The Shorn Lamb

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He sat, the breeze ruffling his sun-bleached hair, gazing over the undulating fields interrupted by verdant groves of trees. As the flies buzzed, his roving eyes settled on a small bird flitting about in the branches of a nearby sandalwood tree. Squinting into the sun, he watched the bird going about its business unhindered.

It was almost a week, and he felt so alone. No one had spoken to him much, just a few obscene remarks made from a safe distance. And then they had looked in his direction and laughed. "Oh well," he thought, "this silent treatment can't go on forever. Pretty soon they'll be jumpin' all over themselves, bein' friendly, tellin' everyone else how they know me."

Satisfied by the image that he had created, he brushed away the flies that had settled on his uneaten food. He chuckled aloud thinking, "I've always been an outsider, sortuv an oddball. But they eventually come around, learn to appreciate my true talents."

A smile formed on his lips as he remembered Calvin, Calvin the stooge. He had been a loner until Calvin Brookmyer had come along. But Calvin wanted to be his friend, always did everything he asked, joined in; but better, Calvin was a good audience. Sometimes he had made Sonny a little angry though, laughing loudly at his antics even if they weren't quite that funny.

But it was good to have a friend, one you could dominate, one who was on your side and a good audience. Recalling memories of Calvin made him feel good inside. Sonny remembered how Calvin had helped when they made all the kids laugh in class over the parody of Cleveland TV's "Cool Ghoul." And they had liked him that day, admired his cleverness. "It was great," he remembered, "standin' there in my brother's helmet and fatigues listin' the bargains on 'The Cool Command Show.'" He felt a warm glow as he reviewed the script in his mind: "Send in today. You, too, can have, at the low price of only $39.95, an M-2 mortar, 4.2" that fires M328A1 and M335A2 cartridges."

But it had gotten better; he really had them rolling in the aisles when he pitched the 50 caliber Browning and the 2.36" anti-tank rocket. And they really liked the mailing address. That was all Calvin's contribution, he remembered warmly: "Irwin Rommel Parkway; Mesopotamia, Ohio; 30-ought-6. Great stuff!" He had wanted to conclude his performance by exploding a plastic tank, "Ghoul" style, using just a small firecracker; but his stooge had taken command for a change, talking him out of it, warning that he couldn't risk another suspension.

Risk? He had really taken a chance when he had dared Calvin to aim and fire his 300 Savidge at the Brookmyer farm. Criss-crossing the county roads, firing from the window of the pick-up at the imagined enemy troops amassing at the Maginot line. With Brautigan's dog-eared Rommel Drives On Deep into Egypt in its usual place on the dashboard, they had approached the Brookmyer fortress. Sonny recalled how he had handed the rifle over to his stooge intoning, "This is a frontal assault; there's an enemy position over there that needs to be taken out."

Sonny laughed aloud, hugging himself as he recalled Calvin at the moment. Eyes widening, breath coming in gasps, his stooge had taken the proffered weapon and lined up the area left of the big window in the cross-hairs of the rifle. As Sonny had gradually lessened the pressure on the accelerator, three shots had rung out, filling the cab of the truck with an acrid odor and deafening his ears. Shouting, "Objective destroyed," he had slammed the pedal to the floor, and they had roared off in the direction of the flame-colored horizon.

He again smiled broadly as he remembered that moment and later how they had laughed until their sides hurt,
tears streaming down their cheeks. He hugged himself again and said aloud, “A successful sneak attack and no one ever really found out who did it.”

Feeling better now, he straightened his shoulders, waving away the flies and wiping his sweaty brow with the back of his hand. “These guys don’t know what they’re missin’ not knowin’ me better. I’m smarter’n alluv’ em. They just don’t know it yet.”

His brave thoughts were interrupted by a clattering noise punctuated by laughter and curses. He looked down in their direction, smiling plaintively; but they ignored him. Then he turned away, glanced down at his knees, and with a sweeping motion again brushed away the flies. Slowly, painfully, his shoulders drooped, and he sank back into silence and loneliness.

“They guys don’t like me,” he thought wearily. “But they don’t know that they’re in the presence of a star, a real star. I’ll show ‘em. They’ll see.”

The flies continued to circle ceremoniously, trying to get into his ears, making passes at his nostrils. He hated flies, but he hated the heat most. The heat always wore him down, sapped all of his energy. He never could figure out why they made you work in the heat. Seems like they always waited for the hottest part of the day and then gave you the biggest jobs. And they told you that you had to do it even if you could hardly take a breath.

“Wasn’t that way back home,” he recalled. “I could always sleep in school when it was hot, and the teachers never said nothin.’”

Refusing to exchange his army fatigues for lighter clothing had made it worse, especially in June, but he had a reputation to uphold so it was worth it. He thought of the stifling history classroom, of the perspiration that soaked his armpits, ran down his back, how he always nodded off during 7th period. “Boy, that room was always a hot one, couldn’t hardly breathe, but that sub just wouldn’t leave me alone. She was a real jerk. Yeah, a real jerk.”

A warm breeze played over him from the second-floor window, he had been dozing, lost in a world of battles and blizzards on the Russian front. He was commanding an armored division under Guderian at the battle of Kursk, holding off the Russian T-34’s, making important decisions, when she had rudely forced her way into his private reverie.

“Yes, you, I’m talking to you, whatever your name is.” He had slowly returned to the warmth of the classroom, trying to get her in focus through the slits of his eyes.

“Yes, you. I’m talking to you, young man. There will be no sleeping while I’m in this classroom. Straighten up and pay attention.” He could hear the voice blaring at him, but he couldn’t quite get her into focus.

And then the haze had begun to clear from his eyes, and he had seen her clearly, standing over him, leaning into his air space. She was enormous, bovine, with great pendulous breasts that hung like headlamps in the night. And he hadn’t been able to contain himself, hadn’t been able to hold it in. A long moo-oo-oo had come from over his rounded lips, almost as startling for him as it was for her.

The class had immediately bust into hysterical laughter, but she just stood there, hands on ample hips and purple-faced, trying to regain some composure. And then his eardrum was nearly shattered by the scream that she had emitted, “Leave the room immediately. Get out of here. At once.”

He had drawn himself up, face flushed, a look of bewilderment spreading. And then, slowly regaining control, he had reached for his helmet, which clattered and banged as he drew it from under the chair. In one fluid motion he had placed the helmet on his head, risen from the chair, and begun striding toward the open window. Once there, he had hoisted himself to the ledge, and had stood erect in the opening.
He remembered how the class had enjoyed it, cheered him on. And he wasn't about to let them down. With military bearing, he had executed a perfect salute and then leaped through the opening. And best of all, he had remembered to shout "Geronimo" on the way down.

They had suspended him for an entire week, but it had been worth it. It had been a great week, the greatest of his life—kids calling to tell him how funny he was, calling to say that his leap was an original, telling him they had never seen anything to equal it.

But his mother wasn't so pleased. She had held whispered conferences with her sister over the telephone. He heard her mention "psychological help," and "What am I going to do with him?" But he felt good, never better, in fact. His mother's problems weren't going bother him. After all, he was a star. They liked and envied him, and nothing could take that away. And Calvin? Calvin was still like putty in his hands. Calvin worshipped him now.

Drawing his index finger through the loose dirt, he attempted to play a game of tic-tac-toe with himself, wishing that Calvin were here to keep him company. "I'd even let him be the X," he thought generously. "Poor ole Cal, never did beat me. Never figured out it was cuz I always went first. He always was sorta dumb, but we sure did have some good times together."

He felt so sleepy and wished he could take a cold shower, imagining what it would feel like to have icy water pouring down over him. "Must be the heat. I never could stay awake in the heat," he thought as he absently watched the flies gathering on his pants. Even they appeared lethargic. He slowly raised his hand, took aim, and slapped his thigh with a resounding thwack.

"Hey, it's alive and drawin' flies." Looking directly at him, the man who had spoken sneered and then turned away with a high-pitched giggle, his friends joining in the laughter.

Sonny looked away, staring off into the distance. "They're just a bunch of jerks," he thought. "If Calvin were here, we'd fix 'em, show 'em what it's all about. Then they wouldn't mess around."

He remembered how he and Calvin had fixed them, shown them all, all those jocks who were gettin' into the pants of the cheerleaders. "They always thought they were better'n us, cuttin' in at lunch, lettin' the air out of my tires cuz I took one of their parking places. But me and Calvin showed 'em, we really showed 'em."

He again felt a glow of satisfaction remembering that day. And what a great audience they had been. They were all there, all the couples, all the cars, the guys eating hamburgers and fries, the girls sucking on their Mountain Dews, the air blue with cigarette smoke. "Jock lungs. Them and their jock lungs," he said aloud. Yeah, Millie's Drive-In had been full that day, a great day.

He and Calvin had been riding around, dressed in their usual combat fatigues, with nothing really exciting to do when it came to him. And then they had spotted the dog, some stray standing forlornly along the edge of County Road 42. Glancing at Calvin with a mysterious smile playing on his lips, his good buddy had understood immediately. "Go for it," he shouted excitedly.

"That dog never knew what hit him. Put him out of his misery fast," he recalled. "He musta' been worth about 50 points." And then they had gotten out of the cab and hoisted the bloody carcass onto the truck's front end, tying it down with his deer lies, securing it for the trip back into town.

"We gotta get him to evac real quick," Calvin had shouted. And they had headed for Millie's Mash Unit at top speed.

They had circled the drive-in parking lot three times, slowly, ever so slowly, searching for a casualty aid station, the lifeless animal draped across the hood. It was still vivid in Sonny's mind, the teenagers between bites and sips, looking up, watching the slow progress of the truck as it made its circuit. Some had smiled faintly, but
With most had recoiled at this macabre sight. And then one of the guys had shouted, "Sonny, you're crazy."

Responding with a stiff salute, he had floored the accelerator, and he and Calvin had laughed all the way home.

Well, maybe they had overdone it a little, but he chuckled as he remembered the looks on their faces. They were so chicken shit at the sight of a little blood, especially the girls, so squeamish. Some of them had even turned away from him on Monday, turned away from the familiar sound, the clomping of his combat boots in the upper hallway. But they would remember that day at Millie’s, remember him, and that was what was important.

The flies continued to buzz about him mechanically. Gripped by an uneasiness, he wiped his sweaty brow and tried to dry his palms on the legs of his trousers. When he stopped thinking, stopped remembering the good times, the loneliness returned and enveloped him. He resolved to pay no attention to anyone, just to think of how it used to be, all the fun that he’d had. That way they wouldn’t be able to get to him, wouldn’t be able to make him miserable.

And then he heard it, a high-pitched whistle from some place beyond the trees. His eyes rolled and his Adam’s apple bobbed up and down. From somewhere near he heard the shout, “Incoming! Incoming!” He looked about wildly and then stared in the direction of the loud explosions, watching as the black smudges and brilliant flashes of fire walked across the terrain. The earth around him began to shake, the loose dirt around the hole dancing in a drunken jig. He was aware of the dryness in his mouth, the ringing in his ears. The black procession appeared to be heading directly toward him.

Ca-r-r-ump! In one motion he threw himself flat against the bottom of the hole, locking his hands against the back of his head, elbows jammed against his ears, pressing his face against the sourness. The concussion lifted him up and then slammed him back down. Ears popping, clumps of dry earth raining down, he felt a tingling, drawing sensation as the bile rose in his throat. And then dampness spread over the front of his trousers, and vomit spewed from the depths of his shaking body. He lay in the nightmare of the dirt waiting for the next salvo.

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