

War can take place anywhere. A few thousand feet behind an elementary school playground, shots were fired, taking down two young men who had just settled laser sights on the enemy. Only the victims heard the kill-shots. The tearing of camouflage BDUs and the shattering of one's glass facemask. The attacker was now hundreds of feet away, moving swiftly through the Florida swamp.

John was better than you'd expect. Two tiny red points were playing across the makeshift lean-to where a couple of his snipers lay, their own silenced rifles up on tripods. One had just noticed the dot on his partner when John wedged between them. The stiff sound of a poker card ruffle as John squeezed the trigger. Two enemies dropped from a branch-covered blind eighty yards off.

"Shoot *more*," John said, patting Levi's shoulder. Then he was gone again. Always moving.

This last one was going to be a bit more difficult. Wading knee-deep in the bog, John could tell he was in-fact out there, maybe forty yards away or so; after the sound of a gas-powered round, the thin leaves around his head had been shredded. Then came the ripples in the water which told him his target had gone under again. John has a full-face shield with a tiny nipple on the top which can be used as a short-term snorkel. His opponent, one identical.

John went under too, this time all the way. In a single breath he approached an orange band under the murky deep and knew he was on top of him. Surfacing, he recognized the top-facing nipple of his opponent's head. He had come up directly behind him. John pointed his pistol.

The man burst from the deep water as if he were half-fish. John's shot went askew, and with confusion he reached up to steady the clothed and masked mannequin which spun from a short rope under a triggered tree trap.

From under the hanging booby trap, Gunner slickly surfaced, the muzzle of his pistol planted firmly into John's ribs. He squeezed off three rounds point blank. From beneath his body armor, thick red pushed through cloth and mixed with the murk. John doubled over and Gunner caught him, cradling him in the water like a babe.

"Fair and square," John managed to say to Gunner.

John was still looking up at the slowly turning fake-out, which he'd sprung, when Gunner finally said, "Well, look on the bright side. We can still bring down the house."

Then the two had a laugh.

The five boys had been playing paintball with friends all summer. Bringing down the house, was code for shooting up the abandoned home down on 9th St and Peters Ave. The gravel drive was so grown over, you wouldn't know it was back there unless you had stumbled across it while exploring in the woods.

What remained of the architecture was hair on a skeleton. Being unfortunate enough, this single home was fully submerged in the downpour of 2001, may have survived had the storm drain not plugged up. The whole property was but two acres of swamp, a bungalow converted to musky mosquito heaven.

Strips of drywall fell into the bog when the paintballs struck. Had the boys had an unlimited supply of ammo, they may literally *bring down* the house. Ammo was always in short supply, but it never prevented them from trying.

Chuck, had a giant mole on his left cheek, and the guys all called him Beavr. He refused to use a firearm, even it was only powered by CO2. He always brought a blowgun, like he were some kind of ninja. If only ninjas wore trimmed up trash bags. Beav was easy to please. He was always happy to just get one round in. If he were lucky enough that the paintball busted, he could happily take ten rounds while retreating.

"Beav, you ain't even gettin' a shot to the wall!" said Levi, eyeing down his sights and squeezing off three of his own.

"That one was totally there!" said Beav.

"It only counts if it bursts, man," Gunner said shooting.

"Yeah, well you try shooting this thing," said Beav, "it takes Stamina."

"I'll tell you what took stamina," said John, "your mom, last night."

"—your mom last night," echoed Beav. Then, with a huge breath, rocketed a stinging shot of yellow paint to Gunner's bare right arm.

No one shot John point blank. John wasn't the biggest, but he was the oldest. Beav would settle for Gunner instead.

Beav pointed, "Hah! It burst! It burst!"

Gunner aimed his muzzle at the Beav and Levi deflected it, "Whoa. whoa. whoa."

"See, I told you it bursts!"

"Yeah, for every one you get to bust, ten roll down the front of our shirts Beav," said Remy. "It's no secret."

"Whatever," Beav said, reloading his blowpipe.

"You might notice if you didn't spend all your time running, Beav," said John.

"Hey, you can't hit what you can't see," said Beav.

A yellow paintball bounced off the side of the Peter's home, and the boys laughed.

Pretty much everyone was sure that Beav only wore those glad bags because he could flip em inside out and pretend he was never hit.

"Guys, look!"

Beav pointed to where a giant raven had lit on one of the standing pillars of the old shed. John raised his paint pistol.

"Five bucks says I nail it."

The boys looked at him in silence as his one eye trained down the sight, breathless. The bird watched the boys.

John finally cracked a smile and opened his eye, exhaling. His gun was coming down when a hiss of CO2 shot-off behind them and a plume of feathers exploded from the raven's perch. Remy had pulled the trigger. In an instant, he had painted the raven's black eye red and it landed, feet sticking up, in the bog. The paint was indistinguishable from blood, if there were any.

"Holy shit!" said Remy, surprised at himself.

No one laughed. They all just stood there, waiting for the bird to move, to struggle.

"Dude, you fucking killed it, Remy," John said.

"You were!"

Beav was still staring, "That's bad karma, man."

"Look!" Remy pointed.

The bird had been flinching in the mud.

"That Raven's dead, man," Levi said. "Something's got it!"

They watched as the algae split along the back of an alligator.

Beav grimaced as he watched the gator adjust its grip on the raven.

"Quick," said Levi. "Anyone got a tube of pellets?"

"Nah, man," guttered Beav. But Remy and Gunner had already started coloring it two shades of red.

John and Beav took a few steps back up the embankment as the gator disappeared. It's attempt at a meal still bobbed in the muck.

"That's bad karma, dudes," said Beav again, following John up the drive.

"Guys!" yelled Levi after them. "Wait up."

One by one, the boys followed John up the hill and from inside the Peters home, the watcher watched.