

# **Very Military Men**

*A Story by*

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*Frontispiece*

I

Ezra dreamed a La Grange whore told him her life story. She had fat tits with half-dollar nipples and a tattoo of Mickey Mouse shooting the bird on her butt.

Farris had this nickel-plated Colt automatic that he cleaned every night and slept with, fully loaded. During the day it was hidden below a false bottom in his desk drawer. He slept with the .45 under his pillow, one hand always tucked in there. Maybe he was crazy enough to hold his finger on the cocked trigger, but in the mornings he was usually on his stomach with both hands under him, holding himself. There was also a fifth of Southern Comfort in that drawer and after taps they'd play the Rolling Stones or Buck Owens and take a few good pulls. Purposeful medicine: sweet, then hot going down. Farris always brought a bottle back from Shreveport to Texas. The empty got put in a brown paper bag, pulverized, and flushed in two or three shots. Farris was eighteen but the top of his head was already thinning, he had a belly on him and he walked like a smiling gnome on heavy heels. Now he was on his stomach holding himself and as Ezra hopped from the top bunk he tapped Farris on the bald spot so he would wake up to stash the automatic for the day with the whiskey. Even if Ezra had been long into the night reading Asimov he was most always the first man up in their dorm. They were both sergeants but Ezra was three years younger than Farris and Farris outranked Ezra by one stripe and he hated to get up early so that made Ezra dorm sergeant.

On cool mornings like this Ezra was glad they had a bathmat. He pissed and shaved. Watching his own young bearded and blemished face intently in the mirror, an idle memory stayed his razor-hand. Perversely running away from that sad grammar school chum, cheeks marred by some childhood fever, who'd asked, "Will you be my friend?" Ezra nicked his chin. Everything was bound together in life. He pulled off the underwear he wore yesterday and stepped into the shower. First it was cold, then it got hot the way he liked it and he rinsed away the lather and blood and washed his cropped head with the bar, leaving it soapy while he washed the rest.

Sometimes he jerked in the shower but today he didn't feel like it. You can't get it up every day from memory until you're really horny. Some guys probably did, but he didn't. Not every day. Ezra rinsed down and got out to dry. The bathmat was a little squirrely but you didn't get your towel as dirty.

He put his shaving gear in his dresser and crammed the underwear in his laundry duffle, hanging deflated from his bunkrail since they'd had laundry formation yesterday morning. He'd been in charge of that one, all the company's sergeants took turns at it. The sleepy formation had fallen apart. One of the fellows set him straight by threatening to punch him in the nose. "Fuck it, it ain't worth fighting about..."

Ezra had just grabbed his laundry and plodded up there to the C&P with the rest of them in the brisk dawn. Is there anything worth fighting about? Ezra donned his sharply creased tan woolen trousers. It was nearly April and they were in their summers. He slipped his navy blue belt on, careful not to smudge the highly shined buckle (no brasso even on the inside), now the dark socks and spit-polished black cordovan oxfords. He draped his tan poplin shirt over his desk chair, all the collar insignia polished as brightly as the buckle and his stripes on the epaulets. Strapping on his wristwatch, Ezra "blew the hatch".

The sun was up now and the asphalt road which looped the campus gleamed purple in the fresh light. The chilly breeze felt good through his snug T-shirt. Across the parade field where grass tried to grow between drills he saw his counterpart in C Company go quickly from door to door, the slams echoing back. Ezra dropped off the front step and strolled up the concrete walk to the next door on the left. He went in without knocking.

"Everybody up!"

Ezra glanced at his watch as he finally got it buckled: six o'clock. Outside again he heard reveille sound. The bugler lived in the F Company dorm, farthest from A Company.

"Time to get up, gents!"

Duty.

Ezra stuck his head in the door of this one.

"Whenever."

Thumb and the three other old boys in this room got up when they felt like it. They just had to make formation.

Ezra headed back down the converted Air Force barracks to his room. The last room at this end was occupied by the dorm officer, Barron, and the A Company Commander, Peck. Peck was in junior college. Barron was also third platoon leader. Barron the asshole.

As he walked back along the dorm windows Ezra saw young men falling out of bunks.

Hammond stumbled to the bathroom in his dirty underwear with unneeded razor and much needed soap. "Ranked higher than yesterday!" Farris said every morning. Hammond seemed perpetually undernourished yet always talked about playing varsity football for Breckenridge. Physically impossible. Small towns mean big teams in Texas. "His old man probably owns the fattest pig in town, see?" Hammond was a private who had come in this January at midterm. The other cadet in the other bedroom of Ezra's and Farris's "suite"--so called by the academy catalog--was dressing and making his bed at the same time. Troon was thin and wiry and loved to box. Good thing, considering the cocky easiness that made him, a two-year boy, a poor marcher and a permanent PFC. He never wore the stripe.

Farris eyed Hammond all the way to the bathroom and heard the various noises. "One of these days I'm going to make him change his underwear," Farris growled.

"You'll need a wire brush."

"When you get 'em off," added Troon, standing at the entrance to their room, "you can wrap them in his sheets. I think he wets the bed about twice a week."

Farris laughed. This was not strictly true, and they would throw a blanket over Hammond and kick his ass if it was.

Ezra shook his head. He put his fly and buckle in line with the buttons of his shirt and thought about checking his squad. No, he'd see them at breakfast formation.

"You were snoring like a hog last night, Farris."

"Dreamin' of pussy all night," crooned Farris,

"I sure want to get back over to La Grange...goddamn!" He flicked on his electric shaver.

Hammond came out of the bathroom. Farris gave his double chin and puffy cheeks the once-over and stepped in there to wash up.

"It stinks!" he shouted, running late as usual, splashing some water around, "light a match in here!"

Uniformed cadets were beginning to gather on the dorm sidewalks in the crisp morning. At this, the farthest point on the parade road from the Front Gate of the Academy, was the Mess Hall.

The bugle sounded formation. Standing on the empty road, First Sergeant Peck, younger brother of the C.C., bawled "A Company, falllllll in!"

Cadets jumped quickly to the aging asphalt surface to find their accustomed positions in the ranks, although the first unit to fall into formation did not determine who went to breakfast first. The first platoon was mainly the oldest, tallest bunch, second platoon the in-betweens, third platoon the youngest. Ezra, older than his men, was leader of the first squad, third platoon. The bugler finished blowing "Soupy". Stragglers popped into the ranks, snapping their caps to their heads. Ezra stole a glance down his squad to verify all present.

Platoon Sergeant Jeffers, SFC, smaller in stature but older by a year than Ezra and in his fourth year here, tried to deepen his voice for this routine, "Re-port!"

"All present!" saluted Ezra, Jeffers returning it.

"All present!" announced the squad leader behind Ezra, his friend Voss.

"One absent!" the piqued third squad sergeant spoiled the list. This was the other older sergeant in Ezra's dorm, Vincent, aka Tiny, Thumb, built like a small scale sumo wrestler.

"Who?" barked Jeffers, already knowing.

"Canwell," reported Thumb in the same bland exasperation he used every morning. "There he comes."

Canwell bolted out of his room and scooted off the dorm walk and across the grassy ditch, soaking the toes of his poorly worked shoes with the heavy dew, one shoelace untying itself as he scuffled into the third rank, third platoon.

"The tail end of the company." Thumb broke ranks and stood before Canwell. The grub's brass insignia were marred by fingerprints and his uniform was baggy, clasped by a poorly-measured belt. His hat was askew on top of his unruly red hair and even the poor kid's hornrimmed glasses were out of control among the freckles.

Thumb poked a stubby hard finger against Canwell's sternum, "You're filthy!"

Jeffers joined them, airing disgust. "Canwell," he said harshly, perhaps hatefully, "you are a real fucking grub."

Canwell did not know what to reply.

"Stand at attention!"

He did not want that finger in his chest again.

"Be sharp at school formation," Thumb threatened.

Jeffers returned to his post.

"Report!" First Sergeant Peck finally called.

The platoons reported and Peck turned A Company over to his older brother. As he did so the platoon leaders, cadet lieutenants, took command of their respective platoons.

Barron the asshole strutted out of his room just in time, as usual.

They right-faced and marched to the Mess Hall, named Jones after some rich guy in Houston. Some rich guy, with this food.

The companies took turns going in first. Today A Company went in next to last. The powdered eggs were watery toward the end and you never got the cereal you wanted and you had to wait for the spoons of the early eaters to come back and be washed again.

About that time the Commandant of Cadets, a retired bird colonel named Billups, called "At ease" to give the morning announcements over the P.A. He usually announced the uniform of the day, which everybody was already wearing, except dumbshits, and other long winded trivia until he said "Rest" and you returned to the watery less warm eggs and uncrunchy cereal, having been waiting all this time in milk. Billups also announced a drill for this afternoon on account of W.D. Inspection coming up next week, before the Easter holiday. They still called the Honor Star Inspection "War Department", even though the Army was now in the Department of Defense.

But breakfast has got to be all right.

Voss was really dowsing his eggs with salt and hot sauce.

"You shining up your braces," inquired Thumb twixt great mouthfuls of corn flakes, "are you just preserving yourself, or what?"

Their table was near where the Headmaster J.D. Harrier and his family sat every morning, breaking the fast for free with some of the faculty members and family and such. Voss was agonizing to peer up Harrier's daughter's dress. She was fifteen like him and Ezra, dark hair to her shoulders in the comely style of southern girls in the early 1960's. Her face rarely allowed any of the signals characteristic of living tissue, displayed no braces or acne and, certainly in this mess hall, got prettier every day, and twice prettier on Sundays. She most blessedly did not always remember about closed knees and cooped up boys.

"Shit, I'm glad to be away from home," explained Voss misunderstanding Thumb, at last capping the hot sauce.

"Out of the womb?"

"I can cut it."

"You might as well blink now, Voss," chuckled Ezra, also peering disinterestedly in the same direction, "she's not going to spare a bite of her breakfast to feast on you."

"Shit," insisted Voss.

"Another week," a smile blossomed across Thumb's full jowls, "you'll be running down Highway 6, dick in hand, pants knotted around your ankles, screaming 'Mama, come wipe me!'"

"Plain bullshit!" blustered Voss, wishing very much for a girlfriend.

"Cards tonight?"

"Ante five, maybe."

"I seen the flick at the Strand last homeleave on TV," said Voss glumly.

"Might rain this afternoon," Thumb pronounced, "drill's for assholes."

"Hope so," Ezra said to the last of his dissipated breakfast.

They all got up together and dumped their trays where the black kitchen help picked them up for washing. They quickly walked back to their rooms to prepare for school formation.

Ezra's dorm was mostly guys his age or older so they didn't live in a garbage bin. In Jeffers' dorm it was different. Some the rooms were like hovels in the morning. Took all day Sunday to get ready for Monday Inspection. Somebody shit in Canwell's dresser once. "Not shat upon the head, anyway," Jeffers, who had delivered gang beatings with metal chairlegs on less account, had remarked at the time.

School formation blew.

There was a quick inspection in the ranks. Demerits doled out to late sleepers and grubs. Canwell nosed the road for twenty pushups for the soiled trousers he got trying to polish his buckle with his belt on.

The Band Company drums struck up the cadence, resounding over the campus for the march up to the classrooms. Books were always carried in the left hand so you could salute officers or remove your cap with the right. Peck tapped the beat with his toes a few steps and started A Company off, "Forward, Harch!" He screwed up and had to give the change-step command. Up they went, every morning but Sunday. In step, marching to the percussion, suitably accoutered with books and blank stares, filing into the tiny auditorium for Chapel, caps off, cramming two-by-two into the old desks that wobbled from loose bolts wringing iron and scarred wood. You knew what you were going to hear.

The shuffling, creaking when you sat down, books slapping on desktops, and coughing nonsense soon subsided in a rushing quiet, some whispering and much yawning.

Dean Wenley rose to the podium. He clutched the microphone gingerly and kept his right fist in his dull blue suit trousers pocket, his pleats ironed sharply but not quite evenly. His black tie was thin like they used to be. He spoke rapidly and his dimpled middle-aged chin shot up and down into the trimmed ashen moustache. All his short wavy hair was gray. Wenley's countenance sort of matched his gruff voice.

Everybody knew that if you could take three licks from Wenley's coathanger you got a free homeleave.

Wenley started his spiel, coming on strong. "Spring's really here, now, boys! We're going to turn up the steam. War Department Inspection is next week..."

Ezra daydreamed about his uncle's telescope: Mizar, the double star in the Big Dipper, the Galilean moons, Saturn's wonderful rings of light!

"...finals and graduation coming up..."

Some Air Force yahoo had shown them the kind of rockets they nearly launched at the Russians. "In order to preserve our peace and freedom, we can destroy the world three and one-half times." Ezra had written a poem that spoke of spaceships and the world left very far behind. Ezra wished he'd been born a hundred years later.

Now J.D. Harrier approached the podium. He was a tall, looming man who dominated all he surveyed, which right now was the corps of cadets. His saucerlike wire-rimmed spectacles had you under careful observation at all times. You were always in earshot of his resonant voice, and his own alert ears. Someone very intelligent may have been buried beneath that crew cut balding scalp.

He called a roll of boys, driving each to instant uneasiness.

"...Dial, C. Y., Ezra, A. T. These cadets report to my office."

Ezra desperately searched his recent past. He caught the glance from his best friend Chinny Dial.

"Third quarter grades are going out to your parents tomorrow. We want our minds as well as our brass to shine, gentlemen! Dismissed."

The ancient study hall was quickly vacated by the long files of young men. Ezra and Chinny Dial found each other behind the administration building after the dispersal. Cadets hurried in every direction for their first class of the morning.

"What did we do now?" Chinny asked in his nasal Cajun, flapping his arms dejectedly.

"Something nasty," Ezra shrugged off a nervous doubt, "what the hell, let's go."

Chinny and Ezra took seats in the foyer of the headmaster's office.

There was the receptionist, Bobby Jean. She was flat with too much hair above her lips. Leon Asche claimed he dicked her twice and said she had hair between her tits that was not as thick as between her thighs. You could smell her hair spray and something else. When she got up to file something you could see her garter belt under her tight skirt.

Some other guys were sitting around, and one or two must have already gone through. *You went in but you didn't come out.* By nod or pointed finger each unfortunate was called, and none had emerged. You went out alone by the other door. After forty minutes J.D. had devoured all the other miscreants. Chinny and Ezra were last.

Too suddenly Harrier opened the door to his inner sanctum and beckoned to them both.

J.D. settled into his cushioned swivel chair, leaned way back with his hands cupped behind his skull, staring intently at them. His lip curled into the familiar, infernally omniscient smile that said you were dead in the eyes behind those shining discs.

"You two look like Mississippi riverboat gamblers," he sternly aped himself, "shave those sideburns to where the ear starts by lunch!"

They murmured their humble assent.

"I believe both of you know the same young man in Houston."

Their skin crawled.

"Mister Bell wrote you a letter, addressed to you both," J.D. now displayed the envelope on his fingertips.

He allowed Ezra and Chinny to see the red lettering all over it. "He sent you this charming note, which was delivered to me by the F.B.I."

Their guts shrank.

Every obscene phrase thinkable to a glue-dazed pubescent was clearly printed on the envelope's exterior in red magic marker.

Chinny coughed, asthmatically twanging his whole thin frame.

"Your reply, I trust," J.D. curtly commanded, "will be not quite so exhibitionistic."

"No sihr," said Chinny.

Ezra shook his head, "No sir."

J.D. passed Ezra the envelope.

"You may read it, I suppose. Federal laws..."

Ezra ripped the envelope open from the stamp on the wrong side, across the glue flap which was presently taped, to the spurious return address. Inside was a single sheet of ruled paper, torn from a spiral notebook. The epistle began: "DEAR FUCKERS-" and continued in much the same vein to the end where it was signed, "YOURS IN SHIT, BILL."

Chinny hawked another histrionic attack of phlegm. Ezra, needing to laugh, held his frown face.

"We didn't ask him to send it to us."

Not actually being at fault was especially delightful.

J.D. did not read that as an apology and was displeased.

Chinny was absorbed in his spasm of consumption.

"Well," Harrier said seriously with much deliberation. "Mr. Dial, you may go to your class now."

Chinny recovered instantly and slinked out.

J.D. brought his effulgent gaze, fully renewed, to bear on Ezra alone. The Headmaster smiled--malevolently, it seemed.

"Congratulations on being first again in the quarterly scholastic standings," J.D. passed a reordering hand over his papers, "You've done excellent work, Mr. Ezra."

Ezra let it sink in, this soft touch.

"You show much promise."

Ezra pushed out a sheepish grin, "I--thank you, sir, I want to--"

The sense of doom was gone.

"Learning is important to me."

Ezra still mistrusted J.D.'s smile.

"You can be anything you want to be, young man."

Ezra thought of his nearsightedness. Because of his bad eyes, he could never be what he really wanted to be, a jet pilot, then an astronaut.

"That gives me a lot to think about," Ezra dissembled. *Not really.*

J.D.'s expression changed, perhaps to share some totally different idea with this bright boy. But, today, he did not share.

The Headmaster concluded the interview, "A student's achievement is his educator's highest gratification."

Chinny waited down the hall for him.

"Well man? Did he give it to you?"

"He just talked my head off."

"What about, man?"

Ezra shrugged.

II

Ezra's biology class was almost over. Dissecting frogs this morning. The class liked to do things in the lab because the teacher, Mr. Furby, was the most boring man in the world. Ezra shared a lab table with Voss.

Voss had his frog pinned in all four limbs.

"Near the hands," explained Voss.

He grasped his scalpel firmly and cut in a millimeter or two, drawing down from the throat. "To the balls."

The frog's eyes bulged and his four legs convulsed. The reflex took him off the paraffin to the floor.

"Goddamn!" shouted Voss.

The frog tried a couple of leaps. His entrails falling out upset his sense of direction and balance so Voss caught him easily, playfully. Voss pinned the frog into the paraffin again.

"Specific gravity all fucked up," Ezra analyzed.

"I thought I had him killed with that stuff Furry gave us in the hypodermic. The exercise was too much for him, by God."

They cut some stuff out of the frog.

The class bell rang loudly.

Mr. Arcenau dressed impeccably ivy league. He wore what you saw in *GQ*. Every cadet thought he was cool, this tall, unhandsome, thickening ex-U.D.T. Korean War vet, salvage diver and treasure hunter, who hated asians, professed many predilections and proclivities, and described his many favorite hoaxes of the world in lazy sarcasms. When asked what religion he was, he invariably answered, "Strawberry."

What he taught you about history was interesting. Even when he was out of the room his class was pretty neat. Last week, for some reason Bagwell called Plauche a liar.

Plauche stood up slowly, "Say that again, Turdwell."

Badly miscalculating, Bagwell squeezed out of his ancient desk and faced Plauche, "You're a liar."

Without hesitation Plauche brought a right cross from his waist across Bagwell's chin and into the next county. Bagwell dropped like a stone. They got him back into his desk before Arcenaux returned to revisit the rivalry of Charlemagne's sons.

Today Arcenaux was hanging a poster on his bulletin board. Wonder Warthog stood over the Earth, surrounded by bombs falling into toilets. Arcenaux got the *LA Free Press* from a bookseller in Austin.

The caption on the poster read: "AT EASE, AMERICA, PUT THE POWER BACK ON THE SHELF!"

"Knowledge is the duplicity of intelligence and experience," Arcenaux said to them. "Delicate dangerous conspirators. Luckily, I'm in no peril for at least one more hour." He spun the globe on his desk, enjoying the blur. For some reason he liked teaching young men. Then Arcenaux stopped the globe. North America faced the class. "Vast yet incomplete dreams," he told them, "perhaps never to be finished. We need to preserve our national dreams. The power of the people is absolutely the most important sort of manifest destiny, but the spirit of each individual man is important, too." He wrote a date on the blackboard behind him: 1456. "The wolves are in the city."

*"Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?"* Arcenaux nodded happily to himself, tapping the date and crumbling his chalk as he repeated it.

"Gentlemen, today I was going to read a few lines of the French poet Francois Villon to you, as I did last Thursday," he chortled, "however, since then, some bandit of high literary taste has denuded the Reading Laboratory of it."

Arcenaux went on.

*"Tell me where, in what country,  
Is Flora the beautiful Bornan,*

*Archipiada or Thais*  
*Who was first cousin to her once,*  
*Echo who speaks when there's a sound*  
*On a pond or a river*  
*Whose beauty was more than human?*  
*But where are the snows of bygone years?"*

He recited from memory the entire *Ballade* from "The Testament" with much pleasure. The classroom was filled by strange wonder and an abnormal silence.

"I hope the thief will read his loot!"

Carruthers slept an awful lot. At night, in study hall, very often in the library, and now he was asleep in the back of Arcenau's class. His forehead rested serenely on the eraser of his pencil, the point grinding to powder in the binding of a heavily scarred open book. His dream was the time he drank a fifth of rum on the bus coming back from homeleave. He got very sick.

Buddy Lewis abandoned his offerings to the daily list of cool things and squatted next to Carruthers' sprawled big feet. He deftly tied the loose laces of the shoes tightly together, wrapped once around the leg of his desk.

"Anything twice is cool," said Buddy.

"Jacksonian democracy!" exclaimed Arcenau. "I wish the damn bell would ring," he had another addition to the list. "Janitor at a girl's college," he proposed, "no, even better...something that kills rice."

The bell marking classtime frittered outside Arcenau's classroom. Gum and paper had rendered this bell a stilted basso.

Everyone quietly shuffled out. When all were out the door, heads crammed back in to see. Arcenau placed his lips very near Carruthers' exposed ear, in the best U.D.T. Hell Week fashion.

"YOU'RE LATE, CARRUTHERS, YOU FUCK-UP!"

He awoke in the inelegant explosion of a dog caught in his mistress's cupboard. Carruthers took off: the interrupted

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skyward launch of a fledgling goose suddenly awakened from slumber in the freezing marsh and, aloft, stung! by the crack of gunfire and shot dead -- Carruthers accelerated upward, outward, and downward, succumbing to the forces which paralyzed his ankles.

A mad crash!

Today's idiot untied and retied his laces nursing a bruised elbow and no memory of his dream. School for him was just like that, or like standing on the drill field thinking of nothing.

III

They were on the firing range with .22 caliber match rifles. Thumb wrapped the sling in the proper manner around his left wrist and elbow and took the prone position.

Ezra was in the next target lane.

"Billups had Iggy in there all morning," said Thumb.  
"They're gonna boot his ass out for sure."

God and assorted other high authorities including Billups and Harrier had received demerits on the last D-list. Iggy had been on duty and there was also a freshly emptied bottle of Bombay Sapphire in the vacant spare tire compartment of the duty car. Iggy was already in trouble over a town girl. Iggy was very cool.

Thumb took his shot.

"Always looking for somebody to crush," he said.

Ezra held his breath and drew his aim from the bull to the bead. He squeezed the trigger all the way to where he thought the pin ought to fall, then impulsively tugged. The sharp crack resounded along the twenty-five yard indoor range.

After the others fired they all stood up and reeled their targets forward. Ezra was out of the bull but at least in the rings. Thumb was very near the bullseye. They got off the range to wait their next turn.

"Making an example," replied Ezra, "standard bullshit."

"What a crock," Thumb shook his head. "Out the spring of his senior year! Where'll he graduate when they do that?"

"He'll have to come back here for another year!"

Seldis came up to them at the ammo table. He was a big, clumsy, really smart senior, the worst shot in the school. Seldis wore thick glasses that made him look stupid rather than studious. Ezra and Seldis had been in a one-act play together last fall. In their most important performance, over at the University, Seldis had forgotten the sequence

of his lines with respect to the exits and entrances of the cast and had completely ruined the drama's climactic scene. Seldis tried to be a funny guy, always pulling tricks to cover being a dumbass, or maybe just to screw people up because they hated him. The trick nobody would ever know he pulled was Iggy's last D-list. A Vietcong RPG will see to that.

"What's all this business about?"

"None of yours," said Thumb.

"They throwing Iggy out?"

"I'm not the newspaper, dipshit."

"He's too sharp," rationalised Seldis aloud, "not this close to graduation."

Thumb raised his iron log of an index finger, "They can do anything they want!"

Ezra noticed the clock, nearly time for lunch. It was too late for another round on the firing line. "See ya'll later," He returned his rifle to the locking rack.

Mail came at the noon formation. Ezra got a letter from his mother. I miss you, save your money wisely, and I am looking forward to seeing you at Field Day after W.D. She was a sad and lonely woman. He pocketed the letter.

The order of mess was the same as breakfast. Since it was Saturday, Harrier's daughter was having lunch with her father. Ezra looked at her often without making a big deal about it. She was nice to look at and he liked her the few times he talked to her, here and there. He didn't know if she ever even thought about him. Probably not. Ezra stared at her now with interest, her face and her closed knees. He determined to know her.

Laura Harrier was clearly preparing to leave.

With carefully executed timing, Ezra rose and deposited his tray in order to arrive, alone of course, at the side door of the mess hall precisely when Laura required it open. In this manner he could smell her fragrance as she brushed by.

He followed her out, ignoring the snickers from nearby tables--they were not loud, with Harrier still in the mess hall.

Spring thunderheads were forming in the bright powder sky. Ezra saw them and prayed for them and the failure of drill this afternoon.

"A nice Saturday so far," he said to her.

"Yes," Laura smiled, "I hope it stays fair."

Maybe she had thought of him.

"Saturdays are always great," he lied.

"I love the Spring," she said happily.

A small gust cooled the parking lot and whipped a little dust devil near the parade road.

"Tornado weather, too," he grinned.

She giggled as she gracefully got into her father's big car. From the corner of his better eye Ezra caught J.D. emerging from the mess hall. He sort of waved good-bye to her and strolled briskly toward the A Company dorms.

Her car passed him.

Down the dorm sidewalk, in front of the far company dorm, Leon Asche throttled an old alley cat by the throat and hind legs with one hand. The brightness of the noon sun faded sharply in the shadow of a cloud whisking across the campus. Asche held a can of lighter fluid. He squirted lighter fluid all over the animal and then he pulled a zippo from the pocket under his nametag. Ezra blinked in disbelief. The ignited feline emitted a piercing howl as it streaked across the drill field, trailing dark smoke. The cat disappeared between the dorms about eighty yards over there.

The fragrance of Laura was driven away.

IV

The cumulus anvils now filled a great third of the sky. Ezra and Thumb had agreed to jointly coerce the rain by telepathy. Ezra thought deeply and sincerely about it beginning to rain, gently until they got cover, then ferociously. He concentrated on those first drops.

"If you gotta hold it in your hands," Thumb was concentrating, too. "It ain't worth a damn!"

Tensely gathering, heavy with water, laced with electricity...a distant flash and the late rattle of thunder sifted past the acoustic peaks of the drums.

As they passed in review a moist breeze came.

They stretched their wills to the sky!

You could smell it coming.

A droplet, then several, soon many. A glorious spring thundershower!

A few of them gathered in Thumb's room. The rain was really coming down now.

"That cherry Peck sure is getting chickenshit," Farris shook his head, "we nearly got soaked! Wants to be a great man. The other night he gave us the detailed plan for the South to win the Civil War."

"Women don't go for that," explained Thumb, "he'll stay cherry."

"Can't hold his liquor, either," Farris confided to everyone.

"We'll have to fix him up some *mung*," said Asche in his throaty monotone. "Hang a pregnant black Dallas bitch and shove a pound of Spanish aphrodisiacs..."

"Peyote is the thing," resolved Thumb. "Close to nature, like at Big Sur out in California. Iggy was with us last time at Isabel. What's the sitch?"

Farris shrugged, "I heard they told him to pack it up."

"Troon, here's a couple of cigarettes," Thumb extended a pack to Troon, "go on over to E Company and find out the skinny."

Troon obeyed instantly and bounded out of the room with his raincoat and the cigarettes. He was devoted to Thumb because Thumb was clever and he could kick your ass without trying.

"We're not going to sit around," Thumb said, "It ain't 1984 around here yet--"

"Still have to wait two years after that for Halley's Comet."

Ezra put an album by the Animals on the stereo. *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* was Thumb's national anthem.

Swindon, one of Thumb's roommates, burst in the door. He made a puddle where he took off his raincoat. Swindon was wearing a short sleeve shirt. Both of his arms were badly burned in ugly red splotches. He liked to play chicken with cigarettes. Unflinching silence won more cigarettes.

"Goddamn, man," said Thumb irritably, "you got to quit playing that shit!"

"Hell, it's fun," Swindon explained quickly and went into his bedroom.

--We could make napalm," Thumb resumed, "mix up some Tide and gasoline. Scratch the football field, maybe the bleachers."

"Saw the flagpoles," suggested Jeffers.

Thumb shook his head, "Too customary."

An old storage barn way back on the school's acreage had burned to the ground a couple of weeks ago.

"Might be risky," Swindon called from the other room. He was drinking cough syrup to sooth the stinging in his arms.

"Rain's letting up," Thumb paused thoughtfully, "we'll see at dinner formation." He remembered a passage in Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution (Arcenaux had loaned it to him). Insurrection was the crest of the wave of revolution. "Spontaneous action might be more effective."

"What good does anything do us?" Chinny Dial harumphed nasally, "we can't make 'em keep Iggy." Chinny wasn't trying to talk anybody out of anything, he was a damned pessimist all the time, "It'll only get him through the front gate that much faster."

"And that much louder!" someone added.

You got to be game, Ezra thought but did not say.

"Every time we sit by," Thumb pronounced evenly and finally, "they get stronger and we get shafted." He switched strangely into a little tune, "We shall over come some day."

Troon hurried back to Thumb's room. He knocked once and came in without waiting.

The rain had stopped.

"He's already gone," announced Troon sardonically.

"His old man got down here and they split during the drill. His old man was pissed but he didn't look too bad."

"Who's gonna look bad gettin' outta here?" said Farris.

Troon had left the door open and outside a 707 jet passed low overhead, as loud as a train next door, on the Houston-Dallas hop. When the noise died they heard the bugle calling "Soupy" and evening formation.

The companies were lined up on the road and the flag was lowered with bugle accompaniment. The cannon was shot off, the thump rolling into the surrounding neighborhood. They marched to the mess hall in their turn.

Peck and Barron the asshole were somewhere else, probably getting the word about Iggy, so Jamie Fairfax, one of

Iggy's buddies and senior sergeant in A company led the formation, sharp and snappy with his cadence. Protest songs were not his way of making a statement.

How do you handle a cool guy hauled out for no good goddamn reason?

Fairfax halted the company in column before the mess hall.

"Right, *face!*"

Sixty cadets turned precisely on one heel.

"Present, *shafts!*"

Sixty cadets presented one great middle finger.

Fairfax felt a lot better now.

The mess hall was too warm and humid after the thundershowers. Harrier sat with his whole family at his regular table, joined tonight by another faculty family. Their son was Laura Harrier's age, in the same class at public high school. He was talking to her about going to college. No impression from the surrounding mass of hostile peer-minds reached him.

"I've been thinking mostly," he was saying, "of the University of Texas at Austin..."

J.D. Harrier felt something stuck between cortex and skull in the back of his meticulously trimmed head. It whispered to him in words he could not decipher. Today he and Billups had enforced the rules. They affected all as they hurt one -- the present moment focused on the one. He knew he had done the right thing today but now he feared he had forgotten some special aspect of the one. It was too late for that.

"The really strange thing was," Farnsworth was visiting Ezra's table, "it was already morning and broad daylight when they landed." Farnsworth's dad was with RAND or somebody out at Alamogordo. "Three of them set down on the road right outside the gate." There had been a very peculiar UFO incident out there. "They stopped traffic for a few hours and then cut out. Nothing was delivered."

"Not surprising," said Ezra. "They probably didn't feel like talking to two-legged cattle."

"Yeah!" laughed Farnsworth enthusiastically, "you're damned right! We're beneath interstellar contempt!"

"I'll bet there are less benign forms of contempt."

Ezra glanced at Harrier's table. Laura was already gone, with that hick.

*Fortune fus par olers jadis nomme*  
Whom you, Francois, insult and call murderer,  
You a man without any fame at all...

"Reciting poetry to yourself, Ezra?" elbowed Thumb. "Out loud, if you please!" He really did appreciate such stuff. You never knew which direction Thumb was going turn next.

"From Villon, Fifteenth Century France," Ezra replied honestly, for now that book was his.

Before on nice nights Ezra had seen Laura sit out on her porch. The sky was clearing in the twilight. *If she wasn't cajoling with that provincial goat-boy.*

"There's Billups," Thumb interrupted Ezra's reverie.

Silence froze the mess hall. You were supposed to drop your hands off the table when Billups snapped "At ease!" but this time nobody did.

"Tomorrow is Sunday-" he pronounced "day" as "dee" in his breathy dixie clip, "- and then Mondee and In-spect-shun. We want to have a good clean-up tomorrow and a real good inspection Mondee mornin'."

That was it. He set the mike down and walked to the staff table. Billups forgot to say "Rest!" to release the cadets. Somebody at the table mentioned it to him. Billups stood straight up in a buffoon's sternest expression, madder than hell at himself, and shouted gruffly, "Rest!" He was bombarded by mocking, unanimous--and therefore anonymous--laughter. A moment later Billups and Harrier and the cadet officer staff retired from the mess hall.

Since the laughter the cadets' energy grew. The growing sympathetic fervor of the day blossomed. A boy in Iggy's company let fly his roll at the still open microphone. As it struck it started to feedback the P.A, in great squeals. Another, larger missile, most likely several rolls compacted into a tough ball, struck the mike again and brought it down in a clattering electronic death-wail. Everything on the mike stand crashed to the floor.

A sudden flash flood of food erupted from every table, the air filled with chicken wings, hamburgers, french fries, and even a few utensils.

"If they can get Iggy they can get anybody!"

Nobody got his eye put out and in an instant it was over.

*That made a hell of a mess for the niggers to clean up!*

Nobody got paid overtime.

"Damned foolhardy!" Ezra huffed with a smile, running from the mess hall, Troon sidekicking, "but goddamn necessary!"

"Not just yeah but hell yeah!" proclaimed Troon, punching the air. He loved to destroy. Troon did not understand Ezra or know that he did not.

Hammond was already back at the room with someone. Loud talking came from his side of the rooms. A slightly oversized fellow from another dorm was shouting at the top of his lungs. Kyle was the strange boy's name. Last semester he had shaved his head under mysterious circumstances. He pushed Hammond around the room and finally pressed him against the bunkrail.

"What's the matter with you, man?" Hammond yelled.

"You may not like me," Kyle roared irrationally, "and I don't think you got a football team and you're not so goddamned tough!" He pushed with both arms again. "You bitch!"

"Give him a shot!" Troon immediately advised, "knock him down!"

Hammond only meekly defended himself, giving with his shoulders to the pushes that were becoming punches. His Christian mother had told him--Troon's excitement with the mess hall was fully refreshed by this new source of pain, "Hit him!" he fanatically urged, perhaps to both antagonists, "go ahead!"

Ezra stood in the doorway, fascinated.

With an ugly noise Kyle shoved Hammond into the corner and reared back for a punch, but getting cornered was too much for Hammond and he shouted, jabbing Kyle on the nose. Blood squirted out Kyle's nostrils. He threw his punch and landed on Hammond's ear. Hammond flailed an uppercut, slamming Kyle's jaw up, clicking teeth, knocking him back. Now Hammond, shouting or screaming or crying, came out of that corner in a slight crouch with his fists raised. Kyle stood fast and punched ineffectively on Hammond's arms. Hammond jabbed again and then let go a roundhouse left and caught his opponent on the right eye. Kyle cried out and swung his dukes wildly.

Hammond jabbed again and again, driving Kyle almost to the door. Another looping left by Hammond abruptly caused Kyle to drop his arms and stare dumbly from Troon to Ezra.

Hammond kicked him in the balls as hard as he could.

Kyle yelped in agony and hobbled from the room with his hands between his legs.

Troon applauded like an aficionado at a grand bullfight.

Hammond was bleeding from his ear. The blood ran off the lobe onto his shirt where it soaked through to his skin. He panted and raced around the room while Troon patted him on the back and coached him for the inevitable next encounter.

"Damn!" Hammond kept saying.

Ezra watched Troon coaching and Hammond bleeding and laughed with their excitement. Hammond and Troon felt good and Kyle had his balls kicked in. That's moral justice!

Now everybody would know who the better man was.

V

The Military Science instructors would tear everything up Monday, inspecting. *To get even.* Dusk faded from the higher red hues to the deep orange glow of sunset. The day was fading.

Ezra walked up to the Huss Shack where sergeants and National Honor Society members were allowed to watch television. They were all mesmerized by *Batman*. Shadows from the western window stretched to nothing.

Ezra stepped outside again, his hands in his pockets--a sin. He thought of the instructor who would inspect A Company, Captain Mastiff. "I never killed anybody in Veet-Name," he would say, "my Huey might've bought a few gook farms, tho'." An animal in human skin. He looked like a policeman. There would be a real fine inspection. Ezra hoped Farris had the Southern Comfort shitcanned by then.

Ezra passed through the secret cut in the Academy fence.

Off limits.

"N," he said to himself, "one letter's all the difference between uniformed and uninformed." He walked down Uvalde Street on the side without streetlights, "Just a couple of n's. N means no."

The houses in this neighborhood were shabby, run-down frame dwellings built long before the Second World War. Abandoned by the small town bourgeoisie, they housed the poor blacks whose former county land had dissolved in the anti-prosperity of real estate developers and welfare offices. The power and telephone lines drooped from pole to pole like these souls from year to year. Fences here did not stand and the streets bore the weather and wear with steady sure sacrifice.

There was a grocery and homespun pharmacy where the old man sold beer. He had the oldest, spindizziest gilt-edged cash register Ezra had ever seen, more ornate even than the old bookstores.

The bell jingled when Ezra stepped through the screen door with the ancient Coca-Cola sign. This store had incense and

tobacco for all uses: chewing, snuffing, dipping, smoking, incanting. Against one wall were all the canned goods and in back was the old freezer for milk and wine. The beer was in a long Coca-Cola ice chest. The counter ran the length of the other wall with the tobacco under glass and behind it was the old man's glorious assortment of remedies, medicines, tonics and elixirs. Every color of label and liquid was behind that counter, for every ailment known, unknown, suspected, or feared. The place smelled of liquor, conjuring and alchemy, as did the old man, his white kinky hair rising behind the crown of his high black forehead, one thousand knowing wrinkles of wise smiles and painful tears.

The face of an apostle. Nicodemus stood braced with a gnarled cane.

A gospel tune played on the gramophone. The player was electrical but the speaker was an old horn, the hearty voice of a big, dark woman pouring forth.

*The people keep a-comin'  
but the train done gone.*

"What might a young man need?" the old man almost sang.

"Beer, I think, Nicodemus," Ezra met the old man's eyes with reverence, "then maybe something else."

Nicodemus pulled a couple of beers from a personal cooler under the register. He opened both bottles and gently pushed one toward Ezra.

The first swig is always the coldest and most refreshing.

Every sort of edible flora was home-jarred here. Even the stuff with brand names was unfamiliar to Ezra.

"Wherever you be, you gots to be there wit' the endin'," said Nicodemus. The old man had been reading the newspaper about the war in the Dominican Republic, his home. "You gots to pick the right voodoo."

"Not just be there," Ezra drank, "I want my cut."

"Yes, just that and never more, boy!"

The old man waited patiently.

"Old Man, something for-" Ezra set the empty on the counter and Nicodemus redeemed it with another cold bottle, "-for making a girl like me. L--love." *I want to love and be loved.*

The old man chuckled and perused his concoctions. Oh yes, there was something here for that. Using his step ladder, Nicodemus brought down a small vial. The container had been labeled by fountain pen on white tissue under some yellowing scotch tape.

"Price too high, boy," explained Nicodemus, "you gets in fo' free!"

Ezra held it to the light and read the nebulous prescription.

*Upon the fall of night, drink without sadness.*

The contents of the vial gave an odor that, once inhaled, filtered through the body, penetrating the muscles into the bloodstream, down to the bone marrow and along the spine by secret routes.

"A toast?" offered Ezra.

"Drink deeply," nodded Nicodemus proudly.

Ezra took a long pull without hesitation. The vial seemed not to be depleted. A new thirst suddenly came over him: the places below and behind his navel warmed to this potion like an oven! Again Ezra tasted it, glowing, then handed the tiny flask back to the old man. Ezra washed it down with another swallow of beer. Nicodemus sipped beer with him and talked of a world Ezra did not comprehend.

The distant woman of the gramophone lamented,

*No more cane on the Brazos...*

Then it was time to go.

Ezra let the screen door slap closed, jingling the bells.

The bright gibbous moon illuminated the dark street. Ezra saw, and understood for the first time in his life, that charming eternal face of the white goddess.

Like knowing someone's wish about you, somehow he was sure she would be there if he went there now.

Harrier's house was across the street from the Front Gate of the Academy. Although it was far too early in the year for them, Ezra thought he heard the cicadas in the oaks-- but you wouldn't hear them after sunset, anyway!

No turning back.

Laura gently rocked in the porch swing and read a thin book. Ezra nonchalantly crossed the street, toward her.

Laura had noticed him several minutes ago.

She never really read on the porch, poorly lighted from the living room picture window, and her eyes always wandered from books of poetry anyway. She waited till he was at her lawn.

"Hello!"

Ezra glanced to the porch, startled that he was here.

"No tornadoes tonight," she smiled.

He came to the steps of the porch.

"I like it clear, too," Ezra looked straight up, "you can see the stars."

"Oh, you're a-," she sought the right word, "an astrologer?"

"Astronomer!" he laughed.

"Yes!" she laughed too, "my mother reads that horoscope stuff and I get them mixed up."

"Still, we can learn from the stars."

"They're better than this stuff," she pouted in fun, tossing her volume aside.

"What is it?"

"Um!" she handed it to him and their fingers almost touched, "Byron."

"'Of thee and me,'" Ezra quoted, opening the book and boldly sitting on the top step.

That was all right with Laura. He was from *somewhere else*, the city, the metropolis, Houston. Perhaps he was from the future. What he wasn't, she realized intuitively, was a yokel like from around here. She knew from her father that he was the smartest boy in his class, maybe the whole school. He was new, he was things unknown to her, and that meant she did not mind his sitting on the top step at all.

"Do you really like poetry?" she asked in honest astonishment.

"Depends on the poet."

"I don't know many poets."

"You get to know them, you know?"

"My A's in Lit don't mean a thing," she giggled, "Daddy says they don't when I show him my essays."

Ezra chuckled with her. It didn't matter that her father was his chief tormentor. He already liked talking to her.

"I write some, I guess," he told her.

"Do you make A's?"

"Well, yeah. I meant other..."

She could not have helped that little bit of teasing. Laura smiled with her eyes and voice as well as with her lips.

"You mean, like poems and things?"

He blushed when he felt her kindness but luckily it was dark.

"Yeah," he handed the book back to her and this time their fingers did touch, "things like that."

It was nice, shared and not spoken.

"What are they about?"

Ezra stood up on the porch and shrugged.

"Hell, I don't know," he said half-seriously.

She laughed at him but it didn't hurt. How could it?

"If you write them you must know what they are about!"

Ezra rested his hands on the railing and stared at the street. He felt that he had seen and done all this before!

"You kind of scribble down your thoughts, before they get away. For trying to make sense out of them."

"I've never read a poem that made any sense to me," she taunted him.

"That's the idea," he turned to Laura, "all poets must be insane."

"Are you insane?" she asked coyly, "you don't look too insane."

"I'm not old enough to be really insane, but I'll get there."

They laughed some more.

Laura whirled in her seat to peer into the living room. Her mother and father were gone to some party near the University and her brother was watching Paladin.

"Let's go for a walk!" she blurted happily.

Ezra's whole being flushed with excitement. He did not know yet that anything is possible on a fine early spring evening.

"You wouldn't be embarrassed, walking with me?"

"Why?"

"Ah, the uniform, and I'm-"

"My father runs the place, so what!"

"Right!"

Ezra followed her down the steps and round the house. They walked across the lot where the school had some huge storage buildings. Hundreds of old broken desks and the frame for the Brigade Ball stage and a thousand other things like that were in there. Laura and Ezra strolled past all that and started down a well-lit sidewalk into the city park with swings and seesaws and a tennis court and a swimming pool that opened next month.

Laura was very pretty in the moonlight.

Nocturnal sounds came from the pond across the park.

"Survivor frogs," Ezra unconsciously jested.

"They like the spring," Laura said quietly.

"Reminds them of their past lives."

He took her hand. It was warm, like any living human flesh in the universe, yet cool in his hand which was not sweating but much warmer than hers. This coolness was outside his experience and it felt good.

They looped the park and walked on the next street back toward her house. Laura came nearer to him. They stopped by the high wall of the biggest storage building.

"I've seen your face before," she said to him and then looked at the moon, "That smiling face!"

She kissed him.

Ezra walked Laura to her porch, never giving up her hand. Here and there were still puddles of the afternoon rain. The evening breeze tugged at the treetops.

"Look at the puddles," he said, "the way the waves from the teardrops spread out."

"Teardrops?"

"What?"

She looked at him affectionately, sympathetically.

"You said 'teardrops' instead of raindrops from the leaves." Laura stared at him for a very long time. "You're so strange!" she cried suddenly and kissed him on the lips again. Then she ran in her house and drew all the curtains.

Ezra walked alone down the asphalt parade road. He followed it where the dorms forked from the road in a big horseshoe. Everybody was doing something. This was Saturday night! A lot of guys were in town, at the movies or the magazine shop, where the old fart would sell you the good porn for an extra buck. Guys were playing cards or checkers or even chess. Somebody blew a conch. One kid was memorizing Caesar's Gallic Wars in Latin. Ezra clapped him on the shoulder as he recited. Ezra began to pace the length of A Company's youngest dorm. He passed Canwell's room.

Something hit the door from the inside.

Ezra heard the slap of a baseball in a well-oiled mit, then another sound. Baseballs did not cry out! He tried the door. It seemed locked but it was really the bummed knob mechanism and finally it opened. Instantly the tangy odor hit him. Brown paper bags littered the front room. A kid was laying on the desk, singing and giggling in a childish pitch. Ezra thought he heard the shower in the back bedroom, with more slapping.

Steam was filling the place.

"Stupid son of a bitch!" someone shouted gleefully.

"Let's sniff this up!"

Moans came out of the rattling water.

Thumb and Jeffers had Canwell in the shower for sniffing glue. They beat his bare skin with their fists while the hot water hit his head. Steam bellowed around them and out of the bathroom.

Canwell was so stoned he could only whimper at the punishment. They whipped him with their open hands unmercifully, running the shower from extreme hot to extreme cold. Thumb and Jeffers were too thrilled to be clearly aware of Ezra. This was a personal blitzkrieg of this grub--stomping the creature into oblivion! They thrashed him into senselessness. Canwell's brain-disabling intoxication forbade him direct knowledge of the damaging bruises everywhere. At last Jeffers yanked him out of the steam by his shoulders and laid him face down on a desk. Thumb picked up his rear by hooking his fist in Canwell's crotch. They rocked him back and forth to the count of three and heaved him through the closed rear window.

Canwell shattered the glass and fell naked in the high weeds behind the dorm.

"These little shits never learn," decreed Thumb in hellish self-righteous humor.

Jeffers nodded energetically, wiping his mouth.

The two of them paraded out of the room.

Ezra unlocked and raised the window and climbed out. He lifted Canwell off the ground and shoved him back through the sill. Canwell's groggy roommates helped drag him to his bunk. Some of the splintered glass was still in the bleeding lacerations. By some miracle it seemed there were no terrible cuts, just a bunch of tiny hacks.

Ezra plucked glass from the wounds.

Canwell rolled from side to side, coming to.

"I was going to talk to you, Mr. Ezra," the boy muttered in broken words. Why did he retain the cadets' stupid

formality? Afraid to cry, he said, "I was going to come by you--"

"Okay, Canwell,"

Canwell's eyes were clouded but he peered directly at Ezra.

"Mr. Ezra-" he stuttered pitifully, "-have your parents ever told you they, they hated you? That they wanted to get rid of you-" A tear rolled down his cheek. "That you weren't even really their kin?"

Canwell clutched Ezra's arm as tightly as life.

"Then who am I?" he shouted, exhausting himself, "what am I and what is all me for!" Canwell broke into horrifying, lonely sobs. "Am I anybody...?"

Ezra recoiled, stunned.

There was nothing to say.

VI

Ezra and Chinny Dial skipped church and hid out in the La Salle Hotel for a few hours with some old black coots watching the Reverend Cleophus Johnston on the television in the lobby.

"There's too many Buddhists for all of them to go to hell," Ezra said, "so we've got nothing to worry about!"

Chinny loved that kind of talk.

"These old folks sure are scared of dying, ain't they?"

"Scared? Chinny, they're singing about it."

"Let's go."

There was a place way back there in the hills, behind the Academy and the old man's property, where a little creek fell over some smooth boulders jutting out of the slope and it made a fine rock pool in the middle of the woods. The wildflowers paved the trail across the meadows and then the sunlight made a path through the piney boughs. Pine needles floated on the surface of the cold running water.

"This feels better than religion."

"Yeah," Chinny tread water contentedly. "I wish we had some fishing poles."

"Like you know how to fish."

"You don't need to know."

The dogwoods were blooming in time for Easter.

They let the fresh water support them, cleanse their flesh, get into their blood.

"Maybe a little still right over there," Chinny added.

"And nobody for a million years."

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Ezra, A.T.  
1965