

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

L. William Knotts for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies in the co-departments of English, English and Postsecondary and Technological Education presented on February 26, 1991.

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Chris Anderson

In a story of his life Les reflects on what he has gained and what he has lost while seeking success in the moving and shifting of military and academic life through homes and schools all over the United States. He describes himself as between races, languages, and cultures.

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Inside, Outside:  
Light and Dark

by

L. William Knotts

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Photographs	
Introduction	01
Section I: Something in the Music	03
Section II: Against the Flow	42
Section III: Learning the Dance	82
Afterward	104

LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS

<u>Photo</u>	<u>Page</u>
1. My sister Noreen, Raymond, Jr., and me near the old house in Sugarland, Texas, 1961	17
2. Me as a 1st-grader at Star Prairie--dimpled and happy	18
3. Making it through four years in F-1 with a smile	63
4. Training in the Mojave Desert--and liking it	81

## INSIDE, OUTSIDE: LIGHT AND DARK

### INTRODUCTION

When I was asked what context I would like this autobiography to be read in, what audience I was trying to reach, I had to think. I was only partially persuaded that any biography written about me, even by me, would have any interest to anyone outside my family.

I shared part of my writing-in-progress with an Oregon native I'd recently met. Although Wil and I are the same age, his life here in Oregon has been very different than mine. At least, that's what I thought. I read him an essay about my grandfather in Texas, then about the salmon I'd watched running upstream in Oregon. Wil seemed interested, and I read about wetting my bed in Wisconsin. Then Wil started talking. Everything I read sparked a recollection, sometimes quite private, of his own. As he talked, I realized that there could be some common thread--among boys who grew up in America, at least--because I had the same sparks of recollection when I read autobiography from fellow graduate student Bob Loshbaugh and Professor Kerry Ahearn at Oregon State and from the autobiography of writer Russell Baker. Their writing made me feel as if scientists were touching my brain with a gentle electric probe, recalling an otherwise irretrievable memory.



Wil's interest was enough motivation for me to continue writing, but I still had a nagging doubt that the thesis was deep enough or serious enough--that it would not contribute enough to the discourse community or be of value to anyone but me and people who knew me. I was encouraged by teachers I respect to consider writing more directly about my experiences, in school and in the military, as a Black man. I thought that the principle reason they were interested in those aspects of my life was because they are white and civilian. Besides, I couldn't think of any good use for recalling those accounts of prejudice or favor which came to me because of the color of my skin. The memories are not too painful to recount, they simply seemed too useless to relive on paper.

I think, now, that I may have something to say to a wide group of people. My story represents a minority view, that of Black men who have achieved a degree of success in the world shaped and controlled by cultures other than our own. I hope to speak directly to those minorities who harbor guilt about where they are and what they have and what they have done, because I have dealt with that guilt, and I find that I am happy living with unanswered questions, even though I may be swimming upstream.

I

SOMETHING IN THE MUSIC

You should have been there. You should have. I was outside in fall weather that felt like spring. The reds and hues actually looked prettier than spring that day. (When spring comes, I'll change my mind again.)

I ran through the quad at the center of campus, its lush green criss-crossed with gray concrete, and I saw a crowd of people on the balcony above the ballroom. I, too, went up the twenty wide, shallow, marble stairs to see what had stopped this crowd. The huge, pillared room was packed. No one moved.

A young woman was playing the cello, beautifully. She cradled the huge instrument and stroked the deepest "baruumms" and "deumms" out of it. She bobbed with the notes, smoothly, fluidly. She was the center of the scene, and we weren't even there. I was still with the rest of them, watching.

The scene was back-lit through a massive picture window which opened the entire wall to the outside but which was filled from frame to frame by what I can best call a gigantic waterfall of golden-yellow maple leaves. I focused on the leaves, and alternately focused on the girl. Her hair was yellow, too, and her music filled the thirty-foot hall.

I wanted to move closer and I wanted to go get my camera no a video camera I don't have one and it will all be over anyway don't move and spoil this. Outside, everything was deliberate and controlled, controlled by the cellist.

I should practice my violin more.

About the first thing I can remember is being watched by Poppa, my father's father. Poppa had a big old pot-bellied stove right in the middle of the single room he lived in around the Rabbs Bayou in Sugarland, Texas. The metal of the stove was that blue-gray rust color that comes from being heated and cooled, heated and cooled until the original coating wears off. The handle for the grated door where Poppa shoved the wood in looked the same as the handles for the hot, heavy covers on top. The handles looked like big springs to me. During the day, light came in from odd places where there were no windows or doors. One side of the room was always dark, and I stayed away from those corners and out near the stove.

I remember the bed in a dark corner of the single room. The roof sort of slanted down so that it was really low above the bed. There was a narrow dark space between the bed and the wall, but a person would have to stoop over and side-step to move back there. The pile of stuff at the foot of the bed would have kept anyone from getting back there--or from getting out. It seemed like a fuzzy, junky, dark kid-trap kind of place to stay away from, so I did.

The covers were piled back away from the side of the bed which faced the stove, revealing the worn mattress. It was one or more of those thin gray-striped mattresses

like you'd find in the army or in a hospital. The mattress was blackened and dirty. The dip of it where Poppa got in and out of bed was a slick dark hollow that dipped almost to the floor at the spot nearest the stove, just a few steps away. There were covers jumbled up on the mattress just as Poppa left them, but there were no sheets.

I remember that Poppa made us some oatmeal in a metal pot. He just dumped the oatmeal in the pot with some water and let it burn on top of that pot-belly. He scraped the burned oats out of the bottom of the pot, and we ate them like that, with just a spoon. No sugar, even. Poppa was a brusque man, and I ate my share of the meal without asking for sugar or complaining about the black scrapings among the pasty oats. I think of that burned taste in the middle of my tongue every time I see oatmeal. I did not eat it for a long time after that.

The last time I saw Poppa was in the aseptic-smelling, hospital-like rest home in Richmond. His room had a large window and light, lime-green walls for the sun to reflect off. The bed was high off the floor, and everything was thin and revealing. The sheets were white and thin. The curtains at the windows and around Poppa's bed were translucent. The robe by Poppa's bed was a single layer of percale cotton which could offer little warmth or cover. He actually recognized us, I think, when

we went there. I remember that he wet on himself. I was surprised, but embarrassed. I used to wet the bed, too.

My strongest memory from our visit to the nursing home is seeing one of the residents hobbling away from the place on stiff legs in the flimsy little green robes they give you there. He had pajamas on, too. The man was wearing some foam slippers. He was moving slowly, but deliberately, like his feet hurt. His hair was very white and thin. His face was wrinkled and looked really clean--maybe because he was so pale. The old man was clutching something in the crook of his right arm as he hurried--he had an urgent look to him, at least--down the graveled side of the small road leading away from the nursing home. His open robe blew over the object in his arm so you couldn't see what it was. His hair would jump in the small gusts, and he looked a little wild. The wind made him look like he was going faster than he was, as if he were running.

I wonder whose dad he was? I was hoping he had some place to go, and that they didn't catch him before he got there.

I could tell you about the stuff I did when I was little--dirt-clod grenades and being the fastest kid on the playground. I could tell you that my three brothers and three sisters called me "Apple-polisher" and "Fat-head" for being a goody-two-shoes and for having a head which looked too large for my body. I could tell you about being born in El Paso, moving from Texas to Wisconsin to Kansas, and then to Germany; moving after that to Florida, then the same house in Kansas again, and then to another house in another town in Texas. Sometimes my father was with us, sometimes he wasn't. Sometimes we lived on the military base where we were, sometimes we didn't. I could tell you all that, but what I remember most about my childhood is that I did not want it to end.

From the time at the old house in Texas when my little brother chased me with his six-gun that fell in the cow-pie until I was an eleven-year old in Germany, I had one idea about the passage of time: it was constant.

Time only mattered in school. There was "time" for dinner and "time" for bed, but one day was just the same as the last. I liked it that way. Get up at 5:30, play all day, go to bed at 8:30. School was a place for structured play, and the rest of the days and weekends were for building tree forts in the woods and hiking too

far and climbing the sheer face of the rock quarry or going deep into black caves. When I got too tired or too hungry I would come home for the rest and food that was always there. Mother saw to that. She still does. Dinner and sleep, carefully arranged by mother. If I missed dinner, she always heated something up for me--for us--as if that were her job.

After a particularly good day of roaming through the forests behind the second apartment we lived in in Germany --climbing an eight-foot tornado fence with three strands of barbed wire at the top to get started, crossing the stream back there on a fallen-tree bridge (which rolled a little dangerously if you didn't know where to step), finding and climbing and repeatedly leaping down the finest, sandiest cliffs in Bavaria--I was back home in bed. There were no ritual bed-time stories or tuckings-in. Mother had shown her love by reheating dinner, and Pop showed his by letting me ride on his highly-polished boots and wrestling all four of us boys together, tickling us into a delighted but exhausted pile of "Uncles!" We didn't wrestle like that very often.

My favorite times with my dad were when he gave me haircuts. It was always the same. He would call me in turn--I was number two, after Randall--and I would get the green haircut bib snapped just a little too tightly around



my neck by his scratchy fingers. Pop would clip my hair with the clippers, then snip with the scissors. The first clippers were stainless steel manual ones, but it was the same head on the electric clippers later. The part I liked was that Pop had to touch me to turn my head or fold down my ear or get just the right angle for the cut he was about to make. The physical contact I got during a haircut had to last until the next one. Sometimes mother would take over the clipping chores, and that would mean a longer wait before my father would grab my head or hold my shoulders in place with a single, strong hand.

I was eleven. I had been thinking too much again. By the time my father came in late from work that night I was still sniffing, the real crying done, loud enough for him to hear out in the living room. He still had his fatigues and boots on when he came in.

"What's the matter, boy?" Still a First Sergeant's voice. I couldn't respond to it at first.

"Nothing."

I rarely cried, and Pop never came in to check on me at night as far as I recall, so this was a particularly awkward time for both of us. He asked again, really wanting to know, I think.

"I don't want to get any older!" I was sincere. I had bared my soul to my father for the first time. He

laughed--and loudly. I was crushed. I pulled away and hid behind my pillow. Daddy didn't understand.

I had not meant that I wanted to be young forever. I meant that I dreaded the thought of growing up into a world where I had to relinquish all the good parts of being alive--the play, the comfort--and be an adult. I had looked into the future and seen where I was headed; I wasn't ready for the change. The change had already begun, and had begun to worry me. There was no recess from the responsibilities of adulthood. There was no summer break. It looked like all the fun disappeared when work and family began. I did not want to be a funless adult forever. If Pop had understood that, I think he would not have laughed, but he would have given me what I needed then--a strong touch or a firm hug.

From that moment when Pop sat on the edge of my bed and almost understood me I had a new awareness of the fleeting nature of life--my life. My endless youth was replaced that evening in Germany with my father by a new urgency which drives me today. Today I have my dessert first--before dinner. I have a long list of things I must do in order to have a full life. Scuba-dive, hang-glide, parachute, run a marathon, circumnavigate the globe. I had to do all those things before I slipped into adulthood. I am still racing to complete my list before

it's too late, before I am too old and too slow and just too cautious. I might lose my ability--or even worse, my desire--to play.

We were at my father's last duty station in Fort Hood, Texas. He was nearing his thirty-year retirement mark in 1976, and I was done with high school, and avoiding college, preparing to face my dull fate as a working adult. He and I were in the kitchen, picking over the dinner which was still on the stove. He was just coming in, and I was on my way out to work.

"Well, high school's over. I guess I have to grow up and quit playing now, huh, Pop? His answer surprised me.

"Why?"

That's all he said. I could tell by his expression and his voice the regret for having been too serious during his own life. I could sense the change in him around that time and ever since. He was loosening up from the tough, controlled exterior to a man who could show tears when our fourteen year-old dog died that year. He said "why" with a conviction that belied the evidence of his own too-serious life raising and providing for the

nine of us. He asked, with a single word, why I should go through my life the same way he was going through his. I had just assumed that was what I was supposed to do, never realizing how closely I was attempting to fit myself into the adult and father role that he had set up for me with his example. Pop knew. He had another vision for me that I had not yet caught, smart as I allegedly was. He told me so in one word, one question:

"Why?"

I think of Pop's response when I am having my dessert before dinner at Novak's Hungarian Restaurant and the matronly waitress wags her finger at me for ruining my appetite with sweets before dinner. I think of it when I repair slingshots for the eight-year old boys in my neighborhood or do aircraft carrier landings on my belly in the snow with them. I thought of Pop when Monika and I stopped the car in the painted desert and jumped off the wonderful pink sand cliffs on the way to the coast. I don't have to be an adult forever.

I suppose I must have been four years old when we lived out in the old house in the country in Texas. I wonder how much more I could recall from before the age of four if the scientists could touch my brain with the tip

of a probe like I saw in a documentary one time. The place we lived while my dad took a break from the army to start a rice-hauling business was in the same place where the new house is now. The old house was ash-gray wood--unpainted--with a loosely boarded porch. We had a hand pump for water and an outhouse, outside, and a porcelain pee-pot, inside. The well-water was always cold when we primed it out of the pump. Mother would heat the water on the stove for our baths.

With nine people in the house, the porcelain pot had to be dumped once per night. There was mother and daddy, Alice, Elaine, and James. They always seemed much older than me. Then there was Noreen, Raymond, me, and Randall--who hated being called the baby, which he was, so every called him that. We four were all born a year apart.

At the old house, the girls had other jobs to do, so the four boys took turns carrying the pot to be dumped at the outhouse. At least that's where we were supposed to go. The night I remember taking the pot out was a cold one. It was dark, too. But the pot was full, and I had to go. I tip-toed out the front door, stepping over the familiar hole where the board was missing, even in the dark. I snuck past the well pump (with the pot of water which had originated there) and part way down the tramped-down brown Texas weeds to the outhouse. An owl hooted. I

was out in the dark and cold all by myself, and I didn't want to be there. I pitched the contents of the pot into the weeds in the direction of the outhouse and flew back inside.

In our yard we had a huge hollow-sounding propane tank that reverberated when it was kicked on the sides. Mother was constantly telling us not to play on it. My little brother Randall and I used to ride it like we were in the rodeo. We used to get spanked a lot for it. It was impossible to remove all the silver paint--evidence of our rides--from our clothes and skin, and we couldn't resist climbing on the silver bull.

I remember the excitement when we were sent tickets for our first plane ride. The airline tickets were for the family to go join my father in Pirmasens, West Germany on his first European tour of duty. I was too young to know what they were, but I knew the little papers were important, so I grabbed them off the table and hid them in my secure place, a little space under the heavy table where the pedestals joined the table top. I placed the tickets there for safekeeping. The family was in a panic for two days looking for those tickets. Pop was going to have to pay for those unused fares. There had to be eight one-way tickets Frankfurt secured under the dining table.

If I had understood what everybody was looking for, I could have produced them sooner. I remember suspecting why mother was so worried, and I crawled under the table to retrieve the tickets.

"Is this what you're looking for?"

Mother was too surprised and relieved to give me the spanking I deserved. As it turned out, between the time the Army had sent us the tickets and the time I pulled them from under the table, the East Germans had begun building the Berlin Wall. The Army quit sending families over at once because of the political tension, and my father ended up staying over there for another year by himself. We stayed at the old ash-gray house with the propane tank in the yard for another twelve months.

There were other things for me to do out there in the country. I went back around the bayou to where the pigs were kept in a large, muddy pen. I would climb the fence and agitate the hairy, mud-caked sow until she would huff herself up and chase me over the fence, both of us puffing and grunting. She was mean, and her yellow teeth looked dangerously serious when she exposed them. I would also eat the sweet, overripe, brown bananas out of her trough if they hadn't come out of the peel yet.

One day the men were going to slaughter the sow. I didn't get to watch that, but I got back down there soon

enough to see them boil the carcass and strip the hair off the outside with knives or wire brushes. The white pig was hanging from a tree, spinning on the chain as the men stripped its hide in long strokes. The exposed skin was so pale that it appeared bright in the sun. I wondered how the men were able to get inside the pen with her, how they wrestled around with those ugly yellow teeth? The sow looked very thin and helpless like that. She was certainly a lot easier to approach.



1. My sister Noreen, Raymond, Jr., and me near the old house in Sugarland, Texas, 1961.





2. Me as a 1st-grader at Star Prairie--dimpled and happy.

I used to get up at 5:30 to watch my father get ready for work. He would greet me enthusiastically with a firm but quiet "Gut MOR-ning, Lester Awbucka William!" I squirmed happily under his direct gaze and this display of undivided attention, smiling broadly. After that we didn't say much. (I still don't know where Awbucka comes from, and Pop still uses it to address me.) I would follow him to the small closet by the front door where he kept his ammo can full of polish and brushes and rags. The army-green can was narrow with yellow lettering:

CARTRIDGE, BALL, 7.62 MM  
100 ROUNDS, TRACER

The can was just the right height and width for supporting a boot.

His boots were always right by the front door where he had removed them the night before. Pop was deliberate

in his routine. He would tighten up his thick green sock with both hands pulling and straightening, then hook the tiny little crooks together and snap! the elastic boot-band into place on his calf. He would snatch the leg of his starched fatigue trouser down over the boot-band, and curl the stiff fabric carefully, centrally, under the band to create a little puff of fabric that would just cover the top of his boot so that when his boot was laced you couldn't see the sock, even though the pants were not tucked into the top of the boot. I could hear the stiff crinkle of thick fabric as he worked it, fibers rubbing and separating. Pop would sit down in the quartermaster chair near the door, and stomp his foot into the boot on top of the ammo can as he tugged on the top of the leather heel. He laced the left boot first, then he tugged and stomped and laced the right one. I wondered why he unlaced the boots so far every night. He practically had to start lacing them from the very first holes every day. I had already decided that I was going to wait until I was older before I learned to tie my own shoes. I knew it would be easier for me to learn later, even though I had to have Noreen tie my shoes for me every day--if I untied them, which I usually didn't.

Pop would rotate the rattling metal clamp up and back to take out the Kiwi Black. He would take out the soft,

limp, white-with-uneven-black-spots-like-a-fire-house dog tee-shirt and wrap a clean spot of the old rag around two fingers. He used to jab his cloth-covered fingers into the middle of the can, flat in his left palm, and smear the black onto his boot, leaving the boot dull and another spot on the rag.

After that he would take the horsehair brush and spread the polish around in a buff shine. I thought the boots looked good then, but he would take the long soft cloth and snap it across the toes and heels of those boots until they reflected most of the little light in the room. Everything went back into the ammo can with a rattle and a final metallic "clank!" Moments later my father would be out the door.

When I left for the Military Academy years later, I asked him for some fatherly advice. Pop said, "Keep your boots shined." That was it. I remember opening my first can of 7.62 millimeter ball ammunition at the rifle range and half-expecting to find shoe polish in it.

My father was a platoon sergeant at an air defense missile site. We lived in the pink house in New Richmond, in northern Wisconsin. One day we got to go out there way north of town where my dad worked to watch them slew the long Nike-Hercules out of the hardened concrete bunkers

into firing position on heavy black rails with that screaming hydraulic whirr. The missile was sleek and gleaming white--dangerous-looking--with perfect blocked black letters which said "U.S. Army" squarely centered down the side of the missile. I was impressed by the neatness of the lettering.

It was open house day at the missile site. I got to go into the remote control room and ask questions of the radar men in the dim red glow of the mobile trailer. Three black metal stairs led up to the narrow radar room door. Inside, I had to wait for my eyes to adjust to the low light. I was soon able to see that there was barely enough room for the two men there to swivel on their padded, grey-metal stools. They were more side-to-side than back-to-back in there, but they let me push in. Both of them were wearing bulbous plastic headphones--no hats. Everybody else had been wearing hats or helmets. These men looked very serious and involved at their panels on opposite walls of the trailer. Each wall seemed to a solid spread of dials and switches and scopes, end-to-end and from the ceiling to waist-level of the seated men. All the fixtures, even the screws and knobs, were black. Only the chairs and uniforms lighted by the green of the radar and red light from the illuminated toggles stood out, oddly bright in the secure blackness.

I asked about the radar and missile speed and how many there were and about the dots and blips and hums and clicks. The radarman on the right set a single earphone off behind his ear to listen to my questions. He answered them all. I kept returning to the round, clockwise sweep on the radar scope. I knew that this rotating arm inside had something to do with the curved cage spinning around outside. They did not hurry me, and when I was done they let me back out into the too-bright daylight. The radar was revolving rapidly and quietly overhead. I felt as if I had been let in on something secret. I wanted to be an army man.

The trip to the Nike site was on Saturday. On Sunday mother cleaned up all seven of us kids and got us out early to go hear Reverend Chambers at the church downtown. We had to go. I didn't like to sit that long without being able to ask questions. We weren't supposed to talk, and we weren't supposed to move. We were supposed to be reverent. It was rude to look back, even when something loud caught our attention back there. Mother had the scowl and the thigh-pinch, silent but powerful enforcement of the rules of still and quiet.

One time I had to pee really bad, but I knew we were supposed to be still. I suffered silently, trying not to

squirm. Near the end of the endless service, I could hold out no longer. That awful relief that came with the release found me trying to stop the flow down the pew with my hands so no one would notice. My pants were wet. My hands got wet on both sides. Everyone noticed.

The church had the same perfectly blocked black letters on a white background as the Nike-Hercules missile:

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH of NEW RICHMOND

Church was not as impressive as the missile.

At home, Pop kept his field equipment in the basement in a canvas duffle bag. He had a helmet and canteens and a pup tent with "U.S. ARMY" on the side. It all had that army smell--like damp, green canvas or wool. I have only smelled that smell on army stuff, though. I used to wear his belt, even though it was too big to stay up; without the leather liner his heavy steel pot would roll around on the close-cut hair on top of my round head. I spent hours reading the field manuals and drawing in the minutest detail the M-1 Carbine and Browning Automatic rifles and component springs and housings from the marksmanship manual. I recreated them faithfully on rough paper with a sharp pencil from the black-and-white manuals, shading the springs and pins precisely as they were on the page.

I never thought, until now, about how I knew to repair the trigger housings on the weapons in my arms room later when I was a rifle company executive officer. My company had weapons "down" for maintenance, and it was my job to get them up and operational. Instead of sending the guns to the weapons shop, my school-trained armorer and I just fixed them. We inspected and repaired and tested every rifle and pistol on the racks in the secure concrete armament room until we ran out of usable parts. The complexity of the repairs were beyond what we were supposed to be able to fix. After I would snap the buffer assembly back-plate on the Browning M2 Heavy-Barrel machine gun, SGT Pence would say, "Sir, you're not supposed to be able to do that."

It seems odd to me now that my brothers and I never played army together. Raymond, Jr. is a year older than me, and Randall is only a year younger. Raymond always had a G.I. Joe ( the original one who was big enough to date Barbie, not the little ones that came out later). I played with the "skis" and "wheels"--parts from mother's sewing machine box--and sneaked spoons out of the kitchen to dig with in the back yard. I did sled down the hill in back and I did play "Go Fish" and the board game "Sorry" with my brothers and sisters, but mostly I played alone.

I wasn't lonely--at least I didn't feel lonely. I

was never alone at school, either. Usually I was the center of the battle-ball or Red Rover game, because of the energy with which I played. I really like to play. At home I was content to be alone. I have always enjoyed silence and the quiet of early mornings. I didn't talk much, and I would not argue. I don't remember fighting with my brothers until we were in middle and high school. I would just tell mother on them for calling me fathead or apple-polisher (both of which I was).

I saved every coin my parents gave me, and then traded the coins to my parents for dollar bills, which I would iron, and then store neatly in the Encyclopedia Britannica under "W" for Washington. I spent a lot of time with those encyclopedias and the old Webster's Dictionary (which mother still has, mended with army green tape across the bindings). I also played by myself with my 98-piece military task force. The task force had friendly soldiers crouching with machine guns and kneeling with bazookas, and riflemen in the standing and prone positions. At Christmas I would only ask for one thing, because I was aware--annoyingly aware, as far as mother was concerned--of our financial position. The task force was my Christmas present when I was six.

I worried about everything. When we took trips to visit friends out in the country, mother reminds me how I



used to ask if she was sure she knew the way back home, and if we had enough gas to get there. My brothers and sisters were busy playing sign tag and "popeye," and I was craning my neck to see the gas gauge and watching the highway for landmarks. I was five.

In order to go to the grocery, mother borrowed the twelve dollars I had managed to save by nickels and quarters. We were between paydays. I was happy to help, but the borrowing only made me worry more. She repaid it with substantial interest. After that, I always had money in my ceramic Kennedy bank for emergencies--a ten-inch replica of fifty-cent piece on a flat base with a black rubber plug in the bottom to get the coins out.

Mother didn't show that she was worried about my playing alone until junior high school. One day she asked me if I wanted to go visit any of my friends from school. I didn't know why she seemed so set on having me play with somebody--I didn't feel lonely then, either. But we drove out to the base where some of my classmates lived. I remember that we were looking for Dennis Hull's house. We drove up and down the streets on Homestead Air Force Base until we saw Hull on one of the placards posted by the front door. I had been hoping we wouldn't find the name, so we could go home, but mother seemed determined to help me find Dennis. I really didn't know him that well, but

his was the first name I could think of when she asked me if I knew anybody on the base. Mother sat out in the car and encouraged me to go up to the door. Dennis' mom answered the door, but didn't invite me in. When Dennis came out he said, "What are you doing here?" He let me in, but the visit was very short. I didn't really know why I was there, and I didn't want to ask my mother.

The second house I remember (there was at least the one where I was born at Fort Bliss, Texas that I don't recall) was a friendly-looking, pink, little rectangle of a house on the first big curve of the road coming south out of New Richmond, Wisconsin. Usually, if we were all in the car, it was because we were coming home from church. Sometimes we would splurge on payday and go to the A&W Root Beer stand with the huge Yogi Bear on it, but mostly it was all of us coming home from a church social or Sunday service.

After passing the flour mill and canning factory, we would cross the tracks. The curve was the last landmark indicating we were nearly in sight of the house. As we drove in, the long gravel driveway led to the flat-roofed garage--a sharp contrast to the gabled house. The garage

was attached to the left side of the house, and the small sidewalk right next to the front wall led to a small concrete porch, three steps up to two decorative wrought iron supports with a small roof over it. The porch was centered on the front door we never used, and ended just short of the large picture window which faced the road. From the window I could see the yard, the rain ditch, the road, and then a corn field which ran to the horizon. At the far end of the house, at the end away from the garage, there was a red-bricked chimney.

I climbed up on that garage one day. Mother never would have allowed it, so she couldn't have been home. She would have heard me scrambling to get up there and come out roaring. I remember that there was no car in the driveway, so she and Pop must have been gone. I had one of my father's wool army blankets. I had little scratches on my forearms when I finally struggled up there to the tar and gravel roof. Pausing only long enough to grab all four corners of the blanket, I went to the corner above the grassiest part of the lawn, near the front where the driveway came in, and I jumped off, holding the blanket over my head, expecting it to fill with air like Bugs Bunny's.

I had already felt the sting in my ankles, hit my chin on my left knee (biting my tongue), seen exploding

white flares in front of my eyes, before I realized the chute hadn't worked.

Noreen and Raymond and Randall and me used to wait in the garage on wet days or cold ones until Kenny would drive the school bus up to the end of the driveway. We would all run down the driveway to hop on and make a big scene as if we had done something great by getting to the bus at all under those wet or cold conditions. I did not go to kindergarten, but that did not put me behind in Mrs. Fitzgerald's, Mrs. Emerson's, and Mrs. Anderson's first, second and third grade classes. I was, in fact, the leader of the charge into the girl's bathroom, and the guys used to wax their soles with candles from my mother's kitchen and try to beat my distance as we ruined our school shoes sliding down the thick ice on the long sweep of driveway at Star Prairie Elementary School during recess.

In the classroom, I always had my hand up for more information on why we had silent letters and whose foot was used to make the first ruler. I read more books than anybody, sometimes getting ahead in my reading by flashlight under the covers at night. I was in the "Lions" reading group with a few others. The rest of my classmates were Tigers and Bears.

It was the same routine all the way through school

until fourth grade. At the beginning of my fourth year of school, a new teacher was hired at Star Prairie. Miss Zaloudek became my fourth-grade teacher. She was new to the school, and the youngest teacher by far of any at Star Prairie. Kenny took me on the long rural bus route out to see Miss Zaloudek at school every day.

Miss Zaloudek was more lively and less strict than my other teachers. She used to make jokes in class. Most of the time nobody laughed but me. Maybe she wasn't trying to be funny, but I thought everything she said was funny. Whenever I would laugh, she would make eye contact with me and give me the sense that we were communicating something more than her words said.

I left New Richmond when my dad was sent to Korea. Miss Zaloudek and I continued to write to each other. I asked her for a picture, and she sent it. In the letter she apologized because it was kind of old, but I thought she looked perfect, her hair curled in big loops around her small face. I still have the picture, and the letters. I stopped writing after she told me about her fiance, Larry, and what a nice guy he was. I don't know what I was thinking, then. I think now that Miss Zaloudek knew.

While we lived in Wisconsin I used to hide under the dining room table. Mother always had a long linen tablecloth (usually covered by a kid-proof plastic one, with another layer of Disney place-mats over that) draped over the dining room table, almost to the floor. With the leaf in, the table could seat all nine of us--tightly--at Sunday dinner. I was under the table practicing my patience.

At seven, I would crawl up under the table and lay across the chairs, hidden by the tablecloth, for hours. When my body wanted to move, I would not let it. Sometimes my limbs would go numb with laying there. When my mind was ready for some other play, I would deny it the release. I waited. I waited for hours, hearing mother vacuuming, listening to my brothers wrestling in the bedroom, my sisters picking at each other in the kitchen, and to my father gaining control of the whole situation with a single, silencing "Hey!" Finally I would listen to my mother ask, "Where's Les?" I was happy to finally be missed. I would not come out until the room was clear. Sometimes Crystal, our dog, would come under there and lick me, and nearly give me away.

From the earliest times I can remember, I put myself to bed at 8:30 p.m., or earlier if I wanted to read. I shared a queen bed with Raymond and Randall when we lived

in Wisconsin, because the pink house only had three bedrooms. When we did go to bed at the same time, Randall and I would hop in the bed, and mother would unfold the clean top sheet for us. She used to pop it open over us, and we would squirm around as the cool sheet lilted down and chilled us with its billow of air. Mother would just smile. I thought that smile was as good as a bedtime story.

It was a good thing that my brothers were not anxious to go to bed, because I had to rock myself to sleep each night. I would lie in bed on my back and roll left and right, left and right, and the next thing I would remember was waking up in the middle of a wet spot with my brothers nearly falling out of the bed on either side of me trying to stay dry. Neither the relaxation of my bladder, nor the resulting pool, woke me. My brothers never slept through the episodes. They made me sleep with my head at the foot of the bed, while they slept at the head. By morning I'd be by myself in the middle of the stain, and Randall and Raymond would be curved out on opposite edges of the bed where the mattress was dry. Those were not good mornings for me.

I was still playing by myself a lot when we moved to Germany in 1969, but the kids became close because the American housing area was so isolated. In Aschaffenburg, near Frankfurt, we lived in a four-story apartment house that was third in a row of nine buildings. Above the fourth floor was an angled attic under the red ceramic-tiled roof which was used as a playroom in some buildings, and as living space in others. From the attic dormer windows I could see out over the Schweinheim, the town across the street. To the right there was Richmond Kaserne with all its armored vehicles and motor pools surrounded by an eight-foot barbed-wire fence. Then there were the rows of family apartments where we lived, then off to the left, down the slope and across the street, was Schweinheim. I hadn't needed much of the mandatory German language to figure out that Schweinheim meant pig-home. The honey wagons filled with manure told us that whenever they rolled by from the barns to the fields on Schweinheim Strasse, pulled by a single draft animal and smelling quite fresh.

There were three stairwells in each of the nine white buildings, left, center, and right. There were two doors facing on each landing, odd numbers on the left, even numbers on the right, increasing as you went up the stairs. We lived on the third floor, Building 693, R-4.



Each apartment had its own balcony on the front side, with a large glass patio door to get out to it. There were only narrow metal bars, like a crib, except spaced farther apart, to keep you from falling off. I didn't trust the bars, and I didn't like the cracks in the concrete floor out there. I only went out on the balcony to launch a paper airplane or pitch off a flaming plastic model airplane with fire crackers taped to the fuselage in a simulated crash-and-burn. Down in the basement a hallway ran the entire length of the buildings where all the storerooms were. The buildings had musty, dusty bomb shelters at each end. You had to crawl in through a heavy steel door to get in there, and it was just a dirt floor to sit on. There wasn't quite enough room to stand fully upright, either.

I was always throwing things. That's what I remember most about being in Germany. I was throwing paper airplanes off the balcony and water balloons off the roof and fire-crackers around corners at people. I threw snowballs at taxis and rocks at cars. I hit Scott Burns in the mouth with an unopened pine-cone (against the rules in pine-cone fights, but they flew straighter) and split his lip. We had climbed out the science class window (also very much against the rules) while Mrs. Grillo was

out of the room to throw the cones at each other.

I was up on the fourth floor of our stairwell with a water balloon when Mrs. Hoheisel came up the steps with a bag of groceries in each arm. She had to pause at the top of the stairs to shift the bags and open the stairwell door outward, step back, and sort of spin her way in if she didn't want to set the bags down and prop the door open. Opportunity met temptation. All was quiet except for the squeak of the metal hinges as the door came open. When I saw her step under to grab the door handle, then back to swing it open, I launched my balloon straight down. WHAM! It smashed with a resounding wallop and splash on the flat roof extending over the door. All the windows in the stairwell shook and vibrated from the impact. I bet she had to pick up all her groceries. I waited just long enough for the shock before bounding down to the third floor and into the house. I stayed home for a while after that.

Later, on a dare from some kids down by building 698, I rolled a spare tire, still on the rim, out in front of a dark blue Mustang on Schweinheim Strasse. There was no fence between the American and German communities, just the road--the same one the honey wagons used. Headlights were on, because it was dusk, but there was still enough

light for me to see the driver smack his chest into the steering wheel as he jammed on the brakes, and follow the silhouette of a smaller passenger in the rear--a girl, I think--as she pitched forward into the front seat. Worse than I expected. I still remember running across through the weeds into Schweinheim, away from the driver, and away from my house. He was shouting "COME BACK HERE, G--DAMN YOU!" I had no intention of coming back.

The Pie-man used Schweinheim Strasse to sell his pastries, pies and cakes to the Americans. He wasn't supposed to drive his Volkswagen bus onto the American side, but he always did. His pastries were always good, too. We used to scream about the Pie-man like kids in the States would sing out for the ice-cream man. One winter the Pie-man and his son stopped the van in front of 693, in the parking lot down front. He got out as usual and opened the sliding door to display the cakes. I winged a snowball through the opening as he slid the door back.

I had the snowball when he pulled up. My act was not premeditated; I was looking for a target and he pulled up and I threw and I ran. I wasn't really afraid of the Pie-man. I ran because that's what I did so I couldn't be identified and have my targets tell my mother. Pretty

soon I hopped back around building 693 to have a look. I had made a huge loop through Schweinheim, out of sight of the Volkswagen vendor. He was still there. I snuck up to the back of the truck, courting danger.

Paul Mayfield, a friend of my brother's from Building 692, said: "Don't come up here. He's waiting for you." I didn't believe him. I kept moving closer.

"He's got a knife." I really didn't believe that. The Pie-man was a fat old friendly guy, like you would expect somebody in his business to be. I peeked around the back of the truck, low, by the bumper. The knife swished by me in a clumsy stroke--the best effort the old guy could make. It was a big knife.

The Pie-man (and his son who was too slow to keep up with me) chased me from early that afternoon until evening. They were still driving up and down the Schweinheim Strasse after nightfall when I slipped past them into my building and went through the full length of the basement to sneak up the stairs.

Mother didn't understand why I didn't jump to go down to the store when she gave me two Deutsche marks for some Coke to drink with dinner.

There were three of us playing on the motor pool end of 693. The buildings were on a sort of tiered base,

where the second floor of 693 was even with the third floor of 694, the buildings set about forty yards apart. I was up on the 693 tier, and my playmate Elaine Hoheisel was at the bottom of the slide of loose orange dirt on the 694 side. I picked up the biggest rock I could heave and pretended that I was going to toss it down on Elaine. She was looking at me when lofted the heavy thing down towards her. All she had to do was step to one side. Instead, Elaine ducked where she was and wrapped her thin arms around her head. Her arms were no protection. There was a hollow thump when the large, dirty stone struck her head. I didn't see the impact, because when I realized that Elaine wasn't going to move aside I winced and closed my eyes and rolled backward in the grass, clasping my hands over my eyes, not wanting to see the rock hit, not wanting it to hit at all, but imagining the impact. I had my eyes tightly closed as if my not seeing would make the event not happen. My stomach was already sick when I heard the "koonk" of the rock on her head.

I hopped up and ran down the loose dirt to pick Elaine up and look for the cut. She was bleeding big clumps from somewhere on her scalp, and I used my fingers to separate her fine hairs to find the hole. I think I was going to put my hand over it. I could not see where the blood was coming out, so I lifted and pulled her up

the hill toward our building. Her little faceless friend had already run screaming ahead of us, and before I had gone much past the top of the dirt slide up to 693, a man came and scooped Elaine up and away from me.

Things changed in our stairwell after that. Mrs. Hoheisel threatened to sue me and my parents for trying to kill her daughter. Elaine had needed surgery and stitches. Christine told me she was still in the hospital. According to her mother, Elaine could have died. She was gone a long time. I was not allowed near her when she finally came back. I stayed away, but I was glad she had come back.

I talked David Jackson and Mike Lewis into going down by Jaeger Kaserne--an American army compound--where the train tracks ran. We would go out on the walking bridge and stand in the thick smoke of the stacks-- eyes closed and breath held--as the trains billowed and thundered beneath us. The trains came by regularly.

I think it was on that first trip I decided to test the theory that a penny could derail a train. I went back to the tracks by myself, slid down the steep embankment and placed the penny on the center of the far rail, then I scrambled back up on the side nearest my house and waited. I realized that people ran the train, but they were

enclosed in the steel cabin, and besides, the steep banks here would keep the train from falling over completely anyway. I felt powerful.

After the train billowed by I went down, disappointed, and recovered a very flat copper coin. After that, I tried to stack the coins. They were all scattered and flattened and hot to touch. I tried putting coins on both sides of the tracks, slightly offset. I tried pfennigs, too. The German coins were even flatter than the American money after the train had passed. I began to think the trains were invincible, so I placed bigger obstacles on the tracks. First, I put some rocks on the rails. The train never slowed down as the rocks were knocked away.

When the rocks did not work, I went around the blind curve in the tracks to make a large pyramid of stones and logs. The train would have to slow down when it hit that. I was really nervous about the possibility of stopping the train, so I hid much further away than I had before. I wanted plenty of head start when the train wreck happened. It never happened.

I couldn't seem to stop that train (although the rock pyramid had alerted the polizei--I heard their sirens immediately after impact).

On my next trip to the tracks, after I heard the sirens, I took David and Mike with me. We went out onto the walking bridge together. This time, I had a large rock with me. As the train thundered below us, I timed it perfectly, and without looking (it would have been impossible to see) or breathing I chucked the large stone down the boiler room stack. I heard it clang off the sides as it went down the pipe. We ran. The sirens followed us.

In 1981 I returned to Germany to train with the Armored Cavalry. When we came back off the border, I borrowed a car and drove to Aschaffenburg. I had no trouble finding 693 R-4. The master sergeant and his wife were home, and they allowed me to come in and look the place over. It had been ten years. All the memories came back, and I told them some stories.



II

AGAINST THE FLOW

I'm tough. I am a U.S. Army Airborne-Ranger-Expert Infantryman. I have a personal discipline which carries me through the toughest training ordeals in cold Korean mountains, Panamanian jungles or dusty desert lake beds in the Mojave. When I reach the point where one more step is impossible, I step anyway. That's the kind of guy I am.

I'm nothing. I just came from the Fall Creek Hatchery on the Alsea River tributary in Western Oregon. I heard about salmon runs, and I had seen them on television documentaries. I went with my wife Monika to see for myself. We took a sack lunch.

A mile downstream from the hatchery, I stopped the car and stepped out onto a knoll overlooking the stream twenty feet below. I was not sure what size or color fish I was looking for, and I saw only the water crashing down the falls on its twenty-mile journey from here to the sea. Monika and I went on.

We parked again at the hatchery and walked alongside the man-made stairs designed to assist the salmon on their way upstream. What did they do before we were here to assist them? Concrete steps, indeed. And fish with no legs. Seemed ridiculous. The stairs were obviously spaced too far apart, anyway, and the water was coming down too fast for the fish to get up this way. I went back to the stream. There had to be a path of lesser resistance. The salmon would find it.

But the river was blocked with a wooden grate. As I think about it now, it was like a cage, or bars, stretched across the full length of the river. The Chinook and Steelhead would have to use the steps. I went back to the steps and ate my sandwich.

The first thrash sounded like someone had fallen in the water. I turned just fast enough to see the dorsal red of a fish through his translucent scales. Thirty pounds of salmon, airborne.

Now, I used to be impressed with human endurance. I used to be impressed with my own endurance. Not any more. After swimming against the current for at least twenty miles, the salmon was actually going to climb these stairs. He already made the first step. That was impressive enough for me. I began to silently root for him. Hup. Hup!

But what was I rooting for? This fish had made the run downstream as a fingerling a year or two ago, adapted from fresh water to salt water and back again. He was fighting not only the current but the tide of extinction,

the over-fishing, and the wooden grates. In giving the white chunks of flesh from his battered and once-piked jaws to make the climb, he was giving himself for the perpetuation of his kind. Instinctively, he was making the ultimate sacrifice. He was running upstream to die.

We talk about tough, be we don't know tough. Fresh water to salt water to fresh water to death. Not many of us will be so single-mindedly purposeful that in friendship or love or altruism, we will run to die, and work hard at it.

We moved to Miami after a short stay in South Carolina, where we waited for our car to come in on a ship from Bremerhaven, Germany. Florida was a new world to me.

I don't know why we didn't live on the air base, but we had to find a place off base, and mother wasn't about to have us live in the middle of the tough Black suburbs of Miami. The place we moved into was a white-with-green-trim, plaster-covered, flat-roofed house in the white suburb of South Miami Heights. The house had those high narrow windows with four-inch glass louvers that the burglars could silently slip out one at a time until they had enough space to slide through the opening. I remember that the hinges of the doors were outside, too. I knew from the Ellery Queen short stories that doors open toward their hinges. With the hinges on the outside, it was nearly impossible to secure your house. All the burglars had to do was tap out the hinge pins and pry the door away from the jamb. Local people said that the purpose of the louvered windows was to let the air in but keep the rain out. The hinges were set that way to allow the door to blow harmlessly out instead of dangerously inward when the frequent tropical storms caused violent pressure differentials between the inside and outside of the house.

All the places had carports where we lived--I don't think anybody had a garage. Our house had a huge tree in the front yard whose roots made the grass impossible to cut. Mother made us four boys cut it, anyway. The mower blades took a beating hacking at the grass between those thick roots, and mother spent a lot of time yelling at us to be more careful about snatching the mower around as if we were trying to break it so we wouldn't have to snatch it around any more.

The cockroaches in Miami were called Palmetto bugs. They were more of a mottled brown than roaches I had seen in Texas and Kansas. They were just as big, or bigger, but even worse--they would fly. It wouldn't have been bad if they would get scared and fly away. The Palmetto bugs always flew right at you and shot inside your collar or in your hair looking for a dark, warm place to hide. There was no getting away from them, no matter how clean the house was. Plus we had all four boys in one room, then. No degree of neatness on my part was going to keep James and Raymond and Randall from eating in the room and leaving crumbs for the Palmetto bugs. They came out in force at night, would scurry right across the sweat on my belly to get at the food remnants. I think the bugs were the worst thing about living in Florida.

We lived across the street from an elementary school.

When we first moved there, I went on my usual exploration of the premises. Beyond the school across the street was a lime grove with trails through it leading to a deep blue man-made lake. "The Blue" was unfinished, had steep sides, and we weren't supposed to swim in it, but the cops caught me in there anyway, hanging on the sides. I was fourteen, but I couldn't even swim. That cop had to help me up the high, loose side to get out. He probably kept me from drowning that day.

One day during summer recess, I was walking down by the classrooms, trying the doors and peering through the windows to see what the kids were studying by the charts and pictures on the walls. All the doors were locked, but it would have been nice to go in where it was not as hot to read some kids books again. One class had a world map spread across the wall on the side of the room away from the window. I was leaning against the glass, memorizing the capitals of the Mediterranean countries. I had to shield the glass with both hands so that I could see through.

"Ankara, Turkey. Athens, Greece. . ." It was hard to read the map from this far away.

"FREEZE! Get your hands up!" A thin white guy leapt out of the bushes to my right rear, screaming at me not to move. I almost jumped out of my shoes. My hands shot up,

and then immediately relaxed and I told him:

"Hey, you scared the mess out of me . . ."

He began screaming and gesturing for me to raise my hands again, and I realized that the thing that allowed him to be so bold was the revolver he had pointing at my face, just a few feet away. I put my hands up. I wasn't scared anymore, but I thought he must be kidding. He didn't seem to want to rob me, and I was only forty yards from my front door, memorizing country capitals.

The plainclothes officer led me back to the far end of the school building. On the way, he showed me that one of the doors I had tried was partially open, about eight inches. He said he had seen me do that. I lowered my hands once more in disbelief, exciting him once again.

"Get 'em up!"

"You know I didn't do that."

"Let's go to the car," he responded. From where his unmarked car was parked at the end of the classrooms we could still see the white house and its green trim. He asked me where I lived.

"Right over there." I pointed.

He seemed surprised. He asked me what I was doing, and I told him that I was memorizing capitals through the window.

There were a half-dozen city names in my head when he

scared the knowledge out of me. But I had recovered. He drove me the block or two to the house to verify that I did in fact live there. I began to cry. My mother didn't understand at first, and I was blubbering so much the officer had to explain. He left shaking his head, and I went to our crowded room, glad that my brothers were all out.

I lived through the times of burning racial stress in the 1960s, but what do I really know of it? I had arm bands and a lead Black Power fist that my brother designed and molded into a charm to be worn as a heavy necklace, but it was just the heft of the thing that I liked, and that my brother had made it himself, ruining one of mother's pans and making a mess of the kitchen to do it.

I have never been to jail for the things that I believe in. I have toured jails, and I have sent men to jail, but I have never been in jail. When I first went to court, I was working the Miami-Dade Court docket as part of a high school honors study program. Court was more dramatic than television. There was the young, pretty Black woman who spoke only French who got raped in an abandoned elevator shaft by a large dangerous-looking



man she was afraid to look at. When the prosecutor made her point to him for identification she went limp on the stand in a wash of tears and was unable to recover. If I had been watching a T.V., I would have been impressed by the acting, but sitting in the courtroom with her, I was left slack-jawed by her fear. The way she was shaking, she must have been reliving the torture.

Then there was the ragged, middle-aged guy who came in the same day as the rape victim. He had holes in his clothes, and apparently was wearing the best that he had. He was accused of sneaking up to the back of a Piggly-Wiggly Grocery while a delivery rig was unloading, and stealing a case of mayonnaise.

"Why did you steal a whole case of mayonnaise?" asked the judge.

"I wanted to make a sandwich, your honor."

The next time I went to court was as a witness against Sandra Handy, a classmate of mine at the predominantly Black Mays Junior High School. I say I testified against her, but what I actually did was recount the truth as I had witnessed it. That worked against Sandra in the end. I was asked to testify by the prosecution. I asked my father what I should do. I had expended a lot of effort to remain neutral in the

What happened was that after school let out I had gone straight for the bus to claim my middle seat. As I waited for the bus to fill up, Sandra had stopped to talk right in front of the open doors of the bus. She was a big girl. And loud. And very black. A white girl named Debbie (who lived a couple of blocks from me in the White Miami suburb we were bused from) tried to brush past Sandra to get on the bus (after waiting a little longer than she should have had to for Sandra to get out of the way). The beating was over in an instant.

Sandra grabbed the thin girl by the upper arm and spun her around. With a stinging open hand she slapped Debbie to the ground and stomped her big foot on the front of Debbie's white sweater, leaving a dusty mark. Sandra was yelling "Don't you never try to push me. You don't know who you're messing with!" Debbie was writhing in a fetal curl in the dirt, covering her face with one hand, and her chest with her other arm. I don't even think she was crying. I think she was too stunned. When she finally got up, with help, Sandra's hand print showed plainly in purple on her left cheek. She was dazed and whimpering. Her eye was already beginning to blacken. I had to testify.

At the time I felt an allegiance to Sandra Handy. I knew she had done wrong, but she was Black. I knew we

were supposed to stick together. My first impulse was to avoid going to court, avoid the confrontation, and maintain my neutrality. I could not. I don't remember a subpoena, but the day before I went to court I asked my father what I should say.

"Tell the truth, son. That's all you can do."

What a relief. I had been trying to figure out how to make Sandra look good. I had thought about sitting on the stand and not saying anything at all. I had considered not showing up in the courtroom. All along I had been trying to figure out how to do wrong, and my dad gave me permission to do right. I told the judge exactly what I had seen from the open window on the right-hand side of the bus, right in the middle where I always sit.

In junior high, as now, I find myself reluctant to sacrifice career or safety or personal goals for the winning of some moral victory that I might not see any benefit from. I believe I did the right thing in Miami, but why was there any debate at all about what I should do? What association and responsibility do I have with and for the rest of Blacks in America, anyway? Why do we feel obliged to acknowledge one another knowingly when we pass, even though we have never met? What requires this mutual familiarity among us who are brown?

I realize that I am privileged to be and know and do what I am because others died for the causes of freedom and justice. Should I be upset because they suffered and died? Would those who died want me to take advantage of the dearly won prize of freedom and the opportunities associated with it? I think they would.

But why don't I feel comfortable with my own people? Who says these ARE my own people? How am I supposed to respond when I don't know how to do the current handshake, or even know if there IS a current handshake? What has caused the rift between me and the rest of Black America? Can I blame the separation on bad decisions in my youth, or on my parents?

I could be trying to transfer fault away from me as I am, now, if there is actually any fault or blame to transfer. I do have a guilt of uncertain origin about choices I have made and what I am doing with respect to my race, today. What would Martin Luther King expect of me? He wasn't my leader or my idol, but his work has surely been to my benefit and betterment. I respect his work, and I owe him. But how much? What do I owe to King and those who suffered on my behalf?

I am a White man trapped inside a Black skin. No, I don't really believe that. I only feel trapped when people expect me to speak and behave in a particular,

predictable way because my skin is dark. I don't know how to act! I am forced to be myself or be silent.

Who can tell me what is right, now? Who can tell me what I should have done, what decisions I should have made? Do I have any responsibility to any but my God and myself for who I am and what I do? I think not.

I haven't done anything wrong. I haven't done anything wrong!

So why do I feel guilty?

I graduated from Killeen Senior High School--the third high school for me--and went to Central Texas College for two years. When we arrived at Fort Hood in December of 1975 I was half way through my senior year. I went to work at MacDonald's within six days of getting to Texas. Most of my friends from school worked there, too.

Terence was the first person who befriended me in Killeen. His mother is Mexican, and his father Armenian. He looks like he's from the Middle East. We liked each other right off, and Terence gave me a ride home from work after my first night of flipping burgers. Later, when he decided to go to Texas A&M, I decided to go with him and share an apartment. As soon as I figured out how much that was going to cost me and my parents, I decided to go back to work, get some education grants, and return to Texas A&M in a couple of years. Instead, I was interviewed for a slot at West Point, the U.S. Military Academy, and decided to go there.

At the time I went, Terence's dad was the senior enlisted advisor to the Brigadier General who was Commandant of the Corps of Cadets. SGM Bandoian was stationed at the Academy when I got there. Terence was there, too. It was summer break, and he had decided to spend it with his family in New York. I stayed with them when I flew in.

The two and a half years I spent in Texas with Bill, Doug and Terence they'd been trying to get me to do the undisciplined things that teenagers are supposed to want to do: dope, alcohol, sex, cigarettes--even littering. They were always amazed by my resistance. By the time I met them I had been practicing my resistance for so long they didn't have much of a chance to change my squeaky-clean ways. There were some great attempts to break my will--a smoke-filled grocery bag over my head when I fell asleep over at Doug's house, the marijuana brownies--but in the end I woke up and refused to cave in. It became a game between us after a while.

When I got to West Point, it was only Terence and me. He said that we should celebrate somehow, so we went to the Class VI store--army jargon for personal demand items--principally alcohol. I didn't know what to look for, so Terence selected two of the sweeter wines and handed them to me. On the way to the register I grabbed some chips, so when I rounded the turn at the end of the isle I was cradling the two bottles of wine and clutching two bags of chips. I turned to face Major Kelly, the only officer I knew at the Academy.

Major Kelly had flown down to Texas to interview me. He had recommended that I be accepted based upon the mature, All-American image I presented at my parent's

home. He looked at the bottle in one arm, then the other, then at me. "Hello, Les."

The next day I left early for the New Cadet initiation ceremony. Terence had enjoyed himself watching me drink the wine like Kool-aide, a tumbler at a time. He just kept filling it up.

I left a purple mess of sheets and carpet for him to clean up. I left them in a rapidly spinning room.

After a friendly orientation with our families, we new cadets were separated from our friends to begin cadet basic training. When I was told by the Man in the Red Sash how I must double-time everywhere and ascend the stairs at the combat speed along the wall with my forearms parallel to the ground, I almost quit. I was running up the stairs robotically, as directed, when I ran into an upperclassman. He told me I had to stop and smack my back against the wall for him, and for every other upper-class cadet or officer who passed me in the hallway or on the stairs. I dropped my robot facade at once and leaned into him incredulously. "You've got to be kidding."

He and the four loud cadets who joined him to form a screaming ring of red faces around me were definitely not kidding.



On the first morning of the academic year at West Point in 1978, I had already been made clearly aware of the numerous penalties which awaited those of us who failed to show up for class on time. I had successfully reconnoitered the classroom. Before our first class meeting the English Department had already assigned us an essay, and we had written it during cadet basic and turned it in. On the first day of class they were returned. Of the fourteen students in my class, there were thirteen F's. The top students in the nation were sent into a panic. I was shocked at first, too, until I saw the grades. I didn't talk about my "C," a grade I used cry over years before, but I was happy to have it.

My first class was in Mahan Hall. Mahan used to be an indoor riding arena when horsemanship was taught to all cadets at the Academy. The way they added walls and floors to what was once an open indoor riding arena made the sturdy building into a maze of halls and classrooms. I had timed the route from my first floor room down the stoop stairs, across the paved lot to the arched stone walking bridge. The bridge led to some huge wooden doors with great wrought iron hinges. The doors opened to the second floor of Mahan. My first class was, amazingly, just two doors down to the left on the right-hand side.

The upperclassmen made a special point to yell at us in formation that morning not to be late for the first day

of class. It would embarrass the company (which we plebes desperately wanted to become a part of), hurt our grade, and earn the offender a slug--a large chunk of demerits and disciplinary walking tours appropriate to the offense.

It was August, and the uniform for all cadets was dress gray trousers and class shirt; the heavy dark blue cotton over the even thicker fabric of the gray trousers, tailored individually to each wearer. Mine fit perfectly. My shoes were shined, and I was ready for class. On that first day, I made it to the classroom two minutes before class, just as I intended. But I had to pee. I didn't know where the men's room was--I just hadn't planned for this. The instructor wasn't in class yet, and I didn't want to leave before he got there. I couldn't leave, but the pressure to go was unbearable. I sat down, and got up and sat down again. I decided that I couldn't possibly wait the additional minute and a half for class to begin, so I bolted for the hall. I ran to the right, but only found more classrooms--and a water fountain. I hurried back to the main entrance, to the corner of the hallway, but there were only more windowed doors. I was out of time. I released.

The dark stain spread from the inside of my leg to the sharp peak of the crease on the front of my thigh. I hurried the three minutes back to my room, made an instant

change, and zoomed back over to Mahan in less than three. The "P" said nothing. No one seemed to have noticed.

Before I was born in March of 1958, there had been only fifteen Black graduates from the United States Military Academy. That's all I was able to find in the library records. The place has been operating continuously since 1802. The numbers wouldn't have concerned me at all, except for two reasons: The Sergeant Major of the Corps, and the warnings.

Sergeant Major Bandoian was serving at Fort Hood when his son Terence befriended me. He and Connie made me feel a part of the Bandoian clan, which is a very close, closed group. I was even invited to the annual clan pig roast down on Long Island. There were no other visitors among the dozens of Armenians circulating through the huge house with piled plates. With almost no words of introduction Uncle Kenny slapped me on the back, ushered me over to the table in the crook of his arm, and all at once I belonged.

Fifty-one miles north of Uncle Kenny's place the Sergeant Major watched me. He wasn't watching out for

me, he was just watching. I often went to the Sergeant Major's house to relax. Connie would invite me in and let me go limp. If I wanted to talk, she would listen, and if I wanted advice, she was a perfect counsellor. I have to admit that I stiffened every time the Sergeant Major came home. As soon as I realized he was there I would refasten the high collar on my Dress Gray and slip my shoes back on. I had to be in full uniform and fully alert for his inspection. That's what it seemed like--an inspection. He would march in, give me a "Well, hello, Lester!" and grip my palm, all the while inspecting my uniform and examining my demeanor with a critical eye. I was never completely at ease when the Sergeant Major was around. He let it slip a couple of times, strategically, that he had seen me at parade drill, or had heard about my calculus grades from an instructor. He finally told me, near the end of my Plebe year, that he thought I should strive to be the first Black First Captain--the highest rank a cadet can attain at the Academy: the Cadet Brigade Commander, a six-striper with a star. To be competitive for that position I would have to strive to build to excellence all five pillars of Academy life: the social pillar, military, moral-ethical, physical, and painfully, the academic pillar--which was less a marble pillar than it was a two-by-four at the time the Sergeant Major put the

challenge to me.

The Sergeant Major's challenge was the second thing that made me head for the library records. The first nudge came when I was a plebe standing at attention in front of a large, Black cadet. I don't remember his face. He was looming over me and I was looking perfectly straight ahead. He was wearing a saber--he had to be a Firstie. I remember the serious authority and deep bass of his voice.

"Are you have any trouble, Cadet Knotts?"

"No, Sir."

"You know what I mean. How are you being treated over here?"

"Fine, Sir."

"Are you SURE?"

"Yes, Sir."

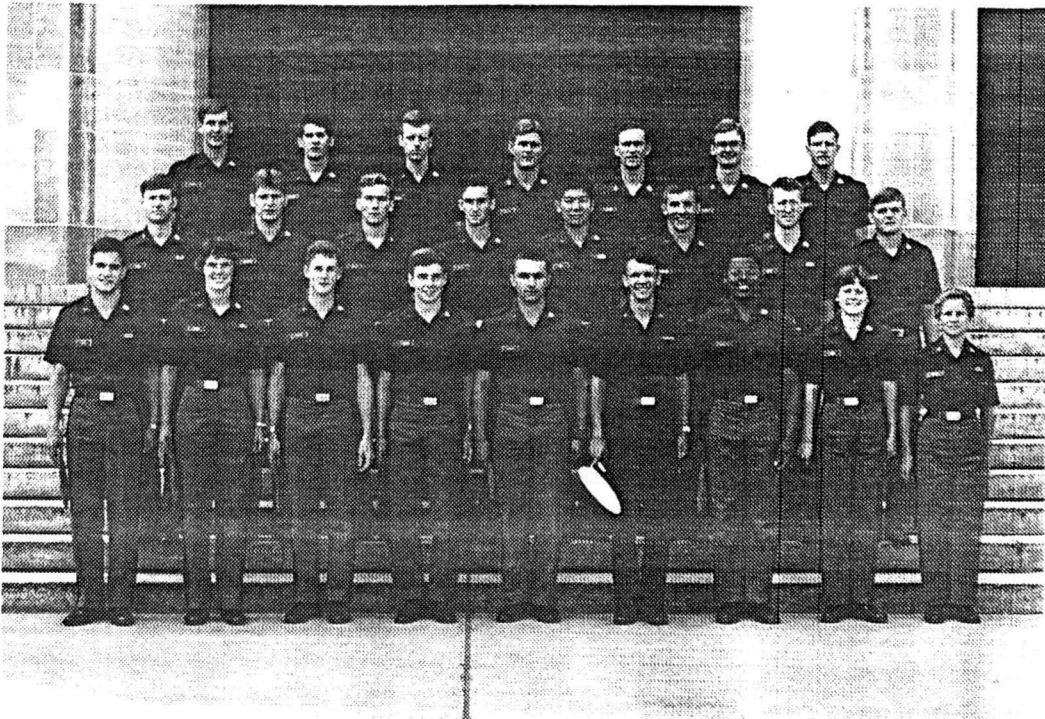
"All right. I'll be watching you."

I wasn't watching out for anything myself, so I was relieved that somebody was doing it for me. I was even more relieved that there wasn't anything to watch out for.

I had heard that no Black cadet had ever gone through four years in company F-1. When cadets in basic training heard which company I was going to, they would whistle and say things like "better you than me." Everyone had heard of the fiery reputation and strict military discipline of

the First Regiment. Of the nine companies there, A-1 and F-1 were the hottest pans a new cadet could hop into.

Fewer people had heard the rumor about Black cadets not being able to make it through F-1. I don't remember where I heard it, but it was before I got to the company. "No black has ever been able to finish four years in company F-1." By the day we reported for the Academic year and our new companies, I had already decided that I would be the first one to make it.



COMPANY F-1, USCC CLASS OF 1982

3. Making it through four years in F-1 with a smile.

"The Power Fraternity." Throughout the Army, West Point has a reputation (a notoriety, to some) for looking after her graduates, for pushing them to the top of our profession a little faster than other officers. Chris Bland would be easy to push, if he ever needed it. He was a good cadet, and a great guy.

I don't know where Chris was from. I do know that I liked working with him. We met on the class committee--our cadet government. I was vice-president, and Chris was his company rep. He was popular with our classmates in his company of over 100 cadets, and capable of representing their interests, so he faithfully participated in every meeting and function.

Every year we had the Sandhurst Competition, a military sweepstakes named after the "West Point" of Britain, the royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. All thirty-six companies in the Corps of Cadets formed teams to see who could navigate, shoot, assemble weapons, and generally out-military the other units. The four-man teams were matched in a points system and were ranked one through thirty-six at the end of competition, no ties. In Company F-1, we expected one of our teams to finish in the top three, and I expected my team to win. We were the best among the nine teams in the 1st Regiment, and we strove with purpose against the other eight. We were the

"Military Regiment," and everybody knew that. Our motto was: "1st Regiment and Proud!" The other three regiments would have liked nothing better than to see us accept defeat in that competition, but it had been years since a team from any except the 1st Reg had won the top honors.

It is easy to see why Chris made his team. He was six-foot three and tremendously physical. He had little trouble with the combat gear run. He could probably carry another person, let alone that 40-pound rucksack.

There is, I now recall, one other place that I knew Chris from--Rock Squad Swimming. All cadets must know how to swim prior to graduation, and Chris and I were stuck with the rest of the anchors in a class taught by patient and dedicated officers who labelled our condition "negative buoyancy." I spent two years trying to get comfortable in the water: two years trying to get out of that class. I do not know how long Chris took to get out. I used to watch him do the back stroke, beautifully, about 24" beneath the surface of the water. Only his hands broke the surface with regular splashes. His face was a wavy picture of puffed cheeks and closed eyes.

Fortunately, swimming was not a part of the Sandhurst Competition. All streams in the field were fordable, but we were directed to bypass all water obstacles. Chris and I could compete without that healthy respect (fear) of



water slowing us down as each of us traversed the thick New York woods, running to complete the timed land navigation course. We raced against the clock, and we had to punch our course cards at each station, then return to be scored within three hours. Some navigation was individual, some paired. Some teams got pretty lost in those three hours.

Class and competition were over for that Friday, and we were at dinner when the rumor began circulating. "Had I heard about Chris?"

"No, what about him?"

"He never came back from the land navigation circuit."

"Probably lost, he's 3rd Reg. What's the worry?"

"He's the best navigator they've got."

"Oh, he'll turn up hitchhiking on the highway somewhere."

I was wrong. They found Chris submerged in a pond out on the land nav course. He still had his pack on. The packs have a quick-release! Why didn't he use it? It's so simple! Yet, from watching him in the pool, I wonder how rationally he was thinking when this "fordable" pond was deep enough to cover his head. I have suppressed that panic many times in a calm pool.

Bugle calls. There are over a dozen different ones.

We played only one that night. All the cadets came out at midnight, robes hanging open, some in shorts and unauthorized tee-shirts, all with heads hanging. Nobody talked. We stood in a huge ragged horseshoe on the concrete apron, facing out across The Plain, and we played the bugle call that makes you cry. I cried, too.

In a few minutes I was back in my room, studying.

I really like this. Marching, running, functioning as a unit. These guys are my friends. When we first got to Fort Benning, Georgia, they were calling our names off alphabetically at the first formation, and there was Dan Kosciwski standing right next to me! I didn't even recognize him until the lieutenant called his name, nor he did he know me. It had been a lot of hair and many pounds ago that we knew each other back in high school.

Dan and I tended to pair up for the briefings and missions. We became foxhole buddies. We worked in harmony to dig our two-man fighting position; he held the bags while I filled them, then he filled the next batch. The lumber for overhead cover required us to heave in unison. When Dan moved out in front of our position to

set the booby traps, I covered him with a steady vigil. At night when it was quiet, we were alone. It is O.K. to be alone like that. I have confidence in Dan even when he is sleeping. I watch out for him as he does for me. Bonds like ours were growing between every man in the unit--and with the entire company--as we collectively conquered one Infantry challenge after another.

Barry and Scott had the same camaraderie that Dan and I have. They've had a lot more practice being buddies, since we've all gone through four years of trials at the Academy together. Those two are inseparable in their new freedom outside the conditions of the Academy. Always together. The obstacle course is a game to them, and they bound across the "Nutcracker" logs together, hands behind their heads as required, and then push and pull each other up the "Hightower." A soldier working by himself cannot climb it, because the upper platforms are wider than the lower ones, and spaced farther apart as they go up. Barry and Scott make it to the top, predictably. Low-crawling under the barbed wire is just an excuse to cool off and play in the mud. The trainers shout that the more we sweat in training, the less we bleed in battle. They yell. We train. As demanding as it is, basic training is a vacation compared to being in uniform and on a schedule for 24 hours each day behind the Great Grey Walls.

Just an average morning at Airborne School. We have done our pre-dawn calisthenics, and it is time to run five miles 'round the airborne track. It is inspiring to watch Barry go through this grueling series of pushups and leg-lifts with a smile on his face. He's a thick-chested, black-haired, handsome guy--the guy they tried to make us all look like at the Academy in those high-collared V-shaped woolen molds that we wore to parade.

The training was effortless for Barry. His green t-shirt is stretched to the limit. He bulges with muscle and with confidence. He is the guy you want on your side in the field because he could carry his own weight and yours as well; he would do so, willingly. He was that label applied to only the select fewest by the rest of us: a "good guy."

"O.K., Airborne! Form into files for a little Airborne stroll!" ("Airborne" is always spoken with emphatic volume and a trace of noticeable reverence. We are trying to become part of that special breed. We love this.) Most of the dirt and sawdust from the push-up pit stays on as we brush ourselves and hasten to positions in the ranks. Every move is at the double-time. No walking.

Barry (and Scott) are three ranks ahead of me as we start out at a shuffle. I like to watch them. They would move together like this even if we weren't in formation.

They gel. Their brotherhood is complete.

We have run less than a mile when something happens. There is a ripple of men in the files in front of me. Oh, somebody tripped up ahead. He'll get stepped on, for sure, but no big deal. Get to the back of the formation and keep going. It's Barry. A few guys drag him off to the side as we continue to run. Wow, he really got stepped on--he looks all ashen and grey. My first thought is that he looks like those victims in the comics when they put those little x's over the eyes when somebody is unconscious. We run. I cannot continue to look back and keep my place in ranks, so I run, too.

Barry parked his dark blue Trans Am in the parking lot in front of our barracks. After Barry's heart attack, Scott left to tell his parents. I never saw Scott again. The Trans Am sat out there, day and night, getting covered with orange Georgia dust. Nobody went near it.

And every day we continued to chant our Airborne cadence, and clap to the rhythm of stomping, booted footfalls. But we ran without Barry.

When I was a cadet, the leadership hand-picked certain cadets to participate in the most rigorous combat training the Army has to offer: Ranger School. "You will be hotter than you've ever been. you will be colder than you've ever been. You will be hungrier than you've ever been, and you will be more tired than you've ever been." That was our welcome speech at the beginning of the 62 days of training.

I was a primary to go to Australia that summer. All the cadet summer programs were desirable--we went to Africa and Europe and jumped out of airplanes--but the exchange to Australia was at the top of my choice list. I really wanted to go to Australia. Major White, the company tactical officer, had asked me weeks earlier to consider taking one of the two Ranger School slots for that summer in 1980. I didn't want to go, and I was relieved when Joe Hajost volunteered to fill the vacancy. Australia was in the bag. With the Australia exchange, I could get some good international military training and probably three weeks of leave, too.

Joe got hurt playing basketball, and there was no chance that he could complete Ranger School if he went injured. I was safe, though. The deadline for submitting names to the Infantry School which conducted Ranger Training had come and gone. Why would anyone choose to

leave school early, sweat and suffer for the entire summer with no leave, come back late for the first few classes with a shaved head and gaunt body? No leave. No hair.

Sixty-two shaved-head, hypothermic, diseased and swollen days later I was wearing the coveted black and gold Ranger Tab.

Major White had halted me on the granite stairs of the covered "stoops" in front of my barracks. I stood at attention on the second stair, facing him. Major White stood directly in front of me, hands clasped behind his back, heels together, carriage erect.

"Mr. Knotts, you know we have an opening for Ranger School."

"Yes, sir."

"Have you thought about going to Ranger School?"

"Yes, sir. I want to go to Australia."

"You really ought to consider how much better Ranger School is for your career."

"I have, sir."

"So, you want to fill the Ranger slot?"

"No, sir." The deadline was past. I was saying no to the man in charge. This should not be happening. Major White was rooted to that spot directly in front of me. I wonder how long he would have stayed there if I had kept saying no?

That afternoon I was scheduling the pre-Ranger training into my calendar. People were already wishing farewell and good luck, as if I weren't coming back. Apparently there were no guarantees that I would.

I lost only twelve pounds. Some people were unrecognizably different. I did go back to school after the training. I'd been deprived of enough sleep to induce hallucination. While moving in a Ranger file through the cold darkness of Tennessee Valley Divide, I saw the men in front of me stop and build a nice fire as we were route-stepping. Just as I was about to drop my pack and join them, I was jarred by the crunch of a rifle in my back by the guy behind me. The scene looked so real. I had hallucinated long enough to lose the rest of our patrol.

I had been hungry enough to eat coffee grounds and powdered creamer from my field rations. I walked for ten hours in the Florida swamps with water up to my chest at a time when I swam like an anchor. They even gave weak swimmers a little strobe light to wear high on our chests. If we went under the water with the eighty-pound rucksack and twenty-pound combat load and twelve pounds of rifle tied to us with parachute cord they could find us more easily and fish our waterlogged bodies off the bottom. Yes, and recover all the equipment. "Don't forget nothin'" was part of the Ranger creed. (As a result of



that training I still make sure that I don't double back over the same route when I walk to and from class or drive out and back for groceries. If I become predictable--a creature of habit--I might get ambushed.) Two Ranger classes before mine, they had had to hook the limp, wet body of one Ranger candidate out of a Georgia lake. We had to keep hearing about what a bonehead he was for dying. All of us in the rock squad were placed up forward in the direction of march (wading) where we held our weapons over our heads "to keep our powder dry" and the strong swimmers could watch us. The rucks have a quick-release strap on the left shoulder so that when we come under fire we can jettison the load at once and move freely. Snap and yank, and you can roll the load across your shoulders and drop it in a single rapid shrug.

I attached quick-release straps to both sides of my load-carrying equipment and practiced with them often.

After Ranger School I went back to West Point. Two more years of Mickey-Mouse spoon-feeding. Of the sixty-five model cadets who had been chosen for the program, thirty-nine of us earned the Tab, and thirty-nine of us became discipline problems in the Corps. Some drank too much. Some drove too fast. I disobeyed an order for the first time and earned the biggest "slug" of demerits I would ever get. Some got caught. Some got hurt. I

turned myself in to the Tac after my offense.

Bob Grow got kicked out for playing "Rodeo" at the First Class Club, where the girls from the local colleges came for the weekend hops. There were the "Cliffhangers" from Ladycliff who would put up with a bit too much rudeness to date a nubile cadet. They usually converged on the Firstie Club, an old wooden lodge which had a concession stand added to the inside. There was room to dance, too. All the "riders" would kick in a few bucks to the kitty, and whoever got the longest ride won the pot. A ride consisted of latching on to the hind-quarters of a female dancer with your teeth--sometimes you got skin, sometimes not--and hang on for as many seconds as you could. Bob Grow could really ride.

We wanted more challenge. We wanted to go to work in the field. We wanted out of that place. I don't really know what we wanted, but we weren't getting it in school.

They cancelled the Ranger program for cadets that year.

We face the Red Forces in a seemingly endless Mojave Desert. The enemy probes and infiltrates our lines all night, and drops artillery on us all day. Constant vigil. Keep moving. To stop is to die. If we must stop, we dig. Not just casual spading, but armpit deep pickaxing and bulldozer defenses for the armored carriers.

My Radio-telephone operator digs alone. He always does. I have to ensure that all the machine guns are not pointed in the same direction. It is up to me as platoon leader to create a line of guns firing so that when one man dies, another can continue to kill the enemy in the open sector. We call this deliberate overlap "mutually supporting fires." The men call it "shooting between the sticks," because that's the method I use to keep excited, frightened privates--who may be firing with their eyes closed--shooting in the right direction.

I troop the line checking sector sketches and quizzing the men on their jobs, and Davis digs our position. He never complains. He is one of the few guys who can carry that 23-pound radio and still keep up with me on foot. Davis is strong and smart. That's why I chose him.

Davis is constantly at hand--never further away than the length of the microphone cord. He has to remain in my hip pocket because it is commonly known that "If I'm out

of commo, I'm out of command." The defensive line I have established is too long to control on foot.

When I die, Davis will continue to give orders to the platoon as if they were coming from me until the platoon sergeant arrives to take command of the platoon. Davis is all business. He knows that the life expectancy of a second lieutenant in battle is six minutes.

Davis is digging our fighting position near the center of my perimeter and monitoring the company command net on the radio at the same time. He knows that I rarely stop to eat, so he saves food for me in his canteen cup when I miss the chow truck. This is only training. We have to keep telling ourselves this.

Private First Class Davis. Twenty years old. Arkansas native. Waited for his brother to graduate from high school so they could enlist in the Army together. Now they are two of my thirty-two in the 3rd Platoon, Company A.

This morning the enemy rolled at us behind a tremendous veil of smoke. When they popped out of the curtain, their tracks were within thirty seconds of our positions. Thirty seconds later they were behind us and headed for the supply lines to our rear. I was among the first to die. Infantry are no match for tanks in the desert. As I was trying to keep the men fighting and

watching for the follow-on enemy ground troops, a figure walked out of the smoke and waved at me as I wildly waved him back to his position. I tried to see who it was through the smoke in the air and the fog in my mask, and he waved, raised the Light Anti-armor Weapon to his shoulder and fired at me before I recognized the long grey enemy uniform.

We move to a new defensive position thirty kilometers away. In the new position I miss the meal again while attending the operation order at the commander's track. Again Davis takes care of me. When I return I brief the sergeants on the upcoming mission, and as they go to brief their men along our platoon sector, I take a turn at digging. We have to be ready to defend here by 0600, and that will take all night in this rocky soil. Davis appreciates the break, but feels guilty about resting while I work, so he soon resumes digging, although he has had nearly as little rest as I have. I fill sandbags for overhead protection with the dirt Davis has shovelled from the hole. We switch roles so that I can pull security while Davis sleeps. Two hours later, I wake him to dig again, and I sleep, finally.

The shaking of the ground jars me instantly awake. As I leap from the foxhole I smack Davis with an open hand to rouse him and fling myself in front of the thirteen

tons of armored personnel carrier bearing down on me, roaring at the driver louder than the Cummins diesel engine is roaring at me. "Hey!-- HEY!" I pound on the trim vane and hoist myself up into the driver's face. Only his head sticks out through the driver's hatch.

The terrified enlisted man rapidly locks both differentials, stopping the tracks. I demand that he dismount at once and see how close he has come to driving directly across my position. Specialist Skidmore climbs out of the driver's hatch and down the left side of the track to comply. When he steps around the front to the right side of the carrier, Skidmore swoons and falls limp to the ground. His helmet rolls down the incline. I ignore him, and step to the far side of the track to see what has caused him to pass out. It is Davis.

He is unrecognizable when I pull him from under the right track. His head is only a third as wide as it was, and all his teeth protrude from where his mouth used to be. Davis never woke up.

I move back to the left side of the carrier and clasp my temples with both hands and rock backward with a groan so deep that it empties my entire insides. Only seconds.

I fire the red flare to stop all wargaming. I switch my radio channel to initiate the call to the MEDEVAC helicopter on the dustoff frequency, and give the

coordinates to my position.

"You two, go set up a pick-up zone right down there and you, call for the commander. Sergeant, ensure the men remain in position, and have someone get the evaluator over here with his jeep. Take over the set and guide the helo in. I'm going to get little Davis."

When I got to his position, I helped Little Davis from his foxhole. The helicopter was already coming down in a swirl of noise and sand.

"Is it my brother?"

"Yes." We were running to the MEDEVAC helicopter.

"Is he hurt?"

"Yes."

"Is he going to make it?"

"I don't think so." Davis was pushed aboard the helo by the crew chief who was impatient to be in the air.

Later I got a letter from Little Davis in Arkansas asking me to be the commander of his brother's military funeral detail. I could not go: too much training on the company schedule.

I wonder if I could have been all business there?



4. Training in the Mojave Desert--and liking it.



III

LEARNING THE DANCE

When he discovered I was going to the dance, my friend Todd surprised me by asking if he could go along with me. I suppose I knew that he could dance this way, but I didn't think he would come with me. I had not asked. Later, I would be surprised to see Paco and Dan at the dance--two more unlikely fox-trotters.

I'd watched people dancing in this very room two times last year. I watched from the outside, peering through the narrow windows, wishing I could be so elegant. The dancing was a far cry from the "heel-toe, heel-toe, slide-slide-slide" of my second-grade class in rural Wisconsin. I liked the way people dressed, and it seemed that everyone was enjoying the dancing. Unlike most--no, all--of the other dances I have attended, these people were dancing for the pleasure of dancing rather than dancing to be seen.

This time, though, I was observing from the inside, and more keenly. I was more aware of the wide disparity among the skills of the dancers. There was quite a range of couples: some were twirling as easily as if they were on ice, and others were pushing the proverbial wheelbarrow. The one constant among us all was that we were all having fun. Well, at least it seemed like we were all having fun. I was happy just to watch, and eager to try the [two] steps I knew.

To every other dance that I attended before I was married to Monika I have carried the added burden of anticipating rejection by eighty percent of those potential partners I dared to ask. I am unusually resilient, so I usually stayed at these dances as long as my friends wanted to, despite having a rather lonely time, myself. When I asked women to dance, I would approach courteously, stand near enough to be heard without crowding, ask "Would you care to dance?" in my most gentlemanly voice, get rejected, and go sit down.

This dance had none of that pressure--none of that negative ambience. I danced more than I had at the three previous dances I had attended. Liz even asked me to dance (We had never met.) That hasn't happened to me since my high school sophomore year at the "Sadie Hawkins" dance. Must be the 1990s.

Now that I have seen the type of social event a ballroom dance can be, I expect to dance frequently. Monika and I move well together, and she willingly practices the moves I bring home from the dance class each day. When the waltz music begins at the next military ball, Monika and I intend to be out there with the colonels and generals, gliding and lilted in the midst of them, as if we have been doing the dances all our lives.

I've had this feeling before, this "wanting." When I was training up on the Canadian border in New York, the U.S. invaded Grenada. The way we heard it in the field, we thought we would be going, too. Guys lined up at the three available phone booths to say goodbye to their wives and girlfriends. All were anxious. Some were crying.

I have to admit, I was eager to be going to do what I had trained for years to do. But we didn't go to Grenada. We had a difficult time railheading all those armored vehicles back to Fort Knox. By the time we could have shipped them to Grenada, the mission would be long since completed.

I trained in Germany, patrolling the East German border. There is a sense of urgency to the mission when you can see the enemy watching you watching him in his grey uniform up in the guard tower. You stay alert when you can see the mine fields, see the stockpiles of girders and concrete and reinforcing steel cached at strategic points so they can bridge the tank ditches and their own obstacles to come over and get you in a hurry. The threat was real. But I thought the Pacific had a more volatile potential. Philippine bases to protect, North Korean Communists, Soviets in the Sakhalin Islands. When I had a choice, I traded my orders to Germany for orders to the

Pacific. I went to Schofield Barracks. You can still see the bullet holes in the barracks there from the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

While I was there, the U.S. invaded Panama. We were alerted at Schofield, but we did not go. Ten years of regimentation, ten years of preparation, and I was not needed.

I don't want you to think that I am eager to kill people, for I am not. I have no desire to kill anyone, although there's no doubt in my military mind that I could do so. It would be more correct to call my feelings anxiety, not eagerness. The Army is my chosen profession. I soldier, and that's what I do. I go where the Army needs me to go, and I serve without complaint in places hostile to humans from Alaska to Australia. So far my expertise has been tested in peacetime through drills and exercises and maneuvers. Each time there have been publicized and unpublicized real military actions, I have been somewhere else. Now we are sending 400,000 of my peers, my friends, and my men to a potential world-scale conflict in the Saudi desert. After all my training, here I am in school, out of uniform, on precisely the opposite side of the earth. Iraqi missiles cannot reach me here.

Oh, I have no illusions about being the brave, undaunted hero of some major skirmish or battle. I more

realistically see my guts churning at the impact of every incoming round, and I see myself cowering, momentarily, at the bottom of my foxhole. I see myself crying, as I have done in training, where my men are hurt or killed. I have no illusions about the glory of war. There is no glory in war.

There is no glory in graduate school, either.

I have another paper due on Tuesday.

Yesterday the dryer made a funny noise, as if there were someone in the utility closet with it. I warily, jokingly peeked around the corner to spy the intruder. Of course there was no one in the hallway. There was only Monika and me in the house. I looked into the dryer stall anyway. I really don't know why. Perhaps I was looking to see what could have fallen to make that thump we both heard earlier.

I hopped into the office where Monika and I had been conversing, singing, "We have a fiii-er, we have a fiii-er" just as a small child might do. The flames lit up the whole wall behind the washer and dryer set, and the smell was that peculiar metal-plastic you get with an electrical fire. Moni did not know this, and she thought I was kidding, as usual. I dashed for the fire extinguisher in

the garage. At some point Monika must have realized I wasn't kidding, because although she did not beat me to the fire extinguisher, she did beat me outside. She had been sitting down.

Moments later there were only burn marks on the floor and wall to indicate what had happened. The dryer was tipped over in the hallway, but I was already talking about going to the gym, and Moni was preparing to go to work. She said that it was a good thing that I had not panicked, because if I had, she would have, too. I did not panic. I do not panic.

A few minutes ago Monika came up to visit me at the Oregon State University campus. She brought the mail with her--a couple of catalogs and some letters. She never opens mail with my name on it. I have this obsession that the person to whom the letter is addressed should have the exclusive rights to the contents of personal mail, married or not. Monika tolerates this attitude in me.

I flipped through the catalogs and carefully slit each additional piece of mail along the top with the bayonet letter opener which some of my officer buddies had given me back when I was a lieutenant. Earlier today I had used the bayonet to stir some powdered chocolate into my coffee--my office mates thought that was unusual. The

first letter was from the headquarters of the Student Detachment at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana, where I am assigned. The Fort Ben HQ handles the administration for us active duty officers participating in civil schooling. I expected another letter from the commander about giving at a blood drive or contributing to the Combined Federal Campaign, but I announced aloud to my office mates that these were my orders to the desert.

I don't remember my heart beating any faster. I didn't feel any anxiety or stress. The orders from headquarters were that I was to report to Fort Lewis, Washington, at the earliest possible date following the public announcement of full mobilization.

ATZI-TED (27 Jul 89 ) 1st End CPT Allen-Brown/ab/AV 699-5649  
SUBJECT: Order #170-6, HQDA, US Army Sup Cnd and Ft Shafter


HQDA, US Army Soldier Support Center, ATTN: ATZI-PAG, Fort Benjamin Harrison,  
Indiana 46216-5170 11 Jan 91

FOR CPT Lester Knotts, 3656 NW Tyler Plc, Corvallis, OR 97330

Upon declaration of Full Mobilization you will proceed to Ft Lewis, WA. You will arrive at the earliest date possible, but not later than seven (7) days after the public announcement of Full Mobilization. Travel expenses incurred will be reimbursed after arrival at the reporting station listed above. Travel of dependents and shipment of household goods will not initially be authorized. Contact the transportation officer at the gaining installation after confirmation of mobilization assignment for further instructions about movement of dependents and household goods.

FOR THE COMMANDER:

*Redacted for Privacy*

 FREDRIC D. ZIEGLER  
Adjutant General

Monika was sitting right in front of me, and I wish I could have read her expression, but I could not. She is good at leaving me clueless about her emotions, a thing most strangers cannot do. My office mates, Jeff and Colleen, were eager to read the orders, which I had refolded and set aside. I unfolded the orders and handed them to Colleen. I was already looking at the next piece of mail.

Am I really that cool? Is my outward relaxation hiding some significant internal reaction to a form letter announcing my possible execution in some sandy place where I don't know anybody?

While I remained calm, the anxiety level in the room elevated. I heard Jeff make one of those audible exhalations people make when they are under stress. Colleen, who had her coat on to go, stayed a while longer. She asked me if the notice meant that I could be ordered out after the midnight deadline, tonight. I paused only momentarily before responding with a "Yes."

I walked Moni to the front door of Moreland Hall, then went back and changed clothes in the office for a racquetball game at Dixon Recreation Center.

Maybe I ought to read that order again, and figure out how to panic, properly.



It is 161600JAN. Perhaps the smoke from the sea-launched cruise missiles floated all the way around the world to this side. I can see the residual grey that looks like spent propellant in the skies over Oregon today. Maybe we're not too far from Baghdad, after all.

You can tell something big is going on, because no one is on campus today. I was at the gym when the announcement came over the radio. Only a few people continued pushing iron when White House Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater announced that the liberation of Kuwait had begun. Most of us crowded closer to the speaker.

I had just finished speaking with Sergeant Sammy Mitchell. He used to work for me in Hawaii, and he proudly told his lifting buddy that I was one of his company commanders. Actually, I never commanded Mitchell, but our relationship was so professional that even though he is out of the active Army, he still calls me "Sir." He asked me when I was going, and I told him I got my turd-gram yesterday. He had already been asked to volunteer to return to the service, but he is about to be married, and his fiancée canceled any thoughts Mitchell had about proudly volunteering for national service and patriotic soldiering. "You'd better not even think about it," Stacey said. Her demand was enough to squelch his professional longing and call to duty.

Last week when we crossed paths in front of Moreland Hall, Mitchell told me that I "needed to be over there, because I am the type of commander that the soldiers need there." I looked Mitch in the eye and "um-hmmmed" my agreement. I would resign my commission and go over to Saudi Arabia as a private to be a part of that action. I feel the need to be a part of that two-way live-fire for myself, even if the men don't need me. I want to see how I would really act under fire--I want to know. I want to be a part of that circle of veterans who wear a combat patch on their right shoulders.

My classmates at Oregon state obviously do not understand my desire. Last night, Colleen came back to the office to commiserate--she could not eat. I think she was hoping I would still be there so we could talk. Colleen is my office mate this year, and we have become friends. She trusts me, and we like to swap ideas about teaching and life with each other.

I came in perspiring from a very physical time at the gym, and after I listened restlessly as she talked, and saw the genuine worry in her big eyes--over me. I wanted to give her a hug to make her feel better. Instead, I left. I rationalized to myself that she wouldn't have wanted the sweaty comfort I could offer. Actually, I

figured that if Colleen were as worried as she seemed, then Monika must be in a panic at home.

When I got home Monika was on the phone, panicking. She had already called her best friend, her mother, and another of my classmates from the infantry attending graduate school in Georgia. She wanted someone to tell her that the orders were false, that she need not worry about my being pulled out of school to go overseas. Monika was able to joke about the stress she was feeling, and I was able to calm her down just by being there and listening, hoping to myself that I would be called.

This morning, Susan, another teaching assistant with whom I work, approached me in the hallway. She said she had been crying. I think she meant she was crying for me. She tried to sound upbeat about the possibility of my going abroad, but she didn't really sound very sincere about it. I felt bad that she could not be at ease along with me about my job as a foot soldier. Susan still checks in on me daily to see if I'm still here. When I left the office today, Dana and Colleen and Holly were in a small cluster around a note on my desk. Holly was the most obviously disturbed. She thinks the war is wrong. The thought of my willing participation in the war perplexes and annoys her. She asked: "Just what precisely is meant by full mobilization? Will it be a public

announcement?"

I assured her that full mobilization will be a Presidential decree, well publicized, and that I would leave for Fort Lewis ASAP after acknowledging the announcement. Holly's brow was furrowed in unusually tight rows. Her expression did not change as I responded. It could have been because in the answer I gave I referred to myself as cannon fodder. It was a playful attempt to coax Holly to start arguing, which might have eased her tension. The attempt did not succeed.

I hurried out. I pitched the note from my desk into the rubbish. The note was from Monika, but it was in Colleen's handwriting.

"It's started."

I was washing my car at the "Splish Splash" car wash on 9th Street yesterday. The car is a small white BMW. A couple of teenagers were washing their father's car, which they had just "dinged" (their own words) in a one-car accident. They had been driving too fast, apparently, because from their own description they had spun 180

degrees and skidded about eighty yards, removing eight small evergreens from the earth as they slid. Much of the root system from the trees was still sticking to the undercarriage of the large white Thunderbird-- grass, weeds, and mud poking out from under the body of the car. The boys seemed unworried about their father's response to the ding in the T-Bird, which was actually a severely crunched right rear quarter panel which had come to rest against something more solid and unyielding than the eight small trees the drivers had proudly uprooted in their spin.

Another fellow drove up behind me to wash his blue RX-7. It was a nice car. The teenagers took note.

"You guys are together aren't you? Those are two really nice cars."

The guy glanced at me to see if I had heard as he responded simply.

"No."

I don't want to make a big deal about this--I never want to. The main reason the teenagers thought we were together is because the fellow driving the RX-7 was a Black man. We had never met. He felt uncomfortable enough about the question to back out and drive to wait at the stall on the end. I, as I always do, chose to ignore the comment as if nothing had been said. It's the way of

a peacemaker not to make waves, not to correct every wrong. I didn't see what good would come of pointing out to these two, and every person who behaves similarly, how offensive some assumptions can be. I consider such assumptions to be part of living as a minority Black in the midst of the White majority. Somebody has to give in, and I volunteer. If a store owner doesn't want me in his shop, I do not get insulted. If I am unwelcome, I gladly leave. It's his store. He can run it as he pleases.

The difficulty I face is that there has got to be an appeasement or complacency problem with my approach to what many people would describe as prejudice. I want to see prejudice disappear. I need to figure out how I can be a part of the solution without insulting and alienating a lot of people. Is it possible that I've gotten so good at denying the tension that I just think it doesn't bother me to be the victim of racial pressure?

I remember when we moved to Miami in 1972. The separation between the White, Black, and Cuban communities was distinct. Because we lived in mostly White South Miami Heights, we had to drive across town to attend church at the all-Black church in Richmond Heights, where we felt comfortable in service. My parents made a choice about the exposure they wanted for their children. It was tough decision-making. The costs for deciding to live in

South Miami meant the inconvenience of getting to church each week, but there was also a degree of social isolation attached to being the only Blacks on our block.

From South Miami I was bused to Mays Junior High School. The bus made a circuitous route to pick up a mix of Black and White kids. The Blacks would congregate in the back of the bus (even then I thought that was ironic) and the Whites would fill up seats from the front. After school each day I would race to the bus to be among the first aboard for the ride home. I had to be first so that I could sit in the middle of the bus--in this way I avoided having to choose between sitting with the Blacks or Whites. My language was not the same as the Blacks; I received disparaging remarks from my black peers because I sounded White. To sit forward with the Whites would open me up to a different barrage of insults for choosing White friends over Blacks. As the bus filled from both ends, the decision of which side I was on was made for me.

I discussed the conflict with my father. He confirmed for me that the language taught in school was as valid as the street talk I was rejecting on the bus. I became emboldened then to stick to "talking proper" like a White person and not worry about the jeers.

There is a problem, though, as I see it. When I raise children, they will likely be another step removed

from Black culture, since I cannot teach them Black English Vernacular. I place a high value on the preservation of culture, and the cost is significant. What is at stake here is who I am and who my children will be. I placed great faith in the advice and experience of my parents that the language and living they chose were the best for me. They could not have realized the degree of social ostracism I would experience due to my use of a more academic literacy, and how my sense of belonging is suspended at times between Black and White cultures. Nor could they have predicted how their own literate evolution would place them in a somewhat socially distanced position in their own hometown. Can I honestly say that I am not bothered by these unintended effects of language and living choices?

Recently, Thursday and Friday of last week, I awoke with a feeling that nothing was worthwhile. I mean for two days I had this "malaise" under the influence of which I could find no reason for doing anything. Breakfast was pointless. Promotions meant nothing. Another degree was useless.

If I am right about the life after this one,



promotions and degrees won't matter. If I am wrong, it still doesn't matter. What am I working so hard for? My dad. My dad has always been the source of real praise for me. Other praise was nice, but to have Pop say, "That's alllll-right, son" was enough ego boost to last me for a year.

Once I realized that it is Pop, and not me, who is my prime motivator, I was able to more clearly analyze my actions and better understand my decisions. Often times I resolve dilemmas by asking myself, "What would Pop do, now?" I act accordingly.

In the spring of 1989, my mother called me in Hawaii. She was crying when she told me that my father was in the hospital. I had noticed on each visit home that it was easier to beat him at the bowling alley, and that he seemed to fall asleep in his recliner much faster at the end of the day. I observed his mortality. It's just that I expected daddy to continue to go out slowly, not just give up and die. That's not his style. In Germany he chased Randall around the entire housing area--nearly a mile--for whistling with one of those irritating tongue-whistles. Pop was nearly fifty, running in boots, and huffing loudly, but he caught Randall.

Mother said they weren't sure what was wrong with him, but the doctors wanted to admit daddy for a day of

observation. I hung up the phone and cried.

Monika said that she had never seen me cry before. The words were of no particular comfort, but she did hold me until I was through. I did mental rehearsals in reaction to bad news about Pop's health, but uncontrolled crying was not part them.

I believe that there is a better life after this one. Why must we be sad at funerals and why do we cry when people are buried? Why am I so affected by death in the Army and death at home? I know it's coming.

I was rock-hard emotionally as I drilled with the funeral detachment I commanded for my first military funeral. Even when the ceremony was underway, I stood erect and reverent as the widow cried without ceasing over the casket of her soldier-husband. At my direction, my men discharged their seven weapons in three distinct reports at a high angle into the otherwise silent air--silent except for the lone widow's weeping. I was still in command of my emotions when the bugler blew taps as the casket was lowered. We all saluted.

My detachment carefully and correctly folded the national colors into a perfect blue triangle, and the sergeant secretly slipped a single brass cartridge into the final crease as he inspected the colors and presented them to me. I don't know how many rules were broken to

carry on that unwritten and unspoken tradition. We are so strict with expended cartridges that we have the soldiers frisk each other and account for every cartridge and casing. Somehow there was always the single shell to place in the flag. The widow would probably never know of it. That was just something between soldiers. I saluted and received the colors with two gloved hands.

I faced smartly about and spoke directly to the widow "On behalf of a grateful nation . . . "

The woman stopped crying. I remember that she sat up and looked me directly in the eye. In the clearest, most unfettered voice, she said: "Thank you, son."

It was then that I cried. I was able to maintain a military bearing by pivoting swiftly on my left heel. The tears might have been evident if I had not smartly faced about and moved off the mound.

What was the woman thinking? Was she asking herself what her husband-the-retired-sergeant would do if he were here and alive? Would he have been able to pull himself to half her regal posture and gain control as she had done? I have no doubt that a very real sadness was the cause of her tears. What makes a person able to squelch emotions on demand? Why did the sergeant's wife do it for me? Why could I not do it for her?

What would my father have done?

Things have finally come full circle. Ever since my father began calling me "Professor Les" after my first elementary school report card, I was expected to do well in school--expected to be smart.

Most everything I do has centered has always been my father and the Army. Every time something happens to me my father or the Army have been involved somehow. Pop's thirty years in the Army led to my ten years and counting.

I am earning my master's degree at Oregon State under the Army Fully Funded Program. Pop came up to Oregon State to see me teach. As we left the classroom Pop said, "I can do that." I have been trying to tell him that for ten years. Now that he has seen the son he has taught and trained standing in front of a group of first year college writers, he realizes that he is as smart as anybody else on the planet. How could he have not known that? He let his lack of a high school degree set him back on his heels, probably because the Army said his usefulness was limited without one. Thinking back, I'll bet that his lack of a high school diploma may have been one reason they would not promote him to Sergeant Major.

Pop casually agreed to come to class with me. It was a fifty-minute composition class. I explained to him what I intended to do, and gestured to the place he could sit--a place at the left rear of the classroom in a seat which

was never occupied by my class. When I assigned the writing drill to the class, I simultaneously handed Pop a writing assignment of his own. He was a little surprised at first. I got him. He grasped the folder and immediately recognized the writing project he and I had been working on for the past few days. He calls it "the Masterpiece." The Masterpiece is an original draft of the constitution and bylaws for an association my father wants to begin in his hometown. To me it was a unique collaborative writing effort. To Pop it was, most likely, the longest and most ambitious writing project he had ever done. He conceived the project, and carried it two thousand miles to let me help invent ideas for it, troubleshoot it, and edit it. I got to help him.

That daddy had seen me twenty-five years after he first called me Professor Les standing in that role was a release for me. I did not have an idea in my conscious mind that I would ever become a college professor (although I am certainly considering it now). It's just that I think I finally met my father's expectations. I don't think anybody else has met his standards, in the family or out of it. I have not heard my father speak in awe of anybody--except General Julius Becton, who he wanted me to be like. Lieutenant General Becton is now President of Prairie View A&M, a predominantly Black

college in southern Texas. When he left, daddy was casual about his impressions. He did say that he was not yet ready to go. The visit had been too short. I felt good.

I might never have known how Pop really felt about his visit if he hadn't gone to Florida to visit my sister at her Graduation from Western Florida State. She called me.

"Les, all daddy talked about was you. He kept asking me why I didn't work out every day, like you do. He was bragging about your discipline every day."

So, did I make the grade? I thought so. I called my father this morning. You know what he asked?

"What about a doctorate, son?"

## AFTERWARD

I have written about patriarchy, patriotism, power-- even peeing. I have included in this piece moments of embarrassment and pride alongside sketches of sadness and death. I suppose I could have left you to figure out for yourself what kind of guy I am turning out to be, but the selection of sketches in the previous pages might make you think I am a detached person: that I am malicious and that I am a worrier about my color and my job and being accepted. The truth is that I am none of those things.

What I am is a happy, confident and friendly man. I still have elements of discipline and watchfulness, and even a touch of impetuosity from my youth. I like to eat chocolate and honey and sugar. I really like to play, and I do that every day, sometimes walking through all the aisles of the grocery store with frozen pizzas on my head. I joke with my co-workers: I tease my wife. And I throw stink-bomb vials down the escalator in the downtown mall just watch people's faces. Some of the pranks from my days as a cadet were left out of the text where they would have nicely tied in to my theme of resisting authority because they are still too fresh to tell.

Likewise I have omitted tales of pressure and prejudice in my personal and professional life which would

embarrass people who might see this writing, even though my detachment from the ill effects of color prejudice are remarkable, now that I look back. In fact, I might say that deliberate detachment from my siblings as a child, detachment from death, from prejudice and from worry may be the underlying theme to the way I live my life.

I don't feel detached. I am certainly not detached from my father, the shadow figure in this entire piece. I feel involved and vital and important to the people I know. I feel confident and capable, sometimes even invincible. I trust, and I earn trust by practicing honesty. I feel like I am being watched all the time, and that despite my resistance and mistakes and reservations, I will still be successful. Finally, I feel comfortable Inside this brown skin and I feel just fine Outside any relationship or place I am not wanted. When I can, I simplify things so that I see them as Light and Dark, but I am happy, even while swimming up into the dusky parts of my life-stream.