

Something Left to Lose

—by James Foley

Limp as a Channel swimmer raised up by a sailor, the redhead lay against him as he carried her to the truck.

Or like some countess, he thought, drenched and bruised in a storybook pirate's arms.

Then later, as he was driving, she seemed still unconscious, wrapped in one of his old black leather coats, her skinny legs drawn up under her on the seat—leaning, slumped like dead weight next to him.

Something to remember in days to come? Some day maybe when your life stalls out? This night in July, with its rushing headlights and still surging adrenalin. And you're wet, getting actually chilly now: tired nerve ends jitterbugging. Yet it feels good to be doing something as simple as rolling south in the darkness with a long-legged girl beside you.

A brassy girl with a smart mouth; but built with style like a thoroughbred, the great chestnut mane like some incendiary device.

And somehow, strangely, he thought that beneath the tough surface she might have a good heart.

"Where are we going?"

Finally stirring. He couldn't find anything appropriate to say—finally said, "Welcome back to the world."

"Where are we going?"

"Police station . . . in Easton."

“NO! No!” She was sitting up at once—as if she’d exploded.

He reached over. “You’re hurt. You’ve been beat up.”

“No! Don’t touch it. Does it look horrible?”

“It must hurt.”

“I think it’s just swollen. He knows how to do it without breaking things.”

“Jesus. What kind of man . . . ?”

“You saw how they backed off when you kicked him away from me. That must tell you something.”

“Listen. The police’ll get you to a hospital for a checkup. I don’t know any hospitals . . . Unless you do.”

“No. No hospitals. No police.”

He thought about it. “Okay, I’ll take you home.”

“Home?”

“Yeah. Where’s home?”

“Home’s with him. At the moment. I can’t go *there*.”

“Okay. I can take you to a motel, but . . .”

She sat up even further, facing him. “I don’t have any *money*. I don’t even have clothes. I don’t have anything. I don’t even have a job.”

“Don’t you have any family—parents . . . friends?”

“No, not around here. Just him. And his friends. I can’t go back there, not to his place—not now, anyhow.”

A long pause. “Can’t we go to your place?”

“My place is a rat trap.”

“I don’t care. Maybe we can clean it up.”

Suddenly she seemed to fling herself about a little, laughing . . . as if the whole crazy scene had been totally *dumb*. “My *hero!* Right?” She was doing a little half-dance on the seat, ending in a deep, hands-folded

bow. “My God. What kind of time warp are we in here, anyway? So where’s home?”

He laughed. “Home is where when you go there the roaches can’t sic the law on you.”

“Oh. Now I really *am* waiting to see it.”

He wanted to take her out onto the shaky docks first . . . with their age-old smell of creosote mixed with the scent of the early morning salt air. Hoping she’d be impressed by the derelict beauty of the ambient water. And the silver pre-dawn light lay over the shining surfaces, shadowed by overhanging trees: broken by the rippling waves of the migrant rays and fishes and the sea turtles.

All that wildness in and under the water—would she go for that—watching it as it renewed itself among the tumbledown structures of man? Seeming to harmonize with their and fallen man’s stained destiny.

There was an old oak-and-cedar yawl tied up to the big blackened pilings, most of which had once been telephone poles. She was riding low in the water; and he went aboard, got into the engine space, into the water . . . which was high in the bilge. The float switch on the bilge pump looked jammed open with debris. So as the girl sat above on the dock he worked prone in the water and oil to free the switch and reactivate the pump.

Whirrrr-rr-rrr.

“This is your life?” she said as he crawled back out, soaked and foul from the bilge water. “You call this living?”

He laughed, shivering. “It’s temporary. I’m sort of . . . hanging out . . . lying low—just *temporary*.”

“What? You're hiding here? You're in trouble?”

“No—nothing. Nothing serious. Just a little.”

“Tell me. I like stories.”

He could feel it coming on, all of it definitely wrong. In absolute full consciousness he was falling for her, going soft. He was about to make a mistake. A huge mistake . . . to tell her anything. But he was in a sinkhole of shame—a girl like this . . . bringing her to a place like this.

Why was he losing it? Loneliness? He had nobody at all right now, not a soul in his world—if he'd ever had a world. And the only world that he'd ever known was gone with the sewage, flushed totally out of *the* world, leaving him stranded here, free and nowhere.

“I was in the Corps. But I left.”

There it was—starting to rush out. Blabbing things in a desperate effort to find something that would impress her. He ought to stop it—stop it *at once*.

Her look: quizzical, uncertain. “Not the Peace Corps?”

“Unh-uh.”

“You left? What? Iraq? Were you in Iraq?”

“Okay. Yeah.”

“You deserted?”

“No. Yeah . . . but . . . ”

“You ran away?”

“No. No, it wasn't like that. I had to leave. I did something.”

“Tell me. What did you do? Please tell me. I'm interested now.”

“All right. I shouldn't do this. But I like you. I can't do much for you right now, so . . . ”

“Uh-huh. Forget that. Just tell me.”

“Listen. Do you talk? Do you go around . . . ?”

“No. NO! So tell me.”

“Somebody killed a friend of mine. A sniper.”

“A sniper? An Iraqi?”

“Yes, an Iraqi. Who’d you think?”

“Republican . . . ?”

“Yeah, Republican Guard.”

“So? So you . . . ”

“Yeah, we flushed him out.”

“We?”

“Right . . . this friend of mine . . . and I did.”

“So? Please. Don’t make me coax you. So you...”

“Unh-uh. Not now. I don’t want to talk about it. Not now, anyway. Really. Can’t you understand?”

“All right.” She looked around. “So you’re hiding out here in this old boatyard? It’s a good place to hide. It’s the end of the goddamned world.”

“Not exactly hiding. Don’t make it too sensational. I don’t think they’re looking that hard. Look. Maybe we ought to go up to the loft and clean the place up a little.”

They did. Her bruises were worse-looking than painful, she said. And when he’d patched up the superficial cuts, he smiled at her standing there, in that loft above the boatyard office—dressed in some of his hiked-up clothes and staring around, gesturing melodramatically:

“So this is how Paleolithic Man lived? I always wanted to know . . . up close and personal.”

That helped. Laughter did some good. They began to dump belongings, throwing things out that were so old and soiled and neglected that they seemed already growing into the woodwork.

She helped him. They grabbed and tossed and trashed and ditched half of everything. And he remembered that as they worked she was quiet for a

long time; but then she talked—strangely, in languid, broken phrases—about her entrepreneur lover or whatever. And he listened—not to the words but to her voice, her face, the inflections of her athletic body.

They had already filled a dozen king-sized black garbage bags; and he toted them to the dumpster, sunrise flaring the water like a goddess in love.

She had accumulated about four loads of wash. She seemed full of energy now as she grabbed the truck keys to drive to a nearby Laundromat and a shop to get some women's clothing and makeup. And now somehow the upgraded squalor of the old boatyard didn't seem to matter so much: like some necessary penance, some desirable purgatory for having let themselves fall into the life of acute sensation.

And she actually did come back . . . the funny thing being that when she did, it amazed him—*that* she did; though he'd never thought that she wouldn't.

They worked on. They dusted and swept and scrubbed the floors. He hauled in a power-washer and they spray-blasted the loft, using an industrial-grade vacuum cleaner to dredge up the puddles.

Then they mopped. They mopped . . . and mopped. She worked. He had never seen a belle work so hard. They dried the floors. They washed and dried the windows. They patched the broken windows with duct tape. Past noon, filthy themselves now, they collapsed side by side on the hard floor.

When he awoke she was on top of him.

“So you took *his* life, right? Back there in Iraq. The sniper's, I mean. He took your friend's life, so you took his? Was that it?”

“All right.”

“You did that.”

“All right. Yes. His and his spotter’s.”

“His *and* his spotter’s. Wow! *Both!*” She smiled.
“So? So, this was in warfare?”

“Not exactly. They were trying to surrender.”

“Oh.”

“The thing was . . . they shouldn't have killed ‘Miro in the first place. That was our friend. You see, it was already all over. Their war was already completely lost. Those two were just diehards.”

“I see. And so when you cornered them, they stopped being diehards.”

“Something like that.”

“What would have happened . . . I mean, if you'd let them surrender?”

“Nothing, probably. They would have gone free, basically.”

“But that wouldn't have been justice.”

“Maybe not, but it would have been the law.”

“But if they shot your friend after the war was over . . . ?”

“Well, there never was a war. No declared war, I mean. We just went in and they tried to fight us off. It was over for some sooner, later for others. Who’s to say when the war was over . . . or not over?”

She was pinning him down, her body’s weight on her hands against his shoulders, as if in a kind of victory. “This is my first. I've had guys try to beat me, but never anybody who did that . . . what you did . . . what you say you did.”

“You don’t believe me? Good. You're right. I was making it all up. It never happened.”

“I think maybe I believe you too much. I think there might even be more to it. But I don’t care. Right

at this moment I don't care about anything. I don't *want* anything . . . except maybe . . . ”

“Look.” All her weight was on him—all the thickness of stale blood, sea salt, sweat salt, dirt and uncleanness pressing upon him from on high, mystically desirable.

“Look. I . . . ”

“What? Don't you want to?” Smiling. “I don't *know*. What my hand's telling me . . . tells me something else.”

“Sure. I want to. More than anything else in the world right now . . . ”

“Then what? What's the matter? You're afraid of AIDS? Or something . . . aren't you?”

“No, I never thought about it. It's not that. It's just that I might like you *too* much.”

“Oh. So you don't want me to fuck you just because you're an interesting person who kills people? You want it to mean more than that?”

“Yes. It's just that . . . I don't know. I don't know if I'm good enough for you. Right now—the way things are . . . ”

“You're good.”

“I'm thinking about . . . maybe beyond now.”

“Oh.” Her mood switching. “OK. We're filthy. I know you have a shower. I cleaned it.”

Showering together: clean bodies; clean sheets on the bed. Afternoon now, the world gone AWOL.

Nothing to eat. The last good meal had been a day ago. But the clean bed smiled first. No other reason to exist anymore—to make any exertion, to ever stir again.

Almost innocent. Lips' slow burn at first—flame coming in pulses. And this time when it came, it

arrived from epochs—from light-years of longing . . . approaching from so far away that it came vast . . . like a tidal wave... . . . like affection.

So all that day and into the evening they didn't bother to eat. They lived on love and love-making and snatches of sleep and sips of bottled water.

Then: "I'm starved. I'm dead."

Oysters in the shell, dumped on platters from little buckets: iced oysters. Then broiled oysters on separate platters.

Not a fancy restaurant but a good one on the water—an osprey's nest perched on a channel marker just outside the big window. Some not-quite-to-be-despised champagne. Side plates of Caesar salad.

Tucked napkins, slippery oysters; crabs broken, shrimp peeled, and then more shrimp. Wine glasses lifted . . . eyes over the rims scanning each other's eyes.

Famished, half-starved—eating greedily and tasting the wine. And the view was easy: night of soft clouds in the soft dark sky above the blacker water. And always that nest with its visiting sea eagles: one, then one-and-one, then one again. No one to tell how the world was going: about brokers and the uncertainty of the market.

"I need to go back and get my things," she said finally. "But not when he's there."

"You have keys . . . and everything?"

"Yes, of course." She seemed to be thinking. "Unless he changes the security setup. Then we'd have to break in. Can you do that?"

A smile. "Well, it's not my trade."

“Your trade is more like...”

“Uh-huh . . .”

“More like doing people, right?” She shook her hair back. “Will you go with me? Help me pack? If I’m there alone, and he comes back . . .”

“OK.”

“Listen. He’s got a load of junk. Stuff he inherited from his mother or grandfather or somebody. It’s supposed to be worth a lot. And there’s some cash there too. I know where he keeps it.”

He was laughing. “No. Unh-uh.”

“*Listen!* We’ve got *nothing*. I don’t have *anything*. And you don’t, either.”

“Unh-uh. Sorry. I don’t think so.”

“Look. He deserves it. He pushed it just as far as he knew he could. He got every inch of it. In front of his friends . . . everything. He *enjoys* it. He *likes* that kind of thing.”

“Look, I’m sorry. I can’t rob him. I can’t rip him off. I don’t do that.”

“Please. Take this chance. Do it. Get up for it. I am. There’s probably not even any real danger. We need a stake to start with. Without it I can’t do this.”

“No. Look, we don’t need this. I admire you. I like you. And it’s not always going to be like this. I understand boats. I can find and buy boats cheap and sell ‘em at a profit.”

“The economy’s bad. This is a depression. It’s hard even to get a job.”

“It’s all right. I can still get paid for fixing up boats or delivering them. Eventually, who knows . . .”

“Working on boats? That’s going to be our life?”

“For a while. Until we get lucky.”

“And that’s how we’ll live our life out? With you working on boats? I saw you working on a boat this morning.”

She was shaking her head, seriously. "I don't *understand*. You can take someone *out* . . . and you can't take this bastard *down*?"

When he didn't answer, she said, "Were you ever *in* Iraq?"

But now he was still. Nothing came from him . . . no answer.

"Were you . . . ever . . . in . . . *Iraq*? Were you ever really *there*?"

He still didn't answer and she said, "Even if you were, you didn't do that, did you?"

No response, and she said, "*Did* you?"

"I guess not."

"No, tell me. I need to know."

"OK. I didn't."

"I don't believe you. I think you're lying right now. *Are* you lying now? Or were you back then?"

"I was lying back then."

"No, tell me. Really!"

"I didn't do it."

"So you just told me all that stuff . . . back then? So I'd feel sorry for you? Because you have no money and your place is a rotten hole. You had to have something to impress me with. Right?"

"Yeah. I guess so."

"So that I'd sleep with you? Right?"

"Yeah. And so you'd help clean the pad too."

She whirled away. "You're even *worse*. You're even worse than he is...than they are." Then, turning back again: "No, I don't believe it. I think you're lying now. Damn it! I don't know *what* to believe."

"Believe what you want to. It's better that way. I'm going to get the bill."

"You've got enough money?"

"No, but they know me here. I've done them some favors. They know I'm good."

He wasn't gone more than five minutes. And, of course, there inside at the bar, he didn't hear the truck start. She'd used some kind of thick greasy black pencil, possibly something like an eyeliner—writing on a white napkin:

You'll get the truck back.

We were close, lover.

It was an almost.

Signed with two scarlet lip-prints:

His coat? Hanging there on the back of the chair. When he grabbed it, the wallet was there; all the cards. That was important. That was the main thing.

All the keys gone, of course.

Bitch. Semi-whore. Tramp.

And you, you fool. You idiot. You set yourself up for this.

I'm going to *do* her. I'm going to fucking find her and finish her.

Totally ridiculous.

So what *do* you do? Right now you walk out on the veranda of this restaurant above the boisterous sea-surge. Dial 911? Out of the question. She knows that. You'll get the truck back. Stupid to worry about it. Why would she wreck it? She might even have it washed.

No cab money. Hit Sam at the bar for it? Better not. Only a two-mile walk down to Anchorage Marina. There borrow a boat for the night and get across the Bay . . . just as she'd borrowed the truck.

Yeah. He'd get the truck back . . . tomorrow or the next day. Then a drive down to Ocean City or Assateague—hit the ocean...do some surfing.

In his mind he was already there, catching a big one, poised tanned and wet on its breaking foam, feeling the salty breeze on his neck and shoulders, the surge in his heart—riding the crest of happiness.

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