WRESTLING WITH ANGELS:

A DISSERTATION IN

CREATIVE WRITING

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And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Tell me, I pray, your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.

Genesis 32:24-29

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INTRODUCTION

Like all writers of fiction, I have nothing especially new to say, only my own way of saying it. Whatever uniqueness there may be in the stories of this collection is largely shaped by my perception and my historical era. Fiction, as I have come to understand it, derives its vigor from technique and thematic emphasis. Insofar as essential human concerns like moral responsibility, love, and death do not change, neither does the essence of fiction. The influence of tradition is strong in the realm of serious fiction, not because the writers whose works have survived lacked imagination, but because their central concerns have remained essentially the same.

Thus I prefer the beaten path of mimetic fiction to the more fashionable side trails of experimental fiction. The current experimental forms, of which absurdism, surrealism, and metafiction are the most easily categorized, are not without value. Novelty can be interesting for its own sake; it can force traditional stylists to reassess and justify their methods, which is always healthy for art. There has always been a place in literature for the fantastic and fanciful as well. Nevertheless, as Erich Auerbach demonstrates at length in Mimesis,[1] from the Odyssey to modern fiction, the major traffic of fiction--however decorated it may be

with fantasy or folklore--has traveled the path of mimetic literature. Influenced by prolonged study, laborious practice, and plain intuition, I follow this way without apology.

Consistent with the mimetic tradition, for me the center of interest in fiction is character. Other aspects of a fictional work, no matter how significant or well rendered they may be, are crafted in vain unless character compels the reader's interest. In some way the writer must establish his characters as human beings worthy of sympathy, and showing them in conflict is the age-old method of invoking the reader's sympathy, even his active emotional involvement. Traditionally, this conflict is staged in a setting of objective reality and delineated with varying degrees of overt action. In the twentieth century there has been a tendency among serious writers and critics to devaluate the role of overt action in some cases and concrete detail in others. This trend is a reaction against the stress on plot and detail which has accompanied representational fiction. Many writers, the absurdists such as Brautigan and Barthelme in particular, have largely disposed of coherent action and realistic surface but put nothing in their place to do the work of fiction. They tend, instead, to rely on texture, their blend of style and imagery which is expected to yield meaning without the aid of more substantial structure or sympathetic characters. I have never questioned the importance of style and imagery in fiction; but neither have I ever assumed that they could generate meaning without some

kind of recoverable narrative, be it ever so broken or subdued. And this narrative describes the actions of people to reveal their character or inner nature. John Gardner reiterates the value of traditional thought: "then there is nothing inherently wrong with Aristotle's opinion that what chiefly interests us in fiction is characters in action."[2]

It is not the proper task of fiction to offer simple answers to complex questions, but it is its task to clarify the questions, to give insight. The struggle of sympathetic characters is vital to the experience of fiction, and such experience rewards the reader with the emotional pleasure of involvement and the intellectual satisfaction of insight. Aristotle's observation that one can both learn and delight "in works of imitation"[3] still applies. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, William Faulkner insists that the concerns of fiction should be "problems of the spirit . . . the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing."[4] According to the theory of Aristotle and the practice of Faulkner, literary creation calls for a representational picture of life.

In seven stories, which can be characterized as representational in style, I employ a variety of protagonists involved in struggle. The stories neither rely excessively on action nor make rigid assumptions as to the nature of reality, but they were written in the belief that strong narrative action and concrete setting are crucial in realizing my goals as a writer of fiction. To the extent that action and

detail can involve the reader with my characters, both are instrumental to my style. Both are used to reveal the inner states and delineate the conflicts of the characters--characters, who, like Jacob, struggle at great risk and for uncertain reward, but struggle nevertheless.

Theory

In the introduction to their short story anthology Innovative Fiction, Klinkowitz and Somer quote Ronald Sukenick as an appropriate spokesman for the avant-garde in fiction:

> Reality doesn't exist, time doesn't exist, personality doesn't exist. . . . since our reality lacks the sanction of a creator, there's no guarantee as to the authenticity of the received version. Time is reduced to presence, the content of a series of discontinuous moments.[5]

In the spirit of the words of Sukenick, the thrust of their remarks is twofold: the conventional world view of traditional fiction is inadequate to convey the disorientation of modern man, and the "new" fiction, by its bizarre form and technique, forces one to re-evaluate his assumptions and find a valid basis for forming new values. In the works of writers like Sukenick, Brautigan, Barthelme, and Barth, "Dull, insipid reality is revitalized."[6] The essential argument for new forms in fiction is, "The world is new, and its experiences must be known by a new epistemology."[7]

A few stories will serve to illustrate the avant-garde theories in practice. Sukenick's "Momentum"[8] employs a

gimmick of typography whereby an unstructured and apparently autobiographical mass of information fills the right-hand side of the page and on the left-hand side are occasional evaluative comments. Printing the story in this manner is supposed to offer the reader simultaneous narrative and commentary, which is a typical goal of metafiction--to present the fiction and comment on the artifice at the same time. Despite the lofty intent of such a work, the effect is that it calls considerable attention to the surface by its blatant devices. No amount of surface manipulation can compensate for the unstructured looseness of the writing. Sukenick appears to become so concerned with the surface that he slights the substance beneath it. Similarly lacking in coherent structure are Richard Brautigan's "The Shipping of Trout Fishing in American Shorty to Nelson Algren"[9] and Donald Barthelme's "Views of My Father Weeping."[10] Both stories are collections of satiric images and the easy ironies of word play. Like true absurdists, the authors devote themselves more to providing shallow, bleak entertainment than to making a statement of any resonance. A clear step above the aforementioned writers is John Barth. A story such as "Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction"[11] surpasses the others cited. No, it is not any more profound, but it plays its word games with dazzling skill. In other words, it plays trivial games better than the other stories. However, like all metafiction, it is a story looking at itself in a mirror, and it ultimately wilts of narcissism.

There are countless stories similar to these four, and their common trait is that they exist in a realm devoid of artistic coherence. As anarchists in literature, the writers have discarded the old conventions but have failed to replace them with anything adequate. Karl and Hamalian speak of Ulysses and The Sound and the Fury as forerunners of the new fiction.[12] I imagine that Karl and Hamalian would defend Brautigan and the like by saying that Joyce and Faulkner were also branded as too experimental for their times. Of course, the obvious and frequently ignored fact is that most of what is called too experimental to have any real worth is exactly that. Departing from the established norm is neither a virtue nor a vice by itself; the only sure effect of such a departure is that the writer is obliged to defend his practice. In the cases of Joyce and Faulkner, the use of stream-of-consciousness is purposeful. Beneath the complex surfaces both novels have a taut structure and a recoverable narrative sequence. Neither is the case with many of Brautigan's stories. Most of the avant-garde writers believe that the very chaos of their work is an ordering principle and defend themselves saying,

> Discontinuity or the disconnected narrative is often, paradoxically, a technique for creating coherence. The failure of the narrator to discover or create unity out of his experience might actually unify a particular story.[13]

Fiction of this sort operates on fallacious assumptions. The writers assume, first, that the experience of modern man

is unique and, second, that language can be revolutionized to reflect this condition. Because of their stress on surface artifice, for the sake of simplicity I shall label the practitioners of surrealism, absurdism, and metafiction artificialists. I realize that the term carries a pejorative connotation, but considering the examples of their stories which I have given and the seriousness of the fallacies which they employ, I think the title is earned.

In the wake of Einstein's theories, the massive destruction of the Second World War, the potential for nearly total destruction by means of nuclear weapons, the frustrations of wars in Korea and Vietnam, the artificialists claim that no tradition approach to literature is adequate to express the Angst of modern man. The world is more complex than ever, but man's environment has always struck him that way. Indeed, it has been true. Anyone at a given moment has outlived history to the extent that he is dealing with a present that is like no other. But men throughout history have contemplated the uniqueness of their times. It is not unusual for an audience to hear a speaker quote Aristotle's complaint over the rowdiness of the youth of his time and to accept his words as though they had just been written. Each generation throughout history has had the same complaint. Circumstances and pressures on people change considerably, but people do not. The uniqueness of each era is part of its common bond with history; therefore, a writer who becomes concerned with topical and ephemeral issues is not writing

for the beginning of a new world order--he is writing for an audience which is bound to dwindle when the world is seen with yet another "unique" vision. Josephine Hendin says, in praise of the artificialists, "Current fiction blocks the flow. It celebrates the discontinuity of people from history and society, and praises the separateness of individual experience."[14] All in vain. No matter how rapid the rate of change in society may become, a human being can no more escape history than he can his own memory. To ignore history or to claim to be free from it is purest folly. The cultural danger of such an attitude is frightening since it is an open invitation to barbarism. The artistic danger is that one takes a passing current such as absurdist thought or typographical manipulation and declares that is is the mainstream of the future. As one can deduce from the larger implications of Auerbach's Mimesis and Booth's The Rhetoric of Fiction,[15] that literature which totally rejects tradition and claims to exist purely of and for its age is doomed.

Just as man cannot escape history, neither can he escape the limitations of language. Language is linear, not spatial. In order for words to communicate with any degree of clarity and controlled effect, they must follow each other across the page on a line, and they must be used with an awareness of their denotation and connotation. Language can communicate only on the strength of widely held conventions. To challenge those conventions, as in "Momentum," is to call so much attention to the surface as to impoverish the underlying

substance. While manipulation is problemmatic in "Momentum," "The Shipping of Trout Fishing in America Shorty to Nelson Algren" and "Views of My Father Weeping" have problems which dwell deeper. Brautigan's story, like Barthelme's, lacks a coherent structure. The images are strewn about to make several unsophisticated satiric remarks about American materialism. The final product reads more like notes for an absurdist story than a finished story. Though his narrative surface is similarly fragmented by the repetition of tangential and contradictory images, Barthelme appears to have a more serious intent than Brautigan. He is seeking more than easy jokes, but his social commentary suffers from the same lack of coherence. There is no recoverable narrative in his story. The writer who presumes that a chaotic structure will elicit a contemplation of chaos from his reader is not (as the currently popular notion has it) working <u>with</u> the reader to create a story; rather he is throwing onto the page pieces which could become a story and asking the reader to do the work of the artist. That is not cooperation; it is irresponsibility.

Those who claim to be revolutionizing the language ignore two enduring facts: language is conservative and language is moral. It is conservative in that it cannot function at all without conventions, commonly held meanings and practices that have achieved clarity through time. It is moral in that it is nearly impossible to use many words on a given subject without expressing some attitude or value

judgment. Only the most sterile language, such as that in an instruction manual, is free from all expression of bias. One who tries to strip language of its moral implications will also strip it of its meaning. Free association has its value in psychology, but it is no substitute for control in art. Booth puts his finger in the major wound of the artificialists:

> Any story will be unintelligible unless it includes, however subtlely, the amount of telling necessary not only to make us aware of the value system which gives it its meaning but, more important, to make us willing to accept that value system, at least temporarily.[16]

To deny linguistic convention and moral implications is to deprive one's fiction any chance of lasting significance. If the result of this effort is not chaos, it will be a reduction to simplistic statements. The artless declarations of Brautigan illustrate my point. Simplism is the only alternative to unredeemed chaos in the fiction of the artificialists because they give up all means of subtlety and irony when they set out to revolutionize the language. They have discarded the precision of traditional language with its rich possibilities for exactness and originality. They have chosen to attempt their own new expression, which is like descending from the locutions of the lecture hall to the grunts and roars of the cave. The effect is the opposite of what they claim to have achieved.

Having rejected the avant-garde, I am obliged to mention

a few contemporary writers whose work I do admire. Artists such as Peter Taylor, John Updike, and James Whitehead are accomplished followers of the representational tradition in American fiction. These writers are dealing with important and enduring human problems. In the spirit of Faulkner's words, they do write of "the human heart in conflict with itself." Whether one looks at Taylor's spinster of "The Spinster's Tale,"[17] at Updike's Harry Angstrom in Rabbit, Run,[18] or at the title character of Whitehead's Joiner,[19] one can see people making decisions and trying to live with the results. These writers have used experience, skill with language, and personal vision to delight and instruct readers with the insight they offer by means of characters in action. Each of these works exhibits an awareness that twentieth-century man is inseparable from his history and a care with language that enables the authors to exploit the conservative and moral properties of words. Each earns artistic resonance. None of these writers uses extraordinary or experimental means to render his story. The surface of fiction is the beginning, not the end, of their art.

These writers and others like them are often criticized by the artificialists for refusing to experiment. After all, the more traditional writers are capitalizing on the inventiveness of men like Joyce and Faulkner without taking similar risks. Of course they are, and their choice shows good sense. The critics who want a Joyce in every decade have little historical perspective. Genius simply does not appear

at regular intervals. Refusing to accept this historical commonplace, many critics charge into the stacks of books by writers currently in favor, rummage until they find a writer whose work is rather artful and very eccentric, and come out of the stacks proclaiming "a major talent" or "a revolutionary new voice in fiction." Their comments serve more to sell books than to give critical perspective. In short, when there is no Joyce available, they take someone like Brautigan or Sukenick and campaign to elect a new Joyce by popular acclaim.

In a recent article, Bryan Griffin criticized the misplaced zeal of such critics with the term the "New Profundity."[20] He argues that critics presume that purely confusing and shallow works must be profound because they are so hard to decipher. Griffin adds, "Sometimes it takes us so long to figure out what is being said that we don't notice it's not worth the trouble."[21] Critics and writers count on the optimism of the public which is eager to find good books whether they are being written or not. Sometimes the gimmicks of a writer, the approval of undiscerning critics, and the optimism of the reading public combine to create a best-seller where there should not have been one. John Gardner preceded Griffin with his complaint:

> The lost artist is not hard to spot. Either he puts all his money on texture--stunning effects, fraudulent and adventitious novelty, rant--or he puts all his money on some easily achieved or faked structure.[22]

Related to this emphasis on surface at the expense of substance is the pervasive nihilism of many prestigious contemporary writers. In their introduction to the 1959 edition of Understanding Fiction, Brooks and Warren, discussing the role of irony in fiction of quality, disavow the withering irony of nihilism as the "celebration of smug and futile skepticism."[23] They rejected in advance much of contemporary fiction, that which has been the most highly publicized, if not the most highly praised, since 1960. The fiction of the artificialists professes this "smug skepticism" and takes it one step further by giggling at the futility of human existence. Not unlike Samuel Beckett and other absurdists in drama, they are every bit as didactic as John Bunyan or Horatio Alger, only in reverse. As Gardner puts it, "On the whole our serious novelists. . . are short on significant belief. . . short on moral fiber."[24] They justify absurdities of style with their jaundiced world view. The fact remains that a responsible writer does not create fiction about futility by merely saying the futile and absurd. By simulating the viewpoint of the mentally retarded Benjy in The Sound and the Fury, Faulkner has demonstrated that the style of the writer must transcend the limits of those whose problems he depicts.[25]

The irony which Brooks and Warren praise is not that which obliterates meaning, but that which enriches it. It gives focus to the depths of conflict, draws the strings of unity tight:

> The unity which the fictional structure possesses is of a very special kind. It is not the result of a purely genial conspiracy among the constituent elements. There is conflict and tension present, and the structure involves almost as much of vindictive opposition as of genial conspiracy.[26]

One of the most painful, but ennobling, ironies of the human condition is that sincere people can try to do the right things and still suffer for their efforts. Sherwood Anderson offers one explanation: "The moment one of these people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live by it, he became a grotesque and the truth became a falsehood."[27] The burden of human frailty and the nobility of man's struggle to overcome his limits are at the heart of fiction, and they are the source of the most resonant ironies.

If life is not meaningless and human struggle does have value, moral questions are bound to arise for both the responsible writer and the perceptive reader. Questions of degree, intention, and responsibility. The ancient questions of right and wrong are indispensable to serious fiction. Though the absurdists' answers are bleak, they are pat, entirely simplistic themselves. Sukenick states that life has no purpose, Brautigan that current American values are mockery, Barthelme that we are all silly and self-deluded, Barth that life at best is a silly game and that the artist should enjoy it as such. Gerald Graff comments on such writing, "As if our society had not rendered literature unimportant enough already, literary intellectuals have

collaborated in ensuring its ineffectuality."[28] Worthy problems, those which are the proper concern of art, admit no easy answers, whether they be happy or sad. Only when a man has free will can what he does bear any moral significance. Whether the protagonist has very little choice, as with Crane's correspondent in "The Open Boat,"[29] or considerable choice, as with Hemingway's Francis Macomber;[30] in worthwhile fiction there is still a choice and it does matter.

Ideally, the experiences of conflict and choice in fiction produce enlightenment, always for the reader, sometimes for the characters, too. Though I have stressed the dignity of struggle, implying a largely tragic viewpoint, I am not wholly given to a view of man as the heir of Prometheus' struggle. There should be times of pure joy in fiction as there are in life. The relative scarcity of these times only intensifies their delight. I concur with Robertson Davies that the "moments of piercing beauty. . . are bounteous reward for all the anxieties and dark moments."[31] Though the serious observer of the human condition sees much sadness and may take a negative view of the fate of man, the negative view is not obligatory. Art and optimism are not inconsistent, just less often coupled than art and pessimism. Whichever view is expressed in a piece of fiction, it must be earned in the context of the work. For example, the genial resignation of the narrator in Faulkner's "Spotted Horses"[32] and the utter malaise of Hawthorne's Goodman Brown[33] are equally justifiable in their respective contexts. The

"happy life" of Francis Macomber is earned in the last seconds of exhilaration before death, but the happiness is no less real because the moment is preceded by fear and followed by death.

Having presented ennobling struggle and moral responsibility as the premises of my fiction, I shall proceed with examples of how I apply them in the rendering of my stories.

Technique

Though the tradition of fiction is quite short compared to that of poetry, there is general agreement as to the principal devices employed by writers in the mimetic tradition. Introductory literature books generally begin by listing and defining several terms such as plot, character, imagery, style, point of view, foreshadowing, and theme. Then there are governing criteria like unity and narrative efficiency, which are used to judge the effectiveness of a writer's skill with fictional devices. A high point in technique is achieved when a writer's insights and fictional devices blend appropriately and the unity and efficiency of the piece are optimum. In order to indicate the degree to which the effects of my stories are deliberately achieved, I offer representative examples of my use of imagery and point of view.

Representational fiction at its best offers rich possibilities in the study of human affairs, and imagery is vital to the process. Auerbach notes, explaining his term figura,

"an occurrence on earth signifies not only itself but at the same time another."[34] The apposite image carries rich metaphoric potential to speak of the human condition. Insisting that fiction should "carry its justification in every line,"[35] Joseph Conrad goes on to explain that a primary means for that justification is the effective use of imagery. His reasoning is that all art

> appeals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions. . . . My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel--it is, before all, to make you see. (p. ix)

Conrad imbues imagery with transcendant powers of starting with sight as a simple sense and elevating it to artistic vision. Such is the ideal effect of imagery.

I try to make imagery as much an establisher of theme as of setting. My intention is to create a setting of verisimilitude, in which the realistic objects may also carry symbolic and thematic value. In "The Maple Tree," the process of tapping the tree presents a sequence of images to suggest the continuity of the life cycle, as does the old tree itself. The football field as island--both battlefield and monastery--serves as the physical and moral arena of "Bulldog Bliss." The permanent wound on Bliss's nose reflects his relationship to the world at large: bluntly stated, a bleeding martyr in white. The agony of Sebastian

Chang as he flails in the swimming pool and sinks repeatedly establishes the strength of his commitment and the ultimate futility of his efforts. In "Blessed Assurance," there is even more imagery of drowning, coupled with ironic suggestions that baptism has become a kind of drowning for Brother Bob. The water imagery is vital to presenting a man anchored in a shallow faith and beset by deep waves of trial. One of the key images of "A Clear Objective" is what is not seen. James has come to know the enemy only from blood trails and faceless silhouettes which shoot at him. This shadowy vision poses a contrast to the painfully clear view of the mutilated body of Crossman. The scene in which Hank chews tobacco in the fall sunshine, suggests concretely the resistance and wistfulness that are central to "In Heaven You Have Heard." In "Virginia Unfolding," the passages devoted specifically to the smell of the woman are intended to present--all at the same time--a precise olfactory image, the nostalgia caused by remembering so small a detail, and the pervasive sensuality of the woman. Once these aspects of her scent are understood, so is the theme of the story.

Since it influences every word the reader finds, point of view is not as easily isolated as imagery. In Booth's words, "all fiction requires an elaborate rhetoric of dissimulation,"[36] and point of view is the primary device in shaping the illusion. A convenient method of examining point of view is to group the stories into third-person and first-person types. Point of view in "A Clear Objective," somewhat

like that in Crane's "The Open Boat" or Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," is third-person limited. Crane stays primarily within the perception of the correspondent; whereas Hemingway's point of view is confined entirely to the sensibility of the single character of the story. In both cases point of view is used to show the disillusionment of a young man and portray his difficulty in reconciling himself to disappointment. Unlike the young men of these stories, Sebastian Chang starts out with a totally naive view of the world and keeps it. Resembling the protagonist of Norman Mailer's "The Language of Men,"[37] Sebastian can never fit in. In order to counterbalance his folly and his bravery, I have employed an ironic third-person point of view. The narrative persona of this story speaks at a much greater distance from the protagonist than he does in "A Clear Objective." In my mind, the effect of rendering Sebastian in this manner is to make him sympathetic and even endearing in spite of himself. Also calling for an ironic treatment is Brother Bob, but it is irony at a lesser distance. Though he is at points comic in his narrowness and Christian zeal, I never intend for him to appear as the buffoon that Sebastian is. His intellect and introspection never approach those of Hawthorne's Dimmesdale,[38] but his suffering does. He, like Dimmesdale, is driven by conscience to confess his sin and by duty not to. If the story succeeds at all, point of view pierces the reader with Brother Bob's suffering.

I have employed first-person with less overt irony.

With a mature narrator reflecting into his childhood when he saw the decline of his grandfather, the tone of nostalgia is established early in "The Maple Tree." In this regard, it resembles Truman Capote's "A Christmas Memory,"[39] but I hope it goes farther. In the reminiscence about his grandfather and the unpleasant dealings with Mr. Scoggins, the reader should sense the persona trying to come to terms with the inevitability of death. He dwells on the details of the snow, the tree-tapping, and the long walks in the hope of coming to grips with what John Berryman called "the epistemology of loss."[40] Also nostalgic, but far more analytical, is the narrative persona of "Virginia Unfolding." Hugh speaks at a greater distance here than when recalling his grandfather. He is also dealing with more elusive matters, and his uncertainties play a larger role in this story. The recent sight of Virginia's granddaughter has renewed his thoughts about Virginia and her search for fulfillment. Furthermore, he saw her die when he was in his twenties, which experience causes his perception of her to be more complex than the one of his grandfather. "In Heaven You Have Heard" presents the narrative persona farther yet from nostalgia. Here analysis is paramount. Hugh, as he tells the story, is older than the narrator of Anderson's "I Want To Know Why"[41] but like Anderson's narrator has an unanswered question at the end of the story. The first-person plural point of view in "Bulldog Bliss" is intended to magnify the protagonist of the story. Despite being

radically different from Faulkner's Miss Emily Grierson,[42] Bliss is presented similarly. The first-person plural is used to present her as a sort of index to the attitudes of the community. Likewise, the character of Bliss develops in the story by virtue of the impact he has on the team through whose collective eyes he is seen. My intent is to enlarge him, making him legendary by the volume of the voice which relates his story. It is a voice which can joke about him but remains in awe of him at the same time.

I have set forth portions of my theory of fiction and illustrated my techniques. Now it is for the reader to assess the worth of both as they are put into practice in my stories.

NOTES

[1]Erich Auerbach, Mimesis, trans. William Trask (1946; rpt. New York: Doubleday, 1957).

[2]John Gardner, On Moral Fiction (New York: Basic Books, 1978), p. 113.

[3]Aristotle, The Basic Works, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 1457.

[4]William Faulkner, The Portable Faulkner, ed. Malcolm Cowley, rev. ed. (New York: Viking, 1967), p. 723.

[5]Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer, eds., Innovative Fiction (New York: Dell, 1972), p. xv.

[6]Klinkowitz and Somer, p. xxi.

[7]Klinkowitz and Somer, p. xxiv.

[8]Ronald Sukenick, "Momentum," in Innovative Fiction, pp. 177-214.

[9]Richard Brautigan, "The Shipping of Trout Fishing in America Shorty to Nelson Algren," in Innovative Fiction, pp. 37-40.

[10]Donald Barthelme, "Views of My Father Weeping," in Innovative Fiction, pp. 147-57.

[11]John Barth, "Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction," in Innovative Fiction, pp. 220-24.

[12]Frederick R. Karl and Leo Hamalian, eds. Introduction, The Naked I (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1971), p. 3.

[13]Karl and Hamalian, p. 4.

[14]Josephine Hendin, Vulnerable People (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), p. 9.

[15]Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961).

[16]Booth, p. 112.

[17]Peter Taylor, "The Spinster's Tale," in Reading Modern Short Stories, ed. Jarvis A. Thurston (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1955), pp. 311-31.

[18]John Updike, Rabbit, Run (New York: Knopf, 1960).

[19]James Whitehead, Joiner (1971; rpt. New York: Avon, 1973).

[20]Bryan Griffin, "Literary Hype," The Atlantic, June 1979, p. 46.

[21]Griffin, p. 48.

[22]Gardner, p. 52.

[23]Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, eds., Understanding Fiction, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton, 1959), p. xix.

[24]Gardner, p. 66.

[25]William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury (1929; rpt. New York: Vintage-Random House, 1956).

[26]Brooks and Warren, p. vii.

[27]Sherwood Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio (1919; rpt. New York: Viking, 1960), p. 24.

[28]Gerald Graff, Literature Against Itself (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 29.

[29]Stephen Crane, "The Open Boat," in The Rinehart Book of Short Stories, ed. C. L. Cline (New York: Holt, 1952), pp. 125-50.

[30]Ernest Hemingway, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," in The Snows of Kilimanjaro and Other Stories (1925; rpt. New York: Scribner, 1970), pp. 121-54.

[31]Robertson Davies, "The Writer's Conscience," Saturday Review, 18 March 1978, p. 46.

[32]William Faulkner, "Spotted Horses," in The Rinehart Book of Short Stories (See note 29.), pp. 262-81.

[33]Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown," in The Rinehart Book of Short Stories (See note 29.), pp. 20-33.

[34]Auerbach, p. 490.

[35]Joseph Conrad, Preface, Nigger of the "Narcissus", (1897; rpt. New York: Vintage-Random House, 1962), p. vii.

[36]Booth, p. 44.

[37]Norman Mailer, "The Language of Men," in Advertisements for Myself (New York: Putnam, 1959), pp. 122-31.

[38]Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (New York: Harcourt, 1961).

[39]Truman Capote, "A Christmas Memory," in Breakfast at Tiffany's (1950; rpt. New York: Random House, 1958), pp. 159-78.

[40]John Berryman, "The Ball Poem," in The American Tradition in Literature, eds. Bradley et al., 4th ed. (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1974), p. 1865.

[41]Same as note 40, pp. 1378-84.

[42]William Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily," in Collected Stories (New York: Random House, 1950), pp. 119-30.

THE MAPLE TREE

Once the chill of autumn set in, there was a taste in the air of my grandparents' sitting room that could nourish by itself. When Grandaddy and I returned from our morning walk, coffee, bacon, and biscuits were still strong from the kitchen and gave way only to the smells of burning soft coal and pipe smoke. Everything had mixed and sweetened like the spots of molasses on his trousers. I never saw the spots but could smell them, the final seasoning to mellow the scent of coffee and Prince Albert tobacco that clung to him. He would rock in his chair with the high back and flat wooden arms while I sat in his lap talking and listening, warmed by the pigeon-coo of an old man's voice and the slow pat of his hand. Although his lap felt like axe handles under a blanket, it never occurred to me to be uncomfortable.

I did most of my growing up in my grandparents' part of the house while my parents were at work. The vigor that had made Grandaddy appear nearer sixty-five than eighty waned suddenly during that summer and fall, but he still enjoyed the walks as much despite his walking slower and using a cane. We walked to the corner grocery, through the

neighborhood, to kindergarten, to the picture show, always passing through more than distance. The walks were full of birds names, flower names, stories of his father who spied on the Yankees and once surrendered to a tomcat that sounded like an armed enemy in the dark, stories of Moses and David and Daniel; full of phrases that drifted in my mind like dust in the sunlight of the sitting room.

When the name sugar maple came up, I wanted to see the sugar. He said there was a trick to it. We would use the old maple in the front yard after a month or so. When the leaves turned orange and the sap dropped, we would catch some on the way down.

Before there were enough leaves on the ground to pile into forts that left acrid crumbs in my pockets, it was time to tap the tree. Grandaddy took a long reed, cut it into three parts, and notched one of them. He used his old pocket knife with wooden grips and two blades that had been sharpened away by half. He started the other two notches and gave me his knife to finish them. He went to the basement and took from a sooty shelf the case that held his brace and bits embedded in green velvet, then he held the bits end-to-end with the reed until he found one slightly bigger. We gathered up three shining paint buckets and carried our gear outside.

He churned the bit into the thickly ridged bark at an upward angle, pressing his elbows against his sides to steady himself. The damp inner wood spiralled out, curled

and fell from the bit, sweetening the air like fresh bread being sliced. I was still hoping that he had told me wrong and the tree would spurt like a punctured can. He finished the hole in spite of my help and questions and shoved in a reed, telling me to hang a bucket from the notch. By the time we had worked our way around to the third tap, I returned to the first, expecting the sap to be trickling into the can.

"Grandaddy, what's wrong with it?"

"Not a thing, son. Just takes time."

"How much time?"

He poured tobacco into his pipe from a red can the size of a wallet, snapped the lid shut, and slipped the can into his coat pocket, careless of tucking the pocket flap in with it. Like most of his coats, it was one that had outlived its suit trousers and was worn mismatched. He held the pipe at the bottom of his hand so that the dry flakes were funneled into the bowl, spilled some tobacco, tamped the rest tight, and struck a match to it. His long puffs of smoke dissolved into the wind.

"Won't have enough to cook down till in the morning. Then we'll have us some real maple syrup."

"For breakfast?"

"See what your grandmother says."

"Can't we make it come faster? Can't we make more holes?"

It'll come when it's ready. Go drilling a bunch of holes and you'll make the tree sick. Won't have any syrup or any tree either."

I dreamed that I squeezed the tree like a big orange and the yard was covered with sweet maple sap. The worst waiting of all came the next morning while the syrup bubbled on the stove in front of Grandmother and I ran back and forth from Grandaddy's lap to the chair where I stood to watch in the kitchen. Grandaddy's final answer to a series of questions was, "Hugh, sometimes you just have to wait."

Finally Grandmother poured the syrup hot from the pan over a stack of pancakes. I twisted each bite across the plate on the end of my fork, the pancakes rolling through the syrup like a wheel and dripping all the way to my mouth. The accomplishment satisfied as much as the syrup, but it bothered me that all our work was being eaten up so quickly.

At an age when I rarely held still for anyone, I still sat in his lap sometimes and could feel him slumping, leaning against my back for support. I had become the only one he spoke to much. On some days he would call me by my uncles' names. These were the days when a distant quiet would settle over him, causing his eyes to lose their glitter and look painfully tired. Little was said on our walks. Instead of naming birds and telling stories, he would point with his cane at things I should notice, saying a few words, letting me fill in the rest to show what I had learned. I

would point, too, with my cane, a small hickory limb that he had cut for me when I had to have a cane of my own.

His long fitful nights had begun about the time of the cold weather. He walked in his sleep, kept Grandmother up, weakened himself and her until Mother decided to hire a practical nurse that the doctor had recommended. A nursing home was out of the question.

A couple of weeks after Christmas our first snow arrived, and Mr. Scoggins with it. My sisters and I were throwing snowballs in the yard that morning when I noticed a slumped figure carrying a suitcase down the street toward our house. The snow was barely deep enough to supply what we needed for snowballs and a snowman, but he picked his way down the sidewalk as if it were treacherous with ice and drifted snow, counterbalancing the weight of his pasteboard suitcase by extending his other arm. The arm flailed in a motion that was almost rowing, which made the baggy army overcoat flare wide to one side. The empty red hand, clenched as tightly against the cold as the one that held the suitcase, broke its pumping rhythm long enough to backhand his red dripping nose. Trying to smile through a grimace fixed on his face by the contest with snow and baggage, he spoke.

"Looking for Mrs. Buchanan."

"Mother's inside. I'll go get her," Mae said.

The man followed her onto the front porch where he set down the case, stomped the snow off his cracked shoes, and

lit a cigarette in the shelter of his lapels. He looked at Kathryn and me as we approached the porch to see who he was. He grinned tightly at us with the cigarette in the corner of his mouth and shook his head.

"Bet you chillun don't know you're li-bel to freeze to death. Having fun, ain't you?"

Kathryn nodded while I gaped. He looked bent and overburdened, like a light coathanger just able to keep the heavy coat from dragging the ground. Mae came back out to play when Mother arrived to invite him inside.

While I was still trying to decide what to make of him, Kathryn asked Mae, "What's he here for?"

"Wearing white clothes and beat-up old shoes. I guess he's a painter."

I ran to the middle of the yard to mount a snowball attack before my sisters could arm themselves. During the skirmish I saw Grandaddy sitting at the side window, looking over his shoulder at me from the couch. He waved as I was overrun by the counterattack. Then he waved again and made a face at me to offer himself as a more desirable target than my sisters, who were in a position to fight back.

I took aim and began to pelt the side of the house in an effort to hit his window. More eager than accurate, I left white lumps all over the weathered, yellowed, white clapboard around the window. I threw faster, breathless and starting to sweat inside my hooded jacket. Finally I hit the screen with a quivering thunk. I never saw Grandaddy

quite so happy. He brought Grandmother to the window, clapped his hands, pointed at me triumphant in the snow. He moved closer to the screen to reward my success. In the blinding whiteness of the snow, with everyone looking at me, with the screen shaking and humming from one snowball to the next, with the snow bursting, spraying, melting, and sparkling on the tall window pane, the moment became crystalline and timeless. No matter how many times I hit the window before his face, it never hurt him. Neither the throbbing cold nor my snowballs could touch him.

He laughed and I threw snowballs for what seemed like hours, hardly noticing the aching of my hands inside wet mittens. Mother called us in, but I lowered my head and kept on filling the air with chunks and showers of snow. When Mother came out for me, I ran to the maple tree, held on, and released my grip only under threat of a spanking.

As I retreated into the house, Mr. Scoggins, who had just heard from Mother what she expected of him, was leaving. He covered his balding head with a stained felt hat, turned up his collar, and thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his overcoat. He shuddered against the cold, hunching his shoulders with pain like a child grabbed by the neck. He noticed me coming in with damp trouser legs.

"You did pretty nigh freeze to death," he chuckled.

Having been forced inside as I was, his attempt to be pleasant was wasted on me. Now I was close enough to smell the mothballs his coat had lain among in somebody's attic,

to see his bleary eyes and missing teeth. I already disliked the man.

With Mr. Scoggins came a pervasive sadness. It was not that he changed things that much or that Grandaddy got any worse all of a sudden; Mother would not have agreed to having a nurse if there had been any hope of recovery. Now it was a matter of trying to make life more bearable for both of my grandparents, trying to help them through a bleak time with some grace. But the presence of that little man with his raspy, congested cough made it impossible to forget Grandaddy's condition. Even when he had good days and seemed almost right again, the man in worn white clothes, moving his lips as he read a newspaper off in the corner or smoked on the porch, would not let us pretend. It was impossible for the rest of us to pretend, impossible for Grandaddy.

His sloppiness troubled Grandmother all the more because there was an outsider to witness it. She would scold him for sloshing coffee on his shirt or forgetting to zip his trousers. He would pour molasses on his biscuits and not be able to stop in time to miss the tablecloth. She would snap, "Walter, watch what you're doing! You're spilling all over the place." She would get a sponge and daub at the tablecloth and his cuff. He would cut an indignant glance at her then stare rigidly out the window, waiting for her to leave him alone.

Recalling their long looks at each other and the hollow way their words would sometimes echo, I know that they were

both afraid. He feared the feeling of a firm world going limp in his grasp, like a feed sack emptying until it is nothing but shapeless burlap. She feared the loneliness his death would bring, the unanswered urge that causes the amputee to try to rest his hand on a missing knee, the visceral grief that bypasses the mind and ripples through the whole body for the loss of a part.

Grandaddy was determined to ignore Mr. Scoggins. He didn't dislike him so much as he disallowed him. He refused his help as often as he could with a shake of the head or a jerk of the arm, almost never speaking to him. On our walks, which resumed after winter relaxed, he stood nearly straight, raising his head and shoulders by force of will, often lifting his feet in an awkward gait to prevent shuffling. Still, he insisted on opening doors for Mother and taking her arm on the steps.

Mr. Scoggins trailed behind us when we walked. Despite his air of a man doing his job in a bored manner, he seemed to want to be included. He reminded me of Billy Todd, an ugly kid on the street who always acted like our games of army and cowboys were silly until we would let him play too. Then he overplayed his part until we spent most of the time telling him how to act. Sometimes I felt sorry for Billy or felt guilty about hiding from him in the bushes and laughing at the gawky way he took long strides and tried to look like someone with a purpose while he searched for us out of the corner of his eye. But pity and guilt never led to affection.

At least twenty years younger than Grandaddy, the old man would follow us with his hands sunk deep in his pockets and look around for something to occupy his attention while Grandaddy and I communicated by incomplete phrases and gestures with our canes. He sometimes shook his head at us and mumbled to himself. I could almost forget him, but a glimpse of him slouching along behind us, with only a cigarette and his bloodshot eyes clearly visible among the wrinkles of his face, would make him real again. My grandparents wore old age the way fall wears its leaves. On Mr. Scoggins gray hair and wrinkles were ugly.

In the spring Grandaddy stayed in his pajamas and seldom wore his dentures or glasses. Mother said that he was sick and I could only see him for a little while each day. I took him things on the brief visits--an iris from the back yard or a blue jay feather or a picture I had drawn.

One morning I brought a branch from the spirea bush beside the house, quite proud that I had broken off so much without getting into trouble. The small, clustered white blossoms with their faint sweetness were a favorite of his. He sat up on the edge of his bed, hugging me and crushing the blossoms.

"It's mighty pretty," he said. As he held the branch to his nose and inhaled, he knocked off a shower of petals. He looked over his shoulder for Mr. Scoggins, who had left the room, and leaned toward me. "Don't let that man see the flowers." He sniffed the branch again and placed it in the

space between his mattress and the bed frame. He turned back to me with desperate eyes. "Watch him. He's mean."

The room smelled of the musty rollaway bed and urine. Whenever I left, I felt a wake of darkness rush in behind me as I shut the door. In that room Grandaddy's calm had disappeared. He could no longer sit in a cloud of pipesmoke and drink coffee straight from the stove, too hot for anyone else.

In the afternoons Mr. Scoggins would slump in a rocker on the porch whistling to himself in a low hiss, whittling. He reminded me of the old men I saw through the windows of the lobby in the hotel downtown. Using a long pocket knife with a curved white handle and a vicious blade, he would sit reared back in the rocker with his feet propped high on one of the columns and shave the stick in his lap. His whistling was so halfhearted that it sounded no different whether he had a cigarette in the corner of his mouth or not.

On the day I had given Grandaddy the spirea, I crossed our yard, not liking the way he sat on our front porch.

"Hey, boy. Ever seen a knife like this un?" I shook my head. "Ever helt one?" I shook my head again as I stepped onto the porch.

I stopped to watch him curl shavings from the piece of cedar he held. He drew on a wet cigarette in the corner of his mouth and squinted against the rising smoke. The cigarette was so short that I waited to hear the heat make the wet paper sizzle at his lips. As he piled up ringlets of

the fragrant cedar, he seemed pleased with himself, squinting and grinning as if I should be impressed. Grandaddy could turn out shavings twice as long and leave the cedar slick as an onion besides. I ignored the invitation to take an interest in his knife but stood there staring at him when I wanted to go inside. The yellow of his teeth behind the faint smile and the jagged veins in his eyes fascinated me. He looked up to meet my gaze with a broader smile, confident that I was hypnotized by his skill.

He carefully caught the wet cigarette butt between his thumb and fingernail and flipped it into the yard. He laid the knife and the stick in his lap and reached into his shirt pocket. Pulling a Camel package out and tearing the top all the way open, he found nothing, crumpled the paper and cellophane noisily, dropped it beside the chair.

"Hey, boy." That's how he always spoke to me, as if I were too small for a name yet. "Here's a quarter." He flipped it in his hand. "Take this on down to that ere store and git me a pack of Camels. Think you can do that?"

"Why can't you do it?

"That's no way to talk to your elders."

"You aren't my elders." I ran into the house and slammed the door.

The next morning after breakfast I heard Mother's voice coming from the front porch. I went to the shadow of the screendoor where I could listen. I had seen her get mad before when the power company topped our trees, but it was

nothing like this.

She held a piece of rope in her hand and shook it in Mr. Scoggins' face. She leaned forward trembling, seeming to tower over him with her shoulders drawn up and her fists clenched as if to hit him. He kept on looking at his feet and then back at her sideways to avoid the heat of her eyes. Her dark brown eyes that had always spoken comfort now grew and blazed until everything she looked at seemed to wither. Her head was tilted forward so that she glared from beneath her brow. She appeared near charging right over him.

Before leaving that morning, she had gone to see about Grandaddy and felt his feet to see if he had kept warm during the night. When she touched his feet, she had felt the marks. Then she looked under the mattress and found a length of nylon rope. With it clenched in her hand, she had run through the house and found Mr. Scoggins leaning against a column on the porch. My mother, who had always kept family problems private, who had always kept a tight rein on her temper, stood there on the front porch for all to see and shook the rope in his face.

Her voice was not loud, but the effort she made to keep from yelling sharpened the edges of her words, gave them a bitter clarity. The hard tones cut the air as if they came from a loudspeaker with too much treble, while she stood shaking that rope at the slouching man in dingy white clothes. He finally spoke.

"... and that's the only way to handle people when they

git out of their heads and start to roaming around at night," he offered. He sounded like he wanted her to know that he was offended, that he knew his job and that was the way it was done. He tried to act like he wasn't afraid of her.

"That's my daddy lying sick back there. He's not some animal you can tie to a post and leave. Any fool can tie people up and go to sleep. Your job was to take care of him."

"I done my job right. Done it thataway for years. You jist don't understand..."

"Damn your soul to hell, get out of my house!"

He turned to leave then looked back at her to show that he had been wronged and that he wasn't afraid. She stepped toward him raising her hands and looking like she would claw his face if he said another word. I opened the screen as she covered her face and stood there shaking.

"Mother?" She wiped her eyes and looked over her hands at me.

"You need to get on to school," she said with deliberate calm. She combed at my hair with her fingers. "Run comb your hair and get along."

"What did he do?"

"Nothing. It's time for him to go. We don't need him here anymore." She had to be upset if she didn't insist on wetting and taming my cowlicks herself.

As I went down the hall to leave for school by the back door, I looked into the room where Grandaddy now slept.

Cool and dark in the spring morning, the room glowed with an amber light from the shades drawn over the tall windows. The only trace of Mr. Scoggins was the sweet reek of his aftershave lotion hanging in the air after he had gone. The familiar smells of high, papered walls and the wooden floor freshly dust-mopped grew stronger as I stood and let my eyes adjust to the darkness.

There was a faint squeaking. In the darkest part of the room, Mother sat on the edge of the bed with Grandaddy held against her. She rocked and hummed the same tune she hummed to me when I felt bad. Grandaddy seemed neither awake nor asleep and muttered with his head on her shoulder while she rocked and looked at the wall. There was nothing to see but vertical garlands of flowers in the wallpaper and an old brownish family picture.

In the picture Grandmother and Grandaddy sat stiffly, not quite smiling, and the children, all dressed in white, were arranged between them. Standing with an arm on Grandaddy's knee, Mother, at the age of six or so, leaned against him and stared serenely beyond the camera.

In the following days Mother and Daddy talked in the kitchen after I went to bed. Soon Mother called her brothers and sisters for help. For various reasons from a tyrannical husband to sick children, the only women in the family who could come were her sisters who lived in Texas and Oklahoma, the farthest from home. The sister-in-law who lived in town refused to help but offered to pay her share

of nursing home expenses. Mother hardly spoke to her for years.

By the time my aunts had each stayed a week and it was time to start the cycle over again, even Mother admitted that it was hopeless. Grandaddy had been incoherent off and on. Now he wanted to get dressed and walk down to the square to see his old friends, most of whom were dead. They tried to talk him out of it, but he became sullen and resolved to sneak out later. When he got outside and fell on the steps, Mother agreed to take him to a nursing home.

I knew something was wrong when she got me ready to go with them. Her eyes were dark and sunken, and she combed my hair so gently that I wondered when she would get on with it.

Grandaddy rocked in his old chair in the sitting room while Mother packed his clothes in the back room and Grandmother sat on the rollaway bed and watched her. When I entered the sitting room, he looked more himself with his teeth and glasses, wearing a suit and white shirt without a tie. He smiled when he saw me.

"Hugh, I need my pipe and tobacco."

I pulled a chair up to the bureau and stood on it while I lifted a pipe out of the rack and picked up the red can and the box of matches. I felt the solid roundness of the bowl in my palm, looked into the familiar whorls of the briar, rubbed my thumb over the tooth grooves in the bit. He held out his hands for me to climb into his lap. He

filled his pipe with repeated and fluttering motions, his fingers having lost their sureness. Finally, he fired the tobacco and then forgot the match, which fell from his relaxed hand to the floor where it went out. The orange burning flakes swelled over the edge of the bowl, and he tamped them back into place with a flicking finger. Sparks showered us. Resting his head against the chair as he rocked and watched the vigorous puffs rise, he never noticed; I brushed them off his coat.

For the moment things felt right, as if all the sadness would leave now, would be packed off the way Mr. Scoggins had been. The only sounds were the steady creak and pop of the rocker and an occasional gurgle from the stem of his pipe. He looked out into the shaded yard where the new maple leaves filtered the sun into a green flow. Once I had told him I thought the cool green air had a sweet taste, and he agreed. He puffed steadily until the smoke hung over us in a wavering layer, some rising, some settling. After hanging awhile, it would stream slowly away through the window.

Mother, Grandaddy, and I drove to the edge of town on the highway to Nashville. I sat between them with Grandaddy patting my knee for most of the short ride. The nursing home was an old remodeled house, which sat close to the narrow road. Mother pulled the car onto the gravelled area beside the road, turned off the engine, and sat for what seemed a long time looking off to the hills where the highway

disappeared. Grandaddy tensed and his hand fell still on my knee. He turned to Mother.

"Rachel, let's go home."

She came around to his side of the car and opened the door. She took his arm. He looked up at her the way Mae used to before a spanking. She begged, as much for the look to stop as for him to get out, "Please, Daddy. Hugh, take Grandaddy's hand."

As we approached the entrance with him shuffling between us, I noticed the chill of his waxy hand. He looked from Mother's face to the door, unable to speak. Mother told me to wait in the car. When I reached up to grab his neck, his mouth quivered. There was such a deep stillness in his eyes after I hugged him that I looked up at him hoping that the strangeness I felt would turn into something familiar. His unbroken gaze confirmed countless times each second that I was standing before him--solid, real, alive. It would not end unless I moved. When she squeezed my hand and nodded, Mother broke the spell for me to run to the car. She put both arms around him as a fat, gray-haired woman in a white dress and stockings came to the door to help them inside. That was the last time I saw him.

The last time I saw Mr. Scoggins was a couple of weeks later on the square. On the way to the Saturday matinee with my playmate, I passed him. He walked unsteadily, head down, hands in his pockets, more or less whistling. All that was missing was a cigarette. He chewed a toothpick in its

place. I passed near enough to see that he still wore the same cracked shoes, near enough to be drenched in fumes of urine and alcohol. Without the white clothes he seemed less threatening, more pitiable. When I said hello, not knowing why I did, he looked up surprised and unrecognizing. He grunted something, walked on sideways looking back at me. I couldn't tell whether he was trying to remember me or making sure that some kid wasn't mocking him.

Looking back caused him to stumble into a parking meter, where he leaned to regain his balance. There was not enough awareness left in his face for him to resemble a grabbed child any more, not even the fear I had last seen in Granddaddy's eyes. Getting under way again was a big enough task that he had already forgotten me. I stood watching him until he turned the corner out of sight, unaware that I was giving him all the funeral he would ever have.

I went home that afternoon and sat against the maple tree. I inhaled the sweet green shade, felt years of curling bark dig deep into my back.

BULLDOG BLISS

"Whatever you do, don't let on you don't love it. Ole Bulldog will cut you some slack if he thinks you're putting out. But if he thinks you're going half-ass, he'll hand you your head in a minute. He chased off the fastest back we had. Wouldn't block. Made that ole boy hit after practice. He'd call for an end or linebacker to stay every day. New boy each afternoon. A week of getting busted and hearing how there's more to football than scoring touchdowns, he up and quit."

Hardeman seemed to think it was his right or duty to fill us in on the coach before our first practice. He stood there chuckling as he stepped into his jock and pulled on his half-shirt. With all his rumbling, he resembled the front end of a semi when it's idling rough. If anybody needed a little down-home fanfare, Hardeman was the man to provide it. But Bulldog Bliss didn't. He could build his own legend without benefit of pitch man or press secretary. And, so far as we could tell, he was never really trying.

"Least that's how he was at Staunton. Don't see college would change him. He must of known I got drunk after every game, raised all kinds of hell. Never said a word. Long as I came to practice growling like an ass-eating bear."

We stood listening and dressing among the lockers. We were trying to figure out where truth trailed off and folklore came in. At the same time, we were trying to see if there were any visible differences among high school stars from all over; trying to pick out the tough ones to whip in scrimmage, the ones who were too shifty to tackle in the open field; trying to spot the coddled golden boys that would fold up and feel sorry for themselves when they got stomped a few times and there were no cheerleaders to mourn their pain; trying to see if what was good enough back home would keep us going here. Hardeman felt all this as much as the rest of us; he just kept his mind calm by keeping his mouth busy.

"He's got it in his blood, like malaria. When those pads crack like two planks slapped together, the Dog creams in his pants."

Hardeman's talk of blood-and-guts football got right next to Graham. He knew that brand of ball puts lots of wear and tear on the quarterback, and he already had it figured that he would start as our quarterback in the first game. The only problem was to get everybody else in line--his blockers, receivers, the coaches. Graham went along through Hardeman's foreword like most of us, dressing, smirking, believing now and then. Mostly he was giving Hardeman an uneasy look, as if he were waiting after a meal for the big tackle to belch loud enough to rattle the windows and grin like a mule, as if he were waiting for the

inevitable to pass. Graham placed his shined loafers in the bottom of his locker and hung his shirt neatly from a hook.

Maybe to hurry the end of Hardeman's introductory remarks, he questioned him: "When coach recruited me, he said we would pass some, do some pro-set stuff. What did he use at Staunton?"

"Graham, my boy, you're in for a jolt. Oh yeah, we passed. Let's see. We passed in the Lovett game, the Headland game, at Avondale. Oh yeah, we must of thrown ten-fifteen passes all season."

"Come on."

"Naw. We did throw more than that. The Dog don't much like it. We had a hot shot quarterback like you. If Bliss hadn't been trying to show him off to recruiters, we wouldn't of thrown more than a dozen times all year. He don't like the ball up squirting in the air. His idea of a wide-open offense is tearing the line wide open and sending the whole backfield through like a pack of scalded dogs."

"That won't work in college."

"Ask Bear Bryant. Ask Woody Hayes."

"They've got the horses to do it. They aren't coaching Vanderbilt."

"You mean just cause Bliss came to a little smart-kid school, he don't plan to kick ass? Throwing the ball is something you gotta do every now and then, but for him it ain't football," Hardeman insisted with confidence. "To score through the air, you gotta out-smart somebody. Score

on the ground, you gotta out-whip 'em."

Hardeman was right about that much. Bulldog had no taste for fancy stuff. He liked basic football all the way--which mattered very little in the Ole Miss game. By the end of the first quarter, behind 17-0, he started passing plenty. It was a terrible thing to watch him pacing, coming to grips with what he had, and what he didn't have.

He punched the air and hissed when we made one mistake on top of another. He got red in the face early and stayed that way. He didn't seem mad at individuals for their missed assignments or for being overcome by sheer muscle: it was the whole situation that angered him. Time after time, he yanked us to him by grabbing the collars of our shoulder pads. Some of the guys, mostly "stars," got pouty over it; but he wasn't riding anybody. He was mad because what he had planned for us just wasn't happening, no matter how hard he tried. His vision of things wasn't working out. It wasn't right that hard work should pay off so poorly. He was no fool, but had counted too much on our being able to stick with them despite the clear difference in talent. To close the gap, he tried a halfback pass on one play and a naked reverse on the next, only making things worse.

When the ace-in-the-hole plays failed, we fell apart. Bulldog locked his thick arms across his chest and paced the sideline staring at the ground and occasionally at the field. Sweat beaded in his short red hair and dripped from his nose.

The small, straight scar on his chin looked bone white in his red face. He scraped his hand noisily over the thick stubble on his jaw, his beard seeming to grow with the heat and frustration. The fuming churned within him, volcanic. Every rage turned inward, toward his failure to reach what he believed we had in us. He looked up the field, looked down at the ground, clenched his chin in his hand, and watched Ole Miss pound us, 38-7.

We gathered around the blocking sled before practice, leaning or sitting as usual, but with an uneasiness that was quite different. No matter how good-hearted a coach appears, bad defeats call for radical remedies in practice. Bulldog was never cruel, but he was violent. We figured his solution to our problems would be violent as well.

He swung open the heavy fieldhouse door, oblivious to its weight, and approached the blocking sled with quick, short-legged strides. Behind him came the other coaches, fifth-year men finishing their degrees after playing out their eligibility. Though both were a head taller than Bliss, they lengthened their steps to keep up. Unlike Bulldog, they carried clipboards with notes and plays. His uniform for practice did not vary: spotless white tee shirt and shorts with <u>Vanderbilt University</u> in black-trimmed gold lettering.

Hardeman had claimed, "That's all he'll wear till it's cold enough to drive your balls up into your armpits." For

once he spoke the unqualified truth. Bulldog didn't come out in a sweatshirt until the wind made us ache. While we were wrapping our hands in our shirttails or shoving them into our pants, he never seemed to notice the weather. Even when his stubby nose turned red and the chill thickened his speech. A sweatshirt and the fleece of curling red hair on his legs comprised his foul-weather gear.

As he walked toward us, he twirled the whistle on the lanyard around his wrist, clockwise then counter-clockwise. The way he jumped around and demonstrated blocking and tackling, a whistle around his neck would have cut his face or hanged him. Whether he meant to look fierce or not, the effect was the same. He moved out smartly, as drill sergeants like to put it, whipping that whistle around and flexing his jaw muscles like biceps. There was no doubt that the cure for our ills lay in hitting. Hitting each other, sometimes even hitting the coach.

Every coach demonstrates techniques by walking through them himself from time to time. If the boys are really ragged on a given day, the coach might get pretty worked up and hit the dummy with the form and the force that he wants. He might even let out a little steam on a live dummy. But Bliss was different.

He never popped anybody in anger, only in excitement. The first time we saw him get really cranked up was in the third practice, demonstrating head and shoulder position for the head-on block. We were running a live blocking drill

and the blockers were spending too much time on the ground and not enough knocking men out of the way. He called over Hardeman, who knew what to expect from high school.

"You guys are waving at these linebackers. You're standing up before you make contact. First mistake. You're not hitting 'em square. Second mistake. You're not sticking with 'em. Third mistake.

"Come here, Hardeman."

The coach grabbed the hefty tackle by the arm and steered him into place like a girl on the dance floor. Hardeman smirked. He knew what was next.

"You usually won't get a target this big, or this ugly," Hardeman continued to smile, "but he'll do for demonstration purposes." Bliss lined up across from him, like a guard, and talked from the ready position with his forearms resting above his knees. "You gotta charge out low and level." He walked slowly from his four-point stance in a crouch with his back parallel to the ground. "Take dead aim on his belt, Drive the front of your helmet into his gut, and explode and lift with your arms at the same time." He rested his forehead against that big, hard stomach and went through the motion of completing the blow with his flexed arms. "Slide your head off to whichever side the ball will be going, and plow him out of there." He kept his head high so that he was looking downfield and had Hardeman's body pinched between his head and his raised, bent forearm. "Don't go to one side first. He'll read the block and go

where you don't want him. Fire out straight at him, stick him good, then slide to a side." He walked through driving the linebacker out of the way. He returned to his position and lined up.

"You've got to put the whole thing together. Do only part of a block right and your man can still wreck the play. Here's what I want. Button your chinstrap," he said to Hardeman. "Full speed. Meet my charge and shed the block."

We all stood there expecting him to make a half-speed run, expecting Hardeman to more or less catch him and give ground with the block. We had all seen this kind of thing before, coaches calling it full speed blocking when it really wasn't. After all, Bulldog, crazy or not, had nothing but freckled skin and red hair where Hardeman had a helmet and shoulder pads. Hardeman looked like he was getting awfully serious over a simple walk-through, but he had seen the coach block before.

"Palovik, give the snap count on two."

"Down. Set. Hup-one. Hup-two."

And out he came, like a rock from a slingshot. So fast and hard that we hardly realized what was happening. There was the perfect form--shoulders low, head up, feet wide apart, forehead aimed directly for Hardeman's stomach--and it was full speed, the way he said it would be. He charged across the two-yard space. Hardeman met the charge with a stiff shot from his hands, enough to knock most people upright and stall their attack. Hardeman's blow glanced off

the coach's shoulders, letting the coach to his body. And, sure enough, it was a by-the-book perfect block. As head and arms struck their target, there was an explosive groan, the kind that rises from the guts of a weight lifter trying for a record. "Bwa-ah-ah!" He growled and churned until Hardeman was driven back four steps.

For the few seconds the whole block took, the rest of the world could have disappeared and Bulldog wouldn't have noticed. The whole of his world was himself, Hardeman, and the ground between them. For all his violence, there wasn't the slightest awareness of physical pain or the first trace of malice. That was blocking, pure and complete, without any hesitancy, compromise, or excuses. It never occurred to Bulldog that there was any other way to go about it. He was showing us exactly what he wanted, showing more than mere technique, showing the spirit of the perfect block.

He gave Hardeman a slap on the tail and resumed his position. He called for the next two men to continue the drill. Only then did he notice the blood, when it began to seep from a wide scrape on the bridge of his nose and run down slowly. He mostly ignored it, wiping it with his hand a few times, wiping his hand on the grass. The bleeding finally stopped.

Nothing was so unnerving as hitting the coach and being lifted from the ground or driven into it by those blunt arms. It wasn't the force of his licks. The big boys could hit a little harder than he did. What made it feel so strange was

that he wanted us to whip him. He genuinely wanted us to beat him, like the father who bears down on his son in a scuffling match. You would never guess it if you saw him hitting, though.

He had the pure dedication of a Trappist and the zeal of a warrior. The essence of the man was his skinned nose. There were lots of jokes about it, perhaps because it was so typical. After the first injury, it stayed scraped and in various stages of healing. Whenever he drove his face into the canvas of a blocking dummy, he would renew the damage before the wound had healed. Like the pure white shorts and shirt, it was part of his uniform. Some of the guys swore he buffed it with sandpaper.

And now we were going to see how he dealt with losing a game. He stepped onto the riding board of the sled. The twirling whistle snapped to a stop in his hand.

"Talk is cheap, and it never changed much. What I have to say won't take long." His thick, abrupt, Pittsburgh accent punched through our silence. By the time he had reached us, we were all standing or kneeling on one knee. The ones who played a lot at Ole Miss were easy to pick out: they looked like the losers of a rock fight. He looked each one of us in the eye before he spoke again. His scanning came to a stop with Mims, a friendly, wild-eyed kid missing some front teeth.

"Look at Mims here. Too small. Not quite fast enough. Fumbles every third time he carries the ball." Mims tensed

as he waited to hear the rest. "But, by God, he'll hit you! And if you're dumb enough to get up too quick, he'll hammer you into the ground like a tent peg. Sure, he's ragged. Wastes lots of energy recovering from mistakes. We're working on that. That's what the coaches are for. But he's got what I can't give him. He won't quit. Next time we go over to the varsity field, watch the backs. Goodrich and Davis hate to see him line up at cornerback cause it's a goddam dogfight when they have to block him. When he doesn't make the tackle, he screws up everything so bad that somebody else can.

"It was the same way at Ole Miss. Most of you limping around feeling sorry for yourselves. Mims is so dumb he thought we were there to win a football game. Before long, they stopped running his side. But you don't win football games with a few breaking their asses to win and the rest waiting for the horn to blow."

"I've made some bad mistakes. That's why we got our faces rubbed in the dirt. I apologize to all of you. I started lots of people who are long on potential and short on pride. Should have known better. What you <u>can</u> <u>do</u>, but won't, never has been worth a damn. Men, when you look at our clipboards, you won't see a single roster of the first, second and third teams. They're in my wastebasket. We're starting all over. Right now."

He held us with his stare, wouldn't let us move while he waited for the quiet to harden his words. He looked us

over again, seeming to linger on those who had given up in the game. The stare, from pale gray eyes in a face harshly framed by his bulging neck and red hair cut in a short flat-top, was very much like a bulldog's.

We hurried through calesthentics and agility drills to spend the rest of practice on Oklahoma Drill--"the heart and guts of football" according to the coach. Each of the coaches set up a station, a two-yard gap between blocking dummies dropped flat on the ground. Instead of having us divide up on our own, they called for us by name, often first- and second-team players against each other.

The first man Bulldog called for was Palovik, an end who carried himself like a Tennessee walking horse, erect, muscular, fluid, confident to the verge of insolence. He knew he was one of the players the coach had been talking about, the gifted athletes who had not given their best. He couldn't hide his resentment as he walked to his position between the dummies. He had played on winning teams all his life, and it was no secret Vandy wasn't everything he wanted. Ohio State and Tennessee had shown some interest in him, but they had signed better prospects and he was left to do the best he could. Now he was at a school where every game was a challenge, every victory remarkable.

When the coach stood Owsley between the bags, Palovik jerked his head around to look at the coach, jerked around as if to catch whoever hit him in the head with a spitball. That was Bulldog's way of telling him to get with it or

bring a stadium cushion to the next game. Owsley was a raw-boned kid playing without a scholarship, without the first mention of one from anywhere. He was hard to figure. Tall and fairly strong, he used to have spells of clumsiness. Sometimes, when he would be knocking himself out to hustle, he would stumble, miss an assignment, or trip over a man he had just beaten. On other days he could trade licks and play football with almost anybody on the team. He had played behind Palovik all season, and Palovik made it clear he thought Owsley didn't deserve to be on the same team with him, much less compete for the same spot. He sneered and imitated Owsley's friendly manner and his slow drawl. Good day or bad, you could count on Owsley to hit Palovik every chance he got.

After what the coach had said, matching up these two was clearly supposed to illustrate his point.

They crouched in their stances, Palovik to drive Owsley out, Owsley to shed him and tackle the runner. With the snap of the ball came a violent crack of shoulder pads and arms along with the grunts of struggle. Arms pounded and legs churned, cleats clawing the hard ground.

Bulldog's brow tightened as he watched, studied the unequal parts of technique, strength and will that were mixed and hurled against each other. A shiver ran through his stomach, chest, and arms. He grunted under his breath and strained with them. He seemed impartial at first and must have thought he was; but when a couple of seconds had passed

and Owsley stood squarely in the gap, back arched and a forearm driven into Palovik's chest, Bliss almost smiled.

The grunting and churning whined to a higher pitch as the ball carrier rushed the jammed space. He hit Palovik's back, slid off, and tried to butt past Owsley, who caught his thigh on a shoulder pad. With more clashing they all fell in a heap. Bulldog blew his whistle and nodded slowly as he crossed his arms.

Palovik's roommate taunted, "Hey, don't let Slats hurt you, now."

Palovik, refusing to look at anybody, lined up again. First the nagging by the coach, then being embarrassed by that skinny old boy: Palovik had taken all he intended to. He lined up with the clear intent of making Owsley pay. In the set of his eyes and head it was obvious that he wanted to sting him, drive him flat on his back and bounce his helmet on the ground till his ears rang. While he waited, the sweat ran down his legs and shined in the hot sun, making every muscle in his calves distinct.

Again the ball was snapped, bodies crashed, bounced off each other, crashed, crashed again. The runner sprang through the gap slowed only by a lean arm. Palovik won that round but still missed the revenge he wanted.

"We-e-ell shit," muttered Owsley as he caught his breath. Returning to position, he knelt on one knee with his arm across the other and waited to go again. His arms stayed purplish brown with bruises, new ones appearing before

the old ones faded. Owsley dropped his head back to take a few breaths and blotted the bloody knuckles of his right hand against his pants. The cracking and growling of others filled our ears, broken only by occasional whistles. A growing cloud of dust filled the air over the field.

Again with the snap, the crack. Bulldog leaned toward them with the whistle clenched in his teeth, his hands locked on his knees. Palovik fired out low and level as a battering ram slung from ropes, priming himself in two short steps to explode into Owsley. With his feet wide apart and pumping, his shoulders aimed at thigh level, his head cocked back to drive his faceguard into Owsley's lowered chest, Palovik was the perfect combination of form and power--what line coaches look for every time the ball is snapped.

We had all seen him get serious before, seen him charge like a bull from behind a raised gate and trample a linebacker like a rodeo clown. Owsley himself had been plowed under a few times, but he had learned. The only way to fight off Palovik was to lunge at his chest and try to lift him with a blow. If he hit low enough and quick enough, he could shunt the charge upward and stand him up in the hole. Unable to match Palovik's strength, he relied on pure frenzy.

Owsley was the kind of kid recruiters love to watch but never offer a scholarship, the kind who has to push himself just to start in high school, who has to bust a gut to beat other average first-string players. Those guys whose best is barely enough in high school don't have a prayer in

college. The boy colleges look for is smooth, gaining strength faster than he knows how to use it, has always succeeded without straining too much. The college coaches get excited over undeveloped talent, can't wait to work the broad, untilled soil between performance and potential and raise champions. In Owsley's case, there wasn't enough space to raise a tomato plant. Still, he lined up on Palovik like a hammer going after a nail.

They collided, churning and grunting--Palovik expelling a long groan, Owsley answering with a shriek, part hog squeal, part Rebel yell. With that, Bulldog's face split into a quick smile. As Owsley shoved by Palovik, the runner popped into his chest, he clutched him, and again, they all fell in a flailing pile.

"Palovik, you want me to call him off?" asked Bliss.

Everybody knew Bulldog would start Mims against Kentucky. He had earned it as a substitute at Ole Miss. We also figured that Owsley and a couple of other walk-ons would get some playing time. Starting from scratch had fired them up. Most of us responded to the coach's challenge, but some bitched, complaining that Bulldog's basic football and all his Knute Rockne rah-rah were ridiculous. Some said they would suffer through the pep talks and his notions of "pure football" just to reach the varsity.

Everybody knew it was the freshman coach's main job to develop the Paloviks, to make the most of the guys with

the horsepower to help the varsity as sophomores. But Bulldog seemed to get a real charge out of seeing Mims and Owsley and a few others kick ass. Mims was one thing; at least he was on scholarship. But nobody thought Bliss would actually start walk-ons against Kentucky. The varsity coaches, eager to see how next year's material could perform in a game, would raise all kinds of hell.

Hardeman must have had the athletic offices bugged. He was the first to pass the word on the reaction to Bulldog's starting line-up. He told Owsley as we dressed after practice.

"Coach is a fair man. He's doing right by you. If anybody deserves to start Friday, you do. But you ought to know what's going on. He's got his ass in a sling over y'all."

"What are you getting at?" asked Owsley.

"When Phillips heard what Bulldog's gonna do, he pitched a damn fit. He wants to see the people he recruited on that field. He's already got next season on his mind. Getting whipped to shit every week ain't so bad when he can tell himself he's got some studs coming next year.

"He don't want to go to that game and see a bunch of psyched-up little kamikazes in gold pants. He wants to see the guys who can cut it for three years of SEC ball. He's foaming at the mouth. He don't give a shit if they <u>deserve</u> to play or not. Far as he's concerned, it's Bulldog's job to get the right boys on the field, one way or another.

"Coach is screwing himself bad. Y'all can't save him from himself, but you gotta do all you can to help him out." He paused, looking at his hands in his lap. "Don't even know why I bothered you," he sighed. "Eat your Wheaties, son. Eat your Wheaties."

Owsley knew he didn't have a future in football, but he couldn't resist taking a crack at it. Whatever he achieved now was that much more beyond his potential. He was eager to start the game, but he wondered if Bliss knew what he was doing after all.

We had heard the story of Bulldog Bliss from one of his assistants who lived in our dorm. Bliss had not followed the typical career of a jock. Apparently, he never intended to go into coaching or try pro ball. Like Vanderbilt, Temple wasn't exactly a proving ground for the pros. Besides, at five-nine and one-eighty, he was too small to hope for much in college. A linebacker who is that short isn't supposed to be able to see what's going on. But he was a regular wild man, lettered three years. Nobody could say whether "Bulldog" came from how he played or how he looked; it fit either way.

He went to work for Westinghouse, got married, had a child, took on the whole suburban routine. Stayed with it for years. For some reason he quit his job and started coaching in a Pennsylvania coal town. He won quite a few games, but his wife wasn't impressed. He lost her. Within a few years he had worked his way up to Staunton Military

Academy, where he kept on winning. Phillips liked his style and hired him to recruit and coach the Vanderbilt freshmen.

It sounded like the story of more than one preacher that we knew of, men who, in their thirties, gave up their careers and went to seminary. It took a while to realize that Bulldog sometimes resembled a preacher when he talked.

Once, when practice was going badly and the coach swore, grumbled, and got redder in the face with every play that was run, he stopped everything and called us up. That day is still vivid because we figured we would be running stadium steps till it was too dark to see. We had done that before. But this time Bliss just talked, no harangue, no punishment.

He paced, looking at the ground and then off at the sun sliding behind the stadium. He stood for a while until nobody breathed hard anymore and there was silence except for the noise of five-o'clock traffic beyond the fence and whistles from the varsity field. His face was no longer red but reflective and pained. We had gathered around him, kneeling and unhelmeted. Slowly, he looked at each of us. His eyes burned until the rest of his hardened face seemed to exist only as a background. They burned with the anguish of a saint's eyes in a medieval painting.

There was none of the usual hoarse roar in his voice, which was now so soft that some would have liked to ask him to speak up. He meditated more than he exhorted, as if to view that afternoon in terms of a lifetime. He said a

little about our next game but seemed to have much more on his mind. In the same tone but more intensely, he concluded: "Don't be blind to what you've got here. It will be all over soon. It's pure and there's nothing else like it. Here you make one whole thing of your body and mind and commit yourself. The football field is the last place you'll ever be where the goals are clear, the penalties are just, and the rewards are complete."

We followed him from the field at a distance. Some questioned, some snickered. Most of us said nothing at all.

Brassy music echoed across the empty seats and concrete of Dudly Field. In our helmets and satiny breeches of deep gold and black jerseys, we ran into the glare of floodlights led by the Commodore waving a cutlass above his plumed hat. From a jostling mass at the gate, we funnelled into a single file and circled for exercises. With all the noise, color, and crisp movement, it felt like we were prepared for something more than just a game. Bulldog walked outside the circle, talking to us, laughing, slapping backs, full of the same clean exhilaration we felt. We began, counted loudly for each exercise, clapped and shouted in between, and soon released small billows of steam into the cold air. He kept walking and inhaled the sweet air tinged with lime, adhesive tape, and sweat.

Whatever went on between him and Phillips, Bulldog hadn't budged; the starting teams hadn't changed. Whatever

price he had paid to keep it that way seemed to suit him just fine. His eyes glittered in the lights, and the smile that we had seen only a few times before was constant that night. To look at him, nobody would have guessed that his fate was sealed, that his career as a college coach would end with that game. It must have been a great temptation for him to say something about it to us, but he never did. All we knew for sure was that something had happened and he was a happy man.

There has never been a night quite like that one. Pure joy and frenzy.

Kentucky won the toss and received the ball. Mims took it on himself to set the pace. On the kick-off he ran down the field fast enough to pass for somebody else, knocked the runner down like cord wood crashing off a dump truck, and dislocated his own shoulder. Bulldog never was one for razzle-dazzle, but that night he even skipped the obligatory half dozen fancy plays that Vanderbilt and Tulane always tried in the hope of slipping in a touchdown or two to keep from being embarrassed with a shutout. He didn't call twenty different plays all night, but each time a play came up again, the execution was more intense. Not so much better as more intense. When we missed blocks on the first shot, we chased our men, butting, throwing body blocks, pursuing until hounding was almost as good as blocking. Maybe because defense takes less skill, we looked better when they had the ball. We seldom had an individual tackle; instead,

the Kentucky runners were met by converging tacklers and the announcer finally gave up and called the name of the first man whose number he could make out. "Kamikazes!" Hardeman kept on roaring and laughing.

Bulldog clapped his hands, ran up and down the sideline, pulled us aside for a few shouted words--carrying on like that field in its island of glaring light was the only real thing in a dark world.

Finally, with a long pass when less than a minute remained in the game, Kentucky beat us 7-0.

In the locker room, Bulldog looked each one of us in the eye and shook hands. He said he was proud to be our coach. We had played a fine game and had nothing to be ashamed of. A slight smile stayed on his face as he talked, shaking hands, asking about our injuries. He was happy on his own terms, but that wasn't enough. If he could risk playing the ones who deserved to start, we should have been able to give a victory to the man who deserved it, who lived the game, body and soul. He was a happy man, but it was hard as hell to look at his face without crying.

At practice on the following Monday, the B-team coach took charge of us. Bulldog had told Phillips what he planned to do and had done it. Phillips had said it would cost him his job the minute he left the field. Both men were true to their word.

Mims, his shoulder mended, came out for football the following year and was red-shirted. He had expected as much,

but he finally figured out that football was more a business than a game over on the varsity field. Victory, when it came, was not the reward for total effort; it was the payoff for calculated investment. He said it was no fun without Bulldog and gave up his scholarship at the end of the season.

Others fared as you might imagine. Hardeman flunked out and went home to Virginia, where he played ball and drank beer at some little school for the next three years. Owsley didn't play after that year, knew he wouldn't if he wasn't offered a scholarship. He went full-speed-ahead to becoming a lawyer, made the Dean's List a few times, and went to law school at Tennessee. Palovik made All-SEC for two years. When he was a senior, Chicago drafted him in the tenth round, so he quit school and got on with his life. The rest of us behaved as becomes Vanderbilt athletes, who are, after all, gentlemen, even if we looked a little out of place among the rich kids. We played ball, got our degrees, and took responsible jobs.

Bulldog went back into the hills east of Vanderbilt to coach at a country high school. He and the farmboys are getting on well, winning their share of games. Those boys don't know much about football or the world at large, but they know heart.

THE POETRY AND WOES OF SEBASTIAN CHANG

Sebastian was becoming the complete soldier. In stiffly starched fatigues and spit-shined paratrooper boots, he looked as if he were wearing his big brother's uniform. But he had earned it, and he never pushed his hand into a starched sleeve and heard the crisp tearing sound without satisfaction. There was a sparkling magic in boot toes and a belt buckle that reflected the world with the sharpness of a new mirror.

He inhaled the scent of pines as he stood outside the compound gate then smiled slowly, like a child entering a flower garden. He came from the University of Hawaii with a literature degree and an infantry commission and planned to leave Ft. Benning wearing parachutist's wings on his chest and the Ranger tab on his shoulder. He ran his fingers over the hard weave of the canvas duffle bag which leaned against his leg. The familiar texture and smell soothed him.

All through college he had looked forward to these months, even to this minute which had a taste of its own: the mixture of clay dust and pine needles. Shining shoes and brass, going on field exercises, studying tactics, reading military history--all to be the good soldier, the man of action in desperate times. It disturbed him that men who

enjoyed the arts were considered weaklings. He could read both Keats and MacArthur and be the better for it.

He took pride in his sonnets. The death sonnets flourished grand images to show death losing its sting before the shield of courage. The ones on love enshrined an imaginary woman, who sounded much like Annabel Lee and was fashioned after a counterculture art major who sat across from him in his Romantic poetry class. She was a pale blonde slightly taller than Sebastian who was fond of talking about the "gut feelings" of Wordsworth and the "repressive establishment garbage" which Byron had to contend with. He didn't like what she said but was convinced that she could be mollified by the right kind of man. He also wrote an occasional letter to the campus paper on the role of the United States in Vietnam.

His father cut out the essays and saved them, proud of his son's willingness to take an unpopular stand on campus. When the Communist army overran his ancestral lands and destroyed the family fortune, the elder Chang left Cambridge to take a commission in Chiang Kai-shek's army. He fought for three years and was twice decorated for bravery before Chang was pushed out of the Chinese mainland. Unlike most of the Nationalists, he had a chance to go somewhere besides Taiwan, and he joined his cousin's accounting firm in Honolulu. Sebastian sensed that his father was still bitter, still longed to go back, fight again, and win. His father had seldom mentioned the war in Sebastian's childhood, but

when he did, he often ended saying, "Everyone speaks of principles, only those who act have them."

After Officers' Basic and Jump School, Sebastian faced Ranger School. The first two made their demands in rather a gentlemanly way. Ranger School was wreathed in a folklore all its own. It was commonly known as "the meanest mother on the block" and "the ultimate ass-kicker." Even those who dismissed the whole thing as senseless suffering noticed the tab on a uniform. For Sebastian it was the most manly initiation rite left in a soft society. It was the ultimate preparation for a leader, and it lured him even more than it scared him.

He shouldered his duffle bag and walked through the compound gate which bore the arched motto Rangers lead the way. He expected the double-time frenzy of processing, but all the yelling seemed needless. The heavy south Georgia air quaked with shouted orders and responses, running steps, and slamming doors--giving Sebastian the feeling that he was late before he ever started. The atmosphere of his company area reminded him of the beginning of summer football practice when the other boys clattered by the tennis court in their cleats. Most of the lieutenants and enlisted men dashing around him were near his age, and most had the bearing of athletes, the gristly, square-shouldered look of halfbacks, wrestlers, woodsmen, and mountaineers. Added to this, their shorn heads and abrupt movements gave them a predatory quality, as if one who fell in the rush might be

devoured by the pack.

Sebastian took his place in a line of men that advanced by twos into the tactical officers' quarters. Two captains sat at a table. One was a blue-eyed blond with a sharp jaw who looked better suited for an SS uniform than the starched fatigues he wore. The other was much older, a black man whose face had been creased by years in the ranks and whose left forearm was shiny with shrapnel scars. Both exuded contempt.

Sebastian and his "Ranger buddy" were next outside the door. The pairing of buddies to face the weeks ahead appeared to be the only kindness offered by the designers of the course. Most of the pairs knew each other and had agreed to go it together before they arrived. Those who came unattached, like Sebastian, had partners assigned. His was a thirtyish artillery captain who had decided that the Ranger tab would give the needed boost to his career. They had stood together in strict silence and watched others being sent out of the door repeatedly to do push-ups and go to the back of the line.

The artilleryman knocked on the door jamb as the rest had before they went in to begin the mysterious interview. Chandler's knock was answered with an impatient "Come in," and both ran inside.

"Ranger Chandler reporting, sir."

"Ranger, you sound off pretty good. I heard that all right. But who was that pecking at my door?" Sebastian

stood beside Chandler and waited for the black officer to finish before he announced himself.

"Me, sir. I knocked," Chandler nearly shouted.

"No, Ranger, you didn't knock. You pecked! And if a pecker-wood didn't have no more strength than that, he'd starve before he dug out a bug. You all mouth and no arm strength?"

"No, sir!"

"Then drop on down and give me thirty."

"One, sir, Two, sir. . ."

For the third time Sebastian started to announce himself. Before he could, the white captain pounced.

"Who are you? Are you lost? Did you stumble in here on your way to camp?"

"Chang, sir," Sebastian sputtered.

"Who Chang? Charlie Chang?"

"Sebastian Lewis Chang!"

"Like I thought. You are on your way to camp. We don't make belts and beanies here."

"Lieutenant Chang, sir!"

"Chang, put this down as your first lesson. There are no first names here. No ranks here. You are Ranger Chang! Nothing more and maybe less."

The events of the afternoon tumbled over each other rapidly. The echo of counted-out push-ups caromed between old wooden barracks and the pine forest. Sebastian hurried through the various stages of paperwork and equipment issue

trying to stay one step ahead of the next reprimand. After chow came an hour of orientation in the bleachers, then the whole class of two hundred dispersed into platoon meetings.

When they returned to the barracks, the tac officers gave the requirements for preparing equipment. And all of them had to be met between dismissal at 2200 and the morning formation at 0400. Those who were the most adept at rigging gear, cleaning rifles, and oiling boots could hope for four hours of sleep. Most got less. Well past midnight Sebastian sat on his bunk sewing two luminous strips on the back of his cap. Each strip was to be fastened with twelve stitches, each tied off with a square knot. Most of the men gave up precision for speed. Not Sebastian. He held his cap close to his contorted face and wrestled each strand of thread into place.

As he sat in the silence in the long room brimful of the odors of oil, musty nylon, and canvas, Jackson's closing words for the evening came back over Chandler's snoring. "Some of you like to play soldier but don't want to live it. Some of you don't belong under my roof. There's no room for candy-asses in these woods. Just the Rangers and the animals. Remember, when you start dragging and feeling sorry for yourself, it's only pain. It'll go away. But what you do here won't go away. It'll be in you like a tattoo for the rest of your life." When he was through with his sewing, Sebastian leaned against the foot rail of his bunk and didn't move until Chandler woke him for formation.

Though the men wouldn't have believed it, the first morning was much easier than those to follow. They began with a physical proficiency test which called for crawling, running, and other skills considered a measure of combat readiness. Sebastian had prepared for this with regular runs for a month and outstripped Chandler who clearly had not.

The first test was followed by the water survival test. Each man had to carry his rifle and swim fifteen meters in uniform and boots. Uniform for the test included ammo pouches and canteens. The swimmers quickly discovered that they could swap a few pounds of water for two quarts of buoyancy by emptying their canteens. But there was simply no way to make a flotation device out of the eight-pound M-14 rifle. It had to be clutched to the side with one arm while the other side-stroked. Those who kicked and stroked slowly could keep their noses just above the surface; those who thrashed about fighting weight and water never lasted for more than a few meters.

Sebastian was uneasy because his turn came before he was quite ready. He was confident that he would do well if he could study the technique of the successful men, all of whom swam so near to going under that each panting stroke appeared to be their last. He felt the growing sensation that he was witnessing one drowning after another with the victims miraculously climbing out at the far end of the pool. The message he heard passed on from all the dripping

men, whose boots sloshed until they emptied them and wrang out their socks, was, "Don't fight it. Keep your nose just out of the water."

This was so unexpected, so different from Jump School. There everyone had to deal with the fear of lunging into open space. Jumping bothered him more than most, but he found a way to deal with it. To make himself jump from the thirty-four foot tower, he would assume the prescribed position (knees bent, palms on the outer surface of the door, head and eyes straight out) and then pinch his eyes shut and leap wildly when he felt the go slap on his hip. The sunburned sergeants squinting up at him from below were always shouting as soon as he felt the jerk of his harness.

He remembered one. Sliding down the cable, he heard, "Lieutenant, I seen chickens git their necks wrung with more control than you got." Only at the end of the day, after the inevitable push-ups and extra jumps, could he reflect on the pity that the bellowing crew-cut man didn't appreciate his own metaphor.

Despite all the shouting and punishment exercises to correct his technique, Sebastian flailed out into the air again and again with a blind determination to win his wings. Rather than risk freezing in the door, he would dive out and fall head over heels until, like the fabled chickens, he felt his body snatched upward by the opening of his chute. This twisted his lines so that he spun around dizzily most of the way down. Still, the method worked; each time he

became a little more frantic until he had made his five jumps.

"What you waiting on, Ranger?"

There was nobody between him and the choppy water. He closed his eyes as he threw himself as far out over the water as possible, trying to cross most of the distance in the air. He sank deeper than he had expected to and surfaced in search of the far end, fourteen meters away. Shouting in his mind not to fight it, he took several quick strokes and did well to stay up, much less make progress. The water which covered one side of his face soon engulfed his nose. He stroked wildly, wishing for the use of his other arm, went under, pushed off from the bottom, and continued to work for the finish line. He swallowed water until he choked and had to reach for the safety line.

He fought it the second time and lost. Before the third try Chandler told him to empty his canteens. When Sebastian complained that it wouldn't be honest, Chandler did it for him. He resolved that he would succeed or drown, swimming much of the distance under water. On reaching the edge he felt others pull him out and slap him on the back. He stood shakily and almost fell back in.

While others pinched themselves to stay awake in classes and avoid push-ups, he wrote letters in the pocket pad where he was expected to take notes, letters to his parents in Honolulu, to his sister, and to his girlfriend. Maybe she wasn't really his girlfriend since he had only taken her

to one movie and the senior dance, but he had no doubt that she would be at the airport with his parents to meet him when he went home on leave braced in his tailored uniform.

He asked her to save the letters as a "chronicle of this ritual of stress and survival." He wrote of his daily experiences, grew prouder of how his descriptive passages expressed the spirit of the training, and soon progressed from "Dear Cathy" to "My Dearest Cathy." He couldn't help musing on how a letter from Byron must have been all the more entrancing when it came from the battlefront in Greece. He savored the manly reserve he would display when he saw her again and she questioned him eagerly and, like Desdemona, loved him for the dangers that he had passed. They would be good for each other.

While the students were being run and marched from before dawn till after midnight in order to eliminate the unfit and grind down the rest, the classes in navigation, communication, and tactics were being worked in as quickly as they could run to them. Everyone would have to lead combat patrols successfully for his tab. This and the sweet sadness on Cathy's face as she found no more letters in her mailbox were often on his mind.

The black mornings began with runs which always led to the obstacle course. It was laid out beneath floodlights that glared across a nightmare of mud, poles, and ropes. By the morning of the sixth day Sebastian assured himself that things had gotten as bad as they could. Of the thirty-eight

men in his platoon, six had already been eliminated by injury or harassment.

Blisters, pulled muscles, and infected cuts were so common as to be ignored. To him they seemed as much a part of proper uniform as the fatigues stripped of insignia and the short-brimmed patrolling caps. Sebastian told himself it would all look different from inside the uniform that bore his own tab. Chandler grumbled that he would rather stay a captain the rest of his life than go through two months of this. The only thing that kept him there was the shame of going home empty-handed.

He spoke to Sebastian as he laced his boots. "Every morning I tell myself the worst is over, they're going to stop trying to kill us and just make us leaders. They want fuckin track stars. Get three hours sleep. Run till you puke your guts out. Then get shit all day long. I pushed a detention barracks in Korea. We treated thugs better."

Sebastian sighed, "It's got to be better. They've got to have somebody left for the mountains."

"Hands so screwed up I can't tie my boots. Blisters on one side, cuts on the other."

"It's hard to keep things in perspective."

"Face it Chang. Those bastards eat this up. They aren't happy till somebody doubles over screaming."

Today the sergeant said three miles. They all knew that meant nearly four. He turned on his flashlight and led the formation down the blacktop road. A jeep followed with

its lights shining through the ranks. He gave the command to double-time and was at a dead run in a few strides. The regular thud of boots in step broke down. Sebastian felt throbbing, like that of catching flu, surge through his body. With the first long hill steady breathing splintered to gasps, stomachs twisted, thighs numbed. Chandler dropped back from beside him.

"Get your ass back in formation. Chicken shit!"

Several knew that they couldn't hold that pace for long and gave up, falling behind to have their weakness spotlighted by the jeep. Sebastian tried to hypnotize himself with the bobbing heads that rippled before him. Most of the formation made it through the second mile, even though many of them leaned forward awkwardly and flailed their arms trying to stay up. Occasionally one would fall as if to prove he had gone his limit. Each hill took out a few more. Sebastian forced his legs forward and told himself that it would all be over in a few minutes. He crested a hill and saw the obstacle course a half mile away. As they started up the last hill, the pace quickened as it always did. He joined in the gasps that became groans.

Sebastian's legs melted and the group flowed quickly ahead of him like a current leaving a branch behind. At the rear of the group he felt himself lurch forward. Locke and Edwards had grabbed him.

"Come on, Chang."

"Don't let the bastards see you quit."

One on either side, they had him by the belt, adding his strain to theirs.

"No, don't ruin yourselves."

They carried much of his weight until they reached the top of the last rise. Each step that was eased with their help was made unbearable by his guilt.

"Make it now?"

"Yeah. Go on."

He struggled to feel his legs, make them move faster. He focused on the lights and leaned toward them and fell headlong. The smell of exhaust came before he realized how close the headlights were. The jeep stopped a few feet from where he lay breathing convulsively. He knew he must get up, but the strength was wrenched out of him with each breath. He couldn't feel his bloody elbows and only sensed his legs as a heavy numbness when he rose.

"Ranger! That was a stupid thing to do. What you doing, diving for the touchdown? You're ninety yards short."

Sebastian shuffled on to the obstacle course. For the record he might as well have dropped out in the first mile.

He stood trembling at the end of the line that never was long enough for him to catch his breath before coming to the chin-ups. Next was the low crawl beneath barbed wire. It was laid out through a mud wallow which made hands too slick to get a good grip on the horizontal ladder, causing him and others to fall into the water below the rungs. The

clay bank always threw him back once or twice before he slid over it. He fell back and heard "Goddammit, Chang!" without knowing who said it, then was shoved over the top.

He trotted on to climb the slippery high rail fence, crawl through a culvert, and lunge at a climbing rope which swung over more water. He didn't know how to pinch the rope between his feet and only got halfway up. When his grip failed, he slid down the rope and was flipped over backwards when his buttocks hit the knot at the bottom. With a humor born of despair, Sebastian's muddy comrades cheered his acrobatics as he surfaced in the brown water. He grinned and shrugged to acknowledge their applause. Others slipped too, did push-ups with him until they could only lock their arms and wait as the sun rose.

The exhaustion of each day spilled into the next until the strongest men could not think beyond the next meal. The night's sleep ended before it refreshed, and the day's exertion continued as though the morning run took different shapes but never ended until midnight. The ambition that brought most men there was not enough to keep them. Alone no one could endure the pressure, physically or mentally. Individuality dissolved in the flow of sweat and darkness, and Sebastian joined the flow desperately. The arrogant were learning their first humility. The weak were resented as a burden to the group but were often helped because everyone knew that his own weakness would soon be found. Only those who whined or gave up were abandoned. Sebastian

did neither.

To cover for others' mistakes, men who seldom thought of lying before did it with the poise of con artists. Though he would only lie for someone else's sake, he admired the artful deception of the conspirators around him. He often smiled at his membership in this fraternity of liars, the first fraternity he had belonged to.

It began to bother Sebastian that Chandler seldom spoke at all. On the ninth day Chandler asked to go on sick call because of blistered heels. The tac officers laughed and told him to go and check everyone else's and come back if his were worse. He grumbled to Sebastian that they had gone beyond the limits of what should be tolerated "even in a concentration camp like this." Before the next run, the fifth in a row that he obviously could not finish, Chandler announced to Snell that he was "a captain in the United States Army" and had "swallowed all the flagrant insults" he intended to. Sebastian urged him to reconsider.

When he came back to shower before breakfast and looked for Chandler, all he found was a patrolling cap under the bunk. For the first time Sebastian felt alone, alone with the fear that he might break too.

After ten days the routine of waking up to run and wrestle with the obstacle course changed. He was sure things would improve. Thirty-six men having been purged from a class of two hundred, the strain had served its purpose. He didn't notice the stares he got from those who

assumed he would never last this long. Forced marches and patrols usually lasted the night, and they got what sleep there was in the woods between dawn and breakfast. More than once he awoke walking behind someone and didn't know how he got there. As the daily tactics classes became more complex, the number of ways for a patrol leader to fail became more obvious.

He shared the common dread of being startled from a walking daze in the middle of the night to hear the accusing words, "You're in charge now, Ranger. Where are we? What you gonna do now, Ranger?" Ranger was inflected bitterly, more like a taunt than a title. The tone emphasized that the conduct of a few crucial hours would determine the outcome of the whole course. He had already failed his first patrol.

When the day came to climb into the trucks for the trip north, a savage pride filled the shouts and laughter which rang out until the convoy rumbled away and rocked them to sleep. Sebastian only smiled and fell asleep before the trucks reached the highway.

Those who finished the first phase without buddies were paired off with new ones in the mountains. Sebastian's new partner was Cane, a muscular young sergeant whose buddy had also dropped out. When Sebastian introduced himself and began telling Cane how much he looked forward to the cool weather and colorful leaves, he grunted. He had heard how Sebastian's patrol missed the objective by nearly a kilometer.

After a couple of days of climbing ridges by holding onto saplings and sliding helplessly down rock faces in the dark, the Rangers surrendered whatever hope they had of relief. But Sebastian still told himself that it would improve. The patrols lasted several days at a time, and meals were cut to two C-rations a day. The combination of fatigue and hunger would "simulate the stress of leadership in a combat situation."

The highlight of a mission was attacking a base camp to find a compassionate enemy who lay in temporary death with a can of cookies placed on his chest. The one time this happened to Sebastian, he insisted on shaking the dead man's hand and almost exposed his spoils to the tac officer.

Soon it was Cane's turn to lead a patrol, and the mission was to destroy a radar site. When the patrol reached the top of the next ridge, he halted them and sent out two men to make a close reconnaissance of the objective while he studied the area and put in a call for artillery support. In every move Sebastian could see that he was a leader who would succeed. He doubted that Cane even remembered this was all make-believe. There was a job to do and men had to be led and controlled. When one of the men didn't respond to an order to move along a different approach route, Cane ran over and shoved him to the proper course. Sebastian thought he could have been firm without being harsh.

When the attack was finally launched, the usual exuberance rose. The noise of gunfire and shouting was always a

relief after hours of silent struggle with the terrain. There was also the hope of finding edible booty. Sebastian noticed that there was a primitive joy that must have accompanied the hunts of prehistoric man. The shrieks, the swift savagery, the perfect triumph of the kill. Controlling this chaotic rush was Cane's plan of attack as he maneuvered his unit by shouts and hand signals. The operation was devastating, a paradigm of ruthless efficiency. Neither Sebastian nor anyone else doubted that a real enemy would have fallen before them just as surely as the support troops had.

When the mission was concluded and a new leader was named, Cane and Sebastian were back together. He complimented the sergeant on his success, but Cane only smiled. Sebastian asked if he would give him a few pointers on making out the patrol order, confiding that he admired his sound planning and decisiveness during contact.

Cane's reply was less than he had hoped for. "I follow the field manual and kick ass till the job's done."

Sebastian was determined to have a conversation as they ate before moving out again. Cane spooned out his canned ham and eggs in big chunks, seeming not to taste it. He was watching a squirrel climb a tree, squinting one eye as if to kill with the first shot, not hearing Sebastian's thoughtful, dinner-table sentences.

Sebastian poised his spoon over a precious can of peaches, "You know, this is the hardest thing I've ever done. But there's no doubt I'm better for it. It's rough

now, but that tab will be worth it. Besides, I owe it to the men I'll command in Vietnam. In perspective, it's not all bad."

"Well I'll be shit," grunted Cane as he stomped a can flat and walked away.

Once the survivors had reached the mountains, even the least motivated had invested too much work to lose it all to injury without bitterness. Men who had stumbled through continuous night cursing briar thickets and swamps, sheer slopes and loose rocks--all with the growing resolve that they could be killed but not beaten--hated to lose one of their number, whether they liked him or not. When the latest casualty limped to the truck to leave, he would be congratulated on going home, but nobody was surprised if he cried. Sebastian felt this, tried to explain it to his parents in a letter.

When his turn came to carry the radio or machine gun, he pushed himself to keep from falling behind. Often he had to trot to hold his place in formation. Everyone fell occasionally: he fell continually. Cane called his long descents "one big tumble." Sebastian decided after a few days that when the falls came, he would use them to the best advantage. Rather than struggling against them, he would let himself go. After all, he lacked the strength to prevent them, and as long as he fell forward, he was assured of keeping up.

One afternoon after he rolled through yellow leaves to

the end of a typical descent, he pulled himself up and noticed Cane nearby. He caught his breath to speak as they walked on together.

"Hasn't been a bad day, huh, Cane?"

"Bout like the rest," he replied around the twig in his mouth.

"I mean, we got a little sleep. Patrol is squared away. Even the leaves are pretty. Sort of a bonus."

Cane's jaw tensed with Sebastian's words. The column stopped for a map check, then the halt lengthened when a new leader took over. The partners lay within a few feet of each other on perimeter guard, looking down into an orange valley.

"Chang, tell me something."

"Sure," he said, eager to get his mind off his left knee, the knee he had bruised so often that it stayed swollen.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"What's wrong? Think I'm too close to the trail?"

"For Christsakes, Chang. What the fuckin hell you doing here? In these mountains? In Ranger School? In the army?"

"I don't follow."

"That's for damn sure. You're getting whipped all to shit. Damn near dead. Can't keep up. Can't lead a patrol. Instead of giving a patrol order, you tell us to sit around a circle and 'contribute ideas.' Like a fuckin student

council."

"I'm just trying to work with everybody else. Trying to do a good job," he offered.

"Trying ain't shit. Doing's what counts. I been watching you. Know how many times you fell on your ass in the last four hours?"

"A few, I guess," he admitted, clearly hurt. He stared at the stream in the darkening valley.

"You busted your ass six times. And you done good today."

"I can take it," Sebastian squeezed from his filling throat and still stared, seeking comfort in the dim water.

"That's right. You will take it. Never seen the like. Take it and get nothing for it. Then you'll go to Nam and keep on falling on your ass. But there it ain't bruises. It's body bags. Stinking and O. D. green.

"I had a platoon leader nearly dumb as you. Carried that fucker two days. He played John Wayne in a firefight. A little gook with a big AK blew the shit right out of his head. When we was pulled out, I had so much blood on me you'd of thought I's killing hogs. Why don't you get out of here and save yourself a world of misery?"

Sebastian stared at the stream, waiting for it to wash the lieutenant's blood out of his mind.

The third phase was in the swamplands of northern Florida to approximate Vietnam. The terrain was less severe, but the patrols were always in water. Having failed the

first two patrols, Sebastian knew how important the next one would be. He dealt with his depression by planning out his future success in detail. He swore that he would out-Cane Cane. Nobody would be carrying him.

His next turn came at night, in a knee-deep swamp. At least there was a full moon. For some reason he got off to a passable start. His patrol order was nearly adequate and less polite than usual. At the end of each segment, he glanced at Cane. The movement through water, which occasionally swelled to swift streams, was slow and tiring, but soon fell into a slogging rhythm.

Sebastian looked around him at the splashing figures in a close file and concluded that he was in control. It was his patrol, and it was succeeding by his leadership. He had a clear plan, they were on course, and he had no doubt that this was the beginning of success. He swelled with a deep breath as he continued to jerk his feet out of the mud with each step. It amused him to think that even struggle can assume a rhythm that makes it graceful. He wondered whether the laboring column seemed graceful because he understood it or because he was too tired to know better.

Some of his old dread returned as they began to cross a bone-chilling stream that ran deeper than most. Locke followed him in the radioman's customary position. There was a surprisingly strong current surging nearly to the waist as the men entered it and caught their breath. Sebastian forded the water with Locke behind. As the water rose above his

belt, the shock took his breath completely. He had been in so much water for so long that he doubted he would ever go swimming again.

He heard a sudden thrashing and turned to see Locke up to his neck in the water. Sebastian waded back to him.

"What's wrong?"

"Twisted my ankle." Locke stood and the ankle gave way. He fell slightly forward and Sebastian steadied him. "I'll be okay. Let's get out of this damned flood."

"Here. Give me your pack."

"Are you crazy? It's all you can do to make it yourself."

"Dammit, Locke, this is my patrol. Give me your pack. Now!"

"All right, all right." Locke shrugged off his pack.

Sebastian struggled with the straps until he had one arm wrapped in them and slung the pack from his shoulder. It was as much beneath the water as above, but he was adamant.

"Edwards, give Locke a hand." Edwards grinned at Locke, shook his head, and grabbed an arm. He looked ahead ten feet and saw Sebastian in the middle of the current.

Sebastian looked back and smiled as he continued to battle the extra weight. The men and their problems belonged to him. Locke had saved him once, or tried to save him. Now it was his turn. He had said to himself over and over, "It's only pain," until he believed it. He was

convinced he could stand anything for two more weeks, but just enduring wasn't enough.

By God, he would be the man of action in desperate times. The pain and discouragement would pass, and he would have something to be proud of for the rest of his life. He wouldn't just endure, he would beat it. Though it was all he could do to carry the extra pack and stand up, the weight felt good. Nobody required him to carry it or even thought he could. It was what he as leader thought was necessary. Just because he had thoughts and feelings that never touched Cane didn't mean that he couldn't accomplish the mission. He would do it and do it his way.

The current startled him with a sudden grab at the pack and began to pull it from his shoulder. He gritted his teeth and countered by holding the straps tighter and digging his heels into the muddy bottom, leaning against the flow that much harder. The stream pushed him a few feet. He dug in again, this time slipping with the second step and falling forward until his face hit the water before he righted himself. He had given the water a good fight and felt entitled to some success, but it seemed to surge against him harder with each step.

He felt himself being pulled overwhelmingly downstream and shuddered with the feeling. But he still stood against it. A few more feet and he would be out of the current. He could get on with the business of leading his patrol. Extra pack, injured man and all, it was his to master. He was

closer now than ever to a victory and refused to let go until it was his. He actually loved the fight and what he fought. Surrounded by water and his own controlled fear, he was exhilarated by the contest.

He lost his footing again, and again he kicked and flailed to regain control, but couldn't. A new force swelled in the current. He thought it would soon pass or he would find footing below or a branch above and continued the fight, always tightening his grip on the straps in one hand and his rifle in the other.

The water splashed over his nose. He sputtered and jerked to get above it, swallowed some, spit, and rose again. He was surprised to see the other men far upstream. They were shouting frantically. Locke and others were trying to outswim the current and reach him. They were afraid for him. He knew he had their respect, the respect that a leader of men had to have. It was all so close--the objective, the tab, and Cathy's smile at the airport. This was what he had come for, the struggle amid the dazzle of moonlight on churning water. It was the essence of life.

As he tried to plant another step toward the bank, his feet were completely swept from the bottom. He felt himself carried swiftly under. The full moon dimmed above him. The water wouldn't allow a breath. It roared over him and grew louder as the moon melted away.

BLESSED ASSURANCE

The preacher held the microphone in one hand, the thunder of his voice splitting the thick July darkness, and waved the other hand high above his head until time to bring it down with the suddenness of lightning. The yellow lights of the concession stand glowed on the red-and-chrome sparkle of the tailgate which supported his right foot.

Whether rain was in the forecast or not, Jake Burrows had one of his boys put a new coat of wax on his Silverado truck every Friday. Everything had to be just right when he pulled into the shaded front yard of a farmhouse for the Saturday auction, but supplying Brother Bob with his truck and loudspeakers tonight meant more to him than making a sale. He sat down on the wheel well and kept the speaker from squealing while the preacher filled intermission at the US 41 Drive-In with the wrath of God. Smiling the hard-jawed smile of a man working toward sure success, he kept adjusting the knobs of his amplifier to help out all he could.

The 41 had it coming. Brother Bob had attacked its panting features from the pulpit, then he had even tried to talk the manager into playing a few PG movies and seeing if his business didn't hold up. Nothing conventional had

worked, so now he was "declaring guerilla warfare in the name of Christ."

In the spirit of a tradition which somehow mingled the Apostle Paul with Rogers' Rangers, Bob directed Jake to maneuver the truck into position under the cover of darkness so that he occupied the dominant hilltop when the lights came on. Several squinting people, mostly boys in their late teens, climbed the terraced hill on their way for more cokes, popcorn, and prophylactics. Some snickered when they realized what was going on, but many returned to their cars for fear of being scolded by name. Brother Bob had followed the football games and plays at Hatton High so closely in the last three years that he could recognize many kids who had never been to his church.

He was at once popular and dangerous. He was so much into everything that senior boys out for all the corrupting experiences they were entitled to had to be on the lookout for him. One week earlier, he had stood outside the Gotta Linga asking boys with bleary eyes if it would be worth it in the morning. The joke among the other ministers was that he had turned his flock at First Baptist into a pack of Christian wolves. In Hatton that was more a compliment than an insult.

Knowing that turning off the lights and starting the movie in a hurry was his only chance for selling a little cold popcorn, the manager yelled at his pimply projectionist until the preacher stood in the flickering light of a nude

woman's body.

"Your body is the temple of the Lord. Don't make yourselves and others cheap. Everybody is talking about all kinds of pollution. Well what about sex pollution? Every time a movie like this is shown, the holy is defiled."

In his knit shirt and rainbow-plaid slacks, he looked like the sort of man who would be more at ease holding a putter up under his chin to judge his next shot instead of clutching a microphone there with both hands. He had nearly finished when the film started, but once the lights went out and the film spotlighted him in the dark, he couldn't let it appear that he had been overpowered by the nude figure that illuminated him. He was obliged to say a little more.

Brother Bob's torso cast a twenty-foot shadow on the right side of the vast screen, enough to be distracting but not to interrupt the seduction. In the scene that every patron of the Burger Queen now knew by heart, Gretchen's large breasts with their spike-like nipples swung out of Brother Bob's shadow. She was catching a sweaty basketball player by surprise in the locker room. A quick close-up magnified every detail of her nakedness mirrored in the boy's wide eyes while she purred something about the best part of his education. She went on about jump balls and free throws and pulled his shorts down inch by inch, running her tongue over her lips as the film cut back and forth from her mouth, to the boy's face, to the shorts. Tongue of the Vixen proceeded toward a climax, the second of four.

Brother Bob finished his plea. When he jumped over the tailgate, the fleshy light on him turned pink as she drew her tongue into her watering mouth. His shadow vanished from the screen as if swallowed. The red truck worked its way to the exit, in but not of the dense rows of cars which ran downhill to the entwined feet of Gretchen. A duet of shrieks followed the red truck through the gate.

Whoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein.

As he and Jake jostled onto the highway, Bob felt better, but not as much as he had hoped for. Of course, there was something cleansing about making a spectacle of himself for his convictions, but not cleansing enough. He could bathe his wound with this campaign and others like it; but it would not heal.

The sermon Sunday would help, he was counting on that. Standing before his beloved people, giving his annual testimony, feeling the energy of his words flow toward them, feeling their faith return and rise beneath him.

"Yessiree. Brother Bob, you stood up there and let 'em have it. Both barrels of the judgment of God. Reminded me of that ole pitcher of George Washington in the boat acrossing the Delaware. Standing up there in the bed. Straight and strong. Boy, if they didn't scatter like field mice. Bet they'll do some thinking fore they come back."

"I hope so."

He stared at the approaching headlights that grew and

separated before his eyes. No matter what had happened to him, taking this stand was something he had to do. There was plenty of temptation for kids to face without places like the 41 fanning the fire.

Jake was a good soul in Brother Bob's book. Crude and as eager to make a buck as any man in town--and better at it than most--but a man who loved his church and gave money to it as if he were easily generous. His customary goodbye to Brother Bob was, "Any time I can hep you out, jist holler." Bob loved him for his faithfulness. But lately he was almost too much, like the proud child who says the right thing and keeps on saying it because it feels so good.

What did Jake know of guilt? Probably nothing. There was church and there was business, different places, different rules. If the man who was saved on Sunday lacks the good sense to keep from getting skinned in a deal on Monday, he needs to smarten up, that's all.

The truck hummed back to town and Jake talked on, refreshed by the bracing waters of the Delaware. He talked much like Wesley Sims with his quick, blunt hands, red face, and gravelly laugh that often cracked into a smoker's cough. Wesley was the driver he had ridden with back when he was <u>that damned Bobby Venable</u>. They worked together for the Falls City Beer people for over a year, and Wesley kept him out of more drunken fights than Bob could remember. When Wesley yelled and called him shithead from time to time, Bobby figured he had earned the right and never took offense.

Right now he would rather hear Wesley's curses than Jake's praise.

Before becoming a pastor, he had never imagined there could be a sensation like what he felt standing in the pulpit before his admiring congregation. Though it was too thrilling for him to put into exact words, it amounted to a grand spiritual orgasm, seeing the people respond to his every statement with a warm tide of approval which lapped against the pulpit and swirled around him until he felt buoyed up on it. These last two weeks the peace, the exhilaration, had failed to come, perhaps because he was so desperate for them. The tide of admiration sometimes stung more than it consoled, like salt water in an open cut.

Wesley liked him well enough, had even shown his brusque affection by bullying him out of fights and into doing enough work not to get fired. But still, to Wesley, he was a fool kid without the sense of a billy goat. There were no expectations of him beyond a simple few, no responsibility and community leadership, no people eager to see him and recharge their faith from the power of his. Back then he had been one person, and not much of one at that. Now he was the man for other men, the leader, the saver, the embodiment of Christian living--the mighty young man of God whom people gave the kind of respect that was generally reserved for John Wayne and Billy Graham. He was also an adulturer.

<u>That's where salvation begins, with the simple faith</u>

of a child.

The new life, the life of faith and service, had blessed him. He loved the people and the notion of serving God while helping them. But the sweet simplicity of that melting September afternoon was lost. The wages of sin. He ached to stand in the shade of that ragged old tent again, to taste the cool water while sweat ran down his back and soaked through his shirt, while his hot feet sank into the sawdust.

That was the last place that damned Bobby Venable would have been expected to show up. By the grace of God and a blown radiator hose and one of Wesley's three-day binges, he was left alone on US 70, four miles from the nearest town in the East Tennessee hills. He had taken all the searing, sticky blacktop he could stand for awhile, and a revival tent looked like a good place to pass a few minutes for the first time in his life.

He nodded to the too-friendly welcomes from the folks in the back of the tent and drank from a pointed paper cup. He figured he could face hellfire and brimstone to cool his mortal flesh for a few minutes. He gulped his water and stared into the thick green of the next hill, but he couldn't rest for the crackle and thunder of the big voice that filled the tent.

The little man at the front, mopping his face with a red bandana, rising high on his toes when the message lifted him, spoke of Jesus with the woman at the well and of the

waters of everlasting life. The man hurled neither hellfire nor brimstone, only the soul-jarring power of his voice. It wasn't what he expected. He wasn't battered but prodded and tugged until he decided to leave; he had beer to haul and things to do.

Each time he turned to leave, the voice gripped him tighter until he felt like a man trying to swim out of a net. Finally, he stood dumbfounded and listened. Cutting through the frenzy of his confusion came the clear words as a little child, as a little child. Coolness dispelled the heat, still waters lifted the net from him, and he felt himself merging with the people who flowed toward the sweaty little man who waited to wash and be washed in the waters of the spirit.

"Jake, Lord bless and keep you. Thanks for helping tonight. See you Sunday."

"You betcha. Wouldn't miss that one for anything."

The pickup door slammed with a crisp chunk and Brother Bob headed into his house. The low skies rumbled and flickered, but no rain fell.

I confessed my sins and came to Jesus with the faith of a little child.

He stood with his back against the counter, gulping lemonade from the quart glass until the ice cubes slid down and crashed against his nose. He lowered the glass with a sigh and poured more from the big plastic pitcher that always leaked around the red top. Unlike Jake, he wore the

face of a man who was working hard and failing.

"Bob-honey, was it all that bad?" asked Cindy as she scuffed into the kitchen. She shuffled in the slew-footed gait of small women who are pregnant beyond any hope of comfort. With her weak smile, she was easier to pity than love, but he loved her, loved her now with a painful awareness.

"Naw, I can't really complain. I said my piece and shook up a few people. May hurt business out there a little. I just wanted something more. Don't know what it is, just wish I felt better about the whole thing."

"Bob-honey, you want too much. You push too hard. Be satisfied to do your part and let the Lord take it from there," she advised, looking up from pouring her last glass of cranberry juice for the day.

He knew she had the right to speak of patience. The house had only been quiet since she put the girls to bed, she had carried the third child nearly nine months, and she hardly made a face as she drank the bitter juice prescribed by the doctor. Instead of complaining, she devoted herself to planning for the baby and making sure that nothing would interfere with Bob's work.

Cindy had gone directly from being cute, when she had the giggle and bounce of a cheerleader, to being sweet, when motherhood brought the mildness so appropriate in a preacher's wife. As she sprawled in a chair at the breakfast table, she choked down the last of her juice and offered more

consolation. He owed her too much to let her down any more than he already had.

When he started to discuss problems with her, the girl he married in seminary would rush to his side. She would say the right thing so quickly that there was nothing else to be said. After all, that was what he loved her for, that quick smile and those bright eyes that saw him as good--always, whether he was or not. So their discussions of his problems tended to be short and conclusive. What could he do? criticize her faith in him? insist that she become a brooding intellectual? He had married a girl who cheered and kicked her white saddle oxfords high in the air whether her team was winning or not. The team was counting on her.

He had thought about confessing to her. Often. But it was always the same. He saw the devastated look in her unblinking eyes no matter how he went about it. Oh, she would still love him, love him in the crushed, forgiving way that only a good woman can. Perhaps she would love him more intensely than ever, determined to supply whatever he lacked. She wouldn't leave him or cause any scandal. But the joy in her eyes would be drained forever, never again to reflect him better than he was. There was no sense in making her suffer for his sin, no justice, no benefit. Her faith in him was too great to be rewarded with cruelty.

<u>And I was baptized in the waters of everlasting life, redeemed from sin, and bound for joy</u>.

He hardly noticed the noisy sparkle and splash of the

swimming pool beyond the server. All the charms of his surroundings were put aside for the moment. The pool noises, the ripple and flap of the awning over the patio, the long swish of the breeze through tall oaks on the hill where an ante-bellum farmhouse had stood, the crackle of golf spikes along the walk, the contrived chatter of the women on the adjacent court, who seemed sure they had an audience. It felt good to be comfortable enough, sufficiently at home in such a place among such people, that he could ignore it all for the moment and anticipate a back-spin serve.

He met the ball as it bounced short and curled away from him, caught just enough of it on his strings to ladle it back over the net away from the partner. The partner lunged at it, missed, and barely broke the fall of his stocky body with his hands. The heavy wooden racket slapped the asphalt like a book against a blackboard.

"See why I play with you, preacher? You hit stinkers like that and I can't cuss you like you deserve. Good for my self-control. But you'll pay for your sins. Try it again," growled Phil Etter with a round-faced smile.

Bob laughed as he moved up for the serve to the other side, laughed with his success and Phil's compliment. "You know how I am, brother. Anything for spiritual growth."

Phil whipped the hot morning sunlight and grumbled at himself as he crossed the court and prepared for his partner's next serve. T. C. Long was also his law partner and had played with him for so many years that they had become

the pair to beat. Bob and William Eatherly, the insurance man, managed to do it every now and then, and now it looked like they were on their way.

Since William and Phil belonged to First Baptist, they had asked Bob to fill in, more as a courtesy than anything else, when the original fourth man moved to Nashville. His lack of polish wasn't surprising, but what he lacked in finesse he made up in hustle. Watching him rush the net, play every shot to the hilt, and refine his serve until he rarely took a second one, they soon realized that for Brother Bob winning was nearly as important as saving souls.

One of the books he studied told him what he had already learned in the ministry: confidence is the key. Dwell on the good shots. Forget the bad. See every shot rifling and bouncing its way to success before your racket ever touches the ball. He practiced and believed until it worked.

He was convinced that something as minor as tennis was being used for God's purposes. Here he was, sorry old Bobby Venable, at ease among the elite of Hatton, living proof that God could do anything with anybody who was willing. He had never expected his call to lead to such rewards, but he accepted them gratefully--the club membership, the clothing discount at Joe Finchum's, the sleek Grand Prix the church had given him. These material things seemed like signs of God's approval for spiritual things well done.

T. C. bounced the ball several times before going into

his motion. Even that sharp, hollow thump pleased Bob, like the other sounds and the smell of air cooled beneath the oaks and of the perfume from the next court. While the breeze washed over him, he twirled his racket slowly and waited. T. C. examined the ball, tossed it behind him, pulled another from his pocket, and bounced it deliberately.

Beyond his shoulder Amelia Stone swung herself from the ladder to the high diving board. The rising surge of her hip and breast captured Bob's gaze. In a pale pink bikini that almost disappeared when wet, she stood very straight, walked to the end of the board, bounced twice, and curved into a swan dive. The arch of her back and arms caught his breath as she fell toward the water then ducked into it. She slid out of the pool as smoothly as a seal, water dripping from her dark hair as she wiped her face and slicked back her hair with a stroke of her hands. She looked toward the tennis court and the green of her eyes glinted like new leaves in the wind.

William met the serve and replied with a line-drive to T. C.'s backhand which was too well placed to return.

Amelia knelt on a towel and began to dry herself. Despite the agony she had already caused him, Bob had never seen how beautiful she was. Rich skin glistened as she dried her legs and one motion flowed into the next without pause.

He moved into position and waited for the serve, looking past the bouncing ball at Amelia, who now sat eating an

ice cream sandwich. It broke and dripped. She wiped her chin, licked her fingers and then her lips, and closed her eyes with satisfaction. He heard the report of the serve and only spotted the ball when it hit and skipped by him.

"Sorry, William. Got caught flat-footed on that one. Good serve."

Caught. Never had he been more surprised than when he found himself in her crying embrace two weeks ago. He had agreed to talk to her at his office on Sunday afternoon, something about her husband. The idea of Steve being jealous and refusing to join the church because of the way she carried on over him was ridiculous. The more she talked, the more she cried. She got to the point that he couldn't reason with her or pray her out of it. When he grew desperate and steadied her by the shoulders, she leaned on him, and soon pulled him tight against her.

He had hardly noticed other women. His work absorbed him so much that he even felt guilty about neglecting Cindy. He had never thought of being tempted by another woman until Amelia's breasts pressed so hard against his ribs that he could barely breathe. He felt like a swimmer caught in a sudden current.

Jesus said to the bleeding woman who touched him in the crowd, "Your faith has made you whole"!

The locker room conversation was wasted on him. It was all he could do to put Amelia out of his mind, to blot out the memory of her on the carpet groaning that she loved him,

to forget the ripple of her body into and out of the pool. He had finished rinsing the soap from his hair but still stood with the water beating on the back of his head, watching it run over his feet and slide into a bottomless whirlpool.

He was the leader, the man for other men. He had confessed his sin, read the Bible passages that promised forgiveness, prayed until his knees were numb and his eyes burned with the drying of tears. He had done all he knew to do, but the ache would not go away. There was no one he could confess to but God, no pastor for him, no comforting Brother Bob to tell him that God has grace sufficient for every sin, no one to tell him it would be all right. It was between God and him. He had confessed and was assured of forgiveness, but why didn't he _feel_ forgiven? And why, even now, was Amelia still a temptation? Why did the smell of her skin linger despite every prayer?

The water continued to pound, splash, trickle, and whirl into the drain as he stood waiting for it to soothe, staring into the dark vortex. The steam rose in continuous, shapeless layers, like one prayer crowding another against the ceiling.

T. C. shouted, "Hey, Bob. Quit sulking and come on out. No reason to hide your face just because my blinding serve got you."

No matter who you are or what you've done, we all start the same way. With the faith of a little child.

Amid the dying echo of organ music and voices his people reseated themselves, shifted, and settled while he sat bowed behind the pulpit. He prayed for the effectiveness of his words, for the souls of those he spoke to, and most of all, for the comfort of promised forgiveness. He would tell once again how he became a Christian, this time for his sake more than theirs. This would be the greatest sermon he had ever preached. He could hear the words burst cleanly across the pews (so clearly that the microphone only got in his way), see the loving faces he warmed, feel the Holy Spirit bathe them all in the peace of God.

Hundreds of faces opened before him and brimmed with the eagerness to hear his words. His love for them made him wonder once again if he didn't owe them a confession, the same kind of open admission that so many of them had made to him. It would feel good, for the moment at least. But then, like Cindy and the girls, the whole church would suffer with him for his sin. Could he justify destroying the confidence, perhaps injuring the faith, of all those people? undoing three years' work to ease his conscience? All the decisions for Christ, the new members, the growing ministry.

The responsible course was clear and had been all along. He would use his weakness to build, not destroy. Recapture the thrill of new faith. Save more souls than ever. Make expiation for his sin. Shed his guilt the way he took off the Falls City shirt in the roadside tent. Rise from the waters of that cold mountain stream again and gasp the

breath of new life.

He lifted his limp Bible, the black cover wearing away to brown, held it high above the pulpit.

"Hear the Holy Word of God. Luke 18:17, 'Verily I say unto you, whoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein.' Friends, this is where I started as a Christian thirteen years ago.

"Now, I've spent lots of time in school since then, college, seminary and all. I've learned things that helped me. Important things. But the smarter I think I am, the harder I try to remember that the first thing Jesus Christ demands is the faith of a little child. That's where salvation begins, with the simple faith of a little child."

The force of his voice and movements would have awed the little man in the tent. His words resounded in the balcony. As he stepped from behind the pulpit and back, the eyes of everyone moved with him; many breathed with the rhythm of his phrases.

He would carry his responsibility like a man, a Christian soldier. Letting his light so shine. Bearing fruit for the Kingdom. Bringing in the sheaves, yes, rejoicing!

Despite the exuberant response of the people, he could not feel what they felt. The tide of their faith built mightily--the same tide which had lifted him so often--but now he felt it rising without him. He preached on with conviction and struggled to overcome the sensation of being hopelessly anchored. So many brimmed with the faith he had

nurtured. If he could look into enough of those faces fast enough, he could buoy himself up on their confidence. Now, most desperately now, they could save him, help him experience what he knew but could not feel. He searched each face for the final assurance as he spoke with an intensity that allowed no one to look away.

Inevitably, his eyes fell into the green magnetism of Amelia's gaze. He could see his words churn through her body as her breast rose and fell with the rhythm of his speech, with the thrust of every gesture that burst upward after he crouched close to his open Bible. While penitent hearts rose and crested around him, his eyes were drawn into hers until he looked away abruptly. His mind was filled with the taste of her skin.

He couldn't recall his last words, but they must have made sense, judging from the rapt expressions he saw. He went on instinctively as the words and gestures spewed from his body in appropriate combinations, amazed at the way he formed phrases without conscious effort. Even though he continued, he was stunned--by the sound of his voice as his mind withdrew from the words he spoke, by the power Amelia had over him with her hopeless tangle of faith and passion, by the wholeness of spirit that floated farther and farther from his grasp.

And so I was saved, and so we can all be saved. With the faith of a little child.

The faith of a little child. It had begun his life as

a Christian. It had built up three churches from nothing. It had brought hundreds to Christ. It had given him peace and purpose where there had been nothing. Why couldn't it comfort him now?

The question roared through his head as he stood at the front of the church following the invitation.

The people sang the final hymn as he stood with his head bowed and his outstretched arms lifted high and to the side. They came toward him in a growing wave, eleven altogether. Brother Bob prayed and waited.

A CLEAR OBJECTIVE

James watched the face of his company commander, the sudden jerks of his head as he looked around, and knew what was going through the mind of Captain Silvers.

Hell of a mess. Almost dark. Rest of the company twenty clicks away waiting for the damned slicks. Whole goddam battalion back in there, getting ready. Counting the slicks when they land. Figuring the men I've got. Dark in thirty minutes. Barsanti expects me to charge in there like I'm running a bayonet course. What the hell they doing back there? How long does it take to load up and fly twenty lousy clicks? We get hit now, our shit's in the wind.

The battalion commander expected Silvers to move his company two kilometers or more before dark. Now they couldn't cover more than a few hundred meters unless they used a trail.

Silvers studied a map and his mouth twisted into a knot above his pointed chin. He looked up from where the map rested on his crossed legs and scanned the shadowy canopies of the green forest, drumming his fingers on the map until James could hear the rattle of crisp paper. The CO leaned to the side, pulled a can of beer from his pack on the ground, and punched the top twice with the opener which hung

from his neck. The Adam's apple bobbed in his throat as he drank half the beer and returned to examining the map and his surroundings, occasionally holding still to listen for returning helicopters. A second-tour man, he had assured James he would get used to drinking the rationed cans of warm soda and beer. When Silvers stomped the can under his heel and shoved it into his pack, James saw several cans of beer stored where water was usually carried.

Again he scrutinized the map like a child looking for the hidden face in the picture of a tree, as if further study would show the NVA position marked with some mysterious symbol.

The map reflex. James, along with most of the leaders in the field, had developed it before he left Ft. Benning. Whenever you're lost or scared or frustrated, pull out your map and look at the land around you. Maybe it will tell you something new. Maybe it will show where the dinks are waiting for you, or where you can go to defend yourself, or where the buzzing-roaring swarm of choppers can set down to get you the hell out. You don't know what's going to happen, so the only edge you've got is to know everything about where it will happen. If you keep your mind busy until something happens and you don't have to think anymore, you can stay cool, keep your people under control. They figure you're as scared as they are, but as sure as you show it, everything will start crashing down around you. Look at the map. Look at the land. Maybe it will tell you something.

"Lamb!" Silvers called. The first platoon leader ran over and squatted beside him. "Send a squad up that trail," the captain pointed to a northward path. "Find out if anybody's used it lately."

Lamb had the round face and ruddy cheeks of a college freshman. Leaning close to Silvers' gaunt, acne-scarred face, which looked older because of the rapid blinking of his eyes behind the gray-framed GI glasses, made Lamb look even more surprising in his calm.

The platoon leader sent Yglesias' squad. Gathering his men, the Chicano sergeant shouted at his Kit Carson scout. "Off your ass, man! We been ten minutes in gookville and you're spreading chow like a picnic. Drop that shit. Let's go."

The Vietnamese soldier scowled at him. The sergeant not only interrupted his meal but expected him to leave it uneaten. When Yglesias called for his squad, the scout was warming a can of beanie-weenies over a heat tablet. In theory, James thought, the Kit Carson scout thing was just fine: in fact, these English-speaking South Vietnamese, who were supposed to make it easier to deal with civilians, were looking for a free ride. If they had to get stuck in this endless war, what better way to survive it than to be surrounded by those big Americans, protected by their artillery and air support, and fed by their C-rations? James' radioman said he had never seen a Kit Carson that wouldn't leave ammunition to carry extra food. To them duty with a

US unit was a trip through the war with a traveling smorgasbord.

James saw the Vietnamese feared Yglesias, which was as the sergeant wanted it. He went after the scout the way he snatched up dice and shook them to roll, with ruthless authority. A couple of months ago, when the scout's first turn came to walk point, he had complained that he didn't know the area and couldn't do his job. After giving the order a second time and getting more discussion, Yglesias sighed, unslung the rifle from his shoulder, flipped the bolt to chamber a round, and aimed the rifle at the scout's moving mouth. Since that day, the sergeant had kept him wary with a murderous stare.

But the smell of warm beanie-weenies made the scout bold. He spooned into his mouth all he could before the sergeant slapped the can from his hand and picked him up by the collar. "Sorry little fucker. I'd like to lock you in a grocery store and watch you eat yourself to death." His men snickered with a certain pride as they moved out.

James knew that Yglesias was a crap-shooter before he had heard about his being a squad leader too. In his legendary hot streaks, the swarthy, moustached sergeant rolled more for the honor of C Company than to fatten the money orders he sent home to Houston. The men thought it was a shame that Bones Yglesias had to break his concentration with soldiering.

The second lift arrived, and the company was ready to

go when the squad returned. Silvers, now frantic to move from a location known by all the NVA in the area, listened to the sergeant impatiently.

"Trail's big. Two men wide. Too big. But there's no sign it's been used."

"Good," the CO answered with a little relief.

"Don't think so. It's too big. There's lots of gooks around. They stay off one that big, they stay off for a reason. Let's break brush instead."

"Sergeant, the facts is what I want. Leave decisions to me. Platoon leaders, listen up. Got to cover some ground. Get the hell away from this LZ. We'll take this trail to the north, move a click before dark, then circle up."

James liked the sergeant's idea better, and from their faces, so did the rest.

The company merged quickly into a long file. They hurried along the trail; still, Silvers called for the point man to pick up the pace. He was worried about getting far enough before calling in his position for the night, about having to give excuses on his first day. It stood out as clearly as the sweat dripping from his jaw.

The company stumbled into the approaching night with a noisy jostling of packs and rifles. A shower began to beat through the leaves and it covered the clanking of the column. James strained to keep all his men in sight, kept signaling for them not to bunch up. Now it was hard to see

and impossible to hear anything but the rain. When the rain had fallen for a couple of minutes and grown to full force, the thick rattle of drops on leaves was cut by a burst of machine-gun fire. Men fell to the ground and thumbed their safeties while they looked around for the muzzle flash. James tried to find out what had happened.

The point man, a tall, quiet boy who had been trying to grow a moustache, lay back on his pack, his helmet hurled back toward his buddies, his rifle sling tangled around a limp arm. His face was lifted to the dark gray sky. Rain fell into his open eyes and mouth and into the hot bloody holes in his shirt.

Ten meters behind him, others dove into the brush and fired toward the machine gun without seeing it. Dozens of small, dark figures rose from hiding and fired on the Americans, trying to hit those who were slow in taking cover. The ambush failed. The gunner must have thought he was discovered and opened up on the point man, instead of waiting for several to fill the killing zone.

James heard the lead platoon radio back that one man was killed. Even worse was hearing that the fire had come from a bunker complex. There was every reason for panic: bunkers, darkness, rain noise, and the unit was strung out along either side of a trail covered by heavy fire. Before they could attack his men, Silvers ordered a retreat.

In a blur of darkness and fear, men nearly ran as they crashed through the undergrowth on both sides of the trail.

They grouped into their night defensive perimeter fifty meters off the trail, a perimeter where they lay too close, but darkness and the dead boy in the rain pulled them toward each other.

James didn't know what he had expected to happen when he got shot at, but after several contacts with the enemy, it still felt wrong. The fear was never as bad as the confusion. His platoon had been second in the column, the one Silvers had marched with; and seeing the CO's shock made his own worse. His men were all right. He had counted them and positioned them as much as darkness would allow, but he felt no real control over his unit, no more control than he felt canoeing in rapids. He kept paddling by giving orders and positioning his men, but he knew the time might come when what he did would make no difference.

The dark and the rain and the dead boy made it worse. He hadn't volunteered for Vietnam to make the world safe for democracy. He was no crusader, but he had assumed that some feeling of accomplishment would follow when men risked their lives together. He had found none. He had seen a few men wounded and listened to their cries, seen the bodies of others carried back wrapped in ponchos and transferred to body bags with nauseating efficiency. After a month of this he thought he would have felt different.

For Silvers the satisfaction seemed to come from playing the part of the seasoned warrior. He waited for awe to encircle him when he told of the radioman who had been blown

away from his side, leaving him holding the handset and a ragged cord. Were war stories at happy hour the only reward for all this?

Repeatedly the company was told to "work the area" inside various map coordinates, never to take a clear objective. Endless circles--their missions, the NVA locations, the orders for each day. The firefights weren't battle in any regular sense. They began with the crackling sputter of a few shots then burst into a roar which each side poured out, as much to protect themselves as to kill the enemy. They were shoot-and-run skirmishes without clear targets, only the blur of the running shapes silhouetted in light and shadow. There was no ground to take, none to keep.

He had never seen an enemy's face. He had seen the blood trails, the bright red splotches and streams made by more blood than he thought the body could hold. Drag trails were another sign of kills, paths plowed in the damp earth by heels and rifle butts. The slack weight of a body broke a clearer trail than a whole squad of running men. The trails, smelling of gunpowder, blood, and opened guts, were all he really knew of his enemy. Once, crawling through foliage under fire, he caught the gaseous scent of a cooling body a few feet from him, and he hesitated for a few seconds. The headless body was nothing but a mass of bloody rags with a knapsack on top. If the comrade who carried off the dead man's rifle had tried for the body too, he would have strewn it in pieces. What lay near him was

nothing like a man. It reminded him of the spilled garbage in restaurant alleys.

If there had been any way to gather it up, that body would have been dragged off before James ever saw it. The dinks were ready to die but obsessed with proper burial. Without it, they believed, their souls would wander for eternity. Which is why helicopters played the "Wandering Soul" tape over the jungle at night. The choppers drew fire if they stayed over one area for more than a minute or so. That was how long it took to tell the story of the NVA soldier who came south to fight and die and have his spirit condemned because his body was not buried. It struck a nerve if the NVA were willing to give away their positions by firing at the aircraft. He couldn't understand people who value proper death more than life.

He had begun to wonder what made them so different, what gave them their blind dedication. Was it what they knew or didn't know? Their political officers kept them fired up with pep talks and threats. But they couldn't say anything to make the dinks forget all the bodies they dragged with them or the shock of artillery shells hitting close enough to make their ears bleed.

Whatever kept them going in hard times, they must have been smiling in the bunker complex that night. They had 110 Americans in a bad way. Too tired to stay awake, too scared to sleep. Some grim things were bound to happen before James heard the sweet slap-slapping of rotor blades beating

through the air to pick them up.

He could see nothing more than a few feet away. Rain turned the space around each man into something easier to feel than to see. Men lay in the heavy green scent of trampled leaves, with faces against forearms, hands curled around M-16 rifles. A few heads lifted. James heard a rustle that could be the wind stirring wet leaves or could be the steps of sandled feet, could be the last sounds before the shriek and flash of an attack.

His skin shriveled in the damp, withdrawing from the water that settled in his clothes. He ached for sunlight to dissolve his blindness, restore shape and color, comfort with the sight of light and dark faces. Raindrops, barely slowed by the short hair of his head, trickled down his face, collected and dripped from his nose, four or five drops per minute.

He saw somebody crawling up behind him but didn't recognize Lamb until he was close enough to touch.

"How's the raggedy bunch you call a platoon?" Lamb whispered with a smile.

"Mad as hell they couldn't get assigned to the supply depot at Cam Rahn. Did you get anybody hurt?"

"No, but everybody's ass hole is so tight that a fart sounds like a gnat in your ear."

It was good to have somebody to talk to. Lamb was always closer to having things under control than anybody else, but being a good leader wasn't much consolation at this

point. Good or bad, they all stood a good chance of being overrun in a dawn attack. That was a dink favorite when they had you outnumbered in the woods and cloud cover was too thick for air support to do any good. Both of the lieutenants had heard the after-action reports. At least talking lightened the pressure, let them hold up the fearful to each other and laugh at it.

"If we don't get hit, then what?" James asked.

"Got problems any way you cut it. Markham left a man dead on that trail, left without the body. You don't do that in Barsanti's battalion."

"So?"

"Unless that nasty bastard has changed, he won't let us back on the firebase without Crossman's body."

"Is he crazy? By now they've got Crossman hidden, or they left him where he fell and packed a big enough charge under him to blow up a tank."

"Probably. And I guarantee you the old man will tell Silvers he should of thought of that before he turned tail."

"You mean it serves us right?"

"The way the Godfather sees it. You don't leave bodies. Bad form"

"And we're supposed to play <u>banzai</u> to get it back?"

"If we're lucky, we'll get enough artillery and air in there to leave the bunkers like a plowed field."

"Lord. I hope so."

"You and all the rest of us gnats. I'm supposed to be

sleeping. Think I'll give it another try," Lamb said as he turned to crawl away.

James sighed and rested his face on his arm. He had never felt so stupid and angry at the same time. He didn't know what he had expected when he got his orders changed from Korea to Vietnam. The major on the telephone had laughed a little and said there would be plenty who wanted that slot in Korea. He must have figured he had a young MacArthur on the line, a kid hell-bent on being a hero or a corpse before the year was out. Maybe James had been, but it had started to change the first time he heard a boy screaming with a compound fracture. As bullet wounds went, it hadn't been so bad. No vital damage, no permanent loss. The kid even got to go home after two months in country. But he almost died of shock before the Medivac got him. James remembered the sound of those screams. He wondered if he had accomplished anything worth having to hear them from others.

He hated the NVA, hated them enough to feel no regret over killing as many of the shadowy, faceless enemy as he might have. But without the first trace of ideology. He didn't care if they were Communists or Shriners. His hatred was simple, visceral, and--he was sure--unbecoming of a man who had been raised on the ethics of compassion. They took such pleasure in hurting his people that he wanted to kill them as a child wants to kill a bully. Because he had sensed nothing noble in the killing, he hated them all the more. If a man risked his life voluntarily, didn't he have

the right to expect something higher to run through his emotions? Vengeance motivated, but it did not satisfy.

He picked up his rifle, tilted and shook it to clear water out of the chamber. Once more he tried to see into the jungle then gave up and listened. It was quieter. The rain had nearly stopped, leaving wind and dripping leaves to fill his ears with enough noise to cover all but the clumsiest footsteps. He tried to sleep.

He heard a rustle before he caught the smell of sweat and muddy fatigues. He felt a hand tap his leg.

"CO wants the platoon leaders." The small radioman crawled on through the crushed grass searching for the other lieutenants, slowly lifting his head high like a lizard.

"Got a full day's work ahead," Silvers said to the four figures squatting and lying around him in the faint light. He sat against a tree trunk, cross-legged with his map resting on an open can of beer between his legs. "Talked to the old man. S-2 says there can't be more than eighty dinks in this area now. That's the most we can expect in the bunkers."

James heard the strained firmness in his voice, like a boy's in speech class. Bad news was coming. Silvers was working hard to make it sound like business as usual. His eyes jerked from one face to another, looking for support, defying complaint.

"Soon as it's light enough to see how they're set up, we're going back in." He paused, looked down at his hands

before going on, as if ashamed of what he would say next. "We're pretty sure Crossman is dead, but you know we still can't leave a body."

"Pretty sure? Hell, sir, ask Markham. Both the guys behind him said they saw a dozen holes in him. He was dead before he hit the ground."

"Okay, Lamb. So I know it and you know it. The old man knows it too. That ain't the point. The point is policy. You can't leave a body for the dinks to play with. Barsanti's never lost a body. Dead or alive, all his troops go home."

"We've been in bunkers before," Markham picked up the argument. "It's bad enough when you get a jump on them. But they know where we are, and they'll know when we start in. We'll be marching down a target range."

"All the pissing and moaning in the world ain't gonna change the facts, gentlemen. We lost a body. We got to get it back."

"How much support will we get?"

"Artillery before we hit it. No close air unless all this shit breaks up in a hurry. Looks like clouds all day. The more time we give 'em, the worse they can make it on us.

"Johnson, send a squad out to recon. Find how far the positions stretch to the right and left of the trail. Get locations on the machine guns. Get a headcount too. Have the rest of your men spread into a decent perimeter and dig prone shelter.

"When the other platoons come out of the bunkers, the dinks will follow most likely. They'll be trying to get some birds when we are extracted. We'll stick it to 'em here, try to keep 'em away from the LZ.

"Lamb, you take the center. Markham, move up on his left. James, right. We'll try to pinpoint the machine guns before you start. I'll coordinate things from right here."

There was a pause for questions. James watched the Adam's apple of the CO rise and fall as he took a long swallow of beer. Budweiser, King of Beers. In the red, white, and blue can that was too familiar to notice back home. An American emblem of good times, of fraternity parties, of Saturdays with football on TV. Of almost anything but dawn in Vietnam. There is nothing unusual about drinking beer early in the morning when it's coolest, he thought. But you don't tell a bunch of guys they're going to get shot at and wash it down with a swig of beer, like the order was a mouthful of peanuts. And you don't drink beer while telling these guys you're going to sit back on your ass with the security platoon.

The briefing was over and the next few hours could not be escaped; but they all sat there waiting for some news, some encouragement, however fake, to take to their platoons. Silvers finished his beer. The lieutenants crawled to their men.

James felt his face tighten into a bitter smile. He was the one who hated running through the woods without a

clear mission, the one who wanted a definite target so that he would know when the mission was over. No order could be any clearer than this one. Run right into a bunker complex full of gooks tired of being bombed and starved, dead set on getting even for the ambush they blew, certain of where you're coming from and what you're coming for. It couldn't be any clearer.

The recon squad brought bad news. Crossman's body had been pulled back and placed on top of a bunker, directly above a machine gun. The other gun sat on a slight rise to the left, where it could rake the ground in front of the body with crossing fire. Dug-in positions extended forward of the body on either side so that the attackers would have to charge into a funnel of fire. Lamb called over Markham and James.

"It's gonna be my ass swinging in the wind when we go in. That shithead's got a can of beer and a platoon around him, so he doesn't care. When we go in, you guys stay close. Put your chunkers on the inside next to my people and drop all the grenades you can on the guns. Take one each. Until they're gone, all I can do up there is crawl around pissing on myself. Soon as you've got 'em, we'll go for the body. The more of that alley you can shoot up, the better chance we've got."

"You've got it," James heard himself saying.

Lamb knew what he was doing, even if he did look like a Boy Scout. And Yglesias was a good man to have up front.

When everything split wide open, he would take off like the first man in a human-wave assault. His men always followed, too loyal or too amazed to falter. James had watched him lead his squad in a firefight and didn't see how he could stay alive more than a minute. Crap-shooter's luck. After it was all over, the stout Chicano shook till it was all he could do to get a match up to his cigarette.

And here James was saying that his two grenadiers would drop enough rounds on one of the machine guns to keep the retrieving squad from being rolled up in their ponchos and carried back along with Crossman. How could he blurt out that promise? Say it like he was going to bring home a loaf of bread? What other choice did he have? With no air cover and with Silvers back there drinking his way to the bottom of his pack just to hold himself together, the three platoons had nobody to rely on but themselves.

The old CO was never flashy but always near the fighting, muttering and wide-eyed. "Hose 'em down. Move in on the little bastards. Blow 'em away. Keep your men moving together. Drive the bastards off before somebody gets hurts. My wife is too young to be a widow." The bow-legged little man sported a shaggy red moustache, the kind that officers sometimes grew in the field and shaved off before returning for rear duty. Under fire he moved around and jabbered until he became fixed in the corner of James' eye as a ragged red mouth amid the roar, cursing and laughing to fill the fearful lulls in the noise. James had been through two

firefights before he realized that the CO had kept his mind too busy for fear or indecision to take hold. When the captain was no longer near, he figured he had measured up. They had soldiered together, bullet-cut twigs and branches falling around them, and he could feel without ever having to think the words: He won't leave us hanging if it gets bad. The missions were still shapeless bump-and-run operations, but at least he didn't have to worry about his company commander making them worse.

He was supporting Lamb with a promise he would be hard put to keep. Lamb knew it, too.

The three platoons, stripped of all gear except water and ammunition, spread out and waited in the gray-green light of the cloudy morning. They would stay close enough together to lay down maximum fire on the bunkers around the body, with James and Markham curling back to cover the flanks.

The call for artillery was in, and they lay flat in the soft, decaying earth, in depressions and behind trees, as deep as they could press their bodies. It was a risk worth taking, but knowing that didn't ease James' mind. It was almost a formula for times such as this: close in as much as you can on the objective, hide from the wild shrapnel of the barrage, then run like hell to hit the dinks before their ears stop ringing. At one hundred meters, they were well inside the Danger Close zone. Better to duck stray steel than to face aimed fire for a second longer than necessary.

The 105 shells crashed into the bunker area. First they cracked at tree-top level, sent shrapnel exploding through dense foliage, shredding leaves and thick tree trunks, whizzing through the air like a bullwhip before it cracks, pressing the Americans down until they resented every breath for raising their backs too much. The second volley, fused for ground bursts to follow the enemy into hiding, jarred the earth and spewed chunks of wet dirt. With every tremor of the ground, James felt the instant of the attack draw closer.

The CO's radioman called. The last round had been fired. The smoke and smell of the prep fire mixed with the humid air and rose slowly into the tree tops.

Lamb roused his men.

The platoons moved together on line, Lamb's men slightly ahead. All walked as fast as saplings and vines would allow. In open spaces they broke into a few running steps, looking around to stay even with their buddies, looking ahead for the first muzzle flash. After sixty meters of running, walking, craning their necks, they heard the machine guns. The first fire was not the choppy bursts of AK-47s but the smooth, steady chugs of the belt-fed machine guns.

They dove to the ground, returning fire first and aiming afterward. James had learned: at this point it was more like a snowball fight than a target match. Whoever threw the most bullets the fastest would win the moment.

His grenadiers were already firing on the near gun emplacement. The 40mm grenades fired with a hollow thunk like small mortars. Both fell short. The two kneeling men adjusted their aim and fired again while the crack of the first rounds still shook the air. They would have to hit near the small firing port to do any good.

James saw Lamb's men working forward, using tree trunks and dips in the ground for cover. One man, bleeding from the calf, stayed behind and continued to fire over the heads of the others.

The Kit Carson scout had disappeared. The last James saw, he was idling along at the rear of Lamb's formation. Yglesias was too busy moving his men forward and directing fire to notice the scout's absence. Maybe he was even glad not to be bothered with a man he couldn't count on. At any rate, he was gone. He would probably wander back to the perimeter after the fighting was over and mumble something about getting separated when the shooting started. For a while at least, his English would become very poor. He would give an Academy Award portrayal of a poor little soldier lost and confused. If somebody slapped him around and accused him of cowardice, he would hardly understand a word. He would put on the pained face of the professional beggars along the Tu-Do Street, Saigon's finest.

James heard groans from farther over on the left, the high wails that came with a shattered bone or opened guts. He wanted to run to the sound and stop it. How long would

it be before the same sounds came from somebody near him?

He moved his men up slowly and tried to push ahead of Lamb's by a few meters. When he reached a small rise twenty meters from the gun and saw his men squeezing against the ground as they fired, he felt better. Things almost seemed to move by themselves. He yelled, waved for certain ones to move, kept four men back on the right to protect the flank; but all the motion and noise seemed to have a will of its own, like rapids.

James ran and crawled to the rise. His radioman ran behind him, the antenna scraping and slapping branches along the way. After the last firefight, James had laughed that he wasn't really a loyal soldier; he was just hiding behind James' thick body. As James ran, he fired all twenty rounds in two bursts. He was shooting too much. The old CO had told him, and he knew it. "The platoon leader isn't a god-dam $300-a-month rifleman. He's a <u>leader</u>. You move 'em. They shoot." He slapped a new magazine in and chambered a round, all the while looking around to see that his men were in place. Still none of them screamed out.

Now he saw the bunker with the body, saw the body clearly for the first time. It was louder than everything exploding around him. Crossman's pale body lay naked across the parapet of limbs and dull orange earth. The sight of it uttered a long, quaking shriek in James' head. The body moved. It shuddered and bounced every few seconds as if the bullets which struck it were jarring it awake. It shook

like a sobbing child. Most of the head was gone. Another grenade cracked, almost a direct hit on the bunker, and a mutilated arm fell from the parapet, rolled to the ground. The gun, covered with red earth, ceased firing. James lay still, with his rifle to his shoulder, staring.

On the left Lamb still waited for the other gun to be destroyed, his grenadiers and Markham's popping away at it. The attackers lunged forward a few feet and the M-16 fire continued to fill the forest with chatters and echoes. To the right of the body, James' men had killed a few of the NVA and were keeping the others busy enough to give Lamb a chance. Finally the second gun fell silent. The erratic fire of the enemy riflemen increased in automatic compensation.

James looked up and down his uneven front. If anybody was hurt or killed, he couldn't see him. He was waiting for something to go wrong, to break loose. The sooner it happened, the sooner he could face it. There must be fewer dinks than they had thought. The artillery must have done the job. Still fire came from most of the bunkers.

Lamb called on the radio. "Give me max fire in ten seconds. Start timing <u>now</u>."

James waved to his men in either direction to reload and be ready for his signal to fire. The noise broke up into spread cracks and chatters, mostly from the bunkers.

James followed his second hand and looked up to pick an exact target. All he could see were shadowy figures behind

muzzle flashes. He chose one. Holding his rifle in firing position with his left hand, he raised himself off the ground, thrust his right arm upward, yelled "Now!" as he dropped. The air quivered with the crackle and roar. Grenades cracked within the torrent. Lamb yelled and waved; so did Yglesias as he led his six men, firing-running, reloading-crawling, firing-crawling. No voice could be heard. Then NVA rockets began to explode along the line, at least three of them. Their whoosh cut through the other sounds and disappeared in explosions. The rockets struck in the trees a few feet above the ground.

For the split second when they exploded, James was struck by the silence. Noise mounted over noise until he could hear no more. The cracking and breaking of air had reached the point that there was nothing left to hold new sounds. In James' ears, battered insensate, there was silence.

The concussion knocked him breathless. His eyes watered and he gasped for air. The shock ebbed and feeling returned to his ringing ears. He shook his head and looked around. One man was bleeding from the face. The blood dripped quickly from his chin to his shirt. He screamed for the medic and lifted an O. D. green towel from around his neck to his cheek. With the sight of the blood on his shirt, his eyes widened and he called again. The man beside him slumped forward over his rifle, his helmet fallen off to the side. Leaves and branches showered around them.

James stirred his men to move a few meters and draw some attention from Lamb. Yglesias, having crawled closest to the body, stretched out flat, let his rifle fall, leaned on his left side, and tossed a hand grenade from his right hand into the nearest bunker. Each time James blinked, he thought he would be focusing his eyes on Yglesias' dead body. But the stocky, crawling body picked up the rifle and started firing again. The other men were close behind him. Two of them sprang forward and grabbed the body by the heels.

They might as well have pushed a detonator. As they turned to crawl away with the body, a rocket hit just behind them, wrenching the body from their grasp, throwing them to the ground. Yglesias and someone else grabbed them and helped them crawl wildly back to cover. Lamb ran toward them in a crouch firing and yelling. The NVA stitched the ground with rifle fire. Lamb fell to his knees then sprawled backwards on bent legs. James could see but not hear as the fallen lieutenant heaved a great sigh. He rolled to the side, and blood seeped from his forehead.

James kept firing, kept waiting for Lamb to move. Finally, someone grabbed him and dragged him back. Behind them all, a naked, mutilated, headless body lay a few feet from the bunker where it had been spread.

Looking at the wounded crawling for cover, at Lamb, whose limp body moved in rough jerks as Yglesias dragged it, James kept firing. His stomach heaved and his throat choked tight until the only sound he could utter was a long,

wailing groan. In spite of his anger at the mission and the way Silvers handled it, he had become absorbed in the effort to recover the body, to support the ones who had to take the greatest risks, and he had forgotten for the moment what he thought of the mission. He had lived a few minutes beyond reason once he had become wholly absorbed in the goal. The urgency of those minutes under fire overshadowed everything else in his mind. It was an experience he would have been proud of if it had been for a purpose.

But at the sight of men rushing toward a dead body only to come away nearly like it, James' hardening impulses dissolved. Blood streamed from Lamb's head, darkening the whole left shoulder of his shirt, absorbing in its dark surge the black insignia on his collar and the First Cav patch on his shoulder, leaving bright red spots on the dark soil.

James looked back at what was left of Crossman. The dinks were firing everything they had saved into the small area around the body. They had bet it all on a dead man, and the bet had paid off. Enough. Corpses would create no more corpses.

He radioed the other platoons, told Lamb's men to gather themselves up and return to the NDP, told Markham that their platoons would leap-frog their withdrawal, protecting each other as they retreated.

As James moved his men, halted them to cover the rear, and moved them again, the past minutes convulsed through his

mind and body like dry heaves after vomiting, caused him to wince. The roar, the screams, the flutter of shredded leaves, the smells of gunpowder and sap. Lamb running toward the men who were stunned by the rocket blast, firing and shouting, then sinking to him knees, becoming horribly still in the shuddering jungle.

The retreat moved steadily. No one had the energy or the urge to hurry. If the dinks wanted more, James knew his men would simply drop where they were and become the defenders, let the dinks take their turn at facing shots that were aimed from cover.

They neared the perimeter, and he spotted Yglesias ahead of him. Lamb, stretched over the sergeant's shoulders in a fireman's carry, bounced with each step the stocky man took. His head jostled behind Yglesias' right shoulder, no longer bleeding on it. James thought of Silvers, whose head was sure to be jerking as he looked around, listening and waiting to discover how high a price his men had paid for a dead body.

When they reached the perimeter, James and the others felt surrounded by tense pitying stares. The expressions said, Sorry you got shot up. Sorry it was such a fucked-up mission. We should have been up there too. But we're glad we weren't. Wish to God you hadn't been.

The waiting men offered beer or canteens of kool-ade, offered cigarettes, listened to the victims as their rage spewed out in curses of the NVA, the battalion commander,

the company commander. Through all the curses rose a steady refrain: The gutless son-of-a-bitch.

James saw Silvers sitting against the tree where he had left him, clutching a beer to his chest and waiting for a report on the mission. He quickened his step like an attacker speeding up when his target comes into view. He passed Yglesias, who had put Lamb's body down on his poncho and knelt beside it. Kneeling and staring off into the blurring layers of green that were dimly visible beneath the cloudy sky, he hesitated where most men would hurry. Instead of wrapping the body, sealing it off from the living, he waited. Those around him saw that he wanted no help, and they waited with him.

James did not stop until he nearly stood on Silvers' feet. The CO looked up and waited for him to speak. James glared at him with red eyes in a pale face.

"Three men dead. Lamb, one of his men, one of mine. Hell of a lot hurt."

"Did you get Crossman?"

"No." James narrowed his eyes until they dug into Silvers' twitching face. He waited for him to say something, to give an order, but knew he wouldn't. He only sat there, his face contorted like a man in too much pain to move. Gradually the tension melted, and his face went limp. He looked around slowly without appearing to see anything, as if he were about to fall asleep.

James called the radioman and put the handset in the

CO's cupped fingers.

"Call Barsanti. Tell him the artillery blew the body away. Call him."

The helicopters came. James had circled the company at the north end of the clearing, where they were prepared to run as soon as the Hueys hovered down. Since they expected to be fired on, the skids would never touch the ground. The lift came into view over the treetops, each aircraft dropping sharply when it passed the treeline, dropping like escalator steps that merge and flow level into the floor. They hovered, buzzing, whirring, slapping the air, bobbing sideways as men jumped onto the skids and climbed through the doorways.

Such an abrupt way to leave this damp, clinging place. It seemed like a pleasant dream to lunge into the shuddering metal womb of a helicopter and rise quickly and cleanly--a falling dream reversed, a pursuit dream ending in the relief of safety. They all jumped up, clattered through the doorways with equipment, and sprawled uneasily as they wished for the final stage of the dream, the steady, groaning rise of the Hueys above the treeline. James waited, on the verge of giddy relief like the rest, but burdened with the weight of bodies. With Lamb's, which was already loaded up, with Crossman's, which would decay into the moist green forest, burying itself in slow stages until bones surrounded by undergrowth became the only monument to those who died there.

The lieutenant and his radioman ran to the last doorway.

James was eager to escape the clutch of springy earth around the soles of his boots. The helicopter rose in line behind the others, the labored roar smoothing out once it cleared the tall trees and its nose lifted. He looked at the tree-tops a few feet below the skids, looked at the leaves until they became one long green blur.

IN HEAVEN YOU HAVE HEARD

In Heaven you have heard no marriage is,
No white flesh tinder to your lecheries,
Your male and female tissue sweetly shaped
Sublimed away, and furious blood escaped.

John Crowe Ransom, "The Equilibrists"

We moved the summer before I started high school, and within a few days our new neighbors invited us to dinner. Margaret greeted us at the kitchen door wearing a ruffled apron and those glasses. They swept up to sparkling points at the hinges and had a gold chain attached which draped down either side of her face. Hank stubbed out his cigarette and rose from his easy chair where he was watching the Atlanta Braves on TV, a gaunt, white-haired man with a chilling handshake. Though his grip was firm, it had the cool, bony feel that belonged to an old man.

Mother helped Margaret in the kitchen while Daddy and Hank discussed the failing fortunes of the Braves. The gas logs in the fireplace caught my eye, and I wondered why anyone would want them. Above the mantle were several plates with painted profiles of composers and a large pair of carved wooden hands folded in prayer. There was a big organ layered with music at one end of the den, an upright piano at the other end, and overstuffed furniture and tables

full of figurines in between. In Hank's part of the room were his chair, worn and shaped to his bones, and the table beside it. On the table lay a carton of cigarettes and a stack of wrinkled Sports Illustrateds.

At supper Margaret smiled to hear that I played football. She asked what position I played, and when I said guard, she nodded pleasantly, as if to admit that she didn't know a guard from a goalie.

Cutting his ham, Hank explained with a wink at me, "Margaret, he's one of those tough characters who knocks people down while the halfback carries the ball." In fact, I had escaped "husky" blue jeans only a summer before and never had a chance for the backfield, but like all linemen, liked to think of myself as one of the workhorses of the game. Hank knew how to scratch where it itched, and I smiled.

No sooner had I taken my last bite of fried corn than Margaret passed me the bowl. "Now, Hugh, you'll just have to let me know what you need. Hank and I have never had any children to feed, much less a 'tough character.' We eat sort of light around here. Hank just eats like a bird. Always has since that stomach trouble. And you can tell I don't need much." She smirked so that her chin doubled as she passed me the rolls.

"I guess you noticed that Sarah Akins has a real weight problem now." She referred to the lady who had owned our house. "Well she never did until after Harvey died. I

think it must be a mental thing, eating for comfort. I never saw anybody get so bitter." She looked at the buttered piece of roll in her hand as though someone else held it and continued. "After all, he was a few years into retirement. But when he died, you'd of thought he was a young man struck down in his prime the way she acted. He had a blessed death if there ever were one."

Hank dropped his napkin beside his plate and pulled a new pack of Lucky Strikes from his shirt pocket, stripping the cellophane and a corner of the foil from the top, knocking the pack against his hand, offering Daddy one of the cigarettes that jumped out, and lighting one himself. Margaret looked away. As she continued her story, he probed with a paper match for a corn husk in his teeth and tapped an ash onto his salad plate. She opened the china cabinet and put a bonbon dish beside his plate.

"A few days after the funeral I was out back cutting flowers. All of a sudden I heard such a terrible screaming it scared me. When I got to Sarah's, there she was on her knees on the floor."

Her words softened to suggest her shock while she looked around the table at us. Hank sat back from the table and watched his smoke seek a draft in the corner of the ceiling as Margaret spoke in a tragic tone that seemed to come from a funeral parlor and chill the dirty dishes. She interested me more than her story, and I shifted in my chair awaiting even slower words. Her delivery suggested that some

mysterious truth would be divulged.

"She had thrown a glass of liquor against the wall. Oh it smelled like a brewery in there. And all that crying. I didn't know what to do. I got her to the divan," she whispered with glistening eyes and fingertips at her lower lip. "She wanted to know why God killed Harvey. Took the Lord's name in vain! I thought she would be struck down right there. Poor thing."

She gazed into her water glass, savoring the heavy silence, then slowly brushed the napkin over her mouth and began to clear away dishes and discuss dessert. That was but the first of the woeful stories that would always accompany dinner with Margaret. Someone was forever suffering or dying, and she told the stories as if each one offered a new insight. But the moral of each story never was as profound for me as I gathered it should have been. Still, these grim anecdotes seemed to purge and invigorate her. After the hushed concluding gaze she faced dessert with renewed appetite.

She brought out the frozen peach pie, which she had heated, and prepared for her conclusion. Daddy admired the china press in the corner, and Hank explained that he had bought it for a song and refinished it. She measured two drops of saccharine into her coffee and then cut away the crust of her pie. She stared at her water again, chewing and swallowing slowly. "That's why Hank and I are so happy that our new neighbors are Christians." She smiled and

tilted her head with satisfaction. "And, Hugh, you have no idea what a wonderful thing it is for your parents to love you enough to send you to school where you'll study the Bible. There's where you can find the strength you need."

Somehow Margaret always grasped the edges of things without ever getting to the center. Yes, we were Christians and, yes, it was important to them that I study the Bible. But it was never so important to them as to Margaret. They wanted me to be prepared for college. In the next year or so Margaret would often ask me about school and, usually, about my Bible studies. During one of these discussions, I explained the theory that the Pentateuch "of Moses" was actually written by four different authors, none of whom was Moses. The more details I gave, the more she fidgeted with the chained glasses around her neck. Before long her questions stopped, and we were discussing how the azaleas had done that spring.

Once dessert was finished, we sat in the den where they discussed common acquaintances and the condition of the lawns and flowers. At the age of thirteen I couldn't help being impressed with the intricate organ against the wall. I walked over to examine the great bank of keys and stops, which reminded me of bomber cockpits I had seen in movies. Margaret was pleased and asked if I would like her to play something. She asked for requests, and I suggested "Rhapsody in Blue," having discovered Gershwin. She said that she didn't have the arrangement of it but did have one of

"Summertime," which suited me too.

I was delighted--the lavish flourishes she added didn't bother me back then. From the same book of music she went on to play "The Man I Love" with dramatic shifts in tempo. Then she volunteered "The Tennessee Waltz" because we used to live in Tennessee, and my folks smiled as she played from memory. Though I've never known why, the tune seems the universal favorite of parlor organists, especially matronly ladies. She played a couple of other pieces and stopped when modesty dictated. Daddy applauded, insisting that this was the only way to hear good music any more. Hank added that he had hit the jackpot, with a good wife and a fine little entertainer to boot. Margaret smiled bashfully and told Hank to stop it.

Hank was harder to get to know than Margaret, but in time he warmed to me. He was quiet, that much of his country nature was unchanged. Silence suited him, and he wasn't going to break it unless he could improve on it. But he enjoyed swapping tales as much as anybody when the time was right and Margaret was busy enough with dinner or something else that he could talk without being interrupted.

The best conversations came when I worked for him. He was so frail that I cut his yard regularly and did any heavy work that was needed at his house. I never took money for the odd jobs; they seldom took long and offered me new ways to prove my strength.

One of these was cutting down a water maple that was

taking over his back yard and shading his rose bed. Like others in the South, he valued the slow, solid trees like sugar maple, hickory and oak and went to great lengths to protect them; but the fast-growing, easily diseased water maples were planted for quick shade and then cut down whenever they got out of hand. Before sinking my axe into the soft silver bark, I climbed about ten feet up the trunk and tied Hank's rope around it for him to control the fall and protect the rose bed on one side and the dogwoods on the other. As I dropped from my perch to the ground, Hank released a short stream of brown spittle. I knew that Margaret would shriek if she saw that and I couldn't resist needling him.

"Hank, what would Margaret say if she saw you chewing tobacco?"

He smiled, spit again and said, "She'd raise all kinds of cane. That's why it's a good thing you're here with the axe and she's at the grocery, and not the other way around." He chuckled, "If you can be bribed, I'll give you a chew."

I was flattered. Though Hank would never have thought of giving me a cigarette, this was different. At fifteen I could try some Beechnut if I wanted to.

I proudly accepted, pulling what I thought was a modest cheek full from the red, white, and blue foil pouch. Like all novices, I took too much, overchewed it, and nearly drowned in my own spit. I know Hank must have been tickled but kept on talking, occasionally spitting as if both of us

knew what we were doing. There are some things that experience can teach in a hurry. When I finished hewing a notch in the low side of the tree, I pulled half of the tobacco out of my mouth and adjusted my chewing style to imitate his before going to the high side. The bite of the autumn breeze and the warmth of the sun that Saturday morning gave chewing tobacco a mellowness that it has never had since.

Through a tobacco-muffled mouth I commented, "This is pretty good once you get the hang of it. My head hasn't been so clear since the cool weather began." That made his day. He stood where he had been squatting over the coiled rope end and inhaled deeply, seeming to taste the bright yellow light of the sun filtered through hickory leaves.

"I'll tell you Bub," Bub had become his nickname for me, "the old chew and me go back a long way. Course, indoor living and chewing just don't go together, so I don't get much chance now. Cigarettes never have done much for me. Lots of smoke but no real taste. Once you've worked a tobacco patch and spent a summer in the barn where the crop cures and got a nose full of that powerful smell, you're ruined for life. There's nothing like a good chew. I even knew some rough old cobs that'd tear a piece out of a drying leaf and chew it. Somehow you can remember the good times so much better than the rest. That strong taste always reminds me of the shady creekbank where I'd bait my hook and watch the clouds through the tree tops. Or the pitcher's mound when the sun was baking my brains and I was

sweating like a horse. But I wouldn't of traded that for all the comfort in the world. Boy, I loved that baseball."

"Who did you play for?"

"A little semi-pro outfit down in Valdosta. Strictly bush-league. Used to sell cars all week and travel around playing ball on Saturdays and Sundays. That was some fun, but things like that just can't last. We'd play baseball all afternoon and carouse all night. To this day Monday morning is hard to face." I continued to chop the high notch as he spoke. "All that fast living is great for a while, but it'll get you."

"Why did you stop?"

"I guess the years just closed in. Not that I wasn't feeling good. Still played some pretty fair ball, too. But there was too much falling in on me. By that time I had a wife and baby. Wanda liked baseball right enough--and the parties too--but she couldn't stand being left behind. When we had to travel more than a few miles, she had to stay home to tend the baby. She said what she thought of that in a hurry." He paused, spit quietly and gazed into the finished notch. The breeze which had been lifting his thin white hair grew strong enough to flap his jacket collar against his neck, but he didn't notice. Behind his fixed gaze he seemed to have picked up old memories like letters discovered in a box.

"Is that when you quit?" I waited.

"What? Oh, no, not then. Maybe things would of turned

out lots better if I had. Those trips started the trouble. First thing I knew, we were having terrible rows. I thought the noise would never stop, but it did. I got in late one Sunday night, and there was nobody home. And that was the end of it. She ran off with some big deal from the R.C. Cola plant in Columbus. Never saw her again. Just some slick lawyer that came to handle the divorce.

"That was the last year I played. My heart just wasn't in it after that. And then there were some bad years." He looked at the scattered wood chips and then spoke as if to shove his letters back into the box, "But we all have to grow up some time. Well it looks like you got it. Whenever you're ready, give her a good heave and I'll guide her in." He played out enough rope to be clear of the thirty-foot top when the tree came down, and I leaned into the trunk like a blocking sled until I heard the satisfying crack begin. Then I slacked off and tried to help control the fall. The tree swished and crushed to the ground, and I wiped my face on my sweatshirt sleeve. I picked up the axe to start stripping off the branches and heard Hank coming toward me.

"I think you're a better lumberjack than I am, Bub. Look over there. Damned if I didn't almost flatten Margaret's favorite rose bush."

By the time I had chopped away the offending limbs, Margaret drove up with a back seat full of groceries. I already had two sacks in my arms before seeing Hank without his tobacco reminded me of my own. I responded to her

chatter with single syllables, trying to flatten the lump in my cheek while suppressing the need to spit. Hand saw my problem as he brought in a sack behind me.

"I can finish up here, Hugh. You go on back to our tree," he said as he patted his hip pocket to make sure the pouch was out of sight.

That was the first of our minor mischiefs over the years. I don't know whether Margaret never noticed anything or simply ignored what she saw. Not that Hank really did anything to antagonize her. There was never any doubt that he was devoted to her; it was just that he changed so many of his ways for her that the few remaining ones were all the more noticeable.

He had married Wanda, who never got over being the beauty queen at the county fair and never wanted to give up the attention and high times that a pretty girl in a small town can count on. His regular job as a car salesman didn't buy the kind of life she wanted, and she would have tired of any man after a few years. So it was no surprise to anybody but Hank when she left him for a man with money and prestige.

Perhaps Hank saw more good in her than there was. Rather than healing with time, he got worse. His drinking spread from the weekends to the weekdays. His lunch hours got longer and longer, until he rarely came back after lunch. He lost his job and recovered just long enough to get a new one and start all over again. He managed to talk

his way into a dealership in Milledgeville, where Margaret lived with her mother in the old home place and taught music at the women's college. No sooner had he braced himself with mouthwash and aftershave and sold her a new Dodge than she had seen his agony and begun his reform. Within a year they were married, saving him from alcoholism and her from spinsterhood.

Hank admired Margaret's refinement, though he couldn't always follow along. All of the country rowdy in him simply would not bleach out. While he had given up drinking, he still smoked cigarettes and had a furtive chew now and then. Where he would have sworn loudly before, he grumbled profanely when the toaster didn't work or Martin Luther King appeared on the evening news. I think he also liked to hear Daddy complain that I never knew when to come in from a date, probably because Hank recalled the rewards of those late hours. Margaret would make a disapproving face occasionally over his smoking or swearing, but she was oblivious to his past, as though insulated by Providence from things she could not change.

But there was a stain which she had to face before she could marry him. Considering the proposal of a divorced man when she was nearly forty was certainly torture since she took to heart the biblical warning not to remarry with a spouse still living. In her childhood days such a marriage was living in sin just as much as common-law marriage. Even though churches became more lenient, Margaret's Bible had

not changed. She prayed, cried, and agonized for days, suspended between the evils of a stained marriage and a lonely old age. Her father had died young and left her mother to pass from youth to old age without much life between, and now Margaret could feel herself doing the same, as her mother depended on her to live for both of them. Of course her mother was dead set against Hank.

Margaret told Mother that she wrestled like Jacob at Peniel with the dilemma of marrying Hank. She was so eager to explain that it seemed she wrestled all over again while Mother became the unwilling referee. No doubt she spoke in the same breathy voice that she always slipped into for the sad or scandalous: "Oh, honey, there are no words to tell the agony I suffered after Hank asked me to marry him. There was <u>that woman</u> (she never allowed her the title <u>wife</u>, which she reserved for herself) and some other awful bad things he had to go through. And my mother said that he wasn't from good people and I would be sorry. But I finally decided that a just God wouldn't allow all that hardship to come to no good. Hank was a pitiful thing when we met, but he was still a kind man and he needed me so much. I could feel myself becoming a real person for the first time in my life. As far as I was concerned, that woman died when she deserted him. There was nothing he could do about it. Together Hank and I could make something where there had been nothing before. I just had to believe that there was no sin in making a Christian home."

That's how it went more or less. All Mother could do was listen, calm her, and look for the first opportunity to talk about something else. Maybe Margaret looked for her approval because we weren't Baptists. Margaret's beliefs always seemed to be creating problems where there need not have been any. That was her way of taking up her cross daily; it gave her a fruitful sense of struggle. She assumed that every sincere person endured such trials regularly, and I suppose that's how she explained my theology. Even so, she was sweet about it.

For high school graduation she and Hank gave me a book of T. S. Eliot's poetry instead of the religious book I might have expected. She had asked my parents what I wanted and then had written an inscription in it: "To our own Hugh, a scholar and a gentleman. God go with you to college and beyond. Love and best wishes, Margaret and Hank." The fact that neither of them knew T. S. Eliot from Allen Ginsburg made the book all the more endearing. Then there was the hug and the warning not to let them take my faith away at college, and I winced at her notion of college as a haven of anarchists and atheists preying on innocent youth.

The summer after my junior year Hank went into the hospital with cancer of the colon. The malignancy had spread too far to be removed, and the doctors gave him a few weeks to live. When I went to see him in the hospital, I found Margaret staring out the window with a closed Bible in her lap. Hank, who had withered until he was translucent, lay

contorted in the chrome bed. His sharp bones pressed so close to the surface that his skin had a tallowy sheen; his elbows were bandaged where the bones had cut through the skin. He was diapered and had a tube running along the side of his bed which emptied his urine into a plastic bottle. He slept fitfully, convulsed by twitches and quieted by weakness, as his breath drew stubbly cheeks in over his gums.

Margaret walked to me and whispered loudly, "Oh, Hugh honey, it's good to see you looking all big and strong. Poor Hank is just wasting away pitiful," she said through a glaze of tears. "Only the Lord and I know how he has suffered. I've tried to be strong for him." She shook her head slowly as she spoke, and my eyes were drawn to Hank's plastic bottle by a dripping noise.

I hugged her and stepped aside as an attendant rolled a dinner tray into the room. The noise of the tray and the blonde and colorless young woman's "How are we doing this afternoon?" were enough to wake Hank. He looked at the ceiling trying to focus his eyes and rolled his head from side to side smacking his lips loudly then twisting them into a scowl. "Got to have some water, some water." Whatever weakness had not done to his speech, the removal of his dentures had. Through his flapping lips and groans the simplest sentences were hard to follow.

Margaret poured a little water into a glass, held it to his lips, and tried hopelessly to keep the water from ebbing

out of the corners of his mouth. It streamed from his pointed chin and spread large spots of his light blue gown. He smacked and sighed with satisfaction when she set the glass down and patted his face dry. "Lord, it's a hot one. Weather like this, a man's not good for much."

"That's all right Hank. You just rest," Margaret said mildly. He never seemed to hear her. She continued to talk to him as she spooned a brown, green, and yellow baby-food dinner to him. "Honey, I know it isn't too tasty, but you'll feel better. Try a little." He stared out the window, seldom chewing and swallowing only when there was too much in his mouth not to. As the feeding continued, Hank took the food only to be done with it. He ignored Margaret but accepted the spoon less grudgingly once she began to sing. She hummed "Amazing Grace" and went on to "I Dream of Jeannie." After he took a swallow of water she finally gave up and said, "Look who's come to see you, Hank. It's our Hugh."

I moved nearer to the bed and groped for words that wouldn't sound stupid. There was no sense in asking how he was feeling. Under the circumstances it was equally ridiculous to say that I was glad to see him. So I patted the hand without the intravenous tube in it and said hello. When he grabbed my hand and said, "Hey, Bub," I was surprised. He not only knew me but began to talk as if the ordeal of hospital food were far in the past.

"Are you staying out of trouble and breaking the

girls' hearts?"

"Oh, a little of both, I guess."

"Well, good." He closed his eyes but still held my hand. "Yessir, you're the first one I've seen today didn't try to stick something in me. Damn place getting to me."

He looked me over, nodding slowly, then grabbed my forearm. He squeezed it a few times, smiled, and let his hand fall back on the bed, still nodding and smiling faintly.

"Don't you beat it all, you big devil. All sunburned and tough as a hickory limb. Better not let those doctors see you. They'll have you bleeding and pissing in a bottle till you can't move. You working construction again?"

"Hank, Hugh made the Dean's List. Aren't you proud of him?"

"I'm trying to talk to the boy. Let us alone. Trying to talk. . ." He waved wildly for her to leave, shooing her like a barnyard chicken, flipping both hands toward the door until I expected the needle to jerk from the back of his hand and spurt blood across the bed. Margaret patted me to stay put and rushed out the door before he hurt himself. I leaned over the bed wanting to ask him to ease up on her but too concerned about riling him more. He fell back panting.

"Dean's List, huh?"

"Yeah, I've got them all fooled. Learned how to play the game."

"Hell. You're a smart kid. Wish I'd of had enough

sense to do more than play ball and chase girls. Could of got somewhere, been somebody. Even made a little money. Then Wanda wouldn't of run off." A weary calm weighed him down as he stared out the window without seeing the tops of the buildings of the colorless sky.

"Hank, you know Margaret loves you. Let her help. She's doing the best she can."

"Let her help," he sighed as if the weight on his chest were too much to fight. His stare wavered until his eyes shut.

When I left the room, I found Margaret standing by the door wiping her eyes. She looked in behind me and saw Hank asleep then turned and took my arm. We walked down the hall with her leaning on me heavily.

"Wish you didn't have to see him like this, so sick and angry. But he loves you. I know it does him good to see you."

"Margaret, how long has he been like this?"

"Oh, it comes and goes. He's not mad and yelling all the time, but he doesn't want me around much. Sometimes he talks crazy and calls names I've never heard him say before. He drifts for minutes at a time like he's with some of his old buddies.

"Poor Hank. He's out of his head with pain. When he yells and carries on so, it's just because it's too much for him. I ache for him, but there's nothing I can do. Sometimes he feels better if I sing, but that's all."

"What can I do? Do you need anything?"

"No, honey. You're doing the best thing in the world when he sees you and lights up so."

"I'll be back tomorrow."

From what I had heard, Hank should have died before I got home. He had already lived two weeks longer than the doctors thought possible. He was an embarrassment, not only living on but often raving with the energy of a man recovering. Raving with a spite for the doctors and nurses that shook his fetid skeleton. Grumbling at Margaret but seldom speaking to her, tolerating her efforts.

At first I thought it was delirium, but his abuse mounted with the days, as though he had contained the resentment for years until it burst from his leaking body. Perhaps he longed for the alcoholic death she had averted, or for any death, no matter how many years earlier it had to be, in which he would not have to be fed and diapered like a baby and wait flat on his back and toothless like an old man.

I returned daily to talk with him when he was rational and play the necessary characters when he wasn't. He became so lost in time and space and pain that he would sometimes rave by the half-hour--calling for more liquor, luring hot country girls into walks to the riverbank, joking with old teammates, begging Wanda to come back to him. He clawed his way deeper into the past every day.

Margaret returned each day determined to ease Hank's pain as she had not been able to before, determined that her

faith in God and her devotion to Hank would not wither with his body. She was well beyond complaining about the cruelty of his lingering death; she was driven, like Hank, to the skin and bones of survival. Facing his suffering, surviving the travail of his death in some useful fashion, simply coming to grips with the horror of it was all she prayed for. The grace to accept, the strength to endure. Whatever pain his state had not caused her was added by his delirious excursions into the past. Her wounds of spirit that were raised by his dying were pricked by his raving. Despite the strength that they had shared in the past, it seemed that they were not able to do anything but hurt each other now.

Perhaps because I was her closest link with Hank at that point, Margaret confided things to me that she would have preferred to ignore altogether, but the pressure was too much.

"Hugh, I wonder if anything I do here matters. If God Almighty is true to his promise not to put more on us than we can stand. If Hank wouldn't be happier if I just stayed away."

"You know better. He doesn't want to hurt you. But now everything is painful to him. When you get close enough to help, that pain is bound to spill over on you."

We had that same conversation several different times. I always tried to say my part differently, to give her renewed conviction, even comfort if I could. She was so tormented that it became our private litany in the antiseptic

hallway. I looked for new ways of saying it with little success, but it reached the point that she might have been just as happy for each of us to repeat it verbatim each time, so that she could reassure herself with the rhythm of familiar words.

I started going by on the way home work since it made supper easier for Margaret if I was there to distract him. At the beginning of the second week I stepped out of the elevator to see attendants running into Hank's room. Hank's shrill voice carried unevenly down the hallway so that the old people walking by the handrails and several visitors stared at the door to see how the troublemaker would be dealt with.

As I entered the room, I smelled tomato soup and heard the shoes of the big black attendants and the colorless nurse scrape through the remains of a bowl shattered on the floor. There was a wide spatter of pink stains on the lap of the nurse's dress. S. Riggins narrowed her eyes and squeezed her lips together as she concentrated on a syringe and vial which she held toward the window to measure out the sedative. Her hands moved with the brisk efficiency of a mother subduing her anger while tending to a child.

Margaret, who was also splotched with the soup, stood at the foot of the bed with her eyes brimming and pleaded with Hank to calm down. She looked fearfully at the nurse's cold stare, wanting to caution her to be gentle.

"Hurt myself, hell. Leave me alone. Margaret, can't

you help me? Put me under a shade tree and get the hell away. I'll die my own way when I'm good and damn ready." He strained against the broad hands that held each arm and leg, jerking his head and demanding a fair fight.

Margaret began sobbing out loud and sat down, then saw me standing in the doorway. "Hugh! Talk to him before he hurts himself." He was already hurt. He was so shriveled that the grip of the attendants would leave brown bruises. When the nurse put down the vial and moved toward him with the needle, they had to hold him tighter. There was more fear than anger in his flailing. He had already had his share of dying and knew that it was easier to fight than lie still. I moved to the bedside and put my hand on his arm in place of the attendant's.

"Good God, boy, where you been?"

The nurse paused to see if I could do any good before she lifted the sheet to stick the needle into his leg.

"Got here as soon as I could. It's going to be all right. Lie back and take it easy now. I won't let anybody hurt you."

"Hear that you big niggers? Get away from me fore this boy eats you like a buzz saw." The nurse nodded and the men stepped back. "You too," he said to the nurse who waited to see if I could quiet him.

"Easy, Hank. Nobody's going to hurt you."

He fell back limp and wheezing on the pillow. I asked the nurse to wait a few minutes. When he had done this

before, he often fell asleep from exhaustion. She nodded, gritting her teeth, held the needle by her side. Hank held my right hand in his as if to shake it and gripped my wrist with his other hand. There was a purple hole in the back of his hand where the IV had been, but didn't bleed at all, only seeped a little colorless plasma.

He talked to me with his eyes closed until his words fell into a babble. Before long, the hospital people left the room and then Margaret, with hands and mouth trembling toward each other as they often did. I watched her go out the door as Hank clutched my hand, sighed, and talked on with his eyes shut. I stood there certain that nothing I could do would be enough for either of them.

He was so emaciated that all the strength of his body must have been used in holding me so long. Like the soldier in the training film, I wanted to lift him from the bed with the tubes falling away from his skeleton, with his delirious smile undisturbed as I knelt on one knee and smoothly broke his back over the other. His agony and Margaret's would end without festering another day.

Once he was asleep, I pried his hands loose and went down the hall to where Margaret stood shaking at the window with both hands on the sill as if preparing to kneel. I put an arm around her shoulders. She was steadied, perhaps calmed a little, but I don't think she ever felt me touch her.

"Margaret, you know he doesn't mean all that."

"No," she controlled herself to speak, "I don't think he does. But there's not anything else I can do for him. Nothing but sing and leave when he gets upset. He's still alive, but I lost him days ago. It's the old dreams he's living on now. I wonder if I've ever been what he needed. I wonder if we were married to each other or I was just married to him."

We stood together staring at the heat waves that melted and wrinkled the water maples bordering the parking lot. The trees, for all their solidness, would melt and ripple and then resume their true shape again. I tightened my grip on her shoulder and looked forward to the cool of the evening when the trees would no longer change shape.

VIRGINIA UNFOLDING

Virginia Bradley lives again. She has been dead seven years, dead from the bloating pain of cancer that a mastectomy could slow but not stop. If a woman can swell up, suffer, and die beautifully, I suppose she did. At the last it seemed that all her spirit and appetite, driven from her body by raging, diseased cells, were barricaded against the siege in her clear gray eyes. She grew listless and her eyes sometimes glassy from the sedatives, but even then, they kept a polished-steel sharpness. They had it still in the numbing smell and false warmth of her modernistic hospital room on the day before she died. I saw those eyes again last week in her granddaughter, a child of thirteen who, since I saw her last, seems to have shed all traces of her own parents and reincarnated the beginnings of her grandmother's beauty.

When I saw Anna K. last week, I felt old for the first time in my life. That brought the passage of time into much clearer focus than lifting my own newborn daughter in my hands. To look into the angry red face of my little girl was to see love fulfilled and life perpetuated. To see Anna K. was to watch the generations unfold like a figured scarf, spread out in the air before me, then rush together and

become one as if a rock had been dropped into the scarf's center, snapping all the corners together as it plummeted and flapped and cut a single streak through the air.

I saw the long-legged girl, daughter of my childhood playmate, walk into his den barefooted and wearing shorts. Carelessly filing her nails and tossing the hair out of her eyes, she glided, in spite of herself. Her bored expression and pouting mouth suggested she was there for lack of a better place to go at the moment. But her practiced grace said that she liked to be looked at. She had the smooth honey tan that only dark blondes can possess, making her skin flawless, silky, and all the more beautiful for her apparent indifference to it. She was no more aware than the barn swallow which wings its orange breast up into the sun's first rays, traces repeated arcs of color through the dim sky, and flies away. Her skin was Virginia's, growing again into womanly richness. Her eyes were closer to green than the gray of her grandmother's, but their brilliance, their ability to cut into or skip over whatever they saw, was the same. Through an inversion of time, I was allowed to see Virginia as a ripening virgin. I was seeing what the boundaries of life usually preclude, the origins of the first beautiful woman I ever noticed. The scarf unfolded, spread, rushed together.

I first noticed Virginia when she was in her early thirties. I say noticed, but I had known her much longer. She and Howard were friends of my parents, and Skip and I

had played together since I was old enough to walk down the front steps by myself. In the summer of my ninth year, I began to sense that she was more than just Skip's mother. She would take us swimming and play golf while we were at the pool. Even though Howard was the high school football coach and a fair athlete, he took no interest in golf, and she always played with other women while he spent the summer worrying and planning for the start of practice early in August. I used to think golf bored him or he was too busy; now I believe it frightened him. The whole atmosphere of leisure and social interplay went against his grain. He had succeeded on the farm and in football by working hard, being happy as the ant when most people wanted to be grasshoppers.

Virginia was born to be a grasshopper, lovely, exuberant, given to the moment. Had she married someone wealthy and indulgent, there is no telling how splendid her ruin might have been. But, for some reason, she married her diligent and loving high school biology teacher the year after she graduated.

When she took us home from the country club in that small town, where most respected people could afford to belong to the club, there was always a smiling, wide-nostriled satisfaction about her. She had played nine holes with the girls and, I have since surmised, had a couple of drinks in the clubhouse. She didn't drink much, and she disguised her breath well because I can't recall smelling the liquor; but I'll never forget the smell of the woman.

Her skin was a perfume unto itself. Her perfume was faint, floral, and soon absorbed, but her skin was sweet and spicy. It made such an impression that I was disappointed to discover that all tan blondes didn't emit the same odor. When she came down the sidewalk toward the pool in her smoothly clattering golf oxfords, Bermuda shorts, and thin, sleeveless blouse, I began to anticipate, that summer, that her scent would soon reach me. Hers was the peculiarly fresh odor of a bathed and well groomed woman who has just perspired and been dried by a sunny breeze, not unlike the smell of linen dried in the sun. The fragrance was tinged lightly with nicotine, from cigarettes that Howard disliked in general and for his wife in particular, and with the leather of the golf glove, which she usually forgot to remove until we reached the car.

On the way home, because I didn't remember to call shotgun, I sat between her and Skip in the car. For many years she drove too fast and rather carelessly; but with the music of the radio and the smell of Virginia filling my head, it seemed that we flowed back into town over the narrow, bumpy road. She asked about our swim, asked if we got too much sun, and promised a snack to ease the sharp hunger that swimming always brought. It embarrassed me when her bare leg brushed mine, but I looked forward to it.

Often, and usually over my mother's reticence that I might be in the way, I ate supper with them that summer. Virginia insisted that I was hers too, since Skip and I were

inseparable. She sliced tomatoes, onions, and lettuce while Howard grilled hamburgers in the back yard. Their daughter Evelyn, who was in junior high, always seemed to be off somewhere. She was going through a stage when her parents seemed unbearably demanding and stodgy. We ate at the picnic table under a hackberry tree, and everybody was happy in his own way. Skip and I attacked the hamburgers, elbowed each other, and eyed the big, cold, uncut watermelon at the end of the table. Virginia ate lightly, talked of golf and the condition of the scorching course, and described her latest projects for the house to Howard.

It seemed that she devoted every summer to projects, winter being a time to read Better Homes and Gardens and get ready. The rock garden is the first thing I recall, then painting and re-flooring the kitchen. That summer it was the bathroom. The putrid pink-and-black, pink-and-white, and pink-and-gray bathrooms, which still exist in many homes of the '50s, are lasting evidence of that era when the bathroom was a decorator's joy. But there was never any danger that she would simply follow a fad. It seemed that, in her household as well as in her clothing, she studied the latest thing, cast off the tasteless, and took for herself what other women would have liked, if they had possessed the imagination to see it, to give shape for themselves.

The bathroom was her masterpiece. It was black. She covered the walls with a paper that had a profusion of pink, gray, and gold starfish and seashells on a black background,

painted the linoleum wainscoating black, a flawless job without any drips or streaks, and covered the floor with solid black linoleum. To relieve the darkness, she used light pink curtains and plain brass-trimmed light fixtures on either side of the medicine cabinet and on the ceiling. The pièce de résistance of her scheme was the floor. She cut the starfish and seashells from extra wallpaper, glued them to the linoleum, and sealed it all with varnish. It might be garish today, but at the time it was the only beautiful bathroom I had seen. Virginia's bathroom became the talk of the town. I think there were even a few second-rate copies made. She always came out of a winter with decorator magazines like Moses coming down from the mountain.

So we sat at the picnic table, Skip and I eating and giggling, Virginia talking in enthusiastic bursts, Howard smiling and taking it all in. It was as though we were all his children.

Occasionally we were joined for supper by Culley Hodge and his wife and boys. Skip and I hated to see the kids because they were much younger and brats to boot. Mrs. Hodge, a flighty redhead, talked loudly and seemed determined to keep the men's attention away from Virginia. I think I sensed her desperation even then. Meanwhile, as she went on with the latest from the Jaycees or the beauty parlor, Mr. Hodge, Howard's assistant, tried to ride herd on the little hellions. Virginia would sometimes offer help by getting their dessert early, and Mrs. Hodge would stab her with an

angry glance and yank the boys to their seats so she could go on talking and making flashes in the air with her bright red fingernails. Those particular suppers were more pain than pleasure as far as I was concerned. But Howard and Mr. Hodge were close, and Virginia seemed happy to put up with things as they were.

He was so different from Howard that it struck me as odd for them to be good friends. Of course, they had the strong bond of coaching together, which is much more than just working with each other. Men who coach beside each other share so much in sweat, triumph, and disappointment that, if they have anything in common, a bond results, as with missionaries or soldiers. They had played on the same team at Middle Tennessee, Howard a senior center, Culley a sophomore halfback. Howard had the hard, honest features that the farmer in American Gothic would have if he were made young and strong. He had a pleasant smile and a quiet, observant manner, but Skip went out of his way not to make his daddy mad. Culley was the college all-star of a Fitzgerald story. He had dark, wavy hair, a smile that could get votes if he ever wanted them, and he moved as though his feet hardly ever touched the ground. I don't guess I should have been surprised years later when Skip told me that his mother had carried on a long affair with Culley. Apparently it began that summer.

Virginia was the daughter of a dour Methodist preacher over in McMinnville. She was the youngest of four, and in

her family they followed the pattern I have noticed with the children of most ministers: they tend to be either very pious or very rebellious. The older three children were pious.

As Skip (everybody calls him Howard now) tells it, Virginia gave the Kirkpatricks fits. She was a cheerleader, an erratic student, and a girl who had her choice of dates to every event in town, not that there were many events in McMinnville in 1942. She saw the world around her exploding, people responding to the war with recklessness and courage, and she was never short on either. But in that time and place, there wasn't much way for a decent girl to be heroic. There was, however, the disgruntled and manly young football coach. Asthma took away his chance to go to war, so he lived for football and, after several months, to see Virginia come into his biology class and sit smiling on the front row.

Naturally, he never asked her out in high school, but she was not dismayed. After a year of her talking to him after class and sitting near him on the team bus, it was only a matter of time until he came courting. Her throaty laugh and bursting energy would have been the undoing of almost any man who was the target of her affections for a year. At first Brother Kirkpatrick was troubled about an older man calling on his daughter, but the longer he saw Howard in church every Sunday and pondered the relative calm that had settled on his daughter, the fewer his misgivings became.

By the time they were married in the fall of her nineteenth year, the preacher was relieved that his willful child was in stronger hands than his own. After the war Howard took a better job in Hatton and managed to get Culley, just home from the air corps, hired as his assistant while he finished his last year of college.

If the story were reduced to its deceiving essentials, it might sound like Arthur, Guinevere, and Launcelot all over. But if not Culley, it would have been somebody else sooner or later. I don't think she ever failed to love Howard, but neither was he ever quite enough for her. At some point she realized that she had graduated from the care of one father to the bed of another. Just as she had in adolescence, she began, very gradually this time, to rebel.

I can remember a time when she didn't smoke, though I can't say exactly when she started. Surely she took it up as a convenient means of rebellion, a way to prove that she was no longer in the powerful shadow of the steeple. In those days in Hatton, a woman didn't start smoking casually; it was a statement of worldliness. What was all right for Bette Davis in the movies was quite different for local women, who were raised to know better. But if Virginia began it as rebellion, she didn't continue for the same reason. I never saw her smoke nervously, as a sophisticated substitute for nail-biting, or affectedly, as though she planned her poses. At that time most women smoked one way or another. Usually when she smoked, she was seated and calm whether at

the breakfast table or out by the rock garden. She was contemplative and often watched the smoke rise as if it might give some sign before it dispersed. It looked like meditation.

Howard always disapproved, but considering her stubbornness, he apparently decided not to make an issue of it in the hope that she would quit if not challenged. That was wise of him, but she enjoyed smoking and never did stop. Anyway, he had bigger problems to deal with.

One reason I'm convinced that her love for Howard was genuine is that, during the time that I now know the affair was going on, she never drew away from him. Most people in her circumstances would have become curt and secretive, would have withdrawn and looked for excuses to justify what they were doing. If they couldn't say that there was a lack of communication when the affair began, they would begin immediately to create one, to protect themselves. Instead, Virginia talked to him more than ever. If she had been looking for excuses, she could have found them, because Howard uttered words like an old man pulling coins from a change purse. He never spoke unless he had something to say, sometimes not even then. But during that summer, when Skip and I were out catching lightning bugs or in the den watching TV, they often ended up talking in the kitchen after supper.

She sat on a stool at the white enamel kitchen table while Howard stood leaning against the counter. She talked, smoked, and drank from a glass of iced coffee. He listened.

As the preacher's daughter, her readiness to speak her opinions had been embarrassing; as the coach's wife, it could be disastrous.

She was openly critical of the local churches on the liquor referendum that was coming up. Saying so at bridge club was taking a risk, since those who said nothing at the moment were sure to be appalled behind her back. Gossip was the customary punishment for any unguarded statement. But when she dared to say the same things in a circle meeting at church, it was an open scandal.

"Howard, you know how many people in that very church go to Nashville for their liquor. Whether you approve of drinking really doesn't matter. Why should Nashville get the taxes that we need for schools and roads?"

"If it's out of the county, it's harder to get."

"Give five dollars to one of the cab drivers and you can have a bottle in ten minutes."

"How do you know?"

"Ask around."

"That still doesn't make it right to build liquor stores in town."

"You may not think it's right. Take your choice. Who's going to profit from the drinking that goes on anyway? The bootleggers and the Nashville stores? Or the people of this blind town?"

"We've been through this already. There's something more important."

"What?"

"I think you're wrong, but I'm not telling you what to believe or how to vote. . ."

"But you wish I'd shut up about it."

"Outside the house, yes."

"Just cause everybody else is two-faced, saying one thing on Sunday morning and doing the other on Saturday night?"

"You aren't responsible for them."

"Somebody in this head-in-the-sand place has to be responsible. The bootleggers and the preachers make a pretty silly coalition. You'd think the preachers would have more sense."

"I would hope you had more sense."

"What have I said that isn't logical?"

"People care a lot more about being blameless than logical."

"Can I help it if they're cowards?"

"You can let it alone. You're only embarrassing us. Let it alone."

They had many discussions like that. Virginia argued her principles, and Howard told her that there were stronger considerations. He was often the mediator between her and the world. Perhaps because she was never out on her own, she had a child's sense of justice. What was right was simply what ought to be done. It particularly galled her when she thought the church was on the wrong side. Sometimes

they talked about important things, sometimes about things that seemed to matter only to Virginia. But Howard always listened, listened long after he would rather have sunk into the peace of the sports page. I suppose she cost him a great deal in terms of community stature and peace of mind, but he rarely lost patience. Even her questioning and complaining seemed an act of love, as if she thought talking to him might ease problems that had no other solution. I'm sure she never talked to Culley like that.

Maybe she was trying to find a substitute for Culley when she decided she wanted a job later that year. She had talked to Mr. Tisdale, who owned the big home-furnishing store, and convinced him that she could make him some extra money as a decorator. If her politics were in question in town, her taste never was. On that afternoon in the spring, Skip and I heard her talking to Howard in the bedroom. We were nipping our way through the honeysuckle vines outside the window.

"Why on earth not?"

A long silence.

"Howard, you know I could do a good job."

"Sure you could. But I don't want to wreck our household."

"It won't. I'll just have to keep things organized. Plan ahead a little more."

"Aren't the children, the house, and the church enough to keep you busy?"

"They keep me busy enough, but there's no challenge. It's all routine. I want more than being busy."

"Responsibility comes first."

"Don't I take good care of things?"

"I want to keep it that way."

"You can't just hold still. Whether they're growing or withering, people change."

"Maybe you ought to try the garden club."

Grudgingly, she did. Before long she had the mild matrons of that group attacking eyesores all over town. They cleaned up the vacant lots near the square, which were strewn with paper, soda cans, and liquor bottles all fastened in place by weeds and blackberry bushes. She got Howard to mow them with the tractor from the high school. Everybody was pleased to see the rambunctious Virginia Bradley put her energy to good use. When she got after the merchants to chip in for flowers and shrubs to go around the courthouse, the approval continued but was less enthusiastic. For over a year she "tried" the garden club, tried it until hardly a piece of public or disused property had escaped her hand. Once the possibilities for major projects were reduced and the club returned to a steady diet of programs on flower arrangement and house plants, she lost interest.

Virginia and others began talking to the ministers in town about holding a community Christmas service. There was a surprisingly good response until the matter of the Negro churches came up. Virginia had assumed they would be

included, but nobody else had. That was the end of the Christmas service. Howard must have regretted not letting her take a quiet job with Mr. Tisdale.

It was not in Virginia's nature to be satisfied. She took pleasure in the things she did, but as soon as an activity was completed or became static, she looked for something else. Her dissatisfaction was not that of the spoiled child waiting to be amused. She sought out new interests, worked hard at finding useful ways to occupy herself. Which made her inevitable disappointment that much sadder.

I suppose that was where Culley came in, though he, too, must have been a disappointment. A man of Howard's goodness, Culley's charm, and intelligence beyond either of them might not have been enough. Anyway, she filled in some of the blank spaces with Culley. Their affair ended abruptly when he divorced his wife. I'm not surprised that he divorced her, with or without Virginia in mind. A man can only stand so much noise. But afterwards, he must have tried to get Virginia to leave Howard, which was a sure way to lose her for good. She always had a strange blend of rashness and responsibility, something even she could not have explained. She went to work that year, took a job in a women's store in Nashville.

That was the year I was twelve, the year she seemed to change. Nothing radical, it merely seemed that her pleasures became quieter and possibly fewer, that she had settled for what her job and family could provide. My family

moved to Atlanta, and when I saw her on vacations in the following years, she seemed to have settled into her acquiescence. I didn't see much of her again until I went to college in Nashville.

The intervening years had been eventful. Howard's team had finally won the state Class A championship, and he had retired from coaching to become principal of the high school. Evelyn, always aloof and scholarly, was finishing at Duke, where she was engaged to a divinity student. They must have been an interesting pair. I never met him, but she had all her mother's brains and more without a trace of her charm or passion. I suppose she resembled her mother, despite having too much of Howard's plainness, but she was so unlike her in temperament that I never saw much similarity. At any rate, her course in life seemed to be set, and according to Virginia, she was very happy. Skip had gone to Auburn on a football scholarship and taken his new bride with him.

A couple of weeks after I started school, Virginia took me out to lunch. She was now one of the department heads in the fancy women's store across the street from Vanderbilt, and she had just returned from the fall buying trip. As she drove to the deli, she was full of questions about school and my family. She smoked and chattered gaily. Since I had seen her last, she had had a breast removed. The doctor said the operation was a success and the malignancy was completely gone. We said nothing about the operation, but I marvelled at the way she looked.

Into her forties, she was making her conquest of middle age. The signs of age seemed more seasoning than wear. Her dark blond hair, spun lightly with gray that a less ardent observer wouldn't see, was still rather short and wavy. She had never liked tight curls even back when everyone else seemed to. Her hair was loose and graceful, apparently styled to follow the natural waves, since she had kept it like that for as long as I could remember. Her neck and eyes were creased with lines, but age had only accentuated the small, firm chin and full lips. Her eyes, saddened by time and disappointment, were still cold-steel clear and bright gray. When she looked directly at me, they were especially bright, as if looking at me brought back the summers when she had been with me the most. The times when she sometimes left us at the pool and played golf and sometimes left us to spend the afternoon with Culley.

She parked the car in front of a small neighborhood deli that was decorated with chipped paint, worn wood, and faded signs. I opened her door and she resumed talking.

"Handsome, grown up. I've lost my best beau forever now. I bet there's a trail of broken hearts between here and Atlanta."

"The highway's still passable," I laughed.

We ordered sandwiches and coffee, which I only drank sometimes with breakfast, but I was determined to give her all the maturity she wanted. The dark little restaurant with narrow aisles of creaking floorboards smelled of cheeses

and smoked meat. She said she ate there often. It was the kind of place people from Hatton would call a sleazy Jew-joint.

"What's the latest from Skip?" I asked.

"Looks like he'll be first string," she said, avoiding the obvious. "He and Kim have a cute little apartment on campus. We went down and took them some things last weekend. Getting married all in a whirl, there wasn't time to pack up everything before practice started."

She looked up from her coffee with a sad smile, sparing me and herself the obligatory lie she told back home about how "Skip said he couldn't live without the little girl." Her sadness was calm, resigned, even good-natured, and it seemed to engulf everything. That Skip and I were growing up and taking her youth with us. That he was tied to a silly girl who had managed to get pregnant on the night of graduation and keep him from the brighter, prettier girls in college who were sure to take her place. That Virginia herself had chosen to treat her as daughter for the sake of Skip and the child. That I was never going to have as much happiness as she wished for me, no matter how well things turned out. That Skip and I and the unborn baby would have to face lives of compromise in spite of deserving better. That every joy seemed to come at a terrible price.

While we ate, I obliged her with a few tales of dormitory life and of a history professor who came to the vast lecture hall in white sneakers and insulted us for lacking

the courage to find a cause and revolt. I must have been in good form because she smiled then shook with suppressed throaty laughter. Warming to her appreciation, I went on as long as I could think of anything funny to say. She had always talked to me as though I were grown, and she listened, which was always flattering in a pretty woman. Throughout a life largely surrounded by close-mouthed preachers and athletes, she was hungry to hear any male who could be glib and amusing. Even in a child's way, I suppose I did that for years.

Her blue silk blouse shimmered and gracefully outlined her body. As always, she held her shoulders back, and her bosom swelled smoothly below. When she laughed, I noticed that the weight of her breast caused it to bounce slightly, while the padded side only moved in a confined, solid fashion. I was hurt by the thought that those breasts I had glimpsed as a child through the openings of bathing suits and loose blouses were no longer the same, that one was flattened and scarred. In the thrill of her laughter and the flow of her movement, I wanted to press my hands over the silk blouse and tell her how lovely she still was. I wanted to see the curved scar because I knew that it would have a bizarre beauty of its own.

Once the laughter subsided, she told me about her buying trip to New York. She admitted that the city still fascinated her as though she were a farm girl seeing concrete for the first time.

"It's so big and fast. Big and shabby or big and elegant, but everything is big. And everybody is in a terrible hurry. And Yankees are rude, don't let anybody kid you. If I hadn't started opening my own doors, I would have been trampled to death."

"But there's a magic about the place. So many people and cultures all thrown together and brought to a boil. The libraries, the art museums, the restaurants. All the theaters. I know I would be sick of the place in two weeks if I were turned loose to roam, but, Lord, I would love the chance to find it out for myself. You would love it. We must go some time." She laughed and asked for the check.

Even though she spoke in fun, she meant it in some ways, with that faintly sad laugh of a woman unfulfilled. Her laugh flowed over me like a breeze, and I savored the passing thought of going with her to New York, of walking alien streets, our shared discoveries encircling us. Her rich laughter and sacred odor would fill the cold air around us as she reached back for what she had missed and I forward for what eluded me. The more forbidding the dark streets, the greater our adventure would be. Walking arm-in-arm with her, I would have asked her questions from childhood, questions she first raised when I saw all women become mysterious through her. I would have heard the cool wind of her voice flutter through tied-back dreams, rippling and popping the old fabric with fresh air.

But everything grew calm again. At eighteen I was

bound into place too, by expectation, by my own well bred sense of responsibility.

I saw her occasionally during college, stopping by the store if things were going particularly well or badly. Mostly, we talked about her work and family and my current interests, whatever they were. Evelyn's preacher had jilted her, and it sounded as though she was taking it badly. She had gone to work for the YWCA in Chicago and had tried to turn it into a feminist organization. When that failed, she and some of her sisters in the cause moved to Oregon, bought overalls, and went into worm farming. I have only seen her once since then and felt quite uneasy over being a male. Whether I was bearing the guilt of her preacher or the whole male gender, I couldn't tell. I sensed from the way Virginia spoke of Kim that she was losing patience with her daughter-in-law as fast as she was being charmed by her granddaughter. They had named her Anna Kirkpatrick, much to Virginia's satisfaction. When they were home from Auburn, Skip stayed at Virginia's and Kim with her parents. Anna K. was shuttled between grandmothers so that Kim hardly changed a diaper for weeks, which suited her. As the years passed and Kim grew accustomed to thinking of herself as married, she sulked, complained, decided that Skip had robbed her of her youth. Virginia talked to her and kept her in line after Skip had nearly given up talking altogether. They didn't divorce until after Virginia's death. She held them together by force of will for a year longer, even from the grave.

I graduated, went into the army, and returned three years later to learn that Virginia was in the hospital with inoperable cancer. I had become engaged to a girl I had met in Hatton. Knowing that Virginia would enjoy meeting her and seeing that I was in the hands of someone bright and pretty enough to meet her standards, I took her with me to the hospital. We stood by the bed where she lay swollen, talking in a weary voice and clutching my hand, too weak to talk and laugh the way she wanted to.

When we returned with our wedding pictures as promised, she greeted us with a weak smile. Only the eyes still held life. She looked through pictures and asked a few questions. For a few minutes she appeared to find escape. When we closed the album, she turned to my wife.

"Honey, he's been my beau for twenty years. Take good care of him. And watch him, he's a smooth talker."

She died a few weeks later in November, and I was one of her pall bearers. At the funeral home, Howard, straining not to break down completely, was far beyond words. He shook hands and took the offered consolation in a daze. Skip was nearly as bad off, and Kim was closer to dignified and likable than I had ever seen her. The only trace of Evelyn was a wire saying that she couldn't come. We assembled in the chapel for a service by the Methodist preacher. Virginia had not gone to church much since the kids had left home, and he hardly knew her. It showed. He bubbled eulogy and comfort like a plastic party fountain, proceeded to have

her buried as though she were but one more sweet church member and dull, loving mother taken from our midst. For all he knew, he was burying Pollyanna at age fifty.

There was some comfort, some communion, in carrying her casket to the grave beneath the awning. In the blinding sunshine of that cold Saturday, the leaves blew around me, skittering and tapping against the tombstones. It would have been fitting to sow her ashes in the wind to travel as far or high as a gust might take them. But the weight of her body and the bulky steel casket felt good. I wished for more, enough to displace grief with struggle. I wished Skip and I could have come out together and been left to ourselves to dig her grave. We took her youth away in growing up; she took ours away in dying.

I had given up Virginia as buried until last week, when the scarf unfolded, spread, rushed together. Since Anna K. had always resembled her mother, I avoided her. She was high-strung, loud, spoiled. I hadn't seen her in two years. In the meantime her mother had given up trying to raise her and sent her to Skip and his new wife. Kim found it trying to be a mother and a "self-actualizing human being" at the same time.

If I had seen her on the street, I could not have identified her, except to say that she was Virginia's. The carriage of the head and shoulders, the sensuous parting of the lips in a slight smile, the transfixing power of her eyes--all are Virginia. But Virginia before I ever could

have seen her. She is the embodiment of what Howard must have seen in that classroom in McMinnville years ago. She has the lovely restlessness of her grandmother, but seems, by her pouting air, to lack Virginia's willingness to suffer for her desires, to earn her joys. Maybe Virginia got as close to what she wanted as anyone could.

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