



THE THING BEGINS



THE MEN OF BRAVO are not cold. It's a chilly and windwhipped Thanksgiving Day with sleet and freezing rain forecast for late afternoon, but Bravo is nicely blazed on Jack and Cokes thanks to the epic crawl of game-day traffic and the limo's minibar. Five drinks in forty minutes is probably pushing it, but Billy needs some refreshment after the hotel lobby, where overcaffeinated tag teams of grateful citizens trampolined right down the middle of his hangover. There was one man in particular who attached himself to Billy, a pale, spongy Twinkie of a human being crammed into starched blue jeans and fancy cowboy boots. "Was never in the military myself," the man confided, swaying, gesturing with his giant Starbucks, "but my granddaddy was at Pearl, he told me all the stories," and the man embarked on a rambling speech about war and God and country as Billy let go, let the words whirl and tumble around his brain





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sacrifice



Bush



values

God

Thanks to asswipe luck Billy will have the aisle seat at Texas Stadium, which means he will bear the brunt of these encounters for most of the afternoon. His neck hurts. He slept but poorly last night. Each of those five Jack and Cokes puts him deeper in the hole, but the sight of the stretch limo pulling up to the hotel aroused a bundle of nervous cravings in him, this boat of a snow-white Hummer with six doors to a side and black-tinted windows for maximum privacy. "What I'm talking *a-bout!*" cried Sergeant Dime as he pounced on the bar, everyone whooping over all the pimp finery, but after destroying all hopes for a quick recovery Billy subsides into a gnarled, secret funk.



"Billy," says Dime, "you're flaking on me."

"No, Sergeant," Billy says at once. "I'm just thinking about the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders."

"Good man." Dime raises his glass, then conversationally remarks to no one in particular, "Major Mac is gay."

Holliday yelps. "Damn, Dime, the man sitting right here!"

And indeed, Major McLaurin is seated on the rear banquette, watching Dime with all the emotion of a flounder on ice.

"He can't hear a damn word I say," Dime laughs. He turns to Major Mac and slows down his rate of speech to moron speed. "MAY-JURH, MACK-LAAAUUURIN, SIR! SAR-JINT, HOLLI-DAY, HERE, SAYS, YOU'RE, GAY."

"Aw fuck," Holliday moans, but the major's eyes merely take on a needling glint, then he holds out his fist to show his wedding band. Everyone howls.

There are ten of them in the limo's plush passenger bay, the eight remaining soldiers of Bravo squad, their PA escort Major Mac, and the movie producer Albert Ratner, who at the moment is hunkered down in BlackBerry position. Counting poor dead Shroom and the grievously wounded Lake there are two Silver Stars and eight Bronze among them, all ten of which defy coherent explanation. "What were you thinking during the battle?" the pretty TV reporter in Tulsa asked, and Billy tried. God knows he tried, he never *stops* trying, but it keeps slipping and sliding, corkscrewing away, the *thing* of it, the *it*, the ineffable whatever.

"I'm not sure," he answered. "Mainly it was just this sort of road rage feeling. Everything was blowing up and they were shooting our guys and I just went for it, I really wasn't thinking at all."

His chief fear up to the moment the shooting started being that of fucking up. Life in the Army is miserable that way. You fuck up, they scream at you, you fuck up some more and they scream some more, but overlying all the small, petty, stupid, basically foreordained fuckups looms the ever-present prospect of the life-fucking fuckup,

a fuckup so profound and all-encompassing as to crush all hope of redemption. A couple of days after the battle he was walking down the gravel path to chow and there it was, this sense of reprieve or release, of a terrible burden eased, and all with no more effort on Billy's part than the exhalation of a normal breath. This feeling of *ahh-hhh*, like there was hope for him? Like maybe he wasn't completely expendable. By then the Fox News footage was viraling through the culture and there were rumors that Bravo was going home, the kind of suicidally hopeful talk no soldier in his right mind would dare credit, and then, lo, they were QT'ed to Baghdad on two hours' notice and thence across the ocean for their *Victory Tour*.

One nation, two weeks, eight American heroes, though technically there is no such thing as Bravo squad. They are Bravo Company, second platoon, first squad, said squad being comprised of teams alpha and bravo, but the Fox embed christened them Bravo squad and thus they were presented to the world. Now, here at the tour's end, feeling soft, sated, bleary, under-rested and overproduced, Billy grows sad and nostalgic for the beginning. They were hustled onto a C-130 in the middle of night and took off from Baghdad in a hard spiraling scrooge. Shroom was with them, in a flag-draped coffin at the back. For the entire flight to Ramstein a couple of the Bravos were always sitting with him, but it's the others who Billy thinks of now, the twenty or so civilians of various shades and accents who joined them for the ride. Not spooks—they were too plump for that, their smiles too heedless of the woes of the world, and as soon as the plane was airborne those guys were partying hard. Good whiskey, music blasting from a dozen boom boxes, a forest of Cuban cigars set ablaze—the fuselage quickly filled with a witches' brew of smoke. It turned out that they were gourmet chefs. For who? The men just smiled. “The coalition.” They were French, Romanian, Swedish, German, Iranian, Greek, Spanish, Billy could discern no pattern or meaning in their nationalities, but to a man they were friendly and more than generous, eager to share their booze and smokes with

soldiers. Evidently they'd made a lot of money in Iraq. One of the Swedes opened his calfskin attaché case and showed Billy the gold stash he'd acquired in Baghdad, several pounds' worth of chains and ropes and coins, of such purity that they glowed more orange than gold. There amid the cigar smoke and rollicking laughs Billy had lifted one of the chains, testing it for heft. He was nineteen years old and had no idea that his war contained such things, and what a damn shame for him and the rest of Bravo that it has not been won in the two weeks since.

"Yes," Albert is saying into his cell, which he bought special in Japan, which is two years ahead of everyone else in the race for cell phone superiority. "Tell her that, you can tell her this picture will maul. But it will also reward." He's silent for a moment. "Carl, what can I say? It's a war picture—not everybody gets out alive." Meanwhile Crack is reading aloud from the sports pages of the *Dallas Morning News*, reciting the odds from America's Line so Holliday and A-bort can get their bets down. There are more than two hundred ways to bet on the game, including whether the coin toss will be heads or tails, which song Destiny's Child will open with at halftime, and which quarter will the network broadcast make its first reference to President Bush.

Crack speaks as if reading from a recipe. "Drew Henson's first pass of the game will be, complete, minus two hundred; incomplete, plus a hundred and fifty; an interception, plus a thousand."

"Incomplete," says Holliday, making a note in his little book.

"Incomplete," A-bort agrees, marking his little book.

"How about quarter where Beyoncé sits on my face," Sykes says.

"Fucking never," Holliday says, not missing a beat.

"In a million years," A-bort adds, similarly deadpan. Sykes is saying hell yes he'll take those odds as Albert snaps his cell phone shut.

"All right, guys, it looks like Hilary Swank is officially interested."

Whanh, whoa, *who*? "Hilary Swank a *bitch*," Lodi sputters. "Why she talking to us?"

“Bee-cause,” Albert answers, punching it, knowing the rise this will get from Bravo, “she wants to play *him*,” and he points at Billy. Bravo erupts in hoots and cheers.

“Wait. Wait a second.” Billy is laughing along with everyone else, but he’s troubled too, already he senses the potential here for humiliation on a global scale. “If she’s a girl then I don’t see how—”

“Actually,” Albert says, “she’s floating the idea of playing Billy *and* Dime. We’d fold both parts into one role and she’d play that as the lead.”

More hoots, this time directed at Dime, who merely nods as if well satisfied. “I still don’t see . . .” Billy murmurs.

“Just because she’s a woman doesn’t mean she can’t do it,” Albert tells them. “Meg Ryan was the lead in that chopper flick, the one she did with Denzel a couple years ago. Or she could play it as a guy, hell, Hilary won a goddamn Oscar playing a guy. Well, playing a girl playing a guy, but whatever. The point is she’s not just another pretty face.”

Others who Albert is in talks with: Oliver Stone, Brian Grazer, Mark Wahlberg, George Clooney. It is a heroic tale, not without tragedy. A tale of heroism ennobled by tragedy. Movies about Iraq have “underperformed” at the box office, and that’s a problem, according to Albert, but not Bravo’s problem. The war might be up to its ass in moral ambiguity, but Bravo’s triumph busts through all that. The Bravo story is a rescue story, with all the potent psychology of the rescue plot. People respond deeply to such stories, Albert has told them. Everyone worries, everyone feels at least a little bit doomed basically all the time, even the richest, most successful, most secure among us live in perpetually anxious states of barely hanging on. Desperation’s just part of being human, so when relief comes in whatever form, as knights in shining armor, say, or digitized eagles swooping down on the flaming slopes of Mordor, or the U.S. cavalry charging out of yonder blue, that’s a powerful trigger in the human psyche. Validation, redemption, life snatched from the jaws of death, all very powerful stuff. Powerful. “What you guys did out there,” Albert has assured

them, “that’s the happiest possible result of the human condition. It gives us hope, we’re allowed to feel hopeful about our lives. There’s not a person on the planet who wouldn’t pay to see that movie.”

Albert is in his late fifties, a big-boned, fleshy man with an unruly cloud of mostly gray hair and thick, wiry hedgerows of midlength sideburns. He wears black-frame glasses with round lenses. He chews gum. His hands are large and knuckly, and dark clumps of jungle growth sprout from his ears. Today he’s wearing a white dress shirt with the collar open, a navy blazer with a lining of brilliant scarlet, a black cashmere overcoat and cashmere scarf, and sleek, dainty loafers that appear to be made of pliable chocolate bars. This crossfire of dishevelment and suavity provides no end of fascination for Billy, and from it he infers a worldliness that could eat Bravo for breakfast and swallow the bones. This is a man who direct-dials the likes of Al Gore and Tommy Lee Jones and whose movies have featured such money stars as Ben Affleck, Cameron Diaz, Bill Murray, Owen Wilson, two of the four Baldwin brothers and so on, all of whom unfortunately have prior commitments or aren’t interested in a profile-leveling ensemble piece.

“We’re gonna *Platoon* it,” Albert says on his next phone call. “Ensemble plus star, hell yes it works. Hilary’s extremely interested.”

The Bravos listen for a minute. Ho’Wood talk. It is its own tribal dialect, rich in tonal permutations of put-down, bitch-slap, call-out, and gaff.

“No way. I’d rather sleep with Mother Teresa than make a movie with that guy.”

Bravo smirks.

“Oh sure. Like having an enema when you’ve got a catheter shoved up your cock.”

The Bravos’ eyes bug out, they chortle snot through their noses.

“*Only* one battle? Larry, come on, *Black Hawk Down* was *only* one battle. Look, I know it’s a war movie, but I need a director who can bring some human empathy to the story.”

Pause.

“Enemas I can handle, it’s the catheter I can’t take.”

More nasal chortles. Lodis would fall off his seat if he wasn’t strapped in.

“Listen, Larry, we’re talking two days. My boys ship out in two days and access becomes extremely problematic after that. Unless your lawyers feel like parachuting into a war zone.”

“Hooo-kay,” Crack resumes, rattling the paper. “Will Drew Henson throw an interception—yes, minus a hundred and twenty, versus no, plus a hundred and five.”

“Yes,” Holliday says.

“No,” says A-bort.

“Will Beyoncé show me her tits while sitting on my face,” Sykes offers, then starts singing in a screechy black-girl falsetto, *I need a soldjah, soldjah, need me a soldjah soldjah boy . . .*

“Quiet,” Dime woofs, “Albert’s on the phone,” which the rest of the Bravos take as their cue to scream at Sykes. *Shut up, fuckhead, Albert’s on the phone! Quiet, shitbag, Albert’s trying to talk!* Meanwhile an SUV has drawn even in the next lane, and women, actual females, are hanging out the windows and yelling at the Hummer, college girls, maybe a couple of years older, and they are fine prime examples of that buxom talent pool of all-American booty that runs amok every night on reality TV.

“Hey,” they cry as traffic crawls along, “roll down your windows! Hey you, whoever you are, got any Grey Poupon? Woooo-hoooo, go Cowboys! Roll down your window!”

Oh Lord, beauties they are and amped as all fuck, bellowing, whipping their hair around like proud war banners, they are the girls gone wild of Bravo’s fondest dreams. Sykes and A-bort futz with the windows on that side and are roundly cursed for their incompetence, then they realize the damn things have been childproofed and everybody screams toward the front, finally the driver flips a switch and the windows go down and you can just see those girls deflate.



Oh, soldiers. *Jarheads*, they're probably thinking, because it's all the same to them. Not rock stars, not highly paid professional athletes, nobody from the movies or the tabloid-worthy world, just grunts riding on some millionaire's dime, some lame support-the-troops charity case. Bravo tries, but the girls are just being polite now. *We're famous!* A-bort cries. *They're gonna make a movie about us!* The girls smile, nod, look up and down the freeway as if scouting better prospects. Sykes flops his entire torso out the window and yells, "Hell yes I'm drunk baby and I'm married too! But I'll still love you ugly in the morning!" This gets the girls laughing and for a moment there's hope, but Billy can see the light already dimming in their eyes.

He sits back and pulls out his cell; they were probably never serious anyway. *Ten hut!* reads the text from his sister Kathryn,

keep it in yr holster kid

Then from Pete, his other sister's roughneck husband,

Bang a cheerldr

Then this from Pastor Rick, who won't leave him alone,

He who honors me, I will honor

And that's it, no more texts, no calls, nothing. Fuck, doesn't he know *anybody*? He is sort of famous after all, at least that's what people keep telling him, so you would think. Traffic is moving and they've lost the wild girls, but now the stadium appears on the horizon, rising from the sweep of suburban prairie like an engorged and wart-spattered three-quarter moon. They are supposed to appear today on national TV, details pending, no one knows the actual drill. They might have lines to speak. They might be interviewed. There's talk that they'll take part in the halftime show, which raises hopes of





personally meeting Destiny's Child, but equally if not more plausible is the possibility that they'll be coaxed, cajoled, steamrolled, or otherwise harassed into doing something incredibly embarrassing and lame. Local TV has already been bad enough—in Omaha there was footage of a very stiff Bravo “interacting” with the zoo's new monkey habitat, and in Phoenix they were taken to a skateboard park, where Mango did an ass-plant for the evening news. Humiliation always stalks the common man when he ventures onto the tube, and Billy is determined it won't happen to him, not today, not on nationwide TV, no sir, thank you sir, I respectfully refuse to act like a moron, *sir!*

The possibilities set off a whinge in his gut like air escaping through a pinhole wound. He wants to be on TV, and he doesn't. He wants to be on TV as long as he doesn't screw up and it might help get him laid, but watching the stadium swell outside his window to Death Star proportions he wonders if he's truly up to the day. Self-confidence has been a struggle these past two weeks, this sense of treading water way over his head. He's too young. He doesn't know enough. Not counting the small-time drag races his father used to emcee, he's never been to a professional sporting event. In fact he's managed to grow up in Stovall, a mere eighty miles west, without ever setting eyes on fabled Texas Stadium save through the expurgating medium of TV, and this first sighting feels historic, or at least strives to be. Billy studies it at length, with real care and attention, taking the measure of its size and lack of humor, its stark and irremediable ugliness. Years and years of carefully posed TV shots have imbued the place with intimations of mystery and romance, dollops of state and national pride, hints of pharaonic afterlife such as always inhere in large-scale public architecture, all of which render the stadium of Billy's mind as the conduit or portal, a direct tap-in, to a ready-made species of mass transcendence, and so the real-life shabbiness is a nasty comedown. Give bigness all its due, sure, but the place looks like a half-assed backyard job. The roof is a homely quilting of mismatched tiles. There's a slumpiness, a middle-aged sag



to the thing that suggests soft paunches and mushy prostates, gravity-slugged masses of beached whaleness. Billy tries to imagine how it looked brand-new, its fresh gleam and promise back in the day—thirty years ago? Forty? The past is always a shaky proposition for him, but there's a backdoor link between the way he feels now, looking at the stadium, and the feelings he gets when he thinks about his family. That same heaviness, the same torpor and melancholy, a kind of sickly-sweet emo funk that's almost pleasurable, in the sense that it hints at something real. As if sorrow is the true reality? Without ever exactly putting his mind to it, he's come to believe that loss is the standard trajectory. Something new appears in the world—a baby, say, or a car or a house, or an individual shows some special talent—with luck and huge expenditures of soul and effort you might keep the project stoked for a while, but eventually, ultimately, it's going down. This is a truth so brutally self-evident that he can't fathom why it's not more widely perceived, hence his contempt for the usual public shock and outrage when a particular situation goes to hell. The war is fucked? Well, duh. Nine-eleven? Slow train coming. They hate our freedoms? Yo, they hate our actual guts! Billy suspects his fellow Americans secretly know better, but something in the land is stuck on teenage drama, on extravagant theatrics of ravaged innocence and soothing mud wallows of self-justifying pity.

“Shit,” someone murmurs, a speed bump in the silence—their first burst of enthusiasm on sighting the stadium has flatlined into verbal arrest. Maybe it's the weather that brings them down, all this early-winter gloom, or maybe performance anxiety or just plain weariness, the burden of knowing much will be required of them today. Bravo doesn't do so well with silence anyway. Guff and bullshit are more their working style, but the spell of introspective dread concludes with the appearance of a large, carefully rendered homemade sign affixed to a roadside utility pole. *STOP ANAL RAPE IN IRAQ!* the sign reads, below which someone has scrawled, *heavens to betsey*. Bravo howls.



A PRIVATE IN THE INFANTRY



THEY ARRIVE TWO HOURS before kickoff and no one seems to know what to do with them, so they're parked in their seats for the time being, forty-yard line, home side, seventh row. Sykes and Lodis immediately start debating the retail value of such totally sick seats and how much they would bring on eBay, \$400, \$600, up and up they go, their analysis based on nothing more than air and wishful thinking. It's a fuckwit conversation and Billy tries not to listen. He's got the aisle seat with Mango on his left, and they talk a little bit about last night and how awesome it is to be here instead of spitting sand out their ears at FOB Viper. Hebert known as A-bort is sitting to Mango's left, then Holliday known as Day, then Lodis a.k.a. Cum Load, Pant Load, or just plain Load, then Sykes who will never be anything other than Sucks, then Koch as in coke which makes him Crack and *Crack kills!*, especially when he squats and shows a slice



of his ass, then Sergeant Dime, then Albert's empty seat, then that infinite enigma known as Major Mac. Everyone says it's cold, but Billy doesn't feel it. The forecast calls for sleet and freezing rain by late afternoon, and through the stadium's open dome they can watch the weather going to hell, the cloud deck bristling like a giant Brillo pad. The half-empty stands—it's early yet—give off the low hum of a floor buffer or oscillating fan.

"Load!" barks Sergeant Dime. "How long is a football field?"

Lodis snorts; too *easy*. At least ten times a day he has to prove that certitude is the hallmark of the true moron.

"A hunrud yards, Sergeant."

"Wrong, dumbshit. Billy, how long is a football field?"

"A hundred twenty yards," Billy answers, trying to keep it low-key, but Dime leads the rest of Bravo in whooping applause.

Hooah, Billy, get some. He's leery of this roll Dime's on for singling him out for favors and praise and doing it in so frontal a manner, as if daring the other Bravos to call him on it. It's like a punishment, whose Billy hasn't figured out, but instructional aggression is a specialty of Dime's. *NO* he's bellowing now at Sykes, who's begging permission to place a couple of small bets. Ever since he maxed out his credit cards on porn, Dime has had him on a vicious budget.

"Sergeant, just fifty bucks."

"No."

"I've been saving up—"

"No."

"I'll send every penny to my wife—"

"Damn right you will, but you aren't betting."

"Please, Sergeant—"

"Sucks, have you not had your morning glass of shut up?" With that Dime is stepping over the seat below and sidling down the vacant row at Bravo's front. "Gentlemen, what it do?" he says on reaching the end of the row.

"Just chillin'," says Mango.

“You get any chiller, we’re gonna put you on a stick and sell mango Blow Pops. Lodis still says the football field’s a hundred yards long.”

“Is!” Lodis calls from down the row. “Since when anybody count the end zone, yo.”

“Sergeant,” Sykes wails, “just please this once—”

“Shut!” Dime barks, the stalk of his neck twisting around as if he means to pop his head off by self-induced torque, then his eyes alight on Billy and there it is, The Look, the fixed fire of Dime’s gaze bearing down on Billy’s humble self. This has happened a lot lately and it’s freaking Billy out, the concentrated calm of Dime’s gray eyes with that sense of mad energy swirling at the edges, like finding yourself at the center of a hurricane.

“Billy.”

“Sergeant.”

“Your thoughts on the Hilary Swank deal.”

“I don’t know, Sergeant. It seems sort of weird, having a girl play a guy.”

“But Billy, haven’t you heard, weird is the new normal.” Dime is buzzing with game-day energy, arms swinging, hips juking little half-feints and slants. “But maybe she’d play it as a girl, you heard Albert. They’d turn you into a chick, how about that? So for the rest of your life people’ll be like, ‘Look, there goes ol’ Billy Lynn. He let them turn him into a girl for that movie they made.’”

“She wants to play you too, Sergeant. Would you do it?”

Dime gives a lippy sort of laugh. “I tell you what, maybe. If she’d let me be her boyfriend for a couple of weeks, I could be persuaded.”

Now he laughs for real, cackling with the wicked innocence of the bright and easily bored. Staff Sergeant David Dime is a twenty-four-year-old college dropout from North Carolina who subscribes to the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, *Maxim*, *Wired*, *Harp-er’s*, *Fortune*, and *DicE Magazine*, all of which he reads in addition to three or four books a week, mostly used textbooks on history and politics that his insanelly hot sister sends from Chapel Hill. There are

stories that he went to college on a golf scholarship, which he denies. That he was a star quarterback in high school, which he claims not to remember, though one day a football surfaced at FOB Viper, and Dime, caught up in the moment, perhaps, nostalgia triggering some long-dormant muscle memory, uncorked a sixty-yard spiral that sailed over Day's head into the base motor pool. He has a Purple Heart and Bronze Star from Afghanistan, and among the other company sergeants his tag is "Fuckin' Liberal," but what was extraordinary about Bravo, the miracle that only gradually became apparent to Billy, was the presence in the squad of not one but two demonstrably superb warriors, neither of whom had any use for the prevailing orthodoxies. When Vice President Cheney made his morale-boosting stop at FOB Viper, Dime and Shroom had cheered with such sick abandon that even Captain Tripp registered the savage mockery of it. Woooo-wooh, yeanh, Dick! Give 'em hell! Bring it *awn!* Woooo-wooh, let's kick some raghead ass! The entire platoon snickering and giggling, about to piss their pants, finally the captain passed a note to Dime saying to "tone it the fuck down *now*," though Cheney seemed well pleased with his reception. Standing there onstage in his L.L.Bean khakis, hands in his pockets, NASA windbreaker zipped to his neck, he complimented Viper on its fighting spirit and offered up encouraging news about the war. *There is no doubt*, he said. *The latest intelligence*, he said. *Our commanders in the field*, he said, all in that modulated dial-tone Cheney voice that made everything sound so fucking reasonable. So what was it he said? Oh, right. The insurgency was on its last legs, he said.

"Albert!" Dime calls out. "Billy thinks Hilary Swank is weird."

"Wait. No." Billy turns, and there's Albert coming down the steps, smiling with a bemused sort of West Coast cool. "I just said I thought it's weird she'd wanna play a guy."

"Hilary's all right," Albert says mildly. "In fact she's one of the nicest ladies in Hollywood. But if you think about it, Billy"—the young soldier is always shocked when Albert calls him by name;



Dude, he wants to say, not necessary, you don't have to remember my actual name—"that's the supreme challenge for any actor, playing the opposite sex. I can see why she'd be interested."

"He doesn't want a chick playing him," Dime says. "He's scared people are going to think he's a pussy."

"Albert, don't listen to anything he says."

Albert chuckles, and for a second Billy thinks of Santa Claus, another jolly man of girth. "Stay loose, guys. We've got a long way to go before you have to worry about that."

Albert's target is a hundred thousand down for each Bravo's life story, plus all manner of arcane fees, points, percentages, and other unintelligible stuff they will just have to trust him on. For the past two weeks he's been jumping in and out of the *Victory Tour*, meeting up with Bravo in DC, then jetting out, another meeting in Denver, then jetting out, Phoenix and out, and now here at the tour's end, Dallas. Two weeks ago he said they'd have a deal by Thanksgiving, and while it looks like everything's under control Billy senses an inchoate diminishing of heat, a barely perceptible laboring on Albert's part to keep it stoked. None of the other Bravos has said anything, so maybe Billy is wrong. Probably he's wrong. Dear God please let me be wrong. If he could come out of this just a little bit rich all monies would be devoted toward a most worthy cause. When Billy joined the platoon at Fort Hood, Dime and Shroom rode him 24/7 with taunts of punk, thug, delinquent, and not in a friendly way. For some reason they had it in for him, and with deployment looming, not to mention three and a half years left on his Army contract, he was screwed if he couldn't get them off his back. So one day they come upon him lifting weights in the gym and there it is again, the whole shitbag punk-ass gangbanger line. Billy follows them out to the lobby and addresses them in his most formal manner. Sergeant Dime, Sergeant Breem, I'm not a delinquent or a punk or a gangbanger, so please stop calling me that. I'm just a guy busting his ass as hard as he can to be a credit to his platoon and his company.



No, Shroom said, you are a fucking delinquent punk. Only a punk would trash another man's car.

The fuck, Billy thought, how'd they know about that? "Depends on whose car," he said.

So whose?

My sister's fiancé. Ex-fiancé.

This got their attention. What kind of car? Dime asked.

A Saab, Billy told them. Convertible five-speed with graphite-alloy rims, three months off the lot. By then they were ready to hear him out, so Billy told them about Kathryn, his middle sister and the star of the family, an extremely beautiful girl and gentle and smart who won a partial scholarship to TCU. So far so good. Majors in business, joins a sorority, makes dean's list every term. All good. Becomes engaged to a guy three years her senior who's getting his MBA, kind of a tight-ass pussy boy and far too impressed with himself, but it's still good, mostly, sort of, even though Billy secretly hates the guy. Then one rainy May morning at the end of her sophomore year Kathryn's driving to work, she has a job as receptionist and broker-trainee at the Blinn Insurance Agency, all good except she's T-boned on Camp Bowie Boulevard by a hydroplaning Mercedes in a flat spin, this enormous dark object windmilling her way and it's the sound she remembers more than anything, the *whoof whoof whoof* of its rotary vortex like the flapping wings of the angel of death. Next thing she knows she's lying flat on her back and three grizzled Mexicans are standing over her, trying to shield her from the rain with a sheet of cardboard. Kathryn always cries when she gets to this part. She simply cannot talk about it without breaking down, describing the three men hovering there wide-eyed and scared, their soaked clothes, their whispered Spanish, the delicate way they held the cardboard like an offering of some sort.

Never even thanked them, Kathryn will say. I just laid there looking up at them, I couldn't talk. In fact all the doctors said she should have died. Fractured pelvis, fractured leg, ruptured spleen,

collapsed lung, and massive internal bleeding, then the complicated lacework on her face and back, 170 stitches below the neck, 63 above. You're gonna be fine, the plastic surgeon tells her the day after. It may take a couple of years but we'll get you there, I do this all the time. But pussy boy can't handle it. Three weeks after the wreck he drives to Stovall and breaks off the engagement, whereupon the gentle Kathryn *thumps* the engagement ring in his face, thumps it as you'd thump a spider or slug you found crawling on your hand. But Billy felt called to a more active response. His sister, family honor, basic goddamn human decency, all these and more seemed crucially at stake. He drives to Fort Worth, locates the pussy-boy Saab outside the pussy-boy condo, and proceeds to reduce said vehicle to scrap and spare parts with the True Value crowbar he bought along the way. A sanctifying calm came over him as he mounted the roof and prepared for that first mighty swing at the windshield. He had a job to do, that was his sense of the moment, and after a frazzled adolescence marked by much conflict with authority and numerous self-inflicted fuckups, he was determined to get this right. He swung calmly, picking his spots with real care and deliberation. The work was pleasing. Even the shriek of the car alarm couldn't shake his concentration. The feeling had been building for quite some time that something drastic needed to happen, and now it was.

He was two weeks away from graduating. After several meetings and much official jerking around, the school board decreed that Billy would receive his diploma, but only by mail. He would not get to "walk," i.e., do the traditional senior passage across the stage to receive his diploma. "You will not walk," the chairman of the school board announced in the darkest, direst tones of churchly reproach, and Billy thought his throat would burst from holding in the laughs. Like he gave a flying fuck! Ooooo, I don't get to walk? Ooooo, my life is over! The lawyer who cut the deal with the school board had to work rather harder to keep him out of jail. The demo job on the Saab wasn't so much the problem as chasing p. boy across the parking lot.



With the crowbar. "I wasn't gonna hurt him," Billy confessed to the lawyer. "I just wanted to see him run." In fact Billy had been laughing so hard that he could barely stand up, much less manage anything like a credible chase.

The DA agreed to drop the felony charge down to criminal mischief if Billy joined the Army, which seemed as good a place as any to be sloughed off, better than jail and being raped every night by guys with names like Preacher and Hawg. Thus he came to be a soldier at the age of eighteen, a private in the infantry, the lowest of the low.

So how's your sister? Shroom asked when the story was done.

She's better, Billy said. They say she's gonna be okay.

You're still a fucking delinquent, Dime said, but after that they didn't ride him so hard.

