

Battle stations

Silence stank into a mush of dying vegetation, fumes hanging on the damp air, perspiration dripping down his cheek, tangling in the folds of his beard, blending into a narrow chest, trying not to heave with the tension. In the stillness or aroused by the tenseness of his nerves, the lice tingled all over. He itched to scratch. Knew he couldn't. Not a sound. A bawl in the distance. His prey approached slowly. Tumbling through the undergrowth, head spinning side to side, knocking branches to the floor, where slowly, over depths of time they would rot and feed future generations and if he lived long enough, his ancestors.

Salty sweat stung his eyes. His arm flexed. His instincts wanted to test the spear head again but he knew he couldn't. Not a move. He was afraid now he would cramp. That would be mortifying. Deadly. When you had to jump, a stiff leg was death. He glanced up at his cousin. Another potential dead limb.

The beast howled as it snagged another tree, tearing the vegetation to shreds. Food for days if they got it. They had to. Something rustled under foot. More vermin. Another animal running for cover. The leaves overhead whistled as insects flew by. The beast stopped short. Neck swaying under the weight of a tiny brain and heaving body; it attempted to calm down, reach out and take in the threats all around. The head swung in confusion, sensing fear. The vegetation and creatures normally scuttling, hiding from it's approach, had already been beaten away. Too much silence. Nature should make more noise. The monster lunged forward unable to comprehend, to predict it's own infallibility.

His stomach ached. They'd been there for so long. Waiting, patiently, sweating, lungs heaving under the pressure, eyes watering beneath the gaze of a hissing skyline. There wouldn't be fresh air for seasons, until the storms cleared the clouds and let the tension out. He risked a glance up at his cousin. Perched in the knurled tree fork he couldn't hide the twitch of a shaking arm. He'd better

not fail. Not again. This was a last chance. Lose a nerve, die young, leave scant traces for those still to come.

A sun arched overhead as the beast began its last paces towards them. Mouths watered in search of drying saliva. Muscles tensed in the hope of a springing release. He refused to glimpse his cousin one last time. No point checking now. The animal lunged. Stopped. Twisted. Suddenly, beneath the constant rustle of animals, insects, vegetation stirring themselves into a frantic struggle for life the beast had sensed a change, an alternation in the natural patterns. It finally understood. The fresh smell of lingering death. Devolution. The neck peaked. Tail curled into sweeping threats, slashing wildly, thumping in fury as it realised there might have been a trick.

Two steps more he pleaded breathlessly. They had to do it together. No room for maneuver. No chance of repeating the operation. Jaws clenched, mouth snarled in a final frenzy, a last act of survival. He deafened himself with his own scream. He launched the spear with the training of months on the kill. His cousin followed the order but slipped. Nerves cracking his joints. He caught his balls on the rough wood and screamed in agony. Uncontrollable, the cousin's spear launched in a futile attack, way off mark, on track for an unwanted target.

Grunting he saw his cousin fall from the tree. The animal lurched with a howl and rumbled off to the right. He grasped his thigh. Blood ran where his cousin's spear head lodged stubbornly. If he'd thrown it as hard at the beast he could have gone for the eye and they would have paralyzed it and starved it to death slowly, over the days as they cut off the meat and chewed the fat. But no, the idiot had lost his nerve. Lost his balance. With luck, lost his manhood. He could finally scratch his own balls, kill some vermin, let his empty stomach rumble. Didn't matter now.

Night was approaching when he stumbled into the entrance. The cave yawned in welcome. She looked up in hope. Eyes dropping in recognition. She saw him

limp in, slump to the floor. The blood stank of stale meat and damp fur. He avoided her eyes, pushing forward the wounded leg.

She pummeled some wild grain. A bit of bark. The baby cried. She tried to pump out a few drops of milk. The rocks were slippery. Damp hung with the persistence of a dying winter, the heat of a never ending summer. His thigh pained, throbbed. The blood had matted. The lice were knitting it tighter. He hobbled over the rocks.

She watched. He'd never hunt again. It was time to find another man, another beast. She wound leaves around the embedded spear head to hide their thoughts, attempting to bind wounds that would never stop bleeding.

Drizzling rain. Wouldn't help the fucking door. The damp had already soaked though the curling paint. What was wrong with blue anyway. Peter's foot slipped. That dull ache in his leg bit afresh. He thought it had been long gone. But it was back. Had never gone away really. Limping. Bending, hand instinctively pulling a shard from his thigh. Water entered his shoe.

"You shouldn't go out like that. Keep yourself wrapped up. Be home in time. I'll have a nice tea for you."

But she was gone. She'd have sorted the door. Without her he couldn't be bothered. With anything.

"Good morning to you." Fred chanced, not sure if Peter had seen him. Although the pavement was narrow enough.

Peter stared at his friend vacantly. Trying to avoid him really. He could do without distractions. Too many lately. Difficult to stay focused. That bloody door.

"Need to get some paint."

"You're not a painting man."

Peter fumbled for the letter. It was stuffed in his left pocket, scratching his groin. He couldn't keep coins in that one any more. The keys had made a hole in the faded fabric. She would have sewed it. She'd promised. Just as she'd promised to fix the door. Peter kept his change in the other one now, along with the keys. Weighed him over to one side a bit. Made him hobble, off balance. He scratched his balls as he tore the letter out and trusted it forward.

Fred glanced through it. "Sour bastards. Fuck the lot of them. What the hell does it matter what colour door you got. Come in for a pint."

Peter shook his head. She wouldn't have approved. "Better keep going." He put the letter back. "See about the paint."

"They're only the neighbours."

Fred wasn't sure what else to say. Why a blue door should stand so far out of line was beyond him. But he lived in a flat. Senior citizen protected. He would never have to paint it himself. Poor Peter. Not fair really after all he had been through. Had they nothing better to worry about? They'd be making him cut the hedge next. All in the interest of a neat intersection, a pretty roundabout through dreary outskirts. Nothing like a block of flats, where everything crumbles away inside, unseen. He could smell the pub over his left shoulder, lingering like a faint promise, a whiff of love half-forgotten with time, but vividly close in memories and desires.

"Are you sure?"

Peter nodded vaguely. She wouldn't have approved this early in the day. And he might have an appointment. There was a vague memory of something he had to do. Somebody he had to meet. Something he had agreed to a long time ago. Better keep moving.

"No. No. See about the paint. She'd have liked that."

Fred was watching warily, looking for a clue, a glimpse of the past. Peter was looking beaten. The neighbours should just leave the old man alone. "All right

then," he proffered uselessly. The years were suddenly building up in his own head. No energy to coax. Let him paint the bloody door if he had to.

Peter sloped off, leg hurting. Hobbling. But that wasn't what worried his friend. It was the suit beneath the raincoat. Never seen it before. Smelled of mothballs and old chicken soup. What was he doing all dressed up to go out and buy a stupid can of paint? Time for a drink really. Fred moved towards the inviting doorway as if it had been opened just for him alone. Stale beer hit him in the face and he felt at home.

Peter suddenly felt feeble. That leg hurting again. A bump on his head where something had fallen and hit him. Walking through doors. They didn't seem to open as quickly any more: always a rustiness to their sheet, an unwillingness to cooperate as he lunged towards them.

He hadn't eaten for a couple of days. Not since those mushrooms. He was feeling faint. He couldn't imagine any other colour but blue. It had been her favorite. The mushroom had been another hue. The most beautiful. Then the most hurtful. The light stung his eyes, frizzling them to spores. He held out a hand but was refused. They were told to walk forward, across the burning desert, now even crisper in the fallout. The urge to touch another soul in the face of the blooming clouds whirling into their wispieness to fade slightly, then rocked as the blast hit, dirt fell, and things began to grow where nothing had dared sprout before. He had that urge to touch another human. But soldiers only did that when fading away. They wouldn't die for years yet. But they would. The falling graffiti told them so, like confetti at a wedding it celebrated something which could never last.

"You got yourself into this."

"I didn't have a choice."

"Shut the fuck up" shouted the sergeant. They had all been conscripted one way or another. He wasn't holding no private's hand no matter how much he

shat himself. He could do with a good piss himself. Not sure how much longer his guts would hold out. Then the sound wave hit. They could no longer hear each other scream. A face melted into hell as his eyes closed, unable to take any more.

He'd had lots of mushrooms in his youth but that was back in Chicago and not in the middle of the Nevada desert. Out in the Pacific it has seemed less imposing, maybe too far from home to have a direct impact. Sheltered behind concrete, the billowing steam was almost a love poem, reaching out to the sky in a plea for forgiveness, then banging overhead in a hardcore of fury. None of those adventures had prepared him for this trip, when they had to dress up in battle gear and walk towards it across the rising heat, the hazy furnace, the crying eyes that could barely see it happening for real. The heat of the storm cloud rose. The troops obeyed. There had once been pigs, now just grunts. Dying of cancer some years later, he never suspected the energy would travel so far down the line and that a relative would retain the aversion to mushroom clouds and carry within him the damage they released.

Mushrooms coming up his stomach again taking shape in the puffcakes in the sky. Blue white wispy puffs turning pink, a dark shade of poison. All too easily avoided if you wanted to keep to yourself and pretend you were normal. Hadn't crossed a battle field, hadn't flown a drone, hadn't seeped out of a trench or walked into a fiery storm: maybe you should just keep quiet. Respect those who fought. On all fronts.

Peter ducked. His legs stumbled. The curb was uneven. Or he was. A bus seeped by puffing fumes. He caught his breath. They stung his throat. He wouldn't manage dinner today he realized. Couldn't stomach it. His head jerked. Another duck. A flint flying. Takes centuries to build a cathedral and seconds to kill your son with a falling stone. Masons needed to be careful but seeing your wife down the fields, fucking a simple farmer, left you a bit unsettled and on a height that was all you needed to get stoned. The chiselled shards wouldn't yield, caught his throat. He stopped hammering as he lost focus. The hard chip before his eyes faded into the deep focus of a tree, a failing red skirt and the

spotty backside of an intruder. He could smell him farting as he pushed deeper into the shameless vase of his gaze. Had she no sense? Didn't think he could see it all, sense it all from the top of an arching spiral? The pain threw him. Grisly hands lost their touch. For a moment, a split second, he let the rock slip. It thumbled down the scaffolding and ruptured the forehead of his son three layers down. Knocked off balance. His offspring stumbled, foot lost it's place, hand missed a hold. He fell. Trundled through years of masonry until he fell flat on the soft grass that mopped up his blood. He'd stamp his name on a rock, which would last forever, buried in the hives of a stone furnace built to mourn the dead and frighten the living. Not much of a future there. He would never see the cathedral finished. He had always known that. And now his son wouldn't either. And his father could no longer dream the illusion that he would.

Slowly he started making his way down the slippery wooden scaffolding. Stank like hell. Mossy and green, delirious and anything but clear. He'd kill the bitch. His chisel grew into the palm of his hand, each as knurled as the other.

Peter stumbled down the street. The paint shop was just on the corner. Or so he had been told. A neighbour crossed the street, trying to play both sides, ingratiate himself with the winner and loser, just in case. He wore a kindly smile, a shield of deference, two-sided ambition. He'd encourage Peter to repaint and win the gratitude of the whole street. No need to nag. Just a kind word in his ear. After all those years she'd finally gone. Behind it all Peter was a soft old soul. He was sure.

"Just around the corner. You'll have no problem finding it."

Peter wheezed slightly, swayed from one foot to another while the neighbour wondered whether or not to touch the hunched shoulder in comfort. Better keep his hands to himself. They'd always said old Peter had a temper when aroused.

"You'll have it sorted in a second."

Another pause. Breath freezing on the shadow of a morning still searching for a purpose. "She'd have done it herself you know. Never wanted to be awkward." The neighbour shuffled a little. Peter was always a hard one to fathom. He took off his glasses to wipe away the rain. Put them again to be re-sprayed. Squinting, he watched Peter struggle with the world. It wasn't that complicated. The wife at least had been straight forward. Peter he realised, always hinted at an undisclosed weight hankering over his shoulders, the glimpse of another world hovering but never making its intentions clear. "She wouldn't really have minded" he heard himself refrain. It sounded comforting. Peter needed that.

And Peter needed that like a can of paint in the head. She wouldn't have minded? He didn't give a shit. Never had. She had fought him for years. "Not going to change the colour of that fucking door. Blue is my colour and they can go fuck themselves." And they can. If they knew how. If it was allowed by their hypocritical norms. No one could guess at what went on behind closed doors. The colour outside gave barely a hint, just covered up the cracks, the weariness and chipped layers beneath, a cheery face to the sun when it came out, a damp rag of insolence in the face of harsher forecasts.

Drizzle bit in with the insistence of a hungry baby, steadily, constant, irritatingly unstoppable, like long sleepless nights. His glasses started to fog up. He paused to catch a breath, put himself back in place. End of the street. On the corner. He thought he could see the sign. Too many distractions but it looked like a paint tin hanging aimlessly on the wall, swinging without rhythm in the breeze, rattling humourously as if beaten insistently by an unforgiving rain. She could have taken the door with her. Like everything else. That would have solved the problem. After all those years what stopped her? What else remained? She could have taken it with her, given it to the new man, held it over his head and make sure she kept him well locked in. She'd been doing it for years. Why stop now.

But she'd left it to him. In the end. Cream they had suggested. More in tone. Well he would cream it. Start falling into line, belonging to the street. She'd left him in the mess. It was time to sort it out. And Julie would agree. Of course

she would. That's all that really mattered. His daughter would understand. He wasn't betraying a mother who'd walked out on them both. Not keen on the idea, but she would understand. She said she might make it this weekend. He'd try and have it done before she arrived. He didn't want to argue about it again. Things had moved on. They'd both moved out. He'd cook a chicken. Julie had always liked that. And if she brought the boyfriend maybe he would too.

The traffic was howling like a pent up hound lunging at the leash, thrusting betrayal in it's desire to get free. But the dog backed away. As Peter approached, shuffling, sweat dropping down the neck of his starched collar, they both stopped and stared, almost snarled, a faint sense of recognition, genes falling back into place where memories were frazzled but lingered on in that sticky odour you couldn't quite place, the sense on the tips of your fingers you couldn't quite stroke. They'd used dogs in the trenches to send messages, as look outs, to find bombs or simply as mascots. The German breeds, ironically, were most popular on both sides. Through the wire their loyalty tore them onwards, slicky in mud, bawling at the shells; they would always do what they had to, as loyally and innocently as the troops climbing over the edge to slumber through the clay into the barking rattle of machine and rifle fire: anything better than staying at home under the whistling torment of another bombardment, the silent thuds that exploded your nerves if nothing else as the wooden hoarding plopped, shattered, shafted your legs and let the rats run free.

The dog backed away. The Mercy dogs would find the wounded in the sinking remains, drop medicine to those who could take care of themselves and then, empty handed, lie close to those who would fade away, screams of pain locked between destroyed jaws, seeping from open stomachs. Occasionally, just occasionally, they would search for a hand to sneak out, touch the warmth of the fur, the tip of a dry tongue dripping slowly over your face, a last splatter of comfort in what was once again no man's land.

The dog could feel Peter's need to touch him, sense that fleeting desire for warmth, through the brittle fall of rain, the hiss of damp tires slopping through

puddles, the pissing prattle of bustling humans all ignoring him, apart from those from the past who wouldn't leave him alone. The dog slumped away. Whatever genetic memories it had of trenches long covered over with grass, kept him from offering solace one last time. The man would have to find his own gauze. The dog was empty and no longer in the mood to lie with the fading.

The cars kept coming. The corner seemed to recede. But he needed the paint. For Julie at least. He hadn't realized he knew how to starch a collar. His leg ached. His head hurt. Another bang, another fall. His stomach reeked mushroom clouds, pent-up, noxious fall-out. He was falling apart at the seams: the dotted lines of his ancestors seemed to have decided to finally join, unite and call it a day. Maybe his genes had decided to give up and make room for something better. Is that what he had done with her? Or she with him? Having fought for so long it didn't make much sense to leave it all over a blue door. Julie said it wouldn't make any difference. But he wanted to give it one last try. Blue was her favorite colour. He'd always told her that. But maybe if he finally gave in she would be at peace, with the neighbours at least. And she might even want to come home. It should be blue. He'd held out for years. Should have listened to Julie back then. But now was never too late was it?

The car sped towards him. As it flashed into sight he had a vague genetic memory of some party. Where everybody was dressed up smartly and DNA intertwined in double spirals. Dripping jewels, loose clothing, but formal, pink and sweet as they drank champagne and sang and smiled like Robert Redford and got all jazzed up in a pretty big house. Peter's suit suddenly fitted just fine. He touched the starched collar in pride. Just as in the picture. That one of his grand uncle Reg back in the twenties, before the scandal and his leaving for India. "I keep that photo behind the cuckoo clock for a good reason" his grand mother had always said. "Naughty boy but got his uppance." Peter had never quite known what she had meant and for a moment the memory shuddered his spine. Julie he remembered. Needed to check she was coming.

"Will you look at him"

"God he's in some shape."

"Do you think we should call someone?"

"Enough troubles of my own."

Scattered fragments of speech passed him by. He mumbled on between them, legs trawling, mind wandering, the corner slowly approaching. Had he remembered his wallet to pay? Rolling around the corner the car sizzled into vision. There was no stopping it's vengeful intention. It climbed the curb with the ease of a seal slicing up onto snow. Peter felt his mouth open. His stumbling stopped. "Julie" he whispered trying to identify the figure through the windscreen. But it could have been anybody. There were so many in his past and they were all beginning to look more and more familiar, more and more alike.

For a second he was silent, only his brain pounding in the oncoming rush of centuries past. FOR REG the registration plate said. He remembered seeing a car with that on it back in the eighties when he was stationed in Ireland. They'd blown one up. Just in case. And now it blew back in his face. "For Reg" they roared as they bonnet spat out his stomach, the right hand tire smothering his outstretched leg. The dog scurried away. Too late this time. No mercy required.

And who the fuck would paint the door now he wondered as the rain entered his brain. Vengeance came home to roost. Come back to find him. If he could only get through the door, switch on the apple, plug in DNA to Google and rewrite the past. For a moment he glimpsed sweet revenge. The door would remain blue, chipped. Unopened, the past safely locked away, intact. It had been a long fight. He hoped Julie would see it that way.

By: E. F. S. Byrne

CONTACT:

Enda Scott

José Maluquer, 15 Blq 7 3-D

41008 Seville,

Spain.

5/02/14

efs@scottboardman.com

<http://eflbytes.wordpress.com/>

<http://www.scottboardman.com/>