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The Hard Way

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE HARD WAY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

David Sangiao-Parga

2021

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

This thesis, written by David Sangiao-Parga, and entitled The Hard Way, 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.

Vernon Dickson

John DuFresne

Les Standiford, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 3, 2021

The thesis of David Sangiao-Parga is approved.

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

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

Florida International University, 2021

DEDICATION

Dedicated to the memory of Jack Ketchum, AKA Dallas Myr, a gifted writer
gone too soon.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank the members of my committee for their support throughout my academic career. I wouldn't even be in this program without Professor John DuFresne's guidance almost a decade ago. Dr. Vernon Dickson is a wonderful mentor who helped me crystallize the elements of Shakespeare I most draw from in my work. And Professor Les Standiford has been an unceasing champion for my completion of this program, never giving up on me even when I struggled the most. Their insights and expertise have been invaluable to me, and will always be treasured.

I also want to thank my wife, my first reader, Lisa Figueroa, who has always been my harshest critic and my greatest muse. She never lets me get away with mediocrity and has never been afraid to tell it to me straight, the greatest asset a writer can have. I would not be here without her help.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

THE HARD WAY

by

David Sangiao-Parga

Florida International University, 2021

Miami, Florida

Professor Les Standiford, Major Professor

The Hard Way is a fiction thriller set in small-town West Virginia in 1997. It tells the story of a group of independent professional wrestlers who are waylaid in Chimney Corner while on their way to a big show in Richmond, Virginia. The group have a fight with a couple of local meth dealers at a diner in the middle of night. Other wrestlers come looking for them the next day. What happens after is a brutal fight for survival, as the wrestlers use all their skills to overcome a threat they were never prepared for.

Narrated in the third person, Hard is a thriller that examines how people who've defined themselves by their toughness cope with falling short in a truly dangerous situation. Inspirations for it come from Mick Foley's Tietam Brown and the overall works of Jack Ketchum. While most sophisticated readers judge professional wrestlers as fakes and cartoonish caricatures, the attempt here is to play against that myth, painting them as a cross-section of ordinary human beings, forced to dig deeper than they ever have, and to work together in order to survive.

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Prologue:

Release

July 6th, 1991

Mt. Olive Correctional Complex, West Virginia

2:33 PM

There were a lot of things that Lester Goode was pissed off about as he waited in the summer sun. He was pissed about the heat. He was pissed that Norm had forgotten today was release day. He was pissed about the hole in his shirtfront that he was certain had not been there eight years ago. But the thing irritating him the most was his pants. He never would have thought it possible to actually gain weight in prison, but somehow in the past eight years he'd managed to outgrow his size 34 Levis. Even with the top button undone, he could barely sit comfortably. His legs felt like they were in spandex. He sat on a concrete bench at the start of the access road to the prison, reclined as much as he could to relieve some of the pressure.

Les had walked almost three miles to reach the bench, and he would have been happy to walk even farther if needed. No one wanted to stay near Mt. Olive once they got out, not one second longer than necessary. Putting a bench here was the only real act of kindness he'd seen come from the prison.

He heard an engine coming from the northbound lane. Les tried not to get his hopes up. With his luck, his ride home was somewhere in Virginia right now. It was only a thirty minute drive from the farm to Mt. Olive, but he didn't trust Norm

not to get lost. He stared down the road as a white Ford Econoline van came rattling around the corner. It had a grimy windshield and rust stains all along its body. Les shook his head sadly as he saw Norm come into focus behind the driver's side.

This was not the car he was expecting.

Before going away, Les had given the keys to his Chevy 2500 to his cousin Annabelle. The Chevy was his most prized possession, the most expensive thing he owned, and he treated it like a God-damn show car. Annabelle he trusted to take care of it. Her husband Norm, on the other hand...

The van came to a staggered halt in front of Les's bench. Norm rolled down the window, grinning at Les and showing off his missing incisor.

"Hey there, cuz, you need a lift?"

"I ain't your cuz," Les growled. "And you shoulda been here three fuckin' hours ago." He stood up and walked awkwardly to the open window. "Where's my truck, Norm?"

"Don't worry, Les, everything's fine. Just hop on in the van, we'll explain on the way." Les didn't reply, instead going around to the passenger side of the van and hopping in the back.

"Damn, Les, you put on some pounds, huh?"

"You'd'a known if you ever came to visit."

"I didn't know you wanted me to visit."

"I didn't." Les looked at the rider in the passenger seat. "Jesus, you brought Nate?" Norm's son Nate was tall, broad, and nearly as stupid as Norm in Les's

opinion. But he was also mean in an unsettling way. Les had only seen him smile once, and he never wanted to see it again.

“He wanted to come,” Norm said. “Tol’ me he was anxious to see ya. You know, the last time you saw this guy, I think was three years ago. He was only 15. Hadn’t quite sprouted yet.”

“If you were gonna bring someone, why not Mark?” Mark was Norm’s son with Annabelle. Nate’s stepbrother. The only person left that Les really gave any shits about.

“He’s watchin’ over the farm. Can’t really leave it unattended.” Norm wasn’t making eye contact with Les anymore. He was hiding something.

“Watchin’? Watching what, exactly? The pigs fuck?”

“We ain’t doin’ the pig thing no more,” Nate said. He had no inflection to his voice. Like a robot. For a moment Les was worried Nate had killed all the pigs for fun.

“Son, shut the hell up! We ain’t even made it home yet.” Norm turned to look at Les. Les stared hard at Norm, trying to intimidate him. Eight years ago that might have worked, but Nate’s presence changed the nature of their relationship considerably.

“Before we go any farther,” Les said, “I wanna know what happened to my Chevy.”

“Sold it,” said Nate.

“God damn it, Nate!” Norm shouted. Les leaned forward between Nate and Norm. He’d heard enough of their bullshit.

“Norm, I don’t give a shit how big your son is. If you don’t tell me what the hell is going on, I will fucking tear you to pieces with my bare hands.” Nate started to say something, but Les whipped around and silenced him with a look. “Not a word, boy!” Nate stared back with a blank, dull hatred. “You wipe that look off’a your face, or I’ll take your daddy’s belt and beat you myself.” Nate looked like he was ready to test that threat.

“The farm was goin’ to shit,” Norm said. He tried to sound defiant, but there was a tremor in his voice that Les knew very well. “Anna had to sell the Chevy to cover bills. You don’t understand, Les, you been inside too long. The whole state’s goin’ to shit. Everyone’s leaving. Buncha miners got laid off last year.”

“Anna died two years ago,” Les said. “How the hell have you been making money since then?”

“Well, that’s what we wanted to talk about,” Norm said. “We know ya just got out and yer on parole or sumthin’, but we got a thing going on now that we really want your help with.”

Les leaned back and listened. It was a long story. As the van traveled round the mountains back to the farm, Les thought about what Norm was saying. And he knew that in spite of his hopes, he was going to be pulled back into a world he’d wanted to walk far away from.

Saturday, October 25th, 1997

1

US-60, 27 miles NW of Chimney Corner, West Virginia

1:07 AM

Waking up in a moving car after dark is a disorienting experience, Eric Johnson thought as he opened his eyes. He squinted into the light punching at him through the rear window. The sulfurous glow of the street lamps punctuated the darkness in slow-moving sweeps through the car. In his head, Eric could hear them humming.

Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh.

He rubbed his eyes reflexively, sitting up in the back seat. There were five of them crammed in the SUV. Eric, Julie Sandusky and Ricky Chalmers in the back, with Terry Jones and Burt Knox in the front. Eric's ass was sore where he'd fallen wrong on a table earlier that night. It would be one hellish-looking bruise for sure. Ricky stirred next to Eric but didn't wake. His head was canted at an odd angle that would surely cause him some trouble come morning. On the other side of Ricky was Julie, staring out the window while she chewed on half a protein bar.

He watched Julie out of the corner of his eye, examining the way her jaw moved as she ate. In the brief flashes of light he could see the outline of her face