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English 335-001

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The Artilleryman’s First Tale

In this class there was an ARTILLERYMAN,

not particularly noteworthy or known throughout the land;

but he could gun, and record, and set a fuse

fix a truck, reckon accounts, fire a rifle

march and march all the day--fifteen miles or more, I’ve heard, if he was told to.

Well-traveled he was, the Levant and Greece

Spain and Africa, he had seen: even the land of Jews during Yom Kippur

Of his stature, he was average, brown of hair, blue of eyes

many a scar did adorn his skin, burns on his back from hot brass,

a split upper lip (of that you will hear) cuts from the loading tray all over his hands

and a chunk of his chin removed by a corafram.

But even more were internal, from things that he’d seen.

He was melancholic by nature, he didn’t have many friends;

a smile would most likely hurt his face.

Even as a lowly peasant among trust-fund brats,

he tries his very best in everything academic despite his low birth.

When asked to regale us with a tale of his adventures,

he begrudgingly acquiesced

“This one is good, but perhaps not the best.”

In the land of the Cretans, on my 21st birthday

we were ashore to drink, fuck and eat

lamb was the usual fare and Mythos to imbibe.

Many bars had I visited, over the drinking age there by three years

but it’s our customary celebration.

One place in particular, this place with no name

but a picture of an Archer over the door

and a view of the bay

my friends and I very much enjoyed,

the food was superb, and the drinks fairly priced,

minus the Asian prostitutes tugging at your sleeve, it was great.

Angry Greeks came about two hours in

“Fuck Americans! *Pígaine spíti*!”

“Go home!” I was later told

(Why Greeks hate us I never quite grasped

Maybe it’s because their economy collapsed.)

at any rate, the owner begged them to stop

they were losing him money.

Soon enough a bottle hit my back, my collar was grabbed

the melee spilled into the street

a Greek punched me hard, and split my lip

I bear that scar to this very day

but an unknown sailor broke that particular Greek’s nose.

I can’t quite recall events in order after that,

But a bicycle was thrown through a window,

and I tossed a Greek into the sea.

Michael Hawk, our Battery Gunny

grabbed my friends and I up

“Get back to the San Antonio you drunken fucks!”

all in all, it was a good time, two Marines

ended up in the brig, but I escaped,

anonymity is a good thing sometimes.

Never again did I step foot in Greece.

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“You exaggerate!”

“No way!”

“A dubious telling at best!”

These were the responses he usually got.

Back to the bottle then, an easy choice.

But friends and family,

students and professors

they always wanted to hear more.

But fellow Marines understood,

they themselves have done similar things.

One night at a Christmas party, among poker players

uncles and cousins, Grandfather and Tim (his father)

all were in attendance, and asked him to tell a tale.

“I would hear of your travels, while away in the Marines.”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

 his immediate reply: it was second nature.

“Tell us!” tankards beat upon the cedar

Beowulf himself would feel at home at this table.

“Fine, fine. A quick one, that’s all.”

This one is from Boot Camp, but I swear its true

Parris Island was an inhospitable place.

An island surrounded by deadly swamps,

Cholera, Dysentery, and alligators too:

These were just some of the perils that young recruits faced

if they chose to flee back home.

“They found the remains of a recruit in an alligator.”

Murmurs abounded, surely the Drill Instructor spoke in jest

but a picture was produced, and a still uniformed leg

whole, and stilled clothed in digital camouflage

was freed from the creature’s gullet—truly a man-eater.

But the Marines there on the Island

were a hazard unto themselves

one risked a rifle butt to the face,

or perhaps a knife-hand to the throat

for the very slightest perceived offense.

Here’s where the tale begins:

One day in July, I think

we were getting the usual Third Battalion runaround

up the stairs, back down the stairs, get in formation

back to the barracks, “Not fast enough! Again!”

beaten with hand, boot, and the flat of a sword,

we were ushered in our “Fuck-Fuck games”.

One kid sat down, he’d had enough

no amount of blows rained upon him

could persuade him to move even an inch.

broken and bloody, he stoically sat upon the stairs

I admired his boldness, but not his stupidity.

Sun Tzu says (and I paraphrase here)

“One must choose his battles carefully.”

This could not be won, needless to say

He apparently knew himself, but not his enemy.

The one they called Radu, that sadistic fuck

had the bright idea of moving him from the stair

with a kick to his back, that recruit rolled down

wailing and bleeding the entire time

many of us there witnessed the crime.

That poor man’s femur burst from his skin

broken and jagged, blood spewed out

it sounded as if a rifle had gone off.

We all just stood there mouths agape

watching him writhe in pain

I was threatened with death,

blade against my skin

“He fell on his own, you saw everything.”

We never saw Radu again.