

AYRES

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Junior in Liberal Arts

PRIVATE AYRES was in the first squad. Therefore he stood in the front rank. Behind him, on either side of him, the men of his company stood like patient cattle in the heat, in the fine golden dust of the parade space.

Ayres breathed deeply the dust-laden air. The danger of sneezing was gone and he stared impassively at the monotonous drab buildings that ringed the company area. Ayres' rifle was at his side, held carelessly by his right hand in the position of order arms. Ayres had long ago forgotten about the rifle. It had become by now an ordered part of his existence and had passed into that realm of forgotten necessities together with his wristwatch and the yellow plastic comb in his hip pocket. He dutifully carried the rifle where he was told, and at night returned it to the slotted rack at the end of the barracks wall.

Ayres distantly regarded the inspecting party as they approached, using the numbed inner vision he reserved for bank tellers and those who sat next to him on busses or street-cars. He saw them from the corners of his eyes, without turning his head, as they came to Shipley, the first man in the squad—the short, egg-shaped company commander who strode like an automaton behind the fat-lipped inspecting colonel, trailed by the officer of the day and the blunt-nosed sergeant. Private Ayres blurred his eyes out of focus and saw them as four converging smears of brown against the shaded patterns of buildings and trees. The heat sang in his ears. He stirred his fingers on the rifle and again became aware of its presence. The metal was always either colder or warmer than his hand. He wondered if he could go to sleep, standing up like a horse.

Ayres, who had been listening to the buzzing in his ears and watching the heat-distorted mountains, was startled when the colonel paused in front of him. Reflexively he lifted the rifle, clumsily swung it to inspection arms. The colonel handled the rifle disdainfully, but with pretended interest.

"Dirty rifle," he said.

"Ayres, dirty rifle," said the sergeant, repeating the offense, dutifully. He wrote importantly on the sheet attached to his fibre clip-board, pausing to study Ayres' face, as though it were necessary to record his physical characteristics.

The colonel thrust back the rifle. Ayres could see a mustache of yellow sweat beads, heavy as syrup on his upper lip. The colonel turned stiffly. He had managed not to look at Ayres all the time that he had been inspecting the rifle. The others trailed after the colonel like minor priests of the inquisition. As he passed,

the captain turned to look at Ayres as one who has found his trust betrayed. Ayres felt the blood spreading in his cheeks. His hands trembled as he closed the bolt of the rifle and snapped the trigger. The rifle was large and slippery as he lowered it to his side. Sweat drops tickled from his chin to his navel. The men on either side of him had not moved...

Private Ayres sat dumbly at evening mess, not speaking to the men at his elbows. After chow he would go look at the company bulletin board. He had heard that the names taken in today's inspection would be on the extra-duty list. It did not seem fair to him. In previous inspections officers had stopped to examine him, but none, since basic training, had taken his rifle. It was not fair. He did everything else that was expected of him; he awoke promptly at five-thirty, was never late to formations. In range firing he had made a score of seven-



hundred twenty, better than marksman, not high enough for expert. His bed was always made and swept under. He shaved his plain, ordinary face each day and seldom went on leave at night, going instead to the post theater or to one of the canteens on the base.

He chewed the boiled carrots thoughtfully.

It was not right for them to judge him on this act alone. Others with more disgraceful records, he knew had passed the inspection. More than that, however, he felt for the first time that his womb of privacy had been invaded. The shell which he had labored so carefully and quietly to establish was gone. He was no longer Private Ayres. He was Ayres with the dirty rifle.

He rinsed out his mess kit with the remaining coffee from his canteen cup into the galvanized pail and waited for his turn at the scrubbing brush in the hot, soapy water. The soldier ahead of him had lost his fork in the boiling water. He was trying to retrieve it with the scrubbing brush.

"Come on," said the man behind Ayres. "Get the lead out."

Ayres stood quietly, waiting his turn. The acrid, oily smell of the immersion heaters hung over the bubbling water, irritating his nostrils.

"I give up," said the man who had lost his fork.

"The fork's probably melted in there by now," said the man behind Ayres.

Ayres stepped forward, took the brush, and began to scrub his mess kit vigorously.

THE group of soldiers around the bulletin board did not move when Ayres arrived. He read his name carefully once, twice to make sure, and moved quietly away. Ayres did not go to the canteen that night. He went to bed early. He went to bed early, but he could not sleep. He did not sleep until long after lights out. Thoughts whirled in his mind like wheels of a slow-moving freight. They were upsetting

the plan—the plan that had obsessed him since he had been drafted into the service—to perform quietly and apart until the end of his enlistment, protected from the realities of disciplined existence by instinctive obedience and a cloak of bland nonentity. It was like a drug. He could perform the motions by now, leaving his mind free and detached to contemplate his officers and fellow-soldiers as one who looks down from a high mountain and remains himself unseen...

In clean, laundry-smelling fatigues Private Ayres reported sleepily to the fat, heavy-lidded corporal who stood beside the detail truck. A cool, pre-dawn mist wavered near the ground. A single, naked electric bulb burned feebly at one end of the company headquarters.

"Where's Martin?" asked the corporal, reading from his list.

"I don't know," said Ayres.

He climbed into the back of the truck to wait and sat with his arms folded on the slatted bench. It gave him a quiet satisfaction to know that the others were late. He was on time as usual. Perhaps the corporal would remember this.

"Guess you should have stayed in bed another hour," said the corporal.

Ayres did not reply. He took out a package of Juicy-Fruit. The gum was hard and brittle until it softened in his mouth. He crumpled the silver tinfoil into a fine ball and put it into his pocket. There was no use in becoming upset.

Although the blacktop highway was hard and smooth, everything in the truck rattled. The waste cans spilled fine powdered ash and bits of paper. The road to the dump grounds was pitted and dusty. The truck moaned in a lower gear. Dust rose from the tire ruts and filtered through the canvas. Gradually the men and the truck became covered with gray dust.

One of the men sitting across from Ayres began to cough.

The men swayed helplessly like puppets on a string. Ayres stared out of the back of the truck at the receding dust. He thought of tonight and a shower and was very calm. He put his handkerchief over his mouth so that he would not have to breathe the dust.

After they had been to the dump grounds the men raked stones in the company area. The corporal did not seem to care whether the men worked or not. Everytime the corporal looked away the men would stop working. Ayres did not stop working. He worked very quickly, raking all of the stones in his area into a neat, circular pile. Ayres was finished before the others, so he helped them. The muscles in his shoulders and forearms began to pain, but he raked steadily until the stones were all formed into neat, circular piles like his own.

"Okay," said the corporal. "Take ten."

He lit a cigarette.

IT was nine o'clock in the morning. At nine-fifteen Ayres and Richards were sent to clean the latrine. Richards put up the CLEANING—USE NORTH LATRINE sign and closed the door. He sat down on a wooden bench and lit a cigarette.

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