

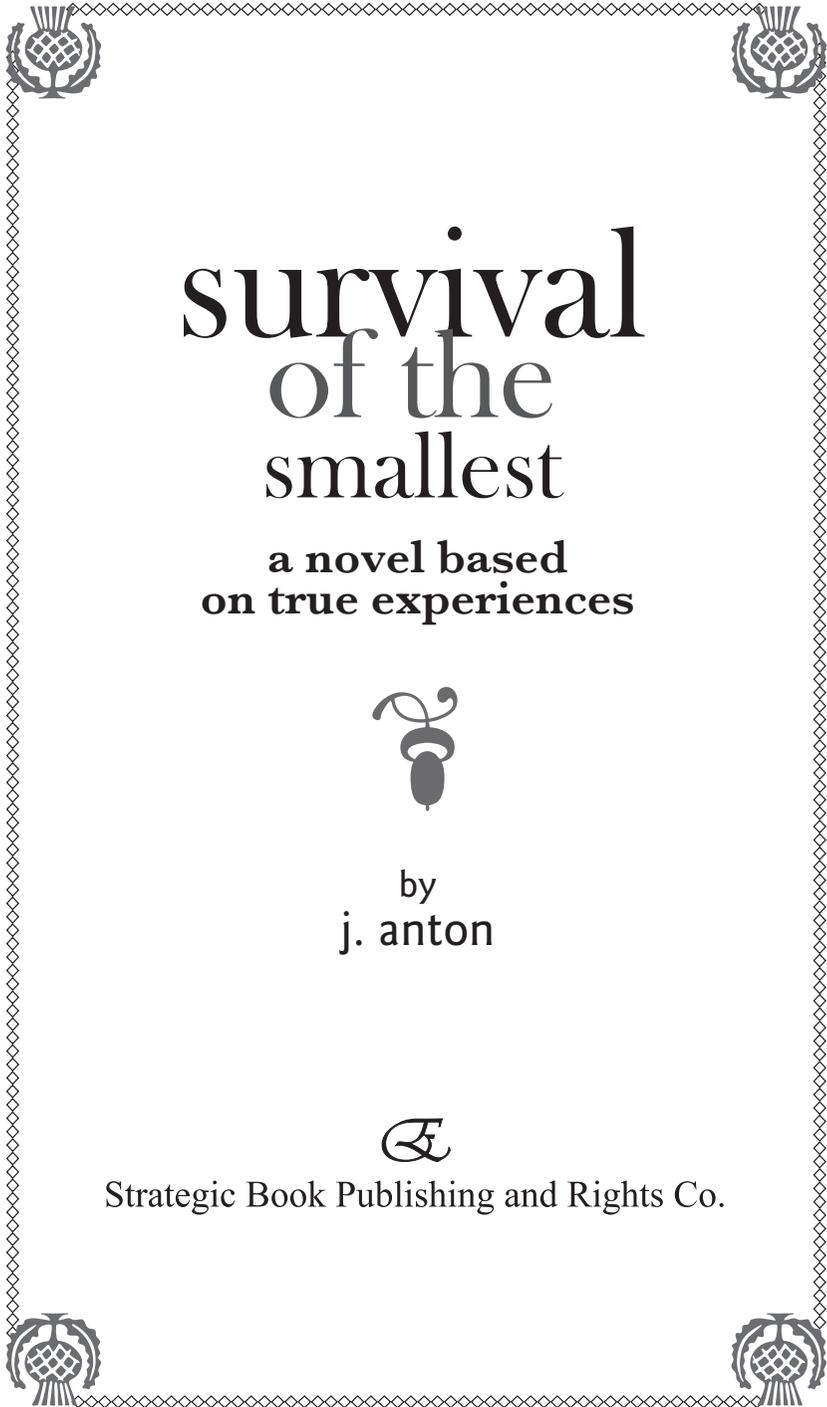
survival
of
the
smallest

a novel by

j. anton

based on true experiences

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Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.

12620 FM 1960, Suite A4-507

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dedication

To Susan, who took me away from the insanity
and gave me structure in my youth.

To Doctor Mac, whose insight and calm demeanor
gave me strength to write this.

And to my loving wife, Nanette, whose support and
encouragement through the arduous task of remembering
these moments gave me comfort to continue.



introduction

This story begins with a young soldier injured in Vietnam, returning home to the United States to spend the next several months in an army hospital to heal from his physical injuries. In and out of a coma, his mind takes him back to his early childhood, a childhood of torture and torment, physical and sexual abuse. It was the 1950s . . . a time when children were possessions of their parents, a time when children were not protected and parents were not punished to the full extent of the law. Born into a family where his conception was a constant reminder to his parents of the illicit affair between his mother and her brother-in-law, with no hope of escape, the little boy suffers physical trauma that only one who has experienced this could ever conceive to be real. He survives his childhood, only to witness even more torment as he ages. This book reveals his beginnings, as the smallest among us.



preface: 1970

Fear is forgotten in the storm of testosterone known as the teenage years. Exactly when the metamorphosis takes place is a grey area.

One day you sit in the principal's office, that unmistakable skunky scent emanating from your armpits; your heart races with the anxiety of the unknown weighing heavily on your mind and the next thing, you are standing next to his 1964 Plymouth Valiant, baseball bat in hand, having just felt the satisfying crunch of the windshield.

I can smell the scent, I can feel the anxiety, yet I am floating on a cloud somewhere between this backboard and the low ceiling of the small craft.

“Stay with me, soldier! Don't you fall asleep! Get that damn drip going.”

I feel the sting of his slap, and the warm ooze, the air rushing past in thumping waves.

“I can't find a vessel! Hold his arm there!”

I can still smell the damp jungle floor—that mossy, musty smell—and the diesel smell and copper and the heat of the flames, burning, burning, into the brain and taking the skin off my feet.

“Get some atropine in him! Right here, soldier, pay attention to me, don't you go to sleep! That's an order.”

The ground shakes; the side of the Huey blows outwards, surreal and real. I lose the grip on the gurney; I am sliding into the bay, working a hot



Chapter One

THE DUNGEON

The voices are louder, and my brain begins to focus. *Mom? Dad?* I am on the toilet, looking down at my feet; I see they are bare, cold, and kind of blue.

It is the winter of 1955, in that small house with all the rooms. I sit alone in the add-on bathroom. The house, built in the 1860s for the housing of Chinese and Irish rail workers, is much like a barracks. There was not much forethought to the design with a small porch to shield the entryway from the harsh winds of the winter. Its nondescript exterior is an extension of that lack of attention to the aesthetics and accounts for the Spartan décor. There are six bunk rooms and an anteroom now used as a living room. The real living room, now employed as a dining room, served as the sitting room at the base of the stairwell. In the 1930s, the house is said to have been used as a house of ill repute. At the entrance to all the rooms was a gaslight, each equipped with a decorative key. One would tip the candle to the turned key and the gas would ignite, giving a most pleasant glow to the surroundings.

Late in the 1930s, a contractor purchased all of the land east of the newly laid rail. That portion of land included seven bunk-

houses, five on the east side of the tracks, two on the west. The two on the west were the Chinese barracks and the layout was of four large rooms.

All of the housing was without indoor plumbing, but by the 1930s, newly enacted zoning laws required the renovation of those buildings to include bathroom and kitchen facilities.

The small brown house, well, it received the deluxe treatment, complete with added electricity (fat and fuzzy wire on the exterior, ending at receptacles and fixtures) and the addition of a lean-to section that housed the bathroom and kitchen. A root cellar was the result of having to excavate the area beneath the newly added bathroom; it simply was not refilled after the project was completed. The walls were roughly bricked, and very little expense was given to the shoring up of these new walls. The result was the shifting of the kitchen and bathroom, a cant if you will, that lent to the character of that end of the house.

There are stove-holes in the walls of each of the lower rooms, now covered with ubiquitous decorative covers. That is the source of heat for the entire house, with each lower room equipped with a vented ceiling to allow the warmed air to reach the upper floor. The current heat source is a small, gas stove with an exposed lattice front, which the gas creeps up as it ignited. It might have been an adequate heat source were the occupants bedded in front of it, but the battle against the winters on Lake Erie were mostly lost on the tiny stove.

The temperature isn't more than 32°F, for the water in the toilet has a layer of ice on the top. I had just had a bowel movement, and there it sits on the surface of the ice. It was something I had never seen, just there, floating, but not, two small, brown stools. I dismount in fascination. How is this possible? As I get

with a tattoo on his right bicep decrying the fact that he crossed the equator. He had enlisted in the navy the day he turned seventeen and was off to the South Pacific during the waning days of World War II.

He was sporting his usual outfit for the evening, wife beater with his workpants, held up with that imposing belt. I have never in my life encountered a more fearsome symbol of violence. He makes a great show of removing it with a flourish, folding it in half, flailing away without regard for where the blows land. Soon, totally lost in the act, he allows his psyche to overtake his consciousness and for the next few minutes, relieves himself of the anger and despair that dictate his ill will toward the little boy, an ever present reminder of his shortcomings and of his young bride's infidelities. Only exhaustion limits this tirade. Sweat flies from his brow, the task overwhelming his sense of reality. Now there are welts, bleeding, raised, and split flesh. The bloodlust served, he comes into himself, slowly defusing; he once again is Father. He sees for the first time the damage he has inflicted.

More angry now than when he started, he comes into himself with loathing for allowing the circumstance to envelop his being and for letting her shrill and taunting voice once again prompt punishment he is sure was not justified.

He drags the small, frail figure to the cellar door and unceremoniously tosses him down the stairs. Now, while he is out of sight, he can forgive himself, now, while uncapping a Stroh's longneck and taking that first pull, he can finally relax for the evening.

There I awaken fully, the voices overhead sometimes recognizable, sometimes not. The air is very cold and I am in my undershorts and tee shirt, barefoot. I begin to shiver uncontrol-

lably. The welcome darkness envelops me but does not obliterate the pain of broken teeth and broken skin.

Is it real? Am I really here? I doze off to the beeping and pinging, pain everywhere, and voices that echo in and out. Every time I begin to grasp a thought, its tail end slips through the fingers of my brain.

I feel a very soft touch on my forehead. There it goes again. The contact with the real is intoxicating. Then as pleasant as it was seconds ago, now it is nothing but a searing pain on my right eyebrow. I raise my arm to touch the spot and a rat, larger than my hand, helps himself to the gnawed-off portion of my face. I scream. At least I think I do, but I cannot hear anything. Is it real?

Just then the feeling of warmth throughout my body, every cell, every corner is suddenly warm, and I can smile at the sensation. As the darkness creeps in and takes hold of my consciousness, I sleep.

The warmth--circulating through and through, energy seemingly reaching every cell--voices and noises penetrating the unconsciousness.

"Why wasn't someone watching him? I ordered twenty-four-hour observation! Somebody explain to me how a paralyzed patient manages to remove a trach. What kind of bush league outfit are you running here, Captain?"

Darkness envelops the consciousness once again; shivering and cold come creeping back. There I lie, freezing, bleeding, screaming. A brightness appears over my right side, a scraping, noisy hinge breaks the silence, and soon I am snatched up by my arm, feel pain in the shoulder, my head makes contact with the brick step.

I'm in the tub of my childhood . . . the water running cold, and a hard and coarse potato brush is being used to clean me to the core. My mother is working furiously to clean the broken skin, to remove the evidence of the dungeon. The pain is too

much; I again lose touch with the here and now.

When I reach the plateau of real consciousness, I am in a very sterile and scary place. The smells are acrid and almost burn the nose. Just over my face is the brightest light I have ever seen, burning its way to the back of my brain. The voices are hushed, and I cannot discern the words. I do feel the gentle touch that, even though gentle, is painful.

“There is infection everywhere. We need to know how long these wounds have been weeping like this Where did you say his father is?” Out again, blissfully pain-free. I won’t regain access to the part of my brain that contains cognizant thought for several days. Yes, there are activities all around me; yes, I can almost ascertain their meaning, but not quite; the first real solid thought comes to me when a caress touches the side of my cheek.

“Are you able to wake up? Can you hear me, Anton?”

With sleepy eyes and blurred vision, I manage to focus with difficulty. There is a halo around everything. The edges are ragged and uneven. But there, to my left, is a very kind face, smiling, petting my arm. I croak out that I am awake, I am hungry.

As I turn in the bed, the pain returns all over. I feel as though I have been beaten and burned all over. I try to sit up and am weak; my limbs don’t respond, and I fall back to the bed.

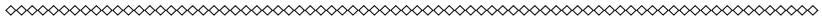
“It’s okay, never mind, just rest. I want to ask what happened”

“When?” I say. “What happened when?”

Again the sweet smile, “How did you get hurt . . .?”

I ponder the question. “Am I hurt?”

She smiles. “Are you hurt? Can’t you feel the places that are raw on your body?”



“How are we this morning?” The smile is reflected in the tone of her voice. “Have you decided to talk to me yet?”

I can’t resist her softness and reach out with both my arms. She plunges at me and gives me a hug reminiscent of Grandma Mom’s; she smelled of something sweet, and was very warm, and very soft. I did not want to let go and the feeling transmitted to her.

She looks down into my soul and asks, “Who hurt you?”

I am compelled to sustain the moment and say simply, “My mom and dad . . . ”

She pats my head and asks for details, “Why did they hurt you? How did they hurt you? Tell me everything . . . ” I begin to tear up, not really wanting to, but there is genuine pain in the memory. I recite the entire episode, from the moment my teeth met the bowl to the trip to the cellar and the potato brush.

It comes out in a rush, and by the time I finish, she, too, has tears in her eyes. The pattern will follow me for the rest of my life; for you see, I am a sucker for the tears of anyone. I shared things with this stranger in exchange for the comfort of a hug, and I knew all too well the consequences. I knew that when I was returned to that house, I would once again be the focus of hatred and a constant irritant to those who would be called my parents.

I hadn’t seen them in more than a week, and I was getting curious as to why. I asked the kind woman; I found out from a helpful nurse that her name was Juanita. “Why are my parents not here?” She sat down at the side of the bed and explained that I would not be returning to their house, that what they had done to me was a very bad thing, and they were in a lot of trouble. I was immediately elated and terrified at the same time!

Not going back to the place where I was viewed as a filthy

animal was a real plus. Eventually, returning to that place was a very unpleasant thought, for that would mean that the two of them would have no outlet for their brazen, violent ways. I began the countdown, for it was surely inevitable that the day would come, but I worried about the siblings I had left behind, and their tears are the hardest to forget.

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