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Prisoner Of War

by Lisa Norris

It was difficult for Joe Yablonsky not to think about dying. He was 68, and a bad back had recently forced him to retire. He'd sold his bookstore to a much younger man who immediately installed a stereo system. Shoppers were forced to listen to exotic music, whale songs, and the sound of the ocean while incense burned by the cash register. It all made Joe feel strangely displaced, as if returned to the city.

The only thing that gave him any relief was walking. Standing, sitting, lying down—he was always in some degree of pain. But something about walking, whether it loosened the tight, sore muscles or forced the vertebrae into different alignments, or whether it was just because he felt more useful then, like he was going somewhere, doing something—at any rate, it worked. Sometimes, while Frannie was at work, he went for three, four walks a day, logging six to eight miles.

But it was August. Temperatures in the nineties kept him from going out as much. Forest fires burned out of control that summer, and the smoke reached the small northern Idaho town where Joe and Frannie had lived for the last thirty-six years. They were originally from Brooklyn, where Joe had been mugged in 1958, walking from the subway. The traffic that year, the summer heat and humidity and finally the mugging had made him decide to get out of the urban sprawl. Frannie hadn't been so sure. She didn't understand what they were dealing with, the sheer numbers of people who were desperate to survive, who'd do anything to anyone to get a little power. He, on the other hand, knew he'd been lucky. The muggers had simply knocked him down from behind, yanked his wallet from his pocket, and

fled. It would have been easy for them to do worse—slip a knife into his back or shoot him. So when he read the ad in the New York Times about the bookstore in Idaho looking for an owner, he convinced Frannie they should take the chance.

They arrived when the wheat was green, fertile fields rising and falling like the breasts of a sleeper, sheltering the clean town. They'd thought they might raise a family—in fact, the safety of their future children was the argument that finally persuaded Frannie, but she was unable to conceive, so they lived quietly, happy enough with the rhythms of plowing and planting, harvest and the burning of the stubble that surrounded them. Lately field burning was banned because of drought conditions and high winds. Joe sat indoors with the air conditioner going, reading everything that came in the mail, even the sweepstakes entries. He wrote letters to people who he hadn't heard from in years. He listened to the radio, his back stiffening.

Finally one afternoon he got the idea of walking up Shoulder Mountain, under the cool shade of the pines. It was the highest in a small range of green humps rising above the undulating fields of wheat and lentils and rapeseed on the Palouse prairie. He'd been meaning to hike to the top for years, but instead he and Frannie used their time to go to the cities—Spokane, Seattle, or Portland—driving the vari-colored Pontiacs they'd had over the years. Now, though, even in the Western cities there were increasing reports of violence—the same gang wars and racial tensions he was accustomed to hearing about in the East. But he and Frannie knew how to avoid the bad sections of the cities. And they knew they'd be returning to their safe haven in Idaho.

He pushed himself out of the chair where he'd been reading. The day was already hot, but the smoke had cleared. He imagined himself sipping cool water from

his thermos under the pines, seeing the Palouse, checked by farmers' plows, spread before him like a tablecloth.

He drove the Pontiac out of town onto the graveled roads. Small patches of trees appeared at the edges of wheat fields. He admired the neat houses perched at the tops of hills, horses grazing in their pastures. He and Frannie had thought of moving out of town when she retired, waking up to the songs of meadowlarks instead of the coarse chirps of starlings. It might be nice, though they liked living closer to the amenities; the older they got, the more important it seemed to be near the police and the hospital. When they were younger the two of them had once spent a week in an isolated cabin by a lake. There was no phone. Even though Joe'd been mugged in a place where, theoretically, help was available, he'd felt more vulnerable than ever before in that cabin. It was the only time in his life he'd wanted a gun. Frannie laughed at the irony. He'd been the one who always said the further they got from people, the safer they were.

The road turned to dirt and steepened, but Joe kept the Pontiac on course. Finally he parked on a wide shoulder. He walked up the road at a leisurely pace, looking off to the sides. Sunlight filtered through the firs, stippling the ground. Now and then, squirrels chattered, scampering across fallen logs. A grouse blasted up from the brush beside him, and he shouted, frightened by the explosion of wings, then laughed at himself. His laughter sounded good in the forest. He put his hands in his pockets, and peered into the dense vegetation more carefully as he walked. Several flickers sailed between dead trees in one clearing, and high in the pines he could hear the calls of smaller birds.

He'd just topped a hill and stood breathing heavily, admiring the view—golden hills undulating into the

blue-rimmed horizon—when he heard engines. Soon he could see dust rising below, spiraling upwards as the vehicles traversed the mountain road, and he cursed. He moved off the road into the woods. As the cars passed he could see they were full of young men with close-cropped haircuts. They looked at Joe as they passed, some raising their hands in greeting. Joe nodded, but kept his hands over his nose and mouth to keep from breathing the dust. After awhile, he could hear the engines die, then voices and car doors slamming.

He walked on, curious. Dust still hung in the air. Around the next curve he could see the cars. Young men milled about, laughing and shouting as if they were at a party, all of them carrying rifles and dressed in fatigues. As Joe approached, a stocky, dark-haired man who looked a little older than the others and was dressed in civilian clothes walked out from the crowd to greet him.

"What are you, ROTC?" Joe asked.

The man nodded. He was healthy and powerful, with a good strong-looking back. He wore a T-shirt splattered with paint spots, but beneath them the word "Judge" was printed.

"War games?" Joe asked.

The man nodded. "One team gets a head start to organize an ambush. Then my men walk down the road, trying to anticipate."

"What do the shoot, blanks?"

"Paint pellets," said the man, pointing to the spots on his T-shirt. "The goggles are to protect their eyes." He pointed to a cluster of men whose goggles hung around their necks.

"What about you?"

"I'm the judge." He pointed to the lettering on his T-shirt. "I walk in the back. Usually I don't get shot,

but someone got funny.”

“Would it be safe for me to walk on up?” Joe nodded past the congregated men.

“Sure.” The judge grinned. “We don’t usually shoot civilians.”

Joe made his way through the crowd. The men parted respectfully for him. He thought with enjoyment about how he would tell the story to Frannie. In a way he wanted to stop and watch, maybe walk with the judge. But in another way he wanted to get on up the mountain before all the young men did. He began to move faster as if he were racing them.

Soon he could no longer hear their shouts and laughter, and though dust coated the brush beside the road, the air itself was cool and refreshing. He took a deep breath and congratulated himself for gaining distance on the young men so quickly. Maybe he hadn’t lost a certain athletic spirit after all. He’d heard of men just a little younger than himself winning marathons. His back couldn’t take the punishment of jogging, but there might be some other way to make his mark. He saw himself in the winner’s circle, his legs firm and muscular, head bowed to receive a medallion. Frannie stood to one side, pride bringing the blood to her cheeks so that her skin was pink and beautiful.

When he heard the report of a gun, he stopped. There was a crashing in the brush, and he yelled, “Civilian, I’m a civilian!” A deer leaped into the road in front of him, a blue paint spot over its heart, panting, wild-eyed, and was gone. He heard men’s voices and laughter.

“Come out of there!” Joe yelled. “Goddamnit, come on out!”

Two young men dressed in camouflage emerged from the woods, their faces painted black. They pointed their guns at Joe, but he stood stubbornly with his

arms to his sides. “You’re not here to scare the wildlife.”

“We’re taking you hostage, sir,” the shorter man said apologetically.

The other man, taller, and with a broad face that might have looked innocent had it not been blackened for the game, spat tobacco juice. “Sure would hate to see that nice shirt all splattered with paint.”

“Just be careful around his head, Mitchell. He doesn’t have goggles.”

“This is against the rules,” Joe said, “Your judge told me. And what do you mean by scaring that deer? It—”

“Is he talking about Wally?” The tall one grinned. “Can you believe this guy?” The shorter man was staring at Joe and didn’t respond. “I said, can you believe him, Saunders?”

“It’s got to be Wally,” Saunders said without turning to Mitchell. His blue eyes looked oddly albino against the black face paint. To Joe he said, “Wally wears that T-shirt as a joke. Once we get going, we try to play this game just like we would if there were a real war. How do we know you’re not a spy? Even if you aren’t, we have to ask ourselves what value you might have. We won’t know that unless we take you for ransom. Maybe we could get some of our POWs back.”

“Like Wally,” Mitchell said.

Joe sighed, but he was beginning to get interested in the game. It was certainly better than reading his junk mail. “How long will this take?” he asked, glancing at his watch.

“Wars aren’t timed,” Saunders said. “We try to be faithful to that.”

“And if I don’t cooperate?”

“I’m sorry, but we’ll have to waste you.”

“Waste me?”

“Boom, boom,” Mitchell said, pointing his rifle at

Joe's heart.

"Son of a bitch," Joe said, cheerfully.

They prodded him into the woods with their rifles and walked to a clearing surrounded by dense brush.

"What now?" Joe asked.

"I'm afraid we'll have to tie you up," the shorter man said. He took some rope from his fanny pack.

"Hold on," Joe said, getting worried. "I'm an old man with back trouble. You boys skip this part and I'll sit here quietly."

"What position would be most comfortable for you, sir?"

"Did you hear me?"

"It's a goddamn jungle out there," Mitchell said. "War." He put a new wad of chew under his lips. "Can't trust nobody."

"Not even you," Saunders said to Joe. "If you hadn't trusted Wally, you wouldn't be here now."

"I didn't know the rules," Joe said.

"You've got to read between the lines, old man," Mitchell said.

"Our commander says if there's an aggressor somewhere in the world then we're all threatened," Saunders explained.

Joe thought back to his mugging. If these young men had been present, he might have a healthy spine today.

"We have to be prepared as realistically as possible for the day we meet the enemy," Saunders said.

"Do I look like your enemy?" Joe asked.

Saunders looked at him critically. "You could be."

"I thought this was a game," Joe said. "Tying me up would be real torture. You don't realize how bad my back is."

"How do you sleep?" Saunders asked.

"Flat on my back," Joe said. "On a good, firm mat-

ress. And even then, getting up is a chore."

Saunders began to clear a section of dirt next to a fallen log. He took the butt of his rifle and scraped the dirt until it was level. "Lie down here," he said to Joe, "just like you would if you were sleeping."

Mitchell laughed.

"No," Joe said. "This has gone far enough."

Mitchell raised his rifle, but Saunders put a hand on the barrel, pushing it down. "I'm sorry about this. I really don't think we'll be more than thirty minutes. It would look pretty stupid if we cut a deal to get our POWs back and couldn't make good on the trade. Even if you were here when we got back our commander would chew us if we didn't secure you. He wouldn't want us to trust an unknown quantity."

"One half hour?" Joe asked. "Thirty minutes?"

Saunders nodded.

Joe sighed. "Well, tie me loosely." He pointed a finger at Saunders. "And don't forget. I'm doing you a favor."

He lay down on the dirt. "Got anything for a pillow?"

Saunders put down his rifle, pulled off his camouflage shirt and then the T-shirt beneath it. The sight of his pale chest embarrassed Joe, who glanced away.

"You can use this," Saunders said.

The shirt smelled of sweat, but Joe rolled it up to support his head. At least no one would say he was a bad sport.

They tied his hands and feet. Saunders was careful to ask whether the ropes chafed him, and adjusted them accordingly.

"Adios," he said, saluting before he and Mitchell disappeared into the woods.

Joe listened to the branches cracking under the boy's feet, marking the direction of their movement. Insects

hummed in the still woods. He felt silly. All this to keep from being spattered with paint. Still, there was nothing funny about having a rifle pointed at his heart. The boys had played their parts convincingly.

He was grateful that he hadn't had to go to war. A touch of asthma had kept him from joining the service, but boys he'd grown up with had died, some in World War II, others in Korea, even one or two in Vietnam. A younger cousin came back whole from Vietnam, but couldn't sleep without having nightmares; Joe's aunts had spoken of finding the sheets soaked through with her son's night sweats during the coldest of Pennsylvania winters. Given what Joe had missed, he supposed thirty minutes wouldn't be too great a sacrifice for the young men being trained in his country's defense. Besides, it was kind of exciting, like playing hide-and-seek as a youngster.

An insect crawled under his collar, and he lifted his tied wrists to brush it off. According to his watch, five minutes had passed. The needles of pines brushed the blue sky overhead, their cones dangling like ripe fruit. There was no wind, and the spot where Joe lay was entirely shaded except for a patch of sunlight across his legs which felt good. He closed his eyes.

In his dream, people whispered to him, but he couldn't make out the words. The people in the dream (his high school PE teacher? his father? he could barely make them out—) began to pour sand over him, lightly at first, then in bucketloads he knew would eventually smother him. The sand tickled and burned. He tried to make himself heard, forming sounds in the back of his throat.

The sounds woke him. Ants crawled along his arms and neck, tickling and occasionally biting him. He sat up and rubbed himself frantically against the fallen log. The wind had picked up, blowing smoke from the far-

away fires over the sun. An hour had passed. Joe considered the knot that bound his hands. His mouth felt hot. He spotted a sharp rock some distance away, stood gingerly, feeling the pain travel up his back, and hopped over to the rock, his spine jarring with the movement. At times the pain forced him to stop and rest. Finally he knelt beside the rock and worked the rope against it until it began to fray. He sawed doggedly. The rope came loose. He chafed his wrists and untied his ankles. He felt a little sorry for the boys, but they hadn't held up their end of the bargain. Maybe they'd been captured themselves.

He started back for the road, thinking of dinner and a hot bath. His back hurt from the effort of hopping and bending over the rock. He kept to the side of the road, ducking from bush to bush so the patrols wouldn't take him. He had to crouch behind a tree when one of them went by, a group of seven, moving quietly in formation. Joe's heart beat fast.

After they passed without seeing him, Joe gained more confidence. He began to walk faster. It was late afternoon. If he wasn't home when Frannie got there, she would worry. He pictured her going from room to room in their house, calling his name even though she would see the Pontiac was gone. After awhile she would call the police and the hospital.

If this were a real war, the soldiers would take his car, and he might never be found. He'd have to escape across the border, maybe go to Canada, living on wild roots and berries as the Indians had. At least this wasn't happening in the dead of winter as it was for the Nez Perce, pushed further and further from their homes. The white invaders—cavalrymen—had probably been boys little older than these.

It was difficult to move soundlessly in the dry woods. The crackle of dead leaves and branches made Joe anx-

ious. Normally, he walked with his spine straight, coming down heavily on his heels. Now he led with his toes and silently cursed his aching back.

Voices caused him to crouch behind a tree again, and he gritted his teeth against the burning sensation that traveled down his spine, radiating outward to his arms and upward to his neck. The voices drifted down from the direction he'd come.

"He'll be heading for his car," the voice said.

He heard a rustling sound and saw a strange soldier poking his rifle into the brush by the road.

"Yablonsky!" a familiar voice called. "Come on out! We've got your car surrounded anyway." Saunders emerged from around a curve in the road.

Joe hadn't told him his name they must have broken into his car and read it on something in the glovebox. The game, Joe decided, had gone on long enough, especially if the Pontiac was threatened. He was angry and tired. He came out from behind the tree with his hands up. "So shoot me. You said thirty minutes. I waited an hour. If I don't get home soon, my wife—"

"Shut up, sir." Saunders lifted his rifle. "The war's not over."

Mitchell came around the bend and guffawed. "Shoot the bastard."

"I tell you, I'm too old for this. If you boys want to go on playing, go ahead, but don't force innocent bystanders to be part of this. Now I've got to go home. My wife will be worried."

"The thing is, sir," Saunders said, "I can't vouch for your safety if you decide to go. Some of them have real bullets. They're not supposed to, but they do."

Joe stared at him, lowering his arms. "Young man, you have a strange sense of humor. I'm telling you, I'm sick and tired of this."

Saunders tucked the rifle under his arm and pulled a

pistol from his belt. He spun the chamber, shook out a bullet and tossed it to Joe. "I'm not kidding, sir."

"Who's in charge here, anyway?" Joe shouted. "Does your commander know you boys have bullets?"

Saunders didn't answer.

"What do you think you're doing up here?" Joe asked. "What do you think you're fighting for?" Aren't you supposed to make it safe for a man to walk wherever he wants?"

Mitchell laughed, and two of the soldiers Joe didn't know shifted toward one another, smiling.

"We're just playing, sir," Saunders said. "But we take winning pretty seriously."

"Your commander's going to take it seriously when he hears what you've been up to."

"You're making it imperative that we keep you here."

"We could turn him into coyote bait," Mitchell said.

Joe appealed to the other two soldiers who stood off to the side, watching. "Don't you boys know how much trouble you could get into? Threatening a civilian with paint pellets is bad enough, but real ammunition could land you in jail. Being ROTC doesn't excuse you from the law."

"Who told you we were ROTC?" Saunders asked.

Joe looked at them more closely. He'd thought they were all college age, eighteen or so, but maybe it was just the uniform.

"If you're not ROTC, what are you?"

"We're just boys, sir. Preparing ourselves for war."

"What war?"

"There's always war."

Beneath the black paint, Saunders face was fresh and earnest. He could be any local farmer's son.

"Where'd you get your weapons?"

"I can't tell you that"

Joe imagined grain silos full of automatic rifles and

explosives. He'd heard of a used car salesman in Idaho Falls who'd bought scraps from a nuclear facility—scraps enough, it turned out, to build several atomic bombs. Frannie'd been very upset. What if the so-called scraps had fallen into the wrong hands? She said they ought to write letters of protest to their senator, let him know how they felt about what the government called its "indiscretion," but Joe didn't see how it would help.

"We can't let the son of a bitch go now," Mitchell said. He moved toward Joe threateningly.

Joe still found himself unable to believe the boys weren't play-acting. He was only a few hours from home. Frannie was wrapping things up at the lawyer's office. Toys were strewn across front lawns, and soon parents would sit exhausted in front of their televisions. As the sun sank, sprinklers would come on in Joe's neighborhood.

"I'm going home now," Joe said. He turned his back on the soldiers and began to walk down the hill.

"Yablonsky," Saunders said. "That's Jewish isn't it?"

"Polish," Joe offered over his shoulder. He felt a warning chill prickling his scalp and stopped. "Who the hell are you?"

Saunders smiled.

"Who's your commander?"

Saunders shook his head. "Go on." He nodded down the hill. "You won't get far."

"What's the damn hold-up?" Mitchell asked. "Why not get him now?"

Saunders turned to Mitchell. "I say let him go on home. What's he going to do? Call the cops? They'd think it was all an old man's nightmare. Isn't that right Yablonsky? What would you think?"

"Sorry bastard," Mitchell said. "He wouldn't think nothing as long as his own ass was comfy-cozy."

"You know where he lives," Saunders said to Mitchell. "And now he knows you know, and he knows if he talks about us, we'll be coming after him."

"Slimy Pollack," Mitchell said. He fired a paint pellet at the ground in front of Joe. Joe backed away slowly, then turned and ran.

"You're dead, Yablonsky!" Mitchell yelled.

A contingent of men came at him up the hill. Joe's chest burned. He dropped to his knees, panting. When the soldiers took him by the arms he looked into their faces. He'd seen all of them before, in the photographs of uniformed young men on the pianos and buffets of retired friends, in the old movies of boys marching happily toward war. They were faces full of power and certainty, the excitement of conquest, faces which probably folded in on themselves from boredom when they got home.

In the distance, he heard a shot, and it made him think of the volley fired over his veteran cousin's grave, the only other close, live gunfire he'd ever heard. The mournful sound of "Taps" and the regular, inevitable rhythm of the soldiers marching in formation from the grave had moved him profoundly. But now the way the boys operated together, dragging him back up the hill toward Saunders, swarming through the woods, made him think of millions of tiny spiders bursting from their eggs, nests of rattlers awakening in their pits, maggots burrowing blindly into carcasses.

The soldiers brought him up to face Saunders. Joe breathed deeply, trying to calm down. "All right. You boys have just got carried away. I'll go home and forget about it. Okay?"

"Take him to his car," Saunders said.

"What the hell," Mitchell grabbed Saunders arm. "You're not going to let him go?"

Saunders didn't answer. The others obeyed him. Joe

walked between the two soldiers who held his arms.

"I don't have to listen to you," Mitchell said to Saunders. The boys were behind Joe now, but he heard the sound of scuffling, a few loud thuds, and a moan. The soldiers kept Joe moving. Before long he saw his car. One door stood open. Otherwise it looked all right. They must have jimmed the door open gently. With relief, he noticed the interior light was on. The battery was probably still okay. In a few seconds he'd be driving down the road toward home. He longed to reach into his pocket to feel his keys—in a sudden panic was afraid they might have fallen out of his pocket when he was tied up—but the soldiers still had a tight hold on each of his arms.

They stopped in front of the car and turned slightly to look behind them, awaiting further instructions. Saunders stood a few yards back and up the hill with his legs apart. There was no sign of Mitchell.

"You won't regret this," Joe said.

"I know," Saunders answered.

"I won't say anything to anyone."

"No, I expect you won't."

The soldiers still held onto Joe's arms. "They can let go now. I won't even tell my wife."

Saunders nodded at the soldiers, and they released Joe, who stood feeling dazed for a moment, rubbing his arms, then dug in his pocket and closed his fingers gratefully around his keys. He got into the car and started the engine. The soldiers moved out of the road as he turned the car around. He couldn't believe his luck. They must be ROTC after all, and afraid he might get them into trouble. They must have been playing with him all along.

Joe stopped the car and looked back at Saunders, who still stood on the hilltop, his legs apart. "You really had me going there for awhile."

Saunders smiled and waved.

Joe put the car in gear and coasted down the mountain, touching the brake occasionally as he headed the curves. He felt oddly elated. Though the car bumped over ruts in the road, he didn't feel the same electric jolts of pain in his back as he had on the way up. The walk must have done him good, despite the long spell on the hard ground, the soldiers' jerking on his arms, and his own dodging and running through the woods. Maybe he was in better shape than he thought. Maybe he'd make it into some winners' circle after all. Those boys were pretty good, he thought chuckling to himself; they'd been able to do what none of the doctors, even in Seattle, thought possible, making Joe bend in ways he refused at the therapist's. He wished he could tell Frannie about it, but he'd made his promise. In a way he wished he could go back up the mountain another day and get in on the game. Next time he wouldn't get caught. Next time he'd. . . but when he rounded the hairpin curve and started down the steep grade, there was someone next to the road—a boy who looked like Mitchell pointing a pistol at the car. Joe jerked the car away from Mitchell's side of the road. It bumped a tree trunk and sent a slide of rocks down the slope. Joe glanced in the rearview mirror and saw Mitchell still aiming the pistol. He turned the wheel and gunned the engine, moving down in his seat so his head wouldn't present a target. Something in his back caught and locked. He cried out, gripping the wheel, his teeth clamped together.