A General’s Soldier

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Abstract

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I WATCHED the hands of the two men rather than their faces. In the bad lighting of the bus station their hands seemed to move in pantomime as if no words were being spoken. But there was cruelty in their voices. Old Enis Bellomy sat with his hands folded across his lap and nodded at the man who told him about war as he knew it. Standing by the ticket counter and listening to them, I saw then more than I ever had before the cruelty that remains constant, that men finally need more than they need anything. And I remembered when I was twelve and had gone fishing with my father. It was very dark and near the edge of the lake I had heard the reeds crack as if someone were walking in them. I did not turn around when I heard the soft treading noise. Then someone laughed deeply and clasped his hands tightly about my ears and the hook I was holding dug into my thumb. When I screamed, my father let the bucket fall into the water and the minnows spread out in a fan like silver pebbles. It was Clyde Jordan. They were both drunk and they wrestled together until Clyde fell near the water and I could hear him saying, Dammit, Chilton, don't hit me . . . Although I could not have known then what death was, the white form lying face down in the slime had seemed as stark and violent to me, before it rose, shaking and weak, as the death Enis and the man talked about.

I did not know the name of the other man. He was much younger than Enis, perhaps thirty-five; but I knew his face. I had seen him every month or so during the years before. He drove a truck to the valley and sometimes across the Rio Grande to Mexico. As he stopped and listened to Enis speak, he was serious in a way that only those men who seem to live without purpose can be. It was not a respectful but a fearless expression with his jaws jutting and rigid.
“In the Spanish-American war, I was just a youngster — almost twenty-two if I remember right. Those was the times when it was a man to man battle with hard steel and none of these new-fangled ways to kill each other...”

I watched the tremor of his face as he spoke and his hand tugging gently at his beard. I thought that if I were old and could look back on my past life I would no longer fear death; that it would be like listening to my voice, much younger and deeper, and tracing its change through the years; that cruelty would gather as a shadow with all the images of my father and others who had died, and I would not be afraid. But I was not old and there was no strength of age in me. Had I found strength in anything, I would not have stood there, a wanderer rather than a writer, listening to them.

“You don’t know how it is. There’s this big howitzer — I was in the artillery — and you know wherever that shell hits it’s going to blow the hell out of everything.” He spread his hands out in a large arc. “And these 109’s diving down at you.”

“But that’s not like pushing a bayonet into a man’s middle and watching his eyes jut out at you.” Enis shook his head back and forth. “It takes more nerve.”

We were the only ones in the bus station. It was late and the ticket counter had closed. They sat across from each other and the sudden silence seemed to go past me into the street. It was the last of March and nights were still cool. When the man started talking again, I could see Enis looking toward me, his eyes twinkling as though he remembered all the times he and I had talked together. I had moved to Terrel the year before. I met him near the old courthouse a few days after I arrived and instead of being surprised to see me, he asked why I came back. He had been a clerk in the post office until I joined the army and when I went to town with my father on Saturdays he used to look through the bars of the stamp window and say, That boy’ll make a fine soldier when he grows up, Chilton. You can bet your life on that. He retired a few months before the war started. He had never changed much until then, but during the five years I was away he seemed to grow very old. For a while, I did not tell him why I came back. The war was over and I felt that I had no other place to go. One day when we were sitting on
the porch of his house, he turned toward me and said, *Chilton would've wanted you to stay in the army, Doyle, instead of coming back here to your mother and taking up this writing. He was never a soldier but he was proud of you.*

The man looked toward me over his shoulder. "You come from around here?" he asked. I stepped nearer and Enis laughed. "He's been here most of his life. He's Sara Robinson's boy. You knew Chilton Robinson, didn't you?"

"The name sounds familiar."

"He was killed in that truck accident just outside town during the war."

"Were you in the army?"

"Yes," I said.

"What unit?"

"I was in the infantry."

"Yeah?"

"I didn't like it."

"I've seen you around. What's your business?"

Enis laughed again and I could feel my face become warm. "He stays with his mother and writes."

"Writes? Writes what?"

"Stories," I said.

"Is that why you stand around here watching everybody like a hawk?"

"No."

"I bet you jot down everything we say."

"I don't do that either."

"The boy came back because he wanted to live where his father did."

"Everybody to their own choice. You're not married, are you?"

"No."

"That's the answer. No wife, no mother-in-law." He looked at me not knowing whether he should laugh. "Why didn't you stay in the army?"

"Because I don't like killing people."

"Not even if they'd kill you?"

"Someone has to stop."

"It won't be me ... not by a long shot."

"Or a short one?"

"You probably didn't have the guts to stay in."
“Doyle would’ve stayed in if his daddy hadn’t died.” Enis’ hands trembled slightly. “He’s not yellow.”

The screen door opened and as I turned I thought, only for a moment, that he looked like my father. I could not see his face, but the broad shoulders and dark leather jacket were outlined in the shadows. I imagined that it was him, that I could hear his deep, clear voice saying, *Where in hell have you been? I’ve been looking all over for you.* And a large hand reaching out to grab my arm. I wanted to believe he would not have been ashamed: he would have laughed at my coming back the same way he laughed the night I enlisted, saying I was never cut out to be a soldier.

“Come in, Mr. Chapman.”
“Good evening, Enis . . . Doyle.” He rested his hat against one leg. “It’s pretty cool tonight.”

The man stood up. “Finding any crooks, sheriff?”
“Not looking for any.”
“You might take a look at this young man here.”
“Doyle? What’s he done?”
“Nothing in particular. Just says we should’ve given up rather than fight.”

Sheriff Chapman stepped into the circle of light and looked intently at me. “How’s your mother, Doyle? She any better?”
“Yessir.”
“I was talking to Dr. Farrington just a while ago. He says there’s nothing really wrong with Clara’s heart.”
“He’s already told me.”
“You know it’s funny Clara could get something like that fixed in her mind. Before Chilton was killed she was the most healthy woman I ever did see . . .”
“Sheriff, maybe I ought to take Doyle here to Dallas with me so he can sign up again.”
“The war’s over. I don’t blame him for high-tailing it out while he could. It’s been over a year now. Let bygones be bygones, I say.”

I walked to the door and before I opened it, the man said, “We’re going to stop by and pick you up, Doyle.” I did not stop to hear them laugh but turned and stepped outside. I could see that the lights in the living room of the house were on. I knew Clara was waiting for me. Each night
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I returned late she stayed awake, sitting by the lamp and reading the Bible. During the war, she wrote me again and again that when she was worried and could not find strength, she would open the Bible and that she always found an answer on the very page before her. When I entered the hallway I heard the grandaddy clock strike twelve and each chime seemed to measure my steps. I knew that as soon as I reached the stairs she would call for me; she would say the same words she always said when I came home late. But she did not call until I was almost to the top of the stairs and for a moment I thought that she might have left the light on rather than wait for me and I turned to go down.

"Doyle, is that you?"

"Yes."

"Where have you been? I’ve been worried to death.” She stood in the square of light in the hall and looked up at me. “Why didn’t you tell me you were going to be late?”

"I was at the bus station talking to Enis.” Her shadow seemed to grow longer as she stepped closer to the stairs. “Is your heart feeling all right?”

"It’s been bothering me some.”

"I’m going to my room. Can I get you anything?”

"You don’t look well. Have you been drinking?”

"No.”

"Your father used to drink so much. I never want you to start.”

I walked to my room. When I opened the door, there was a faint odor of geraniums about me. I knew she had been there, perhaps looking out and watching for me. I sat in the chair near the window and looked toward the bus station. In the dimness of the street lights, I imagined that three figures appeared and walked toward the house: Sheriff Chapman, one hand on his belt, the man beside him, and Enis behind both of them tottering along with his cane.

Enis: The boy’s brave. He won’t mind going.

Sheriff Chapman: He’s not nearly the man Chilton was, we’d better expect a struggle.

The man: He’d kill all right, to save his own skin.

Enis: He’s not yellow. I’ve known the boy ever since he was knee-high to a grasshopper.

Sheriff Chapman: Maybe we shouldn’t go breaking in
with his mother the way she is. We ought to call him outside.

The man: And what if he won't come?

Sheriff Chapman: Then I guess we'll have to go in and get him.

The man: You just wait until the army gets its hands on him again. They'll see how much guts he has.

Enis: I think we ought to get his mother to call him down if he don't want to go on his own accord.

Sheriff Chapman: The boy won't cause no trouble. If Chilton was living all we'd have to do is get him to say the word and there Doyle would be.

Enis: I reckon the boy loved his daddy more than he did anyone. We talked together a lot and he can remember things they did years ago. He remembers things I said and did that I couldn't recollect even if I tried.

Sheriff Chapman: He has a good mind all right. Maybe he should write, maybe we should let him alone.

The man: What good is he? Stays with his mother and lets her support him.

Sheriff Chapman: Now that ain't right, not entirely. He gets some kind of benefits from the army.

The man: You mean he was wounded?

Sheriff Chapman: I don't rightly know?

The man: Then why didn't he say so?

Enis: He never told me about it.

The man: He's a funny one.

Enis: When I was telling him about his daddy's funeral — we was sitting outside the old courthouse — he broke down and cried. I guess I never should have mentioned it, but he talks about Chilton so much I thought he'd like to know how many people showed up. It was the biggest funeral since Reverend Adrian died.

Sheriff Chapman: I remember racing outside town and finding the cab of the truck crumpled up like a cracker box.

The man: Maybe he came back so his mother wouldn't be alone. It's awful to be left alone that way.

Sheriff Chapman: I don't rightly think so. He probably just wanted to come back and live where his daddy did.

Enis: There's truth to that. Clara and him go out to the
cemetery once a month and put flowers on the grave.

When I turned from the window, I could see Clara by the door. I had not heard her come up the stairs. She switched on the light. "Why don't you sleep in the living room tonight? I'm afraid to stay down there by myself."

"Why?"

"Because I keep hearing Chilton's voice when I close my eyes."

"His voice?"

"There's something I've never told you, Doyle. I know you and he were closer than we can ever be. The night you enlisted, I wanted more than anything to keep you from it. But he wouldn't let me, and I never forgave him for it."

"It's your imagination . . . nothing else."

"After he was killed I lay awake nights, never knowing when the Lord would unleash his punishment. I feel I killed him. We never loved each other like we should. He was too strong, except for drinking. That was his only weakness. And I drove him to it . . ."

"Mother . . ."

"I know I did! The night he was killed, we had got your letter telling how you were wounded and everything. I flew into a rage and said he'd sent you to your death. He left the house and I never saw him again . . ." She whispered like someone trying to keep from crying. "You can forgive me, can't you?"

"It wasn't your fault . . ."

"The Lord knows I've asked forgiveness . . . I've tried to forget, but I can't."

"Let's go downstairs . . . You need sleep." She seemed not to hear me and I said, "Both of us were too weak and needed him more than he ever needed us."

"Yes, we're too weak."

When I was alone in the living room, darkness seemed to close in around me and I raised the shade. The door to the bus station opened and two men stepped out. They waited there for a while before walking away from each other. Near the circle of light beneath the street lamp in front of the house I could see an image of my father standing and looking toward them. He was almost transparent, with
veined outline, like Albert Ryder's *The Equestrian*. And I knew that I could never be the way he had been. He was a general's soldier, afraid of nothing — not even death.

—James T. Jones

**The Derelicts**

DOWN on Skid Row you see the men standing around. Waiting for the bars to open at noon, or talking to other men, the only people they know. They are empty men, with empty faces.

You wonder why they're there. Bad luck in business, or a broken love affair, or too much alcohol, or a desire to drift, until, at last, there's no place left to drift.

* * *

Dave Henderson stood in the doorway watching his brother Bob pull another shirt out of the closet and carefully fold it into a suitcase. He was older than Dave, slightly stoop-shouldered, and his round face was topped with some straight black hair.

Bob had always seemed somewhat mysterious to Dave. A college man — well, almost a graduate. A navy veteran, even if Hawaii was as far as his tour of the world ever took him. A man that could change his job with hardly a second thought. A man of the world.

“Where are you going this time?” Dave asked.

“Oh, it’s you, Dave . . . Well, I haven’t quite made up my mind. Actually, I’m on leave from Boeing to go to the Veteran’s Hospital. The doc I saw in Seattle sent me.”

“Well, are you going back to Boeing?”

“I don’t know . . . It’s getting cold in Seattle. I might go south for the winter. Maybe to Los Angeles.”

Dave looked at the cold Oregon rain washing across the windows in Bob’s bedroom, and shuddered a little. He’d be out in it, on his way to work, in a little while. He watched Bob packing in his methodical, quiet, manner. Always sure how he wanted to do it, always calm and deliberate.

Brother Bob. The oldest child in the family. Bob had protected Dave when the neighborhood kids had a fight . . .