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She laughed when they were together. Her smile was bright and real. She stood up a little straighter. He gave her pride and made her feel beautiful again. As for me, Wilmoth became as close to a healthy father figure as I've ever had. He didn't coddle me. He didn't tell me he loved me or any of that fake, sappy nonsense, but he was there. Basketball had been an obsession of mine since grade school. It was the core of my relationship with my best friend, Johnny Nichols, and Wilmoth had game. He and I hit the courts together all the time. He showed me moves, tuned up my defensive discipline, and helped me develop a jump shot. The three of us celebrated birthdays and holidays together, and the summer before eighth grade, he got down on one knee and asked my mother to make it official.

Wilmoth lived in Indianapolis, and our plan was to move in with him the following summer. Though he wasn't nearly as rich as Trunnis, he made a nice living and we looked forward to city life again. Then in 1989, the day after Christmas, everything stopped.

We hadn't made the full-time move to Indy yet, and he'd spent Christmas Day with us at my grandparents' place in Brazil. The next day, he had a basketball game in his men's league and he'd invited me to sub for one of his teammates. I was so excited I'd packed my bags two days early, but that morning he told me I couldn't come after all.

"I'm gonna keep you back here this time, Little David," he said. I dropped my head and sighed. He could tell I was upset and tried to reassure me. "Your mom is gonna drive up in a few days and we can play ball then."

I nodded, reluctantly, but I wasn't raised to pry into the affairs of adults and knew I wasn't owed an explanation or make-up game. My mother and I watched from the front porch as he backed out of the carport, smiled, and gave us that crisp single wave of his. Then he drove off.

It was the last time we'd ever see him alive.

He played in his men's league game that night, as planned, and drove home alone to the "house with the white lions." Whenever he gave directions to friends, family, or delivery guys, that's how he always described his ranch-

style house, its driveway framed by two white lion sculptures elevated on pillars. He pulled between them and into the garage where he could enter the house directly, oblivious to the danger moving in from behind. He never did close that garage door.

They'd been staking him out for hours, waiting for a window, and as he climbed out from the driver's side door, they stepped from the shadows and fired from close range. He was shot five times in the chest. When he dropped to the floor of his garage, the gunman stepped over him and delivered a kill shot right between his eyes.

Wilmoth's father lived a few blocks away, and when he drove by the white lions the next morning, he noticed his son's garage door open and knew something was wrong. He walked up the driveway and into the garage where he sobbed over his dead son.

Wilmoth was just forty-three years old.

I was still at my grandmother's house when Wilmoth's mother called moments later. She hung up and motioned me to her side to break the news. I thought about my mom. Wilmoth had been her savior. She'd been coming out of her shell, opening up, ready to believe in good things. What would this do to her? Would God ever give her a break? It started as a simmer but within seconds my rage overwhelmed me. I broke free of my grandmother, punched the refrigerator, and left a dent.

We drove to our place to find my mother, who was already frantic because she hadn't heard from Wilmoth. She called his house just before we arrived, and when a detective picked up the phone it puzzled her, but she didn't expect this. How could she? We saw her confusion as my grandmother walked over, peeled the phone from her fingers, and sat her down.

She didn't believe us at first. Wilmoth was a prankster and this was just the kind of screwed-up stunt he might try to pull off. Then she remembered he'd been shot two months before. He'd told her the guys who'd done that weren't after him. That those bullets were meant for someone else, and because they merely grazed him, she decided to forget about the whole thing. Until that moment, she never suspected that Wilmoth had some secret

street life she knew nothing about, and the police never did find out exactly why he was shot and killed. The speculation was that he was involved in a shady business deal or a drug deal gone bad. My mother was still in denial when she packed a bag, but she included a dress for his funeral.

When we arrived, his house was wrapped in a ribbon of yellow police tape like a twisted Christmas gift. This was no prank. My mom parked, ducked under the tape, and I followed right behind her to the front door. On the way, I remember glancing to my left trying to get a glimpse of the scene where Wilmoth had been killed. His cold blood was still pooled on the garage floor. I was a fourteen-year-old wandering through an active crime scene, but nobody, not my mother, not Wilmoth's family, and not even the police seemed disturbed by me being there, absorbing the heavy vibe of my would-be stepfather's murder.

As screwed up as it sounds, the police allowed my mom to stay in Wilmoth's house that night. Rather than stay alone, she had her brother-in-law there, armed with his two guns in case the killers came back. I wound up in a back bedroom at Wilmoth's sister's place, a dark and spooky house a few miles away, and left alone all night. The house was furnished with one of those analog, cabinet television sets with thirteen channels on a dial. Only three channels came in static-free, and I kept it on the local news. They ran the same tape on a loop every thirty minutes: footage of my mom and me ducking under police tape then watching Wilmoth get wheeled on a gurney toward a waiting ambulance, a sheet over his body.

It was like a horror scene. I sat there all alone, watching the same footage over and over. My mind was a broken record that kept skipping into darkness. The past had been bleak and now our sky-blue future had been blown up too. There would be no reprieve, only my familiar dark reality choking out all light. Each time I watched, my fear grew until it filled the room, and still I could not stop.

A few days after we buried Wilmoth, and just after the new year, I boarded a school bus in Brazil, Indiana. I was still grieving, and my head was spinning because my mother and I hadn't decided whether or not we were staying in Brazil or moving to Indianapolis as planned. We were in limbo and she remained in a state of shock. She still hadn't cried over Wilmoth's death.

Instead she became emotionally vacant again. It was as if all the pain she'd experienced in her life resurfaced as one gaping wound she disappeared into, and there was no reaching her in that void. In the meantime, school was starting up, so I played along, looking for any shred of normal I could hang onto.

But it was hard. I rode a bus to school most days, and my first day back, I couldn't shake a memory I'd buried from the year before. That morning, I slid into a seat above the back left tire overlooking the street as usual. When we arrived at school the bus pulled up to the curb, we needed to wait for the ones ahead of us to move before we could get off. In the meantime, a car pulled alongside us, and a cute, overeager little boy ran toward our bus carrying a platter of cookies. The driver didn't see him. The bus jerked forward.

I noticed the alarmed look on his mother's face before the sudden crush of blood splattered my window. His mother howled in horror. She wasn't among us anymore. She looked and sounded like a fierce, wounded animal as she literally pulled the hair from her head by the roots. Soon sirens wailed in the distance and screamed closer by the second. The little boy was about six years old. The cookies were a present for the driver.

We were all ordered off the bus, and as I walked by the tragedy, for some reason—call it human curiosity, call it the magnetic pull of dark to dark—I peeked under the bus and saw him. His head was nearly as flat as paper, his brains and blood mingled under the carriage like spent oil.

For a full year I hadn't thought of that image even once, but Wilmoth's death reawakened it, and now it was all I could think about. I was beyond the pale. Nothing mattered to me. I'd seen enough to know that the world was filled with human tragedy and that it would just keep piling up in drifts until it swallowed me.

I couldn't sleep in bed anymore. Neither could my mother. She slept in her armchair with the television on blast or with a book in her hands. For a little while, I tried to curl up in bed at night but would always wake in the fetal position on the floor. Eventually I gave in and bedded down low to the

ground. Maybe because I knew if I could find comfort at the bottom place there would be no more falling.

We were two people in dire need of the fresh start we thought we had coming, so even without Wilmoth, we made the move to Indianapolis. My mother set me up for entry exams at Cathedral High School, a private college preparatory academy in the heart of the city. As usual, I cheated, and off a smart kid too. When my acceptance letter and class schedule came in the mail the summer before freshman year, I was looking at a full slate of AP classes!

I hacked my way through, cheating and copying, and managed to make the freshman basketball team, which was one of the best freshman teams in the entire state. We had several future college players, and I started at point guard. That was a confidence boost, but not the kind I could build on because I knew I was an academic fraud. Plus, the school cost my mom way too much money, so after only one year at Cathedral, she pulled the plug.

I started my sophomore year at North Central High School, a public school with 4,000 kids in a majority black neighborhood, and on my first day I turned up like some preppy white boy. My jeans were definitely too tight, and my collared shirt was tucked into a waistline cinched with a braided belt. The only reason I didn't get completely laughed out of the building was because I could ball.

My sophomore year was all about being cool. I switched up my wardrobe, which was increasingly influenced by hip hop culture, and hung out with gang bangers and other borderline delinquents, which meant I didn't always go to school. One day, my mom came home in the middle of the day and found me sitting around our dining room table with what she described as "ten thugs." She wasn't wrong. Within a few weeks she packed us up and moved us back to Brazil, Indiana.

I enrolled at Northview High School the week of basketball tryouts, and I remember showing up at lunch time when the cafeteria was full. There were 1,200 kids enrolled at Northview, only five of which were black, and the last time any of them had seen me I looked a lot like them. Not anymore.

I strolled into school that day wearing pants five sizes too big and sagged way down low. I also wore an oversized Chicago Bulls jacket with a backward hat, cocked to the side. Within seconds, all eyes were upon me. Teachers, students, and administrative staff stared at me like I was some exotic species. I was the first thuggish black kid many of them had seen in real life. My mere presence had stopped the music. I was the needle being dragged across vinyl, scratching a whole new rhythm, and like hip hop itself, everybody noticed but not everyone liked what they heard. I strutted through the scene like I did not care.

But that was a lie. I acted all kinds of cocky and my entrance was brash, but I felt very insecure going back there. Buffalo had been like living in a blazing inferno. My early years in Brazil were a perfect incubator for post-traumatic stress, and before I left I was delivered a double dose of death trauma. Moving to Indianapolis had been an opportunity to escape pity and leave all that behind. Class wasn't easy for me, but I'd made friends and developed a new style. Now, coming back, I looked different enough on the outside to perpetuate an illusion that I'd changed, but in order to change you have to work through crap. Confront it and get real. I hadn't done a shred of that hard work. I was still a dumb kid with nothing solid to lean on, and basketball tryouts ripped away any confidence I had left.

When I got to the gym, they made me suit up in uniform rather than wear my more generic gym clothes. Back then the style was getting baggy and oversized, which Chris Webber and Jalen Rose of the Fab Five would make famous at the University of Michigan. The coaches in Brazil didn't have their fingers on that pulse. They put me in the tighty-whitey version of basketball shorts, which strangled my groin, hugged my thighs super tight, and felt all kinds of wrong. I was trapped in the coaches' preferred dream state: a Larry Bird time warp. Which made sense because Larry Legend was basically a patron saint in Brazil and all of Indiana. In fact, his daughter went to our school. We were friends. But that didn't mean I wanted to dress like him!

Then there was my etiquette. In Indianapolis the coaches let us talk trash on the court. If I made a good move or hit a shot in your face, I talked about your mama or your girlfriend. In Indy, I'd done research on my trash talking. I got good at it. I was the Draymond Green of my school, and it was all part

of basketball culture in the city. Back in farm country, that cost me. When tryouts started, I handled the rock a bunch, and when I crossed some of the kids over and made them look bad I let them and the coaches know. My attitude embarrassed the coaches (who were apparently ignorant that their hero, Larry Legend, was an all-time great trash talker), and it wasn't long before they took the ball out of my hands and put me in the front court, a position I'd never played before. I was uncomfortable down low, and played like it. That shut me up good. Meanwhile, Johnny was dominating.

My only saving grace that week was getting back with Johnny Nichols. We'd stayed close while I was away and our marathon one-on-one battles were back in full swing. Though he was undersized, he was always a nice player and he was one of the best on the floor during tryouts. He was draining shots, seeing the open man, and running the court. It was no surprise when he made the varsity squad, but we were both shocked that I barely made JV.

I was crushed. And not because of basketball tryouts. To me that outcome was another symptom of something else I'd been feeling. Brazil looked the same, but things felt different this time around. Grade school had been hard academically, but even though we were one of only a few black families in town, I didn't notice or feel any palpable racism. As a teenager I experienced it everywhere, and it wasn't because I'd become ultra sensitive. Outright racism had always been there.

Not long after moving back to Brazil, my cousin Damien and I went to a party way out in the country. We stayed out well past curfew. In fact, we were up all night long, and after daybreak we called our grandmother for a ride home.

"Excuse me?" she asked. "You disobeyed me, so you may as well start walking."

Roger that.

She lived ten miles away, down a long country road, but we joked around and enjoyed ourselves as we started to stroll. Damien lived in Indianapolis and we were both sagging our baggy jeans and dressed in oversized Starter

jackets, not exactly typical gear on Brazil's country roads. We'd walked seven miles in a few hours when a pickup truck came bouncing down the tarmac in our direction. We edged to the side of the road to let it pass, but it slowed down, and as it crept past us, we could see two teenagers in the cab and a third standing in the bed of the truck. The passenger pointed and yelled through his open window.

"Niggers!"

We didn't overreact. We put our heads down and kept walking at the same pace, until we heard that beat-up truck squeal to a stop on a patch of gravel, and kick up a dust storm. That's when I turned and saw the passenger, a scruffy looking redneck, exit the cab of the truck with a pistol in his hand. He aimed it at my head as he stalked toward me.

"Where are you from, and why are you here in this town?!"

Damien eased down the road, while I locked eyes with the gunman and said nothing. He stepped within two feet of me. The threat of violence doesn't get much more real than that. Chills rippled my skin, but I refused to run or cower. After a few seconds he got back in the truck and they sped off.

It wasn't the first time I'd heard the word. Not long before that I was hanging out in Pizza Hut with Johnny and a couple of girls, including a brunette I liked, named Pam. She liked me too, but we'd never acted on it. We were two innocents enjoying one another's company, but when her father arrived to take her home he caught sight of us, and when Pam saw him, her face went ghost white.

He burst into the packed restaurant and stalked toward us with all eyes on him. He never addressed me. He just locked eyes with her and said, "I don't want to *ever* see you sitting with this *nigger* again."

She hustled out the door after him, her face red with shame as I sat, paralyzed, staring at the floor. It was the most humiliating moment of my life, and it hurt much more than the gun incident because it happened in public, and the word had been spewed by a grown man. I couldn't understand how or why he was filled with so much hate, and if he felt that

way, how many other people in Brazil shared his point of view when they saw me walking down the street? It was the sort of riddle you didn't want to solve.

* * *

They won't call on me if they can't see me. That was how I operated during my sophomore year in high school in Brazil, Indiana. I would hide out in the back rows, slump low in my chair, and sidestep my way through each and every class. Our high school made us take a foreign language that year, which was funny to me. Not because I couldn't see the value, but because I could barely read English, let alone understand Spanish. By then, after a good eight years of cheating, my ignorance had crystalized. I kept leveling up in school, on track, but hadn't learned a thing. I was one of those kids who thought he was gaming the system when, the whole time, I'd been gaming myself.

One morning, about halfway through the school year, I walked into Spanish class and grabbed my workbook from a back cupboard. There was technique involved in skating by. You didn't have to pay attention, but you did have to make it seem like you were, so I slumped into my seat, opened up my workbook, and fixed my gaze on the teacher who lectured from the front of the room.

When I looked down at the page the whole room went silent. At least to me. Her lips were still moving, but I couldn't hear because my attention had narrowed on the message left for me, and me alone.

We each had our own assigned workbook in that class, and my name was written in pencil at the top right corner of the title page. That's how they knew it was mine. Below that, someone had drawn an image of me in a noose. It looked rudimentary, like something out of the hangman game we used to play as kids. Below that were the words.

Niger we're gonna kill you!

They'd misspelled it, but I had no clue. I could barely spell myself, and they'd made their point. I looked around the room as my rage gathered like a

typhoon until it was literally buzzing in my ears. *I'm not supposed to be here,* I thought to myself. *I'm not supposed to be back in Brazil!*

I took inventory of all the incidents I'd already experienced and decided I couldn't take much more. The teacher was still talking when I rose up without warning. She called my name but I wasn't trying to hear. I left the classroom, notebook in hand, and bolted to the principal's office. I was so enraged I didn't even stop at the front desk. I walked right into his office and dropped the evidence on his desk.

"I'm tired of this," I said.

Kirk Freeman was the principal at that time, and to this day he still remembers looking up from his desk and seeing tears in my eyes. It wasn't some mystery why all this was happening in Brazil. Southern Indiana had always been a hotbed of racists, and he knew it. Four years later, in 1995, the Ku Klux Klan would march down Brazil's main drag on Independence Day, in full hooded regalia. The KKK was active in Center Point, a town located not fifteen minutes away, and kids from there went to our school. Some of them sat behind me in history class and told racist jokes for my benefit nearly every day. I wasn't expecting some investigation into who did it. More than anything, in that moment, I was looking for some compassion, and I could tell from the look in Principal Freeman's eyes he felt bad about what I was going through, but he was at a loss. He didn't know how to help me. Instead, he examined the drawing and the message for a long beat, then raised his eyes to mine, ready to console me with his words of wisdom.

"David, this is sheer ignorance," he said. "They don't even know how to spell *nigger*."

My life had been threatened, and that was the best he could do. The loneliness I felt leaving his office is something I'll never forget. It was scary to think that there was so much hate flowing through the halls and that someone I didn't even know wanted me dead because of the color of my skin. The same question kept looping through my mind: Who is out here who hates me like this? I had no idea who my enemy was. Was it one of the rednecks from history class, or was it somebody I thought I was cool with but who really didn't like me at all? It was one thing staring down the barrel

of a gun on the street or dealing with some racist parent. At least that was honest. Wondering who else felt that way in my school was a different kind of unnerving, and I couldn't shake it off. Even though I had plenty of friends, all of them white, I couldn't stop seeing the hidden racism scrawled all over the walls in invisible ink, which made it extremely hard to carry the weight of being *the only*.


DAILY JOURNAL

KANKAKEE, ILLINOIS | FAMILY OWNED SINCE 1903

Members of the Ku Klux Klan salute a burning cross in the yard of a Center Point, Ind., residence in this Nov. 4, 1995, file photo.

The Associated Press

KKK in Center Point in 1995—Center Point is fifteen minutes from my house in Brazil

Most, if not all, minorities, women, and gay people in America know that strain of loneliness well. Of walking into rooms where you are *the only* one of your kind. Most white men have no idea how hard it can be. I wish they did. Because then they'd know how it drains you. How some days, all you want to do is stay home and wallow because to go public is to be completely exposed, vulnerable to a world that tracks and judges you. At least that's how it feels. The truth is, you can't tell for sure when or if that is actually happening in a given moment. But it often feels like it, which is its own kind

of mental torture. In Brazil, I was *the only* everywhere I went. At my table in the cafeteria, where I chilled at lunch with Johnny and our crew. In every class I took. Even in the basketball gym.

By the end of that year I turned sixteen and my grandfather bought me a used, doo-doo brown Chevy Citation. One of the first mornings I ever drove it to school, someone spray painted the word “nigger” on my driver’s side door. This time they spelled it correctly and Principal Freeman was again at a loss for words. The fury that churned within me that day was indescribable, but it didn’t radiate out. It broke me down from within because I hadn’t yet learned what to do or where to channel that much emotion.

Was I supposed to fight everybody? I’d been suspended from school three times for fighting, and by now I was almost numb. Instead, I withdrew and fell into the well of black nationalism. Malcolm X became my prophet of choice. I used to come home from school and watch the same video of one of his early speeches every day. I was trying to find comfort somewhere, and the way he analyzed history and spun black hopelessness into rage nourished me, though most of his political and economic philosophies went over my head. It was his anger at a system made by and for white people that I connected with because I lived in a haze of hate, trapped in my own fruitless rage and ignorance. But I wasn’t Nation of Islam material. That took discipline, and I had none of that.

Instead, by my junior year, I went out of my way to tick people off by becoming the exact stereotype racist white people loathed and feared. I wore my pants down below my butt every day. I ghetto wired my car stereo to house speakers that filled the trunk of my Citation. I rattled windows when I cruised down Brazil’s main drag blasting Snoop’s *Gin and Juice*. I put three of those shag carpet covers over my steering wheel and dangled a pair of fuzzy dice from the rearview. Every morning before school I stared into our bathroom mirror and came up with new ways to mess with the racists at my school.

I even concocted wild hairdos. Once, I gave myself a reverse part—shaving away all my hair save a thin radial line on the left side of my scalp. It wasn’t that I was unpopular. I was considered the cool black kid in town, but if

you'd have bothered to drill down a little deeper, you'd see that I wasn't about black culture and that my antics weren't really trying to call out racism. I wasn't about anything at all.

Everything I did was to get a reaction out of the people who hated me most because everyone's opinion of me mattered to me, and that's a shallow way to live. I was full of pain, had no real purpose, and if you were watching from afar it would have looked like I'd given up on any chance of success. That I was heading for disaster. But I hadn't let go of all hope. I had one more dream left.

I wanted to join the Air Force.

My grandfather had been a cook in the Air Force for thirty-seven years, and he was so proud of his service that even after he retired he'd wear his dress uniform to church on Sundays, and his work-a-day uniform midweek just to sit on the porch. That level of pride inspired me to join the Civil Air Patrol, the civilian auxiliary of the Air Force. We met once a week, marched in formation, and learned about the various jobs available in the Air Force from officers, which is how I became fascinated with Pararescue—the guys who jump out of airplanes to pull downed pilots out of harm's way.

I attended a week-long course during the summer before my freshman year called PJOC, the Pararescue Jump Orientation Course. As usual, I was *the only*. One day a pararescueman named Scott Gearen came to speak, and he had quite a story to tell. During a standard exercise, on a high altitude jump from 13,000 feet, Gearen deployed his chute with another skydiver right above him. That wasn't out of the ordinary. He had the right of way, and per his training, he'd waved off the other jumper. Except the guy didn't see him, which placed Gearen in grave danger because the jumper above him was still mid free fall, hurtling through the air at over 120 mph. He went into a cannonball hoping to avoid clipping Gearen, but it didn't work. Gearen had no clue what was coming when his teammate flew through his canopy, collapsing it on contact, and slammed into Gearen's face with his knees. Gearen was knocked unconscious instantly and wobbled into another free fall, his crushed chute creating very little drag. The other skydiver was able to deploy his chute and survive with minor injuries.

Gearen didn’t really land. He bounced like a flat basketball, three times, but because he’d been unconscious, his body was limp, and he didn’t come apart despite crashing into the ground at 100 mph. He died twice on the operating table, but the ER docs brought him back to life. When he woke in a hospital bed, they said he wouldn’t make a full recovery and would never be a pararescueman again. Eighteen months later he’d defied medical odds, made that full recovery, and was back on the job he loved.

Scott Gearen after his accident

For years I was obsessed with that story because he’d survived the impossible, and I resonated with his survival. After Wilmoth’s murder, with all those racist taunts raining down on my head (I won’t bore you with every single episode, just know there were many more), I felt like I was free falling with no chute. Gearen was living proof that it’s possible to transcend anything that doesn’t kill you, and from the time I heard him speak I knew I

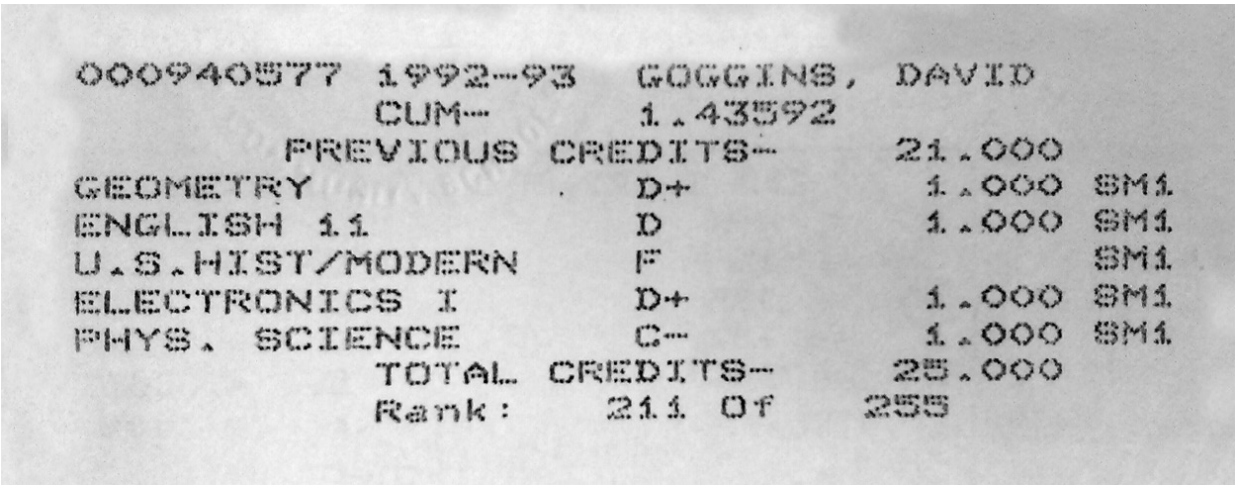
would enlist in the Air Force after graduation, which only made school seem more irrelevant.

Especially after I was cut from the varsity basketball team during my junior year. I wasn't cut because of my skills. The coaches knew I was one of the best players they had, and that I loved the game. Johnny and I played it night and day. Our entire friendship was based on basketball, but because I was angry at the coaches for how they used me on the JV team the year before, I didn't attend summer workouts, and they took that as a lack of commitment to the team. They didn't know or care that when they cut me, they'd eliminated any incentive I'd had to keep my GPA up, which I'd barely managed to do through cheating anyway. Now, I had no good reason to attend school. At least that's what I thought, because I was clueless about the emphasis that the military places on education. I figured they'd take anybody. Two incidents convinced me otherwise and inspired me to change.

The first was when I failed the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery test (ASVAB) during my junior year. The ASVAB is the armed forces version of the SATs. It's a standardized test that allows the military to assess your current knowledge and future potential for learning at the same time, and I showed up for that test prepared to do what I did best: cheat. I'd been copying on every test, in every class, for years, but when I took my seat for the ASVAB I was shocked to see that the people seated to my right and left had different tests than I did. I had to go it alone and scored a 20 out of a possible 99 points. The absolute minimum standard to be admitted to the Air Force is only 36, and I couldn't even get there.

The second sign that I needed to change arrived with a postmark just before school let out for the summer after junior year. My mother was still in her emotional black hole after Wilmoth's murder, and her coping mechanism was to take on as much as possible. She worked full-time at DePauw University and taught night classes at Indiana State University because if she stopped hustling long enough to think, she would realize the reality of her life. She kept it moving, was never around, and never asked to see my grades. After the first semester of our junior year, I remember Johnny and me bringing home Fs and Ds. We spent two hours doctoring the ink. We turned Fs into Bs and Ds into Cs, and were laughing the whole time. I actually remember feeling a perverse pride in being able to show my fake

grades to my mother, but she never even asked to see them. She took my word for it.



000940577 1992-93 GOGGINS, DAVID

CUM-	1.43592		
PREVIOUS CREDITS-		21.000	
GEOMETRY	D+	1.000	SM1
ENGLISH 11	D	1.000	SM1
U.S.HIST/MODERN	F		SM1
ELECTRONICS I	D+	1.000	SM1
PHYS. SCIENCE	C-	1.000	SM1
TOTAL CREDITS-		25.000	
Rank:	211 Of	255	

Junior year transcript

We lived parallel lives in the same house, and since I was more or less raising myself, I stopped listening to her. In fact, about ten days before the letter arrived, she'd kicked me out because I refused to come home from a party before curfew. She told me that if I didn't, I shouldn't come home at all.

In my mind, I had already been living by myself for several years. I made my own meals, cleaned my own clothes. I wasn't angry at her. I was cocky and figured I didn't need her anymore. I stayed out that night, and for the next week and a half I crashed at Johnny's place or with other friends. Eventually the day came when I'd spent my last dollar. By chance, she called me at Johnny's that morning and told me about a letter from school. It said I'd missed over a quarter of the year due to unexcused absences, that I had a D average, and unless I showed significant improvement in my GPA and attendance during my senior year, I would not graduate. She wasn't emotional about it. She was more exhausted than exasperated.

"I'll come home and get the note," I said.

"No need for that," she replied, "I just wanted you to know you were flunking out."

I showed up on her doorstep later that day with my stomach growling. I didn't ask for forgiveness and she didn't demand an apology. She just left the door open and walked away. I stepped into the kitchen and made myself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She passed me the letter without saying a word. I read it in my room where the walls were papered over with layers of Michael Jordan and special ops posters. Inspiration for twin passions slipping through my fingers.

That night, after taking a shower, I wiped the steam away from our corroded bathroom mirror and took a good look. I didn't like who I saw staring back. I was a low-budget thug with no purpose and no future. I felt so disgusted I wanted to punch that idiot in the face and shatter glass. Instead, I lectured him. It was time to get real.

"Look at you," I said. "Why do you think the Air Force wants you? You stand for nothing. You are an embarrassment."

I reached for the shaving cream, smoothed a thin coat over my face, unwrapped a fresh razor and kept talking as I shaved.

"You are an idiot. You read like a third grader. You're a joke! You've never tried hard at anything in your life besides basketball, and you have goals? That's hilarious."

After shaving peach fuzz from my cheeks and chin, I lathered up my scalp. I was desperate for a change. I wanted to become someone new.

"You don't see people in the military sagging their pants. You need to stop talking like a wanna-be-gangster. None of this trash is gonna cut it! No more taking the easy way out! It's time to grow up!"

Steam billowed all around me. It rippled off my skin and poured from my soul. What started as a spontaneous venting session had become a solo intervention.

"It's on you," I said. "Yeah, I know things are messed up. I know what you've been through. I was there, remember! Merry Christmas. Nobody is coming to save you! Not your mommy, not Wilmoth. Nobody! It's up to you!"

By the time I was done talking, I was shaved clean. Water pearled on my scalp, streamed from my forehead, and dripped down the bridge of my nose. I looked different, and for the first time, I'd held myself accountable. A new ritual was born, one that stayed with me for years. It would help me get my grades up, whip my sorry butt into shape, and see me through graduation and into the Air Force.

The ritual was simple. I'd shave my face and scalp every night, get loud, and get real. I set goals, wrote them on Post-It notes, and tagged them to what I now call the Accountability Mirror, because each day I'd hold myself accountable to the goals I'd set. At first my goals involved shaping up my appearance and accomplishing all my chores without having to be asked.

Make your bed like you're in the military every day!

Pull up your pants!

Shave your head every morning!

Cut the grass!

Wash all dishes!

The Accountability Mirror kept me on point from then on, and though I was still young when this strategy came through me, since then I've found it useful for people at any stage in life. You could be on the cusp of retirement, looking to reinvent yourself. Maybe you're going through a bad break-up or have gained weight. Perhaps you're permanently disabled, overcoming some other injury, or are just coming to grips with how much of your life you've wasted, living without purpose. In each case, that negativity you're feeling is your internal desire for change, but change doesn't come easy, and the reason this ritual worked so well for me was because of my tone.

I wasn't fluffy. I was raw because that was the only way to get myself right. That summer between my junior and senior year in high school I was afraid. I was insecure. I wasn't a smart kid. I'd blown off all accountability for my entire teenage existence, and actually thought I was getting over on all the adults in my life, getting over on the system. I'd duped myself into a negative feedback loop of cheating and scamming that on the surface looked

like advancement until I hit a brick wall called reality. That night when I came home and read the letter from my school, there was no denying the truth, and I delivered it hard.

I didn't dance around and say, "Geez, David, you are not taking your education very seriously." No, I had to own it in the raw because the only way we can change is to be real with ourselves. If you don't know anything and have never taken school seriously, then say, "I'm dumb!" Tell yourself that you need to get to work because you're falling behind in life!

If you look in the mirror and you see a fat person, don't tell yourself that you need to lose a couple of pounds. Tell the truth. You're fat! It's okay. Just say you're fat if you're fat. The dirty mirror that you see every day is going to tell you the truth every time, so why are you still lying to yourself? So you can feel better for a few minutes and stay the same? If you're fat you need to change the fact that you're fat because it's very unhealthy. I know because I've been there.

If you have worked for thirty years doing the same stupid job you've hated day in and day out because you were afraid to quit and take a risk, you've been living like a coward. Period, point blank. Tell yourself the truth! That you've wasted enough time, and that you have other dreams that will take courage to realize, so you don't die a coward.

Call yourself out!

Nobody likes to hear the hard truth. Individually and as a culture, we avoid what we need to hear most. This world is messed up, there are major problems in our society. We are still dividing ourselves up along racial and cultural lines, and people don't have the stomach to hear it! The truth is racism and bigotry still exist and some people are so thin-skinned they refuse to admit that. To this day, many in Brazil claim that there is no racism in their small town. That's why I have to give Kirk Freeman props. When I called him in the spring of 2018, he remembered what I went through very clearly. He's one of the few who isn't afraid of the truth.

But if you are *the only*, and you aren't stuck in some real-world genocidal twilight zone, you'd better get real too. Your life is not messed up because of

overt racists or hidden systemic racism. You aren't missing out on opportunities, making no money, and getting evicted because of America or Donald Trump or because your ancestors were slaves or because some people hate immigrants or Jews or harass women or believe gay people are going to hell. If any of that stuff is stopping you from excelling in life, I've got some news. *You are stopping you!*

You are giving up instead of getting hard! Tell the truth about the real reasons for your limitations and you will turn that negativity, which is real, into jet fuel. Those odds stacked against you will become a runway!

There is no more time to waste. Hours and days evaporate like creeks in the desert. That's why it's okay to be cruel to yourself as long as you realize you're doing it to become better. We all need thicker skin to improve in life. Being soft when you look in the mirror isn't going to inspire the wholesale changes we need to shift our present and open up our future.

The morning after that first session with the Accountability Mirror, I trashed the shag steering wheel and the fuzzy dice. I tucked my shirt in and wore my pants with a belt, and, once school started up again, I stopped eating at my lunch table. For the first time, being liked and acting cool were a waste of my time, and instead of eating with all the popular kids, I found my own table and ate alone.

Mind you, the rest of my progress could not be described as a blink-and-you'll-miss-it metamorphosis. Lady Luck did not suddenly show up, run me a hot soapy bath, and kiss me like she loved me. In fact, the only reason I didn't become just another statistic is because, at the last possible moment, I got to work.

During my senior year in high school, all I cared about was working out, playing basketball, and studying, and it was the Accountability Mirror that kept me motivated to keep pushing toward something better. I woke up before dawn and started going to the YMCA most mornings at 5 a.m. before school to hit the weights. I ran all the time, usually around the local golf course after dark. One night I ran thirteen miles—the most I'd ever run in my entire life. On that run I came to a familiar intersection. It was the same street where that redneck had pulled a gun on me. I avoided it and ran on,

covering a half mile in the opposite direction before something told me to turn back. When I arrived at that intersection a second time, I stopped and contemplated it. I was scared stiff of that street, my heart was leaping from my chest, which is exactly why I suddenly started charging down its throat.

Within seconds, two snarling dogs got loose and chased me as the woods leaned in on both sides. It was all I could do to stay a step ahead of the beasts. I kept expecting that truck to reappear and run me down, like some scene from Mississippi circa 1965, but I kept running, faster and faster, until I was breathless. Eventually the hounds gave up and loped off, and it was just me, the rhythm and steam of my breath, and that deep country quiet. It was cleansing. By the time I turned back, my fear was gone. I owned that street.

From then on, I brainwashed myself into craving discomfort. If it was raining, I would go run. Whenever it started snowing, my mind would say, *Get your running shoes on.* Sometimes I wussed out and had to deal with it at the Accountability Mirror. But facing that mirror, facing myself, motivated me to fight through uncomfortable experiences, and, as a result, I became tougher. And being tough and resilient helped me meet my goals.

Nothing was as hard for me as learning. The kitchen table became my all-day, all-night study hall. After I'd failed the ASVAB a second time, my mother realized that I was serious about the Air Force, so she found me a tutor who helped me figure out a system I could use to learn. That system was memorization. I couldn't learn just by scratching a few notes and memorizing those. I had to read a textbook and write each page down in my notebook. Then do it again a second and third time. That's how knowledge stuck to the mirror of my mind. Not through learning, but through transcription, memorization, and recall.

I did that for English. I did that for history. I wrote out and memorized formulas for algebra. If my tutor took an hour to teach me a lesson, I had to go back over my notes from that session for six hours to lock it in. My personal study hall schedule and goals became Post-It notes on my Accountability Mirror, and guess what happened? I developed an obsession for learning.

Over six months I went from having a fourth grade reading level to that of a senior in high school. My vocabulary mushroomed. I wrote out thousands of flash cards and went over them for hours, days, and weeks. I did the same for mathematical formulas. Part of it was survival instinct. I sure wasn't going to get into college based on academics, and though I was a starter on the varsity basketball team my senior year, no college scouts knew my name. All I knew was that I had to get out of Brazil, Indiana; that the military was my best chance; and to get there I had to pass the ASVAB. On my third try, I met the minimum standard for the Air Force.

Living with purpose changed everything for me—at least in the short term. During my senior year in high school, studying and working out gave my mind so much energy that hate flaked from my soul like used-up snakeskin. The resentment I held toward the racists in Brazil, the emotion that had dominated me and was burning me up inside, dissipated because I'd finally considered the source.

I looked at the people who were making me feel uncomfortable and realized how uncomfortable they were in their own skin. To make fun of or try to intimidate someone they didn't even know based on race alone was a clear indication that something was very wrong with them, not me. But when you have no confidence it becomes easy to value other people's opinions, and I was valuing *everyone's* opinion without considering the minds that generated them. That sounds silly, but it's an easy trap to fall into, especially when you are insecure on top of being *the only*. As soon as I made that connection, being upset with them was not worth my time. Because if I was gonna kick their butt in life, and I was, I had way too much to do. Each insult or dismissive gesture became more fuel for the engine revving inside me.

By the time I graduated, I knew that the confidence I'd managed to develop didn't come from a perfect family or God-given talent. It came from personal accountability which brought me self-respect, and self-respect will always light a way forward.

For me, it lit up a path straight out of Brazil, forever. But I didn't get away clean. When you transcend a place in time that has challenged you to the core, it can feel like you've won a war. Don't fall for that mirage. Your past, your deepest fears, have a way of going dormant before springing back to

life at double strength. You must remain vigilant. For me, the Air Force revealed that I was still soft inside. I was still insecure.

I wasn’t yet hard of bone and mind.

CHALLENGE #2

It's time to come eyeball to eyeball with yourself, and get raw and real. This is not a self-love tactic. You can't fluff it. Don't massage your ego. This is about abolishing the ego and taking the first step toward becoming the real you!

I tacked Post-It notes on my Accountability Mirror, and I'll ask you to do the same. Digital devices won't work. Write all your insecurities, dreams, and goals on Post-Its and tag up your mirror. If you need more education, remind yourself that you need to start working your butt off because you aren't smart enough! Period, point blank. If you look in the mirror and see someone who is obviously overweight, that means you're fat! Own it! It's okay to be unkind with yourself in these moments because we need thicker skin to improve in life.

Whether it's a career goal (quit my job, start a business), a lifestyle goal (lose weight, get more active), or an athletic one (run my first 5K, 10K, or marathon), you need to be truthful with yourself about where you are and the necessary steps it will take to achieve those goals, day by day. Each step, each necessary point of self-improvement, should be written as its own note. That means you have to do some research and break it all down. For example, if you are trying to lose forty pounds, your first Post-It may be to lose two pounds in the first week. Once that goal is achieved, remove the note and post the next goal of two to five pounds until your ultimate goal is realized.

Whatever your goal, you'll need to hold yourself accountable for the small steps it will take to get there. Self-improvement takes dedication and self-discipline. The dirty mirror you see every day is going to reveal the truth. Stop ignoring it. Use it to your advantage. If you feel it, post an image of yourself staring into your tagged-up Accountability Mirror on social media with the hashtags #canthurtme #accountabilitymirror.

CHAPTER THREE

THE IMPOSSIBLE TASK

IT WAS PAST MIDNIGHT AND THE STREETS WERE DEAD. I STEERED MY PICKUP TRUCK into another empty parking lot and killed the engine. In the quiet all I could hear were the eerie halogen hum of the streetlamps and the scratch of my pen as I checked off another franchise feed trough. The latest in a never-ending series of fast food and dine-in industrial kitchens that received more nightly visitors than you'd care to know about. That's why guys like me showed up to places like this in the wee hours. I stuffed my clipboard under the armrest, grabbed my gear, and began restocking rat traps.

They're everywhere, those little green boxes. Look around almost any restaurant and you'll find them, hidden in plain sight. My job was to bait, move, or replace them. Sometimes I hit pay dirt and found a rat carcass, which never caught me by surprise. You know death when you smell it.

This wasn't the mission I signed up for when I enlisted in the Air Force with dreams of joining a Pararescue unit. Back then I was nineteen years old and weighed 175 pounds. By the time I was discharged four years later, I had ballooned to nearly 300 pounds and was on a different kind of patrol. At that weight, even bending down to bait the traps took effort. I was so fat I had to sew an athletic sock into the crotch of my work pants so they wouldn't split when I dropped to one knee. For real. I was a sorry sight.

With the exterior handled, it was time to venture indoors, which was its own wilderness. I had keys to almost every restaurant in this part of Indianapolis, and their alarm codes too. Once inside, I pumped my handheld silver canister full of poison and placed a fumigation mask over my face. I looked

like a space alien in that thing, with its dual filters jutting out from my mouth, protecting me from toxic fumes.

Protecting me.

If there was anything I liked about that job it was the stealth nature of working late, moving in and out of inky shadows. I loved that mask for the same reason. It was vital, and not because of any insecticide. I needed it because it made it impossible for anyone to see me, especially me. Even if by chance I caught my own reflection in a glass doorway or on a stainless steel countertop, it wasn't me I was seeing. It was some janky, low-budget storm trooper. The kind of guy who would palm yesterday's brownies on his way out the door.

It wasn't me.

Sometimes I'd see roaches scurry for cover when I flipped the lights on to spray down the counters and the tiled floors. I'd see dead rodents stuck to sticky traps I'd laid on previous visits. I bagged and dumped them. I checked the lighting systems I'd installed to catch moths and flies and cleaned those out too. Within a half hour I was gone, rolling on to the next restaurant. I had a dozen stops every night and had to hit them all before dawn.

Maybe this kind of gig sounds disgusting to you. When I think back I'm disgusted too, but not because of the job. It was honest work. Necessary. Heck, in Air Force boot camp I got on the wrong side of my first drill sergeant and she made me the latrine queen. It was my job to keep the latrines in our barracks shining. She told me that if she found one speck of dirt in that latrine at any moment I would get recycled back to day one and join a new flight. I took my discipline. I was happy just to be in the Air Force, and I cleaned that latrine with pride. You could have eaten off that floor. Four years later, the guy who was so energized by opportunity that he was excited to clean latrines was gone and I didn't feel anything at all.

They say there's always light at the end of the tunnel, but not once your eyes adjust to the darkness, and that's what happened to me. I was numb. Numb to my life, miserable in my marriage, and I'd accepted that reality. I was a wanna-be warrior turned cockroach sniper on the graveyard shift. Just

another zombie selling his time on earth, going through the motions. In fact, the only insight I had into my job at that time was that it was actually a step up.

When I was first discharged from the military I got a job at St. Vincent's Hospital. I worked security from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. for minimum wage and cleared about $700 a month. Every now and then I'd see an Ecolab truck pull up. We were on the exterminator's regular rotation, and it was my job to unlock the hospital kitchen for him. One night we got to talking, and he mentioned that Ecolab was hiring, and that the job came with a free truck and no boss looking over your shoulder. It was also a 35 percent pay raise. I didn't think about the health risks. I didn't think at all. I was taking what was being offered. I was on that spoon-fed path of least resistance, letting dominoes fall on my head, and it was killing me slowly. But there's a difference between being numb and clueless. In the dark night there weren't a lot of distractions to get me out of my head, and I knew that I had tipped the first domino. I'd started the chain reaction that put me on Ecolab duty.

The Air Force should have been my way out. That first drill sergeant did end up recycling me into a different unit, and in my new flight I became a star recruit. I was 6'2" and weighed about 175 pounds. I was fast and strong, our unit was the best flight in all of boot camp, and soon I was training for my dream job: Air Force Pararescue. We were guardian angels with fangs, trained to drop from the sky behind enemy lines and pull downed pilots out of harm's way. I was one of the best guys in that training. I was one of the best at push-ups, and the best at sit-ups, flutter kicks, and running. I was one point behind honor grad, but there was something they didn't talk about in the lead-up to Pararescue training: water confidence. That's a nice name for a course where they try to drown your butt for weeks, and I was very uncomfortable in the water.

Although my mom got us off the public dole and out of subsidized housing within three years, she still didn't have extra cash for swim lessons, and we avoided pools. It wasn't until I attended Boy Scout camp when I was twelve years old that I was finally confronted with swimming. Leaving Buffalo allowed me to join the Scouts, and camp was my best opportunity to score all the merit badges I'd need to stay on the path to becoming an Eagle Scout. One morning it was time to qualify for the swimming merit badge and that

meant a one-mile swim in a lake course, marked off with buoys. All the other kids jumped in and started getting after it, and if I wanted to save face I had to pretend I knew what I was doing, so I followed them into the lake. I dog paddled the best I could, but kept swallowing water so I flipped onto my back and ended up swimming the entire mile with a screwed-up backstroke I'd improvised on the fly. Merit badge secured.

Boy Scouts

When it came time to take the swim test to get into Pararescue, I needed to be able to swim for real. This was a timed, 500-meter freestyle swim, and even at nineteen years old I didn't know how to swim freestyle. So I went to Barnes & Noble, bought *Swimming for Dummies*, studied the diagrams, and practiced in the pool every day. I hated putting my face in the water, but I'd manage for one stroke, then two, and before long I could swim an entire lap.

I wasn't as buoyant as most swimmers. Whenever I stopped swimming, even for a moment, I'd start to sink, which made my heart pound with panic, and my increased tension just made it worse. Eventually, I passed that swim test,

but there is a difference between being competent and comfortable in the water, another big gap from comfortable to confident, and when you can't float like most people, water confidence does not come easy. Sometimes it doesn't come at all.

In Pararescue training, water confidence is part of the ten-week program, and it's filled with specific evolutions designed to test how well we perform in the water under stress. One of the worst evolutions for me was called Bobbing. The class was divided into groups of five, lined up from gutter to gutter in the shallow end, and fully kitted up. Our backs were strapped with twin eighty-liter tanks made from galvanized steel, and we wore sixteen-pound weight belts too. We were loaded down, which would have been fine, except in this evolution we weren't allowed to breathe from those tanks. Instead, we were told to walk backward down the slope of the pool from the three-foot section to the deep end, about ten feet down, and on that slow walk into position, my mind swirled with doubt and negativity.

What are you doing here? This isn't for you! You can't swim! You're an imposter and they will find you out!

Time slowed down and those seconds seemed like minutes. My diaphragm lurched, trying to force air into my lungs. Theoretically, I knew that relaxation was the key to all the underwater evolutions, but I was too terrified to let go. My jaw clenched as tight as my fists. My head throbbed as I worked to stave off panic. Finally, we were all in position and it was time to start bobbing. That meant pushing up from the bottom to the surface (without the benefit of finning), getting a gulp of air, and sinking back down. It wasn't easy, getting up fully loaded, but at least I was able to breathe, and that first breath was a salvation. Oxygen flooded my system and I started to relax until the instructor yelled "Switch!" That was our cue to take our fins from our feet, place them on our hands, and use one pull with our arms to propel ourselves to the surface. We were allowed to push off the floor of the pool, but we couldn't kick. We did that for five minutes.

Shallow water and surface blackouts aren't uncommon during water confidence training. It goes along with stressing the body and limiting oxygen intake. With the flippers on my hands I'd barely get my face high enough out of the water to breathe, and in between I was working hard and

burning oxygen. And when you burn too much too fast, your brain shuts down and you will black out. Our instructors called that, “meeting the wizard.” As the clock ticked, I could see stars materializing in my peripheral vision and felt the wizard creeping close.

I passed that evolution, and soon, finning with my arms or feet became easy for me. What stayed hard from beginning to end was one of our simplest tasks: treading water without our hands. We had to keep our hands and our chins high above the water, using only our legs, which we’d swirl in a blender-like motion, for three minutes. That doesn’t sound like much time, and for most of the class it was easy. For me, it was nearly impossible. My chin kept hitting the water, which meant the time would start again from triple zero. All around me, my classmates were so comfortable their legs were barely moving, while mine were whirring at top speed, and I still couldn’t get half as high as those white boys who looked to be defying gravity.

Every day it was another humiliation in the pool. Not that I was embarrassed publicly. I passed all the evolutions, but inside I was suffering. Each night, I’d fixate on the next day’s task and become so terrified I couldn’t sleep, and soon my fear morphed into resentment toward my classmates who, in my mind, had it easy, which dredged up my past.

I was *the only* black man in my unit, which reminded me of my childhood in rural Indiana, and the harder the water confidence training became, the higher those dark waters would rise until it seemed I was also being drowned from the inside out. While the rest of my class was sleeping, that potent cocktail of fear and rage thrummed through my veins and my nocturnal fixations became their own kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. One where failure was inevitable because my unchecked fear was unleashing something I couldn’t control: the quitting mind.

It all came to a head six weeks into training with the “buddy breathing” exercise. We partnered up, each pair gripping one another by the forearm, and took turns breathing through just one snorkel. Meanwhile, the instructors thrashed us, trying to separate us from our snorkel. All of this was supposed to be happening at or near the surface, but I was negatively buoyant, which meant I was sinking into the middle waters of the deep end, dragging my

partner down with me. He'd take a breath and pass the snorkel down to me. I'd swim to the surface, exhale and attempt to clear the water from our snorkel and get a clean breath before passing it back to him, but the instructors made that almost impossible. I'd usually only clear the tube halfway, and inhale more water than air. From the jump, I was operating from an oxygen deficit while fighting to stay near the surface.

In military training, it's the instructors' job to identify weak links and challenge them to perform or quit, and they could tell I was struggling. In the pool that day, one of them was always in my face, yelling and thrashing me, while I choked, trying and failing to gulp air through a narrow tube to stave off the wizard. I went under and remember looking up at the rest of the class, splayed out like serene starfish on the surface. Calm as can be, they passed their snorkels back and forth with ease, while I fumed. I know now that my instructor was just doing his job, but back then I thought, *This idiot's not giving me a fair shot!*

I passed that evolution too, but I still had eleven more evolutions and four more weeks of water confidence training to go. It made sense. We would be jumping out of airplanes over water. We needed it. I just didn't want to do it anymore, and the next morning, I was offered a way out I hadn't seen coming.

Weeks earlier, we'd had our blood drawn during a med check, and the doctors discovered I carried the Sickle Cell Trait. I didn't have the disease, Sickle Cell Anemia, but I had the trait, which was believed at the time to increase the risk of sudden, exercise-related death due to cardiac arrest. The Air Force didn't want me dropping dead in the middle of an evolution and pulled me out of training on a medical. I pretended to take the news hard, as if my dream was being ripped away. I made a big act of being upset and ticked off, but inside I was ecstatic.

Later that week the doctors reversed their decision. They didn't specifically say it was safe for me to continue, but they said the trait wasn't yet well understood and allowed me to decide for myself. When I reported back to training the Master Sergeant (MSgt) informed me that I'd missed too much time and that if I wanted to continue I would have to start over from day one,

week one. Instead of less than four weeks, I'd have to endure another ten weeks of the terror, rage, and insomnia that came with water confidence.

These days, that kind of thing wouldn't even register on my radar. You tell me to run longer and harder than everyone else just to get a fair shake, I'd say, "Roger that," and keep moving, but back then I was still half-baked. Physically I was strong, but I was not even close to mastering my mind.

The MSgt stared at me, awaiting my response. I couldn't even look him in the eye when I said, "You know what, Master Sergeant, the doctor doesn't know much about this Sickle Cell thing, and it's bothering me."

He nodded, emotionless, and signed the papers pulling me out of the program for good. He cited Sickle Cell, and on paper I didn't quit, but I knew the truth. If I had been the guy I am today, I wouldn't have cared less about Sickle Cell. I still have the Sickle Cell Trait. You don't just get rid of it, but back then an obstacle had appeared, and I'd folded.

I moved on to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, told my friends and family that I was forced from the program on a medical, and served out my four years in the Tactical Air Control Party (TAC-P), which works with some special operations units. I trained to liaise between ground units and air support—fast movers like F-15s and F-16s—behind enemy lines. It was challenging work with intelligent people, but sadly I was never proud of it and didn't see the opportunities offered because I knew I was a quitter who had let fear dictate my future.

I buried my shame in the gym and at the kitchen table. I got into powerlifting and layered on the mass. I ate and worked out. Worked out and ate. In my last days in the Air Force I weighed 255 pounds. After my discharge I continued to bulk up with both muscle and fat until I weighed nearly 300 pounds. I wanted to be big because being big hid David Goggins. I was able to tuck this 175-pound person into those twenty-one-inch biceps and that flabby belly. I grew a burly mustache and was intimidating to everyone who saw me, but inside I knew I was a fraud, and that's a haunting feeling.

After Air Force Boot Camp at 175 lbs. in 1994

290 lbs. at the beach in 1999

* * *

The morning I began to take charge of my destiny started out like any other. When the clock struck 7 a.m., my Ecolab shift ended and I hit the Steak ’n Shake drive-thru to score a large chocolate milkshake. Next stop, 7-Eleven, for a box of Hostess mini chocolate doughnuts. I gobbled those on my forty-five-minute drive home, to a beautiful apartment on a golf course in pretty Carmel, Indiana, which I shared with my wife, Pam, and her daughter. Remember that Pizza Hut incident? I married that girl. I married a girl whose dad called me a nigger. What does that say about me?

We couldn’t afford that life. Pam wasn’t even working, but in those credit-card-debt-loading days, nothing made much sense. I was doing 70 mph on the highway, mainlining sugar and listening to a local classic rock station when *Sound of Silence* poured from the stereo. Simon & Garfunkel’s words echoed like truth.

Darkness was a friend indeed. I worked in the dark, hid my true self from friends and strangers. Nobody would have believed how numb and afraid I was back then because I looked like a beast that no one would dare mess with, but my mind wasn’t right, and my soul was weighed down by too much trauma and failure. I had every excuse in the world to be a loser, and used them all. My life was crumbling, and Pam dealt with that by fleeing the scene. Her parents still lived in Brazil, just seventy miles away. We spent most of our time apart.

I arrived home from work around 8 a.m., and the phone rang as soon as I walked in the door. It was my mother. She knew my routine.

“Come on over for your staple,” she said.

My staple was a breakfast buffet for one, the likes of which few could put down in a single sitting. Think: eight Pillsbury cinnamon rolls, a half-dozen scrambled eggs, a half-pound of bacon, and two bowls of Fruity Pebbles. Don’t forget, I had just decimated a box of donuts and a chocolate shake. I

didn’t even have to respond. She knew I was coming. Food was my drug of choice and I always sucked up every last crumb.

I hung up, flipped on the television, and stomped down the hall to the shower, where I could hear a narrator’s voice filter through the steam. I caught snippets. “Navy SEALs…toughest…the world.” I wrapped a towel around my waist and rushed back into the living room. I was so big, the towel barely covered my fat butt, but I sat down on the couch and didn’t move for thirty minutes.

The show followed Basic Underwater Demolition SEAL (BUD/S) Training Class 224 through Hell Week: the most arduous series of tasks in the most physically demanding training in the military. I watched men sweat and suffer as they tore through muddy obstacle courses, ran on the soft sand holding logs overhead, and shivered in icy surf. Sweat pearled on my scalp, I was literally on the edge of my seat as I saw guys—some of the strongest of them all—ring the bell and quit. Made sense. Only one-third of the men who begin BUD/S make it through Hell Week, and in all of my time in Pararescue training, I couldn’t remember feeling as awful as these men looked. They were swollen, chafed, sleep-deprived, and dead on their feet, and I was jealous of them.

The longer I watched the more certain I became that there were answers buried in all that suffering. Answers that I needed. More than once the camera panned over the endless frothing ocean, and each time I felt pathetic. The SEALs were everything I wasn’t. They were about pride, dignity, and the type of excellence that came from bathing in the fire, getting beat down, and going back for more, again and again. They were the human equivalent of the hardest, sharpest sword you could imagine. They sought out the flame, took the pounding for as long as necessary, longer even, until they were fearless and deadly. They weren’t motivated. They were driven. The show ended with graduation. Twenty-two proud men stood shoulder to shoulder in their dress whites before the camera pushed in on their Commanding Officer.

“In a society where mediocrity is too often the standard and too often rewarded,” he said, “there is intense fascination with men who detest mediocrity, who refuse to define themselves in conventional terms, and who seek to transcend traditionally recognized human capabilities. This is exactly

the type of person BUD/S is meant to find. The man who finds a way to complete each and every task to the best of his ability. The man who will adapt and overcome any and all obstacles."

In that moment it felt as though the Commanding Officer was talking directly to me, but after the show ended I walked back to the bathroom, faced the mirror, and stared myself down. I looked every bit of 300 pounds. I was everything all the haters back home said I would be: uneducated, with no real world skills, zero discipline, and a dead-end future. Mediocrity would have been a major promotion. I was at the bottom of the barrel of life, pooling in the dregs, but, for the first time in way too long, I was awake.

I barely spoke to my mother during breakfast, and only ate half my staple because my mind was on unfinished business. I'd always wanted to join an elite special operations unit, and beneath all the rolls of flesh and layers of failure, that desire was still there. Now it was coming back to life, thanks to a chance viewing of a show that continued to work on me like a virus moving cell to cell, taking over.

It became an obsession I couldn't shake. Every morning after work for almost three weeks, I called active duty recruiters in the Navy and told them my story. I called offices all over the country. I said I was willing to move as long as they could get me to SEAL training. Everyone turned me down. Most weren't interested in candidates with prior service. One local recruiting office was intrigued and wanted to meet in person, but when I got there they laughed in my face. I was way too heavy, and in their eyes I was just another delusional pretender. I left that meeting feeling the same way.

After calling all the active duty recruiting offices I could find, I dialed the local unit of the Naval reserves, and spoke to Petty Officer Steven Schaljo for the first time. Schaljo had worked with multiple F-14 Squadrons as an electrician and instructor at NAS Miramar for eight years before joining the recruitment staff in San Diego, where the SEALs train. He worked day and night and rose quickly in the ranks. His move to Indianapolis came with a promotion and the challenge of finding Navy recruits in the middle of the corn. He'd only been on the job in Indy for ten days by the time I called, and if I'd reached anyone else you probably wouldn't be reading this book. But through a combination of dumb luck and stubborn persistence I found one of

the finest recruiters in the Navy, a guy whose favorite task was discovering diamonds in the rough—prior service guys like me who were looking to re-enlist and hoping to land in special operations.

Our initial conversation didn't last long. He said he could help me and that I should come in to meet in person. That sounded familiar. I grabbed my keys and drove straight to his office, but didn't get my hopes too high. By the time I arrived a half-hour later he was already on the phone with BUD/S administration.

Every sailor in that office—all of them white—were surprised to see me except Schaljo. If I was a heavyweight, Schaljo was a lightweight at 5'7", but he didn't seem fazed by my size, at least not at first. He was outgoing and warm, like any salesman, though I could tell he had some pit bull in him. He led me down a hall to weigh me in, and while standing on the scale I eyed a weight chart pinned to the wall. At my height, the maximum allowable weight for the Navy was 191 pounds. I held my breath, sucked in my gut as much as I could, and puffed out my chest in a sorry attempt to stave off the humiliating moment where he'd let me down easy. That moment never came.

"You're a big boy," Schaljo said, smiling and shaking his head, as he scratched 297 pounds on a chart in his file folder. "The Navy has a program that allows recruits in the reserves to become active duty. That's what we'll use for this. It's being phased out at the end of the year, so we need to get you classed up before then. Point is, you have some work to do, but you knew that." I followed his eyes to the weight chart and checked it again. He nodded, smiled, patted me on the shoulder, and left me to face my truth.

I had less than three months to lose 106 pounds.

It sounded like an impossible task, which is one reason I didn't quit my job. The other was the ASVAB. That nightmare test had come back to life like Frankenstein's monster. I'd passed it once before to enlist in the Air Force, but to qualify for BUD/S I'd have to score much higher. For two weeks I studied all day and zapped pests each night. I wasn't working out yet. Serious weight loss would have to wait.

I took the test on a Saturday afternoon. The following Monday I called Schaljo. “Welcome to the Navy,” he said. He downloaded the good news first. I’d done exceptionally well on some sections and was now officially a reservist, but I’d only scored a 44 on Mechanical Comprehension. To qualify for BUD/S I needed a 50. I’d have to retake the entire test in five weeks.

These days Steven Schaljo likes to call our chance connection “fate.” He said he could sense my drive the first moment we spoke, and that he believed in me from the jump, which is why my weight wasn’t an issue for him, but after that ASVAB test I was full of doubt. So maybe what happened later that night was also a form of fate, or a much needed dose of divine intervention.

I’m not going to drop the name of the restaurant where it went down because if I did you’d never eat there again and I’d have to hire a lawyer. Just know, this place was a disaster. I checked the traps outside first and found a dead rat. Inside, there were more dead rodents—a mouse and two rats—on the sticky traps, and roaches in the garbage which hadn’t been emptied. I shook my head, got down on my knees under the sink, and sprayed up through a narrow gap in the wall. I didn’t know it yet, but I’d found their nesting column and when the poison hit they started to scatter.

Within seconds there was a skittering across the back of my neck. I brushed it off, and craned my neck to see a storm of roaches raining down to the kitchen floor from an open panel in the ceiling. I’d hit the motherlode of cockroaches and the worst infestation I ever saw on the job for Ecolab. They kept coming. Roaches landed on my shoulders and my head. The floor was writhing with them.

I left my canister in the kitchen, grabbed the sticky traps, and burst outside. I needed fresh air and more time to figure out how I was going to clear the restaurant of vermin. I considered my options on my way to the dumpster to trash the rodents, opened the lid, and found a live raccoon, hissing mad. He bared his yellow teeth and lunged at me. I slammed the dumpster shut, exasperated.

I mean, seriously, when was enough truly going to be enough? Was I willing to let my sorry present become a screwed-up future? How much longer

would I wait, how many more years would I burn, wondering if there was some greater purpose out there waiting for me? I knew right then that if I didn't make a stand and start walking the path of most resistance, I would end up in this mental rathole forever.

I didn't go back inside that restaurant. I didn't collect my gear. I started my truck, stopped for a chocolate shake—my comfort tea at that time—and drove home. It was still dark when I pulled up. I didn't care. I stripped off my work clothes, put on some sweats and laced up my running shoes. I hadn't run in over a year, but I hit the streets ready to go four miles.

I lasted 400 yards. My heart raced. I was so dizzy I had to sit down on the edge of the golf course to catch my breath before making the slow walk back to my house, where my melted shake was waiting to comfort me in yet another failure. I grabbed it, slurped, and slumped into my sofa. My eyes welled with tears.

Who did I think I was? I was born nothing, I'd proven nothing, and I still wasn't worth anything. David Goggins, a Navy SEAL? Yeah, right. What a pipe dream. I couldn't even run down the block for five minutes. All my fears and insecurities I'd bottled up for my entire life started raining down on my head. I was on the verge of giving in and giving up for good. That's when I found my old, beat up VHS copy of Rocky (the one I'd had for fifteen years), slid it into the machine, and fast forwarded to my favorite scene: Round 14.

The original Rocky is still one of my all-time favorite films because it's about a know-nothing journeyman fighter living in poverty with no prospects. Even his own trainer won't work with him. Then, out of the blue, he's given a title shot with the champion, Apollo Creed, the most feared fighter in history, a man that has knocked out every opponent he's ever faced. All Rocky wants is to be the first to go the distance with Creed. That alone will make him someone he could be proud of for the first time in his life.

The fight is closer than anyone anticipated, bloody and intense, and by the middle rounds Rocky is taking on more and more punishment. He's losing the fight, and in Round 14 he gets knocked down early, but pops right back

up in the center of the ring. Apollo moves in, stalking him like a lion. He throws sharp left jabs, hits a slow-footed Rocky with a staggering combination, lands a punishing right hook, and another. He backs Rocky into a corner. Rocky's legs are jelly. He can't even muster the strength to raise his arms in defense. Apollo slams another right hook into the side of Rocky's head, then a left hook, and a vicious right-handed uppercut that puts Rocky down.

Apollo retreats to the opposite corner with his arms held high, but even face down in that ring, Rocky doesn't give up. As the referee begins his ten-count, Rocky squirms toward the ropes. Mickey, his own trainer, urges him to stay down, but Rocky isn't hearing it. He pulls himself up to one knee, then all fours. The referee hits six as Rocky grabs the ropes and rises up. The crowd roars, and Apollo turns to see him still standing. Rocky waves Apollo over. The champ's shoulders slump in disbelief.

The fight isn't over yet.

I turned off the television and thought about my own life. It was a life devoid of any drive and passion, but I knew if I continued to surrender to my fear and my feelings of inadequacy, I would be allowing them to dictate my future forever. My only other choice was to try to find the power in the emotions that had laid me low, harness and use them to empower me to rise up, which is exactly what I did.

I dumped that shake in the trash, laced up my shoes, and hit the streets again. On my first run, I felt severe pain in my legs and my lungs at a quarter mile. My heart raced and I stopped. This time I felt the same pain, my heart raced like a car running hot, but I ran through it and the pain faded. By the time I bent over to catch my breath, I'd run a full mile.

That's when I first realized that not all physical and mental limitations are real, and that I had a habit of giving up way too soon. I also knew that it would take every ounce of courage and toughness I could muster to pull off the impossible. I was staring at hours, days, and weeks of nonstop suffering. I would have to push myself to the very edge of my mortality. I had to accept the very real possibility that I might die because this time I wouldn't quit, no matter how fast my heart raced and no matter how much pain I was in.

Trouble was there was no battle plan to follow, no blueprint. I had to create one from scratch.

The typical day went something like this. I'd wake up at 4:30 a.m., munch a banana, and hit the ASVAB books. Around 5 a.m., I'd take that book to my stationary bike where I'd sweat and study for two hours. Remember, my body was a mess. I couldn't run multiple miles yet, so I had to burn as many calories as I could on the bike. After that I'd drive over to Carmel High School and jump into the pool for a two-hour swim. From there I hit the gym for a circuit workout that included the bench press, the incline press, and lots of leg exercises. Bulk was the enemy. I needed reps, and I did five or six sets of 100–200 reps each. Then it was back to the stationary bike for two more hours.

I was constantly hungry. Dinner was my one true meal each day, but there wasn't much to it. I ate a grilled or sautéed chicken breast and some sautéed vegetables along with a thimble of rice. After dinner I'd do another two hours on the bike, hit the sack, wake up and do it all over again, knowing the odds were stacked sky high against me. What I was trying to achieve is like a D-student applying to Harvard, or walking into a casino and putting every single dollar you own on a number in roulette and acting as if winning is a foregone conclusion. I was betting everything I had on myself with no guarantees.

I weighed myself twice daily, and within two weeks I'd dropped twenty-five pounds. My progress only improved as I kept grinding, and the weight started peeling off. Ten days later I was at 250, light enough to begin doing push-ups, pull-ups, and to start running my butt off. I'd still wake up, hit the stationary bike, the pool, and the gym, but I also incorporated two-, three-, and four-mile runs. I ditched my running shoes and ordered a pair of Bates Lites, the same boots SEAL candidates wear in BUD/S, and started running in those.

With so much effort, you'd think my nights would have been restful, but they were filled with anxiety. My stomach growled and my mind swirled. I'd dream of complex ASVAB questions and dread the next day's workouts. I was putting out so much, on almost no fuel, that depression became a natural side effect. My splintering marriage was veering toward divorce. Pam made

it very clear that she and my stepdaughter would not be moving to San Diego with me, if by some miracle I could pull this off. They stayed in Brazil most of the time, and when I was all alone in Carmel, I was in turmoil. I felt both worthless and helpless as my endless stream of self-defeating thoughts picked up steam.

When depression smothers you, it blots out all light and leaves you with nothing to cling onto for hope. All you see is negativity. For me, the only way to make it through that was to feed off my depression. I had to flip it and convince myself that all that self-doubt and anxiety was confirmation that I was no longer living an aimless life. My task may turn out to be impossible but at least I was back on a mission.

Some nights, when I was feeling low, I'd call Schaljo. He was always in the office early in the morning and late at night. I didn't confide in him about my depression because I didn't want him to doubt me. I used those calls to pump myself up. I told him how many pounds I dropped and how much work I was putting in, and he reminded me to keep studying for that ASVAB.

Roger that.

I had the Rocky soundtrack on cassette and I'd listen to *Going the Distance* for inspiration. On long bike rides and runs, with those horns blasting in my brain, I'd imagine myself going through BUD/S, diving into cold water, and crushing Hell Week. I was wishing, I was hoping, but by the time I was down to 250, my quest to qualify for the SEALs wasn't a daydream anymore. I had a real chance to accomplish something most people, including myself, thought was impossible. Still, there were bad days. One morning not long after I dipped below 250, I weighed in and had only lost a pound from the day before. I had so much weight to lose I could not afford to plateau. That's all I thought about while running six miles and swimming two. I was exhausted and sore when I arrived in the gym for my typical three-hour circuit.

After rocking over 100 pull-ups in a series of sets, I was back on the bar for a max set with no ceiling. Going in, my goal was to get to twelve but my hands were burning fire as I stretched my chin over the bar for the tenth

time. For weeks, the temptation to pull back had been ever present, and I always refused. That day, however, the pain was too much and after my eleventh pull-up, I gave in, dropped down, and finished my workout, one pull-up shy.

That one rep stayed with me, along with that one pound. I tried to get them out of my head but they wouldn't leave me alone. They taunted me on the drive home, and at my kitchen table while I ate a sliver of grilled chicken and a bland, baked potato. I knew I wouldn't sleep that night unless I did something about it, so I grabbed my keys.

"You cut corners and you are not gonna make it," I said, out loud, as I drove back to the gym. "There are no shortcuts for you, Goggins!"

I did my entire pull-up workout over again. One missed pull-up cost me an extra 250, and there would be similar episodes. Whenever I cut a run or swim short because I was hungry or tired, I'd always go back and beat myself down even harder. That was the only way I could manage the demons in my mind. Either way there would be suffering. I had to choose between physical suffering in the moment, and the mental anguish of wondering if that one missed pull-up, that last lap in the pool, the quarter mile I skipped on the road or trail, would end up costing me an opportunity of a lifetime. It was an easy choice. When it came to the SEALs, I wasn't leaving anything up to chance.

On the eve of the ASVAB, with four weeks to go before training, making weight was no longer a worry. I was already down to 215 pounds and was faster and stronger than I'd ever been. I was running six miles a day, bicycling over twenty miles, and swimming more than two. All of it in the dead of winter. My favorite run was the six-mile Monon trail, an asphalt bike and walking path that laced through the trees in Indianapolis. It was the domain of cyclists and soccer moms with jogging strollers, weekend warriors and seniors. By then Schaljo had passed along the Navy SEAL warning order. It included all the workouts I would be expected to complete during first phase of BUD/S, and I was happy to double them. I knew that 190 men usually class-up for a typical SEAL training and only about forty people make it all the way through. I didn't want to be just one of those forty. I wanted to be the best.

But I had to pass the ASVAB first. I'd been cramming every spare second. If I wasn't working out, I was at my kitchen table, memorizing formulas and cycling through hundreds of vocabulary words. With my physical training going well, all my anxiety stuck to the ASVAB like paper clips to a magnet. This would be my last chance to take the test before my eligibility for the SEALs expired. I wasn't very smart, and based on past academic performance there was no good reason to believe I'd pass with a score high enough to qualify for the SEALs. If I failed, my dream would die, and I'd be floating without purpose once again.

The test was held in a small classroom on Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indianapolis. There were about thirty people there, all of us young. Most were just out of high school. We were each assigned an old-school desktop computer. In the past month, the test had been digitized and I wasn't experienced with computers. I didn't even think I could work the machine let alone answer the questions, but the program proved idiot proof and I settled in.

The ASVAB has ten sections, and I was breezing through until I reached Mechanical Comprehension, my truth serum. Within the hour I would have a decent idea if I'd been lying to myself or if I had the raw stuff necessary to become a SEAL. Whenever a question stumped me, I marked my worksheet with a dash. There were about thirty questions in that section and by the time I completed the test, I'd guessed at least ten times. I needed some of them to go my way or I was out.

After completing the final section, I was prompted to send the entire bundle to the administrator's computer at the front of the room where the score would be tabulated instantly. I peeked over my monitor and saw him sitting there, waiting. I pointed, clicked, and left the room. Buzzing with nervous energy, I paced the parking lot for a few minutes before finally ducking into my Honda Accord, but I didn't start the engine. I couldn't leave.

I sat in the front seat for fifteen minutes with a thousand-yard stare. It would be at least two days before Schaljo would call with my results, but the answer to the riddle that was my future was already solved. I knew exactly where it was, and I had to know the truth. I gathered myself, walked back in, and approached the fortune teller.

“You gotta tell me what I got on this test, man,” I said. He peered up at me, surprised, but he didn’t buckle.

“I’m sorry, son. This is the government. There’s a system for how they do things,” he said. “I didn’t make the rules and I can’t bend them.”

“Sir, you have no idea what this test means to me, to my life. It’s everything!” He looked into my glassy eyes for what felt like five minutes, then turned toward his machine.

“I’m breaking every rule in the book right now,” he said. “Goggins, right?” I nodded and came around behind his seat as he scrolled through files. “There you are. Congratulations, you scored 65. That’s a great score.” He was referencing my overall, but I didn’t care about that. Everything hinged on my getting a 50-spot where it counted most.

“What did I get on mechanical comprehension?” He shrugged, clicked and scrolled, and there it was. My new favorite number glowed on his screen: 50.

“YES!” I shouted. “YES! YES!”

There was still a handful of others taking the test, but this was the happiest moment in my life and I couldn’t stifle it. I kept screaming “YES!” at the top of my lungs. The administrator nearly fell out of his chair and everyone in that room stared at me like I was crazy. If they only knew how crazed I’d been! For two months I’d dedicated my entire existence to this one moment, and I was gonna enjoy it. I rushed to my car and screamed some more.

“YOU FINALLY DID IT, GOGGINS!”

On my drive home I called my mom. She was the one person, aside from Schaljo, who witnessed my metamorphosis. “I did it,” I told her, tears in my eyes. “I did it! I’m going to be a SEAL.”

When Schaljo came to work the next day, he got the news and called me up. He’d sent in my recruitment package and had just heard back that I was in! I could tell he was happy for me, and proud that what he saw in me the first time we met turned out to be real.

But it wasn’t all happy days. My wife had given me an implied ultimatum, and now I had a decision to make. Abandon the opportunity I’d worked so hard for and stay married, or get divorced and go try to become a SEAL. In the end, my choice didn’t have anything to do with my feelings for Pam or her father. He’d apologized to me, by the way. It was about who I was and who I wanted to be. I was a prisoner in my own mind and this opportunity was my only chance to break free.

I celebrated my victory the way any SEAL candidate should. I put out. The following morning and for the next three weeks I spent time in the pool, strapped with a sixteen-pound weight belt. I swam underwater for fifty meters at a time and walked the length of the pool underwater, with a brick in each hand, all on a single breath. The water would not own me this time.

When I was done, I’d swim a mile or two, then head to a pond near my mother’s home. Remember, this was Indiana—the American Midwest—in December. The trees were naked. Icicles hung like crystals from the eaves of houses and snow blanketed the earth in all directions, but the pond wasn’t completely frozen yet. I waded into the icy water, dressed in camo pants, a brown short-sleeved T-shirt, and boots, laid back and looked into the gray sky. The hypothermic water washed over me, the pain was excruciating, and I loved it. After a few minutes I got out and started running, water sloshing in my boots, sand in my underwear. Within seconds my T-shirt was frozen to my chest, my pants iced at the cuffs.

I hit the Monon trail. Steam poured from my nose and mouth as I grunted and slalomed speed-walkers and joggers. Civilians. Their heads turned as I picked up speed and began sprinting, like Rocky in downtown Philly. I ran as fast as I could for as long as I could, from a past that no longer defined me, toward a future undetermined. All I knew was that there would be pain and there would be purpose.

And that I was ready.

CHALLENGE #3

The first step on the journey toward a calloused mind is stepping outside your comfort zone on a regular basis. Dig out your journal again and write down all the things you don't like to do or that make you uncomfortable. Especially those things you know are good for you.

Now go do one of them, and do it again.

In the coming pages, I'll be asking you to mirror what you just read to some degree, but there is no need for you to find your own impossible task and achieve it on the fast track. This is not about changing your life instantly, it's about moving the needle bit by bit and making those changes sustainable. That means digging down to the micro level and doing something that sucks every day. Even if it's as simple as making your bed, doing the dishes, ironing your clothes, or getting up before dawn and running two miles each day. Once that becomes comfortable, take it to five, then ten miles. If you already do all those things, find something you aren't doing. We all have areas in our lives we either ignore or can improve upon. Find yours. We often choose to focus on our strengths rather than our weaknesses. Use this time to make your weaknesses your strengths.

Doing things—even small things—that make you uncomfortable will help make you strong. The more often you get uncomfortable the stronger you'll become, and soon you'll develop a more productive, can-do dialogue with yourself in stressful situations.

Take a photo or video of yourself in the discomfort zone, post it on social media describing what you're doing and why, and don't forget to include the hashtags #discomfortzone #pathofmostresistance #canthurtme #impossibletask.

CHAPTER FOUR

TAKING SOULS

THE FIRST CONCUSSION GRENADE EXPLODED AT CLOSE RANGE, AND FROM THERE everything unraveled in slow motion. One minute we were chilling in the common room, hanging out, watching war movies, getting pumped up for the battle we knew was coming. Then that first explosion led to another, and suddenly Psycho Pete was in our faces, screaming at the top of his lungs, his cheeks flushed candy apple red, that vein in his right temple throbbing. When he screamed, his eyes bugged out and his whole body shook.

“Break out! Move! Move! Move!”

My boat crew sprinted for the door single-file, just like we’d planned. Outside, Navy SEALs were firing their M60s into the darkness toward some invisible enemy. It was the bad dream we’d been waiting for our entire lives: the lucid nightmare that would define or kill us. Every impulse we had told us to hit the dirt, but at that moment, movement was our only option.

The repetitive, deep bass thud of machine-gun fire penetrated our guts, the orange halo from another explosion in the near distance provided a shock of violent beauty, and our hearts hammered as we gathered on the Grinder awaiting orders. This was war alright, but it wouldn’t be fought on some foreign shore. This one, like most battles we fight in life, would be won or lost in our own minds.

Psycho Pete stomped the pocked asphalt, his brow slick with sweat, the muzzle of his rifle steaming in the foggy night. “Welcome to Hell Week, gentlemen,” he said, calmly this time, in that sing-song Cali-surfer drawl of

his. He looked us up and down like a predator eyeing his kill. “It will be my great pleasure to watch you suffer.”

Oh, and there would be suffering. Psycho set the tempo, called out the push-ups, sit-ups, and flutter kicks, the jumping lunges and dive bombers. In between, he and his fellow instructors hosed us down with freezing water, cackling the whole time. There were countless reps and set after set with no end in sight.

My classmates were gathered close, each of us on our own stenciled frog footprints, overlooked by a statue of our patron saint: The Frogman, a scaly alien creature from the deep with webbed feet and hands, sharp claws, and a six-pack. To his left was the infamous brass bell. Ever since that morning when I came home from cockroach duty and got sucked into the Navy SEAL show, it was this place that I’d sought. The Grinder: a slab of asphalt dripping with history and misery.

Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUD/S) training is six months long and divided into three phases. First Phase is all about physical training, or PT. Second Phase is dive training, where we learn how to navigate underwater and deploy stealthy, closed circuit diving systems that emit no bubbles and recycle our carbon dioxide into breathable air. Third Phase is land warfare training. But when most people picture BUD/S they think of First Phase because those are the weeks that tenderize new recruits until the class is literally ground down from about 120 guys to the hard, gleaming spine that are the twenty-five to forty guys who are more worthy of the Trident. The emblem that tells the world we are not to be messed with.

BUD/S instructors do that by working guys out beyond their perceived limits, by challenging their manhood, and insisting on objective physical standards of strength, stamina, and agility. Standards that are tested. In those first three weeks of training we had to, among other things, climb a vertical ten-meter rope, hammer a half-mile-long obstacle course studded with American Ninja Warrior type challenges in under ten minutes, and run four miles on the sand in under thirty-two minutes. But if you ask me, all that was child’s play. It couldn’t even compare to the crucible of First Phase.

Hell Week is something entirely different. It's medieval and it comes at you fast, detonating in just the third week of training. When the throbbing ache in our muscles and joints was ratcheted up high and we lived day and night with an edgy, hyperventilating feeling of our breath getting out front of our physical rhythm, of our lungs inflating and deflating like canvas bags squeezed tight in a demon's fists, for 130 hours straight. That's a test that goes way beyond the physical and reveals your heart and character. More than anything, it reveals your mindset, which is exactly what it's designed to do.

All of this happened at the Naval Special Warfare Command Center on prissy Coronado Island, a Southern California tourist trap that tucks into slender Point Loma and shelters the San Diego Marina from the open Pacific Ocean. But even Cali's golden sun couldn't pretty up the Grinder, and thank God for that. I liked it ugly. That slab of agony was everything I'd ever wanted. Not because I loved to suffer, but because I needed to know whether or not I had what it took to belong.

Thing is, most people don't.

By the time Hell Week started, at least forty guys had already quit, and when they did they were forced to walk over to the bell, ring it three times, and place their helmet on the concrete. The ringing of the bell was first brought in during the Vietnam era because so many guys were quitting during evolutions and just walking off to the barracks. The bell was a way to keep track of guys, but since then it's become a ritual that a man has to perform to own the fact that he's quitting. To the quitter, the bell is closure. To me, every clang sounded like progress.

I never liked Psycho much, but I couldn't quibble with the specifics of his job. He and his fellow instructors were there to cull the herd. Plus, he wasn't going after the runts. He was in my face plenty, and guys bigger than me too. Even the smaller dudes were studs. I was one man in a fleet of alpha specimens from back East and down South, the blue-collar and big-money surf beaches of California, a few from corn country like me, and plenty from the Texas rangeland. Every BUD/S class has their share of tougher-than-nails backcountry Texans. No state puts more SEALs in the pipeline. Must be something in the barbecue, but Psycho didn't play favorites. No matter

where we were from or who we were, he lingered like a shadow we couldn't shake. Laughing, screaming, or quietly taunting us to our face, attempting to burrow into the brain of any man he tried to break.

Despite all that, the first hour of Hell Week was actually fun. During breakout, that mad rush of explosions, shooting, and shouting, you are not even thinking about the nightmare to come. You're riding an adrenaline high because you know you're fulfilling a rite of passage within a hallowed warrior tradition. Guys are looking around the Grinder, practically giddy, thinking, "Yeah, we're in Hell Week!" Ah, but reality has a way of kicking everyone in the teeth sooner or later.

"You call this putting out?" Psycho Pete asked no one in particular. "This may be the single sorriest class we ever put through our program. You men are straight up embarrassing yourselves."

He relished this part of the job. Stepping over and between us, his boot print in our pooling sweat and saliva, snot, tears, and blood. He thought he was hard. All the instructors did, and they were because they were SEALs. That fact alone placed them in rare air. "You boys couldn't have hung with me when I went through Hell Week, I'll tell you that much."

I smiled to myself and kept hammering as Psycho brushed by. He was built like a tailback, quick and strong, but was he a mortal weapon during his Hell Week? Sir, I doubt that very much, sir!

He caught the eye of his boss, the First Phase Officer in Charge. There was no doubt about him. He didn't talk a whole lot and didn't have to. He was 6'1", but he cast a longer shadow. Dude was jacked too. I'm talking about 225 pounds of muscle wrapped tight as steel, without an ounce of sympathy. He looked like a Silverback Gorilla (SBG), and loomed like a Godfather of pain, making silent calculations, taking mental notes.

"Sir, I'm laughing just *thinking* about these wannabes weeping and quitting like whiny little brats this week," Psycho said. SBG offered half a nod as Psycho stared through me. "Oh, and you will quit," he said softly. "I'll make sure of that."

Psycho's threats were spookier when he delivered them in a relaxed tone like that, but there were plenty of times when his eyes went dark, his brow twisted, the blood rushed to his face, and he unleashed a scream that built from the tips of his toes to the crown of his bald head. An hour into Hell Week, he knelt down, pressed his face within an inch of my own while I finished another set of push-ups, and let loose.

"Hit the surf, you miserable turds!"

We'd been in BUD/S for nearly three weeks by then, and we'd raced up and over the fifteen-foot berm that divided the beach from the cinderblock sprawl of offices, locker rooms, barracks, and classrooms that is the BUD/S compound plenty of times. Usually to lie back in the shallows, fully dressed, then roll in the sand—until we were covered in sand from head to toe—before charging back to the Grinder, dripping heavy with salt water and sand, which ramped up the degree of difficulty on the pull-up bar. That ritual was called getting wet and sandy, and they wanted sand in our ears, up our noses, and in every orifice of our body, but this time we were on the verge of something called surf torture, which is a special kind of beast.

As instructed, we charged into the surf screaming like *senseis*. Fully clothed, arms linked, we waded into the impact zone. The surf was angry that moonless night, nearly head high, and the waves were rolling thunder that barreled and foamed in sets of three and four. Cold water swiped the breath from our lungs as the waves thrashed us.

This was early May, and in the spring the ocean off Coronado ranges from 59–63 degrees. We bobbed up and down as one, a pearl strand of floating heads scanning the horizon for any hint of swell we prayed we'd see coming before it towed us under. The surfers in our crew detected doom first and called out the waves so we could duck dive just in time. After ten minutes or so, Psycho ordered us back to land. On the verge of hypothermia, we scrambled from the surf zone and stood at attention, while being checked by the doctor for hypothermia. That cycle would continue to repeat itself. The sky was smeared orange and red. The temperature dropped sharply as night loomed close.