

## The Devil in Ibiza.

Screaming. All I hear is screaming. At least... that's all that makes its way through the misty smoke that billows about my Hippocampus as I drift in and out of reality.

Screaming... Screeching now like a banshee as she claws at me, digging nails into flesh and grappling with the arms of the plastic flimsy chair I am perched on. My legs are shaking violently as I become aware of a low buzzing in the central part of my skull, whilst my jaw sways back and forth in its sockets. Left... Right... Left... Right... Eyes with wild pupils, so large that it's engulfing the usual hazel iris, leaving nothing but obsidian...

"Ma Quy!" She wails... "Ma Quy! Ma QUYYY!". In between this there are mumbles and drones of words I can't place... their origins seeming ancient and otherworldly. If any of it is English, then I have reached a point where it is no longer recognised.

"MA QUY!"

One of my arms is bent back on itself, the elbow pointing directly upwards, with my hand curved at the wrist and draped lifelessly over my right shoulder. A wholly unnatural position and bizarre look that no human in their right mind would assume. Legs continue to shake and kick out in bursts, before they rest and continue to quiver and vibrate...

Totally ripped, twisted, stoned and soon to be totally fucked... but how did this night get so weird? How did I end up here? Where am I? Am I alone? Why despite clearly being around people, do I feel so hopelessly alone?

I don't have any time to answer such questions. All I can think to do is ramble and try to explain myself in this disturbed climate...

"You have no... the shit... What? I can't... ha ha... I've seen... do you know? Were you there? No... but you wish you were... don't you? You'd know him better... know me... ha ha" the giggles bursting through my temporary mania.

"Ma Quy! Get away! Ma Quy! Someone... help us!" she shouts as with one aggressive and exalted pull; a strong arm removes the

chair from beneath me - gravity does the rest, and I land hard on the cracked and chipped patio...

"You stupid... fucking...", I begin as I try to work my jellied legs frantically to stand up, but discover I am totally helpless to do so and can't get purchase on this floor that feels like it's made of marshmallow... unable to get any kind of stable footing...

"Do you know what you're dealing with?! *Who* you're dealing with?" I wail, "I am a *killer*. Bonafide bad news... look over there in the corner... you see that shadow? he knows... he *knows*... the shadows always fucking know... ha ha ha ha" I point into the corner, where a faceless figure stares down at me, blankly, before disappearing between blinks.

As I spit and chuckle, I hear a chattering in between some of the words. 'What the fuck is that?', I ruminate on this as I whip my head around frantically, looking up at the distorted and melted faces, all red and puffy now gazing down at me in disgust on the floor... I realise the noise isn't coming from any of them... no... It's... It's my jaw... chuntering away as I can feel my teeth grind together... a side effect of all the dangerous chemicals I've ingested...

"No one gives a fuck... you're a no one to us... you're a freak!" A male voice shouts, but I can't identify or make them out... can't see... faces impossible to pinpoint in the shifting darkness... I make out the usual shadow... the one that's followed me here from a distant land... I feel darkness descending... I can't hold my grip much longer on this loathsome scene... body seizing up... brain starting to fill with bubbles that pop and squeal...

"Ma Quy!" she screams again, and I hear a hocking of spit as something wet hits me on my cheek before I feel a sharp sudden thumping pain on the side of my head...

"You *cunts!*" I blurt out with vitriol as my head is thrown to the floor from the impact... and I am swallowed by the night.

The memories after this point cease. In fact, they barely even start before this horrible spectacle. The last thing I truly remember is arriving to Ibiza with the other soldiers I'd been on operational tour with: Stan, Jay, Mike, Smythe, Red and Lyle - the only exception is the latter, who is a friend of

one of my brothers, who was tagging along as he was looking to exit civilian life and join the *Marines*. Why not? We all thought, he's trained hard and knows us well... he deserves to be here... we'll just have to ignore any valour he chooses to steal in our company to pull women, obtain the odd free drink and perhaps turn a blind eye if he also partakes in any illegal treats...

None of us started with the intention to come here and get loaded up on volatile and mild altering drugs... In fact, far from it. We are honourable lads, returning from Afghanistan after serving our Queen and country I'll have you know... these actions if found out through a routine test would leave us disgraced and out of the army on a dishonourable discharge, never to wear the colours again... retired to the vanities of civilian life. I suppose after what we saw and did, we had zero fucks to give now... we were disillusioned, betrayed, forgotten and it was time to celebrate being alive, by pushing the extremes even further. After all, we were immortals now... or so it was to us... Buy the ticket, take the ride. I remember the first 2 ecstasy tablets. I felt nothing for at least 30 minutes, I had no *rise*... no *come up*... no escape from the pain... the blood I kept seeing on my hands wasn't drying up or washing away, and neither was the watch of that cursed shadow. Despite all best efforts, the duly departed by my own hand and the one that encouraged me, remained... I felt their weight pressing down upon my shoulders, an immeasurable weight... I am *Sisyphus* now, but no more rolling of this rock up that hill. I have to break free... so I took 2 more tablets. 20 minutes later... the rise came on quick, I felt the blood rush through me, the inside of my chest becoming weightless and rising up to the back of my throat as a warmth engulfed my face, sending my nerve endings into free fall... bile started to rise up, expelling from my lips, as I instantly felt an unnamed feeling takeover... that wickedness coming back... then it goes blank... until the screams of "Ma Quy!" were heard. No journey in between, just that feeling... of suffering, before I ventured forth into the night, to cause chaos, discomfort and pass on the pain... They need to see... I need to be seen...

My eyes slowly flicker open as I raise my head slowly from the folded flesh and bone of my forearms, squinting at the light in the room... despite it being only a dimly lit establishment,

the light is too much for my expanded pupils to bear. I start to make sense of my surroundings, and it appears I am arched over a bar, atop a rickety wooden bar stool, legs dangling like empty sausage casings.

"What... no... wh... where?" I mumble to myself; unaware I am being watched...

"Where the *fuck* am I?" I question, speaking a little louder and clearer, but mostly rhetorically...

"You're okay..." a soft accented voice cuts through the silence... I start up and turn swiftly, dropping from the bar stool, bending my legs at the knee and raising my fists... ready... although my legs feel like dead Eels, I am able to stand my ground.

"Who the fuck?!" I shout in the direction of a small and swarthy looking man. He was about 5 foot 6, skin darkened like tanned and well-worn leather, wrinkled but despite this, I'd place his age to be in the mid-40's... 'hard trails and times on the circuit of Ibiza'- I ponder. His hair was reseeding from the forehead yet still full-on top to the back and on the sides, speckled with streaks of silver. He's clearly not a threat... but I've learned now that you never can be certain...

"Sorry! Sorry!" He exclaims, throwing his hands in the air and dropping his broom.

I try to soften, but I can't break my mode... that fight or flight response. I am out for blood tonight, besides, last, I remember, I passed out on the floor somewhere, how did I get here? Or rather, how did he get me here... I assess him for another 30 seconds, not breaking eye contact as my breathing shallows...

I slowly lower my fists.

"Who are you? What is this place?" I ask as I pat myself down to check I still have my affects; wallet, phone and keys for the hotel room...

"You're okay... you have everything... I made sure no one touched you... not that anyone would..." He says gesturing with his arms outstretched, showing his empty palms.

"I appreciate that," I say, gesturing that I understand he is desperately trying to show he is not an enemy, "What happened? I don't remember... ah... my head..." I hold my hand up to my

forehead and cradle it as I bow my head to ease the searing pain, flashing across my cranium like lightning, "Who did I come here with?"

"No one... you came alone... scared some people outside... I heard the screaming then saw them pull a chair... knocked you to the ground then smack you in the face... I chased them off... helped you up and in..."

"Why?"

"You seemed to be in a bad way... they were spitting on you... being violent... no one deserves that, not when they're vulnerable..."

"Well... shit, I do remember that bit... but not much else... I am certainly not vulnerable... I assure you," he gives me a discerning look that I choose to ignore, "what happened next?" I continued to probe.

"Nothing... you get up... said some strange things... then you sit at the bar, put your head down and you go to sleep..."

Ee gads... what the hell kind of establishment is this. Who is this sweet saviour of that evil scene happening outside. A saviour to me no less... Why? Some of the phrases I had been chucking out earlier are starting to flash in my mind... I am disgusted... Me, a killer? Why confess this? I do not know these people... what was I doing?

"Do you know what I did outside? Why did I have an issue with those people? Or them me?" I ask.

"I do not know... you came up looking all... uh... how do you say? Hmmm. Deranged... like a creature, a monster... me, I am used to it... uh... I try not to judge, but they were travelling... Vietnamese I think... nice girls and a guy... you tried to sit with them I think... yes... they were scared I think..."

"Shit... and I guess in that state I spooked them... Jesus... let's move on, I don't want to think about it... What are you doing now?"

I look around and notice the bar is empty. It dawns on me, that it has just been us this whole conversation. I spot a clock that says it is 0114. The tables scattered around this run-down bar, with one neon sign flickering on the wall saying '*Budweiser, king of beers*' casting strobed shadows that make me twitch, with each dance they make across the room... I am

clearly on a come down now... the red mist has dissipated, and I am left alone... except for... the one who watches...

"Sorry, what is this place again?" I ask.

"Is Johnnys bar..."

"And you are?"

"I am Johnny."

I laugh...

"Well, that makes sense... You closing up Johnny? I can't help but notice that all of the chairs other than those at the bar are on the tables... and the doors are bolted shut..."

"Yes... I close at one in the morning. Locked the doors to ensure you were safe... you don't seem bad to me... just lost... needing something? Someone maybe? I don't know..."

Lost? He was not wrong there... I certainly didn't need anyone, despite the fact I had never felt more alone in my 22 years... Coming down, in some random bar, protected by a small Spaniard who looked like he'd be more averse to helping a fiend like me and run the other way, than to provide cover. I offer to help him close up, to which he accepts. I wipe down a few tables and stack some chairs, clear some bar mats into the back room and pour away some of the trays from under the bars... muscle memories kicking in from jobs of days gone by.

"Thank you... you really didn't have to..." he speaks gently, almost embarrassed that I want to repay the favour for looking out for my inhospitable and deranged self.

"It's nothing... honestly... Did I even buy a drink from here?"

"No... you just came in with me and then went to sleep..."

"Well shit, I need to at least compensate you financially..."

He throws his hands up smiling; "No, no... please... you don't have to, you've done enough..."

I insisted and asked if he would mind making me a cup of tea... He agreed to this, chuckling at the notion of the visiting Brit requiring a tea... feeling like a wimp at this, I thought I'd better back this up with some grit... show him there is more to me and that I am not quite done yet with this night.

"And two shots of tequila... How far is it back to the Strip?"

"It's about three miles walk if you take a left and follow the road..."

"Holy shit! Three miles... that'll take me at least an hour to get back... shit... you know what Johnny... make it four Tequilas..."

Just under 55 minutes later, I find myself back on the main strip outside our hotel. A delightful tourist centric area... clubs, restaurants, kebab houses, strip clubs - including a neon sign of a pin up barely dressed, striking a suggestive pose - plenty of bars and all kinds of different stalls selling any kind of cheap plastic crap your heart could desire, or perhaps the odd *I love Ibiza* t shirt, with the love replaced with a graphic and emphasised pink heart. I spot a bar in the distance and can see some of my group... thank fuck... they're still out.

"Where the fuck have you been!" Stan screams out to me as I walk up to the heavily stacked bouncer, with shirt affixed so tight, you aren't sure if it's the steroids or the attire making his veins swell to the surface...

I walk brazenly up to him, well aware that I still have a certain gait of someone on a serious come down... neurons continuing to misfire as I jitter and tick, head snapping to the side as teeth skim off each other...

"Oh for fuck sake... you again?" he fixes me a stern look and steps to me to block my path.

"What the fuck do you mean, you roided out street thug. Let me in to join my compatriots or you'll have hell to pay..."

"Mate... look, I get it... you told me the story... you boys are back from a tour, and it was hard on you. It sounded... dark... awful... we had a decent chat about it until you switched on everyone here..."

"What the fuck do you mean *switched*?"

"You went crazy... one person knocked into you... you went berserk... started throwing glasses... you even did that..." he begins to explain and then gestures towards a table on the patio area, just out of reach behind some fencing, where all my brothers watched on with bated breath. The table he is

pointing at has been obliterated - torn in two, right down the central line. Off shoots of splintered wood, jagged and doused in ... blood...

"Shit... that was me?" I puzzle...

"Oh right... come on... how could anyone not remember? You jumped up on it and started stamping around like an animal... then you picked a fight with those sitting on it, before smashing one of their faces into that jagged edge..."

"Fuck... did he at least deserve it?" I ask, knowing that no one really could, but I had to have some hope that my actions were justified... even perhaps, in self-defence...

"Well... yes, I think so... you were being out of line, but he was trying to slash you with a bottle... it was a real mess... I convinced him he slipped just to avoid the police... but you really pulled a sharp move there... swift, fast... inhuman..."

At this point it started to dawn on me that this bouncer wasn't really stepping to me with a confident assertiveness... he had sweat on his brow and a worried look... he was tired and just wanted the ugliness of his night to be over... he was fearful... but of what? Me?

He leaned in towards me and started to speak in a whisper...

"Look... I get it... my brother served... it's hard to come back and adjust... I really don't want any trouble, but I can't just let you back in... you seem like a decent guy. Let's just let tonight go... get some sleep and come back tomorrow... I'll let you in..."

I am starting to feel my patience is running thin... but he's right, this isn't worth it... I've lost my way... the demon has come out tonight and reaped havoc. I agreed to leave my brothers, and this bouncer made of sculpted polystyrene and retire back to my room - well, after offering to pay for the table to be replaced... which the bar owner overheard from his hiding spot behind some bushes to my left and gleefully took £250 in cash...

Upon returning to the hotel room, I collapsed on the bed and was tormented by the shadows of the departed that follow... my hands were wet with blood. I ran to the bathroom to wash them, turning the tap to full as it blasted red specks up to the

mirror and across the walls... I felt my chest rising and falling rapidly as I fell to the floor, writhing in the pain of a panic attack.

Once I composed myself, I stared deep into my eyes, that now had some iris returning again... calmer now... my hands were no longer red, but my trigger finger twitched... pulling back on an absent trigger, a trigger I pulled back many times and with this simple muscle action of the index finger, had erased people from this earth. Such a simple little motion, yet it brought fourth such destruction...

But so, fucking *what*? They had it coming... they picked up arms... against me. Against my brothers - what did they expect? Was I just going to sit there? - No... of course not. I couldn't watch my brothers get blown to pieces or worse. No. Against my better judgement, I had to listen to the sinister voice telling me to go hard... To develop a hunger for it... a passion for the violence... the hunt... vindicate that need for assertive and explosive action by remembering I have to do it to protect others and do the right thing on a difficult day... but that taste I have learned now is starting to consume me. Now I'd tasted combat, I was ready to show the world that I was not to be fucked with... Desperate for them to know what I am... Don't tell me how this world works bubba, I've killed in it... It feels even now an infantile separation to say that killing has different terms and is acceptable in certain circumstances. In war, it is not seen as a murder, but the premeditation of knowing you're about to go out on a patrol to engage enemy forces... well, isn't that the definition of premeditation? My brain couldn't manage all of these conflicts - I now felt like that my hemispheres had departed each other to begin competing and hating each other, loathing each other, yet one side... the darker side, was winning.

Screaming. All I hear again is screaming...

"300 metres, 11 o'clock!" I hear a voice shout... at least, that's what I believe he's said.

"200 metres, 12 o'clock!" heart rate going up now, the rounds zipping overhead... the Crack! Thoom! of sonic disruption shattering the atmosphere surrounding the dome of my helmet.

Projectiles hurtling, invisible yet their image of potential life ending possibility vivid... I couldn't put my head up... It didn't matter that I was the gunner... the man with the GPMG... this could be my end in this advanced position, that I now realise I can't peel easily back from, without covering fire, or blasting off rounds to suppress further and make my escape...

Must raise head... they need covering fire... must take aim... I need to get the fuck out of this...

Pfft! Pfft! Bursts of dust blast upward to the right of me... they know I am here... I have to change position.

"200 METRES! WATCH MY TRACER!"

At this, I know this will be my chance... covering fire and tracer rounds. I can shift and then take aim... kill the fuckers if I see them... I don't want to... I never wanted this... but I have no choice. It must be done. The voice demanding I do it... take them... take them all... adrenaline surging... heart thumping.

I scramble down deeper into a ditch to my right, ignoring the thuds that are landing around me and stay low, pulling my GPMG into position... I take aim, watching the red-lights flash into an area where I see him ... the enemy... my first... I control my breathing... exhale... pull the trigger and watch the followed through shots land with precision, as lifeless limbs, connected to lifeless torso, affixed with its lifeless head fall away from me... just like that... I was a killer...

GASP! Spluttering... coughing... spitting... I wake from the nightmare that keeps repeating, staring into the crisp and golden Mediterranean sun... The stench of vomit hit's my nostrils. I turn to the side of the deck chair and spew onto the tiled floor by the pool.

"Fucking hell... look who's finally awake then lads..." I hear through a snigger, before the whole group erupts into hysterics.

"Jesus," I start, taking a brief pause to spit, "what the fuck am I doing out here by the pool? Which one of you fuckers brought me out here?"

"What are you talking about?" asks Stan, "You brought yourself down here hours ago... legs shaking and shit, then you planted yourself down and have slept for almost 4 hours... We've been

bloody having to turn you like a rotisserie chicken, so you don't burn bud..." his Welsh twang prominent.

"Yea," starts Jay, "we thought you were dead... figured if we kept turning you, we could relax a bit more and the bar staff wouldn't notice the corpse in the middle of the pool area... figured we'd cannibalise you for lunch once you were crisp enough..."

I go to start speaking but feel another rush of bile as I reach for my sunglasses. Wrap around Spanish shades with an Aviator look about them and orange lenses... I swallow down hard and prevent another expulsion.

"You'd do that, wouldn't you? You sick bastards..."

At this point, I hear the familiar tapping of plastic hitting a mirror. I squint my eyes and focus on Lyle, who without a care, is racking up lines of Cocaine on the small table...

"Here..." he says, passing me an already rolled note, "you look as if you could use a pick me up..."

Damn fucking right I could. The rest of the afternoon, played out like any other holiday, with Pina Coladas flowing and sides of white snow going up my nose. It wasn't uncommon in Ibiza, in fact nothing was apart from Psychedelics, which seemed harder to come by, or at least so I thought as to my surprise when we retired back to our hotel room I had a few paper sheets on my bedside table that looked familiar... aside from the adorned smiley faces on it...

"Is this fucking acid?" I asked.

"Sure, fucking is... you're on your own with that shit..." spoke Smythe, judging me coldly...

"You were enough of a menace on E's... I'd hate to see what that turns you into..."

"Well," I started, "If somethings worth doing, it's worth doing right... who even got this?"

"You did... remember?"

At this point, we were 2 days into a 7-day holiday... the brothers that made it, celebrating. We didn't need all these drugs, but hell... we'd tried everything else to get better...

What other option did we have? Once we arrived home, the army wanted nothing to do with us. They asked a few questions with a counsellor, but after 7 months of war, you're prone to answer simply and concisely... besides, you know that weakness can be shown in the face of adversity... even the mental stupors and flashbacks we were starting to be consumed by.

"Have you been having any negative thoughts?"

No, Maam

"Have you had thoughts you'd be better off dead?"

No, Maam

"Have you had flashbacks seeing those you put bullet holes through that will never see their families again, because of you 'doing your job'... you spineless, feckless piece of shit... you can't even manage it can you? Pathetic..."

Yes, Maam... I mean... No Maam... what? It wasn't my job... I am not a killer... the demon doesn't have me... I swear...

Panic. Shit, the Cocaine has started to get on top of me, whilst the acid shifts gears. The worm is turning... I am starting to twist again, only this time I am having a flashback trip from a time long ago where the walls have started to convulse and breathe in unison with my own chest compressions... We're in a club on the strip now.

"Holy fuck... I am getting the fear!" I turn around in the now bright red room and see nothing but creatures... indescribable, Lovecraftian blobs of flesh... oozing and bulging with viscous green and red liquid that's shooting out of their multiple orifices. Their round waxy and slimed bulks, covered with eyes that have multiple limbs extruding out in all directions, with mouths that smack together flashing rows of razor sharp teeth as they chomp away at the floor, slowly devouring it from beneath my feet...

"How the fuck do we get past these goddam animals?!"

I can feel the bile rising... The room is an expanse of liminal space, all white tiles that shift and pules with the beat that is coming through, making my pulse convulse louder in my ears...

THUMP THUMP THUMP...

"I have to get the fuck out of here... Jesus help me!"

As I run through the slithering, writhing beasts, their arms reach out and clutch at me.

"Get the fuck off of me!" I squeal as I head for the exit... Voices start screaming at me, howling for me to stay and not to do it again... where are you going? Rex! Someone stop him... he's freaking out... but I am too quick...

The cold and frigid air snaps me into a state of alertness, but all the faces and people around me are stretched and thin... gaunt and empty as my soul feels

"Dude, are you okay?" I hear Red's voice... "It's okay man... it's just the acid, don't fight it... just relax..."

I slowly collapse down to the floor, into a foetal position with my back up against the wall as I sit on the backs of my heels.

I look up and see him... standing across the street... staring at me... Once we clock eye contact... he walks off into the alleyway...

"Fucking ghost..." I mutter.

"What ghost?" asks Red, following my line of sight to an empty area of road.

"Doesn't matter..."

"He's following all of us you know... we're cursed I think..." says Red.

"What?"

"Doesn't matter..." Red drifts off before starting up again, shifting the topic, "Listen man, we think it might be a clever idea to get some grass... you know... calm you down a bit... you're scaring the girls that are with us. Billy says he's got some guys who will hook us up... I asked for an ounce... figure you and I can get it..."

"Sure..." I start, "I could do with something to bring me down... you're right. There is some kind of mania gripping me something fierce... has everyone chipped in?"

Red pulls out a wodge of notes and rolls them neatly, before tucking them into my left pocket...

"That's everyone chipped in... we've got some blunt papers ready."

"Where are we meeting him?"

Red points across the street, to the alley where I just saw my tormentor descend down...

"That alley... same as when we got the pills, and I guess where you got the acid? He says 20 minutes..."

"I'll go alone..."

"You sure? What if it gets dodgy, I don't want you pulling anything like last night..." he fixes me with a concerned look... almost fatherly, despite Red being the youngest of our group...

"I'll be fine... I'm the demon of this strip... the spectre of this town... hell, when we're down here, they'll call me the devil of Ibiza!" I scream out loud as I stand up tall, fist raised in the air, affixing eye contact and glaring into the souls of any passer-by before ushering forth the evillest of laughs. Anyone listening would be fooled into thinking that Vincent Price once again walked the Earth...

It wasn't long before Red disappeared, and I headed into the alley way to collect the weed.

Distortion. Haze. Something isn't right... I feel pain all over my body now... reality coming back into focus...

Drip

Drip

Drip

I stagger up the stairs of the hotel block and gently pull the key card out of my shorts to enter the room. I feel it brush against a tightly packed plastic bag, and I stink of cannabis. That must be the weed... I check my pocket to confirm my assumptions.

Drip

Drip

Slip

Slip

Slip

My arm feels heavier than it did... I have to concentrate my right bicep and tense, as I quiver to raise my arm to get the keycard onto the magnetic plate by the door.

Beep

I push through into the room.

Drip

Drip

Slip

Slip

I make my way through the drab lounge and hear music playing from the balcony as I clock that the time is 0206.

I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the glass of the sliding doors. Cuts and bruises are dashed across my face.

Drip

Drip

Slip

Slip

I shuffle towards the door and hear a scream from some of the girls who have joined my band of brothers...

"Aaaaahhhh!"

"Holy fuck" shouts Mike... "What the fuck happened to you..."

"Nothing... Must have taken a fall... I got the weed..."

They all stood there, staring at me in shock... at this point, I noticed the dripping had continued and I looked down to find droplets of blood falling from the knuckles of my left hand... Deep cuts were dashed into my knuckles, exposing red sinews.

"What. The. Fuck... RED! You were supposed to be with him... Why did you let him go alone?" Mike berates him.

"Come on... you know Rex can manage it... made it back didn't he... my boy's the fucking devil..." Red comes over and puts his arm round me and guides me to the sofa. The group stand in front of me, watching with caution as Red - with delicate care - aides me in lowering myself into the red armchair...

"What happened?" Jay asks...

"I don't know..." I respond.

"What's the last thing you remember?" Smythe enquires.

"Entering the alley way..."

"Fuck... they must've mugged you... looks like you put up one hell of a fight though..." Mike brandishes a soft smile, raising up just one corner of his lip...

"Yeah... but jokes on them if that was the plan..." I pulled out the ounce bag of weed from my pocket...

They had a look of bewilderment. The sort of look you have when you're in the front row, seeing your favourite band finally belt out that song you've been longing to hear the whole night...

"How the," begins Stan, "I really do not understand how you're alive right now..." he outstretches his arm and forms a fist...

"Solid drills, brother. The Devil of Ibiza..."

We bump fists, and after the clack of our bones, I release my left arm and let it fall limply into my lap, where I hear a rustle emanate from my left pocket. All eyes fix on each other and then onto me...

"That can't be..." begins Mike.

I reach into my pocket and pull out all the money Red had given me... Guess I was the mugger...

7 days expired and more fear and loathing were felt for the duration of the trip. When I'd called the dealer to look to procure more drugs to add to our ever-growing collection, he howled at me to 'move the fuck on' because 'you've had fucking everything from me and everyone else... don't forget two of my boys are practically in the hospital because of you...'. At this point, it was clear Billy wanted nothing to do with us and the kind of violence I'd been wreaking across the strip... at one point, I was played a tape recording of us outside one of the adult theatres where Jay had been kidnapped by the staff... he went into the backroom, where they'd brought him some fine girls for him to fuck the pain away with and with acute desperation try to get over the nightmare of watching one of his brothers die from a .50 calibre sniper round, that left his insides like soup... he always believed that he should've

been able to save him... Poor Jay. The voice recording had me shouting at the bouncer about how Jay had only just been peeled away from jumping off a ledge and needed love, not kidnapping and being held at ransom until he paid the extortionate tab they said he owed... the recording pauses then resumes where you can hear the screams and shouts of other prostitutes as we enacted a coordinated strike with flash bangs we'd snuck into the country for some fun and we successfully extracted Jay... All that only for him to hang himself many years later...

The locals, the shop owners, the holiday makers... everyone now knew or knew of me and my brothers... we were hell raisers, outlaws, dangerous thugs with a penchant for aggression. Bruisers that wanted to prove we weren't forgotten. Desperate to be seen and *heard*. We had to be remembered and known for what we had done. It couldn't be for nothing. These people... no... these civilians had to be made aware, of the sacrifices we had made to keep them safe... giving a piece of our soul to the devil, because they aren't strong enough to dance with him and come back from it...

It's hard to tell now on reflection what this trip was all meant to mean. It had a purpose initially, and that was to celebrate that we'd survived. Against all the odds, in spite of all the IED's, RPG's, Mortars and 7.62 rounds fired at us... we were here, we were alive to tell this tale. We arrived home as heroes, and I think all of us felt the shame within that accompanied thoughts of 'if only they knew' and 'if only they really cared' when we were greeted with banners, streamers, and cheers... the elation faded quickly once people realised how we had changed.

Afghanistan was a failure, and we'd learn that some years later, when despite all our best efforts to push back the insurgency and provide key skills to the security forces of that Nation, the Jihadist slugs of the Taliban, would slither and creep their way back into power as soon as the withdrawal of allied forces began. All those lives, all that death... for nothing. We tried to tell ourselves at the time that it meant something. That we were on the winning side of history. The scars left from watching the Twin Towers burn as ten- and eleven-year-olds, had been reopened but somehow re-healed because we had been a part of Uncle Sam's - nay, the worlds -

war on terror... Despite however, these proud ruminations, it was clear... we'd had to sacrifice a piece of ourselves that remained out there in the ditches we carved with our eyelashes... That piece that once made us human... that piece that told us we were good guys, doing the right thing... that piece that was pure and had not killed someone's brother, father, son, or uncle... well, those days were gone. The devil got in us and turned us into ravenous beasts that now had to wrestle with the contradiction of power and survival versus loathing and self-hate. We were proud to be alive, only to be doomed to suffer for earning it. No sympathy for the devil... please allow me to introduce myself.

That's what this trip was about... finding some way to tell everyone about what happened without saying it, without admitting to it. Without truly facing it. To show them the suffering we felt and what monsters we had become, beneath the 'hero' façade that kept being cast on us... we felt cheated - or rather so that we were the cheats. We'd stolen valour, despite 'doing our jobs' and being successful at it... we were killers... we were without all those we deployed with and now we reduced back to the vile dope fiends we'd all worked hard to escape the clutches of. We were sinners... whether we were religious or not, we had committed ourselves to eternal damnation and all for what?

The devil had crawled his way out from beneath the underbelly, promising retribution for the mark the terrorists left on Western Democracy and boasted how he was a friend, to help us seek out our vengeance on the jihadists that started this forever war. He conned us into thinking we were the answer to the kingdom of fear and that the peaceful times before 9/11 could come back, but we just had to give something first. As he distracted us with that sparkle of hope and promise in his eyes, he delicately sunk his jagged claws into our flesh, cutting out the childhood fat that once kept us warm, then threw the innocent blubber into the hellfire, where it crackled, sizzled, and reduced to ash, releasing forth the red mist that emboldened us to take up arms against our fellow man, cursing us to forever walk with ghosts... to forever have the devil in our hearts and walk this earth knowing we're different from the rest...

We are changed men... broken and now reduced back to junkies - *killer* junkies in fact.

It has been said that the devil moves in mysterious ways and that a junkie, abuses their body to tell you that something has gone horribly fucking wrong with this world..

*"He who makes a beast of himself, get's rid of the pain of being a man."*

*Dr. Johnson*

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