

The Thousand-Yard Stare

I am looking down the black length of an M16-A2 service rifle, and when the sight lines up over the target, and the distant outline of a human body blurs, I will pull the trigger. It is the shape of any man. The shape of every man. The oblong hump signifies the head and the arms are down. Why can't they be up, threatening with raised fists? Anything but sad and drooping shoulders. I wish I have a reason to shoot beyond earning a badge, but mostly I wish my reason for being here does not come down to one sentence that my father said to me long ago as he chopped wood on a camping trip.

The man's shape blurs.

I fire.

I want the badge that says 'Rifle Expert' and has the two rifles crossed in an X over a bull's-eye. It's no bigger than a half dollar. But I know its significance; I know that if I fail to hit the target, I will never see things the way a Marine does. Everything that I attempt to achieve will always be out of range.

U.S. Marine Corps boot camp consists of three phases. Phase I breaks you down mentally and physically, getting you used to the idea that for three months you will be so integrated into your unit that you will no longer be you; in fact, you aren't allowed to speak in the first person. "I" is a privilege that you will not have until you graduate. Phase III prepares you for graduation; you get your uniforms, your orders, and you practice marching morning, noon and night so as not to embarrass yourself or your drill instructor on graduation day. But Phase II is the most important to me and I have been looking forward to it since I stood on the yellow footprints waiting to have my head shaved at the Recruit Depot in San Diego. Phase II is where you learn to shoot.

Shooting is something Marines ought to be proud of. The basic enlisted marine is trained to shoot to higher standards than the soldier, sailor or airman. We are trained to hit a target from one thousand yards off, and if we ever spot an old Marine, "salty" we might call him because we can see his battles in the lines on his face or the wear on his uniform, what will give him away is the stare.

The thousand-yard stare is something that Marines are said to have the way Zeus is said to throw lightning, but I have seen men who have it. My Drill Instructor could look at you as if you could run and run but you'd never make it out of his range. Some men's eyes can see right through you, can hit you like a bull's-eye is painted over your heart.

The first few days on the range you learn how to hold your weapon: how to stand, sit, kneel, and lay down, all while pointing the rifle in the right direction. This last step is not as easy as it seems.

A drill instructor skulks behind the focused recruits like a chicken hawk. His eyes bug out and he leans so far forward he is nearly perpendicular. His mouth foams at the edges as he barks orders. Recruit Pace, a descendent from a long line of picante sauce men, does not hear. He's said he'll inherit more money than he'll know what to do with, but he had to join the Marine Corps first, and I figure he always seems slow because he has to consider all of the things he'll do once he has his money. He's said he joined for that money, not Uncle Sam's but the cash in Uncle Pace's Texas leather pocketbook, and no one would have believed him if it weren't for his breath, worse even than the Drill

Instructors' and hot enough to make your eyes burn. It's like salsa is in his blood. When I think of Pace's story I regret enlisting so soon after my father's death; my head had been cloudy and crooked as the glasses on Pace's face are now, as he lay there prone on the burm, but still I envy him and his answers to the question most people ask when you enlist: Why?

I don't, however, envy him his current situation. Pace's mistake is that instead of responding to the Drill Instructor in the third person and facing straight ahead, he turns around. He forgets that where he turns, his weapon turns, and he holds the rifle limply before his body. The drill instructor spots his prey.

He's a skinny, Opie Taylor of a kid no one speaks with much because someone who messes up does so out of habit, and habits are contagious. He jumps up onto his boots; the rifle barrel haphazardly sweeps in every direction. Recruits dive to the ground. Drill Instructors duck. I stare, wide eyed, and with pity for what he has brought upon himself. I also wonder: "If someone gets shot, do we get the day off?"

Pace's eyes shut tight as the Drill Instructor grabs his throat and the kid's mouth gasps open like a fish thumbed through the gills. The Drill instructor wrenches the rifle from Pace's hands and asks him: "Do you know that you are the most worthless, shit-eating son of a whore I have ever laid eyes on?"

"Yes sir!"

"Are you crying?"

He is.

"You pussy . . . No! You don't deserve to be called that. I like pussy too much to insult it that way."

You learn how to curse, how to shoot, and you learn both with deadly precision. The Drill Instructors teach you how to curse, but the weapons instructors teach you how to shoot; their job is to calm you down so that no one buckles under all of the stress and fires at something that shouldn't be shot. The weapons instructors wear safari helmets; helmets that a Hemingway character would wear on a big game hunt. And a few of them duck and dive around the burm, a stray helmet rolling down the slope of dirt like a stray hub cap, and they are frantic because some recruits have shouted in the excitement that a recruit is going 'Full Metal Jacket' on the range.

Their helmets remind me of my father when we'd go camping. He'd outfit himself with hats, boots, and packs as if the paved roads, running water, and electricity at our luxury campsites were at any moment in danger of attack by a grizzly bear. One day, as he chopped firewood I crept around the fire-pit playing with GI Joes. I'd made parachutes for them out of paper napkins and they were calling in mayday.

"Did you ever want to be a soldier?" I asked, and I watched him in awe of his axe as it cut an arc through the air. He said that if he'd ever joined the military he would have been a Marine. I told him that I wanted to be a Marine too. I wouldn't remember that until a weapon's instructor held his helmet on as he dove out of the line of Pace's rifle.

That summer, after I'd finished the fourth grade, my father decided that we would hike Half Dome together. The Half Dome trail is 16.4 miles roundtrip, and it runs past waterfalls, up steps hewn out of the rock, and around back the giant dome that appears to have been split through the middle, the other side crumbling away to reveal a sheer face. Before I was old enough to hike, every young man in my family had hiked Half-Dome.

All of the younger kids and every parent but my father would stop at the bridge that was the designated cut-off point between the men and the boys. Unable to follow them, I remember watching their large boots kick up dust as they followed the trail up into the mist from the waterfall. If there had been enough snow in the winter, rainbows faded into and out of sight there, obscuring my view of the men in my family. My mother would run her fingers through my hair to console me as the water that started high up in the mountains and out of my range of sight, and now fell into a pool and slid beneath the bridge, set the wood to rumbling beneath my small shoes.

My father had to persuade my mother that I would be fine. I had had to beg my father to believe it himself; and I'm not sure if either of them believed that I was ready, so much as felt sorry for me: the last of three boys and behind the nearest in age by eight years. It was my turn to share this rite of passage with my father and I am grateful that I did it so early. He must have sensed, as did I, that he was getting too old to make that hike. We got started on the trail late and made it up to the top by late afternoon. I could hardly look over the edge, I was so afraid of being swept away by the wind as it pushed me around like a bully. Dark clouds threatened rain and the top of the mountain was closed off because of lightning. A park ranger directed us back down the trail.

Trees lined either side of the path, the canopy seemed our only resistance against the heavy clouds above; both darkened our way. Once we emerged from the trees at the top of Vernal Falls and looked out over the falling water the sun was setting. We searched in our packs for flashlights but we'd forgotten to pack them.

It was hard to see anything but the gray trail at our feet. Mosquitos buzzed at my ears and I was too exhausted to swat at them. With miles of trail still unwinding before us I began to cry. I started dragging my feet, kicking up dust on the darkening trail.

My father stopped me and turned me to face him and put one knee down in the dirt. He put his hands on my shoulders.

"Mijo," he said, "You can cry all you want but you can't give up."

It was dark by the time we made it to the bottom of the trail, where the road was paved. Still miles away from camp, the bus back had stopped running. The road was black like everything else around us and my legs were numb. It seem as if I floated out into a starless sky. There were many miles left to walk and I couldn't go on. My legs were buckling and we were out of food and water. My father chose a direction, hoisted me up with one arm, and with the other he held a lighter so that whenever there was a noise that frightened me he could hold the lighter out, scrape it on with his thumb, and show me that there was nothing within sight to fear.

I woke up covered in sweat in my bed at camp and outside I could hear him saying to my family how brave and strong I had been. I felt bad that I hadn't made it all the way back and that he'd had to carry me. He didn't tell them that I'd cried and I was grateful.

The next morning he woke me up for breakfast and he brought out two shirts. They were matching "I Made It To The Top" shirts, with pictures of half dome on the front. His was draped over his arm for everyone to see and mine was clutched in his fist.

"Here, Christopher, you have to show it off. You earned it!"

He was smiling big behind his beard and I took the shirt from him and we all sat down to breakfast at the steel table bolted to the concrete floor of our cabin. When

everyone had finished eating we all got ready to go down to the river. I stuffed my shirt into the bottom of my backpack where no one would see it.

That summer had been the last in which my father was able to hike anywhere. When my father was diagnosed with cancer it had already spread to most of his internal organs. It started in his bile ducts. It wrapped around his stomach, making it impossible for him to digest anything but blended foods: stinking smoothies that my mother fed to him through a bendy straw. He was placed on painkillers but these only numbed his awareness of the pain; we could see it in his continual grimaces and tremors, and sudden grasps of the rickety bed-rail. He gave us dull, skeletal smiles.

“I can’t even feel it,” he’d say.

But we had no way of knowing when he could feel it. He never cried. He gritted his teeth and gripped his yellowed sheets, but not once did I hear him cry out; nothing.

So I didn’t cry either. I went to school every day and had headaches that sent me to school nurses, to doctors and later, psychiatrists. I bit my lip when I felt tears coming. I watched him suffer in silence and I thought that this was how a man should suffer.

Now, whenever I fire my weapon at the target, the gas from the internal explosion is expelled into my eyes and it seems like a good excuse for tears. My eyes burn. Water rushes out of them but I fire on, blurry-eyed. On rifle-qualification day you are given three magazines and you load each one with brass rounds. They are golden space shuttles the size of your pinkie finger. Every recruit is lined up on a low hill and we launch each rocket to a personal rhythm. We discover the oneness of firing a weapon. Relax. Aim. Exhale. Fire.

I hear the orders of the Drill Instructors. They bark and scream and even with earplugs in and rifles firing, I can hear them like my own muffled conscience. I try to ignore it but I regret scribbling my name on so many forms that my signature became a single slash of a line in the interest of time. Before my eighteenth birthday had come, I had already let two recruiters into my home.

They had sat across from my mother, and I sat beside her in the empty spot on the couch, and persuaded her to allow me to join. The arm of the couch was too far for me to rest my elbow on it. The men across from me had shoes that shined as brightly as their medals and they had powerful arms and long legs and I felt foolish sitting so close to my mother. I’d wanted in fast and I left for boot camp the day after my high school graduation.

In his last days we replayed a video in which someone dressed as Jesus Christ spoke the gospel to a new-age soundtrack. The video seemed to comfort him but I turned the volume down whenever I was in the room, afraid that I would laugh in front of my father. On one of his last nights he sat in front of the TV in his portable padded aluminum chair. He gestured for something with which to write, moving his hand in the air, swirling it like he was writing something down that couldn’t be seen. I set a TV tray in front of him and I brought him a pen and some stationary and I crouched beside him

“Please, write this down,” his voice rasped. I leaned in to hear him. “You’ll help your mom. You’ll do these things. It’ll be alright.”

He comforted me, putting his hand on mine. Veins mapped courses over his brittle skin, tracked and scabbed from Chemo, and I was ashamed that I couldn't comfort him. There was a building pressure at the back of my eyes; another headache coming on.

I took the pen and he tried to speak so I leaned closer. I couldn't hear him. I felt his breath, hot on my face, but it was impossible to hear him. He reached for the pen and scraped it across the paper. Lines were drawn. He drew shapes up and down and sideways. I squinted.

He tapped the pen onto the paper and the sound cracked on the TV dinner tray. I said, "Ok, I'll take care of it." But I wanted him to be able to speak at least as much as he wanted to. I hoped that one of the things that were on his mind, one of his most serious concerns, was that he hadn't had with me a conversation I'd been waiting for since childhood. I had imagined that at some point in my life, my father would sit me down and tell me that I was a man. I wasn't so naïve as to think that there would be badges or pins, but I knew that it would be my father who would tell me when I deserved to call myself a man.

He looked into my eyes and his were glassy and dark. The TV Jesus spoke about the heavenly father. I tried to take the paper but he kept his hand on top of it, moved his lips but no sound came. Maybe he was trying to tell me what I wanted so desperately to hear. Maybe if I knew that I was no longer a boy, but a man like him, he would find comfort in knowing that I was there to take care of whatever problems he'd be leaving behind.

I said: "Don't worry, dad." But he looked worried.

My brother woke me up the next morning, standing in the doorway.

"Chris," he said, "dad died last night. The priest is in the living room. They're going to take him away soon, so you should come see him."

I said, "I'll be right there." When he'd closed the door I put on my powder blue shirt and my blue slacks, climbed out of the window, and hopped the brick wall surrounding my backyard. I went to class as if nothing had happened. When my 2nd period teacher Mrs. Malm found out that I'd left my dead father and grieving family at home, she accompanied me to the principal's office. She cried down the hallway, through the courtyard, and past the gentle-eyed statue of St. John Bosco, patron saint of young men.

I reach into my cargo pocket and tug out a magazine. In one magazine there are ten rounds but in the other two there should only be five. I've been thinking too much and I'm not sure which one I need, but the drill instructors are yelling so I grab the first cold square I feel in my cargo pocket. I slip it into its place on the rifle and tap the hard underside with the ball of my palm until it clicks and settle my elbows into position on the cheap green matting some people keep in patios. I fire five rounds and the recruit beside me begins to reload as he waits for further orders, but my rifle's chamber doesn't lock as it should: there is one more round in it. The brass glints in the slit beside my eye. I must have miscounted. I fire again. The recruit on my other side is at rest. All of them are.

I think about the term "at rest", and how its meaning has been forever changed. It used to mean relaxing by the Merced river, splashing in the ice cold water, and warming

on the shore at altitudes that put me right beneath the sun. My letters from boot camp to home have all mentioned Yosemite; that seems to be the place I go in my head when I need to get away from here. The hikes, the camping, the food out of a rucksack, its all easier when I imagine it in the right context.

Again, there is a new round in the chamber. I fire. All of the other rifle blasts have ceased and there is no longer the crashing waves of constant weapons-fire; no white noise. I fire again and the shot echoes alone.

My drill instructor takes the rifle from me and I look up at him through watery eyes. They're not tears, I know, because there's still too much pressure in my head, like my helmet is made of rock. He stands above me, shouting down, but I can't hear what he's saying. I know I have been disqualified and I sit up and look down the rows of recruits looking on with dark, tired eyes. Some of them squint behind blurry-lenses, black rims covering half their faces. All of them are young like me.

He looks out down the range. "Goddamnit, Rosales."

My target has been raised up from the trench and it is marked throughout the center and the head with colored circles. I wonder who is down in that trench, marking bullet holes and raising cardboard bodies.

"You would have scored expert if you hadn't fucked up. Get out of my face."

I stand up. The unqualifieds stand at the back of the range in formation and I assume that I am headed there. I turn my back to the cardboard men out on the range and I march alone to stand in formation with the other unqualifieds. I wonder if they all think the same thing inside of their shaved heads as I do in mine: who has the badges, the words, to make men? Out there on the range they are lowering the targets. I can see the round red and blue markers disappear down into the ground. It's a thousand yards off and my focus is sharp as the blade of a knife. The exhausted recruits climb out of the trench from which the targets are raised and lowered like magic. It seems now the trick is revealed.