

The First Lesson



“PLEASE, MISTER . . .” EDDIE PLEADED. “I DIDN’T know. Believe me . . . God help me, I didn’t know.”

The Blue Man nodded. “You couldn’t know. You were too young.”

Eddie stepped back. He squared his body as if bracing for a fight.

“But now I gotta pay,” he said.

“To pay?”

“For my sin. That’s why I’m here, right? Justice?”

The Blue Man smiled. “No, Edward. You are here so I can teach you something. All the people you meet here have one thing to teach you.”

Eddie was skeptical. His fists stayed clenched.

“What?” he said.

“That there are no random acts. That we are all connected. That you can no more separate one life from another than you can separate a breeze from the wind.”

Eddie shook his head. “We were throwing a *ball*. It was *my* stupidity, running out there like that. Why should *you* have to die on account of *me*? It ain’t *fair*.”

The Blue Man held out his hand. “Fairness,” he said, “does not govern life and death. If it did, no good person would ever die young.”

He rolled his palm upward and suddenly they were standing in a cemetery behind a small group of mourners. A priest by the gravesite was reading from a Bible. Eddie could not see faces, only the backs of hats and dresses and suit coats.

“My funeral,” the Blue Man said. “Look at the mourners. Some did not even know me well, yet they came. Why? Did you ever wonder? Why people gather when others die? Why people feel they *should*?”

“It is because the human spirit knows, deep down, that all lives intersect. That death doesn’t just take someone, it misses someone else, and in the small distance between being taken and being missed, lives are changed.

“You say you should have died instead of me. But during my time on earth, people died instead of me, too. It happens every day. When lightning strikes a minute after you are gone, or an airplane crashes that you might have been on. When your colleague falls ill and you do not. We

think such things are random. But there is a balance to it all. One withers, another grows. Birth and death are part of a whole.

"It is why we are drawn to babies . . ." He turned to the mourners. "And to funerals."

Eddie looked again at the gravesite gathering. He wondered if he'd had a funeral. He wondered if anyone came. He saw the priest reading from the Bible and the mourners lowering their heads. This was the day the Blue Man had been buried, all those years ago. Eddie had been there, a little boy, fidgeting through the ceremony, with no idea of the role he'd played in it.

"I still don't understand," Eddie whispered. "What good came from your death?"

"You lived," the Blue Man answered.

"But we barely knew each other. I might as well have been a stranger."

The Blue Man put his arms on Eddie's shoulders. Eddie felt that warm, melting sensation.

"Strangers," the Blue Man said, "are just family you have yet to come to know."

☞WITH THAT, THE Blue Man pulled Eddie close. Instantly, Eddie felt everything the Blue Man had felt in his life rushing into him, swimming in his body, the loneliness, the shame, the nervousness, the heart attack. It slid into Eddie like a drawer being closed.

"I am leaving," the Blue Man whispered in his ear. "This step of heaven is over for me. But there are others for you to meet."

"Wait," Eddie said, pulling back. "Just tell me one thing. Did I save the little girl? At the pier. Did I save her?"

The Blue Man did not answer. Eddie slumped. "Then my death was a waste, just like my life."

"No life is a waste," the Blue Man said. "The only time we waste is the time we spend thinking we are alone."

He stepped back toward the gravesite and smiled. And as he did, his skin turned the loveliest shade of caramel—smooth and unblemished. It was, Eddie thought, the most perfect skin he had ever seen.

"Wait!" Eddie yelled, but he was suddenly whisked into the air, away from the cemetery, soaring above the great gray ocean. Below him, he saw the rooftops of old Ruby Pier, the spires and turrets, the flags flapping in the breeze.

Then it was gone.

SUNDAY, 3 P.M.

Back at the pier, the crowd stood silently around the wreckage of Freddy's Free Fall. Old women touched their throats. Mothers pulled their children away. Several burly men in tank tops slid to the front, as if this were something they should handle, but once they got there, they, too, only looked on, helpless. The sun baked down, sharpening the shadows, causing them to shield their eyes as if they were saluting.

How bad is it? people whispered. From the back of the crowd, Dominguez burst through, his face red, his maintenance shirt drenched in sweat. He saw the carnage.

"Ahh no, no, Eddie," he moaned, grabbing his head. Security workers arrived. They pushed people back. But then, they, too, fell into impotent postures, hands on their hips, waiting for the ambulances. It was as if all of them—the mothers, the fathers, the kids with their giant gulp soda cups—were too stunned to look and too stunned to leave. Death was at their feet, as a carnival tune played over the park speakers.

How bad is it? Sirens sounded. Men in uniforms arrived. Yellow tape was stretched around the area. The arcade booths pulled down their grates. The rides were closed indefinitely. Word spread across the beach of the bad thing that had happened, and by sunset, Ruby Pier was empty.

Today Is Eddie's Birthday

From his bedroom, even with the door closed, Eddie can smell the beefsteak his mother is grilling with green peppers and sweet red onions, a strong, woody odor that he loves.

"Eddd-deee!" she yells from the kitchen. "Where are you? Everyone's here!"

He rolls off the bed and puts away the comic book. He is 17 today, too old for such things, but he still enjoys the idea—colorful heroes like the Phantom, fighting the bad guys, saving the world. He has given his collection to his school-aged cousins from Romania, who came to America a few months earlier. Eddie's family met them at the docks and they moved into the bedroom that Eddie shared with his brother, Joe. The cousins cannot speak English, but they like comic books. Anyhow, it gives Eddie an excuse to keep them around.

"There's the birthday boy," his mother crows when he rambles into the room. He wears a button-down white shirt and a blue tie, which pinches his muscular neck. A grunt of hellos and raised beer glasses come from the assembled visitors, family, friends, pier workers. Eddie's father is playing cards in the corner, in a small cloud of cigar smoke.

"Hey, Ma, guess what?" Joe yells out. "Eddie met a girl last night."

"Oooh. Did he?"

Eddie feels a rush of blood.

"Yeah. Said he's gonna marry her."

"Shut yer trap," Eddie says to Joe.

Joe ignores him. "Yep, he came into the room all google-eyed, and he said, 'Joe, I met the girl I'm gonna marry!'"

Eddie seethes. "I said shut it!"

"What's her name, Eddie?" someone asks.

"Does she go to church?"

Eddie goes to his brother and socks him in the arm.

"Owww!"

"Eddie!"

"I told you to shut it!"

Joe blurts out, "And he danced with her at the Stard—!"

Whack.

"Oww!"

"SHUT UP!"

"Eddie! Stop that!!"

Even the Romanian cousins look up now—fighting they understand—as the two brothers grab each other and flail away, clearing the couch, until Eddie's father puts down his cigar and yells, "Knock it off, before I slap both of ya's."

The brothers separate, panting and glaring. Some older relatives smile. One of the aunts whispers, "He must really like this girl."

Later, after the special steak has been eaten and the candles have been blown out and most of the guests have gone home, Eddie's mother turns on the radio. There is news about the war in Europe, and Eddie's father says something about lumber and copper wire

being hard to get if things get worse. That will make maintenance of the park nearly impossible.

"Such awful news," Eddie's mother says. "Not at a birthday."

She turns the dial until the small box offers music, an orchestra playing a swing melody, and she smiles and hums along. Then she comes over to Eddie, who is slouched in his chair, picking at the last pieces of cake. She removes her apron, folds it over a chair, and lifts Eddie by the hands.

"Show me how you danced with your new friend," she says.

"Aw, Ma."

"Come on."

Eddie stands as if being led to his execution. His brother smirks. But his mother, with her pretty, round face, keeps humming and stepping back and forth, until Eddie falls into a dance step with her.

"Daaa daa deeee," she sings with the melody, "... when you're with meeee ... da da ... the stars, and the moon ... the da ... da ... da ... in June ..."

They move around the living room until Eddie breaks down and laughs. He is already taller than his mother by a good six inches, yet she twirls him with ease.

"So," she whispers, "you like this girl?"

Eddie loses a step.

"It's all right," she says. "I'm happy for you."

They spin to the table, and Eddie's mother grabs Joe and pulls him up.

"Now you two dance," she says.

"With him?"

“Ma!”

But she insists and they relent, and soon Joe and Eddie are laughing and stumbling into each other. They join hands and move, swooping up and down in exaggerated circles. Around and around the table they go, to their mother’s delight, as the clarinets lead the radio melody and the Romanian cousins clap along and the final wisps of grilled steak evaporate into the party air.



The Second Person Eddie Meets in Heaven



*E*DDIE FELT HIS FEET TOUCH GROUND. THE sky was changing again, from cobalt blue to charcoal gray, and Eddie was surrounded now by fallen trees and blackened rubble. He grabbed his arms, shoulders, thighs, and calves. He felt stronger than before, but when he tried to touch his toes, he could no longer do so. The limberness was gone. No more childish rubbery sensation. Every muscle he had was as tight as piano wire.

He looked around at the lifeless terrain. On a nearby hill lay a busted wagon and the rotting bones of an animal. Eddie felt a hot wind whip across his face. The sky exploded to a flaming yellow.

And once again, Eddie ran.

He ran differently now, in the hard measured steps of a soldier. He heard thunder—or something like thunder, explosions, or bomb blasts—and he instinctively fell to the ground, landed on his stomach, and pulled himself along by his forearms. The sky burst open and gushed rain, a thick, brownish downpour. Eddie lowered his head and crawled along in the mud, spitting away the dirty water that gathered around his lips.

Finally he felt his head brush against something solid. He looked up to see a rifle dug into the ground, with a helmet sitting atop it and a set of dog tags hanging from the grip. Blinking through the rain, he fingered the dog tags, then scrambled backward wildly into a porous wall of stringy vines that hung from a massive banyan tree. He dove into their darkness. He pulled his knees into a crouch. He tried to catch his breath. Fear had found him, even in heaven.

The name on the dog tags was his.

☞ YOUNG MEN GO to war. Sometimes because they have to, sometimes because they want to. Always, they feel they are supposed to. This comes from the sad, layered stories of life, which over the centuries have seen courage confused with picking up arms, and cowardice confused with laying them down.

When his country entered the war, Eddie woke up

early one rainy morning, shaved, combed back his hair, and enlisted. Others were fighting. He would, too.

His mother did not want him to go. His father, when informed of the news, lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out slowly.

“When?” was all he asked.

Since he'd never fired an actual rifle, Eddie began to practice at the shooting arcade at Ruby Pier. You paid a nickel and the machine hummed and you squeezed the trigger and fired metal slugs at pictures of jungle animals, a lion or a giraffe. Eddie went every evening, after running the brake levers at the Li'l Folks Miniature Railway. Ruby Pier had added a number of new, smaller attractions, because roller coasters, after the Depression, had become too expensive. The Miniature Railway was pretty much just that, the train cars no higher than a grown man's thigh.

Eddie, before enlisting, had been working to save money to study engineering. That was his goal—he wanted to build things, even if his brother, Joe, kept saying, “C'mon, Eddie, you aren't smart enough for that.”

But once the war started, pier business dropped. Most of Eddie's customers now were women alone with children, their fathers gone to fight. Sometimes the children asked Eddie to lift them over his head, and when Eddie complied, he saw the mothers' sad smiles: He guessed it was the right lift but the wrong pair of arms. Soon, Eddie

figured, he would join those distant men, and his life of greasing tracks and running brake levers would be over. War was his call to manhood. Maybe someone would miss him, too.

On one of those final nights, Eddie was bent over the small arcade rifle, firing with deep concentration. *Pang!* *Pang!* He tried to imagine actually shooting at the enemy. *Pang!* Would they make a noise when he shot them—*pang!*—or would they just go down, like the lions and giraffes?

Pang! Pang!

“Practicing to kill, are ya, lad?”

Mickey Shea was standing behind Eddie. His hair was the color of French vanilla ice cream, wet with sweat, and his face was red from whatever he'd been drinking. Eddie shrugged and returned to his shooting. *Pang!* Another hit. *Pang!* Another.

“Hmmp,” Mickey grunted.

Eddie wished Mickey would go away and let him work on his aim. He could feel the old drunk behind him. He could hear his labored breathing, the nasal hissing in and out, like a bike tire being inflated by a pump.

Eddie kept shooting. Suddenly, he felt a painful grip on his shoulder.

“Listen to me, lad.” Mickey's voice was a low growl. “War is no game. If there's a shot to be made, you make it, you hear? No guilt. No hesitation. You fire and you fire and

you don't think about who you're shootin' or killin' or why, y'hear me? You want to come home again, you just fire, you don't think."

He squeezed even harder.

"It's the thinking that gets you killed."

Eddie turned and stared at Mickey. Mickey slapped him hard on the cheek and Eddie instinctively raised his fist to retaliate. But Mickey belched and wobbled backward. Then he looked at Eddie as if he were going to cry. The mechanical gun stopped humming. Eddie's nickel was up.

Young men go to war, sometimes because they have to, sometimes because they want to. A few days later, Eddie packed a duffel bag and left the pier behind.

☉THE RAIN STOPPED. Eddie, shivering and wet beneath the banyan tree, exhaled a long, hard breath. He pulled the vines apart and saw the rifle and helmet still stuck in the ground. He remembered why soldiers did this: It marked the graves of their dead.

He crawled out on his knees. Off in the distance, below a small ridge, were the remains of a village, bombed and burnt into little more than rubble. For a moment, Eddie stared, his mouth slightly open, his eyes bringing the scene into tighter focus. Then his chest tightened like a man who'd just had bad news broken. This place. He knew it. It had haunted his dreams.

"Smallpox," a voice suddenly said.

Eddie spun.

"Smallpox. Typhoid. Tetanus. Yellow fever."

It came from above, somewhere in the tree.

"I never did find out what yellow fever was. Hell. I never met anyone who had it."

The voice was strong, with a slight Southern drawl and gravelly edges, like a man who'd been yelling for hours.

"I got all those shots for all those diseases and I died here anyhow, healthy as a horse."

The tree shook. Some small fruit fell in front of Eddie.

"How you like *them* apples?" the voice said.

Eddie stood up and cleared his throat.

"Come out," he said.

"Come up," the voice said.

And Eddie was in the tree, near the top, which was as tall as an office building. His legs straddled a large limb and the earth below seemed a long drop away. Through the smaller branches and thick fig leaves, Eddie could make out the shadowy figure of a man in army fatigues, sitting back against the tree trunk. His face was covered with a coal black substance. His eyes glowed red like tiny bulbs.

Eddie swallowed hard.

"Captain?" he whispered. "Is that you?"

☉THEY HAD SERVED together in the army. The Captain was Eddie's commanding officer. They fought in the Philip-

piners and they parted in the Philippines and Eddie had never seen him again. He had heard he'd died in combat.

A wisp of cigarette smoke appeared.

"They explained the rules to you, soldier?"

Eddie looked down. He saw the earth far below, yet he knew he could not fall.

"I'm dead," he said.

"You got that much right."

"And *you're* dead."

"Got that right, too."

"And you're . . . my second person?"

The Captain held up his cigarette. He smiled as if to say, "*Can you believe you get to smoke up here?*" Then he took a long drag and blew out a small white cloud.

"Betcha didn't expect me, huh?"

⊙⊙EDDIE LEARNED MANY things during the war. He learned to ride atop a tank. He learned to shave with cold water in his helmet. He learned to be careful when shooting from a foxhole, lest he hit a tree and wound himself with deflected shrapnel.

He learned to smoke. He learned to march. He learned to cross a rope bridge while carrying, all at once, an overcoat, a radio, a carbine, a gas mask, a tripod for a machine gun, a backpack, and several bandoliers on his shoulder. He learned how to drink the worst coffee he'd ever tasted.

He learned a few words in a few foreign languages. He

learned to spit a great distance. He learned the nervous cheer of a soldier's first survived combat, when the men slap each other and smile as if it's over—*We can go home now!*—and he learned the sinking depression of a soldier's second combat, when he realizes the fighting does not stop at one battle, there is more and more after that.

He learned to whistle through his teeth. He learned to sleep on rocky earth. He learned that scabies are itchy little mites that burrow into your skin, especially if you've worn the same filthy clothes for a week. He learned a man's bones really do look white when they burst through the skin.

He learned to pray quickly. He learned in which pocket to keep the letters to his family and Marguerite, in case he should be found dead by his fellow soldiers. He learned that sometimes you are sitting next to a buddy in a dugout, whispering about how hungry you are, and the next instant there is a small *whoosh* and the buddy slumps over and his hunger is no longer an issue.

He learned, as one year turned to two and two years turned toward three, that even strong, muscular men vomit on their shoes when the transport plane is about to unload them, and even officers talk in their sleep the night before combat.

He learned how to take a prisoner, although he never learned how to become one. Then one night, on a Philippine island, his group came under heavy fire, and they scat-

tered for shelter and the skies were lit and Eddie heard one of his buddies, down in a ditch, weeping like a child, and he yelled at him, "Shut up, will ya!" and he realized the man was crying because there was an enemy soldier standing over him with a rifle at his head, and Eddie felt something cold at his neck and there was one behind him, too.

☉THE CAPTAIN STUBBED out his cigarette. He was older than the men in Eddie's troop, a lifetime military man with a lanky swagger and a prominent chin that gave him a resemblance to a movie actor of the day. Most of the soldiers liked him well enough, although he had a short temper and a habit of yelling inches from your face, so you could see his teeth, already yellowed from tobacco. Still, the Captain always promised he would "leave no one behind," no matter what happened, and the men took comfort in that.

"Captain . . ." Eddie said again, still stunned.

"Affirmative."

"Sir."

"No need for that. But much obliged."

"It's been . . . You look . . ."

"Like the last time you saw me?" He grinned, then spat over the tree branch. He saw Eddie's confused expression. "You're right. Ain't no reason to spit up here. You don't get sick, either. Your breath is always the same. And the chow is incredible."

Chow? Eddie didn't get any of this. "Captain, look.

There's some mistake. I still don't know why I'm here. I had a nothing life, see? I worked maintenance. I lived in the same apartment for years. I took care of rides, Ferris wheels, roller coasters, stupid little rocket ships. It was nothing to be proud of. I just kind of drifted. What I'm saying is . . ."

Eddie swallowed. "What am I doing here?"

The Captain looked at him with those glowing red eyes, and Eddie resisted asking the other question he now wondered after the Blue Man: Did he kill the Captain, too?

"You know, I've been wondering," the Captain said, rubbing his chin. "The men from our unit—did they stay in touch? Willingham? Morton? Smitty? Did you ever see those guys?"

Eddie remembered the names. The truth was, they had not kept in touch. War could bond men like a magnet, but like a magnet it could repel them, too. The things they saw, the things they did. Sometimes they just wanted to forget.

"To be honest, sir, we all kind of fell out." He shrugged. "Sorry."

The Captain nodded as if he'd expected as much.

"And you? You went back to that fun park where we all promised to go if we got out alive? Free rides for all GIs? Two girls per guy in the Tunnel of Love? Isn't that what you said?"

Eddie nearly smiled. That was what he'd said. What they'd all said. But when the war ended, nobody came.

"Yeah, I went back," Eddie said.

“And?”

“And . . . I never left. I tried. I made plans. . . . But this damn leg. I don’t know. Nothin’ worked out.”

Eddie shrugged. The Captain studied his face. His eyes narrowed. His voice lowered.

“You still juggle?” he asked.

∞“GO! . . . YOU GO! . . . YOU GO!”

The enemy soldiers screamed and poked them with bayonets. Eddie, Smitty, Morton, Rabozzo, and the Captain were herded down a steep hill, hands on their heads. Mortar shells exploded around them. Eddie saw a figure run through the trees, then fall in a clap of bullets.

He tried to take mental snapshots as they marched in the darkness—huts, roads, whatever he could make out—knowing such information would be precious for an escape. A plane roared in the distance, filling Eddie with a sudden, sickening wave of despair. It is the inner torture of every captured soldier, the short distance between freedom and seizure. If Eddie could only jump up and grab the wing of that plane, he could fly away from this mistake.

Instead, he and the others were bound at the wrists and ankles. They were dumped inside a bamboo barracks. The barracks sat on stilts above the muddy ground, and they remained there for days, weeks, months, forced to sleep on burlap sacks stuffed with straw. A clay jug served as their toilet. At night, the enemy guards would crawl under the

hut and listen to their conversations. As time passed, they said less and less.

They grew thin and weak. Their ribs grew visible—even Rabozzo, who had been a chunky kid when he enlisted. Their food consisted of rice balls filled with salt and, once a day, some brownish broth with grass floating in it. One night, Eddie plucked a dead hornet from the bowl. It was missing its wings. The others stopped eating.

☉THEIR CAPTORS SEEMED unsure of what to do with them. In the evenings, they would enter with bayonets and wiggle their blades at the Americans' noses, yelling in a foreign language, waiting for answers. It was never productive.

There were only four of them, near as Eddie could tell, and the Captain guessed that they, too, had drifted away from a larger unit and were, as often happens in real war, making it up day by day. Their faces were gaunt and bony, with dark nubs of hair. One looked too young to be a soldier. Another had the most crooked teeth Eddie had ever seen. The Captain called them Crazy One, Crazy Two, Crazy Three, and Crazy Four.

"We don't want to know their names," he said. "And we don't want them knowing ours."

Men adapt to captivity, some better than others. Morton, a skinny, chattering youth from Chicago, would fidget whenever he heard noises from outside, rubbing his chin and mumbling, "Oh, damn, oh damn, oh damn . . ." until

the others told him to shut up. Smitty, a fireman's son from Brooklyn, was quiet most of the time, but he often seemed to be swallowing something, his Adam's apple loping up and down; Eddie later learned he was chewing on his tongue. Rabozzo, the young redheaded kid from Portland, Oregon, kept a poker face during the waking hours, but at night he often woke up screaming, "Not me! Not me!"

Eddie mostly seethed. He clenched a fist and slapped it into his palm, hours on end, knuckles to skin, like the anxious baseball player he had been in his youth. At night, he dreamed he was back at the pier, on the Derby Horse carousel, where five customers raced in circles until the bell rang. He was racing his buddies, or his brother, or Marguerite. But then the dream turned, and the four Crazies were on the adjacent ponies, poking at him, sneering.

Years of waiting at the pier—for a ride to finish, for the waves to pull back, for his father to speak to him—had trained Eddie in the art of patience. But he wanted out, and he wanted revenge. He ground his jaws and he slapped his palm and he thought about all the fights he'd been in back in his old neighborhood, the time he'd sent two kids to the hospital with a garbage can lid. He pictured what he'd do to these guards if they didn't have guns.

Then one morning, the prisoners were awakened by screaming and flashing bayonets and the four Crazies had them up and bound and led down into a shaft. There was no

light. The ground was cold. There were picks and shovels and metal buckets.

“It’s a goddamn coal mine,” Morton said.

FROM THAT DAY forward, Eddie and the others were forced to strip coal from the walls to help the enemy’s war effort. Some shoveled, some scraped, some carried pieces of slate and built triangles to hold up the ceiling. There were other prisoners there, too, foreigners who didn’t know English and who looked at Eddie with hollow eyes. Speaking was prohibited. One cup of water was given every few hours. The prisoners’ faces, by the end of the day, were hopelessly black, and their necks and shoulders throbbed from leaning over.

For the first few months of this captivity, Eddie went to sleep with Marguerite’s picture in his helmet propped up in front of him. He wasn’t much for praying, but he prayed just the same, making up the words and keeping count each night, saying, “Lord, I’ll give you these six days if you give me six days with her. . . . I’ll give you these nine days if I get nine days with her. . . . I’ll give you these sixteen days if I get sixteen days with her. . . .”

Then, during the fourth month, something happened. Rabozzo developed an ugly skin rash and severe diarrhea. He couldn’t eat a thing. At night, he sweated through his filthy clothes until they were soaking wet. He soiled himself. There were no clean clothes to give him so he slept naked

on the burlap, and the Captain placed his sack over him like a blanket.

The next day, down in the mine, Rabozzo could barely stand. The four Crazies showed no pity. When he slowed, they poked him with sticks to keep him scraping.

"Leave him be," Eddie growled.

Crazy Two, the most brutal of their captors, slammed Eddie with a bayonet butt. He went down, a shot of pain spreading between his shoulder blades. Rabozzo scraped a few more pieces of coal, then collapsed. Crazy Two screamed at him to get up.

"He's sick!" Eddie yelled, struggling to his feet.

Crazy Two slammed him down again.

"Shut up, Eddie," Morton whispered. "For your own good."

Crazy Two leaned over Rabozzo. He pulled back his eyelids. Rabozzo moaned. Crazy Two made an exaggerated smile and cooed, as if dealing with a baby. He went, "Ahh," and laughed. He laughed looking at all of them, making eye contact, making sure they were watching him. Then he pulled out his pistol, rammed it into Rabozzo's ear, and shot him in the head.

Eddie felt his body rip in half. His eyes blurred and his brain went numb. The echo of the gunshot hung in the mine as Rabozzo's face soaked into a spreading puddle of blood. Morton put his hands over his mouth. The Captain looked down. Nobody moved.

Crazy Two kicked black dirt over the body, then glared at Eddie and spat at his feet. He yelled something at Crazy Three and Crazy Four, both of whom seemed as stunned as the prisoners. For a moment, Crazy Three shook his head and mumbled, as if saying a prayer, his eyelids lowered and his lips moving furiously. But Crazy Two waved the gun and yelled again and Crazy Three and Crazy Four slowly lifted Rabozzo's body by its feet and dragged it along the mine floor, leaving a trail of wet blood, which, in the darkness, looked like spilt oil. They dropped him against a wall, next to a pickax.

After that, Eddie stopped praying. He stopped counting days. He and the Captain spoke only of escaping before they all met the same fate. The Captain figured the enemy war effort was desperate, that was why they needed every half-dead prisoner to scrape coal. Each day in the mine there were fewer and fewer bodies. At night, Eddie heard bombing; it seemed to be getting closer. If things got too bad, the Captain figured, their captors would bail out, destroy everything. He had seen ditches dug beyond the prisoner barracks and large oil barrels positioned up the steep hill.

"The oil's for burning the evidence," the Captain whispered. "They're digging our graves."

☉THREE WEEKS LATER, under a hazy-mooned sky, Crazy Three was inside the barracks, standing guard. He had two large rocks, almost the size of bricks, which, in his boredom,

he tried to juggle. He kept dropping them, picking them up, tossing them high, and dropping them again. Eddie, covered in black ash, looked up, annoyed at the thudding noise. He'd been trying to sleep. But now he lifted himself slowly. His vision cleared. He felt his nerves pricking to life.

"Captain . . ." he whispered. "You ready to move?"

The Captain raised his head. "What're you thinking?"

"Them rocks." Eddie nodded toward the guard.

"What about 'em?" the Captain said.

"I can juggle," Eddie whispered.

The Captain squinted. "What?"

But Eddie was already yelling at the guard, "Hey! Yo! You're doing it wrong!"

He made a circular motion with his palms. "This way! You do it this way! Gimme!"

He held out his hands. "I can juggle. Gimme."

Crazy Three looked at him cautiously. Of all the guards, Eddie felt, he had his best chance with this one. Crazy Three had occasionally sneaked the prisoners pieces of bread and tossed them through the small hut hole that served as a window. Eddie made the circular motion again and smiled. Crazy Three approached, stopped, went back for his bayonet, then walked the two rocks over to Eddie.

"Like this," Eddie said, and he began to juggle effortlessly. He had learned when he was seven years old, from an Italian sideshow man who juggled six plates at once. Eddie

had spent countless hours practicing on the boardwalk—pebbles, rubber balls, whatever he could find. It was no big deal. Most pier kids could juggle.

But now he worked the two rocks furiously, juggling them faster, impressing the guard. Then he stopped, held the rocks out, and said, "Get me another one."

Crazy Three grunted.

"Three rocks, see?" Eddie held up three fingers. "Three."

By now, Morton and Smitty were sitting up. The Captain was moving closer.

"Where are we going here?" Smitty mumbled.

"If I can get one more rock . . ." Eddie mumbled back.

Crazy Three opened the bamboo door and did what Eddie'd hoped he would do: He yelled for the others. Crazy One appeared with a fat rock and Crazy Two followed him in. Crazy Three thrust the rock at Eddie and yelled something. Then he stepped back, grinned at the others, and motioned for them to sit, as if to say, "Watch this."

Eddie tossed the rocks into a rhythmic weave. Each one was as big as his palm. He sang a carnival tune. "Da, da-da-da daaaaa . . ." The guards laughed. Eddie laughed. The Captain laughed. Forced laughter, buying time.

"Get *clo-ser*," Eddie sang, pretending the words were part of the melody. Morton and Smitty slid gently in, feigning interest.

The guards were enjoying the diversion. Their posture

slackened. Eddie tried to swallow his breathing. Just a little longer. He threw one rock high into the air, then juggled the lower two, then caught the third, then did it again.

"Ahhh," Crazy Three said, despite himself.

"You like that?" Eddie said. He was juggling faster now. He kept tossing one rock high and watching his captors' eyes as they followed it into the air. He sang, "*Da, da-da-da daaa,*" then, "*When I count to three,*" then, "*Da, da-da-da daaaa . . .*" then, "*Captain, the guy on the lefffft . . .*"

Crazy Two frowned suspiciously, but Eddie smiled the way the jugglers back at Ruby Pier smiled when they were losing the audience. "Lookie here, lookie here, lookie here!" Eddie cooed. "Greatest show on earth, buddy boy!"

Eddie went faster, then counted, "One . . . two . . ." then tossed a rock much higher than before. The Crazies watched it rise.

"Now!" Eddie yelled. In mid-juggle he grabbed a rock and, like the good baseball pitcher he had always been, whipped it hard into the face of Crazy Two, breaking his nose. Eddie caught the second rock and threw it, left-handed, square into the chin of Crazy One, who fell back as the Captain jumped him, grabbing his bayonet. Crazy Three, momentarily frozen, reached for his pistol and fired wildly as Morton and Smitty tackled his legs. The door burst open and Crazy Four ran in, and Eddie threw the last rock at him and missed his head by inches, but as he

ducked, the Captain was waiting against the wall with the bayonet, which he drove through Crazy Four's rib cage so hard the two of them tumbled through the door. Eddie, powered by adrenaline, leaped on Crazy Two and pounded his face harder than he had ever pounded anyone back on Pitkin Avenue. He grabbed a loose rock and slammed it against his skull, again and again, until he looked at his hands and saw a hideous purplish goo that he realized was blood and skin and coal ash, mixed together—then he heard a gunshot and grabbed his head, smearing the goo on his temples. He looked up and saw Smitty standing over him, holding an enemy pistol. Crazy Two's body went slack. He was bleeding from the chest.

“For Rabozzo,” Smitty mumbled.

Within minutes, all four guards were dead.

☞THE PRISONERS, THIN and barefoot and covered in blood, were running now for the steep hill. Eddie had expected gunfire, more guards to fight, but there was no one. The other huts were empty. In fact, the entire camp was empty. Eddie wondered how long it had been just the four Crazies and them.

“The rest probably took off when they heard the bombing,” the Captain whispered. “We're the last group left.”

The oil barrels were pitched at the first rise of the hill.

Less than 100 yards away was the entrance to the coal mine. There was a supply hut nearby and Morton made sure it was empty, then ran inside; he emerged with an armful of grenades, rifles, and two primitive-looking flamethrowers.

“Let’s burn it down,” he said.

Today Is Eddie's Birthday

The cake reads "Good luck! Fight hard!" and on the side, along the vanilla-frosted edge, someone has added the words, "Come home soon," in blue squiggly letters, but the "o-o-n" is squeezed together, so it reads more like "son" or "Come home son."

Eddie's mother has already cleaned and pressed the clothes he will wear the next day. She's hung them on a hanger on his bedroom closet doorknob and put his one pair of dress shoes beneath them.

Eddie is in the kitchen, fooling with his young Romanian cousins, his hands behind his back as they try to punch his stomach. One points out the kitchen window at the Parisian Carousel, which is lit for the evening customers.

"Horses!" the child exclaims.

The front door opens and Eddie hears a voice that makes his heart jump, even now. He wonders if this is a weakness he shouldn't be taking off to war.

"Hiya, Eddie," Marguerite says.

And there she is, in the kitchen doorway, looking wonderful, and Eddie feels that familiar tickle in his chest. She brushes a bit of rain-water from her hair and smiles. She has a small box in her hands.

"I brought you something. For your birthday, and, well . . . for your leaving, too."

She smiles again. Eddie wants to hug her so badly, he thinks he'll burst. He doesn't care what is in the box. He only wants to re-

member her holding it out for him. As always, with Marguerite, Eddie mostly wants to freeze time.

"This is swell," he says.

She laughs. "You haven't opened it yet."

"Listen." He moves closer. "Do you—"

"Eddie!" someone yells from the other room. "Come on and blow out the candles."

"Yeah! We're hungry!"

"Oh, Sal, shush!"

"Well, we are."

There is cake and beer and milk and cigars and a toast to Eddie's success, and there is a moment where his mother begins to cry and she hugs her other son, Joe, who is staying stateside on account of his flat feet.

Later that night, Eddie walks Marguerite along the promenade. He knows the names of every ticket taker and food vendor and they all wish him luck. Some of the older women get teary-eyed, and Eddie figures they have sons of their own, already gone.

He and Marguerite buy saltwater taffy, molasses and teaberry and root beer flavors. They pick out pieces from the small white bag, playfully fighting each other's fingers. At the penny arcade, Eddie pulls on a plaster hand and the arrow goes past "clammy" and "harmless" and "mild," all the way to "hot stuff."

"You're really strong," Marguerite says.

"Hot stuff," Eddie says, making a muscle.

At the end of the night, they stand on the boardwalk in a fashion they have seen in the movies, holding hands, leaning against the

railing. Out on the sand, an old ragpicker has built a small fire from sticks and torn towels and is huddling by it, settled in for the night.

"You don't have to ask me to wait," Marguerite says suddenly.

Eddie swallows.

"I don't?"

She shakes her head. Eddie smiles. Saved from a question that has caught in his throat all night, he feels as if a string has just shot from his heart and looped around her shoulders, pulling her close, making her his. He loves her more in this moment than he thought he could ever love anyone.

A drop of rain hits Eddie's forehead. Then another. He looks up at the gathering clouds.

"Hey, Hot Stuff?" Marguerite says. She smiles but then her face droops and she blinks back water, although Eddie cannot tell if it is raindrops or tears.

"Don't get killed, OK?" she says.



☺A FREED SOLDIER is often furious. The days and nights he lost, the torture and humiliation he suffered—it all demands a fierce revenge, a balancing of the accounts.

So when Morton, his arms full of stolen weapons, said to the others, “Let’s burn it down,” there was quick if not logical agreement. Inflated by their new sense of control, the men scattered with the enemy’s firepower, Smitty to the entrance of the mine shaft, Morton and Eddie to the oil barrels. The Captain went in search of a transport vehicle.

“Five minutes, then back here!” he barked. “That bombing’s gonna start soon and we need to be gone. Got it? Five minutes!”

Which was all it took to destroy what had been their home for nearly half a year. Smitty dropped the grenades down the mine shaft and ran. Eddie and Morton rolled two barrels into the hut complex, pried them open, then, one by one, fired the nozzles of their newly acquired flamethrowers and watched the huts ignite.

“Burn!” Morton yelled.

“Burn!” Eddie yelled.

The mine shaft exploded from below. Black smoke rose from the entrance. Smitty, his work done, ran toward the

meeting point. Morton kicked his oil barrel into a hut and unleashed a rope-like burst of flame.

Eddie watched, sneered, then moved down the path to the final hut. It was larger, more like a barn, and he lifted his weapon. *This was over*, he said to himself. *Over*. All these weeks and months in the hands of those bastards, those subhuman guards with their bad teeth and bony faces and the dead hornets in their soup. He didn't know what would happen to them next, but it could not be any worse than what they had endured.

Eddie squeezed the trigger. *Whoosh*. The fire shot up quickly. The bamboo was dry, and within a minute the walls of the barn were melting in orange and yellow flames. Off in the distance, Eddie heard the rumble of an engine—the Captain, he hoped, had found something to escape in—and then, suddenly, from the skies, the first sounds of bombing, the noise they had been hearing every night. It was even closer now, and Eddie realized whoever it was would see the flames. They might be rescued. He might be going home! He turned to the burning barn and . . .

What was that?

He blinked.

What was that?

Something darted across the door opening. Eddie tried to focus. The heat was intense, and he shielded his eyes with

his free hand. He couldn't be sure, but he thought he'd just seen a small figure running inside the fire.

"Hey!" Eddie yelled, stepping forward, lowering his weapon. "HEY!" The roof of the barn began to crumble, splashing sparks and flame. Eddie jumped back. His eyes watered. Maybe it was a shadow.

"EDDIE! NOW!"

Morton was up the path, waving for Eddie to come. Eddie's eyes were stinging. He was breathing hard. He pointed and yelled, "I think there's someone in there!"

Morton put a hand to his ear. "What?"

"Someone . . . in . . . there!"

Morton shook his head. He couldn't hear. Eddie turned and was almost certain he saw it again, there, crawling inside the burning barn, a child-size figure. It had been more than two years since Eddie had seen anything besides grown men, and the shadowy shape made him think suddenly of his small cousins back at the pier and the Li'l Folks Miniature Railway he used to run and the roller coasters and the kids on the beach and Marguerite and her picture and all that he'd shut from his mind for so many months.

"HEY! COME OUT!" he yelled, dropping the flamethrower, moving even closer. "I WON'T SHOO—"

A hand grabbed his shoulder, yanking him backward. Eddie spun, his fist clenched. It was Morton, yelling, "EDDIE! We gotta go NOW!"

Eddie shook his head. "No—no—wait—wait—wait, I think there's someone in th—"

"There's nobody in there! NOW!"

Eddie was desperate. He turned back to the barn. Morton grabbed him again. This time Eddie spun around and swung wildly, hitting him in the chest. Morton fell to his knees. Eddie's head was pounding. His face twisted in anger. He turned again to the flames, his eyes nearly shut. *There. Was that it? Rolling behind a wall? There?*

He stepped forward, convinced something innocent was being burned to death in front of him. Then the rest of the roof collapsed with a roar, casting sparks like electric dust that rained down on his head.

In that instant, the whole of the war came surging out of him like bile. He was sickened by the captivity and sickened by the murders, sickened by the blood and goo drying on his temples, sickened by the bombing and the burning and the futility of it all. At that moment he just wanted to salvage something, a piece of Rabozzo, a piece of himself, something, and he staggered into the flaming wreckage, madly convinced that there was a soul inside every black shadow. Planes roared overhead and shots from their guns rang out in drumbeats.

Eddie moved as if in a trance. He stepped past a burning puddle of oil, and his clothes caught fire from behind. A yellow flame moved up his calf and thigh. He raised his arms and hollered.

“I’LL HELP YOU! COME OUT! I WON’T SHOO—”

A piercing pain ripped through Eddie’s leg. He screamed a long, hard curse then crumbled to the ground. Blood was spewing below his knee. Plane engines roared. The skies lit in bluish flashes.

He lay there, bleeding and burning, his eyes shut against the searing heat, and for the first time in his life, he felt ready to die. Then someone yanked him backward, rolling him in the dirt, extinguishing the flames, and he was too stunned and weak to resist, he rolled like a sack of beans. Soon he was inside a transport vehicle and the others were around him, telling him to hang on, hang on. His back was burned and his knee had gone numb and he was getting dizzy and tired, so very tired.

☺☺THE CAPTAIN NODDED slowly, as he recalled those last moments.

“You remember anything about how you got out of there?” he asked.

“Not really,” Eddie said.

“It took two days. You were in and out of consciousness. You lost a lot of blood.”

“We made it though,” Eddie said.

“Yaaaah.” The Captain drew the word out and punctuated it with a sigh. “That bullet got you pretty good.”

In truth, the bullet had never been fully removed. It had cut through several nerves and tendons and shattered against a bone, fracturing it vertically. Eddie had two surgeries. Neither cured the problem. The doctors said he'd be left with a limp, one likely to get worse with age as the misshapen bones deteriorated. "The best we can do," he was told. Was it? Who could say? All Eddie knew was that he'd awoken in a medical unit and his life was never the same. His running was over. His dancing was over. Worse, for some reason, the way he used to feel about things was over, too. He withdrew. Things seemed silly or pointless. War had crawled inside of Eddie, in his leg and in his soul. He learned many things as a soldier. He came home a different man.

☉ "DID YOU KNOW," the Captain said, "that I come from three generations of military?"

Eddie shrugged.

"Yep. I knew how to fire a pistol when I was six. In the mornings, my father would inspect my bed, actually bounce a quarter on the sheets. At the dinner table it was always, 'Yes, sir,' and, 'No, sir.'"

"Before I entered the service, all I did was take orders. Next thing I knew, I was giving them.

"Peacetime was one thing. Got a lot of wise-guy recruits. But then the war started and the new men flooded in—young men, like you—and they were all saluting me,

wanting me to tell them what to do. I could see the fear in their eyes. They acted as if I knew something about war that was classified. They thought I could keep them alive. You did, too, didn't you?"

Eddie had to admit he did.

The Captain reached back and rubbed his neck. "I couldn't, of course. I took my orders, too. But if I couldn't keep you alive, I thought I could at least keep you together. In the middle of a big war, you go looking for a small idea to believe in. When you find one, you hold it the way a soldier holds his crucifix when he's praying in a foxhole.

"For me, that little idea was what I told you guys every day. No one gets left behind."

Eddie nodded. "That meant a lot," he said.

The Captain looked straight at him. "I hope so," he said.

He reached inside his breast pocket, took out another cigarette, and lit up.

"Why do you say that?" Eddie asked.

The Captain blew smoke, then motioned with the end of the cigarette toward Eddie's leg.

"Because I was the one," he said, "who shot you."

☺ EDDIE LOOKED AT his leg, dangling over the tree branch. The surgery scars were back. So was the pain. He felt a welling of something inside him that he had not felt since before he died, in truth, that he had not felt in many years: a fierce, surging flood of anger, and a desire to hurt some-

thing. His eyes narrowed and he stared at the Captain, who stared back blankly, as if he knew what was coming. He let the cigarette fall from his fingers.

"Go ahead," he whispered.

Eddie screamed and lunged with a windmill swing, and the two men fell off the tree branch and tumbled through limbs and vines, wrestling and falling all the way down.

☉ "WHY? YOU BASTARD! You bastard! Not you! WHY?" They were grappling now on the muddy earth. Eddie straddled the Captain's chest, pummeling him with blows to the face. The Captain did not bleed. Eddie shook him by the collar and banged his skull against the mud. The Captain did not blink. Instead, he rolled from side to side with each punch, allowing Eddie his rage. Finally, with one arm, he grabbed Eddie and flipped him over.

"Because," he said calmly, his elbow across Eddie's chest, "we would have lost you in that fire. You would have died. And it wasn't your time."

Eddie panted hard. "My . . . time?"

The Captain continued. "You were obsessed with getting in there. You damn near knocked Morton out when he tried to stop you. We had a minute to get out and, damn your strength, you were too tough to fight."

Eddie felt a final surge of rage and grabbed the Captain by the collar. He pulled him close. He saw the teeth stained yellow by tobacco.

“My . . . leggggg!” Eddie seethed. “My *life!*”

“I took your leg,” the Captain said, quietly, “to save your life.”

Eddie let go and fell back exhausted. His arms ached. His head was spinning. For so many years, he had been haunted by that one moment, that one mistake, when his whole life changed.

“There was nobody in that hut. What was I *thinking?* If only I didn’t go in there . . .” His voice dropped to a whisper. “Why didn’t I just *die?*”

“No one gets left behind, remember?” the Captain said. “What happened to you—I’ve seen it happen before. A soldier reaches a certain point and then he can’t go anymore. Sometimes it’s in the middle of the night. A man’ll just roll out of his tent and start walking, barefoot, half naked, like he’s going home, like he lives just around the corner.

“Sometimes it’s in the middle of a fight. Man’ll drop his gun, and his eyes go blank. He’s just done. Can’t fight anymore. Usually he gets shot.

“Your case, it just so happened, you snapped in front of a fire about a minute before we were done with this place. I couldn’t let you burn alive. I figured a leg wound would heal. We pulled you out of there, and the others got you to a medical unit.”

Eddie’s breathing smacked like a hammer in his chest. His head was smeared with mud and leaves. It took him a minute to realize the last thing the Captain had said.

"The others?" Eddie said. "What do you mean, 'the others'?"

The Captain rose. He brushed a twig from his leg.

"Did you ever see me again?" he asked.

Eddie had not. He had been airlifted to the military hospital, and eventually, because of his handicap, was discharged and flown home to America. He had heard, months later, that the Captain had not made it, but he figured it was some later combat with some other unit. A letter arrived eventually, with a medal inside, but Eddie put it away, unopened. The months after the war were dark and brooding, and he forgot details and had no interest in collecting them. In time, he changed his address.

"It's like I told you," the Captain said. "Tetanus? Yellow fever? All those shots? Just a big waste of my time."

He nodded in a direction over Eddie's shoulder, and Eddie turned to look.

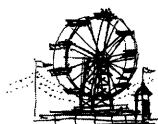
☉WHAT HE SAW, suddenly, was no longer the barren hills but the night of their escape, the hazy moon in the sky, the planes coming in, the huts on fire. The Captain was driving the transport with Smitty, Morton, and Eddie inside. Eddie was across the backseat, burned, wounded, semiconscious, as Morton tied a tourniquet above his knee. The shelling was getting closer. The black sky lit up every few seconds, as if the sun were flickering on and off. The transport swerved as it reached the top of a hill, then stopped.

There was a gate, a makeshift thing of wood and wire, but because the ground dropped off sharply on both sides, they could not go around it. The Captain grabbed a rifle and jumped out. He shot the lock and pushed the gate open. He motioned for Morton to take the wheel, then pointed to his eyes, signaling he would check the path ahead, which curled into a thicket of trees. He ran, as best he could in his bare feet, 50 yards beyond the turn in the road.

The path was clear. He waved to his men. A plane zoomed overhead and he lifted his eyes to see whose side it was. It was at that moment, while he was looking to the heavens, that a small click sounded beneath his right foot.

The land mine exploded instantly, like a burping flame from the earth's core. It blew the Captain 20 feet into the air and split him into pieces, one fiery lump of bone and gristle and a hundred chunks of charred flesh, some of which flew over the muddy earth and landed in the banyan trees.

The Second Lesson



“Aw, JESUS,” EDDIE SAID, CLOSING HIS EYES, dropping his head backward. *“Aw, God. Aw, God! I had no idea, sir. It’s sick. It’s awful!”*

The Captain nodded and looked away. The hills had returned to their barren state, the animal bones and the broken cart and the smoldering remains of the village. Eddie realized this was the Captain’s burial ground. No funeral. No coffin. Just his shattered skeleton and the muddy earth.

“You’ve been waiting here all this time?” Eddie whispered.

“Time,” the Captain said, “is not what you think.” He sat down next to Eddie. “Dying? Not the end of everything. We think it is. But what happens on earth is only the beginning.”

Eddie looked lost.

"I figure it's like in the Bible, the Adam and Eve deal?" the Captain said. "Adam's first night on earth? When he lays down to sleep? He thinks it's all over, right? He doesn't know what sleep is. His eyes are closing and he thinks he's leaving this world, right?"

"Only he isn't. He wakes up the next morning and he has a fresh new world to work with, but he has something else, too. He has his yesterday."

The Captain grinned. "The way I see it, that's what we're getting here, soldier. That's what heaven is. You get to make sense of your yesterdays."

He took out his plastic cigarette pack and tapped it with his finger. "You followin' this? I was never all that hot at teaching."

Eddie watched the Captain closely. He had always thought of him as so much older. But now, with some of the coal ash rubbed from his face, Eddie noticed the scant lines on his skin and the full head of dark hair. He must have only been in his 30s.

"You been here since you died," Eddie said, "but that's twice as long as you lived."

The Captain nodded.

"I've been waitin' for you."

Eddie looked down.

"That's what the Blue Man said."

"Well, *he* was too. He was part of your life, part of why

you lived and how you lived, part of the story you needed to know, but he told you and he's beyond here now, and in a short bit, I'm gonna be as well. So listen up. Because here's what you need to know from me."

Eddie felt his back straighten.

∞ "SACRIFICE," THE CAPTAIN said. "You made one. I made one. We all make them. But you were angry over yours. You kept thinking about what you lost.

"You didn't get it. Sacrifice is a part of life. It's *supposed* to be. It's not something to regret. It's something to *aspire* to. Little sacrifices. Big sacrifices. A mother works so her son can go to school. A daughter moves home to take care of her sick father.

"A man goes to war. . . ."

He stopped for a moment and looked off into the cloudy gray sky.

"Rabozzo didn't die for nothing, you know. He sacrificed for his country, and his family knew it, and his kid brother went on to be a good soldier and a great man because he was inspired by it.

"I didn't die for nothing, either. That night, we might have all driven over that land mine. Then the four of us would have been gone."

Eddie shook his head. "But you . . ." He lowered his voice. "You lost your life."

The Captain smacked his tongue on his teeth.

"That's the thing. Sometimes when you sacrifice something precious, you're not really losing it. You're just passing it on to someone else."

The Captain walked over to the helmet, rifle, and dog tags, the symbolic grave, still stuck in the ground. He placed the helmet and tags under one arm, then plucked the rifle from the mud and threw it like a javelin. It never landed. Just soared into the sky and disappeared. The Captain turned.

"I shot you, all right," he said, "and you lost something, but you gained something as well. You just don't know it yet. I gained something, too."

"What?"

"I got to keep my promise. I didn't leave you behind."

He held out his palm.

"Forgive me about the leg?"

Eddie thought for a moment. He thought about the bitterness after his wounding, his anger at all he had given up. Then he thought of what the Captain had given up and he felt ashamed. He offered his hand. The Captain gripped it tightly.

"That's what I've been waiting for."

Suddenly, the thick vines dropped off the banyan branches and melted with a hiss into the ground. New, healthy branches emerged in a yawning spread, covered in smooth, leathery leaves and pouches of figs. The Captain only glanced up, as if he'd been expecting it. Then, using his open palms, he wiped the remaining ash from his face.

"Captain?" Eddie said.

"Yeah?"

"Why here? You can pick anywhere to wait, right? That's what the Blue Man said. So why this place?"

The Captain smiled. "Because I died in battle. I was killed in these hills. I left the world having known almost nothing but war—war talk, war plans, a war family.

"My wish was to see what the world looked like *without* a war. Before we started killing each other."

Eddie looked around. "But this *is* war."

"To you. But our eyes are different," the Captain said. "What you see ain't what I see."

He lifted a hand and the smoldering landscape transformed. The rubble melted, trees grew and spread, the ground turned from mud to lush, green grass. The murky clouds pulled apart like curtains, revealing a sapphire sky. A light, white mist fell in above the treetops, and a peach-colored sun hung brilliantly above the horizon, reflected in the sparkling oceans that now surrounded the island. It was pure, unspoiled, untouched beauty.

Eddie looked up at his old commanding officer, whose face was clean and whose uniform was suddenly pressed.

"This," the Captain said, raising his arms, "is what I see."

He stood for a moment, taking it in.

"By the way, I don't smoke anymore. That was all in your eyes, too." He chuckled. "Why would I smoke in heaven?"

He began to walk off.

"Wait," Eddie yelled. "I gotta know something. My death. At the pier. Did I save that girl? I felt her hands, but I can't remember—"

The Captain turned and Eddie swallowed his words, embarrassed to even be asking, given the horrible way the Captain had died.

"I just want to know, that's all," he mumbled.

The Captain scratched behind his ear. He looked at Eddie sympathetically. "I can't tell you, soldier."

Eddie dropped his head.

"But someone can."

He tossed the helmet and tags. "Yours."

Eddie looked down. Inside the helmet flap was a crumpled photo of a woman that made his heart ache all over again. When he looked up, the Captain was gone.

MONDAY, 7:30 A.M.

The morning after the accident, Dominguez came to the shop early, skipping his routine of picking up a bagel and a soft drink for breakfast. The park was closed, but he came in anyhow, and he turned on the water at the sink. He ran his hands under the flow, thinking he would clean some of the ride parts. Then he shut off the water and abandoned the idea. It seemed twice as quiet as it had a minute ago.

“What’s up?”

Willie was at the shop door. He wore a green tank top and baggy jeans. He held a newspaper. The headline read “Amusement Park Tragedy.”

“Hard time sleeping,” Dominguez said.

“Yeah.” Willie slumped onto a metal stool. “Me, too.”

He spun a half circle on the stool, looking blankly at the paper. “When you think they’ll open us up again?”

Dominguez shrugged. “Ask the police.”

They sat quietly for a while, shifting their postures as if taking turns. Dominguez sighed. Willie reached inside his shirt pocket, fishing for a stick of gum. It was Monday. It was morning. They were waiting for the old man to come in and get the workday started.