

# Paradise Suicide

Jacob Quarterman  
Dereck Brown

Copyright © 2016

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Copyright © 2016

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

El Monito Enterprises

# CHAPTER ONE

## PRIMATE DIPLOMACY

With my eyes open or closed, I could still see his fist covered in blood. His arm wet to the elbow. The shattered remains of the bottle glistening as he brought it down. Again and again. His chest heaving. His face twisted and ugly with rage.

I clenched my teeth, and a cramp in my jaw shot a splinter of pain up into my temple. I had never been so cold. I jammed my fists deeper into my armpits and curled forward, but the wind cut through my t-shirt, prying into every crack.

No boots, and my socks were soaked through. My feet like dumb cinder blocks. I watched them rise and fall like they were on someone else's legs, stomping through the splattering snow. He had turned his head, his eyes finding mine, and I was gone. *God help me.* I ran.

Air hissed through my teeth in wheezing gasps, leaving a bright

raggedness in my lungs. I tightened my abs against another cough and sniffed up half-frozen snot from the stream creeping through my moustache and into my beard. Tears freezing to my cheeks.

I had run for a little while, but the Indiana winter had made me a dumbass. Made me slow down and curl up. Shivering. Shuddering. Biting the inside of my cheek and filling my mouth with copper. I saw his bloody hand, yeah. I also saw that radiator. My boots. My sleeping bag rolled up in the corner. My leather jacket hanging on the back of the chair. That leather jacket.

When I was nineteen, I used to play bass in a punk band with a kid named Scotty Price. Even though he liked *The Prodigy* way too much, he was a good dude. When I got my second public intox the week before a big Halloween show, he bailed me out, gave me that jacket, and replaced me with the bass player from *Fun Party*. She wasn't as good as me, but she stayed sober.

I slipped, and my feet threatened to come out from under me. I shot my hands out to keep my balance, and the cold immediately started eating away at the pink skin of my knuckles. I caught my balance and looked around for the first time since skidding through the slushy gravel at the end of the driveway.

The sun had dropped behind the hills, but the moon was out. Dormant cornfields and distant trees, blue with reflected winter light that twinkled in the snow. *I'll take my chances with what's in the shadows*. My feet moved without telling them to (after all, they were someone else's), and I re-crossed my arms, cramming my cooling

fingers back into my armpits. I *had* to keep them. Playing music was all I had.

We used to close our shows with a song called *Primate Diplomacy*. I fucking loved that song. It was a song that could have been written by a band ten times better than us, and *everyone* knew it. We'd roll into that one, and the crowd would lose their minds. It was special, and if I hadn't been such a piece of shit, maybe it still would be, but Scotty doesn't play it anymore, and I probably never will.

It started with sixteenth notes on the hi-hat. Opening and closing in shimmering waves. Eight measures in, you get a kick drum on the first and third beats. My favorite part. It had a sweet disco feel before switching into a jungle rhythm on the toms.

The first crash, and I would come in with a run up the neck, sliding back down with a big bend at the bottom. For the lows, I had a big Peavey scoop cabinet that I built myself, but the Ampeg filled out the mids and brought out some sparkle.

After two measures, the guitars come in, a chugging crescendo, and the whole thing just builds and builds. The crowd's energy washes over me. I'm sweating, playing with my bass held straight up like I do, and Scotty snatches the microphone from the stand, his wail a counterpoint to the swell, and everything comes together in a perfect moment.

He belts out the first verse, and my feet slap into the snow with the beat. The muscles in my forearms twitch and flex as the memory

takes form, and I close my eyes. We play and play, never getting to the end.

A car horn blared next to me, jolting my heart into hyperdrive. I clamped down too late as piss spread across my crotch. I spun toward the sound, almost going down again. Throwing my hands out again. Feeling the cold again. *How long have I been running?* The white cargo van slowed to a sliding stop, and the passenger door swung open. The ground went from blue to yellow as light from the interior swept across the snow. *I've been running all my life.*

I hugged myself and squinted into the interior. Earl was stretched across the center console, an easy grin splitting his face. A cigarette dangling between his fingers. The smoke swirled out, and I wanted it. The craving was so strong that I barely noticed the dried blood on his knuckles. Around his nails.

“Hey, man,” he shouted. “You ain’t gotta be like this. Come on inside.”

“You killed him.” I said it through a clenched jaw. Barely a whisper. Earl put the cigarette between his teeth and spun the key in the ignition. The engine died with a labored chug, leaving the door chime and radio to fill in the silence. He was listening to NPR.

He leaned back over, draping his arm across the passenger seat. He took a big drag from the cigarette, blowing the smoke out around it, and cupped his hand behind his left ear. “What was that?” he asked.

I clenched everything down and took a shuddering breath. “You

killed him,” I repeated. It felt like I’d screamed, but it was a meek and soft sound, trailing into a chattering sigh.

Earl pulled the cigarette out of his mouth and scratched his forehead in thought. He nodded. “Yeah, I did,” he said. He flicked the cigarette out the door. The wind snatched it away before it could come near me, and it dropped by the back tire with a little sizzle. The next shiver brought the craving back, and my mouth watered. My palms were sweaty against the skin of my arms. The wind dropped, and the heat from the van hit my face. I gasped, and the wind came back up, stealing my breath away, pulling the heat with it, and mixing it with the cigarette smoke that I could suddenly taste.

He reached down and pulled out a can of Miller Lite that had been nestled between his thighs. He tipped it up, and the sound of it pouring into his mouth made my knees weaken. The memory of the taste of it crashed through me harder than it *ever* had in rehab, and I staggered, catching myself on the edge of the open door. I leaned in a little and put the side of my head against the window. He crumpled the can in his fist and threw it past my shoulder. It clunked into the snow behind me.

The door blocked most of the wind, but my feet burned. Beer and smoke and Earl’s Old Spice all rolled out, and I couldn’t think. Couldn’t care anymore. I wanted warm toes. Warm fingers around a cold can. A fucking blanket.

“I tell you my daddy’s name was Ulysses?” he said. He stressed the first syllable like the hillbilly he was, and it was the first time in

my life that I didn't mind hearing my first name. "Named after Grant," he continued. "A real badass, my daddy. Grant, too." He twisted in his seat and reached to the floor in the back. Ice cubes swirled as he fished another can from a Styrofoam cooler. He pulled it up and cracked the tab, putting the can to his lips just as the foam hit the air. He took a long pull, and dropped it back to rest between his legs. His watery eyes never left mine.

"I come home crying, once, when we was still in Kentucky. Crying 'cause some big kid from across the hollar had been giving me a bunch of trouble. Slapped me a couple times, pushed me in the mud." The vinyl creaked as he leaned forward. His eyes were hooded by his brow, and the grin was long gone. In its place was bitterness.

"My daddy beat the shit outta me," he said. "Beat me until he couldn't raise his arm no more, and I couldn't lay on my back for a week. Told me if I ever lost a fight ever again, to don't bother coming home. And I *loved* my father. He was a great man. Grant, too."

He pulled his eyes from mine, and brought the can back up. He drained it, but he didn't crumple it. He pulled it in against his chest. "I damn near killed that kid over the summer. Beat him so bad that he had to do fifth grade from the hospital. Forgot how to tie his own shoes." He looked back at me, and the bitterness and anger were gone. Just that "awe shucks" grin and a shrug, and I wanted that beer so bad.

“I was named after the James Joyce novel,” I said.

“Jesus Christ, that’s a big fucking book,” he said. He finally crumpled the second can and sent it soaring by. “He settled down there at the end, though. Get in the van, Atkins.”

I had never read it. Mom and Dad were all about it, though. He’d come home, she’d ask about his day, and he’d say, “Ah, you’re just like Molly.” They’d smile in that private way of couples, and for the millionth time, I’d tell myself I was gonna read it, but Earl was right. *It is a big fucking book.*

I looked at the bulge of the cigarettes in his shirt pocket, and my eyes drifted to the space between the seats. Where the beer was. My weakness dropped onto my shoulders. Fresh tears stung my eyes. I reached out a shaking hand. “Can I get one of those cigarettes?” I asked.

Earl threw back his head and laughed. A deep and full laugh that sounded real. That sounded like he was pleased and surprised. Like a thing he had been hoping for had finally happened. “Of course you can,” he said. He reached into that pocket, and the sound of the cellophane crinkling under his fingers sent a shiver through me on top of all that cold.

“And one of those beers,” I said. He laughed again and reached into the back with his other hand. I hitched up one of my cinder block feet and dropped it with a splat onto the floormat. *God help me.* I got into the van and closed the door.