

Point Man

I did not go crazy, not in the clinical sense, but others did.

—Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*

I suppose the real reason I left for Gabriel's after arguing with Jean was I knew Randy Kodoski would be in the bar, like always, and I needed a drink. Jean didn't want me to go out, made a big fuss about it, said I was going to end up a drunk like Kodoski if I wasn't careful. They'd been together for a time before I came home from Vietnam. I never thought much about them because that's the kind of thing that'll make you crazy, make you say and do things you'll later regret. It might not hit you until you're down the road a year or two, but sooner or later, when you least expect it, a feeling from deep in your gut will have its say, get right in your face, make a fool out of you.

After that night, north of the suburbs where I'd been with Kodoski and Kasia, I was surprised to find a note from Jean on the refrigerator door:

*Micky, I know you'll understand because I'm
just like you. —Love, Jean.*

That was it.

Thinking we all had to make it in this world any way we could, I ripped the note into little pieces, tossed it into the kitchen wastebasket. Wondering where your life was going to take you, like I kept telling Jean, wouldn't make your life any easier. You had to take care of business, do whatever was necessary to keep going.

That's what my old man taught me, how to take care of business, which he did up until he died after I'd come home from my tour. He worked for thirty years on the Chrysler

assembly line, and eight weeks after he spot-welded his last fender onto a '70 New Yorker he had a heart attack at the dinner table. His face was already a shade of gray by the time two EMS attendants wheeled him into the ambulance. I'd seen that look in Nam so I knew he wouldn't last long. His dying scared me, not because I was afraid of death, but because I didn't feel a thing. It wasn't until later, years later, like most everything that's happened to me, I realized I didn't have a father anymore. He was gone for good. I guess that's why I'm thinking about the night Jean left and didn't come back.

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That night when I finally closed the apartment door and backed out into the hallway, Jean glared at me like someone ready for a fight. I heard the lock turn, the security chain slide into place. On the street I looked at my watch; it was midnight. Plenty of time to have a drink with Kodoski, I thought. When I got into the Mercury, where it had been parked on Gray Street, I took a bottle of whiskey from the glove compartment, had a good swallow, and felt my parched throat go numb. After another good hit on the bottle, I lit a cigarette, looked into the rearview mirror at my eyes. Even then I liked it when the whiskey leveled out in my brain. The whiskey plateau.

The Merc came to life with a roar. I rolled the windows down, felt the engine's power under my foot, and a breeze like hot breath coming into the car. It was good to be out of the apartment. I felt like a bird who'd found its way out of a chimney, flying blind over houses and trees.

The traffic on the Edsel Ford Expressway was heavy, the air coming in dry as dust. I changed lanes and took an exit ramp up to Chalmers Avenue. At the next green light I turned a corner and drove past the abandoned Conner Park Projects. The buildings looked like the ones I'd seen in Hue after Tet.

I was anxious to get to the bar so I hit the gas. After a few more blocks, I pulled into the parking lot behind Gabriel's, and slid the Merc in next to Kodoski's truck. My T-shirt was soaked. I had a short-sleeved shirt in the back seat so I put it on. The parking lot was empty, but I looked around before getting out of the car

and going into the bar. Several people turned to look at me when I opened the door. Two guys were standing next to a pool table in the light overhead. I heard a sharp crack, a ball drop, then swearing and laughter mixed in with rock-and-roll coming from the jukebox. At first I didn't see Kodoski, and thought about leaving, then I spotted him at the end of the bar. He wore a fatigue jacket, which I thought was kind of odd, it being so hot and all. I took a stool next to him, put my hand on his left shoulder where half his jacket sleeve was pinned. "Not too shabby," I said, and pointed to the barmaid who was drinking at the other end of the bar, something clear, vodka or gin. Her laugh exposed her bucked teeth, her lips were turned up in a pout under a small rounded nose, almost rodent-like in a cute sort of way.

Kodoski leaned over, slid a quarter off the bar. "She's new," he said. "Her name's Kasia. C'mon, I'll flip you for her." Kasia watched us, then came down to our end of the bar. She stood in front of Kodoski, wiped her hands on a towel. "We don't allow no gambling in here," she said.

Kodoski smiled. "We're not gambling. Ever since Nam I haven't been able to tell my head from my tail." He had his hand over the quarter. The wannabe pool sharks argued about whose quarter was up for the next game.

"Are you one of them Vietnam vets?" she asked, looking at me.

I shrugged, thinking about the bad time Kodoski had gone through on Firebase Henderson. That was in Nam during monsoon. After the attack, we found NVA skeletons lying in craters left by mortar rounds exploding all over the red clay hilltop; it was a mass grave no one knew was there. When Doc Crowe and some of the other medics stumbled onto Kodoski under tent posts, rib cages, and skulls, he was knocked out, covered in mud and rats the medics had to chase off so they could pump him full of morphine. He was dusted-off in a chopper that same night, taken to a hospital ship anchored off Cam Rahn Bay. I didn't see him until we were back in Detroit.

"He don't talk much," Kasia said then walked away to wait on a woman who'd had too much to drink, who wore too much make-up to cover the miles, her clownish face a smear of ruby

lips, dark rouge, and deep lavender eye shadow. She tried to talk, tried to say something, but it all came out in a slur—*I'd never let my daughter come into a dump like this*, she said. *It ain't a place for no lady*. Then she lit a smoke, looked at the ceiling, waited for an answer.

Once Kasia was out of earshot, Kodoski said, "I've got something." He pulled his fatigue jacket up to show me a .45 automatic, its barrel tucked into his pants.

I looked around the bar. "Are you crazy?" I said.

"Some rats are going to die at the spillway tonight."

"I didn't plan on this," I told him.

"We're not robbing a fucking bank for Chrissakes. Just a little hunting is all."

It was closing when Kodoski asked Kasia for another drink, but he wanted her to have one with him, leave the bar, go someplace quiet. "Don't worry," he said, seeing the look on her face. "He can't get it up," then motioned to me. "Nothing to be afraid of."

"Looks healthy to me," Kasia said. I was glad she had a sense of humor. I thought everything might turn out all right in spite of the lousy feeling I had after the fight with Jean.

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I heard the walk-in cooler door go *thunk*. Kasia came out with a six-pack of beer in a grocery sack. "Take this," she said "and wait for me outside. I'll be out in a minute."

Kodoski nudged me and we left the bar. Outside, I felt tar sticking to the bottoms of my tennis shoes as I walked across the parking lot to get the whiskey from the Merc. "She's not coming," I said after a while, and gave Kodoski the bottle. "She'll be out," he said.

Kodoski's appeal to women, the way he had with them, amazed me. I wondered what it had been like for him and Jean, wondered what it was she'd been attracted to. He knew how to talk to women, seemed to know when he had the edge, when he was about to get in. He bragged about getting laid as if he'd solved some problem, explained the process as if he knew everything there was to know about fucking, as if there was anything to know. The women were just curious, I think. Maybe

they wondered what it would be like to ball a guy with one arm. But he made them laugh, and they actually seemed to like him until they figured out he was mostly a fake, and wouldn't stay with them for more than a few days, weeks, or at the most, a month or two.

"How's Jean?" Kodoski asked.

"Fine, I lied. We never talked about Jean, not in a way I thought settled anything. I wanted to tell him about the look on Jean's face when I'd gone out the door, but decided against it.

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Jean never said where she'd been, except to say out with her girlfriends. It bothered me. They'd go somewhere a few times a week on Saturdays when they worked the late shift at Polanski's Vegetable Warehouse over on Mack Avenue. At first I didn't think about it much, but her boss, this fat Polack named Louie Polanski, made time with all the girls who worked there, married or not. He invited them into the back room to show them the biggest cucumber he said they'd ever see. Jean told me all about it. I was worried, accused her of partying with Polanski when she wouldn't tell me where she went with her friends. When I asked her to quit her job, she said, "You are such an asshole. I thought you had more class."

"Asshole?" I said "The asshole is that disgusting vegetable Polack."

"Okay, Mickiewicz," she said "I get it. Double standards."

I told her I didn't hate anybody who didn't deserve it.

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The Clinton River spillway drains into Lake St. Clair about fifteen miles outside Detroit. I'd gone out there with Kodoski when we were kids. All night we fished, kept a fire burning near the river until the sun came up, watched it rise over cattails and reeds in the shallows near the river's mouth; at dawn the sky was burnt orange, the same sky over Firebase Henderson when Kodoski got hit.

"Don't look so glum, hero." She was standing near the door of the truck. I smelled her. Stale booze and cigarettes. I got out

and let Kasia slide across the seat. She'd changed into a skirt, and it rode up her thigh, showed her pale legs where they rubbed against the shifter.

Kodoski started the truck, put it into gear, his hand brushing her legs. "Your legs remind me of Grand Boulevard," he said

Kasia cocked her head. "How's that?"

"They go all the way to Joy Road," Kodoski said, then laughed at his own joke.

We left the parking lot where a few noisy stragglers had come out of the bar to find their cars. Once on Jefferson Avenue we drove north, passed the Old Grosse Point mansions, the yacht club, and followed the Detroit River shoreline to Lake St. Clair until we came to the Clinton River. Kodoski turned onto a two-track road paralleling the river, he steered over potholes and ruts, downshifted. Finally we stopped, and Kodoski killed the engine.

The spillway was different, not at all like it was when we were kids. In front of us was a '57 Chevy full of bullet holes, its sharp chromed fins visible in the headlights. Behind the Chevy was a mountain of trash: rusted bed springs, dirty mattresses, pieces of twisted steel, fifty-five gallon drums, cans, tires, you name it.

A hot wind blew in from across the lake. Some rain clouds moved in. The spillway was lit in moonlight. The water seemed like a sheet of aluminum foil. Far off, a roll of thunder. Kodoski jumped out of the truck the headlights still shining on the junk pile. "Did you see that?" he said then pulled the automatic from his belt, pointing to a spot near a charred smoking tire. The truck's engine cooled, ticked in the night air.

"See what?" Kasia said

"There!" shouted Kodoski. He waved the pistol at one target, then another. "A fucking rat!" He fired.

When the echo died in the canal, Kasia climbed out of the truck. "Looked more like a cat." Her voice was calm, collected. It was not what I expected from her, especially since she stood between two strangers, between one shooting imaginary rats, and the other feeling nervous as a cherry walking point. I didn't know whether she was brave or stupid, the two traits being so close together if you think about it.

"I know what a rat looks like," Kodoski said. He waved the gun around. "Missed that son-of-a-bitch, too. What we need is a goddamn dog. You want to be my dog?"

"Woof," Kasia said. "Give the gun to our hero. Let's you and me take a stroll." Kodoski slapped the grip into my palm as if he were handing off a baton. "Don't hurt yourself," he said.

I turned off the headlights, sat in the driver's seat, smoked a cigarette, examined the automatic. After moving concrete all day the gun was light, hardly noticeable except for its warm feel in the palm of my hand.

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Jean never liked the guys I worked with, didn't trust them, didn't like the fact I'd sometimes stop at Gabriel's to have a few drinks and shoot a few games of pool with them. Even though I looked forward to working for the Giovanni brothers about as much as I looked forward to the headaches I'd get some mornings pressing down on me, I crawled out of bed and drove to Eight Mile Road and Gratiot Avenue at seven a.m. to pick up drunks and welfare bums waiting on the corner for a day job. I never thought of them as bad men, not in the sense they'd hurt anyone. They were no worse than some of the guys I knew in Nam. But Jean wouldn't have anything to do with them. She thought they were the same ones we saw every night on the eleven o'clock news, schmucks caught in a gangland crossfire or a liquor store hold up. Maybe they were.

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I got out of the truck and walked over to the smoking trash heap where it seemed to move in the dark dotted with glowing embers. I pulled out a coffee can wedged in between a tire and some old bed springs. The can was warm; it still had its plastic lid. I walked over to the water's edge, threw the can into the spillway where its bottom turned up to shine in the moonlight. I heard Kasia laugh, Kodoski's muffled voice in the darkness behind me.

I shot three times. Each time a cartridge ejected from the .45 I felt the recoil radiate up my arm, into my elbow and shoulder,

each time a silver spray hung over the spillway, then the coffee can sank before I could get off another shot. It felt right because I was always a damn good shot, hardly ever missed, and it was okay knowing there was still something I could do the way it was supposed to be done.

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In those days I wanted Jean to appreciate me because I worked hard to keep us going, tried to save some money to move out to the suburbs where she thought it was safe. She stayed with me in the Gray Street Apartments for three years, on the east side, near Jefferson Avenue, not far from the Chrysler Assembly Plant and the Detroit River. When it's clear, which it hardly ever is, I can still see across the roof tops of other houses, watch lake freighters go up and down the river.

At first, Jean was pretty excited about the apartment, the hardwood floors, tall windows in the living room, a fireplace that didn't work because the chimney wasn't safe. But more than anything she hated coming home after dark. There were only a few worn-out locks anybody could open if they wanted to. When we first moved in, though, I felt good about the place because I'd started to work steady. After we hauled all our stuff upstairs, and Jean arranged everything the way she wanted, we'd watch the river freeze, then in the spring we saw the ice break up, the ore boats begin to move slow through the channel.

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At the spillway, a quarter-mile downriver, a car passed over the Jefferson bridge. A few lights were on in the new condominiums near the river's mouth, and a freighter beyond inching upriver. I thought someone might've heard the shots. I got nervous thinking they'd call the police, but it was quiet except for the hum of an outboard motor somewhere out on the lake.

I walked back to the truck, dropped the tailgate, let the clip slip out of the automatic. There were two cartridges left. One in the clip and one in the chamber. I sat on the tailgate, put the clip back in and made sure the safety was on when I saw Kasia and Kodoski coming. She looked ruffled, her hair was matted in sweat

against her forehead. "Did you get off on that gun?" she asked.

"Sure he did," Kodoski intruded. "He's Pointman, the killer—that's what we called him in the Nam."

I didn't like it when Kodoski talked about Vietnam; it made me think of guys in our squad—Pineapple, Hippie, Tennessee; it didn't matter what anybody called you. One day you were joking and getting stoned with your pals; the next, you were calling in a medivac, and you never saw them again. Like Bobby Strong, a skinny black kid from Chicago, a cherry we called Face because his was unusual: pock marks, deep-set eyes, thick lips stretched across a wide set of teeth in a mouth with more teeth than a mouth has.

One night Kodoski told Face he was the horniest bastard he'd ever known, said Face would fuck a snake if he could get someone to hold the head. We all laughed, even Face. The next day on point Face set off a trip-wire rigged to a Claymore mine the gooks probably took off some dead grunt. It blew his arm and leg off. Before the dust settled, Face was on a chopper headed for a Da Nang hospital. He might be wheeling around Chicago right now.

"Here," Kasia said. "This will cool you down." A bottle of beer fizzed in my hand.

Kodoski set his beer on the tailgate, picked up the .45, and said, "You know, people are a lot like animals."

"You're stoned," Kasia said, unbuttoning his shirt, running her hand inside.

"I'm telling you," Kodoski said, "we're all animals. Right, Pointman?" Then he put his arm around Kasia, the muzzle of the .45 pointed at her back. Slowly, moving out of Kodoski's grasp, she began to undress, unzipped her skirt, let her blouse slip off her shoulders until most of her clothes were around her ankles. She stepped out of them, left them in a heap in the dirt.

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I slid out of my own clothes one morning after drinking all night at Gabriel's, and got into bed with Jean, trying to be quiet. For a while I listened to a fan running on top of the dresser, it squeaked and hummed, vibrated as it rotated back and forth

circulating a room full of humid air. I heard a siren not far away, voices in the alley, the city getting louder. I couldn't sleep so I turned on a light next to the bed. Jean sighed and rolled over. The light made her squint "It's early," she said. "When did you come in?"

"Just a few minutes ago. Couldn't sleep."

Jean sat up and stroked the back of my neck. "Where were you, Micky? I was worried."

I let my head rest against Jean's hand; her hand felt good on the back of my neck. Then she got on top of me. I put my hands on her hips. "I've got to get ready for work," I said.

"Take a day off."

"I can't, Jean. You know that." I rolled her off to one side. In the shower I wondered how much money it was going to take to move out to the suburbs, how much it would take to raise kids where Jean wanted to.

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"I want to be an otter," Kasia said, "and swim in the river." She turned and ran toward the water. We followed her down the embankment. When she got to a concrete retaining wall, her bra came off. She climbed down a ladder built into the wall, and quickly disappeared from sight.

Kodoski set the gun down on the ledge and took off his clothes. I wondered if he was right about people and animals. When I eased into the water, I noticed the current didn't pull much in the river where it flattened out the way it did close to the mouth. I watched Kodoski float on his back as he drifted in and out of light coming and going behind the clouds. Kasia dog-paddled towards me. Her forehead made a V through the water, her slicked-back hair tucked tightly behind her ears. I tried to float, but booze pounded in my head. The air felt thick and still. Kasia came up against me then, her small breasts pushed into me, drops of water slid down her face. I held her for a minute, tried to kiss her, but she went under the water, breaking the grasp of my arms around her neck, laughing when she came up for air a few feet away.

Thinking it was too late to go home, too late to make things right with Jean, I swam back to the wall and climbed out of the spillway. I reached for my pants, stubbing the .45 with my toe, catching it just before it fell into the water.

The gun was still warm when I picked it up, pointed it at the water, watched Kodoski swim towards me. His face was pale in the moonlight, all the blood gone out of it as he struggled to make the last few yards. Kasia trailed behind. I looked down the barrel, caught the moon reflected on the water, sighted down the barrel at a shiny, bloodless face.

"You know that feeling, Mick," I heard Kodoski shout, "the one at the end of a high? You think you're supposed to take care of some unfinished business, but you never know what it is."

"Yeah," I said, "I've noticed it." I wanted to throw the gun over their heads, hear it splash in the water behind them, but I couldn't let go of it.

Kasia came out of the spillway, shivered in the morning air, water glistening on her stomach. I put Kodoski's field jacket around her shoulders. She held it tight against herself. And just as Kodoski climbed out of the spillway some rain clouds let loose. Big plops fell around us as we walked up the embankment toward the truck. Half-dressed, we stood there a minute, all of us, I guess, wishing we were home in our beds.

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When I parked the Merc in front of the Gray Street Apartments, it was still raining. I stood on the sidewalk for a minute, letting the rain soak me. A cool breeze blew in from downriver. I felt it coming from places I'd never been, would probably never go. The wind whistled through broken windows of abandoned buildings and decayed warehouses near the river. I listened for a while; then I went up to the apartment and found the door unchained, unlocked, Jean's closet empty of clothes. □