

DAMON LEWIS

DISCHARGED

THE JAILER CHECKED UP ON ME ABOUT EVERY HOUR OR SO. He did it more often on my last visit to the brig. By now he knew I was a model inmate. I never nodded off, didn't make noise, and didn't lay on the rack during the day. I guess I would have been saintly if I read the small bible. Actually, I would have read it if I could have kept a steady train of thought, but it's hard to concentrate when you're starving. Whoever thought of having a sailor do three days of bread and water for punishment was smart. It painfully extracted a lot out of a person and made one feel pretty damn docile.

I meditated for a while by clearing my mind and staring at one of the green cell bars. Soon my eyelids grew heavy, and not wanting to break the no sleeping till lights out rule, I did some pushups, situps, and ran in place. Yet I inevitably wound up weak and lonely on the hard wooden chair, squirming with disjointed thoughts. My parents came to mind often. I envisioned my dad scowling at me over ruining the Navy career he pushed me into. Then I remembered my mother, standing between us, patting us on the chest so we wouldn't growl and attack each other like pit bulls. Strange how our worst feelings came out when my mother was around. I guess deep down my father and I knew she was the control, allowing us to vent our hatred without ripping each others throats out. Well, I didn't plan to contact them when I got out of the Navy. I didn't want to disappoint my mother who had always believed in me, and I didn't want to hear my father saying, "I told you he was a screw-up."

My parents thought the Navy would help me to control my drinking and make a man out of me, but three months out of bootcamp, I was still the same stubborn party animal, the only change being I wore a Navy uniform.

I stood, shook the bars for emphasis and sat down when I heard the jingling of the guard's keys.



TOM MORAN

"Everything alright Matthews?"

I nodded, embarrassed, then smirked realizing the jailer looked a lot like my nemesis on board ship, the Thomas C. Hart. All he needed was a beard to frame his weathered chubby face. I considered telling him he reminded me of a jerk I knew, then I changed my mind and asked him how many hours I had till lights out.

Sleep was a little rough with my body crying out for food. I tried meditating some more, but my hunger wouldn't allow it. I thought back to two nights ago when the first waves of major hunger pangs had dissipated to be replaced by a subtle steady gnawing, reluctantly encouraged by fantasies of steak, pizza and ice cream. Now it wasn't so bad, for every moment brought me closer to a meal and freedom.

The clanking sound of my cell door being opened woke me. I rolled out of bed bleary-eyed and ravenous, patting at the wrinkles in my work clothes. I followed the jailer like a clinging puppy, hoping I wasn't being taken back to the ship under guard. All I wanted was some food and a few drinks in peace. Going back to the ship now would be akin to extending my sentence. I got a little excited when I was taken outside the wire mesh prison area and into the screening lobby. I looked toward the exit door, then back at the jailer.

He handed me my wallet and peacoat, speaking gruffly, "your orders are to report to your ship." I nodded, giving him a sarcastic, "Aye, Aye, Sir," and left.

The vending machine, that dingy hunk of plastic and metal, looked like a champagne brunch at the Ritz Carlton. My joy was only partly realized because all I had was a hundred, some twenties and two single dollars. The ham sandwich I bought was great, but not as heavenly as the three I had money for the last time I did bread and water.

I walked away from the vending machine toward the base exit tense with fear. I passed the Marine guard shack hoping the ship hadn't given the Marines orders to detain me. When I glanced sideways at them, I was relieved they were more interested in who came into the base than who left. Quickening my pace on the way to the bus stop, I imagined Block, the ship's Sergeant at Arms driving up beside me with the Shore Patrol to take me away. I felt more like a runaway slave than a criminal, because my only offense was that I refused to work. After all, it was nothing like the last incident when I broke Sanders' nose for calling me a punk. There was a lot of blood. It sort of spurted out of his nose the second I pulled my fist away from his face. I lost control, and was sorry, but the best part was when the preppy lily-white lieutenant came down the ladder, turned gray and threw up in a corner of the mess deck. I laughed. He called me an animal, and I wished I'd hit him instead.

The dingy blue and silver bus came. I gagged a bit on the exhaust fumes.

They reminded me of the dust clouds that would float through the ship when we were chipping and sanding the bulkheads in preparation for re-painting. It was one of those endless jobs where, when you thought you were almost done, you would have to add another coat there, here, all over until everyone in the ten man boatswain's division knew every inch of the ship. Fast frigate? To me it had as much area to paint and clean as an aircraft carrier.

There were no exotic lands or strategic military maneuvers as far as I could see. The recruiter really played me for a sucker. The promised hull technician (welding) school never materialized. It wasn't until after I was on board ship that I discovered I had to earn my school by serving a year in the boatswains division. Some "Navy Adventure." It was more like a nightmare.

I stared out the bus window on the way into Norfolk, where every bar had gangs from other ships and every woman was spoken for. I saw some cute buns in red pants and slid back the window to hoot, then sat back disgusted. It was a guy. There were always a lot of gay hustlers in military towns, that and hippie types who sold bogus drugs. The service seemed like the last chance for a lot of losers I thought; lonely, underachieving angry people, a lot like me. Alone or in groups, no amount of booze or drugs or sex could ever cover up the reality of our situation.

Seeing the beach ahead, I pulled the bell-cord. The bus stopped with a whoosh as I thanked the driver and hopped off, nearly slipping on the sand covered asphalt. Muffled by the beach and a row of small houses nearby, the waves thundered in like my anger and retreated softly like the mellow person I wanted to be. I went to a nearby liquor store and bought two burritos, a fifth of Bacardi and a half-gallon of Pepsi to go with it. The Oriental clerk gave me a knowing nod and I raised my eyebrows in return, happy I'd be partying soon. As I walked to the beach, I cradled the bag in the crook of my arm while I tore the wrappers off the burritos and gobbled them down.

Soon sloshing through the sand, I plopped down, opened the bottles and gave chase. First with Bacardi then with Pepsi, and kept going until the warm glow in my stomach and face permeated my body. I watched the waves for a while. They seemed pretty peaceful now. Then I lay back, inhaling the sweet salty air, so unlike the rusted oily stench of the ship. I stared at the clear blue sky, cozy in my Navy peacoat, and drifted off to sleep.

I awakened suddenly to a loud scream and sat up fast to see it was only a pelican flying by. I rose unsteadily, put my half-empty bottles back in the bag and tucked it under my arm. I weaved my way down the shore like a running back that just had his bell rung. Noticing a broken Budweiser bottle in my path, I picked it up and threw the bottle toward the sea, watching it glisten and spin to a quiet splash.

"Hey!"

I jumped and turned, She looked like some kind of homeless person. I approached her. "Hey, what!" I challenged.

She crossed her arms and looked at me playfully as my mouth dropped open. I was mesmerized by the tops of her breasts pushing up through her unbuttoned flannel shirt. "You shouldn't litter," she teased.

I stared. I mumbled, "Yo, you must be cold out here."

"Naw, I'm warm-blooded, and my room's close by."

She pointed with a flourish, showing off her long red nails. "Need a date sailor?" she laughed, "forty bucks."

On the way to the motel she told me her name was Caroline.

Though I was beside myself with lust, my nostrils flared with disdain at the peeling motel sign and its dim bulb. Her scuffed door had a crack in it along with a few imprints of people's knuckles. I got a little nervous. "You have jealous boyfriends or something?" She ignored me and ushered me inside. I looked over my shoulder as I went in and noted a manager sign on a door across from Caroline's room. She glanced away from me as I squinted at the peeling wallpaper and wrinkled my nose at the musty bed. I grabbed my bottle of Bacardi, took a healthy swig and put my forty dollars on the night table.

I gave Caroline a hug at the door and she grimaced. When I asked her what was wrong, she gave me a forced smile and told me she'd be around for a while. I made a small fuss over writing her address down on a matchbook cover, feeling foolish because I knew I'd never be back.

Walking to the bus stop, I remembered leaving my rum at the motel and didn't care. I was ready to go back to the ship. Soon the sense of wholeness that being with a woman always gave me started to fade, until it was just a thin shell of confidence being chipped away by self-doubt. I told myself I was a good man and wondered why my eyes watered.

The bus came. The driver looked at me poker-faced, probably thinking I was returning from unauthorized leave, I thought. Not many sailors came back to the base early on Friday night. I was still a little buzzed from the rum I drank a few hours ago, so I got off the bus a stop early and jogged the rest of the way to the base entrance to sober up for my fate aboard ship. Dizzy, I slowed down, gathered myself and flashed my military ID as I was waved by. I walked briskly back to the ship, anxious to get my next confrontation over with, but afraid all the same.

I scanned the decks for Block to no avail and strode up the creaky aluminum entry plank. My heart lifted a little because he was evidently gone for the weekend. The moment I said, "permission to come aboard," to the ensign, Block stepped out of the shadows by the forward missile launchers. Grateful he didn't

handcuff me, I followed him as he requested. Trying to look stoic while walking behind him, I considered jumping ship and going back to Norfolk. I was glad most of the crew had gone to town for the weekend, so they wouldn't see me lagging behind Block like a wimpy schoolboy. Holding my composure became more of a challenge as I began feeling woozy and tired stepping through hatch after hatch. We finally walked down the ladder to stop on the mess deck.

Block pointed toward the galley and spoke, "wash the pots and pans, I'll be on the mess deck with your next job. And Matthews, next time you get out of the brig, maybe you'll remember your not on a friggin' vacation."

The pots reached the low grease-stained ceiling of the galley. Most of them had burnt muck inside. I heard a noise by the serving trays outside and saw Block peeping at me through the serving windows. I waved and he turned away sour-faced. I turned the hot water on, then the cold, and scrubbed a pot half-heartedly with a crusty brillo pad while the sink filled with warm water. I stared at the huge rancid pile of pots and pans and thought of the cook, probably being told to burn the last of the potatoes or eggs or bacon drippings. Screw this, I thought.

Then another more twisted thought worked its way into my mind. I glanced around for Block, opened one of the utensil drawers and grabbed a knife. I drew it lightly across my wrist and examined the scratch, silently daring Block to stop me. I applied more pressure during the next cut and drew blood. Not satisfied by the slow oozing, I held the knife tightly and cut deeper. The blood began to drip from my wrist into the sink at a steady rate and turned the dish water pink. Then I grimly slashed my other wrist.

The wound throbbed and stung as I stretched my arms out before me. I stepped from the galley dripping a trail of blood across the worn linoleum floor to where Block sat reading. A small puddle reached his shoes by the time he lowered his magazine to address me. Block stood abruptly, dropping the copy of *Field and Stream*, and knocking over his chair. I wasn't sure what to expect and was relieved when he ran to the first-aid cabinet like a scared train porter in a Three Stooges movie. I stared down at my bloody wrists. Starting to sway on the balls of my feet, I hugged myself to slow the bleeding and leaned against the bulkhead.