

War can take place anywhere. A few thousand feet behind an elementary school playground, shots were fired, taking down two young men who had just settled laser sights on the enemy. Only the victims heard the kill-shots. The tearing of camouflage BDUs and the shattering of one's glass facemask. The attacker was now hundreds of feet away, moving swiftly through the Florida swamp.

John was better than you'd expect. Two tiny red points were playing across the makeshift lean-to where a couple of his snipers lay, their own silenced rifles up on tripods. One had just noticed the dot on his partner when John wedged between them. The stiff sound of a poker card riffle as John squeezed the trigger. Two enemies dropped from a branch-covered blind eighty yards off.

"Shoot *more*," John said, patting Levi's shoulder. Then he was gone again. Always moving.

This last one was going to be a bit more difficult. Wading knee-deep in the bog, John could tell he was in-fact out there, maybe forty yards away or so; after the sound of a gas-powered round, the thin leaves around his head had been shredded. Then came the ripples in the water which told him his target had gone under again. John has a full-face shield with a tiny nipple on the top which can be used as a short-term snorkel. His opponent, one identical.

John went under too, this time all the way. In a single breath he approached an orange band under the murky deep and knew he was on top of him. Surfacing, he recognized the top-facing nipple of his opponent's head. He had come up directly behind him. John pointed his pistol.

The man burst from the deep water as if he were half-fish. John's shot went askew, and with confusion he reached up to steady the clothed and masked mannequin which spun from a short rope under a triggered tree trap.

From under the hanging booby trap, Gunner slickly surfaced, the muzzle of his pistol planted firmly into John's ribs. He squeezed off three rounds point blank. From beneath his body armor, thick red pushed through cloth and mixed with the murk. John doubled over and Gunner caught him, cradling him in the water like a babe.

"Fair and square," John managed to say to Gunner.

John was still looking up at the slowly turning fake-out, which he'd sprung, when Gunner finally said, "Well, look on the bright side. We can still bring down the house."

Then the two had a laugh.

The five boys had been playing paintball with friends all summer. Bringing down the house, was code for shooting up the abandoned home down on 9th St and Peters Ave. The gravel drive was so grown over, you wouldn't know it was back there unless you had stumbled across it while exploring in the woods.

What remained of the architecture was hair on a skeleton. Being unfortunate enough, this single home was fully submerged in the downpour of 2001, may have survived had the storm drain not plugged up. The whole property was but two acres of swamp, a bungalow converted to musky mosquito heaven.

Strips of drywall fell into the bog when the paintballs struck. Had the boys had an unlimited supply of ammo, they may literally *bring down* the house. Ammo was always in short supply, but it never prevented them from trying.

Chuck, had a giant mole on his left cheek, and the guys all called him Beaver. He refused to use a firearm, even if it was only powered by CO2. He always brought a blowgun, like he were some kind of ninja; If only ninjas wore trimmed up trash bags.

Beav was easy to please. He was always happy to just get one round in. If he were lucky enough that the paintball busted, he could happily take ten rounds while retreating.

"Beav, you ain't even gettin' a shot to the wall!" said Levi, eyeing down his sights and squeezing off three of his own.

"That one was totally there!" said Beav.

"It only counts if it bursts, man," Gunner said shooting.

"Yeah, well you try shooting this thing," said Beav, "it takes Stamina."

"I'll tell you what took stamina," said John, "your mom, last night."

"—your mom last night," echoed Beav. Then, with a huge breath, rocketed a stinging shot of yellow paint to Gunner's bare right arm.

No one shot John point blank. John wasn't the biggest, but he was the oldest. Beav would settle for Gunner instead.

Beav pointed, "Hah! It burst! It burst!"

Gunner aimed his muzzle at the Beav and Levi deflected it, "Whoa. whoa. whoa."

"See, I told you it bursts!"

"Yeah, for every one you get to bust, ten roll down the front of our shirts Beav," said Remy. "It's no secret."

"Whatever," Beav said, reloading his blowpipe.

"You might notice if you didn't spend all your time running, Beav," said John.

"Hey, you can't hit what you can't see," said Beav.

A yellow paintball bounced off the side of the Peter's home, and the boys laughed.

Pretty much everyone was sure that Beav only wore those glad bags because he could flip em inside out and pretend he was never hit.

"Guys, look!"

Beav pointed to where a giant raven had lit on one of the standing pillars of the old shed. John raised his paint pistol.

"Five bucks says I nail it."

The boys looked at him in silence as his one eye trained down the sight, breathless. The bird watched the boys.

John finally cracked a smile and opened his eye, exhaling. His gun was coming down when a hiss of CO2 shot-off behind them and a plume of feathers exploded from the raven's perch. Remy had pulled the trigger. In an instant, he had painted the raven's black eye red and it landed, feet sticking up, in the bog. The paint was indistinguishable from blood, if there were any.

"Holy shit!" said Remy, surprised at himself.

No one laughed. They all just stood there, waiting for the bird to move, to struggle.

"Dude, you fucking killed it, Remy," John said.

"You were!"

Beav was still staring, "That's bad karma, man."

"Look!" Remy pointed.

The bird had been flinching in the mud.

"That Raven's dead, man," Levi said. "Something's got it!"

They watched as the algae split along the back of an alligator.

Beav grimaced as he watched the gator adjust its grip on the raven.

"Quick," said Levi. "Anyone got a tube of pellets?"

"Nah, man," guttered Beav. But Remy and Gunner had already started coloring it two shades of red.

John and Beav took a few steps back up the embankment as the gator disappeared. It's attempt at a meal still bobbed in the muck.

"That's bad karma, dudes," said Beav again, following John up the drive.

"Guys!" yelled Levi after them. "Wait up."

One by one, the boys followed John up the hill and from inside the Peters home, the watcher watched.

"Just a week and summer's gone," John said to his mom over lunch.

"You don't need to go out and get muddy every day of the week, John."

Her look practically dared him not to take his seat at the table. Mac and Cheese wasn't exactly the Doritos and soda he'd score en route to Remy's. Plus, Remy had a good PC they could keep busy on til Beav got released from captivity at four.

"Sit down, John," Dad said. "A meal with the family won't kill ya for once."

Reserved to wait it out, he tuned out the drawl of parent's obligatory small talk and sat. John almost had the spoon to his mouth when he saw the black bird, beyond Mom, light outside of the kitchen window.

Mom had taken advantage of John's undivided attention and asked him if he'd considered the colleges she'd suggested.

"John?"

She turned to look over her shoulder, but the bird had gone.

Her cell phone was ringing. It was Remy.

Remy was watching YouTube videos of crocodiles eating antelope when John arrived.

"You called just in time, man," he said. "Mom was getting into college conversation."

"You pick one, yet?" Remy asked, turning in his desk chair.

"I don't know. Kinda want to hang around for a while," John said, watching. "Jesus! Do you think that was a crocodile yesterday?"

"You kiddin'?" Remy asked. "This ain't fuckin' Australia!"

"REMY!" came his Mom's voice from the kitchen.

"Sorry, Ma!" he turned back and paused it. "It was a gator man. Maybe you oughta at least consider trade school?"

"I'll show you schooled, later in the swamp." John leaned against the desk and tossed a CO2 cartridge up and down. "Nah, I thought, maybe get a job while ya'll are doing senior year, ya know?"

He fumbled the cartridge and it struck the spacebar. The crocodile thrashed and rolled again.

"Jesus, man. You wanna do another one of my keyboards in?"

"Ah, relax," John tried not to let the video disturb him. "Hey, d'you wanna hear something creepy?"

"You mean, even more so than this?" Remy asked.

"A little." John slid the cartridge into his pocket. "I think that raven you shot was just outside of my kitchen window."

Remy watched as John leaned over and typed into the search bar: Ravens.

"Over here, Levi!" Gunner said tugging his sleeve. "Right under there."

"Under where?"

"Ha ha!"

"Shut up, Gunner!" said Levi, tired of the joke. "Just tell me where you want this thing."

"Well, the way I figure, John'll follow you through here and assume you went down the slope into the water," he pointed with his paint rifle. "But, he's gonna stop before he commits to losing the high ground, especially if he sees you out in the bog."

"Okay, so what's your play?"

"We stash that contraption under the roots here and I will hide up the tree in range of the transmitter." He motioned for Levi to give him the bomb. "Then, when he stops to consider his advance, boom."

"My old man must've put a liter of paint in that thing," said Levi. "Ya think it's bad for the swamp?"

"It's a swamp!" said Gunner. "Gotta be a case of empty beer cans down here already."

"Well, ya got me there," Levi said, kicking one out into the water.

"Besides, your old man's last trap was genius! Finally got him. We'll get him again."

They pushed the cannon under the root.

It really was trash city behind the school. If not for all of the swamp grass, the fact would be even more apparent. Levi couldn't help but notice now, since Gunner mentioned it. A pair of old blue jeans here, a yellowed wiffle ball half buried in the mud. At least the water spiders hadn't vacated. Their little legs still left needle prick lines through the green algae as they raced away from the two boy's rubber waders. Then there was that creepy mannequin with absent eyes. Rotating slowly on dingy green line as they walked past.

Something beneath it stirred.

Kristin tightened her brother's facemask to her handlebars. John had shattered hers the night before, leaving a nick under her eye that her mother had been relentless about. If she were caught hanging out with those boys, it'd be all over. She liked the boys. It reminded her of when Dad were alive. She never knocked on Tricia's door, and instead, peddled off toward the elementary school.

Beav had been set free an hour early. TV dinners were his friend. He looked like a vacuum-packed peanut biking against the wind as he rounded the corner of 9th. The whipping plastic of his makeshift poncho settled when he stopped. He pushed his goggles up on his head. There, in the woods, was Kristin's bike.

From beneath the mannequin a sticky bubble formed. First undulating in the marsh, and then ballooning to the size of a baseball. Gunner and Levi had stood there and watched, both expecting the thing to pop when it struck the underside of the dummy. From a veiny lime green, the bubble darkened into an inky sac atop the algae. Levi stepped back when he noticed something inside of the bubble move. Gunner had seen it too. He had also seen that whatever was growing in there was looking back at them through slick black eyes. He raised his rifle. Levi steadied himself on Gunner's shoulder just as the red-eyed raven screamed for attention in the trees above. Both of the boys saw it up there and stumbled back onto the creek bed. When Gunner glanced back at the mannequin, he saw a sharp grey beak emerge from the swamp bubble. Backing up the bank, the two boys watched in cold shock as the bog gave some kind of twisted birth to another black crow who croaked a chilling dare as it shook the muck from its feathers and took flight.

They fled.

Beav could never have known that Kristen had followed a red-eyed raven down to the old house on Peters avenue, which only the boys knew existed. He didn't witness Kristen lean over the shallow swamp and get lost in her own reflection, nor see that reflection change to that of another little girl. He simply had to find one of her red sneakers, lying on its side by the water, to go sprinting back up the slope to his bike and race off toward the school.

Levi and Gunner were propped up against the fence by the playground when Beav let his bike roll to a drop in the weeds.

"Guys," Beav could tell by the look that Levi was already unsettled. "I think something's happened!"

Gunner simply stood. How could anyone who always dressed like a character from Halo look unsettled, albeit his knee and elbow pads belonged to an old skateboard set?

"Calm down, Hass," said Gunner, a stiff arm out to steady him.

"It's Kristen," Beav said, "I saw her bike down by the Peters home."

When Gunner and Levi's eyes connected, Beav knew something else was going on. He stood there panting.

"What?"

"That's not your prince charming," said Remy, as he and John approached the guys behind the school.

Beav had been kneeling by his backpack, the red shoe in one hand. Gunner didn't look amused.

"John!" Beav made a bee-line for him, clearly unsatisfied with everyone's calm.

"It's Kristen's."

"What are you doing with her shoe?" asked John.

"I found it."

"And you took it?" he asked, "You didn't think she'd need it?"

Remy was just now noticing that no one had laughed at his joke, and the eerie way that Levi was watching the exchange made him feel uneasy.

Beav tried again. "She was down by the Peters house."

"Damn it, Beav. You know no girls are allowed down there. Who have you been telling?"

"No. I found it down by the bog. Next to where Remy creamed that crow."

John reached out and took the sneaker.

"And that's not all ... " said Levi, risking a nudge from Gunner.

It was strange, Gunner leading the pack down through the woods where they had seen the swamp give birth to a bird.

"I'm telling you, that thing survived the shot, Remy," said Levi. "Gunner and I saw it."

"You guys," whined Beav, "can't we forget about the dumb crows?"

"It's a raven, Beav," said Levi. "Crows don't get that big."

"Who cares? I really think that gator got Kristen," Beav was using a fern as a makeshift rope down the slippery shortcut. "We should be checking on her."

"We will, Beaver," said Gunner. "It's just right down here."

And there it was. The geared-up dummy.

John pulled his mask down and Gunner stiff armed him to a stop.

"Whoa. What are you doing?"

"I'm going under to check it out," said John.

"Uh, I don't know if that's such a good idea, man." said Levi.

John eased Gunner's arm down. "C'mon. You said it came up right under there, right?"

Levi's eyes were up in the canopy, now. No sign of the raven.

"Come on, John," Beav said, "there's nothing there. Let's go out to the house."

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