He walked with quick, short steps down the dim hallway. The cane clutched in his left hand sounded time to the soft whisper of his steps. The knuckles of his right hand were white from the pressure of holding an old, leather briefcase.

As he passed a door, he glanced at the number above it, then at his watch. He was five minutes late.

Coming to Room 136, he paused and set his case down. Withdrawing a greyish handkerchief from his back pocket, he daubed at his face as he listened to the sounds coming from the other side of the door. He jerked when he heard a loud crash followed by laughter. Wiping his face one last time, he returned the now sodden handkerchief to his pocket and took a deep breath. It did no good. His heart still beat in his ears.

Retrieving his case and shifting his weight to his right leg, he twisted the door handle and pushed it open. The noise hit him like a slap in the face. For a heartbeat he stood in the doorway, his eyes taking in the whole room in a single glance. Desks were pushed back against the walls; some were overturned. Books and papers littered the floor. In the middle of the floor crouched two boys surrounded by their jeering classmates. One of the two held a knife in his hand; the other had a chair before him.

Someone said, "Cool it," and the knife disappeared as if it had never been there. Then all eyes turned toward him—eyes which seemed to say, "Who the hell are you and what right do you have to come busting in where you don't belong?"

He cleared his throat, then smiled—or at least he tried to smile. His lips felt as if they were made of parchment.

Looking at the boy still holding the chair, he said, "Uh, I think that chair belongs on the floor."

The boy stared back, then sneered, "Izzat so? Well, I'll be damned. Nobody never told me that afore."

The boy casually tossed it to one side, nearly hitting the one who had held the knife.

"Watch it, fool!"
"Who you callin' fool, fool?"

The two faced each other again, but before they could come together he shouted, "That's enough!" then more softly, "Uh, I mean, it's getting late. Time to get to work. How about moving the desks back where they're supposed to be?"

Saying that, he walked toward the large, wooden desk in the left-hand corner, his cane sending low taps throughout the room. Setting his case on the floor beside the desk, he turned to the class and said, "I believe that chair belongs up here. Would one of you mind bringing it here?"

The boy who had been holding it shrugged and said, "It's over there."

For a second their eyes locked. His were the first to drop. Walking to the chair he dragged it behind his desk and set it down. As he did this he heard the class chuckle and he knew he had made a mistake. Mentally shrugging, he stood behind his desk and waited until the students had arranged their desks in a haphazard manner and had taken their seats.

Looking once more into all those eyes staring at him, he got the feeling he
shouldn’t be there, but it was too late now. He licked his lips, glanced at the
door, then looked back at the students before saying, “Good morning. My
name is Mr. Stark. I’m uh, going to be your teacher for the next two weeks
while Mrs. Bradley is away.”

Their faces were blank, but their eyes said, “So what?”

He cleared his throat again, then opened his briefcase and brought out the
instructions Mrs. Bradley had left for him, glanced at them, then said, “Uh,
Mrs. Bradley has left instructions on what she wants us to do in her absence.
There’s quite a lot, so I guess we’d better start.”

He sat and looked at the papers again, then said, “I guess we’d better start
with roll call. Okay, Miss Johnson.”

There was no answer. He placed a check after her name and called the next
name on the list, “Mr. Washington.”

Again there was no answer. Another check on the paper and he called,
“Miss Wilkins.”

He frowned when no one answered. Nor were there any answers for the
last eighteen names. After calling the last one he smiled and asked, “This is
the sophomore English class, isn’t it? Or do I have the wrong room?”

Finally one of the students, the one who had held the knife, said, “Yeah,
man. That must be it. You done got the wrong room. We ain’t even here.”

The rest of the class laughed—a wicked, vicious laugh—and started talking,
“Yeah, man, we ain’t even here.”

“Yeah, you gots the wrong class.”

“And the wrong school.”

He sat quietly for a while, the paper shaking in his hands. He saw the
students laughing at him, not paying attention to him. He felt the sweat
sliding down the middle of his back, sending a shiver down his spine. He felt
his stomach tighten and the bile beginning to rise in his throat.

Then the voices gradually faded until they were just a droning in his ears.
The faces before him blurred until they were a swirl of light and dark, night
and day.

...okay you bums you think this is just a game you think that because they’re
so short they can’t hurt you listen up and maybe half of you will live to go back
home and get some girl pregnant...

“Hey, man, you spacin’ out on us? Like we says, you gots the wrong
school.”

He rubbed his eyes, then peered at the face bending over his desk. When
did he walk up here?

He tried to smile but it came out more a grimace than a smile. Licking his
lips he croaked, “All right, uh, we’ve had our joke for the day. Now it’s time
to get to work.” Glancing at the second sheet of instructions he continued, “Uh,
in your literature book, on page 213, is a short story by Ray Bradbury called
The Veldt. Let’s start there.”

He waited until they finally opened their books and had found the right
page, then asked, “All right, who wants to read first?”

No one answered. He turned to the student closest to him and asked,
“How about you?”

“How about me what?”

“Uh, how about you reading first?”

“Man, you gots to be jokin’.”

Someone in the back of the room piped, “Man you gots to be jokin’! Ole
Leroy can’t read! All he do is look at the pictures.”

He licked his lips again. This wasn’t the way things were supposed to turn
out. They had told him that he would have an easy time of it, and that it would
be a good experience for him. They didn’t say that it would be like this.
He avoided Leroy’s stare and looked at a girl sitting in the front row, just to
the left of him, “Uh, how about you, Miss?”
She snapped the gum she was chewing, then leered, “Are you trying to
proposishun me?”
“Yeah man, you tryin’ ta start somethin’ wi’ muh woman?”
His eyes travelled from the girl’s face to Leroy’s, then back again. He could
feel the blood rushing to his face. He could feel the blood pounding in his
head.
“Uh, all I’m trying to do is...”
One of the boys in the second row had stood and was walking toward him,
“We knows what you is tryin’ ta do, man. You is tryin’ to steal our women. An’
we don’t like that. Do we?”
“Hell no we don’t!”
“What right he got cornlin’ in an’ tryin’ ta steal our women?!”
He stood, his hands clutching the edge of the desk, his face flushed. “All I’m
trying to do is to teach you about literature. I’m not trying to steal anyone’s
girl.”
Leroy joined the other boy and began walking toward his desk, saying,
“What’s the matter? Ain’t they good enough for you?”
“I didn’t say that. I didn’t say anything like that. All I was trying to do was...”
His voice was drowned out by the angry hum of voices as the rest of the
students now stood and began to advance toward him. He started for a
second, thinking that this couldn’t be happening. They were actually
threatening him! And they were so young! What were they trying to prove?
He tried once more, “Look, all of you. I want each of you to take your seats.
Now!”
“F--k you man!”
He shot one last glance at them, then grabbed his cane and started to back
toward the door, saying, “I’m your teacher. And I want you to sit down!”
The knife had appeared again, its blade glistening in the dim light. Another
boy had a sap in one hand, pounding it against his palm. They came nearer.
And nearer.
Finally he broke and ran out the door, his left leg dragging on the floor and
his cane beating on the floor like a machine gun. Behind him the students
were laughing and sending curses after him. “Run muthah f---ah!” and
“Lookit the muthah run! Looks like a crab runnin’.”
Then the voices were lost among the echoes of his cane. The hallway
faded, faded, faded, then turned a deep green and he heard the angry whine
of bullets flying low over his head.
...get down get down hit the dirt you asses where are they they’re all
around m’god im hit im hit medic medic look out they’re behind us get up fire
fire don’t just lay there get up watch out watchoutwatchout watchout
inhitimhit...
“Mr. Stark. Mr. Stark. Are you all right? Mr. Stark.”
He opened his eyes. Bending above him was a face that he recognized, but
he couldn’t place it.
“Mr. Stark, I heard the noise and came to investigate. When I got to your
room all your students told me that you just suddenly jumped up and ran out
of the room for no reason at all. Are you okay?”
“My room?”
“Yes, Mr. Stark. Your room. My God, man! Are you all right?”
He sat up, then looked around. He seemed to be in a closet of some sort.
Looking back at the face hovering above him he asked, "How many of them did they get?"

"What did you say? How many did who get?"

He shook his head. The man didn't understand. Then he looked down. His gun was gone. Someone had taken his rifle! He had to get his rifle back!

"Rifle! What are you talking about? Did one of those hooligans have a rifle with him?"

He shook his head to get rid of the cobwebs. He looked back at the concerned face. He knew who the man was. He was Dr. Adams. The principal. What was he saying? A rifle? There was no rifle.

He smiled and said, "Did I say something about a rifle? I'm sorry. I think you just misunderstood me. I said a trifle."

Dr. Adams looked at him, frowning, then said, "Alright. You said trifle. But what was all that noise about? And why were you hiding on the floor in a broom closet?"

He didn't answer. What could he say? That he had freaked out again and run away. Away from a classroom full of kids.

Dr. Adams looked at him, then said, "Why don't you just take the rest of the day off? Mr. Tompkins can take the rest of your classes today."

Before he could answer, Dr. Adams continued, "No, no arguing. And don't worry. It'll be okay. Everyone has the jitters the first time they face a classroom."

He licked his lips, then asked, "Do, uh, do you still want me to come back tomorrow?"

Dr. Adams nodded his head, then helped him to his feet. Glancing around, he noticed that he had somehow lost his cane. He asked Dr. Adams if he had seen it. He hadn't.

Keeping his weight against the wall, he allowed Dr. Adams to help him into the hall. There it was, about ten feet from the door. Dr. Adams retrieved it for him.

As he limped away, Dr. Adams told him once again to get some rest and not to worry about today. He mumbled something, then trudged toward the door and out into the sunlight.

The next morning he was at his desk a full hour earlier. His eyes were red from lack of sleep and his stomach growled. A slight pounding echoed in his head and his mouth tasted like a stale cigarette.

As he waited for the first student to arrive, he thought about yesterday's fiasco for the hundredth time. Little beads of sweat popped out on his brow but he didn't notice, not even when they trailed down into his eyes. What had he done wrong? What? Was it him? They had told him that it wasn't his fault! They had told him that! He hadn't meant for them to die! It hadn't been his fault! It hadn't!

behind you lookit behind you more of them more get down can't get down got to run got to run snake get over there keep firing keep firing don't just throw your rifle down keep firing or i'll put a bullet through you myself the little bastards are every watch out keep together move back saved back until keep it hit hit medic told you get you out alive some of you half ten kidding more that two more died no not true not true fortyeight dead fifty mygodno...

“Well, well, well. Lookit who's back again."

He looked up into the eyes of Leroy and felt panic take hold of his mind. No! Not this time. I will not! I will not!
He looked beyond Leroy and saw that most of the class had trooped into the room. How had they come in without his knowing? They were looking at him again! With that same kind of look! Can't they understand that he had a job to do! It wasn't his fault! It wasn't!

...sgt stark honored to present medal of honor valor above beyond duty but they died all but two fiftysix kids died medal of honor nononono grab him grab him all right mr stark 'scuse sgt stark not your fault we know medal of honor means nothing nothing all dead but two but two all kids kids kids don't belong marines kids dead medal of honor dead dead dead not fault medal dead jungle vc dead kids medal...

"You gonna space out like you did yest'day?"
The rest of the kids had surrounded his desk. They were all staring at him. Sneering at him. Waiting for him to crack again.

Then they walked to their seats. Turning, he saw Dr. Adams standing in the doorway, frowning.

He looked from Dr. Adams to the kids, then cleared his throat.

"Uh, I believe that today's assignment is still The Veldt. Page 213."

Dr. Adams asked, "Is everything okay?"

He nodded, then said, "Er, I believe so. Yes, I think so."

Dr. Adams turned to the class. "I'm warning you right now. I don't want to hear of any of your tricks today. Got it? Especially you, Leroy! And you, Scat! And you, Thompson!"

The three mumbled something about not doing anything, then were silent. But their eyes weren't. As soon as Dr. Adams turned and left the room, they turned their eyes on him again. And their eyes were talking! How they were talking!

He shivered, then tried to smile. He couldn't. Taking a deep breath, he said, "All right, who wants to read first?"

No one answered. Not again! Not again!

"I said, who wants to read first?"

They jerked with surprise at the authority in his voice. He was surprised at the authority in his voice. Did he say that? Was that his voice?

Leroy, with a troubled look in his eyes, said, "Man, nobody here knows how ta read. Why don'tcha just lay off us?"

The others looked confused too. Why?

Another student, the one who had held the knife yesterday, added, "Yeah, man. Nobody knows nothin' 'bout no reading noway. 'Sides, what's the use of reading 'bout a-a whatever-ya-call-it?"

He looked at the class. They weren't threatening him! Was it because of Dr. Adams? No. Dr. Adams wasn't standing in the door any longer. Were they afraid of Dr. Adams? And his threats?

He smiled, then said, "It's The Veldt. And there are plenty of reasons to read it."

"Name one."

He smiled again. They acted like they were going to listen to him today. "Well, for one thing it's about communication. Or the lack of it. And misplaced love."

One of the students jeered, "Ole Leroy knows about misplaced love. He's gotta have more li'l misplaced Leroy's runnin' 'round than they is weeks in the year."

"Watch your mouth, sucker!"

He stood, clutching the desk, and shouted, "That's enough of that! Now quiet down! All of you!"

Leroy's eyes burned a hole through him, "Man, he bad-mouthed me. Ain't nobody can do that to me!"
"Leroy, I want you to take your seat. Now."

Leroy glared at him, then started to sit, but as he did the one who had mocked him snickered. Leroy jumped to his feet and lunged for the boy. In his haste he banged into another student, causing him to fall from his seat. Then the whole class was into it.

He stood at his desk, not knowing what to do. It was happening again! Again! He wouldn't let it! They were going to listen to him this time! They would! They would!

He shouted, "All of you, back to your seats! Now!"

But no one paid any attention to him.

"I said in your seats!"

Half of the class members were pushing and punching at each other. The rest were standing against the wall, egging them on.

He had to stop them! He had to get them to listen! He'd make them listen! They weren't going to die! Not this time!

He limped around his desk and pushed in between two students. A fist came from out of nowhere and sent him rocking back on his heels. Someone kicked his left leg, sending pain racing through his body. He felt something hot strike his hip and when he looked he saw blood. And a knife glistening.

...all died because wouldn't listen wouldn't listen to me tried to tell them died wouldn't listen wouldn't listen not my fault not my fault died kids fault...

There was silence broken only by a few moans. He looked around and saw that the kids were all staring at him, their mouths open. Leroy lay at his feet, a dazed expression on his face... In the corner lay another student, holding his arm against his chest and rocking back and forth, moaning to himself.

"What in hell is going on in here!"

He turned and saw Dr. Adams standing in the doorway. Before he could say anything, Dr. Adams stormed into the room and repeated, "What the hell is going on! It sounded like World War Three! Mr. Stark, are you all right? There's blood on your shirt! What happened?"

He looked down at his shirt. There was blood on it. And on his arm.

"What are you doing with that knife?"

Knife? Where? He looked around the room, at the kids, but he didn't see any knife. Wait! It was in his hand. How had it gotten there?

He looked back to Dr. Adams.

"I-I. They wouldn't listen! They wouldn't listen to me! It wasn't my fault! They wouldn't listen!"

He stood there, a knife in his right hand and his cane in his left. Voices, screams, cries of terror and anguish tore through his head. Then one long scream. His own.

Thrusting past Dr. Adams, he hobbled through the door and down the hallway. He couldn't let them catch him! He couldn't bear to see their parents' eyes anymore! He couldn't! But he always did. Especially at night. When he slept. Those eyes, all blaming him! But it wasn't his fault! It wasn't! They just hadn't listened to him!

He found himself in a cold, sterile room. There were mirrors on the wall. In each mirror was a face, and they were all staring at him! Blaming him! Why had he lived when so many had died! And all so young! So young! It wasn't right! Not for him to live when they had died!

He backed into a corner and covered his head with his arms as if warding off those eyes. Then the voices started.

"Stark? Where are you?"

"Stark! Come out!"

"Mr. Stark, you need help. Please call out to us."

But he wasn't going to be tricked! He knew they all blamed him. But it
wasn't his fault! It wasn't! He lifted his head and saw the eyes staring at him. Still staring. Why wouldn't they leave him alone? He had said he was sorry, hadn't he? Hadn't he?

He looked down and saw the knife lying on the floor beside him. Its cruel blade mocking him! Mocking him! Just like the eyes. And the voices!

Touching it with a finger, he felt the cold, hard blade. What was on it? Was it blood? Was it the blood of those kids? Was it?

He screamed, "Noooooo!"

Grabbing the knife in his right hand he brought it before his face. Little tiny eyes stared back at him. Even there!

He heard voices! Coming closer, closer, closer. He wouldn't listen to them any more. He couldn't! He couldn't!

Bringing the knife to his chest he counted up four ribs, then paused for a second.

"It wasn't my fault. It wasn't! Please, God, tell them it wasn't my fault."

Then the voices became louder. "Mr. Stark, are you in there? Mr. Stark, are you there?"

Then the voices were no more.