TRUE STORY

a novel

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VIKING
PART I

LAX WORLD

1999
n the fall of our senior year, my buddy Max Platt was arrested for shining a laser pointer at an airplane. We didn’t even know this was illegal. It was one of the least bad things Max ever did, and it was hilarious that it ended up being the thing he got in trouble for. (This was still a few months before the whole thing with the private school girl.)

We were at Denny’s when we heard the story, of course. The lacrosse team practically owned Denny’s. But that night it was just Max and me and my old buddy Richard Roth.

*Been doing it since August,* Max said. He’d cut class, go out to the empty field behind the auditorium, and lie on the sandy grass, pointing the red light at the sky, slowly waving it back and forth. *Like the Bat-Signal.*

Really? Richard said.

It always got under my skin how Richard was so impressed with Max. So I said, *But why, Batman? What’s the point?*

Fucks with the pilots, Max said.

Max did a lot of things we wished we had the balls for. But this one, personally, I never understood the appeal.

He told the story again at practice. The story was better with all of
us there. Max stood up and did his impression of the cop who caught him. “What are you doing?” he said, in a big Yosemite Sam voice. He waddled around with his hands out to the side, like he was too fat to put his arms all the way down.

“I slipped and fell,” I shouted, Max said, or I tried to shout, I dunno, I was so fucking high, who knows. I put my hands up over my head, they felt like jelly, like I was moving them through jelly.

We all nodded like we knew what he meant. Like we’d all been too high to raise our arms. Even though I knew for a fact some of those guys had never smoked.

The cop goes, “Get over here, son. Put your arms down.” I just leave my bowl in the grass, he never checked, too lazy to walk a hundred feet, Max said. He had no fucking clue.

We were all cracking up listening to the story. The cop had no clue Max was high! We shook our heads.

Cops are such dumbasses, I said. Everyone laughed.

But the next Monday, Max wasn’t at practice. He was suspended. Coach told us the laser pointer thing was actually a federal crime. A $250,000 fine and up to five years in prison. We were all super low that day. The state championships were only eight months away. We wondered if Max would be in prison then. We wondered if he would tell the FBI that we smoked weed. For a while we discussed nothing else, jogging in anxious circles around the track.

But in the end nothing really happened. We were only seventeen. And Max’s dad was a CPA, so maybe he knew a good lawyer. Max didn’t even have to do community service. He was put on probation and had to check in with a cop every month for a year. That was basically it. The only other thing was that he had to get up in front of the whole school and give a speech about the dangers of laser pointers. It was, of course, hilarious.

Say it with me: watch where you stick your pointer, Max said, pointing
his thumb over the podium like Bill Clinton. And everyone in the auditorium said it with him: *WATCH WHERE YOU STICK YOUR POINTER.*

Mr. Kaminsky, the English teacher, tried to step in—“Thank you, Max, that’s enough”—but the whole school just kept chanting it: *WATCH WHERE YOU STICK YOUR POINTER! WATCH WHERE YOU STICK YOUR POINTER!*

In the end it took two administrators to quiet everyone down, Max grinning onstage the whole time. We sat in the back and cheered him on. We knew that he was with us again.

The only thing was, now he had a record, so he couldn’t get caught again. But we didn’t think that would be a problem. If we could get out of a felony, we could get out of anything.

**I MADE VARSITY SOPHOMORE YEAR,** a year earlier than Max. Richard and I had gone to lax camp and we were pretty good. Only two other sophomores made varsity that year, Ham Tierney and Alan Byron.

The four of us got buzzed in together the first week, right after last period on a Friday. There was only half an hour between last period and practice. It wasn’t much time. And you had to do fifteen push-ups for every minute you were late to practice. I wasn’t that good at push-ups and doing more than ten was humiliating, so I made sure I was never late. I always went to the locker room right away after chemistry.

That day, I was thinking about something a girl had just said to me at the end of class. She’d said, “Nick, for a guy, you’ve got such pretty hair.” I couldn’t understand why she’d said it. We weren’t having a conversation. We were standing at our desks, packing up our stuff, and she just said it, out of nowhere. But she said it in a really nice way. Maybe she meant it as a compliment, and I should have asked her
out. Maybe she was being sarcastic and insulting me, and I should have said my hair was pretty like my dick, and then I should have asked her out. The point is I failed.

This is what I was thinking about when I opened the locker room door and saw like six of the juniors and seniors sitting silently on the benches. This was strange. Usually I was the only one there so early. I let the door swing closed behind me. Then, all of a sudden, I had a funny feeling. I had this sense that I should get out of there. But they were already up. They grabbed me and then I was on the floor.

When you play lacrosse, you get used to being under a lot of weight. We always pile up after a goal, to celebrate. We even did it at camp, where the goals don’t matter. The weight freaks you out at first, like you’re drowning. But you get used to it. I was used to it by then. It was kind of a familiar feeling, actually. It helped me stay calm. I just breathed and tried to play it cool.

One senior straddled my chest and someone was holding my legs and one guy was tugging on my hair. “With this long hair, you’re just too pretty,” someone said.

I wondered if I was really so pretty. Between the girl in chemistry and now the team, I wondered if people were going to keep saying this to me forever.

“So pretty she’s turning me on,” someone said, and they all laughed. I was pissed off, but I didn’t want to seem like a jerk. I hoped I didn’t look pissed off. The guy on my chest was pulling his dick out over his shorts waistband. That freaked me out. But I stayed still. I knew that as long as I didn’t resist, it would be over soon, and then they’d leave me alone. There was a buzzing sound. “Hold still, my pretty,” someone said. “Wouldn’t want to slip.”

Suddenly, I understood what the girl in chemistry had meant. She hadn’t meant anything. She’d only said it because the lacrosse team told her to. They put her up to it, to get me ready. It was part of the
ritual. They were all shouting and laughing and the senior sitting on my chest was waving his dick around. It was limp, of course, we weren’t gay. I closed my eyes as he waved it in my face. I kept my mouth shut. I thought about the fact that the girl wouldn’t even have talked to me if I wasn’t part of the team, and how she wasn’t actually saying anything to me. She was just the messenger.

Then I felt someone rub my head and they said, “Like a monkey ready for space,” and the sound had kind of died down, and the weight was lifting off of me, a little bit at a time, like pulling yourself out of a swimming pool, and everyone’s dick was in their pants, and everyone was playing it cool.

“I thought he was gonna piss himself,” someone said. They were all walking out.

Then someone else said, You’re all right, Nick. You’re cool. We’ll see you on the field. Their voices had changed. Like they respected me all of a sudden.

I got up onto the bench and sat there for a second. I felt a little better. Then I stood up and looked in the mirror. My hair was gone, shaved off in uneven patches. My face looked strange—bigger. I stuck my tongue out at my stupid face.

They’d left me the buzz cutter. I ran it over my head until I was clean. It left a few spots of blood, but I wiped them on my jersey. A little blood on your jersey looks tough.

When I walked onto the field I was very late. The team was stretching as usual. But it seemed that I was not going to have to do any push-ups.

Sit down, Nick, Coach said, with a nod of approval.

I folded my leg and felt the stretch all the way up my thigh. I looked at Richard. His hair was gone, too. Ham and Alan wouldn’t look up from their knees.

Richard told me later that they’d gotten him in the bathroom
outside the gym. After they shaved his head they stuck it in the toilet. His face wasn’t in the water, though. Just the top of his head. It wasn’t like they were trying to kill him. They stuffed toilet paper in his mouth and made him learn one of the sacred team songs. Every time he messed up, they added another wad of toilet paper. He had to get through the whole thing without gagging. This made sense. Richard was a little soft.

But I didn’t say that to Richard. I just said, *That's crazy! All they did to me was put me through the paddle wheel.*

Ham said, *Same with me.* And Alan said, *Me too, just a paddle wheel.*

It was the first time I had ever caught a friend in a lie. I looked at Ham and Alan a little different after that. I wondered what the team had actually done to them.

But the important thing was that we had all been buzzed in, and together. I felt warm whenever I thought about that. It was humiliating, but at least we were humiliated together. Not like the usual humiliations, girls or parents or whatever. We had been through something important. We’d probably go to state again this year.

I wanted to play well on that first day with my hair buzzed. I wanted them to know that I was tough. The cold air around my scalp and neck felt strange as I ran, but I played well. I played maybe better than ever. I wondered if maybe, all this time when I felt humiliated, when I was alone and lonely, when I didn’t know what to say to a girl, maybe all this time it was my hair that was holding me back.

After practice one of the seniors, Dean McGarvey, said, *Hey. You maggots wanna hang out?* So Richard and Ham got in his car, and Alan and I rode with Matt Komen and Sam Simpson. We threaded back through the neighborhoods to one of the guys’ houses. We parked on the street and walked around back. The lawn sloped down
to a dock that stretched into the Chesapeake Bay. The sun was starting to set behind us and the sky was all pink. The dock stuck out like a middle finger.

It’s Coach’s, Dean said to someone.

“What?” Richard said.

I was annoyed at Richard for reminding the others that we were newbies. It’s Coach’s house, I told him, trying to play it cool, like I’d known all along. I hoped I was right.

I was. The seniors explained that Coach’s son was a senior when they were sophomores, and they were still allowed to use the dock, just not to go into the house. So if you gotta pee, you gotta pee in the bay. It’s nature’s toilet, Gary Wooten said. We all laughed and sat on the weathered wood and marveled: we were at Coach’s house.

I got a little nervous when Komen said, Take your shoes off, gentlemen. Relax. Gary was pulling on a slimy rope. We were all playing it cool. We were all laughing and joking. We didn’t feel nervous, we were part of the team. I didn’t have to worry that Gary was pulling up a crab trap. I didn’t have to worry that they were going to make the crabs pinch our toes. We’d been buzzed in. We didn’t have to worry anymore.

And I was right again. It wasn’t a crab trap. It was a blue cooler, secured with a bungee cord and covered in barnacles. I felt that something incredible was about to happen.

Nature’s refrigerator, Gary said, gesturing toward the bay. He unhooked a rusty carabiner on the bungee cord and opened the top of the cooler. It was filled with rows of golden cans. Sunken treasure, Dean said. We all laughed.

Dean tossed beers to the others, one at a time. The smell from practice drifted away over the slow-moving water. We dipped our bare toes in the bay. Our feet were hot and tired, and the water felt good.

I wasn’t sure if we sophomores were going to get beers or not.
Greg Morrissey and Matt Iglehart didn’t want beer. I was confused, but I didn’t want to look stupid, so I didn’t say anything. But they told us anyway. We’re on Oxy, they said. Can’t drink on Oxy.

Shrivels your swimmers.
Which is why I don’t mess with Oxy.
Me neither. I save them for girls.
Yeah. It’s better that way. When the girl takes the Oxy. We all laughed at that.

“What’s Oxy?” Richard was my oldest friend, but I really wished he wouldn’t be such a dickhead. Dean still hadn’t tossed us beers. Morrissey and Iglehart looked at each other and started laughing.

Oxy makes you happy about everything, Komen said.
Yeah, Wilbur got it when he broke his ankle in June, Iglehart said.
Matt Wilbur, one of the seniors, raised his beer in salute. He didn’t say anything.

Komen said, He’s a true tough guy. He took, what, like one a day? Barely any. So he could save some of the love for the team. Komen had a couple of big pits on his nose, like he’d scratched a bad batch of zits. He had a lot of freckles so you couldn’t really see the scars. But I was sitting a few feet away from him; I could see. He was pretty funny looking, actually. But everyone seemed to like him. He talked for a while. You guys can try some next time, he was saying. There’s not enough to go around now, but it won’t be long until someone else gets injured and gets a prescription. There’s always injuries.

Then Komen looked at Wilbur. Wilbur nodded. He seemed to be the resident expert on injuries. He seemed to be a true tough guy. He hadn’t said a single word yet. And then he said, If it’s you? You know what to do.

We nodded solemnly. We agreed with all our hearts. We’d take only the minimum Oxy. We’d save some of the love for the team.

We never got beers. We worried that we had failed, and we were
right: on Monday after practice the seniors got into their cars and drove off without us. We felt humiliated, and we blamed Richard, mostly. He shouldn’t have asked what Oxy was. He should have played it cool.

But the next Saturday we won our scrimmage, and we were invited to the party after. Everybody drank. I had a beer even though I didn’t normally drink back then because I was an athlete first. Ham and Alan drank a lot. Richard drank a little. We sang the sacred team songs with our arms around each other in Wilbur’s backyard. When Alan threw up on the driveway we all helped hose off the pavement. We hosed off Alan, too. It was hilarious. After that we were invited to all of the parties. We partied whenever we could.