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## Cycle

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## Cycle

The rain was leaking into the prison cell, pummeling its makeshift metal frame. It beat, beat, beat, on the thin tin roof and leaked in the corners. Taylor's bare feet sunk into the cool mud floor as he struggled to stand up. It was nearing evening, or so he guessed, and he had just finished dinner. He was trying to stretch his bruised limbs that ached from the mid-afternoon beatings. Dark, purpled welts spotted his arms, legs, face, back, hands. His muscles were sore. A cut above his left eye made it impossible to see, not so much from the bleeding, but because it was so swollen. A cold ransacked his body with persistent sneezing and a dry cough that squeezed his chest. He rubbed his one good eye and fought the urge to lie down and sleep.

A wooden bowl lay empty on the ground. Taylor rolled his tongue over his front teeth to dislodge hardened pieces of rice caught between them. He had an itch in the small of his back which he found impossible to reach. Managing to rise enough to lean against the door of his cage, Taylor rubbed his back against it. The door had a small, square window, thatched with thin steel wires so thickly overlapped that it had the effect of a screen. This and the rain made it almost impossible for Taylor to see anything but incoherent forms and shadows as he strained to see out.

But he could tell they were coming again. He could see their forms approaching, bringing the blunt ends of their guns, the steel tips of their boots, their fists, the backs of their hands. They were coming to torture, to inflict pain, to bring anguish. They were coming and he could see their forms approaching. He coughed. Slowly, he collapsed to his knees and looked up, beyond the roof and the rain which sent tiny droplets down on his head. He looked up into the face of God, into the face of whatever person or power he felt could see his unshaved, cut, swollen, bleeding face: the thing or being that could tell what was going through his mind.

He prayed. Silently.

Taylor gasped. The blunt end of a gun jabbed his tender ribs. He groaned. Callous hands grabbed his fingers and twisted them. There was a snap. Taylor screamed. A fist sent him into the mud and a heavy boot kicked into his ribs, kicked his butt, kicked the side of his head, and kicked and kicked and kicked...

There were words spoken--shouted. Angry words. Taylor heard them only faintly. He was elsewhere, talking with a close friend in a taxi in New York City, slowly caressing the curves of his wife's soft breasts, holding

her hand as they walked through the sand as the sun sank into the ocean, hearing the squeals and giggles of his son as he pushed him on the swing in the park, feeling the sudden pull against his seat as his fighter plane peeled off into the horizon, watching his mother make sour dough bread for--

A gun fired. The soldiers left the cell empty. The door lay open. Taylor was free.

## II

Doug took another swing at the tall oak. It towered above him. But soon it'd be on its way to the fireplace, he thought. Swing after swing, but the oak still stood. It was the third tree he and his father had felled today and it was beginning to rain so it would probably be their last. Doug didn't mind the rain, but Momma always was fussing for them that they would catch a cold if they stood out in the rain too long.

Doug looked up at the tree and rubbed his eyes. They were still sore from getting up at 6 a.m. He looked forward to waking up late on Sunday. He watched some birds land on the branches of the oak, black specks flying off into the gray sky as he gave the tree a final blow and Taylor swung slowly to the ground.

## III

Five-year-old Harry's brown eyes widened as he saw the elephant. He leaned back against his mother's tall legs, his small fists gripping the folds of her pants. He stood on her feet and she walked him closer to the cage.

"See the big elephant?" she said and mussed his light, blond hair. Harry smiled, showing his neat, little baby teeth that always reminded her of fangs.

"Harry, my little monster, what do you think of this big thing, huh?" She pointed to the elephant and looked down at Harry. A pained expression came over his face, disturbing his picture-book features.

"Oh, come on, you little baby. Let's get some cotton candy." Harry looked up at his mother and grinned a huge grin, giggling.

As they walked away from the elephant cage, a lone ant began its trek toward a pool of spilt soda. As the ant scurried toward the sticky patch, Harry glanced down and followed it with his eyes.

Still holding his mother's hand, Harry took a bouncing hop and pulverized Taylor with the soles of his miniature Reeboks.

#### IV

The morning was chilly when Uncle Carl and Randy set out to do some real man's fishing. Both, though, had insisted that they wouldn't need gloves even after Aunt Sandra gave her sternest warning.

"You'll need those gloves all right, boys," she said. "You'll need them when your fingers start feeling like they're about to fall off!"

She had insisted on getting up early with them to make bag lunches of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, barbequed chips, apples and for each, a thermos full of beef stew. They left without gloves, except for the ones Aunt Sandra sneaked into their brown paper bags. She was convinced they'd need them

On the way to Reed's Lake, Uncle Carl stopped at Cash's Store to pick up a six-pack.

"Mom doesn't like me drinking," Randy said as Uncle Carl was setting the beer on the cashier's counter.

"She doesn't like me drinking either, son, but that's not stopping me."

"Can I just get some soda or something?"

The elderly lady behind the counter pretended not to hear, but smiled quietly to herself as she punched the antique cash register. Carl handed her money for the beer and for three Orange Crushes.

The tiny boat's motor filled the quiet air with cacophonous buzzing as Uncle Carl and Randy set out for a lucky spot on Reed's Lake. They were both silent for a while as the boat slowly crept across the water. Then, as if struck by a divine revelation, Carl told Randy to stop the boat.

"This is the spot," he said. "I can feel it."

There was silence again. A misty morning. Just two men and a day's worth of fish still yet to be caught. A bird's chirp-chirping echoed over the lake and through the surrounding woods. It sat in a tree near the bank, about a hundred yards from where their boat sat afloat.

Randy looked around and felt odd. He felt free from the noisy buzz of life at home in the city and a sensual fascination for this nature that was his uncle's home. He loved the smell, the touch, the taste and the look of the country, but here out in the middle of the lake he felt helpless. He felt alone. Except for Uncle Carl.

"It's been a while since we've been able to get together, boy."

"What?" Randy's eyes had been wandering around the lake's shore, looking for the tree where the chirping bird sat, hoping to see it, to make the connection between that chirping and an actual living thing.

"It's been a while since I've seen you," Uncle Carl repeated.

"Oh. Yeah. Sure has."

"I'm glad that we get to spend some time together."

"Uh-huh."

"Your mother doesn't like me too much, but that doesn't mean we can't be friends, right?"

"Yeah, sure. I suppose it doesn't."

A silence passed between them for a bit and again the sound of the bird and other birds echoed over the lake. A breeze blew. The lake rippled. A fish flopped its tail out of the water, making a plop sound and Randy thought he could feel a drop on his hand.

"Do you know how to bait a hook, Randy?"

"Sure do."

"O.K. Here you go, then." He handed Randy one of the fishing rods.

Randy took out a wiggly purple and yellow plastic lure from the tackle box and carefully put it on his hook. Carl did the same with the largest worm that Randy had ever seen. They both cast their rods from either side of the boat.

A large fish swam in the general direction of the boat. It sensed movement in the water and thought about breakfast. It swam closer to the movement and saw a strange-looking creature bobbing around. Good enough, the fish thought and with a quick bite he felt a jabbing pain ripping through his mouth. He felt a pull towards the surface. He felt his gills beat furiously. He felt his tail beat madly about. He felt himself swimming as fast as he could away from the surface, but a strength kept pulling him towards the water's edge, and overwhelming strength.

Human hands grabbed his convulsing body as Taylor felt air. The hand slid the hook out of his mouth.

"That's a pretty big one, Randy. Can't wait till we get that sucker fried up."

Randy put the fish into a large container filled with water from the lake. He rebaited his hook and cast again.

## V

Tai-Lee dispatched the messenger with a curt bow. The news was good. It was no longer necessary to torture the prisoner. Central Command had threatened to kill all prisoners if the enemy did not stop its needless

killing in Jeu-Piong. The enemy had persisted. The prisoner would be killed. Snapshots of the tortured victim lay scattered across Tai-Lee's desk. They were to be sent to the enemy to follow the others, a message of rebellion and indignation. Taylor was a national hero and if there was a way to circulate the pictures, the enemy would be sure to feel pressure from its own people to end the violence.

Tai-Lee sat down on his wooden chair. Drops of rain leaked through the thin, tin roof and beat persistently in his eardrums. He had a headache. His neck was sore. He had not slept in three days. A voice called to him, but he did not notice at first. His mind was elsewhere-- having a home-cooked meal in the now-ruined village of Zi-Zhing, the place of his birth, slowly caressing the gentle curves of his wives' breasts, hearing his son giggle and laugh as he ran with the other children through the village square, receiving the medal of valor for excellence and courage in the battle of Peuo...

"Commander, should we kill the prisoner?"

Tai-Lee looked up from his desk. "Yes, we should," he said. His voice was tired, but firm.

The prisoner had been badly beaten and already would be dead soon if the torture persisted. Tai-Lee heard a group of soldiers muttering in somber tones as they walked through the thick rain. They entered the prisoner's cell and then there were the sounds of pain.

He watched, his face revealing no emotion. Torture was never a pleasant sight for Tai-Lee. They were hurting him badly and finally, as the soldiers kept kicking and kicking and kicking the prisoner, Tai-Lee called for an end.

A gun was fired. He and his soldiers walked silently out of the empty cell and buried Taylor in the mud.

*Jeff Fowler*  
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