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“Panamax”

—from *Four Strings, Four Bullets*, a memoir in progress

FUN FACT: Panamax ships are built to the maximum dimensions that will fit through the locks of the Panama Canal. The dimensions of the lock chambers, and the depth of the water in the canal determine Panamax. Iowa Class battleships are the largest US warships able to lock through.

THERE WASN'T ENOUGH SKY VISIBLE in the narrow break of the canopy overhead to get a read on the weather, but it was rainy season and I could feel the first of two daily rains coming. Keiser, Wilson, and I rode from Panamá City to some isolated patch of jungle called Penonomé. The jungle, rooted in red clay banks taller than a man above the roadbed hemmed the roadway tightly on both sides. The tunnel of vegetation soaked with morning dew occasionally spat drops onto the windshield, which Keiser wiped away between hits on the bottles we were passing among us. We were outbound to help the base chaplain and a bunch of marines rebuild some part of some desperate orphanage, a schoolhouse. Actual boxers never look like Sylvester Stallone in *Rocky*, construction workers never look like actors on TV or in the movies, and none of us looked our part—missionaries or do-gooders. Keiser sang loud and out of key to Ted Nugent's menacing rock anthem “Stranglehold.”

“Nugent gets me so horny I have to dig holes in the damn jungle in my time off.” Keiser was happy to be driving, living, and drinking, to be in civilian clothes, and not our usual olive drab green utility fatigues, our pickle suits.

Wayne Keiser, my roommate at the barracks was a long-legged, barrel-chested plumber, with absolutely no ass. He cauliflowered our ears with how he didn’t want to advance past petty officer second class, that as long as there was a paycheck, booze, and hookers nearby everything was copasetic. Once at the Ancon Inn, a GI strip club, I heard the operator compliment and complain at 6:30 a.m. just before we cleared out and went to shower and then to work, “Wayne you are my best and worst customer. You come often, but Ai-yi-yi you stay so late. My wife thinks you are part dog.” That and Wayne’s 3’ x 5’ black velvet tapestry of three bulldogs playing cards earned him the nickname, “Dog.”

Wilson riffed in, “kin’-A. We got the Nugent without a reach-around.”

Larry Wilson was an African-American mountain of heart and work ethic. Unlike Keiser, Larry wanted to advance. Quietly and steady, his evaluations were good and he did solid work. When Larry played pool, it was Broadway and he was the star of a show called *9-Ball*. Not all folks got his deadpan humor, but he could make most people laugh, somehow.

As a team Keiser, Wilson and I worked together easily and usually caught the arduous or difficult jobs around the little Navy base at the mouth of the Canal. We got the jobs already screwed up by somebody else, or that the civilians in the public works department didn’t want. Where Chief Ewell usually stood, hands-on-hips, barking out comments and asking questions with the force of orders on most jobsites, he smoked, listened, and talked on ours.

“Pass it back here,” I said. It was about 9:00 a.m. Kessler’s tolerable when smoothed out with a little Coke, but nobody can drink Coke so early in the morning. I pulled deep on the jug.

Nugent foamed away within the eerie bass line, “Gonna cruise is a bitch now, baby. You know you can’t do me ’round. If your house gets in my way now, baby—gonna burn it down.”

“kin’-A! Uncle Ted means the business.” Keiser was trying to break up my growl.

Something was still wriggling inside my belly like a garter snake ball in the spring. I took a big drink. Whiskey warmed from the esophagus outward from the middle. My problems were still squirming, flailing around in the middle somewhere, but I imagined the movements were more sluggish. Kessler’s could take the edge off that squirming fuck-nest in there somewhere; at least it hadn’t let me down yet.

Further on up the road the navy chaplain and twenty-five marines, some senior NCOs, and a few officers and their wives rode in the air-conditioned charter bus. A couple marines followed the bus closely in an ancient haze-gray International Harvester flatbed with Navy markings. Our tools and materials rode on the old

warhorse. Even in their most accessible moments, the marines were a saturnine bunch. Marines could be a lot of fun to drink with early in a sociable moment. However, as a night passed on they usually would drift into their immediate clique, huddle up and talk their spooky shop. Sure, they would call a Navy SEABEE to help in a brawl against the Army Airborne Rangers, but they didn't really want to drink with Navy pussies. To the marines, SEABEEs were girly-men who didn't live and sweat 10K races, pushups, and inspections.

It was peacetime or the Cold War, however you wanted to look at it the SEABEEs were doing boring, dirty jobs—playing in the dirt with boards and concrete, sweating supply lists, broken down equipment, and cursing the rainy season. Old men and illegal aliens did that shit back home. SEABEEs didn't sport about in the new HUMVEES with the newest M16A2s and Berretta 9mms. The marines considered us, a bunch of dirty, sweaty old ladies. But they never seemed to mind when we showed up with supplies or heavy equipment to make their day a little easier.

Keiser cackled, “Chaplain isn't playing any cool shit on that bus. Those marines probably are listening to some of that Lee-Greenwood-I-heart-America-rah-rah shit.”

Wilson disagreed, “Naw, man, them whitebreads be singing Kum Bay Yah and shit.”

“Poor bastards, dry as a bone, just laying back and getting the word of the Lord mile after mile from the chaplain. I hope they at least get some shut-eye in that air-conditioning.” I said.

It had come to us like this: Months earlier the base chaplain had a similar “volunteer” mission go horribly awry. The job was to have been cleaning up some remote church, painting it and whatever else there was to be done at an isolated site somewhere in the interior. The personalities of a senior non-com and a junior officer came into conflict during a “volunteer church outing” in the jungle heat. It would seem that the “whole construction thing” was more complicated than it originally appeared. Limitations like no electricity and water were something they hadn't planned on encountering. There were disagreements over was to how to do the work. Eventually the excursion devolved into bickering and frustration. In the end, the Lord's work went undone, the USN didn't look so good in front of the indigenous nationals, and it was a big goose egg for the chaplain. The results were predictable. The chaplain complained to some senior officer. Some senior officer then called Chief Ewell, the Sea-Daddy of the fifteen or so SEABEEs assigned to Rodman's 50M department.

Just as the Chief Ewell got the call for “volunteer SEABEEs” on behalf of the chaplain's mission, he also caught Keiser drunk at work. Ewell threatened him with a demotion and loss of pay—then turned right around and gave Keiser a chance to

run this “volunteer” gig to atone for his sins against the Chief of Naval Operations. Keiser knew better than to kick or drag his feet, he was getting the better part of the deal.

Meanwhile that little church committee slammed into overdrive. Painting and minor repairs were not enough. There was a roof to rebuild, a playground to create, a kitchen to design and build. The job was beyond one good SEABEE so eventually Chief Ewell dragged Wilson in, then me, promising a break in the duty roster if we worked this gig. I wasn't particularly for or against the orphans, or churches, or driving to the end of civilization, or dealing with all the Panamanian Defense Forces or PDF regulars in between, but I damn sure didn't mind missing a few rounds of foot patrol duties in the rainy season.

Eventually Wilson took the roof activities, I took the playground construction, and Keiser was to handle the kitchen and float around assisting the other jobs. Keiser promised to handle anything related to the marines, and I would handle the overall strategy.

The day before H-Hour of our big “volunteer” mission Chief Ewell gathered us together and lit a cigarette and stared at the floor deciding how exactly he was going to send us into glory. We stood in a loose circle in his modest office attached to our barn-like shop just before we were to cut out and chow down.

“Guys, the chaplain wants this work done, done right, done on time, and with competence at all stops.” It was standard shit #13 generally titled “We got to consider the team image.” I realized he was sweating the profile on this job. I also remembered he was up for promotion to Senior Chief.

“The chaplain is in charge. If any static develops, any fucking static at all, I have the chaplain's word that he himself will make sure everybody cooperates with your plan. He will make sure everyone is reading all-sevens on the program, not you guys. If there is a problem, just talk it over with the chaplain. The Chief had pushed his finger in my chest.

“This is the closet thing you are ever going to get to a diplomatic mission. So fucking use diplomacy,” Ewell was tense and it showed. “Fucking use diplomacy. If you do not use diplomacy, I fucking guarantee you without any diplomacy at all, you will not be happy.” Nothing ever worked that easy, but it was the way to pitch it to us—with “diplomacy.” Keiser passed a bottle back.

My groan was two-fold: First: I could be out on the town, being a party gringo. I got enough construction in a day, and I'd rather be thinking beach, booze, and bikinis any chance I had. Second: Projects designed by vast committees of Navy engineers and architects were already challenging enough to be done, let alone be done correctly. So to find out a do-good, guitar-strumming, congregational committee was dreaming up this gig with no professionals in the mix caused me anxiety right away. Third: Stack that with a bunch of marines backed by their

non-coms and officers not really wanting to pitch a spade or a pick, and the project was likely to become a church social. I feared that we would make this trip only to stand around sucking sodas, and not doing actual work. Little shit added up to a huge headache you would eventually get if things tangled up in the Dance of the Flowcharts.

The Dance of the Flowcharts was my name for Critical Path Management or CPM. CPM was the navy-approved, SEABEE-beloved method of planning and thinking about projects. The stuff worked and SEABEES will work their ass off all day long, but like all expert laborers, they are connoisseurs of efficiency. NASA used Critical Path Management and CPM got us to the moon. On a critical path flowchart, every possible activity on a job is identified, and then quantified in duration. Once you calculated all the activities and durations, a manager would get an overall idea of how much and how long for every aspect of any job.

The beauty of this system was that the shortest path, the critical path, would reveal itself at some point—that was what a good manager was to stick to. You could walk onto the pure chaos of any project, maybe with hundreds of workers doing thousands of tasks, equipment all around digging, lifting and packing earth, and you could understand the entire picture instantly through a simple line diagram you could memorize or roll up and stick in your pocket. It was a huge, beautifully cerebral lens through which to look at unglamorous work. I took good care of my notes and flowcharts and kept them on a special clipboard in the beat up haze-gray pick-up truck I carried the Brig-Rats in. It gave me a sense of order and security.

Brig-Rats were sailors every ship passing through dumped off on our pier for either stupid or criminal behavior. Since our work was heavy labor, these individuals were mustered into our crews as punishment. I got along pretty well with these people. They were screwed and they knew it. All I had to do was treat them right. In gratitude for being treated like humans they often worked harder than my fellow SEABEES. In some cases, there were other reasons sailors came to our crews. For example, they caught one really nice guy sleepwalking on his ship. However much you loved your Navy, this was an automatic discharge—they didn't have room for a sleepwalker. Also, bales and bales of drugs in Panamá also kept our crews fat. At the time, cocaine ran \$150.00 a gram in the US. Imagine the supply in Panamá City that would drive a gram of coke to only \$10.00. So, weekly, navy cops, ironically and eternally vigilant against homosexual activity and drugs watched with great interest in your hands and your pecker as you peed in a bottle. Everybody who failed the test got to ride in my pick-up.

I was picking up bad vibes from the jungle road. We were on General Noriega's road, in Noriega's country, breathing Noriega's air. Noriega's band of despots-in-waiting, known as the Panamanian Defense Forces or PDF, was staged and waiting

up and down this road. I had already spent a day in their custody for trumped-up bullshit, for wearing my uniform on a motorcycle and violating some treaty. So whenever I saw PDF hatred, tension, and fear flooded my stomach and bloodstream at the same time. The soldiers looked younger than eighteen and stood easily cradling old M-1 carbines, as well as M-16s. They weren't armored up and dressed out like US troops, but they had just enough firepower to fuck up your day. The fact that we were off base and only going farther away from it was messing up my groove. I didn't like cops much back home—this was just beyond the pale.

I pulled hard on the Kessler's and handed it up front to Wilson.

"Sandy, how many they say they had for this job?" Wilson asked.

"It's hard to say who's there to actually work."

"Officer's wives?"

God-fearing officer's wives were continually worrying about whose dick was in whom, porn, booze, hookers, the curb appeal of buildings, and other shit that usually spelled work details, extra duty, and pointless exercises. One basic tract of thinking the officer's wives held was that if the enlisted fornicated with each other, then, of course, God would not be as helpful in keeping commies or other forces of serious evil at bay. Most of the officer's wives went to the base chapel every chance they got, figuring ways to improve the morality of our federally-funded Gomorrah. Whether or not the major in command of the marine barracks was sleeping with one of my coworkers on "semi-official junkets" to the Colón side of the Canal was not to be examined—despite hard-line taboos of fraternization between officers and enlisted. Of course, the major's cuckquean wife was riding on the bus ahead of us, her eyes shining out rays of pure goodness.

"Let's hope they stay out of it," I said.

Wilson was quiet, looking out the window. I handed the bottle up to him.

"Burn it down, Ell."

Wilson drained the pint and Keiser handed back another butt-end of a bottle to be finished off. He pulled out a bag to trash the empties, which I stuffed into a gym bag. We opened the windows and chewed some peppermint gum. In the middle of nowhere a guard shack and a barricade emerged along with an extra lane. The first drops of the morning rain began to fall.

At a checkpoint halfway to the orphanage site, there was a red and white barrier gate across the road. There was a small guard shack and a group of armed PDF soldiers stopping and inspecting autos passing from both directions. Off to the side was the charter bus and the flatbed parked in front of a red and white striped barricade. A tense chaplain and a marine officer were gesturing violently to the north and at the bus. None of the American officers on board these vehicles noticed we had caught up to them and idling in our vehicle twenty feet away from where they stood engaged with an official.

A young PDF officer stood loose cool, impassive, holding all the cards in the suit of sleepy-eyed privates in jungle camouflage and combat harnesses surrounding the whole affair, their hands touching their weapons lightly, almost in a caress. The Americans gesticulated, pointed, using loud English and hacked-up Spanish. They postured and asserted their right to continue down the road and that this stop and subsequent inspection of the vehicles was improper. It wouldn't be till we arrived on the jobsite that we would find out the PDF had tried to grab some of the giant bags of rice on board the bus as a bribe, "the bite" to pass through.

The rain steadily increased into a downpour and the Panamanians simply took a step or two one direction or another, found cover, and stayed dry while the delegation of Americans spluttered away with rain in their faces, soaking their clothes.

Militaries across the globe hate eye contact. Like Ohm's Law it's abstract, sometimes hard to figure, but violate it and you will get bit. Officers and senior NCOs stare recruits down the way trainers stare down dogs to get them to submit. Eye contact is powerful bad stuff to the business of command and submission. Officers even blindfold the guest of honor at a firing squad. Nobody wants to look a human target in the eye if they have to kill them—the executioner needs to keep everything an impersonal task. But if you understand this feature of military life, you can screw up pretty badly, and if you don't look anybody in the eye, and keep your uniform clean, pressed, and shiny—well you can generally sail right through the eye of about any shit storm.

But the further fact is this: Foreign military officers are super-sensitive to eye contact and respect of their authority. Many are the gringos that got into jams by violating this unwritten rule on foreign soil. Self-important Americans will often use "country-club" mode in dealing with foreign authorities. They will square their shoulders, look some cop or soldier in the eye and usually finish the sentence "I'm an American citizen and . . ." in the fetal position holding their nuts, either literally or figuratively. Respect and eye contact are mutually exclusive under these conditions. To be fair it wasn't their fault. Big-hearted Americans simply didn't understand these parts. They didn't spend much time on the streets, didn't eat where you had to speak Spanish, or know many Panamanians. PDF troopers were never in front of the boutiques on Via España, but they were never far away, around the corner, in the alleys, and never far from the gated communities—the white people's habitat.

My luck with cops in the states and overseas was such that I automatically figured shit would be coming down, so I puckered up, and wished for another pint. I carefully studied the headrest behind Wilson's head while we waited to pass through the checkpoint. Wilson was staring down the glove compartment. Keiser was looking straight ahead at the road beyond the barricade. We had this shit figured, now it was a matter of their whimsy. I stared my way into that velour and out of this time and space. In a way this was as dangerous as eye contact.

In trying to outrun memories, my upbringing, my failures I ran into music and women who weren't afraid of wearing colors, showing skin, moving their hips, or saying, "yes." The faster and harder I ran the districts of Panamá, I was bound to run into stuff that few or no Americans saw. What did I care—Eighty-five cent drinks, three-dollar steaks, five-dollar cartons of Camels, eight-dollar whorehouses, and a thousand bucks in my pocket. As B. B. King sang, "Let the good times roll."

A PDF corporal looked at the Subaru in the rain with disinterest and waved us past the tension with the bus and truck. Keiser nodded and took off he headed down the road until we were out of sight two miles down the foliage tunnel.

I wasn't tense over the PDF without reason. Brown people with badges and guns are every bit as unsettling as white folks with badges and guns. Lots of folks ran out of luck with the PDF. Like when they found an US soldier with his wife at well-known lover's lookout watching the surf. The PDF beat him senseless, locked him in the trunk of his car, and raped his wife in the back seat inches from his head. Or when the PDF caught a Puerto Rican petty officer from the Special Boat Unit out on the town. They beat him so he'd never have children again, took his billfold, and left him for dead on the street. The PDF were also multi-media: A video crew at one of several uprisings against the regime watched paramilitaries (most likely off-duty PDF) walk up to an unsuspecting old man observing the spectacle and taped them as they simply produced a Colt Python .357 and blew his brains out onto some of the protesters. That's just the stuff I heard about.

"What was that beef at the checkpoint all about," Keiser asked.

"Dunno, hard to say," Wilson was craning his neck back. "Must be checking for communists."

"I thought it was Sandinistas. Isn't it Sandinistas?" said Keiser.

"No, Sandinistas, they in Nicaragua," Wilson corrected.

"Sandinistas are communists. Any more Kessler's?" I said.

"Why don't they call them communists?" Keiser asked.

We drove up the road to a gas station and bought up all the bottles of orange juice. The rain dialed itself down in easy steps then stopped. Debauched chain-smoker that Keiser was, you couldn't smoke in his car. The shade of the jungle was chilling. Wetness steamed up from the warm roadbed. In turns, we each smoked, stretched, yawned, made new drinks in plastic tumblers, and waited for the bus and flatbed to catch up and pass us again. Eventually they came through and we casually hopped into the car and swung easily into the rear of the procession at a good distance.

This process repeated itself two more times at two more checkpoints. Bus and truck detained, IDs checked, questions asked, points made, guns hung loosely at sides, veins stood out on necks. Wayne's program of not hanging tight with the convoy worked like a charm and we breezed by the hassled vehicles each time.

As we got farther into the interior, the road got narrower and narrower. It changed from concrete, to gravel into dirt ruts that seemed impassable, yet yielded. The houses looked more like huts or cabins. Utility poles became sparser in their interval and lighter in the construction, and then ceased altogether. At the ragged end of the grid, sliding into the last wilderness left, we never saw a soul.

The little Subaru crept through the jungle onto a final dirt rut and we pulled into the yard of the schoolhouse we were to rebuild with a handful of local volunteers standing in the yard. Back home, this school building might have been mistaken for an ambitious chicken coop with a giant black cavity in its roofline. A man of average height could touch what was left of the fascia without jumping. The gaggle of senior NCOs, officers and their wives were shocked at the whole setup; this place was something stuck to the bottom of their designer sandals purchased especially for the occasion. They began discussing how to get an old photocopier from the church office up here.

In Panamá, in 1987, under Cold War logic: By helping these orphans in Penonomé, we could stick it to the PDF. The Catholic Church was at this time for the poor people. The Catholic Church at this time was a strategic ally to align with and support. The casual observer might believe this was a universal truth, but in Central America nothing is that easy.

For example the Bishops of the El Salvadoran Catholic Church, with one dissenter, sent secret word in early 1980 to Rome that an Archbishop and a priest had gone and broken from the program to become radically political. The unlikely political extremists were Father Rutilio Grande and his boss Archbishop Oscar Romero. What had they done to be so dangerous? They had surprised even the most jaded El Salvadorans and asked for international assistance in stopping the genocide in El Salvador. As Father Bartholomew De Las Cases had written Emperor Charles the V over four hundred years earlier, Grande and Romero wrote President Jimmy Carter and said something like, "Hey, man, 3,000 dead bodies a month are choking the waterways and piling up in the countryside. Do you think we could get some help and stop killing so many poor, unarmed people?" These radical clerics had prayed publicly for an end to the violence affecting their parish and wrote a letter to help stop it.

Why such a message to the US, who was sponsoring the genocide through proxies, would be so dangerous and disturbing to Catholic Bishops of El Salvador was unclear. Maybe it is simply a policy, like during the Holocaust of World War II. The Church preferred to keep quiet about disappearances and mass graves then as well. It seems counter-intuitive when it is your own sect that is getting the shit end of the stick. And from a very practical point of view any religious leader of any sort has to at least reckon that dead people don't tithe. On the other hand the Bible

is clear that a priest is a shepherd. Eventually every shepherd has to take the flock to the market or to slaughter however you care to view it.

If the outraged bishops of El Salvador were struggling with these radicals among their ranks, their dilemma didn't last long. In March of 1980 D'Aubuisson's minions ambushed and killed Father Grande. A couple weeks later an assassin, most likely trained at the School of Americas, shot Archbishop Romero dead on the steps of his own church.

In October of 1980 the bishops of the El Salvadoran Catholic Church reversed themselves and finally spoke out about the genocide going on. They said that all this killing was really naughty. The government response, and thus the American response since these were our cronies came just in time for Christmas. The National Guard of El Salvador raped and murdered four young nuns and some religious workers who had just arrived in country.

The chaplain was supervising the unloading of the bus, leaving the flatbed, tools, and materials to us, as we had agreed. Marines started unloading boxes of stuff marked KITCHEN from the belly hold of the bus. There were a couple of iron gas rings some connecting hoses and a couple of LP tanks. From the aisle of the bus and some of the unused seats, other marines started unloading foodstuffs donated from the Rodman Galley and a church canned food drive. A couple more marines struggled with large unwieldy nylon and plastic bags of rice, military-sized, enough to feed the masses.

Our chaplain today was to advance US military missions through making connections with indigenous local spiritual leaders. He was a military man in charge of taking an objective. While most societies have conflated spiritual belief with martial activity, the US military is outwardly one of the most ecumenical organizations to weld god and country together. Some of the most hardcore soldiers in the service were some of the most fervent and regular of any military chaplain's flock, be they in sanctuary, temple, mosque, or ashram.

A navy chaplain has special powers and uses in the military. They keep the troops spiritually ready to fight. Chaplains may be of one religion or denomination within that religion, but they are trained to be tolerant, knowledgeable spiritual generalists that can preach fire and brimstone for a Baptist at 9:00 a.m., perform Catholic sacraments of mass at 11:00 a.m., facilitate Jewish temple, Islamic prayer, or help the LDS or Mennonites set up their meeting.

An officer congratulated the chaplain on his courage at the checkpoints.

"I promised Father Carlos we would bring food. It would look bad here if I didn't bring it. It wouldn't send the right message." The chaplain ticked items off the clipboard as they came off the bus.

Four strings of barbed wire followed a ragged fence line in a square creating a yard about thirty yards in any direction. There was a privy dug into a back corner that looked well maintained. The school building itself was neatly painted sometime before the fire. The windows and doors were burned-out with black scorch marks blossoming to what remained of the roof. Each classroom had two doors leading from either side of the room to the outside, and three generous windows on either side. Remains of chalkboards, teachers' desks, and benches for the students to sit upon lay in the center of each room charred and in pieces. The PDF was talking to the Catholic Church in their special way. Violence, intimidation, fire, beatings—these were some of the various denominations in coin of the realm.

Wayne was shook up by the enormity of the destruction. "Look at this place! What the fuck! I don't even know if that structure is safe."

"Building's fine."

"What is this shit? Kristallnacht? Some shithole in the South? It's kids; it's a fucking school for Chrissakes. It's in fucking nowhere, man."

"Everybody comes from somewhere, even Texans—big guy. Look, I gotta drain."

Wayne poured vodka into a juice bottle. PDF thugs were talking fire, beatings, and decapitations. Our diplomats replied in some strange and highly offensive language by withholding treaty payments. So then somebody decided to hit the US right back in the nuts by burning up a rural schoolhouse full of kids who didn't know from escrow and status of forces agreements. Now we were here talking swing sets, teeter-totters, and hopscotch from the ashes. Strange way to reckon the world, but there it was.

"Look, we planned the work, now we just work the plan."

"Yeah, shit. Yeah."

A good military man is like a good Buddhist monk, in the moment and nowhere else, not thinking about shit. Eventually, you will have to think, but only to break shit down, organize the details, reduce it to its mathematical expression and a flow chart. A flow chart, a line drawing of mutant spiders attacking. You worked a flow chart, like killing a big pile of these mutant spiders, you hacked away—one leg at a time, working methodically through every cluster of activities. You kill enough spiders and they'd give you a whole new mess of spiders to tangle with.

"We'll be back before the girls on "J" Street will miss you. The Ancon Rangers will return. 'Kin-A."

Out near the dirt track leading past the gate was a utility pole with a yard light on it. The stains on the pole running down from the lag bolts holding the suspension arm onto the pole told me had probably been there for years with no wires running to it. I couldn't see the nearest pole. I was in a mood to blaspheme. Fucking optimists. If God made electrons flow across that much space, we called it lightning.

A few feet into the pampas grass that made up the leading edge of the jungle I unzipped and relieved myself. The shrill voice of the some NCO's wife yelled her English so one of the local volunteers could understand her better. Wilson called it the Berlitz method. I felt eyes upon me again, but the hink read close. I did a slow 360. Off three yards back and right were four little boys watching me, watching the whole deal go down. There I stood hand on my shit, caught short.

“¡Hola!”

I coaxed the kids to the back of Keiser's car with smiles and hand gestures. I gave the boys each a bottle of orange juice. They took the drinks and sipped them tentatively.

“Gracias, gracias. Thank you. Tanks.”

They smiled. In Iowa these boys might be working a trap line, hunting, fishing, racking up broken bones and teeth with skateboards, shooting hoops, worrying about bigger kids, same stuff kids did across the globe. Today, the boys had a real show; they had a bunch of loco gringos to watch.

They didn't look like kin, but you couldn't be sure. It figured the locals would keep their kids out of the way on a day like this, so I reckoned them to be some of the orphans we were here to help. They weren't skinny or fat, just the perfect litheness of boys on a summer break. The smallest one had a twinkle in his eye and it was clear he enjoyed a good laugh. The tallest one looked to be about eight or nine. The other two were about the same build, but one had a scar down his arm. Each of the boys had black shiny hair and a regulation style haircut.

“De nada, 'migos.”

Keiser got excited and took them over to the flatbed, and started describing the swing set, tetherball rig, and teeter-totters. He gestured with big movements swooping to demonstrate the swing set. We had enough words to show goodwill and a few necessities. All the workers on base made a point to speak to us in English. Some of the officers and their wives spoke Spanish, but the people they addressed seemed to always get a confused look on the listener's face. Others simply bellowed English and enunciated in exaggerated ways. These boys were the only real things here. Sending these little guys to the church committee was like throwing kittens to a Doberman.

I told the chaplain, diplomatically, we were going to reflow the work priorities due to a new opportunity in the critical path flow chart. He nodded vaguely, “Of course, I understand.”

Screw it. Playground first, then the classroom. Keiser agreed readily. The headmaster, Father Carlos pointed to where he wanted the playground, the chaplain translated his wishes, and maybe smelling whiskey, he eyed us with suspicion.

A few quick measurements and I was digging the holes for the playground equipment. Keiser set about assembling the various rigs in his pre-meditated way. One way to get started with a job like digging a hole or busting up concrete is to

think about shit that bothers you. I could always come up with something that pissed me off. This was one secret of how I became the base construction king.

I used the pick point to make a small X in the dirt. *Maybe you could bust ass and get something nice.* The pick struck dead center on the mark, into the red clay up to the shaft. I pried out the first lift. *Maybe you could get something good, something bigger than yourself going.* The next swing sank that backbreaking bitch of a tool back into that deceptive red clay down to the shaft. The pick glanced off a rock, but the force loosened the rock in the dirt. I pulled the spade from where it stood at attention stabbed into the dirt nearby to spoon the loose stuff out of the hole. *But there seemed to be an equal amount of fucksticks who just weren't about to let that happen.* I moved over to the next spray painted marks Wayne had laid out and sank the pick back into the dirt for the second leg of the array he was wrenching together. The pick bounced off a submerged rock. I flipped the tool from the broad digging edge to the pointed pick edge—down. The rock exploded into pieces. *These hotshots make up a few campfires songs about evil, killing the unrighteous, flaming swords of justice and then hit the enemy right in their women and children.* Spoon the hole clear of dirt to set the other leg of the teeter-totter frame. Done.

It could have been the booze, but I began to imagine the leggy redhead from Rodman. She was the one I could never work myself up to talk to. I would watch her on her daily walk past our shop to the base post office, I imagined her in one of her short, tight skirts and heels, with those dragon tattoos on her calves dancing as she was bringing us all some cold beers, some lemonade, some relief. *My little wood sprite, my little dream vision, my little fuck queen; we'll live in one of these little thatched huts with corrugated metal roofing. No overhead, no nut to make, no Jones' to keep up with. It could be a world with only us, simple, peaceful, easy, lots of love, no bullshit.*

It was beautiful shit to dream up, but it wasn't going to happen. First, the redhead was out of my league. Second, millions of years of genetic coding went against every decent social construct laid on me since day one. I lost all powers of speech or coherence of thought whenever she appeared in my world—I could only try to imagine her sexually. That just doesn't make a good place to lay out some diplomacy. Third, I'd already tried to live out an equally hopeless set of happy wishes with my high school sweetheart. Our marriage was a missile wounded at launch. Even thinking about the future with a woman was a dangerous, punishing form of optimism. However, I couldn't help it. I was as fucked up as that utility pole with the useless yard light hanging on it. The booze was wearing off, sweating out.

The heat reached its maximum and people along the equator around the world were now observing siesta. Only mad dogs and stupid volunteers were out in the noonday sun. The boys hunkered down in the shade had never taken their eyes from us. Behind me, somewhere a gunny sergeant and some junior officer were

dancing around about the best way to remove the scorched window and door framing. They had a good-sized wrecking bar and a ten-pound sledgehammer, but they had a novel approach to the work. If they talked about it enough the scorched frames would jump from the sills and make tracks for the trash heap without either of them lifting a finger. I remembered Chief Ewell looking into my eyes, tapping his finger on my chest, and diplomacy prevented my from asking if what we really needed was Uri Geller and The Amazing Kreskin to knock this whole project out in one television special.

Wilson was working with some grunts to clear the burnt furnishings from the site and pile them into a corner of the lot. The boys watched us all from the shade of the pampas grass beyond the perimeter of the schoolyard. Wayne and I set the equipment in the holes, and mixed the concrete with hoes and plastic buckets of water in a shallow trough, then poured the anchors in. It was hot, and the booze wasn't helping our stamina. We leaned on our shovels to catch our breath.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the boys coming up to the barbed wire fence. Each of them nimbly climbed the barbed wire and stood balanced precariously on the top of the wood fence post they had been standing in front of a moment before. They stood there for a moment and when they had our attention. They stood above us, wobbly, smiling for us, showing us their courage, causing us to look into the sun, shielding our eyes with our hands.

One of them gave the signal and with perfect unity, they each piked into the air, flipping over gracefully with a diver's twist, each of them perfect in their compact, graceful movements. I thought back to my childhood, to jumping off old cars, small buildings, a clubhouse I made in our backyard once. There was a yellowish haze radiating through all these memories. The arc of these boys was like the arc of millions of other children across the globe. I remembered girls jumping from monkey bars, and being chased by other kids, only to turn around and chase them right back. I grew up in the network of love, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins, all enveloped in this light. I missed that light more than anything in the world. I wanted a drink before the boys hit the ground.

The kids piked out in the trajectory of a mortar round on a hilltop. Each of them stuck his landing, like East Bloc gymnasts. It was their best, and they gave it to three drunken dirt-sailors. We had come to their soggy chunk of nowhere, they were happy to see us. In that moment they were perfect. They turned around in perfect unison and smiled at us. We clapped and whistled. They were in a world of shit and pain, yet perfect in some small way.

Wilson came over to check in on our progress.

"Shee-it, look at the Sand Man punching holes down. He such a bad-ass-mahrfahr that dirt jes be jumpin' up outta that hole," he said.

Keiser had recovered from his initial shock and was back to his calculating precise self. He'd started measuring and marking for the swing set. "You know our Tractor Boy, he knows his dirt," he said.

"You know, back home I used to dig graves in the city cemetery," I said.

"No shit?" said Wilson

"Really?" said Keiser

I stayed deadpan. "Oh yeah, no shit. Y'know I was digging one day and I found this little chest made out of metal."

"No shit?" said Wilson

"Fuck me running. Get out of here," said Keiser

"You know what was in the chest?" I asked.

"Treasure?" said Wilson

"Stocks and bonds?" said Keiser

I did my best to look like Chief Ewell. "Nope. Just two big bottles of 'Get the Fuck Back to Work.'"

We laughed and Wilson started prepping a room to start on new rafters and roofing. Keiser started setting the swing set up, working the giant pipes into their sockets with huge wrenches.

I turned to and began the next set of holes. Who would want to shell farms back in Iowa? It was hard to imagine and figure. The pick chattered into some shale, stuck fast. I groaned and pulled it out. Thousands of displaced individuals floated north to the very place that built the mortar shell that ended their family life. I flipped the digging tool to the broad end and chipped the shale out like a golf club. Some of the smallest pieces pelted the bus, causing some officers and the chaplain to turn around with their hands on their hips and watch me work. The families, the farmers, their wives, and their children usually went south, ending up in small armies, the warehouses down on "J" Street, or turning tricks in Bogartá or Cali.

I spooned the loose rubble and clay out and worked the next hole. There were all these words, acronyms, diplomatic statements, and mission statements, abstract shit that said nothing. Somehow, it always meant somehow, some way some sonuvabitch could pull the trigger on some woman or child and still feel like a man. The pick hit in and cleaved a stone the size of a grapefruit in half, sending fragments toward the officers. They blinked and stepped back a few yards. Speeches, platitudes, clouds of words "our Latin American neighbors... these developing countries." I spooned the last hole out and threw the shovel in the loose dirt sticking it in at an angle. I was ashamed and pissed at the same time. I finished off my drink and went to the car to catch my breath and mix a fresh one.

I wanted the little boys in the pampas grass to run and play. I wanted them to take me with them. I had a tight knot of emotions surging about inside me, with nowhere to express it but some dirt holes. I just wanted something good for these

little guys. There was nothing in this world but four little boys. I wanted to take them home to my family, let them run loose on a farm and not sweat the boot, ever. I wanted to cut the knot of God, flag, duty, and training into a million pieces with the flaming sword of righteousness.

“Keiser, you needin’?”

“No Sandy, I’m good.”

I chugged my drink halfway down. I was a fucking nail in a boot heel worn by Malcolm Forbes and his buddies in the penthouses and suburbs of Cronyfuck. I was in the middle of the jungle in some shit hole nobody ever heard of or cared about. I was the epitome of everything Lord Baden-Powell wanted from a Boy Scout, I had done everything to be the best shop-rat in high school, I was one of the best America could produce.

The early afternoon rain came down in big drops. I was hot, soaked with whiskey sweat, and filthy from working the pick and shovel.

The precedents were being met, the critical path was at its shortest, and the spider legs on the flow chart were all tight, still. We would make quota, the Lord’s work would be done, and our diplomacy and image were intact. I looked for the little guys in their vigil, to wave them to the bus, to stay dry, to get a sandwich and a Coke from somebody. The boys were gone. Wilson, Keiser, and I sat in the Subaru, turned on the Nugent, refilled plastic cups, and waited for the next step on the critical path.



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