

J.A. Bernstein

The Works

I

In the woods, before dark, we used to come upon a great pin oak, its leaves a flaming red. Perhaps it was seasonal, but I only recall it as red, and its trunk spanned the width of a car. Rob Muller, who was ten and attended Lake Michigan Catholic, walked with a bowlegged strut and carried a slingshot, a homemade contraption of leather and wire. His braces gleamed with the sun, and what little of it streamed down through that dappled canopy. Tim Zilke, who was nine, held the bomb, a glowing, plastic Diet Rite bottle filled to the stem with The Works, a potent drain opener. I carried the tin foil—large, ragged chunks, balled and crushed in my palms, cold against the day’s dying sun, which we could vaguely descry southwestward, over the mottled pines.

Smoky, Tim’s cat, a lime-eyed Bengal, flittered in and out of the dust kicked up by our shoes. All of us wore Pumps that summer, though Tim’s were the best: slick, royal blue, and recently endorsed by Joe Dumars, he of Pistons’ acclaim.

The bark on this tree was striated, huge. It clawed at your hands. In order to climb it, you had to dig your heels in lengthwise and heave yourself up by the wrists, seizing any branch or appendage you could find. The trunk V’d about twenty feet up, though at the time it seemed like forty. A few black-throated warblers dipped and sprang from the boughs, squeaking their *tsips*. Stragglers, perhaps, heading south.

“I ain’t seen him,” Rob shouted, referring to Old Man Kawasaki, who owned the green house up the hill. “But if Rusty [his dog] comes, I’ll shoot it.” He gave the slingshot a twang.

Beneath him, Smoky gazed up in delight, perhaps entranced by the warblers, or him.

The plan—to the extent any third- or fourth-graders have a plan—was to set a trap for Kawasaki, and ideally his dog, who had once chased Tim off his property and, if rumor was to be believed, had once beheaded a cat. A mangled carcass was found on the beach about half-a-click west of his property. Tim suspected it was “Wiccans,” whatever that meant, but Rob was sure it had to be the “Old Jap.”

Only coming to the area on weekends, where my parents had a home—we lived year-round in Chicago, about ninety miles west—I wasn’t sure what to suspect, but, as the resident city-boy and the youngest by a year, I obviously deferred to them. This is also why I carried the foil.

“We’re gonna have to do it by the pits,” Rob shouted, referring to a sandy embankment, adjacent to a grove of white cedars. Then he licked his finger and raised it. Wind’s outta the west.”

Rob’s calculations were never made terribly apparent to us, nor did they need to be. After all, he played point guard on LMC’s team. But one could vaguely induce he intended to start a small fire and, luring the evil figure, detonate our bomb.

“Me and Josh’ll go. Tim, you stay and give watch.” Rob seized the bottle from Tim’s prying hands, and we scuttled down out of the tree. “You see any signs of him, you give the signal,” which was a birdcall those two could make.

I followed Rob’s wide, bowlegged walk over the leaves and thorns, stepping on wild geraniums and huge ostrich ferns, whose fiddleheads his mom liked to cook. (They tasted like soap, Rob said.) Yellow spicebush drooped in the light, its berry clusters oddly cocooned, almost like clams, and the smell was overwhelmingly resinous, though that might have been the Works bomb he held. Suddenly Rob stopped and surveyed the sparkling groves.

“Thought I heard intruders,” he said. There were rumors that the Johnson twins, who lived a mile north, liked to make inroads down here.

He lowered his Tigers hat, folding the brim. Then he carried on, slingshot and bottle in hand.

II

As a chemical reaction, the Works bomb was fairly straightforward. Hydrochloric acid reacted with aluminum to produce a salt called aluminum chloride—in itself not terribly interesting—and copious amounts of hydrogen gas. It was the gas, of course, that we sought, since it built up inside the sealed bottle, creating a pressure bomb. When it detonated—and it would—the sound could be heard almost as far as Detroit.

We had tried it on a couple of occasions previously and nearly severed a hand. This time, feeling more adept, like infantry sappers, we set out under the brush, careful not to leave any prints. This wasn’t terribly difficult, since the sand shifted underfoot and blew back again in the wind, rustled by the swaying dune grasses—wild rye, marram, and brome. Beneath, a few wild grapes still clung to their vines, and a rusting front-loader slumped beside a medley of boards, mostly old two-by-fours, the occasional pallet. Kawasaki had construction in mind.

What we didn't know, but would later find out, is that he was ceding this land to a housing development, and soon these woods would be cleared, giving way to a smattering of gabled wood homes, not unlike the one my parents had bought.

Rob crouched in the sand, an excavated pocket, chewing a jimsonweed leaf. His eyes glittered faintly. He struck a match, cupping the flame with his palm. "Help me with the kindling."

"What?"

"You know, get me some twigs."

I scurried off towards the grove, the towering cedars, whose dampness tingled my skin. The earth turned chalkier, soft underfoot, the air redolent of pine. We had built an elevated fort here—rather, they had constructed it, perhaps with their dads—though I couldn't find it, circling in and out of the trees, their slanted bows glowing with cones.

I searched for twigs but only found pokeweed, puccoon. The violet stalks clung to my hands, which were already burdened with foil. I wanted to impress them, my friends, since I didn't really have any friends in Chicago, nor did I know these two. But they had reached the top level of *Zelda II*, and their Pumps were incredibly cool.

Overhead the sky hummed—filled with Caspian terns—and I could smell distant smoke, which commingled with the scent of the trees. It reminded me of Tim's parents' bathroom, where strange candles burned and oils lingered in jars. I crouched with my tinfoil, closing my eyes, inhaling the camphorous scent.

"The fuck's my wood?" Rob shouted, and I returned with my vines.

III

Years later, I'd be deployed overseas, serving in an infantry regiment, where our duty was to round people up, occasionally arrest them, though more often avoid getting shot. My own experiences with combat were minimal, though a couple in my battalion were killed. Strangely, I recall almost nothing of my service, apart from some voices and scents.

I recall the sound of a guitar—a deep strumming sound—the night we completed our training and were about to ship out to the line. A friend, or a platoonmate anyways, plucked the strings of his acoustic, while outside our tent the dark-amber sky gelled. The song was by Radiohead—"Street Spirit (Fade Out)"—and I guess I had heard it before, though never with any resonance, never with any meaning or thought. I suppose it occurred to me then, lying on my bunk, in what was probably the first free moment we'd had, that at least a couple people would die. Like all soldiers, I was acutely consciously of this and yet,

superficially at least, incapable of saying a word, of mouthing the slightest regret. U., who would later become a naval commando, continued strumming his chords.

*Rows of houses, all bearing down on me
I can feel their blue hands touching me*

He sang the words gruffly, his eyes darkly fixed on the ground. The second recollection, a smell, is most viscerally associated in my mind with the aftereffects of a fire. It was started by a bomb in a Middle Eastern city, which claimed a young soldier's life. The perpetrator was not caught. It detonated inside a small truck, one filled with produce, and grapefruits littered the street. I never saw the blood or the body, though I recall that horrible scent.

And it was this scent, I fear, that I smelled in the woods then, seventeen years prior to the bomb. Racing back, tracing the smoke, I found Rob crouched beside an enormous conflagration. Yellow steam funneled out of the vines, circled by a gauzy haze.

"This'll get his attention." Rob uncapped the bottle. "Tin foil?"

"Check."

We knelt beside a stand of dune willow. Brown bats circled far overhead; they had probably slept in the trees. The sky lightened gently, reflecting our smoke and the afterglow of the sun. "Smells like dynamite," said Rob, fiendishly smiling, mopping his brow with his sleeve. He wore a plaid flannel and deeply starched jeans, which his mother, in spite of their poverty, or perhaps, looking back, on account of it, invariably, rigorously cleaned.

"Help me fan it," he shouted, through enveloping steam. The place was getting acrid and hot. The smell was overwhelming: burnt licorice, salt.

"We have to get outta here."

"Don't be a pussy," he said.

"I'm not."

That's when we heard the call—what sounded like a hyena but was meant to mimic a bird. Old Man K. was on his way.

"Run," Rob said, eying the cedars.

I followed him, diving into the grove. Fortunately, the sand pit was bordered by a clearing of gravel and mud. The fire wasn't spreading, though its smoke was probably visible for at least a mile around. Rob's plan worked, it had seemed.

We thought we heard barking—that might have been Tim—and a shuffling of feet through the leaves, beyond an embankment. "Shit," Rob whispered. "Stay down."

I knelt with my chin to the earth. The air in this grove had grown cold, even with the modest conflagration beneath us. A quiet wind nipped through the trees.

“Here he comes. Give me the foil.”

I didn't want to pass it. Uncertain of what would occur, I clutched the balls in my hands.

“Give me it,” he shouted, eyeing me redly. Then he seized the foil from my hands and stuffed them in through the neck. His eyes glistened brightly, lighted by the sweltering fire, which raged about thirty feet down.

“Shit, where's Tim?” Rob asked, as if I would know. “He's gotta get outta there.”

Whether this was because the fire could spread, or others could detect him, was not immediately clear.

We heard a dog yapping—a powerful one, it seemed, larger than the one K. had owned. Then a figure emerged through the brush, backlit brightly, like the grim reaper himself on that perch. He was carrying a flashlight, accompanied, it seemed, by a friend.

“Give me this,” said Rob, retrieving some foil I had dropped. Then he capped the bottle and shook it convulsively, his eyes that raging red. At first nothing happened. A quiet foam rose, and the bottle gleamed in his hands. “You wanna throw it?” Rob asked.

“No,” I would have said, had I had the courage to speak. Instead, I just watched him, pursing my lips, inhaling the welter of smells. I thought of *Zelda II*, the land of Hyrule, where the blob-looking enemies lurked, and the myriad passages and tiny black doors and boulders and pebbles and lakes, and how entrancing it all was, and frightening, and strange, and how I'd never rise to find the Great Palace or locate The Princess herself.

I took the bottle, and I threw it off towards the woods, as far as I could fling it, opposite the approaching men.

“What the fuck?” Rob shouted.

Heads turned below, alerted to our place in the grove.

“Come on, run.”

Then we took off sprinting, over more dunes and Indiangrass and huge butterfly flowers in bloom, their deep lilac scents following us both as we ran.

IV

In the army, the first thing you learn about combat, to the extent you learn anything at all, is that it never really goes as planned. The whole point of training—the pushups, the drills, the endless regimentation, the sweat—is to instill in you a sense of preparedness, a discipline for when the inevitable chaos ensues.

“I don’t know,” I told my father, back at home, when he asked me where I had been, why I hadn’t come for dinner—the table was set, the grilled flank steak left on my plate, soggy with its juices now, rotting—and why my hands were scraped. I guess I had cut them on the vines.

“Well, this isn’t forgiv—”

It was then, of course, that it blew. The sound—like a shattering of glass, the crunching of steel, and the crashing of plates all in one—nearly tore through the windows, shaking the house where we stood.

To this day, I have heard LAW rockets firing, C4 explosives, even a live RPG, but I have never, in my thirty-eight years of existence, encountered anything so loud. It’s possible, of course, that memory distorts things, and childhood most of all.

But I recall the explosion in the army—on that damp eastern street, the pavement slick with its rain—and the way the world shook then—the macadam, walls—and I think it was nothing at all.

As for what happened to Old Man Kawasaki, Rob, Tim, Smoky, the rest, I don’t honestly know. I suppose we were punished. But by whom, or when, I can’t say. I do know I wasn’t allowed to play with those friends for at least a few weeks, and I never saw Smoky again.

As for the service, well, I went through it scared and came out of it no more relieved. To this day, I can still hear the whistles, the catcalls and hoots, as my company left for patrols. And I can still smell the burning—charred fruit, and the pines: these smells and sounds that won’t leave.