

Between the Feet



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It was after Skinner told me what he did to his girlfriend's cat that he showed up in my dreams.

We were alone in our squad's tent at the Baghdad Airport, going through final checks for the next day's convoy, cleaning ammo belts for his SAW and packing our rucksacks and vests for the morning. Then, he took the headphones off his ears, turned to me, and said, quite simply, that he was sorry he had done it. "Damn cat didn't do a thing wrong," he said. "Always liked me and I went and drowned the little fucker."

I stopped a moment, my hands draped with belts of gleaming brass rounds, and stared at him—shirtless and wearing a star-spangled do-rag over his bristly scalp.

"You drowned her cat?" He was only nineteen, I had to remind myself.

"The goddam slut was fucking two other guys while I was over here. What was I supposed to do, Machus? I had to do something."

"So you drowned her cat?"

His stars-and-stripes bobbed.

I was just a year older, but I didn't get him. I liked him well enough, but I just couldn't fathom how he—

"Drowned that little fucking cat in her lake. I shouldn't have, though. He didn't do anything wrong. But I found out about her that day, and I

was just—sick, you know? I kept seeing her with that guy, kept seeing him touch her, then they'd kiss, then next thing I knew they'd be naked and on top of each other and she just—just wanting it so bad. She'd want him and not me. You know what I'm saying?" He shrugged and turned back to packing. "And I couldn't stop it—it kept coming back and back and wouldn't fucking stop." He was shoving dirty laundry into a duffle bag, but now he stopped and stared at the naked light bulb swaying by its electric cord from the tent ceiling.

"So that night I went to her house—her parents' house, and I saw her window, and I just kept thinking he might be there, might have snuck in like I used to, maybe even now he was giving it to her, and I was—I don't know. I sat on her porch, on the little swing there, and I started to cry. I am serious. I started to cry and her cat came out the little door they have for him. He knew me. He came over and started purring and rubbing up against my leg. I was bawling, Machus, bawling like you wouldn't believe."

The earphones around his neck were blasting "Enter Sandman" as he talked on. I slid the ceramic plates into my flak jacket, and wondered why he'd chosen me as his confessor out of the entire platoon. I was kind of glad he did. I didn't mind Skinner's stories. I liked the way he lost himself in the moment of telling, how he was never bound by pesky details like Truth or What Really Happened, how he reveled in the moment where he made himself magnetic and lived for the scene.

I could never do that. I just sat and listened, always sat and always listened. Maybe that's why I got the inside scoop on the cat-slaying—because I stayed quiet, because I heard and saw it all as he spoke.

Skinner had sat on the cot, and now he reached a hand down as if to pick up that same cat all over again. "I just thought that this little guy, this little guy knows that me and her was meant to be together. He knows we had something special. He was a kitten when we started, and now—now

she must of been upstairs with that guy, and I was bawling my eyes out downstairs on her porch with her damn cat.”

Skinner stood now. “So I picked him up, and I walked to the lake in their backyard. She’s got a nice home, you know. Her parents never liked me and all that, but she used to be crazy about that, too, going after the guys in my part of town just to piss them off. They were so clueless. But I just walked down there, and I had to hold the little fucker tight now—he knew something was up and started to fidget.”

I checked my Kevlar one more time, adjusted the chinstrap, and set it back on its shelf over my cot. I counted my magazines, pressing in the top round to make sure each was full. I checked the Camelback—good and empty so I could fill it tomorrow with fresh, cold water for the convoy. I’m like that—I’m the guy who checks things too many times. I’m the guy who checks things and never drowns any cats. Maybe that’s why I only sit and listen, I thought—because I never have any stories of my own worth saying.

“And I walked out there in the lake, down in the mud, and the water was up to my thighs, you know, and the damn cat starts to make some noise, and his claws are out now, and I just kept thinking of her upstairs, maybe even now, and how many times we used to play with this little cat while I was over, and here I was bawling in the goddam lake carrying this fucking cat and—it was all so damn ridiculous. And I did it, man. Just like that, I dunked that little fucker, and he was scratching like hell at me. It was hard to keep him under. He was all thrashing and shit. And all wet, it felt creepy—all wet and his muscles tight and thrashing like hell for his life. He clawed the hell out of my arms.”

He showed me the red scratches and whelps still streaking up and down his wrists.

“But in the end, you know, in the end he couldn’t get out. And I felt the moment he got weak, and when he stopped fighting, and his tight

muscles sort of just oozed away. I could feel his body go limp right there in my fingers.” Skinner had a knack for the dramatic; he let a long pause hang in the air before continuing. “I kept him there I don’t know how long. I was bleeding in the water, and I was crying and snot was running all outta my nose, and I didn’t know why I done it.”

He shook his head in the light of the glaring bulb. “I shoulda been kicking that guy’s ass or slashing her tires, but instead I was sopping wet with a dead cat, and I came back to her porch and laid it across the steps, and I whispered goodbye and that I’d never forget her.”

He looked back down at his hands and his wrists, then back at me—me in the middle of the piled gear and ammunition: me, just staring and listening. The distant churn of a generator outside seeped through the tent walls, Metallica smashed through a guitar solo, and he waited for me to say something.

I stared blankly, and shrugged. It might be good, I thought, if I were more like Skinner. I wondered what my dad would say if I’d go out and drown an ex’s cat. He might like that.

“You think I’ll go to Hell, Machus?”

That night I couldn’t sleep. I was thinking of Dad again—how he’d love this convoy, how the silent gleam of the coming fight would lift his eyes, how he’d glare at me for never having anything right. Over and over he came to me, but when I finally drifted off, it was Skinner’s face that floated before me, crimson-eyed and quivering, staring and shaking for all the world as if he were the one drowning. I heard a voice creak out of the vision, a mourning sort of sob rolling over and over, but I couldn’t make out the words.

I found myself back in the tent: cave-dark and my cot soaked with sweat. I swung my feet into the dusty floor and dropped my face into my palms—we convoyed tomorrow, and I was slotted to drive. I needed sleep.

Skinner was nuts, but I liked him. Do you tell a guy dreamed of him dying before you go outside the wire?

We convoyed tomorrow.

I needed to sleep.

My face planted in my palms, I thought how Skinner and I weren't that different. Skinner's Dad was a biker—the black and chrome Harley and the eagle tattoos, a mustache past his chin and thick boots clamped to his feet. He was a real hard-ass, Skinner told me, and a real ass to have to live with, always roughing him up and cussing him out and laughing him off.

I lay back on the sweat-dampened cot. Maybe he's not so different, I said to the flapping canvas ceiling. Which is worse, a hard-ass biker who chucks an emptied keg at his kid or an ex-Green Beret who sits and waits and stares you down so you know you're never enough? A dad who broods over you until you're too scared to say anything at all? A dad who makes sure all you ever do is watch and listen and never say a wrong word?

Skinner and me—are we really so different?

I'll tell him tomorrow, I said to the darkness and the snores and the stagnant reek of many men in a tight tent. I'll tell him tomorrow, I promised myself. I would say something for once. Things are different in the daylight.

In the morning I found Skinner in the chow hall, surrounded by Goshen, Thompson, and half the squad. "So there I was," Skinner gestured wildly with a couple sausage patties pierced on his plastic fork, "and the damn cat comes right out of the door. 'Perfect,' I said, 'I'll get her pussy wet one last time.'" They erupted in laughter, and Skinner shoved the forkful into his mouth. He nodded and chewed furiously through the

uproar. When the noise calmed a little, he picked right back up. “So I grabbed the little fucker and I marched right the hell down to the lake.”

“Skinner!” Shoultz whined. “You can’t do that.” She liked to play innocent when the platoon sergeant wasn’t around. Soon as he showed up, though, her flirting was for him alone. It got her out of a lot of unpleasant details.

“Already done it,” Skinner said, pointing the greasy fork at her chubby cheeks. “I plopped that damn cat under and,” he saw me set my styrofoam plate down at the rim of his audience, “and I drowned the hell outta that damn cat. Look.” And he rolled back his sleeves for them to see his wounded forearms. “I did it in alright. I drowned that motherfucker right there in her backyard. And when I left, I heaved that soggy carcass back on her porch, and I screamed loud enough for the whole damn street to hear, I screamed ‘Damn you whore! You goddamn slut!’ and I marched right back home and got drunk.”

Staff Sergeant Goshen was roaring in laughter, Shoultz shook her head and tried not to grin as she looked at the floor. Skinner nodded and shoveled imitation eggs into his mouth. Thompson clapped him on the back and said if anyone knew how to handle a woman, it was Skinner—said he would have done the exact same thing.

“You fuck around with me,” Skinner said though a mouthful of eggs and sausage, “and see what you get.”

“Hey Skinner,” Goshen called, “you up for riding gunner in my Humvee today? I got LT and we’re leading the convoy.”

“Hell yeah!” Skinner glanced at me a moment, then quickly back to his audience. “I’m a goddam killer. I’m heartless. Hell yeah I’m up for lead gunner!”

I still had to tell him. I knew I had to, but not here, not now. I’d let the kid have his moment. I couldn’t say it right anyway, not here in front of so many people. Besides, it was hard not to smile when he got going.

But the thousand nagging details and the hundred final checks of a major convoy prevented any moment alone with Skinner. Maybe he knew I wanted to say something and avoided me. I was getting a headache, and the sun was young in the sky and already boiling. We rolled into the harried Baghdad traffic in triple-digit heat without any mention of the death-face dream. My temples were pounding, despite swallowing a mountain of aspirin and Ibuprofen with my breakfast.

Skinner was riding gunner for Sergeant Goshen in the lead Humvee; I drove the five-ton right behind them. That means I had an eye on him the entire convoy: Skinner in the turret spinning his SAW to fake-fire in the cabs of passing trucks and laugh, Skinner flipping the bird and smiling to children in backseats, Skinner flexing and winking at every hijab and burka we passed, Skinner raising a cat-lacerated arm to fist pump for an Apache cruising overhead. I saw it all, but said nothing. What could I say? He was Skinner. He was nineteen. He had an automatic rifle and a license to bull through traffic. Let him live it up, I said to myself. Let him live his moment. And when I remembered his pale and trembling face floating in from the dream, the panicked eyes and a cigarette stuck in his thin lips, I said it's better I didn't tell him anything. That dream—it couldn't be Skinner. More likely it was me.

Suddenly he jerked forward in his turret, Shoultz beside me screamed and threw her pudgy hands in front of her face, and the entire convoy locked its brakes and squealed every one of its tires. Bumpers came to rest inches from other bumpers: We'd hit a Baghdad traffic jam, stopped dead, no way out.

“Damn, Machus, just run me the hell over, why don't you?” Skinner was smiling with all his white teeth—invincible—and he slapped me on the back.

I rubbed my forehead with my non-firing hand. It was a long time before I spoke. “I figured you could handle a five-ton. It was the others I was worried about.”

Skinner laughed, and the scorched tires stung my nostrils.

We were on the ground already, shuffling through a hasty perimeter. LT got on the handset and shouted back a report of twin roadside bombs on Route Irish, traffic choked to a standstill all over west Baghdad—even here on northbound Tampa. Easy targets in the trucks, he said, so we stalked among the parked cars and the stares of their passengers, guarding ourselves from something, but no one knew what.

“This is some shit,” Skinner said, “some real shit,” and then he laughed with an open mouth, slipped his Kevlar off and ran bony fingers over his close-cropped scalp. He checked to make sure LT was busy on the radio, then pulled out a cigarette and started to light it. “Hey Tommy,” he noticed Thompson on the other side of the highway, “Tommy, what are you aiming at? Hey! Better not be gunning no towelheads without me.” And he bounded off toward the shoulder of the freeway, SAW swinging as he ran, cigarette freshly lit and the lighter still in his fist.

I turned my back, wiped my brow, and squinted into the traffic—stares, sweat, a smattering of horns—the crowd’s initial curiosity was giving way to anger. A few doors slapped opened; men emerged with quick gestures, eyes wide and teeth flashing. They began pacing, milling, shouting at one another and at us. Hands darted in the tumult; horns rained down. Farther down the highway, our platoon was fanning out alongside their trucks, uncertain, glancing at each other, at the crowd. Sweat poured from under my Kevlar, and the flak vest and ammo hung heavy on my shoulders. It’s nothing, I told myself, gripping the rifle more tightly. It’ll blow over. It’s just—

“Damn hajji kids!”

I spun around to see three boys running off, Skinner flinging a dried-up stick after them. “Little fuckers stole my lighter.” He bent to grab a sandbag standing there, to hurl it at the thieves, but the bag ripped away, its gritty soil spilling onto the blacktop, revealing a 105mm artillery shell, its Nokia detonator and nine-volt power supply taped to its side. Skinner stumbled, off-balance from the unexpected weight shift. His boot struck the shell—nearly as tall as his knee—and I stared in silent horror as it wobbled, tipped, and finally toppled with a thick click of steel on dirt and asphalt.

Skinner froze.

I watched it fall and waited to die. Car horns faded into the background heat, the screams melted into the throbs of my temples, and all existence condensed to the dumbstruck teen and a primitive pack of explosives, toppled and primed to detonate.

“Fuck! Oh, motherfuck!”

Then I saw it: Skinner’s face as pale as I’d dreamed it, and the veins bulging in his eyes just as crimson. Even the smoldering cigarette clinging to his lip was a dead ringer.

For a long while, that’s all I saw: the nightmare made material—Skinner too scared to move, too paralyzed to run, too pale to mouth anything but moaning nonsense.

Then I was plunged into the scene again: halted traffic stacked four lanes thick on the freeway, sweated men in beards and Daewoos shouting at one another, Shoultz whimpering, still in the cab of the five-ton, Thompson squinting through his rifle sights into a crowd of bouncing children, snapping his aim from one young ribcage to another, LT jabbering like mad over the radio: “That’s right, dammit. I got a soldier standing right on top of explosive ordinance . . . Yes, dammit, yes. Right on the side of the highway . . . Route Tampa, two clicks south of Irish... What’s it matter how he got there? Get me someone out here, dammit. . .”

Skinner's hands trembled and dripped sweat to the asphalt, his smooth chin shook, and his SAW hung limp from his shoulders. The IED had failed to explode, but death waited between his feet. He was paralyzed, mouthing nonsense and muttering curses through his smoldering cigarette.

With LT on the radio, Sergeant Goshen rose over the din of stalled traffic: "Hoss, get this traffic outta here. I don't give a damn where you put them. You get them the hell away from that explosive. Machus, Browning, push this crowd back. Move them back. Move them all the way back and get them behind the vehicles. Kershaw, dammit, stay behind the trucks in case that shit blows the hell up. Thompson, Finn, get on the shoulder of the highway, upstream and downstream from Skinner. Stay covered behind a vehicle, but you keep those hajjis from coming up behind—get them back, dammit. Get them all the hell away. These civilians got no idea the blast radius of that shell."

Conventional wisdom and popular legend held that a man on a landmine is safe until he steps off. Maybe old-school landmine lore kicked in and kept Skinner there on the IED. Goshen's shouts, too, from far outside, told him not to move a muscle—it may be nothing more than a loose electrode that prevented the blast. Maybe the slightest breeze, maybe the tiniest fidget would connect that wire, would loop that circuit, would send the fatal spark. Judging by his gasps and his mumbles and his shivering limbs, I don't think Skinner could have move if he had wanted to.

LT was still screaming into the radio in the lead Humvee. "Dammit, I don't care how many IEDs have exploded on Irish, we need those demo teams here on Tampa—now," he paused, "Traffic? Of course there's fuckin' traffic—backed up at least a click each way," and after listening impatiently, "Give me an ETA, dammit!"

“Oh, hell. Oh, hell.” Skinner stared between his feet. He had his moment now—right in the middle of it all.

“Quit eyeballing him, Machus.” Goshen was back. “You face out and hold that perimeter. Damn hajjis going to rubberneck this shit. Outta that truck, Shoultz. Dammit, I said out. I need you on this perimeter. Thompson, what the hell are you doing? Thompson! Get that rifle down, dammit. I said stop staring at him, Machus—you got to hold that line there. Keep them outta the blast radius.”

Goshen was right. Civilians were everywhere. From the jammed and steaming cars they came, from the homes of concrete blocks with webs of wires trailing overhead they streamed, from the barren earth they teemed and peered and pressed to see the execution, to witness a soldier explode. Some pointed, some shouted, some buried cringing eyes behind their hands and stole furtive glances; one hid a child’s eyes and stared so long that the girl in her purple print dress wiggled free to watch.

“Sergeant Goshen.” Thompson’s voice pierced the chaos from the roadside. “Sergeant Goshen. Skinner goes down, I’m gunning down them kids. I swear I am. I swear I—”

“Dammit, Thompson, you quit aiming at those kids. Now, dammit.”

The kids had seen Thompson’s aim and had picked up stones.

My head was pounding again in the sea of shoves and rising voices. The crowd pressed closed, enveloping me, climbing on cars and craning over my head to witness Skinner’s detonation. I waved and I shouted as if they understood me. I jerked my rifle to tell them to stay behind the biggest trucks they could. I screamed and pointed to get away. You don’t want to be around if that thing goes off. You don’t—

“Oh shit. Oh damn. Oh hell”: Skinner panicked alone in the crater of it all, suffocating in the sun and the sweat and the panic. In the shouts and the shoves and the surge of primal frenzy, his known universe consisted of a crescent of friends turning their backs, hiding their bodies behind a

dusty string of still-chugging trucks, helpless to do anything but protect their lives from the flash of his death. He was drowning, held under by the impossible weight he still stood over.

Amid the shoves and the shouts the heat and exhaust I found I was turned and watching his panic—his death throes lived in perfect health before a thousand eyes reveling in the nausea. His face was the face from my dream, and the sobs as incomprehensible. And I had told him nothing of it.

“Dammit, Machus, hold that perimeter. Dammit Shoultz, get outta that truck. Tommy boy, if I have to tell you one more time to drop that rifle—”

And a stone zipped by Thompson’s head, zipped cleanly by his brow lowered over the sights, and skidded across the asphalt toward Skinner.

“Oh fuck! Oh shit! Oh—”

Hell—it was coming right for him.

Skinner’s moment slowed to hours; from the raucous multitude, silence stifled every throat, and all souls stood tied to a lone stone’s bounces across the scorching blacktop. We were so stuck to its course we missed the little girl. We completely missed her. No one had even noticed her wade into the craning arena. We only saw the hurtling stone come to rest in the angle of her heels—the feet she placed between the stone and Skinner’s life.

She might’ve been eight—she in her purple print dress, she who picked up the stone in her pristine fingers, turned and walked the remaining feet to Skinner, she in purple who gazed long into his panicked eyes. He, dust-covered and pale and fading into the barren landscape and the mottled crowd behind him, stood unnoticed next to her purple which seized the blaze of the sun and shimmered it back in steady glory, her brilliant hue heightened by his drab camo, her innocence sparkling beside the cigarette in his lips and the SAW slung from his shoulder. From what

the watching world gathered on the war-tortured asphalt, these two stood, linked by a shell primed to erupt between her bare feet, impossibly bare on the scorching pavement, and his thick-soled boots. We stared, silent at the spectacle; pulses and breeze suspended in the heat, as if even the sun itself were fixed on our ring, grinding all heavens' courses to a halt. Skinner's cigarette trembled in his lips, and the girl in purple's dark curls knotted and tousled about her brow, the stone held in tiny hands behind her back.

As if she'd known all along the task which fell to her, she knelt before him—knelt just as if she were going to wash his feet—her tiny face a foot from the coming blast. Any second, any second now that steel would rupture, would blast right through that innocence and sling its pieces to pierce the gathered crowd beyond. Skinner stared in speechless terror at her guiltless fingers poking the coarse gray rock under the dull metal curve of the shell. I saw the terror and the guilt dripping from his pallid face, his pride melting before her simple courage.

And I knew he waited for, watched for, loathed and longed for the moment when the pent-up reality would burst upon them.

When it struck, it was not the hot ripping of flesh he'd imagined. It was a gentle tug on his boot. On his boot planted so firmly to the earth which he could no way leave, from which only death could pry him, the girl in purple was lifting the thick sole of his boot and scooting it to the side. I stared and swallowed, though my mouth was dry and cracking.

"Oh my God," Shultz was out of the truck, whispering through hands covering her face.

"Get outta there, Skinner," I heard Goshen beside me. "Get the hell outta there."

As if on cue the girl in purple motioned him toward us—she, kneeling on the black asphalt and remnant grit of the sandbag, drew her open hand toward the tan and olive trucks still rumbling their fumes on the strangled

freeway. Skinner stared at her a long moment before obeying. He stepped over the bomb as if half-asleep. Then, toward us, a clumsy half-step on a fawn's feeble legs. Then another, with more confidence now. Then—but he stopped short and turned back. She was still kneeling over the explosive, her back to him.

She turned to catch his gaze and reached for the wires.

“Oh God no,” and Shoultz turned away.

Goshen ducked behind the Deuce, and Thompson was too stunned to train his rifle on her. I froze and I stared, and so did Skinner, as the crowd dropped and covered and squealed and the girl in purple's slender fingers found the red and the black reaching into the explosive's core. Her tiny fist closed as the dull, matte hull of the shell loomed before her. In a flash of the sun, her arm yanked the wires. The cables cut into the tender flesh of her faultless hand.

Silence pounded to the milky horizon.

Moments stuck, frozen in golden honey.

Eternity stepped into time.

Before our eyes, the girl in purple kneeled motionless with the wires in her hands. She gazed a second at the shell before dropping them and wrangling the nine-volt battery out of the melted tape.

“What the hell was that?” LT said, radio receiver still plastered in his fist.

Shoultz was sobbing.

“I'll be damned,” said Goshen.

“I don't believe this shit. I ain't ever gonna believe that shit just happened.” I heard Thompson even from his position on the shoulder.

Skinner did not move; he stared at the girl in purple. She rose and came to him, and tucked the battery in his pocket. Taking his right hand from the pistol grip of his SAW, the right hand scratched to hell by a

helpless cat, she held it in both of hers. In those tender hands torn by the cables, she brought Skinner to us.

His face was still pale, still reeking his fear and his guilt. He looked me once in the eye. I wanted to hide, to look away, to deny what I had seen. But where else was there to turn—to the dead earth beneath our boots? To the gaping crowd? To the lifeless shell? I watched Skinner's helpless eyes.

I didn't see where the girl in purple went; she vanished back into the crowd. Some of the vehicles had started to inch forward on the freeway. Shouts and horns and traffic began again. LT was back on the radio, we needed the ordinance destroyed before we moved on. Goshen trotted down the convoy to re-establish a perimeter around the vehicles.

"Skinner," I tried to start, "I'm sorry. I—"

"I ain't moving outta here," Thompson shouted, "till I kill me some hajjis. Till I fucking see the blood of whoever the hell put this damn thing here."

Skinner broke his eyes away from mine. He watched Tommy's jaw jerk in his shouts. He began nodding, slowly at first, then more vigorously, his face still washed in pallor. "Yeah. Yeah, Tommy. I like it." His trembling hand steadied itself on the pistol grip of the SAW. He watched Thompson stalk back to the roadside and scream his fury at the crowds.

Then Skinner turned back to me, took a long drag on the cigarette still burning in his lips, and said, "Machus, I ain't sorry about that damn cat, either." Smoke poured out his mouth as he spoke. "I ain't sorry. Just forget it. Just keep quiet."

I left him there on the pavement. I climbed over the Humvee's bumper and took my position in the perimeter. And there, rifle tight in my hands, I stood in the glances of the passing crowd and waved the halting traffic through.

When Skinner finally returned and took up his position next to the lead Humvee, I spoke up. I finally did. I shouted at him, told him to watch the back seats, the mothers' laps, the crowded station wagons for the girl in the purple dress. "Watch for her," I shouted. "You see if she comes back." Goshen heard me and said to shut the hell up, but I didn't care. I knew my dad would kick my ass if he would see me do it, but I shouted it all the same. "You watch for that girl in purple, Skinner. You watch for her."