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(*from The Climbing Wave, by Marion Zimmer Bradley*)

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Bryce Walton began his writing by covering the Iwo Jima and Okinawa campaigns as a combat correspondent for Leatherneck. In the decade and more since then he has written two novels (an s.f. juvenile and a crime book), close to a hundred scripts for CAPTAIN VIDEO and other TV shows, a series of articles on American history for British readers, and innumerable stories and novelets for just about every pulp magazine in existence, western, detective, adventure, and science fiction. His first story in F&SF is a brilliantly vivid nightmare of If-This-Goes-On . . . a flashing glimpse of the future in which the Psych boys think they have found the answer (cool, man!) to our heavily publicized problems of juvenile aberration.

The Midway

by BRYCE WALTON

SOON AS HERM LATHROP SAW THE Whirbug drop past his window, he ran to the secret compartment behind the desk of his room and dragged out the Black Raiders' hidden phone. He listened to see whether or not his old man might be spying on him, tapping the phone on the sly, then he waited for Ringo's plug-in.

"You ready, Herm?"

"Ready, Ringo. Got to get some fun money first from the old man, and I'll be right out!"

"Then we'll get release," Ringo said from the Whirbug hotrod outside. "This time I'm hunting me down a redhead!"

Herm wiped at the nervousness coating his face and hardening his

thin lips. "I'll go for anything to-night! It's been a week since I had a girlie."

"A week for me too, a week too long for Ringo. So let's move, Herm!"

Herm made the salute of the Black Raiders and said with a hollow haunt in his throat, Ho! Hoooo! Black Raiderrrrrrr!"

"Ho! Hoooo! Black Raiderrrrrrr!" Ringo answered.

Herm slipped down the stairs with the weight of his Old Man's total lack of feeling, sympathy or understanding on his lungs, and the Old Man's tired marshmallow face in his mind's gray space. He spied carefully across the living room.

The Old Man sagged snoring be-

fore the TV screen, dead inside as usual, gone with the life-killing work-week, so that he'd be snoring the weekend away like in a gray dream.

Herm slipped some credit paper from the Old Man's wallet, replaced the wallet and crammed the credits into his skin-tight blue jeans. Then he leaned close to the bald head and blasted it right off the Old Man's eardrum. "Ho! Hoooo! Black Raid-errrrrr!"

Old Man Lathrop cried out as though shot. He leaned far away from his only offspring and almost fell off the chair on the other side. Adult squareheads were either unconscious, Herm thought, or with eyes open looking dead from slaving too long in the work groove. Master craftsman Lathrop who geared himself to eight hours a day in a factory turning out boxes for the storing of cereal to make kids feel like supermen. You couldn't even feel sorry for the Old Man who had forgot what it was to spit in the face of the world.

Herm doubled over laughing. Old Man Lathrop's tired face seemed to be looking into a wavering mirror of doubt and doom. "Youth's impunity!" he almost screamed. "I'd kick your heels up your back like window shades if I didn't know I ought to give you more love and affection! What's the idea, Herm?"

Herm couldn't stop laughing. His Old Man was the world's worst square.

"What do you want, Herm? Tell me! Your Mother needs help in the basement!"

His Mother was always on the clean kick, wrapping herself up in the new thermodynamatrix washing machine, probably trying to forget that she wasn't really living any more. "I've got to have fun at the Midway again, Poppa."

"You been to the Midway once this week!"

"Feel dangerous suppressed impulses digging my insides," Herm said, doing a little dance around his Old Man. "Got to release frenzied adolescent drives, Poppa. Got to get myself a woman."

"You had yourself a woman last week!" the Old Man yelled. "What is this — release from adolescent frustration, or addiction to sexy dope?"

"Give me some credits, Poppa. You think the world gives releasing pleasure for nothing?"

"You don't have any allowance left!" A line of white moved around the Old Man's tired lips. "Listen: you aren't going any place but into the basement to help your mother. You're not getting another credit from me until next week!"

"You want I should turn into a delinquent kid because I don't get love?" Herm yelled, even louder than his Old Man.

His Old Man leaned over and put his hand over his eyes. He whispered. "You get a woman once a week, son. That's what it says on your release

chart. It's plenty. It's plenty for any kid, especially a kid who doesn't even study his lessons and won't help his mother. You'll never graduate. You'll never follow in my footsteps making boxes to help keep the complex consumer-productive system running smoothly —"

You can't trust a moron, Herm thought. He'll get you in a hassle. The Old Man really thought he was important, a soldier in the great production army, worthy of the Medal of Honor, just because he helped put pasteboard boxes together all day. The creeping fear came back to Herm then as the muddy flat future opened before him. He had to get out, had to get to the fun of the Midway!

"Ho! Hoooo! Black Raiderrrrrr!" Herm screamed, and his face was getting red. "I'm going to the Midway, Poppa! Give me pleasure paper. If you don't you may get a black mark when the Social Worker comes around from the school wanting to know if I'm getting enough fatherly affection!"

The Old Man's hand was shaking as he got the credit papers from his wallet and threw them into Herm's face. Herm grabbed the credits out of the air like in a magic act and danced backward out the door.

He ran laughing out into the crazy starlight and into the Whirbug beside the fatso Raider, Ringo Reese. The fat boy jiggled all over the seat killing himself with the expected joy of release at the Midway.

"Ho! Hoooo! Black Raider Fatso!" Herm said and hit Ringo on the slab of a shoulder. "It's high release time, so let's split the sky open!"

"Herm, you got plenty of credit moneys?"

"Loaded, Fatso. Loaded for love!"

The thought of the Midway, the plunging into high skies of night, the promise of sound and the screams of the women . . . it always seemed to push those indefinable fears of the future and its meaninglessness out of Herm, those frights that came from nowhere to blow empty spaces inside him.

Fatso Ringo started killing himself all over again with sounding excited, and the Whirbug shot straight up 5,000 feet and was soon hitting high at 1500 miles an hour for Midway love of living, streaming fiery lust all over the skyway, and making like a moon rocket racking at the stars.

"Ho! Hoooo! Black Raiderrrrrr!" Herm and Ringo yelled in towering togetherness. And to avoid disaster from the Whirbug's howling plunge for Midway fun, a passenger rocket plunged itself desperately 500 miles off course.

Below them, the Midway whirled spinning, making like a big neon top twisting, all fiery color for a mile along the lakeshore.

"We're going to get release huh?" Herm said.

"Release for us," Ringo yelled.

"So school won't be a headache."

"And home won't be a headache."

"And we can face the responsible future like it said in the adolescent psych book."

"Right!" Ringo yelled. "We got to get quick release from adolescent tensions."

Looking down through the trickling beads that bled from neon, Herm's eyes sailed the glaring wonders of escape.

"Maybe adult squareheads aren't so wrong," Ringo said as he wavered the Whirbug all over, making for a parking slot, and the fun-ice sparkling below whirred up to greet them. "They threw this pleasure park up here just for us love-starved, excitement-crazy kids!"

"They had nothing to do with it from beginning to the end!" Herm said. "Not the adults, they didn't. Not the parents anyway." He found himself again inanely looking for the spot in his life when he stopped whistling and started feeling a serious depth in every little thing. Adolescence was sure a bad time, like the books said, all full of danger. "It was the psych boys that did it. The learning mill figured we need release from frustrated adolescent drives!"

Ringo laughed. "We do, we do need it, Herm!"

Sometime, Herm thought, Fatso would laugh his lonely insides right out of his basketball body. "They got the Midway set up for us, Fatso. Now we won't lounge and loaf all full of suppressed sin on the street corners."

"So, Herm, maybe we ought to be thankful."

"Not to the parent squareheads. Maybe not to anybody. Something's wrong somewhere, Ringo. Adults never get nothing but TV eyestrain at home, and moronitis from living in the work groove. What are we getting healthy release for, Ringo — so we can make pasteboard boxes all day and be retired with empty heads after twenty years?"

"You're too serious," Ringo said. He wasn't laughing.

"Then after that you drop dead."

"Anyway, I sure need a woman," Ringo said. "Must be they gave me somebody else's release chart by mistake. I figure mine was aimed for some other stoop, some sick kid with pernicious anemia."

"Let's drop down there, Fatso. I can't suppress my dangerous impulses much longer!"

The Whirbug clicked like a cog in its slot and Herm and Ringo raced down the steps toward the Midway all reflecting flashing colors like living neon. They shot past the lesser pleasures, strictly for puberty pixies: the fun rooms, hate-expressing rooms where you could smash images of your old man and old lady, the Superman Tunnels, the Spaceman's Realm, the horror shows, the Kill Alleys, the Hunting Houses and Chase Lounges and the psychodramas and the rest of it. They headed past the Barkers dressed in blue jeans for Girlie Land.

"Come on in, you hepkids," the

Barkers slapped their jeans and yelled wildly, all hyped up in the pay of the state and eager to stay in their easy cool income racket. "Get release and relax your backs. Clear your brain for the scholastic strain, and rub out that growing pain!"

Herm sneered up at the Barker. "What a lousy way to make a living," he said, and then he dragged at Ringo, pulling him unresistingly and faster after him toward the Girlie Hunt.

"For us, the Barkers bark their throats out," Ringo laughed. "All for us wild adolescent problems."

"They're heroes!" yelled Herm. There weren't many roads for the trapped, he thought; climb a tower to Mars, or drown out your brains, you couldn't long endure reality. Get to the Midway and get release. Go loose again, Jack. Muh-muh-muh.

"Hero shmero!" yelled Ringo. Again he belted out long fatty laughs and all around, kids of all ages ran this way and that having a ball, getting healthy escape from growing-up pressure that would keep them off the streets, keep them from running over innocent square-headed adults on side streets with Roaromaster Road eaters, keep them from lounging in surly groups in front of malt shops and snarling insults at delicate ladies, keep them from roaming the vast city jungle in secret gangs and beating up honest adult moronitis victims, robbing stores of junk, and committing rape and sundry sabotage and assault.

For a moment, Herm didn't hear Ringo's laughter as they dived into the neon bath of the Midway. He didn't hear the bells, horns, drums, shrieks, and releasing energy exploding all over the Midway.

Where was he going — when the Midway ended? The Midway only a flood-lighted oasis between being a kid and being a squarehead adult who got stuck in a machine-tooled box factory or something and could never go anywhere but asleep in front of a TV frame.

Suddenly, Herm didn't want to think about anything but the Midway. The Midway couldn't end. The Midway *was* the end. The Midway was everywhere, stretching in all directions and he was in it and would never have to get out. He was suddenly taken with a flooding feel of gratitude, and he wanted to fall down on his knees and give thanks to the Midway and the schools and everybody who had ever had anything to do with building the Midways that were scattered all over the land for dangerous teen-agers to get release from ominous energy in. A sourceless sensation of suppressed terror crawled up through him and started to ooze into his throat so that he thought he might never be able to laugh or yell crazy any more.

He didn't really want to make with the gags about it. He was scared — scared if it wasn't for the Midway about what he might do, how he might sneak out at nights all full of

dangerous steamed up energy and do something real gone bad.

Oh thanks for the Midway, Jack, it's cold outside.

The psych boys had figured it. The psych boys built the Midway. In the Midway you could get cool, it was all planned and plotted so that a kid of any age could get rid of the craziest animal impulses and it was all like fun.

Oh thanks Jack for the psych boys, they knew what was what all right.

If it weren't for the Midway, Herm thought, I'd be a juvenile delinquent ten times over by now, and sent up to the hammer with a sin record longer than the hairs of Daddy Freud's beard put end to end. I'd have innocent women's blood staining my eager beaver palms and I'd be washing them in Lux all day like Macbeth's wife who was really his mother image gone nuts with greed.

"Get yourself a Girlie, kids! Red-heads, brownheads, blackheads, and luscious babes all scared and hiding from the hunters! Come on in and fire the lady's skin!"

The barker leaned down from his altar, and twisted his ratty face in a scrimy promise, and made willowy gestures of anatomical curves with practised glidings of his hands. What for a flunky middle-man like that? Herm thought. Don't they think adolescents know what they want?

"Ho, ho, Black Raider!" yelled Ringo as, with Herm, he looked over

the adolescent mob gathered hungry in front of the Girlie Hunt. Dangerous energy was over the shiny upturned faces like a vapor in a Chem III lab experiment that nobody ever remembered. Who needs chemistry when you make paste-board boxes? There were a few Black Raiders in the mob, and they yelled in eager unison.

"Hol Hooool Black Raiderrrrr!"

"Ho, ho!" laughed the barker. "Looks like lots of eager hunting waiting for release. Come on in and fire the skin. Grab a gun and get the naked lovelies on the run!"

Herm wiped at his mouth and shoved to the front and Ringo followed, both digging out their pleasure paper and throwing the credit leaves upward to grabbing fingers and getting a ring of hunting tickets in return. Across the front of the Girlie Hunt ran three-dimensional neon-activated lovelies, all shapes and sizes and colors, naked flesh shining as lifelike as life, but lovelier.

Herm was the first through the door and Ringo ran panting after, and Herm could feel sweat of animal desire popping from his skin and he didn't feel like laughing at anything any more, and Ringo wasn't even smiling. His fat round face was squeezed into determination to get release like an oldish grapefruit, and he was breathing with heavy desire.

They jammed tickets through the cage and were issued with fast practice sonic rifles, satchels of vibro cartridges, and score cards.

Herm no longer had the urge to feel or say anything except the thrill of hunting, the all-enclosing feeling that there was only the Jungle, big as Africa, and no factory or school waiting outside of it. And Ringo was the first to hit the door leading through and into Girlie Land. Herm ran through and dropped fast to his knees as Ringo yelled a warning and flopped out of sight among thick bushes.

Trembling, Herm lay there flat and looked through the leaves, and the trees and vines and trunks of Girlie Jungle hung over him and rustled away everywhere whispering promise of danger as far as he could see.

An eager adolescent who was not in sight long enough for Herm to tell whether he wore a Black Raider button or not dropped out of a tree behind a redheaded lovely and aimed. The woman screamed and the sound was a hypo in Herm's blood and he started shaking with suppressed impulses. The teen-ager aimed and the invisible, inaudible and brief charge of sonic energy must have got the redhead dead center in the birdbrain because she ran around shrieking in a little circle, then fell squirming on the mossy jungle floor.

Herm saw Ringo, suddenly light on his feet like Jungle Man, slip away through the jungle shadows, his rifle ready for female game. Herm felt a woman's arrow rip leaves beside his head and he tried to figure quick

where the shot came from. The arrows, like spiritual shafts from Cupid's bow, didn't really hurt a guy, but if a kid was honest in the hunt he had to put it on his score card. A Black Raider was strictly strychnine if he got tapped by a Girlie's Cupid arrow.

Herm crawled toward a grove of trees and he could hear the screams and shrieks of the hunted echoing along with the shouts of adolescent stalkers of Girlie game. Another arrow almost parted Herm's brush-cut hair. Hey Jack where are the giggling Girlies?

The ache in Herm's belly threatened like paralysis. He wanted to get up, get running, get moving, get shooting and shouting and watching the Girlies gallop screaming naked through the forest green. He'd never gotten a Cupid's arrow mark on a score card yet and Ringo hadn't either. Two real solid Raiders.

Herm leaped up and suddenly ran straight for the grove of trees by a lake. A brownhead with a body like Anita Starre on TV, long and cool and dipped in brown hot sauce, dropped next to the pool and ran along the edge making like a nymph. Giggling, she turned to aim her Cupid's bow.

Herm dodged and ducked and went up a tree like Jungle Man with a hotfoot, feeling dangerous suppressed desire in his blood and his breath, and he ran along a big limb, concealed by leaves and trailing vines.

The Girlie was starting to run along the pool, still cool, and Herm aimed and fired his vibro charge. The Girlie's scream sent a flooding weakness through Herm's knees, and as she fell fainting, Herm dropped out of the tree, marked up No. 1 on his score card and ran on, shooting with a panting intensity at anything naked, giggling, or aiming a Cupid's arrow.

He marked down four more on the score card, two redheads, a blackhead, and another luscious autumnal tan. And he looked around for Ringo, but the jungle stretched away in a quiet cool way, and maybe it would go on forever for a guy who never really wanted to get out of it.

He walked a way and stumbled again on the hot sauce special sprawled beside the pool. He started to run on, wanting to find himself another redhead, but he stopped and looked down at his first shocked quarry lying there, with one hand gripping at the water like it was solid, and her face with eyes stiff-wide, looking up into the sky's phony props.

Suddenly it was like he couldn't bring his mind together with the level of his screaming feelings. He thought about it all, without thinking at all, but feeling it all and it was something distantly frightening and it rolled up into nausea.

He didn't want to leave the brown-head or the jungle where fun was. He had a creeping fear that all, everything, all of them were dying

while moments hurtled out of the sun to change from gold to ashes. The jungle rippled for a while through life's muddy promising flatness, but the time wore out, the pleasure paper ran down, you had to get out into the future.

His Old Man's grimacing image covered his brain like a film.

He tried to pull himself away from looking down at the Girlie, get going fast to continue the hunt, fill out his score card, get release, be ready for the schoolmill grind, the study periods when you had to think of what you didn't really need to learn instead of thinking about jungles and adventures and Girlies, be ready for statistics, ballistics, fairy lectures and musty gestures. Why Jack, why all the study when you go into the assembly line to make with the little pasteboard boxes?

Adult squareheads and school-teaching jerks all figured a kid had to do unskilled work because it didn't take anything but a moron and was easy security, and paid higher than anything else. Sometimes a guy wanted to yell and rebel and take off out of it all.

He tried to move away from the brunette bundle, but he couldn't budge any farther through the webs of Girlie Land. He was gripping the score card so hard the stuff crinkled up like what you wanted to do to a report card, and ripped across the middle like useless scratch padding.

What was it all for? You got out of school and turned, like the Old

Man, into a moron sticking little boxes together all day to put cereal in? To stay forever in the Girlie Jungle — but it wasn't realie real. It was just a sidefreakshow all the way to phony heaven.

He thought of the neon-jungled city exploding away in all directions so that at a thousand miles an hour in a gone Whirbug you never got out of it, but somewhere there was an edge to it, and maybe it would be like this, like Girlie Jungle and even if it was a jungle without Girlies, it would be better than this!

Herm took two steps back and felt how scared he was. He saw his Old Man's tired marshmallow face in his mind's gray space again and sweat ran down his back. He stared at the brunette. Oh Jackie girl what a way you got to get state pay, what a lousy way to stay in the gravy-getting groove. Hunted all the time and giggling phony laughs like in the TV drip shows, and even the screams were no more realie than in a TV dragnet diabol . . . knocked out of life for twenty minutes by a subsonic smack in the brain cells, and then up again to be hunted and to aim your little Cupid's arrows.

Herm sighed and was on his knees and touching the Girlie's face like touching clay. A scream smashed through the leaves, and somewhere he heard Ringo's triumphant laughter lathering the leaves like a bull ape's mating call in Jungle Comics.

Psych boys wrong, all wrong, all squareheads. Phony comic jungles

and Girlie slavies getting imitatively bumped off a hundred times a day, that was not enough. That was wrong.

"It's not enough," Herm whispered. He put his fingers on the Girlie's throat. "When you know it's not a realie, it isn't enough, Brownhair."

His hands seemed far away but realie as they squeezed more tightly on the soft clay throat, and the Girlie's hand wavered on the water like a fish looking for the sun. But that's no real sky up there, Girlie, and there's no realie sunshine coming out of it, and the silver lining in the ersatz cloud-structure is reflections from a baby spot.

Herm felt his hands squeezing tighter and tighter and for realie as his mind seemed screaming to split open some prison of bone and lay bare and breathing wide a while in a real jungle far away, then to run down freedom paths to wide-openness a million miles from the City. He felt the heated conduits washing past his eyes, and he felt the throbbing threats of his own aloneness, and uselessness, and he saw himself ending where his Old Man had ended, snoring away gray life before a TV frame, never having been anywhere, and nowhere else left to go.

Even the Girlie hunts weren't enough. They ought to have something real, and there ought to be a reason for it all.

Herm leaned down and his body

corded all down its length as he put pressure downward from his whirring brain through his arms into his hands into her throat. This would be for realie.

Was this what the adult square-heads meant? Was this the deadly danger stuff of growing pains everyone had built million-dollar midways to divert?

Release he felt all right, for realie. He felt it exploding out everywhere, and he knew now what it was. They had said so many times how dangerous he was and now Herm knew it, and he knew it for sure and all. It was like when a mortar goes off in War Comics and steely jagged knives of metal tear the flesh to pieces.

The harder Herm pressed the more slippery her neck got, the more for realie it all was for Herm. That was what they really needed, something like a war, like in War Comics. Not this phony jungle land and the props two for a nickel, and the baby spots and Cupid's arrows twanging like the harpstrings in a corny stringed longhair chamber session.

Hands strained at Herm's neck. He fought to keep his hands on the Girlie's neck, on something for realie.

"Herm! God, Herm, you're riding the wrong kick!"

"Leggo!"

"Jack! This jungle's strictly for release, don't let it hip you!"

"Leggo, leggo!"

"Don't get yourself all in a hassle, Herm boy!"

Herm felt himself being dragged away and Ringo was turning him around in the air. Ringo tried to laugh, but his face was white as he jumped toward the Girlie and felt of her pulse and her heart and her neck. When he looked up he was forcing a slaphappy grin.

"You didn't do for her, Black Raider boy. Her heart still throbs to play Cupid." He jumped to Herm's side and pulled him away toward the door that led out of Jungleland. "Man, you really got hunting fever tonight. You all right now, Jack?"

"Cool . . . Oh I got to get cool," Herm whispered. And he went stumbling after Ringo humbly out of Girlie Land and afraid of himself, more afraid of himself and his suppressed dangerous impulses than he had ever been before.

There was his Old Man's gray marshmallow face still snoring in front of the TV frame. Herm stood there on the stairs that went up to his room and looked into the living room and rubbed at his burning eyes. There weren't many roads for the trapped, Poppa, but Poppa was too dead inside to know or care.

Poppa didn't care how your eyes looked when they darted around for something real to hold to. The records didn't show when your body is hungry with all kinds of needs. . . .

He ran on up and into the dark and into bed and lay there thinking about how dangerous he was, so dangerous that even the Midway couldn't release it safely, and there was no one to tell about how dangerous he really was.

But his Old Man and his Old Lady who never saw or understood anything, maybe they were lucky. They couldn't feel dangerous any more, if maybe they had felt that way once. They didn't feel much of anything now. They were in the gravy-getting groove, and after a while in that you didn't feel anything.

Herm closed his eyes. He thought about the dreams that were his: how great it had been to imagine himself a Black Raider flying big

rockets in the night, conquering enemies, doing something big, powerful, good, and never afraid of striking out and feeling powerful because it was so gone dangerous. Real cool, man.

But it was dangerous. In two years he would be out of school, and in a little while longer he'd move up in years and slide off the adolescent chart scale and into adult squarehood. Oh Jack I'd better hurry and get off that adolescent chart before my dangerous suppressed impulses really turn into loveless juvenile delinquency.

Then I'll be safe. Like the old man. Not feeling anything, making pasteboard boxes fit together all day for the cereals that made kids feel like supermen in the mornings.

