Talk About God
Talk About God

&

Other Stories

F. G. Paci

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Recruits, listen and listen well.

The ID on my fatigues says RI. You will call me Reading Instructor or Sir. Nothing else. If you speak to me directly, you will not eyeball me. You will ask permission to speak and end your sentence with a Sir. Your names are stencilled on your fatigues. You will refer to yourself as Recruit So-and-so. You are no longer a he or a she. You are no longer at home. You will not use the word “I.” If you wish permission to speak, you will say, Recruit So-and-so requests permission to speak. You have lost your first names, your bad habits, your drugs, your smartphones and electronic devices, your TVs and video games, your computers, your YouTube and iTunes, your porn, your Google, your soft beds, your hair and nails, your mommies and daddies, your cars, your alcohol, your music, your former life. You have all been shorn of your golden locks. You are no longer black or white or brown. Spanish or Italian or Polish or Filipino. Muslim or Buddhist or Catholic. You are now a
recruit of the Reading Corps. Nothing else, and I mean nothing, is more important than the Reading Corps. And it’s my job to start you off on the painful process of making you into elite members of a war machine.

Let me tell you right off it’s a painful process. But pain is good, pain is very good. If you don’t like pain, or come to like pain, you will be weeded out. You will be sent back to your former decadent life, with its lax values, its bad grammar, its mindless culture, its disrespect for the word. Pain is the way through to a new life. Pain will set you free.

Some of you will not make it through this camp. You won’t stand the pain. You don’t have the guts. There’s simply no hope in hell. I’ve been you. I’ve played the sports you play. I’ve watched the thousands of telecasts — the football, soccer, hockey, golf, tennis, baseball, curling, whatever. I’ve read the sports pages, heard the radio talk-in shows, hung out with you guys in the dressing rooms and at the local watering-holes over beer and wings, been there, done that. And I’ve watched the movies you watch. So I won’t beat around the bush. You can handle the action stuff, the factoids, the literal, the plain, the visible — but when it comes to reading anything deeper than a tweet or text message, let alone an abstruse thought, all your synapses freeze up. They go into crisis-mode. And you’re lost.

And you female recruits, you’re not much different. You may be able to read a little better, stand the pain of forming thoughts a little more, you may be able to understand the subtleties of relationships a little more, but when it comes to hard serious reading, respecting the word in all its uncompromising demands, you go gaga like the rest. Your knees shake. You say you’re too busy. You don’t have the time. Or you have other things to do — like wash your hair and do your nails. Or do some down time putting all your nonsense on Facebook.

If you don’t make it through, fine by me. You can go back to your hair and your nails and your Facebook life.

Here there’s no politically correct. There’s no individual rights. There’s no coddling, no entitlement. There’s only the code of the Reading Corps. Words, courage, commitment.

Here you will forget your previous existence, your soft comfortable and worthless lives. You will forget your bad habits, your entitlements, your me-first attitude, and learn what honour is, and courage is, and what the Corps stands for. And it’s my job to make you put the Corps first ... always the Corps, forever the Corps of READERS.

Get used to it.

If you want to be a Reader, if you want to be part of an elite fighting corps, you have to say good-bye to your former life. Once you get through Reading Boot Camp, you’ll never be the same again — and once you’ve changed, the veil will be lifted from your eyes and you’ll finally be able to see through all the bullshit.

We look at your former life with disdain. It’s a world where everything’s muddled, confused, and undisciplined. With its competing rights and interests. With its different fads and raves and phobias. With its different beliefs and businesses. With its lies and deceits. With its total disrespect for the word. With everyone looking after themselves...
and their families first. Where mere opinion and self-interest rules as conventional wisdom, all manipulated by the ROI, the Return on Investment. Here we cut through the quagmire of opinion and entitlement and rights. We emphasize duty to the word. We keep it simple but not stupid. We achieve clarity of thought and action. We bring back the purity of the word. But it can come only at a great sacrifice.

I hope you’re ready for that sacrifice.

Among other things, boot camp is comprised of Orientation and Marching Procedures, Weaponry and Marksmanship, The Obstacle Course, Close Combat, CPR, and Basic Warrior-Reader Training. All during this process you will be evaluated. If you meet the stringent standards of the Corps, you will graduate and become full-fledged members of a proud tradition, the Reading Corps.

One last thing. I love the Corps. I love it with a passion. And I won’t let anyone, and I mean anyone, drag it down into the mud. I’m a Lifer. And, make no mistake, it’s war out there now. Our enemies have not only stormed the gates of the Tower of Babel, they’ve taken over the whole apparatus of government and media and sports and business. And whether they’re in smile mode, whether they foam at the mouth or speak with rhetorical flourish, it’s clear they have no respect for the integrity of the word. They have no respect for thought, let alone poetry. They don’t read. They don’t even know how to listen. They just blab and jab, twitter and jitter, blog and jog, spewing out their garbage, trying to fill the empty hole in their soul.

Facebook, hell! They don’t know what the face of a book is!

**PHASE TWO: Orientation and Marching**

All right, let’s begin with a few simple Corps rules. You will obey my orders at all times. You will listen carefully at all times. You will be totally alert at all times. You will do everything you’re told to do, quickly and smartly, at all times. You will give of yourself completely, even to the point of losing yourself.

You will always, and I mean always, honour and follow the code of the Corps: Words, courage, commitment.

You are now Corps Group 462. When you write home you will use that as your address. You will tell your mommy and daddy that you are having fun, that you’re enjoying your time with the Corps, and that you are becoming valued Readers.

**IS THAT CLEAR?**

“Yes, sir.”

I CAN’T HEAR YOU.

“YES, SIR!”

You have received your fatigues and utility hats and hair-cuts. High and tight for the guys. A little longer for the girls. You have received your chow times. Some of you haven’t slept in thirty-six hours. You have been yelled at, screamed at for thirty-six hours straight. You’ve broken rules you didn’t even know existed. You have learned to make a bed, Reader style, with a forty-five degree fold, keep a tidy footlocker, stand at attention for inspection, and always give unquestioning and immediate obedience.

Now, get in line. NOW! I want to see a tight formation. MOVE IT! FOUR TO A LINE! TOES RIGHT ON THOSE MARKS ON THE GROUND!
That took all of twenty seconds. We're going to get it down to four seconds for tomorrow, got it?

All right, let's have a head count.

Before we learn to fight as Readers we must learn to think as Readers, act as Readers. And live as Readers. You will always put the Corps first.

This is how you will stand erect as a Reader. This is how you will lift your feet when we march. Precisely like this. Left foot, right. Left foot, right. Crisp and sharp at all times. And when we march, we march as a unit, Group Unit 462.

Do you read me?
“Yes, sir!”

I CAN’T HEAR YOU!

“YES, SIR!”

PHASE THREE: Weaponry and Marksmanship

Repeat after me.

Language is my weapon. My weapon is closer to me than my life. I will learn everything there is to learn about my weapon. I will learn how it works, how to take it apart, how to put it back together. I will learn how my enemy uses it and abuses it. I must keep it beside me at all times, keep it clean and ready even as I am clean and ready. Sleep with it, eat with it, dream with it, dump with it. Without it I am nothing. With it I am ready to fight the great fight.

I am issuing you now the official Corps dictionary of the English language. It is prescriptive and not the descriptive crap they publish nowadays. It has been especially written and published for the Corps by a trained group of Readers. It is short and sweet, zeroing in on the words mostly misused, on the usage mostly abused, on the vocab skills you will need. You will read it from beginning to end and tattoo it to your brain so that in combat you will not even think about it since it’ll be there ready for use at all times.

Keep in mind that a language is a living, breathing entity. It changes with the times, but it is also rooted in the past. In order to know how the language works, we have to know about the history of the language. The dictionary is a weapon without bullets. The language in usage is the weapon firing. And the weapon firing correctly is the same weapon that Chaucer used, the same weapon that Shakespeare and Swift used.

Needless to say, it would be good to know how to use more than one weapon. Each weapon is different in its own way—and much is lost in translation, as you might know. It would be good to know how to use ancient Greek or Hebrew or Latin, especially as these weapons have been integrated into our own. Not to speak of modern French and German. We don't have time, however. In this boot camp our weapon of choice is English. Fortunately for us, almost everything of value has been translated into English, and the great books so often that you can get enough variations to form your own sight lines.

Now open your Corps dictionaries.

Today’s drill involves the use of infer and imply.

Repeat after me. Since the mayor implied that he would not raise taxes, we inferred that he would call an election.
Again. *Since the mayor implied that he would not raise taxes, we inferred that he would call an election.*

Recruit Valencia, I see your smirk. Give me thirty push-ups right now! Move it!

“Sir, I don’t believe I presented, like, the slightest evidence of a smirk.”

SHUT YOUR MOUTH! You’ve broken about fifteen Corps rules with one sentence. You’re a disgrace to the Corps. Number one: request permission to speak. Do not use “I.” Do not use *like.* Every time I hear the word *like* I cringe, recruits. I literally cringe. It makes my blood run cold. As sure as I’m standing here in front of you, I will wipe away your smirks. I will wipe away the use of the word *like.* You will never use that word again, unless you use it properly. UNDERSTAND?!

“Yes, sir!”

I can’t hear you.

“*YES, SIR!*”

Recruit Valencia, straighten your back. Do the push-ups correctly or you’ll be doing them till your arms fall off.

DO YOU HEAR ME?

“Aye, aye, sir!”

Recruits, I think we have a bad-ass dude in our group. I’m telling you all right now you will never make it in the Corps if your smug index is above stupid. Today’s crop of recruits is the worst I’ve ever encountered in my thirty years in the Corps. It’s the Me-first generation. The most coddled, the softest, the most self-centred group I’ve ever had the misfortune to drill. Your parents have done a stinking awful job. They over-did it. They gave you too much. Too much care. Too much love. Too many drugs. Too many chances. And they didn’t equip you with self-supporting skills. You all feel too entitled. You have no respect for authority, your brains have been muddled, mashed, mired, mollycoddled, mutated by the Digital Age. And your bodies, well, I won’t even go there, except that all the fries and burgers and sodas, not to mention the sit-down time in front of the TV and computers, have taken their toll. You’re all a bunch of butter-balls. Mass-produced, homogenized, and tweet-brained. You wouldn’t stand a chance in battle.

Now, repeat after me.

*Language is my weapon. There are many like it but this one is mine. My weapon is my life. I must master it as I master my life. My weapon without me is useless. Without my weapon I am useless. I must learn to fire it true. I must shoot him before he shoots me.*

Without respect for your weapon, you might as well give up right now. But it takes more than respect, recruits. You have to love your weapon as you have loved nothing else in your life. You have to love it to distraction. You have to love it so much that when someone abuses it, drags it in the dust, or spits on it, your whole body cringes. As if they were stomping on the flag. As if they were stomping on your mother’s throat. And you will not let that happen, will you? You will NEVER let that happen.

Let’s understand each other, recruits. Out there, in the me-first world, in the land of buying and selling, of glitz and glamour, of half-truths and lies, of the god of the ROI, our language has been so warped it can’t shoot straight.
And you will never be able to go into battle if your weapon can’t shoot straight. You have to love your weapon, respect your weapon, and keep it clean at all times. And maybe one day you’ll be able to hit your target at all times.

Let’s understand each other, recruits. We can’t get into the subtleties, the poetry, the rhetorical flourishes, unless we start with the one-on-one correspondence. And we can’t get back to the purity of the word unless we clean our weapon at all times.

I got carried away.

Let’s get back to business. Open your dictionary. Repeat after me.

*I’m lying down on the sofa. She’s laying the table for dinner.*

LOUDER!

*I’M LYING DOWN ON THE SOFA. SHE’S LAYING THE TABLE FOR DINNER.*

**PHASE FOUR: The Obstacle Course.**

OK, today, recruits, we’re in our first day out on the obstacle course. You can see it in front of you. The ropes. The walls. The water and mud. And the running route through the forest. You have all been issued twenty books to carry in your backpacks, twenty or so full pounds of paper and binding. I know it’s not easy. It’s a formidable task. And I’ll be timing you. Most of you have never carried such a heavy load on your backs. In order to become Readers, however, you have to do it. You have to do the obstacle course. And I’m going to tell you why, so you’ll be well-motivated.

At ease and listen carefully.

Once upon a time people would go to libraries to read books and take them out for circulation. Once upon a time libraries were the only indoor public spaces you could go to without having to buy something and where you could get books free. Well, that has all changed. A library, a free public space where books are taken care of and revered, has now become a place where books are ignored. And there will be a day in the not-too-distant future, when the physical Book will become extinct, when it will be considered a relic, a dinosaur. And when that day comes, we have to be ready to carry all the extinct relics to a safe place. I can’t tell you where now. But the Corps is preparing places all over North America as I speak. Places in remote areas in Montana and Saskatchewan. Arizona and the Northwest Territories. Places where the E-people would never set foot. Invisible places. Like silos for ICBM’s. Places that the E-people would never find—even if they did, they’d never capture. Why? Because the dedicated and courageous Corps members like you will defend those places with their lives.

We must be dedicated in saving the Book.

There will come a day, mark my words, when the Electronic Grid all over North America will be knocked out, when all the juice will dry up, and all the batteries will run dead, and the Book will be needed again.

Most of you are here, trying to become Corps Readers because you probably have some personal idea of why you want to save the Book. But I have to explain another reason, even if you don’t understand it now, so that you’ll have some idea of our vision.

Just as there is no speaking without listening, there is no word without the space around the word, the white of the page against the word, the flesh against the spirit. There is no word on the scroll without the time in the desert, the pain of the flesh, the thirst, the hunger, and the purification. There is no law, no word, no thought without the surrender and the submission. We must smell the desert, smell the page, smell the scroll. We must feel the desert, feel the page, feel the scroll — and then we can live by the words.

Without the physicality of the Book and the page and the scroll, the word will lose its substance, its power, and ultimately its life.

And we’ll all be kneeling to the e-words of the new kingdom, the ROI.

Make no mistake, recruits. Our job in the Reading Corps is to save the Book and the Scroll at the cost of our lives.

Do you have the will and the commitment to do that?

“Yes, sir!”

But it won’t be just your wits and your love of reading. You need physical strength, courage, and commitment. You can’t do it alone. We have to work together as a group. And the group is only as strong as its weakest member. We read together, fight together, win together.

It’s my job, however, to create a tight fighting unit. And we can’t be strong unless we eliminate the weak. So when you see a fellow recruit slowing down, when you see a fellow recruit giving up, when you see a fellow recruit on her last legs in the obstacle course, you don’t stop and help them. You take strength that it’s not you slowing down and giving up. And you push yourself even harder to finish the course. Because when push comes to shove, we have to know the person who has our backs is as good if not better than we are. We have to put our trust in our brother and sister because we win together or die together. There’s no third option.

And remember this. When the pain gets to the point where you can’t go farther, when your mind is screaming that you can’t go on, when the pain gets so intense you think you’re dying, remember this: pain is just the ego leaving the body.

All right, I want you to line up in two rows in alphabetical order. MOVE IT! UP TO! UP TO! Recruits Abrams and Almeida first. I have the stopwatch. You can see the end of the obstacle course just over there, the Wall of Doom. Wait for my signal to start.

I don’t care how long it takes, each one of you will finish the course. I’ll stay here with you till tomorrow morning if I have to. The Wall of Doom is the backbreaker. Take it with a running start, grab the rope, and pull till your arms fall off. If I see any of you weenie out on me, I’ll personally see that you get an FTA and get bounced from the Corps. And you women, I better not see you cry. You will NOT cry.

DO YOU LOVE THE CORPS?

“Yes, SIR!”

DO YOU LOVE THE CORPS MORE THAN YOUR LIFE?
“YES, SIR!”
WHAT’RE WE DOING?
“SAVING THE BOOK.”
HOW’RE WE SAVING THE BOOK?
“WITH OUR BACKS AND OUR BRAINS!”

PHASE FIVE: Close Combat

All right, at ease. I want you to sit down on the grass in a
circle around me.

Before we armour-up for the pugil stick, we have to go
over the techniques to maim someone with our bare hands.
You never know when the enemy will engage you in close
combat. And our enemy can be as ruthless as the fiercest
Mixed Martial Arts fighter. You’ve seen MMA fights on
TV, I’m sure. These cut-guys kick each other, punch each
other, choke each other, elbow and knee each other, till
they’re bloodied and raw and exhausted and tap out. But
the MMA has rules for disqualification. As bloody and fe-
rocious as that fighting is, it’s nothing compared to the
fighting we learn in the Corps.

In the MMA, they can’t bite, they can’t kick the groin,
they can’t pull the hair, they can’t strike the Adam’s apple,
they can’t kick the head, and they can’t gouge out the eyes.

Here, it’s a different story, recruits. It’s not TV-land.
It’s not computer-land. Here it’s maim or be maimed. And
if an attacker attacks you in ambush and is strangling you
from behind, this is what you will do. You will ignore what
your attacker is doing, ignore the pain the attacker is
inflicting, and instead inflict the most massive pain you
can inflict. By breaking a bone, jabbing an eyeball, hitting
the crotch, and stomping on the skull.

OK, Recruit Valencia, get up and we’ll demonstrate.
You look a little frightened, Recruit.

NO, SIR!

I know you’re afraid. I greatly suspect that not one of
you has ever been in a fight. Oh, yeah, you’ve seen many
fights on TV and in the movies. You’ve seen even the most
ghoulish activity on the Net, I imagine, where there are no
taboos. And a lot of you were readers in your other life, not
serious readers, but readers nonetheless. You simply aren’t
used to fighting. And you definitely don’t know how to in-
flix pain.

That’s another reason you’re trying to be Readers in
the Corps. To eliminate your fear. To learn how to fight.
To learn how to be an accomplished engineer of pain.

So here’re a few elementary principles of fighting. Your
fear is only in your mind. Fear can be eliminated. Fear pro-
duces panic. Panic muddles your thinking. And a muddled
mind can’t fight. Most important of all, a muddled mind
can’t cover a Reader’s back.

Say after me: We read together, fight together, win together.
Fear is only in my mind. I can eliminate fear. When I
eliminate fear, I will be a true Corps Reader.

All right. Recruit Valencia, who thinks he’s so baaaad,
I want you to assume a choke hold on me from behind. Put
your arm around my throat. Now hold tight. C’mon, a little
tighter.

“This is as tight as this recruit can go, sir.”
What did you read before boot camp, Recruit Valencia?
“What do you mean, sir?”
You know what I mean. Now answer the question. And keep that choke hold.
“This recruit liked fantasy fiction, sir. The graphic novel.”
D’you hear that, recruits? Bad-ass Recruit Valencia is nothing but a Mamma’s boy. Fantasy fiction. The graphic novel. I’ll bet he’s never read anything serious in his life.
Ah, I can feel the hold getting tighter. I can feel Recruit Valencia getting serious. The comic book reader is starting to use his magic powers on me. If I’m not mistaken, he’s taking it personal. He’s starting to inflict some serious hurt on me.
Now, watch carefully.
BING, break his pinkie. BING, an elbow to the gut. BING, grab him by the arms and flip him over. And BANG. One serious stomp on his face once he’s down.
You NEVER make it personal, Recruit Valencia. YOU GOT THAT?
“Yes, sir!”
We’re serious warrior-readers here, got that? For homework for next week, Recruit, you will obtain a good translation of *The Iliad* and commit to memory five quotes that best describe the rage of Achilles, one of the greatest warriors ever to don the armour. DO YOU READ ME?
“Yes, sir!”
And then you might learn a smidgeon of what it means to be a warrior. As Achilles was a warrior. Because we don’t want BB’s, brainless-brawns, in the Corps. Just as we don’t want GG’s, girlie-girls. We want serious readers, elite readers, who, one day, can feel the depth of emotion at reading a touching scene in a work of literature and then, in the next day, come out and fight the enemies of literature.
All right, Recruit Isaacs, it’s your turn to show me what you got.
“This recruit has to warn you, sir. This recruit is an expert in Jiu-Jitsu.”
DID I GIVE YOU PERMISSION TO SPEAK?
“No, sir!”
Get your face over here and shut up.
What mistake did Recruit Isaacs make right off, recruits? C’mon, think. Use your noggins. Yeah, Recruit Radinski?
“She showed compassion, sir.”
That is correct. Recruit Isaacs made the most common mistake many females make. She showed compassion. She showed weakness. In warning me of her amazing powers of martial arts, she gave me the upper hand. In wanting to be fair, she lost her initiative. Her ego spoke for her. The ego of a female who wants to be a male.
Isn’t that the case, Recruit Isaacs?
“No, sir!”
Are you disagreeing with me?
“This recruit begs to differ, sir. Does this recruit have your permission to speak forthrightly?”
Do you hear that, recruits? Are our ears deceiving us or are we hearing correctly? Recruit Isaacs wishes to speak forthrightly. She’s going to show a little more compassion.
She’s going to show us her nurturing-nature. By all means, speak forthrightly, Recruit Isaacs.

“This recruit has never wanted to be male, sir. This recruit has always wanted to be fully female, sir. This recruit glories in being female, sir. This recruit will kick your male ass, sir.”

I’m impressed. What did you read in your former life, Recruit Isaacs?

“This recruit read the I-Ching, sir. The Gita, sir. The Iliad, sir. The Art of War, sir.”

And what did you learn from The Iliad?

“Those old Greek warriors had nothing but contempt for words, sir. But when they smelled blood, they went in for the kill, just as we do, sir.”

And what did you learn from Sun Tzu?

“The first rule of the art of the military is deception, sir.”

Ah, recruits, I may have been hoisted by my own petard.

**PHASE SIX: CPR**

This is the part of boot camp you’ve all been dreading, I know. But you can never make it as a Corps Reader till you pass CPR.

I’m going to be upfront with you. Some of you will never make it through CPR. You just won’t have the mental acuity, the alertness, the fearlessness, not to mention the patience and dedication to do the job required. Oh, I imagine a lot of you listened to the prevailing pop tunes in your former lives. I imagine a lot of you got caught up in the beat, got caught up in the power. I imagine a lot of you couldn’t fight the power. That it played with your blood till you all became a good return on investment.

But there’s a big difference between listening and reading, let me tell you. In listening, we give our enemy the power. With the amps and the mic and the audience. In reading, we reclaim the power.

And don’t be intimidated by your lack of education. You don’t have to be a PhD in literature, a college graduate, or even a high school phenom. Did Arty Rimbaud have a college education? Did Johnny Keats actually attend classes at Oxford? And what about Billy-Boy Shakespeare with his paltry public school education?

As a matter of fact, education can even be a handicap in CPR. The more you analyze and criticize and scrutinize, the more you keep the poem dead on the page.

And our job in the Corps is not to perform an autopsy. Our job in Reading Corps is the opposite. We bring the poem back to life. We resuscitate. We perform CPR, recruits.

Let’s go over the order of procedure for Close Poetry Reading. Say after me.

*One. The poem is dead. It is surrounded by a white shroud on the page.*

*Two. The poem is at the centre of the universe. To resuscitate we must navigate, look to our co-ordinates, linger over every word, as if it were the last word of a beloved one.*
Three. The proper procedure for CPR, beyond the sound, is to hone in on the three coordinates. D — for diction. I — for imagery. T — for tone.

Four. We blow our breath into every word till we have no breath left — and then pound the chest and give it back its pulse.

Five. It’s not alive till we feel the pulse of its heart.

For today’s drill I’ve given you all handout of a short lyric poem to perform a CPR on. The author’s name is not on it. You will work on the poem individually for ten minutes. Feel free to mark it up anyway you wish. Then we will divide into groups and see what our results are. There are seven groups of three who have the same poem. Are there any questions?

“This recruit wishes to know if we are to identify the poet, sir.”

Negative, Recruit Radinski. If I wanted you to identify the poet, I would have so instructed. The author is not important. All you have to know is that the author is dead and will remain dead. Our job is not to resurrect the actual historical author. It is to resurrect the words of the poem. Only the words matter, do you read me?

“This recruit reads you loud and clear, sir. But it is his considered opinion, as lowly as it is, that a poem exists in time and space. That it has a frame of reference. And that the author’s identity is part of that frame of reference.”

RECRUIT RADINSKI, YOU WILL SHUT YOUR MOUTH. YOU WILL NOT QUESTION MY ORDERS. IS THAT CLEAR?

“Yes, sir!”

Recruits, let me make one thing perfectly clear. I don’t care what you learned in your former life in the halls of academia. I don’t care how much you think you know, because you don’t know shit. You’re here, as a matter of fact, to de-learn everything you learned. Because everything you learned was WRONG. Recruit Radinski thinks he’s very nimble of mind, fine. He thinks he knows poetry, fine. Maybe he even fancies himself a poet, fine. I have no trouble with that. What I do find totally objectionable, however, is that he still has an ego. And he puts himself before the Corps.

LET ME MAKE ANOTHER THING CLEAR, RECRUITS! YOU WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO PERFORM CPR PROPERLY UNLESS YOU NEGATE YOUR EGO. DO YOU READ ME?

“Yes, sir!”

I know the enemy. And we cannot fight the enemy with just the requisite skills. We can know all we want about denotation, connotation, figurative language, meter, word-play, and not know shit about the nature of poetry. All over North America the enemy is not only killing our sacred words, but burying them every day. No matter what lip service you hear, our enemy despises anything that’s not practical and gives good return on investment. We are losing our dedicated readers even in academia, let me tell you. And how many parents want their sons and daughters to grow up and be poets?

Make no mistake. Our enemy is strong and legion. And we have to be even more ruthless to take back the word.
For the word on the page is more important than our lives. It challenges the conventional wisdom. It stretches the imagination. It brings forth what it reveals. It’s playful, joyous, and sad. It seeks only to create its deepest truth, with all its paradoxes and uncertainties. It names all that exists—with all the anguish and terror of existence. The word—

“Sir, this recruit has to interrupt, sir. This recruit believes you are getting schmaltzy, sir.”

That is not schmaltz, Recruit Isaacs. That is just a preview of our secret weapon in the Corps. The M-19 Reader-rifle.

**PHASE SEVEN: Basic Warrior-Reader Training**

All right, if you have gotten this far, you’re close to graduation. You’re close to calling yourselves full-fledged Corps Readers. But there is one last thing we have to do. The crucible. What separates recruits from true Readers.

Each one of you has memorized a canto, roughly the average length of a hundred and twenty lines from the English translation of *The Inferno*. We will jog in tight formation through the city, through enemy territory. On command, you will recite your canto, word for word, one recruit after the other.

Now, let me make a few things clear.

One, while the reactions of the enemy can sometimes be unpredictable, I can prepare you for what will probably happen, depending upon what part of enemy territory we’re in. In most places the enemy will totally ignore you. They’ll be so busy doing what they’re busy doing, they won’t even notice. Some E-people will find you mildly amusing. They’ll point to you and chuckle. You’ll be an object of ridicule. They will use the clichéd names. Fruit-bars, clowns, poet-lovers, word-nerds, browners, artsy-fartsies. You have been drilled, however, to withstand all the clichés that they will shoot at you.

Other places in the city will find our manoeuvres offensive. These are our war zones, recruits. These are the places we will be on full alert. These are the places the enemy will deploy their full weaponry. And these are the places we may have to use our secret weapon.

You have all been issued the M-19 Reader-rifle. It can blow an enemy’s smugness off at 500 meters. It has a 30-round magazine clip. It can fire 300 rounds of head-blowing, shit-kicking metaphors in five minutes.

Two, you will not use the secret weapon unless I give the order. IS THAT CLEAR?

“Yes, sir!”

I don’t want any innocent bystanders maimed. There could be kids out there, walking about or on their bikes. There could be infants in carriages and sweet little old ladies just passing the time. There could even be Readers-in-the-closet, secret Readers, members of the Corps who are doing Intel, heaven knows. We don’t want a stray metaphor to harm the innocent. Or our friends out there in the city.

Not to worry, however. Our enemies will make themselves abundantly clear. You will recognize them instantly. They were you before you became members of the Corps. You will see them walking about, separated from each
other, going about their business, as if feeling on top of the world. You will see them in the malls buying things they have no need of. You will see them going into banks and stores that are no longer real to you. You will see them looking after their own interests, oblivious of the brothers and sisters around them. You will see them consulting their smartphones or androids, or whatever they call their e-devices, listening to their music on the earphones, observing the ads and signage, separated and as smug as a bug in a rug. You will see them wired to cyberspace and connected only by their e-lusions. You will see them riding in their cars, with all the comforts around them, locked in their own little worlds.

All right, are you ready?
“Yes, sir!”
Right shoulder, ARMS!
Port, ARMS!
Mark time, MARCH!
Double time, MARCH!
Sing after me.

If I die in the combat zone,
If I die in the combat zone,
Pack me up and send me home.
Pack me up and send me home.
If you hear my momma cry,
If you hear my momma cry,
Tell her Readers do or die.
Tell her Readers do or die.
We’re the best damn fighting machine
We’re the best damn fighting machine

That the world has ever seen.
*That the world has ever seen.*
There’s no ego where we go,
*There’s no ego where we go,*
Loving the word is all we know.
*Loving the word is all we know.*

**GRADUATION**

At ease.

Let me be the first to formally address you. Today is the day you become a Reader.

You have gotten through boot camp. You ARE a Reader. And once a Reader, a Reader forever.

It’s good to see you on this parade ground, on the ground where we drilled you so often, all in Dress Blacks, with the buckles and collars and peaked hat. And with the insignia of the Reading Corps proudly on your uniforms. It’s good to see your families on the reviewing stands. I’ve talked to some of your parents and I have to be truthful with you. Some of them thought you’d never make it. And some of them didn’t want you to become Readers. They know the danger involved.

But you also know that from this day forward you have a great responsibility. From now on you are to uphold the proud tradition of the Corps. It means living up to the high standards established by all the proud Readers of the past. It means keeping the sacredness of the word alive in all circumstances, in all tours of duty. Whether you’re in uniform or out of uniform. Whether you’re in a city or on
the road. Whether you’re in-country or out-of-country. It means living by principles other Readers have died for all over the world.

Rest assured, it will never be easy. It will always be hard to defend the sacredness of the word. Our enemies now control every facet of e-word technology. They’ve stomped on the word, devalued its intrinsic power, and used it only as a means to get a good return on investment. But we will never quit, we will forever defend the integrity of the word. We will carry on. We will abide. As proud Readers of the Reading Corps.

And it does my heart proud to think that I’ve had a hand in the process of transforming you from raw recruits to Readers.

We’ve lost a few along the way, I know. But that is good. They were never meant to be Readers. They have gone back to their e-person existence.

You, however, have met the challenge. You have survived the crucible. You have been forever transformed.

Oh, one final announcement. It’s my duty and pleasure to announce that Reader Valencia and Reader Isaacs have bonded in more ways than one. They will be married next week in a ceremony on-base, at the Octagon. Yes, Readers, where they fought is where they will tie the knot. Poetic, I would say. For in keeping the sacred word alive, we will always keep poetry alive.

So, I say good luck to all of you.

And when you are dismissed, you will have our motto forever tattooed to your heart.

_Lector Aeternum._

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Talk About God

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Patrick was talking about the procedure for his open heart surgery—a coronary artery bypass graft, to be precise. He was getting into the nitty-gritty, not sparing us the details, with the saw that was used to open up the ribs, the pinkish and bean-shaped heart, all the clamps and instruments stuck in the aperture, at times going off into tangents, explaining this or that medical term, and tampering with the arc of the story.

A teacher of English Literature at the local university and specializing in drama, Patrick had a tendency to either let his stories get overly dramatic or turn them into lectures. But this was different. Something had happened during the post-op recovery that had shaken him up.

We were having our teas and liqueurs after our meal and sitting in the living room of his upscale home in the P-Patch in my home town, so called because every street in the area started with the letter P. Panoramic Drive. Placid Drive. Paradise Drive. Pleasant Drive. The area was on a rise overlooking the eastern skyline. Through the large bay window we could see over the highway and the bush to the
hills at Echo Bay. The sky was deep blue, the kind of blue that is so deep and so blue that, if we were to pause from what we were doing, really pause and let the sky suck us into its warm embrace, Patrick had told us, it could make us shudder with joy.

He had never spoken like that before.

It was early July, the time when Jen and I usually came up to visit our families. Jen had her father, her sisters and brothers, her nephews and nieces. We were staying at my sister’s place, a fifteen minute walk farther up the P-Patch.

Patrick, in oversize walking shorts and Hawaiian shirt, was sitting by himself in his reading chair just to the left of the window. Anyone could see the heart problem and surgery had changed him physically. He had once been a robust guy, short and thick at the waist, with peppery straight hair and a cowlick, over his large head and impish grin, with two prominent front teeth that could cut down any tree in the forest. Now, however, he looked sunken-in, his chest hollow, his cheeks gaunt, making his mouth even more pronounced, his hair almost totally white. Gone was the impish grin and the twinkle in his Irish eyes. He was still in the recuperating stage, there was no doubt, experiencing pains in his chest, having to do physio, and being careful with any strenuous physical activity. It was like being a prisoner in his own body, he said. With all the time on his hands, along with his reading, he had become a little more circumspect, a little more thankful of life’s unexpected bounties. He might have to take the first month off work as well.

His wife Anne was on his right, on the red velvet love sofa. She was ten years younger than Patrick, in her summer shorts and a white sleeveless top, her slim attractive figure draped over an arm rest. They had met way back when he was new at the university and she had been in one of his adult evening courses. I had kidded him about marrying a former student, but he wasn’t amused. Anne had dark hair and pale skin, with large alert eyes and a ready disposition to get into a fray. Of Ukrainian stock and raised in town, she had gone south to university and come back to teach History and Geography at a local high school. Their two daughters, Meghan and Sophie, both in their late teens, were away being camp counsellors somewhere north.

Patrick had been raised in Montreal, gone to Dalhousie in Halifax to do his doctorate on Samuel Beckett and Absurdist Drama, and then had landed a job in a small northern Ontario city, which he clearly found wanting for its lack of culture. He wasn’t a sports guy, and if you weren’t a sports guy and didn’t like the outdoors life, my hometown, with its down-sized steel plant, its top-heavy population of seniors, its long winters, its isolation in the northland, could be a killer. The majority of the population also had a tough time with newcomers who rode into town from more cultured parts and tried to open their minds. What Patrick had done to make things even tougher was to develop a passion for the Marquis de Sade. Every so often he put on the tamer plays written by the Marquis in the small Shingwauk Hall theatre at the university to
Talk About God & Other Stories

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show the locals what it was all about. The Shingwauk Hall was a former church and part of a residential school for native children, an irony that hadn’t escaped his notice.

He and Anne and the girls would usually spend their summers in Avignon, on the Rhone in southeast France, where they had a little flat, not too far from the ruins of the chateau once owned by the Marquis. Patrick had been writing a book about de Sade for the last six years, a book that would set the record straight, as he said.

How a fun-loving Irishman from Montreal had become interested in de Sade was beyond me, but it had to do with the fact that the Marquis was even more of an iconoclast than Beckett. Plus, the Marquis had been in prison so long he had acquired an imaginative, not to say unconventional, manner in which to épater le bourgeois, a penchant that Patrick found both amusing and appealing.

This summer, however, the family plans had been changed. Patrick had suffered a heart attack and had been flown to Sudbury, with Anne by his side, for the emergency surgery. It had been after the surgery, while he was in ICU, that he had this transforming experience.

Jen and I were sitting on the other side of the coffee table from Anne, with Patrick just to our right. Jen was in blue shorts and white sleeveless top, her long dark hair falling to her shoulders, her sleek legs and bare feet tucked under her. She was clearly listening with great interest to Patrick’s story. Age had softened the edges of her thin features, but she still had the dimple in her chin and her warm accepting nature. After consuming a few glasses of wine for dinner, I had my tea and glass of Grand Marnier in front of me, in my green walking shorts, with one leg under me, ready for the long haul.

“I’ve seen these open heart surgeries,” Jen said, during a pause in Patrick’s story. “When I worked in ICU as a nurse, one of my first duties was to observe the CABG or the Cabbage, as we called it. They put a stool behind the chief cardiac surgeon and let me peek over his shoulder. It was something else, I’ll tell you. Six hours, I think it took. And when they shock the heart back into work everybody holds their breath. Of course, that was twenty-five years ago.”

“It’s pretty well the same thing,” Patrick said, “with a few technical improvements.”

“I don’t know, honey,” Anne said. “It was nip and tuck for a while.”

“Beautiful use of words, Babe,” Patrick said. “Snip and clamp would be more appropriate. But it was afterwards when I was in ICU that I almost didn’t make it.”

“The cardiologist told us he had post-op complications,” Anne said. “He told me Patrick suffered cardiac arrest and lost all his vital signs for a number of seconds. They thought they had lost him.”

“He actually said I was clinically dead for a while.” He looked at us with a serious eye.

“Let’s keep it to near death, honey.”

“OK,” he said. “I’m alive, ergo I’m not dead, was never dead, only close to dead.”

“I wish you wouldn’t harp on that fact, honey.”

Jen abruptly adjusted herself on her seat, a sure sign she had something more to add. We were in her territory, the body and its malfunctions. After working in town and
various hospitals down south, she had become a Public Health Nurse.

“Even after all the vital signs are gone,” she said, “the brain can function for a while. Once the oxygen is cut off, however ...”

“The fact of the matter is that if you’re dead, you’re dead,” Anne said. “Nobody comes back from the dead.”

“OK, anyway, what I really want to tell you about,” Patrick said, taking a deep breath, “was the near death experience.”

We all looked at him.

“I have to be honest with you,” he said. “I’m still not exactly sure about what happened. I’ve done some research on NDE’s and tried to compare my experience with what’s happened to others and it’s pretty close, I have to admit. And I haven’t spoken about this to anyone but Anne. Even now, though, all I can remember was lying on the bed and feeling this tremendous pain, as if someone had hit my chest with a sledgehammer. The shock of it must’ve knocked me out. The next thing I knew I felt myself in this dark constricted space, so dark I couldn’t see a thing. And every time I tried to draw in a deep breath it felt I was breathing through a tiny straw. So I started to wriggle free, barely inching along at first, then slipping through at a faster rate. Eventually I felt myself crawling through this tight passageway, like a pipe of some kind, so narrow I had to squeeze through, every inch an effort of extreme pain. And every time I tried to take a breath the straw was getting smaller and smaller. My head was on fire with the pain. And just when I thought I couldn’t breathe anymore and my chest was about to explode, I saw a bright light at the end of the tunnel, so bright I couldn’t keep my eye on it lest it blind me. I could smell its warmth, however, like a warm crackling camp fire beckoning me forward, as if promising me that all would be well. That all manner of pain would cease. That all would be forgiven. That I would only be going where I had begun. And all would be well. And all the waiting and wondering, all the struggle and anguish would melt away. And just when I thought I couldn’t move any farther, I felt myself floating up and away. And, suddenly, I opened my eyes and saw my body lying on the bed, the catheters and such sticking out of it, but the it of it undeniable, its mouth slack and its beat and heat gone, the life totally gone from it.”

Jen and I were on the edge of our seat.

“Pat, I love you, but no more pâté de foie gras for you,” Anne said, breaking the tension.

“What do you mean, the it of it?” I said.

“I don’t know what else to call it.” He shrugged. “My body was there and I was somewhere else. I could see the nurses wheel the defibrillator to the bed. I could see one nurse take the paddles and rub them together and the needle of the charge indicator moving and then applying the paddles and the body leaping up into the air. So high it almost fell clear off the bed. I know it’s called an out of body experience. But it’s the strangest thing. The feeling of serene peace, as if this light were shining through me and there was no before and no after. And my body was there like a thing that I had just shed, as if it had been a cocoon or a piece of old skin.”
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