

INTRODUCTION

Being “Nitro”

Come at me the wrong way tonight and you may not walk out of here alive.

Nitro.

I can't see the audience yet, but I can hear the expectant buzz of excitement as they call out my name. The buildup is infectious. My heart pounds as I pass through the entrance, turn a corner, and catch my first glimpse of thousands and thousands of fans dressed in red, white, and blue. They seem to stretch out forever.

Nitro.

Totally pumped, I burst onto the arena floor of Madison Square Garden as fifteen thousand cheering fans slam to their feet. It is a fantastic world like no other—breathtaking, infinite. I lose myself in the reverberations smashing into each other, a wonderful chaos, as one noise rises above the uncontrolled fervor of screams and whoops. A chant.

NITRO!

All eyes are on me. I luxuriate as the people in the stands lose sight of who they are. Dignity and restraint are tossed aside because

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standing before them is a hero upon whom they can project their thrills, dreams, and insatiable demands.

NITRO! NITRO! NITRO!

I stand in the midst of the pulsating frenzy, lapping up and sucking in each and every drop.

I look up and catch my breath. There I am, larger-than-life, plastered on the giant JumboTron screen that dangles above the arena like a suspended star.

God, let me die right here.

I begin to run the outer perimeter of the arena in a prebattle ritual. The lyrics to a song by The Who blast from a two-hundred-watt amp and dance in my head.

No one knows what it's like

To be the bad man . . .

To be hated

To be fated

To telling only lies

I spot my opponent for the upcoming event. The hair on the back of my neck and my arms stands up, my heart thumps, and my ears ring loudly with each step toward my opponent—until I am standing across from him.

Like all the ones before him, he is scared. He closes his eyes and sucks in a stiff breath of courage. I can see his eyelids flutter and I sense the terror that churns inside him. He might have been captain of the football team. Hell, he might even have been the best athlete in his state. But now he is standing in front of fifteen thousand people, trying to beat *me*.

He thought he had what it took to get here. He'd put his money where his mouth was, and now he is going to pay the price.

The chant explodes again.

NITRO! NITRO! NITRO!

My body vibrates, my heart rattles against my ribs, and every

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muscle in my body tightens. I am about to explode into my opponent as hard as I can, to hurt him, to punish him, with my rage and my 235 pounds of solid muscle. At this moment I feel revulsion toward my opponent, absolute hatred. All I want to do is wipe the stupid look off his face.

“Contender, are you ready?” Mike Adamle’s voice booms out of the speakers. “Gladiator, are you ready?”

My heart pounds. Louder. Harder. Faster. *Get ready, here I come!*

The whistle blows. I blast into my opponent with reckless abandon, instantly overwhelming and dominating him. My shoulder slams into his ribs, sending the “football captain” flying in the air before landing in a painful, broken heap at my feet. The world slips away, and for a moment the voices are quiet. The universe is mine. Nirvana. The world makes sense. For one moment in time, everything is in sweet, simple order.

This is my refuge, the reason that I compete. It is all about the rush—the hits, the legal acts of physical violence that make the crowd roar and make me grin from ear to ear. The rush lasts for only an infinitesimal period of time, but while it is happening, I revel in a make-believe world where normal rules do not apply. I know that when it is over and the cruel reality of life sets in, the joke will be on me, but I don’t care. Everybody craves the incomparable power of being a Gladiator—the potent experience of rising to the heavens, however briefly, igniting and blowing up any dark, hidden places within.

When the referee gives me the victory sign, I fling my arms wide open, tilt back my head, and scream, somehow trying to expose the truth about my beautiful but fucked-up world. The fans are oblivious. I exit the arena while they cheer, and I head into the locker room, where I sit, my head slumped, my body still shooting adrenaline. But even then, when my dreams have become a reality, behind the cheers is a dark secret, a hidden agenda of a life being torn apart and wasted.

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I lock myself in an empty stall, and there I am, all alone, the crowd still shrieking from my victory as I sit on the toilet in the shadows and cry for a long time.

Who am I kidding? I know that each time I slam a syringe into my ass or swallow a steroid, it is nobody's fault but my own. I also believe each and every time that I can never stop.

You're asking me why?

Look at the world that has opened up to me.

I have this picture of myself in the back of my head as a chubby kid. And now, girls are hanging on to me, agents wine and dine me, and Warner Bros. wants to make a movie with me.

I pull up to Roxbury, the hottest club in Hollywood. A line of people spills out onto Sunset Boulevard, all waiting to get in. The doorman knows who I am and I slip inside and nod to Sylvester Stallone as I head up the stairs to the VIP room. Everyone is here: Denzel, Van Damme, Snipes, and some rookie seven-foot-two-inch basketball player they call Shaq. The atmosphere is anything-goes. The girls, the armpieces, the hopefuls, the I'll-do-anything-to-get-close-to-celebrity types, pack the room. They're all ripe for the picking. Hell, it is harder to go home alone than it is to take someone with me.

One afternoon, I'm having lunch at Mezza Luna in Beverly Hills when Steve Martin arrives at my table, introduces himself, and tells me he's a huge fan. As I stand up, shake his hand, and tell him I'm *his* biggest fan, he brings me over to Dustin Hoffman's table and introduces me to the actor and his wife. A few nights later, I'm at the home of the late billionaire Marvin Davis. Tony Bennett is the entertainment, and Cristal Champagne is on ice as I'm introduced to former presidents Ford and Carter. As I'm leaving, Merv Griffin calls out, "Dan, there's someone I want you to meet." It's Ronald Reagan.

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I was living the all-expenses-paid life everyone dreams about. I could walk into any place in Hollywood like I was a fucking movie star. I went from looking at the world to watching the world look at me.

The thing is, I love my country. I'm proud to have been the star of a show with the word *American* in the title. *American Gladiators*. A hit show that aired in more than forty countries with over 12 million weekly viewers. Madison Square Garden was the first stop in our 150-city live tour and I loved it, but somewhere inside, I knew it was all a lie, that I was deceiving people. But I told myself it was okay because they didn't really want the truth. They wanted to be entertained. That I was addicted to steroids, drugs that not only altered my consciousness but also altered my appearance, was the secret hook that drew the crowds, and everybody ate it up. If only someone had told me the truth back then when I was Nitro and thought I was indestructible.

Of course, the question is, would I have listened? Would I have done things differently if I'd known then what I know today? It's hard to say, but these days you should see me wake up in the morning . . . or maybe you shouldn't. As a result of twenty years of steroid use, I walk with a limp, I have seven scars on my face, two destroyed knees, and I can't walk up a flight of stairs until I chug a couple of cups of black coffee and a handful of anti-inflammatory pills. What strapping eighteen-year-old athlete could ever imagine ending up with a herniated back disk and a neck that pops like fireworks on the Fourth of July from a mere turn of my head? And those are the obvious problems. The *real* prizes are a pair of shrunken testicles and surgical scars across my nipples from having breast tissue removed from my chest.

It wasn't always like this . . .



CHAPTER 1

In Search of an Identity

What are the worst three words a child can hear?
We're getting divorced.

I am four years old in 1968, and my father has just returned to California from a two-year work stint in Vietnam. He walks into the living room of our box-size home in the severely depressed belly of Orange County, California, and announces, "Your mother and I are getting a divorce. You and your brother are going to Minnesota with me. Your sister is staying here with your mom." My father, Wally, is massive, forceful, and relentless. We are all insignificant and powerless in his wake.

So this is it. No explaining. No comforting. No choices. My brother, Randy, two years older than me, is my idol. My hero. My rock. My chubby-cheeked, ebullient little sister, Christine, is two years my junior.

My mother, Kazuko, whom my father met while he was in the marines in Japan, can do little to protest. She's been in the United States for only a short time, barely speaks English, and doesn't understand the customs and laws of this country. She doesn't know

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it's customary for the mother to get custody of the kids, and she doesn't know my father's threats of deportation are empty slings of intimidation.

A few days later, I'm standing in the airplane aisle watching the flight attendant closing the plane doors. I'm squeezing my eyes shut as hard as I can, with nothing but the blindness of hope that I can still keep this divorce nightmare from happening. That is when I still dreamed. That is when I thought I could make a difference. That is when I still believed. A flight attendant approaches me, shattering the illusion: "Young man, you're going to have to sit down."

I open my eyes to discover I'm still on the plane with my father and my brother already seated to my side. I see my mother, her eyes full of sorrow, on the tarmac holding my two-year-old sister.

"Sit down," my father barks.

I shake my head no. I am making a stand. Somehow at that young age, I instinctively know if I sit, life as I know it will be over. I glance over at my brother and think, why isn't he protesting? He's older and he should just tell everyone we're not doing it. This doesn't work for us. We're not leaving my mother and sister.

My dad glares at me, the threat of violence in his voice. "Sit down!"

I stand my ground, even though I am *deathly* afraid of him. I know I'm somewhat safe because he won't hit me in public. Now everyone is staring at me. I'm sobbing as I watch my mom and my sister disappear from the tarmac. *No, don't leave. Don't go! I need you. Stay! Fight! Fight for me!* The door is shut and I start sobbing even harder.

A man in an aisle seat across from my father leans over and says: "Big boys don't cry."

Are you kidding me? Big boys don't cry? I'm four years old, my family has just been torn apart. I don't know when I'll see my mother or sister again. And this ridiculous, idiotic statement is supposed to make me stop crying?

Well, it works.

That, and he asks me to flex my muscle. I squeeze my arm tight and up springs this little bud of a biceps. The man acts impressed and makes gushing sounds of admiration. “Wow, you see that?” he asks. I nod that I do and he says, “You’re a big boy, and big boys don’t cry.” I get the message loud and clear at the tender age of four: Muscles make you strong and invulnerable. When you’re a boy, the quickest way to become a man is not to cry.

My brother and I spend almost five years in Minnesota, from 1968 to 1972, but not with my father. He dropped us off on his way back to Vietnam and we lived with my father’s brother, Uncle Ron, and his wife, Barbara. The most important thing you need to know about Minnesota is that we were wanted. Ron and Barbara couldn’t have children, so they treat us as if we are their own. They do everything they can to make us feel like we are not just a couple of kids dumped on their doorstep.

We do family things. In the winter we play hockey and sled; in the spring, baseball; the fall, football. We take family drives in the convertible, my brother and me squished in the back between two giant collies, the wind blowing in our hair, the world rushing by us. We are free and happy.

In the fall of my second year in Minnesota, my mom and her new husband, John, drive 1,933 miles cross-country, from California to Minnesota, in a Ford Pinto with a defective, exploding gas tank, to visit us. She couldn’t afford to fly so she saved up for two years and has to sleep in the car on the way, but she makes it.

You see, the Japanese culture frowns on being overly expressive, emotional, or affectionate, so Mom prefers to bow rather than get tangled up in an embrace. To this day, when I try to wrap her up in a big hug, she stiffens up like a board.

In Minnesota, every time my older brother leaves the house, my aunt hollers, “Take your little brother with you!” Randy races off on his bike a little faster than he knows I can pedal, and I struggle mightily to keep up with him. But he never goes fast enough to lose

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me. It's just a typical big-brother-torturing-his-little-brother thing and *I know he loves me*. He can do or say whatever he wants to me, but if anyone else lays a finger on me or says anything inappropriate, he'll have the kid clenched in a headlock in no time, making him apologize to his little brother. Every touchdown my brother scores, every home run he hits, I stand off to the side and watch, knee-deep in envy and admiration, hoping and praying that one day I'll grow up to be just like him.

Time flies by in Minnesota. In 1972, we've been there for four years and we're happy. We've finally accepted this as our home when the unthinkable happens on a crisp Saturday morning. Randy and I are playing "kill the guy with the football" in our front yard with a couple of kids from the neighborhood when a taxi pulls up. A man exits and walks toward us.

Our father.

When he sees us, he drops to one knee, opens his arms wide, and bellows, "Hey, boys! It's your dad." Neither of us moves. He is our father but he is a stranger to us. For the last four years, we have received not one phone call or letter from him.

He calls out again, "Hey, boys! Come say hello to your father!" I look at Randy for a cue on how to proceed. I see the contempt in his eyes, he isn't moving. The next thing I know, I'm walking toward my father and hugging him. I don't know if I feel sorry for him or if I actually want to hug him.

Later that night in our bedroom, Randy gives me an earful. "Look, he can't just come back here and think he's going to be our dad and that everything is all right."

"But at least he came back," I say.

"It just doesn't work that way," Randy says, frustrated with me. "You're too young, you just don't get it." The admonition hurts, but he's right. I didn't get it. Maybe that's the difference in the mind-set of an eight-year-old and a ten-year-old, or maybe it's simply the difference in our personalities. He's the leader and I'm the follower.

As we sit huddled in our bedroom, we can hear Ron and Barbara arguing with our dad. Things went well for him in Vietnam. He quit his job at the engineering plant, he opened a successful American restaurant in Saigon that served homesick GIs, and he wanted to take us to Vietnam with him. Ron and Barb rise up in fierce opposition. They don't think it's safe for us there and they desperately want us to stay with them. My dad refuses to listen in spite of the horrific headlines plastered across the papers of bombings, bloodshed, and dead soldiers.

"We're Americans," my dad says proudly. "We've never lost a war and we're not going to lose this one."

A few days later, my brother and I are on a plane to Vietnam—one more journey in a long line of trips about which I had no choice. I don't cry when the doors close this time, but I am scared to death. The night before we left, a kid named Michael Johnson from the neighborhood told me his oldest brother went to Vietnam and never came back. They sent his mom a flag, instead.

Randy tells me, "Michael Johnson's brother was a soldier in the war. They don't kill kids there." He promises he won't let anything happen to me. We promise each other we'll always stick together, no matter what.

The airplane lands, the door swings open. I exit the craft and stand at the top of the steps, sweating from the blistering heat. I squint, trying to see through the bright summer sun to get a glimpse of my new home. Silhouetted figures skitter below us. I blink again, and slowly the world comes into view as I see soldiers strapped with M16 rifles littering the tarmac. We step off the plane, walk into the terminal, and I stop in front of a soldier. I've never seen a real gun up close. It is frightening and exhilarating to be inches from a hunk of hardened metal that could play God.

As we drive away from the airport, the sounds and the sights of this new, bizarre world rush in. The streets are filled with the

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chaos of cyclo mais, taxis, bicycles, and cars. Pedestrians pack the sidewalks, and everyone is in a mad but civilized rush. We arrive at our new house, where a host of people are waiting for us. My dad leads us to a petite Asian woman in her thirties.

“Boys, this is your new mom, Kimm,” Dad says.

Kimm cracks a down-turned smile. It’s immediately clear that having us come here wasn’t her idea. From behind this hardened woman steps a cute five-year-old girl with a white ribbon in her hair. “This is your sister Debbie,” Dad says.

I’m stunned to find out I have a sister here, and her radiant smile immediately wins me over. Living in Vietnam in 1972 is like living in New York in the weeks following 9/11. You can smell the fear, the uneasiness, the despair, which to an eight-year-old boy is both glorious and hellish.

After about a year, the U.S. government pulls the majority of its troops out of Vietnam, and my father loses the majority of his clientele. To keep his business afloat, he puts a couple of blackjack tables upstairs above the restaurant and brings “tea girls” (prostitutes) to the bar. When a customer sits down at the bar, the girls try to strike up a conversation and to get him to buy them a \$15 glass of tea. The girls get a cut from the drinks, so the more overpriced drinks the customers buy, the more money the girls make.

I recognize the art form in it. The girls who do best make the men feel as if they genuinely like and are interested in them. You do this for a man, he’ll open up his wallet for you. If a customer wants to do more than drink, he talks to the old mama-san who looks after the girls and makes an arrangement to take her home for the night for about \$30.

I don’t end up losing my virginity to a tea girl, even though they constantly heckle me, calling me “cherry boy” and telling me how they want to “pop my cherry.” At ten years old, I desperately want that, too, but I don’t have any hair down there and there’s no way in hell I’m going to let a girl see what my dad commonly refers to as “peach fuzz.”

My dad is a womanizer. If he could keep his dick in his pants, he could save himself a lot of trouble and money, but he doesn't feel that he has to live by the same rules as everyone else. He simply follows his desires and is a victim of his appetites. It was no surprise, then, that in November 1974 his gallivanting ways got him into trouble. Dad is seeing a young waitress named Tu who works at the restaurant. Kimm finds out and kicks Randy and me out of the house, putting us in a cab that takes us to Charlie Brown's, another American restaurant in Saigon.

We wait there, and hours later my dad shows up and takes us to his friend's house, just outside the city. "You'll be staying here at the colonel's house for a while," he tells us. But a week later, he informs us he's sending us back to the States. He doesn't give us a reason, and I don't think, at ten, I'd have understood if he had. But looking back, I believe it was because the situation in Vietnam had deteriorated so badly it was no longer safe for us to remain there. I also believe somewhere in his heart my dad knew that he wasn't doing a great job as a father, and it would be best to send us to someone who could raise us better—another stunning change over which I have no say. But as long as I'm going with Randy, that is enough for me.

The day before we're scheduled to leave, I became what I am today.

Randy and I are alone on the rooftop patio of the colonel's three-story cement block of a home. My father and his new girlfriend, Tu, have gone into the city to buy supplies for our trip home. Randy doesn't want to leave because he has fallen hard for a teenage girl he met a few weeks earlier. He is heartbroken over never seeing her again. I'm drawing a picture of an airplane as a sudden gust of wind whooshes by, lifting my picture in the air.

It lands on a thick rope of electrical cable on the other side of the four-foot wall that encompasses the perimeter of the roof. "I'll get it," Randy says as he hops over the wall, landing on a two-foot

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ledge. He's three stories up with nothing in front of him but air. The picture is draped across the eye-level-high wire, fluttering in the wind.

Filled with the spirit of Bruce Lee, Randy grabs the wall behind him for support and kicks out, trying to hit the paper. He misses. "Damn! I can't reach it," he groans.

"Bruce Lee could reach it," I say, egging him on.

Randy kicks out with all of his strength and connects with the paper—and the wire.

Then it happens. A flash of electrical discharge and a loud popping noise as a sudden jolt of electricity surges through Randy's body with such force it knocks him back against the wall. He starts to fall forward, and instinctively to prevent himself from falling three stories, he reaches out and grabs the wire with both hands.

A shower of sparks. The crackling of electricity. Randy's body shakes and convulses as seventy-five thousand volts of electricity course through him.

"Let go!" I scream. "*LET GO!*"

The electricity continues to rattle his body as the sparks fizzle, and a thick, white smoke fills the air with the stench of burnt flesh.

Please let go!

Randy is suddenly buffeted back, slammed against the wall, and he disappears from view.

"Randy! Randy!" I scream and race forward, praying that he didn't fall all the way to the ground. I peer over the wall and see my brother slumped over on his side, unconscious, having barely managed to stay on the ledge. Then I notice his fingers, burnt to stubs. Fragments of white bone are visible through charcoal-black flesh that extends all the way up to his wrists. The bottom of the tennis shoe on the foot he kicked the wire with has melted, and burnt flesh protrudes through the opening.

I lean over the wall, reach down, and grab Randy with both hands, trying to lift him back over the wall. I'm not strong enough. I try again, but I can't do it. "C'mon, Randy, you gotta help me!"

I plead as I try again. And again, I'm not strong enough. I scream in frustration and hold my brother tight against the wall. Scared . . . not knowing what to do . . . not wanting to let go of him . . . hugging him . . . loving him . . . needing him.

I spot three men working in the street below. I yell at them, but they're too far away to hear me. I gently release my brother, making sure he stays on the ledge, then I race downstairs to the street where the men are working.

"You've got to help me! It's my brother! Help me please!" No one moves. They just look at me. I scream at them again. "You have to help me! Please . . . *chet*" ("dead" in Vietnamese). "My brother, *chet*." Still nothing. They don't speak English. I grab one of the men by the shirt and start dragging him violently toward the house, saying, "Come! Come now!" in Vietnamese.

Two of the men finally get it and start to follow me. We charge into the house and race up the stairs to the roof. I jerk the men toward the wall. With their help, we lift my brother over and lay his rigid body on the tile floor. My eyes flick across the workers as they check Randy's vitals. I'll never forget the sickening hum like a mad swarm of bees that fills the air and exists under everything. I don't know where it's coming from.

"*Chet . . . Chet?*" I ask.

The men don't know and continue frantically to check my brother's body. I feel the tears welling up in my eyes. I'm going to cry.

But, no . . . *Big boys don't cry.*

I fight back my tears. A single droplet threatens to escape over the brim of my eyelid and spill down my cheek. I blink furiously, sucking in large breaths between gritted teeth, feeling somehow that my brother's fate hangs in the balance of my keeping that tear from falling.

Don't cry! Don't cry!

Don't die! Don't die!

One of the men suddenly looks at me and in broken English says, "Ho-sp-tal." My heart jumps. That meant he's alive and there's

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something worth saving. The men indicate they need my help to carry my brother down the stairs. I rise and stand over my brother, looking down at him. His face is undamaged and still beautiful, but his body is rigid . . . not flaccid as it should be. I know there is a word for this . . . *rigor* . . . *rigor* . . . something . . . but isn't that only after someone has been dead for a while?

The sickening buzzing sound continues to permeate the air. I can't figure out where it's coming from as I try to quiet my mind—millions of thoughts crashing into each other. I kneel down and slide my hands underneath my brother's shoulder to help lift him. My face is inches from his. Then I realize that the haunting hum is coming out of his open mouth. It's the sound of seventy-five thousand volts of electricity coursing through his charred body.

At the hospital, I stand outside the primitively equipped operating room and watch through a window as a team of doctors works frantically on Randy. He is still in his clothes and has a host of tubes coming out of him. My dad and Tu are there as well. Dad, disjointed and in bad shape, mumbles something about taking Randy to the Mayo Clinic . . . and how it'd be the best place to get skin grafts for his hands and feet.

"Dad, is he going to be okay?" I ask.

"I'm not sure . . . but . . . I think so," he answers as he wipes back his tears.

I nod, push away from the window, and walk down the hall. I am angry. Furious. Full of more rage than my little ten-year-old body can handle. *You idiot. This is your fault! If you hadn't let that stupid paper blow away, Randy would be okay.* I pray to God and thank him for keeping my brother alive. That's when out of the corner of my eye—

I see my dad move closer to the window, a look of horror on his face. Something is terribly wrong. I run back to the emergency room and look through the window to see a doctor with both hands on Randy's chest, frantically trying to get his heart to beat again. Blood has formed at the side of his mouth and his face is

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turning blue. The EKG flatlines. A doctor jumps on him and starts to pound on his chest, desperately trying to revive him.

Still the *flatline*.

Two doctors finally stop him from pumping on my brother's chest. He climbs off Randy and looks at us for a long, chill moment. My dad begins to weep. *But you were talking about . . . going to the Mayo Clinic? I thought he was . . . he was . . . going to be okay.* Then reality slowly begins sinking in.

But he can't be . . . he can't be . . .

My father crumples to his knees, buries his face in his hands, and sobs uncontrollably. I don't cry. I can't cry. I run as fast as my little legs will carry me and find refuge around the corner, where I pummel a wall with both fists in blind rage.

Please, God! Let Randy live.

He's stronger . . . smarter. Better than me.

He deserves to live, not me.

Please take me instead, God.

Please, God . . . take me.

It's the last time I pray.

My father doesn't want to bury Randy in Vietnam. He wants to send him back to the United States, but there is too much political red tape. It will take over a month to get his body back home. My dad decides to bury Randy in Saigon, in a cemetery that is exclusively for wealthy Vietnamese and French dignitaries. This all happens during the peace treaty. I don't think anyone thought we'd lose the war and have to evacuate the country.

The funeral is held in a Buddhist shrine. I stand over Randy's open casket gazing down at his pale, inert face. I can't get over how peaceful he looks. How *beautiful* he looks. It is nearly impossible to believe that Randy, my beautiful twelve-year-old brother, is *dead*.

The Buddhist monks chatter in excitement over a moth that has landed on Randy's casket. They believe it is my brother incarnate.

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I stare at them as a myriad of emotions runs through me, but no tears.

I keep thinking, *Big boys don't cry. Big boys don't cry.*

Then another thought pops into my head: *Big boys don't die. Big boys don't die.*

Randy was big. Bigger than I could ever be. If he died, then what in the world was going to happen to me?

When I am ten years old . . .

I see my dad bloody and beat the shit out of a guy.

I see my dad writhing on the floor, suffering a heart attack.

I see my dad beat the shit out of my brother.

I see my dad cry and drink himself to oblivion after my brother's death.

I see my dad fuck two prostitutes while I lie in the same bed.

I see my father wave good-bye to me as I board the plane to return to the United States, alone.



I became what I am in a shower of sparks when I was ten years old.
At my brother's funeral with my dad and little sister Debbie.