Ain't Comin' Back

by Mary Szmagaj

The Greenheads kicked Sammy out for Gross Misc when he went through the first time. He was drunk; he urinated on a statue in the darkness. At the tribunal, his appointed maintained that Sammy had been aiming for the shrubbery at the statue's foot. But the statue had been someone of importance, and so the wigs saw it as a political gesture and Sammy some kind of alarming rebel.

"A man's worth is measured in terms of his corrigibility," they said. "A man becomes unmanageable."

Watching with concern, Sammy's Paw knew his boy not to be feckless. Yet neither was he the seditious gloominary the wigs painted. How far along the scale towards one side or the other, though, he couldn't say. Almost through with the brain-train at F-Wheel, had Sammy been. It alters a person, that training; Paw didn't quite know him now.

In a Bluehead regiment, he would probably just have had to scrub the oxidation off with his whim-wham, but the Greenheads are very detail-oriented and traditional. Out Sammy went, as dishonorably as they could construe. Secretly, Paw was relieved. The training methods scared him, and he far preferred nominal ignominy to having a boy he couldn't fix.

Twenty-eight months later, Sammy was getting on with his life when the call-up came. They had run out of Good Guys, and he was near the top of the reject list. They were sending him to Anchor-K to guard the royal palace.

"Who from?" Paw wanted to know.

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/mary-szmagaj/aint-comin-back»*
Copyright © 2010 Mary Szmagaj. All rights reserved.

"From the evil bugaboo subservigence," Sammy answered calmly. The training was still strong. His mind had never yet become wholly his own again.

"The palace!" Admiration. Worry.

"Yeah, I'll be livin' large on the flog. I'll eat off the king's silver; I'll smoke his clue-bans; I'll dally with his chambermaids behind the door of the Ovoid Sanctorum. I'll have a pretty good time for a while." His expression grew pensive. "But buy me a nice coffin, Paw, for when the bugaboos snip my noodle. I ain't comin' back."

There was a pig storm the day he flew out. All flights except the Greenheads' were grounded. Sammy paused at the top of the boarding stairs and looked back at the barricade, trying to focus through the intervening precipitates. Threw a half-hearted wave that said he couldn't.

The letters came thick and fast for a while. At heart, Sammy was a smart and sensitive boy, fully cognizant that he was living through a historical time in a hysterical place, or vice versa. He wanted to docusize it all. He told of the wilting heat, the fulgent landscape, the people. The bugaboos, he wrote, were not the spugilous foe they had been made out to be. His noodle, he reckoned, was safe.

The flow of words tapered off after a few months, but that was to be expected. Subservigence activity in Anchor-K had flared to unsurpassed levels, and Bad Apple Company, of which Sammy was a member, was right in the flick of it. A terse missive from this middle period concluded:

Livewire 25/8. No rest for the wicked. Send downers.
Love, Sammy

Paw remembered Sammy telling him, in a rare fit of confidulation, about the Greenheads' standard issue ampers. They turned a person into alertness incarnate. You absorbed, you reacted, you stopped on a dime. They livewired you. Sammy hadn't slept at all his first two months of training. Ampers were an essential part of the brain-train, and the combat dosage, while lower, was still palpitatious. Downers were, of course, highly illegal. Sammy's request was probably in jest, but Paw could not absolutely have guessed.

"I won't say my boy never had a fatalism about him," Paw later told Mr. McAgency, whose suits were dispatched to interview him in the aftermath of what was to come. "But those last days were all yours. All snippin' yours." The suits noted that he seemed very bitter.

It was all an act.

Ten months in, the letters tapered off completely. The last one, shorter than the rest, conveyed a sense of urgency formerly absent.

I'm on the pidge. Full-stop now. Don't worry.
Love to all, Sammy

A post-tour corporal who'd been at F-Wheel with Sammy came to visit. "On the pidge," he translated, was becoming a double agent. It could mean only one thing. Sammy was now secretly working for the bugaboo subservigence.

But poor, naive Pfc. Sam Hill! Babe in the woulds and the should-have-beens! Never imagining for one moment the prying fingers,

the spying eyes which gleaned every drop of inflo from every message sent!

"Now, see here, mister. Your son has been a very bad boy. Very bad, indeed."

Another trial, another travesty, another series of sad tales. The accused not even there to tell his side of things with winking, blinking, tearing eye. The exuberant waste of resourcery, the mockery of the public lie. When you got 'em by the balls, their hearts and minds lie fallow.

Everyone agreed that Sammy was a dangerous character. But half of Everyone said it must have been the Greenheads' fault. How else could this have happened? You didn't see Blueheads running off to the arms of the enemy, now did you? And half again speculated that maybe it meant the bugaboos were not truly the enemy, after all. Opinions flew like sedulous bullets.

Yet in the middle of it all, way down inside himself where no one could scrutinize, Paw resounded with the pride of lions. Sammy, he knew, had finally shaken it off--the brain-train that had, thirty-eight months previously, rendered his will so flaccid, so utterly ownable. Somewhere, his son was his own man, a liberated agent. The bugaboos had opened his cage door, and now the debt was paid.

Yessir, yessir, three rings full.