The Derelicts

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Abstract

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...
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 Vet-
eran'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 . . .
He'd taken the scouts on camping trips, before the navy got him. And when he came back, there was college with studies, and no more scouts and camping trips . . . Bob, who went skiing with his older friends, his younger brother wasn't invited now . . . But sometimes Dave could use his little red Ford convertible, on which Bob "got a real deal" from one of his friends.

"How'd you like the job at Boeing?" Dave asked finally.

"I got a little tired of it. I just followed some engineer's plans. Not much chance to design anything of my own."

Bob stopped for a moment as he pulled a pair of shoes from under the bed and blew the dust off them, before dropping them into a cardboard box.

"Some of the stupid engineers up there at Boeing, with college degrees, don't know as much about it as I do. They just draw some plan and then I have to make it work."

Dave watched as Bob labeled the box "shoes" with a fancy script he had learned in a graphic arts course at college. "Old English Classic," he had said.

Three months ago Dave had watched Bob pack to go to Seattle. He had a job as an electronics technician for Boeing Aircraft Corporation. "A dollar seventy-three an hour," he had said. "Looks like a pretty good job."

He'd said that about a motorcycle messenger's job last summer . . . and there'd been a three-weeks job with the evening newspaper before that . . . and a summer working as a grounds keeper for a girl's school . . . and a summer as a forest service lookout . . . and for a while he'd thought it'd be fun to drive a taxi cab.

"Maybe I'll go back to school this fall, and get my degree," Bob started.

"Why don't you go back to college?" Dave thought out loud. "Remember the time you told me how the real way to live would be to go to school until you were ready to teach in college, and never leave? You could be a college professor."

After all, it had been silly for Bob not to get his degree. He'd gone to college for four years, but didn't finish his senior thesis. That was all, just a thesis . . . and he quit because of a fight with the math department. He was majoring in
math, but his senior year he didn’t take any math courses, just social science . . . and they hadn’t liked that too well . . .

Why, he’d even spent two summers in college. One at Hiram studying French and one at the University of Washington studying math.

“I don’t know,” Bob said. “I think I’ll wait until I have enough money saved so I can afford it.”

He stood looking at a pair of ski boots he was getting ready to pack away. ‘They look way big for him, Dave thought idly.

“Maybe I’ll give Reed College another chance, or maybe I’ll go to Nevada, where the skiing is terrific.”

Bob looked at the boots, and then at Dave. His deep brown eyes seemed to know some secret, something that they wouldn’t tell. Dave turned and looked out the window again . . . the rain was just a drizzle now. It would be like this all winter, he thought.

“Well, why not?” Dave said quietly. “You’re done with the service, and if you had a degree you could get a pretty good job, couldn’t you? The kind of job you’d really like . . . especially with a degree from Reed.”

Bob looked at the window. Outside the air was thick with moisture. “I don’t know,” Bob said at last. “I’ve got to get this kidney trouble, or whatever it is, cleared up first . . . Besides, I don’t have enough money to go to school right now. I got through the first four years on the G. I. Bill, but that’s run out.”

Bob was talking to the window. Dave felt as if he were eavesdropping on a private conversation.

“I think I’ll see if I can get a job in California this winter. It’s too cold and wet here. By next fall I can save enough to go back to school.”

“ Heck, you could work part-time here, and when you get your degree you’d be able to get a job you really want,” Dave offered feebly. “Unless you find a better job in Los Angeles.”

Bob sat down on the edge of his bed and started thumbing through his copies of E. E. Cummings, as if looking for the right passage for the situation.

“Maybe I’ll look into U.C.L.A. and Stanford while I’m there; they might be pretty good schools,” he said to the book. “Joe Alex is there. Maybe we can take a couple of weeks off to do some skiing in Mexico or Arizona.”
Dave picked up an old copy of the "Handbook for Boys" and began thumbing through it.

It must be kind of fun to be free to wander, to see the country, to pick your own place to live. But is there ever an end to the search for a room, a new job, new friends, and trying to keep track of old friends?

Dave looked up at the newspaper clippings of Boy Scout events on the wall, and thought of the time Bob had taught the minister's son how to strike a match, and the patience it had taken. He thought of Bob sitting on a street car somewhere, reading a book... E. E. Cummings... while the car rattled him to work. Or sitting in a forest service lookout, reading and sunning himself while time passed him by. Of days that had been—of some that might come.

Dave stood up and grabbed his brother's skis. "I'll take them out to your car for you," he said. Without waiting for an answer he walked out into the cool Oregon mist. He noticed that the street lights were already on in the half darkness of the late afternoon as he slid the skis into Bob's red convertible.

* * *

On Skid Row, men stand waiting. If it rains they move inside. They have no place to go, no job to worry about today, or tomorrow, or the next day... They wait. Empty men, with empty faces.
And you wonder why they're there.
—David H. Leonard

Winter Nightfall

The deepening light of the setting sun,
Scattered by bare branches on the hill top,
Danced in lingering, childish tardiness
On the white drifts,
Till the stars called it home;
And the evening coasted
Down the snowy hillside
To sleep in the dark woods below.
—James Wickliff