

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

By Jerry Rabushka

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It was raining. A spring rain falling through the trees, wetting the ground on a North Carolina morning. An early rain, before you know it's gonna get so hot – so, so, so hot and it just won't cool down. A rain you hope will make all that go away.

All this water – it's not really water at all. It's Murdoc. He's hot, he's sweating, he's wet just like dew under an early sun back at home. Then it starts pouring off him like that same rain. He's laying in a bed looking up at me. Sweat rolls off him and soaked white sheets surround him like wet grass, and he's scared – so scared.

We're both in the army infirmary. I give him some water – he drips morphine into his bloodstream through a tube in his arm. It cools his pain like that same rain – just a bit – just hope that the pain will wash away like water, down the sewer, down somewhere where you can't ever retrieve it.

He's not talking right. He's scared of losing the leg. Scared he'll wake up one day and I won't be there with the water. Scared he won't wake up at all.

"It should be *you* laying here." He has a weak moment. "I took your watch, Travis – I let you sleep, Travis. I was your friend." I just hope he won't still blame me when the drug wears off.

You never know who the enemy is – not by dress, not by language. You assume it's all of them. You don't want to, but you do to stay alive. They drove up asking for water – clean water. Water like that same rain we miss so much back at home, and poor Murdoc – he went to answer and they opened fire on him.

They shot up his leg – they tried to blow up our whole building. We killed eight people and it made the news. We keep computers here. Records and data. They know it. They think they can shake us loose of here if they blow up our computers. But mostly they just want to kill. Break down some random lives, make someone cry and pour wine and laugh about it later.

A Matter of Life and Death - Page 3

Murdoc looks at me and he hates me. Just for now. He says “We shoulda stayed home, Travis. We shoulda just kept fighting with your dad about music. I’d rather be beat up at home than die so far away.” We always knew at home, we could escape. So we did. We joined the army to have peace. Murdoc was my friend. Best friend. He had long stringy hair like a rock star. He wore sandals all the time and he’d pick up dirt on his feet, and my dad said he was a loser, and so was I for hanging with him.

Dad and Mom fought. Dad and my sisters fought. I lived in a cave in my room. Me and Murdoc. Played suicidal rock songs to drown it out. Family said count your blessings – I counted that I had a door I could shut. It was no better at his place.

Someone drunk – someone on drugs – they all blamed it on someone else. Your hand puts the pills in your mouth, pours the drink over your liver like acid rain falling in eastern Pennsylvania, but you insist that *someone else made you do it*.

It was always a burden – a rain, a storm – pummeling someone so innocent. We thought any war, any hell, anywhere, was an escape. When you’re 17 you have few options. Few safe ones. On the streets you become a slave and die. I begged Grandma.

Take us in! I can't - I can't - I can't live like this.

She says, “Work it out, Travis! A son and a father should get along with each other.”

So we went to the recruiter. Me and Murdoc.

Father says “Good, I hope they shoot you.”

He was drunk or something. I know he... ***(we can tell HE only hopes this is true)*** didn’t mean it.

Murdoc’s hair came off. All that long mess of hair on the floor, falling like rain and swept away. More falling like snow. A rare thing in North Carolina. Like snow, quietly. You don’t hear it. You wake up and all you know changed, silently.

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