SALVATION AND OTHER SHORT STORIES

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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Denton, Texas
August, 1993

This is a collection of short stories written to satisfy the requirements for a Master of Arts degree. These stories are done in several different forms in an attempt to help the author discover which one suits his personal style best.

The preface to these stories is an examination of how and why the author goes about the creative process. The author has examined the lives and methods of other literary figures to see what their individual inspirations were and how they worked. This preface also looks at some of the obstacles and hazards that these men and women face while they are writing.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge all the help given me by members of the faculty of the University of North Texas and to thank them for their assistance without which this thesis would not have been possible.

First, to Dr. Barbara Rodman, who chaired my committee and who spent innumerable hours reading, critiquing, and correcting my manuscript. Her patience, knowledge, and understanding were invaluable.

Second, to Dr. Helen Leath, who read the first drafts of my stories and whose advice helped me in utilizing a regional (Texas) style, tone, and voice. Her kind criticism was always welcome.

Third, to Dr. Giles Mitchell, who taught the first class I ever took at the University of North Texas--creative writing--and who was instrumental in furthering my writing career. His inspiration and criticism were always helpful, and he was never too busy to take time to help a budding novice.

Finally, to all the other members of the English faculty at the University who gave unstintingly of their time to read and review my efforts.

My sincerest "thank you!"
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Why does anyone write; a physically, mentally, and emotionally trying endeavor which, more likely than not, will yield little or no recognition and even less financial reward? I've tried to investigate the motives of many of the more famous authors in history in hopes of finding my own promptings. In some cases it has been relatively easy; in others, one can only wonder what could possibly have moved these people toward such demanding undertakings. Where does the writing urge come from? How does it manifest itself in the creative process? But most importantly, just exactly what is it?

Perhaps it is the psychological need to punish oneself for sins past, either real or imagined, or to purge the psyche of some inner demons that stain and impair its function. Historically, writers have been among the most tortured of artists. Ezra Pound wrestled with the specter of insanity throughout his life. Whether it was responsible for his writing or the result of it has been argued for years. Robert Frost, that grand old hoary-headed man of American letters, might have found his inspiration in the alcoholic rages directed at his wife and family. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas De Quincey, William Faulkner, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Hans Fallada, Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams: the list is endless. Eugene O'Neill said that the two major occupational hazards for a writer were alcoholism and suicide. If this is the case, if it is unconscious masochism that drives writers to self examination in their
efforts to purge the inner demons, then creative journalism is indeed a dangerous and unprofitable profession. If, however, this is not the case, if the writer is well adjusted and at ease with his psyche, then the driving force must lie elsewhere.

It could be the desire to bring about change, to make things better than they are through writing. By definition, satire holds established manners, customs, beliefs, convictions, or actions up to ridicule. And some of our finest works have come from this genre.

Although Juvanel and Horace were not the first satirists--satire has existed since man's first written efforts--their works were among the best of antiquity and are as fresh and biting today as they were at the time of Christ. Chaucer's satirical tone may have gotten him in serious trouble had not he had John of Gaunt as his patron. John Skelton's *The Bowge of Courte* satirized not only the court of Henry VII but Cardinal Wolsey as well. Jonathan Swift savaged corruption in religion and education in *A Tale of the Tub* and *Gulliver's Travels*, not to mention numerous political pamphlets. John Dryden's biblically-based *Absalon and Achitophel* centered on efforts to replace Charles I with James, Duke of York.

Satire always entails the risk of offending someone more politically powerful than the satirist. In 1717 Voltaire wound up in the Bastille for his essays and was later (1724) exiled to England for his pamphlets. Alexander Pope only barely avoided serious trouble with his *Dunciad* and his *Imitations of Horace*. And even though he escaped imprisonment, he alienated a large segment of the social elite with his "waspish" writings. More recent satirists include Mark Twain in *Letters from the Earth*, H. L. Mencken; *Pogo*’s author, Walt Kelly and, of course, Gary Trudeau with
And Salman Rushdie still lives under a sentence of death because of his \textit{Satanic Verses}. But whatever the historical period or the method of the message, satire has lent a tremendous wealth to our literary heritage.

Maybe writing is a method for satisfying the desire for revenge. Untold numbers of authors have come forward in order to disclose untidy secrets of the rich, famous, and infamous. These so-called "tell all" biographers recently reached an all time high (in sales) or low (in journalistic ethics).

Could a writer's motive be one of pure profit? Could someone labor day after day courting mental disaster on the million-to-one chance that they will strike the mother lode of fame and fortune? I realize that several writers have become millionaires via their writings, but this is by far the exception. Only a tiny percentage of fiction realizes any return at all, and that is usually minuscule. Melville continued to work throughout his life in a customs office. Joyce was universally condemned, as was Lawrence, to menial labor or friendly subsidies to live. Scott Fitzgerald, Tennessee Williams, William Saroyan, William Faulkner, and John Steinbeck all resorted to writing screenplays (which they regarded as artistic prostitution) to pay their bills. So the answer must lie elsewhere.

Some widely published and universally known authors consider writing nothing but a back-breaking labor, and they don't mean a labor of love. Gore Vidal said recently, "I love writing, it's the paperwork that I can't stand." Others share that opinion. Stephen King has declared many times that he considers writing sheer drudgery. However, he also says that writing has helped him develop a sense of discipline that not only raised his literary output but stabilized the rest of his life as
well. According to King, he sits at his word processor for eight hours a day every
day of the year save two: Christmas and his birthday. During his working hours, his
wife answers the door and the telephone, fields visitors, receives the mail and fax, in
a word, totally insulates him from the outside world. This, King says, is the only
way that he can maintain his literary output.

James Michener, one of America's most prolific writers, freely admits that his
production has decreased now that he is in his eighty-sixth year, but he still maintains
an office at the University of Texas and works not only on his novels but on his
research as well. Michener started writing as a young naval office stationed in the
Pacific Theater during World War II. His explanation for his motivation to write is
simple: "I started writing when I was off duty because there was simply nothing else
to do, and I was in danger of going absolutely crazy. It wasn't that I like to write; it
was simply therapy." For Michener it was a learned habit that carried over into
civilian life.

William Styron is more analytical about his motives. He maintains that
writing itself wasn't so bad, but the accompanying fame and its responsibilities drove
him to alcoholism, depression, and attempted suicide. On the other hand, he says that
his best seller about his condition, Darkness Visible, aided in his recovery by acting
as an analysis/catharsis of his psychological illnesses. Styron maintains that no
matter how cathartic the effort, he still considers it "damn hard work."

Here, then, we have seen many views of the creative process, and we may
conclude that if writing is a labor of love, it is a hard, demanding, exacting labor.
Few choose to labor at anything under difficult and trying circumstances unless the
rewards are visible, obtainable, and within reach, so we can also conclude that there
must be some other reason or reasons to sweat out countless hours to produce
something called "writing." There must be some other stimulus pushing a would-be
author through the trials and ardors of creation with so little promise of reward. If
so, what is it?

I believe that the urge to write is seated somewhere deep in the ego of the
would-be author. My theory is that some unidentifiable something is strong enough
to demand that writers put down on paper whatever it is that they think is important
enough to say in order to satisfy their innermost being. And this is not simply
confined to writers. Musicians, artists, playwrights, poets, actors, sculptors, anyone
involved in a creative endeavor harbors this compulsion. This "need" is manifest to
different degrees in different people, but it is always there, subject only to the
person's ability to acknowledge that need. Here, however, I shall deal solely with
authors.

So why do I write? The examination of this question is the basis for this
paper, and I can only hope that through this can I arrive at some sort of
enlightenment.

I enjoy putting words on paper. I am enthralled with the beauty of the
language for its own sake. Though not personally adept at any musical instrument, I
find the sound of English to rival that of any opera. But why not? Isn't opera simply
the blending of two forms of beauty, the sound of words set to music, with notes,
measures, and bars complementing words, paragraphs, and punctuation to form
sounds within sounds? These are complementary, and the vibrations which we label
words can be combined to form more intricate ideas than music alone is ever capable.

So on this level, I write because I enjoy the words that echo within my head, giving me pleasure. And I am not ashamed to admit that when I've created something that I really like, something which really brings me magical feelings or thoughts, I return to it time and time again, savoring it all the more with each additional reading.

I am also egotistical enough to think that I can contribute some beauty to the world which, in turn, lends importance to me as a human being. This feeling is not always borne out by the results of my labors. Inspiration, ephemeral at best, must now be coupled with imagination to forge thoughts into words, words into paragraphs, paragraphs into a finished whole. This is the hard part. I can't count the number of times I've been awakened in the middle of the night by some train of thoughts which I'm sure will be a story of Nobel Prize quality only, when I review the notes I've made of my revelation the next morning, to find that my "masterpiece" is the thoughtlessness of a disturbed idiot. How can something so inspired, so beautiful be transformed overnight into meaningless babble? If art is the inspiration of the Muse, what cerebral demon can mutate this gem so quickly? The answer, of course, is that inspiration can be a figment of imagination and that only through hard work can we accomplish anything in this realm.

The corollary to this theorem is that I enjoy telling a story. Again, I feel that this is ego satisfaction, the quest for love, acceptance, admiration, achievement, the desire to bask in the sunlight of the affirmation of self-worth.

I've felt this as an actor, standing center stage after a really good performance,
nearly delirious with the knowledge that those strangers out there have accepted ME as another person, and their shouts and applause are vindication for having done a job superbly well. The difference between acting and writing is that acting is of the "now"; it is transient, and tomorrow those shrieking adulation may have forgotten not only you but the vehicle as well. "Sic transit gloria!"

Writing, on the other hand, at least has a chance of being embedded—if only for a little longer—in the memories of those who read it. For the written word—YOUR written word—lasts forever. Only for the writer, perhaps, but it is still there, and in that fact lays one's personal reassurance. It doesn't matter that only you, the author, can relish these to their fullest. The fact that they were made by you lends substance and value to them.

If this is so, how then do we explain the pain that writing has caused some authors? Perhaps it is the emotional devastation of denied love. Abelard wrote with heartbreaking clarity about the love of his life, Heloise. Dante bemoaned (and immortalized) his Beatrice. Poe's laments for his lost Lenore drove him to art and alcohol. Supposedly the young Edmond Rostand mirrored his love's loss in his creation of one of the most tragic lovers in all literature: Cyrano de Bergerac. Interestingly enough, Rostand never wrote anything of consequence after that. Someone has observed that there is no pain like the pain of lost love and, if so, it is amply recorded throughout literature. However, written anguish is not confined to affairs of the heart.

Hans Fallada, the German author, just before his death from a drug overdose, wrote in Deadly Ecstasy about the horrors and degradation he had undergone in his
quest for morphine.

John Hershey, in his autobiographical novel *The War Lover*, tells of helping remove the body of his best friend—minus the top of the friend’s head—from their bomber after a raid during World War II, and the pain he felt is evident in every word.

John Gunther wrote movingly in *Death Be Not Proud* about watching his young son die from a particularly vicious form of cancer. This would seem to be a particularly difficult event to record.

Numerous ex-prisoners of war and survivors of the holocaust have endured untold misery as they emptied their memories onto the printed page. Otto Frank, Anne’s father; Simon Wiesenthal, who alone of his family of thirty-one survived Auschwitz; thousands more have detailed the horrors of the Dachaus, the Triblinkas, the pogroms, the death marches, and the prison camps.

Other writers have been prisoners of the elements, like the members of the 1974 Chilean soccer team who endured fifty-four days in sub zero temperatures after an air crash in the Andes, surviving by cannibalism. Or young Mark Taylor, who was adrift for over one hundred days in a small boat, his physical suffering complicated by the most heinous hallucinations.

Certainly one of the most poignant documents in history, a magnificent tribute to human selflessness, endurance, and courage, is the diary of Robert Falcon Scott recording the incredible sufferings and deaths of his entire party (including himself) during their race to the South Pole in 1912.

Torture, starvation, beatings and executions, mental and emotional
depredation, death in the most horrible ways possible are only a few of the subjects that these men and women dredge up from the shadows of their minds, smothering their personal pain in order to render these experiences into words.

Evidently these people feel that the gist of their thoughts is sufficiently important that in order to be told, every other sensation can and must be shoved aside. The necessity to remind mankind of SOMETHING is more urgent than any other single thought or feeling.

To these writers, there is something else beside recording physical pain; there is the element of psychological therapy in their writing. This is the ability, through writing, to purge their souls of some thing or things that are so monstrous that writing is the only way in which they are able to confront them. Writing is a catharsis, a cleansing, a healing in the truest sense of the word.

William Styron, as I said, is the model spokesman for this canon, and I cannot recommend his *Darkness Visible* highly enough to anyone who strives against depression yet ventures into the realm of creativity.

Personally, I find that if I am truly honest with myself, this autopsychanalysis plays a part in my own writing. By telling a story, by acting out the parts, I bring myself face to face with things that I might otherwise examine at my own peril. My tour as a Marine, the death of my mother, the emotional abandonment by my father, the bitterness of my childhood; these are painful to write about. But these are simply facts of life--of MY life--and like all facts in the real world, once they are recognized and confronted, they become, if not completely understandable, as least manageable.

To paraphrase Frank Sinatra, "I'm for whatever gets you through the long
night; whether it's writing, the Bible, or a bottle of Jack Daniels." For me, writing is a form of mini-therapy. I drag the demons from their hiding places and shove them into the light of examination. I find emotional shade in eclipsing these personal dragons before they can get out of hand. I am simply fulfilling a need to my mental well being. And I believe that I can shape these thoughts and memories into a work that will interest readers, that they can identify with.

Having investigated to some extent the reason for my writing, I now want to look at how I write, and I can only do this by examining the mechanics of others. R. V. Cassill reminds us that "Good writers are your real teachers of how to write fiction, and their novels and stories are the means by which they teach" (5).

Major emphasis in my fiction is on setting. I do this for two reasons. First, I set my stories in places that I know best: rural Texas, Viet Nam, the cockpit of an airplane. I try to heed W. H. Gass' statement that "The esthetic aim of any fiction is the creation of a verbal world . . . " (7).

I also want the setting to support the characters. They must complement their surroundings completely or, if not, there must be a distinct and compelling reason for the deviation. For instance, clowns are not usually found in a horror story unless, as in Stephen King's It, the purpose is to heighten the effect of fear. Here, a clown, the symbol of happy, playful foolishness, tears children apart with canine-like teeth.

Second, I try to manipulate plot to give readers a sense of anticipation. Cassill gives the example of this in Chekhov's "The Lady With The Dog." Cassill says of Chekhov's setting, "The first sentence implies, without a direct statement, that the setting will be one in which rumor has the force of authority, that here people are . . .
free of custom and the rigidity of . . . social positions" (6).

I also try to think and feel as my characters do, to get into their heads, so to speak. I want to develop an empathy with them, to know what it is that makes them what they are and what they do. Several prominent writers feel that this sharing is absolutely necessary in order to produce a believable protagonist. Carson McCullers said, "I become the character I write about. I am so immersed in them that their motives are my own. When I write about a thief, I become one . . . and I bless the Latin poet Terence who said, 'Nothing human is alien to me'" (17-18).

A corollary to this is the fact that for a character to be interesting, he must be full, rounded, a persona that makes us care, one way or the other, about what happens to him or her. This might be called the "so what" test. Can we read about a character and simply say, "So what?" If so, the character leaves us uncaring and, therefore, is not one of prime importance. Isaac Asimov says that the author must "introduce complexities [to his character] and thus add dimensions. Heros should have their flaws, villains their admirable aspects" (67).

Besides physical description, nothing defines a character as much as speech. No matter how close we think we are to another human being, can we ever REALLY know what they are thinking all the time? Of course not. Some of our knowledge must be based on intuition, on guesswork. And that is why dialogue is so important to the fiction writer.

Perhaps no one ever used dialogue as well as William Faulkner. His use of syntax, diction, dialect, idiom, and colloquialisms draws his characters as sharply for us as any photograph. Each individual is as perfectly distinctive as the written word
can make him or her. Frank N. Magill says, "... Faulkner seems especially drawn to paradox and oxymorons, kinds of verbal juxtaposition particularly suited to conveying the tension between the motion of life and the human need for pattern" (2: 917). Physical, mental, and emotional descriptions are important to be sure, but it is the spoken word which shows us the person.

I love to use words well in my writing. Syntax is probably one of the most important parts of my work because I believe that there is an inherent beauty in the language itself. I don't consciously create irony, but some of my passages are ironic. I don't consciously teach, yet some consider my writing didactic. I don't use symbols as such, but some say my stories are sometimes very symbolic. No, I write for the word usage in our language, and I strive for fresh forms of metaphor, simile, and imagery.

Not everyone considers this a good approach. Asimov, one of the most prolific and eclectic writers in this century, declares, "All things being equal, you pump for the direct, the familiar, the short" (62). But his excellent use of metaphor and simile sometimes contradicts him.

Except for very brief passages, I don't write in dialect because I believe is it very difficult to do well. Bad dialect confuses readers, makes them struggle, makes them pause to try to figure out meaning, and they become bored. And boredom is the death knell of any literature.

When I do write in dialect, I do so either to stress a point or to underline some aspect of the character that I feel requires additional attention from the reader. When I have a black man in the deep south say, "Yeees, suh!" I am not being a racist or
stereotyping; I am trying to make the importance or urgency understood because that is the way it sounds in southern Alabama. When a farmer in south Texas tells his field hands, "Now you boys git on down yonder and chunk out all 'a 'em tractor tars," I am not necessarily envisioning the typical "redneck." I mean to convey an image that is emphasized by his speech. This helps the reader to know more in depth who and what this character is.

Related to this is the fact that I almost always write in the first person. I do this simply because it is the easiest voice for me. I try to project myself into the every aspect of the character, but I also hope to negate my own feelings, substituting those which fit the character. That is the main caution when writing in the first person. The author must never be the person who is speaking. The character MUST be the speaker, speaking through the author. In effect, the author becomes a medium. Asimov says about this flow, "Writing in such a fashion that the writing is unnoticeable, that the events described pass directly into your brain as though you were experiencing them yourself, is a difficult and a necessary art" (63).

Nathaniel Hawthorne said that an author's purpose should always be to entertain, to tell a story. I firmly believe this. True, one's story may have a moral or make a relevant statement. It may preach or criticize, instruct or direct, plead a cause or point of view, but in order to really be effective, it MUST be entertaining.

Another aspect of plot construction that I agree with is that to be effective—and therefore readable—the story must move. The plot must stimulate the reader enough to retain his interest or else the message, whatever it may be, will be lost. John Gardner, in The Art of Fiction, simplifies this concept. "In any piece of fiction, the
writer's first job is to convince the reader that the events he recounts happened, or to persuade the reader that they might have happened..." (22).

Ross Macdonald and Raymond Chandler, two of America's foremost detective writers, consistently do this. They construct tight, taut, fast moving scenes without resorting to the pulp writers old saw that "Whenever things get slow, send in a beautiful woman or a man with a gun." Macdonald, writing about Chandler, says, "Chandler described a good plot as one that made for the good scenes, as if the parts were greater than the whole. I see plot as a vehicle of meaning" (185).

Characterization and plot must be tied together if the piece is to succeed. The characters must be identifiable if the plot is to be believable and the story is to move. Frank O'Connor decrees that "One character at least in any novel [or short story] must represent the reader in some aspect of his own conception of himself..." (17).

This brings us to the question of style. I have difficulty defining "style," as do many other authors and critics. When someone says that so-and-so writes in the style of Turgenev, Poe, Chekhov, O'Henry, or Cheever, I wonder on what do they base their judgement? I certainly agree that there is good style and there is bad style, but who is to decide what is good style, and what is very good style? And when that point is finally reconciled, how does anyone make a valid comparison between the style of this author and with the style of that author?

William Strunk, Junior and E. B. White decreed the fundamentals of style in the mid-fifties in their classic, *The Elements of Style*; in fact, Chapter V is entitled, "An Approach to Style." This includes such reminders as "Write in a way that comes
naturally. Avoid use of qualifiers. Do not affect a breezy manner. Do not explain too much" (66-85), and other generalities, both valid and worthless.

As authors, we understand that there are certain elements of style to which we must adhere if we are to be taken for anything more than scribbling bumpkins. Another truism is that all writers must, at some time or another, discover for themselves the style that works best.

Writers must develop their own styles, and they do this in an area where there are few, if any, laws. Margaret Atwood, in the introduction to Best American Short Stories of 1989, says, "Once you start making lists or devising rules for stories, or for any other kind of writing, some writer will be sure to come along and casually break every abstract rule you or anyone else has ever thought up, and take your breath away in the process" (xi). I think that the key precept here is for authors to develop their own style, one which works, and one with which they are comfortable. This is paramount to making the creative process easier, quicker, and more pleasurable, and I believe that this developing or polishing can only help the reader understand and enjoy the author's work more fully.

This, then, is the "why" and "how" of my writing. Needless to say, I attempt to put on paper the very best of whatever skills I possess. Any writer who does less is cheating himself as well as his audience and, in the end, cannot expect to see his efforts achieve what they are capable of. This author cannot realize the self-rewards that most artists strive for.

If a book (or a short story) succeeds, Ross Macdonald says it moves us as few other things can:
It reaffirms our values as they change, and dramatizes the conflicts of those values. It absorbs and domesticates the spoken language, placing it in meaningful context with traditional language, forming new linguistic synapses in the brain and body of the culture. It describes new modes of behavior, new versions of human character, new shades and varieties of good and evil, and implicitly criticizes them. It holds us still and contemplative for a moment, caught like potential shoplifters who see their own furtive images in a scanning mirror, and wonder if the store detective is watching (185-87).

These, then, are my thoughts on the creative process and my speculation on how this process works. As in every area of invention, these tenets are not iron-clad truths and must be amended as necessary by the authors themselves. However, perhaps I've included a few points which may help some future writers or guide present authors to new areas of self discovery.
REVIVAL

The sun rose rust-colored, as it always does in southern Alabama in late August. My grandfather strode back to the house through the red dust, swinging an ancient pail, done with feeding his hogs.

Though nearly eighty, he was very tall, lean and incredibly strong, straight as a saber fashioned of Damascus steel. He paused beside the well under the great chinaberry tree that ruled the backyard, wiping his face, dipping gouts of sweet water with a gourd that hung from the frame.

His name was Robert E. Lee Taylor, and he was the constable of Stonewall County, having been elected a record eleven terms. Now, however, it was mostly an honorary position, officiating at various holidays and parades, serving divorce papers, that sort of thing. Of course, not all his administrations had been peaceful. He had vehemently opposed the Ku Klux Klan, and his barn had been burned three times in warnings which he ignored. He had been in his share of gunfights and wore a foot long zipper-shaped scar from trying to arrest a drunken knife wielder. Even now, he carried a Colt .45 wherever he went, even to church.

I was six in that molten summer of 1950 when I first consciously recorded my indelible memories of the man that I worshiped. Fatherless since birth, I suppose it was natural to choose him as a father figure, but it was also something more. Watching his raw strength as he heaved and shoved around the barnyard, or his gentleness taking a sow with multiple breech births through her searing pain, the
simple thoughtfulness of warming a horse’s bit in his armpit before putting it into the horse’s mouth on a frosty morning.

Psychiatrists have some terms to describe a thwarted hatred toward a non-existent father or a latent homosexuality with which I couldn’t deal, I don’t know. I only know that this man led me through the early jigsaw of my life, making order and purpose and discipline where there might have been waste and chaos.

This is not to say he was lenient; God, when he punished he whipped with a ferocity that bordered on sadism, whether the culprit was human or animal. Nor, as my mother testified, did he make any distinction between male and female in this regard.

He wasn’t a cruel man; far from it. And he was neither ignorant nor stupid. He had attended Transylvania College for two years, winning awards in both Philosophy and Latin. He could be profane as any truck driver, but I never saw him sit when a woman entered the room or fail to remove his hat during conversation. Dinner meant dressing, which meant cleaned, combed and wearing a tie.

Though only a nominally religious man, he attended a fundamentalist church, and he possessed a reputation for miles around as an honorable, moral man who lived and died by his word. He had been approached several times to run for Justice of the Peace.

He was simply a Southern man, a man whose father had fought with the 36th Alabama during the Struggle (as it was known), leaving an arm scattered on the field at Gettysburg. For my grandfather there was no gray in the world, only a code to
live by, and that was not to be violated though death be the result. I guess you could have called him a redneck Samurai.

He returned the gourd to its nail and banged through the screen door, starting a little when he saw me.

"I swan, Poot, what are you doing up at this hour?"

"I was coming to help you slop the hogs."

"Well, you're a day late and a dollar short. Those hogs have already had their breakfast, and I'm ready for mine. Besides we've got to get ready for church. Sunday, remember?"

"Yessir," I replied.

We washed our hands and then I followed him into the kitchen where my grandmother had already set the table, burdening it with the backbreaking meal that traditionally starts a rural southern day. Bacon, sausage, hotcakes, eggs, grits, cane syrup, biscuits, real butter, jelly, gravy, all awash with whole milk or coffee. We heaped our plates, said the blessing and started in, me perched on a Montgomery Ward catalog.

I never tired of watching him, even eating. No slurping his coffee or letting food dribble out of his mouth like Aunt Minnie after her stroke. No tucking his napkin into his shirt collar; it was spread precisely across his lap. Nor did he put his elbows on the table or mix his food on his plate. Every one of his movements was economical, fluid, planned. He didn't stir his coffee; he caressed it, making small swirls that never made a "clinking" sound in the cup.
He once said that the cruelest aspect of being a gentleman was not being able to read while eating. His theory was that anything that enriched one’s mind was never in bad taste, but everyone must make sacrifices in this life, even if they were sometimes senseless.

Pop compensated for this by telling me stories during our times together. These were not merely fairy tales or some similar infantile entertainment. Oh, no! These were elaborately constructed sagas complete with monsters of horrendous proportions, wizards with magical powers and disfigured henchmen. There were leering ogres, reeking of blood and death. Gargoyles camped in trees; trolls burrowed under bridges, waiting to decapitate the unwary. Shrieking furies soared on bat wings, their bloodied eyes scanning the decaying landscape for innocent children, their victims of choice.

Heros were invariably personifications of General Nathan Bedford Forrest, clad in Confederate gray, wielding their engraved sabers, charging headlong into battle, oblivious of the odds, accompanied by snapping battle flags and encouraging bugles. Maidens with golden tresses and billowing gowns cheered on their champions.

I listened hypnotized, visualizing the torments, the blood, the contests, and the victories as Pop spun each tale, the pitch and timbre of his voice bringing life to the stories. I lived a thousand adventures through his magic. He was my protector, my mentor, my inspiration, the best friend in all my worlds.

"Let’s go, Poot. We’re going to Aunt Beulah and Aunt Bennie’s church this
morning, and we've got to pick them up."

I scraped back my chair, rushing to get ready. My suit was already laid out--I had shined my shoes the night before--and included a clip-on tie which I thought made me look very grownup. I finished dressing and went into my grandfather's room. He scrutinized me thoroughly, straightening my tie, brushing some dog hair off my shoulder. Then he put Wildroot Cream Oil on his hair, parting it perfectly down the middle, combing both sides back carefully, making it lie just so. I waited expectantly.

He looked down at me with a smile. "Well, Poot, do you think you're old enough for some of this axle grease?"

"Yessir," I said, trying not to plead. And as I stood ecstatic, he repeated the ceremony of anointment on my bowed head.

My grandmother's voice broke our communion: "Robert, are you about ready?"

"Just about, Mama," he replied. Then he stepped to the closet and took down his pistol belt which holstered the ivory handled Colt .45. I bubbled expectantly, knowing that the most wonderful part of the ritual was at hand.

"Give me a hand," he said, drawing the huge pistol and extending it to me butt first. It was my sacred duty to hold the gun while he buckled on the belt. This holy trust was mine, and I well knew the rules associated with this great responsibility. I must always keep the gun pointed at the floor; I must hold it firmly with both hands; I must NEVER touch the trigger; and I must return it directly to his hand butt first,
as I'd received it.

There was something hypnotic about the dull sheen of the weapon, like the slick skin on a water moccasin. I loved the odor of the gun oil, especially when mixed with the rich leather smell of its holster. Its deadliness was fascinating, and my grandfather's mastery of it--indeed his symbol of authority--proclaimed his status as man and hero in my eyes. And his absolute trust in letting me, a child of six, hold this terror was affirmation of his love and confidence.

He extended his hand and I reverently returned the pistol, feeling a sudden lightness and loneliness in my hands. He holstered the pistol, pulled on his coat, and picked up his hat.

"Let's ride, son," he grinned. "Come on, Mama."

We climbed into Pop's elegant 1939 Oldsmobile, my grandmother clutching a huge, leatherbound Bible, with me sitting in the middle, careful not to interfere with the floor mounted gear shift. Pop stomped on the starter, and the huge straight eight roared to life. He let it idle for about a minute then pulled out onto the dirt road that led to the aunts' house, great rooster tails of red powder marking our passing.

We pulled up in front of their house and found them waiting on the porch. Both old maid sisters in their sixties, they lived in solitude, devoting their lives to the church and the service of others. Aunt Beulah and Aunt Bennie (her real name was Bernice but she'd been called Bennie all her life) were physical twins, both weighing about three hundred pounds, with turkey wattle jowls and bosoms that always reeked of sachet. They always cuddled me, which really meant they squished me every
chance they got. They almost always wore black dresses with pink handkerchiefs pinned to their breast, and their feet overflowed their shoes. They didn’t wear makeup because their church said it was some kind of sin, but they poured bucketfulls of some kind of really smelly perfume all over themselves. My cousin Harlan swore that he could track them months after they passed his house.

They rolled toward the car like two bowling balls moving in unison, perfectly in step, bobbing gently from side to side like penguins. Aunt Bennie had forsaken her bodice handkerchief for a little watch on a chain, but both she and her sister clutched vast Bibles with little crocheted cloth bookmarks hanging out of them.

They huffed and puffed into the back seat, settling like great nesting hens, smoothing their skirts, patting the buns of their hair, dabbing at their lip lines of sweat.

"Hello, Robert. Lucille. Stevie. The good Lord Jesus certainly gave us a beautiful Sabbath, didn’t he?" Beulah said.

"Hallaluah!" chimed Bennie. "Beautiful but hot."

"Just a reminder of what we sinners can look forward to unless we seek salvation," Beulah replied with a stern look.

"Good morning, ladies," Pop said as he shifted the Olds into first. Once again the big car spewed red dust as it slid out of the drive.

It took us nearly fifteen minutes to get to the New Ebenezer Pentecostal Church, though it was only a two or three mile trip. When we pulled up in front, there were about two dozen pickups and three cars already there, and people straggled
The church itself was small, rectangular, with white clapboard sides and two or three stained glass windows that never opened. I knew from past experiences that this would be a horribly hot session, especially if the preacher felt the spirit or the offering wasn't large enough. In either case, the service could drag on eternally and, coupled with the strangling heat and my claustrophobia, would develop into a literal hell on earth.

I was hit by that particular smell that identifies churches, libraries, old schools and funeral homes as soon as we entered.

We arranged ourselves in a mid-church pew with Pop next to the aisle followed by my grandmother, with me sandwiched between the two black mounds of aunts. I subtly tried to insert myself closer to Pop, but I was struggling against immovable objects, so I settled in to watch this new religion in action.

The Reverend J. Dorsey Pender was a battle-hardened veteran of the pulpit, a fat man, florid of complexion, who gasped repeatedly. He was completely bald with liver spots smudging his pate. His false teeth were so badly-fitted that his lower jaw jutted out in an obscene underbite, and he constantly chewed his lower lip when deep in thought or faced with some overpowering question, and the marks upon the flesh made it look perpetually scarred. But the most disgusting aspect of the Reverend Pender was his eyes. They were small, completely lacking in any identifiable color, and they darted around like a rattlesnake's tongue until they lit on some item of interest, usually a prepubescent female child. Then the lids descended about half-
way, and if the little girl was especially fetching, small amounts of spittle would appear at the corners of his mouth. All in all, he was probably the most disgusting human being I've ever encountered in my life.

This morning the good Reverend was in perfect form, and it didn’t take long for the service to proceed from the announcements of the meeting of the Layman’s Union through the singing of several hymns to his mounting the pulpit.

He started out smoothly enough, quietly, almost whispering about the scourge of God and the horrible punishments awaiting unrepentant sinners. His voice rose slightly as he drew vivid pictures of the rivers of fire, the smell of brimstone, the lakes of sulphur and pitch waiting to engulf the transgressor.

Several parishioners shouted "Amen" and "Hallaluah," and their voices startled me because I had never seen grown people shout in a church before. My religious background had, to this point, been in the quietly reserved Methodist Church and nothing had prepared me for this. Dr. Pender’s voice rose another notch.

"And the tongues of blasphemers shall be torn out with hot tongs, and the eyes that lust after carnal images gouged out with sharp stobs. The thieves shall have their arms ripped off, and those without mercy shall themselves be shown no mercy. No! No! The love and the mercy of Jesus shall both be shut up and shall avail them naught! The genitals of the adulators shall fall off as with leprous flesh, and dogs shall devour them. And the liar’s ears shall be filled with molten rock without end."

"Oh, yes!" "Hallaluah!" "I'll vow!" And someone screamed something in a language I didn’t understand; it sounded sort of like, "ommgodamonabambo!" Both
my aunts were now standing, bobbing up and down on the balls of their fat feet, their hands in the air, great half moons of sweat on their black dresses.

Fear clawed its way into my consciousness. There was a curiously copperish taste in my mouth, and I felt the hot walls closing in on me. I whispered a prayer.

"Please, Pop, help me. Make this be over. Take me home, out of here, anywhere."

The good minister's voice reached a semi-shout, a reverberating chant that was taken up then answered by the congregation, like the African tribes do in those National Geographic specials.

"Do you love Jesus?"

"Yesssss!"

"Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?"

"O Lordy, yessssss!"

Several people had left their seats and were walking around, both arms upraised, heads thrown back, doing a kind of little dance step. Both aunts had abandoned their Bibles and now bounced up and down even harder, their enormous bosoms occasionally striking me on the head. I tried to see Pop but my view was obscured by mountains of black, stained blacker with sweat, pulsating with energy.

I knew that I wasn't supposed to show fear, but I was close to panic. The heat was making me dizzy and the darkness of those enormous dresses was threatening to smother me. I could not for my very life understand what was going on.

"There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins. Are
"Hallaluah!" Bless the holy blood! Jesus be praised!

"Jesus is calling, calling to you and to me! Will you answer?" Reverend Pender's voice became a piercing wail, and it went to the very depths of my soul, like a dentist's drill. He was skipping up and down the length of the stage, a berserk toad.

A woman in the next pew fell out into the aisle, her skirt bunched around her waist, her pelvis pumping wildly, her legs jerking up and down as if she was doing the backstroke. Two elders rushed to restore decorum. They got her skirt down and placed large handkerchiefs over her lower legs, but she continued to roll from side to side, putting out some imaginary fire.

I looked for an avenue of escape, but I was surrounded by a corporeal wall screaming for salvation or something that I couldn't comprehend. My terror was raging. These people were insane, and when lunatics scream, violence soon follows. I was gasping for breath, trying with everything in me to resist the panic welling just behind my eyes.

"I want to hear it. Do you love Jesus?"

"Yeessss!"

"Do you believe He died for your sins?"

"Lord God, yeeessss!"

"And only through His blood can we be redeemed?"

"Yeessss!" "Hallaluah!" "Thine the glory!" "I'll vow!"
"Blessed be the blood of the Lamb!" "Amen!"

Another woman fell, and another sagged to her knees but was caught in mid-faint by an elder. Still Brother Pender raved on. His eyes were white circles, rolled back in his head, looking like a rabid dog just before it collapses and dies.

I was being squeezed between my aunts, then I realized Aunt Bennie was rubbing herself against me in a way that I knew just wasn't right. I tried to retreat but she had her hands around my neck, pulling my face into her ample bosom. Darkness closed around me.

Then I snapped. I let loose a scream, and swung my fists into Aunt Binnie's stomach, forcing her to release her death's grip on my head, her eyes widening into tear-filled circles. I pushed against her, but she was simply too big; I might as well have been trying to move the Rock of Ages. So I brought my heel down as hard as I could on her fat foot.

She screamed and sat down hard, making a loud belching noise like a plow horse when the blade hits a big rock. I launched myself, blind with tears, past her, shoved my grandmother out of the way, and threw myself at Pop, my thin arms locking themselves around his waist. As long as I live I will never forget the cold, slick hardness of that huge pistol against my cheek. I abandoned all pretense of pride, of courage. I could only sob.

"Please, Pop, please help me. I'm so scared. Don't let them get me. I've been good. Please, Pop, I can't help it; I'm afraid. Please, please help me." I was completely hysterical, reduced to a babbling infant by the heat, noise, and fear.
And then those cable-like arms, strong as any horse, were wrapped around me, instantly sweeping me up, as gently as one would a fallen baby bird. He stepped over a prostrate man and with giant strides carried me from that hellish place. He walked with me through the red dust, cooing to me in soft, male tones until my shaking subsided and my sanity returned. When my first words were an apology for crying, he shushed me and told me not to worry, that everything was all right. And I knew that that was true.

I don't remember much about the rest of that Sunday; I dozed in the back seat of the car until the service was over and we went home. Neither he nor I ever discussed that day again.

I wish I could say Pop lived eternally, inspiring young boys with an ideal of strength, courage, kindness, and chivalry, the essence of the southern manhood (how corny that sounds in today's ears). But he didn't. He died at the age of 98 of cancer of the liver and, in the end, weighed fifty-eight pounds. But he left me an enduring savor, and ever so often I take that ancient Colt .45 from its bed in my dresser and sit, holding it like a witching wand or a scepter, drawing another man's strength from its cold pride.

The End
THE STORE

The decayed town of Prairie Hill lies astride Farm-to-Market Road 1187 in south central Texas. In fact, FM 1187 comprises Main Street. The highway is paved now, but when I was young it was simply a graded roadbed that turned into black gumbo whenever it rained.

I guess about a hundred people still live there, too tired or lazy or worn out to move. In the 1950's, however, it was a humming hive of nearly a thousand souls, mostly leftovers who came to exploit the oil discoveries at Tulia and Corsicana in the early 20's.

This was my family fountainhead, my ancestors having immigrated from Alabama and Georgia just after the Civil War. Indeed, ninety-nine percent of the inhabitants were white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and very, very southern. I was a boy of ten, nicknamed Poot—which I hated—because of embarrassing bowel problems as a child. I've often wondered why adults seemed to find this physical weakness so entertaining. Anyway, I was too small to do any major field work, so my aunt let me help her around her store for the princely sum of ten cents an hour.

My great aunt Lucille was the biggest owner of commercial property in Prairie Hill. Her vast holdings included the cotton gin, a gas station, a deserted building of unknown purpose, and the only grocery/general store in town. Her real estate empire consisted of three more buildings than anybody else had, making her a sort of Leona Helmsley. Everybody stopped on the front porch of her general store (which didn't
have a name; it was simply "The Store") at least once a day to gossip, complain, loaf, cuss, discuss, and occasionally buy something.

One particular week the town rumbled with news that the highway department was going to build a new rest stop complete with flushing toilets and electricity on the east side of town. The kicker was that the townsfolk had to match the state's monetary contribution. To say this caused something of a stir is an understatement. Everybody had a very definite opinion on the pro's and con's of the impending situation and stopped by The Store to give voice to Aunt Lucille, who doubled as the City Manager. Some, however, were more vocal than others.

My cousin and best female friend was Wanda Joan Bronough. She was a couple of years older than I, chronologically speaking, but eons ahead in the ways of the world. I'm not saying Wanda was promiscuous because I try not to make snap judgements. Suffice it to say that, according to another cousin, she took her first lover at age eleven, and by age fifteen had slept with every adult or adolescent male in Limestone County and was working her way through Throckmorton County, with a few brief stopovers in adjacent communities. Wanda had a kind and loving disposition; well, actually she just couldn't say "no." She dispensed her favors as one would food to a starving puppy. It was, to her, just the charitable thing to do. My fundamental Baptist relatives would shake their heads, tongues clicking, and say, "Well, Wanda Joan is just a affectionate child." One thing for sure, she never lacked for dates.

Though Wanda Joan was not considered one of the county's moral models, she
voiced her opinion loudly and succinctly: "I don't give a hoot in hell what these crackers do. I'm getting out of this dump as soon as I can." And she did.

One of the boys that worked at the cotton gin was a lumbering dump truck of a guy named Billy Joe Wharton. Billy Joe had an IQ lower than his waist size, and we all knew that he got that way because of his mother. I'm not talking about genetics, either. No, we'd be standing in the middle of the road which led up to his house shooting the bull when his mother would come out and the following exchange would ensue.

She: "Billy Joe, get your big, dumb ass in this house."

He: "Up yours, old woman. Get the hell away from here and leave me alone."

She: "Don't you talk to me thataway, you smart-ass sumbitch. I'll take a bois d'arc branch to that feeble brain of yours."

He (with an upraised finger): "Nah, nah, nah, nah."

Since his mother couldn't find a limb to suit her, she would pick up a rock the size of a tennis ball and chunk it at her loving son. And she always aimed for the head. God, that woman was good! Nolan Ryan prays for an arm like hers. While we scattered for cover, there would commence the damndest rock fight you've ever seen, and the hits were usually in the ratio of two or three to one in Mama's favor. We all figured that the multiple concussions Billy Joe suffered over the years reduced his mental apparatus to a state rivaling a possum's. Therefore, his contribution to the town's decision-making machinery was completely ignored, and the last time I heard
he was confined in the State School for the Bewildered at Mexia.

Another employee at the cotton gin was The Human Pipe Organ--Junior Osgood. Sad-eyed Junior was fat, and worked as a brakeman for the T&P Railroad when it wasn't cotton season. He would come to The Store just to get a RC Cola or a Grapette and pass the time. What was most interesting about Junior was the myriad sounds that came from the assorted parts of his body. He wasn't rude, you understand; he simply had no notion that most of the noises were socially unacceptable. He would yawn loudly, showing staff-stained gums and tartared teeth. Then, after about the third swig of RC, he would let go a belch that scared the dogs that slept under the porch. If he had a cold, he would cough up something that looked like pancake batter, and he blew his nose by placing his thumb over one nostril and blowing mightily through the other. This resulted in a sort of projectile the size and color of an overripe grape.

Even when just breathing, he had a high-pitched wheeze that he interrupted with a saw-like gasp that made any conversation with him interesting. There were other sounds of course, but I won't go into them. All in all, I think Junior's bodily repertoire had a range of about three octaves and from fifty to sixty decibels. He was pathetically slow of speech and this fault coupled with his distracting physical sounds rendered any listener totally incapable of understanding anything he said.

The meanest kid in school, bar none, was a sawed off sadist named Linwood Bumgardner, who made Attila the Hun look like Mother Teresa. Linwood was not only the meanest kid in school, he was also the ugliest. He had a low forehead that
ended in a brow that served as an awning for his reptilian eyes, and his entire body was covered with mud colored freckles. His lower jaw produced an awesome underbite, and he had unusually long canine teeth which he used with great dexterity in a fight. But the most curious thing about Linwood was the length of his arms, which dangled almost to his knees. This, of course, only heightened his simian appearance. We used to joke (never to his face) that Linwood's knuckles were always scarred not from his semi-daily fistfights but from dragging them down those rocky country roads.

Antagonizing Linwood was to be avoided at all costs. He didn't challenge you to meet him in back of The Store after school. Oh, no. He simply spread his rubbery gray lips in a maniacal grin, and then flattened you with his fist or whatever object happened to be at hand. He once coldcocked Troy Edison for some imagined insult during the prayer before lunch period!

Linwood was in great demand during football season when school rivalries occasionally erupted into interscholastic brawls. He could always be found in the thick of the fight, shrieking like a tractor with a bad fan belt, happily gnawing away on some part of his opponent's anatomy.

As in all civilized societies, we found a place for Linwood. He was great when it came to castrating calves in the spring and killing hogs in the fall, although I still shudder recalling the relish with which he performed these grisly tasks.

I often wonder what happened to Linwood--and immediately check the locks on my doors. I search the credits of movies like "Texas Chainsaw Massacre" or
"Friday the Thirteenth" expecting to see him listed if not as author, at least as technical director. I sincerely hope he's doing thirty-to-life on Devil's Island, but I suspect he's the military advisor in residence to the Khmer Rouge or maybe Idi Amin.

Linwood's only contribution to the discussion was his suggestion to make the Highway Department build the park for free or find out where their wives and children lived.

Reverend Roscoe Satterfield dropped by, having completed his visitations for the morning. Reverend Satterfield was the preacher of the Four Square Gospel Church, a denomination that teetered between fanaticism and hysteria. We called them "Tambourine Shaking Baptists," and they were the spiritual and moral guardians of the community. Needless to say, Wanda Joan was not one of the members of the congregation. Strangely enough, she was (secretly) the best friend to Reverend Satterfield's winsome daughter, Wyndolyn.

Wyndolyn was to beauty what Linwood was to ugly, both studies in superlatives. She was blond and blue-eyed, with that porcelain complexion that models and movie stars kill for. And she compounded these sins with the fact that she was brilliant, kind, considerate, well-mannered, and chaste. In school she was always elected Miss Everything. Naturally, she was despised by every female within a hundred miles, and lusted after by every male for twice that diameter. I never had any designs on her--except in my dreams--for I knew that my physical attributes could never succeed in capturing the attention of one so lofty. I assumed she was destined
to become the mate of the coach's son, Buster Landis, who although a physical Adonis, possessed a mental range somewhere between Billy Joe Wharton and an armadillo.

At the time we never suspected the tricks that fate would play in our little American Gothic cosmos. It was ironic juxtaposition that Wanda Joan, who had set multiple records for sexual performances in the presence of six or more consenting adults, would end up marrying a doctor in Dallas, thus becoming one of that city's leading citizens, while the angelic Wyndolyn would flunk out of Baylor and become, first, the highest priced call girl in Dallas; second, a star in porno films; and, finally, the mistress of a U. S. Senator.

When Wyndolyn started to say something about a study she had done regarding the park for her civics class, her father told her to be quiet since young ladies did not have any opinions worth hearing. I felt a particular annoyance, but she simply said, "Yes, Daddy," and fell silent. Reverend Satterfield said he had consulted the Bible for information concerning parks and the like, and had prayed about the problem, seeking guidance, and ended by intoning, "God's will be done." Although we figured this to be a celestial dictum, it left us as bewildered as before, trying to figure out what the hell God's will was.

Just about the time that God was starting to speak through the good Reverend, Buck Mangum and his wife, Iola, staggered up. Buck was the resident bootlegger, Iola his driver and bottle washer. They were tolerated in this Baptist, all dry county because Buck made the best wine in the region, and drinking folks came from miles
around to buy it. Buck's wine was made from wild Mustang grapes in his vineyard, and he aged it in huge ceramic cisterns in the cool shadows of his well house. "Sweet Lucy" resembled a very fine Cabernet Savignon in bouquet and flavor, but possessed a subtler nuance, much like a Mouton Cadet, though lacking the robust body of the latter. What made the real difference, however, was the two gallons of Everclear that Buck added to each batch. Legend had it that an overdose of Sweet Lucy had caused one of the Poindexter boys--and they were all boozers of heroic proportions--to go blind for three days, after which he took the Pledge and went into the ministry.

Buck had been arrested several times but never convicted. Logically, these arrests were a waste of state money because you couldn't find a prospective juror within fifty miles who wasn't one of Buck's customers. Once they even brought in a special prosecutor, an arrogant, sissified little lawyer from Mount Pleasant who was a staunch abstainer and Cumberland Presbyterian, who swore he could get a conviction at a distiller's convention. But even he admitted he was overmatched when those filing into the jury selection room were heard to say to the defendant:

"Why, hello, Buck. How you been? Say 'hello' to Iola for me."

"Hi, Buck, how's the grapes this year?"

"Hey, Buck, haven't seen you down at the VFW lately."

"Say, Buck, that last dose of 'medicine' sure helped Mama's constipation. She feels like a new woman, and she's eighty-eight!"

This particular day Buck stood there on the front steps of The Store, leaning
heavily on Iola, both of them swaying to some inaudible tune, and made his
pronouncement which went something like this:

"Ay God, I think we oughta build the goddamn thin' 'cause I need a place out
ona highway where I can sell some Swee' Lucy to the passerbys. That'd sure give
the touris' trade a kick in the ass!" Iola belched blearily in agreement, and they
zigzagged off into an alcohol-induced sunset.

Someone said he didn't think that was the type of commercial enterprise we
were looking for, and Reverend Satterfield grabbed the lovely Wyndolyn and fled to
his car.

Sometime later, Edna May Stacks showed up. Edna May was one of the
school teachers, covering everything from first to eighth grade as needed. She was
very tall, thin, and had gray hair that she rinsed with Mrs. Stewart's Bluing which
left a tint that we called Goodyear Blue because it was the exact color that covered a
new whitewall tire. I've never understood why elderly women did that, though I
think the custom originated with Bedouin tribes. I still don't see how it got to Prairie
Hill, Texas.

Edna's face was elongated, with a slender nose running ridge-like down the
middle, and bulging eyes set so far apart they were almost on the sides. Wilma Jo
Hattson said if you looked at her head on, her face looked like a horn toad that had
been run over.

Anyway, Edna May seemed to have a tad of sense and because of that--plus
her college education in mathematics--she was sometimes sought for counsel. There
was one slight difficulty, however.

When Edna begin to speak, she took on a look of complete concentration, as if she were coating every word with background knowledge and presenting every idea with indelible reason. As her argument progressed, so did her rate of speech, and her eyes rolled slightly upward, as if looking for divine approval. And as her words came faster, her tongue began to dart in and out, moistening her lips, looking for all the world like a lizard hanging on a screen door. The effect on the listeners was hypnotic. They would find themselves fixed on that pink sausage that was doing a horizontal jack-in-the-box and hearing less and less of anything she said. Faster and faster would come the ideas, and faster and faster would come the flicking of her tongue. Finally, when she was at the climax of her argument (and at maximum speed), her eyes would roll INDEPENDENTLY in their sockets! This occasionally caused some listeners to break out in applause. This physical act proved to be of mixed blessings, for although it entertained a lot of folks, it rendered them completely incapable of remembering anything she said, and, therefore, coming up with any idea of what she was trying to tell them. This dazzling darting also gave her the name of Liz, which was short for The Lizard Lady.

Another person who frequented The Store was a genius named Travis Tankersly. The Tankersly family lived far out on the road that ran toward Coolidge and, for the most part, they were the closest things to an ape colony. Some people said they remembered when old man Tankersly started to walk upright. Others said they remembered further back than that, and that was when Grandfather Tankersly,
the founder of the clan, was born with an opposable thumb.

There were three girls, Inez, who was in her 20's, and twins, Dora Fay and Doris May, seventeen. They shaved neither their legs nor their armpits, and ambled about in shapeless frocks made from flour sacks. If some natural urge arose while working in the fields, they calmly squatted in place until done. Though they came into heat with monthly regularity, all the local boys were loath to get close to them unless they had partaken liberally of some Sweet Lucy. Even then, some had thrown up due to the smell.

The oldest boy, Minor, was no better. He was stocky, dumb as a stump, and possessed of enough body hair to properly be called a pelt. He had been nursed to age ten due to his mother’s belief that as long as she was giving milk, she couldn’t become pregnant. Another child, less than a year later, disproved this quaint fable, but by that time Minor had no intention of giving up his place in the maternal scheme of things, and so she nursed both him and the newborn, one on each side, with equal dexterity.

Minor abandoned school in the sixth grade when he passed the required attendance age of sixteen, and went to work for the highway department picking up road kills. He would drop by The Store to buy a Baby Ruth or Moon Pie, and describe in nauseous detail some particularly interesting corpse he’d acquired that week.

How Travis emerged from this herd must have been a phenomenon to rank right up there with fishes taking to land, sort of a genetic mutation in reverse.
Now Travis was no Frankie Avalon; in fact he shared the pudgy hands and sloping brows of his siblings, and his ears stuck straight out from his head like albino butterflies, but he had not inherited their unequaled sense of stupidity or their complete absence of deductive reasoning. In point of fact, Travis was a genius.

Travis' thing in life was numbers. In any shape, form or fashion, if some problem had to do with mathematics, whether in theory or practice, Travis was a past master. Those of us that had gone to school with him knew of this unique talent which bordered on the mystical. If Travis had been mute or catatonic, he would have qualified for the title of Idiot Savant. As it was, Travis would simply stare softly into space, his ears wiggling like crazy, and pronounce the correct answer.

This came to the fore one day in our eighth grade elementary algebra class. Miss Stacks had an intricate problem in trigonometry which she had prepared for her classes at Hill County Junior College lying on her desk when Travis happened to pass by. He paused long enough to study it--about ten seconds--then announced the correct result.

"How on earth did you come up with that?" Miss Stacks asked.

"Simple," Travis replied, then proceeded to explain how any other answer was impossible.

Nor was Travis' talent confined to theory. He was constantly building things, and his ability to measure objects ACCURATELY by sight alone was something to see. If, for instance, you were building a barn and you found a joust to be thirteen feet, seven and three-eighths inches long and Travis came along, looked at the board,
and proclaimed it to be thirteen feet, seven and five-eighths inches, then you’d better go back and remeasure.

But perhaps Travis’ most fertile field was inventions. He would come up with ideas that were either 1) years before their time, 2) so zany as to defy belief, 3) of absolutely no application to the human race whatsoever, or 4) reeking with a stellar brilliance.

One of the models he made was a one pound coffee can nailed to the end of a broom stick with a bit of string sticking out. He said it would be gasoline powered and used to cut grass. That sent us into paroxysms of laughter.

Another was a pie plate which, when the rim was turned down a bit, sailed incredible distances, made floating turns, and sometimes stalled almost to a hover. Travis solemnly described the aerodynamic forces that caused this to us but, of course, his dissertation on lift, drag, asymmetrical force, and Bernoulli’s Principle left us gasping with dumb. We nicknamed him "The Mad Scientist."

In fact, Travis was almost the first person at the impromptu town meeting on a fiery Friday afternoon. The temperature hovered at a terminal 110 degrees, and the heat sent undulating waves off the semi-bare, tar colored cotton fields. The sun-cooked cotton stalks squatted like burnt and withered children, and everything even marginally animal-like passionately sought whatever shade they could find.

Travis arrived at The Store the same time as Billy Joe Wharton and Junior Osgood. They had been on the porch for only a minute when they were joined by Buck Mangum, Iola, and Buck’s perpetual jug which was soon going around like an
berserk carrousel. Their conversation covered the usual: cotton prices, the weather, Orin Rutherford's two-headed calf, sex, the Tankersly twins, sex, and the proposed rest stop.

Now this "town meeting" was not your run-of-the-mill Norman Rockwellian gathering. No, these people were hot, dirty, and irritable. Their begrimed, sweatstained bib overalls and gimme hats that sported a permanent "ring around the band" identified them as people who lived off the land and were already suffering from a less than fortuitous cotton and wheat season. They were not, in any way, disposed toward angelic temperament. However, whatever fire that was harbored in their voices was quickly subdued when Linwood Bumgardner slithered up in his 1951 Dodge pickup. He was sucking on a pint of sloe gin, and when in his cups was even known to attack adults.

The debate, or rather the question of whether or not to accept the state's alms for the new rest stop, escalated quickly. The idea of an additional pull on an already strained economy did not sit well with these folks.

"Just where in the hell are we going to get all this damn money the Highway Department wants?" Junior said. He punctuated his question with a belch that sound like an old eight foot tarpaulin being slowly ripped down the seam.

"We'll have to raise some kind of tax, I guess," Buck answered.

"We can't afford any kind of tax," replied Travis, "Unless we institute a whiskey tax on your Sweet Lucy."

"Your dying ass!" Buck said.
"What the hell does 'institute' mean?" Billy Joe asked with the blank look of a stone.

"It's 'institute' you dummy," Junior replied, "And it means to get started... well, sort of."

Iola smiled a confused, besotted smile. "I've got an idea," she announced. "Let's get started with a tax on religion. With all these pious hypocrites around here, we would have the money in no time."

As if on cue, the Reverend Satterfield appeared at the corner of The Store. Reeking with righteousness, he drew himself up to his full 5' 5" and intoned, "Oh, daughter, do not blaspheme. Do not approach the Word of the Lord lightly."

"Well, Reverend, just what the hell do you suggest?" Buck asked.

Thinking that he had been seriously asked for his opinion, the good reverend basked in an aura of self importance, stared dramatically heavenward for a full half minute and stated that the answer lay in prayer.

Billy Joe gained sudden enlightenment. "You mean pray that those Highway Department bastards drop dead or something?"

Before Reverend Satterfield could answer, Linwood pitched in. "Billy Joe, get your dumb ass out of here." He turned to address the rest of the group. "Now here's my idea. I've been reading this book, see, called Death Chicks from China, and these babes go around torturing guys. This book describes over a hundred of the worst tortures known since Hitler. What we do is pick the ten best ones, write them down and mail them to the head guy in this department. We include the statement
that we know where his kids go to school. I personally like the one about giving somebody a sulfuric acid enema."

Travis smiled wryly. "Linwood, I somehow just don't think that will accomplish anything except landing us all in Huntsville for about thirty years."

Iola's neurons misfired once again.

"What the hell. If we can't tax sin, why not make it pay? I mean all us women--and any of you guys that want to--could kinda pass our favors around. At a price, of course. We'd have to excuse Wyndolyn but, what the hell, me and old Wanda Joan and them Tankersly twins could raise enough to pay for this roadside sonofabitch in no time. 'Course we'd have to clean up the twins some. At least so's they wouldn't smell like hog shit."

Reverend Satterfield's complexion reached apoplectic proportions.

He fairly screamed, "No, no, this is the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah and the whores of Babylon. I will not countenance this lust of the flesh. I will be heard as one crying in the wilderness, and I shall condemn the followers of Mary Magdalene. I shall not . . ."

"Oh, shut your ass up," Linwood said. His intake of sloe gin was really beginning to show. "Another one I like is where they take this guy and put his thing through a hole drilled in a steel plate. Then they take this tiger, see, that hasn't eaten in about a week and turn him--the tiger, not the guy--loose. How does that sound?"

Suddenly everyone noticed that Travis' ears had begun to twitch, and knew that this was of great import because it was a sign that a revelation was imminent.
Silence fell like an anvil through a greenhouse. These people realized that they were in the presence of genius, and the oracle was about to speak to them.

Travis' ears flapped to a halt.

"Why don't we build the rest stop ourselves?"

"Whaaaaat?"

"Look," Travis continued, "this county's not named Limestone for nothing. We could cut the stone from that quarry south of town in no time if all the men pitched in. We could use Billy Joe and Junior's trucks to haul the rocks in. This wouldn't take time away from the fields 'cause the cotton and wheat crops are ruined anyway. Minor Tankersly could get any additional supplies from the supply shed at the Highway Department. In effect, that would be their donation. Lucille could donate some food, and the other women could do the cooking. Buck could give the work crew some Sweet Lucy . . . as long as they stayed reasonably sober, and the good reverend could bless the effort and work the water barrel. Finally, we could all figure our time at about $20.00 per hour and deduct that amount from our income taxes as donations to a public service. When this is coupled with our cotton and wheat losses, we should be able to just about come out even."

Everyone was stuck dumb. In less than thirty seconds Travis had solved a problem which had been discussed without progress for the past three months. The circle nodded, oohed and ahhed, congratulating Travis and marvelling at his brilliance of thought.

But Travis simply rambled off into The Store to get himself a Seven-UP.
I lost track of Travis—as I did nearly everybody—over the years. He's probably the CEO of General Electric or the Chief Researcher in charge at DataSystems. Or he's an alcoholic bum living in a cardboard box in downtown Los Angeles, showing the other bums how to solve Rubick's Cube in only twenty-six moves.

I didn't keep up with Prairie Hill's citizenry as I should have, either. I moved away when I was seventeen, but I can't help wondering about them. I passed through there several years ago. The rest stop is still there, sturdy as the Pyramids. Its walls of polished limestone--three feet thick--glisten in the sun, withstanding everything short of a 50 megaton nuclear blast, though graffiti has almost completely camouflaged its native beauty. The rest stop stands there in the Texas sun, sparkling through the dust, bedecked with wasp's nests, a memorial to that special summer. I stared at it a while, remembering, then I drove out to the cemetery, just to look around.

Wanda Joan was there, dead at thirty-eight of breast cancer. Those magnificent breasts of which she was so proud had slain her.

Aunt Lucille had finally died at a 102, completely mad, raving about a long ago somewhere in the South where she had left her childhood.

Buck Mangum died of a stroke they said. Dropped dead while sitting out by the well house, drunk as Cooter Brown on his own wine, talking to the resident mockingbird.

His wife, Iola, had been told by an old colored woman who read fortunes that
she would live to be a hundred and die quietly in bed. Fate queered that when she got drunk while helping a wheat harvesting crew and fell into the threshing machine.

Milton Lowry, a real nice guy and Reverend Satterfield's nephew, ran off with one of the Tankersly girls though nobody could remember if it was Dora Fay or Doris May. Everybody just hoped that they would keep on going. The rest of Tankerslys are still there, struggling upward through evolution.

The rest have disappeared. For better or worse, a time has passed away and a way of life with it. Like I said, it's left me with a lot of memories, some good, some bad. But I guess the thing I remember most is the fact that there wasn't a single person named "Bubba" in the whole town.

The End
Dear Mama and Papa;

I take pen in hand to bring you all the latest news. I arrived here safe and sound four days ago, and this morning I was sworn in as a Private in Company D of the Frontier Battalion of the Texas Rangers. At 16, I am the youngest member, and I'm afraid I had to tell a small "fib"--I said I was 18--in order to enlist. The letter of character reference from Judge Rheinlander was of great help. I know you are disappointed that I have abandoned my studies at the university, especially when I am
within a year of obtaining my degree, but I must go to seek my fortune. Besides, you always said that I was a precocious child, and I have brought near thirty books with me to continue my studies. Indeed, several of the boys here are quite well educated, and spirited arguments, sometimes in Greek and Latin, are often heard around the bunk house. They say that my grasp of philosophy and rhetoric are the equal of any they have ever heard.

Our commanding officer is the redoubtable Captain Leander H. McNelly, as famous for his exploits here on the frontier as he is for his service in General Wade Hampton’s Legion during the War. It is said he took part in thirty-two engagements and was wounded seven times. He fought in such memorable cavalry encounters as Cross Keys, Champion’s Hill, Thoroughfare Gap, and Yellow Tavern, this last being the battle in which the gallant General Stuart lost his life. Although Captain McNelly rose to the rank of Colonel in the Army, he prefers to be addressed by his current Ranger title.

Physically, the Captain is lean as a rail. About 5’ 10” tall, his weight could not be more than 150 lbs. His features are as spare as his frame, with an aquiline nose and piercing eyes of the deepest blue I have ever seen. His complexion is fair, seemingly unaffected by the climate here, and his cheeks contain an almost maidenly blush (tho’ one would be very imprudent to mention this to his face). His brow is noble and his cheekbones high, verifying his Scot’s background. His hair and Van Dyke are both coal black, although he is a somewhat elderly man. (I would guess his age at about thirty or thirty-five years.) He carries himself as straight as a sabre,
whether mounted or afoot. His voice is soft and well modulated, and he invariably
gives commands in a timbre that demands obedience. The men all love him
exceedingly well, and swear they will follow him anywhere.

Captain McNelly hails from Georgia where his family were plantation owners
of some note before the War. I believe that his father was a lawyer and that he, too,
was trained in that discipline at Transylvania College. There are divers opinions as to
why he left his home in the "Peach State" for the rugged plains of Texas. One
supposition is that he killed a man in a duel over the affections of a grass widow.
Another is that he was involved in an unhappy love affair with a senator's wife. Still
another--I shudder to relate it--is that he possessed an "unnatural" affection for his
stepsister.

As he is a confirmed bachelor and quite handsome, I can easily believe that a
woman was at the core of his tribulations. But having heard so much about his
courage, honor and spotless character, I cannot believe that he would lower himself to
impugn a member of the fair sex in any way. Besides being a paragon of Christian
virility and an inspiration to all who know him, he is a lay preacher in the Baptist
Church and frequently leads services here. In a word, he is straight as a string.

Papa, your present of the two Colt's revolvers arrived yesterday on the
Butterfield coach, and I thank you for them. I know you carried them with
distinction during the recent struggle and I can assure you that I will do them
honorable. I carry them in two engraved Mexican holsters along with a large Bowie
knife I recently purchased, and I cut quite a figure when I take a turn about town. I
am also glad I heeded your advice and purchased a new Winchester repeating rifle in 44-40 calibre. Every man in the company, save two, are thus armed. Of these exceptions, one is armed with a Spencer carbine which he "liberated" from a yankee soldier during the War, and the other carries a fifty calibre Sharps buffalo gun. He claims it will kill a man even if it only hits him in the arm. Considering the size of the bore, I am inclined to believe him.

Mama, I want to thank you for letting me have Aunt Dora's little secretary. It just fits my saddlebags and I will write often, sending you my dispatches from the field, so to speak. I also appreciate the supply of pencils as I intend to do some sketches in order to enliven my correspondence. Well, my bunk-mate, Harley Throckmorton (we call him "Buck") has just told me the Captain has called a general muster, so I must continue my missive later.

* * * * *

From: L. H. McNelly, Captain, Co. "D", Texas Rangers

To: Honorable J. Frank Norris, Adjutant General, State of Texas

Dear Sir:

1. I write my weekly report in some haste, the reason for which will soon become apparent.

2. Today, I swore in three new recruits to the Ranger Force. They are to be paid private's pay ($40.00 per month plus found), and each has furnished his own horse,
saddle, rifle, sidearms and other accoutrements. They are: (1) Jonathan Henry Lowrey of Baxar Country, (2) Marcellus Eugene Payton of DeWitt County, and (3) Lawton Benard Laws of Parker County. Please forward their warrants at your earliest convenience.

3. Last evening (the 10th inst.), a scout rode in with distressing news. He said a large raiding party of Indians and Mexicans (rumor has it they number nearly a hundred rifles) has swept down from the Llano Estecado and have attacked ranches all along the border. According to his sources, they have burned at least twelve, including the Rancho Santa Catarina, Rancho Porvenier, the Turkey Track, the Snake-Goes-Walking, the Rancho de Nuestra Senora, plus two unnamed spreads: those of Felix Von Hoelenstein and Heros Koonsmann. The scout said that over a hundred men, women and children had been killed, and that the surviving women and children have been ravished and carried off into slavery. He said the leader of this band is Ramon Salazar, also called "Iron Jacket" because he often wears a cast-off piece of Spanish armor which he found on the prairie, and which he believes renders him impervious to white men's bullets. His gang is truly a "cut throat" bunch, made up of Mexicans, halfbreeds, and Apaches, with a smattering of Comanches. They are said to be pushing nearly five hundred head of stolen horses and cattle toward Val Verde, apparently with the purpose of crossing the Rio Grande at Jimanez' Ferry.

4. I have sent for my best scout, Lazarus, and notified the troop to be prepared to move at a moment's notice. However, due to illness, leaves, and a recent hanging, I will be able to put only sixteen men in the field. But these men are Rangers, though
three of them are untried, and I feel that sixteen will be aplenty.

5. I intend to leave tomorrow at first light, provided Lazarus has come. I intend to go north along the South Llano River to the point where it joins the Concho. This way, if Salazar has any spies in the area, they will surmise that we are heading northwest and, thus, off his trail. When I reach Leona Creek, I will bend back westward and increase the pace. When I reach Buckhorn Canyon, I will turn southwest for about seventy miles, using it to screen our movements. At the south end of Buckhorn, I will turn south for several miles until I reach Mount Calm where I will provision. Then I will head due south for Sonora, thus putting my force in a position to intercept the miscreants whether they go by way of Carrizo Springs or Piedras Negras. I believe that although they have near three days head start, the cattle will slow them down and by hard riding my men can catch them before they reach the sanctuary of Mexico. I will continue my report and send it to you directly upon my return.

* * * * *

Dear Mama and Papa:

Please excuse my poor penmanship, but I have been in the saddle for near thirty-six hours without pause, and I am wore out. We are out to catch some desperados that have been savaging the countryside before they can cross into Mexico, and it has been a trial, I can tell you. We’ve had nothing to eat but some
bacon, jerked beef and biscuits, all washed down with cold water. O dear mama, I would die for some of your boiled okra or collard greens! It rained most of the night but that did not deter Captain McNelly. Astride his big bay charger, he led us up and down, left and right, north and south, until I am completely lost. We must trust in our scout, Lazarus, with our lives.

Here I must pause to tell you about Lazarus. No one seems to know his real name; he is called Lazarus because, according to him, he has risen from the grave. Until late, he was a prosperous Mexican rancher living on this side of the river and his allegiance was to Texas. Then, whilst away to Galveston on business, his ranch was raided by some of his countrymen. They burned his ranch, murdered his hands (including his two sons), and ravished his wife and three daughters, one but on the brink of blossoming womanhood. His wife, unable to bear the shame, took her own life. His oldest daughter lost her mind and wandered off onto the prairie, never to be heard from again. The others have gone into the Carmalite Convent in Monterrey. Crazed with grief, he roamed the border for nearly a year, seeking the identity of the assassins. Failing this, he gave himself over to the Rangers as a scout. He is a pitiless man, as driven as the devil himself, unafraid of God or man, constantly seeking death. Indeed, he often curses the Name of God much to the irritation of the men. And his hatred knows no bounds.

Last evening we came upon the camp of two of the raiders. Their horses had give out, and they had been abandoned by their comrades. So much for that old saw about "honor among thieves!" Anyway, they were questioned at length by Captain
McNelly, but they insisted that they would not "squeel" on their friends. The Captain then summoned Lazarus and conferred with him briefly.

"Si, mi Capitan," Lazarus said, and quickly bound the men's hands behind them. He then threw a lasso around their necks and, mounting his dapple iron mule, led them to a small post oak about fifty yards away. I could not discern his purpose; certainly not to hang them for the tree was only eight or nine feet tall. But he cast both ropes over the highest limb, turned the bitter end around his saddle horn and, with soft clucking sounds, urged his mule forward three or four steps. This pulled the men up until only the toes of their boots were frantically inscribing curlicues in the mud. He held them there for perhaps one minute until their faces had started to turn bright purple. Then, he released them, and the Captain began questioning them again. If their answers were devious or vague, the process was repeated. When he was satisfied that he had obtained all the information he could, the Captain turned and addressed the troop.

"Boys," he said, "this is a hard land and these are hard men. They have chosen to ride the hoot-owl trail and now must pay for their transgressions. Out here, justice must be swift and sure, and we must be judge, jury, and executioner. We must do our Christian duty without prejudice. Indeed, if any man here were guilty of such outrages as these men have committed, I would not hesitate to place him up there with these felons. I will go even further. I would hang my own brother if I caught him riding a stolen horse. Again, I want to say that this punishment is harsh, but life out here on the frontier is harsh. You must steel up your souls and do your duty."
Think about the men they have killed; the women and fair children they have ravished; the tender babes they have torn from their mother's breast in order to bash out their brains. Reserve your pity for those who deserve it. Think only of your duty. Let no man avert his eyes. If the penalty if too much for you, then you have no place in the Ranger service. FORM RANKS!"

Thus saying, we formed and watched as the Captain spoke briefly with both men. Then, he remounted his horse and stared at them without speaking for a full minute. There was not a sound to be heard. Where his thoughts were, I know not; I hope he was praying for their souls. Then he nodded to Lazarus, who clucked to his mule, which again took several steps and lifted the men on tiptoe as before. This time, however, Lazarus clucked twice more and the mule took two more steps, leaving the poor wretches dangling and, finally, struggling into eternity. They jerked for three or four minutes, making the most horrible sounds and swinging to and fro, until death brought them peace. I wanted to stop up my ears and shut my eyes, but I dared not. If I am to be a Ranger, I must have grit and accustom myself to such sights. So, with quivering chin, I saw the thing through.

* * * * *

CONTINUANCE:

Sir, I acquired the services of Lazarus, and the troop started out the next morning. We rode hard, keeping to the aforementioned plan and managing to keep
our movements secret. My scouts reported finding the trail of the stolen cattle and, even with the recent rain, we had no difficulty following it. The men behaved admirably, and I did not hear a single complaint. We reached the south end of Buckhorn Canyon and had just crossed Salado Creek when we happened upon two of the rustlers. Though they denied any complicity in the raid, they had over three hundred dollars in gold on their person. We searched their traps and found several articles belonging to old Mister Hoelenstein, including a tintype of his eldest daughter, Eula Mae. We also recovered a revolver with the brand of the Turkey Track burned into the grip. I questioned them at length and found out that the main party was to cross the river at Jimanez’ Ferry—as I suspected—and meet buyers of the horses at the Los Chisos Ranch. This being the case, I have decided to forego provisioning at Mount Calm and head straight for the river. I will continue my report as soon as practical.

P. S. We hanged the two rustlers to a tree.

* * * * *

Dear Mama and Papa;

I am resuming my narrative after a most extraordinary morning. I will continue to write as long as I can since the Captain and Lazarus are out scouting, and I’m sure we’ll be on the march as soon as they return.
We rode through the night, stopping only to rest the horses and to grab a moment's sleep. We forded the Rio Grande just as dawn was breaking and another half hour found us behind a low ridge just to the east of the Los Chisos Ranch. As I was riding in the front rank, I was halted next to Captain McNelly when Lazarus returned from his latest sortie. He told the Captain that the main ranch house lay about half a mile further on, and that there was smoke coming out of the chimney. He also said that immediately over the ridge there were ten or eleven men cutting wood, but he had seen no signs of a band such as we had expected. He said the woodcutters had not seen him and were unaware of our presence.

"Well, I swan," said the Captain. "I cannot fathom this. They cannot have simply vanished!"

The Captain then signaled us to form a circle about him and addressed us in low tones. "Boys, there is something unusual going on here, but I am not quite sure what. But you joined the Rangers seeking action and, by God, action is what you'll get! We are going to attack the ranch house over this ridge. We'll have the sun at our backs and the element of surprise in our favor. Form battle line and when I give the word, we will move forward at a gallop. Kill every man you see. Spare the women and children under ten years of age if you can. Ride hard, shoot straight, and be sure to pick your man. Make every shot count. And remember, 'Fortes fortuna iuvant!'" (This means "Fortune favors the brave").

He then spoke directly to me. "Payton, I know this is your first action, but I'm sure you will do your duty. Stay close to me, follow my lead, and you will come
through this scrape just fine." And he favored me with a fatherly smile.

O, my excitement was at a fever pitch as we formed up. I started to draw my rifle from its scabbard but the Captain said, no, to use my pistol as this would be close work. So drawing my trusty Colt (which I nearly dropped in my eagerness), I awaited the fatal order. It was not long in coming.

Captain McNelly quickly surveyed our line, drew his revolver, and crying, "Forward, men!" plunged over the ridge. My horse, too, sprang forward with such power that I was almost unseated, but I managed to stay in the saddle as our line swept forward.

The wood cutters, upon seeing this mass of armed men pouring down on them at breakneck speed, dropped their tools and sprang for their rifles. In a thrice, bullets were whistling in both directions. I immediately loosed two shots without telling effect as some of the Mexicans quickly mounted their horses, evidently intending to warn the occupants of the house. Captain McNelly shouted to me to follow him, and we set off in hot pursuit of four of them. The Captain fired, and one flung his arms up and toppled from the saddle. I fired again and thought I saw my man flinch, but he turned and sent a ball screaming past my ear. The chase grew hotter, and we closed the distance rapidly. I fired again, and my man's horse went down in a heap. He was still trying to extricate himself from the poor beast when we galloped past, and I extended my arm and shot him through the head at a range of three or four feet. I didn't pause but turned my attentions to the "vaquero" in front of me. He fired several shots over his shoulder but, of course, they flew harmlessly by. The Captain,
meantime, had shot another, and together we closed in on our remaining adversary. All three of us were firing when a jolt struck my arm (like when you hit your "funny bone"), and my pistol went flying from my grasp. I drew my other gun and just then saw our man go down. But imagine our surprise when he sprang to his feet, his pistol still in his hand! The Captain shouted, "Kill him as quickly as you can, then rejoin the troop!" then turned his horse around and sped away. I rode on, holding my fire until I could be sure of a "hit," bending low behind my horse's neck to offer as little target as possible. When I was about twenty paces from the man, I realized that he was no longer shooting, possibly because he had exhausted his ammunition. I raised up, took careful aim, and placed shots three shots directly into his breast. He was dead before he hit the ground.

I did not tarry but hurried back in case any of my "brother" Rangers needed my help. I stopped only long enough to retrieve my lost pistol and saw that a ball had struck it just in front of the cylinder, that being the jolt I felt when I lost it.

I rode back to the foot of the ridge, but the fighting was done. The bodies of the Mexicans were scattered about like discarded dolls. Only one Ranger had been wounded and that but slightly; a ball had nipped off his left ear lobe. I rode up to a group which included Lazarus and Captain McNelly. They were questioning a Mexican woman who, though terrified, was talking freely. The exchange was thus:

Captain: "Where are the others, old woman?"

Woman: "There are no others, senor."

Captain: "Do not lie to me. There is a special place in hell for those who lie
to me."

Woman: "I do not lie, senor. I have worked here for many years, and you have killed all the ranch hands. I swear it."

Captain: "You are a black liar. I was told that near a hundred men were on their way to Rancho Los Chisos. It was a dying declaration."

Woman: "But, senor, this is not Rancho Los Chisos; this is Rancho Las Pulgas. Rancho Los Chisos is lower down the river, perhaps a mile or two, I'm not sure!"

Captain: "Well, I'll be double damned! Boys, we have lost the element of surprise, and we cannot attack a force of such size if they know we are coming and are ready for us. Wait here while Lazarus and I scout out the trail, but be prepared to ride like hell when we return!"

Instantly the Captain swung into his saddle and rode away with Lazarus, leaving us to gape with lax jaws at the carnage around us. I asked one of--forgive me, but the Captain is coming back now, and I must postpone my journal.

* * * * *

CONTINUANCE:

Sir, we continued our pursuit, crossed the river and struck the Rancho Los Chisos (or so we thought) just after dawn. We fought a quick, spirited action, killing twelve men on purpose and one woman by accident. Our losses were nil; Homer
Hunnicutt sustained a slight wound to his ear. As it turned out, the ranch was not Los Chisos at all but the Rancho Los Pulgas. Knowing that the thieves would now be aware of our presence and would have surmised our purpose, I recrossed the river, hoping to either get them to divide their force in an effort to locate us, or to draw them into chasing us toward the Eighth Cavalry garrison at Eagle Pass. Their course of action was the former.

We had ventured only a little distance when, rounding a slight bend, we ran smack into about thirty-five of the scoundrels. I immediately ordered a charge and, tired as both men and horses were, they went forward with a will. The bandits, surprised by our audacity, fired two volleys and took to their heels. We chased them as far as we could, but our horses were simply rode out. We could do nothing to prevent their escape, but they left seven of their "compadres" behind in the form of corpses.

I regret to inform you that we suffered two casualties. One was Sergeant Eustace Dollar who was shot through the mouth, the ball lodging in the back of his neck. His speech is unintelligible, but he says he is still able to ride.

The other was our newest recruit, Marcellus Eugene Payton, who was felled by a shot through the breast just as our attack commenced. I was riding by his side and caught him as he went down. He said that it wasn't bad, but my practiced eye instantly saw that his wound was mortal. I stopped and lowered him gently to the ground. He was in no pain and seemed quite peaceful. I asked him if there was anything I could do for him. He simply said, "Please, Captain, send my traps to my
mother and tell her that I love her." He then expired without a struggle.

He was a brave boy and had distinguished himself in the action at Las Pulgas. It is terrible to witness the death of one so young, but it will be noted that he died doing his duty. He gallantly gave his life in the Ranger service and the service of Texas. *In pace requiescat!*

I am sending his body and his effects, along with this report, back with Ranger Dollar. I would ask that you send his things to his folks as soon as possible, and I will visit them in person as soon as I return.

The troop will continue south toward Eagle Pass as soon as the horses are rested in hopes of catching up with the gang. We cannot cross the river again in our condition and to stay here is to invite an ambush by superior numbers.

I hope that my "excursion" into the Republic of Mexico will not be reported. Perhaps I should not have done it, but my ardor was up and the thrill of the chase clouded my reason. In any case, if we find any more of the rustlers, my objective is to kill as many as I can and retrieve the stolen cattle. Colonel Richard King of the King Ranch has posted a large reward for them.

I will report to you in person and in more detail immediately upon my return.

Respectfully submitted,

L. H. McNelly, Captain

The End
The heat. I'll always remember the heat, a killing heat that saturates man and beast, leaving the entire country immobile, gasping for whatever air is stirred to movement in this desolate place. And the color! WHITE! Everything so bright that it leaves you almost snowblind with the brilliance of the noons. The whiteness that is everywhere, undulating off the dusty roads, ricocheting off the albino buildings, festering in your nose and mouth as you try to nap in the midday inferno.

The nights are no better; a few sweat-soaked hours of tossing under the mosquito nets before dawn comes and summoned us to our aircraft once again. Oh yes, all takeoffs are made just at that hour before the heat sneaks in and steals the lift from our wings. Only in flight does some semblance of cool prevail but even then you sweat, not from the heat but from fear.

I uncoil from my cocoon, stretching slowly and start to dress. My movements are slow, sleepy, like the stirrings of a drowned man. I stagger down to the dirt floored hut that serves as a mess hall. Bleary-eyed, I stand in line to receive greasy eggs like heaps of yellow rags, bacon shriveled like tapeworms, all plopped on my mess tray. I get a cup of coffee and join the other flight crews. The coffee has been transported in empty fuel cans and bears the nauseating taste of kerosene. I drink it simply out of habit. I use it to wash down the salt tablets and anti-malarial pills, neither of which do much good. I sit gently, pampering my hemorrhoids which are
the common complaint of men doomed to spend long hours in the cockpit, listening to the snoring of the engines. I stare at my tray. We are not fighter pilots, mounting aluminum chargers to do battle accompanied by trumpet salvos and waving maidens. No, we are the tired, diseased cargo pilots, the wilted salads of the Marine Corps, soaked through with exhaustion, pithed emotionally, our eyes like hollow olives. Our ambiance is death.

* * * * *

What brought me to this insanity, I wonder? Certainly no rabid commitment to king and country, no Galahad-like devotion to a blind quest, no burning desire to drape my name with honor and glory. No, my reserve unit was called up. Sort of ironic, really. The instrument I had employed to evade involvement in this war was the very trap that sent me into its maelstrom.

I had finished my enlistment, fulfilled my commitment, and I didn't want to risk the further disruption of my life by the national pursuit of killing off our fellow earth-occupants. I had totally regressed to a civilian mindset and a civilian way of life. Oh, sure, I went to my Reserve meetings all right, but they consisted mostly of quasi-military get-togethers where we indulged our passion for flying at the government's expense and spent many pleasurable hours at the Officer's Club. It was idyllic. And the rest of my life was just as ordered, just as settled, permeated through and through with tincture of middle America. As I said, it was idyllic.
I was one of the lucky few to come out of the Marines at a time when the airlines were hiring anything that wore wings and walked slowly past their front door. When the war started, I knew I had a bird's nest on the ground: I was 4-A and had (I thought) a critical skill. So with this self-deluding security, I took the next logical step: I got married.

Jo Anne was the perfect choice. She was my college sweetheart, possessed of Wheaties-induced beauty, no physical or mental disabilities, and reasonably developed intelligence. This insured that she would keep my house, care for my physical needs, be reasonably faithful, and not embarrass me in public.

We settled into a modest two bedroom house situated in one of the better sections of Dallas, scarcely a mile from Love Field. The down payment was a wedding gift from my father-in-law. Since neither Jo Anne nor I had any inclination toward reproducing ourselves, we enjoyed the freedom to travel, fish, read, paint (her hobby), write (my hobby), and myriad other things that were made possible by our self-enforced sterility. And as time progressed, our marriage, if not the passionate union of James Stewart and June Allison, was at least comfortable, built on mutual "liking" and unencumbered by the twin anchors of mewling brats and backbreaking debt. There were a few arguments, of course, and these were unique, for although they were relatively scarce, they bore a brutality and ugliness out of all proportion to their importance. And their remembrance was exceptionally long lived.

When these armageddons occurred, my job was my salvation. Eighty hours a month I went to the airport, read the weather and maintenance bulletins, flirted with
the female ground personnel, and moved a hundred thousand pounds of aircraft and
its contents from point A to point B. Enroute, I supervised my aerial office, mentally
seduced the stylishly clad flight attendants and, provided there was no disrespectful
weather or mechanical complaints, arrived at my destination in succulent comfort.
After resting overnight at a modern, comfortable, well appointed hotel, I would arise
the nest morning and repeat the procedure. For this I was paid an obscenely
exorbitant salary.

Because I have NEVER received a certified, signature-required letter that
brought good news, I should have know something was amiss as soon as the postman
said, "Sign here, please." I stared at the envelope for a long time, lost in
contemplation of its possibilities.

Well, what the hell. I ripped it open.

"From blah, blah, blah. To blah, blah, blah. SUBJECT: REASSIGNMENT
TO ACTIVE DUTY EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY.

1. You will report to Commanding Officer, 249th Air Transport Squadron,
3rd Marine Air Group, Marine Air Wing; El Toro, California for redeployment to
CinC, FMFPac.

2. Report by 1200, 10 May 1966. Individual travel is authorized. There
were a couple of additional "blah, blah, blahs," but the essence was there. My
world, so recently conceived in smug assurance and dedicated to my personal
hedonism, had completely collapsed. There was no recourse, no appeal. To defy the
powers that be would invite a lengthy jail term, and I had neither the guts nor the
inclination to become either an inmate or a Canadian fugitive. My demi-paradise was finished, kaput, as cut off from me as a physical amputation which, in fact, it was. And so I came to Viet Nam.

* * * * *

I stare at my tray. I do not want to fly today, or any day for that matter. But today is worse than usual. Today I am burdened with the ultimate cargo, the silent testimony of man's insanity, the proclamation of the depths to which man can sink. Corpses. The bundled remains of hopes and dreams, of inspirations and erections, of magnificent unfulfilled potentials now reduced to 180 pounds of decaying meat (if you take the average; some corpses are obviously lighter, especially if they are missing several parts). I wish for the myopic mentality of my copilot, Carl. He can find beauty even in death. He compounds this pollyanna attitude with the disgusting habit of nearly always being in a good mood.

Once Carl and I ferried some supplies to a besieged Marine unit which, the night before, had fought a fearsome battle against overwhelming odds. The battle had raged back and forth across the spine of some nameless ridge for many hours and, toward the end, most of the fighting had been hand-to-hand, with bayonets, rifle butts and entrenching tools. We had been invited to tour the area with the Marine's commander, a Captain Lewis, to see for ourselves "how the other half lives." I am no stranger to a battlefield; I was an artilleryman before I underwent pilot training,
and after a man has seen—and smelled—his first one, he immediately loses all preconceived idealism, usually accompanied by much of his lunch.

But still, I had to swallow hard again and again as the three of us strolled among the discarded viscera. Suddenly, I realized my copilot was merrily reciting some grandiose bullshit from Shakespeare; you know, the "once more into the breach" thing! He might as well have been singing Gregorian chants in an abattoir! Lewis and I exchanged the looks of those pitying some depraved soul who has lost the ability to pity, lost the capacity to comprehend suffering on a grand scale.

Later, when I asked Carl about it, he said it was his defense mechanism, a sort of mental body armor. He claimed he didn’t see the torn, festering bodies, only young heroes fallen in battle. I can only plead amazement at someone who can so absolutely disregard reality. But Carl is a good pilot, steady, and stays away when he knows that I am in need of some emotional shade.

The clatter of arriving silverware awakens me as a young captain whom I haven’t seen before sits down. He is hitching a ride with us back to his unit, having recently returned from convalescence in Hawaii. His face and neck are freckled with puckered, star-shaped shrapnel scars, and the side of his jaw bears a long purple gorge where it was rebuilt. He has the "thousand meter stare," that dilated, fixed gaze that goes beyond present panorama, glazed over by having seen and done too many things that he can never reveal. He is also suffering from what we call the "cobra syndrome," manifest when fear and exhaustion and nerves have so depleted a man’s mental reserves that he darts his tongue in and out in reptilian fashion.
These are not good psychological forecasts.

"You know," he says softly, "they're carrying protest signs outside the hospital at Keneohe."

He is staring straight ahead.

The captain continues: "I guess if I were someplace else I would be, too. But, you know, it seems like I'm always carrying something." He is thoughtfully massaging the ball of his thumb. "Like ammo, water, wounded, the dead. Always carrying something."

I try for words, but they won't or can't come.

"But they don't understand." He is speaking to someone, or to me, or to himself, darkly, dreamily.

"I was on a medivac flight to Hawaii with a young corpsman who lost a leg at Con Thien. Funny thing, he was a conscientious objector, but he volunteered to be a medic. During the battle, he personally rescued seven Marines under fire, going out time and time again, dragging the wounded in to safety. The eighth time a VC grenade blew his leg off. He crawled back behind the lines, put a tourniquet around the stump, and continued treating the wounded for another two hours. He was one of the last to be evacuated. They gave him the Navy Cross.

"Well, we got off the plane and were going through the Honolulu airport, and we're going kind of slow 'cause he's on crutches, when his trouser leg starts flapping. We stop and I'm pinning it back up when this young, hippy-looking girl comes up and says, 'Did you lose your leg in Viet Nam?' I mean you could tell 'cause he was
in uniform with all his decorations. Anyway, he says, 'Yes,' and you know what she says? 'Serves you right!' Man, this guy just cried! I mean just broke down right there and cried!

"I mean, what kind of shit is that? Huh? Here's a guy whose beliefs wouldn't allow him to carry a gun but who felt like he owed something to his country, who's saved at least seven guys in that one battle alone, who's won the Navy Cross, and he gets treated like that!"

I shrink back, pulling my emotional cloak tighter about me.

He stands, looking down. "I can't eat this crap," he says, then quickly pushes back his bench and walks away, leaving me mentally stranded.

My hand is shaking. No, it is not the malarial tremens. It is something worse, something more than fear. It is the coming flight. Oily puddles of horror build within me like congealed drippings on a garage floor. There will be physical dangers, of course, but they are known and can be dealt with. It is the other that bothers me.

Enroute, there will be the usual caches of iodine-colored people honoring our passing with some very accurate anti-aircraft fire. The tracers--red and green--will float lazily up at us like a film of falling Christmas decorations run in reverse. But I will foil them because I have noted the weather and, at the first sparkling appearances, will simply slide into the cleft of the belly-white clouds, depriving those on the ground of sight. Then I will continue on instruments, avoiding the mountains, until I can let down into more friendly air. See? No sweat, no strain. Deadly

There could be other things. Even, for instance, an engine failure would be of concern, but not a major problem. A deceased motor, whether it expires of internal injuries or the heartbreak of conflagration, is easily soothed by the fire extinguisher, and the flight continues via its twin. And if worse were to come to absolute worst, I would simply turn out to sea, abandon my flying garbage truck and parachute into the waiting arms of some Navy vessel.

If they should forsake me, I would return to the deep, that undulating medium from which our ancestors slithered forth umpteen eons past, granting us all a common birthright. We were swaddled in maternal liquid until we struggled out into the sunlight of life. A young whore in Bangkok once told me that even our semen tastes of the sea. The sea is always moving, throbbing, pulsing. The sea, according to Ovid, is beyond all things. The sea shelters its dead, bathing them in eternal balm. But is there balm in the Giliadian sea?

There, I've spilled my coffee. Sometimes my mental palsy is transmitted to my physical claws. Sometimes, as they say, I just flat-ass lose it.

But, logically, what's there to fear? Those ghastly lumps encased in green Saran Wrap cannot harm me. They are merely marking time until they can be repaired sufficiently so that they can be viewed without horror by friends and family.

"Oh, my. Look at him, Aunt Edna. Doesn't he look like he's just asleep?" Paint and powder work wonders. They even cosmetically puttied up the fifty caliber bullet hole in his forehead, where that missile emptied his brainpan and his life
forever. He can't hurt me. Can he?

Remembrance tumbles into my brain, careening down my neurons at the speed of light. **THIS IS MY LAST FLIGHT!** I have completed ninety-nine missions and, after this final sortie, will be reassigned! I rip through my memory, trying with all that is within me to recall every trip, praying with suicidal intensity that my thought damaged mind has not betrayed me. How could I have been so forgetful, so stupid? What could have possibly prevented this fact from being engraved on my mind? But what if I'm wrong? What if I have miscounted?

I tear open my shirt and retrieve a waterproof pouch I wear around my neck. In it, along with my dog tags and a Saint Christopher medal, is a battered, geriatric date book where I have numbered and recorded each mission as meticulously as a mother sets down the words and steps of her first child. I turn to the last page and find this entry:

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MISSION NO. 99

DEP: AN HA 0830
ARR: Hue 1145
DEP: Hue 1410
ARR: AN HA 1715
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My count is correct! My memory, so recently treacherous, cannot prolong its larceny. I have a witness, inscribed in my own unsteady hand, which cannot be impugned. HA! HA! HA! I have a stone tablet upon which is graven the very law of God: "And I say unto thee, after thy one hundredth mission (the original Old
Hundred), thou shalt be lifted up and cleansed and given succor."

HA! HA! HA! I have won! Oops, must be careful. Laughing out loud at the breakfast table is not only bad manners, it can bring confining men armed with straight jackets.

But wait. Why does the cancerous uneasiness still corrode my soul? I know why. It is an epidemic of horror that has invaded me.

Logically, I've nothing to fear. So I said. So you said. So he, she or it said. But the pilot of dead men is not an impersonal pronoun. No, it is I. And I am very, very afraid because they are very, very dead. Why am I using the adjective "very" before dead? There are no degrees of death. Either you are or you're not; a simple, binary state of being.

Let me tell you something about flying corpses. First of all, in this cremating heat people smell bad. Living people smell bad; dead ones smell worse. Then there are the fluids that leak from the bodies. They are supposed to be contained by the "Bag, remains, human, US issue." I assure you they are not, exiting chiefly through the zipper, making green, slippery, slug-like trails down the floor of the aircraft. If you should fly into a cold front, these deposits freeze, making ghastly popsicles. But that is not the worst.

In an unpressurized plane, the air inside your body expands as you climb, seeking to equalize the inner and outer pressure. There will issue from inside you various burps, belches, and flatulence as the air is pushed toward the nearest exit. The air itself is totally unconcerned about whether the body encasing it is alive or
dead; the air simply must leave. Unfortunately, in the case of corpses, the air is forced out through the throat, past the congealed vocal cords . . . and sound occurs.

Oh, holy God, what sounds occur! The hissing and whispering, moaning and groaning, and given the twin ogres of fear and lack of oxygen, you begin to hear first words then sentences. You grip the control column and your sanity with white knuckle strength and try with all that is within you not to listen. "Eeeeee" becomes "we;" "Ooooo" changes into "you." Nothing, absolutely nothing, can describe those soliloquies. And if you once weaken, if you allow your thinking or imagination to wander, then those soliloquies become conversations, conversations become apologies, apologies mutate into debates, until finally, ultimately, all dissolves into madness where one simply drools and fondles his physical toys, sheltered forever from those hideous voices by stonewall insanity.

A shadow falls over my hands. "I've got some good news for you." I look up into the grinning face of my squadron commander, a large, ape-like man, known for his rust-colored hair and easy manner. He stretches forth a freckled paw, dropping a stack of papers beside my tray.

"Your flight's been scrubbed. The starter on number two crapped out, and we can't get parts, so you don't have an airplane. Ergo, no airplane, no flight."

I half rise, horrified. Saliva pools in the corner of my mouth.

"Noooooo, you can't, you can't."

He stops me with an upraised hand. "Wait a minute. I'm not finished," he says. "You know as well as I do the monsoons will be here any day now and once
they get here, nothing's going to move for at least two months. Now I don't see any reason your ugly ass should be sitting around here doing nothing, so I'm sending you out on tomorrow's mail chopper. Get squared away and be ready to go at 0630. Here's all the paperwork." His voice softens, "So long and God keep." He spins away without another word.

I stare down into my coffee cup. It is over. I am spared. I am saved. My lips are starting to tremble and with snakelike precision, my tongue extends to moisten them. My eyes puddle, and as I try to see into my cup, a tear tumbles down, inscribing soft, brown concentric ripples.

The End
WORKS CITED


