

Lonely Voices Calling in the Wilderness

by

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November, 2012

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Major Department: English, Creative Writing

This text is a work of creative fiction that delves into the minds of those who have experienced conflict. Whether it is during war or life situations, these stories are often internalized. The text explores how the young are more resilient to casualties and are more apt to mend. We call it a rite of passage. Those who are part of a battle might not be able to compartmentalize their emotional expenditures. This we call PTSD. The text explores two men's different approaches to handling the stresses of war, their ideologies, and their ways of mending.

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A Thesis/Dissertation

Presented To the Faculty of the Department of English

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English, Creative Writing

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A Uada Mentis Clamans In Deserto

These are indeed the times that try men's souls. I am neither a summer soldier, nor a sunshine patriot, just a sheep in the land of many verbose wolves. What I mean by this is the *Brass* with their feathery words tickle the ears of young men, flattering them with their Machiavellian *raison d'être*. "He who neglects what is done for what ought to be done, sooner effects his ruin than his preservation," they would say. And we, like sheep, would fall victim to the cunning of those old lupine wiles. But rather than fighting oppression, tyranny, and terrorism, we are asked to guard poppy fields and assassinate the *political dissonant*. We fight and die bravely or else we exist as a mere echo of our former being. We then become troubled, lonely voices in a wilderness of neglect. We become trapped in our own seventh circle, like Alexander, immersed to our eyes in fire and blood, guarded by the monster of guilt, unable to answer the question "why." And so our stories, like this one, become banished, inner demons.

Not every mission is measures up to a career soldier's American idealism. There are three things that I desire upon my final mission in the service of *King* and country: to survive, to keep my sanity, and to know that I made a difference in the world. As my brother guards Afghan poppy fields, I am sent to "drug alley" in the Yucatan peninsula; sent here to expire a Cartel bigwig. What, one might ask, do Mexican Cartels have to do with the price of tea in Kabul? Nothing. But they have every thing to do with the price of opiates in the western hemisphere - those poppy fields that American soldiers guard in Afghanistan being 90% of the opiate production in the world. I hear that an entity called the Golden Crescent drug trade arcs from Afghanistan to the Cartels in Mexico to the Triads in the Far East. For some reason, I cannot say, we are preserving this institution.

“I call it Flanders Field,” said my brother. I talked to him briefly after an insurgent attack. “Except instead of red poppies growing where soldiers bodies lie, bodies fall on poppies turning them red with their own blood.” Not how an idealistic young American soldier wants to spend his days in the service of his country.

Quod Alii Vivere

They said that I was specifically chosen for this mission. “You have a gift, son,” they would say. “And we need the best and brightest.” I recognize this party line of bull and reject whatever flattery they are attempting because war and killing are not the legacies that I want to be remembered for. My legacies are 3000 miles north east—red-headed twins sitting in a 5th grade class room learning the states and capitals, the parts of the government, and what it means to live in a free country; and a two year old at home with my wife Myra, singing silly songs and boasting how two plus two is *soup*. Nobody needs to tell them that the cost of freedom has its price. I miss them. I want to hold them. *Has it been eighteen months already?* I usually call Myra before a mission. Something about her voice sobers me before I go into the field. I remember my last Morale Call (or Myra Call, as Dan, my spotter referred to it); how I absorb her every word as she tells me about our children—how Jake did at his game this past Saturday, how beautifully Janie played at her performance, and how P.J. is some kind of baby genius. I bask in this as if it was the sun about to shine its last rays for months. This gives me perspective. Who’d have thought that hearing about soccer games, piano recitals, and baby one-liners would center my thoughts? I think of how I have to miss them and it pains me.

The pain of loneliness darkens my perspective of the up-and-coming assignment. I was about to tell Myra that I would be temporarily leaving the “sand box” when our connection was interrupted by an insurgent mortar attack. Among deafening explosions, Myra frantically asked

what was going on. I could barely answer before the phone began reporting of static. “Be careful,” she sobbed. The last thing I heard were her cries of confusion and concern. Fate disallowed me a moment of grief as a nearby detonation sent me sailing, just as I stood from my seat. It was an odd feeling, like my feet were trying to find purchase on a cloud. I was blown across the room, cartwheeling over 30 feet. I tried to get up and run out of sheer panic, but a quiet, small internal voice told me that it was okay, that I was not going to die here today. Still, my first thoughts were that I lost my legs and I suddenly remembered every horrible story about soldiers who were trying to run away from carnage that they had experienced, but had no means to do so. Being shell-shocked is a very odd experience: the ringing in your head, the blood from your ears, the terrible pressure behind your eyes, and the disorientation. I did find my bearings, however, and when I walked out of the communications building, the structure that was standing next to me a mere moment ago was an unrecognizable mass of rubble.

Inter Arma...

Some grey-suited stooge said that this was to be a simple double assassination. Me and Dan and another sniper team would have separate high profile kills in the same zone, only from snipe points several miles apart. There was hardly time for a serious briefing before sending us on our assignment. Rubble from the runway siding blew across the tarmac as we emerged from Base Operations.

“What the hell kind of a briefing was that?” asked Dan. ““Some bad guys are doing something bad to some good guys and that’s not good?”” he scoffed.

“That’s all we need to know, Dan,” I said, trying to reassure him. “So, you know, it’s, “Ruck up fifty” and “wheels up at zero-four-thirty,” and into a cold-ass C-130 we go.”

“Who can sanction a rush mission like this and who was the stooge in the grey?” he asked with a lighthearted touch.

“CIA,” we both said rolling our eyes, grabbing our gear, and heaving it over our shoulders.

Dan quipped, “And what does CIA stand for?”

“Corruption-Inciting Autocrats?” I answered.

“Criminals in Action,” said he.

“Capitalisms Invisible Army.”

“C – I – Am an idiot.”

“Good one Danny,” I laughed. We climbed aboard the clunky airship chuckling needlessly for a few minutes too long, the joke vanishing, like the ground below us.

It was a sordid flight: long, lonely, and lethargic. Dan and I said a few things, but nothing of importance. We’d start up a conversation, while reading our hometown newspapers:

“So, how’s the weather in Podunk, hillbilly?” I’d ask. I might get my answer an hour or two later.

“76. Rainy. Who’s the main attraction at the fair this year?”

“I don’t know.” Thirty minutes later I’d answer him. That’s how it went on those long, cold, dark flights.

It took us about four hours to realize that there was another man on the plane; just one, and he was a mystery. We said nothing to him; just sort of hailed each other with a mock-friendly nod of the head. A shadow seemed to shroud his face like a veil, yet I was able to catch a glimpse of a strong, chiseled jaw and something protruding from his mouth, which he was intently chewing on. At first, I thought it was a straw, but as the shadow turned and curved to the other side of his head, I saw that it was a wheat stalk. “Odd,” I thought. We got on in Saudi

and have been airborne since. Saudi isn't exactly known for its billowing wheat fields.

"Where'd that come from?" I asked myself. And just then I wanted one.

... Enim Silent Leges

We've become quite intimate with the terrain here. It's been 16 hours since the botched hit and we've been circling our ground, cutting back and forth trying to evade capture and escape to our secondary route of exfiltration. With all my being, I wanted to get out of here. Every few hours, we would try to raise command on the satellite phone, but so far no one has been listening. Worst case, they think we're dead. Best, the density of the jungle is weakening our uplink. We figure that our best bet is to find some high ground and establish that coveted S.O.S. We do make pretty good time despite hankering for some food and eking along on our stomachs at the rate of a quarter click an hour. At this pace, you don't miss a detail. I think I had counted about three hundred iguanas along our trek. Apparently iguanas occur in Yucatani nature frequently. As we slithered through the jungle, I heard rustling in a big tree at my four o'clock. If not for an overwhelming feeling of complete safety I thought I might have time to say my last Hail Mary, but when I looked up I saw a 6 foot green iguana with a bright orange fringe on his back. He looked down at me in my Ghillie suit, confused and I looked up at him relieved and hungry.

On my honeymoon in Cancun, I remember the locals telling Myra and me that iguanas were good eating. "Que sabe a pollo, *it tastes like chicken*," they would say. "This is why they are called chicken of the tree." I never discovered the truth in that; I wasn't about to go eating iguanas. The most adventurous in my dining choices I have ever come is eating my MRE's.

The Cartel skirmish lines are regular and predictable. One will ramble through every two

to three hours with about a dozen men. One group brought a dog, but luckily he found one of our traps before he found us. At one point of the day there was an odd lull between search parties. Dan and I agreed that it would be okay to hike a bit rather than crawl.

As we talked, Dan looked up at a spire of thick, black smoke rising in the sky. This plume was situated perfectly between our sought-after high ground and our current position.

“Can never be too easy can it, boss?”

“Get aloft and scope it out, Danny,” I said to him motioning to a tree with my chin. “I know you Tennessee boys can climb.”

He cut his eyes at me as if to say, “Really Sergeant Major?”

“Go!” I ordered, poking my thumb toward the tree.

Dan dropped his rucksack, grabbed his spotting scope, and was shimmying up in a flash.

“That’s it,” I teased. “Davey Crocket and Alvin York have nothing on you, buddy.” A second later, an iguana was tossed from a branch barely missing my open-mouthed face. I decided not to stow any further jokes with so much “ammunition” at Dan’s disposal. Once he found a solid branch high enough to spy from, Dan looked down at me with a face of concern and began his descent.

“They’re dead.”

“Who is, Dan?”

“A group of Cartels,” he said rubbing the back of his head. I paused a minute to think.

“Could have been SEALs looking for us,” he offered.

“Not without establishing communications first. Too risky,” I said without thinking.

Looking at Dan’s disappointed face, I added, “Still, you have a point. Maybe they got our first mayday.” My attempt worked at first, but I saw it in Dan’s eyes, turning the possibility over and

over in his mind: Mission a bust...broken signal...dead signal...no re-establishment of a signal. Still, he half smiled and nodded with mock contentment even though we both knew the reality of our situation.

With haste, we decided to reconnoiter the dead Cartels in an effort to realize our brightest hopes. We approached the scene in a staggered formation with me taking the lead and Dan five meters behind me. I waved Dan ahead of me as I saw that the scene was clear. He moved quickly up to the lead and walked in among the massacre. We were both on high alert, but took in every detail of our surroundings. Once we eliminated the chance of us being watched, we relaxed our weapons and dug for intel.

“Dan, two mikes and we’re gone. These Cartels have amigos out here that might see this smoke and think its something worth checking out.”

“Roger that, Sarge.” I took a minute to remove a rock from my boot, and just as I laced it back, Dan returned.

“Sarge, you gotta come see this.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said as he led me to this mysterious venue.

As we approached the site, Dan urged me on but stayed still. In a way he reminded me of Jake when he colored on my favorite slippers with a red permanent marker. He just turned his back to the scene not retreating, but not moving forward either. He looking at me with an ashamed face turned down to the ground. It took me a few paces, but I saw what Dan was referring to. The stench was unmistakable and I raised my hand to cover my mouth and guard my nose as I moved to the first display: Men in sitting positions, up against a tree with playing cards in their hands. They appeared to be using an empty gas can as the table. One of the

“players” I noticed was holding aces and eights. Just beyond them a man was set up in front of a gas can wedged between two branches with the spout turned down. The man was holding a cup under the spout and it looked as if he was getting a glass of water from a water cooler. Another body was sitting under a tree with a flask turned up to his gaping mouth. In another scene there were two men positioned so it seemed that one was servicing the other. One body was sitting in the smoking jeep with his hand on the radio dial. Or was it the cigarette lighter? Most of them had unlit cigarettes in their mouths. It was like the Bodies in Motion Exhibit only instead of muscular and skeletal displays, there were melted skin and burnt clothes to see. In the thick of my disgust, Dan lifted his rifle towards the noise of an approaching jeep.

“Toss me a grenade, Dan.” I quickly pulled the pin and set it under a rock, careful to keep the spoon pressed to the side of the container.

“Let’s get out of here, buddy, most rickey-tick,” I said as I passed him. “That might confuse them for a while, but we need to put some distance between us and them. It’s gonna get dark soon, so we need to hustle.”

We jogged through the dense brush with our weapons trained in front of us, frequenting a quick check of our six o’clock at regular intervals, like good special operators. About fifteen minutes later we heard the report of the grenade in the distance. I estimated we covered a click and a half from the macabre scene. Too soon the darkness fell over us like a black shroud. We tried to move on with our night vision goggles, but the dense brush availed us no foresight.

“We’ll camp here,” I said. “Get some shut-eye, and I’ll take first watch. I doubt they’re anxious to be stumbling through the jungle in the dark.”

Dan hunkered down and walked around a tree to relieve himself. “Search and Rescue wouldn’t do that would they, Sarge? SEALs neither, right?”

“That was just plain inhuman. No, Dan, they’re not sadists, they’re professionals and they wouldn’t take the time. Plus,” I stammered, “I’ve seen this before, kind of.”

“What was that, anyway?” he asked as he fell asleep.

“The work of a psychopath,” I replied.

I grabbed the *sat* phone out of my pack and decided to use the benefit of the cool, night air to hail command. “Romeo, Romeo - 223, this is Green Arrow, come in.” After a few attempts I gave up and returned to my sentry duties.

Somewhere in the middle of our respite, Dan took over and I got some rest. I dreamed of Myra, naturally. I dreamed of our last night together: the coziness of our queen-sized bed with a comfortable egg-carton mattress cover; that over-sized comforter with the fall-colored stripes; our fluffy pillows in clean-smelling shams; our children, all three, laying between us, across us, on top of us. We just looked at each other’s eyes and mouthed our *I Love You’s*. Just like that Dan woke me from my sweet reverie.

“Chow time, Sarge.”

“Any activity last night, Dan?”

“Nope. But you can be assured that those bastards are milling around like cockroaches trying to find the sonofabitch that desecrated their pals.”

“You got that right. Take up a lookout position over there and go silent. Have your ghillie suit ready.”

“Sarge, what ammo do you have in your rifle?”

“.223 rounds,” I said through a stretch and a yawn.

“Yeah, just like me.”

“Where’s this going, Specialist?” I asked him.

“Why carry these rounds?”

“Cartels use them,” I answered.

“Right, and if we got into a firefight, the Sec Def wants to be able to deny any involvement because the rounds are not the 5.56 NATO rounds that the US military use.”

“Okay.” He tossed me a spent bullet casing.

“Picked this up back at the...back there.”

“5.56,” I read from the bottom of the casing.

“Something’s off,” he said. Dan knew that I was withholding something, but he didn’t press the issue.

Dan and I commenced with the rationing of food. At home, when Myra and I would go to a restaurant we would pick the things off each other’s plate that we liked, but the other did not. This was the scene between Dan and me as I tossed him the freeze-dried peaches and he gave me his rice.

The most curious delicacy in the standard MRE has to be the rice. White rice pressed into a rigid bar, held together by a tub of coagulated butter. 3 ounces is about 160 calories. But it is so good, and it beats settling for “Chicken of the Tree.” I actually salivated when I caught the packet of rice that Dan threw to me. We didn’t speak...we couldn’t, unlike dinners out with Myra, chatting 100 miles an hour. We just made short, quick movements to throw the food the three-meter distance to each other. Dan’s look of concern was trumped by his satisfied mien at getting the peaches. We scarcely noticed that shadows were passing over us in the morning sky, hopping like frogs from tree limb to tree limb. I slowly turned on my side to spy the spectacle. Monkeys. I don’t know if they could smell the food, or what, but dozens of Monkeys were filling the trees above us. It was kind of scary in a way. Dan was busy devouring his peaches,

but he kept an eye on me. I waved my hand in front of my face to get his attention. This was the alert signal. I pointed up and he gave me a half smile as he saw the mass of primates aloft. Not really sure what he was thinking, but he tossed an opened bottle of Tabasco (the small one that comes with the MRE) into the field between us. Like a shot a monkey came swooping out of the tree and rose back up to his perch. Two seconds later, we heard a shriek of pain and laughed as quietly as we could. The hot sauce gave me a hankering and I motioned for Dan to send me one. He motioned back that he had no more. I was disappointed. Dan motioned for part of the chocolate bar he knew I had saved for him. I broke the bar in half and sent it flying his way. At the apex of its trajectory, however, a low hanging limb caught it and deflected it into the field the Tabasco had fallen in a minute before. Just as before, a monkey came down grabbed at the prize without a stop and smelled it carefully. Before he could consume the treat, his monkey friends began chasing him and upon catching him, began beating him up for the sweet morsel. It was then that Dan let out a short belch of a laugh that sent birds flying from the trees in fear. In a second we buried our trash and hugged the terrain once again.

“You gringos finished monkeying around?” came a voice from the brush. I saw the silhouette of a man standing in front of me, but for all my squinting I could not see his features for the sun trickling its rays through the trees. What I did see was a stalk of wheat protruding from his mouth that he was intently chewing on.

Principio Finis

I remember with vivid detail the mission and the great failure. It began on a sultry day. The C-130 landed who knows where and we stepped onto a UH-1 waiting for us, rotors moving. After about a twenty-minute ride, the pilot came in over the *com*.

“Two minutes until I.P.” I related the information to Dan.

“Infiltration point, two mikes.” We both gathered our gear and after a quick bank to the left the executed a three second ‘touch and go,’ where we got ourselves, our weapons, and our fifty-pound Rucksacks on the ground. If all was right, we were to be inserted about five clicks from where the supposed target would show his pretty head. We run to the tree line to take cover just in case someone was tracking the aircraft. Once out of view, we Ghillie up and slowly, patiently make our way east to the target.

Intel says he wouldn’t be there for another sixteen hours and we’ll need every minute of it to get to our sniping perch. We’ll hike about four and a half clicks of the distance and stalk the rest of the way, low and slow on our stomachs, avoiding any skirmish lines, proximity detection, or over watchers. This is where patience comes in: crawling slowly through mud and muck; moving without a sound as patrols walk by, not losing your cool if soldier steps three inches from your face. For a sniper, hiding from the enemy is not all that difficult. Fooling the grasshoppers and katydids is the biggest trick. There is such a thing as too quiet; when the insects stop chirping, there’s danger close by. If you can move through the noise...well, that’s validation of your skills. Cartel goons are clumsy and loud. The telltale silence is a giveaway as they approach from aft. I wonder where Dan is in relation to me. I’d estimate he’s a hundred yards away, maintaining discipline. I shouldn’t worry. Dan was the best stalker I ever saw in Sniper school.

On the field test for stalking, a scout sniper trainee is required to move through a field to a target 1,000 yards away without being detected. Several sniper graduates were tasked to detect the snipers in the field before they can close to 150 yards. On the way in, the snipers have to shoot at targets at regular intervals and still not be detected by the highly trained eyes of field-

proven snipers directing two marines on foot in that field. I was one of those spotters. I found the other three snipers eking their way in, but Dan I never found. None of us did. Not until he was 80 yards from us. It's not a big surprise that this is a sniper school record that stands today. One of the Cartel troops walks over towards my position, unzips and urinates on the tree next to where I am. It splashes on me and I look at the droplets; he's well hydrated. Not a sound now, not a burp, hiccup, sneeze, sigh or you're dead. Bad guys move on, time for us to go.

I allow myself a tinge of admiration for the spot I was in. The density of the jungle could not obscure the beautiful array of birds one can see. Not far from me I saw a group of chachalaca. If a turkey was half as big, and could perch in a tree, this would be it, red gizzard and all. It's an odd bird, quite shy, but very loud. If I have ever heard the sound it makes, I would have compared its call to a rusty meat grinder. Not sure if it's trying to attract a mate or give us up to the local thugs. As if this wasn't enough noise, a yellow-bellied bird (a kiskadee), flew in to investigate the din. This bird looked like an escapee from a prison with a black-striped "mask" across its eyes and the bright yellow breast that looked like a prison jumper. I named him Pecho. Pecho Amarillo.

"Hi Pecho," I whispered.

"Eeeeeee! Eeeeeee!" was it's loud and shrill reply.

From then I decided that trying to befriend the "locals" was detrimental to our mission.

After an exhausting trek, I finally reach our vantage point—a grassy plateau overlooking the compound. I propped myself against a pile of rocks only to have a black iguana half crawl on my shoulder and burp his protests at me having disturbed his basking session.

"Sorry, sir," I said to him and pushed the lizard off of me with the muzzle of my M-40. Fearlessly, he looked straight down the barrel with his bulging, hazel eye, then closed it and

slowly moved on. I hear Dan approaching from 6 o'clock and say to him, "22 mikes until the convoy arrives. Let's have that picture of el hombre malo." I used that time to get to know this bad man.

Sniping is a very personal business; that is, you can tell a lot about a guy looking through a high-powered scope. I spied through the window of his hacienda and eyed his office. Shades were open, so I knew he wasn't there. I saw on the wall degree from the Universidad Veracruzana; a double major: Agricultural Science and Business Administration. Suma Cum Laude; impressive. I see him in a photo with his dad or his uncle training horses. I consider for a moment the memories he carries of those long nights studying, those playful weekends at the family farm, his plans to take over the family business and bring it into the 21st century. There are photos of wife and children, happy memoires of a life dedicated to family, just like myself. In spite of all this, I allow myself a moment of reflection: *two plus two equals soup*, I chuckle and shake my head. Sounds of the convoy nearing the front of the compound snap me from my daydream. Out steps the man (I kind of like him now) talking on his cellular phone. I noticed that he must have had a hard life, judging from the pockmarks on his face. The edges of his mouth are wrinkled and turned down—he smokes a lot. I see the wedding ring on his finger—the phone call he just got had to be from his wife, whom he is deeply in love with (the flash of admiration in his green eyes is unmistakable). Staring at a man half a mile away, watching him as he smokes his cigar, picks his nose, scratches his butt. I recognized the power that I have over the man: me, knowing that he is about to die; him, thinking he has dinner plans tonight; there is much power in that; an evil, morbid power that no man should bear. I hesitated for a few seconds asking myself what it is that he did that was so bad to warrant me snuffing out all of his experiences, all of his memories, all of his stories unshared. His children are going to be scarred

by this single act. I brushed that battle of sentimentality aside for the higher ground: *This guy is trying to sell drugs to my kids.* In a deliberate action I slowly positioned my rifle down toward the mark. I loaded my projectile slowly in the shaft of the magazine and smiled as I lovingly finger the hard trigger. “Come on Betsy,” I say to the gun. “Be true.”

Crosshairs on target, he looks up almost as if he sees the gun about to go off. A gentle squeeze later and I can hear the “phud” of the rifle spewing its death...silence for about 5 seconds and then the bullet hits its mark. The bloody mist sprays from the victim’s head, lingering in the air like an eerie fog. Brain matter makes a Picasso on the wall in the background. The man’s lifeless body drops. “Rest well, brother,” I thought and I pondered how many birthdays, soccer games and piano recitals he won’t be around for; how many baby one-liners he’ll never hear. I think of how he has to miss them and it pains me.

“Target down. Primo shot, Sarge!” Dan said excitedly. My spotter looked on though his scope waiting for the second sniper to take out his target. The shot missed, hitting the grey stucco siding of the house and sending splinters in the air. Quickly I loaded another round into the chamber of my rifle. The second target was crouched behind the wheel of the car. For a sniper this is not a possible shot. The wheel-well of any car is reinforced with layers of metal. I waited to see if the Arab was impatient. His entourage and the Cartel goons were taking cover and looking through binoculars for our position. Arab guy sticks his shumagg out around the wheel a little too far and I shoot. At first I thought I missed and reloaded.

“Target down,” said my spotter, with a somber voice. We saw a pool of blood expanding over the brick drive, zigging and zagging through the grout grooves. All too soon, we saw the bad guys pointing up to the precipice from where we sniped.

“Time to move, Danny!” I ordered. “We’ve got about 100 Cartel thugs looking for us.

Bonum die mori

“You!” I screamed, looking at a tall, lanky Marine with a wheat stalk hanging out of his mouth.

“Fine shooting Sergeant,” he said in a slow, southern drawl.

“What are you doing here? You can’t be here!” I said.

“Just catching up with the boys who saved my bacon.”

“We have to keep moving, those patrols are looking for us,” I told him.

“Don’t worry, Sergeant, they’re not all that. Ran into a few of them fellow a few clicks back. Weren’t any trouble at all. They were...fun,” he smiled maliciously.

“You’re reckless and incompetent and when we get back to base, you are going to have a lot to answer for,” I said.

“I’m reckless? What do they teach in your sniper training? Give away your position by making awful noises in the jungle? Why, I’ll bet you wouldn’t even know if I had snuck up on you, you were sleeping so hard.”

“I’d know,” Dan said.

“You sure about that, stretch? Because I have a dog tag and a family photo of your man over here that says otherwise.”

Immediately I searched for my picture of Myra and the kids that I kept on a strap on the butt of my gun. It was gone.

“Fine looking family: Janie, J.P., and Munchkin, is it? And that Myra, what a dish! A fine Scottish Clan! I guess we’ll be answering to no one.”

Rage built up in me like I’ve never known. I saw only red as I rushed at him. He didn’t move at first; he just stayed there leaning up against that tree and smiled behind his wheat stalk.

Half a second before I reached him, he placed one arm under my armpit and the other over my shoulder and upon turning at his waist, flipped me right on my back. I saw my feet flailing helplessly in the air and for the second time in my life, had the sensation of brute force propelling me across a space of time and turf.

“Now don’t we look silly?” asked the man.

“Stand fast, you sick bastard!” screamed Dan, holding his sidearm to the man’s head. Dan looked down at me for a second...his fatal flaw. The man slapped at Dan’s gun, which had moved to the side. The gun erupted and the bullet hit me in the thigh. Not a death-shot, but a painful one. A second later Dan was on the ground with a sharp K-Bar knife gliding across his neck.

“No!” I shouted, helplessly. The pain ripped through my leg. I saw blood pouring from him and his eyes were wide with fear. He tried to speak, but a gurgling noise was all he could muster. I saw his blood spread out quickly on the ground and in that moment I ceased seeing the color red.

“The troops will have heard that,” he said in an almost concerned way. “Good luck...I’m keeping these,” he fanned himself with picture and held the tags from their metal lanyard. With that he left.

I tried to stand and brace myself, but the pain was too severe, I fashioned a tourniquet from the strap on Dan’s gun and while doing so, I looked at lifeless Dan’s body. A football hero, married to the Prom Queen, full ride to the University of Tennessee, but instead volunteered for Marine Force Recon. His daddy is crazy rich in the oil business, and his mom was Miss Tennessee. What an unrealized legacy. I wanted to do something with his body, but couldn’t spare the strength or time. I thought that I might buy myself a moment or two by pulling Dan’s

ghillie suit over him and propping him up on his gun. If the troops passed this way, it might cause them a moment of pause. I thought about how tasteless it was to borrow from Wheat Stalks sick repertoire of positioning the dead. Moaning in agony I completed my task and continued to the high ground, slithering more out of necessity than concealment.

I'm not sure if it was the fever kicking in or if it was actual, but I radioed my position to someone on the radio and couldn't tell who. For all I know, it was the guys looking for me. My whole life, I wanted what I did to matter to the world. I wanted to die for something. I wanted to die old or fighting for my country. Is it a good day to die? I called out to Myra. I called out to God. Everything went black.

Natura Humana

I used to believe in the innate goodness of man. What I've seen of this creature makes me wonder at all of the content of character man exhumes. I would posture to any who might argue that man is evil within, and all we see are veneers. Man is a naturally malevolent beast, of whom I am the chief. People cannot be trusted. They are spies and they mean to do harm at the slightest provocation. Don't judge! Unless you've been to war and have seen your best pal knock you over to get to cover and save his own hide, don't judge. I've seen the absolute worst in mankind and this animal predilection to be the fittest is ugly business. Cemeteries are filled with Americas best and brightest, not because they gave up their lives for the greater good, but because the greater failed them and sent them to their burial grounds

Execuiis

Selecting a burial spot is just morose; creepy at best. I wonder why the living would preoccupy their lives by the consideration of where they might lay themselves when they die. Don't get me wrong, I know we all must die. I'm just not in a hurry to have my funeral flash before my eyes, or rather the worry of being absent from proceedings dealing with my committal. I would not entertain you with details of how I might see my own burial, rather those of others here in this cemetery. These late loved-ones who left the interment details to their survived mourners, mourners who overlooked perhaps one small factor in the burial act. For example, in normal North American funeral practices, the dead are chosen an ornate lacquer-finished wooden coffin, laden with an intricate embroidering of flowers – or a fish, or a favorite rock band emblem – sewn into a velvet lining. Complete with a plush comforter and pillow – even an interior drawer to place revered memorabilia. Their dead are embalmed to slow the

inevitability of decomposition and placed within gasket-sealed casket sold to them by a career-minded Funeral Director. I can understand why undertakers and coffin-makers fail to tell the well-meaning bereaved that such a tight seal coupled with the embalming chemicals are conducive to decomposition by anaerobic bacteria. This means nothing to the mourner, unless, heaven intercede, they are chosen as the family representative to attend an exhumation. The olfactory and visual systems receive quite a shock at the putrefied liquefaction of remains. Not for me!

The alternative is, of course cremation, the burning of a dead body and the capture of the ashen remains to display in an urn or to bury in a memorial park. There is the casting of one's ashes into nature, an agreeable thought. This way the remains could be swept up in a great rush of wind or to be swirled around in little eddies along nature's floor to finally rest somewhere upon a gorgeous green lea. Unless it is a great meadow where cattle graze and the grass that you have fertilized with your ash is engulfed by some Jersey heifer; to be chewed up and regurgitated through four stomachs; to be spent as fertilizer, to grow the grass that the cow eats again; and so you spend your death in a continuous cycle of defecation. Ask me and I will tell you that I would prefer the aforementioned illustration; nature's vomit on pristine linens.

This is what occupies my mind. Even as I walk the cemetery, smelling the freshly mowed grass, reading the names on the headstones, counting as I go. Step 13, Daniel Webster Gardner, Specialist USMC 1980 – 2006, I knew him well. Very militaristic, perfect marker.

I know these markers, these names. I have walked this maze, this garden of stones some 137 times. I call them off by numbers, Step 16, Zephram Elijah Lane, 1997 – 2001, a chip in the top left corner of the stone. What? Zephram, there's a crack now – in your headstone!

My head shoots down and I continue my walk, now unable to consider in memoriam, Zeph's untimely death as I did so many times before. Step 29, I continue, naming the stones from memory.

Perfectum Maticula Ad Requiem

I've seen many dead men. I've even dealt death to some myself in war. I have set up the charred remains of men in the most practical of positions so that for eternity they could be something to be remembered, like art. Although I have considered the time of my death, for it is at hand, I have not, as of yet, chosen my burial space. In doing so, I resign myself to that grave; that one single corporeal spot for eternity. What bothers me most is that I have quite a difficult time thinking of staying in one place.

If I must choose a place most appropriate to lay myself to rest, I would prefer this *Podunk*, Tennessee cemetery. Laid out on some 2.78 acres of land where 536 plots, four graves per plot, now sit – the grounds would get no larger and the exclusiveness suited me just fine. It was simple and uniform in its stunning, flush rows, like marble pawns aligned for my inspection. In the center of these perfect lines there stood a big and beautiful oak, its shade a comfort after a midday walk. So cleverly planned and immaculately kept, was this cemetery, situated along a quiet country road, far from the bustle of traffic.

On my first visit, I found the worth in walking a graveyard. Peaceful, no one to talk to; just me and my thoughts and those departed buried beneath such faultless grounds. Upon the median of the grounds, I saw the oak tree towering over the stones, its branches stretching out like huge arms gathering its young to its bosom. And there it was, the perfect site for me. Flushed and centered under the spreading tree, a perfect right angle to other stones, a place of stature and meaning. A perfect place to rest.

Chaos Ineundam Formam

Call me neurotic, phobic, or obsessed, but I can't take to change very well. A perfect example is this very memorial park. My perfect resting place has been removed! Some small-minded buffoon decided to remove the tree for a more progressive look. Tiles lay in stacks, waiting to be placed in whatever forms the maker chooses.

Days later the tiles took shape, but my walk was cut short for lack of attentiveness. How could I meditate with such a dissonant array of tiles strewn from one side of the median to another?

It's been weeks now and still my mid-day walks have been waylaid by ill-placed tiles. But the shape takes form.

Finally, my walks resume upon tiles in the form of the fleur-de-lis. I misspoke when referring to the mover of trees as a buffoon. The craftsmanship of this form is masterful. I don't see tiles placed and cut in forms of loops and swirls. I see a path etched into the earth, a walkway of three fleurs-de-lis spiraling into each other coming to a concrete centerpiece of the same design. They are so faultless I treat them as holy ground and remove my shoes. The tiles are perfect; a true work of art; I must walk them.

Step one, perfect. Two, perfect. Three perfect. Four...

Armorum Ad Pedes

I am a prisoner to my mind. That is to say I am captivated by my own thoughts – no confined by the horrors that I have to relive in my mind's eye. Call me Neurotic. I have earned

the name in the service of king and country. The government breeds the best – or worst neurotics. They also spawn the best kind of killer – pawns, cold, calloused, and calculating. I am a demon child, a soulless specter who preys on violence. I will tell you how I lost my soul to my own dark demons – no, how the devil stripped me of my soul. Indeed, it will make a forlorn and contemptible tale. Perhaps I would regale you with exploits of secret missions, daring rescues, and heroic firefights, or instead maybe I would attempt to conceptualize, legitimize, and trivialize the blood mist, the charred remains, the broken bodies threaded around twisted metal – the devil’s work wrought by my hands. I was a quiet hero, a closet hero – I was no hero at all. Call me Death’s Head, the Face of Death, a Death Dealer. Dead to the government that bred me, Dead to the world.

I feel the most alive when I walk these tiles among the dead. I walk with purpose, careful not to step across a tile border. The child’s rhyme floods my thoughts, Step on a crack, you’ll break your back, step on a line, you’ll crack your mind. So, I step deliberately within the tiles; my walk is slow and resolved. As if my life depends upon my every careful pace. It is a perfectly choreographed walk, eyes down, left foot first swings out and finds its mark, gently placed, right foot next, picked up, swung out and around, cautiously finding its resting spot, then the left again. The walk takes hours to complete and my muscles ache from such deliberately slow moves. I welcome the pain soaring through my neck, my back, my thighs, my calves. I feel more alive than ever.

My mind recalls a similar walk in Iraq, 1991. I was assigned as an Air Force Pararescueman to the 20th Rescue Squadron (20th RSQ) out of RAF Upper Heyford. Deployed to Incirlik AB in Turkey, I making trouble for the Republican Guard in Northern Iraq. On one special occasion, I was tasked to walk a supposed minefield readily identifying its breadth and

depth, the type of ordinances encountered, and to propose a method of removal. I chose the slow and deliberate pace I'm accustomed to now, keeping in mind a certain sense of urgency – while trying not to get lobotomized. I cruised nicely into the field and on my way out found myself standing among dozens of 'Toe Poppers' and 'Bouncing Betty's.' A sobering situation, I am sure you understand. My first thought was, how will they bury my remains? Slow and resolved. Step one, perfect. Step two, perfect. Step three perfect. Four... CLICK!

I'm amazed to have even survived the war, the loss of nine good men, my being tortured by captors, dodging bullets in a canyon, the "Bouncing Betty" that turned out to be a dud; and later in the Yucatan, that unfortunate accident, which claimed my final shred of goodness. What's even more curious is how I survive life, suffering from PTSD, insomnia, anxiety, OCD – slight paranoia, and visions of grandeur. I have made my life one minefield after another.

Hominem Mors

There is but one pleasure in my life and that is the coffee house that my new apartment is situated above. It is by design that I chose this perfect spot to reside. I release myself from the cares – and demons – that possess my night thoughts and bask in the fresh aroma of Sumatra wafting up through the vent and into my morning reverie. In pajama bottom and night coat, I pull on my slippers and bound carefully – down nine steps – hit a platform and turn right – down nine more – another right turn to the door of the café. I am greeted at the entrance by an onslaught of aromas of Hazelnut, Sumatra, and Arabica. As I make my way to the barista, I look towards a man in a trench coat. His hat plays with the light so that I can't really see his face. I stare at him lowering my head to get a look. As I do so, I order my coffee and sit at my usual table. The barista brings me my scalding quaff, as usual, and as I reach to pay her, she says, "This one's compliments of the man in the hat." I look around her at the man and nod a thank

you. He tips his hat. Who does that anymore? I don't like him much, but he is my hero today. Perhaps I'll return the favor some day.

Diabolus In Numeris

One, two, three... Counting. I always do it. For example, I am now at 2,100 words in this writing – and 2,100 divided by 300 is seven, my prime number. I count my steps – light poles, parking meters, tiles, people – and it seems that they are always grouped in nines. The number nine is – a curse to me!

...Four, five, six...

Iraq, January 1991. “Seven,” I said, as we counted off. I don't know why Sergeant Pace always had us count off, probably as a matter of assigning us pawns the dangerous missions in a fair and impartial way. For example, there was a tunnel that needed to be ratted out. Sgt. Pace would go to someone and say, “Give me a number between one and ten.”

“Three, sergeant!”

Three is prime – Fromm's **three** symbols are the conventional, the accidental, the universal; Plato's **three** parts of the soul are the appetitive, the spirited, the rational; the triangle – a **three**-sided object known to be the most stable; the atomic number for **three** refers to Lithium (Li) – and there it is – LITHIUM, a mood stabilizing drug. NOT FOR ME!

“Three, okay. The third odd number in OUR counting system is seven, who is number seven?” We all looked around puzzled.

“Sergeant, the third odd number is five,” someone pointed out.

“Yes, but I am number one and we don't use my number,” he retorted. “Seven, front and center!” Seven was my number. I marveled at his method of choosing volunteers. It didn't really matter what number came up, he somehow justified a predetermined person to ‘volunteer’

when it came down to it. Once, Sgt. Pace miscalculated and chose his own number. We led him on...

“What if this person refuses to carry out the sergeant’s orders?”

“I’ll see that person brought up on charges.”

“And if that doesn’t deter him?”

“I’ll shoot him in the head!” We laughed at the thought of the sergeant putting his M9 sidearm to his head and pulling the trigger for disobeying his own orders.

This time it was my number. Seven – the perfect number – prime. I went into the tunnel and commenced looking around. It was dank and dark, so I resorted to using my never touched, immaculate, AN/PVS-5 night vision goggles. As I began, my scouting mission I heard laughing from the mouth of the tunnel – the guys in my squad and their usual camaraderie – I laughed at their laughing as I crouched and carefully walked. One, two, three, turn right, check your six. One, two...

There was recent activity in the cave, but whoever was here left in a hurry. I followed the narrow and winding walkway. It kept going. My orders were to reconnoiter the entire cave and not return until I mapped it out. As I came to the center of the tunnel, I found it expand out into a big room, probably a command center, by the look of it. I saw empty tables lining the wall. On the left of the cave I saw an entrance to another chamber. I entered and gagged – this one small and smelled of death.

Sgt. Pace told me to radio back every five minutes. I guess the sergeant didn’t realize that the tunnel would create too much interference for even the SABER-R special ops radio. I pressed on through the tunnel on the other side of the room. One, two, three, turn left, check your six. One, two...

After about a quarter mile in, I saw sunlight flash in my visor. Take off the goggles genius. I ran up ahead and came out of the other side of the tunnel, my eyes struggling to adjust to the light. I radioed Sgt. Pace to tell him that I was approaching their position from their 'six o'clock' and began walking toward their position. That is when I saw a most horrific sight: Airman First Class Bannister's face had just burst into flames in front of me. I turned too late to avoid the sight of it and as I did I saw Sgt. Pace bruised, bludgeoned, and bleeding, on his knees, with the rest of the massacred squad of airmen around him. He was hysterical. I never heard the approach of the Iraqi soldier behind me. The butt of an AK-47 to the back of my neck brought me down right before I could engage the enemy. I was quickly tied, picked up, and knocked out with another rifle butt to the head. Darkness...pain...fear.

In a state of horrible reverie, I remembered my SERE training. I recalled my being tied to a tall stool and sat in a dark room with a concrete floor. I was 19 at the time, just nine months ago. I remember being asked all sorts of questions from my instructors – brigands, the lot of 'em. With an attitude of hubris, I refused to answer with anything except my name, rank, and serial number. All the shouting, hitting, and sleep deprivation they could muster would not break me (the youngest in our squad). One vile instructor had his limit with my arrogant manner and kicked the stool out from under me. I came crashing down, my full weight on my shoulder. Pain.

Here I am again, tied to a stool, being asked questions in a language unknown to me. I noticed that I was back in the middle of the tunnel, obviously their command center. Now there was radio equipment, maps, and other items strewn around the tables where there were none before. By the inflections in the interrogators voice I could tell that they were not interested in my name, rank, or number. A smug little man in an officer's uniform, complete with sword and

satchel, entered. He asked me, in English, what my purpose was in being here. I said nothing. This frustrated him and he pulled something out of a sack he was carrying. It was the severed head of Sgt. Pace.

“Your sergeant did not want to talk either,” he said. I seethed, sobbed, and struggled in my fetters. The smug officer withdrew his sword and sliced my face along the left cheek down to my chin. It was deep, but I didn’t feel the pain. I looked at Pace, he had a similar cut along his face – I will never forget that look of terror upon death’s head. Even in the face of imminent demise, I thought about escaping. I had to act quickly. The longer I stayed, the more difficult it would be to attempt. By the stench, I knew I was in the ‘death room’ and knew how far it was to the nearest way out – down to the final step, I knew. Six steps to the officer and his sword, nine steps to the guard at the door and his AK. A scalpel on the table near the door – meant for my torture – was going to be used in felling another guard – one of many, no doubt in the next room. How do I get my arms free? My way of freedom was supplied by the sword-wielding officer. In frustration, he kicked the stool out from under me and I fell to the ground. CRACK! That was not my shoulder, it was the stool. I did not hesitate, I rolled back tucking my knees to my chest and pulling my feet over the ropes I was tied to. Now my hands were in front of me. He swung awkwardly to stop me, but I rolled forward, grasping a broken, jagged leg of the stool, and stood up in front of the bewildered officer and stuck him in the neck. I drew the shiv out of his neck and shoved it into his throat. He went down, blood spurting. Taking the sword from his limp hand, I sliced it down at the guard four steps away and cut off his weapon arm before he could get off a shot. His screams were cut short with a quick, powerful slice to the neck. I picked up his weapon and jumped back into the room in time to see the head of my enemy flying outside the chamber. A clamoring ensued and then a riot as they realized what happened. Weapons

cocked (I cocked my own). Two steps, dive to the ground, shoot. They weren't expecting that. Flying bullets found their marks. I stood up and grabbed what I could from the tables (an ammo pouch, maps, compass, grenades, Claymores, radio, Pace's M9). I tossed a grenade into each tunnel and set the Claymore's to level the place. Finally, I exited to the rear where the sunlight hit my face once more – freedom. I dropped a few more hostiles outside the tunnel and began walking into the desert. The hot sun snapped me out of my stupor. I realized that I took a round in the hip and that I had on no shoes. Step, drag step, pain, quickstep. Step, drag step, pain, quickstep. I knelt and fumbled in the ammo sack for the radio, adjusted the frequency and called for help. In the distance the Claymore's blew. Pace was buried with his killers; an unjust end for a soldier.

“Dust Down, Dust Down, this is Player Three.” Nothing. Panic set in as I realized that more Republican Guard soldiers could be following closely. I rose and tried to walk – got as far as I could before I saw the squad dead in the sand, baking in the sun. I tried the radio again.

“Dust Down, Dust Down, this is Player Three, come in.”

“Player Three, Dust Down,” came a response – relief.

“Dust Down, Player Three is solo, wounded, and being pursued, over.”

“Player Three, come again. Did you say solo?”

“Affirmative, I have nine down, nine men down, nine dead.” I sputtered into the radio.

“Solo...wounded...being pursued.” I lost consciousness to the muted, far-off whirling of a UH-1 Medical Helicopter.

I regained a bit of sense; Just enough to hear the medics counting to lift me into the hold. “One, two, three.” As we lifted off, I saw a medic starting my IV. She looked down and smiled. “You're gonna be just fine airman,” she said, “Just fine.” I doubted her optimism.

Beneath my oxygen mask I mumbled, “Nine down.” That’s where sanity broke...and I passed out.

Nine would become my nemesis until this day. I would see it everywhere. Obsess over it all the time. Once even I got into a bit of trouble because of it. Over a crossword puzzle, no less. In my defense, the missing word was nine down. I was petrified. I couldn’t think. The clue was: a preoccupation with something – nine letters. I kept hearing my report back in Iraq, nine down, nine men down, nine dead. Panic set in and I could not focus myself – so I dialed 9-1-1 to ask them for the answer. Seemed reasonable at the time; I needs a crisis intervention. They took me before the judge for that one – sentencing forestalled pending psychiatric evaluation.

Ave Victor

We heard about the heroes’ welcomes. Never had one, but heard about them. The lavish setting of food and the long line of brass greeting you as you step from the plane to the tarmac, the proverbial brass band playing Stars and Stripes in the background. They would welcome you home by patting you on the back, saying, “Great job son, you did well, we’re real proud.” We always wanted to ask them, ‘Really, what did you hear?’ Never did though. I seem to recall those same ‘heroes’ a few months before in Saudi cursing their luck for having to be there, wondering what in the world they were doing for the war effort, wishing that they could go home, wanting to be a civilian so bad they would shoot themselves in the leg to make it so. These guys were the first ones being patted on the back, so proud of themselves...idiots! They received the most prolific of all welcomes. They received the most distinguished metals for complaining about having to do their jobs. We wanted to pin those metals to their jugulars. As

later flights came in, the welcomes got more sparse, until, if you were one of the last to come home, as were we, you were met with a dark, empty hanger where the glitz and brass were a few weeks earlier, not even an echo remained of the words and songs from before, just a forlorn building and it's forgotten warriors. Even the media lost interest. Those 'heroes' were able to come back and forget about their desert experience. Forget about the heat, forget about the partying they did after their shift, forget about the splinter they got from sitting around the while the real heroes were out fighting the war. I envy their clear mind. We remember every little detail about the desert. We remember the heat that evaporated our sweat and how we walked around emitting steam vapors, like we were about to burst into flames. We remember being stung by a scorpion, making our hand swell as big as a softball. We remember the rescue, muffled noise, Bannister's face, the blood mist, red flash, fireball, screams. We left the military an empty cocoon of what we were going in. The better part of us: love, peace, and contentment completed its dark metamorphosis and left us hateful, warring, and conflicted. 'The government giveth and the government taketh away.' We had nothing to call our own. We were not offered assistance from the government that we served. No V.A., no G.I. Bill, no job placement. I saw that psychiatrist a year after I got out – a pro-bono quack. His assessment: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Tell us something we don't know genius. His answer was drugs and institutionalization. I thanked him for his recommendation – and told him to choke on it. Nothing of my own, just extra baggage.

Finalis Verbum

Thing is, I don't really know what I'm doing with my life. I have no reason to be. I am not living, I am merely surviving. Being chased by a ghost; a man who wants nothing more than

to dispatch me to the grave. He lives in a shadow and I am near his domain; he will catch me and kill me. I sense that he is here right now. I hold the family picture in my hand that I took from the soldier so long ago. I feel a wisp of air move and a force from the shadows grabs it from me.

“I knew it was you in the coffee shop.” No reply. I looked down at the table in front of me and notice a K-bar knife, the blade pointed toward me in an accusatory manner. I hear a faint breathing from behind me. Finally, he was here. This was the end. I feel like I should say something else. I’m sorry, perhaps. A desperate, You don’t have to do this.

But my final words never escape my mouth; I can only muster a gurgling, as a strong swipe comes across my neck, and I see grey liquid pour from my throat.

The 'Fishman' of Bay Shore

It was a warm August morning in Bay Shore. Children were walking or riding their bikes along Heckscher Avenue, but not Allegra Azzone, who sat quietly in the family car next to her father, longing to be skipping rope in the driveway with her friend Betty Gianocchio. Betty was the first friend Allegra had made since moving from Brooklyn two months earlier. They made fast friends over Hopscotch and Saucy Walker dolls. Allegra looked back at Betty pensively and waved to her as she and her father backed out of the drive and headed to the city.

Allegra had many questions on her mind about this trip; the foremost was why they were driving to Brooklyn on Saturday to begin with. She spent most of her waking moments in a back brace, and Saturday was the one entire day that she was free of that bond; free from the worry of scoliosis; free to run and jump and play like a regular eight-year-old kid. "It's just not fair," she thought. But like a good Catholic girl she didn't question her father. She just sat there and smoothed out her gingham dress and twirled the end of the white, satin sash around her dainty fingers. She looked at her handsome father and thought of how no one could be bigger than he, sitting tall in the driver's seat with his white dress-shirt, blue checkered vest, and tan, casual pants. She caught a flash of light from the sun reflecting off of his black mirror-like shoes. She remembered hearing a tale or two about how her father was a decorated war-hero and how he almost died from an infection in his hip. But that all happened years ago, when she was a baby. Her father never talked about the war and always denied any involvement in heroics. During their move, Allegra found a small cedar box with lacquer finish amongst her parents' things. She opened it and inhaled the sweet wood aroma. Inside were several medals awarded to her father during the war. She read the small print on each of them. First the star-shaped one: "FOR

GALLANTRY IN ACTION;” then the cross with an eagle on it, “FOR VALOR;” finally the purple one with a President Washington’s head on it, “FOR MILITARY MERIT.” Now, as they drove on the Southern State Parkway to Brooklyn, she saw him place his hand on his hip and shift uncomfortably in his seat. She smiled at her father, the quiet hero, a smile which he missed.

Ilario didn’t act differently to his daughter, even though he was nervous about his meeting. They talked, but not about anything of significance. Ilario sporadically asked his daughter questions that would challenge her budding intellect. Allegra, a gifted thinker, answered each question seemingly without contemplation and in a very concise manner. Afterward, Allegra would pause, looking at her distant father waiting for another round of questions. But the conversation had fallen away to nervous thought once again. As Allegra turned toward her window and watched the sparse trees slice across her view of the midday sky, Ilario piped up again, “So what kind of truck is the Red Mule?”

“The Red Mule is a red three-quarter ton pickup truck with wooden boards that make up the tailgate,” she recited the words that her father spoke so few times before.

“And how much fish can the ‘Mule’ haul?”

“Three-quarter tons is the equivalent to fifteen hundred pounds of fish,” she said. “But no more than that.” Their conversation never strayed further to work or business. (To Sicilians, the act of work is as matter-of-fact as brushing your teeth or walking your dog; you did it every day; you just didn’t talk about it.)

Allegra felt a tinge of excitement come over her as they drove closer to Brooklyn. Soon she saw a familiar sign and said, “Papa, I just saw a sign for Rogers Avenue!” Rogers crossed over Linden Avenue, where their old apartment building was. Allegra immediately thought of the stickball games she played on the weekend in the alley and the sidewalk where she drew her

hopscotch course. She thought about how bizarre it was that Bay Shore had no sidewalks or alleyways. She drifted back to Brooklyn and the sight of the old ladies of the apartment building sitting in two facing rows on the patio knitting sweaters or winter socks and hats, talking the latest gossip. Allegra shifted her wonderings to her new home, much quieter than the city. Allegra's thoughts of moving hadn't been those of a sad girl leaving her known world behind, but rather of someone on the threshold of a great adventure in the kingdom outside the city. Allegra welcomed the change. In this old realm of Brooklyn, she was treated more like a court jester, than like the princess that her father said she was. Since the day she was told that she had a slight curve in her spine and was made to wear her special brace, she was treated by other children with amusement and mockery. Adults, including the nunnery at her school, either saw her as a fragile, China doll or the neighborhood pariah. Allegra knew she was treated differently when she wore the brace and she hated it. She knew a few facts about this brace and none of them made the device appealing to her in the least. It was uncomfortable to wear, it didn't allow for the exercise she wanted, it had to be worn six days a week, it was given to her through the charity of an anonymous donor. Allegra prayed every night to be able to move to the moon, where surely everyone wore such accessories. She wished on every star in the sky to be treated the same as every other girl her age; like she was treated before scoliosis. But whether it was divine providence or serendipity, the Azzone family moved from their Brooklyn apartment to a house on Long Island. There Allegra met her friend Betty, who wore a special shoe that allowed her to walk and play normally despite a crippling birth defect. Being friends with Betty made her feel normal again and even better on those unfettered Saturdays. Only once did Allegra admit the feelings to her father about having to wear a back brace. It was after a particularly brutal day at school, where the kids relentlessly picked on her. Ilario came home from work and

barely got through the door before Allegra rushed to him, throwing herself into his arms, sobbing about Abigail Traylor who said she walked like the robot from the old Flash Gordon serials.

Abigail got the other girls to start calling her ‘Allegrorobot.’

“I’d trade anything to be out of this brace!” she cried.

Ilario looked at her tenderly and said, “What would you trade, princess?”

“Oh, anything, Papa,” she said desperately.

“I certainly hope that this is not true, Allegra,” said her father as he dried her teary eyes.

There was but one small instance that caused delight in Allegra’s life, and that was when she Nick Brody stood up for her in Sam’s Drug store. Sam’s was on the corner of Linden and Nostrand, the first store past the neighboring apartment building. It boasted of the biggest selection of candy within five city blocks. And the soda fountain was the best in Brooklyn. The owner of the store originally kept his stock on shelves on the main floor, but something happened to the kids in town that changed the landscape of Sam’s forever. *Rebel without a Cause*. After the release of that movie, every boy wanted to be James Dean (or Jim Stark) and every girl, Natalie Wood. They dressed like them after that; the boys in jeans with black biker boots and their hair slicked back, and, when not covered by a black leather jacket, cigarettes rolled up in a sleeve of a white t-shirt. The girls wore puffy blouses under thin sweaters and the poodle skirts with saddle shoes and the white socks rolled down. These kids and their new clothes, new language, and new attitude needed someplace to hang out. So, they went to Sam’s and ordered sodas and candy. Sam decided to make room for the crowd of rebels by moving a few tables and chairs in, adding a soda fountain to his business, and the biggest idea he had, putting in a jukebox. He saw the same kids in the store every day dumping all their nickels into the music machine to listen to Bill Haley and the Comets, Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis, and

Elvis Presley. Allegra frequented Sam's before all the changes; whenever she needed something to cheer her up. Nick Brody was the quintessential rebel teen boy. He boasted to have seen *Rebel* twenty times and could pull off a passable James Dean. Every girl thought he was dreamy, and no one more than Abigail Traylor. Allegra was immune, it seemed, to Nick's charms; she would often sneak shy glances at Nick, wondering what all the fuss was about him, while hoping he wouldn't catch her looking. Allegra's deliberation was broken one day by a resounding, "Hey, look! It's Allegrobot." Allegra was about to rush past Abigail and out the door, when Nick stood up and yelled,

"I'd rather hang out with Allegrobot than 'Scabby Abby.'" He alluded to the acne breakout that Abigail had on her face. This time it was Abigail that ran out crying. After that noble gesture, Nick became Allegra's first big crush.

The female role model in Allegra's life was her Aunt Maria, Ilario's sister. Maria lost her husband Antonio during the D-Day invasion. Maria's grief was so terrible, that she was treated in a sanitarium for two years. It was during those two years that Allegra's mother died from cancer. That news brought Maria from her grief, knowing that Allegra needed a female presence in her life. As of late, Maria's attention was occupied by a gentleman caller named Salvatore. Salvatore was a tall man with youthful good looks and big muscles. They were a perfect sight together; Maria was beautiful, with a perfect olive complexion, big, green, almond-shaped eyes and shapely figure. They looked like they belonged together atop a wedding cake.

Allegra didn't like Salvatore very much. Although he did treat her nice and talked nicely to her, he was somewhat clumsy and uncomfortable around children. Aunt Maria did not notice and Allegra never spoke of it. Allegra never would forget about the Valentine's Day she came

home with a diamond. Maria was quietly excited. She took Allegra to the living room and very lovingly told her of the engagement. “It is every good woman’s providence to find a good man, settle down, and raise her own family. I never had the chance with Uncle Tony. I think I am ready for this, Allegra,” she smiled for the first time during her speech. Allegra had the thought that Maria might be trying to convince herself rather than Allegra, who didn’t really need convincing.

Ilario Azzone was ready to go into the fish business for himself when the war broke out. Afterward, he squeezed every ounce of worth out of his money and eked out a meager, but adequate life for him and his Irish bride. Finally he saved enough to buy his way into self-employment. The bombing of Pearl Harbor, however, changed that. Ilario felt an overwhelming obligation to serve. He was a first generation American and at a time where America needed its men to serve, Ilario couldn't imagine shirking this, his first responsibility. Although his parents and wife begged him to stay, Ilario enlisted in the Army where he served as an officer and translator. He was used as the primary interpreter during the talks of surrender with the Italian government and, for his brilliant efforts, was promised an illustrious career in the military. A tragic accident halted any thoughts of this ever happening. During the battle of Anzio, Lt. Azzone was sent to the forward line with some communications from command. A mortar round exploded nearby him and shrapnel caught him in the hip. He was hospitalized and eventually sent home. The Army doctors had missed a splinter of that shrapnel and it festered unchecked. The day before he was to sign papers to open his business, he collapsed and was taken to the hospital.

“We removed the splinter from his hip, but it caused an infection in his bloodstream,” said the doctor to Allegra’s aunt. “It will take some time for him to recover.”

Bedridden, Ilario bled time and treasury. He cursed his bad fortune and his only recourse, which was to eventually return to his old job on Carroll Street. For three more years, Ilario Azzone was deadlocked in a menial job as a clerk at the Carroll Street Fish Market. Although he never complained, he always thought that he had wasted his talent on another man’s wealth. He labored three more years; scraping by and doing without. But those years were not wasted as Ilario had thought. Word spread of his skill at filleting without leaving a single bone. He became well-liked and highly recommended by Brooklyners, and rumors of his prowess extended to Manhattan and Queens from the affluent businessmen to the criminal underworld; from the five-star to the one, Chefs sought him to adorn their dinner tables with New York’s finest catch of the day. This wasn’t the greatest gift a man could possess, but it was his and Ilario attacked his daily work with gusto, as if it was a task to be conquered. This was the Sicilian way.

“If they only knew,” he thought, “the real reason behind such detail.” Ilario had to slow down. Working faster would exacerbate his wounded hip.

Everything was coming into place for Ilario. Everything, except for the fish. He needed to establish himself with a local market so that he could supply his business. But his jealous counterpart blocked his every attempt. There were only a few markets in New York that bought directly from the fisherman’s guild and sold to local stores. All of them were closed to Ilario. All of them said, “We are disinclined to supply new business ventures at this time.” All of them but one. The last one. The only one that he *could* not be ostracized from was Fulton’s beside the

Manhattan docks. This one was exclusive. Exclusive because it was Mafia owned. Ilario's last choice was actually his best choice.

As they reached their destination Ilario couldn't keep his thoughts from drifting to the *marker* he held in his favor. In the fall of '36, Ilario's father Giuseppe was asked by Joseph Boccino Sr. if he would allow his son to be godfather to Joe Jr. Joe Boccino Sr. didn't want his son to get mixed up in the grimy mafia underworld. He imagined his son a lawyer or doctor, nothing having to do with this ugly business. As such, he wanted someone outside of the mafia business to look after his son, should anything happen to him. Being a good friend of Joe's, Giuseppe quickly agreed knowing how important this position was to Sicilian Catholics. At long last, the time had come to call in this marker he had held on to for the last fifteen years. Ilario didn't worry about his marker being good after the passing of so much time. No books were opened over the favor; no records of kindnesses shown to a mob boss were ever kept. But Ilario didn't worry. He knew his marker was good.

Ilario guided Allegra to a side door of an unassuming brick house (number 2323), attached to many other unassuming brick houses on 137th Street, and knocked. It was soon answered by a small woman in a purple paisley dress. She wore a white apron and wiped her hands on it as she answered the door.

"Hector, l'appuntamento," she said. *Your appointment.* She let Ilario in and upon seeing Allegra, put the back of her hand to her mouth as if to stifle a cry.

"Grazie, Rosa!" came a voice from inside the house. The two walked down the entrance stairs to see Hector Savaglio, a huge man wearing black pants, a sleeveless t-shirt and a white apron. The man filled the doorway and Allegra could not imagine how this broad-bellied,

strong-shouldered man could fit through such a narrow entrance. And as impressed by her father as she had been, she realized that he was not such a big man standing beside Hector Savaglio.

As smells of garlic and broiling sausage wafted out of the basement kitchen door, Ilario introduced Allegra, who remained shy but respectful when greeted. Hector Savaglio smiled warmly at her and welcomed them to come down into this part of his home. As they moved through the doorway, Ilario and Allegra were ushered into an open room and to a large square table. This basement had defied everything known about basements. It was a well lighted place and not dingy or dank at all. It sported furnishings that were not flashy but were fine and comfortable. There were Persian rugs under most every piece of furniture and hand sewn, white doilies under every lamp. The table had silk brocade cloth on it. This long and narrow decoration ran down the middle of the table. The ends came to points and from them hung two large tassels, one on each side. In the center of the table was a wooden bowl full of fruit. Almost ceremoniously Ilario was offered a seat on Hector Savaglio's right side and Allegra was shown to a seat two down from her father. She looked at the tassel with rapt curiosity as the men spoke quietly. As the woman in a paisley dress, his sister, busily prepared the evening meal, Hector Savaglio shot a request over his shoulder towards her. She made no reply, but brought Allegra a glass of water. In a soft, maternal voice she said, "Sit straight, my dear, you're slouching." This too is what her mother always told her at the table. Allegra studied Hector for a short moment. He was too big to sit in the chair he pulled up for himself. So big, in fact that he had to sit on the chair's edge and lean in to the table. Hector placed his folded hands on the table and looked at Ilario with a certain consideration; almost like recognition.

After the preliminary small talk, Hector Savaglio turned to Allegra and said, "Bella, si scusi as we discuss our business in Italian." From then on, the men talked only in Italian until

they were finished with business. Ilario was proud of his daughter's bravery. He knew that she didn't understand her purpose in being there; that she was the gesture of trust needed to convene business over. This was, after all, how Sicilians did business.

Hector Savaglio was a tough older man of sixty years. He liked to cook, grow red roses, and listen to Opera. He gave to charities and supported local artists. He was a regular contributor to The Our Lady of Faith Girls School—Allegra's former school. Hector Savaglio was also a killer and the captain of his faction for far too long. Everyone in the Family, including the boss, knew that he should be Capo by now, but tragedy stunted his career growth. He was a true soldier for his boss in the early days: young, brash, and ruthless. He made his bones and then some. He had seen his share of violence and took part in a lot of it during the gang wars of '45, which propelled him to his current, stagnant position. He was a smart businessman and a talented tactician, which is why he wasn't disposed of in his leadership role. Deep lines of age and worry were etched in his face and gave testament to too many hard years; none harder than when he lost his wife and daughter.

During the New York mob wars, a hit went out on all captains of his Family. The hits were performed by a new bunch of gangsters that the veterans called the 'Young Turks.' These guys were merciless and without honor; the kind that spray a lot of bullets around hitting everyone and everything, hoping to kill their mark (and more times than not, succeeding). It was a public and bloody spectacle. The kind that made the public fear, the police cower and the politicians moan. Hector Savaglio was at the top of the rival gang's list. They found him unawares in his garden and drove by in their black Pontiac Silverstreak's with their Tommies poking out of the windows and gunned him down in the middle of a spring morning. Except it

was not him, but his wife and daughter who were in the garden. Hector Savaglio went mad. The dogged soldier commenced a furtive rampage. He would have his revenge. He knew that they couldn't hide from him forever and Hector was a patient man. He waited for these killers to come out of hiding. He waited until they were with their families. He waited until they were at their weakest, most unsuspecting place. He struck from the shadows; a slash to the throat from a Stiletto blade, two bullets behind the ear from a .22, a piano-wire garrote in the theater. In each case he acted alone and left the guilty men dead who took his family. Just the guilty and not their families; no innocent lives lost. On the last job, he stalked Gino Scarpacci, the mastermind who planned the slayings, for five weeks. Gino had a mistress named Lucy in Manhattan that he visited on Wednesday and Friday nights. On Wednesdays they would stay in the apartment and fornicate. Hector would stand in a shadow at the end of the hall and wait, watching the door and listening to Gino spend himself within five minutes. At the door, a vigilant sentry was posted to discourage anyone who would disturb the couple. "No good," thought Hector. It would have to be done on Friday.

On Fridays Gino and Lucy would frequent the Empire Room at the Waldorf-Astoria. All the wise guys planted themselves at some dining establishment in their territory and Gino landed the Waldorf to fuel his never-depleting ego. Gino liked the Singing Pantomimists that headlined there. After the show and dancing and drinks, Gino slowly walked his lady to his car. Only it was more like a stagger from all the drinks they consumed. He hung his tired arm halfway around her shoulders and whispered something suggestive into her ear. She made a hideous screeching noise that faintly resembled a drunken laugh. It made Hector's skin crawl. He watched them from his alley. They would pass by three feet from him never knowing how close to their ends they were. A few other pedestrians walked past the inebriated couple and stared

irritatingly at them. Gino stood up as straight as he could and asked, “Whud’r you’s lookin’ at?” in his deep, guttural voice. The pedestrians quickly moved on. Hector seized the moment. He threw a bottle and hit Gino in the back. Gino stopped, turned around and said, “Who’s the wise guy?” The only answer was another bottle being hurled at him. Being quite lubricated, Gino barely moved out of the way of that bottle, this time seeing it come from the alley. Gino drew the snub-nose .38 out of his trench coat pocket and shot two bullets into the dark alley. “Ain’t so tough now are ya?” he taunted. No answer. “Thought so,” he said as he turned and walked toward Lucy, who was amused by the incident. Gino heard the low whistle of an object coming closer to him and he turned just in time for the final bottle to smack him in the forehead, dropping him to the sidewalk. Gino slowly got up and wiped the blood streaming down his face with his bare hand. He looked worried. Lucy let out a blathering laugh but stopped it short when she saw the serious look on Gino’s face. Gino got up, retrieved his gun, and wobbled into the alley nursing his bleeding head, intent on killing the joker who hit him with a bottle. From the darkness came another gunshot, than an eerie scream. Not the scream of the manly Gino that entered the alley, but the shrill, horrified screech of a hopeless man at his end. Luck approached the dark alleyway, careful not to step out of the light provided by the lamppost behind her. “Gino,” she murmured.

“Run away,” replied the cold whisper from the shadows. And Lucy ran.

As he crept from the alley, Hector looked back at where his lifeless victim was stashed among the refuse. “Ora un debito pagato,” he said to himself. *A debt now paid.* The next day, Hector Savaglio turned old. He lived on the love of his family for years. After they were killed, he survived only to avenge them. Now that the bloody business was complete, Hector hardly

knew what to live for. He survived as an empty shell of himself, the better parts departed; his soul among them.

Sitting at the table with Ilario was refreshing. Here was a young man at the beginning of his career asking to be allowed to deal at Fulton's. It was proper for him to ask, since this was within Hector Savaglio's realm. Hector asked Ilario about his plans even though he knew he would grant him permission. Hector knew about the favor to the Boss, he knew about the other marketers who blocked him from doing business, and he knew of this Ilario from Bay Shore, who could filet a fish and leave no bones or scales. In fact he had several in his refrigerator waiting to be basted in his scampi sauce for tonight's fish course. As Ilario pitched his business plan like he rehearsed in his mind all the way from Bay Shore, Hector Savaglio looked over at Allegra, who had not touched the water, and smiled. He tuned out Ilario as he went on about his expected first year's profits. Hector recalled those times he spend in the garden with his daughter and how he would place a stepstool for her to stand on when she stirred the sauce. He relished the memories of listening to the Opera on the radio with her falling asleep across his chest. She reminded him of his dear Gabriella, with her light brown locks and her hazel eyes.

"È fatto," said Hector Savaglio cutting off Ilario's speech. "I want you to filet for me a fish," he commanded. "What knives do you need?" asked Hector, leading Ilario towards the kitchen.

"Let's see," said Ilario. "I need that thin curved blade and if you have it, a broad, flat bladed knife as well." Hector handled both knives carefully as he handed them to Ilario. "Be careful, that's French cutlery...very sharp," Hector warned. Ilario took the knives and studied the edges, holding them up to the light and looking at them closely. He placed the blade up to his arm to shave a patch of hair from his arm. Hector let out a long sigh of concern.

“Do you have a leather strop?” Ilario asked. “I’ll take that sharpening steel too,” he said pointing toward the cutlery set on the counter beside the stove.

Hector retrieved the items Ilario asked for along with a simple cutting board. Ilario used the sharpening steel first. He the broad knife first and began zipping it down the length of the steel, alternating sides of the knife. Hector admired the quickness in which he performed the task. Next he used the steel on the thin curved blade. This one was shorter so the zips came faster. When he finished, Ilario placed the steel on the counter top and took up the strop. Ilario wondered if he should explain the reason for sharpening the blades in such a way. Perhaps, since he didn’t ask him to explain, Hector already knew that the sharpening steel was the best way to get a razor edge on the knife, but left minute jagged edges on the blade that were bad for precision cutting. The strop polished those jagged edges out and made the blade shine. Hector didn’t ask so Ilario kept that trade secret to himself. Ilario slid the edges of each knife down the strop. The hissing sound it made could be heard in every corner of the basement kitchen. When Ilario was finished using the strop he got to the business of filleting. He held the fish flat on the cutting board, and while using the thin knife, pierced the skin behind the front dorsal fin. He sliced the knife diagonally across the fish, cutting to, but not through, the backbone. He held the fish by the head and ran the blade down the backbone towards the tail in a gentle sawing motion, as to not cut too much of the fillet off the backbone. He took a hold of the tail region, held the knife flat against the backbone and pushed the point right through the side of the fillet. With the knife protruding out the other side, he cut right through the remaining fillet towards the tail. Ilario peeled the fillet back with one hand while cutting the fillet away from the backbone using small slicing motions. Most fillet-ers try to cut too much away in one stroke. Ilario always thought that it was better to use many small cuts, guiding the knife along any bony structures to

remove all that beautiful meat. The most difficult task was to remove the fillet from the rib cage area. A very sharp knife is essential here. Using small strokes again, Ilario felt his way around the bones, eventually removing one side of the meat completely. Turning the fish over and making sure to hold the fish fairly flat on the cutting board, Ilario repeated the procedure to remove the other fillet.

Hector applauded Ilario's skill and awed at the two finest cod fillets he had ever seen. But Ilario wasn't finished yet. Next he began removing the skin. Other, less skilled fillet-men would have scaled the fish by now, not Ilario; he thought that it was a waste of time. He held the scaly skin in one hand and using the flat bladed knife, he sliced a small portion of the meat away from the skin. Then he made a finger hole in the skin and using that finger hole, Ilario took the broad bladed knife and gently remove the skin from the fillet. Quickly he flipped the skinned fillet out of his way and took the other, removing the skin in the same manner. This entire series of cuts took Ilario less than 60 seconds. No bones, no scales. Hector thought that if this was Ilario filleting slowly, it would have been awesome to see him fillet when he was faster at it.

Hector threw two more fish down on the cutting board and gestured to Ilario to filet them as well. Two minutes later, Hector had six perfect filets ready to scampi.

After the performance, Hector gave Ilario a towel to wipe his hands on and ushered him back to the table. Neither of them took their seats. Hector held out his hand and welcomed him to buy at the Fulton fish market and Ilario inwardly let out a breath of relief. Hector was excited to continue cooking the evening meal so he led his guests part way to the door and Rosa showed them the rest of the way.

"Buona Fortuna," broke Hector's voice from inside. Rosa smiled gently as she closed the door.

A few weeks later, Ilario happily worked his final day at the Carroll Street store. He was finishing the orders from the Waldorf, the Sea Colony, and Luchow's. He even had enough time to prepare the usual five cod filets for dear Mrs. D'Ambrosio. Ilario would miss her; one of his first customers. She was so supportive during his recuperative years; offering words of condolences tipping more than she really should have. He smiled secretly after deciding to give her order to her complimentary.

As he reveled inwardly, two men entered the store speaking of how they had found some man they had been looking for. Ilario's first inclination was that they were Feds or the police and they had found some guy that was on the lam. Ilario kept working. It's never a good idea to overhear customer business," he thought. But the men kept talking, never taking much notice of Ilario, who kept busy behind the butcher's counter. Finally one of the men handed an envelope to the other and left the store. The second man stepped to where Ilario was working and ordered three pounds of Calamari. He opened the yellow envelope and pulled out a hundred dollar bill. As he did so the man looked at a slip of paper for quite a while, did a poor job of crumbling it up, and a worse job of throwing it into the trash can four feet away. He missed, but made no move to toss it in the trash again. Ilario secretly disapproved of the man leaving trash on the floor, but decided that he would pick it up himself and place it in the trash. The man took his parcel of Calamari and left the store, without a glance back. After he left, Ilario walked from behind the counter and moved to pick up the scrap of paper. What he had inadvertently read on the paper caused him to stagger; an address—2323 West 137th Street. "It couldn't be," Ilario thought. It had to be, he reasoned. Ilario was conflicted about what he should do. Should he telephone

Hector? Call on him personally? Forget about it altogether? No. Hector was about a ten-minute drive from the Carroll Street store. He took a step toward the door, then turned back and went behind the counter. He reached for his store keys and quickly left with his grimy apron still on. Ilario only paused to lock the door.

The Red Mule was driven so quickly, that Ilario jumped the curb in front of Hector's house. He bounded up the main steps and knocked frantically on the front door. He heard movement inside and finally Rosa came to the door and quietly asked, "Who is there?"

"Rosa, Mi è, Ilario."

Rosa went to get Hector. When Hector came to the door, he was not at all happy with Ilario and his unannounced visit. He approached Ilario quickly and grabbed him with one hand behind his neck and one hand on Ilario's elbow. Hector jerked Ilario towards him and asked him sternly, "What are you doing here? The hour is no good!" Ilario fished in his pocket and pulled out the slip of paper with Hector's address written on it and held it up to his face. Hector released Ilario and looked at the piece of paper. As Ilario explained how he came upon this paper, the men heard the screeching of tires on the road in front of Hector's house followed by a volley of gunshots from a Thompson sub-machine gun. Hector grabbed Ilario and pulled him into the house. With a speed he hadn't known since his youth, Hector sprung back up and fired back with a handgun he produced from only God knows where. He watched as the black Silverstreak squealed away. Rosa screamed hysterically in the background. "Rosa," Hector yelled, "Questo è abbastanza." That's enough.

Hector knew that he'd been shot by the piercing pain in his arm. Blood trickled down his massive limb, puddled in the hand that cupped the grip of the gun, and dripped from his knuckles to the floor. He took the towel from his apron pocket and placed it on his wound. "I owe you

my life, Fishman,” said Hector, still looking down the street. Rosa yelped from right behind Hector, and he yelled again, “Rosa!” As he turned to face her, he saw too much blood on the floor to account for the flesh wound to his arm. That is when Hector saw Ilario lying face down on the floor in a pool of blood that was expanding across his hardwood entryway. Ilario coughed twice, spurting blood from his mouth. Hector turned him over to hear what he was saying. Ilario barely got his last words out of his blood-filled mouth...“Allegra.”

Allegra stepped from the car in front of her Brooklyn apartment. Aunt Maria stood and waited for her with an outstretched hand. Allegra noticed her finger; no ring. She turned quickly to avoid that revelation and saw a hopscotch course sketched on the sidewalk. Sadly, it held no interest for her. Allegra thought she saw Nick walk by her with his hands in his pockets, as always, heading to Sam’s. Nick glanced her way, but didn’t seem to notice her. She perceived how nothing seemed to have changed here on Linden Avenue. The same old ladies were holding the same old knitting needles, knitted the same old loops of yarn, and talked the same old gossip as they always had. Allegra drew a hush from the onlookers as she walked the makeshift lane on the patio. She clutched the cedar box tighter to her chest as she hurried between the opposing lines of chairs, and through the front door.

Allegra ran to her room and closed the door behind her. She threw herself on her bed and opened the box to reveal her father’s wartime decorations and a photograph of the two of them. Allegra remembered the better days when that picture was taken. It was last June, the day that they went to Fort Wadsworth on Staten Island. They picnicked and toured the fort with its U-shaped structure that protected New York City through several wars. When she was hungry, he

bought her an ice cream cone; when she was tired of walking, he carried her on his back; when they sat under a tree to rest, she put little purple flowers in his hair and giggled at the sight of them. Allegra could think of no better time than that.

“Papa,” she sobbed, “I would trade anything...ANYTHING to have you here with me.”