

ABSENT WITHOUT LEAVE

It was close to midnight when I showed up on my parents' porch. Big mistake. My dad stood in the doorway, his arm across the frame. "We've had the MPs here, you know. You're not bringing us into this."

I made no move to come in, just dumped my kitbag on the floor as it was cutting into my shoulder. I was dog-tired. The bus trip from Seattle to Baltimore had been three days and three thousand miles sitting butt to butt with drunks and grifters.

"You're turning me away?"

I saw my mother's anxious face as she ducked under my dad's arm to get a look at me. Bugs dive-bombed the streetlights, and Mrs. Rizla stared at us from her stoop, a goiter blooming from her neck like the ginger roots I'd seen in Kowloon Market. As my dad closed the door in my face, I tried to smile at my mom so she wouldn't feel bad, but I don't think she saw. I trudged back up the road, saluting Mrs. Rizla with two fingers to my ball cap.

It was no surprise, but I was still crushed. I mean, I knew he'd bawl me out, but I could have used one night in my old bed before moving on. Beat as I was, it was time for plan B, which was to head for Florida and my cousin Babs whose husband Chuck was studying at the

University of Miami. But no more Greyhounds, screw the expense. I hitched downtown to Penn Station, and before the train left, I took my balled-up Navy whites out of my kitbag and stuffed them in a trashcan.

When I got to Miami 24 hours later, I called Babs from a phone booth – “Guess who!” Chuck showed up at the station on a Honda 125 CB – the smallest bike ever made – and drove us like a bat out of hell to their apartment building in Coconut Grove. I hung onto his belt as he took the corners, but the warm air hitting my face felt good. Babs didn’t seem too shocked I’d turned up, even though she’d figured I was still out in the Gulf of Tonkin. The three of us drank beer and smoked a joint or two, and it was almost morning when she set me up on the couch with sheets and a pillow.

Babs and I have always been close. Seeing as how my mom was the eldest of a big family, Babs and I had dozens of younger cousins, but she and I always played by ourselves. I’d be Perry Mason and she’d be Della Street, and together we’d hunt down bad guys and make them pay. She grew up to be far more of a lawyer type than me – these days she’s an admin advisor for small businesses, checking all that small print no one else wants to read. Babs is a doer, always was. Doesn’t let the grass grow.

When I woke next morning, my back spasmed so hard I could hardly stand. I’d fucked it up trying to lift a 140lb barbell on the ship one day, though I barely weighed that much myself. And I guess all the traveling had taken its toll. Babs made me stay on the couch and brought me coffee and a bagel and started asking questions.

“Why’d you do it, Curt? Deserting in wartime’s not the smartest move.”

It wasn't easy to come up with a simple reason. I'd gotten used to how it was in Bremerton while the ship was in dry dock, more relaxed. We were allowed to grow beards and live in town. It was like heaven after nine months trapped on the ship, but then it all changed.

"The new CO was a real hardass. He'd pick on us for every dumb thing. I mean, he bawled me out for not polishing the soles of my shoes! The *soles* for christ sakes!"

"Frustrating."

"Uh, yeah!"

"What did you do?"

"Sold my Kawasaki. The one I bought in Japan? As soon as the cash hit my hand, I walked off the base."

"Seriously, man, you must have known it would come back and bite you in the ass."

I shrugged. "I don't mind rules when they make sense, but when they do it just to fuck with you, it makes me want to take a baseball bat to the china closet."

"Well, it's a done deal now, I guess."

Babs patted my leg and went to refill my coffee.

Until a year or so back, I'd thought she was my aunt – we both did. My grandparents had 11 children in 20 years so no one blinked an eye when the 12th appeared. That was Babs. But come to find out, she was my aunt Ruth's baby with some guy who'd passed through the neighborhood before she was married. It's not unusual – you hear stories – but when Babs found out, she was devastated. And the worst of it was, she didn't find out until my aunt's funeral who'd died youngish of some cancer of the female parts. As we all stood around the open casket, my aunt's husband told Babs she was Ruth's bastard daughter. Such a dick move. Babs was still

angry with the whole family, my mom in particular. We talked about it again as we slumped together on the couch.

“She should’ve told me,” she said, “She knew what’d gone on with Ruth and that guy. But the family said no, it had to stay quiet.” She mimed zipping her lips. “And no way your mom would ever step out of line.”

Babs wasn’t wrong, but I felt bad for my mom being caught between them, afraid to make anybody mad. It was kind of how she always was between my dad and me too. I tried to call her a couple times, but it was hard since she worked nights at the hospital, and my dad was home all the time. Even when he wasn’t there, her voice sounded tight, like he’d still know somehow. He’d never wanted me in that house. In high school, I wasn’t even allowed to put a poster up on my bedroom wall or get a snack from the fridge. When my mom ironed my shirts, he’d tell me, “That’s my woman you’re using.” On my thirteenth birthday, he gave me a doorkey and told me to stay out as late as I liked.

There wasn’t much for a guy with a bad back to do in Coconut Grove. After I gave Babs money for groceries, there wasn’t a whole lot left in my wallet. When I was able to hobble around, I’d sit in the courtyard of the apartment building, holding a transistor radio to my ear. One day a girl sat down on the grass and asked what I was listening to. I got all uptight like I always did around chicks. “Uh, they’re playing some Diana Ross.”

“You like Motown?” she asked.

“Sure. They’re a class outfit. You?”

“Love the Jacksons. And Stevie.”

“Sure, Stevie’s great.”

She had long black hair and a strong face like Buffy Sainte Marie, and her name was Janine. She told me she was studying to be a pharmacist, and I made a lame joke about her being able to score the good stuff. Despite my lack of conversational skills, for some reason she seemed to dig me. When she wasn't studying, we'd hang out in the park across the road, watching kids play Little League, people walking their dogs. One time, we saw a German Shepherd run snarling, teeth bared, towards a Great Dane. The Great Dane swiped him down, laid one paw on his neck and took ahold of his head in his open jaw. You can bet that German Shepherd fled like the hounds of hell were after him. Later, Janine and I snuck up to the apartment while Babs was out at her bookkeeping job and had fumbling sex on the couch, but I was still thinking about that Great Dane showing the other one what was what.

I couldn't stop looking over my shoulder. My mom would never tell the Navy where I was, but if my dad got it out of her, he'd turn me in in a heartbeat. And I guess the carrier was all still there in my head. One night I howled like a banshee in my sleep, and Babs came running, bare feet slapping the floor. As I sweated and panted, she asked what I'd been dreaming, but I said I couldn't remember much. Which wasn't true, but she didn't need to hear about it. She made us some herbal tea that smelled like wet soil and stayed up with me till I drifted back to sleep.

After a couple of weeks, my back was better, and I sensed Chuck's patience was getting thin with having me around all the time. He'd get home from class, a pile of books under his arm, and me and Janine would be stoned on the couch with the curtains closed, watching some dumb-ass soap opera.

“Come on, man,” he’d say, pointing to the dirty dishes in the sink and my stuff strewn around the living room. “You need to pull your weight a little around here. It’s not fair to leave it all to Babs.”

He was a good guy, and I felt bad about being a lazy prick. I wracked my brains for somewhere to go, but nobody I knew would want to get involved. One evening as Janine and I were making out on the grass in the park, she said, “Why don’t you go to Canada?”

It wasn’t like I hadn’t thought of it myself, but all I’d ever known about Canada was maple syrup and a shitload of snow. And the Mounties. I must have pulled a face that showed I wasn’t crazy about the idea.

“You’d be safe there, baby.”

“But I couldn’t ever go home.”

“You’d want to go home to your folks? Sounds like you’re better off without them.”

I flinched. “No. It’s just my mom’s afraid to go against my dad, that’s all. She’s okay.”

She caressed my face with her thumbs. “You know what, baby, how about I come with you?”

“To Canada? What about college?”

I guess I must have sounded alarmed.

“Never mind. Forget it.”

She looked hurt, and I hated that I did that. “No, wait. You’d do that for me? That’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me – ever.”

I pulled her close and kissed her neck. And said into her ear, “But I couldn’t let you do it.”

I didn't want to spend my whole life running, I knew that much. The more I thought about it, the more I saw a long hallway that got narrower and narrower till it led to just one door that said United States Navy.

When I told Chuck and Babs my decision, they threw me a going-away party in the park, with a barbeque pit and hanging lanterns in the live oaks. It was nice of them, but I knew they had to be relieved. Their neighbors were mostly other students who were against the war, so they slapped me on the back and wished me luck. When I said goodbye to Janine, she cried a lot, which almost got me going too. Canada was starting to sound real good to me right then, and I might have done it if I'd had a few more beers.

Next morning, hungover as all hell, I took the bus down to the Key West Naval Station to turn myself in. An annoyed looking civilian at the desk gave me a clipboard with some forms. Kept me overnight, and the next day gave me some paint and a brush and told me to paint a wall, like some lame-ass Tom Sawyer. I waited all day for someone to come get me, getting more strung out with every hour picturing what they'd do to me. I was also getting pissed. The MPs had put the fear of God into my father but couldn't get off their asses when I made it easy for them and turned myself in? Seems going AWOL wasn't such a big deal after all. By late afternoon when nobody showed up, I thought "Well, fuck them," got my kit bag and walked away. Hitched my way up Highway 1, and by 9pm I was back in Coconut Grove. Chuck took one look at me and said, "What the ...?" but Babs just smiled and made up the couch.

I'd got myself all worked up to turn myself in, and now I had to start over. Or maybe I didn't. I talked it over with Babs the next morning as she made me some eggs.

"What the hell's the Navy playing at? If they don't give a rat's ass, why am I running?"

“Look, Curt,” she said, “Your instincts were right the first time. You need to face the music. If you don’t, this’ll hang over you forever.”

I felt a flare of resentment. “Easy for you to say.”

She put the plate of eggs on the counter in front of me. “It’ll be hard, I know, but you’ll be okay. I’ve got faith in you, Curt.”

Not too many people had ever said that to me. I was lucky to have Babs in my life, my cousin-aunt. And I knew she was right – I needed to deal with the shit heap I’d made of things.

This time I decided to go straight to the heart of the operation. Me and a college friend of Chuck’s hiked to I-95 and stuck our thumbs out for Washington D.C. In Jacksonville, a middle-aged man in a Cadillac stopped and asked us to drive while he slept. That blew me away – him sleeping like a baby with two strangers driving his swanky car. We could easily have rolled him out and floored it, but we didn’t. Rode that sweet ride all the way north.

This time, the military paid attention.

“We’ve been looking for you, you little fucker.”

That’s the first moment I faced the stone-cold consequences of what I’d done. I was banged up at the Anacostia Naval Station for two months, scrubbing latrines. My mom wrote me every week about nothing much, how my sister was doing in her Christian college, how high the trees behind the back fence were getting. I knew how disappointed she must be in me and tried not to think about it. I wrote back asking about Mrs. Rizla’s goiter, just kidding around, and she told me she’d had surgery to get rid of it.

They made me see a psychiatrist, a tight-lipped snippy guy. When he asked why I’d deserted, I said it was because I didn’t believe in the war. So why did you sign up in the first place, he asked, and I said I’d done it because my dad wanted me the fuck out of his house. His

ears pricked up at that so I backtracked and said it was because I knew the draft would get me in the end. And I chose the navy because no way I was going to let them send me to the jungle. The psychiatrist said, “Wasn’t your father in the navy too?” and made some comment about being passive-aggressive. I could tell he thought I was a worthless little prick, but at the end of our sessions, he said he’d recommend they go easy since I’d served 18 months on the carrier in a war zone.

When they bused me to the Pentagon for my court martial and I saw “Seaman Curtis Warfield versus the United States of America” on the papers, I felt sick to my stomach. Three officers behind a big desk looked at me like I was shit on their shoes. I don’t remember much of the ins and outs of that day anymore, but they busted me down from E3 to E1 and sentenced me to four months in the brig. Before I was taken away, I had a minute with my lawyer, a nice young guy with large spoon-shaped ears. He told me it was a good result, I’d be free and clear once I did my time, but it didn’t feel so hot right about then.

When they brought me to Quantico in the evening, it was dark out, and there was an endless clang clang clang of doors slamming shut behind me. A Marine Corps Sergeant made me strip and jump up and down holding my ass cheeks apart, and just like that, I was back in hell.

All I’ll say about it is I served my time. I did the 4am exercises in the rain, I cleared brush with blistered bleeding hands, I ate the disgusting food. And tried to steer clear of the crazies, just like on the ship. One time in the cafeteria line ahead of me, an inmate slammed a server with a metal tray so hard he broke his eye socket. I got through it by playing my favorite albums in my mind, track by track. Van Morrison, CSN, Creedence. And since we weren’t allowed on our bunks until lights out, I’d sit on the cold floor and read whatever they had in the library – a bunch of big fat novels I’d have never touched in high school. *Crime and Punishment* and *Moby*

Dick and *Les Misérables*. I was crushed when Fantine died, carried it around in my throat like a shard of glass for hours. Visiting days were once a week, but no one came to see me. And my mom's letters stopped so I guess my dad told her not to write any more.

It was around then I found out she'd shown up at my court martial. She'd asked to be a character witness, but they didn't let her anywhere near the courtroom. My lawyer mentioned it in a note he sent with some paperwork I had to sign. When I got that letter, I hung my head between my knees and sobbed – didn't care who heard. My mom was afraid to go anywhere she didn't know, but she'd made that drive all the way from Baltimore to the Pentagon by herself. I knew then I'd never thought a damn thing through to the end, not enlisting, not deserting, nothing. Life just dragged me around like a dog drags a messed-up chew toy with all the stuffing gone, and I let it, I let it, and I drank and smoked weed and sat on my ass feeling sorry for myself and never did a goddamn thing about it.

They gave me an honorable discharge in the end, though there was nothing honorable about it. I never talk about my service, it's not something I feel good about. These days money's tight, but when my wife says, "What about your veteran's benefits? We could use them," I won't do it. I just won't.

My mom's in a nursing home now. She thinks I'm my dad and talks about stuff between the two of them I don't care to hear about. I work for a haulage company. I always liked to drive, especially long straight roads with nothing much to look at. Babs and Chuck live in Arizona, and Babs has been going the distance with cancer for years. Sometimes I can't see the point of anything, and then I see my wife teaching our grandson his ABCs on an Etch A Sketch. He's with us while our daughter's posted overseas in Kuwait, doing some kind of intel work she can't discuss. She knows about my time in the brig, but all she says is "Everyone's allowed to be

stupid when they're young, Dad." She's probably thinking as much about herself, how she got pregnant at 18, but she was only broken for about a week and then started planning. It blows my mind how she forges through life, but my wife says not everyone has parents who'll teach them how to do it. She's right, I guess, but some of us are harder to get through to than others.

In my defense, there were times on that carrier in the relentless buzz of the fluorescents when I really thought I'd lose my mind. Once I was so desperate to see some daylight I snuck up to the flight deck where the jets were taking off to bomb the shit out of the Viet Cong. The brass spotted me from the bridge and barked at me through the PA system to move, but I just stood there, deafened by the engines, breathing jet fuel in through my pores, and let the whole world go to hell for one goddamn minute, just one goddamn minute, so I could look up at the goddamn sky.

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