

CRITICAL MASS

Richard Cass

Dermot McCarthy drank a lot of Scotch his first month home from Iraq, until he understood that nothing he took in would change the information—what he saw and heard and did there—into knowledge. So he switched to red wine. Whiskey was a selfish drink, he thought, eking itself out in evaporation. Wine grows from the generosity of yeast.

The night Arlene brought Liam home, Dermot was sitting on the granite hump in the middle of the backyard with a Pinot Noir from the Russian River. Even in the dark, with his back to the house, he sensed her walking out over the damp grass, and when he heard his son's joyous squeal, Dermot's heart spun. He held the glass so she wouldn't see how full it was.

"Aren't the mosquitoes eating you alive?" she said.

"They get their fill after a while."

She sat beside him on the rock with Liam in her lap, his back braced with her thighs. Dermot knew he should wait to touch her—he owed her too much to pretend everything was normal.

"He almost took a step today," she said. "Didn't you, little man?"

At least she wouldn't deny him that.

"I found a group," he said. "Every Thursday night."

Her shoulders relaxed, maybe hope settling in. She took his glass and drank.

"That's a nice one," she said. "Carneras?"

He nodded, then realized she couldn't see him in the dark.

"It's late in the day to say I'm sorry," he said. "But it's true."

"Show us." She handed him the glass.

"That would be the way."

"Regardless," she said. "It wasn't right to leave. Me and Liam, we aren't quitters. Are we, little man?"

The boy crowed and they both laughed. The urge to see his son grown had been much of what sustained Dermot through his year in Iraq.

"Sometimes straight through isn't the only way," he said.

“I love it when you mangle Robert Frost.”

He shifted the big balloon glass to his other hand, spilled a thin stream of wine on the rock.

“Some words for those who cannot raise their own,” he said. “A toast.”

Arlene stood up and cradled Liam in her left arm. Then she helped Dermot down off the hump, against the stiffness in his knees. He stood close to her for a minute, feeling their warmth together in the cool night. Then he switched on the flashlight and picked out the start of the flagstone path back to the house.

“Not every soldier wants to be a hero, Dermot.”

Dr. Leander was playing to the group again. Dermot had thought he was going to like the psychologist’s style, until he encountered Dr. Leander’s ironic tone, his distance. As a line commander, Dermot always tried for distance’s opposite, the sense that he and his men shared the boredom, the terror, the high joy of mastering one’s own fear.

Dr. Leander insisted they use his title, but called each of them by his first name. You didn’t have to be a psychologist to see he was intimidated.

“We brought everyone home this last time,” Dermot said. “Three Purple Hearts, but everyone pulled their weight.”

That shut everyone up for a moment, except Tommy Lee.

“Come on, Dermot. Everyone? No fuck-ups, dopers, cowards? You and I both know that isn’t true.”

Tommy Lee tucked an unlit cigarette between his lips. His mouse-colored hair was caught in a red plastic clip. He wore a bleach-spotted black Led Zeppelin T-shirt, dirty jeans, a shell casing on a cord around his neck. He liked to lean on Dermot’s name, remind him there was no rank in here.

“Thomas,” Dr. Leander said. “There’s no smoking anywhere in the hospital.”

Tommy Lee grinned, stuffed the cigarette into his mouth and started to chew.

In the beginning, Dermot thought the group might help, but under Dr. Leander’s guidance, the meetings devolved into Tommy Lee baiting Dermot, while the other ex-officer, Paul Talbot, and two noncoms, sat

politely and listened.

“Even if you don’t love the man.” Dermot looked straight at Tommy Lee. “You respect the role.”

“Role,” Dr. Leander said. “You make the war sound like a stage play.”

Paul Talbot said his first words in five weeks.

“Of course it is.” He was pale and balding, dressed tonight in a starched French blue shirt and khaki slacks, and his eyes were red, as if he’d been crying.

“I was a family doctor,” he said. “You yank me out of that and drop me on a hospital ship, where I’m now required to repair deliberate cruelties. As if disease and natural injury weren’t cruel enough.” He snorted. “How else do you survive, except by making yourself an actor?”

He stopped speaking, as if startled by his own boldness. His hands shook.

Dermot raised his Styrofoam cup. “Well said.”

Talbot blushed, lighting up the capillaries in his nose. Dr. Leander checked his watch.

“Fucking officers,” Tommy Lee said.

Once he’d mastered the mechanics, Liam wanted to walk everywhere. Dermot knew that eventually he would return to work, to help Arlene keep the farmhouse in heating oil and the family in groceries, but for now, in the crisp shortening days of October, he was satisfied to stay home and watch his son toddle.

He attended the last session in the cold white room at the VA. One of the sergeants—the two silent noncoms—had quit already, and Talbot was a no-show tonight.

“Are we expecting Paul?” Dr. Leander said.

Tommy Lee glanced at Dermot, stuck his thumb in his mouth, and tilted back his head. Talbot hadn’t said a word in group after that one night, though Dermot kept hoping he’d come alive again.

“So.” Dr. Leander adjusted his gold wire-framed glasses. “We don’t really have a critical mass any more, if it’s just the three of you.”

Dermot wasn’t sure they’d ever had a critical mass, but he felt as if he could get along without the group now. He only asked on Tommy Lee’s behalf, and the remaining noncom, Smith.

“What about joining another group?”

Dr. Leander pretended to consider that, shook his head.

“The other groups are all settled. I wouldn’t want to introduce a perturbation.”

Tommy Lee pointed the open mouth of his water bottle at Dr. Leander.

“Well,” he said. “It’s been real and it’s been fun, but it hasn’t been real fun.”

On a raw, rainy night in November, a month after the last group meeting, Tommy Lee showed up at the farmhouse. Liam was in bed and Arlene was watching the news, something Dermot couldn’t stand to do any more. He was racking plates in the dishwasher when he heard the double rap on the back door.

He rattled the dishwasher drawer closed, then walked around the kitchen island to the door.

Hatless and shiny in the wet black poncho, Tommy Lee stood under the overhang with his right hand lifted to knock again.

The inside door sighed as Dermot pulled it open, spilling cold air into the house.

“Come in.”

Before he entered, Tommy Lee stepped out from under the poncho and hung it on a nail. In the kitchen, Dermot handed him a dish towel. He wiped his face.

Dermot was prepared for anything—more taunts, a plea for money or a job—except what Tommy Lee said.

“That Talbot dude. From the group?”

Dermot nodded warily.

“He’s heading down the tubes.”

“You’re saying he needs some help right now?”

Tommy Lee nodded, and Dermot saw his relief.

He stuck his head into the living room to tell Arlene he was going out. She seemed to worry less about his moods, though he hadn’t told her the group had disbanded.

“Careful,” she said. “It’s nasty out there.”

Tommy Lee slipped under his poncho, while Dermot pulled on his long Barbour waterproof. They stepped out into a sleet. Dermot led the way to the barn where he kept the pickup, and though Tommy Lee must have driven out here, he followed without question.

“Where?” Dermot said, as the wheels slid in the muddy driveway.

“You know Campy’s?”

The tavern was on a dark side street between the smoke shop and a pizza parlor. There was no music, no TV, no video poker, only unmatched chairs and tables, a short mahogany-stained plywood bar, and the holy pyramid of bottles against the mirror back, elixirs of the blank and dark.

“Nice place,” Dermot said. “Your local?”

Tommy Lee hung his poncho on a hook in the entry. “I work here.”

Dermot flushed. “Where’s Talbot?”

Tommy Lee pointed back in the corner, where Dermot barely distinguished the bulk of someone slumped over the table.

Dermot’s soles stuck to the floor as he crossed the room. When he touched Talbot’s shoulder, the man jerked as if he’d been shot.

“Colonel McCarthy.” His head wobbled. “Come to save me from myself?”

Dermot didn’t recall mentioning his rank in the group.

“It’s plain Dermot, Paul, and no. I don’t do interventions.” He turned to Tommy Lee. “Is there coffee?”

Tommy Lee retreated to the kitchen.

Sitting up, Talbot didn’t look so pathetic, though his muddy eyes and sour breath suggested he’d been medicating himself for longer than tonight. Dermot sat down across from him, moved a half-full rocks glass to the side.

“We missed you at the last few meetings,” he said.

Talbot stared away. “I wasn’t finding them terribly useful.”

Tommy Lee delivered an insulated carafe and mugs, no cream or sugar.

“I have to get to work,” he said. The shell casing bobbed under his Adam’s apple. “You guys OK here?”

Dermot understood he wasn’t asking Talbot, and nodded. “Should be.”

He poured them both coffee, but when the steam reached Talbot, he grimaced.

“Paul. I don’t know specifics. But I do know you can’t let it kill you.”

Talbot stared. “And how do you know that?”

All of Dermot’s answers sprang from the context of the war: you stayed alive to continue doing your duty, to come home safely to your

family, to resist your enemy's desire to see you off the world. But none of those seemed strong enough here.

"I don't know," he said. "It's a faith."

Talbot lifted the leftover drink. "At least you're honest."

Dermot considered ordering himself a whiskey, but sipped the coffee instead. Lukewarm, it tasted bitter and burned.

"What frightens me," Talbot said. "I can't find words for what I saw. Without the words, I can't get it to leave me."

"I'm not so sure it all can be said."

"Perhaps. It doesn't solve my problem."

Dermot thought of what Liam did for him. "Something else to focus on? Your work? Your family?"

Talbot shook his head.

"We could meet for coffee once in a while."

Talbot almost sneered. "You and me and Tommy Lee?"

"Whatever it takes," Dermot said.

Talbot stood, his dignity spoiled by a stagger. "Thanks for stopping in, Colonel. But I've got to be going."

He walked out of Campy's. Dermot shut his eyes. He couldn't save them all, but that was no reason not to try.

He looked into the kitchen. Tommy Lee was up to his wrists in bread-ing fish.

"I'll get a ride out later for my car," he said.

The sleet had quit. As Dermot drove the narrow road to the farmhouse, the trees and road gleamed silver. His failure sat like unexploded ordnance in his gut.

After that night, Tommy Lee phoned Dermot every couple of weeks, usually with nothing important to say. When he called four days before Christmas, though, he sounded a thousand years old.

"Talbot," Dermot said.

"Seven PM. St. Agnes."

"You'll be there." Dermot wasn't asking.

"Tomorrow."

Dermot was pleased that Tommy Lee had worn his uniform too. They sat together in the middle of the back row, polished and bright and

sharp as a parade. Tommy Lee had cut his hair and shaved, and Dermot saw how young he really was.

“He couldn’t have killed himself.” Tommy Lee spoke from the side of his mouth, a veteran at talking in formation.” They wouldn’t have given him the real Catholic deal.”

The casket, lined with white satin, glowed as the organ music rose. Dermot wasn’t going to argue with Tommy Lee over the subtler ways a man could kill himself. Judging from the expensive clothes and rigid demeanor of the widow and the large extended family, they wouldn’t have acknowledged Talbot as a suicide if he had swallowed a shotgun.

The sermon and the few spoken remembrances seemed generic. The man’s military service was barely mentioned. By the time the church disgorged them all, Dermot felt all hope squeezed out of him.

Standing next to him on the sidewalk, Tommy Lee lit a cigarette. They watched the mourners climb into limousines.

“No fucking mercy,” he said.

“Come back to the house,” Dermot said. “We’ll have a bite.”

Surprise pinkened Tommy Lee’s shaved neck.

“Sir,” he said. “Yes, sir.”

Arlene and Liam were visiting at Arlene’s mother, so the farmhouse was black and cold. Dermot let Tommy Lee precede him into the kitchen and turned on a light. Both of them immediately unfastened the top buttons of their uniform blouses. Dermot smiled.

He took a ham out of the refrigerator, some sliced Swiss, mustard. Arlene had made potato salad the day before. There were plates on the table, small glass bowls for olives and pickles.

“Beer?” Dermot said. “A glass of wine?”

Tommy Lee shook his head. “Not drinking.”

Dermot shaved thin slices of flesh off the bone and piled them high on a plate. They sat on opposite side of the kitchen table, and Dermot uncorked a half bottle of Oregon Pinot gris. Tommy Lee picked up his sandwich.

Dermot tipped a few drops of wine on the tablecloth.

“Some words for those who cannot raise their own.”

Tommy Lee lifted his can of ginger ale. Neither spoke again while they ate.