

THE WOLFMAN



RICARDO ZEGRI

The Wolfman by Ricardo Zegri

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Cover art by Yana Zegri

Book designed and handmade by Sara Lefsyk for
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Dedicated to:

Clara Mae Matzau, Chris Hope, and Zarmina Dawn,
the next wolf pack.

For:

Armando
&
Yana

On the day we killed the wolf, I was licked clean like a cub.

My brother Rey found a red handkerchief to use for the eyes. The same rag dad used to clean my face. He would wet the corner in his mouth and leave a snail-trail of warm, pot-scented spit to tighten on my eight year-old cheeks like Indian warpaint. It's hard to describe the sensation of being licked clean by your parents to someone who didn't grow up in a family of slobber-swabbing barbarians, but it was part of my daily life. Saliva just doesn't age well outside the mouth and the scent of his bland vegetarian diet mingled with a sour tinge of reefer to form a hypoallergenic masque of hippie drool.

I swore I would never clean my kid's face that way. I'd rather show up to a party covered in peanut butter and boogers than put them through that, but crumbs are crumbs and yogurt is everywhere.

On the day we killed the wolf, the island was dripping with magic.

Dad worked a lot. Not nine-to-five at the office, but on a deal, or a harvest, or some other non-violent criminal activity that paid the rent. We lived in Hana on the weather side of Maui. A volcano and treacherous road separated us from all the tourists with matching umbrellas. I'm sure there were other ways to make a living on the island, but the only one I knew of was growing Pocololo.

Our house had two stories. Mom and dad upstairs, while the kids shared the bottom floor with He-Man and Skeletor. No toy guns or G.I. Joes allowed. War toys were propaganda for the military industrial complex and my father was always on the lookout for where “The Man” was going to infiltrate our lives next.

Our backyard was a wild mango orchard where the smell of sweet rot and overripe sugar hung on me like a fruit-leather cape. It was delicious just to stand under those trees, to close my eyes and breathe; like being inside of a piece of candy. I spent every day on that island with sticky hands.

Most of the time it was just me, Rey and our friend Skybear who was three years older, like my brother. Skybear's mom was on the mainland “taking care of some things”. We knew enough about our parents and their friends to know that was code for drying out and kicking something hard. Skybear's dad wasn't in the picture, he came from a broken home. We didn't know as much about that yet.

His grandmother was a Navajo woman named Oceana who lived down the road. A mystic lady with long gray hair and deep brown eyes tucked into the wrinkles of her chestnut face. She performed sweat lodge rituals and shook bones. We were pretty sure she was a wizard.

The year before we killed the wolf, we got hold of a copy of The Exorcist on Betamax, the entertainment system of the future. Like most people we would never look at pea soup the same

way again, but our fear went a step further. The three of us believed that the film was an absolute true story. Every time the bed shook or a light flickered, we were convinced that demonic possession was about to take place in that very room.

I grew up unburdened by the usual platitudes parents told their children about no monsters in the world and how everything was gonna be alright.

“There are good spirits and bad spirits around us.” Dad said. “They're trying to break through all the time. You gotta make sure to invite the good ones in, and not get tricked by the bad.”

But even he couldn't keep the bad ones out forever.

On the day we killed the wolf, the family business was booming.

Past the mangoes and up the mountain was the house of Chris Whitecloud, my dad's business partner. He had a cleft chin and a diamond implanted in his front tooth that he would flash at us when he smiled. This thrilled us to no end and we convinced ourselves he was moonlighting as a James Bond villain.

His house was surrounded by acres of sugar cane. Like suntanned rats, we made tunnels and forts winding in and out of the dense stalks. I could hide there in the green shade breathing unripe sweetness for hours, but the hedge maze was just a front for the real cash crop. The world famous Maui Wowee.

On the day we killed the wolf, he could smell my fear.

“Cops are pigs. Narcs are everywhere. Don't say anything at school about what we do.” Dad would say. Behind everything we did was the specter of getting busted.

Meanwhile, the cold war was still in full swing. Like every other kid in the eighties, we had drills at school where we climbed under our desks and practiced kissing our asses goodbye. Every time a plane flew overhead my heart went into my throat.

I was sure we were about to get nuked, or our crop had been raided and it would be matching bracelets for our folks and foster homes for us. Or maybe, the devil himself was taking a vacation from the mainland to reap a soul or two in the islands.

On the day we killed the wolf, we had to fight.

We had a few friends at school, but they never let us forget we were haoles. Our South American blood earned us exactly zero clout with the locals, it was the white half that mattered. There were a couple other white kids who got picked on as much as we did. The smart move might have been to team up with them for strength in numbers, but we hated them most of all. If we had to live at the bottom of the social ladder, at least we could try to push them one rung below us.

When the bell rang at the end of the day there was a fifteen minute window before we got on the school bus. A swarm

of kids from kindergarten to fifth grade raced up the hill to cluster in a ring of trees just off the road. It was in this arena the disputes of the day were settled, trivial rivalries, a misinterpreted sideways glance, an exchange of insults at recess. The reason didn't matter. These brown-skinned native kids in t-shirts and flipflops were warriors in a colonized land. There may have been an American flag waving over the schoolhouse, but in that grove for those few minutes, it was a tribal feud. A chest thumping show of machismo where us skinny kids from the mainland had to prove we deserved to suck air in the most beautiful place on earth. Of course, anthropology didn't cross my mind at the time, I just wanted to see some kid get punched in the stomach.

I had it easier than my brother. I took on the dark complexion of my Chilean father, whereas Rey got all the light skin and platinum hair my mom's Norwegian blood had to offer. At least his eyes were brown, but the left one was lazy. Being cross-eyed canceled out any potential benefits of not being a complete poster-child for the Aryan race.

As a first-grader I was only expected to cheer for my pick in the ring. I wish I could say I was a bold, trash talking hype-man for my brother, but mostly I was just afraid for him. Those afternoons laid the foundation for a lifetime of pleading with him to not dangle over cliffs or walk on the edge of city rooftops. But he never fell, not in that way.

I was lucky I didn't have to fight. Fisticuffs were never part

of my instinctual bag of tricks. My patented strategy of windmilling my arms and weeping openly seemed to inspire less fear in the hearts of opponents than I hoped. I had to prove myself on the battlefield only once, and as my mom's Jimmy Cliff records had been telling me for years: "The harder they come, the harder they fall."

Every day on the school bus there was this wall of a Hawaiian kid from the third grade who had been held back a year. I don't remember his name, but I'm sure it was something medieval and terrifying. His favorite hobby was taking turns picking on any kid smaller than him, which turned out to be just about everyone. Measured against my scrawny frame he was a Goliath of biblical proportions, so my turn came soon enough.

One day, after weeks of ear tweaking, insults and threats, my little Scorpio thermostat burst and bubbled me up, out of my seat. Before I knew it, I was standing on the moving bus as it snaked down the crumbling coastal road. Sheer cliffs stabbing into the ocean on one side, the hard rock of the mountain on the other. There he stood before me in the aisle, a slack jawed monster, arms crossed, grinning with crooked yellow teeth. He taunted me in pidgin with challenges ranging from my validity as a citizen of Hawaii, to my validity as anything other than a stupid little faggot white boy.

"Eh, lolo haole boy, you like beef? Wago'n bus you mahu haole up."

While my pidgin was not the most refined on the island, I understood enough to know that these were legitimate “fighting words.”

At this point my memory slows down and takes on more cinematic tension than it probably deserves, but as one of only a handful of fistfights in a childhood spent hiding in the bushes, it felt downright Oscar worthy:

Squinting eyes in stark close up. Ennio Morecone's 'Ecstasy of Gold' blaring at full blast. Fingers twitching at the sides of my shorts, ready to draw (either a pencil eraser or some corduroy lint, those being the sole contents of my pocket). The other children on the bus chanting for blood. A helicopter shot of a yellow school bus in flames, careening wildly out of control and hugging the cliff, screeching tires narrowly avoiding a fiery end on the rocks below...

In reality I'm sure I was sobbing uncontrollably and sputtering some version of the “F word”.

As I puffed up my bony chest in front of this drooling titan, he did what people with the upper hand usually do. He pushed me with that upper hand, and I fell like a rag doll a few rows back.

Lacking any actual technique or strength, a wiser kid would have stayed in the fetal position until he reached his final destination. Instead, I decided the best strategy was to abandon all strategy and let blind rage take the reins.

Next thing I knew I was up off the ground with my hands

on the seat backs of either side of the aisle. He looked down at me with his snaggle-tooth grin as I lifted myself up on toothpick arms and swung my legs towards his face with the full force of my sixty pound vegetarian body. Unprepared for any real resistance, he stood there stock-still as my feet clacked against his jaw. It sounded like a window slamming shut, and for a second everything stopped. The jeers from the other students, the rumble of the tires on the road, the wind in the palm trees, the waves on the rocks below. The whole world paused and held its breath. His face didn't show pain or anger, instead it twisted into something like curiosity. He took a step back, then another and seemed to bob for a moment like a cork in water. The world switched back on as he succumbed to gravity at last and fell hard on his ass.

There was no blood, no permanent damage, but there was something longer lasting. As the kids on the bus snapped out of their stasis and cheered, a swell of pride hit my chest and I almost started crying again, for different reasons. I found my way back to my seat where my brother clapped me on the back, grinning ear to ear.

The boy got up, sat down in his seat and said nothing. When he got off the bus a few stops later he scowled at me with dark venom, but his fangs were gone. He never messed with me again and the bus seemed a more peaceful place after that. I would like to think I gained his respect as a worthy adversary and later in life he thought twice before picking on the little guy. That he

sometimes thinks about the snot-nosed twerp who stood up and knocked him down, but I doubt it. It was just one lucky hit in a hundred.

Still, when I think about that day, I can't remember a time I felt so brave. A field of possibility stretched out before me in that moment. Adrenaline shook the tall grasses, peeling open reluctant flowers and carrying in springtime noises of birds and bugs. It was a place with no consequences, where a moment of caution would be like capturing a butterfly to admire its wings and forgetting to poke holes in the jar.

As my brother jabbed me in the ribs with his elbow, heralding my triumph over the ogre who had terrorized the bus for so long, I felt a mountain grow in that field. Green and lush with dragons circling its peak and me at the summit. Not a small and meek eight year-old, but a knight, clad in armor with a sword thrust through the clouds, throwing thunderbolts down into the valley of fear.

The years have chipped away at the stones of that mountain. Taken the wild from the flowers replacing them with weeds that strip the clay of its power to grow green things. Maybe that's what growing up is. Collecting fragile specimens of wonder, trapping them to keep them safe, and forgetting them on the shelf.

On the day we killed the wolf, the mask fell to the floor.

We performed the operation on the kitchen table. Rey folded the handkerchief and plunged his arm into the mask like stuffing a turkey. He pushed the fabric behind the eye holes, then stood it upright. Those blank red eyes stared back at us, adding new menace to the rubber teeth and tongue.

It was just a Halloween mask from who knows where, but it had always been part of my dad's uniform. When we lived in the Haight Ashbury he would put on a tight brown polyester suit, the kind of thing only late nineteen seventies fashion could create, pull on the mask and prance down Haight Street as the Wolfman. Past the apartment where my sister was born and the rainbow mural my mom painted during the Summer of Love, to disappear into the wilderness of Golden Gate Park. We didn't find anything odd about it, he always played a cast of characters: outlaw, hippie, dealer, father.

The image of the wolf was the totem of our family. My mom drew a series of counter culture comics for Rip Off Press called "Wolfman". Stories about a slick wolf in a leisure suit, a shaman, a mystic, a conman. Stories about my dad. They also cut a seven inch record as the Wolfpack Band with tracks like Public Enemy #1 and Peyote Twist. Songs about turning on and dropping out, spilling over with wolf howls and growls, saxophones and electric youth.

The Hawaiian climate did not inspire dressing up as the

Wolfman, so the mask had an honored place in our house, thrown up on a cardboard box on the brace of our A-frame. We restored him to his perch to watch us eat cereal just like any other morning, except for those red eyes glowing behind the rubber.

The mask always scared me, even with my dad's smiling face inside. But it wasn't cool to be afraid of baby-stuff like a monster mask when my brother wasn't. The prospect of being left behind on an adventure was much more terrifying. Being his friend was worth any measure of heebie-jeebies.

Still, I couldn't shake the sight of those eyes. Later when we walked to the end of our driveway to throw gravel at the stop sign across the street, they were all I could think about.

On the day we killed the wolf, he had been watching us a long time.

He saw my brother and I camped out under the tree, trying to catch Santa Claus in the act. Nobody had a chimney in Hana, so we figured his most likely entrance was the sliding glass door that framed the swaying palms across the street. There was just enough room to land a sleigh on the porch. We placed ourselves in such a way that good old Saint Nick would have to trip over us to so much as fill a stocking.

Had I known that would be the last one, our last real Christmas, I would have tried harder to stay awake. I would have made sure to catch my mom and dad slinking out of their

bedroom, placing wrapped gifts all around our splayed legs and arms. A soccer ball, a Battle Cat, a Stretch Armstrong.

After the divorce, in San Francisco, my mom bought a tiny living tree. We decorated it, watered it once and watched it die. The next Christmas she painted the dead tree with day-glow paint. The year after that she uprooted it and painted the roots too. It was part of a holiday wonderland that included not only a stick that glowed green and red under a black light, but the kind of high quality presents only welfare and art-school student loans could buy.

It sounds hip now, the avant-garde twig, exposed roots suspended by wire over a secondhand triangular end-table. The truth was, be it social pressure or the plastic embrace of capitalism, all I really wanted was a real goddamn Christmas tree, a cup of eggnog and some Nat King Cole on the radio.

She tried for a while, but we were always broke and holidays were never mom's thing. When it came down to just her and us, there was no reason to pretend anymore. She had bigger worries, the kind of things kids don't stop to care about. Things like money and food, and fighting to clear the room of the darkness that hung on her like a coat most days.

On the day we killed the wolf, my mother was an ocean away.

The wolf looked down on the kitchen, on the pillows in the window seat where my mom used to sit and play the mandolin

in the afternoon. I would crawl up on her lap and put my ear to her stomach. Sitting as still and silent as I could, I closed my eyes and listened to the gurgling, to the churning, to the voice of her body. A familiar song.

We laid perfectly still, but her insides were always moving. In the stillness, in the peace and the calm, my mother always moved.

On the day we killed the wolf, we watched together as my father turned blue.

Dad's eyes bulged bloodshot. Silence swallowed all the noise in the world. His face contorted into a mask of horror. Rey pounded his back, pushing his stomach onto the back of a chair.

Then it was over, as quickly as it began.

The murder weapon flew from his throat with a cough that hit me like a slap on the face. The gentle noises of the island switched back on, the wind in the trees and the buzz of nocturnal insects. We looked down at it laying on the beige carpet, the insidious culprit: a bright green gecko's tail. The lizards were everywhere and their tails fell off so often we collected them in the yard like prehensile twigs. Somehow that night, one had made it into the spaghetti sauce.

My father was a colossus to me, a giant. Tanned like a leather bag and filled with power, even half crippled and walking

with a limp. According to sacred family lore he broke his neck in a car wreck before I was born. The doctor told him he would never walk again. By pure strength of will he stood up from the wheelchair, pulled off his neck brace and walked out of the hospital. I'm sure at least half of that story was bullshit, but I never searched too hard for the truth.

At the beach, succumbing to our repeated requests, he would flex his arms and hold me and Rey dangling from his biceps until we lost our grip and fell to the sand. Our strength always gave out before his. Strange that he could be struck down by something so small, so ridiculous as a gecko's tail.

He held my brother by the shoulders.

“You saved my life” he said. Water in his eyes from gratitude or the effort to breathe. “I love you.”

He pulled Rey in close and hugged him hard, then he laughed. Thunderous peels of laughter cutting the tension to ribbons. His big smile beaming larger than I'd ever seen. My dad could have choked to death that night, but he was saved by an eleven year old fist on the back. In that moment my brother was the strong one.

I think now of all the ways I could have saved my father, but I just stood and watched it happen.

On the day we killed the wolf, he knew how to keep his little rubber fangs shut.

Dad hired a live-in babysitter named Shelly. As free-range kids the need for such a thing was relative. In this case, it was relative to the fact that she was young and blond and as interested in my dad as the concept of free love. It didn't take long to make the smooth transition from granola munching babysitter to granola munching concubine.

The excuse for hiring her in the first place was that mom flew back to San Francisco to re-paint her rainbow mural. A symbol of the Summer of Love, white-washed by the new tenants of the building. I joined her for the summer to picket with other activists and in the end the mural was repainted. When the new school year came, I went back to Hana expecting her to follow soon after.

My dad believed in the concept of free love to a fault, a trait passed down to his sons for better or worse. Shelly was an unrepentant recipient of my father's affection, but I don't blame her. He was a charismatic and persuasive man. I was the one who should have said something. My mom was fighting for her legacy and setting a precedent for preserving public art in the City. It was important shit, and leaving her kids behind must have been the hardest part.

My only excuse for not being a tattletale at the first sign of hanky-panky was a series of uninvited chemical explosions in my

brain. Things I couldn't fully understand; the stuff of underage goose-bump legend. There was no way to articulate these feelings without breaking down into giggles on the floor.

I never went through that classic “girls are gross” stage where buck-knives and bug worship won out over the attentions of the opposite sex. Our tree houses were always co-ed and the password was “come on in!” Not that any girls ever did, my palms were just as sweaty and voice just as cracked as the next kid. The only difference between me and the ew-ick-girls crowd was that I welcomed those clammy hands and awkward silences into my dog-eared comic book world.

Rey and Skybear, ahead of me in years and libido, came up with a plan to act on some of these forbidden thoughts. After hiding my head under a blanket and laughing nervously for an hour, I must have agreed. The wolf was there that day. He watched in silence as we confronted her in the kitchen.

“We know what you and dad are doing.” My brother said with more smug confidence than any eleven year-old should have.

This was not a big revelation. Even when my mother was around our dad was notorious for never closing or locking the bedroom door. There are enough fleshy images burned onto my brain to fill an entire wing of the “walking in on your parents doing it museum”, a place I sincerely hope doesn't exist. Still, it was a bold opening statement and my brother let it sink in before continuing.

“We're gonna tell our mom the next time she calls. Unless...”

“Unless what?” she said.

My brother leaned in close for the kill. “Unless you do something for us.”

“Oh really?” Arms crossed, she leaned against the counter with a mixture of concern and bemusement. “What exactly is it you want?”

“You have to give each of us a french kiss.”

Boom! There it was. He just blurted it out. No timpani drums, no ascending piano chords pounding out an ominous dum Dum DUM. Just the sound of warm wind and the scent of rotting mangoes coming through the open window.

How he mustered up the nerve I'll never know, my palms still get wet just thinking about it. I stayed quiet and did nothing but grin the whole time. I was sure if I made a noise or moved a single nerve ending, they would notice I was there and the deal would be off. Or worse, I would be excused to go sit downstairs and try to picture all sorts of carnal pleasures for which I had no visual reference.

Whatever I did must have worked because before I knew it, Shelly had us standing in line by the sink as she took her time to mix up a pitcher of lemonade from frozen concentrate. She insisted that we each drink a tall glass before anything happened.

We never spoke of it afterwards, any of us. I don't think my dad ever knew and I'm sure my mom didn't. We never brought it up, not even among ourselves.

I said nothing when we visited Shelly and my dad living together in New York a couple years later. I sat next to her in the theater watching *Back to the Future* on the big screen and shared popcorn. On the way home we talked about the Flux Capacitor and Marty McFly hanging off the back of a truck riding a skateboard, but we didn't talk about that day.

That week in New York, the last week I would ever see my dad in the flesh. The last time I smelled him, the last time he held me in those invincible arms. We talked about a lot of things, but nothing about that day on the island. I thought about it though, over and over again I thought about it.

I can't remember the kiss now. My first kiss. Eight years-old with the twenty something babysitter who was sleeping with my dad. But when I close my eyes, even now as I write this, I can still taste the lemonade.

On the day we killed the wolf, the water was cool and still.

Hooting, hollering and howling, we moved in starts and stops by the side of the road. I waved to the Papaya Man who sold fruit to passing tourists twenty feet from groves of wild trees. We walked until we reached a hole in the barbwire fence keeping cows

in their coastal pasture. Squeezing through the rusted barbs, we found a path carved by the bare feet of locals.

My eyes unconsciously scanned every cow-patty on the lookout for magic mushrooms. Dad taught us what to look for and it became a reflex. I must have stared at a thousand turds, but never found one. To this day I can't walk past a pile of shit without looking for a psychedelic volunteer.

The highway was far behind us when we came to the lip of the Venus pool. No one else was there, in fact we were lucky to have the place to ourselves most of the time. It was a secret known only to a few locals and us haole hippies who went there to get naked and jump off the rocks.

The pool was a bowl of dark water, still and deep with a bald rock in the middle, a natural landing to lay in the sun. My mom would swim out and spend hours there baking her skin to try to match my dad. The pool was fed on one side at high tide, over a rocky beach where the sea crashed against the shore pouring salt into the fresh water. On the other end was a waterfall that only roared when heavy rains ran off the hills above. That day the tide was out and the river was dry. The pool was brimming with endless gallons of blue sky, broken only by our silhouettes peering over the edge.

The cliffs formed a semi-circle where one running leap could smash the mirror and send ripples throughout the deep blue cosmos. It always felt like a thousand-foot drop to me. I was scared

to do it, like so many things, roller-coasters, surfing the big waves, talking to girls. The fruits of boyhood I could only nibble at while my brother ate them whole. Rey would cast himself off the edge of all these things a hundred times while I stood by and watched.

I thought again about the wolf as I stepped onto the sun-bleached rocks of the river bed. Those red eyes, the fangs, the angry brow. Dad said if I got caught there at the wrong time a flash flood would sweep me away, dash me on the rocks, push me out to sea. His warnings may have been overblown, but the weather on Maui changed one minute to the next and I must have been one of the top five most gullible children in America. My brother would prove that daily with improvised urban legends, like the time I squished a black widow and he convinced me that spiders avenge their fallen brothers over generations...until the job is done. I took these stories to be the gospel truth until I was far too old to know better.

Watching the sky for signs of rain, I listened for the wall of water with every rustle of wind. Each minute spent on those rocks felt like a daredevil feat of reckless bravery. I was still holding my breath and setting my teeth for crushing death when I saw it. A black mark on an otherwise featureless gray rock. I moved closer and goosebumps made their rare appearance in the tropical heat. The wolf found me through the walls of our house, across the road and through the fields. We looked down together, the wolf and I, at a small thing no bigger than a quarter staring right back.

Drawn in charcoal with horns, pointed chin and deep angry slits for eyes. The same shape as the red eyes of the wolf, but these were black, the deepest black, scratched onto the ancient stone. The eyes of the devil.

I knew we were dabbling in some dark juju when we put that bandanna behind the eyes of the mask. Had we awakened something, or was it always his true form, his true nature? Wolves get a bad rap along with sharks, snakes and alligators. Written into every fairy tale as the darkness in the woods, in the jungle, in the water.

The wolf is a creature of instinct lead by hunger, but he enjoys chasing the rabbit to exhaustion, cornering it, smelling its fear. The fast beat of the rabbit heart accelerates as the wolf makes contact, teeth sinking into soft fur. Through the skin, into the body, pulling the tendons that move its little twitching nose. Severing the big fat vein that pumps blood into the tiny rabbit brain. Lapping up the fuel that tells the bunny to eat, to sleep, to run and finally to scream.

On the day we killed the wolf, he could smell my fear.

I always slept with the lights on and jumped into bed just before hands grabbed my ankles. Covers over my head, clenching my eyes tight to block out evil eyes looking down at me.

If the devil comes looking for a soul to eat, to push down

his red throat, is that what makes him a monster? His other sins aside, the betrayals, the wheeling and dealing, the trickery, at the end of the day the devil's got to eat just like you and me. Just like the wolf with the rabbit.

To him of course, we are the rabbit. We are the meat.

Struck dumb, looking into the face of the devil on that rock, I was more than scared. I was fucking terrified. I called out to Rey and Skybear who came running.

“Did you draw that, you asshole?” The usual thrill of using cuss words when our parents weren't around was lost in the moment.

“No dude.” Rey's voice cracked a little, that was maybe the scariest thing of all.

“You're fucking with me, right?”

“It wasn't me.”

“Holy shit what's that?” Skybear pointed at another crude drawing of a black bat, wings unfurled.

That's when we noticed we were surrounded. Each crack in the rock had a spiderweb or a sinister face, wings and claws, a pentagram. Just then the sky started to turn and a buffalo herd of gray clouds stampeded towards us from the ocean. Still air gave way to a gale that howled in our ears so loud we had to shout to be heard.

“It's the devil! We brought the devil with the red eyes!”

Rain started to fall. Fat drops hit the rocks like gunshot wounds. One after another, picking up pace until the whole rock, the whole creek, the whole world was a dark wet wound. We didn't have to discuss what to do next, we ran. Through the pasture, the search for psilocybin abandoned, we raced towards the snipped piece of barbwire fence.

“Wait for me!” they were leaving me in the dust, but I didn't look back. I was sure that there was a demon with dark wings, sharp teeth and smoke coming out of his nostrils, snapping at my heels. It would devour me if I fell behind. Rey and Skybear stopped when they hit the road and called for me to catch up. We paused there exhausted, bent in half and gasping for air, until my brother took charge.

“We need to go to the church.” His breath was shallow.

All I could do was nod, then we ran again, the way only children can. A trained Olympic athlete would have trouble keeping up with three kids running for their lives. The church was at the top of the hill, one of those little one-room chapels you see in the movies. Stucco bell tower, painted blue like the sky that day, before the prince of darkness was conjured by a couple stupid boys and a handkerchief. The door was locked and rattled as we tugged at the handle. Jesus wasn't there for us, he was probably surfing.

Our family always had a fair-weather relationship with

religion. My mother could best be described as a secular humanist, while my dad brought the deep spirituality to the table. His tastes ran towards medicine-bag mojo of one kind or another; incense, eagle feathers and crystals were commonplace. There was also some Christian faith mixed in, enough to give us a vivid impression of heaven and hell.

Whatever his internal beliefs, one thing was certain. We never went to church. In fact I can't remember a single time we stepped foot inside one on purpose. Devout or not, it didn't matter much on that particular stormy afternoon because the joint was closed.

“Drop to your knees!” Rey said, thinking fast to save our immortal souls. I was pretty sure the devil had manifested on the island. If a grass-stained knee got us out of this mess, then hallelujah.

We kneeled in a line, snapping our eyes shut and mumbling pleas. I spent most of the time apologizing for not calling more often. It was like talking to your grandparents on the holidays, assuming grandma not only baked a great oatmeal cookie, but also created humpback whales, woolly mammoths and the duck-billed platypus. After a few minutes of clasped hands and whispered deals with the big kahuna, the clouds broke and a ray of sunlight came down on us. The only thing missing was an angelic chorus, but beggars can't be choosers. We had asked for help and received a reprieve, now there was work to be done.

We had to kill the wolf.

On the day we killed the wolf, we were brothers in arms.

Shaking rain from our hair, we ignored the greeting of the Papaya Man. Kicking up rocks on the driveway we took the back steps two at a time, spilling into the kitchen where we paused to catch our breath. The room was still and dim. The only sound, a gentle clang from the wind chimes on the porch.

I looked up and there he was glaring right back at me, just as always except for those damned eyes. I could feel them burning through me, calling me, daring me to challenge him.

No one had the nerve to climb a chair this time. Instead we gathered up pillows from the couch and threw them at the leering creature. I missed twice, so did Skybear, but Rey hit it with his first throw and the wolf came tumbling to the ground. I jumped back like it was a hissing cobra. The wind picked up again shaking the windows, blowing loud outside and inside my head. The devil was in the room.

“What do we do now?”

“We need something holy.” Rey said.

“The crystal! We can use the crystal!” Skybear pointed to the coffee table.

The centerpiece was a crystal the size of a loaf of bread, a

gift from Oceana. I always wanted to hold it but was scared of breaking it somehow. It was a sacred object that cast rainbows on the walls when the sun shined through the window. A thing to be respected almost to the point of fear. It was the only weapon that could work.

Rey picked it up and we all put a hand on it. Sinking to our knees on the carpet over this rubber mask imbued with all the powers of the underworld, we lifted our small arms together. As one we brought the crystal down hard, striking the wolf in the middle of the forehead. We lifted it again and again, the tip of the crystal stabbing the brown fur, poking holes in the rubber. I don't remember if we howled. If we yelled in triumph over evil. If we laughed like comic book villains consumed with blood lust, but I hope we did. It seems fitting for an exorcism.

When our strength wore out at last, we laid on the ground gasping for breath.

The wolf was dead.

Light came back into the room. Faith came back too, not the desperate faith we clung to on the church lawn, but the real, pure faith of a child. The belief that everything is going to be alright. That mom will come home, that dad will survive. That evil had tried to tear us apart and failed.

The devil took a great risk not using his usual tricks and temptation. He made his intentions known, but we beat him back for good. That old devil would never have the balls to take our

father from us, three thousand miles away, with heroin and disease, just a couple short years from that day. He wouldn't dare let my dad die sick and alone somewhere far from us, where we never got to see him fall. My father would remain forever that strong man holding us up, swinging like monkeys from his arms.

That cowardly snake, that devil. He wouldn't have the nerve to pull my mother out of rainbows and light, and thrust her into darkness with pain pills and drunk boyfriends. Cast us all into a world of welfare and food stamps, sleeping like sardines in the back of a truck on cold San Francisco nights. To break our family to pieces.

At that moment it was all true. The devil himself had been shouted down by a couple kids with no shoes, living in paradise.

Sweat cooling on our foreheads, we stood and looked down at the ruin of rubber and fake fur. The crystal lay beside it like a murder weapon from Mount Olympus. Rey pulled the old spit rag out of the wreckage and we held it in our hands, laughing at how powerless it had become. I felt as strong as my dad in that moment. As wise and brave as my mom. We were brothers, and right then in that living room, holding each other by the arms, we were something more.

Whatever that was, we were something a hell of a lot more.

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Ricardo Zegri is a writer and musician with a deep affection for pretentious beer and humble burritos. His work has appeared in the Welter Literary Journal, Paragon Press, The Esthetic Apostle, Mind Equals Blown and various other coffee stained zines. He lives in Vallejo California with his wife, crazy kid, and a pile of animals.