

PARRIS ISLAND 1968

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SEVENTEEN AND FINALLY FREE, I sat quietly on a chartered Greyhound bus bound for Parris Island, South Carolina. Around me, as I tried to concentrate on my book, my fellow enlistees, all of them boys scarcely older than me, fidgeted and smoked cigarettes. Other than the clothes I was wearing and a few dollars, I had brought nothing with me but this battered paperback copy of *The Naked and the Dead*. I had read many war novels, among them *A Farewell to Arms*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, and *Battle Cry*, but none with language as graphic as Mailer's. Yet, on this, my second reading of the novel, I was still stumbling over the words "fug" and "fuggin."

I knew they stood for "fuck" and "fucking," words that had been in my vocabulary since I was ten. Nonetheless, I was confused. Was this, I wondered, an example of the distinctive language of the military? Did soldiers, sailors, and Marines say "fug" and "fuggin" instead of "fuck" and "fucking"? So eager was I to fit in, to adjust to the new life that awaited me, that I practiced saying the two words as the bus chugged through the South Carolina night.

Neither word rolled off my tongue and I was still whispering "fug" and "fuggin" to myself when the bus jerked to a stop. Looking out the window, I saw a floodlit sign, four feet high, gold letters on a red background—Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island. A white-gloved MP waved the bus through the gate. It was March 4, 1968, and I was soon to learn whether it was "fug" or "fuck."

Late the next morning, I stood at attention in the Recruit Receiving Barracks. I wore stiff combat boots and a green, ill-fitting, work uniform. My cap was pulled down over my freshly shaven head; I wore a field jacket zipped up to my chin. Next to me was a seabag stuffed with the other uniforms and gear I'd been issued that morning; my civilian clothes were already in the mail, on their way home. My copy of *The Naked and the Dead*

had been confiscated on arrival, swept into the trash along with all the other possessions the clerks had deemed “contraband.” Around me were seventy-nine recruits who, like me, had arrived in the night. The preliminaries over, we were about to meet our drill instructors.

The DIs strode into the Receiving Barracks like wolves on the fold. Standing at attention, staring straight ahead, I was surprised by their number and terrified by their manner. I didn’t know it then, but we were the first platoon in a “series” of four to be formed; each platoon would have three DIs, and the nine assigned to the three unformed platoons, with nothing else to do, had joined our three DIs for the fun of “picking up” a new platoon. So, instead of three tormentors that morning, we would have twelve.

They were lean and muscular. Their uniforms, green wool trousers and long-sleeved khaki shirts, were crisp and tailored. Their collars were stiff, their ties tightly knotted and held in place by shiny clasps. Their distinctive DI hats were tilted at angles that added to their swagger. Each had several rows of ribbons above his left pocket. My recruiter had worn the same ribbons and I knew what they meant. Vietnam. These men were killers. Never had I seen unarmed men who looked so dangerous.

One of them spoke, his voice booming. “What a bunch of fucking turds.”

The others joined in. Their shouts, scornful and contemptuous, shook the room.

“Can you believe these fucking hogs?”

“Goddamned maggots.”

“What kind of turds are they sending us now?”

“Twenty-three niggers.”

With that remark my knees began to knock, even though I wasn’t one of the twenty-three. I knew it meant there were no rules.

Around me, the DIs attacked individual recruits.

“What the fuck are you looking at, you pimple-faced puke?” The DI was shouting into the recruit’s ear.

“Nothing, sir,” said the recruit.

“Oh, you think I’m nothing. Is that what you think, you little bitch? I ought to punch your fucking lights out.”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“That’s right shit-fer-brains, you are a sorry son of a bitch, aren’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

I concentrated on keeping my eyes off the DIs. The recruit next to me couldn't. A passing DI pounced.

"Are you queer for me boy? Is that why you're eyeballing me? Do you want to suck my cock?" In my peripheral vision, I could see that the DI's face was an inch from the recruit's. And his arm was cocked.

"No, sir."

"Then keep your eyes off me, you fucking faggot." He dropped his arm and moved on to the next recruit.

Other recruits were attacked for no reason.

"You're a motherfucking communist aren't you, boy?"

"No, sir."

"Yes you are. You're a communist. Your communist friends sent you here to spy on my Marine Corps. Isn't that right, you fucking communist?"

"No, sir."

"I'm gonna remember you boy."

I had expected drill instructors to be tough, even cruel, but no more than harsher versions of the high school coaches who'd badgered me in P.E. These men, however, were savages. Beasts, without boundaries. In immaculate uniforms.

A clerk broke in, instructing recruits to answer "here sir" when our names were called and then fall in, outside, on the road.

"At a double-time, you fucking assholes," a DI added.

As the clerk called names, recruits answered and ran for the door, the DIs hollering at them as they ran.

"You call that a double time, you fucking turd?"

"Get your ass out on the road, you worthless fucking cunt."

Every third or fourth boy caught a kick as he ran by a DI.

When the clerk called my name, I was strangely relieved. At least I still had my name. I answered up, slung the strap of my seabag over my shoulder and ran for the door. Outside, I tripped as I double-timed down the three steps, almost tumbling into a DI.

Grabbing my field jacket at the collar, the DI pulled my face to his. I saw the bristles of red hair under his DI hat and the veins popping out on his face. I felt his breath as he spoke.

"You skinny piece of shit, do you know how close you just came to getting yourself killed?"

I was too frightened to answer.

"I ought to kill you right now. Keep your ugly ass the fuck away from me or I'll beat you to a bloody fucking pulp. Do you read me?"

"Yes, sir," I stuttered.

"Now get your ass over there with the rest of the fucking pigs," he said.

As I ran toward the other recruits, another DI pushed me into one of the four ranks.

"Move and I'll drop you like a turd from a tall Injun," he said.

In the morning's heat, my clothes, underneath the field jacket, were soaked in sweat. Too terrified to move, I kept my seabag slung over my right shoulder, struggling under its weight to stand upright.

Meanwhile, as recruits filled in the ranks, the DIs continued to swarm. They were mad dogs—vicious, pitiless, and relentless.

"Stand up straight, asshole. You're at attention."

"Quit eyeballing me, pig."

When all the recruits were on the road, we stood in four columns, twenty to a column. We had become a platoon.

"Unslung those seabags," a DI ordered "Get 'em off your shoulders."

We hesitated. Were we staying here?

"Don't think, you fucking maggots. Do it!" another DI shouted.

We unslung our seabags.

"Now pick them up. Hold them in front of you." The DI held his arms out as if he were carrying a load of firewood. "Like this. Get 'em the fuck up!"

I lifted my seabag and cradled it in my arms. Thirty pounds, at least. Right away, my arms were drooping.

"Now, close it up! Close it the fuck up!"

We closed up the formation. As I held my seabag high, my elbows dug into the back of the recruit in front of me, just as the elbows of the recruit behind me dug into my back. Every recruit was off balance. Except for the unfortunate recruits at the head of the columns, each of us was leaning on the recruit in front of him. When the order came to move out, we were dominoes waiting to fall.

"Now run, herd! Run! Double-time, you fucking hogs."

As we started off, our run was little more than a shuffle, jammed as we were against each other, weighted down with our seabags and desperately trying to maintain our balance.

Running alongside us, the DIs kept us their abuse. "Close it up, you fucking pigs! Move! Move!"

We hadn't gone far when a recruit near the front fell. The boy behind him went down and then the boy behind him, and so on until, inevitably, I toppled over the boy ahead of me, my seabag spinning out of my arms. The boy behind me tumbled over me and the boy behind him fell on both of us, seabags flying.

The few recruits who'd managed to stay on their feet ran over us. A boot ground my face into the asphalt. More boots crushed my legs and back as frightened recruits ran over me. And then, as more boys stumbled, I found myself at the bottom of a pile of bodies.

We heard a shout. "Halt! Halt!"

Above the pile, another DI shouted, "Get on your feet you fucking cunts! Get up!"

Untangling myself, on my hands and knees, I looked up at the DI.

"Get on your fucking feet you worthless piece of shit!"

"Yes, sir."

Rising, I picked up a loose seabag, hoping it was mine.

The DI's face was inches from mine. "You're gonna die in Vietnam. You know that, don't you, you worthless fuck?"

"Yes, sir."

Almost every recruit had gone down. Some were still on the ground. Others, like me, were back on their feet, terrified and already exhausted. With pushes and shoves, the DIs reformed the platoon.

"Get those seabags up. Now close it up."

Again my elbows were pressed against the back of a boy in front of me. I felt the elbows of the boy behind me against my own back. I was trying to catch my breath as I heard a DI shout, "Double time! Run, you turds, run. Run!"

Again we ran. And soon we fell, one boy after another. Halted and reformed, we started out a third time, running a short distance until the formation collapsed in another series of pileups. And then we reformed. After that, the process repeated itself again and again—running, falling, reforming. All the while, we endured the DIs' shoves and kicks, winced under their threats and curses, and, in our confusion, began to believe that we just might be what they were calling us—bitches and cunts, hogs and pigs, turds and maggots.

Up the road we ran and then across the parade ground, an asphalt desert that seemed as wide as the Sahara and just as hot. Along with the others, I

ran and tripped, fell and was trampled, getting up each time to run some more, my arms aching and struggling to hold up my seabag. It was a stam-pede in fits and starts, and I was a frightened animal, helplessly trying to follow the commands of my twelve sadistic masters.

On the other side of the parade ground, we halted before a white, two-story barracks. Gasping for breath, my seabag now at my side, I looked back at the parade ground and saw the stragglers. Some had fallen and stayed down, littering the ground like battlefield casualties, DIs hovering over them like vultures. Other boys were dragging their seabags, their heads down, DIs berating them as they trudged the last lengths of the trek.

As the stragglers caught up, the platoon reformed on the road. Around me, boys were crying, struggling to stay on their feet. The boy next to me threw up, the vomit splattering his boots and mine. Another recruit collapsed onto the road. Curling himself into the fetal position, his shoulders heaving in sobs, he looked up at three drill instructors who stood over him.

"I'm going to die," he said.

"Then die, you motherfucker, die," one of the DIs said, the three of them laughing.

A DI pointed toward the barracks, to a door that was up a short flight of steps.

"You hogs have ten seconds to get through that hatch," he said. "When I walk into that squadbay, I want to see every one of you standing in front of a rack. Move."

We broke for the steps, lugging our seabags through a final gauntlet of DIs.

"Get the fuck in there, you hogs."

"Move your fucking asses, you goddamned pussies."

"You girls ain't gonna make it in my Marine Corps."

A row of twenty double-decked bunks lined each side of the squadbay. Within seconds, all eighty of us were standing, two-by-two, in front of the bunks, our seabags beside us, wondering what came next.

Three DIs strode into the squadbay and began to prowl. In my peripheral vision, down the line of recruits, I saw a boy wipe his face.

A DI pounced, punching him in the solar plexus.

"If you want to fucking die, boy," the DI said, "do that again."

I started shaking. My legs were wobbling. My lungs burned. My body ached from the falls and blows I had taken on the death march. My face and

hands were scraped and bleeding. As a second DI passed in front of me, his face set in a sneer, I willed myself to stop shaking and stare straight ahead.

Directly across from me, the third DI paused in front of a boy. The boy flinched and, instantly, the DI slapped his face.

“Stand at attention, you fucking turd,” the DI said. “You belong to me now.”

I was in shock. I couldn’t believe what I’d just been through. Nevertheless, I realized I now had my answer. The words were “fuck” and “fucking.” *Not* “fug” and “fuggin.”