

Mentors & Manatees

by Eli Hopkins

The first mentor was a kid who lived down the road from me, in Hood River, Oregon. Kevin had a deformed ear and was pathologically obsessed with bow-hunting. Which isn't to say that he was opposed to regular hunting. Kevin was an interesting guy, always coming to school dressed head to toe in camouflage. I always thought he would've been more popular if people had been able to see him, if he hadn't blended so seamlessly into the background.

Together we roamed the forest between our houses, which was fraught with landmines, enemy combatants, and other equally glamorous dangers. Looking back with what I know now, I can confidently say that there's nothing glamorous about landmines, but at the time they were very *haute*, as was dying a long, slow death from a gruesome knife wound.

Lying in bed at night I would fantasize about being captured by enemy forces, all of whom had thick, indiscernible European accents. I, of course, would be disarmingly brave and my captors wouldn't know what to make of me. They'd say, *Here's a guy with everything in the world. Women, riches, height, looks...and he doesn't give a damn that he's about to die. What an incredible man.*

Any last words? the enemy General would ask in his incomprehensible accent, visibly losing his nerve. For some reason he'd be wearing a bloody surgeon's apron. But rather than utter any of the powerful words I'm more than capable of producing at critical moments, I'd simply light up a cigarette and stare everyone down until they were nothing but quivering husks of humans, begging for my forgiveness and my telephone number, which I would give them under the condition that they never call after 8:00 p.m., that was *me* time.

For some reason being friends with a dreamer like Kevin made my own dreams seem more attainable, as if it was only a matter of time before the President was going to show up at my door, ready to pay any price if only I would be willing to pry myself from professional

baseball long enough to go do some top secret ninja work. Not only would I accept the mission, but I would waive my usual fee of one million dollars cash in exchange for one kiss from the President's daughter, who would look exactly like Molly Ringwald. Of course one kiss wouldn't be enough, Molly would inevitably want more. But first I'd have to go assassinate some dictators while dressed in black spandex.

Unfortunately, Kevin's parents divorced when we were in the 7th grade and he had to move to Alaska with his dad. "Just imagine how many bears I'm going to bow-hunt," Kevin said as he packed the last of his camo t-shirts into an Army surplus rucksack. "I'm going to kill everything I see."

One minute I was sitting in Kevin's chair playing with the 12-gauge shotgun he'd gotten for his 10th birthday, my brain feverish with thoughts of violence, and then he was gone, and I was left on my own again. But I was different than before. Kevin had left something with me, a stronger sense of myself. Or maybe I'd simply taken something away from him.

The loss of my first mentor came as a harsh blow. Roaming the forest with my dog Rosie just wasn't the same. Her heart was in the right place, but when it came to armed combat, Rosie just didn't have the goods.

Fortunately I was soon consoled by the arrival of Kevin's replacement. Jeremy was the grandson of my neighbor, Lucille, with whom he lived sporadically between stints in juvenile hall. He was only 17, but could easily have passed for 25, which is good or bad depending on how you look at it. He looked old enough to buy beer, but too old to date girls his own age. Fortunately Jeremy preferred the older ladies, or so he constantly told me.

Under Jeremy's careful tutelage I learned about explosives, firearms, and setting traps for humans. I also learned to distinguish between good-shit and shitty-shit, and to appreciate the difference.

Jeremy was worlds ahead of where Kevin had been, and he seemed more than willing to take me with him. All I had to do was listen, and share the candy I was always stealing from the store.

Vacillating constantly between joints and cigarettes, Jeremy would extemporize on a wide variety of topics, from military history to aliens and the global conspiracy to deny them. He'd light up and gaze off into the distance, setting the stage for another stunning soliloquy:

“Of course there are aliens, bro! It's not even a question. They've been talking to us for like a long time, man, trying to warn us that we're fucking up the planet and shit. They even offered to help us and shit, but we were like, fuck you, we're Americans, we don't need your help. But the thing is, we like totally need their help, cause we're fucked, for real. But, whatever.”

After offering these words of wisdom, often in a single breath, Jeremy would launch into an explosive coughing fit worthy of Jack Palance, which for a 17 year old was extremely impressive.

Jeremy was wise beyond his years. In addition to aliens, he also knew all about Satan-worshippers, whom he blamed not only for his own problems but most of society's problems as well. Soon I was convinced that behind every closed door was a secret congregation of Satan-worshipping psychos, planning horrible things for anyone that didn't join them.

“It's the Satan-worshippers,” I'd say when my step-mom confronted me about a destroyed flowerbed. “They must've gotten into the garden again. They do worship the Devil, afterall, they don't care whose flowers they trample.”

According to Jeremy the entire Oregon coast was littered with the severed limbs and heads of people whose only crime had been being in the wrong place at the wrong time, which was almost everywhere when you considered how many Satan-worshippers were wandering around looking for easy victims. He told me about finding a motorcycle helmet washed up on the beach, and when he picked it up there was a human face looking back at him. And there was the time he found a motorcycle boot—Surprise!

Satan-worshippers always seemed to pick on motorcyclists, which made perfect sense to me. Motorcyclists were bad people, and at least the manatees were getting fed.

Despite the dubious things he told me, Jeremy had a certain x-factor, and I assumed that he would eventually excel at something dangerous and exciting.

It turned out that I was half-right. When Jeremy was arrested for grand theft auto I was shocked. Not because he'd stolen a car—we'd often discussed various plans for stealing cars, weighing the merits of each plan and ultimately dismissing them as too easy—I was shocked because he'd been caught. Again, I started to wonder if maybe I hadn't taken something from him, absorbed some ethereal part of his spirit that he needed in order to get away with stealing cars. But I'd taken it and now he was in prison for at least two years.

And Jeremy wasn't the only friend I've had who would end up incarcerated. Whether for arson, grand theft, or selling cocaine, there seemed to be an endless list, and any detective worth his fedora could've seen that I was the common denominator. There must have been something about me that brought out the worst in people, despite my own disinclination to engage in most of their destructive behaviors.

I recently got curious about Kevin, and what had come of his apocalyptic bow-hunting odyssey. So I started searching the Internet for signs of him, expecting to read about the eradication of black bears in the Yukon Territory, since it seemed that those I'd known in childhood were capable only of committing atrocities.

It took awhile, but I finally found a link to a newspaper article from the Juneau Chronicle. It was about how Kevin had single-handedly saved a family from dying in a house-fire. According to the article he was considered a hero, and was even given the keys to the city. Here was a childhood friend who'd managed to reach adulthood without ending up a drunk or a felon! Maybe I wasn't a vampire afterall!

Sure, he looked a little different in the picture, a little heavier maybe. But who wasn't heavier? Also, the Kevin in the picture had two normal ears, but I figured that was something you could probably get fixed.

Then at my high school reunion I was talking to someone and I happened to mention what I'd read about Kevin. I talked about how great it was for someone I'd grown up with to be considered a hero, even in an irrelevant state like Alaska. But apparently I was mistaken.

It turned out that the Kevin I'd known was currently serving a prison sentence for a series of destructive crimes he'd committed while high on amphetamines. The Kevin that I'd read about was a different guy altogether.

When I got home I found the article. After taking a second look at the picture it was obvious. The Kevin I'd known had green eyes, light skin, and rusty blond hair. The Kevin from the article had brown eyes, brown hair, and was African-American.

Still, I printed the article and taped it up next to my desk as a reminder of something, but I can't remember what.

