

**“How are everyday people  
becoming hired assassins,  
contract killers, and . . .  
mercenaries?”**

The Last American  
Mercenary

a new novel  
by

**NICHOLAS BLACK**

THE LAST AMERICAN  

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MERCENARY

BY

**NICHOLAS BLACK**

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## PROLOGUE

THERE ARE TIMES IN EVERY man's life when he has to back his partner's play. It may be at some fancy dinner when your brother-in-law is getting drunk and obnoxious, or it may be in a some dark alley in Marseilles, France when a couple of Moroccans want to spill your guts with some ridiculously large knife that looks as if it was designed to cut camels in half.

Well, you kind of get my point: There are times when you just have to do something, and regardless of the circumstances and possible outcome . . . it's go time. When I saw my friend, Shane, tear across the small, dim-lit club, I knew that it was time for something violent.

Shane is an ex-football player, turned business owner. He goes about 260 pounds, five-eleven, dark hair, pinkish-white skin that burns in three seconds of sun light, brown eyes that seem to do back flips when he drinks—and he can drink like a fish—and an IQ that is dangerously high. This, if you haven't imagined, can make for a volatile, yet extremely enjoyable, personality. He and I get along just fine. He boxed when he was younger, wrestled when he was older, and can run the forty in about a 4.5 seconds. And believe me when I say that, you make a hole when he comes a running!

When you've known somebody for a while you learn each others' body language and gesturing. It gives you a kind of silent communication. He gave me the classic 'cover-my-ass-because-*we*-are-about-to-get-into-a-fight' glance. It would normally have been sweet music to my ears, but at that exact moment I was working this

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beautiful, little Brazilian girl with the kind of body most girls would sacrifice their first born for. She was a hotty. So he nods and I nod back, and then I look down at the bright, brown eyes of the one that will probably get away. She looks up at me and smiles this kind of 'boys-are-so-lame' smile and I acknowledge by smirking stupidly and shrugging my shoulders.

She gave me a quick hug, her body pressed against mine in the kind of way that you always hope an attractive girl will—firm, body to body, you can feel her breath on your neck. Shane makes it to the front doors of the club and I see two guys shoot out of the bathroom where Shane had just been. Hmm? He's been known to rub people the wrong way.

Time to get on the clock. I curse myself for letting go of the girl. But I grudgingly made my way into the crowd and fall in behind the two, curiously tunnel-visioned patrons. Other people who know me, or know of Shane and I, notice my casual mood change to that of a kind of focused observer. *Mr. Happy-go-lucky is out, please leave a message.*

There is a mind set that all predators seem to understand and utilize. It kind of looks like a bad attitude to the untrained eye; head lowered, eyes wide and frantically searching the periphery, arms hanging loosely by the side, hands open with the palms facing back—it kind of resembles a cat stalking some unsuspecting bird. And trust me when I say that just because a person sees a predator coming their way, doesn't necessarily mean that they recognize how much danger they might be in. So, now I'm hunting. I follow these two guys out the front door and nod at the Door Guy, a buddy named Jason who trained with us at a fighting gym. Jason nods back, letting me know that he will try and keep the fight relatively even. It's good to know the staff at your local stomping grounds.

Shane is outside, in the middle of a bunch of scurrying valet guys. They know enough about Shane to give him some space. One of them yelled to us, "Please, no trouble for the cars, no for the cars!" Yeah, yeah. We know that all these expensive cars are your responsibility, and we will respect that.

So immediately Shane launches like a rocket ship, across the parking lot, and slams into the first guy. He lifts him up and, of course, slams him into the side of a red Dodge Viper. Needless to

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say, the valet guys are running, in mass, to pull the pair of drunks away from the car. The valet guys were so panic stricken that their eyebrows were practically on the top of their heads—like circus clowns . . . or meth junkies.

I keep an eye on blue-shirt, that's my label for the first guy's buddy. He was wearing a blue polo shirt, so I figured that would be his name—Old School, door guy tactics. Blue shirt is staying just out of harms way. He seemed to recognize the futility in mixing it up with Shane, but you just never know with club drunks—kind of like a family pet with rabies, can't ever be quite sure when Spot is going to take a bite out of grandma. But Blue-shirt hadn't broken the *code*. Yet.

What Code, you ask? One-on-one is fair. Two-on-two is fair. But, two-on-one, and it's open-season on their ass! But I digress. The valets wrestle apart Shane and Black-shirt. They separate, and I notice that Shane is so bloody hammered that he is probably seeing three or four guys wearing black shirts. To him it probably seemed like he was fighting a synchronized basketball team.

I need to mention that Shane and I almost always wear sandals. It sure is comfy wearing open-toed shoes, but then it's miserable when you slide your bare feet across the concrete after your sandals have been kicked to the side. Shane didn't even notice that the top of his left foot had been scraped raw by the pavement. Heck, it matched his red shirt, and to us it is ultimately more important to coordinate your colors, then to avoid bloodshed.

Some unseen force seemed to push Black-shirt towards Shane. Good luck, dude. Shane dropped into his classic linebacker stance and rushed his opponent again. This time he would not be denied the audible landing. As the two of them crashed down to the hard ground, a horrible thud seemed to reverberate outward, making every other person in the now-gathering crowd of spectators cringe. It sounded like a watermelon being dropped off of a ten-story building.

*Thuuud!*

I have to admit that I was enjoying the show, so much so that I didn't react quick enough to stop Blue-shirt from charging into the one-sided beating that was taking place. Shane was on top of Black-shirt, straddling his chest, both of Shane's knees resting on the concrete beside the victim.

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He took turns pounding the guy with open-handed slaps. Like if you were to get slapped by a golf club—it was just like some freakin' nightmare . . . not a good time. Shane's hands are as big as soft-balls, but feel like bowling balls when they are smashed into the area known as the . . . body! There were a staccato of ooo's and ouw's. And Blue-shirt slipped by and went in for a cheap shot. I sprang forward, a bit slower than I should have reacted. It is so fun to be a spectator that you often forget that you are a participant. Shit! I closed the gap just before the cheating cunt launched a lame kick for Shane's head. It's a good thing that the guy was a chump, otherwise he might have hit what he aimed at. I think that the only reason he tried to hit Shane was that later his friend wouldn't be able to say that 'you let me get my ass kicked!'

He, too, had to back his partner's play.

The kick bounced off of Shane's upper back and didn't seem to have any affect other than to enrage him and up the ante a bit. Blue-shirt must have expected somebody to pull him away because he turned and watched as I launched my right leg towards his left thigh. And he watched as my shin cut through the air in a low, half-arc. And he continued to watch as my shin buried deep into his left thigh, just above the knee. I felt the soft, sinking, squishy resistance that you feel when you smash a Thai-leg-kick into somebody's peroneal nerve. His knee buckled and he fell to the ground, both of his hands reaching out for his new found pain. The Thai-leg-kick is a tool used in Muay-Thai kick-boxing. It could best be described as a shin kick that is focused in a fast sweeping motion. It feels like getting hit with a goddamn baseball bat. Shins are bony and hard, and they hurt like hell when you get hit with one . . . or several.

The next kick came from my left. Again, a Thai-leg-kick. Again, he didn't react. And again, it smashed into him like a drunken driver crashing his Buick into a school bus full of nuns. Nothing but carnage! Not trying to show off in a fight is like trying not to enjoy sex with a supermodel. It just isn't possible.

Sure, people say all these cliché things like; nobody wins a fight; you should always try to avoid a fight at all costs; or my favorite, there's nothing so important that you have to fight over it. But that is all just stuff guys say to seem virtuous. Trust me when I tell you that people need to fight sometimes, and that people do win fights. You

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do want to show-off when you are pounding some guy that really had it coming to him. Chuck Norris never 'barely' kicked anyone's ass. No, he laid the smack down every time. If you have to fight, then win. And you only back down in a respectable way. If, even for a split second, you feel that there will be no 'respectable' way to back out of the fight . . . you smash the mother-fucker to pieces—end of story, period, full stop!

So, I dropped my shin across the cunt's right side, just above his stomach, kind of landing across his right arm and chest. Fwomp! He doubled over. Well, I guess you'd have to call it quartering over, since he was already doubled from the first thai-kick. Blue-shirt was done for the night.

And then, as I turned to bask in the envy and awe of the crowd, I heard such a strange scream that I thought somebody must have seen an alien pop out of somebody's stomach.

Were the walls bleeding?

Was signs of the Stigmata?

But no, locusts hadn't descended from the skies. It was Black-shirt making all the noise. And then I noticed that Shane had spit something into his hand. Like a good showman he had graciously walked along the outer edge of the well-dressed crowd and displayed the trophy. I walked over to him and caught a glimpse of the lower-half of the ear, most of it lobe. I have a fairly strong stomach, but I have to admit, by all measures, that was gross. Now this was turning into some surreal dream. I half expected to find myself running around in my underwear trying to dodge my high-school principal, only to awaken to a half finished 3-liter bottle of Dr. Pepper. It was *that* weird.

“Hey, Shane!” I said loud enough to pierce the invisible vale of his quasi-psychotic thoughts, and, in fact, the first words we had shared all night. “Lets bolt, bro. The cops are gonna be here any second!”

I paused for a second, squinting at the piece of flesh. “What is that?”

“I bit his ear off! Look,” he said for the benefit of our live audience. Always the showman, Shane.

Some people were gagging.

I guess that's an appropriate response.

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Shane had this kind of grim smile on his face, “He never expected that when he started talking trash, did he?”

*Doubtful.*

He was so very proud of his exploit that I almost hated to awaken him from his elation.

“We’ve got to evac, bro. Now!” I pressed, and he turned, nodding. I looked over and noticed our friend, Jason—the door-guy—jogging up to us. He handed me the keys to Shane’s red Jeep Grand Cherokee.

“Roll, dude. I’ll cover for you when the cops come!”

“We’re out, Jason. Nice one,” I said as I grabbed the keys and motioned for Shane to hit the bowels of the parking lot. It was time to engineer a quick ex filtration from the hostile environment. Both targets had been neutralized. Mission: Successful.

I late-apexed the corner like I was at the Monaco Grand Prix cutting across several, empty lanes of traffic. We were back at his apartment in just under ten minutes. We made as little noise as possible, jogging up the long outdoor stairwell to his second-floor apartment. It was a nice gated community, and we assumed that no police had followed us at any point in the extraction. We rushed into his artificially-cold, dark apartment and waited with the lights off to be sure that we hadn’t been followed.

The place was clean and sober, not like Shane. And it was scented like Pine sol, also not like Shane. But the apartment screamed Shane. It was just the kind of down-played extravagance that a 28-year old with a half-million in the bank can pass off. He never flaunted his money, but you knew that he had it. He knew he had it. And you knew that he knew that you knew he had it. Give it a moment.

We walked across the soft gray carpet into his kitchen, and posted on either side of an island counter-top that had cabinets built into the sides and an open-range grill set into the counter. The kitchen surrounded the island, decked out with a Sub-zero style, stainless steel refrigerator. High-tech toaster oven, and all kinds of modern, expensive knives on a magnetic fixture where they all seemed to stick in mid-air. The place reminded me of some space lab, or maybe one of those sealed-air labs that we all know are hidden inside the Nellis military facility, otherwise known as 'Area-51 ' (by the way: Shane and

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I have been to Area-51. Well, as close as you can get without being shot. It really exists, and they get really pissed when you trespass)

Shane flicked on the fluorescent, overhead light. The strangely cold white light turned the kitchen almost into a morgue. He reached into his pocked and pulled out something and then tossed it onto the counter-top. We both stared in silence at the red and pink chunk of cartilage. It wasn't much bigger than a quarter, but it was big enough to understand where it came from. I looked at the torn piece of flesh and then up at Shane. He had this sinister smirk on his face, and it reminded me of that movie where all those clowns are eating people.

“You know what we have to do, don't you?” he said to me.

Normally, as a sane human being there would be only one of a few choices in a situation like this. We could pack the ear in ice and try to get it back to the police, or medical staff, so that it could be re-attached. We could offer to help the guy pay for the medical attention. We could have had one of our friends find the ear-piece anonymously and deliver it to him. I knew that we had to do what was descent.

“You get a small cooking pan, and I'll prepare a butter and garlic sauce to cook it in,” I said, knowing that this was the right thing to do.

We went to the task of preparing a delicious sauce with which we would hopefully drown out the taste of human flesh and replace it with a spicy, garlic and oregano flavor, in a base of melted butter.

I'm getting hungry just writing this.

Now, there was a strange threshold that we were balancing on, like a limp tightrope just begging for you to fall. It is a line in the sand that you can never uncross. Once you eat human flesh, your . . . well, you become something quite *different*. A new breed.

We hadn't yet crossed that line. We had done horrible things to people who, in my humble opinion, deserved it.

We had broken arms and knees.

Choked out countless angry drunks.

Bedded many, many women out of wed-lock.

Sped, cursed, pushed and pulled, and all around cause a lot of trouble.

But we hadn't crossed this line.

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I had rationalized it like this: The ear of a person is not unlike an ear of an animal. It's not like it's the heart, or some exposed muscle . . . that's something that sick-o's do. Not us. No, sir. We's respectable types. And besides all of the societal taboos, when were we going to have another chance to eat part of a human?

It was strange how the aroma of garlic seemed to *de-monsterize*, what we were about to do.

"You understand that this is a horrible, horrible thing that we are doing," I said flatly as the butter started to sizzle in the pan. My eyes were staring through the bubbling sauce, to somewhere far off.

"Well, we are horrible, horrible people, aren't we," Shane responded in an equally matter-of-fact tone. And there was a kind of haunting iciness to his words.

"Does it bother you that people like us are lurking in the flocks of civilian sheep?" I said.

He considered my question. "A little bit," he answered without emotion.

"Do you think we're fucked up in the head?" I posed to him as I added a few more pinches of garlic salt to the yellowish-brown, bubbling sauce.

He looked up into the blank space just beyond the scope of our sight and considered my question. "There is that possibility," he said skeptically.

I bit my bottom lip, a nervous habit, and said, "You never know if you'll like something until you try it."

"That's right," he said softly as he used a shiny, chrome spatula to place the ear in the pan. It whined and spurted as the boiling sauce overwhelmed the cartilage and skin choking out the last traces of humanity.

"This is pretty cool," I said as he moved the ear around the dish like a hockey puck.

"Yup."

"Hungry?"

"Famished."

We all have monsters that are buried deep within us. Some of us keep the monsters at bay, hiding them from the world in which we live, and the people we associate with. Rarely, and only for fleeting moments, do we get a glimpse of such ugliness. The rules for a

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*civilized* society won't allow it.

But what happens when the rules don't matter anymore? What do we do when the monsters leave their cages; escape their darkness? What happens when the monsters outnumber the rest of us; become the majority?

Where do we hide then?

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## 1

I BLINKED, TRYING TO GET the salty burn of the sweat out of my eyes. It had been cold and raining in the south of France for a couple of months. Well, really, it had been cold and raining in France for the last couple of centuries, but who's counting. I was about as paranoid as you can be and still function as a point man. Our patrol was a small foray into the mountains, looking for signs of ETA (Basque Separatists), Al Qaeda (translated as, "the Base," Islamic fundamentalists), Salafia Jihad (Salafist, Northern African, Islamic fundamentalists), or any other nasty bad guys that might make their way through the hilly, French countryside.

You know . . . politically-legislated garbage collectors. That was us.

Alpha team, or *Equipe* (pronounced 'keep', in French) *Alpha*, as we were called, were at the lead edge of a tactical spear formation. There were eight men in our keep. I was on point; there were two more legionnaires behind me; then a Sergeant who came from the Israeli para-commandos; two more Russian legionnaires; our Lieutenant, a mean prick from the French Arme de Terre (ground army); then our radio-man, the most important guy in the keep—because he could call in air support and artillery; and that was it.

Sgt. Mlynarski made a clicking sound with his tongue and I placed a closed fist into the air—*Stop!*

I lowered the fist and spread my hand flat to send another signal—*Down!*

Like one organism the entire keep dropped down, silently, into the wet mud that stagnated in the bottom of the small gully we were

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making our way through. I looked around, scanning the landscape for anything out of place. What looks out of place? Anything that ain't a plant. It's all suspect.

Noise is bad.

Silence is worse.

If you can't hear all the little beasties in the forest, then something is amiss. Colors and reflections are usually out of place. You pay special attention to any movement that occurs in your peripheral vision. You can distinguish the slightest movements if you just let you focus melt out into the foliage. The trick is to stare blankly out.

Smells can give a bad guy away quickly. In fact, if you're going to operate in a foreign country for more than a few days you need to start eating the local diet, because if not, your body odor will give you away like a lady in a mens' prison. Aftershave, deodorant, cigarette smoke; all can be picked up from distances up to a half-click (half-kilometer) away. And as far as light goes, for all you cigarette smokers out there, a cigarette's burning embers can be seen at night at a distance of up to five clicks, and we can doctor a surface-to-air missile to target the heat signature of a Marlboro light from even farther. See, smoking really does kill!

Anyway, I had conducted my survey and then looked over my shoulder at the Sergeant. He was a big, stocky guy with a penchant for violence, but he was also the first guy you want coming through the door if your daughter is being held by terrorists in some seedy hotel in a third world country.

He explained to me in a series of hand gestures that we were going to change our heading and continue on in a new direction. Off the beaten path, so to speak. I nodded and returned my eyes to the cloudy horizon.

It was still kind of cold out, maybe only a couple degrees Celsius. I was wearing my thick winter camies, my helmet, full Load-bearing gear (looks like a pair of thick green suspenders attached to a web belt), my primary weapon (F. A. M. A. S. , 556 automatic, light machine-gun), two K-Bars (knives with a serrated edge on one side, and a razor edge on the other side, good for stabbing in the neck of anything that lives and needs to *not* be), two canteens (30 ounces of Gatorade each), and other nominal gear (ie. Compass, medical gear,

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food, gloves, face paint, yada-yada). I was pretty warm from carrying around all of this gear, and it made it less miserable to be out and about on this brisk February morning.

I didn't particularly like traveling in the muddy creek bed in the first place, but I didn't relish the idea of leaving its cover either. Most bad guys hate the cold wet mud, so you're usually safe if you're covered in it. I made my way, like a squirmy little lizard, up the side of the creek and then stopped, frozen.

*Oh, shit!*

I instantly raised my fist to stop the keep from proceeding. As slowly as I could, I backed down the black mud and, holding my breath as I did it, crossed around a big clump of tree roots that looked like a pile of large earth worms. There was a medium-sized tree off to the right side of the creek bed, it probably only had a trunk diameter of a couple of feet, but it obscured my view of the box.

I rapped my right knuckles against my helmet a couple of times. The Sergeant would be along soon. I got down on my belly and inched my way forward, painting myself wet-black in the process. I did my mental check-list. Look for wires, look for pressure pads, anything out of place. As my head rounded the tree trunk I could see the box again—small, brown, flipped on its top.

The box wasn't obscured by the mud, but it was covered by some patches of leaves and small grass. I looked for the tell-tale signs of a come-on. That's any object or objects that appear simple and harmless to a bomb disposal technician. Something that's not too suspicious. He then rushes forward to render the device safe, and in the process, sets off a much more complicated and illusive device.

Now, I know that you are thinking, 'hey, it's just a box in the mud,' and you might very well be right. But it could also be an IED (Improvised Explosive Device). They come in all shapes and sizes—a little child's toy, a mayonnaise jar, a book, or even a half-buried old box in the mud, in the south of France. So I was just a bit more careful than I might be if I was in the civilian world. If you watch enough CNN you'll already have heard about these explosive devices. The *favorite* of the insurgents!

There are three main types of explosive devices. One, the Remote operated device—where a transmitter sends a signal to a

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receiver that is located in the TPU (Time Power Unit: Where the timing device, all explosive material, and any anti-handling devices might be). This usually required the bad guy to be close to his bomb. This was not, seemingly, that type.

Two, the Timed device—where a timer is initiated and at a certain pre-programmed time the bomb is detonated. Could be, but the chances of a timed device way out here was pretty remote. Not impossible, just unlikely. It would have been quite difficult to hope to time a bomb to kill a patrol of French Mercenaries, who don't ever use the same path, or schedule . . . ever.

Three, the Victim Operated device—where a trigger, a tension wire, a pressure plate, a light-sensitive relay(slave), or any other of a million different tricky mechanisms are used to initiate the device in the proximity of the person who is unlucky enough to blunder into them. This category covers your basic *booby trap*, although most of these are a mixture of each group, depending on the time demands and purpose of the bomb. These days, almost everything that you touch will have some kind of anti-handling device attached to it.

There was the greatest possibility that this could be such a device. Say I had just gone over and flipped over the box, maybe kicked it as I walked? It could be quite nasty when three pounds of Semtex (dark colored high-explosive) mixed with shards of metal and ball bearings were ignited at knee level.

So I did what we are told to do when we encounter a situation that could possibly kill us—I ran up the flagpole, so to speak. The Sergeant made his way to my left side, he too was covered in black muck. I'll save you the trouble of translating my poor French grammar.

“Huck, what's going on up here?”

“Strange box,” I said as I pointed to the, well . . . the strange box.

He eyed me as if I might have slept with his daughter, but had somehow sneaked away before he could catch me. “Okay, its a fucking box. So what?” Contrary to his words, his eyes scanned everything around the box. He was taking it very seriously.

“Papers all around it,” I said as I pointed to a couple of sheets of small, white, soiled paper. “And also,” I offered, “why would there be a box out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“Come-on?” he posed, referring to our aforementioned system

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of luring some unsuspecting bastard to approach a seemingly safe situation, and initiate a device. I've seen photographs from Ireland where there was an explosive device with a trip wire that you could clearly see. But the trick was that if you crawled up to cut the wire, you would set off a pressure switch that had been hidden on the floor under some old newspapers near the wire. That's a come-on!

I just shrugged my shoulders, my forearms and stomach sinking deeper in the mud. He nodded and then turned and gestured some orders to the keep. The other soldiers, including the LT, took up positions on both sides of the ravine a safe distance away from a possible explosion. Every other legionnaire was on the same side—all of them equally spaced save for the two of us lucky SOB's.

I took out a small notebook, out of a plastic baggie, that was in a small pocket in my jacket. I started to sketch exactly what I was seeing. I drew the box exactly as it lay. I looked at my watch and noted down the time, temperature, and ambient weather conditions. Trust me when I tell you that all of these things are very important when you are reviewing the fallout from a major FUBAR(F'ed up beyond all Recognition).

As I finished my field-survey I gave a mushy thumbs-up to Sergeant Mlynarski. He had already taken off most of his gear, and slowly caterpillared his way forward, towards the box.

It was at that moment that I chose to think about what the hell I was doing in France, looking at a potentially explosive device, buried in cold effing mud? And I guess that, technically speaking, I'm a *American Mercenary*. On the run from the authorities in at least one country, maybe more? I suppose I should back up a bit.

First things first: What is a Mercenary?

*Mercenary*(mur'se ner'e) adj. working or done for payment only  
—n. , pl. -ies a soldier hired to serve in a foreign army.

As you can see, Webster's New World Dictionary seems to leave the reader with a rather vague description of just what a Mercenary is and how he is described. That is what I will attempt to do in the following pages. Bare with me when I ramble on, and try not to chunk the book out a fifth floor window when I am less than polite.

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If you are a good Christian, I apologize in advance. If you're a good Muslim, mar-haba. If you're Jewish, good luck with all that. And if you're a non-believer . . . there ain't no atheist in the jungle.

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## 2

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY THE house doesn't look like that, normally," I said once while studying one of my father's photographs. He is an architectural photographer, and makes a rather healthy living doing so.

"It's because we used hidden lights to brighten everything up," he said as he studied my expression. He frowned, "Look, it isn't what you see, it's what you don't see."

Obviously, I'm paraphrasing, here. I was a stupidly curious little kid. But, he went on to explain how they hide lights behind the furniture to bring the ambiance of the room out. How they burn newspapers in the fireplace to create that warm fiery feeling that photographs always have—and that real fireplaces can never recreate for more than a few fleeting seconds.

Photographs capture the beauty that dances between the normalcy of our lives, holding time hostage for us all to study and interrogate later. It's like cheating on history. It's like dating an ex-girlfriend . . . forever.

My dad was good at explaining things like that—the man hidden behind the mask, and so on. He studied physics but after graduating college, got burnt out on it and followed his hobby of photography. He instilled in me this thirst for knowing the secret behind the tricks. He would pull me out of school to go watch a new movie, all the while enjoying it as much or more than me.

We never got really close, he and I, but I can still meet him in the early afternoon and catch a film. We sit back and let Hollywood take us on an adventure. And I remember those times as being some of

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my favorites.

He liked to do his work. I suppose it made him happy to produce these elegant images, capturing their essence forever in a kind of chemical symphony. Now he uses digital cameras and the latest-n-greatest computer technology. He told me recently that he doesn't need the weather to cooperate with him on a shoot. He will just add the perfect sky and clouds, and soft orange sunset, later.

He no longer needed Mother Nature to be kind. Screw her anyway, she causes nothing but trouble, in my opinion. Her services will no longer be needed.

At some point in time, before I was even a fully developed spermatozoon, he met my mother; and I guess there were sparks or something. He was a photographer, she was into modeling—hmmm? She, being a woman, could multi-task, and therefore was needed to complete the family unit. So, I pop out in the mid-seventies. My brother, Josh, pops out a couple of years later.

My first question, when they brought the new one home was, "Does it have feet?" I couldn't see them beneath all the white blankets that he was wrapped in. Seemed like a fair enough question.

My mom laughed, my dad smiled, and I learned that just because you can't see something, doesn't mean it's not there . . . even baby feet. So I had a kid brother to play with. We played war at the creek and went to summer camps. Did all of the things that kids do in a middle-class neighborhood. My parents didn't exactly spoil us. Alright, that was a slight fib, they spoiled us at every turn. But my point to all of this is that we were doing fine. Sure, I could go into the darker years when they got a divorce, separated, and sent us all into inner family chaos, but why dwell on the past?

Treat the past like a tax return. After a few years, cut it loose.

I remember having a good time as a kid, and I did not turn out the way I did because of my parents, either through nurturing or my childhood. I am a product of life.

Since I was a small child, maybe around two months old, I remember being completely enamored by martial arts and war movies. My coaches and teachers weren't at the schools that I attended. No, they were named Bruce Lee, Chuck Norris, and Steven Segal. Their lessons are forever etched on the celluloid frames that formed my morality . . . my code. And they taught me everything I

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needed to know about right and wrong, good and evil, victory and defeat.

I also had a certain, indescribable respect and admiration for the Samurai. Of course we all know about the Samurai, the warriors that controlled feudal Japan for many hundreds of years. They, too, were mercenaries in a sense, although with a much greater attachment to honor and respect than some of the mercs that I know. Some of my associates will take a contract on a human in Europe for 1,500(euros, roughly between the us dollar and the British pound). A human life for less than the down payment on a goddamn Honda Accord!

Life is cheap, folks.

But the Samurai had class and respect. And they had something else that is quite hard to explain . . . they had the *Way*.

A warrior, in fact all warriors, must adhere to a code of sorts. We all have one. When I say warrior, I'm not just talking about people who live by the *Way of the Gun*. I mean every person out there that makes an active effort to fight. Fighting for a better life. Struggling against seemingly unstoppable forces—like office managers, secretaries, farmers, agents, gas prices, ex-girlfriends, etc. Anyone that fights in their life is a warrior. And we all must have a code.

*Why?*

To keep our sanity. To be able to sleep at the end of the day. To close our eyes that one last time knowing that we didn't betray our own morals. Its got nothing to do with society's 'right or wrong'. Its about being true to *your* own Way . . . whatever that may entail.

If you're a doctor, be the finest doctor.

If you're a criminal, be the finest criminal.

For the Samurai of the past, the code started with honor, courage, humanity, and wisdom. Skill was important, drive was exceptional, and focus was unyielding. At the drop of a hat the Samurai had to be prepared to take a man's head off of his shoulders. And in doing so, they knew that they might be asked to commit seppaku.

Seppaku is the ritualistic suicide that is ordered of a Samurai in certain circumstances. It is accomplished by using a small sword(or a long knife) to slice open the stomach, from side to side, exposing your intestines and dieing with a fairly exquisite amount of pain. In most cases, it was an honor to do so for your master. I wonder how

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many people, these days, would be able to make such a sacrifice?

There was another condition of being a Samurai, and that was the position of the Ronin. If a Samurai made a mistake, or if his master had been killed or died, and he hadn't been asked to commit seppaku in honor of his master's death: He might be made Ronin. A masterless Samurai.

They were the first real mercenaries, although many arguments can be made for early vikings and explorers. But I only knew of the Samurai and the Ronin as I grew up. Instead of cowboys and Indians we played Samurais.

Occasionally I was a ninja, too.

All of this didn't do much for my grades in school, but it did push me into studying the martial arts from a young age. I trained in Kung Fu, a soft style with relaxing flowing motions. I trained in Tae Kwon Do, a hard style, choppy squared movements. I trained in Muay-Thai, a very hard style, elbows, knees, shin kicks . . . lots of carnage. I spent a considerable amount of time training myself in Brazilian Jiu-jitsu, a system of ground fighting, wrestling with punches, head butts, knees, chokes, and many broken bones.

I suppose that I was also trying to overcome a little man's complex that I hadn't yet been diagnosed with; but like a long, guttural cough . . . you know something worse is on the horizon. I wasn't a big kid, ever. Hell, when I finished Hell-Week in BUD/S(Basic Underwater Demolitions/ Seal Training) I only weighed about 125 pounds.

So, even though I wasn't a big guy, I wanted to feel that kind of security and capability. I guess I figured that I couldn't exactly be a samurai if I got my ass kicked at every corner. I trained as much as my attention span would allow. I read books on warfare and tactics. I just kind of closed off the world and disappeared into a different dimension.

I lived in a dark place, where every trip to the supermarket could be my last. Can't be too careful with all those Russian spies around, no can we. Hey, I was a kid. Some people had imaginary friends. I had imaginary secret missions. I think I've saved the world at least 43 times already. And looking back, my imaginary missions were a lot more fun than the real thing where you basically just wait around until somebody tries to kill you or blow you up. Good times.

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I moseyed through high-school and then bumbled my way around the college campus for awhile. I studied Psychology and Philosophy, and continued to work out. I didn't have any real direction in my life. I was just kind of going through the motions. Idle minds and all that. I knew that I wasn't going to be like everyone else. I just didn't know what that was going to entail. I saw a movie with my roommate, Pete—a molecular biologist who, as of our last discussion, worked at MIT doing genetics research. The movie that we watched was, “Navy Seals.”

Calm down! Yes, I know it is the greatest movie of all time, and that it was somehow *overlooked* by the Academy—totally political.

This film, in its, dare I say, dramatically brilliant way, lit a small flame inside of me. Was I good enough to be one of them. I had already conceded to myself that I should finish college and apply to the Christians In Action . . . the CIA. But the Navy would be good for me, and I could use the SEAL (Sea, Air, and Land) training to fill my resume. It would also be a good way to see where my breaking point was.

Would I make it through first phase, the most difficult training in the world? Or so the Navy Recruiter said, he himself having washed out of BUD/S. Could I make it through Hell Week? Seven days of non-stop harassment and torture. If I did, I could eventually go to a Seal team and kill some bad guys. And trust me when I say that there are more bad guys out there than you will hear about on CNN, or in the Wall Street Journal. You might not sleep to well at night if you had met some of the people that I have. But again, I digress.

Did I have what it takes to be an Unconventional warrior?

Being a warrior isn't just about joining the military and getting trained for action. Its much deeper. A person must go deep within their own soul and ask themselves this: Are you capable, and willing, to do the unthinkable . . . to become a monster?

Can you engage in horrible violence for the sake of God and country? It's more than just a decision you make.

All over the television right now we see pictures of the carnage just minutes after it happens in Iraq, or Afghanistan. Every day people, who had mothers and fathers and wives and husbands and children, are forever silenced, ripped apart by hot metal and fire and misunderstanding and hate. And they all get sent, in their many

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pieces, to the place that we will all eventually go.

It is a place where the lights fade to darkness, and this world is forever lost.

More fake reality. More cheating history.

The sacrifice a person makes for his country—even a thankless, evil country—is incredibly brave.

What if there is no afterlife?

What if we only get one shot at living?

Would you risk all of that to defend your country?

Would you risk eternal darkness to fight for other peoples' way of life?

The difference between the good guys and the bad guys is politics. War kills equally. Violence makes no assumptions.

In the winter of 1995, I was about to find out what was inside of me.