

J. SCOTT SMITH

Poly Trauma

I'm standing here in the garage working on the guitar again, sanding this piece of mahogany with 220 grit wrapped around a plastic block. I'm pushing it back and forth, hard at first, then soft, then softer, then still a little more softer. After sanding I apply thin coats of polyurethane with a ripped-up tee-shirt. Clear satin. I'm on my fifth coat, and the pours are really starting to fill in, the crevasses and the valleys and the fingers and even the little draws all building up to the brim, giving off that sheen of brightness, that look of finished clear coat. I use *wipe-on* poly, and it looks like semen when I pour it on the rag to apply. And someday, when this porous block of mahogany is filled to my satisfaction, it should look like the morning surface to a calm lake. And it will be thick and hard and from an angle it will reflect color and refract light. You will be able to knock on its hard body and hear an echo reverberate from the pounding of your curled, bonny knuckles. The final coat will involve beeswax, not polyurethane, which is a natural substance, an organic compound, made by bees.

It's Christmas break, and with my own two hands I sand and wipe, I let rest, I sand and wipe some more. I let rest. It doesn't take long, each sanding job. And while I sand and wipe and let rest I wear white gardening gloves. I play Metallica. I choose not to wear a respirator because the shavings of silica and fiber are too small and insignificant to cause any real short or long-term health problems. It's a ritual, this project of mine, and every morning while I stand here sanding I put *No Leaf Clover* on repeat. I think of 9/11, and of the towers, and I think of how I never saw the first plane hit, how I never saw it but how we were in formation, having come back from a platoon run, and how Gunny came marching out with

his boots clonking on the asphalt, all Drill Instructor-like, and tells us, "It's a good day to be alive, Gents!" Yeah, he was excited, because he knew. Then he about-faced and forward marched. We were standing on the basketball courts, surrounded by barracks, and you could see that on almost every floor there were doors propped wide open with the TVs on and groups of Marines standing around watching these TV screens, some in cammies, some still in PT gear. There were even officers in these rooms, standing among enlisted, which is usually a no-go, usually. After working hours that's called fraternization. I don't know what you call it during. Unbecoming of an Officer? Unbecoming of a Marine? Unbecoming?

So I recently started smoking again, Lights, menthols sometimes. And I take my smoke breaks outside away from the garage at the edge of the fence line. I don't like to walk by my parents and cause suspicion. I wouldn't care though because I'm 29 and just visiting for the holidays and what are they going to do about it, really? So I light up and inhale and taste the taste of tobacco and filtered chemical, and I watch how the wind puts out the cheery so that only a thin sheath of paper is left on top to burn and become bored out with hot, hungry holes. When I take a drag I can feel my cigarette igniting from the inside out, being canoed, and when I hold it up to the light it still stands tall, only there's this giant, black burning hole crawling outward and upward until the edges of the canoe are flaked away and sprinkled off into tiny ash and blackened strands of burnt tobacco. It's like being at a really fun funeral. The wind blows here and it makes the now visible cherry even brighter, even redder.

It doesn't taste the same as before, of course. I'm no longer in the military or in the war or when smoking was an allotted pleasure that was always taken for granted but always there in surprising abundance. But if you talked to my father about it you wouldn't know that. The way he talks to me you would think that I was still in, that I was in between deployments, that I had been promoted to Sergeant instead of NJPed. Well, fuck the apple eat the Corps, right? But I would never tell him that because he doesn't rate it. He was in the Navy.

So for Christmas I bought myself a K-bar.

"You know Scottie," he always calls me Scottie, "You know...this is a real special thing, a Marine's K-bar. Don't they issue these to all Marines?"

He asks me this in the living room, in the background the Military Channel playing.

"No, Dad," I say, "they issue them to *certain* people, not everyone."

"Don't they give every Marine a K-bar?" he asks again, confused, holding the seven-inch blade up to the light.

“No, Dad.” I say, “You only get one if you’re issued a sidearm, like with a gunner or a driver, or an officer. It’s supposed to compensate for the replacement of the M16.”

“Well,” he says, “you should have told me you wanted one...I would have bought it for you.”

He closer examines the knife under the lamp, hilt to tip.

“I’ll tell you,” he says, “it’s a special thing when a Marine gets one of these. A lot of history to a Marine and his K-bar, you know?”

“I know, Dad.”

In Kuwait we used to practice throwing these things at sandbags, stowing them under our seats next to hand grenades and forgetting about them for days, for weeks, then for months. We never sharpened them, except for this one guy, but he left the war early because he got hit in the gut with an RPG. When we get together we never talk about it. But before that, this other guy, Mendoza, nearly cut his nose off with a K-Bar. It left a giant gash around the bulbous section of the tip. From then on we called him Mennoza. And then, once we got into country, he accidentally shot himself in the hand with an Iraqi 9mm. Lieutenant took his weapon away, just for the day, as a form of punishment.

“When a Marine gets one of these,” my dad starts up, “it’s a *real* special thing... they don’t just give them out, you know.”

“I know, Dad.”

We go back to watching TV, the mute button still on.

Later that night I wait for everyone to go to sleep before I pull out the K-Bar. I walk to the kitchen and test the blade on a can of olives, and it performs flawlessly.

I’ve been working on this guitar for a while now, since ‘03 when I first drafted the design and cut the body from a solid block of red-brown wood. I used a scrollsaw to cut the pattern, because a scrollsaw will cut intricate designs, like puzzle pieces. You have to keep in mind not to pass your fingers through the fast moving vertical blade. From behind the operator looks like someone playing with a weegie board. From the front, a butcher.

The bottom portion of the guitar, the hips, look like a Fender Stratocaster. Topside it looks like a Gibson SG. There are these horns to it, toward the highpoint where the neck bolts in and the 24th fret ends. I’ve routed out two pickup cavities, two volume knobs, two tonners and a three-way switch. I did the wiring myself, and it’s all fucked up. When I plug it in it doesn’t even click or hum, even with the nine-volt attached, even with the copper tape laid down in the back which grounds the instrument. For electrical work you use wire cutters, wire strippers and a soldering iron, because when you twist thin strands of copper and steel together

it needs to be neat, the work area needs to be clean and not dirtied with extra lines, poorly cut lines that might cross paths and short circuits.

When solder reacts it turns to a liquid state at 460 degrees, Fahrenheit. The soldering iron looks like a death-ray gun, and sometimes, with solder, you'll miss your target, and it'll fall past your objective or get halfway hung-up on the lines you're trying to bond, freezing mid-air and then hitting the bottom without breaking, without even shattering or exploding into larger gobs that were once soft and hot and moving but now rock hard, frozen and undisturbed.

For a brief moment solder looks like quicksilver, looks like the amalgam fillings the Navy put in half my teeth. And for a *semi-brief* moment a thin plume rises from the end of the death-ray gun, eyelevel, thinning and waving as electricity burns and plastics melt under high temperature. And for an even briefer moment, like a *nano* second, I see this couple falling from the towers and how, when they fell, they were holding hands, even though I'm not quite sure about that, *but you could see it...* you could see it so clearly even though it was a little digitized. I want to think I saw it, and I want to hold on so tight to my death-ray gun and never let go of it as I bond these copper lines. But I can't because it heats up so fast and the odor that emits is so foul, and if I'm not too careful my arm hairs will begin to singe and curl. But now it's happening, on the stereo, and I know this feeling even though I hate the emotions that come forth. Every time I give them allowance, for some reason. And instead of Gunny it's now James Hetfield, telling me how it's a...

Good day to be alive, he said,
Then it comes to be that the soothing light at the end of your
tunnel,
Is just a freight train coming your way,
Then it comes to be, yeah.
Then it comes to be,
Then it comes to be,
Yeah...

But that doesn't come into the picture until I'm working in the poly, after I've given up on the electrical and when I sanding with a kink in my back and examining how nicely those pours are filling, building those gaps, making it so the body is flat, even, smooth and without drag. It is like being underwater, like my vision is cloudy and fogged and my eyes start dropping faster than the 460-degree solder, so fast that I wish it would slow down and I wish I could touch those words and hold their

hands and look back at them and then look down wishing even more that this song would not end because if it didn't end, maybe, just maybe, I would truly start to feel it, I would truly, *truly* start to understand why that day was such a good day to be alive, that despite the death of thousands I would want to live and not die, like they had, like so many had.

I continue to sand, despite the lacrimation that falls, which does not tumble even though the tears are splattered and rubbed into the porous body under the many coats of polyurethane, which looks like semen when first applied. I wipe on with a rag using soft, delicate pushes from my white gardening gloves. And as I stand here sanding it gives me feelings that are hard, feelings that were once alive but now dead. But more so they are feelings of a coma. Certainly, they were once there, I know it. *Something* was there before, was definitely there at one point. I can't be sure of it, though, even though I never saw the first plane hit. I just know.



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