

Boozer

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Bayonet practice is one of those things that nobody wants to do. But you'd better not let one of the DIs (Drill Instructors) hear you badmouthing it. They don't care for recruits having opinions. Hell, they don't care for recruits, period. We'd been at it for half an hour or so and you could feel the pervasive tension. Everyone was ready to call it quits, except for the instructor.

"OK, girls, I've learned from past experience that you're too stupid to catch on. So, just to clarify things,—how do you like that word, *clarify*, pretty fuckin' spiffy, huh?—that thing on the end of your rifle is a bayonet. It's sharp, it's hard, and what do we use it for, children?"

"Kill. Kill. Kill."

"I can't hear you."

"KILL! KILL! KILL!"

"That's more like it. Now give me a jab."

We thrust the bayonets forward in a jabbing motion. Then, as we recover, the DI hollars, "Jab!" and we repeat the movement. I look at Boozer. He is right across from me in another line that forms one of the sides of our square surrounding the central platform. The DI is standing in the middle. Damn, Boozer is a mean-looking son of a bitch. He's huge, weighing in at two-eighty and standing six-four. He holds his rifle with one hand as he runs his other paw through his flaming red hair. I am a little jealous of him. No doubt about it: he looks like a Marine. Bayonet practice ends as I mull these things over. Boozer and I trudge to the barracks.

"I am a Marine," I thought. I also thought I was a bad actor. In reality, I am about as dangerous as Mother Teresa. Like a lot of guys, I fell for the Corps'

propaganda routine and was convinced that they would turn me into a lethal killing machine that would put Arnold Schwarzenegger to shame. I mean, look at the names given to Marines over the years: Devil Dogs, Leathernecks, Gyrenes, etc. Many monikers are simply unprintable. The Corps is not supposed to be a place for sissies; it is dedicated to the purveyance of violence, to the perfection of combat techniques. The Marines instill in their ranks esprit de corps. The goal is for each recruit to become a skilled warrior. At least, that's the way it's supposed to work. Unfortunately, even after basic training, I'm still the same old afraid-of-the-dark, look-under-the-bed-for-the-boogey-man, I-want-my-mommy sucker that I had been in high school. I am also still as skinny as a scarecrow with big ears. At six-foot-two, I could handle two hundred pounds easily, but the closest I come is my miserable one fifty. Boozer tells me one day that I look like a fuckin' trophy. It's obvious that members of such an organization are bound to be what might be called "loco" or classified as "menaces to society." Jerry Boozer falls into either of these categories.

Boozer and I are privates, the lowest rank the Corps offers. I have been in for only six months and I'm due to be promoted to Private First Class at any time. Boozer, however, has been on active duty for over two years. He has been promoted several times and then busted back down for fighting. I think it's pretty ironic: the Corps wants its Marines to be tough but, when they indulge in violence, they are punished. Boozer just can't resist a good fight. Not only can he not resist it, he loves it. He told me after I got to know him that he could smell a fight. If there is anyone who is tougher, I've never met him.

After work you can find him out behind the tank park honing his killing skills. This is the place where all the martial arts experts and wannabes meet to practice judo, karate, hand-to-hand combat, and God knows what else. Boozer really has a taste for this stuff, and he knows various and sundry ways to break any bone in your body. The edges of his hands are calloused from rubbing, scraping, and banging on rough surfaces; his skin is as tough as No. 40 sandpaper. The ends of

his fingers are damn near square from being rammed into trees. And, oh yeah, he is fast. He can run a hundred yards in ten seconds and move laterally with unbelievable quickness. I'm sure you get the picture. Of course, there are various jokes when the subject of Boozer comes up. One time, a guy came in the barracks looking for him and asked, "Hey, where does Boozer sleep?"

The answer came back, "Any place he wants to."

When somebody would ask, "Has anybody seen Boozer?"

The reply might've been, "No, and I sure as hell hope I don't."

One Friday evening I am lying on my bunk trying to decide if I should go over to the Slop Chute (the base bar) and get a couple of beers. Boozer walks up to my bunk.

"Hey, Oscar, you doing anything tomorrow?"

I forgot to mention that Boozer has taken a shine to me for some reason, and I'm not quite certain how I feel about it. I'm a little leery about being around him too much. He was recently busted down in rank for breaking a guy's collar bone. The only reason his punishment was relatively light is because an officer who witnessed the altercation said the other guy had started it. I have visions of Boozer going off and disassembling parts of my body, which isn't much, but it is all I have.

Boozer explains he wants me to go into Jacksonville with him. He is going to trade his car, which I have never seen, for a great-looking, 2002 Grand Am he spotted on a car lot. For some reason, he asks if I still have a little set of tools he saw me with. When I ask him why, he gets down to the nitty-gritty. He wants to use my mechanical capabilities. Boozer has larceny in his heart and his plan involves me being the larcener. In other words, since he knows I can fix (or unfix, as the case may be) anything mechanical, he wants to use my services to pull a fast one on the guy at the car lot.

At first I say, "Absolutely not, my tastes don't run in the direction of getting put in jail." But Boozer is a pretty persuasive guy and I eventually agree. As we

are talking, I have the old medulla working overtime. I can use Boozer to my advantage. Hey, my momma didn't raise a fool. I want on Boozer's good side. I'm talking about self-preservation. Guys like me need guys like Boozer. What if one of the local bad boys decides he wants a piece of my ass? There are some real bad actors around this place. Then, of course, there is the other motive: I can't resist the opportunity of showing off my abilities with a set of tools. I honed these skills in high school by tinkering around with cars in my hometown.

The plan is kind of iffy. According to Boozer, if all systems aren't go, we simply abort. Well, he doesn't exactly say abort. Hell, he doesn't even know what abort means. What he really says is, if we have to, we can call the whole fucking deal off. I figure I can always bail out if I see that it isn't going to work. So, we agree to meet at eleven the next morning in front of the mess hall.

I arrive on time and stand around for about ten minutes. As I mentioned, I have never seen Boozer's car; I had forgotten to ask him what it looked like. The only thing I see is a God-awful looking vehicle parked about a hundred feet down the curb with colored splotches all over the body.

I go inside the mess hall and look around. No Boozer. I walk back outside and I hear my name being called. It's Boozer in the old rattletrap I had seen a few minutes before, head hanging out the driver's side window. As I approach, I'm amazed at how ugly and junky it looks. If a person had attempted to construct the freakiest automobile imaginable, it would not outshine the abomination I beheld.

It doesn't have any specific color. Rather, it's an outrageous mélange of all the hues in the spectrum. Brown blobs overlap red, orange, and yellow spots; blue smears coalesce into a sickening, filthy tinge. It looks like a thousand condors with diarrhea have flown over and deposited their filth onto a rusted canvas. I notice that the chassis has a twisted look, as if the entire under carriage has been screwed out of shape by a pair of giant hands. As I get closer, Boozer tells me to climb in a window; none of the doors will open. I walk around and squiggle in through the front passenger window.

Believe it or not, the interior looks as bad as the rest of the miscarriage. Smack dab in the middle of the dash is a large hole with a couple of wires hanging out, reminders of a long gone radio.

Boozer pulls away and heads in the general direction of the main gate. He asks me if I brought the tools, and I pat my pocket to let him know I have. This elicits a huge grin and I feel like the plot is thickening. There is a mysterious leer on Boozer's mug. He's already an evil-looking sucker and now he appears downright sinister.

Surprisingly, the old clunker has a decent engine and transmission. As far as I'm concerned, the working parts are doing what they are supposed to do. I can't imagine anyone giving him any money for this pile of festered metal, but what do I know about car deals? I notice pedestrians stopping and gawking. I'm sure they're trying to figure out what they are looking at. I am totally embarrassed, but Boozer's whistling a tune and seems totally unconcerned.

It feels as if the rear end is getting ready to swing around and overtake the front part of the car. I feel a draft inside my pants leg. I look down and spy an elongated hole in the floorboard. The ceiling liner is loose and is rubbing along the top of my head. On top of all this my seat is moving and when we come to a stop sign I have to brace with my feet to avoid sliding forward.

Boozer still hasn't said a word as we pull up to the base's main gate. There are four guards on duty, and as we come to a halt, they are all discussing our strange contraption. One of them asks:

"Ok, Boozer, how in the hell did you get permission to bring that pile of crap on the base?"

"The Sarge there said it was all right." He nods toward a beefy, red-faced sergeant, standing by the door to the guard house.

"Yeah, yeah, I told him that it was okay," says the sergeant.

A skinny sentry says, "Damn, he must really have something on you, Sarge."

“Yeah, never mind that. Boozer, get the hell out of here and don’t ever let me see that whatever you call it around here again.” I figure, like everyone else, the Sarge wants to stay on the good side of Boozer, so he has allowed him to bring the clunker on base.



Boozer gives the guys the victory sign and we’re out of there.

We’re tooling down the highway when Boozer says, “Hey Little Buddy, I got something I been meanin’ to ask you.” He has been referring to me as “Little Buddy.” I didn’t like it much but I figure what the hell. In other words, I’m afraid to ask him not to call me that.

He continues, “I ain’t about to ask nobody else, but I ain’t afraid to ask you cause I know you won’t say nothing about how stupid I am.”

“Yeah, sure, Boozer, anything I can do to help. What’s up?”

“Well, I heard some guys talking the other day about the President, but nobody ever mentioned his name. I got to thinking, ‘Hell, I don’t even know

what his name is.' I mean, I used to know but I forgot. Down in South Alabama on the chicken farm we didn't much care about politics no way. So, who in the hell is it, Little Buddy?"

Boozer has already told me about his upbringing on a chicken farm. He had it tough, and I mean *tough*. His dad was a drunk and his mom slept around. By the time he was twelve Boozer was fighting with older men and running around with his older brother and a bunch of no goods. He told me that joining the Corps was a huge step up for him. This is a little much, though. I know that Boozer is no Phi Beta Kappa but, to not know who the president is, come on.

I start laughing and say, "Ah hell, Boozer I'll bite, what's the joke?" As soon as I spout off I realize that I've made a big mistake. His freckled face becomes as red as his hair. He has a scar on the side of his head about four inches long and probably around a quarter-inch wide. He told me one time that he got it from his brother who had attacked him with a pitchfork. He had been grazed just enough to take away the hair and leave the scar. I know that when he is mad it starts turning color. It is red as a beet and throbbing. I'm not sure what to do. Finally, I stammer, "Yeah, I know what you mean, Boozer. Sometimes we all, for some unknown reason, seem to forget the simplest things. Why, I remember one time in high school I forgot my teacher's name and it was really embarrassing." This is a barefaced lie but I figure it's better than nothing. I finally get out that Obama is President, hoping to pacify him. After a little while, I notice the pitchfork scar has returned back to its original color; he seems to be calming down.

We're on the outskirts of Jacksonville in a strip where bars and car lots are all over the place. We come up to one that has a sign out front that says, "PINKY'S CAR CORRAL." Balloons stream from the antennas of some of the cars and most of the inventory is junk. We pass a powder-blue Grand Am that looks to be in pretty good shape. Boozer's face lights up. "Hot damn, that's it, Oscar. Ain't she a beaut?" I have to admit that it is a nice looking car. We pull up to where everyone is standing and climb out the windows. Boozer squeezes himself out

with agility, considering his size. Of course, all the salesmen are laughing and making fun of Boozer's ride. The ring leader, who I assume is Pinky, hustles our way.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Pinky Thurston and I'm proud to say that I am the owner of the property on which you are now standing. Also, allow me to make the observation that I have never had the experience of beholding a vehicle, shall we say, of such an unusual color or, should I say *colors*? The Thurston family has been known for many years in these parts for their reputable dealings, and from womb to tomb our family members have the blood of car dealers in their veins. I have yet to behold such a sample of car hood as what I see currently before me. Pray tell, what make is it? I see no identifying logos."

Boozer tells him that it is an '83 Olds.

"Yes, of course, I should have known. Yes, *indeed*, now that you mention it I can see that that's *exactly* what it is. I must be slipping in my old age. It's an Olds. Let's see, according to my calculations that would make it twenty-seven years old. Well, gentlemen, since you have come to my humble surroundings. Is there something I can interest you in?"

"Yeah, we're lookin' for a used airplane," Boozer says.

"A what?" Pinky replies.

"What the hell do you think we're interested in? We want to see about buyin' a car."

"Yes, of course, is there any particular one you had in mind?"

"Nah, we'll just look around." And that's exactly what we do. I notice that Boozer is avoiding the Pontiac. I assume that he doesn't want old Pinky to think that he is interested and have Pinky jump up the price. Anyway, after walking around the lot for about twenty minutes and asking some questions about various junkers, we end up at the Grand Am. Boozer asks Pinky what the price is and is informed that it's three thousand dollars. Boozer acts insulted.

“Look, Pinky, I’m talkin’ about how much it would be using my car as a trade in.” Pinky tells him if he took his car it would be four thousand. Then he laughs. But he stops and clears his throat when Boozer gives him a look you might expect from a grizzly bear with a tooth ache. Boozer asks if we could take it for a ride.

“Certainly, allow me to get one of my representatives to accompany you.”

I guess the salesmen are tired of poking fun at Boozer’s junker. When Pinky looks towards the office, they are all out of sight. Boozer tells him that we don’t need any company, and after checking Boozer’s driver’s license, Pinky says that he guesses it will be all right for the two of us to take it for a ride.

We jump in and take off. Boozer is in heaven. He keeps exclaiming, “What a great set of wheels,” asking me if I have ever seen anything like it. He checks out the radio. It works great. We get onto the main highway and Boozer opens it up. It runs like a top. There is a place on the right for cars to pull over. It’s gravel and has a marked off parking place. Boozer pulls in. It’s time to go to work.

Boozer raises the hood. I get my little tool packet out and start loosening some stuff, tinkering around with this and that until I figure it would just run. I finish my sabotage and Boozer closes the hood. As I put my tools back in my pocket, we jump back in and head in the direction of Pinky’s. Man, I can’t believe it is the same ride as the one Boozer drove off the lot. It’s shaking all over and I suspect it might die at any minute. Coughing and sputtering, it limps down the highway. It looks as if the trees and fences are bouncing by.

“Damn, Oscar, I hope you ain’t tore it up,” Boozer said.

I assure him it will be okay. I hope I’m right as I put one hand on the dash to make certain that a giant lurch doesn’t throw me from the seat. Boozer isn’t talking, and one look tells me that he isn’t interested in discussing the situation. I notice that he’s fidgeting around. It’s obvious that he doesn’t want anything to go wrong. He wants this car!

We cripple back into Pinky's and jerk to a halt just down from where the owner is standing, scoping us out in wide-eyed amazement. He walks over as we get out.

"What in the world happened?" He stammers. "It was running fine when you left."

"Yeah, well, I'll tell you what, Mr. Pinky: you ain't dealing with a couple of bums here, ya' know. We know when we're getting fleeced; we know a pile of junk when we see it!" Boozer rails.

Pinky hadn't fallen off the last load of alfalfa, though: "I'll have my mechanic work at Corn's garage over on the bypass work on it. We'll just run it over there and see what the problem is. I'm sure we can get everything straightened out." I gotta say one thing for old Pinky: he makes the best out of a bad situation. I have no doubt that he was suspicious that maybe we are trying to pull one over on him.

Boozer is insistent. He tells Pinky, "Nope, we're outta here. I ain't gonna get took over no damned old car."

That gets Pinky's hackles up. His pinkish complexion is taking on an angry-looking, reddish tint. He's ready for war. "My good sir, I resent your implication. Pinky's is built on a reputation of honesty and trust. As a matter of fact I can't help but have suspicions about what may have happened out on the highway." I notice Boozer's pitch fork scar changing hues to a darker red. *Is he able to make it change colors any time he wants, or is he really getting pissed?* Surely he isn't planning an attack on this small, innocent-looking pixie. I have visions of my ass in the local jail, charged with aiding and abetting a murder.

"Are you accusing us of something?" He asks Pinky.

"No, no, of course not. Tell you what I'm gonna do. Most young men around your age know their way around the workings of an automobile. I'm sure you're no different. How about you give me twenty-five hundred dollars and you can drive it the way it is. I'm sure there's nothing seriously wrong."

The haggling begins; back-and-forth they go. I'm not sure which one was the biggest bull-shitter. When they finally come to an agreement, Boozer is the owner of a 2002 Pontiac Grand Am. Pinky ends up with twenty-two hundred dollars of Boozer's money and the junker.

As soon as we get away from the lot, Boozer starts crowing. I can't say I blame him. He got a good deal. When we get to the wide spot in the road, he pulls over, we get out, and I make the necessary adjustments. In a couple of minutes we are back on the road and she is back to cooing like a pigeon.

Boozer is flying high. No doubt about it: he *is* the man. He turns the radio on full blast.

I'm happy for Boozer and feeling pretty good. I figure I'm on the good side of the meanest son of a bitch at Camp Lejeune, and that ain't bad. Semper Fi.