THE SHORT STRAW

Ву

PJ Willingham

In 1943, war is hell on the home front too for three men with deferments.

April 2011

PJ Willingham PO Box 11601 Austin, TX 78711 760 464 2403 pjwillingham@gmail.com

EXT. NIGHT ESTABLISH

Railroad office in The Texas Panhandle.

INT. NIGHT RAILROAD OFFICE

A large steel-faced wall clock reads 11:40 and continues to loudly tick off the seconds. Below the clock is a bulletin board with various notes, train schedules, a poster of UNCLE SAM pointing saying I want YOU for the US Army. Pinned on the board directly under the imposing clock is a war bond calendar showing the date is 1943 December 31.

In the middle of the office is a potbelly stove with a roaring fire. ANGELO stands warming himself by the fire. ANGELO is draft-age, pale and desiccated. It is uncertain if he is a citizen, Mexican national or angel of death.

Angelo does not look up as the door blows open with a loud thud. The calendar pages flutter as the cold breeze drafts into the office. BUCK blusters in with the cold Texas December wind and snuggles up to the fire next to Angelo. BUCK is a wealthy, arrogant spoiled 20-something year old hothead.

> BUCK Hey, Amigo! Muy Coola out tonight, Righto, Angelo?

BUCK laughs and waits for ANGELO to get the joke. ANGELO continues staring into the fire without emotion.

BUCK (CONT) But tonight's the night we heat things up, don't we?

ANGELO Hello, Buck.

BUCK Tonight's the night, ain't it, Kemosabe?"

ANGELO Yeah, Buck. Tonight's the night.

BUCK Our destiny is in our hands tonight, Angelo buddy. We are ten-minutes away from infamy. I can't wait to see old Johnny Foreman's face squashed like a (MORE)

(CONTINUED)

BUCK (cont'd) grape under the eleven fifty-seven tonight. After we pop his cork it's happy New Year! BUCK rubs his hands together and continues BUCK (CONT) My old man thinks he did me some kinda favor pulling strings with the senator to land me a job in this hellhole instead of some foxhole overseas. (SMIRKY SNIFFLE) My old man told the senator I'd get myself killed the first day. The Senator told him

> (MOCKING) "yeah, probably by his own men".

BUCK sniffs heavily and wipes his nose with the back of his hand

BUCK (CONT) I'll show him. I'll show them all that I'm not the yellow-belly coward slacker they think I am. I can kill with the best of them. And tonight's the night. Tonight we...

ANGELO Have you seen Louie?

BUCK tone changes as quickly as ANGELO changes the subject of conversation

BUCK Nah. He ain't showing his ass tonight. I'm telling you. That tit-sucking Mama's boy don't have the guts for this. I've told you that all along. It's just you and me `Lo.

ANGELO We'll wait for him.

ANGELO ticks off his words as the clock ticks off the seconds.

BUCK Wait? NO, Angelo, we got one chance to get rid of Johnny Foreman tonight. We've waited all year for this night. We've waited long enough.

BUCK reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a small, black, tattered notebook with the corners of the pages dog-eared.

BUCK (CONT) Looky here 'Lo, I've written down everything that dirty devil bastard done to everybody this past year. It's all right here. Look. March 15. He made you clean shit out from under the engine when you repaired the brake line. Wouldn't release you until just before the train pulled out.

BUCK Forces the book into ANGELO'S face.

BUCK (CONT) If you'd stayed ten seconds longer your body would be scattered from here to Midland and your soul would be in Beulah Land right now.

BUCK thumbs through the book

BUCK (CONT) (cont'd) It's just you and me, 'Lo boy. We've waited for this all year. No way am I going to miss this chance just because that snotty-nosed yellow-bellied coward don't show his ass. I'll kill both the bastards if I have to.

ANGELO stares into the fire and speaks slowly with the rhythm of the wall clock

ANGELO We'll wait for Louie, Buck.

(PAUSE) When Louie gets here, we'll draw straws and see who's going to kill Johnny Foreman. Just like we planned

BUCK Listen Angelo. Why don't I just go kill him right now? He needs killing and I need to kill him.

ANGELO Buck. We Wait for Louie. Whoever draws the short straw kills him just like we planned.

BUCK Angelo! Angelo! Louie's too nervous. Let me go kill Johnny Foreman. I'll kill 'im with my bare hands. Louie's too weak. He's a punk. Louie can't wipe his own ass. Mark my word, he'll panic, he'll puke and fuck it up. Louie'll ...

The door blows open, the cold air drafts in as Louie enters the railroad office.

BUCK changes directions and tone faster than the wild Texas wind.

BUCK (CONT) Louie, O' buddy. We've been waiting for you.

LOUIE is a pimply faced 19 year old with soft whiskers on his chin.

LOUIE quietly closes the door and joins the two by the fire.

LOUIE Hey, Buck. Angelo.

ANGELO continues to gaze into the fire as he speaks.

ANGELO Getting worried about you, Louie. Your mama okay?

BUCK attacks with his arsenal of words.

BUCK This is the night, pal. We're shaping out destiny tonight. No more crap from Johnny Foreman. Ever. He's off our asses forever. Good riddance to bad rubbish.

ANGELO

Looks up from the fire and studies LOUIE You don't look too good, Louie. Did your mama take a turn for the worse?

> LOUIE Nah, Mama's about the same.

Louie wipes spittle drooling from his mouth

LOUIE (CONT) I been sick all day.

BUCK You up to this, Louie?'cause if'n you ain't, I'll do it. I want to do it, man.

LOUIE I'm okay. I can do whatever I have to do.

BUCK

You sure?

LOUIE

I said I'm okay. Get off my ass. If I draw the short straw I'll do what I said I'd do.

ANGELO

No more doubts.

LOUIE

None.

BUCK

Hell no. If anybody ever had a right to kill Johnny Foreman, it's you, Louie. He's always on your ass harder than anybody else. Look right here in the book. Easter Sunday. He made you clean up the shit in the sleepers and insulted you the whole time. He called you every name in the book and your mama too. Called you a coward slacker.

(PAUSE)

BUCK reads from his little black diary "Shirking you patriot duty to stay home with your mama".

BUCK holds the book up for LOUIE to see,

BUCK (CONT) What does he think you're supposed to do? You can't leave your widowed mama to die of cancer all alone. I don't know how you've kept from killing that devil-dog bastard already. If he did to me just half of what he's done to you, he'd be dead right now.

LOUIE I don't want to kill anybody.

(PAUSE) But I'll do what has to be done.

ANGELO is now convinced that all three are up to the task and the killing is going to happen as planned.

ANGELO

It's a good night for it. It's supposed to keep snowing all night. The snow will hide all the evidence. No questions. It'll look like an accident for sure.

(BEAT) On a night like this, an accident like that can happen to anybody. Just one little slip and he'll fall right under the train.

(BEAT) (cont'd) Could happen to anyone on a night like this.

BUCK Let's do it Angelo. Draw straws.

ANGELO takes three matches from his shirt pocket and brakes them into different lengths. Shuffling the lots in his hands, he repeated the mission. ANGELO

Whoever gets the short straw, you know what to do. Johnny Foreman comes to the office when the train gets in. Short straw goes with him to set the signals.

(PAUSE)

Always walk on his right side. Keep Foreman between you and train. Don't let him get you next to the train. And he'll try. He'll stop and tie his bootlace or try to catch ya off guard. Stay alert. Walk half a step behind him to watch him. When he hears the whistle, he'll look up at the train and wave like he always does. Wait for the engine to pass and when he's next to the first freight car, that's when ya got to do it. Right then.

ANGELO pulls the gun from underneath his coat and holds it out.

ANGELO (CONT)

One shot in the head when he looks back at the train whistling. Then push him. Push him hard at the elbow to pen his arm down so he can't grab you and pull you under with him.

LOUIE takes the gun

LOUIE Are you sure that's the best way?

BUCK grabs the gun

BUCK Anyway is the best way.

ANGELO takes the gun from BUCK

ANGELO This is the only way. It's got to look like an accident. There can be no evidence of the gunshot in the head. None. Everybody clear? Know what to do exactly? BUCK Gimme that short straw and the gun, amigo.

BUCK grabs one of the match sticks from ANGELO'S hand.

LOUIE I'm ready too, Angelo.

LOUIE carefully chooses one of the two remaining matchsticks.

The three huddle tightly together and compare the lengths of the matchsticks as JOHNNY FOREMAN roars into the railroad office with a draft of winter wind.

> FOREMAN Okay, girls! It's show time. This is one bitch of a night.

JOHNNY FOREMAN gets nose to nose with BUCK

FOREMAN (CONT) But not as cold and wet as the weather overseas that our fine American boys are fighting and dying in so you three can sit on your candy asses here all comfy at home by the fire.

JOHNNY FOREMAN spits on BUCK'S feet

(BEAT) Come on Buck, get your yellow butt out there and set the signals.

ANGELO fingers the shortest matchstick and sticks the broken end between his front teeth. He stares into the fire clinching his jaw

> ANGELO I'm setting signals tonight, Boss.

FOREMAN

You?

Johnny Foreman leans forward trying to look into Angelo's eyes.

FOREMAN (cont'd) Well? Okay. Come on. Do it!

The door slams closed behind ANGELO and JOHNNY FOREMAN. BUCK cackles a nervous laugh.

BUCK

I can't wait to hear that whistle. It's all happening right now just like Angelo said it would. We ought to hear that whistle blow any second now. Listen. Shhhhhh!

Buck paces around the office overtaken by anxiety. The wall clock steadily and loudly ticks off the seconds like a ticking time bomb. The piercing train whistle blows at precisely eleven fifty-seven

BUCK and LOUIE jump and cling to each other startled as if the sound was unexpected. BUCK giggles hugging LOUIE.

> BUCK (CONT) (chilling cackling laughs) On a night like this an accident like that can happen to anybody.

BUCK hugs LOUIE tighter

BUCK (CONT) (cont'd) Louie! At last, we're rid of that bastard and all his bullshit crap. He ain't never going to call me a coward slacker again.

LOUIE breaks away from Buck and goes to the window

LOUIE Angelo oughta be finished by now.

BUCK is oblivious to LOUIE'S concern and rages on

BUCK Johnny Foreman's under the eleven fifty-seven sliced to sausage. I can just see that surprised look on his face frozen in infamy on the tracks. I showed him. I showed them all.

LOUIE Look at the clock, Buck. It's taking him too long. Angelo should be coming back by now.

LOUIE nose and hands pressed against the window looking closer to see outside through the window.

BUCK paces around the potbelly stove fire wringing his black book of judgment in his sweaty hands.

(CONTINUED)

BUCK Louie. Do you see him? Is he on his way back? Do you see Angelo, Louie?

The door flies open

LOUIE runs out gagging, catching rancid vomit in his hands and downy whiskers.

JOHNNY FOREMAN stands in the doorway holding the gun

FOREMAN Come on you yellow-belly slacker. There's been an accident. Angelo slipped and fell under the train. I told you it was a bitch of a night.

(BEAT) Night like this an accident like that can happen to anybody. Just one little slip and he fell right under the train. Could happen to anyone on a night like this.

BUCK cowers behind the pot-belly stove. JOHNNY FOREMAN gets right in BUCK'S face and spits the words out at him.

FOREMAN (CONT) Get your shovel and bucket you yellow-belly coward SLACKER. It's a bitch of a night and like I said, on a night like this an accident like that can happen to anybody.

BUCK cringes at JOHNNY FOREMAN'S words and turns back to the fire. With trembling hands, BUCK tries to stuff his black diary into his pocket. JOHNNY FOREMAN grabs the book, thumbs through all the pages laughing a disgusting snicker.

> FOREMAN (CONT) (cont'd) Fine American men are fighting and dying while you sit around writing fairy tales.

JOHNNY FOREMAN tosses the small black diary into the flames in the potbelly stove.

JOHNNY FOREMAN spits on BUCK and shoves him out the door with an insulting kick in the pants.

FOREMAN Sorry, cowards. Damn slackers.

(BEAT) Can't do anything right.

JOHNNY FOREMAN exits through the door behind BUCK and slams the door closed behind him.

FADE TO BLACK with the clock continuing to tick off the seconds roll credits. (END)