Not One of Them

DAVID CRAIG

Steve plowed through the snow, past the college, and up fraternity row, with a flat, square package clutched under one arm. He was a big, blonde boy with a pink face and a wash board wave, which made him look as if he just had come out from under the dryer. He walked briskly with his shoulders back and his stomach pulled in, until he came to the little incline in the sidewalk where he always began to move as if he had lead in his feet. At the top of the incline he would turn right into the red brick fraternity house with the dirty cream pillars.

It was mid-afternoon and he noted that Onnie's jallopy was not yet parked out in front. He assumed an elaborately casual air as he climbed the steps, opened the door softly, and stepped inside, listening as intently as an F. B. I. agent. He heard Blackie's booming voice in the living room singing, "I hate you 'cause your feet's too big." Cautiously he moved toward the door until he could see the singing Serbian with the black crew cut and heavy eyebrows.

Steve laid his campus coat on the radiator but held on to his flat package.

"Where you been, Steve?" Blackie boomed.

"Down town," Steve answered.

"Whatcha got?"

"Records."

"Who are they by?"

"Bizet. Offenbach. Murphy-Davis is selling out at a fourth off."

"Can I hear 'em?"

"You really mean it?"

"Yeah, I mean it."

"I don't want to open them unless you really mean it."

"Yeah. I want to hear 'em."

Steve put Bizet's Carmen Suite on the Vic, sprawled out in a leather arm chair, and lit a cigarette. He rubbed his hand over a two day growth of blonde beard and tried to act relaxed.

Blackie tapped his foot to the opening strains of the Intermezzo and said, "What's that?"

"First part of Bizet," Steve said. "It's got a lot of feeling."

"That's beautiful," Blackie said.

"Yeah. I rather like it. I spent a hell of a long while picking the stuff out for my collection."

"How many records have you got, Steve?"

Steve made a deprecating gesture with his hands. "Oh, I dunno. Forty-five or fifty albums."

"I'd like to hear 'em some time," Blackie said.

"I didn't know you liked this stuff, Blackie."

"Well, I don't know much about it, but I like to hear it all right."

"You're a queer fellow. I saw you reading Hemingway the other day."

"Yeah. I like to read."

"Do you read much?"

"No. I don't have time, but I like to write."

"What do you like to write?"

"Short stories. I've got a lot of them. Would you like to read some of them?"

"Wish I could, but basketball practice takes up a lot of time."

As the Carmen Suite swung into the Toreador, the front door slammed with a shattering crash, and Onnie thundered in with a couple of pals.
“Jesus Christ! Turn that stuff off. Let’s have some good music,” Onnie shouted.

“Aw, cram it. I’ve got the Vic,” said Steve.

“Well, why don’t you play something decent?”

“This is decent. You’re just ignorant.”

“Oh, so I’m ignorant, am I?” mocked Onnie in a high, falsetto voice. He bent his body to a forty degree angle, thrust his impish red head forward, and took a few jitterbug steps.

“Tall, tall, tall skinny Papa. I want a tall, tall, tall skinny Papa,” he sang in competition with the Danse Boheme on the Vic.

Blackie scowled and got up. “Aw, pipe it. You guys are bats. I’m gettin’ out of here,” he complained, as he two-stepped it up the stairs.

Steve listened until the Carmen Suite came to a close, when he packed up the records, grabbed his campus coat, and left the Vic to the jitterbug, who was still crying for a tall, skinny Papa. He put the records in his locker upstairs and went to the dorm where he kicked off his shoes and piled into the lower shelf of a rickety iron double-decker. The dorm was wide open, and he pulled the blankets over his head and dozed.

He was half asleep when he heard a commotion on the stairs. Suddenly his body grew tense under the covers. The dorm door swung open and whammed shut. He pretended to be asleep.

He heard Onnie whisper, “Yeah. He’s here.” Then the covers were ripped off with a great tearing of sheets. A snow ball broke open in his face. He gasped and sat up, wiping melted snow out of his eyes. Before he could pull himself together rough hands grasped him by both arms and legs and dragged him off the bed into the hall.

“What the hell’s going on here?” he cried.

“We’re going to take you for a little snow bath, Steve, old man,” Onnie said.

“Not if I can help it!” With a mighty thrust of his arm Steve sent Onnie spinning half way down the kitchen stairs. Another powerful jerk freed his other ram, and he saw that the fight was five to one. Patchy Page, varsity full back, had hold of his legs.

Steve let out the distress call of his class. “’45! ’45!” But no member of the class of ’45 appeared. He saw Onnie staggering back up the stairs with every pimple on fire.

“Hey! Hold it! Take off my watch, will you?” asked Steve.

“Okay. Okay. Take off his watch, fellows, while I hold his legs,” grinned Patchy. “Better de-pants him, too.”

Onnie dived at Steve and tore his T-shirt from top to tail.

“Take it easy, Onnie,” said Patchy. “You beat it downstairs and open the door. We can handle him.”

A minute later, still struggling, Steve, wearing nothing but his thin, white skin was thrown out the back door in the snow. A circle of boys stood in the back yard armed with snow balls which they let fly. A boy on the roof above dropped another huge snow ball on his head. It shattered and caught in his hair and eye lashes. Red in the face and panting, Steve struggled to his feet, packed a handful of snow and threw it blindly. Everybody laughed as it missed the mark.

Steve thumbed his nose and ran for the back door, but Onnie flew out at him and pushed him back. He slipped and fell flat while the audience roared. Awkwardly he struggled to his feet, his skin wet with perspiration and slippery as a greased pig’s. His broad chest, covered with blonde fuzz was heaving. Thick patches of pale freckles
stood out on his heavy shoulders. With lowered head he glared at Onnie’s slender, muscular body. Suddenly he lunged at him, grabbed him by the belt buckle, and tossed him in the snow. Steve stumbled over him into the house, hurried upstairs to his room, and locked the door.

His roomy, Dick Price, was there, sitting with his feet propped up on the desk.

“What the hell happened to you?” exclaimed Dick.

“Aw, the fellows threw me in the snow. Have you got a towel?”

“Jesus Christ, where did you get that gash on your foot?”

“Must have cut myself,” Steve said, staring at a stream of blood that trickled from his toe. “Got some ale?”

“Sure.”

Steve wrapped an old terry cloth bathrobe around him and fell back in a swivel chair, shaking like a wet dog. Dick brought a bottle of alcohol and a towel from the closet.

“Jeez, that stuff stings.”

“It’s a hell of a cut.”

“I’m sick and tired of this house. I’m moving out,” Steve said.

“I don’t blame you. I’m kind of tired of it myself. Ever since the war, the fellows have gone hog wild,” Dick said.

“First they take me, an active, on a road trip, and then they throw me in the snow. Don’t you think I take more bull than any other guy around this house, or am I just nuts?”

“I’m afraid they’ve got it in for you, Steve.”

“But why? I haven’t done anything.”

“Well, I don’t know. I heard some stuff.”

“What stuff?”

“In the bull sessions you’re always the first one they talk about.”

“What do they say about me?”

“They didn’t like the way you took hell week last year.”

“Christ, I took it just like anybody else.”

“You cussed Jeff out when he made you drink halibut oil.”

“Anybody would cuss who drank a quart of that stuff. What else do they say?”

“Some of the guys don’t like the way you walk.”

“I’ve heard that before. What’s wrong with my walk?”

“They say you hold yourself in a superior sort of way. You come downstairs one step at a time, and the fellows can’t hear you coming.”

“Afraid I’ll hear them talking about me, I guess.”

“They hold it against you because you never had to work. They think you’re spoiled because you never had to fight for anything. You can buy what you want, and you’ve got good clothes.”

“I suspected something about the clothes. I don’t bring much down here any more but this old bathrobe and a coat for dinner . . . to wear when the alums drop in.”

“Another thing is you’re too damn neat.”

“I quit shaving every day a long time ago.”

“They said you had sophomoritis, because you made the pledges clean up your room.”

“Well, hell, I’m an active. I have a right to demand that they keep my room clean. When I was a pledge I painted the showers without being told, and I didn’t get any credit for it. Took me four days.”

“That’s what they mean, Steve. Those guys don’t give a damn whether the showers are clean or not. It’s the sort of thing that makes ’em say you’re just not one of them.”
STERLING LAW BUILDING

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John Herron Art Museum
"I don't know what to do about it. The pledges don't consider me an active, and the actives don't consider me an active."

"I think it's the reason your grades have gone down."

"Yeah. My grades stink. Seems like I just can't settle down and study."

"Well, hell, I'm all for you. The guys in this house don't know a gentleman when they see one."

Someone knocked on the door.

"Yeah?" Dick answered.

There was another knock.

"Who is it?" called Dick impatiently.

There was still another knock.

"Aw, whaddaya want?"

"It's Jeff," said a sirupy voice. "Got my lamp?"

"Well, get it later. I'm busy."

There was a light shuffling in the hall. Somebody snickered.

"Sounds like Onnie," said Steve suspiciously.

"If I had your physique I'd beat the hell outa that damned fool."

"He isn't worth it, and besides I hate to fight," Steve answered. "How about taking a shower with me before dinner?"

"I just took one."

Steve stood up and tightened the belt of his bathrobe around his waist. "Okay," he said. "See you later."

He flung the door wide open and jumped back. Onnie and his click were waiting there for him.

"Get him!" cried Onnie.

Like a flash they were on him in a snickering pack. Onnie jumped at him from the rear and stuffed a snow ball down his back, squashing it as it oozed to his waist. An angry red color flooded Steve's face and neck. Snaky blue veins swelled out from their hiding places on his forehead. His lips drew back over his teeth in a bloodless line.

A little startled the boys fell back. Furiously Steve wheeled on Onnie.

"I've had enough outa you," he snarled.

With his right hand he caught Onnie by the bosom of his shirt, and with his left he crashed into his jaw. Onnie crumpled up on the floor and lay there motionless. Steve stood over him, heaving, with fists clenched so tightly that the bones in his knuckles stretched the skin white. His teeth still gleamed between locked jaws.

Patchy broke the silence. "What the hell is the matter with you, Steve? It's all in fun!"

The blood ebbed from Steve's face leaving it a greenish white. His hands relaxed and his eyes were watery. He saw somebody throw a glass of water in Onnie's face and heard Jeff mutter, "Jeez, he's out like a light."

The president of the house came up and spoke angrily to Steve.

"What did you do that for?" he snapped.

Steve unlocked his jaws with difficulty.

"I — I don't like snow down my back," he said uncertainly.

"Well, that's a hell of an excuse."

"You're a fine sport," said Jeff.

"He asked for it," muttered Steve. He turned abruptly on his heel and walked down the hall to the showers. He hung his bathrobe on a hook and turned on two hot sprays to warm up the room. When it was thick with steam he cooled off the water to a bearable temperature and stepped inside. With shaking hands he lathered himself from head to foot and let the hot water run luxuriously over his body. Then he worked his jaws up and down and massaged the muscles in his arms, while gallons of hot water rushed down his back into the drain. Finally he closed the faucets and rubbed himself slowly with a towel.

The room was getting cold again, and
he hurried into his half wet bathrobe. He heard the gong downstairs calling the boys to dinner, and waited just inside the shower room door listening silently to the din in the hall. He heard the boys pour out of their rooms and call to each other in easy comradeship.

"Come and get it! Let's eat!"

He heard their laughter as they chased each other down the stairs. Dejectedly clutching his clammy bathrobe about him he opened the door quietly and stepped into the hall. Alone in his room he pulled on a fresh T-shirt, corduroy pants and some moccasins. He looked at a saddle stitched cashmere sweater a moment and then pushed the hanger to the back of the closet. Instead he chose a green slipover, frayed at the elbows. He looked in the mirror on the back of the closet door and tried to flatten the ridges in his hair with a comb. Reluctantly he turned to the door and walked down the steps one at a time, still listening to the voices below. He paused outside the dining room and heard the boys talking noisily about last night’s basketball game. Somebody said, “Patchy scored 18 points. He’s good.”

Steve shoved his hands in his pockets and slouched into the room. He noticed that there was no one in Onnie’s place. His own empty chair was between Blackie and Mack Slade. He fixed his eyes steadily on the back of the chair while he walked casually across the room and sat down. He saw a plate of fried meat with cooling gravy and a dish of the inevitable mashed potatoes sitting on the cheap white tablecloth. The boys at his table stopped talking as suddenly as if a Prof had come in. There was an awkward pause in which Steve stood out like a sore thumb.

“What the hell happened to you?” Mack asked.

“heard you had a fight,” Blackie said, grinning.

Steve gulped down a cup of coffee. “Yeah,” he said. “I blew a cylinder head.”

“Whatja do?” Blackie asked.

“Get somebody else to tell you. I don’t feel like talkin’.”

“He knocked Onnie colder than a mackerel for no good reason,” Jeff said.

“Aw well, fights happen in all fraternity houses,” Blackie said.

Steve pushed the mashed potatoes around his plate distastefully.

“Yeah. But I wish it hadn’t happened to me,” he said.