

## SELECTION 7

### The Man Who Grew a New Body

#### Vocabulary Review

a temporary insulated *jumper*  
the problems were *multifold*  
I was bleeding *profusely*  
a burn where there is *marbleizing*

1 When Ed Kobak got up at 6:45 on the morning of the  
2 Monday that was July 10, 1961, and looked out of the  
3 bedroom window on the third floor of the three-family  
4 house at 37 Rogers Street in Branford, Connecticut, he  
5 knew it was going to be another dog day. It was clear, he  
6 saw, but too warm already, and this is something you  
7 regret if you are a utility lineman because when you put on  
8 the rubber sleeves and rubber gloves that are good against  
9 anything up to 10,000 volts, you sweat inside of them.  
10 Then he noticed that there was a light wind beginning to  
11 move the leaves at the tops of the trees and he knew that  
12 the wind, if it grew, might be a saver. What he did not  
13 know was that five and a half hours later he was going to  
14 turn into a living torch, his torso roasted flesh from neck to  
15 ankles, and that the wind, grown, would save his life.  
16 "At the garage," Kobak says, "we picked up our tools  
17 and belts and hooks and hard hats and the rubber gloves

18 and six of us went out on the line truck. We might have had  
19 another little job first, but I don't remember."  
20 "Bobby Moore and I were working up there together,"  
21 Kobak says, "and we decided to work into our lunch hour  
22 so that after lunch we wouldn't have to put on our rubber  
23 sleeves and gloves again. We had put a temporary insu-  
24 lated jumper as a bypass across the line going into the  
25 disconnect and we were going to cut a foot out of the line.  
26 "Bobby was going to cut, and then he opened the cutters  
27 and I saw and heard the flash. It was just a big ball of fire,  
28 bluish-yellow, and with a terrific roar that I imagine they  
29 could hear a mile away. It engulfed the pole and me."  
30 "All I know is that everything around me—above me  
31 and below me—was a mass of flames. I knew right away I  
32 was in awful trouble. My clothes were burning off me so  
33 fast and the pain was so bad that I hollered out to God to  
34 save me. Then I remember the pain was so bad around my  
35 groin that I tried to pat myself out with my gloves, but it  
36 was just about impossible, and in those few seconds my  
37 clothes had burned almost completely off. I had my climb-  
38 ing hooks on and that's why my legs were burned so deep  
39 because the steel shafts that go down your legs got so hot.  
40 "The next thing I realized was that I had to get out of  
41 there, and I remember it was so hot that I could see the  
42 brown porcelain melting and dripping right in front of my  
43 eyes. I couldn't go down, because of the cables below, so at  
44 first I went up as high as I could and then I got out of my  
45 climbing belt and I was still in flames when suddenly  
46 everything stopped. I guess the disconnects in the substa-  
47 tion had kicked out and everything that could burn on me  
48 had burned and the fire was out."  
49 One person on the ground was Andy Sheehan, the driver  
50 of the truck. He was directly beneath the wires and looking  
51 down when he heard and saw the flash.  
52 "To me," Sheehan says, "it looked like the whole ground  
53 lighted up orange-red. I ran out from underneath because  
54 I thought that the primaries were coming down, and then I  
55 saw Eddie on fire and Bob's shirt burning and I remember  
56 Eddie calling out for God and Bob jumping and we tore  
57 Bob's shirt off his back."  
58 On the pole, Kobak, naked now except for his boots, his  
59 climbing hooks and the few fragments of clothes, his skin

60 gone and his flesh raw, was crawling over the crossarm,  
61 somehow instinctively remembering to keep away from  
62 the 13,800 volts above his head. When Kobak got to the  
63 other side, Sheehan and George Buttrick, the foreman, put  
64 a ladder up and Andy Malin and Roger Merrill went up the  
65 pole. They put a rope around Kobak's wrist and the four of  
66 them eased him down.

67 "As I remember it," Sheehan says, "his body was  
68 reddish-yellow with the body fluids, and I was amazed he  
69 could even move. I'd never seen anything like that."

70 While still on the pole Kobak had felt his body stiffen-  
71 ing. On the ground he was unable to move and then he  
72 began to shake.

73 "The pain was so intense," he says, "and I was shaking  
74 all over and I couldn't hold still. Then I heard the ambu-  
75 lance siren."

76 The attendant on the ambulance was Jerry Bradbury,  
77 who says he has picked up a lot of accident victims and  
78 suicides and burn cases, but he had never seen anything  
79 like this.

80 There are three degrees of burns: first degree, a reddening  
81 or sunburn effect; second degree, blistering; and third  
82 degree, destruction of the skin with charring or marbleizing.  
83 When more than 50 percent of the body is affected by  
84 burns the case is rated severe and serious and it is unusual  
85 when the patient survives. Seventy percent of Kobak's  
86 body was involved, almost all with third-degree burns.  
87 Only his face, neck, arms, feet and portions of his shoulders  
88 and waist were unburnt.

89 The problems of preserving life in Kobak immediately  
90 in the emergency room and then over the 36 months re-  
91 quired to make him a person again were, of course, multi-  
92 fold. With so much of his body surface susceptible to  
93 attack and the possibility that infection might kill him, he  
94 had to be kept in a sterile environment constantly, and  
95 this is almost impossible. The fluid losses through his raw,  
96 open body had to be replaced and for the first 10 days this  
97 was done intravenously. A catheter had to be introduced  
98 into his bladder to determine the amount of urine output  
99 as a check on the adequacy of the kidney function. Heavy  
100 doses of narcotics had to be administered for control of the  
101 intense pain with which Kobak was to live during the

102 many months of skin grafting, bandaging and rebandag-  
103 ing and physical therapy.

104 "You almost can't describe it," Kobak says. "The pain  
105 was so bad and then when it would seem to subside the  
106 shaking of the body seemed worse. I felt so cold at the  
107 beginning that it was like somebody put me outside for a  
108 day or so in zero weather. Then I had nightmares for  
109 months and I was always on a stretcher sliding downhill  
110 and I'd wake up screaming."

111 During the next three years Barbara Kobak was to visit  
112 her husband daily, with but four exceptions. During the  
113 first five months she was with him 15 hours a day, for the  
114 next year she was there 11 hours daily until they agreed to  
115 diminish this gradually to the three and a half hours she  
116 was spending with him during the final months of his stay.

117 "Just the sound of her voice was so wonderful," Kobak  
118 says. "She'd read aloud to me, magazines and books after  
119 they'd been treated with a germicidal preparation. She  
120 read me eight novels in five months in 1961. She read 24  
121 novels in all, and one was over 1,500 pages."

122 The first skin grafting was done on the eighth day. To  
123 survive permanently, grafts must be from the patient's  
124 own skin and a major problem was the scarcity of donor  
125 sites on Kobak's body.

126 Skin from limited sites had to be used repeatedly in  
127 order to cover the vast amount of Kobak's body that  
128 needed grafts.

129 "Some of Kobak's grafts took on the first go-round," the  
130 surgeon says, "but in some instances all of a set would be  
131 lost. Weeks ago you've spent hours and today you change  
132 the dressing and see the graft fall off in front of your eyes.  
133 Kobak would ask: 'How are the grafts?' I'd have to say:  
134 'I'm sorry, Ed, but not very good this time.' It's a hell of a  
135 discouragement to the doctor and the patient."

136 Over the long period that he was hospitalized, most of  
137 the time helpless and in that constant pain, Kobak taxed  
138 the facilities of Grace—New Haven as has no other patient  
139 in the memory of anyone at the 850-bed hospital.

140 "Take, for example," says the surgeon, "the two to six  
141 hours twice a week that the operating room was used for  
142 Kobak. This meant that that particular room was not  
143 available for other members of the community who had

144 gallstones or cancer of the breast or whatever. While  
145 Kobak was in the O.R. the housekeeping department had  
146 to assign two or more people to wash his room down from  
147 ceiling to floor with a sterile solution. Then a nurse would  
148 be washing down his bed and changing his sheets, and this  
149 had to be planned by the nursing supervisor and coordi-  
150 nated.

151 "At the times Kobak was anesthetized, blood samples  
152 were drawn for cross matching and sent by messenger to  
153 the laboratory where the blood-bank technician and the  
154 blood-counting technician worked for 20 minutes or more  
155 before they could send back their reports.

156 "The dietetics department had to give Kobak what he  
157 would need for a high concentrate diet and what he  
158 wanted, and this had to be passed into the sterile situation  
159 in his room and not carried in. He had to have three nurses  
160 a day for three years and, living as he did in such pain, he  
161 put such pressure on nurses that few of them could take  
162 the assignment for long. Then you had all the physical  
163 therapy treatments and the strain on the staff there."

164 Physical therapy started with Kobak immobile, pain  
165 wracked, his torso wrapped in dressings and bandages,  
166 moving just his toes. Next they had him tighten his thigh  
167 muscles and, after three and a half months, the more  
168 rigorous procedure of exercising his limbs began under  
169 anesthesia. "The worst time I had with therapy," he says,  
170 "was in the spring of '62. I had bandages—dry dress-  
171 ings—down to my buttocks and you come back from the  
172 operating room and you bleed through the dressings and  
173 they harden like a rock."

174 Early in 1964, two and a half years after Kobak en-  
175 tered the hospital, the procedure for the removal of the  
176 bandages was changed. Until then it was done under anes-  
177 thesia, but now that Kobak was more mobile the blood-  
178 crusted wrappings were soaked off in an oval, stainless-  
179 steel tank, and Miss Linda Sherburne, a young therapist,  
180 says she will never forget it.

181 "It was horrible for me," she says, "so you can imagine  
182 what it was for him. It wasn't easy to get him into the tank  
183 and then we had the problem of teasing off the dressings to  
184 get him out of there as soon as we could and he was  
185 hollering: 'Wait a minute! Let me rest a minute!' He

186 couldn't help screaming and crying and it was messy.  
187 There were six of us in the tank room with all the windows  
188 shut so he wouldn't get cold and with the water at 100  
189 degrees we all just about felt drained when it was over."

190 "It was a very, very bad experience," Kobak says. "This  
191 poor intern there was saying: 'I got to get them off! I got to  
192 get them off!' I said: 'Hell, no!' There was so much pain I  
193 almost passed out and I probably said a lot of things I  
194 shouldn't have. I came out bleeding profusely and they  
195 bandaged again and it caked on me. By the fifth time,  
196 though, the water would float the bandages off, and then I  
197 was happy to get in the tank."

198 The almost quarter of a million dollars that it cost to  
199 keep Kobak alive and restore him to health cost him noth-  
200 ing. He was a Workmen's Compensation case and the bill  
201 was paid by the United Illuminating Company and its  
202 insurance carrier. He is still receiving payments under the  
203 company's sick benefit plan, plus supplementary assis-  
204 tance.

205 When Kobak will be able to return to work and what  
206 work he will be able to do he does not know. He simply  
207 knows that he is alive.

208 "Sometimes I was on the verge of death," he says, "but  
209 after that first day it never really entered my mind. You  
210 have so many people who have faith in you. We've been  
211 blessed with a good marriage and the kids. We had such a  
212 good life that I wanted to live, and I had faith in God."

## Selection 7 Comprehension Questions

Decide whether each of the following statements is true or false according to the selection. Then mark T or F in the appropriate place.

- \_\_\_ 1. Kobak's nurses found their assignment very difficult.
- \_\_\_ 2. Kobak's face and neck were not burned.
- \_\_\_ 3. The steel shafts of Kobak's climbing boots actually melted from the intense heat.
- \_\_\_ 4. Many people had to volunteer skin in order to have enough for all of the grafts that were necessary.
- \_\_\_ 5. Luckily, drugs were able to control Kobak's pain.

Choose the correct answer for each of the following questions and circle the letter before it.

- 6. One thing that was of help to Kobak during his stay in the hospital was:
  - a. The same nurses, because of their interest in the case, tended to stay with him through most of his hospital confinement.
  - b. His wife visited him daily during his entire stay except for four exceptions.
  - c. Although he suffered considerable pain much of the time, he was almost always able to sleep at night.
  - d. Although 70 percent of his body was burned, most of the burns were second-degree rather than third-degree burns.
- 7. One of the problems related to his recovery was:
  - a. Sometimes a whole set of skin grafts would not take.
  - b. The hospital did not have an adequate burn therapy unit.

- c. Although his hospital bill was covered by insurance, he was constantly worried about money to support his family during his confinement.
  - d. There was concern about his becoming addicted to the massive quantities of drugs he was being given.
- 8. The hospital also had its facilities taxed as a result of Kobak's needs. Which of the following is *not* one of the ways mentioned?
    - a. The operating room was needed for Kobak from two to six hours per week, thus limiting its use for other patients.
    - b. The housekeeping department had to schedule considerable time to keeping Kobak's room sterile.
    - c. Physical therapy involved considerable amounts of time and strain.
    - d. The excessive amounts of bandages and drugs that were needed taxed the supply department so that an additional person had to be hired.
  - 9. Which of the following statements is true according to the selection?
    - a. Kobak's partner, Bobby, was killed in the fire.
    - b. Kobak has returned to the same kind of work that he did before.
    - c. Kobak's clothes were almost completely burned off of him.
    - d. Part of the severity of the burn was due to the electric shock that Kobak received while on the pole.
  - 10. Which is the most severe degree of burn?
    - a. First.
    - b. Second.
    - c. Third.
    - d. Fourth.