

~ Short Story ~

David O. Stewart
When They Did It

There was one thing that Clay couldn't get away from. *Sitting in the recliner most of the day, using the remote to cruise the babbling channels, he remembered that thing so well that it was never really out of his head, which was funny since he had managed not to think about it for so many years. But now it was always there, the time when they did it, did it to him and the others.*

Joe Osborne had told him his company was scheduled to go out on the Test Site, to Frenchman's Flat. Clay didn't get it at first. He'd been out on the flats before, after some of the Knothole shots. He drove guys from the Atomic Energy Commission all over the Test Site.

"During the shot," Joe said. "That's when they want you out there."

"How do you know?" Joe was a sergeant, too, ran a team in the motor pool. He might hear something, but Clay wasn't so sure.

"Gus said. Orders from Washington."

That made it real. Gus Bliven was career Army, twenty years in, top sergeant for the whole Test Site. He'd done all of it—fought his war in Europe, been a Drill Instructor for Korea, now was the best paper-pusher around. Anywhere you needed to find something out, Gus knew someone. Majors and captains asked him what he knew about transfers, promotions. If Gus said so, you could take it to the bank.

"What'd he say?"

"He was checking on the colonel's jeep, came over special. Said your unit's going out on the flats for the next shot." Clay couldn't keep it off his face, how he didn't like the news. "Gus likes you," Joe said. "You're his boy."

"He likes Emily."



'The southern Nevada desert is Ground Zero for the American id, most vividly at the Nevada Test Site where atomic bombs were exploded for a generation. What was it like out there for the 1950s GIs who were ordered by their own government to march into nuclear holocaust? I tried to imagine.'

~ **David O. Stewart**

"What he really likes"—Joe stabbed a finger against Clay's shoulder—"is that buster of a boy of yours."

Which was true. It had been something to see at the party for the boy turning one. Gus Bliven, toughest soldier on three continents, making faces and funny noises, down on the floor, tickling and being tickled. Afterwards, nobody razed him about it. They had too much respect for him. He didn't have family that anyone knew about. It might've been the first time most of them saw the old bird smile.

It also was true that Gus looked out for Clay. He never did him favors, not like that. But he told Clay things it helped to know, situations Clay was getting into that he shouldn't. The Army was a funny place in peacetime, no sense of proportion to things without an enemy to fight. Someone gets a hair across his ass for no reason and suddenly there's a major problem.

Clay stopped at the NCOs' lounge that night. It was just another tent with wooden floors, like the tents where the enlisted men slept. The bar was serve-yourself. Light bulbs dangled from the crest of the tent. Gus was at his usual table, having his usual Manhattan, straight up. He nodded for Clay to sit.

"Not drinking?" he asked.

"Heading home," Clay said. Gus nodded again, offering only his level gaze. "Joe told me."

"Nothing I can do."

"How bad is it?"

"They say it's great. Sprinkle it on cornflakes." Gus sipped his drink. He always drank slow. "Your cornflakes. Not theirs."

"I've been out there."

Gus nodded and looked down. "You know the score. Army owns your ass. They want to blow it up, they can." He took another sip. "Man with a family's got a right to know." He looked away. "Nothing I can do," he said again.

Clay knew then he'd tried, which meant something.

He didn't talk to Emily about it. Nothing she could do but worry. And he didn't know what it would be like. It was the atom bomb, sure, he knew

NEW MILLENNIUM WRITINGS

that, but that wasn't knowing what it would be like. It seemed like Gus did.

The Test Site was humming for the Teapot series. It was exciting when a shot was on. People set their alarms so they could get out and see the flash in the sky, feel the ground rumble. The high floors in the casinos would be filled with people watching. For those working at the Site the excitement was greater. The tests were for science and American glory, for keeping ahead of the Russians, who had their own bomb now, thanks to those dirty Jew spies. A Commie bomb meant there wasn't a choice. America needed bigger ones, more powerful ones. And they had to be tested.

New troops were in from California. They were there to go out on the flats. Clay's company was supposed to make sure the new troops did what they were supposed to. Nobody told the new guys that, but that's what they told Clay.

There were muckyety-mucks in from back east, guys in short-sleeved white shirts and short ties. They weren't much older than Clay, but they were scientists. They knew about the bomb, about the tests, about the plans for him and his company. They didn't tell.

Truth was, everyone knew they'd been eating some kind of fallout for a while. The shots were timed for when the wind was blowing from the west, so it wouldn't go to California. It wasn't like there were *no* people to the east, but there were a lot less. On a couple of shots the wind had shifted, blown back over the Site. And how could they be sure everything just drifted away like they wanted it to?

Clay had been all over that Test Site, in places that had been hot, really hot. They gave him radiation badges when he went out. One time he came back and the badge registered ten more rads than he was supposed to get in his whole life. The safety officer said the badge wasn't working and threw it out. It didn't inspire a lot of confidence. Either the badge was bad or the guy was.

*

The test was only a few days after the orders came in. Nobody talked about any danger. It was orders.

It was a nice day, Clay remembered that. The Test Site wasn't a pretty place, not usually, but it was dramatic, powerful to look at. There were black and tan and silver rocks up against that blue sky. The light changed from minute to minute. Clay had never seen skies like the ones out west. That was why he never went back east, not even once. He couldn't bear to leave that sky, wide open over him. It filled him up. On a warm day in May like that one, that was about as good as it can be.

It was after supper, when the light was ready to stop. Clay hadn't gotten used to the shortness of dusk in the desert. Shadows got longer, then really

NEW MILLENNIUM WRITINGS

long, then everything was shadow and it was dark. The air was cool, with a taste of the last of spring.

They loaded onto buses. Old school buses. The orders were clear enough. They were going out on the range, going to dig in. They'd be there for the test, do some maneuvers, then come home. The orders left out how close they'd be. Driving there, bouncing over rocks and bumps, Clay realized how close. They were going very close.

It was smart not to take them out until after dark. That way they couldn't see the blackened spots from the old test shots. Those were from the metal towers that held the bombs, that had melted into the ground. Clay had seen it in the daytime. The sand around the tower formed a glaze, black and brown, from the heat. You wouldn't want the troops seeing that.

They stopped about two miles from the tower, at trenches already part dug. Clay had his people dig in more, almost six feet down. It took time to get that far. He walked the line and hollered to go deeper. The ground was hard, tough digging. It kept them busy, and he wanted them busy. Some guys tried to knock off and go to sleep, but Clay kicked them to get digging again. With what happened the next day, it wouldn't have helped to dig to China, but he didn't know that. He maybe suspected it, but he didn't *know* it.

He didn't sleep when the digging was done. After the moon went down the stars were unbelievable. There were thousands, bright as can be. The stars can hypnotize out there. Clay liked to think about how long ago the starlight left where it started from, how far the light had to come. Those same stars might not still be there when he was seeing the light they sent out. That light might have left the stars before there were humans on earth. It was creepy, but an interesting creepy, like watching a movie with an actor who's just died.

Clay thought about Emily and Wade, about leaving the Army. It was tired-out thinking, where he wasn't really thinking in any direction. The thought sat in his mind. It didn't go anywhere. He'd think the thought. Clay learned to do that in Korea whenever something was coming up, something that could be bad. He controlled his mind. That's the part that gives way first. He used those thoughts to keep the bomb out of his mind, to keep the next day away. He had a strong mind then. He felt happy with those thoughts, especially about Emily.

Before dawn they told the sergeants what to tell the men. The countdown would come over loudspeakers so everyone would jump into the trenches in time. They handed out welding goggles for the men's eyes. The men should turn their backs to the tower and cover their faces with their hands and arms. The second the wind passed over they had to get out of the trenches or they could be buried alive. Then they had to form up in marching order. And they should keep their mouths shut against the sand. It could be radioactive.

NEW MILLENNIUM WRITINGS

Clay passed the word. Some guys acted bored, didn't seem to understand what was going on. Most were scared, which showed in their eyes. Those listened carefully, like Clay knew something that could help them. One kid whimpered. He looked like he was going to cry. Clay didn't say anything to him.

About five minutes before, a voice came over the loudspeaker, welcomed them to the land of the giant mushroom. The countdown started at twenty-five. It was still mostly dark. Clay dropped into the trench, next to the kid who was scared. The loudspeaker crackled, but the sound carried good. The kid had dug the trench deep. Feeling the kid's shakes, Clay leaned back against him and took a deep breath. There wasn't any sound but the loudspeaker voice, down to five... four... three. The voice stopped there. Clay wondered if it was like the movies, how the countdown never goes past three, you do two and one in your head. Maybe there wouldn't be any test. Sometimes they got canceled for the wind, or they didn't fire right.

Since that day, Clay had watched film of atom bombs going off. In the films it was always slow and steady how the cloud forms. It unfolds like a flower. It's beautiful. Those films don't look like what he saw that day. Maybe a camera wouldn't work up close where he was. It was different there. It wasn't beautiful.

The flash was like a thousand stars in front of his hands, inches away. There was no noise. He could see through his eyelids, see the veins in them. He looked through the goggles and through his flesh at the skinny bones in his hands. They looked like bird's feet, or claws. For another instant it was still silent. The white light turned to red. The world glowed. The heat seared him. One minute it was a cool morning. Next minute he was in fire.

Then the roar hit. The sound crowded everything out of his head, like it was cut open so the sound went straight in. Wind like a jet passed over them. It howled and shrieked and beat the air down into the trench, pounding them deeper. It was like the fury of a billion angry animals. It must have been 150 m.p.h., carrying dirt and rocks and pebbles, hammering down on them. A ball of flame went over the trench—maybe burning sagebrush. His eyes were still shut and his hands were still over them, so he didn't know how he saw that. There were guys who said they saw birds catch fire in flight, rabbits ignite in mid-hop.

The wind slowed. The noise kept up. It wouldn't leave his brain. He remembered—climb out or get buried. He stuck his head out of the trench and reached out with his hands. The wind was still strong. Debris pinged off his helmet, stung his hands. He squinted his eyes. He saw flashes. He got over the side away from the tower and knelt for a second, one hand on the ground and the other holding his helmet on. The roar was easing. He leaned against the wind. A deeper sound was starting. He blinked and looked out, away from the tower. There was still a world out there. He remembered

NEW MILLENNIUM WRITINGS

thinking that. There was still a world. Dust and crud gathered in his mouth, his ears, up his nose. He couldn't breathe. It was like the wind and the bomb sucked all the air out and left only dust and filth.

He started yelling, "Out. Out. Get out. Get your asses out." He had to spit the crud out of his mouth. He turned back and kept shouting. He got to his feet and started up the line, reaching down to hit guys on the arm and helmet. His throat felt raw and bloody. He breathed in gasps and held it in between. He was yelling like crazy. Then he looked back across the trench. The air was still full of junk, but he could see. He stopped cold.

An orange fireball rose straight up from where the tower was. It went up a mile or more, turning almost peachy, leaving a black column behind. Then there was a gray umbrella, spreading out over them and all the flats, out towards the hills at the edge. Inside the column and up in the umbrella there were colors, purple and orange and red and brown. And there was like ice at the top edges of the umbrella. The real sun was rising on the other side of the cloud. Its rays brought out the colors, not regular colors. He'd never seen colors that bad.

He looked at the base of the column and saw the ground was buckling, coming at them like a wave. That was the rumble sound, the ground shock. The heat was impossible. It was too hot to sweat. He was cooking, like meat. His hand rested for a moment against his belt buckle and the flesh burned. His pants were scorched and stiff. They were too hot to touch. He kept lifting his feet because the ground was so hot. It was the end of the world.

A soldier, blinded by the flash and the dust, stumbled into him. The guy's nose was bleeding. Clay started again, yelling to get out. He didn't bother leaning over any more. He kicked the ones still in the trench. They needed to move. There were piles of sand and dirt on them. Guys were pulling buddies out, brushing them off. He went back to the kid. He was curled up. Clay hauled his ass up.

Then the ground shock hit. The earth lifted and dropped down. It slid sideways, then slid back. It *moved*, goddammit. Clay wondered if they could knock the earth out of orbit, send it spinning into the sun. Half the guys went down, arms and legs flailing. It was like they were the duckpins and the bomb was the bowling ball.

After the shock rolled through, the men had the holy moment. Clay could see the look come on each face when it saw what Clay had seen—the black evil column, the bulging cloud, the spreading umbrella. When their brains worked, every one of them thought what Clay was thinking. *Get me the fuck out of here.*

Most just stared. A few cried. Several fell to their knees, blank looks on their faces. One shook himself like a wet dog. The ones who took off their goggles looked like raccoons only backwards, black faces around flesh at their eyes. A bunch gagged and retched and grabbed their stomachs. Clay's

NEW MILLENNIUM WRITINGS

held skeletons of animals and even of men who'd been left out for the blast. Clay didn't see that. He did see the dust devils, little desert twisters that whooshed past them. Other guys said they were given thorazine to make them forget, to mess with their minds.

Clay didn't take any mind drugs. He knew they walked by Doom Town, two houses they'd put up less than a mile from the tower, to see how they'd last. They were pulverized. He saw a tank and some jeeps blown on their sides and upside down and welded into globs. He saw the scorched ground near the tower. They stopped short of it, by maybe an eighth of a mile. That ground would have broiled them for sure. They stood there for a few seconds.

A guy in a white suit, totally covered from head to foot, boots and gloves and hood over his head, came running over. He looked like a moon man. He yelled something Clay couldn't make out. He carried a geiger counter. He waved for the soldiers to go back, then pointed to the counter. It was too hot, he meant.

They were supposed to make a battle line, the men on one knee on the ruined earth. They were supposed to fire volleys across ground zero, like they were shooting the bomb, or its ghost. He thought maybe the guns would be too hot, they'd misfire, blow up in the men's hands, or the crap from the sky would foul them. Even the officers knew how crazy it was. They turned around to march back.

They marched back past the trench. Parts were completely caved in. It looked puny. They marched a couple of miles farther before stopping. The men slumped to the ground like rag dolls. Some leaned back against their packs without taking them off. He had the last of his water. He stayed standing. He didn't go check on them like he would on a march. He knew how they were. Nobody talked.

After a while he took his pack off, but he stayed standing. He was strong. He was showing them. The umbrella cloud was mostly blown off east. They were to the west. That might help. There was more light in the sky. Not much was falling on them. The men stayed quiet.

After another thirty minutes they could hear the buses. It seemed like a long time before they arrived. The men shuffled on, moving like old men.

There was a little talk on the bus. A few asked for water. Some muttered. "Unbelievable." Stuff like that. They mostly didn't look at each other. The faces were filthy and empty. Nobody made a joke. He didn't remember saying anything.

They stopped outside Camp Desert Rock, where the men were stationed. Other soldiers brushed them with little whiskbrooms. Then they stripped and went into the shower building. After the shower a Geiger counter was passed over each man. If the count was too high, the man went back for another shower. They said to shampoo all over.

NEW MILLENNIUM WRITINGS

ears started to work. The only sound was the junk falling out of the air, like a drizzle. It was fallout. What else could it be? The roar powered up again, noise cramming into them. The wind started up from another direction. It was the ricochet off the mountains behind them.

A soldier yelled out, "Sarge, what's happening? What's going on?" They all looked at him. A couple shouted stuff he couldn't make out. The kid was kneeling next to him, tear lines through the grime on his face. He was covered with flecks of white stuff. They all were.

The wind was better. Clay didn't flinch. He was hard. He stood tall. He was one tough son-of-a-bitch. He hawked and spat. He said, "Straighten up, soldiers. Fall in."

Straighten up, soldiers. Fall in. He said it with authority.

And they did. They were good guys. He was a good leader. He'd led them into hell. Now they were going in for a closer look.

They pulled their packs out of the trench, which was bent into a snaky S. They grabbed rifles. They fell in. They were the first unit ready. The officers of the California troops shamed their men by pointing out Clay's unit, ready to roll, dazed by the heat and the white-gray ash from the sky. He had a terrific burn on the back of his neck. His head hurt like it would split open. Guys had bright red skin on their wrists and the backs of their hands, wherever the flash caught bare skin.

After the holy moment, most didn't look back. Neither did Clay. The light was dim. The umbrella cloud still covered most of the sky. There was a funny smell, not greasy and smoky like explosives. It was like an oven or a furnace or an iron that had been left on too long.

He told the men to drink water. They rinsed out their mouths and spat. Some puked again. Some poured it on their eyes. The warm water was like a blessing. He held it in his mouth, felt it seep into his tongue and cheeks. He swirled it around and spat out the crud. He swallowed the second mouthful. It was like being born, all the way down. His hand holding the canteen started to shake. He put the canteen away and clamped his hand on the butt of his rifle. The barrel was still hot.

Finally the others were ready. They marched around the trenches, then turned towards the tower. Except there wasn't a tower. The flakes and grit kept falling. The heat was steady. They started to sweat as they walked. The sweat mixed with the sand and white stuff, coating faces and hands, uniforms and helmets. Some tried to put their goggles back on, but they were too hot on tender skin. Jets screamed across the sky, passing through the cloud.

Closer to ground zero the soles of their shoes sizzled. They could look up into the cloud, but most didn't. The crap kept settling on them. The only sounds were boots crunching sand and planes slicing the sky. The officers didn't talk. The men didn't talk. They marched like dying men.

Some guys said they saw cages near ground zero. They said the cages

NEW MILLENNIUM WRITINGS

Clay passed after his third shower. He stayed extra long in the first one. Tears started down his face when the hot water hit. He pretended to be washing his face. After a minute it passed. Others cried, too. He didn't look at them.

After his second one the hot water gave out. There were about a hundred soldiers still waiting. A man inside the shower house started cursing. Men in line outside picked it up. They shouted how the Army couldn't treat them this way. Their faces twisted with anger. Clay didn't shout. He was a sergeant. But he didn't try to stop them. You can't command men with nothing but a towel around your middle. Also, he figured they had to get angry at something.

He passed after the third shower. They handed him paper coveralls to wear and paper shoes, like cardboard. Everyone got them. He didn't know what they did with the uniforms. He never got his pack or his rifle back, either. That was OK.

He walked into camp, past people who hadn't been out on the flats, people who didn't know what he knew. If they'd been awake when the shot went off they probably noticed the flash, heard some sound. Most would have looked up. A few might have walked to the window. Then they went back to what they were doing, getting ready for their days. Normal days.

At the mess tent he drank water for about five minutes. He couldn't get enough. He didn't eat, didn't think he could hold food down, not Army food anyway.

He drove home in the paper clothes. When he turned up his street it looked the same as it had the day before. The houses were small, cheap. Most of the neighbors were military, too. They were on the north side of town, towards the Test Site. No one was outside. It was a hot afternoon.

He sat in the car outside the house. He got the shivers, maybe from the burn on his neck. His teeth started to chatter. He gripped the steering wheel and started to sweat. It went on for a minute, then another. It slowed after about five minutes.

He had to think about the shot. He told himself it was for the country. It was his duty. He told himself they wouldn't do this if it would kill us. They were all on the same side. The air came through the car window and slipped over his wet skin. His neck hurt. His hand hurt where it had burned on the belt buckle. He felt jittery.

He could have been killed a hundred times in Korea. He was in danger every day, and it went on for months. Over there guys he knew, guys standing next to him, got croaked. So that meant he was lucky, he told himself. That's better than being smart or fast or strong. Way better. And he was those other things, too. He decided this wasn't going to kill him any more than the chinks had. He'd get through this.

He thought about how to talk to Emily. When they were first together

NEW MILLENNIUM WRITINGS

she had asked about Korea, but he didn't say much. He didn't want her to know about the things he'd done. If he told her then he couldn't be the man he wanted to be for her. Korea had to stay separate from him and Emily.

He needed to do the same with this, even though this wasn't the same, not really. There were different reasons why he couldn't tell her about this. She wouldn't understand about it, that was the same. What was different was that he didn't understand, didn't know how he felt. This was bigger than him. Big brains had to figure this out, understand what it meant, and brains had never been his strong suit. He worked on it some, sitting in the car that day, but he didn't get anywhere with it.

So he didn't tell her much. It was another day at the Test Site. The bomb was something else. It was powerful. Wouldn't want to get in the way of that thing on a dark night. That's what he said. She had to know there was more, just from his burns, from the paper clothes. But she didn't push. He was grateful for that.

*

The kid—the one he jumped next to in the trench—was the first. About two days later he started bleeding from his eyes and nose. They flew him to a hospital in Salt Lake City. He died there. Gus found out it was a cerebral hemorrhage. Not usually a big risk for eighteen-year-olds who make it through basic training.

When the kid's parents collected his body, the Army didn't say he'd been at Camp Desert Rock, never said he was even in Nevada. Clay knew that because he called them. Their name was Hurlbutt. He didn't know the kid. He made a point of not getting too close to the men, a habit from Korea. You didn't know who you were going to order over to the next hill to lose a leg or an eye or an arm. It was better not to know them. Still, Hurlbutt got under his skin.

Gus got the phone number for the kid's folks. Gus told him not to call, but Clay called. He lied to them. He said the kid was a young man to be proud of. He had a quiet dignity and courage. Clay said they'd miss him. But he told the truth about the kid serving at Camp Desert Rock. His father asked why the Army wouldn't have told them. Clay said maybe it was a mistake.

He got drunk that night. Gus stayed with him, nursing his Manhattan. Clay felt bad for him so he got drunk fast, then Gus drove him home.

Except for the kid, they didn't die right off. It took a few years for others to get sick. There wasn't any pattern. Weak guys might hold up for twenty years, while a couple of tough ones went fast, throat cancer or leukemia or lymphoma or who the hell knew what. One way or the other, everyone got sick. That day in May, anyone who wasn't brain-damaged knew it was going to kill them.

NEW MILLENNIUM WRITINGS

He was OK for a while. His neck healed. He felt the same. He had energy. Food still tasted. He still wanted Emily, though maybe it was different between them. The boy kept growing, getting into everything. He was blonde like Clay, a buster like Clay had been.

He finished out his hitch, left the Army in the fall. They made him sign a secrecy agreement. He promised not to tell anyone about the shots or the tests. He didn't mind signing that. He didn't want to talk about it.

A year after leaving the Army his gums started bleeding, and then his teeth started falling out. He hid the bleeding from Emily, and even the first tooth or two. But missing teeth are hard to hide. She got upset, asked if it was the fallout. He said he didn't know. More teeth came out. After he'd lost five, the dentist said to take them all out, to avoid infection. He got a full set of choppers. At twenty-five.

Emily wanted to know more about the shot. She was upset about him, but about the boy and her, too. She knew fallout was bad. They weren't totally stupid back then. He didn't tell her any fairy stories. He said he didn't know what it'd do, but he felt OK so far. He just was losing his teeth and his gums were bleeding. That was all.