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THE TOWER JOCKEYS (excerpt)

by

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DYING TO TELL YOU

Since I'm lying here dying, you probably want to know all about me.

Tough shit. If you want a 900-page biography, look up Benjamin Franklin. He's much more interesting than me.

Besides, I don't have that much time. My reservation in the hereafter is already booked. My bags are packed, my goodbyes said, my obit as polished as a Spartan warrior's shield . . . which I won't be coming back with, but on top of.

Of course my condition's not special. We're all dying. It's only a matter of how close we are to our finale, and how many more indignities of old age we must endure before the closing credits begin to roll. For me the only question left is whether the Ferryman takes Bitcoin.

Sure, I had one hell of an interesting life. But who really cares about that? I won't waste your time with my artistic and sexual escapades.

However I will tell you the story of the tower jockeys--very possibly the most infamous U.S. military unit ever. If you think that's hyperbole, keep reading. I'll make it quick because I'm on deadline.

I was minding my own business one fine spring in the early seventies, not bothering anyone, working part-time mounting the finest in automotive retreads while nearing the end of my first year of college and looking forward to year number two. I had grand plans for my future. I was going to be a journalist . . . or a novelist . . . or an actor--even though I hadn't ever so much as worked for a school newspaper, written any fiction, or overcome a mild case of stage fright. So as grand as my plans might have been, they were based more on tenuous hopes and dreams than any solid foundation. Still, as nebulously muddled as they were, they were *my* plans, *my* hopes, *my* dreams.

Then one day a letter came in the mail . . . from the President of the United States. At least that's what it alleged.

"Greeting: You are hereby ordered for induction into the Armed Forces of the United States, and to report for forwarding to an Armed Forces Induction Station."

Some greeting. It seems like, at the very least, they could have made an effort to concoct something more appealing. You know, so it inspired some enthusiasm.

"Congratulations! You've been selected for all-expenses paid vacation to Fort Ord, California, where you'll be assigned a highly qualified instructor who will serve as guide during your personal journey through a physical and mental regimen that will eventually lead to a whole new and healthier you. From there you will travel the globe to parts unknown for an extended period of exhilaration and adventure."

Something like that might have softened the blow . . . at least for a few seconds.

Granted, the letter wasn't totally unexpected. My birth date had drawn a fairly low lottery number for the military draft, so the possibility loomed like an insatiable buzzard over everything I did. When it finally swooped down to feast I shouldn't have been dumbfounded. But I was.

After some research on the subject, I argued (to anyone who would listen) that the Selective Service Act violated the 13th Amendment to the Constitution that prohibits "involuntary servitude except as punishment for a crime." But I was a naïve teenager. I hadn't yet realized governments do whatever they want--make up new rules as they go along for whatever suits them at the time. Nobody cared anymore about the wording of the 13th Amendment. That was ancient history. So, apparently, was my personal freedom.

I'd already discovered the government was no longer allowing college deferments from the draft, so I figured I had four choices--none of which were very attractive. Run off to Canada, effectively nullifying my current life. Refuse to show up and be sentenced to five years in jail,

effectively nullifying my current life. Join the National Guard, the Army Reserves, or report for said induction into the military, effectively nullifying my current life.

After much deliberation and profound soul searching I chose the latter. The possibility of being sent to Vietnam, where I might end up in a snug body bag, wasn't part of my equation (though it should have been). To me it was simple math. Two years in the regular Army, six years in the Reserves or National Guard, or five years in prison. Canada was too much of an unknown. Plus, I didn't think I'd ever be allowed back into the United States. I had no way of knowing that five years later all draft dodgers would be pardoned.

Resigned to my fate, I applied for a leave of absence from college, said all my goodbyes, and told my dad to sell my car. After all, I didn't want it to sit around and depreciate for two years. Little did I know 1965 Mustangs would only continue to increase in value for decades to come. I loved that car.

Though always considered a reasonably bright student--an intelligent guy--I wasn't what you'd call "worldly." As a 19-year-old I wasn't aware enough to appreciate the inanity of the fact my favorite comedian, George Carlin, had recently been arrested for obscenity while performing at a Milwaukee fair . . . even as America's politicians were snatching up teenage men and sending them halfway around the world to die in an obscene war. I just knew what I believed--that individual freedom was the bedrock of America's foundation, the most important thing it provided for its people, and that the draft was wrong. I was of the opinion that stripping away someone's personal liberty was inherently immoral.

Reality check--nobody cared what I thought. After all, "serving" in the military was the manly thing to do . . . wasn't it? And if my masculinity wasn't fully developed yet--no matter--the military would make a man out of me . . . wouldn't it? By Nixon, I'd become a man or die trying.

With my youthful idealism ruptured like an aged condom, the next thing I knew I was on a red, white, and blue Greyhound bus headed for basic training at Fort Ord, only a whisper away from the luscious green hills and abundant marine life of beautiful Monterey.

Many of those on the bus had longer hair than I did, letting their freak flags fly for a few more glorious hours. In addition, my nose told me someone on that bus was smoking grass (what we called it then). It felt good to know I was among friends.

It would be a fleeting sentiment.

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POLITICAL PRIORITIES

I won't bore you with the physical and psychological pummeling that are standard operating procedure for military basic training. Such indoctrination has been documented over the years in films like *Tribes* and *Full Metal Jacket*. For my part in basic training I portrayed someone who was a cross between Jan-Michael Vincent's Zen-like peace-loving hippie draftee and Matthew Modine's go-along to get-along recruit.

My two closest acquaintances in basic were much more interesting than me, and demonstrated how the military was all about diversity. One enlisted in the Army so it would look good on his resume when he got out and joined the FBI. The other one was wanted by the FBI-- or at least he had been until he was arrested and given the choice by a judge to join the Army or go to jail. Near the end of basic training, when he'd almost made it through the rigorous two-month ordeal, he dropped acid. The drill sergeants found him wandering around the base sans clothing. They took him away in a tight canvas vest and I never saw him again. For all I know, his solution might have been one of genius.

The future FBI agent wanted to further his resume by becoming a military policeman. He got his wish . . . and I was going to join him, traveling to Fort Gordon, Georgia. I wasn't sure how I felt about that, except it seemed a bit of an abrupt about-face for a pot-smoking non-conformist who'd taken part in mass marches for peace. Regardless, I'd soon be learning methods of crowd control and how to use my police baton to keep those protesting flower children at bay.

Near the end of our military police training--that wasn't particularly eventful *or* instructive--we all found out where we were going next. Keep in mind during our first days as members of the U.S. Army we all filled out what were appropriately called "dream sheets." On those we wrote down where we would like to be stationed after our training was completed. Only one guy I knew was ever sent to where he requested. As a joke he'd written down Alaska. I hope he had plenty of long underwear.

Now (if I may digress momentarily) isn't it funny how everywhere we fight a war we move in and stay like the guest that wouldn't leave? Germany, Belgium, Italy, England, Korea, and Japan are only some of the locations where the U.S. has engaged in armed encounters and now has military bases. At the time you're reading this, I'm sure you could name others from more modern conflicts.

Apparently the U.S. military is akin to a tenacious fungus you can't get rid of once it takes hold. It's able to accomplish this by propping up local governments with its fabled military might and bribing them with billions of dollars in foreign aid (our tax dollars). How is it able to do this in so many countries around the world? Because the Defense Department always gets whatever money it asks for . . . sometimes *more* than it asks for. The Pentagon's budget is sacrosanct and forever proliferating. Health care and a proper education for all Americans be damned. There's a tank factory in some senator's state that needs to keep its assembly lines rolling. So what if the military hasn't really wanted any more tanks since World War II.

Okay. I got that out of my system. Now back to me and my modest part in all this.

I learned I was going to be sent to Korea. I didn't know what to think about that . . . except it had to be better than Vietnam. Of course, knowing what I'd already learned about the Army, my destination could be changed at any moment. It's true by that time the Southeast Asian war was winding down, stuttering towards a bungled resolution, and the Pentagon was bringing more people home than they were sending to fight. I'd even caught part of a news program where Henry Kissinger, who was representing the U.S. at the Paris Peace Accords, said about the Vietnam conflict, "Peace is at hand." Of course I was to learn, years later, Kissinger had proposed to officially end the war in October of '72, but President Nixon told him to delay the talks to insure his re-election. It didn't matter to him that, in the meantime, more American boys would be dying. A politician must keep his priorities in order.

Sure enough, Nixon was re-elected in a landslide a few weeks later. But then I had no horse in the race, because I'd only recently been given the right to vote. The day I received my draft notice I wasn't legally old enough. Consider that for a moment. Let it really sink in. I and tens of thousands of other American male teenagers were old enough to be forced into a war they didn't necessarily believe in, and possibly die for, but they weren't considered mature enough to elect their own government representatives.

With that in mind, while I was at Fort Gordon I took the opportunity to write a letter to the President. In it I thoughtfully and eloquently stated why I believed the draft violated both the letter and the principal of the 13th Amendment. Of course I doubted my letter would ever reach Nixon, but I *was* surprised when two weeks later I got a reply. It was obvious someone in the military had illegally opened my correspondence, for the curt reply stated I should go through my chain of command to resolve any issues I had.

I could see myself going to my drill sergeant and explaining how conscription was unconstitutional. It would have prompted either a belly laugh or a sterile grimace . . . followed by extra KP duty. Drill sergeants weren't known for their grasp of constitutional law.

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Though all the somewhat laughable training I'd received at both Fort Ord and Fort Gordon was preparing me for a long stay in an Asian jungle, I *was* relieved it appeared improbable I would be thrown into combat and become cannon fodder for an insidious political war. At least that's what I thought. I had no idea of the battles awaiting me.

It took nine interminable days from the time I reported to Oakland, after a brief leave at home, to arrive at the post where I'd spend the next 15 months of my life. Nine days of mostly sitting around doing nothing but grappling with dozens of forms while gazing up at photographs of Vietnam battle scenes and a clock showing the correct time in Saigon. All that wasted time would have surprised me if I wasn't already aware the words *Army* and *efficiency* seldom make camp in the same sentence.

While I was waiting I learned Nixon had ordered the heaviest bombing of North Vietnam yet, saying it wouldn't stop until a peace accord was reached. "Operation Linebacker II" lasted 11 days and slaughtered more than 1,600 Vietnamese civilians, with 70 U.S. airmen killed or captured. Still we were told, "Peace is at hand."

However this tale isn't about war, per se. It's about that lull between hostilities--when the military's grasp recedes from its reach. The interval when stagnation sets in and the hawks are unable to spread their wings and strut their stuff. Think of it as an intermission--a brief respite from death and destruction--a finger on the pause button until, once again, the fighting forces march headlong towards center stage.

That doesn't mean there isn't any conflict in this narrative. Alas poor Yorick, there's plenty of that still to come, filled with both heartache and hilarity.

3

KOREA, HERE I COME

Eventually I found myself on another bus. This time it was a slate gray military job and the driver was a foreigner. No, check that. He was Korean. *I* was the foreigner--a stranger in a strange land.

But why, you may ask, was the U.S. military in the Republic of South Korea? Well, we stayed there after the Korean War was over to continue to promote democracy and protect South Korea against communist aggression from North Korea. No matter that, when I arrived, South Korea had the fourth largest army in the world--50 percent larger than the army north of their border. It may have seemed they were comparatively capable of protecting themselves, but we couldn't take any chances. Plus, we were already there, so why leave?

As for the matter of promoting democracy, the U.S. supported a military coup in 1961 that overthrew South Korea's first democratically-elected government. Their motives, I'm certain, were altruistic. Afterwards they installed General Park Chung Hee as president and continued their support for his government with more than 35 billion U.S. tax dollars over the next several years.

Under the justification of reconstruction and reformation, Park ruled his nation in a virtual military dictatorship, denying his people their rights under their own constitution by outlawing meetings of large groups, enforcing martial law whenever it suited him, and using secret police agents to keep tabs on "troublemakers." Those dissenters who objected publicly to Park's rule

were tried and sentenced by military courts in the country the Pentagon referred to as "Freedom's Frontier."

So the natural question is . . . *If a person loses the right to voice their opinion, is communism any worse?* Just asking for a friend.

Now if you're reading this sometime in the early 21st century, you've probably heard someone spout the specious platitude that the U.S. military is "defending our freedoms." Somehow, whether they're in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, or Timbuktu, they're always defending *our* freedoms. So I became one of 40,000 American troops in the Republic of South Korea that were reputedly protecting the freedoms guaranteed to American citizens by their Constitution (including that troublesome 13th Amendment). If you can't figure out how we were protecting American freedoms from halfway around the world, I'm sure your congressional representative can explain it to you.

What we were doing to safeguard the freedom of the Korean people was less certain, but I'm sure someone must have devised a plan. Maybe the same someone who orchestrated the marvelous Vietnam strategy.

Anyway, my first day in "The Land of the Morning Calm" was forbiddingly and portentously drab. All I'd seen outside the dingy windows during the three-hour bus ride were empty hills, thatched huts, miles and miles of rice paddies, and a few forlorn looking locals. Two of which, a pair of elderly workers, were walking up each side of the same road, one followed by a scrawny old dog. They had bundles of thin wood branches strapped to their backs--bundles at least five times the mass of the venerable old men carrying them. In both color and accumulation the men almost disappeared into their burdens, leaving the impression of a batch of sticks with legs. The sight left me with the barest sense of the economic hardships many of the Korean people were living under, strained by the idea America's foreign aid must be earmarked for more important

items than keeping such senior citizens off the streets and out of the sun. I looked back, continuing to watch these aging pack mules, amazed by their fortitude, until they disappeared down into the vanishing point.

Someone else on the bus who'd been watching the countryside pass by muttered, "Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore." I nodded quietly and turned my attention to the graffiti adorning the inner metal surface of the bus. Someone had scratched *FTA* in a prominent place. I'd seen that acronym before . . . and I would see it plenty more before my time in the Army concluded. It represented a common sentiment--shorthand for the prevailing zeitgeist. (*Fuck The Army*, in case you're unaware.)

There were eight of us on the bus, including my basic training comrade Ben Strayder and a couple of other guys I would come to know very well over the ensuing months. Our shared journey across the hills and valleys of Korea was coming to an end, yet my demoralizing but quirky personal adventure was only beginning.

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STRAIGHT SHOOTER

Private First Class Benjamin Joseph Strayder was the guy I mentioned earlier with hopes of becoming a G-man. In truth I didn't know him very well. I can't say I knew any of my fellow basic trainees much. There wasn't either the time or the inclination. We were frantic mice in a maze just trying to make our way out the other end.

However Strayder would become one of my roommates, and in the weeks and months to follow I would come to know him as well as anyone I met in the Army. Not that we were best

buds or anything. We weren't at all alike. We came from different places--both geographically and ideologically.

Unlike me and many others, Strayder actually joined the Army because he wanted to. His righteous enthusiasm sprouted from good clean American soil to grow in neatly regimented rows of red, white, and blue.

He was a member in good standing of his high school's ROTC program and, upon graduation, immediately signed up for a four-year hitch with the express promise from the Defense Department he would be a military policeman stationed at Fort Bliss, Texas, not far from where he grew up in Lubbock. His plan was to spend some time as a military policeman in the Army, get some experience in law enforcement for his resume, and then process out and join the FBI. With the four-year agreement he was also supposed to receive a cash enlistment bonus once he completed his training.

I would eventually learn what motivated Strayder's ambition. His father had been a policeman, his grandfather a county sheriff, and his great grandfather a U.S. marshal. His aspirations to join the constabulary went back as far as his familial memory. It was the professional outcome that had become an ancestral assumption--preordained by the Texas god who oversaw such things. When he talked about it I realized he had law enforcement in his blood . . . or at least he believed he should.

"I want to be an FBI agent like Efrem Zimbalist Jr.," he told me once. "I want to be a force for good--for justice."

I was certain he must know Efrem Zimbalist Jr. was an actor who portrayed an FBI man, not a real agent, so I didn't say anything. We've all got our own heroes. Personally I preferred Al Mundy of *It Takes a Thief*, even though I knew Robert Wagner didn't, in reality, steal anything except the hearts of his female fans.

Strayder had a sincere face incapable of guile and, despite his desire to rise to a position of authority, his demeanor was invariably friendly. He was ever anxious to please. Though it says more about my own stereotypes than his character, those were not attributes I associated with policing. Regardless, I thought he was an okay guy--forthright and dependable . . . if rather ingenuous. Which made what happened to him that much more lamentable.

Strayder tried, usually with little luck, to fit in with the TJs . . . who were generally a bunch of raucous rebels and layabouts. He was always broadcasting on a different wavelength than the other tower jockeys. They tolerated him, but he was never really one of them. His laugh was always a bit tardy, a trifle hesitant, as if he wasn't actually getting the joke or wasn't certain it was something he should find amusing.

In basic training he'd even tried out a nickname to "be one of the guys," using his first two initials, because that's what his parents had called him as a kid. But, as you might expect with a barracks full of testosterone-fueled boys, the moniker *BJ* didn't really work out so well. His attempts to integrate with his fellows weren't helped by the fact he had this unusual stride, which was more a march than a walk, like some phantom drill sergeant was calling out a cadence in his head.

At 5'9", rail thin, and somewhat stoop-shouldered, Strayder was not anyone you'd ever mistake for an imposing authority figure. Yet he was dedicated to his life plan and determined to be the best soldier, the best MP, and the best FBI applicant he could be.

So you may ask, as I did, what was he doing on this bus in the Republic of South Korea?

Basically the Army screwed him . . . as it did numerous recruits. They didn't read the fine print. It seems, buried somewhere deep in their recruitment contracts, the Army states it can do anything they want with any of their personnel--for whatever reason they want--regardless of any promises they may have made.

I know, while in Korea, Strayder spent countless hours filing paperwork and complaining through the rust-tarnished chain of command without results. For anyone who cared to ask, he kept saying that as soon as he finished his tour in Korea he was certain he'd be sent to Fort Bliss. I think he actually believed that . . . at least for a while. My belief in the military's sense of fair-mindedness was, admittedly, already jaded by cynicism. So I kept my mouth shut.

As for his enlistment bonus, the Army "misplaced" it. I know he spent months trying to track it down and get the Army to pay him. Whether it ever showed up I can't say. I only know if it did, it didn't do him much good.

Technically, he *was* a military policeman. That was our MOS (Military Occupational Specialty). So the Army had kept *that* promise--except he would end up doing very little "policing." Instead he would become just another tower jockey.

Now you would think someone who was treated as he was would be bitter, a discipline problem--a rotten apple among the ranks. But no, Strayder was a true-blue American down to his red-blooded core. He never questioned authority--never failed to obey an order given him by his "superiors"--never even flashed as much as an acerbic look at a dim-witted sergeant or a dictatorial officer. He was the dog who got kicked and still came meekly back with his tail wagging. To put it another way, he'd drunk the OD-green Kool-Aid.

Okay, I shouldn't say *never*. But it took him a helluva lot longer than it would any other reasonable human being to surrender to wearisome routine. Maybe it was the time it took, the dramatic transformation he would undergo, that had his psyche dancing the fandango at the end.