

# Randall Barnett

# That Takes the Reason Prisoner

**H**e buttoned his travel orders, trip ticket, and the little, white envelope of pills into the pocket below the campaign ribbons. A staff sergeant gave him a brown envelope that contained instructions for his care if he needed treatment. At dawn, the corpsman handed each man a prophylactic kit as they climbed the steps of the bus to go to the train terminal in Cleveland.

The Terminal Tower was busy with traffic leaving for the holiday weekend; Memorial Day came on Monday this year. Another train had to be made up for non-priority travelers. He waited two hours and twenty minutes past his scheduled time of departure. An egg-salad sandwich he bought was stale. The orange soda with it was too sweet.

The train south was delayed by many interruptions. As he stood waiting to leave the train, the web strap of his barracks bag jerked. It wrenched the muscle beneath his right shoulder blade when the brakes hissed. The scar there itched.

Floor plates clicked and shuddered beneath his burnished, brown boots. He stood just inside the door of the third car. The other passengers, waiting behind him, were jostled as the car screeched and lurched.

The coach was gritty. Its dark, red upholstery was redolent of thousands of travelers, their cigarettes and secretions and sleeping bodies. The narrow window before his eyes misted. Then the door folded open as he pulled its handle.

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When he stepped between the cars, slanting sunlight made him look down. He hesitated. A forbidding, rust-pitted, steel angle edged the concrete platform. Then a burly, florid man elbowed him aside: "Damn it, soldier, move your ass!"

He stepped awkwardly down onto the platform and thought, more than three years since I've eaten at home. The depot looked the same as when he left. He had finished his embarkation leave then. He remembered in a recorded speech he heard at Fort Leonard Wood, President Truman said something about home cooking. He saw the glaciers of the Rocky Mountains when they flew to Tacoma and Fort Lewis. In the ASCOM hospital, he heard President Eisenhower, as promised, had come to Korea the year before. From debarkation at Pusan to departure from Korea, he had been in the combat zone thirty months. Time was the difficult thing.

At the ASCOM hospital, they had taken the fragments out of his back. The scar had healed again, but it continued to itch sometimes. He had been four months in the hospital at Brecksville.

Tateh and Mama brought a birthday cake when they came to visit in February. Last month, they had come before Passover to visit him again. That was when he was getting therapy. His appetite was better now; six hours had passed since he threw away the remainder of the sandwich.

He shifted the barracks bag through the double doors into the empty waiting room of the passenger depot. The ticket agent looked out through the grill on his window.

"You want a cab?" he asked. "I got to telephone to get you a cab if you want one."

The letter he had sent to Mama and Tateh last week told them he would arrive on the earlier train. He answered, "I guess you'll have to call a taxi for me. Can I check this bag here?"

"Just shove it behind the door there, son," the ticket agent said. "I'll watch it for you. Ain't nobody going to mess with it."

If he could keep in mind the sequence in time, the other things were easy. The hard thing is time. "I used to live near here, but I've been gone," he said. "There was a tavern on Ohio Street; can I get a cup of coffee over there?"

"Sure, take your time. It'll be forty-five minutes or so before a cab gets here anyway. Not many folks come in on the three-forty these days. Are you stationed up north?"

"I've been at the Army hospital in Brecksville."

The brown envelope was stuffed into the top of his barracks bag. The ticket agent could not know what the instructions for his treatment implied.

"That's where they keep all them loonies that was brainwashed by the Communists, ain't it?" asked the ticket agent. "You seen any of them?"

The answer to that question was studied frequently at Brecksville. "They don't look much different from you or me. Does Linus Wheeler still run that tavern?"

"When Linus ain't laid up with arthritis or a hangover, he runs it, but his old lady runs it mostly."

At Wheeler's Beer & Eats, the spring whined on the screen door as he opened it. He closed the door gently behind him when he entered. Sudden noises startled him, and slamming doors sometimes caused him to contract painfully.

Linus Wheeler's daughter was bent over the deep sink behind the counter when he slid onto the leatherette covering a bar stool. Her dark hair was bobbed now, and she wore bangs like Mamie Eisenhower's above her arched eyebrows. Red, plastic cherries embellished her earrings, and red arabesques embroidered at the neckline of her peasant blouse made her skin look very fresh. She had been in the class that followed his, and he recalled she had worn Bobby Foltz's basketball letter.

When she looked up at him, he said, "You're working too hard, Dixie."

"Now ain't that the truth!" she said. "Omigod! It's Mayer! We all thought you was killed in Korea. Omigod! Dad talked to your father at the American Legion last week, and he never said nothing about you. We saw in the *Citizen Gazette* that you was reported missing more than a year ago, and we thought you was dead."

"No more dead than most folks around here," he said. "Can a ghost buy a cup of coffee here?"

"Folks here are as much alive as everybody else, Mayer. I don't believe in ghosts, but I'll give you a cup of coffee."

"Thanks Dixie. It's nice to find respect for the dead."

He thought he had lost the art of sociability, and he blushed in

embarrassment. Mention death and murder conversation; and so he accepted the coffee with tacit gratitude. The strong, hot coffee in the heavy, stoneware cup helped him slough off the lethargy of the tedious train ride. Dixie passed the telephone to him at the corner of the counter. No one at home answered his call.

He was perturbed when he returned to the depot to meet the taxicab. He told the driver the address and rode in silence. Cinderland's peaceful streets were shaded by trees in new leaf.

The taxicab stopped before the Dutch Colonial on Chestnut Avenue. At the end of the gravel driveway, he heaved the barracks bag off the pavement and trudged around the east corner of the house to the back door. Mabel Doubleday's climbing roses beside the neighboring house were as fragrant as he remembered. No one came to the door when he knocked.

He found the key in its usual place beneath the milk delivery box and let himself into the kitchen.

The familiar kitchen seemed strange. It was still, and the measured tick of the regulator clock quietly repeated on the wall above the samovar. The air was heavy with its rich Friday aroma. He opened the oven door of the gas range. A pudding of grated potatoes and onions and eggs was warming there. A roasting pan filled with slices of brisket of beef in brown gravy and a casserole containing carrots with prunes and honey perfumed the house with a savor

of Sabbath evening.



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Beneath his combat boots, the scrubbed kitchen linoleum looked fragile. The starched ruffles of Mama's curtains were translucent in the dwindling sunlight as he looked out the west window above the kitchen sink. His sister, Bobby Foltz, and he had studied their homework here after school. The room seemed smaller now; the ceiling looked lower than he remembered. Remembering was his problem.

Two weeks after leaving Cinderland High School, he had received greetings from President Truman; he was ordered to report for induction. Then this kitchen was the secure center of his life. Now there were too many blanks in the time that had passed. He was damaged goods. The Army did not want him. Broken soldiers were not selling well now in a buyer's market. The problem was time.

Much that his friends in Cinderland had experienced in the blank time was obscure. He had never owned a car or gone on a vacation trip or worked at a daily job. He had never paid rent or written a check or intimately known a woman. When his friends in Cinderland entered college, he was in advanced infantry training. When his sister, Rivka married, he was reported missing in action.

Now he could not remember clearly; his secure center was lost. He thought he could be sure and safe if he could remember. Was the sureness taken from him? Was it consumed in anxiety or wasted away by dysentery or scorched by fever? It seemed that his assurance had fallen away as his nails fell out when his feet were frozen on a barren Asian

hillside. Was his confidence mired in the tidal flats of the Yellow Sea? Was it in that concrete box in the cave at Camp Nine near Kangdong?

He took one of the pills from the little, white envelope and swallowed it with a cup of water. He sat at the kitchen table and rested his elbows on its bleached, oak surface. He trembled. The sinews tightened in his neck. His head down upon his forearms, Mayer closed his eyes so he would not see the place that had made him safe.

In the stillness, the quiet repetition of the clock is amplified. With the rhythm of the clock's reverberation, he withdraws to the close, concrete box in the cave at the side of a muddy road along Taedong Gang. His knees draw toward his chest. His book heels on the stretcher of the chair, he feels as he squats on his ankles. He seems to press the concrete opposite the sliding door in the sheet iron ceiling.

He covers his ears to mute the hammering sound. The flesh throbs under the scab beneath his right shoulder blade. Gray light from holes in the iron ceiling pulses through his tight eyelids. Trying to breathe shallowly, he feels faint in the suffocating miasma of his filth. The fetid stench of the pail in the corner intrudes its reek to every neuron.

At dawn and before nightfall, when the hammering noise stops, the door in the iron ceiling rattles. He scuttles to raise the pail and cup and bottle above the door, and he turns his face to the wall. The cup of cold, cooked millet is put down beside the track of the door, and the bottle of water is against it. After he takes the cup and the bottle, the emptied

pail is dropped inside. The door slams; the bolt scrapes. The hammering noise begins.

When the hammering noise stops again, the wire-recorded voice, ringing in the iron-covered box, repeats its command: "No sleep," the voice says. "No sleep, no sleep. You have brought this contagion to us. You have infected our children. You will not sleep until you confess it. No sleep, no sleep, no sleep."

The voice has a cultivated accent and timbre. It is the resonant, modulated voice of Lieutenant Lee. He meets Lieutenant Lee in a warm, clay and thatch house. Lieutenant Lee is behind a table, and he stands before it. Lieutenant Lee tells him he is a probable progressive at Camp Twelve before he comes to the cave.

Lieutenant Lee sits on a chair in a country where chairs are curiosities and smokes Players Navy Cut Cigarettes. The Lieutenant shows him photographs of sick children, of dead women, of trenches filled with corpses. Lieutenant Lee surmises he is not a reactionary; that he is turning to the light of socialism.

He meets Lee dispassionately. He says: "Nathanson, Mayer A., Sergeant, US 52 404 731."

Then Lieutenant Lee sees him looking at the B-29's as they fly down the Taedong Valley to bomb P'yongyang. The men in tan, quilted clothes and black tennis shoes put him in the box in the cave. He is taken out to see Lieutenant Lee again after forty-two cups of grain, and again he says his name, rank, and number. Now he hears Lieutenant Lee's

recorded voice but does not heed it. The hammering contracts his cramped body, and he oscillates in its rhythm. In the meter of the hammering, he repeats the last words of his night prayer: "The Lord is with me, I shall not fear."

He curls his legs beneath him on the slippery floor in a space too small to lie down or straighten his neck. He contracts in spasms but does not listen to the hammering noise. His consciousness subdues the voice. In the daze of fever, he loses count of the cups of grain.

A day came when the door rattled too early on its track, and it was left open after the pail dropped. When he crawled out of the box, he was unable to raise his head. He looked through encrusted eyelids at his blackened fingernails in the sodden clay. He twitched convulsively and did not feel the lice.

An American gave him clean water to drink from a canteen. He was taken to the Neutral Zone in a truck and washed. There, progressive Americans gave him additional political indoctrination to take the light to America. The "Big Switch" was made in June. He was exchanged for four men in tan, quilted clothes and black tennis shoes.

It is eleven months since they took him to Freedom Village and the hospital. He is startled yet by sudden sounds and jerks painfully. The hated, pounding rock'n'roll music is ubiquitous in America; it abrades his nerves. In traffic he feels impelled to cover his ears and hunch his shoulders. The air is sweet in



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the strange, familiar place, but his safe center is lost.

He heard tires on the gravel driveway behind the kitchen and the plosive closing of two doors. Keys jingled outside; the door latch rasped. Tateh reached inside to press the light switch beside the door. Mama stepped abruptly into her kitchen. She glanced at the clock. She stared when she saw him sitting at the table. Stricken, her face blanched. "Mayerleh!" she gasped, "*A klog i mir!* You frightened me!"

He stood and stepped past the corner of the table. "I look different in uniform, Mama. When you saw me last month at the hospital, I was still in pajamas."

He had forgotten how much his appearance had changed. He had lost a quarter of his weight, and he would never again be upright and healthy. The angularity of his head upon his neck had altered. The flesh and skin at this throat lost its tone. His eyes were much deeper in their orbits and shrouded by eyelids always swollen. To Mama, he appeared a wizened, stooping man who imitated her son.

Mama took the closely-trimmed temples between her hands, and she kissed the left side of his face and then the right. She pulled his face to her shoulder so that he could not see her tears. "You are safe now," she said. "We can keep *Shabbos* in peace."

Mama went into the dining room to dry her face with her handkerchief. Tateh patted Mayer on the cheek as he had when Mayer won a swimming race in sixth grade. He went to comfort Mama.

When Tateh returned to the kitchen, Mayer scented his familiar emanation of witch hazel and tobacco. The tactile welcome of Tateh's warm, strong grasp came to his hand. "Nu, Mayer, you made your Mama cry again. When you didn't come on the noon train, she was very upset. Then we went to make a condolence call; Max Rosenblatt died at mid-week. His family is sitting in seven days of mourning now. Mama feels tired out from cooking for them."

"They made you take a later train, didn't they? Soldiers are just marching freight for the railroads. Do you want a little schnapps?"

"No, Tateh, I can't drink. The pills that I take to keep me from cramping make me sick if I drink anything strong."

Tateh sighed as he surveyed his son's thin, tired face. Thirty-seven years before, when he was with the American Expeditionary Force, Tateh saw the men coming out of the trenches after the Meuse-Argonne offensive. He saw the look of men who anticipate the next noise, and he knew his son's remedy was beyond the practice of medical doctors.

"Help your Mama now, Mayer," Tateh said, "she needs you. You know you are the only son she has to care for. Since your sisters married, this house has been too empty for her."

Mama came back into the kitchen. She covered her hair with a linen napkin. She said the hand washing prayer and washed her hands at the kitchen sink. Tateh filled and lighted the spirit lamp beneath the samovar, and with a pitcher of water from the tap, he filled its reservoir so tea could be made for breakfast.

The table was set. Two braided Sabbath loaves were covered with a napkin, and the tiny wine glasses were filled for the prayers that blessed the interval from sunset to the next sunset. Mayer said the blessing and washed his hands for dinner.

When they were seated at the table, Mama lighted the Sabbath candles. She moved her hands above the flames, covered her eyes, and whispered the blessing that separated the Sabbath from the week. A new soul replaced the careworn, weekday spirit in intense quietness.

Tateh said the blessings for wine and the heritage of the Sabbath. He tasted the wine in his little glass and then he said the prayer for bringing bread from the earth. He touched a piece from the fresh loaf to a saucer covered with salt and tasted it. Some distress left Mayer's family, and the assurance of safety began to heal the breach of the blank time.

Following the soup that started every hot meal at Mama's table, Tateh filled the plates with potato pudding and beef to comfort them. The honeyed carrots and fruit was Mayer's favorite dish. Mama had baked a flaky pastry roll of cherries, *kirshen shtrudel*, for a special dessert to celebrate his homecoming.

After dinner, Tateh asked, "Mayer, how much longer will you be at the hospital in Brecksville. If you want to do it, Hosea Sutton will be glad to have you work with him again at the fair grounds. He said you had the best 'natural hands' on the reins he's seen since his cavalry service."

"I don't know what I'll do, Tateh. The doctor told me that I'll be separated from active duty by the fourth of July. I'll have to take medicine for a while after I'm released."

Mama said, "Tell Mayer about the car, Ahvrom. Tell him what Leah Rosenblatt said about the car."

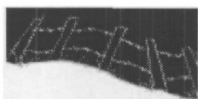
"Leah wants to sell you Max's fifty-three Chevy, Mayer. It's a convertible with a V-eight engine," Tateh said. "Leah thinks it's *tsu oysgeputst*, too ostentatious for her and her girls. She said Max didn't drive it after he had the stroke in December. I told her I would talk to you about it. You'll need a car when you come home to stay. If you want it, we'll buy it; and you can pay for it with your Soldiers' Deposit account after you're separated."

"I don't know if I can drive, Tateh," said Mayer. "The doctors told me I shouldn't drive or operate machinery while I'm taking the medicine. I don't have a license to drive now; it expired while I was away."

"Mayerleh, I sent the dollar and seventy-five cents to the state bureau," Mama said, "and I have your new driving license. You don't have to drive now, but you should have the license for identification when you finish with the Army."

"Now tell us," Mama asked, "was it in a bad place that you stayed in Europe?"

Mayer knew that Mama had little formal education and limited knowledge of geography. She knew America was good, and that when she was a little girl, she learned that Europe was not as good. Mayer thought Mama did not know about the United Nations or their police



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action and the cruel struggle for private enterprise in Asia. She did not know where he had been for three years.

"It was a hungry place, Mama, and cold."

Tateh said the grace after the meal, and Mama was on her feet with "Amen." Mayer helped her take the dishes to the sink for washing. She put the food in glass containers. "You can't do the dishes yet, Mayerleh. You can't separate the dairy dishes from meat. Go with Tateh."

While Mama washed the dishes and put them in the appropriate places in her kitchen, Tateh and Mayer sat beside the mahogany table in the parlor. On the table, the lamp had a large, ornamental base of Czechoslovakian red crystal that Mama prized, and beneath its fringed shade, its bulbs shed light from the table's pie-crust edges to the pale green walls. It would remain lighted until they went to bed on Saturday night.

Tateh carefully read each of the wonders and marvels published in the evening's *Cinderland Citizen Gazette*. The front page displayed a photograph of Marilyn Monroe leaving a limousine assisted by Joe DiMaggio. The lead article told that Emil Turner, who had lived on Dorian Street, had stabbed himself in the back five times, and then thrown himself into an abandoned cistern. His insurance company, of course, had refused payment to his widow because his death was self-inflicted. Eleven United States soldiers were imprisoned in Communist China on charges of espionage, and it was likely they would remain there because the United States would not arrange their release while its government refused to

recognize the Communist Chinese government. Roger Bannister, pursued by no one but his ego, had run a mile in fewer than four minutes. Howard Hughes, outbid by no one, purchased RKO Pictures Corporation. Racist bigots in Arkansas had burned effigies of Chief Justice Earl Warren when, only ninety years after emancipation, the Supreme Court at last ruled that racial segregation in public school systems is unconstitutional. Wondrous and marvelous things happened in the spring of nineteen-fifty-four.

Mayer perused an old play written in odd verses. Two soldiers going home from the war met strange women and occult portents in a cold, windy place. The skeptical one said:

Were such things here as we do speak about?

Or have we eaten on the insane root?

That takes the reason prisoner?

Then he went home to meet his family. It was not a cheerful story, so Mayer put it back into the shelves with Tateh's collections of Sholem Aleichem and I.L. Peretz and Isaac Bashevis Singer.

The shelves contained Tateh's threadbare prayer books and the Talmudic commentaries he reread on Saturday afternoons. They were packed beside Mayer's paperbacks and children's tales: Crusoe and Huckleberry and Tarzan and Lancelot. Saturdays were for happy reading.

After Mayer climbed the stairs to his back bedroom above the kitchen, he took off his uniform and found a flannel robe. In the bathroom, he was the face



in the mirror above the sink. The eyes that looked back seemed worried. He went back to his room and lay down in his boyhood bed. It was quiet.

Before dawn, Mayer awoke in the quietness. He lay entirely motionless and closed his eyes again in the darkness. It was the time of visions, and the vision of a lost Eden returned to him.

On Corinthian Street, behind Rosemary Harrigan's house in autumn, some of the apples fell and rotted amidst the thin grass and sparse weeds at the roots of both trees beside the graveled alley. Coming through the alley after school, Mayer saw them scattered, half-green and crunchy under foot except, or course, in the brown, rotten places.

Rosemary's soft, auburn curls and laughing, hazel eyes caught his attention when he heard the slam of the screen door on her back porch. She saw Mayer pull himself up five feet onto the bottom branch of the apple tree.

"There you go!" she said.

She turned to go into the house and then reappeared with a glittering object carried above her shoulder. On an overturned, galvanized bucket abandoned by a wistful harvester, Rosemary boosted herself to the bottom branch. She reached out her hand to pass Mayer the salt that could sweeten the green apples. Then she hooked a knee around the bough. Leaning back, she showed a patch of white cotton beneath her dark, green, woolen pinafore.

Rosemary yanked her elbows with practiced skill to drag both shoulders above the bough. Her laughing eyes

bobbed toward Mayer. The hazel irises, flecked with gold, stared directly into his own eyes as Rosemary swung onto the bottom branch. So just after school on Thursday, the third of October in nineteen-forty-one, Mayer fell in love.

Among the cobwebs and the twigs, the musky, sweet pungency of tempting apples captured him. His left elbow crooked over the third branch, and the glass salt shaker in his left hand, Mayer hung completely enthralled. Beyond his control and of its own volition, Mayer's right hand grasped Rosemary's right wrist. Mute with the intensity of his adoration, Mayer was breathless and dizzy.

Rosemary pulled her hand away to reach the second branch. Mayer seemed ridiculous to her. She was older than he was. She was nine.

Mayer stretched down to kiss Rosemary's hand on the branch below. With a wrenching, ripping sound, the seat of his corduroy knickerbockers separated at the seam. The salt shaker fell softly into a tuft of buckhorn between the apple tree's roots.

"Oh, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! You pillock! You dropped my mother's salter!" squealed Rosemary.

Irresistibly, Mayer fell. His chin struck the bottom limb of the tree snapping his jaw shut and jerking his head. A ridged, projecting root jammed below his ribs. Panting, whirling purple-red engulfed him. His *neshamma*, the spirit leapt from his wracked body beside the tree trunk. He heard the screen door

