

# Vernalfest Morning

by Michael Bishop

*The modern concept of the child as someone to be cherished over the span of a long, leisurely growth and protected from the world's rough edges is a comparatively recent one—go back only to the end of the nineteenth century and such sentimental notions vanish, and you will find children of eight and nine working grueling eighteen-hour shifts in the mines and factories and mills, children barely old enough to walk harnessed to loads like sledge-dogs and made to haul them until they drop. These were poor people's children, admittedly. But go back only a few hundred years before that, and you will find even the children of the rich and mighty treated more casually and with rather less care than that usually lavished on a household pet today; there was no sense wasting much time on them until it could be seen that they had a chance to survive into their teens...*

*Here Michael Bishop—one of the best of the new SF writers, author of Catacomb Years (Berkley), Transfigurations (Berkley/Putnam), Stolen Faces (Dell), and Eyes of Fire (Pocket Books)—shows us how easily in a disintegrating world, such a state of affairs might come about again...*

Priesman calls the place us kids live Little Camp Fuji. Fuji is short for refugee, and Priesman is—was—a lieutenant with the guerrillas on the rampart side of City. Since most of our mothers and daddies were sympathizers, one of Priesman's jobs is seeing after the kids in our camp. Already he's shown us how to keep the Fujiniles from Deeland, Viperhole, Poohburgh, and the other nearby kiddie camps out of our gardens and barracks, and twice in the last month he's been through Fuji with a side of wild greyhound.

I like Priesman. I like the way he takes care of us, and I like the way he looks. He always wears dappled fatigues, creased combat boots, an automatic carbine slung over his shoulder, and a pair of bristly 'rilla burns that sweep down from his ears and out across his cheeks like wings. My father (I have a photograph of him with his last bullet wound showing on his left temple) had 'rilla burns just like Priesman's.

A little over a week ago, four days before Vernalfest, Priesman came into Little Camp Fuji's central barracks, number 3, and dropped a bloody side of greyhound on the floor. I was sitting on Little Mick's winter thermals playing a game of bodycount with Lajosipha Joiner, our twelve-year-old self-appointed witchwoman. Lajosipha had made the bodycount markers out of spent machine-gun shells and several old rampart-side safe-passage tokens. A bunch of kids got up to look at the meat Priesman had just dropped, but the lieutenant turned my way.

"You're the oldest one here, aren't you, Neddie?"

"I'm fifteen."

Hands on hips, Priesman twisted at the waist to stare all the other kids right in the eye.

"Anyone older than Neddie?" When no one fessed to being older, the lieutenant swaggered toward me, hooked a finger inside my shirt, and led me out onto the porch. While his big hands were squeezing my shoulders together, all I could see was the broken button just below the X of his cartridge belts.

"Fifteen, huh? If you weren't so damn puny, Neddie, you'd've probably been promoted out of Fuji by now."

I didn't say anything; I didn't look into Priesman's face. He already knew that in the last six months his own unit had run me back to camp half a dozen times. Finally, Priesman's beetle-browed colonel, Simpson, had said, "Don't come back before you're asked, little boy, or I'll have your scrotum for a dice bag..."

"Listen, Neddie," Priesman was saying, "do you know who Maud Turska is? Ever heard her name?"

"She's in your unit. She's the Poohburgher proctor."

"That's right. Well, Simpson thinks she's passing holdfast locations and potential bomb targets to the airport-siders. He thinks she's using some of her kids as runners."

I looked up, wrinkling my forehead.

"Listen, now. We can't give you any metal, Neddie—no hard ammo, you understand—but on Vernalfest morning we want you to hit 'em. Hit Poohburgh, I mean. Do it right, and you'll have your promotion out of Fuji, I can tell you that."

When I went back inside to tell the others, most of the kids had rumbled down the rear steps to spit Priesman's gift and build a fire under it. Lajosipha was still there, though, hunched over the shells and tokens, and when I told her about racking through Poohburgh she jumped up and paced all over the barracks like a stork on stilts. Her legs were so long I sometimes used to think her head sat right on top of them.

"It didn't matter, them not giving us any metal. Other ways will do; beautiful ways. We need cardboard, Neddie. We need cardboard. And lumber. And rags. And eight or ten old automobile tires. I think Lieutenant Priesman's asked the right folks to get this done, Neddie, I really do."

The next day, three days before Vernalfest, I led Little Mick, Awkward Alice Gomez, and a couple of other Fujiniles from barracks number 4 through the rampart-side ruins to the old trucking warehouses under the expressway. Little Mick had a wagon, a noisy one with wheels that we'd wrapped with torn bedding, and it bumped along, going clink-clank-clatter, and slowing us up.

Over the drooping expressway bridges, drifting up from City's burnt-out heart, oily plumes of smoke wriggled on the sky, and I could imagine Lajosipha trying to conjure with them, voodooing the airport-siders but blessing us rampart 'rillas with magical gobbledygook. She wasn't worth a poot on a scavenger hunt, though, and I was glad we hadn't brought her.

As it was, Little Mick nearly did us in while we were flattening pasteboard crates near the warehouse incinerator and laying them out in our wagon. He got punchy with success, I guess, and started jiggling around the parking lot each time we flattened and stacked a box. Just as a huge, gray-green copter with rocket launchers under its carriage was tilting over the expressway toward the ack-ack emplacements on the mountain, Alice tripped Little Mick and hauled him up against the dumpster. That probably saved our bums. Priesman says the airport-siders like to go frog-gigging.

But we got back to Little Camp Fuji okay, and the next day while two other dog-parties were out for paint and lumber, Brian Rabbek took the wagon and a couple of thirteen-year-olds over toward the Pits. They were going to dig inner tubes and tires out of the sand. They ended up being gone 'til way past dark. Lajosipha, in fact, started muttering about death and weaving her arms around in front of her face like two black geese trying to knot a double hitch with their necks. The littler kids got spooked, and I told her to go do her witchwomaning in a closet somewhere. She ignored me and kept it up. Brian and the others eventually got back okay, though, and that pretty well undid the spookiness of her mumbling and jerking about. Damn good thing.

The day before Vernalfest broke clean and clear. Awkward Alice, just as if she was old enough to know, said that the smoke hanging over the airport across town and among the trees on the mountainside looked laundered. It *was* white, white and fluffy.

That was the day everyone in Little Camp Fuji really worked. We sat crosslegged out in the yard between barracks and worked at cutting the tires and inner tubes into long pieces. We made breastplates, helmets, and shields out of cardboard. We painted designs on the shields and cuirasses we'd finished. The plans for all this get-up and for the coats-of-arms and mottoes we painted on it were all Lajosipha Joiner's; she told us what everything was supposed to be called, showed us how to use strips of rubber as flexings on our shin- and armguards, and insisted that every flimsy lance have a banner tied to it somewhere along its length. A few of us made broad swords out of scrap lumber, and Little Mick found a number of odd-sized tins which he cobbled together on a board for a set of marching drums. Lajosipha supervised everything. Her hands were streaked with three different colors of paint right up to her elbows. We were really busy.

Priesman came by in the afternoon. He was sweaty and crotchety, he had gray circles under his eyes. "What the hell is this, Neddie? You think you're going on a goddamn *crusade*?"

"No metal, you said. We've made our own stuff."

"Listen, the first Children's Crusade was a fiasco. If I know anything at all about first-strike

advantage, Neddie, this one isn't going to go a bit better. They'll hear you coming. They'll see you coming. It'll all turn out a botch, and Simpson'll have my neck."

"He'll have your scrotum for a dice bag," I corrected Priesman.

"That'll all right," Lajosipha said, answering the Lieutenant instead of me. "We don't sneak." She was wearing a cardboard breastplate with a drippy red eagle outlined a little off-center against it. A white hand print lay on her left cheek like Indian war paint.

Priesman turned to me. "Neddie—"

"It'll be okay," I assured him. "We don't have to sneak to hit 'em right. We really don't."

Not looking at anybody, the Lieutenant said, "Shit!" Then he unslung his carbine, fired three quick, pinging shots at the weather vane on the number 4 barracks, and stalked to the entrance of Little Camp Fuji. Here he turned around and spoke only to me: "*Our* scrotums, Neddie. Yours and mine. Simpson wants Turska taken down and out, but her daddy was a field commander with the original rampart force, fifteen years ago, and it's got to be done obliquely." He let his eyes rove disgustedly over our medieval get-ups. "Obliquely doesn't mean back-asswardly, Neddie. I swear, you just don't seem to understand."

He wiped his forehead with his sleeve, sent a blob of spittle into the dust, and disappeared up the hillside between an ashy-black automobile and a row of trashed phone booths.

On Vernalfest morning Lajosipha was the first one off the floor. And the first one to get down on it again in order to pray. Keening, moaning low, coughing from the spring cold, she woke the rest of us up. The barracks were dark, and when some of the kids in number 3 started slamming doors to the dormitories next to us, it was hard not to think of gun shots.

With Little Mick's thermals under me for a mattress I lay staring at the ribbed ceiling and remembering how until I was four I had lived in the lobby of the International Hotel. Then the airport-siders had collapsed the building with mortars, and it was almost two years—I got real good at looting and grubbing, even as a little kid—before the first kiddie camps were "bilaterally organized." Priesman says there's a six-year-old treaty outlawing military activity in or around the camps, but Fuji's been strafed before and so have Viperhole and Mouse Town. Maybe the kids on airport side have caught it, too, I don't know. But if you just look up, you can see the colander holes above the rafters...

"Come on, Neddie," Brian Rabbek said. "If we don't get started, it'll be light soon."

Everyone dressed. Everyone pulled on their cuirasses, casques, and greaves, old Lajosipha right there to say which was which and to help lace you in if you couldn't do it yourself. Outside, as the aspens on the mountain ridge began to twinkle, we grabbed our lances and formed up in two columns. Little Mick started bonging his peppermint and tobacco tins, but someone knocked him on his ass, and the stillness got thick and nerve-tweaking again. Pretty soon, we were all shuffling out of Little Camp Fuji like the pallbearers at a propaganda funeral. It was eerie, marching in front of them before first light.

I wasn't really in front, though. Lajosipha Joiner marched ahead of me, wearing a long white dress that had once been her mother's and not an ounce of cardboard armoring. Her goose-neck arms weaved back and forth as she walked, as if she was spelling the sun to come up. I didn't mind her going ahead of even me, because I kept waiting for a 'rilla unit—ours or theirs—to spring out of the rubble into our path and mow everybody down with words or rifle fire. In the cool, spooky morning rifle fire didn't seem much worse than words. Also, it was okay by me if Lajosipha wanted to lead us to Poohburgh, because it sits about two miles off the perimeter expressway in an area of rocks called Sand Spire and I felt like she knew where we were going maybe even better than I did. She had a sense for that kind of thing. So all I had to do that morning was wonder why, except for the flapping of our banners, it was so still and quiet.

"Truce today," Brian Rabbek whispered. "Vernalfest truce. We're breaking it, Neddie."

I guess we were, going against a rampart-side camp on the first Sunday after the spring's first full moon—but what mattered to me was doing what Priesman had asked and getting promoted into an adult unit bivouacked on the mountain face overlooking City. I was too old for Little Camp Fuji. Only a couple of the kids had ever really seemed like family to me, which was how Priesman said I ought to think of *all* of them. Anyhow, I've heard Simpson say truces are made to be broken, that's what they're for...

"Play, Little Mick," Lajosipha commanded loudly as we straggled into Sand Spire toward the quonsets of Poohburgh. "Give us a tat-and-a-too to march to."

So Little Mick, with permission this time, began bonging his tins, and all us Fujiniles flapped and fluttered along, holding our lances high and squinting against the pale light seeping across the eastern plains and through the ruins of City to the rock garden surrounding Poohburgh.

A sentry heard or saw us coming. He raised a piping, echoing shout to rouse his barracksmates. They got up in a hurry, too. They got up a lot faster than we had, in fact, so that whatever "first-strike advantage" Priesman had wished for us was lost by our fluttering and drumming. That didn't seem to matter, though. Our get-ups—our visors, our shields, our other cardboard whatnots—put even the older Poohburghers in a panic, and Lajosipha led us right up their main avenue before any of them thought of picking up a rock and flinging it at our funny-looking heads.

By this time our lances had come down and we were spreading out across the camp like iodine seeping through a bucket of water, scuffling along beside each other with our broad swords and lances pricking at whoever not from Fuji got in our way. I don't remember a whole lot of what happened, except that it didn't seem cool after we'd tramped into the Sand Spire area. I remember that a lot of the younger kids on the other side came out of their quonsets without many clothes on, and a couple of little boys were stiff from the dawn shock. When we chased them up against a porch railing or a boulder of sandstone, their bellies gave way as easily as a wet sponge would. What I remember mostly, I guess, is scuffling and

screaming and myself feeling sick because everything seemed to take so long. It all just went on and on, and in the midst of it all I remember Lajosipha Joiner weaving spells with her arms and charming us invincible.

Finally, someone thought of picking up a rock. The first one thrown struck Lajosipha in the eye, and she crumpled down into her tattered white dress like a wilting flower. Then more rocks came, and while I was trying to pull Lajosipha out of camp I could hear the rocks bouncing off shields and breastplates with sickening *thwumps*. On one side of me I saw Brian Rabbek retrieving stones from the ground and chunking them back at the kids who had thrown them. Awkward Alice Gomez was doing the same thing on the other side. Pulling Lajosipha along, I noticed that the dust was clotted and sticky, but didn't really think about anything but getting her home. Throwing rocks and jabbing with our lances, we retreated. We backed out of the Poohburgh kiddie camp, tore our armor off, and tossed aside our weapons, and, after regrouping on the far side of the Sand Spire overpass, helped each other get home to Fuji.

Lajosipha was dead. We buried her in her mother's dress in the trough of dirt where we used to spit and roast the greyhounds Priesman brought us. Little Mick and a couple of kids from the number 2 barracks never came back at all. Not counting one kid's mild concussion and some really-nothing scrapes and bruises, though, these were the only casualties we suffered. Brian Rabbek says we were gone only an hour and twenty minutes, and most of that time was used getting down to Sand Spire for the attack and then returning home. Three days later, in spite of how bad my memory is concerning what we did down there, I feel like we spent the whole day in Poohburgh. The rest of Vernalfest is just a shadow thrown by the morning, even poor Lajosipha's burial. We just dug her down and covered her up. I don't think a single one of us thought about carrying her in a prop-procession through the main streets here on rampart side, and that's too bad.

That's why I say that the rest of Vernalfest was just a shadow thrown by the morning.

It wasn't until yesterday that Priesman got by to see us again. I had myself so worked up waiting for him that two or three times I nearly went out looking for his unit's bivouac, just to ask him how us Fujiniles had done. When he finally came strolling in, though, Priesman was wearing *two* carbines and a smile that made his 'rilla burns stand out.

"Turska broke, tough old Maud herself. Her daughter by an airport-sider was in Poohburgh Vernalfest morning, and that just wiped her out. She fessed the whole schmeer under sedation, and Simpson's higher than a migrating goose." Priesman tossed a rifle at me. "Here's your carbine, Theodore. Let's get the hell out of Little Camp Fuji."

"I've been promoted?"

"Sure." He bent his fatigue collar down so that I could see the new insignia on it. "And so have I, Theodore, so have I."