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The Termination

by Leon Marks

The second I hear the gunshot, I start running. We all do. Tourists, families, even the rambunctious teens who've been smoking in front of the drugstore. Nobody can tell the bullet's origin. I look back and find the body lying in the street. A black woman whose thigh has been punctured. A tiny explosion of denim and flesh. Seconds earlier, she was selling roses to café patrons like a gypsy. They'd tried to ignore her, turned their backs on her offerings, but she'd stood patiently, both hands presenting her bouquet for sale. Now, she lies in shock and the entire square is a battlefield.

I run toward the river, and follow the crowd into the grassy park that in a couple months will attract hundreds of sunbathers. My heart thumps in my ribcage while my mind races backwards to this morning, when things fell apart. My wife is gone, and now I'm running for my life.

The next bullet jolts a fat woman wearing a baseball cap and a tan blazer, standing inside the pigeon-guarded gazebo.

We sat there last summer, watching the sunset reflecting on the river, and threw popcorn to the birds. It was the day before I left for Iraq, and she had her arm around my neck and was kissing the side of my head.

The woman clenches her chest, and blood coats her hand as she finally goes limp. An old man out of nowhere steps into the gazebo and crouches down to whisper in her ear. Words of reassurance. He looks around for help,

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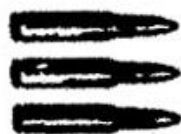
squeezing her hand to feel for life. I won't forget his huge bowtie. It's fire engine red. I can see it from thirty yards away, like a bright red butterfly perched under his chin.

Another shot, and I fear for the old man, but he doesn't fall. Instead it's the skateboarder, who has long abandoned his wheels and has been running parallel to me. I slow down and turn to see him fall on his stomach. One moment he's sprinting, the next he's asleep on the grass. The back of his tee shirt has a charred hole, but no blood yet. It will come. He's young and handsome, his head shaved on one side, as if one half of him had the courage to enlist, but the other half chose to play on wheels all day. I start running again and take the skateboarder's face in my mind.

Soon his face becomes that face, the one I startled when I flicked on the light the night before last. His arm was around her naked breasts, his nose nuzzled into her neck, on the gold cross I had given her, and he wore a bright smile, which wasn't predatory, or even desirous. It was blissful.

She had presumed I was visiting my mother down at the beach, like I did every Friday.

I wish I had shouted at him, or yanked her out of bed, but I didn't. She looked so afraid. I walked away instead. I left them in the bedroom, with their legs entwined under the sheet and her saying something. I kicked my suitcase, and walked out of the apartment. I stumbled about for a couple of hours in parking lots and alleys, shouting at the sky, and it was almost midnight when I returned. She was waiting for me, her legs crossed on the couch, a cup of tea in her hand. She didn't greet me with words, just her eyes, shining with guilt.



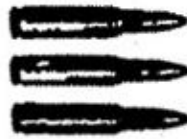
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At the river's edge, we all turn north and run alongside the water. This is where the masses come for fireworks on New Year's Eve.

I brought her once, and she covered her ears the whole time.

We're heading toward the arboretum. A few people look back, which makes them run faster. One is a woman with a young boy who is crying and can't run fast enough, so the woman scoops him in her arms and holds his chest to hers, his little sneakers bouncing behind her. People aren't screaming anymore, just running. A helicopter circles overhead. What does the pilot see? Crowds scrambling along the river like frantic ants sprayed with poison.

A pop sounds and the mother falls. She lands on top of her boy, whose mouth is wide open, frozen in a wail. Cherry-colored blood springs from a hole in her head. The boy wiggles underneath her, shouting "Mama!" I should cry. Maybe I already am. I want to scoop him up in my arms, tell him that everything will be okay. I wave at him, as if a wave transmits compassion, and run past him toward the arboretum, into which most of the crowd has already vanished.



"Don't you think we were just too young?" she asked last night, while serving me wine and cheese.

"Twenty-one isn't young," I said.

"Today it is," she said. "Even my parents were twenty-eight, and that was thirty years ago."

"We made our bed."

"I'm just saying it's not the end of the world. People change."

"You met him while I was in Iraq."

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"That's not true! I was completely faithful. But since you got home...what happened over there? Your mind is distorted. You're home almost four months, and you're so quiet, like we're strangers to each other. I feel like you're waiting for something. Waiting and watching everyone. Especially me."

She turned away from the conversation when a tear shone in her eye. She hung her head as she poured a glass of wine, then raised it to her lips and gulped. Afterwards, she inhaled deeply and looked at me again. My expression must have changed because she went a bit pale. She opened her eyes wide and stepped backward. I grabbed her forearm and pulled her toward me.

"What do you think you're doing?" I said.

"You're hurting me. Let go."

"You can't drink."

"Let go of me. You see? This is what I'm talking about. What's wrong with you?"

I released her.

"It's over," she said. "It's just over. These things happen."

"This isn't a thing that happened. This is your deliberate decision to dishonor our vows."

"The words you use. Dishonor is so dramatic."

"Adultery is dramatic."

"Adultery! It's like I'm talking to a priest."

"That would do you good."

"Such arrogance! I'm sorry I can't be as perfect as you are, but I'm not the Virgin Mary. I don't want to be judged by God or you."

"You're an angel."

She opened her mouth to say something, but just squinted.



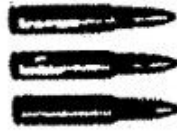
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I leap over the stone wall into the arboretum. We've scattered among the trees. We've gone from running to hiding, and I suddenly notice the silence. The city is gone, muffled by dense treetops. I stand still, listening for another shot. I hear the strumming of a guitar. I walk toward the music and spot an old man hunched over his strings, sitting beneath an ancient apple tree. Is he deaf? His eyes are closed, his head slowly nodding to his music, safe as if in a dream.

"Run!" I shout.

He smiles at his guitar pick, not at me. I study the deep cracks on his face, like fortress walls.

Another shot, and I hear a groan in the distance. I leap behind a tree and peek out to find the victim. A young man with a blonde crew cut, dressed all in blue, grabs a sapling, like a cane, to steady himself. He looks about thirty, and his sneakers shine bright white as if they're brand new. When his body finally falls, it hits a small wooden sign—a genus, maybe—on the way down. He makes no thudding sound on the grass. I hope he falls softly asleep in his blue pajamas. But they're not pajamas, they're hospital scrubs. A doctor on his lunch break. Or running errands for his pregnant wife, who sits at home unpacking baby clothes and smiling to God as her husband's heart and brain come to the end of their useful lives under an *Acer cappadocicum* tree.



"I know this is painful," she said this morning, when we found ourselves together in the kitchen.

"It's unjust."

"Those words you use."

"And what about the baby?" I asked.

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"The baby," she said. She avoided eye contact, and tossed her dirty blonde hair to hide part of her face. She had mastered this technique over the years, her way of signaling a desire to change the subject or end the conversation entirely. I usually granted her wish, but not this time.

"Does it mean nothing to you?" I asked.

She chose this moment to take a long sip of coffee. This couldn't be the first time she's pondered the question. To conceive a child and then so quickly make love to another man. Our whole family in bed with a stranger.

"It's complicated," she said. "I know it's hard. But you can't force things."

"What about the baby?"

"I can't think about that right now."

"You have to. It'll be here, in your arms, in six months. You have to think about it."

"It's too hard."

"You've made it that way."

"Stop with the accusations. I can't take your constant judgment."

"Have I accused you of something?"

"It must be so wonderful to have never made a mistake."

"I've made mistakes."

"Then why can't you just accept this as mine?"

"The infidelity?"

"The marriage! My god, infidelity. Those words."

"What about the baby?"

Her mouth hung open, like a marionette. She shifted her eyes to the ceiling, buying time.

"We have a family, whether you like it or not," I said.

"That's jumping the gun, isn't it?"

"No. You're carrying our child. Why don't you get that?"

"I don't see it that way."

"You don't see it as our child?"

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"No."

"So, it's only your child?"

"There is no child."

"Call it what you want. It will soon be a baby in your arms."

"It won't."

I granted her a moment of silence, which she allowed to last too long, like she was preparing herself to pry open a coffin.

"There won't be any baby," she said.

"You sound crazy. Six months from now—"

"I had it taken care of."

I watched as she stirred her coffee with a spoon, which rattled against the ceramic mug.

"I couldn't bring a baby into this situation. I don't want to cry like this every day for the rest of my life. Don't look at me like that! I was happy when you got home, I really was. But you've changed and it scares me, and if I feel scared in my marriage, what kind of life would that be for my baby? I should have told you, I know. But it was the right thing to do."



It's been a full minute since I've heard a shot. Sirens blare in the distance. Policemen coming to protect us. Paramedics coming to save the dying. The guitar music has ceased. I hope the guitarist fell asleep on the grass, far away from death. But I fear the worst.

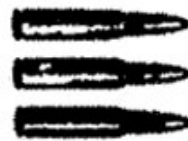
A nearby tree twists upward like a giant claw from the ground. It reminds me of the Monkey Tree, whose massive boughs dangled over the swamp where I hid for hours when I was a boy, talking to myself or the frogs or God, until my mother rang the bell that meant dinner. I grasp the lowest limb and vault myself up. I'm a warrior.

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I've kept my Army body strong. From here I can step onto a series of low branches. I pull myself up and over.

The grass is now a dozen feet below. I straddle the branch and look behind me, but the swirling leafy gowns block out my surroundings. I bring my knees against my chest and rest my head against the trunk. I hear myself panting. In the muffled silence, each breath is like a bomb exploding. Birds sing in the next tree. The guitar plays again—why isn't he running? He's asking for trouble. His strumming is a tease. I halt the machinery of my lungs to listen for anyone else's sounds. But no soldier snores in the next bed. No collective breathing or marching. No orders. No code of honor. It's gone.

Another shot and the guitar ceases. Through a hole in my leaf canopy, I spot his body draped over the instrument. One side of his face is red and wet. Above him in the distance is the church steeple. I've been to this church. I took her there after her grandfather died. Surprised her on her lunch break. She prayed with me. A homeless man was draped across the last pew, napping like an infant. I remember a small crowd by the altar, rehearsing for a christening, preparing for another life full of God. Above their heads Jesus glanced downward, his hands and feet blood-specked, his expression not sad.



"Where did you get that?" she asked about an hour ago, her eyes wide and on fire.

I'd been riffling through my Army duffel bag.

"What are you doing with that?" she asked again.

"What's wrong with you? Get it out of here."

I heard every word, but she might have thought I'd suddenly gone deaf.

"I can't even look at that thing. Get it out—"

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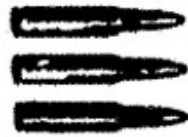
She was leaning against the dresser. She opened the top drawer and began folding my undershirts. It was another of her habits. When she got nervous, she either drank wine or folded clothes.

"Why are you wearing your uniform?" she asked.

Behind her sat my framed high school diploma. Most people don't frame their high school diplomas, but she did that for me not long after we met. She said I should be proud of it. That not everyone needs to go to college, but that if I want to go someday, it's never too late. That I had my whole life in front of me, and that good things were in store for me. For both of us. She was holding me in her arms as she said these things.

Next to the diploma was the photo of our kiss the day I left. I was in my uniform, and her mother snapped the picture, like one of those images of couples parting during World War II. I told her I was leaving not only to protect a nation, but to protect her and our future family.

I lifted it to my shoulder. Her face was perfectly centered in the scope. It looked beautiful. I froze so I could admire her long neck, her tiny curled lips, her high cheekbones which had always made her seem regal, and just slightly out of reach to anyone other than me. Her skin was that swirling mix of pink and beige paint that could light up a canvas. She stood patiently. I could tell that a thought had entered her mind. That she calculated quietly, and then dismissed it. She knew what she deserved.



In the tree, I remove my shiny black boot and pour out the rock that's been bugging my foot. It falls into the grass below. This was a mistake. I lean back again. My own breathing is under control, soft and silent, my chest barely heaving. So, why do I hear panting? I inhale and hold my

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breath. The panting continues. It's coming from somewhere else. From below.

There's something comforting about accepting one's fate. When you hear the click, stillness takes over your body, moving outward from your heart to your extremities, your brain, your dreams. You enter a new body, one that will transport you to your seat next to The Lord. You don't want to sing and dance. You want to sleep, or at least rest, because you understand that peace is all that's left for you.

I hear the click from below. It's followed by three more, with no pattern or rhythm. Four clicks total, all from different directions. Like a baby bird peeking from the nest, I spot a dark blue uniform in the haze. To the far right I find another. They're wearing thick protective vests and boots like mine. One of the officers shouts something, but to me, it's muffled. I've already entered the dream, where He is honoring me. Another muffled shout. They're calling me. Commanding me to do something, but they sound farther away with each word. Two more clicks with two more arrivals. More shouting. They think I am the evil one.

Look kindly upon them. They can't help their blindness. They will say that I went crazy. They'll need to believe that. Only then can the doctor's wife, the skateboarder's mother, the guitarist's grandchildren accept it. It's too agonizing to blame themselves. They've dispensed with moral laws, so all that's left is madness. Madness brings comfort, so I must be mad for them. That will be my gift.

I grasp the hand of The Lord, and He leads me. We place the muzzle in my mouth and I can taste the steel. We place my fingers on the trigger guard. More muffled calls from below. They don't want me to go. Of course not. I am the truth. We rest my forefinger on the trigger, and with a breeze, like a hand stroking my head, we leave my body behind.