

WHITNEY TERRELL

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**excerpt from *The Crossroads***

Systems had always been of interest to the Bonta men. Herman Bonta fought bravely in World War I, even though he knew Congress had declared Puerto Ricans to be U.S. citizens just so they could draft men like him. His grandson Ramon attended Pontifical Catholic in Ponce, settled into a mid-level insurance position with MetLife and, spurred by Herman's grit, got a transfer to Kansas City in 1986 where he sold policies in the Spanish-speaking Guadalupe and Argentine districts. Surfaces mattered, he taught his son, Ernesto. Appearances mattered. The system was designed to protect the group and the more you looked like the group, the mean, the better the system protected you. But his coffee table Picasso books and his fly rod and his hand-sewn gloves were sold after he died of a heart attack, when Ernesto was eight, because Ramon Bonta, it turned out, had skimmed on his own protection. His life policy only paid \$50,000. And their house, which had been purchased with a white real estate agent, in a white neighborhood, had to be sold at cost because the neighborhood was, thanks to suburban flight, already on its way out.

Ernesto continued to address himself to the system: thin, lithe, muscled, in white polos, and skinny jeans tucked into impeccable Nikes. A prow of gelled black hair. Not perfect. He knew that. Moles.

A twisted canine. Eyes slightly too close together. At rest, he had an air of stunned and watchful suspicion, as if someone had hit him, but he wasn't sure where. He was sure that premiums were lower across the board—life, health, car, and home—if you lived in a good neighborhood rather than a bad one. And that by the time he entered eighth grade, his family was renting in the same Mexican-American community his father had avoided *except* when selling policies. His mother waitressed for a white-owned taco restaurant with sombreros tacked to the wall. Ernesto shelved books at Barnes & Noble. He studied French. He got a scholarship and played soccer at Redemptorist High. He was good. But not good enough to pay for college. One spring afternoon during his senior year, he sat out on the un-swept back deck of his mother's house, and sorted through the musty remains of his father's files, watching the Gomez brothers slap plastic light sabers on the muddy slope of their back yard. A terrifying darkness awaited him and his sister, Diana. The files laid this out. Actuarial Charts. Morbidity Tables. Annual Income. Liabilities. At the very bottom of every chart were the poor, frozen in the deepest, coldest risk pool. But the charts were not always final. Sometimes, his father had told him, the best of his clients would manage to escape by briefly maxing out their risk, in the hope that such a gamble would slingshot them higher in the end. He scrounged through the bottom of the file box and, eyes on the Gomez brothers, lifted his great-grandfather's revolver onto his knees.

And so he joined the Army, bought a new Dodge Charger with his signing bonus (or made the down payment, anyway), completed basic training, and shipped out to Joint Base Balad as an operations specialist, prepping to take the sergeant's exam, in the winter of '08. He worked in his battalion's air-conditioned tactical operations center, on the fourth floor of a yellow brick building that reminded him of a public school back in the States. Linoleum floors, water fountains, dented metal elevators with those fat black buttons you saw in buildings from the 1960s. They sat in rows at plywood tables, fitted out with Panasonic Toughbooks. Beside him was Sergeant Keifer Morgan, his partner, his guide, though they rarely deployed any farther than their ten-foot square of desk space.

Between them, a folder marked SECRET that contained their current target's headshot, height, weight, eye color, aliases, and relatives, gathered in a page or two report called a Baseball Card, plus any other intel they had on the guy. Also research reports from Credit Suisse on the stocks that he and Morgan would be trading on that day. "Let's do a pairs trade," Morgan would say at nightfall, when they sat down to work. "Short Hassan Al-Khalid, this little shithead mukhtar, and long Wells Fargo into earnings. Booyah, mutherfuckers!"

Sergeant Morgan was black-haired and schlubby, not athletic, as Ernesto had been. His froggy eyes were so far apart that you could punch his nose and miss both. Which happened. Ernesto learned to pick him in the intra-company softball game so he didn't end up on the bench. Choose him as his secret Santa, so he didn't end up without a gift, and above all council him on women—especially Sergeant Lucy White, who worked in their maintenance platoon. But late at night in the TOC, when their commanding officer, Major Pickering—otherwise known as the S3—was away, Morgan was a master, brooked no fools, felt no regrets. They coordinated "current operations"—meaning they kept in contact with infantry on the ground, facilitated air support, helped pilots and the ground pounders identify their targets, and "clarified" whatever the rules of engagement were that week. Busy times. That year, they worked one hundred and eighty missions, which led to seventy arrests, thirty KIA. After each, they cleaned the desk of their target's artifacts and burned them according to protocol. Burn bags of Baseball Cards, an All Star roster of the naked and the dead. It was what he'd wanted, wasn't it? He was in the safest part of the system, glimpsing all the most precious information. No value was intrinsic. Morgan taught him that. A good trader was never wedded to a cause, to a belief, to a stock, even to a person. Truths Ernesto's father had missed. "These guys in the insurgency look like fucking idiots now," Morgan explained one night, while waiting to support a raid. "But they're just in a bear market. Experiencing consolidation. Five years from now, one of these same dudes will have survived. We'll have wiped out his competition and we'll be *selling* him weapons instead."

It was their commitment to this truth, heartless truth, that bound them together and kept them safe. And kept their families safe, since Ernesto was wiring more than half his salary home to his mother and sister, to pay for food, rent, and Diana's college tuition.

After a year, Morgan and Ernesto returned to Fort Hood with private sector prospects and good skills. They had blood on their hands, too, but that was added value, wasn't it? How many new employees at Palantir or Barracuda Networks could say they'd killed a man anywhere outside of a Play Station screen? Morgan had three months left on his Army contract; Ernesto had two years. But that did not stop him from taking a dry run on his own future along with Morgan, checking San Francisco real estate on Zillow, discussing stock options, checking the route lines of the Google bus, or the sushi selection at the Facebook cafeteria. That was the slingshot he'd imagined, where he moved past all those kids back at high school, when he accomplished something that even his father never dreamed, until an MP knocked on his apartment door outside Fort Hood and led him to CID, where he'd never been, and sat him in a conference room, with a camera up in the ceiling corner, so he'd know he was being seen. For an hour he sat there, then two. He did not ask questions; he did not cry out. He knew how this went. But that did not prevent him, in those two short silent hours, from wishing, with unspeakable terror and loathing, that he could cut his losses and disinvest himself from himself, because that's what everybody else would do to him, now that the cameras were turned his way.

So he didn't really examine the charges or ask for a JAG lawyer when the CID investigators came in with their dossiers, their logs of his emails, the lists of his computer searches he'd executed while supposedly working—highlighting the visits he'd made to his brokerage account at TD Ameritrade. Not even the typed up deposition from Sergeant Morgan. But he did watch the video from a Warthog's targeting system that had that morning leaked to the public, replicating itself on the internet and cable news. It included the recorded conversation between the pilot—

*I don't know if this target is right.*

—and a second voice, which was his:

Doesn't matter if it's right. Rules of Engagement say you can shoot. Just make it effective.

*There's people moving around the building. I can't identify if they're armed or not. They may be noncombatants.*

Bravo will make it look good when they go in, Eagle 2. Just give me my dead rag heads. My S3 isn't here and by the time I find him, it'll be too late. Finish it off. I am way too long Apple and the market's closing in New York, so I need to make a trade.

The S3, Major Pickering, really hadn't been there. But Morgan had been, slouched in the dark beside him, telling him what to say. They had always talked this way, Morgan especially. But the voice was his and once he saw the first line of Morgan's deposition—*That guy was a mad man. Reckless. The S3 and I had stepped outside just for a minute when this happened, or we would've stopped it immediately*—he knew he was on the short end of the trade.

His discharge was classified as Other Than Honorable. Silicon Valley was out. So, too, most contracting. No GI bill, no benefits. In one stroke of a pen, the entire reason he'd had for joining the Army was stripped away. He was marked, a broken stock, a washout—as Morgan had told him, a stock could keep going down for much longer than you'd ever think. Four years later, he moved back home to his mother's house at 18<sup>th</sup> and Summit, in the old Guadalupe Parish he'd originally hoped to escape. Like his sister, the neighborhood had moved on without him. A French patisserie had opened two blocks down, where Mr. Gomez's bodega had once been. A rap recording studio next door, a shop that sold hipster memorabilia, if such a thing was even sane. And on his own block, close enough that he could hear the noise and chatter at night, a restaurant and bar called West Side Pride, with bare brick walls and \$15 glasses of Chardonnay and picnic tables in a side patio area that were hung with gaudy electric lights, like some white person's fantasy of what a Mexican bar might look like, filled with the kind of people who would've fit in perfectly well in . . . well, Silicon Valley. Did he get the irony? Copy that.

Mornings, he went to Reggie's Snack Bar, a hipster joint just down the hill from their house, and a place Ernesto had begun to

frequent because it was cheap. His sister, perfumed, in a slinky taupe dress and massive heels, sat across from him. She ran social media for the Mayor and kept her phone face up while she stroked the back of his hand. “Ernesto—”

“Flea,” he corrected. He’d adopted the name in California; someone on his roofing crew gave it to him because he rode on everybody else’s back.

“—I just want to help you get better. You helped me, when I was little. And you paid for school. I believe in you. I did. I do—but you got to meet with somebody.”

*Everything I’ve ever taught you was wrong.* That was the message that would help his sister. But when he tried to speak this warning, everything fell apart and *he* sounded like he was insane. “Yes,” he said. “It’s okay. Don’t worry about it. I’ll get some counseling. There’s time to talk about these other things. Just maybe, I don’t know, promise me one thing: promise you’ll stay on the same side of the camera as me?”

His smile must have been horrifying, judging from how still she kept her face.

Diana went to work. The Flea sat there drinking coffee. That was when he met the owner, Reggie Burton. He was there in his café frequently: an unruly, hairy, burly man who wore an American flag bandanna around his head in the way old rockers did to cover up their thinning hair. Some days he sported a rumpled corduroy suit, wool time and cowboy boots; sometimes a wife beater and a track suit. An undercover person, with different uniforms for different days, none of them strictly true—which pretty much matched the style of the café.

“You’re not wrong to worry about what side your sister’s on, man,” Burton was saying to him, some time later—time that The Flea hadn’t really paid strict attention to passing. “If you’ve seen the bad side, you know what it looks like. But trying to explain that to someone who hasn’t been there, that’s a complicated thing. Try this book. They won’t have it at the VA.”

*The colonialist makes history and he knows it, he read back at home. And because he refers constantly to the history of this metropolis, he plainly indicates that here he is the extension of this metropolis.* He flipped to the

front cover: Franz Fanon. Then back to the sentence, its meaning surging through him like disease. In Iraq, he had been an extension of his city. And if he'd been an extension of the principles of his city, his sister was in the Mayor's office, extending the same thing. *The Church in the colonies is a white man's Church... It does not call the colonized to the ways of God, but to the ways of the white man, to the ways of the master, to the ways of the oppressor. And as we know, in this story many are called but few are chosen.*

He had chosen himself, in the end.

The riot in his brain slowly organized itself, rewriting his life with secret malevolence: Risk pools, systems, moral hazard, the Mexicans he'd looked down on, his own great-grandfather, Herman, suiting up in the U.S. Army uniform to become the colonizer rather than the colonized.

*The colonized subject will first train this aggressiveness sedimented in his muscles against his own people. This is the period where black turns on black . . .*

All of it was written in fire. And once he knew how to look for it, he found the crackle of oppression everywhere: Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, the Charleston nine. He followed protests, read police reports, made thoughtful denotations of their lying. He knew war and the thoughts of killers. It was his special insight, knowing that. But that was not the most terrifying thing, that he'd for years wished to be the thing that hated him. The most terrifying thing was that he would go back to it, knowing everything. He woke up one afternoon feeling this danger all over him, like a siege. The television blared. It showed the markets closing on CNBC. He didn't know who had turned it to that channel (though of course it had been him, he was the only person there) and Morgan's voice was speaking to him directly through the guests: "The market has its wisdom and if you don't respect the market, it will cut you off at the knees. The market is not about belief. It's not about truth. It's not even about being right. You might be right, but it doesn't matter at all if the market disagrees . . ."

The neighbors called his sister. When she came home, he'd taken the TV outside and shot it—more a symbolic act, to get that voice out of his head, though he knew it looked bad. "Fuck you. Fuck you. There is no fucking way you're getting me back." He may have been saying that out loud to his sister, once she arrived. He may also

have had his great-grandfather's pistol in his hand—not much, compared to the weapons he used to command, but still.

“Now I'm going to tell you what you need to do, Ernesto,” his sister said from the deck, keeping her back pressed against the door. “Now we're going to stop pretending with each other. I need you to listen carefully to me.”

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**WHITNEY TERRELL'S** novel, *The Good Lieutenant* (FSG) was selected as a best book of 2016 by *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, and *Refinery 29*. It was long-listed for the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction. He is also the author of *The Huntsman* and *The King of Kings County*. He was an embedded reporter in Iraq during 2006 and 2010 and covered the war for the *Washington Post Magazine*, *Slate*, and NPR. His nonfiction has additionally appeared in *The New York Times*, *Harper's*, and *The New Republic*. He teaches at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.