

Killing Boys

This is an excerpt about The Academy from my Viet Nam novel. There are a lot of lies in the book, but a few true things, too. This is one of the true ones. I know, because it happened to me, even though I'm not Steve. Here it is, mostly the way it happened on that first day at The Academy.

Steve knew scars. He had a few. They were psychological rather than physical, but nonetheless real. A lacework of scar tissue covered all the exposed surfaces of his ego, but there were still deep raw gashes that had yet to heal. Most of them had been rendered seven years ago.

The sign above the entrance to the United States Air Force Academy had said “BRING ME MEN,” but instead, the country sent its boys. The Academy’s mission was to kill them.

The Academy destroyed boys deliberately, systematically, and spit out new creatures at the end of four years—the original material recycled, usually reconstituted as loyal military fighting men ... sometimes not, but always altered.

Seven years ago, Steve had walked through that entrance, up a wide concrete ramp to an enormous pebble-embedded expanse of paving called “The Terrazzo” and into a hellish year-long nightmare of psychological torture. Upperclassmen waited at the top of that ramp in impeccable white-gloved uniforms, hard eyes peering like small glowing stones beneath the silver rims of black-billed wheel caps. They waited in packs and then swooped upon unsuspecting boys as they straggled onto the Terrazzo two or three at a time.

The technique was to swarm a boy like a pack of hyenas cutting a young calf from the herd. Bring him down hard, go for the throat and rip the metaphorical jugular, spill the blood and tear the limbs before the calf had even stopped twitching.

“Hit it for twenty,” was the most common phrase Steve heard that day.

“Dumbsmack, dojazz, hit it for twenty.”

“Give me twenty big ones, smackwad.”

“You’re a pimple on the ass of the military, dumbsquat. You’re the sorriest excuse for a basic I’ve ever seen. Hit it for thirty ...”

“Give me forty ...”

“Let’s see fifty ...”

“Yes sir!”

“Count, smackjazz.”

“Yes sir! One sir, two sir, three sir, four sir, five sir ...”

“One, one, one. That’s one, doosmack. One! Get that back straight. Those aren’t push-ups. My grandmother can do better push-ups than that. Start over.”

“One sir, two sir, ...”

“One, one, one ...”

Steve probably did between five hundred and a thousand push-ups that first sunny, warm-soaked Colorado June day. There was no way of knowing for sure. He did twenty, thirty, forty at a time until his arms turned to rubber and he collapsed on his face and chest, an upperclassman squatting beside him, face inches away, upper class voice screaming into his ear, “Fifty,

dumbsquat, I said give me fifty!” When his arms stopped twitching, when he had minimal control over them again, he resumed.

The upperclassmen were all over them like harpies—furies—three or four at once on each new boy, and what kept them going and kept Steve and his classmates functioning was the realization that they could not go home, they could not return to boyhood, they could not return to families and friends wearing the same faces as when they’d left or they would be tagged forever as losers. And so they lasted out that hellish first day—most of them—not for positive motivational reasons, but from fear of everlasting shame.

They carried big duffel bags stuffed with thirty pounds of gear. The upperclassmen ran them in groups five stories up the stairwell from the bottom to the top of Vandenberg hall, then down to the bottom, then up again, down again ... two, three, four more times. Few were acclimated to the seven thousand-foot altitude. They were seriously exhausted by the first trip, completely worn down at the end. Steve became the Tail-end Charley. When they hit the top floor of the dorm the last time, he teetered on the verge of unconsciousness.

The upperclassmen stood the boys at a brace against the walls of the dormitory hallway and figuratively chewed on them. Steve’s face had apparently drained white, his blood gushing from a metaphorical jugular, because one of God’s anointed death angels, one of heaven’s hyenas, came close and whispered into his ear.

“Sit down.”

Steve slumped along the wall to the floor, wheezing, unable to breathe. The upperclassman squatted on his haunches, white-gloved hands draped casually between his knees, put his mouth close to Steve’s ear and whispered again.

“All you have to give is one hundred percent. That’s all we ask. We don’t want any more than everything you’ve got.”

Steve’s eyes were glazed. He was nearly senseless.

“A hundred percent, that’s all we want. No more, no less. Can you do that? Rest a moment, don’t try to answer, just nod.”

Steve nodded.

“Yes sir,” the words whistled from his throat between great gasps for air, and abruptly he stood at a brace again. He stood because he wanted to. He stood because he was proud. He stood because this upperclassman whose name he would never know had made him rise and brace. Not by order, by admonition, or confrontation, but by the application of a small kindness. He loved this man, this leader, who knew exactly what Steve needed to hear after hours of agony. Those few whispered words were defining. He never forgot the incident—the one moment that kept him from resigning and leaving for home and shame that first day.

It was to be the last kindness he would receive from any upperclassman for the next several months. There were to be many trials far worse than this one, many times when—physically exhausted, utterly humiliated, abjectly depressed—he would burrow beneath his blanket at night and sob quietly, privately to himself, wondering where he would find the will to last another day.

By the end of that first year, he was still there. He had lost some and gained some. The wounds were deep, but he had survived, and out of survival, he had learned one great truth about himself. He knew rather than felt it. It was not in his nature to feel it, not yet, but intellectually he knew *this*—he knew that over the long haul, the only haul that counted, he was one tough son of a bitch. A finisher ... not a quitter.

And lo, by the time Steve graduated, gold bars of a second lieutenant on his proud shoulders, the Academy had not completed its mission—it had failed. It had not killed the boy. Somewhere beneath developing scar tissue lurked a free spirit who *still* rode naked through the desert.