

## Adrift

Soren Folan is more than a best friend to me. The brown-haired street-clothes loving classmate turned confidant is nearly my height, sporting classy aviators like a seasoned and highly decorated fighter pilot for the navy. I swear that guy must have polished them once or twice a week. Its reflection of natural light could illuminate a janitor's closet effortlessly. With them on, they made me feel Soren has everything under control, knows exactly what he wants and could overcome any obstacle like an impermeable monster truck as it screams around the customized dusty track with sparkles of flash photography shooting from all sides of the stadium reminding people of exasperating television static minutes before the begin of the long awaited Superbowl showdown between two clashing titans. Soren can evoke the greatest of reactions, the most amazing opinions and he would not even know it. This natural talent evades him, but to Soren it is business as usual within the designated confinements of an adventurous teenager.

If you would not have known him, say freshmen from another city and state, the first thoughts of cockiness and egotism explodes into the scene for the localized community to see with their own multi-colored eyes. Confetti, fireworks, and controlled tumult rained upon the unsuspecting greenhorns who are expecting something other than a grand entrance of a self-absorbed sectarian ruffian. They would stroll passed the trophy case and anticipate sharp pictures of Soren beside every flashy trophy with beams of light showering upon them like angelic spirits from high above. His name is engraved into every single award. "*The prodigal athlete and upcoming valedictorian must have his craving attention,*" they grimace and growl amongst each other. They wish their scrutinizing and malevolent eyes could emit a pair of laser beams like

Superman and destroy the display of egocentric pomposity forever. A tempestuous group of new students would have believed this. None of it happened and I can tell you why. Upon greeting Soren and shaking his hand, this malfeasance dissipates and is replaced with self-reflection. New foundations are being poured for long-term, honorable friendships. But I must say, they would never reach the incontestable level of comradery between me and Soren. No way. I could not imagine it if my life depends on it. One distinct event will always keep us together and it is something that someone should never experience or witness, but I will tell you about that later. I promise you.

He is the person who holds the door open for me, invites me for dinner at his folk's home in Idlewild Farms, and gave me once five-hundred dollars with no strings attached. I mean, he tells me I do not have to pay it back to him! His bi-weekly paychecks from a discount store close to the Andrew Jackson Highway are nothing to rave about. He cannot afford the latest Xbox game console from Best Buy and has eliminated the possibility of owning his first car after passing his driving test at the DMV. "It is a grant, Flynn," he announces to me patting my back gently with his right hand. "Do you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, it means I do not have to pay you back. But I want to. Eventually. Don't you want to get yourself anything?"

"Dude do not worry about it. You need it more than I do."

I can feel my nose run a little. My eyes begin to sting. I do not have to express my gratitude in words. Soren can see how thankful I am. Lack of appreciation does not bother him. He once bought lunch at a fast-food restaurant on Providence Road for a vagrant who must have been as stiff as a wooden board for sitting hours close to the main entrance. He snatched the

paper bag containing the savory content that could make any starving human being drool without any control and scarfed down the entire order without expressing acknowledgment of Soren's good intentions. I scoffed and was close to mention something to the unknown man in a negative tone until my friend pulls me back gingerly. "You do not know what he has been through, Flynn," he advised me with sincere care. "I do not think he has anybody. Who knows when the last time this guy had a nice warm meal in his stomach. He must have been scouring dumpsters and garbage bins in the alleyways and public spaces for food that have long passed its expiration date. Not even a single mold spore could prevent him from taking a hearty bite."

The image caused me to shudder. His explanation smoothed the edges for me with an electric sander nestled comfortably in my right hand as I visualized his chronic hunger pushing him into the nose-pinching stench of trash to find anything edible that can make him sick. Full exposure to the elements is another daily event in his melancholic itinerary. Any shelter had to do. It was as if Soren had some magic window he could summon with a spell to witness this unidentified man's repeated misfortune in the Queen City. An award-winning documentary about his unceasing struggles is a perspicuous career option for Soren. But the entertainment industry does not interest him at all, and he leaves the message on the community billboard for someone else to take.

You would think we were locker buddies and shared many classes with each other at high school. I feel empty, deprived of my unalienable rights without Soren by my side as each teacher hands out our assignments, tests, and pop quizzes. Hey, I feel invincible when he is around me. He is the living embodiment of an over-the-counter performance enhancer at the independent neighborhood pharmacy, giving me the unquenchable sense of fearlessness like an unarmed man in front of a tank. Despair keep on slapping me hard in the face in the twelfth grade. The physical

interventions are strong enough to draw blood. It wraps around my tongue and reminds me that these incursions will intensify. *Come on! Why does it have to be in the final year of high school where everything matters the most? Does fate want me to take a spill and suffer from a concussion?* But as luck would have it, we meet up in social studies class and become star pupils. Mr. Alton thinks we memorized the intense and thought-provoking substance in our textbooks on our own time likely at our homes or maybe even the city park that allows a paradise of lush green to thrive in a sea of steel, concrete, and wood. Whatever it could have been for the teacher, we see the most embracing letter in the English alphabet on every assignment and test.

Four days before our graduation ceremony starts, Soren notifies me of the next chapter of his life with explicit excitement. It happens on the stairs between the main entrance to the high school and the curb to the parking lot. It is getting cloudier by the minute and the weather forecast does call for showers later in the day. He is standing beside the flagpole as the string sown into the flag makes repeated contact with the bright aluminum leg. “Hey man. I have not told anyone about what I want to do yet. But I want to tell you first.”

“Okay.”

“I want to join the marine corps.”

His wish does not surprise me. Soren tells me he does not want to be stuck with monthly student loan payments that could ground him like a helicopter without its rotors. He is not sure if a reasonable job is around the corner for him. Soren does not want to rely too much on his parents after he leaves the age of nineteen behind him. The military can provide him with education that is not possible through any other channel. I have more breathing space and it will be shoved to the side with force once I realize Soren wants to wear a standard uniform with his

trusty service rifle tightly clutched between his arms and hands. Sorry North Carolina State University! You will not see me for a little while. With a little help from the military, there is chance we will meet. Keep the road clear for me and I shall arrive with my friend someday.

We enlist together and board a bus to Parris Island. The training program is responsible for conducting my transition from an adolescent to a full-grown adult within thirteen weeks. The receiving phase separates me from Soren. His waive and light smile are burned into memory. They are standing side-by-side nearly touching each other beautifully framed and dust-free on an imaginary nightstand beside my simple bunk reminding me why I am here. Telling me my friend still has my back somehow even if his assignment to another squadron at an undisclosed location of the depot remains a closely guarded secret. Mind-crushing regret and doubt threaten to toss me into an unrelenting quicksand and force my head down with their unsympathetic hands. I do not want to sink into this murderous mixture of grout, rock, and rainwater as expected. Personal approbation attaches me to the bumper of an off-road truck. The drill instructor has no remorse and will congratulate my warring internal forces for breaking and taking me down for him. I can see him standing a few feet away, clapping and cheering my foes with the raving desire of getting the band to come in and play a frenzied overture for my timely demise.

I find myself looking at the other side of a canyon only two feet away from the edge. This frightening scar deep into the Earth's cracked crust is far larger and wider than the Grand Canyon. The jagged rocks are the teeth of a mako shark with the sole purpose of tearing its prey with flawless savviness. No civil engineer wanted to design a bridge long and safe enough to span this treacherous rugged crevice. Doing so is a guaranteed risk to lose your license and reputation as a professional who once enjoyed the company of complex yet harmonious equations in the books and chalkboards of your memorable intramural timetable. Since roads

began criss-crossing the continental United States of America like some strange misshapen spiderweb between the back corner leg of your worn and discolored dresser and the repressed baseboards, no engineer was daring enough to take on this unnerving task. To successfully accomplish this would turn you into a legend. You place everything you have, the mortgage to the property, the well-being of the family, the integrity of your full name on a single high stakes bet at the poker table and win. And, as fate would have it, somebody did pull off this godly feat and I do not know who it was. I *should* know. This person did the unthinkable and yet there is no mention of the mysterious engineer anywhere. I look to my right and see the pedestrian suspension bridge with its sagging catenary. Lack of maintenance and the forgetfulness of time have subdued the once perfect parabola and rearranged it with no discernable mathematical purpose. The missing wooden planks, and raggedy ropes are detached and hanging off from the side at certain sections give me an estimate of this structure's age.

The long walk across the brittle bridge begins. Each step evokes a noise that causes my stomach to sink into my feet. It is like walking on Doritos chips that have poured out from the bag only moments ago after you carelessly misjudged your strength to open it with your hands. Hey, I get it. You had a long and stressful day at work, and you want to obliterate its annoyances with an incredible abundance of irrefutable flavors on each all-dressing drenched Dorito chip. You think the quick solution to combat the weight of repetitive mind-sensitive grunt work is this heavily taxed item of intoxicating crunchiness. Not today and not for a while. The torture can start.

The following planks sound like an inflamed baker mishandling parchment paper in front of his overworked preheated oven. My bladder is about to onload its cargo. Every orifice on my body is pulling itself apart slowly to allow more sweat to gush out. I am having trouble

maintaining a good grip on both ends of the bridge. Each piece of wood has a musical repertoire it loves to share to a devilish record production company. They are always looking for an interesting sound to capture the attention of any listener. Hey, the collective sound group does have what it takes to record billboard chart topping songs and make serious money for anyone who wants to offer them a collaborative contract. No one can dismiss the concise notes and beats of a dilapidated wooden struggle kept together with rope and string. That is its perceptible advantage over other groups with their mainstream melodies and it is a competitive industry with chief representatives looking for the next greatest sound.

It takes me so long to reach the center of the fabled span. The entire structure swings gently like a pendulum in a grandfather clock. The breeze upgrades to gusts of wind causing the bridge to swing a little more. The contents in my stomach spin, my head becomes light as I try to regain my balance. The nonstop creakiness of the planks add to the crippling nausea. My body becomes paralyzed. Self-doubt and regret tie me up and threaten to throw me off the bridge. It does not matter if I fall into the calm shallow river and cannot untangle myself in time before drowning. This is such an awful way to go. *“Please let it end! I do not want to suffer anymore,”* I beg. I wail profusely until I hear someone call out my name. It is coming from the other side of the river. I wipe the tears from my eyes and let my vision correct itself. It is Soren. Somehow he has found a safe way across this moving boundary. *“I guess there is another bridge nearby or he found a spot shallow enough for him to cross on foot. He always knows what to do. What would I do without him?”* Another thought comes to mind. *“He also could have made it across this bridge earlier. He is so fast and fearless. I hope I can be like him someday.”*

I become one of many recruits who have made it across this bridge. Soren gives me a big hug and congratulates me on my success. “You did it, my friend! I knew you could do it. I am so

proud of you!” I keep my arms tight around him. Receiving acclaim from him was the biggest reward I could receive to date.

We embark on our first tour of Afghanistan two months later. Our platoon is riding in six Humvees on a gravel road approaching a base housing our allies from the UN. We leave a long, thick smokescreen behind us in an arid landscape that reminds me of some unpopulated rural swath of land somewhere in the American southwest. We flew for hours, and the sight of such familiar topography wants me to question my confidential geographical position.

Soren is riding in the light armored vehicle ahead of me as an improvised explosive device detonates beside his vehicle. A fierce mixture of dust, fire, smoke and debris cover the entire right-hand side of the Humvee. Our armed carrier and others behind us come to a grinding halt. A terrifying exchange of fire erupts. None of us know how many insurgents are out there using the desert foliage to impede our judgment. I am holding my rifle and my finger is on the trigger, but I use the scope to determine Soren’s condition. The entire right-hand side of the Humvee is blown open like a sardine can. I detect no movement inside. Adrenaline is injected into my legs, and I sprint wildly towards the disabled unit. Soren is sitting on the driver’s side and is still conscious. The explosion shattered his legs and covered them with twisted metal. The sudden blast ensured his passengers have made it to the afterlife. His continuous moaning causes an outpour of emotion to billow out. “Soren! I am going to get you out of here!” I wail.

The impulse of energy from the jab runs its course. The debris prove to be a daunting menace. Bullets ricochet and implant themselves into the remaining pieces of metal that is designed to protect us from infantry assault. Soren is breathing heavily, and I am not sure if he is trying to keep himself conscious for as long as possible. “Stay with me, brother! I can get you out! Hold on!”



Our second lieutenant rushes over to us and commands me to abort the rescue. “We must go now, soldier! We do not know how many are out there!”

“We cannot leave my friend here. Those guys will tear him apart!”

“I am not jeopardizing the safety of my entire platoon!” he screams at me before looking at Soren and calming down in an instant. “May peace be with you.”

I feel Soren grab my left hand and squeeze it. “Do you remember what Mr. Alton taught us about act utilitarianism?”

“*The social studies teacher,*” I think to myself before answering my friend. “I think so. He said something about maximizing utility for the greater and equal recognition of all people involved. Happiness is pleasure. What does it have to do with this?”

“I will fight them off as much as I can. Please go.”

His suggestion shocks me. “No! I will not leave you!”

“Our commanding officer gave you an order, Flynn. Do I have to remind you what Mr. Alton told us about consequentialism as well? I think you know what it means.”

I certainly do. But his proposition sticks to me like industrial glue. It is morally correct for any sentient agent to act in a specific method that guarantees the best production of results for everyone else involved. If it means to preserve happiness within the collective, then it is ethically correct to perform this deed. Human beings will naturally avoid pain and suffering whenever possible and will use every tool to their disposal to ensure that these debilitating problems will not overtake them. Who wants pain? Nobody does except for people riddled with insanity. They

have lost touch with themselves and cannot be reasoned with. “You do not have free will in this case, Flynn,” Soren continues to argue with me.

“But you do?” I cry.

“Yes. You and the clerk saved my life and I love you guys for that. Now go before they court-martial you.”

A big part of me is dying. I feel my soul is splitting away from me. It becomes a lethal fight for my identity. Bombs detonate all around me. Their shockwaves cause my body to liquify. The punishment of court-martial tips the scales in favor of subordination. *“You and the clerk saved my life and I love you guys for that.”* I will carry these sacred and immortal words in me for the rest of my life. Soren has changed me forever. I do not think I will ever meet a fine man like him ever again.

The Humvees are thrown into reverse and turn around. I look behind and see the immobilized vehicle erupt in flames. We lost five comrades that day. They had families waiting to hear the worst news they could imagine. They appear in their worst nightmares and crawl into their realities with no remorse. These traumatic visions in their heads love to destroy everything they built together. Almost nothing was spared. It is the primary infiltration unit to turn anyone’s world upside down.

I could not sleep for the next three days. Soren’s tidy made bunk across from me will remain untouched until the next marine arrives. His clean clothes are beautifully folded and waiting to be used. I keep looking over to his bed and see him underneath the blankets. *“Soren is tough as steel! He has somehow made it out from the ambush. He can take them on by himself!”*

I tell myself repeatedly. *"It cannot end like this."* But it has and I cannot convince myself otherwise.

I remember what he told me. Soren has repaid the favor. I could never forget how I met him for the first time at the convenience store. He was just a kid, like me. All he wanted was a chocolate bar that he wanted to pay for with his allowance. Some guy, and I still have no clue to this day who he was and what he looked like, came in with a retractable knife in his hand and demanded money from Soren and the clerk behind the counter. His partially torn black hoodie did a superb job in concealing the culprit's identity. Soren refused to give him his five-dollar bill. It fell to the ground after the boy realized something foul tore itself into his abdomen. The thief took three steps back, left the bill on the ground and bolted from the store. I was standing just around the corner with my chosen snack in my right hand. That small bag of potato chips was already abandoned once I ran to where Soren laid on the ground, losing consciousness. We were both eleven years old at the time. The clerk rushed over with a roll of paper towel and gave me a wad to use to apply pressure on his wound. The employee was wearing his nametag, but I did not look at it. The paramedics told us our intervention saved Soren's life. I wanted to thank the clerk for what he helped me accomplish a week later. In his place stood another man who told me his predecessor walked away from the job later that evening. I never saw him again.