

SHOOT ME

WHEN I was eighteen years old I almost killed a man. It would have been a “hunting accident,” but looking back I can say it would have been less an accident than manslaughter. Though I’m as pro-gun-control as you can be, I happen to have a Sharpshooters badge from the NRA. When I was twelve, my Dad, who was a sergeant in the U.S. Army, used to take me to the rifle range. There, over the space of a few months, I worked myself up from a Marksman’s badge in small-bore target rifle to Sharpshooter. God, I loved shooting. And when I was seventeen and could legally go out hunting on my own, I shot up everything in sight.

If you’ve read Flaubert’s *Legend of Saint Julian the Hospitaller*, you’ll know that in the first part, Julian is a maniacal hunter. He runs through the forest killing everything in sight. I was like that. My license might allow me to shoot only squirrels, pheasants, doves, or geese, but that didn’t stop me from shooting muskrats, groundhogs, and even robins, bluejays, and every other bird in range. I seldom missed.

One day I was roaming through dense woods and saw a cardinal. I’d shot more than a few that year. I loved to see all those blood red feathers exploding. Only this time, no explosion. From behind a tree came a tall man in a red cap and military fatigues, carrying a hunter’s bow. As he came straight for me, dropping his bow and lifting his quiver over his head and dropping it, his face was almost as red as

his cap. He punched me right in the nose, breaking it and decking me, then grabbed my .22/410 gage over-under, broke it open and dumped out the shells, then flung it by the barrel against a big tree, shattering the stock. Then he leaned over me and took off his cap. He stuffed it in my face, his finger poking through the top. There was no button. Then he drew his finger across his scalp, showed it to me, then wiped the blood on my forehead. He reared back his right leg as if to kick me, then he stopped, said, "You stupid little fucker." I thought he was done; instead he got on his knees and straddled my chest, pinning my arms. As he pounded my face, I begged him to stop. I was totally helpless, but suddenly, after I said, "Please, mister, it was an accident," he stopped and asked my name. I told him, and he got off me and stood up, looking down at me and shaking his head. It was as if he'd worn himself out beating me. Then he charged off, picking up his weapons, as though looking for someone else to pummel. His bloodlust had been even worse than mine.

He had busted my right cheek, knocked out one of my front teeth, and fractured my collar bone. I passed out.

Of course, the guy knew my Dad, and as soon as he could reach a phone called the police, then Dad to warn him that the police would be there soon. He described exactly where I was probably still lying in the woods. Dad and the police found me still unconscious and took me to the hospital. I was released three hours later with a neck brace and my arm in a sling.

"You could have destroyed your entire family, you foolish bastard!" Dad yelled at me.

Instead of taking me home, Dad took me to the police station where I was arrested and charged with reckless endangerment. I spent the night in jail. The guy in the next cell had stabbed his girlfriend with a screwdriver. He kept humming the tune to Neil Young's "Down By the River". He scared the hell out of me.

The next day, while I was still in bed, an officer came in, yanked my blanket off and yelled, "Get the fuck up!" Then he took me into

a room with a table, three chairs, and no windows. Expecting an officer or detective to come in, I was shocked when my Dad came in with my victim.

Dad sat down and said, "This is Fire Chief James Wiley. He's the man you shot yesterday."

"I'm sorry," I said in a whisper, as he sat down. "It was incredibly stupid and careless of me."

"Your father promises to have me arrested for assault and battery if I continue to press charges, so I'm letting it drop."

"I don't understand," I said, wondering why I was still there.

"I want you to say, 'With a razor in my hand,'" said the fire chief.

"What? Why?"

"We'll see. Go on."

I hesitated, looking at my Dad. He said, "Say it, damnit."

"With a razor in my hand."

"Again."

"With a razor in my hand."

"I think it was him," the fire chief said to my father. "When he was asking me to stop hitting him, I was pretty sure then."

"Go on," said my Dad, pointing at me.

"Did you call me this spring?"

"What?"

"Did you dial seven sevens in the middle of the night back in the spring?"

"Yes," I answered and put my head down on the table. He'd obviously told my Dad the whole story.

CLOSE CALL

I sit in my Dad's den, sneakered feet up on an ancient cobbler's table with shortened legs, sipping my fourteenth beer of the day. An hour earlier, I had been tackled in a driveway by a senior classman and kicked in the head by his young brother after I'd cursed at

their father in his own home after having crashed the party to celebrate the man's retirement from the Army Reserves. I had started a shouting match because both boys thought themselves better than me because my Dad was only an electrician and theirs was a lawyer.

It's one AM. I settle the bruise on the back of my head gently into the corduroy sofa, pick up the phone and dial 777-7777. Someone picks up after the first ring.

"Hello?" A man's voice.

I don't answer.

"Hello, who's there?"

I wait for the man to hang up.

"I know someone's there. I can hear your breathing. Is it you, Clare? If it's you, Clare, I'm okay. You can talk to me now. Clare?"

I can tell he is getting increasingly emotional.

I still say nothing.

"Oh," he says, realizing it isn't Clare.

"Whoever this is, it's okay."

I can't believe the guy won't hang up.

"Are you in some kind of trouble?"

Finally, I say, "Why don't you just hang up?"

"Why didn't you?"

"Most people would have hung up."

"Probably." Now there is some exasperation. "Who is this?"

"Me. Sitting here with a razor in my hand."

"Yes?"

"I'm wondering whether I should use it on my wrists."

With my thumb, I work the softened label off the glass of the beer bottle.

"Why would you even think of doing that?"

"Does that make any difference?" I say with a short laugh.

"I don't understand."

"Everybody's got reasons to do it, don't they? Doesn't everyone have at least one damned good reason?"

"Reasons, maybe, but not one good enough. Tell me what's the problem."

"I've got this razor."

"You said that."

"I could draw a bath. They say it makes it easier. A nice hot bath and you don't feel much. And with the lights off."

"Messier, too."

I laugh again, briefly.

"Give me one reason, even a bad one, for not doing it."

"Let me ask you a couple questions, okay?"

"Sure."

"Are you sick?"

"No, but that's not..."

"Say just yes or no. Are you poor?"

"No, but we're not rich, if..."

"Please. Do you have parents?"

"A father."

"Do you like him?"

"Most of the time."

"Does he treat you badly?"

"I suppose not. What do you mean 'badly'?"

"Do you have friends?"

"Some."

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"No!" I say, angrily.

"I see." His voice now gentle, thoughtful. "Now let me tell you something. Do you know what leukemia is?"

"I've heard of it."

"Do you know what it is?"

"Some kind of cancer, right?"

"It's my blood. It's rotten. It's turning bad like spilt milk."

Neither of us speaks for a minute.

"Who is Clare?"

“Clare is my wife. She doesn’t want to be with me right now. She’s at her mother’s.”

“Isn’t there anybody there with you?”

“Just me. I’m still here. I say that to the mirror every morning. ‘I’m still here.’”

Another pause.

I whisper, “I think I should go to bed. I’m really drunk.”

“I could tell. I think sleep is a good plan.”

“Were you asleep?” I have to ask.

“I don’t sleep much anymore. I don’t want to miss anything.”

“Like this call.”

“You got it.”

“What’s your name?”

“I’m Fire...no. On second thought, I don’t think I should say.”

“Do you want me to call again?”

“If you need to.”

“You hang in there.”

“You too.”

“I hope your wife comes back soon.”

“Me, too.”

“I don’t really have a razor,” I add softly.

“I know. Maybe I don’t really have leukemia.”

I listen—his breathing is soft and measured, not a trace of excitement. I decide I don’t want to know the truth that just one more question is likely to uncover. Then he hangs up.

I lifted my head up from the table and said, “So that was you.”

“And that was you,” he replied.

“What is wrong with you!” shouted my Dad.

The fire chief held up his hand. “It’s okay.”

“Are you still sick?” I asked.

“I’m in remission, for now.”

“Did your wife come back?”

“The next day, actually, after I told her some crazy teenager had called me. I was very upset.”

My Dad got up and said, “Let’s go home.”

The fire chief looked at him and said, “I would have dropped the charges anyway. It was an accident.”

“A damned stupid accident,” said my Dad, raising his voice.

“Can’t argue with that,” said the fire chief as both of us stood up.

I put out my hand and we shook, as I said, “Really, I am sorry. About everything.”

“You’re a strange one, I’ll give you that,” he said, turning toward the door.

“Not the word I’d use,” said my Dad.

“Understood,” he said, grinning at him.

I couldn’t hold my tongue. “Can I ask you one question?”

He turned back and we looked at each other. “Did it make it better or worse that night?”

He turned to my Dad and said, “Believe it or not, it was a blessing.”

BALL

*“Ah, what a beautiful ball that is; red and round as an everywhere.
Good, that you created it. Wonder if it comes when one calls?”*

—Rainer Maria Rilke

THE sheer fabric of physical impossibility billows like a blood-red balloon in the flickering dawn. We grow stupid and credulous in the hot, thick air, at the heights few riders reach. Under the obvious lamp of noon, we land with a bump and laugh at what was only an effect of lighting, after all.

What then gave more than it took? A gray ball the size of sponge rubber ball children toss about. It took my happiness—what there was of it—and nearly took my life.

And who was Randolph N. Domegas? He was nobody. He gave me the ball.

Any effective priest commands at will a demeanor of stern entreaty, to quell the dying man’s blasphemies, to shame the drunkard’s pummeling of his wife, or to chide his parish’s neglect of the collection plate. Randolph N. Domegas was this way with everyone at our company. He drew apologies from people like juice from lemons.

In simple conversation he was unequalled by anyone I ever saw in a pulpit. Sin, taxes, politics, wages, the World Series, women’s deodorants, all took on eschatological proportions. Nothing escaped his censure. One never took a stand in disagreement, and Heaven help the secretary who broached the subject of her boyfriend. Yet, in more ways than one, he held the lowest position in the company structure. Domegas was our record keeper.

Domegas wore the same chalk-streaked black wool suit summer

and winter and the same yellowed linen shirt every day. His huge, scarred face resembled a rumpled pillow and always bore razor cuts and tiny streaks of dark blood. His white hair flew in all directions. His black eyes glared from pinched watery sockets. The secretaries called him “the Deacon” behind his back, innocent of the irony. Through the wires of his record-keeper’s cage he grimaced incessantly, puffed and blew, a gorilla performing for the Sunday crowd.

Why was he tolerated? In the basement, behind Domegas’ screened counter, endless and labyrinthine rows of floor-to-ceiling steel shelving held every word, photograph, and bit of statistical data prepared for every client of our firm throughout its hundred-year history. Domegas knew where every piece of paper, cardboard and acetate lay. He knew, and no one else. His filing system was so hopelessly chaotic that without Domegas to decode it the contents of those myriad shelves were as accessible as the lost library of a dead culture with a forgotten language.

If Domegas didn’t like you, if just the tone with which you asked for something was not to his liking, he would say, smiling stiffly, “That’s not possible today. Come back when you can be more pleasant.” There was nothing else one could do.

Watching all of this for several years with mounting fascination, I derived much satisfaction from the company’s ongoing mistreatment of its workforce being in this one instance turned against itself. Even the company president was scared of Domegas. Unlike everyone else—everyone—Domegas was not expendable.

“Why don’t you just fire him and have the files done properly?” I once asked a young vice president—bright red hair, ambitious, cut-throat.

“It’s been proposed, of course,” he explained, wincing so that I guessed he himself had made the suggestion. “We made a study of the difficulty of such a massive re-organization. Time, not money, is the problem. We calculated that it would take more than five years in total man-hours. Putting the entire clerical staff to the task, that

amounted to roughly two months during which the files would be virtually useless. Lord help us the day that pompous old fart dies.”

I assumed his having brought attention to the hopelessness of the situation—offering no workable solution—had done nothing to strengthen his position with the senior staff.

“Who let him run amok in the first place?”

“Nobody knows. It sure wasn’t me!” he whined. “Most likely nobody let him. No one even knows how long he’s been around, screwing things up. He won’t let anyone see his employment records, and there’s not a soul here who remembers when he was hired.”

I was about to suggest that they offer him money when the vice president swore with exasperation and stomped off.

So what was Domegas’ secret?

At first, I thought, an amazing example of applied mnemonics: a distribution of materials so cleverly devised that to Domegas, the immense jumble of information, appearing as so much confusion to anyone else, read like the pure logic of a recondite equation to an Einstein.

“How do you remember the whereabouts of everything so infallibly?” I asked him one day, poking my forefinger between the thin wires. “It is extraordinary. Some form of mnemonics, perhaps?”

I threw out the word, looking for the knowing smile.

“What’s that?” the old man grumbled, “What are you jabbering about?”

“Recall by association,” I defined.

“No!” he boomed his favorite word. But I thought I saw a twinkle in his eyes. Thinking I was close, I persisted.

“Then it must be photographic, or eidetic memory. Your mind takes a perfect or near perfect picture of that mess, such that it doesn’t much matter where things are, your recall being total.”

I was quoting from a book I’d been reading.

“No,” he said again, more menacingly. “What in hell do you think this is, public entertainment? I just do my job the best I know how.