

1.

My father didn't teach me much except how to lie, cheat, and steal, and then lie, lie, lie some more. Mostly it was by example. I was rebellious and stuck to the truth, maybe because I knew I could never live up to the standard he set. I have paid the price for not following his example, but I'm trying to get my head right. I won't say I lie with the smooth skill and frequency he did, but I won't say I don't, either. Somehow the Marines sensed my natural ability in this direction and sent me undercover while in Afghanistan. Mission completed, I went from undercover to under a cloud. And that cloud followed me all the way home.

Not home. Camp Pendleton, where two guys in a black SUV had been shadowing me for a week every time I left the base. At the depot, where I went to requisition a jeep, Staff Sergeant Comeau said, "Why do you keep going out every day if those men are following you?"

"If I don't let them follow me, Sergeant, they'll never figure it out."

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“Figure it out, sir?”

“That I’m not going anywhere.” The sergeant considered arguing, but returned his attention to filling out the proper form. I said, “Do me a favor, Sergeant.”

“Sure. Yes, sir. What?”

“When General Remington asks, tell him I refused to answer your questions.”

Impatience persuaded me to take a longer ride that day so I could get a better sense of how serious they were. As far as I knew, I had nothing to hide, at least no more than everyone else. I drove out the main gate, where the traffic was thick. They fell right in behind me and I led them to the coast, then south toward La Jolla. If I weaved, they weaved. When I stopped for gas I did not need, they stopped down the street. It was too blatant to be mere incompetence. They wanted me to see them. Near the UC San Diego campus, I stopped for a burger at Monk’s, a spot filled with students, where I knew these guys would be reluctant to enter. They looked like Lifers to me, even if they had already retired, and Lifers are more afraid of civilians than they are of any enemy. If they came into Monk’s, it would mean they were eager for a confrontation.

I used to go out with a girl who worked at Monk’s. She told her friends that I was a grad student working on my Ph.D. in astrophysics. I enjoyed playing the part for a little while, but I didn’t like conning her friends just to con them. Her former boyfriend was drunk and belligerent in a bar one night. “How’s the studying these days, Rollie? Find any new stars no one will ever see or care about?”

“The earth has a twin. Did you know that? It’s never been seen because it’s always exactly on the other side of the sun. We’re pretty sure there’s life on it. We’ve caught radio signals because, as you

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know, they trail behind. And, it seems, stuff happens there before it happens here. It could even mean we all have doubles there.” I went on to soothe his doubts by explaining that the government has been keeping it a secret, which is one of the most reliable lies in the world. “I’m going to get in trouble for telling you,” I said. He wasn’t a bad guy, and I knew he was going to go around telling this story to everyone. I wished I had just fought him. Which is worse: sounding like a fool or getting beaten up by a scientist?

Soon after, the girl told me she could not go out with me anymore because a professor who had been coming into the restaurant for months and staring at her had finally asked her out. She knew I would understand. “He’s the real thing,” she said. She always lacked confidence, so I told her she was the real thing, too, and I hoped they would be happy.

I lingered in Monk’s for forty minutes, and the followers were still outside. This annoyed me, though I couldn’t think why it should. Maybe I was just bored and antsy being back in the States, even though it had only been three weeks. I took back roads on the return trip, winding into the desert, through the low hills. It wasn’t hard to lose them. I pulled onto a short loop road and came back on the main highway behind their SUV. That was all the provocation it took: the passenger leaned out the window, aiming his rifle at me. I swerved and hit the gas so I’d be too close for him to get an angle for the shot. I rammed the back driver’s side of the SUV and tried to push it off the road, but he had too much power. We played that game for a little while. Then the back window came down and I was facing a rifle and I was close enough to recognize it: a Type 88 marksman rifle, made in China, the kind of weapon a sniper might use if he also thought he might get the opportunity for a closer,

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quicker shot at the target. Like now. He missed his first shot, cracking the jeep's windshield. I slammed on the brakes and spun the wheel, and the jeep swung around the other way. Too far. The jeep careened off the road and down the slope. I didn't care. All I thought about was the copse of cottonwoods about a hundred yards ahead. At eighty miles per hour, I had about three seconds to make it there before the guy in the back of the SUV could set up again. My chances were good because he would get jostled when the SUV came to a sharp stop and I was bouncing around enough to make the shot extremely difficult. I didn't slow down or look back to check if he got any shots off.

The condition of the jeep brought me before Captain Winston, who had a vague sense he wasn't supposed to like me.

"Two guys have been following me. They shot out the windshield. I tried to knock them off the road. That's how the fender got dented."

"You were drunk," he said.

And in the Marines, that meant I was drunk even though I'd only been drunk twice in my life. The first time was to try it out. I hated it. The second time was to make sure I got it right the first time. The captain confined me to the base, which did not suit me at all. If I wanted to deal with the two shooters, and I did want to, I'd have to go off base to do it. I was sure the shooters were sent by General Remington, but I couldn't do anything about him directly. Not yet. Though I spent a lot of time thinking about the day I would.

A day later, I snuck out to a bar not far from the main gate. I chose it because it was mostly populated by civilians who worked on the base or for companies that serviced the base. The idea was

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to get these shooters in front of civilian cops. I sat down at a table in the corner, under a moose head and next to a photo supposedly signed by Alex Rodriguez. The waitress popped right over, and I ordered a beer and took a menu. I scanned the patrons. The place was only about half full: a long table of men in their forties and fifties who looked like they had taken the day off to play golf. Three mixed groups of men and women, young and old, just off work and settling in for the extended happy hour. Six lonely guys drank at the bar. None was having his first beer of the day. At the far end of the bar, a dark-haired woman was staring at me. I made the mistake of smiling. She picked up her drink and walked over to join me. She was a pretty woman, late thirties, about ten years older than me, with dark hair and blue eyes. Well, blue and a little red. She was drunk.

“Are you a sholdier . . . soldier?”

“No, ma’am.”

“May I sh . . . sit down?”

I got up and pulled out a chair for her. The way she looked at me, I thought she might pull me down to sit on her lap. “Well, what do you do?” she said.

“I’m a lumberjack.”

“I thought so.” She paused and took a long drink. “What does a lumberjack do, exactly?”

The waitress delivered my beer. “And another for the lady, please,” I said. I handed over a twenty. When the waitress walked away, I took a sip, then started to get up. “I have to leave now. Excuse me, please. It was nice to meet you,” I said. The woman grabbed my sleeve and pulled. Her eyes got sharp and focused.

“No, no. Please. Please. We just met and I . . . I’m really looking forward to . . . later.”

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She stared at me and let herself go soft again. But now I knew that the slurring drunkenness was an act. I sat down. She emptied her drink and looked around, as if for the waitress, but she might have been checking to see if anyone came in the door.

“Do you think they come in here themselves? Actually make an appearance?”

“Who?”

“All these guys on the walls. Do you think they come around with an armful of posters and photos and a pen and sign the things for, what, free drinks? I mean, if you don’t see them sign it, how do you know a machine didn’t do it? Or a friend? Why does it matter if it’s signed if you don’t meet the person, if there’s no connection?”

“I met Mickey Gilley once.”

“Who’s that?”

“I don’t remember. A singer, I think. At least that’s what he said.”

“Maybe the bar owner did the signatures. I would. Your friends are here.”

She turned quickly to see the two shooters, dressed as MPs now, scanning the place from just inside the door. She started to rise, but it was my turn to grab her arm.

“You stay.” I held on tight and guided her back into her seat. “Besides, if you don’t collect now, you’ll never see your money.”

The taller one stayed near the door. The shorter one, the one who shot at me, strode over to the table. When he got there, he said to the woman, “You can go now.”

“Make him pay you first.”

She didn’t move. He glared at her, then at me. “Get up.”

“Sit down.”

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“Get up or we’ll kill you right here.”

“Okay.” We both knew he wasn’t going to kill me right there. Everybody in the place was watching us. The waitress halted half-way to the table with the woman’s drink on her tray. The short man was silent for a moment, probably because he wasn’t used to people agreeing with him, so I said, “Who do you think killed that moose up there on the wall?”

The woman at my table chuckled, but the shooter took that as a threat. His hand moved toward his sidearm. I yelled, “These guys are not military police. They’re imposters. Call the cops.” The only person moving in the place was the tall shooter edging toward us. Then the woman pointed toward the bar, at a man on a stool near the middle.

“He’s a cop,” she said.

Cops seldom do just what you want them to. I wanted him to arrest these guys. Instead, he shrugged and turned back toward his beer. I slugged the short man and kicked the tall one in the groin just as he arrived at the table. Then I picked up a chair and threw it toward the cop at the bar. It bounced past him and knocked down some bottles. If he wouldn’t arrest the bad guys, he’d at least have to arrest me.