

## Splinters

Marty turned off the pavement onto an old logging road in rural north Louisiana and eased his pickup truck carefully through puddles from recent rains. A quarter-mile into the thick pinewoods he stopped, turned off the headlights, and killed the engine, which chattered for another second before shuddering still. He wished he could switch his mind off like the headlights to escape his worries for a while. That afternoon he'd learned that his friend Ken had been killed in a helicopter crash near Fort Polk during a training exercise. Ken volunteered for the Army the year before and his unit was scheduled to ship out to Vietnam in a month. When Marty closed his eyes, an image of Ken came to his mind, standing with his shotgun slung over his shoulder, black hair amiss, unshaven face smiling, a photo from a hunting trip. They weren't kin, but brothers just the same.

Marty wrapped a purple wool scarf around his neck, one his mother knitted for him, buttoned up his Army Surplus coat, and stepped out into the cold, windless February night. He opened his grandfather's gold pocket watch and struck a wooden match to see the face. It was a little after ten, a few minutes before the last freight train of the night was scheduled to pass on the Kansas City Southern Railway. *PSSS*, went the match when it landed in a puddle near the muddy front tire.

The tall pines let in just enough starlight to avoid briars and puddles as he walked on the soft, straw-covered ground. In five minutes he reached his destination, the edge of the pines ten yards from the tracks, a place he'd been many times before to be alone, watch trains, and think. He tucked his hair in the hood of his coat and pulled the drawstrings tight, slipped on thick gloves, and leaned against a tree, watching his breath roll out in puffs then dissipate. The night air carried the scents of creosote and grease from the railroad tracks, eye-level as he stood. An owl nearby called, *hoot, hoot, a-whoaa ... hoot, hoot, a-whoaa*.

Stars spread across the blue-black sky reminded him of when he was a kid and his father got him up in the night to go outside with a blanket to wander among the stars, planets, and the spaces in between. That seemed a long time ago, he thought.

Marty's eyes followed the line of trees along the rails to the west till they landed on a tiny spec of light shimmering on the steel ribbons. He grew colder the longer he stayed still, breathing in the silence, waiting for the train to arrive. U.S. troop levels in

Vietnam had grown to over half a million and he was eligible for the draft. Talk about the war with friends, parents, and his girlfriend, shrieked in his mind like a mob of angry crows attacking a hawk. The light, growing larger, glittered along the trees lining the sides of the trackway. His heart was heavy with the realization that he would never see Ken's smiling face again, the profound mystery of death.

A deep, muffled sound broke the utter silence of the night as the freight train neared. The rumble widened and deepened, steel wheels on steel rails bearing tons of weight. The cone headlight grew in size, sharp spikes of white light almost as brilliant as the sun pierced the blackness in its path. He shielded his eyes against the terrible living eye. The rolling thunder of the beast overwhelmed his ears and reached all living things within miles, asleep or awake. The *pop, pop ... pop, pop ...* of the wheels hitting rail joints marked the rhythm of passage.

A second before the speeding locomotive came even with Marty, the awesome white light was hidden from his view, and then the wheels rushed rapidly by at eye-level, bearing the immense load through the cold steel rails, creosote-soaked cross-ties, and the crushed, gray rocks, upon the earth, trembling beneath his feet.

Two more locomotives followed the first, dragging a dozen lumbering black oil tankers, and then a string of pulpwood cars swaying gently back and forth, squeaking under the strain, each packed tightly with fresh-cut pine logs, spreading their sharp sweet perfume into the shadows. He crouched and looked west toward the train's length, pulpwood cars as far as he could see. A loud *bam, bam, bam, bam* approached, an undercarriage with damaged wheel bearings hammering under tons of weight. *BAM, BAM, BAM, BAM*, the sound overwhelmed the deep, angry roar of the monster, and as the injured car passed, the pungent smell of overheated steel reached his nose.

In an instant, a log slipped off a railcar, bounced in the rocks, and fell under the steel wheels. *POW*, the sound reached Marty's ears as something flew over his head, crashing in the woods behind. He felt a prick in his forehead. Warm blood rolled down between his eyes and along the side of his nose, bringing the salty, metallic taste to his lips. He plucked a small splinter from his forehead and pressed his palm against the wound. Splinters spiked his green coat like a dartboard; one, ten inches long, had pierced

his coat sleeve, but not his shirt. Behind him on the ground lay a shattered pulpwood log twelve feet long, much of its bark stripped. The smell of pine enveloped him.

Marty stood and turned to watch the last few cars pass. As the air in the monster's wake stilled, the single red light of the caboose grew smaller and smaller until it disappeared, leaving only empty rails receding in the distance to the east under the stars.

His ears rang a few minutes more before the silence returned and with it his worries. The draft lottery for his birth year would take place in a month. He had decisions to make. So much life was ahead of him, he hoped.

