

The Field

Noland leashed the Brittany one day after work and headed out to the field. It was a surprisingly cool day for August. Cottonwood leaves danced in the crisp evening breeze. The western horizon was ablaze with the setting sun. Feathery cirrus clouds floated slowly across the dome of the sky. Clear of the trestle over Crawford Avenue, Noland released the dog and watched him fly out into the field, leaping in great parabolic leaps through the tall grass, appearing, then disappearing like the rabbits he hoped to startle from their lairs. Soon Noland felt the anxieties of the day melt away under the balm of the overarching sky, the swaying trees, and the unseen presence of hundreds of birds and mammals distributed throughout a beautiful tapestry of grasses and shrubs: a community that spoke to him of natural order and permanence.

All that evaporated with one note: a precursor to a long chain of noise that shredded Noland's pastoral tableau like a chain saw might destroy a framed Cézanne. A pair of teenagers riding dirt bikes tore into view from a slight rise to the west. The cacophonous symphony of their under-muffled machines grated on Noland's already bruised nerves, making his muscles tense and his heart beat harder at the sight of them. He whistled to the dog, reversed his direction and began walking towards home. Fifty yards from where the narrow track intersected the gravelly berm of the railroad tracks, the cyclists overtook him. One raced past not three feet from his left side. The other, a burly rider who looked familiar from an earlier encounter, passed him on his right, barely missing the dog as he cut sharply to the left, crossing the plume of torn grasses and dirt thrown up by his comrade. Noland yelled and shook his fist as they flew past, evoking in response from the last rider the cliché gesture of a single upraised digit. As he watched both riders sail over the tracks and disappear in a southerly direction, he had a gut feeling was that this by no means over.

Brushing divots of dirt and grass from his shirt, he shortened the Brittany's lead to twelve feet, and began working his way along the trail towards the overpass. Instinctively he picked up a length of rusted tie rod he found lying in the weeds and swung it in an arc, taking satisfaction from the heft of it. Soon he could hear the muted rumble of traffic and see the line of sycamores flanking Crawford Avenue. Even though he could still hear bursts of home-like noise from the motorcycles, he began to breathe a little easier and the muscles in his back and neck began to relax.

Just as he prepared to ascend the gravel embankment of the Chicago and Joliet Railroad right of way, the peripheral vision of his right eye picked up the trajectory of one of the bikes as it flew up over the tracks in an arc. The heavy machine slammed into the ground in front of him, pinning the Brittany under the high-fendered front wheel. The dog screamed once, convulsed, then lay still. The cyclist recovered his balance, shot Noland a furious glance, then gunned his bike and tore off through the field. Noland ran to the dog and gently pressed on his rib cage, trying to revive him. His heart sank when he saw the angle of the spine and felt the last spasmodic quiver through the dusty fur. Noland threw his head back and screamed in apoplectic

rage and sorrow as the crackling racket from the motorcycle receded. His vision seemed to narrow until he could see only the rank growth of the field vignетted before him against the dark tree line beyond, could feel the thundering in his heart and taste the suffocating dust.

Sergeant Dawson was down before he could warn him. Noland had seen the rounds striking the close-cropped turf in a tight cluster in front of him seconds before the sniper's next shot hit the marine square between the shoulder blades, sending a little puff of dust off his flak jacket. A Chinese machine gun ensconced in a bamboo and earth reinforced bunker in the tree line across the meadow shredded the heavy air of the Vietnamese piedmont a foot above their heads. Then the stream of green tracers began chewing away at a concrete way-marker near the intersection of the main trail, not three feet from where Corporal Garcia was setting in his fire team. Three marines, not including Dawson, already were down, two of them dying. Noland screamed, "Guns up!" and rolled into a depression beside the trail, motioned for Sergeant Porter, his third squad leader, to position the 3.5-inch rocket launcher on the far side of a stucco shrine and signaled him to fire only on his command. As soon as the second M26 fragmentation grenade left Noland's hand, he screamed, "Fire". The shrubs and grasses behind the rocket launcher disappeared in a cone of smoke and dust that amplified two sharp explosions across the meadow. With satisfaction, Noland saw that the luminous stream of steel from the bunker had ceased.

An ear-shattering staccato roar jolted him back to the present. He turned to see the first rider's companion thirty yards out, bearing down on him at considerable speed. The skinny kid had sunken cheeks, the smear of a goatee and an expression that bordered on fear. Just before the cycle hit him, Noland swung the rusted tie rod in a backhand arc with his right hand, catching the rider square in the Adam's apple. With a puzzled look on his face, the motorcyclist clutched his crushed larynx with his left hand, held on with his right and rode the careening cycle over the embankment until it upended between the rails, throwing a fan of gravel towards the far side.

Noland rolled over and felt his right calf where a two-inch tear at the base of the muscle oozed blood and was beginning to stiffen. Cursing, he raised himself up slowly, testing his weight on the right foot. The pain surged, then settled into a dull ache. Behind him the whine of another dirt bike grew louder, the uneven terrain and the pockets of cool air underlying warm air modulating the sound in a tremulous warble. Holding the tie rod loosely at his side, he turned to face the pudgy teenager as he gunned his Suzuki dirt bike down the track towards him. He dodged the rider's outstretched left leg, then thrust the rod hard into his rib cage, sending youth and machine hurtling into a power pole next to the gravel berm of the railroad tracks. Catapulted forward by the force of the impact, the rider slammed headfirst into the pole, while his bike somersaulted to the right, catching his shoulder by the handlebar and pinning him to the ground. Noland could tell by the angle of the rider's neck that he would not rise again.

He hobbled over to the Brittany and picked him up, cradling him in his arms. Then he began to work his way back along the tracks towards home with the Brittany's lifeless muzzle encrusted with dirt and grass resting on his upper arm and the sharp end of one of the dog's

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shattered ribs working its way through the skin. Despite the destructive disasters of his puppyhood, he had been the best of companions: the one living thing that cared whether or not he came home in the evening. Regardless of the severe punishment he had meted out for accidents, high-spirited shenanigans, or deliberate dismantlings in the townhouse, the dog never harbored a grudge, always acted as if his master was the most important person in the world at the end of the day. And most poignant of all, it was obvious to Noland that the dog trusted him implicitly to keep him fed and safe from harm.

So unexpectedly and powerfully did these thoughts well up from the depths of Noland's soul that his legs gave way and he collapsed onto the cinders between the rails of the Chicago and Joliet Railroad, sobbing uncontrollably. A bitter brew laced with guilt over failed husbandry of the dog, his overreaction to puppy mistakes and brashness, and the loss of a treasured companion overflowed spontaneously. He had lost grandparents, aunts, and cousins without suffering such an emotional riptide. Still clutching the shattered body of the dog, he lay gasping and weeping on the cinders until he could catch his breath, compose himself, struggle to his feet, and continue on.

The western sky glowed with the color of brass fading to deep rose as he started across Crawford Avenue. By the time he had cleared the field beyond the overpass and began walking slowly along the gravel road towards the lights of the townhouses, the hollows beneath the cottonwood trees had gone dark.