It was a horrible joke, but Lt Col Daneeka didn’t laugh until Yossarian came to him after an alert and pleaded again, without any real expectation of success, to no longer pull alert.

Lt Col Daneeka snickered once and was soon immersed in problems of his own, which included Major White, who had been challenging him all that morning to Indian leg wrestle, and Yossarian, who decided right then and there to go crazy.

’You’re wasting your time,’ Lt Col Daneeka was forced to tell him.

’Can’t you not let someone go on alert who’s crazy?’

’Oh, sure. I have to. There’s a rule saying I can’t let any anyone go on alert who’s crazy.’

’Then why don’t you decertify me? I’m crazy. Ask Clevinger.’

’Clevinger? Where is Clevinger? You find Clevinger and I’ll ask him.’

’Then ask any of the others. They’ll tell you how crazy I am.’

’They’re crazy.’

’Then why don’t you stop them from going on alert?’

’Why don’t they ask me to no longer go on alert?’

’Because they’re crazy, that’s why.’

’Of course they’re crazy,’ Lt Col Daneeka replied.’ I just told you they’re crazy, didn’t I?

And you can’t let crazy people decide whether you’re crazy or not, can you?’

Yossarian looked at him soberly and tried another approach. ’ Is Orr crazy?’

’He sure is,’ Lt Col Daneeka said.

’Can you stop him from going on alert?’

’I sure can. But first he has to ask me to. That’s part of the rule.’

’Then why doesn’t he ask you to?’

’Because he’s crazy,’ Lt Col Daneeka said. ’He has to be crazy to keep going alert after all the close calls he’s had. Sure, I can stop Orr from going on alert. But first he has to ask me to.’

’That’s all he has to do to stop going on alert?’

’That’s all. Let him ask me.’

’And then he doesn’t have to go on alert?’ Yossarian asked.

’No. Then I can’t stop him from going on alert.’

’You mean there’s a program?’

’Sure there’s a program,’ Lt Col Daneeka replied. ’Personal Reliability Program, PRP. Anyone who wants to stop going on alert isn’t crazy.’

There was only one program and that was PRP, which specified that a concern for one’s own time and sanity in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could stop going on alert. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to go on more alerts. Orr would be crazy to go on more alerts and sane if he didn’t, but if he was sane he had to go on alert. If he went on alert he was crazy and didn’t have to; but if he didn’t want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of PRP and let out a respectful whistle.

’That’s some program, that PRP,’ he observed.

’It’s the best there is,’ Lt Col Daneeka agreed.

Yossarian saw it clearly in all its spinning reasonableness. There was an elliptical precision about its perfect pairs of parts that was graceful and shocking, like good modern art, and at times Yossarian wasn’t quite sure that he saw it at all, just the way he was never quite sure about good modern art or about the flies Orr saw in Appleby’s eyes.

Excerpt modified from Catch-22 by Joseph Heller