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GRENADE



Trace Mullins stole an M67 fragmentation grenade from his father—the post weapons range instructor who, according to Trace, had “a whole closet full of stuff”—and we all spent one Saturday afternoon in the dugouts behind the Officer’s Club pool deciding what we were going to blow up. It was the beginning of our last summer vacation on Ft. Bliss, deep in the heart of Texas. Well, maybe not the heart. More like the intestinal tract. The four of us—Trace, Danny Ticker, Marvin Woods, and myself—were still a month away from enlisting in the Army, each one as invulnerable and bored as every other recent high school graduate on the planet. But even though we’d done everything there was to do (in our minds), we still couldn’t shake the feeling that we’d be spending the rest of our lives patting at our pockets, as if for a lost key, unable to pinpoint that one vital reward we missed out on. Such misconceptions have watered the weeds of not a few epic disasters.

“Symbolism is important here,” Trace said. He was picking at the steel loop that dangled from the cotter pin of the grenade. “This baby has to speak. I don’t want to just blow up a trashcan.”

He passed the grenade to Danny who cupped it with both hands, as if receiving a communion wafer. “Wow,” Danny said, his voice catching. “It’s light.”

2 LAST KNOWN POSITION

“Until you pull the pin,” Trace said. “Then you’re holding a shot put.” He leaned back and stared out at the softball diamond, muddied from a recent rainstorm. “That’s what my old man says anyway.” His eyes were dark gray, like gunpowder, dashed with just enough wisdom to be threatening. A weary fly made the mistake of lazing across his line of sight and he snatched it out of the air with the reflexes of a coiled snake. When he opened his hand, the dead insect floated to the ground like a piece of balled-up black thread.

On the dugout bench beside him, Marvin unfurled a plastic baggie of purple-haired sensimilla he had scored from a GI over in the enlisted barracks. “We should toss it into the O Club lounge,” he offered, “when all the butter bars come charging in for their evening coma.”

Trace glanced over at me and said, “That would be mercy killing. They don’t deserve mercy.”

“Isn’t it supposed to be shaped like a pineapple?” Danny said. His eyes looked wet and swollen with awe. He was the youngest among us, as thin as a refugee, with a clean, pert voice that puberty forgot. He was also the most intelligent, which meant, logically, that he was most likely to come to great harm. His father was a helicopter pilot who had a reputation for beating up the family, especially Danny’s mother, a South Korean national who spoke little to no English. We used to joke that the only clear phrase she knew was “Operator, get me MPs!”

“You’re talking World War II,” Trace told him wisely. “These babies are much, much meaner. Bigger blast radius. Higher kill rate.”

“Won’t your old man miss it?” I asked him.

Trace shook his head. “Plenty more where this came from, Cadet, don’t you worry.”

“I wasn’t.”

He went on to explain that he didn't mean to imply his theft was without risk. His father would be out for blood if he found out, but the only way he'd find out was if somebody told. If that happened, Trace assured us, that somebody would be getting pay-back. That somebody would get a grenade for Christmas. Or a birthday. Whichever came first.

"I say we sabotage the Bradley parade next week," Marvin suggested. "We could roll it into the street when the Army band marches by." He giggled nervously, focusing what little concentration he could muster toward packing weed into a bong constructed out of a pickle jar. He always giggled, usually without provocation, with a looseness that I likened to a cheap doll after it had been shaken a few times. The dugout quickly grew hazy with smoke as the bong made its way among us.

"Or that horse," Trace said, his eyes softened with a slight buzz. "I'm so sick of hearing about that goddamn horse. Last night, I dreamt I was married to it."

We all nodded in stoned agreement. Every summer, the post commander organized a parade to show off the latest military hardware he was in charge of. This year, the bash was in honor of what would have been the one-hundredth birthday of General of the Army Omar Bradley. Bradley was, of course, dead, but a parade horse he once rode was being flown in from California. There were banners all over the base announcing the event.

"Wait a minute, hold it, no way," Danny blurted, wasting a mouthful of perfectly good pot smoke. He looked startled, a full minute or so behind in the discussion. He pushed the grenade back into Trace's hands. "I'm not going to be a part of anyone getting hurt. Forget it. You can just cut me right the hell out if that's your plan." He made it sound like a threat, although he must have known that it would never have occurred to us to feel threatened by him.

“Stop crying,” Trace told him.

“I’m not crying. My dad’s going to be in that parade.”

“So’s mine. Look hard and tell me if you see me crying.” Trace turned to me. “So how about it, Cadet? How bad should we be?” He handed me the grenade as if this would clarify things, as if I could make no decision without first consulting, like a crystal ball, the explosive device.

I examined the grenade. A seamless olive drab orb save for the metal housing unit and safety lever, roughly the size of a tangerine, comfortable in my hand. Although lightweight, I could tell immediately what Trace had meant by shot put. The responsibility of taking hold of something that could turn us into hamburger in a burst of brutal light settled into the sinew and cartilage of my knuckles, pushing sweat into my hand like grease through a sieve.

Feeling Trace’s eyes on me, I pursed my lips, turning the grenade over a couple times as though looking for imperfections. I didn’t want him to see my unease, to get hold of it. Since the day we’d met two years before, I stood somewhat in awe of Trace, the intense and troublesome sergeant major’s son, just the kind of friend my mother warned me about. He didn’t return the sentiment though. He disliked me at first because my father was an officer. Worse, a *medical* officer. Because of this, he enjoyed baiting me to no end. He especially liked calling me “Cadet” despite the fact that I had sworn I would enlist. Over time, neither of us demanded too much of the other. Our relationship was somehow simplified by the fact that we were destined to come to blows.

I looked up and found the three of them staring at me, waiting for my answer, the final vote in our grimly hatched scheme. Finally, for lack of anything resembling a courageous thought, I said to them: “Let’s kill something.”

Trace laughed greedily through a veil of smoke, pleased with my answer. “Or someone,” he said. He plucked the grenade from

my hand, then offered up a gamy, fluoridated smile for Danny to show that he was kidding—sort of.

It was the last time I ever saw him smile.

With the grenade nested safely in a camouflaged TDY pack slung over his shoulder, Trace led us down Sheridan Road, single file, in step and silent, like soldiers on patrol. Off our left shoulders, the desert sun kissed the spine of the Franklin Mountains, stretching our shadows to obscene twelve-foot lengths. There wasn't a cloud to be seen above, which was hard to believe since only hours before, a storm had dumped probably half the annual rainfall in about fifteen minutes.

As we shuffled ever forward, past the movie theater and Four Seasons, I couldn't help but notice the stark decline in housing quality. The officer's quarters, where I lived, slowly gave way to post enlisted. These houses were decidedly smaller, red-bricked and screenless, with none of the clipped, pampered hedges found on my part of the base. My mother called this area "the projects," something I never repeated to my three friends although I'd heard them say it once or twice.

Just before the dreary duplexes yielded to the parade fields on the north end of base, Trace held up his hand and we stopped with staggered imprecision. He tiptoed a few feet, then squatted beside a swath of sagebrush that framed one of the grassless backyards, reached in and retrieved a medium-sized yellow cat. He stood up, cradling the complacent animal against his chest, all the while whispering into its ear, "Who's dat? Who's dat whittle kitty?"

"Look-ee there, Danny," Marvin said, feigning awe. "I thought your mama-san fricasseed up all the cats on this street."

Danny ignored the gibe. "That's Pontoon. He belongs to my next door—"

"Nobody asked you who he belongs to, soldier," Trace snapped. He flashed us all a feral look that demanded obedience, or at least

ignorance, then headed off toward the parade field, scratching the cat's head to calm it.

Marvin offered a subdued giggle and gave Danny a playful prod as we fell back into line. "Yeah, nobody asked you, soldier boy."

The parade field was deserted, but showed signs of looming activity, including a red, white and blue cloth banner draped along the front of the grandstand. Beneath the podium was a giant circus poster with the caption, *Ft. Bliss Welcomes "Reveille," General Omar Bradley's Favorite Parade Horse!*

Marvin giggled and delivered his best Gomer Pyle, "Gaaaww-lee, did you guys know that General Bradley's favorite parade horse is gonna be in the parade? Didya know? Huh, didya?"

"He does tricks," Danny said.

"Now what I can't figure out," Marvin went on, reverting to his own voice which, come to think of it, didn't sound that much different from Gomer Pyle, "is how they got the old coot up in the saddle? I mean a horse only lives for so long and Bradley kicked the bucket, what, ten years ago? How could it be his favorite if he never rode it?"

"My dad met him once," I said.

"Who? Reveille?"

"Bradley, dip shit. It was right before he died. In Ft. Dix. My dad said the brass just couldn't get enough of the old guy." As we moved away from the parade field toward Pershing Drive, I related the story as my father had told it. Of how he and some fifty junior officers had been forced to study rules and regulations of formal military mess dining. Stuff like which spoon to use, when to use it, and what to use it on. After getting decked up in resplendent mess dress uniforms, complete with polished shoulder boards, the men took their seats around long white tables held down by a ton of silver. Called to attention, it was more shock than anything

when the ancient, disease-riddled Bradley—Five-Star Omar, the Master of the Normandy Breakout, the GI's General—was wheelchaired into the room by a pair of morose light colonels. Heavily sedated, my father had said. Stone cold stoned. The old guy wouldn't have known where he was if he knew where he was. Awe and anticipation gave way to repressed disgust as the aides began to feed the old man, spooning pea soup into his barely receptive mouth, dabbing at the run-off slithering down his bony chin.

I was about to relate what I had considered the best part of the story. How my father had written a letter of protest to the base commander, asking for the charades to discontinue. He'd even managed to convince several of his friends to co-sign the letter which, as one would expect from a well-oiled, spit-shined military unit, yielded nothing.

But Trace cut me off. "And to think," he said, over his shoulder, "we'll be missing all that by enlisting."

"Me, I can't wait 'til I'm that age," Marvin said. "Drooling and wetting myself. All them pretty nurses cleaning up after me."

"You're a sick pup," I told him, and he giggled appreciatively.

"Fifteen years," Danny piped in from the rear.

"What's that, shitbird?" Marvin said.

"The lifespan of a horse."

"Hey, do us a favor and keep up with the damn conversation."

"You wanted to know."

"Ten minutes ago I wanted to know. Is your brain that fried, man? Or is it because you're half commie?"

"My mom's *South* Korean, you fucker!" Danny shouted.

"Same island though, right?"

"It's a peninsula!"

"Quiet in the ranks," Trace sneered back at us, his fingers scratching the underside of the cat's chin. "You're scaring the prisoner."