

THIS PAGE: MARCHERS IN THE HEAVY CATEGORY—CARRYING 35-POUND PACKS—COOL OFF WITH MISTERS AT THE START OF THE 2008 BATAAN MEMORIAL DEATH MARCH. OPPOSITE: THE REAL DEATH MARCH ENDED AT CAMP O'DONNELL IN 1942. HERE, SURVIVORS ON BURIAL DETAIL TRANSPORT THE DEAD.



THE  
SURVIVAL  
ISSUE



# THE HARDEST MILES

SURVIVORS OF THE BATAAN DEATH MARCH OVERCAME ONE OF HISTORY'S MOST GRUELING WALKS. WHAT KEPT THEM ON THEIR FEET? AND COULD YOU DO THE SAME? EVERY YEAR, MORE THAN 4,000 PEOPLE HIKE THROUGH THE NEW MEXICO DESERT TO FIND OUT. BY EVEYLN SPENCE

The men, even now, can't describe how hot it was on Bataan. There's no way to say it. Hot as the dickens. Hot enough to fry an egg. Hotter 'n hell. The heat couldn't be explained, only experienced. And it was torture: Sometimes, the Japanese guards halted columns of surrendered men, forced them to stand under the open, insistent sky for hours, hatless and withering. Someone dubbed this the "sun treatment." But it was better than getting bayoneted while lunging for a sip of fetid water from a ditch. Getting pistol-whipped for stumbling. Getting your teeth knocked out, like Private John L. Mims did, with a Coke bottle. "My mouth felt like a bag of glassware," he says. "I spit my teeth out, and some were hangin' on by half, broke." And then he kept marching through the heat.

I think about the temperature in Bataan as I walk through the 85°F New Mexico desert. I've had a lot of time to think since I woke up this morning on an army-green cot, lined up with 4,000 others, and started the 26.2-mile Bataan Memorial Death March. The annual event commemorates the original Bataan Death March, one of the greatest survival episodes in history. In comparison, of course, calling this a death march is laughable. I can see buildings on White Sands Missile Range. I can hear semis rumbling along US 70, heading up and over the Organ Mountains. Sometimes, I pass guys in fatigues and women wearing spandex. Sometimes, they pass me. "Power through, ma'am," the men say. *Ma'am*.

But after seven hours, my feet feel like roadkill and my shoulders—thanks to a 38-pound pack—are grouching, big time. For a moment, I wonder if I'm going to make it. I'd been warned about how tough the Memorial Death March is. How boot-camp-proof Marines often don't finish. I signed up as a way to test myself. To push my physical and mental limits and to answer, admittedly under controlled conditions, the question we all wonder: *Do I truly have what it takes?* Equally important, I wanted the opportunity to meet and learn from the real Bataan survivors—the soldiers who trudged for 70 miles with no food or water, who were beaten for slowing down, and who kept walking through that awful heat when they were sure they couldn't take another step.

It's an opportunity that won't be available much longer. The World War II veterans, now in their frail and wobbly late 80s and early 90s, know they're on the brink. And after trying for decades to forget what they went through, suddenly they don't want to be forgotten. They come to White Sands every year to be commemorated, to be honored. They want us, maybe, to feel a small part of what they experienced and wonder to ourselves if we could have made it. The Memorial Death March is a way of meeting in the middle for a shared glimpse, a mere taste, of suffering and survival.

About 15 miles in, I pass Army Aircorpsman Ben Steele, 91, who had been driven here so he could cheer marchers along. As if *we* deserve cheers from *him*. When he returned from Bataan, Steele painted what he'd seen—Filipinos throwing biscuits to POWs along the road from Mariveles to Camp O'Donnell; soldiers collapsed in the dust—because it

took a generation before he could talk about it. "How're your feet?" Steele asks. He grins and teeters up to give me a hug.

"I'm getting a few blisters." I say it, then feel stupid. The whole contrivance of what I'm doing compared to what these men endured is almost embarrassing.

"You know how I made it through the Death March?" Steele asks. "I stole a sock off a dead guy. Every time we stopped, I rotated that sock. It saved me. Blisters literally killed people."

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### The Army ROTC at New Mexico State started the Bataan

Memorial Death March in 1989 to commemorate their own: Many of the 1,800 men from New Mexico's 515th and 200th Coast Artillery units who were sent to the Philippines in the fall of 1941 were captured and ruthlessly herded across Bataan. Fewer than half came back. The memorial march takes place in the open country around the headquarters of 3,200-square-mile White Sands Missile Range, where dun-colored buildings huddle under 8,990-foot Organ Needle in the Chihuahuan Desert. The course starts and finishes in front of the Frontier Club (think Elks-lodge-meets-Motel-6). It passes by the Missile Park, a gravel garden of vintage rockets pointed heavenward. Then through the Owens Road arroyo, where the sand gets fine and soft; up and around the dusty cone of Mineral Hill; and through the ankle-deep Sand Pit at around mile 22. Then back to the Frontier Club.

It's rough walking, to be sure, but 26 miles with aid stations and medical tents can't be too bad. So to enhance my pseudo-suffering, I decided to wear boots I'd put on once. And I entered the so-called Heavy category: Marchers carry 35-plus pounds over the entire marathon distance. Though even that seems trivial when you learn the complete story of the Bataan survivors.

In the fall of 1941, the United States sent troops to the Philippines to head off a Japanese buildup in the Pacific. After Pearl Harbor was bombed, Japan invaded the Philippines, pushing the American and Filipino soldiers down Luzon onto the dead-end of the Bataan Peninsula. Part of the problem: These Americans wore WWI-era helmets, carried 1903 Springfield rifles, and drove tanks with no recoil oil. They were simply outmatched by Japan's modern weapons.

In January 1942, President Roosevelt decided to spend his military budget on the war in Europe. Europe First, the policy was called. (Bataan Last, it implied.) War Secretary Henry Stimson put it this way: "There are times when men must die." In March, Roosevelt ordered General MacArthur to evacuate to Australia. The Americans on Bataan were abandoned. They came up with a rallying cry that's still shouted at the beginning of every Memorial Death March:

*We're the battling bastards of Bataan  
No mama, no papa, no Uncle Sam  
No aunts, no uncles, no cousins, no nieces  
No pills, no planes, no artillery pieces  
And nobody gives a damn.*

But they kept on fighting—until April 9, 1942, when General Edward King met with General Masaharu Homma and conceded. It was one of the low points in U.S. military history, the largest surrender ever on foreign soil. No one knew what to do. The Americans had never been instructed on how to lay down arms. The Japanese hadn't expected so many prisoners, didn't think they'd be so sick and wounded, thought it would be no problem to march them from Mariveles to Camp O'Donnell, a distance of about 70 miles. Even worse, the very idea of surrender was beyond them: In *Busbido*, the code of the Samurai, captives were regarded as sub-human—and often treated as such.

No one really knows how many men marched, or how many died. Some say it was 60,000 Filipinos and 10,000 Americans who marched, and 10,000 that died. Men fell, were bayoneted, shot. Men were run over, run through, run into the ground. And the Japanese soldiers frequently ripped off dog tags, tossing them aside. The practice turned existence into a rough estimate.

The death toll wouldn't have been so horrendous if the troops were in better shape at the outset. When American and Filipino soldiers started north, they were already seriously compromised. While holding off Japanese forces for all those months, they had lived on smaller and smaller rations. Halves became quarters. A little bit of flour, sugar, canned milk, and meat. A thousand calories a day, maybe. Europe First. (Bataan Last.) When their rations weren't enough, the men killed their horses and mules, then killed fish with hand grenades. They boiled ravens and trapped iguanas, ate the crickets off the leaves and the leaves off the trees. As they got weaker, they picked up tropical diseases: malaria, dysentery, and beriberi—a deficiency of thiamine that causes feet and hands and balls to swell like udders.

"In prison camp, I had it so bad that I probably weighed 300 pounds," says Steele. "Mostly water." He even got beriberi in the head, so that when he woke up after sleeping on his side, one half of his head was bigger than the other.

Translated from Sinhalese, a language of Sri Lanka, beriberi means "I cannot, I cannot."



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### A "love-in." That's what Gerry Schurtz, who currently

organizes the Bataan Memorial Death March and whose father died on the Japanese "Hell Ship" *Oryoku Maru*, calls the event. Young people patting old people on the back. Old people crying. Strangers hugging. Love of country, love of history. T-shirts read, "This land isn't free without the brave." Bumper stickers read, "If you don't get BEHIND our troops, get in FRONT of them." Peach-fuzzed Iraq vets walk by with two artificial legs, or bodies like Reggie Bush, in wife-beaters and baggy shorts. A British team huddles wearing Desert Storm-style camo says, "I was here last year, and the march was the hardest thing I've ever done."

Inside the community building, where participants register, crowds stand in line to meet survivors and get autographs. For a short time, the old men are like teen idols: Kind-faced Abel Ortega, dressed in a maroon uniform with yellow trim and a matching garrison cap, signs copies of his book, *Courage on Bataan and Beyond*. Glenn Frazier, with a white mustache and black leather vest, hands out flyers about his new book, *Hell's Guest*. He talks about how hatred is bad for the health. William Eldridge doesn't say a thing. John Mims, from Pinehurst, North Carolina, sits next to his rolling oxygen tank. Young women line up to shake his hand.

Many Bataan veterans credit their survival to luck—good and bad. You were in the right place at the right time, or the wrong place at the wrong time. Who's to say why the man next to you dies from malaria, and you don't? Why was that kid shot, and this kid wasn't? Everyone quickly learned to take the line of least resistance: Do what you're told, try not to be obvious, don't stop, don't fall.

Carlos Montoya marched for 11 days, and during one quick break he sagged against a tree, trying to rest. A Japanese soldier ordered him—jabbing a bayonet—to move, and Montoya didn't. The guard yelled. Montoya prayed. The guard finally left him alone. Lucky.

But one man's luck is another's resourcefulness: Ben Skardon always walked in the middle of the column of four—all the farther from rifle butts and bayonets. Survival



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JOHN MIMS SURVIVED THE BATAAN DEATH MARCH WITH SHATTERED TEETH; 2008 MARCHERS WARM UP; A MEMORIAL MARCHER PASSES THE ORGAN MOUNTAINS; CARLOS MONTOYA WALKED FOR 11 DAYS WITH ALMOST NO FOOD OR WATER.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: GLENN FRAZIER (IN BLACK PANTS) IN BATAAN DEATH MARCH, 1942; FRAZIER IN 2008, GREETING PARTICIPANTS IN THE MEMORIAL MARCH; BLISTERS PLAGUE MANY WALKERS; BEN STEELE SAYS OPTIMISM HELPED HIM SURVIVE THE WAR.



have passed away since last year, and someone plays taps, and we belt out O Say Can You See, and then yell the oath of the Marines: *I will always place the mission first. I will never accept defeat. I will never quit. I will never leave a fallen comrade.*

There's a lot of saluting and stiff-legged stomping of boots. The civilians—about a quarter of the total participants—slouch around, looking vaguely guilty.

I've never been particularly patriotic. Entitled is more like it: Of course my life is good. Of course I deserve it. Never mind that I haven't done anything to earn it. The Greatest Generation has always been an abstraction to me. Before today, I'd never talked to a World War II survivor or really considered, beyond what was in my textbooks, the idea of sacrifice. Current and recent wars have left me disillusioned rather than inspired. But standing in a sea of creased camo and erect spines, the thought of putting my hand to

my heart momentarily feels right. Not, perhaps, because I feel a sudden burning patriotism, but because I feel a profound and surprising tenderness for the men of Bataan. For my good fortune. And for the people around me who truly believe America is worth marching—not to mention dying—for.

And then the gun goes off. At the starting line, survivors sit in metal chairs, holding out crooked-knuckle hands to marchers. "Thank you, thank you," they say. *They're* thanking *us*. We're about to walk in a 26.2-mile circle with 12 water stops and six medical tents and 262 medical personnel, and the race organizers already gave us our medals—shaped like dog tags—in our registration packets. Yet Carlos Montoya, wearing a blue blazer and a white garrison cap, looks up at me and says, "You're my hero."

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**Are survivors born, or made? Maybe both. Montana-bred** Ben Steele was brawny and happy. He dropped out of high school to work on ranches. "I was a cowboy and I camped out half my life," he says. "I had a lot of optimism in my upbringing. A lot less bitterness and anger. It got me through the war." At age 16, Abie Abraham broke the world record for sitting in a tree (121 days). Talk about *will*.

The *U.S. Air Force Survival Manual* describes the will to survive as "the desire to live despite seemingly insurmountable

could be as simple as a few chlorine pills stashed in a pocket, a comfortable pair of shoes, a bottle of iodine. A stolen sock. One kid pulled the helmet off a puffed-up Filipino corpse, gave it a wipe, donned it. Skardon chugged a can of condensed milk before the March started—one more can than the next guy. The weak and the sick and the injured faltered, dropping from the front of the column to the middle to the sagging rear, where strangers would hold them up for a while, maybe, until their weight became too close to dead weight and they fell off the back and disappeared.

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**The lights come on with a pop at 4:00 a.m., three hours** before the start. I'm in a gymnasium. The floor is covered with a gymnasium-size blue tarp. And the blue tarp is covered with men. Soldiers, hundreds of them, do their routines with their feet, their teeth, their hair. Most of them pull on fatigues and buff-colored lace-up boots, tighten their belts, lift their packs and set them down. Count out energy bars and eat bananas. They pack their stuff and fold up their beds and line things up in a row. I stumble around, trying to remember where I put my washcloth. By the time I heft my 38-pound pack and walk to the start, the gym is empty.

At the opening ceremony, thousands of men (and the occasional woman; only 49 female participants end up completing the Heavy march) mill around under klieg lights in the dark, eating muffins from plastic packages. An American flag, as long as a bus and hanging off a fire truck crane, flaps in the wind—which is already gusting warm and strong. The porta-potty lines reach 40 people deep.

We all line up while the color guard marches in, and someone reads off the names of all the Bataan survivors who

mental and/or physical obstacles.” Tools and training, manuals, schools, TV shows—they only go so far. After that, things become much more visceral and basic: Do you decide to keep going, or not? In the Korean War, prisoners called this *give-up-itis*, and the syndrome alone is thought to have caused 50 percent of POW deaths. *The Dictionary of Psychology* describes give-up-itis as “the condition in which a patient loses hope, relinquishes all interest in survival, and eventually dies.” The term didn’t exist in WWII, but Bataan survivors often evoke the same image: A man gazing into the distance, empty. A man refusing to take another step.

The men who kept walking went through classic stages of survival. First, there’s the crisis period: You realize you’re in deep shit. Then there’s the coping period: You resolve to endure, rather than concede. You think constructively rather than panic. You tolerate pain and you handle fear. Sometimes, you hate or love something so much—enemy soldiers, your wife, your kid—that you persevere. And, a lot of the time, you pray.

Some men already had faith when they started walking, like Frazier: “I knew He walked along with me on the march. He gave me strength to resist the temptation of trying to get water.” Some men lost faith as they walked: “When I prayed, there was no result,” says Steele. “So I couldn’t believe in God—where was He?” And some men found faith the more steps they took. Not God perhaps, but hope.

New research suggests that the Bataan survivors may have had more than faith or luck or happy childhoods. Charles A. Morgan, a professor of psychiatry at Yale University, has spent 15 years examining soldiers in SERE training—Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape—and his research has shown that soldiers’ hormone levels affect how they perform under high stress. In a 2000 study in *Biological Psychiatry*, Morgan showed that highly trained Special Forces soldiers, immediately after military interrogation at the U.S. Army survival school, showed higher levels of a stress-buffering hormone called neuropeptide-Y (NPY) in their systems than non-Special Forces soldiers. NPY works on the prefrontal cortex of the brain to keep you focused on tasks under stress. It’s also been associated with resilience, which, in psychology, is defined as an individual’s capacity to handle stress—and not end up with mental dysfunction because of it. In another study in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Morgan determined that “stress-hardy” individuals experience less dissociation—or emotional numbing—during acute stress.

The upshot? The will to survive can actually be learned. “You can become more resilient at any point in your lifetime,” says Salvatore Maddi, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Irvine, and the author of *Resilience at Work*. “What you increase is hardiness—a pattern of attitudes and skills that augment resilience.” You learn to stay committed, no matter what. Stay under control. See stress as normal. Problem-solve. You can respond to difficult situations with less adrenaline—and keep your head about you. Later, when I asked Maddi whether the Bataan Memorial

## Toughen Up

10 ways to suffer—and increase your ability to handle a real survival situation

**The Barkley Marathons** This 100-mile run in Tennessee boasts 55,000 feet of elevation gain—and no real trail. mattmahoney.net/barkley

**The Everest Challenge** In two days in the Sierra, cyclists pedal more than 200 miles and climb almost 30,000 feet. everestchallenge.com

**24 Hours of Allamuchy, solo** Mountain bikers rack up more than 100 miles in New Jersey forest. Without sleeping. 24hoursofallamuchy.com

**Primal Quest** Try mountaineering, trekking, rappelling, paddling, biking, and swimming—for a week straight. ecoprimalquest.com

**Manhattan Island Marathon** Swim 28.5-mile around most of the Big Apple. It’s the world’s longest open-water race. nycswim.org

**Texas Water Safari** Over this 262-mile course, teams paddle—and portage—nonstop. Threats include wasps, water moccasins, hypothermia by night, heat exhaustion by day. texaswatersafari.org

**Badwater 135** This run from Death Valley to Whitney Portal punishes with 13,000 feet of uphill, 130°F temps, nausea, melting shoe soles—and an average finishing time of 48 hours. badwater.com

**Ironman Triathlon** Swim 2.4 miles, bike 112 miles, and finish by running a marathon. Enough said. ironman.com

**Elk Mountain Grand Traverse** From Crested Butte to Aspen, Colorado, teams of two ski some 41 miles across 12,000-foot passes. Expect whiteout conditions and avalanche danger. elkmountaintraverse.org

**Bataan Memorial Death March** Slogging 26.2 miles through the New Mexico heat is no cakewalk, but enter the Heavy category—carrying at least 35 pounds—to up the ante. bataanmarch.com

Death March made me tougher, he said, “It’s a great example of hardiness. Not only did it help you complete the march successfully, but you’re using the feedback you obtained to grow in hardiness. It will certainly enhance your resilience in the future.” Translation: The next time I climb a 14er, perhaps I’ll find the physical effort less mentally taxing. Or at least be able to handle bigger blisters—for longer.

The men of Bataan didn’t have SERE. They didn’t get electrodes and manuals and simulations. In fact, it was only in the midst of WWII that the idea of teaching mental survival—as opposed to hard skills—became widespread: Outward Bound was started by educator Kurt Hahn in 1941, when he heard that young merchant seamen, torpedoed by German U-boats, weren’t surviving at sea as well as their older comrades. They couldn’t cope with life, Hahn thought. They lacked self-reliance and tenacity. Hahn devised a month-long training course out of Aberdovey, Wales, that was a mix of cross-country routefinding, expeditions across mountain ranges, small-boat instruction, rescue practice, and athletic competitions. It was like stress-inoculation training—similar, in some ways, to actual physical immunization. Bump into the edge of your possibility, endure, and end up stronger for the next difficult encounter. Hahn’s motto was simple: *Plus est en vous*. There is more in you than you think.

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**After walking a mile or two down a sizzling paved road,** around mile 18, my feet are on fire. It’s worse than going uphill. My trekking poles click on concrete, my legs feel

*Continued on page 107*

FRANCIS LIVES NEAR POINT REYES NATIONAL SEASHORE, WHERE 40 YEARS AGO THE SIGHT OF A HERD OF WHITE FALLOW DEER STRUCK HIM AS AN OMEN: HE’D FOUND HIS HOME.

## The Hardest Miles

*Continued from page 60*

like lead. In my own sort of survival mode, I've resorted to listening to Justin Timberlake on my iPod.

I can stop, of course. Catch a van ride back to base and call it a day. Drop my pack, finish without weight, and get disqualified from my category. My physical pain is, in some ways, totally pointless: I'm not trying to stay alive. Adrenaline isn't surging to my heart, and emergency glucose stores are not flooding my muscles. The human instinct is to avoid pain, of course, but if pain is simply part of the path to survival, it has to be ignored.

I manage to ignore it for 15 more minutes. When I pass a water stop at mile 20, I decide it's time to get help. An olive-green tent sits next to the road, plastic windows snapping in the wind. Soldiers lie on a row of cots in front of it. I drop my pack, sit down, and start untying my boots.

A medic squats in front of me. "What's the problem, ma'am?" *Ma'am*. I tell him about my blisters—a couple here, maybe a couple there.

We pull off my socks, then try pulling off the duct tape and Band-Aids. They stick to the blisters. The tape has caused new blisters next to the old blisters, and those blisters have grown blisters. Some of them are as big as quarters. I'm amazed, and disappointed, at how wimpy my feet are—which reminds me of Ben Steele and his third sock. I've gone through six socks in seven hours and I have two dozen lesions.

"Um, let me get someone else here," he says. Another medic comes over. She grabs a third. He calls the guy who's in charge of this tent. That guy runs to get his camera. After heated debate, they carry me inside the tent and lance a few of the biggest blisters. Stuff squirts out.

The whole process takes an hour. For some reason, it bothers me—though it hardly matters whether I finish in 8.5 hours or 9.5 hours. The athlete in me sees people walking by while I'm getting babied. The sage in me knows that I'm walking, and walking isn't racing, and it's about the

journey rather than the destination. The momentary patriot in me thinks about the old men, and how they marched and marched and didn't know where the end was or what it was. They just put one foot in front of the other until even their fingernails and nosehairs were exhausted.

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MY END IS OBVIOUS: WHERE I STARTED. But when the men got to the end of the Bataan Death March, it was just the beginning of their odyssey: They had to ride 24 miles in boxcars—packed so tight that if someone expired standing up, he wouldn't even fall to the ground. And then the men had to march eight more miles to Camp O'Donnell, where there was one water spigot for 10,000 prisoners and 29,000 men died—and the men who lived spent all of their time putting their friends in the ground.

After O'Donnell, the men were sent all over: Beverly Skardon ended up in the dark crowded belly of the *Oryoku Maru*, which was accidentally attacked by Navy divebombers. Glenn Frazier started on the Tabayas Road Detail, then got sent to Bilibid Prison in Manila, then Osaka, then Tsuraga. Ben Steele's weight dropped from 170 pounds to 82. The men were in prison for years, tortured, starved. They laid their jabbing bones on bamboo slats. They watched as their friends took on million-mile stares, then gave up. But these men somehow persevered—with their faith or their hatred or their hormones. "I was given the Last Sacrament three times," says Steele.

At my last water stop, kids hand out cups filled with Lucky Charms and salty peanuts. The course goes straight for miles, then loops around the perimeter of the base, along a high wall next to some big peach-colored houses. When I turn the corner to the finish, a crowd four-deep cheers loud and long—though the winners passed by hours ago. I don't see any veterans. It's been a long day for them. They've shaken a lot of hands, deflected a lot of praise.

I stop into the medical tent to get my feet cleaned up. Next to me, there's a kid—maybe 19—lying on his stomach.

And there's a blister on his foot as big as a sand dollar. A few cots away, someone passes out. The yell goes out: "We need fluids!"

That night, I eat at the Frontier Club—pasta and red sauce in metal trays, lemonade from a dining-hall soda machine. I sit with Steele and Ortega and Murphy. As we talk over the food, they talk *about* food: One of them describes a recipe for *quan*, a Filipino word that means "everything that's edible." Guffaws. Another remembers that he and his comrades made a pact that when they got out of Bataan, they'd buy a grocery store and fill it with food—then lock themselves inside and never, ever come out.

The men chuckle over the memory of a hunger I can't even imagine.

At the airport the next morning, I see a man so sunburned that his whole right leg is welted scarlet and wrapped in gauze. Soldiers with huge biceps and tight calves lie under benches with their feet taped, and twentysomethings limp through the terminal wearing Bataan Memorial Death March medals around their necks.

And I see Ben Steele, staring out the window, watching the planes go by as he grips his cane. He grins and gives me a hug, and he talks about the third sock and the beriberi and what, again, a group of Death March survivors discusses over dinner. "Glenn Frazier—now *that* guy can tell a tall tale," he says with a smile. I picture the men, safe and weathered and soft around the middle, laughing about hell. 🍷

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