

Sunrise at Coffin Rock

Thomas sat alone upon the cold stone, shivering slightly in the chill pre-dawn air of this April morning. The flashlight was turned off, resting beside him on the bare granite of Coffin Rock, and involuntarily he strained his eyes in the gray non-light of the false dawn, trying to make out the shapes of the trees and the mountains across the river. Below, he could hear the chuckling of the water as it crossed the polished stones. How many times had he fished there, his grandfather beside him?

He tried to shrug away the memories, but why else had he come here except to remember? Perhaps to escape the inevitable confrontation with his mother. She would have to be told sooner or later, but Thomas infinitely preferred later.

"Mom, I've been expelled from the university," he said aloud in a conversational tone. Some small night animal, startled by the sudden sound, scurried away to the right. "I know this means you won't get upgraded to C-3, and they'll probably turn you down for that surgery now. Gee, Mom. I'm sorry." It sounded so stupid. *Why?* she would ask him. *How?*

How could he explain that? The endless arguments. The whispered warnings. The subtle threats. Dennis had told him to expect this. Dennis had lost his parents in the First Purge back in '04, and his bitter hatred of the State's iron rule had failed to ruin him only because of his unique and accomplished abilities as an actor. Only with Thomas did he open up. Only with Thomas did he relate the things he had learned while in the Youth Re-education Camp near Charleston. Thomas shuddered.

It was his own fault, he knew. He should have kept his mouth shut like Dennis told him. All of his friends had come and shook his hand and pounded him on the back. "That's telling them, Adams!" they said. But their voices were hushed and they glanced over their shoulders as they congratulated him. And later, when the "volunteers" of the Green Ribbon Squad kicked his ass all over the shower room, they had stood by in nervous silence, their eyes averted, and their tremulous voices silent.

He sighed. Could he blame them? He'd been afraid too, when the squad walked up and surrounded him, and if he could have taken back those proud words he would have. Anyone is afraid when they can't defend themselves, he'd discovered. So they taught him a lesson, and he had hoped it would end there. But then yesterday had come the call to Dr. Morton's office, and the brief hearing that had ended his career at the university. "Thomas," Morton had intoned, "you owe everything to the State." Thomas snorted.

The light was growing now. He could see the pale rain-washed granite in the grayness as if it glowed. Coffin Rock was now a knob, a raised promontory that jutted up from a wide, unbroken arm of the mountain's stony roots, its cover of soil pushed away. There were deep gouges scraped across the surface of the rock where the backhoe had tried, vainly, to force the mountain to reveal its secrets. He was too old to cry now, but Thomas Adams closed his eyes tightly as he relived those moments that had forever changed his life.

The shouts and angry accusations as the agents found no secret arms cache still seemed to ring in his ears. They had threatened him with arrest, and once he had thought the man called Goodwin would actually strike him. At last, though, they had accepted defeat, turned away from Coffin Rock and walked slowly down the mountain, following the gashed trail of the backhoe as it rumbled ahead through the woods.

At home, he had found his mother and father standing ashen faced in the doorway.

"They took your grandpa," his father said in disbelief. "Just after you left, they put him in a van and took him."

"But they said they wouldn't!" Thomas had shouted. He ran across the yard to the old man's cottage. The door was standing open and he wandered from room to room, calling for the grandfather he would never see alive again.

It was his heart, they said. Two days after they had taken him, someone called and tersely announced that the old man had died at the indigent clinic a few hours after his arrest. "Sorry," the faceless voice had muttered. Thomas had wept at the funeral, but it was only in later years that he had come to understand the greatest tragedy of that day: that the old man had died alone, knowing that his own grandson had betrayed him.

That grandson was Thomas, and he was now too old to cry, but in the growing light of the cold mountain dawn, he did anyway.

Thomas was certain that his father's de-certification six months later was due to the debacle in the forest. As much as anyone did these days, they had "owned" their home, but the Certification Board would still have evicted them except for the intervention of Cousin Lou, who worked for the State Supervisor. As it was, they lost all privileges and, when his father came down with pneumonia the next autumn, medical treatment was denied. He had died three days after the first anniversary of Grandpa's death.

Thomas had been sure that he would be turned down at the University, but once again his cousin had intervened and a slot had opened for him. But now that was finished, he reflected. He would be unable to obtain any certification other than manual laborer. "Why didn't I keep my mouth shut?" he asked the morning stillness. In a tree behind him, a mockingbird began to sing its ageless song and, as if in answer, the forest below began to twitter and chirp with the voices of other birds, greeting the new day.

No, what he had said had been the truth and nothing could change that. The State was wrong; it was evil. It was unnatural for men to be slaves of their government, always skulking, always holding their tongue lest they anger The State. But there is no "State," Thomas considered. There are only men, holding power over other men. And anyone who speaks out, who dares to challenge that power is crushed.

If only there was a way to fight back!

Thomas shifted on the stone, hanging his feet off the downhill side. His feet had almost touched the grass that day, but now, although his legs were certainly longer, it was at least twelve inches to the scarred rock surface below. As he kicked his heels back and forth, he could almost hear his grandfather speaking to him from long ago...

... one day, America will come to her senses. Our men will need those guns and they'll be ready. We cleaned them and sealed them up good; they'll last for years. Maybe it won't be in your lifetime, Thomas. Maybe one day you'll be sitting here with your son or grandson. Tell him about me, boy. Tell him about the way I said America used to be.

You see the way this stone points? the old man had said. *You follow that line one-hundred feet ...* Thomas' heels were suddenly still. For many minutes he did not move, playing those words over and over in his mind. *... Follow that line ...*

What hidden place in his brain had concealed those words all of these years? How could the threats have failed to dislodge it? He stood upon shaky legs and climbed down from the Coffin Rock. In his mind's eye, he could see the old man pointing and he walked down the hill and through a clinging briar patch, counting off the paces. The round stone did seem solidly buried, but he scratched around near the base and found that the rock ended just an inch or so

beneath the surface. *One man with a good bar can lift it*, Gramps had said. Thomas forced his fingers beneath the edge and, with all the strength in his twenty-one year old body, he lifted. The stone came up, and he slid it off to one side. Cool air drifted up from the dark opening in the mountain. Thomas looked to the right where the scars of the State's frustration ended, only fifteen or twenty feet away. They had been that close.

He squatted and stared into the blackness and then remembered his flashlight. In a moment, he was back with it, probing the dark with the yellow beam. There was a small patch of moisture just inside, but then the tunnel climbed upwards toward the ridge. On hands and knees, he entered.

It was uncomfortably close for the first twenty feet or so, then the cavern opened up around him. The men who had built this place, he saw, had taken a natural crevice in the granite rock, sealed it with poured concrete, and then covered it with earth. The main chamber was bigger than the living room of his house, and they had left an opening up near the peak of the vaulted roof where fresh air and a faint, filtered light entered.

Wooden boxes and crates were stacked everywhere on concrete blocks, up off of the floor, stenciled with legends like *RIFLE CAL30MI, 9MM PARA, M193 BALL, MAK90, 7.62X39MM, and 5.56MM*. He pushed between them and crawled to the wall where he found cardboard boxes wrapped and sealed in plastic sheeting. These were imprinted with names like *OLIN, WW748, BULLSEYE, and RL550B*. There were also green steel boxes, stacked almost to the ceiling. He did not know what the crates and boxes contained, and was afraid to break the seals, but near the center of the room he found a plastic wrapped carton labeled *OPEN THIS FIRST*. With his pocketknife, he slit the heavy plastic wrapping.

It contained only books, he saw with some disappointment. But he studied the titles and found that they were manuals on weapons, how to repair them, how to clean them, how to fire them, and ammunition ... how to store it, and how to reload it. And here was something unusual: *A History of the United States*. He lifted it from the carton and crawled back to the open air. Leaning against a stone, he tore open the heavy vinyl bag that enclosed the book and began to read at random, flipping the pages every few moments. On each page something new met his eye, contradicting everything he had ever been taught.

Freedom is not won, he learned, by proud words and declarations. He remembered a quotation taught at the University: "Blood alone moves the wheels of history." An Italian dictator named Mussolini had said that, but now he read of a man named Patrick Henry who said, "the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and of tyrants." Mao was required reading at the University, too, and he now recalled that this man called a hero by the State had once said, "political power comes out of the barrel of a gun."

Freedom is never granted; it is won. Won by men who are willing to die, to lose everything so that others may have that greatest possession of all.

Mentally, he began to list those he could trust. Men who had been arrested for speaking out. Women whose husbands had been arrested and had never returned. Friends who had been denied certification because of their father's military record. The countryside seethed with anger and frustration. These were people who longed to be free, but who had no means to resist ... until now.

Thomas laid the book aside and then worked the stone back into position, carefully placing leaves and moss around the base to hide any evidence that it had been disturbed. He tucked the book under his arm and started for home with the rays of the rising sun warming his back. He imagined his grandfather's touch in the heat. A forgiving touch.

A long, hard struggle was coming, and he knew with a certainty that defied explanation that he would not live to see the day America was once again free. His blood and that of many patriots and tyrants would be spilled, but perhaps America's tree of Liberty would live and flourish again.

There is a long line stretching through the history of this world: a line of those who valued freedom more than their lives. Thomas Adams now took his place at the end of that column as he determined that he would have liberty, or death. He would be in good company.