisions under my belt. I hated that no one believed in me enough to realize that I knew what was best for me. Where was the respect? Their ill-informed protests made it sound like they thought I didn’t know what I was doing.

And of course, I didn’t.

I packed my bags with skill and organization, adding enough clothes so that I could carefully rotate outfits for the entire session. Thirteen weeks is a

long time. What if I saw the same people over and over? Plus they might have formal nights.

I delivered my goodbyes as casually as if I were leaving for regular summer camp. I didn't do any reading or research on the Marine Corps, even though I normally vetted the clubs I joined to determine whether they were a good fit. I'd not watched a John Wayne movie or played Army. Although I had a G.I. Joe action figure, I spent all my time with him violating his trust with illegal fantasies about the man they modeled him after.

Had I known the changes I'd go through, the experiences I was about to have, I would have dropped my suitcases, run to my room, and locked the door. I'd have stuffed my face in my pillow and cried, refusing to bid farewell to everything about my life that looked familiar.

I never "left" my family. Wherever I've been in the world, literally and metaphysically, they've been in my heart. My mother is an accomplished woman for whom I've always had immense respect. She raised four boys with little help. As a kid, I wasn't always able to allow my resentments to fade away immediately for actions I disagreed with. But there were awesome times. She took me to museums and taught me to use chopsticks when I was eight. We might have been eating canned Chun King Chinese food in Fort Worth, Texas, but I could go hand-to-hand with any kid from China.

As children, my three brothers and I pursued different interests, but none that any of us didn't understand. We were close, yet leaving my family to go to the Marines should have been perceived (by me and everyone) that I was successfully raised to be independent.

Plus I was looking forward to flying to New Orleans to stay with Dale's family after I signed up and waited about a week before we were to ship off to boot camp. I loved whenever I got the chance to stay with them. They were Dale, his mom, his dad, and his sister. They looked like the traditional families I loved to watch on television.

Dale and his mother had been at the New Orleans airport to meet my flight when I arrived for my recruitment appointment. As I mentioned, Dale's mother, Miyako, was born in Japan. Her accented English and malapropisms have entertained us for decades. She once asked Dale if I was foggy. He looked at her, trying to figure out how I could be a type of weather. She made her wrist go limp, repeating foggy.

“Ah, faggy! Yes, mom, he’s gay.”

They had patiently waited as suitcase after suitcase emerged onto the luggage carousel. As we wheeled the cart to their car, Dale’s mother looked at me, then at the luggage. She tossed her thumb toward me as she told Dale, in her heavily accented English, “He don’t know you can’t even bring your own toothbrush.” True. I did not know that. Now I did. And I felt lost without my five suitcases. Yes, five suitcases. Matching.

As soon as we stepped off the plane in Savannah, we saw a stern-looking older man holding a clipboard with our last names displayed on it. We waved to him, but he simply turned and started walking toward the door. We silently followed him to an olive-green school bus.

The night air felt even thicker in Savannah than it did in New Orleans. Our escort yanked a handle on the side of the bus to open the door, then climbed in and sat in the driver’s seat. We stepped on board, and I was surprised to see the bus already full of young men talking excitedly. All of the window seats were taken. Dale and I sat across the aisle from each other, assessing the scene. We’d been told in New Orleans that there was a bus ride to the base from the airport, but one of us thought it would be on a luxurious Greyhound with headrests and a bathroom. The other one of us would try to sleep.

While we were still in the city, the other boys were chatty, asking each other where they were from and if they were nervous. I was relieved no one spoke to me; I didn’t see a need to know any of them. I was quiet and meek. Always the new kid at school because of my family’s frequent moves, I felt like I was constantly on the outside of the inside joke. And I felt the joke was always at my expense.

In seventh grade, I tried to crash a party. One Friday, the hallways had been abuzz about a private teenage bash at someone’s house on Saturday night. But as I approached, lockers slammed all around me, shutting me out of the details and an invitation.

I got worked up about not being acceptable enough to get invited to the party that I figured everyone else was going to. The party was only about a mile away from my house. I decided to go. Uninvited. I fortified my resolve with a few stiff shots of Kool-Aid, and then dressed in a nice shirt and a spiffy pair of pants, I wrapped a silk handkerchief around my neck and borrowed a double-loop scarf ring from my mother’s jewelry box. I slid the ring up the ends of the scarf to tighten it closer to my neck. Instant ascot. If

I'd had any sense, I'd have noosed it all the way up till I blacked out. That would have kept me home.

The fact that there wasn't even a sidewalk on the street I had to walk along should have clued me in that I was on the wrong path. I knew I was chasing a bad idea as I walked in the street's gutter, as close to the curb as I could, stumbling against it almost every time a car zoomed by. I heard the party before I reached it. It sounded fun. I stopped in front of the host's house, then daringly strode right across the grass. There was a sign taped to the door: "Come on in, party in the back."

I walked through the house with the confidence of a first-time burglar. Once in the yard, I nodded hello at the other kids, all of whom I knew. I bobbed my head in what seemed like slo-mo to me. The conversations around me came to me distorted, as though I was underwater. And drowning. I reached for something to steady my nerves and grabbed up a can of Coke. At this age, I was still Mormon, and we weren't allowed caffeine, so this trivial action was a big "fuck you" to the church. Hopefully "rebel" me would be welcome in this place. I tried not to look uninvited and started wandering around.

At the far end of the patio, I walked in on a hot round of the game Seven Minutes in Heaven.

I had never kissed a girl before, or even been remotely interested in doing so. Of course, I had been exposed to the standard model of the boy-girl couple, both in real life and on television. In the 1960s, America had no openly gay role models on the small screen—or on the big screen, for that matter. On the TV show *Bewitched*, Darrin came home to Samantha, not Samuel. Hard as I wished I could twitch my nose and make magic, I knew that I had the same chance of succeeding at that as I had of Darrin marrying me when I grew up. The first Darrin.

I searched for indications from society that there were others that felt like I did. I picked up on the subtle hints that gay was bad—the sotto voce allusions to "confirmed bachelors" and men who were "fond of other men." I also heard the loud, manly yells declaiming fags and fairies. The very core of my being was condemned by society, by my classmates, by my church. When I walked into a new school, or a mall, or any room, for that matter, I didn't hold my head high. Why should I? Whatever I was, whatever I felt—was wrong to everyone else. I entered every room as less than everyone else. I hid my shame behind a wide-eyed smile. I didn't even want to be at

this party, close my eyes and kiss a girl, although I'd dreamed of being coupled up since I was a kid. My visions weren't clear, but I didn't imagine a woman by my side. I knew, impossible as it probably was, that my happily ever after involved another man.

Being raised Mormon that was a tough fantasy to realize. I also didn't believe the church was true, so I abandoned Mormonism as soon as I figured out that its foundation was shaky. I was ten.

Mormons believe everyone must fit in the same slot. Get married, have kids, tithe. I comprehended what all the fuss was about meeting the right girl. But I couldn't feel it. Marriage looked clear to me on paper but appeared blurry in my head. Mormons need to make more Mormons; therefore, they stress propagation. They figure the best way to ensure more believers is to create them.

At that party, in five minutes I found myself locked in a grey plastic Sears shed with Susan Sudderly. She was a cheerleader and on the debate team with me. I don't know if she wanted to go in the big plastic box with me, but she did. I pulled the door closed. Someone outside shut it harder, as if we were being jailed. I heard giggling. It was dark. I smelled potting soil and gasoline. Susan tripped. I caught her. That led me to lean in and kiss her.

My first kiss.

I don't have a sister, and if I had, there would have been little likelihood of us making out. But that's what kissing Susan was. I moved my head around some. Hers moved too, but in different directions. Her hair smelled good. I pulled away only the tiniest bit. "Do you shampoo with Gee Your Hair Smells Terrific?" I asked. She kept kissing. Her tongue hit my lips. I was horrified that my mouth wasn't already open. In two seconds we were Frenching. In ten more she pushed me back. I thought I was doing great, but I guess she figured me out.

The door swung open and I watched her walk past the group. It hadn't been seven minutes. Heaven flipped to hell. I ducked my head on the way out of the shed, even though it wasn't necessary. I kept my eyes straight ahead. I knew what everyone was thinking. I took my time retracing my steps through the living room and out the front door.

I stepped right in the gutter, on purpose. With every step I was reminded how stupid the idea of going to the party was. I pulled the ascot off and

threw it away in someone's trashcan. Not the scarf ring; I couldn't handle trying to explain that loss. I just wanted to get home.

Riding in the bus that first night in Savannah, I just wanted to get to the camp. As the bus rumbled away from the airport, the city lights grew sparse.

One of the boys had a freshly shaved head and boasted that he'd shaved it himself so he would "get the jump on those DIs."

Great. I just got on the bus and I'm already a step behind, I thought. Yea! The bus was cramped, but Shaved-Head sat with his arms crossed and his shoulders tilted toward the window, as if he didn't want to soil himself by socializing with us. His bald head was a reminder that I was on my way to military training. And his head was ugly. I ran my fingers through my hair, trying to determine the shape of my skull.

A boy with the roundest head and thickest beard I'd ever seen on a teenager swatted the bald guy on the shoulder. "You asshole, the DIs are gonna freak out when they see you shaved your own head. What's your name? I'm steering clear of you."

Shaved Head's eyes narrowed when he answered, "Webster."

"Well, Webster," the scruffy Charlie Brown chuckled, "you just did their job. They're gonna fucking love you."

Webster turned away and looked out the window. None of us knew what we were going to encounter, but I bet Webster shouldn't have done advance work. I already didn't like Webster and I'd not actually met him.

A black hand, originating from the seat behind me, materialized between my seatmate and me. It thumped my seatmate on the head.

"You a fat motherfucker. Hope you don't be running in front of me. I'll roll over your fat ass."

The voice was high-pitched. I knew better than to react or turn around.

The whole bus laughed. In my mind, I inched away from my seatmate as if the bullying was catching. I felt bad for him, but in that I'm-glad-not-to-be-you way. I'd been a target for body slander before, too. I stuck out my hand like I was the consolation committee.

"I'm Greg."

We shook hands.

"Bowman."

He was overweight; I was underweight. I figured introducing myself would tell him that I knew how he felt about being different.

I didn't need to look around the bus to check out the other guys—I could feel them. Many of the boys scrabbled around the bus freely, in a teeming familiarity that made me more uncomfortable. It reminded me of what it was like to start a new school in the middle of the year. I had no idea how many recruit busses were scheduled to land at Parris Island, but I figured a lot. With all those other busloads of boys, I probably wouldn't see them again after this ride. I was glad.

One guy stood out because he wore a plaid wool jacket. In June. In Savannah. His New York accent slipped out and justified the coat; perhaps it was still cold when he left home. He sat in the front row, bouncing like a cocky teacher's pet. He kept turning around to spout off geeky military info. Eventually he just kneeled on the seat, facing backward. I realized he was shockingly short, maybe five feet tall.

"You know, the M16 was invented by a Russian. We stole it. Their AR-15 is a copy and doesn't have the same accuracy. I've shot one."

Great, I thought, this guy's showing up prepared, too. Dale shot me a look that let me know the guy was an idiot. I sat back in my seat a bit, relaxed only by the thought that I wouldn't see these jokers again once this bus ride ended.

The talking dimmed as the lights of the city faded behind us. The freeway became a highway and then just a road—and not a good road. Eventually it got so narrow that the bus grazed a few straggly roadside trees, sending a branch whipping in the window to slap some of the boys.

We turned off onto a long cement driveway. Bright floodlights illuminated the bus as if it were being interrogated. High chain-link fences flanked a lowered guardrail. The bus eased to a stop. A soldier with a rifle stepped out of a booth and spoke to the driver.

I had seen soldiers on television, but not often in real life—and never carrying a rifle. It looked to me like a machine gun. My first reaction was to freeze.

It seemed odd to me that we'd be entering an area that was on American soil, yet under guard. I shot a quick look over to Dale, expecting reassurance, but he was looking outside too. The guard silently circled the outside of the bus, staring in the windows with a face completely void of expression. His eyes passed over me without any curiosity. After completing his circuit, he walked at the same deliberate pace to his booth and raised the guardrail. We slowly drove past.

Peering out of the bus, we must have looked like baby mice searching the sky for hawks. The bus engine made the only noise on base as it rolled past countless rows of identical rectangular buildings. It was about 3:00 A.M., and I couldn't tell if the base was asleep or deserted.

With a soft, drawn-out squeal, the bus stopped in front of three uniformed men standing dead still in the middle of the road, their arms behind their backs. The look they lasered at the bus could have stopped it if the brakes had failed. On board, you could have heard a zit pop. The three men broke formation and disappeared from sight.

Suddenly the door flew open and those men stormed onto the bus.

"Get off of the bus! Get off my motherfucking bus! Get off this goddamn bus, you faggots, and find a pair of yellow footprints and stand on 'em!"

The other boys, including Dale, scrambled into the aisle to escape, as if the bus were about to blow up. It was chaos. The uniformed men were stalking up and down the middle of the bus, pinballing into all the other boys with the same noise and flash as a game on full tilt. Bowman pushed past me on our seat and shoved me out of his way so he could join in the mass exit. I kept my seat. I wasn't used to being talked to like this, especially at such volume. Plus, there was no need to join the exodus immediately; we couldn't all get out at the same time.

"Get off the motherfucking bus, retards! Find a pair of footprints—they're on the fucking ground next to your balls!" Heretofore, the only uniformed Marine I had dealt with was Sgt. Evans—kind, handsome, and what I figured was typical. He had been so cool and nice, and now these guys were screaming at me and terrorizing this entire busload of seemingly harmless boys. In just a few seconds, these Marines revealed Evans as a slick salesman who had created an impression of "normal" that in no way matched the current situation. This was not—could not be—normal. If I could have, I would have crossed my arms and blinked, Jeannie style, to magic him there; he could explain to these tough jerks that I was a good guy and wasn't going to respond to being addressed in this hysterical manner.

As the last few boys made it off, one Marine came charging back and stopped at my seat. His contorted face wormed down near mine.

"Why the fuck are you sitting here?! What the fuck is wrong with you that you think you don't have to get off this goddamn bus?!"

In my head I responded, *Because I don't care for the way you are talking to me.*

I felt his mouth on my ear.

“Get off this motherfucking bus!”

I jumped up and scrambled past him and off the bus at the speed normally reserved for cartoon characters fleeing a nest of angry bees. There were yellow footprints painted on the asphalt, and each of the other boys had placed his feet on a set as precisely as he could.

“I got an asshole that wants to stay on the fucking bus,” he said to one of the men.

He was obviously talking about me. I shrugged as I passed Dale, who had found some footprints and was standing on them, frozen. Dale shot me a wide-eyed What the hell are you thinking?

I searched for yellow prints next to Dale, but they were occupied. So was the next pair. And the next pair. I took the closest pair I could find, remembering what Evans had promised about the buddy system: “As long as you don’t fuck up, you will stay together.” But Evans was a goddamned liar. Were Dale and I about to be separated?

I had never seen a single Hollywood depiction of boot camp. Full Metal Jacket and Private Benjamin were yet to be filmed. Army movies to me meant that Abbott and Costello messed up a mission and the Andrews Sisters sang it all better. I realized I was about to meet challenges I had not yet been exposed to—but I was still expecting something fun.

These guys were not very welcoming; I was to be their guest, and they had just shouted me off of a bus—a bus that I already wasn’t thrilled to be riding. They had yelled at me and lumped me into a mass of strange boys in the middle of the night. This was not at all what I had envisioned.

No one—I mean no one—had said anything that led me to expect that I was going to be met rudely. While I wasn’t naïve enough to think I’d be greeted with a gift basket and a map to the base’s spa area, I do believe in good first impressions. And I was scared. The fear of getting beaten up is on every gay (and not gay) kid’s mind. Now a possible baseless assault was right in my face. Terror ran up my back as I felt the air from their voices hit my neck and whoosh past to hit another recruit. The hostile running around and yelling made it difficult to think anything except What have I done?

That remained the foremost question in my mind for the next thirteen weeks. What had I done?

All of us were standing on the yellow footprints, but the Marines kept screaming and weaving through us like grim reapers desperately seeking

their next victim. One of them stopped at a boy next to me and yelled at him that he was an idiot pussy. My brain twisted trying to make literal sense of that phrase. Panic prevented me from thinking clearly.

“What big-ass piece of shit have they sent my Marine Corps?”

Even if their questions weren’t rhetorical, we were all frozen with fear and unable to speak or move.

One of them had a clipboard and commanded, “When I call your name, say ‘Here, sir.’ Anderson!”

He waited exactly one nanosecond for a response before barking out, “I said fucking Anderson! Are you that stupid that you are going to fuck this shit up? If I gave a shit I would shove you all back on that goddamn bus. ANDERSON!”

Thankfully, someone said, “Here, sir!”

The Marine continued to call out names, struggling to pronounce some. Instead of querying the pronunciation like a kindly grade-school teacher, he would slam his clipboard against his thigh and exclaim, “What the hell kind of name is that? Who the fuck’s father passed down some shit like this? They better not have sent me any fucking Polacks. I hate those fucking dumbasses!”

I’d heard and told Polack jokes, but even I knew better than to actually call a Polish person a Polack right to his face.

The other two Marines continued to scrutinize us during the roll call. If someone accidentally let his foot stray from a yellow print, one of Marines spied it out of the corner of his eye, swooped over, and screamed until the recruit’s feet were exactly back in place. The schoolbus-yellow footprints were painted on the bumpy asphalt from a stencil, pointed out at a 45-degree angle. We all stood there like modern-day Charlie Chaplins. I kept those observations to myself and shouted a simple “Here, sir!” when I heard my name.

We were ordered to peel off row by row and march into a building about twenty feet away. We’d only just been dismissed when one of the Marines yelled a ridiculous, “Taking too fucking long, you stupid recruits!”

Although I’d been miffed at the ill treatment, not for a second did I consider explaining to them that we weren’t taking too long—that they were rude and probably much less smart than many of us. In this brief time these men had made me afraid. I may not have known where I was or what I was doing, but I was scared enough to keep my mouth shut. I had no panic

skills. I'd watched Prissy lose her shit when Atlanta was burning in Gone with the Wind, after she had talked tough. So here I was running around, trying to act—well, like I wasn't prissy. These men in charge of us were a war all by themselves, the bullies I'd avoided my entire life. I couldn't see Dale, I felt unprotected and I knew it was too late to ask to go home. I felt I was in danger. I had been looking through rose-colored glasses, and things were about to get very green.

“Move it, recruits!”

Ah, I was a recruit. I had just gotten lumped in with those guys I had paid no attention to on the bus. Now my shoulders knocked into theirs as we were herded into the building. Normally I would have politely waited until there was a little space in front of me before proceeding, perhaps with a friendly nod or smile to the stranger as we both attempted to get through the same door. Instead, I bounced around like a bubble in a shaken soda bottle. Judging from the way we all exploded through the doorway, everyone else felt pretty shaken, too. I hardly looked at the other boys; I just glued myself to Dale.

“Get inside my goddamn building, you fucking idiots!” The Marines believed just as much as I did in good first impressions. They just quibbled over the definition of good.

3. Off The Top Of My Head

We spilled directly from the dark night into a large, brightly lit classroom. The human current swept me down one of several long, orderly rows of desks. In the surge of bodies, I managed to stick to Dale and scoot into a desk behind him. As we all settled, the Marines who had welcomed us so graciously paced at the front of the room, flanking a table where another man was seated, reviewing papers. He seemed more authoritative—perhaps because he was still. The Marines barked at us that we were in the receiving area and being processed onto the base.

“Take your sweet-ass time, you bunch of Raggedy-ass Anns. When we’re finished, you get released to your drill instructors,” yelled one.

“Motherfuckers want to stroll into my Marine Corps? That’ll fucking change when you meet your DIs!” shouted the other.

I’d never seen so many rowdy, cocky boys cowed so quickly. One minute, everyone had been joking, bragging; the next, these Marines came in and drained the swagger out of each and every one of us. They hadn’t just simmered us down; they’d clamped a heavy lid on every bubbling spirit in less than thirty seconds.

I was happy for the support I got just from looking at the back of Dale’s familiar head. He might not have been to Marine boot camp before, but he had been to the Air Force Academy. If he had any advantage over me and could help me out, I was counting on it.

The Marines patrolling the aisles to make sure we didn’t talk or fidget reminded me of hungry sharks—always moving, never resting, the look of death in their cold eyes. After the rush off the bus and into this room, I expected the hectic pace to continue. We just sat there for an hour. No plan was shared, no speech given. The seated man opened and closed files. The predatory patrol continued to demean and berate us as if we’d done something wrong.

“Quit eyeballing me, recruit. Don’t fucking breathe.”

Even though this wasn’t directed at me, I tried to take only a discreet sip of air.

“I heard that—one of you jackoff faggots took a goddamn breath!”

Maybe this was training in case we were captured by an enemy. After thirteen weeks of this, the meanest person in my civilian life would seem like a kitten.

“On your feet, recruits!”

A Parris Island Marine’s command could compel you from a coma. We all jumped, hitting our knees against our desks and bumping into each other in the aisles.

The Marines ordered us into a single-file line and out of a second doorway and down a hall, where we waited with our right shoulders pressed against the wall. I wanted to peek out and ahead of the line, but the Marines in charge seemed to be everywhere at once.

“Keep your eyes glued to the head in front of you! Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir!”

I felt my own yell burn in my chest and tear up through my throat. I wasn’t surprised at the group’s instantaneous response, but I was shocked when I reflexively joined it. I found reassurance in the bass-booming power of the group response.

I heard buzzing. We inched up a bit, and I risked a glance out and to the left as I stepped up. Immediately, I felt a Marine rushing toward me, so I popped my head back into place before I had a chance to figure out what was happening. The line moved around a corner, and one boy emerged from a room ahead. He had no hair.

This was it: the legendary head shaving. About to happen to me.

In that video Sgt. Evans had played for me, just after I had signed my enlistment contract, I watched large groups of young men marching in unison. The camera zoomed down a line of boys outside a barbershop, then cut to one kid sitting in the barber’s chair, smiling into the camera. The barber grabbed the boy’s head and roughly tilted it forward. He ran electric clippers over the boy’s scalp, leaving nothing but the boy’s sheepish grin. Within seconds, the brutal shearing was over and the boy sprang out of the chair, rubbing his bald head. Another boy hopped into the barber chair. To my relief, we moved on to another scene, where the boys were now in camouflage uniforms, carrying rifles and running through the woods, up and over nets made of rope.

I had looked around to see if Sgt. Evans was nearby. I wanted to talk to him about what I was watching. I had a sinking feeling that this film was showing me what being in the Marine Corps was like. The angel on my

right shoulder waved a white flag. But the devil on my other shoulder wanted to stay in the fight.

My success in convincing Sgt. Evans that I wasn't gay had felt like a victory. Meeting him, seeing the Marines on the posters—it all made me want to be one of those guys. To be one of those guys, however, I'd have to do what I saw in the video.

At that moment, I had started to realize that boot camp was going to be hard work. But I was still a ways from recognizing that I would technically be working harder than anyone else in my platoon: I would have to do everything they did, but also mask my secret.

Now the moment I had seen in the video had arrived for me. I was not ready. The long hippie styles that had shocked conservatives in the 1960s had grown out comfortably by the 1970s. Teen idols such as David Cassidy, Starsky, and Hutch had become my role models. I rocked huge feathered wings of hair that folded over my tiny egg head like the protective wings of a mother bird.

I checked in with the angel on my right shoulder, but both he and the devil on my left had bugged out to preserve their shiny locks. I thought about joining them, yet I didn't dare risk the wrath of the patrolling Marines to look around the hallway for an exit. As I moved closer and closer, boys filed by, their heads looking like fields cropped down to stubble. A couple of them rubbed their bald heads, their new badge of honor, excited to kick-start their military career.

This is how much I loved my hair: I actually believed that the “repeat” portion of “lather, rinse, repeat” was for the benefit of my hair, rather than the shampoo company's bottom line. My hair was already fantastic; I coaxed and cajoled it to new heights and widths with liberal applications of product. My hair was my exercise program. By the time I finished blow-drying my hair in the morning, I was exhausted—both my hair and I needed time to settle down.

I wanted to run my hands through it to say goodbye, but I dared not move. I got close enough to the door to see three frumpy, middle-class civilian men presiding over their barber chairs. When they weren't shouting out for the next boy in line, they were discussing sports scores with each other like they were at a cookout. One of the barbers looked a little shaky, which didn't ease my anxiety. I would probably get him.

I returned to staring at the back of Dale's head as commanded. Although Dale's mother was Japanese, his father was Mississippi white. Spin Dale around, and you'd be hard-pressed to pinpoint his heritage. He looked more Mexican, his Asian features blending into the multi-national, dimpled good looks of a United Nations staffer. But from behind, he could be the Japanese Elvis Presley, with his pitch-black hair. Very shortly, you would not be able to mistake him for such a person.

When I was living in New Orleans for one year in high school, I loved hanging out with Dale's family. They blended me into their activities. One night, I was maybe fifteen, and Dale's sister's boyfriend, Jerry, asked us if we wanted to go for a ride to catch a Mardi Gras parade. Thrilled to hang with an older teen, we jumped at the chance—it was an opportunity to show off our new home permanents, courtesy of Dale's mother. Yep. Just a couple of white boys sitting in the den with towels around our shoulders while a nice lady took a long time reading the not-in-her-native-language instructions on the back of a Clairol box. The fumes obliterated any sense of caution over the idea of getting a perm in the first place.

That evening, once our just-plain-wrong curls were dry, Jerry drove us around New Orleans, chasing the tail end of the parade. We got stuck in traffic. Jerry spotted some guys that he'd beaten in a fight the week before. Soon the toughs—appearing as Mardi Gras revelers to others—were taunting us to step out of the car and fight. The gang leader ordered one guy to bash in a headlight while another broke the car's antenna.

I heard tapping on my window. I looked over, and my eyes met the barrel of the boss's gun. He twirled the business end of the pistol, indicating that I should roll the window down. I froze like I was trying to fool a bear into thinking I was dead. I finally managed to point at my head, hoping he'd understand the universal sign for mercy: Please, I just had a perm.

Luckily, in a few seconds, enough space opened up for Jerry to drive onto the sidewalk and away to safety.

My fond, hair-related reveries were shattered when one of the barbers shouted "Cover any moles on your head with your fingers, and I'll mow around 'em."

What?

Dale turned back and our bugged eyes shared the same silent scream—we had no idea if we had any moles. The disgusting thought of growths on my head was overtaken by the mental image of blood spurting from shaved-off

bumps. Given the less-than-gentle treatment we were receiving, I had no confidence anyone would render aid.

My turn came. The Marine at the door pointed to a chair before the current occupant had even finished. I got the shaky barber. Of course. I grabbed the chair's red vinyl armrest for support, but hesitated before twisting my body into the seat—it was covered with the hair of other people. The barber placed his hand on my shoulder and pawed me into place. Any hope of a consulting chat with the kind-looking old man ended when he shoved my head forward into a humbling prayer position and—buzzzz. The cold steel clippers hit the nape of my neck and he pushed the clippers across my head, ending with a flourish off my forehead. I wanted to look up in the mirror, but the barber held my head down firmly. The clippers tapped the back of my neck again, then another scrape across my head. The buzzing muffled when the clippers hit thick, intact hair, then resumed full volume as the hair fell away. I watched my prized hair fall to the ground and join the pile left by countless others. An accomplishment years in the making became a memory in mere seconds.

In the same few moments it took to buzz my hair from my head, the barber erased any doubt that I'd truly joined the Marines.

I needed time to process the loss, but I was pushed out of the chair by the barber, who was anxious for his next conquest. I thought, perhaps unkindly, that he must be paid by the head. I felt naked and vulnerable as I walked down the brightly lit hallway back to the classroom, where I slipped behind the desk I'd occupied before. Soon, Dale walked down the row of desks toward me. He looked hilarious with his stark white scalp and tan face. We knew not to talk, but I wanted to laugh. We smiled at each other, then I turned to face the front. He settled in his desk in front of me and I stared at his head. I thought of the French class Dale and I shared in high school. Our teacher, Madame Sanchez—whose name I could blame for my poor French, if I were less honest—teased her hair into a shellacked beehive. Dale and I discovered that, by focusing on the line where her forehead met her scalp, it was easy to imagine her bald. We laughed ourselves into hysterics and out of a strong grasp of the French language.

Dale boldly turned around to look at me. He grinned, reached up, and rubbed my buzzed head. I rubbed his. With my other hand, I rubbed my own head for comparison. Dale did the same with his head. Four hands, two heads. The stubble on my head felt soft and thin. His felt rough and prickly.

like my G.I. Joe's velvety head. Even though we couldn't speak, the look on his face clearly communicated Unbelievable, and the tilt of his head said No turning back.

Suddenly a Marine was screaming, razor-close to our faces.

"What the fuck are you two doing?! Why are you rubbing his head, faggot?!"

We yanked our hands away. I'd been called a faggot before, but never while actually touching another boy. The Marine's glare, focused solely on me, felt like a prison floodlight. Gay was a crime in here; I had to remember.

He ordered us both to stand up and follow him. This was it. I was being kicked out for being gay, and I'd cost Dale his chance to be a Marine.

He threw us out a door into an alley and pointed at some dented, crusty old garbage cans and a pile of gnarly scrub brushes.

"You faggots want to get nasty with each other, then you can scrub the fuck out of these shitcans."

After experiencing it, I can think of nothing more gross than reaching deep inside a huge can to touch—much less clean up—other people's gooey, discarded, nasty, food. Dale kept his head down as he scrubbed, letting me know that this was not a great start to boot camp. A whiff of anything negative could become a stench you carried around for the rest of the summer.

A single streetlight spotlighted our shameful activities.

"I'm sorry," I humbly said.

"Don't talk to me. Don't look at me." He jammed his whole arm in the can.

I was horrified. I felt guilty and upset that I might have compromised him. I reached into the can as if searching for redemption. I focused on trying to dislodge the sludge seemingly melded into the sides. Chunks of carrot and bits of turkey at the bottom told me I was handling some guy's vomit with my bare hands. It was getting under my fingernails. I scooted chunks of dark, congealed, sticky slime up the sides of the can. I choked back disgusted gags in case Dale might construe them as a feeble attempt to talk.

Dale was and is my hero. I couldn't let him down. A year before, instead of applying to colleges, he had sought and won a coveted appointment to the Air Force Academy. In exchange for his commitment to fight for his country, he'd earn a free college degree and learn how to fly jets.

Although he'd never done his own laundry or made his own bed, Dale had excelled at the Academy. But stress created one challenge he couldn't overcome—his eyesight slipped just short of the perfect 20/20 vision required to fly jets.

He'd had to resign from the Academy. With a military commitment left to pay out, he made the tough decision to become a Marine. And I vowed to join him.

And I did not think that through.

It didn't occur to me that being in the military would make me uncomfortable. I didn't predict that it wouldn't be just my feet that would feel raw and painful, that I was voluntarily exposing myself as a target for hatred.

It was as if we both forgot that I was gay.

He tried to outline the horrors of boot camp for me, yet we never discussed that I was about to put my sexuality secret on a very public and potentially violent playing field.

I couldn't walk out. This wasn't a job anyone could quit. I had signed a contract for six years that could only be broken by the government if it decided I was unfit, like if I broke the law or a leg. Furthermore, and the government could use any hint of a problem to separate Dale and me. The Marine Corps had written the Buddy System clause, it was their policy to offer and they could take it away. Finally, and most importantly, I couldn't possibly disappoint Dale.

I wasn't a chance-taker. I had little confidence. But Dale took risks, successfully, and he had a strong plan for his future. I didn't want to mess up his experience. No matter how I felt up to that point in my life, right there in that alley and from there on out, I lowered my head. That helped keep my mouth shut.

4. Rude Awakening

We spent a total of about five hours in that classroom. Except for the time we took for haircuts and the shitcan-scrubbing, we sat silently, staring straight ahead. Any lingering excitement among the boys waned into a lull. I was tired but obviously couldn't sleep. I kept my eyes locked on Dale's stubbly head.

The classroom door slammed open. Sunrise backlit three new Marines as they stormed in, immediately dissipating my sleepless-night fog. Two of them stomped up and down the aisles, startling us into the perfect posture of the awake and alert. The third stayed up front. He popped his legs two feet apart and planted his fists on his hips in one choreographed move. Clearly, he was in charge.

"Get on your motherfucking feet!" the leader barked. My knees hit the desk as I rushed to obey.

"I am your senior drill instructor, Staff Sergeant McKinnon!" His voice was raspy from overwork. "You will call me sir. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir!" we said in unison.

"You will begin everything you ever say with sir. Do you understand?"

I wasn't sure I did understand. Everything I said? I was raised to say Yes, sir, and No, sir, but sir as the start of every sentence seemed—

"Sir, yes, sir!" yelled everyone else in the room.

Oops. I got caught out on that one.

"Speak the fuck up, you ass pile of dumb shits! When I tell you to do something, you will fucking do it to the best of my satisfaction, and you will do it the first fucking time, or we will be here all fucking day! Now, do you understand?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" This time I responded instantly, using my diaphragm like I'd learned in acting class to push air up and project my voice.

"You will answer as a unit, as a team. I do not care about you as individuals. You are one fucking person to me—a bunch of recruits sent to me by some asshole that got you to sign a paper and thinks I can turn you into Marines. I'm looking at a pile of shit. Are you telling me that my Marine Corps is now a pile of shit?"

“Sir, no, sir!” we yelled.

McKinnon practically hopped up and down in agitation. “I did not tell you to answer me! Holy shit, Sergeant Andrews and Sergeant Hutchins—they sent us a bunch of motherfucking idiots.” He dropped his head. “Goddamn it, just fucking stand there and try not to even breathe my Marine Corps air, faggots!”

He wore a Smokey-the-Bear-style hat that hid his eyes but not his nostrils, which flared as he hyperventilated like a bull in the ring.

The other two Marines joined him at the front to face us.

“This is Drill Instructor Sergeant Andrews and Drill Instructor Sergeant Hutchins. They are my assistant drill instructors, but I might have them quit. You’re a useless pile of shit! Your father should have jacked off in a Kleenex and flushed instead of fucking your mother!”

Hutchins was about six feet tall, with brown eyes that sloped toward his cheeks. His long, thin nose pointed down to his body as if to say, “There’s more of this going on down there.” Being skinny, I thought perhaps I’d find something in common with him. They all wore the same brown hats and camouflage shirts with the sleeves folded halfway up their biceps. The bottoms of their pants were gathered tightly around the tops of their black combat boots. Only the wide belts they wore were different—the senior DI had an obviously superior shiny black one, and the assistants wore olive-green canvas. In the era of bell-bottoms and leisure suits, the clothes looked as outlandish as I figured I did with my shaved head. Andrews had an acne-scarred face. While I realized teenage skin problems are not the bearer’s fault, it still gave me the impression he was a bad guy. The film *Grease* had opened the week before I left for boot camp (of course I saw it) so I guess the crater-faced bad guy that stole Olivia Newton-John at the sock hop was a fresh impression.

McKinnon ordered us to fall out. Most of us just stood there, not knowing what “fall out” meant. I looked around for Dale, who was already headed for the door.

“Get out of my fucking building, stupid dickshits! You better learn my goddamn language—you’re in my world now, assholes.”

We rushed to the front and out the door. We had to pass the DIs, who leaned in and used their voices like a sharp knife to jab at us. Sgt. Evans had assured me that they couldn’t hit recruits any longer—in fact, if Dale and I experienced any physical abuse, we were encouraged to call our

Congressman. But I didn't trust these guys. Every promise had flown out the window of that bus. Protesting wouldn't accomplish anything except make me look like a coward. No one wants to be the whiner who calls his Congressman. I flinched away as I passed the DIs and ran out the door to join the others, who had formed back up on those same yellow footprints.

Exhaustion and new surroundings left me disoriented. My eyes floated blankly over rows of stark, bland buildings. The frenetic action of the drill instructors as they ranted and berated us into formation was a bizarre contrast to the quiet of the base and the logy silence of my fellow recruits.

Once we were lined up in some semblance of order, McKinnon looked us over and yelled, "Left, face!" I figured he meant us all to turn left, so I did. Some guys didn't move, and some turned right. McKinnon had the same level of brown in his skin as Dale did, and from his short stature and narrow eyes I knew he was Asian. He was too young to have had his name American-ized at Ellis Island, so I figured McKinnon was his Anglo father or some ancestor.

I was standing next to this jumpy guy I'd noticed on the bus, Pritchett. He had looked cute until his head was shaved. Now he looked wide-eyed and crazed. When any DI spoke, his eyes bugged out farther and his head tilted back like he was going to pass out. Pritchett was one of those who turned right.

Andrews flew up to him, put his mouth against Pritchett's ear, and screamed, "You stupid fuck! Are you fucking telling me that on day fucking one you are blatantly disregarding a direct order from your senior drill instructor? Are you too fucking stupid to know left from right? Which one is it, you motherfucking faggot?"

Pritchett flinched and turned with a jerk to face left, then hopped back to the right.

"Any goddamned day, Private!" Andrews's voice was gravelly and gruff, like McKinnon's.

Pritchett wobbled through the about-face necessary to get him facing the correct direction. "I got confused, sir!" he squeaked out.

"Everybody fucking freeze!" McKinnon screamed.

"You will not refer to yourself as I as long as you are in recruit training. You are no longer an I. When and if you are allowed to speak, you will refer to yourself in third person and third person only. That means Private, for you slow-ass maggots. Do you understand?"

“Sir, yes, sir!” We sounded louder if not better.

McKinnon continued, “I am going to say ‘Forward, march.’ That is a command, privates, which means you are to going to start fucking walking in a forward direction. I expect you to stay together, get in step, and keep it tight. You look like a bunch of motherfucking idiots, and I’ll be goddamned if I want to be seen walking down this street with you. Forward, march!”

Pritchett scrambled to face the right direction. We started down the street.

“Left. Left. Left, right, left. You assholes better get in fucking step,” McKinnon warned, but we were bumping into each other and giving each other flat tires with our shoes. He’d call “right,” and my right foot would hit the asphalt. It stood to reason, then, that my left foot would hit with his call of “left.” But I somehow messed up.

Starting fresh at countless new schools taught me one thing: Getting off on the wrong foot was not the way to fit in. In my current situation, I could interpret that lesson literally.

Other groups of boys marched past us, but they didn’t look at us. They kept their heads facing forward and marched with amazing precision, all completely in step with each other. They looked alike, and not just because they were wearing the same white T-shirts and camouflage pants with black boots—the attitude they threw off with each step made them identical.

That old jealous feeling I used to get when I would move to a new school and see the confidence and camaraderie of those already in place rose up quickly. I wanted to be those guys so I wouldn’t look awkward and new. I did what I had years of practice doing in a new situation: I focused and put one foot in front of the other.

McKinnon halted us in front of a red brick one-story building with a wide screen door. He told us to break off into a single-file line and follow Hutchins in to chow. It took a second, but I realized that we’d been marched down the street to breakfast. I looked around, behind me, and up the street. No cars. I had a feeling that if we ever needed to travel on this base, we’d do it on foot.

The chow hall—a huge, ramshackle cafeteria—featured little else but tables, ceiling fans, and a long line of food behind a low glass wall. I inched up in line and took a tray from the stack. It was warm and wet, like it had been recently washed and not dried. I didn’t want to touch it, much less put food on it. It was bound to make the food worse.

I noticed the men behind the glass, serving the food, had freshly shaved heads. They had to be recruits. Although they kept their heads down, they couldn't hide their angry expressions—or their dull eyes, which made them appear halfway between brainwashed and electroshocked. If their expressions were the result of training and discipline, I dreaded becoming them. If their expressions were a result of punishment. . . . I had gotten a taste of torture from scrubbing the trash cans; whatever got these guys to this state was something I didn't want to imagine.

I held my tray out to a server. He slapped a spoonful of what-the-fuck on my tray. We made eye contact, but his eyes looked stripped bare. They gave me nothing except a glimpse of my own future.

We sat on benches at long tables. High windows offered light but no view. Even though the huge room was full, the only noise came from metal utensils hitting the trays and, from another room, the chatter of men supervising the food prep. The sounds were harsh in the bare room. I felt air on my head and looked up to see ceiling fans slowly but doggedly bouncing the clatter back down to us. I heard a cymbal crash of silverware hitting the concrete floor and bet someone would be in trouble.

The tray looked like it had been through a war. So did the food. I touched a forkful of scrambled eggs to my tongue and found them to be loose, slimy, and not at all egg-like. We drank syrupy fruit punch from plastic glasses that were scratched and cracked. I wasn't sure whether the black bits on my potatoes indicated that they were burned or that they were rotten. I was hungry, but I couldn't finish the food.

The other groups of recruits sitting around the chow hall looked fit in their tight white T-shirts. The white boys had tanned faces that turned average looks into handsome. I looked at our group; we were raggedy compared to them, still in our civilian clothes.

It hit me then that the guys I had arrived with were now my platoon, the group of boys I would be with the entire thirteen weeks. We were all just dumped together based on the time we arrived. Up to that point, I'd imagined we'd be evaluated and, after careful consideration, matched up with the recruits who complemented us best. Each unit would comprise like-minded and compatible young men. I didn't want to be with random boys—there were guys on the bus I'd instantly disliked and hoped to never see again.

Even though everyone in the room had a shaved head, there was something about one of the other groups of recruits that made them look sharper than us. Their haircut was different. The sides and back were still shaved to the skin, but there was a little patch of hair on the top. It looked tough and not as prisoner-ish as ours did.

Andrews wedged himself between us and the other table. “Quit eyeballing that other platoon, faggots!” We all lowered our heads to our trays.

“There’s not a chance in hell most of you will make it to that point. Those boys are about to graduate.”

I wanted that haircut. I wanted that little patch of honor hair. It was a far cry from the feathered, flowing hair I’d just relinquished, but here, inside this protected and insulated environment, it was coveted.

When the more experienced recruits got up from their table, I noticed the confident way they strode out the door, and I couldn’t imagine ever reaching that level.

After about fifteen minutes, the drill instructors ordered us to our feet. They told us to walk our trays to the scullery area, a room at the back, where other recruits were doing dishes.

I scraped my remaining food onto the garbage already heaped in the metal trashcan. Sgt. Andrews was standing there, so I tried to work neatly and efficiently, thinking that was what he would want.

He barked, “We eat everything on our plates, boy! This may be your last meal!”

I cringed inwardly at being singled out.

“Eat that goddamned chow!”

I looked at my empty tray and then up at Andrews, then back at my tray again. I opened my eyes wide to express what my mouth didn’t dare.

He pointed at the mound of filthy, unrecognizable slop piled high in the garbage can.

“Find the shit you threw away and eat it, maggot!”

I wished he hadn’t used the word maggot as I reached into the can. As if I were guiding the claw of an arcade game to a prize, I delicately picked up some chunks covered in what I prayed was the gravy from my own tray. I hesitated as I brought the food to mouth level. Seeing that I was less than fully committed, Andrews shoved my hand against my face. I don’t know what I put in my mouth, but I swallowed one valuable lesson.

Outside, we scrambled back into a group. I stuck with Dale.

McKinnon marched us away. “Stand up straight and try to look like men, you motherfucking maggots! You make me want to throw up my good Marine Corps chow!”

The sun was rising fast, but it was no match for the heat we were taking from the DIs as we marched into this new environment. This was my world now—and it had been my idea.

5. Extreme Makeover

“You recruits march like a bag of fucking rocks,” McKinnon hollered as he punched us up the street with his left, right, left. Then, as if he were giving up, McKinnon stopped us in front of a large, grey building that looked like an airport hangar.

“That was the worst goddamned attempt at walking in a forward direction that I have personally witnessed. I’ll pray for you, privates. Jesus fucking Christ.” He exhaled as he hung his head dramatically. “Just fall the fuck out.”

Eyes lowered, we shuffled into the building through a door flanked by Andrews and Hutchins. I glanced over and saw McKinnon reach up and free the thin, black strap that held his hat on his head. He gingerly tucked the hat under his arm as if it were a spun-glass football.

I had no idea what waited for me inside the room, but I was relieved to leave the bright sun outside. I felt the rush from cool shade as I adjusted my eyes to the relative darkness. Small, with nothing but benches.

“Strip! Take your fucking clothes off! Everything! Do it, privates! Shove that shit in here and write your fucking name on it.” The DIs’ shouts rained down on us, amplified by the closed space and propelled by their waving arms.

They passed out brown paper grocery bags, which made me think my clothes would be thrown away like trash. They told us we would get them all back after we graduated—or before, if we failed to graduate. As instructed, I wrote 2032, our platoon number. Slowly.

The other recruits had already yanked off their shirts and pulled their pants down and off. I wasn’t comfortable with removing even my shirt, but I reluctantly unbuttoned it and shoved it in the bag.

Everyone else peeled off their underwear like it was on fire. I need a little time. The last thing I wanted was to expose myself to a bunch of better-built boys in a tiny room. If I were almost anywhere else, watching seventy guys strip would’ve been like unwrapping seventy tempting candies.

Andrews rushed over to me. “What are you waiting for? A personal fucking invite? Fucking strip, asshole!”

My pants were down, underwear off, and asshole exposed before he got his asshole out.

And then we were all just . . . naked. I felt awkward and vulnerable. Almost every other recruit looked stronger than me, and I would have gladly traded bodies with any of them except the few fat guys. I didn't want to strip.

When I was in seventh grade, despite all efforts, I ended up in gym class. The coach's whistle blast pointed us all along the edges of the gym. The captains picked teams. I focused on the wood-planked floor, as if I understood what the colored lines blocking out the basketball areas meant. The idea of playing basketball was the furthest thing from my mind, but I for damn sure wanted to get asked. I tried to look disinterested and desirable at the same time. I was successful in confusing both team captains; I didn't get picked. At all. It felt like liquid nitrogen ran through my body. I hoped to vaporize from embarrassment. The teams formed and walked down to the other end of the gym and commenced the game.

I slunk over to the bleachers and . . . sat. No one inquired as to why I wasn't playing. The boys dribbled up and down the court in a macho parade, pounding in the fact that I wasn't chosen. Coach's whistle blew and class was over. I joined the sweaty boys and went to the locker room.

I didn't strip and shower. I wasn't sweaty. I hadn't played. If I took off my shirt the others would see that they were right—I was too scrawny to pick. If you see two trees in an orchard—one lush, strong, and thick, and one skinny and bare—you're always going to take fruit from the strong tree.

I pulled my street clothes over my baggy, clean gym shirt. I tugged my pants over my gym shorts. I adjusted my walk to handle the lumps and left the locker room. I had to throw my leg out further away than on a normal step to clear the bunched up shorts, while I tugged my pants up by the waist. I joined the Weird Kid Club with this unexplained hump under my shirt. And I had to make it look like my regular walk.

Now I was in another locker room. McKinnon blew his whistle. "Say goodbye to your past, recruits!"

I closed the paper bag and said a mental goodbye to my civilian clothes as I surrendered them to a Marine behind a counter. I robotically joined the single-file trail of other recruits shuffling into another part of the building. Some boys were looking back and around, but I tried to keep my eyes glued

to the bald head in front of me and my hands glued in front of my genitals. Silently comparing myself to the other boys, I felt like a newborn.

I peeked at a few penises. I instantly knew that this sort of behavior, if noticed, what would get me kicked out. But it was hard not to look. In a second, my eyes snapped back in to focus on nothing specific and from the safety of my own thoughts I could wonder if straight men looked at other men's dicks. I searched the eyes of the others to see if anyone else's line of sight was aimed at crotch level.

A whole new world was opening up to me: I'd never seen an uncircumcised penis or a black penis, and here I was, presented with the combination. I kept myself guarded—and so did the DIs, who continuously shouted out commands that received my complete compliance.

We moved down a hallway toward two large doors that swung open, releasing mist, as each boy entered. As I passed through the doors, I stepped onto a rubber mat. The all-tile room was noisy from spraying water. I made out Andrews and Hutchins standing against one wall, grasping fire hoses and spraying us down as we walked through the room.

Their feet were planted firm to manhandle the powerful hoses, dousing us from head to toe. "Bull's-eye!" I heard from Andrews just as the strong spray of cold water hit me square in the chest. Hutchins and Andrews looked at each other and cackled. The frigid water shooting out of the nozzles smelled of chemicals. It stung. McKinnon's voice boomed from somewhere ahead, easily heard over the rushing water.

"Move it, privates! Rub that water all over your nasty bodies, boys. Wash off all the fucking filth and lice and whatever other civilian slime you tried to bring into my Marine Corps. You are undergoing a Marine Corps transformation, privates. This transformation is forever." McKinnon's loud, even voice rang out like a baseball bat against thick steel.

The mental shock from this assault of a shower was stronger than the forceful streams of water hitting my body. I put my hands up automatically to protect my eyes and delicate, formerly private, parts. I felt like I was being sprayed down like grapes coming in on a ship. After this, I could by no means be considered organic.

The line of boys kept moving forward, never stopping, and we progressed out of the shower as if on a factory conveyor belt.

I emerged from the shower never more grateful for something to be over. I spat out the water like it was poison. It probably was. I wished I had a towel

or huge, Mickey Mouse hands to cover up with—anyone with a larger penis or more pubic hair could make a mental note of my deficiency and use it against me later. All of the boys walked around the room wet, in the dazed confusion that comes from a surprise attack. I rubbed my eyes and wondered if I'd suffer long-term mental or physical side effects from the water.

We had no chance to protest anything—and I wasn't about to despite the fact that I found the experience agonizing. That was how I operated in a new environment: Don't complain, fit in. Had the next task been a group tattoo, I would have been the first to call out, "Sign me up."

We'd emerged from the shower—all of us now as fearful and bug-eyed as Pritchett—to enter a narrow room with a counter staffed by four uniformed Marines. Each had the same severe haircut and stern face. Their biceps seemed about to tear through their camouflage shirts. I liked their look, but they scared the shit out of me.

"Get your nasty assholes up here, privates!" one of them yelled. Apparently everyone was free to degrade us. Dripping wet, we scrambled up to the counter in a cluster, but soon squeezed into a single line. As I passed by, one of the Marines thrust a large green canvas bag at me, punching me in the chest with both the bag and a hateful look from narrowed eyes. I was already uncomfortable—now I felt extra vulnerable. I had no idea where Dale was in the line. I kept walking, holding the bulky, green canvas duffel in front of me like a shield.

Andrews and Hutchins stomped around, snatching bags away from recruits just for sport, knocking their victims off balance.

"It's a good thing you motherfucking faggots got sprayed down. Some of your brains got washed away too," said Hutchins. His voice was gruff, but also high and squeaky, and his thoughts seemed to slip out of his mouth not fully formed. I was glad to have McKinnon's more stable—if threatening—personality driving us.

"You will take what you are given, recruits, and put one on your body and place the others in your sea bag. These are gifts from my Marine Corps to you," McKinnon said.

I got a snide-vibe from Andrews. "We will try to hide you with this camouflage. You do not deserve to wear these uniforms, but I have no desire to see your naked, disgusting bodies, so you will cover that shit up! Do you understand?"

“Sir, yes, sir!”

At the next stop, the second Marine behind the counter issued “Small!” “Medium!” and “Large!” as commands, not questions. Bowman, my chubby seatmate on the bus from the airport, was in front of me; the Marine issuing uniforms didn’t look up, but thrust some white boxer shorts at him.

“Jesus Marine Corps Christ, I don’t think extra-large skivvies will cover your fat ass!”

Bowman kept his head down and just took what he was handed. He bent over to put the shorts on, then stuffed the rest of the underwear in his duffel bag. He turned his face to me and exposed a shy, embarrassed smile with dimples that matched those on his butt. The “fat ass” slam must have had a familiar sting. I was insulted for him, although that feeling was mitigated somewhat by the experience of having a guy I just now had barely got to meet bend over and put on boxer shorts in front of me.

The Marine held some boxers out at me. I almost handed them back and asked for briefs. I’d never even held boxers, much less worn them. They made no sense to me. They were too loose, like my overly lax parents. Where was the support? What was their purpose?

The drill instructor’s yell quickly hustled me into a pair. They were baggy, and I imagined I looked like my grandfather in similar boxers, both of us skinny and bald. All I needed was black socks and a cocktail, and I’d look like him on vacation, standing in a motel doorway, smoking a Tareyton and squawking at my grandmother for more ice. The Marine thrust a few more pairs at me, and I shoved them down hard into the bottom of my bag.

Next, he gave me olive-green wool socks.

In. The. Summer.

My first reaction was to refuse them, but strong-looking, mean-sounding men were yelling at me in a cement-walled room, where the echoes made sure I heard everything three times.

“That’s right, you idiots, just take your mother-fucking sweet-ass time putting on socks,” said Andrews.

“I got all day, privates,” advised McKinnon. “You want to spend it putting on fucking socks? Fine. You won’t become Marines, but you’ll kick ass working in a shoe store. You here to work in a shoe store?”

“Sir, no, sir!” we boomed back.

Andrews hopped on a bench.

“On your fucking feet when you address your senior drill instructor!”

We jumped up, some wobbling into others.

“Sit back down, finish the immediate task at hand, privates!” McKinnon commanded before we were all completely up.

Socks feel creepy over wet feet, and these wouldn’t slide on. I was glad to sit; it was hard to wiggle them up when I was hopping around trying not to bump into anyone else. Plus the socks were stiff and cheap and wool. Green wool. When I’m shopping in non-military stores, I notice green socks are the last socks to go. The hot weather begged for cotton. And could wool even be washed without the socks shrinking down to fit a Barbie—I mean, G.I. Joe?

“Keep moving, ladies!”

Stop number three was for T-shirts. I gladly pulled one of the white cotton T-shirts down over my head to cover my offensive, underdeveloped torso. As I placed the rest of the T-shirts in my bag, it hit me that we were shopping. I got this! The first thing since my arrival I could relate to. I heard the fourth Marine at the counter ask what my waist size was, like a helpful clerk.

“Twenty-eight.”

The gruff Marine threw a hard laugh at me, inviting his nearest Marine buddy to “Look at this fucker, skinny as a little girl.”

His comment took me back to my shopping expeditions in the boy’s department at JCPenney. When I was ten, shopping alone, finding pants was not fun or cool or always successful. I threw a fit more often than I found a fit; everything available was too big.

As I flipped hangers, being careful not to clang them together and make noise, I heard the saleswoman.

“Do you need help, ma’am?”

This wasn’t the first time I’d heard that; nor would it be the last. I wanted to crawl in the middle of the rack. I needed to yell in a deep voice that I was a boy. What the hell did she see about me made me look more girl than boy? Why would a girl be shopping in the boys department? I still regret that I didn’t have the balls to pull my pants down and produce my cock. I didn’t look up. I didn’t flip my hair or my finger at her. I worked my way down the rack, jumping to the shirts and then the belts, clawing my way out of the store.

Now this Marine was that JCPenney clerk on steroids. I took the camouflage pants he gave me and pulled them on quickly, then stuffed the

other pair of pants in my bag.

We got matching camouflage jackets, and they tossed silver fiberglass helmets at us.

It was hot enough inside the building to make me sweat. I did not want to face the humidity of South Carolina in another layer. McKinnon threw us a bone. "Put the jackets in your sea bags."

"But keep the chrome dome out," Andrews added, to my dismay. "We have to cover up your delicate little gourds. The sun will bust you open, and while I doubt any brains will spill out, your mama won't suck my dick anymore if I let you die."

A pile of webbed cotton belts, tangled like a nest of snakes, was on a table. We each pulled one out. I wrestled it through my belt loops as I walked, trying to hold my heavy duffle bag and still catch the commands thrown at me. The belt closed with a shiny brass buckle. As I fastened it, I felt no premonition that I would be polishing it thousands of times, over and over and over. Had I, I would have dropped that belt like it was a viper.

My bag was full and heavy, and I was almost dressed. I got to another counter, and two pairs of black boots came flying at me, with two packs of shoelaces sailing after them like beads from a parade float. I'd certainly earned them.

I struggled with the boots and bag and shuffled in my socked feet to a long bench, where we all sat to lace our boots.

"Hurry the fuck up!"

All three DIs dashed around, kicking our stuffed duffel bags as they darted by, probably wishing the bags were actual recruits.

I'd laced shoes since I was five, but now I was fumbling like a nervous preschooler. And it wasn't only me. Just as I was almost finished, the drill instructors yelled at us to halt.

"Too slow! You privates would fuck up a wet dream. I don't care if your boots are laced. Rip 'em out. We do it all together. I got all fucking day for this shit. You live here now."

We removed our laces to start over again and again. I resented the recruits who couldn't figure out how to tie their shoes, but then I thought of the things that I might have a hard time with later.

"Move out!" McKinnon tossed the order over his shoulder as he left the building.

The invisible conveyor belt that had started in the showers now deposited us back out on the street. We'd been squeezed into the building like dozens of different vegetables into a blender—no matter what shape or color we had been going in, we poured out as a uniform green smoothie. Different heights, weights, and races were amazingly equalized by matching camo.

I looked around the platoon, now in uniform and in somewhat of a formation. We'd been issued green backpacks and two plastic canteens that attached to a belt. It was a lot of equipment.

That entire frantic exercise, with all of the yelling and confusion, was to get us dressed and equipped. Despite the apparent chaos, it was efficient; we used ourselves to outfit ourselves. I'd like to see any civilian company supply a summer wardrobe for, and physically dress, seventy nervously wiggling young men, head-to-toe, in thirty minutes.

McKinnon called a marching cadence. His gruff and steady "Left, right, left" gave the impression he could will us into perfect step.

I wanted our feet to strike the ground in unison, but we must have looked like drunk toddlers as we wobbled down the street. Most of us hadn't adjusted our helmets correctly; one unfortunate almost lost his twice. The big duffel bags we all carried were long and lumpy. Although some guys slung them easily over their shoulders as if they'd just returned from a war and were glad to see their girl, I wasn't the only one getting knocked off balance by the heavy bag. I could feel the boots inside, and my arm sank past soft shirts. I quickly readjusted my hold.

When my family traveled, my mother had one simple rule: Pack what you can carry and handle by yourself. She wasn't going to—and couldn't—carry everyone's bags. I might not be wheeling a suitcase through the lobby of a Holiday Inn, but I was grateful to my mother for her rule as I squeezed the bag hard. The last thing I wanted was to appear as if I were having trouble with the load.

My entire life, I'd wanted to coexist comfortably, to be thought of as the same as everyone else. To look clumsy or weak made me stand out. In this environment, I may have had little chance of pulling ahead, but damn if I wouldn't do my best to avoid falling behind. Everything in my life had been exactly this new and insurmountable at one point—walking, understanding English, riding a horse. No one gets a handbook or a cheat sheet for life, but I always suspected that they did and feared I was one step behind.

I tossed my shoulders around to adjust my backpack, bear-hugged my sea bag, and sort of kicked it to move it forward with my upper leg. Andrews and Hutchins were all over our gangly ranks, making fun of our inability to march.

“You wouldn’t know left from right if it kicked you in the ass,” Andrews accused.

“Gomer Pyle bunch of dumbshits,” Hutchins said. Ah. That’s who Hutchins reminded me of. I knew there was something familiar about him.

“Left,” called McKinnon. “You know nothing. You are nothing. You will do this shit my way or you will leave my Corps. Left!”

They would have heckled Jesus on his final walk: “Get in step, Son of God!”

McKinnon swaggered as he kept us on course, marching us away down the street.

“You’re doing the sea-bag drag. Welcome to my Marine Corps, boys.”

The hot sun was all the way up and proud of it. With each breath, I both grunted like a champ tennis player returning a serve and silently questioned my decision to enlist. I forced my head and eyes straight ahead, grabbed my bag harder, and pushed on.

On day one, success to me meant making it down the street without passing out in front of the other recruits.

6. You're In My House Now

McKinnon halted us.

“Drop your trash!”

I happily let the heavy bag fall to the ground and wished I could join it. My arms now felt light enough that they'd easily float up if I didn't keep them at my sides.

“Ladies, when I say ‘fall out,’ you will hustle your soft bodies into my house. You will take those stairs—”

I turned my head to check out his house, a looming, enormous, two-story grey insult to architecture.

“Did I fucking say look?! Who the fuck told you to snap your grapes around and eyeball my goddamn building?”

We all jerked our heads back to the front.

“You will climb the stairs quickly and quietly and not disturb our neighbors. Do you understand me?!”

I still wasn't sure when to respond, but within a fragment of a second, the collective mind of the platoon fired a common neuron and I joined the reply.

“Sir, yes, sir!”

McKinnon paced up and down in front of us with his hands behind his back.

“You will enter my house in an orderly manner. There are two rows of racks, and you will each find a bunk and stand by it. You will lock your body at attention until you are told otherwise. Do you understand?”

Sgt. Evans had told me that the military operates on a need-to-know basis. You're not entitled to any backstory or reason for your mission. Someone—not you—is in charge, and that someone will tell you whatever information he deems necessary for you to complete the task. If you're ordered to jump off a bridge, you jump off the bridge, confident in your fellow Marine's ability to lead. If you all fall to a horrible death, that Marine made a huge mistake. Thankfully, Marines have a terrific track record.

Today's activities were setting a precedent for learning to act without much thought and tackle anything and everything. Nothing was explained

to us; we were being herded like sheep in Marine clothing. So no, honestly, I didn't understand. I knew that McKinnon wanted us to run into a building and stand by a bunk bed. But I wanted to ask why. And that was definitely not the response McKinnon was looking for.

A "Sir, yes, sir!" burst out of me. I shouted as loudly as anyone else saying that I did understand.

McKinnon stopped pacing. He looked the platoon over from one end to the other. He was responsible for us, and we were responsible to him.

"Fall out!"

We ran to the building like we were staking a claim on free land. Seventy boys hit the stairs almost single file, but urgency and our bulky duffel bags turned us into a throng of immigrants competing for space on the last boat.

I cranked my long neck up like a periscope to keep my eye on Dale. He was my life raft in this sea of sameness. I lost him in the mass of boys around me and felt like I was drowning as I struggled against the teeming rush.

When we reached the top of the stairs, the knot eased as we began to spill out into a large, open room. It was huge, about 120 feet long and 50 feet wide with two long rows of bunk beds. I saw Dale walking in the center of the room, and I rushed to catch up to him.

"Stay near me," I whispered.

"Just grab a bunk. There," he pointed to one side of the room and rushed to the other side. I hurried to grab the spot directly across from him.

As McKinnon promised, there were two seemingly never-ending rows of bunk beds, one lining each side of the room. Each row of bunks was against a windowed exterior wall, and sun streamed in on one side. There was an open square space at the front of the room, and a large path, about twenty feet wide, ran down the center of the room, separating the rows of beds.

Dale and I stood frozen by the bedposts, staring at each other. I hoped he didn't try to make me laugh—I'm sure I didn't look like I fit in, but I didn't want to get busted for cracking up. I needed to be near him, so I was glad he'd secured us opposite bunks.

I couldn't look around much because I was performing my best guess at the position of attention. I tried to see what others were doing. Everyone ran down the center of the dormitory, then settled on a bunk.

I guessed this was home for the next thirteen weeks. The room was plain, with no blinds on the windows. It smelled stale but looked clean. It seemed

like it had been vacant for years, with the mattresses rolled up on the end of each bed, exposing the bed's simple wire frame. It didn't look like a prison, but it was far from a cabin overlooking a picturesque lake.

I had allergies as a child. A doctor advised my parents to create a special room for me to sleep in, free of as many allergens as possible. This ideal room would have a tile floor that could be mopped every day, and it would contain only a metal bed frame with a plastic-covered mattress. There would be no curtains or blinds on the windows and no lamps or tables. If these guidelines were followed, and I lived in this plain room where dust had little chance to gather and could be wiped away easily, I might be allergy-free and therefore more comfortable. My mother thanked the doctor and we left, presumably to shop for the metal bed. Instead, we went home and never spoke of it again.

Here it was, that unspeakable bedroom.

As we all stood next to our claimed bunks, McKinnon, Andrews, and Hutchins zipped up and down the center of the room, thrusting their faces into ours, attempting to yell us into order. We recruits were like a handful of jacks they'd thrown on the ground—you can yell at jacks all you want, but they're still not going to line up. No matter, the DIs tried.

"This is your squad bay, privates. Do not call my Marine Corps squad bay a motherfucking barracks—you did not join the Army."

"Some of these idiots wouldn't make it in the goddamn Navy, Staff Sergeant McKinnon," Hutchins mused. The way he said Navy made that branch of the military sound remedial.

However, McKinnon adopted an upbeat tone. "Do you like your new house?!" he asked us.

"Sir, yes—"

"I don't give a shit what you assholes like!" McKinnon shouted.

"Starting with this first private on my left, you will count off in order—one, two, three, and so on. Then that count will jump across my motherfucking squad bay, and you assholes will keep counting until you end with this private on my right. That is the number you will have the rest of your time here, so I can keep track of you. Do you understand?!"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"Begin!"

The first guy yelled "One!"

Then the next guy, "Two!"

“Three!”

“Four!”

“Five!”

“Six!”

“Yes, sir!” The seventh private choked. Andrews rushed into his face.

“‘Yes, sir?!’ What the fuck kind of number is ‘yes, sir’?! Are you that retarded that you think ‘yes, sir’ is the number after six?! On top of that nonsense you fucked up a fucked up response—it’s ‘Sir, yes, sir,’ you moron! What is your name, recruit?”

“Baker, sir!”

I kept my head forward but slid my eyes to the side to see Baker.

Andrews looked like he was chewing on Baker’s face.

“You say ‘Sir, Private Baker, sir’—it’s not fucking hard, asshole. It’s your fucking name!”

Hutchins chimed in. “Jesus Christ, we got some mo-rons!”

McKinnon hurried over to Andrews. Both of them were in Baker’s face.

“Drop and give me twenty push-ups!” McKinnon demanded.

Baker just stood there looking, frozen at attention from fear compounded by confusion. McKinnon stepped back and opened his arms wide, indicating the entire group of us.

“Do you see this, privates? Private Baker, here—who does not know the number seven—doesn’t think he has to do what I tell him to fucking do. Sergeant Andrews, do you think he has a hearing problem, or is he just a goddamned idiot?”

“Are you deaf or stupid?” Andrews screamed the question directly into Baker’s ear.

I grabbed another fast look with a risky flinch of my eyes. I’m sure we all did. It took Baker a few seconds to answer; his voice sounded slow and thick.

“Sir, no, sir!” He crumpled down and started doing push-ups, counting out loud: “One, two . . .”

“Shut the fuck up, recruit!” all three DIs yelled reflexively.

McKinnon strode down the center of the aisle; he clearly owned this room.

“If I say fucking pull your goddamn head off, you will not pause or ask any dumbshit questions! You will reach up and rip that fat-ass melon off your neck! If I tell you to kill some motherfucking enemy, you will kill every goddamn enemy in sight until I tell you to stop! If I tell you to drop

and give me twenty of any motherfucking thing, just fucking begin! Now—all of you privates drop and fucking begin!”

We dropped. I hadn’t done many push-ups before, but I did now, trying hard to focus on form and wondering how long we’d be down on the floor. All three DIs prowled around, monitoring as we pumped our bodies up and down.

I now knew why McKinnon’s voice was so gruff and raspy. He yelled like this all of the time. I didn’t know how long he’d been abusing his vocal cords to achieve this level, but if he didn’t ease up, I figured there was a good chance his voice would be stuck like that permanently. I took one second to think it sounded sexy, and then shook my brain to renew my vow against having those thoughts.

Only thirty seconds in I was getting tired, and my push-ups were getting sloppy. I had to use my body to wiggle side-to-side to gain enough momentum to push back up when my chest hit the ground. If I could lie on the cool cement for just a second. . . My fatigue was broken by the three DIs running past. Someone down the way must’ve totally stopped, because they all ran up and crowded around one boy. I looked down the row, and it was my chubby friend, Bowman—the one who’d shown me his big, white moon at uniform issue.

“Did I say stop?!” McKinnon shouted.

“You gotta be fucking kidding me, asshole! That all you can do?!” Andrews added.

“Don’t you have a heart attack and die on me, recruit!” yelled Hutchins.

McKinnon was down on the ground in his face.

“What’s your name, recruit?!”

Bowman kept doing a push-up as he sputtered out “Sir, Private Bowman, sir!” like he was grunting through a huge turd.

“Your fat ass is slowing your platoon down, Private Bowman! Get the fuck up!” McKinnon leapt up and moved to the center of the room, Bowman struggled to his feet.

“Everybody get up on your goddamned feet!”

Andrews marched around the room, pointing at Bowman. “Meet the fat-bodied private that will get you killed in battle. You better drop some fucking weight, Bowman.”

I scrambled up, wobbling back to the position of attention. It took a second to get my bearings. I was breathing hard and sweating. I had no idea how

many I could do, but I sure wasn't going to risk stopping. I felt so bad for Bowman—surely I was the next victim.

When Dale first told me of his summer boot-camp plan, and I said I wanted to join him, he warned me that I wouldn't be able to keep up because I'd never done anything physically challenging before. Since my basketball nightmare, I hadn't played one team sport unless you count the debate team. No matter how vigorously you argue, you're not going to break a sweat.

McKinnon ordered the count to begin again from one. I hoped Baker was thinking to himself seven, seven, seven, seven. I knew that, if I were him, I'd be so nervous that I might blurt out "Fuck!" I imagined all hell breaking loose and me ending up with broken arms or a bashed head.

Thankfully, Baker called out seven. I couldn't look down the row to count how many were left before I had to call out a number. I heard nine. Ten. Eleven. The voices were getting close.

Oh, no, I thought. Please not that. I have enough going on without getting . . . I closed my eyes to wish evil away as I heard the number first inside my head, then up from my throat, then sliding across my tongue, and finally crackling into the air in high-pitched voice that I wished wasn't mine for so many reasons: "Thirteen!"

I tried to give up my superstitions each year at New Year's, but I was afraid that might bring bad luck. I didn't need to kick off boot camp with thirteen.

We were seventy-two young men in total. McKinnon pointed at the ground at the front of our bunks, our racks, to show us an invisible line that ran along both sides of the squad bay. When we were commanded to get on line, we were to cease all activity and—

"—Get on that motherfucking line, privates. Stand at attention and wait for the next instruction. I will see all seventy-two bodies moving in one fucking instant. You better stand the fuck still like you're a goddamn statue."

We had a quick drill. He told us to retreat back a few feet and face the windows.

"Fall out!"

I did an about-face, but before I could even take a step, he yelled, "Get on line!"

I heard boot soles squeak against the slick concrete floor, and bodies flew back to the line.

“Too slow, get back!”

We kept fucking it up, but after a few rounds, we got faster and neater.

We settled in to the squad bay step-by-step and as a unit. No one unpacked anything until ordered to do so. If McKinnon called out, “Remove one pair of trousers from your sea bag,” we all reached in and found them, held them over our head, and waited until everyone was doing the same. Then he told us what to do with them next. Anyone caught moving ahead earned the whole group an order to stop, drop, and do push-ups. Unpacking—a seemingly quick task—took a long time, but we learned the concept of following orders very quickly. Repetitive physical punishment sweats the lessons into you.

The drill instructors showed us how to place each item into our footlockers—simple, dark-green plywood trunks with a removable tray that rested inside near the top. The contents of our footlockers had to look identical.

Someone put in an item wrong, and we all had to yank everything out and start over. We dropped and gave McKinnon twenty push-ups about five times during those instructions, which dragged the five-minute task into twenty. I sprouted a dislike for being punished for others’ mistakes.

We’d been issued some basic supplies along with our uniforms: a towel, a washcloth, soap and a plastic box to keep it in, a razor, shaving cream, boot polish, a boot brush, a toothbrush, toothpaste, Brasso metal polish, a bottle of Aqua Velva, a pad of writing paper, two pens, two padlocks, and a few items that were weird and not explained.

“If you don’t know what some shit is, just pack it the fuck away—you will. You are on a need-to-know basis, privates. I will tell you everything you need to know. Right now you need to know to keep your fucking mouths shut, you fucking maggots.”

I kept my head down and put all of the small items in the trunk’s top tray, as neatly and as organized as I could in the few minutes we were given.

While clothes and incidentals went in the footlocker, our toiletries were stuffed in a black vinyl zippered Dopp kit. McKinnon reached into a recruit’s bag and yanked out the bottle of Aqua Velva. He held it high above his head and walked in a circle around the center of the squad bay, in no way resembling a chesty, bikini-clad bimbo parading the prize for the winner of a knockout fight.

“Every swinging dick in this platoon has a bottle of this ‘smell-good.’ Take it out, get on line, and stand in the position of attention. Hold it out in

front of you. Move!”

I found my bottle easily and jumped on line, presenting the bottle as a temple offering in my outstretched hand.

“There are seventy of you maggots and ninety days of boot camp. I am collecting all Aqua-fucking-Velva. It’s not for your ugly-ass faces. Put it in this box.”

He kicked a wooden crate into the center of the aisle; it spun to a stop.

“When you nasty assholes have stunk up my squad bay, you will pour one bottle into the mop water and scrub this place down. Do you understand?”

I couldn’t believe it. The Aqua Velva was a grown-up toiletry I’d never had, and I had been excited at the prospect of both needing and using it. Aqua Velva, the Pine-Sol of the Marine Corps.

Unpacking for Idiots came to a close, and just as I secured the footlocker with an issued padlock, McKinnon’s “Get on line!” sounded out. I strung the lock’s key on a chain as I rushed to the invisible line.

“You will learn the correct position of attention, privates! You will lock your body and wait for the next command. Watch Sergeant Andrews, Sergeant Hutchins.”

Hutchins and Andrews stood at each end of the squad bay to demonstrate as he taught us this position, which would be our primary stance. I looked at them, then down at my feet to make sure I was doing what they did. I placed my heels together with my toes pointing out at a forty-five-degree angle. I heard Andrews’s boot knock into other boots as he inspected the other recruits.

“Forty-five degrees. No more, no less.”

My hands locked down by my sides with my fingers closed up into my palms, my thumbs straight up and down facing forward, arms and hands held tightly and exactly along the seams of my trousers. It seemed simple to copy, but I saw the DIs jerk several recruits’ hands to properly meet the pants seam.

“Only women and faggots call trousers pants, recruits. Any of those in here?!”

Every time they said “maggot,” I heard “faggot.” Every time they said “faggot,” I heard my name.

“Sir, no, sir!” I probably yelled that louder than anyone else. And I only needed to hear that clothing distinction once.

“I’m responsible for you, but you’re responsible for your shit. Put that key and chain around your necks and never take it off. You will shower in it. You will sleep in it. If your sorry ass dies in here, you will die in it, and we will use it to drag your body out of my squad bay.”

All day I’d wondered if dying was more of a possibility than I’d realized, and now it had been said out loud.

The next task was stamping our names into our clothing, but we had to start from square one and construct the stamps ourselves using cut-out letters and glue. With my simple name, I finished quickly and had to watch the torture slower boys endured as their nervous hands became all thumbs.

“Some of you dumb shits ate the fucking glue in kindy-garten and fried your brains,” Andrews mocked.

“This ain’t the hard shit,” Hutchins said, jerking some guy’s letters into the correct configuration.

I pressed hard on the stamp to leave my name in black ink on the inside collar of the neck of my T-shirts, and I wrote the numbers “13,” my scar of a laundry number, on my towel and washcloth with a black marker.

McKinnon moved over to Private Baker, who was seated behind his footlocker, working on stamping his clothes. Without warning, McKinnon reached down, yanked Baker up, and ordered him to stand in the center of the squad bay. As he held Baker’s T-shirt in the air, he moved his face close to Baker’s face. He asked him quietly, through closed teeth, “What’s your name again, Private?”

“Baker, sir.”

I knew almost nothing about this entire place but I feared for Baker.

McKinnon fired like a gun.

“You better learn to say ‘Sir, Private Baker, sir!’”

“Sir, Private Baker, sir,” Baker answered flatly.

“Well, no screaming eagle shit, Private Baker.” McKinnon took the T-shirt on a tour around the squad bay, waving it by our faces.

“Private Baker has shown you what not to do. He has stamped his motherfucking name on the outside of his shirt. And his shirt is inside out. And he has stamped his name backwards. McKinnon pulled the shirt closer to his face, and his mouth fell open at what he saw.

“Private, you misspelled your own name! B-A-K-K-E-R. You’re fucking Bakker, Baker!”

Baker stared blankly ahead, seemingly void of the frantic concern that was beating through my chest. I didn't want Baker's vacant mind. He was starting to look like the boys I'd seen serving food in the chow hall. It seemed unnatural to me that he was so stoic.

No way could I have maintained Baker's steadiness in the same situation. The one thing I saved some smidgen of energy to focus continuously on was my mantra for boot camp: "Don't look gay." I didn't feel as if I could devote much energy to anything else. I needed to find a safe balance that let me survive.

"Jesus Christ, Baker, I hate to break it to you, but you don't get more shirts—you get what you got. Get the fuck out of my sight."

Baker returned to his spot, passing Hutchins and Andrews as they began walking down each side of the squad bay, carrying small buckets of bright yellow salt pills.

"It's fucking hot outside, privates, and I'll be goddamned if you're dying on my watch," said McKinnon.

We each took one, swallowing all at once, as a squad. It was our first of dozens, meant to help fight dehydration in the South Carolina summer.

Somewhere around 11:00 A.M. we met a new bitch: bends and thrusts. Bends and thrusts is a cruel, horrible exercise that took all of our effort and exhausted my entire body. We bent down, placed our hands on the floor by our boots, thrust our legs up and then out behind us until our feet landed straight back and on the ground. We paused for a fraction of a second, holding our bodies straight out like a plank of wood. Then immediately we jumped our feet back up to join our hands, quickly standing all the way up to the position of attention.

"Now fucking repeat! Don't stop, don't sigh, you pussies. Just drop and continue repeating until you are told to stop."

In my mind I was executing each one perfectly. But after a few, I was so exhausted that I knew I looked spastic and sloppy. I got dizzy by the third one. I hated them then, and I hate them now. If I believed in God, I'd bet there were bends and thrusts in hell.

We couldn't help but make noises. Seventy guys grunting in a concrete-walled room is loud. Grumbling, panting, and mumbling only made the drill instructors yell harder and walk faster among us. If we slowed, the DIs got down in our faces.

"What is your problem, recruit?! Did they send me a fucking retard?!"

If we sputtered or stalled, they were right there, the world's most hostile service-station attendants, applying insults as jumper cables.

"Fuck that deck, Private! Grind your needle dick in that bitch. Fuck that motherfucking deck with your sorry-ass soul!"

McKinnon quickly hopped down next to me. He left his butt sticking up in the air and maneuvered his face right next to mine. He turned his head at a crazed, monstrous angle so he could get it under my head. He rested his fingertips on the ground, looking as if he were prepared to spring up in an attack.

"What the fuck do we have here?!" I hoped he referred to nothing more than my slow pace.

Then it was over. One burst, and he was off to hassle someone else.

When the DIs could see that we were struggling to keep up, it fueled their criticism that we were unworthy to handle this training. They preyed on the weak, and my biggest fear was that I was the weak. I pushed harder and kept pushing—not to be noticed, but to stay unnoticed, to keep them away from me. Even when I thought I couldn't go on, I kept going.

I wanted to raise my hand and say "Sir, excuse me, sir, but could you weigh me right now? I might not be fit to handle recruit training." I was sure that I had lost weight during this initial induction process. The words from the doctor at the enlistment processing station bounced around inside my head: "Unfit for recruit training." I was ready to concede defeat. At least my underweight status would be a reason to leave with my head held high; it wouldn't appear to be a cowardly desertion. As I was led out, I'd look at the others and shrug with a look that said, "What can I do? They have rules."

But that's what everyone would expect. That idea flashed in my head like a warning light. I shut it off and returned my focus to the exercises.

We were out of breath, exhausted, and dripping with sweat. McKinnon once again stalked the aisle of the squad bay.

"This is your family for the next thirteen weeks, privates. Me, Sergeant Hutchins, or Sergeant Andrews are in this house with you at all times. Sometimes you will have the pleasure of all of us on your ass at the same time. Cherish those times, privates. We all could be doing something a lot more fun than babysitting your pathetic civilian butts."

He motioned to the front square area I had seen when we came in. It looked bare and cold.

“My office is at the front of this quarterdeck. If you need to talk to me, you must ask permission to speak to me. The same with Sergeant Hutchins and Sergeant Andrews. Do not come up and start flapping your goddamn jaw. You will approach us and ask permission to speak, in this exact manner: ‘Private Dicklicker requests to speak to Senior Drill Instructor Staff Sergeant McKinnon.’ If you fuck it up, which you faggots will, I will not answer you. If a motherfucking miracle occurs and you get it right, I might—again, might—tell you to proceed with your question. Do you understand?!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“If you need to take a piss, I don’t want to hear that shit. You want to be goddamn Marines, you better learn the fucking language. You ask me if you can speak first. Then you inform me that you need to make a ‘standing head call.’ That is what we call a piss, privates. And if you need to take a shit—we are on a tight schedule, so everything is my goddamned business—I’ll decide if you can do that. You will ask to make a ‘sitting head call.’”

I looked at Dale, wanting him to see me and throw out a lifeline of a smile, but his eyes were locked straight-ahead. I hoped that he was taking really good notes and would later interpret all of this nonsense into understandable language for me. We would need a code or signal so that I could get his attention at all times without using only my mind.

“If you have an urge to piss or shit in a motherfucking bad way, tell me that. Ask me for permission to make an ‘emergency sitting head call’ so I will know to call the authorities and clear a toilet for your goddamn flabby ass so you do not mess up my uniforms.”

“They look that fucking stupid,” Andrews interjected.

McKinnon kept rolling.

“If I give you a chance to make a head call, do not speak to me—just fucking go. Now, when I tell you to, you will fall out and walk—and I do mean walk, you assholes—up this squad bay and through that wide-ass door across from my office and take a piss or shit or whatever the fuck you have to do in there. When you get this kind of chance, take it. You will learn that your time is my time, and my time is whenever the fuck I want it to be.

“Fall out into the head, privates!”

I did need to pee. We broke our position of attention and flooded into the center area toward the quarterdeck. I was relieved. It would be great to sit down alone and isolated, even in a bathroom stall, to gather my thoughts.

With seventy boys rushing into one bathroom, I maneuvered past the others using the skills I'd learned as a kid to deftly navigate through the crowds at Mardi Gras.

I entered the room and froze. An eight-foot-long cement trough blocked my path—and ability to pee. There were already at least nine guys jammed around it, freely pulling out their penises like hoses and confidently releasing their stream of piss before they'd even bellied all the way up to the edge. The tile walls knocked every sound around, turning lively chatter into taunts and the hiss of streaming piss into jeers.

There was no way I was going to wedge myself into that pack. I've always been suspicious of men able to walk up to a communal urinal and pull out their dick. They brashly brandish their penis about and demand that it pee on command. And it always does. I want to be that type of man, but as soon as I hear a brave river of urine pouring out of what sounds like a very wide opening from a surely bigger cock, my own member pulls back. Some mean little insecure elf that lives in my brain turns the faucet off, and I'm unable to pee.

Then I have to flee the scene. I act like I've just finished peeing. I make a big move like I have to fold my humungous penis in half in order to coax it with a shove back into my pants, and I swagger away like a cowboy fresh off a horse. Moments later, I'm back in the lobby of wherever I am, hating myself, jiggling my leg and still needing to pee.

So I kept walking past this trough of terror—I always used a stall anyway, no matter where I was. I walked through the cavernous room along with several other kindred privates who must have seen the crowd at the urinal.

The clicks of unfastening brass belt clasps reverberated like tinny gunfire. I saw an opening in the wall on my left and turned into it. My jaw dropped open and my heart slammed to a stop.

What I saw is a horror still fresh in my mind. The Marine Corps should have been legally obligated to show this on the recruiting tape.

A twenty-foot-square room lined with toilets. Just toilets. All around the walls. No stalls. One pot next to another pot next to another pot, ad infinitum. Simple, white, commercial-grade toilets and rolls of toilet paper lying on the ground. I knew the toilet paper would be as rough as the scene before me. I froze just inside the room, taking it all in. My bare-ass butt sitting on an exposed, bare-ass toilet in front of dozens of other recruits was a shitload of not-gonna-happen.

Recruits were dropping their pants and sitting down like this was the way they'd used the bathroom their entire lives. I'd travelled, I'd been to summer camp, with its shared facilities. I'd seen men having sex on the streets of New Orleans at Mardi Gras. But this? This was not normal. And these guys were acting like they had been raised in a house with more than one toilet in a bathroom.

The Marine Corps immediately instilled in me a remarkable ability to hold my pee.

I left that toilet room in disgust—partly at myself for not feeling comfortable enough to do something others had no problem doing. What was wrong with me that I couldn't pull my pants down, sit on a toilet, and crap in front of total strangers? Common decency was being flushed away in there as if it were . . . well, shit.

I'd return in the middle of the night, when these freaks would be sleeping.

Dale found me and led me to a wall along the hallway.

"How you doing?" he asked.

"I don't know. I feel like I'm sticking out. Someone's going to find out. I shouldn't be here."

"That you're gay?" he asked. "Or not Marine material?"

"I look ridiculous," I said.

"You look like everybody else!" he said as he rubbed my head. His smile was reassuring. "Nobody knows what they're doing. This is all craziness. The Air Force was nothing like this. You can do it. I'm here."

"I'm freaking out. Why do they have to be so mean?" I asked. "Don't you dare go anywhere."

"Where the hell could I go?" he reminded me.

In high school, Dale and I sneaked into the R-rated movie *Blazing Saddles*. Every time he laughed, he punched me in the arm. I had bruises for a week.

Standing there in the hall, he punched my arm. "I'm right here. When we're old we'll remember all this shit. If you need me—find me. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. Just don't hit me. I got enough to worry about."

He punched me hard as he left.

The drill instructors rushed past me into the bathroom, yelling at everyone, "Clear out of my motherfucking head and get back on line."

When we had all returned, McKinnon shouted, “When I give the command, you will fall out, reach into your footlockers and grab your pad of paper and a pencil and get right back on line. Do you hear me?!”

“Sir, yes, sir! “

Once that was accomplished, we were ordered to drag our footlockers to the center area and set them up in an orderly pattern. Images of flag-draped coffins I’d seen on ABC News—and never thought much of—flashed in my mind. I remembered what boot camp might lead to. McKinnon snapped me back to the present with his command to sit cross-legged in front of these makeshift desks.

“You will each write a letter to whoever the fuck back home misses you. I don’t give a rat’s cock if it’s your mommy, your sister, or your goddamn next-door neighbor. Just write on that sheet of paper that you are alive and happy and made it safe. Don’t be writing anything in there about being mistreated, or I will make that dream come true. Begin!”

My hand was shaking; I was nervous. I wanted to put down in writing exactly how I felt and how bizarre this entire process was, but the best I could do was hope that someone back home would find my subversive hints in this letter and come rescue me, or at least have some goddamn sympathy for my circumstances. Were they sharing a toilet in solidarity tonight? Did they eat garbage?

“May I remind you, privates, that you asked for this? No one put a gun to your head and made you sign that paper. You are here of your own accord. If there is anyone here that was forced at fucking knifepoint to sign up to enlist in my Marine Corps, stand your ass up.”

This seemed like a great chance. Someone seriously should throw me on some scales. I bet I’d dropped ten pounds. I glanced around at my fellow recruits. I guessed I looked like them but I didn’t feel like them. I expected someone to haul me up and out of the room. I felt less than everybody in the room. I cheated, I lied, and if anyone found out, they’d hate me before giving me a chance. Just like in the outside world. Why did I do this?

I waited for someone to stand up then I would too. Surely one of these guys had been tricked into joining. But no one even looked remotely inclined to stand up. We had all signed a contract and agreed to commit to a term of some length. Unless I broke a law and served time in military jail, I’d have to serve my time in my platoon.

And I'd have to do more than just that. Both Dale and Sgt. Evans had made it clear to me that I'd need to keep up physically. If I didn't, I'd be dropped from this platoon and taken to an extreme platoon that exercised non-stop in order to get recruits in the shape required. This could separate me from Dale. I had total faith in his physical ability, but mine was undeveloped. I was suddenly aware that all of those years of avoiding physical activity might have a cost.

I looked over at Dale. He was alert but I could tell not alarmed, and I was able to find a useful speck of calm from his being right across from me. I held on to that life preserver. I put my head down and began to write the letter.

I promised my family that if they wrote me back often, I would be grateful forever. Our contact with the outside world had come to a screeching halt when we stepped off that plane and onto the bus. We had no newspapers, radio, or television. Time wasn't standing still, but others were handling it for us while we were otherwise engaged.

At least somewhere, soon, my loved ones would begin reading my letters. My mouth was dry, but I licked the envelope really well and pressed it closed, hard.

Hutchins rushed into the squad bay, yelling for us to fall outside. We hustled onto our feet and out the door as quickly as we could, which wasn't quick enough. Andrews and Hutchins both screamed and yelled at us to move faster faster faster! Any yell from the DIs scrambled us like eggs. Not knowing what the plan was or where we were going made me feel stupid, but I stuffed my letter in a bucket Hutchins held and ran out with everyone else.

As we crammed back into the stairwell and spilled out onto the street, I remembered what they said was true—I did ask for this. I repeated that in my head with each step, chiding myself. Our loose bodies eventually rattled into a platoon formation, toy soldiers placed by a fumbling child. In the surreal haze, I stood at attention waiting for the next command. This wasn't a game.

7. Sharing One Brain

I hate boxer shorts. Briefs keep dangling bits tight and in place. Being yelled at by three Marines had the same effect on my testicles, but my penis was free to swing around in my trousers because of the loose underwear. I hadn't been aware of it when I was struggling to drag my sea bag, but now, as McKinnon marched us back down the street, I was mortifyingly conscious of the fact that my penis was hitting my leg with each step. As I kicked my foot out for the next step, the penis went out too, and sometimes my balls followed—and sometimes, they stuck to my leg. It was those sometimes that drove me crazy. I didn't have the freedom to reach down and adjust while marching. Ironically, thanks to the free-flowing boxers, the Marine Corps had given my genitals all sorts of freedom. Almost.

All the movement caused . . . feelings—normally a great feeling—but here, that was my worst fear. Just today I had seen more well-built torsos, enviable penises, and firm, round butts than I'd seen in my entire life. There was forbidden fruit everywhere I looked, and to even smile was out of the question, much less appear sexually aroused.

There is a time and place for everything, they say. Walking down the street in Marine Corps boot camp is neither the time nor the place for a boner. I missed briefs.

I saw the chow hall in the distance and guessed it was lunchtime. The drill instructors were calling every shot; they told us when to stand up, sit down, pee, and eat.

I entered the mess hall with a fresh attitude. The day had been chaotic, and strangely enough, even with all of the brittle sounds in the chow hall—the clanging of the metal trays, the clinks of silverware, the Marine cooks yelling at each other, and the recruits dishing up the food—it was a more familiar chaos than the squad bay. I'd hoped the food would be better than at breakfast, but it wasn't. It was slop. Bad slop.

I stayed close to Dale and ate next to him, with our platoon. Andrews and Hutchins ate the same food we did, just at a different table. They took turns slinging comments our way, from “Eat your chow” to “Shut the fuck up.”

We only had a few minutes to eat. Not a problem, since the bad food combined with the less-than-hospitable hosts made enjoying a leisurely lunch impossible. As I approached the trash cans and the dishwashing area, I looked around for Andrews. I lucked out. Only Hutchins was nearby. Seemingly in the clear, I tilted my tray to scrape the remaining food into the trash.

I never had a chance. The tray was arrested mid-tilt by Hutchins. I shot my eyes at my tray, hoping to use my mind to force the food to disappear, then flashed my eyes up at Hutchins, wishing I were invisible too.

“My chow ain’t good enough for you, boy? What’s your name?”

This was the worst question he could ask. Almost.

I froze. Hutchins was still holding my tray. So was I. I left one hand on my tray and jerked my other down to my side and stood at an awkward position of attention.

“Sir, Private Cope, sir!”

“Private Cope.” He drawled my name out as if trying to ruin it. “You are one skinny motherfucker. You better eat every bite of this goddamn chow so you don’t fucking die on me.”

I hesitated before I resumed eating. That was a mistake—at least this close to a garbage can. As the flash of realization—Private Cope hates the chow; Cope doesn’t want to eat the chow—hit Hutchins’s eyes, I did the only thing I could to prevent disaster: I steadied my tray with my hand and began eating the scraps with my fork. As I shoved the food in my mouth, associations of the muck I had dug out of this very garbage can earlier in the day haunted me.

Hutchins’s eyes filled with pure rage as I ate. If he didn’t make me eat from the garbage can, I thought he might hit me. I could see it; it would be so quick and easy just to reach up and pop me. Maybe he wouldn’t even get caught. I shoved the slop in my mouth, barely chewing. If I hadn’t learned my lesson the first time—and apparently I hadn’t—I’d learned it now. I’d be eating every bite from now on.

I hadn’t even swallowed, but I dropped the tray on the conveyor belt and met Hutchins’s eyes for a second before I ran out of the building to join the others. He didn’t stop me, so I supposed he was releasing me from the chow hall. What I wasn’t sure of was if he would remember my name. I hoped he wouldn’t.

Before we had all made it back through the door of our squad bay, McKinnon's voice boomed out from his office. "Two sheets and a pillowcase and get on line!"

I tore back to my rack and found a stack of folded cotton sheets with a pillowcase resting on top of an olive-green wool blanket. My hand touched the blanket. It was scratchy. Yuck. I snagged the sheets and ran back to the line. We all presented the sheets in front of us on open palms. Some of the boys had also grabbed the wool blanket and held that, too.

In two seconds, McKinnon materialized next to me, in front of the guy I shared a bunk with—the frightened Pritchett. He stared at Pritchett for a second, tilted his head, then leaned over into my face.

"You better school your bunkie."

I got busted taking a few seconds to decipher bunkie.

"A bunkie, Private," he said, then stood straight to address the room, "is not your boyfriend, faggots. It's the recruit you share a rack with." McKinnon waved his arm to indicate everyone in the platoon. "Meet your goddamn bunkies, boys! You'll be spending a lot of time together."

Pritchett was next. McKinnon stepped close so Pritchett wouldn't miss his quiet, threatening undertone. He pointed at what Pritchett was holding.

"What the fuck is that?"

We didn't know which questions were rhetorical and which he wanted us to answer. We never would.

"Sir, a blanket, sir?" Pritchett replied, voice full of surprise that his senior drill instructor didn't know what a blanket was.

Before Pritchett had even finished his sentence, McKinnon's entire body bolted up off the ground an inch in outrage.

"What's your name, recruit?!"

"Sir, Private Pritchett, sir!"

McKinnon jerked the blanket out of Pritchett's hands so hard, Pritchett rocked back and lost his footing. McKinnon threw it back on the bunk and ordered any of us who had grabbed a blanket to put the fucking blanket back on the rack and drop and give him twenty. I had not grabbed my blanket and felt amazingly smart, like I'd passed a test or solved a puzzle. The recruits on either side of me had grabbed their blankets, as had the guy across the aisle. Dale and I looked at each other with relief in our eyes—for once, we weren't lumped in with everyone else. It felt great to have correctly done something even so simple as listen to directions, but it felt

even better to not have to pay for others' mistakes. I shot a sideways glance at my bunkie, wondering if I'd randomly chosen the wrong partner. I needed someone stronger than me; I wasn't able to pick up anyone's slack.

We were instructed to make our beds. I'd only made a bed with a fitted sheet before, and from the dozens of white sheets flying around in the air, I guessed no one else had used a flat sheet as the bottom sheet either. But we were about to learn how.

"This is a group fucking effort, privates. You will help your bunkie, and he will help you. A unit is as strong as its weakest man, so pick your buddy up and carry him, if you have to."

Pritchett had the top bed, and I had the bottom. We made mine up first, and if I tugged the sheet away even an inch, he flinched and shot me a bug-eyed look. Had we not been scared out of our minds, you could have recorded the scene for a Three Stooges movie. I looked across the squad bay at Dale to see how he made his bed. Both his bunk and the bunk above his were already neat and tight; he'd done this in the Air Force, so his example was the best to follow.

McKinnon stood by our bunk and yelled out, "Unless you're nine fucking feet tall, you better start with the top bunk. If you make the bottom rack first, you boot-fuck it when you stand on it to make the top rack."

Hutchins interjected his advice in messy spurts. "Don't put your nasty boots on your clean sheets, you dumb shits."

That tip came in late, but at least he didn't stop us and make us do push-ups. We abandoned my mattress and jumped on the top rack right away. I tried to make the corners just like they wanted, at a forty-five-degree angle, but nothing was good enough. Every time I thought we were on the way to finishing, one of the DIs hollered at us to rip everything off and begin again. Over and over and over. We started over countless times.

"You'll learn to get shit right the first time, privates! You get one chance in combat."

Combat. Right. We were just making beds.

Andrews and Hutchins stomped up and down and darted in between the bunks, pausing to correct a fold or a wrinkle. Correcting meant yanking the sheets off and throwing them to the ground and ordering the sloppy recruit to begin bends and thrusts.

One recruit was ordered to stand at attention while a DI screamed in his face.

“You motherfucking idiot! You can’t make a goddamn rack. Look at these other privates figuring this shit out, and you are too fucking stupid!”

I looked up from my bed making; it was Baker again. As glad as I was not to be him, I found space outside my own anxiety to feel sorry for him. This wasn’t an easy task, and maybe he hadn’t ever made a bed.

“You just got your platoon blown up, asshole.” We were making a bed, not attacking Russia. What was the big deal?

Once the sheets were in place and the blankets on top, we had to fold the blanket exactly six inches back over itself to reveal a white border of sheet. The pillows slipped in the case as usual, but the open flap was tucked back into the pillow.

To get seventy-two beds perfectly made had seemed impossible. But after an hour, our beds were successfully dressed. The seemingly futile mass operation had yielded pretty good results. This base was run like a prison, with us as inmates doing the support work.

McKinnon went from bunk to bunk, checking the progress. He kicked Dale’s mattress. I knew Dale was pissed—he’d worked hard making his bed, and it looked perfect—but he limited his reaction to assuming the position of attention.

McKinnon walked on. “You recruits all gotta work together, no matter how you got in here. Some of you think you got your shit squared away, and some of you took a judge up on his offer and came in here instead of going to jail. I know who you are—but your fellow recruits don’t. Keep it that way.”

I risked a glance up and down the room, hoping to determine who was guilty. I wanted to be extra nice to any car thieves or burglars or murderers. I saw two black guys immediately lower their heads. I made assumptions.

In the late 1970s, racial integration was a beacon of hope for some, but still a fresh wound for others—both black and white.

The black kids I attended school with in Texas had generally been nice. My father worked at a radio station that played soul music, and I hung around one African-American DJ, Irv Jackson. His boldly mod clothes and huge hair fascinated me as much as his deep, rich radio voice. He was my friend.

As an example of the racial hostilities of the time, once, someone anonymously poured an entire can of red paint over his car as he was inside on the air, playing records and making people feel good with his voice. My

parents didn't let me see it, but I knew my friend's prized baby blue Grand Prix was effectively covered in blood. Later Irv looked at me with dulled eyes and lied through his flashy smile that it didn't matter.

I knew a white person had slung that paint, I heard my dad say so. But at the end of the day, I went home to sleep peacefully in my all-white Texas neighborhood.

On my first day in boot camp, with these new guys, I didn't mean to, but of course I made assumptions. If a black boy looked mean, I was afraid of him. I don't know where prejudice comes from. Perhaps fear.

McKinnon stopped at my rack and jerked the top sheet back.

"Six inches, Private. Use a fucking ruler if you have to."

Once he was gone, Pritchett and I repaired my fold to the six inches. We were the labor force that supported ourselves. It made sense; if the military budget needed room for guns and ammunition, there was no money for maid service. Given the surly attitude of the drill instructors, I certainly didn't expect them to make the beds.

"Grab your extra pair of boots, a tin of polish, and get on line!" Andrews was addressing us now. I watched McKinnon retreat to his office and slam the door.

As I stood there with my eyes frozen in front of me, boots in one hand and a tin of polish in the other, I wanted to just sit down and start—polishing boots is not a difficult concept. But I was smarter than that. We didn't move until ordered to move. I'd learned.

Andrews started a brief soliloquy—from him, a virtual ode to military equipment.

"Your equipment must be cared for. Your body is equipment; you take care in making your rack properly so you can rest your pathetic bodies on it. When you get your rifle, that is equipment and must be taken care of."

Hutchins interjected, without interrupting his pacing, "When you recruits get to the rifle range, you better not shoot somebody."

I didn't even know what the rifle range was, but I made a note that getting shot was a possibility.

Andrews continued, "You will polish your boots like you're fucking in love with them. I want you shining, privates. Do you understand?!"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

We sat on our footlockers and polished our boots. Or, rather, boot. We did one at a time. Rubbing the polish in a circular motion over and over the

slick leather produced a shine pretty quickly. On the one boot.

The other boot taunted me, begging me to just reach out and grab it. Only after about an hour of polishing the first boot were we commanded to switch. Then we polished the second boot. I learned.

I'd received so much information in the past twenty-four hours. Lessons can be doled out in spoonfuls, allowing the recipient to chew each bite. They can be ladled out in one big sloppy serving, granting no time to digest. When I was six and learning to swim, I could have listened to a swimming teacher explain the physics behind floating. I could have studied his charts and graphs about why movement propels one through the water. But the swimming teacher just picked me up and threw me in the pool. I swam.

The Marines threw us in the pool.

This is not to say that we didn't receive personal, individualized instruction on occasion. Andrews was quieter than Hutchins and would lean down and whisper specific information right into our ears: "If I see you look up at me one more goddamn time, I will jerk your fucking head off, shit down your neck, then personally kick your motherfucking ugly head back to your mama."

Dramatic. Explicit. Compelling.

Like all my lessons in the Marines.

8. Green, Green, Or Green

McKinnon knew when to yell and when to soften his tone to be most effective. When he shouted out his command to stand on line after dinner, I jumped to as if saving the world depended on my total and immediate obedience. But once we got there, he lowered his voice.

“We are a family now, recruits. Move your fucking gourds side to side and look at each other. I don’t want any fucking discord in here. There’s no more black or white—you’re all green. Light green, dark green, and in-the-fuck-between green. Got it?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

Walking down the line and meeting our eyes as he passed, he made it clear that we would do everything together and as a fucking unit. We were not to look around at other fucking recruits on the base. We were to worry about each other, not strangers.

McKinnon delivered his after-dinner speech alone; Andrews and Hutchins weren’t there. With only McKinnon on staff in the squad bay, the speech felt more fatherly and less like a group assault or family intervention.

He told us to strip, grab our bar of soap, and come back to the line with our towel wrapped around our waist. I hesitated for a moment, but bent over and began unlacing my boots. The others were ripping their boots off quickly. To avoid earning special attention for being the last to complete this assignment, I tried to pick up my pace. But when I got to my last item of clothing—my boxers—I put my fingers under the waistband and eased them down with the hesitation normally reserved for wading into cold water.

I wrapped my towel around me tightly and looked down the line of boys stripped of the uniformity granted by the green camouflage. Now there was no green, only black mixed among the white. I was glad to hear McKinnon’s race theory; I still perceived black people as a “them” among “us,” and my experiences living in New Orleans made “them” a threat. I needed to get comfortable quickly and think of all the other recruits as simply roommates and fellow Marines. If I accepted everyone else, perhaps they’d accept me.

McKinnon shouted an order: “Right, face!” We all turned to face our right. “Forward, march!”

My platoon-slash-family began an orderly procession into the bathroom. I entered the head, glanced down at the urinal trough on my right, looked left and saw the horrific room of toilets, and kept walking. I heard the showers running before I entered, and robotically copied the boys in front of me, who were removing their towels and hanging them on hooks outside the showers. As if making a mental note of where I was parking my car in a lot, I noted the approximate spot my towel hung so I could grab it quickly when I got out of the shower.

I had never played team sports, had no locker-room experience, and certainly had not showered with other guys like this. The group shower scene wasn’t in the recruitment video. I imagined little privacy curtains, with everybody keeping their body on their side. During the past two weeks, in preparation for the Marines, I’d focused solely on getting in and gaining weight. I hadn’t thought for even a second that showering with seventy other young men might make me anxious. If I had, I would have done massive amounts of push-ups to improve my chest.

Eyes ahead, I entered the shower room. It was about twenty feet square; five simple shower heads were spaced over each of the four walls. We walked in a circle from showerhead to showerhead until eventually we got cranked back out the door we came in through. McKinnon, fully dressed but somehow impervious to the spraying water, stood in the center of the room and watched. I paused underneath a showerhead to rub the water all over me, then ran the bar of soap over my chest and face.

“Keep moving! Calgon isn’t taking you the fuck away, recruits!”

Left with only a vacant stare for protection, I saw pecs firming under chest hair as the other boys reached up to scrub the velvet of their freshly buzzed heads. I looked down at my flat, hairless chest as I rinsed the leftover clippings from the back of my own sweaty neck. I glimpsed the thick, curly pubic hair of the boys standing next to me. I looked down at the thin wisps plastered limply to my own unimpressive penis. The other boys soaped under their balls and down their butt crack. They bent over as they picked up each foot and washed between their toes. I wanted both their outward manly appearance and whatever confidence they had to bathe freely with others watching.

I marched to the next showerhead, willing whatever soap rinsed down from my chest to take care of my lower body. Not looking directly at the other recruits—but not not looking at them—I thought to myself, Sure, I routinely shower with seventy other men. In fact, I insist on it.

The recruit in front of me was black, and I was a little nervous around him—the black kids in my New Orleans high school often hit white kids just to hit them. One quick strike, and always when no teacher was around. But McKinnon was in the shower, watching, so I relaxed a bit, replacing my anxiety with curiosity; I'd never seen a black man naked. I didn't even realize that he would be black all over, void of a tan line like the one that I'd burned into my body with year after year of swimming and sunning. He rotated under the water, and a quick glimpse took in his crotch. His pubic hair, even wet, was a small mass of tight curls, so different from mine.

The walls were completely tiled, and made the sound of the shower spray and McKinnon's voice reverberate.

"Keep moving, privates. Wash your nasty bodies and don't forget your assholes, you fucking morons."

Despite my discomfort at being naked in front of so many men, other thoughts started to occupy my mind. The penises. Seeing a lot of penises is probably on every gay man's bucket list, and even heterosexual men like to check out the competition. I'm sure that a group shower is the birthplace of both athlete's foot and penis envy.

Our neat loop through the showers was interrupted as several more recruits shoved into the room. A good-looking white boy scurried past me and settled on the shower in front of me. I recognized him as Jhimchek—Hutchins had stumbled to pronounce his name earlier. Jhimchek repeated it twice; Hutchins kept messing it up.

"I don't speak all that Polack shit; I'll call you Chek." I guessed Polish and Czech were all Greek to Hutchins.

I hadn't planned on ending up next to Jhimchek's muscled farm-boy body in the shower, but sometimes that's just how these things go. He confidently grabbed his cock and soaped it up. Perhaps this was his idea of getting it clean, but it was my idea of public masturbation. I prayed I wasn't getting hard, but didn't look down in case I made a mental and physical connection. I saw his long, soft penis with the head completely covered by foreskin, and recalled seeing an uncircumcised penis once before—and then, only in a few vintage pornographic photos. I wanted to reach out and touch it; it

looked like it was wrapped up like a to-go sandwich. All I had to do was extend my hand for a quick grab, just to feel the difference between his and mine.

However, the resulting scream would be like a siren, and I'd be beaten to a bloody mess. I'd have to leave the military ashamed, and on the first day. These easily predictable results kept my hands busy washing my own body. I wasn't a bold gay teenager prior to coming into the Marines; I wasn't about to start a predatory gay career here. Or ever.

As I stepped gingerly from showerhead to showerhead, I kept my head down. I avoided bending over, and definitely disregarded the direct order from McKinnon to wash my nasty asshole.

Although I had been looking at other penises before, now I was completely focused on my own penis—and not because I was comparing size or shape, but because I feared arousal. With each step I made a mental note of any feeling, movement, or swelling of my penis.

I can get hard thinking about other penises—hence the gay thing—but one sure way to bring an on erection is to touch my penis, especially with any kind of lubricant, such as soap. Trust me, this experiment had been done repeatedly, and always with the same fantastic result. The last thing I wanted to do was pop a boner while in the shower.

I emerged from my shower—or sexuality test—and looked for my towel among the few hooks that now held dozens of other towels. We'd written our numbers on them. My "13" was glaringly obvious. It dangled there alone except for its bad-luck association, as if it had been the last to be picked for the team. How very fitting. I snagged it and wrapped it around my waist and began walking back to the squad bay. I was dripping wet, but would dry off near my bunk, where the double-stacked bunk beds offered a minimal screen of privacy.

I watched the boys walk in front of me, using the towels to dry themselves off, not missing a step as they deftly reached down to dry an ankle or confidently run the thin, cheap towel up their legs and across their balls. I could see penises and testicles dangling between legs; I grabbed my towel a little tighter, letting my hand rest just in front of my penis, as if to tell it to stay out of this for our own good.

I wasn't looking at any of my fellow recruits as sexual objects, hoping that they were gay. Precisely the opposite. I might not have known exactly what I was signing up for, but I wasn't looking for or expecting to meet a

boyfriend in here. I needed this training to be hassle-free, and it was becoming more of a mental obstacle and challenge for me to keep my sexuality secret. When I signed up, I honestly hadn't thought about the fact that I'd be living with these same seventy guys and under the scrutiny of three studly Marines around the clock. Or what that might feel like. It's easier to keep a secret if you only see someone once or twice or for a short time. I never acted macho to hide my homosexuality—that would look silly, and I didn't have the skills or deep voice to butch it up for thirteen weeks.

What I could do was exactly what I had learned to do after each of my dozen moves as a kid: know my audience and try to be appropriate and likable. The stakes were higher now.

I'd worried about hate my entire life. No one wants to be judged. I was only comfortable being gay as long as no one else was uncomfortable with it. I suspected that the overweight guys could have had the same obvious, cheap hate thrown at them as the black guys—their differences were outwardly visible. Maybe being gay was lucky; the DIs called the heavy boys fatbody or fat-ass or whatever they wanted. I'm sure it hurt to get hit with those names, even though they were thrown to help in a passive aggressive way—minus the passive. I felt almost guilty for having an invisible—or what I hoped was invisible—character distinction.

That said, I had to keep the distinction invisible. I had to make sure that I didn't let the word faggot visibly shake me. Technically, the heavy recruits had brought criticism upon themselves, and their problem was fixable. My problem was the opposite in both respects. I believe that I was born this way; I didn't eat Twinkies and become gay.

Once we were dried from our shower, we stood on line at attention in only our boxers. McKinnon walked up the center aisle, looking at us, pausing at every few men and assessing. His voice was calmer as he spoke. He asked Pritchett why he looked so scared.

"Sir, Private's just excited, sir," answered Pritchett. I hadn't had the chance to speak in third person yet, but I practiced in my head.

"Well, no screaming eagle shit, Private. My Marine Corps is the most exciting place to be in the world."

McKinnon told the first eight recruits standing near him on line that they were to be firewatch that night. He'd written one private's name on a sheet of paper, next to each hour of the night. Once he appointed a platoon scribe, that person would prepare the lists. Each private on firewatch would walk

around, dressed, guarding us and the squad bay, for one-hour shifts. He pointed to a clock on the wall, identical to the one in every schoolroom, and he instructed the guard to wake up the next recruit five minutes before his shift was over and then go to bed once the other boy relieved him. And so on.

“Someone’s always watching you, privates. Here, and when you’re out in the Corps.” Another good lesson.

We were to stay in our beds and not talk to each other. We could get up only to use the head, and I planned on doing that. McKinnon would be in his office, sleeping, and was to be awakened by the firewatch if the need arose.

“And no fucking need better arise.”

The first recruit pulled his trousers on and was lacing his boots while I thought how glad I was not to be him. Those standing guard duty wouldn’t get a whole night’s sleep.

McKinnon finished his brief inspection and ordered us into bed. We lay there in a modified, reclining position of attention, bodies under the covers but our arms outside and on top of the green blankets. He walked around the squad bay, peering into bunks. I forced my eyes to close. I listened to his voice, tracking his moves and placing him in the room in case he got near me and pounced. It wasn’t until his voice trailed off and he commanded us to sleep, closing his office door, that I dared to open my eyes.

Wound up and not ready to sleep, I kept my eyes straight ahead on the bottom of Pritchett’s bunk above me, but my thoughts careened all over the room as if my brain were a pinball machine.

I tilted my head up and in the direction of Dale’s bunk. I sat up on my elbows and saw Dale with a huge grin on his face. He lay back down quickly and seemed to be trying to sleep. I was too worked up to try; I’d been counting on talking to him, just to check in and make sure everything that was happening was normal. I looked around the room. It was dark outside, but huge streetlights shone in the windows.

Several of the guys got up to use the head right away. They were probably just as horrified as I was at the communal urinal and the open toilet room. Eventually I gently pulled my blanket and sheet to the side, slid out of bed, and softly walked in the bathroom.

All of the toilets were occupied. Guys just sitting there, some whispering in the dark. I turned and left, stopping at the urinal. I had one end all to myself. I steeled my mind, determined to pee quickly and confidently lest the other two boys at the trough think I was there to look at their dicks.

I had to force it, trying not to audibly grunt. I managed to eke out a little stream, enough to ease my bladder through the night. I tapped it and stuffed it back in the baggy boxers, and walked back out into the squad bay.

In the dark, I had to look carefully to make sure I found my own bunk; they all looked alike. Once I'd slipped back under the sheet, Dale appeared at the foot of my bed, peering through the bars of the bed frame. He'd sneaked across the squad bay like he was visiting a prisoner. His friendly face was as calming as a file baked in a cake.

"Is this some crazy shit?" he asked.

I nodded with emphatically wide eyes. "I can't believe we're in here."

He slapped my blanket and hit my foot under the covers. "I can't believe you're in here! You're doing it, man! This is it." He hit my foot again.

"Ow. That's my foot."

"You okay?" He wasn't asking about my foot.

Of course I wanted to unload my anxious mind and tell him that this was crazy and dangerous. I wished I could tell him to simply look around—there were so many people in this room. Besides a few nights at camp when I was younger, I'd never slept in a room with more than a couple other people. Now I was sleeping in the same room with seventy strange guys—in every shade between white and black. I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't living in one big room. They really needed to make a longer recruitment video. To think that I'd be instantly comfortable and just drift off to sleep was ludicrous.

I'd been raised to believe that all men were created equal, but until this moment, all men had gone to their own homes at the end of each day to do whatever they usually did, and I had not been super curious to know what that was.

McKinnon's speech informing us that we were no longer any color other than varying shades of green made me look at the black recruits closer. Sharing bunk space with anyone at all was nerve-wracking, but I was also nervous about sharing space with black guys. I was afraid to sleep in the same room only because I associated them with the black kids back in New Orleans: the rough behavior I saw at school, the angry faces that jumped

into mine as we reached for the same plastic beads being tossed to the crowds during Mardi Gras. The black kids snatched the trinkets from me and my brothers, saying, “Whatchu gonna do, white boy?” They saw my answer in the zeros formed by my wide eyes.

There was an unavoidable hard edge where New Orleans put black right next to white. The mansions that fronted St. Charles Avenue hid the jumble of ramshackle houses only one block away.

In the 1970s, public high schools in New Orleans were segregated. Not by race—by gender. The administration claimed that the black boys gave the white girls such a hard time that this was the best decision for everyone’s safety.

That first day, I snuck through the halls. I watched a white boy get shoved into a corner by four black boys. “Lemme hold a quarter for ya, brah.” Before the cornered boy could answer, two of the extortionists jammed their hands into his pockets and took everything. I kept sneaking, trying not to be singled out.

I feared that my small, thin body—so different from the bodies of the older, more mature boys surrounding me in the halls—might be a target. My fears had me, on my way to lunch, meeting some rough boy who missed girls. I was too skinny to mount much of a defense if one of them pinned me against my locker, ran his hand over my cheek, and announced, with a feral grin, “Maybe, baby, I’m not missing girls so much.”

Up till now, I’d only had one real black friend: Jesse, a funny but tough-looking black kid who attended the same high school as me in New Orleans. Jesse kept his finger on the pulse of fashion with his huge bell-bottom pants, back pocket stuffed with a big cake-cutter comb to keep his giant Afro in a perfect, round, fluffy globe. His confident strut made his hair move in a floaty, slow-mo wave, as if under water. No one messed with me when I was with him. When he wasn’t with me, black boys hit me up for money almost as reflex when I walked past.

Jesse came home with me after school and ate with my family a couple of times a week. I wished we’d go to his apartment sometimes; I wanted to see it. He was too embarrassed to invite me. He lived in public housing, a high-rise complex, like those in New York City. He told me that if I walked into the projects, I’d get killed. That sounded so outrageous it made me want to do it to prove him wrong, but I didn’t.

I wished Jesse could see me now. I wished Jesse were there in case I needed him. Here I was in a squad bay, living with black guys, and I had no idea what to expect. How was I going to just go to sleep as if everything were normal? Being awake was nightmare enough. I focused on remembering a lesson from school: inside or outside, fear looks jumpy. The last thing I wanted was to actually look afraid—people who look fearful get picked on first.

I sent my eyes on a mini tour of the room, coming back around to Dale, who was still sitting at the foot of my bed.

“I’m fine,” I told him. “Better go to sleep.”

He winked, checked his left and right for safety, and dashed away. I knew he was proud of me for making it through the first day, and that felt reassuring. I needed that, and exactly at that moment.

Sounds woke me during the night. Guards changing, things rattling, boys whispering—all echoed by this bunker of a room. I don’t know how, but I drifted off in between those noises. I was exhausted. My mind was stripped beyond naked, all the way down to raw.

In that respect we were all the same.

9. This Is My Rifle; This Is My Gun

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Noise so loud that my sleeping body bolted upright of its own accord.

All three drill instructors shot into the squad bay and ricocheted from one side of the room to the other, banging garbage can lids together like cymbals.

“Get out of the rack! Get out of the rack!” they screamed over the clanging.

The sounds crashed in my chest as I scrambled out of bed, wary of the DIs marching around like part of a demented drum line. Their voices were louder, with a sharper edge than yesterday. They stomped their boots as they leaned inside the racks to yell at any slow-waking privates.

I steadied myself on line as I tried to figure out what we’d done during the night to earn this wrath. I blinked from the fluorescent lights. It was still dark outside.

The DIs did not stop banging the garbage can lids even when we were all standing totally still on line, at attention. I flinched as they passed. Pritchett trembled like a terrified chihuahua.

My instinct was to do whatever I could to calm down the DIs and stop this craziness—ask what was the matter, appeal to their sense of reason. Other recruits just struggled to wake up.

“Don’t you fucking rub your eyes, you lazy piece of shit! Don’t you move a goddamn muscle!”

I rarely set an alarm clock. An alarm is too much of a jolt and not the easy, natural way I prefer to wake up. Waking up to an alarm is completely counter-productive to a good night’s rest.

On this morning, I got a jolt of a different kind as I discovered a new fact about boxers: A man’s morning wood sprouts easily from the loose front flap. I saw several boners poking out of boxers and was happy not to be among those sleepyheads—most of them entirely unaware of their personal alarm clock of a hard-on. It may have still been dark outside, but in here it was evidently boing o’clock.

“Jesus Christ, privates! Put your goddamn dicks away. Don’t point your fucking hard-ons out at me,” shouted McKinnon.

From all the way across the squad bay, I could see that little factoid-spouting suck-up from the bus, Private Marks, his erection a plump bratwurst out of its package. Barely five feet tall, his body was in perfect, if miniature, proportion—except his cock, which hung long and thick even when soft, way past his balls. It had shocked me when I had seen it in the shower, because I had figured it would be teensy.

Hutchins waved his trash can lid at Marks’s crotch as if he were going to whack it down. “Put that little gun away, private. Nobody needs to see that shit.” The comment caused the offending engorged cock to deflate like a balloon. Thankfully without sound, and hopefully with no lasting mental scar.

The ultimate erection-killer is not a cold shower. It’s a Marine drill instructor striding up to you with a gruff voice, morning breath, and a trash can lid aimed to return your full salute.

They rushed us into the head to “shit, shower, and shave.” They chased two slow moving guys, Baker and Cooper, out of the squad bay like they were shooin’ chickens. That would never be me.

“Big day today—look pretty,” McKinnon sneered.

I grabbed my toothbrush, toothpaste, razor, and shaving cream and joined the manwave into the head. The urinal was crowded, the toilets were all full, and the sinks had several boys around each one.

We went about our various rituals in silence, most still reeling from the harsh wakeup. The drill instructors hovered in the sink area. Hutchins asked Pritchett if he missed his mommy. Andrews demanded to know if we all had faggoty dreams about him last night.

“Is that why you woke up with hard-ons, privates?”

I focused on finding a sink.

The DIs got as close to our faces as the razorblades did, offering critiques of our shaving speed. I had no technique and really no need to shave. My beard was soft and barely there on my chin. I checked to see if this morning’s garbage can wake-up call had scared it off.

As a kid, I’d heard that if I shaved emerging peach fuzz, my beard would be tougher and fuller. I’d lean in close to the bathroom mirror, tilting my face to better see what I had to work with. I was excited when I first saw a few light hairs on my upper lip. I sneaked foam, lathered my entire face,

and shaved everything. I shaved all the way up to my eyes in the hope of stimulating hair growth.

Later, I ran my finger along my shaved mustache, anxious to feel the five o'clock shadow I'd seen on other guys. Nothing. I checked every day and shaved the slightest reemergence of fuzz. Pamela Anderson's bikini line had never been tended so well. But I didn't get hairier, I just got cut.

I held out hope that one day my face would have the stubble and prickly beard that I found attractive on other men. It was one of the first representations of masculinity for me as a kid. The few naked men I had seen so far in my short life had boasted body hair, so I threw in the hope for that outward appearance of manhood, too.

Nevertheless, I ended up with blanks in my follicular arsenal.

I didn't want to be singled out by the drill instructors for not shaving, so I perfunctorily lathered my face and began to glide the razor across the invisible stubble. We were crammed in tightly. I ended up next to the Charlie Brown-headed recruit—Johns—so close that I could hear the razor hitting his whiskers. I was jealous of the scraping sound the razor caused as he dragged it up his neck and over his chin.

My eyes caught his catching mine looking at his face.

"Get your own mirror," he muttered.

I wasn't lusting after him. In this tight space I needed to throw up a shield, keeping lust the furthest thing from my mind. I sensed Johns was uncomfortable with me being in his space. As I perched my Dopp kit on the sink's edge, my own balancing act of looking disinterested began. We had to share a mirror, and I had to act naturally. I shoved in between Johns and the edge of the mirror and claimed some space. He continued shaving.

"Easy on the neck. You'll cut yourself," he advised.

I looked up into the mirror. Johns was smiling. He grabbed my razor and pushed my chin up so my head tilted back. I had to peer down my face hard to see what he was about to do. He dragged the razor up my neck, opposite of the downward stroke I'd started with. He handed the razor back to me.

"Go slow. Who the fuck taught you to shave?"

"Nobody."

Hutchins's face appeared in the mirror, scaring both of us. "Leave this private alone," he said to Johns. "Shave your own face, ya monkey."

Johns eased away from me a bit and kept shaving. I avoided looking at him in the mirror. I hoped neither of us was in trouble and that Johns wasn't

pissed at me. I quickly finished and was already leaving the head when Hutchins ordered us all back out to the squad bay to dress.

The shrill blast of a whistle preceded McKinnon into the bay. “Look around, recruits. Witness the horrible condition of my squad bay! It’s a goddamn clusterfuck!”

We glanced about groggily at the bare, pristine space. Andrews showed us where a mop bucket and mop lived, along with a pile of scrub brushes and rags. We all grabbed something and began mopping and scrubbing what looked to me like a clean room.

“Two sheets and a pillowcase and get on line!” Everyone stood frozen as he repeated the order, me for one hoping that it didn’t mean what it sounded like—that he wanted us to strip our beds. It didn’t seem necessary to start from scratch. I had purposely slept as neatly as possible.

Hutchins heckled us in his high, screechy voice. He often sprayed spit.

“Did you hear your senior drill instructor? Two sheets and pillowcase and get on line, assholes!” It’s always the spitters who use the letter S a lot.

McKinnon walked to the closest bunk, grabbed the blanket and sheets in one hand, and yanked them off, launching them into the air. The pillow sailed off the bed, landing in the center of the squad bay. We all rushed to strip our beds.

Our bay now looked like a war zone, and we held the casualties in our hands. McKinnon told us that our beds were to be made perfectly each day the very second we woke up.

We stood at attention, dazed and holding our sheets.

“How the fuck can you defend your country if you can’t even make a rack?” McKinnon complained. “In case it hasn’t dawned on you morons, everything is goddamned connected.”

He left the squad bay with a disgusted wave of his hand, telling Hutchins and Andrews to finish the job. They shook their heads in agreement with McKinnon’s summation of the shameful situation.

“Just fucking begin!” Hutchins ordered. There was a collective hesitation, and Hutchins spastically jumped up and down: “Bends and thrusts, privates!” We all fell to the floor at once, some still holding their sheets.

“You idiots haven’t learned yet?! When you get told to begin, you better stop and fucking begin! Did you dream you were in goddamn Disneyland last night?!”

Andrews casually stepped over a boy mid-thrust. I knew he'd gladly step on him. "Wake the fuck up, privates! This is the United States Marine Corps, and you will follow orders immediately and without question. You have pissed off your senior drill instructor. I suggest you unfuck this and make those fucking beds correctly, maggots. Now!"

We zoomed back to our racks, trying to make them up. I was confused, it was early, and the sheets were not cooperating. It was as if the DIs poured gasoline in the room, lit a match and locked us all in. No one knew what to do. We were bumping into each other and getting angry as we tried to remake the beds. Sheets fought against blankets. I'd only had one lesson, and trying to recall that under stress was kicking my ass.

I froze in place when I heard McKinnon's whistle ordering us back on line. He walked up and down the rows of beds, occasionally reaching in between two privates to yank sheets off a bunk. He threw a few into the center of the squad bay. How are we going to know which ones are ours if they're jumbled up? I thought.

"You recruits better learn. You heard the Marine Corps saying 'gung ho'? It means work the fuck together, privates. I don't need to see you assholes jacking off in my squad bay. Two sheets and a pillowcase and get on line!"

I rushed back and grabbed mine. Those with sheets tossed in the center tried to figure out which ones were their original sheets. Andrews jumped in the middle and shoved sheets at them randomly.

"You fucked up your sheets, assholes. Now you will sleep in somebody else's juice. Get it right, you nasty motherfuckers! Fly!"

I ran back to my bed. I leaned in and looked at Pritchett. Our eyes met as we flung the sheet over my bunk. His eyes were even wider than usual. I worried for him.

McKinnon yelled, "Two sheets and a pillowcase and get on line!" Line was drawn out into two syllables, maybe three. Pritchett looked at me, completely freaked out. I just tore the sheets off and took my position of attention on line.

"We can do this all day, privates." McKinnon strode up to a guy just a few feet from me.

"What's your name, recruit?"

"Sir, Private Webster, sir!"

"Webster, what is your fucking problem? I told you to work together. Privates, take a good look at this recruit."

We all stuck our heads out to look at Webster, glad we weren't him but knowing any one of us could be. Wait—he stood there fully dressed. We were still in our underwear.

“Webster took it upon himself to get his ass dressed when the rest of his unit wasn't on that step. This is the recruit that will get you all fucking blown up in battle. Follow this asshole and kiss your motherfucking ass goodbye.”

Hutchins hopped in. “He'll dance on your motherfucking graves, recruits.”

I had no interest in seeing Webster dance. He was a selfish fool and I didn't like him.

Andrews walked up to Pritchett. I certainly didn't want Andrews to get in my face, but I felt bad for Pritchett. Andrews leaned in close.

“Where the fuck are your sheets, Private?”

Pritchett looked back at his bunk, toward his sheets.

“Did I tell you to move your head?!”

Pritchett whirled his head back around. Andrews left to address the bigger audience.

“Until every goddamn rack is made perfectly, we will continue to grab two sheets and a pillowcase and get the fuck on line!”

McKinnon interrupted and commanded us to stop.

“Leave it as it stands! You let me down, privates. Your racks look like shit, and so do you. We have a schedule, so get fucking dressed. For the rest of the day I want you to remember that you are pigs and your squad bay looks like shit.”

He walked back to the quarterdeck and into his office. The door slammed after him, but his “Jesus Christ!” shook the large glass window. The room was more somber for the ensuing silence.

Andrews and Hutchins supervised our dressing, berating recruits' sloppy beds, or the way they laced their boots. I had considerable pre-boot-camp experience with putting on pants, slipping a T-shirt over my head, and lacing shoes, but the obstacles to getting dressed were almost insurmountable: if all seventy of us didn't do something exactly the way the DIs wanted, we had to start all over again.

“Too slow! Strip!”

I angrily tore my bootlaces out. These repeated exercises were teaching me two things: to try and get it right the first time, and to make careful note

of the guys that were repeatedly screwing it up. I needed to avoid those guys. Dale would be my only example of what to do; I had confidence in him because he knew how to do a lot of this already. So far, Baker and Webster seemed attached to each fuck-up. I figured I needed to stay clear of them.

I may not have known what a Marine was, but I came into boot camp with the awareness that I didn't want to be the one who held others back. The additional motivation of screaming and punishment was something I neither anticipated nor appreciated.

McKinnon strode out and ordered us to grab our silver-colored fiberglass helmets. They would protect our heads from the sun and weighed a lot less than the heavy metal ones used in combat, but they seemed like silly costumes. We kept them slung on the bedposts of our racks. I grabbed mine and put it on as we ran out of the building to form up to march to chow.

As we left on our attempt to march, we passed more platoons; I again noted the sharp precision of their marching. They all looked exactly alike, their helmets not bobbing, instead solid and steady. Their feet hit the pavement in sharp slaps as their boot heels struck the ground in perfect unison in response to their drill instructors' cue.

It was hard to keep my eyes to the front as I hoped we moved like that one day. Right now, we were spastic and amateurish. McKinnon's cadence helped me focus on my own attempt at marching. I'd walked before, but never with purpose or direction.

We were in four columns of about twenty guys each, with McKinnon out to the left side. Andrews and Hutchins were free to float among us.

McKinnon was telling us to swing our arms "six to the front and three to the rear." The numbers corresponded to inches. Some of the recruits had no concept of six inches, and their arms flew way out in front, almost shoulder height, creating a goose-step effect.

When arm-swinging was added to the task of "left, right, left," my mind swirled a bit, and I found myself swinging my arm and stepping out with the same leg, resulting in a stilted, Frankenstein walk. I was overthinking it. I did a little double-step with a hop to get back in sync, hoping no one mistook it for skipping.

We kept walking forward, and Andrews moved in and alongside Baker, who was a few guys in front of me. "What the fuck are you doing, Private?" Baker didn't answer. "What's your name, fuck-up?"

Baker stumbled with his feet and words. “B-baker, sir!”

Andrews put his face closer to Baker’s face as we all kept marching. “Just fucking B-baker?! You got dough under your helmet, Just B-baker?”

“No, sir!” Baker stammered out.

“Then when you answer me, asshole, the first thing out of your mouth better be ‘Sir.’ If I ask your name, you better start with ‘Sir, Private’s name is,’ you dumb son of a bitch.” Andrews turned his head back to the rest of us. “That goes for all of you dickheads.”

“Now what is your motherfucking name?”

There was a fatal second of hesitation. We all wanted to shout out, “Sir, Private Baker, sir!” but we knew better. Andrews grabbed Baker by the T-shirt and shoved him out of the line. I saw Baker’s silver helmet wiggling loosely on his head as he stumbled out of our ranks.

I turned my head back to see what was going to happen to Baker. I wasn’t the only one, because Hutchins yelled out in his squeaky Southern drawl, “You all best keep your eyes in your head, privates, and keep marching.” Hutchins had easily carried the thick accent with him from the deep, slow South, as he seemed unburdened by an education.

Andrews kept Baker in the back and marched alongside him. His running patter of corrections threw off our rhythm.

“Your left foot, Baker. If you hear motherfucking ‘left,’ your left foot hits the ground. If you hear ‘right,’ put your goddamn right foot down. That’s as hard as it gets. Two fucking choices.” I felt bad that Baker was being singled out. I’d never thought about something so seemingly simple. I’d walked thousands of casual steps before, but now I urgently needed a better than fifty-fifty chance of using the correct foot.

We stopped in front of a building with bars on the windows. I wondered why a building on a secure military base protected with gun-toting guards needed additional security.

A Marine came out, squinting in the sunlight. His voice didn’t have the rasp of a drill instructor’s but was still strong and authoritative.

“When you come in my Armory, privates, you will not speak,” he said. “You will sign your name, take the rifle that is handed to you, and proceed in a forwardly direction out my back door. Do not hesitate. Do not even fucking look at your rifle. Place it on your shoulder by the strap and fall into formation and wait for the rest of your platoon to gather. If I catch one of you touching your goddamn rifle without being told to do so, I will snap

your head off and shit down your neck. I am not your drill instructor and I do not care about you.”

He knocked his boot heels together and disappeared into the building.

I wanted to call after him that our drill instructors didn't care either, and that they, too, had offered to shit down my neck.

As we formed up into a line to enter the Armory, I sensed the excitement within our platoon. Some of the guys craned their necks to look ahead down the line. I hadn't realized they'd be giving us our own gun.

I had very little experience with guns. When Dale and I were fifteen, we spent Thanksgiving at his grandparents' farm in Mississippi. It was isolated, and there wasn't much to do; they suggested we go hunting.

We walked alone in the dead, quiet winter woods. The grey sky made the mission feel extra serious. We stealthily whispered, making our breath steam out like smoke signals.

Dale pointed up at the top of one tree, “See that?” My eyes followed his finger up the tree trunk, out across the bare branches to a thick cluster of leaves and twigs woven into a big squirrel's nest.

“If we shoot up in there, maybe we'll scare some out, and we can chase them down.”

Perhaps this was a more aggressive style of hunting than I'd read about in romanticized tales of men bonding while hiding in trees or bushes, patiently waiting for hours for a bear to stumble into their line of fire. I agreed to Dale's plan, and Dale placed the .22 against his shoulder. The sudden pop pop of the gun broke the stark silence of the woods.

A couple of squirrels jumped out, ejected from their nest exactly like the bullets from the rifle. They raced down the tree and away from us in different directions, so fast that leaves flew up in their wake.

Dale expertly followed one squirrel's escape with his aim, then shot. We ran over to the squirrel, and indeed it was shot, but not dead. He lay there among the leaves, his eyes still open, and I wondered what he felt and what I looked like to him. Dale told me to finish it with my BB gun, but I didn't like hunting now.

Without thinking less of me, Dale mercifully ended the squirrel's pain. He picked the squirrel up by his tail, and we walked back in the same silence that brought us out.

We handed the dead squirrel to Dale's grandfather, who told us that he'd skin it for dinner.

“On this farm, we eat what we kill.”

It would have been nice to have known this in advance. Now that I was in boot camp, I could think of other things needing advance alerts. In the future, before making major decisions, I needed to pause and remember that decisions can carry serious consequences. Like joining the Marines.

Dale’s grandmother placed the whole, intact squirrel, deep fried in a light brown batter, in front of us next to a relish tray with sliced tomatoes and green onions. A BB was visible on the squirrel’s forehead, poking up through the batter. I took one tentative bite just to honor him. The meat tasted like chicken, but it was dry and tough. I was glad; I didn’t want to like it.

The private in front of me inched forward. I followed the line of recruits as we snaked inside the building, our right shoulders against the wall, leaving room for the drill instructors to monitor this process. Cards were being passed back, over the shoulder, from one private to the next.

McKinnon informed us that he would tell us when to proceed, just like he did with the boots and marching and peeing. He told us to write our first name in the slot that said “First Name.”

“If one motherfucker in here asks me what to write down as first name, I will not only personally kill you but I will jack off on your grave,” Andrews jeered. “There’s always one stupid faggot in every bunch.”

Once I filled that in, it was really hard not to jump on over and fill in “Last Name,” because I was pretty sure I knew that answer. However, here in the Marine Corps, I couldn’t be absolutely sure; I waited.

Andrews’s face turned hot red as he buzzed up beside Private Johns, who was in front of me. Andrews’s veins protruded on his forehead as he leaned in close to Johns’s face. Johns was from the Bronx and had a tough-guy accent that matched his stubble. He looked strong and had an easy, gentle smile. Andrews was smaller than Johns, in every way except his voice. Holding his mouth a centimeter from Johns’s face, Andrews funneled a deafening scream deep inside Johns’s ear.

“Are you deaf, asshole?! Did you not hear your senior drill instructor tell you to goddamn wait until he told you to make a move? You want to lead this platoon, you basketball-headed freak?”

Johns locked himself up tighter in the position of attention. It was the only defense we had. I’m sure he was regretting whatever he had written. Andrews kept yelling, trying to get him to answer back, but there was no

answer that would make the situation better. We were too new to have any negotiation skills, and had been told by everyone to shut up.

Andrews kept asking him, “You gonna be a fucking hero and lead your platoon on day fucking one?! Huh? Private Smartass? What’s your fucking name, you goddamn dick?”

“Sir, Private Johns, sir!”

Andrews snatched the card and read it. He got even madder, ripped the card, and threw it on the ground. What happened next scared me more than anything I’d seen in the Marines so far. He punched Johns in the chest and sent him slamming into the wall, hard. Johns lost his balance and fell into the recruit in front of him. Even the guy standing two men up had to brace himself to stop the domino effect. Andrews pulled his arm back again, fist closed, and leaned down. His fist punched hard and landed on target. I couldn’t see it, but I heard skin hitting skin with a forceful thud, as if Andrews had slammed a wet chicken onto a counter.

I saw Andrews’s fist fly back up to make another strike. Out of nowhere, McKinnon appeared and grabbed Andrews’s clenched fist in one of his, then clamped his other hand around Andrews’s neck and walked him out of the building.

Johns staggered up to his feet. I took one of his arms to help him up, but he shook my arm off and regained his composure quickly. I bet he’d been in fights before and maybe not lost any, but with both hands tied behind his back here, he had no other option than to lose.

Hutchins hustled the line back in motion. I looked at the ripped card on the floor as I passed. No last name. Only the blank for first name had been filled. That was puzzling; the attack seemed senseless.

A recruit had gotten hit. I let my mind leave that hallway and fly out the door all the way back to Sgt. Evan’s office. That handsome man had lied through his teeth: The DIs did hit us, and they were sure to hit me—a gay man is the most hittable target.

I’d never been hit, but I knew the power of words. Even verbal insults hurled behind our backs score a direct and scarring hit, and some assholes feel free enough to spit those vitriolic words and thoughts right at us. Just because I’m stylish and well put together does not make me impervious. I feel everything.

I’ve tried to be nice my entire life—mostly to be thought a good person, but also to avoid being senselessly beaten. Perhaps I’d trusted Evans

initially because he was a good-looking man and I got distracted—but I should have known that, like a car salesman, he smiled out of both sides of his perfect, gleaming mouth. I had to operate on what I was learning and witnessing, not what I had been sold. Caveat emptor.

I looked at the card and refocused my eyes. It was a basic agreement: I was signing for an M16 rifle and was legally responsible if anything bad happened to it. I couldn't take time to digest what I was reading, but it hardly mattered; I'd signed my life over to the USMC and could legally be sent in to fight in a war, so I needed a weapon.

My attention shifted to the cage up ahead. I approached the counter and slid my completed card toward the Marine manning the booth—the same one who had met us outside. It smelled like metal and oil in this area. Another Marine walked back to a long metal rack that held hundreds of black rifles. They were hanging in a fairly orderly way, but parts of some of the rifles stuck out just enough to make the display not too perfect. I got the impression that these guns were used often and could be dispatched quickly.

They matched my card with the serial number etched onto the rifle that was going to be mine. The Marine held the firearm out to me. I reached out and closed my fingers around the rifle, but he held on to it. We both held on.

He looked at me and barked, “You want this rifle?”

“Sir, yes, sir!” I shouted. Had I hesitated?

“Then fucking take it!”

I grasped it harder and snapped it toward my chest, out of his hands.

I slung it over my shoulder confidently, careful to make it look not like a purse but like a comfortable appendage of my body.

No one else had been challenged to take his weapon. I worried that my secret might have been obvious to the Marine passing out rifles. His hesitation over giving me a weapon made me think that he didn't want a gay guy like me to have one, much less be in his Marine Corps. I expected someone to jump out and announce, Aha, you're gay! A firing squad could be easily arranged. I vowed to try harder to keep my fear from becoming a reality. We were only on day two.

I walked out of the Armory as if I'd stolen the rifle and was hoping to escape unnoticed out the door to safety. I held the rifle against my body and locked it down with my elbow to keep it from swinging as we marched

back home. Once I was out of the Armory and in full possession of an M16, I felt a swelling of pride.

McKinnon halted us outside the squad bay and instructed us that when we got upstairs, we were to immediately place our rifles over the post of our bunks and lock them securely. I was excited to run back up into our squad bay armed. I'm sure we all were. With my rifle out in front of me, I felt like a big-screen soldier crossing enemy lines into a fiery battle.

I positioned it across my chest in perfect storm-the-beaches fashion. I felt the cool metal against the soft palms of my hands as I gripped the rifle harder to make sure it was secure. I felt stronger. Like a man. I reveled in that prideful moment, holding an accessory that made me as strong and capable as anyone else. I was ready for anything as we all ran up the stairs to the squad bay.

All the recruits who had been whooping as they rounded the corner into the squad bay closed their mouths. We all froze and took in the crime scene in front of us.

Our sheets, blankets, and pillows had been ripped off of our beds and thrown in the center of the squad bay in a big jumble. I remembered an incident from a few years before, when I had walked into my family's house after it had just been burglarized. I was confused. The beds were all turned over; everything was dumped out of the dresser drawers. As I walked room to room, I thought at first that someone in our family had made a big mess, but I quickly figured it out and ran out the back door, which had been axed in. I often still take a moment after unlocking my house to peer in and make sure it's safe.

Since I was now on a military base, I knew no stranger had done this to our beds. Any trace evidence of the prideful high I had gotten from being trusted to carry a rifle was wiped away.

McKinnon walked through the debris and into his office, slamming the door closed.

Hutchins ordered us to stand at attention with our rifles by our side. Andrews hadn't marched back with us.

"You privates are fucking around, and we don't fuck around. Let me introduce you to your rifles. Put your rifles in front of you against your chests."

We all did. They were easy to hold, since they weighed just under eight pounds.

My eyes to the front at attention, I felt my rifle against my body. This rifle could kill—a huge responsibility. The drill instructors revered the M16. I was entrusted with it now.

Dangling from its strap, an M16 resembles the sun-scorched, desiccated corpse of a hanged gunfighter. At the slightest touch, it could swing back to life, pissed off, and start firing.

“Extend your fucking arms, recruits. Straight out. Do not lower ’em!”

I pushed the rifle out. After a minute, it felt like lead. My arms started sinking. Hutchins ran up and down the line, screaming in his howler-monkey voice, “Straight out, privates! Straight out! Get your fucking arms up!”

One minute turned into ten. My skinny arms became spaghetti noodles cooked long past al dente. We all were grunting, and some guys started wriggling their bodies to keep their rifle in the air. I knew I was going to drop mine. But I didn’t just yet.

“Meet your rifles, assholes!”

We collectively groaned. Hutchins didn’t even tell us to shut up.

Finally he let us drop our arms. “Lock your rifles, faggots. Unfuck this mess and make your goddamn racks.”

I limped back to the bed and leaned on the frame. My shoulders felt lifeless. I could barely lift the rifle up and over the post.

On that first day, the drill instructors hinted we would be able to disassemble the rifle in seconds, clean it, put it back together, and then fire it. All of this was inconceivable to me as I watched my fellow recruits struggle with what seemed like the simple task of threading of a cable through the rifle and under and around the bedpost, then closing the lock. I was careful not to let the M16 hit the metal bed frame too hard in case I might damage the weapon.

Securing our rifles was simple, but it was also a ceremony. We all had to do it exactly alike. It took many tries—Hutchins kept running up to one of us and screaming that it was all wrong, yanking the cable out and throwing it to the ground, then making us all start over. Between the stress, the chaos, and the repetition, my thin and usually nimble fingers felt paralyzed.

Once my rifle was successfully locked, I stared at it, wondering if I were going to be a good shot.

It wasn’t any easier to fall asleep that night. The recruit on firewatch was checking all the locks on the rifles; every few seconds, he would reach up

and yank a lock to see if it was secured, and the click would echo down the squad bay. When I heard bedsprings squeak rapidly for a minute and then stop, I knew some boys were finding a level of comfort that extended past the shared toilets and into the squad bay. I wasn't about to quickly rub one out, turn over, and go to sleep. I had to lie low and still, never letting anyone think this experience was arousing to me.

This is my rifle, this is my gun; one is for fighting, one is for fun.

10. Fresh Horses

Gunfire shot me out of bed. I must have gone to sleep gazing at my rifle, then dreamed we were under attack. But as I robotically found my place on line I realized that Hutchins and McKinnon were banging their trash can lids and screaming just as wildly as the day before.

I was surprised they'd done it again, although the effect was in no way diminished. There is no coffee in the world that wakes you up with the same kick as two Marine Corps drill instructors banging trash can lids together. My heart had been racing for two days straight.

As we stumbled to the line, a quick glance revealed that the same privates as yesterday had privates sticking out of their boxers. I thought for a second that maybe they just had thick penises all of the time. I hadn't seen that many boys naked first thing in the morning; perhaps this was another trait I lacked.

I didn't stare at my fellow recruits like I was five and seeing my first midget; that was too risky. If I paid attention to a simple T-shirt pull over the head, which might seem, to most, a task beneath notice, I was evaluating who took the longest to get dressed and might slow us down. It took no extra time to make a note of who had the best treasure trail leading down into his trousers.

McKinnon snapped at my bunkie, Pritchett, who jerked to attention.

"You look like you just fucked something up, Pritchett."

It was bad when they learned your name—at least according to the mutterings I overheard in the head. I planned on spending the entire summer with my name unknown. I prayed that the day that had passed since the chow hall incident had given my name a chance to shake out of Hutchins's brain.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a Marine materialize from nowhere and stride past McKinnon. Then that new Marine was suddenly in my face. He was shorter than me, and he thrust his face into mine with the speed of a cobra strike. The wide felt brim of his Smokey-the-Bear hat almost touched my nose. He tilted his head up so that he was looking directly in my eyes. His were brilliant blue, like bright flashes of sky. He froze there. Our eyes

stayed locked. I didn't know what to do or not do or think or not think. My mind was twitching so intensely, I know some of that twitchiness leaked out on my face. I held my breath.

McKinnon backed away from Pritchett and into the center of the squad bay.

"Privates, this is Sergeant Santoro. He is joining us today as your new assistant drill instructor. Sergeant Santoro has a good side and a bad side. This is his good side. I pray for you, privates."

Santoro hadn't left my face.

"I don't like the color of your eyes, Private! Change 'em! Change 'em!"

It was an order, and I made every attempt to obey it. I called up the same silent inner grunt I used when trying to get a shit started.

Our eyes stayed locked. His were bright and alert, rimmed with dark, thick lashes that made them beautifully threatening. His hat highlighted his etched, tanned cheekbones. He had an almost purple, perfect shadow of a closely shaved beard. Santoro was the very picture of masculinity.

I wanted so badly for him to go away from me. I felt my face turning red. He had to see I wasn't exhaling.

"What the fuck is your problem, Private! I gave you a direct order! Are you refusing to follow my order, Private?!"

Why was he picking me out of all seventy of us? Was he on to me? When he said to change the color of my eyes, did he mean change the sexual orientation of my eyes? Had the con I'd pulled on the other guys and drill instructors just come to a crashing halt?

"Private, you better fucking try! I better see some goddamn brown shit floating up in all that blue. You want to be a Marine?! Show me!"

The ultimate representative of the powerful, the handsome, and the masculine was standing here in front of me now, and he was dangling the keys to his man-club.

I had to stand there and take it—how fittingly submissive. My embarrassment raced against my fear, and my scared eyes revealed the winner. Santoro stared, surely reading my mind.

"You fucked that up, Private. When I say change the color of your eyes, you better prove to me that you're doing your goddamn best to fucking follow an order."

Almost simultaneously, I gasped air in and yelled it back out. "Sir, yes, sir!" I wanted to convince him of so many things in that one response.

He had a sellable smell. Danger. Strength. Desire. And then he was gone. He ran from one recruit to another at full speed, starting and stopping in this small space like a champ tennis player. His gruff voice sounded deeper and richer than Hutchins's or McKinnon's. His crackle would have gotten him horror movie work in the civilian world.

I never saw Andrews again. McKinnon never told us officially, but hitting that recruit in line at the armory must have been Andrews's last Oorah. This calmed my fear a bit: they couldn't hit us, after all—or at least they couldn't get away with it. But a hit was still possible, and would still hurt.

Santoro's hyper-masculinity was menacing even without the extra punch of drill instructor authority. He had the ultimate flirt of semi-orderly chest hair poking up all along the crew neckline of his stark, white T-shirt.

These guys were always better than me. They had the extra manliness that I didn't and couldn't have. If this had been a movie, the director would have already had Santoro's shirt off. At this point, all the gay men I had met were more like me than Santoro, so the hairy-chested virile guys were the opposite, the he-men. Santoro's brazen heterosexuality highlighted my obvious to me homosexuality.

Santoro struck a superhero pose in the center of the squad bay. McKinnon and Hutchins departed, surely leaving Santoro alone to set his scent.

"Lie on your backs! Get your assholes against the deck! Now!"

We scrambled to the floor, some feet in, some feet away. He stomped his boot on the deck near a recruit's head.

"Get your heads in one fucking direction, you retards! Heads away from me, before I crush your stupid grapes!"

We scooted around, our feet now facing him and the center of the room.

"When I say 'ninety,' stick your goddamn legs up in the air at a ninety-degree angle. Ninety!"

We did. He walked around the room, slapping feet and legs.

"You don't know what ninety degrees is? You will. When I say 'six,' drop your feet to six inches from the floor! Six!"

We lowered our legs down until they were six inches from the floor. After a few seconds, our legs shook and some waved. Webster dropped his to the ground. Santoro crashed down on him in an avalanche of insults.

"You think you're too goddamned good to raise your fucking feet! Good God, you're white, boy. You look like a frosted goddamned doughnut. I

hate motherfucking doughnuts, you freak. Get your feet up, you lard-ass piece of shit.”

Then: “Ninety!” We all sighed, relieved.

“Six!” We moaned our legs down.

Ninety. Six. Ninety. Six. I knew those words as numbers, of course. If I live to be ninety, I will never forget the quick, horrid feeling they conjure up every time I hear them in any context or order.

“I got all fucking day. Piss me off, and I’m a bad dream that’ll live in your heads forever. Make me happy, and I’m your shelter in a motherfucking shit storm.”

I believed him about the nightmares, but wondered if I’d ever feel safe to trust him as a friend.

11. I Shit You Not

The white building had a small red cross over the front door.

McKinnon halted us in front of it. In his gruff bark he called out “Pah-rade rest!”

Parade rest is achieved by swiftly kicking one leg out about two feet from the other and planting it firmly on the ground. Angelina Jolie demonstrated this move at the Oscars one year when she thrust a leg out of her dress and struck a kickstand pose surely learned from a Marine. At the same time, you center your weight over your legs and snap your hands precisely into a V behind your lower back, hands crossed, palms open. This method of parking a two-legged vehicle might not sound comfortable, but compared to the position of attention, it’s a luxury.

Parade rest is often used, predictably, at parades or when a unit is on display. The next position on the comfort level is rest, in which your feet stay apart like parade rest, but you can move your arms and head freely, and even speak quietly. It’s the caviar of positions and offered about as often as toast points in the Marines. The only thing more rare than the position of rest was a private stall in a room full of toilets.

As soon as McKinnon said “parade,” I assumed “rest” would be croaking out of his mouth next. But to move our boots apart in anticipation of the command was a huge mistake. McKinnon toyed with the cadence of the command, and his mood determined the length that he held it out. If he was all business and in a hurry, it was quick and snappy: “Parade rest!” If he was in a good mood—if someone had made him laugh, or we were marching well and he just wanted to show us off—it was drawn teasingly out: “Paaaah-raaaaaade rest!” This time, the syllables were drawn out just a bit.

Santoro took over.

“This is the dentist’s office. Some of you privates have never seen a dentist in your shitty little lives. There is nothing to be afraid of, but you cannot fight for your country with fucked-up teeth.”

Santoro was quick. He walked quickly. He spoke quickly. He’d stepped into our platoon a few days late, like a stepfather, and he wanted to make up

for that lost time. Quickly.

“First Squad—atten-hut!”

Our boots closed. It didn’t yet sound as if we were one set of two boards clapping together, as it did with the advanced platoons. We sounded more like falling dominos.

Walking into the white building, I was hit with light. Maybe I was seeing more clearly in my black plastic, government-issued glasses I’d received after a basic eye exam on day two. I didn’t have to wear them all the time, but they told me to get used to them, and I’d be glad I had them come time for shooting the M-16. Or maybe I’d already seen too much of the drab colors, peeling paint, and poorly furnished buildings typical of military bases, but the white walls here looked as bright and clean as Donny Osmond’s teeth. The floor tiles looked crisp; the overhead fluorescent lights were hidden in the ceiling, not dangling and swaying like the ones we had in our squad bay.

A dozen dentists in white coats hunkered over their patients in a neat row of dental chairs. Soon I heard the whining spin of drills and the matching whines rising from the patients. I took my place in the line and soon was seated in a chair. The dentist roughly manhandled the overhead lamp so he could see into my mouth, but gently touched my shoulder to lower me into the chair. I squinted past the light to see him—I wanted a glimpse of a civilian face. It seemed like it had been a long time, though it had only been a few days. I missed the familiar very quickly.

The dentist pronounced my mouth the cleanest he’d seen all day and tapped me to get out of his chair. On my way out I saw a brown door, contrasted against the white walls.

Music swelled inside my head as I saw the simple word on the door: “Men.” It meant a private bathroom—probably with stalls and dividing walls.

I looked around and saw Santoro flirting with a nurse. I walked right up to him, practicing my line in my head. I could not mess this up. I stopped about three feet away and locked myself into the position of attention and waited for him to notice me.

“What the fuck do you want?”

“Sir, Private requests permission to speak with Drill Instructor Sergeant Santoro.”

“Just fucking speak, Private.”

I took my one shot.

“Sir, Private requests permission to make an emergency sitting head call.”

I almost instantly regretted this subterfuge—it wasn’t an emergency, like I had to go right then or I’d shit my pants—but I didn’t want to miss out on the private bathroom.

“Go!”

There is a calm, precise way to break the position of attention. You pivot your feet out of their forty-five-degree angle and into a ready-to-march position, and then you simply proceed forward. Your arms stay locked along your trouser seams and begin their sway naturally as you walk. Smooth, slick, tight.

In this instance I broke my position more like a puppet whose strings had just been cut and walked quickly to the target bathroom.

I pushed the door open with a single finger. Shining as if it were lit by a ray of sunshine was a single stall door. I cocked my head to the side and eyeballed the lock: open. Gently, so as not to shatter this fragile moment, I opened the stall door and stepped into the stall. A precise and graceful about-face allowed me to shut the door and lock it.

I had brushed and flossed fastidiously for years. I helped old ladies across the street. I rescued puppies from burning buildings. And if I had only done one of those things so far, I would do all of them in thanks for this boon from the gods. The brushing and flossing had already paid off.

I unclasped my belt, then dropped my trousers and boxers to the floor as I sat. I inspected the polish of my belt buckle and resolved to give the back extra attention. I observed, with regret, the tiny specks of dirt my boots had left on the clean tile floor. Once I’m done, maybe I should clean that up, I thought. I mused over the obvious superiority of briefs over boxers as my gaze fell upon the pile of bunched white fabric inside my camouflage trousers. I breathed.

I was alone. I could think. I could reflect on the events of the last two days, the people I had met, every lesson I had learned. In this cool, pristine sanctuary, I settled in for a long summer’s crap.

The outer door to the bathroom burst open so hard that it hit the opposite wall. Two stomps, and the intruder was banging on the stall door.

“You’re done, Private!”

Santoro. Fuck! Apparently he did not respect the universal sanction against speaking to anyone who is sitting on a toilet.

Santoro banged the door again, harder.

“You’re done! Get the fuck out!”

Closing my knees and covering my lap with my arms, I pleaded man-to-man.

“Sir, Private’s not done, sir.”

Santoro grabbed the door and started shaking it—and the entire stall.

“I said you’re goddamned done!”

I rocketed off the toilet, grabbing at the waistband of my boxers, which were all tangled with my pants. Trousers.

“You’re done! You’re done! Move it, Private, move it!”

I hurried to button my trousers. My belt buckle jingled as I fumbled to clasp my belt. I shot the stall’s bolt and opened the door.

Santoro was in a lather, blood vessels and sweat emerging across his bright red face. I braced myself at attention and tried not to flinch as he came at me, halting with his face just an inch from mine.

“You want to come in here and sit down and take a private shit? Who the fuck do you think you are? Get the fuck out of my building!”

I ducked past him and ran outside. I hadn’t even taken the precious shit. Santoro nipped at my heels as I scooted out.

He had given me permission to be here, and I hadn’t lingered long. If that whole exercise was to teach me some sort of military lesson, I didn’t know what it was, and didn’t care. If it was a test of my reflexes to see if I could stop a shit on command—as logical an explanation as any—then Santoro was an asshole.

I hated Santoro now. He was singling me out, and we were supposed to be a unit.

Even as we marched back to our squad bay, I kept a sense of where he was. We always had one drill instructor marching us and calling the cadence. But if there were two, the second would walk among our ranks. Hutchins was lazier and tended to hang in the rear with any slow-learners, like Webster and Baker. But Santoro had boundless energy and a hundred eyes. He was eager to rush up to us while we were marching and correct our hands or yank our rifles straight.

I felt Santoro’s stare fixed on me, suspecting me and judging me. All of us were off balance. All of us were adopting new behaviors to survive in this new life. But I had that damned secret. I think I spent 80 percent of my energy on training. The remaining 20 percent went toward fear. Fear that

my secret would be discovered. Fear that it already had been. Fear that a word or a look—a simple order, an ordinary rebuke—was a judgment or a discovery.

This case was no different. I interpreted Santoro's rage as a sign that he had clued in to my sexuality, and I felt I had to try harder to hide it. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was still fifteen years in the future. Right then, the active policy was "Accuse and Discharge": Shoot first, and ask questions later, once the recruit is safely away from other Marines.

If only Uncle Sam had seen how agitated I got in response to a room full of toilets, a bad haircut, and cheap wool socks. He could have shaved my head, stuck me in fatigues, and simply pointed me at the enemy. I'd have fought through an entire army just to get to a single toilet stall.

12. Bullet Points

A couple things have been called a great equalizer: death, education. The Marine Corps belongs on that list in its own right. The Corps shaved our heads, dressed us alike, and blended us all into one unit.

That said, education was one of the Corps' great equalizing tools. I don't mean education as in Philosophy 101. I didn't arrive with any advantage from the year of college under my belt. I may have known that Plato believed in the soul, but there isn't a class that could have prepared me for the military. If anything, I felt at a disadvantage because I'd never played soldier and no one in my immediate family had served in the armed forces. No military lingo was passed down the table to me along with the mashed potatoes.

So when I got to boot camp, I really had nothing in the way of practical military knowledge. I think that was one reason it was easy for me to enlist.

Fortunately, that deficit was remedied almost every minute of the day. We were in Phase I of boot camp, which lasted three weeks. Phase I not only introduced us to every aspect of military life, it ensured that we quickly became intimate. Our DIs could turn even the most mundane or trivial of the day's events into an informal lesson on being an effective member of the unit. A string dangling off a shirt became the fuse on a bomb that was going to blow us all up. Dust on boots was some sort of deadly powder, and a dirty bathroom was—well, that was just disgusting. The DIs were kings of drama.

We also were given formal lessons, in the classroom or in training sessions. Our DIs shot military knowledge at us like bullets. We had to pick that information up and forge it into armor. Learning the Marine Corps history helped me understand where all the chest puffing and pride came from. Their motto, *Semper Fidelis*, "always faithful," is laden with beautiful sentiment. To be the "First to Fight" might seem risky, but it's an honor. It was in these classes that my blank slate about the military got written on. The instructors taught with a wild passion I'd certainly never seen in a junior college classroom. I quickly came to view the Marines as a club so desirable that I wanted to stay in no matter what. I sat in my seat getting hit

with stories about pride and tradition—and I'd not experienced that before. It was impactful that the staff could boast about being the best, that I had the chance to soak up that knowledge and then hit the field and apply it. I saw how being one of the best seemed to feel good. And I liked it.

We had classes on first aid and had to pay special attention to the symptoms of heat stroke and heat exhaustion. I don't know if the Marines loved dramatic medical conditions or were concerned about the bad PR that stricken recruits would bring, but everyone on staff at Parris Island was obsessed with one of us falling victim to heat stroke or heat exhaustion. Even though I had the symptoms drilled into my head until I could repeat them from memory, I could never tell the difference. One of them ends in a dramatic toss into an ice bath, and honestly there were many times in the South Carolina sun when that sounded enticing.

The DIs hoped that we would all become proficient in what we were taught; however, each recruit took a different route to proficiency. Some guys needed to make the same mistakes over and over again, and some entered with the skills to walk into a room of toilets, sit down with a dozen other guys, and take a shit with ease.

Dale was one of those who had an easy time learning. For a short time at the start of boot camp, Dale was the platoon scribe. The scribe kept files and generally assisted our DIs with administrative work. He served well because he was quick to learn. That is also why he served in that position briefly.

Classrooms were prize-fighting arenas. A dozen platoons participated in the free-for-all, with rights of pride going to the platoon that made the best showing. A Marine stood at the front, giving his lecture. At the end of the lesson, the instructor tossed questions out at us and called on whichever recruit was the first to stand up.

"After what battle did the Marines earn the name Devil Dogs"?

We were tired, but couldn't appear restless. We couldn't walk around, shake it off, or fidget. But Dale stood up right away. He always stood up right away. The teacher threw a finger straight toward him.

"Sir, Battle of Belleau Wood, sir!" Dale was correct.

"What platoon are you from, Private?" the teacher asked.

"Sir, the Private is from Platoon 2032, sir!" Dale properly responded. Getting that part right was an integral portion of the answer.

The instructor asked another question. Dale was first up. First to fight.

Our entire platoon benefited from his quickness. Not only did we look good, but also our DIs loved it. They preened and could barely contain themselves until the next question. Hutchins looked like one of those toy tipping birds drinking water. He'd tilt over, anticipating, then ease back upright as Dale got each answer correct. Day after day, we won the classroom battle.

After a week of this, the teacher stopped Dale before he responded.

"Are you the scribe for your platoon by any chance, son?" he respectfully asked.

"Sir, yes, sir!"

Being the scribe had given Dale a slight advantage, and the instructor had figured it out: Dale had access to all the lessons in the DIs' office.

Technically, Dale hadn't done anything wrong. He had no access to quizzes or the list of questions the instructor would ask. He'd simply read the class lessons because they were in front of him as part of his scribe duties. When he heard them again in the classroom, he'd already seen the material once. Once was enough—Dale was a quick learner.

The DIs soon transferred Dale to a new role—squad leader. You can't hide a light under a bushel, and you can't stifle leadership behind a desk.

Others didn't learn so easily.

Pritchett tried to answer the following question: "Your buddy's just been shot. As soon as you quit screaming like a fucking little girl, assess the situation. It's a gaping chest wound with an exit wound in the back. Do you apply pressure or a tourniquet?"

I felt so bad when Pritchett suggested the tourniquet. The tourniquet was almost never the right option. Santoro exploded.

"Why you touching his arm, Private? It ain't hurt! You do, he then loses that arm, Private! Are you telling me that you are that quick to tear a buddy's arm off? I hope you get fucking shot and some asshole immediately applies a tourniquet to your perfectly good arm, you goddamn shit-brained motherfucker!"

Marines on a roll are like tanks. They can't stop—their passion is too massive. Their momentum keeps their words rolling out and over whatever—or whomever—is in their path.

Hutchins always appeared half-asleep during these sessions, but this time Santoro's outburst jolted him out of his daze, and Hutchins piped up.

“God help my Marine Corps, full of dumb shits like you that just rip a brother’s arm off when he is the last Marine standing who could’ve raised that arm and fired his rifle and saved your useless ass, but you put a goddamn tourniquet on him.”

The theme of all our lessons was that Marines take care of their own. The Corps takes pride in the fact that it never leaves fallen warriors behind on the battlefield. Once a Marine, always a Marine.

Although I wasn’t as slow as many in my platoon, I wasn’t as quick to learn as Dale. Nor did I enjoy it quite so much. The heat outside the classrooms reached inside the shoddy squad bay and reminded me of an oppressive church with promises of hellfire to those who didn’t learn their lessons.

As a kid I was forced to go to church, and I’d get so bored and desperate to be anywhere else that I’d cross my legs tightly until they went to sleep. When the tingling started, I’d imagine thousands of tiny ants running up and down my legs, attacking me. Since I was in church and not supposed to move, I had to sit there and take it. My mind flew away with thoughts of my predicament, including how long I could stand the agony. I wondered if my legs were being permanently damaged.

The next thing I knew, church would be over. I had to struggle to get my legs up and moving again, and the first few clumsy steps made me look as if I had recently been healed by a miracle of God.

Because I actually wanted the valuable information from military history class, I found it easier to concentrate on those details than the cockamamie claims of Joseph Smith, inventor of Mormonism. Not to mention the fact that our DIs threatened us with physical punishment if we didn’t pay attention.

Since we were in recruit training, there was no guarantee we would become Marines, even if we learned everything they taught us in the classroom; we were never referred to as Marines—that honorable title was a carrot dangled from the end of a rifle. Ironically, one of the things we had to learn to become Marines was how not to think for ourselves.

Lesson number one: You know nothing but what the Marines teach you. And you do nothing but what the Marines tell you.

Hutchins seemed a good DI, but not the brightest man. Despite having languished for years in the oven that was the South, his mind was a half-

baked biscuit. One day, marching us to chow, Hutchins called out “Column left, march!”

It was easy to see the wall even before we turned. Simple-minded Hutchins simply wasn’t watching. Marks, who had been appointed our platoon guide and flag carrier—an appetizer that announced the main course of the platoon following behind—hit the wall. Our mascot started marking time, lifting his legs up and down in the marching rhythm, but unable to go forward.

Immediately, the squad leaders slammed into the wall, and within seconds we were a tangled crush of boys trying to stay in some semblance of a formation.

Hutchins finally looked up and screeched, “What the fuck, privates?! If I say left, and you know you can’t turn left, don’t fucking turn left!”

The conflict was that we had to turn left. We had to follow his orders, and he knew it. We’d been freed of both the privilege and responsibility of independent thought. I had given up my rights and freedoms to learn to defend my rights and freedoms.

Our main job—our main lesson—was to follow orders: Stand up. Sit down. Learn this. Shoot that. Everything we knew before boot camp was forfeited. How to speak? We learned a new way. How to walk? We learned a new way. How to fold clothes, make a bed, take a shit? All new. My awareness of all the comfortable features of the outside world receded. Vivid colors faded to the olive drab I saw everywhere. My bunk was the only bed I thought of. My fellow recruits became my inner and only circle.

The title of Marine is not a veneer. It’s not a thin, pretty layer slapped over a foundation. It is the foundation itself. I wasn’t a Marine when I started boot camp. With every swipe of boot polish, every step on the way to chow, every lesson learned, I was becoming one. An equal to the other recruits. And for the first time, I felt a definition of my masculinity coming into focus.

13. Do Sweat It

I'd never been involved in team sports—or individual sports, for that matter. My family's many moves taught me to adapt quickly, but not necessarily easily; it was still always a struggle to conquer new environments.

In the Marines, there are two types of physical training. So far, we had only done incentive PT. Push-ups. Bends and thrusts. Exercise performed not as an incentive to become stronger, faster, but as an incentive not to fuck up again.

Although we were in motion nonstop, we hadn't done any official, as in on-the-record, physical training. The real PT started now, after we'd had a week to acclimate, and we'd been issued proper athletic gear. After spending several days with my skinny legs covered in baggy camo trousers, I felt extra gangly in my yellow, Marine-emblem T-shirt and red nylon shorts, and I'm sure my black boots looked comically clunky. I was wearing white cotton socks rather than the scratchy, sweaty, green wool ones I'd been wearing for days. I was most excited about the jockstrap. My genitals had been whomping around loose and wild in my Corps-issued boxers, and I felt like I needed the jock's support not just physically but emotionally.

McKinnon marched us to a large field scattered with bare patches of grass and lots of barelegged recruits from other platoons. I sized up the track encircling the field. No other recruit seemed to be having trouble running. You'd think that, once I saw that no one was lying on the track bleeding from a compound fracture or convulsing, my mind would be set at ease, but my self-doubt was stoked by the sight of hundreds of strong and lean recruits running effortlessly.

Even this early in the morning, summer's humidity haunted my legs the way Dale's doubt about my ability to handle PT had been haunting my psyche. I had never run a mile in my life. I'd always left the running to the men with bulging quads and knot-like calves. Knowing that I couldn't stand there in the early morning light and use the power of my mind to muscle-out my legs, I kept my apprehension to myself and watched some of the other boys warm up. A private named Hudson placed his hand on Cooper's shoulder without asking and lifted his own leg up behind him to stretch. I

definitely wasn't going to reach out and act like I knew what I was doing. I'd probably fall over. My prep consisted entirely of anxiety.

When McKinnon blew his whistle, I took off running because the entire platoon did. A few of the recruits had been boasting and needed to show off. They flew out in front of the group, taking long strides.

My breath shortened, and the humid air burned my lungs as I started to breathe faster.

Santoro suddenly appeared running behind me. Not him, not now. I didn't want anyone, especially him, to know that I hadn't run track before.

"Count to five!" he commanded. I didn't look at him but obeyed and counted out loud to five. It interrupted my stride and I hoped I wouldn't stumble or stop when he ordered me to do it again.

"One, two." I inhaled for more air. "Three, four," I coarsely exhaled, pushing out a "five."

"No, you fucking idiot! Count to five on your inhale—all the fucking way to five! Then exhale and count to five. Single fucking breath, five counts. Hit a fucking pattern, moron."

I was afraid my legs would fall out of rhythm because I was now being forced to think. If swinging my arms while marching was tough, how would I manage this?

"Just follow me and do what I do, Private. Let out all of your air." He pushed a long breath out.

"Now, take in the next breath and count to five as your boot hits the ground. Every time your fucking boot hits, count." He spoke as he inhaled, gasping, "One, two, three, four, five." He blew out that breath and barked, "Exhale that shit at the same fucking pace! And don't change your running. One inhale for every five steps you take, then five steps as you exhale—make it work! Begin!"

I breathed out. I'd never heard of being taught to breathe before, but I had to obey him. Plus, he was in such good shape, I trusted him. "One, two, three, four—"

He jumped in before I reached five. "Good. Now don't pause, just start with 'one' on your inhale."

The air stung as I counted one-two-three-four-five.

"Five counts each breath. That's your pace, that's your stride. Keep that up. Run away, Private. Get the fuck away from me!"

As I left him, he called out, “And don’t count out loud, you goddamned faggot! Keep that shit inside your head. Five fucking breaths in and five out.” I ran on ahead, not knowing if he had hurled faggot generically or specifically. Either way, I was grateful for the advice. Santoro was the ideal Marine. He looked exactly like I wished I did. I needed to be more like him to be a successful Marine, and I wanted to be like him as a man. But he intimidated me. Was he the man I’d never be? Outwardly? Yes. He was handsome, hairy-chested and had a deep voice. But I also wanted his confidence. He seemed strong inside and out, and I wanted that.

Counting my breaths, resolving not to lose track of the simple sequence or the required number, I kept pushing forward. Five in was almost too much. By the time I was at four, I had to push a little to get to five. As I began to get winded, it was really hard to slow the five out to match my steps. My lungs told my brain, Just fucking breathe when you feel the need. My brain told my lungs, You’ll breathe when I tell you to. My brain won.

The self-consciousness that made me focus on others started to disappear. Within a few strides, I was only aware of myself. The scene around me blurred, and only my breath, my legs, and the track ahead were in my thoughts.

My lungs adjusted. I wanted my strides to be even, so I allowed my body to stretch up as tall as it could, not caring if I looked gangly or disproportionate. The hot and humid brick wall that was South Carolina’s air felt cool as I ran my heated body through it. My chest was thumping and my side began to hurt.

Dale, competitive by nature, had bolted out as soon as we started. He’d slowed his stride a bit since then, and soon I was gaining on him. He moved to the side as I reached him, and we ran together. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him looking at me.

“How you doing?” he quietly asked. We knew better than to talk to each other with the drill instructors around, but the current environs seemed safe enough.

“Good.” Reassured by his quick check-in, I turned my head and smiled. As I took my next step, my right boot hit my left leg and I stumbled.

My arms flailed as I caught my balance. Hutchins’s high-pitched voice startled me—though I should’ve known someone was watching.

“You privates talk on my PT field, and you’re gonna break your fucking leg. Shut the fuck up and keep your eyeballs on the track. You two, bust

up.”

McKinnon’s whistle blew a halt; we were finished. Momentum prevented me from stopping cold; it took a few strides before my legs listened to my mind telling them to stop.

I’d been warm while running, but once I stopped, a wave of heat raced all the way up my body, lingering in my face. It felt like I was going to pop. My breathing became uncontrollably rapid, and I worried that I wouldn’t be able to catch my breath. My arms felt light and my hands flew to my hips to hang on. I walked around in a small circle, hoping my breathing would normalize and the burning in my chest didn’t mean I’d damaged my lungs.

Many of the other boy’s shirts were wet. At the time I entered boot camp, I’d never really broken a sweat. I figured I’d been bred not to. Sweat stinks; why would I want that? I thought sweating meant you were overdoing something and were improperly prepared. In reality, I just hadn’t ever done anything strenuous enough to work up a lather. But now I wanted to sweat. Sweating was a badge of honor. I wanted it on me like a drunken sailor wants a tattoo. As we marched, the smell of body odor fought with that of freshly cut grass. Normally I would root for the grass. But the sweat was more satisfying, and I was proud to be part of its source.

When we got back to our barracks, Santoro raced up the stairs first. McKinnon yelled at us to strip, grab our soap, and head straight for the showers.

I heard Santoro squeaking the faucets on. We robotically dropped our shorts, and soon I joined a long line of naked, sweaty boys headed toward the sound of the water.

As we entered the steam I could make out Santoro standing in the center.

“Asshole to belly button, privates! Close in tight. This ain’t no glamour shower. You motherfuckers are disgusting, and we have a busy day. Tighten up! Asshole to bellybutton!”

We got close—uncomfortably close. The guy behind me pushed himself into me, and although I wasn’t planning on actually touching the guy in front of me, I suddenly was. My entire body was surrounded by other wet, naked bodies.

“Soap it up! Do your buddy a favor and help him out. I don’t got all day—keep moving! Spin around, privates, spin the fuck around!”

I moved my bar of soap up my body, but it landed on another body. I felt soap and hands on my back. My eyes closed, not wanting to be stung by

soap and definitely not needing to see who was touching me. As I turned around, other hands raced over my body and my head. I don't know if they were the hands of one guy or seven. My soap-filled eyes only opened to search for the next showerhead as I moved through the room. Even though I was immediately concerned that I might get an erection in that shower action, I ran my soap-holding hand across and around my penis and balls, hoping that it was my own penis and balls that I was washing, but hazily aware that it might not be.

What a predicament.

This scene would have been a gay man's dream anywhere else; in this setting it was a nightmare. I prayed I didn't pop a boner. I wasn't looking at anyone with any sexual intention. I needed to separate my sexuality from the job. Dishonorable discharge would be the result of my failure, but the bigger fear for me was just being suspected by members of my own platoon. I liked most of the guys and wanted to be part of the team. So if I looked at a dick, it was because I felt jealous that I didn't have one that big, not because I wanted to borrow it for a few minutes.

I'd seen some impressive penises in my squad. Uncircumcised penises freaked me out since I'd never seen one before. I associated them with home births where no doctor was on hand to perform the necessary snip. I thought uncircumcised penises were a bad idea, and that the dangling, uneven foreskin loosely covering the head made the whole sculpture look unfinished. When a boy had to pull the skin back to wash the entire thing, I shook my head, pitying the poor guy for being saddled with a raggedy, germy cock. It took me a while to realize that my circumcised penis was wounded, partially amputated.

No one spoke or protested or flinched as we washed each other. Even though we'd only been together a few days, we all appeared to feel pretty comfortable. Or, at least they did. Plus we were under orders. The DIs were training us to charge into combat without pausing, thinking, or resisting. We had to be willing to do everything together to be an effective fighting unit.

Soon I was sitting on my footlocker, back to the daily struggle of tugging wool socks over still-wet feet, dreading whatever the day was about to bring. My T-shirt clung to my damp back, but it didn't matter; soon we would be marching somewhere, and our shirts would be wet again.

Situation normal. No fucking up.

14. Hot Rocks Get Dropped

McKinnon ordered us all onto the quarterdeck outside his office. This space was semi off-limits. If we needed to speak to McKinnon privately, or were called there, we stood outside his door at attention. There was a block of wood about eighteen inches square nailed to the wall. We had to slap that block as hard as we could—three times—then announce ourselves and our need: “Sir, Private Cope requests permission to speak to the Senior Drill Instructor.” Screw up any of that and you would be promptly granted a denial of your request, plus some bends and thrusts for being so fucking stupid.

It was a small area, so with all seventy of us gathered there around McKinnon, we looked like a religious flock listening to a very clean-cut Jesus. Important information was always given—and received—with a near-religious reverence.

“Listen up, privates. The Marine Corps requires that all recruits pass a basic physical fitness test in order to serve in active duty. You must be able to do at least three pull-ups to pass this test and stay in this platoon.”

What if my attempt for three resulted in zero? I feared failure and then suddenly smelled after-shave. Santoro, standing next to McKinnon, wore only a white T-shirt and his camo trousers. The T-shirt was tight. The thin cotton did a lousy job of hiding his chest hair, which his muscled chest pushed unevenly against the damp fabric. His sex appeal was enhanced not only by his authority, but also by his ultra-hetero masculinity. I felt the same confusion I’d encounter for the rest of my life when trying to determine if another man was gay merely from appearance: Was he gay just because his body type was similar to mine? Was he hetero just because it wasn’t?

Santoro peeled off his sweaty T-shirt and I felt a crush coming on. I hoped I was discreet about it, but I was taken aback. It was almost as if he removed his shirt for effect. I knew he was in good shape, but I wasn’t ready to see the most perfect chest ever. I’ve always figured that guys who know that their body is incredible tend to strip in confidence. He had the kind of startling good looks that even a straight man could appreciate as ideal. I didn’t know if he had worked out hard to get that definition, but I

did know that he didn't have to do anything to get the perfect chest hair he sported, and I resented him for that. No matter how many pushups I did, I couldn't push a thick mat of chest hair out. If I looked like that, I'd go shirtless all the time. The same goes for peeing at a public urinal; if I had a fat hose of a penis like Jhimchek, I'd whip it out and pee free of shyness or the need to employ the cupped-hand shield.

I figured everyone was thinking about sex all of the time, but I'm sure I was the only one thinking about having sex right then—not about having sex right there in the boot camp setting, but someday, somewhere else. And as much as I respected Santoro as my leader, he was incredibly hot and easy to think about sexually. Fear doesn't make objectification difficult. It just makes it weird.

Some in my platoon were not in good shape. We had about ten very overweight guys who struggled climbing stairs. They were the first to slow down as incentive PT accelerated. The DIs would make fun of them and threaten them with being dropped—separated from the platoon and placed into that other, remedial unit to shape up. I did not want to be that guy. But I could.

Private Bowman was one of the fat guys. We'd become friends. We sat together in the squad bay and then found each other in the chow hall and ate together. In school, that's how I made friends—I'd see someone a few times in class or in the halls, and then when I walked in the scary cafeteria and spotted them, I zoomed to their table as if being pulled to safety. I sought shelter in any familiar face.

Our trays knocked into each other as I put mine on the table. I poked my fork at my toast loaded with chunky gravy.

"I can't eat this shit."

"I'll eat it," Bowman said. I looked around for a DI, saw none, and knocked the goop onto his tray.

Bowman told me that he joined the Marine Corps to lose weight.

"My whole family is fat."

"I bet your mom's a good cook."

"I had to get out of there. Everyone calls me fat, and they're fat. My mom's making me fat."

"Wow. With the food in here you shouldn't have a problem."

"No matter what I do, I don't lose weight. You're lucky."

"Trust me, Bowman, I'm not lucky."

“I’m gonna lose fifty pounds,” he said. “I’ll walk in my house after this and show them all. They’ll be sitting around watching TV, and I’ll be in my dress blues. I’ll just stand there.”

Bowman looked a bit like an inflated balloon. He had a small nose on a round head and his body didn’t cinch in at the waist. He wanted to come back from boot camp not just a Marine, but also a regular-sized one. I asked if it hurt when the drill instructors called him lard-ass and made the whole platoon drop and exercise when he couldn’t keep up.

“I deserve that shit, but you guys don’t. Sorry.”

Standing on the quarterdeck, McKinnon blew a short whistle blast and we got quiet and attentive.

“Sergeant Santoro will demonstrate the proper Marine Corps pull-up.”

There was a four-foot long metal bar suspended from the ceiling of the quarterdeck. I’d seen the long, lightly rusted iron bar as I went to the head, but I thought it was part of the crude government plumbing system. Santoro leapt up and grabbed it. I hoped the pipe didn’t break off and start spewing water from Santoro’s macho antics. He started doing pull-ups on the bar, up and down, with his feet crossed almost delicately at the ankles. His pace was rapid, and his armpit hair quickly grew wet and matted from sweat. I’ll never be him pumped into my mind with each rep.

McKinnon stood next to him, out of danger of being hit by the bobbing Santoro, and commanded our attention.

“You must use this form, recruits. You may not swing your legs to make this easier. I do not allow that excess swinging to get you up and over my fucking bar. Kipping is for pussies. Do you understand?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

All I understood was that Santoro was on about his thirtieth pull-up. He looked down at McKinnon and smiled the smile of cockiness before dropping down from the bar. His boots hit the cement deck in a solid, precise slap. He grabbed his T-shirt and wiped the sweat off his chest, which might have dried it, but to me he was swirling the hair around and around on his chiseled body into an even more desirable display.

I’d never done a pull-up in my life, just as I’d never run a mile or showered with others. I worried that I wouldn’t be able to do one, let alone three, and that meant that Dale and I would be separated, as promised upon our enlistment.

I had no idea if anyone else was freaking out. Dale gave me his assured not to worry look, and I wanted not to worry, but when I am in full-panic mode, I am like a jet falling from the sky—there's just no controlling it.

Santoro stepped aside and McKinnon started calling our names from the roster on the worn brown clipboard he always held. Marks hopped up and quickly pumped out three pull-ups. He kept going, but McKinnon tapped his swinging legs.

“Save it, Private, just need three today. Next!”

I took a breath to psych myself up; I figured it was easy for Marks since he was so short—he had less body to pull up. He smirked as he dropped off the bar.

Dale hopped on and also did three without any effort. I knew Dale could have done fifty. I wished he could loan me some if I came up short.

McKinnon held his clipboard and ticked off names as each recruit hopped down from the bar successfully.

McKinnon continued, “To pass my physical fitness test, you must do a minimum of three pull-ups, forty-five sit-ups in two minutes, and you complete a three-mile run in under twenty-eight minutes.”

All of those goals sounded impossible, and so far away.

Santoro circled the quarterdeck.

“You’ll be in the best shape of your lives when you get out of here, recruits. Your idiot girlfriends will need all ten fingers to count your abs. Work really hard, and she’ll need to take off a sock.”

Bowman was next. He was so very white and chubby that he looked doughy. Since he was my friend, I hoped this went well. He tried to hop up and grab the bar, but he missed. We laughed. McKinnon was quick to yell.

“Shut the fuck up, privates. Give this recruit the chance to get up there.”

He walked close to Bowman, who I know hated this attention. McKinnon leaned in close to his ear. I figured his extra encouragement would help Bowman get over his confidence issues.

“Get the fuck up on that bar, you fat piece of shit!” he shouted.

I didn’t see that coming.

“You are taking too much time, you roly-poly motherfucker!” He was really screaming, his face red from the effort. Bowman jumped, and he fell to the ground again.

“Get up on that goddamned bar. You sat at home eating all that pizza and now you want to be in my Marine Corps? Not if you can’t give me some

fucking pull-ups, you fat, stupid loser.”

Bowman stood under the pull-up bar. I knew part of what he was thinking, and how much was riding on this test for him. I silently wished him well. The German philosopher Goethe has a great line about how, at the true moment of commitment, the entire universe conspires to assist you. I wanted to beam that to Bowman’s mind. I also needed that credo for myself.

His eyes darted to McKinnon as he jumped up and caught the bar. I smiled, relieved. Bowman’s T-shirt flew up and a roll of flesh popped out, making it look like he was wearing a giant Cheerio. The fat middle he hated was now shamefully and obviously bared. It looked like it wasn’t part of his body and that it might slip off, making his mission easier. I was happy that he was able to grab the bar at all. He hung there for a second, although I’m sure that in his mind it was forever.

I moved in closer and looked up at Bowman, thinking about how wrapped up I’d gotten in his personal story. I’d sit on the floor of the squad bay listening to my new friend fantasize about walking into his parents’ house, dressed in his Marine Corps uniform, and their shocked look as they almost didn’t recognize their now-thin son. It sounded like he believed his life would be different and that they would suddenly love him. Just like on the bus, I liked him but felt glad not to be him. I’d always wanted to be someone else, someone better than what I thought societal standards dictated I was to be, so to see someone who might have less of a chance of measuring up than I did was new.

He pulled himself up, but only his arms moved. They bent at the elbow, and what muscles he had became tight. His feet kicked out into the air like it was water with resistance he could use to push his body up. His arms shook, and his face got really red, really fast. His bulging eyes narrowed, and his lips pulled back against his clenched teeth. Every part of him was working hard.

He released his arms back to straight. His body hung there, but he didn’t let go of the bar. Santoro stepped up close, tilted his head back on his thick, muscled neck, and barked at Bowman.

“You fat ass bastard, pull your goddamn entire body up on my bar!”

Bowman flexed his arms again. He hung in that half-flexed position; every neuron in his being was trying to pull himself up. Santoro moved in closer. He reached up and pulled Bowman down till his arms hung straight again.

“Private,” he said in a surprisingly supportive tone, “you’re using too much strength. You’re just wasting what you need. Grab the bar, breathe out and pull, fast and hard. Fast! Now go, asshole!”

Bowman looked down for a second at Santoro. He bit his lower lip, let out a breath and pulled. He made it to the same exact spot. He hung there suspended in hope, shaking, sputtering, legs kicking, fighting the good fight. He was the condemned yet innocent man fighting the fatal charge of the electric chair, defiantly staring his executioner right in the eyes as the surge shakes his strapped-down body, letting everyone know that he was meeting an unjust fate.

Bowman hung on; Santoro walked away. McKinnon tapped Bowman on the legs to let go of the bar.

Bowman fell to the ground. He stood on the quarterdeck in disbelief; his hopes and dreams dashed by his own body. I looked away.

Bad news opens a crowd like a snake winds side to side, clearing a path. We cleared a path for Bowman to pass. His face was now more white than usual, his cheeks flushed the flaming red of embarrassment. Our eyes met and I could see he was going to cry. I’d learned Marines pick up our dead on the battlefield, but I wasn’t sure if we were supposed to comfort a crying fellow recruit.

All I could think about was that this boy, who wanted to be here so badly, just had his entire fantasy blown to bits. If he couldn’t do one, how the hell was I supposed to do three?

The group stayed very quiet. This test wasn’t a chance to show off for anyone any longer; this was survival. As another boy was called to take his place on the bar, I didn’t care if he could do twenty; I just prayed he could do three. I wanted everyone to stay in our platoon. So far.

As boys finished, the crowd pushed me up closer. I was as nervous as if I were back in fifth grade, hoping to be picked for a basketball team. And just about as confident.

“Cope!”

I flinched, then froze in my spot. Part of me wanted to pass McKinnon a note: “Sorry, sir, I can’t do even one, so let’s just avoid all the embarrassment and not waste your time. Maybe I can do it in a couple of weeks when I’m stronger.”

I used will I didn’t know I had to shove myself forward to an uncertain fate. I only had a few feet to go, but time slowed to a crawl as I walked to

face my doom. Soon I would be swinging from the bar, dead at the hands of hangman McKinnon.

From a distance, the bar had looked closer and easy to grab. Standing underneath it, I leaned my head back until my neck hurt. I felt all eyes on me. I hated that. I doubt anyone loves having everyone watch you as you lose any kind of virginity.

I jumped up and surprised myself as I caught the bar. It had someone else's sweat on it, which, under other circumstances, would make me let the bar go. Instead, I gripped it tighter to stay on. It seemed minutes before I attempted to begin pulling my body up, but I did start. My body felt heavy, which was weird, since I was so skinny.

I started pulling my body up. I heard Dale call out, "You can do it!" And as much as I loved that support, I thought he might get busted for speaking out of line. He didn't.

As my face reached the top of the bar, I smelled the iron shaft. It had that acrid metal smell that you could taste too. Keeping my hands grasped on the bar, I dropped back down, sure that the one pull-up had been my only pull-up. Were those boys in gym class, the team captains who left me on the sidelines, right?

I felt McKinnon's arm reach out to touch my legs to stop them from swinging. I quickly adjusted my hands; they were slipping a bit. I pulled up, and it was harder, but didn't require the crazy wiggling and grunting I'd seen from some of the other guys. As I lowered myself, my mind did a dance of doubt and I struggled to judge the amount of strength I'd used versus the amount I thought I still had. Just one more. It was tough with my arms shaking. I smelled the bar and had to tilt my head back to avoid hitting it, so I knew I was close. I grunted as I pulled up. I watched the bar pass my eyes, then my nose, and I tilted my head back further and used my long, rubbery neck to jerk my chin out, up, and over the final hurdle. I had to shove down the fear of being separated from Dale but at the same time use that threat to keep pulling. I was now over the top. I rested my chin down on the metal, but its cold startled me back down and off the bar.

I dropped to the floor, hoping for a perfect dismount, but I landed at an uneven angle on one ankle. My landing was just flawed enough to remind me that I was not safe simply because I had accomplished this one task. Fuck those boys that didn't pick me for basketball.

I shook my arms as I walked to the rear of the group to watch the others; my in-head celebration wasn't a touchdown dance but simply relief that I wouldn't be dropped from this platoon.

Four recruits out of seventy-two failed to do three pull-ups.

Every single one of us, regardless of background and personality, felt the pain of those recruits as they stuffed their belongings into their green duffel bags. We hadn't been together long enough to exchange promises to stay in touch. Despite our sympathy, we let them go in case their weakness and failure were contagious.

As the pariah privates shuffled out of the squad bay, those remaining shared an unspoken fear. The Aqua Velva we added to the mop water masked only mildew and body odor—a resentful attitude from defeat, like that of the privates forced out, was a stench that lingered. We learned to shake off this kind of loss like we were shaking out a dirty mop. The mission, as any show, must go on.

All sense of security we felt was gone. In that test, I witnessed for the first time the horrific consequences of failure.

Bowman was a good, sweet guy who swapped stories with me as we polished our boots at night. My butt would go numb from sitting cross-legged on that floor. I'd have to shift my bony ass-cheeks to keep my legs from falling asleep, the way I made them fall asleep in church. I never told Bowman that I had taped a lead weight to my crotch to get in, not only because he didn't need to hear about my being underweight, but also because I didn't trust anyone not to turn me in for cheating. Not even this sensitive boy who told me his secret feelings about being fat. I didn't judge his past behavior that led him to being overweight. We all had issues.

When I felt compassion for others who were misjudged for their weaknesses, I hoped that they too would have compassion for what made me different. Compassion for the secrets I carried, from being gay to my insecurity about being less masculine than most men.

He looked back just before he passed through the door. I wished I knew how to send positive vibes to make him successful, some sort of a look from me, his friend, that told him he was still a valuable man. I had no idea what went on in the mythical and dreaded Physical Correction Platoon, where he was going. I only knew I needed to stay with Dale; I didn't want to be sent there. I couldn't tell where exactly Bowman looked as he silently

said goodbye to maybe us, maybe the squad bay, and probably his chance to be the Marine—the man—he had so passionately told me he needed to be.

And then he was just gone.

15. Double Or Nothing

Skinny guys in our society are perceived as ill, weak, or frail. I know that's what people thought of me. But peel those flimsy layers back, and my soul is hearty. I've always felt loyal, smart, funny, and kind. For my entire life, I'd wanted my outsides to look as nice my insides.

I'd wanted to be bulkier and heavier in the honest belief that I'd look more—well, normal. Gay, to me, looked like me. I wanted people to like me and see what I felt inside, not what I looked like outside. Looking out from inside my head, I could believe I looked like everyone else, but if I encountered a mirror, I looked less than . . . everyone.

I avoided gym class to hide my underdeveloped, puberty-resistant body. Gym wasn't my thing. Although I dabbled in gymnastics when I was young, I quickly switched to acting in plays, participating on the debate team. My strength was mental performance, not physical. I would never stand out in physical competition—not with my body.

Luckily for me, negotiating a successful passage through boot camp often equates to not being noticed. During the first weeks, not much of our training asked that we shine or be recognized individually. As a group we were an individual. If the DIs knew your name, it wasn't good. For one thing, it meant they'd had a reason to single you out at some point. Even if that reason were good, the DIs would find something bad to make up for it. For another thing, you could and would be blamed for something your neighbor did just because a DI could call on you specifically.

In the beginning of boot camp, when the DIs walked into the squad bay, they yelled at everyone. After a week, they'd scan the room and call a few recruits—either the fuck-ups, like Baker and Webster, or the ones who had shot up early as bright stars like Marks, and of course, Dale.

If you had a last name that was difficult to pronounce, any distinguishing physical or emotional characteristic would be your new name. I got called "Four Eyes" sometimes, but didn't mind it; I did wear glasses. Besides, they could have called me worse things.

In fact, they regularly did call me worse things, but the epithets had little substance—kind of like me. I'd wanted to weigh more all my life—not just

so I could buy regular grown-up clothes and not search for the slim cut, but so I could blend in. Not stick out and look different. Skinny. Weak. Gay. I looked skinny, weak and gay. For me, normal was the ideal. I'd be happy with average.

My quest to remain unnoticed had already suffered because of my underweight body. I needed to get bigger for personal reasons and for Marine reasons. I needed to have power to endure and excel at physical fitness. I needed to eat.

Irony, that cruel, sadistic bitch, slopped some Marine Corps chow on my tray.

I was stuck with this slop as my only source of food. The words take out now meant killing an enemy, not ordering pizza. I couldn't just open the fridge. Jeez, we mopped the floor with confiscated Aqua Velva—our amenities were limited. What we got in the chow hall was all we got.

After being called out by Andrews and Hutchins, I tried to eat everything on my tray. The exercising made me hungry enough to eat it. I wasn't a big breakfast eater when I arrived at boot camp, but I also didn't wear green.

I ate everything on my tray. No matter how hard the training got, we always took breaks for meals. One basic rule was always having the three Bs covered: beans, bullets, and Band-Aids. It was the beans that were tough to swallow. Perhaps the Band-Aids had more flavor.

I ate. The food wasn't something to look forward to; meal after meal was a gruelish letdown. But still it was a break.

After lights out, the drill instructors helped us off to sleep with personal stories, usually relating to the Marine Corps, sharing what they'd been through. McKinnon talked of Vietnam, his experiences recent. I'd run each story in my head like a movie. I didn't see myself in any of them. I didn't belong in the military. I was acting a part. My job was not to be found out as a fraud.

These bedtime tales would have been easier to swallow with a cookie and a cold glass of milk.

But there were no cookies in boot camp, and having food mailed in a care package from home was a very bad idea. The DIs were brutal. Private Jackson got cookies every few days, and the same routine played out each time. McKinnon would hold the package over his head. The box looked like a deranged child had wrapped it in an old brown paper grocery bag, jumped up and down on it, then shoved it through the mail slot.

After about the fourth box arrived, McKinnon forced Jackson to open it, taunting him. “Does Private Jackson’s mommy make the best cookies in the whole wide world?”

“Sir, yes, sir!” Jackson boasted, excited about the cookies.

McKinnon’s gentle tone whipped into anger.

“Eat every fucking cookie, recruit. Chew on the motherfucking box and swallow the goddamn stamps!”

McKinnon ordered Jackson to stand over the trashcan and eat the cookies.

“Shove those motherfucking cookies in your piehole, Private. Two at a time! Two at a time! Faster, faster!”

Jackson pushed two cookies into his mouth, gagged once, gagged again. . . . His swallowing reversed course. Soon he spewed out not just the cookies he’d eaten, but also ones he’d only thought about. Thankfully there was a trashcan nearby. This was not the DIs’ first mail call.

I kept thinking that Jackson would write home and beg his family to stop sending the cookies. But they were as dependable as the mailman.

McKinnon strode down the center of the squad bay one night, speaking quietly but not sounding any less gristly.

“Privates, when you get back on the block, your friends will notice something different. Not just your haircut. You’ll walk straighter, your goddamn eyes will be clearer because you haven’t been eating chips and drinking Cokes. They’ll ask you if it was rough in here. Your first instinct will be to tell them all the gory details, but trust me, if you just look them in the eye and say that yes, it was hard—and then shut the fuck up—they’ll be more impressed than if you tell them I made you do bends and thrusts in the motherfucking mud.”

* * *

At the start of boot camp, everything moved so fast. But by week two, we got used to the pace and we flowed through the morning ritual, mealtimes, and most bedtimes.

The DIs’ harsh micromanagement of our mundane tasks softened, allowing them to turn the screws on new lessons. I could go through the chow hall process in my sleep. I walked in the giant hall, grabbed a tray and cutlery, and began sidestepping down the line, holding out the tray. I instinctively adjusted my grip to keep the tray level when the heavy slop was spooned onto it.

Toward the end of week three, as I placed my dented tray on the dishwashing conveyor belt, which seemed stupid, considering the tray's banged up shape—they should just toss the junk—Hutchins grabbed my arm. When I turned around he inspected my body like he'd never seen me before.

Time slowed to a crawl as I waited to see if he remembered my name.

"You eating, Cope?"

Fuck. I assured him with my best, "Sir, yes, sir!"

"You're one skinny motherfucker. We're going to put you on double rations, Private."

I was horrified.

As I marched along back to the squad bay, trying to look invisible, each time my boot hit the road I hated myself. My baggy, Marine-issued camouflage trousers flapped against my skinny, inadequate Cambodia legs like sails in the wind.

As much as I wanted to have my biggest insecurity hidden forever under a bulky layer of muscle or even fat, I knew I couldn't eat twice the Marine Corps food.

An hour later, I wasn't surprised when McKinnon called me into his office. I slapped the square board three times, making my hand sting.

"Sir, Private Cope reporting as ordered, sir!"

"Get in here, Cope," McKinnon commanded. Hutchins was standing there too. I'd walked into an ambush.

"Look at him, Senior Drill Instructor. Nothing but a goddamned bone."

McKinnon locked eyes with me and then rolled his gaze down my body.

"Why you so skinny, Private?"

"Sir, Private's always been this skinny, sir!" I said, trying and failing to add a casual and matter-of-fact tone to my stilted response. I hated even thinking the word skinny.

"Drill Instructor Sergeant Hutchins, here, wants you to go on double rations. You want to go on double rations, Private Cope?"

"Sir, no, sir! Private does most definitely not want to go on double rations, sir!"

"You saying something's wrong with the chow?"

"Sir, no, sir!" I meant *Sir, yes, sir, something is very wrong. It's barely edible. I didn't want to see that food once, much less twice. Can't America invade France or Italy or somewhere people know how to cook? If you*

could see inside my head I'd be on my knees begging you not to put me on double rations. Please do not make me stick out more than I think I already do.

Hutchins had brought the case to trial; he wasn't going to withdraw his motion quickly. "Private, you a damn skinny little thing. I don't want you falling out and not keeping up."

"Sir, Private promises to keep up on just the regular amount, sir!"

"Put a little bass in your voice, recruit," Hutchins demanded.

Fuck, I thought, that's what this is about. I felt my skinny body being read like an X-ray, my high-pitched voice exposing my most personal weaknesses. When my teenage tenor hadn't changed into a deep, manly baritone, I'd close my bedroom door at night, cover my face with a pillow, and scream until my throat was raw and I was sure I'd worn my voice into a low rumble. I should have gone to DI school.

My entire life, I had relied on using humor to deflect the pain of not measuring up, but I couldn't do that right now. I didn't know what to say. I almost didn't want to even risk talking again. I widened my eyes and did my impression of the most earnest, sincere Boy Scout of all time:

"Sir, Private's been this way his whole life, sir!"

McKinnon had my red administrative file open. He closed it. After a thought, he stood up and thrust his face into mine.

"You been to college, Private?"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

Hutchins let out a low whistle usually reserved for pretty girls passing construction sights.

If beauty can be found in education, no one could beat me in a pageant. I didn't have the most stellar education, but if quantity trumped quality, I had it made. I'd attended thirteen schools in eleven years. Before college.

"Your test scores say you're paper-smart. You look like a fucking bookworm. I need a scribe to help me file papers and write things, keep me organized. You up to the job, Cope?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" Dale had been scribe so I knew a little about the job. I was happy the subject was moving away from the dreaded double rations and into more palatable waters.

"Good. I can keep an eye on you that way. Fuck up and I'll put you on double rations in a heartbeat."

Hutchins swatted at a fly, hitting it.

“Start with that fly, Cope. Clean that shit up.”

16. Pick Me, Pick Me

I took the scribe job because it was a command. Okay, maybe the DIs had capitalized on one of my biggest vulnerabilities and extorted me with the double rations threat, but like any wallflower at a dance, I was excited to be asked. It meant that the DIs saw something in me that merited trust.

It was thrillingly hectic. I had access to the office, and I'd sometimes be present when another recruit got lectured or counseled. I kept a few files and I had limited inside information—nothing sensitive, maybe that a commanding officer was going to be on deck at 11:00, or that some private needed to report to the nurse to follow up on a cut.

My most regular task was writing the firewatch schedule. I wrote a new list each day. I was fair with the assignments; the DIs could tell and never questioned my choices. I had no idea how the previous administration had done this job, but it was pretty simple. I put a name next to every hour from lights out until reveille blew us awake.

The first and last shifts were the best, and I rotated the recruits who got those. I took a few middle-of-the-night shifts—lead by example—and Dale did too. I was fair. Really fair.

If a private caused the entire platoon to start a task over, we'd hear the DI yell, "Just fucking begin!" I shot a look at that offending recruit and burned a note in my mind as I bent-and-thrust in the sun: You just made my list, recruit. Enjoy your bitch of an oh-three-hundred shift.

If anyone thought me privileged, he was wrong. I came in the military used to prejudiced looks, so I tried not to worry about it. Some guys lobbied for someone that they thought deserved the shit spots. I was happy to oblige. The offender had probably hurt me too. Personal vendettas were fun.

Survival of the fittest benefits from access to brainpower. I had to keep up with my regular duties in the platoon and even excel—I didn't want any DI to say that I slacked at shooting or running, and therefore didn't deserve to be scribe. There were only a few jobs in the platoon, and I wanted one. We had one guide and four squad leaders; squad leaders got fired all the time for fucking up. Dale was one recruit who managed to hang on to his position as a squad leader and Marks was the guide.

Private Marks. He carried the red platoon flag; he was a damned mascot. He was chosen to be the literal representation of our platoon. That assumption of perfection sickened me with envy. He was strong and quick and almost as good as Dale at everything, but there is such a wide space from almost as to just as. Dale was hard to beat, which frustrated Marks and irritated Santoro, who, for some reason, had taken Marks under his wing.

What irritated me was that Santoro clearly regarded Marks as a little pet. After going to so many schools, I saw a lot of pets. I always wanted to be one, if only because they were never the new guy.

And now I was in boot camp revisiting my school days, watching Marks establish himself as the teacher's pet. I hated the way he sucked up to the staff. McKinnon had positioned Marks near his office at the head of the squad bay: "Gotta keep my eye on you, Private. You're fucking tiny. I don't want you lost." Because of his near-front bunk location, Marks was the first recruit the DIs saw when they entered the squad bay. He popped up like a piece of crisp toast every time they walked in.

I was in the office wrapping up some paperwork one night when Santoro called in Marks. Marks had just showered, and he reported as he was, bare-chested and in boxers. Through his soap and Santoro's sweat, I could smell a tension in the air that to me hinted at sex. Marks stood at attention in front of seated Santoro.

"Marks, you fucked up that column left turn today and led the entire platoon into a fucking wall."

Marks stared ahead, responding in a strong voice but in a volume appropriate to the small office. "Sir, yes, sir."

Santoro dug further.

"Drill Instructor Sergeant Hutchins give you the wrong direction?"

Marks squirmed, which made Santoro smile and break the tough character. He laughed a little.

"He's a great drill instructor, but he don't know right from left." Marks's tight lips got tighter and curled up into a smile.

"At ease, Marks."

Marks relaxed into parade rest.

"At ease, Marks," Santoro insisted. Marks relaxed and let his arms drop, but kept his eyes straight ahead.

"You got a girl back home?"

I tried to focus on my work, but it was hard because I was witnessing something that didn't happen—a DI chatting with a recruit one-on-one, in private. It felt like I was in a power-tripping, role-playing scene. Marks was cute. Santoro was hot. To my horny, nineteen-year-old imagination, this added up to possible action.

I was looking with my ears; my head stayed down. Out of my peripheral vision I spied Santoro's face turning in my direction before he spoke.

"Jesus Christ, look at the way you're standing, Cope! Put your goddamn feet together. You look like a girl. Get your fucking hand off your hip!"

I instantly snapped up; I didn't have to check my position. I was standing like a housewife holding a baby on her hip while she mindlessly stirred soup. By striking this one posture I had fucked up in so many ways, and in front of Marks. How could I measure up to him or Santoro—or anyone—if I got in my own way?

Any extra work I was doing as the scribe to impress the DIs or other recruits and prove to myself that I could keep up was poofed back to fantasy. If I thought I was fooling anyone with my attempt to come off as totally masculine, I was the idiot. I felt so stupid and so conflicted and feminine in that one second.

Santoro knew it.

"Get the fuck out of here, Cope."

Santoro had known all along. And he'd share it with Marks. Within a few steps, I'd hear the laughs. I hated that moment when I heard laughter as I walked away from a couple of guys in a store, or at school. It meant they were sharing something they found funny about me—but a bad funny, one that they couldn't let me in on. But I knew. I always kept walking, hyper-self-consciously, wondering if my shirt was too loud or my hair was poking up.

I let the reactive, self-loathing heat rise up my body, rushing past embarrassment. That's where soul scars come from. Of course, maybe those strangers in the mall weren't laughing at my flashy shirt, but at a joke they just remembered. Or not.

I didn't hear giggles from the office and don't know if anything sexual ever happened between Santoro and Marks. I wanted them to get together. Not only did they look good, but also if they got together, it would mean I was okay.

They stayed close, and I, of course, impossibly wanted to be Marks. Santoro pushed for Marks to beat Dale in any test or challenge. When Marks didn't win, Santoro threw a narrow-eyed angry look at the ground, emphasized with a clenched fist, like he'd lost a bet. Only one recruit would be named Honor Man, the top in the platoon at graduation, and Dale and Marks both wanted it badly.

Maybe if Santoro and Marks had laughed, it would have been from something else. But I'd never know, and if I had known, I'd not be remembering it now. I walked out and into the squad bay, adding feminine posture and casual stances to my list of behaviors to avoid if I wanted to escape detection. Lipping, limp-wristing, eye-rolling, head tossing, leaving in a huff, and pretending to know about sports all can kick your ass right into an ass kicking.

17. Involuntary Legslaughter

Even before I ran my first mile, normal boot camp life had me performing physical feats I never dreamed I could or would do. Back home, I drove to the corner 7-Eleven. Now I didn't merely walk everywhere, I marched. Marching was tough enough, but to do it in cheap boots with no support was downright dangerous. Catching the pair the Marine threw at me on uniform-issue day was the closest to a boot fitting I got.

It took a while for the shin splints to kick in. All those years of not exercising had eased my legs into a false sense of complacency, so when I was forced to run, my legs cried out, Oh, hell, no! They sent me a sharp, painful message in the form of tiny splintering muscle shards shooting directly into my unused shin muscles.

I had never experienced such intense pain before. I didn't know what was happening. Although the pain struck my legs, instantly hobbling me, it simultaneously punched me in the gut, making me gasp out loud. I instinctively leaned over to try to take weight off my legs. This also hid my tear-filled eyes.

Santoro raced over to where I was resting on the side of the track. I jerked up; I had to appear tough, not defeated.

"What the fuck did you stop for? Did you drop a goddamn testicle?"

"Sir, Private has something wrong with his legs, sir."

"I could give a shit, Private. What's wrong is you're standing still, asshole. Fly away!"

I had dabbled in debate. In eighth grade, the national debate topic was fat pigs vs. skinny pigs. If you think that's easy, make a list of the pros and cons of each, and soon your mind will be sizzling in bacon fat. Now, imagine you have a Marine drill instructor leaning into your face and one second to influence him in your favor. Feel the burn.

"Sir, it feels like the muscles are ripping apart, sir."

"What muscles, you skinny little fuck?"

I hated his exasperated sendoff, punctuated with a dismissive wave of his hand. I limped to the end of the field to the Navy Medical Corpsman.

The medic pointed to a chair, where I sat down and stuck my legs out. I was embarrassed for people to see my bony legs, much less inspect them. I always wrote their disgusted interior monologue for them and played the scene in my head. How do you manage to get around on these toothpicks? Can you help me with this Marine chow stuck between my teeth? The Navy man lifted my legs, turned them side-to-side. He looked like he was thinking, “I gotta be careful I don’t snap ’em in two.”

He poked my shin; I winced. As he mumbled “shin splints,” he bent over and grabbed some thick, white athletic tape from his bag and yanked out a long strip. He tore it off with his teeth. He placed one end of the tape on my knee and patted the strip down my leg to my ankle. I just watched the tape roll down my leg, over the sparse hairs, along my entire shin. The Corpsman pointed to the field and ordered, “Get back out there.” Everyone was the boss of a recruit.

What, no butt pat? I thought as I limped away.

Discretion is actually the better part of not getting beaten up.

Dale ran past me and gave me a concerned look; one I hoped meant worry and not disappointment. He’d warned me that I hadn’t done this type of physical exercise and might not be able to. With a determined breath, I narrowed my eyes and started running. The pain was less and bearable.

The tape stayed on for a week. The same two strips. Rather than go back to the Corpsman, I decided to keep them on, as if they were leg braces. After seven days of marching, showering, and sleeping in the tape, the edges started curling up. I needed to change the tape, so I picked at an edge and started to ease it off, but it was catching on my leg hairs. With my approval, Dale ripped off the tape in one motion. We laughed at the brief reminder of the taped lead weight incident. I’d come a long way.

We looked at the tape, shocked to see it covered in yanked-out hair. My skin burned for a few days, and I had a straight, three-inch-wide bald patch on each shin. At least when I taped it again, I knew the worst was over.

I took my injuries in stride, limiting my bitching to my letters home. I wrote my family that I was learning a lot, missing them and the activities I knew they were doing. I’d toss in a few details about running far or marching hard—if they couldn’t comprehend it at the time, they’d at least have a point of reference when I’d later tell them in person. They’d write me back that training sounded tough, so I guessed my messages had been effective. Did I need them to be impressed that boot camp was tough and I

was surviving? Yes. I had to tell someone—this was an unbelievable experience.

When marching, we were taught to dig in our heels with a chop so the DIs could hear the clap of seventy boots hitting at once. By the time we were marching well as a unit, each of the DI's calls of "Left, right, left" coincided with an impressive thud.

That sound of boots hitting the asphalt muffled the snap of several tiny metatarsal bones breaking in my foot. I saw the medic; he shrugged and told me to walk easier. I limped out and learned to adjust my walk and chop so they were a bit less severe.

The broken bones were a pesky injury, but they didn't keep me from doing anything. They were more of a harsh reminder of what I'd signed up for. I had to keep pushing—without thoughts of quitting. I was surrounded by people who probably thought that I wouldn't make it. Including myself. Self-doubt can cause a simmering brain to boil over at any moment. But from platoon peer pressure I learned to keep my overactive brain on a low flame—to steady my nerves, take control, rise to challenges, and push myself. My injuries taught me to respect my limitations and not act recklessly or get hurt.

One morning, McKinnon threw a twist in the day's training schedule.

"Today we learn to fight with pugil sticks. Anyone who has an injury or has had facial surgery, such as a nose job, will not fight. I won't have your pretty little face getting busted up again on my watch. Anyone had a nose job?"

I had to guess that a pugil stick was the long, padded staff I'd seen recruits sparring with on base, but thanks to my deviated septum repair, I knew for sure that I'd had a nose job. My hand went up. And only mine. Santoro ran up to me.

"You had a nose job, Cope?"

"Sir, yes, sir," I replied at a volume proportionate to the one-inch height at which I now stood.

"What the fuck kind of lizard did you look like before? They're supposed to improve shit. Jesus Christ." He walked away.

"Fall out, maggots! Except you, Cope. You stay behind."

All the other recruits were ordered to remove the brass buckles from their web belts and toss them into a pile. I was sentenced to sit alone in the squad bay to polish others' brass. With each furious stroke of the soft cloth, I

hoped to scrub away the tarnish of emotional defeat. I was reminded of a skiing trip with my brother—quite the expert. He led me to the edge of a black diamond trail. I didn't have the skill to attempt, much less navigate, that, although I imagined I did have the skill to land in two full leg casts. I took off my skis, threw them over my shoulder, and pronounced, "I don't ski above my level." I heard applause and approving yells. The clear Colorado air had carried my brave-chicken voice up ten feet to throngs of skiers stopped in the chair lift. I'd not noticed them right above my head. The searing embarrassment of that moment found new life in my reflection off the polished brass.

When everyone came back from the pugil-stick outing, I knew I'd missed a platoon bonding session. The DIs were joking with the recruits, replaying funny moments. And I hadn't been there. I didn't know what the scene looked like, what it sounded like, much less how it felt. I heard the guys retelling how the day went—which small guy knocked off which big guy with the big, padded sticks. I bet that, even if I had gotten thrown off by a stick, my nose wouldn't have been hurt from the giant Q-tips.

I generally didn't like being lumped in as a unit with seventy other guys, but this was one time I wished I had been among them. I vowed not to miss any activity again, no matter what. We were seventy, on the way to one.

* * *

We never knew what opportunity or challenge would be thrown at us—Parris Island is a giant obstacle course. The Marine Corps has conveniently boiled that overall concept down to an actual obstacle course.

When I first saw the Obstacle Course, it looked like a fun, elongated jungle gym. We stared down the long line of over-and-under obstacles that ended with a thirty-foot rope climb. Santoro demonstrated.

He took off, hurdling the first metal bar, climbing the next short wall, then scrambling up a slope of netted ropes. He then hopped over another wall. He took off down the line like a monkey gymnast and made it look easy. He ended up at the last obstacle, the rope. Four ropes awaited at the end of the course.

Climbing a rope takes technique. It might look easy, but it's not. Santoro grabbed the arm-thick rope. He slid just his eyes all the way to its top, relishing something that made him feel great, with a silent, Hello, my friend, then turned and faced us.

“Recruits, you run this course balls to the fucking wall, do you hear me?” He was eight hundred feet away, but I didn’t just hear him, I felt his boom.

“Sir, yes, sir!” We were excited. If nothing else, this was different; running around the usual dirt track was a little boring, and being watched by the DIs made me feel like a fish in a bowl. Our other main exercise was being punished with incentive PT, so a new challenge was welcome.

“When you get to my rope, do not fuck this like your girl back home.” He jumped on the rope, grabbed it with his whole body, and wiggled around like he was . . . fucking it.

Fucking it the way I’d first fucked a girl. In high school, I had a friend named Josh who showed up every day exhausted. His serious girlfriend, Shelly, was the cause. “It takes her forever to come. I fuck and fuck and fuck her all night.” Josh was the best-looking boy in school, and I felt bad for him; he deserved a better response for his effort.

A few months later, at our graduation party, I talked with exhausted Josh’s hard-to-get-off girlfriend. And another girl. After bad dancing and a few beers, I burped out that I was a virgin. That fact had limited truth, but technically was inarguable: I hadn’t had sex with a girl.

They were fascinated. Together they determined to make me a man, using the irresistible lure of a three-way. I knew it was going to be a freak show. I’d hoped to avoid this day, but I manned up and faced those body parts I couldn’t have picked out of a lineup. A penis always made sense to me—you could grab on to it like a handle or a rope. A vagina seemed like a dark trap.

Within minutes, we were all three naked on a blanket in the other girl’s family den. They proudly got me hard, but it was me who was impressed. I had feared I might not respond. Soon I was inside Shelly. As I rhythmically pumped, I fast-forwarded to the next morning, already forecasting my exhaustion from the anticipated endless fucking. Which I wasn’t enjoying. After thirty seconds, wild-eyed Shelly grabbed my ears. She yanked my head down hard, next to her mouth. She managed a hoarse whisper, “Can I come?” I immediately thought of adorable, bad-fucker Josh. What was he doing wrong? I got her off in record time; that thought cheered me on. I threw in a few flourishing final strokes, then pulled out and rolled over on my back.

She might not have even noticed that I didn’t reach orgasm. But I did. I got no thrill out of the encounter. I didn’t like normal sex. I was happy with

what I did like, but crushed not to officially feel what other guys felt.

I participated in two ceremonies that night: I graduated high school and passed the gay test. Studying pays off.

* * *

“Don’t make this difficult, privates.” Santoro demonstrated as he talked. “Step on the rope; clamp your foot down with the other one. Use your legs, not your arms, to climb up. This is a rope climb, not a motherfucking rope pull.”

He put one foot on top of the other and clamped the top foot down hard, like he was being nailed to a cross. He slid his hands up as far as they could go, then released his foothold and pulled his feet up near his waist before clamping his feet back together. Then he just stood up, in the air, held in place by his feet. He reached up, grabbed some more rope, clamped, and stood. He swung out, the rope in one hand, the other waving hello. His cockiness was sexy, and for a second he wasn’t my drill instructor, but a flirty boy trying to impress me on a date.

“Even you fat-bodied assholes can do it.”

And just like that, he was no longer my date. He scampered up the rope and slapped the top of the wooden crossbeam, then slid back down in a rope-burning swoosh. His circus act had an ease to it that was intimidating.

“I’ll show you dumb shits one more time.” He took one fat rope in each hand—I’m sure his hands didn’t close all the way around them—and, facing us, he climbed up both ropes. No feet—just arms. His rock-hard body swung side-to-side, and we witnessed his jaw-dropping thrill ride of an ascent foot by foot.

At the top, he let go of one rope, slapped the beam, and croaked out the Marine Corps battle cry, “Oorah.” As a reflex, we shouted “Oorah” as he held on to both ropes and slid down to the ground in one possibly skin-removing fast swoop. He hit the ground in an Olympics-worthy dismount.

He put his hands on his hips. “Got it?”

When I did that, I looked like a wuss. Now I realized my mistake—I placed my hands on my hips with open palms. Vowing to remedy that, I took off down the obstacle course and felt pretty comfortable hopping and climbing.

As a kid I was flexible and energetic, so I’d pursued gymnastics, the best match for those attributes. I didn’t continue very far with the sport, but I can still do a cartwheel—though I wisely resisted that urge in boot camp. A

video of me cartwheeling down a battlefield toward the enemy would be all the ammunition the military would need to kick me out.

I moved down the course at a steady pace. I couldn't let the space in front of me stretch too far, or I'd get noticed by McKinnon or Santoro, plus I had other recruits pushing up behind me. The oncoming physical pressure of one's peers is a great motivator.

We'd be timed on this course, eventually. A perfect score was one minute—fast but possible. Mentally, I felt it within my grasp. But was that the fantasy of gym-class misfit?

I hopped over the first wooden beam pretty easily, and then climbed over a wall. For the first time in my life, I was aware that being relatively tall and flexible had an advantage. I applied my advantage by hopping up onto an iron bar—and was instantly grateful to be gangly. The obstacles got harder, and the need for speed was evident by the DIs yelling at us to “Move it, move it!” If a few recruits got jammed up, the DIs' voices jabbed at us like fireplace pokers.

I imagined running all the way to the edge of the base. But I couldn't escape, quit all of this and fly home. I'm not a rope climber, I thought as I ran. Santoro's slick tricks couldn't be further from my reality.

Back home, my brothers would be lying in the sun or watching old TV shows—also far, far away from my reality. The life waiting for me back home was bland, empty. I pushed on. I hit the wooden wall and reached over the top. Just like Bowman wanted to walk in his house and show his family he was capable of shaping up, I wanted my family to see that I did something no one thought I could.

I grabbed a bar and swung. I spidered up the last cargo net, paused at the top and saw the ropes ahead.

When I reached them, Santoro was holding one in each hand with a look that dared me to take one from him. That rope was a metaphor for my limp life back home. With no time to stop, I hopped on one. Santoro let go, but I could feel his eyes following me up. Stand, clamp, reach. Stand, clamp, reach. I can't go home, I thought. Not yet. Not as a quitter. I won't.

My inside voice was repeating his words, jamming in you can do it, don't fuck this up, you can do this, he's right there watching over and over until I almost hit my head on the beam at the top. I leaned my head back, slapped that fucking post, and grunted “Oorah!”

As I slid down, more careful than showy, I passed Cooper, who was sliding down as he was trying to climb up, as if the rope was greased. Santoro was screaming at him, “Cooper, get up my fucking rope, you asshole—clamp your big-ass feet and use your legs. Jesus Christ.” I kept descending, then let go of the rope when I reached the bottom. My feet landed on the dirt, and I lifted my head and caught Santoro’s eyes. Through the abuse he aimed at Cooper, he flashed me a wink.

“Cope!” he called.

It took me a second to freeze after the exertion.

“Stop thinking you’re fucking average.”

I hated it when he perfectly nailed my insecurities on the public wall. I didn’t want to be average. I didn’t answer, but bolted off. I was breathing hard from the exercise and the exhilaration. That rush I’d felt on my first run was becoming an expected reaction. The heat rose up from my core through my chest and pounded against my face from the inside, coming out in pops of sweat.

A door closed for me. In my head, over my heavy breathing, I heard it shut. Not being able to do things was in my past. Another door opened. This was a room full of fit young men. I didn’t rush inside, but I peeked in. I still wasn’t sure I belonged in there, but the door was open.

I bent over to grab my knees while I caught my breath and squinted through the suddenly bright, hot sun at those struggling on the rope. I made the connection that my mind could help me get through these challenges. All of my life, I’d let baseless insecurities keep me down, and now my weak, skinny legs had climbed a thirty-foot rope. Santoro’s scary brawn had a brain.

My recovery time after a hard workout shortened each week. I dealt with my injuries as we all did, just by pushing onward. The goal was in sight, and conquering physical challenges helped bring it into focus no matter how far down the field it seemed.

I became the embodiment of the phrase Suit up and show up. I suited up because my uniform was all I had to wear. I showed up because I had no other choice. I had three mean drill instructors, all professionally trained to motivate me. I was terrified of them. McKinnon told us that while we were in his care, part of his job was to teach us to follow and part of ours was to please him.

That I was pleased with myself over tiny accomplishments like running or doing sit-ups was icing on the cake, my first glimpse at self-confidence.

My whole body felt fit—as it should have, since we exercised all day and ate no junk food. At eighteen and nineteen, a body responds quickly to change. My pants got a little more snug, my T-shirts fit a little tighter. When I looked down to check my boot's shine, small pecs on my chest interrupted my eye's path. The tops of my ears were brown as an acorn from being left out of a hat's protection, but my face was pale, since the bill of my cap shaded it. When I soaped my arms in the shower, I rubbed the dark, severe line of my farmer's tan and felt the surprise bump of a new bicep.

The daily training sessions had purpose. We had to be fit to fight. The pressure of keeping my secret was compounded by my nervousness over the physical tests that were coming. Every other boy seemed stronger, faster, and accustomed to the race I was just joining. Were they more deserving of success? No.

We were seventy drums being beaten by the same drummer, hopefully ending in a perfect, thundering crescendo. My little pink, gay heartbeat thumped loudly in my chest, and as my body got stronger, my fear got weaker.

18. Ad Infinitum

Recruit training was one three-month long fucking day.

A typical day in boot camp is like having sex. You wake up aroused, then thrust in and out of a tight training schedule. In order to prolong the ecstasy, you slow your nineteen-year-old, muscled body down and have lunch, regain strength, then resume the day's course with renewed energy and fervor. You fuck boot camp all afternoon with ferocity unparalleled by you or anyone before you—but wait, use your military discipline and hold out—you don't want to finish too soon. This is your one shot for the day. When you can stand it no longer, and the daylight is waning, you pick up the pace, dogged on by chants of encouragement from those around you, until finally you climax. The release is powerful, intense, and often accompanied by a spray of semi-automatic gunfire or extremely rapid boot polishing. Exhausted, spent, maybe wet, you limp into dinner, arms around each other for support and comfort, and tuck in to a warm meal as your post-coital cocktail. Back in the squad bay, you bask in the afterglow of your day's training with your fellow recruits, cleaning your weapon, showering, reading love letters from home. This camaraderie and wind-down time is the only cuddle you get, so enjoy it.

At day's end, even sleep didn't halt progress. The training went on relentlessly, just as a battle does. A long day turned into a brief night, often shortened by a shift on guard duty. Nothing is worse than being exhausted from a day of exercise on top of exercise, then being woken up by a flashlight-wielding crazy with a shaved head and an M16. Firewatch at 03:00 is a mind fuck.

I dressed in a minute in the dark, through half-asleep eyes. I didn't lace my boots all the way up, happy to shuffle around with the tops flapping open—I figured the circulating air gave my blisters more opportunity to heal. I sleepily took the bright orange safety vest from the previous guard and put it on while I walked down the squad bay, not even tucking in my T-shirt or caring if it was clean.

I looked down at a sleeping recruit. I paused, not even sure who I was looking at; I never got to know anyone well. I recognized nervous Pritchett;

for one thing, he shared my bunk, and for another, he looked jumpy even as he slept, flat on his back with a tortured look on his face. So strange that his face reflected misery—he must not be dreaming of the wife he loved and missed so deeply.

Boys passed me going in and out of the head; I had to patrol the bathroom, too. I walked through the doorway and avoided anyone peeing in the trough. He looked over his shoulder and said hi. There was no shyness here. I said hi back. As I passed the toilet room, I didn't have to look in. I knew there were guys sitting on the john, enjoying the solitude of a night crap, even though they could reach out and touch the recruit enjoying the same solitary moment right next to them.

I saw a boy with one hand on the tiled wall in the shower room, kind of bent over. I respected his privacy and kept walking. No one ever looked up from jerking off to exchange greetings. This is my rifle; this is my gun. . . .

The hour of guard duty dragged by. Midway through, I checked the list at the front of the room to see who I had to wake up to relieve me. Tree. Shit. Tree was the hugely tall black guy; his size alone intimidated me when he was awake. I circled around his bunk, hoping that he was going to wake up easily and not in a bad mood. I said a silent prayer of Cover me I'm going in, shook him, and flinched when his eyes popped wide open instantly. Thankfully, he woke up harmlessly, probably because he hadn't actually slept, and took the vest from me. Had I any, I'd have passed on information as part of our training for real-life sentry duty—Enemy spotted in the northeast quadrant at oh-three-hundred. And Jhimchek is jacking off in the head again.

Actually, Jhimchek usually was. Nobody could blame him. He had a huge dick, even when soft, and wasn't shy. If I'd had what he had, I'd never leave the house.

I crawled back into bed, praying I'd get to sleep for the few remaining hours. Dreading the next day when you're agonizing over the current one is not the way to a peaceful sleep.

This was preparation for battle—when there's no time to mourn a day or a death.

I must have drifted off to sleep, because the garbage can lids banged me awake. No. This was not happening again. Fuck. I whipped off my covers and got on line. In boot camp, pre-dawn isn't a joyous witnessing of the sunrise, it's just fucking night.

McKinnon and Hutchins stopped banging the lids; our response time was honed down to the bare minimum.

I'd been awakened in the dark before, but not for this particular exercise: marching in the dark while carrying flashlights. That took a lot of coordination. We'd only done this once before, coming home from a class after dinner. The DIs made us practice throwing our flashlight beams along a uniform trajectory as we swung our arms six inches to the front and three inches to the rear. Occasionally a wild light flew up higher than six inches, higher than the rest, catching my eye, and I was glad it wasn't my flashlight because I knew a DI's reprimand would follow.

Yawning, we marched off to our first day of a week of chow duty.

And then it started to rain. A frog-strangling, turd-floating rain. Lightning flashed a foreboding fuck you and made the normally humdrum base look jagged and wicked.

In South Carolina, it rains often, but this sudden rainstorm was an attack; someone upstairs was pissed. The rain started dumping down. Texas rains were hard too, but in Texas I could get out of the rain.

We were also training for abject circumstances. We didn't run inside; we didn't even stop to pull out our ponchos. Instead, we were ordered to keep marching and reach into the backpack of the recruit in front of us, pull out his poncho, and pass it up to him.

McKinnon was soon sputtering his marching commands through the water running down his face.

"Keep marching, privates—you're not sweet enough to fucking melt."

Rain runs off of a vinyl poncho, but still finds ways inside. I had on a hat, boots that went halfway up my calves, and a poncho covering most of my body, yet I still got wet.

Normally, I would have the sense to come in from the rain. The fact of the matter was that my opinion was irrelevant. We'd been trained to march and keep our eyes locked on the head in front of us, regardless of circumstance. We weren't supposed to think or look ahead or behind us—just march.

I tried to surrender the need to find logic. Drops hit my helmet like I was being gonged for being stupid. Any argument I was having with myself about exercising free will was shattered by McKinnon's piercing voice, as startling as a clap of thunder.

"Enlisted rank structure—begin!"

I stared at the private's head in front of me while reciting, at the top of my lungs, the ranks. "Private, Private First Class, Lance Corporal, Sergeant . . ." I spewed the list through the rain splashing into my mouth. There was so much rain coming in from the cheap, government-issued poncho that I could feel my wet clothes sticking to my body. I didn't like the wool socks we were forced to wear when they were fresh and dry; now they got wet, and my feet slid around inside my shoddy, ill-fitting boots, aggravating my well-earned blisters.

As the rain poured down, I tried to calculate how long until lunch, figuring in the fact that we hadn't even had breakfast. By the time I did the math, we were standing in front of the mess hall.

The fluorescent lights hit me in the eyes as soon as we filed inside. I ducked my head from the harsh contrast with the sleepy, dark, outside world. Usually, the chow hall would be a place of refuge from both the torrential rain and the rigors of military training. Not today. Today the rain would be the refuge. Today the chow hall would be the training. That was the Marine Corps—turning your world and everything in it upside-down.

The chow hall was noisy with activity. I was wet and uncomfortable, and the Marines running the operation offered only an asshole attitude to dry us off. The goon in charge sent one squad of us flying off toward the prep kitchen with a jerk of one muscled arm, and my squad into the dishwashing room with a dramatic grunt and wave of his other arm. No wonder the food tasted so bad—he seasoned everything with his mood.

The seventy of us swarmed over the kitchen like ants over the proverbial picnic—if such a prosaic term can be applied to the sludge and chaos that was the chow hall. When I was just a diner walking leisurely down the line, the food had looked bad enough as it was plopped onto my tray. But to work there and see food being mixed in huge vats. . . . Within seconds, I realized that any food coming out of here should not be consumed.

I entered the scullery and was stunned at the disgusting piles of pots and trays. I saw the crusty buckets they used to mix slop. It was 05:00—the mess, in both senses of the word, must be perpetual. The twenty-foot-square room was manufacturing Hell's aromatherapy: steamed garbage. The floor was sludgy-slick, and my boots slipped. The jerk in charge threw a shaggy mop at me. He then kicked a dented, rusted bucket as if it were my ass.

"Clean the fucking deck, faggot. If it's not spotless, I'll use your pin head as a mop and you'll lick the shit up."

Faggot never gets easier to hear, but my mind was learning to slap salve on that wound. Today, faggot is a meaningless term to me; I choose to assign no weight or value to the word. Call me a bad dresser and the gloves come off.

When I hit the floor with the mop, it loosened up sludge. The smell of rotting food bubbled up to overpower the soapsuds. This torture reminded me where I was and what consequences my dash off to “summer camp” were. Not only was I locked on the base for boot camp, I was locked into a six-year contract that made it illegal for me to act true to my nature. I kept my head down, beating the mop against the floor as if it were my head. What have I done? What had this faggot done?

But then I was always asking myself that, especially when I first hit the gay scene. At sixteen I graduated high school and moved to Dallas. In 1977, disco’s hot thump drew America and me into nightclubs. I had to sneak in; legal age was eighteen. I danced with friends at straight clubs, always feeling fraudulent, disconnected and obvious. I’m no great dancer, but just in case I restricted my body into tight, small moves. I didn’t want to be perceived as flamboyant. I was jealous of the couples that got to use dancing as foreplay, seductively locking bodies. Dancing is an intimate act.

I didn’t date anyone. I lived at home with my single, divorced mother and two younger brothers. My mom dated—she was barely forty and attractive. If you’re under legal drinking age but a parent is with you, clubs let you in. So there were times my mother and I were at the same club. In a way that helped me not need to be seen hitting on girls. “Geez, my mom’s in the room.” After seeing my father leave, then her divorce from my stepfather, it didn’t bother me to see her trying to meet a new husband. I wanted her to marry again. I watched her—a beautiful woman with a mind to match—struggle to fit in with feminism. She had to make that weird wardrobe change from 1960s housewife to 1970s working woman. Bring home the bacon; fry it up in a pan. And not get fat from the bacon so she could get a man.

When I turned eighteen I got a job at a restaurant part-time at night. Among my co-workers were a couple of older gay men. Unbeknownst to them, I took snippets of their social plans and used them as my guide to Gay Life in Dallas. They whispered of the Oak Lawn section as gay bar central.

The bars were clustered together for strength. I drove around that neighborhood a few times, trying to look inconspicuous while being hyper-aware of the road. A wreck would ruin more than my bumper. Driving by after work made the most sense. Not only did I not need to make up a lie to tell my mom, but also gay happened late at night. Men completed all of their other obligations; then a secret life was less guilt-ridden. Which confused me and kept it wrong and dirty and dark. I had no idea how this was ever going to be part of my life.

At first, I sat in my car. I watched gay men go in and out of the few bars. We had no rainbow flag yet. I watched them like I was at a zoo. As much as I wanted to jump in the monkey cage and play, I hesitated.

Finally I gathered up the nerve to go in. With each step to the door I had a new anxiety. I didn't have a good body. I worried that I looked young. I wasn't what I thought of as a manly type. If I wouldn't date me, who would?

I was in my usual preppy clothes; light blue Oxford cloth shirt and khakis. I must've looked like I was on an Easter egg hunt. A tough guy bumped past me, his patent leather-billed cap pulled low over his eyes. I could see his bushy Village People mustache. He had the balls to wear a vest with no shirt. He scared the shit out of me. I was in the world I was supposed to belong to, yet apparently it was uber-masculine. I didn't feel like that.

"Well, hello there," he flirted out. He looked like Steve McQueen but sounded like Liberace. I was confused; but buoyed in a weird way. Maybe this was a world where I would fit in.

The music and ten-cent drinks on Wednesdays numbed my anxieties enough. I danced when asked, inhaled poppers when offered, and watched the fan dancers in the corners of the dance floor. They fascinated me, alone in their thoughts, dancing non-stop for hours, filled with drugs or freedom of expression. I imagined them the next morning, sliding off their leather armbands and slipping on a necktie to teach school.

I never found a niche in the gay bar scene. Never found a clique where we exchanged numbers and met for brunch. No "girlfriends" emerged. I went out maybe once a month. Like I was reporting for duty.

I went home with some guys. Maybe ten. I faked and fumbled my way from clumsy teen to adept sex partner. In private, whether in a comfortable bed or on the floor or the kitchen table or maybe a parking garage (I was eighteen)—alone in a man's arms, the entire process felt natural. However,

when I left at a reasonable hour to sneak back into my own house and as I walked to my car, the night air had a sobering chill. Society's propriety made me aware that I'd done something wrong. I learned to zip my gay urges up and unzip when appropriate.

And here I was on Parris Island, learning to zip up trousers, not "pants." A piss-stream of water hitting a metal tray jerked my mind off gay sex and returned it to the scullery. You think thoughts of baseball or kissing your grandmother kill sexual desire? Clean a scummy kitchen and I guarantee you won't get an erection for a month.

I looked up; Dale was at the sink. He smiled and aimed the sprayer at me. Of course he knew I was gay. We swapped tales of our sexual conquests. Still, he was able to think of me just as a guy. He wanted me to be happy, but he had no idea or desire to help me discover the process to get that way. From day one Dale accepted me for me. Goofy, awkward, non-athletic, smart, and fun. Perhaps because Dale moved a lot due to his dad's military career, he understood my insecurities about my moves. I noticed his compassion early on. In high school, he had a part-time job at a New Orleans grocery store. If a person came through his line without enough money for their food, he helped them. He didn't judge them. He treated me with that same respect. An unspoken part of our decision for me to attempt boot camp was that I had to stuff my sexual experience down while I was in boot camp. It's like when you have a bullet in the rifle chamber. Control your fire. You can't unshoot a bullet.

I grabbed the mop and focused on the filthy floor. I didn't clean it; that was impossible. I swirled the skanky mop over the slimed tiles, waking up old grime and swirling it side to side. Seemingly every surface in this scullery was covered in what looked and smelled like vomit.

We choked down breakfast in small groups so the work could continue nonstop. By the time the recruits we fed streamed in, we'd been up for hours. My skin was soggy and my hands were prune.

I'd been regarding those blank-eyed recruits as prisoners that had been serving me all this time—I'd never thought about working in the chow hall myself. We were so busy, I didn't have the time to worry about it.

I should have. Working in the chow hall took food, something pleasant, and turned it into a nightmare. It was like watching your wife give birth, if your wife is a monster being shredded before your eyes by her own spawn. Hunger was hard to summon.

Unlike every other day, we didn't leave after breakfast. We stayed in the mess hall to get lunch ready. Then dinner. I resented each tray that I saw get picked up and filled with food, because it would soon be left for us to wash.

The cooks were the ogre counterparts to the Keebler elves. I watched as they opened huge cans of unnamable substances and dumped the contents in scuzzy buckets. They stomped around like they had the mandate of a four-star general instead of the resentment of every recruit to pass through Parris Island. Food prep like cutting and mixing was mainly handled by the "chefs." But we were equal partners in this shit-on-a-shingle show.

I took out trash and had a strong feeling that I'd see it coming back in another door and served at dinner. The staffers laughed at us, delighted if we slipped while attempting to haul rickety crates in from the outside.

If boot camp was immersion training—dropping us in the Marine Corps lifestyle so we had to adapt and conquer to survive—kitchen duty was aversion therapy. It's an effective tool when you want to quit smoking, but serve a week in the chow hall, and you might quit eating.

As a between-meal snack, all three DIs stopped by for surprise inspections and dished out incentive PT. Over the hiss from the filthy steam, I didn't notice Santoro march in the scullery. He picked up a pot and threw it against the wall.

"Just fucking begin!"

Without taking time to think, "Wow, we're in the middle of intense labor and they want to punish us with pushups?" all six of us thought fuck it and hit the sleazy deck. My hands slid on the gooey floor and my arms shot to the sides like I'd hit a slick sheet of ice. I struggled to complete the bends and thrusts, looking as if I were skiing out of control.

"You think you're getting away from me this week while you're on this fucking spa vacation?"

I would have licked the pots clean just to get out of there and back on dry abusive land. My hands pushed up and away from the slimy deck but slid, almost dislocating my shoulders. It was hard to balance my boots on the slippery tiles, and my ankles turned out. I had to contort my torso and wiggle my skinny arms to lift my body up, and once up, I didn't want to go back down. The floor smelled like barfed up eggs. My eyes teared up and I tried to shut Santoro's voice out of my head. Despite the stench of our surroundings, I could smell him; freshly showered, still reeking of soap, and from his vantage point I was equal to and part of the floor slime.

“Get up, privates and get back to work. You got a lot of mouths to feed.”

We didn’t leave until it was dark again. Marching home, I looked around at my exhausted platoon, realizing that we had an entire week of this nightmare. Kitchen duty was a brick wall on the train tracks, blocking any view of the light at the end of the tunnel.

To teach us that wherever we were in the Marines after boot camp, our rifles and gear were always to be guarded, someone had to stay in the squad bay all day while we were at the chow hall working. Because of a minor injury, Webster had been ordered on light duty by the medical corpsman. The platoon was happy to have him stay back and guard our squad bay. After being punished as a platoon for his selfish behavior, like marching badly or mouthing off, we were happier when he was away from us. He acted like he was a separate person, and we operated best as a unit—which was the goal behind our training. Like any machine, when we ran smoothly, it felt great. Webster was a misfit. Useless and in the way.

We dragged ourselves into the squad bay in a pooped-out parade. He raised his grinning dickhead up from his rack, where he was reclining. He’d stayed in the squad bay all day relaxing while we worked. Our glares failed to kill him as dead as we wanted him.

Too tired to waste energy, we crawled into the showers to try to get rid of the smell and the grease. We were dirty, sweaty; someone had blood running down his leg from a cut. I was used to seeing recruits—or myself—limping into the head, where we all straggled into the shower room as if parts on an assembly line.

The first recruit to pause—even for a second—at a showerhead to let the water run over his head and down to salve his body became the wrench in the machine. The DIs shouted extra loudly, easily heard over the dozen showerheads: “Asshole to belly button! Move it!” Our bodies slammed together like an accordion closing, and sweat, soap and water provided the lubrication for us to smoothly rotate and move down the soapy production line.

We were more comfortable as a group now; it was likely that I was friendly with the recruit I was soaping, so when he spun around and faced me, I sometimes got a smile and always gave one back.

It wasn’t a gay moment for me—it was a brotherly bond. We were in this together and it wasn’t fun. It was natural and never weird to pause for a second, reach out, and scrape the soap across someone’s stubbled head in a

noogie, then get a gentle slap on the face as a signal to turn around. I spun, not now knowing whose hands were running down my body. Fast-moving hands didn't halt as the small of my back turned into the mounds of my butt. A hand running up my leg and encountering my balls retreated at the same clip, but wasn't jerked away. The sides of my penis were grazed, but its entirety never grabbed.

Even though the showers were more about camaraderie than cock, I was curious, and gay. A shower full of cocks was an eye-candy store. Every guy is curious enough to at least window shop. My fear of getting found out as gay was the stern look from the shopkeeper that slapped me on the penis, hard, to knock some sense into my naughty little buddy to make sure it didn't get visibly excited. Boners popped up easily and were as unwelcome as zits on our teenage bodies. It was best to leave both on others untouched.

By the end of our sudsy journey through the room, I was squeaky clean and, mentally, semi-erect.

Our exhaustion didn't allow us to fully dry. When a recruit bent over to put his boxers on and revealed soapsuds lingering in the crack of his ass, I kept moving. I was doing him a favor since we would be sweating in the swill of the mess hall the next day; he might feel a little fresher, longer.

Most of us had huge open blisters—caused by marching and complicated by moisture—that had never been allowed time to heal. I passed Johns, looked down as he rubbed several hideous open wounds on his feet. He looked up. No words were necessary; he knew I knew the same pain. It would have been fruitless to complain; we had to keep going.

A metal mop bucket tore down the center of the squad bay. Before it hit the wall, Santoro stormed in after it.

“Get on line!”

If Santoro snapped his fingers, they sparked. By the time he finished his sentence, we were already there. We froze, not knowing yet what the problem was. For all we knew, one of us was missing a button, or had murdered his mother—the crimes would have carried the same import. But we were so fucking tired.

“Private Webster took a piss in the shower.”

Hutchins marched in to join Santoro, pissed off and amped up; I'd hate to face them in battle. Yet now I was. We were the enemy, and their ire had switched on like that. They both paced as Santoro explained “the goddamn serious situation.”

Webster had gotten caught peeing in the shower instead of in the communal urination trough. At first I didn't blame him, because I hated peeing in that penis-comparison device, too. I didn't get it—what the fuck was Webster doing in the shower room when he'd been resting all day? We were the filthy, disgusting pigs that'd spent hours in that slave labor camp of a chow hall. He was obnoxiously clean.

When Santoro discovered that Webster had peed in the shower, that handsome Devil Dog had a freak out similar to Faye Dunaway's performance in *Mommie Dearest* when her Joan Crawford pulled the potted plant back and saw dirt. Except his eyebrows weren't as thick.

"That's right, privates. Your nasty-ass boy Webster took a piss where you stand and walk."

From the locked position of attention, you can only react inside your mind. I wanted to cock my head at least to communicate *Say what?* But I stayed stoic—training in case I'm captured by the enemy and they torture me to gain information beyond name, rank, and serial number.

Santoro did not calm down. Huge veins in his neck burst out like someone strong was squeezing him, trying to make him pop. Hutchins got really worked up and animated, gesticulating, pacing, screeching, and forcing me to mentally chart filth levels from urine exposure in a shower. We all flinched as he used his squeaky voice to slap the point home.

By the end of the rant, I was imagining Webster cackling, waving his penis about and forcefully spraying pee all over the tile walls, floor, and possibly the ceiling.

"You're gonna scrub my entire fucking head clean if it takes all night, recruits."

My eyes spun back in my head from exhaustion and shock. I wished McKinnon were there. Santoro and Hutchins ruled more emotionally, and we were tired.

Seventy recruits in one shower room, all wielding buckets of bleach, sponges, scrub brushes, and Comet. This room normally had pleasant connotations for me; we were usually naked in there. This wearing of our boots and clothes to scrub the shower felt wrong. Like the chow hall, another space ruined. Webster scrubbed too and he had to feel the hate we emitted his way. The DIs strolled through, oblivious to our hacking and spitting from the fumes. They held their hands behind their backs, rocked, and chided: "Old Private Webster just wants to piss in the shower."

We scrubbed that room for hours with every cleaning product we could find, inhaling toxic fumes not yet measured or regulated.

Once it was over, I fell on my bunk like it was a hara-kiri knife, not caring if it killed me and somewhat hoping that it would. Instead, the mattress welcomed me as if I were coming home. Although I'd been waking up every morning still exhausted from the day before, I couldn't sleep knowing what the next day held.

For months, no matter how insanely intense boot camp got, thoughts of chow hall had helped me through. Those meal breaks, however wretched or repetitive the food was, were my salvation. The juicy apple that I kept on my mind throughout the day to give me hope was now shriveled and rotten.

We had to support the base—the Marine Corps has to feed the recruits—but the kitchen was a torturous duty.

All bad things come to an end—or at least I held on to that hope. The Corps had to teach us that we were always responsible for our actions as a group or as an individual. We had failures and victories. When we accomplished something in our training, it wasn't celebrated very long. Were we in battle, a tiny victory could be interrupted by a deadly explosion.

The squad bay lights were turned off. We all got under the covers face up, in a prone position of attention, identically, with our arms outside the scratchy wool blanket, our fingers curled up and along the imaginary seam of our trousers, eyes staring, as ordered, straight ahead at the rack above us or at the ceiling. At least mine were. Our bodies were all in the same orientation: Our feet pointing out to the windows, the tops of our heads facing the center of the room. I hadn't been to a yoga class yet, but we hit the racks in the final pose of a yoga session, shavasana. Once there, the teacher guides you on a meditation. Likewise, a DI would share some inspiring tale at lights out. I heard some guys already snoring; DIs would make great yogis.

Santoro was sweaty, and the night was hot. I saw him peel off his drenched T-shirt and stride up and down to cool off, his damp, blue-black chest hair glistening in the moonlight.

His nighttime chat always romanticized duty and honor. He loved his Corps. He said the Marines had turned his life around, and now was his whole life; I don't think he even had a girlfriend. I could tell from his passion that his emotional dial easily turned from angry to sad.

He tucked us in with a pitch-black scenario:

“People will fuck with you in a bar because you’re a Marine, privates. Always drink beer in a mug. If some asshole tries to pick a fight, do your best to avoid trouble, but if he gets out of control, don’t even look at him. Just grab the handle of your mug and knock him in the face. It might kill him, but it’ll sure as hell shut him the fuck up.”

When we moved into the squad bay and McKinnon welcomed us, one of the first things I learned about my fellow recruits was that some of them had chosen boot camp over prison. Upon hearing that, I was scared—and not irrationally so. It was already disturbing to sleep in a room full of strangers, but to know that some were actual dangers to society, as proven in a court of law, crystalized my anxiety into actual fear.

I hoped no one dangerous remembered Santoro’s beer-mug tip. I prayed that most were asleep.

The night stilled all activity, save for the firewatch walking around, jiggling locks. Santoro ended his patrol back up on the quarterdeck outside the DI office. He stopped and faced the room. He gave us our last command of the day.

“Sing it.”

No matter how tired we might be, our souls always had room for Marine Corps tradition. The hum of seventy male voices rose into our nightly lullaby. We remained locked at attention in our beds because we were trained to freeze whenever we heard the Marine Corps anthem. The firewatch stopped at attention with us. Spirit sweetly rose from our beds as we softly sang,

From the Halls of Montezuma

To the shores of Tripoli;

We fight our country’s battles

In the air, on land, and sea.

The meaning behind the words had been revealed in hours of classes and was reflected in our respectful sincerity. We hit a stride and sang the entire anthem until we reached a quiet, harmonious, reverent crescendo.

First to fight for right and freedom

And to keep our honor clean:

We are proud to claim the title

Of United States Marine.

That last wonderful moment lingered as our bass voices trailed off. Santoro turned in to his office, barking his goodnight.

“Oorah. Now shut your goddamn lucky eyes, privates. You’re not fucking Marines yet.”

19. Shining Star

Each branch of the U.S. military has a basic training program. The Marine Corps has the toughest—but don't take my word for it: It's an uncontested, well-documented fact. Anyone who thinks otherwise has no idea what he's talking about, and no time should be wasted convincing him.

No matter how much time you might have already served in the Army, Air Force, or Navy, including in the graduate programs such as the Navy SEALs or Army Rangers, if you want to enlist in the Marine Corps, you must go through Marine boot camp. The Corps doesn't care who you are, or what you did before—everyone has to pass through either Parris Island or San Diego if they want to slap that eagle, globe, and anchor on their sleeve.

I'd picked Dale's brain before we shipped out from New Orleans. I'd had a lot of questions, and I used his answers to imagine the scene I'd walk into. That's like reading a book on brain surgery and then expecting to be able to perform a delicate operation.

Not everything can be taught. When we sat in our squad bay at night and polished our boots, I'd glance over and see that Dale had a gloss on his that was better than not just mine but also everyone else's. Desperate Marks would repeatedly ask him for his secret, wondering if he were using cold water, a really light touch, lots of thin layers of polish. Dale shrugged, claiming he didn't know.

My closest recruit friends, like Pritchett and Hudson, came to me to ask my help in learning the method behind Dale's magic. We figured it would be really cool if the whole platoon had extremely shiny boots.

I waited to ask Dale till we had a night of calm, an evening free of a crazy DI marching around interjecting challenges as we polished our boots and brass or cleaned our rifles. I figured that Dale wasn't about to tell the others; however, with him being my best friend, plus how I got here in the first place, any gems of inside information should be tossed my way. He wanted me to be more successful, right?

When I asked, he promised even me, in confidence, that he didn't know why his boots were so freakishly shiny. I studied him, watching as he carried the top lid of the tin of black polish to the water fountain at the front

of the squad bay and fill it with frigid water. He walked carefully back to his footlocker so no water spilled, then sat down and wrapped the soft polishing cloth tightly around his index and middle fingers. I paid attention to how many times he twisted the cloth; I followed his fingers onto the polish's surface to determine how hard he dug in and how much polish transferred to the cloth. If you got the polish too hot from rubbing, it melted and got blurry. Rub too lightly, and the polish didn't adhere.

I tried to replicate exactly what I'd just seen. The process was maddening. I'd ask Dale for his secret again; he'd promise me that he didn't know how the hell he did it.

One night, Santoro and Hutchins clomped into the squad bay followed by another drill instructor—one we didn't know. Since we only interacted with our staff, this stranger on our deck was disconcerting. The other DI had blond hair and blue eyes. He was a California surfer compared to our Italian, Filipino-American McKinnon and whatever Hutchins was. We snapped to attention when they entered. Pritchett's eyes went wide and darted side to side, as if he were sure that he was about to die. I hoped he never made it into a real battle, or got captured—he'd crumble. He was like an abused dog, jumpy and reactive for reasons he held deep inside.

They marched over to Dale and demanded that he open his footlocker. He did, revealing perfectly folded T-shirts and trousers and accessories, all neatly squared away like food in a bento box. This precise organization must have been his Japanese heritage seeping out. He'd lined everything up and measured the folded clothes with a ruler to make them exactly the same. No one else in our platoon did this—partly because it wasn't a requirement, but also because we didn't have the skill. He'd learned it in the Air Force Academy.

The other drill instructor looked at Dale's footlocker and shook his head.

"Where'd you learn this shit, Private?"

Dale looked at Santoro before answering. Santoro shot out, "Answer any drill instructor that asks you a question, Private!"

Dale locked himself at attention and stared straight ahead. "Sir, Private learned it in the Air Force, sir!" The drill instructor clasped his hands behind his back and walked a few feet away, never taking his eyes off of the footlocker.

He paced back to Dale and leaned in close to his face.

"You think the Air Force is better than the Marine Corps, Private?"

Dale was calmly defensive. “Sir, no, sir. That’s why the Private’s here, sir. To be the best, sir.”

“Keep trying, Private—the Air Force is a bunch of ladies who eat ice cream and cry at weddings. Do you cry at motherfucking weddings, recruit?”

There was no right answer. A yes would get you labeled a pussy, and a no would get you a “What the hell kind of dick are you that you won’t even cry at a goddamn joyous event?!” It didn’t matter that the question was probably rhetorical. Often the DIs had no desire to be answered, but we had to respond. Hutchins sometimes asked bizarre questions late at night while we were in our bunks, almost asleep.

“You privates out there choking your chickens?”

A couple of privates were actually jerking off in their bunks, because I heard a few weak Sir, yes, sirs, to which Hutchins spat back, “Don’t answer every fucking thing, you mo-rons.”

Dale opened his mouth and was about to answer the foreign drill instructor’s question, but Santoro stopped him by shouting out, “Show us your boots, Private!”

It was as if they were accusing him of a crime. He presented his boots in his outstretched hands, like on a silver platter. Santoro snatched them. He held them up for the other DI.

“See his footlocker? Every one of my recruits’ footlockers looks exactly like that.”

“No shit?” The DI looked at Dale with his pale blue doubting eyes, then glanced up to dark Santoro, who remained deadpan. He had to trust another DI. He was impressed. He scanned the long squad bay, pausing at a few men, dashing his eyes to their lockers. He returned his stare to Hutchins and Santoro. I hoped he didn’t ask us to throw open our lockers—ours didn’t look like Dale’s. Only Dale’s looked like Dale’s.

The DI asked Hutchins and Santoro if they’d bring Dale to his platoon to show his recruits these perfect boots. They hauled Dale away and out of the squad bay, with Santoro walking behind Dale as if to corral him. They disappeared past our showers, down the mysterious hallway that connected our head to another squad bay. I guessed it was a mirror image of our area, but none of us had ever been down there.

As they left, I was concerned for Dale’s fate. I had lost him once before, and the painful emotions from that memory were still close to the surface.

When my wandering mother had gone off to Brigham Young University and left me with my adoptive father, he'd done his own wandering and took up with Jane, a woman at his office. She was a thick-ankled, pretty-faced young woman who fit a type: Self-esteem just high enough to date only married or gay men. If she's alive, I'm sure she's sipping tea, listening to Janis Ian, and perpetually surrounded by cats and only cats.

I thought she was Marlo Thomas That Girl cool; she had a handsome, openly gay housemate. He was the first gay man I'd met, and the glimpses of his life as a ballet performer fascinated me. I looked at him as if I were reading a verboten magazine, though hopefully not flipping ahead and getting a peek into my own future—I had no desire to dance, parade around an apartment in a red shorty robe, or be single. I sensed all were connected.

Jane hired Dale and me to paint her apartment, and we did a bad job, partly because I resented her, but mostly because we didn't know how to paint. After we finished, she phoned me to have a serious, difficult chat. She informed me that Dale never wanted to speak to me again.

“Dale told me to tell you that no matter what, please don't call him.”

Even though she'd only known him a short time, something must have happened that made him hate me. My teen brain rocked back into doubt and despair.

I had lost my best friend.

I was confused and didn't know what had happened. Dale and I had only gone to school together for one year. After that, we'd gone through a lot of trouble to see each other. We lived on opposite sides of the Mississippi River and didn't have cars. To visit him, I had to take a streetcar to a bus to a ferry to a long walk past frightening industrial shipbuilding yards where I felt dwarfed and threatened by looming machinery and rough people. In between meetings, we spoke on the phone for hours, sharing our experiences and dreams. We grew closer. We spent time and energy building our relationship. He was closer to me than my family.

My world crashed when my mother and stepfather announced their divorce and I moved away from New Orleans to Utah to be with my mother. Losing Dale was part of that crash. Not one day went by that I didn't think of Dale, regretting whatever I'd said or done that had driven him away. I bet it had something to do with my being gay and him being straight. What vain right had I self-indulgently invoked, expecting him to

accept me in the first place? A best friend is armor, and I surely got cocky from that protective layer. Maybe that offended him.

I learned my lesson and spent the next nine months not letting anyone in or close; I didn't deserve their trust. That's a huge, dramatic statement, but in agony's midst, loneliness often seems a less painful emotion than grief over the loss of a friend. What you don't have can't be taken from you.

He was the first friend I'd lost due to user error and not from me simply moving away. My own love and respect and desire to honor his wishes kept my fingers from dialing his number. Days stretched into weeks and then became months. I moved to Little Rock to finish high school. Time doesn't heal all wounds, and the distance actually made my heart ache. I missed Dale.

I'd picked the phone up and placed it back down dozens of times. His birthday came and I found the guts to call his house. I had nothing to lose; he couldn't cut me off again. My heart began to thump loudly as I dialed; I cleared my throat and tried to relax as the harsh rings started, not wanting to sound jumpy and shrill if someone answered. I practiced my hello six times fast just to get squeaks out of my nervous voice.

I tensed up as Dale's mom answered in her Japanese-English: "Herro?"

I clumsily blurted out my name and that I hoped it was okay that I was calling, in case Dale had left strict orders to refuse my calls.

"Where the herr you been? We thought you die."

In seconds, Dale jumped on the phone and jumped on me. Why hadn't I called? He couldn't find me; my father had moved away from New Orleans, leaving no forwarding number. To Dale it seemed as if I'd disappeared. He'd missed me.

The year of pain washed away with relief. Within minutes we were caught up and back on the best-friend track. Jane had thrown a speed bump in our path; Dale was as shocked and horrified by that heinous bitch as I was. She played a game enjoyed by evil queens and taught me to hold only my friends close. My enemies are held at knifepoint; Jane and the Marines taught me that.

While I waited for Dale to return to our squad bay, I realized that his friendship was the rock-solid cornerstone to the family foundation that I had always wanted but lacked.

I tried to focus on polishing my boots. About five minutes later, Hutchins and Santoro walked back in from the head with Dale trailing behind,

carrying his boots. Then, behind them, a line of strange recruits trailed into our quarterdeck.

“Private, return to your rack,” Santoro commanded. Dale obeyed and soon was standing directly across from me, unable to contain his grin.

The other DI emerged from the head and wrangled his platoon. “Recruits, file slowly by that open footlocker. Take a good look. Every single private in this platoon has an identical footlocker. I’d rather slit my motherfucking wrists than go back to live with you assholes.”

Santoro and Hutchins stood in the center of the room as the platoon filed past. Each of the seventy boys looked down at Dale’s bizarrely squared-away locker, then back at him, then at each of us and our closed footlockers, as they walked past. We were being held in awe and, I’m sure, hated for our unexpected perfection. I wanted to release my smile; if they only knew that one look into Baker’s locker would reveal the aftermath of an explosion. Even mine was jumbled in comparison to Dale’s.

We listened as the unfamiliar DI ranted that his platoon were all fucking idiots who would never amount to shit in the Marine Corps because they couldn’t even shine boots.

“What kind of soldier are you gonna be? The kind that gets us all motherfucking killed.”

The other recruits filed out, into the head, and back to their squad bay, shamed. Santoro lightly shoved Dale back into his bunk and walked across the quarterdeck into his office. He shot a look at Dale, who didn’t see it, but I did. He then looked at Marks, and I knew that Santoro resented Dale for being so good. Santoro walked a fine line; he wanted us to be the best, but he wanted to be the one responsible for that. Dale was good all on his own.

Dale swears to me he still has no idea how he got his boots looking like black glass. One day he’ll probably come clean and pull me aside, telling me it was four circular motions to the left, then seven counter-motions to the right, and he’ll demonstrate on my hand the exact pressure that made him a boot-polishing star.

He did look out for me. He’d often toss a smile at me, and in a flash of his white teeth I knew he was proud of what I was doing. Of course, he could also look at me like I was a knucklehead and adjust my rifle to sit more comfortably on my shoulder or show me how to fold the hated boxer shorts to replicate those in his perfect footlocker. He was the best man in our

platoon, and he was my best friend. Every second of every day held a threat that we could be separated if I fucked up. That was my nightmare.

20. We're Having A Gas

Although it was my own decision to enlist in the Marine Corps, Dale was the ostensible reason I was there, and I relied on him to help me through. He offered the occasional reassuring looks to get me over simple hurdles and gave me glimpses of insight into the more fearful challenges—like how to survive the gas chamber. Yes, I literally survived a gas chamber.

I didn't want to believe that my own country would put me through a tear gas simulation as training. Yet apparently we needed to experience it so we would not be unprepared if we ended up in a war and we were gassed.

The Air Force offered this training too. Probably right after ice cream on the patio. This was an exercise Dale could help me out with. He said that the tear gas was so painful and so lung searing that it crept up his neck, He worried that it seeped in deep and scorched his brain. He dreaded it all the more, since he remembered what it was like so vividly. He was excited to share a strategy based on what he'd learned.

McKinnon told us to roll up a T-shirt and pair of socks and skivvies inside a pair of trousers. We secured the bundle with the two green elastic straps we'd eventually use to balloon our trouser legs up over the top of our boots—that privilege came later in basic training. For the three weeks of Phase I, our trouser legs hung loose along the bottom of our boots. No matter how slick we felt when we marched, a quick glance to our feet let anyone identify us as newbies.

We got dressed in the pre-dawn dark, grabbed our bundle of clothes, and marched off. The sun crept up and over the hazy horizon—the flaming eye of a demon casting you into a pit of boiling lava.

I looked toward the edge of the base. Parris Island was surrounded by a high chain link fence, and past that fence lay swamps. Supposedly. We were told that any attempt to escape would be a rush to our demise. McKinnon's eyes narrowed down to a sliver as he spoke in a hushed tone.

"Feel free to make a break for it, recruits. Outside my base—nothing but swamps with alligators and snakes. The nearest town is too far away to reach before a gator eats you. 'Course, they only eat live prey, and the sun'll

bake your gourds and kill you. Plenty of rats and buzzards to pick your bones clean.”

I had no point of reference as to exactly where we were. We all believed his warning. That’s what they needed us to do—not just because we were a herd and the DI was In. No. Mood. to discuss—but also in the event that our true purpose was activated. If and when we were commanded into battle, we had to do our job. No matter how horrific, grotesque, and life-threatening the situation. These stark reminders of what I’d agreed to do made me feel anxious and trapped, yet determined to carry this mission through. I felt resolve replace fear.

One of Santoro’s favorite marching cadences included the line “This is what you asked for.”

And it was. If any of us thought we were dressed up in really authentic costumes playing army or that with Vietnam so recent that another war couldn’t really happen, our DIs refreshed the concept behind our training in our minds. Leading in the military is tough—you’re asking people who might hate you to lay down their lives, and they might not even believe in the mission.

I tucked the roll of clothes tighter under my arm. With each step toward the horizon, my mind raced with anxious thoughts about the destination that day. It was hard to wrap my head around the fact that my own country was planning on locking me in a room and turning on tear gas with the intention that I feel the harmful effects. The Corps seemed to be cavalier about so many harsh tasks. I still wasn’t over the delousing shower.

Even the yellow salt tablets they’d made us swallow to prevent heat stroke and heat exhaustion worried me. I took each pill as instructed, wondering as I swallowed if I weren’t being given something other than salt. We just did what we were told; an order was an order.

“If I told you to run into a burning building would you do it?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

Or:

“Kill that man, private.”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

Maybe the pills were the chemical saltpeter that, rumor had it, was added to our food to prevent us from getting erections. If they were only salt, I didn’t know why they were yellow, but I didn’t want to suffer heat exhaustion or heat stroke, especially if I didn’t know which was which or

how to treat either of them. If they were saltpeter tablets, I was happy to take a pill to curb an embarrassing hard-on. I figured any damage caused by an unknown pill would be less traumatic than the physical and psychological pain that would result from discovery of my sexual orientation. Erections can be misunderstood. It was better to swallow a pill and take my little betraying penis out of commission.

McKinnon kept marching us farther away from our squad bay, onto a dirt road and into some woods. The trees were a contrast to the neat concrete-and-asphalt grid of the base, with its rows of identical buildings. Those woods held the promise of tranquility and sweet nature.

The road became a path, and just before the path narrowed to a trail, we were given the command to split up from our four-column formation down into single file. There's a reason we marched four men across: it not only looked strong and coordinated as we moved ahead, it made us feel strong and coordinated. The protectors felt protected. Single file was literally uncomfortable. The separation from my thick, solid unit left me feeling vulnerable, dangling. We'd look wiggly and unsure snaking into the woods. I hate snakes.

When we marched like this, gaps naturally formed between us. When they did, those lagging behind had to hustle their strides a bit to restore the exact and proper distance. I tried to always march behind Johns or Jhimchek or Cooper—anyone strong, smart, and kind who took others into consideration. I never got behind Webster because he marched to the beat of his own inner asshole and didn't care if the line stretched out so the guys behind him had to run to close the gap. I never wanted to start out in the back, either, where Baker was always placed so the DIs could correct him as he struggled with his rifle or gear. From above, the last few stragglers would make our line look like an accordion opening and closing.

I leaned my head out of line to peek ahead to our target. The woods were fairly thick, but the trees themselves were thin, probably because this part of South Carolina had swampy land.

I knew we were headed to a tear-gas chamber, but it seemed like we were being marched to an actual execution. Suddenly we entered a clearing, where McKinnon had already halted. His hat was lowered so his eyes weren't visible. The shadow cast by his hat's wide brim shoved a sinister creepiness down his face. He held his jaw set tight, his lips slightly apart but stretched tightly against his white teeth.

“Platoon, halt!”

We stopped in our places.

“Fall in!”

We left our single-file line and formed back into our standard platoon formation; there was space in the clearing to do it.

“Drop your clothes directly in front of your body, privates!”

There was a collective soft thud as we did.

“Remove your boots! Give them time to air out. Apologize to Mother-fucking-Nature for having to smell your stink.”

We all muttered a disjointed “Private’s sorry, Mother Nature . . . about . . . feet . . .”

“Shut the fuck up, assholes.”

I leaned on the guy next to me and we supported each other as we yanked our boots off. We left them next to our spare clothes. “Remember where you dropped your shit in this clusterfuck of woods, privates, so when you come out you will find them. You might be having trouble seeing. When I give the command, you will fall into single file and follow Sergeant Santoro. Do you understand?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“Fall out!”

This was it. However dreadful the anticipation as we marched into the woods to be gassed, it was now worse because it felt real.

I heard a door creak open and slap against a wooden wall. A quick peek out showed we were headed into a small wooden cabin.

Dale had told me about his Air Force gas chamber, and this was nothing like that. His sounded slick and clean. This was more like a ramshackle outbuilding where the Deliverance bad guys got drunk on moonshine before red-necking it up. Being barefoot made me feel even more vulnerable—how Ned Beatty must’ve felt moments before the sexual assault that sent his dimpled bare ass running through the woods and into my mind forever.

I was hoping that my knowledge of Dale’s prior experience was going to pay off. He told me that, as the gas cylinders filled the room with gas, the drill instructors at the Air Force Academy made the recruits run in place. After a few minutes, they were all ordered to remove their masks. Naturally out of breath from running, the cadets took deeper breaths than normal, and the gas was all the more painful—making the whole exercise extremely effective.

The space was smaller than our squad bay shower, so seventy clothed guys fit tight. I stood on the chamber's cold concrete floor. It felt wet and creepy on my bare feet. If you step on wet, you want to know the source of the liquid. I saw some of the guys dancing in place a bit to avoid solid contact.

I looked down at the mask in my hands. It was a dark, drab, olive-green rubber mask with fly eyes. The first time I saw the cartoonish mask, it seemed like a relic from a World War II museum. When we had all donned them in the squad bay, we looked like a bunch of Mad magazine Spy vs. Spy characters.

Once the mask was on my head, I could hear my breathing being filtered through the mouthpiece, and it sounded Darth Vader heavy, affected and laborious. I didn't feel protected; I felt trapped.

I was glad my head was shaved—the mask had a better chance of fitting tightly with no hair in its way. But when we tried the masks on in rehearsals back in the squad bay, I never felt a tight seal on mine. The rubber was thick, and the masks must have been stored and shipped all piled on top of each other because they were bent and curled, leaving gaps that I hoped would disappear as the material warmed and softened.

They ordered us to put our masks on. I looked around before pulling mine down over my face. Everyone else was doing the same, stealing last glances at each other to reassure themselves that this was going to be okay.

Someone cackled. In the tiny room, any noise was amplified, and we all froze. Looking back on this moment, the scene was hilarious. Come on—we were getting gassed. By our own guys. But at the time, I was too close, too caught up, and the danger was real. This was serious, and to laugh meant you were demeaning our training.

I looked around to find the guy who laughed, thinking it might be Webster. But Webster had landed right next to me. The laughing was coming from the front of the room.

I looked to my left at Dale. He and I both feared inappropriate laughter and barely survived without getting busted daily. I had no control over the comedy of a situation, and it could easily get a tooth-hold on me. Growing up, my brother Clay made me laugh uncontrollably at dinner when my mouth was full, and I knew I'd someday choke to death on stuffed bell peppers. I had to move away from home as soon as possible in order to survive.

But the recruit wasn't laughing, he was crying. He'd boldly crossed that fine line between comedy and tragedy. He was one of the boys I hadn't gotten to know yet. When they shaved our heads, they took away a primary distinguishing characteristic. Now this nondescript boy was distinctly sobbing. In the civilian world, that outward emotion draws perfect strangers closer to offer comfort, but in boot camp, it clears a space and creates a pariah. Drill instructors soon swarm the recruit like lions on a zebra kill. The path to valor is not lined with tissues.

"Tears are for queers!" Hutchins dove in with his pointed nose. McKinnon was already there, the brim of his Smokey Bear hat digging into the recruit's forehead.

"Is my training bothering you, Private? Is this taking up a big part of your lollygagging day? Did you have other fucking plans?!"

It turned vicious, fast.

"Cry, you motherfucking pussy, your ass is getting gassed. If you die, one of your fellow recruits will drag your dead, cold body back to your mama so you can hop back on her tit and resume sucking!"

The recruit was crying even louder. His whole face was sputtering and red; the expertly trained DIs matched his color shade for shade and sputtered back harder.

As Santoro rushed by on his way to the front, his elbow dug into Dale's stomach, doubling Dale over. Dale bent right back up and his eyes found mine. Maybe it had been an accident resulting from Santoro's rush, but he seemed to have taken the chance to deliberately hit Dale.

All three DIs now laughed at the recruit, who only decompensated further.

"Congratulations, Sergeant Hutchins and Sergeant Santoro, we win. We finally know who the buttfuckers are and who has the balls to face the goddamn enemy."

They all laughed hard. They slapped each other on the back.

I thought the private was slowing down, but his heaving, crying breaths shifted into a sick roar on his next inhale. His head darted from DI to DI.

"I demand to call my congressman! I demand to call my congressman!"

McKinnon's wide-open mouth was up against the private's, as if he were feeding the screaming boy like a pissed-off mother bird.

"I don't know who the fuck your congressman is, but do you see a motherfucking phone, asshole? Lock it up!"

That cracked up the other DIs. The private broke the ultimate rule and left his place before being dismissed. He ran to the doorway, froze, and turned to face the rest of us. He screamed with his eyes shut as if to make it all disappear, “I demand to call my congressman! I demand to call my congressman! I have the right to call my congressman at any time I feel my rights are being violated, and my rights are being violated! Sir!”

McKinnon’s brown face was now purple. His eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared. “Don’t you fucking sir me, you goddamn piece of shit!” McKinnon grabbed him by the collar and shoved him out the door of the gas chamber.

Santoro took over. “Enough of this nonsense. Start the fucking main event! Any of you pussies want to suck each other’s dick, or are you ready to get fucking gassed?”

“Sir, fucking gassed, sir!” In that small room, the majority opinion was deafening.

“Put your goddamn masks on! Now!”

I looked at Dale as I placed the mask over my head. Then I looked over at Webster, not wanting him to be watching Dale and me. We had a plan from which he didn’t deserve to benefit.

Santoro and Hutchins ran in between our tight rows, yanking on our masks, checking that ours were tight before pulling on their own.

“Run in place till I say stop! Begin!” Despite being mask-muffled, their commands were perfectly clear.

I ran, but not with my full effort. I more created the impression of someone running. The room was fairly dark, but I heard the gas cylinders sizzle into action. Terror shot up through me and widened my eyes. I shuffled my feet back and forth like a mime, moving my arms in tight, fake swings.

I kept my eyes locked on Santoro’s. Just as Dale had predicted, after about thirty seconds of us running in place, Santoro reached up and yanked his mask off and yelled at us with his eyes closed, “Take off your masks! Take off your masks! Now!”

He pushed the door of the chamber open and darted out.

Before I took my mask off, I took the deepest breath I could—expanding my lungs fully for the first time in my life—and held that air in. Then I removed my mask.

Everyone else took a huge breath immediately after taking the mask off—they were winded from running. They started coughing, spitting, and gasping. Some started choking.

Dale and I held our breath as we took off our masks. I clenched my teeth and closed my eyes tight. The gas still stung, and I felt pain creeping into my throat. I felt panicked. Even not inhaling more gas, I had no control over its effects. I wondered if anyone died from this. I wondered how long I could hold my breath versus how long I'd need to.

In a few seconds, after the DIs felt we'd experienced enough, we were ordered to leave the hut. Santoro had his mask off and yelled at us to grab the shoulder of the recruit in front of us to scoot out. I put my hand on Dale's shoulder.

My feet tapped into others as we shuffled in tiny steps toward the door. I felt myself letting a little air in. I smelled the gas and it burned my closed eyes badly. That gas stung and was no joke as it seared into my lungs.

When a tender steak hits a hot grill, marks are intentional and desired. This must've been what the Marine Corps wanted from this exercise.

The claustrophobic space opened up as soon as I passed through the narrow door. I let go of Dale's shoulder, keeping my eyes tightly shut, as I walked away from the chamber and into the woods. Within a few steps I cracked my eyes to a squint. Hutchins yelled at us to walk in a straight line with our arms away from our bodies.

We peeled our clothes off, dropped them on the ground, and kept walking. My hands unbuttoned my trousers and they started falling down. I pushed them off, stepping out of them as I kept walking. The clean, fresh air felt good as it rushed in, replacing what little poison had seeped in.

I finally opened my eyes and looked around. We were seventy naked boys wandering through a tree-filled thicket. The tender-footed flinched as they gingerly tried to avoid twigs. The only sounds were coughing and spitting. Hudson was bent over, throwing up, with good old Navy man Cooper's hand on his back. Cooper helped Hudson up so that he could keep walking.

We reached the spot in the woods where our bundled clothes waited. We dressed and drank a canteen of water as ordered, swallowing another salt tablet at the same time. Why the fuck not? I thought. Can't do any more damage. I poured a little water on my hands and rubbed my eyes. We all looked like we'd been crying. Because we had been.

Pritchett's nose was running and he used the cuff of his sleeve to wipe it. Since his hand was already in action, he wiped his eyes too. Hudson muttered and cursed the government, but with his squeaky high voice, his intended threat sounded silly. Anyone who had chosen the Marines over prison might be rethinking.

Marching back, Santoro refrained one of his standard Jody calls:

Ain't no sense in going home.

Jody's got your girl and gone.

Sound off: one, two,

Sound off: three, four,

This is what you asked for.

Your girl is a big fat whore.

You're better off inside my Corps.

The platoon repeated each line as we marched. This ritual always made me feel more comfortable, maybe because the song was familiar, or maybe because it brought us together and calmed us down. It relaxed the whole platoon; he took the sting out of the gassing. It felt kind and showed me he cared for us. It was not unlike a mother soothing an out-of-control crying baby with her song.

We were supposed to depend on each other to save each other's lives, and ultimately the life of our nation. While everything we were going through was a dress rehearsal, nothing was to be considered casually.

As we walked out of the cool woods into the late morning sun, the heat hit us hard, adding insult to our recent injury. Soon sweat ran down my back, caught and trapped against my skin by my fresh T-shirt. I had learned to appreciate perspiration; I knew that when I walked into any building or shade, the wet fabric would become a cold compress.

With the gas chamber over, we could tick that off the list of what we had to experience and accomplish before graduating. Some of the list items we heard as scuttlebutt, but most of them were pre-announced and planned out in the three phases. First Phase was winding down.

If Dale and I had a more a comfortable gassing than the others, I'll never know, and I surely don't care. It burned and hurt. That type of memory, especially since it had physical effects attached, is the easiest recalled. In a real gas attack in a real war, we would know to grab a quick breath and reserve our strength to remain able to lead our platoon to safety and victory. This was war, and all was fair.

The recruit who had exercised his vague rights was shuffled away into the woods. We never saw him or heard about him again. No one spoke about it. He and his gear were gone by the time we reached our squad bay. McKinnon handled it masterfully—I never knew if speaking up got the boy a ticket home or a severe beating. Info was dished out on a need-to-know basis, and what I needed to know was never to complain.

It was hard to monitor our progress in boot camp because we never talked about it or rehashed it over dessert. “Hey, Private Baker, remember when we first got here and you stamped your T-shirt backwards?” We moved on—we had to. If the passing time granted a certain ease or familiarity to the training, we didn’t notice because we were kept unstoppingly busy.

Once back in the squad bay, I went to the head and looked at my face in the mirror to assess any damage. I rubbed my head. I was used to the stubble. I leaned in, checked behind me to make sure no one was watching. I moved my eyes back to settle on my face. More serious, calm. I leaned back out and stood up straight. A resolute feeling rushed in—I started to believe I could do this.

Back home, I’d never taken risks. Here in this bizarre setting, I was, because I had to. If it took force to get me to experience a gas attack that made me a stronger man, bring it on. But I was feeling that I’d take the sense of adventure home with me. I was surviving. And a new life was starting.

Ten weeks to go.

21. Recruit's Recruitment

Nothing in my environment turned me gay; I believe I was born gay. But being a Mormon helped turn me atheist. And the church definitely taught me to lie.

My parents joined the Mormon Church when I was about seven. I was baptized at the church-standard age of eight. I faced a chapel full of adults and testified that I believed that some alien buried a sequel to the Bible written on solid gold plates in an upstate New York backyard. I was never really convinced that the Mormon Church's ridiculous religious foundation was true. In fact, I knew that it wasn't. But I wanted to be accepted everywhere I could be, including in the illegitimate faith that my parents had chosen. I stood up weekly, grabbed a microphone, and praised Joseph Smith and his totally illogical claims. It was good practice and honed my convincing skills.

It wasn't the first secret I had to keep. Putting a lid on my true religious feelings while vocally affirming the church's crazy lies gave me practice in presenting myself as someone else—someone straight—in social situations. I must have become convincing: in worship, no one challenged the depth of my belief. Or my sexual orientation.

Just as the Bible teaches, some societies grow gradually. Two people beget a third, and that person begets another, and soon they've become a working group of individuals, co-existing. It's an evolution of sorts.

Boot camp isn't like that. You are not gradually introduced to individuals as they join the group; everyone pours in to close quarters at once. Marks of our individuality were shaved off or covered up. We became an instant mass of sameness. Baptism was by fire, not water, although boot camp is very much an immersion experience.

Being chained to seventy guys twenty-four hours a day gets old. But I'd signed up for just that, without any stipulations. The recruiter doesn't push that element as a selling point, probably because he too has gone through boot camp. I learned to walk the walk, talk the talk, and to keep my sexual orientation under my helmet.

Maybe they knew. Maybe America needed military personnel so badly that the Corps looked the other way and let me slide in. I never assumed that; I was trying to keep my boots on the ground, and the road got rougher every minute. It's been said that Ginger Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did except backwards and in high heels; I marched every step the other recruits did with the extra weight of my secret stowed carefully in my soul.

When we were caught up in the most difficult, dirty, sweaty exercise, my first thought was that I didn't have to be there. Or that I didn't belong. Those passed quickly as I completed the push-up or spat out the mud; I did belong there. Serving my country was my inherent right, if not the original intent behind my enlistment. Being gay is also my right—my right to be myself. Both serving my country and respecting my nature are equal, personal responsibilities.

I worried, however, that if my homosexuality were discovered, the Corps would exercise its right to kick me out. I might not have wanted to go through some of the hardships in recruit training, but I damned sure didn't want to be dishonorably discharged for a character trait I didn't believe harmful.

Except when I was in the DI's office doing scribe duties, I couldn't get away from my platoon. Privacy, even in the night, wasn't possible. Masturbation sessions are a huge part of a nineteen-year-old's life, and while some guys were fine jacking off in their open beds, in the bathroom, or in the shower, I was too nervous to do it in the midst of the group in case someone thought I was turned on.

Being together all the time made me resent some of my fellow recruits. In retrospect, there were only maybe six recruits in my platoon that I would have wanted to see again after boot camp. Yet I would still have put my life on the line for all seventy of them. Except Webster. He made me sick with all his fuck-ups. They felt intentional.

My platoon woke up together and ran together, then showered together. We marched in a pack and ate the exact same food, with never any variance. There wasn't a way to get around that. However, the same legal obligations requiring the Corps to feed us three square meals a day and allow us to sleep at night forced them to let us worship.

The first Sunday, McKinnon looked a little cleaner than usual when he marched out of his office holding a Bible. We were headed to church. As a group.

I was hoping the church would be air-conditioned. I'd be the best worshipper they'd seen if I could just feel seventy-two-degree air hit my face. I'd take it as a direct sign from God.

On the march, McKinnon served as an opening act for the reverend and shared with us his thoughts and love of God.

"Remember what the preachers tell you, privates. There's no hope for some of you, but just listen the fuck up and maybe some shit'll rub off."

We halted in front of a huge tent and our entire platoon peeled off one line at a time, squad by squad. I passed by a fat rope tied to a stake and entered the humongous tent attached to it. Inside, the tent smelled musty and had rows of low wooden benches in an arc around a stage.

I followed the private in front of me down a row. We both kept walking until he stopped. We entered other spaces, such as classrooms, in the same way. We filed down until we could go no further, then stopped in our tracks and turned to face the front and sat down. It was a scene that could have been set to music.

Other platoons streamed into the tent from all sides. Mixing with other platoons felt weird; we had our own exclusive thing going on, and to see others who looked like us but were not part of us totally diminished our platoon's special bond. We never spoke or interacted with members of other platoons.

Despite that strangeness, I suppose being lumped together under a tent, but also under the bigger enclosure of religion, made me feel somewhat calm, which I never had the chance to feel elsewhere on the base.

Generic church occurred. The sermon covered all basic Christian faiths. It was full-on gospel, but it was nonspecific. We were a conglomerated congregation.

The excursion to the church was a mission that got us all out of the squad bay, and, more importantly, our routine. As with any other mission, McKinnon held a debriefing afterward. He strolled up and down the barracks as we furiously polished our boots and our brass or wrote letters or cleaned our rifles or studied military history or did incentive push-ups on this, our one day of rest.

He hoped we got the message from the sermon. I glazed over as I had during the benign Bible thump. McKinnon said that if anyone in the platoon didn't get the message because he worshipped a different God, the Marine Corps had options.

“If you’re a Jew or a Mormon or some other shit, raise your hand, and we can arrange for you to go to that service.”

Mine was the only hand raised.

“What the fuck, Cope? You a Jew or a goddamned Mormon?”

“Sir, Private’s a Mormon, sir.” Was. But any God in a storm . . .

He looked me up and down a couple of times as if to assess what a Mormon looked like. He seemed like he’d known something was different about me all along, and my religion might be a piece of the puzzle. He told me to stay back from the platoon next Sunday and he’d arrange an escort to the Mormon service.

“Now get your Mormon ass the fuck out of my face. Fly!”

I did fly, all week. Thoughts of being away from the platoon flew into thoughts behind my beliefs. I hadn’t actually been a Mormon since I was sixteen and came out of the closet as a disbeliever. I found the premise ridiculous, and the ten percent tithe they forced from even the humblest paycheck should have brought Christ back from the dead, again, to kick founder Joseph Smith’s hallucinogenic, “visionary” ass. When Jesus returns, He’s going after false-profiting prophets first. It’s His thing. He branded that on His first go-round.

But to get away from my squad bay alone, I would have French-kissed Smith in front of my entire platoon.

Sunday came. McKinnon ordered everyone to fall out for church. I stayed frozen on line. He marched right up to my face and made me jump as we locked eyes.

“Fall the fuck out, Cope. What’re you waiting for, a goddamned personal invite?”

“Sir, Private was told to stay here. Private is Mormon, sir.”

McKinnon walked back into his office. “We have a fucked up situation on our hands, Private. I didn’t get you an escort.”

That he had forgotten to arrange an escort was a blessing. There wasn’t time to find one now. He gave me a crude map to the Mormon service and a lecture putting the fear of God in me. He threw in the threat of his boot in my ass if I fucked up and made him look bad. A minute later, I was walking away from the squad bay. Alone.

The day was prettier than the other days that week. The air moved around me freely, unimpeded by the rest of the platoon that would normally be surrounding me. I didn’t even sweat. The drab base that always appeared so

dull and dusty was now brighter. Maybe it always looked that way, but being marched around inside a massive herd kept me from seeing that. I got to walk on the narrow sidewalk I'd seen while being marched down the wide street.

I nervously readied myself to salute passing Marines. Although Marines only salute commissioned officers, recruits salute everyone except fellow recruits. A Marine approached, and the sun's glint bouncing from his officer-rank insignia caused my arm to fly up to the side of my forehead, landing exactly at the outer tip of my eyebrow in what I hoped resembled a practiced snap-and-pop salute.

"Sir, good morning, sir!" I shouted as we passed each other, not looking at him but feeling his eyes on me. He easily replied, "As you were, recruit."

I lowered my hand, exhaled, and kept walking. Soon, strips of green grass appeared, along with the building I was looking for. I wiped my boots on its steps, opened the glass door, and walked into a small room filled with metal folding chairs. There were about six other recruits seated, who all looked up as I came in. I sat in a row by myself, as most had done.

I reflected on my possible sins. Even though I used to use swear words sparingly, my mouth was now sailor-filthy. Partly because I was hearing so much, partly because I wanted to fit in and it was macho. I still always regretted it, and as I sat in church, the old feelings of Mormon guilt crept in. Fuck that shit.

There were two female recruits in the group. I knew women were on the base, but we rarely saw them, and then only at a distance. Our DIs used these sightings as a time to invite any of us not keeping up with the physical demand du jour to drop out of our platoon and join theirs. "Goddamn girls are doing this better than you, privates!"

The service was as lackluster as a religion whose doctrine forbids caffeine. The procedure was rote; I responded the way I'd learned. No one needed to know of my insincerity toward the church. I smiled, dragged my figurative Mormon-suit out of the closet, and dusted it off. When I spoke, I might've sounded gay, but I knew I was undetectable as a heathen. I spent my time appreciating being away from my platoon.

I walked back into the squad bay and didn't feel I'd missed anything; I'd had my own unique outing. It was probably no big deal to the rest of the platoon. If they looked up from their boot polishing as I passed, it might have been because I was blocking their light.

Dale rushed over to me for the rundown. As soon as I told him there were girls in the church, he lit up.

He wanted details I wasn't qualified to give. "Were they hot?"

"They were just girls."

He decided to go with me the next week. He missed girls so badly that he was willing to listen to any sermon to see one.

McKinnon didn't argue. I explained to him that part of the Mormon religion was recruiting other people to hear the wonderful message. Recruiting was a quickly understood concept in the Marine Corps. Permission to go "Mormon that shit up" together was granted.

"It's this way," I explained to Dale. I'm sure he was thinking, One trip alone and look who's the expert. But on this journey, I got to be the guide for a change. I pointed out landmarks as if giving a tour of Disneyworld. I waved my hand toward a nondescript, boxy building that we had never passed as a platoon as if I expected him to "ooh" at the magnificent architecture. "I swear the grass looks greener than usual," I remarked. "Maybe because we get a chance to actually see it and appreciate it."

"Damn, you're gay," Dale replied. "It's fucking grass."

I pointed to a tree that we were approaching. "I was walking past here last week and had to salute an officer."

"How'd you do?"

"Pretty good, I think." I raised my hand up in a salute, then lowered it. We'd practiced saluting in the squad bay, alone and as a group. I had raised my arm so many times and with such force that it hurt. But the pain felt justified; this was our strongest symbol of earned respect.

Dale raised his arm up in his salute. I returned it. He adjusted my arm, and I did it again. He saluted me back and we exchanged salutes like we were returning gunfire, each salvo more impressive than the previous. We got distracted until a drill instructor—not one of ours—appeared out of nowhere.

"You don't fucking salute each other, recruits. Stupid shits. What platoon are you from?"

We'd been having a good time and felt free. I wanted to respond that we were from the platoon that didn't end our sentences in prepositions, but Dale and I snapped to attention and blurted out, "Sir, 2032, sir!"

We should have given him a wrong number like he was a loser at a bar, but we couldn't risk it. We walked away, praying that he didn't follow up and

tell our staff that we'd been goofing off. I didn't want anything to interrupt Dale's chance to see a girl. Even if it meant me going to a Mormon church. I love many Mormons but hate Mormonism.

Even in that entire half of my 10th grade year that I lived in Utah, I never knew how long I was going to live in a town. However, I was lucky enough to make two great friends there, Rod and Kevin. I also met a Mormon girl, Serena.

Serena fit her name—peaceful, easy, and kind. It was easy for me to get swept up in that fervor. I was in Mormon Mecca. I was raised with the traditional family as the ideal model for me to slip into. In my heart I knew neither the church nor a heterosexual marriage were true fits for me. There was safety, however, in that marriage was easy in Utah. Everyone swirled around in the same tiny dream. Catching a wife in the Utah beehive was like shooting fish in a barrel. It seemed easier to keep my secret thoughts safe in that small space. I figured that outside the hive, no one would buy me as a lady stinger.

Proust wrote, "Dream all the time." My dream had me living in the same house for a lifetime and married to a man. Regardless of what I saw represented in 1975 society, I held fast to my personal vision of a traditional marriage. Everyone accepted me in my fantasy. The partnership was dreamy. He was no one I knew in real life, but he was handsome. We had a dog and I drove a Corvette. We had kids.

Regardless of how I felt, society said I was thinking wrong. If I saw a homosexual in the news, he wasn't out and proud—he was often being led out in handcuffs and shame. When newscasters announced a bust, they added extra vowels and dragged the word out as if mopping up disgusting slime. Hayaooommosexxaall. Opera singers couldn't hold a note that long. With no gay couples in the spotlight showing me that lifestyle as possible, I kept my dreams bright, but faced a dim reality.

I met Serena at a part-time job in Utah I got at a commercial nursery. We earned three dollars an hour to poke seedlings into trays of dirt with a crochet hook. I guess stuffing the tender plants into the warm, moist earth looked like I was capable of sex, because soon Serena batted her long eyelashes that flapped slowly like spidery butterflies at me. I hovered around in a flighty relationship with her. I was fifteen, so dating meant going to the organized Mormon social events like dances. A proctor stuck his arms in between our bodies to ensure a good distance. The message was,

“Have babies, just don’t enjoy it.” And give us ten percent of your earnings so we can buy real estate that decades later will finance our hateful anti-marriage equality campaigns.

Underneath my acne, I knew dating a girl wasn’t right; I knew I couldn’t get married and live a lie. As much as I hated leaving my best friends Rod and Kevin in Utah, I was relieved when, after a few months of me living in Little Rock, she ended it. I frustrated her by not being totally into her. She often asked if I didn’t find her attractive (which she was) and I felt so bad and weak for not being honest. She joked that I must not want a ball and chain. I liked the balls part. I replied to her Dear John letter with the sound “I’m not ready and can’t hold you back from your dreams of a married life” speech to Serena. As a good Mormon, and a pretty young woman, I’m sure she married and babied up fast.

Did I want that life? Sure, but it didn’t feel sincere. I wanted to be accepted—and loved—but I never wanted to “act” sincere. And certainly not drag another person into my straight life deception. No gay rights existed anywhere. At sixteen I couldn’t picture gay equality, even theoretically. Basically, the real me had no place in society. A “man without a country” thing. I felt alone.

In boot camp I wasn’t alone. Hardly ever. We were a mass of organisms crowded onto a Petrie dish under a microscope. I feared my unique sexuality would shine out from the others like a fleck of glitter. I had to stay on the dish and be part of the mass.

Taking Dale to my church made me feel less of a burden to him. I was returning the favor he did me by bringing me up to speed on military life. In seconds, his thirst for a female sighting was quenched. For a day. By the next Sunday, the testosterone-soaked atmosphere given off by our platoon made him thirsty for more girl sightings. He went with me every week.

He started listening to the missionary leading the service, intently, as if he might be tested on the material. He couldn’t help himself; he’s a natural student. Dale got very engaged.

He got so engaged that, before the end of boot camp, he joined the church. I was shocked. I wasn’t sure he should. I didn’t believe in the church, but Dale assured me he wanted to join. I didn’t argue; crazier things had happened. I joined the Marines for example. The best part of the experience was that we were excused from our platoon for an entire half-day. We

traded the yelling, the forced PT, the hard labor for a little faith. If there is a man among you without sin, let him cast the first stone.

I witnessed the thrill of the missionaries on their improbable conquest, and then Dale dressing in all white clothes and being dunked whole in a makeshift baptismal font on Parris Island. Were I not already a member, I would have joined the church just to get to wear a different outfit.

As he was immersed in the water, I realized that he had listened to the missionaries' sales presentation as I had listened to the Marine recruiter. His baptism into the church, me getting my head shaved—all the results of a good pitch.

22. A Lamb Among Lions

We grew as a unit and moved as a whole. One way to judge our group progress came from our time spent drilling on the Parade Deck. Marching on the Parade Deck was an exercise to teach us to move as one unit—to sharpen our marching skills, our ability to follow orders, and our response time. At first we looked like a bunch of loose sheep being herded by frustrated, if sharply dressed, shepherds. As we marched, I had to keep my eyes straight ahead, but I'd hear someone getting yelled into an adjustment: "Swing your hands six to the front, Caputo!" Or "Quit eyeballing me, Private, you look like you're fucking falling in love with me!" I always checked to make sure that wasn't aimed at me.

After a couple of weeks whirling clumsily around the giant asphalt field, we started to get our act together. If we were having a great day marching, we got cocky. So did the DIs, and their frustrated yelling would settle down into the proud call we all loved to hear, "lean back and strut." It meant we were being shown off to platoons passing by.

We had to become that gung-ho, work-together team. Who knows, we might fight a shared enemy one day. Together. It was easy—usually—to look past personal quirks to get our job done. I always remembered that I was silently asking that my "quirk" be overlooked by my platoon and DIs as we marched in the drama-stealing heat.

Without intending to, I gradually learned the names that went with all the faces I had first seen on the bus to the base. I was the platoon scribe, so I saw the platoon roster daily. Dale and I privately connected names to traits and nicknamed a few fellow recruits: "Cro" to the Cro-Magnon look-a-like, and "Pizza Face" to the kid with horrible skin. Although I never got to know some of the recruits, most names morphed into personalities, and some became fully realized characters that I cared about.

Getting to know one another in boot camp was difficult. Although the days dragged by, we were kept very busy. The DIs were around almost all of the time, and no personal chatter was allowed in their presence; the free time we had was precious. I was a nineteen-year-old gay man, so of course there were a few I found cute, and some I found incredibly hot—but, just as if we

were in the civilian world, I didn't let my eyes linger; I didn't want to get caught looking. It was more important to me to survive this ordeal and become a Marine than to satisfy urges that passed as easily as the slimy food through my gut. I wanted to get out of boot camp with status as a Marine, not with telephone numbers.

At night, we sat on the floor in neat rows, polishing our boots as we listened to one of the DIs lead a class on a military subject. As the weeks went by, we got more comfortable with life on the base, and we got more comfortable with each other. That defensive shell we all arrived with softened as our bodies hardened from training.

Some guys would walk around in their boxers holding a rifle part in one hand and a rag in the other, not really polishing the weapon, but using that activity as a reason to walk around visiting. No one had fired his M16 yet, but it was fun to talk about. We all could now break our M16s down in a minute and put them back together just as fast—with no leftover parts.

The DIs had made us write a letter home on our first morning in the squad bay. It took a couple of days for mail to arrive, but once it started rolling in, each mail call brought all the joy of Christmas plus a surprise party. We waited quietly, anxiously, and respectfully during the mail-call ceremony so we could hear our names called by whichever on-duty drill instructor delivered the mail. The DIs would playfully tease you if your letter came addressed to your nickname, or if the stationery was scented. If someone received a box of food, the DI would hold the contraband high in the air, showing it to the entire platoon like it was baby Jesus before forcing the recipient to eat the contents.

When I got a letter, it felt like I'd won something. I promised my family that if they wrote me, I would never forget it, and I never have. After a particularly grueling day, I opened a letter from my brother Clay.

Dear Greg,

How's the training? Are there any cute places to have lunch?

If he envisioned Parris Island as full of boutiques and tree-lined boulevards, with me in a snappy uniform, wrestling with the decision of which café to try, I didn't have time to clarify. I showed the letter to Dale; we both knew that no one in my family could understand what any of this was like. I wanted them to know, but it couldn't be explained. My Marine family was filling any void. I didn't feel homesick. Even when I hated

Parris Island or my platoon, I didn't wish I were home. Other than my childhood home Belle Place, I'd never had a place I longed for.

I took proactive measures and wrote my family, begging that they never, ever, ever send me any food. I couldn't believe I had to beg against food. My birthday came and went in mid-July, only acknowledged within the platoon by Dale—quickly and secretly. I sat on my foot locker and read the birthday cards I received from my family, grateful to have them but more relieved the DIs were unaware that the day held any special meaning for me. The resulting fuss might have been painful.

Letters were our only lifelines to the outside world, since we had no television or newspapers. Living in a bubble, I felt like I was suspended in time and totally separate from the rest of my world.

Santoro winced as he ran an envelope under his nose.

"Somebody got a letter from Suzy Rottencrotch!"

Pritchett was normally skittish, but at mail call he went into panic mode. Whenever a name was called, his head emerged up out of the crowd like a gopher's; his eyes darted from the DI's mouth to the ever-decreasing stack of letters.

Pritchett was married. And recently. Being separated from his wife was hard on him; I could only hope that, in his case, opposites attracted, and she had a calming effect on him when they were together. He really, really missed her. He would jump up before his name was finished, "Pritch—" and stand at attention, desperately needing that letter. The DIs picked up on his desperation quickly and would hold his letters until the end to draw out his agony. Santoro once handed out all of the mail without calling Pritchett's name, then walked back to his office. Pritchett was looking around the room for something to hang himself with when Santoro whipped a letter out of his pocket and flung it at the dejected husband.

"Jesus Christ, you're fucking whipped, Pritchett!" Santoro told him. "You're gonna have a heart attack on me, boy, and that would be a shame—who'd sniff all your wife's pretty little panties if you were gone?"

Pritchett went to the end of the squad bay and sat down to read. He'd close his eyes and sniff the envelope. When he couldn't take it any longer, he'd carefully open the flap. He'd remove the letter from the envelope as if it were breakable and just hold it in both hands. Then he'd bend his head down and devour the words. His lips would move as he read, slightly, so I wasn't sure if he was so overwhelmed that they were shaking or if he was

reading to himself. I could smell the perfume scenting the paper, since I was his bunkie. Pritchett's shaking hands wafted it in my direction. He read his letters over and over. "I want to go AWOL," Pritchett told me more than once. He'd enlisted in order to get the Veterans benefits but he couldn't predict how much he'd miss his wife. I guessed his jumpiness got him hitched, but he'd nicked out a spot in the wall of normal accomplishments way earlier than most. I was happy when a friend got married, and sad. It reminded me of something else I probably would never have.

Pritchett paced until it was time to hit the rack, cleaning his rifle as he walked.

"I don't know what I was thinking when I signed up."

"Why did you?"

"I couldn't find a job. I got a wife. . . ."

"It'll be over before you know it," I said.

He wasn't listening to me. "I'm going to jump the fence. Fuck the alligators—I'll make it. I gotta see my wife," he said.

I tried reason on him. "All you got is your uniform. They took our clothes. You'll stick out. If you get caught, you'll go to jail, and in military prison they throw away the key." I'd heard McKinnon, Santoro, and Hutchins each say that.

I couldn't tell him he had created his own dilemma or that I felt his pain and worried about being here too, but for different reasons. I liked Pritchett and didn't want him to go AWOL; our association had been brief but intense. I'd notice him running next to me. We'd chat during dinner. It would be like losing a family member.

"I just miss her so much, man." He opened his wide eyes wider, possibly opening his tear ducts, because his eyes welled up with water that only I saw. I loved that trust and wished he'd relax. Secretly I was grateful to him because his hyper-anxious, reactionary manner calmed me down.

Someone always has it worse than you.

I could depend on one thing; the moment the lights were out and the DIs had left our squad bay for their office, Pritchett would jump up and rattle the lock on his foot locker, creaking the locker open and pulling out his wife's letters.

He masturbated to them almost every night. Our bunk rocked and squeaked for about two minutes, then it stopped. He'd get up and put the letters away. Of course I lay there imagining what that scene looked like. I

imagined that he'd place the letter close to his body, shut his eyes tight, ensuring that he could focus on the task at hand. Or maybe the task at both hands.

On the other end of the mail spectrum was Private Baker. He eagerly hung on as every name was called at mail call, too. When he didn't get any mail, he'd walk away, obviously disappointed. He lingered a couple of times, and McKinnon shooed him away, since there wasn't any mail left to distribute. After seeing this more than once, I told Dale I felt bad for Baker never getting a letter. Mail is a volley; you have to send one over the net to get one back. I hadn't seen him writing any letters.

Baker would go back to his footlocker and sit. We were on free time, but never allowed to be idle. The DIs wanted us to be shining boots or our belt buckles, cleaning our rifles, and reciting military facts as a group.

Santoro was our most engaged DI. Even when he probably was supposed to be off, he stayed and hung out. He'd come back to the squad bay after a workout, smelling freshly showered. He'd stride around and snatch a rifle muzzle away from a private and show him how to use a cotton swab to clean the crevices. If we weren't calling out enlisted or officer rank structure, or anything at all, he started us off.

"Fucking lazy-ass privates—you're just sitting on your asses. Recite the goddamn chain of command, for Chrissakes. Something!"

Dale and I noticed that Santoro went over to Baker's bunk a few times. He sat with Baker on his footlocker, and they'd talk. Santoro didn't snatch the boot away from Baker the way he might have from me, but would guide Baker through polishing it. Eventually, Santoro would stand up, snap at a recruit nearby, and walk off and into the office.

Baker almost never spoke. His lower lip stuck out and hung low, making him look like he was confused. Which he was. His confusion was probably due to an unpracticed mind. It was easy to spot him. During that first frantic exercise when we arrived at the squad bay and were ordered to stamp our names into our clothes, he was the one who had stamped his name on the front of his T-shirts. Backwards. Baker had labeled himself as an idiot.

It was so hot in the South Carolina summer that the black tar on the deck was softened as it drank in the sun. As my black boots hit the tar, my soles seemed to stick. The heat felt like the bars of a prison. The humidity was thick enough to resist as we marched. The very atmosphere seemed to conspire to make boot camp more difficult. Baker's skin was a dark black,

and the heat combined with humidity combined with exercise caused large, silver balls of sweat to form all over his bald head. If I was marching behind him, I would stare, waiting for them to roll off. Vegas odds makers would have had a field day on how long each drop of sweat would hold on to the stubble.

Our white T-shirts and camo trousers were somewhat comfortable if we just strolled around, but we never strolled. We marched and got hot, wearing our fiberglass chrome domes. They had an adjustable canvas liner strap that ran around the inside, making them the fabulous version of a construction worker's hardhat. Some of the helmets had straps that had either worn out or rotted, so a few of us didn't get a tight fit; those helmets wobbled a bit as we marched. Almost everyone succeeded in adjusting his helmet so it would look sharp and wouldn't wobble. Except Private Baker.

As luck of the draw would have it, Baker had been issued a helmet without a liner; the helmet jiggled around on his head while he marched. If his head had been glass, the helmet would have made a rattling ring like a lid spinning against the top of a jar.

When we were commanded to halt while marching, his helmet would wind up dramatically draped over one eye. He'd tilt his neck back to lift his head enough to see out. It was cartoonish, giving him the look of Dopey from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.

I could just imagine me raising my scrawny hand like a little know-it-all suck-up, speaking a cloyingly perfect "Sir, Private requests permission to speak to Drill Instructor Sergeant Santoro."

"Speak!" he'd say, already wanting me to shut up.

"Sir, Private Cope notices that Private Baker has been issued a helmet without a liner, and it just whumps around on his head."

Santoro would rush up to me and say, "Is Private Baker's helmet your fucking concern?! Is everything in your personal fucking house so squared away that you can take on everybody else's problems?"

I'd seen him hit Dale, and this is exactly the kind of occasion where he could quickly check over his shoulder to see that no one was watching and then beat the smartass out of me. I could hear his mind thinking, through clenched teeth, Just one smack.

After killing me with his bare hands, he'd yank off my well-fitting helmet, then stride up to Baker and slap it on his head. Marines are fast-acting problem-solvers with no time for the weak.

So I didn't say anything.

Baker's loose helmet was the bell on the alarm clock alerting me to other problems. Marching to commands, in a large formation, was hard and new to most of us. We went with the flow. But Baker would turn the wrong direction and keep on that wrong path. In one or two steps, he would get tangled with other recruits and cause an actual clash of clanging rifles, helmets, and men. We were trained to follow orders, so the boys in his direct swath of error tried to keep going in the right direction, but couldn't.

We were on the Parade Deck drilling one day when the command rang out, "To the left flank, march!" The platoon flawlessly executed that huge sweeping turn—but I saw Baker isolated on the sidelines. Hutchins had ordered him to drop his trousers.

"You want to make this hard on me, Private?! I'll make it hard on you."

Baker was still marching, but struggling to take each step, hobbled by bunched-up fabric. His rifle was upside-down.

Hutchins was screeching howler-monkey style right in Baker's face.

"You motherfucking idiot! You can't tell the difference between the butt of your rifle and the hole where the bullet comes out?! You will, asshole, when you get shot in the motherfucking foot, mo-ron. You're gonna kill your whole goddamn platoon. Do me a favor and stay in touch after boot camp so I can keep the fuck away from you."

I couldn't imagine how Baker didn't realize that the thin, tubular M16 barrel was jabbing in his hand, and the fat butt intended to rest in his palm was on his shoulder. If nothing else, the sensations of imbalance should have clued him in and caused a correction, but they never did.

The first few times these things happened, the entire platoon—as was customary and expected—dropped to the ground, rifles at our sides, and began punishment PT.

If I committed the offense that led to PT, I worried that my fellow recruits hated me; when they caused it, I certainly hated them. The first twenty times with Baker, we all groaned, "Aw, shit, Baker, not again." But soon even the drill instructors couldn't bear punishing us for his basic stupidity and began punishing only him.

"Your head better catch up to your body, Private Baker," Santoro warned.

Baker never seemed bothered by the mistakes. The DIs moved him to the back of the line to keep an eye on him or give him individual instruction or just to get him out of our way. I figured he was like some of the students I'd

gone to school with in New Orleans who were failed up because the teachers didn't care enough to tailor the lessons just a bit to fit a struggling kid's ability. Those teachers had probably been failed up in a few classes themselves, both victims and perpetrators of the unsuccessful public educational system.

Despite Baker's fuck-ups, we all settled in to a routine. Our wake-up calls no longer included the trash-lid-banging. The last recruit on firewatch would rouse us, and at least one of the drill instructors would stride out of the office and start yelling for us to gather.

We would yell out our last names in our croaky morning voices, going down the line one after the other to make sure we were all there and no one had escaped.

I could count on Marks being up and neatly dressed like the suck-up he was. Cooper was the oldest recruit and woke up slower than the rest of us. Jhimchek would have his hand down his boxers, scratching his balls as he walked down the squad bay. His sleep-heavy eyes would look over at me with a gleam, and he added a grin as if he knew he was hot and was damned happy about it.

Like a crowded family, we rushed by each other without saying good morning—each attending to our own agenda to efficiently use the few minutes we had to shit, shower, and shave. The thick-bearded Private Johns would pass me as he rushed into the head to shave. Since my beard was undetectable, if not nonexistent, I used shaving time to square away my footlocker or re-read a wrinkled letter from home. I also didn't need to shit so badly that I'd join the gang of crazies led by Private Cantrell in the communal toilet, clucking away as if they were in a henhouse.

I wanted to run in that room, stand in the middle, and scream, "What is the matter with you guys?! You're shitting in a room of toilets talking about everything except the crazy fact that you're shitting in a room full of toilets!"

I could hold it without any problem until late at night, when I would be alone in the head. I'd shit there in the quiet dark, aware of how stupid my need for some modicum of privacy was, but so glad not to be casually passing a roll of toilet paper to a buddy like it was a note from a girl. There were a few others I'd see in the dark of night in the head. We wouldn't speak, understanding that, although we shared habits, the act of openly communicating about this one defeated the need for discretion.

The DIs told us when to shave and shower, but they respected our toilet habits enough to trust us to take care of that task on our own. We were, however, free to approach the drill instructors if the unexpected need to use the head arose outside of the luxury of our squad bay—hopefully with better results than I had from my dental office failure.

The request itself still had to be executed correctly, or it could be denied. Once you approached the drill instructor, you locked your body into the position of attention and waited to be acknowledged. If he wasn't busy, you spoke in a strong, loud voice:

“Sir, Private [insert any name here] requests permission to speak with [insert the DI's rank and name and get it right], sir!”

“Speak!”

“Sir, Private requests permission to make an emergency sitting head call, sir.”

“Go!” was the best answer you could get, and off you went. These chances to speak to the DIs were akin to wishes from a genie—don't waste them and don't fuck them up.

One cool morning we were running on the small dirt track. We started our runs as a clumped-up knot of boys. The drill instructor blew his whistle, and we took off. Soon we were thinned down the track like long, straggling hair.

Some recruits were born runners and loved to sprint out. Private Hudson was a skinny black guy so bowlegged he shifted side-to-side when he walked. His face was always scrunched up into what looked like a grimace of pain, but it was really an eye-squinting grin. He was cheerful and smiled as he talked in a high, squeaky voice.

When Hudson ran, his legs flew out far in front of him. After only a few strides, his legs were spinning around like the blades of a fan. He flew past the rest of us and blurred down the track. He was terrific to watch, and as he whizzed by I wished nothing but to run like he could.

We drilled wearing long, hot trousers, but ran in the red nylon shorts. At the end of a run, we'd crash on the cold, dew-dotted grass. Three weeks ago, sitting on wet grass would have creeped me out—now I used the shock as a quick ice pack.

With the red shorts on, it was harder to tell who was who. Except for Baker. He ran with a gait that would make him feel at home in the zombie apocalypse. His ankles seemed unsteady as they struck the dirt, and he knocked into other recruits, who had to scramble to stay on their feet. I'd

see his shoelaces flying in the wind as he ran. They hadn't come untied—they hadn't been tied to begin with.

Baker rolled across the track in front of me, wobbling near McKinnon. I hoped he didn't run into him. He missed, but started stammering McKinnon's name. I knew he was attempting to ask permission to speak.

McKinnon kept running in the center, keeping his eyes on the platoon.

"What the fuck is it?"

"Private Baker, sir."

"I know your fucking name, asshole. What the fuck do you want?"

"Head, sir."

"Baker, if you think I'm gonna give you head, you goddamn faggot, you are in a world of shit."

Baker was out of breath and too nervous to respond appropriately. I'd never heard him speak to a DI before. Nor had I ever had a conversation with Baker. I'd see him hanging around a few other recruits in the squad bay at night, but mostly he listened, smiling at comforting things he heard that might have reminded him of home.

"Baker needs the head."

"No motherfucking sir?! Asshole, you fucked it up—get out of my face. Go!"

Baker lingered, raising a hand as if asking a question in class.

McKinnon screamed without looking at Baker. "I told you to goddamn go!"

Any DI's temper flew out of control when we didn't react lightning fast. Baker wobbled off, his upper body bending over to the right.

I watched Baker's red shorts turn dark and then sag. Soon, I saw light brown sludge running down his left leg. He kept on running, and the shit soon was on both legs and trailing behind him on the track.

Close up, comedy is tragedy. What would have been a funny scene in a teen movie was horribly tragic in reality. Baker didn't look down or back but held his head up and kept running. McKinnon blew his whistle, commanding Baker and everyone else to halt and fall into formation.

I watched McKinnon's frustration rise up through his body, his arms grabbing his hat and throwing it on the ground. It was as close as real life got to steam shooting up from a cartoon character's head. McKinnon's cussing was the sound effect.

Santoro ran over to Baker and walked him to the back of the platoon, where they marched as we returned to the squad bay. McKinnon called the left-right-left cadence we depended on to stay in step, but he tossed in a general lecture along the way.

“If you have to take a shit and you fuck up the correct way to ask, do not shit yourself, privates. Have some goddamned dignity.”

Baker could have been any of us. I’d like to think that we all knew that and would have stopped and helped Baker had we been able. But our first responsibility was to follow procedure. We had a duty to ourselves and our unit as a whole as well as to our fellow recruits. We couldn’t break the unit’s integrity. It was a difficult balance to strike, especially in a case like this.

It was not a proud marching moment for McKinnon. When we reached our home base, we were dismissed and hustled into the squad bay to shower as if we were all covered in shit.

Santoro corralled Baker. I’m not sure where they went, but we all watched them walk away. I saw Santoro with his arm around Baker’s shoulders, talking to him with a smile on his face. Santoro tugged Baker’s head a bit, to squeeze a smile out of him, and hopefully nothing else.

We never saw Baker again. McKinnon explained that Baker had been found incompetent to handle recruit training, and he was sent home. Baker’s recruiter had filled out all Baker’s paperwork—including the basic IQ test—for him. Baker couldn’t read or write. His squad leader stuffed his belongings into his sea bag.

23. Broken Home

We were in boot camp to learn more than anything to shoot. Everything we were taught had a purpose connected to shooting—to being an effective Marine. For example, if you were a great runner, you'd be a better shooter, since you could sprint into position and take aim. The best supply sergeants and most efficient administrative personnel had to be ready to abandon their posts and grab their always handy, always ready rifle.

The rifle range was mysterious, almost mythical, built up by our DIs as both a time and a place. They threw hints out, but, like everything else, until we experienced it, it wouldn't feel real.

Every fact about the M16 rifle had been drilled into our heads. We robotically chanted its physical characteristics at the top of our lungs while marching and also in quiet voices as we polished our boots or cleaned our rifles.

I felt like I was dating my rifle. We were introduced by a friend. I wanted to get to know it, to become closer. I invested a lot of time learning about its history and skills and current goals. "Oh, so you can fire forty-five rounds per minute in semi-automatic mode? Wow, impressive."

Our physical relationship was a little awkward at first—I just wasn't sure how to hold it and make it feel special. But I learned what to do to make sure it was always safe and secure. I attended to all its needs at night as we had long conversations in the squad bay. And I wasn't afraid to take the lead in the relationship, either: I manhandled it and manipulated it on the Parade Deck. When we danced, I led.

I never asked the rifle to consummate our relationship. I was patient. I could wait. Sure, it was hard to resist getting some early thrills, but I was in this relationship for the long haul.

I spent five weeks with that bitch before it put out.

From the moment it was issued to me with a simple handoff, I was entrusted with total responsibility for the rifle, including its care and cleaning. But we had to earn the privilege of firing a live round.

The DIs showed me how to break down an M16 into about a dozen parts in seconds. After practicing hundreds of times, I could reassemble that

weapon in under a minute. A few seconds more and I could be snapped in, ready to fire.

The rifle and how you shot it was everything to my drill instructors. McKinnon's already narrow eyes squinted into tight focus when he talked about shooting, which led me to believe he must be an excellent marksman.

Santoro always spoke quietly about this next phase in boot camp, usually when leaning his head so close to a recruit's face that the front edge of his hat brim dug in to the boy's forehead. He would whisper through clenched teeth, "You gonna kill with that rifle, boy? You got what it takes to hit a gook a thousand feet away while running?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" any of us would proudly puff out.

"You gonna run, boy? I teach you to stand and fight, and you run at the sight of the goddamn enemy?!"

They handed me a rifle along with the authority to use it.

"Kill him before he kills you and everything you love."

I was here willingly to learn how.

We attended highly technical classes about the capabilities of the rifle. The Marine leading the class would describe the rifle's color and finish, its grooved barrel, the purposes of the front sight and the rear sight, the 8.5-pound weight, that if we heard "affix bayonets" we'd know close combat was close—really close. Soon the stats would reel off in my head automatically, just like you can still hear the phones ringing after a busy day at the office. The M16 rifle is an air-cooled, gas-powered semi-automatic weapon repeated in my head even as I held my penis and peed.

We were never allowed to be comfortable. Not for a minute, an hour, or a night. The idea was to keep us on edge. We had to be ready to drop everything on the command to fight on the spot. McKinnon illustrated this concept of readiness with the powerful image of a selfless, fast-acting Marine jumping on a hand grenade before it exploded and killed his entire squad.

"You think he had time to think about his motherfucking turtle back at home, privates? Just jump on the goddamn grenade. You have a mission that's a whole helluva lot bigger than you."

These were the bedtime stories that rocked us to sleep at night. Even when we were resting, the DIs kept us on edge. On purpose.

After five weeks of relatively calm awakenings, one morning the squad bay lights flipped on and all three drill instructors strode into the squad bay

banging trashcan lids and screaming—like they had the first few days.

Our reactions were so much sharper, but it still felt like going backwards. It made no sense. In the chaos, time dilated; while everyone was scrambling to wake up and get on line, I saw everything in slow motion. In the center of the squad bay, McKinnon was yelling to “get two sheets and a pillowcase and get on line.” Hutchins was flipping a mattress containing a still-groggy private. Santoro was in Cooper’s sleepy face: “You in a stupor, Cooper? Are you fucking ready?!” I watched as Santoro’s jugular veins popped up and raced each other up the sides of his neck.

“Pack your trash, ladies,” said McKinnon, and I groaned inside: We were moving to live on the rifle range. Since I never heard any gunfire, I figured the range was far way and therefore; we’d need to live closer. We were shipping off to the rifle range for two weeks for Phase II of boot camp.

I had built up an allergy to moving by being exposed to too many homes. When I was a young child, my original parents bounced me and my brothers around Lubbock, Texas. I’ve stitched memories of porches and backyards and living rooms into a tattered patchwork quilt in my mind.

Then my mother remarried and we all moved to Fort Worth. My parents eased the shock by settling us into Belle Place, a beautiful house with grounds, a guesthouse, secret passageways, and silk wallpaper. I knew all the neighbors. Belle Place had a huge attic playroom with windows overlooking the landscaped backyard. My brothers and I shared this space. We painted pictures, put on plays, used our imaginations. It was a room for fun.

Three springs later, my parents announced we’d be moving to Mormon Central, Salt Lake City, Utah. I was stunned.

I held my traveling satchel as I stood on the world’s biggest front porch. I stared at the ornate fruit basket painted over the front door of Belle Place. It had never made sense to me. I’d miss it. I said goodbye not only to Belle Place that day, but also to ever knowing a real home again.

Utah was foreign and uncomfortable. Even our house seemed eager to escape, slanted as if trying to slide off its steep street in the Avenues. Perhaps it was hoping to be carried off in the torrent of water that rushed through the street gutters after every rain. We stayed in Utah one and a half years.

We all missed Belle Place, especially my mother. So when I was halfway through fifth grade, in the winter of 1970, we packed up and moved back to

Texas. During the days-long drive, as I stared out the window, watching the icy winter Utah landscape melt slowly back to warmer, more familiar Southwest terrain, I daydreamed about magnificent Belle Place—every wall, every room, how the stairway smelled, and the creepy squish under my bare feet when I stepped on matted wet leaves near the fish pond.

My fantasy screeched to a halt when I learned that no job waited for my father in Fort Worth. In fact, Belle Place wasn't even for sale. My mother had moved us back to Fort Worth on the strength of her belief that she could convince the current owners to sell it back to us, as if we were the rightful owners returning to claim it—returning to our senses, to finally live happily ever after.

By then, houses and hotels carried the same sense of permanence for me. We arrived in Fort Worth and checked in to a motel. That night, from an adjoining room, I heard my mother having a nightmare. Belle Place was on fire.

The next morning, I stood in the doorway of her motel room, holding a bucket of ice, as my mother cried on the phone. She placed the handset back on the cradle. "Belle Place burned last night. It's gone."

I dropped the bucket like it was on fire. Shards of ice flew in every direction—slowly, it seemed to me, without noise. I didn't want to accept that her nightmare had come true.

Belle Place was the last home to which I felt connected.

As everyone scrambled to pack up and move out of the squad bay, I vacantly stared into my sea bag. It seemed like such a long time since I'd opened it. I tried to stow my uniforms in the duffel bag neatly, but the DIs were melting down, so I stuffed. We emptied our footlockers and rolled up our mattresses and left them at the foot of the rack.

"Move out!"

I wanted to look back and see what the room looked like, but I didn't want to be caught with my eyes anywhere but to the front. And besides, I knew what the room looked like—all bony and cold with the paint-chipped metal beds and ash-grey colored floor, exactly the same as the day we arrived. It looked like a burned out house.

24. Snap And Pop

If boot camp was summer camp, now I was at camp within camp.

I struggled with my sea bag as I boarded the bus. It weighed almost as much as I did. Combined with the backpack, rifle, helmet, and canteens, it was awkward and hard to handle. Hustling onto the bus made it harder, especially since everyone was pushing and shoving, and I felt like I was going to be trampled if I didn't hurry up. In my mind I had to make handling the heavy bag look effortless. I suspected that if I looked weak to others, it would open the door for them to suspect that I was gay. In retrospect, I bet most of the boys had trouble grappling the heavy bag. That was the point of the exercise.

I took my seat on the bus next to Pritchett. The green bus rocked from age. Even when the road was smooth, it felt like we were rolling over big rocks. Just three weeks ago, knocking into someone on a bus would have been rude. Now it was normal. With each turn we rubbed shoulders. We all wore the same T-shirt that got sweaty from the same exercise.

"I can't wait to shoot me some targets."

Pritchett kept his head facing forward, and his comment seemed directed to no one. I looked over at him.

"I've never shot a rifle," I admitted. I wanted someone to know in case I failed.

"Nothing better than shooting. Only thing I've been excited about."

I wanted to feel his excitement. I hoped the shooting bug bit me too; it would make me feel like one of the boys and would keep me from feeling completely lost to the male gender when friends talked about football or girls.

The rifle range was only five minutes away. Even though it was still on the base, it looked different than the training depot we had just left. The squad bay buildings were dark green and single-story.

That short ride filled me with anxiety about both entering a new place and being scored on firing a weapon. We all looked out the windows of the bus like we were seeing a strange land. Scuttlebutt around the platoon had it that the DIs relaxed a bit at the rifle range so we could focus on shooting.

But once the bus stopped, the DIs screamed us off the bus with the command to fall into formation just outside—and the rifle range suddenly didn't seem so foreign. The DIs were hardly going to give us a tour of the squad bay—or more than a few minutes to unpack. Once we were all inside, they quickly got back to business.

“Get your goddamn rifles, maggots, and fall the fuck out.”

McKinnon, Santoro, and Hutchins strode out, leaving us to unlock our weapons. They were doing this more lately, trusting us to get it together and meet them outside in formation. We still screwed this up sometimes, and had to all fall back in because one private would ruin it for the whole platoon. With more than seventy recruits, the odds of that happening were not low.

We hated whichever recruit made an error even more now than ever; he should have known better than to make stupid mistakes. Resentments were growing as we grew tighter. Our resentful feelings were what the DIs wanted; they needed us to feel our mistakes so we wouldn't make them here or, more importantly, in battle. They were indeed our mother and father, with all the commensurate guilt trips.

I looked around as I took my place in formation. The area looked different, had far fewer buildings. Still, isolated.

It was quiet as we marched along the rough road. We didn't encounter any other platoons. McKinnon halted us, ordered us to “Left, face!” We all turned in perfect precision to face left. He paused a moment to let us take in the scene. We faced a vast, grassy field. The worn grass was brown, tanned by the South Carolina sun, just like my arms.

“This is my rifle range, privates. For the next two weeks, after morning chow and until it's dark, this is your motherfucking house. Do you like your new house, privates?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

There was definitely more enthusiasm in the response. Most of the boys were itching to fire the M16; we had been lugging it around for five weeks. Lots of my fellow recruits had told me that this is why they joined—to get the chance to finger the trigger of this legendary weapon, which no one had access to in the civilian world. No matter how many rifles and shotguns they might have used at home, you had to enlist to shoot an M16. The Russian AR-15 was street legal for civilians and was a close second, but not exactly what you grabbed to kill a deer.

Sitting on the grass in a loose classroom huddle, I listened to the first of a thousand safety lectures. I needed to hear every word because I had no idea about rifle safety, etiquette, or anything. I could tell you which fork to use and that one didn't wear brown shoes after six, but I needed to hear that you always assume your weapon is loaded.

"Never point it at anyone unless you're going to shoot them," the DIs instructed.

I needed everyone to hear that.

We'd been lectured from day one about the responsibility of our rifles. I'd cleaned it when it was already perfectly clean. I'd even slept with it, carried it like my own baby. I never surrendered to the heat or exhaustion—it was precious, and I treated it as such. The new bit of info we were handed that hot day was that we'd be shooting live rounds.

I looked around my platoon. I had no fear that I would snap like a twig and fire a live round at anyone. I could count on Dale to refrain, too. But the rest of the guys gave me little confidence. What if this was someone's intention the entire time? A person looking to kill just had to enlist, and the U.S. government would not only teach him how, but also pay him to do it. Perhaps a disgruntled youth was among us and wanted to take me out. And not to dinner for conversation as sparkling as my eyes.

No one cracked a smile during this lecture. Live rounds were real bullets. Anyone caught sneaking one away from the range to keep as a souvenir would be court martialed and maybe shot with the stolen bullet. Threats weren't a new tactic in our training; this one was taken seriously.

McKinnon walked a few feet away from us and pointed down the long field. My eyes freely followed him, since we weren't locked into the position of attention.

"Those are your targets, privates. Half of you will be down there and the rest of you here, shooting at them. You'll score your fellow recruits and mark on those targets where the bullet hits."

Santoro butted in. "If you hit the fucking targets."

The targets looked tiny and so far away, like a little row of tombstones.

"Remember the things I have told you. Those targets are five hundred yards away. The gun is not. When you fire my weapon you might damage your sensitive little pussy ears. So you will wear earplugs. And you will hit those goddamn targets or you will not become a Marine in my Marine Corps! Do you understand?"

“Sir, yes, sir!”

We were itching to shoot. I certainly was. Not only anxious to see what it was like, but nervous that I wouldn’t be any good. Confidence is tough. Some of the guys in my platoon had fired weapons a frightening number of times and would talk about it excitedly. Pritchett got even twitchier, and I wondered how he could hold the rifle still and not flinch, sending the bullet off its course.

It was an overcast, grey day. The clouds were a good sign, heat-wise, but carried an increased chance of rain—and we were to be outside all day. The five hundred yards looked far, but I didn’t say anything. I just looked at my fellow recruits, letting their bright eyes light up my own. If I wasn’t authentically, confidently excited, I at least looked it. I stood as good a chance as anyone to be successful, as long as I stepped aside from my irrational fears and dove in.

Everyone has first days—children starting kindergarten, teens experimenting with sex, even the guy who gets a job working a Muppet. Firing an M16 is a hugely humbling first day. I’ve fallen in the past; I’ve failed; but how I conducted myself and how honest I am with myself has always paid off.

McKinnon divided our four squads into two. He sent the first two squads marching down the field to pull the targets for those of us firing. It was weird seeing half the platoon march away, following Hutchins. As they trailed off, the long column of camouflaged boys blended into the gray sky; their loose formation made them easy to imagine as ants as they silently stretched farther away.

I lay on the ground in a prone position. I wore my camouflage field jacket for the first time. We rarely wore the jackets. Even though it made me hotter, it was a layer between the worn-down grass and me. Everything we had or got or used—except our clothes—was worn down, but not totally out—even the grass.

When I put the earplugs in, my first assumption of the shooting position became a solitary moment. It was creepy to be alone with a rifle in my hand and the thoughts in my head. Even with my ears protected, I could still hear the booming voices of the DIs as they gave us instruction. When I yelled back, “Sir, yes, sir, I heard my own muffled voice in my head.

I’d been surrounded by men and noise and yelling for three weeks. Now I was lying on the grass in an artificial quiet, waiting for a DI to check my

strap to see if I had snapped in correctly. I looked around at my fellow recruits scattered on the grass around me. Some were wiggling into position and some were already gazing down the barrel of their M16.

We all looked like we were ready to fight. With only the sound of my breathing in my head, I saw boys in battle, doing what we were training for and being paid to do. I didn't want to kill anyone or be caught in a gun battle. I wanted to drop the gun and run yet at the same time, with the same intensity, I didn't want to do either.

The dry grass was matted down from thousands of boys trampling and lying on it, grinding their hips down as hard as they could to shoot this exclusive weapon. We were told to envision enemies and to "hit 'em between the eyes."

"Shoot to kill, 'cause they're ready to kill you."

I could feel all of those boys around me and all of those who had been there before me—my body soaked up their collective thoughts from the ground, and I didn't pick up fear. At least being so close to the ground, no one should notice if I shot badly.

It was hitting me once again that I was here to defend my country. That's big. I wasn't even sure I could defend myself. I glanced down at my uniformed body, then at the rifle in my hands. I looked like a soldier, but I didn't feel like one.

It was early in the morning; the South Carolina haze hadn't cleared, and as I gazed down the long field toward the targets, I hoped it did clear. I needed all of the help I could get. Up until this week, my anxiety over being good at firing a rifle was mild. Now I was flat on the ground like a soldier, waiting my turn for the instructor to check my rig. I had anxiety as if I were back in high school, unprepared for a test. I felt pressured; I wanted to shoot well.

Snapping in gives you the best, most secure firing position. I'd figured the canvas strap attached to our rifle had no purpose other than to enable us to sling the rifle over our shoulder. Now it was detached from the rifle at one end and tightly bound around my upper arm like a tourniquet. I followed the demonstration and twisted it behind my elbow and around my forearm, then grasped the front end of the barrel cover. It was so tight that even the slightest wiggle would make the strap spring loose from my shoulder and uncoil.

It took a lot of attempts, but each time the rifle butt slipped out, I shoved it back in my shoulder, resolute in getting the setup right. I didn't want anything that I could control to make me a lesser marksman. I had to shoot as well as anyone else.

So far I'd cheated and lied from fear of being judged undeserving to be here, but I got a chance to prove that arbitrary self-judgment wrong with every challenge. I kept a lid on my gay nature, but I knew it could raise its true head up anytime. My imagination let me worry that some feminine side would bubble up—I'd scream or throw my hands up in the air when confronted in some surprise situation. I couldn't use hyper-masculinity as a disguise. I might not know if I appeared girly to the others, but I for sure knew I didn't appear macho. The firing range was a great place to practice my low profile; a rifle is a great prop, and there's no talking.

We snapped in and snapped out. I felt the spot in my shoulder where the rifle was supposed to go, over and over and over.

Santoro dropped down on the ground next to me. He caught me off guard. With the earplugs in, I didn't hear him coming. He didn't call me stupid, or chicken shit, or even by my name. He just grabbed my rifle butt in one hand and put his other hand behind my shoulder and shoved them together.

"Feel that, Private?" He yelled so that I could hear.

"Sir, yes, sir!" I yelled back, my own high-pitched voice letting me down again.

He yanked on my strap, almost dislodging my rifle from my shoulder. I resisted and kept it in tight. He grunted, pushed himself up, and was on to the next guy. I wondered if he realized it was me he'd just checked. Or was I just some regular guy to him? He didn't linger; I was glad. At this close contact between us, that was success.

I didn't fire live rounds that first day. The DIs built up the anticipation more, like a girl in a movie not letting the leading man under her bra. I'd see him onscreen: He can totally feel the boob, just not what he was after—the fascinating nipple. I bet firing the rifle was touching that nipple.

After a morning of snapping in, we broke for lunch. I marched to the chow hall a bit more proud. The food, however, was marking time. Like at the first squad bay, I didn't take chow breaks for granted—lunch in the chow hall, with its dented metal trays and sloppish food, was weirdly reassuring, an anchor. I was grateful for the pause. I wasn't even all that disappointed in

the food; I accepted that it wasn't getting better. At least it showed up. Like me. Except I was getting better.

We, our platoon, were getting better.

* * *

"Get two elastic straps and get on line!"

I didn't need to decipher what he was talking about: blousing straps. After a month of marching in what seemed like the military equivalent of bell-bottoms, today was the day we wrapped our loose-bottomed trousers tight around the tops of our boots. Today, we got big-boy pants. Trousers.

From the age of ten I'd disguised my skinny body with baggy clothes. That all changed one day when I was fourteen. I babysat for a family at church. The dad was a handsome, athletic man—you know, the kind of man I wanted to be and someday date.

When he drove me home one night, he asked me what sport I played.

"None. I'm not really in shape," I said.

"I was like that. You ought to wear tighter clothes. The baggy look just makes us skinny guys look skinnier," he said.

That weekend, I grabbed the sewing basket from the hall closet. I sat on the floor of my room and turned my light blue corduroys from JCPenney inside out. I ran the needle up one leg, over the crotch, and down the other leg. I tried them on; they were tight.

Monday, I wore them to school.

"Hey, Cambodia Legs," a voice called. I smiled, joined the group, and died a bit as we all shared a laugh over my legs. I sat in class and pulled at the thread I'd sewn in.

Here I was again with baggy trousers—although not by intention. The Marine corps provided uniforms that fit well-muscled legs, and mine were anything but. Nonetheless, I would now be wearing my baggy trousers with pride. I had earned them.

This was a big day—like our balls were dropping and we needed our first jock strap. I knew it was coming and had been anticipating it as much as the day when they didn't shave our entire heads. In both cases, we would start to look more like Marines.

We followed the DIs' example and put the elastic straps on around our boots, then carefully tucked the bottoms of our trousers up and under the elastic band so our trousers were now gathered tightly near the top of our boots. The fabric poofed out a little. Snap and pop.

I instantly felt better and more precisely dressed. This was an important milestone. Not only had I made it into Phase II, but also I had something to show for it. Outside these gates, in the civilian world, it wouldn't matter which fashion icon tried to make this look popular—I'd never follow along. It would look affected and kind of fancy; accessorizing is a tricky skill. But in the Marines, the elastic straps were more than a great chance to jazz up a dull uniform; they had a purpose. Our trousers needed to be locked up and kept out of our way while we were running into combat position.

The boot camp process put us in competition with ourselves; we were challenged, and we stretched to reach personal goals. We were constantly compared to others. Someone always did better. The Marines start with individual soldiers, form them into a squad, then a platoon. The Corps builds and builds, unit by unit, until you have the entire armed force, and you are back to one unit—and that unit protects the nation. But since we are only as strong as our weakest member, it always goes right back to that one Marine and his individual training.

25. Shoot To Kill

If there's a job to be done that recruits can do, the recruits do it. The Marine Corps isn't bringing civilians in to peel potatoes, much less pull targets at the firing range. The Corps has to be self-sufficient in battle and at home.

After lunch, it was my group's turn to pull the targets to show the firing recruits where their bullets landed. Those recruits would get to fire their weapons; I would have to wait until the next day. I walked along the range and down a small hill, and ended up in a ditch behind the targets. It was a long trench that held about twenty targets all lined up. We were now five hundred yards away from the firing line, and the bullets zoomed by and hit targets safely, way above our heads.

The targets were on wooden frames that loomed over our heads, and I could hear if a shot hit the target. Immediately after a round was fired, we reached up and grabbed the rope to pull the huge target down hand-over-hand, as fast as we could. It was like hoisting the mainsail on a boat. But pulling down. And on land.

We searched for the bullet hole. The targets had been shot up hundreds of times, but we had to find the new hole. We ran our hands over the canvas until we felt an opening that hadn't been taped up or if we spotted sunlight shining through we knew we'd found it. Each shot was scored by where the bullet hit the target. You got the maximum points for hitting the center of the target—the bull's-eye—and then fewer points as you hit the target further out. If you missed the target, well, you fucked up your one job.

This action was as fast and well-timed as a racecar flying in for a pit stop. We stuck a piece of colored tape on the new hole and sent the target flying back up—the shooter needed to know how he did in case he needed to make adjustments.

We were equipped with five-foot-long metal sticks, each with a circle at the top with a different color and pattern on each side that represented the score. Closer to the center, higher the score. We held up the stick like a flag to signal the shooter on how he'd done.

If someone hit a bull's-eye, we waved the stick with the solid circle. That was the money shot that everyone was after.

If we found no bullet hole, we had to wave the stick with a solid white circle—Maggie’s Drawers. I don’t know who Maggie was, but reference to her huge, flapping panties has made her immortal as the symbol for any soldier missing a target.

There was a whole line of targets at the end of the field, and there were two of us to pull each target. Dale and I paired up with each other for this exercise. We really got into it—yelling out, “Pull, pull, pull!” as we pulled the target down and then frantically searching for the bullet hole. I bet this is where real camaraderie started for my platoon and maybe for all others. We wanted to encourage the shooter, whose identity was unknown to us other than that we knew he was in our platoon.

We marked most shots exactly as the target reflected, but, in unspoken agreement, we marked a couple of bad shots better than they actually were. If a shooter missed once, we gave him a Maggie’s Drawers and waited for him to adjust his shot or position and fire again. If he missed a few times, we went ahead and slapped tape on the target as if he hit it somewhere—not a bull’s-eye, but something.

We did this to encourage the recruit who was firing because we knew that he was going crazy up there, lying on the field, an obnoxious stress flying at him from the DIs. And he was getting an earful from within his own head. We knew he could shoot, and we wanted him to score well. I also hoped that this karma would be remembered and returned should I miss the target.

The sounds of bullets hitting the targets made the shooting real. It brought war within my scope.

We pulled targets in our T-shirts, each team pulling in unison with the other teams. We looked like we were involved in real action—action with a purpose, unlike drilling on the Parade Deck. Because each round was fired at the same time, the scene felt almost choreographed. The excited yells of encouragement were meant to be boredom-disguising macho calls, but looking down the line, it was a real show. Dust flew up as the targets came down, and the precision of arms grabbing ropes and pulling down hand-over-hand was nothing less than a beautiful production.

That night, as we relaxed in the squad bay, shooting chatter buzzed in the air. Those who had shot were the heroes to those who hadn’t. Myths about firing the weapon were both put to rest and validated by the half-day experts.

I was coming out of the office after finishing my scribe duties when Private Hudson startled me in the doorway. He had such a friendly face, always smiling, but he surprised me.

“You look like a girl,” he said with a grin.

My heart lurched against my T-shirt.

“What?” I asked roughly.

I did not smile; this was not funny. I just stared at him, hoping I reacted not just nonchalantly but also like a person who wouldn’t use the word nonchalantly in Marine Corps boot camp.

“Just your eyes. You got pretty eyes.”

And with that, he left. I didn’t watch him walk away. I left my mind frozen in that doorway, but my feet scooted me away and to my bunk. I was crushed. Why didn’t people think I looked like a man? It’s as if they knew it hurt me and that their “mistake” was on purpose to make me doubt my own masculinity. In fact it did hurt. People’s confusion over my gender confused me. I wanted to grab my rifle, jump on my footlocker, wave the weapon around the room, and scream an announcement:

“I am a man. I’m not a girl. I don’t want pretty eyes or soft skin or a high voice. I am a man just like you motherfuckers! Deal with it.”

But of course I didn’t say anything. I knew I was a man. Just a different type of man. I tried not to think about Hudson as I sat quietly and cleaned my rifle. I didn’t look at anyone the rest of the night.

I woke up with Hudson on my mind. I didn’t want to see him. Once on the range, I concentrated on snapping in to clear my head of Hudson so I could focus on firing. Live rounds were passed out, but counted first.

I had always loved those belt-mounted coin-dispensing contraptions worn by people who give change. I didn’t aspire to a job that came with one; I wanted to have one just to play with. Our bullets fed into the gun’s bullet holder, the magazine, just like quarters into a coin dispenser. My fingers felt clumsy as I placed the shell in the slot and then pushed it up until it snapped in. After one made it in, I took another and pushed that up inside too. We had to be good at doing this quickly because in battle we might have someone shooting at us and need to return the fire.

The bullets were heavier than they looked, and the cold metal body took up almost the entire length of my hand. I opened my fist after grabbing a bullet, relaxing my fingers and placing my thumb on top to steady it as I shoved it up inside the magazine with the butt of my palm. I’m sure loading

the first few involved such complicated maneuvers as me sticking my tongue out the side of my mouth and contorting some random part of my upper body. The magazine held the twenty bullets I was issued, and by number ten I felt less clumsy as I loaded up.

I rammed the magazine in the rifle's undercarriage, then laid my cheek against the top of the rifle. I peered down the barrel and took a deep breath. At any second, the DIs would begin screaming for us to start firing.

My strap felt like I had it in the right position; I hunched my shoulder around to see if the rifle butt was going to slip. I tried to bump the end of the rifle out, but it stayed in place. The strap held. Practice paid off.

I was ear-plugged. So was everyone else. In that artificial solitude I was finally able to be grateful for the goofy, black plastic glasses the Marines had issued to me after the basic eye exam. Just like Dale, I lost my perfect vision in the military. Sort of.

The end of the field looked sharp and clear. I peered over the top of the glasses just to see what it would look like without them, and the field blurred. With my free hand, I quickly pushed them closer to my face. I squinted, closed one eye, and looked through the rear sight to find the front sight. Everything lined up.

The tiniest wave of the rifle, possibly even the mere thought of moving it, made the target go out of focus. I needed to be precise, since I was asking a bullet the size of a pencil nub to fly through the air thousands of feet and hit a target. I planned on asking nicely. I sent good vibes from my mind, down my arm, and out into the rifle barrel, which I grasped firmly and held tightly. I wanted to exude confidence and wanted the rifle to feel that, like I was going to lead it in a dance and knew what I was doing. I needed to take charge with authority.

"All clear on the left! All clear on the right! All clear on the firing range! Fire!"

I inhaled deeply, exhaled about a third of my breath, and repeated the shooting mantra, BRASS: breath, relax, aim, squeeze. I'm not sure what the last S is for, but I never needed it. I squeezed the trigger that I'd been supplying the click sound effect for so far. That trigger came back and met resistance for a second. It felt like I had pulled it through Jell-O. For a flash.

Everything happened all at the same time.

My eyes closed as the shot went off. I bet everyone's did the first time as a reaction to the movement and the sound. So much pressure with that one

moment, like a first kiss. There were a lot of similarities to a kiss: I nervously approached the rifle, unsure how it would react, then held it close. There were a few moments going from awkward to comfortable—that tightrope-walk over the uncertainties, the check to be sure we were both ready—then I leaned in and gazed into its eyes. When I was as sure as I was ever going to be, I went for it, pulled the trigger, and hoped nothing bad would happen.

Although it felt like I waited a long time and left my head on the rifle, I know I lifted my head up almost immediately to see where the bullet struck. I looked down the field with as much anticipation as I had before I shot off the round. I watched the stick rise up from the pit; I could see black on it. A great sign. My shot had gone far to the right, but I had hit the target. Whew. Not a bull's-eye, but on the target. When you deserve a smile, you can feel it being spread across your face like butter in one bold swipe.

I felt relief, but what I needed to feel was proud; I had the same chance as anyone to be a good marksman. I snapped back in, recalling everything I felt when the rifle fired. The rifle had punched into my shoulder—the kickback they'd warned us of. Next time I'd hold it more firmly and, once I pulled the trigger, keep it tight. I'd be ready.

McKinnon squatted down next to me and pulled on my strap. I knew better than to look up at him, and I resisted his tug to show him I had a good, tight hold.

“Go up three clicks. Take your time, Cope. Who you seeing at the end of that target? Kill 'em.”

He hopped away to the next boy. I released my rifle from my shoulder to make the three-click adjustment on the rear sight, raising it a tiny fraction of an inch.

I looked at the sleek, dangerous beauty in my hands. It was lightweight and comfortable to hold—it's best to make danger palatable and easy to grasp. These past weeks, the Marines had been peeling back layer after layer of my psyche—of human nature—to train me to commit the most reviled act of mankind: Murder.

With that rifle, I was handed permission to kill anyone I deemed threatening, and I was expected to execute him as precisely as the command was issued. But, at least for me, there is no action void of thinking. I decided not to visualize anyone's face on the target. I had a semi-automatic rifle in my hand. Really real is real enough.

My conscience faded as the target came into my sight. I returned my focus automatically and as instructed. The next group of rounds I fired was better. Although the target was clear, since I'd been down in the target pit and seen them up close, I knew how damaged they were. I had to trust that the recruit marking my target was being as honest, or lovingly dishonest, as I was.

Once the shells spat out of our rifle onto the dirt, we had to leave them untouched for several minutes. They held heat from the shooting. Waiting for them to cool gave me time to reflect. I'd managed to hit the target and pull myself one step closer to doing what was asked of me. During the course of all of our training, we were the rifles; we were the bullets being fired out over and over, always expected to operate on command, tirelessly. And were we in war, our minds would need to reload in less than a heartbeat and never perform at anything less than the best.

* * *

It was hot all the time. Lying on the ground was sweaty, especially since we had to wear our camouflage jackets on top of our T-shirts. We needed the sleeve to cushion the strap against our arm, and I was glad to have the thick fabric, since we were lying on the stiff, worn grass.

But once firing was over, I stood up, unbuttoned my jacket, and appreciated the rush of air against my sweaty chest. I still didn't sweat as much as the other guys, but that dark jacket soaked up the sun until I oozed juices like a ham in the oven. I walked as I peeled the shirt off to increase the air flowing around me. Walking away from the firing line to the target-pulling area, all of us talked excitedly about how we shot, how we were scoring, or how we needed to improve. That walk and the talk were pleasant. I was dry by the time we formed into our platoon to march back home.

We were trained to look at the target every time we fired a live round.

Once we had all fired our rifles, we walked around the squad bay cockier. One night we were coming out of the shower and a guy in front of me dropped his towel, grabbed his rifle off the post, put his rifle up against his bare crotch, and did a fuck-thrust with the weapon into the air, safely toward the window. His How do you like that, bitch? could have been meant for a girl or an enemy. With his balls dangling down under the gun butt, it was funny—and thrilling, but I made sure I didn't look any happier to see the very quick show than anyone else. I have a feeling I'm the only one still thinking about it.

We were feeling relaxed because the DIs eased off a bit while we were at the rifle range. They didn't announce the new approach, but after three weeks of being hassled for merely looking sideways and being punished nonstop for unpreventable mistakes, we all noticed the difference here.

Despite the relative relaxation in discipline, we were often reminded to never get complacent. Complacency is a lack of readiness looking for an opportunity to kick you in the ass. We got held up one hot day outside the chow hall. I could see about twenty guys between me and the door, but we weren't moving. I was so close to getting inside the cooler chow hall and out of the sun, I wanted to lean my head out and see what the holdup was. But Santoro was pacing up and down the line. He picked up on the fidgeting, and ordered us to attention.

Sand fleas hopped all over the base. They're tiny, invisible mighty mites that no one can control. As I stood in the line, locked at attention, one hopped in my ear. In a crevice at first, then it flicked out. Then it was back—in a different part of my ear. My ear felt like a huge satellite dish that was now the playground of one sand flea. At least one; maybe there were two. No, wait, one.

I allowed my eyeballs to move to the left, hoping the movement would cause the flea to leave, and checked Santoro's location. He was patrolling the line; not only were we his charges, we were also his entertainment. He was always hyper and walked on his toes, ready to pounce. When we ran, I noticed his calves were really well developed. I figured it was from his tippy-toe walk, and I tried to do that walk in the hope my skinny calves would thicken. I'm not specifically a leg man, but since so much of my body was undeveloped, there's not a body part I don't appreciate.

That sand flea was driving me crazy. I wanted it gone, but I couldn't break the position of attention to swat it away. I tried to focus on the recruit's head in front of me and count the individual hairs on his head. It's what I always did when we were forced to lock our eyes in front. I imagined what the recruit looked like with longer hair, and if I saw a scar, I made up a story about how he got the scar. Usually a result of senseless violence. But I could only think of that fucking flea in my ear. Its buzzing sound moved in and out and got loud, then soft, then loud. I knew this was the Chinese-water-torture kind of treatment that drives military prisoners insane.

I could have reached up and swatted it away—I'm one of the free Americans I was defending. Maybe Santoro wouldn't see it; maybe he

would. If he didn't, I'd be so relieved. If he did, I'd drop and do twenty or forty, or maybe the whole platoon would get punished and they'd hate me. And they would all get bullets after lunch.

I stood there, unable to even scrunch my eyes closed. They had to stay open and not give me away.

Santoro raced up to me. He put his face close to my ear and spoke softly. "You have a sand flea in your ear, Private." I wondered how he knew. He seemed to know everything,

"Sir, yes, sir," I responded in my normal speaking voice, since he hadn't yelled.

"You want to reach up and scare it away, don't you?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" Not one recruit nearby doubted me or wanted to be in my boots.

"Go ahead—it just takes a second."

I didn't move, but the sand flea was still there and was now a knife stabbing my ear, and I could feel the situation's pressure in my chest.

He stayed there, leaning in closer. His breath was on my cheek. "I can see him. So tiny, but I bet that's fucking irritating to have that sand flea right in your ear. What's keeping you from reaching up? Just do it; one quick swat and it'll be gone."

He was right.

"Nothing's stopping you."

I hated Santoro once again. He had me right where he wanted me and figured this was his chance to test me. He was hoping I'd do it.

"Sir, Private's at the position of attention, sir. Nothing moves, no matter what, sir."

"A fucking sand flea, Private? You're gonna let a tiny goddamned sand flea take control of your body?"

"Sir, no, sir. Following orders, sir. Private's Drill Instructor Sergeant Santoro commanded this Private to the position of attention, and he obeys commands, sir." Speaking in third person was hard, and to get it right I had to do pronoun conjugational math in my head before I spoke. Before the Private spoke.

Santoro leaned back on his heels, still a mere foot away from my face. "Good, Private," he barked as he did a sharp left turn and walked toward the front of the line.

He didn't turn back. He spoke at a normal volume. "Scratch your ear, Cope."

I obeyed, and the sand flea was gone before I touched my ear. I jerked my arm back down to my side. I still hated Santoro, but I understood and respected him.

He stopped at Pritchett and leaned in to speak to him. "At ease, Pritchett." Pritchett's attempt to fall at ease betrayed the command. His shoulders actually tightened and jumped up closer to his ears as his feet moved apart. It was funny—especially with his wild, round, scared eyes—but frustrating to Santoro because he just wanted to talk to him about being such a good shot.

"How the fuck can you hit the fucking target like you do, you jumpy little shit?"

It may have sounded harsh, but it was actually a show of respect; Santoro and the other DIs were really proud of Pritchett for shooting so well. They called him in their office to talk about it and congratulated him in the best way they knew how—by holding him up as a sterling example, demanding that we all shoot as well as Pritchett, who looked like he wanted to evaporate from the attention.

Within a few days of living at the rifle range, it felt like home. Our time at the original squad bay seemed so long ago. Maybe I had an edge from moving so much as a kid, and maybe quick transitions were the goal of the military, since they moved you often.

My firing went well. There were three levels we could reach at the range: Marksman, Sharpshooter, then Expert. On the days leading up to the one firing test that counted, I sometimes qualified at the Sharpshooter level, and I even found Expert in my sights. I did even better later, once I was out in the regular Marines. In boot camp, I qualified for the final test as a Marksman, just a couple of points away from Sharpshooter. A Marine Marksman title is something to be proud of. I can still nick the ear of an epileptic squirrel from 1,500 yards away. While he's mid-fit.

I had another notch in my ammunition belt. I couldn't believe that I could fire a semi-automatic rifle—and get paid. I found Dale that night.

"You know I'm a professional shooter? Like, for money."

He shook his head at my joke. Yes, he was fully aware. "Would you kill somebody in a war?" he asked.

“I don’t want to ever be in that situation. But I could do it. That’s all I got right now—I can.”

On another level, the rifle range also taught me to always want to do everything better—because it’s possible. Tie my shoes, make my bed, run, please someone tough—all good, but I can always improve. Although our DIs made a big deal about the recruits that made Expert, they never made fun of anyone who only got Marksman. Scratch that word only—I had qualified to fight right alongside any one of my fellow recruits, and any other Marine. My skills were growing like the hair on top of my head.

And just to keep that, and me, in check, we got a haircut at the end of rifle range. I moved my head out from behind the guy in front of me, to see the first recruits who emerged from the barber—just like on day one. I wanted the high-and-tight—the haircut that left a little extra on top—but they buzzed the whole thing.

26. Floating To The Top

As soon as we passed our final test on the rifles, we entered Phase III. As the scribe, I got some news a little before the other recruits but had to keep it to myself. I was perfect for that mission—secrets were my thing. We were ending our time at the rifle range after two weeks and returning to our original squad bay.

The day McKinnon had me box up the platoon files, I wasn't surprised—I knew the phase was ending. However, when he told me we were moving back to our original squad bay, my spirits sank. When we left that place, we rolled up our mattresses and said goodbye. At least I did. I feared that going back would feel like regression instead of progression.

Once again we were ordered to pack everything into our sea bags. We scrubbed the rifle range squad bay top to bottom and rolled the mattresses. Another platoon was going to move in right on our heels. Such is war. Keep moving. I shoved my uniforms and my feelings deep into the canvas bag, tossed the bag over my shoulder, and hustled back on to the bus in the reverse of the clumsy, sweaty process that brought us to the rifle range in the first place.

But the moment I walked back into our old squad bay, I felt triumphant instead of disheartened. That mood floated up in the air with the mustiness. We all walked in cockier. Not only was this place familiar, we'd put a notch in our belt by conquering the rifle range. I'd seen what the rifle could do and felt a deep connection with it; it wasn't just a prop. I imagine I felt the same way about my rifle as a farmer probably feels about corn. Until the plant produces food, it's just a burden. But once it can be harvested, it's a vital part of his overall mission.

Phase III held more chances for us to apply everything we'd been learning and every skill we'd been practicing. Our runs in the morning were timed. Our pull-ups and sit-ups were counted. I was beginning to forecast how I might score in the final physical fitness test. Finishing a three-mile run in eighteen minutes or under and doing twenty pull-ups and eighty sit-ups in under two minutes earned us one hundred points each—three hundred

points equaled a perfect PFT score. A perfect score seemed as far away from me then as the holy grail or world peace.

These scores—along with our rifle range level, a test of military knowledge, a swimming test, and recommendations from our drill instructors—all added up for consideration for meritorious promotion to the next rank upon graduation. Everyone entered as a Private, and about six of the seventy recruits would earn the next rank, Private First Class. We all wanted this promotion because it indicated you were at the top of your class. Plus you would earn more money each month; with each rank increase, you got a raise. My monthly pay was almost four hundred dollars.

I kept forgetting that we were earning money during training. It was odd to be paid when your bosses yelled at you all the time and told you that your work sucked. I wasn't sure if the money was a reward or an apology, but I appreciated the paycheck nonetheless.

There was excitement in the air on paydays. We stood in lines, like we did for everything, while McKinnon sat behind a desk with the pile of checks. Santoro held a clipboard and checked us off as we each signed that we had received our pay.

One payday, someone had looked at his check and muttered “Good enough for government work.”

McKinnon had shot back, “You’re fucking lucky to have that work—defending your country is a privilege you have to earn. You motherfuckers better learn to understand that.” Whether we were privileged to be there was arguable. At times, when the training was extreme, I had to remember that I couldn't walk away—I had a contract, and unless I fouled out, I was stuck. Boot camp threw me a lot of lemons, but at the same time gave me the muscles to squeeze them. The DIs made sure I stayed thirsty, too.

The right to wear the Marine Corps emblem must be earned. It signifies that the Marines fight in the air, on land, and at sea. So we had to know how to swim. Since we might be dropped in the middle of the ocean or thrown overboard by U.S. Navy personnel, or “squids” as Marines call them, we'd take the swim qualification test fully dressed, boots and all. We had to float in the pool, moving very little, for an hour to pass the test.

“The enemy ain't gonna give you time to get in your goddamn Speedos, privates,” Hutchins explained. “And nobody wants to see that shit.” Well, almost nobody.

During our first five weeks on the base, our business had been confined to a relatively small number of nearby buildings, so as we marched out and away from our familiar area, the sense of adventure rose. The swimming pool was enclosed in a two-story red brick building. I'd never noticed it before, though it wasn't far away.

We halted in front and were commanded to peel off one squad at a time. We reverently marched through the wide doors in a long single file. The cavernous room was open to the ceiling two full stories above us, and the windowed walls were tiled. The DIs' voices reverberated off the tile, sending echoes around the room. I spotted several Marines dressed in green T-shirts and camo trousers or shorts. A couple of them had whistles slung around their necks.

The echoes jumbled their words, but I could tell that the pool staff was joking around as we were led over to them. They established their authoritative position with a casual, indifferent attitude. I wanted all of this to be familiar to me so I could be as confident, both here and out in the real world.

Except for its size, the square pool looked like any country club pool, with high dives and a floating rope running across the middle. The staff stopped talking to each other and addressed McKinnon.

"What the fuck do you have here, Staff Sergeant McKinnon? Looks like you got a bunch of freaks in this batch."

"We got a few that ain't too excited to be here," McKinnon hollered back. He offered us up quickly sometimes in new situations; however, once we proved ourselves in a task, he was just as quick to defend us. Both actions are perfect examples of Marine Corps camaraderie. But Private Hudson had told me that he couldn't swim and was actually afraid of water. I felt bad for him, yet quietly pleased that I didn't share that fear. "Who's a girl now?" my inside voice asked.

"Welcome to my pool," said the swimming coach. "This is the second largest swimming pool in the nation."

Impressive, I thought, but not helping the guys who are afraid of water. Some had never been swimming. But it wasn't only those recruits who were afraid of this task—Dale was terrified about this because when he tried to float, he sank. Most of us excelled at something. Dale—at everything. Dale's boots were super shiny, he shot perfectly, he could run, he could do what seemed like unlimited pull-ups, and his footlocker was used as an

example to everyone. And he made it all look easy. Were he not my best friend, it would have been obnoxious.

Some boys were happy just to pass the various tests along the way, but Dale was trying to be the best, as were others. Although he'd dominated every task so far, he knew this one would be a challenge. Comfortable in the water and a good swimmer, he simply couldn't float.

I could float just fine, but my years playing Marco Polo were of no use to me now. We weren't here to splash around in the pool. We were being evaluated on water survival. We had to jump in the deep pool fully dressed, in our boots, and float for one hour.

"Economy of movement, privates!" said the coach. Then he started a lecture. "You dumb shits don't even know what that is, flopping around all spastic and shit. When you float in my pool . . ."

Just as Sgt. Evans had referred to the Marine Corps as his, the swim coach referred to the pool as his. Everything belonged to the person in charge. The entire mess hall belonged to the cook. The rifle cage where thousands of rifles lived was one guy's cage. But this rule applied only to the good stuff; if we passed a piece of shit on the street, a DI would bark, "Who the fuck took a shit on my goddamn street?!"

When the swimming coach spoke, his original voice was deep, but the one bouncing back was shrill and jagged.

"Now, Sergeant Campbell here is going to jump in my pool and demonstrate how you will move in said pool. Pretend this is a dangerous fucking ocean, privates; you're not here to lollygag like at a goddamn summer pool party."

I expected a swimming instructor to look waterlogged, but he looked muscle-logged instead. Campbell jumped in, sank midway down, and then bobbed to the top. He left his head down and floated with his arms and legs dangling in the water.

Hudson, standing next to me, started to tremble. He looked to the left and right for an escape route. Finding none, he hid the only way he could in this situation: He closed his eyes and turned his head into my shoulder. I wouldn't normally have thought of myself as a source of comfort in this environment, but pools were indeed comfortable to me. Perhaps I had a chance to excel at something.

The swim coach gestured at the man floating like a corpse in the pool. "You will notice, assholes, that Sergeant Campbell isn't spazzing around

like a retard. He uses economy of movement when he needs to take a breath.”

Campbell turned his palms up and slowly swept his arms toward the surface to keep him afloat. When they reached the surface, he gently lifted his head out of the water and took a breath. He then lowered his head calmly as he pushed his arms back down to float. This buoyed him and he rested, suspended in the water.

Santoro sounded off: “Privates, you get attacked and blown off the fucking squid vessel, you have no fucking idea how the fuck long before you get rescued. You can’t waste your energy flopping around like a goddamn fish outta water.”

“That’s correct, Sergeant,” the swimming coach continued, probably trying to take back control. “You won’t even know where you are. With proper technique, you can float like this all night.”

“Unless some shark comes up and eats you.” Hutchins sometimes spoke to remind everyone he existed. When no one even looked up at him, he shot a stern look at a random recruit, snapping, “Lock it up, Private. This is important shit.”

“Sergeant Campbell, please demonstrate how you approach the surface in the event my mother fucking ocean is on fire.”

Hutchins stepped up to the edge of the pool. “A ship carries gas and oil, recruits. That shit blows up, and water don’t put the fire out. In case you ain’t heard, oil and water don’t fucking mix, just like some of you in here. Listen to what he’s saying so you don’t get your goddamn idiot bodies burned up. You already got your ship blown up, you mo-rons.”

I’m not sure the swimming instructor needed or wanted that help, but he motioned to Campbell to go back underwater and then come up like the surface was on fire. He turned back to us. “You do this, privates, no matter what, whenever you come up to the surface for the first time. It shoves you up into a safer, open space.”

We all watched Campbell swim down into the deep water, then turn up towards the top. He slowed down and I could see him rubbing his hands together over his head, still totally underwater. His hands emerged, karate-chopping the water. Finally his head followed. He went back down, and then came up the same way, shuffling the water. His hands broke the water like the fin of a shark. The waves created by his hands rippled away from him and soon hit the side of the pool near our feet.

“The back-and-forth moves any fire or debris out of the way of your beautiful little faces. Some asshole’s dick floats by, this prevents it from landing in your faggoty mouth.”

We had another assignment before the qualifying swim. Apparently, in the event of an emergency resulting in a water landing, our camouflage uniform could be inflated and used as a flotation device. The swim coach stood on the side of the pool and buttoned up a camo shirt—or blouse, as they called it, which made no sense to me, because if we called the trousers pants we were accused of being girly. He dipped it in the water, then tied the sleeves closed in a knot. After gathering the bottom and the collar to tie them in a bulky knot as well, he inflated the dripping wet blouse like a balloon and handed it to surely-prune-by-now Campbell, who placed the shirt—which now looked like a camouflaged puffer fish—under his chest. He floated.

The boys who couldn’t swim looked at each other in disbelief, as if some smarmy peddler was trying to sell them magic beans. They weren’t about to trust a regular fabric shirt to keep them afloat. But Campbell bobbed in the pool, rolling over on top of the inflated blouse, showing us that it supported his entire hunky frame.

Luckily, we only had to make the float and then employ it for a few seconds, long enough to see that it could be done. To get the maximum points in the swimming qualification, however, we also had to float for one hour, fully dressed, using that economy of movement they insisted on. Were we to move too much, we’d be yanked out of the pool like bad dancers in a dance-a-thon.

McKinnon ordered my squad to line up on the pool’s edge. My toes wiggled around excitedly inside my boots as they dangled over the water. I looked to the right to check my alignment with the others. I could see Hudson hanging on to the dive rail. Santoro was trying to ease him off. I know how paralyzing terror works; I felt so bad for the boys who had never swum. But my sympathy waned, replaced with a joyous confidence that I was about to have the chance to do well at something.

McKinnon gave us the dress, right, dress! command. Standing on the edge of the pool, our right arms all flew out straight and to the right, touching the top of the shoulder of the recruit next to us, and we looked to the right to ensure we were spaced evenly.

“Eyes front!” McKinnon snapped; our eyes whipped back to the front, and our hands made a resounding smack against fabric as they returned to our

sides.

The Marine in charge blew his whistle: “Jump!”

We dove off the edge like a row of water performers in an old Esther Williams swimming movie. All we were missing was glitter and jungle drums.

I caught Dale’s eyes as we pushed away from the side. The expression on his face was one I’d never seen him wear before—one that asked for help, or at least that I wish him luck. Although he was about six recruits down from me, I jumped in lopsided, trying to land closer to him.

The loud yelling of the DIs was extinguished as I hit the surprisingly warm water and sank into the quiet world of the pool. Four feet down and I only heard my heartbeat.

I opened my eyes underwater and turned my head back and forth, looking at the chaotic slow-motion scene. It looked rather horrible; bodies and shirts flying around. I wiggled out of my blouse, unable to stifle panic as I struggled to get it off.

Treading water with my legs, I closed the shirt quickly, took a deep breath, and went back underwater to tie the sleeves closed. We’d barely had a full demonstration of the technique, and that was on dry land—a literal dry run. It seemed only a few seconds before I needed to bob back up to the surface. I took a fast breath, went back down, and resumed tying my shirt into a blob that didn’t really seem closed.

I breached the surface like a whale, took a spastic breath, then dragged the shirt up and out of the pool and tossed it in front of me as if casting a net. I kicked my legs to keep my body suspended while I maneuvered the shirt out into the air. The shirt filled and I quickly closed the opening.

I precariously eased over it as if I were sitting on a Fabergé egg. The Russian Empire had cracked; I had no faith in this float.

But it worked. We might sleep on ancient beds and eat off trays used in the Civil War, but the Marine Corps had splurged on waterproof fabric. Sergeant Campbell was swimming around us to check our floats. Once he was happy with a float, he tapped that recruit’s shoulder and pointed to the side of the pool.

Dale and I both swam to the edge and hung on to the side, unbuttoning our shirts so we could put them on for the endurance float test. I looked back out across the water at the flailing recruits who were struggling with the float task mainly because they couldn’t swim. Green U-shaped life

preservers flew out from the side, and the staff helped the boys on and guided them back to safety.

I know it was hard for Dale to admit to me that he lacked confidence. “I don’t think I can float for an hour.” He had to be careful talking to me so the DIs wouldn’t bust us, especially in here with the traitorous acoustics.

I tried to sound solid.

“Sure you can. Just relax; you’re a great swimmer.”

He looked away and out to scan the pool; he was worried, and I wasn’t used to seeing him doubt anything.

I sang a little of the chorus of the song “Blue Velvet.”

She wore blue velvet. . . .

My voice trailed off as soon as I saw a wide smile ripple across his wet face. When we were sixteen, he’d stood on the landing of his parents’ New Orleans staircase and sung that song.

“You have an excellent voice,” I had called up to him from the living room sofa. We made a crazy plan that lasted about five minutes to move to Los Angeles and pursue entertainment careers. With his talent, I was sure we’d be recording stars. All these years later, we still sing a few bars of that song and laugh about it. From our homes in Los Angeles.

“What are you worried about? You swim all the time.”

A big boot suddenly shut me up. Santoro placed it right between my hand and Dale’s and twisted his foot on the pool’s edge into a grind. Looking up at him from boot level made him seem extra menacing.

“You ladies swim the fuck out and start the fucking float. This ain’t a goddamn coffee klatch.”

We swam back out to the center of the pool and joined the rest of our squad. I saw a couple of recruits sitting on the edge, burdened by their wet clothes and hot shame. Their heads hung down so they didn’t have to look at those of us in the water. The pool might have defeated them, but at least they weren’t going to drown today, which was their real fear.

I practiced the demonstrated movements while I waited for the command to start. I was trying not to move too much, so my breath didn’t get rapid and short. I knew I needed to relax, take deep breaths to fill my lungs, and raise my head out of the water to come up for air as infrequently as possible. I tried to give Dale an encouraging smile.

“You can watch that clock over my head, recruits, if you want—won’t make the hour go by quicker. Just float, and if you start moving too much,

I'll order you out of my pool. Don't argue, just swim to the side. If at any point you feel like you are gonna pass out or die or throw up—Jesus Christ, let me know. I do not want to drain this motherfucker.” He blew his whistle.

“Begin!”

I took the deepest breath of my life and lowered my head. I kept my eyes closed and hung there, trying to let my arms and legs dangle, but feeling gravity pull them and me down. Before I really wanted to, I had to sweep my arms up and away to float me back up. I came to the surface, took a breath. I resumed the float, trying to lengthen the time underwater. I knew that blowing air out would sink me faster.

I needed to see how Dale was doing. I opened my eyes underwater and looked around. The hazy bodies moved at different paces; I saw some go up for air. The way the arms and legs were hanging there, suspended in camouflage clothes, made it easy to imagine everyone dead. It was quiet under the water, which made all of the movement, even the sinking, look beautiful. The entire scene made my gaggle of squad mates look like they were performing a macabre ballet.

I surfaced, took a breath and went back down to look for Dale.

I saw him. His sinking, green-clad body could have been anyone, but I knew it was Dale. He really couldn't float. I watched his body slowly descend lower and lower. I was worried for him, he would have to paddle back up to the surface and not get caught. Was he praying the staff's eyes were elsewhere? He sank down pretty far and then barely moved his arms to swim back, hoping the staff wouldn't notice him. He'd take a breath, then just sink. His lungs defied the laws of physics.

He was my rock, yet in the water, he was a rock.

The whistles from the instructors could be heard underwater, but I kept my focus on my economy of movement. I tried to count and use my internal running mantra—five breaths in, five breaths out—to hold a steady pace and occupy my mind. I sank a bit, then rose, sank, rose.

That clock on the wall was huge. I couldn't not look at it. I checked—and often. Each time I came up for air, I checked it. An hour is a long time; a watched clock never moves.

Dale's attempt to hide his sinking was going better in his mind than in reality. I looked over and saw him pretty deep down, using his hands as tiny paddles to get him back up near the top. I heard the whistle blow three times. On my next breath I heard Santoro calling him out of the pool.

I took another uneasy breath, lowered my head back in the water, and stayed on task. I thought of Dale and all he had done for me. I took my breaths and floated as instructed for what seemed an eternity. I saw dozens of boys swimming to the side, and those failures made me more determined to stay and win.

When the final whistle blew, I came up and treaded water for a minute, looking around at the few of us who had made it. I dug into my water with strong strokes, pulling the side of my pool closer to me. I reached the edge and climbed out.

Marks and about five others had lasted the hour too. When Santoro met him and they walked off, Santoro kept his congratulatory hand on Marks's back. But he kept his narrowed eyes on Dale.

Dale was waiting for me. He was disappointed in his eighteen-minute performance, but his face beamed.

"You made it!"

"I know, that took forever. Marks maxed it too."

Dale looked away for a second at Marks and Santoro. "Fuck Marks. He still can't shoot for shit." Dale slapped me on the back, hard. "But you, you aced it—how does that feel?"

"Fan-fucking-tastic." I felt what I imagined a baseball player feels after making a home run. That amazing feeling was new.

We stood there grinning as we changed into dry clothes, both knowing that, as much as Dale hated not mastering this event, he was really proud of me for getting a perfect score.

Always faithful.

I didn't want Dale to feel bad, but I felt he was as happy as he could be for me. And I was merely earning my paycheck.

Even without any congratulations from my drill instructors, that swim buoyed me into the last four-week phase.

27. Trim The Fat

Everything that happened to anyone happened to me. It felt like it did.

Our platoon had thinned out. I dashed off the news of each departure in letters to my family as if they were playing along with cross-referenced lists, graphs, and charts. I informed them who got dropped and why, mostly to let them know that being dropped was a possibility. In case I was expelled, they wouldn't think I was the only one.

We lost four recruits after the Initial Strength Test—the pull-ups—then Baker, then the gas chamber conscientious objector. We were down to sixty-six from the seventy-two that walked in together. Since we were in Phase III, I figured anyone still with us would graduate. But some of our activities could have killed us, so there was still that option for a way out. And there was an additional option as well.

Private Cantrell was a heavy young man, but not one of the weak; he was strong and tough, an entertaining character who strutted cockily around after a shower with his fat belly hanging over his towel. From the Deep South, he drawled out over and over, “I am a country boy.”

He sang a lot. It was strange, but then many of the boys were odd. At first, he sang to himself—songs he made up. One of the songs was a marching cadence. When the DIs heard him, they let him step out of the platoon and march in the sacred DI spot next to us. He bounced along, his fat cheeks forcing his eyes closed when he opened his mouth.

“Fly flew in the grocery store.”

We repeated the line, energized from having one of our own lead us in a marching song: “Fly flew in the grocery store.”

Cantrell: “He shit on the ceiling and he shit on the floor.”

We didn't respond in unison because some of us had to giggle. Hutchins was marching with us and barked out, “Lock it up, privates.”

Cantrell: “He shit on the coffee, and he shit on the tea.”

We sang, following orders: “He shit on the coffee, and he shit on the tea.”

Cantrell: “Then he shit on the table and he shit on me.”

Hutchins ordered Cantrell back in formation. That was his whole song. No finish, no chorus. He sang it often. His song caught on. I found myself

singing it in my head, and heard others humming it out loud.

Like his song, Cantrell was a mix of whimsy and darkness. There were some types of shit duty he hated—we all had those. He hated some so much that he started disobeying orders, preferring to take his punishment. For one whole week, he was sent back to the squad bay midday from his antics. He was happy—he'd drop what he was doing and just leave.

We were far enough along that the DIs recognized his fuck-ups as deliberate, blatant. His behavior came off as belligerent to me. One day everyone saw a glimpse of crazy in Cantrell's eyes as he stood on line, at attention.

He started singing. Staring straight out—and interrupting McKinnon. “Fly flew in the grocery store. . . .” Flat-out insane.

Which was what he was going for.

As scribe, I knew he'd been sent to the medic's office. Soon after, I was in the office writing the firewatch schedule when McKinnon walked in with two other Marines. I figured he was going to order me out, but he asked for Cantrell's file. I grabbed it from the small drawer, and he snatched it away. He charged out to the squad bay.

“Private Cantrell! Pack your trash, recruit.”

I left the office and stood near my bunk. McKinnon ordered us to carry on.

“Don't rubberneck into a situation that doesn't concern you.”

But it did concern us. The three Marines hovered over Cantrell as if he were an employee being monitored as he cleaned out his desk. Cantrell was being taken away. He kept on muttering in his sing-songy voice with the air in the room charged and intense. He shoved everything in his sea bag in two minutes. The Marines each took an arm and led him away from his rack and down the center of the squad bay.

My bunk was near the front, and as Cantrell passed, almost being dragged, he looked over at me. His face was quietly batshit crazy. Still mumbling out his fly-in-the-grocery-store song, he broke character and winked at me. I think he arrived at Parris Island with an insanity round in the chamber, decided the military wasn't for him, and pulled the trigger.

I never saw him again. For the rest of the week—and the rest of boot camp—whenever we were being pushed and I was miserable, I thought of Cantrell and the option he exercised. Scuttlebutt bounced around, most of it agreeing that he was discharged. But his wink haunted me, reducing his craziness to an act to get out of our platoon. I had signed a six-year

contract; by the time I left the Marines, I would have committed a quarter of my life to the Corps. Due to the instability and lack of purpose to my life before boot camp, I was attracted to the commitment, not afraid of it.

After one particularly grueling morning, morale was really low. We'd been whipped like potatoes and felt as dead and heavy. McKinnon marched into the squad bay and told us to fall outside in platoon formation. I often saw the calendar in advance, but had no clue where we were headed. When the DIs didn't tell us to grab our rifle, helmet, or books, it was anyone's guess. I dreaded something just as bad as chow hall duty, or worse. This was what a war must be like—you finish one battle and there isn't time to grieve; there's just more.

After two turns down the road, I knew we were headed for the barber. I hoped this was the day they left the patch on top of our heads unshaved so we looked like a platoon with some time under our belts. Because I'd made that wish before only to feel the electric clippers run up my neck and over the top of my head, I put it out of my mind.

As a unit we all hung on this small desire. It meant we had achieved something. It reminded me of my own frustration waiting for puberty to give some sign it hadn't passed me over. When my friends were already shaving, their production of body hair kept me out of gym class and sent me into hiding over doubt about my own body's promise. If I didn't possess the outward manifestations of masculinity, I didn't expect other guys to accept me. I'd try to comfort myself with the logic that it would happen to me in time, but like anyone exercising faith, I needed a sign. And a miracle. No one ever told me that some guys were smooth and some were hairy—all guys I saw had hair, and that meant I didn't measure up. When I see today's men waxing and shaving their—well, everything—it proves that most people want whatever they don't have.

I stood in the single-file line, about ten back from the barber's door. I did my best to sneakily lean-out and peek ahead, trying to see if the first guy emerged with that little patch on top, or shaved. If he was white, and we were getting the usual all-over buzz, his bright scalp would show through, contrasting against a deeply tanned neck. He'd quickly slap his hat on his head, ashamed of its nakedness.

Dale was first in line, since he was squad leader. When he emerged, the second guy leaned out, which made me lean out, and I imagine the guy

behind me had to lean out even farther. Dale didn't put his cap on. What I saw took away all the bad thoughts from the prior week.

He had the patch.

Passing by me, his smile nearly reached his ears. His deep dimples conveyed his excitement. We shared that proud moment. Ten weeks earlier, after our first haircut, we'd reached out and rubbed each other's heads, bringing shame and disaster. We'd come a long way—now our eyes met, but he kept on walking. Our shared thoughts were as good as a rub.

I sat in the chair, not daring to look up at the barber's face in case that pissed him off and he shaved my whole head. Sort of like when you shake a Christmas gift, and it feels like clothes, but you wish for electronics anyway. Put good thoughts out there.

I didn't bother to sit all the way back in the chair; the haircut would only take a few seconds. My head was on auto-tilt and dipped down toward my chest before the barber even laid the palm of his left hand on my neck to press it down. The metal blades were hot from action, and they stung on my neck as he clipped up. Since my eyes were already closed to keep the hairs out, I squeezed in a wish for a high-and-tight haircut.

The clippers tickled over my ears. They ran along the upper part of my head. I got the tap from the barber. As I got out of the chair, I reached up. My hand traveled up the shaved side of my head and hit the patch. My hand felt what a golf ball must feel when it leaves the manicured putting green and rolls into the rough.

That top patch of uncut hair helped earn us the name Jarheads from the Navy. They think it makes our heads look as if they have a lid that can be screwed open. If anyone, squid or not, picks that name up and hurls it at us thinking it's insulting—it isn't. We earned that patch with months of sweat and hardship.

Grab hold and try to twist it off our proud heads, motherfuckers. It doesn't budge.

We got another lesson at about the same time we got our first high-and-tight haircut: hard work pays off. McKinnon came in the front door of the squad bay one day carrying a stack of file folders. He looked back and jerked his chin up over his shoulder, signaling for someone to enter.

Three recruits walked in, struggling under the weight of their fully packed sea bags, their rifles swinging about. It was weird to have new recruits join our Phase III platoon. I wondered how they'd ever fit in. McKinnon

snapped his fingers at them and pointed to the invisible line at the front of the quarterdeck. He barked down the squad bay, “Get on line!”

“Aye-aye, sir!” We’d advanced to responding with the more professional “aye-aye.”

We all stopped what we were doing and stood at attention with eyes ahead.

“Drop your trash there, privates, and lock it up.” I heard the thump and rattle of their bags as they dropped. I shifted my eyes to peek to the quarterdeck. McKinnon walked past the new platoon members, knocking the hat off the head of a recruit who had rudely left it on after entering. The recruit stayed locked and frozen.

“Don’t give me some shit about forgetting to remove your covers inside my house!”

I returned my eyes to the front to avoid McKinnon’s detection.

“Eyes on me, privates!” Our heads snapped to lock on him, our bodies still facing front. This move was usually done in public when our DIs showed us off while delivering information, like we were mechanized puppets.

“We don’t always get a second chance in life, privates. You fuck your shit up and get your ass blown up in a battle, pull some shit and get your goddamn squad killed—that’s it. Some chaplain knocks on your sweet mother’s door and hands her a fucking folded-up flag.”

Back in Phase I he’d used the same emotional voice to deliver the sad news that John Wayne had died. Wayne is the Marine mascot movie star; the Corps took the news hard and delivered it even harder. I wasn’t sure John Wayne had really died, because we didn’t have access to television. Although I wrote home asking for confirmation of John Wayne’s death, no one answered—I’m sure my question was such a non sequitur that my family assumed I wrote it while delirious.

McKinnon walked back up to the quarterdeck, shark-circling the three recruits.

“What you see today—get your goddamn eyes off me and on the recruits on my quarterdeck—is a second chance.”

It took a minute, but I recognized Bowman’s huge smile—this group was three of our fatbodies, the guys who’d been dropped because they couldn’t do pull-ups at the Initial Strength Test. I hadn’t expected to see these guys again, but here they were in the flesh. Less flesh, actually—after two months they looked fit and thinner.

“While you dumb shits have been lollygagging and beating off to your girlfriend’s letters—Pritchett—these recruits have been busting their hump to get back here. Fall out and gather ’round, platoon!”

We were up there in a flash; I looked them over like they were freaks. I couldn’t believe they were back. Webster hobbled up on his crutches; how the hell was he still here?

McKinnon ordered the three recruits to take off their camo blouses. They’d worn them to move from their other barracks, I guess, as if getting dressed up to travel.

“You soft bodies got to earn your way back in. Your other drill instructor tells me that you deserve to be here, but you still got to prove it. If you can’t do three pull-ups, then back you go.” He pointed at the pull-up bar hanging from the ceiling and pointed back at Bowman.

As Bowman approached the bar, I thought of what he had told me before he got dropped. His whole family was heavy and no one believed he would be successful in boot camp. I told him that he could do it, because here I was and no one thought I would even make it to day one, much less through day one. He wanted to prove his family wrong. He wanted someone to believe in him, and if he needed to be forced to shape up, then signing the enlistment papers was his first step toward that goal. The someone he needed to believe in him was himself.

Back when he had failed and walked out of our platoon, all I could see was him beating himself up and realizing that he was trapped in that state, that everyone was right. He passed by me with his sad panda face, forcing the corners of his mouth up into a smile, but when we locked eyes, all I saw was sadness and fear.

He had no way of knowing that I was him.

I’m not sure if a silent audience is a dream or a nightmare, but we were totally still. Bowman looked up at the bar with a hope I knew we all felt. His eyes never left the bar as he jumped up and caught it. He hung for second—then started to rise. He pulled up to the top and dropped back down, pausing at the bottom, in the same spot where he’d gotten stuck before—where he had struggled and wiggled, but couldn’t finish.

But he pulled up again, and popped his chin over the bar as a fuck you to his fat past. I looked up at him like I was peeking up the shorts of some workman on a ladder, and noticed that the flabby, frosted donut of a belly that had hung over his pants on his previous attempt was mostly gone.

Out of conditioning from our training, the entire platoon simultaneously yelled an “Oorah!” of recognition to encourage him.

He lowered back down, the silent anticipation broken by his own grunt as he pulled himself back up to the top. He went back down. Three.

He hung there poised to dismount; the entire platoon erupted. I could see Bowman’s eyes shut tightly, his face calm. I read his mind: He had this. Whatever the hell he had to do those weeks in the fat-camp platoon, he’d emerged victorious. I expected him to descend, but he held his position. Santoro wore a look of disbelief. We were slapping each other on the back, looking up at him, yelling his name.

McKinnon didn’t tell us to shut up. Bowman had done it.

He paid no attention to us. He held on the bar a few more seconds, then pulled his body up a few inches. He stopped, arms bent as if he couldn’t pull up further. Had he overdone it? No. He pulled up a few more inches. Stopped. His arms were bent out away from his body like a paperclip you extend to use to clean your teeth. There’s that second before the paperclip snaps. His arms were not shaking. I wondered if he was going to fall. But Bowman didn’t drop to the deck. He stared straight ahead, gradually controlling his entire body, lowering it until it hung straight down. And instead of releasing the pull-up bar and dropping to the floor, he grabbed it tighter and pulled back up. He got to the top, pushed his chin over, and yelled “Oorah!” before dropping back to a hang. He pulled back up. I knew he was experiencing a dream come true. Since he’d told me his fantasy of walking into his house, thinner and a Marine, I felt proud for him.

We gave him a burst of Oorahs back—then everyone automatically got quiet again. He was hitting the stride, that up-and-down pull-up rhythm that only a few could do, including Marks and Dale.

Bowman pumped the pull-ups out. By the tenth, we were screaming and hopping around. Our voices chanted his name, spraying “Bowman!” through the air like congratulatory champagne. He must have done thirty pull-ups before McKinnon finally grabbed his swinging feet and ordered him down.

When Bowman dropped to the ground, his face was purple and he wasn’t smiling.

McKinnon, caught in the moment, wrapped him in a hug. I’d never seen that before. I’d also never seen a man fight so hard for his life.

With every pull-up, every stroke of my boot brush, every step I took, the desire to succeed in the Marine Corps was pumping through me. Victory was inching closer. Bowman was me. I was Bowman. We were in this together, and for the first time in my life I felt like I was part of a team.

28. The Weakest Link

My fellow recruits and I had sought and found our own level of comfort with each other. However, the behavior of several individuals was challenging—for me and the platoon as a whole.

We all detested Private Webster and hated to see him return. Dale and I had pegged him as a sadistic thrill-seeker who had enlisted to make us miserable. Over the first ten weeks of training, he emerged as the shit star of the platoon. We'd lost some far better guys yet he survived. As we neared completion, we all lost patience with him. I wished we could flush him. But the platoon makeup was up to the DIs.

Private Webster was an asshole that looked like a dick. A limp one. His round blond head sat on a pink neck attached to his long, soft, shaft of a body. Everything about him was light, from his hair to his skin, which looked as if it had been whitewashed like a fence. His weak body was more doughy than defined. He had no spine.

He gladly used the entire platoon as a pillow to absorb the blame for something he had done. We were still raw with resentment from scrubbing the shower after he took a piss in it. Any initial sympathy I had for him had gone down the drain with all that cleanser. He was consistently and purposely a jerk, and he was unapologetic about playing with our lives as if we were worthless. When we talked about him, we said his name with the disgust he deserved. It sounded like we were spitting out something that tasted bad: Webster.

Webster broke his leg early in Phase III. Not from hard training, but from being a diva. Too lazy to get out of bed, he reached for his rifle that hung on the bedpost, and fell out of his top bunk. A couple of days later he hobbled into the squad bay on crutches with a leg cast up to his hip. Had the break happened the first week, his contractual military obligation could have been voided; he could have gone home. Had it happened at the rifle range in Phase II, he would have been given a medical discharge or been sent to the correctional platoon to train at a slower pace. But now we were in the home stretch.

When we saw Webster limp in, he was carrying a bag of chips. We hadn't seen snacks for weeks. He didn't offer to share. His return was met with jeers rather than condolences. A broken leg might have humbled another man, but it made him even more intolerable. He was on light duty. It got you out of PT, but usually lasted only that day. Whoever getting it was expected to hit the ground harder the next morning.

Anyone on light duty pitched in where he could. Except Webster. He refused to help us clean. He refused to do any tasks at all, blaming his injury and citing his medical protection. Light duty doesn't mean no duty—there is that, too. He could have dusted or folded or done something to get off his flat, white ass. My only solace was the thought that his broken leg was shriveling in that cast.

I made sure he walked—or, in his case, limped—firewatch. And often. I gave him the worst hours. The DIs reviewed my lists—if they ever noticed, they said nothing to me. They had to know he deserved it.

We all feared that he would graduate with the platoon, when he didn't deserve to.

While we were caught up in the rapture of Bowman's triumphant return, Santoro and Hutchins had performed a surprise inspection of our squad bay. Inspections happened occasionally. Sometimes we would get back from class and the contents of someone's entire footlocker would be scattered around the squad bay as if a tornado had torn through. That person never forgot to lock his shit up again.

This time they only found Webster's rack made badly. Webster had done this before. He didn't care for himself or us, and I don't know why he was there. Not just there in our platoon wreaking havoc, but in the Marine Corps. He wasn't a team player—he was just a player.

Back at the pull-up bar, as we finished hugging it out with Bowman, Santoro and Hutchins emerged from their office, pissed off, and marched over to Webster.

Hutchins screeched, "You think you're too goddamn good to make your fucking rack, Private Webster?!"

Webster stood sort of at attention, resting on his crutches. He stammered out a weak, "Sir, no, sir!"

"Then why does yours look like dog shit and the entire platoon got theirs perfect?"

Webster looked around. "Sir, Private has a broken leg, sir."

Now Santoro got up in his face.

“I don’t care if your legs are fucking MIA, asshole, you make your rack with your goddamn arms.”

“Two sheets and a pillowcase and get on line!” Santoro ordered.

Were they fucking kidding me?! Our DIs were pulling that first-day nightmare in Phase fucking III? Those were the worst words. I hope never to hear “Incoming!” followed by the explosion of grenades, but if I do, I know how I’ll feel.

I took the task of making my rack seriously. It felt great to learn something new and then see the result when I did it well. Although I’d been skeptical on day one that how I made a bed could relate back to how I’d perform in battle, I now realized that everything, from firing a rifle to scrubbing the floor, tied back to caring for our equipment and operating effectively as a unit. We left exactly six inches of white sheet folded back over the green blanket. We measured the length so it would look uniform. We did it together. We helped each other. And we respected the rules.

It’s hard to follow every command. The DIs would sometimes give us bizarre commands in order to ready us for war. We all did exactly as they commanded, rather than following our instincts. Our instincts needed to be to follow a command without hesitation. Even though we were into week eleven of thirteen, we still had to obey orders, and we still needed constant reinforcement. Never get comfortable.

I grabbed my sheet and blanket and yanked them off, hard. The corner that had been at a perfect forty-five-degree angle peeled away from the worn mattress. I joined the other sixty-plus guys standing on line holding sheets and blankets. Pritchett and I had this trick we tried to use—we ripped our covers off neatly so our racks were easier to re-make—but the DIs had seen this before. They made us separate everything and shake it all out. Our time was valuable and in short supply; we should not be doing this.

We leaned over our racks, in the heat of the day, pissed off and frustrated into a crazy state, tucking in our blankets and sheets with each other—bunkie helping bunkie, then each of us turning to his neighbors to check their corners. I could see ostracized Webster way down the squad bay, making his bed alone. The hate toward him lingered and buzzed in the hot, humid air.

Scuttlebutt flew around the barracks during our free time that a soap party was being thrown that night for Webster. It was a threat we tossed around

the platoon a lot, never really meaning it. You put a bar of soap in a sock, then swing it around and hit your target. He ends up hurt; you don't. It sends a message.

The rumors must have spread to the DIs. I saw Hutchins and Santoro standing in the office doorway, talking with their heads close. Santoro looked over his shoulder at Webster, then quickly glanced away to scan the rest of us. His eyes caught mine for a moment, then he looked back at Hutchins. In that second, I felt they condoned the plan. They might have pitied Webster or felt responsible for his safety, but they must have created hate for fellow recruits before—they had been boots like us themselves. They knew that the weak member of a platoon is the man who gets you killed. One has to prioritize his responsibilities.

I was awake when I saw a recruit pass my rack carrying his pillow. Not that weird. But then I watched boy after boy go by and that middle-of-the-night activity was strange. I sat up on one elbow and watched a private place the pillow over Webster's head. Three other guys pinned him down in his bunk. I saw everyone around me was up.

Dale rushed over to me and crouched down.

"Can you believe this shit? You know what's going to happen?"

I was weirdly glad I did.

"That fucker deserves this," I whispered. With my shaved head, I imagined that I looked pretty tough and eligible to join the fight for once.

Dale pounded his fist on my bed. "I want to hit him so bad, but it might mess up my chance at Honor Man if I get caught."

We looked over at Marks's rack in unison. Sure enough, that little suck-up wasn't even watching. His angelic head rested against his pillow, and his eyes were closed in a semblance of sleep.

There was enough moonlight to see which recruits were beating Webster. The pounding was muffled, as was his voice, which struggled to get past his covered mouth. Everyone could hear the wiggling and squeaking. Dull thuds landing on flesh sharpened to a crack when the soap-filled socks hit his plaster cast.

The event was horrific. My heart sped up, but my anxiety raced ahead of it, fueled by adrenaline. My eyes opened wider to see better in the dark. I watched the socks flying up and down in huge, vicious arcs and was glad when I heard them hit his body. Webster was supposed to be one of us, but

instead of joining our unit he consistently pissed us off by proving that he didn't want to be part of our platoon. He was our weakest member.

A mighty wave rushing to the shore isn't stopped by a jutting rock—the wave rolls over the rock to a victory marked by a deafening crescendo. Fuck that rock.

I sat up straighter and stared down the squad bay towards Webster's rack. My eyes roamed the room, looking at my fellow recruits. Webster was the guy who would get us all killed in a battle. We acted as a unit and against our enemy. I didn't hit him, but I didn't stop it. I supported the decision.

It was over in thirty, maybe forty solid strikes. Dale raced away to his bunk. I quietly lowered my head back down to my pillow, aware of other recruits passing by to return to their beds.

Webster was quiet. The recruit on firewatch startled me as he shook a padlock on a rifle. I felt a bit sorry for Webster if he was in pain, but not for him being a fuck-up. I imagined that if my platoon found out I was gay, I'd get the same treatment. But I had served my fellow recruits well, bravely, and stayed true to our mission. I hoped they'd see that over my sexuality.

My heart pounded as I tried to go to sleep. That could have been me. I felt like I'd dodged a bullet, that I was getting away with something. It wasn't the time to get cocky and celebrate Webster's punishment.

Bullying is bad—as much as I hated Webster, I lay there feeling hypocritical about my detachment. My entire life, I've feared that hushed whispers would gather and grow into fists pounding on my face. But the real injury would be the thought that someone hated me without taking the chance to get to know me. Webster had had a chance to change his behavior. He was potentially dangerous. I wanted to make the world a better place, and if my homosexuality got in the way, I'd move it aside temporarily—then slide it back into place when appropriate.

The next morning, Webster wasn't in the squad bay. One of the firewatches told us that McKinnon came in the squad bay and took Webster into his office. I felt victorious from sleeping through an action as big as the evacuation of a body.

Webster's rifle and footlocker were still locked when we left for breakfast, gone when we came back. He was cycled out of our platoon. We were happy he wouldn't be graduating with us. He didn't deserve to. I have to hope that the Marines were able to rehabilitate his attitude with the same success with which they had rehabilitated Private Bowman's body. What if

that had been me? I'd have gone home. To what? Junior college and ridicule? A life I wasn't excited about. I meant nothing up to this point. I'd made it this far and was feeling that I mattered. I moved from wanting to be "as good as" to "better than." I heard Santoro when he said, "Get your eyes off the ground. Aim fucking higher, asshole." I really heard him.

You know who would have been surprised if I had quit? Not one person. Guess who would have had the power to not only start this mission but also finish it? Me. How about I complete boot camp and march off the place a goddamned Marine? I was finding my comfort zone in an uncomfortable zone.

In that one event, months of confusion dissipated. I was no longer training toward a purpose I didn't understand. Everything counted, everything mattered. Everything got noticed. I was becoming a Marine.

29. Power Over Adversity

The physical ordeal of boot camp is a roller coaster ride operated by madmen. And I wasn't a passenger; I was the car. Not only was I tasked with climbing the hills and speeding around curves, I was ordered to do it over and over again while carrying a heavy weight. I prayed I didn't fly off the tracks.

We all knew we'd be timed on the Obstacle Course and the final Physical Fitness Test. Each time we practiced, I kept that in my head; I had a long-term goal. I also had a short-term goal: simply finishing whatever task I was doing.

We all started our journey physically unscathed—no one enters boot camp in bandages or limping. Our progression was kind of a battle. We entered strong, and by the end of the skirmish, we had casualties. Not as horrific as those suffered in an actual war, but relative.

"You privates who limp around nursing blisters and wincing like your goddamned miserable life is over are fucking lucky," lectured McKinnon on the day of the timed Obstacle Course. "You get hit in battle and get hurt, you gotta keep on fighting. Enemies don't kiss boo-boos. Enjoy this training, recruits. Life out there doesn't get better. It gets real. And it's fucking bloody. I don't just want you to be the best. You have to be ready, and it's my fucking job to get your pathetic asses in line."

I'd reached the comfort point where I'd put my hand on anyone's shoulder to stretch my sore legs in preparation for the timed Obstacle Course. The chilly morning got chillier as Santoro sent an emotionally freezing sentiment up my spine:

"Pray for peace, prepare for war!"

I'd practiced the course dozens of times. To get the maximum score, we had to complete it in under a minute. I peered down the row of metal bars and wooden walls—it looked as harmless as a child's playground.

We ran the Obstacle Course in groups of four. As I made it through the first, and easy, element, I prepared myself mentally for the obstacles ahead. McKinnon blew his whistle. We bolted off before the blast was over, teeming over the first obstacle as Santoro and Hutchins ran among us,

yelling encouragement. We transformed the lonely playground into a busy thoroughfare—recess was over.

I relied on the experience from all of my other attempts. I knew how hard to push my arms to get up and over the wall, and I found the necessary balance quickly. I shot a look ahead; Santoro was already at the end of the course, under the ropes, with a stopwatch. Without looking up, he shouted the time as each recruit dropped off the rope.

I thought of the boys in my junior high gym class playing basketball while I watched from the sidelines, chosen for neither team. That one childhood snub scarred me with self-doubt. It was easier not to try than to attempt and fail. Why prove those boys right by publicly falling on my face? Not trying was my own power play. But here, in boot camp, as I watched guys I respected struggle, it felt safe to try.

I shut the DIs screams out and heard only the taunts, the imaginary chants of teenagers telling me I couldn't do it.

My heartbeat could have kept time with Lynyrd Skynyrd's drummer, and I grunted with effort on the upbeats. My brain told me that I couldn't do this, that Dale and everyone else had been right when they pointed out that I didn't have what it took to complete this type of run—or do anything physical—because, prior to pulling on combat boots, I hadn't.

But now I had. Other voices bubbled up into my head, stronger voices. I took advantage of my limber legs and light body. I hopped up and over every goddamn pole and wall and beam that got in my way, and I felt my heart rate soar. My legs moved me forward, and as I approached the ropes, I belted out a Tarzan yell in my head as I leapt out and grabbed one. My momentum helped me ascend as the shards of prickly hemp sticking out of the rough rope abraded my soft palms. Till now the idea of me climbing a rope was absurd. I wasn't supposed to be here—but I was.

Pride yanked my body up that rope. The crescendo I heard was not imaginary. Chanting started up among those who had finished and those still waiting their turn, and their cheers weren't just for me, but for every one of us. I reached the crossbeam at the top and slapped that fucker. It stung my hand hard, but I knew from practice that it was going to sting. I just slapped it even harder.

I slid down the rope with slick skill and hit the sand with both feet in a solid landing that would have made an Olympic gymnast jealous.

“Forty-seven,” Santoro fired off without looking. Even if he were huggy, this wasn’t a hug-worthy moment. There was another boy right behind me.

I maxed the score. Fuck yes.

I blinked from the sun as I walked around on the grass—hands on my hips like a superhero, not a housewife—to recover my breath. I pulled the bottom of my sweaty T-shirt up to wipe my face, carelessly exposing my stomach. We’d all seen everything by now, and my body issues had decreased as my level of fitness increased.

I looked directly into every boy’s eyes I passed, searching for any sign of doubt he might have about my being able to pass these tests. No matter who thought what, who held onto prejudices or doubts, I knew what I had accomplished, and it was now also a matter of record.

One week later, the timed Physical Fitness Test—sit-ups and pull-ups—came around. I wanted to max them out, too. We did the test outdoors on wet grass. I felt it itch on my back, and I wriggled as I grinned at this is it at Dale, who held onto my ankles. With my knees bent and my arms tucked behind my head, I engaged my stomach muscles, ready to blast off at the end of the countdown. The whistle blew, and I was up. My face went between my knees, then I pounded my torso back down. Dale counted out loud, announcing each number when my head was near his so I would hear him and not the boys on either side. The PFT required regular sit-ups—half-assed crunches weren’t invented yet.

My back touched the ground just long enough for the sit-up to count. Then I was back up.

“Sixty.”

My butt scooted on the damp ground, and the last sit-ups were harder, but I was determined to knock the eighty out in under two minutes.

“Eighty.”

I kept going. Dale grabbed my feet tighter. I pulled my elbows closed. Slobber ran out of my mouth. As my butt slid back and forth on the grass, I realized I was going to be extra dirty in the shower later.

“Time!”

Santoro held a clipboard and went down the line, asking the counter the number of sit-ups he witnessed. He got to us. We both jumped to our feet and locked our bodies at attention.

“Sir, Private Cope did one hundred and three, sir!”

Santoro looked at me, then at Dale, then wrote a number down.

“All we needed was eighty, Cope.”

That’s right, I did more than eighty. Bitch. My inside voice is not only richly deep, but super brave.

Pull-ups were hard. I had found three almost impossible a mere ten weeks ago, and I wanted twenty today for the full hundred points. We couldn’t swing our bodies much, which made the pull-ups that much more difficult—seemingly unattainable. We did the pull-ups outdoors instead of in the squad bay this time. I grabbed the bar, which was wet from sweat or dew or bird shit—who cared—and began. I had learned that hesitation would kill my rhythm. I closed my eyes and imagined I was in the squad bay. Dale and I had practiced this—he’d coached me. I’d done twenty there, and now I needed to shut out the pressure of this timed test and focus on what I knew I had in me. At about pull up fourteen I thought I was done and would fail. My hands started to slip—I wiggled a bit. I kept on, expecting to feel a tap on my ankles to get down—that I was out. But none came. My last three pull-ups were shaky, but I tightened my grip, inhaled deeply, and pulled up and over that bar. Today mattered most. Twenty.

I hopped off and shook my arms away from my body, congratulating them. The main event was next. I hadn’t run ten feet before I started boot camp. Now I was expected to run three miles in fewer than eighteen minutes. That was the goal for all of us, but I had my own goal: simply to complete the three miles within the minimum required time of twenty-eight minutes. If we took over twenty-eight minutes, we failed the PFT. That could be me.

My shin splints had never healed, but I had gotten used to that pain. It ended when the run did, so I didn’t have to deal with it all the time. When a side cramp had first hit me, it stopped me for a minute. But there is no stopping. I learned to lean into those cramps and keep running. They wouldn’t ease right away, but eventually they’d subside.

I took off on the run. Hudson and Cooper and Pritchett jetted away from the rest of us. I used them as inspiration now, not competition. But that didn’t mean I wasn’t afraid. I felt more alone with my fears on the big track among the other recruits than I had been during the other tests. I looked out and ahead of me and just ran. My legs had learned to reach out and grab the ground and pull it toward me.

I hit my stride—the same feeling you get when the tennis ball hits the sweet spot of your racquet, or your hand fits perfectly in another’s. I breathed my five breaths in and five breaths out.

I'd purposely maxed the first two events to pad my score in case my run wasn't perfect. Control what you can—I was taking my own personal approach to the principle of “divide and conquer.” I'd worked hard to earn perfect scores on the sit-ups and pull-ups so I would get a high overall score even if I flubbed the run.

When I crossed the finish line and heard “nineteen minutes, forty seconds,” I kept running. I ran a good, unnecessary two hundred yards just to process my relief that it was over. I slowed, then stopped. Alone by the chain-link fence, I rested and heaved and almost threw up. From zero feet to three six-and-a-half-minute miles in only three months. I might have looked exhausted, sweaty, and spent, but inside my head, I let Shirley MacLaine perform my feelings in a spectacular, high-kicking rendition of Sweet Charity's “If My Friends Could See Me Now.” It's a shame Fosse never got to see my brain doing a happy-dance—his numbers went really well in the safe place of my mind.

My overall score was high—not perfect, but I had six years to reach that three hundred. Nice to have it in my sights. Dale was astonished by my results and pleased that he got a perfect three hundred—amazing because he had overcome his own hardship: He had entered boot camp eighteen pounds heavy, thanks to me. I loved him being the best.

When met with a struggle, always let them see you sweat. Tell everyone to shut the fuck up, because you're working on it. And then conquer it.

My DIs might not have believed in me specifically, but they believed in their job. They were successful—as were all of the staff at Parris Island. Fierce motivation was effective. Confidence was contagious, and, although a new concept, very welcome.

Baby steps lead to strong strides. Boot camp gave me a rock-solid introduction to physical fitness. I am proof that you can come to the party late but still have a great time. The training may have knocked me to my knees sometimes, but I stood up over and over and over—boot to boot with every recruit in my platoon. I was expected to remain in this shape, free to improve, for the rest of my service commitment. We were available to be called into active duty so we had to stay fit. I'd want to maintain this level forever, and had I not gone to boot camp, I'd never even made an effort at improving myself.

I proved everyone wrong. Even myself.

30. Are We There Yet?

Gossip matured from the wild-eyed, crazy rumors of our first weeks to well-founded suppositions based on everything we had so far witnessed. We knew we had certain rites of passage yet to come, but the DIs held the cards close to their chest.

They needed to keep us on guard, yet catch us off guard.

So far, our unit marched for two reasons. When we needed to travel from one place to another, we did it in a short burst of a marching session with the specific purpose of getting there fast. We marched quickly, our steps coming like the punches of a fighter: pow, pow, pow. At other times, our platoon marched more slowly, more deliberately, in longer sessions around the giant Parade Deck. This type of practice developed our moves and techniques.

Rumors had been flying around from day one that we'd encounter another type of foot transportation—the legendary forced march. Although it would serve as the culmination of all of our other experiences, we would never formally prepare for it.

The first force march event happens in the middle of the night—when many of us lose our virginity, although the sex usually isn't initiated by three loud, rough Marines waking you up at zero dark thirty, shouting that you have one minute to grab your pack and fall outside into platoon formation. Or maybe it is. Maybe your dream does include other guys. Everyone walks a different route to his destination.

I knew the nighttime assault was coming fairly soon, so I was somewhat ready—and more than somewhat anxious. As we lay in our bunks, we all heard the DIs rustling around in the office. Most of us were trying to act asleep, but were ready to spring up. I tried to drift off and dream this rough camping experience into one of the fun camping trips my family took. We packed the car, pitched the tent, ate some weenies not fully cooked. Then, after one night, we checked into the Holiday Inn. Turns out campgrounds don't have good showers or room service.

My heart pounded me out of dreamland and up to my feet when Santoro, McKinnon, and Hutchins stomped in, screaming and yelling at the top of

their lungs. Instead of turning on the overheads, they swung the beams from their flashlights over the walls, the floor, and our startled faces. Chaos erupted as the DIs yelled for us to ready our packs. Random legs and elbows jumbled about in the dark night as we all scrambled to get our backpacks and set them on the floor, ready to be filled.

Finally, the DIs turned on the lights and shouted out the list of items we had to pack. “Every man carries the same exact motherfucking load, privates.” We went on a scavenger hunt through our own belongings to find and pack an inflatable mattress, a tarp, three tent poles, a change of clothes, and our shaving kit. When they ordered us back to our rack to strip our blanket off, I took a second to resent the fact that I’d have to make that fucking bed again later.

I rolled the blanket up and shoved it in the pack. We were confused and clumsy, but once we were all sheathed in our canvas and nylon, we quickly rattled into a long line. We took off into the night. I couldn’t see where we were going, but I had learned it didn’t matter. I was prepared to fuck this bitch like the rest of the recruits. Although I thought pink, in the Marine Corps we are all one color, just as McKinnon told us at the start—green.

McKinnon quietly called a cadence: “left, right, left.” We shuffled along, not marching sharply. The beams of our flashlights created a light show on the uneven ground, but none of us were in the mood for disco. The platoon’s mood for the first mile was quiet and grumpy. Although many of us had been prepared for the early wake-up, we’d still been shouted out of bed and forced to go on a walk. This was not the camping trip of my youth.

I wasn’t used to the extreme weight of the loaded-up backpack. Marching with the weight on my back was like driving a boat with a delayed response on turns. The backpack kept making me veer off to one side or the other, but I countered the leverage of the weight and leaned it right back straight. Each step came with a quick adjustment to the backpack, my rifle, or my helmet.

After maybe two miles, the two full canteens strapped on my waist hung lower than usual. The loaded pack started to dig into my waist. After four miles, I wasn’t the only one adjusting my equipment to handle the distance.

The next time I looked up, a ten-foot gap had stretched out between me and the guy in front of me, and Santoro yelled, “Close it up!”

I had to quicken my step to stay caught up, but without running, as that would tire me out too soon. This was a marathon, not a sprint. We all

carried the same weight, but I weighed less than most of the guys. In fact, the pack increased my weight by over fifty percent.

After seven miles, my legs hurt.

At mile ten, I didn't think I could move my legs forward to take another step. I had pain that I couldn't even specifically connect with a body part. The backpack made it agony to breathe. My vision blurred.

Somehow, I engaged my mind and concentrated. My legs kept moving. I was shocked. I was Helen Keller spelling W-A-T-E-R in Anne Sullivan's hand. I would have smiled, but I didn't need the distraction—I only needed to put my foot forward and take another step. And I could. This three-day field exercise was to test all of our military training, including endurance.

At mile fifteen, we marched directly into the horizon; our stomping feet woke up the sun and shook it all the way into the sky.

We came to a clearing and were ordered to halt. The long chain of men jangled to a stop. My rubbery legs reminded me that I'd been called Gumby as a gangly kid. On McKinnon's command we dropped our packs and foraged in them for the tent poles and tarps.

The folded canvas and rubber inflatable mattresses were dead weight. I had no idea how the one smelly green cloth and three rickety poles were going to become a shelter.

"Find your bunkie and snap your fucking tarps together, assholes," Santoro yelled as we tried to puzzle it out.

Pritchett and I worked together to form our two tarps and six poles into a floorless tent in the shape of an inverted V.

McKinnon ordered us to grab our green air mattresses. "Blow up your rubber bitches, privates!"

I stuffed my blown-up mattress inside the tent and hastily spread the blanket on top.

Next we were told to put on camouflage makeup. We grabbed tan, green, and black makeup sticks and painted camouflage designs on our faces. The color felt greasy and thick; the stick pulled my skin as Dale marked me up. Some guys just wiped it across their faces carelessly, but Dale and I took some time to get into character. We created camouflage patterns like on our uniforms, blending away our identities as recruits and painting new ones as Marines on patrol.

All made up, we broke into teams of four and headed back out to start patrols of the area.

We moved through the woods as if we were on a mission, each of us taking a turn leading the team. My legs forgot that they'd marched all night; I wasn't sleepy. We rounded each curve as if exploring Oz.

Then we fell right into an ambush. A random grunt burst out of the brush and caught us off guard.

"You idiot recruits just got yourselves blown up," he snapped. "No one cleared the land for mines."

Once he spoke, I saw it was Santoro, his face also painted up. He crouched down on the ground and carefully slid his bayonet into the dirt. He pretended, for demonstration purposes, that the ground might contain buried explosive devices. When there was no explosion, he moved a foot ahead and jabbed his knife in the ground again. He waved us on, using hand and arm signals, reminding us to clear our path. He retreated into the bushes to wait for the next group. Or to have a smoke.

It felt strange knowing he would attack the next group. Several other platoons were participating in this field exercise with us, even if we hadn't seen or heard them yet. I was used to Santoro being ours exclusively.

We broke to eat. Imagine a long, wooden picnic table covered in a red-and-white checkered cloth that flutters in the breeze. Imagine huge pitchers of icy lemonade too slippery to pick up because of the condensation dripping down the sides. Heaping platters of fried chicken being passed convivially from recruit to smiling recruit. Grandpa telling tall tales to the children gathered at his feet.

Now scratch all that.

We sat on the ground eating MREs—Meals Ready to Eat. I sucked down a packet of cold tuna and chased it with chocolate pudding.

Night came. We gathered at our campground and slathered Avon Skin So Soft on our skin. It was no Aqua Velva, but it kept the mosquitos away like nothing I'd ever tried. We might have looked raggedy and dirty, but we smelled like a gang of delightful old ladies.

It felt odd that McKinnon, Santoro, and Hutchins sat with us; it seemed like we were just a group of peers hanging around the campground. I felt kind of honored to have them sitting among us. It was dark enough for the stars to come out.

Pritchett and I crawled into our shelter to sleep. He wasn't having a good time. Being out in the woods made him miss his wife even more, as if being away from our squad bay made this a trip away from home. He had a

firewatch in the middle of the night. That meant an interrupted sleep for me; I knew I'd wake up when he was roused to start his shift.

"You ever think about home, Cope?"

"Not really. I think of being away from here, but no place specifically. You?"

"Fuck yes. I got a wife, remember."

Yes, we all remembered.

"You have kids yet?" I asked. I was pretty sure he didn't, but he liked talking about his wife; I wanted to hear more.

"No. I fuck the shit out of her, but nothing sticks."

"You'll have plenty of time when you get back."

"No, I won't. Eight days and a wakeup and I'm off to my next station."

"Fuck her like crazy then."

"Hey, fucker, don't talk about my wife like that."

He was sweet but sensitive. Jokes about her stung. I made a fast apology but went to sleep grinning. Pritchett wrestled his body away to face the other side of the tent, muttering under his breath.

Water woke me up. It took me a while to realize it wasn't a dream. Rain was pouring in from the top of our tent. I bolted upright; our tarp halves didn't form a watertight seal. Pritchett was gone.

My blanket was wet. Wet wool smells like wet farm animal, but it feels like dead, wet farm animal. As I sat up, my feet landed in mud. I reached outside and felt around for my boots. I'd put them out there before bed to let them air out; I didn't want them inside, stinking up the tiny tent. I couldn't find them.

Pritchett ducked down into the tent, his guard duty over.

"Can you believe this shit? I put your boots inside. How the hell did the DIs make it fucking rain?"

I was happy for dry boots, but our shelter was a disaster. We had to stay in our makeshift racks, drenched as they were, until we heard reveille played off in the distance. Any warm and happy mood from the night before had been washed away.

I grabbed my entrenchment tool, a little folding shovel, and headed off to find a private place out in the wilderness I was sharing with about a thousand other recruits. The slurping sound as my boot lifted out of the mud made it sound like I was already taking a messy shit.

I looked down at my hand. Who was I? I held the small shovel like it was what I did every day. I'd gone from freaking out at the sight of a room of shared toilets to this. I looked around the woods to see dozens of other recruits all looking just like me—all of us stoically, silently walking through woods to dig a shallow pit and take a morning dump. And I was okay with that.

There was an odd solitude in the woods, broken only by my jangling belt buckle as I opened my trousers and pulled them down. I squatted, hoping I didn't shit on my trousers or leg. Once settled, I glanced around to see countless others scattered around, all of us assuming the same position while keeping to ourselves. In some progressive country like Amsterdam, I'd imagine this a modern art installation.

Once we squared away our camp, roll call was taken to make sure no one escaped. (Spoiler alert: No one did.) We threw our backpacks on and trudged off. Throughout the day, we accomplished tasks that simulated those we might encounter in battle. We fired blank rounds. We administered first aid to fallen Marines. The DIs threw challenges at us that had no actual solution, then evaluated us on how we attempted to handle the problem. Trying is an action—and part of the solution.

As the day scorched on, the mud on my boots dried and fell away. Hour after hour, the DIs hurled tasks at us that required strong shoulders and sturdy legs. I carried fellow recruits who'd been blasted by an imaginary bomb to safety; they carried me over water that didn't exist. The DIs added tasks that required a dexterous mind in addition to a stable body. I learned that mental challenges are more difficult to solve when you're exhausted.

But the most important lesson I learned in the field over those three days is something I use every day, more than once.

I can do anything any other man can do.

Regardless of my insecurity about my appearance and sexuality, I gained confidence from membership in a group I never thought I could belong to, a group I never thought would accept me. I adopted the same attitude they did; I did everything anyone did. I was a man with a job, a man who happened to be gay. If I shoot badly or lead my platoon into danger, then fire me or court martial me; but if I do my job well, then honor that. Being a Marine is hard work and takes a lot of focus, practice, and dedication. I learned that I had to respect myself if I wanted others to respect me. And to

care less what anyone thought of me. Find your truth, and you will find love.

Regardless of how I was perceived, I knew what I could do. Forever.

31. Someone Always Dies

Near the end of the last day out camping, I was leaning against a big tree, surrounded by my squad, digesting the last three days. We were still exhausted, but as the stress of the forced march lifted, levity floated up. We sat relaxing a bit, enjoying the pleasant afterglow of the dreaded—but completed—field event.

A group of Marines entered our shaded area and walked toward us. McKinnon was with them; they all shared the same serious face. We'd memorized rank structure, recited it hourly, so as soon as I saw the gleam on one of their collars, I knew he was an officer. From the tiny cross on his uniform, I pinned him a chaplain.

Normally we would have jumped to attention the second we saw Marines, but we'd been taught that in the field you never, ever, ever saluted—in case snipers were watching. Saluting an officer will get him killed. Enemies like to take out leadership in the hope that the rest of the unit will scatter like ants from a kicked-over mound.

The faces of the officers told me that someone in our group was about to get some bad news. The timing sucked—we'd already been through so much. I looked around and wondered who it was. I was sure glad not to be that guy.

The men approached, then stopped near me. I looked up. McKinnon spoke calmly.

“Private Cope, get up. These Marines need to talk to you.”

I scrambled to my feet, hoping they couldn't see my thoughts. I was busted. My mind raced, wondering when and where had I fucked up and acted obviously gay. That they brought a chaplain to be on standby as they delivered my verdict made it extra serious. The government must have had some policy in place to pray over my homosexual body. Bless this lying sinner—but get him the fuck out of our Marine Corps. In the name of our Lord. . . .

What had I said to someone, or written in a letter? I knew our goddamn mail was being read. Who had told them I'd lied on my enlistment papers? I'd been doing great and felt accepted, and no one had ever directly accused

me of anything. I wanted to look in the face of every recruit around me to see if I could tell who outed me. But I kept my eyes locked to the front as I'd been trained to do.

The Chaplain wore square, wire-rimmed glasses. He smiled at me. After two months of everyone in authority frowning, it alarmed me. "Private," the Chaplain started in an expectedly soothing voice, "I have some bad news to deliver, son."

I looked straight ahead, not directly into the smug eyes of my accusers, thinking, *Go ahead. I've known this was going to happen. What was it, the hip-popped-out stance? My concern over wearing a tan belt with black boots?*

"Your grandfather has passed away."

Oh my God! What a relief—oh, wait, my grandfather died. But I was not found out. I most likely was not leaving this meeting in handcuffs. I took a step back as if to give this news a little space. I was not busted.

But I was gutted. I loved my grandfather. Having been raised by a gang of itinerant boyfriends and a stepfather, I considered my grandfather the one stable male authority figure in my life. He was a master carpenter with bulging biceps that my three brothers and I could hang from all at once. To make sure I turned out a proper gentleman he taught me to waltz and to tie a bow tie without needing a mirror. He'd supplied me with my model of the ideal male physique—one that I figured wasn't available to me since I didn't use tools or lift boards. I'd never had the chance to tell him that I revered and appreciated him.

I fell against the tree. I was stuck in boot camp and not around my very small, close family at this tragic time.

"I'm sure Mr. Cope was a fine man," the Chaplain continued.

"Yes, sir, he was. . . ." And then it hit me.

"Excuse the Private, sir, did the Chaplain say, 'Cope'? The Private's grandfather is Guy Barclay."

He checked his paperwork. "I have here a Milton Cope of Lubbock, Texas."

Thank goodness. My adoptive father's father. I barely knew him, and sad as his death was, I hadn't seen or thought about him in years and had no affection for the man. Although my mother had divorced my adoptive father, and my connection to him was also severed, my last name was still his, changed by my mother when she divorced my birth father.

The news still deserved a reaction. The Marines may have taught me how to shoot, but I came in knowing how to be dramatic. I lowered my head and got my pitiful act together. I let my mouth droop and put a grave look in my eyes. I didn't manage a tear, but we all looked so dirty and crazy from the days out in the field that I didn't need it.

"Perhaps a phone call home, once you get back to your squad bay, might make you feel better."

"That would be good, sir." Inside I was jumping up and down; we normally weren't allowed to use the phone. I'd not made a phone call since I left home. Outside, I maintained the sad disposition.

Our exercise over, we packed up our tents and began the journey back.

A time-lapse aerial view of our platoon marching, from our first day to this day, over twelve weeks later, would've shown our gradual transition from a jerky, rag-tag, disjointed mess of a gang into a solid mass that moved as a unit. We marched well. I heard our boot heels hitting the ground at the same exact second.

About one mile from home we hit a stride and a slick rhythm. Santoro grunted out, "Lean back and strut!" We did, and proudly.

Santoro started a new Jody call with a smooth, almost wistful quality to his singing. His voice cracked a bit, perhaps from emotion, and that made it sweeter. I felt his sincerity. We repeated each line as he sang it, as if we were serenading each other.

They say in the Marine Corps, the chow is mighty fine.

It looks like Chesty Puller and tastes like turpentine.

Oh, Lord, I wanna go, but they won't let me go . . .

Our heels slapped the asphalt like a metronome to keep our voices in rhythm as they responded, sounding rich and making me feel a warm connection to the men behind them.

They say in the Marine Corps, the women are mighty fine.

They look like Phyllis Diller and march like Frankenstein.

The miles-long march ended as we arrived back at the front of our squad bay. Santoro gave us a quiet, "Fall out!" and led us up the stairs, continuing his song and looking over his shoulder to make sure we were still repeating after him.

Oh, Lord, I wanna go, but they won't let me go,

Oh, Lord, I wanna go home.

We sang all the way up the stairs and into the squad bay and didn't stop until we were all standing in our places on line, locked in the position of attention with our hands along the seams of our trousers, eyes staring forward. As our emotional finale, we dragged out home to ho-oooo-ooooome. I can't have been the only one who got chills. This was what camaraderie sounded like.

We entered our squad bay like we were returning from a years-long battle. And then we took the same epic shower Odysseus's crew must have taken after returning from their odyssey.

Once I was scrubbed back to white, I made the precious phone call home to my family—who, I imagined, were grieving heavily with cocktails and clam dip—from McKinnon's office. He left me alone so I could speak freely. I was still nervous that someone was listening in.

I reached my family at my very-much-alive grandfather's house. I was so happy to hear their voices. They asked me many more questions than I could answer. The one subject that didn't come up was that poor dead, somebody-else's-grandfather. His dying while I was in boot camp was the only good thing to come out of my mother's entire marriage to Cope.

I was laughing as I hung up, which of course was the very second McKinnon walked back in the room. He asked me how everyone in my family was, and I excitedly told him, "Great!"

His cocked his head and his face twisted in confusion. "You got a sick fucking family, Cope. Now get the fuck out of my office."

32. Outdamnstanding

The next morning we stood on line, dressed for the day, waiting for the next command. McKinnon strode up the center of the squad bay wearing a crisply pressed uniform that mirrored against the creases formed by his narrowed eyes. “You’re the shabbiest bunch of recruits I have ever seen. Fall out!”

Soon we were marching down the street, me relishing the sound of seventy boots hitting the street in one clap. Hutchins raced up inside our ranks and shoved Hudson out of formation. McKinnon looked back at them.

“Platoon, halt!” I had no clue what Hudson had done, but I would soon find out. I might have panicked at this interruption ten weeks ago, but as I got more familiar with the military environment, I gained an ability to handle anything.

“Privates, if I tell you to grab your canteens, I better see nothing but a blur of hands grabbing their war belts. I could give a shit if you’re thirsty, but you will not die on my watch. Private Hudson decided he didn’t need water weighing him down today. Maybe that’s how you run so fast, Hudson, but you disobeyed a direct order.”

McKinnon looked slowly up and down our lines. His eyes narrowed with disdain.

“Unblouse your trousers, privates!”

We all hesitated, not wanting to undo the achievement we’d worked so hard for. We might have made it through twelve weeks, and we were treated with a bit more respect, but we were not graduated Marines—still lowly recruits. This was a harsh reminder.

Santoro shot inside the ranks, leaned down and tapped at a recruit’s boots with the back of his hand. Hutchins screeched, “Get your straps off now! You stupid pieces of shit don’t deserve that privilege.”

They were all hyper-macho drama queens. We slunk away down the street, our now un-gathered trouser bottoms flapping down around our ankles along with our spirits. Regression is effective rebuke, and they knew exactly when to serve us a fat slice of humble pie. We had earned the privilege to wear our trousers gathered up against our boot tops; and lost it.

I had no idea how long this horrifying badge of disgrace would be in effect. I came in boot camp with a strong fashion sense, so this slight was slightly more personal.

“Today you get fitted for your service uniforms,” McKinnon announced. “You may be wondering why you had to wait so long to look pretty. You assholes had to earn this uniform. And now that you’re off your fat behinds and eating my good Marine Corps chow, my uniforms won’t hang off your slack asses.”

Santoro had his own theory. “We wait till the end to see if you fucking make it this far before spending more money on you. I don’t waste taxpayer’s money, assholes.”

We only had our camouflage utility uniforms so far. I knew other uniforms were in the pipeline because other platoons graduated in green jackets and trousers with a tan shirt and tie. Like everything else, these uniforms were earned.

The process of being fitted for our service uniforms was an about-face from the process of getting our utility uniforms. Then, surly Marines who considered it beneath themselves to talk to a newbie such as myself hurled trousers and T-shirts at me with disgust.

Now we entered a large, open room lined with actual civilian tailors. We broke off into small groups to be fitted for the dressier uniforms. I saw racks of olive green jackets and rows of tan shirts. Boot camp makes the Marine, but uniforms wrap up the experience nicely. The Marines take pride in their uniforms—dress or casual—and the Corps is regarded as the most stylishly outfitted branch of service.

Our DIs stalked around as the tailor ran a measuring tape up my inseam and around my neck. I looked down as he closed the tape around my torso and I inhaled as he instructed—he was making sure I had enough space to breathe; the Corps liked jackets skin tight.

McKinnon held a blue jacket up above his head and proudly walked it around the room. The trickiest clothing color to match is blue. You leave the house in what you believe to be a coordinated all-blue outfit, and trust me the subtle hue differences will fuck you over. Yet the Marine Corps dress blues uniform mixes normally opposing navy and royal blue to a harmonious result.

“You see this, recruits? The dress blue uniform. Best for the best. One recruit in this room will earn it. The one wiggling maggot in here with the

highest scores and best overall performance will parade into graduation at the head of your platoon as Honor Man—wearing this. Who it will be? Time will fucking tell; I won't."

He handed the jacket to Santoro, who reverently returned it to the rack. Santoro barked at us, "I can tell you who it goddamn well won't be. Some of you assholes are on thin fucking ice."

The Honor Man was only revealed graduation morning, and the dress blues were tailored in secret, using the same measurements as for the service uniform. I felt Dale would be Honor Man. No one else excelled at so much. Marks had continued to fight, and Santoro clearly believed in him. My hope for Dale was matched by a hope that Marks failed.

A few days later, our service uniforms arrived; it was exciting. When I had caught the boxers thrown my way on day one, I had been naked, shocked, frantic. The gauntlet of painful humiliation that was uniform issue held all the threat and none of the promise of the thirteen weeks to come, a seemingly endless stretch of torture and abuse.

Now when a DI threw me a bag of tailored uniforms, I caught it with the stoicism and professionalism of a real Marine. These uniforms were more than a symbol of the end of boot camp. They were a symbol of my own process toward graduation—which I could actually see happening, now that I had my uniforms in my hands. The end was feeling closer and real. I realized that I, most likely, was going to wear these uniforms when I walked off this base.

Although our clothes were new, they were wrinkled. They held promise as well as loose threads and stubborn creases from mass production. They weren't tailored from whole cloth for each of us, just altered from ready-made trousers, jackets, and shirts. They needed to be ironed.

I watched our DIs go into teaching mode. Whatever the new task was, they changed their demeanor to skillfully, calmly, teach it to us. They taught us everything from marching to shooting a rifle to, as it just so happens, ironing. But we were still in Parris Island, not the Paris Hilton; for an ironing board, we covered the top of our footlockers with our towels. The DIs could turn on us like jealous lovers, but when they were in calm teaching mode, their manner was comparatively gentle and fatherly. Even if Santoro gruffly grabbed the shirt I was ironing to show me how to position it better, he softly laid the shirt down and offered an explanation.

"Ya dumb fuck!"

Once they'd taught us, the gentle treatment ended. If we messed up, the floodgates of abuse opened and craziness rained down. They used bends and thrusts to hammer lessons in. I'd be exhausted, shaking, barely able to breathe; then I'd be ordered to stand up and get right back to the fucked-up task. As blurred as my vision was from the punishing exercise, I was able to resume the activity—shockingly, more focused.

Their goal wasn't to make us tireless, but to show us that we already were.

Our training was paying off. I could snap into action and carry out an order with precision. Instruction and discipline infuse into the Marine with practice and repetition. They sink so deep that they start to seep out from the soul. Our uniforms reflect this and present us to the world in an organized embodiment of tradition. Clothes help make the Marine, but a lot of hands go into sewing us up.

The next day we had our first in-house inspection. These were pressurized, practical field tests. If you ever want to learn to make someone happy, go to Marine Corps boot camp for instruction. Learn to satisfy your DI's every bizarre command in a heartbeat. Later in life, whether you need to please a tough boss, a finicky client, or a tender lover, you'll have the world's most effective training to handle any demand. Marines are flexible and strong, with boundless energy. We carry every mission through accomplishment.

From our original uniform issue, we all had held back one pair of trousers, one T-shirt, and one of our pairs of boots—just for inspection. After running around for weeks looking grubby, we now all looked brighter from the fresher clothes. But as perfect as you think every piece of equipment is, something is always wrong. A loose thread poking out of a trouser pocket gets tugged on by the inspecting DI, then held high in the air: "Irish pennant!" Those damn little loose threads! Fail.

The last thing I did to prepare for the inspection was scrub my rifle. After weeks of repetition, I could break down my M16 in seconds and put it back together in a few more. I got the rest of my gear in place; then oh-so-carefully dusted off my highly polished boots. If the polish was even a little too thick, one wrong move could shatter the finish like the glaze on a doughnut. Bunkies checked and triple-checked one another for possible errors—and not perfunctorily but thoroughly. I needed Pritchett's inspection to go well so that the entire unit passed. We were one individual.

We stood on line, locked at parade rest, waiting. That day's inspection was a rehearsal for the day we stood outside for inspection by high-ranking

officers, total strangers. The commanders of our commanders. It was hard to imagine such people existed. Who were they?

All three DIs prowled into the squad bay, faces hard and serious, eyes critical, suspicious. McKinnon walked the line of recruits like a tiger choosing dinner.

“You think these maggots look ready, Sergeant Santoro?”

“Couple of these guys look like they’d fuck you up the ass without the courtesy of a reach-around,” Santoro replied.

I was pretty well desensitized to these overt sexual comments. Of course no one was fucking anyone up the ass, nor offering to reach around and give the fuckee a hand job. But if any other privates still took it literally, I could almost hear the increase in the heartbeats of the recruits around me.

Our hygiene was up for inspection too. The DIs leaned in close to smell our breath. I had to shave my practically nonexistent beard; caught in the light of the squad bay, even the finest peach fuzz was as bad as day-old stubble.

Private Johns, who lived halfway down the line from me, had whiskers that grew so thick on his round face that, by the end of the day, hours-old stubble appeared to be tied in a race with the days-old stubble on his head.

McKinnon pulled up in front of Johns and studied his face.

“When was your last shave, Private Johns?”

“Sir, Private’s last shave was this morning, sir!”

“You’re either part monkey or a goddamn liar. Sergeant Hutchins, get me the lighter fluid.”

When Hutchins returned, he was indeed carrying a yellow tin of Ronsonol. McKinnon poured some in his hand and wiped it on Johns’s face, smearing it under his ears, over his chin, and back up across his other cheek. We all were at the position of attention, eyes supposedly forward, but if boot camp teaches you one thing, it is to be a stealthy rubbernecker.

Inside my statue-like stance, I was freaking out; Johns was sure to leave skid marks in his good inspection underwear.

McKinnon reached into his pocket. He pulled out his cigarette lighter. And then he lit Johns’s beard at the chin. As the soft, blue flames started to spread up Johns’s shocked face, McKinnon patted them out. He shoved Johns off line.

“Get in the head and shave that shit off. From now on you shave twice a day. I’ll be goddamned if you’re going to represent my Corps like a fucking

bum.”

Even though the lighter fluid singed his beard, it didn’t burn Johns’s skin, but there was not a recruit who didn’t mentally rub his face to check for stubble. Half the men reading this right now just did too. And a few of the women.

Shoving my eyes to the right, I saw Santoro coming down the line. I heard him ask a recruit a question about military history, and I recited those same facts in my head in case I was asked the same question. We had to be ready for anything.

I heard Hutchins and McKinnon, each covering other parts of the platoon.

“Don’t lock your goddamn knees, privates. You’ll fall the fuck over.”

I felt my body tense up as Santoro reached the recruit next to me. On an unspoken cue I moved my stance from parade rest to attention.

Santoro glided slowly toward me, then stopped and paused for just a moment. He then pivoted perfectly on his left foot and snapped his right foot to it, his body landing squarely in front of me. His icy blue eyes searched mine, fast.

“Present arms!” In one swift move, I lifted my rifle and held it across my body.

He suddenly reached up and snatched the rifle. My hands flew down to land on the seams along my trousers.

“Don’t give me the fucking weapon, Private. Make it hard for me to take!”

I felt like a wimp. When I’d seen that happen to others, I’d vowed to hold on and not get that kind of attention. But he really grabbed the rifle hard.

He handed the weapon back to me. I reset it into position and he snapped his hands up, trying to trick me into thinking he was about to take my rifle. I hoped my flinch wasn’t noticeable.

The next time his hands went up, they landed on my rifle and I held fast. He pulled hard, but I didn’t let go. My rifle quivered in my hands, but I held on. He let go and leaned his face into mine, squinting his eyes, intensifying his focus. He quickly jerked his hands up to catch me off guard and really yanked. I held on. He looked in my eyes like he was searching for something, then nodded as if he had found it.

“What’s the highest enlisted rank, Private?”

“Sir, the highest enlisted rank of a noncommissioned officer in the United States Marine Corps is Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps, sir!”

“Do you like pizza, recruit?”

“Sir, Private likes pizza, sir!”

“Have you had pizza at Parris Island, Private?”

I kept my eyes straight, hoping I hadn’t missed out on some secret pizza.

“Sir, the Private has not had pizza, sir.”

“Both are in my Marine Corps’ world of possibilities, Cope. Dream fucking big.”

Neither of us eased our grips from the rifle.

“You do have to let it go, Cope, for inspection.” I released it. We held our stare. His mouth turned up into a tight, very thin smile. He held my rifle up in the air to peer down the barrel. It was slightly oiled, and I hoped that no tiny piece of lint had floated through the air and down inside in the few minutes since its last cleaning.

He tossed my rifle back to me; I caught it and completed the slick, step-by-step return of the weapon down to my side. He lowered his usually loud voice to a personal, growling whisper.

“Outdamnstanding.” I kind of wanted to cry. This moment was exclusively for me and I cherished it. Without tears, as I figured that caused demerits.

He walked on, and I slid my body back to parade rest.

* * *

That night, McKinnon quietly stood at the front of the squad bay, rocking back and forth on his heels. My rack was close by, so I quickly noticed both him and the envelope in his hand. “Any fucking day, privates,” he called out.

Cue the mad scramble to our places on line.

Santoro stood on the other side of McKinnon. His spot was right next to where Marks stood, at the front, up a bit and across from me. I spied Santoro looking at Marks, and although Marks had to keep his eyes straight ahead, he must have felt the stare.

“Recruits, I’m extremely proud of most of you. You’ve done an outstanding job and we are close to the fucking finish line. In addition to the one Honor Man, my commanding officer allows me and your other drill instructors to pick six of you to meritoriously promote to the next rank for superior performance. What’s that rank?”

“Sir, Private First Class, sir!” we yelled, as if enthusiasm could win us one of the spots.

We’d all heard about this. Six of our swinging dicks would swing a little prouder tonight.

“I’m about to announce those outstanding recruits. When I call your name, get the fuck up here and lock your goddamn body at the position of attention.”

“Thornley. Marks.” Yes! I knew Dale would get it. I figured Marks would too, but I wasn’t happy to hear his name in the same sentence as Dale’s. I watched them fall out into the center of the room and run up as ordered—both were squad leaders, and squad leaders usually got promoted. They’d been mini-leaders all summer.

“Jhimchek.” Probably on account of his donkey schlong.

“Pritchett.” He flinched, jumped straight up in a little hop, and took off running. I made a mental inventory of the platoon and tried to calculate who else would be promoted. Not Johns, not Tree, maybe Bowman. Triumphs and fuckups flashed in my head. There would only be six names, and I was counting. Pritchett was four. My heart thumped in my chest.

As Pritchett made it to the front, Santoro spoke. “Every swinging dick in here was eligible for one of these promotions. But somewhere along the line you fucked it up. The men you see up here are the ones you need to follow. When you join your next unit, make sure you correct your behavior. It can take a long time to reach the next rank,” he said.

McKinnon waited for him to finish. There were two spots left. I realized that even though I had aced the swim qualification, I had only shot Marksman. I looked around trying to remember who had scored as an Expert. There were so many guys.

McKinnon resumed his announcement. He called out, “Cope! Hudson!”

Me? I was so knocked out by the news that I turned my head to look in McKinnon’s direction. I needed to make eye contact with him to make sure I’d heard right. He was looking right at me. Even though I wanted to, I’d learned not to smile. But it was me! Hopefully, only my inside voice was screaming. I’d wanted the promotion, and I’d worked extra hard as scribe in the hope that my efforts would be noticed and factored in. But I never felt they’d give me the promotion.

I entered the center of the squad bay and headed up to the front. Hudson came up beside me from his place on line, and as we walked up, it looked like the opening of Charlie’s Angels where the three leads joined up one by one on the street. I took my place among the six of the entire platoon that were being meritoriously promoted. I had kicked boot camp’s ass and I was getting a prize. Bite me, weakness; fuck you, doubt.

“Stick out your right hands, recruits.” I extended my hand with snap and precision, my elbow at a ninety-degree angle.

McKinnon walked down the line, facing each of the six of us in turn and handing us a chevron signifying our new rank.

“I’m not giving you anything; you earned this,” he said in his rough voice but with kind eyes.

If there was anything I needed to hear right then, it was that. I needed everyone to hear that. No one had the right to say I hadn’t worked hard for this. If anyone in my platoon suspected that I was gay and therefore didn’t belong here, they just learned I did. As soon as McKinnon placed a chevron in my hand, I snapped my hand shut and lowered my arm, resuming my position of attention. He punched my arm hard. “Well done,” he said. I felt a connection between us. I’d worked closely with him in his office, yet there wasn’t any special bond during that time. But here, in this moment, I felt truly appreciated.

“About, face!”

I executed the move sharply, keeping my eyes dead ahead. I wanted to search the faces of my fellow platoon members for the suspicion that I had been advanced solely because I was scribe. I hadn’t. I’d scored high on the tests covering military knowledge, maxed the swimming challenge, scored high on the PFT, and I hadn’t pissed in the shower. I had no inside edge or influence—I spent less time hoping to be promoted and more time worrying about not graduating or the Corps finding out I was gay. My mind whipped me up a congratulatory cocktail of self-doubt, disbelief, and the fear of unworthiness, then shook it all up with ice-cold shock. I wasn’t used to winning. I halfway expected to hear faggot from someone’s narrowly opened lips, but I didn’t.

I stood locked at attention. When I first got here, I’d been thrown in ice water like a green bean being shocked to stop cooking. We were meant to look the same—heads shaved, uniforms issued—yet I felt so different. McKinnon hollered as we got dressed, “Superman needs five minutes and a phone booth. We don’t got phone booths or five minutes.”

Now I was promoted. No matter how I felt or worried, someone saw something in me that was Marine-ish. They could still kick me out, but I’d leave with accessories.

“Get back on line!”

Once we were all back in place, my eyes found Dale standing at attention across from me, as he had been since day one.

He was looking at me with a proud smile that sank into me, vibrating through me with enough force that I would be able to carry it with me every day of my life. If I expected disbelief, that smile laid all my fears to rest.

The honor was humbling, and none of us who received it gloated; we were still one unit. If anyone felt he deserved the promotion more than I did, he never let me know.

What they couldn't and needn't know was that I had earned more than one victory that night. That day was the first time I saw excellence in anything I had attempted. I had followed through on something without deviating from my course or backing away. And I won. I saw potential in myself.

In a movie there's a montage of scenes showing our hero's journey. I could easily insert shots of what my life was like back before I got to Parris Island. So much of it seemed silly and aimless. I'd made no goals or plan and wasted a lot of fucking time back then. I was marking time in the civilian world. Now, I was clearly in a forward march.

For me, just completing recruit training was miraculous. To be recognized for excellent performance defied imagination. If boot camp were the Academy Awards, being promoted to Private First Class would be equal to the thrill of winning versus merely being nominated. Just my luck to finally win something, and sixty-plus guys all wore the same outfit to the ceremony.

Once the night wound down, Dale sat down on my footlocker and asked to see my chevron. He had one just like it, but he turned mine over in his hand, punctuating the rotations with shocked looks and grins. "I can't even believe you're here, and now look at this. You got promoted to the next rank—and you didn't even have to blow anybody."

His smile got bigger and overflowed into a strong hug. He was more proud of my achievement than his own. My best friend had been with me step by step. He had taken a huge leap of faith just to humor me as I attempted this. But now I'd given him a bit of return on his investment. At times I worried that Dale might have to defend me if I faltered. I knew he would, but I never wanted him to suffer any embarrassment over being my friend. "We were in the Marines together," is often how he introduces me to his friends today. Those words take me back to rubbing each other's shaved heads,

living in our squad bay, laughing over letters from home and marching in the rain.

McKinnon barked from his office, “Lights out.” I was in the rack before I heard the switch flick.

Making someone happy—especially your best friend—is the best way to sleep well. And as for me, I was the happiest swinging dick in the squad bay. I saw the end of boot camp coming. In a few days, Dale and I would be separated—that was the last time we would serve together. We’d remain lifelong best friends and live in several different cities. But we’d always have Parris. Island.

33. Bring It Home

Boot camp was a study in contrasts. Our eighty-plus days were bustling, packed, and hectic, yet each day seemed to inch forward like it was crawling through razor wire while under fire. I never thought we'd reach the end of thirteen weeks. But now, exposed to as much basic military training as the Corps felt necessary, we were in our last three days—processing out. We had comparatively little to do, yet each day seemed as brief and ephemeral as a ghost.

Our platoon itself was a lesson in contradictions. After all, we were a family: we'd do anything for each other, but we also got on each other's nerves. Familiarity breeds contempt, and it was time to leave these motherfuckers. Each of whom I'd die for.

Just as it had taken us a few days to get processed in—to get our uniforms, weapon, and gear—it took a few to process out. But this time, everything was different. For one thing, we weren't naked and we weren't scared. As scared. Our last days in boot camp were about skill, training, community, and pride.

Part of the processing-out procedure was our final inspection, when senior officers gave each of us the once-over and spot-checked our knowledge and skills. On the morning of the final inspection, we ran around the squad bay as if we were getting married. Our freshly pressed service uniforms hung on the rails of the upper bunks, dangling like macho paper dolls.

Three months ago, joining another recruit in the bathroom had been creepy and invasive. Now when we rushed into the head to shave, the face crammed into the mirror next to mine was an extension of my own. We grinned, our eyes narrowing in a happy squint as if the light at the end of the tunnel was way too bright.

Still high from my promotion, I confidently held my cheek up tightly with one hand and guided the razor with my other, starting on my neck and then expertly gliding the blade over my jawbone and up my face. I cleaned my glasses in case the inspector leaned in close, which was likely.

I had polished and picked at my uniform and dress shoes as if they were prize rosebushes. Dressing was a ceremony. As I slipped my arms through

the sleeves of my tan dress shirt, I had to wiggle in, since it had been altered to be my second skin. I wasn't used to wearing a tie, so it still felt like a special occasion when I did. I wrapped the thin, matching tan tie around itself just as my beloved and non-dead grandfather had taught me, and guided the knot up to my throat.

Dressing came to a halt with a bark from Santoro calling Private Cooper to the quarterdeck. I fastened my trousers closed and leaned out and up toward the front of the squad bay to see Cooper, still in his utility uniform, standing at attention. Santoro paced around him, waving a can of soda.

"Private Cooper here wants to disrespect his platoon and drink a soda. Do you think you're better than every other recruit in here, Cooper? Fucking begin."

Cooper dropped and started bends and thrusts. We were so close to graduating, the incentive PT had slowed. I wanted to resume dressing and ignore Cooper and Santoro out of respect for my fellow recruit and our entire platoon, which had accomplished almost everything.

Cooper, twenty-seven and married with three sons, had served in the Navy for seven years. When you're nineteen, any age over twenty-one seems old. Back in one of my high school theater productions, the Juliet to my Romeo was the unmarried twenty-three-year-old typing teacher. I used her old-maid status to make her death that much more tragic—and, methinks, my performance that much better.

I thought it was crazy for Cooper to go through Marine boot camp when he was comfortable in the Navy. He had to take orders from our DIs, whom he probably outranked, but the second he passed through the gates at Parris Island, his rank and powers were stripped from him as if they never existed.

The humidity alone made us sweat, but now Cooper was exercising and the bends and thrusts had him sweating heavily. The platoon had protectively floated to the front. Cooper was one of us. The DIs were still them.

Drops of sweat were running off Cooper's face and forming a pool on the concrete floor underneath him. The PT was going on uncomfortably long.

Santoro stood over him and tilted the can of soda over his head.

"I trusted Cooper to go to sickbay alone. He passed a soda machine that's just for Marines and bought a soda. Who the fuck do you think you are? A squid? A Marine? Over my fucking dead body. You're nothing but a recruit."

Santoro poured the remaining soda onto Cooper's head. Maybe the cool liquid felt good, but I felt it was a cruel insult. Cooper didn't slow down, even though he was clearly exhausted and breathing alarmingly heavily. His sweat poured out onto the deck, just like the soda.

Cooper sped up, pulling not from anger and embarrassment but from determination. His lower lip became stiff from his concentration, and he bent down and threw his legs out with speed and accuracy. His eyes stayed focused in front of him, not looking at anyone or anything. He fought this battle with dignity. He was definitely no longer a squid.

The soda can emptied and Santoro stood back, hands on hips, watching Cooper. Just a couple of months ago this would have broken any one of us. We would have collapsed and the DIs would have walked away, disgusted by our inability to handle the work. But Cooper kept going. He stood up and bent down at an ever more furious pace.

Santoro smiled and walked away into the office. Cooper didn't look up—he just kept going.

Santoro yelled out, "Cease, Cooper, you're goddamned done. Hit the shower."

We helped drenched and smelly Cooper to his feet and steadied him with a slap on the back as he limped into the bathroom to clean up.

He made a mistake but survived that intense surprise attack beautifully. Even though we were moving on soon, the platoon was still a unit. Had he faltered, there wasn't a person in that room who wouldn't have jumped in and grabbed him, comforted him, and volunteered to take his place and resume his punishment.

I finished dressing for the inspection. I ran my hand over the single red stripe the tailors had sewn on my sleeve designating me as a Private First Class, reliving the promotion in my mind as I tucked in my shirt. I carefully indented the sides of the shirrtails, squaring them off the way I'd noticed Santoro did. The tucks made his shirt fit extra snug. He still scared the shit out of me, and we might never have much in common, but he was still my ideal Marine.

I turned stiffly to Pritchett for a final check. We pulled Irish pennant strings off our uniforms like monkeys grooming each other.

We didn't run out of the squad bay like we usually did, but carefully walked, giving each other space so no one stepped on another's highly

polished shoes. We held our perfectly clean rifles away from us as if we were rushing them into surgery.

Standing at attention, I heard the inspecting officer coming down the line toward me. I bent my knees so I wouldn't pass out—I was being tested on three months of training, and I would not end this in a girly faint.

Earlier that morning, as we ironed our shirts and polished our shoes, McKinnon came in without his Smokey-the-Bear hat on and gave one of his fatherly lectures. He wanted us to use our training and represent our DIs well.

“When that officer comes down the line, try not to fuck up all the training I’ve done. Believe it or not, you are a direct representation of my work, and I have to trust you and let you fly. I can still reach out and knock you the fuck down, privates. You’re still my property.” He yanked a handkerchief from me and rubbed my belt buckle.

“And don’t touch your belt buckles right before you fall out—you finger-fuck the brass. Jesus Christ, I might have to fight alongside you one day, and you need to keep your shit squared away.”

He was a proud man, proud of himself and us. And he had to let us go. His job was to raise us. In his early speech about him being our entire family, he saw this moment in our future. If we weren't able to fly from his nest, he couldn't pluck a feather from our tail as we flew away to add to his hat. I hoped not only to feel as proud as he was, but also to find something in my life I'd be proud of as well.

My heart pounded as the inspecting officer slid in front of me. He was about six feet four inches tall. I had to keep my eyes straight ahead, so I immediately knew any answers I'd give him would be addressed to his neck. He was older than our DIs, maybe fifty. That meant he'd served in the Marines a long time and knew his shit. I felt I would do well as long as he didn't ask me the difference between heat exhaustion and heat stroke. I snapped to attention and pulled my rifle across my chest. I was ready for him to challenge me when he grabbed my rifle. He took it, but not too roughly. He lifted it up to see how clean it was while he asked where I was from—as if we were at a cocktail party. He asked me the chain of command, and midway through my fascinating recitation he handed my rifle back to me, thanked me, and moved on.

I took a breath and moved back to parade rest. I'd waited for that interaction and for three months. “If this is what being prepared feels like,”

I thought, “sign me up for more of that.”

All three of our DIs had started training other platoons, since we were phasing out. Although one of them was always on duty, in our last few days they breezed in and out. They actually could trust us; we were a stable society—discordant at moments but able to put one foot in front of the other unsupervised.

After the inspection, we sat on our footlockers, facing the center of the room. McKinnon held a clipboard and found each of our names and called out the military occupational specialty we had been assigned. Our MOS request had been compared to our aptitude, and then we were assigned to the department where we were needed. Most of the guys were going to infantry training school to be the backbone of the Corps, the grunts. McKinnon barked out each recruit’s name and the code number for his new job: “Jhimchek, 0311. Oorah.” The platoon echoed, “Oorah.” Jhimchek would also be a grunt.

He got to me. “Cope, 2512, field wireman.” I looked up like he must have the wrong guy.

“Field wireman?” said McKinnon. “Cope, you gonna be climbing telephone poles.”

When I signed up, my recruiter had explained to me that I was applying for a job with the Marine Corps and that I needed to pick an intended specialty in advance. I remembered scanning down the list of possibilities, like electrician and mechanic, and thinking that I wasn’t qualified for or interested in any of them. But I had to pick one; I was part of the we that ran the Corps. Since I was studying communications in college, and my stepfather was in the radio station business, I checked the box next to communications.

I had no idea about climbing telephone poles; that sounded bizarre. Santoro must have noticed I was lost, so he needled in, “Field fucking wiremen establish communication in battle. They run the fucking wires in the goddamn field.”

Hutchins piped in. “First to get their ass shot by the enemy. Climbing those fucking poles.”

I wondered what Hutchins’s MOS had been. He’d boasted of his entrance test scores being a lofty sixty-seven, which is just above idiot and slightly below toaster.

When the day came to turn in our rifles, I stood in the single-file line outside the armory, already not missing the hot sun. As I stepped in front of the cage where the Marine stood, I saw the same racks of M16s lined up behind him. They no longer looked like a monstrous mass of metal. I understood them. It was like looking at a complicated painting and finally seeing the subtle elements the artist had intended that I see all along.

The rifle that had become a comfortable extension of my arm slipped off and felt almost weightless as I held it out to the Marine. My eyes met his eyes without a flinch.

A weak, doubtful arm would have taken that rifle three months earlier, but a strong, solid arm gave it back.

On the night before graduation, all three DIs came in the squad bay, Santoro bearing a dress blues uniform high above his head. McKinnon took time to walk the squad bay, stopping to talk to most recruits about something they'd done well—or really fucked up. He rubbed Johns's face to check his shave. He looked at Bowman and said he was proud not to call him fatbody. Some he still had no hope for. He looked up at super-tall Private Tree: "I'm gonna be glad not to have to bend my neck back to look at you."

McKinnon grabbed the dress blues Santoro was holding and assumed his place on the quarterdeck, flanked by Hutchins and Santoro. He called Dale's name and ordered him to the quarterdeck. Dale ran up and locked himself at attention.

"Sir, Private Thornley reporting as ordered, sir!"

"No screaming eagle shit," said McKinnon. They stood there, the exact same height, eyes locked. McKinnon presented Dale with the uniform.

"Ain't your dad a goddamned Master Gunnery Sergeant, boy?"

Dale responded, "Sir, yes, sir!"

In the Corps, that rank is roughly equivalent to Jesus.

"Now he won't have to hang his head in shame." Hutchins said.

Santoro couldn't have been happy with Marks's loss, so his congratulations seemed weak. "I can see myself in your goddamn shiny boots."

Dale was dismissed. He took his place on line, staring straight ahead with his own private thoughts, holding his trophy. Three months of hard work with the goal to achieve exactly this had paid off. He respected that moment I knew that, in fact, Dale set his eye on the prize and had every intention of

winning. I had to remember that in helping me gain weight, he'd entered boot camp heavier than he wanted. He overcame his burden.

Dale's parents were flying in to watch graduation, and I was glad that his dad would see him in his dress blues. I knew it would thrill them to watch their son graduate. They put a lot of pressure on him to excel, and maybe this stellar achievement would make them permanently happy. He was literally following in his father's boot steps, but kicking it up a notch by earning the top spot. His father accomplished a glorious military record, but he wasn't Honor Man.

But that's not how pressure works; it shouldn't let up completely. I hadn't invited my family, just in case I didn't make it. But that's not the only reason. I simply didn't care if my mom saw me graduate. I hadn't been raised with pressure; I was perfectly happy graduating unwitnessed. When I graduated high school at sixteen, that ceremony was, in fact, almost missed by my mother. I'd thrown a fit, insisting that she attend, and I decided not to throw another one. Now that I was a Marine and had been trained to throw a grenade with my tantrums, I decided I could save my fits for more important causes. This day was for me.

That last night at Parris Island was exciting because it was our last goddamned night at Parris Island. Even though everyone was heading off to other training, it was away from here. I was ready to sleep just to rush the next sunrise, like a kid willingly going to bed early the night before Christmas.

Santoro sauntered in after lights out as he'd done before, his normally hard-charged walk slowed by what appeared to be a few beers. This was an unofficial visit; he just felt like hanging out it seemed. I liked drunk Santoro, buzzed just less than his hair.

Santoro walked around the dark squad bay for a few minutes without speaking. The moon shone in, and as he passed my rack I saw he was in his dress uniform.

"You know, privates, you might face situations in the Corps where you know you're right and others are wrong, and that is a fucked up situation. It's how you handle yourselves in these times that shows what kind of man you are."

His speech flew in broad circles like an eagle surveying for the best landing spot.

“The Marine Corps is my pride and joy. I’d fight to the death for any one of you.”

I followed him with my eyes, my head turning on my pillow. He stopped on the quarterdeck and faced the center of the squad bay. His somber tone rang through the room. I loved his commitment. Any success I had in my own training could be linked to his hard work and faith.

He continued, “I picked up my next platoon, and they’re the raggediest idiots ever to straggle through these fucking gates. Wish me luck, assholes. I’d like to take you over there and hold you up—some of you are fucking outstanding representations of my work.” His raspy voice got quiet, which made some words crackle and break up.

His speech made me realize that he liked us. As unpredictable as he was, he cared. I ran the movie montage in my head—starting when he jumped in my face, then transitioning to the track where he taught me a breathing rhythm, smash cut to the time he’d hit Dale, then insert his quick wink when I did well, building to this crescendo moment, spotlight showcasing him in the dark with his captive audience. Out of chaos I’d gained sympathy for Santoro and understood him. I knew he’d made me a better man, so he could help anyone. The Marine Corps was his life and they were lucky to have him.

“No matter what happens to you out there in the Corps, in the civilian world, I will always be with you, privates.” He wasn’t that slurring uncle cornering me in the kitchen with a my-mother-never-loved-me speech—Santoro’s words were true.

“Whatever challenge you have the good fortune of conquering,” he continued, “go for it. You’ve got the power. Fuck ‘em with the whole dick.”

He looked right at me, or it felt like he did. I left my head turned to the side and watched him. I wanted to reassure him; I was the adult and he was the kid. I guess that’s effective training. In a second he turned and walked out.

He intended to put his stamp on my brain that first moment he flashed in front of my eyes and demanded that I change their color. I planned on keeping every memory close. No one could ever make me feel more terrified than he did, and there’s a lifetime of comfort in that sensory recall. If you think you’re tough, come up and give me your best shot—I’ll let you know your score.

His reflective share left me awake. Boot camp isolated me from anything familiar, giving me time to separate thoughts and events and put them into a meaningful perspective. Like a prison sentence must. I'd accomplished more than just passing time. Every step I took when I didn't believe I could was by my own initiative. Seventy peers and three screaming DIs is a support system I wish on everyone.

When we woke up graduation morning and stood on line, just as we always did, the DIs threw our brown paper bags full of civilian clothes at us. I opened the bag and felt no connection to the contents. I didn't even want the clothes, but I stuffed them in my sea bag with my uniforms and locked the bag closed with the padlock from my former rifle. We quietly slipped on our service uniforms and marched to our final meal at the chow hall.

I enjoyed that last breakfast. It tasted deliciously horrible.

The march back to the squad bay was solemn. Boot camp was ending, and with any end, whether joyous or sad, there should be respect. Time wasn't set aside to say goodbyes. I took Pritchett's number on a piece of paper but knew I'd never call him. We held the paper and looked at each other for a solid minute, as if memorizing the moment. My wish for him was that he not go AWOL and complicate his life.

I wandered through the platoon, purposely looking at each recruit, as if I were invisible and none of this were real. This was my family, and I was losing it. Old memories of leaving friends whenever I moved away crept up my spine in a tingling flash. When I'd leave a school for the last time, I always walked down the hallway consciously shutting the sounds and sights away from me. As I left, the lockers, doorways, and students blurred into a cushion of denial that I used to create an ability to disconnect quickly and, hopefully, not feel sad about leaving again.

Spending the past months with these guys had turned them into more than friends. I hadn't chosen them; in that sense, they were just like a real family. I hated and loved them and I cared about them. But once again I was leaving. If at some point during training I anticipated the day I'd be away from these recruits/friends, and if I wished it were soon, I didn't also remember that it was painful to separate.

The military might have been processing my platoon out, but I was also mentally processing the military out. This world was temporary, and this squad bay was all I knew. It was ending in another move.

The life was draining out of the squad bay as everyone packed up his belongings. I passed Bowman and didn't see a frightened fatbody. I saw a brave fit man. I saw another version of me. My line of sight was filled by Jhimchek's perfect chest barely contained by his white T-shirt. He wrapped me into a muscled hug; half of those muscles belonged to me. Cooper's huge, proud smile caught my eye and I flashed a matching smile back. Marks reached up and punched me in the arm on my Private First Class stripe; I punched him back on his.

Being gay in the military was still illegal. I'd worried from the start that my sexuality would be discovered, but it wasn't—at least not that anyone openly shared. That internal fear had been superseded by the struggle to survive boot camp. I did, and I was still me. Still gay. If ten percent of men are gay, then I really am one of the few and the proud.

I wanted to believe that it wouldn't matter to these men I'd served with, trained next to—that I'd proven myself to be as much a man as they were and that my sexuality didn't matter. If any of my fellow recruits had a problem with me, they never told me. Perhaps they were too busy doing the same things I was doing—surviving.

Santoro crossed the quarterdeck and ducked into the office. He looked smaller, less scary. I realized I wouldn't see him tomorrow or ever again, and I wanted to.

As I stuffed the last of my gear into my duffel bag, familiar abandonment emotions from my countless childhood moves marched into my head. But now they didn't hurt. A fresh realization hit me as if I'd figured out a math problem. I was leaving this place like I'd left every home, but in fact, I'd never left anything or anyone behind. I'd always taken it all with me; I still have it now.

If I miss something, I can conjure up thrilling memories. If I've forgotten something, I'll never know.

I entered the Marines on a lie. I was scattered and fragile. The Corps stripped everything away from me, scared anything unnecessary out of me, and then built me back up. They taught me to respect what's important, including myself. We are our best equipment. I have the right to be proud. From day one, I had a primal fear. In the end, the Marines made me strong.

Fears and anxiety over acceptance still swirl in my head; however, I walk into every room and situation with the bearing I learned in the Marine

Corps. I stumble, but I remember that forced march. I remember everything my DIs drilled into my head—and I get back up and fucking begin.

I grabbed my sea bag, slung it over my shoulder and headed out of the squad bay. I saw others do what I did—turn and look back at that long room. My mattress was rolled up at the foot of my rack, the lid to my footlocker propped open just as I had found it. Any evidence that we had been there was gone. I never thought of the recruits in that squad bay who came before me; there wasn't time, and they had left no evidence of their life for me. The next batch sleeping there would look just like me, maybe have the same feelings I had, but wouldn't know I'd been there, either.

As we started marching away, carrying my sea bag was different than that first day after uniform issue. I guess because now I understood the contents, the uniforms felt like mine, and I was stronger. Rather than dragging the bag like dead weight, we hoisted them up on our shoulders. One good shift and mine balanced pretty well. Our necks all leaned to the side to accommodate for the duffel. Our lean was uniform; we silently applied sharpness to everything. The march was solemn. When we arrived to the parade deck—that wide, asphalt field we'd drilled on for countless hours, it didn't look so forlorn to me. It was my last day on it and I'd not miss spending time on it. We dropped our sea bags near the parade deck and, as we marched on alongside dozens of other platoons graduating, I expertly performed reconnaissance on the reviewing stands filled with Marines and civilian families.

The stands were stuffed with both uniformed officers and enlisted men, all with perma-pride tattooed on their faces. Their chests were full of bright medals and badges of honor. The brilliant sun bounced off the officers' metal rank insignias, sending glints of shiny importance bouncing out like paparazzi camera flashes.

I was witnessing history and tradition. And so were they.

Marks still lead our platoon, carrying the platoon pennant, the guidon. But today, he seemed more like he was announcing Dale, our Honor Man, in his brilliant dress blues who marched behind him.

McKinnon had a shiny new accessory. He carried a long, wide, beautiful chrome sword by his side. He held it pointed low to the ground. As we walked onto the field, he started quietly humming the Marine Corps hymn. Within seconds, Santoro and Hutchins, and then the entire platoon, joined in, sending us off with an impromptu buzz through the air that announced

our arrival onto the parade deck. Out of the corner of my eye I saw other platoons marching on and some marching off. Tiny packs of tight Marines smoothly moving on the vast area as if mechanized. I joined the group hum.

From the halls of Montezuma

To the shores of Tripoli . . .

We fell silent as we were paraded by the reviewing stands; I stood taller. I wanted the reviewing officers to see that my DIs had done well. I planned on representing them proudly. Suddenly McKinnon brandished his sword straight out in front of his body and held it there as he ordered “Eyes, right!” Our heads snapped in one swift move to face the stands. His “Eyes, front!” snapped them back. His sword lowered slowly as we marched off the field. Even in the blistering sun, a blast of chills exploded through my entire body from deep inside my chest. I know that every swinging dick in my platoon felt it too.

McKinnon ordered us to a halt. He paused. And then he slowly reviewed the entire platoon, from the left to the right. His head returned to the center. He raised his sword high above his head in a fast strike at the sky—swift, silent, deadly—then with the same speed, he slipped it down into the scabbard strapped to his waist. He lifted his hand to his hat in the sharp salute that had been my first model.

“Marines dismissed!” He’d accomplished his mission, I figured. He had to have been happy, if for nothing else, we were off his hands. I bet he was proud of us; he made us.

I’d walked onto that field a recruit. Now I was a Marine. No achievement had ever made me feel different, much less proud, but this did. Marine was a real title. Had I received a phone call informing me that I was now also a prince, it wouldn’t have been as meaningful or impressive. Don’t get me wrong—I’d totally appreciate the prince thing, but I’d hyphenate it with my Marine rank.

Our four squads of long rows of men had been held together so long that there was a second before we obeyed his order to dismiss. Then, perfect platoon formation burst into instant chaos. Our eight-inch long, green piss-cutter hats sprayed into the air like bullets. We all bounced around like olive-green pogo sticks, hugging each other and screaming “Oorah!” I grabbed guys I really hadn’t gotten to know well by both shoulders. Our locking eyes instantly told me that I knew them extremely well regardless and never would forget our time in boot camp. I swam through that

boisterous sea of green, pulling past one Marine after another, ducking under waves of arms and loving the back slaps. I found jumpy Pritchett and hugged him tight. His dick was probably pointing like a divining rod toward his beloved wife.

Dale propelled himself toward me. Our hug muted the swirling platoon into the background. I pulled back to see his eyes, my vision blurred from welling tears. The pride we felt from just surviving equaled the cold, hard rush from the realization that we had successfully completed the training. His smile didn't ease as his tears began, and we moved back to the closed embrace.

Summer camp was over. Our inseparable cluster of a platoon scattered into fragments in seconds. All of our training had an underlying understanding that important things can end—a problem, a duty station, a life, a country.

Dale and I found his parents. They hugged him and then me. His mom pulled away to look at me, said nothing, smiling as she shook her head. I imagined they were surprised. I watched Dale look at his dad, and his dad look at Dale. Even though Dale and I went through Parris Island twenty years after his father, I knew they'd have a new level of respect for each other—there are timeless elements of Marine training. As we walked four across down the main street, his dad pointed to the buildings he remembered; we filled him in on the new ones.

Dale's mom leaned her head out and peered over at me. "I never thought I'd see you alive again."

I was glad she didn't tell me that three months ago.

As we headed to the base exit I scanned the expanse of the black parade deck. I wanted to take in the entire base. I looked as far to my right as I could see, then slowly moved my head to the left. From trees to the scattered Marines, at first everything looked green. But the bright blue sky was close. The vibrant buildings all focused in my view as if I were now able to appreciate the colors for the first time.

We walked along the sidewalk, away from any boot camp activities we had to be part of. I heard Hutchins nearby, screeching at his new platoon, yelling the exact same words he'd slung at us on our first day.

"Take a good look, privates. Those recruits graduated, which is more than I can say for most of you dumb shits." I was relieved I no longer had to sort through Hutchins's vast mind field for little bombs of logic.

The last sight I saw on Parris Island was Santoro. He walked toward us. He saw Dale's dad, who had proudly squeezed into his uniform for the first time in a long time, he told us. His rank insignia took up most of his upper sleeve, as the highest enlisted rank should—three stripes up, four stripes down, with a bursting bomb in the center. It was impressive to say the least.

Santoro raised his arm in a salute out of awe and respect, even though you don't salute an enlisted man. After a moment he shifted his head in my direction. His eye caught mine, and he maintained the salute. I returned the tribute. It felt amazing. The man that I held in the highest regard held me in—well, at least enough regard to salute me.

We lowered our arms in unison and turned on our heels away from each other. I walked out of Parris Island with nothing but love and a canvas bag of uniforms, and no need to look back.

In ten days I'd be on Camp Lejeune, standing in front of my commanding officer, making a logical case about why I was refusing to climb a creosote-slathered telephone pole at field wireman school. In two years, I'd accept the Marine Corps' invitation to become an officer. I'd complete Officer Candidates School—which splits its basic training into two arduous summers—thus effectively enduring boot camp three times. That's a lot of sea bag drags. I would decide not to go to law school and serve in the Marine's Judge Advocate General Corps as a military attorney, but instead move to New York to act and write. First, I'd finish my six-year commitment as an enlisted man, rather than as an officer. I would earn three more meritorious promotions, achieving the final rank of sergeant.

The camaraderie built in boot camp isn't limited to those who shared my platoon. Today, if I should see a Marine across the room, he might take in my general appearance, from my fabulous clothes to my shoulder-length hair to my designer eyeglasses and think of me as a man he wouldn't associate with. However, if we have the chance to speak, within two minutes we will find a commonality that he might not have expected, and any negative, judgmental first impression will be replaced by a sense of kinship, of family. I'll extend my hand, and we'll quickly run through a qualification process like fraternity brothers. We'll mention where we trained—Parris Island or San Diego—then the year, then the month, then our platoon number, then any wild, crazy shit that happened. More than one shared experience will float to the top of that conversation. His sideways glance will straighten so our eyes can meet and find ready compassion.

Maybe I don't look like the Marine on a recruitment poster. But I am one, inside. When McKinnon told my platoon on the first day of boot camp that we were all family, I didn't realize that he was right. I may have even rolled my eyes a little. And yet the Marines would supply all the connection and stability I was missing in my life. I'd abandoned my boring, unaccomplished life back home and now had camouflaged it—with actual camouflage—and was returning to a brighter future. I needed everything the Marines offered me, and I marched through hell to earn it. And after all that, I earned something else: my own self-acceptance. Who would have thought that I'd have found that in an organization that technically forbade my lifestyle? No one can ever take that away from me.

Once a Marine, always a Marine.

Semper Fidelis.

Acknowledgements

Many others have ink on their hands from helping me write this book.

I'm grateful to the United States Marine Corps. They took a chance on me; otherwise I'd have no story. I used their lessons on endurance to force my fingers to push forward and complete the process.

Thank you Meek and Miyako Kiker thank you for every kindness and inspiration.

To my agent, Susan Finesman, for knowing where to go and how to get there. My champion Court Stroud helped her by pushing this book into a publisher's hands.

Thank you to Jane Friedman for even taking my call. You schooled me on this book's publishing realities and recommended your copy editor, Nicole Klungle.

From the moment I recruited Nicole Klungle, she pulled on my boots and marched in my voice. She tamed my jungle maze of stories into an orderly menagerie. She's a darling, darling killer that writed every wrong. Her generous insight and advice came with a side of compassion. Nicole shape-shifted from editor to friend.

Thank you Eve Brandstein, Vicki Abelson, Beth Lapidés and Greg Walloch for letting me perform pages on your stages. Julia Huey, thanks for your coverage. Thank you Jessica Bendinger for inspiring me to put the "I" in write. Thank you Jason Storey for your design.

I owe book coach Greg Miller. When I stalled, he waited. When he asked me which is more important, "having a life or writing a book," it made me go after both. He led me to my agent. Thank you, Nancy Wayne, for your thoughtful notes.

I needed your fantastic support Sean Wrather, Tim Quinn, Jack Campbell, D. Neil Lipsky, Kelly Hommon, Jeff Stettin, Scott Silverman, Daniel Gamino, Wendy Wray Miller, Marisa Ignacio Hormel, Phil Tremo, Justin Casio, Kathryn Tague, Don Carroll, Court Stroud, and Tom Landry.

Mark E Pollack, Norman Lear, Ron Burla, Bob Underwood, David Youse, Nancylee Myatt and Richard Weitz for your unceasing professional guidance—and calling me Sergeant for twenty plus years.

Thank you to Jerri Bell and Brian Mockenhaupt. To Veterans Writing Project and Military Experience and the Arts for your inclusion of my stories. And to The Good Men Project and Huffington Post.

Thank you Jeff Janger and Rachel Davidson for asking me to reveal more. I'm astonished by your energy, brains and love.

Sean Dwyer, thank you for the twenty three-year loan of your flawless mind. You stuck my linear story in a blender and whipped up an exotic smoothie. I love your strength and dedication.

I'm grateful to my grandfather, Guy Barclay, for showing me what storytelling looked like.

Thank you my forever star Taylor Negron for still sending me encouraging notes.

Thanks to Ben Lear for listening to these stories as a kid, then sparking the image for the book's cover as an adult.

I'm thankful for the support of Lyn Lear, Lexi Warren, Caitlin Kiker, Courtney Walden Rawson, Brianna Lear, Elizabeth Cullen, Mary Ann Williamson, Pam Williams, Kendall Clark, Madeline Lear, Addison Kiker and Laura Thornley Kiker. You make my life splendid. Watching you all use your bright minds assures me that the world has a wonderful future.

You said I could, Cathie Shaw. I should have known you were right.

Thank you, Mother, for taking left turns when the signs said right. You create beauty, even in rapidly changing environments.

To my brilliant brothers. Bradley, I told you if you wrote me in boot camp I'd never forget it. Thank you for those letters then, and for your edit help to get this book all proper. Clay, thanks for letting me live past my fear of dying at the dinner table from choking on laughter. I hold both of you high, as life's sterling examples of gentlemen. And Timothy you are not forgotten.

Bob, you wanted me to tell this story to others. Probably to make me stop talking. You've witnessed me weave dark colors into lighter parts of my life's fabric, and I'm amazed that you love the resulting shirt. I can never be as honest and good as you are, but your example inspires me. The Marines taught me to aim high; you helped me pull the trigger.

To Dale, that kid I met on the bus when we were thirteen: Thank you for never getting off our ride. Your friendship is my greatest blessing. If you want to know about tolerance and acceptance—don't ask me. Ask Dale.

For everyone ever seated next to me at dinner that told me “write that book” after hearing a story, I heard you.

Thank you.

About the Author



PHOTOGRAPH: BADER HOWAR

Author, blogger, and television writer Greg Cope White is a former sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps. He has a long history in film and television production. His writing credits include HBO's *Dream On*, Norman Lear's *The Powers That Be* and *704 Hauser*, Fox's *Life with Louie*, Sony's animated series *Jumanji*, and Disney's *Social Studies*. He appears on Cooking Channel's *Unique Sweets*. He's a sixth generation Texan now living in Los Angeles.



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