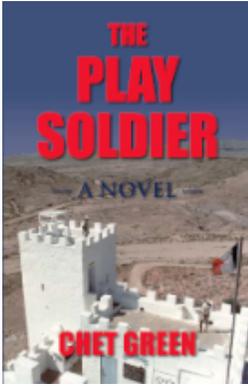


THE PLAY SOLDIER

A NOVEL BY

CHET GREEN



Under the spell of combat myth, hounded by recession and god-awful luck, a counterfeit hero with a useless college degree decides to go for broke as a conflict photographer in the last European colony in Africa. He expects to change his lies to the truth until he discovers his favorite war stories lied.

The Play Soldier

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Third Edition

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HOFER WAS doing push-ups on a paint can to seal it, using a wire-brush handle placed across the lid. The exercise warmed him up too. He was wrong about the weather, and the four-car garage was a carriage house he should have hiked his fee to do. He didn't explain how he got that one wrong. Warz mentioned the slave wages Hofer okayed but didn't rub it in.

Warz was at the open garage door, washing his hands of latex under a cascade from the roof. It was hard to paint wearing gloves. Now the rainwater mixing with the paint on the drive looked like somebody spilled milk of magnesia. At Warz' feet was a half-empty quart thermos of Squirt mixed with vodka.

Hofer came over and nudged him, but Warz didn't feel like a toke. "Throw a live fish out there, it won't die," Hofer joked as if he hadn't screwed up.

Clouds were closing ranks all afternoon. Still, he insisted they wouldn't break open. In business, you had to think positive. "Least it ain't snowin'," he said.

More thunder rolled, then cracked. The roof seemed to split. Hofer ducked. "Tomorrow, if Mother Nature ain't on the rag, we'll come back and finish the job."

Hofer went to the paint-spattered radio that always accompanied him on his jobs. He pulled over a paint can to set half his rump on and got a Detroit rocker that made him groan. "Every time it rains, fuckin' 'Riders on the Storm'."

"Shouldn't feel that way even if you don't like it."

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Hofer raised his hand like an excited first grader. “I know, I know! Because rain is water and we’re mostly water ourselves!”

“You never heard that song in a commercial, did you? Or the other songs they did. Jim Morrison made the band sign a contract never to sell out. He even threatened to take a sledge hammer to an Opel if Buick put ‘Light My Fire’ in the car’s ad.”

Hofer sniggered, shaking his head. “How could I get through life without you?”

“Put CJOM on. They won’t be playing ‘Riders’.”

Hofer dialed it in but got commercials. “So, Mister Know It All, what really did happen to him?”

“Open his grave you might find only bags of sand. The doctor that signed the death certificate popped up and vanished. And Jim had good reasons to disappear: about 20 paternity suits, a prison sentence for that Florida concert. He’s supposed to be dead, but his lawyers are still appealing that one just in case. One guy said he OD’d on a shitter in a certain bar. Heroin and vodka. Or”—Warz took a rag from his back pocket and started wiping his hands—“maybe he went to Africa like Rimbaud. Maybe he’s selling ostrich eggs in Ethiopia. Morrison was really into Rimbaud.”

Warz waited for the bored look that would tell him to fill in the blank. It came.

“Rimbaud’s Europe’s most famous poet,” Warz continued. He knew he was aggravating Hofer. “You know, ‘Attain death with all your appetite, your selfishness and your capital sin.’”

“Oh, yeah, him,” Hofer replied, then wagged his head because class had started.

“He was French,” Warz lectured. “Rimbaud got sick of things and split for Ethiopia just like Mister Mojourisin could have. I mean, Ambrose Bierce disappeared.”

Hofer didn’t care to know who that was. “Ostrich eggs. That’s what I want to do when I get tired of bein’ rich.”

He couldn’t get a good signal and fooled with the antenna. “He was no civil servant. If he didn’t wipe out on a crapper in Paris, he died there in that bathtub.”

Warz breathed on his hands and then put them inside his work coat’s pockets. “Romans believed souls were ferried across a river. The

ferryman got to see everybody for the last time. When you die, you can ask him yourself if he saw Morrison.”

“I’ll do that.”

More lightning. Hofer flinched, inclined to check for third-degree burns, but CJ finally came in.

“You ducked,” Warz needled him. “Used to be a mark of cowardice.”

“Fuck you. You can get killed out there.”

“Sure, but it beats dragging it out, adding to the national medical bill. How do you want to die?”

Hofer assumed a defensive crouch on his paint can, turning around to hide a little tin-foil-wrapped cube of hash. He made a face Warz couldn’t see. “I can’t leave it alone now. Thanks.” He took out a safety pin. “I want to die in bed, all of a sudden, in my sleep. Go nice ’n’ easy.”

“Then your spirit will be confused. Is he sleeping or is he dead? And if it’s confused, it won’t let the ferryman take it across, which means you wind up a ghost.”

“We better never die then. There ain’t no good way out according to you.”

“There are ways, ways just a moment long that’ll fill a whole lifetime, make you a legend forever too.”

“Okay, okay. I know, I know. Get it in a war. That’s how you think.”

“Maybe it’ll be ugly....”

“See? I know you.”

“But it’s probably going to be quick. Actually, death’s something to look forward to.”

“Sure, why not?”

“Peter Pan got it. ‘To die will be an awfully big adventure,’ he said. Read the original; forget the cartoon.”

Hofer groaned as he turned to crouch over the portable and the storm hit harder. “Peter Pan,” he muttered, bored with Warz’ academics.

Warz watched the wind bend the rain.

A guitar riff Hofer never heard before slithered out and coiled on top of the sound box, striking and retreating and striking again. He unwrapped the cube, broke off a gram, stuck it on the pin, and went digging for his lighter. After blowing out the flaming chip, he closed

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one nostril and sniffed up the smoke wisp. The rush wiggled the pigtail he always tied the hair in to keep it out of his work.

Warz zipped himself to the throat and turned up the collar, just in time for Hofer to open bloodstone eyes and see him walking on water, head down, arms folded against the rain that was raking the flooded yard like shrapnel.

Hofer went to the threshold and watched him stop at a steel clothesline pole. Warz tugged on the crossbar, then swung himself up to straddle it. He curled his feet around the upright for a secure perch.

“Warz!” Hofer yelled.

The hash was hyping Hofer’s concern, but Warz couldn’t hear him over the storm nor see him through rain-bubbled, paint-flecked lenses. He kept his head down and took the whip stings, flashing off and on with the rest of the yard. The couple that hired them were at a window, watching.

A few minutes later the thunderheads were tumbling over themselves to the next county, and Warz climbed down. He sloshed stiff and shivering to the garage. Hofer’s pained expression demanded an explanation.

Warz groped for one and found a little levity. “A good soldier never leaves his post, get it?”

All Hofer could assume was drugs. “Don’t you never take none of that crap again!”

The couple was coming to them under umbrellas. The man looked pissed off, his wife concerned. She was carrying a bath towel. It started snowing.

SINCE WARZ was well on his way to being sober, Hofer let him drive while he tried to enjoy the road-spray kisses being blown through the window he’d rolled down because Warz in his wet clothes needed the heater on high to keep from freezing. It didn’t help there was a hole in the floor on Hofer’s side where road salt had eaten through. Skip dashes blipped through the cavity in synch with the wipers’ clunks. That and the tires’ hiss passed for music. The Chrysler’s radio didn’t work.

Rain cellophaned the mansions on Lake Shore Drive like huge bake-off cakes.

The couple had paid in cash, half the agreed price for the half of the job completed. They were sorry, the couple said. Wasn't it a shame about the storm? And, oh, by the way, they didn't have to return to finish the work.

Hofer exploded. "Were you high!? 'Cause if you were, I won't kill you!"

Warz tried deflecting more fire. "Now you know why they call her Muh-thuh Nature."

"Oh, no, you ain't blamin' the bitch. And you weren't stoned!"

Warz tried for an answer that would keep him from embarrassing himself and keep Hofer from overreacting and putting the car in a mahogany-paneled den. Warz knew him. Hofer wouldn't ease up until he had the truth. Warz had to tell him, as much to justify the event to himself.

Moments later Hofer was still waiting. He smacked the dash. "What got into you!?"

"Okay, okay, don't piss your pants," Warz said, faking anger to hide shame. "I wanted to know what it felt like."

"Sicko."

"What!?" Warz fired.

"You and anyone else that gets off that way."

"I used to think you were just stupid."

"Watch it." Hofer meant it.

Warz kept quiet.

Hofer realized Warz' silence was an apology, but Warz didn't care to explain himself and Hofer wanted him to because if it wasn't a perversion, what was so wrong it was unspeakable?

Finally, Hofer exploded. "I'm drinkin' hot water and slitting my wrists! What the fuck was *what* like!?"

"Seeing the elephant," Warz answered and heard a groan like dinner was shit on a shingle again.

"The elephant," Warz explained, "don't you know that one?" He pointed his index finger at Hofer while his thumb went up and down on it. "*Bang, bang*. Know what I mean now? To feel what it's like!"

Hofer played with the knob on the window crank and laughed. "That's not really why you pulled the stunt. Is it? Like a kid? Is that the real reason? Like a little kid?"

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“Is that the real reason?” Warz mock-whined. “Thirty-four hundred years of recorded history and every other page reads like script from ‘Gunga Din’ or ‘Gung Ho’. Tell me you don’t wonder, hero.”

“Oh, yeah, I wonder. I do. I’m wonderin’ now—if I’m gonna be paintin’ fire plugs now on!”

“And when he gets cancer, he’ll blame me for that too,” Warz said, looking out the side window a bit too long. He jerked the car back from the other lane, this time genuinely angry with Hofer for not accepting his defense summation. “Screw being honest with you again!”

“I was gonna get a spray unit!”

“Is that all? No problem.” Steering with his knees, Warz dug out his wallet. “Here. Don’t cry.” He slapped his pay on the dash.

Hofer grabbed the bills before they blew away and calmed down, satisfied Warz wasn’t going to benefit from the mess.

Warz reached low for his thermos that was sloshing on the floor with the news it wasn’t empty. He loosened the cap.

He wished he could tell Hofer about the regret, that sometimes it actually hurt.

THE SNOW relented, and the war memorial’s lit spire glowed over the tree line. Warz wasn’t impressed. The only way you got your name in other shrines was by not coming back. He checked on Hofer. The tires’ swoosh had lulled him to sleep. The worst part of Warz’ drunk had worn off, dulling inhibition. Then the wipers began smearing brake lights on the windshield.

Two toy cars fresh out of their boxes were stopped side by side, blocking half of the two-way. A green MGB and a red, bug-eyed Sprite. The Sprite was hogging the median. To Warz the frat letters on the ragtops’ plastic rear windows certified the cars were just playthings.

Warz crossed the centerline to pass but noticed neither toy was in trouble. If the drivers were having an argument, that was something he could respect. But they’d taken over the avenue to chat. Warz laid on the horn. Hofer snorted.

As soon as Warz was clear, the Sprite pulled away. It came up fast in Warz’ rearview mirror, screaming like a thousand-pound bee. Warz knew the driver wasn’t going to let him get away with the disrespect.

Sure enough, the little car's brights came on and the driver began tailgating. Warz couldn't tell if there was a passenger to be impressed or if it was post-adolescent honor that had to be satisfied. But he began playing, too, tapping the brakes, daring him to rear-end the Imperial.

Despite the bucking, Hofer kept on snoring, getting rocked deeper into sleep.

The Sprite had enough and tore away to come alongside. It stayed clear by inches. Squeezed into the cockpit, the driver's beefy passenger tried to whack the Imperial with an ice scraper.

But Warz was unimpressed, bored with their manhood rite, uncomfortable and tired too. He yawned at them and accelerated to lose them. But the Sprite tore ahead to cut Warz off. Only, it cut too close.

Bang!

The Imperial knocked the plaything out of the way.

"What's goin' on!" Hofer was back.

Warz checked behind. The Sprite was on the sidewalk and facing the way it came. He floored the Chrysler, betting his blood alcohol level was incriminating.

He turned off the lights and sped with Hofer yelling to pull over. Hofer tried to get the ignition key but stopped when Warz slipped into an alley.

They rumbled through the darkness to the lane's center where they got out. Hofer went over the front end while Warz reconed. The alley would never stink again; the old tracks were disappearing under mown grass. Antique wagon wheels were set here and there and big wooden tubs full of flowers. A dog, some kind of overdeveloped macho breed, saw them and was trotting back and forth anxiously in a nearby yard.

Warz felt safe. He jumped and slapped himself for warmth when he didn't wave away exhaust. The motor sounded worse than it did before impact. Red paint where the big front bumper was buckled made it seem swollen from a split lip. It was loose now too. Hofer tried wrenching it free and almost pulled it off. One end thudded on the lane and sprang back up to hang over the ground by inches. Warz decided to help, but Hofer shoved him away. The dog saw that, got excited, and started barking.

Warz kept himself from jumping Hofer, who, he knew, could waste him. "It wasn't my fault," Warz said.

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“I saw you hit ’em.”

“Because they made me, and I’m not sorry. And you know what else? The meek won’t get the earth. Well, tonight a couple punks didn’t get the street.”

“You know what else?” Hofer shook his finger in Warz’ face, “You’re nuts!”

He got too close and tapped Warz’ chin. Nobody touched his face in anger. Instinctively, Warz punched up, and Hofer’s jaws clopped shut. Warz backed away, ready to parry Hofer’s fists, but Hofer didn’t retaliate. The violence incensed the dog, which barked more now.

Hofer was ready to cry but, instead of decking Warz, walked away rubbing his neck, disappointed to hell with his best friend. What were friends for? Soon his car was lumbering off with its newest deformity clanging like a cowbell.

Warz didn’t expect to be abandoned. Pride kept him from reminding Hofer he was wet, cold and on foot in enemy territory. What were friends for?

Hofer shouted out the window, “Cops come for me, I’m pointing you out!”

“I’ll call ’em for you!”

“You’re hit ’n’ run! You ain’t got the balls!”

“Yeah!?” Warz grabbed his crotch and shook it. “Come back here if you got a pair!”

“Screw you, too,” Warz told the angry dog and came back to the subject of Hofer. “Fucker squats to piss,” he mumbled. “Shut up!” he ordered the dog. Then he got an idea.

Damming himself off, he stood squarely in front of the animal. The stream hit it full in the face.

The dog flung itself against the fence, too angry to see it could clear the top.

Its owner poked his head out of his house, and Warz ducked behind his garage. Not quite finished, he stuffed himself into his pants. What the hell, he reasoned, he was already soaked.

The man stayed close to his house and looked for the people arguing. Of course, he didn’t see anybody. “Inside!” he told his dog.

But the dog knew where Warz was and couldn’t hear its owner over the noise it was making, so the man marched to it.

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Warz jogged away. The half run would keep keep him warm. Somebody's trashcan lid became an umbrella. Back in the alley, a big mean dog yelped in pain.

It started snowing again. Fat, wet flakes. Warz didn't care. The snow wouldn't stick. Home was four miles away, but it wasn't that cold.

5

SHIT,” WARZ said and sent his cigarette twirling toward the unemployment office.

The recession was supposed to be over, but it wasn’t quite 8:30 in the morning, the day so gray it looked like 6 p.m., and the line already outside was bent double inside itself like a paper clip. Straightened, it would have reached the Ramona Theatre. The Italianate derelict’s gorgeous hexagonal tower was a block away.

Well, he took it easy, most of them weren’t here to scan Job Service want ads. In just a couple of hours he’d have a scrap of paper with the name of the next employer never to be on his résumé, if he didn’t spend the whole day there because his file was lost.

Inside, he politely pushed through queues of economic refugees that stank of BO and cigarettes, speculating how much pride he’d have to swallow when he found out what was available.

An angry man shaking a letter was putting up a fuss at a claims window. His benefits were not exhausted, he protested. It said so right there, goddammit!

The clerk lectured him not to cuss at her or he’d be “ejected”. The man warned her not to patronize him with 50-dollar words.

Warz found the end of the smaller Job Service line, but it also doubled back. Soon he was facing the wrong way behind a biker in club colors with welder’s goggles around his neck. Good for wind too. Farther up was a middle-age man in a blazer and tie. Pens and a little ruler were in the breast pocket. He hadn’t shaved. His last job was still warm.

The line shuffled forward. When it stopped, Warz was face to face with recruiting posters and standing on a newspaper page. He looked down. “Beau Geste Image Fades” the torn header read. Right away he recognized what the French meant. Only thing it could be, but he assumed someone was reviewing another bad movie about the French Foreign Legion. The Legion and swashbucklers, he thought, two genres Hollywood and the low-information public never got right.

He knew about the Legion from watching “Captain Gallant”, the U.S. kiddie TV series about the modern Foreign Legion, for the 1950s, that is. The captain was, no surprise, an American. In this case, swimming star Buster Crabbe. It was filmed in French Morocco with real legionnaires sometimes.

Warz had wanted to join. He’d sent the sponsor, H.J. Heinz, the 50 cents they wanted along with the label from one of their new condiments. In return, he was promised a pint-size Legion képi with a de rigueur Beau Geste-era neck cover. But the relish tasted awful and the hat never arrived.

Most of the page was intact, though, along with a photo of marching men in flat-topped white hats, so Warz picked it up. Something to read. But it was actually competing with the U.S. military ads in front of him. “Despite reports of its impending demise,” the piece began, “the French Foreign Legion is alive and well and living in the south of France.”

He thought they were extinct. You never heard about them anymore. Good place to be, though, he thought. France. The French took equality seriously. At the beach, women could go topless. Try that in liberal California.

The line shuffled again. He returned the page to the floor. Then Warz saw him, almost didn’t recognize him because ahead a bit was the sweatshop vet. He was in street shoes today, still looking for a fresh start and symptom-free of the chemical-warfare legacy metastasizing in his bones.

As much as Warz wanted to strike up a conversation, he couldn’t. The guy might remember him from the shop, seen Warz’ phony wardrobe, seen the fight, and he’d ask for Warz’ unit, for names, places, his MOS. So Warz kept quiet, kept his head down; he couldn’t even talk the talk.

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A woman screamed. The angry man was climbing over the counter. A security-guard hat bobbed over people's heads toward them.

IT WAS time to wash away differences with Hofer, so Warz bought a 12-pack. Eventually, the Cutlass crunched gravel behind the laundromat Hofer lived above. But the Imperial wasn't around. Warz opened the glove compartment, took out a pen and an old receipt that didn't reveal what the purchase was, then went up the outside back staircase to leave a note.

The old nubby pink sofa was visible through brown, hillbilly-plaid drapes. Hofer's taste wasn't much, but at least that junk belonged to the landlord. A TV and stereo, on the other hand, were Hofer's, and they were missing. In fact, a lot of his things were gone. Warz dialed the flat from the laundromat pay phone.

"Disconnected," the phone company informed him.

6

SHE NEVER liked yard work. Warz would give her flowers, and the next day they'd look terrible despite the plant food. He decided they were absorbing the poison they heard when she spoke about him. He knew she wasn't helping his successor take care of the lawn. You didn't just water and mow bentgrass.

Her used, green Karman Ghia rested beside a new, brick ranch-style house, both wedding gifts from her new husband. Warz' consolation was that her dream didn't come true: a new, candy-apple-red Mercedes 450SL. Warz wondered why a black Berlinetta was parked there.

The pale-cement drive was as smooth as a Miami beach. Sicilians, he smirked, cement went with them like tommy guns and hair oil; every Italian in America came from there. But mainland Italians didn't even consider them Italian. Piedmontese called them Mau Maus. What was a blonde Lutheran like her doing with one?

She didn't have to work, and her new husband never had to move. Either he kicked his ex out, or she couldn't wait to get away. Warz never learned why. He didn't like coming over to pick up his girls. Every time he did, he'd get his nose rubbed in his own mess. But, he had to admit, the punishment worked: He hadn't remarried.

He disagreed with her new name—Virzi. It didn't go with her blonde hair. Warz wondered how he got used to it. Long and thick, it always smelled clean, like her. No soap or hair-spray scent, just clean. When she wore cologne, he was disappointed. She had a little knock knee, too, which gave her a schoolgirl's gait. In fact, the first time he took off her shirt, he wondered if she lied about her age; the nipples were

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blushes. Sex was spiced with the fantasy of statutory rape. Even before the divorce, Warz wanted to know if she and Joe were getting it on. Charlene had remarried fast. Two months after the divorce.

He parked the coupe behind the Ghia. The new vanity plate defied deciphering. He never asked her to explain it. It might upset him. He took a box of candy off the seat. Chocolate bunnies. Easter was coming. It was early.

He almost forgot. The toke whistle. He took it down.

THE INNER door opened. He didn't have to knock. Because there she was in a sweatshirt from the marina where Joe kept his Egg Harbor and which, Warz knew, she could claim half of now. The Scooby Doo TV show was playing in the background.

She looked at him through the storm door's security scrollwork like the baroness at her castle's portcullis. It pissed him off when she did that. But instead of letting him in, she kept her thumbs hooked on the slant-front pockets of designer jeans.

He knew something was up he wasn't going to like, but he decided he better find out about it the round-about way. "You get another car? Black?"

"It's Joe's brother's. He's fixing the washer."

"Where's Joe?"

"At his parents' with his kids."

He showed her the box. "This is for *our* kids."

She stayed quiet, pursing her lips. The door stayed closed

Warz tapped his foot a bit, then shifted his weight. "Okay, Shar, what's going on?"

She sighed, already exasperated and, a little apprehensive, folded her arms across her chest. "Kim and Sammi are at a birthday party."

He smacked his thigh with the candy. Some of the bunnies broke.

"They're not here?" He bent around her to peer inside. "Then who the hell's watching cartoons!?"

"I am *not* lying! I called you about the change. Somebody took the message. I didn't hear from you, so...."

"Who?"

"What do you mean 'Who?'"

"Who you talk to?"

“How do I know?” She didn’t blink but traded stares straight on. She was telling the truth. “People are always coming and going at your place.”

“Shar,” Warz calmed himself, “nobody told me.”

“You haven’t called back before. I figured you didn’t care again. If you stayed in touch more, you’d know the girls really wanted to go to their friend’s party.”

“If I stayed in touch? Whenever I do, I feel like I’m selling magazines. The b.s. with Joe goes better.”

Her fingers fluttered over her arm. “Frank, they’re getting older.”

“They’re five, for Chrissake!”

“They don’t want to just sit in front of a TV!”

“Gee, excuse me, but I can’t afford the Ice Capades!”

“You can’t afford that car.” Her fingers moved faster.

“The car’s my security. All I got. I know you know what I mean.”

“We’ve been cutting you slack on the child support, or did you forget how expensive it is to raise kids?”

“Get a job yourself. Live within your means. I don’t make enough to support myself, let alone him and you too.”

She took the insult but glared back. “They’re your kids besides mine.”

“Not that simple.” He leaned forward, nose to nose except for the glass between them. “You were the one that wanted them.”

He stepped back and tossed the box so that it rotated. When he caught it, the candy shifted in a crushing shuffle.

He screwed up his face and mock-whined, “Why do you want kids? Because what’s Christmas without them? Want to leave everything to the animals!” Warz turned serious. “Whole planet would be better off if there was nothing but animals!” He rattled the gift at her, shattering the bunnies into more pieces. “I gave you what you wanted!”

She pushed the inner door before her. She’d given him his audience so that he could vent his spleen and not break her window. It was true she persuaded him to start the family, and yet he proudly handed out the phallic cigars.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry,” he said, regretting he’d slighted his own children.

She enjoyed watching the mortification beat him up a little, but the storm door clicked anyway.

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“Wait! Just wait, okay?” He raised the box. “For the kids. It’s Sanders. Sorry, a little rearranged, I guess, but, hey,” he grinned, “they’re bite size now.”

She undid the locks and opened the door a crack, and he caught the side.

“I’ll call somebody, Frank.”

“All I want to do is talk”—she pulled back on the door, but he resisted—“so the whole year isn’t shot.”

As a sign of good faith, he released his hold, but she slammed the door shut and snapped on the lock in the same motion.

“Shar,” was all he could say.

“Don’t, Frank.” She wished she didn’t pity him.

Each had become impatient with the other over differences that infected the marriage like a fast-acting virus, though they never became physical. Still, she had to admit, he’d been a good provider and loved his kids, even if it wasn’t from up close.

“We used to help each other,” Warz said before he turned and began leaving...and heard the door unlock.

SHE TURNED off the television. Warz took a seat in his armchair and looked around. Like a whore house waiting room. The cat was white. The carpet was white. The big front window was tapestried with brocaded red drapes they could cut into High Mass chasubles. They bowed the curtain rods. But here and there were what he gave up. Only a matter of time, Warz bet, when his old things would be gone and a scale Trevi Fountain would be spouting right there in the living room.

Her new brother in law appeared and spooked him. One moment there was nothing else in the room, next there was a monolith. He was dressed head to foot in black. One hundred seventy-five extra pounds made him wheeze. Charlene introduced Vinnie. The two men acknowledged existences and Vinnie lumbered downstairs.

Warz whistled through his teeth. “He’s never allowed on top, is he?”

Loyally disdainful, she flashed Warz a disapproving look and sat down beside a laundry basket to resume folding clothes. A Pontiac Trans Am brochure was on a table.

“Getting another car?” he asked.

“We’re thinking about it.”

The black-on-black color scheme was checked off.

“You never liked black cars,” he said.

“Joe wants one.”

Warz swallowed his envy. Joe had everything, not just his woman. Never mind Warz wanted to be rid of her. He grinned diplomatically, looked around more and stopped on the kitchen. “Got anything to eat?”

“I just cleaned off the table.”

“From making the Mob lunch, right?”

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply.

“Take it easy. Sorry. It’s all right. But, hey, in case they haven’t told you yet because you’re new, Mafia don’t like eating meat right after they whack somebody.”

She bit her lower lip. He knew she wasn’t restraining a laugh.

“Joke, joke! Polish joke. Anyway,”—he picked a piece of animal cracker from between the cushions, a rhino head, showed her and smiled mischievously that she missed one—“Joe drive now?”

“No.”

He popped the piece in his mouth. “He makes good money just for working the dock.”

“The overtime helps a lot.” She flapped open one of Joe’s undershirts and quickly folded it on her lap.

“Nice his uncle’s got all that extra work for him.”

“Joe works hard.”

“Mafia sure take care of their own.”

She stopped folding and gave him a warning look.

He threw up his hands. “Sorry. I mean it. Won’t happen again.” He couldn’t help press the wrong buttons.

Grabbing another T-shirt, she folded it more quickly. “You said you wanted to talk.”

A lot of kids’ things he didn’t remember were lying around, making it hard for him to tell what belonged to the twins or Joe’s three youngsters. “I don’t suppose he considers me family.”

“They’re not hiring,” she said as she brought up a pair of men’s black bikini briefs, which she whipped to the basket.

But he noticed and that she was keeping her legs crossed, which made it harder for her to work on the laundry. Then he saw a photo he took of

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her and the girls on a carnival ride. They were being tickled by a rocket ship that was straining its chain tether.

“Was that in Lowell?” he asked, glad the photograph remained special to her.

She checked for herself. “Rochester.”

“You look good.”

“You have a knack for taking pictures. You ought to follow it.”

“I mean *you* look good.”

She returned to the laundry without comment, wary of a trick. She wasn’t about to gaze at him as she knew he wanted her to.

Scanning the room again, he saw an official photo showing they were one big, happy, extended family, minus himself.

The new wedding picture was prominent. Once more, she was in white. But it made him feel superior the guys who stood up for him were in white tie and tails, not the peach lounge-lizard threads on the knee cappers with Joe.

He brought up a knee and locked his hands around it, rocking back and forth, working up the courage to risk a fight. “I’ve been thinking. I’ve given up trying to find decent work around here. Probably have to go away.”

“You have to do what you think’s best.”

Warz opened his arms. “Aw, come on, Shar, look at me. You won’t turn to stone.” He took a breath to stay under control. “Can’t Joe get me in? Then I can make child support with no sweat.”

She went on folding. “We’re lucky he’s getting overtime. That’s how tight things are around here.”

“In other words, he can’t even make me a loan?”

She stopped her work.

“Easy,” he said. “You’d get interest.”

“Frank, we’re cutting you slack. Don’t you know that? Your support checks are always short. When they come. We know how things are with you.”

Warz pounded his leg. The remark embarrassed him. “You’re getting your new car thanks to those checks.” Warz saw she wasn’t wearing her three-carat rock. “Where’s the Krupp Diamond? I helped him buy that for you, too!”

She white-knuckled a kid’s pajama top. “You are incredible!”

“He doesn’t make enough for you, does he?”

She threw the little shirt to the floor.

He pointed at her. “If you knew how much he really made, you wouldn’t have gone after him, would you?”

Charlene rose, shouting, “This time you are paying!”

“Collecting’s easier from him! You want extra cash, he asks whose legs they want broken!”

“I’m gonna break yours, you dumb Polack!”

It was Vinnie. He was climbing out of the basement fast, and she wasn’t calling him off. The next instant he was in the living room, winded and already in a sweat. Warz picked up a brass vase and cocked his arm. That stopped Vinnie.

Warz felt stupid. He was amazed he didn’t figure it out sooner. It was insulting.

“He’s your body guard,” Warz said, the gripped vase shining like a gold bomb. “He is, isn’t he? That’s why he’s here. To protect you from me. You think so little of me as a man you didn’t get muscle, you got cartoon watcher here, this one fat wop!”

Vinnie lunged, and Warz threw the vase at the big man’s head. There was a thud, then a bigger one when Vinnie went down on all fours, fighting to keep himself from going flat, but he collapsed and started to bleed. Warz grabbed his collar and dragged him off the carpet to the kitchen in time for the headwaters to overflow on the tile. She gasped and put her hands over her mouth.

The victory made Warz feel like a success. He stood over Vinnie and teased, “Wanna get hurt? Fuck with me again.”

She was in shock, but he didn’t care. “What, no *grazie* for saving the pope’s rug? Hey, you didn’t make him something with garlic, did you? Garlic thins blood, you know.”

The remark made her go for the kitchen’s wall phone. He wrestled her briefly and yanked it away, leaving her rubbing her wrist, but she wasn’t afraid. “They’re going to find you,” she seethed.

“Who? Bums like this?” He looked at Vinnie. “I’m scared.” Then he grinned and replaced the receiver. “You’re just tired. You need a pick-me-up.”

He started jumping in place.

“They’re going to use baseball bats!” she warned him.

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He kept on jumping.

“What’s your problem now!?”

“No problem. Just making you a protein shake.”

He blocked her slap from hitting his face. Her grimace told him she was going to have a bruise. Fine, Warz thought, let her show her new husband.

Vinnie let out a long moan.

She looked at her in law, then jeered at Warz, “Too bad you didn’t get in the Marines. You could have been killed.”

Warz pulled her close, grinding against her to begin enjoying her one last time, wanting to leave her in a little pain, too, so she’d never forget him.

He kissed her neck, breathed in her scent—and stopped the rest. No way was he giving her what she wanted. No way was he letting her yell rape. He released her.

Charlene wrapped her arms around herself and backed up, her eyes brimming from nervousness not self-pity, afraid because she retreated. Retreats, she remembered, incited menacing animals.

Warz quit waiting for the words to another apology, fearful he would only turn it into an insult. He had that talent. So he left driving nowhere, worrying he was changing, losing control.

A SIREN jumped on his back. Warz pulled over, afraid she’d called in domestic violence, but the cop wanted him to know a taillight was out. He got a verbal warning.

When Warz opened the glove compartment to get the insurance certificate, he saw the business card from the vice president and recalled the standing invitation from the heir apparent himself. Saturday night, Warz recalled the guy’s telling him. Well, it was Saturday night.

7

WARZ RODE around until dark. It wasn't cool to be early. He followed the map the vice president had drawn on the back of the card and stayed on Mack as the card instructed even after the neighborhood got ragged. He wasn't sure he should continue, but why, he wondered, would the guy mislead him? Then a sign appeared—Indian Village. And Warz saw the palaces and remembered. He hadn't been there in a while.

The Village was shoulder-to-shoulder mansions on three streets named for First Americans tribes. In fact, the community was near the place where Pontiac tore up a big unit of Red Coats coming to get him. In Europe or the American South, each residence would be in its own park.

Many of the gorgeous structures were owned by four or five single white guys splitting a cheap lease on a 20-room extravaganza in the inner city. Cops, electronic security systems, and the opportunity myth were keeping them safe. No mansion was surrounded by a wall with broken glass on top.

For two blocks of Iroquois, a wheeled menagerie waited curbside, gleaming dangerously under street lights, wings folded for the moment, claws and fangs retracted. Warz didn't have to refer to the house numbers on the business card, he just followed the music.

But he wasn't there for fun anymore. The money shining all over those cars made him wish he could afford to join the club. The vice president would help.

The other word out there a lot was “entrepreneur”. Either you networked to get a job or you made your own. And since he didn't

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know how to spin straw into gold, he was going to pour on the charm. But it would take effort. Already, schmoozing felt the way a blowjob looked.

He removed his glasses and left them in the car. Now he felt more confident. Beautiful girls didn't make passes at guys in glasses. You needed to look your best for them, needed to look healthy. Natural selection. Anyway, uncorrected, his 20/100 vision let him discern most blurs accurately. Even in dim bar light, he was able to tell whether a girl was worth a come-on. He just had to get a little closer. Contact lenses were too much like makeup.

Inside, a man with a professional system was taking pictures of confident people between their mid-20s and very early middle age who would never stand in a jobless line or ever wore a military uniform or were ever going to. A couple more hours and one of them would star on channel 7's 11 o'clock news.

When he found the great hall, Warz saw a claw-foot bathtub filled with beers trapped in ice. He salvaged one.

"Help you?"

Warz turned to see the questioner to know how to answer. It was a two-headed security system. "No thanks," Warz said, "I can open this by myself."

The other half of the bull-necked detail became testy. "Are you a guest?"

Warz flipped out the business card and disappointed them. He spotted his host holding court. Roger was swaying a little. He hoped Roger remembered him. People didn't usually forget "Warz" once they heard it.

The introduction intimated they were friends. Roger knew what to do.

"Frank was in the war," he announced. Somebody said "Oh" and Warz assumed they were impressed; however, the recognition didn't last anywhere near the quarter hour you were supposed to be famous. Nobody even remarked how ironic his last name was. They didn't care. Then the host almost tipped over, but his whole entourage caught him and looked like they wanted him to know they had.

Roger weaved away with his court, leaving Warz to break his own ice. So Warz decided to tour the playhouse and pick up a job along the way.

He began wandering past laughing gaggles and cliques, searching for one he could join when he'd be asked, "And what do *you* do?" You were your job. The great identity standard. People always forgot you could forever be what you did once in a couple seconds a long time ago.

An auburn-haired girl that reminded Warz of an America's Cup groupie sent him a smile. She had Tinkerbelle's haircut and wore a ribbed off-white turtleneck with a black cashmere pea coat that she didn't find too warm. Not drinking anything, she kept her hands in the pockets.

Congregating in one room paneled with bookcases but no books were several young professionals. Warz got within earshot, hoping to insinuate. One with a sweater over his shoulders like a tennis star said, "He really doesn't expect associates to kick ass. With him, you make partner by kissing his. If that's the case, I don't care if he takes off his pants!"

His friends laughed but didn't disagree. Warz noticed their fingernails were surgically clean. He checked his own, then hid one hand in a pocket and curled the other out of sight around his beer. But the sip he had this time could have been river water.

The pretty girl in the pea coat came over. She knew what Warz was up to. Still smiling, she surprised him when she told him she knew. "Sucking up's just another way to give head."

Warz liked her style. She was alone, though it wasn't natural to see a stunner like her without a post-adolescent protector draped all over her. And she seemed interested in him, but he didn't like it. Her high-caste pack was cunning while any woman looking like her was high maintenance. He wanted out before she wolf ate him alive.

"I'm Amy. Hi," she said. "Roger told me about you."

He made sure she watched him place the bottle on a table with a cheap bronze souvenir from Pompeii, a statuette of a satyr balling a nanny goat.

"Not to change the subject," he said, "I'm leaving, not coming."

She laughed.

"Yeah"—his eyes toured the ceiling—"I've seen haunted houses before."

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“Can’t relate to your peers. I know. Been watching. But me too. These guys, they’ve got hands softer than mine. You haven’t seen the place, though. I know you haven’t been upstairs. Like I said, been watching. You’ll like upstairs.” She smiled. “Come on.” But she stopped after going up a couple of steps. “Anybody tell you you look like—oh, who’s that movie star? From ‘Wanted Dead or Alive’? You wanted?” She wrinkled her nose and smiled again. “Let’s go.”

Warz hoped she was connected.

Amy gushed design specs and the bio of the robber baron that slept there first, making sure everybody they passed heard her. Suddenly, she changed the subject. “Heard about you. You see a lot of action?” She grinned mischievously, as if she didn’t want him to spank her hard for asking.

“I got a couple Purple Hearts,” he said, sure he’d never get the chance to show her the truth.

“What were you in? Army, Navy....”

“Marines.”

“Really?” She moved to the main staircase and began climbing bordello-red carpet until she had a thought. She checked to be sure he was following. “Marines are so”—she shrugged—“extreme?”

Warz kept quiet, wanting her to think incredible memories not just humility were keeping him from a comment. A chatting couple squeezed over to give them room.

At the top, she moved briskly down a hall, still jabbering while stopping to let more people pass. When the hall was clear, she opened a door on people doing lines of coke, tried another door and this time peaked in cautiously. It was free and the hallway was suddenly empty.

She didn’t bother to close the door or look for a light or give him a chance to find one, just tugged him in after her. Hallway light let him make out a small fireplace, a double bed with a bare mattress and an old oak steamer trunk in a tartan of rusty bands and abraded straps. She went to it and tried to pull it.

“Help,” she called playfully.

She stood watch at the door as he happily strained his back, towing over the chest and looking forward to the rest of the tour.

She sealed them in darkness and he blocked the closed door with the chest.

Then she asked, “How many did you kill?”

Things stopped being fun for him. You never asked that one, and he couldn’t answer, not even lie. So she took his wrists and held down his arms. He was under arrest for a lousy number.

Uneasy now, he didn’t know how she wanted it. Worse, he feared he might prove inadequate. She put her open mouth hard on his. Her tongue went searching. He wouldn’t tell her she was hurting his gums, but she was cutting her own and came up for air.

“We have to hurry,” she panted. “How many?”

“I don’t know.”

AMY REFASTENED her bra. “My fiancé is the jealous type, so”—she shook the cups and jiggled in her breasts—“you won’t try holding hands or anything, will you?”

They headed downstairs where she collected somebody called Chad. Chad said he had been looking for her. He left little doubt he was jealous and suspicious.

She pleaded with him to put a fireplace in the upstairs bedroom in their new house, like what she just showed Warz, who built houses, she said, gracefully kicking him out because, she said, he had another party he was expected at, and “Oh, thank you for the design tips, Frank.”

Warz was happy to go but met Roger again, who gave Warz a sloppy salute. A girl was hugging him from behind while unbuttoning his shirt. He didn’t inquire why Warz was leaving empty handed.

“VERNOR’S,” WARZ told Al.

Warz didn’t feel like alcohol.

Created in Detroit in 1866, aged in wood barrels for 4 years, Vernor’s was the Cadillac of soft drinks. They said General Custer liked it.

The Red Wings were on the TV again, but nobody was watching. Someone approached. Warz cheered up, ready for a playful punch, but it wasn’t Hofer.

“How ya holdin’ up, Mike?” Al asked his customer.

“Havin’ the surgery. My asshole feels like I put out my cigarette on it.”

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A Zippo lighter went off with its trademark *click, clop* as the hemorrhoids sufferer grumbled about spoiled grandkids staying over.

A pink sword lay on the bar top beside a drained highball glass. Lipstick smudged the rim. Warz picked up the cherry sticker and turned it around and around and recalled that in Pompeii, 18 human skeletons were discovered in a gladiator barracks cell. One was a woman's, in gold and jewels. It had always been that way, he decided.

Warz needed a friend. His grandfather came to mind. The old hero never let him down.

8

DZIADZIA'S FINGERS hooked the aluminum walker like steel rings. His thin frame made the big hands more obvious. The gloves made them look bigger, but one glove's finger grasped poorly. Being mostly empty, it protruded. The index finger inside was gone to the second joint. Long ago, there was an accident at the tire plant.

Warz walked slowly beside him until Dziadzia stopped. Pronounced jah-jah, it meant grandfather. It was about the only Polish Warz spoke.

Jahj, as Warz liked to call him, leaned on the walker, watching the memories appearing around the headstones. Either the old man was regretful or very serious, Warz couldn't tell. A breeze blew wisps of white hair across his grandfather's eyes. He didn't like hats.

Jahj picked up the walker again and put it down, hobbling behind it, following flat markers that circled the white-marble sculpture of a snarling polar bear that protected a grave. The tilted cross it stood over was capped with a doughboy's helmet. Fissures cracked the bear's haunches. Two bronze plaques bolted in the monument's pedestal had gone green. The top one was unapologetic. "My country right or wrong." The plaque beneath it gave the business that went wrong. "In memory of the Veterans of the North Russia Expeditionary Forces 1918-1919."

World War One didn't quite end with the armistice. In August 1918, the U.S. sent 5,500 Army infantry to protect matériel in Archangel Province, North Russia. They were put under British command. Instead of promised guard duty, they were ordered against Bolshevik forces.

Conditions were fantastic, so cold that wagon horses' breath suffocated them when it would freeze in their nostrils. The men began

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calling themselves Polar Bears. Then their own country forgot about them. Nine months later, shamed for abandoning the soldiers, Washington recalled them. The little undeclared war accomplished nothing. Even Russia dismembered it, though it started relations between America and post-czarist Russia with a sharp, bloody bang.

“Snow lot up der,” Dziadzia said. When he spoke, each Slavic-accented word ending with a little “g” gonged.

“On patrol one man had tuh go a way, den he fall over to a side, make room for duh next felluh dat go little more way. Den *he* fall over to a side. So on, so on, and dat how we do patrolling”—gong—“in June!”

It had been a while since he related the story of his medal to his grandson. Jahj was the only relative that had one for valor, and it wasn’t even American. Warz promised him he would leave the Croix de Guerre with the bear when the time came.

Dziadzia admired the sculpture, except for one thing. “Look better,” he said, “when der snowing.” Gong.

But he could never see his pet again in winter. Another fall and he might break the hip again and never walk.

Warz helped him to a corner of the black granite base to sit. He took him enough times to White Chapel Cemetery that getting the walker in and out of the car was easy.

More than 200 Americans died in the forgotten campaign. Ninety-four were killed in action. The bodies surrounding the bear included most of the 86 dead a disinterment party brought back in 1930. The taiga was keeping the rest.

Traffic on I-75 couldn’t hush the American flag. Its nylon whistled as the wind dropped the temperature to freezing. The halyard clanged once on the metal staff.

Warz helped his grandfather to sit. “Jahj, tell me about the medal.”

“Oh? You hear me on dat before.”

“Been a while.”

Etiquette mandated his grandfather act reluctant, but soon a big, gloved hand was rubbing pale leather through a frost of chin stubble. He grinned sheepishly and said, “Damn French kiss ya.”

He hesitated once more, a little embarrassed, but he wanted to talk. “It was at duh railroad bridge,” he began dryly, as if he was relating a routine incident. “Near Karpa Gora. Paraskiwicz der”—he nodded at a

grave—"Skiv on duh Lewis gun wit' me. Good gun. Little heavy but good.

"Lieutenant Higgins now, he don't like, but no choice. Orders from duh Brits, see? He has tuh let us go wit' Lieutenant Roux an' some Whites. White Russkies. Roux was French. We tawt Roux shoulda go help duh Foreign Legion. It was French owned. Legion got phony unit a Whites up der; officers were Whites, not French. But Whites don't measure up. Say der snowshoe no good. Bah!" He waved away the excuse. "Anyways, Skiv, me an' Roux, we had, oh, 20 Whites wit' us.

"See, peasants at Karpa Gora say Reds are 'roun', Bolos, an' doze guys show up, all right. Natcherly, Whites run. Nutting outta ordinary. Roux shoot one in back tuh stop duh rest, but he only make 'em go faster. Well, we stop lotta Bolsheviki, Skiv an' me mostly.

"Now one Red was a officer. He got real nice coat, a sweep-duh-floor job Russians like. Lining all fox fur. Even duh sleeves. But Skiv cut him in half so duh ting look purty bad. Not takin' it home."

He trailed off until the memories released him.

"After dat, mop up time. Roux going 'roun' easy come, easy go, shooting wounded. He say duh cold killed pain, an' he want 'em burning in hell right now! You know, you get nice an' warm right before you freeze tuh det. Oh, Roux wasn't no bad egg; he put me an' Skiv in for Croy duh Gerz." He paused, trailing off again. "I don't know; gun do all duh work.

"Any rate, one day in camp, call formation: 'Private Kaminski, front center.' One step forward." Dziadzia put out a foot. 'Private Paraskiwicz, front center.' One step forward." The foot rose to come down again. "Den Captain Allier give us duh medals"—he began laughing—"an' kiss us!" He blushed. "Day full a tanks!" He laughed harder. "Skiv got intuh fights wit' guys wouldn't leave us 'lone 'bout duh kisses." His eyes teared. "I tink, I tink, one a dem"—he backed up to catch his breath—"one a dem really wanta get married!"

A gleaming black hearse appeared on the central lane. Behind was a file of luxury sedans, most fashionably black. The sleek cortege rolled solemnly toward the mausoleum. The wind died as if it was made to, and the flag went limp.

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Dziadzia wiped his eyes and pulled himself halfway up on the walker to see better. Warz steadied it. “Betcha everyone in black, too,” Dziadzia said.

“Want to visit Busia?” Warz referred to his grandmother. “No trouble to take you there.”

“Naw, dat cemetery, heck of a drive. An’ give Busia duh break. Not too long, we see each other forever.” Dziadzia lowered himself to the stone. “Howz duh folks’ graves?”

“They’re okay.”

“Howz about *der* folks?”

Warz sat down beside him. “Grampa Joe’s headstone’s sunk.”

Dziadzia waved at the ground. “Spread a little gravel under der. You do it; cemetery people got no care.”

Warz waited a bit to be sure he wouldn’t be out of line. He needed to phrase it right. “Jahj,”—Dziadzia wiggled his hearing aid—“all that action, you really never got hit?”

“No scratches even.”

“Maybe we’re meant to come back. Our family, I mean. Maybe nobody from this family’s ever died in a war. Seems we’re not meant to.”

“Well, your mother’s brother, Richie, he got dat steel in his head.” He tapped his forehead. “Alway’ headache.”

“But he wasn’t killed.”

“Tell you what, on day when der bad, he wish he was.”

Warz took off his glasses to get rid of a smudge he had been putting up with for too long. He breathed on the outside of the lens and rubbed it gently on his pants.

“Remember the blind guys with the accordions, playing for change in front of the dime stores at Seven Mile, selling pencils? One got around on a board with wheels. Always wore a poppy. Bet he was wounded. He hardly had stumps.” Warz put the glasses on. “That could’ve happened to you.”

“Naw, dat kind ting happen tuh-der guy. Happen tuh *him*, see?”

The cortège stopped beside the mausoleum.

“Rich people,” Dziadzia humphed, “too good for duh dirt.”

The wind revived and the flag rustled. Thirty-foot blue spruces beside the bear moaned.

“Damn Russia,” Dziadzia said, hunching over, even though his old wool overcoat kept out the wind’s bite. “Pine tree doing dat in summer make me cold.”

People were leaving the cars.

Then Jahj got excited. “Look! Look, tole ya! Rich guy! Everybody in black. Real people don’t dress up tuh take out garbage. Don’t dress up tuh take me out!”

Two men reached into the hearse and four more helped pull the coffin onto a gurney.

Dziadzia’s upper dentures clicked. “Hard tuh be jealous. Probly all he do was make money. Wonder if he borned before me. Hey, maybe he a *she*.” He chuckled.

He sat down but leaned forward a bit, looked over the walker and frowned, gripping the handles on the walker as if he was going to fire it. He scanned the headstones again and nodded several times.

“You 27 now?” Dziadzia asked.

“Twenty-eight.” Warz braced for a lecture to get a life.

It came all right but not as he expected.

“I never see kids play baseball like you,” his grandfather began.

“I never liked baseball.”

“I got you duh hard ball, remember? Soon you get it, der telling you stop fooling. You tro it like grenade.” He swung overhand, realized he forgot the sequence, laughed at his mistake and put a fist to his mouth. “After you pull duh pin wit’ your teet’!” He chuckled some more.

“Kids make games of everything.”

The old hero fidgeted. The hip was hurting. Time to leave. “You only one like hearing ’bout Russia.”

Not caring to be embarrassed by analysis, Warz didn’t encourage it. But Dziadzia prepared to give him something else. He pulled the walker close and began rising. Warz anchored the walker and helped him to turn around and get up to the monument so that his grandfather could accomplish the last detail of every visit.

As Dziadzia picked and swiped pine needles from around the bear, he said, “Lieutenant Higgins use tuh try peppin’ us up. ‘Boys,’ he say, ‘remember, any man don’t get tuh be soldier gonna be rough on hisself.’ Den he say, ‘Doctor Johnson,’ whoever duh hell dat was.”

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“Samuel Johnson,” Warz said. He heard the career advice loud and clear and folded his arms tightly against the regret that suddenly came to life. “Has to be Samuel Johnson. Sounds like what he’d write.”

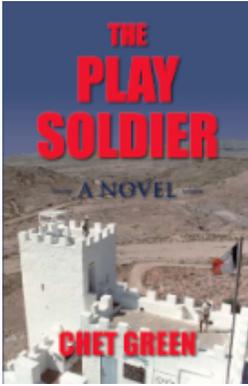
“Okay, who was he?”

“The English guy that said he could love anybody but an American.”

Dziadzia stopped cleaning. “He say so? Boy, I like tuh give it him!”

“He died a long time ago, Jahj.”

“Good.”



Under the spell of combat myth, hounded by recession and god-awful luck, a counterfeit hero with a useless college degree decides to go for broke as a conflict photographer in the last European colony in Africa. He expects to change his lies to the truth until he discovers his favorite war stories lied.

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