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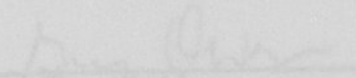
ACKLEY, DAVID LAWRENCE. *Halt. Who Brinser? and Other Stories.* (1968) Directed by: Dr. Guy Owen. pp. 79

This thesis is comprised of three short stories written during the last two years. The stories have little in common with each other except the author's style and even that changes somewhat from one to the next. Their settings are, respectively, an unnamed army base, a fictional New England town, and New York City, specifically Greenwich Village, Harlem, and Morningside Heights. Two of the stories are written through the point of view of soldiers in the United States Army and a lesser character in the third is also a soldier. The time of the stories is either the present or the immediate past.

Submitted to
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
May, 1968

Approved by


Thesis Advisor

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis has been approved by the following
committee of the Graduate School of the
University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

HALT. WHO BRINSER?
"AND OTHER STORIES

by

David Lawrence Ackley

Oral Examination
Committee Member

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
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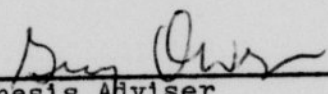

Thesis Adviser

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

HALT. WHO BRINSER?	Page 1
ALL OF YOU, ALL OF US	30
PROLOGUE.	51

shirt. He still had fifteen minutes until the guard muster but he slung the rifle and stepped outside, easing the screen door gently shut to avoid rupturing the quiet of the empty squad bay. This was the second time in ten days he'd been on the roster. Lately though, ever since the division shipped out for Nam, a ten day split was almost a vacation. Once or twice a week was more the rule. His khakis hadn't been cleaned since the last time and he felt the dampness under the arms, smelled a faint sour whiff of armpit.

Across the drill field at detachment HQ the other guards had already lined up in three ragged ranks, suggesting they were anxious to fore up but reluctant to admit it. Approaching, Brinser studied them, looking for a couple whose uniforms were as shabby as his. Things being the way they were, he had a number of choices. He edged in near the middle of the second rank, the guards on either side making room with a gentle bumping of shoulders that was passed on down the line.

HALT. WHO BRINSER?

When Brinser had finished dressing for guard he picked the bullet from where it lay on the mattress beside his M-1 and slipped it between the buttons of his shirt. He still had fifteen minutes until the guard muster but he slung the rifle and stepped outside, easing the screen door gently shut to avoid rupturing the quiet of the empty squad bay. This was the second time in ten days he'd been on the roster. Lately though, ever since the division shipped out for Nam, a ten day split was almost a vacation. Once or twice a week was more the rule. His khakis hadn't been cleaned since the last time and he felt the dampness under the arms, smelled a faint sour whiff of mildew.

Across the drill field at detachment HQ the other guards had already lined up in three ragged ranks, suggesting they were anxious to form up but reluctant to admit it. Approaching, Brinser studied them, looking for a couple whose uniforms were as shabby as his. Things being the way they were, he had a number of choices. He edged in near the middle of the second rank, the guards on either side making room with a gentle bumping of shoulders that was passed on down the line.

Off to the side a Spec. 5, wearing the blue felt armband of Sgt. of the Guard, fingered the clipboard he held canted against his belt buckle and looked nervously at his watch. Brinser recognized the face but for a moment couldn't place it; then it came to him: framed by cook's whites, a face usually pasty and streaked with pink from the heat of the grill which it listlessly oversaw. Well, why not a cook? Weren't the rest of them leavings?

He had found that out in another formation a few months ago though he had probably known it well before about himself. At the time he was merely hoping the knowledge wasn't general. Anyway, it hadn't been Brinser who stood there, but rather a towering shithheap of past mistakes that happened to be labeled with his name. He had wanted to say, "Okay, I'm a fool, I admit it. But a fool can pull a trigger, can kill. What more do you need?" He hadn't of course and Maxwell had ticked off the names, his one of the first, so if nothing else, it was quickly over. What a crew, that skeleton crew. Skeletons was it all right -- the skinny, the fat, the sickly, the piss-beds and a couple of others, like him not so easily known, who heard their names with real confusion on their faces, apparently never having realized that you didn't have to look like a failure to be one. And then there'd been Maxwell himself: an old man, who, because of his war

trophies -- the shrapnel in his calf, the steel pins holding his knees together -- lurched forward on tiptoes when he walked as if he was staggering on last legs to the paradise of twenty years in and his pension. Maxwell himself actually smiling when he announced that he too would be staying back to be NCOIC of the detachment. The smile being the last twist of the knife because it reminded Brinser (as if he needed reminding) that there must have been plenty of others who would gladly stay here: Why then keep Brinser? Wanting Nam so bad he could taste it.

He jerked his head to shake loose from the memory.

What slobs they were. In the formation there was only one guard sharp enough to make Colonel's Orderly -- a P. R. in the first rank, at the moment checking himself out with bobbing chickenlike movements of his head. His khakis were bleached almost white and rigid with starch, his brass polished so perfectly it flashed auburn with the rays of the setting sun. Next to the P. R. was Elkins, another refugee from Brinser's old company, who Brinser happened to hate. Elkins had just ended a tour in the stockade; his sleeve still wore a few threads framing the darker place where his PFC stripe had been.

Elkins's shoulders were shaking and he kept glancing at the P. R.'s feet. Following his eyes down, Brinser saw the lunger -- a grey-green pearl -- floating tensely on the black shimmering toe of the P. R.'s right boot.

"Alee, Motherflower!" the P. R. shrieked and began to dance in place. But when he noticed Elkins grinning down at him, he gave a sick sigh and bent to wipe the spit away with his handkerchief.

It was good, but since Elkins hadn't seen him, Brinser didn't bother to laugh.

The cook/sgt. of the guard called them to attention. Brinser blinked into the red sun with eyelids that felt like they were lined with grit. They'd been working him hard lately and he could never seem to get enough sleep. Dull work too -- sweep the barracks, mop the latrine, chip away the old paint and spot paint over the chipped places -- work that gave him quirky, hard-to-find aches in the bones of his arms. He often lay awake half the night rubbing his wrists and dreaming about Nam. (In Nam the broads would crawl into his hootchie and bang for a cigarette -- no strain, no pain.)

As yet there was no sign of the O. D. so the cook gave them rest. He seemed to be practising his commands on them; with each one his voice had a different pitch. Brinser stared at a spot dead center between Elkins's shoulder blades. With a certainty he wished he had for himself, he knew that Elkins was destined for Nam. What did he have? Confidence? Whatever, it was clearly present and by his gapped grin, Elkins knew it himself. Not the stockade, nor a bust nor his loudly expressed

contempt for all the Army's ways ever seemed to harm him. When he went on a tear and was assigned a little gardening as punishment the NCO's had practically stood in line to congratulate him. While he leaned on his shovel and laughed, not quite ruefully, about how he'd gotten in one fix or another, the NCO too would laugh and say, "You're lucky, Elkins. I'll be goddam if I don't wish I was a private again myself. I never had so much damn fun."

I'll go, Brinser told himself; they can't keep me here forever. He patted the shirt over his bullet for luck. Pretty soon they wouldn't be so choosy; pretty soon all they'd want would be warm bodies to fill the spaces left by the dead.

For all his tenseness, his repeated glances at the door of headquarters, the cook somehow managed to miss the O. D.'s arrival. They were talking and smoking, a couple of the guards relaxing flat on the ground when the O. D. charged down the steps and strode briskly across the grass toward the formation, his chest tipped forward as if he were butting into a gale.

The cook blurted "ten-hut" and they came to the position disconnectedly, stamping on cigarettes, tightening rifle slings long seconds after the command. Brinser laughed at the confusion, ducking his chin so he wouldn't be seen.

While they squared the formation, Brinser studied

the O. D. Lately they had all looked alike...all young, tall, blond, crewcut...he caught them passing through on their way to Nam. Second Johns with eight seconds of life expectancy in combat. When they inspected him he looked into their eyes to see if there was foreknowledge. And with a few of them he had seen it, he thought, in the form of envy for him and the other stay-behinds. They had no way of knowing he too would have gladly changed places -- eight seconds and all. Some of them couldn't have cared though; the hardasses, like this one, now standing in front of the first man in the first rank and whipping his cold eyes back and forth, up and down without a movement of his head. Then he asked a question and as the guard fumbled the answer the O. D.'s hand came up and scooped the rifle from the guard's grasp -- a move with the style and speed of a well-thrown bolo punch. Brinser grunted sympathetically. They weren't supposed to grab the rifle fast anymore because if you didn't let go quickly enough the butt might pivot right into your balls. Every so often there'd be an officer like this one who chose to ignore the word and turn an inspection into a contest. He was spitting out questions one after another now and his first victim was sweating himself down to jelly, not even attempting to answer until the lieutenant finally handed the rifle back and wheeled toward the next man, his face crimped in a grimace of

disgust. ~~we heard the click of teeth.~~

When the lieutenant had worked his way to the end of the first rank -- past Elkins whose indifference seemed to take him back slightly, and the P. R., who was slick enough to draw a fleeting smile -- Brinser's stomach muscles tensely bunched. He thought through the counter-move, the one they practised for such bastards as this. It was easy really: coming to Inspection arms you let your left thumb curl slightly atop the forepiece. When the officer reached and you dropped your hands, the rifle, instead of hanging, was driven down by your thumb. If he was lucky he might just catch it by the bayonet stud, likely gouging a neat bloody V in his palm. Otherwise, according to an unwritten rule, if the rifle hit the ground it was his to clean. The trick was in the timing. You had to watch his shoulder for the tell-tale dip because he had to have started his move. If he hadn't when you dropped the rifle, it was bad news.

Brinser stiffened, no longer daring to look as they came down the second rank. But the sounds were so crisp he seemed to be seeing it all. First the shuffle of feet on the grass and the hush-hush of starched khaki, then a moment of silence followed by two slaps on the stock of the rifle and the clack of the thrown bolt. And another slap -- more brutal -- when the lieutenant grabbed the rifle. And the questions bit off so sharply Brinser

thought he heard the click of teeth.

"What's your fifth general order?" "Mumble, mumble... Sir!" "Speak up! Who's the Secretary of the Army?" Dead silence. "USARCON Commander?" "I...." "Commander-in-Chief? ...come on, boy, that's the President of the United States. You do know who he is, don't you?" "Hur, hur, yessir, it's...." "Never-the-hell-mind. Sgt. of the guard, take this man's name. See if you can teach him what army he's in before he goes on post. Damn!"

Then, too soon, he was facing Brinser. All right, Brinser thought, now we'll see about Lt. Chicken-shit here. He pulled the rifle across his chest, snapping his head down and up when he opened the breech. His left thumb curled slyly over the forepiece. But the lieutenant didn't make a move, didn't say a word, looking him over so carefully that Brinser began to wonder how he had given himself away. The lieutenant's gaze slid to his boots and for some reason Brinser thought the move was coming and came that close to dropping the rifle. No! He couldn't! The lieutenant hadn't even twitched. His grip on the stock tightened convulsively just as the lieutenant's hand shot up from nowhere and then Brinser's bastard hands wouldn't let go and the rifle butt bounced against his thigh, hurting.

"Unh!"

"Relax," the lieutenant said.

"Yes, sir," Brinser whispered.

After the inspection was over the lieutenant stood in front of the formation and told them they were the rottenest excuse for a guard detachment he had seen in his entire time in the army, and didn't they know there was a war going on? He appointed the P. R. Colonel's Orderly, adding, "This is the way every one of you men should look." Brinser heard Elkins say, "He wants us to look like Spics?"

The lieutenant's remarks shook no one. As Elkins remarked to Brinser while they route-stepped toward the motor pool, being fresh from OCS the lieutenant could hardly yet know what rottenness was. "Not to say we ain't as bad or worse than he says. Just that he ain't quite earned the right to say it yet. I got more time in the stockade than he's got in the army." This with mild pride. Brinser nodded, squirming inside between his hatred for Elkins and the comfortable feeling, in this collection of strangers, of having someone to talk to, someone who, for better or worse, knew him by name. On the other side, whatever disdain Elkins had once felt for him seemed to have disappeared, probably for the same reason. He believed if anyone else from the company were still around Elkins would have dropped him like a hot rock.

They passed the E. M. Club and a few yards beyond

came to the hip-high cable slung on metal stakes that fenced the motor pool.

The guardhouse was set near the center of the motor pool; a small wooden shack with a corrugated aluminum roof. Between it and them there was the broad expanse of oiled dirt, practically empty now -- on the far side, a row of quonset huts -- the section shacks -- and here and there a few isolated vehicles, some of which had been cannibalized for parts to keep the others running: four battered jeeps, a motorless deuce-and-a-half, an APC with its rear end jacked-up and its tracks removed, all of them separated by too much space as if there had been a feeble attempt to deal with all that room.

Inside the guardhouse Brinser walked quickly to a bunk near the back wall. Elkins ambled along behind him, stopping at the next bunk; he stretched out on the bare springs, pillowing his head on the rolled mattress. While Brinser set about unfolding the blankets, he could feel rather than see the amusement on Elkins's face, an expression he had gotten in the platoon when they caught him being conscientious, as if right actions became wrong simply because they were his doing.

But when he glanced at Elkins after he had finished tucking the corners of the blanket under the mattress there was nothing on Elkins's face but mild friendly interest, patient waiting for Brinser to be able to converse,

and he was confused. He felt his cheeks become prickly hot. He lay down facing the wall, as if all he cared for was sleep.

Elkins spoke to him anyway. "I'll tell you, Brinser, they's one thing about jail -- it sure makes you 'preciate the outside, even bullshit like this."

"Mmm."

"You know what else? I already got my damn orders for Nam." He chuckled. "How's that for a bitch and a half? Outa the stockade and into the war. I told them I got nothing against those Veecees, but you think they'd listen?"

Brinser felt his insides twist. Didn't he know what he was saying?

"Say, Brinser. You still carrying around that bullet you stole out to the range?"

He could feel the bullet's tip pressing against his stomach, just above his belt buckle. He rolled over to look at Elkins who was up on one elbow, smiling, as if it was their special shared joke. "Naw," he said. "I threw it away a long time ago."

Elkins looked reflective for a moment as if he had one more question. But then he shrugged it away, lay back on the bunk, and closed his eyes.

Brinser had never been able to explain about the bullet. Because as soon as they found out about it

(thanks to Elkins, he believed) they started harassing him. "What you goin' to do, Brinser?" they said. "Ke-ill somebody?"

At least a little of the day it came to him had been the best of his time in the army -- that was part of it. For those few brief moments a whole world of competence -- another Brinser -- had seemed available. They had been shooting for qualification at target silhouettes, cardboard likenesses of the head and shoulders of a man, which rose silently among the camouflaging bushes and trees, and, if hit, dropped back out of sight after an instant of seemingly stunned hesitation, just the way he imagined a man might. For most of the targets, he had been shooting by the book, from the steadier kneeling or squatting positions, but he lost some of them when he dropped down and on one lane he decided the hell with it, he'd shoot offhand -- standing, he could at least see what he was shooting at. On that lane he dropped all eight targets: the last silhouette a barely seen blur of white, four hundred meters away, far enough for him already to have begun lowering the rifle after his shot -- disgusted with himself -- when it died, disappeared, in that pained fashion. The scorer, an E-6, who had been following him up the lane, whistled softly as if he'd been holding his breath. "That's some shooting, son." he said. "First time I ever seen that done."

And how had he felt? He could no longer recall it. But it had been a good feeling, he knew that much. But quickly gone. It must have been the excitement that ruined his shooting on the remaining lanes. When the scores were totaled he had only made sharpshooter, two points shy of expert, the badge he needed so he could tell about what he'd done and have them believe him. Maybe even that wouldn't have been enough. When he'd casually tried to describe his feat to a couple of them, they gave him a slit-eyed look of mere endurance, neither belief nor disbelief, but the simple reminder that the things he did, whether good or bad, were unimportant.

Later that same afternoon, while the other half of the company qualified, his group received a class on ammo. His excitement still alive, he paid attention; the others dozed behind sun-glasses or the pulled-down brims of their helmet liners. The words spilled from the instructor's motionless lips as if they were sent up from a tape recorder unreeling somewhere in his innards.

"This is your armor-piercing round," he said, holding up an orange-tipped cartridge with a black stripe circling it where the bullet joined the casing. "It will puncture an inch and a half of cold rolled steel. When the tip strikes a solid object the brass peels back just like the skin of your dick." There were a few appreciative snorts, which he acknowledged with a pleased grin.

"At which time the bullet's core -- thermite, the hottest burning substance known to the science of man -- is exposed to and ignited by its contact with air. Remember this is the fraction of the second. The bullet is still moving forward at muzzle velocity. And that damn thermite -- why it just burns right through that steel." He gave the bullet a comical look, as if he found it hard to believe himself and they laughed again. "Amazing! You take an APC say, when this thing gets inside, it's nothing but a blob of white hot metal. She'll bounce around in there breaking up into little pieces and every damn little piece burning holes in everything it touches. This bullet is the original Smoke Bringer, Men. You better believe it."

Brinser caught himself nodding, and glanced sideways in embarrassment at showing his interest.

The instructor walked to the first row and handed the bullet to the man on the end. "Pass it around so's you can familiarize with it."

The bullet took a long time to come to Brinser. When it did, just as the class was drawing to a close, he unhesitatingly slipped it into his pants pocket. Slick! The instructor never said a word about it either because he'd forgotten, or remembered but decided it might be trouble for himself. Elkins, though, had seen Brinser take it and grunted, "Hunh!" just to let Brinser know he'd

been seen.

He didn't decide the bullet was a good-luck charm for quite a while, even though afterwards he immediately started carrying it with him everywhere he went -- in his shaving kit when he took a shower.

The harassment, token of Elkins's vigilance, started immediately too. In a way he didn't care so much about that. They were always hooting at him about something -- if not the bullet then something else. It didn't matter.

He would have liked to explain it to them though. Having a bullet he thought wasn't any different than a rabbit's foot. He happened to believe it was lucky was all. And if it wasn't, so what. He simply liked having it, particularly on guard. When you stood guard, everybody who saw you knew your rifle was empty, that you were really nothing more than a scarecrow. Maybe luck, but maybe something else, when he could fake them all, and if the worst came, could save himself or government property with the curl of his forefinger. Nothing Elkins or any of them could have said would have been enough to make him give up that kind of luck.

Maybe tonight he'd fix that smartass O. D. He would, by God! Go through the whole routine of refusing to recognize the bastard -- making him show his I. D. card, placing it on the ground at his feet and five steps

back and down on his hands in the Front Leaning Rest position while Brinser would pretend to minutely examine the card as if he really believed the lieutenant was a spy or a thief. When he would finally pretend to be satisfied, the only thing the lieutenant would be able to do would be to congratulate Brinser for his sharpness -- this being the way the game was played. But then the lieutenant would remember him, his name and face, and that was always bad.

His shift, the third, fell out for posting at eleven o'clock, lining up sullenly, with groans and cursing, in the foggy yellow circle of light in front of the guardhouse door. Like Brinser most of them had got less than an hour's sleep; just enough to sour their mouths and make their heads feel cottony. And make them meaner than the first two shifts who were better off for no sleep at all.

Their surliness unnerved the cook. He was standing a little to the right of the formation gazing off into the darkness, pretending he didn't hear them, maybe thinking that once he got them away from the guardhouse they would suddenly scatter, leaving him alone to face the O. D. They, with that instinct for weakness in a superior, began to shuffle their feet and curse louder. "Let's get this show on the road," somebody suggested, just loud enough for the cook to hear.

"All right," the cook said, moving reluctantly to the front of the formation. "Who knows where their post is? Post number one?"

"I should," one of the guards said. "I'm standing right in the middle of it."

There were a few snickers. "That's right," the sergeant said quickly. "Post number one is around the perimeter of the motor pool, including the area of the guard-house and...."

"Yeah, yeah," the guard said.

"Well, if you don't have any questions, I guess I don't need to...." Unwilling to finish his sentence, the sergeant made a shooing gesture with his hands.

Post Number One had already slung his rifle and started into the darkness but then he turned and came a few steps back. "Say, sarge, there is one question."

The sergeant's head jerked up alertly. "Yeah, sure, what would you like to know?"

"What time is the O. D. coming around to check us?" Lulled, the sergeant almost let it slip out. "He said he'd be by around.... Hey, what the hell. You know I can't tell you that." He tried to scowl.

"Can't shoot me for trying." The guard grinned, and turned away.

"What the hell," the sergeant repeated indignantly while they laughed at him.

Brinser was tired of the bullshit. The hours ahead loomed like a wall. He had to start walking to break into the other kind of time that could only be measured by the rise and fall of his boots. He slung his rifle and said, "I got post 3, I know where it is," and headed to his post.

Away from the guardhouse, the darkness was a hood suddenly dropped over his eyes. He walked slowly, feeling his way, trying to sense through his skin anything that might block his path. Just as he was beginning to make out shapes a voice somewhere in front barked, "Halt. Who's there?"

Without breaking stride, Brinser angled toward the source.

"Halt! Halt! Who's there?" The voice shripped alarm.

"Who'd you think it is?" Brinser said wearily. "I'm your relief."

"Name," the voice demanded. Brinser saw him; a darker shadow against the quonset hut that bulked behind him. He'd probably been dozing, and startled awake by Brinser's footfall, was twice as scared as he should have been.

"You wouldn't know it anyway," Brinser said, still moving forward. "You want to get relieved or would you rather wait until the next shift comes around?"

By then Brinser was almost upon him. The guard suddenly lowered his rifle and rushed past in sheepish silence. Nothing on his sleeve, Brinser noticed. Just a dumb scared recruit -- scared of the darkness, scared of the O. D. sneaking up on him, scared of the crazed whoops that came from the open windows of the E. M. club. He'd probably been halting everything he saw. Brinser snorted.

"Halt, who's there?" he said to the big tree beside the fence. "Tree," he answered. "Advance tree and be recognized.... Recognized. Pass on." But the fact that it was now his turn silenced and sobered him.

He turned left and made his way along the fence. Outside the fence the drainage ditch was a black bottomless slash. Other things showed themselves as if they had been dropped in his path moments earlier; the double row of whitewashed rocks bordering the walkway to a section shack whose windows were nailed over with squares of crosshatched steel fencing. A huge steel padlock was slung through a hasp on the door. Gone to Nam, sang the refrain in his head.

A few steps further on a waste can took the shape of a short man, and he stopped, then skirted it carefully as if the man might anyway be hidden inside.

The quonset huts were jammed close, too close, to the fence and he turned reluctantly into the path behind them -- the worst part of the post. Where walking with

the walls of the quonset hut brushing the knuckles of his left hand, the fence and ditch inches from his right foot was too much like walking a thin ledge.

There was nothing in the TM on Guard Duty that really told how to walk guard -- not about the hard part anyway: how to be simultaneously relaxed and alert. Brinser tried but he could never keep from being caught by surprise, just like (he admitted) that 'cruit he'd relieved. Yet he was always tense and would find himself rising on tiptoe, staring ahead for the fearful things that were first imagined and then somehow unsprung from his mind to take bulky shape in the night just beyond the reach of his vision. Back in the guardhouse after finishing a tour he'd be exhausted but shakily unable to sleep, his aching calves twitching under the coarse blanket.

He came to the end of the enclosed path with relief and turned the corner by the last quonset hut where his post opened up to its third reach; a long walk across the center of the motor pool to the fence again where it bordered Cavalry Road.

Halfway across he caught a glint of light from something. He stopped, stared, and then walked closer to what revealed itself as a jeep, though not one of the rusted junks that had been rejected from duty in Nam. This was one of the new, square-nosed Fords wearing a shiny olive paint job that held few trapped highlights, deep inside

it, like candles down a well. Brinser circled the jeep dragging his knuckles tenderly over the finish, wondering where it had come from. On a plaque attached to the front bumper were two white stars, but he hadn't seen a general in months. As far as he knew, the highest rank on post was the senile major in command of the detachment. Brinser hadn't even seen him in the last three weeks. Not that he cared. He could do without seeing every officer in the army. But he didn't object to guarding General Whoever's jeep, was in fact happy to guard it.

On the next few circuits, he sped up a little when he neared the jeep, slanted in from his prescribed route so he could touch it. He laid his hand on the angle where the fender dropped sharply down behind the wheel, fingered the tight weave of the new canvas top, smelling of cleaning fluid. He blipped the horn and danced away with the muted chuckle of a vandal. But soon that pleasure was drained and he became concerned only with the effort needed to lift one foot and then the other over and over again. The air in his lungs felt heavy and wet. Cool oily sweat snaked around the inside of his shirt collar.

Some time later he realized that he was reeling drunkenly from side to side. The upper part of his body refused to stay properly above his feet. He stopped but in the darkness there was nothing to line himself up with;

for all he knew he might be lying on the ground. He stomped his feet to reassure himself and took a few uncertain steps forward, by then having forgotten what part of the post he was on.

He met the waste can again. It came up at him suddenly; a squat cylinder gapping him with its black open hole mouth, he jumping back in terror, his mind groping for the word that would freeze it, return it to whatever it was.

'Can; garbage can,' he thought but he had to say it and for that first moment the words were locked below his constricted throat.

He squeaked it, "Damn garbage can."

And it became just that again, its lines became straight, but he huffed and panted and his body jerked with heartbeats like hiccups. On their own, as if they had the power of thought, his fingers slid into his shirt and touched the satiny brass of the cartridge casing.

He unslung his rifle and opened the breech, slid the bullet into the bore with his thumb and with his palm's edge riding the operating handle to slow it, to keep down the noise, he closed the breech. When it closed the rifle cocked -- a single quiet click from all the complicated springs and levers in the trigger housing. Brinser heard the sound and his breathing became easier.

When the E. M. club closed at midnight Brinser had

long since lost any idea of the number of circuits he had made. He could hardly remember the beginning of his shift. He leaned on the big tree at the edge of the motor pool and watched the solid flow of drunks fanning outward as they made it through the door of the club. Small groups of men came together -- huddled -- and then pinwheeled wildly apart with flailing arms and shouts of laughter.

Two friends, arms draped on each other's shoulders, staggered off the sidewalk and without warning faced off and began to trade punches: serious punches. He heard the dull smack, the grunt, as each fist struck. But their arms tired, fell to their sides and they embraced again, laughing.

"Hey, guard," someone called, "here's a snort for you." They all turned to him just as the bottle shattered at his feet. He slipped behind the tree. Moments later a whole barrage of cans and bottles looped over the fence, bouncing and clanking on the hard-packed dirt in a din that seemed to last for minutes. Brinser considered shooting one of them as an example, but then began to back away keeping the tree between him and them until the darkness itself covered him. Their howls faded.

They were lucky. One of them was still alive because of him. He saw them laid low by the shot, one of them clapping hands -- his last move -- to the charred

hole through the bridge of his nose while the rest crawled around, afraid, bumping each other like blind worms.

He was walking through the middle of his post. Entertained by his thoughts, he came to the general's jeep and sat on the driver's seat to rest, his left foot lightly touching the ground.

He had just become conscious of how relaxed, how wonderfully calm he felt when he heard the noise. The O. D. -- his sneaking approach betrayed by the soft click of a turned pebble. Brinser's helmet liner brushed the canvas as he bailed out of the jeep and landed six feet away with his rifle at high port.

"Halt! Who's there?" he yelled.

"Lieutenant Parker, Officer of the Day." Brinser heard and understood the chagrin in the lieutenant's voice.

"Advance Lieutenant Parker and be recognized."

When the lieutenant was ten feet off Brinser halted him again for a good look. The lieutenant turned on his flashlight and flipped it up beneath his chin -- his face showed dead white with two dark pools of shadow blotting out his eyes.

"Recognized," Brinser said, bringing his rifle to Present Arms.

"Taking a little rest, were you?" the lieutenant

asked softly. His light played aimlessly over the jeep, pulling Brinser's eyes.

Brinser admitted it was true. The lieutenant nodded as if satisfied: he'd known it all along.

"What's your first General Order, son?"

Son!

"To walk my post in a military manner, keeping always on the alert and observing everything which takes place within sight or hearing, sir." Too late now to put the lieutenant down -- nevertheless while he recited he pictured the lieutenant's face kissing the dirt, pictured his boot resting ungently on that stiff neck.

"Exactly correct," the lieutenant said. He ambled closer and when he was no more than a foot away from Brinser turned the flashlight up so that its beam exploded right into Brinser's eyes. "To walk! Not lie down. Not sit. Walk constantly unless you can reimburse the United States Government for the property someone could steal while you're off somewhere catching a few zees.... Walk!"

Did he mean right now? But the lieutenant was gone, and Brinser was unable to tell where or how far because of the bright blue ovals, the shapes, shifting red and green, skittering across the surface of his vision.

"Move out!" he heard and carefully shuffled a few feet in what he hoped was the direction of Cavalry Road. He couldn't see his feet, not even his hands. His

light-blind eyes stung with sweat. He dared not lift his feet from the ground. His thigh bumped into something which he dropped his left hand to feel. A cable, the fence. But which way? Counterclockwise. What was that, those three contradictory things? Left, then.

Something twitched -- his rifle -- against his side. Turn left. He turned. Move out! He moved out.

"Quit that," he said and at once it did leaving him encased in and penetrated by a massive silence.

The lights of the club had been doused and the area around it was empty, swept clean. He saw this before he realized he could see again. Not everything though. Things were beginning to show themselves, more like it. Could dance in and out of the darkness as they chose. For whose eyes? Who Brinser?

"I said quit that." I said quit that.

There was a whirring sound either in or out of his head. He heard also his feet begin to pound pound on the dirt, felt their separate shocks all the way to his neck because now, for some reason, he was running. Toward a sound which was an engine that caught, almost stalled, idled, roared with a shriek of fan belt. They were doing something else to him.

Then he was standing stiff and still with his legs spread and rifle at High Port while the jeep jumped and bucked toward him. "Halt," he said. "Halt. Who is there?"

Over or through me and probably through because I am only air darker than the night. Who Brinser anyway? Or what?

It went around him, zip, gleaming at him, that beautiful jeep, and stopped some distance beyond. A head popped from its side.

"Hey, man. Hey, you want to watch out. You supposed to use the crosswalk. I could of ran right over you. C'mere and have a drink." A bottle clinked on the ground beside the jeep as it began to roll away from him. Its lights went on.

I didn't hear it, anything, Brinser thought. He was running again.

He saw the cable in the lights, the gate cable padlocked at either end to metal stakes, which were then cleanly uprooted...and then striking sparks on Cavalry Road as the jeep made a wide jerky turn.

And here am I, thought Brinser, skidding, planting his left foot, his body profiled to the road, the rifle butt hitting, then settling into the soft part of his shoulder, locked by his cheek and his right hand. The jeep's gears clashed, missed second. It slowed, coasting. Clash and clash again. With both eyes open he saw the rear tire over the end of the rifle. He held high on it and toward the back slightly, remembering. His right thumb bumped against his cheek.

But in that moment he didn't hear a thing and knew

that the shot had been good.

The rear tire blew with a bang and a short sinking whistle. The jeep lurched and then the rear end was jacked a foot above the ground; the gas cap spun away on an arm of white flame.

"Hey," someone said. Brinser felt the hot wind push his chest.

The right front wheel hooked the drainage ditch and very slowly, very gently, the jeep nosed down. He heard a sound like a welder's torch and a great cupping hand of flame curled up and around the door; fingers of flame touched the canvas top, taking their own sweet time. White blue orange.

He couldn't remember if there had been a driver.

The hood blew open, pivoted back on its hinges and shattered the windshield instantly in a frost pattern of cracks.

It was bright, beautiful, but for the moment too bright so he had to look away. His whole post was lit up now and that was nice too. Pretty, the way each of the quonset huts was orange, and stood on a block of shadow that pushed the darkness back.

From the other parts of the motor pool, a half circle of sluggishly running men tightened on him. And ahead of them all, the cook, running well for a cook, but showing the strain in his bulging eyeballs. Behind him a few

feet the O. D. came, in his fist his drawn forty-five; he gestured with it and yelled incoherently as if angry with the cook for beating him in the foot race.

Brinser raised his rifle to the challenging position and moved forward to meet them before they started to cross his post. Some of the guards had slowed to a walk, seeing what it was, seeing that they weren't going to miss anything. Into the gap between them and their leaders came another figure running flat out and then attempting to stop so that it staggered on a few extra steps. Elkins. With his head and neck outthrust in amazement, craning two or three times from Brinser's calm, still stance to the burning jeep.

"Is that you, Brinser?" Elkins said, almost conversationally. His head swung back to the jeep. Brinser began to smile. "IS THAT YOU?"

And then Elkins's head tipped back as if he were giving to the stars and the world his hoarse howl of delight: "Sweet Fucking Jesus, Brinser, what have you done?"

ALL OF YOU, ALL OF US

Buzzing fitfully, the Volkswagen labored up a long rise in the turnpike between steep dirt banks studded with rocks and rootless patches of sere, stunted grass. It was a new turnpike built under the concept of 'limited access,' a phrase that in Henry's present thoughts neatly somersaulted to mean limited escape. Entering the highway, committed to travel a specific number of miles, there was no leeway for the frailty of machines, or for the simple desire to change your mind and turn back. He pictured himself standing beside a crippled car, gazing bleakly up to where a chain link fence topped with barbed wire barred the way to an unbroken vista of trees, a prospect no less desolate for thinking that the trees likely concealed houses, gas stations and mammoth shopping centers.

This was their first trip to Tucker since his company had transferred him back to New England from San Francisco and it was not a trip that he really wanted to make. Ten years ago he had left the city with the unspoken notion that he wouldn't be back; except for a week or two each summer during college and the flight from San Francisco in August of this year for his father's funeral he had kept to that notion. Once he and Ursula

were resettled in Boston, however, it seemed to him he could hear from Tucker, a hundred miles north, smug whisperings that his return was an admission of error and that soon he would be back to stay.

"You're so quiet," Ursula said, over the whine of the transmission. "What are you thinking about?"

"This," he said, taking in their surroundings with a flick of his fingers. "It's quite a change from the cowpaths we used to call highways."

"What? Nostalgia?"

He sensed her grin. "Hardly," he said.

"Are you sorry? That we decided to come back, I mean?"

He glanced at her. "Reading my mind again, you witch? No, I don't think so, anyway."

But he wasn't so sure. He had never been the kind of person who regretted having to do things which didn't seem to involve a choice. At the funeral, seated beside his mother, he had tried to console her as she wept and mumbled incoherently. Then he'd begun to hear what she was saying. "The flowers...awful...McCecknew always hated...father." She'd turned her veiled face to him. "Oh, what will people say?" Looking to the front of the chapel, he had suddenly realized what she was talking about. Some of the floral arrangements, apparently those from McCeckney's Market, were withered, the petals

closing in on themselves like tiny arthritic hands: his mother was crying her shame. He supposed that was when he knew he would have to come back. The three thousand miles to San Francisco seemed the last unforgivable distance in a family where distances of one kind or another were the rule. Henry was fifteen years younger than his only brother Bert who had fought through the Second World War, had come home untouched and six years later reenlisted, went to Korea and within a month of his arrival was reported missing and presumed dead. Their father had been a silent, brooding man who could turn the dinner table to a desert with his glare. This thin, tired woman had made feeble attempts to bring them together, but always with a built-in attitude of defeat as if she knew what the result would be.

Henry worked for a large insurance company and when he returned to San Francisco from the funeral, he had found in the company bulletin an opening for a statistician in the Boston office. He had applied for the position and a week later the transfer came down. They also needed a branch manager in Tucker and he supposed he was qualified, but he hadn't been quite prepared to go that far.

There was something else too, although he wasn't sure what, if anything, it had to do with his return; he had, over the past year, been having what?--visits?--from

his brother Bert. When his mind was unoccupied, he found he could picture Bert with remarkable accuracy, this in spite of what had been a lifelong inability for identifying faces. People, apparent strangers, were always confronting him on the street. "By God, it's old Henry Clew!" And while he gropingly tried to replace the hair, or thin out the jowl, Henry would feel twice condemned for being himself so recognizable. Yet here was Bert, appearing spontaneously in the back of his mind, no snapshot this, but Bert in the round, turning slightly, almost preening, so that he could see a mole on the cheek, the curl of gold wire looping the ear; a plump face, with a smile bending the thin brown mustache--only the eyes unseen, hidden behind the glare of some light reflected in the rimless glasses. Were they blue or hazel? He was stopped here and when he attempted to peer through the glasses to isolate the one feature the whole vision would expand at the edges in rubbery waves and then split apart. Other than the mild pride he took in being able to picture Bert, like a fumbler who suddenly discovers he has repaired his watch, it didn't seem to have any particular significance.

Ahead of the car three crows dropped to the center of the road, lit for a moment, then rose and beat lazily away toward the trees. Where they had landed Henry saw the remains of a small animal, dead for some time and

now cuffed and flattened by tires to a shapeless outlet of dried meat patched with matted brown hair. A sign on the right said Exit 14, 5 mi. Tucker.

Tucker had always been to Henry's mind a hard-luck place. During the thirties when the textile mills and shoe shops that were its main support either closed down or went south in search of cheaper labor the city acquired an air of failure that remained, as visible as smog, in spite of a later influx of electronics plants that put the mill hands back to work. Traffic on this Saturday afternoon was sparse. On the benches in front of City Hall old men in starched white shirts and grey hats sat watching the cars go by. At Briggs Shoe Store, farther down, Charley Briggs, a high school classmate, was poised hopefully in the doorway, his gold tie clip flaring in the sunlight.

They passed the Carnill Building, gutted in a recent fire. Sections of plywood masked the lower half of the building; the second story windows were smashed in, each one framed with jagged rays of soot. A scrawled sign on the plywood said, "Carnill's--Open Soon at New Location," but Henry doubted it.

Elm Street dipped down to the bridge across the river and rose abruptly to the library, a building of grey stone with slender towers at each of its corners which sat on the triangular island where Elm Street and Amherst intersected. They turned up Amherst and drove

between rows of grey duplexes whose doorsteps jutted out flush with the sidewalk; houses built by one of the big shoe factories in the twenties when Tucker prospered. He remembered the sons of the families who had lived here, stocky Canucks or Polacks doing their time sullenly in the eighth grade until they were sixteen and could join their fathers at the looms or the tanning vats. Their choices had been simple; go to the mills or leave town, and although he hadn't ever been limited to those choices himself, his understanding that for most of its inhabitants Tucker was this kind of place had only quickened his desire to leave.

As a boy he had walked here on his way home after a pick-up ball game, his spikes clattering against cement, cap low over his eyes so that he had to raise his head cockily to see ahead. Years before Bert had probably walked the same way, arrogantly aware of the pale faces in the windows that turned to follow him.

A few blocks beyond the duplexes they came to the edge of the cemetery where his father was buried and it was more his general mood, the somewhat dreary turn of his thoughts, than any sense of filial duty that made him decide to visit the grave before they continued to the house.

He wheeled the car through the gate without bothering to explain and Ursula remained silent, subdued per-

haps by what she mistook for dormant grief. He let it stand since he couldn't think of a better reason.

The cemetery was flat and treeless, the gravestones all in neat rows and all more or less of a size: a Protestant burial ground where ornate displays were forbidden by custom and most of the markers contained only the necessary names and dates.

He stopped the car and with Ursula following picked his way in from the graveled road to the family plot, hoping he wasn't stepping on any outstretched feet. Already the grass blended smoothly across the plot, making it impossible to tell which narrow segment overlay his father's body. They stood at the foot reading the stone:

RANDOLPH HENRY CLEWS b. 1901 d. 1965
 LILA MARSTON CLEWS b. 1906 d.
 BERTRAM RANDOLPH CLEWS b. 1924 d.

"Why do you think she did that?" Ursula asked.

"Did what?"

"Had them leave the what-do-you-call-it, the death date, blank for your brother?"

In the back of his mind Bert's face flashed into view and was gone.

"Well, of course, Bert isn't buried here, that might have something to do with it."

"But he's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes," he said. How calm his mother had been once

the initial shock of the telegram passed. Unfolding the crumpled yellow paper Henry had read, "...your son Bertram Randolph Clews--missing in action with the enemy March 2, 1951, presumed dead Stop...."

He turned abruptly away and walked back to the car.

"Henry, wait." Trotting behind she grabbed his arm and pulled him to a stop.

"Look," he said, turning to her, "I don't know why she did it. I don't want to know. Let's forget it!" And only the way her face began to crumple inward made him aware that he was yelling.

While they drove out of the cemetery and Ursula sat silent beside him he tried to think of some way to apologize, to reassure her, but any gesture would be a half-lie. Waiting for the light to change at Broad Street he heard again fragments of certain conversations.

"You goddamn fool," his father said, glaring across the table at Bert. "How many wars you think you can fight? They don't want you, you're too old!"

"They want me. They want anybody that knows what they're doing. Anyway, it's settled. I'm already in." That impregnable calm, as if they were discussing a weekend in the mountains.

The light shifted to green and they came onto Broad Street, past McCeckney's Market on the corner.

While Bert packed, he had asked, "Where's this Korea?"

Glancing back over his shoulder Bert grinned, "I don't know, kid. Some place in Asia. It doesn't matter."

They pulled into the driveway and his mother immediately appeared on the back steps, giving the impression that she had been waiting for hours with her hand on the doorknob.

"Hello, hello," she said gaily. "How was your trip?"

"It was fine," Ursula said. "Isn't this a marvelous day?" They embraced quickly and went into the house, Henry staying behind for a moment to get the suitcase from the trunk.

His mother kept the shades drawn and the windows closed year round because of some theory she had about balancing the temperature. As always the still air bore a faint, sour whiff of mildew.

He and Ursula sat at the kitchen table sipping coffee while his mother bent nervously over the oven door and pelted them with questions, most of which went half-answered. Her hands fluttered as she removed the cookies from the baking sheet to a plate. She had always been vain about her cooking and at the moment he was glad that there was something to absorb her attention, something to keep her from noticing that he couldn't look her in the eye. In the same guilty way, fumbling out quarters for the blind guitar player who worked the

sidewalk in front of the office, he could never meet the man's mad, wandering gaze.

"Well, that's done." She sat down across from Henry. "Help yourselves, don't be shy. You're not either on one of those diets, are you? It's awful, nobody enjoys food anymore. I used to love to watch you and Bert eat when you were boys."

His teeth bared in what felt more like a rictus of pain than a smile, he groped for the plate and bit into a cookie. It was hot and absolutely tasteless. He raised his head and smiled at her. "Delicious," he said. "You haven't lost your touch, Mother. You don't mind if I take this with me, do you? The drive tired me more than I thought. I believe I'll go upstairs and lie down for a bit."

He fled the room hearing Ursula's apologetic voice, "Henry's been working very hard lately. I think they're taking advantage of him because he's new."

At the top of the stairs he paused and looked accusingly at the remains of the cookie crushed in his hand. So she forgot the sugar. People forget things when they get older. It's nothing. Nothing.

He ate the rest of it slowly and licked the crumbs from his hand. The door to Bert's room faced the stairway. He opened it, stepped inside, closed it quietly behind him.

Walking aimlessly about, he ran his fingertips across the top number of a stack of NATIONAL GEOGRAPHICS; they came away dustless. The bed was made, its pillowslip gleaming white and Bert's O. D. blanket folded at the foot, the block letters USA square in the center. The room was ready, waiting, as he had known, he supposed, that it would have to be.

He opened the closet door. Bert's rifle and twelve gauge double were propped against the side wall. The clothes on the hangers smelled and looked as if they had recently been cleaned. The barrels and actions of the guns though were coated with a thick layer of cottony grey dust, clinging to the cosmoline. No--she wouldn't have touched the guns.

Lighting a cigarette, he slipped his shoes off and eased himself back on the bed. Bert's face smiled at him. Incompetent, he thought. Don't you know yet how to haunt? Fifteen years you've had to learn the trade and what do you do?--Smile. Rattle some chains, cultivate an eerie, empty voice, walk in the night glowing phosphorescently. You jerk, tell me what you want. Or else, go bug her--she'd love it.

He had sometimes asked Bert about the war but had usually found the telling not nearly as exciting as what his own imagination produced for the games he played with his friends. On the surface at least Bert seemed to have

had no discernible attitude about his participation. It was a place he had been, it was something he had done, but that was all. "So when we saw they had all the windows covered," Bert said, "I rolled a grenade down the coal chute and when we went in they were all dead. I got a Luger off the officer but I sold it to this Air Force lieutenant in Liverpool before I shipped out."

"That was pretty smart," he had said, feeling he should say something, "rolling the grenade down the coal chute."

Bert, lying on this same bed, had picked up his NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC. "Yeah, wasn't it?" he had replied, flipping through the pages.

His mother tapped softly on the door and thrust her face around its edge for a quick look before hesitantly entering the room. That look took in everything, though; before he could ask she had handed him an ashtray from the bureau. She moved quickly to the window and peered out. "Don't you think it's going to rain? It's very grey to the east. Although the weather's been unseasonably nice for this time of year, wouldn't you say?"

He wished she'd light for a minute. "You've kept this room very neat."

She glanced around uncertainly. "Yes, well, it's a way to keep busy. It takes your mind off things. Your father used to say that I was too much of a fanatic about

a clean house. He used to say that a house had to look lived in before it could be a home."

Walking past the bed again she tugged at one corner of the O. D. blanket and Henry drew back his feet.

"How do you feel?" she asked. "Ursula tells me that they've been overworking you at that office. You ought to be more careful of your health."

"It's not all that bad. I like the work."

At the door she paused with her back to him and said, "Well, that's all right. I'm glad you like your work. Why don't you nap for a while? I'll wake you later."

"I think I will, thank you."

When she had gone he butted his cigarette and set the ashtray on the floor. The words were all ready in his mind but he hadn't been able to say them. And so what. Maybe it's a harmless obsession. I know he's dead, certainly he knows and probably in some secret place, she does too. Who does it hurt? You don't make the dead any deader by putting them in the ground. Is your sense of propriety offended, Henry? Are you superstitious? Just what the hell is your problem, anyway?

At least she didn't say 'You're all I have left' because then you would have said 'Not quite,' wouldn't you?

Henry slept and when he woke had trouble remembering

where he was. He followed the crack of light to the door in the dark and stood outside listening to the muted gurgle of conversation from below before walking down the hall to the bathroom. Slopping cold water on his face in the glare of the fluorescent tube above the sink, he tried to recall when he had made the decision. That wasn't quite it. The decision, if it could be called that, seemed to have come on him, preconceived, full grown, ready for use, fitting his previous experience with decisions--they tended to make themselves and carry him along like an unprotesting bystander.

For dinner his mother served them roast prime ribs, blood rare, baked potato with soured cream and chives, baby peas and mushrooms and a dessert of hot apple pie with wedges of pale yellow jack cheese. Henry ate and asked for more, like a warrior feasting to battle.

Over coffee, which they drank from small cups in the living room, Henry studied his mother when he could, trying to see signs of her aberration and wondering if she knew she had forgotten the sugar in the cookies. Probably not. She had always been a light eater and she rarely touched sweets. Of the other there was no indication.

Weighted by the meal, conversation lagged and died. Shortly after nine both Ursula and his mother went upstairs to bed. Pleading his nap as an excuse, Henry

said he was going to stay up and read for a while.

He gave them half an hour to get settled and then walked softly through the kitchen to the cellar door. Fumbling for the light switch on the dark stairway he felt a nasty twinge of fear before his hand touched it--once when he was a boy he had tumbled into that dark pit reaching for this switch. The single bulb was set directly over his father's work bench. Below the bulb the tools hanging on a pegboard threw strangely elongated, mournful shadows. He took down a ball peen hammer and unable to find the other tool he wanted, selected instead the largest screwdriver of three.

At the front door he stopped, uncertain whether he should say something to Ursula--she might worry if she came down and found him gone. He shrugged, laid the tools on the hall rug, and more for his own sake than hers--it pleased him to touch her when she was asleep--went to her bed and putting his lips to her ear whispered, "I'm not tired yet so I thought I'd go for a walk." She rolled to face him and drew his cheek tight against her neck. "Okay," she said, "Hurry back. Be careful."

Outside the stars were blanked out and the sky plunged uniformly black to the rooftops. It was surely going to rain. He considered going back inside for an umbrella, but in view of his errand the idea of carrying one seemed ludicrous. He lifted his jacket and tucked

the hammer and screwdriver into the back of his shirt and, as he walked toward the pinpoint of red marking the intersection of Broad and Amherst, was comforted, strengthened, by the gentle clicking of steel on steel.

As he reached the corner a few tentative drops of rain exploded dustily against the sidewalk. He stepped back under McCeckney's awning and between cupped hands peered into the dimly lit store. Lining the left wall were the refrigerated cases where the flowers were kept and in front of them on the floor, the rows of fancy wicker and fiberboard baskets used for funeral arrangements. Transfixed there, held by certain memories--of pilfered candy and being caught by red-faced McCeckney himself, of a corsage for a girl he had been ashamed to be seen with, of his mother's misplaced tears for the wilted funeral flowers--the light that blared around him like the blast of a horn seemed a part of all this and for a few seconds his past-trapped mind was reluctant to believe it real.

He turned slowly, one hand shading his eyes from the beam, and could just make out, beyond the shifting corona, the outlines of a car.

"Evenin'," a voice said.

"Good evening, officer." Bracing himself, Henry walked toward the car. Jesus! The tools! Well, it's this way, officer, I needed a pack of cigarettes and all

the stores were closed.... "Would you mind lowering that thing?" The policeman obligingly tipped the light so that it focused on Henry's belt buckle. There were two of them in the car, but he couldn't see their faces.

"Out for a walk?" the same voice asked. It sounded teasingly familiar but he guessed the official voices of all cops were alike.

"Yes. We're staying with my mother, up the street. This is the first time I've been back in some time and...."

"Got some identification, I 'spose." The very mildness of the voice contained a variety of threats.

He took some small comfort in finding he had his wallet with him. Opening it to his driver's license he laid it on the outstretched hand.

"Back up a bit there," the voice said, not quite so mildly.

He retreated four steps wondering if there were guns pointed at him.

The flashlight beam dropped back into the car and then flitted across his face again. "Henry Clews," the voice said. "Hell, I know you." Surprisingly, its tone was one of relief. "You wouldn't remember me I guess--I was a couple years in front of you in school. Charlie Prentiss."

"Did you have a sister? Lurline?" Henry said. He couldn't keep his hand from shaking as he took back his

wallet, but at the same time he felt a warm pulse of gratitude distend his throat. He wanted to thank them for believing he wasn't a criminal.

"That's her. Yeah, she would of been in your class now that I think of it. She's married now, got a couple of kids, lives in Newton. Nice guy she married--got a good job with Raytheon."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it," he said, perhaps too heartily. All he could remember of Lurline was that name.

After a polite pause Charlie spoke to his companion, "We better get going, I guess. Somebody's liable to spit on the sidewalk while we're lollygagging around here. Nice talking to you, Henry." Henry stepped to the car window and shook the extended hand. "You better watch out," Charlie said, as the car moved forward, "looks like it's going to rain all over you."

"Okay," he said, waving. "We'll see you, Charlie."

"So long."

The car's tail lights disappeared around the corner and the rain fell as if to Charlie's command. Henry retreated beneath the awning and waited for a minute to make sure they hadn't decided to swing around and offer him a lift. Then with a deep breath he sidled into the downpour, his hands stuffed among the lint and coins in his pockets. He stayed on the near side of Amherst for a block and a half after he rounded the corner. In a

dark patch between streetlights, he stopped, looked both ways, and trotted lightly across the already glistening pavement, the tools jouncing in the folds of his shirt.

He came to the white fence surrounding the cemetery and placing both hands on the top board, vaulted neatly over and ran on toward one of the graveled paths. His hair and the shoulders of his shirt were drenched now; his shoes, slippery inside, spurted water and small stones from underfoot at each stride. His own sweat mingled with the rain and kept him warm. He saw the headlights of a car on Amherst and cut to the grass, dropped full length on the ground, almost touching a chalky narrow slab. He raised his head cautiously and read

REBECCA MAUDE THURSTON BORN 1803 DIED 1805

Beloved Daughter of Silas and Margaret
'Sleep Now and Know Not Sorrow. We
Shall Come to Thee Again When All Awake.'

He backed away on hands and knees until his foot touched the safety of the path. Rising, he rotated and took his bearings, then followed a series of interconnecting paths to his destination, while he tried to shake loose the vision of graves opening like ripened seeds. Squatting at last in front of the family stone, he laid the hammer and screwdriver side by side on the grass and lit a cigarette, thinking, for the first time really, about what he was going to do. She would have to be told;

what he planned wasn't the kind of thing that could stand without explanation. His original fear was gone, her obsession was probably a mother's privilege, and even if she went to her own grave carrying the belief that Bert was alive, it was harmless enough. It isn't a matter of sanity, he thought. In some places they carry the dying out and leave them to the wolves. In a way that might be better, knowing that your warm flesh becomes part of another animal, but we don't do that and like it or no we are condemned to our ways. We bury our dead, we mark their graves in a certain fashion. Between us and them, isn't it a contract? Do you understand, Mother? Bert? I'm not trying to kill you, you know. If you were to come back, you could stand here and laugh while I scratched it off. But if I don't change it now, it might never get changed.

Working by the light of the cigarette dangling from his lip he set the screwdriver to the stone and began tapping it with the hammer. It went easier than he had thought it would and in a short time he had chipped out a shallow groove that was a recognizable '1,' or would be when he had cut out the other numbers. The nine was more difficult, entailing as it did, two horizontal lines, but he finished it all right and was satisfied with the proportions. He stopped to light another cigarette from the stub of the first and then went back to work, barely

conscious of the rain pooling and flowing down the back of his neck. Taking a last nick he dropped the tools and leaned forward slightly. The numbers were legible enough, if a little unbalanced and obviously an amateur job: 1951. "Rest, Bert; Dad; All of you," he said. "All of us." Standing, he hefted the hammer in his right hand and threw it as far as he could beyond the gravestone, then turning precisely in the opposite direction did the same with the screwdriver, hearing a faint clank as it hit something solid.

He felt very tired and uncertain; in the aftermath all his good reasoning escaped him. What could he say to her?

His shoes were saturated with water and sucked greasily at his feet as he came out the main gate onto Amherst. Staying on the cemetery side he headed slowly toward the traffic light, his shoulders slumped, his head bent like an old man's.

At the crossing there was a small yellow box set on a pole and a sign which said, Push Button to Change Light. Though there were no cars in sight he pushed the button and stood staring across the street at the words in bright red, DON'T WALK. But then they changed, became WALK, and he was obliged to cross the street and continue on his way.

PROLOGUE

"Four Bucks," said the pawnbroker, and dropped Chad's wedding band on the counter. Rick looked at Chad, who was bent over, peering intently at a section of one of the glass showcases lining each side of the narrow shop. After a moment, Chad turned his head slightly and said, "Five," then resumed his perusal of the merchandise, a jumbled confusion of pen knives, garnet earrings, beads, dashboard ikons and miniature cameras, all in one shelf-long heap.

The pawnbroker, a fleshy man whose complexion was grey as dust, pursed his lips, and looking up at the ceiling, slowly shook his head.

Although Rick was sure Chad couldn't have seen this, the message got across to him somehow, perhaps telepathically, because he straightened up and walked decisively to the counter. Picking up the ring, he drawled, "This ain't the first time you know. I guess I kin get my price somewhere else."

The pawnbroker lifted one shoulder in a so-what shrug, apparently dismissing the matter, and began an absorbed study of his right thumb nail, letting them get all the way to the door before he yielded. "Okay," he said. "Five it is."

While he waited for Chad to fill out the pawn

slip, Rick felt a certain vicarious pride for the bland skill he had shown; for a recruit with six weeks of basic behind and two years less six weeks stretching ahead, a method of dealing with pawn brokers seemed an infinitely more valuable lesson to learn than anything the army had so far force-fed him. Chad, with his three years of prior service in the Navy, had an enviable store of such skills and a knack for exposing them one at a time, like hoarded jewels, as the particular need arose. On the basis of that same prior service Chad, in the first week of training, had gotten himself appointed platoon guide of the first platoon, and Rick, having had two mandatory years of ROTC in college, was made a squad leader. It hadn't taken them very long to find out they had a similarly relaxed attitude toward their duties and a common zeal for taking advantage of any privileges that accrued to their positions. With this discovery they had become friends, or buddies as the army has it, and had begun this, their first weekend pass in New York, by fulfilling Chad's expressed desire to get rid of his wedding ring.

Afterwards, they paused outside in front of the pawnshop window, where a number of ceremonial swords were displayed, fanlike, on a piece of maroon carpeting.

"I thought it was illegal to sell weapons in New York," Rick said.

"I think they can sell them--you just can't carry

them concealed on your person."

Rick laughed. "Where the hell could you conceal one of those mothers, anyway? In your pants' leg? You'd castrate yourself." Picturing it, his pelvic muscles tightened reflexively. "What's your wife going to say when she finds out about the ring?" he asked, forcing himself to look away from the window, and grin at Chad.

"That bitch," Chad said calmly. "I couldn't care less what she says--and if I'm lucky I'll never have to hear her say it. She must have known I was gone for good though, when she found out I enlisted, so I don't guess anything else would be a big shock--even the ring. You know," he said thoughtfully, "if we'd hopped around some, I could've probably gotten six, but the main idea this time wasn't the money, but just to get shut of the ring. I don't want anything left to remind me of that mistake. Damn all you picky yankees, anyway," he added, returning Rick's grin. Chad's wife was an Italian girl from East Boston and he claimed she and Rick had the same niggling traits, things like stinginess and lack of humor, which he believed were common to all New Englanders. Rick, in defense, usually suggested that Chad suffered from congenital myopia, a universal southern malady (attributed to bad food and a debilitating climate), making him unable to distin-

guish one person from another ("Seriously Chad, doesn't my face look like a blur to you?") and therefore assume that members of any conveniently labeled group were all exactly alike. They got along very well together.

At Rick's instigation they spent the rest of the afternoon meandering through the Metropolitan Museum, a kind of ritual sacrifice he made to prove his two years of college hadn't been wasted. He was surprised to find that Chad enjoyed the paintings as much as he did, perhaps more, and then a little ashamed for letting it surprise him. They came out culturally sated and thirsty, squinting into the long rays of afternoon sunlight. Leaning on the metal pipe banister which bisected the stairway to the museum entrance, they lit cigarettes and considered the evening that lay before them, promising and unmarred--virginal.

"There's this place in Greenwich Village that I read about someplace," Rick said. "It's called Julius's-- it's supposed to be a good bar."

"Say no more," Chad said, holding his hand up. Julius's it is."

On the subway car to Washington Square, which was only moderately crowded, he managed to squeeze into a seat next to an obese, stringy haired old woman. She held a large shopping bag on her lap and while he tried to act unconcerned she carried on a muttering, bitter monologue as she poked through its contents. Once,

without looking directly at him, she snapped her head around suspiciously, but he had anticipated her and was staring across the aisle at an advertisement for a Dale Carnegie course, "The key to a better you." Leaning over him, both hands clutching the metal hanger, Chad grinned like a monkey and rolled his eyes insanely.

"Dirty bastids," muttered the woman, thrusting her right hand to the bottom of the bag. For an instant Rick thought she was referring to him and Chad, and he tensed to move quickly if she became suddenly violent.

"Cheat old ladies, that's all the bastids know to do," she said, reddening at the indignity of it all. She grunted and her hand came out of the bag holding a soup bone, with small shreds of meat clinging to the joint. She examined it carefully, then dropped it back in the bag, her face still suspicious and a bit dissatisfied, as if, having expected the worst, she found anything else unacceptable. Rick reflected that her disappointment at not having been cheated was something like the way New York was affecting him. He wasn't sure of how, specifically, the city hadn't quite measured up--or down--to his preconception, but in a way this didn't really matter; whether one's expectations were better or worse than the reality which inevitably supplanted them, the unsettling effect on the soul was probably about the same, either way. For one thing,

though, he had the skin crawling sensation that he was constantly being looked at; unused to this, it made him nervous, even while he realized it was mostly because of his green brass-buttoned uniform which stood out rather luridly against the blurred drab colors of the civilian clothing all around him. Six weeks in the army had taught him to cherish anonymity, the wonderful secret power in being camouflaged among thousands of identical uniforms and knowing that, try as they might, nobody could really find him. Here without that camouflage, he felt tender and exposed, as if his nerve ends had sprouted shoots that twined deviously through the weave of his clothing to dangle, pink and wet, in the hostile air.

The two streets intersected obliquely at about 120 degree angle and the cafe was on the corner with its front and side walls joined at the same angle, giving it an architectural nonconformity that he thought fitting and proper to Greenwich Village. He liked its look immediately; and liked it more when he saw the way the name was printed on the window--just Julius, without an apostrophe--so that he had an urge to anthropomorphize and give Julius a personality of its own.

They ordered two ten cent draft beers and, looking at themselves in the mirror back of the bar, silently

toasted.

"Mmmm," Chad purred, setting his half empty glass on the bar. "I sure needed that. Museums are all right, but they sure do give you a thirst, don't they?"

"That's the price of culture, my lad," Rick said. "How could you know you got anything beneficial out of all those pictures if they hadn't cost you a little discomfort?"

The interior of Julius had a nice, eclectic inconsistency. On a shelf in front of the mirror were pictures of bare knuckle boxers, a snapshot of Dylan Thomas and a bartender, a few tarnished and unreadable loving cups, an old brass candelabra and a framed newspaper column with a few sentences about Julius, "the oldest bar in Greenwich Village," underlined in red ink. Overhead, cones of greasy dust hung like beehives from the bare ceiling.

Only five other customers were in the bar at that hour; two non-belligerent looking swabbies, a swarthy, middle-aged man with a girl twenty years too young to be his wife, and a snomish old man, wearing an apron, who sat on the end stool and read a newspaper. Each of these people was absorbed in himself or his immediate companion and ignored the others. After the subway ride it was very pleasant to sit at a bar with a beer and be ignored. Except for the dirt on the ceiling

Julius was a totally fine and likeable place. So much so that his distaste for New York began to slip away. A city that had bars like this couldn't be all bad.

They stayed, drinking the ten cent beers, until 8:30. Rick had an exfraternity brother who lived somewhere near Columbia University and who had extracted a promise of a visit the first time Rick got a pass. He found the address in the telephone book and by then they were both just loose enough on the ten cent beers to decide against calling ahead. The fun was surprising Bob and his wife; it overweighed the potential inconvenience if they weren't home. However, leaving Julius he felt a mild but tangible sense of loss, which he neutralized by promising himself that he would return the next time they got a pass.

Bob lived on West 125th Street so, changing trains at Times Square, they got on a local that was marked for 125th Street and some Avenue which he didn't get a chance to read. This seemed reasonable until they were settled in their seats and he noted that of the eleven or twelve passengers, he and Chad were the only whites. For some unclear motive they got off the train at 120th Street and the last vestige of good sense in the choice dissolved when they came up to street level, right into the midst of what was undoubtedly the biggest gaggle of colored pimps and hustlers and shills this side of Algiers.

Those voices; cajoling, wheeling from octave to octave, rising all around them like flocks of startled birds:

"Hey, G.I., you come wif me--I show you some stuff!"

"You want some poontang? Clean, Nice?"

"Just down here, baby. One hundred coffee colored girl, guarantee to make you a man."

"Sheeit! Don' lissen to him, chief. The Purple Panther--that the place for you."

While the voices whirled around them--never touching them, but almost, almost--peals of high-pitched laughter came from behind, where less aggressive types lined a bright store front, shoulder touching shoulder, looking on. Rick stayed partially in the lee of Chad's left shoulder, hoping Chad's dauntless amiability was sufficient armor to take them safely to the opposite street corner which was void of people, and perhaps hallowed ground, like the goal in "hide and seek."

They made it, although there was a hard and lengthy moment when Chad paused at the curb to ask the closest pimp if he could tell them how to get to Columbia. Forget it, he had mentally urged. Move on, Chad, move on! and heard, as if boomed from a loud speaker, the revealing inflections of Chad's southern accent.

Now they're going to lynch us in retaliation, he had thought, believing it completely, and at the same

time wanting to laugh out loud because the situation was so painfully ludicrous; a deep southerner asking directions in Harlem and--worse yet--getting directions. They were across the street and halfway along the next block before he could really believe they had somehow escaped intact.

It was exactly then, too quickly for any relief to have come, that he understood there might be worse places in Harlem for a white man than a brightly lit corner adjacent to the subway--pimps or no pimps. Far ahead of them were lights, noises--horns; the unmuted roar of the subway where it came to the surface; an occasional voice, like the voices that filter through the closed door of a theater--all alluring reminders of the city, which with its collapsible walls, had suddenly folded away from them on this empty silent street. As they walked he felt the weight of the silence, and its dimensions; on its other side he knew there was breathing he could not hear. They stayed to the left of the street, walking a line close to the wooden doorsteps--the first thing to the eye that distinguished one building from the next. Looking more closely, he could see the different textures of the buildings, the one or two story variations in height, the thin crack where each reluctantly gave way to its neighbor, but all these distinctions, even the streets cutting the ends off every block, seemed like

after-thoughts, sloppily applied over a single, unified building, which extended to the far reaches of the city. After two blocks he noticed something else; of the apartments they had passed, not one had shown a lighted window. If there were lamps within any of them, the glow was caught and contained by tightly drawn curtains.

At the next cross street he glanced up at the sign, and stopped short. "We're going the wrong way," he said.

"The hell you say," Chad replied.

"We are, Chad. We started at 120th and we're now at 117th. 125th Street is back the way we came."

"I thought you said your buddy lived near that College--that guy I asked said it's up there on the right somewheres."

"I don't know. I guess we might as well muddle on the way we are--."

They continued walking in the same direction.

As a relief from his repeated desire to peer into every doorway they passed, with the correlative fear that if he looked too hard he might see someone looking back, he glanced frequently across the street. On that side there were no buildings. A low chain mesh fence bordered the side walk and beyond the fence a bluff loomed, thrusting against the night sky to the

west. Further ahead the face of the bluff changed, leaned back invitingly and became climbable. Shaded into its ridge were a cluster of stout, long roofed edifices. The variety of shapes and their untidy juxtaposition, spires and triangular facades impinging on massive rectangles, was unmistakably academic.

"I think that's Columbia up there," he said. "The question is; how do we get there from here?"

Chad turned to him and grinned. "You caint."

"Seriously."

"That guy I asked said there was a way up through the park . . . Yeah there it is." Following Chad's pointing finger he saw the stairway, its landing lit with flourescent lamps. Alternating with the cones of light were evenly spaced inroads from the darkness, patches where the stairs were obliterated out of sight.

"You sure about this? I mean it looks like a kind of tiring climb. That's rather a long way up and steep besides."

"Well, maybe so," Chad said. "But we're not getting anywhere walking down this street in the wrong direction. Anyway I'm getting jumpy down here; I feel like I got on one of those glow in the dark halloween masks, you know?"

"I know."

They crossed the street and went through a gate

flanked by a pair of aluminum painted lamp posts. The harsh light tinged the edges of objects with a violet corona, but abrasively stripped away shadows and wiped out depth so that everything it touched acquired the same, hard two dimensional cast. He averted his eyes, trying to see into the darkness ahead.

Steadily, treading lightly on the balls of their feet to minimize the sound, they climbed the stairs. Close to them were small bushes, and a few stunted trees, but behind these nothing else was visible. The void away from the stairs was impenetrably black, like a cave turned inside out.

Once Rick thought he heard whispering voices and he wondered if Chad had heard them also, but if he had, it went unmentioned, and they continued mindlessly upward. Little by little, fatigue eroded his anxiety. When they reached the halfway point, and flopped down on a bench to rest, the only thing he could think about was those remaining stairs, and the number of times he would have to lift his legs. At that moment he was in better shape than he had ever been before. Before the army, he would have had to crawl the last fifty steps, drooling cigarette scum and old booze with every breath. They got you that way, he thought, right by the old narcissism. They even let you put your own ring in your nose and smiled as they stuck their finger

through it.

"Okay, private no class Chadwick," he said. "Onward and upward."

As he lifted his foot for the first step, Chad nudged him and he froze with the foot in the air, like an addled hen. Three boys had appeared on the next landing, thirty feet up from where they had rested. The middle one--judging from his clothing, the leader--leaned on the knobbed handle of a slender black umbrella. His body was relaxed, his face calm--obviously he was a boy who was in his home place, and knew it, who wore the fact of it like a doeskin glove. He had on a red cardigan sweater, opened all the way to his waist, and a round, narrowly brimmed cap pulled low on his forehead. His expression as he watched them was almost tolerant, the expression of a cop about to chide someone for walking on the grass. His two companions stood stiffly on either side of him, dressed identically in white T-shirts and dungarees; each had a white strip of cloth encircling his forehead.

Chad touched his elbow and they started up the stairs toward the boys. He told himself he was disillusioned. Three small boys not one of whom looked anymore than thirteen. Really!

"You gentlemen lost?" the boy asked. He tapped the sharpened tip of the umbrella on the concrete once

and his two companions uncrossed their arms, the blades in their hands opening with a single oiled sound-- Flick!--drawing first blood from the air. Rick felt his stomach muscles give a responsive twitch; not an emotional response, this, but his body's memory of every blade that had ever laid open its flesh, and the sensation of being cut which was somehow worse than its aftermath of pain.

Watching their faces for the effect, the boy smiled, with paternal pride. "Quick, ain't they?" he said. His voice was caressingly gentle, controlled; the voice of one who has learned that there is no need to yell. "These my men," he continued, "And I am the Man." He lifted the umbrella a few inches and again tapped it on the concrete--Plink!--for emphasis. "This is my park too, and right now you standing on my stairs." He glanced left and right at his two "men," then leaned forward confidentially. "Most times we would kill you for this, but I see you wearing the uniform of the country. My men and I respects the uniform of the country and all it stand for, just like Miss Johanson say, so I have decided not to kill you. Thass right! However," he paused, savoring the word, and finding it to his taste, repeated it. "However, we a little shy of bread this month, so . . ." He extended his hand, palm up, in their direction.

Chad reached for his inside jacket pocket and the "men" came shiveringly alert, like bird dogs, but perceptively relaxed when he produced nothing more than his cigarettes. He lit one and flipped the pack to the boy, who deftly plucked it out of the air, removing four cigarettes--two for his companions, two for himself--then, after weighing the pack in his hand for a moment, tossed it back to Chad.

"So?" Chad drawled. "So what?"

"Say what?" asked the boy.

"So what do you want from us?"

"I tole you, baby. Bread, green stuff, you know-- money." His tone expressed infinite patience with Chad's stupidity.

"Why?" asked Chad.

"Why?" the boy chuckled. "Mmmmmmmhmmmm. Why. 'Cause I say so, mostly. You trespassing on my property, see? You lucky I don't kill you. All you got to do is pay a little toll and you can go through."

Chad shrugged. "How're we supposed to know . . ."

"Ignorance of the law is no excuse," recited the boy. "Besides who you trying to bullshit? Everybody in this whole town know about the heights." He paused, considering. "Where you from, anyway?"

"Louisiana," Chad said, and Rick winced inwardly.

"Baton Rouge."

"Louisiana. Huh; my old lady from down there, which makes us pretty near home-boys--you oughta be glad to give money to me."

"You ought not to take money from a home boy," suggested Chad.

"Thas right, whitey--be clear about that. If you don't give it to us, we sure as hell going to take it."

"Don't git too puffed up sonny," Chad said. "The only reason you're still standing there is because I got scruples against beating up on little boys."

"You got the weight whitey, but we got the stuff to cut some of it off," interjected the boy, nodding towards the knives.

Chad smiled. "As I was saying, I got scruples, besides which, being a holder of the second degree black belt in kempo karate, I am forbidden by law to fight anything less than three grown men, and then only in self defense. First thing I had to do in New York was register my hands as deadly weapons."

The boy slowly shook his head from side to side, giggling. "Hee-hee-hee, man! If you ain't the biggest fool to ever come through here, you damn well the most wicked liar." He shifted his attention to Rick, who while they debated had been trying, successfully, he thought, to maintain a facial expression which combined boredom with a hint of certain underlying capabilities for lethal action. "Whas a matter with friend here?"

He look like he falling asleep." Addressing Rick directly, he said, "Wake up, friend--say something, show us you still alive--while you still can." When Rick didn't reply, (what could one say?) the boy turned back to Chad, and said, "You better check his heart--he maybe dead already, and nobody know it."

"He never talks," Chad offered in explanation.

"He can't talk?" asked the boy. "You trying to bullshit me again. How'd he git in the U. S. Army if he can't talk?"

"Oh, he can talk all right, I guess. He just won't. He was drafted and he hates the army so much he hasn't said one word since--for two months to be exact. He wants them to think he's crazy so's they'll discharge him . . . If you want the truth, I think he's a little crazy myself. Awful easy to get along with though."

"Yeah?" the boy said dubiously, "how you know all this if he never talked to you?"

"He wrote it down for me," Chad said. "He's been to college and he writes real nice. At night he sticks a big wad of bubble gum in his mouth so he won't say anything intelligent while he's asleep."

"I bet you he talk if I stick this in his ear," said the boy, patting his umbrella.

"I doubt it," said Chad. "Like I told you, he's crazy--they's no telling what he might do if you start messing with him. One old boy back in the barracks was

bothering him, two weeks ago--you know, poking him and all, until Old Rick finally got tired of it, grabbed a hold of the guy and like to bit his nose off. We had to pry him loose with an entrenching tool."

"A what?" the boy asked.

"A shovel," Chad said.

"Hunh!" grunted the boy. Yet, from then on, the way his eyes occasionally wandered toward Rick suggested he was at least considering the possibility of madness, if not fully convinced of its presence.

"What about those two?" asked Chad. "Your bodyguards aren't the gabbiest boys I ever saw, either." Rick looked at them again. While the boy and Chad talked, they had stood, silent, legs spread, switchblades loosely held next to their thighs, their only movement the stretch and sag of breathing and an intermittent slow flexing of wrists, which was somehow separate from the rest of them, as if the knives rather than their bodies were its source.

"Them!" the boy said, investing the word with affection and mild contempt. "Thas different--they don't talk because I don't want them to." He squatted with the umbrella between his knees, his forehead barely touching the knob. "I do all their thinking and talking--"

"And they do all your fighting," finished Chad.

Lazily, the boy slid his right hand down the umbrella shaft and, in one fluid motion, drew the umbrella behind him and whipped it forward, its point on line to Chadwick's right eye. Silken fabric hissed through the circle of thumb and palm, then his hand caught the knob and the point arced to the concrete, striking with that same metallic note--Plink! Neither he nor Chad changed expression, and the boy said quietly, as though nothing had gone between, "You got a awful big mouf you know? I taken a notion to carve it bigger if you aint careful."

Rick felt a droplet of sweat trickle down his ribcage.

"Well," said Chad, "I been told that before. Just caint seem to keep it shut though. It's a terrible thing." He shook his head dolefully. The boy stood up and flicked a minute particle of lint from his sweater. Sighing deeply, as though suddenly remembering a burdensome responsibility, he said, "I enjoy this little talk, but we seem to have got off the subject. You an' friend lay you wallets on the step there, if you please. I can't be foolin' around here no more."

Chad backed down four steps, nodding for Rick to do likewise. While he moved he opened his jacket and unstrapped the dark blue garrison belt, then stripped it from his waist and began to loop it around his right

hand like a bandage; all this done casually, automatically, without taking his eyes from the boy.

Rick followed him, imitating his moves and when they finished each of them had six inches of belt and the brass buckle swinging loose from the right hand; by mutual agreement the time for conversation seemed to have ended.

The boy slid forward, his umbrella cocked and poised like a rapier, his two companions circling away from him in a slow sidling flanking movement, their faces showing emotion for the first time; lips peeled back, eyes bright--not malicious or hard at all, but glistening with the pure perfect joy of animals at play.

The boy hesitated. "Nah!" he said, and abruptly, for no immediately obvious reason, sat down on the top step. "Nah," he repeated morosely. "I just aint in the mood." He spoke in close to a whisper, talking primarily to himself. "Killin', cuttin', fightin'--it just like everything else--you got to have the mood for it." He was watching Chad carefully and Rick sensed that he was waiting, and perhaps hoped for Chad to say the word or make the move that would bring the right mood on him. The boy's companions had stopped also and turned to him, astonished, silently beseeching him to let them continue. After a few seconds, he waved an imperious hand and they moved reluctantly behind him.

Chad said nothing, but merely began to string his belt back through the loops on his pants with an air of profound indifference, as if this outcome was no more preferable to him than any other. Hoping that he projected the same attitude, Rick slipped his belt into his pocket and buttoned his coat, feeling betrayed by the sudden demand of his lungs for deeper, more frequent draughts of air.

It ended so. If in the beginning, when he and Chad had been halted by the boy, there was a core of discernible sense to the event, that such a thing could, no should, occur at such a time in this place, there was yet no corresponding sense in the boy's refusal to carry the dormant violence to its destination. It puzzled him, for he had always believed that beyond a certain point events carried their own weight, forced their own conclusions, regardless of human preferences in the matter. Certainly he was relieved, yet the boy had maneuvered them at his own will to the edge of something, perhaps death, and then on his own whim, had left them there hanging, --deflated, was the word that came to mind. Before letting them pass the boy pointed out again that irrespective of his desire to show mercy, there was still the issue of property rights to be settled, they were still, in a sense, trespassers. Chad settled on four dollars--two for him, two for his

"men"--which seemed a standard unit for the boy, whatever the medium of exchange. The boy took the money and tucked it in his pocket without looking at it, then he and his companions stalked off the landing and disappeared into the surrounding darkness, so vivid the apparition, so quick the departure that Rick immediately began reconstructing their figures and the event in his mind, already uncertain where imagination and reality overlapped.

As they trudged up the last flight he asked Chad why he thought the boy had let them go. "Was he scared, did he like us or what? I mean it was kind of strange it ended like that, don't you think?"

"I don't know about him, but I was scared, buddy," Chad said, vehemently. After thinking a moment, he amended, "I don't think he was scared, though. When he sat there, it was more like he was disappointed than anything else. We were pretty damn lucky. The other two wanted us so bad they could taste it, and if they'd been running the show . . . well." He grinned crookedly.

At the top of the stairs a waist high stone wall parted, allowing entrance to the Columbia campus. Between the wall and the outer buildings was a concrete mall and there they stopped to look down on the place they had just escaped. Seen this way, certain features of the park became visible; they could distinguish the

darker shadows of trees, massive bulges of rock, and indiscriminately scattered clumps of bushes; could see the park's general shape, the way it lost its steepness on the lower slopes and splayed out to meet Amsterdam Avenue which, without the widely spaced street lamps, might have seemed itself an extension of the park, so consistently were the windows blacked out along its length. To their right the bluff rounded off and became a hill just before the street where the city once more asserted itself, where there were enticing lights, noises, cars, and, one could assume, civilized human beings. From here Rick could see it was a long way, perhaps a half mile, to where Amsterdam Avenue intersected with the other one; in terms of distance, at least, Chad had picked the better route. And in terms of results, the fact that they were still alive, who could say that it hadn't been safer to come the way they had? Yet looking down on the stairs, so exposed by the lights that were supposed to make them safe, he felt an exploratory charge of nausea--the first harbinger of panic--slide quickly through his belly.

"You'd never know there was anybody in that park," Chad said. "Looks like the emptiest place in the world from up here, doesn't it?"

"Yeah . . . what I'm wondering is how many others are down there that we didn't see?"

"And saw us you mean? Good question. Could be hundreds I guess."

"Thanks a lot," he said grimacing. "Let's make it, shall we?"

They cut between two buildings and as soon as he stepped within the campus he regained some of his confidence. Gnarled, dignified elms spread aloofly over the sidewalks and there were lawns clipped golf-green short filling the spaces between buildings. The sidewalk meandered across the campus in gentle curves, as if its makers had wanted one to walk slowly, and forget for a while the need to reach a destination. Slightly elated by the familiar ambience of a college campus, he left the sidewalk, and strolled on the edge of the grass, pretending to himself for a moment that he was a student again and that all this was his. At the end of the sidewalk were two stone pillars hung with the open wings of an ornate cast iron gate. Passing through the gate, they emerged on a street alive with traffic and brilliant with the cold aura of those ubiquitous fluorescent streetlights; only then did it occur to him that the campus had been as dim and quiet as the park and the Harlem street below it.

While they stood outside the gate trying to decide which way to go, two young men and a girl, walking with their arms linked, came down the street towards them.

Taking quick inventory of the tweed jackets and the girl's long straight hair, Rick felt an instant rapport and he smiled. But just before the threesome reached them, the young man on the inside freed his arm and stopping a few feet away, he bent over and sweepingly drew a shape in the air with his hands--unmistakably--the shape of a large mushroom, while the girl and the remaining young man applauded and vibrated with laughter. Before Rick could reply or explain they had moved on down the street, punching the wit appreciatively on the arm, and laughing still.

"What was that all about?" Chad asked, genuinely puzzled.

Wanting suddenly to tear off his uniform and somehow disappear, Rick said through gritted teeth, "Those sonofabitches won't think it's so funny in a couple of years. Supercilious bastards! What do they know, anyway?"

But the shame and inarticulate rage stayed with him until they reached the doorstep of the apartment building where Bob lived--five and a half blocks away--and it still took an effort to let the emotion be superceded by the anticipation he wanted to feel, should have felt, for seeing his friends.

The front door to the building was slightly ajar so he decided not to use the buzzer. They took the

narrow, wheezy self service elevator to the fourth floor and walked down the hall to Bob's apartment. He knocked and heard shuffling noises inside and then an unnaturally lengthy silence, as if they were hoping whoever it was would go away.

"Maybe they think we're bill collectors," he said. "Open up or we'll huff and we'll puff and we'll . . ."

The door opened to the length of the chain lock and Bob's face appeared in the crack.

"Wha do--Oh for crissake," Bob said, and closed the door again. They heard him fumble with the chain and call, "It's Rick, honey," and then they were inside the apartment, Rick and Bob punching each other enthusiastically while Jean and Chad stood by and waited for them to cool down.

A few minutes later he was seated on the couch in their living room, revolving a squat glass of scotch between his palms. Jean was next to him on the couch and Bob sat astride a straight backed chair facing them, absentmindedly tracing circles on her knee with his fingertips--a gesture which for Rick embodied the tranquility he had always associated with them.

Chad had removed himself to a deep chair in the far corner of the room where he seemed perfectly content to sip his scotch and reply pleasantly when they thought to include him in the conversation. Rick had already

mentioned how he and Chad had ended up in Harlem. And the subsequent trip through the park--without giving any hint of the encounter on the stairs. Mentioning the park had apparently been enough excitement for the moment. "You what?" Bob had said, while Jean gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. "Do you know where you were?" Bob had continued feverishly, his voice rising in pitch slightly. "That's Morningside Park, pal--the jungle--the gaddam mugging capital of the world." His voice contained a curious mixture of fear and pride. Rick had let it drop while Jean fixed the drinks.

Now, watching the oily streamers of scotch swirl around the icecubes in his glass, he felt rather ugly and out of place in their impeccable little nest. From the way Bob had spoken it seemed obvious he had little idea of what really went on in the "jungle" just a few hundred yards from his front door. That had been Bob's excited imagination talking, and perhaps a pardonable touch of the expertise that he had seen in other friends of his who lived in the city; none of them could bear to believe that there was anything about New York that they didn't know, first hand.

He played with the idea of saying nothing about what had happened to them. But something churned resentfully in his stomach at the thought of leaving all those words unsaid, all those impressions unrefined. And he

knew also that the fear he had felt had not disappeared but lurked somewhere around a corner of his mind waiting for him to remember everything just exactly as it happened, so it and the others like it could come skittering to the center of his consciousness, like bats to a window.

Tilting the glass, he swallowed once--too much--the scotch hitting his glottis like a golf ball. He coughed four times, harshly, and looking up at his friends, caught the expression of shy concern on their faces. He smiled to reassure them, and began his story.