

THE BUGLE BOY AND ALBERT

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This is the story of a man, marked by an experience from his past. The scene that haunts him, and whose meaning he was to grasp only decades later, happened on Governors Island in New York, immediately after World War IV.

New York city and the five boroughs had been depopulated in a matter of minutes. The fate of the rest of the United States and the world was yet to be known. From his point of view, he alone survived. He awoke to the water smashing him against the sea wall. His legs burned from the night's overexertion or a neurological weapon. The island, like him, remained intact as if having been protected by a great bubble. His survival is inexplicable, but it is exclusive. During the next several days and nights, sounds frighten him. He searches for life forms, for food, for water. Eventually he discovers the severity of his aloneness and reconciles with it.

The very next morning, he awakens to the sound of a bugle. The player is frustrated, unable to get the melodies right. Streams and clusters of jammed notes break up the natural cadence of the rhythm. Gradually, angered frustration turns into elegant improvisation. He finds a bike on the rocks at low tide, repairs it, and searches. He rides in the direction of the sound, but he only hears it behind him. After unrewarding days spent circling the island, he begins to think it originates from inside himself: there is nothing left of humanity, so he must be hallucinating his own memories. He finds himself back in his eleventh year with a saxophone hung from his neck. His attempts to play 'Mary Had A Little Lamb,' 'De Camp Town Races,' and 'On Top Of Old Smokey' end in frustration. His solution: to scream through the horn as loudly as possible. It was in these moments that he felt free. Once he broke the cycle of the melody, he found the freedom to explore. But no one encouraged this. The school band he played in specified what to play and how to play it, when to play and for how long. Playing from sheet music seemed unnatural. As he reconciled with this memory, and took pleasure in the entertainment provided by his own psyche, he found peace again and slept, often dreaming to the sounds of a bugle in the distance, familiar then shattered, but then elegantly cobbled together into beautiful improvisations. He didn't remember playing this well when he was young, but that's what dreams were for.

The next day I was awakened at daybreak by a persistent jabbing to my shoulder. A funny little voice referred to me as 'fresh fish.'

"Please teach me the Reveille."

I leaped up as if I had been struck by lightning. I rubbed my eyes hard. I stared. And I saw an extraordinary little fellow staring back at me very seriously. Remember I was on an island surrounded by impenetrably contaminated water. No humans could have survived the devastation. While it was true that I had survived, and I could not explain this, I had searched

every corner of the island and found no signs of another. But there in front of me was this little boy, no older than twelve in a funny outfit, jabbing at me with a bugle.

“Hey, fresh fish,” he said again, “Teach me the Reveille.”

“I opened my eyes wide and looked around. He was the only person around. This little fellow seemed to be neither lost nor dying of exhaustion, neurological damage, hunger, or thirst, nor did he seem scared to death. There was nothing in his appearance that suggested a child stranded on an island, a sole survivor of a calamity. But in the face of an overpowering mystery, you don’t dare disobey. Absurd as it seemed, a thousand miles from all inhabited regions and in danger of death I took up the bugle. I told the little fellow that I didn’t know how to play.

“That doesn’t matter. Just teach me how to play it.”

So I put the bugle to my lips and tried to make a sound. I remembered playing the Reveille on the saxophone when I was a boy of his age, and even then I wasn’t very good at it, but, still, I didn’t know how to translate that to the bugle. So I let out a few notes. “There you go,” I said. “The Reveille. Now, who, may I ask are you?”

“That’s not the Reveille,” he snatched back his bugle. “It goes like this.” He began to play the Reveille, but at about the sixth note he lost his place, and in his frustration he blasted a flurry of seemingly random notes that flowed from his mouth. I jumped back several feet from the blast. He continued on like this for a moment seeming to find his own path in the random notes he had set himself off to, concocting, in the end, what I thought to be a wonderfully lyrical composition of his own making. Once he finished this flurry, he pulled the bugle from his lips in frustration. “It goes like this,” he said again, and this time he hummed the short melody of the Reveille, perfectly in tune.

“Please teach it to me.”

“I can’t play the bugle, but it sounds as though you have the hang of it in your head, now you just have to say it through the horn. Can’t you hum it into the bugle?”

“You sound like Albert.”

“Who’s Albert?” I asked, anticipating a father or someone he might be traveling with. While he asked me a fair amount of questions, he never seemed to hear the ones I had asked him. This I learned to be his habit.

He once again put the bugle to his lips and began to play the Reveille. But again, after losing his train at the sixth note or so, he let out a torrent of notes that still made me jump back. Though not the Reveille by any stretch, I was still moved by the melodic sounds he produced. When he finished, he pulled the bugle away from his lips and repeated, “I can’t do it, so you have to teach it to me.”

“Why do you need to play the Revelie?” I asked him. “You’re playing just fine without it. Besides, since I’m already awake and called to arms, there is no one else to alert.”

“But it’s not the Reveille. Can you teach me ‘To the Colors’?”

“I don’t know that one either. Plus, I told you I don’t play the bugle. Once, a long time ago, when I was your age, I played the saxophone. But that’s a long time ago.”

Without seeming to hear or to care, he said again, “It goes like this,” and raised the bugle toward his lips, but this time he hummed the melody, perfectly in tune as if he were playing it on the bugle. “Please teach it to me.”

“But you don’t need any of those bugle calls. There are no troops here to command, no flag to raise, no schedule to adhere to. As far as I can see, it’s only you and me, and for my sake, I don’t need the bugle calls to remind me when to wake up, to eat, and to sleep.”

“But I need to know them,” he insisted. “My commanding officer requires it.”

Here I saw my opportunity to get him to stop hounding me, and I took it. “As your commanding officer, I am commanding that you no longer need to learn the bugle calls. No, your new orders are to play what you feel, let your lungs play the songs they like. You just follow along with your lips and head.”

I was anticipating another blast out of frustration and defiance, but instead he lifted the bugle to his lips and played a lovely melody of his own making. When he finished his song, he gave me a stern look and asked, “How was that, sir?”

“Fine,” I said, “Just fine. You’re getting the hang of it. Now keep practicing that.”

“You sound like Albert,” he said, again failing to inform me who Albert was.

He slumped down on a nearby rock and pulled what appeared to be a pipe from his inside jacket pocket, which I thought strange for a boy of twelve. “Commander, sir,” he said, “Do you have any tobacco?”

And that’s how I made the acquaintance of the little bugle boy.

It took me a long time to understand where he came from. While he had no trouble asking me a series of questions, he was in the habit of never answering mine. Whoever he was, I was simply glad to have a companion. It was only through passing remarks, bits of questions that he would ask me, and other information I could gather that I put together his history.

His overcoat, jacket, and trousers were of a coarse lightly toned material. His overcoat was single breasted and had a cape reaching down to the elbows, and it had a row of brass buttons on the breast, the cape, and the coat tails. The jacket, which came to his hips, had a standing collar, and what appeared to be an inside breast pocket. It was here that he kept his pipe. Another row of brass buttons ran down the front and the sleeves. There were white braids on the collar and the sleeves. His shoes were coarse looking with broad toes and heels and leather thongs. The trousers were plain without stripes and had two pockets. He also had a Forage or fatigue cap that was a clumsy looking affair, made of a dark thick cloth that looked quite heavy. It had a large overhanging crown with a welt, a chinstrap with a brass button on each side, and a leather visor. But the most striking part of his outfit was the leather cravat, what looked to me like a dog collar, which elevated his chin in what seemed to be an uncomfortable manner. It looked to be made of dark shoe leather about two and a half inches high, and it fastened at the back of the neck with a leather thong. It seemed quite uncomfortable. Add to this ensemble the fact that all of the garments seemed to be men’s sizes, voluminously ill-fitting for a boy of his age. Of all of it, the great coat, trousers and jacket seemed to fit him slightly better, but underneath you could see the gathering of extra material from his shirt and undergarments. His shoes, in particular, were well oversized, and if it weren’t for the doubled pairs of thick wool socks, surely he would have lost them long ago.

While his uniform was particularly unusual, this was not the most unusual thing about him. Something else struck me as most peculiar. He was purely in gray tones. By this I don’t mean simply his uniform. I mean his entire being. All of the color had been sucked out of him. And not only that. Once I hit upon this fact, I soon noticed that the entire island was also in black and white. All color had been removed and everything took on simply shades of gray. While this was jarring in itself, it wasn’t until I looked at my own hands that I truly got a shock. I, too, was in grayscale. There was no color in me, neither what remained of my clothing nor my flesh. I asked the boy if he noticed this, but of course, he was in no position to entertain a question from

me. Instead he was sucking on his dry pipe humming to himself some bugle call or another. Though this came as a shock, with time I became accustomed to this circumstance.

I gathered from his appearance, his concerns, and his behavior that he was a “bugle boy” from the civil war era, stationed on Governors Island. There had been a School of Music Practice there between the years of 1836-1878. He and his fellow enlisted boys of the ages of twelve to fifteen learned to play the bugle, the fife, and the drums for military life and war skirmishes. There were so many things I wanted to learn from him, but all he kept asking me was to teach him to play new songs on his bugle...and if I had any tobacco. His outfit was a civil war “bugle boy” issue. (All of this I confirm only now, from the safety of this library I sit in decades later and tens of thousands of miles away, as I recount this tale for you. This is neither the time nor the place for the story of my survival, but I can assure you it was successful). His clothes were neatly pressed and didn’t seem like they were well over four hundred years old. But he kept both himself and his bugle clean and polished daily. As his commanding officer, he daily asked if his appearance was satisfactory, and I assured him it was, considering the careless wreck I had found myself in. Over time, his discipline began to wear off on me, and I began to take better care of my own appearance. At first I didn’t care since there was no one to impress. But as I saw the pride he put into keeping himself and his bugle in order, I began to take pride in my own sanitation. Besides, what kind of commanding officer sets an example by not following his own standards? Though the boy needed no role models for his own discipline.

One day, after his insisting that I teach him to play the bugle calls, I firmly suggested, knowing that this would get him off my back, “If you could get me a saxophone, then I will teach you all of the bugle calls you need to know. I don’t know how to play the bugle, and I’m not about to learn.” He finally backed off. With this I had found some breathing space. I had put the impossible task to him. If he wanted to learn the bugle calls, then he would have to make a saxophone appear out of thin air. Of all of the buildings I had rummaged through on the island hoping to find even a bit of food or water, I found nothing. Not even left-behind curtain rods or rings. There was not a single utensil, decoration, or remnant of any kind that would have suggested that these homes were once inhabited. It seemed more like I was filling the empty shell of a movie set, yet one that the designer took great care to make the homes, the landscape, and the entire island itself authentic to the extreme that they had built it some four hundred years ago in order to give it the realism it needed to serve as a backdrop for the scene I was now playing in. So I felt fairly secure that my request for a saxophone would be quite impossible, and therefore I had discovered a way to get him to stop insisting I teach him new songs.

Some days he would take me on tours. This day he took me to the South Battery, a building I had rummaged through before. This, he said, was the building he lived in. He took me inside and showed me around. The South Battery was the very same building, built just prior to the War of 1812, that housed the “School of Practice” through the Civil War era. As he took me on the tour, he pointed out what everything was. “Here,” he said, “are the bunks, this one is mine, and here is where we keep our uniforms, and here our instruments, and here is where we eat.” As he said all of this, I didn’t let on to the fact that nothing was where he said it was, nor did it correspond to what he was saying. In fact, the building had been converted in the late 1920s and ‘30s into a ballroom and officers’ club by the army and used as such by the Coast Guard up to 1996. So where his practice room once stood now stood the remains of a bar and lounge. Yet he saw his past as clearly as if it still remained. As I took the tour, I used my own imagination to try to see what he was seeing, since, as I had come to believe, it was likely historically accurate even if no longer visible. I had come to know him as a trustworthy source

and as the spirit of a boy who had lived here many years ago. His tour of the School of Practice included many details that I would verify later. As he walked me down the hallway he pointed out tin washbasins that hung from hooks on the wall. Each boy was to take one and pump water to fill a basin, place it on a bench, and wash himself and finally dry himself on a roller towel. When it was warm out, he told me, this took place outside. Next we entered a room on the first floor that he called his sleeping quarters. He described everything it contained to me as if I were a new recruit.

“There are six iron double bedsteads, and this single bed in the corner next to the window overlooking the parade grounds is for the corporal. This will be where you sleep. As you can see, the doubles are folded to allow for more room during the daytime. The bedsacks, which are stuffed with straw, are rolled up during the day, and all of the blankets are folded properly on top. You’ll notice there are no pillows. We use our jackets for that. This wide shelf running around the room above the beds is for storing knapsacks, shoes, drums, fifes and other things and the hooks below are for hanging our overcoats. This is where the coal fire burns, but because the weather is nice, it’s not necessary today. That’s the corporal’s chair. Use it when you like, and the wooden benches are for the boys. Behind the door you’ll see a water pail and a tin cup. You can see a few books lying around and candles for reading at night, and checkers and checkerboards that we made ourselves.”

None of this, I should remind my reader, was visible to me. The rooms were empty and poorly neglected. Even the shapes and sizes of them were not as he described. But I took him at his word, knowing that if I stopped to question him, the tour would end abruptly.

“This is the mess hall. The entire company of boys can sit at these long tables and benches at one time. We each get a thin plate, a large stone china bowl, an iron spoon, knife, and fork, and there is some salt and pepper at the table. For breakfast we have a small cold piece of boiled salt pork, a piece of bread and a large bowl of black coffee. Grease in a dish is a substitute for butter, and there is the salt and pepper. For dinner we have a bowl of rice soup containing desiccated vegetables, a small piece of boiled beef and the usual piece of bread. Three times a week there is bean soup served with boiled salt pork or bacon and at rare intervals, one or two boiled potatoes. And then for supper we have stewed dried apples, black coffee (sweetened, no milk) and a slice of bread about four ounces. At the sulter’s store you can buy pies, crackers, cheese, cake, and ginger pop.”

His description, though paltry by normal dining standards, sounded gourmet to me, as I hadn’t eaten in several days. I told him my concerns and worry about food and asked if there wasn’t any of this left on the island, somewhere, a cache of food. Of course, he didn’t answer my question, but I did notice in his patient recognition of my concern. Otherwise unfazed, he continued with his tour.

Next he showed me into a grand open room that he called the music schoolroom. He called it a tiny room, too small for full attendance, and pointed around at pine desks, benches, a blackboard, desk and chairs for two teachers and shelves, none of which I could see. Inside one of the desks he pointed out where the teacher kept his rattan to keep order in the classroom. As with everything else he pointed out in the School of Practice, sadly nothing was where he said it was supposed to be. Next he said he wanted to show me one last thing. He took me to a basement room where they had kept all of the instruments for the new recruits. We entered the room and it looked to me like a room that had once been used to store potatoes or for growing mushrooms. It was only a small room, large enough for him to enter with ease but I had to crouch so as not to hit my head on the ceiling. As we both entered, he pointed into the corner, and said, “There it is.

Take it.” Like everything else, I had the feeling that he expected me to pick up something that had been there four hundred years ago, and I would have to push my imagination to the far outreaches just to entertain him and to hear him tell his story in his own way. But I wasn’t about to reach into the past and grab for something that no longer existed.

So I asked, “What is it?”

And as he never directly answered my questions, he just pointed with a more firm finger into the corner. Not wanting to upset him further, I moved toward the corner and grabbed in the direction he pointed. To my surprise, there was actually something there. This was the first object that he had indicated that was actually physically present. So I grabbed for it and it seemed familiar. I opened it, and indeed, there was a familiar smell, the smell of brass, wood, velvet, must, and saliva. Sure enough, I was now in the possession of a saxophone. I had so many questions, first of which, how did a saxophone arrive here when the Belgian, Adolphe Sax, hadn’t even invented the saxophone until 1841? The School of Practice was strictly for buglers, fifers, and drummers. As a matter of fact, the saxophone never made it into military engagement. It wasn’t until several years, decades, after its invention that it even made it into ceremonial military bands having been rejected by orchestras around the world. It simply didn’t make sense to me how this bugle boy could know of the existence of not only this saxophone, but of the saxophone in general, and it made even less sense that it would be here, in this place, the only tangible thing I had yet to find on the island. Here was a physical reminder that once another life form lived within these abandoned homes.

As could be expected, the saxophone was old and musty. The case wore its age, as did the sax, but remarkably, it played rather well. Even the pads had been well-cared for. I should have expected this coming from a boy who kept his clothes pressed and his own instrument polished and cleaned for daily use. It seemed as though since he was the only boy remaining, he took the responsibility of caring for all matters that concerned the School of Practice, so this saxophone became his responsibility.

I asked him over and over again, where this instrument came from, who had left it, when it had arrived, why he had taken so long to show it to me, and all of the other pressing questions I needed answers to, but he again refused to answer my questions. Instead, he simply put his bugle to his lips and said, “Now teach me the bugle calls.”

We spent the afternoon trying to get me familiar with the instrument again. Since his memory was so clear about how the bugle calls went, he could teach them to me, however ironic that may sound. Then I would fumble my way around the sax trying to find the notes. Miraculously I remembered the basic fingering. A simple C scale came to me quite naturally. Luckily this was all I needed to find all of the bugle calls. They consist of only three notes, C-G-E, in two octaves and various arrangements. It took me quite some time to find the melodies. It had been some thirty years since I had even seen a saxophone much less had one under my fingertips and in my mouth. How he had managed to care for the reeds was still a mystery to me, but everything was in good playing order with the exception of the low Bb, which luckily I didn’t need for the bugle calls. And over time, my embouchure would fix this, too. So I would play the bugle call on the sax, then I would ask him to tell me where the corresponding notes were on his bugle, and he would try to play them in the same order. Each time, he would make his way to the fifth or sixth, or even seventh note, and then he would get distracted, lose interest, or for whatever reason, go off into a tear of a new homemade lyrical melody. At these times I would sit back and just enjoy it. It was so beautiful, the complex rhythms he could play on his instrument, the intricate and unpredictable turns he would make and the shifts from upper to

lower register at the most unlikely but the perfectly harmonic moments. I was so impressed that when he completed one of these cycles, I would ask him to teach me how to play it. Instead, as was his nature, he would ignore my request and insist more strongly that I teach him to play the Retreat.

He hummed the Retreat, and I played it, and then I asked him to play it for me. As he had done occasionally with some of the other bugle calls, he mistook it for another call, but even so, lost the rhythm shortly into it, and proceeded as he had before. Thinking little of it, this time I laughed at his mistake, finding the consequences of mixing the messages of the Charge call with the Retreat call to be comical but with severe consequences if executed in the field. He did not find this as funny as I did. It was one of the rare times where I saw him show emotion. I tried to explain the joke, but he only insisted more strongly that we try it again. This increased my curiosity about his past.

One day I had asked him how long he had been on the island. “What did you do once you left the island? What happened to you?” Of course I was making many assumptions. The first was that he was not a real person standing in front of me. Clearly, no boy could live four hundred years. At the same time as I was assuming that he was a spirit, I was also assuming that he was not a product of my imagination. As he told me more and more about his past, the island, and his life, I knew that there was no way that I could have known these facts about the civil war or life in the 1800s. Later, many years later, when I finally left the island by a makeshift air vessel, and made my way to this country where libraries still exist, I verified all that he had told me. Though I didn’t find any indication of who he was exactly, I found many first hand accounts of bugle boys who served on Governors Island and could piece together the authenticity of what he had told me. I learned more about his life in retrospect, when I had finally left the island.

The last assumption embedded in my line of questioning was that he had, in fact, left the island at one time and lived a full life. Though he never told me what happened to him, I began to piece together the puzzle on my own. Daily, whether he was with me or not I would hear him playing the bugle. In time, under my new directive to play what he felt and not worry about bugle calls or prewritten music, he became quite proficient. He learned to trust his ear, and he came up with some of the most exciting and moving melodies I have ever heard. Every now and again, though, he would try to play a bugle call, and just like the first time, he would lose himself after the sixth note, and go off on a tear, that, though not useful to the military, was quite useful to both my well-being, and, as I tried to insure him, to his too. This being said, he had never run a bugle call to its completion, and he had mistaken one for another many times. At first this humored me a great deal because there was no need for him to insist on getting the bugle calls right. The bugle calls were built as commands to signal to troops on the battlefield on when to flank right, flank left, when to advance and when to retreat, and off the battlefield on when to wake up, get dressed, eat, swim, pray, rest, play, and sleep. Before the age of transistor radios, walkie-talkies, and cell phones, these were an early form of military semiotics that served its purpose in its day. The role of the bugler was important in that he was the one issuing commands from the General telling the troops when to move. It was so important that the buglers became one of the most significant targets on the battlefield. The first of the enemy targets was the General, but a worthy adversary knew that if he took out the bugler, then the troops would be left without commands in chaos. At first I suspected that this was the fate of my bugle boy – he had gone into battle and was taken down by enemy fire trying to gain an advantage. But as I researched later, Governors Island had never seen battle. The forts were intimidating enough, so they never needed to fire a canon in defense. From little bits of things he had said, and from

watching him struggle with the bugle calls and proceed into these beautiful lyrical tears, I slowly began to surmise his fate. Though Governors Island in fact never saw battle, the troops often staged battles to keep in practice in order to be prepared for the real thing if it ever came their way. So I am guessing, for he never told me in so many words, that what happened one day while they were practicing with live rounds (or maybe it was just one soldier, possibly by the name of Albert, with a grudge), he was stationed on the battlefield as the lead bugler. When he should have issued the command to fall back right and retreat arms, he instead issued the partial command to move forward left and fire. Either way, the bugle call he issued was only partial, and I can only imagine the sad scene of him playing the opening to the wrong bugle call and finishing with his habitual outburst of frustration which then turned into a most beautiful melody, though of little use as a military command. And this he did straight through the fatal bullet that pierced him in the confusion and continued as he lay dying on the ground, another senseless casualty of war.

On another day he asked me to teach him to play the Mess call. At this point, I had been stranded on the island for over eleven days. My water supply had all but dried up and the wells on the island had been dry for some years. My food supply was consumed, and I was at the end of my nourishment. My little friend luckily didn't need to eat or drink and didn't have a care in the world for these practical matters. I spoke and worried about this more and more, though he never acknowledged my concerns. But on this day he insisted that I teach him the Mess call. Sensing a degree of urgency in his persistence, I ran through the Mess call with him. He, of course, failed to get it exactly, but when he was tired of practicing, he invited me to take a walk with him. He led me to one section on the south end of the island that I had explored many times before, where he believed stood a garden. I told him that if he were going to continue to point out things from the past that no longer existed and torture me with more descriptions of food, I would no longer listen to him, and his music lessons would end forever. But once again, I had no choice but to follow the direction of his firmly pointing finger. While everything else on the island was dark and depressing at least from my gloomy outlook there in the direction he was pointing stood various things in color. This was the first time I had seen color in I couldn't remember how long. My eyes found it vibrant and delicious. Before me was a garden full of black and white plants, but hanging from them were fruits and vegetables in their respective colors. While my eyes found these delicious, so too did my mouth. I indulged until I felt satiated. My friend pulled an apple himself, but the moment it entered his hand, it, like him, returned to black and white. My hands too remained black and white, as did my entire body, but the fruits and vegetables retained their colors when I held them. Next to the garden was a water pump that I had pumped repeatedly and futilely every single time I had passed it. He told me to pump it, and I again told him not to torture me. But this time, water poured forth from it. It was neither in color nor in black and white. It was perfectly clear and transparent as fresh water should be. At first I was hesitant that it was salt or brackish water, like the water that surrounded the island or that it was rain or ground water that was contaminated with the chemical and biological agents that had destroyed the world I had once known and loved. But he insisted that I drink it, and, resolving myself to dying either way, I drank it, and it was good. Eventually I got my spirit back from my little friend and my energy back from the fruits, vegetables, and water. Within the upcoming weeks, as we resumed practice of the bugle calls, I soon began to fish simply at first to see if any of the fish were still alive and if they could be eaten. Many were contaminated floaters,

but as I complained and began to speak more dreadfully about my fate, my luck began to change and, quite impossibly, I slowly pulled more colorful fresh fish from the waters. I made a fire from primitive means and eventually was able to provide for myself (with his help). As his musical education depended on my survival, he provided for me. My little friend ate simply to share the experience with me, though he apparently didn't need to. Every time he took some food, which had taken on its natural color in my hands, it would return to black and white in his. Eventually, too, I began to notice that the more I began to eat, as the days went on satiating myself with food, I saw the color of my own skin return. As my time and companionship with my friend grew on the island my own color began to restore while his remained black and white. I worried about him, but he rejected my fears and assured me that my coloration was good.

Every chance he got, he would ask me to teach him something. And every time I got close to teaching him something, he would go off on a tear and I would find myself wanting to learn from him. I had often asked him how he learned to play the bugle the way he did. But he seemed to not know what I was talking about. He had no idea he could play the bugle. He was so caught up with not getting the bugle calls that he didn't understand that he had become more proficient at everything else there was to know about the bugle. Again I had asked him about how he had learned to play, and again he would not answer my questions. He would just insist that I teach him something.

Over time I began to find my answers. He had mentioned someone by the name of Albert such that when I first heard mention of him I thought surely we were not alone on the island. He mentioned Albert many times, and one day I thought he would introduce me to him. Maybe he was his father, his commanding officer, another bugle boy, I didn't know. Albert, it turned out, is the one who left the saxophone behind. And he had not left it behind in the 1840s. Instead he had left it some time around 1970. My little friend one afternoon just started talking about Albert, and I let him speak without asking questions because I was sure this would stop his story telling. I have said that he asked plenty of questions of me but never once answered any of mine. Instead I had come to learn that once I had expressed a curiosity it would take him several days, but he would eventually show me exactly the answers to my questions. Although he seemed disinterested in my questions, it turned out that he had his own way of telling me, or rather showing me, the answers.

It turned out that Albert was a fantastically talented jazz musician in the 1960s and 1970s (my friend could not place dates for me, because time had stopped for him, but the way he described Albert's playing cued me in to the style of the 60s and 70s. This, too, I confirmed later). He too had been stranded on the island for some time and had brought with him his saxophone. Apparently it was dented and broken when he arrived, but my little friend had fixed it for him knowing too well that it was the only way that Albert would teach him to play the bugle calls. It turns out that Albert was quite proficient at the bugle calls and began teaching my little friend, too. But Albert, like my little friend, had the same tendency, once he had gotten the bugle call, to continue to improvise the simple melody into the most beautiful and lyrical passages. While my little friend surely came to his own lyrical sensibility as a result of his frustrations as a young military bugler, spending time under the apprenticeship of Albert certainly allowed him to explore it further. It wasn't until I began to piece this information together that I realized why my little bugler friend was still frustrated every time I tried to teach him a bugle call. Once I put two and two together, I tried a new strategy. I would begin with the bugle call, but when I got to the sixth note, though sometimes I would vary it around the fifth or seventh or wherever, I would go off into an improvised tear in as lyrical a voice as my

inexperienced skills would allow me, for this is how I know that Albert taught him. Soon I could see in his playing, and in his change of spirit, that these were the real bugle calls he had wanted to learn. It was not his commanding officer from 1850s that he was trying to impress, nor was it troops he was trying to command. Instead, he was trying to live up to the standards that Albert had taught him for that brief time in 1970. It would take me some time to learn of Albert's fate. My little friend didn't give me many clues. But he often said that even before my arrival he would construct passages and play the bugle calls and improvise on their melodies to the water, shouting them to the river in hopes that Albert would hear them. Even now that I was present on the island with him, in the night when he thought I was fast asleep, I could hear him playing to the river. It was at these moments that I could truly hear his talent. There was something deep within the boy, something spiritual coming from this spirit, but it didn't issue from a God or a deity. The spirituality within him was fabricated from his own past. It came from the people he had encountered and the teachers he had learned from. It came from the fate he had suffered and from the fate that he witnessed others suffer not only during his time in the Civil War era but even up to the present day as he witnessed now what would be his fourth world war. Although I didn't know it at the time, he had also witnessed Albert's suffering in the brief moment he got to know him. He poured all of these memories into his bugle, and they came out as a lyrical incantation to the spirits he had encountered. He himself was a spirit, and he played to the spirit of Albert that he located within the river.

There was only one afternoon, and one afternoon only that I thought I too had seen Albert. We were passing by the old ammunition storage magazine and I heard what I thought to be the wind blowing from deep within the magazine. It sounded more lyrical than usual, and my little friend said, "That's Albert. He likes to play down there." So we entered the rooms, one large room in the center surrounded by six rooms off to the side in a star formation, mimicking the pattern of the entire fort. In the shadows I thought I could make out a figure, but this could have been my imagination acting overtime after being stimulated so much by these stories I had put together myself from the bits my little friend told me. But he did tell me that Albert hadn't left. Though he lives in the river, he returns to the island to play in the magazine.

Of this entire tale I cannot distinguish between what my friend told me and what I surmised myself. In fact he said very little to me with the exception of, "Teach me to play the bugle calls." Everything else could be fabrication on my part, including my companionship with the little bugler. All of it could have been mere delusion to keep me engaged and entertained at the height of my suffering. Either way, it was and remains very real to me as it should to you.

In my last days on the island, my little friend watched me as I made my makeshift inflatable air vessel. I could see that he was both sad to know that I would be leaving, but also happy. I was leaving in a way that was different from the way Albert had left and from the way his fellow buglers were now gone. I was leaving to never return.

When my craft was complete, I wished him farewell. I too was sad to leave him, but I knew as well as he did that I couldn't survive with the friendship of only a ghost from the long distant past. It was not time for me to become a ghost like him, so we both knew I had to go. He remained, and I left Albert's saxophone with him. For that's what Albert intended by leaving it behind. It was his, not mine.

When I finally returned to safety, the harrowing story of which I will not tell at this point, I eventually bought myself a saxophone. The home I live in today is within walking distance to a river, countries away from Governors Island. But in some way all rivers eventually connect even if they have to go underground or through the ocean to do so. At nights I go out and play to the

river, playing the bugle calls as commands to my little friend and to Albert to, as a means of keeping in touch with them. While my practice space off the river is away from the general public areas, and I am still not very good – no where near as good as my little bugler – I know somewhere I’m either bothering someone to know end or making someone feel quite at ease with my playing. I play at night to simulate the disembodied playing of a spirit. My saxophone is a communication device just like my little bugler’s instrument was. Both he and I continue to use it to communicate between us and to anyone else with the desire to listen.

As I write this from the library I mentioned earlier, which is not far from my home, it is only now that I begin to fill in the details of who my little bugler friend could have been. From Augustus Meyer’s account of life on Governors Island I can see now everything that he was pointing out to me in the South Battery and throughout the island. For him, those things are all still there. For me they can only be found in history books.

I looked up one other thing, too. I found one Albert matching the descriptions that I gathered from my little bugler. Albert Ayler was a truly spirited and gifted saxophone player who started playing as a child and later more seriously in an army band. He struggled significantly through the 1950s, 60s, and 70s to come up with an individual style that was unique and ground breaking. But, for the most part, his music was not widely accepted during his own time. And it was founded on simple melodies of which the bugle calls played a significant role, as did nursery rhymes, and the French national anthem. I listen to his music today and think that if there were a way to bring his recordings to my little friend, he would never need another teacher again. But as Albert remains with him on the island, he probably hears these songs and many new compositions on a daily basis. Albert Ayler’s body was found floating in New York harbor at the foot of Congress Pier in Brooklyn on November 25, 1970. He was last seen in New York on November 5 where his girlfriend at the time recalls him throwing his saxophone at a television and leaving with the cryptic words, “my blood needs to be shed to save my mother and brother.” He is suspected to have met his death in the river after, most likely, jumping off of the Staten Island Ferry. Different poetic accounts place his body floating near the Statue of Liberty (different from the one that exists today, as the original was destroyed in the war) with the suggestion that he entered into his death from the Liberty Island Ferry. Other conspiracy theories have him assassinated as a prominent black figure. While both of these seem poetic, embellished, but finally unlikely, all accounts suggest that regardless of which vehicle he departed from, or how his body entered the water, he drowned himself in the river. And this is how his spirit came to remain there. For the brief period of what could have been the twenty days between when he was last seen on November 5 and his body was discovered on November 25, Albert Ayler may have spent his last days on Governors Island sharing his musical wisdom with a little bugle boy from the civil war era.

There are things that actually happened, and there are things that you choose to believe happened in order to motivate you to survive or accomplish extraordinary things. In the end, nothing you believe is actually the case, and the stories we tell of our pasts are always elaborated and therefore fictions. But in small ways they might germinate and allow someone else to come along and pick up a saxophone and continue blowing in the direction of the river. Such is the power of fiction.