

THE BOAT IN THE TIGER SUIT

By Hank Willenbrink

para Y.E.S.

contact:
208 Ridge St.
Clark's Summit, PA 18411
(502) 314 - 3896
hankwillenbrink@gmail.com

Part I: A boat on a man-made lake

Part II: Another boat, somewhere else, later

Characters:

Rene

Gene

Dave

April

Mom

Herman

This opening could be a painting, the negative of a Norman Rockwell.

The deck of a boat on an inland lake, man-made, and big enough to hold a boat of this size which has six people aboard – Rene, April, Dave, Mom, Gene (in combat fatigues), and Dad, who is dead and in a casket with a flag on it. Stillness. The iconic sound of a group of bagpipes playing “Amazing Grace” from Dave’s iPod.

Everyone stares at the casket trying very hard to cry.

The audience enters during this. Maybe they should try to cry as well.

GENE

Why do white people love bagpipes?

Mom steps forward. Gene moves with her. He is just about to hand her the flag from the casket when the song ends and a new one begins.

DAVE

Uh oh.

APRIL

Uh oh, what?

On the recording: “1, 2, 1, 2, 3, 4.” The squeal of an electric guitar in very earnest hands.

APRIL

Uh oh.

A rehearsal recording of a song titled “The Band Name Sex Pistols is a Euphemism for Penis” as recorded by a high-school aged April (vocals and guitar) and Dave (clarinet).

MOM

David?

DAVE

Yes, Mam?

APRIL

Turn it off, Dave.

DAVE

You don’t know what she’s going to say.

APRIL
Dave!

DAVE
She could really like it.

The phrase "I'll cut your dick off Axl Rose" is heard.

MOM
I've always applauded initiative.

GENE
Who is it?

RENE
Their high school band. April was really into progressive feminism.

APRIL
I'll turn it off.

DAVE
Why do you have to do that? Your mother was enjoying it.

MOM
It does have a certain air to it.

DAVE
See, it was playing "Traditional Irish Bagpipes" and the next artist is Translucent Vagina.

APRIL
I got him the iPod for Christmas.

DAVE
I don't like music.

RENE
Except your own.

MOM
I don't think young people are creative enough anymore.

DAVE
Prince only listens to his own music.

RENE

Well, that's Prince.

APRIL

Dave Jr. is taking painting classes.

MOM

I thought he was three.

APRIL

Finger painting.

DAVE

This sounds better than I remember. It's like when you go back and start rereading your diary and you suddenly think: oh, life wasn't so bad back then, maybe things are worse now than they were back then. Of course, then if you think about it too much you might start to live in the past, but we wouldn't want that would we? No. You could also go back and look at your yearbook photo and say: oh, I wasn't that bad looking. But no one ever has good yearbook photos.

MOM

I've been reading *The Artist's Way*. Have any of you read that book?

APRIL

You hated that band.

DAVE

Well, sure, back then.

MOM

It's a very good book. Very educational.

APRIL

I spent like 200 dollars on that thing. And it's the 16 gig one and you only have two songs on it.

DAVE

It costs money to download songs, too April. And by the way, there were two people in the band. You and me. I helped with the lyrics, remember: "With a name like Syd Vicious / How can you not be misogynist?" That was me.

APRIL

It's misogynistic.

DAVE

Doesn't rhyme.

RENE

Where'd the wine go?

MOM

I'd prefer if no one drank during the ceremony.

RENE

Is that what this is? A ceremony?

A moment. They stare at the casket.

GENE

You don't mind if I do?

MOM

Of course not, you're a guest.

APRIL

You said no one else could be in the band, that it would ruin the musical purity of our songs.

RENE

It's not fair if you're going to let him drink and not let us.

MOM

Please, Rene, grow up.

APRIL

Later, I found out that you were afraid, if we had other band members, that they'd try to touch my thigh.

RENE

My dad's dead, isn't he? How more grown up can I be?

MOM

Really, Rene.

DAVE

You can't tell what's going to happen when you're loading equipment.

APRIL

Like your clarinet case, Dave?

DAVE

That wasn't what I was being protective of.

APRIL

I told you I was sexually attracted to Jacob Schlesinger. I distinctly remember telling you that.

DAVE

You played truth or dare on the choir bus and dared him to / feel your thigh.

APRIL

Those rumors are unsubstantiated.

RENE

He stopped doing choir. Which probably says more about April's thigh.

APRIL

Choir members are the bottom feeders of the high school food chain.

DAVE

I loved doing choir.

APRIL

There's more to life than high school.

RENE

Says the social reject.

APRIL

Who knew being the gay best friend could get you so far?

RENE

I was the prom king. Did you go?

MOM

Children. Your father's dead.

APRIL & RENE

Sorry, Mom.

Stillness again. It doesn't take. Everyone starts fidgeting like kids in church.

MOM

We should find a way to honor him.

APRIL

Yeah, this really isn't working.

RENE

This wasn't my idea.

MOM

Does anyone know any good songs?

APRIL

(to Rene) If you didn't want to be here, then you didn't have to come.

RENE

I didn't say I didn't want to be here.

APRIL

You should start acting like it, then.

MOM

Maybe we could keen: explore our grief and unfulfilled desires through ambiguous vocal tones. Can any of you keen?

GENE

Are you Irish?

RENE

WASP.

MOM

Anything is better than standing here.

GENE

Because you miss him?

MOM

Because I can't cry.

APRIL

Mom, he kinda left you for the army.

MOM

Does that change anything?

RENE

...yes?

MOM

Well, it shouldn't.

DAVE

What's bigger than your family? Your country, am I right buddy?

High five requested.

GENE

Are you talking to me?

DAVE

Are you or are you not serving your country?

GENE

I am.

DAVE

Well, don't leave me hanging here.

High five finally, reluctantly, given.

Your father left his family for his country. That's amazing. That's sacrifice.

APRIL

Don't be patronizing, Dave.

DAVE

I'm not being patronizing.

RENE

That's sacrifice.

DAVE

That was patronizing.

MOM

You should be able to feel something for someone you love, loved.

APRIL looks at DAVE.

RENE

What was that?

APRIL

Nothing.

RENE

Are you two splitting up again?

DAVE
No.

APRIL
Kinda.

DAVE
Can't you keep anything quiet? I'm trying to have a nice time at your dad's funeral.

MOM
Your father always wanted a burial at sea. So do I, when I go. There's something romantic about it. Maybe I was a sailor in a past life.

GENE
This is a lake.

MOM
Do you know what it costs to ship a casket to Florida? They charge you by weight. By weight. I did my research. You can't just fed ex a body. You can't just stick a dead body in the fed ex.

GENE
You could have left him over there.

MOM
Why? So you could have him.

GENE
I barely knew him.

MOM
I'm sorry, honey, that sounded so personal. I didn't mean you. I meant the army. You know, the military industrial complex.

RENE
You didn't tell me you're splitting up.

APRIL
Nothing's final. I'm just tired.

DAVE
I'm right here.

APRIL
We'll have to see how it goes.

DAVE
Your name is Eugenio?

GENE
Si.

DAVE
Great. I'm going to call you Gene. Color Guard Gene. That isn't a comment on your ethnic background.

MOM
Night was your father's favorite part of the day. It was in the night that he could get thinking done.

APRIL
Dave?

DAVE
What?

She takes his hand.

RENE
Why don't we, uh, do what we came to do? Sir, if you don't mind.

Gene steps forward, again, with the flag.

MOM
Someone should say something.

RENE
Mom...

MOM
Not yet. Someone should pray.

RENE
A little late for that, isn't it?

DAVE
I like to pray. You usually begin "Oh God" or "Our Father."

APRIL
Other people knew their father.

GENE

I could say something.

MOM

But you barely knew him.

GENE

In the military sense. We were in the same unit.

RENE

Is that an actual military term? Unit?

DAVE

Funerals are odd occasions. There's so much that's emotionally expected of us, but do we have the tools to grieve? I mean properly feel something for someone. Anyone. Much less a father or friend, for example. Often I find myself worrying about my own fate much more than the one who has passed on.

APRIL

I'm afraid to die.

DAVE

Exactly. If you're afraid to die, then how can you expect to talk to someone who's dead?

RENE

Christ.

DAVE

That's a great way to start the prayer. Christ! Go on.

RENE

No thanks.

DAVE

Did you know that we no longer have a birthing ritual? For millennia we had a ritual to bring people into the world, into the tribe. Now what do we do? Pull 'em out, shove 'em in a box, in another box, kick 'em out of that box and say get a job, son and don't disappoint your old man, because his future happiness relies on you living up to his fabricated standards.

GENE

In my hometown, we sit with a body after it dies for 24 hours.

APRIL

In the same room?

RENE

That sounds unsanitary.

GENE

It can be very beautiful. A way for you to mourn.

MOM

You'll have to excuse my children. They're emotionally challenged. Enlighten us more about your culture.

GENE

Uh, well, we sit with the body.

MOM

You covered that.

GENE

And the body is out.

MOM

Uh huh.

GENE

Sometimes we pray.

MOM

So the body is just lying there.

GENE

Yes.

MOM

Well, I think that's a splendid idea. Rene. Help David get your father out of the casket.

GENE

I'm not suggesting / you do it.

MOM

We've kinda run out of options here and this seems to be the best way to go.

APRIL

Mom, you really shouldn't rely on Dave, his back has been killing him all week.

DAVE

I can help.

GENE

Really, don't bother with, it's a weird tradition. You don't have to copy it.

MOM

No, no, no, don't belittle yourself. We'll think of this as a cultural exchange. Rene?

GENE

I should really tell you something first.

MOM

That's alright, you've been quite the help and comfort. April?

APRIL

Coming.

GENE

Please. Just a second.

But it's too late. They've got the casket open. And there's nothing inside.

APRIL

I think there's something wrong with this casket.

MOM

Why?

APRIL

It's empty.

DAVE

They can have secret compartments.

APRIL

For what? Dental Floss?

DAVE

I don't like your tone.

APRIL

I don't like yours.

DAVE

You're being a real bitch, you know that?

RENE

So let me guess, you were going to tell us that there's nothing in the casket.

GENE

Si.

RENE

Fantastic.

APRIL

Like that bitch Gloria from work you're always talking about.

DAVE

Gloria is not a bitch.

APRIL

Not to you, not to you!

DAVE

You have a jealous streak about my close associates.

APRIL

How close?

DAVE

Close close, okay.

APRIL

I should have never entered into a domestic partnership with you.

DAVE

Why not? It's not like we're married.

RENE

You couldn't have given us any heads up about that?

GENE

Confidential.

RENE

What kind of a burial is confidential?

GENE

That's confidential as well.

RENE
He's dead, what's the secret?

APRIL
Marriage is a heterosexual religious construct.

GENE
I can't say.

APRIL
Promulgated by centuries of sexist oppression from the church.

RENE
Then fuck it, I'm getting drunk.

Rene tips back a bottle.

APRIL
The state, and society. It's an excuse for you to wrest control of my estate from my family!

DAVE
I don't want to wrest anything! Of course, I wasn't reading Betty Friedan when everyone else was trying to make it through Johnny Tremain.

APRIL
You resent me because I'm smarter than you.

DAVE
I resent you because you resent me! I wanted to be married to you, because it's nice. That's all. Not everything has to be a political stand!

APRIL
Breathing is a political stand!

Mom is bent over the casket, crying.

Oh God, Mom.

RENE
What are you doing?

A door opens in the floor and the sounds of war explode out of it as Herman pulls himself out in full combat gear. The sounds of choppers, bombs, and machine guns explode in the distance.

HERMAN

First day in the army you know what they teach you? How to be a part of the team. Know why? The scariest thing out here is isolation. You go too far, you get the supply line cut off, they cut off your head. They don't teach you the way that you're taught in school. They shave your head. They make you the same as everyone else. You look at yourself and say – look at you, asshole. You're no different. Later on they yell that at you. They know how to get the point across.

You run until you puke and then you run some more. It's a good thing they shaved your head because it's hotter than Texas. I ran next to a woman from Russia who had moved to Texas when she was a baby. She says that Texas is hotter than two rats fucking. Later she told me the phrase "hotter than two rats fucking" was her favorite English phrase. After that she said that my ass looked hotter than two rats fucking. I told her that I wasn't into women anymore. She asked why. I said I was married.

The first time they sent me over, everything was already over. It was like going to a party at someone else's house and no one is there and you've gotta clean everything up and you don't know where the serving trays go.

They didn't tell us where we were going. Just loaded everyone up into humvees with blindfolds on more to protect our eyes than anything else and dropped our asses off in the middle of this jungle. I swear I had sand in every orifice imaginable but by the time I pulled off the mask, you couldn't see anything but green. The kind of green that lawns look in magazines. The kind that the jungle looks in picture books and nature programs. And it was about that time that I realized that this wasn't a picture book or a tv show or a magazine that we were actually in a jungle and that the jungle had materialized out of the desert like, well, like someone turning water into wine. And it was beautiful. A big marble fountain in the middle was the only thing that looked like it had been touched by man tho I assume that the whole thing must've been man-made because how the hell else does a jungle get out in the middle of a land that God forgot?

There were three of us. The specialist, Natasha, and my buddy Eugenio. Natasha had a bunch of sunblock on because like my family she burned easily. Any insect that came within ten feet stuck to her so that she turned into a human flystrip. So she was swatting and bitching and Eugenio and I are laughing at her.

The orders are to secure the area and since nothing is going on, we decide it's secure. Eugenio lays down his pack. Natasha finally stops swatting and suddenly a sense of calm seems to fall, and after a while they're both dozing like children in the sun; like kids do after a long day at the lake when the sun has finally been enough and there's been so much fun had that there's no choice but to shut your eyes, because really what else in the world could compare; I decide that I've gotta taste the water coming out of that fountain. The way the sun catches it, you can see right through it like it was made outta glass. So I take my canteen, dip it into the water, and once it's good and full, I put it to my lips and I swear to you I have never tasted anything so sweet in my life. Time seems to stop and I can feel that water moving down my throat, I swear to God, I can feel the water going into each of my little cells and making it wet, making it breathe, making it turn alive again. And then I hear it: from under the brush, a low, guttural growl. Maybe it was me that heard it. Then:

there it is again. I look over and I'll be damned if there isn't a motherfucking tiger poking his monstrous head out from under the green canopy. It's then, right then, that I get the feeling that I've never had before and that I'll never have again: that we truly are not safe here. That we are just visiting and that no matter what we do, we will never be back.

The sound of machine guns and bombs and aircraft grow louder. Herman disappears from whatever hole brought him here in the first place.

Rene (in a tiger mask), drinks wine from the box on the aft of the ship. It seems peaceful if cheaply decadent. Gene enters.

GENE
Is that supposed to be a joke?

RENE
I'm sure it is, but it never felt like it.

GENE
I mean your costume.

RENE
Let me guess, you don't like tigers. It's understandable. They're number two on the big cat list. Everyone prefers lions.

GENE
What?

RENE
When April and I were little, we looked very, very alike. Because we're twins--if you couldn't tell--anyway, Dad used to make me wear this to tell us apart. So, no, it's not a joke. It's a tribute, it's why it never felt like a joke.

GENE
It's funny.

RENE
Really?

GENE
No, I mean, it's a funny tribute.

RENE
Thank you.

GENE

I don't think we've officially met. I'm Eugenio.

RENE

I know. I heard my brother in law butcher it earlier.

GENE

David?

RENE

Dave. Mom calls him "David" because she saw a movie once where this rich woman called people by their full names even though they have nicknames and everyone found her endearing, so Mom thinks it'll do the same for her. But it doesn't.

GENE

It's good to meet you.

Gene extends his hand.

RENE

Put that thing back, I'm not touching it.

GENE

Why not?

RENE

I don't want to get whatever you've got.

GENE

I served with your dad.

RENE

Tell me something I don't know.

GENE

Your mother's overbearing.

RENE

She's alright, you just have to give her a chance.

GENE

Okay...

RENE

Oh I get it, that's the thing that I didn't know.

GENE

It took me a while to see that in my own mother.

RENE

Where is she? Back in the homeland?

GENE

She's dead.

RENE

Right.

GENE

I'm not Mexican.

RENE

Who said that you were?

GENE

People just assume.

RENE

Shame on you.

GENE

For what?

RENE

For assuming that I'm people.

GENE

They usually think I'm Mexican or an Indian.

RENE

Indian Indian?

GENE

No, native American.

RENE

Who thinks that?

GENE

People in the army.

RENE

No wonder we haven't won any wars lately.

GENE

I think they can only conceive of so many things at once.

RENE

I think you're an optimist.

GENE

That's a crime?

RENE

Where I'm from? Yes, yes it is.

GENE

We're from the same place. I'm Puerto Rican.

RENE

From the same country.

GENE

My father lives here.

RENE

Ah.

GENE

We're a colony.

RENE

Thought no one had those anymore. I'm kidding. I passed geography in ninth grade. I know California is on that side and that New York is on the other and that Texas thinks its somewhere else. If Puerto Rico seceded from the union, just decided to be done with the whole United States thing and stop sending kids to play for the Yankees, would you go down there and fight?

GENE

Of course.

RENE

Why?

GENE

Because that's what I have to do.

RENE

Thank you, thank you for saying that.

GENE

You're welcome. Why?

RENE

Because I'm glad to know there's someone who hates himself as much as I do.

GENE

I signed up.

RENE

No wonder you liked my dad so much.

GENE

He was a good solidier.

RENE

Why are you speaking in the past tense?

GENE

Because he's passed on.

RENE

How do you know? There's nothing in the casket.

GENE

I was there.

RENE

Well, that's nice and all but you should know that he's been dead long before anyone told us about it happening. So, frankly, this whole thing is kind of a nuisance.

GENE

He was a great man. He was my lover.

RENE

Do you really think Mom's overbearing?

GENE

He was my lover.

RENE

No, I heard you. I'm not shocked. Do you want me to be shocked? I'm not shocked.

GENE

I thought you should know.

RENE

Well, it's good you're here. Because you'd bomb your own people. So thanks for dropping the flag off now get the fuck out of here.

GENE

I can't.

RENE

Because you're going to prove to all of us how great he was? You're going to tell us war stories and we're all going to get together and have a nice big cry for this former asshole.

GENE

I can't swim. And we're in the middle of a lake.

RENE

I thought you were in the army.

GENE

We don't swim. That's the Marines.

RENE

What about rivers?

GENE

We build bridges.

RENE

And when someone destroys them?

GENE

Then we can't get across.

RENE

Yes, we've all got our problems.

GENE

Si, es verdad.

RENE

I like it when you say things in Spanish.

GENE

Do you want me to say something else?

RENE
No.

GENE
I don't hate myself.

RENE
Of course you do. We all do. We're mammals. I sneaked a peek when they were loading him on board. I wanted to see if I looked like him. It'd been so long since I saw him. I wanted to see if he was like I remember. The dirty joke was that it was exactly like I remembered—not there.

Renee takes off his mask.

GENE
Gracias.

RENE
Por?

GENE
Por no decirle a nadie lo que sabes.

RENE
De nada.

GENE
Sabes espanol?

RENE
Si. Did you love him?

GENE
Tu padre?

RENE
Si.

GENE
Si. Mucho. Can I have some wine?

RENE
Sure.

Rene pours him some wine.

GENE
It was a tiger that did it.

RENE
No shit.

GENE
No shit.

RENE
Bueno, salud.

GENE
Por?

RENE
Por mi padre.

GENE
Salud.

They toast.

GENE
I'm sorry.

RENE
What?

From off stage: April yells *Rene?!?*

RENE
What? (to April) One second!

GENE
We're at a funeral.

From off stage: April – Where are you?

RENE
It's a boat, April, it's not that big!

April: Like in the back? The aft?

GENE

I'm sorry.

RENE
Eugenio.

April enters with several bottles of wine.

RENE
Shit. I don't know what you call it.

APRIL
Hey. Found you!

RENE
Hey.

GENE
Hello.

APRIL
Mom's downstairs reading Joseph Campbell.

RENE
Again?

APRIL
Yeah, she's pretty boring.

GENE
I was just going to the front.

APRIL
You mean the stern.

GENE
Yes.

APRIL
No rush, stick around.

GENE
It's fine, really. I'll see what Dave's doing.

APRIL
Uh, okay, well, he's eating. So...

GENE
That's fine, I'm hungry.

RENE
I can get some food.

GENE
Esta bien. Adios.

RENE
Hasta luego.

Gene exits.

APRIL
That was weird.

RENE
Tell me about it.

April sits on the floor. She takes the cork out with her mouth and they have some wine. Have some more. It's as if drinking is giving them an excuse not to talk.

RENE
/That was some break down.

APRIL
/Haven't seen that mask for a while.

RENE
/Huh?

APRIL
/What?

RENE
Go ahead.

APRIL
No you.

RENE
I said: that was some break down.

APRIL

Break up.

RENE
What was?

APRIL
Earlier.

RENE
With Mom?

APRIL
I meant with Dave.

RENE
Oh. Just then?

APRIL
No. A month or so. She invited us both tonight. You know Mom. I didn't want to be alone anyway. More difficult that way. Not just here. But with the kid. I mean you start to read the literature and you start to wonder: is my happiness worth the happiness of someone else – like how can you gauge that kind of question? And we're not even officially, so...

RENE
Right.

APRIL
No one's moved. It's easier for now. Just keeping things simple.

RENE
I didn't know.

APRIL
Why would you?

RENE
I don't know. A ripple in the universe.

APRIL
You don't call, Rene.

RENE
Christ, April.

APRIL

I'm just saying.

RENE
Phones work both ways.

APRIL
I didn't know how to start the conversation.

RENE
That seems pretty simple.

APRIL
Why?

RENE
Because, it's about, you just, you know, pick up the phone and say.

APRIL
Dave and I are through?

RENE
Something like that.

APRIL
I can barely say it now. You work for so long with someone to make it work.

RENE
I never really liked him.

APRIL
And that's why I couldn't. We were never any good at this. How's Jacob?

RENE
Jacob?

APRIL
Wasn't there a Jacob?

RENE
Yes?

APRIL
You know what we should have done?

RENE
Bought a calling card?

APRIL

No. We should have come up with a secret language. Like those twins who can talk to each other and no one else can understand them because they're speaking in this weird kind of code that that's unique only to them. Maybe we had one and we just forgot it.

RENE

I took Spanish in high school.

APRIL

Our heads were together for nine months in the same womb. Maybe we can transmit thoughts back and forth, like that thing that submarines do that make the dolphins wash up on the beach.

RENE

That's sonar.

APRIL

Well, you say it out loud. But you both have to know how it works.

RENE

How does it work?

APRIL

I don't know. Try it with me.

RENE

Um, ok. What am I supposed to say?

APRIL

Think back to before your first memory. Think like someone who isn't ready to think would think. Then, I'll think the same and we'll arrive at the same thought. Okay. Are you ready?

RENE

As ready as I'll ever be.

APRIL

Go.

April and Rene close their eyes. Nothing. Rene and April open their eyes.

RENE

What if we just took a Dutch class?

APRIL
Or we could hide.

RENE
Yeah.

APRIL
Yeah, like Dad. Where is Dad?

RENE
Evidently he was killed by a tiger.

APRIL
That's confidential?

RENE
Yep. Army stuff.

APRIL
Huh. No wonder we haven't won any wars recently.

RENE
Now we have to make it through the party.

APRIL
And then what?

RENE
Then...then. You know, April. There was a Jacob.

APRIL
Really?

RENE
Yeah.

APRIL
Recently?

RENE
No. High school. Schlesinger.

APRIL
No wonder he didn't like feeling my thigh.

RENE
No he did not.

APRIL
Solves that mystery.

A sound from off.

Look out.

RENE
What?

APRIL
Mom.

RENE
Coming?

APRIL
Peace.

They exit in different directions.

MOM
Kids? Where did you go? Little jerks. You'll remember this when I'm gone. When I'm dead! That's right. I'm not going to be around forever. Just look at your father! Or, don't look at your father, I don't know. Look at him but don't, because he's not there. Missing in Action. Ha ha. We're dead for a long time. For most of our lives. You should get used to it. Think dead thoughts. Dead thoughts. I don't want to be unprepared. We should practice. Maybe all of us together. Like that play with all the dead people. God, what was the name of that play...who remembers? Anyway, dead thoughts. It's like Zen, Margaret, get a hold of yourself, you can do it.

Margaret lies down on the floor. She closes her eyes. From a door in the floor, just behind her, Herman emerges.

HERMAN
Margaret.

MOM
I should've known they'd send you.

HERMAN
Who?

MOM

The dead thoughts.

HERMAN

It makes sense. I'm dead. A tiger ate me. I got here as fast as I could.

MOM

What's the rush? It's your funeral.

HERMAN

Well, about that...this isn't a burial at sea.

MOM

We must work on your tone if we're going to live together.

HERMAN

Live together?

MOM

In the afterlife.

HERMAN

What makes you so sure there's an afterlife?

MOM

You're haunting me. Isn't that proof?

HERMAN

It's proof of certain new age spiritualities, I'm not sure if it confirms the presence of life after death.

MOM

How philosophical you've gotten.

HERMAN

You have a lot of time to kill.

MOM

And what else do you kill?

HERMAN

People sometimes.

MOM

Because you're a murderer.

HERMAN

Because I'm in the army.

MOM

Which means sometimes you die too.

HERMAN

That's the irony.

MOM

I often think what if I hadn't gotten pregnant.

HERMAN

And what do you decide?

MOM

That you wouldn't have gone off to the army.

HERMAN

Well, I'd probably have left, but I'm not sure about the army.

MOM

It was a very final decision.

HERMAN

It's not that I didn't love you.

MOM

Yes it was.

HERMAN

Yes, mostly it was. But mostly, I was never suited to love you.

MOM

Why?

HERMAN

Because you ask too many questions.

MOM

But they brought you here.

HERMAN

A form of punishment, I'm sure.

MOM

Why do you say that?

HERMAN

Because anytime anything ends in a question, I feel like there is a hot poker the size of my pinky pushing dully into my left fourth rib and I simultaneously feel that there is a cold poker the size of a matchbox car pushing into my right sixth rib. Both pokers are unbelievably sharp and serrated. When the question is answered, and the pokers pull themselves back out, they take a good deal of flesh with them.

MOM

I'm sorry to hear that.

HERMAN

You're not the only one.

MOM

Is there anything I can do?

HERMAN

Stop saying questions.

MOM

I want to put some music on.

Herman snaps his fingers. Music plays.

I don't think the kids want to talk to me. I cried.

HERMAN

I'm sorry, cookie. You cried.

HERMAN

Who left the wine?

MOM

I want some.

HERMAN

Do you want do dance?

MOM

Yes.

They do.

MOM

You feel like Jello.

HERMAN

That would be the dead body.

MOM

It feels wonderful.

The song stops. The bottle is left behind. Dave enters eating a piece of cake. He sees the bottle, washes the cake down with the wine. It's not a good combination, but that doesn't mean that he stops drinking. Gene enters. Dave turns to him and then back.

DAVE

Thought you were someone else.

GENE

Who?

DAVE

Does it matter?

GENE

No.

DAVE

Did you ever go fishing as a kid?

GENE

Sure.

DAVE

Yeah, me too. I hated it.

GENE

I enjoy fishing. But not on lakes.

DAVE

My dad loved fishing. Best amateur fisherman around here. He used to joke that he wanted to be mounted on a wall next to the fish when he died.

GENE

Was he?

DAVE

No. He's not dead. Hey, know something? I'm proud of you, man.

GENE
You are.

DAVE
Yeah. Definitely. I know we're trying to treat veterans different this time around and we should because you guys keep us free and what not.

GENE
This time around?

DAVE
Yeah as opposed to Vietnam or whatever.

GENE
Huh. Okay. Apology accepted.

DAVE
I mean, I've never known anyone who was actually in the army, some people from high school, but that's like it. It's funny, I knew this one guy who was like a real stoner dude, the kind that always went around with one of those like dark green army jackets, know what I mean? Of course you do. So yeah, this guy was like a big stoner, beard and everything, pot smoker, and he got this girl pregnant and when he found out, he joined the army.

GENE
That's funny?

DAVE
Sure, because he was wearing the jacket ironically, right, then he's wearing it for real.

GENE
Poor girl.

DAVE
Well, yeah. That's. I mean, that's a given.

GENE
That's an awful story.

DAVE
Would it be better if you knew that he stayed with the girl and married her and the only reason he did the army thing was because he had to provide for her and that was the best way when he was 17?

GENE
It would.

DAVE
Cool, well, that's what happened. Have you been in war?

GENE
What do you mean? We're at war.

DAVE
Yeah, but have you been there?

GENE
Yes.

DAVE
How was it?

GENE
I kinda resent that question.

DAVE
Because...?

GENE
Because you're at war too.

DAVE
I'm not.

GENE
You are. We all are.

DAVE
Our country is.

GENE
And what's the country made up of? People. People like you and me.

DAVE
See, that's where you're wrong.

GENE
About the people?

DAVE

No, not about the people. Obviously there's people, but see, the difference is that you're being paid to do what you do. You chose to do it. So, I can be grateful to you for that, but let's be honest, it's a job.

GENE
It's not a job.

DAVE
It is.

GENE
It's service.

DAVE
So is waiting tables, you don't see any of them getting fancy flag caskets.

GENE
You must not read newspapers.

DAVE
Have you ever slept next to a woman who won't sleep with you any more?

GENE
I'm not / into women.

DAVE
Yeah, I figured you hadn't.

GENE
Why don't you move out?

DAVE
It's complicated.

GENE
How complicated?

DAVE
I still love her. It's like war.

GENE
What?

DAVE
It's war.

GENE
It's not.

DAVE
No?

GENE
No.

DAVE
Huh. Feels like it. Cake?

GENE
No thanks.

DAVE
Too bad, it's good.

GENE
I was actually looking for something else.

DAVE
Which is?

GENE
The, uh, wheel.

DAVE
Gonna have to time travel for that one, solider.

GENE
I want to get off here.

DAVE
I don't know why I keep eating this cake.

GENE
I want to go home.

DAVE
It's like I can taste the fact that April made it and that just makes me want more. So I drink wine, because I know that when I go home she'll just be lying there with so many pajamas on, you feel like you're sleeping with the Michelin man.

GENE
The Michelin man?

DAVE

Yeah he's made out of tires so he's white and fat. I think they're tires, anyway, I have no idea.

GENE

I don't think I should have come.

DAVE

April in the morning? Now that's war. Her hair is all like *RAWR* and her breath? God, it's bad. And I say, honey, you know you should probably get that checked out. They have things they can do about morning breath now. Noninvasive surgeries, still, she does nothing. But I stick by her, because I care.

Gene rushes Dave and Dave's pretty easily taken to the ground with Gene's knee on his solar plexus. Dave looks up at him partly afraid, partly stunned with Gene's obvious strength and violence.

GENE

You want to talk about war now?

DAVE

I don't know what you mean.

GENE

Your girlfriend is not a war.

DAVE

It's a metaphor, ok? Sorry? Can I have my breath back now?

GENE

No.

DAVE

You're good at your job.

GENE

Yes, I am.

Gene relents. He sits on the floor. Dave manages to get up and, if a bit out of breath, at least not worse for the wear.

GENE

Sorry.

DAVE

It's fine. My bad.

GENE
We like to think that what we've done is good, right?

DAVE
You do. Don't speak for the rest of us. Remember that funny story?

GENE
The one that wasn't funny?

DAVE
Yeah. That one. Those were my folks, just so you know.

DAVE rushes GENE. And bounces off, onto the ground. But, something has fallen out of GENE's pocket and onto the floor.

Whatwasthat?

GENE
What?

DAVE
The thing that flew out of your pocket?

GENE
My pocket?

DAVE
It looks like...skin.

Dave peers down to look at it.

DAVE
Ohmysweetjesusitlookslikea...finger...

GENE
Fuck, shit, fuck, fuck fuck!

April and Rene run in.

APRIL
Dave, what're you doing?

RENE
Hey Gene, I thought—oh, shit / fuck fucking shit fuck shit.

APRIL

Oh my holy fucking shit. Jesus fuck my fucking shit.

DAVE

What the fuck—fuck fuck fuck fuck!

GENE

I'm sorry, oh jesus shit fucking oh god fucking shit fuck.

RENE

It looks like a knuckle—I'm gonnabesick, i'm gonnabesick, gonnabesiiiick.

APRIL

What is that thing? What is it? Huh huh huh what is it?

DAVE

We were just standing here and then all of a sudden...

GENE reaches reverently for the nubbin of flesh. MOM enters, placid, tranquil, among the chaos.

RENE

What're you...Gene?

DAVE

Don't touch it, please don't touch that. I DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT IS.

RENE

Is he going to? Ugh I don't want to watch.

GENE, unfazed, reaches over and picks up the knuckle. He holds it to a light.

GENE

When you're all garbled up. When they can't tell who you are. When a tiger eats you and there's nothing left. You'd be surprised how much we look the same. But, then again, maybe you wouldn't. When you're like that, just parts of a body. So maybe it's just as well that force you to forget who you are in the army. That you forget who you are, because you become the role you play. Some are the brains, some are the golden ones, some are the duds. You are what you do. Fact of the matter is that you're a family in as much as you don't care to be anything else. Being anything else is just that anything else which might as well be nothing which is what it is. So you do what you do. And what does it matter what the truth is, or when anything happened? It's all the same. Same same. You think it's time passing, but it's just you falling apart. I knew that this was him, because he was married, so there was a

wedding ring at some point right here. Right on his knuckle. Which is all that's left. And that's ironic, because the reason he signed up was to get away from who he was and the reason we know who he is, is because of what he tried to get away from.

I told them I wanted to return. To explain to the family what had happened. They let me go, but said it was confidential. What was confidential, I asked. We can't let the American People know that tigers are eating people over here, they said. But it's his family, I replied. And he was one of ours, they told me. It's true, I said. He was ours.

MOM closes. GENE looks at her. She slaps him.

MOM

That's my husband.

GENE gives her the nubbin. Mom places it in the casket.

MOM

There, it's done.

BREAK

During the break, perhaps a song plays. Perhaps there's dancing. Perhaps life preservers are passed out to the audience. Perhaps there's an intermission.

PART 2:

Anyway, when that's over, another boat, somewhere else. Years later. GENE and RENE sit together across from DAVE and APRIL. They are all dressed up. They drink champagne. It's a calm evening. The soft tolling of a bell in the distance. A breeze. In other words, perfect.

END OF EXCERPT

**To read more, contact the AUTHOR
hankwillenbrink@gmail.com**