

French, “Is it yours?” He must have seen that I wasn’t wearing it, perhaps noticed how I was holding it.

I said, “No, it’s from a man long ago. You want it?”

He said, “That’s fine.” So I put it on his head and, from then on, I saw him walking all over camp, raising dust in his pith helmet. Whenever I saw him, I laughed and I could hear that my laugh was an old man’s.

I felt very feeble, and found myself unable to walk back on the path to my own camp, to the red door I had ripped off the shed. I thought, “I can’t be that bad. I’m at least not aging as quickly as the others. And I’m eating fine. Maybe I’m letting all this death and feebleness rub off on me.”

I constructed a task for myself, in the form of running from the bottom of the pit to the top, as fast as I could. But I found that I couldn’t run at all, nor could I make it to my own cave, which was only about thirty feet up the hill. So I changed the idea: I would try to go from the top of the hill to the bottom and see how that went. I whistled for someone to carry me to the top of the hill. As the man was carrying me up, the red pencil fell out of my coat and began rolling down the hill.

“Wait!” I cried. “Stop!”

He let me down and I spent the rest of the evening working my way down the pit, searching for the pencil, to no avail.

I sat on the side of the flute box that night, again thinking of the time I had sat there, talking to Herb. For the next few nights I would always end my night there, lost in melancholic nostalgia. That particular night, though, my troubled reverie was interrupted by a flurry of activity among the men, along with lights in my peripheral vision.

I looked up and a man in khaki shorts with dark hair was inspecting the flutes with a flashlight and muttering to the men, “None of these look