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Invisible

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Invisible

You were an altar boy then. You remember the stations of the cross. The halting procession of incense as the priest's purple vestments swayed in even rhythm through the church. You recall Latin verses. The repeated phrases. His black shoes moving and stopping, turning slowly to face each station that represents the suffering.

You smelled Vitalis in your grandfather's white hair as you moved closer to the pew he knelt in. You looked at the floor or at the red glow of the incense that burned in the brass urn at the bottom of your chain. You swung the incense urn on cue as the priest spoke in Latin and the people answered as they knelt. You tried to imagine the suffering of a man who died almost 2000 years ago. The kiss of betrayal fascinated you.

At thirteen years you couldn't imagine how it was. Roman soldiers gave the man vinegar instead of water. Gambled for his clothes. Stabbed him with a spear till water came out. It was too much to think about. So you said "*Dominus vobiscum*" and "*et cum spiritu tuo*" when the priest needed you to.

So here you are in a tree near the Ho Chi Minh trail. The supply line of North Vietnamese passes like a procession in slow cadence. Two soldiers stop and say something too far away to make out. Through the scope you watch their lips move. They point at you and all around you.

The one who is talking and pointing the most is the easiest. The other one is turned sideways. You squeeze and say "*Dominus vobiscum*" to calm your breathing. Some men just breathe out slowly but you always say this phrase. It is your mantra. It means, "The Lord be with you." The green barrel does not smoke. The shot is silenced. You watch in the scope.

To the untrained eye, metal jacket bullets give few clues as to which hole is the entrance and which the exit. The body muscles spasm uncontrollably when the bullet passes through. There is blood, but very little. The easy one twitched forward when he was hit. This is lucky. The sideways soldier crouches over the easy one. He looks for you. You hear shouting and gunfire as they run the wrong way. They scour the valley below the trail, looking for you. Someone drags the body away.

The priest bent low to deposit a small wafer on each tongue. With your left hand you held a silver dish beneath their chins in case the host was dropped. You held your right hand to your heart as the priest said to each person, "*Corpus Christi*." The people knelt at a rail surrounding the altar. They tilted their heads back and closed their eyes when you approached. Wide open mouths with tongues extended, they waited for the body of Christ.

When you take them out, they usually lurch back or fall sideways. Their mouths open in astonishment. The tongues sometimes hang out but not always. The eyes you do not notice. You never look at their eyes. You aim for the button on the left pocket. They never move again.

When the priest said, "*Corpus Christi*," the eyes closed and the mouths pulled in their tongues to say "Amen" before they tasted the salty bread wafers. The wafers stuck to the tongues then were flicked into the mouths. When the people reached their pews each touched one knee to the floor and made the sign of the cross before sitting.

As a linebacker, you dreamed you would go to Notre Dame. The high school coach was a Jesuit priest. He wore a black shirt unbuttoned to the waist. His stiff white collar stuck out of the black pocket of his black game pants. Once he hit you in the helmet with his clip-board. He shouted, "Take the little son of a bitch out—take him out of the game." You looked at the lights. Through the glare you prayed to be invisible. You needed this to do what the priest wanted. "*Dominus vobiscum*."

The center fell as he snapped the ball. The quarterback struggled for the football. You rushed him. Untouched, you smashed his chest with your helmet. Hurtling your body as a spear you heard the crack of bones coming unhinged. The crowd cheered for you. The quarterback that the priest wanted taken out lay unconscious. The crowd was silenced until he moved again in pain. They cheered as he limped off, supported by his coach. He was holding broken ribs. The opposing coaches yelled for revenge. They looked for you, but you had disappeared. Invisible, you'd slipped away into the dressing room. You cut the tape off, dropped your pads, and showered while the defensive line coach stood yelling. You unloaded your locker and walked away. He screamed obscenities and threw his clipboard. You said, "Amen."

On the trail the procession moves quickly. They have already forgotten the death of the easy one. Staying here is the best plan. They are sure the sniper is gone now. Hit once, then move on. That's the way it goes here. They understand this. But the easy one saves you a hike by falling forward. You thank him silently. "*Et cum spiritu tuo*: And with your spirit."

W. C. Fleischman