

THE ROAD HOME

Enzo's parachute never deployed, that much we knew. Stumbling, I took off across the grass. Other soldiers had started running, too. They bumped into each other, fell down, got up again. Some were shouting. It was as if the entire drop field had darkened under shadow of a radioactive cloud, and in the midst of the chaos lay Enzo, eyes closed to the sky. I cursed my own to clear them, then took it back just as quick.

Some things a man isn't supposed to see.

A week later I was rocketing south on 401, twenty miles over the limit, when an apparition blew into view. At first I thought it was Enzo, a thinned and tanned silhouette, hazy from heat, hauling the shredded remains of his parachute. But it was a woman. She met me on the shoulder, grinning as if it were every day that found her traipsing barefoot up the yellow divide of a two-lane highway. Before I could ask if she wanted a lift she introduced herself as Samantha and held up a green bean, offering me one. "No, thanks," I said. "Just ate."

"Well, I guess I better get going," said Samantha, kicking a pebble. "Getting late."

"I can give you a lift."

"I don't have very far to go."

"Oh." I put the truck in gear, barely an idle. "I guess I'll let you go, then."

With a little wave she set off, then stopped. She marched back to the truck, brushing dark hair from her eyes. "I don't think you told me where you were going."

I told her I was going to Hattadare.

"Can I come with you, if it's not too much trouble?"

"No trouble at all," I said, motoring onto the road as she set the basket of green beans in her lap. "Maybe Melody would like to meet you. Poor Melody's been through the wringer."

"Melody?"

"My friend."

"She's depressed?"

I didn't explain, and she didn't say more. She rolled a green bean between her thumb and forefinger, wearing a groove that snapped it in two. She smiled at me, eyebrows raised as if to say *Well, here I am. Now what?*

Now what indeed. By now I'd noticed the pale circle around her finger where, on another night, perhaps, a wedding band would sit. I decided it was better not to ask about it—I wouldn't get the truth, anyway. Women as unselfconscious as she was, I'd learned, hid facts about themselves the easiest of anyone.

"What brings you out here all by yourself?" I asked.

Samantha punched out a cigarette from a crinkled pack, shrugging. "I thought it would be a good idea to touch down with a few old ghosts before moving on."

"Ghosts?"

"I grew up here."

"Where're you moving on to?"

"To the same mistakes that have brought me this far, probably," she said, with a little laugh. "But if you asked me again, I'd tell you I'm here because I don't want to be home."

"This isn't home?"

"Not the home I have now, if *that's* what you mean."

Clearly, it was time to change the subject. I decided to tell Samantha a story about Hattadare, how it wasn't an Indian reservation at all but a trailer park founded by an electrician who stalked the grounds in a pair of swim trunks, fins, and headdress imported from god-knows-where. At night he peered into the living rooms of his neighbors, eyes ghoulishly magnified behind a filmy scuba mask. Enzo called him "Chief of Little Fuck" and said the only good thing he ever did was leave his wife Melody alone three weekends a month.

Samantha didn't seem to care for that story and so I started up another, this one about the first time Enzo took me to the trailer park. It was a sunny autumn day. He drew up to the barracks in a

little MG the same color orange as the rotted pumpkins sitting on the porches of the houses we would soon pass. He wore a starched white shirt, cuffs rolled to crisp perfection beneath which his tanned skin glowed like an oil lamp. On his wrist, dangling loose like a woman's bracelet, sat a gold watch. From time to time its bulky face slid to the tender part of his wrist, and he flicked it back to position with grace. On base, he was known as "Cool Hand Lo," and loved to free fall. It was easy to imagine him dropping through clouds, weightless, unencumbered by parachute or heavy black boots.

Enzo was at least ten years younger than me. I'd never met someone so worldly and, with the exception of his natural talent for jumping, so out of place in the Army. Rumor had it he was heir to a linen manufacturing empire and had signed the dotted line to piss off his father. We had that in common: I'd signed up to escape an engagement to a woman I didn't love. That was almost fifteen years ago. I wanted to tell Enzo to be careful, that if he didn't watch it he'd become a lifer, too. Every decision we make that isn't our own has a way of re-routing the road so that before you know it, one more bend up ahead has you sliding back to the beginning, ass-backward and spitting gravel.

Enzo had asked me to tag along that day because he was worried Chief might return home in the middle of his rendezvous with Melody. Halfway to Hattadare, however, we caught sight of a dog limping along the side of 401. Enzo pulled to the side of the road, slowing down just enough to grant clearance as I jumped from the car, hitting the gravel in a stumble. I ran across the adjacent field to where the dog now stood, eyeing me warily. "Here doggy, doggy," I called. "Come to Papa." The dog bolted, and it was then I realized she was pregnant.

I threw my arms up, defeated: *What the fuck? I tried.*

To my surprise, Enzo slammed the MG in park, hopped out and gave himself over to the same thankless chase. His white shirt and gold watch gleamed in the sun as he circled the field, returning to the car covered in dust. Sweat ran down his face and his dark aviator glasses were gone. "Some bitches just don't know what's

good for them," he said, shrugging.

When I finished the story Samantha—her back was pressed against the passenger door—regarded me with dark eyes narrowed. "Which character am I?" she asked. "The bitch who needs rescuing or the bumbling idiot masquerading as a white knight?"

I stopped talking after that.

We drew up to the park and I eased the truck under a statue of a black bear reared up on hind legs. We'd trekked past the point where the broken-down trailers thinned out and the woods became more dense when Samantha suddenly stopped. "That's the *millionth* sandspur I've stepped on," she cried, using a live oak for support as she removed a cluster of the thorny flowers from her heel. "Where did you bring me—the beach?"

"I could carry you," I said, pleased at the thought of Samantha coiled newlywed-tight against my chest, a blast of heat warming the stone cold ache that had settled there over the past week. "I'm always happy to lend a hand."

"Gee, thanks," she groused, rolling her eyes to the treetops. "I'll remember that next time I'm tied to the railroad tracks."

Bumbling idiots and sandspurs had become Samantha's enemy.

Mine was the recurring image of Enzo as he appeared in my dreams: mouth twisted in a scream, eyes bolted open.

Shoving my hands in my pockets, I walked on.

Through the trailer's open door I spotted Melody on the couch in one of Enzo's shirts, eating ice cream from the carton. Blue light from an infomercial had downgraded crisp linen to a ghost of its former brightness. Bile rose in my throat. Though we weren't holding hands, I was relieved Samantha was in reaching distance as I stepped inside, calling out in a booming façade of cheerful optimism, "What say you, Kemosabe?"

"You didn't tell me you were bringing a friend," said Melody, eyes glued to the television. "I would've cooked."

"Thank God you didn't," I said, kissing her cheek.

"Have a seat. I'll make some sandwiches on the commercial."

"I can make them," said Samantha, brightly. "Where do you keep the bread?"

The three of us sat at the card table in the kitchen, eating peanut butter on white toast and drinking warm red wine from a box. "I grew up here," said Samantha, shyly, "and I never knew this was here."

"White people don't bother with us," grunted Melody, who was three-quarters Cherokee and had met Chief at a Grateful Dead concert in Atlanta. He brought her to Lillington and told everyone she was his mail-order Russian bride. "We're lower than pissants," she said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I was telling Samantha here a story on the way out about the time Enzo tried to get that pregnant dog in the car," I said, ignoring Samantha, who must've been stewing in her seat. I felt an overwhelming urge to change the story—not as I'd told it in the truck, because it was the truth, but as it would now be heard, because it was also how I'd lived it. "Poor Enzo," I said, shaking my head. "I'd never seen him so disheveled in all my life."

"Oh, I had," said Melody. "I'd seen Enzo disheveled once or twice."

"So did Chief—unfortunately for Enzo."

"The man who walks around in a pair of fins?" asked Samantha.

Melody and I laughed and laughed. Melody so hard tears glittered in the corners of her eyes. She struck the table with her palm, "Poor Lorenzo!"

"Poor Lo!" I cried, slapping the table, too. So did Samantha, which at first made Melody laugh harder, but soon the tears arrived. "I miss him," she said, wiping her eyes with a paper napkin. A smear of grape jelly dotted her mouth, above her lip. "I miss the old bastard."

"I miss him, too," I said.

"I'm sorry," said Samantha, "did something happen to your friend?"

Melody stared at her hands in her lap while I revealed a few

details of the accident, those Melody knew or had surmised. I left out the part about witnessing Enzo's death, how even though I'd been an EMT for years his accident obliterated anything I'd learned, such as how to react when all that's left of your best friend is a crumpled jumpsuit.

At the scene I searched for clues to let me know an accident had killed him, all the while haunted by memories of our most recent outing, a night at the bar that started with Enzo uncharacteristically agitated. He swiveled his stool in full-circle orbits, giddily toasted complete strangers, and slammed two whiskey sours to my every one. Once we were both sufficiently lit, he confessed the reason for his nervous state: his father had died of a heart attack.

"How fucked up is this?" he'd said, shaking his head. "I didn't learn the old man had kicked it until the deed showed up on my doorstep."

"Deed to what?"

"His business."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

I asked Enzo what he planned to do. "What else?" he said, shrugging. "Move back to the shithole town I grew up in, marry a can of hairspray, and play touch football with the choirboys on Sunday. All a man needs to be happy in this world, right?"

All that kinetic energy—whether he was pissing away his father's money at the bar or barely holding his feet still as he recounted his latest jump—was no longer there as I sat on the field next to Enzo, drinking in the last of his dust. We later learned his heart had exploded upon impact. I didn't know that then, but one thing was evident: Enzo had transformed into someone as unfamiliar to me as he was familiar, as if the sinkhole created in his death had cleared the way for a more expansive, generous spirit. I loved this new Enzo as much, if not more, than the old. I wasn't sure why this was and carried my shame tucked deep in my chest so that every breath had become part of the struggle to stay alive in his absence.

"I saw that in the paper, the accident," Samantha was saying.

"Is it true they weren't sure it was . . . that he may have—"

"No way. It was an accident," I said, shaking my head. "A faulty release cord or backup or both. They're still investigating."

"Accident, my ass!" cried Melody. "Enzo was like a flea flashing a freight train! If it hadn't happened then, it would've been a car crash or a toaster oven dropped in a kiddie pool. He was as good as gone long before he left. And *that's* what I hate—" she paused, tears stinging. "How much of Enzo did we actually get? We'll never know."

Melody blew her nose. I fiddled with the bread crumbs on my plate. Outside it had grown dark; moths threw themselves at the screen door. Samantha rose from the table and began cleaning up. She returned the remaining bread to the cupboard, the wine. She wiped down the lids to the peanut butter jar and jelly and put them inside the refrigerator door. I sensed her movements, her desire to disappear and yet stay and appease. The moths slammed the door in droves, and I suddenly remembered I'd left Enzo's watch in the truck. I'd brought it for Melody, and so excused myself to go get it.

"I'm so sorry," I heard Samantha say, as I closed the front door.

The power lines dividing Hattadare in two crackled and hummed as I made my way down to the truck. The air smelled like tobacco, roasted peanuts, and burning trash. I kicked at a plastic doll lying face down in the sand, ants marching up its legs in angry waves like a monsoon. From inside one of the trailers, a baby wailed for its mother.

When I'd first started accompanying him to the trailer park, Enzo had wanted me to date Courtney Breedlove, a friend of Melody. Courtney and Melody were so much the opposite of one another that Enzo referred to them as "dark-souled sister twins." Unlike Melody, Courtney was thin and muscular, light-skinned and always sunny—hardly my type. I took Courtney to a local bar where we danced awkwardly to George Strait, chased shots of whiskey with lukewarm Cokes. On the dance floor I struck up a conversation about mutual friends and felt her shoulders stiffen under my palms like sun-hardened wax. *Sometimes I wish Enzo*

would leave Mel alone, she said, when I asked what was wrong. *It's like he doesn't care about anyone but himself.*

Come on, now! Enzo cares about a lot of people! I was hot now, trying not to let it show. An elderly couple spun a two-step around us, smiling hard as if willing their ease and grace into our counterfeit little hearts. *He's been a good friend of mine for years*, I said. *I think of him as a brother.*

Like a brother, huh? That's not what Melody says.

I left her swaying in the sawdust, realizing only after I was in the truck that I'd forgotten my keys at the bar. I hiked the ten miles back to base and the next afternoon called Enzo to give me a lift to the bar to pick up my truck. That's when I learned Melody had made him retrieve Courtney from the bar not long after I'd left. According to Enzo, he and Courtney had sex in the parking lot. When Melody asked why it took him so long to get home, he told her Courtney had gotten sick on the side of the road.

But goddamn, Wade, you need a cattle prod on your ass sometimes! I ain't never seen a man so slow to get it going with the ladies. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were queer.

I stepped from the truck, Enzo's watch in hand, and pitched it high into a wall of pines. A dark cloud of crows flew off with a clatter. I dropped to my knees. Some time later Samantha found me in the same position. She lassoed my neck with her arms, pressed her cheek to my back.

"I don't even know your name!" she cried.

Samantha tapped ash out the window as the basket of green beans bounced between us like a bag of rocks. We'd left Melody's and were headed toward the same spot on 401 where I'd picked her up a few hours ago. I was hoping a clue as to why she'd been out here would show up on our way to town—a busted-down car or angry husband hoofing it up the shoulder with a pair of women's shoes set to mold Cinderella-perfect to her feet even if the wedding band no longer fit.

Night air rushed in with a *wooosh*, blowing Samantha's skirt past her knees. Scores of red scratches cross-hatched her thighs.

I hadn't noticed these before, and offered her use of the Vaseline clunking around my glove box.

"No thanks," said Samantha, drawing her knees to her chest. "I'm okay."

"So this is where you grew up? Out here in the sticks?"

"Something like that."

"Where do you live now?"

"Fayetteville."

"Your husband always let you stay out so late?"

"My husband doesn't *let* me do anything."

I knew the questions were losing me points but no longer cared. There were too many things I needed to know. For instance: why had she come with me? It was as if she were a butterfly, carried along by the wind. I'd known women like that, women who made a habit of relinquishing control, only to later revise the narrative to convince themselves they'd been in charge the whole time. I wondered what part I would play in the version of this particular story—both the one that was real and the one Samantha was mentally composing, even now.

Soon we came to the spot in the road where Enzo had found the dog. "I hope you don't mind," I said, pulling off the road. "I'd like to sit here a second."

Samantha shrugged.

I left the headlights on. We sat in silence, watching as a halo of moths skittered this way and that in the twin beams, diving past each other in narrow, perfectly timed missiles. I could still see it: Enzo, gunning the engine. The look of surprise on the dog's face as the car bore down. I squeezed my eyes shut as Enzo let out a warrior whoop. I felt the swerve of the MG, the telltale *thump* as we hit the dog.

Moments later as we surveyed the scene, I managed to convince myself Enzo had hit the dog on accident, but when it came to assessing the damage we'd done, it hardly mattered. The dog stared the length of the road with glazed eyes. Her belly had ruptured, and inside the folds of matted hair and deflated skin wriggled five blind pups, waxy and white, slippery as grease.

"Now what?" I asked, stupidly.

Enzo didn't answer. He picked up a pup, whispering in its ear. Then, moving with so much speed and certainty that I failed to grasp his intent, he snapped the animal's neck.

"What the *fuck* was that?"

"What good is surviving if you don't know what you survived?" said Enzo, calmly, reaching for the next one.

"That's bullshit and you know it."

In all our years of friendship I'd never called Enzo's bluff, not even when he denied taking part in the Cherry Blast—the Airborne's version of fraternal hazing—that cracked the skull of a trainee who was dangled then dropped out a second story window. Enzo swore it was an accident but his eyes hardly blinked as he proclaimed his innocence. I never fully believed his account, but shoved my doubt aside like always, defending him against others in the company who wanted him punished.

"Leave them here with me," I pleaded.

Enzo stroked the ears of the pup he held in his hand. "They'll never make it without their mother," he said, wrapping his fingers around the animal's neck. I turned away only to be beckoned in the next second by a tap on my shoulder: Enzo, offering me the last orphaned pup with a sweet, expectant smile. I took it, relieved to feel the small warm body pressed against my chest.

I planned on carrying the puppy back to base, making it a mascot for the platoon. If not, there was the pound. Or any old stretch of road with houses on it, a father and son tossing a football in the front yard. Once it was old enough, of course. I could see the dog's life: the family I would find for it in the country, the boy who would take him fishing; lying on a hearth while a fire crackled, nose on its paws.

"It's okay," I said, as the puppy whimpered, pricking my wrist with its slippery dewclaws. "I'm right here."

Only I wasn't. I had left the here-and-now years ago and was swimming in the depths of Enzo's madness, which had snared my lungs like barbed wire. Thinking only about this, about my desire to breathe freely again, to have my friend return to me, whole and

intact, I pretended to twist the animal's neck and then left it on the side of the road, curled up with its dead siblings.

Later that night when Enzo dropped me off at the barracks, I got in my truck and headed down the same ground we'd just covered. But I was much too late; the puppy I'd abandoned was dead.

Maybe Enzo was right after all, I thought, wildly. Maybe there really is no use surviving if we don't know what we've survived.

Over and over I repeated this, until I made it home.

The moths danced like a tribe under a harvest moon, wings translucent in the artificial light. Samantha lit a fresh match, cupping the flame to block the wind. She threw her head back, inhaling smoke with closed eyes as if deep in prayer. I started the engine.

"Ready to take off?"

"Not yet," she said, blowing out the match.

We sat in the darkness, watching as the moths beat their wings with an unpredictability as sure-footed as I'd ever seen, drawn to a blinding source of light for no other reason than it was there, and they were here.

I cut the engine.

For now, we would wait.

D. Salner

THE SHOOTING LESSON

OKLAHOMA TERRITORY

April, 1892

"Who was the fellow who told on Jesus?" Colonel Reinhart asked Frank, who leaned against the porch railing. Slanting away from the cabin on the west side, beyond the hog lot and small barn, the light blond grass covering the gray earth of the Oklahoma territory rose up to meet the spring sky.

"Judas Iscariot," the fourteen-year old answered. He had grown like a weed in the last year, large hands, strong from farm work and his job in a stable.

"And what do you call someone like that?"

"A traitor."

"And who killed Jesus?"

"The Jews." Frank cocked his head and sniffed the breeze coming over the pasture on the next farm. He couldn't remember how he knew this answer. Maybe from some of the older boys at the stable. It wasn't from church, for his mother had never taken him to the church that most of the other Cherokee attended.

"Was it Jewish soldiers who laid their hands on him and fastened him to the cross? Did Jews drive the nails?" The Colonel's blue eyes stared intently at the boy. The old man had been a school teacher, as well as a Union Army officer, and now the boy did chores for him in exchange for these lessons.

"No, it was Romans."

"That's right," Colonel Reinhart pronounced. "Judas and a few other Jews *were* traitors. They turned Jesus over to the Romans. But the Romans were the ones who did the killing. They were the enemies of the Jews. The Romans nailed hundreds of Jews to crosses. Jews lined the road to Jerusalem like great birds with their wings spread out against the sky. Some cried before they died. Some begged forgiveness from the empire. Others suffered for days in silence . . . But that's enough about suffering . . ."