

Tangled Up in a Razor Wire Dream

Jack Vian

“It’s one of them beautiful days, Bossman.”

“Yes, it is, Leak-Eye. Yes, it is.”

“Beautiful day,” Leak-Eye repeated. “Got a family of ducks out on the pond. If we had some flowers and a rainbow we could put it on a postcard and sell it at the commissary.”

Sarge unhooked his leg from where it had been wrapped around his saddle horn and looked over at Leak-Eye’s ducks before letting his eyes resettle on his field hands. They were working plowed-under tracts into rows for the spring planting. Each squad tended their own one-acre plot that would one day yield okra, squash, cucumbers, or collard greens. And maybe, if the Lieu ever got his heart right, something good like onions, peppers, or watermelons. The Lieu didn’t seem to understand that the squads might have more incentive to work if they grew something they might actually want to eat.

As it was, half of them did more leaning on their aggies than working with them. Truth be told, the ground needed more discing anyway. The local soil had the clayey consistency of a sticky gumbo and made for a hard, lumpy, cloddy pain in the ass. It seemed a real wonder that any seeds could grow out of such an otherwise inhospitable and recalcitrant earth, but grow they did if given more than half a chance.

“Look out, Winters! Looks like your squad’s having a Sunday social. Think you can break up that party around Broadway Kim long enough to get some work out of ‘em? Hate to smoke a whole squad our first week back on the cut.”

“Yes, sir!” Boss Winters yelled, and high-stepped his horse out from under the shade of a china berry tree.

“You heard the Sarge. . .” he began.

Sarge readjusted his position in the saddle and stood up in the stirrups to stretch his back. Two more years and he could retire from this bullshit and draw both a pension and a paycheck. He’d get a real job then, one where he didn’t have to hustle so hard on the side to make ends meet. Then again, his ends wouldn’t be so far apart if he didn’t have both a baby momma and a jealous wife. Each month, child support ate up a whole check he never saw, At least his wife had stopped throwing it in his face every time he looked at her sideways. Hell, she’d known about his weakness when she married him. At least he tried to keep it on the down low when he got caught up--not like some men he knew—but she didn’t seem to appreciate what he went through. It seemed like every time he walked on the unit, a new crop of OJTs was getting fitted for uniforms, nearly all of them female and most of them black—not that he had a pussy prejudice, but those fine, little titty black girls were hard to resist. He always told them “no,” at first, but it seemed like a different woman slipped him her phone number every day of the week. Maybe it was the cowboy hat, maybe it was his smile, or maybe there simply weren’t enough good black men to go around. Whatever the reason, each year the women seemed to get younger and more aggressive. He couldn’t help but slip-up once in awhile. But like they say, slippers count.

Sarge shook his head as if to clear it and returned his attention to Leak-Eye, who stood with his back to Sarge while he watched the ducks swim across the pond. Leak-Eye’s body still held the outlines of a penitentiary athlete, but the weight of the years had finally started to deform that shape, softening the edges and padding the gut. But make no mistake, he could prove as cock-strong as a short-tempered bull when he felt the need.

They called him Leak-Eye, or Leaky-Eye, because back in the ‘70s he carried his own all-punk squad on the Rockin’ D. No one else could get those punks to work like he could, so the white folks gave him a horse and carte blanche. Leak-Eye didn’t need handcuffs, a uniform, or a pistol to keep a punk in line. However, he did end up wishing that they could’ve issued him a third eye and placed it in the back of his head like some vigilant and unblinking cyclopean spy.

The details are always sketchy no matter how the story’s told, but suffice it to say that it was over a punk that Leak-Eye got stabbed in the eye. For a long time the injured eye wept continuously, hence the name. Although his eye didn’t weep anymore, evidence of the old wound still showed as a brown spot in the white, while a slight paralysis gave his stare a glazed off-kilteredness. He’d managed to parlay these defects into an advantage, morphing his OG scowl into

the cartoonish, old-timey smile of a cocoa-skinned clown with 20-inch guns and a secret rap sheet darker than most were willing to imagine.

A good old boy, Sarge thought. Been locked up forever and a day, but a good old boy. He could be bothersome, though; talk a mule into working if you let him.

“Leak-Eye.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Can you get me some ice water and an orange drink?” Sarge said, and tossed him a half-empty plastic water bottle. Leak-Eye ambled off to the tool wagon to refill the bottle and dig a soda water out of the red and yellow Igloo cooler that doubled as an ice chest for the field bosses.

Sarge really wasn’t all that thirsty. Sometimes he just liked to sit off by himself and not be bothered, but that rarely happened. Inevitably, someone would want to holler at him. Everybody always seemed to need his help, and his bosses were damn near as worrisome as the convicts and twice as hard to brush off. Nobody ever seemed to consider that maybe he didn’t want to hear about their problems. He was their sergeant, not their daddy. Besides, he had his own problems. Nine-hundred of them every month. Girl was ugly, too. That made it that much harder to explain.

But right then—right exactly then—things felt all right. No Lieu was looking over his shoulder, they’d actually had enough security staff so that he’d been able to pull his field bosses off the buildings and put them on their horses for the whole week, and Leak-Eye had it right: it was one beautiful day.

The sun shone bright but not too hot, and a steady Gulf breeze wiped away his sweat before it could stick. The hoe squads—field squads, he chided to himself. Hoe squads were no more, gone by the wayside like inmate building tenders, inmate turnkeys, and solving your own problems with a phantom right hook—they weren’t doing too bad, not considering what he had to work with. City boys, half of ‘em kids, and 90% black, none of which seemed to matter once you dressed them all in white and put a five-pound hoe in their soft, Play Station hands. Not many of them had ever learned how to work in the first place—that’s how they ended up convicted felons. All they knew came from listening to the radio and watching TV while hustling dope and running game. If they didn’t know how to work by the time he got them, he could do next to nothing to teach them. Oh, he could yell, cuss, and write them up, but even when he got in their faces, the message never made it past their two-cent masks. The best they could manage was to fake it until he looked the other way. But mostly they’d cuss him back, bump about kicking ass (rhetorically, of course), and generally piss him off.

Better to be pissed off than pissed on, he mused, because he knew he could still handle himself—once a marine, always a marine—but a man gets tired of fighting. Besides getting too old for it, he couldn’t just take them into the turn-out room, whoop their ass, and send them on their way anymore. He had to contend with video cameras and snitches and never really knowing who’d have his back and who’d break weak. Then came the extra paperwork. All of it new-wave bullshit, but all of it had to be done to keep ADMIN happy. Last thing he needed was another asshole warden putting their foot on his neck over a black-eyed convict.

Nope, nowadays he liked to sit back and let his COs do their jobs and wait for the problems to come to him. And if he knew any one thing about prison life, especially as it applied to the confines of the Texas Department of Justice—Institutional Division, nothing ever ran like it should for very long.

“Coming up on you, Bossman!”

Sarge took his reins in one hand and motioned for Leak-Eye to approach from the left, opposite the revolver holstered on his right hip.

Leak-Eye handed Sarge the re-filled water bottle and the soda and stepped back a few paces. Leak-Eye wore a plain and much-abused white cotton cap high on his clean-shaven head. He’d brought back an aggie along with an extra orange drink. “Hope you don’t mind, Bossman. But I got myself a soda water.”

“I got one left?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Help yourself. Getting warm out here.”

Leak-Eye popped the top and gulped half the can. “Aah,” he sighed. “That hit the spot.” He stood there, can in one hand and leaning on the aggie with the other, surveying the scene around him like a shop steward on a union job.

Sarge popped his own top and sipped his drink. He listened to his horse's steady cropping of the crunchy green grass. The morning had taken a turn for the quiet and Sarge couldn't help but feel pleased. Sometimes boring was bliss.

"I can't get over how beautiful it is today."

"Yes, sir, Leaky-Eye, you picked a fine day to turn out."

"It's not just beautiful, Bossman—it's perfect. Look at it, just look at it. The sky is so blue it looks like you could swim in it, and the grass—the grass has that clean, fresh-cut smell and it's as green as a picture-book. We could frame it if we wanted to. And we got ducks, Bossman, a whole little family of 'em. Look at 'em, Bossman. Look at 'em!"

Leak-Eye paused long enough to down some more soda, but not long enough to surrender his end of the conversation.

"You think you could hit them from here, Bossman? With your pistol? I hear you're a good shot."

"Pretty fair," he said, eyeing the distant ducks. "But we're out of pistol range. Be pure luck to hit something from here. "

"But you're good with a pistol," he said, more of a statement than a question.

"Been shooting all my life."

"Ever shot a man before?"

"Shot him? Nah. I have shot at a few, but I never hit anyone."

"Think you could?"

"If I had to. Somebody wants to run, it's my job they're putting on the line. My kids gotta eat."

"I thought you'd say something like that," Leak-Eye said, and finished off his soda. He crushed the can between his hands and slid the left-over disk into his back pocket. "You're a good man, Bossman. You wouldn't shoot a man unless you had to, not like that dumb-ass, Winters. Then, I don't think you'd try to kill him. You'd look for a way to let him make it. You wouldn't kill a man unless he made you do it."

"You're probably right, Leak-Eye, but in my experience, it's not that hard not to shoot someone."

Leak-Eye had turned to face Sarge, and while he spoke both of his callused, meathook hands worked the wooden handle of his aggie like he was practicing Indian burns. "Well, Bossman, today's the day we find out how hard it is."

"What's that?"

"Grab your pistol, Bossman. You're about to do some shooting. Some real John Wayne cowboy shit."

"Leaky-Eye, wait—" was all Sarge got out of his mouth before Leak-Eye up-ended his aggie, let out his version of a rebel yell, and charged forward.

Sarge dropped his soda and tried to control his big bay horse, but Lucky—already considered a crazy sunuvabitch under the best conditions—skittered sideways and reared up. Sarge was not a bad horseman, but once Lucky began to buck he didn't stand a chance. When Sarge hit the ground he followed his first mind and rolled away from the spooked horse before it could stomp his sorry black ass into a steaming pile of gray-suited TDCJ shit. Then his second mind took over, and it told him to hang on to his pistol at all costs.

Leak-Eye swatted Lucky on the rump with the blunt heel of his aggie's cirlet haft. The horse ceased bucking, stomping, and kicking and bolted for the safety of its barn, leaving Sarge to fend for himself.

Sarge rolled to his feet, his hat still pressed firmly to his crown, his sunglasses still hooked around his ears, and his .38 preternaturally locked and loaded at the end of his outstretched arms. The gun's short barrel had leveled to the center of Leak-Eye's point-blank chest.

"Lay it down, Leak-Eye! Lay it down!"

Leak-Eye slung the aggie over his shoulder like an axe, and swung it downward in a seemingly lethal arc. Sarge simply stepped to one side and let the aggie's slicing blade ka-thunk deep into the quaggy gumbo beneath the earth's protective green rind.

An over-lapping chorus of curses and "lay-it-downs" rang out and coursed over the clumping sounds of horses galloping in the round, and before Leak-Eye could lever his aggie free of its fecund trap, Sarge had lunged forward and knocked him over with a forearm shiver.

Leak-Eye, more nimbly than most would suspect, sprang to his feet and dove for Sarge. Sarge stumbled and fell backwards and lost his hat. Leak-Eye spidered atop him and they grappled for the gun. “It’s the perfect day, Bossman. The perfect, goddamn day, and you know it.”

Sarge twisted and turned and managed to scissor his legs around Leak-Eye’s waist. Then he cinched his free arm around Leak-Eye’s throat. Leak-Eye still had a hold of Sarge’s gun arm, but Sarge held him tight, squeezing the air from his lungs while choking off all hope of its return. His arm wrenched back Leak-Eye’s head so that Sarge was able to whisper into his ear. Men on horseback continued to encircle them, pistols drawn, their nervous horses shuffling and snuffling while their masters considered the prospects of a well-placed shot.

Leak-Eye bellowed in a cracked and strangled voice, “Shoot me now, you cowards! I swear—I’m gonna kill you all!”

Sarge shouted, “Don’t shoot! Don’t nobody shoot! Ain’t nobody getting shot today!” Then he went back to whispering in Leak-Eye’s ear, whispering like he might whisper to a skittish horse during a lightning-laced summer storm. Slowly, inevitably it seemed, Leak-Eye withered under Sarge’s unwavering embrace. He stopped struggling, and when Sarge released his grip, Leak-Eye rolled over on to his belly and didn’t move. He scarcely seemed to breathe. Sarge handed over his pistol to another former marine, the boss everyone called Big Dee, then he plucked his handcuffs from their crackled leather holster.

“All right, Leaky-Eye. We gotta get you up and get these cuffs on you. We need to try and get you back inside the fence before the Lieu shows up and starts raising six kinds of hell.”

Leak-Eye stood with his shoulders slumped and his arms out behind him. He did not protest while Sarge cuffed his wrists even though the short paid of silver links between the manacles barely stretched far enough to contain Leak-Eye’s arms. Then Sarge led Leak-Eye out of the circle of horses and glaring bosses. They walked up an embankment and stood on the unit’s perimeter road. The armed guard high in C-picket eyed them warily.

“Sgt. Jethro, I’m walking this one to the back gate myself.”

“Want me to call for the van?”

“Nan, I think we got it under control, but I need a minute to clear my head. Get a head count and get the squad’s ready to turn in. And make sure Winters doesn’t get excited and shoot somebody, himself included. We’ve had enough drama for one day.”

Sarge paused and took a mental inventory. He had his radio and his sunglasses and his skin felt sticky with sweat and grime. No blood, but grass stains and orange soda dotted his uniform. All in all, not too bad, but he’d definitely had better days.

“Can somebody please chase down my hat before it blows all the way to Jasper?”

Leak-Eye and Sarge set a tired, silent pace around the perimeter road. The adrenaline passing from their blood left behind a heaviness in the flesh that begged for a soft seat and a cold beer. Big Dee trailed after them, his horse’s hooves clopping against the macadam road while Sarge’s unholstered .38 rested aimlessly atop his thigh.

Sarge had thought he’d wanted to talk to Leak-Eye man-to-man and one-on-one before official statements had to be made. But the longer they walked, the less he felt the need. What was there to talk about? The man had done over thirty-five years flat. He was entitled to flip-out. It was a wonder he had any sense at all, and knowing why wouldn’t change a thing. He was gonna have the same amount of paperwork whether Leak-Eye’s momma had finally died, or whether he’d been denied parole yet again. Sarge decided to save his worrying for his ugly baby momma and his angry wife, for his kids and his family, not for a convict and prison bullshit. At least nobody had gotten themselves shot. Not even Winters. He’d have had an extra mile of paperwork if he had.

They arrived at the back gate and the back gate officer went about the business of checking them in while the guard above them in B-picket cradled an AR-15 and watched. Big Dee sat his horse off to the side and nonchalantly spit sunflower hulls into the grass.

Leak-Eye turned to Sarge and met him eye-to-sunglassed-eye. Leak-Eye wore the incredulous look of an old man to whom the wonders of the world had passed by.

“Bossman, why didn’t you shoot me? I gave you the chance. I could have killed you if I’d hit you with that aggie blade.”

“Could have, but you didn’t.”

“I don’t understand it.”

“My job’s security, Leak-Eye. I don’t get paid to cowboy.”

“No, Bossman, you don’t understand; I’ve been praying. Today was the perfect day. It was the perfect time. The sky was blue, the grass green, ducks was swimming, and I was outside the fence and as free as I’m ever gonna get.”

“You still are, Leak-Eye, you just ain’t noticed yet.”

Leak-Eye shook his head but he didn’t tear-up and he didn’t plea-bargain. Sarge continued to stare into those old eyes, looking deeper than he’d care to admit. He looked past the old injury and the tangled thousand-yard glaze of countless razor wire dreams, looked as deep as he dared before coming up for air. He had wanted to find something he could show Leak-Eye, something within that would give him reason to hope. But Sarge never got deep enough, never found anything he could recognize or grab ahold of and name. Leak-Eye may have presented a charismatic black-face to the outside world, but inside his empty depths nothing existed beyond the indecipherable tracks of an unseen but intractably keloid soul.

The tower guard hit the release for the walkway gate and the electric lock hummed and buzzed like the bolt inside had been created for an evil intent. Then the lock popped as loudly as a pinball machine awarding a free game. Sarge opened the gate with one hand while simultaneously passing Leak-Eye into the walkway’s vacant, wire-tunneled cage with the other.

“I don’t know what else to tell you, Leak-Eye, but I do know this: God’s going to decide your fate, not me.”

Sarge slammed the gate and got on his radio. He needed to find the Lieu and check in his weapon and take a cigarette break and fill out a passel of “MAJOR USE OF FORCE” forms and make sure his cuffs got back to him after Leak-Eye went to lock-up. On top of all that, he could feel that fine-ass new-boot Ms. Bixlie’s phone number burning a hole in his pocket like a brand-new nine-hundred dollar mistake.