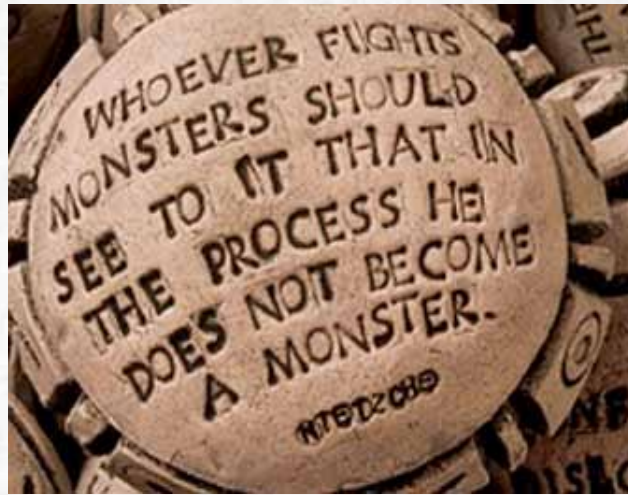


A Hard Place

By John Moore



The following story was created as part of Stories on Stage's "Words of Art" initiative. Writers were charged with taking inspiration from an assigned piece of artwork integrating the written word: "Hopestone Detail," above, was created by Denver artist Gayla Lemke

PART 1

"So how far are you willing to take this?" the hostage said, his hands bound, his feet tied to the chair, a blindfold effectively executing the job that blindfolds are made to execute.

The older man lay back on the tattered motel bed, drew in a deep and deliberate breath and let time pass before exhaling.

"That depends," the man with the gun finally answered ... "How far are you?"

Then, nothing. If silence could talk, these two would never get a word in edgewise.

At last, the ring of the cell phone punctured the quiet of this squalid little motel room that wore the stench of smoke and liquor for wallpaper. It all looked straight out of 1988, but then, Ronald Reagan would still be president, and our hostage would still be a gleam in his father's eye.

The captor barely got out the word, "Yeah?" before being cut off by pitched pings and pangs that told the captive this was his mother on the phone.

"Calm down and listen," the man interjected --

when he could, followed by all the clichéd warnings you'd expect in a conversation like this: Don't call the police. Don't try to find them, etcetera. "Yes, your boy is fine. And he'll stay that way, as long as I get exactly what I came here for." But the woman would not be placated by this man's word. What mother would be?

"Enough!" he screamed, "If it will shut you up, then fine, I will let him say so himself."

The man pulled off the blindfold and put the phone to the young man's ear, but with a warning: "Tell her you're all right. No more. No less. Don't make me do something we'll both regret," the man said, as if that line had not yet long been crossed.

The boy looked up at his tormentor as if to spit in his face.

"FUCK YOU ... DAD!" he yelled.

PART 2

Quiet returned to the room as these men pondered how they might begin for one last time this conversation they had started a dozen times before but never satisfactorily completed. They avoided one another with deep, vacant looks, the kind Nietzsche described as

“thousand-yard stares” ... but this room was a twenty-foot box.

“So how did we ever get ... here?” the younger man finally said.

The pause was pregnant with twins.

“A series of very bad decisions, Georgie.”

Robert still called his son Georgie, though the moniker sounded absurd here, now that he was 18 years old and far greater in stature than his wiry father. You don't call someone Georgie when you've bound him to a chair by duct tape.

“So seriously, what are we doing here?” George asked. But he knew. He knew that one word from him would end this standoff. One word, and father and son would be back home watching “Sports Center” together by nightfall.

But it was the one word the son was not willing to utter: “Rescind.” No way the newest, proudest, youngest recruit in the United States Marine Corps was going to rescind his enlistment the day before he was to report for duty.

“Well, this will all come in handy when I get taken prisoner,” George wisecracked, the tape beginning to tear into his wrists.

“You think this is a joke?” said Robert.

“No,” he responded. It's not funny enough to be a joke.”

Then, nothing.

“They say there is always a threshold for acceptable losses in wartime,” Robert said. “I've always wondered how one gets put in charge of determining the threshold for acceptable losses in wartime.”

“So what's yours, dad?” George asked. “I don't imagine many fathers and sons ever recover from a kidnapping. How much are you willing to lose here?”

Robert responded with what he was NOT willing to lose. “I am not willing for you to lose one fingernail, Georgie,” he said. “Not for ... this cause. Not for this.”

Now George, as you might imagine, sensed ... a contradiction. “Well, this whole gun-toting pacifist kidnapping approach of yours is confusing me a bit,” the son said. “I mean, you're crazy, fine, that's not news. But you're not going to shoot me to save my fingernail. Something about babies and bathwater and all of that.”

“Oh give me the splendid, SILENT son,” Robert muttered. “He meant sun, when he wrote that -- with a 'u'. But somehow it speaks so much more to me as son, with an 'o.'”

George begged his father not to quote poetry. Not now. Even if it meant having this whole redundant argument all over again. Anything but Walt Whitman.

And they did have that whole argument again. It was driven by emotion, twisted by contradiction and even interspersed with occasional bursts of logic. You've heard the basic content before, or some variation of it, somewhere: In a bar or a living room or around a water cooler. Does it ever change? Is it ever not rooted in fear? For one, a fear for his son's life. For the other, fear for his nation's safety.

George said this would not be the land of the free if it were not also the home of the brave. Robert chided him for risking his life for a slogan. Robert reminded George that his grandfather had fought in “the last just war” in the hope that his children, and their children, would never have to again. The son pointed out to his father that he was the one who named him George ... for the patron saint of soldiers?

“My mistake,” said Robert.

It was, as these debates always are these days, circuitous and unwinnable. And once politics are all pitched, such arguments have only one place to go, and that's personal. This one did, too. The details aren't important. Feelings were hurt and tempers were strained in a way that only fathers and sons ... and fathers with guns ... can do to one another.

Eventually, George pointed out the obvious. “In the end, dad, you are going to have to accept that this is my decision,” he said. And this moment of hubris only made the desperate man more desperate.

“No,” Robert snapped. “Georgie, listen to me. I mean, really listen to me. I have nightmares, son. One night I see your arm blown off, and it's bouncing like a tumbleweed in a sandstorm. The next, I see your half-buried leg, rotting in the 120-degree desert. They're just limbs, but I know they're yours, Georgie. I know they're yours because I know my only son's arm and leg when I see them, even when they're in pieces in a dream! And then I see you coming off that plane, and you're not whole, and you never will be whole again, and I wake up screaming.”

George's eyes welled, but not with anger. He sympathized with his poor, irrational old dad. But he was now answering to a higher calling.

“I'm not saying this to hurt you, dad,” he whispered with compassionate conviction. “But I believe that an arm or a leg is small price to pay for freedom.”

“But I want you whole!” his father cried helplessly.

“Hear me when I say this,” George said. “If I leave an arm or a leg behind, believe me, I will still be coming home ... whole.”

“How?” Robert cried. “When your arm is being paraded down some dusty street like a trophy? Or kicked around by kids as a soccer ball?”

“Dad, I understand where you are coming from, I do. A parent defines ‘whole’ by counting 10 toes and 10 fingers. I get that. But what truly defines me are my beliefs. You should be proud of that.”

“What beliefs?” Robert said. “When did you get out of diapers? March? When I was 18, the only belief I had was that I believed I was never, ever going to get laid!”

“Dad, you’ve been lucky,” George said. “You grew up at a good time in history. You’ve never been asked to sacrifice anything for your country. Maybe it’s your turn now.”

It was the sincerity of that statement that enveloped Robert in inevitability. He was losing his Georgie. He just knew it. Maybe not today. Maybe not even a year from now. But someday. Today was the first day of his only son’s slow and unnecessary and voluntary death.

Robert’s sudden calmness was not to be mistaken for resignation. This was merely the moment when Robert’s threshold for acceptable losses in wartime ... shifted.

“You’re right about one thing, son,” he said. “Your mother and I named you George after the patron saint of soldiers. So that he would protect you. That day ... I tell you, Georgie, watching you be born was like standing before the altar of God. I did count 10 fingers and 10 toes and I gave thanks for that gift. And that’s a gift I am not willing to give back. NOT FOR THIS! So no, Georgie. No. Not one arm, not one leg, not one toe. Not ... one ... fingernail!”

But this moment of evangelical conviction had failed to spread beyond a congregation of one. And Robert knew it.

“All bullshit aside, Georgie, you’re no closer to changing your mind now than the moment I dragged you in here, are you?”

“No,” George said kindly. “I am more determined than ever.”

“Well bully for you,” said Robert, letting loose some sound that might be mistaken for a laugh. In this moment of sarcastic defeat, Robert slumped to the bed, reached into his right pants leg, and produced a flask.

“I chant this chant in the name of all dead sol-

diers,” Robert said.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, dad, don’t,” said George, who now really began struggling to break free for the first time.

“I exhale love from me wherever I go, like a moist perennial dew, for the ashes of all dead soldiers.”

“Please dad, don’t,” George begged. But Robert just kept on reciting from this old poem that must have been lodged in the recesses of his dusty noggin since childhood.

“War, death, cataclysm like this, America, Take deep to thy proud prosperous heart.”

“Stop, you son of a bitch,” George said. “For mom’s sake. Don’t do it.”

Too late. With one swig, Robert polished off the flask’s contents. And with that, George stopped struggling. He had just experienced his first loss in battle.

“Congratulations, dad,” George said. “That was a one hundred thousand dollar drink.” That was how much the family had spent on programs to help Robert quit six years before. “Now take this damned tape off of me!”

Then, nothing.

At last, the ring of the cell phone punctured the quiet of this squalid little motel room.

Robert lied sadly to his wife, while using his pocket knife to slit the tape holding his son. “Georgie was just too strong for me,” he told the hysterical woman. “Yep, he’s gone ... Yes, I’ll be home soon.”

Robert dropped the phone and the knife and buried his face in his hands, crying. George shook himself off and hugged his father.

“I am sorry I couldn’t give you what you wanted, dad,” he said. “But you know the motto: ‘Resist much, obey little.’”

That was not the Marines, of course. It was Whitman.

“Now, now,” said Robert. “Your new bosses won’t go for that kind of talk.”

George kissed Robert lightly on the cheek. “I was talking about you, dad,” he said. “Now go home. Hug mom. Pray for me. I believe that I am going to be OK. And if it’s meant to be, I will be.”

George headed for the door, sure that this sad drama had played itself out. Instead he was stopped by a desperate cry.

“So help me God, Georgie, don’t you walk out that door!”

George turned around, his face still filled with compassion. For the first time, the son saw that the man

standing before him was really just a boy. A boy with a gun pointing at him.

“Dad, I have to go,” he said. I love you.”

And for the first time, the father saw that the boy standing before him was now truly a man.

“I love you too,” Robert said. He then shot wildly.

“Jesus, dad,” said George, titillated but yet unafraid of his father’s woeful marksmanship. “I didn’t think you had it in you.”

George turned back to the door, when his father’s voice rang out again. But this time in a commanding tone George hadn’t recognized since he was 12.

“Don’t move!” shouted Robert.

And George didn’t.

“Hands up,” shouted Robert. And the hands went up.

“C’mon dad, we both know you aren’t going to shoot me,” said George, though he was no longer at all sure of that.

“Maimed over here? Or dead over there?”

What choice do you leave me, son?”

“You don’t know that, dad!”

“No,” Robert replied, as he trained the gun, first on his son’s shoulder, then the thigh. “But one thing I do know: If I shoot you right here and now -- you know, just a flesh wound -- then you aren’t going anywhere. Not over there anyway.”

George started to stammer. “Yeah? But but but ... if you do that, dad, then you’re going to jail. C’mon you can’t-”

His father interrupted: “I grossly underestimated my threshold for acceptable losses in wartime.”

“Dad, I know deep down you’re trying to help me, but you’re not making sense now. You’re in a panic.”

But he wasn’t, and George knew it. And then Robert cocked the gun again.

“You, you do this, dad, and you’re no better than they are -- those people who are parading our arms and legs in the streets. You’re always quoting poetry. What about, that thing you always said about when fighting the monster, not becoming the monster?”

Robert considered this bit of philosophy for a moment. “That’s not poetry,” he sneered. “That’s Nietzsche.”

“Who gives a fuck who said it?” George said.

“You have your duty, son. I have mine,” Robert said. “Yours started when you signed your papers. Mine started the day you were born.”

“Daddy?” Georgie called meekly to him.

Robert fired again. Only this time, his aim was steadier. A horrible cry rang out, but it wasn’t from Georgie. Not from a Marine. George slumped to the floor; Robert slumped to the bed, grappling with direst fate, the monstrous inexactitude between intent and action. With Whitman’s words echoing through his head like a malediction, Robert was left to ponder anew all that had now been lost.

Then, nothing.

THE END