

Identity and direction:
Reflections of a former West Point cadet

by

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My self-perception used to be dependent upon the perceptions that others had of me. I no longer live to affirm the opinions of others, but to affirm the identity I have come to know through self-reflection. This thesis, then, is dedicated, in part, to those who are beginning to explore their identities apart from external expectations; I also dedicate my work to Susan, now my wife, the person who helped me to recognize and appreciate the *John from Creighton*.

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CHAPTER 1. ARRIVAL AT WEST POINT, R-DAY

Mr. Onufrow was driving casually. Often he looked at me in the rear view mirror. I was sitting in the back seat behind him. Mrs. Onufrow sat sideways in the front seat so she could face me, and Michelle, their daughter, sat sideways in the back seat so she could face me, too. We were on the road that went north from New York City to West Point, located on the Hudson. The Onufrows had been on this road many times--their son was a cadet--so there was nothing new for them to see; I was the main attraction. Mr. Onufrow knew my dad through work, and had offered to pick me up from the airport in New York when I flew in from Chicago. So my delivery to West Point had become their mission; they had told me stories for a day and a night in order to prepare me as best they could, and now all they could manage to say was, "Are you nervous yet?" One would think that there might be plenty of other topics to discuss. And besides, I wasn't nervous; how could I be nervous about something I knew nothing about?

Regardless, the Onufrows insisted that I should and eventually would be nervous about arriving at the academy. It was inconceivable that a young man or woman could begin such an endeavor without so much as a hiccup, or something. West Point was the big cheese for these people. Their son was a cadet there! They knew all about how wonderful the academy was. They loved West Point so much that it seemed as if they had voluntarily molded their lives around their son's experience as a cadet. It wasn't enough to say "My son is at West Point." Instead, they said, "I am a parent, or a sister, of a West Pointer." With all the

propaganda that the academy puts out about itself, I don't blame the Onufrows. But at the same time, as we sped north towards the sacred proving grounds of the U.S. Army, I began to enjoy telling them I did not feel the way they expected I should feel.

"Aren't you nervous?" Michelle would ask, tossing her brown hair away from her face and looking at me almost sideways.

"No, not really. What's there to be nervous about?"

"You're going to West Point!" she claimed. "Don't you know what they're going to do to you there?"

"I know a little bit. But I'm aware that it is all just a game, and they really can't do anything to harm me, so I might as well enjoy playing it." I admit, I was trying hard to defy their expectations.

Her eyes grew wide, and her mouth hung just a little--perhaps I enjoyed her awe of me. I was the bold young man who was openly defying a tradition of fear to which even her own brother had succumbed. To tell the truth, though, I really didn't know much about what lay ahead, so I couldn't be apprehensive about it. If I had known, I'm sure I would have been the frightened nineteen-year-old I should have been.

A mild rain dampened the journey. It was still early, 7:00 a.m., when we arrived at the Army post. I had managed to catch a half-hour nap in the back seat, which dumbfounded the Onufrows. As I woke, we were rolling past the front sentry. He was rigid. Mr. Onufrow waved once, a gesture of familiarity, but the M.P. didn't respond.

“Well, we’re here,” said Mrs. Onufrow. She looked at me, her smile big, with rose-colored lipstick surrounding her large teeth.

“You’ve gotta be nervous, now!” Michelle blurted.

I didn’t want to disappoint her again, “Yes, I think I am a little bit.”

As soon as I said that, it was as if I had unleashed a herd of comments that had been penned up inside Mr. Onufrow. He had been driving along patiently, every so often scratching the back of his graying head, waiting for a moment to chime in with his patterned response: “Well, just remember, now, this is all just a game. They’ll do some stuff to you, but you gotta remember what you’re here for. I know when Mike first came here, he didn’t want to stay past the first week. But you should see him now....”

“Yes, oh, you should see Michael now,” Mrs. Onufrow said. Again her eyes and face lit up, and she reached softly to touch Mr. Onufrow on his forearm. They were proud.

Mr. Onufrow continued, and I gave him my attention, although I had heard it before, “I just want you to know that when things get tough, we’ll be here for you. Okay?”

“Yes, thanks, I really appreciate that, and everything you’ve done for me.” I leaned forward between the front seats, speaking earnestly.

We pulled up in front of Thayer Hotel, a hotel for civilian visitors located on the reservation. The building was old and covered with ivy. Its granite walls were immense and impenetrable. There were, however, several intricately carved windows and arched doorways scattered along the front perimeter of the building. All around people darted. With each

set of parents there was a young man or woman dressed in a white t-shirt, pants, and black shoes. Except for the holes in my jeans, I looked like everyone else. In my pocket I carried one dollar in change--exactly what the report documents instructed me to bring. That was it.

It was at Thayer Hotel that I had the opportunity to make one last phone call. I told the Onufrows I would be with them in ten minutes. Then I went in search of a phone. There was a row of eight phones, and at every phone stood a young man dressed in the appropriate attire--black shoes, pants, and a white shirt. It was then that I began to sense what lay ahead, and a tight spot formed in my stomach.

I waited a couple of minutes and was able to get on a phone. It was only 7:10 a.m., but I had told Susan I would call her in the morning before I reported. Her dad answered, "Sure, I'll accept the collect call." I could tell Mr. Searl was sleepy. "John, I'll get Susan."

"Thanks."

"Hello." Susan's voice was sleepy, too.

"Susan, it's me. I said I'd call before I reported. Tell your dad I'm sorry for calling so early, and for calling collect."

"Oh, that's okay. How ya' doing, sweetie?"

My stomach knotted, "I'm all right, I guess. It's almost time to go in. I've been told that I can't call anyone for at least two weeks."

Susan was quiet. I didn't know if she had fallen back asleep. She finally sighed and said, "God, I really miss you. I'm scared for you. Not because I think you won't do well, but just because it's so different for you, and I just...."

"I know, you're right. I don't know what to expect, but it'll be fine. I miss you too. I'll be thinking about you a lot. I've gotta get going."

"John, be careful. I love you so much."

"I love you, too, Susan. Don't worry, I'm gonna kick butt here. I'll write as soon as I can. I love you. Bye bye sweetie." I listened to her hang up the phone, and then I did mine. I walked slowly through the lobby, headed out the door, and met the Onufrows at their car. It was time to get psyched up for the new challenge. I got in the car and we drove off towards the indoor sports facility, where all the new cadets would voluntarily remove themselves from the company of their civilian escorts and begin their careers as military officers.

Mrs. Onufrow asked, "Did you get a chance to talk to your girlfriend? Susan, right?"

"Yeah. I woke her up." Mr. Onufrow chuckled. He reminded me of my dad. I wasn't sure if it was because they both worked for Allstate. They had the same look: suit, tie, fresh shave with a small nick here and there, special purchase Florsheim wing-tips, and a large boring raincoat.

"She'll be so proud of you," said Michelle.

I smiled but didn't say anything more. I was concentrating, thinking about how I could win the ensuing mind game. No way was I going to let the academy break my mind the way the Onufrows insisted it would, even if it was considered an honor to be first broken and then *made* into a West Pointer. I was thinking about how I could be the first one to make the academy change to suit me, not the other way around.

The road wound along a cliff that overlooked a flood plain for the Hudson River. High hills bordered the river on both sides. I couldn't see their tops because they were shrouded in the misty rain. We rounded a curve and Lusk Reservoir came into view, as well as the football stadium, and then the indoor facility.

The parking lot was full, and hundreds of newcomers were swarming through the doors to be in-processed. Before long I was shuffling through the doors, followed by the Onufrows. I did not yet associate myself with the other new cadets. I still felt like a loner, like a bull being led into the arena; but unlike a bull, I was fully aware that there would be people trying to overcome me, although I didn't know how, nor did I know to what extent. I only knew that I was going to gore anyone who tried to mess too deeply with me.

We sat in some bleachers overlooking a basketball court. There was a microphone set up at the base of the bleachers in the center. Before long, a partially gray-haired man with silver eagles on his epaulets addressed the crowd:

“May I have your attention. Several hundred fine young men and women have gathered in this gymnasium this morning as a first step on their way to being West Point cadets. And let me tell you now, there is no finer honor than being a West Point cadet....”

The man went on for ten minutes, explaining what it meant to be a cadet, and how this year's incoming class had the highest average scores compared to all other previous incoming classes. He mentioned the tradition of excellence at West Point, and the fact that fifty-five of the

sixty major battles in the Civil War were fought with West Point graduates commanding both sides. He talked about the type of person it takes to make it through West Point. He told us that we had the ingredients to become fine cadets and fine officers. We had been carefully selected.

And then he closed, "At this time, take a few moments to say good-bye to those who have accompanied you here, and then head through the exits at the top of the bleachers."

I stood, as did everybody else, and I looked at the Onufrows. This was it. This was the moment that had been fast approaching for five months. There I stood, fully aware that I was willingly saying good-bye to the freedom that every American has but is seldom conscious of. I hugged Mrs. Onufrow. She had a tear in her eye. She smelled like a freshly perfumed mom--I don't know the exact perfume, but the kind older women wear which lingers in a room, or in a spinning door at a shopping mall after a woman who is wearing it passes through.

Michelle was jittery. She hugged me quickly and whispered "Good luck. But you won't need it." Then she stepped back from me smiling and biting her bottom lip.

I shook Mr. Onufrow's hand. His grip was tight, tighter than when I had first met him, as if I had already become more of a man somehow and was deserving of a more firm handshake. I thanked them again for all they had done. I realized as I was walking up the stairs towards the designated exit that perhaps I should have acknowledged the Onufrows' attitude instead of having disregarded it. I climbed the stairs, thinking about all of the steps I had taken to apply: the nomination from the

congressman, the academic tests, the medical examination, the athletic test. All of it to get there, on a stair, behind a long line of anxious young men and a few women, far from anything familiar, and wondering how it was that I ever decided to go there in the first place.

When I was first learning how to cut and paste, back in kindergarten and first grade, Mom showed me how to make a scrapbook. She gave me a nice portfolio with big manila pages, and told me to paste the pictures that I really liked inside. Paging through, now that I am twenty-four years old, I try to remember why I included certain pictures. I loved horses, and cowboys, trucks, airplanes, Indians, and large machines, and soldiers--so these are some of the pictures. There's also an autographed picture of Bobby Douglas, a quarterback for the Chicago Bears, which Dad gave to me. It's probably only in the scrapbook for that reason.

I have found that I am still interested in most of the things that caught my attention when I was making my scrapbook. I spend recreational time on an Arabian horse-breeding ranch. I have a cowboy hat. I drive big trucks and tractors in the summer where I work.

The most noteworthy similarity between my scrapbook and life, though, is that I spent a year at the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York. I don't know whether or not the inclusion of so many soldier pictures was an indication of a future engagement with the military. In hindsight it seems true, but I know that as a child I never intended to join the Army.

Perhaps there is a chain of events to be considered for psychoanalytic purposes, though. I spent a lot of time alone as a boy, playing *little army* in my sandbox. I had dark skin, thin, slanted eyes, and Spock-like ears. I'm Italian, one hundred percent, and after playing in the summer sun nearly naked for only a few days, I naturally looked like an olive. And my eyes, dark and set deep under boyish features, looked Chinese (so my classmates told me). My ears, lobes attached, and tops curved down and out a bit, looked like those of Captain Spock--and Mom's special haircuts never helped, either. Kids in school often teased me about the way I looked. Thus, despite having six friends on the block who didn't tease me and whom I played with often, my most valued memories are from my Tonka-time in the sand. I enjoyed playing alone. It was good to escape to my own little world in the sandbox behind the garage.

It was there that I perfected the art of playing *little army*. I called it this because I was playing with a huge collection of small, green, plastic army men. It would take hours to set them up in the sand, and then I would pretend there was a battle and knock them all down. I developed a strong love for these little green men. I placed great trust in them--they were my companions, as I did not have a brother (only five sisters who played with Barbie dolls). Perhaps I sought masculine affirmation through my army toys. Whether or not playing with little army men affected my psyche I do not know, but I do know that when I went to West Point I was nearly as steeped in the Italian tradition of machismo as

Rocky. But despite the element of machismo I was still far more appreciative of women than were most other cadets. Growing up with five sisters and no brothers helped me to develop an appreciation for what Jung called the *anima*, or feminine psyche. Needless to say, such appreciation was eventually at odds with the macho atmosphere of the academy.

My Catholic education began in the sixth grade when my parents removed me from the public school system and placed me at Visitation Catholic Grammar School and Junior High. My parents considered their decision as a form of strategy--they wanted to make sure that I would be ready for Fenwick, an all male Dominican high school. Dad had graduated from there, and from the minute I was born he said I would, too. Fenwick's reputation turned many heads for my dad, back when a handful of high schools offered educations that were as respectable as a college degree, which Dad never went for (a person would never notice, though). Dad wanted me to receive the same respect. He always wanted the best for me. So I entered Visitation as a rambunctious child, in order to prepare for Fenwick; I graduated from the eighth grade as a well-disciplined student eager for high school. My parents' plan had worked.

The plan worked, in part, because of Sister Joseph Bride. She was a nun who scared her students into diagramming sentences. In the sixth grade, as a transfer student, I was timid. When I encountered Sister, I was scared.

She wasn't very big, perhaps five feet and five inches. But I was only four-six or seven. She was old and her eyes were ice blue and her hair was silver and extremely long--down to her lower back. She usually wore a nun's hat, but one day I saw her hair. I was after school, and she was in her room. I was looking through her door as I walked by the room and I saw her. She had her back to me and I thought she was an apparition: silvery flowing hair, slow, wavy movements, a white habit. It stunned me. I never suspected that she had a bun of hair under her hat.

Sister Joseph Bride used to float between the rows of chairs. I couldn't see her feet, and the hem of her habit hung less than an inch above the floor. She had a large mid-section, and that caused the habit to hang away from her legs, so I never saw a break in the material from the knees as she walked. The habit swayed, but it never betrayed her leg movements.

One day, as she floated towards the back of the room while we meticulously diagrammed, she caught Brian Cleary drawing obscene pictures, or at least that's what the students believed.

With a slow, scratchy voice she said, "Come here to me, you." Her right arm was outstretched, revealing a white forearm and cruel hand. With her index finger she beckoned to Brian, who sat open-mouthed and confused. He hadn't heard her float near.

"I said come here to me!" She shouted. If she had been wearing a hood, she would have looked like the Grim Reaper. By then she was raising the pointer stick in her left hand, pointing it towards the door.

“Yes, Sister?” Brian was scared. He was the class bully, and he was scared. We were scared for him.

“Out in the hall, Cleary!” she hissed.

He sprung out of his chair as she moved towards him. He hurried down the aisle as she floated behind him, her habit lifting in her wake. I thought I caught a glimpse of a slipper type of shoe, but I wasn't sure.

She reached the door. Brian was already in the hall. With one movement she gave us an evil glare, grabbed the door, and whisked herself into the hallway, the door slamming heavily behind her. It was only my first week at Visitation. In the next half minute I got to see all of the new faces of the other students I had not yet met, as we stared horrified at each other. For three minutes we listened to the thuds and crashes as Sister whipped Cleary like a rag doll against the lockers, over and over again.

I had thought Visitation was intimidating. Fenwick, though, was an entire school, not just a nun, out to get me. As a freshman, I couldn't walk up and down certain staircases. I had to carry lunch trays for seniors. I had to sing the fight song in the lunch room. I received paddle spankings from irate teachers. It was like nothing I had ever experienced before.

Because it was all male, there was a great sense of camaraderie. At pep rallies in the gym the entire student body of one thousand young men would shout cheers and clap patterned claps, and go crazy when guest

speakers motivated us. We were not shy, because we were all boys. We were smug within our protected testosterone-appreciating institution.

We received three types of education: academic, moral, and male. Often the latter two were intertwined. Once, in my senior year during religion class, a student asked Father O'Malley how far a guy could go with a girl before it was a sin.

The entire class knew that the kid had asked the question in order to get Father on a tangent. It worked.

The priest sat back in his chair which tilted back. He was wearing a white habit. He placed his feet up on the desk. The black socks he wore looked funny with the sandals. As he leaned back he put both of his hands on the top of his head, which was balding. Lightly he ran his fingers around the top of his head, tapping his scalp.

He muttered, "A sin, you say?"

"Yes Father."

"Hmmm." He paused a few more moments, now rubbing his eyes furiously. His cheeks hung like those of a bloodhound. He sighed once more, and then he sat forward after taking his feet down. His bug-like eyes nearly popped out as he slammed his fist down and shouted, "There will be NO fondling of bosoms!" And he shook his head so that his jowls wagged with the word *NO*.

The class burst out in an uproar, laughing more at the sight of Father O'Malley than at his comment.

"Why, Father?" someone asked.

“Because the majority of you idiots wouldn’t be able to stop once you got there!”

The bonds were tight at Fenwick. On the street, a Fenwick jacket meant a friend. A cluster of jackets was power to be reckoned with by challenging schools. Our colors were black and white. Our team uniforms were absorbing and ominous, like storm clouds in the summer. We were an army. We were the Fenwick Friars.

Before I went to West Point, I attended Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. Away from home for the first time, I finally encountered opportunities to mold my character in a manner that differed from what the environment of my first eighteen years of life offered. It was at Creighton that I explored a very important element of my being: spiritualism and my personal relationship with God.

Growing up a Catholic meant doing a bunch of stuff that seemed to have more meaning for other people but not me. I could never figure out why that was so. Still, I learned my catechism and obeyed most of the rules, at least all of the important ones, like no sex, drugs, alcohol, smoking--that kind of stuff. But I never really had a sense of what it was that my religion encompassed. Fenwick brought me very close to knowing, or rather, learning my own identity. But it was at Creighton that I *found myself*, so the saying goes.

I believe that a person comes to know his or her own identity only after he or she develops a personal relationship with God. God can be whatever a person wants it to be. For some it is a transcendental spirit in

Nature. For others it is the Trinity. Regardless of what God is, people believe in a God because it gives them hope and helps them learn their self-identity through self-reflection.

A common metaphor that helps explain my philosophy is that our life is a pattern of reaching one higher plateau after another; each plateau is a more sophisticated self-awareness of ones own identity, which we reach when we take the time to stop and reflect on who we are (a process that is most effective, in my opinion, when a person has a relationship of some kind with God). And when we reach the next plateau, we can look back and compare our present awareness with that of our old. The recognition of and appreciation for change in our lives is a sign of maturity, and it is also a sign that we are well aware of who we are.

Without a personal relationship with God, we lose the sense of hope and direction that is necessary to help us continue to self-evaluate. The next plateau erodes from our vision, and we eventually become unaware of the plateau we are currently on. I share my opinion with a purpose in mind: it explains part of the reason I made the decisions I have made in my life, one of them being my resignation from West Point.

* * *

As I left the gymnasium through the designated door, it was as if I had stepped through some sort of portal. There was a hallway, and in the hallway there were several men in white and gray officer uniforms screaming at us to fall in to two lines. The upper-class cadets made no mistake about setting the tone quickly. One cadet picked me out to hear

him scream, "I'm talkin' to you, MISTER! You fall in right now, and get that chest out, gut in, chin up, neck back! Are you EYE-ballin' me? Huh, MISTER?!"

"No."

"No? No what? No SIR. Got that? You call me SIR, you maggot!" He was a big guy with a very thick neck. I wondered if all of the cadets would look like him, and if I was supposed to look like him, too.

"Yes, sir."

"What? Pop off!" White saliva had gathered in the corners of his mouth and when he yelled it sprayed in different directions.

"Yes, sir."

"Louder!"

"Yes, SIR!"

"I didn't tell you to scream at me." He lowered his voice to a harsh, suppressed whisper, "What's your name, mister?"

"Ferrone, John, sir."

He screamed, "I don't want to know your first name! We're not friends! You're a joker, is that it?"

"No, sir. Sir, I just thought..."

"No, maggot, you can't think. You don't talk, either, unless I ask you to talk. Now," he got close to my ear and hissed, "I really don't like you. It figures that one bad apple would have to get in here, and just my luck, I get first crack at `em. I'm gonna be on the lookout for you. You better pay close attention to details you piss-ant because I'll be paying

close attention to you. I don't want you here. And I'm going to make it my duty to see that you don't last here longer than today."

He fell silent, but I could still feel his breath in my ear. I didn't know if I should say anything, or just acknowledge him, or say nothing. I was too shocked to be thinking on my own. I could only wait for his next command.

"And straighten up," he said finally and moved on to another guy behind me.

Before long I had the opportunity to change into my R-Day uniform: black polyester gym shorts with gold trim, black dress socks, black Army issue shoes, a white academy t-shirt with my last name printed above the academy crest on the left side of my chest, and a pair of thick black Tactical Eye Devices (glasses) which we affectionately called TEDs.

And in less than an hour I had received two duffel bags and had filled them with uniforms, personal belongings, shoes, boots, towels, and bedding. I had also received my first *Airborne* haircut--a shaved head. Down into the basement of Washington Hall we had been ushered, like sheep being led to be sheared. One after the other we were ordered into the barber chairs by the upper-class. There was no pleasant, "How would you like it cut today?" No neck massage. No hot cream shave. The barbers, most of them men in their forties, had slight grins on their faces as if they knew what was in store for us. We were entertainment. When I hopped off the chair, I saw in the mirror that my entire head had been

shaved to an eighth of an inch--now visible were all the scars from childhood rough-housing.

After the haircut I was ushered in to get a mug shot for my military identification. We were told not to smile, or pay the price if we did. I looked like a convict that had murdered babies.

I was finally directed to my room where I met my two roommates. I charged in huffing and puffing to find them casually sitting at their desks polishing their shoes.

"Hey," one of them said, "you're the other roommate?"

"Yeah, I'm New Cadet Ferrone."

"Well, New Cadet Ferrone," he said standing up to shake my hand, "I'm Todd, and this is Gregg."

"Hi, New Cadet Ferrone."

"You can call me John," I said, feeling like I was the only new cadet at this place that was so far losing the game.

Todd and Gregg were at least a foot taller than me. Gregg was from Maine, I found out, and he talked in quick breaths, the words shooting out of his small mouth in rapid succession. "So-John, where are you from?"

I didn't quite understand him. I thought he had said *Sojon whererya rom*, and so I could only ask, "What?"

"Where... are... you... from?"

"Oh, Chicago area."

Todd then broke into a lengthy explanation about his life in Massillon, Ohio, and how he played football and his team won the state

championship and so on. He was going to play football at the academy. I looked him over to judge for myself whether or not he looked like Division I material. He had a small round face with big brown eyes--real puppyish looking, and his body was more pear-shaped than seemed appropriate for any athletic endeavor. He didn't look like much of a football player, and suddenly I felt a little more secure. It dawned on me that I was a year older than both of them, and that I had already been to college for a year. The intimidation subsided, and we continued talking.

Three knocks on the door interrupted our conversation.

Todd stood up and yelled, "Room Atten-TION!" Gregg and I stood at attention facing the door. Todd then bellowed, "Enter, Sir!"

The door swung open and a well-composed cadet strutted in. He looked sharp. His white shirt was neatly pressed and extremely bright, as were his white gloves. His shoes were the same kind I had on, only his looked like glass. The shirt was tucked neatly into the gray trousers, which had a black stripe running up each side on the outside. So impeccable was this cadet that even the line of buttons down the front of his shirt was in line with the edge of the shiny gold belt buckle, which was in line with the zipper line. It was called a *gig-line*. He removed his white hat and set it on the bureau. The black visor caught the sunlight breaking through the clouds and reflected it in my eye. I couldn't help squinting initially.

"You, there. New Cadet Ferrone, what's the problem?" Cadet Taylor's face was stern. He had puffy little cheeks and his lower lip stuck out just a little. He looked like Chip, the Disney chipmunk.

“Sir, the hat reflected the sun in my eye and my initial reaction...”

“That’s enough. Try to be more concise.”

He stepped lightly over to the hat and pushed it into the shade.

“Thank you, sir.” The words had slipped out. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Todd’s eyes bulge and his lips tighten.

Cadet Taylor approached me. He was close to my face when he spoke in a forceful yet controlled voice, “New Cadet Ferrone, I am not your friend. Don’t ever thank me or any other cadet again. An officer in the Army does things for his subordinates because it is the officer’s duty, not because the officer is trying to be nice. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now then, new cadets, I am cadet Taylor. I will be your squad leader for the first detail of Beast Barracks during the summer. I want all three of you to be in uniform just like me, out in the hall across from your door with your backs against the wall standing at attention in three minutes or less. Don’t forget to put your name plates on your shirts. Do you have any questions?”

“Cadet Taylor, sir,” Gregg said, “I was wondering if we would have time to continue polishing our shoes this evening?”

Even though I thought Gregg had sounded like a kiss-ass, I was glad that he asked what he did. At least I wasn’t the only one who was thinking thoughts beyond the scope of the present minute.

Cadet Taylor looked away thoughtfully for a minute as if he were going to answer the question seriously. But then he looked back and I could see the dismay in his face. But just before he spoke, he assumed a

professional expression again, with a little bit of a smile slipping out of the corner of his mouth, and gently said, "Don't worry, New Cadet Gosselin, you will have plenty to do and allocated time to get it all done." It was an answer that caught me off guard. I was expecting an explosion from Cadet Taylor. He came across as having genuine interest in our well-being, like a friend.

I thought to myself as Cadet Taylor was leaving the room, that here was a cadet who understood that we New Cadets were more intelligent and eager to please than most upper-class cadets seemed to acknowledge. In this new world where I felt vulnerable, I hastily decided that I wanted to be just like Cadet Taylor--sharp looking, respected, respectful, professional, and serious--an aspiration further from my grasp at that time than I could ever imagine.

By mid-afternoon we had learned to march, salute, and respond. A New Cadet was limited to using four responses when being spoken to by a cadet: *Yes, sir; No, sir; No excuse, sir; and Sir, I do not understand.*

I found out quickly that when the cadets said *four responses* only, they wanted one of four responses, and that was it! I was in a small formation practicing my salute with three other new cadets. An upperclass cadet saw me and decided that he didn't like my shorts.

"Mister! Why are your shorts so big?" I felt dismayed. "Mister, I'm talkin' to you!" It wasn't Cadet Taylor, but some other cadet who wanted to know why my shorts were too big. I didn't know what to say. It wasn't my fault that they were issued to me so big.

“Sir, they were issued to me like this.”

“What?! Is that one of your four responses?”

“No, sir.”

“What are your four responses?”

“Sir, my four responses are: Yes, sir; No, sir; No excuse, sir; and Sir, I do not understand.”

“Now, why are your shorts too big?” He looked like he was Irish or German, and I had a feeling that he was picking on me because I was a small, dark Italian. There were three other big blond new cadets near me, and their uniforms looked worse than mine.

“No excuse, sir.”

“You better get those exchanged, mister!”

“Yes sir.” The temptation was too much, and I blurted out, “Sir, where do I exchange them?”

“Who do you think you are?” His voice was a shriek, and Cadet Taylor happened to look over in our direction. “Mister, New Cadet Ferrone is it? You are bogus! You better get squared away on what to say and what not to say, or you’re not going to last the day. You clear on that?”

“Yes, sir!”

Cadet Taylor approached and said, “New Cadet Ferrone, come with me.”

I *pinged* beside him, as all New Cadets were supposed to do any time they were outside of their room. My knees were locked, as were my arms which swung back and forth. My head was snapped back so that if

any cadet desired, he could hold a ruler from the top of my spine to the back of my head, and my neck would be touching all points of the ruler. The regulation ping was one hundred and twenty steps per minute. A pinging cadet looked like a shooting gallery target dummy in high gear, zipping back and forth, turning with every verbal shot fired by a cadet.

He stopped and I stopped. His forehead was furrowed. He said, "Ferrone, I'll say this once. You have to forget everything you know about normal communication. You are a subordinate, and you are required to do only what you are told--nothing more and nothing less. No questions. No suggestions. No nothing. I know all about you. You've been to college. You've proven that you're intelligent. But so far, you've been bogus. And what that means is that your actions and responses are out of bounds and cannot be tolerated."

He paused, and I was staring blankly at him. Then that hint of a smirk returned on the corner of his mouth, and the furrows smoothed beneath the bill of his hat, and he finished by saying, "All you have to do is think, and I know you can do that. You wouldn't be here if you couldn't handle it."

At 4:00 p.m., all fourteen hundred New Cadets were standing at parade rest in formation on the marching field called The Plain. The upper-class cadets were brilliant in the sunlight--they had changed uniforms and were now fitted in all white uniforms with shiny black shoes, red sashes, gold buttons and cufflinks, and sabers. They were our keepers, and they presented us to the Superintendent of the United

States Military Academy. In the bleachers several thousand civilians gawked at their transformed sons and daughters. At the command of *Attention*, we stiffened up and waited for the Superintendent to administer the Oath of Allegiance. We raised our right hands, and I could imagine what it looked like from the bleachers: a sea of gray trousers capped by breaking waves of white hats and gloves. And then I, along with all the other new cadets, repeated the Oath: "I, John Ferrone, do solemnly swear that I will support the Constitution of the United States, and bear true allegiance to the National Government; that I will maintain and defend the sovereignty of the United States, paramount to any and all allegiance, sovereignty, or fealty I may owe to any State or country whatsoever; and that I will at all times obey the legal orders of my superior officers, and the Uniform Code of Military Justice."

CHAPTER 2. HAZING

The Fourthclass Year, or Plebe Year, is the cadet's first year at the academy. The entire year is a haze, or a physiological, psychological, and emotional test. As stated in the 80th volume of the Bugle Notes (a new cadet's bible), "The Fourthclass System is part of the four year Sequential Leader Development System (SLDS) and concentrates on setting high standards, and enforcing those standards in a demanding environment. Inherent in this system are the learned attributes of duty, honor, and country; so essential in the profession of arms." This philosophy is the essence of what cadets and civilians alike call the mind game, or just game. The game is played by opposing sides: the West Point institution versus the new cadet. If West Point wins, the new cadet will have been "broken and remolded" in the tradition of the Corps of Cadets. If the new cadet wins, then he or she, if still attending the academy, is considered by other cadets to be an inferior officer. The only stipulation to participating in the game is that the new cadet does not know what will happen if he or she wins or loses. Furthermore, I think it was uncommon for new cadets to be mature enough to realize what was being done to them (most new cadets were eighteen and fresh out of a high school environment in which they had been the top dog, and now they were nothing more than a bagel--or a three dimensional zeroes as some upper-class cadets so mildly put it).

I can't guess as to how many new cadets actually became aware of the intricacies of the game during the year while they were playing it. I do know, however, that more than four hundred of the initial fourteen

hundred new cadets in the class of 1992 eventually resigned or were involuntarily separated from the academy before graduating, for whatever reason. I have a hunch that for some of them it was because they weren't playing the game the way the academy wanted them to play; there were some new cadets, and I'd like to think I was one of them (thanks to my year at college), who were aware of what was happening while it was occurring.

My typical weekday schedule was as follows:

- 0530 Wake up, shower, dress, make the bed, clean the room, deliver newspapers, read the newspaper for questioning/hazing information.
- 0605 Report to formation, questioned about the newspaper articles.
- 0615 Breakfast, perform serving duties at the table.
- 0700 Finish breakfast and report to first class, gym.
- 0800 Second class, U.S. history
- 0855 Back in the room, cat-nap, pop-inspection
- 0935 Third class, calculus.
- 1020 Fourth class, psychology.
- 1115 Lunch formation
- 1125 Lunch, perform table duties.
- 1215 Finish lunch, report to fifth class, English.
- 1310 Return to room, perform duties: deliver laundry, deliver mail, clean room again, do homework,

get ready for intramurals.

1500 Report for intramurals.

1750 Report for dinner formation.

1805 Dinner, perform table duties.

1900 Call to quarters: no hazing after 7:00 p.m.

Cadets are required to be in a room, or in an academic building studying. Cadets may visit the snack shop "Boodlers." During this four-hour period, cadets need to study and do homework, socialize in rooms, polish shoes, prepare uniforms, study knowledge for hazing, etc.

2300 Taps.

The schedule varied little from day to day. Each new cadet carried twenty-one credit hours (every other day I would have computer science and military science instead of gym and psychology. Calculus was every day.)

There were two types of hazing: general and personal. General hazing consisted of a new cadet being required to recite verbatim West Point knowledge/traditions, and to perform Plebe duties. Any upper-class cadet could haze any Plebe, but usually only the cadets who knew a certain Plebe would personally haze that Plebe. Such personal hazing served a wide range of purposes, from character development to motivation. A Plebe never knew for sure what the purpose was (if the Plebe ever got as far as to wonder), and that was part of the game.

* * *

Once, earlier in the year during November, I had an experience with a cadet who did not really know me, but who nevertheless took it upon himself to haze me on the personal level.

It started in the mess hall, during lunch. I was standing at attention beside the table with another cadet. We were waiting for the command for all cadets to take their seats. I had finished my duties, so one cadet decided to ask me some knowledge.

"Ferrone, tell me about China on the front page of the New York Times," cadet Cheng called out. He was Asian. He had a flat face with a box chin, and I easily heard his choppy sentence above the mess hall din.

I knew I hadn't read the article he was referring to, but just like a robot I immediately popped off with the proper format for the required answer, "Sir, today in the New York Times it was reported that..." There was a long pause. Even as I spoke aloud the introduction, I knew nothing would follow. "Sir," I began sheepishly. Then I stopped and waited for his accusation, and the request for a Fourthclass Performance Report, the little square piece of green paper that I was required to keep folded neatly in half in my pocket notebook.

"Fer-RONE!" He said. His voice was monotone, but he managed to place emphasis on the final syllable, making it sound as if he were addressing me as his apprentice shogun warrior. Then he demanded the piece of paper, each word of the sentence sounding as if it were a command in itself, "Pass up a 4-C."

I was glad that that was all that came of the situation, or so I thought. I had had 4-C's taken before. No big deal.

We sat down, and the meal progressed. I performed the rest of my Fourthclass duties: I filled the drink glasses for the upper-class cadets; I asked how many cadets would be having desert, and then cut the pie accordingly; and I presented the cut pie to the table commandant, a Firstie (or senior), who approved of it. I made no errors, even when recalling the diverse beverage preferences of the eight upper-class cadets. And as I ate at the appropriate position of attention, taking thumbnail size bites and chewing the regulation three times before swallowing, I kept my ears open and listened to the private conversations of the other cadets.

It wasn't long before I picked out Cadet Cheng's voice speaking to the table commandant about my inability to recite required knowledge. They discussed it for what I thought was a long moment, and even though I could not hear their exact comments, I knew that they had exchanged negative comments.

The table commandant got up. He had finished his meal. He approached me. Stopping right next to me, causing me to look up at a very uncomfortable angle, he began to speak, and both his subject and tone caught me completely off guard. "Mr. Ferrone," he began, his soft, condescending voice dragging out the last syllable of my name in a whine, "I think you can do a better job as a Fourthclassman. Even though it is Navy-week and all, you still have to perform your duties thoroughly, and so far...."

He paused, as if what he was about to say was extremely important and he wanted to make sure everyone at the table heard. Everyone was looking and listening. So gentle was his voice that it was degrading, as if I were incapable of understanding the words of a grown-up. And this tall cadet was only two and a half years older than me. And he wagged his head as if in total amazement that he even had to say what he was saying. "So far," he started again, "you've given me and all the other upperclassmen at the table a very bad impression of yourself. I can't help but think that you are the type of person who wants to slide by with the minimal effort. Now, come on." Again he whined and dragged out the word *on*, and I sunk as low as I could in my chair while at the same time remaining at the position of attention. He added one last comment, "Now I want you to just concentrate and perform like you're supposed to."

I felt defeated. A black hole opened within me, and all my insides were sucked into it, leaving me empty, dejected, sub-human, so incapable of functioning at a respectable level that I felt like a *Yahoo*, groveling in the dirt, forced to deal only with primitive thought. I hated myself. I was angry at myself. I wanted to throw up. The self-disappointment itself seemed to have massed in my throat, gagging me, trying to come out and expose itself so that everyone would know exactly who it was that couldn't perform. I felt faint.

Four minutes passed. I sipped water, and began to rationalize the situation--it was the last defense mechanism I was capable of employing. I started to recount my performance that day, that week. I had done pretty damn well, and he had the gall to unnerve me based on one tiny

episode. Immediately I was filled with spirit again; I was on fire with wrath for that man. I kept on asking myself who the hell gave him the right to make me out as an ass in front of the other cadets? It wasn't very professional, I thought, and it certainly wasn't very good leadership style. I hated him for humiliating me. I had an urge to laugh, an odd defense mechanism that I couldn't control. But it worked, because I saw the situation from a different perspective, one that enabled me to become mentally aggressive.

I started to feel above him: more mature; more worthy of other people's respect.

My appetite returned, and as I ate I began to think of how I could turn the table and make him appear to be the idiot: I would impress the hell out of him by showing him that I was duty-motivated, and could think and perform like the best of the Fourthclassmen.

There I sat. I thought I had beaten my table commandant at his own game, because I hadn't allowed his attack to derail me. I had overcome his most penetrating drives into my ego. I did it. At least I thought I had won some sort of mind battle.

It wasn't until I was back in my room, safe, that the possible irony of the situation struck me: I only did what was expected of me. As a Plebe, I was supposed to withstand psychological strains and remain motivated, wasn't I? Is it true that he had subtly motivated me to improve and impress without my even being aware of it? Or is it true that he was consciously modeling one form of leadership style, so that I could choose to adapt it or reject it for my future career as an officer? I

was troubled by the possibility that my table commandant was such a fantastic motivator that he knew exactly how to make me feel what I was now feeling. After all, it is the job of an officer to know how to motivate every individual in his company.

As I lay in bed I was feeling great about my ability to be a squared away Plebe, but one question stuck in my mind: what amount of credit, if any, should I give to the table commandant for bringing me to a high level of motivation? Or was I naive for wondering that in the first place?

As part of Fourthclass knowledge, every Plebe was to know the badges, tabs, shoulder sleeve insignia, and medals associated with high performance levels in the service of the Army. For example, a soldier wounded in battle would receive a Purple Heart medal. A soldier serving a long period of time with no infractions would receive a Good Conduct medal. For each medal earned, the soldier would receive a ribbon to be sewn on his or her uniform above the left chest area. A soldier who was in the infantry division would have an infantry insignia on his sleeve. Failure on a Plebe's part to know all the badges, tabs, medals, and insignia, of which there were one hundred and sixteen, resulted in trouble.

I was executing my duties in the mess hall when Cadet Seckel approached me. He was tall and skinny, and one of the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse--the title that Schmitt, Simpson, Smith and Seckel had given to themselves, and which the Plebes didn't doubt. Seckel,

Simpson and Smith roomed together in room 666, and they loved to say "Report to hell, tonight at 6:55."

Seckel had a small mouth and beady black eyes, close together over a thin, hooked nose. He always spoke with a sneer, as if he really hated your guts, personally, and was mad that he had to give you his attention.

"Ferrone," he said, and I straightened to attention, and turned to face him.

"Yes, sir."

He pulled out a packet of plastic flash cards which had all of the insignia, badges, tabs, and medals printed in vivid color. "What's this, Ferrone?"

"Sir, it is the Good Conduct medal." He flipped the red and white rectangle badge and a new one was underneath it.

"How about this one, Ferrone?" There was sarcasm in voice, as if someone had told him that I didn't know my badges and tabs, and he was waiting to nail me on them. His sneer lifted the right corner of his lip so that it was almost even with his nostril.

"Sir, it is the Distinguished Service Cross."

He flipped the cards and a familiar ribbon was the next one. I was relieved, until he said, "That's an easy one. Let's see...." He began flipping through them, not showing me what he was looking for. My stomach tightened as I realized that unless I knew all one hundred and sixteen, which I didn't, I would be dead. My hope of bluffing him had faded, especially when he got close to me and showed me a colorful ribbon that didn't register.

“Well, Ferrone, what is it.” He sensed victory. Ten seconds passed, and he simply waited.

Then he flipped to another one. My mind had been jolted. “How `bout this one, Ferrone.” He kept emphasizing my name.

“Sir, it is the Antarctica Service Medal.”

“WRONG!” His reaction startled me. Then he got beside me and stood casually next to me, looking at the flash cards with me as if he had nothing better to do.

One after the other he flipped through them, asking, “How `bout this one, Ferrone,” pausing a few seconds on each card before turning to the next. He varied the tone of his question, mocking me with a soft voice at times.

My neck was on fire. I wanted to grab those cards out of his hands and whip them across the mess hall. I wanted to tell him that I didn’t give a shit about colorful ribbons. He had proven his point that I didn’t know them. I finally piped up, “Sir, I do not know these!”

He stepped back, bewildered at first. Then he exploded, “WHAT! I know you don’t know these! You don’t speak to me unless I ask you to! Listen here, Ferrone,” and he cocked his head and the sneer was more distinguishable, “if you don’t know something, that doesn’t mean I give a shit! I’ll ask you whatever I want! Whenever I want! And you better answer with one of your four responses, ONLY!”

And then, I think because he didn’t know what else to say, he started laughing, like a hyena, and the sound drew the attention of other cadets. He wasn’t laughing at what I had said; he was laughing with glee

at the fact that he had the opportunity to now make my life even more miserable because of my *bogus* comment.

I was still very angry. I was glad I had said that, because it seemed to have stunned him a bit--a minor Plebe victory, worth the ensuing onslaught.

Cadet Simpson, my squad leader during part of the academic year, approached me in lunch formation. He was small, smaller than me by three inches, and I was 5'6". He came right up to me so the bill of his hat was underneath mine and he said, "Ferrone, I'm not satisfied with your performance as a Fourthclass cadet. What's wrong with you? Are you having personal problems? Do we need to talk? How about if I come by your room after lunch, let's say, for a little tea party." He was so close that his eyes were darting back and forth to look into my eyes. I didn't know how to interpret him. He was his usual calm, cold self--his tone was as distant as his ice blue eyes. I had mentioned to him one day during an upbeat exchange that I was trying harder to be more *stract*, or tight with my Fourthclass performance. And I thought I had heard a strain of sincerity in his voice when he asked if I were having personal problems.

I thought wrong.

There was a knock at the door. I was in the room by myself. I braced to attention and called out, "Enter, sir."

Simpson entered, slowly, and closed the door behind him. He had a scowl on his face. "Up against the closet, Ferrone." He shouted the

command and I hurried three steps over to the closet. “Ferrone, you’re a real loser. Do you know that? You make me sick. You don’t know your knowledge. You don’t help your classmates with the duties. You’re a disgrace to look at. LOOK at you! You look like shit! Shoes are dull! Poor shave! Spots on your tie! No respect for the uniform!” He paused, but continued to pace in a half circle around me. I was taken aback. I couldn’t figure out where he was coming from. I knew my knowledge. I participated more in the duties than most of the other Plebes. My shoes were shined very well, and I certainly didn’t have spots on my tie, although I didn’t have the opportunity to look down at it for myself. What was he talking about?

He continued, “Why don’t you leave, Ferrone? We don’t want you here. We talk about you all of the time. Do you know what we say? We can’t even imagine anyone ever taking commands from you. You’re trash. You’re BOGUS! You can’t take anything serious enough to do it well. Someone must of pulled a goddamn ROPE to get you in here.”

I was stunned. The hair on the back of my head began to get hot and itch. He went on, for twenty minutes about how I was the worst Plebe in the company, and how I was dragging down the company’s image. And all I could do was wonder who was talking about me (was it Cheng, Seckel, or the table commandant?), and what were they really saying. Was I really that much of a disgrace? Before I gave in to that thought, I mustered the courage to interrupt his raving. I said, “Cadet Simpson, sir, may I ask a question?”

He said, "No, I'm not finished, Fer-RONE, and don't ever fuckin' interrupt me again." He was nose to nose with me, so close that I could see where a larger freckle abruptly gave way to his pale skin. Then he stepped back, took a deeper breath, raised his eyebrows, and said sassily, "What? Let's hear your question. Come on. What?"

I didn't even want to ask it anymore. I knew he was setting me up for more ridicule. I figured I had nothing to lose. My throat was coarse and thick, my eyes grew hot, my hands began to tremble, and I blurted out, "Sir, I thought you said that we would be able to talk about my problems and that this would be a constructive meeting. Why are you saying all of this stuff that isn't true?" I was almost ready to cry, but I took a big breath after I said the word *true*, and I regained my composure.

He began shaking his head and said, "Ferrone, Ferrone, Ferrone," the tone trailed downward, "first of all, that was more than a question. Second of all, maggot, I never said anything about talking about your problems. And third, I don't lie." He stood there staring at me, for a full minute. I simply stared straight ahead at the position of attention.

He walked towards the door and said as he was leaving, "You better get it together, Ferrone. I don't think you have what it takes, but I can't make you leave." Then he left.

The door slammed behind him, and I eased myself against the wardrobe door. His final words kept shooting through my mind: *I don't think you have what it takes*. My legs were weak. I shuffled over to the nearest desk, Buddy's, and sat in the chair. I wanted to leave.

I sat there wondering whether or not I had what it took to be a good cadet and eventually a good officer. Simpson's speech came three weeks into the second semester, after I had proven myself above average in Beast Barracks and throughout the first semester. Despite having what I thought was self-confidence, Simpson had cultivated self-doubt in me during the course of one *tea party*, and I was reeling, unable to determine if the truth was as simple as he made it sound or if he had a hidden purpose. I kept asking myself if he had intended me to be asking myself the very questions I was' asking.

Yet, in all of my attempts to find brilliance in Simpson's methods, I arrived at the conclusion that he was the one with the bad attitude. Once, during summer training, while standing in formation, I felt someone removing my bayonet from its sheath behind me. I knew it was Simpson. He thought he could steal it without my knowing. He thought he was so stealthy. But I knew he was doing it. To this day I wish I would have turned quickly and punched his nose through the middle of his head. He would have went reeling backwards, stunned, the bayonet falling to the pavement. And I would have picked it up, screaming, "Sir! You are the enemy! Do not try to steal my bayonet! MY M-16 AND BAYONET ARE MY LIFE! Do not try to steal them, Sir!" He would have rightfully been the laughing stock of the academy.

But I didn't do that. I didn't move, because I believed that I did not have the right to do anything. I was a confused Plebe, only four weeks into my West Point training.

Tauntingly, he made his way to the end of the squad and walked back in front of it, until he was eye to eye with me. "Ferrone, where's your bayonet?"

I knew it had been removed, so I couldn't say it was in place. But I didn't know where it was. I answered after he repeated the question with a *hey idiot! I'm talking to you* tone, "Sir, I do not know."

"How could you not know where your bayonet is, Ferrone?"

I couldn't answer.

"Ferrone," the idiot-tone was back, "how come you don't know where your bayonet is?"

I got bold: "Sir, you took it!"

"I did? Are you sure?" He had such a punchable look on his face, eyebrows arched above pale blue eyes, as if to say *who, me?*

And because I hadn't seen him take it, I could only answer, "No, Sir."

It wasn't until after he had called to the attention of the other upperclassmen the fact that I didn't know where my bayonet was, and after they had all taunted me, making me feel like I was incompetent, that he returned it, laughing, and without offering a constructive comment. The whole episode was simply for his entertainment--it had no educational motive!

Formations were the prime hazing times. The Plebes would be standing in formation ten minutes before all other cadets had to be there. We knew who the asshole cadets were because they would go down to

formation with us, even beat us to formation sometimes, so they could drill us on our knowledge.

Simpson and Schmitt would approach the formation slowly, nonchalantly, as if they didn't even see us standing there. I was in the first squad, so I was up front, and the space in front of me was the usual spot that the two cadets stopped their personal conversation and attacked.

"Hey, meathead," Schmitt said to me. *Meathead* was his pet name for me. "I bet you're probably not even meat--you're probably a processed ball of fat and gristle." He was close to my face. I wanted to laugh. The comment was funny, I thought. I was already envisioning sometime in the future when I could say it to someone in jest.

"What's for dinner tonight, meathead?" He had a long face, and his chin jutted out beneath his large mouth like a bony lance.

"Sir, for dinner we are having: fried chicken quarters, mashed potatoes, Boston creme pie, and cranapple juice." I think I had popped off too confidently, because Schmitt lowered his gaze as if accepting a challenge. He moved in closer, six inches from my face.

"Whaddid ya' read in the Times?"

"Sir, today in the *New York Times* it was reported that a woman in the Bronx was attacked in a park on Wednesday night while she was jogging alone. Sir, she was jumped by a group of fourteen teenagers who proceeded to beat her, strip her, and rape her. Sir, her body was found in the morning by a passerby, and the woman was still alive. Sir, she is only twenty-four years old, and she is in a permanent coma. Sir, the boys

were arrested, and when asked why they did what they had done, they replied that they were out for a good time. Sir, they call their habit *Wilding*."

"That was very good, Mr. Ferrone," he said sincerely in a low voice. "Now start *The Corps!*"

He moved on while I began the chant. Cadet Simpson took his place and inspected my uniform as I stared straight ahead and shouted the lines: "Sir, *The Corps!*: The Corps! The Corps! The Corps! The Corps, bareheaded salute it, with eyes up, thanking our God, that we of the Corps are treading where they of the Corps have trod." I stopped. I couldn't remember the next line. I had said it a hundred times, at least, and this one time, after an exacting article summary, I couldn't remember *The Corps!*, one of the most sacred chants of the academy.

"What's the matter, Ferrone, brain cramp?" Simpson was irritated. But he must have decided to give me another chance because I had done a good job on the article. "Start it again."

I sounded off louder, hoping that my energy would jar my memory, but it didn't happen, and I was stumped at the same spot.

"Why are you stopping again, Ferrone?" Simpson now had a concerned expression on his face, and his voice was sympathetic in the most condescending way. "Huh?"

I was silent. I wanted to tell him to fuck off, but it *was* my fault that I couldn't remember.

"IRP! IRP!" Simpson barked the command. Then he said, "Do I have to say it for you? Immediate Response, PLEASE!"

I finally said, "No excuse sir."

"That's damn right there's no excuse. You really *are* a meathead, aren't you?"

I shouted, "No, SIR!" It caught him off guard.

"If I say you're a goddamn meathead, then you are a goddamn meathead!"

"No, SIR!" I was pushing my luck.

"Ferrone, do you like abuse?"

"No, SIR!"

"Then stop bringing it on yourself. Just know your shit, and there won't be any problems. Got it?"

He had moved right under my nose and he glared up at me with unblinking eyes. I told him "Yes, sir," but he didn't go away for a half a minute, never blinking once the entire time he stared at me. I blinked several times, and swallowed hard more than once.

CHAPTER 3. CAMARADERIE

I remember a time when I was fifteen, and I was watching the Army-Navy football game, wondering if the players were just army men who had been given the privilege to drop their M-16's and suit up once a week during the college football season and play college teams. I didn't know Army and Navy were college teams, let alone academies. I had never heard of West Point.

I listened to the announcers describe those *fine young leaders of our country*, and my neck and spine tingled as the camera panned across the uniformed cadets, standing together sharp, proud to be there. One hundred and ten percent awe, I felt. They were there, and I was not. I was laying on shag carpeting in a recroom in the basement of a house in a suburb of Chicago.

I imagined being in the stands, how proud I would be standing in the ranks, impenetrable, performing cheers like at high school pep rallies, throwing smaller cadets in the air, and showcasing the spirit-invoking charisma of the corps. I wanted to be there. I imagined the fraternal energy sucking at me through the television.

I did get there. And then, after completing the first year, I left.

During the summer of Beast Barracks, at 0630 hours, the entire class of New Cadets would stand in formation on the apron, the cemented area that skirted the parade Plain. It was early morning revelry. We stood rigid, stiff with cold as our athletic name-shirts, dew-soaked from earlier calisthenics, steamed in the crisp New York dawn. Above the hills

just across the river, the sun, huge and red-orange, faintly glowed through the mist that filled the valley. I would whisper to the cadet next to me. She was an eighteen year old from Ohio, a little shorter than me, stocky and athletic, yet still very feminine--she, like all the female cadets, masked her femininity, allowing it to show only in the most subtle ways: a wink for support, a big, unabashed smile, a hint of perfume.

"Michelle, isn't it beautiful?"

"Yeah," she'd reply softly, her voice soothing compared to the morning hazing. And we realized that the red-orange globe was like hope, barely visible, yet dependably radiant when we needed it. One by one the companies would shout their motto. The cheers would progress along the apron, until it was our turn, Hotel Company. And we'd scream to out-scream the others: "We are the Hardcore Heroes; our spirit can't be beat! We never will surrender; we never will retreat! Drive on Hardcore. Drive on SIR!" And the distant Hudson valley would echo back our fraternal chant, solidifying us in pride and in service, shivering bodies and all.

The trumpet would sound. The cannon would fire, cracking the peace, and setting the sleeping river into motion. We would lower our salute and head into the mess hall.

Before me stood the silhouettes of a thousand cadets, and behind me a thousand more. We were standing at attention in the mess hall for a ceremony before Christmas leave. The ceiling was high; it could barely be seen looming high above the rows of candle-lit tables. The murals on

the expansive walls were mystical, portraying historic battles with illustrious detail. The Cadet Glee Club sang the “Alma Mater,” and the words floated to us, carried on the echoes created by the vaults in the ceiling, like a Gregorian chant in a Gothic cathedral. The words seeped into my ears and then down my spine, pouring finally into my limbs, tapping previously untouched wells of pride. I was aware of the sacred bond, the sacred spirit for which so many men had given their lives. I glanced across the table without moving my head. I saw the glistening streak of a tear on the face of a Firstie.

Thanksgiving leave, I was at LaGuardia airport awaiting the arrival of the plane that would take me away from West Point for six days. I was in my dress gray uniform--gray trousers with the black stripes, a matching gray zip-up body suit top with black trim around the cuffs, bottom, zipper, and neck collar, and a gray officer’s hat. Plebe’s had to travel in uniform. I don’t think any of us minded, though, because we received a lot of attention from strangers, and we felt proud to be representative of the academy while in the civilian ranks.

There was a group of guys, five of them, sitting a few rows over in the same waiting area. They had military haircuts, and I knew they were upperclassmen.

“Hey, bean!” One of them shouted over to me.

I popped up to attention and shouted back, “Yes sir!” All eyes in the area turned to me. I wasn’t sure what to do.

The cadets laughed, but it wasn't a jeering laugh. Another one said, "At ease, mister, come on over here and relax. You shouldn't be traveling alone." A short laugh followed this last comment, but I took it good naturedly as I grabbed my cadet issue bags and walked over to them. I could tell that the civilians knew what was going on, and that they were happy to see cadets taking care of one of their own.

"What's your name?"

"Sir, it is Cadet Ferrone."

"Fall out!" He said, his blond eyebrows scrunching with dismay that I had not yet realized that they were treating me as an equal. "Don't call us *Sir*, and just be yourself. Pretend you're not a Plebe. Have a seat." He sat back, and I lowered myself as if I were in the mess hall.

"Well, my name is John. Are you guys Yearlings?"

They laughed and the shortest of the bunch said, "No, we're Cows, but don't worry. What company you in?"

"Sir, I'm.... I mean Hotel-2"

"Where you headed?" He continued, while the other cadets sat back and listened as if being entertained.

"Chicago area." I finally felt a little more comfortable. I sat back and eased out of my position of attention. I was thrilled that I had been temporarily recognized by a group of juniors. I thought they were sophomores, which wouldn't have seemed as unbelievable because Yearlings (sophomores) were more than likely empathetic with Plebes. Cows (juniors) on the other hand, had the responsibility of strictly enforcing the Fourthclass haze system. Simpson was a Cow.

“Look around you, John. It’s John, isn’t it?” The blond cadet was talking again.

“Yes, sir.” It slipped out.

“What do you see?”

I paused before answering, to try and appear more casual, and then I said, “Well, there’s a shitload of people waiting to get on this plane, and I’m wondering if maybe I’ll get bumped and get a free ticket.”

“Did you hear that?” The blond cadet whirled with laughter to his fellow cadets. I thought he was excited about my free ticket idea. “He said *shitload* to me. Goddamn! Give a Plebe an inch, and he takes a mile!”

He looked at me again, red with laughter, and the other cadets were laughing, too. I wasn’t. I was slowly raising myself in my seat to the position of attention, but then he said, “No! Don’t worry, it’s just hilarious--we’ve taught you well! Go for more, go for more, all of the time!”

I felt awkward; I didn’t know if I was being hazed or not. I still felt like I was entertainment for the upper-class.

We continued with the small talk until we boarded and were separated. I knew that if I saw them on the post they would haze me mercilessly. But it was their job, and I appreciated that; in fact, I looked forward to an opportunity to show them that I could turn on and turn off the game just like they could. For now, we were partners versus the civvies.

* * *

Beast Barracks was where we Plebes unified and became dependent on each other. I remember entering the academy thinking that I was going to be a loner because I didn't want to have to depend on anyone else to accomplish the tasks that I knew would confront me. However, the upper-class cadets prevented any such attitude from persevering. By the end of Beast Barracks I was a part of a company of Plebes--Hotel Company--and the completion of all tasks depended on our cooperative skills. There were one hundred and thirty Plebes in Hotel company, with forty upper-class cadets in charge. The first time we sent out laundry we didn't know what to expect. Two days later there were one hundred seventy-five bundles, fifteen to twenty pounds each, waiting for us down on the ground level. Hotel company was on the fourth floor of the barracks. Our job as Plebes was to carry the bundles up to our barracks area, sort them out, and deliver them to the upperclassmen.

There were several rules to follow. We couldn't communicate to each other when we were outside our rooms. The bundles were in a pile with no organization, and we had to deliver the bundles in order according to rank: Firsties, Cows, and then Plebes (Yearlings didn't participate in Beast Barracks). We were organized into four different platoons, and we had to make sure that the correct laundry went to the correct platoon area before we could even begin to sort the laundry. All Plebes had to participate.

So there we were, about forty Plebes in a single three-person room, with one hundred seventy-five bundles of laundry piled on the beds, during the middle of the hottest summer on record in New York's

history, with forty upper-class cadets standing in the hallway outside the door jeering and demanding their laundry, and every Plebe who had loud vocals shouting to the other Plebes what way we should go about handling the dilemma.

That first laundry experience was the epitome of the purpose of Beast Barracks: put the Plebes together in a foreign situation and force them to learn the solution through trial and error. It is easy to imagine the bonds, and occasional hatred, that were formed that summer.

We were responsible for creating our own delivery system, and we were forced to rely on each other. If one Plebe sent another Plebe off to deliver the wrong bundle of laundry, it was the Plebe who was delivering who paid the price, not the Plebe who assigned the wrong bundle. The delivering Plebe simply had no excuse for the mistake.

I took pride in knowing that I always gave careful consideration to details so that my fellow Plebes did not get busted. Occasionally, though, I was the one who took the hit for another Plebe. It happened once during the academic year when we were delivering mail (a task similar to that of laundry).

I was pinging down the wall in the hallway (all Plebes had to ping along the inside wall of the hallways, and square every corner). I had an envelope in my hand that I needed to deliver to Cadet Owens, a Cow. Cadet Schmitt, another Cow, stopped me in the hallway.

“Ferrone, who are you delivering that to?”

“Sir, I am delivering it to Cadet Owens.”

“Where’s my mail? Did I get any?” He asked, his Darin Stevens chin jutting out with every syllable.

“Sir, I was told that this was the last piece of upper-class mail to be delivered. I do not know if there was any mail for you, sir.”

“Listen to me, Ferrone,” he said moving closer as I stood braced up against the wall, arms straight down at my sides, neck back and eyes forward, “I know I’ve got some mail because one of your companions said they saw it. Now, I want you to get it! Move out!”

“Yes, sir!” I said, pinged away from him towards the room we had established as mail headquarters.

I shot into the room and several Plebes looked at me.

“What’s up, man?” Williams asked me.

“I need to know if Schmitt, double ‘t’, got any mail. Someone told him they had seen something for him.”

“Oh, shit, I did,” said Nachman, “but it was for the other Schmidt, and I didn’t know it.” His mouth was hanging open a bit, and the others were quiet.

“So there’s no mail for the other Schmitt?”

“No,” said Williams.

“Nachman, take this to Cadet Owens. I have to report to Schmitt,” I said, giving him the letter. Then I turned and pinged out the door.

In ten seconds I was at Schmitt’s door. I removed my hat and placed it on the floor to the right of the door, with the bill facing outward. I stiffened to attention, and knocked three times.

“Enter.” A voice sounded within.

I opened the door, pushed it wide and stepped in three steps, and said while saluting, "Cadet Ferrone reports to Cadet Schmitt, sir."

"What Ferrone, where's my mail?"

"Sir, may I make a statement?"

"Yeah, what?"

"Sir, you did not receive mail today. I have confirmed with the head mail carrier that it was the other Cadet Schmidt who received mail."

He had a disappointed look on his face. I know he wanted to haze me, but I had done everything perfectly. Whatever he thought of would just be an attempt to cast a shadow on my shining performance.

"Get outta here Ferrone, and make sure you guys are getting it right, otherwise I'll visit you more so you know who I am!"

"Yes, sir." I executed an about face and left the room.

We Plebes were constantly covering each others' asses, and then some.

I loved to march. I don't know who else did, if anyone. There was something about parading that made my spine tingle. Perhaps it was the solidarity I felt with the Corps as we presented arms to the thousands of civilians who gathered in the bleachers to watch us. It was during those moments that I felt not like a Plebe but like a cadet, and not alone, but as a gathering of cadets on display for the public.

We looked like toy soldiers: dress gray top with rows of gold buttons, white pants, black shoes, a white cross belt over our chests held

by a gold buckle, tall black hats with a plume sticking out of the top, M-14 wooden stock rifles over our right shoulders, white gloves, the left hand swinging forward and back as we marched, and the West Point band playing triumphant *marches* that sounded better than music from any parade band I had ever heard.

We would fall in to formation in the area enclosed by the barracks. On command we would shoulder our rifles and march towards the sallyport, the gateway to the Plain. I felt like we had suited up for a big game, and we were taking the field. From the paved barracks area to the lush grass of the Plain, we marched to the beat of the drums. At first glimpse of the crowd my body would shiver and my spine would tingle. I was able to stand straighter and taller during parades than at any other time. In front of me was Cadet Panciera, an upper-class cadet who loved to haze me. Yet on the Plain we were cadets unified through a purpose. All hazing gave way to teamwork, and there was no better feeling than that of inclusion.

Undoubtedly, the most rewarding experience of participating in the spirit of West Point camaraderie was standing at the football games. All cadets were required to attend the home football games, and the entire Corps of Cadets stood in one section during the entire game. Like high schoolers at a cross-town rivalry game, or a state championship, we participated in the game by being what West Point tradition calls the *twelfth man*. And at half time, cadets would paratroop into the stadium from high above.

When we got close to the goal line on offense, we would shout, "The bone's goin' in. The bone's goin' in." That referred to the wishbone backfield, of course. And at the same time we would wave our arm (the one opposite the end zone) so that when we said *in* we were all pointing across our bodies towards the end zone. I wish I could have seen it from the other side of the stadium--four thousand cadets dressed the same and performing the same gesture. Our shout was thunderous.

And when we scored, the Plebes would toss cadets in the air. I was lucky, because I was small and strong; I could push off as they flung my body upward, and I would come down into their arms with no fear of being dropped. No one soared higher.

CHAPTER 4. PLEBE SURVIVAL: THE LIGHTER SIDE OF CADET LIFE

Playing baseball provided some relief from the typical tensions of Plebe life. The dugout was a home away from the barracks, and at times I found myself living for the time I could escape to the dugout, where there were no class divisions. Even still, my best friends on the team were fellow Plebes: James Bents, Brent Monroe, and Tim Sheridan. In the dugout we shared our ups and downs. We would arrive and revive, and leave happy, although in the back of our minds we knew we were returning to the pressures we had escaped for a short while. And sometimes that was the hardest part of being a cadet: anytime a Plebe had the opportunity to leave West Point, that cadet returned with the depressing realization that he or she could not permanently escape the monotony of Plebe life, and small stints away from the hazing served only to tease the Plebe; the return trip back to West Point was worse than the hazing itself--I remember traveling for eight hours from Omaha to West Point after Thanksgiving, dreading the sight of Simpson, or Schmitt.

Everyday during the baseball season I lived that cycle. Some days it was harder than others, especially if I knew I was in trouble, or had extra duties to perform, or had too much homework, or didn't know my knowledge, or all of the above. The walk back from the dugout was depressing. On certain days I wished that I had gotten hurt during practice and would have to be given a discharge from the academy because my injury would affect my officer training. I pleaded with some higher power to intervene and make it all end for me. I could not muster

the courage to make the choice to voluntarily resign, no matter how bad an experience I anticipated on my walks back to the barracks.

As a rule, though, the time on the diamond and in the dugout was a happy time, and I, along with the other Plebes, learned how to turn off our awareness of the pressures until we were ready to return to the barracks. Yes, happy times they were, the kind that keep people sane in an insane world.

On one occasion, I had arrived in the dugout before Tim. I was standing, adjusting my cup. Tim walked in.

“Hey Ferrari, what’s up?” Sheridan said to me. The team called me *Ferrari* instead of *Ferrone* because I was fast.

“Timmy bud, not much. What about you?”

“Not a whole lot. I got lit up just before coming to practice.”

“Oh yeah? What’d ya’ do?” We were putting our spikes on, talking between lace-ups. Tim seemed a little tight.

“Oh, well,” he started to say, his voice was the usual: exasperated as if every time he got in trouble it was really because there was something wrong with him as a human being. He was too forgiving of the cadets who messed with him. “I screwed up at lunch today, and my squad leader’s all over my ass now.”

“What’d ya’ mean you screwed up at lunch?”

“I didn’t cut enough pieces of pie. Nine wanted a piece, and I only cut eight.” He looked bewildered. His face was oval, with droopy but

shiny eyes, and full cheeks. But now his forehead was furrowed, and it made me wonder if something was really wrong.

“So...?”

“Well, instead of the usual treatment when they take your piece away--because you forgot someone else, you know?--my table commandant gave me the whole pie.”

“Really? Wow! What kind was it?” I punched him in the shoulder. We jogged out of the dugout and went to stretch in the grass. The sun was bright and the afternoon was warm, a rarity in the fall on the Hudson.

“So then what?” I asked.

“Well, my squad leader was at the table, eating lunch, and he wanted a piece of pie pretty bad.”

“Did ya’ tell `im you’d share if he came to your room?” Tim chuckled, a very unique giggle, like a squirrelle chattering, and I felt good to see him smile. He was pretty down. “And when he comes to your room, tell him he’ll have to wrestle your ass to get the pie!” Now he was laughing, and he played along as we imagined the scene.

“He’d knock,” Tim said, “and I’d say `Enter’ and he’d come in and say `Where’s that goddamn pie?’”

I was clutching my stomach because it hurt from laughing. Between gasps I added, “It’s in a safe place, you fat-fuck slob, and you’re gonna have to wrestle my ass to get it.”

It took a minute for us to stop laughing, and then Tim said seriously as he wiped a tear from his eye, “God! He’d kill me if I said that!”

And I started laughing harder at Tim's seriousness, and he started laughing at his own seriousness. Brent jogged out to stretch with us. "What's so funny?" He said, an eager smile on his face like he wanted to laugh hard, too.

We went through the routine again, Brent laughing harder than us, his sharp comic book hero jaw bouncing with laughter. As Plebes we always wondered whether or not the cadets laughed about us in their privacy--no, we knew they did. And it was necessary for us to do the same. When upper-class met Fourthclass, both played the game, yet each went back to their respective dugouts and laughed at the other side.

Frick the Hick--that's the nickname our company gave to one of my roommates during the academic year. Buddy Frick, his real name was James, was from Texas and he had a problem with his nasal cavities. Some distortion of their shape caused him to sound congested, and when it was real bad, like he was talking while pinching his nose. Once, while being hazed in formation, he was asked about a newspaper article concerning Mayor Koch of New York. He pronounced *Koch* as *Cock*. And with the nasal sound, the word came out as *Caaaaahhkk*. And he didn't even mean it--didn't even realize what he had said. All the cadets burst out laughing when he sounded off in formation with that one.

"Mayor who, Frick?!" Asked Cadet Simpson.

"Sir, Mayor Cock."

"No, Frick, it's Mayor Koch with a c-h as in church, you bonehead."

Despite the embarrassment, Buddy remained hardcore. He

never took the hazing personally, and he was an extremely devoted cadet. He possessed the admirable quality of being able to appropriately balance the two extreme principles faced off against each other in academy life, which were to serve your country, and to keep your civilian sensibility.

This young man, from Seminole, Texas, once said to me, when I had asked him his reason for coming to West Point, "John," (and did he ever drag the "o" out, I had to breathe for him), "I have always wanted to serve my country. I would have joined the Army if I hadn't of gotten in here." I was dumbfounded! Join the Army for the sake of joining the Army! What the hell!? I didn't tell him that the thought had never occurred to me. Damn! I didn't know jack about the Army. I was at the academy because it was prestigious--a real honor, and maybe, only if I didn't keep my sense about me, I would learn to like the Army. Even so, Buddy was the only cadet I knew who said he would have joined the Army regardless of the academy appointment.

Yet as I said, this same kid realized that he too needed to escape from the academy rituals every so often, and he had a knack for doing just that. On a Tuesday night, once, while most cadets were bogged down with academics during study hours, Buddy decided to wrap himself up with toilet paper--like a mummy. No kidding, just like a mummy. He had disappeared from the room suddenly for three minutes, leaving Craig, my other roommate and me baffled about his purpose. When he returned with a roll of toilet paper, and then took off almost all of his clothes, Craig and I closed the notebooks, anticipating a real hazing session if a cadet happened to knock at the door.

Frick had on only his briefs. After we convinced him to put on at least his bathrobe, he stepped into his flip-flops and began to cover his chest and next his head with toilet paper. Rolling it around his body, occasionally chuckling sadistically, he finally uttered, "Boy, this is goin' be great."

"Buddy, what the hell are you doin'?" Craig blurted unevenly between gasps of laughter.

"Shhhhhh. I'm goin' on a `venture" Buddy explained, his nasal congestion truncating his words.

I shot in, "Where?"

"Awww, I don' know, maybe Bice's room, and then Hausman's," he replied.

He had finished covering his torso and head, all except his mouth and eyes. And when he put on his glasses, and dashed on a black, shoe-polish mustache, and called himself the *Plebe Musketeer*, Craig and I fell to the floor, unable to breathe, straining our temples with painful laughter.

"Check the hall for me, John," he said.

I got up, cracked the door open and looked out. Turning incredulously to him, I reported, "You're clear." For a moment I foolishly wondered if he was still serious. But when I opened the door completely and he shot past me, giggling to himself, ping-ponging hurriedly, arms positioned like that of a southern gentleman escorting a debutante, I stood motionless, wondering if I'd ever see him alive again. He disappeared around the corner, and the last I saw of him was the tail end

of the bathrobe drifting up behind him as he gained speed, although I could still hear his mischievous giggle, and the distinctive pitter-patter of his flip-flops slapping the tile floor.

Craig looked at me, and I at him. We couldn't figure out what had gotten in to Frick. The strangest thing he had ever done before was tell a story about racing his horse against an armadillo for forty yards, and the armadillo won. "They're fast little critters, I tell ya'," he had said with sincerity.

So we waited. For fifteen minutes we could only guess at his whereabouts--Hausman's room? Bice's? Or the hallway, locked up against the wall, receiving the full brute force of the upper-classmen of Company Hotel-2? And just as we had determined that Buddy must have suffered an ill fate, the toilet-papered musketeer bolted into the room.

After laughing again, for laughter's sake, and out of fear and then joy for his safety, I finally asked him, "Buddy, what the hell did you do that for?"

"Sometimes this place makes people crazy, and to deal with it," he paused to catch his breath, "someone's got to provide a release for the others. This time, I did it."

I think my fondest memories come from time spent with my roommates in our room. We never hid anything from each other; we had nothing to hide. Just after taps one Wednesday evening Buddy, Craig, and I were brushing our teeth. We had another half hour until lights out. I rinsed my mouth, dried off and went to my closet to prepare my uniform

for the next day. I heard Craig climb onto the top bunk. Buddy had the single bed, and I slept underneath Craig. Buddy's bed was between the closet and the bunk. I heard a loud fart. Craig laughed loud and said, "Buddy, was that you? God!"

I had turned when Craig said *God*, and as I looked across Buddy's bed at Buddy, who was sitting on MY pillow, Buddy said, "Yup!" And the biggest, cheesiest grin broke across his face and he began to giggle. He tried to look innocent, but he didn't fool me.

Craig leaned over the top of the bunk and said, "Goddamn Frick! That smells terrible! Did you lose anything? Jesus!" And then he looked at me for support, but I had a serious look on my face, and Buddy was still giggling, staring back at me.

Then Craig realized Buddy's attack, "Oh my God! You did that on his pillow? Oh! Oh! Oh!" He broke into uproarious laughter and rolled into the middle of his bed.

Buddy looked up at the top bunk and continued laughing.

"You're fuckin' dead," I said sternly.

And Buddy kept laughing.

I yanked down my pajama shorts and underwear and ran over to Buddy's bed. Before he could react I grabbed his pillow.

Craig was watching again, and Buddy wasn't laughing anymore. I could see the panic in his eyes. Craig asked, "What are you doing?"

I took Buddy's pillow and wiped my ass and rubbed my genitals all over it.

Buddy's face lit up with horror. Craig screamed and choked himself with laughter. Buddy ran around the bed to get to me. I threw down the pillow to divert him. He went for the pillow, and as a final gesture I hopped inside his sheets and rolled my naked, hairy body around a few times and hopped out just in time to avoid Buddy's leap.

I was on my bed now, and Buddy was on his bed, on all fours, guarding it and his pillow like a Rotweiler. Craig's breaths came short, and far between.

"Shut up, Craig!" Buddy shouted.

"No way, man, Buddy, you deserved it, and that was the funniest fuckin' thing I've ever seen--you two chasin' each other around naked and fartin' on each other. God!" And he lost control again. And Buddy lightened up, his face softening and the redness disappearing, and he began to laugh at himself. And so did I.

We recounted the event over and over again, far past lights out. I thought we were lucky that no one came in to tell us to shut up.

As I calmed down I felt a little bad that I had gone to such an extreme. I said softly, "Buddy, man, I'm sorry I went so far."

He chuckled and replied, "Naw, that was funny, and I'll get you back. Goodnight, John."

He never did retaliate.

CHAPTER 5. ZERO SPIRITUALITY

Before West Point, during my year at Creighton, I found peace of mind and love of life. I was eighteen, and the change from Chicago to Omaha offered a new perspective on life for me; I no longer felt immersed in an environment that pressured the individual to love money and the cut-throat methods of acquiring it. Instead, in Omaha I was able to appreciate the sunsets on the horizon which was flecked with trees and wheat fields, not buildings. Perhaps the generalizations are too simple, and naive at that, but in Omaha I found a perspective on life that was founded partially on the fact that strangers said *Hi* to each other when passing on the street.

The Creighton environment changed my heart. Close friends, attentive adults, stimulating literature, and, most important, the Jesuit spirituality, all combined to establish for me the strongest sense of identity I had ever had.

When I arrived at West Point, there was no room for the spirituality I had found at Creighton, and my identity slipped into the shadow of the academy's demand for team-oriented thinking. The Fourthclass system demanded rational thinking; I could no longer depend on my relationship with God to see me through hard times. Three weeks into Beast Barracks I had determined that I was on my own, and that God was nowhere to be found on the post.

Cadets were encouraged to attend their church services on Sundays, but simply being in a church did not help me to put everything out of my mind. I was being brainwashed to have the military on my

mind at all times--attention to details, all details, all of the time. I would sit in the church pew and think about the last haze session, or the upcoming haze session, or the test, or paper due, or the other responsibilities I had as a Plebe. And my perception of God did not fit into the West Point routine. Yet throughout the entire year, in the back of my mind, I knew that there was a God, and that I had been in tune with God when I was at Creighton, and I had just not yet figured out how to tune God in at West Point. I felt like Gatsby, when he was forlorn that he could no longer retrieve the innocence he had so long ago given to Daisy with a kiss under a tree in the moonlight. All Gatsby could do was stare at the green light across the lake, and hope that there was some way he could return to the past because he could not recognize himself in the present. Creighton glowed to me like a green light half way across the United States. I was at West Point, wondering how I could recreate my relationship with God there, but believing deep down that it was impossible. I was desperate.

Perhaps I was trying too hard, and the trying itself was the relationship. I don't know. What I do know is that there were times that I felt truly broken, the kind of broken that the Onufrows must have been speaking of. But I protected the pieces of myself, and guarded them from the reshaping process that was the trademark of the academy. If I couldn't have my spirituality the way I wanted it, no academy was going to have me the way it wanted me. Never once did I ever consciously decide that I would give myself entirely to the military.

The moments when I felt broken were the most difficult. At times I would take walks in the woods by myself, trying to create a transcendent experience, but that was in vain. Other instances I would sit in the room and waste time. Apathy was a trademark characteristic of a person struggling against the remodeling process.

There was one spiritual light, however. Major Buck Walker, his wife Cathy, their two little boys and daughter were the sources of my inspiration on many occasions. The Walker family was my sponsor family, assigned to help me escape the Plebe routines and remain sane. They did more than that. Major Walker was very spiritual; he studied the Bible frequently and relied upon it. Mrs. Walker was also religious, and together they tried several times to jump-start my personal relationship with God. It almost worked, until my academy experience took a nose dive during the second semester.

In February I went on a Christian retreat with thirty other cadets. I was one of six Plebes. During the retreat weekend I experienced more religious euphoria than I had during the combined days since I had left Creighton. And in the midst of this religious euphoria I came to the conclusion that my relationship with God was the key to my self-identity and thus was more important than West Point, and that I should leave the academy as soon as possible in order to resume my spiritual life. I had determined that there was absolutely no way I could have God and have the Army at the same time. I was a highly motivated Fourthclass cadet, ready to hit the road home and back to Creighton.

During the last night of the retreat I woke in the dark and scribbled a note to myself in the dark (as not to wake the others). I had been thinking about Susan before I fell asleep, and how she would react to my decision to leave. She was a supportive person, not just because she was my girlfriend, but because she knew me well. She had come to know the John at Creighton, and it was her who, by simply acknowledging my struggling thoughts, helped me to hang on to the seedling identity that I had left behind.

I also thought about the three months ahead until second semester was over--I was planning to stay for the duration of Plebe year. I wrote: "I have to be true to myself. West Point has humbled me, hasn't it? Am I about to do the right thing? If not, I am young, and I can afford a blunder, but I am trusting Christ to help me through. I want to love people. I want to share Christ back at Creighton. I can't wait. I'm scared. I'm scared that Susan will not understand. I am burned out. No more thinking--no more analyzing this, and no more justifying. Just sit back. Day by day for three months. Let God take over. I am coming home. I am coming home, to peace." I felt a rush of energy pass through my body as I lay back down. I believed that I was going to return to the place where I once had control over who I wanted to be, and where I had a personal relationship with God that gave me the strength to define who I was despite the disapproval I felt from many people, people who were unaccepting of my college and career paths: majoring in English, and eventually teaching.

* * *

That inspiration to leave lasted just two days after I returned from the retreat. It perished when I had two good days in a row--no imperfections in Fourthclass duties, good grades on quizzes, and the acquisition of an entire blueberry pie from the dinner table because no one wanted it. "This really ain't so bad, ya' know?" I said to Craig as we devoured the pie in our room.

"Whaddaya mean?"

"Well, I was thinking about leaving. But, there's really no reason."

"Why were ya' thinkin' that?"

"Oh, I don't know," I said casually. I didn't want to share my retreat experience, so I said, "I guess I was just sick of the game and I didn't think it was for me."

It didn't occur to me until much later that my good days had filled the void left by the absent spirituality; I had been very close to making that substitution the norm for the rest of my life.

One night I attended a Bible study at the Walker's home. There were six other adults. I was the only cadet. The evening began with introductions and summaries of peoples' past weeks. I told a few funny stories--I had slipped into my entertainment mode, and the couples seemed to enjoy it. I was a good story teller, being Italian and all.

"How about if we read a few passages for discussion and application," Major Walker said.

Major Walker read a passage from the Bible and we began discussing it. I enjoyed this task because it reminded me of discussions

of literature I so much enjoyed at Creighton. I loved to speculate about deeper themes and discuss relevant applications to the reader's perspectives. Before long, the group was directing questions at me as if I were the interpreter of scripture. I basked in the attention, and I tried so hard to delve deeper into possible interpretations and applications of the scripture.

For an hour and a half we discussed two passages. We took turns sharing opinions, and I only volunteered my comments when they were asked for, and that was often. One passage was from the *Gospel According to Matthew*. It was a parable about jealous workers in a vineyard. Some workers started work in the morning and worked through the heat of the day. Other workers started in the late afternoon after the heat had passed. All of the workers quit at the same time. The master gave the same wage to all of the workers, regardless of their start time. The workers who had started in the morning were mad because they thought they should get more than those who started later. The master replied to this protest with the remark that the morning workers had agreed to work for a certain wage, and that the master had the right to do with his money whatever he wanted. Furthermore, the master told the morning workers that they were jealous of the master's generosity.

The nature of the Bible study was to find personal application from the passages we read. Major Walker started off the discussion by saying, "I think we have all experienced something similar to that of the morning workers. Isn't it true that somewhere down the line there is

someone who is the same rank as us but who receives better treatment or better privileges than we do?”

Everyone in the room nodded in agreement. Mrs. Walker added, “And being a spouse of an officer, you feel it in different ways. It’s so easy to be jealous of other people, but that’s not what God wants us to do.” She was confident. She had short curly hair, bright green eyes, and milk-white skin. I couldn’t help having a crush on her. She was attractive, but her beauty was secondary to the fact that she had a warm personality and she always cheered me up. I was half a country away from Susan, and I needed feminine compassion in this macho environment.

Three of the other adults added personal examples of how they felt like the early morning workers in the parable, and how they should try to recognize that such concerns were not worth the effort. I couldn’t help openly disagreeing.

“I’m not sure I agree with what seems to be the common perspective,” I said, trying to sound specific and academic. “How many times are we ever really in the situation described in the parable?” I paused to see if they were interested in what I was saying. All eyes were on me, so I continued.

“What I’ve been hearing from the group is that people of the same rank or status are being treated better than you. But in the parable, the two groups of workers are different. The master has a right to treat them differently if he chooses. Of course, our self-worth should not depend on how our masters treat us in comparison to our fellow majors, or captains, or cadets, or civilians. But at the same time, because we are

human, we must.” There were a couple of blank looks, and I felt as if I was losing it, just going in circles.

“How do you mean?” Mrs. Walker asked.

“Well,” I responded, “ I, for example, am forced by my academy environment to define my identity in terms of my fellow Plebe cadets. Why? Because the only worth that I can have at this place is through recognition by upperclassmen or fellow Plebes that I am a good Plebe.”

The group was looking at me with a very serious expression. I added one more thing, “The obvious message of the parable is that we need not compare ourselves to others when it comes to heavenly rewards. We don’t say, ‘God, I was better than this person, so I should have more heaven.’” There were a couple of chuckles.

“The concept of comparison is a human perspective and it is limited to mortal application.” As I paused, I thought, *that sounded good*. I was picking up steam for a strong close, although I couldn’t have explained it all again if I had tried. I had lost myself not long after I had started. But they didn’t know that: just like a Plebe, the art of bullshit-- act like you know your stuff and pray no one calls your bluff.

“And that is the deeper message: at the same time that we must realize that God deals with us as individuals without comparing us, we must recognize that we are living among humans who are very fragile, and who need self-affirmation all of the time. And we are fragile and need just as much self-affirmation.” I think they liked the phrase *self-affirmation*, because they nodded in agreement whenever I said it. It had a mature ring to it.

“We shouldn’t be afraid to stick up for what we feel is right in the human realm. God gave us the ability to think and judge so that we could do just that.” I knew they couldn’t argue with that last statement.

I heard a lot of *That was really deep, really good. I never thought of that before.* My heart was pounding. I was beaming from their praise, and I even entertained thoughts of being a preacher.

When the Bible study ended and the guests were leaving, they thanked me for my input and said it had been the best gathering in the past year thanks to me. I felt extremely proud, an unhealthy level of pride. Later I would realize how vain I had been to think that these were shallow people who needed my insights so that their lives would be fulfilled.

That night I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, listening to taps. Craig and Buddy were gone for the weekend. I started to hum a Bruce Springsteen song, *The River*, which seemed appropriate. The song is about lost hope, and I lay there with no hope: it had occurred to me that I had participated in that Bible study not like a Christian, but like a cadet, competing for attention and offering answers in an attempt to place myself above the others. I had been brainwashed to always try to be first, no matter what the situation. There was always a reward to be claimed. Even the gratitude of the guests as they were leaving was a trophy for me. I didn’t even hear my own message when I was speaking--I was too busy trying to be the authority that night.

Before long I was thinking about God. I had never felt so far away from God as I did at West Point. After growing up in a family molded by Roman Catholicism, I felt abandoned at West Point. Staring out the window into the April night, I recalled a poster titled *Footprints in the Sand*, which has a message that during the worst times of our lives, when God is seemingly not present, it is those times that He is carrying us and we are unaware.

I dismissed the validity of the poster's message, and closed my eyes to fall asleep. But I kept thinking about the year so far, and how I had asked God for help every day. I rarely felt His presence, and there was no way that He was carrying me!

I started to get mad. I was sweating under the sheets, so I kicked them down off of my body. I had needed God when I sat crying up on the hill in the woods, trying to think things through, the rain pouring down on my face as I looked up for relief. I had needed Him when I sat helpless in the phone booth, calling Susan a light-year away studying in Spain. I had needed Him when Mom sent me a letter about the phone bills, telling me that I was nothing more than a lying weasel trying to support a long-distance relationship by using my family for all it was worth.

My teeth were clenched. I wanted to whip my pillow across the room. All I ever did was pick my own ass up when I fell. I regulated my attitude when Simpson broke me left and right. I fought back when he was messing with my mind. I recovered and continued forward after

every academic blow that let me know just how frickin' stupid I could be. God wasn't there!

The room door opened. I opened my eyes to see a figure poke his head in to do the night check. I didn't move. I could feel the frustrated energy pulsing wildly through my veins. I wanted to scream out loud and listen to my scream echo against the granite buildings across the paved courtyard just outside my window. The door closed and I breathed heavily.

CHAPTER 6. LEAVING--THE HARD ROAD HOME

"...And the last man feels to his marrow

The grip of your far off hold...."

From "The Corps"

Bishop H.S. Shipman, U.S.M.A. 1896-1905

April passed quickly, and before long the academy was buzzing with graduation excitement.

When asked how many days until graduation, we would respond: "Sir, there are fourteen and a butt days until graduation and graduation parade for the Class of 1989!" Every Plebe knew the number of days remaining just as well as if not better than any graduating Firstie, for after the graduation parade, the Plebes would be recognized, and the hazing would finally end. Not long after that, I kept telling myself, I would be on a plane headed for Chicago, permanently.

Summer had come early. It was in the high eighties during the first half of May. By the time graduation finally arrived, spirits were soaring, and every Plebe found extra energy to willingly perform Fourthclass duties, despite sweating profusely and ruining several uniforms. Ironically, when we were at our best, the Cows didn't bother to pay attention to haze us. Plebe life was enjoyable, and we were tempted to forget the preceding year by simply denying it had ever happened.

Often I found myself close to second-guessing my decision to leave. Once, cadet Rugen came into my room. He had knocked softly on the

open door. I was in the room alone, packing. I popped to attention and said, "Enter sir."

"Relax," he said gently, placing his hat on the sink. "Do you mind if I close the door?"

"No sir," I replied, wondering what was about to happen.

He took his time with the door, walking with it until it closed without the usual bang. Then he turned and leaned against the sink, and said, "So I here you're leaving." He ran a big hand through his tightly trimmed blond hair, and then rubbed his other hand across his small chin.

"Yes sir," I said. My voice was low. I was ashamed. Rugen was the cadet I admired most. He was a Firstie, and he knew how to command a person's respect.

"I was sorry to hear that. I've enjoyed seeing you perform the entire year, one of the best in the company, always thinking. Really sharp. You'd make a fine officer."

I wanted to respond, but I was choked with despair.

He continued, "But if you realize it isn't for you, then you're making the right decision. It's a tough decision--I know a lot of guys who wanted to do the same as you, but couldn't because of parents, relatives, communities, you name it. You've got guts, and it's always showed."

He was pressing his lips together between sentences, and looking at the floor occasionally with tiny eyes that darted about quickly.

"Thanks," I said, with no *sir* attached, "I haven't heard that very much."

“Don’t worry, John.” It was a shock to hear my first name.
“Wherever you go, people are going to listen to you. You’ve got charisma. You won’t have a problem being who you want to be.”

“And your soldiers are going to love serving for you.” It was all I could think to say.

He smiled and broke into a more casual tone, “So what are your plans?”

I spoke more casually, too, and rattled off the *Chicago for the summer and then to Creighton* plan.

And when I was done, he stepped forward and shook my hand. “Good luck,” he said, “and remember who you are.”

“I will. Thanks. Good luck to you, too.”

He left the room, and I was wondering what he had meant. Part of me wanted to stay and graduate, and then follow him and be his loyal subordinate forever.

The next day I filled out my resignation papers.

* * *

The intense heat rising from the expansive wings distorted my vision as I sat in the terminal watching the delays build up.

I felt funny wearing jeans--it was ninety-eight degrees outside. They had a ton of holes in them, though, so they weren't too uncomfortable. My favorite pair of blue-jeans, they were, the back pocket half ripped off, the thighs smooth with wear--a precious artifact of my past. I studied the frayed threads hanging off the side of my knee,

pondering a coincidence: I had had them on nearly a year ago today when I arrived, and now I had them on again, and I was on my way out of here. Reaching down below my seat I re-positioned the one piece of cadet-issue luggage that I was taking back with me--small, gray, and simple, containing a few personal items and a pair of very well spit-polished shoes.

I twisted the threads into a tornado, using the sweat from my tense hand to mold the shape. It made me recall Omaha. Creighton University was typical college; I enjoyed it, and I would be back there soon. I remembered having to tell myself that I wasn't satisfied with Creighton so that I could develop the courage to leave. Leaving. I left friends, family, love, the security of familiarity. And when I was in Chicago's O'Hare airport waiting to board my departing flight for New York, Creighton was already a memory that seemed like limbo. If ever I have felt the way the pioneers of the West felt, it was then, waiting to leave for West Point: I was embarking for the unknown, and I had to rely on simple confidence to deal with the ambiguity.

Roughly a year later, I realized that I had been to *my* West, and now I was heading back. Sitting in a Newark airport terminal, my thoughts swam in an ocean of confused circumstances. It was like I had just arrived yesterday, and now it was over. It struck me violently that I was suddenly without purpose, a cardinal sin for a Fourthclassman, or any cadet for that matter.

I sighed a bit, destroyed the thread tornado, and took up my hourly battle with self doubt. Too often I wondered what in the hell I was doing.

I told myself that I had walked away from it all--everything anyone bent on success could ask for. And for what? To be true to myself! Just like the Romantics. I started wondering if my mom was right. She had said, "Life isn't romantic, John. Why don't you wake up and smell the coffee?!"

My grandma agreed with my mom. When Grandma found out I was leaving West Point, she asked, "Johnny, why you gonna' leave that place," her Italian accent sounding sluggish over the long distance connection. "You made it through the toughest year."

I replied, "Well, Grandma, I don't think that I'm doing what I was meant to do here."

Then she said in a lower voice, "But you gonna' be somebody if you stay there."

I protested, "Grandma, I'm going to be somebody important no matter where I go." But my answer was in vain.

"No, you won't," she said simply, and the conversation was over.

I don't blame Grandma for her opinion. As an immigrant, she traveled to America during the early part of the Depression. She knew what the power of reputation meant in America. She knew, and still believed, that times were cruel towards the working person, and that sweat and faith had nothing to do anymore with providing for yourself or your family. The academy, for Grandma, not only meant a shoe-in for success, but it also signified that those who were disassociated from it were bound to experience hardship and poverty, Depression style.

Outside the terminal window I saw a man on the ground. He waved bright orange flags as a plane approached the gate area. I sighed again, tilted my head back and closed my eyes.

I told my self over and over again that I needed to shake this feeling off and get out of the rut. I was staring out at the jumbo jet now parked in front of me and undergoing preparations for its next flight. I whispered to myself, hoping that the sound of my own voice would comfort me, "You're doin' all right. You are being true to yourself. I took a new direction. That's all there is to it. Can't doubt." Shifting in the seat again, I nodded in disgust as if someone had told me to perk up. I wanted to worry and complain and feel sorry for myself. I had the right. I earned it!

For a moment my thoughts were interrupted by selfish anger. There was no room for positive insight, not until the anger subsided. And it did. The cycle ran its course, and my voice of reason finally returned. There was no time to be negative--before I know it, I will have wasted a day, two days, a week, a frickin' lifetime. Sitting in the airport at that moment I realized that I needed to make a conscious effort to remain positive. But how long could I really keep that up?

The Army had taught me how to get the most out of a minute, and the challenge was to do it for a lifetime.

I had been sitting dejected and defensive in Newark airport, New Jersey. A military police van had delivered me from West Point. Not more than two hours had passed since I had signed my final separation

papers. The head guard post was quiet when I had entered. A tall, perfect cadet--clean cut, posture rigid, uniform crisp, voice monotone--tended to me from the other side of a long office counter. There were three other perfect cadets in the room, and they turned to eye me when I presented my separation papers and requested a final signature before dismissal.

The first cadet, really perfect, signed and turned the paper to me, while placing the pen with a swift, precise motion down on the counter, directly parallel to the paper. He commanded me to read item one before I signed.

I gazed down at the document for a moment, and then began to read: "I, John Ferrone, do hereby voluntarily tender my resignation from the United States Military Academy. My reasons for resigning are as follows: a) I am no longer interested in becoming a military officer; b) I value my experience at my previous civilian university more than the cadet experience at West Point; and c) I am very interested in pursuing a civilian career."

The cadet gave me a nod to proceed with the signing.

I picked the pen up almost clumsily and signed my name. No one said a word. Although they watched, their attention was not out of interest in me (no pleasant "What are you going to do with your *life*," or even a simple "Good luck"); they were simply overseeing another procedure, the paperwork of which would be coldly processed by my social security number--not by name, personality or memory, nor even with the awareness that they were losing a good cadet.

I felt that no one noticed, and that no one cared. No one tried to intervene and plead with me, although the vain and dramatic sides of me half expected and half hoped they would. Yet there would be no final dramatic episode. And so I gloomily acknowledged that my leaving didn't make a bit of difference to anyone but me. I wasn't Clark Gable, exiting dramatically as Rhett in *Gone With the Wind*. Yet I craved an opportunity to tell them I didn't give a damn how much they pleaded with me to stay. Better yet, I wanted to see it in their eyes: *Wow! This kid has balls, and don't we wish we could do what he's doing*. In a twisted way, I knew if that were the case, I would have felt justified in the terminal, rather than despairing at my circumstances; no matter what was in store for me, I would have had the satisfaction of being envied.

Instead, I knew just how insignificant I was, and I was stunned. What had I been thinking? The academy's colors were not flying at half mast in humble recognition of my resignation. Rather, they waved proud, at the top of the pole, overlooking the majestic Hudson River, lazily loafing its way through New York's velvety Spring, lime-green valleys. No memorial for me. And it was every other cadet's duty to make sure I understood that. The routines that I had rejected would still be honored. And only I would remember that I had even performed them.

And perform them I had. "Move out!" The upper-classmen used to scream at us. And I, along with a hundred other peon Fourthclassmen would speed up our ping, hurrying along with elbows locked and arms swinging, and feet scurrying at the official 120-steps-per-minute rate,

nearly running. Like agitated ants after their hill is smashed, we would scatter across the Area--that huge cement courtyard that caused shin-splints and bruised our heels. Sometimes we were on our way to formation for lunch, or dinner, or even a *friendly* hazing session. Or sometimes it was to deliver laundry from the sally port. Or maybe to deliver the mail--scurrying around like jack-rabbits in the hallway, restricted to the inside wall, squaring off corners, colliding with each other at terrific pinging speeds, entertainment for the upperclassmen. And always, as Plebes in Company Hotel-2, we sounded off to the upper-class cadets with our company motto, "Happy as Hell, Sir!"

And the routines carried into the classroom--Calculus I and II: "Sir," I would begin, standing at attention with a pointer in my left hand, addressing the class and professor with regard to the problem I had worked on the blackboard, "I am required to present problem number four...." And I would move the pointer stiffly along, while talking through the lines of the problem, dreading an interruption by the professor that would bring sure humiliation.

And there was Military Science class. Again, we would work at the blackboards, demonstrating our military prowess in designing plans for the defense of a hilltop, so painstakingly calculated, so sadistically serious, so ridiculously colorful. My sergeant inquired about my map, "Mr. Ferrone, is that where your troop was ordered to place the machine gun?" I answered with a simple "No, Sir." And he continued, "Then why is it there?" He pointed to the little symbol I had made with my pink chalk. "Sir, I placed it there because the position offers greater potential

to strike more of the approaching enemy. The other position restricted the gunner's mobility to the left side." And with that the sergeant simply created other variables to persuade me to move the machine gun to its intended location. Then he moved on to the next cadet, while I stood there, half-way through second semester, staring blankly at the chalkboard, asking myself what in the world I was doing locating M-60 machine guns on a blackboard map with a piece of hot-pink chalk.

So I was sitting in the airport, recalling the memories, feeling like a kid who has been riding the merry-go-round while the older boys pushed it faster, until, after jumping off, he lay free in the grass, but still dizzy from the ride.

A woman's voice sounded over the intercom. Half of the people seated in the lounge area in front of gate nineteen got up and prepared to board their flight. So many different routines, millions, maybe billions, all happening, each in its own way, no one caring how their routine might overlap and interfere with anyone else's. But at least they all had a direction, something more than I had. I wondered if they realized it. Could they see in my face as they hurried by: *Oh, dear me, look at that sorry boy right there. He must not have a direction in life: too bad.*

I wanted to get up on my chair and tell them all to go to hell. Tell them to go on doing their mindless routines. Because I *was* stopping to smell the coffee. I might not have a direction, but at least I knew it, and faced up to it. I wasn't unaware and mindless like them, stuck doing routines because that was just the way it was.

I squished myself deep in the bucket chair. I was sitting in the middle of a row, still facing towards the runway, away from the ticket desk. I had two hours until my flight. A man with a large tan suitcase, cowboy boots, and a cowboy hat strutted into line. He made me think of Buddy. I thought of the toilet paper masquerade and smiled to myself. I was really going to miss him.

Now another crowd was beginning to filter into the waiting area for the next flight. A sharply dressed woman sat down three chairs to my left. She reminded me of my oldest sister, a business woman, with her briefcase and small overnight bag. Crossing her legs under her skirt, she looked over and smiled. I smiled back.

Looking away, my eyes landed on a bent old janitor emptying a garbage can. He moved slow, making it seem like his task was too formidable. Yet the filled liner popped out of the can easily, and I could see his rippled arms flexed, enjoying the challenge and eager for the next can. He was wiry, having the kind of build that is small and thin, but strong.

Cadet Rugen told me once I was the wiry type. I liked Rugen. He was the Firstie who had stopped to talk with me the day before graduation. He was tall, had blond hair, red lips, beady blue eyes, and a thick neck. In uniform he looked quite impressive--all of the attributes for a television advertisement. I had an experience with him while I was in the hallway calling out for the upperclassmen the minutes remaining until formation; a cadet told me to put away the piece of paper in my hand--I wasn't supposed to hold anything while calling minutes.

Obediently, and quickly as not to miss the next minute, I pinged to the nearest door, which I thought was a fellow Plebe's room. Customarily, I shot right in, announcing as I entered, "Let me put this here. I'll be right back to get...." Bent forward with my hand outstretched towards the sink counter, I looked up to see cadet Rugen standing in front of the sink in his boxer shorts and black socks, razor in hand, shaving cream spread across his face, and eyes wild as he slowly turned his head and fixed them on me. Wrong room! The terror that crippled my mind! I locked up immediately, half expecting to be slashed to pieces with the razor. My body, rigid with fear, epitomized the position of perfect attention. "Ferrone," he sternly, but calmly began, "Do you realize how bad you just screwed up?"

"Yes, Sir!" I squealed.

"Pick up your paper," he continued, moving only his lips, "Turn around, and go call your minutes. I'll talk with you later tonight." He ended in a disgusted tone.

"Yes, Sir!" I bolted without regard for my professional bearing, the anxious fear of the future encounter already building inside of me.

Yet he never came to talk with me that evening.

The next morning, while I stood in formation, he calmly strode by, pausing a second in front of me to make eye contact, and pursed his lips to keep back a small smile, and then proceeded on to his position of platoon leader.

The manner by which he had dealt with me had affected me so deeply (especially compared to what Simpson would have done) that I

was immediately bound through loyalty to him. Rugen was one man I had encountered who didn't seem to be a slave to the ego-sating methods of contemptuous hazing. He seemed to march to the drum of a higher truth that many cadets could not hear because they were too infatuated with power. He had acknowledged my capability to learn from the mistake, and that further hazing was unnecessary and would have been detrimental to the leader-subordinate relationship between us. Whatever power it is that flows from leaders and commands the wills of their subordinates, Walter Rugen wielded it--he was an officer whose command under which, given an unfortunate twist of fate, I would have died for.

As far as my officer career was concerned, at times I felt in tune with that power, and I believe I would have been a very good officer. A lot of people told me so, including, ironically in the end, my squad leader Simpson, who had taken it upon himself to railroad my psyche all of second semester. He had his own agenda, which I didn't agree with, or appreciate, but in the end he simply said I was good.

The woman picked a magazine out of her briefcase and sat reading it, checking her watch periodically. The old man had finished changing the liner on the can. The old man had done a good job: no garbage spilled anywhere. I wondered what it would like to have his job, for the rest of my life. I had once heard that more than eighty-five percent of those who leave the service after their five year commitment end up starting out in high managerial positions, with an average starting salary of sixty-five thousand.

Behind me and to the left two children argued over who would get to sit in the window seat once boarding began. I could hear the mom trying to control them, shuffling her bags hastily in order to get at them and quiet them. I looked over my shoulder once. The little girl was cute; her brown skin glowed softly in the sunlight. She had red bows in her hair, one on each side of her head. Her brother, not much older--and they were both around four or five--looked clumsy in his big NIKE high-tops. They looked at me and immediately stopped arguing. Uniting against my intruding glare, they cuddled into their mother's sides for protection, each of them then peering out from beneath one of her armpits.

It was nearing eleven. I was getting hungry, and after I had turned back around, the children started arguing again. I checked my watch. I still had an hour and forty-five minutes. Standing up and then reaching for my bag, I suddenly had the craving for a cheeseburger.

June 29, 1988, exactly eleven months ago, I had reported to the Academy with one dollar in change in my pocket. I was following strict orders received in a letter--don't bring anything except the clothes you're wearing, and one dollar in change. These restrictions had refreshed Dad's memory, and he had joked about the hardships in the Army when he served, back when people valued what they had, his statement accompanied by a *kids today don't know what the value of a so-and-so really is*, tone. "We didn't even have beds in our barracks, just the floor, or the ground in the buildings that didn't have floors, and I'll be damned

if we didn't eat sticks for twelve days straight." The fantastic claims would be followed by a story about how he and his buddies *got around* the hardships, usually with some illegal, but really not *illegal*, act. "Times were different back then," he would say. Times are always different for parents when they're justifying themselves. I think Dad may have gone so far as to make up an outrageous claim in the first place that would convince anyone, including himself, that what he and his buddies did was necessary, and justifiable. Dad had fun remembering, and I did listening. He was extremely proud of me. And so was Mom. And there I was in an airport, buying a cheeseburger for four-fifty, awaiting the one-way flight that would deliver me home into their disappointed laps.

Now I sat at a little table in the corner of a cafeteria. I was thinking about Mom and Dad. They were so proud of me, and I felt as if I were letting them down. Once Dad said to me, "You've never just left things unfinished, Johnny, and I just want to know if everything is all right."

His words floundered in my mind as I poured ketchup on my burger and muttered, "Yeah, Dad, everything is peachy."

Both Mom and Dad were behind me one hundred percent in my decision to leave, out of love for me and, as they saw it, out of parental duty. Somehow that just didn't mean as much as if they were to say that they agreed with what I was doing. "Johnny," his words had come pleading, "I don't know what you want from me. I can't say that I agree with your decision, if you really have to know, but I love you, and I'm behind you...." His voice had cracked, and from a thousand miles away, he broke my heart, too. We had cried together, while I sat in a phone

booth in the basement of the barracks, my back to the glass, hiding from the cadets standing impatiently in line behind me. And I knew my father loved me. It was so tough not to do what Dad so much would have liked to see me do. But he never put that pressure on me. I only felt it because I sought it, and now it governed many of my thoughts.

The cheeseburger was small, compared to the large helping of chips that accompanied it on the plate in front of me. I took a bite, and a charred taste filled my mouth. I looked at the piece of charred cow that the cook had served up as a hamburger. A funny memory slipped into my mind.

Once while in formation a Firstie walked up to me and said, "Ferrone, how is the cow?"

I responded with the rote answer, "Sir, she walks, she talks, she is full of chalk. The lacteal fluid extracted from the female of the bovine species is highly prolific to the *n*th degree, Sir." What it meant, or had to do with the Army, I couldn't explain, but it was a part of the body of Plebe Knowledge that I had to know for recital on a moment's notice for any upperclassman who asked. I guess it was simply to sharpen our attention to detail.

"And how many lights in Cullum Hall, mister?"

"Sir, three hundred and forty lights."

Once of my favorite pieces of knowledge was the Sunday Night Poop, which seemed rather applicable: "Six bells and all is well. Another weekend shot to hell. Another week in my little gray cell. Another week in which to excel. Oh hell."

I downed my Coke, bought a Snickers, chucked the charred cow, and headed back to my gate area. The seats were filling up, and I sat one chair closer to the woman who reminded me of my sister. She smiled again, and I smiled back. I contemplated a nap, but I kept imagining missing my flight. I'd never get away from West Point!

Thinking about my return to Elmhurst, I imagined the people I would be talking with. I didn't know what I would say to the people I knew once I got home. I hoped no one would ask. I remembered telling Harold, my boss at work, that I wouldn't be coming back, ever. I was so haughty, and I had no right to be. He said I could always come back if things didn't turn out well.

I recalled one of the basic philosophies of the academy: a cadet must be resourceful--it was printed in our Manual--"Nothing splendid has been achieved except by those who dared believe that something inside them was superior to circumstances." I believed that. I got myself in the academy, and I took myself out. How much more control could a person ask for? There was no need to worry about what to tell people. I decided that I didn't care what others thought of my decision to leave. Besides, if I told them they probably wouldn't believe me. I had to rely on a cadet motto: "Victory belongs to the person who puts up with pain, who persists under pressure, who deals with distress, who fights fatigue, who endures."

A stewardess pranced by toting a luggage carrier behind her. I followed her with my eyes as she zipped between people and finally disappeared through the boarding door.

I was still looking in the direction of the stewardess when someone touched my knee, gently. I turned my face and found myself looking at an old woman. She wore a shawl over a plaid dress. She handed me a three by five card. I took it. While she stood there, I read the card, trying to shield my tears from her sight. It read: "I am a deaf and mute person. Would you be kind enough to help me buy my meals today? Thank you, and God bless you." I looked at her.

Huge brown bags, each dotted with dark moles, hung beneath eyes that were obscured with a pale blue film. Her gray, stringy hair was partially controlled by a bandanna. The bluish-green veins underneath her transparent skin seemed painted on. Slowly she extended a little can, probably an old soup can. I handed the card back, staring at her. She smiled kindly, and I found myself smiling softly back. I pulled out a ten dollar bill and dropped it in her can. She tilted her head in grateful acknowledgment, and again placed her hand gingerly on my knee, long enough to convey an empathetic feeling. Then she walked on down the row. I don't know why I was so generous. Perhaps because I realized that I had given up a position that had commanded respect within a culture that valued power and prestige. It was like helping a fellow outcast.

* * *

I suppose that a person could say that I never should have gone to the academy. I concede that I attended for several wrong reasons: pride, prestige, monetary compensation, and simply because I was ignorant of the Army's characteristic perspectives. I hardly have an argument to offer in defense for myself. However, I do know that I affected many people during the year I was there, and hopefully they are the better for it, as I know I am the better for having spent time with them. No other experience could have served the same purpose of helping me realize the value of examining my identity. Simply put, I tried and I failed. And my recognition of this failure was the culmination of what Henry James called *vastation*, or an ego-destruction. Out of the rubble of my pseudo-psyche rose the identity that was born at Creighton, and it felt good to know that I was returning to nurture it rather than bury it again beneath false identities. If given the opportunity to relive that part of my life a different way, I would choose to do it exactly as I did it the first time around. My experience had such an effect on me that I am only now, five years after, able to think clearly about it, and to settle the emotional waves that were stirred up during that one year.

A month or so ago I watched the rerun of the final episode of M*A*S*H*. During the last minutes, Hawkeye and BJ exchanged fumbling words and gestures, trying to express the way they felt about each other. They kept promising over and over again that they would stay in contact with each other once they returned home, but both seemed to doubt themselves as well as each other as they spoke. As I watched, I knew their dilemma well: never would they be close to

another person the way they had become close during the Korean War, and yet never could their unique relationship survive back in the States, where they would be on opposite ends of the continent. Of course, the sacred foundation of their bond could never be broken, but the relationship was molded in the atmosphere of war, and it took its place in history when the war ended. As Hawkeye lifted off in the helicopter in the last scene, and BJ was riding away on his motorcycle leaving behind the word *Good-bye* printed with rocks on the landscape, I relived the moments when I said good-bye to Craig Suydan and Tim Sheridan on the steps of our barracks, and I was very aware of the emotional waves that had not yet reached shore and dissipated into the sand.

It was early in the afternoon the day after graduation and recognition when we said good-bye. We were no longer Plebes, but Yearlings. I had succeeded in finishing Plebe year, as did a thousand other Plebes. I had also informed my chain of command of my desire to voluntarily resign from the academy, which the other former Plebes did not. I had been ordered to pack all of my belongings and prepare to move to the Transient Barracks, a small barracks aloof from the rest of the buildings, in which those seeking separation or being separated were housed during out-processing.

“So this is it, huh?” Craig said to me. He was standing one stair below me with one bag over his shoulder and another resting on the ground beside him. He had packed for summer camp which started in three weeks.

“Yeah, I guess.” I was at a loss for words. “Are you excited for more Army training?” I raised my eyebrows in jest, and looked over at Tim who was standing in similar fashion next to Craig. Both of them would be hopping in the back of a six-ton truck and heading out to set up for their summer at Camp Buckner, along with all of the other new Yearlings. By the time they would return in a week, I would be at home, probably at work for the City of Elmhurst.

Tim was quiet. We all were. Craig didn’t answer my question. I knew he wasn’t too excited about Buckner. Once during second semester he had toyed with the idea of leaving, too. “I’ll write to you guys,” I said.

“You better,” Tim said, looking up from his feet. His usually cheerful face was long, and his eyes glistened. “Man, you’re gonna do great at Creighton,” he said.

“I hope so. I’m gonna miss you--both of you guys.” My nose was running a little, and my throat was choking up a bit. “You guys are like brothers I never had. More than brothers!”

“Me too,” said Craig. He dropped his bag and stepped up onto my step. I couldn’t tell if he was smiling or trying to hold back from crying. He looked goofy: sandy hair, a big, pink face with a bunch of freckles, a long chin and crooked teeth--like a kid on a Hawaiian Punch commercial. I was ready to shake hands, but he hugged me, and then stepped back and looked down at the ground.

Tim did the same. His hug was longer and tighter. “Good luck with Susan. I know you two will do great.” He stepped back and his face

was swollen and red, but he had the biggest smile--it pulled down the corners of his eyes which were still bright.

"Thanks, Tim." I looked away towards the sally port, and then back at them and said, "Don't forget Plebe year, guys, ever." My jaw quivered and I cried for a moment.

"No way, John," said Craig.

"Are you kidding?" Tim blurted out, trying to add some humor, but then he started crying, and then did Craig. And before long our crying turned into laughter as we recalled stories from the year.

"Do you remember Frick fartin' on my pillow?" I asked Craig.

"Yeah! God was that gross what you did to him." Craig was laughing hard and Tim was begging to hear the story.

We told him, and he chuckled his squirrel-sounding chuckle, shaking his head and saying, "Only you, Ferrari. Damn! I'm really gonna miss you, pal."

"Me too, Timmy. Don't get hurt in this Army. Remember, Military Intelligence! Get a desk job for five years and then you're out."

"Well," Craig began, and I knew it was time, "we gotta get goin'."

"Yep," I said, not wanting to let them go. "Write me back. And someday we'll get together."

"Yeah, we sure will," said Tim.

I was starting to feel awkward. We couldn't find the right words to end on, as if we knew that when we finally did end, only in our memories would we ever see each other again.

We shook hands, and Tim and Craig headed for their trucks. I stood on the steps watching them. Our Plebe year was history, and as we finally parted, I felt empty without it--I had not yet created a present to take its place. I was in limbo, on the fringe of both the past and present, waiting to go home, wishing I could bring part of the past with me.

I am twenty-four, now. I have a video of an Army-Navy football game; it is of the game I was at when I was a cadet, and my parents taped it. Just the other day I sat watching the video, again separated from the event, having been where I had wanted to go, and then choosing to leave and be just a spectator once again. And seeing the cadets in the stands was no less moving than it had been when I was fifteen. Yet my desire is sated, and I don't crave the fraternal energy anymore as I once did. But I am often saddened to know that I will never again feel a power that will so strongly grip my inner being, and bind my heart and soul through an inexplicable force to the essence of another being or institution. What will always remain, though, are the remnants of relationships I left behind, and the still powerful bonds with which they were formed. I still look forward to the day when I will see Craig and Tim again, and Buddy, and Brent, and James, and Michelle, and others. And part of me knows that I will be disappointed when I see them because we will have changed. But the bonds will still be there, unmistakably present, and forever in the past.

At the academy, the camaraderie was real, so real that there was no room for any of the cadets to be individuals no matter how hard we tried;

self-identity was quickly sacrificed for the integrity of the unit. I respect that concept. I simply chose not to adhere to it. I fought it for a year and then resigned. My heart goes out to all those cadets who stayed and gave of themselves for the integrity of the whole. And when they decide to end their careers, I hope that they will have the good fortune of regaining, without suffering painful vastation, their small piece of self-awareness that they willingly gave up on The Plain, June 29, 1988.

"And when our work is done,
Our course on earth is run,
May it be said, `Well done;
Be thou at peace.'"

From West Point's "Alma Mater"

P.S. Reinecke, 1911