The blood is still rolling off my flak jacket from the hole in my shoulder and there are bullets cracking into the sand all around me. I keep trying to move my legs but I cannot feel them. I try to breathe but it is difficult, I have to get out of this place, make it out of here somehow.

Someone shouts from my left now, screaming for me to get up. Again and again he screams, but I am trapped in the sand.

Oh get me out of here, get me out of here, please someone help me! Oh help me, please help me. Oh God oh Jesus! “Is there a corpsman?” I cry. “Can you get a corpsman?”

There is a loud crack and I hear the guy begin to sob. “They’ve shot my fucking finger off! Let’s go, sarge! Let’s get outta here!”

“I can’t move,” I gasp. “I can’t move my legs! I can’t feel anything!”

I watch him go running back to the tree line.

“Sarge, are you all right?” Someone else is calling to me now and I try to turn around. Again there is the sudden crack of a bullet and a boy’s voice crying. “Oh Jesus! Oh Jesus Christ!” I hear his body fall in back of me.

I think he must be dead but I feel nothing for him, I just want to live. I feel nothing.

And now I hear another man coming up from behind, trying to save me. “Get outta here!” I scream. “Get the fuck outta here!”

A tall black man with long skinny arms and enormous hands picks me up and throws me over his shoulder as bullets begin cracking over our heads like strings of firecrackers. Again and again they crack as the sky swirls around us like a cyclone. “Motherfuckers motherfuckers!” he screams. And the rounds keep cracking and the sky and the sun on my face and my body all gone, all twisted up dangling like a puppet’s, diving again and again into the sand, up and down, rolling and cursing, gasping for breath. “Goddamn goddamn motherfuckers!”

And finally I am dragged into a hole in the sand with the bottom of my body that can no longer feel, twisted and bent underneath me. The black man runs from the hole without ever saying a thing. I never see his face. I will never know who he is. He is gone. And others now are in the hole helping me. They are bandaging my wounds. There is fear in their faces.

“It’s all right,” I say to them. “Everything is fine.”

Someone has just saved my life. My rifle is gone and I don’t feel like finding it or picking it up ever again. The only thing I can think of, the only thing that crosses my mind, is living. There
seems to be nothing in the world more important than that.

Hundreds of rounds begin to crash in now. I stare up at the sky because I cannot move. Above the hole men are running around in every direction. I see their legs and frightened faces. They are screaming and dragging the wounded past me. Again and again the rounds crash in. They seem to be coming in closer and closer. A tall man jumps in, hugging me to the earth.

“Oh God!” he is crying. “Oh God please help us!”

The attack is lifted. They are carrying me out of the hole now—two, three, four men—quickly they are strapping me to a stretcher. My legs dangle off the sides until they realize I cannot control them. “I can’t move them,” I say, almost in a whisper. “I can’t move them.” I’m still carefully sucking the air, trying to calm myself, trying not to get excited, not to panic. I want to live. I keep telling myself, Take it slow now, as they strap my legs to the stretcher and carry my wounded body into an Amtrak packed with other wounded men. The steel trapdoor of the Amtrak slowly closes as we begin to move to the northern bank and back across the river to the battalion area.

Men are screaming all around me. “Oh God get me out of here!” “Please help!” they scream. Oh Jesus, like little children now, not like marines, not like the posters, not like that day in the high school, this is for real. “Mother!” screams a man without a face. “Oh I don’t want to die!” screams a young boy cupping his intestines with his hands. “Oh please, oh no, oh God, oh help! Mother!” he screams again.

We are moving slowly through the water, the Amtrak rocking back and forth. We cannot be brave anymore, there is no reason. It means nothing now. We hold on to ourselves, to things around us, to memories, to thoughts, to dreams. I breathe slowly, desperately trying to stay awake.

The steel trapdoor is opening. I see faces. Corpsmen, I think. Others, curious, looking in at us. Air, fresh, I feel, I smell. They are carrying me out now. Over wounded bodies, past wounded screams. I’m in a helicopter now lifting above the battalion area. I’m leaving the war. I’m going to live. I am still breathing, I keep thinking over and over, I’m going to live and get out of here.

They are shoving tubes and needles in my arms. Now we are being packed into planes. I begin to believe more and more as I watch the other wounded packed around me on shelves that I am going to live.

I still fight desperately to stay awake. I am in an ambulance now rushing to some place. There is a man without any legs screaming in pain, moaning like a little baby. He is bleeding terribly from the stumps that were once his legs, thrashing his arms wildly about his chest, in a semiconscious daze. It is almost too much for me to watch.

I cannot take much more of this. I must be knocked out soon, before I lose my mind. I’ve seen too much today, I think. But I hold on, sucking the air. I shout then curse for him to be quiet.
“My wound is much worse than yours!” I scream.
“You’re lucky,” I shout, staring him in the eyes.
“I can feel nothing from my chest down. You at least still have part of your legs. Shut up!” I
scream again. “Shut the fuck up, you goddamned baby!” He keeps thrashing his arms wildly above
his head and kicking his bleeding stumps toward the roof of the ambulance.

The journey seems to take a very long time, but soon we are at the place where the wounded
are sent. I feel a tremendous exhilaration inside me. I have made it this far. I have actually made
it this far without giving up and now I am in a hospital where they will operate on me and find
out why I cannot feel anything from my chest down anymore. I know I am going to make it
now. I am going to make it not because of any
god, or any religion, but because I want to make
it, I want to live. And I leave the screaming man
without legs and am brought to a room that is
very bright.

“What’s your name?” the voice shouts.
“Wh-wh-what?” I say.
“What’s your name?” the voice says again.
“No!” says the voice. “I want your name, rank,
and service number. Your date of birth, the name
of your father and mother.”

“Kovic. Sergeant. Two-oh-three-oh-two-six-one,
uh, when are you going to . . .”

“Date of birth!” the voice shouts.
“July fourth, nineteen forty-six. I was born on
the Fourth of July. I can’t feel . . .”

“What religion are you?”
“Catholic,” I say.
“What outfit did you come from?”
“What’s going on? When are you going to op-
erate?” I say.

“The doctors will operate,” he says. “Don’t
worry,” he says confidently. “They are very busy
and there are many wounded but they will take
care of you soon.”

He continues to stand almost at attention in
front of me with a long clipboard in his hand,
notting down all the information he can. I cannot
understand why they are taking so long to operate.
There is something very wrong with me, I think,
and they must operate as quickly as possible. The
man with the clipboard walks out of the room. He
will send the priest in soon.

I lie in the room alone staring at the walls, still
sucking the air, determined to live more than
ever now.

The priest seems to appear suddenly above my
head. With his fingers he is gently touching my
forehead, rubbing it slowly and softly. “How are
you,” he says.

“I’m fine, Father.” His face is very tired but it
is not frightened. He is almost at ease, as if what
he is doing he has done many times before.

“I have come to give you the Last Rites, my
son.”

“I’m ready, Father,” I say.

And he prays, rubbing oils on my face and
placing the crucifix to my lips. “I will pray for
you,” he says.
"When will they operate?" I say to the priest.
"I do not know," he says. "The doctors are very busy. There are many wounded. There is not much time for anything here but trying to live. So you must try to live my son, and I will pray for you."

Soon after that I am taken to a long room where there are many doctors and nurses. They move quickly around me. They are acting very competent. "You will be fine," says one nurse calmly.
"Breathe deeply into the mask," the doctor says.
"Are you going to operate?" I ask.
"Yes. Now breathe deeply into the mask." As the darkness of the mask slowly covers my face I pray with all my being that I will live through this operation and see the light of day once again. I want to live so much. And even before I go to sleep with the blackness still swirling around my head and the numbness of sleep, I begin to fight as I have never fought before in my life.

I awake to the screams of other men around me. I have made it. I think that maybe the wound is my punishment for killing the corporal and the children. That now everything is okay and the score is evened up. And now I am packed in this place with the others who have been wounded like myself, strapped onto a strange circular bed. I feel tubes going into my nose and hear the clanking, pumping sound of a machine. I still cannot feel any of my body but I know I am alive. I feel a terrible pain in my chest. My body is so cold. It has never been this weak. It feels so tired and out of touch, so lost and in pain. I can still barely breathe. I look around me, at people moving in shadows of numbness. There is the man who had been in the ambulance with me, screaming louder than ever, kicking his bloody stumps in the air, crying for his mother, crying for his morphine.

Directly across from me there is a Korean who has not even been in the war at all. The nurse says he was going to buy a newspaper when he stepped on a booby trap and it blew off both his legs and his arm. And all that is left now is this slab of meat swinging one arm crazily in the air, moaning like an animal gasping for its last bit of life, knowing that death is rushing toward him. The Korean is screaming like a madman at the top of his lungs. I cannot wait for the shots of morphine. Oh, the morphine feels so good. It makes everything dark and quiet. I can rest. I can leave this madness. I can dream of my back yard once again.

When I wake they are screaming still and the lights are on and the clock, the clock on the wall, I can hear it ticking to the sound of their screams. I can hear the dead being carted out and the new wounded being brought in to the beds all around me. I have to get out of this place.

"Can I call you by your first name?" I say to the nurse.
"No. My name is Lieutenant Wiecker."
"Please, can I . . . ."
"No," she says. "It's against regulations."
I'm sleeping now. The lights are flashing. The black pilot is next to me. He says nothing. He
stares at the ceiling all day long. He does nothing but that. But something is happening now, something is going wrong over there. The nurse is shouting for the machine, and the corpsman is crawling on the black man’s chest, he has his knees on his chest and he’s pounding it with his fists again and again.

“His heart has stopped!” screams the nurse.

Pounding, pounding, he’s pounding his fist into his chest. “Get the machine!” screams the corpsman.

The nurse is pulling the machine across the hangar floor as quickly as she can now. They are trying to put curtains around the whole thing, but the curtains keep slipping and falling down. Everyone, all the wounded who can still see and think, now watch what is happening to the pilot, and it is happening right next to me. The doctor hands the corpsman a syringe, they are laughing as the corpsman drives the syringe into the pilot’s chest like a knife. They are talking about the Green Bay Packers and the corpsman is driving his fist into the black man’s chest again and again until the black pilot’s body begins to bloat up, until it doesn’t look like a body at all anymore. His face is all puffy like a balloon and saliva rolls slowly from the sides of his mouth. He keeps staring at the ceiling and saying nothing. “The machine! The machine!” screams the doctor, now climbing on top of the bed, taking the corpsman’s place. “Turn on the machine!” screams the doctor.

He grabs a long suction cup that is attached to the machine and places it carefully against the black man’s chest. The black man’s body jumps up from the bed almost arcing into the air from each bolt of electricity, jolting and arcing, bloating up more and more.

“I’ll bet on the Packers,” says the corpsman.

“Green Bay doesn’t have a chance,” the doctor says, laughing.

The nurse is smiling now, making fun of both the doctor and the corpsman. “I don’t understand football,” she says.

They are pulling the sheet over the head of the black man and strapping him onto the gurney. He is taken out of the ward.

The Korean civilian is still screaming and there is a baby now at the end of the ward. The nurse says it has been napalmed by our own jets. I cannot see the baby but it screams all the time like the Korean and the young man without any legs I had met in the ambulance.

I can hear a radio. It is the Armed Forces radio. The corpsman is telling the baby to shut the hell up and there is a young kid with half his head blown away. They have brought him in and put him where the black pilot has just died, right next to me. He has thick bandages wrapped all around his head till I can hardly see his face at all. He is like a vegetable—a nineteen-year-old vegetable, thrashing his arms back and forth, babbling and pissing in his clean white sheets.

“Quit pissin’ in your sheets!” screams the corpsman. But the nineteen-year-old kid who doesn’t have any brains anymore makes the corpsman
very angry. He just keeps pissing in the sheets and crying like a little baby.

There is a Green Beret sergeant calling for his mother. Every night now I hear him. He has spinal meningitis. He will be dead before this evening is over.

The Korean civilian does not moan anymore. He does not wave his one arm and two fingers above his head. He is dead and they have taken him away too.

There is a nun who comes through the ward now with apples for the wounded and rosary beads. She is very pleasant and smiles at all of the wounded. The corpsman is reading a comic-book, still cursing at the baby. The baby is screaming and the Armed Forces radio is saying that troops will be home soon. The kid with the bloody stumps is getting a morphine shot.

There is a general walking down the aisles now, going to each bed. He's marching down the aisles, marching and facing each wounded man in his bed. A skinny private with a Polaroid camera follows directly behind him. The general is dressed in an immaculate uniform with shiny shoes. "Good afternoon, marine," the general says. "In the name of the President of the United States and the United States Marine Corps, I am proud to present you with the Purple Heart, and a picture," the general says. Just then the skinny man with the Polaroid camera jumps up, flashing a picture of the wounded man. "And a picture to send to your folks."

He comes up to my bed and says exactly the same thing he has said to all the rest. The skinny man jumps up, snapping a picture of the general handing the Purple Heart to me. "And here," says the general, "here is a picture to send home to your folks." The general makes a sharp left face. He is marching to the bed next to me where the nineteen-year-old kid is still pissing in his pants, babbling like a little baby.

"In the name of the President of the United States," the general says. The kid is screaming now almost tearing the bandages off his head, exposing the parts of his brain that are still left. ". . . I present you with the Purple Heart. And here," the general says, handing the medal to the nineteen-year-old vegetable, the skinny guy jumping up and snapping a picture, "here is a picture . . .," the general says, looking at the picture the skinny guy has just pulled out of the camera. The kid is still pissing in his white sheets. " . . . And here is a picture to send home. . . ." The general does not finish what he is saying. He stares at the nineteen-year-old for what seems a long time. He hands the picture back to his photographer and as sharply as before marches to the next bed.

"Good afternoon, marine," he says.

The kid is still pissing in his clean white sheets when the general walks out of the room.

I am in this place for seven days and seven nights. I write notes on scraps of paper telling myself over and over that I will make it out of here, that I am going to live. I am squeezing rubber balls with my hands to try to get strong again. I write letters home to Mom and Dad. I dictate
them to a woman named Lucy who is with the USO. I am telling Mom and Dad that I am hurt pretty bad but I have done it for America and that it is worth it. I tell them not to worry. I will be home soon.

The day I am supposed to leave has come. I am strapped in a long frame and taken from the place of the wounded. I am moved from hangar to hangar, then finally put on a plane, and I leave Vietnam forever.
ing next to her trying to smile. They are holding each other's hands.

My legs are shaking in terrible spasms. They're putting thick straps around my waist and around my legs and now my arms start to shake furiously. My mother and sister are still standing in the hallway. They haven't decided to come into the room yet. Jimmy is strapping my arms along the pole and my big oversized blue hospital pants are falling down below my waist. My rear end is sticking out and Jimmy is smiling, looking over to my mother in the corner.

"See," says Jimmy, "he's standing."

I start throwing up all over the place, all over the blue hospital shirt and onto the floor, just below the machine. Jimmy quickly undoes the straps and puts me back in the chair. My sister and my mother are clutching each other, holding real tight to each other's hands.

"It's really a great machine," Jimmy says. "We have a couple more coming in real soon."

I turn the chair toward the window and look out across the Harlem River to where the cars are going over the bridge like ants.
FOR ME IT began in 1946 when I was born on the Fourth of July. The whole sky lit up in a tremendous fireworks display and my mother told me the doctor said I was a real firecracker. Every birthday after that was something the whole country celebrated. It was a proud day to be born on.

I hit a home run my first time at bat in the Massapequa Little League, and I can still remember my Mom and Dad and all the rest of the kids going crazy as I rounded the bases on seven errors and slid into home a hero. We lost the game to the Midgets that night, 22 to 7, and I cried all the way home. It was a long time ago, but sometimes I can still hear them shouting out in front of Pete’s house on Hamilton Avenue. There was Bobby Zimmer, the tall kid from down the street, Kenny and Pete, little Tommy Law, and my best friend Richie Castiglia, who lived across from us on Lee Place.

Baseball was good to me and I played it all I could. I got this baseball mitt when I was seven. I had to save up my allowance for it and cash in some soda bottles. It was a cheap piece of shit, but it seemed pretty nice, I mean it seemed beautiful to me before Bobby and some of the other guys tore the hell out of it.

I remember that I loved baseball more than anything else in the world and my favorite team was the New York Yankees. Every chance I got I watched the games on the TV in my house with Castiglia, waiting for Mickey Mantle to come to the plate. We’d turn up the sound of the television as the crowd went wild roaring like thunder. I’d run over to Richie’s house screaming to his mother to tell Richie that Mantle was at bat.

And Richie would come running over with his mitt making believe we were at Yankee Stadium sitting in our box seats right in back of the Yankee dugout and when Mantle hit a homer you could hear the TV halfway down the block. Richie and I would go completely nuts hugging each other and jumping up and down with tears streaming down our faces. Mantle was our hero. He was like a god to us, a huge golden statue standing in center field. Every time the cameras showed him on the screen I couldn’t take my eyes off him.

Back then the Yankees kept winning like they would never stop. It was hard to remember them ever losing, and when we weren’t watching them on TV or down at the stadium, Kenny Goodman and I were at Parkside Field playing catch-a-fly-you’re-up for hours with a beat-up old baseball we kept together with black electrician’s tape. We
played all day long out there, running across that big open field with all our might, diving and sliding face-first into the grass, making one-handed, spectacular catches. I used to make believe I was Mel Allen, screaming at the top of my lungs, "Did you see that?! Did you see that, folks?! Kovic has just made a tremendous catch and the crowd is going wild! They're jumping up and down all over the stadium! What a catch, ladies and gentlemen, what a tremendous catch by Kovic!" And I did that all afternoon, running back and forth across the gigantic field. I was Mickey Mantle, Willie Mays, and all my heroes, rolled into one.

When we weren't down at the field or watching the Yankees on TV, we were playing whiffle ball and climbing trees checking out birds' nests, going down to Fly Beach in Mrs. Zimmer's old car that honked the horn every time it turned the corner, diving underwater with our masks, kicking with our rubber frog's feet, then running in and out of our sprinklers when we got home, waiting for our turn in the shower. And during the summer nights we were all over the neighborhood, from Bobby's house to Kenny's, throwing gliders, doing handstands and backflips off fences, riding to the woods at the end of the block on our bikes, making rafts, building tree forts, jumping across the streams with tree branches, walking and balancing along the back fence like Houdini, hopping along the slate path all around the back yard seeing how far we could go on one foot.

And I ran wherever I went. Down to the school, to the candy store, to the deli, buying baseball cards and Bazooka bubblegum that had the little fortunes at the bottom of the cartoons.

When the Fourth of July came, there were fireworks going off all over the neighborhood. It was the most exciting time of year for me next to Christmas. Being born on the exact same day as my country I thought was really great. I was so proud. And every Fourth of July, I had a birthday party and all my friends would come over with birthday presents and we'd put on silly hats and blow these horns my Dad brought home from the A&P. We'd eat lots of ice cream and watermelon and I'd open up all the presents and blow out the candles on the big red, white, and blue birthday cake and then we'd all sing "Happy Birthday" and "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy." At night everyone would pile into Bobby's mother's old car and we'd go down to the drive-in, where we'd watch the fireworks display. Before the movie started, we'd all get out and sit up on the roof of the car with our blankets wrapped around us watching the rockets and Roman candles going up and exploding into fountains of rainbow colors, and later after Mrs. Zimmer dropped me off, I'd lie on my bed feeling a little sad that it all had to end so soon. As I closed my eyes I could still hear strings of firecrackers and cherry bombs going off all over the neighborhood.

The whole block grew up watching television. There was Howdy Doody and Rootie Kazootie, Cisco Kid and Gabby Hayes, Roy Rogers and Dale Evans. The Lone Ranger was on Channel 7. We
watched cartoons for hours on Saturdays—Beanie and Cecil, Crusader Rabbit, Woody Woodpecker—and a show with puppets called Kukla, Fran, and Ollie. I sat on the rug in the living room watching Captain Video take off in his spaceship and saw thousands of savages killed by Ramar of the Jungle.

I remember Elvis Presley on the Ed Sullivan Show and my sister Sue going crazy in the living room jumping up and down. He kept twanging this big guitar and wiggling his hips, but for some reason they were mostly showing just the top of him. My mother was sitting on the couch with her hands folded in her lap like she was praying, and my dad was in the other room talking about how the Church had advised us all that Sunday that watching Elvis Presley could lead to sin.

I loved God more than anything else in the world back then and I prayed to Him and the Virgin Mary and Jesus and all the saints to be a good boy and a good American. Every night before I went to sleep I knelt down in front of my bed, making the sign of the cross and cupping my hands over my face, sometimes praying so hard I would cry. I asked every night to be good enough to make the major leagues someday. With God anything was possible. I made my first Holy Communion with a cowboy hat on my head and two six-shooters in my hands.

On Saturday nights, Mrs. Jacket drove us to confession, where we waited in line to tell the priest our sins, then walked out of the church feeling refreshed and happy with God and the world again. And then Dad and I and the rest of the kids went to church on Sundays. The church was a big place. It was the most enormous place I'd ever seen, with real quiet people sitting up straight and mumbling things. And I remember smelling this stuff and seeing the priest moving back and forth behind the altar, speaking in words we never understood.

And the Sunday comics and Dad cooking big breakfasts of hash browns potatoes and eggs, filling our bellies and making us feel warm and good inside. After breakfast I read the colorful comics on the living-room rug. There was Dick Tracy and Beetle Bailey, Dagwood and Blondie, Terry and the Pirates, Prince Valiant and Donald Duck, Dondi and Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, Uncle Scrooge and Gasoline Alley.

My father was a checker at the A&P. He worked real hard. He was like a big hurricane, always moving with his big strong arms, raking the leaves in the backyard or building new parts to our little house. One summer I remember hammering nails on the roof with him and feeling proud to be up there with him doing all that hard work. Sometimes, he'd get angry because all of us weren't working, or cleaning or just acting busy. It seemed important to be moving whenever he was around and acting busy if you didn't have anything to do.

We were always moving, all the kids on the block and me, like there was no tomorrow. We cut up our mothers' broomsticks, hiding the brooms in the basement and taking the sticks out to
Hamilton Avenue for that night’s stickball game, where we’d belt high-bouncing Spalding balls for hours off Kenny’s roof and into little Tommy Law’s hedge. We hit eggballs that used to spin crazily sideways with everyone screaming “Eggball! Eggball!” seeing if the guy who was pitching on one bounce could handle the lopsided pop-up. Whoever hit the ball past the second telephone pole right in back of Kenny’s father’s station wagon, or over Tommy Law’s hedge, made a home run. We played every night in the spring and the summer until it was dark and the only light left on Hamilton Avenue was the street lamp.

We collected Topps baseball cards of our favorite players and traded them and flipped them and scaled them down against the wall at Turner’s Bar.

In the spring we dug up worms and went fishing with Bobby Zimmer. I made a Morse code set with Castiglia, stringing the telegraph wires across the street to his house. We did science experiments with his chemistry set and Bobby and I played red-light-green-light on summer nights when Mom was taking the clothes off the line. And when it got dark my sister Sue and I chased fireflies with glass jars.

In the fall we played touch football in the streets and raked the summer leaves that had turned brown and fallen from the trees. We and our fathers swept them and piled them and packed them into wire baskets by the sides of our houses, burning them and watching the bright embers swirl in the wind. And the trees again stood naked in the back yard like they did every fall and winter and the air became fresh and cold and soon there was ice on the puddles in the streets outside our houses.

We’d all go back to school and for me it was always a frightening experience. I could never understand what was happening there. I remember once they called my mother and told her I had been staring out the window. I tried to listen to them, and sit in the chair behind the desk like they told me to, but I kept looking out that window at the trees and the sky. I couldn’t wait until the last day of school when we all ran out of our classrooms, jumping up and down, throwing our books in the air, singing and shouting “No more pencils, no more books, no more teachers’ dirty looks!” We were free. And another summer vacation began for all of us on the block.

When the first snow came we’d get our sleds out of the basement and belly-whop on sheets of ice out on Lee Place in front of Richie’s house. We had snowball fights and built snow forts and snowmen. Castiglia and I and Bobby Zimmer used to grab the back bumpers of cars and see how far we could slide down the street on our shoes. Kenny and I would hide in Parkside Woods plastering the cars that passed along the boulevard with ice balls, then get Bobby and Pete and the rest of the guys and go down to Suicide Hill, a tremendous steep hill by the woods, frozen like glass, with a tree stump at the bottom you had to swerve around. Me and Bobby would head straight for it, and just before we were about to hit it,
I'd jam the wooden steering bar with my foot, throwing up sparks and ice, just missing the stump by inches. Then both of us would spin off the sled, rolling down the hill on top of each other, around and around, laughing into a huge snowdrift. We made winter gloves out of our father's socks, packing snowballs with them until they became soaked and frozen and our fingers would become numb and we'd have to take them off. I loved when it snowed, and so did all the rest of the guys on the block.

Every Saturday afternoon we'd all go down to the movies in the shopping center and watch gigantic prehistoric birds breathe fire, and war movies with John Wayne and Audie Murphy. Bobbie's mother always packed us a bagful of candy. I'll never forget Audie Murphy in To Hell and Back. At the end he jumps on top of a flaming tank that's just about to explode and grabs the machine gun blasting it into the German lines. He was so brave I had chills running up and down my back, wishing it were me up there. There were gasoline flames roaring around his legs, but he just kept firing that machine gun. It was the greatest movie I ever saw in my life.

Castiglia and I saw The Sands of Iwo Jima together. The Marine Corps hymn was playing in the background as we sat glued to our seats, humming the hymn together and watching Sergeant Stryker, played by John Wayne, charge up the hill and get killed just before he reached the top. And then they showed the men raising the flag on Iwo Jima with the marines' hymn still playing, and Castiglia and I cried in our seats. I loved the song so much, and every time I heard it I would think of John Wayne and the brave men who raised the flag on Iwo Jima that day. I would think of them and cry. Like Mickey Mantle and the fabulous New York Yankees, John Wayne in The Sands of Iwo Jima became one of my heroes.

We'd go home and make up movies like the ones we'd just seen or the ones that were on TV night after night. We'd use our Christmas toys—the Matty Mattel machine guns and grenades, the little green plastic soldiers with guns and flamethrowers in their hands. My favorites were the green plastic men with bazookas. They blasted holes through the enemy. They wiped them out at thirty feet just above the coffee table. They dug in on the front lawn and survived countless artillery attacks. They burned with high-propane lighter fluid and a quarter-gallon of gasoline or were thrown into the raging fires of autumn leaves blasting into a million pieces.

On Saturdays after the movies all the guys would go down to Sally's Woods—Pete and Kenny and Bobbie and me, with plastic battery-operated machine guns, cap pistols, and sticks. We turned the woods into a battlefield. We set ambushes, then led gallant attacks, storming over the top, bayonetting and shooting anyone who got in our way. Then we'd walk out of the woods like the heroes we knew we would become when we were men.

The army had a show on Channel 2 called "The
"Big Picture," and after it was over Castiglia and I crawled all over the back yard playing guns and army, making commando raids all summer into Ackerman's housing project blasting away at the imaginary enemy we had created right before our eyes, throwing dirt bombs and rocks into the windows, making loud explosions like hand grenades with our voices then charging in with our Mattel machine guns blazing. I bandaged up the German who was still alive and had Castiglia question him as I threw a couple more grenades, killing even more Germans. We went on countless missions and patrols together around my back yard, attacking Ackerman's housing project with everything from bazookas to flamethrowers and baseball bats. We studied the Marine Corps Guidebook and Richie brought over some beautiful pamphlets with very sharp-looking marines on the covers. We read them in my basement for hours and just as we dreamed of playing for the Yankees someday, we dreamed of becoming United States Marines and fighting our first war and we made a solemn promise that year that the day we turned seventeen we were both going down to the marine recruiter at the shopping center in Levittown and sign up for the United States Marine Corps.

We joined the cub scouts and marched in parades on Memorial Day. We made contingency plans for the cold war and built fallout shelters out of milk cartons. We wore spacesuits and space helmets. We made rocket ships out of cardboard boxes. And one Saturday afternoon in the base-

ment Castiglia and I went to Mars on the couch we had turned into a rocket ship. We read books about the moon and Wernher von Braun. And the whole block watched a thing called the space race begin. On a cold October night Dad and I watched the first satellite, called Sputnik, moving across the sky above our house like a tiny bright star. I still remember standing out there with Dad looking up in amazement at that thing moving in the sky above Massapequa. It was hard to believe that this thing, this Sputnik, was so high up and moving so fast around the world, again and again. Dad put his hand on my shoulder that night and without saying anything I quietly walked back inside and went to my room thinking that the Russians had beaten America into space and wondering why we couldn't even get a rocket off the pad.

It seemed that whole school year we talked about nothing but rockets and how they would break away into stages and blast their satellites into outer space. I got all the books I could on rockets and outer space and read them for hours in the library, completely fascinated by the drawings and the telescopes and the sky charts. I had an incredible rocket I got for Christmas that you had to pump compressed water into. I pulled back a plastic clip and it would send the thing blasting out across Castiglia's lawn, then out onto Hamilton Avenue in a long arc of spurting water. Castiglia and I used to tape aluminum-foil rolls from Mom's kitchen to the top of the plastic rocket then put ants and worms in the nosecone with a secret
message wrapped in tissue paper. We had hundreds of rocket launchings that year. Though none of our payloads made it into orbit like the Sputniks, we had a lot of fun trying.

In the spring of that year I remember the whole class went down to New York City and saw the movie Around the World in Eighty Days on a tremendous screen that made all of us feel like we were right there in the balloon flying around the world. After the movie we went to the Museum of Natural History, where Castiglia and I walked around staring up at the huge prehistoric dinosaurs billions of years old, and studied fossils inside the big glass cases and wondered what it would have been like if we had been alive back then. After the museum they took us to the Hayden Planetarium, where the whole sixth-grade class leaned back in special sky chairs, looking up into the dome where a projector that looked like a huge mechanical praying mantis kept us glued to the sky above our heads with meteor showers and comets and galaxies that appeared like tremendous snowstorms swirling in the pitch darkness of the incredible dome. They showed the whole beginning of the earth that afternoon, as we sat back in our chairs and dreamed of walking on the moon someday or going off to Mars wondering if there really was life there and rocketing off deeper and deeper into space through all the time barriers into places and dreams we could only begin to imagine. When we got on the school bus afterward and were all seated, Mr. Serby, our sixth-grade teacher, turned around and in a soft voice told us that someday men would walk upon the moon, and probably in our lifetime, he said, we would see it happen.

We were still trying to catch up with the Russians when I heard on the radio that the United States was going to try and launch its first satellite, called Vanguard, into outer space. That night Mom and Dad and me and the rest of the kids watched the long pencil-like rocket on the television screen as it began to lift off after the countdown. It lifted off slowly at first. And then, almost as if in slow motion, it exploded into a tremendous fireball on the launching pad. It had barely gotten off the ground, and I cried that night in my living room. I cried watching Vanguard that night on the evening news with Mom and all the rest. It was a sad day for our country, I thought, it was a sad day for America. We had failed in our first attempt to put a satellite into orbit. I walked slowly back to my room. We were losing, I thought, we were losing the space race, and America wasn't first anymore.

When Vanguard finally made it into space, I was in junior high school, and right in the middle of the class the loudspeaker interrupted us and the principal in a very serious voice told us that something very important was about to happen. He talked about history, and how important the day was, how America was finally going to launch its first satellite and we would remember it for a long time.

There was a long countdown as we all sat on the edge of our seats, tuning our ears in to the
radio. And then the rocket began to lift off the edge of the launching pad. In the background there was the tremendous roar of the rocket engines and a guy was screaming like Mel Allen that the rocket was lifting off. "It's lifting off! It's lifting off!" he kept screaming crazily. All the kids were silent for a few seconds, still straining in their chairs, waiting to see whether the rocket would make it or not, then the whole room broke into cheers and applause. America had done it! We had put our first satellite into space. "We did it! We did it!" the guy was screaming at the top of his lungs.

And now America was finally beginning to catch up with the Russians and each morning before I went to school I was watching "I Led Three Lives" on television about this guy who joins the Communists but is actually working for us. And I remember thinking how brave he was, putting his life on the line for his country, making believe he was a Communist, and all the time being on our side, getting information from them so we could keep the Russians from taking over our government. He seemed like a very serious man, and he had a wife and a kid and he went to secret meetings, calling his friends comrades in a low voice, and talking through newspapers on park benches.

The Communists were all over the place back then. And if they weren't trying to beat us into outer space, Castiglia and I were certain they were infiltrating our schools, trying to take over our classes and control our minds. We were both certain that one of our teachers was a secret Communist agent and in our next secret club meeting we promised to report anything new he said during our next history class. We watched him very carefully that year. One afternoon he told us that China was going to have a billion people someday. "One billion!" he said, tightly clenching his fist. "Do you know what that means?" he said, staring out the classroom window. "Do you know what that's going to mean?" he said in almost a whisper. He never finished what he was saying and after that Castiglia and I were convinced he was definitely a Communist.

About that time I started doing push-ups in my room and squeezing rubber balls until my arms began to ache, trying to make my body stronger and stronger. I was fascinated by the muscle-men ads in the beginnings of the Superman comics, showing how a skinny guy could overnight transform his body into a hulk of fighting steel, and each day I increased the push-ups, more and more determined to build a strong and healthy body. I made muscles in the mirror for hours and checked my biceps each day with a tape measure, and did pull-ups on a bar in the doorway of my room before I went to school each morning. I was a little guy, back then, and used to put notches with a penny on the door of my room, little scratches with the coin to remind myself how tall I was and to see each week whether I'd grown.

"The human body is an amazing thing," the coaches told us that fall when we started high
school. “It is a beautiful remarkable machine that will last you a lifetime if you care for it properly.” And we listened to them, and worked and trained our young bodies until they were strong and quick.

I joined the high-school wrestling team, practicing and working out every day down in the basement of Massapequa High School. The coaches made us do sit-ups, push-ups, and spinning drills until sweat poured from our faces and we were sure we’d pass out. “Wanting to win, and wanting to be first, that’s what’s important,” the coaches told us. “Play fair, but play to win,” they said. They worked us harder and harder until we thought we couldn’t take it anymore and then they would yell and shout for us to keep going and drive past all the physical pain and discomfort. “More! More!” they screamed. “If you want to win, then you’re going to have to work! You’re going to have to drive your bodies far beyond what you think you can do. You’ve got to pay the price for victory! You can always go further than you think you can.”

Wrestling practice ended every day with wind sprints in the basement hallways that left us gasping for air and running into the showers bent over in pain, and I honestly wondered sometimes what I was doing there in the first place and why I was allowing myself to go through all this.

The wrestling coach was very dedicated and held practice every day of the week including Saturdays and Sundays and I can even remember having practice once on Thanksgiving. I came in first in the Christmas wrestling tournament. There’s still a picture of me in one of the old albums in the attic that shows me with two other guys holding a cardboard sign with the word Champion on it. I won most of my matches that year. When I lost, I cried just like when I lost my Little League games and I’d jump on the bus and ride back to Massapequa with tears in my eyes, not talking to anyone for hours sometimes.

I was very shy back then and dreamed of having a girlfriend, or just someone to hold my hand. Even though I was on the wrestling team and had won all those matches and wore my sweater with the big M on it, I still dreamed of the day I could have a girlfriend like all the rest of the guys. I wanted to be hoisted aloft in the arms of other young men like myself and carried off the field for scoring the winning touchdown, or winning the wrestling match that brought the championship to my school.

I wanted to be a hero.

I wanted to be stared at and talked about in the hallways.

“Hey look,” said one of the kids. “There goes Kovic!”

I was the great silent athlete now, who never had to say anything, who walked through the halls of Massapequa High School, sucking the air deeply into my chest and pumping up the blood into my arms.

“There goes Kovic,” a pretty freshman said. “Boy, he sure is cute.” And as I walked through the crowded halls I was sure everyone was notic-
ing me, staring at my varsity letter, and looking at my wrestler’s shoulders.

And it was also during my freshman year that I started to get pimples on my face. I remember coming home from school and seeing what looked like a tremendous blackhead on my forehead. It was right smack-dab in the middle of my forehead and it was just like the things that were all over my sister Sue’s face. The more I looked in the mirror, the more scared I got. Stevie Jacket’s face was covered with the things, he had the worst case of them of anyone I ever knew in my life. In gym I saw him once taking a shower, and his face and neck, all over his arms and back, his whole body was covered with blackheads and whiteheads and thousands of pimples. And now I was catching them, I was getting them just like Stevie Jacket and my sister. There it was, right in front of me in the mirror, a big goddamn blackhead, and after staring at it for almost an hour, I still didn’t know what to do. I remembered this girl in the sixth grade who used to have them all over her face and it looked like somebody hit her with a rake. It was awful and she used to put this disgusting filmy cream on, to try and hide them, but it looked worse.

I looked in the medicine cabinet for the little metal thing that my sister used, with tiny openings on each end that you were supposed to press against the pimples and pop them out of your skin forever. So I pressed it up against the blackhead real hard like I was going to take my head off, until it finally oozed out of the pore like a tiny white dot. I kept popping those things all year, and I finally broke down and bought that filmy crap, and started to put it on my face too.

It was about the same time I started to get these ugly hairs under my lip and up in my armpits. I was getting these things all happening at once, and I couldn’t stop them, no matter how hard I tried, they all kept coming. I put some Nair under my lip one night because one of the guys in boy scout camp had said that if you shaved with a razor it would grow back twice as fast. So I put on this underarm stuff I found in the closet, it was the stuff that was supposed to take the hair off your legs. Well, I put it under my nose and waited about an hour and then I wiped it off, leaving a big red rash. It looked like a huge gigantic red mustache and I went to school the next week using a handkerchief, trying to hide it and making believe I had a real bad cold. Most of the year was like that, with the pimples all over my face, and by the time the spring came all sorts of other difficult things began to happen.

I felt strange feelings in places I had never discovered before. The part of me that had just been there like everything else now began to get hard and excited every time I looked at a pretty girl. I had never felt anything like it before in my life. That thing, my penis, was getting hard, every time I watched the girls on “American Bandstand” or saw them walking down the streets. They’d even be in my dreams at night. I’d wake up in the mornings with the whole sheet soaked. I felt guilty at first. I actually thought I was committing a sin,
dreaming it, thinking it, just watching them. But then one afternoon I crawled on top of a Rawlings basketball in my bedroom and did it for the sheer pleasure of doing it. And it felt good. It felt so good that I did it again after that, and again, and again—with teddy bears in my bed making believe they were Marilyn Monroe, in the bathroom in the bathtub, in the basement laying the side pocket of the pool table seventeen times, in the back yard against trees. I did it everywhere. And no matter how hard I tried I couldn’t stop. It got so bad after a while, I started saying Acts of Contrition after doing it. I asked God to forgive me for feeling this thing and then I couldn’t understand why I’d be asking God to forgive me for doing something that felt so good.

For some reason Mom and I just didn’t get along back then. I was being sent to my room for punishment almost every night after dinner. “Take a bath,” “Clean your room,” “Take out the garbage.” . . . It was always something like that, and after battling it out with Mom in the kitchen and getting hit with the egg turner I’d be back in my room cursing her out under my breath as she’d be shouting, “God’s going to punish you, Ronnie! God’s going to punish you!” Later she’d come in and tell me she was sorry for yelling at me and I’d give her a big hug and tell her I was sorry too for making her so angry.

Mom always wanted me to be the best at whatever I did, especially at school. “If you fail any subjects this year,” she’d tell me, “you’re not going out for any sports.” I kept telling her I was trying to do my best, but the only thing I could think of was baseball and instead of doing my homework every night I read every sports book I could get my hands on. For hours I’d swing the baseball bat in front of the mirror in my room. I still wanted to play for the New York Yankees more than anything else in the world.

I joined the track team in the spring. I wanted to be the greatest pole-vaulter in the history of the school and so I worked out every day until dark on the parallel bars Dad had built the summer before in the back yard. I remember Mom in the kitchen cheering me on, turning on the porch lights so I could work out even more. I loved those bars and when my brother Tommy was home from school, we’d both get on them together. We’d call Mom and Dad out to watch us perform, doing handstands together, back to back, with both of us touching each other’s feet. “The amazing Kovics,” I’d shout to Mom. “Ladies and gentlemen, the amazing Kovics are about to perform their death-defying feats.” I can still remember both of them standing below us with pride in their eyes as we turned and balanced on those bars. I’d swing my body back and forth, back and forth, until I had swept myself into a perfect handstand, my body in a strong beautiful arc above my back yard. I’d look out around me, holding the handstand as long as I could, and swing down, dismounting with a beautiful twist, thumping onto the ground, stinging my bare feet. It was perfect, I’d say to myself, beautiful, just beautiful.
I was a natural athlete, and there wasn’t much of anything I wasn’t able to do with my body back then. I was proud and confident and there was always a tremendous energetic bounce in the way I moved. I knew what it was to walk and run and I loved it. After climbing the ropes in school, I’d go out to the track. I remember the feel of the long, lightweight, fiberglass pole in my hands and the black Permatack beneath my feet; even in the meets I’d jump without shoes. I’d start running from the very end of the long track toward the pit, with the sleek pole gently vibrating up and down in my hands and my face full of determination. I’d hit the hole with the end of my pole, swinging like a pendulum, then kick high into the air, twisting, clearing the bar by inches, falling into the pit on my back, looking at the bar still up there.

As I got older Mom would kid me a lot because I wasn’t interested in girls, but I was still dreaming about them all the time. I thought constantly about Joan Marfe, the girl who’d sat next to me in sixth grade, but I was too shy to ever ask her for a date.

I’d heard a priest at some kind of church conference warn us how a thing called petting could lead to sin. Kissing was all right, the priest said in a serious voice, but petting or heavy petting almost always led to sex, and sex, he said, was a mortal sin. I remember listening to him that day and promising myself and God I’d try never to get too close to a girl. I wanted to do all the things the guys in the study hall whispered about, but I didn’t want to offend God. I never even went to the senior or junior prom. I just wanted to be a great athlete and a good Catholic and maybe even a priest someday or a major leaguer.

In the spring of the year before I graduated I actually wrote a letter to the New York Yankees management telling them I would give anything in the world for a tryout at the stadium. Castigia’s sister Arlene typed it up for me and for weeks I walked around in a daze waiting for an answer, daydreaming about how Dad and Castigia would drop me off at the Long Island Railroad station that day and shake my hand and wish me luck. I’d be looking at them, pounding my fist into my new baseball mitt: “I’m gonna make it. Don’t worry about it, Castig. I’m gonna make it.” Then there’d be the great moment after the tryout when one of the coaches would come up to me: “Well, Kovic, you really looked good out there today. We think you’ve got what it takes.”

It never happened that way. Even though the letter from the Yankees finally came in the mail and I ran over to Castigia’s house shouting that I had made the tryouts, I chickened out when the morning came to leave for the station. I decided I didn’t want to go after all. Richie and Bobby Zinner were all over me for weeks, and I was sorry I’d ever told them anything. I still played after that, but it was different. I was thinking about other things, other things I wanted to be.

By that fall it seemed the guys on the block were almost grown up. In the halls at school we still gave each other the old Woodchuck Club sig-
nal we had started in sixth grade, sticking our hands under our chins, moving our fingers up and down, shouting, “Woodchuck, woodchuck.” It was crazy but it kept us together. And we went from class to class just waiting for each day to end so we could get back home and play touch out on the street after our homework. Still everything was different. Castiglia was still talking about being a priest or joining the marines, but we weren’t seeing as much of each other anymore. Bobby Zimmer told me one afternoon that Richie was growing his hair long and smoking cigarettes with Peter Weber in some abandoned cement tunnel in the woods at the end of the block.

Bobby’s hair was long too. My mother said he had a pompadour just like Elvis Presley’s. Whenever I saw him in the hallways, he had a pretty girl by his side and he was the first one of the guys on the block to get a driver’s license. I was still shy with girls. While I’d be waiting at the bus stop every morning with Kenny and Mike Lamb, Bobby Zimmer would drive past honking the horn of his car with one arm around his girlfriend. He’d turn the corner on Hamilton Avenue, roaring down Broadway to the high school, leaving the rest of us still jumping up and down at the bus stop trying to stay warm. Peter Weber and Castiglia also drove to school every morning or got rides with their new friends.

I remember for a long time Mike and Bobby Zimmer were a lot taller than me and Castiglia. Then all of a sudden I was taller than all three of them. We’d stand back to back over at Kenny’s house as his mother checked to see who was the tallest and it was so good for little guys like me and Castiglia to be taller than the other guys. And when we weren’t trying to see who was the tallest, we’d be out on the lawn still playing tag and wrestling on the grass.

Steve Jacket was still throwing screwdrivers into his front lawn across from Pete’s house on Hamilton Avenue, telling us all he was going to become a TV sports announcer just like Mel Allen, and Pete was still coming over to my house every once in a while after school to steal beer out of my father’s locker in the garage. Little Tommy Law was hanging out with Billy Meyers, trying to stay out of trouble and graduate from high school like the rest of us.

High school was just about over for me and the rest of the guys. We had been on the block together for almost twelve years, running and moving from Toronto Avenue to Lee Place to Hamilton Avenue. No one could remember how we all first got together back then, but we had become friends, “as close as real brothers,” Peter told me one afternoon, and we wanted to believe it would always be that way.

President Kennedy got killed that last year and we played football in the huge snowdrifts that had settled on the Long Island streets that afternoon. We played in silence, I guess because you’re supposed to be silent when someone dies. I truly felt I had lost a dear friend. I was deeply hurt for a long time afterward. We went to the movies that
Sunday. I can't remember what was playing, but how ashamed I was that I was even there, that people could sit through a movie or have the nerve to want to go to football games when our president had been killed in Dallas. The pain stuck with me for a long time after he died. I still remember Oswald being shot and screaming to my mother to come into the living room. It all seemed wild and crazy like some Texas shootout, but it was real for all of us back then, it was very real. I remember Johnson being sworn in on the plane and the fear in the eyes of the woman judge from Texas. And then the funeral and the casket. I guess all of us, the whole country, watched it like a big football game. Down the street the black horses came and his little boy saluting the way he did, the perfect way he did. Soon after he died there was a memorial picture of him that went up in the candy store down the block. At the bottom of it it said he had been born in 1917 and had died in 1963. It stayed up in the candy store on the wall for a long time after we all went to the war.

That spring before I graduated, my father took me down to the shopping center in Levittown and made me get my first job. It was in a supermarket not far from the marine recruiting station. I worked stacking shelves and numbing my fingers and hands unloading cases of frozen food from the trucks. Working with Kenny each day after school, all I could think of, day after day, was joining the marines. My legs and my back ached, but I knew that soon I would be signing the papers and leaving home.

I didn't want to be like my Dad, coming home from the A&P every night. He was a strong man, a good man, but it made him so tired, it took all the energy out of him. I didn't want to be like that, working in that stinking A&P, six days a week, twelve hours a day. I wanted to be somebody. I wanted to make something out of my life.

I was getting older now, I was seventeen, and I looked at myself in the mirror that hung from the back of the door in my room and saw how tall and strong I had suddenly become. I took a deep breath, flexing my muscles, and stared straight into the mirror, turning to the side and looking at myself for a long time.

In the last month of school, the marine recruiters came and spoke to my senior class. They marched, both in perfect step, into the auditorium with their dress blue uniforms and their magnificently shined shoes. It was like all the movies and all the books and all the dreams of becoming a hero come true. I watched them and listened as they stood in front of all the young boys, looking almost like statues and not like real men at all. They spoke in loud voices and one of them was tall and the other was short and very strong looking.

“Good afternoon men,” the tall marine said, “We have come today because they told us that some of you want to become marines.” He told us that the marines took nothing but the best, that
if any of us did not think we were good enough, we should not even think of joining. The tall marine spoke in a very beautiful way about the exciting history of the marines and how they had never lost and America had never been defeated. "The marines have been the first in everything, first to fight and first to uphold the honor of our country. We have served on distant shores and at home, and we have always come when our country has called. There is nothing finer, nothing prouder, than a United States Marine."

When they were finished, they efficiently picked up their papers and marched together down the steps of the stage to where a small crowd of boys began to gather. I couldn't wait to run down after them, meet with them and shake their hands. And as I shook their hands and stared up into their eyes, I couldn't help but feel I was shaking hands with John Wayne and Audie Murphy. They told us that day that the Marine Corps built men—body, mind, and spirit. And that we could serve our country like the young president had asked us to do.

We were all going in different directions and we had our whole lives ahead of us, and a million different dreams. I can still remember the last stickball game. I stood at home plate with the sun in my face and looked out at Richie, Pete, and the rest. It was our last summer together and the last stickball game we ever played on Hamilton Avenue.

One day that summer I quit my job at the food store and went to the little red, white, and blue shack in Levittown. My father and I went down together. It was September by the time all the paperwork was completed, September 1964. I was going to leave on a train one morning and become a marine.

I stayed up most of the night before I left, watching the late movie. Then "The Star-Spangled Banner" played. I remember standing up and feeling very patriotic, chills running up and down my spine. I put my hand over my heart and stood rigid at attention until the screen went blank.