

# Jack Driscoll

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an excerpt of

## *Sky Riders*

IN late August, our dads off on their National Guard duty, me and Iwo patrolled the town's outskirts on our motorbikes, the aurora borealis igniting the entire sky like tracer fire. Like *incoming*, we'd yell, and balls-to-brains we'd bend low over our handlebars and retreat full throttle down the dust-rutted two-track under the power lines.

Hot Rain, Lady Luck, Sweet Rot we named our operations as we convoyed across the weedy-green streambed, our knobby rear tires rocketing the water scum skyward. And while our dads wheezed themselves into shape with two weeks of push-ups and squat thrusts on the drill fields of Camp Grayling, we raided their cigarettes and Canadian Club, our hair close-cropped and the camouflaged sleeves of our T-shirts rolled tight.

And, seized from the depths of Mr. Jakiela's low-bureau bottom drawer, a condom apiece. Our first rubbers ever, ribbed and lubricated Trojans, which we flipped in our palms like weightless square quarters. Flipped and flipped them as if that might forestall the departure of Stephanie Dilligaff to somewhere called Winnipeg. In her image we'd discovered beauty supreme, beauty unflawed by the fury of our adoration, so absolute it might have burdened the bearer had she so much as paused to acknowledge us. Had she, we would gladly—each of us in turn—have taken a bullet for her. Let Stephanie D. enter my line of sight, and previously undiscovered places inside me trembled and ached.

Iwo's all-time favorite flick was *Planet of the Apes*, and hammer-browed under his helmet he reminded me of fierce General Ursus, a soldier's soldier riding headlong into the dark-scarlet eye of the cauldron. We suppressed admitting that our Guardsmen dads, reservists who'd signed on for the paycheck and nothing else, bore no resemblance to that or any other kind of fire.

Company Diggity is what we dubbed ourselves, after some goof tune from the fifties that Iwo liked and sang, sometimes all the way back to base camp where my mom kept the porch light burning. And where we slap-fought each other black and blue in my backyard, those lyrics rising through the thin glow of that single halogen mounted on a pole outside my dad's upholstery shop: *Hot diggity, dog ziggity, boom what you do to me*. Lyrics as dumb as garden grubs, but that's how we trained in the summer of 1999, the year Iwo Jakiela and I turned fourteen.