THE RESCUE
THE RETURN TRIP

Senior Honors Project
ID 499
by
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Ken rounded the curve, his headlights sweeping across brush and tree trunks alongside the road. He leveled off at just over sixty, since, after all, there was no real hurry now. His mother had really rushed him on his way—it had taken so long to pack and to load the car, and she hated to think of him driving at night. But now he could take his time, get acquainted with the road, and think about what he was getting into. He turned up the volume of the radio. Soon he would probably have to find another channel, when his hometown station faded away altogether.

For the umpteenth time since graduation, he began to wonder if college was really what he should be doing now. Of course, the papers and forms had all been filled out long ago, but the feeling had never left him that he would really be happier getting started in business and perhaps getting married. He was sure he was ready for it, and up until a month or so ago he had thought Jan was, too—but there was no point in thinking about her now. He closed the window and concentrated on watching for route signs.

He wondered if it was too late to give up college. But, of course, it was—he had never had any choice in the first
place. Since his parents had the money, and his grades were high enough, there had really been no other choice after high school. And besides, with the draft and Vietnam breathing down his neck—well, there was no point in even thinking about it...

And then there was Jan—yes, Jan. There was no point in denying it this time. After all, she was the real reason he had wanted to stay home.

He remembered the last really big date they had had, his senior prom at the Knights of Columbus hall. He had picked her up at eight, his little Falcon shining from its recent wax job and his rented tuxedo fitting surprisingly well. She had appeared at the top of the stairs in her pale orange formal, her hair piled carefully on top of her head. He had gingerly pinned his white corsage on her dress, right next to the modestly plunging neckline. And in the parking lot, just before going into the dance, he had finally kissed her, for the first of many times that night. They had danced most of the evening; they had drunk cup after cup of the cherry punch; they had laughed and giggled over the most inconsequential things; and then they had danced some more. And after the prom, as they'd stood on her front porch...

A sign on the right announced the juncture he had been waiting for—"ONE MILE."

But all that, of course, had happened almost four months ago, in May. The last time he'd seen her had been just last
week, when he had taken her to the last Jaycee-sponsored Teen Dance of the summer. It was there, when he had returned from the concession stand with her coke, that he had found her talking with the tall, college-age boy she had evidently just met; and he had watched them for a moment, vaguely aware of a slight tightening in his throat. For the last several days he had been trying to push the incident from his mind, even though Jan had become suddenly unavailable. But tonight, when he'd called her house and had been informed that she was "out for the evening..."

The car sped through the intersection, and Ken gently applied his brakes, gradually pulling off onto the shoulder. He couldn't even think straight with all the racket the damned radio was making. He fiddled with the tuning knob and finally succeeded in eliminating some of the static from the now distant station's broadcast. Turning the wheel full to the left, he pulled across to the opposite shoulder, backed up, and started back toward the crossroads.

"...Barbara Henderson, the third local teenaged girl to have been attacked in the past two weeks, is under intensive care in Clark Central Hospital. The girl described the assailant to police as blond, of medium build, and in his early twenties. She stated that the man picked her up in his car on the west side of town, then forced her to ride with him to a deserted area..."

Ken drove through the intersection a second time, turning
off the radio to rid himself of the static. He pressed down on the accelerator, watching the speedometer needle climb slowly to above the seventy mark. He concentrated on watching the areas to either side of the road for any lights or houses.

A telephone. That's what he needed right now. Just one call to her house to see if she was back yet, or else to find out where he could reach her. He saw a curve ahead, slowed down slightly, and executed the turn with his hands tight on the wheel.

What was the color of that guy's hair? He could almost see that face in front of him—the arched eyebrows, the thin nose, the grinning, no, leering mouth—but the hair! It couldn't have been dark, could it? He mentally tried dark hair on the image—no, not dark. It was light, light brown at the least, maybe even a sun-bleached blond. Certainly it could have been mistaken for blond by some girl who had been through what that girl had.

He saw a small sign on the right—"WATCH FOR SCHOOL BUS." At this time of night, he almost smiled to himself. He held his left arm in front of his face, but he couldn't make out the watch hands' positions. He checked the speedometer—seventy-five miles an hour! What was this he was on—a picnic? He pressed his foot down farther, watching as the needle climbed much too slowly.

A telephone—come on, a telephone, or a house or something. Nothing but fields bordered by two endless rail fences with
barbed wire along the top, an occasional tree,—and telephone poles. But where were the houses they connected? Way back from the road probably.... He kept his eyes out for mailboxes as well.

And what was he doing, going along with his dim lights on, when there was no one around for miles? His left foot pressed the button, and instantly trees and telephone poles stood out white against the black night and stars. A sign appeared with an arrow pointing to the right—"HATSVILLE"—some little village, probably, with just one dirt road leading to it. The fence stopped briefly and then continued. How far had it been? Two miles, five miles? It was too late now. The turn-off was already far behind him.

He glanced at the speedometer—eighty-three. He finally clamped his right foot to the floor. Instinctively, his eyes shifted to the rear-view mirror, but there were no lights, flashing or otherwise. Only black. Anyway, wouldn't that be the best thing that could happen? Have the police radio ahead and find out right away whether Jan was safe. Wasn't that the important thing, after all—have someone get a warning to her in the quickest way possible? Of course it was, of course, of course. He went on driving, his eyes alternating between the road and the mirror.

The speedometer needle was now wavering between ninety-two and ninety-three and climbing very slowly. Ken glanced up in time to see the mailbox on the left side of the road and
slammed down on the brake. He lurched forward, and as the mailbox moved toward the left side of the windshield, he threw the column shift into second. The engine doubled in volume, throwing him forward again, and he turned tightly onto the dirt lane. The road winded, forcing him to dim his lights to see where he was going.

In about a minute he had reached the tiny farmhouse and stopped the little car beside a rail fence. He got out and started running, but stopped short, surveying the unpainted structure. It was completely dark; many of the windows had no glass or screen; and there were no wires anywhere near the house. He got in the car and within a minute was back at the mailbox. He saw it was blank, no name or address. He waited as a car sped past, then pulled out after it.

What would he say when he did find a phone? Ask for Jan, of course, but what if she wasn't there? Would he tell her parents who he was and warn them? He had reached the car in front of him and stayed right on top of it, waiting for a chance to pass. A hill loomed in the foreground.

On the other hand, maybe it would be best to avoid frightening Jan's parents unnecessarily. It might be best if he only asked where he could reach her, saying he had to get a school assignment from her or something. Then he could call whatever place it was and check up on her himself. He and the other car were climbing the hill now, but he decided to chance a pass, seeing no headlights shining over the brim. Flooring
the accelerator, he pulled out to the left and charged ahead, then crossed back over the line just short of the summit. He flicked on his brights, watching the narrow beams disappear briefly among the stars, then return to light up the descending road. He kept his right foot to the floor downhill, finally reaching the hundred mark.

A welcome sign greeted him at the base of the hill—"FOUR LANE HIGHWAY AHEAD 30 MPH." He let up on the accelerator slightly, but he was still above seventy when he reached the small jog to the right. He turned the wheel only a couple inches, keeping in the middle of the road, but feeling the rear end sliding out, he jerked the wheel to the left. Under control again, he got himself back between the broken and the solid white lines and almost immediately discovered a still more welcome sign, announcing a rest stop in two miles—a telephone!

Ken went over again what he would say, determined not to raise a false alarm, but also determined to locate Jan at all costs. He turned onto the short ramp of the rest station at well over the posted speed and screeched to a halt in front of the telephone shelter. Running into the lighted, three-sided structure, he dumped all his change onto the counter and fished out a dime to call the operator. She told him the call would cost twenty cents. He took his dime out of the coin return box and redeposited it, adding two nickles from the counter. In a few seconds he heard Jan's phone ringing.

A young girl's voice answered. "Hello?"
Ken tried to speak calmly. "Is Jan there?"

"No, she's out."

"Then are her parents there?"

"No, they're out, too. This is the baby-sitter."

"Look," he said, "could you tell me where she went?"

"Who--Jan? She went out with Bruce."

"Bruce? Bruce who?"

The voice giggled. "I don't know his last name. He's real tall and handsome."

"All right. Do you know where they went?"

"Well, I'm not sure..." the girl hesitated.

"Please, it's very important. I'm a friend of hers. We're in a class together at school."

"Well, I think they went bowling."

"At the Bowl-Mor?"

"I guess so." The voice became worried. "Hey, you aren't a boy friend of Jan's, are you?"

He paused. "No," he said. "Say, listen. This Bruce--does he have blond hair?"

"Blond hair? Yes, I think so," the girl said.

Ken hung up and looked through his change for another dime. After ten seconds he scattered the pile with his hand—nothing but pennies and one nickel. He ran to his car, started it, and roared off with his tires spinning. "Peel!" he smiled grimly, remembering a favorite expression from his grade school days.
Racing along the lighted re-entry ramp, he glanced at his watch—nine forty. If he assumed the two would stay at Bowl-Mor until it closed, he had exactly twenty minutes to get back to town. He kept his eye on the speedometer and on his watch, noticing that the car accelerated from forty to sixty in just over four seconds. Not bad for a six-cylinder compact. Still, he would have given anything to have had a Corvette or a Cobra under him this one night. He turned the radio back on full blast and felt the electric music pulsate through his body. The telephone poles flashed past him at an increasing rate, darkening as they were left behind and finally fading into the night.

Stupid, he said to himself, that's what you are. If you'd counted the change before you made the call, Jan might be safe by now. All right, all right, he answered himself, no use bellyaching over it now. What's done is done, and you'll just have to make the best of it. He watched as a deserted Phillips 66 station raced backward into oblivion. The radio blared on.

"It's not unusual to go out at any time..."

Maybe he should make a plan right now so he'd know what to do when he reached the bowling center. Should he challenge the guy openly, or would it be better to pull Jan aside to warn her? A man who had attacked only teenage girls probably would not be dangerous, but he would run if warned, and it might be possible to tip the police off secretly if stealth was used. On the other hand, circumstances might prevent anything but direct
action. If Jan and the guy were already leaving the center, then the main thing would be to keep them in the parking lot in any way possible. He imagined his Falcon sliding across the exit to the parking lot just in time to stop them. Both guys would jump out of their cars and leap at each other, Jan watching...

He tried to push the melodramatic scene from his mind, noticing a pair of flashing lights just ahead. He pulled to the left and sped past a stranded car, its owner waving his arms in an attempt to flag him down. A long curve appeared, and he took it at ninety, breathlessly guiding the hood between the white life-lines and trying to ignore the already battered white guard rail and the pitch black beyond.

Back on the straightaway, he thought of how Jan would feel when it was all over. Weak and nervous, trying to thank him. He would try to calm her, of course, and would put his arm around her, leading her gently to his car. He would drive her home, and they sit in front of her house, talking...

"Cherish is the word I use to describe my love..."

A sign sprang into his consciousness, informing him that he had reached the city limits and followed by another sign signaling the end of the four-lane highway. He saw a third sign, announcing the thirty mile per hour speed limit, but he kept the accelerator pedal pressed to the floor. The huge, deserted shopping center flashed by on his left, and he knew that just ahead were the New York Central railroad tracks, with
the downtown area just beyond them. He hoped it, too, would be relatively deserted at this hour.

There was a clanging sound, and he looked up to see the lights at the crossing flashing on and off alternately. Way to the left he made out a yellow light barreling through the night. He maintained his speed for a moment, then realized the danger and clamped down on the brake pedal. His forehead hit the steering wheel rim, and he jerked the wheel to the left and then to the right, trying to control the skid. He finally came to a stop inches in front of the lights. The train hurled by outside the left window. After straightening the car, he got out to inspect the tire marks, which extended in four black lines as far as he could see by the back lights. He checked his watch—nine fifty-nine—and climbed back in.

"And I do... cherish you..."

The train went on interminably. The music stopped.

"Good evening. In the news tonight, police have captured the man they suspect of attacking three local high school girls. Ronald Tanner, twenty-three, was arrested at about nine thirty this evening in a bar on the west side of town..."

Ken switched off the radio. The last freight car passed by, and he jammed his foot onto the accelerator, sending the Falcon bouncing across the rough tracks. There were fluorescent lamps lining the street now. He could read his watch when he held it up to the window. Five after ten. A loud rasping noise suddenly forced itself into his consciousness, and he
realized that the jolt over the tracks must have broken his already weak tailpipe. He continued accelerating, and he was soon moving at twice the speed limit.

What was he trying to prove? Jan was safe now. Wasn't that all that mattered? Why was he going on, trying to pretend that nothing had happened? He was passing small stores and busy drive-ins; the rasping noise continued.

He was still stopping Jan and the stranger in the parking lot outside the Bowl-Mor. He leaped out of his Falcon and pulled the other's door open. He jerked the man out on the pavement. The man stood up and jumped at his throat. He knocked him away, then moved in and smashed him on the jaw. He followed with a left to the stomach, a right, another left...

Ken rolled down the window to cool his wet forehead; the rasping grew louder.

Why did he have to hear that second newscast? Why couldn't he have gone on ignorantly and honestly to save Jan's life? He passed a truck; the rasping echoed against it. Why did he have to lose his chance to rescue Jan? Why couldn't her date have been the rapist?

Ken shivered suddenly. The rasping diminished slowly and finally stopped.

He leaned over and surveyed himself in the mirror—the gallant knight with the bruised forehead. He realized for the first time that it wouldn't have made the slightest difference no matter what had happened. He stared into his eyes until
the reflected image became a separate being, then looked away, embarrassed.

Twisting around in the seat, he loosened some of the twine which held his books together. He used it to tie up the tail-pipe. Then he turned the car around and started back toward college. He glanced at his speedometer and pressed down on the accelerator slightly. After all, he had a lot of time to make up.
THE RETURN TRIP

by Richard Ades

Look, will you forget about that new superhighway. If you're so het up on taking it, I can let you out right here, and you can try to hitch a ride with someone else. But as for me, I'm sticking to this old road. It's the one I always took to the University, and it ought to get me to my brother's place in good shape—it's right on the other side of town.

That's right, I was a student there once, too, though not for long. And that's what I was just starting to tell you—what happened to me that got me thrown out of State U. during my freshman year. I want to tell you this because a lot of students these days seem to have the idea that they ought to start right in trying to change the world. You're a freshman, aren't you? Yeah, well, we've had a lot of these hippie-type students come down here, from the North mainly, I think, and it seems like all they want to do is demonstrate. Well, let me tell you, I was the same way. Not that I went around carrying a sign, but I did have my own ideas about how things should be, and they made me miss two weeks of classes, right in the middle of the quarter, and as a result of that I got expelled from school. Since then I've just been fooling around, trying to make a go of it with my farm, and not having much luck. In
fact, that's why I'm going up there—to see if my brother has any suggestions. But anyway, like I said, I'm telling you this for your own good.

It started when I was driving home, along this same road here, for a weekend visit. I'd been at State U. for five weeks—it'll have been four years ago this October that this happened. I guess I liked the place pretty well, too—it wasn't integrated then like it is now—only there were these two professors there that I didn't see eye to eye with. All that pseudo-intellectual crap they kept feeding us. I know everyone else felt the same way, I was just the only one who spoke up against them. I think they had a lot to do with my getting expelled later. But like I said, I generally liked the school, and I just wanted to get away for a couple days.

So I was coming up the road here—I remember it was a warm day, because I had the windows down—, and I hadn't been driving for more than half an hour, when the right rear tire blew. It was an old tire, and I found out later that it had worn clear through. But anyway, there I was, stuck in the middle of nowhere with a flat tire and no jack. That's right. I'd loaned mine to my pa. Well, I sat in the car for about fifteen minutes, waiting for someone to come along, but no one ever did. So finally I got out of the car and started walking. South, since I knew there were no gas stations back the way I'd come. I walked for about a quarter of a mile, seeing nothing but fields, and then I saw this gate with a sign on it. It said "Col. Mat-
thew Hicks, Private Property." On the other side of the fence, there was nothing but some woods, that I could see. But it was the first sign of human life that I'd come across, so I climbed over the fence and started walking up the little dirt road.

It took me about five minutes to get through the wooded area. Then the road passed by a field, or what had used to be a field. Now it was all covered with weeds and rocks, like it hadn't been used for several years. I began to worry that maybe I'd come across an old abandoned farm. So when the road took a jog to the right to go around a big hill, I decided to climb up and have a look around.

From the top I saw there were two buildings directly on the other side, at the end of the little road. I noticed they seemed to be in pretty good shape, like someone had lived in them recently, so I figured I was in luck. But as I was looking around some more to see if anyone was working in the fields, I noticed something strange on the left side of the hill. There was the field I'd been walking through, bordered by a high, solid wood fence. I'd seen that from the road. But what I couldn't see from the road was that on the other side of the fence was another field which seemed to be exactly identical to the first one. Every time there was a bush, a rock, or a clump of trees on one side, there was the same thing on the other side, directly opposite it.

Well, I was wondering about this, but just then I noticed that there were four figures down in the field, way off in the
distance, and they seemed to be coming in my direction. So I started running down to meet them. I got to the bottom of the hill and was just running past a big tree, when all at once the ground kind of slipped out from under me. The next thing I knew, I was hanging upside down from one of the branches with a rope tied around my leg. I looked up and saw the four figures running toward me, so I didn't think there was any need to yell for help. But I wasn't so sure when the four got close enough for me to see them. Two of them were men dressed in work clothes, and the other two were boys, one white and one black. And one of the men was pulling the boys along at the end of two long leashes, like they were dogs.

By now the first man had gotten to me, but he didn't cut me down right away. He just turned to the other and said, "What the hell'll we do with him," or something like that. And the other said something about they should wait and let the Colonel decide. So the one tied the two boys to the tree, and he and the first guy cut me down and started to tie my hands together with some of the tope. Of course, I was yelling all this time, trying to tell them about my flat tire, but they wouldn't listen to me. They just tied my hands and then led me and the boys around the hill to those buildings I'd seen before. It turned out that one of them was a small, modern bungalow which seemed well kept up, and the other was an old red barn. The men took me into the barn and put me in a little storage room, untying my hands, but locking the door, and then they went away.
I was in that room for the rest of the afternoon. The first couple hours I spent pacing around, worrying about what they were going to do with me. I kept thinking over what I'd seen—the boys on the leashes and the identical fields—but I couldn't make anything out of it. After a while I heard some movement outside, men walking past the door, and it smelled like they were carrying food around. That reminded me that I was hungry. But they didn't bring any to me, so finally I just sat down and leaned my head back against an old saddle and fell asleep.

It must have been some hours later when I heard a noise in front of me, and I opened my eyes to see one of the men standing there in the doorway, holding a rifle. He just said something like, "The Colonel wants to see you." Then he stood aside and waited for me to get up. So I walked outside, and he directed me out of the barn, across the driveway (it was pitch dark by now), and into the house. He took me into the living room, where this old, white-haired gentleman with a mustache and cane was waiting for me. The old man introduced himself as Colonel Hicks.

The first thing the old man did, after I had sat down, was to ask if I had had dinner yet. I said no, of course, and he had the hired man go into the kitchen and bring me some sandwiches. I tried to tell him that all I wanted was to borrow a jack to change my tire, but he said, "I regret this very much, sir, but circumstances force me to retain you here at least for
a while longer." I think those were his exact words. So I began eating the sandwiches, and the Colonel sent the hired man out and then started to lecture. Yes, lecture—that's the only way to describe his manner of speaking.

He started in telling me the history of the South since 1865, how it had constantly been taken advantage of by Northern carpetbaggers, and how it had almost been brought to ruin under the "leadership" of the Reconstruction state legislatures. Then he got around to modern times and lambasted Washington's attempt to force segregation on the South. He said the Southern way of life had been based on the fact that whites and niggers are naturally incompatible, since they have different levels of intelligence and abilities. Therefore, they should be given different—and separate—functions in society. This was necessary for the well-being of each race. But now, he said, outside forces were trying to change all this by saying that whites and niggers are equal. Well, up to this I'd just been sitting there eating, dumfounded, but his last statement reminded me of those two professors of mine, and I spoke up.

"They say," I said ironically, "that science backs them up."

"Science!" the Colonel snorted. He stopped pacing the room and turned to a small bookcase. "I have here twenty books by scientists who aren't afraid to admit the superiority of the white race. But they were all written before 1920. Modern science goes along with the Northern politicians and the so-called intellectuals who are part of the conspiracy to destroy the
South." He was standing directly in front of me now, staring at me. "And are we going to let them get away with it?"

"No, sir!" I said, getting up angrily.

"Then what are we going to do about it?"

I thought for a moment. "I don't know, sir," I said.

He went on staring at me and finally started nodding his head. "Yes. I think I can trust you. I think it's safe to let you know exactly what we're doing here to save the South." He called the man with the rifle in from the next room. Then he told me, "If you've finished your dinner, we'll go out to the barn, where I can explain everything you happened to see this afternoon."

As the three of us were walking out, the strangeness of the fields and the two boys came back to me--I'd forgotten them in listening to what the Colonel was saying. My curiosity grew as we walked past the storage room where I'd spent the afternoon and down to the far end of the barn, where the other hired hand was sitting on a chair, leaning against the wall. The Colonel had the men open the upper half of the divided doors on the last two stalls, and then he motioned for me to look in. The first thing I noticed was that there were steel bars covering the top half of each doorway. They were apparently nailed in place. Then, as my eyes got used to the darkness, I saw that the floor of each stall was covered with straw and that there was a big pile of straw and blankets against the far wall of each. These were the beds. While I watched, one boy appeared from each bed
and came over to the bars to stare back at me. One was white and one was black, like I said before, and they looked like they were about twelve or thirteen years old. I turned back to the Colonel, who was explaining what the boys were doing there.

He told me he had raised them since they were babies, teaching them only the things they would need to know for the experiment which was to be the "salvation of the South." The test was to be run on an obstacle course--that divided field I had seen--, while the Colonel and a group of his aristocratic friends watched on, and it was supposed to take place in about two weeks. In it Jeff, the white boy, would represent the white race, while Sambo, the nigger, would represent his race. The Colonel said the results of the race would be his "rallying point" for gathering forces to rebuild the traditional South.

Then he took me aside. "This is where I need your help, sir," he said. "I have to ask you to keep absolutely quiet about what you've seen here today, because, as you can understand, we cannot afford outside interference at this time. I know I can trust you to do this, because I can see you are a gentleman and a Southern gentleman. When the time comes, I hope you will join me in my movement to save the South." Then he turned to his men and told them to help me with my tire, and after shaking hands with me, he started walking back to the house.

All this time I had been looking at the ground, trying to make up my mind. It was just as he was walking away that I
finally made my decision. "Colonel!" I yelled, running after him. He turned toward me. "Let me be a part of your movement--now!"

I think he stood there staring at me for a full minute, and I could feel four pairs of eyes on my back as well. But finally he took my hand and said, "Sir, I'd be proud to have you with us." So you see, getting into this thing, and missing classes for two weeks, was all my idea, caused by my thinking I could change the world to suit my ideals.

Anyway, the Colonel still had his men bring my car back in, so I'd know I was free to leave at any time. Then he had them set a cot up for me next to theirs, in a double stall across from the boys. When I woke up the next morning, he wasn't there--they told me he generally came around only at night, and the rest of the time he lived in a big house somewhere near there. But I went ahead and started helping the men, Ned and Hal, with their work.

After breakfast, at about eight A.M., we took the boys out to the obstacle course, on the side of the fence nearest the house. There Hal held onto the boys, who were on leashes, like before, while Ned demonstrated different kinds of traps to them--how to avoid them and how to get loose if you happened to get caught in one. For example, he showed them a pit trap, about eight feet deep, which was camouflaged with leaves and grass. These were piled on a blanket which was spread over the top. While we watched, Ned jumped into the hole, taking the
leaves and one end of the blanket down with him (the other end was held by stakes). Then he got out by climbing up the free end of the blanket. After each of the boys had tried it, we moved on to the next trap.

About the middle of the morning, when we were looking at our third or fourth trap, it began to occur to me that Ned was doing all his demonstrating without saying a word. He used only hand motions and grunts. I couldn't understand this, and at one point, when he was having trouble explaining something to the boys, I spoke up to tell them what he wanted. But Hal shut me up. He whispered to me later that no one was allowed to talk in front of the boys, because the Colonel didn't want them to learn how to talk. I realized then how strict he had been in keeping them from learning anything not necessary for the test.

There were a lot of questions I wanted to ask about the Colonel and his plan, but I saw I couldn't as long as the boys were around. We worked out in the field with them till about two in the afternoon, when Ned announced it was "Lunch Time!" But we couldn't eat right away. First the boys had to find their lunch. To do this, Hal held the boys while Ned ran off into a big clump of trees. Then he let them go. They ran off, with Hal and me following, and in no time they found Ned hiding in some bushes with the food—it had evidently been put there the day before. I could see the boys had had a lot of experience at tracking, which, I learned, would be important in the test.

Anyway, after lunch we took the boys to the barn, and then
I stayed to watch them while Hal and Ned went back out to make some new traps—the Colonel had given Ned the plans the night before. I was hoping I'd get a chance to talk to the men after dinner, but the Colonel came by and lectured us for some time, and after that I was so tired I fell asleep right away. But the next day was Sunday, so we were free all day. The Colonel stopped by in the afternoon, but he just talked to Ned, in the bungalow. So Hal and I were in the barn alone (I mean, except for the boys), and I got to talk to him for a while.

I asked him if Ned had worked for the Colonel longer than he had. He said, "Yeah, he's been with the Colonel for the last ten years, ever since Hicks suddenly started carrying a cane and decided he was the greatest Southerner since Jefferson Davis." I wasn't sure what he meant by that, and I asked him if he didn't think the Colonel's plan would work. He said, "I don't give a damn whether it works or not, myself. But I suppose people like you and Ned have to think it will, or you wouldn't be here."

"Why are you here, if you don't believe in it?" I asked him.

He just shrugged his shoulders and said, "It pays better than doing farm work."

After a while Ned came walking in, and I stopped him to ask if he thought the Colonel's plan would work. He glanced at Hal. Then he said to me, "I suppose he's been trying to tell you that the Colonel's insane. He's always thought that.
But I'll tell you this. Colonel Hicks is no more insane than a lot of people that believe what he does and don't do nothing about it."

After he went away, I remarked to Hal something like, "Well, that makes two of us that believe in the Colonel."

"Yeah," Hal said, "I better watch out. It's dangerous being around people that believe in something. Nothing matters to them but the cause." He leaned toward me, lowering his voice. "You know, he would of killed you Friday if I hadn't been there." I just stared at him, not really believing this. He went on, "And how about you? Bet you ain't even stopped to think of the fact that we could get in a heap of trouble if people ever found out about them boys there." I asked him if he knew where they'd come from. "Yeah," he said, "but I ain't supposed to tell." Then he got up and went outside, so I didn't get a chance to ask him anything else.

The next week we followed about the same routine we had Saturday, except that I started taking over more and more of the care of the boys. The men hated this work. I took the boys their meals and changed their straw once in a while and even emptied the buckets they used for toilets. And, of course, I kept on watching them in the afternoons, while Ned and Hal were out working on the course. I liked to sit in front of the stalls and listen to them grunt back and forth to each other--they seemed to have developed a language of their own through the years. And sometimes I would open the doors and let them run
around the barn for a while. Of course, I never did this while
the others were there, they would've been afraid the boys would
try to get out. But they never did. They seemed to have too
much fun chasing each other around to think about escaping.

I suppose you could say I started getting attached to those boys. I started wondering some more about where they came from, and maybe I felt a little sorry for them--living their lives
in cages. But after a while I realized there was no sense in
this, since they had never known anything else and so couldn't
feel sorry for themselves. And it wasn't as if they had been
mistreated. I could see they were both big for their age, which
Hal said was less than thirteen, so they must've had good care.
And after another couple weeks, I told myself, they would be
free to lead normal lives. Besides, when you think of what was
at stake...

The second week I was there, things changed some. The
Colonel came to live in the bungalow all the time, and as a re-
sult, I had to stop being so free with the boys. There was no
telling when he might come in and start lecturing. And that
seemed to be all he did any more, trying to convince us (as if
he had to) that what we were doing was "imperative," as he said,
to the future of the South. As the day of the test came closer,
he seemed to get more and more excited, and it seemed like he
always had to be lecturing or pacing around. The little time
he spent sitting down, he was always tapping his cane or drum-
ming his fingers or something.
I wish I could remember some of his speeches, but after a while they started to blur together. Not that they were boring. But they all covered almost exactly the same material, and we heard it every night of that week. The Colonel just didn't seem to realize how repetitious he'd become. He would start by talking about the glorious effort made by the Confederacy in the Civil War, then he'd tell about the cross the South has had to bear since then, and finally he'd end with an appeal to us to carry on the Rebel cause. By then Hal's yawns were so loud that they would have been obvious to anyone less dedicated than the Colonel, and I guess Ned and I were kind of relieved, too, when we were finally allowed to go to bed. There was more work than ever to do that week, as the Colonel had a never-ending supply of new traps he wanted us to build and try out.

But at last it got down to the day before the test--this was the third Saturday since I had got there. It rained most of the day, so we couldn't take the boys out, and as the afternoon wore on, I guess the Colonel started to worry that he might have to postpone the test. He kept pacing back and forth between the house and the barn. Finally, though, at about four o'clock, the rain stopped, and he sent the three of us out to lay clues for the test--footprints, broken twigs, and so forth. We got back about six and ate dinner.

Around seven the Colonel came out to the barn to give Ned and Hal their pay for the last couple months, after which he
told Ned to come out and help him make a last minute change on the course. Hal asked if he should come along and help, too—which surprised me--, but the Colonel said they wouldn't need him. After the two left, Hal sat staring at the ground for a long time and then put his coat on and told me to watch the boys. When I asked him where he was going, he said, "To get drunk."

It must have been about eleven o'clock by the time Hal got back, and I could see right away that he'd accomplished his purpose. I'd been fast asleep, and I tried to quiet him down and get him on his bed before he woke the others up. But I was surprised to see that Ned's cot was still empty. "They must be making one hell of a trap," I said, as I tried to pull off one of Hal's boots.

"It be'er be," Hal said. "They're counting on it to get rid o' the evidence for them."

I dropped the boot. "What do you mean?" I asked him.

"I mean they're not about to let it get out that they've kept the son of a big plantation owner in a stall for ten years."

"Who, Jeff?" I said. "What plantation owner?"

He fell back on the cot and said to the ceiling, "Colonel Matthew E. Hicks."

I just sat there listening to his heavy breathing for a while. Then I said, "He couldn't. No man could." He just lay there. I said, "What about his wife? Why wouldn't she stop him?"

Hal laughed, almost to himself. "I guess because she wasn'
around. I hear tell he kicked her out about ten years ago, right after he found her fooling around with that big nigger farm hand of his." He laughed again and rolled over on his side.

"So Jeff is the Colonel's son?" I asked him. He didn't answer. I said, "Then where did Sambo come from--just kidnapped from somewhere?" He grunted something that sounded like "yeah." I went on and asked him, "What kind of trap do you think they're making out there?" But I saw he was already sound asleep.

I got up and walked over to Jeff's stall and listened at the door; there was no movement. This was something I hadn't counted on, murder, if Hal was right. But was he? I'd known that the Colonel did tend to go to extremes, because of his dedication to the cause. But a man would have to be really... unbalanced to keep his own son in a stall for ten years and then have him killed. I just couldn't believe it of him. About this time Ned came back in from the obstacle course, and I watched his face while he started to undress to see if I could tell what he'd been doing, but I couldn't. He just looked at me and said I'd better get some sleep, since we had a big day tomorrow. So I got into bed.

It was about ten o'clock Sunday morning when Ned woke Hal and me up to come to breakfast. We ate without talking much--Hal had a hangover, and I was tired from tossing around all night. Afterward I started to take some food to the boys as usual, but Ned told me not to. The Colonel wanted them to be
good and hungry for the test. So I went outside and started
walking around the barn.

It was a chilly October morning; the ground was still a
little soft from the rain. While I was walking, I tried to
figure out what I should do. You see, I couldn't just take it
for granted that Hal was right. What we were doing was too
important. But on the other hand, if he was right, then I had
to stop the Colonel. Finally I decided to walk over to the
obstacle course and try to find the new traps. I walked about
halfway there, looking over my shoulder every few seconds to
see if anyone was watching, and then I happened to look up.
Above me, sitting in a chair way up on top of the hill, was the
Colonel, right where he could see the last whole quarter mile
or so of the course. I guess he'd been sitting up there all
morning. So I turned around and walked back to the barn. It
was then about eleven fifteen.

At eleven thirty Ned got Hal and me together and gave us
our instructions for the test. He told us we were supposed to
blindfold the boys and take them over to the other side of the
course, which was about a mile down the highway. Then we were
supposed to wait for the signal, a gunshot, and let the boys
go, making them think they were chasing Ned and their lunch.
After filling us in on this, Ned went into the house, so the
boys wouldn't see him, and Hal and I went to the barn to get
them ready.

We drove over to the other end of the course in the Colonel's
pickup (I rode in back with the boys, to make sure they wouldn't pull their blindfolds off). Hal let me off on the near side of the fence with Jeff, then went on with the nigger to the far side. After about five minutes I heard the gunshot—just a slight crack at this distance--, and I took off Jeff's leash. He just stood there. I yelled "lunch," like the men had in the training sessions, but still he just stood there. I guess he was nervous, being on his own for the first time. But anyway, it was a full minute before his hunger overcame his nervousness and he started off.

Hal was back to pick me up before he got out of sight. We drove out to the highway, and then he surprised me by stopping the truck and getting out. He pulled his suitcase off the parcel shelf—this was the first time I'd noticed he had it with him. Then he closed the door and started walking. I rolled down the window and yelled after him, asking him where he was going.

"As far away from here as I can get," he said, "and if you're smart, you'll come with me."

I asked him, "Then you really think what you said last night was true?"

But he didn't even stop. He just yelled over his shoulder, "That's the Colonel's business now. I'm just going to get out of here while the gettin's good."

Well, I suppose if I'd been smart, I would've gone with him. But I couldn't leave—not this late. I drove the truck
back by the barn and walked up the hill to where the Colonel and Ned were. They were all alone—there was no sign of any of the Colonel's aristocrat friends that were supposed to show up. But somehow I couldn't get up the nerve to ask what had happened to them. And neither of them asked where Hal was. So I just sat down on the ground a few feet from the Colonel's chair, and we waited. And waited.

I think about fifteen minutes passed by in complete silence—this was the first time I'd seen the Colonel quiet for any length of time. Once he did get restless and said something like, "They ought to be hungry enough, going without breakfast," and Ned agreed. But mostly he just sat there, squinting toward the horizon. As for me, I kept looking all over the course, trying to see where the new traps were. I finally noticed a couple plots of grass, one on each side of the fence, which were a slightly different color from the grass around them. They were right at the end of the course, on the near side of two identical fallen logs. And they were right in the path of the trails we'd laid out Saturday. I turned around and asked Ned if they were the new traps, but he didn't seem to hear me. I noticed, then, that he still had the rifle with him.

It was about fifteen minutes after I'd gotten back that I saw the Colonel stiffen suddenly, and I looked up to see that one of the boys had appeared. For a second I forgot which boy was on which side, but Ned said behind me, "It's the nigger." I saw the Colonel slump back a little. It was just a half min-
ute later, though, that the white boy appeared, and then the race was on. Jeff was running like he knew this was a test and how important it was, though, of course, he couldn't know the nigger was on the other side. In no time at all he'd almost closed up the gap between them. He was really running.

I guess I started to get excited myself, but then my eye caught sight of the new traps, and I realized that they might only be racing to see which would die first. But how could I know for sure? I looked at the Colonel—by now he was leaning way forward on his cane and breathing like he was one of the runners. All at once I got an idea. I asked him, "Colonel, do you have a son?" He turned and stared at me with a strange look on his face.

But just then Ned yelled, "Look!" We both turned toward the course, and I saw that the nigger had gotten himself caught in a trap, the same kind I'd gotten in that first afternoon. He was hanging upside down from a tree, yelling his head off. Ned started to smile at this. But I suddenly realized that what he was yelling, over and over, was his own word for "Jeff." And I wasn't the only one who heard it. The white boy had stopped running. The Colonel jumped up, yelling, "Go on! Go on!" And soon he did, but it was in the wrong direction. He started running toward the fence.

For a moment the Colonel just stood there, staring in disbelief. Then he turned to Ned. "Shoot in front of him," he said, "head him off." Ned stepped forward and raised the rifle.
He fired. I sat paralyzed, it seemed, and watched as the bullet buried itself in a tree trunk ten feet in front of Jeff. But the boy kept on running. The Colonel yelled, "Again!" and this time the shot scattered some dirt right at Jeff's feet. But the boy kept on. By now the nigger had gotten himself loose and was also running toward the fence. The Colonel yelled, "Shoot him! Kill him!" Ned asked which one. He said, "Jeff!" Ned stared at him, then raised the gun, but now I found my feet and grabbed hold of the barrel, spoiling his aim. I heard the shot go off. Then I felt a sharp pain in the back of my head. I blacked out.

I don't know how long I was unconscious. But when I came to, I found the Colonel lying on the ground, just six feet away from me. I crawled over to him and felt his pulse. He was dead. At first I thought he had been hit by the last shot, but I couldn't see any wound. (Later I found out, from the newspapers, that he'd died of a heart attack.)

When I looked up, I saw the boys, Jeff and Sambo, standing some twenty feet away, watching. Ned was nowhere around. I knew there was nothing else I could do there, so I motioned for the boys to follow me, and I walked back down the hill to my car. I left them at this home for retarded children, giving the teachers some story about finding them on the road near the Hicks place. Then I drove back to the University. Three weeks later I was thrown out of school.
The driver leaned on the fence and focused his binoculars on the distant building. "The one thing I could never understand was why the Colonel blew up like he did when Jeff ran toward the fence. Sure, maybe the one test had failed. But there was no reason why he couldn't try it again." He paused. "That's been bothering me for the past four years. I guess I'll never figure it out."

The passenger spoke up. "Maybe you're looking at it the wrong way," he suggested. The driver rechecked his binoculars. "No, I mean, you're driving toward college--instead of away from it, like you were four years ago. Maybe you could put things in order better if you approached the place from the other direction."

"Look," the driver said, "I don't have time for games. The only reason I came up here was to see my brother, like I said. And the only reason I've told you all this was so you could learn from my mistake. As for me, the whole thing is dead and buried."

The passenger leaned against the car and went on in a tentative voice. "Maybe the Colonel realized that he had wasted ten years of his life for nothing..."

"I thought maybe they'd have them playing in the field," the driver said. "I would've liked to see them again. You know, see how fast the two have been progressing here."

The passenger persisted. "I mean, maybe he saw that the first test had already proven his whole theory incorrect."
The driver turned toward him. "You mean that's what you'd like to think he saw. But you're obviously too prejudiced to look at this clearly." He started walking toward the car. "They're not going to come out. We might as well go." He got in behind the wheel.

"You know," the passenger said, "it could also be that Hal was right--that the Colonel was insane."

"Look, no one asked for your opinion," the driver told him. He turned on the radio. "Come on. I'll see if I can tune in some music to listen to the rest of the way." The passenger got inside, and they drove off.