

# *The Meeting*

It was a classic early spring morning – the sun was shining warmly for the first time in months, melting the last remnants of the dark dingy crusts of snow that lined the walk across the quad to the computer center. It was idyllic and peaceful, a complete denial of the tragedy unfolding in Viet Nam 8,000 miles away. The Tet Offensive was over, but now the words on everyone’s lips were “My Lai”. How could American soldiers have done this? I pushed such thoughts from my mind and chose to listen to the birds singing in the trees instead. Viet Nam and its ugliness were the farthestmost things from my mind.

It was about ten minutes before ten in the morning, and as a graduate student at Grainer University, life could not be better. I had an interesting sex life, my 2S deferment, an interesting thesis topic and a part-time job with a future. In a few minutes, I would sit down in the consulting room at the computer center and help my fellow students and faculty members understand the intricate mysteries of our state-of-the-art IBM 360/65 mainframe computer. I was a high-priest of the computer, privileged to not only enter its inter sanctum, but also to actually touch it and even run it.



“Hi, Alex,” Rosie called when she saw me enter the main office. She was a plump twenty-year-old girl with pigtails. I could have gotten interested in her if she lost twenty pounds. “There’s someone here to see you.”

“Huh?” I grunted as I checked my mailbox – just a couple computer magazines. “I wasn’t expecting anyone.”

“He said it was urgent. He’s waiting in the conference room. He looks like FBI,” she added in a hushed voice.

“But I’m suppose to start consulting in a few minutes.” I turned to look at her.

“He said it would only take about fifteen minutes,” Rosie replied quietly. The look on her face was a clear warning. “I could put a sign on the door that you will be a few minutes late.”

One thing I had learned was to trust Rosie’s judgment. She may have been a farmer’s daughter and looked it, but she was a shrewd farmer’s daughter. Very little got by her.

“Okay, I’ll see him,” I groaned, remembering her appraisal of whom he worked for. I turned and walked out into the hall and towards the conference room.



“Hi, I’m Alex O’Connor,” I announced as I entered the conference room. “My secretary says you wanted to see me.”

My visitor remained seated at the conference table. An athletically built man in his early thirties with a crew cut, he wore a dark blue polyester suit, white shirt and almost black tie. A pair of Ray Ban sunglasses peeked out of his jacket’s breast pocket.

“Thanks for taking the time to see me,” he muttered as he moved his overcoat off of his attaché case and opened it. “I need to talk to you about your deferment.”

“What?”

“Your deferment,” he repeated matter-of-factly. “You are a graduate student, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You do have a 2S deferment?”

“Yes.”

“Let me see,” he mumbled while looking at a sheet of paper.

“Ah, I didn’t know that the Selective Service made house calls?” I asked tentatively.

He looked at me for a second. “They don’t.”

“Then who are you?”

“I am Mr. Brown.”

“With what agency?”

“Let’s just say a ‘government agency’.”

“May I see some identification, please?”

“Mr. O’Connor, I am here to help you, if I can,” he said sternly.

“I don’t understand.”

“You are about to be drafted,” he grumbled, pushing a piece of paper towards me. “You will receive this next week.”

I leaned over and picked up the paper. My hands began to shake immediately when I saw the letterhead was from my draft board.

“What?” I cried as I tried to read it, but my hands were shaking too much.

“Basically, it says that your 2S deferment has been cancelled and that you will be inducted in the United States military. You have an excellent chance of being drafted into the Marine Corps, given the casualties they suffered during the Tet Offensive.”

“Maybe I will flunk the physical,” I said hopefully.

“You’re breathing,” he snorted knowingly. “You will be drafted. Trust me.”

“They can’t!” I protested in near panic. “I haven’t finished my degree!”

“You are in your third year of graduate study, and don’t seem

anywhere near finished.”

“But I have a complex thesis topic.”

“Something about ‘worms’,” he muttered while reading the first sheet of paper.

“I’m studying the biological transfer of learning between black planaria worms,” I explained. “My professor, Professor Lippsmeyer, is a world authority on the subject.”

“Well, that will come in handy,” Mr. Brown commented dryly. “They have a lot of leeches in Viet Nam. At least that is what I was told.”

He paused to look at the paper again. “It is thought that you have had enough time and that you are in fact stalling on finishing to avoid the draft.”

“I’m NOT!” I protested loudly.

“It’s the way it looks to your draft board,” he replied with a shrug. “Besides, they are short on their allotment and so they are scraping the dregs in the barrel.”

While I would never admit it, I was not in any rush to finish my Masters, let alone my Ph. D. degree. Bob Talbot, a good friend who started with me in the Biopsychology Department at Grainer, had finished his Masters degree in two years, and was drafted in August. Now he was a private in the military police of the US Army. Last I heard, he was scheduled to go to Viet Nam in a couple months.

“Ah,” I hemmed. “You said something about ‘helping me’?”

“Yes,” Mr. Brown said quietly. “I believe I can. But first I’m going to have to verify a few things.”

“Such as?”

“You are Alexander O’Connor, presently living at 408 Walnut Street, College Park, Ohio?”

“Yes.”

“You are enrolled as a graduate student at Grainer University in the Biopsychology Department?”

“Yes.”

“You work 20 hours a week as a part-time employee of the Grainer University Computer Center?”

“Yes.”

“You are a qualified systems programmer on the IBM 360/65?”

“No. I am the statistical and FORTRAN consultant. Officially, that is. Unofficially, I have played quite a bit with both our 360/65 and 40 as a system programmer, but I am not ‘qualified’, I am self-taught.”

That seemed to throw Mr. Brown for a moment. “It says here that you can do complete ‘sysgens’ – whatever that is – on your own.”

I laughed. “Mr. Brown, we are not a rich university, so we have

problems keeping ‘qualified’ system programmers. That means they are trained and certified by IBM. As soon as that happens, they get job offers for really big money from all the corporations looking for such people. It is extremely hard to find such people at any price, and impossible for this university to afford. Fortunately, I can read IBMese and find it relatively easy to follow their instructions. I didn’t need training. I am self-taught. I simply sit down and read the manual. It comes from my graduate course work. I can reason things out.”

Mr. Brown, if that was what his name was, stared at me for a moment. “You are saying you just read the manual?”

“Yes,” I replied with a smile. “Once you learn the language, it is quite easy. IBM does an excellent job of documentation – if you can read IBMese.”

“IBMese?”

“Well, you know how lawyers talk?”

He nodded.

“Well, computer manuals are the same. They have their own language just like lawyers speak legal language.”

“So you do do system programming?” he questioned to be sure he understood.

“Yes, all the time,” I replied flippantly.

That seemed to satisfy Mr. Brown. “Look, I was sent to make you an offer. As you just pointed out, it is very difficult to find system programmers, qualified or not. I represent a government agency who is willing to give you a part-time job, just like what you have right now, in exchange for getting your 2S reinstated.”

“Who?” I queried.

“You do not have a need to know,” he replied firmly.

I nodded, not realizing how often I would hear that in the future. “Where?”

“I can’t say yet, but it is close enough for you to drive up to our site for a couple days each week, do what is needed and then return here to College Park. That way, you can continue to play with your worms.”

“And if I say ‘no’?” I questioned tentatively.

He glanced down at the letter from the draft board that I had dropped on the table. “You can try teaching leeches instead. You will have plenty of opportunity. I wouldn’t reject the offer, if I were you,” he warned.

“And if I say ‘yes’?”

“You will be invited up for an interview next week. Say, Tuesday. That way you wouldn’t miss any classes.”

I took a moment to reason it out. I was in checkmate. I had no other option.

“I accept your kind offer for an interview, Mr. Brown,” I said as bravely as I could. “But just that. No commitments until I know more about this.”

“Fair enough,” Mr. Brown agreed. “But you must not talk about this to anyone, including your girl friend.”

“Girl friend?” That surprised me.

“Janice Yarber,” he replied confidently. “You usually spend Thursday nights with her. Come up this coming Tuesday with an overnight bag. That way, if things work out, we can put you to work. And don’t worry, you will be home in time to see Janice next Thursday night.”



I wasn’t a lot of fun after that meeting with Mr. Brown. The war in Viet Nam had come home to me and I wanted no part of it. The last thing I wanted was to go live in a hot, humid country where the natives were hostile. Janice took the worst of it, although I tried to shield her. Saturday night was a night I want to forget. She cried the whole night thinking that it was something she had done. However, there wasn’t anything I could say – Mr. Brown had made that very clear.

# *The Site*

Today is Tuesday, the first day of the rest of my life, and I am in my battered old 1957 Hillman Husky headed north. It's a good little car, a sort of mini station wagon that the Brits call an estate wagon. Since with a strong tail wind its little engine might get it up to 60 MPH on a slight downhill, I started for my destination with plenty of time to spare, mainly because I did not want to discover the consequences of being late. I headed to Otten Air Force Base, near Ulysses, Ohio, a SAC base filled with dozens of B-52s. It is about 80 miles from College Park, so I allowed three hours. I needed one and a half.

Mr. Brown told me to show up there at 1300 hours – that's one PM in civilian time – report to the guard hut at the main gate and call 75921. That was all. At first he did not want me to write anything down, but I insisted that I at least write the phone number down. I am sure I would have forgotten it otherwise. After waiting an hour at a diner down the road from the base's main gate nervously playing with a cup of coffee, I finally got up from the counter, left a ten-cent tip and left.



“Excuse me,” I said through the rolled down window of my car to the airman guarding the gate. “I was told to go to the main gate guard hut – could you tell me where it is?”

“It's that building over there, sir,” he replied, pointing to what looked more like a ranch house than a hut. “Park in the lot to the side, and go inside. They'll take care of you.”

“Thanks!” I yelled as he waved me through and turned his attention to the next car in the line in front of his little shack. He didn't answer so I goosed the throttle and did as directed. The airmen inside were polite enough and pointed out a black phone sitting on a table next to the several chairs that lined one wall of the building.

Dialing 75921 carefully, making sure I had each digit correct, I waited for the answer.

“75921,” a woman answered. That surprised me and I nearly hung up.

“Excuse me,” I apologized, “but I was told to call this number at one PM.

“You are ten minutes early,” she chided.

“Better than ten minutes late,” I replied, trying to seem eager.

“You have to learn to do as you are told,” she rebuked me. That scared me. Had I screwed the deal by coming early?

“I will be there in 15 minutes at exactly 1305 hours,” she added frostily.

“But how will I know you?”

“I know who you are and what you look like. I will find you.”

The phone went dead, and so I hung up and sat in my chair, trying not to displease anyone else, or even draw attention to myself. Dark thoughts about walking through the jungle carrying a rifle in a line of soldiers drifted through my mind as I waited. The large wall clock ticked away the minutes as though they each lasted an hour.

Finally the appointed moment arrived and as the clock ticked to five minutes after the hour, a woman appeared in the doorway. I was amazed that the precision of her arrival. Instinctively, I knew who she was – she was the lady on the phone. About forty-five, she was wearing a tan shirtwaist dress that showed her still-trim figure to advantage and wore her brown hair to her shoulders. Still, she had a military look about her. She also had the look of a spinster who really needed to get laid. Although still quite comely, she had the sour look of too many disappointments.

It didn't take her a moment to spot me. It was as though she knew me all her life, but she didn't show it. Instead she walked directly to me and handed me a white card about six-inches square.

“Take this. It's a three-day pass for the base. Leave it on the dash of your car, follow me out to the road, down to another gate and through it. I want you right behind me at the gate because I have to clear you through. Then follow me to the second gate and park your car where indicated, leave your car unlocked, leave your overnight bag and get into my car. Got it?”

Not sure of myself I simply nodded, and wondered what it would really be like to live in a hot, humid country where the natives were hostile.

“I think so,” I replied in a whisper.

The woman exhaled loudly as though exasperated, and turned for the door. I wasn't sure that I was to follow or not, but since she had said nothing to the contrary, I got up and followed her. Somehow I was not surprised to see that her two-year-old Ford Fairlane was parked next to my junker. She seemed to know everything about me, and as I was to soon discover, she did.

The trip to what is known as “The Site” lasted less than ten minutes. We left the main gate, returned to the highway and headed south about two miles. There she turned off onto a dusty road, and stopped at a guard box at the gate. As I waited behind her as instructed, I could see her talking to the guard, an air policeman with a pistol in a holster on his hip. Clearly, the gate was not used much, but the presence of an

armed guard surprised me – the main gate just had an unarmed airman. A few moments later, she drove back onto the base and I followed as instructed. The guard waved me through, so I dutifully continued a respectful fifty feet behind her Fairlane, thankful that the dust it raised drifted off to the right of the road by the time I reached it.

We crested a hill and off to the left I could see a large compound with many guard towers, and rows of light towers spaced every fifty feet, each festooned with flood lamps. The entire compound was surrounded by two barbed-wire fences each at least twenty-feet high and topped with coils of razor wire.

The entrance to that compound was even more impressive. Two pill-boxes guarded the double gates that enclosed an area large enough to park trailer trucks. In fact, there was an all-white trailer truck parked in that area when we went by. Beyond, going back for at least a mile, were rows of what looked like long piles of dirt. I knew that they were munitions shelters. It was the ordinance dump, with enough nuclear explosive power to destroy the Earth. Getting in there unbidden would have required an army, which was I suppose the idea.

The Fairlane continued pass the turn that led to the dump, and as we drove down the road were it ran along the fence, I could see movement in each of the guard towers. Dire thoughts about what could happen should my little Hillman Husky cough and fail on me crossed my mind when I realize that they were pointing guns at us. No, this was not the place for a casual ride in the country. I guess it was then that I finally realized that I was entering a new world, one I had never experienced before, just like Alice going down the rabbit hole. I was entering Wonderland, as I called it.



The Site was similar to the ordinance dump in that it had a double barbed-wire fence with a guardhouse by the gate, but there were no pill-boxes, just a cement building with regular windows. And there were far fewer guard towers and lights. Inside at the bottom of a low hill towards the back of the compound was a large industrial-looking building with no windows covered with tan metal sheeting. There was also what looked like a couple barracks buildings and a neat little two-story office building near the front. The Fairlane stopped in front of the gate and a guard in a military-like uniform waved me to the side, pointing to a parking spot marked “visitors”. Since he was carrying an M-1 carbine and looked like he knew how to use it, I obeyed. Besides, I still wanted the job even though I was starting to have questions in my mind.

“Leave your car, and get into hers,” he yelled as I pulled into the parking spot.

Again, I obeyed, and a few moments later, I was dutifully seated in the passenger side of the woman's car.

"You will call me 'Mary'," she announced. "Only five people here besides you know your real name, so do not use it. You are 'Daniel Rogers' while on The Site or in any way associated with it. Do not discuss your personal details with anyone who does not already know your real name. Conversely, you are to say nothing about what you have been doing today or what you may see or hear to anyone, including you girl friend, mother, or even your dog."

"I have a cat," I responded automatically, without thinking.

"Yes," she answered. "How is Cleo doing? Did she get over her cold yet?"

The woman cracked a faint smile as she slipped her car into gear and I entered The Site for the first time.