John, The Dreamer

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Arch. E. So.

For a moment, there was nothing more to say. Blaine and John had talked over all that had happened in the two years and were waiting now for the time they'd part again. It seemed funny to John to be sitting there in the Grill dreaming of adventure. The air was thick with the smell of food and smoke; but outside, a cold spring breeze turned the red branches a yellow-green. John stretched his legs restlessly and wanted to be outside breathing deeply the cold air. Blaine seemed restless too, as if he were out of place indoors. John contrasted the two years Blaine had spent in the navy with his own two years of college. Blaine had had the courage to try a new life—and John wasn't sure.

Then Blaine asked, "John, why don't you do it?"
"Do what?"
"Join the navy. Skip college. Hang what people would think, and do what you want to do."

It was quite a while before John tried to answer. He'd been dreaming. Now he looked at his empty coffee cup and remembered the times he'd come down to the Grill to drown his sorrows over other cups of coffee. Whenever he flunked a blue-book, he'd get the awful feeling that he didn't belong in school, that he couldn't make the grade. And he wanted to leave. And the fresh spring breeze had taunted him.

Why, just four weeks ago he'd been sitting here rereading Blaine's last letter. It was postmarked March 2, 1940. John couldn't forget parts of it. "A bunch of us went to an old cathedral today. It was shelled...deserted. John, it gave you a funny thrill to go inside and see the dust...the broken stones and a forgotten grandeur. There was a snake hanging on one of the
long chandeliers. . .” Here at school with all the rush and the
noise, it was hard to think of Blaine actually doing this. Now,
the letter seemed more real.

LAST night it had been even easier to dream. John didn’t think
about his calc assignment, for Blaine had come for the last day
of his two weeks’ leave. They’d walked together down the cinder-
path. Now, over the clash of glass and the silly chatter, John
remembered what Blaine had said. “We traveled fourteen thou­
sand miles in eight months. . We almost had trouble with an
Italian ship that steamed up on us in the dark one night—they
wouldn’t let us write about it. Didn’t see a white woman for two
and a half months. . I’m a machine-gunner; I adjust the sights
and inspect them. Swab decks, too. Once I won seventy-five
dollars gambling—my date was a White Russian. I saw a man
killed by a shark. . . I think I lived a life-time in those two years.”
And John had to ask, “Blaine, do you really like it?”
“Yes, I do.”

So John dreamed again. He was off in another world. The
sounds he heard changed to a screaming macaw or the tinkle
of brass. A bright red sweater he saw changed to a robe in a
native market. He didn’t smell the cooking food any more, only
the odor of tea and spices. Somehow he remembered telling
Blaine’s mother that Blaine had joined the navy. He forgot her
weeping and remembered only what he had tried to tell her.
“There are things that call a man, that urge him on to see the
whole world and find himself that way.” The words echoed back
to him now, and called out to him. But Blaine had asked him.
Join the navy. Skip college. . . do what you want to do. . .

“YOU CAN see me in the navy,” he answered finally, “hating
the orders—no, that’s not how I’d do it. I’d ship on a freighter
out of New Orleans—head south. I’d like it better, being on my
own. And you know, I could. I just got a check from home,
fifty dollars. It’d be enough to start on.”
“Then why don’t you?”
“Well. . . well, it would hurt other people. You hurt your
mother when you left. She cried when I told her.”
“Hell, they get over it. Mom feels okay about it now. She’s
glad I’m doing what I like to do.”

Sketch
Somehow it vexed John. There weren't any real reasons why he should stay in college. He snapped back, "Well, what do you want me to do? Forget that I'm going to school? Just drop everything and leave?"

"You could," Blaine answered, matter-of-factly.

"Yes, I know. That's what scares me. It would be so easy to change my whole life."

"WHAT'S there to be afraid of? Look. Take the bus with me this afternoon. We'd ride together most of the way. You'd start right now and end up God knows where—just as I did. You want to, I know you do. Why don't you?"

"Blaine, I can't just leave. I've a building to build in Arch E. I've got a theme to hand in tomorrow. I've got a meeting at four. I."

"John, you're stalling. You're afraid to face it."

And he was—John had to admit it. Sure he was sick of school. Sure he wanted to go. But to change your life in such a short time. To leave the warmth and the security and the friendship. They ordered one last cup of coffee, and lit their last cigarettes.

"Have I told you about the time in Haiti when we were after Voodooos?"

John shook his head no and started to dream again.

"It sounds so strange now, to say it here. Maybe you can see it, though. We'd been ordered to find this ceremony one black night—maybe they were starting an uprising. Two long-boats of us. We beached on the edge of the jungle. There wasn't a sound but those drums. It was like a movie except for the awful feeling that it was real. We stumbled around for hours and didn't find a thing. There was only the darkness and the machete in your hand, and a queer sensation in your stomach, like a dream come true, and always those drums pounding and throbbing in front of us, behind us."

"I hear the drums. I wish I could go."

"Why can't you? Come on. Why don't you live?"

"You put it to me as if you dare me to do it. You ask me if I have the courage to live the dream."

"All right then, I ask. Do you have the courage?"

"No." And it was hard to say it, hard to admit it.

March, 1941
TEN MINUTES later, Blaine had left, and John hurried to his meeting. As he passed the tall pines, a sudden wind sprang up and set them to whispering and singing, bending back and forth. Almost as if Fate were laughing and saying she'd won, because he was afraid to live. So he'd chosen the dreams, John thought. And he blamed it on the other dreams he had, the long lasting dreams that take work to make them live. But the spring breeze was a sea breeze, and the singing wind sounded the call. John wanted the courage.

"Some day I'll go!" he cried. The wind laughed, and he said it again, half-heartedly. "Someday I'll go."

Julie Stoops
To Conquer

Lydia Stewart Welch

BEFORE the first peal of the bell died away, Julie had the phone in her hand and was cooing into its black interior with her best telephone voice, which, she was firmly convinced, sounded just like Hedy LeMarr. But the call was for Jess, who was not at home. She hung up the receiver and returned to flop disconsolately into her chair, bleakly contemplating what promised to be a treacherously dull evening.

From the outside came the little suburban sounds of a summer night. A screen door slammed, a car passed on the quiet street, next door, Mr. Warren was whistling for Toby . . . Toby barked, crickets called.

"Here I sit," thought Julie tragically, "and life's going right on without me. I should have gone to the movies with that dumb Jim Taylor . . . might have known nothing better would turn up with simply everybody out of town." Why did Dad have to be so stuffy about not opening the cottage until August?