chelsor Desert

Stories by Tom Alderson

Michelson in the Desert

A Breakthrough Book
No. 52

Michelson in the Desert

Stories by Tom Alderson

University of Missouri Press Columbia, 1987

University of Missouri Press, Columbia, Missouri 65211
Printed and bound in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Alderson, Tom.
Michelson in the desert.

(A Breakthrough book; no. 52)
Contents: Michelson in the desert—Tim's back home—The auction—[etc.]
I. Title. II. Series.
PS3551.L337M5 1987 813'.54 86-16159
ISBN 0-8262-0621-2 (alk. paper)

∞™ This paper meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, Z39.48, 1984.

This book was brought to publication with the assistance of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Two of the stories in this volume originally appeared in the following magazines: "Michelson in the Desert" in **Intro**, and "The Auction" in **Ploughshares**.

For my parents

Contents

Michelson in the Desert

Dawn again, at the edge of a crystalline vastness of desert. On the backlit horizon low mountains form. Michelson stands outside his government bungalow, urinating in the gravel that serves as his lawn. If any of his neighbors see this they will be outraged. None are awake. Early light spreads over the salt flat, illuminates the scrub and channeled wash. Tiny lizards run for holes. Work, for Michelson and the people sleeping around him, is still three hours away. Blessed respite. He should go back to sleep, but this time is too precious, with most of the hostile world slumbering and he almost pleased by the cold spectacle of dawn: the sensation of shivering alone in the very early morning is one of the true redeeming delights of life. Far off to his right a column of smoke rises from the disposal facility where, night and day, nerve gases are decomposed by alkaline hydrolysis or chlorination. Michelson is a technical advisor for weapons disposal, chemically a very simple process. He could be putting his talents to much better use. If someone had told Michelson at his college graduation that in ten years he would be living alone in the Utah desert among people he despised he would have laughed at the notion.

* * *

Driving to work, Michelson passes through two security gates. It has been home for nearly three years now, this enclave in the desert. Acres of nerve gas canisters shine in the sun. Row on row of what look like metal whiskey barrels lying on end, running back to a line of low dark warehouses. Far away, beyond the outer fence, there are scattered mesquite and yucca plants. Before she left, Michelson's wife had tried in vain to cultivate a desert garden. Some do it successfully, but she had lacked the knack. Michelson parks his car next to Davis's old pickup truck. Their office is an air-conditioned Quonset hut of corrugated metal. Inside, under fluorescent

lights, their desks are separated by a fiberboard partition. Yesterday's unfinished work is piled on Michelson's desk, overflowing the hold box. Davis's desk is immaculate. There is a picture of a wife and three children, a blotter, and a pen set. Davis is nowhere to be seen; he must be out taking inventories. Affixed to the wall behind his desk are enormous charts covered with clear acetate. Davis always updates them with great care. He is meticulous in his paperwork: inspections of his records (and they are numerous) rarely turn up a single deficiency.

Michelson was once just as impervious to outside scrutiny, but lately his mind wanders. His supervisor complains of potentially disastrous lacunae in the records. Weapons disposal is a very sensitive matter, and accountability is strict. At least by regulation accounting is strict, but the records aren't as easy to reconcile as they used to be. A palpable uneasiness permeates the Depot hierarchy; next month a Congressional panel is coming down for a tour of the site. Among the yellow notes on Michelson's desk this morning is a directive to begin preparing a briefing for the visitors, a general overview discussing site operations, methods of storage and disposal, history of chemical warfare, possible threats against the US. They have PR men for this sort of thing; he is a chemist, for Christ sake. He looks out his window at the familiar horizon. Another cloudless day.

* * *

Seen from the air, the Depot forms a series of concentric rectangles, the largest several miles across. Between the outermost fence and the next inner fence are hundreds of yards of unbroken desert floor. Inside a third fence are the symmetrical rows of gas cylinders and the munition storage warehouses. Catty-corner to this array, off at an angle, is the plant where unserviceable stocks of nerve gas are destroyed. Two sets of railroad tracks run in from the east, stretching away to whiteness and infinity. To the north, perhaps half a mile beyond the outer fence, are the trailers and small houses for the almost six hundred souls calling this corner

of the planet home. Everyone knows their neighbor here. From the housing area to the nearest state highway, twenty-six miles away, there is only one road.

* * *

"Hear anything from the little woman?" "No." "Well, too bad, that's too bad." Davis clucks his tongue. He has been at the Depot for eighteen years. His wife is a fat and gentle woman who sometimes brings Michelson homemade pies. Michelson's own wife never evinced much interest in cooking. But she also never complained about the life she had to lead or the friends she had to associate with. "You should have been able to see it coming," she told him in one of the sad, numbing discussions they had as she prepared for her departure. "It should have been evident to you." Perhaps he was preoccupied. Everything in his life seems to be sliding away.

"Been in to see the doctor?" Michelson is taken aback by the question. A query like that, here in this place, seems almost rude. "What do you mean?" "Well, well, now, I don't know—" "You must have something in mind." "Well, now, the department head has been concerned." That only figures, of course. Michelson had a visit with the house shrink a while back—a visit that was to be held in the "strictest confidence." "He's always concerned about something of no import." "He just thought you might be upset about your wife." "Is that so." Michelson tries to organize his briefing. Visual aids—they are big on visual aids. "He's just got your best interests in mind," says Davis. "It's part of his job." So they've been talking about him, wondering if he's cracking up. Michelson moves deliberately to the water cooler and takes a paper cone out of the dispenser. "There's no cause for concern. What happened was a long time coming, and it came as no surprise."

* * *

The view from Michelson's office window is the most

precisely defined and reassuring item in his life. His window is a small two-paned affair, wider than it is high, set into the curve of the Quonset hut wall. Red and white electric wires, two sets, circumnavigate the edges. It is flanked on the left by a filing cabinet and on the right by a safe. In the small space between the safe and the edge of the window, a few policy notices are posted. They stand out in nice contrast to the gray wall; combined with the colored wires, they are an aesthetic pleasure. Beyond the window, perhaps six feet out and raised two feet off the ground, is a silver pipe whose function Michelson has never been able to ascertain. At the right limit of his field of vision, just past the pipe, rise the stark angles and dark panels of the classified waste incinerator. The compound's innermost fence is about twenty-five yards from the window. Between the innermost fence and the far, irregular horizon there are only three parallel erections: two more chain-link fences and a row of power-line poles. Michelson regards them not as an intrusion but as a perfect complement to the tableau. Doodling on a notepad at a chemist's conference in Denver or Cleveland, he can reconstruct the profile of the horizon exactly.

* * *

"Even congressmen on a fact-finding mission like to be entertained." "Is that right?" "That's right. So be entertaining." Michelson is getting guidance from the department head on how to conduct a briefing. There will have to be charts. Graphs and charts. Michelson has other responsibilities. "Why have I been tasked with this?" "You're our disposal man, that's why. They like the idea of disposal, so make 'em feel good." "How do I do that?" "Talk about what we're doing here, the technical problems, the advantages of one method over another." "It's all simple stuff." "Don't worry, Congress is full of simple men." Michelson must prepare a professional show. He must arrive at some striking modes of presentation.

How has he come to this? Through negative selection, by following the path of least resistance—from high school until now, Michelson realizes. He can use a graph to demonstrate the relative efficiency of disposal methods: energy expenditures required to bring the reactions to equilibrium. They had tempted him; they are good at that. They pay him as much as he could make as an industrial chemist. To tell the truth, most of the companies he had talked to seemed to have all the chemists they needed. Only Uncle Sam really welcomed him with open arms. The research jobs he'd coveted had never materialized, and he'd been stuck first in Maryland and now in Utah with an army-sponsored chemical weapons contractor. His wife couldn't stand it, or couldn't stand him, or couldn't stand something. On the phone these days she is polite and disinterested. The divorce will be final in a little over four months.

* * *

"On April 22, 1915, a cloud of chlorine gas drifted across the Ypres salient, released from cylinders in the German trench network. Clinging to the ground, the greenish-yellow vapor filled trenches and shell holes and all low places where men hid. The effect on the French was devastating: 5,000 killed, 10,000 injured, a four-mile gap in the front line. Where the enemy is unprotected and unprepared, there are sound tactical uses for chemical weapons. In their campaign against the Ethiopians in 1936, Italy employed mustard gas, a persistent blister agent. Fighting in a hot climate, their sweaty bodies wearing no protective covering, the Ethiopians were expeditiously put out of commission by the gas."

Michelson is not sure if congressmen want to hear this sort of thing, but he has been urged to give some background in his briefing. "Maybe you should discuss the history of disarmament. After all, you're our disposal man." Is there a trace of unpleasant insinuation in Davis's voice? Michelson looks at him, at his long face, his gray hair. An old man. "What I need is something to impress them." "Slides. Try

slides." Michelson considers the possibility. His wife's image appears before him, as it often does when he is trying to concentrate on his work. Once, in blinding midday, he saw her naked body standing beside a maintenance shed. A mirage, as it turned out. He could have 35-mm slides made up, and give his briefing that way. Slides would lend a professorial aura to the proceedings: the cool professional, in control of his material, dispassionate, swayed by facts alone. That is the image they want to convey. Why have they chosen him?

* * *

Nothing at the Depot—water, food, or poison—is produced locally. Everything comes from distant points by truck or by rail. When one has lived for a time behind the fences, the supply traffic, your lifeline in this inhospitable environment, becomes as familiar as the train schedule for an habitual commuter. Michelson knows what trucks are bringing protective clothing for the workers in the disposal plant; he knows these particular trucks arrive on every other Thursday. Spare parts come by rail, and while they may come at irregular hours, they always arrive the last week of the month on two flatcars. The contractor who supplies the local commissary does so out of medium-sized Internationals. Big rigs, Peterbilt or Kenworth, arrive every Wednesday mid-morning at the supply warehouses to deliver pens, pencils, paper, disposition forms, typewriter ribbons, rubber bands, glue, acetate, paper clips, manila folders, erasers, and the host of other expendable items without which this installation could not function as prescribed by regulation. Twice a week, generally on Tuesday and Friday afternoons, the materials necessary to run the munition disposal operation are delivered by rail. There have been few additions to the stock of nerve gas stored here in the past several years, but when these additions occur the stuff comes in on guarded trains. The installation reservoir is kept full by truck, train, and a pipe to a well fourteen miles away. Average annual

rainfall here is less than six inches.

* * *

"Michelson, I want this thing to be good." "Well, there's only so much one can say." Michelson is sitting in the department head's office, another Quonset hut distinguished by the presence of a carpet on the floor. "These are congressmen," says the department head. "Remember that. The Director will give his spiel, then you'll talk. He'll want to see what you've got, of course, before the whole thing goes." A typewriter raps insistently from the other side of a partition. "What exactly does the Director want?" "Just the things I told you before: a little background on our operation, then a look at the future and our prospects in the near term. They especially want to know about our disposal operation, in case a disarmament treaty is negotiated with the Soviets... that's why you're in on all this."

Michelson wants to know something. "Why is the Director making such a big deal out of this?" The response is sharp. "Look, Michelson, the Director knows what he's doing. That's why he's Director." Yes, indeed. Michelson know the Director is a consummate bureaucrat, a smooth operator, a man perfectly meshed with those above and below him, a man admired by most of the staff, a man with an enviable career progression. "What's the matter with you, Michelson?" "Nothing." "You liking it here?" "I love it here." Michelson finds the solicitude of the department head suspect and irritating. The man is in some kind of collusion with the Director, Michelson is sure of that. The department head takes a roll of antacid tablets out of his desk. "Like one?" he asks. "No, thanks." "Wife made Mexican food last night." "I'm sorry to hear that." "Yeah. Listen, tell me something. What happened a while back between you and the Director?" Michelson is always disappointed that the department head's window reveals only the side of another metal building about ten feet away. He is denied even the desolate comforts of the horizon. "Nothing happened, as far

as I'm aware. Why?" "Well, I don't know. I get the feeling he doesn't like hearing you mentioned at all. Especially since that accountability loss." "You have to expect a few problems in a pilot operation." "I'm planning to have Davis re-check the inventories." "You don't have to do that. I can handle it." "It's just a check." Michelson gets up to leave. "By the way, Michelson, how's your wife?" "She's fine," says Michelson, on his way out the door.

* * *

Part of the difficulty in disposing of chemical agents is keeping track of just how much gets destroyed. If you have a precise inventory of stocks on hand—simple enough to obtain, provided the canisters are all evenly filled—then you should be able to measure the end products of the disposal reactions and, allowing for some losses in heat and faults in the system, balance the equation. Mustard is easy: you just burn it up. No one worries about mustard. But lately the nerve agents have not been balancing out. Michelson doesn't understand it. Any incidental losses can always be covered, though it is an arduous and time-consuming task: inventories refer to other inventories, and these must all be altered and corrected until the last entry jibes with the first, which may have been made years prior. It's done often enough, to pass accountability inspections. In fact so many changes have been made that the whole mass of inventory paperwork is a self-referential system that may have relatively little to do with the actual amount of gas sitting out under the Utah sun. Michelson is not especially concerned about this. He and Davis have a fair idea of how much is out there. What bothers him is that during the last two disposal cycles, there have been shortages not attributable to leaky conduits or equipment breakdowns.

Why hasn't Davis, who's such a stickler on inventories, brought up the recent shortages? "I want you to check my figures for the output end of the disposal operation." "Are you feeling okay today?" Davis is watching him, closely and

curiously. "I feel fine. I'd just like to get your opinion." "Well, straight stocks is all I do." "The department head told me he had mentioned something to you." "Straight stocks. Asked me to check them again." "You haven't noticed anything off there?" "No. What's eating you?" "Well, something's wrong. You know, I had a dream the other night." "A dream?" "Right. I had this dream about the VX. I dreamed it was leaking away into the desert, like a giant sticky glacier or something." Davis just looks at him. "If there were a leak, I'd know about it," he says. "Are you sure?" says Michelson. Davis takes his clipboard and heads out into the sun. Michelson watches him disappear among the canisters. Maybe there aren't any significant shortages, not really. Maybe he imagines too much. Maybe the department head is right to be concerned.

* * *

All the pictures Michelson has taken of the inside of this place are classified; he dutifully leaves them in the office safe every night. Now he goes through them, one by one, holding the slides to the light, deciding which pictures to use in his briefing. Some are overexposed, most are unimpressive, all are lacking in the peculiar quality of light that makes a human-eye view of the desert so exhilarating. For dramatic effect Michelson chooses a backlit shot of the disposal plant, contrasted with a revealing one taken in broad daylight. He hasn't done any real chemistry in months. He would have left long ago, perhaps—only he signed a contract. More money. Now he can't quit, not for another two years. Then what?

A long shot of the warehouses, a train being unloaded, workers in their protective suits, a panoramic view of the horizon, the main gate of the Depot, on and on. He should stick a nude centerfold shot in there somewhere, to make sure his audience stays alert. He could use something from his book of 1,001 great opening lines, but that would be inappropriate. The atmosphere here is "military briefing"—

still, they want it entertaining. What the hell. A factual presentation. A factual presentation about the Depot would put a hyena to sleep.

Except poison gas is stored here; enough to kill off every living thing with a nervous system. We're destroying it, Michelson thinks. Once the program is fully implemented, now that our pilot operation has succeeded, once we receive the go-ahead for a full-scale reduction—Michelson knows the Director will not allow the briefing to become a lobbying forum for either the disposal advocates or the binary munition crowd. Facts. Michelson looks out his little window; late sun is turning the bare mountains gold. Far, far to the west lies the Pacific Ocean. California. Another world.

* * *

Michelson is late for a staff meeting with the Director. When he walks into the conference room, everyone stares. The Director is stressing the importance of the congressional visit. Around the table Michelson sees men he has never seen before. Strange memos have been coming down to him; people he has never heard of are sticking their fingers into the disposal project. The Director smooths his black hair; he looks more like a ferret than ever. "I'm not satisfied that we've covered all the bases," he says. "I want another briefing conference before we rehearse." Michelson can't understand the to-do over a little dog-and-pony show for a few congressmen more interested in Alta than in poison gas. Last time an inspection team came around from the Pentagon, the Director hardly bestirred himself; now he's bent out of shape. After the meeting, the department head wants to hash it over.

"I can't have you showing up late for meetings." "I realize that." "What's wrong with you?" "Nothing. I feel fine." "You know we've got to have our stuff together on this briefing. I'm getting bad vibes." Michelson is interested. What's going on, what aren't they telling him? The department head is eating antacid tablets, one after the other. "You got heartburn

or something?" Michelson asks. "Christ, I don't know. My stomach's been acting up. My wife made fried chicken last night, too. Christ." "Sorry to hear it." "Yeah." "What's the big deal about this briefing?" The department head now looks as if he has a headache. "These are congressmen, Michelson. They control funds, remember? Maybe they'll hire a different company to do this crap, and we'll all be out of a job." "Worse things could happen." "Michelson, you have an attitude problem."

Back in his office, Michelson stares out the window. Almost a year ago his wife took the Toyota LandCruiser and headed west, stopping off in Reno on her way to California. Since then there has been no mail except formal communications from her lawyer, leaving him only conjecture about her new life in Los Angeles. His slides are arranged on his desk; he should be designing the charts he will need. The prospect is too dreary. He decides to focus his attention on the wall clock, and experience the passage of one full minute in the inexorable march to quitting time. The sweep of the red second hand is interminable; it takes so long to traverse fifteen seconds that Michelson must look away and seek an alternative diversion.

* * *

Night, in blessed sleep, and the early dawn hours are Michelson's favorite times. All night he has strings of dreams, mostly unrelated, like a one-reel movie festival. He usually forgets them as soon as he wakes up. Lying in bed, waiting for the alarm to go off, he carries on a daily debate with himself over whether or not to go in to work. It's easy, when it's still dark, to make the flimsiest excuses plausible to yourself. Only when the full light of day brings you to your senses and restores your perspective do you realize it is probably less trouble in the long run to go ahead and get up. But suppose he just sleeps on, on and on, for days, never going to work at all?

Shaving himself, Michelson carries on a life recapitulation

in his mind. He examines causes and effects, seeking a rational explanation for his predicament in this particular time and place. He admits that there was no critical juncture where he did not commit a sin of omission; he admits the fault is his own. Still, it was awesomely unpredictable: how could he find himself so isolated from his surroundings, so out of touch with his colleagues that it takes more concentration than he can muster to listen to them finish a single sentence? He's always in Acapulco twenty minutes after any meeting begins.

Michelson puts his razor away and surveys the inside of his medicine cabinet. It's a very impressive medicine cabinet: well-stocked because of his many contacts among the pharmaceutical houses, one of the perquisites of being a chemist. Analgesics, diuretics, antihistamines, opiates—and in the back corner, his prized ampule of potassium cyanide: curiosity and conversation piece, thrilling to touch, to regard with fascination and reverence: index of the subservience of the animate to the chemical.

* * *

"You know something's wrong with the disposal project." Michelson launches this missile at Davis as the latter concentrates on a thick manila folder. "Gas is disappearing." Davis shrugs: "Leaks. Unweighed residue." "I mean a lot of gas." Davis looks up at him, closes the folder. "I haven't noticed anything out of the ordinary." "That's because you only measure what's on hand... you don't look at what's coming out at the other end. I'm telling you something's screwed up." "Well, you say it, but I haven't seen it." "Maybe you need to look." Davis takes his manila folder and gets up to leave. "Maybe you better talk to the boss," he says.

Michelson watches Davis disappear. The air in the office seems dense. Maybe he will talk to the boss, but what should he say? His records aren't straight enough to definitely establish inventory discrepancies. Only Davis could do that.

There is another yellow slip on Michelson's desk, reminding him of a full-blown briefing rehearsal in two weeks. He feels a twinge of fear: the same absurd fear that had driven him to take this job in the first place. He looks out his window. Sometimes, when he has stared long enough without interruption, the panorama outside loses all depth and exists in only two dimensions, mashing itself against the window pane like a postcard. He wonders about his wife. What does she think about when she gets up in the morning? He imagines the men she must meet during the course of a day, working in the city. They all look like an ad for Hathaway shirts. The Depot is devoid of romantic possibilities, once you discount stray sheep and the pimpled secretary at the contract liaison office. He feels like a monk in a cloistered order, swaddled in vows of abstinence.

* * *

Something not immediately identifiable awakens Michelson from a deep sleep. He has been dreaming, and is annoyed at having the dream interrupted. According to his watch, it is 3:20 a.m. Plenty of time left before the alarm goes off. He listens to the hum of the air conditioner. Outside it seems quiet. Has he confused dreaming and waking? It was a noise that awakened him, a noise he is not used to hearing here at night. It sounded like a train.

* * *

Michelson has never initiated a meeting with the department head. This fact strikes him as significant as he walks to the neighboring Quonset hut. He has always waited to be summoned for some tiresome chore or another. He lurches right in: "I'm finding some problems in the disposal operation." "Yes?" "Gas is disappearing." The department head smiles indulgently. "Good. That's what it's supposed to do. You should be pleased with your section's efficiency." "I'm not joking. I'm talking about straight stocks. Things just don't balance out down at the plant." "If there are

shortages, it seems to me there is an accounting problem you better get on top of. There have been problems in your section before." Michelson knows this is true. It would be nice to attribute these difficulties to his own ineptitude. "What I think is happening is this: the gas is being diverted before it ever reaches the disposal plant." "Michelson, really now." "Listen to me. Someone is altering the disposal cycle and not telling me about it." The department head gazes benignly at Michelson. "You need to relax. You look tired." "I don't feel tired." "Michelson, take the rest of the day off."

* * *

O-isopropyl methylphosphonofluoridate: agent GB, nonpersistent organophosphorus anticholinesterase. Median lethal dose: one milligram. O-ethyl S-2-diisopropylaminoethyl methylphosphonothiolate: agent VX, persistent organophosphorus anticholinesterase. Median lethal dose: .4 milligram. Human exposure to either agent results in blindness, profuse sweating, increasing bronchial constriction, vomiting, involuntary defecation, convulsions, paralysis, and ultimately death by asphyxia following respiratory failure. Very satisfactory results are obtained whether the gas is breathed or absorbed through the skin. Facts. A man in control of his material. Michelson can only dimly conjure up his first meeting with his wife. It seemed that she just appeared, or he knew her a while without really noticing her. He sees a parade of tall Africans, covered with blisters the size of golf balls. Had he been so loveless he had driven her away? Not likely. No, she had changed, drifting into another realm by some osmosis beyond his power to discern. There was so much he could not tell her, across the paper barrier of his security clearance. Now he is kidding himself, for nothing ever really happens at the Depot. The only thing he has to hide is his boredom.

Michelson goes to the door and stands looking out over the endless rows of contained poison. A jet has left a contrail

dividing the sky. High altitude winds are breaking it up, spreading it thin, as if trying to fashion the clouds so sorely missed here. He can twiddle away the afternoon however he pleases; no one will notice. Is his Russian counterpart, somewhere in the wastes of central Asia, as wretched and lonely as himself? There is no motion anywhere, save the shimmer of heat waves rising off the tanks and warehouses. All the movement is underground or in air-conditioned offices—snakes and mice in deep burrows, piles of paper moving from desk tops to distribution boxes. No bird lands on the power lines, no rabbits nest under the switch panels. Convection is the only visual relief.

Suddenly there is movement to Michelson's right front. Old Davis is out among the canisters, checking for corrosion. Even in the dry air, the laws of thermodynamics prevail; the containers are all deteriorating at varying rates. Davis moves slowly from barrel to barrel, examining each one methodically, sometimes hunching down on one knee to get a good look underneath. He will spend the afternoon transferring the information on his clipboard to the enormous charts behind his desk. He is a man happy in his work.

* * *

A fresh yellow note awaits Michelson at his office; the department head needs to see him as soon as possible. "As soon as possible"—frequently abbreviated ASAP—is an ominous phrase in some bureaucracies, including this one. It carries a coded sense of urgency that the initiated can find unsettling. Michelson receives the obligatory invitation to have a seat, knowing something is amiss. "What's up?" The department head gives him a searching look. "Note came down from the Director. You're off the briefing." "The briefing's off?" "No. But you're not participating." "What brought this on?" Michelson is angry, but there is another sensation, too, something like relief. Forget that he has wasted a lot of time on this. Forget, too, that it's a little bit humiliating to be singled out as ineffective amidst so much

mediocrity. "As far as I know, Michelson, they just changed the game plan. The Director will handle the show." "You might have informed me sooner." "Note came down today. I checked on it by phone." Michelson has known this man for a year and a half. They met socially only once, at an excruciating affair hosted by the Director. "You don't have any idea what's behind all this?" "Look, Michelson, who knows what goes on up there. We get a contract and we fulfill our obligations. And we're discreet about it." "I want to see the Director." "No problem, Michelson. He wants to see you."

* * *

One of the things Michelson does to amuse himself is drive at night across the desert, feeling the wind, careening over the narrow roads at ninety, a hundred, a hundred and twenty miles an hour. His car is an extravagance: a nineteen-thousand-dollar Porsche, another reason he can't quit this job right now. Small animals and lizards freeze in his headlights and die under his wheels. The car handles remarkably well. He ranges out forty and fifty miles at a time, roaming new dirt tracks, spoiling the finish on the paint. The air is so dry nothing rusts; he changes the air filter every two weeks. He can drive a new route almost at will, ridge on ridge on ridge, the land unfolding in shallow basins and alkaline flats, all negotiable to the determined. Sometimes he misses the LandCruiser, when the roads end and he wants to push on. Then he gets out and walks, under more stars than he has ever imagined. Standing alone in a yucca-strewn flat, his car the only anomaly around, he looks back over the ridgelines for any indication of unnatural light. From some vantages he can see the glow of the Depot, warm, almost appealing in its distance.

Tonight is different. Tonight he has a mission. He drives out the service road that parallels the railroad line, a route he has driven before, heading for a hillock where he knows he can hide the car and observe the tracks. Calculating back-

wards, balancing the disposal cycles against the shortages, Michelson has arrived at a theoretically probable interval for theft of the gas. There is a full moon. Michelson sits down on top of the hill and looks out over the familiar landscape, the ancient floor of a lost sea. If he's right, tonight an unscheduled train will roll by below him. He's brought a camera with very fast film; he's brought a tape recorder. He knows both items are useless—what he needs is a witness—but who at the Depot could he ask to sit all night on a desert hilltop waiting for a train that might not appear?

At dawn he drives back. Only rarely does he encounter another car or pickup truck. One time a LandCruiser passed him going the other way, and he was sure it was his wife. He nearly overturned trying to wheel his Porsche around, and chased the phantom for seventeen miles before it pulled into a gas station/food store and disgorged a complete stranger much too wide in the hips.

* * *

"Good morning, Michelson," says the Director. "Have a seat." He is holding Michelson's personnel record, looking at the performance reports. "I understand you want to discuss a few things." "Well, I've found some problems." "I've been briefed on the allegations." The Director continues to look at Michelson's record. "You know, Michelson, it's almost time to update your clearance. There are some people in security section who foresee some problems with that." Michelson intends to be forceful—but where is his evidence? All night under the moon, and no train. Just the glittering rails and the sharp mesquite shadows and the dark line of the far range. "I don't understand. Why do they foresee problems?" "Well, Michelson, things are sensitive right now. We're going to have to look very closely at who gets read in on what." "I obviously haven't been read in on my own operation." "You've been working disposal for a while, haven't you?" "That's what I was hired for, yes." "You like it?" Michelson feels himself becoming the passive object of a grilling. "I

didn't come here to discuss my job." "Michelson, I've got your psych eval here. I'm a little concerned about it." "You should be more concerned about what I have to say." The Director sets aside the personnel folder.

"I know this last year has been hard for you, Michelson." "What do you know?" The Director smiles. "I can understand that the routine here must get a little slow, Michelson. Listen. You've done some good work for us. You've got potential. But I think you need a vacation. Maybe a transfer as well." Michelson stares at the wall behind the Director's head. He's losing interest in pursuing the matter; what he wants now is a nap. The Director is still talking: "I've only got your best interests in mind. I've talked to the medical section, and I know you've been under a lot of personal stress. Now, I want to see you finish out your contract with us, but you need to take it easy." Michelson moves toward the office door; the air seems thick. "One more thing, Michelson. On the advice of your supervisor, we're moving you over to the contract liaison office. Give you some experience in that side of the house."

Michelson steps out into the brilliance of noon. So they're moving him out. He shouldn't care. It shouldn't even bother him that his minimal responsibilities are being reduced even further, that his negligible capacity for influencing events is being rendered nonexistent. He can ride out the days and still meet his car payments. All it means is another layer in the dense, textured oppression of the daylight hours, and he can handle that. It'll be good to get home early, and drink a tall glass of orange juice. Maybe he'll start running every day, along the one paved road available, two miles out, two miles back. It had been his wife's favorite pastime. He can sometimes face to the southwest and imagine communicating with her telepathically. It cannot really be that he is only deluding himself, radiating wasted energy, his voice lost in the ether.

* * *

From the door of his office Michelson looks out over the canisters. He has his briefcase; he'll call it an early day. Davis is not in the office, and Michelson can't see him outside, either. Heat waves warp the vistas beyond the warehouses. The disposal plant stands in the full blaze of the sun. He can see workers moving around, some wearing their protective suits, some not. There was a meeting about those suits a while back. Some kind of directive resulted from it. The men are all supposed to be wearing the suits. Smoke pours out of the two high stacks. Around the clock, three shifts, that plant functions, like some kind of organism. Walking to his car, Michelson looks beyond the plant to the horizon. Perhaps they will transfer him soon, but even that possibility does not matter now. What matters is night, and sleep, and forgetfulness.

Tim's Back Home

I used to have a lot of fun with my big brother, before he went off to school and flunked out. Since then, since he came back home, things haven't been so good. Mama can get pretty nervous anyway, but since the thing happened she's just been on edge all the time. As a matter of fact we're all on edge; lately it's been getting mighty tense around here.

We moved to Fairview eight years ago, when I was only three, and I don't remember anything about the move. Mama says we were all happier in Tracy City, but of course I don't remember anything about that, either. It seems to me that things were all right until Tim went up to Austin Peay on that state scholarship. Mama was so proud when he won that. She called all the neighbors and all the relatives, and then she started telling me how hard I should work in school so that I could go to Austin Peay, too, or maybe even the University of Tennessee. Tim was always smart in school. My teachers tell me I'm smart, but not as smart as Tim. All around our house you can see things Tim built, electrical things. There used to be a crystal radio set, made just out of old pieces of wood and metal with wires wrapped around it, but I tore that up one time when I was mad at Tim. He also made a "sparking prong," he called it, that you could shock things with if you hooked it up to a train transformer. There's an electrical device on the mantle that's been blinking for four years—Tim built that, too, and he didn't use a kit or anything. He's made lots of things that light up or beep. None of them are good for anything, except the sparking prong. We used to chase the cats around with that, and when we caught one we'd give it a good shock. Dad wore us out a few times for doing that, but after a while we'd get bored and do it again.

But since he came back from up at Clarksville, Tim hasn't

done anything but sit in the parlor and smoke cigarettes. The smoke smell fills up the whole house, and no matter where you are you're reminded of Tim. Yesterday Mama was washing clothes in the basement, taking them out of the dryer and folding them, and all of a sudden she started crying, just started up bawling for no reason. But then I smelled the smoke, even in the basement you could smell it, and I had to run out in the side yard to get away from everything for a while.

* * *

One of the things we used to do was dam up the creek behind our house by piling up rocks from the streambed. Tim would use words like "hydraulic" while we were working. "Hydraulic" and "flume" and "reservoir." What we were making was a reservoir, and sometimes when it was pretty deep we'd throw the cat in. One time Tim got mad and shoved me in the water, and I reared up and threw a rock that hit him in the head. He started crying, even though he was fifteen, and Mama came running out the kitchen door to see what had happened. I started crying, too, so she would know I was hurt and wouldn't hit me for throwing the rock. Tim's head was bleeding, and Mama slapped me even though I was already crying. I sat down and howled my lungs out, but I wasn't really hurt.

Tim read quite a bit, especially science books. There was one book we both looked at a lot, a science book with big color pictures. There was one picture from back in history, an old painting that showed a scientist named Hennig Brand kneeling in his laboratory after he discovered the element phosphorus. The laboratory was shadowy and Hennig Brand looked like an alchemist. Tim loved that picture. Sometimes he used to act silly about it—he would go around the house naming all sorts of things and saying Hennig Brand invented them.

"Hennig Brand invented windows. Hennig Brand in-

vented paper." Tim thought saying these things was funny. It made Mama mad, though. Once we were sitting at breakfast, and Dad was reading the paper.

"Hennig Brand invented table legs," said Tim. "Hennig Brand invented bacon."

"Hush," Mama said.

I could tell Tim wanted to go on listing things Hennig Brand had invented, but Dad put down his paper and said, "Knock it off, you hear me?"

Dad works in a plant where they make things for electric motors, and he's always afraid of losing his job. Every day he drives up Highway 100 to Nashville, and every night he tells Mama that the traffic is worse and worse. The day after Tim came home from Austin Peay, I saw Dad sitting at the table with a hurt look on his face, holding his stomach like it pained him to breathe.

* * *

It was hard for Mama to face the neighbors after it happened. She did her best, I guess. It's only been a month, and sometimes people who haven't heard the news come by and ask about Tim. I can't stand to see Mama when this happens. "Tim's back home," she says, and her face gets a look like if you tapped it with a hammer it would shatter. "He's going to stay with us for a while, until he decides what he wants to do."

Tim hardly moves anymore, and Mama has to get after him to do things like change his clothes or take a bath. It's a relief for me to get out of the house and go to school, but on my way home, as soon as I get off the bus, I feel it. I feel the strain coiling out of my house like a bunch of snakes. Sometimes I wish I could keep walking, on to some other house that doesn't smell like smoke, and where I won't have to watch Mama's mouth quiver while she snaps the beans.

* * *

Another thing we used to do: we'd get up in the middle of the night and prowl around the place. We slept together sometimes, in a big double bed we got from my grandfather, Mama's father. It came from his house in Northcutt's Cove. The best thing about the bed was the long pillow that stretched across it, as long as two regular pillows. At first I thought it **was** two pillows inside one large pillowcase, but it turned out to be a single huge pillow. We used to get up after midnight—the "midnight snoop," Tim called it—and wander through the house carrying the long pillow between us like a dead body. Sometimes Mama would wake up, and Tim would tell her we were only getting a drink of water. I don't know if Mama believed him or not.

* * *

I was at school the day Tim came home. Dad took off work and he and Mama drove to Clarksville to pick up Tim and all his things. They were up almost the whole night before, screaming and yelling at each other. I just lay in my room in the dark, listening to all that, and I knew it wasn't about me. I knew I was safe, that they'd almost forgotten I even existed. Crawling under my bedcovers, I pretended I was master of a huge electronic control board, a puppeteer in control of my parents and everyone else. I set up a force field around my bed. No one could penetrate to me or make a move without my knowing it.

That's what I made believe, but Dad burst into my room and said: "Are you awake?" I pretended I was sleeping. "Son, wake up," he said. He grabbed my arm and pulled me upright. I could feel his hands shaking.

"What's the matter, Dad?"

"Tim's coming home tomorrow, and when you get home from school, I don't want you to bother him. OK?"

I told him OK, then I asked him why Tim was coming home.

Dad looked at the wall. "It just didn't work out at the

college," he said. "I don't know why."

He wanted to say something else, I thought, and I wanted him to say more, but he left the room. The next day I searched for excuses to stay after school. I even walked home instead of taking the bus. When I came in through the kitchen door, Mama was crying over the stove. Tim was in his room, and he didn't come out to supper. Dad was quiet, and Mama looked ready to sob all through the meal. I was the only hungry one. After supper I went to my room for a nap. I was tired, because I didn't sleep much the night before. In bed I had a dream... I was in a cave, in front of a big pile of rocks with iron bars at the top and a fire burning behind them. I woke up and smelled smoke. It was cigarette smoke, and no one in our house smoked cigarettes. When I got up to look for the source I found my brother sitting in the parlor, smoking. Just sitting and staring out the window. He looked pale and thin, and he acted like he'd never seen me before in his life.

* * *

A few days later I was standing behind our front door, listening to two of our neighbors talking on our porch. They were men who knew my father. Dad sometimes fished with them. I listened to them speak, and my heart was beating too fast.

"He gone plumb fool up there, his daddy said."

"Don't that beat all."

"Yeah, the way I heard it, they found 26 pints of urine under his bed, all collected in Mason jars."

"Ain't that something."

"I reckon he was saving it up for something, what do you reckon?"

They both laughed, real low, and I felt a little sick. I ran out the side door and sat down in the garden. I didn't know what to think.

* * *

Pretty often we used to go fishing, Tim and Dad and I. Mama would fry up a load of chicken and send us off early in the morning. Usually we'd drive to Center Hill Lake and rent a little motorboat. Out in the boat I could always smell that chicken, and my favorite part of the day was when we pulled up to a shady part of the bank and ate lunch. Tim would get bored with the fishing, and he'd try to get me in a casting contest. We weighted our lines with the heaviest sinkers we could find, and then saw how far we could cast them out from the boat. Dad would get mad then. "Did you come here to fish or did you come here to play?" A couple of times he made us get out of the boat and stay on shore while he fished a ways off.

Once, on the way home from the lake, we stopped for a snack at a roadside joint with no windows. The walls inside were paneled and covered with beer signs. "They have the best biscuits I've ever eaten," said Dad. He asked the waitress for some biscuits but she said they were out. Dad ordered a beer and drank it. I'd never seen him drink anything alcoholic before. "Now don't you tell Mama," he said, and winked at us.

We haven't been fishing since Tim came home. Last week I got out the big tackle box and went through it. I counted the hooks and sinkers, and laid my favorite lures on the carpet. There was a huge silver lure with a long orange tail that I like the best, but Dad told me it was worthless for catching anything. Most of the time we just use worms; you catch more fish that way. At home I like to take out the lures and look at them, and play with my spinning reel, but when I'm out at the lake I do better with a cane pole.

I was in the hallway with my spinning reel when I heard Dad shouting out back. I ran to pick up all the lures and get them back into the tackle box, because I didn't want to give him anything else to scream about once he got inside. The screen door to the kitchen slammed, and I bent

over the box, pretending to concentrate on all the red and white floats and gray sinkers. I heard Dad's voice in the kitchen.

"I can't afford a crazy son!"

After some foot-shuffling the door slammed again, and I knew Dad had gone back outside. I gathered the tackle together and stood up to see Tim staring down at me from the end of the hall.

"Hennig Brand invented fishing," he said.

* * *

The day Tim graduated from high school, he took me for a drive. There was a party that night after the ceremony, some kind of thing his friends were having. At least that's what he said—I never knew he had any friends, except me. Every day after school he came home and either listened to his records or fiddled with something electronic. Anyway, some girl he liked was going to be at the party, and I think he'd made up his mind to sort of say something to her, and he was nervous.

We drove south on Highway 100, away from Nashville, out into farming country. Tim was playing the radio loud and swaying around in a funny way I thought was dumb.

"What are you doing?" I asked him.

"Just minding the music," he said.

"I don't like it. Turn it down."

He looked at me like he might hit me in the head, and for a minute I thought we might fight and the drive would be ruined. But then he turned down the radio and went back to watching the road.

"So, are you coming to graduation?" he asked.

"I have to. They're making me."

"It'll be boring, all those names."

"I know it."

We turned off on a side road that led, I knew, down to a railroad trestle. We had once fished in the small stream there, and Dad had let us shoot his .22 pistol into

the water. That was dangerous because the bullets could ricochet off the surface, but Dad was in a good mood and let us do it anyway.

"You remember shooting the pistol down here?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"That was fun."

"You weren't very old."

"I was seven."

"That's not old."

We parked underneath the trestle and got out of the car. The stream was low and the water gurgled around the bridge supports. Tim picked up a rock and skipped it through the shallow rapids. I tried to match him, but I used a dud rock that only jumped once.

I asked him about the girl he was going to see.

"She's just a friend, nothing special."

"How come you're so worried about her, then?"

"I'm not worried. Hey, you'll be the same way in a few years. You'll want the car and you'll want to go out."

"No way."

"You'll turn eleven in a few months." He threw another rock. "You'll understand this stuff soon."

I wasn't so sure; I knew he sat at home until he was sixteen, and then when he got his driver's license the only person he ever took out was me. Mama asked him a few times about girls, but I was sure he didn't know any. Saturday nights he sat in his room with earphones on his head, and he wouldn't even let me come in where he was.

"Let's go for a swim," he said.

"We didn't bring any bathing suits."

"So what? Go naked."

Tim peeled off his clothes, and I felt weird because anybody could drive down the little road we were near. But I leaned against one of the tarred black poles holding up the trestle and pulled off my sneakers.

"Come on," Tim said. "I've got to get back and get ready soon."

He was already out in knee-deep water. That was as

deep as the stream got, I could see. I folded my clothes and splashed in after him. The water was pretty cold, but not unbearable.

"Come on out in the middle. Current's good here."

"These rocks are hurting my feet."

"Screw your feet."

I scattered a school of minnows by stepping in a shallow pool, trying to avoid the sharp black periwinkles stuck to the stones under the water. Once I got out into the currents, the rocks seemed rounder and softer. When I came near him Tim splashed me.

I splashed him back.

Tim dived in the shallow water, kicking himself upstream and allowing the current to carry him backward until he ran aground. I did the same thing, opening my eyes underwater to watch the gravel streambed rush past my face, inches from my nose.

"Is that girl going to be at Austin Peay?" I asked Tim, between dives.

"There's lots of girls at college."

"I thought you liked that one."

"I never said that."

"You don't like her?"

"She's a friend."

He dived in again and let himself drift downstream. When he finally ran aground he stood up and stretched. He stepped out of the shadows of the trestle, into the sun, and I saw there were muscles in his back that I hadn't noticed before. I suddenly felt proud: there he was, my big brother, grown up and headed for college.

* * *

I usually hate Sundays because I know that Monday is coming, but today I wished Monday would come so I could go to school and get out of here. It started early this morning, and it's still going on. Mama told Tim he was a member of this family and he better start acting

like one. Dad told him to wake up and face reality. There was a lot of shouting while I was still in bed. I was sorry I couldn't get on the bus and escape to school. I never looked forward to school so much in my life. Finally Mama opened my door and said they were fixing to eat breakfast.

"Get up and join us," she said.

I joined them and nobody looked happy. Mama asked Dad to return thanks, and just as we all bowed our heads she started crying. Dad said "I've had it!" and threw his napkin on the plate. He got up and left and Mama cried louder. Tim picked up his fork and moved it slowly around in the air, like he was trying to be a magician or something.

"Put down that fork!" Mama shrieked.

"Why?" asked Tim.

"If you can't be civilized, leave the table!"

"What's wrong?" Tim's voice was unnaturally mild.

"You may be excused!"

Tim traced a cross with his fork. "You are invisible," he said. "All is permitted." He spoke like an actor or a preacher. Mama was furious.

"You're our *son*!" she yelled. Her voice was shaking. "Our... son!"

Mama got up from the table.

"What are you doing?" I asked Tim.

He lit a cigarette.

"What's wrong with you?" I really wanted to know.

"You are invisible. All is permitted."

He was really irritating. I'd never felt so confused.

I went outside and saw Dad standing beside the smokehouse. I was embarrassed to see him, so I ran down to the creek and squatted on the bank, looking down at the rocks through the clear moving water. Some of those rocks were left from the dams we built. I felt bad, and after a while I started to cry, the way Mama cried folding the socks in the basement.

I stayed down at the creek for hours. When I finally got back to the house the sun was going down. In the bathroom I looked for some calamine lotion for the bites

I'd gotten. Tim was smoking, I could smell it even in the bathroom. I was putting calamine lotion on my legs when I heard Mama's voice from the front of the house.

"SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!"

I'd never heard her say that before. I went out into the hall just as she ran into her bedroom and slammed the door. Dad was in the kitchen, looking worn out.

"I wish he'd shut up or leave," Dad said.

I looked into the parlor. Tim was lying on the couch in a cloud of cigarette smoke.

"Hennig Brand invented washing machines," he said. "Hennig Brand invented the commode."

I wanted him to shut up, too. I felt like running to my bed and holding my pillow over my ears, or crawling under the covers and never coming out.

"Hennig Brand invented pencils. Hennig Brand invented steel. Hennig Brand invented curtains."

"Shut up or get out!" Dad yelled from the kitchen.

* * *

I'm lying in my bed in the dark, but I can smell his cigarette smoke and I hear him murmuring about Hennig Brand. Dad took the truck to town, and he hasn't come back. Mama went to bed a while ago, and there's only one light left on in the house. That's the one my brother's sitting under; the glow creeps through the crack at the bottom of my bedroom door.

He's out there now in the kitchen, saying those same words over and over and laughing in a deep, fake way, like he's mechanical or something. It's after midnight, and I'm afraid of him—I know he'll never stop.

The Auction

If you drive east out of Centerville on Highway 50, about seven or eight miles down the road you pass the waterworks. Go another mile or so and you've crossed Swan Creek; if it's summertime the stream will be low but steady, while in the winter it will seem like a lake. Sometimes from the bridge you can see water moccasins or a huge turtle moving slow in the current. Keep driving east, past the Totty's Bend cut-off, past a yellow curve sign on the right, and you will come to a whitish board house of no special distinction—built, as it happens, by Robert Wesley Atkinson in the summer of 1917. Mr. Atkinson, long-time farmer and justice of the peace for thirty years, resides now in the nursing home that has his name and five others engraved on a plaque by the door. The cost of maintaining him there has begun to cause concern among his relatives; they have regretfully concluded that his property must be auctioned off in order to support another year in his new place of involuntary residence.

So they've all come, this October morning, to help set the antiques in the yard, to isolate and claim heirlooms, to mourn (though most don't know it) the end of the past. The old man's sons and daughters and grandchildren are all arrayed in front of the turning trees, against the Tennessee fall colors, the most vivid (any of them will tell you) on earth. Uncle J. D. is down from Kentucky, disliking as always the need to part with any fragment of the house in which they all were born; big Aunt Louise is slowly disporting her monumental girth to a safe haven on the porch where she may remain immobile; Aunt Sarah Lynne is watching her husband direct the movement of sacred objects out the front door—and I am standing behind the porch swing, wearing a hat pilfered from my grandfather's closet, representing my father who could not leave Richmond and the Medical College of Virginia to be

here today.

Great-grandchildren crisscross the lawn, dodging among the dressers, the tall chifforobe with the peeling varnish and exposed wood, the boxes of pots and pans, the spinning wheel and the huge black cast-iron kettle, the prizes of the day. "You all stay off that kettle," says Aunt Louise. Her edicts are religiously defied by the great-grandchildren. Sun and blue sky, prime fall weather, and the accumulations of a long lifetime spread on the untrimmed grass. Sixty years ago a young man not yet thirty moved from a neighboring county in the wake of a family misfortune; in the ensuing decades he scarcely left the two hundred acres that circumscribed his life. Now he is fifteen miles away, in another universe, in the land of bedsores and terminal boredom, and his monuments are falling to strangers.

Those strangers are gathering now, cars are filling the garden where the tips of plowed-under cornstalks may be seen poking from the hard furrows. Fat couples with brassy voices are laughing; an impossibly rotund woman in loud red britches crows over the spinning wheel. "Fred, will you come look!" I hear Aunt Sarah Lynne tell someone how sad this is, this business of the auction. I listen to other conversations. "They're always complaining about the produce," says Aunt Louise, whose husband runs a grocery. "They don't know how bad that produce is when we get it." Two men in Panama hats speak of matters that concern them. "I seen they got the new Fords in up the road." "They come in a while back." "I heard Jim Lawson wrecked his motorcycle." "It was his kid that wrecked it." And I am addressed by several of the assembled, and I am full of polite disinterest. "Last time I saw you, you wasn't but this high." "Well, son, where's your daddy?" "I spent the night in Richmond once." "This boy's at Sewanee." "What you studyin' down there?" "He'll be a banker some day, I 'spect."

Insecure with the knowledge that I will never be a banker, I walk toward the gate behind the house. In a moment I'm standing by the creek, the creek I have played in

intermittently for all my short life. I squat and look at the submarine world of rocks and minnows, the slight riffle of water in motion, the definitive images from my early years here. I follow the creek around the back of the yard, and I find a black cracked kettle buried in the bank, a twin of the one for sale at auction. On the bus ride up from Sewanee I read two books, one a novel. My grandfather never finished the eighth grade, and he never read books. But he had a farm and four children, and those children had children of their own, children like me, who read books.

So having read books I walk back toward the house, and I attend to the voice of the auctioneer calling four dollars, do I hear four dollars... at this rate my grandfather will be allowed only one more week on earth. Up for sale are two boxes of miscellaneous tools and other items—bolts, an old oilcan, clamps, a rusty U-joint, washers, nuts, sparkplugs, a cracked distributor cap, a flexible gasoline spout. My cousin Josiah, the ex–football hero and recent dropout at Middle Tennessee State, tries to stimulate the laggard bidding by raising a few dollars himself.

"Six, six, do I hear six, very good... six! Can you give me seven—"

"Seven-fifty!" says Josiah.

"Seven-fifty I have seven-fifty do I hear eight? Eight, eight, eight, do I hear eight dollars for these valuable miscellaneous items—eight dollars?"

Behind me the fat woman in the red pants asks her husband to bring some more fried chicken from the car.

"Sold to the gentleman in the football jersey for seven-fifty. Our next item."

"I'll be dipped in shit," says Josiah.

I examine his purchase with him and offer my condolences. He picks up the gasoline spout and works it back and forth.

"Well, hell, I can use this donkey dick, I reckon."

In his high school football heyday he always had more girls than he could use, and sometimes on my visits here

there were extra ones available. There are no girls with him today. He'll be married soon, like all high school heroes, and his muscles are already going to flab.

"Well, I'm out of the auction business."

We load the boxes in his pick-up, and Aunt Sarah Lynne pads our way with good news.

"They got eighty dollars for the spinning wheel."

"Good for them," says Josiah. "They got seven dollars more than they should have for this junk here."

The auctioneer, with the crowd of prospective buyers in tow, moves from the front yard around to the side of the house where the remnant farm machinery is displayed. There's a rusty disk-harrow and an even rustier cultivator; the corn-picker, the corn planter, and the plows have already been sold to neighbors. The auctioneer begins extolling the virtues of my grandfather's 1948 Model A John Deere tractor, an elegant green machine purchased by Uncle J. D. the year after manufacture. I always admired the thing, it seemed a classic tractor, with its thin lines and centrifugal clutch drum and big exposed flywheel. I like the engine compartment: the two side-by-side cylinders arranged horizontally, the symmetry of the exhaust manifold, the metal tubing and the glass fuel bowl. A spare intricacy, not like engines you see these days, obscured in the endless piping required by government fiat. Uncle J. D. massages his chin, visibly nervous at the impending loss of this emerald tractor.

"Okay, J. D., let's see if she'll start up."

This suggestion is seconded by several interested parties, so Uncle J. D. climbs into the tractor seat for a final ride. Chewing on a cigar stub, he engages the starter.

"Still got juice in the battery."

The starter whines and grinds.

"I'll try her again."

But the engine won't catch. J. D. climbs down and, cigar stub in hand, scrutinizes the fuel bowl. He fools with a petcock and remounts the perforated seat.

"Had it running last month."

It still won't start. Bidding begins, low and slow. J. D.

is not pleased. I feel like bidding on it myself, buying it on my father's behalf, parking it outside my dorm room at Sewanee. It goes down for two hundred dollars.

"I-got offered eight hundred fifty for it and I wouldn't sell," J. D. laments. "I oughta be shot."

"Well, don't fret over it."

"I just couldn't make myself sell it."

"It would have brought more if we'd been able to start it."

"I should have let it go when I first had the chance."

"You had no way of knowing."

"I should have let it go."

* * *

I'm standing by the creek again, surveying the pastured hillside before me, an elevation bisected horizontally by a set of TVA high tension wires on double wooden poles. A pair of blackbirds return my gaze. It's late afternoon now, the auction is winding up, Aunt Sarah Lynne is busy totaling the receipts, she has estimated the take at five thousand dollars. Enough for a good used car these days, or a year in a home for the aged. Or a plot of ground in a cemetery on Highway 100—but that was paid for long ago. I think about climbing to the high field, but crossing a fence doesn't have the allure it once did, and I can easily talk myself out of most explorations. There's nothing up there but summer's dry stubble, and more ticks than would make the climb worthwhile.

I remember my grandfather watching me swim in the deep stream at Raleigh's Chapel. He was standing on the bank in his denim overalls, the sun glinting on his glasses and the row of pens adorning his bib pockets. I was surface diving and swimming as far as I could underwater. I was showing off, staying under longer and longer.

"Boy," he said. "You stay under much longer and you may not come up."

I stayed under as long as my lungs could endure and

then gasped out an invitation to join me.

"I don't care for swimming," he said.

He cared only for farming, and eating the results of his labors. Tonight will, no doubt, bring hard and pained discussions about the future of this land I'm standing on: wars of the heart against economic necessity, fought around the family table by warriors weakened in the attrition of the years. But by that time I'll be back on the bus for Sewanee.

Vigil

In the morning he lay face down on his soiled mattress, watching the light creep across the floor, gradually illuminating the cracks in the cement and the grainy yellow dirt and the curling newspapers. He could hear rats somewhere; that was the worst part about being in this place—the rats, and the tapping sound the roaches made moving among the newspapers. He hated the thought of the rats because he slept so close to the floor, on the frayed and sagging mattress he'd found in the street. The mattress was unusual in that, besides the normal assortment of stains, it was streaked with clotted blood. That was probably why no one else had taken it off the pile of garbage on the corner of the block. There had been a red fire truck with pedals and a bell that still operated, and a chair with no back and a refrigerator with no door and some old paint cans. He'd taken the mattress and regarded it as good fortune; that was his first week in New York City.

He lay face down and watched the light change on the floor, the gray light from the two windows of milky glass laced with tiny wire hexagons. He lay with his hands in the front of his shorts, panting slightly, a large man with a large head and reddish skin and faded blue eyes. He lay there flexing and grunting and hoping that Hector or Manuel would not burst in through the canvas flap to prod him with their feet and goad him with their laughter. He was doing what he'd always done, years ago in the children's home, hoping the nuns would not catch him, then later in the army, through long nights in the barracks, on blankets fuzzy and sour and rough to the touch—the same blankets he took to the stockade when he reported in, escorted by his first sergeant, after that trouble at the college.

He wondered if the girl would come.

In the summer, when he'd first seen her, she wore only

shorts, white or blue, and a sleeveless jersey. She ran nearly every day in Central Park, at about the same time in the afternoon. After a few days in sweltering August he had learned that much, watching her from the trees as she rounded the northwest corner of the park. She was rich, he thought; her hair was light and long, her legs slender and brown. Every part of her that he could see was tanned. Back in August he had been able to see a lot of her, but as fall set in and the days became colder she appeared irregularly, sometimes wearing a blue sweatsuit. Occasionally she had on a hat and gloves. Always he was waiting for her; he squatted in the foliage, wearing his army field jacket as the gold of October fell away and the park turned brown and sere. He watched over her, to protect her if the need should ever arise. He was also waiting to meet her.

Today he wondered if she would come, and if she would be alone. Downstairs he heard Spanish voices and the clatter of dishes. It was time to get up. He rolled over and wiped his hands on the side of his mattress, then he sat up and looked around. A draft was blowing in around his canvas flap. Most of the windows were broken out of the two floors below him, so he had drafts most of the time. In spite of the cold, only in the last week had he used his precious supply of Sterno for heat. His room was near the end of the top floor of the building; the rest of the top floor was a bare concrete expanse of trash and plaster chips. There were no electrical outlets that worked; he'd once run an extension cord to a light fixture in the stairwell but someone had stolen it after only a week. He was the only occupant of the top three floors of the building; a few Hispanic families inhabited the lower three floors. To get water or use the bathroom he had to go down to the third floor and endure the abuse of Manuel's mother and her garrulous offspring. Some mornings he just couldn't be bothered so he'd urinate down the stairwell. This morning, though, he needed to wash. He picked up a towel that was stiff from too much use and too little laundering and

started down the stairs.

On the fourth floor he paused and listened, trying to determine whether anyone was in the bathroom just below him. More than one family shared the toilet, since it was the only one working on the third floor, and the door was always open. He didn't hear anything so he descended another flight and made his way into the dark lavatory. There was a bare incandescent bulb over the cracked mirror, operated by a string. He hated to start the water running, for fear someone would hear him and make a scene. Down the hall a racket flared up, there was a babble of Spanish and the screech of chairs on the floor. A frying pan clanged. Under the cover of all the noise he turned the water on and listened intently for any response. The sounds continued unabated. Relaxing a little, he began to wash himself from the sink. After a while he turned around and pissed in the toilet that had a broken seat. He didn't flush the toilet; that would bring one of the little urchins down the hall, probably armed with a kitchen implement. A child was screaming somewhere in the building.

He gathered his things and climbed back toward his room. On the fifth floor he stopped and peered out of a broken window. Down on the corner he could see the yellow street sign: W. 109th and MANHATTAN AVE. The park lay a block beyond the sign. He wondered if he would meet the girl, if today was the day. He'd come close before, but she didn't always run alone. Sometimes a young man was with her, sometimes another woman. Once he was waiting in the rain, thinking it hopeless, when suddenly she came around the corner and started up the hill, her shoes slapping the wet pavement, a hood over her head. She was running by herself, looking down at the ground, absorbed in her discomfort. No one else was visible in either direction, and he decided the time was right to step out and speak to her. Just as he moved to the edge of the trees two men in black shorts and windbreakers rounded the curve and started up the hill. He'd melted back into the underbrush and watched her pass, but he knew his

chance would come. There were many cold or rainy days when the park was nearly deserted, and there would be plenty of time.

His stomach growled and he considered the problem of breakfast. He had almost no money left from the last time he'd panhandled in the street. He hated doing that because he hated to talk to anyone. Better to get things quietly. Maybe he should go up on Amsterdam and steal some fruit; that had worked well before. He liked fresh fruit. Climbing up to the sixth floor he decided he wanted bananas. He slid past his canvas door, scattering a few of the newspapers and sending the roaches scurrying for the corners. He stood in the middle of the room and reached into his shorts. What does the girl like to eat, he wondered. In his mind she was already in the room with him; she sat among the yellow newspapers and didn't mind the dirt. But there was no woman on the floor. Only blots of semen, dropping between his feet like stars.

* * *

An hour later he stood on his roof eating a stolen banana. Clouds gray and swelling crawled over from the East Side. Across the big avenue the park sat in early winter austerity, a forest of spikes. He looked out beyond the traffic circle at the corner of the park, wishing he could float in the air. If he weren't white he could run into Harlem, he could cross that circle and melt away, grow diffuse in those mean forbidden streets, hide in the dark shells along Morningside Avenue. If he weren't white he could walk two blocks and disappear. But there were boundaries, he knew that. He'd learned it in the army, stuck out in the middle of Kansas in an infantry division with nothing to fight but itself. On one side of the post was a college town, where the young girls off the wheat farms walked the streets carrying their books, and on the other side was a strip city catering to the needs of soldiers. He'd gone to the college and surprised one of the girls from

the wheat farms and the MPs had come and put him in the stockade and he'd had to talk to a doctor and later he'd been discharged.

He'd wanted a war, he remembered that. But the war was over, had ended before he even enlisted. In the barracks he never spoke to anyone. His officers were afraid of him, so they locked him up for a while, then discharged him. Later he came to New York, where he thought he had an aunt in Queens, but he was never able to find her. And now he stood on his roof and finished his banana, listening for any sound of Hector or Manuel, ready to hide behind the elevator works that hadn't operated for years. He remembered when Manuel had blocked his way in the stairwell and refused to let him pass. He was strong; he could have thrown Manuel down the stairs, but he did not want to be knifed in his sleep. They mostly left him alone, unless they were drunk. Some nights he could hear young male voices gathering three floors below him, exclaiming in Spanish, and he knew they were bored and frisky and ready to come upstairs. Once he just lay on his mattress while they laughed and poured beer on him. Another time one of their friends peed on him, and he almost got up then but Hector said fuck it, man, and they all went downstairs. After that he always ascended to the roof when he heard them coming. It was easier that way.

The wind was coming up, rocking the trees in the park, so he came down off the roof and sat on the mattress in his room. There wasn't much to look at: the old newspapers, some dirty underwear, the Sterno stove he'd gotten in the army, the combat boots he'd just pulled off, part of a wooden packing crate. That was it. He'd had a tiny radio he carried everywhere in his field jacket but the radio was gone. All he had now was his knife. He reached under the mattress and pulled it out, a long kitchen knife he'd been honing for quite a while. Rummaging among the newspapers, he came up with his sharpening stone. It was a good stone he'd picked up in the army. Taking the knife in his left hand, he began to work the blade back and forth

across the stone. The edge glinted in the light. He held the knife up and squinted along the blade, then resumed work with the stone. After a time he appraised his work again by sighting along the blade; he was pleased with what he'd done. He tested the knife edge with his thumb. He picked up a newspaper and sliced it to ribbons. The girl would be impressed. He wondered if she would want to come back to his building. Probably not. He could just show her the knife, so that she would know she never had to be afraid in the park.

It was almost time to go. Lacing up his boots, he listened to the wind whistling through the building. He put on his field jacket and picked up the knife. All the way down the stairs he listened for movement on the lower floors; he did not want to be seen with the knife. No one accosted him. He walked out on the street and turned toward the park. It was messier outside than he'd thought it would be, but that was sometimes favorable, for she was more often alone in bad weather. A fine intermittent rain sprayed over him as he traversed Manhattan Avenue and headed for the crosswalk at the far end of the block. There was a red light at the intersection and he paused, considering. Gusts of wind blew up the avenue. It was too unpleasant out here; the girl would surely stay home. He looked over at the benches and the low stone wall that separated the street from the wild land beyond. The light changed and the green WALK signal caught him wavering; a flock of birds flapped out of the line of leafless trees.

Crouched against the wind, holding the knife inside his field jacket, he crossed to the park. He scrambled up a steep bank and squatted in his accustomed spot, waiting.

* * *

After forty-five minutes his thighs began to ache. Raindrops spattered his face in periodic gusts. He stood up, slowly, and made his way down a tangled slope toward the north end of the park. After crawling into a clump of

bushes, he opened his field jacket and looked at his knife. Then he peeped out between a thicket of low branches, observing the wet pavement below. No one was visible on the park road. Beyond a last line of trees a few people walked in front of the boarded buildings along the south edge of Harlem. He wasn't interested in those people, and soon he moved back to his original perch. Sometimes in the summer he had climbed high into the trees overlooking the road, but now, nearly leafless, they afforded no concealment. He stayed on his hands and knees, watching the road expectantly.

A lone woman rounded the curve at the bottom of the hill. He stiffened. A moment later a man came into view, running after the woman. They went by, and he curled low into a ball. His face was down among wet leaves, and he watched a bug he could not identify circumnavigate the edge of a yellow serrated variety. The bug seem confused, hesitant about venturing past the end of the leaf. With his forefinger he flicked the creature into farther reaches of damp. The bug disappeared.

When he looked at the road the girl was running up the hill. He froze, holding his breath. She was looking at the road surface as she ran; he could see wisps of hair curling from beneath the blue nylon hood she wore. Her legs were bare. She came abreast of his position and passed him without looking up. He was hoping she would stop there to catch her breath; he could hear her loudly puffing from the exertion of moving up the incline. But she plodded on past, cresting the hill. He was suddenly panicked by the thought that she would begin her descent of the far side and he might not be able to catch her. Why couldn't she have stopped, casually, right at the top? He might have been able to step out and say something, something that wouldn't strike her as strange or unworthy...

But she was dropping over the top of the rise. Clutching the front of his field jacket, he burst out of the bushes with an unaccustomed rustle and stood in the park road, glancing around wildly. He was alone. Mindful of how

long it had been since he had seriously exerted himself, he started to run after the girl. His combat boots were soaked, and they seemed to sink like lead into the wet pavement. From the top of the hill he could see that the girl had gained around fifty yards. When she ran past him she seemed to be moving very slowly, but now, as he struggled to close the gap between them, she appeared to glide effortlessly. His breath already rasped in his throat; those years in combat boots didn't seem to be helping him now. The girl maintained a steady pace, apparently oblivious to his approach; slowly he gained on her. He wanted to be stealthy, to appear beside her nonchalantly, but he was wheezing and his boots made a great ruckus as he ran. He stretched out his stride. As he came up behind her he expected her to speed away or turn around, but she took no notice. He was only two paces behind her, matching her step for step, rolling his head like an overheated horse and gasping for air. This couldn't continue, he knew. He would have to do something.

"Ma'am?"

The word rattled around in his mouth and only barely escaped. She didn't turn or acknowledge him or even try to move away. He let her gain a step and tried again, louder.

"Ma'am?"

This time she stopped. He brought himself up short to keep from plowing into her. She turned toward him and ran in place, facing him out of the depths of her rain hood.

"Yes?" she said.

He couldn't speak. He held his side, trying to get his breath. He watched her tan thighs flex and glisten in the drizzle. Her eyes, he noticed for the first time, were deep brown. He'd imagined they'd be blue like the windbreaker she wore.

"Can I help you?" she said, impatiently.

For want of words, he took out his knife. It gleamed between them for a moment, and then she was gone,

running up the road very fast, faster than before.

Wait, he started to say, but he was stricken with a cramp in his side that doubled him over. He tottered off the road into a culvert and leaned against the muddy concrete wall, listening. In the distance he heard the sucking sound of her shoes on the pavement. He peeked over the edge of the culvert and watched her until she disappeared.

FTX; Fort Irwin

Late afternoon in the Mojave Desert; the sun sent long shadows across the salt flats and the crazed hardpan littered with mesquite. Sergeant Williamson sat in the shade cast by his stalled M-60 tank and poured a canteen cup of water for himself. He drank a sip and splashed the rest against the side of the tank, a 57-ton hulk of unresponsive metal covered with gray dust. Four hours ago the lieutenant left Williamson and PFC Small to stay with the tank while he went for a recovery vehicle. The lieutenant was going to lead the recovery crew back, he said, because he was afraid they'd never find their way with only a map. That was four hours ago.

"Small," Williamson said to the sleeping figure beside him. "Small, get your ass up and get the Ell-Tee on the radio."

Small blinked his eyes and kicked up a miniature sand cloud with the heel of his left boot. "Ease up, Sarge," he said. "We got all day."

"Shut the fuck up and do what I tell you, Small."

"Shit."

"I used to be just like you, Small. Dumb as a bag of hair. I didn' get nowhere till I wised up."

"You still ain't nowhere, Sarge. Hate to tell you that."

"Get the radio, Small."

Williamson stared down the dirt track left by the lieutenant's jeep. Far to the south he could see the dry alkaline expanse of Red Pass Lake, and beyond that a barren mountain range, reddening now in the late light. The desert was silent; the jet planes that had pretended to bomb and strafe were on their way back to Nevada or Arizona or some other arid place; the artillery had quit firing practice rounds; the tanks and personnel carriers were back in their assembly areas or in long lines at wash racks; the Field Training Exercise was over. Finished, except

that one tank was down, out by a nameless gravel wash thirteen miles from the battalion headquarters. Williamson watched Small insolently handle the radio and cursed his luck.

"Nobody answers, Sarge," Small said.

"Try again."

Anybody but Small, Williamson thought. Big Rolf's nephew. Hometown boy. I'd rather spend six hours alone with that candy-ass lieutenant.

"Nothing, Sarge." Small held the radio handset out to Williamson.

"You check the battery?"

"Battery's good."

"Lemme see that thing."

There was a rushing sound in the handset, just as there should have been. Williamson squeezed the talk button and blew into the mike. He sent his call sign out into the ether. Six times.

"Ah, give it up, Sarge."

"What'd you do to this radio, Small?"

"Come on, Sarge."

"First the tank radio, now this one. You fucking up big time today, Small."

"That tank was down before we ever left the motor pool. The Ell-Tee, he just didn't want his ass fired up for no deadlined tank."

"You fucking up by the numbers, Small. You knew that radio was down."

"No problem, Sarge."

"Don't tell me no problem."

Small pulled a rock out of the drive wheel and threw it down the wash. He struck a karate stance and made a few moves, shadowboxing. Williamson looked at Small's lean hips, his muscular forearms.

No wonder the bitches all like him, Williamson thought.

In the last few years, Williamson had put on weight. The day before the unit left for Irwin, his company commander had counseled him about it. The Army had a weight-control

program, the CO said, and if Williamson wasn't careful, he'd end up on it.

"So how long you think we'll be here, Sarge?"

"I don't know, Small."

"Been here too long to suit me already."

"It's no pleasure for me either, Small."

"Sure it is, Sarge. You dig this shit. You love it out here."

"That's right, Small. Keep it up."

Small picked at the drive wheel again. He pulled off a dirt clod and threw it away.

"Man, I got better things to do," Small said. "This wastes my time and the taxpayer's money, too."

"What you got better to do, Small?"

"Come on, Sarge. Use your head."

"You got women on your mind, Small?"

"Don't you?"

"Hell, no, Small. I'm a married man."

"Shee-it. Yeah, you married all right. Got an old lady'd scare the bark off a tree. No wonder you be tryin' to make time with Alice Seeley."

"Boy, the sun done fried your brains."

"Brain's working good, Sarge. I seen you up at Brigade, hanging out. Besides, Alice told me with her own mouth."

"What the fuck you doin' hanging around with a white chick?"

"You don't look no whiter than me, Sarge. And old Alice, she be color-blind." Small laughed.

Sergeant Williamson leaned back against the side of the tank, feeling his stomach strain against his fatigue shirt. Two pieces of hard candy bulged in his breast pocket, and he debated whether or not to eat one of them. Small flopped down and took out a cigarette. That decided it. Williamson unbuttoned his own pocket and unwrapped a butterscotch sweet.

"That's right, Sarge, suck on that sugar. Cheer yourself up."

"How'd you get to be such a smart-ass, Small?"

"Army made me one."

"Don't blame the service for your troubles."

"Gettin' righteous on me now, Sarge. Look at you. What the service ever done for you. All them years, time in Viet Nam, an' look at you. Sittin' on your fat ass in the middle of nowhere. Sittin' by your busted tank."

"I get paid for it."

"Yeah, you get paid. How long you been in, Sarge?"

"Fourteen years."

"Fourteen years, an' you still a suck-ass E-6. Must make yo' mama cry, Sarge."

"We'll see if you do any better."

"Shee-it. When my time comes, I'm gone. Ain't nothin' could make me live with this another four years."

"You got nothing else to do, Small."

"I'll think of something."

"You oughta straighten up, stop collectin' them Article 15's. You'll regret it someday, all that fuckin' up you do. I'm tellin' you, man. You know, we got slots for jungle school coming up next winter. You be good, an' I'll put you in for one. They send you down to Panama."

"I don't wanna see no jungle. I'll be back on the block by then, Sarge. Shoulda stayed in Florida. You should've, too."

Williamson thought about Florida for a minute. Big Rolf out on the streets of Jacksonville. And Small, too. Small when he was just little nephew Elmore, eight or nine years old, running around after his uncle. Collecting cans and bottles and all kinds of junk for a few cents a pound. The army was an improvement, no two ways about it.

"Yeah, shoulda stayed in Jacksonville," Small was saying. "And Uncle Rolf... he never shoulda joined up and gone to that war. He was one dumb nigger to be caught over there."

"What do you know about it?"

"I know enough."

"You the dumbest bag of shit I ever had the bad luck to supervise. Don't tell me what you know."

"How long ago was you in Viet Nam, Sarge? I forget."

"That was ten years ago, Small."

"Was you a tanker?"

"I was in the infantry."

"When did you get into tanks?"

"In Germany. You know that."

"Tell me a war story, Sarge."

"I could tell you stories, Small."

"Tell me about Uncle Rolf."

Williamson closed his eyes. Big Rolf. The man was a trip. They'd had some times. Outside An Loc they shot a live monkey out of a mortar. Big Rolf always said the VC could never hit him in the field, and he was right; he died in a Saigon whorehouse with two .45 slugs in his neck.

"I'm waiting, Sarge."

"There's nothin' to tell."

"I bet you wish you was back over there."

"I ain't wishin' nothing."

"Shee-it. I bet you be volunteerin' for Africa, Sarge. You be killin' your own brothers next."

"At ease, Small."

"At ease your own self, Sarge."

"I'm talking to you for your own good. You get rid of that attitude you got, you could go a long way."

"Shit, you sound like my grandmomma. They oughta put you in a museum, Sarge."

Williamson heard a crackling sound on the radio. Nothing intelligible, just noise. He reached over for the handset and gave it to Small.

"Try to raise the company," he said.

"Never happen. They ain't answered before. Why should they now?"

"Switch to the battalion push."

"What is it?"

"I don't know, Small, look in your CEOI. Ain't you got one?"

"Ell-Tee told me I didn't need one. Afraid I'd lose it."

"Well, you lost one before."

"Wasn't me, Sarge. Somebody borrowed it."

"You let 'em, didn't you?"

Small put the handset back on the radio.

"Well, that Ell-Tee ain't so squared away hisself," he said.

"Ain't your business what he is."

"You know, I believe you's afraid of him, Sarge."

"Your mouth's way ahead of your brain, Small."

"Brain's on time, Sarge. No, you be shakin' every time that pussy-face comes around."

They looked at each other. Williamson took off his glasses and wiped them on the tail of his fatigue shirt, pulling it with some difficulty out of the top of his field pants. Small snapped out of focus, softened and blurred.

"Go back to sleep or something," Williamson said. "Beat your meat. I don' wanna hear no more from you."

"I wanna get outta here."

"We're gonna get outta here."

"When they said we's going to California, this ain't what I had in mind."

"What'd you expect, Disneyland?"

"I didn' expect this."

"Quit pissin' and moanin'."

"Why don' they send a chopper out? They could spot us in a second."

"I don't know, Small, and I don't care. Go to sleep or somethin'."

"You trust that dipshit lieutenant to get back here? Man, I could walk outta here before he gets his ass in gear."

"You ain't walkin' noplace in this desert."

"Why not? I got two full canteens. You made me bring 'em, Sarge. What good they gonna do me if I don't drink 'em up?"

"Quit talking shit, Small."

Small lit another cigarette. Williamson tried not to think about the second piece of candy hanging in his fatigue pocket. He listened, but there was no sound of another

tank or jeep or helicopter. The wind picked up, just slightly.

"Sun going down," said Small. "Gone be cold as a motherfucker out here."

"Put on your field jacket."

"You bet I'm puttin' it on. I be puttin' on all my mothafuckin' shit. That Ell-Tee don't show up soon, I'm taking a hike."

"You ain't goin' nowhere, Small."

Williamson watched Small draw on his cigarette. Then he took out his last candy and popped it in his mouth. When he closed his eyes he could still see the horizon, a line of low hills, and the long stretch of nothing in front of it.

"So how 'bout it, Sarge?"

"How bout what?"

"You know what."

"Don't play games with me, Small. You got somethin' on your mind, say it."

"My Article 15."

"What about it?"

Small gave a low chuckle and shook his head.

"Well, come on, Small, stop fuckin' around. What about your 15?"

"I just been thinkin' about it."

"You oughta think long and hard about it. You better think about not gettin' another one."

"Come off it."

"What you talking about?"

"My Article 15. I don't deserve it."

"Sure you do. Ten times over. You as big a fuck-up as I seen in the battalion."

"You was with me."

"I was tryin' to find you, tryin' to get you back 'fore somebody found you out."

Small finished his cigarette and slowly field-stripped the butt, singing to himself in falsetto.

"You didn't come back, Small, you took that quarter-ton into town and you had yourself a joyride."

Small stopped singing. He seemed to be concentrating on the butt of his cigarette.

"I came in to find you, Small, and get your ass back out into the field."

"Yeah, you came in. You came in an' you stayed."

"No time at all, Small."

"Oh, yeah, you stayed. Them girls at the bar, they was nice; I know you dug it. You took your sweet time gettin' ready to leave. Don't take no three hours to have a beer. Especially on Uncle Sugar's time. An' when we *did* get back, it be funny. You didn' have no re-collection of the events."

"You fulla shit."

"I don' believe so. I sees things pretty clear."

"You fucked up. Face it."

"An' I expected you to kinda smooth things with the Ell-Tee, seeing how you was enjoyin' it all too. I thought you'd give 'em a good story. I shoulda known better."

"You shoulda known better than to go into town when you supposed to be in the field."

"You was a sight, Sarge."

"I'm a man like you, Small."

"Laughin' yo' ass off, Sarge, and you be shakin' like jello. And gruntin', Sarge. Like a sick pig or somethin'."

"You just got no manners left at all, do you?"

"Yo' fat ass was *shakin'*. I mean you got a wobble down below. And that girl, she be laughin' *at* you, not with you."

"You pushin' it, Small."

"I want you to do somethin' about my 15."

"You better just forget it."

"Ain't forgettin' nothing."

"I'm telling you, you better forget it."

"You was singin' too, Sarge. I can't forget that. Singin' to wake the dead. Flappin' yo' lips. I say *damn*! I couldn't believe it."

"Too busy dippin' your own wick, Small. You didn' see nothing."

"Like a whale matin'."

"Just shut up, Small."

"Like a motherfuckin' whale."

"I told you to shut up."

A lizard scurried along the wash, the first one Williamson had seen out here.

"All right, Sarge," Small said after a while.

"All right, what?"

"Jus' all right, thas' all."

Williamson looked up at the darkening sky, cloudless except for a long wispy contrail left by a very high jet. Probably a commercial jetliner. He wondered if commercial planes were allowed to fly over military training areas.

"You lemme down, Sarge."

That plane was probably on its way to San Francisco, thought Williamson. L.A., maybe, or Hawaii or Mexico. Nice-looking stewardesses were probably serving the passengers drinks, those little airplane whiskey bottles you poured into a cup of Coke. When he landed in San Francisco on his way back from Viet Nam, he'd felt a strange and overwhelming disappointment. He'd been happy when the plane took off at Tan Son Nhut, but the feeling evaporated somewhere over the ocean.

Behind him he heard Small climbing up on the tank. He looked around and saw Small pulling his field jacket out of a rack on the back of the turret. On the other side of the hills at the far horizon the sun died slowly. It was going to be a clear night, clear and cold. Already the temperature was dropping perceptibly. Williamson closed his eyes and lay back on the hard caked ground. He was furious with Small, not just for everything that had gone on today, but for all the times Small had taken advantage of the fact that he and Rolf had been close. Little Elmore. Once Rolf and Williamson were playing cards in a basement, twelve, thirteen years before. Williamson was twenty or thirty dollars down. Elmore kept running in and out, carrying a rusty toy truck, interrupting the game. Finally Rolf smacked him up side the head. Too hard, Williamson thought. He

hadn't felt much like playing cards anymore that night. He'd gone out after the bawling Elmore and tried to quiet him down; he offered to paint the rusty truck, even. He never had gotten around to doing it.

Remembering the truck, Williamson's rage dissipated. He ought not to be so hard on Small, he decided. He thought of Big Rolf laughing, shooting his M-16 at cans and bottles, and his anger mutated to sadness. He opened his eyes and saw stars forming on the edge of the waning sunset. He shivered and considered getting his field jacket.

"What you doin', Sarge, thinkin' about Alice Seeley?"

Small peered down at him from the back of the tank. He had his field jacket on and he squatted on the engine grating, grinning.

"Lay off, Small." Williamson felt his rage come back.

"Yeah, thinkin' about that white pussy."

Sergeant Williamson got to his feet, slowly and stiffly.

"Small, I'm giving you an order: shut your damn mouth. Right now. I don't wanna hear no more."

Small jumped down off the tank.

"I'm still talkin', Sarge."

They glared at each other, not three paces apart.

"What you gonna do about it, Sergeant?"

"You going to jail for this, Small. You hear me? You going to jail for this!"

"I hear you."

"I gave you too many breaks. That was my mistake."

"You made lotsa mistakes. You done wasted your life, Sarge."

Williamson clenched his fists. He felt the same way he had when his car ran off a highway embankment outside Fort Knox: resigned and ready to die.

"Maybe you need a lesson, you punk."

Small assumed one of his karate poses.

"Oh, yeah, Sergeant," he said quietly. "Come on, Sarge."

They circled each other.

"You don't fool me with that karate shit, Small. You a big faker. You always fulla shit."

"Know what, Sarge? You too fat for Alice. She told me herself. How 'bout that?"

Williamson took a swing, a roundhouse right, but Small parried the blow and punched the sergeant in the stomach. Williamson felt his forearm tingling. His glasses were gone. He went down on one knee and gasped for air. Small's boot dug into his side, and he fell face down in the wash. His knee was bruised and throbbing. He couldn't breathe.

"You tough, Sarge."

Sergeant Williamson's face was only a few inches from the earth. He inspected the dirt, closely, as if for the first time, watching sand grains slide along a ripple in the wash. He was afraid he would vomit. The sand grains looked as clear as marbles.

"You got any more orders for me, Sarge?"

Still gasping, Williamson crawled to the tank and pulled himself to his knees. He groped around for his glasses, found them and put them on. The pain in his side was worse. He wheezed and whistled in an effort to get air.

"You gonna make it, Sarge?"

Williamson reached into a tool box on the top of the tank hull and pulled out a heavy wrench. Small walked up behind him. The sergeant swung the wrench in a drunken arc that caught Small right in the crotch. Small went to his knees, letting out his breath in a long sibilant rush. Williamson dropped the wrench and fell backward, holding his side. He lay with his eyes tightly shut, listening to Small moan and dig furrows with the heels of his boots.

"Goddamn! Mah balls!" Small said.

Then Williamson heard a distant engine, and he rolled on his side to listen. It was not a tank, or a tank recovery vehicle; it sounded more like a jeep or a small truck. He listened harder. Presently a pair of headlights poked from behind a low ridge and moved toward him, undulating over dips, illuminating black dots of mesquite and routing small animals. Williamson tried to get his breath. The vehicle was nearer now, and he recognized it as a command jeep: it had two antennas sticking up at the back of its canvas top.

Small lay on his stomach with his mouth open, staring dully at the oncoming lights. Williamson watched, entranced, as the jeep pulled up over the wash and three men got out. One was the lieutenant. Williamson sat up and hugged himself, nodding at the three figures striding his way. As they came closer he could see their questioning looks, their white faces in the white glare of the headlights.

At Salt River

There are incidents in everyone's life, I suppose, that they wince to recollect. It happens to me fairly often: I'll be sitting at my desk at work, going over bills of lading, or I'll be in my back yard turning a steak on the charcoal grill, and some silly statement, some social gaffe, will come back to me like a stab in the stomach. It could be something that happened years ago, even some mistake I made as a child. I sometimes look around after one of these visitations and assure myself that no one in my present company could possibly judge me on the basis of one of my past lapses. Still, I'm never completely at ease. One period in particular bothers me. I recognize it now as a harbinger of much of what was to follow in my life, but I try not to ask myself what I could have done to make things turn out differently. Things are as they are, and if I take the cosmic view I have to conclude that I'm a lucky man. I'm surviving, I'll say that much. I think of myself riding that green army bus from Louisville south to Fort Knox, how scared I was, and I think of myself now. There's an improvement there somewhere. Got to be.

It was the summer of 1976. I was twenty years old, poised between my sophomore and junior years at Vanderbilt, uncertain about what to do next. To please my parents I was majoring in economics, not doing all that well, spending far too many nights drinking beer and eating pizza. The first semester of my sophomore year had been an academic disaster; when I came back from the Christmas break and saw a sign advertising a two-year officer candidate program it seemed like deliverance. I spoke with a captain for ten minutes and signed on, relieved that my summer and my years after college were now taken care of. All I had to do was hold on for the ride.

That ride began as the bus pulled up to the reception station at Fort Knox. We filed off, a nervous bunch in

civilian clothes, and the drill sergeants waited to greet us. They violated my preconceptions by not immediately screaming a string of violent oaths or forcing us to do fifty push-ups. That would come later. For now they quietly and calmly instructed us where to stow our suitcases and which lines to stand in first. We filled out forms and took shots and waited on bleachers, cautiously becoming acquainted with each other. I was listening to a man next to me tell lies he'd picked up about Ranger school when it reached me: a strident screech, piercing and irritating.

"Don't let my name fool you," I heard. "I'm going Infantry."

I found the source of the obnoxious sound and saw a short, squint-faced character strutting around like a banty rooster. He was wearing a rugby shirt with wide red stripes. I could read the name on his paperwork: Gay. No wonder he was carrying on about it.

"If you're gonna go combat arms you gotta go Infantry," he said. "All the way! Airborne!"

He grinned: square teeth in the middle of his puffy, squinty face. There was no humor in the grin, and it broadened when his eyes momentarily lighted on me. I instantly and viscerally despised him. He started telling war stories about the training we were about to undergo, lies he'd heard somewhere. His voice carried all through the room we were in. Somehow I just knew that he and I would end up in the same platoon, and I was right. A thin, wiry man appeared before us, announced that he was Drill Sergeant Ogden, formed us into a marching unit, and put us on another bus. We filed in under his disapproving gaze.

"College boys," he said. "Every one of you got a lot to learn."

* * *

We lived in a long open bay, one large room, forty of us in two rows of double bunks on the second floor of

our concrete-block barracks. We were 2nd Platoon, Delta Company, 16th Battalion, 4th Training Brigade. "Delta-16-4" we chanted in unison, marching to and from the drill field. We marched everywhere we went, we stood at parade rest in the chow line, we sat down and stood up only on command. We did push-ups constantly, duckwalked for half a mile because someone in the unit left a weapon unattended, listened to fellow cadets who had skipped a shave serenade us with "Baa, I'm a Billy Goat" followed by fifty more push-ups. A special hush fell over the formation whenever we heard the springy clatter of an M-16 hitting the tarmac. That was the ultimate sin: dropping your rifle. The guilty party had to duckwalk back and forth through a tiny culvert—the "Glory Hole"—quacking loudly, then run to the front of the formation, flap his arms, and shout: "I'm a shitbird! Gobble gobble gobble." Good army fun. No one minded. I enjoyed it, even. The drill sergeants, some of them, had style. One morning we were heading out on a five-mile run in formation, one of the climaxes of our training. Sergeant Ogden was in charge.

"We're going on a five-mile run," he said, hands on his hips. "And nobody's going to fall out. It's mind over matter: I don't mind, and you don't matter."

In some ways it was a welcome change from the wastrel life I was living at Vanderbilt. The lights went on at 0430 hours and you *had* to get up, there was no question of cutting class or hiding out at the Campus Grill or dodging teachers you didn't want to see. You had to get up and shave and make your bunk and clean the barracks and pull your boots on and fall out in formation before the sun even backlit the low buildings to the east. Then it was right face and forward march and off to calisthenics and running in formation and combat assaults and the rifle range. The drill sergeants called cadence and we responded loudly, in measured unison:

"We like it here! We like it here! We finally found a home!"

* * *

My bunk mate was a black guy from Washington, D.C., named Earl Linton. He slept on the upper bunk, which was an advantage in making the bed because it was easier to pull the blanket taut and achieve the required wrinkle-free surface. Earl was tall and lean, with bulging deltoids and powerful veiny arms, but he had a delicately molded face and gold-rimmed glasses that gave him a scholarly appearance. He studied history at the University of Maryland. When I told him I was from Spartanburg, South Carolina, he looked at me skeptically.

"Where do you go to school?" he asked.

"Vanderbilt, in Nashville."

That information only seemed to confirm his initial dubious impression. He was stuck with me, though, and he'd have to live with it: we were in the same squad, and his name immediately followed mine on the platoon roster. On the doors of our adjacent wall lockers our names were written in black felt marker on white tape: Lander, William C., and Linton, Earl R. Neighbors, whether we liked it or not.

"Call me Will," I said.

"Sure thing, man."

But he never did. He called me Lander and I called him Linton, the whole six weeks we were together. Scholarly looks aside, he was fanatical about basketball; he converted every opportunity to throw out the trash into a series of jumpshot attempts. In the latrine, shaving or taking a shower, he would sometimes rock back and forth and announce "Basket by Linton," as if he were calling a play-by-play. At odd times during our training, he would suddenly out with "Basket by Linton" and guys would look at each other and eyebrows would rise. But no one ever made a comment Earl could hear.

* * *

Every morning we had to have the latrine spotless and the baseboards wiped and the floor buffed before we fell out for

first formation. After we were gone a sergeant would walk through and inspect the living areas, ripping up wrinkled bunks and noting any other deficiencies. Friday nights we paid the price for poor barracks maintenance by staying up for a GI party. Someone different was in charge of the barracks clean-up every day; this practice was designed to put us under pressure and develop "leadership." The first man to have this responsibility was Gay. Our second morning in the barracks he was waiting by the light switch at 0430 hours. I was awake myself, and I had noticed him bustling around in the dark, preparing his uniform and his gear. I knew what was coming, and right on the minute it came: the lights exploded and Gay's voice shrilled out the first command of the day.

"All right, you people, let's get moving and get this barracks squared away!"

There were groans all around; who did this idiot think he was? I dragged out of bed and started cleaning up my personal area. Gay stormed up and down between the bunks, issuing orders and exhortations. Everyone ignored him. He was easily the shortest man in the platoon; I was a not very close second. As he walked by me I concentrated on making my bunk, pretending to be absorbed in the task. Earl was still lying in the sack. Gay slapped Earl's blanket with the palm of his hand.

"Don't touch me again," said Earl.

"Get up, Linton, it's time to get up," Gay said and moved on down the line of bunks. I looked up and saw Earl leaning his head over the edge of the bed.

"Can you believe this shit?" he asked me.

I shook my head. Down at the far end of the bay someone said, "I'll do it when I'm good and ready, Gay."

Everyone looked over. It was Doan, a kid from Indiana. He was about my size. Gay screamed in his face.

"You'll do it now, or you can see me outside!"

Nobody could believe it. Nathanson, the biggest man in the platoon, told them both to cool it. Sergeant Ogden came in just then, so nothing else happened. When we

fell out in formation, I punched Doan's arm. I wanted to shake his hand.

* * *

At the end of our first week of training we took the army physical conditioning test. The worst thing about it, for me and for a lot of people, was an event called the horizontal ladder—what we used to call "monkey bars" back in elementary school. Normally I could eke out just over three trips back and forth on the bars. Sometimes, if I were lucky, I would get the minimum passing score on the test. We stood in lines at the edge of a large sawdust pit, waiting our turn on the ladder. The waiting made the whole ordeal a lot worse; I could feel my palms sweating and I knew I would slip off the rungs after only a trip or two. Sure enough, after turning around at the end of my second traverse—in spite of shouts of "Go, man, go!" and "Hang in there, man!" and "Do it, Lander!"—I fell off the bars and plopped ignominiously on my ass. I sat in the sawdust a moment, until I became aware of Sergeant Ogden yelling at me to get up. I melted thankfully into the group of people who'd finished and were preparing to move to the next event. Shouts went up again.

"Go, man, go!" "Hang in there, Gay, you can do it, Gay, don't give up!"

But Gay fell off, about the same place I had. He scrambled out of the pit and made his way over to me. I made a point of looking intently at my palms.

"You scrape your callouses too?" he asked me.

"A little."

"That thing's a bitch."

"Yeah."

"We gotta do better next time. Practice is all it takes. Maybe we could work on it together."

I didn't want the conversation to continue.

"I'll think about it," I said. I looked around, then wiped my hands on my fatigue pants. From the other side of the

pit, Earl was watching me.

* * *

As the days went by, Gay solidified his position in the platoon: he was the little guy people loved to hate. I could hear his voice at a surprisingly great distance, as if my ears were tuned precisely to his vocal wavelengths. I learned things about him, mostly by overhearing his conversations with others. He was from Flint, Michigan. He owned a '71 Monte Carlo he'd done some work on. His father was dead. That last fact aroused my curiosity, but I never asked how it happened.

I never asked him anything, in fact, because I didn't want to be linked with him in any way. He swaggered around the company area and took it upon himself to make small corrections in the bearing and actions of his fellow cadets. More than once I saw him upbraiding someone twice his size, dressing them down the way a drill sergeant would. He risked life and limb acting that way, but he seemed to pull it off. Nobody liked him, but nobody went out of their way to antagonize him, either. He got into it again with Doan, and this time Doan backed down. I occasionally considered what I would do if he tried that stuff on me. I told myself I'd give it right back to him. At any rate, whenever Gay was particularly out of hand, I could count on a commiserating glance from Earl. We had that much in common: on the subject of Gay, Earl and I saw absolutely eye to eye.

* * *

One morning we marched as a company to the firing range to zero our weapons. Drill Sergeant Ogden called cadence as we walked up the hot blacktop road. Passing cars would respectfully slow to five miles per hour, and I felt proud of myself and the enterprise I was part of. We sang, to the beat of our feet:

O Lianna, O-Li-O-Li-Anna,

O Li-O-Li-O-Li-O-Li-O-Li-O-Li-Anna.

I enjoyed marching out to training sites much more than the training itself. About forty meters up the road the First Platoon halted at the entrance to the range. We heard a sergeant yell:

"File from the *left*, column *left*! *March*!"

We marked time, still singing, until the First Platoon had filed into the training area. We could all have easily marched onto the range at the same time, but they wanted to give us a little drill practice. Finally we were all seated in the bleachers, listening to a lecture on range safety and firing procedures. I looked around the cascade of helmeted heads. Since I was near the top of the bleachers I couldn't see many faces. Earl was sitting beside me. He had a small writing tablet in his lap. I looked at it and saw that, while pretending to be taking notes on the lecture, he was actually composing a letter to someone back home. I looked down too abruptly then, and my helmet slid off my head and dropped on my boots. I barely saved it from falling between the planks we were sitting on; that would have been a major humiliation, and I would undoubtedly have been subjected to some form of public abuse. When I replaced the helmet on my head I heard Earl's voice in my ear.

"Get it together, man."

He was smiling a little, and I gave him a thumbs up sign. The lecture ended. We filed down onto the range and fired our M-16s in response to loudspeaker commands. I managed to zero my weapon in nine shots, a pretty fair performance. A captain came over and asked me if I'd been brought up shooting a rifle. I lied and said yes, sir. I did own a single-shot .22, but I'd fired it maybe a dozen times in my life.

At chow time we sat around under trees with paper plates full of mess-hall food. I was working on a pile of mashed potatoes when Earl sat down beside me.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"Took me twenty-one shots to zero."

"That's not so good."

"That's what they tell me."

We spooned up our food.

"You play any sports at Vanderbilt?"

"Frisbee," I said. Earl laughed.

"I hear that," he said.

I finished eating and went to dump my paper plate. Gay was sitting nearby, loudly recounting his performance on the range and outlining the secrets of a quick zero.

"How'd you do, Lander?" he asked as I walked by.

"Nine," I said, without looking at him.

"That's pretty good. I did the same thing."

I ignored him and dumped my plate. When I came back I saw Earl looking disgustedly in Gay's direction. I rolled my eyes and shook my head.

"That guy's getting to me," Earl said.

"Tell me about it."

"The man's a trip."

"No kidding."

"I tell you what: if he don't watch it he's going to get his ass kicked."

I nodded.

"Yes, sir, I just might have to kick his little ass."

"You oughta do it," I said. I felt funny saying it.

We marched back to the barracks by a different route than we came out on. We were practicing "tactical" movement. We walked along both sides of a blacktop road, holding our rifles at port arms, keeping a five-meter interval between each man. Sergeant Ogden moved up and down the line, saying "Close it up, close it up, you people" or "Five meters! Stretch it out" as the situation demanded. Doan was directly in front of me, and he kept falling behind and then running to catch up. This created an accordian effect that was hell on the guys at the back of the line. Sergeant Ogden positioned himself alongside Doan and directed a scornful stream of abuse in his ear. When he was satisfied that Doan would maintain the pace for a while, the sergeant stood still and let the ragged line move

past him.

"Close it up, you people, the next one of you peckers I see falling back is going to owe me twenty-five."

A mile up the road we came to the foot of a very long and steep hill. At first Doan kept his interval, then about a third of the way up he started his catch-up routine. I was a little tired myself, and I began staring down at my feet, watching my boots in their mechanical progression forward one after the other. I was caught up in a reverie, not realizing that Doan had closed his interval and left a space in front of me. Suddenly I heard a voice in my ear that nearly made me drop my rifle.

"What do you owe me, cadet?"

I jerked my head, first to the left to see Sergeant Ogden's murderous scowl, then ahead to the fifteen-meter expanse of road between myself and Doan's bouncing rucksack.

"I said what do you owe me, Lander?"

"Twenty-five, Drill Sergeant!"

"Well, get on down!"

I stepped to the side of the road and assumed the front leaning rest position, my rifle balanced on the back of my hands.

"Knock 'em out!"

I started doing push-ups. I felt the rest of the platoon marching past and moving away up the hill. At the end of each repetition I counted aloud: "One, Drill Sergeant... two, Drill Sergeant... three, Drill Sergeant..." After twenty-five, I stopped.

"Permission to recover, Drill Sergeant!" My arms were a little shaky.

"What was that, Lander?"

"Permission to recover, Drill Sergeant!"

"Give me five more."

I struggled through another five.

"Permission to recover, Drill Sergeant!"

"Re-cover!"

I scrambled up and stood at attention, my M-16 at order arms.

"All right, Lander, we'll double time to catch up, and you will fall in the rear of the line and you will maintain a five-meter interval all the way back to the barracks or you will march for the rest of the night. Clear?"

"Clear, Drill Sergeant!"

"Move out."

Back at the barracks we piled up the stairs to start cleaning our gear. The sun was already going down.

"Thanks a lot, Doan," I said.

"Anytime," he said. I cursed him under my breath.

My boots and my webgear were caked with dried red mud. I washed them off in the big utility sink, then started in on my M-16. All the cleaning equipment was spread out in a small room across the hall from the latrine. Earl was in there, and so was Nathanson. I went in and set to work.

"What branch are you gonna go for, Lander?" Nathanson asked.

"Is that what we're talking about?"

"You going combat arms?" Nathanson asked me.

"I don't know. Maybe. Are you?"

"I think so. Artillery."

"Second lieutenants in artillery get killed faster than anyone," said Earl.

"So what are you going, Linton?"

"Me? Finance Corps, man. All the way." Earl laughed, and so did I.

Just then Gay poked his head into the room.

"I saw you got some exercise up the road," he said to me.

"Yeah."

"Builds character."

"Right."

Earl looked at the empty doorway when Gay left.

"Mr. Airborne Ranger Infantry," he said.

"You going Infantry, Lander?" It was Nathanson.

"Armor, maybe," I said. "I'd rather ride than walk."

"I hear that," Earl said.

"The Combat Arm of Decision," said Nathanson.

"Right," I said.

Nathanson finished his rifle and left the room. Earl and I sat silently. I was using a pocketknife to scrape the carbon off the metal bolt of my M-16.

"You got a girl, man?" Earl was sighting down the bore of his rifle, looking for dust.

"Yeah, I got a girl."

"At Vanderbilt?"

I looked down the barrel of my own M-16. "Yeah."

We were quiet for a time. Then I said, "How about you?"

"Man, I've got lots of 'em *thinking* they're my girl. There's going to be some scenes when I get back to D.C."

I figured it was probably true.

"Seventeen days to go," I said.

"I hear that."

He finished cleaning his rifle and tossed some wadded paper into a trash can across the room.

"Basket by Linton," I said.

He looked at me and then laughed, offering the flat of his hand.

We slapped five. "See you in the morning," I said.

I turned in my rifle and took a shower. When I came out of the latrine the long bay was dark, and most of the platoon was asleep. I crawled into my bunk and stared at the springwork across the bottom of Earl's mattress. For a minute I thought of the girl back at Vanderbilt. She was from Signal Mountain, Tennessee, a place I'd never been and never would visit, as things turned out. Six months later our romance ended for good, just in time for Valentine's Day.

* * *

Five weeks into our training, we went on a bivouac and night patrol. We assembled at a training site far from the garrison area, riding out in trucks, one of the few times

we were permitted that luxury. Each squad went out in a different direction with a different instructor, sergeants we'd never seen before. The instructor with our group pointed to me and said, "You're the patrol leader. Take charge and move out." This sort of thing happened all the time. It was the way they tested you. I always dreaded it. The sergeant pointed out the patrol objective on a map. It was an engineer platoon from one of the armor units on post—a couple of big tank recovery vehicles or something like that, I figured. I took out my compass and shot an azimuth in the direction I thought I should go. The sergeant kept looking at his watch.

"All right, get going," he said.

It was a warm night, July in Kentucky, and very dark. There was no moon, and I could see very little sky through the trees. Our squad consisted of ten men, too many for an efficient patrol. We went crashing through the brush, trying to swear in whispers, each man struggling to stay in contact with the man in front of him. After an hour or so of aimless activity, the instructing sergeant stopped us and gave us a critique. We were off course, he said, and too noisy. He pointed us in the right direction and we pushed on, jangling and crackling. Finally we came to the edge of a clearing. Now I could see stars over the line of trees on the far side of the open area.

"Do you know where you are, cadet?" The sergeant sounded impatient.

"I'm not sure. I think I'm right here." I pointed to my map. The sergeant squatted beside me and turned on his red flashlight.

"You just came out of this draw," he said, pointing to a different spot on the map. "Now get yourself oriented and get this patrol moving. You're running late."

Gay was right behind me. He started whispering directions to me, directions I wanted to ignore but couldn't afford to. After a while I heard the sound of a generator, and I knew we were on the right track. I called a halt and assigned people to security positions and picked a recon

team to go up and scout the objective. I picked Gay and a guy name Grantham. It was a good way to get Gay out of my hair.

When they were gone the sergeant told me to check the security and I crawled from position to position in the dark, brushing ferns and leaves, fearing possible poison ivy. I found Earl sitting against a tree stump with his arms folded.

"What'd you send that weenie out for?" he asked.

"As long as he's there he's not here."

"You could've sent me."

"I didn't know you wanted to go."

"I don't."

"Then what the hell are we talking about?"

Just then a red flashlight shined our way.

"You men are lousy security," the sergeant said.

"Uh-oh," said Earl softly.

"I bet they can hear this jabber back at the NCO club," the sergeant said. "Patrol leader, you better get your shit together. When the recon team gets back, we'll have a critique up at the clearing."

About half an hour later Gay gave me a breathless rundown on what he'd seen, which amounted to four men sleeping on cots next to a green bulldozer.

"How do you know it was green?" I asked.

"Gimme a break."

"Do you think they saw you?"

"How could they see me? They were all asleep."

It was one in the morning. The sergeant blew a whistle and said we were now Admin, which meant we weren't playing war anymore. We moved up to the clearing and assembled for the critique. The sergeant talked a lot about noise discipline. He named names. When it was over Gay walked over to me.

"What was with you and Earl the Pearl tonight?" he asked.

I didn't like his tone.

"Oh, we were just talking," I said. "The instructor got

a little bent out of shape."

"That kind of thing reflects on the whole squad."

I just looked at him.

"Us little guys gotta set an example," he said, and clapped me on the shoulder. I could barely make out his face, and I hoped he couldn't see mine. Earl came up behind me and said he was heading back to the tent. We walked off and left Gay standing there. Later, lying in the dark, Earl asked me what Gay wanted.

"Wanted to let us know we were wrong."

"That's what I figured."

I didn't say anything else. I slept and forgot everything until Sergeant Ogden shook me out of a dream of deep, black water.

"Out of that fartsack, Lander. PT formation in five minutes."

* * *

Five hours later we were marching from one combat assault course to another when we passed a tank range in full operation. Six giant M-60 tanks were lined up, engines humming, their 105-mm main guns making a gloriously infernal racket. I was drawn to the hulking monsters, even though I knew they were the deathtraps of the modern battlefield. No one in my platoon, including me, really believed we would ever go to war. It was the game that mattered, and tanks were the biggest toys in the game.

We were a mixed bunch from all four squads, marching under the command of none other than Cadet Gay himself. The officer in charge of the last range had formed us into random groups and randomly placed different cadets in charge. I was in the front rank, second man from the left. Earl was marching immediately to my right. Gay called cadence, and his voice grated on me. We left the tank range behind and turned onto a gravel road. Gay tried to lead us in a Jody song, but people were resisting him. I was in a spirit of full revolt after a few hundred meters. We

came up on a sharp right turn, and Gay gave the "Column Right" command on the wrong foot. Around me there was a chorus of groans. I turned my head and shouted:

"Wrong, you asshole!"

There was silence except for the crunching of boots. Then I heard the command:

"Section, *halt*!"

We stopped. I stood at rigid attention, my M-16 slung on my shoulder, my right hand on the rifle strap, my left arm straight down at my side. I could feel Gay to my left, coming around the end of the formation. My heart started hammering, absurdly. He stopped in front of me. Calmly, he lifted the web strap that held my ammunition pouch, untwisted a fastener, then let it snap back into place.

"Lander," he said, still calm, "you ought to keep your web gear squared away."

He was half a head shorter than me, and I felt ridiculous looking down at him. I was also petrified, knowing there would be a scene. I remained foolishly at attention, counting on military formalities to carry me through.

"I guess you don't like the way I'm marching this outfit."

I didn't say anything.

"You blabbermouth *pig*!" His face was suddenly contorted with rage. He shouted at me. "*Nobody* calls me that! *Nobody*! I hear anything out of you again and I'll knock your teeth right down your *throat*!"

I stayed at attention, my heart pounding. Beside me Earl was laughing. Gay stepped in front of him.

"That goes for you too, Linton! I may not reach your teeth, but I'll make you a soprano for life!"

Earl practically doubled over laughing. Then he straightened up and said, quietly:

"Go back to your post, Gay. You're just making us late for training."

Gay stepped back.

"You're both on my list," he said. He walked back to his position and gave us the command to march. I put my left foot forward, feeling stunned and bodiless, grateful for

the mechanical action of marching and dreading to hear the command to halt.

* * *

That night the other platoon members were polite to me. Nobody mentioned what happened with Gay. When I stepped out of the shower, Nathanson was shaving at one of the sinks. He nodded at me in the mirror, and I nodded back.

"How do you get away with shaving the night before?" I asked.

"My beard's blond. I wouldn't trade it for anything."

I walked into the platoon bay. Earl was standing at his wall locker, hanging up his fatigues. He kept his back to me as I prepared for bed. Finally, without turning around, he spoke to me.

"You did the right thing, man."

It was a terrible thing to hear; he didn't think I was even worth a reproach.

* * *

On our last day of field training we marched to the Salt River, a wide shallow stream that crossed into Fort Knox from the east and then intersected another stream, headed for the Ohio River. It was a seven or eight mile walk out, but we were all in high spirits, knowing it was our last road march. Sergeant Ogden told us that the trucks would be waiting to take us back. We marched in long, easy strides, bantering with each other and even with Sergeant Ogden. The other two platoons of Delta Company marched ahead of us. Every couple of miles we stopped and had a drink from our canteens. When we got to the river we listened to a lecture on water-crossing techniques. I located Gay in the crowd and made sure I stayed as far away from him as possible. While the sergeants droned on, I thought about spending August at home, sleeping late and watching TV at night. It seemed a delicious luxury: to

chew on popcorn at one or two in the morning, propped on the living room sofa, looking at some dumb movie. My time at Fort Knox would buy me a month of guiltless leisure before my return to Vanderbilt in September.

The sergeants broke us into groups and sent us from station to station as part of a round-robin training session. At one point we were required to cross the river on a two-rope bridge that had been set up by an engineer unit. It consisted of two parallel one-inch ropes, one above the other, strung from trees on each side of the river. The bottom rope was about ten feet off the water. A sergeant demonstrated the technique of walking across. He stood on the bottom rope and grabbed the top rope in his hands, stepping sideways to the middle of the bridge, then side-stepping his way back. A line of cadets formed up, and the first one started across the bridge.

I was in no hurry. I sat and stared at the river, at the sunlight glinting on the riffles downstream, at the pebbly bottom next to the shore. A new group of cadets came over from another training station. I recognized Gay's voice. I continued to stare at the river. Earl sat down next to me.

"You going across?" he asked.

"In a minute."

"I hear that."

We both looked at the water. Earl was chewing a dandelion stem.

"I see your man Gay is here," Earl said.

I threw a pebble in the stream. I didn't say anything.

Most of the group had crossed, I noticed. The instructing sergeant and Sergeant Ogden were talking a little ways off, letting the line of trainees run itself. I heard Gay pass behind me, headed for the bridge.

"Well, man, we gotta cross," Earl said.

Gay was already on the bridge, side-stepping out across the water. I sat still, looking at the river and the cadets on the far bank. Earl went over to the end of the bridge. I ran my hand over the ground around me, searching for a rock to skip.

I heard Gay scream something, then I heard my own name. I looked up and saw Earl standing on a limb at the end of the bridge, pushing the lower rope down with his left boot and pulling on the upper rope with all his might. Gay was over the middle of the river, struggling to stay on the ropes and yelling like a madman.

"Lander!"

It was Earl. He was staring straight at me as he worked the ropes.

"Lander! Help me, man! Help me!"

I tried to pretend I hadn't heard. Behind me Sergeant Ogden was headed our way. Out over the water Gay was a human concertina, compressing and extending as the ropes gyrated wildly. Earl put all his strength into stomping the lower rope and jerking the upper one. He had a look of malicious rapture on his face. Gay whirled involuntarily into space, his mouth a great O of alarm, and hit the water with a tremendous splash. It was a ten-foot drop, and the water was no more than three or four feet deep. I watched in morbid fascination as he popped to the surface like a rubber ball and started storming toward the shore, screaming curses and imprecations at the top of his shrill voice. Earl had jumped down from the bridge and was now standing on the bank, slapping his thighs and laughing. He didn't look at me. He acknowledged the cheers from the opposite bank. Gay reached the shore just as Sergeant Ogden surged past me.

"All right, both of you dirtbags, give me fifty!"

Gay started to protest.

"Shut up and get down!"

Earl and Gay assumed the push-up position.

"Knock 'em out!"

I heard them counting as I crossed the bridge and lost myself in the group on the far side. Earl never did cross. I didn't see him for the rest of the training day.

* * *

Everyone was excited in the barracks that night, not only because our six weeks was over, but because of what happened at the river. I stood at the window near my bunk and listened to Doan telling someone who missed the training all about it. Looking out the window at the manicured battalion area, the rows of concrete buildings and the parade field, I felt empty and relieved. And disappointed: I had the sense of having slipped the main challenges of the camp, a feeling that I'd gotten off more easily than I should have. Doan was excitedly wondering how much trouble Earl was in.

Not so much, as it turned out. He and Gay had to go see the company commander. The captain gave Earl a lecture, but that was the extent of it. When the two of them came back to the barracks that night, the whole bay was quiet. Gay, red-faced and squinting, went straight to his bunk and crawled in. A couple of people slapped Earl on the back. I waited for him to say something to me, but he never did. In fact, we didn't speak again until after our graduation parade. It was a Saturday; the barracks were full of people saying goodbyes, stuffing duffelbags, packing suitcases. Our bunks were stripped, we were all in civilian clothes, July was fading to August. Earl stood at his locker, holding an alarm clock.

"Well, are you going to miss this place?" I asked.

"Not at all, man."

"You'll be dying to come back."

He looked at me, then slowly wound his clock.

"I might be back," I said. "This is the Armor School, you know. I might be riding those tanks."

Earl stuffed the alarm clock in a corner of his suitcase.

"You won't be combat arms," he said.

* * *

And he was right. Two years later I was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Quartermaster Corps and served an uneventful three-year tour out in California, coordinating

overseas shipments from the Oakland Army Depot. I lived in the BOQ and ate alone in Chinese restaurants. I made unsuccessful forays to nearby Berkeley and San Francisco in search of stray available women. I walked up and down the famed hills and took in the glorious views and reminded myself that I was young and lucky to be stationed where I was. Once I even invaded the campus of Mills College. I sat on a bench, watching the girls go by, and I might as well have been a tree stump. An off-duty soldier in civilian clothes, looking around for a woman: there's no sorrier spectacle on earth.

When my tour was over I went back home to South Carolina. My experience landed me a government job in Charleston, handling part of the Navy port operation. I was comfortable with the job; it was the same thing I'd done in the army, only now I didn't have to wear a uniform. A year later I got married, to a girl I'd known at Vanderbilt, and with her parents' help we bought a small place in North Charleston. A lot of our neighbors were Navy men. It wasn't the Battery, but it kept out the rain, and we like being near my parents in Spartanburg and her family in Columbia. Two years passed, and we even took a vacation in the Caribbean.

It was a new decade, and there were new stirrings in the military circles I was a peripheral part of. The country drifted toward a new war, another miring in a tropical zone where American soldiers would die in jungles for reasons no one could agree upon. I neither promoted nor opposed the drift; I had my job, which involved only the efficient movement of military material in and out of the port of Charleston, I had a mortgage to pay, and I had a wife who was beginning to talk of bearing children. I was settled, as they say.

One June afternoon I left work early. I wanted to go by the grocery and pick up a few things; we were planning a weekend barbecue with some neighbors, and my wife had given me a shopping list. I was on my way to the car when a headline caught my eye. My copy of the paper was

waiting at home, but I fished out a quarter and bought another on the spot. I read the story: Captain Richard Gay, a Special Forces advisor in Central America, had been killed when his jeep was ambushed in a remote mountainous region. There was a picture, the official army photograph from his personnel file. I recognized him instantly: the same sullen, puffy face, but older, more sharply defined around the eyes. No squint. I stared at the picture. I was as rigid as the day he stood before me and called me a pig and threatened to knock my teeth down my throat. Finally I folded the paper and walked to my car, glancing around guiltily as if I'd just purchased a pornographic magazine.

I climbed in my yellow Toyota and drove aimlessly around town. At a traffic light I watched two elderly black men argue over the contents of a shoebox. The light changed before I could learn what was in the box. Two blocks later I saw an old woman walking a monkey down the sidewalk and smoking an enormous pipe. I turned south on Meeting Street. My wife's grocery list sat on the dashboard, a wrinkled reminder that I had things to do. I drove to the bottom of Meeting Street and parked under the live oaks. I felt clairvoyant; objects around me seemed to have been outlined by a felt-tip pen.

The sun bored into the top of my head as I sat on a bench in White Point Gardens, watching the tourists stroll along the Battery. Behind me stretched the long verandahs of the inn where my wife and I spent our honeymoon. A pair of naval cadets, male and female, dallied before me in their spotless white uniforms. Evidently they were in town on some sort of training exercise. I thought of Earl Linton, and I wondered what became of him. The cadets were talking animatedly about a submarine cruise they'd taken. Every so often they would throw something to the gulls, or point a telephoto lens at the distant hazy mount of Fort Sumter. I sat and watched, my heart full of secret shame.

2397-1
5-30

DUE	RETURNED

BOOKS MAY BE RECALLED
BEFORE THEIR DUE DATES

Form 104

With a spare, sometimes biting style, Tom Alderson takes us into the lives of people who are stoic, alone, embittered by life, seemingly past hope or love, and yet intrigued by the people and landscapes about them. Often mourning a loss—of a grandfather to age and infirmity, of a wife to divorce, of a brother to insanity—these characters find their lives awesomely unpredictable. Seeking a rational explanation for their predicament, they admit their own fault, their own lack of courage and moral resolve—and yet they have courage enough to survive, and are moral enough to comprehend good when it appears around them. Entering their lives, we recognize our own more fully.

"With the first-rate stories of *Michelson in the Desert* Tom Alderson proves himself to be a gifted writer with a strong, clear, original voice and possessing all the skills needed to deal with a rich variety of characters and situations. These are fully realized characters and situations which really matter. These are abundant stories and a great pleasure to read."—George Garrett

About the Author

A native of Tennessee, Tom Alderson graduated from Vanderbilt University with a degree in Russian and received his M.F.A. from Columbia University. He spent three years as an Army intelligence officer. He now works as a free-lance translator and is currently finishing his first novel. His stories have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Intro 14*, and *Nebo*.

A Breakthrough Book, No. 52

Cover design by Jean Forrester

University of Missouri Press
200 Lewis Hall, Columbia, MO 65211

ISBN 0-8262-0621-2

MU Libraries
University of Missouri--Columbia

Digitization Information Page

Local identifier	umpress0104

Capture information

Date captured	
Scanner manufacturer	Zeutschel
Scanner model	OS 15000
Scanning system software	Omniscan v.12.4 SR4 (1947) 64-bit
Optical resolution	600 dpi
Color settings	24 bit color
File types	tiff

Source information

Source type	text book
Source ID	104303109006
Notes	

Derivatives - Access copy

Compression	Tiff:compression: 1
Editing software	Adobe Photoshop CS5
Editing characteristics	
Resolution	300
Color	gray scale / color
File types	pdf / tiff
Notes	