

Shadows of the Big Bang (~4.1k words)

by GB and others

During June, at the tip of summer's lips, Bull and I broke off from our platoon and trotted down a narrow trail where the underbrush grazed our pants like spindly fingers. We descended into a small but empty clearing of tall but idyllic yellow grass, at most a few meters across, enclosed by a dome of palm leaves with a central organic oculus that let in a lonesome beam of light. Pollen drifted in the blooming orthogonal shaft, falling from the exotic orchid lips and thickening the mucus in my throat. It was a dry day in the jungle. The creek beside us glided serenely, clear, and unoccluded by the usual humid mist that perused the valley's depths.

This was our first stop in seven hours. Our calves were weak and buzzing with frayed nerves, our mouths aching from having gone without water for most of the journey. The creek was right below us with fresh drinkable water, but it felt wrong to indulge amidst the trees. In my satchel was a bottle of whiskey and some cigarettes that I had planned to enjoy once we reached the stronghold.

Together, Bull and I unbuckled our pants and relieved ourselves in murky, dehydrated orange streams. As I waited for Bull to finish emptying his bladder, the forest shifted swiftly around me— subtle, but distinct. The trees were living, whispering in agitation. I always considered trees to be relaxed beings, so this was an unnatural occurrence, as if they were perturbed by something else. Suddenly, from a thicket to my left, a mass of reddish-brown crows briskly squawked and fled from the leaves. I spun around and flicked the safety of my rifle, squinting one eye down the sights. The polished wood of the stock was waxy— I almost wished it had the coarse rawness of a bamboo shoot— at least then, my callous skin would be able to grip the trigger without worrying about slipping and misfiring.

“Five, maybe six more miles...” Bull mentioned as he flicked out his chubby fingers to count the few numbers. He was a squatty man, no more than five feet tall, but with an obtuse build and skin so thick that not even a bayonet could slice through it. Peaking out of his rucksack was a banjo, its thin neck narrowing into the sky, accentuating his broad shoulders. He climbed up the small path after washing his face in the creek, his gray hair sagging in slithering strands.

“Bull,” I whispered, but I think my words were lost in the depths of my pulsating mind. I had spun three times around now, each circle bending with unease, my black pupils flinging from left to right across the red veins that were woven into the corner of my eyes. With each spin, the rustling around us grew louder, but Bull was still dozing off in his own world, grinning, imagining the faces of the enemy whom our platoon had never seen.

“Bull!” I repeated, this time with more conviction.

“What is it?” he languidly replied.

Just as he noticed me staring into the distance, my eyes focused on any fragment of excitation in the leaves, four shots rang out within milliseconds of each other, all meeting in the center of the small patch of grass, dashing and glaring through the sharp beam of light like singing knives. I threw myself to the ground and crawled into a small divot between two windswept stalks of tall grass. Orchids sporadically tangled around me, their petals falling onto my pant legs as I scooted backwards in the loose, desaturated dirt. Another four shots, then a gaping silence— not even the mutterings of an enraged Bull.

He’s dead.

I broke into an unfathomable sweat with the salty beads dripping in and out of my eyes.

He’s fucking dead.

Should I scream? Who would hear me? The platoon was waiting far up the path that we had wandered down to get here— they were too far. If Bull was still alive, smoke would pour out of his ears and he’d break into a great rage, fuming, face enveloped in red, careless... careless grin behind the iron sights of a pistol that would ring like a high-pitched automatic.

My breath eased— time was passing quickly. I measured it by the dripping sweat that plucked the colorful flower petals beside me. I snatched the revolver out of my satchel and cocked it, aiming directly into the opening where the light poured just onto the tip of my boot, lunging, outstretched, and ready to sprint if necessary. The light faded with a cloud passing by, all shadows diminishing into a mundane painting that lacked depth. I kept my pose for what felt like hours, my thighs straining, my fingers sweating and mixing salt with the black grease that leaked from the axle of the revolver’s cylinder.

Then, without the sound of any footsteps, a small clambering toy brushed its way through the field. It was unlit, imaginary, and tottering like a stop motion picture. Clapping its symbols, the jolly chimp marched towards me on the uneven, dusty ground, the key in its back wound like the pin of a grenade. I debated pulling the trigger, but instead, lowered my revolver when it had stopped just a foot in front of my toes. The chimp’s eyes stared through my chest and the forest behind me, wide open, zero focus, perfectly parallel, as if it had watched Bull be massacred with four nippy bullets through his chest and another four through his jagged scalp lying in a pond of eloquent blood.

Footsteps.

I raised my revolver and shot with my eyes closed. The world felt so distant as I imagined the bullet fly into the stratosphere, dipping into a reddening horizon when it slowed down, galloping in a resonant twist under the stars. There was no whip of the it penetrating cloth or flesh, so a

thousand memories flashed through my mind and I tried to hold onto the best before I was to die imminently: there were not many and every face was blurred and unnamed except for Bull's. He was all I had, but to be honest, I never really took pleasure in his company.

Once, Bull stayed up with me all night to make sure I finished my requirement exercises to join the garrison for the next big push through the jungle. I was tired, and frankly, had no interest in completing the exercises. I was almost hoping that he'd fall asleep as I hung on the bar and straddled myself into the air, onwards until the morning twilight— but he didn't. His eyes were like the eternal stare of the jolly chimp, never breaking to blink. He garnered a vigorous energy that I could not emulate. A remote corner of my mind wished that I had his passion for war, but another corner, more massive and fearful, decided that I was only here because there was no other way out of the valley.

“WOAH!” yelled Bull, his voice gruff like always. He stood in front of me, forearms laid on his helmet and hands patting his ear to make sure it had not been grazed by the bullet.

I was in awe— how did he—

Trying to muster a word, Bull interrupted me, “What's this?”

He picked up the jolly chimp, wound it up, and let it play out. “Freaky fucking thing. You bring it with you?”

“No... it—”

“What are you doing down here, anyways? Why are you hiding?”

“There was an ambush, no? Did you hear the gunshots?”

Bull grinned before bursting into laughter. “An ambush? The Ulterior Pact hasn't breached this part of the valley since last year— we won't be seeing any of those buggers for at least thirty miles.”

“There wouldn't be any stragglers from when they last occupied this area?”

“Not a chance of it. Every trail has been covered by hundreds of thousands of men by now. This place is as safe as home. I like the thinking, though— always on our feet, ay?” Bull began doing a subdued shuffle, skidding a plum brown plume of dust into my face, whistling the tune that he sang to our platoon every evening. “Never asleep— always a gun in hand, a knife unsheathed. Always on our feeet...”

I lifted my helmet and wiped my forehead with the collar of my jacket. Bull helped me up with his strong grip and patted me on the back, still grinning, shoving the jolly chimp into my stomach that now rumbled and yearned for a slice of dense bread. I didn't care how tasteless it would be— I was youthfully hungry and looked forward to settling down at the stronghold.

We soon reunited with our platoon of twenty-one exhausted men and hiked up the hills that had been jaggedly cut by forgotten glaciers. A white, reflective winter used to dominate this valley. Ridges jutted out and created

precarious paths, often interrupted by thick logs that had become obstacles from the mud eroding beneath them. It was so strange seeing the jungle without the fog. The gaps in the trees that leaned over the steep abysses to our left diffracted rays of evanescent light, clear, as if you could see for miles looking through any one pocket of leaves.

It was dusk when we reunited with the garrison at the stronghold, a large concrete building that appeared more as a sculpture than a functional base to house and feed thousands of men. The compound spanned over multiple brutalist and decaying box-shaped units. Guns were sporadically leaning against rickshaws and crates of ammunition, horses scattered and roamed the wide courtyards surrounded by high but barren walls, overgrown with tall and sticky weeds that provided a convenient source of sustenance. There were turquoise and orange dragonflies buzzing everywhere, hunting the beetles that rolled in the horse dung. Rarely, a fuzzy bee would join the bonanza and settle on the snout of a white-spotted horse.

Everything was painted a bright, zesty purple— the colors of the Ulterior Pact. Our General had ordered an excessive amount of gallons of yellow paint to be lugged laboriously by horseback to make it clear that this place, which just a year ago laid in the hands of the Ulterior Pact, was now ours. Our pride for fighting and sacrificing blood came in the form of a new sanctuary, here, on the edge of the valley. Soldiers all around me dipped brooms into buckets and lazily splattered the yellow paint to cover any remnants of the previous purple occupation. The General strutted with his hands behind his back, his white mustache bobbing with each inquisitive march. If he saw a soldier slacking and having a whiff of the tar from a cigarette butt, he would rest his palm gently on their shoulder. No smiles shared, the soldier and him would part ways and continue their work. The General was a productive menace in his drifting appearance, like a ghost haunting the grounds.

As Bull and I observed the transformation, the General's expression rose and he jubilantly raised his fists in the air when he noticed us. I stood awkwardly beside the two, who greeted each other with a handshake that intertwined at the thick, fatty extent of the forearm.

"Bull!" the General rambled with a roll of his tongue, "I'm glad your platoon was able to handle the journey here. I had complete faith that you would have no difficulty fighting the jungle— a brisk slashing of the machete was the most killing necessary, I assume? After all, how many times have you made this journey before? Six, seven—"

"Thirteen," Bull responded sharply, his voice deep and unyielding. His tone was no longer as exuberant as it had been during our journey. I feared that the real weight of the war was settling in Bull's stomach. "Thirteen times."

"*Incredible.* You'll be a real asset this year— I am most certain of that. Our boys could use your motivation. It seems that a peculiar fatigue

has fallen over our garrison in the last few weeks of June. I fear that our camps have not bred the youngest soldiers possible— everyone here appears to already have wrinkles on their forehead and bags around their eyes. This might be because, last year, we only lost a handful of men, meaning most of us have fought before and seen the capability of a single metal bullet. The issue could also be that the camps have taken longer to deliver fresh men to the frontlines. Regardless, we need your motivation before we push into the Ulterior Pact's territory next week. It will not be easy with the mountains to our left and right. We will be trapped, with the only way forward. But I believe we can do it— we must, after all."

"It would be an honor to help, General," Bull replied, "Over these last few days, while trekking through the forest, I have felt a deep desire to see what the enemy really looks like. Twelve years, thirteen trips, and it is somehow still a dream that peeves me even when I am awake. I imagine their faces in front of me with every step. I have seen their skin wrinkled and tired— they look... weak— I am sure of it. I felt invigorated and could not stop singing to myself. There is a sound of a poem building to a climax— a sound—" Bull stuttered, "General, do you think we are near the end of the war?"

I looked up with a fervent curiosity— that was a question that all of the soldiers shared, but only Bull had the audacity to ask.

The General gasped at his question, wheezed, and exhaled a hollow, dry laugh. Before long, Bull had started laughing with him, and together, they twisted their bellies and lunged backwards in joy.

I watched unenthused. I had not contemplated what the enemy's faces would be shaped like or what color their skin was— all I thought about were the bullets that would exit their rifles.

"Did you bring your banjo?" the General asked once he had calmed down and returned to his grave wartime manner.

Bull nodded, tapping the wooden snout of the instrument that protruded from his rucksack.

"Very good. Tonight, I will gather the entire garrison— all one thousand and forty-two troops. We will sing to your song under the moonlight. Do you remember the lyrics to the tune?"

"The only way I could forget them is if a bullet was sent through my scalp."

The General patted him on the chest. Bull's medallions shook, their bronze casting sizzling in the sunlight, the ribbons fading to a desaturated rainbow.

I left the two before the General could ask my name and assign me a role, slipping into the crowds of soldiers slaving by the tails of trucks that churned next to the horses. The tail lights and torches of the garrison grew more vivid as dusk seeped its velvet stain through the sky, like pits of warm fire through stained glass. I wandered through a maze of many

intertwining courtyards and into the old remnants of the concrete building, where our garrison had not found the time to paint it yellow. There were many saturated purple rooms that all hit each other at hard ninety-degree angles. I took the stairs up a few floors and then found a crumbled ledge where there was a view of the valley in its incandescent and murky glory. The clouds struggled to maintain their mundane gray against the dying light.

I dug through my satchel and found a dented paper box, shook loose a damp cigarette, and wrestled to light it. The lighter flickered—once, twice—and finally caught a little flame that danced before my eyes. I inhaled the smoke and felt it burn the inside of my lungs, but my face remained silent apart from a feeble cough.

Murmurs and the crashing of crates reverberated through the building that was stripped of all decoration. There was only this purple concrete and the green leaves, stretching on through the undulating valley forever onwards.

I slouched with my back against the wall for a while, perpendicular to the dizzying fall on the other side of the ledge. It was a bleak spot and the muscle between my tailbone and the ground was pinched to a tickling numbness.

The night fell and the singing of Bull and his banjo echoed through the wind.

From behind the mountain range to my left rose the Pillars of Creation—three massive towers of gas that illuminated themselves once our planet eclipsed the sun. They stood with daunting magnitude, curving over my head, frayed at the edges, sprouting out of the deep blackness like the talons of a celestial eagle's claw. The scale was unimaginable—the heat simmered at tens of thousands of degrees, the radiation so intense that all atoms were stripped of their electrons. It was beyond what I could ever feel, but somehow, the universe had birthed both that monstrosity and myself. That big bang of life included all these puny soldiers dawdling around the floor of this valley, periodically killing each other through elongated and ruthless centuries. Place any one of us in those three swashes of plasma and we'd be evaporated in an instant, all notion of being gone, as if we might as well never have been alive in the first place.

I puffed out a ball of smoke that swirled and caught the low-lying ceiling above me. Metal bars jutted from the edges where the dilapidated building decayed from the heavy, steaming downpours that so often, but not tonight, happened during the midyear monsoons. I kicked the edge of the wall I sat on, watching as a rainbow of pastel dust was expelled from it—there were layers of paint to this place—not just one charismatic layer of yellow toppling over a thin-brushed purple, but hundreds, if not thousands... on and on...

I decided to go down a few stories. Each level got darker, and eventually, after wandering between many different desolate staircases, far away from the courtyards where our stronghold was being constructed, I think

I had gone underground, embedded in the rich soil of the jungle. Four, perhaps five stories, dug deep into the mountainside, nearly as sunken as the creek that ran through the valley. The light dimmed and the layers of paint became more coagulated, mixed with yellow and purple in spastic patterns, no longer brushed with a delicate precision but thrown like pasty spit.

This year was not our first time occupying this base. We had been here many times before—two years ago, we occupied the same territory, but I was too young to join the militia back then, so I only heard stories of the chaos, the defeats, and the victories. We were driven out of this part of the jungle and forced to recede a year later into our eastern pocket of the valley, but I remember at the time having a distinct question: why did we win as many battles as we lost?

One battle was spoken about on a scale greater than all others. It was called 'The Great Battle on the Valley Floor.' Silent yellow powder bombs and fireworks were sent spiraling into the night, for we had achieved a major victory under the name, with only twenty soldiers missing. But soon after, the celebrations in our eastern settlements fell quiet as we received news of a second war with that same name, and this time, we had lost it—catastrophically. Thousands of soldiers did not die, but just never came back—that thought was worse than dying for my young mind. As I grew older, I came to remember 'The Great Battle on the Valley Floor' as one of both defeat and victory, both sorrow and glee.

During my trance of remembrance, I had reached the bottom floor, the absolute basement of the stronghold. A stench simmered in a boiling sludge of groundwater and tender soil, all crawling with worms and maggots. I waddled through the brown slog that sloshed around my ankles, each step like a suction to the liquid. Absolute darkness encircled me now—there was no way to decipher what color the concrete walls were painted. I had to use my thin fingertips to feel myself through the doorways like a blind man.

I flicked my lighter on, giving myself just the most immediate light. Holding it up to a wall, I noticed the layers of paint begin to melt. First, it was purple, glazed by the orange hue of the flame. Then it shifted into green, then yellow, then it was purple again... then it was yellow, then it was... The process went on for minutes, until I understood that the sloshy water I walked in was not a damp residue from nature, but paint manufactured by men, rotting into a sticky artificial quagmire. Intricate spirals of purple and acrylic oil swirled in hypnotic dances of vibrant color.

I coughed once more—from the cigarette, surely? No—I worried the air was dead down here, pure vacuum, like that under the plasma skin that guarded the Pillars of Creation. I turned around and began for the exit, though I soon realized that I had lost all sense of orientation.

Fuck, I thought to myself, *fuck, fuck, fuck...*

I dug through my satchel to find a torch that could guide me, but I had packed poorly.

Bull should have been less brash, he should have prepared me better. I shifted the blame, but truthfully, I knew I was guilty. I should have never come here— I should have stayed where my mellow attitude belonged and failed the exercise regimen.

All that was in my satchel, besides my revolver and its five rounds of golden bullets, was the jolly chimp, staring up at me with those lifeless eyes that I did not need to see to envision.

In that numb darkness, a convoluted feeling brushed against my mind: this war was nothing but a bunch of childish and creepy wind-up toys— a bunch of fanatic chimps running at each other, cocking their arms back and forth and thrashing deafening symbols together— gunshots, the cymbals were, gunshots clapping in routine, periodic at *mechanically timed* intervals. Most of our garrison, including the experienced men like Bull, had never even seen an enemy that belonged to the Ulterior Pact.

We were essentially blind.

I twisted the key to the jolly chimp and set it in motion, letting it rummage through the thick bog in a straight line. Its springs clattered as its faux fur melded into a collage of yellow and purple. Soon, the noise of its clambering symbols became muted, and the whole destitute thing descended into the layers of paint, until at last, there was silence again. It was lying somewhere at the bottom of the pool, its gears clogged and glued into a lifeless indolence.

We were two armies oscillating back and forth like springs tugging on a mass, a ball of tangled humans rolling from the east to the west of the valley, from glee at the mountaintops, to sorrow by the cavernous creeks.

The war would only stop once bodies piled so high that there would be no more room to move, the friction so great that the ball would slowly stop rolling and posit itself at the center— the paint so thick that it could not dry, mixing into a vulgar brown.

Bull was a man set in motion and from there on he held no cognition of his actions— he was a shadow of the Big Bang, just like the stars that were forged under the heat of the Pillars of Creation. Bull had been in this war so long that he forgot the sound of gunshots— he forgot what it felt like to die.

And who was I to attempt to stop such a grand and useless war? I would only be torn apart, radiated, and melted by the unfathomable blazing heat in an instant. I began a shadow and I would die one, cast by the sun on the concrete that broke apart with lawless vines and weeds.