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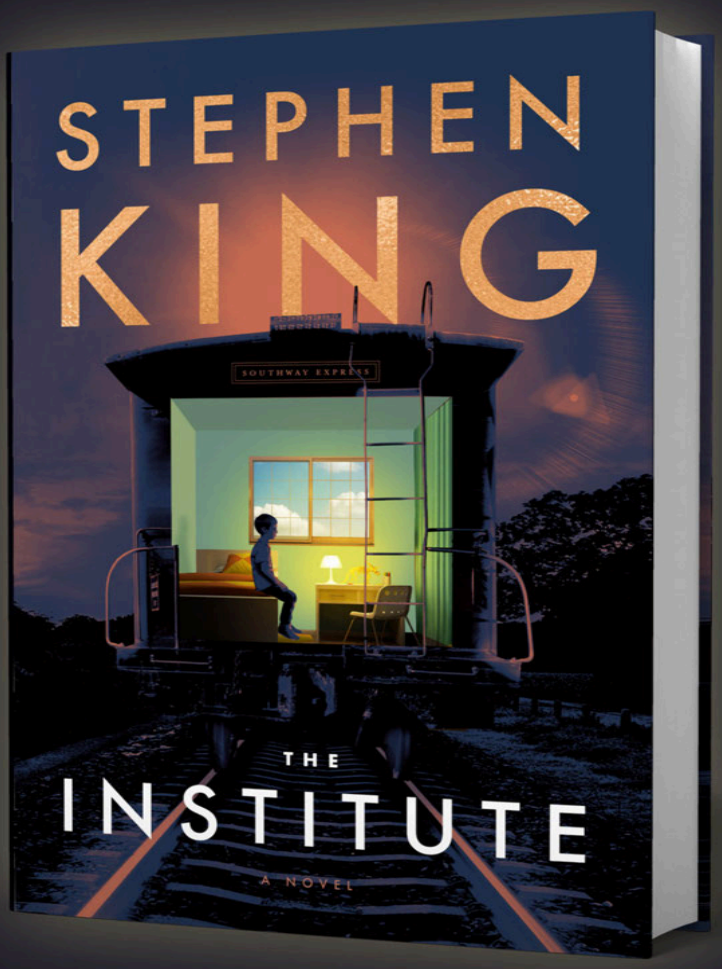

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STEPHEN KING

writing as Richard Bachman

THE LONG WALK

A NOVEL

SCRIBNER

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

This is for Jim Bishop and Burt Hatlen and Ted Holmes.

“To me the Universe was all void of Life, or Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility; it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb. O vast, gloomy, solitary Golgotha, and Mill of Death! Why was the Living banished thither companionless, conscious? Why, if there is no Devil; nay, unless the Devil is your God?”

—Thomas Carlyle

“I would encourage every American to walk as often as possible. It’s more than healthy; it’s fun.”

—John F. Kennedy (1962)

“The pump don’t work

’Cause the vandals took the handle.”

—Bob Dylan

The Importance of Being Bachman

by Stephen King

This is my second introduction to the so-called Bachman Books—a phrase which has come to mean (in my mind, at least) the first few novels published with the Richard Bachman name, the ones which appeared as unheralded paperback originals under the Signet imprint. My first introduction wasn't very good; to me it reads like a textbook case of author obfuscation. But that is not surprising. When it was written, Bachman's alter ego (me, in other words) wasn't in what I'd call a contemplative or analytical mood; I was, in fact, feeling robbed. Bachman was never created as a short-term alias; he was supposed to be there for the long haul, and when my name came out in connection with his, I was surprised, upset, and pissed off. That's not a state conducive to good essay-writing. This time I may do a little better.

Probably the most important thing I can say about Richard Bachman is that he became real. Not entirely, of course (he said with a nervous smile); I am not writing this in a delusive state. Except . . . well . . . maybe I am. Delusion is, after all, something writers of fiction try to encourage in their readers, at least during the time that the book or story is open before them, and the writer is hardly immune from this state of . . . what shall I call it? How does "directed delusion" sound?

At any rate, Richard Bachman began his career not as a delusion but as a sheltered place where I could publish a few early works which I felt readers might like. Then he began to grow and come alive, as the creatures of a writer's imagination so frequently do. I began to imagine his life as a dairy farmer . . . his wife, the beautiful Claudia Inez Bachman . . . his solitary New Hampshire mornings, spent milking the cows, getting in the wood, and thinking about his stories . . . his evenings spent writing, always with a glass of whiskey beside his Olivetti typewriter. I once knew a writer who would say his current story or novel was "putting on weight" if it was going well. In much the same way, my pen-name began to put on weight.

Then, when his cover was blown, Richard Bachman died. I made light of this in the few interviews I felt required to give on the subject, saying that he'd died of cancer of the pseudonym, but it was actually shock that killed him: the realization that sometimes people just won't let you alone. To put it in more fulsome (but not at all inaccurate) terms, Bachman was the vampire side of my existence, killed by the sunlight of disclosure. My feelings about all this were confused enough (and fertile enough) to bring on a book (a Stephen King book, that is), The Dark Half. It was about a writer whose pseudonym, George Stark, actually comes to life. It's a novel my wife has always detested, perhaps because, for Thad Beaumont, the dream of being a writer overwhelms the reality of being a man; for Thad, delusive thinking overtakes rationality completely, with horrific consequences.

I didn't have that problem, though. Really. I put Bachman aside, and although I was sorry that he had to die, I would be lying if I didn't say I felt some relief as well.

The books in this omnibus were written by a young man who was angry, energetic, and deeply infatuated with the art and craft of writing. They weren't written as Bachman books per se (Bachman hadn't been invented yet, after all), but in a Bachman state of mind: low rage, sexual frustration, crazy good humor, and simmering despair. Ben Richards, the scrawny, pre-tubercular protagonist of The Running Man (he is about as far from the Arnold Schwarzenegger character in the movie as you can get), crashes his hijacked plane into the Network Games skyscraper, killing himself but taking hundreds (maybe thousands) of Free-Vee executives with him; this is the Richard Bachman version of a happy ending. The conclusions of the other Bachman novels are even more grim. Stephen King has always understood that the good guys don't always win (see Cujo, Pet Sematary, and—perhaps—Christine), but he has also understood that mostly they do. Every day, in real life, the good guys win. Mostly these victories go unheralded (MAN ARRIVES HOME SAFE FROM WORK YET AGAIN wouldn't sell many papers), but they are nonetheless real for all that . . . and fiction should reflect reality.

And yet . . .

In the first draft of The Dark Half, I had Thad Beaumont quote Donald E. Westlake, a very funny writer who has penned a series of very grim crime

novels under the name Richard Stark. Once asked to explain the dichotomy between Westlake and Stark, the writer in question said, “I write Westlake stories on sunny days. When it rains, I’m Stark.” I don’t think that made it into the final version of The Dark Half, but I have always loved it (and related to it, as it has become fashionable to say). Bachman—a fictional creation who became more real to me with each published book which bore his byline—was a rainy-day sort of guy if ever there was one.

The good folks mostly win, courage usually triumphs over fear, the family dog hardly ever contracts rabies: these are things I knew at twenty-five, and things I still know now, at the age of 25 X 2. But I know something else as well: there’s a place in most of us where the rain is pretty much constant, the shadows are always long, and the woods are full of monsters. It is good to have a voice in which the terrors of such a place can be articulated and its geography partially described, without denying the sunshine and clarity that fill so much of our ordinary lives.

In Thinner, Bachman spoke for the first time on his own—it was the only one of the early Bachman novels that had his name on the first draft instead of mine—and it struck me as really unfair that, just as he was starting to talk with his own voice, he should have been mistaken for me. And a mistake was just what it felt like, because by then Bachman had become a kind of id for me; he said the things I couldn’t, and the thought of him out there on his New Hampshire dairy farm—not a best-selling writer who gets his name in some stupid Forbes list of entertainers too rich for their own good or his face on the Today show or doing cameos in movies—quietly writing his books gave him permission to think in ways I could not think and speak in ways I could not speak. And then these news stories came out saying “Bachman is really King,” and there was no one—not even me—to defend the dead man, or to point out the obvious: that King was also really Bachman, at least some of the time.

Unfair I thought then and unfair I think now, but sometimes life bites you a little, that’s all. I determined to put Bachman out of my thoughts and my life, and so I did, for a number of years. Then, while I was writing a novel (a Stephen King novel) called Desperation, Richard Bachman suddenly appeared in my life again.

I was working on a Wang dedicated word processor at that time; it looked like the visiphone in an old Flash Gordon serial. This was paired with a marginally more state-of-the-art laser printer, and from time to time, when an idea occurred to me, I would write down a phrase or a putative title on a scrap of paper and Scotch-tape it to the side of the printer. As I neared the three-quarter mark on Desperation, I had a scrap with a single word printed on it: REGULATORS. I had had a great idea for a novel, something that had to do with toys, guns, TV, and suburbia. I didn't know if I would ever write it—lots of those "printer notes" never came to anything—but it was certainly cool to think about.

Then, one rainy day (a Richard Stark sort of day), as I was pulling into my driveway, I had an idea. I don't know where it came from; it was totally unconnected to any of the trivia tumbling through my head at the time. The idea was to take the characters from Desperation and put them into The Regulators. In some cases, I thought, they could play the same people; in others, they would change; in neither case would they do the same things or react in the same ways, because the different stories would dictate different courses of action. It would be, I thought, like the members of a repertory company acting in two different plays.

Then an even more exciting idea struck me. If I could use the rep company concept with the characters, I could use it with the plot itself as well—I could stack a good many of the Desperation elements in a brand-new configuration, and create a kind of mirror world. I knew even before setting out that plenty of critics would call this twinning a stunt . . . and they would not be wrong, exactly. But, I thought, it could be a good stunt. Maybe even an illuminating stunt, one which showcased the muscularity and versatility of story, its all but limitless ability to adapt a few basic elements into endlessly pleasing variations, its prankish charm.

But the two books couldn't sound exactly the same, and they couldn't mean the same, any more than an Edward Albee play and one by William Inge can sound and mean the same, even if they are performed on successive nights by the same company of actors. How could I possibly create a different voice?

At first I thought I couldn't, and that it would be best to consign the idea to the Rube Goldberg bin I keep in the bottom of my mind—the one marked

INTERESTING BUT UNWORKABLE CONTRAPTIONS. Then it occurred to me that I had had the answer all along: Richard Bachman could write The Regulators. His voice sounded superficially the same as mine, but underneath there was a world of difference—all the difference between sunshine and rain, let us say. And his view of people was always different from mine, simultaneously funnier and more cold-hearted (Bart Dawes in Roadwork, my favorite of the early Bachman books, is an excellent example).

Of course Bachman was dead, I had announced that myself, but death is actually a minor problem for a novelist—just ask Paul Sheldon, who brought Misery Chastain back for Annie Wilkes, or Arthur Conan Doyle, who brought Sherlock Holmes back from Reichenbach Falls when fans all over the British Empire clamored for him. I didn't actually bring Richard Bachman back from the dead, anyway; I just visualized a box of neglected manuscripts in his basement, with The Regulators on top. Then I transcribed the book Bachman had already written.

That transcription was a little tougher . . . but it was also immensely exhilarating. It was wonderful to hear Bachman's voice again, and what I had hoped might happen did happen: a book rolled out that was a kind of fraternal twin to the one I had written under my own name (and the two books were quite literally written back-to-back, the King book finished on one day and the Bachman book commenced on the very next). They were no more alike than King and Bachman themselves. Desperation is about God; The Regulators is about TV. I guess that makes them both about higher powers, but very different ones just the same.

The importance of being Bachman was always the importance of finding a good voice and a valid point of view that were a little different from my own. Not really different; I am not schizo enough to believe that. But I do believe that there are tricks all of us use to change our perspectives and our perceptions—to see ourselves new by dressing up in different clothes and doing our hair in different styles—and that such tricks can be very useful, a way of revitalizing and refreshing old strategies for living life, observing life, and creating art. None of these comments are intended to suggest that I have done anything great in the Bachman books, and they are surely not made as arguments for artistic merit. But I love what I do too much to want to go stale if I can help it.

Bachman has been one way in which I have tried to refresh my craft, and to keep from being too comfy and well-padded.

These early books show some progression of the Bachman persona, I hope, and I hope they also show the essence of that persona. Dark-toned, despairing even when he is laughing (despairing most when he's laughing, in fact), Richard Bachman isn't a fellow I'd want to be all the time, even if he were still alive . . . but it's good to have that option, that window on the world, polarized though it may be. Still, as the reader works his or her way through these stories, he/she may discover that Dick Bachman has one thing in common with Thad Beaumont's alter ego, George Stark: he's not a very nice guy.

And I wonder if there are any other good manuscripts, at or near completion, in that box found by the widowed Mrs. Bachman in the cellar of their New Hampshire farmhouse.

Sometimes I wonder about that a lot.

—Stephen King

Lovell, Maine

April 16, 1996

PART ONE

STARTING OUT

Chapter 1

"Say the secret word and win a hundred dollars.

George, who are our first contestants?

George . . . ? Are you there, George?"

—Groucho Marx

You Bet Your Life

An old blue Ford pulled into the guarded parking lot that morning, looking like a small, tired dog after a hard run. One of the guards, an expressionless young man in a khaki uniform and a Sam Browne belt, asked to see the blue plastic ID card. The boy in the back seat handed it to his mother. His mother handed it to the guard. The guard took it to a computer terminal that looked strange and out of place in the rural stillness. The computer terminal ate the card and flashed this on its screen:

GARRATY RAYMOND DAVIS

RD 1 POWNAL MAINE

ANDROSCOGGIN COUNTY

ID NUMBER *49-801-89*

OK-OK-OK

The guard punched another button and all of this disappeared, leaving the terminal screen smooth and green and blank again. He waved them forward.

"Don't they give the card back?" Mrs. Garraty asked. "Don't they—"

"No, Mom," Garraty said patiently.

"Well, I don't like it," she said, pulling forward into an empty space. She had been saying it ever since they set out in the dark of two in the morning. She had been moaning it, actually.

"Don't worry," he said without hearing himself. He was occupied with looking and with his own confusion of anticipation and fear. He was out of the

car almost before the engine's last asthmatic wheeze—a tall, well-built boy wearing a faded army fatigue jacket against the eight o'clock spring chill.

His mother was also tall, but too thin. Her breasts were almost nonexistent: token nubs. Her eyes were wandering and unsure, somehow shocked. Her face was an invalid's face. Her iron-colored hair had gone awry under the complication of clips that was supposed to hold it in place. Her dress hung badly on her body as if she had recently lost a lot of weight.

"Ray," she said in that whispery conspirator's voice that he had come to dread. "Ray, listen—"

He ducked his head and pretended to tuck in his shirt. One of the guards was eating C rations from a can and reading a comic book. Garraty watched the guard eating and reading and thought for the ten thousandth time: It's all *real* . And now, at last, the thought began to swing some weight.

"There's still time to change your mind—"

The fear and anticipation cranked up a notch.

"No, there's no time for that," he said. "The backout date was yesterday."

Still in that low conspirator's voice that he hated: "They'd understand, I know they would. The Major—"

"The Major would—" Garraty began, and saw his mother wince. "You know what the Major would do, Mom."

Another car had finished the small ritual at the gate and had parked. A boy with dark hair got out. His parents followed and for a moment the three of them stood in conference like worried baseball players. He, like some of the other boys, was wearing a light packsack. Garraty wondered if he hadn't been a little stupid not to bring one himself.

"You won't change your mind?"

It was guilt, guilt taking the face of anxiety. Although he was only sixteen, Ray Garraty knew something about guilt. She felt that she had been too dry, too tired, or maybe just too taken up with her older sorrows to halt her son's madness in its seedling stage—to halt it before the cumbersome machinery of the State with its guards in khaki and its computer terminals had taken over,

binding himself more tightly to its insensate self with each passing day, until yesterday, when the lid had come down with a final bang.

He put a hand on her shoulder. “This is my idea, Mom. I know it wasn’t yours. I—” He glanced around. No one was paying the slightest attention to them. “I love you, but this way is best, one way or the other.”

“It’s not,” she said, now verging on tears. “Ray, it’s not, if your father was here, he’d put a stop to—”

“Well, he’s not, is he?” He was brutal, hoping to stave off her tears . . . what if they had to drag her off? He had heard that sometimes that happened. The thought made him feel cold. In a softer voice he said, “Let it go now, Mom. Okay?” He forced a grin. “Okay,” he answered for her.

Her chin was still trembling, but she nodded. Not all right, but too late. There was nothing anyone could do.

A light wind soughed through the pines. The sky was pure blue. The road was just ahead and the simple stone post that marked the border between America and Canada. Suddenly his anticipation was greater than his fear, and he wanted to get going, get the show on the road.

“I made these. You can take them, can’t you? They’re not too heavy, are they?” She thrust a foil-wrapped package of cookies at him.

“Yeah.” He took them and then clutched her awkwardly, trying to give her what she needed to have. He kissed her cheek. Her skin was like old silk. For a moment he could have cried himself. Then he thought of the smiling, mustachioed face of the Major and stepped back, stuffing the cookies into the pocket of his fatigue jacket.

“G’bye, Mom.”

“Goodbye, Ray. Be a good boy.”

She stood there for a moment and he had a sense of her being very light, as if even the light puffs of breeze blowing this morning might send her sailing away like a dandelion gone to seed. Then she got back into the car and started the engine. Garraty stood there. She raised her hand and waved. The tears were flowing now. He could see them. He waved back and then as she pulled out he just stood there with his arms at his sides, conscious of how fine and brave and alone he must look. But when the car had passed back through the gate,

forlornness struck him and he was only a sixteen-year-old boy again, alone in a strange place.

He turned back toward the road. The other boy, the dark-haired one, was watching his folks pull out. He had a bad scar along one cheek. Garraty walked over to him and said hello.

The dark-haired boy gave him a glance. “Hi.”

“I’m Ray Garraty,” he said, feeling mildly like an asshole.

“I’m Peter McVries.”

“You are ready?” Garraty asked.

McVries shrugged. “I feel jumpy. That’s the worst.”

Garraty nodded.

The two of them walked toward the road and the stone marker. Behind them, other cars were pulling out. A woman began screaming abruptly. Unconsciously, Garraty and McVries drew closer together. Neither of them looked back. Ahead of them was the road, wide and black.

“That composition surface will be hot by noon,” McVries said abruptly. “I’m going to stick to the shoulder.”

Garraty nodded. McVries looked at him thoughtfully.

“What do you weigh?”

“Hundred and sixty.”

“I’m one-sixty-seven. They say the heavier guys get tired quicker, but I think I’m in pretty good shape.”

To Garraty, Peter McVries looked rather more than that—he looked awesomely fit. He wondered who *they* were that said the heavier guys got tired quicker, almost asked, and decided not to. The Walk was one of those things that existed on apocrypha, talismans, legend.

McVries sat down in the shade near a couple of other boys, and after a moment, Garraty sat beside him. McVries seemed to have dismissed him entirely. Garraty looked at his watch. It was five after eight. Fifty-five minutes to go. Impatience and anticipation came back, and he did his best to squash them, telling himself to enjoy sitting while he could.

All of the boys were sitting. Sitting in groups and sitting alone; one boy had climbed onto the lowest branch of a pine overlooking the road and was eating what looked like a jelly sandwich. He was skinny and blond, wearing purple pants and a blue chambray shirt under an old green zip sweater with holes in the elbows. Garraty wondered if the skinny ones would last or burn out quickly.

The boys he and McVries had sat down next to were talking.

"I'm not hurrying," one of them said. "Why should I? If I get warned, so what? You just adjust, that's all. Adjustment is the key word here. Remember where you heard that first."

He looked around and discovered Garraty and McVries.

"More lambs to the slaughter. Hank Olson's the name. Walking is my game." He said this with no trace of a smile at all.

Garraty offered his own name. McVries spoke his own absently, still looking off toward the road.

"I'm Art Baker," the other said quietly. He spoke with a very slight Southern accent. The four of them shook hands all around.

There was a moment's silence, and McVries said, "Kind of scary, isn't it?"

They all nodded except Hank Olson, who shrugged and grinned. Garraty watched the boy in the pine tree finish his sandwich, ball up the waxed paper it had been in, and toss it onto the soft shoulder. He'll burn out early, he decided. That made him feel a little better.

"You see that spot right by the marker post?" Olson said suddenly.

They all looked. The breeze made moving shadow-patterns across the road. Garraty didn't know if he saw anything or not.

"That's from the Long Walk the year before last," Olson said with grim satisfaction. "Kid was so scared he just froze up at nine o'clock."

They considered the horror of it silently.

"Just couldn't move. He took his three warnings and then at 9:02 AM they gave him his ticket. Right there by the starting post."

Garraty wondered if his own legs would freeze. He didn't think so, but it was a thing you wouldn't know for sure until the time came, and it was a

terrible thought. He wondered why Hank Olson wanted to bring up such a terrible thing.

Suddenly Art Baker sat up straight. “Here he comes.”

A dun-colored jeep drove up to the stone marker and stopped. It was followed by a strange, tread-equipped vehicle that moved much more slowly. There were toy-sized radar dishes mounted on the front and back of this halftrack. Two soldiers lounged on its upper deck, and Garraty felt a chill in his belly when he looked at them. They were carrying army-type heavy-caliber carbine rifles.

Some of the boys got up, but Garraty did not. Neither did Olson or Baker, and after his initial look, McVries seemed to have fallen back into his own thoughts. The skinny kid in the pine tree was swinging his feet idly.

The Major got out of the jeep. He was a tall, straight man with a deep desert tan that went well with his simple khakis. A pistol was strapped to his Sam Browne belt, and he was wearing reflector sunglasses. It was rumored that the Major’s eyes were extremely light-sensitive, and he was never seen in public without his sunglasses.

“Sit down, boys,” he said. “Keep Hint Thirteen in mind.” Hint Thirteen was “Conserve energy whenever possible.”

Those who had stood sat down. Garraty looked at his watch again. It said 8:16, and he decided it was a minute fast. The Major always showed up on time. He thought momentarily of setting it back a minute and then forgot it.

“I’m not going to make a speech,” the Major said, sweeping them with the blank lenses that covered his eyes. “I give my congratulations to the winner among your number, and my acknowledgments of valor to the losers.”

He turned to the back of the jeep. There was a living silence. Garraty breathed deep of the spring air. It would be warm. A good day to walk.

The Major turned back to them. He was holding a clipboard. “When I call your name, please step forward and take your number. Then go back to your place until it is time to begin. Do this smartly, please.”

“You’re in the army now,” Olson whispered with a grin, but Garraty ignored it. You couldn’t help admiring the Major. Garraty’s father, before the Squads took him away, had been fond of calling the Major the rarest and most

dangerous monster any nation can produce, a society-supported sociopath. But he had never seen the Major in person.

"Aaronson."

A short, chunky farmboy with a sunburned neck gangled forward, obviously awed by the Major's presence, and took his large plastic 1. He fixed it to his shirt by the pressure strip and the Major clapped him on the back.

"Abraham."

A tall boy with reddish hair in jeans and a T-shirt. His jacket was tied about his waist schoolboy style and flapped wildly around his knees. Olson sniggered.

"Baker, Arthur."

"That's me," Baker said, and got to his feet. He moved with deceptive leisure, and he made Garraty nervous. Baker was going to be tough. Baker was going to last a long time.

Baker came back. He had pressed his number 3 onto the right breast of his shirt.

"Did he say anything to you?" Garraty asked.

"He asked me if it was commencing to come off hot down home," Baker said shyly. "Yeah, he . . . the Major talked to me."

"Not as hot as it's gonna commence getting up here," Olson cracked.

"Baker, James," the Major said.

It went on until 8:40, and it came out right. No one had ducked out. Back in the parking lot, engines started and a number of cars began pulling out—boys from the backup list who would now go home and watch the Long Walk coverage on TV. It's on, Garraty thought, it's really on.

When his turn came, the Major gave him number 47 and told him "Good luck." Up close he smelled very masculine and somehow overpowering. Garraty had an almost insatiable urge to touch the man's leg and make sure he was real.

Peter McVries was 61. Hank Olson was 70. He was with the Major longer than the rest. The Major laughed at something Olson said and clapped him on the back. "I told him to keep a lot of money on short call," Olson said when he

came back. “And he told me to give ’em hell. Said he liked to see someone who was raring to rip. Give ’em hell, boy, he said.”

“Pretty good,” McVries said, and then winked at Garraty. Garraty wondered what McVries had meant, winking like that. Was he making fun of Olson?

The skinny boy in the tree was named Stebbins. He got his number with his head down, not speaking to the Major at all, and then sat back at the base of his tree. Garraty was somehow fascinated with the boy.

Number 100 was a red-headed fellow with a volcanic complexion. His name was Zuck. He got his number and then they all sat and waited for what would come next.

Then three soldiers from the halftrack passed out wide belts with snap pockets. The pockets were filled with tubes of high-energy concentrate pastes. More soldiers came around with canteens. They buckled on the belts and slung the canteens. Olson slung his belt low on his hips like a gunslinger, found a Waifa chocolate bar, and began to eat it. “Not bad,” he said, grinning. He swigged from his canteen, washing down the chocolate, and Garraty wondered if Olson was just fronting, or if he knew something Garraty did not.

The Major looked them over soberly. Garraty’s wristwatch said 8:56—how had it gotten so late? His stomach lurched painfully.

“All right, fellows, line up by tens, please. No particular order. Stay with your friends, if you like.”

Garraty got up. He felt numb and unreal. It was as if his body now belonged to someone else.

“Well here we go,” McVries said at his elbow. “Good luck, everyone.”

“Good luck to you,” Garraty said, surprised.

McVries said: “I need my fucking head examined.” He looked suddenly pale and sweaty, not so awesomely fit as he had earlier. He was trying to smile and not making it. The scar stood out on his cheek like a wild punctuation mark.

Stebbins got up and ambled to the rear of the ten wide, ten deep queue. Olson, Baker, McVries, and Garraty were in the third row. Garraty’s mouth was dry. He wondered if he should drink some water. He decided against it. He had never in his life been so aware of his feet. He wondered if he might freeze and