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3311 Elvis

Joe Maslanka

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I'm sitting peacefully atop my green wooden footlocker, squinting from the high watt fluorescent lights as I sift through my mail. This is one of few peaceful moments at Marine Corps Boot Camp, Parris Island, SC.

Like a gift from God, each Sunday brings two hours of peace, shared equally between an hour of church service and an hour of free time. The Protestants have their hour, we Catholics have ours. An hour spent sitting on our footlockers to shine boots, clean weapons, read mail, or just contemplate life is mental bliss.

Although you can enjoy the free hour, you can never depend on it. Like everything else on Parris Island, savor the moment, but be prepared for the worst. Just a few weeks ago, peacefully sorting through loving pictures from my family, my tranquility got ambushed. Sergeant Hernandez, the designated dickhead of our team of drill instructors, felt that my mom's picture needed to be posted on the motivation board. This is a bulletin board where the privates in our platoon post pictures of hot girls from their hometown. It is also known affectionately as the 'hog board.'

I resist torture and threats to keep my mother's picture off of that board. My peace was defiled, but my resilience earned me a call home. I was challenged, physically threatened, to coax my family to send an alternate picture. My father owns a bar, and they found a willing patron, a good friend, to pull off her shirt in the back room. Within days a titular photo arrived at Third Battalion, H Company, Platoon 3311.

The delivery of the picture so touched the heart of senior drill instructor Staff Sergeant Reeves, that he found a special place for it in the 'motivation manual' he kept buried in the bottom right-hand drawer of his desk. The reward for my picture was a quick thumb through the manual. Salt peter could not burn those amateur erotic images from my mind.

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Sergeant Hernandez is not on duty today. This Sunday brings the charm and wit of Sergeant Lane. Imagine Dennis the Menace all grown up and stuffed into a set of Charlies, and you may picture Sergeant Lane. Sergeant Hernandez is the dick, Staff Sergeant Newby is the mellow old salt come to DI duty late, and Sergeant Lane is somewhere in between.

Sergeant Lane doesn't yell but speaks loudly. He generally doesn't get physical. His specialty is berating the platoon. One day after we had tested his patience, he had us disassemble every rack, carry the pieces and mattresses down three flights of steps, scrub the deck, and bring everything back. When we didn't do it within his allotted time of ten minutes, he meted out physical exercise to exhaustion, every so often stopping us to call us "little girls" or "ladies." He did this in a condescending tone, exhibiting a level of calm that made it all the more irritating. At one point, he stood alongside me as he continued his barrage of insults. For one brief moment I considered punching him in the testicles, just to shut him up and let the platoon enjoy the moment.

In my mail from home is an issue of *Guitar Player Magazine*. I'm thinking I need to discard it, when the sun and high wattage glare reflect off a pair of spit-shined dress shoes parked before me. The magazine is snatched from my grip with eager urgency.

"What the hell are you reading, boy?" Sergeant Lane begins flicking through the pages of rock and rollers with a dismissive, crooked smile. "What is this hippy shit? Start talking, scum bag."

"Sir, it's just junk mail from home, sir!"

"Junk mail, huh? This don't look like junk mail. You one of those weird rock and roll freaks, Mashefski?"

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Just as I am about to answer him, my best friend from high school, Tommy Kirk, whom I had convinced to accompany me in joining the corps, decides to interject. “He played in a band, sir. They were pretty good.” Ten words and a few seconds is all it took to detonate my free time and shatter the peace.

“Private Mashefski, we had no idea we had a genuine rock and roll star amongst us. Did you have a lot of groupies? Strange sex stuff, drugs? Tell me all about it, boy, I’m really intrigued.”

I peer at my best friend like the guy who’s just gone public with all my dirty little secrets; a look that could kill.

“Don’t look at Private Kirk, oh no, he did us a favor. In fact, let’s go share this revelation with the senior drill instructor.” The shit storm begins to brew.

I follow Sergeant Lane to the senior drill instructor’s office for interrogation regarding my brief career in entertainment. After playing in a band for four years, at the ripe age of twenty-two I decided I needed direction in my life. The band went further than most, but after running into too many drunken wannabes, I sought stability. I knew enough to never discuss it. But here I was, again on the verge of some degrading scenario over another item sent from home. I conclude to never open any more mail.

“What do we have here, Sergeant Lane?” The senior drill instructor pulls himself from tedious paperwork, a bemused smirk on his face.

“Well, senior drill instructor, we have just come to learn that old Mashefski here was a bonified rock and roll star in his hometown.”

“Is that so, Mashefski? What were you one of those long hair freaky guys with a guitar, smokin’ some weed and bangin’ nasty hippy girls?”

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“Sir, no sir. This private drank alcohol, sir, but no drugs. No long hair either, sir. I played in a rockabilly, blues kind of band, sir.”

“Rockabilly, what’s that?”

“Sir, like Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, sir!”

“Damn, Elvis? I like me some Elvis.” He kicks a steel and green vinyl-padded chair towards me. “Get on that chair and sing me some Elvis, boy.”

Wanting all of this to end quickly, I step onto the makeshift mini-stage, cocking my head forward to avoid hitting the ceiling. The drill instructors eye each other with the anticipation of a late-night crowd at a standup comedy show.

“Well, since my baby left me, I found a new place to dwell, it’s down at the end of lonely street called, heartbreak hotel.” I thrust into the Elvis classic with all the gusto of a fat lady at the close of an opera. I finish the song in under two minutes.

The sarcastic smile of Senior Drill Instructor Reeves, who resembles a younger Clark Gable without the mustache, is replaced by a look of astonishment. “Damn, boy, you ain’t bad. Get off the chair. What do think, Sergeant Lane?”

“Mashefski can sing, who woulda thought?”

“I bet there ain’t another private in this whole damn series can wail like Elvis. We’re gonna spotlight you, Mashefki.”

“Sir?”

“I’m rolling you out to the other DIs in the series. They’ll eat their hearts out. Shit, especially Sergeant Pickford. Make us proud, boy. Get ready to sing your ass off. We got us an actual, Elvis-like, rock and roll private.”

“Sir, I couldn’t do this justice without a guitar.”

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“Fuck that, Mashefski, ya just did it. Now repeat that performance or I’ll have Sergeant Lane grind you to boot-shit on the quarterdeck. Choose, maggot.”

“Sir, the private will sing, sir!”

“Smart move, Mashefski, you’ll go far in this man’s corps. Sergeant Lane, round up the drill instructors from the other platoons, I got to show off the talent in 3311. Mashefski, go back to your rack, be ready to put on a little show.”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“Hold on there, boy.”

I freeze at attention and snap a hundred eighty degrees for my senior drill instructor’s final order. “Sir, yes, sir!”

He eases up to my right ear like a python slithering to its prey. “Don’t fuck it up, Mashefski. Don’t embarrass this platoon or I’ll fuck you up.” He lets that sink in, holding me there with a sadistic stare and evil grin. “Now go warm up those pipes, Elvis.”

I return to the brief sanctity of my footlocker. Within ten minutes the platoon is startled by the onslaught of visiting drill instructors, they are the competition. We face off against the other platoons in drill, physical activity, pugil sticks, everything. They are cordial to one another, but the tension underlying their camaraderie is intense. With quizzical expressions, they jam into the tiny office.

“What do you think’s going on in there?” asks my old—and possibly former—friend Tommy Kirk.

“The result of your big freakin’ mouth. That’s what’s going on in there.” I no sooner get my words out as my name is bellowed from the office.

“Mashefski!”

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When the senior—or any—drill instructor calls for you from the office the entire platoon must sound off in unison. “Private Mashefski, report to the drill instructor!”

I hustle into the office and squeeze my way toward the chair. Drill instructors are shoulder-to-shoulder, crammed around me. Amidst smartass comments, half-cocked smiles, and muffled laughter, I await the senior drill instructor’s order. “All right, Mashefski, give us a show.”

I explode into a cappella versions of “That’s all right, Momma,” “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” and close the show with “Heartbreak Hotel,” with minimal to no pause between each song. My heart is racing, adrenaline steamrolls through my nervous system. I’ve played a lot of shows for money, but never for my physical well-being. I come to attention teetering on the rickety steel chair, awaiting my fate.

“How about that? Look at the talent we got here in 3311,” Staff Sergeant Reeves says.

Stunned by the genuineness of my senior drill instructor’s intentions and the approval of our rival drill instructors, I descend the chair with easing nerves and swelling pride.

One drill instructor is very impressed. He is from Platoon 3313. He is ramrod thin, five-foot-five inches of country boy from the hills of Kentucky. “Damn, that boy’s good, he’s really good.” He spits out through missing front teeth in an Appalachian drawl.

The drill instructors burst out of the tiny office. The senior drill instructor steps from behind his desk to stand in front of me, “Mashefski, you entertained the series, time to entertain your fellow privates. I’m booking you for a concert tonight, after chow.”

“Sir, I can’t do that, sir!”

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“Can’t? Mashefski, are we going to have another hog board encounter, should I have Sergeant Lane warm your ass up on the quarterdeck? I told you to entertain the platoon and you will motivate them, you hear me, boy!”

On a chair in a little office was one thing, but stepping out in front of my fellow marines I spend every day with is another. I imagine the ridicule I would open myself up to. The fact that the senior is enamored with my performance wouldn’t help.

“Sir, it has been crystal clear to this private that marines always to do their best, sir.” I take a shot at reverse psychology.

“What are you angling at, Mashefski? You’re pissing me off.”

“Sir, to truly motivate my fellow privates I would need my guitar and harmonica, sir. Otherwise, trying to sing in the large squad bay would not do justice or represent the platoon in marine corps fashion, sir.”

“What do you know about marine corps fashion, boot?” Sergeant Lane decides to chime in.

“Nah, hold on there, Sergeant Lane, this boy has a point. You still remember how to get to the phone banks, boy?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“You got five fuckin’ minutes to run your ass down there, call home and have your mommy and daddy ship your guitar. So why are you standing here, move your ass!”

“Sir, aye-aye, sir!”

My family is stunned to hear from me a second time in three weeks and grateful to ship another package my way. In four days, the package is delivered. I earn the honor of blowing taps

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on the harmonica every night at lights out. To my surprise, I am not immediately ordered to entertain the platoon. It's going to happen, but at least it will be under the cover of instruments.

A week later we move to the rifle range for two intense weeks of marksmanship training. I am shaken out of a sound sleep by the heavy Hispanic accent of the fire watch private.

“Hey, Maz, *de Seen-yore*, he wants you in *de* office.” Private Lopez is a guy from Argentina who earned his US citizenship and decided the marines was how he wanted to spend it.

“Damn, Lopez, what time is it?” I pull back the covers of my rack in the glare of his flashlight.

“Zero-one hundred, Maz.”

I sit up, shove my feet into shower shoes, and shuffle over old, highly polished wooden floors down the hall of the World War II-era squad bay. Light from the office beams into the hallway like a beckoning to death's door. I snap to attention, slap the door frame three times. “Sir, Private Mashefski reporting as ordered, sir.”

“At ease, Mashefski, me and some of the other drill instructors are working late, we needed some entertainment.”

Leaning against a stool is my black, Fender acoustic guitar. Sergeant Pickford is here from 3313. He smiles a toothless grin. “Play us some more-a-*dat*-there Elvis shit, son. Little more “Blue Moon o’ Kentucky” stuff.”

“You got a request, Mashefski, get to it,” says Staff Sergeant Reeves.

Acknowledging his order, I sit on the stool, tune my guitar and barrel into a five-song performance. There's no clapping, no sing-along, although I catch some toe tapping to a few of

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the Elvis numbers. The completion of each song is met with the sound of shuffling paper and humming fluorescent lights.

I get an encore request from Sergeant Pickford. Launching into “Tear it up” by Johnny Burnette and the Rock & Roll Trio, my leg shakes to the rhythm as I throw in some rockabilly hiccups and yelps.

“I like dat, boy, he’s good,” declares Sergeant Pickford.

“Good show, Mashefski. Now get your ass back to your rack, long day tomorrow,” informs Staff Sergeant Reeves. I sound off and turn to vacate the office. “Hold on there, Mashefski, don’t you usually get paid for a gig?”

“Sir?”

“Get your ass over here, I got your pay.”

Oh shit, is all I can think. I come to attention by his desk. Staff Sergeant Reeves reaches into a bottom drawer, snatching a can of coke from its confines. Yanking the tab, the hiss of the can is the sound of angel’s harps. I begin to salivate. Not tasting a coke for at least two months, I lunge for the can.

“Get a grip, Mashefski. Let’s see, five songs, that’s good for five sips, put your hands behind your back.” The senior drill instructor tilts five sips of coke onto my tongue. It’s like sweet nectar.

“Give da boy a bonus gulp for dat encore,” requests my newest fan, Sergeant Pickford. A wash of Coca-Cola kisses my throat like Dom Perignon.

“You’ll entertain the platoon tomorrow, hear me boy?” informs my senior.

“Sir, aye-aye, sir!” It won’t be the last time.

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Through the marines I looked to change my life, but there's just some things that are meant to stick with you. I ran from rock and roll, but I'm grateful it found me and wouldn't let go.