

*Ron Sandvik*

## **Killer Karl Krupp**

**P**anama, the place in the Americas where God reached down and squished the land mass between thumb and forefinger. He made it into a thin bridge of land between two larger masses, and because God is playful he gave it a little tweak so it became an s-shape on its back. As soldiers and sailors stationed on this ridge between the oceans, we laugh hard, sipping beer on a rear-area barracks balcony. In 1988 civilians drive freely on roads between the military positions and the areas where skirmishes have occurred and it is difficult to tell who is what. Our mortars fire in distant positions, unassuming little pops. No war, just tension and we bristle with the new HUMVEEs, TOW launchers, SUVs in all configurations and somebody on our side kept sending out illumination rounds to ward off anything bad. The illumination rounds whistle out into the darkness and arc over the blackened jungle jade walls that encased everything in our world. We are nervous, but take great pains to show that we are not.

The folks at home ask, "What's a Noriega?" We're not sure, but we answer what the officers tell us. "He's a nationalist." But we know better, Noriega is really all those emaciated farmers with so few teeth in cut-off jeans, practicing with sharpened sticks on soccer fields. He's the panicky radio reports of snipers and intruders on our bases. He might even be in the acid look those Indigenous Nationals give Americans when they ride the erratic, multicolored buses blaring salsa music out of twenty speakers.

On the balcony, above the jungle floor, we think of home in silver-plated, fine, filigreed drawing cards of hope and longing. We mottle our words over with a dulling four-color camouflage of bravado and sneering. Under my nose, Morse holds an armor-piercing cartridge he had made into a necklace along with his dog tags. Morse and I don't even really like each other, but we can drink efficiently together. We are convenient for each other.

Snarling like DeNiro, Morse says, "This is this, Man, this is this. You Fredo-looking fuck." We couldn't remember the actor's name, we couldn't remember the character's name, I just knew he played Fredo on *The Godfather*. He was a weaselly little freak that pissed The Deer Hunter himself off.

I run out of words to say about the movie. That movie was all Morse

and I really had in common. We'd both seen it—him in Kentucky, me in Iowa. We are both here, we both want to be somewhere else doing something else. We only have the beer. There is no ice, no cooler, but beer enough to see us through till our boat crew goes on duty again. A helicopter passes somewhere overhead, its running lights out, exhaust muted for stealth. On moonless nights, they prowl off to patrol some stretch of the isthmus.

The rumor is that snipers may lie just beyond our perimeters with starlight scopes. Inside the perimeter all our friends lie cold, tense, breathing dirt behind sandbags. They lie stifling nicotine fits hoping nobody they knew got it. They daydream of the folks at home, or girlfriends. The snipers fire at random, at nothing specific until everyone's tension is as visible as the back spine of an iguana. Everyone is so jumpy; two guys are dead out of the deal—shot by their own buddies. Maybe that's all the snipers want. Who knows?

Uncle Sam's Club-Adventure brochure glosses over a lot of this shit. I'd thought to break the cycle of farm work back in Iowa. Maybe eat some good food, drink some good booze, smoke some killer dope or maybe even find some exotic quicksilver girl. Those dreams were vague, smoky things I never really had pinned down.

The one thing I knew I really wanted was a black Pontiac GTO to restore. A "Goat" with all the trimmings, chrome, gauges, white lettering on the tires. It would be a shiny announcement to the world, something to drive around in the summer and work on all winter.

Nobody really knows where this place is. Most folks really don't want to know about this place, or any place like it. Short of that, nobody really cares. What's a Hugo Spadafora? Why did they kill him? For whom? Why do they just shoot old men at protests? How can these people just bang pots and pans when an eight-year-old girl is being mauled by a Doberman at end of a leash held by a soldier trained in America? All I know is how to jump from a riverine patrol boat with an M-16, how to do "search and seizure." I know how to endure the heat and how to operate in the darkness with night-vision goggles.

Morse can wax philosophical on Mustangs. He talks specs as easily as telling stories about people driving the cars he's talking about. He waffles on a model, though. A Shelby GT last week, a Mach I this week, a Fastback next week. Morse occasionally even talks the odd truck or two. So be it. We're not on the car lot with our paychecks.

A couple of pops sound out in the distance and illum rounds blossom out over the foliage canopy. Illum rounds are sad, pretty sights, dangling,

swinging lightly, spitting off chunks of burning white metal. However reassuring to the officers at the command posts, the illum rounds never shine down into the jungle floor. The light is completely soaked up by three canopies of foliage between the ground and the sky, leaving all eyes to search the jet-black darkness. They don't really shine down where our soldiers lay wishing somebody would clear another two hundred yards of jungle back from their position or send some sniffing dogs. Privates lie in their ponchos spread over red clay hollows and blame staff sergeants for the reason they are lying out on the floor of the jungle. Others listen to speakers placed in the jungle running endless loops of Spanish psychological warfare stuff to the banyans. The warnings, broadcasting in Spanish away from the perimeter, mask the sound of movement. Out there everybody is even more nervous. On the balcony we are drunk and expansive.

Morse says, "Yeah, we ought to get a case of this stuff for when they come back, you know, like a welcome home present. God, it sucks out there."

Morse is drinking deeply. As a drinking companion, I must hold the perimeter of illusion with him. We're tough. We're having a good time. Nothing is better than the States. These are important posts in that perimeter. I crack the fresh beers for us.

And I say, "Yeah, don't you have the high scores on all the video games in the barracks?" We talk about *Defender*, *Centipede*, and *Galaga*, older video games in the barracks lounge.

His advice: first, you learn where to position yourself to keep from being killed. Then you learn what to shoot first, how to gain extra lives. After that, it's an exercise of stamina and concentration. I'm *Centipede*-qualified. Morse switch-hits between *Galaga* and *Defender*. He also has the occasional bout with the decrepit *Captain Fantastic* pinball machine. He says there's not much action left in that machine. Still, he thumps and dings away at it.

Sometimes, when nobody is around, I play *Captain Fantastic*. In the light, when the maids clean the lounge, the machine looks sadly dated. An iconic Elton John with improbable glasses, tight-fitting clothes, a feather boa, elevator shoes and a rack of teeth as big as the English Channel perpetually smiles and dances in some backlit world I'd never seen. I concentrate, racking up points, dings, flashing lights and the sharp twack of extra lives, extra balls. And I think about Connie Lepsome, the girl who hung around the pinball machine back home. An empty bottle clinks against the pile.

He says softly, "Another dead soldier."

Two more pops, and my companion changes the subject. He lights up

on professional wrestling. Good and evil super-matches and how wrestling would be better if this wrestler should win this or that bout, belt or just break somebody's spine. Spit comes off his lips. He speaks of certain wrestlers and all the wrestling magazines sent to him here. Listening to him, swallowing warm beer, something was inside me, burning white and throwing off burning chunks of metal.

I'm thinking about Connie, Coach, and the sweaty wrestling room with the mats and the pads on the wall. Coach Gunderson taught us the pragmatic, economical, Norwegian-sober art of individual combat. He taught us how to leverage weight, to escape, to deprive an opponent of air, and how to force a move. He taught the rules of Greco-Roman and the rules of Freestyle. I know those rules. Pro Wrestling doesn't abide by any of them. No sportsmanship or dignity, just steroids and shit-talking with those guys.

Pro Wrestling? They're just like officers and NCOs in the military. Talk, talk, and talk, threat after threat, that's all they know. "Better do this, son, or you'll be in a world of hurt. Better do that or you're in a world of shit." Like this is that. Did they ever wrap themselves in plastic, starve for two days until the dizziness drags you to the scale, just to make weight? Do they run for miles, knowing their opponent is doing the same, and that's why you have to push it? Mostly they write out supply paperwork and talk about worlds of shit and pain in some place that understands the world of shit and pain more than any occupying force could ever teach it.

For all these thoughts I'm red hot, I'm pissed. Nobody will say what anything really really is. OICs, OODs, JOODs, CQs, COs, acronyms for everything, double-talk, it is fucking something. Somebody is shooting and somebody is dying. I blow. "Look, I wrestled in school, I've seen matches, real ones, that is. No shit-talking and posturing, just go wrestle like hell and follow the rules. Pro Wrestlers are fakes. Man, they're just fakes. How can they break vertebrae this week and come back the next week? It's all bullshit, man. You want it? Well, you can take my share too."

When I finish speaking there is silence—no mortars, no small arms, no helicopters. My companion is staring down between his bare feet, thinking hard, swishing a beer round and round. I have broken the perimeter. I have truthed the poor bastard up from three hundred meters, with one shot. I've won, but I want to take it back, having broken unspoken rules. I want to put in more game credits, go back, and suck those words out of his ears. Two more illum rounds pop outbound, blossoming into white arcs and descending slowly over the jungle.

I have broken the code. Here, a good drinking buddy will help put the perimeter of illusion around the position. That's the drill. I light two unfiltered Camels and pass him one.

I say, "Yeah, OK, I used to watch that stuff when I was a kid. Remember Killer Karl Krupp? They said he was a Nazi, and nobody cared except when he'd get his ass kicked. His Death Grip was just as illegal as pot, y'know."

Morse looks up and throws his bottle at the banyan tree. It bounces off the soft bark and chinkles onto the growing pile of bottles at the base. He takes a deep drag and says, "Yeah. Those damn Interns used it too, sometimes. Remember the Interns? Krupp taught it to them. They were tag-team death, executioner's masks and all. Hell, they'd pin down a referee if he didn't watch them."

"I gotta tell you, though, that Death Grip scared me."

He stares off at something I can't see. "That is that, Man, that is that."

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