Full Metal Jhacket

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How the Rebels Took Port Harcourt

I do not remember when or how I ended up traveling on all fours. I was wandering through the delta in tattered fatigues, far from my battalion, which was not so much of a battalion since it had been torn apart by mortar fire outside Warri. I had no more water in my canteen and only a half-eaten meal bar (fruit medley) in my shirt pocket. My son, an electronic surrogate for the real one that died in its mother’s womb, was shattered in pieces inside a blue gym bag strapped to my back. I had been awake for something close to seventy hours. My headspace churned, fluid with hallucination. I suffered visions of colossal snakes descending upon me from the dense canopy, their jaws distended, absorbing my head down their throats like a hand into a black leather glove. I am certain I was bitten by a fat violet spider at one point, whose venom worked on me like a whole bottleful of the malaria medication I had not taken for days, the kind that made you paranoid. I saw dead rebels in rotting black flak jackets rise up from the swampy bogs, their greenish flesh flaking loose from the skull. They shadowed me in the dappled half-light, slinking effortlessly through the peat. These visions gave way to a period of darkness in my mind, and after that I was crawling on a dirt road—nothing more, really, than two soft tracks worried into the trashed, primal wilderness. I crept along the roadside for as long as I could stand it before collapsing in a shallow, grassy ditch.

I blacked out and when I came back the sun was different. Higher, with a greenish halo. I heard a churning sound, like wood in a chipper. I arched back and saw a beaten blue taxi coming straight for me. I was convinced it was part of the rebel faction that had shredded my comrades at the derricks. I rolled out into the middle of the road and waited for the taxi to run me down. But instead it slowed and stopped, and the cab driver—a spindly man with a white scouring pad for a beard—emerged from behind the wheel, hefted me by the underarms, and tossed me in the back seat. I’d slept on my arm and it fizzed with a dull, tender chill as it came back to life. I sat up straight. It was noonish. The sun moved along in the sky at high bake. We were speeding through a lush
nowherescape, gnarled trees sprouting lonesome amidst stiff yellow grasses. The driver had the radio up unseasonably loud. Some young tough grousing in staccato pidgin.

“What is this?” I called up to the front, startling the driver.

“Why should it matter?” he called back without a pause.

“Can’t argue with that,” I said, and leaned back against the window, making the most of a lukewarm breeze that was threatening to cool my neck. I stretched my legs out across the seat and rolled up the pant legs. My calves were gouged and dented in places I wasn’t aware I’d damaged. I thought about the men in my battalion. I wondered how many were left.

The song faded in an extended chorus, replaced by an angry man’s voice, calling out to the people of the delta to rise up, rise up against. Then another song, not entirely distinguishable from the last.

“Where we headed?” I asked.

“Away from Port Harcourt.”

I nodded. I had, in the past twenty-four hours, seen two good friends roasted alive by a jury-rigged flame thrower. A third got flipped in the air by a roadside bomb, which carved out half his face. I was not anxious for more of it. The rebels could take the whole country for all I cared. I wanted only to get back to cool, cavernous America where my son could be reassembled.

He drove for a while, running his tongue across his taut, purplish lips. As if he might be daring himself to ask me something. “What is your story?” he said finally, gesturing at my outfit. “You military man.”

“Oh, this,” I said. “It’s not—I’m not with the army.”

The driver raised his eyebrows.

“I’m a contractor. For Shelton.”

“Oil man.”

“I actually couldn’t give one what Shelton makes. I’m pulling down sixty an hour with O.T. Or I was.”

“You are from America, though.”

I nodded. I did not even want to be talking! I was in Nigeria on a security contract—it was cheaper and easier for the oil companies to hire American paramilitary outfits for security detail on their facilities than to try to get people in-country, on account of no one wanted to be a target for the rebels or betray their nation, whereas we were sharp and hungry to take on all comers. Until the rebels came in the night and routed us without hardly breaking a sweat. I told the driver none of this.

We continued on in silence for a long stretch, moving very slowly through
a rained-out gully choked with reeds. In the distance a gas flare sent stippled gray plumes into the air.

“I thought America would have fixed this by now,” the driver said.

“Excuse?”

“This, what is happening here. The rebels and the government. The insurgency. I thought of Americans coming here to end the fighting.”

“I’m not a politician, so I don’t know thing one about what’s happening,” I said, hoping that would suffice. I could guess why America wasn’t coming to Nigeria’s aid (mainly that it was a shit country), but I was not inclined to engage the man. I just wanted to gain purchase on a tract of land with usable buildings and roads. A place that looked remotely like it might have an Internet connection. Or at least Skittles.

“Where are we headed, anyway, if not Port Harcourt?”

“I am going to my brother’s house.”

“He has a farm. I am going to stay with him.” The driver paused, glancing at the digital clock on the dashboard. “You can stay with us if you like.”

I muttered something.

He kept driving for a long time, not saying or doing much of anything. I watched his eyes through the rear view mirror. They never left the road. A rebel’s eyes would have drifted. His lids were puffed, as if brimming with tears, although his face was calm and elastic.

The gully gave way to a sort of low, dusty land broken up by low-growing trees and brush the likes of which I’d never seen before. I untied the gym bag containing my son and unzipped it in my lap. The speaker had come loose from its binding in travel, and a rat’s nest of wires hung from the casing. I gently forced the wires back into his frame and tried to tighten the fabric. Jerome—that’s the name of the boy—was a peanut-shaped thing, approximately the size of a loaf of bread, “designed to forestall grief in mothers who have miscarried.” That was the description of the boy in the brochure given to Mandy and me by our health care professional in our absolute darkest writhing hour. The peanut had a voicebox, and the longer you held it, the more things it said. The doctors gave Jerome to Mandy just hours after the miscarriage, within the bonding window, as they referred to it. We sat in the recovery room and looked at the thing sitting there in its bassinet. Then it made a tiny whirring sound, a sad sort of digital sigh, and I went and picked it up and the whirring stopped. I held it for a while and then Mandy asked for it. She took it in her arms and she grimaced and held it tightly and before long it was no
longer an “it” but Jerome, and we took him home with us. Then things started to heat up in the delta and I was called into duty, and not six weeks later I got a big Jerome-shaped box in the mail along with a scented letter from Mandy explaining that she couldn’t take care of him properly while also attending nursing school and maintaining her spot in the leaderboards on Dance Dance Execution, which was in the high tens, which meant that she was competing with actual Koreans who ruled that game. I saw this as a real sign, that the boy was being sent down a vast river to me by his mother, just like Moses down the Nile if Moses’ mother was a wicked, selfish philanderer (I only half-remember the tale). It was the one real sign I have ever gotten, and I have contracted in most of the holy lands and elsewhere in many sacred and mystic places where you would expect to receive signs. I resolved to give Jerome my all, but I fumbled. One night the rebels made it through the concrete barriers and torched us with Molotovs. I was only half-awake when a guy came at me with a two-by-four wrapped in concertina and smashed me in the lower back, which is where I kept Jerome. Because of me, because of my ineptitude and torpor, Jerome was junk. He was just a heap of parts in a bag.

“Son,” I whispered. I looked up to see whether the driver was looking back, but his watery, placid eyes remained focused on the road. “Son, I just want to know—are you still in there? Is there some compartment in there, something built in, an escape hatch of some kind into which you could leap in case of a rocket attack or something? Did your builders build that?”

His pieces sat silently in my lap, his speaker cone trembling with the pits in the road.

The radio cut out in a sharp blister of static. The dashboard lights went brown. “I wish that this wasn’t happening,” the driver said. He pointed to the gas meter, the needle of which dipped at irregular intervals below the “empty” hashmark.

“No gas,” I said.

“No gas,” he said. “When things go bad, my brother says, ‘No gas in the oil fields.’ And now we have no gas in the oil fields. So you know how bad things get when things go bad.” He pulled over to the side of the road.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“We need to wait here. Someone will come by.”

“They’ll just give us gas?”

“Most likely we will have to take it from them,” he said, and reached under the passenger seat to retrieve an AK-47.

“Whoa,” I said, ducking involuntarily. “Where do you get a thing like that?”
It was in beautiful shape, its rosewood butt warm and polished like the skin of a Christmas chestnut.

“The Russians were not stingy when it came to spreading the word of communism,” he said, his mouth for the first time sporting a sort of diluted grin, chased with self-satisfaction. “Anyone with a cause, they provided the weapons.”

“All due respect, your people are communists?”

“No, not here. But during the civil war they gave out guns to anyone who might have a reason to overthrow the government.”

“That’s slick,” I said, shaking my head. “All that stuff you hear about conspiracies, secret documents, things getting shipped here and there. Very slick.”

“Not very slick,” the driver said, running an oily hand towel slowly over the barrel of the rifle. “The Soviets are gone. They went the way of the dinosaurs, nothing left but the fossils rusting away in their missile silos. The Americans, that is what is slick. You see an opportunity to bring hamburgers and soft drinks to a country, you do it out in the open, shaking hands with everybody, smiling. Whenever you open a new restaurant chain, a local band plays and the children are given small toys in vacuum-sealed bags. It has become a cause for celebration.”

“You’re talking about Arby’s, now.”

“The Soviets failed to change the world because they misunderstood how it worked. The Americans understand, and that is how you will spread your arms so wide. When you shake hands, your hands shake the world.”

“What side are you on?”

“What?”

“Is this,” I said, and then stopped to clear a gob of something in my throat. “Are you going to shoot me, or.”

The driver released the trunk and got out of the cab. I sat with Jerome in my lap while he rummaged around with one arm, the other arm cradling the rifle. There was the sound of him unzipping a suitcase, and then a more muted rustling. He closed the trunk with the careful, assured motion of a man who had cared for his vehicle for decades. He came up to the rear passenger side door and peered in, handing me a kind of dried meat wrapped in cellophane and a handgun.

“That’s more like it,” I said.

“What is that?” he asked, pointing the AK barrel at Jerome’s body.

“That’s my son,” I said, and I could not entirely disguise the bitter defiance that accompanied my response.
The driver made a sort of shrugging gesture and placed his free hand on the door. “Get out. You will get in the driver’s seat. Do you understand? You will sit there and wait for someone to come by. I will be up in the trees—”

“Up in the trees?”

“Yes,” he said, somewhat irritated, “up there, in those trees, with the rifle. I will be watching from there. You will wave down the passing vehicle. You will beg them for gas. If they give it to you, you thank them and give them the meat. If they do not give it to you, you tell them there is a man in the trees with a rifle. They will give you some gas.”

“What if they don’t?”

“Most people, when they hear there is a man in the trees with a gun, will give you the gas without an argument.”

“What if they don’t?”

“That is why you have the gun.”

“You want me to hold them up?”

“Very few people would put up a struggle at that point, just over gas.”

“I don’t even get to eat the meat?”

“If you don’t have dash, people will be very upset. It’s better to give them the meat.”

He walked slowly toward the tree line, the brush engulfing him by degrees until it swallowed him altogether. I reluctantly got out of the car and walked around to the driver’s seat.

“Man,” I said to Jerome. “This is rich. I wish you could see this, son. Your father has gotten himself into one hell of a situation here. I never would have thought of this as the ending of my life, son. Not in a million years. I always thought of myself dying at home, in a recliner, fading out to the voice of a well-groomed game show announcer, just gently croaking in an air-conditioned room. I never would have guessed I’d be here, sitting in a foreign taxi cab, misty with sweat, a hunk of meat in my lap, just waiting to get gunned down.”

The afternoon crawled. I fought off all manner of wispy, needle-nosed bugs that swarmed my personal space. I held in my lap my broken son and a loaf of aromatic meat wrapped in plastic. The shadows of the trees crept along the road, engulfing it. In the distance, the sound of a motor heaved forward through the brush. A reflective shaft of silver light pierced the horizon where the road rose up and disappeared. I put Jerome on the floor of the passenger side and lay the meat out in the bucket seat so that whoever was coming would have a clear view. The vehicle was a burgundy station wagon with the back
windows obscured by sheets of corrugated steel. I counted three men in the
car. As it came closer, I saw that the men were wearing the signature black
kerchiefs over their mouths and noses. They pulled up alongside the cab.

“Soldier man. You are broken down?” the driver asked, the kerchief puffing
out from his face like a tiny lung.

“I need gas. I just need gas. You have gas?”

“No,” the driver said in a low voice. “I don’t have gas. Do you have gas?”

I did not know what to say to that. I felt that I had already answered that
question. A tear of sweat ran in a ragged swath down along the crease of my
eyelid, its salt burning my eyes, but I willed myself into stillness.

“I don’t have gas,” I said, in the end. “That’s why I was asking. Do you have
gas?”

The driver looked back at one of the passengers, who began to work at
something I could not see in the back seat.

“Maybe you don’t understand,” I said. “I’m not trying to do anything here.
Just get some gas, get to the next gas station. Maybe some—”

I let the phrase trail off into the hazy distance between us. The man in the
driver’s seat regarded me with furious restraint. His eyeballs were a capillary
relief map, practically furry with raised, reddened blood vessels.

“We can get you gas,” he said. “But we need some things too. Maybe you
have some of the things we need.”

“Okay,” I said, patting the loaf in the passenger seat. “You want this.”

The driver, without glancing at the loaf, said, “We would like you to exit
the cab.”

I had a gun hidden at the small of my back. I had years of military training.
I had seen people die. I had killed the people I saw die. There was a lady in the
United States whose unscrupulous body knew mine. These were the things I
thought then, clearly ordered and prioritized in my mind.

“Okay. I’ll get out. I should just tell you guys, though, that there is a guy in
the trees with a gun.”

The driver’s eyes briefly fluttered, scanning the canopy. The passenger
shouldered an automatic rifle and aimed at me. I dove for the floor as a bouquet
of glass shards bloomed in the cab’s airspace. I heard the men shouting as the
cab driver returned fire. The station wagon peeled out, fishtailing into the cab,
which sent me ass over end into the passenger seat, a shower of glass cascading
over me in a great wave. I heard one of the station wagon’s wheels rupture,
sending the hubcap spinning off into the brush. There followed a round of
spastic shouting, and then a short burst of rifle fire, and then there was just the sound of the station wagon idling and a weird insect buzzing in the trees.

“It’s okay,” I heard the cab driver shout from high up. “It’s okay. They’re gone.”

I righted myself, shaking the glass shards from my clothes. In the rear view mirror I could see a column of smoke rising from the shoulder of the road. I turned to see the station wagon sloped into a ditch, a burled cloud streaming from the hood. An inverted body dangled from the passenger side window, the arm chewed up and gristly.

The door to the cab was not working, so I climbed out through the open window. My calves pulsed, my whole lower half a complex lacework of gashes.

The driver scurried down the tree trunk. “Quickly,” he shouted breathlessly, “the siphon, the siphon.”

He pointed dramatically at the trunk of the cab as he descended.

“No, no way,” I shouted. “That wagon’s about to blow. Neither of us are going near that thing.”

“The siphon,” he said with greater intensity, as if to drown out my response. “Man, I am not getting the siphon. That’s outrageous.”

“Get the siphon. The siphon,” he kept repeating. He was almost at ground level, breathless, so that the shout was more like a hollow whistle. I just heard the whiny upper registers. It was sort of musical.

I figured the old man was going to end up getting the siphon himself anyway, and to stand there motionless while he fished around in the trunk would only humiliate him. He had, too, just skillfully taken out three marauders from a treetop. So I reached down for the trunk release and popped the lever as he rushed over, tossing the rifle over his shoulder.

“You are an American pussy,” he said, pushing past me to retrieve the siphon. I could have come up with some sound arguments against the claim, but this was, I knew, not the time for it.

He rushed over to the station wagon with a length of greasy plastic tubing and a five-gallon metal tank and set to work. He swiftly unscrewed the gas cap and threaded the pipe into the hole. In one fluid motion he sucked the gas up through the tube, drew it from his lips, capped it with a thumb, and forced it down the narrow throat of the gas can. The car was smoking like a tycoon, big black roiling smoke pouring from the hood, but the cab driver leaned back casually, hands thrust in his pockets, rocking back on his heels, as though he were waiting for an ice cream sundae.

When the tank was full he withdrew the siphon and jogged over to the cab
where he began the process in reverse, again with the assured motion of a professional. While the tank was filling, he bent to glance inside the cab.

“This shouldn’t have happened,” he said, gesturing hastily at the shattered windshield. “Who will pick this up, this mess you’ve made?”

I set my jaw and returned to the cab, where I began picking out the glass shards and tossing them into the high grass. “Diamonds of Sierra Leone,” I said under my breath. The driver did not respond, only tightened the gas cap, closed the hatch, and started up the cab.

“Get in,” he said. “We go to my brother’s now.”

I sat down and went to buckle myself in, but there was no belt, so I shifted around in the seat, the remaining shards grinding against my boots.

We drove for a long time on the siphoned gas. I had to allow a grudging respect for the man, who was nothing if not resourceful. We drove through a dull, shiftless landscape until the sky turned a heinous orange, the undersides of the pulled-apart clouds going deep and bloody.

“Man, I am sorry about your cab.”

“It’s not mine.”

“It must be like pulverized.”

“It’s a company car. I can’t even put a bumper sticker on it.”

“Just shot through and through. A total disaster.”

The driver waved off my comments, hissing through pursed lips.

It got dark, and we had no working headlights, so we slowed down to a crawl. The road was caked in litter. The wheels of the cab crushed each soda can, plastic chips wrapper, and desiccated meal with protracted relish. I leaned forward, my elbows resting on the dash, staring through the gaping hole where the windshield had once been to check the road for any beasts that may have wandered into our path.

“You mentioned a civil war?” I asked. I had not slept a real sleep in days (days!), and the dearth of sensory stimuli was wearing on my level of alertness. I felt like I was speaking through a tank of heavy water—each word floated up in a private orb, undulating independently of its peers. I just watched them rise, praying that they’d make sense when they reached the winged men and women who populated the heavens.

“Biafra.”

Before they shipped us over, our employer, Evergreen Security Solutions, put us through a rather thorough training course. I remembered a PowerPoint presentation on Biafra. I remembered how the rebels in that war had made their own tanks from sheet metal and old cars. Badass. “You were part of that?”
“I was a teacher.”
“No shit.”
“Many years ago, things were better here. I was a teacher. I had a wife and two boys.”
“And then the, what, the military, or—"
“We had, in Nigeria, a very stable government when I was growing up. Each year, it seemed that things were getting better. We were on the elevator to the first world. And then suddenly the oil companies came and everything just went sideways. A long time, the country went sideways. Biafra was an attempt to stand straight again, but it failed. We failed. And so things continued to slip down. And now this.”
“I do not know how a thing like that happens,” I said. “I just don’t.”
The driver made a little brushing motion with his hand, and I had a hard time understanding it for what it was. But I figured, any way you cut it, he was not up for an extended conversation about his ruined past. So I put my head back against the headrest and watched the cool gray procession of midnight forest unfolding before us.
“That bag,” the driver said, tilting his head toward my lap.
“My son?”
He raised his hands over the steering wheel to emphasize his lack of comprehension.
“Well,” I said, sucking my teeth, “he started out as just a tool. My Mandy, she had a miscarriage? And the doctors gave her Jerome—my son—as a way to sort of get over it or live through it or what have you? And I just, I have to get him back to the US and get him put together again. Or something.”
The driver nodded and we drove on. I assumed he regarded me as the supreme jackass, a living incarnation of all he’d secretly assumed about the rolling American nightmare. A grown man playing soldier, carrying around a trussed-up radio and calling it a boy. I suppose he had a sort of point. But something happens to a person when a small and needy object is placed in his arms. Something slips away from you, a taut and slithery thing that might be reason, and once it’s gone, you have only the foaming, bared teeth of parenthood, a wild, insensate desire to wall up your private airspace and gun down all foes.
The driver smacked his lips.
“You thirsty?”
“I have lost my children,” the driver said. His nostrils were quivering faintly,
but otherwise he was still as a piece of museum statuary. “There is no bringing them back.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I think I have some water here. Or maybe it’s bourbon.” I started to rummage for the bourbon. My hands trembled, I wanted to get it out so fast.

“I was not at home when they were killed. I was at the school. They came into the school first and told us to get down. We all got down. I thought about it for a long time. Could I have just refused to get down? Could I have made it out through the window? It was something I thought about a lot, maybe too much. At any rate, while we were on the floor, they were burning the houses. And my wife and my children were in the houses, burning, while I lay on the floor. And I remember that my face was pressed to the floor and it was concrete and I thought about how cool it was, and I think it was in that moment of relief, in that moment when I thanked the floor for being nice and cool, that is the very same moment that my wife and my children left the earth. I wanted so much to go back, to try the window, to try to run for the door, to fight the soldiers, to run back to the house and warn my family, but in my mind I could never make it back in time. So I have given it up. Now I carry it around with me. I balance it on my head like a woman carrying water.”

The man’s eyes were glazed and slick. His speech was slurred, almost as if he were drunk with the remembered pain.

“I think that I don’t actually have the bourbon,” I said. “I think I may have just been hoping for the bourbon.”

He looked at me, puzzled, as though I’d shaken him from a fitful sleep.

“I offered you bourbon,” I said. “Never mind. I don’t have it. I don’t have anything in this bag, just nothing.”

“Mm-hm,” he said, returning his gaze to the road.

I was at the base conducting a session on the M60 when the call came through. Mandy sounded rough, like she had inhaled paint fumes or something. Her voice was syrupy and slurred. She told me the baby was having problems. She was calling from an ambulance. It was hard for her to talk, she said, because they had an oxygen mask over her face. I said okay and I told her to just keep the phone by her ear. I told her not to think about the baby. She said “How” and I said I would talk to her about when we met. She said that sounded good so I told her everything I remembered. I was on a detail in Honduras and she was working as a missionary. I described to her the ruins we discovered on our walks together, those mighty caved-in pyramids that were just there in the
middle of the jungle, no velvet ropes around them or anything. I told her about
the time we climbed the ancient stairwell that wound around the side of the
mountain, and when we got to the top the trees fell away and we were above
a cloud of mist, and we were the only people there. I told her about the ex-pat
bar in the middle of town, the Thursday-night karaoke with DJ Big Bill, how
we sang a duet of “Magic Man” by Heart even though it was not a duet. I told
her about the plantains, the salted, fried plantains, nothing like them anywhere
ever in the entirety of the universe.

I got in the Impala and drove. When I got to the hospital they told me that
the ambulance had arrived with the baby dead already. Dead inside her. Mandy
said they made her go through labor anyway. They made her push that dead
baby out. She said they set the lights low, and that it hurt worse than anything,
because there was not a single fabric of hope to pull her through the pain, and
I told her I was not prepared to hear the rest. She got upset, because she had no
choice in the matter so why should I, and she tried to shout some more of the
details to me while I begged her to stop. I think I heard that they cleaned the
dead baby up and took a picture of him, and that this picture is still on file at
the hospital, or something.

The dark was really starting to penetrate the landscape, its black cloak unrav-
eling over the horizon. I stuck my head out the window to get a better look
at the sky. The clouds were thick and variegated, black with smog. Portions of
them lit up at spastic intervals. White streaks plowed through the sky around
them like falling stars in reverse. Closer to the horizon, I could see a point
where the clouds met the ground. Something was burning up ahead.

“Those clouds are not clouds.”
“I know,” he said, nodding evenly. “That is Port Harcourt.”
“I thought we were heading away from Port Harcourt.”
“I told you we had to take a detour.”
“No, you did not.”
“Oh,” the driver said. “Maybe that was just a thing in my head.
“Why are we going back?”
“To get more gas. We are almost out again. I know a place, but we will skirt
the city’s edge.”

The plan was sketchy, but I had seen the man conduct a treetop assassina-
tion. I was relatively sure he had my back. I settled into my seat, reaching for
the AK. “I don’t think this has many more rounds left in it,” I said, thumbing
the magazine.
“The glove box,” he said, gesturing at the smeary leatherette contour of the compartment. I turned the clasp and the whole door came away in my hand, allowing a half-dozen full magazines to slide out and tumble to the floor.

“You are not a man of chance,” I said, stuffing two in my hip pockets.

“I’m not understanding,” he said.

“You like to drive prepared.”

He looked at me with that same expression of total puzzlement. I took it to mean that preparedness was a reflex in this place—that there was no state of unpreparedness, there were only degrees to which one was prepared for absolutely anything.

We kept driving along the single, weatherworn dirt road, never getting any closer to the source of the smoke. We started passing houses, the windows of which were mostly dark.

“They are trying not to be seen,” the driver said, pointing at the squat gray structures, their facades blank and blurred with night air.

The back of my neck started to chill, and I felt a certain action in my bowels, a new level of engagement. We moved forward even more slowly than before. I placed the weapon crosswise on my lap and hugged the bag containing Jerome between my feet. We were night men, prowling silently through the living graveyard of houses and shabby storefronts festooned with banners of the new republic. A single boy wandered aimlessly in a field. There were no other signs of life.

“Where is everybody?” I asked.

The driver shrugged.

We were starting to see better in the dark. The landscape came up in sharp relief, everything clean and well-defined in shades of gray-blue. This was true darkness we were cutting through, almost by intuition or by some kind of oddball faith, just pulling ourselves along by an invisible thread. We were edging closer to the death zone—our ears rang with the surging chemical ductwork that accompanied the end time. I felt like I could split a man’s teeth from five hundred yards with a single shot, blindfolded.

We entered a space that was more clearly identifiable as urban. The houses were coming together, rising into complexes, the stores becoming markets and other places of business. Lights out, everywhere. Some of these, we could see, had smashed windows. Whether or not this was evidence of the current aggression, we couldn’t know. Everything was dead in the windless land.

“Damn, how far do we have to go into this?” I asked in a hushed, dry-mouthed whisper.
“To the connector. Just a few miles,” he said, wheezing, the first betrayal that he was not entirely confident about his plan.

“We don’t have to,” I said. “There’s no law.”

“Can’t go back, can’t stop,” he said. I turned to look at where we’d been—a dark blue field framed by a dark blue sky, bands of deep purple fading at the horizon line, periodically ruptured by luminous tracer fire.

We turned onto a paved road and a new quiet blossomed over us in a meditative dome.

“We must be close,” I said.

“This is a new road.”

“The connector. We just pick up the connector. Get the hell out of here.”

“I think we are not that close.”

The road was marked with faint lane indicators, snaking, ghostly lines that undulated gently as they passed underneath the cab.

I turned, peeling my shirt from the seatback, where it had been adhered by a perspirative gel. “Do you think I’m crazy for carrying around this bag?”

The driver glanced furtively at the bag between my feet.

“I mean, does that make you lose a form of respect for me?”

“I don’t know much about respect,” he said, wiping a constellation of sweat from his forehead. “There are just actions. There is nothing else.”

“But here I am, traipsing around your country with this bag of parts that I call ‘Son.’”

The driver squinted at something far away, his glistening eyes narrowing to slits. “What you carry, and what you call it, has no bearing for me.”

As he said this, the driver sucked in his cheeks and lunged forward, slamming his foot on the brakes. I hurtled into the glove box, smashing my face on the dash.

“Jesus.” My teeth were bleeding.

“This is bad,” the driver said in a measured hush. In front of us, blocking a good portion of the road, was an overturned personnel carrier, just an enormous gray hulking thing, wrecked parts strewn everywhere.

“Whose is it?”

“Hard to tell these things anymore,” he said. He took the AK and slipped out silently, crouching by the door. The world was dead quiet.

“Can’t we just go around?”

“This is a trap,” he whispered, waving bitterly in the air to silence me. “An old trick.”

The driver pivoted expertly on the balls of his feet, his whole body a well-
orchestrated mechanism for stealth. I could barely see him against the night as he silently maneuvered toward the front of the upended vehicle and ducked around the other side.

The night sounds howled in my ears as I tried to locate the driver’s footfalls. Some kind of beast, something with long, sawing lungs, keened in the trees. I stared hard at the outline of the vehicle, which trembled and flagged in the near-total darkness.

I thought to call out to the driver, but I did not know his name. I realized I knew nothing about where I was or how I might get somewhere else. I knew not how to reassemble my son from the bag of parts at my feet. Nothing of the facts and figures I had stored up in my head over the years was applicable or transferable to this place. Like a campsite after a boy scout jamboree, Nigeria would be cleaner when I left than when I arrived.

A crispy insect spazzed in the crook of my neck. Twigs snapped. I slowly took the handgun from the small of my back, where it had made a deep and intricate impression. I cocked it in my lap with a long, deliberate stroke.