

Dreaming of Africa · *Castle Freeman, Jr.*

A KID CAME WITH LEET to fix my wall, and shunned my own boy, who might have been his friend—not approaching him, not even letting him get closer, finally, than the height of one of our trees, except to pelt him; though Leet's kid, Wayne, wasn't more than a couple of years older than my boy, and in fact is a cousin of his, somewhere, for Leet is some kind of cousin of mine.

He used to chase me around our schoolyard, and when he caught me he'd throw me down, though I was a little older and always taller than he. Later, when we were no longer in school together, you'd have to say Leet and I went into different orbits. Now, it happens, we converge once more, and Anne, knowing Leet for the first time, says that she sees some of him in me, some of me in him. She wouldn't have, then. Leet was a hell-raiser when he was younger. He wasn't bad-tempered, but he fought. He was a fist-fighter, at country fairs, behind taverns, and alongside roads by night. Then he'd drive the back roads drunk, and crash. He has a scar on his forehead and scalp from going through the windshield of one of his cars that went off a curve and landed in a brook down under some dark road. Leet's nickname for a time was Buick, for all the cars he crashed.

Sometime he got married and started having kids whom it looked like he'd never get to know well. But then he calmed down, quite abruptly, as though somebody had taken him off the stove just as he was about to boil over. It wasn't marriage that gentled Leet; it wasn't fatherhood. I don't know what it was.

He became a patriot—not an American patriot, but a patriot of Ambrose, Vermont, his town. Life anyplace else was mean and dangerous, Leet indicated. He had seen something of the country. Before he married, Leet had been in the Navy. He had gone out to wherever they send you; I've forgotten where—somewhere away. He was discharged, came home, stayed. I wonder if at some time it didn't occur to the younger Leet, in New London or Great Lakes or Pensacola, that he could leave Ambrose, if he would, and take up life in any of a million foreign places; and I wonder if this didn't make him uneasy. In any case, Leet became Ambrose's tireless defender. Does someone say something about the condition of the town roads? "There are two hundred miles of roads just in this town," Leet says. "You didn't think it was that many? It's

a little better than two hundred. The road crew is five men and two temporaries. I've worked on the road crew. They don't get paid much. They do a job. The roads here are good.

"I don't need to live anyplace else," Leet says. "Nobody does, if they knew; they've got everything here.

"Of course," Leet says, "it's changed a lot. A lot of new people are coming in." Proclaiming his love for his home, and for his life there, with Leet took the place of hell-raising; and, if he comes sometimes to be a bore with it, well, perhaps it saved his life, from the way he was going before he discovered patriotism.

Leet does some of everything now. He's a builder, mason, helper on any job, car mechanic, logger, cordwood cutter, deer hunter. Getting into his forties, though, Leet's beginning to look a little beat-up. He was never a handsome boy, or man, but he always had a quick, incurious eye. He has that gray eye still, but he used to be full of motion, too, and now he looks as though his movements begin to be painful. Leet finds his joints are stiff in the mornings, these days. The men can start to stiffen up young when they work all day outside, as Leet does. Once they get old and lame to a certain point, though, they get no worse; and they may last forever.

The wall Leet came to fix was a retaining wall, waist-high, of round stones. It held the bank the house sat on; on the bank above it, day lilies. When the snow went out, the middle stretch of wall fell. The stones were tumbled about before the wall. Neddy and I went down to see what we could do. We turned over some of the stones. The smallest were the size of a coconut, the biggest, of a footstool. I couldn't stir the larger ones. I got both hands under one of them, braced my feet near my hands, and bent my weight against the stone. The stone didn't move, its weight was fearful. I wanted to make it move. I sent Neddy for a timber we could use as a lever. He got a two-by-four and shoved it under the stone, put a smaller stone behind the stick. Then together we leaned to it, and I seemed to sense a shift somewhere, but I feared the hammer's stroke beginning in my chest, and I released the stone, turned, and sat on it. Neddy was looking at me. I shook my head. Then my wife called from the house, "John? Call Leet, John"; for I had said, days ago, when we saw the state the wall was in, "Leet does that work."

"Do you think it moved?" I asked Neddy.

"I don't know. No," he said.

"Well, it doesn't matter," I said. "Would you take the two-by-four back?" Neddy took it away.

“John?” Anne called again.

“I’m coming,” I said. From my seat on the stone I looked into the bank where the stones had fallen away. In the darkness behind the wall the pale roots of the lilies hung. I stood, went into the house. I called Leet. He wasn’t home. I talked to his wife.

He came, days after I called, rolling up the driveway too fast, he and his kid bouncing around on the seat of Leet’s truck. Anne was away the day they came, which would be a disappointment to Leet, who admired her; he will be more prompt another time.

The kid with Leet was his son, Wayne. He had a conscript look about him, as though he might not be happy to be along with his father that day. Leet got down from the truck and came over to me, but the kid took his time. He was slow to get out of the truck, and when he did he left the door open. He followed Leet, but at a distance. Leet turned to him: “Get the door,” he said. Wayne went back around the truck. He shut the door, softly. Then he came around and sat on the front of the truck, looking away up the hill, not at us. “Come on,” Leet said. Wayne got up from his seat and started toward us, but Leet didn’t wait for him. The three of us went over to the wall, Wayne staying back behind a little.

We stood around the tumbled stones before the wall.

“She said you’ve got some wall trouble,” said Leet.

“It came right down,” I said. “The ice broke it up.”

“The son of a bitch isn’t founded right,” Leet said. “It’s just sitting on the soil, maybe it is dug in some. Nothing can stop ice unless it’s on ledge.

“It will all have to come down,” Leet said. “I don’t know if we’ll be able to finish it for you today.”

Leet’s boy stood with us, looking at the ground before his feet, the fallen stones. I had a look at him—a darker Leet. He didn’t speak.

“You don’t have to hurry,” I said. “I know you’re both busy,” I said to Leet’s boy.

Wayne’s eyes stayed down. He didn’t answer anything, or look at me, but when he heard me say something to him he raised his eyes from the ground and looked up past the house to the meadow and the woods behind—indifferent eyes that suffered the here and now.

I looked up at the house. Neddy’s face was in the window of his room, above us. I waved to him. “Come on down,” I called. Neddy’s face went away, and I thought he was coming down.

“Are you all by yourself today?” Leet asked.

“Anne’s in Boston. She’ll be back tonight,” I said, for I believed Leet and the others expected my wife to move out on me for good sooner or later, and had expected it since we had come back to Ambrose.

“Why would anybody want to go to Boston?” said Leet.

He was put out at missing Anne. Supposing she hadn’t left permanently, he’d have liked to have seen her today. “Leet fancies you,” I’d told Anne. “I know,” she said. “I wouldn’t think I’d be his type.” “Lust knows no types,” I said. “Doesn’t it?” said Anne. “Goodness,” she said, thinking about Leet and what I had put forward as his comic longing.

Leet wasn’t a man for women, I don’t think. I doubt he’d known many women; I’d say he’s the farthest thing from a seducer. Still, he has eyes, and I know he likes to look, gravely, his eyes, when he looks at Anne, going to her hair. Leet and the other men around Ambrose have the old-fashioned idea that red-haired women are special—less moral than others, I guess, and more fun. And Anne played the part, sure she did. She was easy with Leet, which he also liked in her. His own women were too silent for him. “Hello, Leet, how are you? Keeping out of trouble, Leet?” she would say. “Nope,” Leet said, looking up at Anne from whatever he was doing. “Not me. What about you?”

Neddy came around the house on our left. He jumped from the wall down to where we were. It was a bigger drop than he had expected. He landed hard, and his pale hair fell down over his forehead. He pushed it back on his head, and I saw from the way he did this that his jump off the wall was something he’d wanted the older boy to see. Wayne hadn’t seen it, though, or if he had he gave no sign. He was studying his feet. He looked as though he wished he were with them, down in the grass, out of our attention, or up in the woods back of the house, where he had let his eyes rest a moment before. Wayne wasn’t about to see anything that was right here with us.

Neddy’s knees were bare. He made Wayne look like a man—like Leet, in fact. Wayne, I learned, was a troublesome kid, and, like other troublesome kids his age, he was big. His hands were as big as mine, his wrists, heavier. Neddy looked like a sandpiper beside him. Wayne was going to be bigger than Leet. He was ready to help his father on the wall.

“Best get to it,” Leet said. He went up to the wall, then turned to Neddy. “You watch your feet, now,” he said. Neddy hadn’t expected Leet to speak to him. He didn’t move. “Me?” he said after a moment.

“You,” said Leet, with a laugh. “Mash your foot for you.” He laid

his hand on a stone at the top of the wall and pulled it out. The stone he had moved and two beside it sprang out of the wall and fell down on the ground. I could feel the ground shudder with their weight hitting it.

I went back to the house. Neddy followed me. "Why don't you stay out?" I asked him. "Maybe you could give them some help."

"I don't think they need help," Neddy said.

"There is always something that's a help on a job like that. Go ahead. Ask Leet."

"Could you ask him?" Neddy asked me.

"No," I said. "You go ahead."

Neddy returned to the wall, and I went inside. From the house I could see Leet and Wayne working. I could hear the bumping and cracking of the big stones as they pulled them down out of the wall. Neddy was beside them, by Leet, who was talking to him, but looking at what he was doing, not at Neddy. Wayne was to the side, but he wasn't saying anything. In a moment Neddy went off behind Leet and Wayne, and started hauling at one of the fallen stones that lay at some distance from the others.

Neddy was ten that spring. I wondered what he had made of life so far. He was born in the European clinic in Dar es Salaam. It was a crazy place, a frontier town, really, beside the Indian Ocean—a metropolis of exhausted imperialism. I didn't like it, and Anne didn't like it, but I'm not sure about Neddy. He will have an African dream from time to time today, and they are good dreams, of the trees that grew in front of our garden wall, of white stone buildings. In Dar es Salaam German civilizers had reared churches white as sugar beside the splendid harbor.

When I got sick and we had to leave Africa, we weren't sorry, we said, except for the sake of Neddy's friends. He had a barnyard full of exotic companions. They were all colors, spoke all tongues. I remember Robert and Iffy, who was Lebanese, I think, Hanne, and Jean-Jacques, whom Anne must call J.-J. With Neddy, they raced in and out of the shadows in our small, low house. We had to keep the shutters closed all day against the heat.

I couldn't understand a word any of those children said, and I don't know how well they could have understood each other. Nevertheless, their games together seemed to rest on complex premises and formulas

that they had perfected among themselves, and that none of them hesitated over. I remember Neddy, on the run through the front room, shouting, "*La bombe atomique!*", J.-J. right after him. Neddy's pals in Dar'; he had pals there. Africa will always be to me a child's world. Ambrose is different. In Ambrose there are few kids, and they are in the village, and Neddy doesn't know them.

Anne and Neddy talk together, at his bedtime, so long. "Are you lonely, baby?" "No, Pea," he says. "Have you got enough to do?" I don't know what he does all day, with nobody around. Does he think? "What are you thinking about?" Anne asks Neddy.

He's quiet. He's a quiet kid. I don't know how much help he's going to be to me, in the way I now saw Wayne was helping Leet. They were down behind the wall, out of sight, taking out the lower courses of stones. Wayne would stand and carry a stone out of the way, or, if it was a little one, he'd turn and throw it. He threw them to land off behind where he and Leet were working. Neddy was back there. Several of the stones Wayne threw back landed close to him. When one of Wayne's stones hit near him, Neddy started up expectantly, and would have gone on in whatever game with the stones Wayne wanted the two of them to be in. But Wayne ignored him. He never hailed Neddy, or said anything at all. He was already back at the wall with his father.

Wayne could help his father there, and with any other job, because of his size and strength, and because of an inherited will to competence that Neddy didn't get. Neddy doesn't have that; but he doesn't need it. He has what he needs—a willing heart, and a measure of indulgence from his betters. If Wayne decides he doesn't want to help on jobs anymore, Leet will yell at him until he goes along. If he has to, he'll beat him. I'll never lay a hand on Neddy, I know. When I'm gone and Leet's gone, what will Wayne and Neddy think about us? "He was a tough old guy. He gave me hell." What will Neddy think? What is he thinking now? Is there anything as hidden from us as the minds of our children when they are his age?

"How have you been feeling?" Leet asked me. "Pretty well?" I had brought two bottles of beer down to the wall. Leet and I drank them. Wayne and Neddy weren't around, and I had been about to ask Leet what had become of them when he asked me how I had been.

"I don't know," I said. "The other day, I tried to put some of that

wall back up myself. I couldn't move the stones, the big ones. I don't have the strength anymore, I guess is it."

I had never had Leet's strength—but he said, "Oh, God, I know it," as though I'd been talking about us both, our common decline, instead of just my own.

Leet set his beer bottle down in the grass, and started looking at the wall again, and the fallen stones scattered over the ground before it. He knelt and laid his hand on one of the stones.

"I'd think you'd wear gloves for that work," I said.

"You can't," said Leet, down with the stones. He laid his hand on another of them. "You have to be able to feel them."

"What happened to your help?" I asked.

"You're talking about those kids?" Leet said. "Well, you wouldn't say they were much help, exactly, no. Your boy would help if he could, but he's too small. That other one—" Leet stood up and stepped long, over the stones on the ground to the other side of the area where they lay fallen—"is gone off somewhere."

Leet moved among the fallen stones, he touched them, he shifted them, he looked from them to the wall, but as yet he made no move to replace any stone there.

"I hear he's a chip," I said.

Leet wasn't going to have a conversation with me on the subject of his son. Wayne was twelve. He was the only boy. There were three girls, his sisters, one older and two younger than Wayne. I didn't know them. There were those unknown, good girls, and there was Wayne, the son. He was not an easy boy. He wasn't in school today, because he'd socked his teacher. It was not the wild swinging of a powerless kid, either: he'd knocked her down and broken her nose. The school had kicked Wayne out for the remainder of the year. They had never been able to handle him. Now Wayne was going around with Leet, since Leet's wife couldn't stand to have him in the house with her. Wayne's misbehaving looked like it was getting beyond high spirits. He stole. He ran wild at night and looked in people's windows. In a bigger town he would have come to the attention of the police before now. Once he set a cat on fire. "Why doesn't somebody get some help for him?" Anne had asked.

"Boys are mean," I told her.

"Neddy isn't," she said. "You weren't."

"You don't know I wasn't."

She's right. I wasn't. He isn't. Even Leet, I think, was never as bad as Wayne. What did he think?

Leet stooped over a large stone. He got his hand under the edge of it, then straightened up and rolled the stone into the bottom of the wall. "A chip?" he said. "Well, I don't know. He doesn't get away with anything at home, I can tell you that." Leet was looking at the wall, wiping his hands down the sides of his trousers. "But, hell," he said. "That school. They don't do anything. They send him home. I told them if he hit the teacher she should damned well hit him back."

"I heard she was on the floor," I said.

"She wasn't on the floor," said Leet. But he didn't know.

"What are you going to do?" I asked him.

"Nothing," said Leet. "A couple of more years and he'll be through with school. Then he goes into the Navy, or the Army, I don't care. He'll come back and see just what he's got here, his home, his family, and he'll see how he's wasting it when he ought to thank God for being born here and not somewhere else, and having this place for home.

"It happened to me the same way," said Leet.

I wanted to find Neddy and Wayne. Around the house I saw Neddy sitting under a tree. The tree was an oak with low branches that spread out over the ground. Under the branches Neddy sat. Wayne wasn't with him. Well, then? Why should he be? Wayne wasn't a kid you'd want your own to be thrown in with; but nevertheless I caught myself in the assumption that he and Neddy were marked for partners. Why should they be? Why should I have thought those two were to be allies? No things are more different than different kinds of kids. Wayne is a little older, and he is evidently occupied by a particular desperation, like a man trying to fight his way out of a dream that he feels holding him. Neddy is dreaming, too, but not of escape, and not of Wayne, any more than Wayne is dreaming of him.

I went inside and walked among our rooms. There was no newspaper yet, and nothing else I wanted to read, then, with Leet working outside the house in the sun, Anne in Boston as she said, and the boys off somewhere, not together. I decided to get another bottle of beer for myself, drink not being one of the things I feared. From the kitchen I could see the tree and Neddy beneath it. I watched him from the window. There was nothing I had to do. The doctor in Dar es Salaam, when I went to him with the hammer in my heart and he told me I had to leave Africa—and, later, another doctor in Boston—had said,

“Take it easy. Watch the grass grow. Enjoy life.” When have I not enjoyed life?

Neddy was coming down the stairs behind me. Outside, where he had sat under the tree, he was missing, I now saw. He had left the tree and come indoors before my eyes, and I hadn’t seen him do it. Now he was coming downstairs, his step light, quick. I went to meet him. He was just at the door, on his way out again.

“What are you doing?” I asked him.

“Get my helmet.” He was a little out of breath.

“What do you want that for?”

“He’s up the tree.”

I didn’t understand him. “Be careful if you’re climbing up there,” I said.

“I’m not climbing,” said Neddy. “He won’t let me.”

“Who won’t?”

“Leet’s son.”

“Where’s he?” I asked Neddy.

“In the tree,” he said. “He won’t let me go up.”

“It’s your tree. Do you want me to go out and tell him he has to let you up?”

“No,” Neddy said. “He won’t say anything. Why can’t he talk? Won’t they let him?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“I have to get back,” Neddy said. He went out the door and ran toward the tree. We had an old British Tommy helmet from somewhere that had become Neddy’s. He had it now, carried in his hand as he ran.

I went to the window where I’d watched Neddy before. I wanted to see Wayne. He was in the tree, twenty feet up. I’d missed him earlier. Wayne was standing in the tree, his legs spread wide apart and braced against two branches, his body leaning back against the trunk. The afternoon sun was beginning to get down behind the upper branches of the tree; in his place Wayne was a dark mass gently swaying. He was doing something, but I couldn’t quite tell what—fishing in his pants, it could have been. Below, Neddy stood by the tree’s root, looking up into the branches at Wayne. He was wearing the helmet.

I couldn’t hear that either Neddy or Wayne was speaking. Wayne hadn’t said a word all day. It occurred to me that he might have been forbidden to speak to anyone as punishment for his misbehavior in school. That didn’t sound to me like a measure Leet would take, but

possibly Leet's wife was behind it. She couldn't stand to have Wayne in the house with her, somebody had said. I thought then that I hardly knew Leet's wife. Christine? Helene? Marjorie, her name was.

In the tree, Wayne made a sudden motion with his arm, then another. I saw him. Again Wayne's arm went up, then quickly down. I saw then that he was throwing something down at Neddy. Wayne threw again, the branches he stood on shook with the violence of his throw. Damn him, whatever he had he was throwing it down as hard as he could at Neddy, who still waited below him. I tried to open the window I stood at, but it stuck part of the way up. I stooped to get my face at the opening so I could yell at them. The air of spring came in onto my face, and with it the sound of Neddy's laughter. I didn't call out. I looked again. Neddy was at the foot of the tree, his head bent. "*Missed,*" he called. "*Missed then, too.*" Then came a loud, ringing sound. One of Wayne's rocks, or whatever it was he threw, had hit the steel helmet Neddy wore. "*Hit,*" Neddy called. Above him, Wayne dug in his pocket for another round and looked between his feet at Neddy far below, making ready for another shot.

"*Hit,*" Neddy cried. Regret filled me. That silent kid, Wayne, who was already ordained for a lifetime of trouble and meanness, a kid born to hang, could lord over my own, without having to speak a word; could, both of them children, enjoy himself in abusing one whom time would show to be the more fortunate. Today, in their common home, their common childhood, Wayne had the upper hand, and so he always would, til death did those kids part. Wherever Neddy went, whatever he did, the life of Ambrose would be with him, not centrally, but in its corner; and there Wayne would rule. I could hear him telling Neddy, Hey, look, I'll get on up there and try to hit you, how's that? You have to stay down here. I won't throw them, I'll just drop them. It won't hurt. Come on, boy, can't you see we've got to do something? But, then, Wayne never said it, anymore than he'd said a word to anybody all day.

Here, come on over here I'll tell you something. You don't have to enjoy that kid's abuse or bend your head for him to throw things at for his fun. He doesn't matter, you don't need him. Your life will be easier, happier, more honest, more productive, than his. It's fated, you'll see.

You can't explain that. Even Anne, who can explain anything to Neddy, couldn't tell him how lives, conditions, estates, must differ from the first; how Wayne and Neddy, Leet and I, are joined together through our lives like those wedded celestial bodies that spin around each other,

paired. Neither body can escape the pair, but again neither can approach the other, for the gravity that unites them is matched by flight, which divides. They are fixed through life beyond any effort at overcoming, by the opposed gravity and flight of men's affairs: birth, kinship, place, fortune, and mortality.

I hadn't heard Leet. He must have left the wall and found Wayne and Neddy at the tree. Now he came around the house with a stamping walk, his head stuck forward and pointed up at Wayne in the tree, his arm flinging around in a motion of, Get down here. Neddy turned. "You get down from there, you little bastard," Leet yelled. "What are you doing up there? Get down. Was he throwing stuff at you? You'll get it now, boy, you never learn." Leet stood at the foot of the tree, his hands on his hips, intent on Wayne above him. Neddy waited nearby, but off a little way from Leet. Leet stood. He went on yelling up at Wayne, who held his place for a moment, his legs spread apart among the branches, transfixed there by shafts of sunlight.