

I am flying.

My wings beat once, terribly. The wind shakes with its passing. All the while, my ankle slams down, making minute adjustments, preparing for the fall ahead. I hang, as the wind shrieks by my face and gravity waits to snatch me from my lofty heights.

Here comes the plunge.

Biceps curling in stress, they slash and hack at the moving air. Adrenaline blasts through my bulging veins across my corded arms. Across my legs too, though I can't see them. They are too busy pumping on, endlessly. Tirelessly. They are machines of their own, and I have no volition over them. I start them. They stop themselves. As usual, my eyes remain closed. Of course they do; I have no need to see my path. It is well worn from time; I simply follow it like a hound follows a trace, with touch and gut instinct. Most people would be exhausted by now. Seconds bleed away like molasses in this non-state, this frame of mind. Stopping time seems so easy when I take the plunge. Thinking too; the plunge is both refreshing and shocking.

Remembering. Now that's tricky. Thoughts flow slowly here; they grow, they expand, but don't try producing new ones. You'll find it harder than you think. Eventually, everyone hits this synaptic brick wall. A wall of exhausting, when your body's squeezed every last drop of adrenaline from your system, when your muscles are begging, pleading, wailing for you to quit. Will is a two-faced bitch; that much I've discovered from taking the plunge. I'm pumping again, but my tempo's changing. Heart pounding, I slow right down. Matching my heart is only too easy; its beat is perfect. How could I not hit it? I'm soaked again. Damn. I've got a fresh shirt behind me. It's no trouble. A fresh shirt. Shit. Vertigo pinches my gut, and I'm back. Back here, on this stool. Fixed to solid earth, not cloud swept sky. One last thump drives the beat from my body, the rhythm from my soul. The illusion had been struck down. We're done. I do not hear its death cries. In fact, I never hear a sound since dropping off that cliff face three minutes and thirteen seconds ago.

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"Raise twenty."

Cash smashed across the table's mauled face. A single light bulb sizzled and stank, overpowering the miasma of cheap cigarettes, booze and aftershave. "I fold." Glasses clinked, and a man chuckled as three hundred twenty six dollars slid into his pot, out of reach. Four men reclined against the cheap red sofas lining the booth; the padding was wearing thin, even bleeding in places. The black square table bisecting the scruffy group had long since lost its claim to symmetry or geometry; it was now an oval thanks to hundreds of thousands of fists, chairs,

bottles, busty waitresses and guitars slamming it's once delicate corners. Smoke obscured the labyrinth of pipes snaking along the bar's low ceiling. Three of the men were covered in leather jackets bursting with silver zippers; worn and form fitting like second skins. Tattoos blanketed their lined, scar infested faces and arms. They could have been any race, any nationality.

Under the table, knives rubbed against bullet belts, against knock-off handguns. Testosterone hung off the huddle in dense knots; if you poked and prodded those scaly jackets, you might even have to wash your hands to get it all off. The fourth was leaning easily against the back corner, at total ease despite his recent loss of what amounted to two weeks wages for his compatriots. Woolen jacket, black tie, and rounded but discrete brown hair and smooth shaven, untouched face. It clashed horribly and yet the tough three cared not a bit.

"Another hand?" piped up one, fingers like pokers snatching up the cards.

"I'm good" rumbled two others. Luck had been moving slowly tonight, and as always, she was unrepentant for her actions. "How'd it go?" asked the outlier in a clear, perfectly pronounced General American accent.

"He's perfect. I want him."

Three voices had answered as one.

The outlier gave a soft, gentle smile. "I figured you would say that. He's got talent, has he?"

"More than that" shot back the dealer, a twenty-something named Jace. "It's his timing, his precision. Not a stroke's being wasted. The guy doesn't tire. Ever. Never says a word, but that's just fine."

Ignoring the twitching mugs of the other two, the outlier leaned in. "Does he enjoy it?" That took some thought. Finally, one of the losers answered him. "Seems to. Looks like he's *í í* flying."

Ironic, thought the outlier. Not entirely unexpected either; synapses work in funny ways. "All three of you want him, don't you?" Three pierced heads nodded vigorously. "Is it at all possible for him to split up, among you?" Three heads shook vigorously. "I see. You're all entering, of course." "Of course." "Then choose how you will. Just don't push him. He can push back, and he can make it hurt." Acquiescing, the man slipped off the bench and disappeared into the gloom. At the door, he caught the flipping sound of cards smacking the table.

"Raise six." "Call."

Staff Psychologist Anthony Brady had found it amusing to see five card stud being played for the Five Skin Thud.

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I am floating. Floating? No. I feel wind rending my face. I am not floating. I am skimming. Not soaring, not this time. I've taken the plunge. Carefully controlled, my descent was slow, methodical, calculated to the degree and to the very last muscle twitch. Last time, I was straddling the wild beast, merely hanging on. This time, I am riding it, taming it, checking its wild temper under the crop of my will. My ears hear nothing, but this doesn't matter. I can accept it. Or can I? The rush, though orderly, draws away the slivers of self-pity.

Grimly silent, I press the attack, blows raining like bullets. Each stroke falls exactly. It feels right. I slow. Taps and touch strokes are enough. Soft, but firm I press on. Ecstasy, adrenaline, anticipation threaten my will. The wild beast has my crop between its mouth, and it is pulling. I feel the calm give way to the storm. It was always like this, in the days before. When the plunge was real; when these aching muscles and bones creaked and thrashed and thrust to the beat of a different drum. Waiting was hard. It still is.

But oh, the sweetness of patience is well worth the agony!

Like before, I fly high and I fight hard, for every stroke, for every beat. I fly hard and fight hard to prove, once and forevermore, that I am the best. The greatest. They are proud to field me and I am just as proud to be presented. Like before, I lick praise right off the spoon. Why do I spoil the plunge? Why now? Like before, the flight always ends with a landing. A landing or a crash; it makes no difference.

It's still over.

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"That's the game."

Five cards smacked the table, the last in a series of brutal gestures adding yet another dozen table dings. Two men groaned. They'd lost him. Cigarettes suddenly appeared from within callused and cracked hands; a musician's mark of pride. A tarnished silver Zippo was lit and religiously passed about. There used to be a no smoking sign inside the bar. Ironically, it was now buried under a thick green grimy layer of tobacco ash.

The night's champion, Jace, held a cigarette between thick fingers. Faint friction lines across his fingertips bent and cracked; the hands of a professional guitarist. One of the others bore nearly identical calluses; the third was un-callused, but his voice rasped with every syllable.

"You really think he can do it?" rasped the singer. Broken vocal cords couldn't mask his disbelief. They also couldn't mask his envy; he knew the guy was capable of it. They'd all seen the guy play. He was good; unbelievably good. The man was a superhuman.

"Course I do. Why else would we all be bidding for the exact same guy?"

"I dunno. 'Cause we want to piss you off?"

Laughter shook the table; some of it bitter, some of it not. They envied the winner's earnings. If men could be slipped away like wallets, he would have been broke before he finished a smoke. But, men were not wallets, and this man, should he take offense to his removal, might decide to politely cave their skulls in.

"So, man, you're using him for the number, huh?" There was no need to elaborate. All three of them were sitting in this crummy bar smoking cheap cigarettes because they all knew 'the number' too well. Specifically, their drummers had all known the number too well.

Two of them had died after playing. One of them had permanent muscle damage; he'd be lucky if he could tap his way through a White Stripes song after he was out of physiotherapy.

"Yeah. He'll get through the number." 'If it kills him' ran through three skulls, but nobody voiced it aloud.

"Fuck, I remember when Ricky went into it that first time, on stage" muttered the other guitarist. "He was great. For the first thirty seconds. I was up front, hammering on, the crowd was shaking the stage, he finished his triple tom roll, went into the second part. The one with the five bar bass roll, you know? Finished that, though I heard his pedal crack from ten feet away. One stick hit the floor tom, went through it, and then he sortaí í .flopped over."

"Can it" growled Jace. He'd been really good friends with his drummer. Good man. Good drummer. Good sister, too.

Somewhere three seats over, a bass throbbed. Warm-up band. The bar hosted live gigs every Friday; the three of them had all played here back when their respective bands were in the infant stage. Free drinks had been their pension ever since.

"So, how does your new drummer know Brady?"

"It's a long story. Brady's an old friend of mine; I met him when I enlisted. The guy's an army psychologist; he fixes guys. The broken guys who come back from hell and can't quite hack civilian life. Anyway, he gives me a call two months ago. I told him that my drummer, Tom had kicked the bucket, and he told me that he had a new guy in his office every week. Regiment had sent him home. Some sorta head injury; the guy's dumb as a brick. Can't talk, can't hear a thing. I asked him what the hell this guy could do. Brady told me the guy was a quick learner and had good muscle memory. I gave him Tom's kit and a month to play around. We all saw what he could play this afternoon, and here we are."

Conversation a booth beyond broke their meditative silence.

"So, why does this guy want to do the Five Skin Thump?" "Brady told me that this guy used to be a pretty stuck up type; a sense of pride taller than he was. Anyway, after the accident, he lost all of his self-importance. Lost the will to do anything. Brady's hoping the show tomorrow will put the fight back in him. Get him sorted out."

Two pairs of eyebrows changed shape. They screamed in their own bushy way 'are you shitting me?' The Five Skin Thump killed people. It destroyed people's bodies; nobody short of a commando had the body build or the endurance to put up with the strain. Guitars wailed from within the distant fugue.

A passing waitress in working clothes (or a lack thereof) was ordered to bring three beers. Business conversation quickly degenerated to small talk. "So, what happened to this guy?" Jace sat back, polished off his third smoke of the night

"I have no fucking idea. From what Brady told me, he isn't the type to quit. I don't know how he broke, or what broke him. And I'm not sure the Five Skin Thump is going to glue the pieces back together." One finger flicked the butt over the table. "He's going to die trying, or kill himself after he's blown it. That's what I told Brady."

"Did he believe you?" the singer shot back.

"No. He told me this guy could hack it. It's just gonna add one more bag to his emotional baggage. He'll be snuffed right out after tomorrow." It's why he'd picked the guy.

Under the table, three sets of combat boots crunched across broken glass, dunes of ash, and used condoms. Beside a table leg pared with abuse, a stub glowed with embers. Five minutes later, their order arrived and the three stomped out of the shithole that was 'the Glory Hole.' It kept

burning.

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A carpet of fists rocked the wooden stage.

It vibrated in sympathetic rhythm to the single bass drum pounding out a tattoo, a communal heartbeat for the stinking, screaming, drug-frenzied crowd. Jace's fingers laid down the rhythm, covering his six strings in blood. Stinging pain from long hours of practice was now merely an ache, a vague itch tugging at his fingers.

He couldn't hear.

He couldn't smell anything other than the beast-like stench of the tattooed leatherheads moshing to his front. Thanks to the spot lights and bad house lighting, he couldn't see a thing. Just a sea of fists. Dust flew up like snow; his shuffling combined with the amp's vibrations had kicked up a storm, scattering the puny stage with mist.

Kyler, his bassist, kicked his gargantuan amp to life and growled out a chord; meshing, intertwining with his perfectly. They'd practiced this. It was time.

The rules of the Five Skin Thud were simple; your drummer kept playing until he passed out, or until his guitarists gave up. No-one had ever seen a guitarist quit since the Five Skin Thud was written, here on this stage, four years ago. Nobody knew who exactly had written it either. Did it matter? It was near impossible, it was physically traumatic. It was awesome. That was all that counted in Jace's book. It was close enough for rock and roll, Jace thought as his chapped lips curled into a feral grin. Here it comes.

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Here I go.

My arms are a blur; they vibrate and shiver with the force of those two momentous impacts. Just two strokes; and my arms are dead weight. My shoulders roll, taking on the work until my battered forearms can recover. Three seconds have past; I'll need six minutes at least. The plunge is not gentle. It's never gentle; just more or less intense. I've grown soft, expecting the plunge to conform to my expectations. To relax is to fail, to fall, or to die.

Damn. My chest is tight as Kevlar. As my right foot stutters like a rabbit's leg, I remember. I remember machine gun fire. .50 rounds exploding and shrieking inches from my burned face. I

remember swinging a pintle mount around a cabin filled with hot lead, my movements slow, careful, and exacting. It'sí ..painful to re-live these memories. It's nearly unbearable to do so during the plunge; my adrenaline-lined sanctuary from the cruel lash of self-pity. No. NO! Crashing the ride cymbal with all of my strength, I lose more feeling, and drive the beat on for precious seconds.

I will not surrender to memory.

I will not.

I must.

Riding out the storm is how I will make it. I will ride it out, I will expend my strength, and I will come out breathing, gasping, grinning. Success, praise, glory will be mine once more; achievements I have earned.

Very well.

My name is Sergeant First Class Robert Bobaton, 2nd Squadron, 17th Air Cavalry. I was a door gunner on a helicopter; my weapon of choice was a Browning .50 with a thermographic sight. I had fifteen confirmed kills, sixty probables, and more decorations than you could mount on your garage door.

Thirty millimeters of titanium ended my career.

We were executing a low-atmosphere mission; strafing an enemy armor column. The rust buckets died by the squadron; we went sailing on by with barely a dent in our fuselage. I was down to my last belt.

I rattle the toms. A screw pops out, and is lost amidst the mob.

Last thing I remember was slamming the bay door, and the crew chief yelling at the pilot to take us home. God Himself must have drop-kicked us; I slammed into a bulkhead with enough force to shatter my skull. At least that's what they told me, when I woke up. More accurately, that's what they texted me. Never again would I hear the hellish rattle of armor piercing rounds. I'd gone completely deaf. I was dumb, too. Couldn't read any numbers. Still can't. I can't do any sort of math, and my balance is terrible. Just another honorable discharge, and a ticket on the next bird homewards.

Psychologist Brady took me under his wing straight from the tarmac. Had me reading, writing,

and drawing every waking hour I spent with him. I thought it was some sort of assessment. Boredom and frustration hung over me like fog; every time I lost interest, we'd be working out something new. Eventually, we got to the drums. That was fun. Finally, I could wield the ultimate tool; my body. Finally, I could start winning back my praise. Actually win it, as opposed to soaking it up from a sickly sweet nurse.

I hated that. Last time a nurse did that, I broke my bunk in half with one blow. Damn it, I thought, I'd show them I can win praise back. Win my respect, real respect, and bask in it.

Six minutes in, and my joints are on fire. Not long now. My floor tom and left tom are broken. Only two parts left. My hands bend to the task with vigor.

All my rage, all of my frustration, all of my sorrow, it flows through my hands like a hit of heroin. Fingers pummeled senseless suddenly seize up and clench my sticks, clench them until imprints line them. Through it all, through all the weeks of rehab, I'd never broken. My mind stayed as intact as possible; I never refused anything, no matter how simple, no matter how demeaning.

I'd been waiting for a day like today.

I open my eyes. Feel the roars of the crowd shake my boots. The illusion was broken. Finally, I'd lost the need to imagine the plunge. Jace keels over. One thumb, one ragged, mashed fleshy wreck of a thumb waves. He's ok. He's given in.

I'm free. For ten minutes, the auditorium is buffeted by the crowd. I can't hear a word, but I can feel the drone through my boots, thought the sweat slicked sticks dangling from my purple hands.

I raise both hands in victory. Mission accomplished. I've won it. Seconds later, I'm sobbing my heart out. My sobs never reach my ears; never held a candle to the four-hundred mouthed beast roaring its approval. That only makes it all the more tragic. I've finally won respect.

But I'll never, ever hear a whisper of it again.