

Three New Stories by Willie Smith

Contributed by Willie Smith

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WHAT I'LL NEVER BE

Early one Saturday afternoon in the early sixties, when I am eleven and Kennedy is turning out to be a pretty good President after all, I sprawl on my bed reading a book about Mars. I am trying to form an opinion as to whether the canals are real or just hallucinations. First seen almost a hundred years ago by Schiaparelli, a relative of the famous dress designer, whom I never heard of, but that's what the book says, some subsequent observers reported seeing them, some didn't; all admitted whatever they were, they lay at the extreme limit of even the world's largest telescopes' possible reach. At that, the canal network can be glimpsed only by trained professionals on nights of superb viewing.

Dad, preceded by an invisible cloud of booze-breath, staggers into the room. Demands to know what I am doing. "Reading a book," I say, not looking up.

He slurs he can see that. Orders me to put the book down, come downstairs with him and have a look at what I did. Mom is gone for the weekend up in Philly visiting Aunt Frances. Meaning Dad can drink more, earlier and less secretly than otherwise. This can be good, because, under such circumstances, he notices much less. This can be bad, because when he DOES notice something...

I swing off the bed. Follow him out of the room, across the hall, through the door to the basement. He nearly falls twice, each time at the last moment catching himself with both hands on the bannister. He leads me over to the far end of his workbench, where I keep my chemistry set.

"Look at that!"

I kneel where he points. A mess of broken glass. Several large shards, two dozen smaller ones; maybe a few specks of glass powder. My eyes are still accustoming to the dim light in the spacious basement of the new construction Dad's government functionary salary bought the mortgage on and moved the family into less than a year ago...

"Look what you did clean that up!"

Mechanically I pick a large shard, then another, then a third off the cement floor. Pile them not knowing where else put them in my left palm. On the fourth shard cut my finger, while thinking, "Why can't I remember breaking this... must be the beaker... Dad calls it a beaker... it's actually an Erlenmeyer flask... WAS an Erlenmeyer..."

"You'll never be a chemist you're too SLOPPY! Here..." He hands me an empty bag that still holds the shape of a bottle... "Put the glass in this.... You'll NEVER be a chemist."

He's right. I'm sloppy. Kind of on the lazy side, too. But did I break...?

No, upstairs all day cruising delicious facts about the red planet. Nobody draws the canals exactly the same way twice, although Percival Lowell convinced himself of the location of a few that he showed more or less consistently on several of his done-at-the-eyepiece drawings.

I dump the shards into the bag. I could still be a THEORETICAL chemist...

Look around for something to scoop up the finer breakage. Up on the workbench spot a dustpan...

"YOU didn't do this!" He is chuckling. "You know who broke the beaker?"

Oh. Of course. I drop the bag. Stand up, sticking my only-slightly-cut finger in my pocket to get it out of sight. The fewer further topics of conversation the better.

"I broke it!" He belches, rocks on his heels, staggers, nearly falls over backwards. "Now why don't you... don't you stick... stick your nose back in that book!"

Hurry upstairs to my room. Crawl back onto the bed. Pick up the facedown hardback.

I likely won't be an astronomer, either. Just want to collect the facts. Marvel over their implications. Keep up with developments. Learn the names of all the stars.

I remember the hand still cramped in the pocket of my jeans. Pull it out. Hold the finger up to my face.

Bleeding stopped. Just a couple drops, really. I pat it dry on my T-shirt, gliding eyes back into the argument as to whether anybody has ever REALLY seen any canals crisscrossing the fourth rock from the sun. People so often so easily convince themselves of something that just isn't there.

WAR GAME

It comes to war. Behind my back Gilleson has been rearming. Last week, his birthday, he received a full complement of marching marines. Thirty-six inch-tall blue rubber GI-rines with each over his shoulder what resembles an M1 Garand. I can barely scrape together the reserves to confront this new threat. Plus his dad just got a raise promoted to

Lieutenant Colonel. No telling what armament Gilleson might procure next.

Â Â Â Â Hustle up to the end of the block. Knock on his door. Instruct his mom to send him out.

Â Â Â Â Here it is almost noon, and he's just buttoning up his shirt. This guy totally open to sneak attack. Also in the back of my mind percolates maybe soon time to reveal the peewee squish. Nothing definite. Just a couple ideas lounging around the barracks.

Â Â Â Â Announce at precisely two-oh-five pee-em I am declaring war; unless he unconditionally and immediately surrenders to me the entirety "without exception" of his military assets.

Â Â Â Â He squints at the sun. Scratches an ear. Says down to his barefeet. "I can't just GIVE you all my toys."

Â Â Â Â "2:05 PM, Gilleson."

Â Â Â Â I turn on a heel. Go.

Â Â Â Â At one-fifteen pee-em the attack goes in. Catch his entire air force on the ground. Decimate same. Those thirty-six brandnew shiny marines still in a pile out in the open. Not even awake, much less formed up into a defensive perimeter.

At a cost of two ground-attack fighters lost to Gilleson's admittedly formidable anti-aircraft cannon and pom-pom guns, turn every last jarhead into dead rubber meat.

Â Â Â Â "Johnny get your gun, get your gun!" I'm sneering, bombing next the bejesus out of his planes parked wing-to-wing on the three picnic tables refitted into sleek modern aircraft carriers.

Â Â Â Â I don't own any flat-tops. Fly my attack squadrons in from the front yard. All front yards technically neutral, likewise the surrounding air-space. But Gilleson's rearmament forced my hand. Besides, this a sneak attack; neutrality loses all meaning when such a measure goes into effect.

Â Â Â Â Soon as I have Johnny defeated, I'll reveal the peewee. He'll be pissed at my pre-emptive. Sharing the secret will console him; I'm sure he doesn't know; my science years ahead of his.

Â Â Â Â By the time two-oh-five rolls around, I've gained total air superiority. His ground units at the mercy of my warplanes. Everytime his troops attempt to concentrate for a counterattack, I bomb and strafe them into disoriented stragglers. Some of his guys I even go so far as actually to stomp on and bust into a zillion pieces. Especially the army enlisted men made out of plastic. They shatter easy and I have no time to take prisoners. I need to overrun the barbecue before he can deploy his secret weapon. Johnny can't keep a secret. He's already hinted broadly about squirt guns filled with lighter-fluid.

Â Â Â Â The barbecue squats up against the south wall of the brick house. The eave above affording minimal protection from the elements. He's got ack-ack mounted up there to fire down on any attempt at strafing his men targeting my infantry assaulting the position from below. Flanks defended by mortar platoons dug in under the swingset and a dozen tanks hull-down in the sandbox bordering Gilleson's neutral neighbors to the west (some snooty high school cheerleader lives there, her dad, like mine, a civilian employee on the base; I scout her out on those couple days each month civilians are allowed to shop at the PX; she has boobs like long-tom cannon shells, legs long and smooth as BAR's, face cute as Old Glory flying over the Kremlin; I have down to the least follicle memorized her visible flesh for use during late-night squish targeting).

Â Â Â Â I send in all 217 of my army, coast guard and marine guys in one massed frontal attack on the barb. Johnny grins. Can't believe his luck. I'm playing right into his hands. His machineguns mounted on the grill lay down a withering fire.

But still my guys keep coming. Johnny's face, intent on my oncoming infantry, darkens. It's becoming apparent that despite the flanking fire, despite the machinegun crossfire, despite the ack-ack up in the eave now turned directly on the attackers, the incredible elan of my troops is going to overcome the defenders. He has no recourse but to...

Â Â Â Â He reaches behind a cinderblock leaned against the wall of the house. So THAT's where he hides... squirts my men repeatedly with lighter fluid. Strikes a kitchen match on the zipper of his jeans. Cups the match in his palm till it blazes. Makes to toss the...

Â Â Â Â I slingshot him pointblank with eight rubberbanded-together Exacto blades. Johnny drops the match. Clutches his hand. Stands there gawking at the blood stream from his wrist. Too shocked, too horrified, too bewildered even to scream.

Â Â Â Â The match dies in the dust at the foot of the barbecue. I sweep with one hand the defenders off the grill. Announce I just attacked Johnny's commanding general with helicopter-directed rocketfire and have now used another such volley to clear the way for my men to scale the tripod stand and take control of the barbecue. Inform him unconditional and immediate surrender his only option. Unless, of course, he chooses utter annihilation of his entire army. But only a madman would make such a...

Â Â Â Â "Ow!" he finally yells. "Ow, ow, ow! Oh momma, oh shit, oh Jeez "what did you do to me?"

Â Â Â Â I quote General Sherman. Explain carefully that war IS hell. Urge him to calm down, be quiet, it's just a scratch. I took care to sterilize the blades last night "I respect the Geneva. I wouldn't, by the way, exactly call a napalm squirtgun abiding by the Convention. Suppose some of that mass destruction had splattered my eye? Just a matter of I deployed my miracle weapon quicker than he deployed his. I can give you anything but time, Napoleon says, and I'm not about to give Johnny so much as the time of day on this one.

Â Â Â Â Does he want a band-aid or something? "Since you've obviously surrendered and given all your remaining toys up into my custody, I can have my medics rush forward to administer to the wounded; in particular, of course, to your commanding general."

Â Â Â Â He says through tears and gritted teeth, "You fucking asshole!"

Â Â Â Â "If you're going to be that way about it," I sail a prepackaged band-aid out of my shirt pocket and into the dust at Johnny's sneakered, sockless feet.

Â Â Â Â "I'm telling my mom." He ignores the dressing. Clutches harder yet his wrist just below the nick. As if he needs the whole world to know he stands in dire need of a tourniquet. "Telling my dad, too. My dad'll have your goddamn dad fired."

Hostilities are going way too far. I remind Johnny that we are both civilized nations. War is what civilized human beings engage in. It's hell, sure, but it's unavoidable, nothing can be done about it. But when war is over, hostilities cease. The victor is merciful and the loser refrains from harboring grudges. War is no different from any other sport. Except that...

"Fuck you. I'm tellin'." He heads for the patio. Starts up the cement steps to the back porch.

"OK, look, Johnny..." I offer all his soldiers back. Sure, I'll replace the ones I broke with two dozen of my special forces frogmen. I'll even toss in that Audie Murphy tommygunner I got with the cereal boxtops, I know how partial he is to Audie Murphy.

"And, hey, look, Johnny: c'mere for a sec."

He abandons the porch, crosses the patio, ambles back over. Bleeding now looks stopped. But head still down moping. Skin white with suppressed anger and that brown-end-of-the-stick feeling that can cause a nation overnight to rearm and launch through neutral territory a sneak attack. Guys like Johnny "the half-dumb, kinda-mean, half-sly, kinda-kind ones" you just can't trust.

When he comes up alongside, and all forward motion halts, I lower my own head to just below the level of his. Cock my chin to the right. Peer up into his eyes.

This is two men in a huddle. Intimate. Dead serious. Aligned together for this one instant against all the forces in the universe.

"You know," I mutter, "what your peewee is, right?"

Johnny's lips purse. His face and the roots of his hair darken. He nods affirmative.

I prepare to lay out the secret "one, two, three. Easy as skipping rope. Just get the timing right.

But then step back a sec. See myself as Johnny going into detail about his own personal peewee and the rush of a second life contained therein (as lawyers might put it). My stomach flutters. Lip curls. Nose twitches.

No "it'll stay secret. A "weapon" for keeping the men satisfied, conserving their concentration, giving them inspiration. Why, if, after delivering the ultimatum this morning, I don't then calm myself with a squish (jitterbugging visions of Charlene the cheerleader), the particulars of the attack might never even cross my mind.

"Means we're men. Real men. Gimme your wrist."

Holding his forearm in my left hand, I grope in my pocket, retrieve another banded-together clump of blades "extra ammo in case the first shot missed. Nick my own wrist, just enough to coax up one bright drop. Rub his oozy cut over my fresh wound. He winces. I sense he is on the verge of yanking away.

"Now," I focus on his eyes, "we are blood brothers. I mixed mine with yours. So our veins now carry both bloods. You know what this means?"

Slowly he takes away his hand. Frowns down at the smear of bloods.

"We're allies. Our forces are united for life, Johnny. My army will forever come to the defense of your army. If I'm attacked, you join me in attacking my attacker."

Johnny looks up. Not so much doubting, as confused, puzzled, unsure of some of the words.

"This is a treaty. Signed in blood. Just like at the end of the Revolutionary War we signed up with the British, then proceeded to bail them out of both World Wars."

He glances at the smear. Glances back up into my eyes. "So what's my peewee got to do with this?"

"I needed to get us thinking about being men. Allies are special arrangements between men only. Now," I let go of his wrist (drops limp at his side), "I don't know about you, but I've had a hard day directing combat operations on the battlefield. I'm going home and wash up."

"You'll help me out if Randy Newton tries to beat me up again?"

"Honest injun!" I wink. Gather my soldiers into a paper victory bag. Head off. "See ya Monday at the bus stop."

As I step onto the sidewalk, Johnny, following me around to the front yard, calls out, "What about them replacements for my toys you busted?"

"We're allies, Johnny. My army is your army. Any time you need an extra platoon or even a company, call me up and you got 'em. Want me to tell Mrs. Ostman to hold the bus if you're late Monday?" Johnny is often late Monday's; Mrs. Ostman and Mom are friends; she owes Mom a couple favors; everybody knows I'm a nice kid.

Johnny grunts. Meaning yeah. Maybe. Mopes back around the house into his back yard. I notice one of his shoelaces has come untied.

I'll need to be careful for the next couple weeks not to be around whenever Randy Newton comes within hailing range of Johnny. Will take Johnny at least that long to forget all this.

The squish stays, once again, safe with me. Need to remember to keep it that way. Too volatile to trust in the hands of others. No telling what anybody might think. Sure, I want to let somebody else know how smart I am "what a powerful force I have stumbled on, and am now in possession of.

But maybe I should keep that someone inside my skull. Never trust a guy any further than you can hoodwink the sucker.

I only hope "I kick a pebble off the sidewalk into the gutter" I can continue to trust what's inside my skull. Sometimes the allies in there "the pebble skips through the storm drain" rattles to the bottom of the sewer "seem deliberately trying to betray my side."

