

Beyond Terrorism: Survival

by

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The Prelude: An excerpt

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PRELUDE:
DARKNESS FALLS

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Nate and Tiny, two kids already at loose ends in early summer, hovered at midblock with their hands in their pockets, leaning against the white stucco back wall of the town's only gas station, kicking at it with their heels. They were watching the meager midmorning traffic. The Marshy Flats grade school had been out just three weeks and they had already run out of things to do. Nate was eleven years old, and Tiny was ten months younger and one inch taller. They were best friends.

"I guess we could skip some rocks," Tiny said with a shrug, as if it didn't matter much. Of the two, he knew he was the better rock skipper; it was all in the wrist. To keep them outside getting some exercise, they were both barred from video games before dinner, and it looked like a long slow stretch until then.

Nate gave his blond head a single shake. Skipping rocks was a kid's game. He continued to stare down the street at the shore of the Gulf. With barely any wind and not much swell, the glassy water was perfect for skipping rocks. From up the street the whir and clatter of a garbage truck reached them.

Across the street and half a block down, a white van was parked behind Newton's Bait & Tackle. The back and sides were smooth, with no windows beyond the driver's. The passenger door had some writing on it, but it was too far away to make out. Nate thought he'd noticed this van before, making the rounds. A man came out of Newton's back door and set four small boxes down at the back doors. He wore jeans and a blue work shirt. Looking comfortable, as if this was what he did all the time so he didn't have to think much about it, he didn't glance around before he opened the doors and stacked the boxes inside one at a time. He closed the doors again and went back inside Newton's without locking them.

"Look at that," said Nate with a smirk. "What do you think? How fast could that guy run if he saw us take one of those boxes?"

“You wouldn’t dare.” Tiny gave him a startled look that held a trace of awe.

“Just watch me then.” Nate took off running flat out from the first step, even though his untied shoelaces were flying around his ankles. Tiny was at his heels. Both wearing shorts, their bare legs flashed in the sun. They only slowed to a walk three steps from the van. Tiny peered around the back toward Newton’s door. Through the screen, no one was in view, although he could hear people talking inside. With a delicate touch Nate opened the back door of the van and lifted out one of the boxes. The four were all the same. He didn’t bother to close the door as they ran away, turning up at the same corner they’d watched from, swinging around the gas station and sprinting three more blocks before they stopped, holding their sides and gasping for breath as they tried not to laugh.

Nate gave Tiny a wise look as he pulled out his pocketknife and sliced through the clear tape that sealed the top. “Let’s see what we got here. I say it’s money, all in paper too, a box full of twenties maybe.”

Tiny looked around but saw no one coming.

Inside the box, cradled in a layer of bubble wrap, they discovered a yellow plastic fishnet float in the shape of a cylinder rounded on both ends. It was not much different from other floats they’d seen edging the nets on boats in that part of the Gulf. This float had a seam, however, running the long way around it. Because they’d never handled any of the battered floats that washed up around the tiny dredged-out harbor, this difference made no impression on them, nor did they realize that the weight of the float in their hands was too great to be of use in buoying up a net. Placed in water, this float would sink, because it had another purpose entirely.

“Crap,” said Nate, disappointment wilting his features. It was too late to return to the van and run off with something else. The float could hardly be sold. It looked more like a toy, a candidate for kickball, one that would either spin like a rolling pin, or turn end over end. He and Tiny had a great time for twenty minutes or so knocking it about, but then the float ricocheted off a sharp fractured edge of the concrete curb and split open half an inch along the seam. When Tiny kicked it again squarely at the break, the two halves separated, revealing a plastic bag bulging with white powder. He picked it up

and handed it to Nate, who opened his knife again. Hooking the point of the blade into it, he ripped open a cut three inches long. The powder erupted over the edges.

Nate was reminded of the white powder he'd sometimes seen in dozens of tiny plastic bags at his uncle's house. Of course, this one was much larger. Maybe his uncle would give them some money for it. He stuck a finger into it and touched it to his tongue, the way he'd seen his uncle do, but had never been allowed to do himself. He made a sour face at the bitter taste and spit it on the pavement.

"What is it?" asked Tiny. "I'm not going to taste it."

"It's garbage."

Tiny lifted the bag out of Nate's willing hand. The powder spilled out of the cut and over his fingers like flour. In front of the next building a pair of dirty tied-together high top sneakers hung from a telephone line, one above the other with the toes down. They appeared to be dancing through the air in slow motion. Tiny cupped the bag in his right hand and reared back as if throwing a runner out from center field. Streaming powder like a vapor trail, the bag flew in a powerful arc and sailed to the height of the sneakers, clipped the lower of the two and sent it spinning around the wire once more before it settled back again, still in second position. The bag plunged back to the street where it landed with the splat of a flyswatter hitting a table. A cloud of white powder the texture of smoke rose and dispersed in the air, lifting toward the smaller one spreading outward from the dangling shoes above.

"If you were trying to bring those shoes down, I would've gone for the higher one," Nate said, scrubbing his powdery palms on his shorts. "Next time *I'll* throw it. You'll see what I mean."

But the future held no next time for the two young friends. Five hours later Nate was dead after convulsively coughing up sprays of blood and mucus from his shredded lungs as he drowned in his own fluids. A reddish vapor hung in the air around him like an omen of the evil to come. Cradling him in their arms, it collected on the skin and clothing of his parents and grandmother as they wept. Tiny died in the same way half an hour later. Both of their families joined them in death later that evening.

While Nate and Tiny were the first ones to die in Marshy Flats, they were not the first casualties of the war.