

MIKE DICHRISTINA

1001 Ways to Die

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Johnny Knox lay in the top bunk listening to “Mystery Theater” on his transistor radio—the episode where a disembodied hand spiders its way around the world seeking vengeance—when someone scratched the screen of the bedroom window. Johnny looked at his fluorescent wristwatch: 2:57 AM. He turned off the radio and shined his Boy Scout flashlight, illuminating his older brother Brian standing outside in the weedy flowerbed, pressing his nose into the screen.

“Who goes there?” said Johnny.

“What are you doing up?” Brian said, softly enough not to wake their parents in the next room. It was Brian’s last night: In a few hours, he’d be taking a bus to Parris Island and the Marines.

“What’s the password?” said Johnny.

“Sweet you waited up for me.”

“Password, please?”

“You’re dead meat,” said Brian.

Johnny turned off the flashlight. Wearing nothing but his tighty-whities, he climbed down and leaned on the windowsill, staring at Brian through the screen, their faces inches apart. A gibbous moon silhouetted the dead apple tree in the middle of the backyard. Cicadas thrummed in the darkness.

Brian’s left eye was swollen shut. A large stain, black in the moonlight, soiled his t-shirt.

“Whoa,” said Johnny, “Who kicked your behind?”

“Open up.”

“Tess didn’t do that to you, did she?”

“Don’t push it, Johnny.” Brian jabbed a finger through a hole in the screen, nearly poking out one of Johnny’s eyeballs.

Johnny pulled up the screen and helped Brian through the window. The knuckles of Brian’s right hand were bloody. He smelled of onions and weed and beer and sweat. Brian was a big guy, a football player—one of those guys whose shoulder-length brown hair cascaded out of his helmet as he galloped down the sideline, shedding tacklers. Next week, Brian would be wearing a new kind of helmet—minus the hair.

Johnny sat on the windowsill, shining his flashlight on Brian as he kicked off his work boots and took off his t-shirt and jeans before rolling into the lower bunk.

“What’re you looking at?” said Brian.

“Not much,” said Johnny, “Who’d you fight?”

“Punched a mirror.”

“In the face?”

“Why you so worried about me?” Brian said, kneading his right hand.

“I’m not worried about you,” said Johnny. He stood up. “You want some ice for that ugly mug of yours?”

Brian touched his eye. “Ice sounds good,” he said, “and a brew, too.”

“You know the old man counts his beers.”

“Blame it on me,” said Brian.

“I will,” Johnny said, as he opened the bedroom door.

Johnny slipped down the hallway to the kitchen and pulled out a tray of ice cubes from the freezer. As quietly as possible, he cracked it open and put a handful of cubes in a kitchen towel. He grabbed a couple Black Labels out of the refrigerator and rummaged around in the utensil drawer before he found the bottle opener. He opened the bottles and shoved the bottle caps deep into the kitchen garbage can.

Back in the bedroom, Johnny placed the towel of ice on the night table and handed a beer to Brian, who held it against the side of his face. Johnny climbed up to the top bunk with the other beer and took a long pull while lying on his back, most of the beer coming out through his nose.

“You okay up there, big guy?” said Brian.

Johnny rolled over to look down at Brian. His brother lay on his back in the moonlight, one hand behind his head, his body white marble. Brian sipped his beer from the corner of his mouth.

“What happened tonight?” said Johnny.

“Osborne.”

“Again?”

Osborne was the crew chief down on the onion farm where Brian had worked all summer since graduating from high school. The muck, they called it, rich black soil as far as you could see. Only a couple of years older than Brian, Osborne was a bull of a guy who took no crap from the high school kids he hired to weed the mile-long onion fields during the humid summers.

“Just Osborne’s way of saying goodbye,” said Brian. “I didn’t know you cared so much about me.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Bri—I don’t give a shit about you,” said Johnny, “I’m glad you’re finally out of here.”

“You think I’m gonna die over there in Nam?” said Brian.

“Well, I hope you die.”

“How?” said Brian.

“How what?”

“How am I gonna die?”

“How the fuck should I know?” said Johnny.

Brian and Johnny had done this almost every night since Brian’s draft number had been called earlier that summer. The unspoken deal was that any of the Vietnam death scenarios Johnny dreamed up would never come true.

“Get your butt down here, soldier.” Brian kicked the plywood board beneath the top bunk. Something cracked and Johnny’s mattress sagged.

“You’re gonna break the bunk,” said Johnny.

“Then get your behind down here.”

Johnny climbed down the ladder with his flashlight in his mouth, his beer in one hand. He sat at the foot of Brian’s mattress and shined the flashlight on Brian’s underwear.

“Talk,” Brian said, kicking the flashlight out of Johnny’s hands. The light spun across the floor, coming to rest by the dresser. Johnny went over and picked it up, then lay down on the scratchy shag throw rug in the middle of the room. He shined the flashlight on the water-stained ceiling.

“I’m out of ideas,” said Johnny.

Brian said nothing. Johnny shined the flashlight into his brother’s face, his injured eye purple and blue and red in the garish light, the other eye closed.

“Okay,” said Johnny, “A nuclear bomb. Boom. You’re all dead.”

Brian opened up his good eye. “Uncle Ho doesn’t have the bomb,” he said. “Try again.”

Johnny sat up, holding the flashlight to his chest, pointing the light up to his chin to create eerie shadows on his face. “You step into a hole, a booby trap—punji sticks,” he said.

“Ouch.”

“Sticks go right through your foot. You’re screaming. You can’t get out. The sides of the hole are lined with downward pointing sticks, so when you try to pull up, they gouge into your calf. The pain is excruciating. You scream for Ma.”

Johnny stood up and planted one leg on the floor to demonstrate.

“Mama,” said Johnny as he spun around, keeping his foot in one place.

Brian rolled over on one elbow. “Good stuff,” he said. He picked up his pants from the floor and fumbled around in the pockets for his lighter and a doobie. He lit the doobie and took a long drag.

“It’s an ambush,” said Johnny, “Your buddies don’t run, but one by one they get gunned down. You can’t move—you’re stuck in the hole—otherwise you’d be running because you’re a pussy. You shoot up the place, but you run out of ammo.”

Johnny used the flashlight as a machine gun, spinning around crazily, clicking the light on and off.

“Then a bad guy materializes in front of you and slices your guts with a sword.” Johnny ran the flashlight across his bare stomach.

“Not a bad guy—VC,” said Brian.

“A little Vietnamese peasant girl dressed in black pajamas slices your guts with a sword. Your hands are slick with blood. Big ropes of your intestines tumble out onto the ground.”

He fell to the floor.

“You scream for Ma, but it’s too late. Blood comes spurting out of your mouth.”

Johnny stuck the flashlight in his mouth, his cheeks glowing pink, then took it out.

“Fade to black,” said Johnny. He expired, the flashlight illuminating his face, contorted in agony. He stood up and bowed before plopping back onto the lower bunk at his brother’s feet.

“Excellent, but I wouldn’t scream,” said Brian. He blew smoke into Johnny’s face. “Another one,” he said.

“Tunnel.”

“Where?”

“Underground,” said Johnny.

“Fuck you.”

A large moth batted against the window screen, then settled down, spreading its silhouetted wings against the mesh.

“Okay. It’s a jungle. A ravine. You’re on patrol. It’s getting dark. You walk by a boulder and you feel a cool breeze, you smell meat cooking. You know the VC are in the tunnel eating dinner. There’s a crevice behind the boulder, barely big enough for your big old head. You draw sticks with your buddies and you get the short one.”

“I’m too big,” said Brian.

“You whine as usual, but you lost. You gotta go in. You take off your helmet. They tie a rope to your boot so they can pull you out if something goes bad.”

“We’re fucking smart.”

“You got a revolver in one hand, a flashlight in the other, and you wriggle into the tunnel. The tunnel goes straight for fifty feet. You smell the meat—chicken. It smells good, like Kentucky Fried Chicken. You think of Tess. You think of Thanksgiving and your little bro. You think of mashed potatoes and gravy and cranberry sauce. You wish you weren’t in a fucking tunnel twelve thousand miles away from home. You start to cry.”

“Is it that far?”

Johnny said, “You come to a fork in the tunnel.”

“Thought they used chopsticks,” said Brian. He stuck his feet onto Johnny’s lap and Johnny slapped them away.

“You sniff down one and then the other to see where the roast chicken aroma is coming from. One tunnel looks dusty, unused.”

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood.”

“And you take the wrong one. To the left. There’s a booby trap—a wire across the tunnel attached to a bomb. You trip it with your big nose. You have a second to realize you fucked up and then, boom, you’re blown to smithereens, and I get the lower bunk.”

Brian didn’t say anything. He sucked in another lungful of smoke, the burning end of his roach glowing orange for a second and then going dark red.

“What about the rope?” said Brian.

“What rope?”

“The rope they got tied around my boot.”

“That’s the coolest part,” said Johnny, standing up and pacing back and forth across the room. “Your buddies frantically pull on the rope and finally they see your boot, but the only thing it’s attached to is your leg, just the bloody stump of your leg.”

“Do they go in and get the rest of me?” said Brian.

Johnny turned. “Fuck that. They never liked you that much. They throw a few grenades into the tunnel and call it a day. They wrap your leg in a tarp and put it on a chopper. At the base, they cut up a pair of dress pants from an amputee and slip it over your leg before sticking it in a coffin and shipping it home.”

“Which leg is it?” said Brian. He reached down and rubbed his thighs.

“How the fuck should I know? The leg arrives on a dark rainy night in January and they drop it off at O’Donnell’s. We have an open casket wake, everybody kneeling down to pray over your damn leg—even Tess and her new boyfriend, Osborne. Pops tries to get O’Donnell to give us a deal on the service since it’s only your leg we’re burying, but O’Donnell won’t budge on price, says people aren’t dying as often as they used to.”

“Asshole,” said Brian. He swallowed the last of his beer and rolled the bottle beneath his bunk.

“Who? O’Donnell?”

“Both of them,” said Brian.

“We bury your leg up at St. Dominics. A few people like Grandma stand around the grave crying like they’re gonna miss you.”

Johnny didn’t like that image of Brian’s leg in the coffin at O’Donnell’s. It gave him a bad feeling. “I’m tired of doing this,” he said.

“I’m not gonna get blown up in any VC tunnels,” said Brian, “Come on, tell me one more for the road.”

“No. I must have dreamed up a thousand ways for you to die.”

“One more.”

Johnny held out his hand and Brian passed him the joint. Johnny took a long hit and coughed, the stuff going straight to his head. He took another hit and then handed it back to Brian.

“I’ll let you use all my stuff while I’m gone,” said Brian.

“The lower bunk?” said Johnny without exhaling.

“Not the lower bunk. Bad luck. You can use the rest of my stuff, though.”

Johnny exhaled. “You don’t got any other stuff.”

“My books.” Brian pointed with the roach to a small shelf of books above the unused child’s desk in the corner of the room.

“Those are library books,” said Johnny.

“Not any more,” said Brian, “You can have my records, too.”

“Those are Tess’s.” Tess, Brian’s girlfriend, had been a frequent late night visitor in their room on Fairview Ct that summer, forcing Johnny to perfect feigning REM sleep while Brian and Tess wrestled in the bunk below him. Johnny had a

pair of Tess's flowery panties stained with a pinpoint drop of blood tucked under his pillow. Her father was the judge in town, as well as the village barber. She even had a Mustang, Tess had plenty of money. She wouldn't miss the albums.

"And my porn, too." Brian pulled out four or five well-thumbed Playboys from beneath his mattress.

"Those are Uncle Ed's," said Johnny. Brian and Johnny had found the magazines when they were cleaning out their uncle's basement after his heart exploded. Johnny had already jerked off his way through the stack a few times and was starting to get bored with the same old photos.

"I don't think Uncle Ed is missing them," said Brian.

"You don't have to give me jack shit. Maybe you should stay."

"Too late, Johnny Knox. The Marines will come get me. Throw me in the brig."

"Hide," said Johnny.

"Nowhere to hide."

"Run."

"Nowhere to run," said Brian.

"Sounds like a song," said Johnny, before climbing back up to the top bunk. He reached under his pillow and pulled Tess's panties over his face, his eyes peeking through the leg holes. Johnny breathed in what he believed to be the faint scent of pussy.

"You coming to the bus station tomorrow?" said Brian.

"No way. I don't give a shit about you," Johnny said through the panties. "I hope you die."

"How am I gonna die?" said Brian.

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