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The Monument

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Dan Phipps *The Monument*

"These are the dog days of summer, aren't they sir," said Major Jones, as he stood with the Colonel in the small concrete plaza lined with empty chairs. "The dress blue uniform isn't logical for Washington, DC in August."

On cue, the Colonel removed his hat, produced a large red handkerchief, and wiped his brow. "You know better than to expect logic," he chuckled. "Besides, Major, you must admit that this is a marvelous place. Why, just look at that sky and that perfect parade deck. Imagine Robert E. Lee standing here on his family's property and looking out over the Potomac to the Capitol building, the monuments, and the White House. Major Jones you are a big part of history this evening. Feel proud." With that, he turned on his heel and left the reviewing area.

But what Major Jones truly felt were dress shoes pinching his little toes, a tight choker collar chafing his neck, and the pain in the small of his back caused by a sadistically tailored military blouse. Unlike his perpetually positive commanding office, Major Jones had to work through his dread of these Sunset Parades. As he had done three times a week for the last four months, he stood alone and tried to psych himself for the evening. The sweet smell of newly mowed grass drifted up from the parade deck on a gentle breeze. It mingled with the scent of the cologne and aftershave lotion of the well heeled ladies and gentlemen who were now being escorted past him into reserved seats by splendidly clad Marine hosts.

Jones, standing at a military parade rest, monitored and silently supervised the proceedings. At this point in the summer, he told himself, it's rote. Things run like clockwork. I'm like one of those monuments out there... just part of the scenery.

The reviewing area was being transformed into a beehive of smiles, blue blazers, cocktail dresses, and chatter. "Senator, meet Admiral Kennedy, another scratch golfer like yourself...Justice, I would like to introduce you to my wife... Good to see you again. Colonel, you have arranged another fine evening for a parade. What are the musical selections tonight?"

Behind him, on the wooded knoll overlooking the VIP area, Jones could also hear tourist buses delivering their cargo. Bermuda shorts, tank tops, families, and cameras suspended around sweaty necks were hallmarks of these happy vacationers. Jones became so delighted by the aroma of a picnicker's fried chicken, that he subtly repositioned himself to better savor it. From this new vantage point, he caught the glint of the setting sun on the enormous bronze statue behind the parade field. From where he was standing, the American flag that was an integral part of the monument was perfectly aligned with the Lincoln Memorial, the Reflecting Pool, The Capitol Mall, and the Capitol building.

From a distance, obviously in a spot hidden from view by the bulk of the monument, Jones heard the unmistakable clatter of a rifle dropped on pavement.

Almost simultaneously there followed the suspicious thud of a base drum from the same location. "Damn!" he thought. "This should be perfection."

He stepped out of the reviewing area and approached a young man, who was holding a radio and wearing a cowboy hat that disguised a close cropped haircut. "Corporal, contact the monument with your brick. Tell them to knock off the grab-ass."

"Yes sir." The corporal turned to hide behind the tree and mumble warnings like some conspiratorial secret agent.

Major Jones went through a quick checklist. The guest of honor, Senator Horn, was in his place. The reserved seats were filled. A signal had been received from behind the monument that marchers, color guard, and the band were ready. He took the high-sign from the Colonel, then caught the announcer's eye and gave a thumbs-up.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the announcer intoned, "welcome."

To the cadence of drums, units magically appeared from behind the monument and in perfect order spilled onto the grassy field between the monument and the reviewing area. The show had begun.

Major Jones heard the clicking of boot heels behind him, turned and saw the Corporal stepping toward him. "Sorry sir, there's trouble with a tourist at the entrance." His radio hissed, and seconded his report.

"I'm on my way. Tell them to minimize the commotion."

He moved down the asphalt path. Times like this broke the reverie. What the hell, he thought, it's just a job.

As he neared the gate, a Master Sergeant rushed to greet him. "Sir, we've got a real hard case on our hands. We can hardly control him. He won't listen."

By the time he arrived at the gate, Jones was expecting a kind of drug-crazed Ghengis Khan. Instead, he saw three large Marines standing in a tight group. He did a double take and noticed an elderly man in their midst like a seedling in a redwood forest. The feeble-looking fellow stood patiently and respectfully. "What can I do for you sir?" Jones asked, as the forest parted.

"I simply want to see my statue."

"Well, uh—" Jones began.

In the blink of an eye, the gnome had brushed past him and was purposefully making his way up the path toward the reviewing area. After exchanging a shrug and a brief appealing glance heavenward with the three Marines, he pivoted and hurried to retrieve him.

The old man walked with a slight limp and Major Jones, with his much younger and longer legs, was soon able to overtake him and block his way. Then, in the instant it took to mentally register the man's darting downcast eyes, he parried a head fake and then fell victim to a wonderfully executed hip fake. Left standing alone and feeling foolish, he felt his blood pressure rise. He took time to smack one fist in the palm of his hand and then charged off again down the path, this time more seriously.

Major Jones groaned aloud when he noted a herd of milling tourists crossing the path in front of him. With broken-field dexterity, he picked his way through.

but as he looked ahead, he saw that his quarry was apparently agile in a crowd. He was getting away. "Great," Jones muttered. "He's going to make it to the VIP area. That's going to go over well".

As glimpses of his career flashed before him, he became more aggressive and used his hands to clear his path. He was gaining now, and his prey was blocked by four nuns walking arm-in-arm. With the velocity and suddenness of a diving hawk, Jones swooped. As good luck would have it, they were still a few yards from the reviewing area. He had the man trapped between himself, a pine tree, and a large boulder. There was no escape.

The two panting men stood facing one another, and it suddenly occurred to Jones that he and the old man had exchanged few words.

"Do you have a reservation for tonight's parade sir?"

The man's silent and bemused smile made Jones flush and confirmed that it was a stupid question. "Never mind," he thought. "I have him now. He can't get away."

The recent chase seemed even more incredible in light of the old guy's rather pathetic appearance. Beads of perspiration dotted the forehead and his cheeks were flushed. There were deep wrinkles around the eyes and mouth. Small dark eyes alternately registered both pleading and defiance. The parchment-like skin on his hands and face was worn smooth and brittle, and its pigment was accentuated by several dime-sized liver spots. The striking deep brown color of his hair was dramatized by gray sideburns. On second notice, his toupee was badly askew. It gave him the jaunty air of a sailor wearing a perilously balanced white cap. His necktie was off center and one shirt collar end was curled upward. His suit was brown, expensive, but obviously cleaned hundreds of times. It fit him as if he had been a much bigger man at the time of its purchase, probably during the 1950's.

He was decidedly uncertain about what to do. Instinctively, both men turned toward the monument and the sounds of drums and brass instruments. The old man stood transfixed and relaxed. Without moving, he said, "My name is Felix. Did you know this is the most visited monument in the Capitol? It's true." he said defensively. "The Park Service counts everybody and they keep statistics. I've seen them. This is their favorite." His tone changed as he raised his chin upward. He was now obviously concentrating his gaze on the statue that replicated six men struggling to raise the American flag over Iwo Jima "What they were doing was hard work. Can't you just feel that? See those last two? They barely touch the pole, but the job can't get done without them."

"Oh...I can see that, yes." Major Jones was warming to Felix, despite their history. He appreciated the interest in this monument to Marines, and he wished there were a vacant seat for him.

"Those men are nearly three stories high. The bayonets on their belts are five feet long, and their canteens are so big they would hold ten gallons of water if you could fill them."

"Interesting. Were you in World War II, Felix?"

"No, I wasn't."

The Major watched the man's face as unidentifiable and almost imperceptible emotion flickered around the corners of his eyes.

"This statue took four years to complete. It was started in California and transported to Quantico, Virginia, where it was completed. I live in an apartment overlooking the park." He pointed to a large brick complex. "I haven't missed one of these parades in twenty-five years. Usually I stay by my window and watch." He grinned sheepishly. "Sometimes I even count people."

"Were you in the Marines?"

"No," he said quietly, "I'm the sculptor."

Major Jones' nerves sprang alive. His instincts told him that he had an immediate decision to make—either separate this possibly deluded old-timer even further from the reviewing area, or treat him with particular deference. Still uncertain, he took Felix gently by the arm and guided him toward the reviewing area. Passing by the Corporal in the cowboy hat, he made a motion with his hand and was rewarded by being handed the Corporal's own folding chair.

As Major Jones, with a chair under one arm and Felix in tow, entered the seating area, he attracted the attention of the Colonel, who looked over with annoyance. Perhaps sensing the Colonel's distress, Senator Horn also glanced over. At the exact moment that anger flashed across the Colonel's face, the Senator jumped from his seat and cried, "Felix, how the hell are you!"

In the flurry of handshakes, back slaps, introductions, and seat shuffling that followed, Major Jones lost Felix to a bevy of Very Important Persons. And it really felt like a loss. Even though he had spent just a few minutes with the man, he now sensed that Felix was somebody of unusual uniqueness and depth. He regretted not being able to ask more questions. Even now, several came to mind.

Felix had been asked to stand with the Senator and the Colonel at the conclusion of the parade, when the band and the troops pass by the reviewing area, and salute the dignitaries. Major Jones watched the three men standing there waiting for the first of the units to pass by, and he noticed again that Felix was quite feeble. He seemed to be leaning against the Senator for support. This little cameo was framed, in the background, by an enduring bronze statue of such immensity that it radiated strength and power. It was ironic to imagine the evidence of himself that Felix must have left on that work of art. Major Jones wondered, too, if he himself was leaving his own fingerprints on all of this.

The parade ended. Jones stood as straight as he possibly could. He inhaled deeply and thrust his chest forward. The crowd was beginning to break up, and he rushed off to supervise. But as he did, it was with a sense that what he was doing was something more than a job.