

“Existential Drag in Forest”

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Written: 11-15/16-00

Words: 5,189

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We were in the jungle. The only tenuous connection we had to the world was a rutty track scored into the ground by the arrival of the troop transports, vehicles that had vanished again into the foliage only minutes after arriving. There are about 200 grass green soldiers out here, I being only one.

No wait, calling us soldiers is unfair. That makes it sound like I had any choice or desire to be here. I didn't and I don't. But I have to do what I'm told, if I don't I'll get killed by the large blank eyed monster that is running our outfit. The stupid irony is that I'll probably be killed anyway. In the three days since I had the displeasure of seeing him for the first time his expression has never changed from the scowl that is there presently. He is standing outside of where the work is being done, his tank sized arms crossed over his chest. He is wearing dark oversized sunglasses, the kind Latin Dictators used to wear.

When we woke, having been abducted from our beds in the middle of the night, our blank eyed buddy shot a someone at random, to demonstrate that he had no compunction about doing so. That first action, performed while most of us were still groggy and lethargic from the gas, or injection, or whatever they used to knock us out, had set the tone for everything that had happened since. There was only confusion and fear.

I don't know where I am, and although I am supposed to be a soldier, the fatigues guarantee that much, they haven't provided us with any personal weaponry. There are all kinds of rumors floating around concerning shortages, but I cannot believe its so bad that that they cannot at least give us pocket knives or something. No I think that they keep us unarmed because they don't want to waste the weapons. Our only shelter is a pre-fab barracks that is supposed to arrive by helicopter.

It arrived on time, appearing on the horizon like a dragonfly carrying a shoebox. The blades gave off their steady droning whoomp whoomp. The weight of the large rectangular box was obviously right at the chopper's limit, the bowing of the blades was obvious and bordering on dangerous. We all stood watching as the chopper approached, the sun was bright behind it. We had to cover our eyes from the glare. Its arrival was so loud I could think of nothing else as the shelter arrived. I thought about how hard it would be for others not to know we were out here.

As it turns out, I was right. There were lookouts watching for troop deployment and we were being marked, catalogued, and planned for, even before the barracks arrived. The barracks were specially designed structures, cramped and completely ready to go before we ever set eyes on it. I would prefer to sleep under a mosquito net or in a tree if it meant the end of the terrible racket the helicopter was causing.

I felt sore and uncomfortable in the humid climate of the jungle. My body was still rebelling from what the sergeant termed “Boot Camp.” This had mostly consisted of insanely strenuous physical exercise and a distinct lack of sleep. I was exhausted from too little food and too much work.

Its weird you know, life cruises by day by day and we are barely aware of it. My life was just cruising along. I had heard about what the government was doing of course. The massive war campaigns had been deemed necessary by the population planners. After the overturning of Roe vs. Wade in 2003, the ranks of the poor, already bulging at the edges; exploded. Factor in the rapid decreases in arable land to grow food, or potable water to drink and we soon found ourselves in the same situation as India and China, overpopulation. A problem that they were trying to solve with concentration camps and forced sterilization.

The US, always against such overt use of power had opted for war. It had worked during Vietnam and it seemed to be working now, thinning the ranks. People knew it was going on, just as they had known about the prisons. There were no prisons anymore, they sent anyone who was arrested to war. Everyone knew that too, but again nobody questioned until it was too late. They ignored it, pretended it wasn't there. Some even had the foolish pride to think themselves better than those who had been snared into the power of the state.

Status quo was fine, at least until the program caught up to you. Until it was *you* who found yourself who knows where, unarmed, in the middle of a war you knew nothing about. Once you were in this place you had to wonder if it was really a worthwhile way to run a country. If the first time you consider a thing is when you're in the middle of it, it's more than a little too late. Especially if that thing has a gun that it is going to use on you if you resist.

You watch the TV news and you hear about some guy, thirty four years old, one day he takes a quick run to the 7-11 to get a soda, the next minute he is dead on the street. He never even sees the old lady who ran the stop sign and plowed into his car at 30 miles an hour. All of a sudden, gone; like a power outage. The best laid plans...

I could feel death like that, a sudden end to everything, so fast I would barely know what hit me. Death rang in the very trees, in the way they held their branches. They seemed to reach for us, wanting to pull us out of this place that we didn't belong. I really wish I knew where I was. They hadn't told us, when they mentioned where we were going at all, they only described it as “the shit.”

Here in the shit, death comes very quickly, so quickly that they didn't bother training us. We were cattle, not soldiers. Just cattle being led to the slaughter. They pushed us to our limits physically and emotionally and then just left us out here to survive, or die.

That much they made clear. If we made it through, if we were able to reach down into ourselves and unleash the primitive demon in every human soul, then maybe you lived. But even if you did, they had you. No longer are you capable of innocence, of hope in its pure form. On the third night the troop transports would return to take the survivors back to civilization

when the natural survivors would weed themselves out. We had returned to the law of the jungle, which looking around at the thick canopy and smelling the thick humid air, made a certain amount of sense in and of itself.

In a way a devastatingly quick death would be preferable, if metaphysically terrifying. If it went down that way I wouldn't be conscious of the pain, the terrible physical agony that I imagine death is would be avoided. Fast would be bearable, like getting an injection, or pulling a Band-Aid off a hairy area.

The barracks dropped the final few feet into the clearing that we had spent the morning cutting, wrestling free from the structured chaos of the forest. I looked at my chopping hand, I had a nasty callus on my palm and another on my index finger that was bleeding. The bunkhouse was heavy and the ground shook noticeably when it finally settled like an elephant settling down for a nap.

They didn't give us weapons, but they did give us food, or better, we should call it bait for whatever army was out there in the trees, well seasoned and probably hungry. Pure need drove us into the barracks, we tore open the Insta-meals, the kind that cook themselves internally. We were so hungry that some of the others weren't waiting the two minutes it took the food to cook, they just tore the insta-meals open and ate the contents cold. Their faces grimaced with the taste, but their throats bobbed as the gunk went down.

I heated mine, feeling like I would go crazy, my stomach audible and angry with me for having put it through such a terrible hardship. When it was finally done cooking I opened it, the hot steam pouring out in a white plume. The aroma was heavenly, I had drawn some kind of beef stew, although what the beef actually was I tried not to think about.

It started to rain and I got up and wandered into the bunkhouse. The inner walls were the same color as the outer ones, a drab green that seemed to take light in, but not reflect it back. There were several windows across broad sides of the structure. Instead of glass, they were covered with a cheap light weight metal screen and a muslin mosquito net that effectively blocked any possible cheeriness the sunlight could have brought to the thing. There were fold up bunks fastened in rows all over the place. I admired the efficiency. Each bunk was three high, but they could be folded down so that all three were little higher than the thickness of the three mattresses. Collapsed, the bunks made a good place to hide for cover, or they would be if I had anything to protect myself with. I thought to go get a stick from the jungle, at least it would provide some protection. But then again, it would also draw attention to myself in a way that I certainly don't intend. I figure, if I was an invading army guy, I would shoot at the people with the weapons first. I didn't know where I was, and the "enemy" was no less a stranger to me than these other women.

In the far corner, on the same wall as the door was a small partitioned area marked 'HEAD' in thick block letters. I headed towards it, thinking about the dull pressure I felt in my bladder. As I walked I noticed that each bunk had a small paper card attached to it. A computer had printed on each card the name and look-out schedule that we were to adhere to. I quickly realized that the bunks were in alphabetical order when the first three by the door read Abbot, Ackerman, and Adamski. I went down the rows, glancing at the names like one would do in a library, slowing as I neared the T's. There I was, Sally Terryman. I was the bottom bunk about ¾'s of the way down the building. It was up against the far wall, a mesh covered window nearby, a soft breeze blew through it, and for a moment the scent of the place took me and I wasn't in a jungle about to die, I was somewhere much nicer. Aruba maybe. As I returned to reality I thought wistfully, damnit I would rather be in a coal mine than in this jungle.

I passed the bed and went to the HEAD. The pressure relieved I returned to my bunk where I figured I would just lay down to relax for a minute or two. I pressed the catch on the side of the bunk and it sprang up on its hydraulics. I pressed the button again without sitting down and the bunks collapsed again with an efficient hiss. I marveled that such a small space could hold so many women, but that was how they had designed it. The inspiration for the design was clearly a chicken farm. I thought of those terrible films (in the depressing sense) they would show at animal rights conventions, the chicken's feet grown into the bars, terrible runny eyed sores in their eyes. Nasty enough to put me off eggs, although I still ate chicken drummies with ranch or honey mustard sauce. I felt guilty afterwards, but not guilty enough to change my habit. I tried the bed out and it was as uncomfortable as it looked. It was a good thing that I was going to die, if I lived for long my back would surely give out.

It had started to lightly rain outside, it could be heard clinking off of the aluminum roof, and I could see it through the window from my narrow, lumpy mattress. Women were pouring through the door now, getting shelter from the rain. Dusk had begun, and the light in the barracks, insufficient to begin with, was now becoming absent. Soon they would have to turn on the fluorescent lights, drawing whatever enemy lay in the night like flies to a bug light. Only the only one's who were going to get zapped were us. I genuinely hoped that we were in Africa, where women had been conscripted into the army, and not South America somewhere. In South America, men still made up the army and the idea of getting raped and killed, or worse, killed then raped was even less appealing than just straight up dying. As I lay there, my eyes were getting heavy from my profound lack of sleep.

"Hi, I'm Jamie Thipowitz, I'm your bunkmate."

I hadn't realized my eyes were closed until I heard Jamie's voice. I opened one eye and smiled at Jamie Thipowitz.

"Hi Jaime, I'm Sally Terryman. Nice to meet ya." I reached out my hand and we shook. In the middle of it though, our hands stopped moving. We looked at each other and saw the fear. It was written as clearly on her face as I imagine it was on mine. I smiled, more grimly now. I opened my mouth to ask her if she thought we had any chance of living through this, but I stopped myself. I found myself thinking of the line from Fight Club, one of my ex-boyfriends loved that movie and watched at least once a month. "On a long enough timeline the survival rate for everybody is zero." Before today, I had always disliked that sentiment, thinking it rather nihilistic.

It was true though, and that was why the idea displeased me. Even if death seems narrowly compelling at times, it's a pretty major thing. Most importantly death is the anchor that keeps us all clinging to this world, the thing that made my stomach ache was that if whatever was after death sucked, tough shit. There's no going back, no mulligan, and no new quarters to play the game again. Maybe this isn't true either, the Buddhists certainly don't think so. Bonk a Buddhist over the head and they'll die happy as a Born Again Christian, The problem is that they got no more proof than us Westerners. It's all conjecture in the realm of religion.

Somehow sensing that it was macabre to get to know one another Jamie smiled weakly and said, "Well, nice meeting you, good luck tonight."

"You too. May whatever God or force you believe in watch over you." I replied, mustering the friendliest smile I could. Jamie climbed up to her bunk, it was the very top one. When everyone had found their places it became apparent that the third bunk in my section had belonged to the woman who had been shot as an example. If they chose the name ahead of time, perhaps from an alphabetical list, I had missed getting my ticket out of this game by a single inch on some piece of paper. A nasty pain arced briefly through my stomach and I wondered if I hadn't managed to give myself an ulcer in the last 72 hours.

The Bastard in charge began to speak. In one hand he was holding a cattle prod, specially modified to give a jolt more than sufficient to kill several humans. In the other was an automatic machine pistol like the one in the Matrix, another of her boyfriends favorites.

"I am leaving now, you bitches gotta fend for yourselves. Tomorrow afternoon I will return with medical supplies and a fresh ration of food. I will then leave again. On the third afternoon, those of you who remain will receive weaponry. If you are still here after one month you will be shipped home and released from your duty to the state. I regret to inform you that the chance of you being the woman that lives this long is very small. I am pleased to inform you that if you make it through the three days, your chances increase a great deal. Good night." He stepped out of the barracks, never turning his back on us. Again we could hear the whomp of a helicopter as it came to extract the slime who had brought us here to die. I fought off a brief urge to chase after the bastard and try to get at least one good kick to his balls before he took me down. My actions might even start a riot and the women could take down the helicopter and fly to freedom. Only I wasn't Rambo, I was a filing clerk in a lawyer's office. I worked for a nice old guy named Bob who fought big corporations, not the CIA.

Due to the luck of the alphabet, I wasn't scheduled to keep guard duty until half way through the second night. Tonight the A's were on guard duty, and I felt sorry for them. Remarkably, although a part of me felt hyper aware, the machinery of my body was shutting itself down, reacting to the mattress in spite of its lumps, regardless of the mortal danger I was in. It felt remarkably like when I had gotten my appendix removed, the feeling of consciousness being pushed down. I remembered the way the anesthesiologist told me to count backward. I stubbornly decided that I would count back as far as I possibly could before letting myself be dragged into the darkness of unconsciousness. I started at twenty and felt sure I would make it until at least ten. I was wrong. By seventeen my speech was slurred and I'm pretty sure that the only place I said fifteen was in my dreams, if there were any in that state of total unconsciousness.

I decided to try this experiment again, only resolving to do much better this time. I knew that if I failed again there was a distinct possibility that I wouldn't wake up again. We could be gassed, bombed, assassinated, chopped into hamburger, anything. I started to count to myself in a loud internal voice. Twenty, nine... In spite of everything, I fell asleep.

'Click'

My sleeping consciousness heard this and marked it.

'Click'

What was that noise? I wondered, not yet interested enough to open my still intensely exhausted lids.

'Click'

OK now I was awake. Full consciousness returned in a flood, my eyes popped open. The only 'Click' thing that I could see was the bunk above me. I was afraid to poke 'Click' my head out. But the idea of dying on the lumpy mattress was less attractive than dying on my feet, so I rolled slowly out of the bunk and onto the floor. 'Click' I went the opposite direction of the sound. I made very little, if any noise because the mattress was on only inches off the ground. Slowly, on all fours, I crawled around the bunk and looked at the window where the sounds were coming from. A dark figure was at the window, it was impossible to tell if it was a man or a woman because the figure was wearing a thin ski mask of some sort. Whatever sex, the soldier was clearly cutting the wire mesh that covered the windows with wire cutters.

During basic training, during a brief interval between 10 mile hikes, the Sergeant had told us that every bunkhouse had alarms on every fifth bunk, I searched for one of them, finally locating one two bunks away. I rushed for it, the soldier only needed to cut three or four 'Click' more wires before the mesh could be folded back. I felt fairly certain that there would be some kind of coordinated attack, they would come in the door at the same time they came in the window.

I reached the alarm, and pushed it. Immediately red lights began flashing and an intense blaring siren bleated at an ear shattering volume. Within seconds there was a crash of gunshots, The soldiers outside had begun firing through the windows. A bullet whined past my ear. I headed towards the corner where the bathroom was, I wanted to see if they were coming through the door as well. I peered through the bars at the front door and sure enough there were two soldiers with automatic rifles picking off anyone who tried to escape out of the door.

It was clear from the boldness of their actions that they had dealt with groups like this before, they knew that we were unarmed, but they killed us anyway. I felt sure that we were in South America, only men could be this brutal. But hadn't I read that in Tibet, during the Chinese occupation, the women were the best torturers? Everything was happening way too fast now, there were people everywhere scattering madly in every direction at once. Staying low, I tried to ignore the women that were unarmed and concentrated on the increasing number of soldiers who were armed.

I watched as two women overpowered one of the soldiers, pulling away the gun he was carrying. She wanted to fire point blank at the masked face and was shot herself before she could so much as lift the muzzle from the ground. It was clear that we were never going to win in this situation, the only chance was to escape somehow, and hope that later on, the odds would be better.

There was clearly a pattern to what the soldiers were doing. There were about eight soldiers that had crawled through the window, fanned out and were now checking each bunk, one at a time, collapsing them once they had been confirmed empty. In this way they would flush everyone out towards the door, where the folks with the machine guns would be waiting. I watched in horror as they went from bed to bed inevitably approaching a woman who had curled up in a ball sobbing. The bastards didn't

even hesitate, they just shot her and closed the bunk. She had been on the bottom bunk and on her side when she was killed and she barely left a bump in the mattress.

I saw all of this in an atmosphere that was remarkably surreal, the only relief from the darkness was the psychedelic flashing of the warning lights as they spun in their housings and blinding flashes from muzzle fire, as women were mowed down one after another. The air was beginning to fill with the nasty acrid stink of gun smoke which only increased the lack of reality.

My eyes searched desperately for somewhere to hide, I ran between the aisles of bunks, headed back in the general direction of where I had been sleeping. Everywhere I bounced off of women running this way and that, there was no coordination, no teamwork, just individual people running for their lives. It was much too difficult to get around and so I began crawling through the open bunks, making much better time in this manner. I turned randomly, any time I saw a muzzle flash I turned away from it, trying to avoid any of the armed soldiers. There was little doubt that I had been fired at, but so far I remained unharmed, although I was beginning to think that my heart was going to explode out of my chest. My hands felt cold and clammy even in the heat of the jungle night.

I cursed our stupidity, there were really weren't that many soldiers, ten or fifteen at best. There may have been more outside, in fact there probably was, but I couldn't worry about what I couldn't see. I would deal with what I had to. The cramped quarters made it hard to get around. I was two rows away from my bunk and the open window. In a way the high degree of cramped space in the room was working to my advantage, the beds provided cover and broke up the soldier's sight lines. The soldiers were about five rows ahead and making their way towards me. I had a plan, it was a matter of picking the right moment. I thought about the girl who had been closed up into the bunk, she had been on her side and there was barely evidence that she had been under there. I was a thin woman and if I lay flat on my back there was a possibility that I wouldn't be seen between the mattresses. The trick was getting there without getting a bullet in my head, or chest or even ass. I scanned my eyes across the row that I was standing in and looked for a place where the light was leaving the fewest shadows. A couple of rows over was a perfect patch of darkness in the flashing light, I made my way towards it. Standing in this small patch of I waited, my body crouched low, prepared to spring into the bunk a row over. I was going to try to jump through the gap between beds, waiting until the last second. The soldier's checked the bed next to my target, found it empty and pressed the button which collapsed them. I waited, not breathing, trying to simultaneously time the leap and keep crouched low in the shadows. The pair moved to the bunk I was going to try to jump into. By now their actions had become routine, they were going through the motions, not even looking around much.

At the last moment I jumped into the gap between the beds and they closed down on top of me. As the mattresses came down I put my arms over my face, waiting to see if the beds were going to rise again. To see if I had been spotted.

Sometimes, Hell is nothing. Hell is anticipation. I have no idea how long I lay beneath the mattress, how many times I had convinced myself that I heard footsteps approaching my bunk, loud and thundering. The heavy pressure of the bunks on top of me would relax and I might get a single breath of air before the bullets ripped me open.

Then nothing would happen and I would feel better for a second, only to start the process over again. Nothing happened. Time went on inevitably on. No matter what went on in my imagination, in reality I was static, going nowhere fast. And nowhere was where I went, for what seemed like years. I drifted in and out of consciousness, a lot. Every few minutes I would thank God that I had my arms folded over my face, it provided me with a small air space that kept claustrophobia at bay.

Time spun out and I waited. When boredom overcame anxiety I actually embraced the boredom, enjoying it. When my enjoyment of the boredom faded, I figured I had waited long enough. For the first time in what was probably days I began wriggling my arm toward the outside of the bed. Although I had cursed the narrowness of the bed earlier, now I celebrated it. My arm popped free easily and reached out for the bunk release. My hand found it and after a brief pause and a deep breath I pushed the button.

I held my breath as the subdued light of the afternoon blinded my eyes. I felt like I had just pulled the trigger in a game of Russian Roulette, only in this game I had to wait to see if the chamber clicked on an empty trigger or a live round. In, out, in, out. My chest rose and fell rose and fell, nothing happened. I rolled over onto my stomach, and then got to my feet. Every bunk but mine was empty so it only took a moment to see that there was nobody else home. It was just a good sized room covered in waist high square bumps.

To be safe I climbed out the window, deciding that the door was still a little too risky. The thick canopy of the forest began only feet from the edge of the building and in a heartbeat I was out of easy view and into the wilds of who knew where. I hiked a couple of hundreds yards straight away from the barracks and then circled around in a wide arc, looking for the rut that had been left by the troop transport. Things screeched and hooted in the trees, the buzz of insects had returned now that three mattresses weren't stacked over my head.

I found the track, still clearly marked in the ground. The wheel base had not been very broad and the tires spun a lot, kicking out chunks of ground which made following its path pretty easy. I hiked along the thin rut through the afternoon, stopping several times when I thought that I heard movement. I never saw anyone however, and by the time the sun began to set I was feeling as good as I rationally could feel. As the darkness thickened I looked around for a broad tree, thinking I would make a nest in the style of some monkeys I had seen on a Discovery Channel documentary. It didn't take much looking, there were big trees all over the place. Making my way up slowly I climbed about fifteen feet up, finding a crook that was only a little less wide than the bed in the barracks. I wedged myself in and took stock.

I didn't know where I was, I had no food, no water, and was dressed in the uniform of an enemy army. None of these were good things. I was alive, spared the bullet, at least for now. I was able to keep the visions of the previous night out of my head and I felt pretty good. With a little luck I would find a road eventually. I would try to find some clothes, and maybe even an American Consulate. I stretched my legs out, the muscles sighing with relief. After a while I slept again.

Sometime in the middle of the night I rolled over.

As I fell head first toward the ground the last thoughts that went through my head were,

This

Is

So

Stupid....

My neck snapped cleanly in two, and I was dead.