

One Flew East, One Flew West

by H. W. Moss

“ . . . One flew east, one flew west, one flew over the cuckoo’s nest.” Children’s nursery rhyme.

The Ashram

Felice hummed the mantra she had recently been given as she scrubbed the tile floor with a hand brush. It was her secret, her one true self secret and it was part of the path to happiness. Her special song led the way on the road before her and the work was a joy even when the assignment was cleaning lavatories or putting in long hours at kitchen patrol.

She made good use of roadside distractions. Although initially unfamiliar with open fire cooking, Felice had become an expert chapatis maker, rolling out dough balls into thin crêpes, dropping them into the sizzling hot ghee and, after a precise time bubbling on each side, she held them with wood tongs over the flame to get them to puff out like a balloon. Her sensibility produced a delicate crispness that was extolled by everyone in the ashram including, secretly and in private, the head yogi who grudgingly admitted that nowhere in his enlightened view of the world had he encountered such delicious chapatis.

Over two hundred meals a day were served in the ashram, but that was Abhyasa, the reason she was there. To quote the Swami Sivananda, “the purpose for which we have come to this place.” Felice marveled at the simple concept, turned it around in her head as she knelt and scrubbed the rough tile scuffed by years, centuries, of similar acolyte

offerings. She was aware the way was never clear, but sadhana gave it measured nextness for which Felice was happy, happy, happy.

At last she rose from her knees and immediately heard her name called. She was directed to the swami's presence where the yogi said, "Ah, my little Socal. You have been in Bihar long enough. Now is time you are going to Mumbai. A hotel has been arranged. We will miss your chapitas."

The swami remained tight lipped, but in the few hours before departure, Felice learned she would be working at a Mumbai festival that would draw thousands. It was a celebration for the Tantric power of Shakti, a celebration of female energy, consciousness and love.

Felice gave an unquestioning nod of assent. It was the month of the mother and she knew departing the ashram, no matter how exciting it might seem at first, would be difficult. She steeled herself. To once again be among those on the outside would be both a selfless act of devotion as well as further demonstration of her personal strength, her discipline and willingness to sacrifice her ego for the happiness of others.

"You may now break your oath of silence since you will no longer be in the world."

"Jai Ma," she said in a little girl voice. Her throat was not used to speech and croaked, sounded rough after weeks of lying fallow.

"Jai Ma!" the yogi said in strident liturgical response.

The Army

After a formal salute, the soldier stood stoically in front of his commanding officer.

"At ease, Major."

“Yes sir.”

The CO read from a folder, slapped it shut on his desk and said, “You completed Ranger training at Fort Benning, Major.” The General’s words were crisp and precise. He mused out loud: “Hmmm.” Then he adopted a congenial tone, said, “I must admit I am impressed. That’s a young man’s game, not something someone your age usually attempts let alone accomplishes. Not first, but not last in the class either. Congratulations.”

Franklin stared straight ahead in the presence of his superior officer; it was a vigilant rigid easiness that reflected his ever present sense of duty.

“Yes sir. Thank you sir.”

“We have a military plane leaving Kyrgyzstan for Istanbul in an hour. You’re on it.” The General plucked a packet from his desk top, handed it over. “From there you pick up a domestic flight to Mumbai. Here are your orders. Briefly, there is a meeting in Mumbai. India’s considering joining NATO. You are to attend. We want you there as eyes and ears, but don’t offer anything. In fact, I advise you keep silent unless asked directly and then make it short and on point.”

“Yes sir. I understand, Sir.”

“No need to rent a car. A driver has been assigned to take you to your hotel. It’s a long flight to Mumbai, but I’m told it’s beautiful country even from the air. That will be all.”

The Major saluted, said, “Thank you, Sir,” about faced with the packet high up under his arm like a British baton, and marched out of the room.

The Hotel

The front desk was falling behind. Two turban wearing junior managers were hard at work greeting guests, asking them a last name, if there was a reservation, to fill out the proper forms and surrender passports. Almost none of the travelers were from India, although a number were from various nearby countries including Pakistan.

Everyone spoke English so when Franklin arrived he was able to confirm his reservation and asked where the room was located. When he learned it was in the next door tower and not the 105-year-old hotel proper, he asked if it would be all right to take a room just up the stairs on the second floor.

“It would be fine with me, you see, sir,” the young man smiled as he explained the circumstances. Franklin at first thought this meant yes, he could stay in the old building rather than the new. “But it is not up to me, you see, sir. The rooms on that level are what we call second rate and often occupied by mendicants.”

Accustomed to getting his way and not being put off, Franklin asked, “So who can make a decision like that?”

“I will look up the manager, you see, sir, and you may speak with she.”

A woman wearing a rose and white sarong that flowed to the floor and draped her from head to foot appeared. She was exceedingly polite and asked, “Yes, sir. How might I help you?”

When he explained his preference to stay in a room on the next floor up instead of the building next door, she said, “But sir, it is such noise as you cannot sleep.”

“Are you kidding? Listen lady, I’ve slept on the hood of an idling Hum Vee in the middle of the Arabian Desert during a fire fight. You think any kind of sound your people make will affect how I sleep? I don’t think so.”

“It is inconvenient, then, sir, because you will have to see the, how shall I say? The lower castes.”

“You have got to be joking.”

“It is inconvenient, then, sir, because the room will be old and not recently modernized.”

“What? No indoor plumbing?”

She appeared shocked by the question. “Of course it has all the amenities.”

“Well, then, what’s the problem? I intend to sleep in this hotel, not hang out in it. I’m not looking for luxury. I get in late, I get up early and leave. I need three nights and then I’m gone. I prefer the second floor. Are we agreed?”

Turned out, the second floor was given over primarily to the menial tasks which kept a good hotel running smoothly. The laundry was on that floor as was much of service and supply. Room service answered phones, food was prepared and shoes polished on this floor. The second floor was also where the staff bunked and, Franklin realized upon slipping his key in the lock, this was where many holy men, their followers, yogis, Brahman priests and anchorites of every stripe were placed when they called at the world famous hotel. Of course, they had to get past the security gate and pay for their rooms. But the rift between prosperous and impoverished on the streets was equally great within religious ranks. The Maharishi Mahesh Yogi stayed there as did the Bhagwan

Shree Rajneesh, but the sannyasis, Hindu holy men who were homeless mendicants, were kept at bay. Still, the hotel liked to believe it maintained an open door policy.

A group of six or seven saffron robed ascetics, impossible to distinguish one sex from the other, heads shaved and indiscriminant except by height, passed as Franklin turned to shut his door. He threw the deadbolt.

The second floor was equivalent to steerage on the Titanic, he thought. And Franklin felt quite comfortable in steerage.

The Hallway

Felice was asked by her favorite sister to bring back enough water glasses for everyone. That would be seven: six acolytes and the Mother. She was half way down the hallway when a brilliant flash of light spewed up from the ground floor followed immediately by a deafening explosion. This and the sound of machine gun fire stopped her in her tracks. Felice heard a rattling rapid burst of bullets and then another flash as another explosion rocked the downstairs. People screamed and the gunfire continued as she stood unmoved, her eyes wide to the real sound of events unfolding in the foyer one floor below.

The thudding sound of running feet reached her ears. Someone was charging up the stairway. Whoever it was, they stopped long enough to fire a waterfall of bullets down the stairs before their heavy boot steps resumed running.

The man appeared on the landing and Felice realized she was standing directly in the gunman's path. In his initial surveillance he glanced left, saw the hallway was empty in that direction, turned the other way with his weapon close to his body and faced her.

There was an instant of total awareness in which Felice knew she was about to die and was at peace with the thought. Her years in the ashram and as a festival participant as both a giver and a receiver of alms culminated in the almost welcome awareness that her life was over. It was a tremendous relief, she thought in that instant before the gun swung around on its strap and the man took aim. Dispassionately and with a mild sense of the irony contained in the thought, she realized he held the weapon at his waist and aimed from his stomach not his shoulder. What ran through her mind was not fear or even a desire to flee. She was aware this was the instant when she would be allowed to cast off this mortal coil, this mound of flesh, and if she achieved enlightenment, if she were lucky, she would not be reincarnated, but might arrive at lasting peace. There was no panic, merely a placid understanding of what was taking place and an awareness these events were something over which she had no control.

The gunman swung the barrel toward her. In an instant of clarity there was the realization that he was young, barely an adult, with little or no facial hair. A shoulder strap held the weapon steady against his body, the butt on his belly, left hand on top of the barrel to hold it down apparently aware that a wide swathe of bullet spray tended to make the muzzle rise. He pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

In his haste he failed to notice the final round in the clip was spent. He quickly realized what was wrong and reached into a knapsack slung over the other shoulder. He retrieved a 50 round banana clip, occupied himself by looking down at his gun and snapping the old clip out, replacing it with the new. He cocked the weapon by pulling the handle on the right side of the breach all the way back, planted his feet and took aim again.

During the course of this, Felice stepped backward a pace or two, but did not run. She knew she should, but her feet were planted, her back pressed into the wall in the closed crack of a hotel room door. Behind her, Felice heard the door handle click, felt the susurrant of air escaping behind her as a hand grabbed her arm at the shoulder and yanked. She flew backwards as bullets whizzed harmlessly past. She found herself thrown to the floor inside the hotel room, face smothered in the carpet as the door slammed shut behind her. She was somewhat surprised if not dismayed to be alive.

Before she could rise, a voice she recognized but did not believe could possibly be who she thought she heard, commanded her to, “Stay on the floor! Roll over here, get out of the way of the door.”

She did as told, rolled to the left just as a shower of shells blasted several holes in the door at an arcing slant, from lower left to upper right.

“If you understand English, get in here, crawl over here,” the voice said firmly but in a whisper meant not to provoke the gunman outside into taking any more shots.

Her saffron robe hampered her kneeling crawl toward the voice which was connected to a man in military garb. He did not look closely at her, did not reach out to assist her. He indicated his presence in the relative safety behind the tub and shower enclosure on the tile floor of the bathroom with a finger to his lips. Outside in the hallway there was the sound of a gun going off some distance away, screams that lasted a few seconds before falling silent.

Incongruously, Felice heard the sound of rushing water. She kept her head beneath the ceramic tub rim, finally turned her face upward toward her benefactor and said, “You still afraid of elevators?”

Her features remained half hidden behind the hood of her robe, but when she turned to look at him, instant recognition washed across his face. He said, “Jesus Christ. Felicia! What in hell are you doing here?”

Despite his obvious displeasure with her sudden appearance, probably even with her very presence in the hotel, she felt some kinship toward her brother. After all, he had just risked his life to save hers, even if he had no inkling who she might be nor how disconcerted she was to be alive.

He said somewhat defensively in that grating whisper she had heard so many times in her childhood, “It’s not fear. It’s a healthy respect for access to an exit.” Then he added, “You don’t have any hair.”

She said, “Neither do you!”

Two Angels

They were born 100 miles north of Los Angeles one minute apart. Franklin used to say, “She stood on my head” to come out first, which meant that, technically, Felicia was the older twin.

They were close enough as children, yet Felicia and Franklin were nothing alike. At two and three years old they held hands and looked into the camera smiling. They looked like twins in the photos taken during their pre-teen years: tow heads with tousled hair. One series showed them around a Christmas tree standing in a living room, the children sharing a package, each holding one end. There is not the least hint that in later life they would be unable to share a conversation without becoming outraged and indignant with one another.

Their Southern California childhood was filled with sunshine and together they plucked fruit from back yard trees -- citric, fig, avocado and persimmon. Come December, Franklin climbed the front yard sycamore and cut from its branches mistletoe. Felicia made small clusters of green leaves tied with a ribbon and they sold these from his red wagon standing outside the mall. In short, they had a typical childhood which suggested they would be lifetime friends. But they gradually drifted apart, he toward one type of discipline, she to another.

Both graduated high school, but by their senior year they rarely spoke to one another and shortly after graduation, Franklin joined the ROTC. He went to college on the military's dime.

Felicia toured the world with a pack on her back.

As young adults, they simply went their separate ways. Several years passed during which they never saw each other, their wheelchair bound mother the only link between them. There was a shared awkwardness that first time home together after years of separation.

She had become a full fledged vegetarian. "Chicken ranching is a good example," she said while chewing on a piece of raw turnip at the otherwise festive dinner table. "Do you realize dead chickens are all thrown into a big tank of cold water where they soak up fecal matter and disease? They weigh more when they're plumped up with this fecal soup."

Their mother said, "Oh, now, Felicia. Must we talk like that on Thanksgiving? Aren't you going to have anything to eat other than that?"

Franklin finished his first plate, made a point of asking for a second helping of turkey. “You sound like ‘The Reluctant Cannibal’ on one of Dad’s favorite albums.”

After an uneasy silence, Franklin added, “When you lived in New York it sort of made sense. I mean, New York is Lefty but still in America. India? Where’s that fit? And you got me a subscription to that leftist magazine for Christmas, *The New Yorker*. My god, I’ve never read anything more left wing.”

Nothing so infuriated Franklin as the belief his sister had either outsmarted him or out maneuvered him in some way. He belittled her traveling with a back pack as childish, the thing a hippie would do. Naturally, she was hurt by this and defended herself by pointing out that his travels were all part of the military industrial complex. She asked what good it was to spend six months on the DMZ staring at the other Korea. In Bosnia he toured peace keeper compounds to gather intelligence on America’s allies which she called hypocritical. She complained he had no idea what cultures surrounded him no matter where he went and argued that his stint in Kuwait was enhanced by the oil wells that were set on fire.

Felicia admitted she simply did not understand the military mind and Franklin’s embrace of their government’s propaganda. She visited the former Yugoslavia and saw what Bosnia looked like after America shot it to pieces, she told him. She toured Latin America and felt first hand the antagonism toward the northern imperialist. It did not settle well with her that her brother represented the mightiest war machine ever imagined by mankind, which may have influenced her decision to seek another way: Nothing so settled Felicia’s mind as the thought her path was the exact opposite of the one Franklin strode.

“I looked through the Judas hole and your back was to me,” Franklin whispered through clenched teeth. “Thought you were one of those crazy religious nuts this country grows all over the place.” Then to twist the knife he added, “And I was right!”

Felicia fell right back into the tit-for-tat they once engaged in daily. “Yah, well, you don’t have a religion, so how could you possibly know one nut from another?”

“I’m telling you, that guy out there’s a nut job. He’s also inexperienced. No trained soldier would have taken his eye off the enemy while changing a clip. I took a chance pulling you in. How could I know it was my own long-lost sister? If you hadn’t been in the way, I’d have rushed him. And if I’d had a gun, I’d have taken him out right there and then. But I don’t have a gun. Not allowed to carry them on planes anymore. Because of terrorist nuts like this!”

“Yah, well most people carry a water bottle with which to rinse their hand after wiping their ass,” she retorted.

Franklin stuck his arm up and turned off the faucet in the tub.

“What’s up with that?” Felicia asked.

“That’s our water supply if we have to be here any length of time. I thought you were living in a dung hut in Bihar.”

It was not actually made of dung, she said indignantly. “Once you dry a cow pie, it’s dirt. There’s no electricity, no indoor plumbing thus no shower, toilet, wash basin or kitchen faucet. You couldn’t handle it.”

He had a self-satisfied smile on his face as he answered: “As I understand it, Bihar is one of the most unsettled areas of this country. It’s the third most populated state and one of the poorest. It’s like a densely populated Utah full of unreconstructed religious

zealots on welfare. It's so unruly, you know what the joke is? India and Pakistan are always fighting over Kashmir. Well, India said, 'Okay, Pakistan, you can have Kashmir but here's the catch: You have to take Bihar, too.' And Pakistan said, 'Nope, no way hose A.'"

Stinging rebukes were the stock in trade for most of their conversations and this was much the same with one glaring exception: Their discourse was punctuated by explosions and the rattling of gun fire. It was difficult to tell exactly where the sounds originated, but they were either on their floor in the building or on the ones directly above or below. Often there were screams, then silence. The killing noise grew louder.

Franklin said, "Working their way towards us."

"You think there's more than one?"

"I have no idea. All I know is we're about to have a visitor come through that door."

There were shots very close, then what sounded like a boot kicking a solid object. The gun firing again, screams, silence.

Franklin was already moving further into the rented room. "We're next. He's going to try and get in. He's going to shoot first, then kick. When I tell you to, reach around and twist the door handle, then get out of the way."

Felicia was not sure she wanted to do this. "Why? What are you planning?" her voice a loud whisper.

Two twin beds were set back and slightly off center with respect to the front door. Franklin was already ripping one of them apart. He held the mattress and box spring horizontally like a shield, propped against the night stand.

“I intend to sucker that dipshit into our room,” was his whispered reply.

Franklin positioned himself out of the most direct line of fire and snapped the metal bed frame apart. He held one of the short end pieces like a sword, then took a two handed hold to the vertical. He stood in the door jamb as a fusillade attacked the door lock. A second later he nodded at Felicia and said, “Open it!”

The smashing boot met little resistance. The door blew open hiding Franklin. Felicia retreated; Franklin advanced. He fell to his knees as the barrel of an AK-47 entered tentative as a viper weaving in the air before striking. Franklin waited a heart beat, crashed the metal bar as hard as he could into the shin bone of the intruder who screamed in pain and fell to the floor.

Franklin pounced. He tried to use the metal bar like a club, realized the first blow had bent it nearly into a vee. He discarded it in favor of his fist which he brought hard into the man’s face who became dazed, but not completely unconscious. Taking advantage of this, Franklin dragged the terrorist further into the room, reached around and pushed the door closed. It did not latch well.

Franklin slugged the man again. Then he pulled the shoulder straps off the woozy gunman, passed the satchel to Felicia, kept the machine gun. However this made his next task more difficult, so he handed the assault rifle to Felicia as well. Keeping a wary eye on their prisoner, he dragged the box spring and mattress in front of the door as a makeshift barricade which he held in place with the night stand.

Their captive began making noises like he was waking up, so Franklin punched him again.

“Stop it!” Felice cried. “Don’t hurt him. He’s just a kid.”

“That’s no child. That’s a man with a gun and he would have killed you and me. You’ve been hanging with too many Hindus. Our brigade motto is ‘We give the enemy the maximum opportunity to give his life for his country.’”

Returning to their room defense, Franklin wedged the box spring part way in the bathroom door frame which would make it more difficult for anyone to push their way into the hotel room.

Beside the writing desk was a chair into which Franklin unceremoniously propped their captive. He lifted the lamp from the table and Felice was sure he was about to smash into the young man’s head. Instead, Franklin bashed it against the table edge until the ceramic base shattered. He ripped the cord from its connections, pulled the man tight against the chair back and used the cord to tie his hands behind him.

The man lolled with head down, his face covered with a shock of black hair. Franklin gave another punishing shot to the head and Felice screamed, “Stop it! You’ll kill him.”

Franklin looked at her with slit eyes and said, “If I wanted him dead, he’d be dead by now. He’s more valuable to us alive. When we get out of this, an interpreter can interrogate a captive. You can’t ask questions of a dead man.”

“He’s just a kid!”

“He’s a killer!”

The phone rang and both of them jumped. It sounded again and Franklin reached for the handset before it could buzz a third time. He whispered, “Hello?” After a pause, “Yes. Two of us. No. No one hurt. Yet. Okay. But now I want to ask you some questions. How many attackers are there? What do you mean you don’t know? I’ve got one of them,

but if there are more I'd like to know how many and where they are. And when can you get this place cleared out of the rats that infest it? What do you mean, what do I mean? When is the army going to drive them out?" There was a terse silence that lasted several seconds before Franklin replaced the receiver in its carrier.

"Well, that's just great," he said to no one in particular.

"What is?" Felice asked.

Franklin turned toward her as if seeing her for the first time or just remembering she was there. He chewed the inside of his cheek which had been a habit of his since childhood. Felice knew this meant he was thinking.

Finally, he said, "Well, there's good news and there's bad news. The good news: We are to stay in our room until further notice. The bad news: They have no idea how long before they can liberate us. Nor do they have any idea how many shooters there are."

At that instant, a round of gunfire could be heard from somewhere in the hotel.

Franklin turned toward their captive and slapped him up the side of the head. Not a punch, but an open handed smack. He said, "How many of you assholes are there? Hunh? How many?" It became clear the man was not going to answer. Franklin began slapping harder asking, "What's the standard deviation, Kenneth? What's the standard deviation!?" Each time he asked, he punctuated the end of the question with a blow to the head.

Felice winced with each strike; she began pleading with her brother. "Stop it! Can't you see he doesn't understand a word you're saying? His name's not even Kenneth."

Franklin continued using the man's head as a punching bag. "He's not," he said as he brought his open hand hard against the jaw. "Supposed," another slap, "to," another hit, "understand." The man was briefly semiconscious. When he showed signs of a groggy awakening, Franklin bunched his fingers together around the neck and forced the head upright. The eyes opened and the man stared at him clearly, focused, comprehension returning. Franklin shouted with spittle flying from his lips, "What's the standard deviation? Hunh? Hunh? What's the standard deviation, Kenneth!?"

Much to his surprise, when he released the man from the last choke hold, a raspy voice said in perfect English with a hint of a British upper class education, "It's the square root of the variance! Standard deviation is the square root of the variance."

Felice said, "English. You speak English?"

Through lips that were beginning to swell and in a high pitched voice, the young man said, "Of course. Doesn't everybody?"

"What the hell you doing, shooting up this hotel?" Franklin drew his fist back as if to strike again.

The man cringed and said, "I was told to. They made me do it. I was forced to do this."

Franklin began frisking him, pulled the jacket down off his shoulders, patted his breast pocket. He unzipped the flap and retrieved a cell phone. It vibrated in his hand. He punched the button to accept the call and put it to his ear, but said nothing. After a few seconds, he dropped the call and closed the phone.

"Was that your handler?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Franklin bunched his fist and held it within inches of the man's face. "I think you know exactly what I'm talking about."

Felice stepped near them. "You can't do this. This is illegal! You can't beat the shit out of somebody just because you capture them."

Franklin's fist remained poised as he calmly replied: "According to the R. O. E. I have positive I.D. on this little shit and can legally kill him."

"What's R. O. E. stand for?"

"Rules of engagement. If he comes at me with a weapon, I need prove no further intention. He's a conduct-based target."

Felice was outraged. Their captive was plainly in fear. "You go through life like a chicken on roller skates! You bump into things, knock things over. You don't know how much you hurt people."

Franklin was unfazed. "We are taught to know our enemy. That's a lot different than becoming the enemy. I may think like you, but I am not you. I actually have more respect for some of these Moslem fanatics than I do their Christian counterparts. At least they're willing to die for what they believe in." He turned to the terrorist and said, "You believe in Allah don't you? That's why you attacked this hotel, isn't it?"

"Kill for Allah? No. No good follower of Islam would do such a thing. No, I got paid."

Franklin and Felice said with astonishment in unison: "What?"

Felice spoke before Franklin. "You got paid to attack the hotel?"

"All of us were paid. It was a business deal, nothing religious about it. Me and Talib needed money. We went to the souk, met up with these guys who trained us and

sent money to our families. They fed us, gave us these designer shoes and shirts and pants and sent us to do maximum damage. We got paid.”

“The more I learn of their practices, the more I want to bomb them back to the Stone Age where they belong,” Franklin muttered. “He’s more capitalist than we are.”

Felice became solicitous. “What’s your name?”

Their captive said, “I am Ajmal Saeed. I was educated to be an engineer. But I am from Tikrit.”

“Beeb, eh?” Franklin interjected. “Well, I’m a Rakkasan meaning I’m with the Hundred and First. We patrol your province, Salah ad Din, and believe me, you’d be high on my Kill Board.”

“What’s a ‘Beeb’?” Felice asked.

“Army slang for an Iraqi.”

Saeed said, “Consistency. The hobgoblin of little minds.”

Franklin looked at him with a skeptical eye. “What’s that mean? I ask you, what does that mean exactly? Hobgoblin, little mind. I mean, I never understood what’s meant by saying something like that.”

“Perhaps you have not asked the right people,” Ajmal said tentatively.

“No,” Felice said sternly. “You never asked at all, of anyone. It’s the perfect unexamined life. You do your drills and march your marches and salute your superiors and you don’t realize how consistency causes your mind to shrink like a piece of candy disappearing the longer you suck on it. And that’s because you’re military where, famously, you don’t have to ask and you really don’t want to know.”

The echo of an explosion reverberated throughout the building. “That was a mortar round,” Franklin volunteered. “Army must have arrived.”

“There is no past, there is no future,” Saeed said.

Felice added, “He’s right. We really only live in this moment, this now, what Samuel Beckett called the ‘petit pendant,’ the little during, the little hanging, the moment. But that moment is affected by the past in that we remember; and it will affect the future if we cast our influence forward. In other words, we do as we thought what we want at the time.”

Franklin said, “Yah, well, shoot him in the hippocampus, or anywhere in the gray matter, and the ‘he’ is gone.”

Felice replied, “You don’t want to get caught in the web of The Combine, as Kesey called it in Cuckoo’s Nest.”

Franklin grinned. “But we really are all caught in the web, aren’t we?”

There was an explosion that seemed to be right outside their door and then the door fell inward off its hinges.

“We know you’re in there. Come out with your hands up,” a stern voice said from the hall.

“That’s what I like to hear,” Franklin said as he released their captive’s arms and forced him roughly to his feet. “The army has arrived. Let’s get out of this dump.”

Before they could identify themselves, however, a fireball filled the room and incinerated all three.

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