



Winged Shoes
and a Shield

City
Lights

Winged Shoes and a Shield

COLLECTED STORIES

Don Bajema

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Lights

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ROCK-A-BILLIES

THEY WERE ROUGH, WILD-HUMORED TEXANS. Their house rang with laughter and singing, steamed with heartfelt conflict, occasionally spattered with their blood. That house rocked with a lust for the next expression of love, the next fight, the next joke to sum it all up. Five kids raving under the roof of two Rebels. They left their pit bulls in Waco, moved out to San Diego and put a beagle named Chino in the back yard. But the blood lust and heart of those pit bulls seemed as much a part of them as the black Indian eyes of their mother, and the sloping shoulders and wry squint of their old man.

They had audacious courage, stubborn determination, and a fierce brotherhood, because they kept their dead alive. In fact they were on a first-name basis with death. He was like a visiting uncle who carried a straight razor and told glorious stories as he bounced each of us on his knee. He appeared in cars late at night, across the border in brothels, in the bottle, staring at us with blood-red eyes. His were stories sung to the slow low keys of the piano at night, or told with laughter in the kitchen by day.

When our thirst raged hotter than water could quench, they'd take me to the ancient well that keeps the souls of our past beneath its surface. When I took their dare and peered over the edge down onto that black pool, one of them would

slap my back and holler, “See, there it is” — I’d see my own reflection. We each took our turn pulling to the surface another song, pouring out another story. We’d fill ourselves with the desire to accept the next dare by gulping the cold elixir of our unique American heritage, part romantic, part psychopathic.

Until this very day when my heart drops into a dry hollow pit, or during those times it beats with the universe, or even when I’m just catching my breath, I hear a slow rhythm of inhalation and exhalation, a whisper of inspiration from those down in that well. When I fail to live as the man I was born to be, I hear a chorus of low moans as they recall their own regrets, before their time here expired.

We can’t see our ghosts, but we can hear them. When their voices echo in our songs, in our blues, in our dreams, it’s our own voice we’re hearing. Because they were who we are, and what happened to them, happened to us.

Gettysburg. Still-Breathing Ghosts.

Promise them the love of God and country; then watch them become the sons of Satan, transformed by the alchemy of war, from boys crying for their mothers into their brothers’ butchers. Long after you are sick of the sound of the victor and the vanquished, long after your heart is broken observing their astonishing efforts to prolong a life no longer worth living, you’ll hear their last song. It’ll sound just like a rebel yell.

I’m one of those still-breathing ghosts. The last few battles, I remember pinning my father’s name under my gray jacket. I wanted to go home one way or the other. I did the same thing for a few boys new to the regiment who had not seen this kind of fighting before. Without ammunition, we’d have to run more boys at them than they could kill all at once, and get it down to hand-to-hand just as fast as possible.

These new boys' hands shook so badly I pinned their names in for them. They said their fingers were too cold. I took it as a white lie. We'd get up in the morning and vomit, squat somewhere and empty our bowels, and do the things you might imagine a body has to do when it is expecting to die, beside itself with numbing fear.

The older boys start yelling curses across the pasture. The answer returns in the form of a collective jeer filling the black field. The sound of voices preparing for battle drifts disembodied across the low morning fog. The momentum for hysteria builds into a peak as the fingers of the sun clutch another morning. The quiet fear in the darkness comes to light and thousands of men and boys begin to take the first steps toward true wrathful bloody passion. You'll need it, believe me, when men are killing each other by the thousands in a ten-acre pasture on a single summer morning.

I remember I hated the sound of the clubbing and stabbing and crushing. That crunching wrong sound. The evidence of it in my hair, covering my clothes, on my face, under the nails of my hands. I hated the red pile of agony under my feet, clawing at my legs in blind animal panic. You have to teach them that a boot caving in their face is a lot worse than trying to die there quietly. I'm young, fourteen, and not the youngest by far. I've killed boys younger than me. I've pinned their arms to their sides as a couple of men with jack-off voices shouted insanely to "Stickemstickem . . . stick that little son of a bitch, . . ." watching as the boy's white face opened in a shriek for his mother.

I'm one of the last ones left. Since I'm small, they use me to kill the wounded and the dying enemy we leave behind our advancing ranks. It's an important job, because you never want trouble behind you. If a few wounded can somehow mount a move, you can get cut off, surrounded, which is the worst thing that can happen. Some of them were tricky, and you had to stay on your toes.

Struggling for each breath of air yourself, you stumble over a field of groaning, wild-eyed men. The man covered in blood, straining on his hands and knees, howling like a hound, shaking his gory beard — kill him. Move over to the boys encouraging each other in some desperate assurance that the fighting is over for them. Kill them. It is too early in the battle for prisoners. Out of the corner of your eye you see a blue uniform crawling fast and resting, then scabbling again. The man crying for water, and thanking God when he sees your approach, mistaken that you have come to help him — kill him. The man you saw crawling senses your approach and drags his useless legs toward the trees lining the pasture. You hear his gasping breath falling into sequence with your own. Kill him. Stab a dead man just in case. End the sentences of a hundred whispered prayers. Kill, until everyone there is dead, even the ones still breathing.

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BAD GIRL FROM TEXAS

IT'S ABOUT NOON, AND ALREADY over 100 degrees. The novelty of this kind of heat has the energy level climbing all over this Southern California town.

The bad girl from Texas must be making a ragged terry-cloth robe very happy as it clings tightly around her body. She is fifteen. She hasn't been to bed yet. One hand clasps the robe in a knot under her throat. The other hand holds a garden hose; its mouth is open, and a clear cylinder splash-splatters a torrent into the mud that surrounds some geraniums.

Eddie Burnett is tall, thin, and thirteen. Moments ago he woke up startled, kicked off his semen-stained sheets, pulled the oversize white T-shirt over his head, yanked on the Levi's that lay on his bedroom floor, and walked barefooted into the street.

Eddie is approaching her from a few houses up the street, watching her profile bent over at the waist, the robe contouring her hips. She knows he knows who she is and she's not in the slightest ashamed of it: his friends' bad sister, who had to be sent out of town because the boys up the canyon fought and screamed like cats all night long under her window.

Eddie likes the length of her black hair, which has grown

from a short bob to shoulder length in the months since he's seen her. Her voice becomes audible as he gets a few yards closer in a studied nonchalant stroll. She is singing under her breath in a whispering deep register. . . . "Saddest thing in the whole wide world, is to see your baby with another girl. . . ."

The sound of her voice draws a feeling from between his legs, not in his dick, but under his balls, inside. It comes as a jolt that nearly lifts him on his toes. His heart begins pounding as he realizes he cannot stop his stride and must pass within a few feet of her to enter his friends' house.

At times like this, Eddie usually looks to some sort of omen. He believes in magic. The moment he sees a smooth brown stone, about the size of his palm, lying near the gutter, he knows exactly what he will do with it. The girl does not see him picking it up. He looks four houses down the street where the cop, who doesn't like Eddie much, lives. The ex-Marine, Sgt. Johnson, loves his Chevy Bel Air. Although he is nowhere to be seen, he has set out his plastic pail, the Turtle Wax, the chamois. In direct line with the shining pride of Sgt. Johnson, and Eddie, is a wooden telephone pole. Eddie knows that if he can hit that pole with the hot stone in his hand, from this distance, then the gods of jasmine, heat-wave nights and bad girls will smile on him. If he dents Sgt. Johnson's Chevy, he can expect no mercy.

Eddie calculated all of this the instant he saw the stone, felt its smooth hot curves fit perfectly against the heel of his hand and his forefinger. He focuses on the pole with the intensity of a cat under a mockingbird. His arm is already drawn back. In a flash his whole body whips outward, and the stone is launched in the final instant of the whirl. Eddie watches the stone climbing in a wide arc, promising all the velocity needed to reach the Chevy, or the telephone pole. As his heart stops in sheer terror, he sees Sgt. Johnson happily swinging open his screen door, heading toward the object

of his affection. The stone begins to lose altitude, dropping with a line up on the pole that is deliciously close. Eddie is walking as though he had nothing on his mind. The girl has stood up to her full height and he notes she is a little taller than he is. Sgt. Johnson hears the stone thunk into the wooden pole. He sees that Burnett kid twisted in a moment of ecstasy, pumping his arm like a hometown umpire calling a strike to end a no-hitter.

Eddie regains his composure. The girl looks up toward the source of the sound of the impact. She locks eyes with Sgt. Johnson for an instant, noting the confused and suspicious stare on his face. She turns to see Eddie Burnett stepping onto her lawn. He passes without a nod. She shrugs and returns to the search for snails in the geraniums. Sgt. Johnson watches the brown stone bounce along the grass of his sweet-smelling, just-mowed lawn.

Eddie walks to the side of the flat-roofed stucco house, putting a hand on the top slat of the redwood fence as he disappears over it into the bad girl's back yard. She hears the exchange of greetings between Eddie and her little brothers. "Say, Grant, Robert." "Hey, Eddie." "Hot." "Yeah, hotter'n snot." "Play catch?" "Yeah." She walks into the house thinking that Eddie has grown since last summer.

Ten minutes later she's in bed, dreaming about canyons with fire running along their ridges, and boys from the demolition derby driving out of tunnels, cars' back seats in flames, trailing a plume of black smoke.

Late that afternoon she drags herself down the hall. Eddie had it timed by the sun reaching her bedroom window. He told her brothers he was going inside for a glass of water. Grant looked at Robert and shook his head. "Sure," he muttered in contempt. They knew he always drank from a hose outside. There was no reason to go inside unless it was to see their sister.

As he leaned over the sink, with the faucet turned on

and pouring water directly into his upturned mouth, he caught a glimpse of her walking to the refrigerator. She was beautiful with a sleep-swollen face, wearing a huge T-shirt. The smell of Noxzema filled the kitchen. She disappeared into the front room carrying a popsicle and a transistor radio, singing along and harmonizing pretty well with Ronnie Spector. The phone rang and she flew into a rocking chair. One leg crossed over her knee, her bare foot nodding in the air with the song's bass line, she sprawled there until her mother started calling her lazy names. Phone under her chin, she was in the process of making the night's selection. She laughed an intimate laugh and sighed with approval. She hung up the phone and stood on her toes, arms reaching for the ceiling, back arched, T-shirt climbing up her thighs.

Eddie backed out the kitchen door into the dark garage, and into the back yard. Five minutes later the patio screen door swung open and she walked into the full glare of the heat wave, black wrap-around sunglasses, hair hiding most of her face. She answered her mother's calls coming from inside the house.

"In a minute." "I will." "I did." "Oh, I forgot."

Eddie wanted to tell her he'd do anything for her. Steal, lie, leave home, take her anywhere. Instead he played catch with her brother. Without showing the least effort, he threw electric blue lines that smacked into her brother's glove the instant they left his fingers. He knew she could hear the ball hissing from where she slouched against the doorjamb. Eddie threw harder. Her brother showed his bravery, standing in front of an eighty-mile-an-hour fastball with a casual blank expression on his face, his eyes as big as saucers. Eddie spoke to her as Grant's return throw popped into his own glove. "Hey, Sis."

She let his words hang in the air, timing her response to the moment before he'd think she was ignoring him. "Eddie, don't throw so hard."

To show her who was king of this street, who ruled her brothers and the other boys around those canyons, Eddie jerked his chin over the back yard fence and he and the brothers vanished in silence for those canyons, and the shore breaks, and the ballparks, and the matinees, and the girls Eddie's age. Girls he lured out at night into the canyons and behind the bushes, or into unlocked cars. Girls who removed his hands from their breasts. Girls who pressed their knees together, or crossed their legs as Eddie felt their sweating faces, and heard their strange throaty whispers telling him, "No. No. No, Eddie." Girls he had been pretending were the bad girl from Texas, ever since she had left town.

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