

New Fiction from Roz Wiggins: “Lucky”



I.

Under a ceiling topped by swirling fans and surrounded by walls whose windows had no glass, the Private lay on the bed like a slab of stone as hands went about the routine tasks that evidenced that, despite all probability, he was still alive, even if no longer whole. The hands stuck a thermometer in the Private's mouth, which opened instinctively, and fastened a cuff around his bicep, then inflated it with a *whoosh, whoosh*. The hands searched his wrist for a pulse, and paused a while when it found one. They patted and tugged at the bandages that covered his pelvis and thighs, not in an intruding manner but with inquiry, before retrieving the

thermometer from between his lips.

The hands were soft and delicate with smooth short fingers and nails that occasionally scraped the Private's skin. Sometimes, before leaving him, one of the hands would rest gently for a few minutes on the mound of bandages that encased the Private's face. Then the soft hand would seek out that small square of his cheek that had been left uncovered like a forlorn orphan. The fingers would stroke the Private's cheek as if to convey to him that they knew he still existed, that he still was there, somewhere under the mountain of gauze and adhesive and plaster.

Several times a week there were other hands, meaty and calloused, that would grasp the Private and roll and lift him on and off a bedpan. Other times they would lift him onto a gurney and set him aside while they changed the bedsheets stained with the blood and slime that oozed from his wounds or and with urine and shit when he had gone without the pan being under him. The strong hands would wipe along the exposed parts of his body with deliberation and efficiency, but with no more tenderness than if he was a tub that needed scrubbing. While he was set aside, they would change the sheets and then lift him roughly and return him, like an item being restocked, to his place in the middle of a bed smelling of bleach.

These things were happening to the Private in the dark silent space that he had come to inhabit ever since the day he had been on a hill in Kaesong with Randall. One minute they were trudging up the slope same as any other day, then there was a click—just a low barely audible sound, like snapping with butter on your fingers—and he had been thrown into the dark silent void.

Sleep came and went for the Private in the dark space, but there was no rest. Sometimes in the void, the Private smelled his Momma's buttermilk biscuits baking in the oven or his Pops' corncob pipe rich with his special blend of tobacco that

he made from the first leaves of the harvest, which he reserved for himself and cured with slices of apple or pear until it had a sweet intoxicating aroma. And when the void seemed too deep and so dark that the Private was sure he might never leave, the musky scent of sweat that rose from Marren's cleavage just after she came held him from the abyss. All through basic training at Fort Jackson, all during the long trip to Kaesong, and the stops at places with names he could hardly pronounce or remember, and then, even into the darkness, he had remembered lying beside Marren after they'd gone at it like a couple of rabbits in heat. He would close his eyes and suddenly he would be beside her watching her ample chest heave and inhaling her special scent.

The Private hoped that maybe one day he would have enough strength to leave the dark void. He was willing to go to Hell and back just so he could bury his soul in Marren's plump soft breasts until the light came again.

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One day the Private heard a woman's voice singing "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound," and it was like the voice of an angel because it had been a very long time since he had heard anything at all.

And then there were other voices—the fast, accented repartee that went along with the meaty calloused hands that lifted the Private on and off a pan several times a day and instructed him to piss or shit, which the Private sometimes did, and sometimes didn't. When he didn't, the meaty calloused hands were accompanied by foreign curses.

Most of the time what filtered through the Private's dark void was a general chattering and a low dirge of constant moaning. But from time to time, he would hear a car horn or a scratchy radio station, and all too often a nightmarish wail. Nighttime in the ward brought the low hum of the man who mopped down the

floors with a strong ammonia odor that whipped across the Private's nose when the man splashed the mop under his bed. Then, the man's melodic self-serenade floated over to the Private like a jazz riff demanding to be heard.

Less frequently, other voices came; deep and authoritative, they invariably sounded irritated as big words flowed out. These voices were accompanied by the ruffle of papers, unanswered inquiries put to the Private, hurried questions to the singing voice, a few pokes and prods and occasionally the splat of a dropped metal chart.

"Now keep your eyes closed," one of the deep voices said one day as it unwound the bandage that had been tight around the Private's head and eyes. "The glare may hurt at first, but you will get used to it. You won't notice at first that the one is not there but eventually you will realize that you have a restricted view."

The Private struggled to open his eye lids against the crusty muck that had built up across them and the tears that flowed without effort. He finally succeeded with the help of a warm cloth pressed to his face. After a minute, he saw a midget of a man with very hairy eyebrows looking back at him. The doctor stretched to shine a small flashlight into Private's remaining eye and squinted through another instrument causing his eyebrows to move like fuzzy caterpillars.

"How's it look, Private?" said the doctor. "Looks pretty good to me."

The Private didn't say anything because he didn't know what to say. Didn't the doctor know that at that moment anything, everything, *looked* good to him?

"There's some shrapnel in your eye, but it's too risky to try and remove it. You're lucky that it's not worse. Over time your vision may worsen as it moves around. Can't say how long before you notice a difference. Could be years, could be a

decade. But it's just too risky to try and get at it."

The midget doctor continued with his detailed explanation. He was an animated fellow and his face and caterpillar eyebrows bounced up and down as he looked at the chart then back at the Private throwing out words that pained the Private's still recovering ears.

In response, the Private looked all around the ward trying to figure out just what he could see, and what he could no longer see, now that he was a one-eyed jack. The room's lights cast an irritating glare that stung like a lightning bolt. It caused him to keep closing his eye even though that was the last thing he wanted to do.

The Private heard the singing voice approach and turned to face a petite woman the color of toast, not Negro Colored like him, but different with a generous length of wavy black hair that fell down her back like a fine mule's tail and almond shaped eyes, very pretty.

"Good to have you back among the seeing, Private," the singing nurse said patting him gently on the arm. The Private looked down and saw the smooth delicate fingers that he had previously only felt.

"Maybe now, we can get you to say something too?" the nurse teased.

The Private watched the nurse with the singing voice as she cleaned up the spent bandages and scissors and returned the metal chart to the foot of his bed. She arranged his sheets and fluffed his pillows. Pausing by the head of the Private's bed when she'd finished, she smiled down at him. The smooth square of his cheek that had not been covered by bandages now lay in what would have passed more for a plate of raw hamburger than a face; red and craterous.

"I guess you'll just talk when you're good and ready, and not

before," she said squeezing gently his hand that swallowed hers.

Once the singing nurse had left, the Private raised himself up the little bit he could; and saw what he had before only felt, the bulkiness of a cast that started under his armpits and ran down the length of his torso. He gingerly lifted the sheet and saw other bandages, great white mounds that were fitted uncomfortably around him like a diaper (but open in the middle), and which spread down his right leg, devouring his knee but not his calf. His breath quickened at the sight and he hurriedly dropped the sheet letting it hide the mess he had become.

Later, when the Private felt that he had to pee, he wasn't on the pan and the men with the calloused hands were long gone. They had told him someone would come if he called. But he didn't. Maybe he wasn't thinking clearly. Maybe he was so messed up from the torrent of drugs that they were giving him to dull the incessant pain that he didn't know what he was doing. But some part of his brain told him that a man did not piss lying down flat on his back. So, he was determined to try.

The Private struggled out of the bed and onto his feet. It was rough going because the body cast did not allow him to bend. But he managed to get his feet to the floor and to grab hold of a chair that they had planted beside his bed. Placing all his weight on to it, he proceeded slowly like a bruised leviathan, stopping every few feet as he crept towards the light that signaled the bathroom.

At the bathroom door the Private stopped to heave breath into his lungs, exhausted. His atrophied muscles were overwhelmed by the effort and the weight of the cast. He almost hadn't made it the twenty feet. He backed into the bathroom pushing the door with his ample body weight. He reeled and almost lost his footing from the harsh storm of whiteness that assaulted

him. Glare from the fluorescent lights bounced off the white tile that covered the floor and crawled up the walls, where it met white paint. Along one wall were a long porcelain trough and a row of sinks, all white and shiny. The Private turned the other way, towards the stalls, barely seeing through his half closed eye. It was not the manliest approach, but he needed to sit. Suddenly, a blurry image in one of the mirrors above the sinks caught his attention. He had thought he was alone. Out of instinct, despite the pressure in his bladder, he shuffled closer to it and as he did, the image multiplied into the neighboring mirrors. He rested a hand on the sink below him and leaned into meet the image, trying to make sense of it, and gasped. Then he lost his grip on the sink, and then the chair started to slide away from him. In the next instant, just as he lost his footing, and right before the floor became stained with his urine, his consciousness also fled as he realized that the horrific one-eyed monstrosity squinting back at him from the mirrors was, of course, him.

II.

It had been a crisp sunny day when the Private and Randall had started on the recon mission shoulder to shoulder, slowly winding their way up a craggily path on the side of a foothill that had been used by local farmers and their goats for centuries. The hill ringed their main target, the Hook, the bigger mountain in the distance outside Kaesong where the Communists were taking a stand even though they had heard solid rumors that a ceasefire would happen any day. where Movement on the backside of the hillock had been reported and the Private and Randall were just going up to scout the area. It was to be just a quick reconnoiter mission and back down to report. They hadn't even been told to expect mines.

About half-way up the path narrowed, and Randall took the lead. A few minutes later, the Private bent to tie his boot

and Randall got ahead of him. When the Private heard the click, he instinctively looked up and reached out to Randall, but only grabbed air. Randall turn towards him as if in slow motion and mouthed the words, "Oh Shit!" Then, the Private saw Randall explode, his arms and legs flying in different directions, a bloody burnt hole where his chest used to be. In the next instant he saw that Randall had no more mouth, no more head; there was no more Randall. There was just a mass of bloody slime where he had been and then the Private felt that bloody slime all over his face and body and felt it choking him, and felt a thousand pieces of shrapnel and rocks cut into him like a storm of bees. He flailed about and screamed trying to escape but it propelled him to the ground and then into the dark space where he couldn't see, couldn't hear, and couldn't think or move.

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The Private had liked Kirby Randall, a gangly white boy from Minneapolis, Minnesota with enough height, at six foot five, to look him in the eye when most other men of any age or persuasion couldn't . Randall would hang out with the Colored soldiers, drinking beers and listening to their special brand of foolishness that was so new to him. None of the other white boys hung out with them in Mr. Truman's newly-integrated army.

Before Randall, no white boy had ever walked right up to the Private and offered him his hand like he too was white as rice, not in his whole seventeen years of living. But that's just what Randall had done when he had first entered the barracks in Fort Jackson and saw the Private rearranging his army-issued supplies in his footlocker next to the only open bunk on account that there was sure to be an inspection that afternoon. Even though they were in South Carolina where folks just didn't do that kind of thing, Randall had done so like he didn't know no better. Right then, the Private had said to himself maybe this army gig was going to be all right after all, if he could just manage to stay alive.

After a few weeks, the Private had come to believe that the real reason Randall acted like no other white man he had ever met was that Randall just didn't much care for the south's special brand of divisiveness. He hadn't known any Colored folk in Minneapolis, but his parents had been committed Lutherans who taught him to honor the dignity of all men since they were all God's creatures. So, much to the chagrin of most of the other white soldiers, Randall treated the Private and the other Colored soldiers like they too were human and like he might one day soon need to rely on one of them to save his neck.

III.

The Army patched the Private up. The eye doctor returned bearing a replacement made of glass that filled the caved-in socket on the right side of the Private's face. They sent another doctor for his hearing who shouted that there was not much that could be done there. Likewise, for the discolored blur resembling raw hamburger that now was the right side of his face. They said that it would just take time. Shrapnel was like a million little red hot daggers; it makes a mess. In time they would know how much more they might be able to do for him.

The next doctor was the one who carved patches of skin from the Private's buttocks and thighs and grafted them onto his torso to close up deep rips in his skin the exploding mine had left. He chatted away at the Private like he was a tailor who routinely applying patches to the elbow of a coat.

And then the Army sent a doctor who removed the Private's diaper bandage and pronounced that he was still a man after all.

"It could've been worse", said the doctor while casually tapping the Private's thigh with the little metal instrument

that he had used to lift his penis and examine the underside while straddling a small wheeled stool in front of the examination table. The room was cold and the Private felt colder down there without the bandage diaper.

"You're a lucky boy. You are," the doctor went on. "We've seen much worse."

The Private didn't respond as the doctor lifted his Johnson, moved him about, and then scribbled notes on his chart. Instead, he ignored this doctor whose teeth flared out like a mule's and were way too close to where they were never supposed to be. He focused his one eye on the rows of bottles filled with colorful pills inside the cabinet on the wall behind the doctor. The doctor scooted back his wheeled stool and stood up, checking his notes and nodding in that way that indicated that he was satisfied with the job he had done.

"Here's the deal, Private," he said while loudly snapping off his rubber gloves. "You took a bad hit down there, lucky to still have it, you are. But there was lots of shrapnel. We did the best we could. Had to take one of your testicles; it was just shredded, a damned mess. But we managed to save the other one. The swelling and discoloration you see, that should go away over time."

The doctor paused and waited for the Private's response but the Private was trying to ignore the chill on his Johnson and was desperately taking inventory of how many bottles in the cabinet on the far wall held the all green capsules and how many held the half-orange, half-blue ones. He wondered what they were for and just how many of each, separately, or in combination, he would have to take to die.

"Private, I know this is hard," the doctor continued. He moved closer and laid a hand on the Private's shoulder and the Private realized that the mule teeth came with sour breath. "But you need to understand what's what, so I'm going to give

it to you straight," the doctor continued "It could've been a lot worse."

Maybe, the Private thought, if he just swallowed a handful of each color, that would be enough. It would be a coward's way to die, the way a woman would take her life. He wished he had his pistol. One shot to the head and all this talk about whether he was or was not a man would end. But they must have taken his pistol so here he was contemplating the pussy way out. He'd just take the whole bottle, that should be enough to do the job.

"Once the swelling goes away, you should be able to go at it. Even with just one testicle, you should be able to get an erection and ejaculate," the mule teeth and sour breath droned on. "It might take a while for you to get your confidence back, that happens, the body has to remember. But physically you should be OK. Remember that... I gotta be honest though, son, your sperm count, it's just not there. . . But you never know, Private, these things sometimes work themselves out. You have fun trying. With your luck, you just might be OK. It could've been a lot worse."

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They said the same thing again and again at every hospital over the next two years. The Private came to believe that it was something doctors were taught to say no matter how bad the injury—Tell the patient it could have been worse. The Private wondered—How? Lose two eyes. Have half his face blown completely away instead of being roasted and riddled by a storm of red hot shrapnel? Lose a leg? An arm? One of each? Loose both testicles and end up a total freak? How could it have mattered anymore?

They said it to him in Guam, Hawaii, San Francisco, Kentucky and Virginia—"You're a lucky boy. You are. We've seen much worse."

The Private had never believed them. Their words had never held one ounce of comfort for him. He had never reconciled to this luck that everyone spoke of. He was nineteen. He'd been in the Army just eight months and in country only thirty three days, and just days before the whole damned shebang was over, his life had been torn apart. Some fucking luck!

IV.

The Army sent him home, back to the tobacco farm he loved and loathed because it was home and because his family had worked it for a white man for generations, something he'd vowed never to do, which was why he had enlisted in the damned Army in the first place. His ten younger brothers and sisters acted skittish around him, even though his mother, who had given him his stature, kept telling everyone to stop being foolish. She insisted that he was the same boy who had gone away; the same giant manchild who could wring a chicken's neck by the time he was seven, hand as many rows of tobacco as she by thirteen, and consume half a dozen of her buttermilk biscuits nonstop. She would not admit the truth to herself, even as she slathered fatback on his mottled patched skin and calmed her littlest ones when his screams in the night woke them.

But his father did. And this small man, from whom the Private got his redbone coloring and his fierce wanting for more, this man with a frame made smaller from years of bending to the tobacco plants and hands grizzled from tussling with the red earth and wrenching a life from pure adversity, he knew immediately that his first-born had left a great deal on that hill in Ko-re-a. He would load his giant of a son onto a wagon hitched to a tractor or a mule and drive him out to the backfield where the constant acres of cash crop finally broke and a kitchen garden bloomed.

In these alone moments, the Private's father would roll

cigarettes with his special tobacco and they'd take long drags as the cicadas sang their forlorn song and the bees violated one flower after another with impunity. In the shade provided by the full leafy crowns of the clustered trees, with the air swathed in the sweet aroma of the tobacco, the father would go to work.

"Son," his pops would say, " You got to talk about it sometime. You got to get it out of you." He'd pull a long drag on his cigarette before continuing. "I'm not saying you can make the memories go away. Cain't no amount of talking make something like that go away. But you needs to talk about it, to get some of it out, or it will just become a big pile of rot inside of you. It will rot *you* if you don't get it out."

The father would let his words sit with his son as he wandered back among the garden rows to find the perfect melon. He would quarter the cantaloupe, scoop out the web of seeds and hand the fleshy orange quarter-moon to his son. Under the cool of the elms, away from the blazing sun and everyone, they would slurp mouthfuls of the delicate fruit with gusto, wiping their mouths with the back of their hands. And eventually, the father would listen while the Private poured out some of the horror that was inside him. Then the father would hold his son as he shook with the dry crying that men do only when they can no longer stand the pain. It was his father who convinced the Private that life, though different, could still be worth living.

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V.

The first time the Private rode to town with his father, children started to cry at the sight of him and even adults shrank away. It didn't matter one bit that he was a war hero who'd been awarded a Purple Heart, that he had been injured fighting back the Communist hordes, protecting the American

way of life and keeping the world, their world, safe for Democracy. After that, the Private shrank into himself a little more and when his Momma hid his pills that kept the pain at bay, he tried to drown out the world with bourbon.

He waited for Marren to come see about him.

She was the only girl that the Private had stayed with for more than a couple of months after she'd let him go all the way. Even at sixteen she had a way of making a man believe that Heaven lay right between her size 38D breasts and plump but sturdy legs.

The Private had hooked up with her at the beginning of his junior year of high school and spent the Fall driving her around in his pick-up truck, which was a hideous green color and rusted around both front fenders. But that didn't matter to the Private. He had bought it for only one hundred dollars with the money that he made the prior summer washing dishes at a beachfront hotel in New Jersey with his cousin Ray-Ray. The Private had brought Marren RC Colas for months before she finally gave up her stuff after the Christmas social at the Shiloh Free Will Baptist Church.

By the next summer, when he left for the Army, the Private had made up his mind (but had not told Marren) that he would marry her when he got back. He thought that maybe they'd move north where his cousin Ray-Ray said he could get them even better jobs working indoors wearing uniforms and waiting tables; they could make tips in addition to a wage. But he'd grown impatient waiting for Ray-Ray to send word to him and joined the Army instead.

Marren didn't write to the Private while he was away. She wasn't good at words or writing, but that he forgave. The other stuff he could not.

He knew that Marren knew he was back as soon as he arrived. Everyone knew; it was a small, tight, community that prided

itself on caring for (and gossiping about) one another fervently. About a week after his return she had sent word to his house that she was sick, then, that she had to tend to her sick mother, and then, that she had to watch over her sick brother. Well over a month passed before the Private had his brother Odell, who was just fourteen months younger and whom folk often mistook for his twin, drove him over to her place because he just couldn't believe what he already knew to be true.

By then, the Private's face no longer looked like raw hamburger, but it didn't exactly look like a face either. The chickens scattered as Odell brought the truck to a stop under a crooked old oak tree whose long branches spread majestically to overhang the front porch thankfully shading most of the dusty yard. It had been scorching hot for the past few days and everybody was craving any little piece of shade.

Odell climbed down first and went around to help his brother out of the truck, but the Private gently pushed him off even though he had to stop every few minutes to steady himself, holding tightly to and leaning on the Moses-like staff his father had fashioned for him. He hobbled to the house and made the Herculean effort of climbing the two squat steps onto the porch, pausing to catch his breath before moving to the screen door that had seen better days and which was clearly losing the battle to the flies and mosquitoes that snuck through its many rips. He banged on the screen door, too loudly and too urgently because of the tremor in this hand, which he fought to control even as he desperately grasped his staff in the other.

"What y'all banging on my door like that for?" Marren said sashaying towards the door full on like he remembered her. She was wiping her hands on a dish towel head down as she came but paused midsentence when she looked up and saw him. She finished wiping her hands deliberately before tossing the towel aside and closing the distance between them.

“Heyyyy TJ, I heard you was back, “ she cooed smiling brashly from behind the screen door. She didn’t rush to give her big teddy bear baby a welcome back hug and kiss and press her soft body into his as had been their usual greeting when they’d spent any time apart.

“Been back over a month,” he mumbled. “Thought I’d a seen you before now.”

“Oh, you know how it is, folks getting sick. I’ve got to take care of them, she protested. “I didn’t want to come over there and bring all kinda germs on top of all that you got going on.” She narrowed her gaze and took a step backwards before looking him up and down, as if she could see just by looking at him all that he had going on. Satisfied, or unable to reach a conclusion, she started to fan herself with her hand. “Sure is hot today.”

“All that I got going on,” he replied with a half-hearted chuckle, “ain’t none of your germs going to make a difference.” He shifted his weight from one side to the other trying to keep the staff out of her view.

He saw that she’d put on a few pounds, which only made her curves more curvy. She wore a thin cotton dress, a slight, sleeveless number in a muted yellow with tiny red flowers all over. The dress had a deep “V” held together by four small white buttons that looked totally inadequate to the task of containing her glistening cleavage. It fell over her body perfectly, across her flat stomach and broad hips, ending at her calves.

“You look good Marren,” he said with as much of a smile as he could muster considering the scarred skin of his face, which at that moment felt like there were maggots crawling all over it. “How you been?”

“You know, been fine. I’m fine, about the same. This my last year; graduating in the spring. Class of 19-55!” She did a

quick twirl and raised her arms in celebration, before coming back to face him full of giggles.

“Yeah, that’s great. I knew you’d make it,” he said with a sigh. “Kind of wished I’d stayed and graduated.”

“Don’t you tell that lie, TJ,” she said sucking her teeth. “You been places, done things. You always wanted to go somewhere, and you did. TJ You’ve seen the world! Not many folks round here been to New Jersey and Ko-rea.”

She fanned her face and let out a few deep breaths. Then she rested her arms on top of her head. “It sure is hot as hell today.”

It was a habit of hers, unusual for a colored girl. They were usually so finicky about their hair, especially after pressing it with a hot comb. But Marren had just enough Cherokee on her father’s side, and enough gumption of her own, to make her auburn hair loose enough so that she didn’t bother with that. She stood winding her fingers in her thick braids and shifting her weight from one trunk-like leg to the other. The Private couldn’t help noticing that her arms had been bronzed a deep chestnut color by the sun and now gleamed with perspiration. He loved how the sun just kissed her all over glorifying her even more.

Each of her armpits sprouted a tuft of curly auburn hair and every time she lifted her arms they flashed a torturous musky scent at the Private. Every time she took a breath, her glistening cleavage threatened to pop the tiny buttons that barely contained it. Her nipples pushed at the thin cotton as if desperate to escape.

Without warning, she lowered her arms and leaned against the door-jamb. For the first time, she looked him full in the face and in the eye, “What was it like?”

He looked down at her and tried not to be too obvious about

sucking the sweltering air. For a long minute he couldn't bring himself to answer as the sweat ran down his temples and beaded up in his crotch and armpits. A bee buzzed at the screen door agitated that it couldn't find one of the tears to enter through and finally moved away.

As he stood there, the Private admitted to himself that he had never looked at Marren's eyes much before, but now he did. They were a warm brown, large and doe-like, surrounded by thick lashes and set deep in her beautiful dark face with its slightly broad nose and full lips. He saw genuine curiosity there in her eyes, but he was hoping for so much more.

He shifted his weight from one side to the other and then back again, and opened and closed his right hand to calm the tremor before speaking.

"It was war," he finally responded flatly, not wanting for a minute to sully her with even the slightest hint of what he had done and witnessed. "War is hell. Don't let nobody tell you different." He inhaled deeply, stopping himself from saying more and fighting the ache that was beginning to burn in his right side.

Marren crunched up her nose at his confession and twisted her mouth around as if tasting his words and considering what to make of them. "That's all?"

"I thought about you every day, every minute of the day," he blurted out. "I just wanted to stay alive to get back here to you. You kept me alive, Marren."

He poured out his heart to her, blabbering on through the screen. He stood there like an idiot and clutched his staff as if for dear life, no longer able to obscure its presence. He tried not to show how badly he hurt just standing there mustering every ounce of muscle strength to stay on his feet and still the tremor, so he didn't appear a spastic moron.

He knew he was losing the battle as he reached up with his trembling hand to wipe the sweat from his face. "I came back for you, I did." Spent, he lowered his head and took a few deep breaths inhaling her scent as she fidgeted and played in her hair. She bit her lip and started to speak a couple of times but managed nothing but fidgeting.

He waited, wishing for the courage to reach out, yank open the door and pull her towards him. He so wanted to sink to his knees and bury his face, scarred and mutilated as it was, in the sweat of her cleavage for one last time for one fresh memory of the feel of her to go along with the memories that had sustained him through those cold wet mountains in Korea and then the dark silent void of a dozen hospital beds.

But the strength eluded him as did the courage. What if he toppled over when he went to reach for the door? What if the door was latched? Which almost nobody did, but he couldn't be sure what all had changed in the three years that he'd been away. If he reached for the door he could miss and punch through the flimsy screen. And even if he did open the unlocked door and reach for her, would she recoil from him as so many did?

"I'm sorry," Marren said finally. She peeled herself from the door jamb with an audible sigh and began shifting her weight from one leg to the other, which he saw were just as bronzed as her arms, and which ended in bare feet whose stubby toes were painted a harlot's red.

"I missed you too, TJ. I really did, " she purred benevolently. "You was my first and some of the best loving I ever had." She closed her eyes for just a moment, and he saw her tongue slide absently across her full lips before she looked at him again. "Not that I got whorish since you left," she quickly added. "But I've grown up. I'm graduating. I'm a woman now, and I got to think of my future. . . .I just needs me a whole man."

The words, coming out of her succulent lips, out of that beautiful dark face that he knew so well and loved with all his being, cut into him like the storm of shrapnel that had attacked him on that hill in Kaesong. For a minute, he stopped breathing. Then he started coughing and he desperately, jerkily, fought to regain his breath while fighting not to lose his footing. After a moment that seemed like an eternity, some instinct of self-preservation gave him back his breath and compelled him to retreat. The color of auburn and the smell of seduction painfully blended into one and chased after him like a taunting demon.

The Private lumbered down the stairs like the rejected, defective soul that he was, tilting heavily. Odell rescued him as he started to shuffle across the dirt yard. He had waited just five minutes as their momma had instructed him before getting out of the truck and standing at the ready. Equal in stature, he caught his older brother's weight, and this time the Private did not resist as he bore him the remaining yards to the truck. As Odell reached for the truck's door handle, they heard the screen door screech open and slam shut. Looking back, they saw that Marren had now dared to venture beyond her threshold and was standing at the edge of the porch.

"You lucky, you know," she called after him, as if tossing a stray dog a bone. "You could've died over there. Don't know what yo Mama would've done if you'da died over there."

VI.

The encounter with Marren chilled the Private for a long time and almost knocked him back to the dark void. It made him remember the stink of human flesh exploding and suffocating him on a hill in Korea and hospital beds that he knew only by their feel. It made him struggle with the taste of a revolver,

steel mixed with bourbon and self-loathing. It made his momma order his ten siblings, from Odell down to three-year old Little Bit, to never leave him alone. And Little Bit, who had fearlessly taken to chasing the chickens around the dirt yard like a demon as soon as she could walk, took her instruction extremely seriously. She became her brother's anchor and his shadow. When he woke up, she would be perched on the edge of his bed staring at him. When he ate, she ate. When he headed out to the outhouse, he had to convince her that no, she could not come into the little shed, but had to wait outside until he returned.

Over time, the Private somehow managed to push the haunting thoughts that plagued him back to a far corner of his being. He knew he needed to stay out of the dark silent void. He knew with certainty, without knowing how he knew, that the next time he went there, it would be his coffin.

Eventually, he began to tell himself what his parents had been saying all along, that he wasn't dead. He could hear most things. He could see out of his one eye. Thanks to the Army plastic surgeons, his face looked less like raw hamburger as time passed. He didn't yet know if he could get a woman, but at least he still had most of his equipment so maybe he could, and maybe one day it would work properly again.

Little by little, day by day, the Private went on living. He limped around leaning heavily on his staff with Little Bit skipping beside him. And then he hobbled along without it. And then one day, after Marren and the Class of 19-55 had made their ceremonial walk down Shiloh's center aisle, with the whole community, except him, cheering, he shuffled down to his old school and asked the teacher to help him study for his diploma.

Mrs. Ruby Dee Jackson had received him with perturbation and reticence, rather than sympathy and enthusiasm. She had chastised him about going into the army in the first place.

She had even driven out to the farm to try to convince his parents to forbid him from enlisting.

“He should at least wait until he graduates,” she had plead. “A high school diploma is a valuable asset, especially for a Negro. TJ is a smart boy. He could make something of himself, if he applied himself.”

But he hadn't listened, and his parents had backed his decision.

Now, he spent hours listening to Mrs. Jackson, who had a face as plain as a paper sack but a mind as full as an encyclopedia, read him his lessons. She had graduated from Howard University in Washington D. C., and when she read to him the books and problems that he was to figure, her voice sounded like a news broadcast on the radio. His eye tired easily as he struggled to make out the words on a paper held an inch from his face and his damaged hearing was challenged to grasp the words as they tumbled out of her thin flat lips that she always colored in cherry red lipstick. But he persisted.

They spent months with her patiently repeating a passage or stopping to explain a word that produced in the Private (who despite her high opinion of him had never been more than the most average student) only a blank look of confusion or a frustrated pounding on the desk. But over time, he absorbed enough, and he finally became a high school graduate years after he had become a disabled veteran.

The day after he received his diploma, the Private counted his discharge pay and the money the Army had been sending him. It wasn't much in the big scheme of things, certainly not enough to compensate for all he had lost, maybe not much to somebody else, but it was something to him. The Private used some of the money to buy his parents the first Frigidaire they ever owned. And to show his gratitude, he bought Mrs. Jackson a

handkerchief on which he had her initials embroidered and a hat with a real ostrich feather sticking out of it that he sent for all the way from Raleigh. Mrs. Jackson burst out in laughter when he presented the hat to her and she caused quite a storm when she boldly stepped into the Shiloh Free Will Baptist Church with it perched on her head.

Mrs. Jackson told the Private about the G.I. Bill and how this time they were even letting Colored soldiers benefit too. She said that it could pay for him to go to college. He hooted at the thought, remembering the long painstaking hours it had taken for him to earn his diploma. "Don't tell me you want to spend your whole life reading my lessons to me."

Mrs. Jackson assured him that as much as she liked him, she had other plans for her life. But she also told him that he could get a job with the Veteran's Administration and a loan to buy a house. That got the Private's attention.

"Now you talking," he exclaimed, with one of his still infrequent grins. Since he was going to go on living, he would need a job. "Hell, that's why I joined up in the first place. So, I wouldn't have to hand tobacco for some white man all my life. Any job with the VA got to be better than that."

And why shouldn't he take advantage of all the VA could offer him, after all that he had been through? And as for the house, he hadn't thought much about it. But when he did, he wasn't thinking to live with his parents all his life. As far as he knew, none of his kin had ever owned any property; if there was a way that he could be the first, he might just have to do that too.

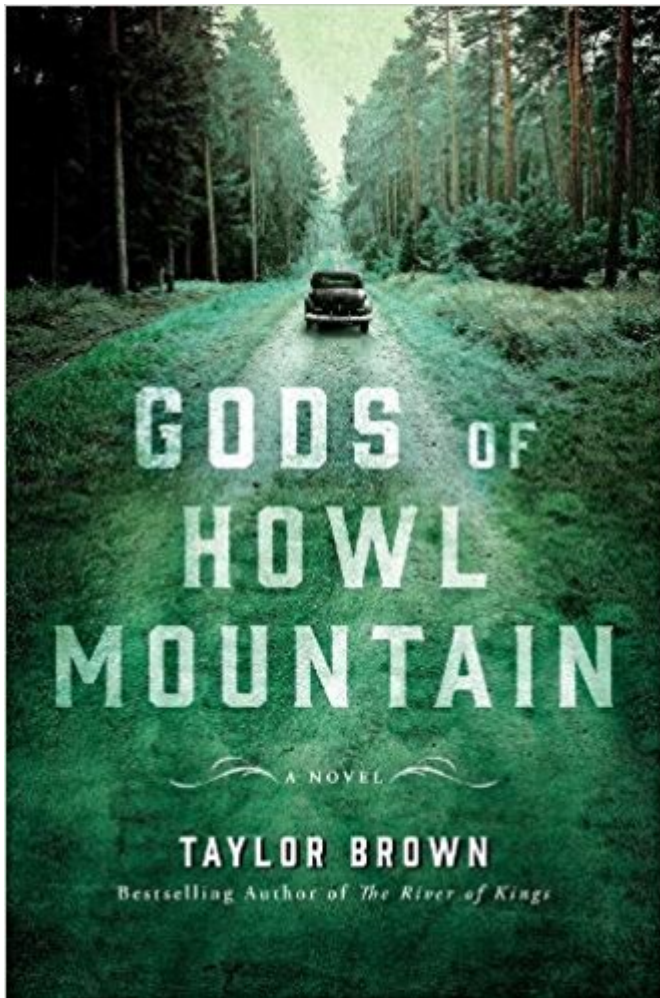
In the following months, as Mrs. Jackson and he worked through all the required forms and applications, the Private would often whisper to himself *-I'm alive. I'm going to go on living.* He said it to fix it in his mind and to firm up his resolve.

But there were moments, despite his new-found prospects, when waves of despair would bulldoze him. Some new insult from someone in town would compel him to go out to the back field to sit alone and eat cantaloupe fresh off the vine, his body and soul aching so much that he often vomited. Or he would masturbate for what seemed like an eternity, until his flaccid penis was raw, without relief, which even a river of bourbon could not provide. At such times, the Private's thoughts would roam back to that hill in Kaesong and to that day that had changed everything. He knew in his mind he was lucky to be alive; but often he didn't *feel* lucky. He could walk, but now his journey through life was an obstacle course paved with hot coals and barbs he had to navigate barefoot, scarred, half-blind and half-hearing, maybe always alone. He didn't even know if he was truly still a man.

At moments such as these, the Private would think that maybe Kirby Randall from Minneapolis, Minnesota was the lucky one. Randall, who was crazy about his mother and his Labrador Spike and who carried pictures of both in his fatigues, whom the Private had called friend and seen become a flying mess of bloody body parts the instant before his life changed forever, who had been granted the dignity of a body bag and a closed coffin in lieu of the best medical care the U.S. Army could provide—maybe Randall had been the lucky one.

Maybe.

New Fiction: Excerpt from Taylor Brown's *The Gods of Howl Mountain*



There was the stone pagoda, three-tiered, built on a small hill over a stream that shone like pebbled glass. The platoon had dammed a pool in the stream. They crouched in their skivvies, soaping and scrubbing the August grit from the creases and crannies of their bodies. Howitzers were perched on the hills around them, like guardian monsters. Still, the Marines washed quickly, feeling like prey without their steel helmets and green fatigues, their yellow canvas leggings that laced up at the sides. Their dog tags jingled at their necks, winking under the Korean sun.

Rory stood from the pool, feeling the cool water stream like a cloak from his form. His bare feet stood white-toed on the curved backs of the stones, eon-smoothed, so like the ones on the mountain of his home. He walked up the hill toward the accordion-roofed temple where they were billeted. He passed olive shirts and trousers drying on rocks and bushes, spread like the skins of killed beasts. The air felt full of teeth. Earlier that day, searching an abandoned village, they had taken sniper fire. Their first. They were Marines, but green. The whip-crack of the shots had flayed the outermost layer of courage from their backs; they were closer now to their bones.

A pair of stone lions guarded the entrance to the pagoda, lichen-clad beasts with square heads and heavy paws. "Foo dogs," the Marines called them. There was a nisei in their platoon, Sato, whose older brother had fought with the 442nd Infantry Regiment in World War II. All Japanese Americans.

"Komainu," he said. "Lion dogs. They ward off evil spirits." Someone had thrown his shirt over the head of one of the beasts. Rory pulled the garment away, so the creature could see. He stepped on into the temple. The air felt cool here, ancient, like the breath of a cave. The black ghosts of old fires haunted the sconces. The place smelled of incense and Lucky Strikes and nervous Marines. Their gear lined the walls. He had never been in a place this old. Granny was never one for churches—"godboxes," she called them—and those in the mountains seemed flimsy compared to this. Desperate cobblings of boards, some no more than brush arbors. But standing here alone, nearly naked at the heart of the temple, he felt armored in the stone of generations. Swaddled. No bullet could strike him here. No arrow of fear.

He wanted to remain in this place, so still and quiet amid the hills of guns. But a cold wind came whistling through the temple, lashing his back, and he remembered that fall was coming soon, for leaves and men. Blood so bright upon the sawtooth ranges, and the screaming that never stopped.

He could never forget.

Rory woke into the noon hour, his bedquilt kicked off, his body sweat-glazed despite the October bite. His lost foot throbbing, as if it were still attached to the bruised stump below his knee. He rose and quickly dressed. His bedroom window was fogged, the four panes glowing a faint gold. Paintings, unframed, covered one wall. Beasts of the field, fowls of the air—their bodies flaming with color where the sun touched them. They reminded him what day it was: Sunday. He scrubbed his armpits and washed his face, slicked his hair back and dabbed the hollow of his neck with the sting of Granny-made cologne. He donned a white shirt that buttoned to the neck, a narrow black tie, the bowler hat that had been his grandfather Anson's. He looked at his face in the mirror—it looked so old now, as if a whole decade had snuck under his skin in the night. The flesh was shiny beneath his eyes, like he'd been punched.

He was sitting on the porch, carving the mud from his boots, when Granny came out. She had a pie tin balanced in the crook of one arm.

"I can get that," he said, jumping up.

"I'm fifty-four years old. I ain't a god-damn invalid."

She sat primly in the beast of a car, straight-backed, as if she were riding atop a wagon. It was no stretch to imagine her riding shotgun on a Wells Fargo stagecoach, a short-barreled shotgun in her lap. She looked at him as he slid behind the wheel.

"You had the dreams again?"

"No," he lied.

"You need to take that tincture I made you."

"I have been."

"You been pouring it through that knothole in the floorboard. That's what you been doing."

Rory fired the engine, wondering how the woman could know the things she did.

In an hour they were down into tobacco country, square after square of mildly rolling fields passing on either side of them, the clay soil red as wounds among the trees. Giant rough-timbered curing barns floated atop the hills, like weathered arks, holding the brightleaf tobacco that would fill the white spears of cigarettes trucked all over the country. Chesterfields and Camels and Lucky Strikes. Pall Malls and Viceroys and Old Golds. The highway wound through Winston-Salem, where the twenty-one-floor Reynolds Building stood against the sky like a miniature Empire State. It was named after R. J. Reynolds, who rode into town aback a horse, reading the newspaper, and went on to invent the packaged cigarette, becoming the richest man in the state.

"They say it's the tallest building in the Carolinas," said Rory. Granny sucked her teeth, wearing the sneer she always did when forced to come down off the mountain.

"It ain't whale-shit compared to the height of my house, now is it?"

They passed Greensboro and Burlington, assemblies of giant mills, their smokestacks black-belching day and night, while beneath them sprang neat little cities with streetcars and straight-strung telephone lines. They passed Durham, home of Duke Power, which electrified most of the state, and then on into Raleigh, passing along the oak-shadowed roads as they wound upward toward the state asylum at Dix Hill. It was massive, a double-winged mountain of brownstone that overlooked the city, four stories high, the narrow windows stacked like medieval arrow slits. The center building

looked like something the Greeks had built, four giant columns holding up a triangular cornice, with a glassed rotunda on top.

They signed the paperwork and sat waiting. When the nurse came to fetch them, Rory went in first. His mother came light-footed across the visiting room floor, hardly a whisper from the soles of her white canvas shoes. She was like that, airy almost, like a breath of wind. She could be in the same room with you and you might not even know it. Her black hair was pulled behind her head, waist-long, shot through with long streaks of silver. Her skin ghost-white, as if she were made of light instead of meat. As if, squinting hard enough, you could see her bones.

“They treating you good?” Rory asked.

She nodded and took his hands. Her eyes shone so bright, seeing him, they ran holes in his heart. She said nothing. Never did. She was always a quiet girl, said Granny, living in a world her own. Touched, said some. Special. Then came the night of the Gaston killing, and she never spoke again. Rory had never heard her voice. He knew her smell, like coming rain, and the long V-shaped cords that made her neck. He knew the tiny creases at the corners of her eyes, the size of a hummingbird’s feet. He knew the feel of her hands, so light and cool. Hands that had scooped out a man’s eye with a cat’s paw, then hidden the detached orb in the pocket of her dress.

There had been three of them, nightriders, each in a sack hood. The year was 1930. The men had caught her and a mill boss’s son in an empty cabin along the river. The place was condemned, destined to be flooded under when the waters rose. They bludgeoned the boy with ax handles, but she fought them, finding a cat’s paw from a scatter of tools, an implement split-bladed like a cloven tongue. She took back from them what she could.

An eye.

None of them was ever caught.

The boy they beat to death was named Connor Gaston. He was a strange boy, people said. But smart. He liked birds, played the violin. His father ran the hosiery mill in town. A boy of no small advantage, and she a prostitute's daughter. Probably one herself, the town said. Didn't she live in a whorehouse? Wasn't she of age, with all the wiles and looks? Hadn't she lured the boy there to be beaten, robbed?

She refused to defend herself. Some said a hard blow to the head had struck her mute. Others said God. The doctors weren't sure. She seemed to have one foot in another world. She had passed partly through the veil. The Gastons wanted her gone, buried. Forgotten. This stain on their son's name. The judge declared her a lunatic, committing her to the state. Her belly was showing when they trucked her off. Rory was born in the Dix Hill infirmary. The Gastons were already gone—packed up and returned to Connecticut, with no forwarding address.

Rory and his mother sat a long time at the table, holding hands. Rory asked her questions, and she nodded or shook her head, as if too shy to speak.

“Any new paintings?”

She nodded and brought up the notebook from her lap. They were birds, mainly, chimney swifts and grey shrikes and barn swallows. Nuthatches, bluish with rust bellies, and iron-gray kinglets with ruby crowns. Carolina wrens, chestnut-colored with white thunderbolts over their eyes, and purple-black starlings, spangled white. Wood thrushes with cinnamon wings, their pale breasts speckled brown, and lemon-breasted waxwings with black masks over their eyes. Cardinals, red-bright, carrying sharp crests atop their heads, and red-tailed hawks that wheeled deadly over the earth.

They were not like prints on a wall. These birds were slashed across the paper, each creature angular and violent and bright, their wings trailing ghostly echoes of fight. They were water-colored, slightly translucent, as if she painted not the outer body of the bird but the spirit, each feather like a tongue of flame. Strange fires that burned green and purple, rust and royal blue. Rory knew that eagles could see more colors than men. They could see ultraviolet light, reflected from the wings of butterflies and strings of prey urine, the waxy coatings of berries and fruits. Sometimes he wondered if his mother was like that, if she discerned the world in shades the rest of them couldn't see. As if the wheeling or skittering of a bird's flight were a single shape to her, a poem scrawled in some language the rest of them didn't know. His heart filled up, like it always did. Tears threatened his eyes.

"They're beautiful," he said.

As always, she sent him home with one. This time it was a single parrot, lime green, with red flushes about the eyes. He would paste it on the wall of his room, part of the ever-growing aviary that kept him company.

It was late afternoon when they started toward home. Rory lit a cigarette, Granny her pipe. Their smoke unraveled into the slipstream. They passed city cars painted swan white or flamingo red, glade green or baby blue—bright as gumballs under the trees. Every yard was neatly trimmed, many staked with small signs that read: WE LIKE IKE. The people they passed looked strangely clean and fresh and of a kind, like members of the same model line.

Soon they were out from beneath the oaks and the traffic thinned, falling away, and the land began to roll and swell, an ocean of earth. In the old days, Rory would ask Granny to

tell him stories of his mother. Of how beautiful she'd been and how kind. Of how she once held a death vigil for a giant grasshopper she found dying on the porch, singing it low lullabies as it lay legging the air on its back, green as a spring leaf. How she buried it behind the house with a little matchstick cross.

"Girl had angel in her blood," Granny used to say. "Where she got it, I don't know. Not from me."

But all those old stories had been told, again and again, save one. The story only his mother could tell. What really happened that night in the valley.

The land rose before them, growing more broken and steep, the mountains hovering over the horizon like smoke. Howl Mountain was the tallest of those that neighbored it, the fiercest. It rose stout-shouldered and jagged, like the broken canine of some giant beast. On its summit floated a spiked island of spruce and fir, a high-altitude relic of prehistoric times. The wind whipped and tore through those ancient evergreens, whirring like a turbine, and it did strange things.

It was said that gravity was suspended at the mountain's peak, and in the falling season the dead leaves would float upward from the ground of their own accord, purring through the woods, as if to reach again those limbs they'd left.

There was a lot of blood in the ground up there, Rory knew. Guerrilla fighters from the Civil War, throat-cut and shot and hanged by rope, and frontiersmen before them, mountain settlers with long rifles who warred with the Cherokee, dying with arrow-flint in their bellies, musket balls in their teeth. And who knew how many rival tribes in centuries past, blood feuds long forgotten before any white man showed his face, the bones of the fallen scattered like broken stories across the mountain. Some said it was all those men's souls,

trying to rise, that made the dead leaves lift.

Rory thought of what Eustace had told him, when he was little, of how men in the mountains had made a sport of eye-gouging and nose-biting. How those wild-born woodsmen faced each another inside rings of roaring bettors, their long-curved thumbnails fired hard over candle flames and greased slick with oil, and how Davy Crockett himself once boasted of scooping out another man's eye easy as a gooseberry in a spoon. Back then there was no greater trophy in your pocket than another man's eye, followed closely by the bit-off tip of his nose. A cruel story, like any Eustace told, but designed perhaps to make the boy proud of what his mama had done when cornered.

He was.

He just wished it had not stolen her voice, and he wondered sometimes if there wasn't something wrong with him, that he wasn't himself silenced by what he'd seen in Korea. By what he'd done. He looked at Granny.

"Is it true you got that eye hid somewhere, stolen by some deputy you had in thrall?"

She sniffed.

"Ain't nothing but trouble in that eye, boy. Some things are best left buried."

"I got a right to see it."

"Sure. And I got a right to tell you to go to hell."

[Gods of Howl Mountain](#) is forthcoming from St. Martin's Press on March 20, 2018 and is available now for pre-order wherever books are sold.

