

Martyr

by Mark Krieger

It was late. My brothers lay snoring and breathing on bunks above me in the darkness. The windows were open to the night. The warm breeze of early summer and the music of crickets drifted in. The room was filled with the smell of lilacs.

It was the breeze, the moonlight on the closet door that woke me.

Through the screen I heard the back porch door creak open. There was a whimper. Soon choked, rattled gasps. I eased up the screen and climbed onto the roof. Little granules of shingle tinkled into the gutter below as I crept silently down in my bare feet.

In the shadow of the back porch, a hulky figure materialized. The dark hollows of my mother's eyes were buried in her palms. The gasps continued.

Before Sal died we'd never heard our mother cry. There were seven of us, all boys, except for Sal. She was the youngest and the only girl my mother would ever have. My mother loved her with an affection I never knew existed till she came into the world.

My body moved instinctively to leap down off the roof—to go to her. I stopped suddenly, teetering on the brink of falling one way or the other.

Then it was too late. I'd waited too long. I listened for a minute more, then crept back up and slipped through the window and back into bed. But I didn't sleep.

. . . There was St. Matthias who was stoned in Jerusalem, then they tore his head off his shoulders. There was St. Mathew who was pinned to the ground and chopped into pieces by a halberd. Nero had them sewn inside the skins of wild animals. They were shredded in the teeth of vicious dogs. Others Nero had wrapped in waxed cloth, tied to poles about his garden, and lit to offer candlelight for his parties.

. . . All of them were brave beyond human capacity. They'd suffered terrible deaths but now they were free, forever forgiven.

I sat on our roof smoking my old man's Reds. The book of martyrs poised on the apex of shingle to my right. The soft blue light of the moon lay on the damp grass between the trees, the yards beyond.

She'd drowned a year earlier. Some nights I felt she was out there just beyond the trees, sometimes closer, much closer, on the roof with me. It seemed she needed me for something. A last favor.

What?

What . . . ?

<LS>

They ain't coming, said Jeff.

Everyone ignored him. Jeff was a few years older than me. I was lost somewhere in the middle of my family.

Out of boredom Jeff had made nunchakus of his rolled Darth Vader T-shirt and was whipping the propeller before Barron's head, Bruce Lee style, then catching it under his armpit on the backswing.

Sun pierced through the haze. It was the first hot week of summer weather. We sat about the cliff edge, shirts off, our legs dangling over the eroding dirt rim. Stretched below us lay the massive crater of the abandoned quarry, the elbow of beach, the lake, the spot where the cross marked where Sal had fallen in. In the corner of my eye, I kept seeing a sliver of white drifting out over the wind rippled water. But each time I turned there was only the water's flat brown surface.

Teddy, the oldest, held a crowbar between his legs, the toe of his All-Stars tapping his impatience against the steel hook. The rest of us had pipes and wood clubs.

They ain't coming, Jeff repeated.

Shut up, said Teddy.

I'm jus' sayin'.

Yeah. Don't say.

Hey, said Marko. Almost forgot. You ladies missed it. Me'n Ozz here saw Julie V stark-ass naked las' week.

Bullshit, said Jeff.

Ozz, my lyin'?

Ozzy fattened his lip, shook his head.

Fuck off, said Barron.

Wears pink silk panties, man. Patience is a virtue.

She's gotta par'a lungs too. When she gotta aload'a Ozz's stupid face—holy Christ. Thought the windows'd blow apart. I almost pissed my pants.

There they are, said Jimmy.

Teddy flicked his smoke down the cliff and rose.

Okay.

Toldja they'd be back, said Barron, climbing to his feet. Then he slapped Jeff over the back of the head.

The fuck off me!

Barron, Teddy, and Jeff capered back up the trail, disappearing into the blue sky over the shoulder of the next rise. The rest of us remained, watching the men, faceless in the distance. They slithered steadily down the lower path that looped the lake, disappearing, reappearing behind tufts of bushes and young trees. There were three of them. Maybe collage age. Maybe older.

The big ugly one was leading. When he noticed us, his cheek bulged out with his tongue. He nudged the others. Ugly was the one who'd kicked over the oak cross Teddy had made Sal. Ugly had pissed on it and kicked it into the lake. Barron, Ozzy, and I saw it happen.

Ugly shouted up.

You shits don't learn. He wagged the aluminum bat at us. We were counting on running into you again. Come on down, faggots! Play some ball!

Marko stood.

Go'n fuck yourself!

I hurled the first stone. It seemed to soar forever through the soundless air.

Now everybody hailed stones down on them. Clutching their bats they loped back up the beach trail, which joined the upper path.

We sprinted down through the sunlit tunnel of trees, leaves fanning pasted our faces. We lured them toward the V where the

sheer upper cliff necked into a smaller pile of broken caldron and rubble. My brothers ducked each way behind.

I was straggling last. I could feel Ugly gaining a few paces behind. I made it through the V just in time—catching the blur of Tim's crowbar out of the corner of my eye. It was beautiful timing. The ring of metal shattering shin. The figure crashing behind me.

I had too much momentum and launched headlong off the trail's bend, cartwheeling down the next slope in an explosion of dust.

Blood leaked from my nose. I pulled myself back up, clambering up toward the fight, but suddenly everybody was hurtling and darting passed me.

Gun—

I stepped through a curtain of dust. Teddy was crippling along on his elbows in the dirt, blood drooling from his nose and mouth. They were ruining him with stones, whipping them at him. I watched Ugly open my brother's forehead with a jackknife.

The stocky one with the gun had the muzzle trained on me.

Hey— Hey—

I picked up the aluminum bat from the dust. There was a gunshot and the quick spray of splintered rock against my right calf.

I swung the bat, catching Ugly behind the left ear. He fell on his side in the dust. I swung back the other way, catching the other in the gut. Stocky with the gun backed up the trail.

I watched my bat striking at bodies groveling over the dust and rock.

Finally a hand stopped me from behind.

Enough. . . . Enough, already.

<LS>

From the incident I earned a nickname.

What's up, Invincible? And. Invincible! Deflect them bullets today? Rip open that shirt, brother.

Vacation arrived. Summer deepened. I led a sort of crusade of nighttime burglaries. Friday night, we'd drift through the cars at Paradise Theatre and peer through the car windows. Purses, wallets, VCR in a box—if the car door was locked we'd smash the window.

We'd break into garages. Most people didn't lock them in those days. We'd break into the houses of vacationing neighbors. But we'd never take much. A necklace here. A boom box there. A lot of the houses on our block had the old milk chute and the skinniest among us, Jimmy and I, all skin and bone, would climb through the cramped opening.

We stashed most of what we stole in sewer tunnels not far from our house. The tunnels ran directly beneath the city, straight into its black heart. Nobody but rats and other subterranean creatures would ever find them.

<LS>

As the summer wore on I found myself going into these houses alone. I'd walk around the strange darkness, somehow feeling Sal's presence there stronger than anywhere. I'd sit on a couch for hours staring into the glow of darkness swelling about me.

In the hour of death some martyrs received visions. The everlasting shone through when skirting the tenuous threshold of the two worlds.

. . . William Tyndale was strangled by rope. Nearing death the hangman stopped and they burned what was left of him at the stake. Through flames the vision opened, the onlookers hearing his cries. Lord! Open the King of England's eyes!

. . . Archbishop Cranmer was tied to an iron chair, the kindling and fagots laid about his ankles and lit. He reached out his right hand, holding it in the flames until it was gone as a piece coal. This unworthy right hand, he said. This unworthy right hand.

. . . It was his mantra. In the furry of engulfing flames he surrendered the ghost and joined his angel, repeating his communion until he was no more.

But what if life itself were the flame? *You*—the word was a flame. It was the only word my mother had spoken to me since Sal died. You. She was killing me slowly with silence rather than finishing me off with a direct accusation.

I learned to make an inner scream. If the scream were sincere enough, the agony ignited, surging through my body, until the whole of me hummed. The other body, Sal's, seemed to glow in the dark. My vision swam with a firework glitter pouring over the room.

One night I went deeper. Opening my eyes I saw I was on my knees, my head pressed hard against the shag carpet. The room flickered with a blue undulating light. There was the odor of lilacs. In the fireplace a thin mist appeared, forming a little statue. Her eyes were radiant. She lingered warily on the hearth.

Please— My voice was a breathless rasp. Please—

An attempt to draw her to me with my mind made her retreat. My hand travelled into my pocket and drew out the pocketknife I'd dropped along the trail and gone back for that afternoon with her at the quarry. I uncocked the blade and began slashing my upper thigh. Quick parallel slits.

The carpet beneath my knee became spongy with blood. She returned, more dimly, hovering an inch or so above the strange seafloor of the room.

Please—

She was speaking, but her voice was garbled.

Please, I said. Sal.

Her hands opened toward mine. She was reaching for me. Reaching . . . A shadow flickered over the room, and she was gone.

The floorboard creaked.

Someone was standing in the doorway behind me. We stared at one another. I was trembling wildly.

What. In the hell you doing?

The voice belonged to my brother Barron.

I stared at him.

It's your fault she's dead, he said finally.

You left her too. My voice was breaking. You went to get beer.

He turned to leave, giving a quick hiss between his teeth.

Ma's your fault too.

<LS>

Jimmy and I were cutting through Kohl's empty parking lot up on North. We had our boards beneath our arms. We'd slammed into enough signs and parking blocks.

It was pouring rain. We were soaked through. Wind coiled in the trees. Gutters spewed like opened fire hydrants. The darkest column of storm had moved to the east, but the rain still tumbled in angling sheets.

Tracy doesn't have a Caballero, said Jimmy. He's got some shitass—

Suddenly headlights came cutting around to our right. Instinct darted through me. I shoved my brother.

Ditch it! Run! *Go*—

I stayed in the engulfing headlights, knowing we couldn't both outrun them in the middle of the parking lot.

They were out of the vehicle before it even stopped. Ugly took his time, slipped his hands inside leather gloves, opening and closing his fist like a doctor stretching on surgical gloves.

Lightning opened the heavens. The earth trembled.

Ugly said, Been looking for you, my friend.

<LS>

They hurt me there in the parking lot as I've never been hurt since. The night was a fury of feet and fists striking from all sides. Ugly clutched both ends of a steel bar. He craned around from behind, placing the steel beneath my nose, then he lifted me. A hot cracking flash filled my head.

When I came to I was lying in a puddle on the pavement. The violence had stopped as quickly as it'd begun. Everybody had ducked down behind the car. A van had pulled into the parking at the far end. But the vehicle was only turning around, now groaning off the other way on Van Buren.

Ugly turned back around. He grabbed my hand.

Get his mouth, he said.

A hand muffled my mouth.

Ugly positioned my left hand against the edge of his knee, my fingers dangling off. He set the outer edge of his palm against my

index finger. He shoved the finger back, his cheeks puffing out. The finger made a popping sound.

I fell back against the concrete. My finger lay lopsided against the others. I couldn't scream.

Ugly sat beside me in the backseat. Streetlights swept over the vehicle. He was doing something with his right hand. First I thought he had a gun, but in the sweep of light I saw him slipping brass knuckles over his gloved fist. They hadn't even begun yet.

Wait, I said. Just wait. I know where . . . there's diamonds . . . gold rings . . . thousands' worth.

<LS>

To reach the tunnels beneath the city you hopped the fence behind Rexall Drugs, dropped down, and followed the open sewer upstream. That night the water was so high and fast we had to edge along the wall to keep from slipping in. Lightning shivered, briefly unveiling the black mouth along the wall ahead.

The underground tunnel was so large you could stand fully upright and reach your arms up or to each side and never touch the encasing throat of cement. Throughout the summer the tunnel had been more or less dry. Now the whipping current was just below the knees.

I led the way with the flashlight. Graffiti gleamed along the walls. We lumbered against the current toward a center that continuously backed away from our light. We felt the tunnel's breath with our wet skin. Listened to its thudding heartbeat.

Dunk *dunk*.

Car tires passing over various manholes above us.

I led them down a marked side tunnel, branching from the main, where my brothers and I'd dragged the barrel.

Ugly snatched the flashlight from me.

I'll take that.

They leaned with the light into the mouth of the barrel. I looked the other way down the tunnel. Here and there in the swinging light I caught snatches of the chasm some five yards ahead. A kind of dark eye opening and closing, opening and closing. We'd dropped

stones down it, never hearing any report. I calculated the steps in my head. The eye itself was maybe four feet across.

Look at all this shit, said a voice.

These real diamonds?

Ugly's back was to me.

I bent down and slipped the knife from the ankle of my wet sock. I uncocked the blade beneath my shirt and positioned the blade between my middle knuckles, the butt of handle against the ball of my palm. I'd spear it neatly in and out between his back ribs. His lungs and throat would swamp with blood.

I drew back my arm. A voice stopped me.

No.

I stood paralyzed, swaying.

No.

It was the kind of no that was a yes. My hand opened. The knife splashed near my feet.

Ugly spun round with the light. I kicked the flashlight against the wall. Darkness fell. I shoved Ugly into the others. In three crudely calculated steps I plunged forward, leaping blind into the darkness.

<LS>

My fingers scraped along the cold damp walls while my foot fished in front of me. I went like that for some time, echoes all around me.

The sound widened out. I came to a tunnel perpendicular to the first one. By the sound of water I guessed the tunnel was much larger than the other, the current quicker and deeper.

I stepped in, and the current swept my feet from under me. I was swept away. I came up, coughing, then pitched forward and was under again.

The current rolled me over, and I got my head above the water. I passed a pale smear of light, and then another. At the next spear of light, I caught on to a wrought-iron ladder leading up to a manhole.

With my good hand I tried to lift the manhole lid but couldn't. I shouted until my voice began to rasp.

Finally a voice came from above. Soon there were more voices and the scraping of feet.

The hole opened above me. A hand appeared, reaching down.

<LS>

Dawn was just blooming beyond the trees and houses. The wings of birds quivered the air. I sat on our rooftop, smoking my old man's Reds. The first rings of early morning cicadas filled the late-summer air.

Below the back porch door creaked open. I heard my mother weeping. Hopelessly wailing. I crept down the shingles. I could just make out her shape among the shadows.

She moved, and it looked as though she'd eaten the miniature sun of her cigarette. It reappeared in the dusky light. I swung down onto the grass with a thump.

My mother gasped.

Mygod— I didn't know what you were!

She looked the other way, quickly wiping the tears from her eyes.

My arm went around her. The cicadas all died for a moment. I held my mother against me in the deep silence. She held herself awkwardly, her hands hiding beneath her thick arms. Then I felt her quake against me. Her arms were still knotted into herself, but gradually they opened around me.

I'm sorry, I said. I'm so sorry.

