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Scarred woman

Bob Ross

The University of Montana

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THE SCARRED WOMAN

by

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It was the kind of weather I'd come to expect. A steady drizzle had lasted for a week, while the temperature hung just above freezing. It was late fall, the football season over and the ground already frozen, so that the rain did no one any good. The clouds hung low above the dirty streets, closing off the vertical. Lincoln, Nebraska, is a pretty town sometimes; but just then it was like living in a wet cardboard box.

I was sitting at the counter in Casey's, the remnants of a cheeseburger in front of me, looking at my third or fourth beer. There was an envelope on the counter; I'd been to the Coin Shop, bought a dollar's worth of foreign stamps. I picked up the envelope to examine my purchase once more, and just then an argument in the back of the bar caught my attention. I sat gazing at nothing, a few bits of colored paper in my hand.

One of the voices was familiar. Loud, deep, and a little Slavic, it belonged to one of the regulars of the place, a tall stooped man who had put in his twenty in the Navy and was working on a degree in physics at the government's expense.

"All they have to do," the deep voice said, "is drop
one on Hanoi. Boom! One big flash, and the war is over."

Two other voices tried to respond at once, then stopped for one another: a man and a woman, trying to get through a door at the same time. The man's voice continued. I didn't catch the words, but the inflection was Eastern, educated.

"The people my ass," the Navy man said. "The people want to be left alone. What they should do is start at the top; you kill the head and the body dies." He stood at the other end of the shuffleboard table, glaring contemptuously into one of the booths. He held one of the steel pucks in his hand; he'd been practicing by himself, waiting for a game.

The other voices chimed in again. I picked up the envelope and slid off my stool, wincing as my right heel hit the floor. As the argument continued, I drifted toward it, limp and tremulous and full of venom as a jellyfish.

"Excuse me, I said. "Excuse me--"

"Dragged in the dirt," the deep voice was saying. "A few queasy liberals--"

"Excuse me, excuse me--" I grew even weaker as I approached, my trembling hand ever so lightly touching his sleeve. He turned to look at me, the small brown eyes contemptuous behind thick glasses, the smooth brown hair slicked back. Suddenly a voice I didn't know was yelling at him, shouting a weird mixture of arguments, accusations, and
obscenities. "WHAT DO YOU KNOW?" the voice kept asking. "IGNORANT BASTARD, WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT IT ANYWAY?"

His eyes narrowed and the dark color crept up his cheeks; but he placed the shuffleboard puck elaborately on the table, and raised his hands toward me, palm outward. The man was a pacifist in spite of his talk.

"Easy, man," he said. "Take it easy. Just a friendly argument. Free speech, right? Besides, nobody was talking to you."

"I have a right to be heard," I said hoarsely, my wrath still shaking me.

"Ok," he said softly, backing away from me. He was still holding his hands palms toward me, two fingers up. Then he did a sort of disappearing trick; he was there one moment, not there the next. My knees went out from under me, and I collapsed in the nearest booth. As I stared at my hands on the table in front of me, I saw that the right hand was holding one of the heavy pucks, the knuckles clenched white around it. My envelope had spilled open and some of the stamps lay wet on the floor, distant and tiny and odd. I bent down and began picking them up carefully, one at a time.

Someone was handing me a clean paper napkin. I took it and placed the stamps on it, colored side down, as best I could; I was still trembling violently. When I had
finished, and calmed a little, I looked to see with whom I was sitting. The man across from me was dark and clean-featured, with soft intelligent eyes and strong, hairy, fine-boned hands. He looked to be of middle height, and twenty-three or -four. The woman across from him, next to me, had long, red hair. I did not look at her for long.

"Thank you," I said, acknowledging the gift of the napkin.

"It's all right," he said. "Are you ok?"

"Sure," I said. "I guess so. I guess I overreact sometimes."

His dark eyes glowed with a kind of compassion that made me uneasy. "Were you in Vietnam?"

"No," I said. I shifted my eyes away from him and found myself looking into the woman's. They were green.

"Nope," I said. "I was an I.P., instructor pilot, down in Texas. Flew T-37's. I heard a lot about it, though."

"I suppose you did. My name's Adrian." I put my hand out awkwardly, and was relieved when he took it in the ordinary way rather than the arm-wrestling style I'd been seeing lately. "And this is Selva."

"Who?" I looked at her fully this time, taking in the wide clear eyes, the broad forehead and high cheekbones, the small aristocratic nose and the full-lipped mouth that bowed down stubbornly at the corners.
"Selva," she said, smiling. I took her small light fingers clumsily in my own, and all the hair at the back of my neck stood at attention.

"I'm Joe," I said. "Pleased to meet you."

She withdrew her fingers, and giggled. I blushed and turned back to Adrian. "So," I said. "What'd I do with my beer?"

I bought a round of drinks, and we began stumbling toward what could be called a conversation. The two of them were a little uneasy about me, and I was abashed: they were a handsome couple, the kind destined for a life of tennis and Volvos, with a tax lawyer and kids with six-hundred-dollar teeth. The kind of people who run things. But they seemed to want to talk to me.

"How long were you in the Air Force?" Adrian wanted to know.

"Three years," I told him. "I got out on a medical discharge." That much was the truth. "I was in a car wreck." That was the truth too, I'd had a couple of those.

"What about you," I asked him. "What's your status?"

"I have a deferment until I finish grad school."

"He's applying for a C.O.," Selva said. "Aren't you."

"I'm a graduate student myself," I said, "until I flunk out, anyway. What's your major?"

"Chemistry," he said, a bit defiantly I thought.
"I'll be damned," I said. "I got my bachelor's in Chem. Had delusions of being a doctor some day."

"Why didn't you stay in school?" Adrian asked.

"Mary Burkheimer," I replied. They both looked at me blankly.

"My draft board lady," I explained. "My old man got out of World War II, so she wasn't about to let me miss this one."

Selva laughed at this. Adrian looked puzzled.

"You must be from a small town too," I said, turning to her.

"That's right," she said. "I know how that works. I'll bet her husband's in the American Legion, right?"

"V.F.W.," I said. "He's the Grand High Shooteminthe-assandfucktheirwomen." Selva laughed uproariously at this; I reddened, feeling that my big mouth had gotten away from me again.

"I still don't see what's funny," Adrian said.

"It isn't really," Selva said, still snickering. "Sometimes in small communities the draft boards are very unfair."

He looked at me skeptically. "You said you were in the Air Force," he said. "They don't draft anybody. Isn't it just the Army?"

"My way of dodging the draft," I explained. "Mary didn't like it much, either. She still tried to nail me,
but I beat her out by two weeks."

"Sounds a little strange," he said. "In the east, it's not that personal, unless you've got a relative on the board."

"In small-town Nebraska," Selva said, "everything's personal."

I asked where she was from. It turned out our high school basketball teams had played one another in the Class B Semifinals, back in the dim past; she'd still been in junior high, hadn't seen it. I'd come off the bench in the last half and scored three points, after our starting five had fouled out. It had been a losing effort. Adrian swizzled his scotch, looking bored.

"Did you play basketball?" I asked him.

"No," he said. "I was on the swim team."

"He was on the yachting team," Selva said, and put her hand on his arm.

"Really?"

He reddened. "She thinks my parents are rich."

I said, "I suppose where you're from it was mostly blacks who played basketball."

"The high school I went to didn't have any blacks," he said, "it didn't have much of a basketball team either. My political beliefs dictate that to have been a coincidence."

"Speaking of sports," Selva said, looking at me, "maybe you should put that shuffleboard puck back on the table. Someone might want to use it."
"Oh." I took a napkin and made sure the steel was clean and dry before setting it back. That killed the talk; I couldn't think of a thing to say. I signaled the waitress and got another beer.

"Let me get that," Adrian said when she brought it. Still, it was quiet. Most of my attention was on Selva, though I wasn't looking at her. Now that I thought about it, I remembered seeing the two of them around campus. She was one you'd notice.

"How long have you collected stamps?" Adrian asked.

"Not long," I said, feeling very uncomfortable. "About a year."

"How'd you happen to start?"

I didn't have an answer for that one yet. "A friend gave me his collection," I said finally.

"Was he tired of it?" Selva asked.

"Yeah. He was tired."

It was quiet again; something wrong with the feeling among the three of us. Adrian finished his drink.

"I have a collection," he said, clearing his throat. "I haven't worked with it for a long time, but I still keep it with me. Maybe you'd like to come over and look at it some time."

"Sure," I said.

"Is it time to go?" Selva asked him. "We have a meeting," she said to me apologetically.
"Five minutes," he said. "I don't want to be early."

"We don't want to be late," she said.

"What's your meeting?" I asked. I looked from one to the other, but there was no answer.

"Just a meeting," Selva said finally. "Campus politics."

"That's something I don't know much about," I said.

"Just as well," she said.

We spent most of the five minutes in silence. I sat looking at Adrian's manicured, compact hands, so unlike my own. They were smooth and agile, without scars or calluses, but they were the hands of an active man, not a philosopher. When I looked up, his dark eyes were watching me.

"Are you Jewish, by any chance?" I asked him.

"My granfather was Jewish. I was raised Catholic," he replied evenly.

"Don't know why I said that. None of my business."

I felt my ears burning. "Best friend I ever had was Jewish."

"Was that in Vietnam?" he asked.

"It was in the Air Force," I said. "In Texas."

I am six feet three inches tall. When I was shipped back to the States I weighed a hundred and fourteen pounds.

It is not so strange that I lied to Adrian. In the first place, that part of my life was over; I didn't want
to think about it or talk about it or remember it. What I wanted was to pick up where I'd left off, to get accepted into a graduate program in Bus Ad or Economics and to go on from there, to live well and to be at peace. I wanted nothing to do with wars, either the war still going on in Asia or the political war at home to put an end to it. And in the second place--

Well. I saw a man I once knew well enough, wearing the Continental Airlines uniform, second-in-command on a jetliner. One of the lucky ones. I recognized him and caught his eye, but he passed me with eyes downcast. I followed him through the crowded terminal, the elderly couples, the young women with little children, the executives pursuing dollars and the middle-class students pursuing life. All these people, I thought, count on this man to be as reliable as a toaster, to take them smoothly through the turbulence above Denver, to keep them safe from flaming death. When I knew him he flew like a bat, drank like a toilet, and splashed flaming death all over the Central Highlands. He went in a door marked "Employees," and I did not try to follow. Sometimes it happens differently: two of us will meet unavoidably, or in circumstances where privacy is certain, and we will exchange greetings and talk briefly. Even then, the talk is of things that've happened since. How've you been, what are you doing now. Are you married.
When I met Selva and Adrian I'd been a civilian about six months. I'd arrived in Lincoln in May of that year, more or less directly from Wilford Hall Hospital in San Antonio, rented an apartment and started looking for a job. It should've been easy; I'd forgotten most of what I knew about chemistry, but the degree itself was an achievement, some sort of validation. And I had my military service "out of the way". But as I yawned and shook my way through interview after interview, my prospects fizzled. I looked like a scarecrow with a hangover, and had developed a hatred of authority that no crew cut or business suit could disguise. Finally, desperate, I went back to Palemon, my old home town in central Nebraska, to think things over. I could've stayed there, could've driven one of my father's trucks for a while; but after two days there I'd been frantic to leave again. I drank the whole time I was there, much to Dad's dismay, and when I left, the concern on his face frightened me.

I drove to Colorado and went camping in the mountains. It wasn't a good trip--I froze every night and got diarrhea and poison ivy--but the crisp air and starlit nights helped me get a bit of perspective. I decided that since I wasn't good for anything else I'd go back to college. I could get 175 dollars a month from the government, and a student loan if I needed it. I'd find a cheaper apartment and dig in;
for the rest of the summer, I'd take any menial job I could find, cut back on the booze, and try to keep the last of my money together.

If I'd been shocked by Bobby Kennedy's assassination, I wasn't aware of it, having no one to talk to and thus no way to examine my feelings. But as I was sweating out August in my basement, watching the news from Chicago on a faint second-hand TV, I felt a sudden sense of terror. The situation was surreal, crowd scenes with cops and tear gas and people running interspersed with the speechmaking and handshaking of the convention. Something about it all seemed vaguely Oriental. I saw people of my own age on television, bloody and weeping, and I saw Mayor Daley appearing to take a brutal pleasure in the viciousness of his police.

Violence, to me, had been a geographic phenomenon, like climate. There was always war in the Middle East, in Latin America, in Southeast Asia. Americans were fighting in Southeast Asia—I had been one of them—and it was clearly pointless and stupid, but not any more pointless and stupid than other forms of catastrophe such as floods and tornadoes. But watching the whirling crowds in the streets of Chicago, I felt disoriented. It was as if an explorer just back from the South Pole, sitting under an air conditioner in Tucson and drinking daiquiris, were to look out the window and see a glacier.
The whole thing was a show. Older men in jowls and neckties were inside a building, posturing and shaking hands, while outside the building chaos raged. And the population of chaos was young. Daley was smiling, in control, a confident master of puppets putting on a morality play for the national audience. But the puppets were real.

My age. The puppets were my age.

Violence was not climate. It was a product; it could be created, imported, used. It was a crop that would grow anywhere.

I was more shaken by this than you would think. I lost appetite. I'd been gaining weight, was back up to almost 150; this stopped. My insomnia returned.

The fall semester was a disaster. I signed up for economics and accounting courses at the senior level, thinking the math I'd had earlier would see me through. But my aptitude for mathematics had vanished; I couldn't add a column of numbers and get the same answer twice. It was awful. I had never tried so hard and got such mediocre results: B's and C's. It was clear that if I wanted to stay in graduate school, even as an unclassified student, I had better find something easier. I had always done pretty well in English, even read some poetry on my own; spring semester, I signed up for English classes.
She was in one of those classes: the green eyes, the lithe figure, the red, straight, yard-long hair. The first day I sat next to her. I had no choice in the matter; if someone had already taken that seat, I'd have sat in his or her lap.

"Hi," I said.

She looked at me and smiled. "I remember you," she said. "You're the maniac we talked to in the bar that day."

"My name's Joe," I said. "I'm not a maniac."

"I'm Selva."

"I know. I remember."

"Your hair's gotten longer," she said, and giggled. It was a high-pitched, nervous sound; naughty-child laughter. "I've been letting it grow since last summer," I said. "Seems like I fit in better."

"It would depend on the crowd," she said. "Actually you look a bit derelickish."

It wasn't funny but I pretended it was. "Give me a break," I said. "I've only been a radical since I met you."

"Another nice country boy gone wrong," she sighed. "I'm a bad influence." Her tone was playful, but the readout was plain: she didn't mind flirting, but I wasn't going to get anywhere. I was glad when the professor came in.

The course was called "Modern" Poetry, that is, E.A. Robinson to Eliot. It was taught by a man known in the
department for his voluminous preparation, who as far as I could tell wouldn't have recognized a line of poetry if it had crawled up his leg. He had a serious yellow face and lank pepper-colored hair which he wore to his collar. His lectures were boring and the homework was heavy; I'd have been as well off if I'd stayed in accounting. It was only Selva that kept me coming to class.

Her hair fascinated me. As I sat beside her—or behind her, for I often came late, and she preferred the front of the room while I wanted to be as near as possible to the door—my eyes would lose themselves in that red cascade. It shone like polished copper, but was a little darker. It was almost straight and rather coarse, but with enough wave that it seemed to flow down her back; it would lie tight to her body, emphasizing the small shoulders, the delicate scapulae. My gazing bothered her at first, but she tolerated and then grew accustomed to it. I think she was used to little conquests; as far as I know she was faithful to Adrian, but that didn't stop men from trying to approach her. Since I was shy and rather wistful in my infatuation, she treated me as a friend, choosing to disregard my occasional diffident passes. I preferred the role of court jester to that of exile, even taking comfort in it. Her beauty conferred a kind of honor; I felt lucky to be her friend. Something else was happening, too, in my own life. I was beginning to accept that I was a loser. It seemed natural
as rain that she wouldn't love me.

She always wore long sleeves and high, tight collars. One day while sitting next to her, I noticed a little line of white tissue in the skin of her wrist. It crept like a wisp of smoke from the cuff of her blouse, fading out among freckles on the back of her hand.

Involuntarily I reached across and, with my forefinger, touched the barely visible white line. After weeks of longing, it was the first time I had reached out to her in any physical way. I was that shy.

"Don't," she said. She gave me a sharp look, and moved her hand away. I felt like a criminal.

After the spring break, I stopped going to classes. I would get up early enough--six or six-thirty, usually, if I'd slept at all--but the time would slip away from me. I'd make a pot of coffee and sit at the kitchen table, drinking coffee and smoking, and before I knew it it would be ten-thirty or eleven. I don't know what I thought about. Then I might work with the stamps until two or so, when I would get fully dressed and drift downtown to eat a bit of lunch and start my day. On most days, Selva and Adrian would come into Casey's at around four or four-thirty. I'd be waiting for them in the corner of a long booth, under an engraving of a very sad Indian riding a very sad pony off into a
snowstorm. Selva's greeting would be to bum a Camel; it was the only time she smoked tobacco.

The booth was built for six and would hold eight at a squeeze. Immediately upon Adrian's arrival it would be jammed with his friends, talking heatedly about politics and "the Movement". I would be squashed into my corner and forgotten, except by Selva, who occasionally sent a raised eyebrow my way when one of them said something unusually preposterous. I learned the vocabulary quickly, and was glad to share in the pitchers of beer they bought, but there was no room for me in the conversation. Selva sat next to Adrian, smoking my cigarettes, looking cool and attentive; she would be turned slightly toward him, her elbow resting on the back of the booth and her hand light on his shoulder. Sometimes, when not holding a cigarette or drink, her other hand would slide under the table. I imagined at those times that Adrian spoke with more animation than usual.

As the weather grew warm, I found myself seeing more of Selva. Adrian was ready for his Ph.D., had completed the thesis and was pursuing job offers. He was a hot prospect in spite of his politics, one of those superb students who remembers everything and understands everything, who loves his specialty and doesn't need much sleep. His interviews took him to New York and Massachusetts, Louisiana and Texas,
Oregon and California; he flew at company expense and brought back presents for Selva and little bottles of airline booze for me. But she was alone often and hated it. She especially hated being alone overnight, and would sometimes stay at the bar with me, drinking until closing time. Other than Adrian, she had few friends; her confidence seemed to depend on his presence, and when he was gone she became a bit uncertain, as though she no longer knew quite who she was. The shyness charmed me completely, and I fell unreservedly in love with her, even while more or less accepting the fact that I would never be her lover.

I became her confidant, then, and learned more about her. She was the youngest in her family, her father and brothers were farmers. She was frightened of cats. Adrian was not her first lover. She had fantasies of joining the Peace Corps, but really hot weather made her sick. Two of her cousins were missionaries. Her favorite country was Scotland. She wanted to become a psychiatric social worker. Her maternal grandfather, a Swedish accordionist, had been both a Klansman and a Wobbly.

I learned all these facts, and yet I learned nothing; her chatter concealed a tough reticence, and inner self that was private. She had, it seemed, wishes and plans that did not include Adrian or any other man, but she defended this inner life with charm and wit, and, if necessary, a cutting sarcasm. For my part, I mostly listened to her. I had no
desire to share my recent career as baby burner or to divulge my nightmares. I maintained the lie that I'd sat out the three years in Texas, told her all the pilot training anecdotes I knew, lit her cigarettes and kept the drinks coming.

That was my spring semester. I took incompletes in all my courses, knowing in the back of my mind I'd never finish them. Lilacs and iris bloomed in the back yards of Lincoln, and the time went by. I worked with my stamps or daydreamed of Selva. My leg, the one with the shrapnel, bothered me that year; the doctor at the VA said it was psychosomatic and tried to cut off my Darvons. I got a different doctor.

When Adrian was out of town, I spent two or three nights a week talking to Selva. When he was home, I drank by myself most nights. My hair was getting long, I had a nodding acquaintance with most of Caseys' regulars and those of a few other downtown bars, but I had no close friends. Mostly, I drifted through the warm nights trying to blend in, to not bother anyone, trying to numb myself in the direction of sleep.

A couple of times I got into fights. I didn't remember them in the morning, but the scars were there, the skinned knuckles. It worried me that I got that angry without remembering it. When I mentioned this to Selva, she told me it might mean I was an alcoholic.

"You go to hell, woman. Keep your family names to yourself." I was offended.
"Joey," she said, laughing. "You **swore** at me."

"That's what you get," I said.

"I was just trying to help you."

"Shit," I said. "If you want to be nice to me—"

"What?" she said. "Go on."

I could feel my face getting hot. "Phooey," I said.

"You're snickering already."

"Chicken," she said.

"Ok," I said. "Take me to bed with you."

She gave me a soft little smile, something I hadn't seen before. "Can't do it, Joe," she said. "Thanks for asking. I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"You shouldn't push me, Selva. I'm crazy about you."

"I know." She looked away sadly. "It would be charity."

"I'm not proud," I said. "Not any more."

"I am," she said. "I think I'd better go now. See you."

"Tomorrow?"

She turned around and looked at me. "Adrian's coming tomorrow," she said. I watched her walk away, wanting to run after her. It was the first time she'd called me Joe. It shouldn't have meant anything to me, but it did.
Our school had a way of chewing up music teachers, and Mrs. Shannon was no exception. Everyone knew she was destined to last a year, two at most, and we treated her accordingly. She must have known it too; there was something harassed and defensive about her from the first. She was a tall, rawboned woman in her forties or fifties, a handsome woman who had auburn hair that she wore up in a twist. I think I hated her on sight. She was alone in the community, a southern Anglican among German Lutherans, Irish Catholics, and a petty aristocracy of blue-nosed Methodists. Whoever Mr. Shannon had been, he was long gone before Palemon got hold of her. As far as anyone knew, the only creature in the world to love her was a blading, neurotic, neutered golden retriever named Willis.

Mrs. Shannon rented a little stucco house not far from the school, and Willis lived in the back yard on a chain. He had the use of an elaborate doghouse, the whim of some retired farmer long a ghost, that was a replica of the house his mistress lived in; it had little windows with glass in them (knocked out with stones soon after Willis moved in) and a piece of sewer tile sticking out of the roof that was supposed to be a chimney.
Willis might've been all right, but his small domain lay next to the alley that several of us used to walk to school. He was a nervous dog, and so he had to bark; he was on a heavy chain, there was clearly no harm in him, and there were rocks in the alley's gravel, but even after he knew better he continued to challenge us each time we passed his way. Not that we were cowards exactly; we would've stoned a vicious dog, or a brave dog to viciousness if it had been Mrs. Shannon's.

It was Mrs. Shannon's job to try to make us sing, and ours to thwart her as much as possible. She drilled the high school choir early in the morning (in winter, next door to where the band was practising), and after school was over in the afternoon she dealt with Glee Club or Triple Trio or, in season, tried to get the cast ready for the Christmas program or the annual operetta. During the day she haunted the grade school rooms, a gaunt and somewhat alarming specter of culture. We'd had an understanding with previous music teachers: if allowed to sing as a group, secure and anonymous, we would boom out "Filla me roo reoc re ayy, a-workin' on the railway" or whatever other nonsense was required, but if asked to perform individually we would blush, squirm, giggle, and generally clam up. Mrs. Shannon showed a reckless disregard for this convention of class warfare; she wanted us to sing harmony, and so she had to find out who could carry a tune and who couldn't. This was precisely the
information our system was designed to protect, and a stalemate resulted, a Lebanese truce punctuated by shelling across the border. Her weapons were scowls and trips to the principal's office; ours were truculence and spitwads.

My own personal vendetta with Mrs. Shannon began one period when she caught me drumming. What I was doing was vibrating a pencil in time with some phonograph music she was playing that day; I think it was dixieland marches. Occasionally, whether from desperation or apathy, she brought in the phonograph and played records to us for an hour. We were bored on principle, but we liked it better than her. I would hold the pencil point down and strum the eraser end, and the resulting buzz would be amplified nicely by the hollow desk; it was an inconspicuous movement and the sound had a ventriloquial property. Occasionally she would rise from her seat in front and stalk the room, a hawkish look in her hazel eye, and I would stop until she returned to her place. I thought I was annoying her handsomely.

Finally she stood up abruptly during one of my performances and snapped out, in drill-sergeant tones, "Who's doing that?" Of course no one volunteered the information, but some spineless canary in the class must have flicked an eye my way. In a moment she was standing by my desk, where I was frozen, pencil poised, nonplused by my predicament. If I'd had the composure to laugh I would've retained control of the situation, but I tried a stone face instead; a
telltale blush crept over me, and suddenly it was I, not Mrs. Shannon, who was the butt of laughter. I learned what every dictator knows, that loyalty inspired by terror is transient. Instead of an outright laugh I broke down in a foolish giggle, and her conquest was complete. The flush of blood had brought tears to my eyes, and I was on the verge of one of my fits of fury, but her look disarmed me. She was smiling, examining me with a sort of intent curiosity.

"That's very good, you know, what you're doing," she said. "Not everyone can do that."

I gave the red eraser a few more flicks, and looked up warily, waiting for a reaction.

"Yes. Well; see me after school today. In the music building. I'll be giving a voice lesson, just follow your ears."

I could've gotten away with not going, but that afternoon I climbed the steps of the old gray building that housed Music, Home Ec, and Vocational Agriculture, feeling a mixture of curiosity, defiance, and fear. I found my way to Mrs. Shannon's office, suffering the hostile stares of high school and junior high students on whose territory I was intruding. She was giving a voice lesson, sure enough; I waited for a lull in the racket and knocked on the door.

It was opened by Geraldine Schaller, a big-bosomed sophomore who had been my sitter in times past. Mrs. Shannon
sat at a battered upright piano, looking straight across at me. She was as tall sitting down as Geraldine was standing.

"Hello," she said. "Oh, it's you." She got up from the bench, smoothing her skirt and steadying the music in front of her. "Miss Schaller, I shall return to you once I deal with this offender. What's your name?"

It was me she meant, and so I told her, meeting her direct and amused gaze as best I could. I would've added my rank and serial number if I'd had them.

"Well, Joseph," she said. "I've thought of a punishment which I'm sure you'll agree is very suitable. Come and take your medicine."

She led the way down a corridor to the room that was used for choir practice. It was a large, empty, echoing room with plaster walls and a hardwood floor, containing another upright piano and a half circle of rickety platforms on which there were music stands. In the empty space between the piano and the platforms there stood a simple trap layout, two snares, bass drum and cymbal. She walked directly to it.

"Come here," she said. "Sit."

I sat down on a piano stool in front of the drums, and she handed me a pair of sticks. I held them woodenly in one hand, as though they were a scepter or a club.

"Like this." She deftly took my hands and placed them over one of the snares, with the sticks balanced. "You have to hold them so they're free to bounce. You'll get the hang
of it. What kind of music do you like best?"

"I don't know," I said. Elvis Presley." I wasn't sure I liked Elvis, in fact I was partial to Rosemary Clooney; but I thought it'd be a good bet to annoy her.

She laughed. "Thought you'd say that," she said. "Today you'll have to settle for Louis Armstrong, anyway, because that's what I've got on the tape player." She walked over to a gray suitcase-shaped machine that was sitting by the wall, and bent down and punched a button; a preliminary hum came out as the tubes warmed up.

"Make some noise," she said, "I want to hear you. When the tape runs out you can go."

As she'd anticipated, I enjoyed my "punishment". After that, for a while, a truce developed; risking my classmates' ridicule, I began to cooperate more in class, even to the point of singing out loud by myself on one or two occasions; and I was allowed to practice on the drum set three days a week. Grade school football did not exist then; it was too wet for baseball in the vacant lots, too cold for fishing for bullheads in the gravel pit. I continued my after-school drumming. I had begun to fancy myself, was learning to read music and surreptitiously working on rock-and-roll licks. When Mrs. Shannon offered me a part in the Christmas concert, I was so pleased I could barely maintain my sullenness.

"Maybe," I mumbled. "I'll ask my Dad."
My father had his own problems. On my account he'd done what he wouldn't do for my mother: he'd given up over-the-road trucking and made a kind of transition to truck-line owner, so that he could spend most nights at home. Still, he was dispatcher, personnell manager, accountant, bill collector, mechanic, and in spite of his best intentions part-time driver. He was glad to see me take an interest in something besides vandalism to fill in the hours between school and supper. I was too wild and thought I was too grown-up for a sitter, and too young to entertain myself without getting into trouble. I practiced in the evenings, too, on a rubber pad; I was quick to dispose of my homework, and TV hadn't yet come to Palemon. Eighth notes, sixteenth notes, and rolls took me to bedtime, and in my sleep I sat in the spotlight, leading the band.

My big part in the Christmas program was more mundane. The choir was going to sing that song America knows so well from listening to supermarket Muzak from Thanksgiving through December: "Come, they told me, prrr-um-pum-pum pum." I would sit in front with my traps, showing the citizens of Dune County something of the prodigious cultural potential that lay hidden in their midst. I practiced my part to perfection, even adding a few little touches of my own, forgetting entirely to hide my anxiousness to please Mrs. Shannon, who gave me what time her frazzled holiday schedule would permit. I grew so preoccupied that I even let up on my
constituents; I forgot to beat up Skipper Sorenson two weeks running. For their part, my classmates were envious of the attention I was getting, and began to vie with one another in music class to display their excellence as pubescent warblers.

A week of rehearsals with the choir went all right—none of the high school students spoke to me, nor I to them; Mrs. Shannon was wild-eyed and hoarse, and smelled of gin—and at last the big night came. The wooden folding chairs were got out from their compartments under the stage, and the gym became an auditorium. Angels, Wise Men, and Sheep had been made out of cardboard and stood on either side of the stage, and above everything a spotlight shone on an aluminum foil star. As the crowd assembled and the auditorium became filled with the sound of coats rustling, men and women talking, and children coughing, Mrs. Shannon and I stood together behind the curtain, stricken with stage fright, our teeth chattering in unison. The choir was down the hall, getting into their robes; Miss Phipps, the community's general-purpose accompanist, was hovering near the piano bench. It was too late to get out of town.

Mrs. Shannon was trembling visibly. She was also snookered. There was a run in one of her nylons that she wanted to examine, but she was wearing high heels, and when she picked up her foot to look at her calf she wobbled and nearly fell down. I looked up at her in awe; she was almost six
feet tall, and very elegant.

"Oh, damn," she said to me. "Would you look and tell me how bad that is? I just can't quite see it."

I peered behind her. There was a run, all right.

"It's not too bad," I said. "No one will notice. You look swell, Mrs. Shannon."

"Oh, damn," she said. "Is it Ok, really?"

"Sure," I said. "Besides, the piano will be in front of you."

"Oh, damn," she said.

We both performed magnificently. Mrs. Shannon only stumbled a little going onstage, and she conducted with passion and authority. I played my part better than ever, and remembered to pound loud enough so those in the back could hear me. After everything was over, I was asked to come back out and sit at the drums for a photograph. A lot of adults wanted to pat me on the shoulder or shake my hand, and a lot of kids gave me the fish eye. I made a fist and showed it to Skipper Sorenson. My dad came up to congratulate Mrs. Shannon, and winked at me.

"A fine program," he said to her. "I'm proud of my boy, too. You're the first teacher he's got along with since kindergarten." He leaned closer to her and spoke confidentially. "Let me buy you a drink sometime."

"I beg your pardon, sir," she said icily.

He winked at me again and squeezed my arm, and we went home.
Christmas holidays began the next day, and Dad and I
celebrated by taking a load of canner cows to Sioux City.
He loved getting away from the office, and I loved riding
shotgun, sitting high in the thundering rig and watching a
day of roads and traffic unfold below us. The truck was a
venerable Diamond T, not an efficient cabover but with a
hood that stretched eight feet in front of the cab, shelter­
ing a huge six-cylinder diesel that by itself weighed as
much as a car. What it lacked in power it made up for with
a glamorous bond-shaking bellow; it left a throb in you at
the end of the day that became part of your bones, a physical
memory.

There were sandwiches, cookies, a thermos of coffee
that was half milk for my benefit, and a can in case I had
to pee. We wore heavy clothes as if we were going ice
fishing, including overshoes and mittens; Dad wore his
insulated coveralls and I had on my blue parka and an extra
oversized pair of pants. The day was white, sky and ground;
the second growth on the hay flats was a rich yellow-brown
against gray ice and white drifts. Light snow was falling,
and wisps of it blew across the highway, curling up and
chasing the cars we met or passed.

There was the drive over narrow roads to the ranch where
we loaded up; there were the red-faced men shouting and
whistling, poking the walleyed, shitting, pissing, snotblast-ing old grannies through the squeaking boards of the corral and chute. There was Dad with his electric prod, making the last trembling and kicking cow jump up into the truck, poking another one in the nose that wanted to jump out over him, getting the sliding door down at last, and gravely counting them through the slats, getting signatures on the ticket. There was the long, long ride east, the important stop at the weigh station, the excitement of being in as big and busy a town as Sioux City, the stockyards with hundreds of pens and trucks from all over waiting in line. There was the unloading, the old cows jumping out the door at full speed, now covered with manure and some of them scraped and bleeding; there was Dad again, going back into the trailer and making the last two wild ones come bellowing out. There was the big meal at the truck stop, all the tough and tired men with red eyes and black oil in their pores who talked too loud and ate as if they didn't care what it was. And there was crawling into the sleeper on the way home, covering up in the man-smelling tobacco-colored blankets, with the mighty lullaby of combustion in my ears.

The next day was the day before Christmas. My father got me up early and we went to the Milestone for breakfast.

The Milestone was a truck stop on the east edge of town.
It was also a gathering-place for farmers and businessmen, my father's peers. These were the important men of the community, men who supplied tools and feed and lumber, who built houses, who raised or bought and sold or freighted grain and cattle. Most of them had known one another for years; some had been friends of my father's when he was in school. Sharing his time with these men was something special to me. I'd sit next to him in the corner of a booth or at the counter, trying to make myself small, listening shyly and eagerly to the big talk and the rough talk, talk about work and money and politics mixed in with talk that I didn't quite understand but that seemed to be directed more toward the waitresses than toward one another. Maybe a man would come in, big and grizzled and coveralled, stomping snow off his overshoes, nod at my Dad, and then catch sight of me and boom, "Hey, who's that you got with ya? That your second driver today?" Then I would make a tight grin and study the counter, my ears aglow with pleasure; Dad would say, "Nah, just a hitchhiker. Thought he looked hungry so I brought him in for a meal," and it would be all right.

On this particular morning, though, it was different. It was quiet when we came in, and it seemed the men were looking at me. Finally one I didn't care for, skinny Lon Dives, piped up in his high voice, "Look who's coming in the door; it's the Little Drummer Boy. Good morning, Little
Drummer Boy!"

I must've turned pale. I fought off an impulse to reach for my father's hand.

Dives was one of those people who can't help twisting the knife. "What's the matter, Little Drummer Boy? Can't you say 'good morning'? Cat got your tongue?"

Paralyzed, I looked to my father. He gazed back at me steadily, his eyes warm and sad. It was a look I knew; it was up to me to do something. But my mouth had gone dry as cotton.

Suddenly I walked over to Lon's table, and before I knew what I was doing I had picked up his coffee spoon and was holding it like a drumstick, trying to reach his head. He fended me off easily, but the approving laughter of the men told me I'd done the right thing. I put the spoon down and bounced into the booth across from my Dad; I felt the glow of their approval, but underneath it all my heart was uneasy. I had always been an adjunct of my father, invisible beyond a bit of mild teasing. What had I done to cause them to see me differently? If this was the fame I'd dreamed of, I didn't want it. The men resumed their usual talk of crops and weather; I looked around surreptitiously. Something was different. Whatever I'd done, I couldn't help it now.

After breakfast, Dad dropped me off downtown. I still had to get him a gift for Christmas, and I also had the vague
idea that I would get something for Mrs. Shannon. That
would be a tricky proposition; I went to the Western Auto
Store first.

The Western Auto store did sell automotive accessories—
you could get a hood ornament there with a chrome goddess on
it, winged and naked but with her vital details blurred, or
one that had the face of an Indian in amber plastic and a
bulb inside so that it glowed when the lights were on—but
its main business was sporting goods. I had been visiting
the store frequently in the past few weeks and had my choices
narrowed to an enclosed spinning reel, an auto compass, and
a good pocket knife. I knew my father was fussy about knives
and would only bother with a good one; but the best kind in
the display case were too expensive, and the rest of no better
steel than the one I carried. The spinning reel was much
cheaper than a good knife, but such a gift would be construc-
ed as a suggestion that he take me fishing more often. That
left the auto compass.

It was a gray egg-shaped object three or four inches in
height, mounted on a bracket that swiveled. It was made
mostly of metal, and heavy to handle; the top third of the
egg was glass or hard plastic, and beneath this hard amnion
there swam a flattened gray hemisphere. It floated at the
bottom of a bubble in a thin, clear fluid, so that it rode
level even when the thing was tilted. On it were written
the points of the compass, and the corresponding numerical
headings from 0 to 360 degrees. When I twisted my hand or turned my body so that the outside bracket pointed in a new direction, the gray hemisphere inside slowly rotated until it took its old fixed orientation, even while it bumped and wobbled in the shaken fluid. It was magical.

Then I noticed something. I took it to the man who ran the store.

"Look. It's backwards; the N points south all the time."

He was a small, dapper, red-faced man, always clean-shaven except for a little clipped moustache, and he had tattoos on his forearms. He didn't like boys much; he suspected us of supplying ourselves with hooks and sinkers, bobbers and BB's at his expense. He took the compass from me and his red face got redder. He turned the thing several ways, scowling at it. Finally he put it down.

"It's all right," he said. "You'll just have to turn the swivel around."

"What if it won't turn?"

"It's all right," he repeated adamantly. "Look, I'll sell it to you a dollar off. Wholesale. If you can't make it work right I'll let you bring it back. How's that?" He gave me an angry piercing look, as if it were a matter of life and death and I was wasting precious time.

"Um-- Ok," I said. "Could you please gift-wrap it for me?"

"Not at that price," he said, his moustache bristling
like a caterpillar. "I'll give you some paper and you can take it home and do it yourself."

My bargain left me three dollars to spend on Mrs. Shannon. I walked the half block to Main Street and turned left to go to the dime store, but then thought better of it and crossed the street to McDonald's. I approached the jewelry case and began studying its contents; I noticed a pair of sapphire earrings identical to those I'd picked out for my mother a couple of weeks before. At the time I'd chosen the ones I'd sent, they'd been the only ones like them in the case. Now there were also a pair with green settings that had the same shape. I was hurt and angry, anybody's mother could be wearing earrings like that.

Disconsolate, I looked around. There were belts, purses, shoes, scarves, gloves, caps; farther away, on one side of the store there was women's clothing and on the other side men's. Off by the overalls a farmer was mulling over the boys' plaid shirts. The remainder of the customers were women, clicking hangars on the blouse rack, testing the fabric of skirts, having whispered conversations with the saleswomen. I moved off to examine a jaunty tam; apparently it went with a knit muffler. The price was out of my range.

I was ready to leave again, unnoticed as I'd come in, when a display of silk scarves caught my eye. One of them was a kind of chestnut color, a good match for Mrs. Shannon's hair and eyes. I went over to it, reaching to touch the
translucent cloth. It was voluptuous, smooth and incredibly light. The scarves each hung by one corner on a circular rack; I blew lightly on them and watched the subtle colors flow against one another. I passed my hand under the tips of them, feeling the silk slide delicately across my fingers. Then I stood with my fists in my coat pockets, waiting for someone to catch sight of me. Finally a white-haired, crane-like woman began tacking toward me across the aisles. It was Cordee Skinner, who came from north of Hanes and had known my father for centuries.

"Well, well," she bugled, pointing her sharp nose down at me and peering through her glasses. "Here's our Little Drummer Boy!"

Her artless condescension affected me as much as Lon Dives's meanness, and I shrank as if I'd been slapped. She was a kind soul and possessed neither tact nor malice; she saw my feelings were hurt but was at a loss to know why. She continued to scrutinize me as if I were the first embarrassed boy she'd seen.

"Well," she said finally, "that was a nice program the other day. A nice program. What can I do for you?"

"How much are these?" I managed, indicating the scarves with my eyes and elbow.

"Those Eyetalian scarves? That what you mean? I think those are two ninety-eight, unless they've been marked down. Have you got a girl friend?"
I squirmed inwardly under her gaze, pinned like a frog under a heron's foot.

"Have you?" she insisted, grinning. "Wait'll I tell your Dad Joe's got a girl friend. Ho, ho, ho!" She laughed heartily in her trumpet voice while I stared miserably at the floor. Cordee loved children, had none of her own and was a torment to other people's.

"Well, whoever she is, I bet she'd love one of those scarves. Won't do much to keep her ears warm, but these young girls, they don't worry about cold ears. That paisley one there is sure pretty. See that one? Sort of green and pink? That's the one I'd like."

"This one," I said, removing my hand from my coat pocket and pointing. "The brown."

"Brown's not for little girls," she said. "You want something brighter, blue or yellow or green. That brown, that's a grownup's color. Too grown up for me anyhow."

I turned even redder and set my jaw. "I want the brown one," I said. "Can you wrap it for me, please? I can't do it very good."

"If that's the one," she said. "Sure I'll wrap it. You want it wrapped in brown paper too? Ho, ho! I said, you want it wrapped in brown paper too?"

It was a rhetorical question and didn't particularly call for a reply. She took the scarf toward the rear of the store and soon came back with it boxed thin, wrapped
in reindeer-covered paper and decorated with a red bow.

"There you are, young fellow," she said, "best I could do."

I handed her my three dollars and closed my hand over the two pennies change. As I left the store with my package, she called out after me: "Merry Christmas, Little Drummer Boy!"

That afternoon, after I'd fixed myself a bowl of soup and a peanut butter sandwich, I screwed up my courage and walked over to Mrs. Shannon's. It was a warm day for December; ridges of old dirty snow lined the streets and a few of the lawns still had the remains of drifts, but mostly the town was brown. The parked cars were dirty halfway up their sides, and the sun shone feebly through a layer of clouds. This was the "January thaw", come a month early. All the snow was melted off the roofs, and the ice off the uneven sidewalks. I turned in front of the little stucco house, climbed the two cement steps and rang the doorbell. In the back yard, Willis barked hysterically.

I knew Mrs. Shannon was home, because her yellow Rambler was parked in the driveway. After a while I rang the bell again, and knocked on the door too in case the bell wasn't working. I was turning to leave when I heard footsteps inside the house.

Finally the door opened a crack. "Oh, it's you," a muffled voice said, and she opened it farther. "You cad cub
id, I'b got da flu."

I barely recognized the person who stood before me. Her hair hung in damp strings around her shoulders; her face, crumpled in around the mouth, was an inch shorter than I'd seen it before. She stood barefoot in a yellow rag of a robe, sluttish and bony, and looked sullenly down at me, waiting for me to say what I wanted.

"Here," I said, holding up the reindeer-wrapped package. "For you." I tried a smile, but the shock of her appearance was working against me.

"Trub your pareds?"

"From me," I said. "Merry Christmas, Mrs. Shannon."

She looked at it suspiciously, and some of the sullen-ness left her face. "Wy thag you, Joseph," she said. "Thag you bery buch. Dice of you to thig of be."

We stood looking at one another. Finally, she said, "I'b sorry, I cad talk dow. I'b really quide ill," and started to close the door. Then she opened it again part way.

"Joseph," she said, "sub wud's bed throwing sdowballs at Willis. Cad you get theb to stop? I'd be gradeful."

"I'll try, Mrs. Shannon," I said. She closed the door; I heard her sneeze and then start to cough. I turned and went down the walk, stunned. Whatever I'd expected, it sure hadn't been that. My elegant Mrs. Shannon, looking like an old canner cow, sallow and sagging and disturbingly female.
I kicked a chunk of snow down the sidewalk until it was gone. Somehow I'd expected more; three dollars would've bought twenty king-sized Cokes, fifteen ice cream bars, twelve packages of BB's, or three boxes of .22 shells. To earn three dollars I'd have to shovel three sidewalks. If it ever snowed again.

As I passed the mouth of the alley that divided Mrs. Shannon's block, I heard Willis barking. There was a garage facing the alley next to her yard, and behind that garage, concealed from her back window, a boy about my age was packing snowballs. He wore a bright blue-and-orange stocking cap and a coat that was like mine except for being faded green rather than faded blue. It was Skipper Sorenson. I started down the alley, walking as quietly as possible. When he looked up, I had him cornered between the garage and Mrs. Shannon's fence. He hefted a snowball and glanced over his shoulder to see whether he could beat me to the fence corner and get off down the alley. He couldn't.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," he said.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

"You're throwing snowballs at that dog."

"So?"

"Don't do that."

"Who says?"
"I says. Give me that snowball."

He backed away from me and put the snowball behind him. It wasn't far from being cocked to throw.

"Give it to me," I said, moving a step closer.

"Eat shit."

"What?"

"You heard me. Eat dog shit..."

Throwing the snowball then was a mistake, because it spoiled his chance to run. It whizzed harmlessly across my back just before my shoulder caught him in the stomach. Then we were down, wrestling in the hard, wet, gravelly snowbank behind the garage. In a second or two I was sitting astride him, my left hand pushing his head back, my right one reaching for a handful of gritty snow. His arms flailed for me but couldn't reach; he tried to kneem in the back but couldn't do any damage.

"You want to eat some dog shit?" I asked. "Maybe I can find some. Maybe there's dog piss in this snow."

"Son of a bitch," he panted, throwing snow up at me. He was already starting to cry. I slammed the handful of snow down on the area of his nose and mouth, and started grinding it in. He began to thrash and kick and howl, and a little blood from his nose began coloring the brown slush between my fingers. I reached for another handful; he'd given up, and lay there crying helplessly.

"What did you say to me?" I held another handful, poised.
"Eat shit," he blubbered. "Little Drummer Boy."

I tossed the snow aside and punched his face; Wham!

It was me starting to cry now.

"What?"

"Little Drummer Boy!"

Wham!

"Little Drummer Boy!"

Wham! Wham!

"Little Drummer Boy!"

I was punching him steadily now with both hands, as hard as I could hit; his face streamed with blood, and my knuckles were gouged from hitting his teeth. He went limp under the rain of blows, and I wore myself out on him. Finally all I could do was sit there and cry, gasping for breath and cursing him.

"Chickenshit! Little cocksucker!" His only response was to wail brokenheartedly, so I let him up at last, getting wearily to my feet. "Run along, little chickenshit," I told him. "Run home and tell your mama all about it, crybaby."

He clambered out of the snow, still sobbing, and began to trot off down the alley. But when he'd gone a few steps, got a little start on me, he turned.

"Little Drummer Boy," he wailed back at me defiantly, and then ran for his life. I picked up a piece of two-by-four that was propped against the garage door and followed, but I was out of breath and he was a fast runner. I flung
the chunk of wood at his back and stood looking after him, my teeth clenched, weeping in anger. All the time we were fighting, Willis had been going bananas, barking his head off. Now I noticed him.

"Shut up, Willis," I said. I began slogging back down the alley toward home, stomping Skipper's cap into the mud on my way.

Willis kept barking. I felt wet and cold.

"I hate you, Willis," I said. I'm going to get you, son of a bitch."

When I got home the mail had arrived, including the Dune County Thunderhead. There was also a letter from my mother, which I put aside until Dad got home. The Thunderhead at least was community property; I unfolded it eagerly, looking for my photograph. It was on the front page, underneath one of the entire chorus with Mrs. Shannon smiling nervously by the piano. I sat erect, my drumsticks held professionally, giving the camera my best steely-eyed smile. Then the caption under the photo caught my eye. "Little Drummer Boy Makes Big Hit" was what it said.

I spun in shock from pride to despair. It was the kind of thing you don't live down. I'd be the Little Drummer Boy forever.
That evening at supper Dad was quiet. Later, when we were doing the dishes, I found out what was on his mind.

"Matt Sorenson called," he said. "Told me he'd gotten a call from his wife. Seems you sent Skipper home without his cap."

I rubbed a plate with the towel and waited.

"I guess she was pretty upset," he went on. "I guess you must've beat her boy up pretty bad. Want to tell me your side of it?"

"He was calling me names," I said. I put the plate in the rack and he handed me another.

"Well, you know, 'Sticks and stones may break my bones...'
Sure there wasn't more to it than that? You and Skip have had fights before, but this one must have been something special."

The flowers on the chipped plate became blurry; there was a lump in my throat so that I could hardly talk.

"...in the paper..."

"What about the paper? Oh." He took the plate from me and gave me another one. "That picture."

I rubbed the plate blindly for a while.

"Here," he said. "Dry the other side of it." He took the plate and handed me some silverware.

"That 'Drummer Boy' business, that'll blow over in a
while," he said. "Till it does, I suppose you'll have to put up with it. You can't very well whip everybody in town, now, can you? Think you can whip Lon Dives?"

"No," I said. "He's a grownup. You can whip him."

"Son, get this straight. I won't fight your battles for you. I couldn't, anyway. This is something you'll have to work out yourself."

I finished the handful of silverware and he gave me more pieces. I dried them carefully, one at a time.

"Best thing to do when they call you that," he said, "is to act like it doesn't matter to you. Act like you're proud of it. Most important is, if you like playing those drums, don't let their calling you the Drummer Boy stop you. That's the way to really get 'em; if they make fun of you for doing something better than they can, do it even better yet, and laugh at 'em. They'll stop teasing you."

"And if they don't," he added, "at least you'll have something out of it besides sore fists and a bad temper. The dishes are done. I brought home some Mogen David. Do you want to have a drink with me?"

"Sure," I said, drying my hands and hanging the towel over the back of a chair.

Christmas Eve was when we opened presents. The Sunday before, we'd gone out and cut a little redcedar on the hills
above the Niobrara and decorated it with strings of popcorn and cranberries; there were the relatives' gifts, the customary ones, a box of homemade candy from one of Dad's aunts, a tin of Christmas cookies packed in popcorn from some of my mother's family in Lincoln who hadn't crossed us off their list. From Uncle Bertie in St. Louis there was a wooden Pluto, strung together with strings so that when you pressed a large button on his base he collapsed and lay down. There was a tin whistle from an older girl cousin, and a pair of mittens sent by someone on behalf of my dimwitted grandmother.

Dad gave me a plaid shirt and a wide leather belt with my name on the back of it, and there was a fishing reel like the one I'd been looking at only a couple of grades better. Finally, there was a large box from my mother, postmarked Seattle, with a letter taped to it. I opened the letter first, but it was just a card with a little note scribbled at the bottom. The box inside the box was wrapped beautifully in metallic green paper; it contained a lot of stuff, socks and underwear, a handsome pair of slacks that were too short, a model airplane, some difficult jigsaw puzzles, a carving of a fat Chinese man with his hands over his head, cuff links, a bottle of cologne, a book about Eskimos, a large photograph of a B-47 in flight (she worked for a while as a secretary at Boeing)-- a lot of stuff, but nothing that made my heart pound or caught my fancy. I had wished most of all for a photograph of her, but there wasn't one. When I had
unpacked the last item, I looked up and found my father staring at me, his eyes shining strangely.

He saved the box I'd gotten him that morning for last, and as he opened it I watched breathlessly for his reaction. Of course he made a fuss for my benefit, fumbling with the wrapping I'd taped together and wondering out loud what it could be; I was old enough to recognize this as drama but young enough to appreciate it. When the box came finally open and he saw the compass, he seemed genuinely pleased.

"I'll be damned," he said, smiling. "Been wanting one of these."

I blushed, delighted to my toes.

"This is a good one," he said. "Where'd you get it?"

I squirmed a little and went over next to him to help him look at it.

"Western Auto Store," I said. "It's backwards."

"What?" he said.

"It's backwards. Look, the N points south all the time. But he said you can turn the mount around."

He looked at it from the top and then held it out in front of him. "Let's see now," he said, and got up and turned so his arm was pointing to the north. Then he knelt down to show me.

"Here," he said. "Look. When you're going north, you're looking at the south side of the compass. See that? There's your N. It's all right the way it is."
"Hunh," I said, surprised. I grinned at him. "He sold it to me for a dollar off," I said.

He grinned back. "He did? So, you snookered old Jensen out of a dollar!" He put his hand on my shoulder as he got to his feet. "Tell me something, are you really that smart?"

I laughed. "No," I said.

He laughed too. "Didn't think so," he said. "How about another half a glass of wine? I don't suppose it'll kill you."

I followed him to the kitchen and sat down while he got the round squat bottle out of the refrigerator. The "half glass" was tiny, an orange juice glass about a third full; he poured one two-thirds full for himself, and put the wine back.

"If your mother was here," he said reflectively, "we'd've had the whole bottle by now. And more besides."

I sat watching him for a while. He was gazing down at the wine absent-mindedly. He looked sort of tired.

"Dad," I said, "can I read the letter? The one you got today?"

"I guess I'd rather you didn't," he said. "It's personal." He seemed to gather himself, and got up to go get the envelope. "There's a part that's for you, though; I guess I can read it to you."

He sat down again and unfolded it. It was a long one, three pages typed. He cleared his throat.
"Tell Joey hello for me, and that I love him very much and wish him a merry Christmas. I'm sorry I can't be there. Here it rains all the time and the only snow is on the tops of the mountains." Then she goes on to thank you for the earrings and says they're very nice and she wears them to work every day. Finally at the end she sends her love again. That good enough?"

"I guess so," I said. "She didn't send a picture?"

"No," he said. "Sorry."

"That's Ok," I said. "Do you want to read the card she sent me?"

"No," he said. "That's between you and her. Thanks, though."

Pretty soon Dad went to bed; I was left sitting up with the gifts. I turned on the radio, keeping it down low, and played with the dial, trying to get a station that wasn't playing Christmas music. The only ones that weren't were the Mexican stations, and that kind of music didn't interest me much. I tried the short-wave bands, but it seemed to be Christmas all over the world. I shut it off and watched the red light fade from the dial.

Back in the kitchen, I poured myself another juice glass of wine. I liked the opaque stuff, liked the warm feeling from the alcohol in my mouth and throat. It was sweet like cough syrup, only not so burning.

After a while I heard my father snoring. I tiptoed in
his room; his shirt hung on a chair, the letter from my mother in the pocket. I lifted it out carefully and took it back to the kitchen, intending to reread the part my mother had addressed to me. But when I opened the letter I couldn't find it. He'd been looking on the second page, but it wasn't there, nor was it on the first or third. I ended by reading the whole thing. It was a strange communication, not so much a letter as a tirade; she'd blasted him for three solid pages. Old bitterness, things I didn't understand her blaming him for, like her not being able to buy clothes in Palemon, him coming home smelling of diesel fuel and never mowing the lawn, me getting in fights and refusing to eat broccoli. The facts were unimportant, even trivial; it was the anger crackling from line to line that gave it a kind of wholeness, a weird vitality. There was nothing at all addressed to me except a postscript: "Tell Joey that I thank him for the earrings. I see that his taste is similar to yours." What Dad had "read" to me he had made up.

I put the letter down at my father's place and drifted back to the front room. There was the Thunderhead with my picture; I'd planned to cut it out, omitting the caption, and send it to her. Now I hated the whole idea. "Little Drummer Boy"— suppose she called me that. It was the kind of thing she'd say sometimes.

I stared blankly at the photograph and it came back to me, how scared I'd been and how proud. Only now I remembered
the way people had looked at me afterward. Especially the other kids; Skipper had found a sore spot and soon they'd all know it. And school would start again in just two weeks.

I put on my parka and slipped outside. The night air was crisp, a skin of ice was forming on the day's puddles. At first I stood looking up and down the dark street, nothing in mind. Then the chill started to creep in through my coat. If I was going to stay outdoors I had to do something; I decided to pay a call on Willis.

The liquid inside the Clorox jug swished, whispering in time with an imaginary jazz cadence as I marched along a quiet street, counting my steps, three pints or so of lawn-mower gas bumping against my leg. It would be a mission of status and revenge. Mrs. Shannon would be rattled, Willis would be terrorized; those of my peers who guessed (and I would make sure certain of them did) would be restored in their respect for me, for my capacity for immediate and drastic action. In my coat pocket I fingered the waterproof cylinder I always carried, made by shoving empty shotgun shells of different gauges together; it contained kitchen matches. The night was dark and calm, frost sparkled under the scattered and feeble streetlights.

The skin of mud on the alley had hardened so that it was possible to approach quietly. There was no need; Willis
was an old dog, and slept soundly, dreaming of a world of kind children or, better yet, of none. There was a gate in the low fence, but I was tall enough to step over it.

The doghouse was lighted on three sides by crusty snow. The fourth quarter, from the front around to the gate, was bare and dark. Willis's chain looped from a stake at one corner of the doghouse outward toward the lighted kitchen window, and then back. The night was quiet. A few blocks off, out on the highway, a truck began tromboning up through the gears.

As I crept up to the doghouse I could hear the slight glassy sound of the dry frozen grass under my feet. There was a faint metallic noise as I took the cap off the jug, and a hiss as gasoline ran onto the dry rotten shingles. I held it carefully in both hands, at arm's length, making sure in the dark that none of it got on my clothing. When I had doused the roof I backed away, still holding the jug at arm's length, now just an inch from the ground as I quietly made a trail from the doghouse to the alley. I put the cap back on the jug and stepped over the gate, wincing as it creaked. Inside the doghouse, Willis sighed and shifted; I breathed shallowly, my heart knocking fast.

The light in the kitchen window burned on, and the stars looked down steadily. Off on the street a car went by, turned into a driveway. Car doors slammed; there was laughter, a man's voice, a woman's. A house door opened and closed,
and the voices were cut off. I placed the jug at a safe distance and returned to the gate.

Silence.

There was a "pok" as the container of matches was opened. A good match was selected, one with plenty of white on the tip. There was a quick, light, metallic rasp as the match was struck on the zipper of a parka and thrown outward in a single motion.

WHOOOH! A sound like a giant cushioned door being closed firmly.

One always underestimates gasoline. I jumped back. My face and the backs of my hands felt singed, and the fuzz around my parka's hood smelled like burnt plastic. I knew it was time to run, but I didn't want to miss seeing Willis come barreling out of his doghouse, yelping in terror, maybe even breaking his chain. I stood by the corner of the garage, waiting more and more anxiously. The shingles of the doomed roof began to crackle.

"Willis," I whispered, then louder: "Willis! Come out, your house is on fire."

A twenty-foot column of light danced above the doghouse; Mrs. Shannon's back yard was as bright as day. Incredibly, nothing else happened. No doors slammed, no neighbors' lights came on. No panicked dog came scrambling out onto the snow.

"Damn you, Willis!" I climbed the gate again; I was
going to run up and kick the wall of the doghouse, but I found it was impossible to get close enough. The roof itself was blazing now, the root of the column moving down, the light wood making it hotter and brighter than before.

"Willis! Hey, Willis! You dumb shit, get out of there!"

I moved quickly around toward the front of the doghouse and tried to peer inside. The interior was dark, but I could see the beginning of a trickle of smoke curling around the top edge of the opening.

"Willis! Willis! Here, boy! Here, good dog!"

I was answered by a sound that made the hair stand up on my head. It was soft and low, something between a snarl and a moan; there was a mortal despair in it that I had not met with in my young life. For a moment I was struck still by it, paralysed. I looked down in shame, and my eye caught the chain at my feet. I picked it up and took up the slack.

"Willis, you've got to come out!" A thick gray tongue of smoke was curling around the lip of the door; the column of fire above the doghouse was shorter, reddish now and full of sparks. I pulled on the chain and it came slowly out, maybe a foot and a half. Then there was a scratching sound from inside and it stopped, even went back a little. I was leaning as much weight on it as my hands could bear, but it wasn't enough. I eased off and moved closer, aware of the intense heat on my face; I sat down and braced my feet, and leaned forward and wrapped the chain a couple of times
around my left forearm outside the coat. Then I took my left wrist in my right hand and leaned back hard, putting my back and legs into it. The chain came out a foot or so while Willis jerked like a hooked fish. Then it stopped and held. I put all I had into it, my endurance against his. It wasn't enough; for all his cowardice, he was a big strong dog. The pain in my left arm brought tears to my eyes.

There was a lesser "whoooh!" as the smoke inside the doghouse took fire; now the interior was a dark whirling glow, with bright flame rolling out the top of the door. I stood up and backed off, uncoiling the chain from my arm but still holding it. A light hissing sound came now, along with the same growl I'd heard before. I expected Willis to come bursting out and maybe kill me, but he didn't. I waited a couple of seconds and began pulling again, barehanded, leaning far forward, slipping on the frozen ground. Crying "Willis! Willis!" in my high boy's voice, I leaned and jerked on it while the sparks roared upward and the door became an oval of flame. My shadow danced in front of me now as lights came from the direction of the house. A pair of long white arms reached around me from behind, down alongside my own; strangely, instead of helping me to pull, they took my own hands gently and as the weight came on me from behind gently removed the dog chain from my clenched grip. As I turned, a dark figure moved past me, dragging something along the ground. It was an old man struggling
with a fire extinguisher.

The town cop, as always, arrived late. He found Mrs. Shannon, drunk and in her nightgown, standing in her back yard, facing the ashes and the hollow stucco shell. She held me tightly in her arms. I howled against her bony chest, and would not be comforted; for I had felt Willis's dying quiver on the other end of the chain.