A Matter of Freedom

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Abstract

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Bob grinned as he unfolded his long legs, to dash through the rain to the front porch. Al's driving hadn't changed a bit in the ten months since they'd come back from overseas. He had driven the company jeep in Germany, with the same careless competence that defied all laws of safety. Bob looked at him now, drooped lazily over the steering wheel. "I hear there's a course in driving you can take here," he said. "Maybe there's still hope."

Al, as usual, ignored the remark. "Go on in," he said. "The rest of the boys are probably down by now. I'll put the car up."

"Hey," Bob protested, "what kind of service is this? After all, I'm still a guest, not a pledge." He scrambled out of the door, dodging a blow aimed at his shoulder.

"Don't worry, you'll be a pledge soon enough," Al called as he sprinted for the porch. "Wait a couple hours. You'll be in my power then, boy."

The engine roared and the car shot around the corner.

Laughing, Bob took the front steps two at a time to come up, panting, beside one of the four big white columns spaced across the wide porch. What a guy, he thought. Al was as unpredictable as a little kid. Just the opposite from himself. Maybe that was why they had made such a good team together in the army.

He leaned against the big wooden pillar, fumbled a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. He remembered the
time he had first met Al. He had just come up to the outfit as a replacement. They were in a rest area, but it hadn't been restful. It had been rainy then, and cold, and they all knew they would be going back to the front soon. And he had been a stranger. Then, standing in chow line that night, he had mentioned to the man behind that he was from Nebraska, and the man in front of him had whirled around. “Nebraska?” he'd said, and stuck out his hand. “Put 'er there, buddy.”

That was Al, his friend. Or one of his friends. There were others inside: Pete, big Jim, forty others in fact. They were waiting for him, he knew. Still, he hesitated a moment, not wanting to go in just yet. Instead, he stood leaning against the pillar, breathing deeply, watching the easy rain come down, slow and straight. The first blustering, pounding gusts of wind had gone. Gone with the crash of thunder and the boiling turbulence of the storm front. All that was left was the cool wetness of the clean air, still carrying a trace of the haunting, musty smell that came when the first big drops splattered down on warm, dusty ground.

He looked out across the brilliant green of the wet lawn, the broad expanse of the playfield beyond, and the rolling hills of the country. It was good to be here, he thought. Good to stand here on the edge of the open like this feeling the pull of wide spaces. That was what freedom meant. Space. No wonder the pioneers had—

The muffle sounded of laughter brought him suddenly back to his friends inside. He turned, tossing the half-smoked cigarette out into the rain, opened the heavy oak door, and entered the hall. There was no one in sight, but from the big front room came the subdued, ever changing, murmur of talk. He went over to the closet, jerked open the door and threw his raincoat over a hook. No one to give him the glad hand this time, he thought. He was just one of the gang now. And why not? After tonight, he WOULD be one of them, for good. Or would he?

Once again, standing there with the smell of wet clothing reminding him of the rain outside, he felt the doubt that had plagued him for a long time now. It had started way back in Germany, really, when he and Al had first
discovered that they both would be going back to the same college. Right then and there, Al had started to make plans, plans that included him, as a member of Al's fraternity, of course. It had all sounded swell except that—

"Look, Al," he had said once, "don't you think lots of that stuff is going to seem pretty silly to us now? You know, all the little rules and things. Be sorta kid stuff, after this."

But Al hadn't thought so. "All the guys will be just like you and me," he said. "There won't be any of that crap when we get back."

Still, he hadn't been sure, and when he came to school in the fall he had politely but firmly refused all of Al's invitations to dinner, on the excuse that he wanted to look around before he decided whether to join a fraternity. Well, he'd looked around for seven months before he'd finally given in to Al's persistent invitations to "come on over for dinner tonight."

"I know you're going to like the crowd we have in the house now," Al had predicted as they were driving over to dinner that first time. And he'd been right, hadn't he. Couldn't find a better pair of fellows than Pete and Jim. Bill, his room mate back in the dorm, just didn't know what he was talking about when he'd said, "You're too independent to tie yourself down to any outfit like that, Bob." He WAS going to tie himself down. In a few hours now it would be decided, once and for all. But—

Frowning, he walked out through the dark hall into the front room. "Hey, there he is! About time!" At the sound of Jim's booming voice, the last trace of doubt left him as quickly as it had come and he was at home, at ease. He looked around the big, friendly, masculine room. Everything was solid here, solid and comfortable.

Jim had come up to him with several other fellows, nameless men with familiar faces. "Hi, Bob," they all said with easy friendliness as he grasped their outstretched hands one by one. Behind them, Al had joined the circle.

"What took you so long?" Al asked. "Get lost between the house and the driveway?"

"I was just admiring the view from your front porch. It isn't bad, you know." He wanted to tell them something
of the feeling he had standing on the porch a minute ago, but he knew it would sound awkward if he just blurted it out. Maybe, if they got into one of those semi-philosophical conversations like he and Al had sometimes down at Ed's Place over a glass of cool beer—. His hopes were futile though, he saw at once.

"Speaking of views," Jim was saying, "we've got a real one from the top floor here. Have to show you sometime. With a pair of good field glasses, you can see the windows of three sororities, and the sun porch of one of them. Talk about scenery, why man—"

"I know, I know," Bob groaned. "Don't you guys have any other talking points? There must be other reasons why some poor befuddled individuals pledge this outfit."

"Well, yes," said Jim in mock seriousness. "There must be. Can't think of any right now, though. That one was enough for me."

"It would be," he said sarcastically. For a moment he caught himself thinking that perhaps Jim wasn't just pretending to be serious. It would be like him to pledge a fraternity on the spur of the moment, for some insignificant reason like that. And never regret it. But he was different; he had to have real reasons. Not that he didn't have them. Friendship was a good one, wasn't it?

Al was talking. "No use trying to interest Bob in anything connected with women. He doesn't seem to think they're here to stay. I tell you, I'm beginning to get worried."

"We'll have to get busy and fix him up," Jim said.

"Now wait a minute," Bob objected. "I had enough trouble last summer with my mother trying to fix me up with 'nice' girls. Don't you guys start the same thing."

The low musical note of the dinner chime interrupted the hum of talk. "Chow," somebody said, and "Boy, am I starved—wonder what we're having tonight." He drifted on into the dining room with the crowd, lost in thought. It would be just like these guys to try and pick his dates for him. They'd already made some remarks about how a good-looking guy like him ought to be going out with the smoother women on the campus. And like his mother, they thought he didn't date enough. There had been two or
three bitter quarrels at home about that. In fact, there had been quarrels about lots of things in those three months before he'd come to school. He really couldn't blame his parents much, though. They had been used to telling him what to do before he left for the army. It was a habit that was hard to break.

Well, joining a frat would please them, all right. His father hadn't said much, but his mother had been very anxious that he get in with 'the right people.' She had been worried about some of his army friends. "Truck drivers and people like that" was the way she always referred to them.

"Hot dog, swiss steak," said Jim at his left. "Good of you to offer me yours, Bob old man."

"Huh?" he said.

"Offer it to YOU!" Al spoke up from the other side. "Why, he promised it to me, lunkhead."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen. Leave us not come to blows," he said, holding his hands out in a pacifying gesture. "We'll compromise."

"We both get half," Jim said eagerly.

"No, I'll eat it all," he said, sitting down at the long table. This was living, he thought. Good food before you, good friends on either side.

The meal passed quickly in a pleasant flow of banter, and dessert was being served before he finally noticed that Pete was absent. "Hey," he said. "Where's Pete? He fall into a vat of acid over in the chem building or something?"

"Basketball intramurals," Jim explained. "They had to eat early and get over to the gym."

"Who? Pete. Why, he couldn't even lift a basketball. And he hates the thought of the game. I've heard him say so."

Jim laughed. "You should have heard him squawk when we told him he was on the team. But we needed that 6 foot 4 inch frame of his under the basket. So we twisted his arm. We've got a good chance of winning the tournament."

Bob was silent for a minute. One of the things he had hated most about his army basic training, he remembered, had been the period of enforced recreation every Saturday afternoon. Now here it was again. He recalled his conversa-
tion with Bill back in the dorm, not two hours ago. He could see him, big easy-going, stretched out on the bunk saying "It's no good for you, Bob. You're just not the rah, rah type. Too much of an individual. They'll try and cram you into the mold and you won't fit. You've knocked around so long you've got too many rough edges."

He straightened in his chair and dug violently into his angel food cake. Bill was wrong, that was all. He could fit in. He did already. And Pete probably wanted to play basketball or he wouldn't have done it. They didn't put that much pressure on you. He finished his dessert quickly and in silence.

When he was done he sighed and laid his fork down on the empty plate. "That was a meal," he said. He turned to Al in sudden seriousness. This business of Pete having to play basketball still bothered him. "Say, Al," he began, "if I decide—well, that is, if you guys—"

He got no further, for someone had started a song and immediately everyone took it up. He sat and fiddled with his glass, bored and nervous. Why was he beginning to wonder, now at the last minute, about whether he should pledge or not? He had hashed all that out with himself two days ago. It was too late now. No! It wasn't either. Not yet. And there were lots of things he hadn't thought much about before. Like this singing every night after dinner. He'd rather talk, he thought, but every man was dutifully singing. Like robots. No, that wasn't right. These men were his friends, weren't they?

"What was it you were saying?" The song had ended and Al had turned to him again.

"What? Oh,—uh—nothing. I've forgotten what it was myself." He grinned a little sheepishly. Good thing he hadn't said anything. Al was a bit sensitive about some of these customs of the brotherhood. Like taking part in intramural sports—or singing. What was it they had told him—the three most important duties in college were first, your studies, then learning the fraternity songs and history, and third, attending house meetings and fraternity activities. Funny, it hadn't seemed nearly as childish then as it did right now.

There was a scraping of chairs and Mrs. Smith, the house-
mother, was walking regally out of the dining room, followed by the rest of the group. He filed out with them, still sandwiched between Jim and Al. Evidently they had been assigned to escort him to the inner sanctum.

“What’s wrong, afraid I’ll escape now that I’ve eaten your food?” he asked.

“Listen, runt,” Al said, “you’ll escape over my dead body, see.”

He grinned. “It’s not much of a body,” he said, looking down at Al’s diminutive five feet and four inches of height. “Shouldn’t have too much trouble.” They strolled over to the radio phonograph, laughing at Al’s answering growl.

“This is the one bright feature of this moldy cracker box of a house,” Bob said, searching the record albums on the shelf behind the machine. “After a meal like that, nothing less than the grandeur of a Beethoven symphony would be fitting.”

Jim snorted with laughter. “Beethoven. Are you kidding? Why, the life of the man who brought something like that in here wouldn’t be worth a plugged nickel.” He raised his hands in mock horror. “Bob, don’t tell me you’re one of these long hair boys?”

It’s sad but true,” said Al, busy searching through a stack of records on the table beside the radio. “Ever since I met him I’ve been trying to reform him, but no luck. I haven’t given up yet th—Hey, look! Here’s one I’ve been hoping we’d get. ‘Leapin at the Lincoln.’ ” He busied himself with putting the record on the player. In a moment, the harsh blare of brass swelled out into the room, drowning all conversation.

Bob stroked his chin thoughtfully, watching with part of his mind as Jim and Al stood tapping their feet and beating their knuckles on the radio in time to the music. So that’s what Bill had meant by rough edges. Things like his love of classical music. Would he have to give up that to fit in? Well, it was a give and take proposition, wasn’t it. But who did the giving? Who was the important one. The individual? Or did the gang count more?

The music stopped abruptly and Walt, the house president, came up to them. “Well,” he said, “do you have the spotlights and the rubber hoses ready?”
“Ready and waiting, chief.” Jim executed a smart salute.
“Let’s go up to my room then,” Walt said.
It was better up in Walt’s comfortable, spacious room, quieter and more intimate. “Cigarette?” Walt said.
“Thanks.” Bob took one from the pack held out to him and waited while Jim got his lighter out. He could feel some of the tension that had built up during that silent climb up the stairs draining out of him now. After all, he was among friends.

Over in the corner, Al propped his feet up on the side of Walt’s slightly cluttered desk, just as though he was getting set for a bull session. This wasn’t a life and death matter. It was nothing really. Nothing but—

“There’s not much point in beating around the bush, Bob,” Walt was saying. “You’ve been here several times.”

Across the room, Al blew a smoke ring and winked at him. “Just the usual guff,” his look seemed to say.

“You know what a fine bunch of fellows we have,” Walt continued. “If there are any questions you’d like to ask, we’ll be glad to try and answer them. I imagine Jim and Al here have pretty much given you the scoop already. So all I’d like to say is that we’d like to have you put on this pledge pin.”

He held out his hand and there was the pin in it and the eyes of the three men were focused on him now. It was up to him.

He set his cigarette down on the ash tray close by and he was surprised to see that his hand was trembling. What was wrong with him anyway? All he was doing was joining an organization. Just an organization.

All at once he found himself thinking of Bill and of their long talks back in the dorm. What was it Bill had said about organizations. That each time you joined one you gave up a little piece of yourself to it, became a little bit more of a slave, a little bit less a free man.

He got up suddenly and paced over to the window and stood looking out over the wide expanse of green. A free man. A free man. That was it! He flushed suddenly with the realization of what the battle he had been fighting with himself was all about. It was freedom. A question of freedom. Friendship vs. freedom. Comfort vs. freedom.
He turned and faced the three men in the room. They were puzzled, he knew, puzzled at his delay. They had expected him to accept immediately. Al had taken his feet down from the desk and was sitting straight in his chair.

"I'm sorry." He spoke quietly, but there was strength in his voice that surprised even him. "I can't do it. I just now realized that I can't. It's—well, it's hard to explain. It's just a matter of freedom, that's all."

There was surprise, and hurt, and maybe a little anger in the eyes of the three men now. He didn't blame them. It was his fault really, for leading them on.

"Why?" said Jim. "What's happened?"

"If it's some question," Walt said. "Like finances. Something you're not clear on?"

"The fellows all like you, Bob," Al said. "They're all waiting down there now, hoping you'll pledge."

"No," he said again, and he was surer than ever now. "It's no reflection on you or anything you've done. I just found out I can't, that's all." He walked to the door, anxious to leave, not wanting to hear their arguments. They got up reluctantly and followed him down the stairs.

Only Al went with him to the door and shook hands with him. "Goodby Al, and thanks for everything," he said. "Maybe sometime I can explain this better."

"If you'd just reconsider. It's not too late," Al said.

"No," he said, and it was final. He closed the door behind him.

Outside, the rain had stopped and it was lighter in the west. He tossed his raincoat over his arm and walked slowly down the walk. At first he felt that emptiness, that hollow sort of sadness that he used to feel in the army every time he was transferred to a new outfit, leaving behind men that he had come to know and respect. But it was hard to stay sad on an evening like this.

He walked a little faster, striding alone down the wet sidewalk, breathing deeply. It was good to walk alone after a rain, he thought. The air smelled fresh, as though the tension was gone from it. He smiled to himself. It made him feel very light and—and somehow, very free.

—Edwin Sidey, Sci. Sr.