

I called Delilah's house twice a day for four days before someone actually answered the phone. It was Delilah's older brother home on leave from the Marines. Her older brother's name was Brown, at least that's what we all knew him as. His real name might have been Francis or Paul or something like that, but everyone knew him as Brown. There was no rhyme or reason for everyone calling him Brown. It's just what everyone called him, and he didn't seem to mind. He was a rough guy — the kind of guy we were careful around. Not only was he older, he was also muscular and aggressive. He earned four varsity letters in high school football and wrestled his way to state runner-up his junior and senior years.

He joined the Marines right out of high school. A lot of guys from our high school went military. Most of us were not college material and came from working class backgrounds. Brown and Delilah's father was one of the few college-educated people in the town. He was a rope salesman, talkative and well-liked. Brown nearly failed high school chemistry and his father's dream of his son going to college slowly dissipated. Sensing his father's disappointment and not interested in slipping behind the wheel of a semi truck pulling a heavy load to Oklahoma City, Brown enlisted in the Marines.

I asked him how he was doing. He told me things were good. He was two years into his four year enlistment and preparing to go over to West Germany for a year. He said he was home for two weeks before heading over there. Other than my grandfather, who was a WWII vet and claimed he was with Kurt Vonnegut in Dresden, I'd never met anyone who'd been to Germany. Years later, as a historian considering writing a book about my grandfather, Vonnegut, and Dresden, I learned that not only was my grandfather's story made-up, but that he was dishonorably discharged from the Army before ever getting out of boot camp. He was stationed at Camp Grant in Rockford, Illinois. It turns out that following orders and being disciplined were

not my grandfather's skill set. He found himself quickly in trouble for drinking in the barracks, disregarding orders and punching a platoon sergeant. He spent six months in the brig before he was kicked out of the Army completely. He spent the rest of the war years working on the railroad laying track and learning the trade. After the war, he just stayed on and ended up doing railroad work until he retired.

His two brothers, my great-uncles, both fought in Europe. When they came home they were so ashamed of my grandfather's behavior that they never spoke to him again. Somewhere out on the tracks my grandfather must have invented the story about fighting in the war, and, years later, when I told him about *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Vonnegut and Dresden, he told me he knew Vonnegut and that he was in Dresden with Vonnegut during the firebombing. He said Vonnegut was an asshole. I was thirteen and willing to believe anything my grandfather told me. He seemed to me to be a very old man at the time, yet his leathery skin and sinewy tendons created an aura of a man who had seen a lot.

Brown was heading to West Germany, and Delilah and I had recently graduated. Delilah was preparing to move to New York City to live with H el ene and spread her wings. Brown told me a few things about being stationed in Texas. He said it really was hot enough to fry an egg on the hood of his truck. He said not to try it, though, because the egg gets stuck to the hood, and it's a real pain to scrub it off. I asked Brown if Delilah was around. He said he didn't know where she was. He had arrived that morning and the house was empty. He wasn't expected until tomorrow, but he was able to get standby on an earlier flight so he was a day early. He had to call the high school football coach and plead with him to drive out to the airport and pick him up. It was over an hour each way to the airport. Brown said that had he not been one of the coach's favorite

players and had he not helped the team win the league title his junior and senior years, the coach would have made up an excuse, but how could he not do a favor for Brown?

The coach was a big man. He had played offensive tackle for Kent State. The rumor was that he might have had a shot at the pros, but he injured his right knee during his junior year, and even though he played his entire senior season, the knee continued to bother him. For the last four games he went so far as to allow the trainer to inject cortisone into his knee twice a week. When the season ended, there was no professional interest. The coach returned home with a teaching degree in social studies. He was hired by his alma mater, more as a football coach than as a teacher. There really wasn't a need for another social studies teacher at the time. He mostly covered study halls, filled in for ill teachers and ran the football program. By the time Brown started his freshman year, the coach had been heading the program for twenty years and had been moved into a regular social studies classroom when an older teacher retired.

The coach's baby was his 1967 sky blue Cadillac DeVille convertible. He inherited it from his father. His father liked big cars, but wasn't meticulous in caring for anything. When the car came into the coach's possession, it was in rough shape at best. The coach rebuilt the 429 V8 and installed a custom manifold. He scrubbed the interior back to white, had the car sanded and painted, and finished it off with a replacement top and new tires. He kept it garaged all winter. He drove a rusty Plymouth Duster through the snow and salt.

Brown said that when the coach showed up at the airport, the Cadillac's top was down. He said the coach was wearing mirrored sunglasses, a Cleveland Indians ball cap, a white oxford shirt tucked into gray dress slacks and a dark blue windbreaker zipped half way up his chest. He said his large stomach bulged out in front of him, but that the car was roomy enough that his stomach did not touch the steering wheel.

Brown said he flagged the coach down, tossed his duffle in the back seat, opened the passenger door, and got in. He told me that he shook the coach's hand and thanked him for picking him up. Brown was wearing his green military fatigues with his pants tucked into black boots. His hat was in his duffle. A pair of Raybans were hooked into the bottom hole of his shirt pocket flap. He said he pulled them free and put them on. He said he was holding a paper bag. The bag contained a fifth of tequila that he bought at the duty-free store in the airport. The coach put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb. Brown said that he unscrewed the cap on the bottle, took a swig and handed the bottle to the coach. According to Brown, the coach also took a swig.

Brown told me that he had never had alcohol with the coach before, but he learned to drink seriously while in boot camp, and he figured that since the coach was driving all the way to the airport to pick him up, the least he could do was buy a bottle of tequila for them to share during the car ride. I didn't know why Brown told me all this and in such detail. Maybe he was just excited to be home or maybe he was feeling a little lonely since the house was empty. I at least was someone to talk to. Then, he invited me over.

He said I was welcome to drink some beer with him and wait for people to get back from wherever they were. Hanging out drinking beer with Brown was not something normal for me. The invitation surprised me, but Brown's long story about the airport pick up also surprised me. I told him I'd be over in thirty minutes or so and hung up the phone. I put on a navy blue short-sleeve garage shirt with the name Frank embroidered over the right breast pocket and a Goodyear patch over the left breast pocket. Delilah and I found it in a thrift store for two dollars. She thought it was hilarious and sort of cool. I looked at my long hair in the mirror; it was a mess. With a comb, I parted it down the middle and feathered it back. It wouldn't stay very well,

so I slid on a ball cap. I walked out to the truck, started it, popped in a mix tape and put the truck in drive. The Doors' *Break On Through* sounded through the speakers. I turned up the volume and sang along as I drove to Delilah's house to have beers with Brown.

When I arrived, Brown was sitting in a webbed lawn chair with an old steel cooler next to him. I parked the truck on the gravel patch under the basketball hoop. The hoop and metal backboard were rusty and the net was long gone. It was doubtful that anyone had shot baskets on that hoop in a long time. I climbed out of the truck. My dusty boots crunched down the stones as my weight pushed their soles against the gravel. I was wearing my favorite blue jeans. The jeans were faded, worn and broken in. I kept the ball cap on as I walked toward Brown.

Brown motioned me over and pointed to the empty matching lawn chair on the other side of the cooler. He had set up the chairs under a small grove of scrub trees and the shade cooled the area almost too much for early June. The chairs faced away from the house toward the muddy cow pasture. There were already two empty Budweiser cans on the ground beside Brown's chair. He was evidently starting on his third. He lit a Winston cigarette. The cigarette smoke quickly overwhelmed the scent of mowed grass.

Brown wore a crisp white t-shirt tucked into his green fatigues. His black military boots were unlaced and loose on his feet. The tee shirt was stretched tightly over his muscular chest and the arms fit snugly around his defined biceps. His hair was cut very short on the sides and flat but slightly longer on top. Before going to boot camp, like most of us, Brown had had long hair parted down the middle and feathered back. I had not seen him since he left for boot camp two years previously. I remember him being big and athletic, but now, with his new short haircut and tight tee shirt, he looked like a force to be reckoned with.

Brown told me to have a beer and asked me if I wanted a smoke. I took one and borrowed his lighter to light it. We sat for a few minutes until Brown looked at me.

"So you and my sister, huh?"

Yes, I was dating Delilah, Brown's little sister, but he knew that, we had been dating since junior year. What was I supposed to say to that?

"Yep, me and your sister." I took a swig of beer and tried to look relaxed.

"You do know that you can't trust her, don't you?" Brown drew a hit from his Winston and exhaled through his nostrils.

I didn't know this, nor did I believe it. I figured Brown was messing with me, but he wasn't smiling. He was looking straight out across the pasture at the Holsteins in the distance. He scratched his muscular bicep. I wasn't sure how to respond, so I remained silent and sipped my beer.

"You probably can't see it because she has you hooked, but I've seen it all before. Ever since she was a little girl she's been like this."

I wanted to ask him what he meant, but I didn't want Brown to think I was challenging him or not respecting his opinion. He looked quite a bit stronger than me, and, even though he invited me over to drink beer and wait for people to get home, I was still a bit nervous. I had never hung out with just Brown before. Anytime I was with him in the past, there were other people, too, and mostly I stayed off his radar.

The sun broke through an opening in the trees and a ray hit me right across the face. Although I welcomed the warmth, the glare made it slightly hard to see. I wanted to move my chair, but Brown had arranged them on either side of the cooler facing the pasture and moving the chair would mess with the symmetry he had established.

Brown pointed to several Holsteins grazing in the pasture. There were several mature cows and a couple heifers. "Aside from those heifers out there, those girls need milking twice a day. If they don't get it, they will let Fred Brandon know. Around five this afternoon they will start walking toward the milk house and soon after that they'll start mooing until Fred Brandon opens the gate and lets them in. They get uncomfortable if they don't get milked. All the pressure builds up and their udders swell."

Of course I knew all this. I too had grown up in dairy country. Brown wasn't teaching me anything about cows. The sun slipped back behind the branches and again I was in the full shade. I inhaled my cigarette and looked at the grazing Holsteins. I still wasn't sure what Brown wanted me to say.

"You see, those cows get bothered and then they get edgy if they don't get milked. You get what I'm saying?"

I had no idea what he was saying. Maybe he was drunk. Why shouldn't I trust Delilah? What did trusting Delilah have to do with Fred Brandon milking his cows? "Honestly Brown, I'm not sure I'm following you."

Brown flicked his spent cigarette. It flew several feet out in front of him and bounced off a wooden fence post. I was impressed with his aim. A light breeze picked up and blew into our faces. I could smell the slight manure odor from the pasture. It smelled mildly sweet and earthy. When you live in farm country, the smell of manure seems natural. I wouldn't call it pleasant, but it was somehow correct and expected. Mostly we didn't even notice it, but when it got cold, or really dry and the smell mostly vanished, something would seem off.

"All I'm saying, dude, is be careful. Delilah needs a lot of attention. When she's not getting it from you, you better believe she's getting it somewhere else. Always has, always will."

Why was he saying this? Had something happened? Was he hinting that Delilah was out with someone else as we sat there smoking cigarettes and drinking Budweiser?

"I'm going to grab my jean jacket from the truck. I'll be right back."

Brown was confusing me. I needed some time to figure out what was happening. I had been dating Delilah for a year and a half. There was nothing that she ever did that made me think she was going out with other guys. No one ever said anything to me. I never saw any signs. But here was her own brother sitting here telling me that my girlfriend, his own sister, couldn't be trusted. As I walked to my truck, I slipped my hand in my pocket and felt my keys. Part of me wanted to climb back in the truck and drive away from there, but I also was concerned about what Brown would think if I did something like that.

I opened the truck door. The hinges creaked and the door fell slightly toward the ground. I reached inside the cab and grabbed my jean jacket off the seat. I slid the jacket on, lifted the door back up so it would shut and latch correctly, and pushed it closed. I noticed that Brown was looking at me as I started to walk back. He must have also sensed that I was uncertain how to act around him and especially how to respond to his comments. Maybe he also sensed that I was contemplating getting in the truck, starting her up, and driving away from him, and he wanted to see if I would. He seemed relieved that I was returning. He smiled.

"Look man, I'm not trying to bust your dreams or anything, I'm just talking straight. Sometimes we need people to tell us how it is."

"I don't really know what to say, Brown. I know Delilah's your sister and all, but what you're saying about her... it's like you're talking about a different person... not about Delilah."

I wasn't sure if that sounded all right, but I wanted to try to explain to Brown what I was thinking without seeming like I was challenging him. Brown leaned back in his chair, lit another

cigarette and exhaled stale smoke. He drank from his beer can and didn't say anything for a long time. I tried to act calm and sipped my beer and gazed at the pasture. I thought that it would be nice to switch places with one of those Holsteins. I bounced my leg slightly and still Brown remained silent.

"So you don't have any idea when Delilah will be back?"

"Nope, but it might not be today. It doesn't happen too often, but every once in a while if the old man is traveling somewhere relatively fun, Delilah and Mom will go along for a mini-vacation. They can usually stay in Dad's hotel room for no extra cost, so hey, why not?"

"So they might not be back today at all?"

"Yep. It's kind of hard to tell. But thanks for agreeing to hang out for a bit. I don't have too many friends left around here."

"Sure, no problem."

Again we reverted to silence. I bummed another Winston and opened a second can of beer. Brown was on his fifth and his cigarette pack was nearly empty. I hoped he'd run out and need to go buy more. At least that would give me an excuse to leave.

"So about my sister... It's like this. She's always been starved for attention. It's like people paying attention to her is her drug. You pay attention to her and that's great, but I'm serious here, drug users are never satisfied, they always want more."

I thought about cracking a joke about how I was pretty good at keeping her satisfied, but I stopped myself as I realized that Brown might not appreciate the innuendo.

"So what are you saying? Are you saying you know something, or that you suspect something because of how Delilah has been in the past?"

I don't know what possessed me to talk so straight to Brown. Maybe it was the second beer on an empty stomach at eleven o'clock in the morning and the silent pauses and nervousness. I'm still not sure, but I said it and now either Brown was going to get mad, or he was going to be cool.

"Let's just leave it here, dude. Live and let live. OK?" Brown pulled the last cigarette from his pack, lit it and switched his gaze to the leaves on the trees above our heads. There were two brown squirrels chasing each other. They scampered up and down the boughs and jumped between branches. For a while we sat in silence and watched them frolick. Then Brown flicked his cigarette again hitting the fence post ten feet in front of us.

"You alright to drive?"

"Yeah, I've only had two beers."

"Would you mind driving me in to town so I can pick up some more smokes?"

I was more than happy to agree. I told him I would, and we walked toward the truck. We climbed in, shut the doors, and I started the engine. The mix tape played Dire Straits' *Sultans of Swing*. Brown rolled down his window and hung his arm out as we drove to town to get cigarettes. I kept the music loud all the way into town so we wouldn't have to talk. Brown seemed fine with it. At the gas station, he bought four packs of Winstons and gave one to me as a thank you for driving him into town. When we got back to the house, there was still no one around. I told Brown I needed to head home to do some stuff. He didn't seem to mind. He simply climbed out of the truck, told me he enjoyed hanging out for a bit, and thanked me again for the cigarette run. He shut the door and turned and walked back to the chairs under the scrub trees. I maneuvered the truck around in the drive so as not to have to back out. As I pulled away, Brown

raised his hand and made a peace sign. I flashed my hand in a half wave, pulled the truck out on the road, and drove away.