



# TAPS

*A Novel*



WILLIE  
MORRIS

Author of *MY DOG SKIP*

# TAPS

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Willie Morris

A N O V E L



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*For the people of Yazoo*

# TAPS

# 1

WE WERE flatland people, each of us in this little long-ago tale: Luke and Amanda and Durley, Georgia and Arch and myself, Potter and Godbold and all the others. The hills came sweeping down from their hardwood forests and challenged the flatness, mingling with it in querulous juxtaposition. But it was the flatland, I see now, that really shaped us — the violence of its extremes, the tumult of its elements, its memory.

I knew the place better than I did my own heart — every bend in the road and the cracks in every sidewalk. It was not in my soul then, only in my pores, yet as familiar to me as water or grass or sunlight. The town was poor one year and rich the next, and everything pertained to the land — labor and usury, mortgage and debt. We lived and died by nature, Anglos and Africans bound together in the whims of the timeless clouds. Our people played seven-card stud against God.

It was one of those years when everything seemed to happen, and sometimes all at once.

Luke Cartwright became for me a harbinger of death in that year. He was in his middle thirties but looked older. He was tall, slender, and taut. His dark brown hair fell aslant on an ample forehead, his translucent blue eyes often filled with mirth.

His handsome features were bronzed even in the winter; he seemed to belong outdoors. He moved about everywhere in a slow, tentative amble, not so much a suggestion of our regional lassitude, I would learn, as an inquisitive caution as to what might lie ahead. His expression in repose was more often than not that of a hunter squinting out from the brush.

I had known him only slightly beforehand, and that from the small-town salutations. I knew he was a bachelor, and that he had grown up on a farm. After high school he had attended the state university for two years, where he played basketball, and made good grades, he would later tell me, except for a D in chemistry under a professor with dubious credentials called Cyanide Thompson. He wanted to graduate, but the farm was in trouble, and when his father died, he went to work in the hardware store on the main street. Luke had enlisted in the army on December 8, 1941. He was a rifleman in an infantry company in North Africa, then landed with the invasion at Normandy. He was promoted to platoon sergeant and fought across France. At the Battle of the Bulge he won the Silver Star. Later, leading a point platoon a few miles east of the Rhine, he was shot in the foot by a sniper. When he returned home, he became a partner in the hardware store. He was made an officer in the hometown American Legion, and I would see him occasionally at public functions wearing his blue cap with the braided gold letters: "Paul Hamill Post No. 12, Fisk's Landing."

It was an ambient evening in early summer when Luke first came by my house. My mother was at a bridge tournament at the country club and would be late, and I was relishing the solitude from her injunctions. Our house was the most modest one on the boulevard, the longest and most imposing thoroughfare of the town, which was lined with the honored domiciles of an earlier day, the gabled and cupolaed and porticoed and ginger-breaded houses of old substantial families in cotton and mer-

chandising and banking and the law, the sweeping porches half-hidden by flourishing magnolias and hickories and gums and chestnuts and weeping willows. There were three Gothic revivals along the boulevard and a grand and lofty Italianate with an oval driveway, all built in that era of confident prosperity when this was the richest cotton county in the state and, for all one knows, the world: black people were bought to raise more cotton to buy more blacks to raise more cotton — the divine decree, the curse upon the unfortunate son of Noah.

I was barefoot in the dew-wet grass. I wore a long-tailed, short-sleeved shirt and department-store khakis so common in that distant time. Earlier it had rained, and the trees arched in shadowy silhouettes, darkly green now before the coming of the heat, dripping with moisture in the cooling breeze. Fireflies were everywhere, embraced by the sibilant dark. The hills began only a hundred yards from the house, and the whole earth sang with crickets and other nocturnal things. Soon the DDT truck came by spraying for the season's first mosquitoes, known and acknowledged as the largest and most aggressive in Christendom, or so we believed.

At first I was looking for frogs in the grass. Then I turned to a private exercise of my own: standing on the sidewalk about thirty feet from the concrete steps leading onto the porch of the house, I threw a golf ball, aiming for the bottom step. If the ball hit the bottom one it was a strike; if it hit the second it was a ball; if it hit the third or fourth I had to catch it on the fly before it got past a certain crack in the sidewalk. Otherwise it would be a single, double, triple, or home run, depending on how far it traveled. I threw one ball so hard it landed on the lawn of the forbidding Victorian across the boulevard; this naturally was a home run.

The chimes from the courthouse clock sounded eight, echoing down the deserted street. I lay down on the moist lawn and gazed into the skies, absorbing the improvisations of the insects all around, and thought about my girlfriend, Georgia. My dog

ambled from around the house and sat next to me. “Look at all the stars coming out, Dusty.” He lay with his head on my lap. After a while he rose and examined a frog near the sidewalk. When the frog croaked, Dusty jumped back; he had learned a long time ago to leave the frogs alone. He was a golden retriever. My father had gotten him for me from Memphis six years before, when he was a bright-eyed puppy who chewed shoes and clothes and once consumed the entire sports section of the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*. I did not know this then, but a boy or a man makes an unspoken pact with himself when he gets a dog. A good, intelligent, deep-feeling dog will give him a few years of fine comradeship, and when they part, the man fulfills the pact with his own feelings of sorrow and loss. But back then nothing was further from my mind; Dusty bent down and looked at me, nuzzling me with his nose, then indolently disappeared into the darkness among the shadows and crickets and owls.

I heard the wheeze of a motor at the front curb. I looked up and saw Luke Cartwright stepping out of his red pickup truck with its high, rectangular cabin and a black cat sprawled on his dashboard. I stood to greet him. He was in khaki trousers and a metallic blue sports shirt that glowed under the streetlamp.

“Taking a snooze, weren’t you?” From a few feet away a frog jumped in an arc and landed with a whish. “Ain’t you a little old to be barefoot in your front yard in the middle of the night? How old *are* you, anyway?”

Sixteen, almost.

“That’s old enough.”

I had never thought of it that way, if indeed I had considered it at all. Does the only child — the solitary *son* of a widowed and indomitable mother fraught with an inordinate propensity for intrusion — dwell on age? Especially when the mother teaches *tap dancing*? Or survival, perhaps, although I would not have used the word then — or *escape* or *improvisation* or even *loneliness*. Old enough for what?

“Can we sit down and talk?”

I led him to the front steps, and we sat down. There was, from inside the house, an uncommon silence, and on the street the mosquito truck drifted by again, shushing arcs of poisonous mist against the deepening night.

“I hear you play the trumpet in the band. And you’re good.”

Only pretty good, I replied.

“Who else is good?”

Arch Kidd, I said, he was very good. He was the best. He practiced all the time.

“Anybody else?”

“No.” The others were younger, and learning. In fact, they were terrible.

I was beginning to perceive in this puzzling interrogation something unusual, if not ominous. Luke sat mysteriously silent for a while, then leaned over and spit on the grass. When I later grew to know him, about as well as I would ever know anyone, I would recognize this as an act of reverence.

“Can you play ‘Taps’?”

“Yes, but it’s hard. On the trumpet you play it with the first valve down,” I said, “in B-flat. That means you have to hit the high F.” Arch Kidd always got the high F right. Arch had the lips for it. I could have told him also that the human face was not designed to play the trumpet. At that time, it was impossible for me to articulate that brass, especially trumpets, are instruments of life in their sound, while reeds are fragile and elusive and deathlike. Could anyone image a clarinet on “Taps”? It is *wood* that makes the sound of the clarinet; *flesh* makes the sound of the trumpet. Pondering these unspoken secrets as I sat next to this perplexing inquisitor, I noticed that I had been moving the index finger of my right hand up and down from instinct, as if I were about to push the first valve.

“I need to talk to Arch too,” Luke said. “Let’s go inside and phone him.”

Arch was not home. He had gone to the coast on vacation.

“Oh, *shit!*” It was an intonation of despair, so loud and precipitate that it would have shocked the widowed neighbors.

“There will be a military funeral tomorrow afternoon,” Luke said, “up in the town cemetery.” They were sending the town’s first dead soldier back from Korea, a boy named Oscar Goodloe. I vaguely remembered him — a squat, resolute, red-faced young man from the hills, a ponderous lineman on the high school team of a few years before.

They needed two trumpets to play “Taps” in the cemetery, one by the gravesite, one in the distance to play it again as an echo. “We’ll have to get by with one this time. You’ll play at the grave.”

I felt dry-mouthed and giddy, breathless with doubt. The thought of trying to hit the high note at a grave surrounded by mourners looking straight at me was an unpleasant prospect, and dangerous. I had a fear of being watched too closely, and of being laughed at. And all the while that body in the coffin.

“Can’t you get somebody else?”

“What are you, *scared?*”

“You don’t even know me,” I replied petulantly.

“I’m trusting you anyway. You’re it.”

“I’ll have to oil my trumpet.”

“Then *oil* the damned thing.” Wear a dark suit, he said. And a white shirt and tie. And regular shoes. No saddle oxfords, no sneakers. Be at the grave at 2:30, just before the procession, and be *at attention* when the hearse and the people arrive. He explained to me the precise place in the old section. Just look for the Ricks Funeral Home tent.

In later years, I wondered: Why did I do it? It happened so swiftly and simply, less a decision than an acquiescing. And the night itself was so soft and private and inviolate. I could have said no — or lied, saying that I could not hit the notes. Was I, a solitary boy, more lonesome than scared? Did I consent that night out of loneliness? Or was there something more?

“Play slow,” Luke said. “And proud.”

“How do I play *proud*?”

“You’ll find out.”

He got up and stretched, then looked lazily into the nighttime sky. “Oscar Goodloe!” he said. “I knew he wouldn’t last.”

I walked along behind him to his truck. Far up the boulevard a freight rumbled through town, its whistle disembodied against the drowsing facades.

Luke leaned against his truck. Then, almost tenderly, he said to me: “See you tomorrow. This won’t be the last one. Where the hell is *Korea*? Do *you* know anything about it?” He opened the door and waved farewell. With a rattle of gears he disappeared down the street, with only the question lingering behind him.

We had heard about Korea. How could we not? Radio broadcasts told about the Yaks and Stormoviks and T-34s, Syngman Rhee and Trygve Lie and Harry S. (for nothing) Truman and Douglas MacArthur and the 38th parallel and the bloody battles for a few feet of mountaintop and “Let every man stand or die” and the “Pax Americana” and the “New American Imperium” and “No more Munichs.” We listened to the alien freakish names of places we could not fathom: Osau, Pusan, Chukminyung, Yongdok, Inchon, Desperation Corner, Frozen Chosen, the bloody Naktong, the black waters of the Yalu, and Bloody Ridge, Heartbreak Ridge, Bunker Hill, the Punchbowl. We had to look them up in the atlas at school to find out where they were. But what was going on there?

This war was not like World War II when you were nine years old and exchanged gum cards of the latest heroes like Colin Kelly and Colonel Rickenbacker and followed the maps of the battles in the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* and went to the war movies and saw the Pathé news and knew whom to hate — crazy, frothing Hitler, who ruled from the French

coast to the Turkish steppes and gassed and burned little innocent naked children and probably even enjoyed it, and fat, degenerate Goering and clubfooted, satanic Goebbels and banal, murderous Himmler, and baldheaded and loudmouthed Mussolini, whom his own people sooner or later hanged upside down, and the Nipponese and the Day of Infamy and the Death March on Bataan and the rape of our nurses while their fingernails were pried off and their ears ripped out, and our prisoners being starved. And we knew whom to admire, too — the valiant English who had defended their land for a thousand years and the London children wearing gas masks, the Free French, the Russians at Leningrad, the noble, all-suffering Chinese. *Life* magazine published a list: among all towns of its size in the nation, my town, Fisk's Landing, had sent the fourth most men to that war, and as children we roamed about in an effort to help their cause, collecting kitchen drippings, scrap metals, and coat hangers, empty toothpaste tubes, old rubber, and the silver paper inside cigarette packages. But now with this war in Korea there was nothing to hold on to.

The entire National Guard unit of our town had been called. It was part of the Dixie Division, the grand old Thirty-first, the same local unit that had been summoned as the Germans overran France in '40; when called, they went. They had been activated several weeks ago, and we all knew they would be dispatched to the fighting as soon as possible. So the small far-away land grew more palpable to us by day, and the Stars and Stripes from that other, more comprehensible holocaust were washed and ironed and brought out again to stand before the houses and storefronts. The younger brothers of veterans of the last war were fighting this one. Fisk's Landing was there, as it had always been.

The local National Guard was an array of the provincial Anglo-Saxon amalgam, interspersed with Lebanese and Jews and Italians and even a few Greeks and Poles. Hill and flatland boys were equally represented, with some of the World War II men.

Yet everything reflected the social and geographic divide. As with the high school football teams, where the prematurely aging hill boys were the tackles, guards, and centers, and the boys from town the ends and backs, so, too, with few exceptions, such as Lieutenant Billy Permenter, the hills provided the ranks and the flatland the officers. The hill-country boys from the small hardscrabble farms had enlisted in the late forties to draw their \$30 monthly pay and to preen about on the main street or in front of the Elks Lodge or Crenshaw's or the Rebel Theater or the courthouse on Saturday nights.

It was an unprepossessing main street, with the patina of the uncertain cotton economy, of the dubious elements and the debt, a raw little thoroughfare ending precipitously at the bend of the murky river where an entrepreneur named Fisk had established his landing years before the Civil War. But on Saturday nights in the milling interracial cosmos with drunks everywhere and summer bugs swarming in violent clusters about the streetlights, the guard boys from the unrepentant backcountry, with their starched khakis and their angular girls in pale calicoes, added an element of theater that I have not to this day forgotten. I remember, too, their names, from the blood source of our nation's sturdiest defenders: Strong, Biggers, Steptoe, Puckett, and Chisholm, Boone, Wingo, Pounds, and Rance, Jetter, Huskey, Glass, Bull, and Scuttles.

"Hey, Hardy!" one of them would shout. "Let's go drink beer at Crenshaw's."

"Too many niggers in there." They would stare across the street at the very Negroes themselves sniffing out the night for its possibilities.

"Then let's get the gals and go up on the Peak."

"Now you talkin'."

They would lounge about on the crowded Saturday street corners, filling the air with their riotous hosannas. They were as spare as hardtack. They would have been with Stonewall in the Valley.

Guard meetings were held every other week. Arch, Georgia, and I would sometimes ride by the fetid old armory built by the WPA and observe the guardsmen lying in the crabgrass looking into the sky or cracking pecans with their knuckles or polishing their obsolete carbines or playing kick the can around the derelict baseball diamond in the rear. The officers and sergeants were brisk and professional, often conferring among themselves in tense little huddles, but when they gave orders to the cadres in the ranks, these were less the standard commands than indigenous cajolery.

“Come on, boys. Up! Up!”

“Too hot.”

“I’ll make it hot. Come on, now, fellas.”

“Give me a minute, sir. I got a stiff leg.”

“Don’t you want to get home early today?”

“Hell, why didn’t you *say* so?” And they would rise and stretch and brush the grass off their fatigues and snap into formless activity. Only Lieutenant Durley Godbold could handle them, it seemed, and mostly through fear.

Then the message came down from Washington. They were given one month’s notice. Arch and I drove out in Arch’s Plymouth the day they departed. The officers had asked our band director, Mr. Percival, to muster an ensemble of brass, reeds, and drums for the formal farewell. We gathered in the shade of a tall pecan. Georgia was standing with us at the edge of the shade; her flute gleamed like magic in the reflected sun. It was a cold, windy forenoon under amorphous skies. Jeeps and transport trucks marked with the solitary white stars had appeared from nowhere; wives and children and parents and girlfriends and dogs crowded about the vehicles. “*Let’s get them gooks!*” This led to exuberant shouting and rebel yells — then suddenly it was very quiet. The guardsmen formed in ranks and came to attention. Two young men held the American and state flags, which flapped strenuously in the wind.

From under our pecan I gazed down the lines. We knew many of these boys. A few of them were seniors in high school. One officer, Lieutenant Tommy Ross Morgan, and two sergeants there were members of our church. Several were from a nearby junior college that gave athletes one-half scholarships and put them in the guard to pay the other half. The tableau before us was touched with a troubled, bittersweet sadness.

The officers had asked us to play "Dixie." For the Dixie Division, they said. And then "The Star-Spangled Banner." The director waved his baton. The flags snapped so that the sound of them echoed off the gray facade of the armory.

When it was finished, Arch and I, trumpets in hand, went over to the trucks. Luke Cartwright and several of the older American Legionnaires, Sarge Jennings, Son Graham, Roach Weems, and the others, were shaking hands with the troops. An air of enigma and bafflement seemed to accompany these proceedings of departure, as if some people felt that the hapless foot soldier was no longer needed.

"We're federal property now," Luke Cartwright's cousin Lieutenant Billy Permenter was saying to them. He was a compact young man with thinning red hair and ears like ovals, who had taught us seventh-grade science and math. I recalled him during recesses disappearing behind the oaks at the farthest edge of the grounds for a secret chew of tobacco. When he saw Arch and me, he shook our hands. "Hold down the school," he said dramatically.

On the steps of the armory I saw Lieutenant Durley Godbold with his wife, Amanda, who taught piano lessons at the high school. At first he was laughing, but soon his expression soured to surliness and venom, so out of character with the prevailing mood of sad farewell that I stared at them for a moment, hypnotized, until he saw me looking and stared back. I moved away in embarrassment.

In the crowd we saw Lank Hemphill, our older classmate, a

wizened, ageless boy whose khakis sagged on his bone-thin frame. I remembered him from as early as the second grade, when he lacked the money for the cafeteria lunches. He and the other relief children would come into school from the hills barefoot in the warm weather; sometimes they brought small jars of home-canned goods to swap for lunches. I wanted to invite them to my house after school and give them something to eat. "We can't have *them* in the house," my mother said. Of all the Ruston Hill children, a hard, inseparable cadre, Lank was the most gentle. They were as profane as their impenitent earth, but I never once heard him swear. Across the nearly unfathomable chasm, he was the one who seemed to want most to be our friend. As a child he sometimes walked the three miles into the town to play with Arch and Georgia and me in the alleyways, the backyards, the empty fairgrounds, the cotton gin. He kept falling back in school, and by junior high had so receded that he finally found himself in our class. "I can't go back down no more," he would say. "I guess I'll go on up with you, just one step at a time." In front of the armory on this day, he was the most dispirited figure I had ever seen, as spindly as a straw, a sulky scarecrow who at that moment could not have alarmed a sparrow or a chipmunk, much less a fanatic, armed-to-the-teeth Oriental. We stood uneasily in the tumultuous scene.

"I don't want to go," he said. "Why ain't you comin' with me?"

We promised to write him letters — the whole class.

"Where *to*? I don't even know where I'm goin'."

They departed that day for Fort Jackson in South Carolina, where they were broken up into other units. Then, we later learned, across to the West Coast, and then Japan. After that, to the obscure little peninsula of Korea, and we lost touch for a while.

Lieutenant Billy Permenter wrote his cousin Luke Cartwright from aboard the *General D. I. Sulton* after they had shipped out from Camp Stoneman in California to Japan: