

1 B E S T S E L L E R

STEPHEN KING

THE LONG WALK

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR,
"THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING BACHMAN"



DOUBLEDAY

THE LONG WALK

Stephen King

(Richard Bachman)

Only death can keep you from the finish line - in the ultimate competition of the all-too-near future
"To me the Universe was all void of Life, or Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility; it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steamengine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb. O vast, gloomy, solitary Golgotha, and Mill of Death! Why was the Living banished thither companionless, conscious? Why, if there is no Devil; nay, unless the Devil is your God?"

-*Thomas Carlyle*

"I would encourage every American to walk as often as possible.

It's more than healthy; it's fun."

-*John F. Kennedy (1962)*

"The pump don't work

'Cause the vandals took the handle."

-*Bob Dylan*

PART ONE: STARTING OUT

Chapter 1

"Say the secret word and win a hundred dollars. George, who are our first contestants? George? Are you there, George?"

-Groucho Marx
You Bet Your Life

An old blue Ford pulled into the guarded parking lot that morning, looking like a small, tired dog after a hard run. One of the guards, an expressionless young man in a khaki uniform and a Sam Browne belt, asked to see the blue plastic ID card. The boy in the back seat handed it to his mother. His mother handed it to the guard. The guard took it to a computer terminal that looked strange and out of place in the rural stillness. The computer terminal ate the card and flashed this on its screen:

GARRATY RAYMOND DAVIS
RD 1 POWNAL MAINE
ANDROSGOGGIN COUNTY
ID NUMBER 49-801-89
OK-OK-OK

The guard punched another button and all of this disappeared, leaving the terminal screen smooth and green and blank again. He waved them forward.

"Don't they give the card back?" Mrs. Garraty asked. "Don't they-"

"No, Mom," Garraty said patiently.

"Well, I don't like it," she said, pulling forward into an empty space. She had been saying it ever since they set out in the dark of two in the morning. She had been moaning it, actually.

"Don't worry," he said without hearing himself. He was occupied with looking and with his own confusion of anticipation and fear. He was out of the car almost before the engine's last asthmatic wheeze-a tall, well-built boy wearing a faded army fatigue jacket against the eight o'clock spring chill.

His mother was also tall, but too thin. Her breasts were almost nonexistent: token nubs. Her eyes were wandering and unsure, somehow shocked. Her face was an invalid's face. Her iron-colored hair had gone awry under the complication of clips that was supposed to hold it in place. Her dress hung badly on her body as if she had recently lost a lot of weight.

"Ray," she said in that whispery conspirator's voice that he had come to dread. "Ray, listen-"

He ducked his head and pretended to tuck in his shirt. One of the guards was eating C-rations from a can and reading a comic book. Garraty watched the guard eating and reading and thought for the ten thousandth time: It's all real. And now, at last, the thought began to swing some weight.

"There's still time to change your mind-"

The fear and anticipation cranked up a notch.

"No, there's no time for that," he said. "The blackout date was yesterday."

Still in that low conspirator's voice that he hated: "They'd understand, I know they would. The Major-

"The Major would-" Garraty began, and saw his mother wince. "You know what the Major would do, Mom."

Another car had finished the small ritual at the gate and had parked. A boy with dark hair got out. His parents followed and for a moment the three of them stood in conference like worried baseball players. He, like some of the other boys, was wearing a light pack. Garraty wondered if he hadn't been a little stupid not to bring one himself.

"You won't change your mind?"

It was guilt, guilt taking the face of anxiety. Although he was only sixteen, Ray Garraty knew something about guilt. She felt that she had been too dry, too tired, or maybe just too taken up with her older sorrows to halt her son's madness in its seedling stage-to halt it before the cumbersome machinery of the State with its guards in khaki and its computer terminals had taken over, binding himself more tightly to its insensate self with each passing day, until yesterday, when the lid had come down with a final bang.

He put a hand on her shoulder. "This is my idea, Mom. I know it wasn't yours. I-" He glanced around. No one was paying the slightest attention to them. "I love you, but this way is best, one way or the other."

"It's not," she said, now verging on tears. "Ray, it's not, if your father was here, he'd put a stop to-"

"Well, he's not, is he?" He was brutal, hoping to stave off her tears what if they had to drag her off? He had heard that sometimes that happened. The thought made him feel cold. In a softer voice he said, "Let it go now, Mom. Okay?" He forced a grin. "Okay," he answered for her.

Her chin was still trembling, but she nodded. Not all right, but too late. There was nothing anyone could do.

A light wind soughed through the pines. The sky was pure blue. The road was just ahead and the simple stone post that marked the border between America and Canada. Suddenly his anticipation was greater than his fear, and he wanted to get going, get the show on the road.

"I made these. You can take them, can't you? They're not too heavy, are they?" She thrust a foil-wrapped package of cookies at him.

"Yeah." He took them and then clutched her awkwardly, trying to give her what she needed to have. He kissed her cheek. Her skin was like old silk. For a moment he could have cried himself. Then he thought of the smiling, mustachioed face of the Major and stepped back, stuffing the cookies into the pocket of his fatigue jacket.

"G'bye, Mom."

"Goodbye, Ray. Be a good boy."

She stood there for a moment and he had a sense of her being very light, as if even the light puffs of breeze blowing this morning might send her sailing away like a dandelion gone to seed. Then she got back into the car and started the engine. Garraty stood there. She raised her hand and waved. The tears were flowing now. He could see them. He waved back and then as she pulled out he just stood there with his arms at his sides, conscious of how fine and brave and alone he must look. But when the car had passed back through the gate, forlornness struck him and he was only a sixteen-year-old boy again, alone in a strange place.

He turned back toward the road. The other boy, the dark-haired one, was watching his folks pull out. He had a bad scar along one cheek. Garraty walked over to him and said hello.

The dark-haired boy gave him a glance. "Hi."

"I'm Ray Garraty," he said, feeling mildly like an asshole.

"I'm Peter McVries."

"You all ready?" Garraty asked.

McVries shrugged. "I feel jumpy. That's the worst."

Garraty nodded.

The two of them walked toward the road and the stone marker. Behind them, other cars were pulling out. A woman began screaming abruptly. Unconsciously, Garraty and McVries drew closer together. Neither of them looked back. Ahead of them was the road, wide and black.

"That composition surface will be hot by noon," McVries said abruptly. "I'm going to stick to the shoulder."

Garraty nodded. McVries looked at him thoughtfully.

"What do you weigh?"

"Hundred and sixty."

"I'm one-sixty-seven. They say the heavier guys get tired quicker, but I think I'm in pretty good shape."

To Garraty, Peter McVries looked rather more than that-he looked awesomely fit. He wondered who *they* were that said the heavier guys got tired quicker, almost asked, and decided not to. The Walk was one of those things that existed on apocrypha, talismans, legend.

McVries sat down in the shade near a couple of other boys, and after a moment, Garraty sat beside him. McVries seemed to have dismissed him entirely. Garraty looked at his watch. It was five after eight. Fifty-five minutes to go. Impatience and anticipation came back, and he did his best to squash them, telling himself to enjoy sitting while he could.

All of the boys were sitting. Sitting in groups and sitting alone; one boy had climbed onto the lowest branch of a pine overlooking the road and was eating what looked like a jelly sandwich. He was skinny and blond, wearing purple pants and a blue chambray shirt under an old green zip sweater with holes in the elbows. Garraty wondered if the skinny ones would last or burn out quickly.

The boys he and McVries had sat down next to were talking.

"I'm not hurrying," one of them said. "Why should I? If I get warned, so what? You just adjust, that's all. Adjustment is the key word here. Remember where you heard that first."

He looked around and discovered Garraty and McVries.

"More lambs to the slaughter. Hank Olson's the name. Walking is my game." He said this with no trace of a smile at all.

Garraty offered his own name. McVries spoke his own absently, still looking off toward the road.

"I'm Art Baker," the other said quietly. He spoke with a very slight Southern accent. The four of them shook hands all around.

There was a moment's silence, and McVries said, "Kind of scary, isn't it?"

They all nodded except Hank Olson, who shrugged and grinned. Garraty watched the boy in the pine tree finish his sandwich, ball up the waxed paper it had been in, and toss it onto the soft shoulder. He'll burn out early, he decided. That made him feel a little better.

"You see that spot right by the marker post?" Olson said suddenly.

They all looked. The breeze made moving shadow-patterns across the road. Garraty didn't know if he saw anything or not.

"That's from the Long Walk the year before last," Olson said with grim satisfaction. "Kid was so scared he just froze up at nine o'clock."

They considered the horror of it silently.

"Just couldn't move. He took his three warnings and then at 9:02 AM they gave him his ticket. Right there by the starting post."

Garraty wondered if his own legs would freeze. He didn't think so, but it was a thing you wouldn't know for sure until the time came, and it was a terrible thought. He wondered why Hank Olson wanted to bring up such a terrible thing.

Suddenly Art Baker sat up straight. "Here he comes."

A dun-colored jeep drove up to the stone marker and stopped. It was followed by a strange, tread-equipped vehicle that moved much more slowly. There were toy-sized radar dishes mounted on the front and back of this halftrack. Two soldiers lounged on its upper deck, and Garraty felt a chill in his belly when he looked at them. They were carrying army-type heavy-caliber carbine rifles.

Some of the boys got up, but Garraty did not. Neither did Olson or Baker, and after his initial look, McVries seemed to have fallen back into his own thoughts. The skinny kid in the pine tree was swinging his feet idly.

The Major got out of the jeep. He was a tall, straight man with a deep desert tan that went well with his simple khakis. A pistol was strapped to his Sam Browne belt, and he was wearing reflector sunglasses. It was rumored that the Major's eyes were extremely light-sensitive, and he was never seen in public without his sunglasses.

"Sit down, boys," he said. "Keep Hint Thirteen in mind." Hint Thirteen was "Conserve energy whenever possible."

Those who had stood sat down. Garraty looked at his watch again. It said 8:16, and he decided it was a minute fast. The Major always showed up on time. He thought momentarily of setting it back a minute and then forgot it.

"I'm not going to make a speech," the Major said, sweeping them with the blank lenses that covered his eyes. "I give my congratulations to the winner among your number, and my acknowledgments of valor to the losers."

He turned to the back of the jeep. There was a living silence. Garraty breathed deep of the spring air. It would be warm. A good day to walk.

The Major turned back to them. He was holding a clipboard. "When I call your name, please step forward and take your number. Then go back to your place until it is time to begin. Do this smartly, please."

"You're in the army now," Olson whispered with a grin, but Garraty ignored it. You couldn't help admiring the Major. Garraty's father, before the Squads took him away, had been fond of calling the Major the rarest and most dangerous monster any nation can produce, a society-supported sociopath. But he had never seen the Major in person.

"Aaronson."

A short, chunky farmboy with a sunburned neck gargled forward, obviously awed by the Major's presence, and took his large plastic 1. He fixed it to his shirt by the pressure strip and the Major clapped him on the back.

"Abraham."

A tall boy with reddish hair in jeans and a T-shirt. His jacket was tied about his waist schoolboy style and flapped wildly around his knees. Olson sniggered.

"Baker, Arthur."

"That's me," Baker said, and got to his feet. He moved with deceptive leisure, and he made Garraty nervous. Baker was going to be tough. Baker was going to last a long time.

Baker came back. He had pressed his number 3 onto the right breast of his shirt.

"Did he say anything to you?" Garraty asked.

"He asked me if it was commencing to come off hot down home," Baker said shyly. "Yeah, he the Major talked to me."

"Not as hot as it's gonna commence getting up here," Olson cracked.

"Baker, James," the Major said.

It went on until 8:40, and it came out right. No one had ducked out. Back in the parking lot, engines started and a number of cars began pulling out-boys from the backup list who would now go home and watch the Long Walk coverage on TV. It's on, Garraty thought, it's really on.

When his turn came, the Major gave him number 47 and told him "Good luck." Up close he smelled very masculine and somehow overpowering. Garraty had an almost insatiable urge to touch the man's leg and make sure he was real.

Peter McVries was 61. Hank Olson was 70. He was with the Major longer than the rest. The Major laughed at something Olson said and clapped him on the back.

"I told him to keep a lot of money on short call," Olson said when he came back. "And he told me to give 'em hell. Said he liked to see someone who was raring to rip. Give 'em hell, boy, he said."

"Pretty good," McVries said, and then winked at Garraty. Garraty wondered what McVries had meant, winking like that. Was he making fun of Olson?

The skinny boy in the tree was named Stebbins. He got his number with his head down, not speaking to the Major at all, and then sat back at the base of his tree. Garraty was somehow fascinated with the boy.

Number 100 was a red-headed fellow with a volcanic complexion. His name was Zuck. He got his number and then they all sat and waited for what would come next.

Then three soldiers from the halftrack passed out wide belts with snap pockets. The pockets were filled with tubes of high-energy concentrate pastes. More soldiers came around with canteens. They buckled on the belts and slung the canteens. Olson slung his belt low on his hips like a gunslinger, found a Waifa chocolate bar, and began to eat it. "Not bad," he said, grinning. He swigged from his canteen, washing down the chocolate, and Garraty wondered if Olson was just fronting, or if he knew something Garraty did not.

The Major looked them over soberly. Garraty's wristwatch said 8:56-how had it gotten so late? His stomach lurched painfully.

"All right, fellows, line up by tens, please. No particular order. Stay with your friends, if you like."

Garraty got up. He felt numb and unreal. It was as if his body now belonged to someone else.

"Well, here we go," McVries said at his elbow. "Good luck, everyone."

"Good luck to you," Garraty said surprised.

McVries said: "I need my fucking head examined." He looked suddenly pale and sweaty, not so awesomely fit as he had earlier. He was trying to smile and not making it. The scar stood out on his cheek like a wild punctuation mark.

Stebbins got up and ambled to the rear of the ten wide, ten deep queue. Olson, Baker, McVries, and Garraty were in the third row. Garraty's mouth was dry. He wondered if he should drink some water. He decided against it. He had never in his life been so aware of his feet. He wondered if he might freeze and get his ticket on the starting line. He wondered if Stebbins would fold early-Stebbins with his jelly sandwich and his purple pants. He wondered if he would fold up first. He wondered what it would feel like if-

His wristwatch said 8:59.

The Major was studying a stainless steel pocket chronometer. He raised his fingers slowly, and everything hung suspended with his hand. The hundred boys watched it carefully, and the silence was awful and immense. The silence was everything.

Garraty's watch said 9:00, but the poised hand did not fall.

Do it! Why doesn't he do it?

He felt like screaming it out.

Then he remembered that his watch was a minute fast-you could set your watch by the Major, only he hadn't, he had forgotten.

The Major's fingers dropped. "Luck to all," he said. His face was expressionless and the reflector sunglasses hid his eyes. They began to walk smoothly, with no jostling.

Garraty walked with them. He hadn't frozen. Nobody froze. His feet passed beyond the stone marker, in parade-step with McVries on his left and Olson on his right. The sound of feet was very loud.

This is it, this is it, this is it.

A sudden insane urge to stop came to him. Just to see if they really meant business. He rejected the thought indignantly and a little fearfully.

They came out of the shade and into the sun, the warm spring sun. It felt good. Garraty relaxed, put his hands in his pockets, and kept step with McVries. The group

began to spread out, each person finding his own stride and speed. The halftrack clanked along the soft shoulder, throwing thin dust. The tiny radar dishes turned busily, monitoring each Walker's speed with a sophisticated on-board computer. Low speed cutoff was exactly four miles an hour.

"Warning! Warning 88!"

Garraty started and looked around. It was Stebbins. Stebbins was 88. Suddenly he was sure Stebbins was going to get his ticket right here, still in sight of the starting post.

"Smart." It was Olson.

"What?" Garraty asked. He had to make a conscious effort to move his tongue.

"The guy takes a warning while he's still fresh and gets an idea of where the limit is. And he can sluff it easy enough-you walk an hour without getting a fresh warning, you lose one of the old ones. You know that."

"Sure I know it," Garraty said. It was in the rule book. They gave you three warnings. The fourth time you fell below four miles an hour you were well, you were out of the Walk. But if you had three warnings and could manage to walk for three hours, you were back in the sun again.

"So now he knows," Olson said. "And at 10:02, he's in the clear again."

Garraty walked on at a good clip. He was feeling fine. The starting post dropped from sight as they breasted a hill and began descending into a long, pine-studded valley. Here and there were rectangular fields with the earth just freshly turned.

"Potatoes, they tell me," McVries said.

"Best in the world," Garraty answered automatically.

"You from Maine?" Baker asked.

"Yeah, downstate." He looked up ahead. Several boys had drawn away from the main group, making perhaps six miles an hour. Two of them were wearing identical leather jackets, with what looked like eagles on the back. It was a temptation to speed up, but Garraty refused to be hurried. "Conserve energy whenever possible"-Hint 13.

"Does the road go anywhere near your hometown?" McVries asked.

"About seven miles to one side. I guess my mother and my girlfriend will come to see me." He paused and added carefully: "If I'm still walking, of course."

"Hell, there won't be twenty-five gone when we get downstate," Olson said.

A silence fell among them at that. Garraty knew it wasn't so, and he thought Olson did, too.

Two other boys received warnings, and in spite of what Olson had said, Garraty's heart lurched each time. He checked back on Stebbins. He was still at the rear, and eating another jelly sandwich. There was a third sandwich jutting from the pocket of his ragged green sweater. Garraty wondered if his mother had made them, and he thought of the cookies his own mother had given him-pressed on him, as if warding off evil spirits.

"Why don't they let people watch the start of a Long Walk?" Garraty asked.

"Spoils the Walkers' concentration," a sharp voice said.

Garraty turned his head. It was a small dark, intense-looking boy with the number 5 pressed to the collar of his jacket. Garraty couldn't remember his name. "Concentration?" he said.

"Yes." The boy moved up beside Garraty. "The Major has said it is very important to concentrate on calmness at the beginning of a Long Walk." He pressed his thumb reflectively against the end of his rather sharp nose. There was a bright red pimple there. "I agree. Excitement, crowds, TV later. Right now all we need to do is focus." He stared at Garraty with his hooded dark brown eyes and said it again. "Focus."

"All I'm focusing on is pickin' 'em up and layin' 'em down," Olson said.

5 looked insulted. "You have to pace yourself. You have to focus on yourself. You have to have a Plan. I'm Gary Barkovitch, by the way. My home is Washington, D.C."

"I'm John Carter," Olson said. "My home is Barsoom, Mars."

Barkovitch curled his lip in contempt and dropped back.

"There's one cuckoo in every clock, I guess," Olson said.

But Garraty thought Barkovitch was thinking pretty clearly-at least until one of the guards called out "Warning! Warning 5!" about five minutes later.

"I've got a stone in my shoe!" Barkovitch said waspishly.

The soldier didn't reply. He dropped off the halftrack and stood on the shoulder of the road opposite Barkovitch. In his hand he held a stainless steel chronometer just like the Major's. Barkovitch stopped completely and took off his shoe. He shook a tiny pebble out of it. Dark, intense, his olive-sallow face shiny with sweat, he paid no attention when the soldier called out, "Second warning, 5." Instead, he smoothed his sock carefully over the arch of his foot.

"Oh-oh," Olson said. They had all turned around and were walking backward.

Stebbins, still at the tag end, walked past Barkovitch without looking at him. Now Barkovitch was all alone, slightly to the right of the white line, retying his shoe.

"Third warning, 5. Final warning."

There was something in Garraty's belly that felt like a sticky ball of mucus. He didn't want to look, but he couldn't look away. He wasn't conserving energy whenever possible by walking backward, but he couldn't help that, either. He could almost feel Barkovitch's seconds shriveling away to nothing.

"Oh, boy," Olson said. "That dumb shit, he's gonna get his ticket."

But then Barkovitch was up. He paused to brush some road dirt from the knees of his pants. Then he broke into a trot, caught up with the group, and settled back into his walking pace. He passed Stebbins, who still didn't look at him, and caught up with Plan.

He grinned, brown eyes glittering. "See? I just got myself a rest. It's all in my Plan."

"Maybe you think so," Olson said, his voice higher than usual. "All I see that you got is three warnings. For your lousy minute and a half you got to walk three fucking hours. And why in hell did you need a rest? We just started, for Chrissake!"

Barkovitch looked insulted. His eyes burned at Olson. "We'll see who gets his ticket first, you or me," he said. "It's all in my Plan."

"Your Plan and the stuff that comes out of my asshole bear a suspicious resemblance to each other," Olson said, and Baker chuckled.

With a snort, Barkovitch strode past them.

Olson couldn't resist a parting shot. "Just don't stumble, buddy. They don't warn you again. They just"

Barkovitch didn't even look back and Olson gave up, disgusted.

At thirteen past nine by Garraty's watch (he had taken the trouble to set it back the one minute), the Major's jeep breasted the hill they had just started down. He came past them on the shoulder opposite the pacing halftrack and raised a battery-powered loudhailer to his lips.

"I'm pleased to announce that you have finished the first mile of your journey, boys. I'd also like to remind you that the longest distance a full complement of Walkers has ever covered is seven and three-quarters miles. I'm hoping you'll better that."

The jeep spurred ahead. Olson appeared to be considering this news with startled, even fearful, wonder. Not even eight miles, Garraty thought. It wasn't nearly as far as he would have guessed. He hadn't expected anyone-not even Stebbins to get a ticket until late afternoon at least. He thought of Barkovitch. All he had to do was fall below speed once in the next hour.

"Ray?" It was Art Baker. He had taken off his coat and slung it over one arm. "Any particular reason you came on the Long Walk?"

Garraty unclipped his canteen and had a quick swallow of water. It was cool and good. It left beads of moisture on his upper lip and he licked them off. It was good, good to feel things like that.

"I don't really know," he said truthfully.

"Me either." Baker thought for a moment. "Did you go out for track or anything? In school?"

"Me either. But I guess it don't matter, does it? Not now."

"No, not now," Garraty asked.

Conversation lulled. They passed through a small village with a country store and a gas station. Two old men sat on folding lawn-chairs outside the gas station, watching them with hooded and reptilian old men's eyes. On the steps of the country store, a young woman held up her tiny son so he could see them. And a couple of older kids, around twelve, Garraty judged, watched them out of sight wistfully.

Some of the boys began to speculate about how much ground they had covered. The word came back that a second pacer halftrack had been dispatched to cover the half a dozen boys in the vanguard they were now completely out of sight. Someone said they were doing seven miles an hour. Someone else said it was ten. Someone told them authoritatively that a guy up ahead was flagging and had been warned twice. Garraty wondered why they weren't catching up to him if that was true.

Olson finished the Waifa chocolate bar he had started back at the border and drank some water. Some of the others were also eating, but Garraty decided to wait until he was really hungry. He had heard the concentrates were quite good. The astronauts got them when they went into space.

A little after ten o'clock, they passed a sign that said LIMESTONE 10 MI. Garraty thought about the only Long Walk his father had ever let him go to. They went to Freeport and watched them walk through. His mother had been with them. The Walkers were tired and hollow-eyed and barely conscious of the cheering and the waving signs

and the constant hoorah as people cheered on their favorites and those on whom they had wagered. His father told him later that day that people lined the roads from Bangor on. Up-country it wasn't so interesting, and the road was strictly cordoned off-maybe so they could concentrate on being calm, as Barkovitch had said. But as time passed, it got better, of course.

When the Walkers passed through Freeport that year they had been on the road over seventy-two hours. Garraty had been ten and overwhelmed by everything. The Major had made a speech to the crowd while the boys were still five miles out of town. He began with Competition, progressed to Patriotism, and finished with something called the Gross National Product-Garraty had laughed at that, because to him gross meant something nasty, like boogers. He had eaten six hotdogs and when he finally saw the Walkers coming he had wet his pants.

One boy had been screaming. That was his most vivid memory. Every time he put his foot down he had screamed: *I can't. I CAN'T. I can't. I CAN'T.* But he went on walking. They all did, and pretty soon the last of them had gone past L. L. Bean's on U.S. 1 and out of sight. Garraty had been mildly disappointed at not seeing anyone get a ticket. They had never gone to another Long Walk. Later that night Garraty had heard his father shouting thickly at someone into the telephone, the way he did when he was being drunk or political, and his mother in the background, her conspiratorial whisper, begging him to stop, please stop, before someone picked up the party line.

Garraty drank some more water and wondered how Barkovitch was making it.

They were passing more houses now. Families sat out on their front lawns, smiling, waving, drinking Coca-Colas.

"Garraty," McVries said. "My, my, look what you got."

A pretty girl of about sixteen in a white blouse and red-checked pedal pushers was holding up a big Magic Marker sign: GO-GO-GARRATY NUMBER 47 *We Love You* Ray "Maine's Own."

Garraty felt his heart swell. He suddenly knew he was going to win. The unnamed girl proved it.

Olson whistled wetly, and began to slide his stiff index finger rapidly in and out of his loosely curled fist. Garraty thought that was a pretty goddam sick thing to be doing.

To hell with Hint 13. Garraty ran over to the side of the road. The girl saw his number and squealed. She threw herself at him and kissed him hard. Garraty was suddenly, sweetly aroused. He kissed back vigorously. The girl poked her tongue into his mouth twice, delicately. Hardly aware of what he was doing, he put one hand on a round buttock and squeezed gently.

"Warning! Warning 47!"

Garraty stepped back and grinned. "Thanks."

"Oh oh oh *sure!*" Her eyes were starry.

He tried to think of something else to say, but he could see the soldier opening his mouth to give him the second warning. He trotted back to his place, panting a little and grinning. He felt a little guilty after Hint 13 just the same, though.

Olson was also grinning. "For that I would have taken three warnings."

Garraty didn't answer, but he turned around and walked backward and waved to the girl. When she was out of sight he turned around and began to walk firmly. An hour before his warning would be gone. He must be careful not to get another one. But he felt good. He felt fit. He felt like he could walk all the way to Florida. He started to walk faster.

"Ray." McVries was still smiling. "What's your hurry?"

Yeah, that was right. Hint 6: Slow and easy does it. "Thanks."

McVries went on smiling. "Don't thank me too much. I'm out to win, too."

Garraty stared at him, disconcerted.

"I mean, let's not put this on a Three Musketeers basis. I like you and it's obvious you're a big hit with the pretty girls. But if you fall over, I won't pick you up."

"Yeah." He smiled back, but his smile felt lame.

"On the other hand," Baker drawled softly, "we're all in this together and we might as well keep each other amused."

McVries smiled. "Why not?"

They came to an upslope and saved their breath for walking. Halfway up, Garraty took off his jacket and slung it over his shoulder. A few moments later they passed someone's discarded sweater lying on the road. Someone, Garraty thought, is going to wish they had that tonight. Up ahead, a couple of the point Walkers were losing ground.

Garraty concentrated on picking them up and putting them down. He still felt good. He felt strong.

Chapter 2

"Now you have the money, Ellen and that's yours to keep. Unless, of course, you'd like to trade it for what's behind the curtain."

-Monty Hall
Let's Make a Deal

"I'm Harkness. Number 49. You're Garraty. Number 47. Right?"

Garraty looked at Harkness, who wore glasses and had a crewcut. Harkness's face was red and sweaty. "That's right."

Harkness had a notebook. He wrote Garraty's name and number in it. The script was strange and jerky, bumping up and down as he walked. He ran into a fellow named Collie Parker who told him to watch where the fuck he was going. Garraty suppressed a smile.

"I'm taking down everyone's name and number," Harkness said. When he looked up, the midmorning sun sparkled on the lenses of his glasses, and Garraty had to squint to see his face. It was 10:30, and they were 8 miles out of Limestone, and they had only 1.75 miles to go to beat the record of the farthest distance traveled by a complete Long Walk group.

"I suppose you're wondering why I'm writing down everyone's name and number," Harkness said.

"You're with the Squads," Olson cracked over his shoulder.

"No, I'm going to write a book," Harkness said pleasantly. "When this is all over, I'm going to write a book."

Garraty grinned. "If you win you're going to write a book, you mean."

Harkness shrugged. "Yes, I suppose. But look at this: a book about the Long Walk from an insider's point of view could make me a rich man."

McVries burst out laughing. "If you win, you won't need a book to make you a rich man, will you?"

Harkness frowned. "Well I suppose not. But it would still make one heck of an interesting book, I think."

They walked on, and Harkness continued taking names and numbers. Most gave them willingly enough, joshing him about the great book.

Now they had come six miles. The word came back that it looked good for breaking the record. Garraty speculated briefly on why they should want to break the record anyhow. The quicker the competition dropped out, the better the odds became for those remaining. He supposed it was a matter of pride. The word also came back that thundershowers were forecast for the afternoon-someone had a transistor radio, Garraty supposed. If it was true, it was bad news. Early May thundershowers weren't the warmest.

They kept walking.

McVries walked firmly, keeping his head up and swinging his arms slightly. He had tried the shoulder, but fighting the loose soil there had made him give it up. He hadn't been warned, and if the knapsack was giving him any trouble or chafing, he showed no sign. His eyes were always searching the horizon. When they passed small clusters of people, he waved and smiled his thin-lipped smile. He showed no signs of tiring.

Baker ambled along, moving in a kind of knee-bent shuffle that seemed to cover the ground when you weren't looking. He swung his coat idly, smiled at the pointing people, and sometimes whistled a low snatch of some tune or other. Garraty thought he looked like he could go on forever.

Olson wasn't talking so much anymore, and every few moments he would bend one knee swiftly. Each time Garraty could hear the joint pop. Olson was stiffening up a little. Garraty thought, beginning to show six miles of walking. Garraty judged that one of his canteens must be almost empty. Olson would have to pee before too long.

Barkovitch kept up the same jerky pace, now ahead of the main group as if to catch up with the vanguard Walkers, now dropping back toward Stebbins's position on drag. He lost one of his three warnings and gained it back five minutes later. Garraty decided he must like it there on the edge of nothing.

Stebbins just kept on walking off by himself. Garraty hadn't seen him speak to anybody. He wondered if Stebbins was lonely or tired. He still thought Stebbins would fold up early-maybe first-although he didn't know why he thought so. Stebbins had taken off the old green sweater, and he carried the last jelly sandwich in his hand. He looked at no one. His face was a mask.

They walked on.

The road was crossed by another, and policemen were holding up traffic as the Walkers passed. They saluted each Walker, and a couple of the boys, secure in their immunity, thumbed their noses. Garraty didn't approve. He smiled and nodded to acknowledge the police and wondered if the police thought they were all crazy.

The cars honked, and then some woman yelled out to her son. She had parked beside the road, apparently waiting to make sure her boy was still along for the Walk.

"Percy! Percy!"

It was 31. He blushed, then waved a little, and then hurried on with his head slightly bent. The woman tried to run out into the road. The guards on the top deck of the halftrack stiffened, but one of the policemen caught her arm and restrained her gently. Then the road curved and the intersection was out of sight.

They passed across a wooden-slatted bridge. A small brook gurgled its way underneath. Garraty walked close to the railing, and looking over he could see, for just a moment, a distorted image of his own face.

They passed a sign which read LIMESTONE 7 MI. and then under a rippling banner which said LIMESTONE IS PROUD TO WELCOME THE LONG WALKERS. Garraty figured they had to be less than a mile from breaking the record.

Then the word came back, and this time the word was about a boy named Curley, number 7. Curley had a charley horse and had already picked up his first warning. Garraty put on some speed and came even with McVries and Olson. "Where is he?"

Olson jerked his thumb at a skinny, gangling boy in blue-jeans. Curley had been trying to cultivate sideburns. The sideburns had failed. His lean and earnest face was now set in lines of terrific concentration, and he was staring at his right leg. He was favoring it. He was losing ground and his face showed it.

"Warning! Warning 7!"

Curley began to force himself faster. He was panting a little. As much from fear as from his exertions, Garraty thought. Garraty lost all track of time. He forgot everything but Curley. He watched him struggle, realizing in a numb sort of way that this might be his struggle an hour from now or a day from now.

It was the most fascinating thing he had ever seen.

Curley fell back slowly, and several warnings were issued to others before the group realized they were adjusting to his speed in their fascination. Which meant Curley was very close to the edge.

"Warning! Warning 7! Third warning, 7!"

"I've got a charley horse!" Curley shouted hoarsely. "It ain't no fair if you've got a charley horse!"

He was almost beside Garraty now. Garraty could see Curley's adam's apple going up and down. Curley was massaging his leg frantically. And Garraty could smell panic coming off Curley in waves, and it was like the smell of a ripe, freshly cut lemon.

Garraty began to pull ahead of him, and the next moment Curley exclaimed: "Thank God! She's loosening!"

No one said anything. Garraty felt a grudging disappointment. It was mean, and unsporting, he supposed, but he wanted to be sure someone got a ticket before he did. Who wants to bow out first?

Garraty's watch said five past eleven now. He supposed that meant they had beaten the record, figuring two hours times four miles an hour. They would be in Limestone soon. He saw Olson flex first one knee, then the other, again. Curious, he tried it himself. His knee joints popped audibly, and he was surprised to find how much stiffness had settled into them. Still, his feet didn't hurt. That was something.

They passed a milk truck parked at the head of a small dirt feeder road. The milkman was sitting on the hood. He waved good-naturedly. "Go to it, boys!"

Garraty felt suddenly angry. Felt like yelling. *Why don't you just get up off your fat ass and go to it with us?* But the milkman was past eighteen. In fact, he looked well past thirty. He was old.

"Okay, everybody, take five," Olson cracked suddenly, and got some laughs.

The milk truck was out of sight. There were more roads now, more policemen and people honking and waving. Someone threw confetti. Garraty began to feel important. He was, after all, "Maine's Own."

Suddenly Curley screamed. Garraty looked back over his shoulder. Curley was doubled over, holding his leg and screaming. Somehow, incredibly, he was still walking, but very slowly. Much too slowly.

Everything went slowly then, as if to match the way Curley was walking. The soldiers on the back of the slow-moving halftrack raised their guns. The crowd gasped, as if they hadn't known this was the way it was, and the Walkers gasped, as if they hadn't known, and Garraty gasped with them, but of course he had known, of course they had all known, it was very simple, Curley was going to get his ticket.

The safeties clicked off. Boys scattered from around Curley like quail. He was suddenly alone on the sunwashed road.

"It isn't fair!" he screamed. "It just isn't fair!"

The walking boys entered a leafy glade of shadow, some of them looking back, some of them looking straight ahead, afraid to see. Garraty was looking. He had to look. The scatter of waving spectators had fallen silent as if someone had simply clicked them all off.

"It isn't-"

Four carbines fired. They were very loud. The noise traveled away like bowling balls, struck the hills, and rolled back.

Curley's angular, pimply head disappeared in a hammersmash of blood and brains and flying skull-fragments. The rest of him fell forward on the white line like a sack of mail.

99 now, Garraty thought sickly. 99 bottles of beer on the wall and if one of those bottles should happen to fall oh Jesus oh Jesus

Stebbins stepped over the body. His foot slid a little in some of the blood, and his next step with that foot left a bloody track, like a photograph in an Official *Detective* magazine. Stebbins didn't look down at what was left of Curley. His face didn't change expression. Stebbins, you bastard, Garraty thought, you were supposed to get your ticket first, didn't you know? Then Garraty looked away. He didn't want to be sick. He didn't want to vomit.

A woman beside a Volkswagen bus put her face in her hands. She made odd noises in her throat, and Garraty found he could look right up her dress to her underpants. Her blue underpants. Inexplicably, he found himself aroused again. A fat man with a bald head was staring at Curley and rubbing frantically at a wart beside his ear. He wet his large, thick lips and went on looking and rubbing the wart. He was still looking when Garraty passed him by.

They walked on. Garraty found himself walking with Olson, Baker, and McVries again. They were almost protectively bunched up. All of them were looking straight ahead now, their faces carefully expressionless. The echoes of the carbines seemed to hang in the air still. Garraty kept thinking about the bloody footprint that Stebbins's tennis shoe had left. He wondered if it was still tracking red, almost turned his head to look, then told himself not to be a fool. But he couldn't help wondering. He wondered if it had hurt Curley. He wondered if Curley had felt the gas-tipped slugs hitting home or if he had just been alive one second and dead the next.

But of course it had hurt. It had hurt before, in the worst, rupturing way, knowing there would be no more you but the universe would roll on just the same, unharmed and unhampered.

The word came back that they had made almost nine miles before Curley bought his ticket. The Major was said to be as pleased as punch. Garraty wondered how anyone could know where the hell the Major was.

He looked back suddenly, wanting to know what was being done with Curley's body, but they had already rounded another curve. Curley was out of sight.

"What have you got in that packsack?" Baker asked McVries suddenly. He was making an effort to be strictly conversational, but his voice was high and reedy, near to cracking.

"A fresh shirt," McVries said. "And some raw hamburger."

"Raw hamburger-" Olson made a sick face.

"Good fast energy in raw hamburger," McVries said.

"You're off your trolley. You'll puke all over the place."

McVries only smiled.

Garraty kind of wished he had brought some raw hamburger himself. He didn't know about fast energy, but he liked raw hamburger. It beat chocolate bars and concentrates. Suddenly he thought of his cookies, but after Curley he wasn't very hungry. After Curley, could he really have been thinking about eating raw hamburger?

The word that one of the Walkers had been ticketed out ran through the spectators, and for some reason they began to cheer even more loudly. Thin applause crackled like popcorn. Garraty wondered if it was embarrassing, being shot in front of people, and guessed by the time you got to that you probably didn't give a tin whistle. Curley hadn't looked as if he gave a tin whistle, certainly. Having to relieve yourself, though. That would be bad. Garraty decided not to think about that.

The hands on his watch now stood firmly straight up at noon. They crossed a rusty iron bridge spanning a high, dry gorge, and on the other side was a sign reading: ENTERING LIMESTONE CITY LIMITS-WELCOME, LONG WALKERS!

Some of the boys cheered, but Garraty saved his breath.

The road widened and the Walkers spread across it comfortably, the groups loosening up a little. After all, Curley was three miles back now.

Garraty took out his cookies, and for a moment turned the foil package over in his hands. He thought homesickly of his mother, then stuffed the feeling aside.

He would see Mom and Jan in Freeport. That was a promise. He ate a cookie and felt a little better.

"You know something?" McVries said.

Garraty shook his head. He took a swig from his canteen and waved at an elderly couple sitting beside the road with a small cardboard GARRATY sign.

"I have no idea what I'll want if I do win this," McVries said. "There's nothing that I really need. I mean, I don't have a sick old mother sitting home or a father on a kidney machine, or anything. I don't even have a little brother dying gamely of leukemia." He laughed and unstrapped his canteen

"You've got a point there," Garraty agreed.

"You mean I *don't* have a point there. The whole thing is pointless."

"You don't really mean that," Garraty said confidently. "If you had it to do all over again-"

"Yeah, yeah, I'd still do it, but-"

"Hey!" The boy ahead of them, Pearson, pointed. "Sidewalks!"

They were finally coming into the town proper. Handsome houses set back from the road looked down at them from the vantage of ascending green lawns. The lawns were crowded with people, waving and cheering. It seemed to Garraty that almost all of them were sitting down. Sitting on the ground, on lawn chairs like the old men back at the gas station, sitting on picnic tables. Even sitting on swings and porch gliders. He felt a touch of jealous anger.

Go ahead and wave your asses off. I'll be damned if I'll wave back anymore. Hint 13. Conserve energy whenever possible.

But finally he decided he was being foolish. People might decide he was getting snotty. He was, after all, "Maine's Own." He decided he would wave to all the people with GARRATY signs. And to all the pretty girls.

Sidestreets and cross-streets moved steadily past. Sycamore Street and Clark Avenue, Exchange Street and Juniper Lane. They passed a corner grocery with a Narragansett beer sign in the window, and a five-and-dime plastered with pictures of the Major.

The sidewalks were lined with people, but thinly lined. On the whole, Garraty was disappointed. He knew the real crowds would come further down the line, but it was still something of a wet firecracker. And poor old Curley had missed even this.

The Major's jeep suddenly spurted out of a sidestreet and began pacing the main group. The vanguard was still some distance ahead.

A tremendous cheer went up. The Major nodded and smiled and waved to the crowd. Then he made a neat left-face and saluted the boys. Garraty felt a thrill go straight up his back. The Major's sunglasses glinted in the early afternoon sunlight.

The Major raised the battery-powered loudhailer to his lips. "I'm proud of you, boys. Proud!"

From somewhere behind Garraty a voice said softly but clearly: "Diddly shit."

Garraty turned his head, but there was no one back there but four or five boys watching the Major intently (one of them realized he was saluting and dropped his hand sheepishly), and Stebbins. Stebbins did not even seem to be looking at the Major.

The jeep roared ahead. A moment later the Major was gone again.

They reached downtown Limestone around twelve-thirty. Garraty was disappointed. It was pretty much of a one-hydrant town. There was a business section and three used-car lots and a McDonalds and a Burger King and a Pizza Hut and an industrial park and that was Limestone.

"It isn't very big, is it?" Baker said.

Olson laughed.

"It's probably a nice place to live," Garraty said defensively.

"God spare me from nice places to live," McVries said, but he was smiling.

"Well, what turns you on," Garraty said lamely.

By one o'clock, Limestone was a memory. A small swaggering boy in patched denim overalls walked along with them for almost a mile, then sat down and watched them go by.

The country grew hillier. Garraty felt the first real sweat of the day coming out on him. His shirt was patched to his back. On his right, thunderheads were forming, but they were still far away. There was a light, circulating breeze, and that helped a little.

"What's the next big town, Garraty?" McVries asked.

"Caribou, I guess." He was wondering if Stebbins had eaten his last sandwich yet. Stebbins had gotten into his head like a snatch of pop music that goes around and around until you think you're going to go crazy with it. It was one-thirty. The Long Walk had progressed through eighteen miles.

"How far's that?" Garraty wondered what the record was for miles walked with only one Walker punched out. Eighteen miles seemed pretty good to him. Eighteen miles was a figure a man could be proud of. I walked eighteen miles. Eighteen.

"I said-" McVries began patiently.

"Maybe thirty miles from here."

"Thirty," Pearson said. "Jesus."