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The String of 10,000 Firecrackers

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THE STRING OF 10,000 FIRECRACKERS

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in

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by

Jan Becker

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To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Jan Becker, and entitled The String of 10,000 Firecrackers, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Julie Wade

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Asher Milbauer

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Les Standiford, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 2, 2017

The thesis of Jan Becker is approved.

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Dean Michael R. Heithaus
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Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2017

DEDICATION

For Grandma and Grandpa Becker, who taught me to love words. This is where I've been. And for Michael E. Davis, always, you are in my words.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

THE STRING OF 10,000 FIRECRACKERS

by

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Florida International University, 2017

Miami, Florida

Professor Les Standiford, Major Professor

THE STRING OF 10,000 FIRECRACKERS is a collection of personal essays that examines the narrator's upbringing as a Marine Corps brat, and her experience immigrating into civilian society in the United States after a childhood segregated behind barbed-wire on military bases.

The collection begins with the title essay, when the narrator, at nine years-of-age, tosses an ignited string of 10,000 firecrackers at her stepfather, a decorated Vietnam veteran, triggering post-traumatic flashback, and a reflection on the author's experience recovering traumatic amnesia. Intended to mimic the disjointed recall of trauma, the opening essay also serves to inform the subsequent essays in the collection, which take place between 1974 and 2014. Thematically, the collection explores: alienation from homeland and family, the diasporic nature of military life, the devastating effects of war, childhood sexual abuse, violence, death and grief, breaking the silence of long-held family secrets, and finding a place to call home.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE STRING OF 10,000 FIRECRACKERS

When I was in the fourth grade, in Hawai'i, my teacher, Mrs. Smith, told me that a string of 10,000 firecrackers would scare away all the evil spirits. That year, at the school on the Marine Corps base, we were studying the culture of Hawai'i, its history, mythology, and the traditions of the many cultures on the islands—and to me, the stories she told us were fascinating, because I knew outside of the confines of the base, beyond the guard shacks and fences topped with razor wire, there was a whole world I had yet to see. If I couldn't leave the base to go explore it, then stories made imagining it much easier. Mrs. Smith told us that the Chinese brought the firecrackers for New Year's celebrations with them when they settled on the islands, to get rid of evil and bring good luck. Maybe I didn't think through what Mrs. Smith told me about the tradition. Maybe lighting a string of 10,000 firecrackers is not effective if you light them on the Fourth of July. To be fair, I wasn't thinking about what Mrs. Smith said when I lit the fuse.

In my memory, a string of 10,000 firecrackers is a beautiful, complicated thing, a long rope of many threads, tied together in an intricate series of knots. They don't look so dangerous when they are lying on a table, latent, or strewn over a tree limb, waiting. It's only when they are lit that they reach their potential. It was only after I lit them that I began to understand how dangerous something like that could be.

Then, I was just playing a prank on my dad. Now, as an adult, I hate the sound, because it triggers my memory and sends it off into 10,000 despicable directions I can't always control. It frustrates me, when I try to shape it into a story with an arc.

My story is shaped more like the wild synapses of a wounded mind, intricately woven in a complicated pattern, or jagged and sharp with shrapnel.

I'm thirty years old, and my stepfather, whom I always just called "Dad," has been dead for nearly a year. I'm sitting in front of my therapist, Tom, in an office in Binghamton, New York, and words are falling out of my mouth. Words I've been holding in all my life. It's my first visit to see him. In that office, my body is in Binghamton, but my mind is in Hawaii, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Massachusetts, Long Island, Boston, along a highway somewhere in Utah, every place I have ever been. Internally, I am scattered like buckshot, and I can't get all of that out of me fast enough to explain it to him. He says, "You need to shut up and listen to me. This is going to take time. You can't heal from years of trauma in a fifty-minute session." But I can't shut up, because all the memories are coming POWPOWPOW, like that, one rapid fire memory after another. I know he's right. I can't tell him the whole story so quickly. It will take time to narrate an arc straight enough for him to understand. For me to understand. I focus on the calm statue of the healing Buddha on his desk, and try to make sense of the bizarre word salad I'm hearing from him. "One of the worst cases I've ever seen. Severe Complex PTSD. Dissociative disorder. Major depressive disorder. Traumatic amnesia. You're like a P.O.W." It makes no sense, what he's telling me. I've never been in combat.

Looking back now, I can see that we spent a lot of time in my family trying to scare the hell out of each other. Dad, especially, seemed to enjoy making my brother and

me, and later, my sister, believe we were about to die. Here, a thousand instances spring up and beg to be presented in snapshot to exemplify how I was taught to ignore my body's fear response, but this is one recurring event I can render: Pick an age. I can be nine, ten or eleven years old. My hair and eyebrows are bleached white from the sun. My skin is sore, burnt, hot to the touch, and itchy with sand that I haven't yet had a chance to rinse off. Blisters are beginning to emerge across the bridge of my nose, my shoulders and chest, even though my mother slathered me repeatedly with sunscreen. We've tried every sunblock imaginable, and there is nothing we've found strong enough to keep me from burning. In my bones, and in my belly, I can still feel the rocking waves of the surf. I haven't yet regained my orientation with the gravity of land legs. Part of me is still buoyant, floating in the salt water, and I stumble towards our big blue Chrysler, sand buckets and castle toys in hand.

Dad is drunk on Jack Daniels or tequila or beer, but usually whiskey. He's slurring his good-byes to the remaining Marines, and their faces are grimaced with worry. Or they are so drunk themselves they don't see he is in no condition to drive. My mother can't get the keys away from him, and she's telling him it's not safe. He's bigger than her, and she's holding my sister, Kim, who is still a baby, with a mostly-bald head, covered in a thin down of bright red hair. My mother is no match for him physically. My brother is whining, because he never wanted to leave when it was time to go, and he is tired. Dad swats my mother's hand away from the keys and climbs in the driver's seat, and we all follow him reflexively, without thinking there could be another option.

At some point on the ride home, Dad is presented with a choice. He can take a direct road to our carport that is flat and clear of obstacles, or he can detour us up the side

of a small mountain with a narrow, winding road. He chooses the winding road, even though it dead ends at a lookout tower at the top. He is only taking us to the very top to drive us all back down again. The ride up isn't so scary; it's the danger of losing control of the brakes on the way back down that I remember more vividly. The scrape of the tires in the gravel as the car veers off the pavement, the guardrail outside my window within arms' reach, just beyond it, a view of open air.

But on these rides, that moment as it presents itself to me in memory is suspended in two endings, the one that occurred and the one I imagined. In the first, every time we took this detour, my mother and brother would shriek out in fear, my mother would curse, and my sister, startled, would cry as an infant does when she is awakened to fright. Dad, depending on the kind of drunk he was at the time, would either laugh at us all, and say something stupid like, "Who loves you?" or he'd yell at us all to shut the fuck up before he gave us something to cry about. I learned to keep quiet very early. I tried not to do anything that would piss him off, or startle him into backhanding me. Instead, I sit in the backseat, quiet, forgetting that my skin, now sticking to the vinyl seats of the car with sweat, is in pain, and that my blisters will tear when I climb out of the car. I feel nothing, and make no noise, hoping we will veer back onto the road, that Dad will realize we are about to careen off the side of the mountain. Or that, as often happened, my mother would grab the wheel and steer us back onto asphalt. Either way this first scenario ends as it had to, back home finally. I'm shaken from the ride, skin chilled in the aftermath of my sunburn, in a cold bath, my mother dabbing my skin with vinegar on a cotton ball that stings any broken blisters.

In that same moment before my family is steered back to safety, when the scene out my car window was a view of open sky, I imagined flight. It wasn't the fast ascent of the Phantom fighter jets we saw every day in the sky. It was a flight straight out into that view of air, only long enough for me to feel airborne, and then an inevitable crash. My body wrecked on the rocks below. In my fantasies, I was always the only one who died. My family, especially Dad, seemed more capable of survival than I imagined myself. I don't remember feeling afraid then, when I could see myself dead. I just remember wanting it to be over—and how pretty the bottom of that steep hill looked, with its sharp rocks and steep incline.

I can present that story to exemplify how scared I was as a child, or I can tell you that the night before we first went to the beach in Hawaii, when I was six years old, Dad took me to see Jaws at the movie theater on base, and the next day whispered to me that there were mako sharks breeding in the water when he lifted me in his arms and threw me into the waves.

I wasn't always afraid. There were also some days when it seemed like I was a normal kid too, like I could enjoy normal traditions.

The Fourth of July in Hawaii is like nothing I've ever seen on the mainland. In Hawai'i, after the fuses have been lit on the Fourth, the piles of spent firecrackers line the streets and gutters ankle deep, some unspent, just waiting to be found. Tradition isn't why my brother Danny and I scoured the rain gutters on the base. Nothing back then was as wonderful as making a tin can shoot up into the air and fall back to the ground smoking.

We liked the tinny plock the cans made on the pavement when they fell, and the burning smell of gunpowder and paper. We spent those days studying the nuances with which the sensitive grass reacted to an explosion—the waves of leaves flattening and exposing the thorns along its stems as they closed. It was an innocent pastime for the most part, though at times our play devolved into brutality against one another. I'd wait until he was high up in a tree, relaxed after a long day of explosions and throw a lit firecracker at him, he'd fall and run home crying, and our fun for the day would be finished. After the night I threw the firecrackers at my Dad, I stopped enjoying the sound, because when I saw how it scared him, I could hear gunshots, what he heard.

Mrs. Smith also taught me the Hawaiian word pau. Finished. She seemed to want to be pau with me most of the time. She was a big Samoan woman, often angry, probably because of something I did. I didn't like her very much, though that wasn't her fault. She'd been brought in to replace our teacher, Mrs. Watanabe when her belly became so full with baby she had to go out on maternity leave. When she left, I knew I'd be pau with Mrs. Watanabe, and I'd have to miss her. My stepfather had already received the papers that ordered us back to the mainland, where he'd been assigned to drill instructor training. Ms. Watanabe spoke softly to me. Mrs. Smith was big and intimidating. She grunted at me. I could understand Mrs. Watanabe when she spoke to me. I had to struggle to understand Mrs. Smith, who often slipped into pidgin. I know now that it must have been a challenge for Mrs. Smith to put up with my disdain, but she held out for months.

Every morning when my class stood for the pledge of allegiance and a prayer, we also sang the school anthem:

On the windward side Oahu, Kaneohe Bay

stands our dear school in Hawai'i,

where we work and play

M-O-K-A-P-U

Mokapu, we sing our praises to.

Proud and loyal, we'll remember

Imua, Mokapu school.

When we spelled out the name of the school, I made a point to stress the P-U loudly enough that Mrs. Smith could hear what I thought of her. I could see it annoyed her by the way her face turned red. She told me I had no pride, but never seemed to take it personally.

Mrs. Smith was right. I had no pride. But I couldn't tell anyone how much shame I was carrying around every day back then. How I was always looking at everyone around me, wondering how much they could guess I was hiding. Sometimes, I could get away from that shame, and bury my head in a book or a story, and forget everything else, the rules, the secrets, everything.

My Hawai'ian school was full of legends. The mo'o were giant lizards who looked like great black dragons. Our teachers told us they lived in the fishponds all over the base, and spent most of their time protecting the birds and the fish, but they liked to eat naughty children. In the murky darkness of the fishponds, I thought they might really lie in wait for my foot to slip off the side of a bridge just enough that one could grab me by an ankle and pull me into the water and eat me. I heard whispers in the breezeways on school that ancient Hawai'ian bones washed up on the playground during the rainy

season. Our teachers told us the Menehune, who are the small folk who live in the rainforests, would turn us into stones if we misbehaved. On a field trip, Ms. Smith said that the ancient Hawaiians would test their royal children by throwing them from the windy cliffs at a summit off the Pali Highway, "Wind blow you back, you prince or princess," she said. "Wind no bring you back? You pau. No royal."

I was wrong about how strong I am, and underestimated my ability to survive. When Dad died, it was exactly as I imagined death in Hawai'i. When my mother woke me up with a call on her birthday in May that year, I knew he was dead. The sun was the brightest I've ever seen it, and for maybe the first time in my life, it didn't burn my skin. I'd expected to get the call that the cancer had killed him, that Vietnam and Agent Orange had finally hunted him down. And when I heard my mother crying on the phone, I was happy— airborne off the edge of a steep cliff, in flight for a moment. But then, in the months that followed, it was more like I had finally been smashed on the rocks below. And I wished I was dead again. It felt like I was in ten thousand little pieces, scattered on rocks on the other side of the world.

After I started therapy, Tom explained I was experiencing traumatic amnesia. It wasn't that I'd ever forgotten what happened to me. It was that until Dad died, my brain kept me safe from reliving the memory of what he had done to me. Once he died, it was like a release valve switched in my brain, and twenty-five years of pent up emotions and memories I'd put to the side came back to torment me. At first, they came as emotions I couldn't connect to events. I'd be in the grocery store shopping and reach for a box on the shelf, only to be confused by tears filling my eyes, and blurring my vision.

Next came the auditory memories. My stepfather yelling in a loud booming voice that came from his diaphragm and made me cower, “Think goddammit. Think. You never think. You never take initiative.” He’d gone through drill instructor training when we moved from Hawai’i to the mainland, and while he flunked out eventually, he learned enough to yell so that my ears resounded with the same fear I’d felt as a young child. This was coupled with my own inner voice, telling me that everything was my fault. That I’d wished Dad dead for so long, I had killed him. These were voices I couldn’t reason with, that no one around me could reason with.

During this breakdown, I was living with a quadriplegic friend named Michael, and providing his personal care in exchange for room and board. He was confused when I’d come running into his room expecting to have to stand at attention as I’d had to do when I was in trouble as a kid because I’d heard a voice in my head ordering me to, “Get over here right now, goddammit.” Or, he’d ask for a hot water bottle and I’d go to my room and sit on the bed, thinking I’d been ordered there for bad behavior. No amount of reasoning from Michael could convince me I wasn’t a terrible person.

There were night terrors too. I’d be in bed asleep, and feel a hand clasp over my mouth to keep me from crying out. In the dream, I’d wake startled and see my stepfather, his index finger to his lip, signaling me to keep quiet. When this happened, I’d wake up confused at the two levels of dream, not sure which reality was real. I started sleeping with a light on so I could know more immediately I was safe. I stopped showering because I couldn’t stand how a washcloth felt against my skin.

The most difficult memories that returned were the ones of my stepfather sexually abusing me. Those never returned as complete memories, but as fractured images of what