Three

We waited till dark and then took it out behind the house and put it in the center of the bare spot in the yard where the old swing used to be. While me and Sanders was fixing it in the dirt DeWitt kept looking back at the house.

“What if your old lady sees it?” he said. “What do we do then?”

“She ain’t going to see it behind the garage,” Sanders said. He was smoothing the dirt around it so as to make a bed for it. When he figured it was good enough he stood up and me and DeWitt followed him back to the corner of the garage. DeWitt kept looking back at the house.

“Who’s going to light it?” he said.

“You are,” Sanders said.

“Not me.”

“You watched us making it, didn't you?”

“So? So what?”

“So you're going to light it.”

DeWitt just stood there.

“I ain't going to do it,” he said.

“Then go on home,” Sanders said.

“I ain’t going home.”

“You want to see if you're going home?”

“Your old lady's going to see it. If she don't see it she'll hear it sure as hell.”

“She ain’t going to hear nothing,” Sanders said. “She’s watching television. Now are you going to light it or are you going home?”
“Look here DeWitt,” I said. “There ain't nothing hard about it. All you got to do is light it and run.”

“Then why don't you do it?”

“Because it ain't his turn,” Sanders said.

“Well it ain't mine either.”

“Here,” Sanders said to me. “Give me the matches.”

I got out the matches and gave them to him.

“So long DeWitt.”

DeWitt just stood there.

“So long DeWitt,” Sanders said.

“How's come I always get the shit's end of the stick?” He had his hands in his pockets and was looking down at the ground, moving his foot around in the grass. Sanders was just about ready to do something when he finally looked up and reached out his hand. “Here, give me the matches,” he said.

Sanders gave him the matches and then me and him waited by the corner of the garage while DeWitt went up to it.

“Go on,” I said. “It ain't going to do nothing till you light it.”

DeWitt squatted down beside it and struck a match and his face came into view. He held the match to it at full arm's length, with his head pulled back from it as far as he could get it.

“Come on, come on,” Sanders said.

The match went out and DeWitt struck another one and his face came back into view.

“It won't light,” he said.

“It'll light if you hold the match down to it,” Sanders said.

DeWitt struck another match and re-situated his squat beside it, and held the match down closer to it, the flame jiggling a little just above where his hand was. He held it like that for quite awhile, until
the flame of the match got so low that I figured it must be burning his fingers, and then all of a sudden he yelled “it's lit!” and he jumped up and came running back down the yard to us and almost slipped on the wet grass when he got to the corner of the garage.

“I lit it on the good end,” he said, breathing hard from the run. “It should go all right.”

We all stood there and watched it for awhile, and pretty soon a tiny bubble of flame came up on the end of the paper and twisted and dipped around it, trying to sit.

“That should catch it,” Sanders said. “With that paper it'll take awhile.”

The flame fluttered and dipped around on the edge of the paper, and then gradually it started to droop, getting smaller and smaller the more it tried to stay on top, and then finally it went down behind the edge somewhere and we couldn't see it any more.

“It’s out,” Sanders said. “You’ll have to light it again.”

“It ain't out,” DeWitt said. “Lookie there.”

There was still a faint glow on the edge of the paper where the flame was, but it didn’t look like it was going to last. We all stood there and watched it while the glowing got fainter and fainter, eating slowly away at the edge of the paper as it went, but then finally it faded too and we couldn't see anything any more.

“It’s out,” Sanders said. “You'll have to light it again.”

“Hell,” DeWitt said, going back up to it. He squatted down beside it the same way as before, reaching at it, with his head pulled back as far as he could get it—like it smelled or something—and still be able to see what he was doing.

“Make sure it’s lit this time,” I said.
“It's lit!” he yelled, and he jumped up and came running back to the corner of the garage, breathing hard and laughing.

“Oh, that sucker's going to blow this time,” he said, laughing and coughing, blowing into his hands. He rubbed them together.

“Watch it now.”

“I don't see nothing,” Sanders said.

“It's on the other side there. Lookit!”

A flame came up and waved minutely on the edge of the paper, and then it went down again.

“It'll go,” DeWitt said. “Give her time.”

We all stood there, looking at where the flame was, but nothing happened.

“It's out,” Sanders said.

“It ain't out,” said DeWitt.

We all stood there and watched it awhile longer, but there was nothing, not even a glow.

“It's out,” Sanders said. “You'll have to light it again.”

“Hell with it,” DeWitt said. “I ain’t going out there no more.”

“You didn't light it right,” Sanders said.

“The hell with it,” said DeWitt. “I just ain’t going out there no more. It’s dangerous. What we need’s a better fuse for it. Hell—”

There was a hard rushing hiss and a glare of light and then thick white swirling clouds of smoke that you could plainly see even in the darkness rose up like a great ballooning sheet past the top of the garage and past the tops of the poplar trees that lined the back of the lot.

The smoke hung over the dark yard for a long time. It looked like fog, pale and thin in the darkness, not seeming to move at all. Then
finally it receded, dissolved into the damp night air, and then you could begin to pick up the thick, sweet, acrid smell of the gunpowder.

Sanders and DeWitt were laughing. Sanders was up against the back of the garage trying to keep his laughing down, and DeWitt was crouched in the grass laughing and holding his stomach and saying, “Jesus Christ, Oh Jesus Christ,” over and over again to himself.

What was left of the paper burned quietly, tossing shadows, dancing fingers, over the bare spot of ground where the old swing used to be.

“Say,” I said. “That was all right.”

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We was all out on the back porch before noon. Besides me and DeWitt, there was Sanders’ older brother Nate, Tom and Jimmy LaFever, Bill Schenefeldt, Frank Klima, and a new kid by the name of Howie McClellen who DeWitt brought over.

We was all just sitting around on the porch when Sanders came out the back door carrying the rocket. He didn't say anything to us, he just stepped off the porch and we all got up and followed him out to the back yard and watched while he set the tripod down in the middle of the bare spot and fitted the rocket into it. The tripod was my idea. It was one Sanders used down in his lab to heat things on, and it was a perfect fit for the rocket: it sat straight up in it, with its bottom fins resting on the ring.

While Sanders was getting it ready everybody kept milling around it, whispering to each other about it. They'd never seen anything like it. There used to be a kid over in Bresson named Ducker Fairburn who built himself a rocket one time and got his picture in the paper for it, but it wasn't the same as Sanders', because everybody knew it was really Fairburn's old man, who worked out at Kress Electric, who did
all the work on it; Sanders did all his himself. He spent over three months on it, working every night down in his lab in the basement instead of doing his school work; but it was worth it. I figured it was worth it all right. Seeing it sitting there in the sun straight up in its tripod, pointing toward the moon like that, with all them kids milling around it, never seeing anything like it before, talking to themselves in whispers about it—I didn’t have no choice but to figure it was worth it all right.

Before we all took our positions Sanders’ older brother Nate went in and got a camera. He said he had to get some pictures of it for time immemorial. He took some of the rocket by itself, sitting up in the tripod, and then he took some of Sanders alone with it, with Sanders kneeling down beside it with his hand behind it like he was holding it up; then Nate took some of us altogether with it, with all of us standing around in a semicircle behind it, and with Sanders kneeling down in the grass in front of us with his hand on the side of it. While Nate was taking one of us altogether, I noticed that Mrs. Sanders was looking out from one of the upstairs windows. I mentioned it to Nate and he stopped in the middle of taking the picture and waved up at her.

Then we all took our positions. Nate and the two LaFevers went over and stood on the edge of my yard, and the rest of us grouped up about fifty feet on either side of the rocket, with me and Klima and Schenefeldt going on one side of it, and DeWitt and that McClellen kid going on the other.

Sanders got ready to light it: I could tell by the way he moved up to it that he was a little on edge about all those people being there, especially about that McClellen kid. I don't know why DeWitt ever brought him over. As far as I knew he was never real good friends with
him. Unless it was about them cigars. That was it: he brought him over because it was him who had the cigars.

“If it goes in the trees be sure and see where it hits,” Sanders said.

“I'm watching,” Nate said. He was standing on the edge of my yard, and the two LaFevers was behind him, sitting down in the grass with their backs up against the trunk of the crabapple tree.

Sanders moved up behind the rocket and bent down and lit it, and then he straightened up again, slow and smooth without breaking his movements, and backed away. The fuse caught right off and burned up, slow and bright.

“Oh, that sucker's going to blow like hell,” DeWitt said. He was sitting down in the grass on the other side of the rocket from us, with his back up against the fence. That McClellen kid was sitting right next to him, just like he was, with his back up against the fence.

“Watch out in case it veers off to the side,” Sanders said.

The fuse started smoking a little, burning brighter as it rose.

“It ain't going to come over here, is it?” Schenefeldt asked me.

“I don't think so,” I said.

The fuse burned on up, throwing off bright sparks and thin whiffs of blue smoke as it climbed. Just before it dissolved into the bottom of the rocket you could hear a faint hissing sound, and the sparks got much brighter. And then, for an instant after the fuse was gone, nothing happened.

“Is it still lit?” Nate shouted.

There was a hissing noise, and smoke started coming out of the bottom of the rocket in thick, white strings. Suddenly the hissing got much louder, and then bright sparks and smoke started pouring out of the bottom of the rocket, and through the rising billows of white
smoke I could see that the rocket was starting to wobble in the tripod. For a minute I caught a glimpse of the flame, clearish and wavering inside the smoke and the continuous hissing, like it was hanging out of the bottom of the rocket from an invisible wire. 'It's burning itself out,' I said to myself. 'It's just going to sit there and burn.'

And then it was gone, in a quick, smooth, sucking sound, like when you let something go up one of those air tubes they have in department stores, and when I looked up it was a good ways above the telephone wires and already on its way down. It came down and hit and bounced in the grass just in front of the bare spot, not ten feet from where it took off.

“Did you see that!” Nate shouted. Him and the two LaFevers was running across the yards towards us.

“Man,” Klima said.

“Man,” Schenefeldt said.

The rocket was laying in the grass, still smoking. DeWitt and Sanders was standing over it, and DeWitt was laughing and slapping Sanders on the back.

“Did you see that!” Nate shouted, laughing and breathing heavy from the run.

“I thought it was going to blow up,” Jimmy LaPever said.

“Don’t touch it,” Sanders said. “It’ll burn hell out of you.”

“Let me get the camera,” Nate said.

“How far up did it go?” asked DeWitt.

“It was above the wires,” I said.

“I thought it was going to blow up,” Jimmy LaPever said. “I was covering my head like this…”

Nate came back across the yards with the camera.
“Let me get a picture of it,” he said, motioning for us to stand back from it.

“Hell, it was higher than that,” DeWitt said.

“I said it was above the wires.”

“Look at that thing,” Sanders said. He was turning it over with a stick. It was black around the bottom edges where the flame was, and on its side, about halfway up, there was a black, jagged hole.

“How far up did it go?” DeWitt asked. “Did you see it Howie?”

“Get back from it now,” Nate said. He had the camera ready.

“Did you see it Nate?” I asked.

“Get around it: Henry, you get beside it there, and the rest of you guys group up behind him.”

“Come on Howie,” DeWitt said.

“Naa…”

“Come on, man.”

McClellen got up slowly from the fence and came over with the rest of us, walking heavily, like his legs were asleep. Then Nate took some pictures. He took some of us altogether and some of Sanders alone with it, and then he took some close-ups of the rocket by itself, just as it lay in the grass in the attitude of coming down.

“I seen it,” Tom LaFever said, after we was done with the pictures. “It was above the wires.”

“Did you see it Nate?” I asked.

“That's thirty feet,” DeWitt said.

“That's more than fifty feet,” Nate said, winding the camera.

Sanders was kneeling down beside the rocket, turning it over with his hand now.

“Man,” he said. “Look at that thing.”
“You got them cigars Howie?” DeWitt asked.
“I got three.”
“Well, come on then. Hen, you bring the rocket. Let's go in and have a smoke.”

Nate went on in the house and the rest of us went in the garage. Sanders had a place fixed up in the back where he'd made sort of a room out of one of the corners by hanging big pieces of canvas over the two open sides. Inside there was a pot-belly stove that he used to heat metal in, a red rocking chair with arms and a high back, a bench, an old clothes trunk, and in the back wall a window that looked out to the yard.

After we all got in DeWitt moved the rocking chair around for Sanders to sit in, and then he motioned to McClellen for the cigars.
“How's come you only got three?”
“It's all I could get,” McClellen said.

Sanders stood the rocket in the corner and moved the chair over and sat down beside it. DeWitt came over and handed him a cigar.
“Let Henry light up first,” he said. “Then we'll all pass them around.”

DeWitt struck a match and held it to Sanders' cigar while Sanders puffed, flaring the flame on the end. Sanders sat back in the chair, puffing on the cigar and looking over at the rocket in the corner.

DeWitt came back and sat down on the floor with his back up against the stove and lit up. Then McClellen lit up his. DeWitt puffed, looking up at the ceiling, stretching his neck, the smoke from his cigar rising around him in big, slow billows.

“Yessiree Hen,” he said finally, holding the cigar in his teeth and laughing around it. “Someday you'll be showing them pictures to your grandkids.”
But Sanders didn't say anything. I don't think he even heard him. He just sat there in the chair, puffing on his cigar and looking over at the rocket that was standing up in the corner.

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He must have been coming around the corner of the garage just when Sanders threw it, because right after it blew and before the smoke had time to clear we heard a “hey!” and turned around and there he was heading down the driveway towards us.

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” Sanders said.

DeWitt picked up a shred of tin foil that was laying in the driveway.

“What've you been making here?”

“Nothing,” Sanders said. “Just something my old man gave me.”

“It's just something we made today,” I said. “Sanders’ old man just brought him the stuff for it.”

“Like hell,” DeWitt said, turning the burnt end of the foil over in his fingers. “Your old man wouldn't be giving you this stuff.”

“He didn't,” Sanders said, and then he smiled. “Watch this:”

He took another one out of his pocket and threw it down hard against the driveway. It made a good BOOM! and a nice cloud of blue smoke came up and we all stood there and watched it while it lifted intact down the driveway and out into the street.

“It's a torpedo,” Sanders said. “You don’t need a fuse or nothing for it. All you got to do is throw it. I made it myself.”
But I think DeWitt knew all right. Sanders didn't have to tell him. I think he knew as soon as he walked down the driveway that me and Sanders had been making them torpedoes for a long time without letting him in on it.

That's why he came over the next night again with that flash bomb of his.

“Something I made,” he said, coming in the garage.

It was just an ordinary flash bomb, like the ones we quit making a long time ago, but the way he was acting with it you’d have thought he just invented it.

“What are you going to do with it?” I said.

“Set it off. What do you think?”

Sanders had told him a while back what chemicals to use if he ever wanted to make one turn different colors, and I guess DeWitt did that—but otherwise, the only thing different about it was the way he had it fixed: he had it tied to a stick with a hole drilled through the center of it, and he figured that by stringing it up between two of the big beams in the back of the garage he could get it to spin.

Me and Sanders went along with him on it. We sat down on the bench and watched him while he got it ready, doing the best we could to go along with him on it. I guess we actually felt kind of bad about him discovering the torpedoes that way.

He ended up having to string it between the damper on the stove pipe and one of the nails in the back wall—the length of wire he brought with him wouldn't fit between the beams.

It looked stupid when he got done with it, like a piece of rag hanging from a clothes line.

DeWitt stepped back from it, so as to look at it from a distance. Then he went back up to it again and tried spinning it around
a couple of times with his finger, making sure it would spin all right. You could tell he really thought it was something.

“You don't have to light both ends,” Sanders told him, after it looked like he was done with the trial spins.

“Yes you do. You need something pushing on both ends of it.”

“Try it with one and see,” I said. “That way if it works it won't burn up so fast.”

“Yeah, and if it don't then I'll have to make another one.”

“Go ahead and light one end of it,” Sanders said. “It should spin all right.”

So DeWitt lit just one end of it and stepped back, and me and Sanders stood up and we all watched it. It started smoking and fizzing a little, sending off thin, fraying strings of smoke as it burned, but it didn't look like it was going to spin.

“Here, give me the matches,” I said.

I went around behind it and crouched down and struck a match and held it up to the unlighted end. It looked like the other end had quit fizzing, so I struck another match and held it around, and then it blew, flashing up yellow, and I heard DeWitt laugh and then there was nothing but the smoke and the yellow flash in my eyes and I couldn't feel anything.

Then I was outside, running—hurrying across the yards in the darkness, holding my arm against my front and knowing and not believing it really happened like in a dream and I'd been lifted outside myself and could see myself as I ran and I knew it hadn't really happened and that soon I'd be let back down again and everything would be like it was before, and then I saw it was a mistake to think that way, and when I reached the edge of my driveway I could begin to
feel my arm again and was very afraid: it was like the whole underside of it was moving—like gills—trying to breathe.

And I quit after that. There was no more fooling with bombs and chemicals for me. I figured I was doing good getting out with what I got: a fried arm.

Not that it wasn't nothing, though. It was bad enough. Bad enough to go to the hospital for, and bad enough so I had to keep going back and forth to the doctor to have him look at it and everything, and change the bandage.

They put a big one on at the hospital. It went all around my fist and down my arm more than halfway to my elbow, and by the time they was done with wrapping all the gauze around it looked like I was wearing a big white boxing glove with a long sleeve.

The kids at school got a bang out of it. The first day I walked in with it they all came up and crowded around me wanting to know what happened and how it happened and all that, and even the teacher herself was interested. In fact, after the bell rang and everybody got in their seats, she had me get up in front of the room and tell the whole class all about it. It wasn't bad, actually, standing up there in front of the whole room telling everybody all about it, with all of them sitting there in their seats listening real close to everything I had to say—it wasn't bad at all. My arm didn't hurt me at all any more, and after I got to thinking about it, what with the whole school it seemed like taking an interest in it (it got so that the whole day I couldn't even walk between my classes without somebody coming up and asking me about it) I started to figure that maybe the whole thing might have been worth it after all.
All I really got was a scar out of it. A light, tan, color scar (a surface scar, the doctor called it) that ran along the top of my thumb and down under my wrist a couple of inches: the doctor said it would go away, eventually. It did too. After awhile it just faded right into the skin. You never could have told there was anything there.

And I quit after that. Like I said: there was no more fooling with bombs and chemicals for me. I promised my parents I'd quit and I quit. I figured my luck was out.

Sanders and DeWitt kept on with it, though. They didn't quit till after Sanders' accident. He'd been down in his basement making some new kinds of torpedoes when one of them blew up on him. It happened on a Saturday afternoon while I was away at my music lesson, and my mother said afterwards it was a good thing too because otherwise I would have been right down there with him. I wouldn't have though. I might have been down there, but I wouldn't have been anywhere near close enough for anything to happen.

When I got home from the lesson Sanders' older sister Susan was standing out in front of their house with Mrs. Redding, an old neighbor lady who lived on the other side of them. Susan was still crying pretty bad by the time I got there. All she kept saying, over and over again, was Hen was hurt, Hen was hurt, and then something about Bill Holbrook being there and just then taking off to try and find Nate. Finally Mrs. Redding got her to go on back in the house with her, and then I went around back and sat down on the porch.

Holbrook must have found him all right, because I wasn't sitting there more than a minute or two when I heard Nate turn in and come roaring up the driveway to the back and he had Hack Willard with him. They both got out of the car and walked by me there on the
John Shields

porch without saying anything or even looking at me and went on in the house and shut the door. A minute or two later I could hear their heavy footsteps going down the stairs to the basement.

Susan had said something about all them being upstairs when they heard the explosion. She said something about a piece of copper tubing too. I wonder how she knew about that? That was what he was making the new ones out of: long pieces of copper tubing that Nate stole him from work. He’d cut down the long pieces to about six or eight inches and then flatten one end and then pour in the powder and then shake down the powder real good but gentle and then flatten shut the other end. They’d be a lot better than the 30.06 shell casings he’d been using: bigger—they’d be a lot bigger: a new dimension he said over them and the wads of tin foil he started out using. That was his word: ‘dimension’: a New Dimension. The only thing was, though, you had to be careful shaking down the powder: you had to make sure there wasn’t none left near the end where you flattened it with the hammer.

Nate came out on the porch again. He had with him a folded sheet of newspaper, holding it out level. He stopped for a minute and looked over at me, like it was the first time he noticed I was there.

“Want to see something?” he said, smiling, but not smiling really.

“What?”

He started to come over and show me what he had on the newspaper.

“I don’t want to see it,” I said.

He looked at me close, and then smiled again—that same thin, tight smile of his that wasn't really a smile at all—and then he stepped off the porch and went over and put the newspaper in the garbage can. Pretty soon Hack Willard came out the back door again, wiping his
mouth with a handkerchief, and then both of them got in the car and took off. I guess they was going to the hospital.

Me and DeWitt went up to see him a couple of days later. My mother said she thought it would be nice if I took him up something, so I bought him a book I thought he'd like called *Prehistoric Mammals of the Earth*. At first I didn't think too much of the idea of getting him a present. I don’t know, I just felt sort of funny about it. But after I saw that DeWitt had one for him too, I was glad I did. DeWitt’s was one of those miniature chess-checker boards that have their own leather case and everything, and holes in the middle of the squares and small colored pegs for men.

Going up the back stairs of the hospital DeWitt slipped and cracked his shin on the corner of one of the steps, and he yelled out a “Oweeee, Goddamn!” so loud that I thought everybody in the building would be down there, and when he fell he let loose of his present for Sanders and it rolled all the way down the steps to the next landing and when it hit you could hear the pegs inside of it rattle.

DeWitt picked himself up, swearing and rubbing his shin, went back down and got the present, and then me and him went on up to Sanders' floor. Sanders’ room number was 427. DeWitt had it written on a piece of paper his old lady gave him. It was around the first corner as you came out the stairway, and then down the hall about halfway, on the left hand side.

There seemed to be a lot of people around. Nurses mainly, and a few old guys in their bathrobes, walking up and down the hall. Most of the doors to the rooms were open. Inside you could see people standing around the beds, looking out at us sometimes when we walked by, and in a lot of the rooms, sitting on a stand up above the beds, there
was a television on. The whole place smelled like medicine, but after
you was there awhile you didn't notice it as much.

Sanders' mother was there in the room when we came in. Sanders himself looked pretty good. They had his bed wound up so he
could lay there and talk to us all right without having to strain his neck
looking at us. There was another sick guy in the room with him, but
they had a curtain pulled around his bed so we couldn't see him. He
must have had company too, though, because all the while we was
there we could hear voices coming from the other side of the curtain.

Me and DeWitt didn’t stay too long. Just long enough to give
him the presents and talk for awhile, and ask him how long he thought
it would be before he’d be able to come home again. It didn't seem to
bother him too much to talk about it. In fact, he seemed in pretty good
spirits. One time he even said he felt pretty good about it. He said to his
mother that he thought he could feel more inside the bandage than he
could the day before. She didn't say nothing though. She just sort of
looked away, and tried to change the subject. They had him on the
operating table more than three hours. I guess it wasn't till a day or so
after we visited him—when the doctor came in to change the bandage
for the first time—that he saw for sure how many fingers he lost.

He was in the hospital twenty-one days. By the time he got
home Nate and Mr. Sanders had most of the stuff down in his lab either
boxed up or thrown away; and I guess it was Sanders himself who
finally took down the pictures of the rocket that he had on his bedroom
wall.