

Lobster Clouds
and
Pieces of People

words by
Michael Watson

seven

I'll tell you how I got to standing on the outer ledge of the roof of the Knight Building.

I'll tell you, but you won't believe me.

It made the papers, even.

But you won't believe it. Not one word of it.

Maura was screaming at me from the maintenance access door, and the wind was trying to push me off the ledge. News choppers were going to swarm, and I was going to be the crazy jumper on the roof of some fifty-story phallus of capitalism. That is, until they figured out who I was. Then, I'd be the *famous* crazy jumper on the roof.

I'll tell you every little detail, but you won't believe a word of it.

I Belong.

You've probably seen those words before. On t-shirts. On bumper stickers. On billboards on the side of the highway.

I Belong.

I didn't write that, of course. Cherry did. And what she didn't write, she had written. I bet you even have a copy of my book somewhere.

Cherry Dixon was the head of Product Marketing for BDM on floor thirty-four of the Knight Building. Cherry was a *marketing professional*. Talk about selling people.

I Belong.

You should see the stuff she rejected, that her "team" came up with.

Let Your Joy Be Endless.

Make the World Your Own.

There were too many to count, and all of them just as bloated with saccharine. Everything from inspiration to flat-out propaganda—Cherry and her "team" covered it all. Sometimes, I wondered who was using whom.

So many people want to be loved; to be a part of something important. A relationship, society, that clique of popular kids in high school. Anything to define them. Most people don't become any of that, though. They feed off of whatever they're told to; become what they're marketed in the shape of. That's *real* belonging. That's *really* being a part of something.

They are the images of what they're told they're supposed to be. People aren't given what they need, they're told what they need.

They buy themselves off a rack in the mall.

Marketing? Marketing is the creation of necessity.

Lexus, Abercrombie, Rolex.

That man on the street? I saved him. Freed him from needing *things* and people made of plastic.

I Belong.

The invention of need.

Maura already needed me, and I needed her; Cherry made everyone else need me.

Skip back a little bit, to my last few moments of fame: I think of the gun, I think of the look on everyone's faces, and I think of the little piece of yellow legal paper that started it all.

Everyone took three steps back if they weren't stuck to the floor.

With the gun pointed squarely at Mr. Talk Show Host and the ON-AIR sign buzzing happily, I thought about just how I got there.

Now, come way back.

Flashback, noun.

On the street, listening to the howl of ambulance sirens coming after Mr. Slicked-back, I walked away without so much as a double-take from anyone. Completely invisible. People barely even noticed it when the man in the three-piece suit hugged the front tire of his saving grace, that pollution-factory bus.

There are six steps to your standard time-delay anti-personnel hand grenade.

One, remove the safety pin from the striker lever. The striker lever is also called a *spoon*, if you talk to the right people.

The bus spewed carbon monoxide into the air around everyone, and no one cared. It burned through the gasoline it guzzled and the oil that lubricated its gears and pistons, made from the bones of the biggest creatures ever to walk the planet, and not a single soul was interested. The dinosaurs didn't survive, and neither would their bones.

Two, the spoon pivots at the top of the grenade and releases its hold on the tip of the striker, a piece of metal that works like the hammer on a pistol. At this point, you'd better have a good throwing arm.

Some things get born again, some don't, I guess. One more dose of randomness in the universe that people try to control with trade tariffs, environmental regulations, and drug laws. Some things get the short end of Darwin's stick, for whatever reason. There is *chaos*, and I want every part of it, I thought.

Three, the striker is shot down into the grenade *hard* by a spring inside the ignition chamber, a small cylinder that houses the end of the striker, the striker spring, and the percussion cap. This chamber is sealed off from the rest of the grenade.

I wanted to turn cities into smoking craters and piss into the smoldering ruins.

Four, the percussion cap explodes and ignites a *chemical delay*. In this case, the chemical delay is a simple chemical fuze that's designed to burn through in about four seconds, in most hand grenades. Without it and the ability to count from one to four, you'd see many more one-armed Marines walking around. The chemical fuze is sectioned off from the rest of the grenade.

I wanted to sentence corporate heads and Greenpeace members to death and push the plungers with the bones of endangered species.

Five, the chemical fuze burns into the detonator, which is nothing more than a small cylinder of combustible material. It's more powerful than the percussion cap, but it's just a taste of what's to come.

I wanted to teach people lessons they couldn't teach themselves.

Six, the explosion from the detonator bleeds over into the rest of the grenade, nothing more than a reservoir for explosive material—often an amount of flaked TNT—inside a fragmenting, serrated cast-iron shell. Enter fireworks. The grenade explodes and sends fire and

shattered pieces of its shell everywhere. Some hand grenades these days are made of plastic instead of metal, so they don't all behave the same.

All anyone on the street cared about was this giant bus that was blocking their paths.

Six steps: Pin, spoon, striker, cap, fuze, detonator.

"Hurry up, David," Maura said to me outside the elevators in the sky lobby on floor thirty. She met me there wearing some absolutely hideous blue bubble-wrap dress normally reserved for ecstasy-fueled raves. I paid it little attention, other than to let her know she looked like the inside of a FedEx package. I rubbed my face after she slapped me.

To get the explosive material inside the grenade reservoir, the material is loaded in before the filler cap is put in place. To get the explosive material *out*, you need steel briars for nerves. Funny how demilitarizing a hand grenade is harder than setting it off.

I stood at the exit door and stared at the grenade gripped in my fingers.

"What the Hell are you waiting for?" she asked me. I felt her fingers on my back, pushing me just a little bit. Everything in my life so far, and I still needed a bit of a push now and then.

"Don't rush me," I told her. "There's no one in there yet."

I kept my eyes on the elevator doors, and Maura kept her eyes on my ear. Fingers on my back.

"Think about all—"

She dragged that last word out as long as she could get away with—

"Of the people going up and down inside that shaft—"

Like I said, I wasn't the pervert—

"All day long, every day." She giggled in my ear. Fingers like a trained piano player's trailed up my spine. "Where did you get the idea for this, anyway?"

I tucked the grenade into my jacket and pulled out a scrap of yellow legal pad paper. Maura took it from my hand and read it aloud back to me.

JAMES, I THINK WE NEED TO TALK LATER. – DIANE

"I found that last week on the sidewalk," I said. I didn't tell her how I found it, or what I was doing—saving Mr. Slicked-back—when I found it. "I couldn't stop staring at it."

"It's just a stupid note," Maura replied. Obviously, all meaning was lost on her.

"But it's not just a note," I said, "it's a thought someone had. Someone, somewhere, had to construct that thought, use the energy, and waste the time to write it down. And *then*, this Diane woman had to give it to this guy, or had someone give it to him.

"If thoughts are just chemicals and cells in the brain, that thought on paper is still a piece of someone. It's a piece of a person, and I own it now. I can keep it in a jar or a box or a scrapbook, and it's going to outlive the person who wrote it."

"Okay, fine, whatever. What does it have to do with why we're here?" she asked.

"Don't you wonder what was so important? Maybe this Diane chick was breaking some bad news to that guy. Maybe something else. I don't know. I thought about it for a while, and started thinking about what that note might say if one of those two people thought they were going to die." I waited for her response.

"That's pretty fucked-up," Maura replied.

Hello, kettle? It's the pot calling.

JAMES, I HAVE CANCER – DIANE

JAMES, I JUST SWALLOWED CYANIDE PILLS – DIANE

JAMES, LOOK OUT, HAND GRENADE – DIANE

If you knew you were about to die, you'd be a different person.

The elevator down the hall had begun to crowd, so we took off for it. I'm a bullet. I'm a button on a string. I *am* the bee-line.

Nothing between me and the elevator doors could dare stop me. I'm the train.

Inconspicuous, efficient, and unstoppable. A secret agent on a mission. We meet again, Mr. Bond.

The elevator doors closed as we walked by.

Maura and I hid around the corner and buried our tongues in each other's mouths right as the drones on the elevator figured out what was going on.

Cut to: Inside the elevator.

In fell the hand grenade, through the closing doors, with the pin following close behind it. Everyone stared for a moment, dumbfounded, as the doors sealed shut.

The screams and howls could be heard across *floors*.

And then, nothing but the loud POP of the detonator.

To get the explosive material out of the reservoir, use a diamond-tipped drill bit to get through the filler cap. A solution of acetone nail polish remover, rubbing alcohol, and club soda, shaken around well enough, will help remove any material you couldn't remove with a vacuum. Rinse with water, drain, and let dry for seventy-two hours.

The sound of the grenade hitting the floor should have given them a clue—there's a big difference between a full one and an empty one when it comes to tile floors.

Back in the hallway around the corner, I ran my hands up and down Maura's body. I wondered what it felt like underneath all that plastic and bubble wrap. Two rushes in the span of ten seconds, counting the elevator.

One of her bubbles popped and we slowed down. Quiet, compressed laughter.

Kiss.

"Okay, so tell me why this building," she said.

Grope.

"Anything special about it?" she added.

"Read the papers lately?" was my rather short response. I have such a way with words.

Kiss.

"Waste of time," Maura said. There are no complete sentences in between two kisses.

Kiss.

"James L. Knight the third died last week—" Kiss. "Got hit by a bus. Owned this place. I thought—"

INSERT—A MONTAGE OF MEMORIES:

Do you even know who I am?

JAMES, I THINK WE NEED TO TALK LATER. – DIANE

Do you even know who I am?

A beat.

"What's wrong, David?" Maura asked me. Her nails bit into my neck.

I stuttered for a second and said, "Nothing." Choke.

"Nothing," I said. Swallow.

"You thought? What did you think?" I'd forgotten to finish my sentence, I guess.

I told her I thought it was interesting that I'd never seen what he looked like before his obituary. Kiss.

Enter a feeling of joy, but not like before. Dimmed. Less lustrous. Just below the chin-up

bar. Something about tolerances, Dr. Morgan once told me. Getting to zero was going to take some serious work.

Enter: Cherry Dixon, stage right.

She stood ten feet tall in one-inch heels. When the building was put up, the contractors made the doorjamb and the ceilings higher just for her arrival. An Amazonian twig towering above us while weighing all of a sack of rice.

I could have broken her in half with a good, hard sneeze. *Ah-choo.*

The look on her face, now that was something I'd never seen before. Not quite disgust, and not quite approval. More like the interested look people have when they're watching a tape of someone's execution by the state. A deer on the side of the road, split open by some redneck's headlights. Trying to spot black ice at night.

Intrigue, but without the real interest in the given situation normally experienced by human beings.

Cherry Dixon. People say snakes don't have legs, good eyesight, or hearing. Bullshit.

Maybe in another life, in another body, I'd have fucked *her* up against the wall. She had one of those bodies that really wanted to be shapely and seductive, but just didn't have the meat to go around. I kept thinking she was under the impression that more lipstick would make her heavy enough not to blow away at the first light breeze.

"That's cute, what you did," she said to us.

Another bubble popped.

"What's your name?" she asked. Folded leather clipboard between her arms and her chest.

"Maura," I heard from next to my ear.

"Not you," said Cherry. Me.

David, I told her.

"David. What's your last name?" Inquiring minds, etcetera.

Psychologists say people in stressful situations often ease their discomfort with humor or laughter. I kept my mouth shut.

Cherry stared me down like a guillotine until I opened my mouth again—

"Preacher." Pop, another bubble. Maura tried to make me lose balance and kept popping—

Popping—

Popping—

Popping bubbles while we stood there under fire by this Pixie Stick.

A greenhouse of a conference room behind her housed more pushers, and she looked back at one of them who just nodded approvingly. Or submissively. A rat in a cage pushing its nose up and down for a pea of a drop of water.

If your worth is dependent on someone else, who's really the one with the worth?

"Well, David Preacher, I think you should follow me. You and your . . ."

Nothing from the peanut gallery.

"Doll, too. Bring her along," she said. I didn't know if it was a sex joke or a plastic toy joke. Maura twitched, like she was going to root her fingers in Cherry's neck as she turned and walked back into the conference room. I was almost let down when it didn't happen. "Or I could just call Security."

"No one got hurt," Maura sneered. I didn't have the heart to tell her about Mr. Knight.

"Who are you wearing, honey? Christian Dior or Versace?"

"Fuck you," Maura snapped.

"What a lovely lady you got here, David. But that doesn't change much. The ball's in your

court. Go with Security or come with me,” Cherry said from the doorway. I almost took Maura by the hand and pulled her back against the wall.

But we’re all sick, and we’re all sheep, so we followed.

“David Preacher, people. That’s our name. David Preacher says . . . What does David Preacher say?” Cherry walked around the conference table while she talked. The walking, talking dry-erase board. Everyone in the there watched her every move with those slick, focused little eyes their kind is so famous for.

Aside from Cherry, there weren’t any three-piecers in the room. These people—with their all-week-long “casual Friday” slacks and short-sleeved button-up casualwear and “survival” watches that tell the time in sixteen different countries—they thought they had it all figured out, telling everyone what to want and what to be. Turns out, though, that life is just like they tell you it is on television, anyway. There’s never anything good on—only reality shows and game show reruns, all day long.

Love doesn’t make the world go ‘round, but dumping \$49.99 on a designer sweater made by ten-year-olds who can’t even say “cashmere” sure as Hell does. You *need* the sweater. You *have* to have the sweater. It’s the final missing part of your soul. Consider yourself lucky they made sure you realized it before you melted like an army man in a microwave.

One by one, they chimed in. Every last chimp, university-trained at Chiat/Day State College.

“David Preacher says, ‘Hope is in your heart?’” one said. I smothered a laugh at the look on his face as Cherry shot it down.

They sent my name around the table.

“David Preacher says, ‘Be empowered.’” came another.

“I got it, I got it,” someone else started, “David Preacher says, ‘What’s inside you?’”

This went on and on. I threw up over and over in the back of my throat.

What a joke.

David Preacher says you’re a moron.

David Preacher says, “Life is God waiting for you to redeem yourself.”

David Preacher says, “Up with entropy.”

“I belong.” A tiny voice from the farthest corner of the room.

Cherry Dixon. As quiet as a mouse, breaking character, and making everyone around the table pay close attention.

“David Preacher says, ‘I belong.’”

You have to be kidding, I thought. I could *hear* my eyes rolling backwards.

I Belong.

“What’s the concept?” a BRIGHT, YOUNG EXECUTIVE asked.

Behind every scheme, behind every campaign, there’s a concept. What’s it going to do for us? How will it sell the product? What product are we selling? What do we *want* to sell?

That last one, that’s the important one.

What’s our concept? How do we take it from the whiteboard to the pockets and messenger bags of our target demographic, and could its influence range be expanded outside the current target demographic into other potential growth zones?

Furthermore, what is *it*?

It was me.

It was an *idea* of me—of something people needed, but had to be told they needed it before they'd believe in it. Before they'd believe in *me*.

"The concept is the same as it has been," Cherry said. "Give people the hope they need."

Give people the hope you tell them they need, she meant.

She looked right at everyone, plain and straight, and started, "Everyone's looking to this religion and that person for guidance and just a little bit of hope. Hope that the future's good, and the past has taught us lots of real important lessons, and all that crap. We'll fill the gap, and it'll be huge. It could just be revolutionary, and everyone wins.

"If we can meet our expectational and projected quotas, the company trip is the smallest thing on the menu, guys. Everyone has faith, and the ones who don't can wear it on their chests and have some of their own. Our faith is just gonna be more visible and comfortably affordable than everyone else's."

"People will really wonder what it is, and it'll be what, anything they want it to be?" The executive was so BRIGHT and GOAL-ORIENTED, I wanted to eat glass.

"It'll be *everything* people want it to be and mean. 'I Belong' isn't just a billboard or a shirt, it's an idea people want to be a part of. It's huge. It's this firm's future," added Cherry.

From mouse to laser-guided missile. I'd seen microscopes with less focus.

"Everyone wins. We win with the market exposure and capital gains, and they win with a little piece of serenity," she said.

"Who wins?" I asked.

I said the wrong thing. How could I be so stupid, as to not understand what was going on? I must have been pretty dense. No sponges here, just us cinder blocks.

Everyone—but Maura, for what it was worth—stared at me, dumbfounded.

"And that's going to be your icon?" asked the SMARTY little FUCKER. I bit down on rusty nails in my gums. Swallowed acid.

"David is going to be *our* new icon, and I don't think he's going to turn us down," Cherry told the Wonderful Young Man.

Give them the hope you tell them they need—when in reality, if they have to be fed hope, they already need it.

I'm an icon.

I'm a figurehead.

I'm hope in a bottle. Have faith in me.

What Would David Do?

David would head for the door, that's what.

He can't be owned by anyone. He's not a product or a service. David Preacher? He's salvation, and you can't put salvation on the auction block.

Up came the phone from the table, and Cherry started dialing. Didn't say a single word to anyone except when someone picked up on the other end.

"Yes, Security, please," she ordered.

Maura jumped out from the other side of me and tried to stop Cherry. Maura must have panicked and completely lost her head, because I know *I* hadn't taught her to break like that. So much for things that didn't matter, and all the stuff we'd learned together. All the stuff I showed her, taught her—all of it—was worthless. Flush, the sound of progress going down the drain.

"Hey, hey, hey—"

St, st, stutter.

“Don’t do that, come on. Please.” Maura pleaded with Cherry. She was a suspension bridge between Cherry and me, holding onto my sleeve and trying to motion to Cherry to put down the phone at the same time. “No one was going to get hurt, we swear, right?”

Maura looked back at me. I was ready—and trying—to keep walking out of the room, but my sleeve was caught on something. Like I’d snagged my leg on a barbed-wire fence.

“David? Right?” She went back to Cherry. “Come on, don’t be such a—”

And the cabin fills with salt water.

She caught herself a little too late. In six words, over the span of two short seconds, Maura single-handedly made the both of us belong to Cherry.

Today, ladies and gentlemen, we’ll start the bidding on salvation at \$14.95.

The twelfth step to recovery is after having had a spiritual awakening as a result of the steps, to carry the message to addicts and practice the principles in the steps in all of your affairs.

I Belong.

That’s the message Cherry came up with for me to carry to people. All the people who wore it on their chest or stuck it to their cars, they were all addicts, too. In their case, what they carried their works for was being a part of something bigger than them. Mainlining religion with one giant shared needle so the infection just spread faster. God, Heaven, the universe, me. Whatever. They couldn’t really *touch* it, so it couldn’t be anything but grand and comforting on some monotheistically mythical scale.

Just made them want more, is all it did.

It makes you want to fill the syringe full of air and jam it right into their chests.

Maura jittered and shook as she tried to make it look like she *wasn’t* about to relate Cherry to a female canine. Back and forth, from Cherry to me. Cherry, don’t call security. Me, listen to Cherry. Cherry, me. Cherry, me.

I’m feeling so torn, and I’m not even in the middle.

But boy, was I about to be in for a treat.

More pleading. If there’s anything she can do to apologize.

I’d travel, Cherry said. See the world. Be part of a movement. All I had to do was say yes. Sell it all away. If I believed, everyone else would, too. All *I* wanted to do was get more than two hours of sleep a night.

Maura got upset again when Cherry told her to sit down and mind her business. Back and forth, up and down, on and off—Maura’s switch kept flipping, and I started to snicker a little with each reaction.

“You—” she started.

I saw her take a step forward, and reached out to grab her by the arm.

“Fucking—”

Without even finishing her sentence, Maura’s claws shot out to Cherry. Like she was wearing some plastic shield that made her invulnerable, Cherry was a block of ice. Didn’t move. Didn’t flinch. Six inches from being short an eye or two, and the icy little cunt didn’t so much as step back.

The Latin form of *frozen* is *glacialis*.

I jerked Maura back and whipped her up against the wall.

I don’t know why I did it. I just remember looking into the thin red cracks in her eyes and being unable to hear Cherry laughing at the crazy girl struggling against the wall. I don’t know why I stopped her from ripping that road cone of a nose off of Cherry’s face, but there I was,

pinning Maura against the wall.

That grin, like running a knife behind your ear. Maura wiggled a little bit, and looked up. She asked to be let go of without opening her mouth, and I did.

I told her I'd do it if she wanted me to.

Sap, noun.

Maura looked up at the ceiling for a second and came back down with the loudest sneeze in existence. I took that as a yes and glanced back at Cherry. The whiteboard seemed satisfied and in approval of the two of us, suddenly.

Back to Maura.

Blood. Everywhere. Like a blasting expedition.

Four hundred tons of TNT.

She took her hand away from her nose and wiped it on her bubble-wrap-and-packing-tape dress. More blood filled her palm and covered her fingers when she reached back up to her face.

"Oh, shit," she said calmly and without a breath. Almost out of it, I'd imagine.

Damage to the nasal membrane can result in posterior nosebleeds triggered by hard sneezes after intense or repeated cocaine use.

Danny had left more than some clothes and his toothbrush at Maura's place. And Maura, never one to let new experiences get wasted, got just that herself earlier that morning.

You've never seen horror until you've seen the looks of horror and shock on the faces of those people. A boardroom of marketing executives, treated to a front-row seat to Drug Abuse 101. Maura, looking like some beating victim from the nose down. A kiss of reality none of them had ever seen before was dumping blood by the gallon from her nose, and they had to sit there and watch it all. Each one of them cringed and felt the strain of nausea as the pristinely manicured 1/8" beige carpeting got painted a lovely shade of maroon between Maura's feet.

The seams of Maura's teeth were staining red as she smiled at me. This wasn't violent; this was sad and lusciously sweet.

I would have kissed her right there, if there hadn't been that mess all over her face.

"Why is it," she started, "that every time we go out, someone ends up bleeding?" It was like she knew about my hallucination with the diner owner. I thought maybe I'd mentioned it, and forgot about telling her.

We were hip and fun people, I told her.

"People might start to think we have a problem, David." Her nose blew bubbles while she talked. A tiny arrowhead of a tongue slipped out and took the blood from the edge of her lips.

No problems here, just us sociopaths.

We're all normal. Subjectivity, as Maura said, is a wonderfully freeing thing to understand.

She kept smiling, and I kept ignoring Cherry. I even blocked out the moans and cringes of disgust coming from everyone else behind us.

I didn't love her, did I? No, that couldn't be it, I thought. Maybe "pity" was closer to the word I was looking for. Felt sorry for. Anything else.

But definitely not that. My tombstone wasn't about to be on some discount, package-deal twin plot with anyone else's, I could make sure of that. I kept telling myself I didn't need Maura like that. I could've quit her whenever I wanted, structural collapse be damned. No need for a twelve-step program or a sponsor or a little plastic chip that told me how many days it had been since my last shot. Being truly free is being able to leave before the neon signs and ceiling

fans are turned off, and I had that down like a grizzly crossing a stream.

Her attack couldn't ambush me, I was sure. Couldn't blast me open with breaching charges across my chest.

Maura gave one last look up at me, and I brushed the hair away from her face so it wouldn't sink into the carnage drying on her face.

I didn't blink, I just let it happen. I let fate do exactly what it had always done, and I got the Hell out of the way. Without looking back at Cherry, I agreed to everything.

Sold, to the lady in the black suit at the head of the table.

