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James Ballard

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*James Ballard*  
A DEPARTURE

TOWARDS SUPPERTIME, boys were coming back from pass and signing in. Each one of them went through the same ceremony. The young ones were earnest about it, the older ones were bored, but all of them performed it. "Captain Randall sir—wish to report in from authorized absence." It had been the same way the times he had been Weekend Officer before, but he still wasn't used to hearing them. The rest of their lives, whenever they saw a desk with a man behind it they would want to report in from authorized absence.

After supper, there was another wave of sign-ins. This was going to be all of them for a while. The rank and file students had to be back by eight thirty. Seniors and Student Officers could be gone until midnight. Bed check came at nine thirty. Randall turned it over to the Sergeant of the Guard, a junior. Nobody was missing. At ten o'clock, lights out. Some scuffling and now and then some yelps went on for the few minutes following lights out. That was a kind of ceremony too. It was over with right away. At ten thirty, Randall moved along the corridors. Everybody was asleep. The grade school students and the upper school students. The boys from well-to-do homes, and the scholarship boys, all sleeping. The boys with police records and the troublemakers and the hard-to-handle ones. For a while now they could leave off with performing anything.

The Duty Room again. There was a bunk here, and later on he would stretch out for a while. Now and then, not often, the building creaked somewhere. It was an old building. Its stair treads were hollowed by four generations now of footsteps. In places, plaster had dropped out of the ceiling. Sometimes patches had been made, sometimes not. These buildings had been in the grand manner when they were new, parapets and casements and lofty ceilings. Not new anymore. Old and gloomy and creaking.

He began after a time to have the notion that something peculiar

was going on. He had been drowsing, but he was awake now, and he heard moaning somewhere, whispering. Something actually had gone wrong. The sound came from down the corridor, and when he went to see about it, it was coming from one of the squad rooms.

The grade school boys lived on this corridor. It turned out that one of them had had a nightmare. The others in his squad room were doing what they could for him, but the boy kept on moaning. They had gathered around his bunk, and one of them was talking to him and trying to get him to answer. Randall turned on the night light to look at the boy's bunk tag. His name was Hobie, Kenny. Grade 5. There was a serial number.

"He's Kenny Hobie, sir," the boy talking said. "He don't have any middle initial. He gets like this sometimes. Hey, Kenny. You better straighten up. Captain Randall had to come in here to see about you. Listen, Kenny. Come on, hear?"

"You people move back a little, okay? Who's your room chief?"

"It's Sergeant Mercer, sir. He's not here, though. He's been gone since this morning sometime. If he was here, he'd know what to do."

"What does he do?"

"He tells him to shut up or he'll beat the daylights out of him. And then he sort of pats him on the head a little, so Kenny'll see he's just joking. And if he's got the blankets and things tangled up, he straightens them out again. I mean Mercer does. Sir, why don't you do that?"

Randal looked at him. Why not try it. He turned to Hobie again.

"Shut up, Hobie. Or I'll beat the daylights out of you."

Hobie stopped moaning. His eyes opened. He had dark places in his eyes still, from seeing the nightmare, but there was also recognition. He smiled, almost, and then took it back.

"Hobie buddy. Having trouble?"

Again, Hobie almost smiled.

"That's Sergeant Mercer's bunk right there, sir."

"Your name Webb?"

"Yessir. Webb, sir, Robert J. It used to be my bunk, but Sergeant Mercer made me move over there, and he moved here. So he could keep Hobie from being scared, I guess. Sometimes when Sergeant Mercer's drunk he lets Hobie get in the bed with him. When Hobie's like this, I mean."

"When he's drunk, huh."

"Man, he gets loaded to the ears sometimes, Captain." Then, Webb

was looking scared. "Sir, don't tell him I said that. Hear? We like him."

"You fellows must have a ball in here. When Mercer's drunk and Hobie's having a nightmare at the same time."

"I know it, sir, but we never do anything. Honest to God. He won't let us cut up or anything. You're not going to tell him I told on him, are you?"

"No. No, I won't tell him." The way it was, he already knew. There had once been some friction between himself and Mercer, about drinking. "You fellows go on back to bed now."

"Is Hobie going to be all right?"

"He is. Go on now, get back in bed" He had to make it sound like he would be all right. He didn't quite know what to do. There was a first-aid box in the Duty Office, but it didn't have any sort of sedatives. "Hobie. You come on with me, okay."

What surprised him then was that Hobie consented. Not with any word or sound, but all the same there was nothing mechanical or automatic. Hobie evidently hadn't learned many ceremonies yet. Randall had the idea that if he hadn't consented he would have needed to be dragged.

But he had agreed, and he was on his feet now. Webb and the others were getting back in bed. Randall switched off the night-light. He felt something at his side, and it was Hobie, sticking close to him. Hobie was bringing his blanket with him.

IN THE DUTY OFFICE, he put Hobie in the bunk there. "You go on to sleep now. Mercer's going to be getting in before long. He'll come in here to sign in, see."

"Yessir. I like it in here okay with you, sir."

"That's good. You go on to sleep now."

But Hobie didn't quite consent to this. "I wish I could talk a little bit first, Captain."

That might be better than sedatives. "All right. A little, then."

"Okay. Well. Let's see. Oh—I was dreaming that my uncle was after me."

"Your uncle, huh."

"Yessir, him. Like, I live with him, see. Or I used to, before this aunt I have sent me here to this school."

It turned out that Hobie didn't like it back there. In one way he did, on account of his aunt, but his uncle used to get drunk, and run

him out of the house. He would hide under the floor, or in the chicken house maybe, but what generally happened, his uncle came up under the floor behind him and pulled him out again. The chicken house wasn't a good place either because a good many times the chickens would start in cackling and that would give him away. "And it smelled bad back in there too, Captain. You know?"

"I guess it did, yeah."

"All of them chickens? Son of a bitch. And then I'd get the chicken dirt on me too, see. You know what chicken dirt is, don't you?"

"I know what it is."

"Oh. So then. . . . Man, I hate them son of a bitches, Captain. Every one. I'd sort of try to talk to them, see, low, like Chicky, Chicky, so they wouldn't cackle, but they still would."

"You like it here though, don't you?"

"Here at this place? Oh, sure. I like it here fine. I mean I wouldn't say I didn't like it, because this aunt of mine, she fixed it for me to come here, and you all run it, but I like it anyway. One thing I like is all the things it is to eat. Breakfast, and then we get milk at ten o'clock, and dinner, and then by God it's supper time. Sergeant Mercer, what he does, he gets the waiters to bring people some more, if they want some more. And if it's time. Except if people eat fast, Mercer says slow down and eat like a human being. He's our room chief, see. That's the same as an adjutant. And the room chiefs, they have to sit at our table with us too. And you know what he does? If you throw a piece of bread or something, or kick anybody under the table, then after supper you have to do ten pushups. He made it a rule."

"Do you throw bread, Hobie?"

"Oh, I threw a little piece once. But he said little pieces counted as much as a whole slice. I didn't mind, though. About doing the pushups. He's the best room chief here, Captain. At least that's what I think. Did you know he can tie his necktie with one hand?"

"Mercer can?"

"Uh huh. He's the one I found out from. The way you tie a necktie. He promised me a dime if I'd learn how. I still didn't learn it very good, but he gave me the dime anyway. I got two Milky Ways, at the canteen. I planned on giving him one, but I couldn't find him, so I ate it. You like Milky Ways, Captain Randall?"

"Pretty good, yes."

"How about Hershey Bars? You like them?"

"I like Hershey Bars, yes. You go on to sleep, Hobie."

"Yessir. I plan to."

"Hershey Bar baby. In the tree top."

"What does that mean, Captain?"

"It means go to sleep."

"Oh. Okay." Hobie smiled. No hesitating this time, or taking it back. He turned over, and curled up. He was asleep in a minute or two. He had had a hard day. He had had a good many hard days in his time. Grade 5. That would make him eleven maybe. About eleven. He turned the blanket down off Hobie's face a little. Hobie mumbled, and got still again.

MERCER got in just before midnight. Two others were with him. They had been drinking. Each one reported in, and also asked permission to sign in from pass, sir. They were not burlesquing: It was a high-tone proceeding, and it was probably, Randall figured, to keep him from noticing they had been drinking. Mercer saw Hobie then, curled up asleep.

"You have to bring him in here, sir? He been giving you some trouble?"

The other two left, while Randall's attention was off them. For a minute it looked as if Mercer wished he had left too, instead of starting a conversation.

"No trouble. He woke up a while back. They say he does that sometimes."

"Yessir. He does."

"You know him pretty good, Mercer?"

"Sort of good. He's in my quarters-room, see."

"You know much about him?"

"Well, he minds good. He never gives me any trouble at least. But he won't take up with any of the other kids. I think maybe he's beginning to lately, but it's not enough to really tell about. It's a funny thing though. Sometimes it looks like he minds me on purpose. I mean like he decides to do it. A lot of these kids, they jump when you tell them to do something. Schroeder and Starr, they're bearing down so much now about reporting things and turning in discrepancies that . . . Major Schroeder, that is. Captain Starr." Mercer looked stubborn. "Well, they are."

"You know anything about his family, Mercer? He said something about his uncle."

"I know about them, I guess. What he's got for a family. They live

around here somewhere. It's a lot of Hobies in this section. What I hear, they're all about the same. His old man's off somewhere, his mother's down in Annistown."

"She work?"

"You could call it that." Mercer was looking uncomfortable. They were already talking low, but he lowered his voice more. "She gets paid anyhow. I mean you asked me, Captain, I'm just telling you what they say. It's—pretty much right, I'd say. I saw her down on Main Street tonight, as far as that goes."

Randall watched him.

"I'll take him on back to the quarters-room if you want me to, Captain."

"You better had. He'll be okay."

Mercer went around the desk. He was starting to pick Hobie up, but when he lost his balance, he changed his mind, and only pushed at Hobie's shoulder. Mercer was wearing a peajacket, the school's uniform jacket. The fellows with him had been wearing the same kind, but one side of Mercer's swung heavy. The cap and the neck of a pint bottle was showing out of the pocket on that side. He pushed at Hobie again. Hobie was waking up then.

"Hey, partner. What're you doing in Captain Randall's office? You been walking in your sleep or something?"

Hobie got his eyes focussed. "Sarm Mercer." He turned over again.

"Uh uh. You can't do that. Come on here."

Hobie struggled up. Mercer steadied him, and so then they were leaving. At the door Mercer looked back. "See you to: morrow, Captain." He was talking formally again now, carefully. It looked like a vodka bottle in his pocket. "Good: night."

"Goodnight, Mercer. See you."

And he was by himself again.

Everything quiet. No more people to come in from pass. Mercer and the other two were the last ones.

The room was turning cold now. This was May already, but it got chilly at night, here next to the mountains. A long way till morning. He would get some sleep, soon. Classes would be by the usual schedule tomorrow, regardless of the Duty. Three freshman mathematics classes, one for the juniors, one for the seniors. The end of this month, final examinations were coming. Next week, Schroeder had told him, he should start his classes reviewing for the examinations.

He had allowed a student to break a regulation. Three students.

Mercer and his bottle of vodka. Maybe it was gin. Possibly it was aquavit. Aquavit didn't have any color either. Schroeder would land on Mercer with both feet, if he knew about it. The other teachers were only Captains, but Schroeder was a Major.

NEXT MORNING at coffee break, Ed Starr was asking him about Hobie's nightmare. "I take it you didn't think it was anything serious?"

"It certainly was for him. I wouldn't say it was an emergency."

"Huh. If you're going to start defining things. What's serious, what's an emergency. It was serious enough to upset the whole room."

Starr was chief of the lower school, the Intermediate Battalion. He was in charge of all the younger boys, and in addition he was English Officer for the juniors and seniors. He wanted to get the English teaching off his hands. Some of the high school guys, he said, had the idea they already knew everything.

"Two or three of the kids in that room been telling me about it this morning. We can't have things like that."

Robbie Roberts looked over. "Let's have a new regulation, Ed. No nightmares allowed."

Starr put his cup down. However, Schroeder spoke ahead of him. "This is that Hobie kid? I'm beginning to wonder if there isn't some basic instability with him. I'd say you still had an easy Duty though, Randy. It can get a person wanting to pull hair. Knock heads together. Right, Ed?"

"Anything you say." Starr was looking glum. But then, he poured himself more coffee, and looked around the table to see if anybody else wanted more. Robbie finished what he had, and held his empty cup. Starr smiled, and filled it for him.

"I was thinking of dropping around last night, Randy," Schroeder said. "See how things were going. And then I decided it would be better to let you handle it on your own. I knew you could always call me, if anything came up. Or Ed here either, he's already in the building."

"Sure," Starr said. "Glad to, anytime, Didn't somebody come in, about midnight?"

"Mercer and a couple of fellows." Starr's apartment was on the same side of the building as the Duty office, on the floor above it.

"Mercer, huh. It was before midnight?"

"That's right. Before."

"Huh. I'm surprised it wasn't after. Mr. Mercer's on thin ice, as far



as I'm concerned. He thinks he can run that squad without any help. I catch him out just one time."

"What would you do, Ed?" Schroeder said.

"What I mean is, he's been just about daring me lately, to call him."

"I know, but what would you do?"

"Oh for Christ sake. All right, I wouldn't do anything. Except write him up for it, recommend the maximum discipline. It's not up to me to do anything, I'm glad to say."

In the school hierarchy, Schroeder was the first man. He was Executive Officer and Assistant Commander now, and it was said the trustees had him in mind for the Commandership next year. The present Commander was in his seventies now. Last March during a drinking bout he had hurt his back, and he was not supposed to do any more walking than he had to. Some afternoons, his butler-yardman drove him over to the Main Building from the Commander's Residence, and after a time, drove him back. Other afternoons, his office remained closed. The trustees wanted him to become an Emeritus, so that a young man could take over. Schroeder was young and energetic. Since March, to all purposes he already was Commander. If the trustees named him for the job formally, Ed Starr would probably move up to the Assistantship.

Randall didn't know who might be next after Starr in the hierarchy. It could well be Robbie Roberts. Robbie was the only one he knew well here but he had known Robbie for years anyway. Last fall Robbie suggested him for the mathematics vacancy that came after the other mathematics officer resigned suddenly, and Schroeder had listened to the suggestion. Robbie was Physics Officer, but he also had some mathematics classes. It might not be anybody next after Starr. The school was a small one, only eleven teachers altogether, and that was too few for a hierarchy that would matter.

The first few weeks after he began here, Randall had been thinking that he and Ed Starr would become well acquainted. Starr was a few years the younger of the two of them, but it happened that both of them had been in Korea. However, nothing came of it. Starr stopped calling him by his first name, Stuart, and also stopped calling him Randy. Starr used his last name now, or didn't use any when he spoke to him. Starr asked him the other day, "You plan to be back here next fall?"

"I'm not actually planning, Ed. I can't say I've thought about it."

"Just passing through, you might say?"

"That might be about the way it is."

"Huh."

He didn't have any planning as to where he would be. These last weeks he was thinking he might begin some, but it hadn't started yet. It would be for when the time came. After his wife's death last summer, anything on the order of planning had become past his reach, and he had become mainly concerned only with keeping his head above water. He had been working as a mathematician in the Department of the Interior, in a group studying information flow through the branches and complications of the Department. He and his wife bought a house in Maryland. They found that she had leukemia. For some people, it could be checked, or slowed down, but it knocked her off in only three months. He moved to a hotel in Washington, so as not to have to face the drive back to the house in the afternoons, and put the house up for sale. He left off working for the Department. Eventually, Robbie urged him to begin doing at least something. He began at the school here. What he was doing, teaching trigonometry and algebra to adolescents, was wasteful maybe compared to what he had been doing or could do. Even so, he was acknowledging lately that Robbie was in the right. Doing something, almost anything, was better than the indolence he had settled into.

Or tied himself up in. Once in one of his freshman classes, a boy at a rear desk spent most of the class hour wrapping and knotting a rope around his wrists. When he finished, his wrists were fastened tight together, parallel and flat against each other. The boy next to him had to unfasten the rope for him. When he himself tried it in his apartment later, it was hard to do. Starr caught the boy the next day roping himself up in American Literature class, and ordered him to wear the rope the rest of the day. Along in the afternoon, Schroeder saw him, and told him to take it off and sent him to the infirmary to have his hands soaked and massaged. His fingers had become black and swollen. The word later was that Schroeder had called Starr down about it.

He rather liked being at the school. It was interesting at any rate, although Robbie said it was not an unusual school. This one, Rampart Ridge, in western Maryland, was farther west than most, but scores of private schools for boys operated here and there. Most of them were impressive from the outside, as this one was, ivy and masonry and flowerbeds and deep lawns. There were more than enough customers.

Rampart Ridge was already turning down applications from parents who wanted to enroll their sons here next fall. It gave first consideration to sons and grandsons of its alumni, and second consideration to, for some reason, descendants of noted explorers. Also it accepted each year ten or twelve needy boys from the local area, on a full scholarship basis. The founder's will enjoined it to do that. Not all of them made it through the year. Some of them had adjustment difficulties, meaning, Robbie said, that they were bastards to have to deal with, or that they flunked tests. Paying students didn't usually have adjustment difficulties. With them, the school did any adjusting necessary.

THE WEATHER TURNED WARM. Even the nights were warm, and the boys were wearing summertime gray cotton twill instead of their woolen uniforms. They played baseball and softball, and the older boys took squads from the lower school on hikes over the Indian Trail. Kenny Hobie tried for the lower school baseball team, the Mustangs, but he didn't make it. He didn't make it for softball either. It went better on hikes, and he was out on the kite-flying hill almost every afternoon. The only thing, hiking and kite-flying were not team sports.

Starr had news at the coffee break one morning. There had been a little case of theft last night. That is, it had come to his attention last night. The actual theft had taken place two days before. When the others at the table wanted details, Starr held back. It would be better to wait until the thing had been all cleared up. But when he looked at Schroeder, and Schroeder said it already had been, he went ahead. The details were that a hunting knife that belonged to a boy named Webb had been found two days ago in Kenny Hobie's locker. Mercer was the one who had found it, and it seemed that Hobie had admitted the theft to Mercer. Starr had got this out of Mercer, and later on Hobie said more or less the same thing. Hobie wouldn't say it outright, since he said he had already told Mercer about it, but it came to the same thing. Mercer had tried to keep all of it covered up. He had got Webb to say he wasn't sore, and he had some silly-minded business going of having Hobie do a hundred push-ups for punishment, twenty every night. He might have got away with it, except that Hughes Blackburn had had enough sense to let somebody know what was going on. Blackburn had learned about thievery the hard way. Last fall somebody swiped a box of candy his parents had sent him. In all probability, this Hobie was the one who took the candy.

"Well, no, Ed," Schroeder said. "Hobie wasn't here at that time."

"What do you mean he wasn't here?"

"I'd think there's only one thing I can mean, Ed. He was not here. He was not a member of the student body at that time. The Juvenile Office didn't ask us to enroll him here, until the second semester opened. January."

"Oh. Well, it's still the same idea. Stealing is stealing, any time. And this time we know who did it. You say you're going to dismiss this kid, Clyde?"

"It's an administrative matter, Ed."

"That isn't what I meant at all, Clyde, now. I'm not trying to horn in on that side of it."

"I'm glad you're not, Ed."

"Oh for Christ sake now. Can't people be interested in something? The reason I know about it, Clyde, is because Blackburn came to me about it. And what he wanted was to see if it was okay for him to see you."

"We go through channels here before we rat on anybody," Robbie said.

"Very well, Ed. No one suggested that you were horning in. By administrative matter, I merely mean it's not something I myself will do. You asked me am I going to dismiss the kid. I'm not, no. I just work here. I don't dismiss people, I personally don't want them to be dismissed. I do represent the school though, the same as all of us do."

"Clyde," Robbie said. "Is Hobie going to be dismissed?"

"Well, Robbie, what is it we're confronted with? The choice has been made for us. The school will not tolerate a thief. The trustees expect us to take a certain number of local boys, but they certainly don't expect us to take anybody that might come down the road. A thing like this can be contagious, Robbie. You know that. We've made commitments to all the boys here, and all we can do is hold to them."

"What I'm asking, is Hobie going to be dismissed?"

"Robbie, have I got to draw a picture for you?"

LATER THAT MORNING, when Randall's junior mathematics class was leaving, Mercer waited until the rest had gone.

"Sir, I guess you heard about Hobie and me."

"Something. The knife?"

"Yessir. Major Schroeder called him in a while ago. He's going to expel him. Or Hobie says he's going to."

He waited. Mercer looked as if he had more to say.

"He called me in too. Chewed me out for trying to keep it in the squad room. Instead of reporting it to him, see. And then besides that, he says I've been giving Hobie a bad attitude. I don't know if you know, but if he gets his back up about something, he just won't do it. I mean Hobie won't. He wouldn't this morning. Major Schroeder wanted him to explain about it and all, why he took it and if he'd ever taken things before, and Hobie just wouldn't tell him anything much about it. He just won't bend, when he doesn't want to."

Mercer wasn't usually so talkative. There was also an understanding that students wouldn't relay to one teacher the hard time they got from another one.

"It just won't work, sir. Here, anyway. Schroeder—Major Schroeder—something he especially wants is for people to explain things to him. I could—" Mercer looked away. "You know. Drink. All I wanted to, as long as I'd go in his office afterwards, and annulyze it and all that, and him counsel me."

"Analyze, Mercer."

"Yessir. Like excape, isn't it? When it's escape."

"Do you get much counselling, Mercer?"

"Aye—. What it was I was going to say, though—you know Webb? The one that that knife belonged to, see. Well, he wasn't even supposed to have that knife. Have you seen it? The thing's ten inches long. He said Captain Starr told him it was okay for him to have it. And there's a regulation, see, about having anything more than a pen knife."

"How does this come in, Mercer?"

"Well they're giving Hobie the shaft, Captain! And Webb's not getting anything. He was doing ten push-ups a night, see, to get to fifty, and Hobie was doing twenty. I put it up to them that way, and everybody was going along with it."

"What do you have in mind, Mercer? For Webb to get his lumps too?"

"No sir, it's not that. But they can't throw Hobie out that way. It's not right. Webb's people are rich, they're well off anyway, and Hobie—well, whatever they are they're not rich. But what I was thinking, you and Captain Robbie maybe could do something. That if both of you—sir, Hobie hasn't done anything to be expelled for. And he hasn't broken any regulations at all before this."

"All right, Mercer. I'll see what I can do."

"Can you keep them from it? I mean will you?"

"I'll see what I can do."

ROBBIE was against intervening. He had thought of it, he said, on the chance that Schroeder wanted to be persuaded. But Schroeder had already made his mind up, and trying to get him to change it would make him more set. Robbie figured he was scared. "You've seen his desk, I suppose? Those pen and pencil sets he has on it? Barometer, all those ornaments? They're for protection. It's a barricade. And all those titles he has. They're protection."

Besides being Assistant Commander, Schroeder was Director of Athletics, and School Safety Director. He was Class Advisor for the seniors, Supply Officer, and Curriculum Programming Chairman. He was some other things, but Robbie couldn't remember them. "It's ludicrous, Stuart. But the thing is, it doesn't strike him funny at all. His barometer, he thinks he has it so he can see what the pressure is."

"What do you suppose he's scared of?"

"Who knows. Who cares. You start getting into those things, it's all you'll be doing."

"Maybe he got chased into chicken houses a few times himself."

"Didn't we all. He's still in one, the way it looks."

HE DECIDED to try persuading anyway. He went to Schroeder's office.

"I'm sorry, Stuart. As I told Ed, it is an administrative matter, and the decision has been made. You have every right to object to it, if you wish to you can even submit a formal objection, but it just isn't an academic matter."

A diplomat. A politician. They would know what bargain to offer. The right leverage to use.

"I appreciate your coming in, but frankly, you have no real basis for offering an opinion in just this situation. Naturally I appreciate your interest, but it does seem to me rather unusual this particular time."

"Clyde, it's only three more weeks of school left. If he leaves now, he'll lose out for the whole semester he's been here."

Schroeder was pleasant. "Yes, I'm aware that we have three more weeks."

"Is stealing ordinarily an expelling offense?"

"Stealing, Stuart, is one of the worse offenses I know of."

"How many people have been expelled for it before?"

Schroeder sighed. "The school's records, Stu, are open to any person entitled to examine them. That includes you, naturally."

This wasn't getting anywhere. Schroeder didn't especially want to hear any of this. And yet it didn't sound like he wanted the conversation to stop.

"I had the impression, Clyde, you know, that Hobie had a satisfactory record here. I was curious about it. Because I'd noticed he has a peculiar attitude sometimes. Maybe not altogether a good one."

He saw that he had said the right thing. That was something Schroeder did want to hear.

"Indeed he does have a peculiar attitude. More people than you have noticed it, Stuart. The boy is getting everything given to him, instruction, recreation, food, shelter, and clothing. If he were to need medical attention, that's here too. It's a fine thing we can do it. Certainly it is. The school has some outstanding alumni who were scholarship cases. Scholarship boys. In just his circumstances. There's nothing unusual to us about him, or his circumstances. The same things that are here for him, they're here for everybody. It's very true he has an unfortunate attitude. If he could only bring about some change in that, this whole situation could be a useful thing for him. It's even possible it could change his situation, to some extent."

It looked as if he had got through to Schroeder. The information was flowing, now.

"Stuart, I'm willing to talk to anybody, two times, three times, ten times. I'm not really sure there'd be any point in it this time, but certainly I'm willing. I'll even send for him right now, if I need to prove the point."

"Let me talk to him first. Okay?"

"It's okay by me, Stuart. Talk to anybody you want to. I hope it will do him some good."

"We'll see."

"Maybe you're the one that can talk to him. In fact, I think it might be that way."

"I'll see you, then."

"Right, Stu. Thanks for coming in. You are going to talk to Hobie?"

"Yes. I am."

"Right. I'll find time to see him in the morning, then."

AFTER SUPPER, he had it in mind to find Hobie, or send for him. Hobie came up to his apartment first. He wanted him to get Major Schroeder and them to let him stay. "Captain Randall, will you do that?"

Lately, Hobie had been in fairly good shape. According to Mercer he hadn't had any more nightmares, when for a time he was clicking off two and three a week. Randall had given him car-washing jobs, and Robbie and another Captain had hired him for baby-sitting a couple of times. He was not so much of a curiosity anymore to the others in his squad room, and they had been inviting him to go along to the canteen with them. He still couldn't quite make it with baseball and softball, but he played anyway. They put him out to field, and when a ball had to be fielded, he ran like hell for it. They had found out that he would throw it to whoever got his attention first. If he threw it to the wrong side, there was an uproar. "Hobie, what did you do that for?" Hikes were called off, on account of snakes, but he still went out on the kite-flying hill.

"Captain Randall? You hear me?"

"Hobie."

"Yessir?"

"I tell you, Hobie."

"Oh. You already did, didn't you. And they wouldn't."

"Hobie. Do you think tomorrow morning you could go to Major Schroeder's office? And tell him all the details about this? Everything there is about it. And tell him besides that anything else he might ask you."

Hobie regarded him. "Why—sure. If you think I'm supposed to."

"And the first thing, when you first go in, tell him you came to say you're sorry. And then, see, go ahead and say it."

Hobie held back. "If you want me to, Captain," he said then. "I mean if it's what I ought to do."

The way we do it in Russia. First the apology. Then the confession.

"Tell him, Major Schroeder, white boss please sir, this here no good—."

"Sir?"

"No. No, I don't want you to. It isn't what you ought to do."

"Well Captain, say which one."

"I don't want you to. You're not to do it. You understand that now? Just forget about going to his office, okay?"

Hobie nodded. "Yessir. . . . Well then—. I better get on back now, Captain. We have to go to study hall in a few minutes, see."

He could forget about study hall. He wouldn't need to bother with any of that anymore.

"All right, Hobie. You take it easy."



HE SAW SCHROEDER in a corridor at noon the next day, when classes were breaking up for lunch. Schroeder was pleasant. "I take it you changed your mind about the Hobie boy, Captain Randall?"

"I did, yes."

"I expected him, you know, until up in the morning. And then I assumed you must have altered your position since yesterday. I'm just making sure, is all."

STARR gave Mercer orders that afternoon to get Hobie packed up. He would leave the next afternoon. The packing was quick. Randall was in the squad room when it was being done. Hobie had a pair of pants, a shirt and a jacket, and a pair of tennis shoes too big for him. They were what he had been wearing when he got here. He had now the school summer uniform, which he could keep. It included a pair of shoes, and three sets of underwear and three pairs of socks. Besides those things, and a comb and a toothbrush, he had a green kite. He offered it now to Mercer.

"Kenny, now what the hell would—. Well, sure. Sure, I'd like to have it. Thanks a lot, okay?"

When Randall saw that Hobie was short on things to wear, he told him to get cleaned up. He signed him out then, and they drove down to Annistown. Down there, he bought some clothes for him. Twenty-five dollars worth, a little over. That didn't help much. What he was trying to do, he saw, was to buy something for himself. Coming back, they stopped at a drive-in. Hobie wanted two hotdogs, and after that he wanted another one. Randall got him another one. After that he had mustard around his mouth. Randall told him to wipe it off, and Hobie used his paper napkin.

"Okay now?"

"Yes. You're okay now. You want something more?"

"No sir. That's all I want.—Thank you very much."

Maybe his wife had sent Hobie to him. Maybe she had interceded for him.

"Captain? I said thank you very much."

"Sure. You're welcome, buddy. How about a Hershey bar?"

"Well—all right. If you're sure you don't mind."

When they got back, Starr was annoyed. Boys in the lower school should not be taken off anywhere without letting him know. It was not customary anyway for students to go on pass on a weekday, and it especially was not a good idea to single out an individual student for

favours. "Frankly, Randall, if it was up to me I'd give you a reprimand for it."

"Okay. Go ahead."

"I mean it. I seriously would."

"Go ahead, man. Reprimand me."

"All right, you just suit yourself then. If you want to take that attitude, it's entirely up to you."

Starr walked away. Four boys were waiting for him. Some of them, the young ones, often were waiting for him, following him around. He had got interested in kids in Korea, when he had to see the starving ones there. He belonged now to something called the Foster Parents Guild. It helped take care of children abroad. Every month, he sent one fourth of his salary to the Guild. Sometimes he got contributions for it from the other teachers.

HOBIE lived twenty miles west of here. Schroeder remarked at lunch the next day that Chris would take him to his home in the school pickup truck. Chris was the general handyman, the Utility and Maintenance Director. Randall considered offering to take Hobie home, but he saw Schroeder watching him so as to say No.

He was in his apartment, at the window, when Chris brought the pickup truck around to the side entrance. Mrs. Chris was with him. Maybe she was going along. But she got out, and walked on over to the laundry building. She worked in the school laundry, and Chris had got his mother a job in the kitchen. They paid him a commission, for their jobs.

Randall went on downstairs, and outside. He said hello to Chris, and sat down on the steps. Chris objected to making the trip. It was not rightly his job to be hauling kids around. None of that Hobie bunch amounted to much. Whole blame bunch, trash. The pickup truck ought to be in the garage anyway, getting greased. That was what he had meant to do this afternoon, and now that darn Schroeder had told him to put it off.

Boys were gathering around the truck. Hobie came outside. One of the others, Webb, was carrying his box of clothes for him. Webb put it in the back of the truck. Mercer wasn't around. Maybe he had already told Hobie goodbye. Maybe the goodbye was a ceremony he was refusing to perform. Starr came out, and told the boys to break it up.

They were moving away then, and calling to him, See you, Hobie,

So long, Kenny, and he was busy answering them. Starr told them again to break it up. Chris started the motor.

"I got to go now, Captain Randall. Thank you very much. For buying me all those things. I think they're nice."

"Okay, buddy. I'm glad you do."

"Listen, Captain. You tell Mercer. Lemme see. Tell him I'm glad I was in his squad room, okay?"

Chris tapped the horn.

"Okay, Hobie. I'll tell him that."

If his wife had interceded for him, maybe now she would keep Hobie in mind. That no harm would happen to him.

In a minute, he knelt down, and took him close. "So long, Hobie. Don't forget me now."

"No sir. I'm not going to forget you, Captain. I wouldn't do that."

"Good deal. So long then." And then, let him go. And stood up. "You go on now."

Chris tapped the horn again.

"Yessir. I plan to."

Hobie went over to the truck, and opened the door and climbed in, and closed the door. The truck was moving then. He turned around, and waved. Randall waved back to him. Hobie turned again then, and sat still. The truck went on down the driveway. Randall heard it squeaking until it got onto the road, at the foot of the hill. Chris was right. It did need greasing.

☞ In answer to a formidable questionnaire, after OCCUPATION AND TITLE, writer JAMES BALLARD of Piney River, Virginia, wrote "None of either." He is too modest. His short stories have appeared in *Atlantic Monthly* and in *Massachusetts* and *University of Kansas City Reviews*. He asks that we dedicate his story to the memory of Lowney Handy and prefers for it the title *The Great Society*. "She ran one of those, too."