

FRONT PORCH

Something Worth Fighting For

Roman Skaskiw

“Did you ever kill anyone?” she asked. Then reconsidered. “I’m sorry, never mind.” She bit her glossy lip. “It’s just, I’m really interested, because it’s really interesting.” Her eyebrows arched high, and her dainty earrings dangled.

The young man twisted on his stool, as if working out a kink in his spine. It was dark, inside and out. The bar was nearly empty. The happy couples had long since left. Only a few desperate patrons still lingered.

She said something else. And then something else.

The young man nodded. She prattled on about the virtues of dissent, hooking and jabbing at him like a boxer, all the while keeping her dukes up, leaving no opening to exploit. He sat with polo shirt tucked into constricting wrinkle-free slacks.

When he’d returned from the war a couple months ago, he learned two things: That his girlfriend whom he told not to wait for him had, in fact, didn’t, and that life was very easy – mostly. The important things were easy. Going for a walk, for example. Eating. Sleeping. Having an endless flow of water, hot or cold, that you can cup in your hands and drink without worrying. Driving was also easy, in any one of the lanes – going anywhere, and doing it without a plan. Just going.

Some of the stupid things weren’t so easy, but they were things that didn’t *really* matter—like deciding what to wear. The colors and patterns seemed like a foreign alphabet. There was no rank, or unit. When dressing for an evening out, he always had a vague sense of doing it wrong. It felt frivolous and strange, but he planned to keep at it for the remaining week of his block leave, or until he got lucky.

The heavy door opened again after remaining shut for a good long time—long enough for the young man to be surprised again by the fact of the night outside. This time it released a single patron from the bar, and the puff of uninfected air brought in when the door swung on its hinges stirred to life the bartender, a blonde as unnatural and irresistible as Hollywood.

Everything seemed affected—all sizzle, no steak. Many people who’d learned he was a veteran seemed genuinely respectful, and the young man hated the thought that the shitbags he’d known, the useless, incompetent ones, were getting the same. He didn’t accept their respect/praise/pity, because they gave it without knowing what kind of soldier he’d been. The past seemed to pale in importance to the front he did or did not put up. It was all Hollywood.

He’d seen movie posters in the subway cars. They promoted an outnumbered, perfect-haired hero sneering at insurmountable odds just as they were poised to overtake him. Throughout the Civilized World, the hero with perfect hair and delicately tended tan appeared, stepping a single, stealthy, balanced, cautious, perfect step—while coddling what the young man knew as an Em-Four carbine with mounted Em-Two-Oh-Three grenade launcher, and never mind that there is no magazine in the weapon, or that the selector switch is not turned to safe, or that the hero takes his perfect step with index finger in the trigger well up to his second knuckle—too deep to shoot any distance without yanking your round off target, but still affording plenty of opportunity for those with the bad habit of keeping their fingers there to, say, shoot a best friend through the femur when he calls your name and you turn toward him anticipating his telling you that it’s time to head back. For example. And, for example, you could have done it in an especially hopefully moment, because the steaks had finally arrived on the morning re-supply, and if you would have gotten back in time, you may have lain on your cot a while, still in your sweaty uniform, to let the tight thing inside slacken a little before getting in line for the steaks.

The blonde bartender, who now arranged glasses in ranks and files was, after careful surveillance, determined to be a difficult target. She moved with an sense of duty, arranging her formation with quick precise movements, no doubt in anticipation of her own escape and the uncoiling that occurs deep inside when the door shuts on the dangers of the world.

The last swallow slithered hotly down his throat and the young man smiled at the bubbly collection of flesh and tits chirping on the stool next to him. She blinked. The verbal pugilist had said something, and now she blinked and he smiled at her.

“So,” she said after giving up on her previous comment, “why would you enlist in the Army?”

“Well, technically speaking I commissioned, not enlisted.”

Blank stare.

“I was an officer,” he added, but saw no sparkle of understanding in her eyes. He could as easily have been a private or general; a cook or helicopter pilot; or better yet, one of those who commands a desk (with iron fist no less) and carries a leather-bound ledger to and from an air-conditioned chow hall, one that serves steaks until midnight, and who, upon returning home, tells all his respectfully silent friends simply that he was there and does not like to talk about it.

“So didn’t you think about doing things you were against doing?” Her eyes followed him as he raised his glass and coaxed one last drop onto his tongue. “Because I find it really interesting,” she said, “that’s why I’m asking.”

“There were lots of reasons I joined. Lots and lots of great reasons.” He had her attention. “I just can’t remember what they were.”

And she laughed and touched his arm, and he thought: Good. Take that. He thought he was onto something so he said: “For one thing, you get to do a lot of really cool shit.” He nodded to emphasize the unspeakable boyish thrills he took to be so obvious.

“A lot of cool . . . shit,” she said, pursing her painted lips as if in literal distaste of the word he apparently obligated her to repeat. He raised a finger and ordered the girl another gin and tonic.

“Did they pay for your college?” she asked.

Still sober enough to spot a trap, he said: “They paid for a part of it, but that’s not why I joined. I mean, I would’ve joined anyway. Something I always wanted to do.”

She searches the bar from her stool.

“For one thing”—he touched her knee where the hem of her skirt ended for as long as he could within the boundaries of friendly, casual chit-chat—“you learn a lot.” Then he said, “About people. And yourself. Leadership.”

“Yeah, but can’t you learn the same things working?”

“No.”

“Or on an Outward Bound camping trip or something.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Because I’m always managing people at my firm.”

“It’s not the same,” he repeated.

“Doesn’t it bother you that you just sign your body over to them and do whatever they say?”

“It takes a lot of faith.”

“Faith?”

"All kinds of faith," he said. "In the people around you. In your leaders and the government. In America."

"You have faith in this government?"

"I have faith in the system."

"They lied to everyone," she said. "Didn't you feel bad about doing something you might not believe in, or were you just doing your job and the reasons don't matter?"

Great, he thought. My luck to get one of these.

He said nothing. He looked at her and thought momentarily about taking her to the apartment of his friend, Crazy Louie, and making a mess of those glossy lips which expressed such horrific distaste toward his world. He thought about black tears running down naked breasts, and imagined laughing at her because he could. And then he returned to where he was. "Do you have a number?"

"Are you changing the subject?"

Slowly drawing in his breath, he flipped through his past and through the stories that were becoming his past with each telling.

"Did I tell you about my parents?" he said. "My parents, they were immigrants. They came here with nothing. And we both went to college. Me and my brother."

She looked at her gin and tonic, appearing to measure the remaining content.

"And now," he said, "my brother's a doctor."

A shrug? Maybe a little impressed.

"So I had faith," he said. "I was thankful and I had faith, and I didn't mind joining the Army. You see?"

"So what you're saying is, you have faith, so the reasons don't matter. You're just doing your job."

"They matter. The reasons, they matter, but . . ."

She smiled. The air was heavy with sweat and alcohol, choking him.

". . .but it's like neither you or I are gonna change the fact that we're there, but I had my little piece of it over there, and I did it. I feel like I did good." He had the feeling of a beggar when he said this and he did not like that feeling.

"Did you ever get shot at?"

"I feel like I made a difference," he said. "Not a big one, but I helped people."

"Did you ever get shot at?"

"What?"

"Did you ever get shot at?"

"Yes."

"I just find it so interesting. Who did you vote for?"

Here, the idea hit him to outflank his way into her panties with literature, and in his eagerness he leaned too far forward, then, like a passenger bracing on a jolting train, he caught himself.

"I'm like Clevenger from Catch-22," he said, "who defended his fascist friends among his communist friends, and his communist friends among his fascist friends." He had the vague notion that something of J.D.

Salinger's could likewise be useful, but the specifics were beyond the reach of his hazy mind, and he trailed off in the middle of a sentence.

"So who did you vote for?" she asked again.

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The subway at that hour was nearly empty. He slouched near the middle of the car with one foot on an adjacent seat, the cuff of his slacks climbed to the shin of his raised leg. He wanted to stay awake and not miss his stop. To one side, a tired-looking woman sat with a young boy. She wore a sweat suit and flip-flops and her expression seemed held together by anger and fatigue. The boy kneeled on the seat and peered over the back of it with enormous brown eyes.

The young man faced them and a toothy smile broke over the boy's face. He raised one arm and showed off the white gauze bandages freshly wrapped around his hand. A badge of courage. The boy sunk down so only the top half of his head was visible, his excited smile apparent in his eyes, a tangled mop of chocolate-colored hair.

Every time the young man looked, the boy ducked behind the seat, waited a moment, then rose again. They made eye contact a half-dozen times over the span of two subway stops. Then, the boy's mother put one hand on his hip and spun him around in his seat, and the young man turned his attention back to not falling asleep.

A lady entered at one station with high heels like knitting needles, and straps and ribbons winding up her legs. She sat near the young man and crossed her legs.

The young man laughed out loud, composed himself, then laughed again. He turned toward her.

"Did you hear the one about the banana fish?"

She didn't answer.

"It eats so many bananas it gets fat and can't get out of its hole."

She trained her eyes on the advertisements and kept them there, on a movie poster.

"And then *bam!* The guy blows his freakin' brains out."

The enormous brown eyes of the little boy flashed out of sight again.

"Don't be scared," he called after her as she exited at the next station, "there's nothing here to be scared of. Not a thing." And there wasn't, because life here was so easy.

The doors closed and the subway lurched forward again in its tunnels.

The young man thought about nothing for a while. Then his thoughts settled on the girl who didn't wait for him. I need her advice, he thought. I need her advice. He imagined her looking him over before an evening out. He could see her smile and the delicate wrinkles it brought to her eyes, and he could feel her hands pulling out his tucked-in shirt. He could smell her perfume. He imagined himself returning to a bedroom where she'd be waiting for him.

That was the world he returned to now, and not to the sofa of Crazy Louie who had spilled his beer while pronouncing to the lone patron at their local haunt, an old man, that his best friend was a hero and could kick the ass of anybody in the bar, or to his mother's where she would stand meekly just outside his old room with kid bed and impossibly small furniture and ask if she was interrupting, or if he would like some Kasha, or if he'd like her to turn up the air conditioner, or suggesting he open a window because a cross-breeze is nice. No, he was not going to that place. He was going to an apartment, to a bedroom, and she'd be there, the girl who waited for him after all, who waited despite him, and she would be happy to see him again. She would smile. Then she'd walk to him, stand on her tiptoes and kiss his cheek. She'd untuck his polo shirt, tell him to relax and lead him to a soft, clean bed, and she'd wrap her arms and legs around him and they would fall asleep and sleep together and dream, and then wake and then sleep together some more.

He was alone in the subway car thinking about the girl, when it exited its tunnels and rattled onto the elevated track. The bright city appeared behind his reflection in the window, and he stopped thinking about the girl.

He stared past the image of himself at the skyline against the night, at the lights, bridges, roof tops, dark valleys and neon signs, and it filled him, briefly, with the same fantastic thrills he felt when seeing these things as a child. He felt himself, as he had in childhood, wanting to reach out and touch that world, wanting to be a part of it. The thrill lasted only a moment. The difference between then and now was that he had already stood in those lights and walked through those valleys. He had seen them up close, and did not find anything worthwhile.

The young man still waited for the tight thing inside of him to uncoil, and the subway rattled forward into the night.

Roman Skaskiw served as an infantry officer with the 82nd Airborne Division in both Afghanistan and Iraq. He graduated from the Iowa Writers' Workshop in 2007. His work has previously appeared in Stanford Magazine. As of May 2007, he is being mobilized from the inactive reserve to support Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"I spent my childhood summers in the Catskill Mountain. We had no television, and my mom would have to go to the 'big house' when she needed to use a telephone. When it rained, I often played Uno on the porch with my sister and some neighbor kids while water ran from the eaves. We'd play for hours."