



Graphic by [Steph](#)

Rating: PG-13 (language)

Classification: Vignette

Spoilers: none

Disclaimer: They're not mine and never will be, so barring some massive shift in the order of the universe, I'll never make money this way. I'm okay with that, so I hope TPTB are, too.

Author's Notes: Sturgis has been with us for two full seasons now, and we still don't know the story behind what brought him here. So I figured I'd take a quick shot at it. The moment I post this, I'm sure TPTB will suddenly decide to enlighten us as to the real story, in much the same way that washing a car brings on a rainstorm. But I'm okay with that, too. Sometimes you just have to take one for the team. Oh, and for the record, I'm kinda clueless about the blue-water Navy, so if I've screwed up the way things work, feel free to let me know.

What happens to a dream deferred?

*Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?*

*Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.*

Or does it explode?

-Langston Hughes

September 1994
J.D.'s Bar and Grill
Alexandria, Virginia

The smoky haze that hung in the air was a welcome change from the wet, frigid weather just outside the door. Sturgis Turner scanned the quiet restaurant, rapidly locating his friend in a side booth. For a split-second, he reconsidered his plans yet again. This wouldn't be a simple meeting to chat fondly about old times. He'd be dragging up painful questions and reopening still-healing scars, all for the purpose of easing his own mind.

But he needed to talk this through - somehow, to someone. And although his experience had been markedly different, Harm would understand this like few others ever could. Steeling his resolve, Sturgis hung up his coat and made his way over to the booth.

With two textbooks and a notepad spread out across the table, his brow creased in concentration, Harmon Rabb fit easily into the role of a dedicated law student. At the other man's approach, he glanced up and instantly broke into a wide, welcoming smile. "Hey, sorry about all this," he apologized, gathering up the books and rising to greet his friend. "Exam on Tuesday -- any free time I get, you know?"

Sturgis clasped the proffered hand and shook it firmly. "Thanks for making some time for me. I appreciate it."

"Happy to do it. How often do you get up here these days, anyway?"

"Not that often, obviously." He slid into the booth across from Harm, sizing him up. "You look good, man. We've talked, but I don't think we've actually gotten together since -- "

"The hospital, yeah." Harm didn't appear to flinch at the reminder of his accident. He lived with such reminders daily, Sturgis supposed. "Nah, I can't complain. I'm good as new, with a couple of notable exceptions."

One notable exception, really: the one that had forced him out of the cockpit was the only exception that sprang to mind. Sturgis only shook his head, offering a look of mock contempt. "What's with this haircut, though? Or should I say, the lack thereof?"

"Hey, I'm inactive at the moment. Might as well take advantage of it while I can." Harm pushed a few locks of longish brown hair back from his forehead and signaled for the waitress to bring another beer.

"So this whole law school thing seems to be working out, huh?"

"So far. I still have a little under a year to go, and let me tell you, there are times when I start counting the days. But enough about me. Didn't I see your name on the selection list for lieutenant commander?"

Sturgis shrugged. "No big deal. You'd have been on it too if you'd been active this year."

Harm shot him a look that conveyed his level of confidence in that assessment. "Below zone? Whatever. Your tour on the *Rhode Island* just wrap up?"

"Two weeks ago."

"Nice. With that new stripe, you're probably looking at an XO slot after another rotation or so, right?"

"Maybe," Sturgis replied evasively, trying to mask his unease with the topic.

But Harmon Rabb could be incredibly perceptive when it served his purpose. They'd each discovered long ago, while rooming together at Annapolis, that trying to hide something from the other was typically a losing proposition.

"Sturg? Is it just me, or are you sounding less than enchanted with the silent service?"

He didn't reply right away, recalling all the different ways he'd devised to begin this conversation. In the end, he settled on a fairly straightforward approach. "Buddy, I have to ask you about some things, and you're going to think I've lost my mind, but I really need your help on this."

"Anything," Harm pledged instantly, with a slight frown. "What's going on?"

A drink had appeared on the table at some point, escaping his notice until now. Sturgis picked it up and took a swig before answering. "I'm thinking about changing over to JAG, too."

His friend just looked at him for a minute, processing the idea. There was no disbelief expressed, as it was obvious that he wasn't kidding around. Instead, Harm said finally, "Wouldn't you get better career advice from someone who's actually been a judge advocate for a while, rather than someone who's still got a while to go before he even takes the bar exam?"

"I'm not looking for career advice. I know it's not a move that's likely to put me on the fast track for much of anything. What I want -- what I *need* -- is someone who knows what it's like to leave something vitally important to him, something that has been the focus of his life ever since he can remember ... to leave all that behind and start over."

Harm's sea-green eyes clouded over, and the disappearance of that light suddenly aged him far beyond his thirty years. In that moment, it became clear that the confident, comfortable persona he'd been projecting up until this point was little more than a mask. This still hurt deeply, cruelly.

"I didn't leave it behind," he stated in a low voice. "It left me."

Sturgis watched the transformation and cursed himself for his selfishness. "You know what - I'm sorry. I'm a jerk to ask something like that."

But Harm didn't seem to have heard. After staring intently at a knot in the wooden table for a while, he suddenly picked up his glass and drained it. "Well, shit," he said, with quiet resignation. "Come on. Let's do this somewhere else."

They went back to Harm's apartment in Georgetown, stopping at the corner store for a six-pack of something -- it didn't matter what. The first thing Sturgis noted as he entered the living room was its austerity, the walls and shelves bearing very few mementos from their occupant's days as an aviator.

Harm tossed his bookbag toward the corner, popped open one of the bottles, and slouched into a chair. "Take your best shot, buddy. It's been most of three years, so if I don't

want to be labeled a permanent head case, I have to be able to handle a conversation like this. I can't promise you any good answers, but -- "

"I think you can." Sturgis took a seat on the sofa and gestured around the room. "No pictures, none of your awards," he commented inquisitively. "No reminders at all."

"I get enough of those just by waking up in the morning and not being on a rack on the boat. I don't particularly want to think too hard about how great I had it before, because I don't have a prayer of ever getting back to that. This is what I have now, so that's what I focus on."

"Makes sense." Sturgis reached for a bottle himself. "What hurts more -- remembering the crash, or not being able to fly?"

"I don't know if I can separate those two things, but if I could, wouldn't the answer be obvious? If I'd just lost my wings -- if they'd found out about my eyes before anything could happen, Mace would still be here. I'd still be a fairly bitter son of a bitch, but at least I wouldn't be a guilty, bitter son of a bitch."

Sturgis shook his head with a humorless smirk. "Point taken."

"And that's the difference between you and me, isn't it? I think I would've heard about it if you'd crashed a sub and gotten somebody killed. So if you didn't screw up, what is it that's making you think about leaving?"

The submariner studied his beer for a long moment. "It's not that I've lost interest in my job. Far from it. I love being out there, and I know I'm good at it. But ..." He sighed. "Have you ever witnessed an injustice and been powerless to correct it?"

Harm considered the question for a moment. "I guess so. I saw guys in my squadron get written up for bad reasons, by fleet JAGs who didn't fully understand what it meant to be the ones doing the fighting. I remember thinking that if there was somebody to defend them who really got it, maybe things would work out better. I guess that's probably why I ended up here." He leaned forward. "You must have seen something bigger than that, if you're honestly considering this. I didn't have much of a choice left. You do."

"On my present course, I'm an accessory to a lie that will torpedo a man's career," Sturgis intoned darkly. "I don't know that I have much of a choice, either."

Harm regarded him calmly, no longer surprised by any of the revelations in this conversation. "I'm listening."

Sturgis took a drink before explaining. "Last month, the *Rhode Island* was participating in an exercise off Kings Bay with the *Kennedy* battle group. We had a problem with our navigational equipment during the exercise, and as a result, we had a near miss with one of the surface ships. After what I'd characterize as a cursory investigation, the captain relieved one of our electronics techs, a petty officer named Kevin Harper, and sent him to an Article 32 hearing for dereliction of duty."

"And you're saying it wasn't Harper's fault?"

"He's a good kid, Harm, and he's way too bright to have screwed up like this. Officers are supposed to sort of mentor the sailors, so I've talked to him a lot. After this happened, I checked around and found out that one of the other guys had been having some problems."

"What kind of problems?"

"The kind that come in a little white pill. Amphetamines, or so I hear." Sturgis set his beer down on the table. "Sub crews are tight, in more ways than one. That kind of thing is exceptionally hard to hide, but this kid, Crenshaw, was pulling it off. Except he and Harper had been friends since basic -- Crenshaw had helped him through when he thought he was going to wash out. Harper found out about the drugs, and he agreed to keep them a secret if Crenshaw would go into rehab the minute our tour was over."

Harm frowned. "That was a lapse in judgment on Harper's part."

"Hey, we were sixteen days from the finish line. Crenshaw would have undoubtedly faced confinement and loss of pay if command knew about the drugs, and his money troubles were part of the reason for the drugs in the first place. He would've been destroyed. Harper felt like he owed him, and he thought that he could keep an eye on his pal for the last two weeks or so."

"So what happened?"

"The day of the incident, Crenshaw was supposed to be on second watch. But he was trying to cut back on the speed, and he was getting some nasty withdrawal headaches and stuff. Harper confessed to me that he'd agreed to swap shifts with him -- so Crenshaw was the one who didn't pick up the glitch in the nav computers. Harper told the XO and the JAGs during the investigation that he'd been the one on duty, because he knew that explaining the switch would have incriminated his friend." Sturgis stared hard at a tiny point on the opposite wall. "The only reason he told me the truth is that it can't hurt Crenshaw any more. The man wrapped his car around a tree eight days ago, and the autopsy showed a combination of alcohol and illegal substances in his blood."

Harm absorbed that information for a moment before asking the next question. "So what now? Seems like the charge against Harper should be dropped in favor of a letter of reprimand."

Sturgis shook his head. "The Article 32 already went forward and referred him to captain's mast, which in a case like this will pretty much kill his chances for advancement. I approached Captain Sutter and asked him to reopen the case based on the new information. He categorically refused, saying that Harper made his own problems and deserves to face the consequences. Furthermore, he ordered me not to approach the fleet JAGs to have the case reopened, and waved an oblique threat of a DDO charge in my face."

As his friend had expected, Harm's features morphed from surprise to indignation. "Can he *do* that?"

"He just did." Sturgis tightened his fingers around the arm of the sofa. "I can't serve under that smug bastard any longer. I can't even look him in the eye without getting the urge to knock some basic decency into him. Sure, Harper screwed up by not getting an addict removed from duty. But he didn't put us on a course to collide with a guided missile cruiser, and now his record will forever say that he did just that. I know I can't do anything about this

particular case, but I don't think I can go back out there knowing that I allowed the truth to be obscured."

Harm said nothing for a moment, contemplating the bottle in his hand. Finally, he pointed out, "The fleet JAGs aren't the only ones who could have the case reopened. Headquarters staff could do it of their own accord."

"I've thought about that, believe me. If I got the chance, it'd be the first thing on my list after Naval Justice School. The thing is, I won't be a JAG at all for at least another three years. By then, the damage to Harper's career will be irreversible. His exam for First Class comes up in a little over a year, and as it stands now, he'll be ineligible."

"A little over a year, you said?"

"November, I think. Why?"

A hint of a smile curled the corner of Harm's mouth. "Barring a catastrophe, I'll be out of NJS by next June. And I'm told that I'll most likely be staying stateside for a while. Might even end up at Headquarters."

Sturgis lifted his gaze, not quite willing to believe. "It would piss off a lot of people at Second Fleet."

"Like they don't already think I'm a screw-up?"

For the first time that evening, a true smile softened his eyes. "Buddy, you are amazing."

"Don't thank me until I find a way to actually pull it off." Harm propped his feet up on the coffee table. "That doesn't change the fact that you still have a choice to make, and you have to make it based on something more than this. Don't become a JAG because you want to fix what happened to Petty Officer Harper, or because you don't want to go to sea with that jackass Sutter. Do it because it's what you want to do with your career, or don't do it at all."

"Is that why you did it? Because it's what you want to do with your career?"

The sharpness returned to his gaze for a brief instant. "My choices were a little more limited, remember? I physically can't do what I really wanted to do with my career. This isn't such a bad second choice."

"An office, and a courtroom?"

"And a little thing called justice. Look, if you want me to admit that I didn't come to law school for the best reasons, consider it done. I didn't want to be here at first, and if I'm totally honest, I still don't. But I haven't just been going through the motions for the past two years. I've seen the law work for people who'd given up on it, and I can see myself stepping into that role. We signed up to defend the country and each other, right? Isn't that what I'll be doing here?"

Sturgis nodded, his lips drawn into a thin line.

"But this isn't about me. Are you willing to give up what you have now, which is admittedly pretty damn good, to start over in a new career field that may or may not turn out to be more satisfying than your old one?"

"If I weren't, we wouldn't be here talking about it. I'd have gotten us tickets to a Redskins game instead." Sturgis raised his eyebrows, but his old roommate wasn't buying the attitude, and he quickly grew serious. "I am willing to do it. If you'd asked me two months ago, I would've said you were nuts, but I've been thinking about this and nothing else for the past few days, and I'm as sure as I'm ever going to be. I'm not doing it because I think Harper needs help. I'm doing it because there are a lot of Harpers out there who need help, too, and I know now that I can't assume the system always works out the way it should. If I went back to the fleet, this would be eating at me for the rest of my life. JAG is something I just have to do."

Harm spread his hands wide. "Then I'm not going to even try to talk you out of it."

"Okay ... Okay, then. I guess all I need to do is go in on Monday and apply for the law program, and while I'm at it, request to change my designator. I'm sure I won't get any argument from Sutter." Sturgis exhaled, a little surprised by the depth of the breath he'd been holding. Now that he'd said the words, a sizeable weight had been lifted from his shoulders, replaced by a lesser tension that would likely resonate in the back of his mind throughout law school, and Naval Justice School, and into his first assignment. Perhaps longer. Maybe he'd never be free of the could-have-beens.

"You, ah, you think we'll be here like this ten years from now, wishing we were still line officers and wondering what things would've been like?"

Harm shrugged, his expression unexpectedly clear. "Nobody gets an answer to that question, Sturgis -- not even the people who choose one path from the start and never waver from it. We're no different from anybody else on that score."

"But people can't really know something they've never had. We know what we had. Admit it -- when your twenty years are up and you're on top of the JAG Corps, you'll still miss flying."

He gave a small smile, just barely tinged with sadness. "If I'd gotten to fly 'til I was a hundred, I'd still have missed it the very next day. I can't change that. All we can do is make the most of what we've got, you know?"

"Yeah. All right." They both rose, and Sturgis reached across the table to clasp his friend's hand. "Thanks, man. Think I can borrow some of your textbooks later on?"

Harm shot him a dirty look. "Buy your own. The Navy'll be paying."

"Fair enough." As he moved to the door, Sturgis nodded once, resolutely, as if confirming his chosen path. "Really, Harm -- thanks. I'll be seeing you around."

"Count on it. Take care."

"You, too."

With that, the young officer set his shoulders, took a step forward, and closed the door behind him.

*** THE END ***