

## **In the House of the Dogs**

When he arrives at the table, the rose-petal color of his shirt is already splotted with translucent patches, his matted chest hair visible on either side of his tie. He takes the folded napkin from his plate and blots the waxed, eggshell dome of his skull before he's even seated. I smile patiently as he drains his water glass and looks around for a waiter.

-Frank, it's nice to see you.

He nods, making brief eye contact with me and then scanning the room again. He snarls distractedly.

-Subway's a fucking nightmare. Goddamn MTA. Fucking Union gorillas.

I sip my water and close my eyes. For a second I see it – the mud-brick walls and the thatched roof – but then I open my eyes and Frank is picking dried mucus from the corner of his large, upturned nostrils. A waitress deposits our drinks – a white Burgundy for me and a Manhattan for Frank – and Frank barely manages to keep his hands off of the tightly cinched waist of her black shirt. I watch him struggle with his hands. It reminds me of the way children forcibly keep puppies in their laps. I sip my wine. Frank begins to speak in a breathy, paranoid tone although the restaurant is too expensive for the media.

-I looked at the material. It's not fucking good, Peter.

I sigh and nod for him to continue.

-For fuck's sake, the man's got one fucking leg. One fucking leg! The man crawled through a sewer ditch for two days dragging a wounded nurse. It's so fucking heroic I want to puke. And you want him smeared. And it's not just heroism. No. Fuck. It's worse than that. Have you seen the nurse? She's gorgeous. Townsend... this guy's got style. He's got Clooney's–

-Clooney's a queer.

Frank cocks his head at me. He stops talking, apparently a little stunned, which strikes me as odd since Frank is renowned for his homophobia. It occurs to me that he might not have known this. Or maybe I heard it wrong. I make an effort to keep up with popular culture as fundraising often requires some fluency in it but quite frequently I fall behind, or grow disgusted or simply weary. I wonder what Frank watches with his family. Do they watch environmental documentaries? HBO? Cartoons? Porn? I realize I'm not actually sure if Frank *has* a family. There is a wedding ring wedged on his ring finger, which is chorizo-thick and nearly the same blend of colors, paprika and pork fat.

-Well, okay, whatever. We'll get to the orientation issue. But the rest of it. He's a war hero.

The *material*...

Frank trails off. I suppose he expects I will free him of his obligation. That I will – because it is good form and good business – allow him to keep what has already been paid to him. I sigh, this time to myself. The Burgundy is quite good. I wonder if the kitchen serves their diver scallops at lunch and then I ask Frank:

-Do you know what BTK is?

-The serial killer?

-No, Frank.

He stares at me. His eyes are too close together. I tell him:

- BTK. Below the knee. As opposed to ATK. Above the knee.

-What's above the knee?

-Listen. If a soldier loses the leg below the knee, they'll excavate the wound up to the end of the femur, which can support a quarter-ton of weight. You can walk. You could hump a full pack

across the Khyber Pass. The new BTK prosthetics are so good they're not letting people use them in the Olympics. Not the special Olympics. The real Olympics. Did you know any of that?

-No. I didn't. But it's fucking fantastic. Miracle of science. So fucking what?

-I'm talking about a political opponent with a BTK wound, Frank. I'm talking about thousands of war vets who think of that wound as a paper cut, men whose shattered femurs can't hold the weight of a pair of pants, men who lost their balls because when an IED hits you above the knees, it castrates you, like Jake Barnes, even if the news never mentions that particular fact. ATK wounds, the ones that take your mobility, your manhood, that's the signature wound of this war. The price of admission and Howard Townsend doesn't have it.

Frank stares at me with wide, impish eyes.

-I'm talking, Frank, about doing your homework.

Frank makes a sheepish face that's a bit shy of actually expressing regret, an emotion he just does not have the breeding for. He doesn't come from gold *or* brass, as they say. He has had no family inheritance, no legacy education, no required military service as a condition of a trust fund. Frank's family doesn't appear in any social register, their patriarchs don't sleep in Arlington. And he's never read Hemingway – the reference, I admit, was a subtle but nonetheless cruel attempt to belittle his worldliness – and he never will. Frank is like a truffle hound. The analogy almost makes me chuckle and I have to take another sip of wine to keep my face straight. The image is irresistible: Frank, with his state university degree and his rent-controlled apartment in Queens, down on all fours, his skin tight and pink, stuffing his fat, dripping nose under rocks and roots. Snuffling and snorting, coming up with a boisterous oink when he finds them, tiny dark knobs of fungus worth a thousand dollars a pound. It's a wonder that what he does is legal. Frank is not above breaking and entering, not opposed to surveillance or extortion; he does not share my distaste for the crude instruments of political power. But he does have one higher, more refined gift. This I freely admit.

The waitress comes. Frank gets the short ribs and a Caesar salad. The appetizer special is seared scallops with shaved truffles; I order it as an entrée. Politely as I can, I tell the waitress that I'm unconcerned with the cost.

It was early morning. The sky was the color of tin. He was standing by the edge of the yard where they kept the adult dogs. A part of me wanted to go over to him. He had spoken to some of us before, in the fractured, improvisational English that they all spoke out there. Maybe I would ask him about his daughter, the one with the violet eyes. Or maybe ask to play with the pups. At a certain point, they were thrown out of the house – away from the warmth and the table scraps and the cuddling of the children – and into the cold. They would be hit with cattle prods at quarter-power, then half-power and finally shocked at full strength, kicked and whipped with chains. By the time they were two years old they stood four feet tall and weighed over a hundred pounds. They would attack a fully armored vehicle, cracking their teeth on steel plates. Once, in the kiln-fire heat of summer, a convoy came through this part of the valley. One of the Humvee drivers had his window down and a dog got its head inside the vehicle. By the time someone shot the dog, it had taken all the meat off of the driver's face.

The dogs fought like demons. The old man told me that he believed dogs didn't have their own souls, but instead inherited the condemned souls of 'wrong people'. The wrinkled puppies, womb-blind and whimpering in the laps of his grandchildren, had the souls of child-rapists, cannibals and mass murderers. This he believed, quite completely. What could you say? How else could a kind man, who would offer fresh bread to the soldiers of his enemy when they were hungry, how else could this man leave a dog out in the blistering winter night? How else could he shock a living thing until its cries trembled at the audible edge of speech, as if crying *no, no more!*

Back then I didn't care about politics. I didn't care about the war, about strategy or tactics. It was just a thing I had to do, a box to check off, somewhere in the middle of a long list. It was an obstacle; the valley was in my way and I hated it. I hated it and nearly everyone in it. But I liked the old man, in spite of how he treated the dogs.

Frank's eyes narrow when his meal arrives, his short ribs arranged asymmetrically on the white rectangular plate: burgundy cubes of three different sizes, the ratios at once seemingly accidental and aesthetically pleasing, a single, impressionistic stroke of gastrique across the plate. It looks like some tiny Zen sculpture, presented not as nourishment but as a prompt for meditation, although it does not have this effect on Frank. My scallops arrive in an onyx saucer, coated in black-flecked cream. Frank nods approvingly, forking an entire cube of meat into his mouth.

-That's the fucking money sauce.

I raise an eyebrow and take the side of my fork to a scallop. It's perfectly cooked, seared like brûlée on the outside, translucent in the middle. The sauce strikes me as something of an overkill. A caviar beurre blanc. Very tasty, but somehow too opulent. I would have paid more for less.

-Perhaps it would have worked better as an appetizer after all.

Frank actually stops eating to consider this for a moment, and shovels the next largest cube into his mouth. Somehow, despite the delicate architecture of Frank's plate, he's managed to smear it on his lips and even get some into the fatty folds of his chin. I suddenly see Frank, sprawled on a thin layer of dried straw. I am kneeling over him, shoving stringy chunks of raw meat into his mouth, pressing the barrel of a pistol into his balls. He tries to spit the meat out and I grind the barrel against his scrotum and he lets out a muffled scream, but manages to choke a bite down. I start clubbing him in the face with the pistol, the dream logic of the scene refusing to accept anything but the most primitive technology of violence.

Frank looks up and sees me staring at his face.

-Don't fucking tell me, I got it all over my fucking face, right? I can't help it. This place has the best fucking short ribs I've ever had. Last time, I came here with Vinny – you remember Vinny, he worked for Giuliani back in the day – and Vinny lost his shit. He's got that fucking beard, well, he told me my face looked like his wife when she was giving birth.

I sigh heavily and wonder how many people actually *know* Frank. If I were to kill Frank – of course I couldn't actually kill Frank, but if, let's say, Frank were to cease to exist – how many people might miss him? How much money would people require to pretend they had never heard of him? How much to *believe* it? I sense that there is a quantifiable amount, a price that could be wrenched from the morass of abstraction and paid. Frank wipes his mouth, finally, and looks up at me.

-Peter, listen. I've been over the material. If you don't want to take this guy on the level, issue to issue, fact for fact, it's going to be tricky. He's pretty squeaky. And the orientation thing – look, I get it – yes, he's a fag. But I'm telling you, this is state politics. New York's red state, upstate, but they don't fucking vote unless it's abortion or taxes and you guys are both – so centrist that they could give a fuck. You know?

-I don't want to go after his orientation.

-Whoa, hold up there. I'm not saying don't go after it, I'm just saying, you know, we gotta go viral, insinuate, we can build a very slippery slope between being gay and gay rights, between gay rights and gay marriage, between gay marriage and the attack on the family, God in schools, unborn babies. It's all one big slippery slope and we'll just keep pumping mud down the hillside. Whadda you say?

I take a sip of wine.

-I say that doesn't sound subtle.

-Look, I'm not saying we connect the dots. But we're talking about fucking yokels. We put the dots very close together and far away from other dots.

-You're full of fascinating metaphors.

Frank smiles, his teeth threaded with short rib debris. Perhaps I am being too harsh on Frank. He is not simply a dumb animal rutting in the mud. There is a keen – if sick – intellect behind his puffy eyelids, a way of seeing that has effectively blacklisted him from certain private poker games, an intuition about a person's liability, a sense that includes but exceeds the political.

I look at him and shift in my seat.

And, of course, there is something about his blunter methods that seems appropriate for the rural parts of the Empire State. As I think about this, Frank finishes his second Manhattan and winks at the waitress. I watch her body quiver, as if her extremities are attempting to retract towards her center of gravity, like one of those mollusks that can retract into its shell. As she walks over, head cast slightly towards the floor, Frank looks at me and smiles again.

-I don't hear you firing me.

I finish my wine. The waitress hands us dessert menus. Frank orders some sort of deconstructed key lime pie. I order a single-malt.

-No, I suppose you don't.

Frank watches the waitress walk away. I wonder if he would undress her or only disrobe himself, rubbing his fatty genitals on her hips and stomach. Frank actually licks his lips. I wonder if I am being too cruel, but then decide, no, I'm being relatively fair.

I don't remember when it was decided, but the division of labor had the undeniable feel of Pentagon logic, the logic of parents who, in dividing up household chores, both accept and deny that their children are not all equally equipped for the world. The Army was down-valley, making the

occasional contact – usually a stray sniper round from some wannabe combatant out herding sheep – but mostly standing around like a stateside Department of Transportation crew: five privates standing around smoking local cigarettes and one poor slob smearing hot asphalt over gravel. The Marine recon patrols had the pleasure of humping up-valley, clearing out hostiles, blowing up weapons caches and getting more serious incoming. Then, when it was all done, the Air Force was going to fly over with a pair of B-52s and essentially turn the entire valley into a bowl of fire and ash.

Why, then, it was necessary for me to go back to the dog yard, I'll never know. A couple of guys asked to go with me. You could tell without looking at their files, they had both plea-bargained into the Corps. My guess was rape, and not statutory. After their first kills they had branded each other with homemade irons. They carved swastikas in anything dead: goats, monkeys, soldiers, children. The prospect of bringing a fifty-cal machine gun out to the edge of the valley and strafing a hundred crazed dogs made them drool. I outranked them and, while it wasn't enough to get them reassigned or to really even curb their behavior, I could at least deny them something. So I picked a quiet corporal named Whitestone, more or less at random, and we took a Humvee and the fifty and drove out there.

The adult dogs lived in a pen across the yard from the house, six-foot fencing with some old shards of razor wire strung along the top. I set up the machine gun at the far end of the fence and started firing, before I could conjure up the need for ritual or lose my nerve. It had to be done, I had to do it. So I did it. I had to reload the machine gun twice with fresh belts, but it was accomplished with almost mesmerizing ease. I raked the yard with long strokes, as if I were watering a parched field. The fifty was so loud I barely heard a thing, although I knew the dogs were howling and screaming. Whitestone sat in the Humvee and read something. Maybe a novel, I don't remember.

When I was finished, as if on cue, the old man appeared. He held one hand over his heart, but he neither shouted nor gesticulated wildly as I had seen other villagers do when their livestock



was killed, either on purpose or by accident, by some member of our group. He looked at me for a long time, standing about five or six feet away, cautious to approach me too quickly. I assumed it was because I was still holding the stock of the machine gun, resting on its tripod on the hood of the Humvee.

He carried a small canteen, which he opened. He tilted a small splash of water onto his hands and then rubbed his face and mouth, as if to grease rusted gears. He offered me a splash but I shook my head. He finally spoke. He said, 'Maybe I thank you.' Perhaps he thought I had dispatched those wrong people, freed him of his responsibility for their corrupt souls. Or maybe I had only freed him from the waiting. The thing we all came to understand as the fundamental nature of the war in the valley: waiting for a bomb to fall from the clouds, or a bullet to scream down from a rocky outcropping, a mad dog to tear your jaw off, or a mad man to take a Bowie knife to your children.

He took two steps towards me and bowed slightly. I bowed back. I studied his face for a moment. And then I asked him to show me where he kept the pups.

Frank is surprisingly delicate with his key lime pie, which has been spread around the plate and appears – at first – as if it were a modular dessert which some careless pastry chef has neglected to assemble. I look closer and realize the effect is intentional, although somewhat mystifying. The meringue partially covers one side of a perfect cylinder of lime gelée. The crust appears as frozen chevrons of graham-cracker gelato. Frank, seemingly not intimidated by the sophistication of his dessert, uses the side of his fork with supple, scalpel-like movements. He finds the natural breaks in the meringue and slides the fork down into the neon gelatin underneath. It occurs to me, for a moment, how unnatural everything about this key lime pie is, and then how unnatural even a regular, undeconstructed key lime pie seems. The arbitrariness of it momentarily transfixes me, as if there

were a cobra swaying on Frank's plate and not a clever, overpriced dessert. When he's finished, he looks up at me with a wide smile of satisfaction.

-That's good fucking pie.

I nod.

-No, I'm serious. I'll eat another fucking piece, right now. You should get one.

-I'm watching my weight. I'll be on camera a lot.

-It's low-cal.

-No it isn't.

Frank's bottom lip quivers, a faint tremble of doubt.

-Whatever, Peter. We can't all be fucking triathletes.

-I suppose not.

Frank's cappuccino arrives and he plunges his mouth into the foam. I sigh.

-Okay. So I think we have an agreement. Yes?

I nod again.

-Of course, you know, a good campaign...it's aggressive. You're okay with that? I mean, we'll do defense, of course. But the best defense is a good offense. An ugly motherfucker of an offense. You can handle that?

-I can.

-The family?

I nod.

-They'll be fine.

-And what about you?

-What about me?

Frank takes his napkin from his lap and wipes his mouth. He takes a sip of water and then leans back in his chair, his body both relaxed and poised. It is the posture I have been trying to affect at this lunch meeting, without much luck. I notice that the sweat has dried from his shirt and his brow. He looks at me, his eyes slowly drifting over my shoulders and neck, the sides of my face and my nose. I suddenly want to reach across the table and plunge my knife into his eye socket. My hand actually moves to the side of my water glass but, of course, the attentive waitress has already cleared my silver, probably about twenty minutes ago. Frank chuckles – a low, fatty, coughing noise – and smiles at me. He makes a wet snorting noise. The way his neck folds and lays down over the ridge of his collar makes my stomach turn. He looks into my eyes and he laughs again, higher this time, unaffected. It is an honest laugh, half a cry of surprise, as if something has actually just struck him – for the first time – as truly, horribly funny.

For a long time we sat in the Humvee, Whitestone and I.

Finally, I asked him to hand me the medical kit from under the seat. I opened it and took out the gauze, wiped most of the blood from my hands and forearms. I opened a sanitary napkin and cleaned the rest, the dark wedges of blood between my fingers. The blood under my fingernails was packed in too deep and wouldn't come out until I could find a proper shower. I balled the gauze up and dropped it out of the Humvee window. I wasn't worried; everything would be vaporized in a few days when the bombers came to incinerate the valley.

We turned around in the yard and drove back up the dirt path towards the base. Whitestone said nothing. After a few minutes, I told him, 'I come from a wealthy family. Do you understand?' He simply looked at me, eyes empty, like two cloudless skies. I told him, 'Before you speak to anyone about this, speak to me. Whatever it is you want, don't assume I can't do it. It's better to be my friend than my enemy. Okay? Just tell me you understand.' He blinked, once, and spoke quietly.

## In the House of the Dogs

He said, 'I understand no such thing, sir. I understand nothing at all.' I was still prepared to pay him. Of course I was prepared to pay him nearly anything. But the next day, he went on patrol and was bitten by a stray dog. He managed to fend off the dog – not one of the conditioned killers, just a scavenger, nearly starved and lacking the strength to put up much of a fight – but the wound became infected. He should have been fine but the infection got into his bloodstream and he died the following day, waiting for a medivac.

The night after Whitestone died I stayed up late and watched the first of the bomber runs come up the valley. At first it was just a distant rumbling, an orange hue to the sky. As they came closer I watched giant blooms – dense rosebuds of high explosives, strangely arcing orchid petals of napalm fire – and after an hour the lower half of the valley was ashen and quiet. I thought about driving back out there, to the house of the dogs, to make sure. But I convinced myself not to. Best to leave it alone, buried in cinders, forgotten.

We took no further incoming, made no further contact. I left a month later, after a brutal hump through a mountain pass that the Air Force refused to bomb for some obscure meteorological reason. On the flight back, I sat next to a heavy-set, sunburnt lieutenant. He was telling stories about how, though many in the valley were killed by the bombings, quite a few had taken shelter deep in mountain caves. In satellite pictures, he had seen them, slowly returning to the valley. They were planting seeds in the ash. They were making houses out of mud and cinders. They were digging up the dead. [END]