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AN INFIELD OUT



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[AN INFIELD OUT]

Richard Lyons

APPROVED

by

DONALD LEE BODEY

A THESIS

Presented to the Department of English
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

September 1975

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VITA

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AN INFIELD OUT

Chapter One

The guy's eyes are like line drives coming from the lights behind home: The mosquito is off the river, east of the sixth, the lights only on for an inning; feeling yellow like sundown had been over third behind the shabby bleachers, when a crash that sounds like half a hickory tree has snapped in the words brings the ball low and hard over where the shortstop was. I see you better dig ass to even get a jump at it...the to Susan you are like that.

Everybody looks alike in this jet that's big as a barnyard. I wonder where we are. From Seattle to, I think, Wake Island. I was only half awake for Wake Island because we and some guy from Phoenix stocked a bottle of bourbon into the plane. They grabbed that too in a junc 14 hours before your flight. I heard some officers call the compound full of you called her "the million." Fifteen bucks for that hundred plus a drink. Sixteen bucks but wanshanch-wan, god. It's like looking out the way to Wake Island and when I look up I see an eagle.

Even though you are not in the plane look like me. Like a box of the airplane. Whatever somebody around the airport looks like that, I believe, you will.

Wake Island Wake Island Wake Island Wake
CHAPTER, I am chattering myself. (This guy can't hit a
Dexter Bull's eye ball. Show it by his.) Chattering to keep
awake.

AN INFIELD OUT

Chapter One

The guy's eyes are like line drives coming from the lights behind home: *the mosquitoes in off the river, last of the sixth, the lights only on for an inning; feeling yellow like sundown had been over third behind the shabby bleachers, when a crack that sounds like half a hickory tree has snapped in the woods brings the ball low and hard over where the shortstop wasn't and you better dig ass to even get a jump at it...the guy's eyes are like that.*

Everybody looks alike in this jet that's big as a barnyard. I wonder where we are. From Seattle to, I think, Wake Island. I was only half awake for Wake Island because me and some guy from Phoenix sneaked a bottle of bourbon into the fence. *They goddamn lock you in a fence 24 hours before your flight.* I heard some officers call the compound full of guys going over "The Bullpen." *Fifteen bucks for that bourbon from a cook. Fifteen bucks but manohmanoh-man, good.* So I was passed out all the way to Wake Island and when I woke up I felt so alone.

Even though all the guys in the plane look like me. Like a box of play soldiers. Somehow everybody around the airport looked inanimate, inflated, not real.

Chapter One

The boy's eyes are like stars coming from the
 lights behind him. The night is very dark, but
 of the stars, the lights only are for an instant
 yellow like windows had been over them behind the
 blackness, when a mass that seems like half a
 has snatched in the words before the ball has
 when the something was't and you better get out
 get a nap at it...the boy's eyes are like stars.

Everybody looks alike in this for there's not a
 yard. I wonder where we are. From Seattle to, I think,
 Lake Island. I was only half awake for Lake Island because
 we had some guy from Tacoma sneaked a bottle of
 into the fence. They probably took me in a fence in
 before your light. I heard some officers call the
 pound full of guys going over "The bridge". "Village
 for that reason from a road. Titled back but
 was, good. So I was passed out all the way to Lake
 and when I woke up I felt so slow.

Even though all the guys in the place look like
 like a box of guy soldiers. Somehow everybody around the
 always looked identical, inflated, not real.

Wake Island Wake Island Wake Island Wake
 CHATTER, I am chattering myself. [This guy can't hit a
 Brahma bull's ass baby, throw it by him.] Chattering to keep
 awake.

Drifting like a popfly drifts, the threads turning.
 When you're there in time to see em spiral slow down you can
 make it slap the pocket loud. The lines on the earth must
 turn like baseball threads. The wing of the plane points
 steady at the light dot of rock while we spiral down; the
 seat belt feels too tight I gotta piss the guy beside me
 wakes up, and everything is upsidedown. I feel like I am
 the island watching the plane spiral down. I think of lying
 on my back in the woods back home. Laying there for half an
 hour and checked the rifle six or eight times before the
 underside of leaves fall out of the black morning...

"Fall out!" The officer screams it. No reason to
 scream.

Okinawa is another airport. The Army world is air-
 ports--stepping stones to the whore's door.

"Ungoddamnly hot here. I'd rather be home."
 Those line-drive eyes talking to everybody else as we
 line out of the plane onto hot black asphalt.

The only way the army has changed me in four months is
 change the direction I look.

"...Nowhere," some Lifer directs us like a traffic cop,
 to a yellow line. Maybe change the neck ahead of you if the

alphabet gets fucked up; maybe change the BO beside you...
ordinarily just fuckin' spin you around and put you in a
line.

"...Ok-i-fuckin-nowhere, that's where you guys are now,"
the cop-Lifer says.

Ok-i-fuckino-where is crisscrossed by red and yellow;
red lines lead two directions and yellow ones run perpendi-
cular. The plane is straddling a red one. We are spilling
into line on a yellow one looking East. Here, Okifuckino-
where, they even paint you a line. Red lines, yellow lines.
We are jungle-green mocking birds.

"US 55 9er 4 9er one."

"Here."

US 315466...."

ETC. Standing in that heat completely Olive Drab.

Like a truckload of fryer hens, all so alike.

"Gabriel Stoick," I say loudly to his line-drive eyes,
"from Cincinnati."

"I'm Albert Steven Swanson, answer to 'Ass,' hail from
Kansas City, and I'd rather be there instead of here," he
says.

"You and me both."

Our line moves toward the tropical webbing that pushes
thick against the airport concrete: vines as thick as tele-
phone poles wound around above into each other and into some
stubby trees that don't have tops; above, the tower of the

terminal looking out on the landing field like it was a rooster looking at us slaughter hens. In we go to a path that is almost invisible from the runways; another open area where most of the men are sitting in red dust. No one has anything to do. Here and there some guy is reading but most of em are grouped into fours and fives. Squatting or sitting in the dust talking about Yesterday or a Week Ago.

Albert Steven Swanson sprawls into the dust and pulls his hat over his eyes. He is lanky; his legs look like they grew twice as fast as the rest of his body, and his uniform is funny. His shirt bags out like it is full of air and his pants are about the right length but balloons.

"How long you reckon we'll be laying around this here hole?" he says.

"Not long enough. The next stop is the big one, I'm sure of that."

"The big one. I like that, Gabe," he says from underneath his hat. He says it again and the bill of his Army baseball hat is so low all I can see is a smile on his mouth. Another plane comes in; a military transport, camouflaged in the colors of jungle this airport is hacked from. But I'm not ready for the load of guys that streams out: not in any line. One tall guy kisses the ground and gets a couple laughs. A voice says to get in line and the kisser yells.

"Fuck off, Lifer, the war was yesterday."

Marines. And fuckin-A filthy. Pimples galore, jags of beard, in OD's that are torn and stretched and not even Olive Drab, but permanently red, rust, the color of the dust. The first ones that come into the clearing pass the word back to the others still on the airfield:

"Hey, goddamn," one yells, "Get a load of these newby dudes!"

And as they come in with enormous packs, every single one stands a minute and eyeballs us. They are ragged, they stink; there is little difference between the color of their jungle utilities and their faces; they carry rucksacks that are like the jungle too: packed to the limit, things tied on with shoelaces, bandoliers of machine-gun ammo strung around like the vines. They've got every weapon I've ever seen, and then some: mostly rifles, M-16's, that are scratched, chipped, taped together; there are M-60 machine guns and a few grenade launchers. Almost all of them have grenades tied on to their rucks and everyone who has a hat on has a Boonie Hat on--a camouflaged compromise between a derby and a Nor'wester.

"Goddamn," Ass comes off his back and pushes his baseball cap back, then just sits there, eyes line-driving the other guys. A short Marine comes over and stands staring back at Ass who is staring only because he can't help it:
I can't quite believe my eyes.

The Marine asks if anybody is from the City and the guy beside us answers Oklahoma City.

"Oh Jesus, just what we need in this war, a bunch o' dumbfucker clodhoppers."

The first few minutes of conversation are like that. We are completely foreign--antagonistic--to each other. As more Marines come and spread throughout the clearing the conversations change. Chauncey ("They call me Chauncey cause I got t'is ahcent") wants to know who is leading the American League and if the '69 Chevies come stock with FM radios, as says the newest guy in his platoon.

"Where'd ya get those hats?" Ass asks eventually.

"Quan Tri. We're up near the Z. 'Course they have em everywhere; you'd best get one if you go to the Field."

He takes his off and gives it to us. It is shapeless, actually, has been rolled, crammed, and wadded so often by now it doesn't have a shape. It is covered with souvenir inkings: a calendar with days X'd off; the names of places he has been; it has "God is my pointman" in red ink. Like the rucks they have, their hats are personal, individual. They look less alike than us new guys.

"Keep your pot closeby though," he says, "you'll wanna crawl up inside that fucker sometime." He slaps his steel helmet that hangs on the bottom of his ruck. He lights a cigarette.

"Been in the field for seven months and been getting the

shit kicked out of us for a solid week so they lifted us out, too many guys losing it, know what I mean?"

"Guys going crazy, huh..."

"Going, going, and gone--that's all there is left of us, y'know? I flipped my own damn self, couldn't've taken another two days...Fuckin-A lost it." His eyes get like quartz in the face grimed red.

There is something so COMMON to all of them. All kinds of things hanging around their necks: they wear dog tags taped together so not to rattle; some have rosaries, some have beads, five and six strings, or silver crosses, crude peace medals ("Good way to pass a night: heat a shotgun round until the lead is soft enough to pour, carve a mold in a bar of soap if you can get hold of one, make yourself a peace sign--drives the Officers fuckin-A mental, but they ain't gonna say anything to you out there in the Field, don't want their shit blown away next fire-fight.") and there is no extra flesh on the hundred of them. They are all, in fact, skinny...and HIGH or getting that way. One guys pulls out a bag of dope that is big as a softball and rolls a joint eight inches long out of some C-ration toilet paper, and when I get a hit I know it ain't anything like the dope I've ever had. My mind begins to float like a popfly hangs, between these veterans and

home: squirrel season will open in three weeks...brother Bob will be using that Remington. I'll be, goddamn,

hunting Vietnamese with a rifle like lays here now. Plastic! [a goddamn Mattell? three pounds?]. . . Draw a early-morning bead on a knothole to stay awake just in case a tail drops red through the bobbing blur of them Sugarmaples, just in case they cancel this fuckin war and I get back for opening day, just in case. . .

For maybe twenty-four hours the war machine breaks down somehow, somewhere. The Marines can't leave until something and we are held up by a halt somewhere. Little by little we mingle with the vets, but there is a constant gap of experience that keeps hold of the conversations, the feelings, the looks, even the laughs.

I keep tripping on the differences in their hats and ours. Ours are all alike: Army, Olivedrab, baseball hats. The tags inside all read the same (Cap, man's, cotton, OG 107 DSA 100-65...ETC) but all their Boonie Hats read different,

FUCK THE ARMY/STOP UGLY CHILDREN, STERILIZE LBJ/
WEST BYGOD VIRGINIA/TRY A LITTLE TENDERNESS/WAR
IS HELL AND HAZARDOUS TO MY HEALTH...

ii.

Timeout is over when light comes in the morning. We line into the plane. Only a few minutes of air time, enough for my gut to roll up like a tumblebug. The guy beside me who hasn't said anything all the way over is picked out of the alphabet because he gets a message of trouble at home. His features don't change when they tell him: plucked out of

this goddamn war basket and spun around for home, he is calm. Maybe catatonic. He is led to another line that goes away. So the alphabet moves one cog, and Albert Steven Swanson brings his ditty bag, his comic books, portable checkers set, and his line-drive eyes, beside me.

"Well, y' reckon the war will be over by tomorrow?"

"I doubt it, they can't decide what shape to make the peace table."

"Wonder why they don't make it the shape of a pile of shit?"

I try to read. Ass sits next to the window and looks out. When I give up the book we are flying through clouds the color of mom's hair.

When we begin to drop he says "Here we go" so when we land I say "Here we are." Cam Rahn Bay.

I keep thinking of what myUnclesherUnclesyourUncles said about the Other War. And what the Marines had said, had implied, had been....

Cam Rahn Bay doesn't look anything like I imagined it: And I imagined it, imagined, imagined it. When we are coming in low the village itself looks like a pile of wood chips does.

We get processed through the airport, put in a bus. The compound is centered around the airport I think, but I can't tell how big it must be. There are nothing but buses, jeeps, trucks on the roads. For one short distance we cross through

some gates and drive for five minutes through what looks like sand dunes: but all along the road is concertina wire spun in three rows with guard towers every so often. This must be outside the Army base. There are Vietnamese walking along part of the road. And there is a scrapped tank that is swarming with little naked kids. There is constant noise: the high whine of the bus's diesel engine, planes landing and taking off every minute, helicopters.

I can see the village now and then through the sandhills. Ungoddamnly low. No buildings higher than maybe two stories. Looks like a bad slum by a freeway. When we are approaching another part of the compound the road is flanked by sand-bagged watchtowers. Men hang out of some of them as we go by slower now. They yell.

"God pity Eleven Bravos."

"I'll be eating your sister and your wife in twenty days."

"Peace, brothers."

No one in the buses yells back. Eventually we stop and line into lines that line into ranks that line-drive into a messhall, eat in twenty minutes and line again in front of a staff sergeant.

"Men, welcome to Vietnam." The NCO is young but wrinkled and squints into the sun behind us. He gravels on in a voice that must have been saying the same thing for a year.

"Since there are very few VC left around here you will

not be issued weapons until you get ready to go to your units. Anybody who doesn't have his dogtags go to the line over there. You must have two dogtags all the time in Vietnam. If you get blown away, somebody will shove a tag between your teeth and kick your jaw shut, so we don't ship the wrong bag of guts to your mama. Any questions?"

I think of a million different things while we go from station to station through air like inside a popcorn machine. The shots are pneumatic. Some gum-smacking medic who says he was a truck driver on the Outside misses my vein somehow the first time so has to shoot me again in my right arm. The next medic is black and has shades on and is a good shot so only my other arm aches. Fuckin' truckdriver?!

We get lectured, told to buy Savings Bonds, warned about Hanoi Hannah, the blackest clap of em all, ushered to a sand-bagged chapel (the chaplain is drunk, says see him about any personal problems), issued a steel pot and five pair--size ape--of green underwear.

I get a shower and am sitting outside in my Olivedrabs, mostly homesick for Monday night football, watching the airfield in the distance [helicopters, as many as there are cars crossing the bridge from Kentucky when there is a Saturday night double-header...blinking blue lightbeads that scratch the faraway darkness] when some guy is suddenly beside me and I get the hit he is watching the exact blue beads I am.

We say howdy. No more. And he lights a joint and passes it to me. Guy. They're all alike. You're one.

"Thanks, this dope is somethingfuckin else, you know what I mean?"

"You new?" His voice is higher than I expect.

"Been here almost a day."

"With luck you've only got 364 more. I got one."

"No shit." That's all I can think of, it seems so incredible, and besides the first drag of the dope begins, so for a flash the helicopters' blinks are like drips, the sky is on its side. Then I say "What is it like to make it?"

He squats and grinds the filter into the dirt. *Filter-tip joints!* There is something wrong about the way he holds his arm but I can't see it clear in the dark.

"I didn't make it whole," he says. Now I see his arm is bandaged and strapped to his side.

"How bad is, uh--"

"Coulda been my nuts," he says. "I've got all my hand left...."

"Good, I--"

"No fingers."

The silence grows a little bit clumsy, or I think it does because the dope is coming on. Next thing I know I ask him how it happened.

"On an ambush. A noise and some FNG panicked and laid his rifle my way. Simple."

"FNG?"

"Fuckin New Guy. They're all alike. You're one. You'll see. I'm Lonesome."

"Me too, and I just got here."

"Well, you can have my name then. I'll be getting my real name, Charles, back by the time you get to your unit. The old guys handled me Lonesome because I built a one-man hootch." He stands up. "I'm done here. Can you dig on that? One more day of that fuckin' hospital and I get on my freedom bird, simple like that I say, and in a hundred hours I'll be Charley again, minus a bit. Meanwhile I get Morphine during the day and go shopping at night in the village--three bucks for Opium and a blowjob, can you dig it? I'm going now, you best come you'll be in the boonies quicklike, no ass for months, I don't want to go by myself tonight. You might get hit tomorrow, wattaya say?"

all comes so fast because I'm loaded by now, that I'm honest:

"I'm scared shitless."

Lonesome helps me sneak out of my area and has a cook ready to cover for me if it comes to that so we're soon on our way to the bunkerline. On the way he tells me fear ain't shit, the hard part is keeping sane somehow--but maybe that's fear afterall--and pretty soon we get talking about hats for some reason.

"I gotta get rid of this FNG baseball cap, don't I?"

"First step," he says. "First act of rebellion, might say. Get hold of a Boonie Hat. It's like a badge. In the Field it's like a wife, can you dig on that? I mean, Army gives you a number, keeps track of you by that number, everything else. You're an Eleven, rifleman, right? You gotta shake that off to remember you're an ordinary dude and not just a number, can you--"

"Dig it," I say. I can see him smile in the light from the bunkerline.

The perimeter is guard towers beaded together on concertina wire. Our side is dark but the outside is lit up bright by big spotlights mounted on top of the guard towers.

He stops in back of Bunker 23 and yells, "Three times 23 is 69."

A flashlight shines from the window of the bunker and a voice comes from where it goes out, "Wanna get the clap, eh Lonesome?"

"I got the Jones, man, gotta get some of that cross-mounted pussy since I'll be a gone mothafucker tomorrow at noon buddy my bird'll be here at twelve bells and I gotta do some last-minute shopping."

"What's in it for us, my man?"

"The best they got."

"Wait one."

And the spotlight on the front of the bunker goes out. Lonesome signals through a break in the wire, and we are soon

running down another road on the other side of the lights. Through the vegetation and immediately in the village. Just as immediately into a hut barely lit and a small woman with black teeth that Lonesome speaks to. Into another room through a bamboo curtain where Lonesome is already giving our order.

"Mamasan, we want Opium and a blowjob, one at a time."

"Only two girls," she says.

The opium screws my head around a notch so I only half know or care where I am. Some memories come backwards: I'm again the rock that is Okinawa and I see the plane circle, but soon see cedar boughs, then the ocean from inside Mrs. Whitelock's fifth-grade geography class, then *in the woods Bobby down the creek under the other den tree when a branch at the top of my hickory moves--no wind--but neither no bush tail, no squirrel face (GODDAMN, the woman's teeth looked like a squirrel's) to blow away until the girl wipes her mouth with her left arm which is half gone. The woman comes back, Lonesome comes from somewhere and pays; we've got a chunk of O for the guard.*

Getting back to the bunkerline seems like it takes us two hours. There are constantly shapes ahead of me and beside me, and sounds behind us all the way so it is all I can do to keep from crying out. Lonesome hasn't said a thing and back at the perimeter I notice the camp is the quietest it has been since I got here. I wonder why.

Lonesome says goodbye he lives on 3rd street in Logan, Utah, his last name is Jones, "Stay high, keep your fuckin' head down, and never forget you could get it any time from here on. Like I say, good luck. Remember there's no such thing as a coward."

atching her fuck herself with her studs tattooed with an American flag, and I've got a shirt on made out of dried rice and water crashed through the door but it's a garbage can rolling down the aisle of the barracks and when I'm on my feet I realize I'm shiny sweaty so I dress fast as I can while the dude that threw the can is saying breakfast served in five minutes, and only for five minutes in case the goddamn Chinese send troops in. He vanished out the door and I hustle to take a shit past guys just coming to asking whatthefuck, etc...

Breakfast doesn't look like anything I ever ate and the dude serving it has a joke for everybody, must be loaded on speed he's so fast, tells me he's so short he can sit on a dish's head and swing his legs.

Afterwards we're put in a line and another sergeant is facing us with his cap pulled low over his black face. He is tall and muscular and somehow looks more kind than he sounds. He stands calm with his hands behind his back. His uniform is faded but pressed.

"Name's Brewer," he says. "If there is only one thing I know, I know most of you want don't wanna be here noway, nobow, and no more. I don't neither. I don't like it here,

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and I don't even have to go where some of you mens do.
There's not much I can say will cheer you up, but that ain't
my job. My job is to keep you busy while you're here in Camp
Pain.

Chapter Two

I'm dreaming of the Vietnamese girl but we're in a boat
somewhere and I'm watching her fuck herself with her stub
tattooed with an American flag, and I've got a shirt on made
out of dried rice and water crashes through the door but it's
a garbage can rolling down the aisle of the barracks and when
I'm on my feet I realize I'm slimy sweaty so I dress fast as
I can while the dude that threw the can is saying breakfast
served in five minutes, and only for five minutes in case the
goddamn Chinese send troops in. He vanishes out the door and
I hustle to take a shit past guys just coming to asking
whathethefuck, etc... there a minute. The black guy goes on

Breakfast doesn't look like anything I ever ate and the
dude serving it has a joke for everybody, must be loaded on
speed he's so fast, tells me he's so short he can sit on a
dink's head and swing his legs.

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tall and muscular and somehow looks more kind that he sounds.
He stands calm with his hands behind his back. His uniform
is faded but pressed.

"Name's Browser," he says. "If there is only one thing
I know, I know most of you mens don't wanna be here noway
nohow, and no more. I don't neither. I don't like it here,

and I don't even have to go where some of you mens do. There's not much I can say will cheer you up, but that ain't my job. My job is to keep you busy while you're here in Cam Rahn. There's a chance some of you may go up North early, there may be empty planes. So anybody who ain't an Eleven fall out, get in line, you're goin' on Detail; the Elevens can hang loose because if there's any room on a plane you'll ship out today. Any questions?"

So the rest of them get in another line. Ass, me, maybe ten other guys go back to the barracks. Some guys begin writing letters. Ass is reading a new comic book he borrows from a big Black guy who is whistling and whittling. He has a pile of shavings between his legs and some officer comes up to him and stands there a minute. The Black guy goes on whittling for a while, then stops and looks up at the Second Lieutenant.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Private?" the Eltee says.

"Just passin' the mornin'," the guy says. I can tell the second luey is pissed but I don't think the Black guy knows it yet.

"See this," the lieutenant says. He is pointing at his rank.

"Yeah..."

"Yeah!"

"Yeah, sir," he says.

"Well, you dumb Black...What's your name, Private?"

The Black guy stands up and a lot of shavings fall off his lap. I notice some of them land on the Officer's boots.

"'Dumb Black' is close enough, sir smart-ass White. Just call me Black." He is really pissed and just as he is ready to take a swing at the Eltee me and another guy grab him. We don't know what the hell to do and neither does the Lieutenant. He knows he fucked up though, it's all over his face that is extra white right now. His ears are red.

"You better learn to control your temper while you're here, Private, or you'll end up in LBJ," he says, then walks off like he's got a corncob up his ass.

We all sit down again and the guy who grabbed the Black guy with me lights a cigarette and spits the way the Officer went. "That guy was a real asshole," he says.

"Hey, uh CallmeBlack," Ass begins, "What's LBJ?"

"Long Bihn Jail."

We swap names around after that and the Black guy says CallmeBlack is fine with him. There's a guy from New York who's name is Green so somebody decides he ought to be called Olive Drab while he's in the Army.

I have to take a dump so I walk down to the latrines. There is some old woman in there who looks like the woman at the whorehouse last night. She is somewhere between the color of Callmeblack and a feed sack. She is tiny, maybe four feet tall. When I come up she is dragging a fuel can

over to a cut-off oil drum. The cut-off drum is the catchpit for the two-holer outhouse. Of course it is full of shit and toilet paper. Just when I get up to the shithouse the woman pours some of the fuel into the drum and lights it. Smoke blacker than barn-swallow shit. After it burns a while she stirs it and it begins burning better again. I can watch her through the wall of the shithouse because there is about two inches between the boards. She doesn't even act like I am around there. She is chewing something and spits it out every so often at the burning shit. Granddaddy comes to me spitting his chew out and climbing down between the spikes of the manure spreader. "Shit is the beginning of everything," he says. I am taking a leak by the wagon and watching Elemental school practice in Shorder's field across the creek. I wonder why I am flashing all the way back to when I was a kid.

ii.

They come and get us about noon. The plane this time is AirForce. A Cargo plane. It is camouflaged too, like the ones the Marines had landed in Okinawa. *Oh no we're getting closer to the war too fast.* The props of the plane remind me of the ceiling fans at The Depot Restaurant on River Street, except these moths swallow this putrid air of the landing strip like a carp taking doughballs. We squeeze into the back section and the hatchdoor slams shut. Some Air Force guys strap us into belts that go all the way across the plane:

five guys into one belt. The inside of the plane looks fragile: it is crossed by steel struts and the panels between the struts vibrate in the suck of the propellers, more yet when we're taxi-ing over the bumpy runway. When we lift, the cases of supplies in front of us slide our way a bit. I feel plain scared. Scared this plane is junk, scared of getting shot down, scared I'll crack up before I even get to my rifle unit, I'm so scared. I begin remembering playing in an abandoned school bus that sat in a big sinkhole behind the school. Playing war. When it rained and thundered and the wind blew we pretended we were in a tank because that old shell rocked and its rattles were identical to these that increase when we come down on another airport that looks the same as all the others but is smaller. The jungle is closer and greener; we're in Kontum Province, Central Highlands, near Cambodia.

At Supply we get a rucksack that's an aluminum frame and a canvas bag with a million little pockets on it. It seems really silly when it is empty, like a Christmas present from an aunt that I don't know what to do with. After a while I get it more and more full, learn a way of stringing it onto the frame, and it feels like home. It is wadded full of some jungle utes, a poncho and poncho liner, my steel pot, a Red Cross pacquet that has shaving cream, stationery, a pocket Bible, and a smaller package with three moist towels like at a restaurant. We get a Geneva convention card too, with the rules of the war.

"You're shitting me," one guy says. "What the fuck is this, a game of checkers?"

"Dig this: Torturing of prisoners is illegal. I wish this was printed in Gooktalk instead of English."

Then we get to go to the PX. I get a carton of cigarettes and a boonie hat and cram them in my ruck.

Ass buys comics, a boonie hat, and candy bars that quick melt in his pocket and attract huge bugs. He buys two strings of beads too and gives me one set.

"That way," he says, "I can see you in that ungoddamny-dark jungle at night."

When we get back from the PX there is a guy from Headquarters there and he says to pack up. We are supposed to get our gear together and go down to the Helicopter Pad because there's a chance we might get out in the afternoon.

The pad area is fenced off by extra concertina. The actual landing pad for the helicopters is only big enough for two supply helicopters to land at a time. It is made out of what looks like roof decking except it is Olive Drab like everything else. This area is outside the main perimeter too, so for the first time I can get a daytime view of some of the country, but not much. Along the perimeter line there are little round clouds of red dust that look like giant beads above the bunkerline. The clouds come from helicopters landing and taking off.

All the way around the landing pad are stacks of supplies:

ammo in metal cans; C-rations in wired cardboard cases; red nylon bags that I think are mail; huge blocks of ice. A lot of different stuff. When we get near the pad the guy who is running things smiles at us. He is wearing a headset and directing the supply choppers in. When one lands he comes over to us with that same big smile. It is obvious that the five of us are new--even if we knew what to do, our clothes are telltale. He is wearing a teeshirt that is torn so his scarred chest shows. I wonder if the scar is what is left of a wound.

"You guys goin' out, eh?" He has to yell because the chopper doesn't shut down. "It'll be quite a while so meantime start loading that bird with those cases of C's." He points to a pile, then goes over to talk into his radio to the pilots.

The cases of C's are heavy. We hand them inside to the door gunners who stack them all around their seat. Another six or eight birds come in and get their load then fly out again. I wonder if they are going where we are, to Echo Company. I know there are five Companies in a Battalion and I wonder if all five are together, or what? We spend another couple hours there helping to load the birds. All the time there are other helicopters going to other pads: I can see two other Pad Zones from where we are. After he loads another bird with C-rations the Padman tells us to get ready, that we'll go out on the second bird: the first one is going

to take the mail.

The mail goes and my nuts draw tighter; my stomach and groin feel like they are stitched together and I can't tell if I'm altogether scared, or maybe hungry too. I go over to a water trailer for a drink just as the bird comes in low over the jungle and slows like a hockey player slows, glides up and bobs onto the pad, bounces, lays there with the pilots helmeted and looking like two of a million eyes on a giant fly. When we get in--the five of us and a leftover mail sack--the door gunner smiles but I can't tell if he is smiling at us or at what is said to him through his headset. The engine gains power and seems wound as tight as I am. There is no other possible sound but the pulsing motor. The gunner hitches up his machine gun and points at my rifle then at my ammo clips and I load the gun with hands that pulsate like the helicopter itself. We sit on the chopper's floor and our feet hang outside. When the sound is so intense I think something is wrong, the bird lifts, bobbles, and rises slowly above the Base Camp Compound that is nearly as red as the mail sacks from the air.

Helicopters pop up from other pads of the big camp and spoke every direction: towards the setting sun, towards the fuselike river, towards the Olive Drab hue that must be the Cambodian jungle. We go that way, away from the distant haze of the ocean; over rice paddies that look like cheese-cloth snipped ragged by the rugged mountains.

Up there in the blinding wind the valleys are black and the ranges that catch the last light look like the veins of a fallen leaf and as we step down on currents of air the ground falls closer, the jungle looks like steel wood, then pubic hair, and we are aiming for a spot in the jungle that is as red as green and dotted by sandbagged huts that look like muskrat hills.

Our pilot sways the bird into a hole cut like a stove-pipe in the jungle and about six feet off the ground the machinegunner throws the mail bag off, then signals me to jump. I take the shock too stiff and roll over on my back like a possum. The rucksack is heavy as a mothafucker from the C-rations and ammunition and I land just so, turn over on my back with my rifle held up while the helicopter is hovering, stirring the chopped bits of jungle that are everywhere into my eyes. The other guys jump and the bird leaves without ever coming any closer to landing. There are five or so dudes standing around in teeshirts laughing at us and when the bird is gone more guys come out of the sandbagged hootches to root through the mail.

"Better learn to stay on your feet, FNG. You'll be in a hot Landing Zone one of these days and you don't wanna be rolling around on the ground, you know what I mean?" The dude is helping me on my feet and another one who has rooted through the mail already is there with a joint.

"Welcome," he says, and hands me the joint that I hit

politely.

"OK, men, help these new guys out now. It'll be dark in an hour, let's get em under the ground."

Within the next hour the blackness spills out of the jungle and into that little chimney so I lose all my orientation. I meet a lot of the guys: Bull Durham, Pops, Chicken-feed. But I can't tell them apart, can't remember who is which while we eat C's and bullshit in the light of a candle made from the sealing wax of artillery rounds. There are five of us in a hootch that is dug maybe four feet into the ground and topped by timbers as thick as wagon tongues, all covered by sandbags.

"Tomorrow, if we don't hump out, FNG, you wanna build yourself a hootch, and dig it as deep as you can, can you dig it?"

What is left of the day, whatever day it is, we spend in the hootch smoking pot and listening to a cassette recorder whine some sound through the gummy red dust that is still everywhere, even underground. Not much gets said because we get plenty loaded. Other guys wander in to share a bowl, a guard roster is got up and I will pull from 3:00 to 4:30 with Bull Durham who sleeps in the hootch next door. Bed is ammo crates dug into the earth wall and even in the dimness of the candle I can see spiders the size of a quarter scurrying into holes, propping themselves at their doorways watching us.

iii.

"INCOMING!"

I hear the shout before I hear the thuds of the rounds. The first explodes at the edge of my hearing and the next ones come closer and closer. We are all crumpled into the aisle of the hootch and I'm not on the bottom and not on the top. My mind flashes and rebounds like the flashes that pour a neon blue light into the hootch. Two bright flashes, and the rest of the rounds land further away again.

"Goddamn, Charlie put a couple in here that time," Bull Durham says, and unwinds himself from the top of the pile even while rounds are still landing. He scrambles to the doorway and peeks out.

"Let's go," he says.

I am goddamn insane. I am shaking and have a hell of a time grabbing and loading my rifle. I don't have any meaning for the whines I make following somebody's ass through the small doorway and crawling on my belly to some other sandbags where other guys are digging. I am insane only for a couple blessed minutes--until somebody brings a flashlight and plays it on an arm coming out of the heap of sandbags where everybody is digging. So I know we are digging out what was a hootch, scratching and tossing sandbags out from around the arm. I am pretty much useless. *I don't know what to do.* A big Black guy barges past me and begins working at the pile of bags.

"Rogers," somebody says.

He is alive but barely and doesn't begin to take normal breaths until he is flat on the ground. His face that stands out like a still photo in a picture album for the moment the flashlight stays, is broken. There isn't much blood but the face is mishaped like a front fender that has bought the shape of a tree.

All this and then some in my mind while dudes are dashing here and there--I can only sit near Rogers and stay out of the way--and I hear some guys yelling across the clearing and into radios.

"Dustoff! Direct hit, get us a bird."

"Anybody know where it came from? Who was on guard?"

I know a Dustoff is an ambulance helicopter although I don't know what I expect to see when it gets here, but it seems like it is taking forever. Everything is confusing; it is like a localized tower of Babel around where the shells hit. Pops is a squad leader, I figure that much out because guys do what he says. He gives me a handheld flare and leads me down the hill a bit to where the Dustoff should land but I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to do with the flare.

Then, while I'm standing near where the bird will land and trying to see anything in the darkness that will tell me something about what is around me I hear the bird coming, far off, rubbing its way up the long valley to our Landing Zone. When they bring the wounded guys down they bring a

portable strobe light too.

The helicopter comes up in total blackness just at the time there is rifle fire a short distance off. Everybody crouches low and some guys leave to get weapons I think. The downthrust of the rotor is powerful as it augurs down on our strobe. It is impossible to tell how far off the ground the bird is and in the noise, the dark, the confusion the whole experience is frightening, real frightening. *I wish I was friends with somebody.* I feel completely lost or misplaced. About fifteen feet off the ground the pilot turns on his huge landing light and lands swiftly. The scene is Halloweenish: guys in skivvies and steel pots, some with rifles and some helping load the wounded. There must be a half dozen wounded and when they're all on Pops says, "OK, bring the KIA."

I didn't even know there was a dead guy, and it turns out his body is right behind where I am so I help load him. I take hold of a foot and am surprised that the boot is so new. *Like mine.* All the other guys' boots are red like the ground is but these are green and black, like mine, like

ASS. A flash of light pins his face on the dark like a dime in the gutter.

I want to shriek but I eat the want: I function; I load the weight that drags away that glimmer of a face I will wear with me like these beads he gave me that don't really shine in the dark. Nothing does, it is so dark when the bird goes.

I drag the rest of my mind back to the hootch that is

now yellow in candlelight. Pops, Bull, a couple other guys are there smoking cigarettes and listening to the traffic on the radio.

"Rogers is OK, ain't he?" Bull asks Pops.

"Yah, I think so,"

"Too bad about the FNG. What a way to go out--you know, first night and all."

The dirt wall feels cold against my back when I lean on it and watch the spiders mosey through the candlelight. I see them carrying Albert Steven Swanson's body to his mother.

"Get a good hit, FNG, get a hit so the day ain't all blue, y'understand? I mean man if you ain't loaded by the time the sun gets over the mountains here you got a rough day to face no matter what. I been here 249 days so I know y'understand. I'm Pops and you're in my squad now because the guy who was supposed to be got it last night. You came out with him, right?"

"Swanson, yeah, I barely knew him...I--"

"That's good, knowing him barely is. That's good. He's dead now. You gotta never forget last night long as you're here because it tells you the whole story of this goddamn war--anybody can get it anytime." Smoke escapes through his mouth and nose and in my cobweb way of looking out of waking up he is blowing smoke out his ears, even his small eyes. I like him immediately: he reminds me of an elder brother I never had.

Chapter Three

Pops is "over 25, too old to play games," he says. He looks it: maybe it's his small brown rabbit eyes buttoned on a face the texture of new-shorn sheephide, the color of the dust, a countenance like the youngest turtle at the zoo. Or maybe it's the smoke he blew in my face to wake me up, or the bowl he handed me when he stands up to scratch his nuts and stretch.

"Get a good hit, FNG, get a hit so the day ain't all blue, y'understand? I mean man if you ain't loaded by the time the sun gets over the mountains here you got a rough day to face no matter what. I been here 240 days so I know y'understand. I'm Pops and you're in my squad now because the guy who was supposed to be got it last night. You came out with him, right?"

"Swanson, yeah, I barely knew him...I--"

"That's good, knowing him barely is. That's good. He's dead now. You gotta never forget last night long as you're here because it tells you the whole story of this goddamn war--anybody can get it anytime." Smoke escapes through his mouth and nose and in my cobweb way of looking out of waking up he is blowing smoke out his ears, even his small eyes. I like him immediately: he reminds me of an older brother I never had.

I wanna cry or something already, say hey man I'm too fucking scared already; I wanna get hit just a little and go back to The World to heal. But, somehow I'm comfortable warm--in shock or something. He keeps handing me the pipe with his right hand and scratching jungle rot around his nuts with his left. He's only got his OD skivvies on: the rot is half black scab, half pus--he scratches selectively. His fingernails are blacker than a kerosene lighthouse in 1950, and his hands are red or brown and in my stone I keep watching at his fingers like I'd watch a guitarist's, but I flash he may think I'm looking at his nuts that remind me of used flash-bulbs...so I look at the wall; the spiders are there, looking out.

"So let's start getting you in a hole," he says. "You feel like using that one?"

I know he means the hootch that got blown away.

"Maybe y' wanna dig another one, eh?"

We go outside and the LZ looks completely different in the bright light of morning. Guys are beginning to crawl out of holes. A radio is on:

"Armed Forces Radio presents, The Adventures of Chi i iickenman!"

At the same time as the radio three or four guys in separate parts of the LZ cry "Chiiiickenman." What strikes me as strange is the way the radio show comes on immediately after that introduction. No commercial, no weather or station

break, no nothing. I am sitting on top of a hootch thinking about it. Pops is inside, then comes out with a guy in Issue glasses, a tatoo of a peacock from nipple to nipple and an intricately scribbled hat crumpled onto his head. He has a rabbit's foot around his neck.

"Glad to have another leg," he says, sticking out his hand that holds a forkful of whatever is in the can he has in his other hand.

A leg is, he explains through the shitbrown wad he's eating, another squad-member. "We split up all the extra shit that we gotta hump, like the radio and batteries, extra ammo, claymores...we split all that stuff up among the squad so when we're short all of us gotta carry more. You can dig on that, uh...they call me Peacock."

"Gabe. I can guess why they call you that."

"I got drunk in Hong Kong two months ago--on R&R--and next morning when I woke up I had this. I never seen it, can't get hold of a mirror big enough. Ya like it?"

"Righteous, Peacock, goddamn righteous. How 'bout struttin' your pretty ass over here and helpin' Gabe dig hisself a hole?" Pops says.

The shovels are only about three feet long. It feels kind of good to dig. Peacock sits on a full sandbag holding open empty ones and I fill them. When they're full he throws them into a big pile. The way he does it all in one motion--tying them then heaving them--shows he has done a lot of it

so I figure he has been here a while.

The LZ is called LZ Niagra and reminds me of a fence scar in a Beech tree, the way it is just hacked into the jungle about three-quarters up a mountain. *A Beech is the only tree that, if you carve your initials in, them initials will get bigger instead of smaller as the tree grows.* While we're working the clouds pull up out of the valley below us. There is a pretty wide river down there that I didn't see before. A smaller one runs down the mountain not far from us and a couple times while we're digging it is quiet enough on the LZ to hear the river falling over what must be 'Niagra.'

The oldest hootches of the Z are in the middle. As new hootches get built the ring expands. There's a section of hootches in the very center that are completely done: they look like a separate neighborhood. Outside these are hootches that are for the most part getting the roof put on: the men who live in them are bringing logs in from the jungle and sandbagging.

We decide to take a break and Peacock disappears into his hootch. I am going back to the hootch I slept in last night to get my canteen because there is a water trailor down the hill. It was the last thing brought in before dark last night, slung beneath a huge cargo helicopter. Most of the morning there has been a line of guys filling canteens and empty ammo cans so I guess that water is high-class and

decide I should stock up. *got share of shit like you did last night* There are four guys standing at the back of the line. I think they have just carried a log in for overhead because they're extra-sweaty and a couple of them still have pieces of bark on their shoulders. When I come up they quit talking for a minute and I see they're smoking a bowl. When the guy with the bowl sees that I see it he offers it to me but I don't want any. *looks purple. I see about it and the short-*

"You new?" he says.

"Got here last night." *working on a steel comb.*

"Just in time for the show?" another guy asks. He is really cross-eyed and I'm not even sure he is looking at me.

"Yeah," I say, "one of the guys who came in with me got it." *his mouth that is deep but doesn't have a roof on it.*

"I heard it was a FNG. I'm glad. No offense," he says, "but it's tougher when an old guy, some guy who is getting short y' know? gets it."

"I can dig it," I say, taking the bowl that is offered again. *fuckit.*

It must be fifteen minutes that we're standing there and they are all asking me where I'm from and telling me how long they got to go. Two of them are under a hundred days-- 'double-digit-midgets'--and the other two are about half done.

"There's no way to tell how long a guy has been here after he's been here a month," I say.

"Really," one explains, "there isn't any difference as

soon as a guy sees his first share of shit like you did last night."

"I dunno, I--" "Well, you might not think so, but wait 'til the next batch of FNG's come. They won't know who's been here longer'n whoever else."

By this time we're up to the trailer and it surprises me that the water looks purple. I ask about it and the short guy says it's iodine.

I can taste it. Like sucking on a steel comb.

When I get back Peacock is there and says he is ready. While we're digging he tells me he has eighty days left.

"That's why I'm ten feet under," he says, nodding towards his hootch that is deep but doesn't have a roof on it. His hootchmates are in the woods now getting the logs. I look toward his hootch and accidentally dump a shovelful of dirt in his lap.

"Sorry."

"Fuckit."

"Nice lid you got there," I say when his hat falls off.

"My pride and joy, man. I got all the LZ's I been on since I got here wrote on it, among numerous other paraphernalia. That and this," he swings his rabbit's foot, "kept me alive for 280-some days. I trust 'em completely."

"You're superstitious, eh?"

He looks at me for such a long time I almost feel

uncomfortable.

"Listen," he says, sitting down, "There ain't no such thing as superstitious. There's only lucky and unlucky. It took me a while to realize it, y'understand, but the Infantry is just like the Lifers say it is, the 'Queen of Battle, always getting the cock shoved to Her.' And if you're a Leg, a Grunt, a peg, an Eleven-whatever y' wanna call it, you're gonna hit the shit before anybody else does so you're either lucky, dead, or inbetween. Inbetween can be same as lucky or same as dead. And when y' realize it's all luck or unluck you quit thinking, start hoping or praying--different strokes for different folks..." and he just trails off there. He gives his rabbit's foot a push. It swings across the peacock tatoo while he readjusts his hat against the sun that goes behind a cloud right then, so the land yawns away like a faded quilt.

ii.

It clouds up a little about the time we are quitting for lunch and a wind comes up. Our Company's First Sergeant comes over to us just as we are getting up. CallmeBlack is with him.

"This is Justin Riggins, Morrison. Riggins, this is Adolph Morrison and--" he looks at me, then at his papers, "this is Gabriel Stork."

"I'm Peacock," he says when he shakes hands with Callme.

"CallmeBlack.

"Black?"

"Callin' Black."

"I did."

"He owns his nickname is Callin' Black," I say. "And we the ball are you? Adolph Harrison."

"Oute my case, Barber," he says laughing. "And you're Stuck?"

"Stuck."

"I don't need your deliv'ring, any kids my way." He ignores me. The first target is still standing there

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Approved:

Richard Lyons

Richard Lyons

"Black?"

"CallmeBlack."

"I did."

"He means his nickname is CallmeBlack," I say. "And who the hell are you? Adolph Morrison."

"Outa my case, fucker," he says laughing. "And you're Stork?"

"Stoick."

"I don't need youse delivering any kids my way." He ignores me. The First Sergeant is still standing there going over his papers. He tells us to go to Pops' hootch for a meeting, that he will round up the rest of the squad. Peacock says that is bad news, that we might be getting up for a hump.

The inside of Pops' hootch is dark and cool because there is a poncho liner in the doorway. Bull Durham is already in there and already has a bowl going. When we come in he passes the bowl to Callme and starts a Janis Joplin cassette going. The recorder is beat to shit: its plastic case is all cracked and some of it is missing and covered with tape. It runs off radio batteries.

The hootch begins to smell like a rained-out brush fire. Now somebody walks over the top and Bull yells at him:

"Would you do that at home?"

Big rounds explode somewhere quite a ways off. I shiver despite myself.

"Calling in the big ones on ol' Charlie's ass," Bull says.

"'cept ol' Charles has already made it back to his dug-out by now."

The cassette winds dead and Bull turns it over. The winds stir the poncho liner over the door.

"Jesus," BullDurham says, "if the wind is coming, the monsoons can't be far away, ain't that right?"

"Oh mothafucker I am too too short to be fuckin' with the rains," Peacock says.

"You'll see what I mean," he says to me and Callme.

"Well, they're a motha all right," Bull says, "but at lease we stay at one LZ longer during the monsoons. We've moved three times in about three weeks, the whole LZ. Our mail is a good month behind us."

Pops comes in whittling something from a bar of soap. He says hi to everybody and sits down. As he whittles small flakes of soap cling to his pants and get scattered along the wooden floor. There are even some flakes in his eyebrows. Once the light inside the hootch gets brighter and I have to look around to discover why: there is a skylight built into the roof.

We are still waiting on the rest of the squad. I don't even know how many more there are. Bull gets talking about playing baseball and in a few minutes is standing in the aisle of the hootch in his skivvies and a hat, a smoke in his mouth.

He's in a hunch like Vic Power and is taking small swings with his rifle. *This is how accidents happen. Maybe his rifle is loaded and somebody will get shot.* I think of Lonesome, about how he is half a hand short because of some carelessness. But I realize I am just flitting to and from the paranoia of the dope and after I relax Bull's act is funny.

"I hit the fastest pitch Sam Levins ever threw," he says, "and he woulda been the fastest rookie in the big leagues but one night he called some tomato-picker a spic and the spic laid his head open so nowadays he just rusts away with his granny who always wears cowboy boots and takes snuff!" *garbage breath, and from about three inches away.*

He is entertaining, not just rapping out of his head but putting on a show. I think I'll like him more the better I get to know him. Later on he says nigger and apologizes to Callme. It don't seem like Callme cared. Bull Durham is the clown, a class-A clown. I'm glad I know him. He has us laughing about something--even Pops is amused--when all of a sudden a big guy shoulders his way down the doorway and blocks out what light is coming through there.

"Hi Prophet," Pops says.

I scoot over to make room for the guy who has moved enough to let some light in and besides the skylight is clear again and I can see him real well: he looks crazy. He is still standing just inside the doorway kind of hanging on the roof supports and leering. I can't see his eyes well enough

to see if he's looking at me but his head is turned my way and I get the feeling he is. He's rank-smelling and the longer he stands there the worse the smell is, coming in with the downdraft from the doorway. He smells like sour milk.

"Sit down, man, we were waiting on you," Pops says.

"No fuckin' mail again," he says. His voice is as big as his body and his breath is as bad as his pits. I can tell easy enough because he's beside me and is leaning over my lap looking at Pops' carving. Then he looks at me, for sure now.

"Who're you?" he says, and "Don't I know you from somewhere? Where you from in The World?" all through that unbelievable garbage breath, and from about three inches away.

I said Cincinnati but Pops was already there between us with the carving.

"Whattaya think, Prophet? Don't it look like Eltee Olson?"

"I think I'll take it to the sonofabitch and ask him," Prophet says, then leaves.

"When's his wagon coming?" Bull Durham asks.

Pops shrugs and looks at me, then asks me if I know what's the matter with him?

"Sure as hell has bad breath," I say. It gets some laughs.

"He's been hit three times," Pops says. Something, some other crutch snaps: I have been thinking getting wounded would send me home.

"Three times?"

"And he's only been here about six months."

"But if we hit shit," Bull says seriously, "stay by him. Nobody with him has ever been hit. The first time he took a round it came through another guy's helmet and never hurt the first guy."

"You're shitting me, he still goes with you?"

"With US, man."

"He's great out there," Pops says. "He walks Point most of the time."

"So he's good for something." Right away I wish I hadn't said that.

"Yeah, good for something, walking Point. Damn good way to get rich if there are enough wars to keep you in business. Anyway, we don't USE him for that. He wants to walk it. When he doesn't, or when he goes, we start rotating Point, and it's no fuckin' fun, Gabe, no fun."

"First Shirt shoulda been here," Pops says. "I'll go find him."

He goes out the door. Bull is picking his nose. Peacock left a long time ago to hustle up some C-rations. A little guy I've heard the others call Chickenfeed, but have never talked to, is going through an ammo can with cassettes in it. I feel pretty awkward after Pops getting down on me but I know it isn't serious. I want to find out how Prophet got his name but I don't feel like breaking the spell: I can

hear music from some distance away; the skylight is blinking gray and grayer slices of light through the smoke; Pops' rifle is loaded and hung on one roof beam. I begin composing a mental letter to no one in particular.

It's just hunting, simple as that, I think. We haven't been out in the bush yet but from what the guys here say it's same as walking those hills back there except we line behind each other instead of alongside. I wish I was home there, get me a new shotgun for rabbit season. Maybe a five-shot. These rifles put out 18 rounds in two seconds. Big rounds that tumble like dum-dums splatter when it hits something... Here you don't even clean the game, far as I know...A rifle whings, a shotgun whams, I wonder what shrapnel sounds like. I don't remember hearing any last night but there must have been....

I begin thinking about hunting rabbits, me and Granddaddy: 'Flush you goddamn hop-headed flopeared bastards. Come on up outta them holes, whattaya think it is, Easter, for Chris'akes. Tramp them woodpiles, I got a feel there may be a convention in that woodpile, all them rabbits tryin' on new hats and buildin' them egg baskets--Flush em Gabe, make enough noise to get em up so's that ol beagle don't feel so bad comin out on a morning such as this. And up like a mornin hardon then, going a yard a hop for the creek going away from the old man with his rabbit hat and Damascus-steel double barrel.... A cotton tail making trails like a Greyhound bus through that white morning: WHAM, and a pretty big buck rabbit nailed in the beech grove, flopping. The beagle sniffs him once and goes to the near tree to piss.

I am tired.

"Not going out," Pops says when he gets back about an hour later. "Three squad is going out and Four is going out if they get hit shit so us and One gotta pull this whole perimeter tonight, all night. The Lifers think Charlie is gonna hit again."

"Fuck them Lifers, why don't they pull some guard once in a while if they're so damn sure what Charlie's up to."

"Fuck Charlie too. He's already checked that mortar in and is riding the subway down to Saigon by now, to lay back on Opium."

I flash on Lonesome, the girls, the old woman with squirrel teeth and the dinks I saw sitting around the gates and convoy points. I got an image of Charlie that hasn't been swept away yet: little yellow guy all wicked face, smile of teeth like machinegun ammo.

iii.

"Hey, Stork, wake up. We're on."

The middle of tonight is darker than the middle of last night, I swear, but I'm awake fast. Chickenfeed is shining a flashlight in my face for a minute. When I light a cigarette to prove I'm awake he remembers something he forgot and starts digging through his rucksack.

"Bring an extra bandolier of ammo," he says. Then I watch him go out and I notice he puts his jacket hood up and I wonder why until I hear a sound like crow's feet on a tin crib roof.

"Rain, damn rain," he says when he comes back again.

"You about ready?"

I'm smoking and shivering, lacing my boots up. He sits down and lights a cigarette. I hear the rain on the roof and a steady ping where it runs onto something metal, an ammo can maybe. There are explosions somewhere way off and their thuds sound wrapped like the rain is somehow. Not quite loud enough to believe in.

The guard position is downhill and it is slick going down. About halfway to the perimeter we go into the radio conex that is bright inside from a light run by generators that whir beneath sandbags outside the door. One whole side of the conex is radios and there is one guy monitoring something through headphones and another guy reading a comic and scratching rot around his arm pits with a letter opener. Rot--Chickenfeed calls him that--says no action, tells us the frequencies, says Hong Kong Radio is bouncing in, says "ain't these rains hell on Grunts?" with a smirk.

"No sweat," Chicken says, "I'm so short I need a step-ladder to take a piss." And we leave.

The guard position is maybe twenty feet in front of the perimeter wire. It is called 'LP,' a listening post. We relieve the two guys there and I am awful nervous. It isn't much of a station, isn't made to be comfortable. I think it is two stacks of ammo crates filled with dirt, with a piece of plastic over the top. The plastic doesn't stop much of

the rain, but it is a soft rain right now. Chickenfeed and me are both sitting on the ammo crate that is the seat and I don't know about him but I can't see a goddamn thing. Maybe for my own nerves, I want to talk--or I want him to talk.

"Kinda peaceful out here," I say. My voice seems to be full of the fake; it quivers or something.

"Peaceful? That's the last thing I expected you to say," he says. "But you're right. On really warm and star-spangled nights it's unbelievable. So quiet. I mean hell man, no where in The World can be as quiet as it gets here. One night it was really quiet and I was pulling the middle of the night with a guy from Philly when all of a sudden we heard this goddamn racket and called Artillery in. Sounded like a whole regiment of NVA. Next day we went out to see what it was and found a lot of dead orangutangs. Can you dig that? So, anywhere there can be a herd of orangutangs can be the quietest place there is when they ain't around, y'know?"

That makes me try to think what the jungle must be like. I still haven't been in it. I've got some ideas about it, but most of my ideas have been modified by degrees. I don't even know what to listen for. I don't know what kind of sound to stretch these ears for. Even though I know Charlie ain't going to show himself to me I am straining, looking for something but I don't know what! The guard pit is about as big as a batter's box. Waiting 'on deck' is a hype. Winging

a couple bats around, reading the pitcher, waiting...eyeballing the guy's windup, looking for a good spot to pull a fast-ball if I get one. My boots are soaked through and I keep my feet bouncing and the bouncing sends little splashing sounds out. So I quit that. I try to keep my attention on looking out at the blackness. I can hear frogs or something chirping, way off.

Shapes shift on me like I'm watching a box of black pups in the cellar. Once, I think I hear some talking. I'll be damned if I know whether I heard it or not. I'll trust Chickenfeed: he's been here before. He must know what he's listening for.

"Chickenfeed, what the hell do we listen for?" I try to whisper.

The rain is all the sound there is and it is gentle. He laughs a little.

"Listen for a motorcycle."

"What?"

"One time some other guys were pulling a dawn shift and they heard a motorcycle so called it in to Headquarters. Headquarters came out and got them, said they musta been loaded. But, next day there were tracks--mosquito-bike tracks--going down the trail. Can you imagine riding a dirt bike through this goddamn jungle at night with all kinds of cannons on the hill above you? 'Course Charlie has been fighting this war so long he knows all the ropes. He knows

GI's ain't no match for him. Even if we heard a motorcycle what're we gonna do? How would you know where to call the guns in?"

"Yeah. Speaking of fighting the war, how long you been here?"

"Ten months. Ten down, two to go. And I'm getting scared again."

"Huh?"

"When I first got here--like you--I was scared shitless all the time, always thought it was gonna happen. Then, after I'd been here a while I got so I wasn't scared, just bored mostly. Now that I'm getting short I am more scared than ever. I wish I was as crazy as Prophet is."

"What's he like?"

"You'll see. You'll know what I mean after a month or so."

"You drafted?" I feel stupid asking him.

"Fuckin-A. I figured they'd never get me but they did. I had a good job in my hometown working in a cement plant. I'm legally blind in one eye. But they figure it only takes one eye to fire a rifle; it don't take none, truth is, to fire the way I do--flat on my face holdin' the gun over my head. Anyway, they drafted me. I got a wife and a kid in the hole too."

"Shoulda had the kid sooner."

"I tried, man. When they started drafting married guys

without kids I started on a kid. Used to come home during lunch and get laid even." He laughs a little.

It is stopped raining. He hawks and a glob of snot lands on my boot that I have propped up out of the water. *It is so dark I can only see as far as the end of my boot, and what's there but a greenie.*

"Then," he goes on, "I met her in Hawaii on R&R not even thinking about knocking her up, y' know? And last time we got mail she tells me I'm a daddy. Quite a feeling, a kid. So I'm no kind of fuckin' hero. I get as deep under anything I can find when the shit hits."

"No such thing as a coward," I say, thinking of Lonesome again. I wonder if he is a junkie by now.

So Bull Durkin turns the tape over and hands Peacock the fire and tells me to hurry up. *It is as I discuss it all.*

"We're going out in half an hour. You better get something warm."

That wakes me up.

"Going out? Into the North?"

"Just a short nap, man. Get all the way to the Trail."

Before it all seems real I am behind Bull and in front of Peacock and we are loading our rifles on our way through the perimeter.

Chapter Four

I'm asleep in my wet clothes dreaming I'm in a river bottom of the Appalachians. Haven't seen anybody for three days, hunting rabbit tracks, but I can't see the ground very well. I stoop down to look at a rabbit squat pressed into briars that are young and green. The ground is split right there and I can see into a cavern that only has a broken-down Combine once run by steam. There are five Dinks sitting around the machine gnawing on bones and passing a cigarsized joint that is rolled out of Granddaddy's muslin underwear.

"My Country 'Tis of Thee" is coming out of the feed chute of the machine. I drop a frag down the hole and dash my ass behind a tree to wait. The music stops.

So Bull Durham turns the tape over and hands Peacock the pipe and tells me to hurry up. *Or am I dreaming it all?*

"We're going out in half an hour. You better eat something warm."

That wakes me up.

"Going out? Into the Bush?"

"Just a short hump, man. Not all the way to the Trail."

Before it all seems real I am behind Bull and in front of Peacock and we are loading our rifles on our way through the perimeter.

Following the old man through the path in the briars because I'm still too small to tramp bog swamps. My gun is too big and gets snagged by the bushes over and over again. Thanksgiving Morning. Somehow my doublebarrel handmedown doubles a maple sapling that would've been Granddaddy but that I fall backwards. My hands are stiff from the cold, my nose is running, my boots leak afterall. I never want to hunt again.

The first part of the trail reminds me of grown-over pasture track. It is rugged and there are rocks and lengths of vines laying in it because of guys dragging and carrying logs for hootch roofs. By the time we are fifty meters out I can't see back to the clearing of the LZ and in another five minutes the jungle is closing down on the trail. This part hasn't been used very lately or very often. Even though Bull is only about ten meters ahead of me I keep losing sight of him when he rounds a curve or drops over a rock. We are going down the mountain and at an angle, towards the river that runs down to the bigger one at the bottom. My rifle is loaded and keeps getting caught on vines and bushes. It makes me think of having a hardon in Sunday School, one too many things to keep track of.

We walk for about an hour before we come to the river that is muddy and not as fast as it sounds from a distance. It is falling over two big boulders where we are. There are vines over the water so old and thick they look like ironwork

on a bridge. We all hop across the water on the boulders and take turns filling our canteens. It is muggy down here and I am sweating terrifically. There are a lot of bugs too. Pops takes me a little bit up the hill to pull security. Callme-Black and Prophet are laying in the water when we leave. Chickenfeed has been carrying the radio and now he is fixing it up against a big stump.

"We'll probably lay around here for about an hour or so," Pops says.

He lays down and pulls his hat over his eyes. I am sitting with my back against a tree, looking through the jungle away from the river. It is as thick as a brillo pad. *This must be what it looks like to a rabbit sitting in briars.* I wonder if any gooks are sitting somewhere else and watching me or listening to the sounds that come from the others downstream. I only see one break in the foilage, otherwise it is as thick and kinkier than the back of Callme's head.

Pops stirs. "Keep your eyes on that trail over there," he says. He is pointing at the one break I saw and it makes me feel good that I saw it.

"I'll watch these two." Now he points and I can't see the two he's talking about.

"Do you ever see anything at times like these?"

"Well, hell," he says, "if the Dinks hear us they'll lob mortars in at those guys down there. But mortars aren't all that accurate. Of course if there are very many of them

together they'll take us on, but if there's very many we don't have a chance anyway. About the only good we're doing is if there's a couple trying to sneak up on us to throw a frag."

"Does it ever happen?"

"Not to me," he says strangely. "But over near Pleiku there are a lot more VC. Over here we're after the Trail, and it's mostly NVA. They travel in regiments and you never hear about them or see them until they're ready for you, know what I mean?"

"Why do we go out in squads then?"

"Looking for signs."

"Signs? What do you see?"

"Listen," he says, then shifts around and takes a minute to pick at his nose, then another minute lighting a smoke and carefully scratching his rot. "Most of the Dinks around here are coming from the Z and are on their way to the Delta. Or they're headed for Cambodia to recoup. This whole area is a switching yard; big trails meet all around here."

"How big?"

"They drive trucks down the Ho Chi."

"Where's that?"

"They move it all the time. I think it's waythefuck in- to Cambodia now because we see a lot of Air Force Bombers going over, then we hear the drops and they come back. I think they're bombing the Trail. Who knows, man? The Officers run the show, and the ones that run it the most are the

ones way up there in helicopters or planes, or way back in the Rear with the Gear, working eight hours a day and living the rest of the time with a whore somewhere. I could never figure out why we do what we do. We just move when some Lifer thinks we oughta."

"Do we move that much?"

"It depends, goes in spurts."

"A move means hard work, don't it? Like, every time we got to dig in and build a new hootch, right?"

"Yeah, it means that--hard work--and it means we're probably going into the middle of Charlie's area."

"How do they know where he is?"

"Lot of ways. Sometimes a SRRP--"

"Syrup?" I can't figure what he's talking about.

"S-R-R-P," he spells. "Short Range Reconnaissance Patrol. Like us."

"No shit? Well, what happens to us SRRPs that makes the Officers decide it is time to move?"

"Once in a while a patrol will pick up a straggler and Headquarters milks them for information. Like, Three Squad picked up two guys a month or so ago and our CO or somebody threw one of them out of a helicopter, so of course the other guy is gonna tell them something but who knows if the Dink is telling the truth or bullshitting--"

Bull Durham is coming up the trail naked.

"Or BullDurhamshitting, them Dinks," Pops adds.

"No Dink can have the brain for the art," Bull says,
"My trademark brand of bullshit takes a big brain."

"Maybe just a big head."

"Could be," Bull says, "I got one o' them too, comes as
part of my big cock."

"I noticed your fist was getting bigger."

"It's wearing the callouses in your ear too I see, now
that I look."

We lay around there for closer to three hours than one
and all that happens while we take turns napping is the jun-
gle changes colors and moves closer, gets inside me so I
feel hidden somehow. Even Headquarters doesn't know where we
are because we call in a position about three times as far
away as we really are. We decide to move before it gets too
dark because we don't want to be too near the Blue Line. Any
rivers that are marked on a map are marked in blue and when
Artillery sets up its Night Fire Program, a likely target is
blue lines. Night Fire is a series of defensive targets that
the big guns shoot all night long at random. Of course
Charlie knows where the LZ's are by the helicopters coming
and going most days. So, Night Fire targets are usually close
to the LZ's in areas that there are trails, to defend against
a lot of Dinks coming to the LZ at night. The spot we are in
seems like a logical spot for Artillery to shoot.

We look over the map and Pops and Prophet decide that
there should be another gully on the other side of the ridge

that is formed by the river we are near. We intend to follow the big river, but stay above it by about as far above it as we are now.

"We'll be walking sideways," Peacock says when we're ready.

"Wha' makes y'all think no dinks ove' there?" Callme asks him.

"May be," he says, "But that's a hell of a lot smaller chance to take than staying here. And by the way, if a gunship comes over just lay down and lay fuckin-A still. Don't move. If them pilots see movement and there ain't supposed to be any of us down here according to HQ, then they open all them holes full of miniguns and rockets."

Weird to be afraid of your own team. Artillery shells are as big as a hickory root. Gunships are helicopters that can cover a football field with a round every inch. We're lying about where we are. We could get mowed down for a simple mistake.

Walking is a lot harder this time. It is tough enough to stay balanced with the ruck on and now we are walking on a constant slant. We are following a smaller trail and I can't even see it a lot of the time but I keep track of Peacock, who is in front of me by this time, by the radio antenna. We walk for about a half hour and rest, then walk for another hour or more and I am beginning to get dizzy. It is so god-damn hot I can barely breathe and I can hear Bull gasping

behind me. Just about the time I can't go any further we stop. The spot we stop in doesn't look any different than what we've been going through and we can't see more than thirty feet in any direction. I guess that is what makes it a good place.

The plan is for each of us to dig a little slit trench to roll into if anything happens. We start setting up our ponchos to run off any rain that comes. I am really slow compared to the rest of them except CallmeBlack, but he gets a lot of his chores done for him because he and Prophet go out on Observation Point, which is daytime watch. It gets darker pretty fast when the sun goes over the mountain so we set up a guard roster for the night and eat. It surprises me how good my C-rations taste, and I drink up too much of my water because there isn't any closeby.

The night goes by, just goes by. Nobody gets completely loaded and I can sense that I'm not the only one who is tense but I doubt if everybody else is as scared as I am. It will take some getting used to. I am to pull the second guard shift so I try to get some sleep beforehand but I barely drift off. I have another weird dream: *I am in The Depot Restaurant and getting in a train with three yellow men who take my draft notice for a ticket. They all look like Albert Steven and have baseball uniforms tatoood onto their bodies. We take the train and by daylight it connects to the Ho Chi Line and they show me my stop. Grandaddy and the counterman*

from the restaurant are there with rabbit guns when I get off. Then we walk down the trail we're on, whistling "Dixie." We come upon the rest of the squad and Chickenfeed is fucking his dog. Granddaddy is undoing his underwear that is tatoeed on his body like the others' uniforms: when he gets it out and is ready to pee Bull Durham lights it for a joint.

Chickenfeed wakes me up. CallmeBlack and me pull our guard, get a little high and listen to the wind that makes vines rattle woodenly. Light comes and we go back to the stream to waste enough time to account for the time it would have taken us to come from where Headquarters thought we were.

Back at the LZ I use a black felt pen and write "Niagra" on my Boonie Hat.

"See that Beech yonder, Gabe? I writ my name there forty year 'go and that there name's been gettin bigger all these years."

We're moving again. Carry in the hootches, set pipes, give equipment to the landing pad, squat in the rain, smoke out beneath a poncho, listen to cigarettes cook and sweat out.

Chapter Five

Some days go by, a couple weeks anyway. *The thing is: to forget time.* But I don't know how many days now no mail, how many nights going to sleep in wet jungle utes, how many Thousand-island shits at holes dug too wide to squat over and so shallow that a medium-velocity fart throws the hole's water back. But all that don't mean nothing cause by now I smell like a constipated pole cat run over by a milk truck, roughly.

We have moved once to a mountain surrounded by two other ranges we named LZ Clitoris. Now we are moving again. I've accumulated a couple Fuck Books; I got an extra poncho liner souvenired me by some guy I don't know except we shit in neighboring holes one day in the rain: I got another bandolier or Sixty ammo, part of a mirror from a guy who got dusted off for malaria, C-rats up the woz because I only eat once a day, and like everybody else, I got an ammo can to keep my matches and toilet paper dry. I got a peculiar vine I want to carve into a pipe. And I got a heavyduty case of Rot already. Raw: a forest of welts, that I have to salve with stuff the medic has, or pick at.

We're moving again. Cave in the hootches, set fires, move equipment to the landing pad, squat in the rain, smoke pot beneath a poncho, listen to cassettes over and over and

over while the birds come and go. LOACHs for the Officers, SLICKs for the first Grunts, SHITHOOKs for the rest of us. LOACHs are Light Observation Craft that look like a tree frog...blowing wailing blues over Black Bog that always call me home--from hide'n seek to puberty stupors and blueballs: chiming out to pastures tracked too near the shape my brain must be, weary of sloshing over the same hump of memory... tree frogs...barnyard nights, those...and come first, burping through the wet air. They pop onto the pad and suck in two officers who will only fly around, command, the movements of:

SLICKs are the mules. Resupply choppers. They are bigger than Loachs are, don't have doors, ride like a rollie-coaster with three flat wheels, are always armed with two Sixties. Each Slick takes eight guys and all their gear. Loading a Slick full is like overloading a corncrib. All morning long the Slicks come in, load and leave, until the LZ is finally very empty, abandoned. Our squad is the only one left and we have to pull the bullshit details, like pulling security and slinging up all the equipment that is left into giant nets that Shithooks dangle. 'Hooks are Chinook helicopters that can carry 60 guys and all their gear inside its belly, and still sling a huge load beneath. They fly on two top rotors that always remind me of giant ceiling fans.

Me, Pops, Callme, and Bull are standing on the sling underneath the last 'Hook trying to fasten the sling together.

The pad is dusty because the morningful of birds coming in has sucked all the rain out: dust in my eyes, up my nose, and in my teeth. Rocks the size of golfballs get stirred up with the dust and I have caught two in the shins. My arms are *so fucking tired* I will drop my end in another minute but just then I feel the stuff I am standing on begin to lift, so I jump down. I land on Prophet who elbows me in the neck and screams something that I can't hear because the 'Hook is gaining RPM's. The giant bird beats off and sends back pockets of THUMP THUMP THUMP through the wet air, then dies over the mountain. We watch it for a few seconds, nobody talking. It sails through the valley and I wonder how it can be as big as a semi truck.

"So we're following a NVA regiment to the Cambodian line, eh?"

"Ain't that the shits?"

They "brief" us about every other morning. This morning they say we're moving. They said we are following a regiment of NVA. They said not to tell anyone.

"...kills me," Peacock says, scratching his rot with a cigarette JohnWayned out his mouth, his hat sloped to the right, "kills me that the Officers say we're closing in. Like we're goddamn sneaky with a million helicopters all flying to the same hill. Charlie ain't fuckin' blind. Why do the Lifers pretend we're gonna kick ol' Charlie's ass?"

"They must pretend nobody gets killed too."

"That's easy I guess when it's always EM's get killed and never the officers."

"Yeah, the only one's got killed in this company since I've been here, we killed."

Strange.

We can't see or hear any helicopters now. There are only the five of us left on the hill. We have a radio but the rest of the company is too far away and there isn't any traffic on the helicopters' channel.

I don't know exactly what Pops meant. WE killed? But I kind of know too. There are lots of stories about EM's rebelling because the Officers aren't pulling their share of the gut work.

Prophet comes up out of the only hootch left on the LZ.

"Where's our goddamn bird?"

"Let's do a bowl while we're waiting," Chickenfeed says. He hops off the hootch roof and slams shut the steel cover on his bible. He packs a big bowl and lights it. We all crowd around the hootch roof and pass it around.

"We better blow this hootch."

"Let's wait on the bird. Goddamn if I even like being last on this LZ, let alone not having a hole."

"You heard the Lifers, we're following the Dinks."

"My ass."

The dope lays me back a bit, numbs me. I wish I had a hammock.

I got laid in a hammock once," I say.

"What'd y' fuck, a seahorse or a stooped old lady?"

"I always wondered how Storks fuck," Peacock says.

"Storks?" Prophet asks.

"Yeah, the First Shirt introduced him to me as 'Gabriel Stork.'"

"Well I wish you'd just pick me up and fly my young ass over them mountains," Pops says. "I want to get there before dark or Charlie is gonna be drawing beads on that LZ with his tubes, and I won't even have a trench to get in."

"See if you can pick up the push on the radio."

"They're outa range, I just tried."

I've got a lump in my stomach I know is the "C-ration tornado" so I head out to take a shit. The holes are on the other side of the LZ and I'm about halfway across when Pops yells at me.

"Hey Birdbrain!" He signals me back with his arm.

"I'm in a hurry."

"C'mere and get your goddamn rifle," he says. And since he picks it up and is walking my way I go back.

"Hey, man," he is looking hard at me. He is scowling as much as anything else, and it shows up a scar on his cheek that looks bleached.

"You forget you're fighting a war?"

"I figure it's gonna be a quick shit," I say as a kind of apology.

"Maybe I shouldn't get in your case," he says, "but I'm tense. I don't like this small o' group on this LZ. There's Dinks all over here, they can cut our shit out if they want to. You don't wanna be over there by yourself without a rifle if a sniper opens up on us."

I had begun to forget, a little. Since Ass got it the first night we ain't seen shit. No SRPs running across anything, no movement at night, no nothing...I'm squatting over the hole thinking heavyduty and staring into the jungle that is about twenty meters away. A lot of the time I look at the jungle I think of pubics. It looks more like that than anything else--its vines curl and kink...and I realize when I am empty that all my wipe is in my rucksack over by the pad. There are a few spares thrown all around the area but most of them are soggy and muddy.

Granddaddy and me sitting in the Two Holer back of Concord Presbyterian and the low hymns-hummed-southern come floating through like treefrog chirps chip time away from the barnyard, Spring nights...Hiding in the outhouse from the sameness of the preacher's sermon. Granddaddy thumbing the catalogue looking at the gadgets, says he remembers the first time he ever wiped with paper.

I see a piece hung on the concertina wire that must be dryer than the rest because it is square instead of a wad. So I retrieve it with my rifle, and it's as dry as I hoped.

"What have you been right about?"

The sun goes on down and the bird finally comes so our ride to the new LZ is toward a fantastic sky over Cambodia.

ii.

It is night, dark as a coal bucket, and me and Prophet are digging a two-man trench, spading each other's foot now and then, talking about playing Little League ball. The noise on the Z is all noise of work: everybody is digging. A few guys set trip flares up but no Claymore mines are allowed, because the hill is still as much jungle as it is Landing Zone, so no one knows for sure what is between them and the perimeter.

Prophet says, "I got the feeling this LZ is gonna be a motha, y'know?"

"Why do you say that?"

I'm sweating despite the night and the sweat is aggravating the jungle rot around my balls, so I am leaning with one foot on the shovel and the air is moving through where the buttons of my barndoor have popped off. It feels good. I don't know Prophet very well. He is mostly quiet. He gets loaded and disappears some nights. The rest of the squad joke about his predictions but nobody has ever been specific about any.

"Dunno," he says, still digging, "I never know why I feel anything, just do. I been right a FEW fucking times since I got here, anybody can tell you that."

"What have you been right about?"

"I knew we were gonna hit some shit the day Greenwire got it. Were you here then?"

"Nope."

"Was a night like this that we went into that Z. Going into a new Z anytime but morning is crazy. That one was called Nicole. What's a name for this one?" I'd be the last to know, I'm the newest guy around, but he asks me.

When we came in it was almost dark and I didn't get the whole shape of the clearing but from the air it had looked like a pig to me.

"Pansy," I say for the hell of it.

"Pansy!"

He stops working and is leaning toward me like he did the first time I ever met him. He leans so close I can see part of his face in the weak glow from the radio that is laying on top of his ruck between us.

"Pansy? Where the fuck did that name come from?"

"I just named it after a pig we used to have."

Prophet scares the shit out of me sometimes when he is tuned like he is now.

"A fuckin pig named Pansy. No shit, eh, no shit? LZ Pansy Pig. I like that. But I predict this pig is gonna be fattened and butchered."

And he walks out of the trench we got started and into the dark, like he knows where he is going. But he can't.

No way. He can't. Strange. I keep telling myself he's crazy for a while as I dig through the loam that works about as well as manure feeds through a wet spreader.

Pansy was a good ol' pig...good ol' pig...good pig we lashed to a stanchion and colcocked with a sixteen-pound sledge one brittle morning. Granddaddy swings once like he is busting rocks and Pansy goes down like a buzzard turd, looking at me. "Bring a hacksaw, Gabe, to fetch her brains." But I can't. I won't. I can't and he says "your face reminds me of a violet wilting in August, boy. Next time I'll have to teather you to the stanchion too."

Prophet comes back with some pills he got from a medic and we take two apiece. Maybe we will dig all night. We are down to our knees when the platoon lieutenant comes by and shines his flashlight at us for a minute.

"Hey, put the fuckin' light out," Prophet says.

"At ease, Specialist," Eltee says. His tone is haughty.

"I just don't want any goddamn mortar bein' zeroed in on MY fuckin hole. We're gonna catch some shit here and I ain't eager, y'understand?"

I wonder if Prophet gives a fuck who he's talking to.

"You two won't be in the hole anyway," Eltee says.

His voice is all there is to him, except I think his wristwatch glows. His voice is weird, like a telephone, and it comes from about six feet up in the dark.

"You're gonna pull three hours of Perimeter, starting in

half an hour. You get Nelson and Whitcomb to relieve you, got it?"

I know Nelson is Pops' last name but I don't know who Whitcomb is. Maybe CallmeBlack. Call me Black, Nelson. Call me Black Nel, son. Call me--I am thinking about ninety miles an hour on the speed.

"See the medic if you're tired," Eltee says.

Ha.

"And don't forget your military courtesy, Specialist," he flashes his light quick once at Prophet and for a minute I am afraid Prophet is going to go after him. When he leaves Prophet sits down and looks at me. I can only see the bottom half of his face in the orange light. His mouth is curled into a sneer.

"That fuckin' El-Tee best watch his shit," he says.

"He's forgetting where he is, I swear."

I get the feeling there is something heavy coming. Deep-down now I feel like I'm about to lose my FNG-cherry for good. I'm gettin' to be a Fuckin' OLD Guy. I'm not sure I want to. Pops said the only officers who'd been killed were killed by WE. That ties into what I think Prophet is saying, and the way he looks--so glum--there in the orange light, so I don't want to miss what goes down here. I'll be living in the same hole with this guy, I want to know him better. And I want to be a part of this outfit, it's a good one...["Carve your initials in a Beech the size o' your leg, Gabe, 'n watch that

name get bigger while you do."]. I am cooking on that pill, my brain is making leaps like a blew-down power line. I feel good.

I feel good. Good. I can handle this goddamn war. I can take care of myself. I will do anything to make it back to The World and when I get back there I DON'T NEED TO BE AFRAID OF ANYTHING. I AM IN A WAR AND I AM GODDAMN NOT AFRAID!

"Prophet," my voice feels strange, "have you guys, our platoon, have they killed any Lifers?"

His mouth comes open a little bit, I can see, but the light is too weak to show his eyes. He smiles then, or smirks again.

"Listen, man, you can't ask me that kind o' shit around here, y' hip?"

"What'm I gonna do, wait til we're home drinking in a bar? Want me to wait until then? Goddamn."

"OK, Birdbrain, OK. Maybe we should call you 'Birdseye' since you're all of a sudden seeing so much, eh? Jump back, for Chrissakes." He leans closer to me again and says, quieter, "Yeah, damnit when the Lifers get pushing us too hard we do our share. No Officer has been killed out there in the Bush, just guys like you and me. But there have been some officers that left here in a bag. Yeah. You by any chance a C.I.D. man? You an undercover cat?"

I feel humble like learning my first girlfriend stuffed

toilet paper in her undershirt.

"No, Prophet, just getting a feel for things, y' know?"

"OK," he says, "I believe you. You're just finding out there are two wars in The Nam, and some of the other team is right here on this LZ, probably listening to us, now y' understand?"

iii.

It is so dark we have to hold onto each other going out to pull guard and I keep stumbling over roots. Vines and bushes keep slapping me in the face. My rifle isn't loaded and I keep seeing dark spots move in the shadows of that night, or imagine I do. *BUT I DON'T FEEL SO AFRAID and I don't know why.*

One of the guys we are relieving is Southern.

"Y'all keep the boogie man away, hear? I got some reefer waiting on me to have a LZ-warmin' party. What's the name o' this hill?"

"Pansy," Prophet says.

"No shit." And he is gone.

I try concentrating to get a feel for where we are, what is ahead of us, even which way is "ahead" for sure, and I bang my shin on the ammo crate that is our seat. I can't see Prophet but I hear him pissing, and right then it begins to rain, barely.

Prophet comes back and sits down beside me.

"Fuckin' rain," he says. Too loud, it seems.

Night is SO dark here. This hours-old LZ is still about as much jungle as Landing Zone. The engineers have only made one blow so far. They come in right after the first Grunts and bring plenty of power with them. They wrap small patches of the jungle with Detonation Cord and plan as close as they can to take out as big a patch at a time as they can, so what is left a lot of times is only thinned-out jungle, and it is Grunts who do most of the work clearing and trying to get dug in. Artillery pieces will be coming in tomorrow and we'll have to help them dig the guns in and build parapets--a thousand sandbags total, maybe--meanwhile us pulling guard and trying to get our own holes dug.

We had only been on LZ Clit for a week when they brought in minidozers and raked away a chunk of the mountain, then brought in Conexes that are little steel buildings. Then we had to dig the dirt and fill the sandbags to fortify those conexes--for Officers as well as radio equipment. *It isn't fair. There are two divisions here...that is the other war. I'm thinking about it a lot.* Prophet seems like he is thinking, I can almost hear him.

I light a cigarette behind my steel pot, shake the pack at Prophet who takes one. I feel home, high. I keep flashing on sitting on a log in the woods and smoking a cigarette because the squirrels have been sitting tight all dawn, and the wind has come up. *I may not be as afraid as I was but I want to get home worse, get home and get into my own woods.*

I feel like talking. I whisper.

"Know anything about trees, Prophet?"

"I know my dog would rather piss on a pine than an aspen."

"So you're from the mountains. And your dog has a sense of beauty."

"Jesus, a real sharpo you are. But anybody with a pig named Pansy can't be too devious. A couple of real bandits here, fighting this war."

"These wars."

"Yeah, OK, but I don't wanna get into that any more right now. Y'ever watch the news before you came over? Ever see those action films they have?"

"Couple times."

"Seems like a movie on TV, don't it?"

"Yeah. But you've been through some shit. I haven't seen anything--"

"That night you came, the night the other FNG got it and Rogers got hurt--"

He ends there, like he's asking me if I remember it or something. I say yeah, clear my throat, shift position so the ropes on the ammo crate don't cut my ass so bad.

"I had it that night too," he says. "I saw that coming too. Never told anybody that time though. But I saw it. I didn't come out of my hole that whole night."

I don't know what to say. I don't want to spoil the

spell that seems to be here: it has stopped raining again and we can see, or I think I can. I don't see anything but shapes.

"Ever since I got hit the first time I been seeing things that would happen, you b'lieve that?"

"Yeah."

I do.

"I just wondered. I don't feel like I'm anything like I useta be. I think I'm goddamn nuts or that I can see different now, like into the fuckin future...I'm either nuts or a fortuneteller, or both."

"Far out." That's all I can think of. But it is perfect.

It begins to rain pretty hard so we tie ourselves into our field jackets and wrap up in our ponchos. We sit that way staring into the jungle I know is there but can't see. The rain is coming from my left at first then lashes around and comes right at us, hard enough to sting. I've got my rifle underneath the poncho, couldn't get a round off if I wanted to. Prophet begins to shiver beside me. Then I can tell he's opening a can of C's underneath his poncho. Without looking I can tell he's using his canopener by the way our seat bounces. I am hungry too.

iv.

I sleep a couple hours after guard: wound into a ball in my field jacket, curled into the muddy hole we are digging, covered by my poncho that isn't a perfect roof but does channel the water to my feet. When I wake up my boots are soaked through which must explain the dream I was having about pissing my pants in the cloakroom, the pee running down my legs and into my rubber boots.

"Hey, my man, eat this and you can go back to sleep."

It is the medic coming around with malaria pills; I eat one but my wet feet keep me from even trying to go back to sleep.

The sun is shining, reflecting off puddles of water here and there on the LZ. Seeing the hill in the light for the first time I realize it doesn't look much like a pig. It is shaped like a tit, slopes evenly down all sides and a rock on top makes a perfect nipple. I am surprised to see that our hole is close to the perimeter wire, but the perimeter will creep down the hill as the LZ grows. The engineers are preparing the area just below us: they have it wrapped with detonation cord.

Prophet is still asleep, his head is laying in a mud puddle. I see now that Pops and Chickenfeed are in the hole next door and I can see Bull Durham's hat bobbing around as he shovels out his hole further down the slope. Of course I got to take a shit but I decide to have some coffee first if

any stayed dry enough...so I'm just getting the water to boil when Prophet comes awake.

"Jesus Fuckin Christ on a warped crutch," he mumbles, "am I really here? Am I really goddamn laying in a hole in the middle of a jungle with my twenty-dollar face in a mud puddle and my twenty-dollar hardon in my hand?"

He stands up, stretches, and walks over to Pops' hole ready to piss. Pops is sitting on his ruck eating. He is only wearing a pair of skivvies; his clothes are hanging on shovels to dry. Prophet looks his way, standing there like he is prepared to piss.

"Prophet," Pops says, "If you so much as dribble in my hole I'm gonna use the lid off my 'Chopped-Ham-and-Eggs' can to perform the operation that doctors in The World are getting big money to perform."

"It would get me out o' the field," Prophet says before he turns downhill. "But I'm afraid that after I left you guys would say I turned pussy. How'd you sleep last night, man? You leave your feather pillow somewhere?"

"I got it," Pops says around his chopped eggs, "but I don't wanna get it dirty, y'understand?"

And all of a sudden Prophet is silhouetted because there is a huge flash behind him where a round lands at the end of the jungle. Prophet is back in the hole as soon as I am, and I was sitting on its edge. More rounds come in and all kinds of shit comes raining down: dirt and rocks and parts of ammo

crates, then some guy who was running by wearing only boots and a tee shirt. I was just turning around to peep over the edge towards the perimeter and this guy is hauling ass by, running low and blind. Just as he's at our hole something comes in that sounds like a rocket and lands down the hill. At first I think of the uncleared patch that is wrapped in det cord...*if they land one in there...*but the dude who was running by takes a load of the shrap and falls into our hole. His legs are on me and are going crazy so his bootheels keep kicking me in the back and in the head. I try to ease out from under him just as Prophet gets up enough to pull him flat into the hole. He is hit bad in the shoulder and neck or chest. Blood is pumping out and for a flash I think of shooting cans full of water in the holler back home.

Prophet tries to hold him down but he thrashes around and pretty soon he is sucking for breath through the hole in his chest and the sound is like an enema. Rounds are still coming in but they're landing up the hill. Prophet is trying to hold the dude down with his knee and at the same time trying to get his own rifle that is underneath the guy. My mouth tastes like I'm eating rusty metal for a minute: my breath comes about as sporadically as the guy who's dying between Prophet and me. More rounds come in, closer again, and that shit I never took takes itself. I'm not very afraid but I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO.

"Can you get to a frag?" Prophet yells.

I've got one and he points towards the perimeter, says "Throw the fucker as far as you can."

I can't remember if anyone is digging a hole below us and I'm not even absolutely positive which way the perimeter is so I begin to inch my way up to the edge of the hole to look. A rifle kicks up mud just outside the hole and I am definitely a scared mothafucker when I get up on my knees in order to throw the frag far enough. I am only kneeling for an instant but meanwhile think of everything from praying to blowjobs. My mind is working ten times fast: I see me as a little kid kneeling to pray and I see myself kneeling to fasten the buttons on my brother's jacket and I see my first blowjob when she had to kneel on rafters in the attic of a corncrib...and I see me getting a tube through my head as I lob the frag that sends back enough of a shock to jolt the mud I'm lying in, and I know I'm not dead yet.

Prophet gives me the OK sign and finishes pulling the poncho over the guy between us who is dead now. Just before the poncho covers his face I see the look that is angelic except for the blood and mud that is splattered across it. The guy looks especially young laying there dead. After the poncho is over the body Prophet props it up a little to make more room in the hole. The bottom of the hole is patted smooth by our rummaging around and in some places the blood has soaked in but in some places there are still pools of blood and dirty water.

Prophet yells for Pops during a lull but doesn't get an answer. He pulls me up to his face then, at the unmistakable sound of an AK firing deliberate rounds.

"Listen," he says, "that mothafucker is sniping, and he is close. He's probably got a good look at our hole so keep your fuckin head down. If he was close enough to frag us he would have by now, so just keep the fuck down and do what I do."

Another big explosion from around the hill.

"That's a GI frag," he says almost nonchalantly. Then he eases his rifle barrel up so it is laying on its forward mount but just as he's shifting position the AK opens up again and we both try to burrow under the body between us from different sides. The rounds splatter into the wall of our hole that is opposite where we are leaning. Three or four round SO GODDAMN QUICK, AND EVERYTHING IS THE SAME COLOR: I AM LAYING IN MY OWN SHIT BESIDE A DEAD DUDE. Spit dribbles out my mouth like oatmeal simmers and suddenly there is an enormous explosion that brings me an inch off the ground. My expression must tell it all because Prophet is almost laughing.

"That's Artillery," he says, "and some really big shit too. Maybe 105's or maybe even Navy guns--7-inchers, I don't know." Then there are five more rounds that land so nearly simultaneously that it has to be something unconscious that counts them. Or maybe I just know from somewhere that

Artillery batteries come in groups of five...I don't know...I don't feel like I know anything. I think. I keep thinking because I can't do anything else. Another battery comes in and is close enough this time that not only do I come off the ground from the shock, but a rock the size of a baseball lands at the edge of our hole, and rolls in. Bigger rocks land too. Then there is another battery and as soon as it's done Prophet sticks his head above the hole just enough to see out from under his steel pot.

"Well?" I expect him to tell me exactly what he saw.

"I think Charlie may be cutting out," he says. "Those rounds came almost up to the perimeter. Somebody somewhere did a hell of a job calling that support in, I'll say that."

"Y' think there'll be any more?" but my last couple words are cut off by another battery so close I grab at the body's arm thinking I might just fuckin BOUNCE out of that hole.

A couple minutes after the last explosions guys begin to yell from their holes. I don't recognize any voices and I can't hear them very well because I'm still pressing half my face into the mud and blood on the poncho: Prophet is crunched into the corner, smiling almost.

"Well, man, was I right about this LZ? What'd I tell you last night?"

As I'm laying there some colors come back: the red-brown of the mud wall that is jigsawed by roots; the

Olivegreeness of the poncho over the body; the blue in Prophet's eyes. All my arms and legs feel like I slept on them wrong: all the nerves are tingling too. There is now only a smell of gunpowder and something burning. I am still laying with my head on the body. There is slobber on my chin and in my mustache. And I get a whiff of my own shit.

"Hey, man," I say, with another tickle, a tear, "I shit my pants."

And he laughs. We laugh.

v.

Prophet was right. At least eight guys are dead besides the one in our hole, and quite a few are wounded including Chickenfeed. Guys are running every which way with their steel pots on and rifles loaded. After Prophet leaves our hole--I suppose to tell somebody the guy there is dead--I sit on its edge and go through some violent shakes for a few minutes. Pops comes by on his way to the medics.

"You OK?"

"Yeah. He ain't."

Almost official-like, Pops gets down in the hole and uncovers the face. It has changed color now, is bleached and parafin-looking. All the bones in his head show like a chart: his eyebrows look like two caterpillars crawling over a knot in a beech log because the face is so white and it seems to have all drawn into its middle: it looks like a twisted rag. Pops looks at him for a minute then looks away, a look-at-

nothing-move, for a few seconds.

"Know him?"

"I think he was in Bravo Company. He was from New York and was gonna be a photographer. He was 'short,' probably about as much time left as I got. No, I didn't know him." He leaves saying go see Chickenfeed."

Chickenfeed is laying in the bottom of their hole, covered with a poncho liner that is soaked with blood. When I get there he is crying: big sobs that are as much like coughs as cries. His whole body shakes when he sobs and for a minute I stand there staring at him, then I get down in the hole and try to keep the blanket on him. His face is bleached but not near like the dead guy's. His eyes are full of water and one of them is full of little flakes of dirt so I try to hold his head still and clean the dirt away from his eye but he is crying and his whole body shakes so I don't do so well.

I begin talking to him like I was talking to a dog, just to comfort him--or me: "Easy man, easy. Lay still. You're OK. You're gonna be all right. They're bringing you some Morph before long. The Dust Off is coming. Pops is getting you something right now that will make you feel better. Try to just cry, Chicken, just cry; don't let yourself stifle it and maybe you won't shake so much. You shouldn't move around, man. Easy. Lay still. Easy. Hold on, man, hold on."

And he takes hold of my wrist but can't hold on so I take his hand. *I don't want him to die. I don't want to be holding*

his hand if he dies. I got to see where he's hit. The bird has to be coming. Why isn't the Dust Off here? Where did Pops go? Prophet? I keep hold of his hand and he begins to calm down. He is still crying but he isn't shaking so much when he sobs. His free hand waves around in the air like he is feeling for my face, but when he feels my face pain hits him and his hand closes into a fist. His fingernails dig deep into my wrist for a minute and I almost jerk my arm away. Pops comes back.

"How's he doing?"

"I don't know. He's calmer. Is he conscious?"

Pops is straddling him on his knees now, giving him water that he takes like the canteen is a nipple.

"Chicken, can you hear me, man?"

Chickenfeed's eyes open and roll once but that's all.

"He's losing a lot of blood. Why isn't the fuckin Dust Off here by now?" He looks at me like I could know.

"I'll go see what I can find out," I say. But when I'm out of the hole I see the medic coming and he looks like a mailman looking for an address so I tell him there's a guy over here and he comes over.

They undo the poncho and hand it to me to keep it out of the mud. Chickenfeed's right leg is shot up bad. The wound is as big as a softball and his bone is there plain as day, and broken.

"Jesus," the medic says. He takes a shot of Morph out

and prepares it. It's in a tube like toothpaste but is only as big as a horse's tooth. It has a number, like everything else in the Army, and the medic has to account for it. The tube has its own needle and the medic jabs it in like he has done it a million times, then marks Chickenfeed's forehead so the Rear will know he's already had Morphine. Immediately Chickenfeed slows all the way down.

"He's lost a fuckuva lot of blood," the medic says. "Keep him warm, I'll get him on the first Dust Off."

The medic leaves and goes toward some other shouts. For the first time I notice that he is covered with blood and some of it has made his hair stiff.

The Lt. comes by taking names and when he is gone Pops says we will probably be going out on a body count.

"He didn't even seem to notice Chickenfeed, did he?"

"He noticed enough to know he can't send him out on a hump."

Just when we hear the Dust Off coming it begins to rain.

vi.

Prophet comes to the pad just as we are loading Chickenfeed onto the bird, then he runs back to Chicken's ruck while the other litters are getting loaded. He brings back his bible and a mutilated picture that shows Chicken's wife in front of his trailer. His dog is in the picture too. Prophet shoves the picture in the bible and that up under his

shirt but Chicken is out too cold to know it. I wonder if he will ever see it again.

When we are done loading the wounded we have to get the dead guys to the pad where a medic records the data from their dogtags, then plants the dogtags between their front teeth and shuts their mouth. The second Dust Off bird brings plastic bags and each dead dude is put into one. A couple of them are in parts and there is confusion for a minute because one body bag has three arms in it.

"Where'd you go?" I ask Prophet after the noise of the helicopter is gone.

"Went to do my thing," he says. I just look at him because I don't have any idea what he's talking about. "I've been puking," he adds. Then, in a tone that is nearer a command he says, "Let's get that fuckin hole deeper, I got the feeling we ain't seen the last of Charlie." And we go back to the hole.

Pops is sitting there smoking a cigarette.

"Wanna dig in with us Pops?" Prophet asks.

"Yeah. Yeah, good idea."

So the three of us begin digging on the hole. None of us say anything for a while. As we dig now we are filling sandbags and laying them around the hole for our walls. The earth is sticky and my job is to hold the bags open and scrape the dirt into the bags. It is hard to keep up.

"Chickenfeed...", Pops begins,

"is gonna make it, Pops. He'll make it. He just bought his way outta the Field forever, dig?" Prophet straightens up and rubs his back. His hat is falling down his face but he doesn't rearrange it.

"He might make it," Pops says, "but that leg won't."

"They'll fix him up."

"C'mon, man," Pops whines, "you don't hafta tell me what'll happen. I ain't his mother or his wife. Tell me WHY HIM!" almost as if he expects the answer.

More birds are coming in, bringing ammo mostly. In a few minutes they call a "Fire-In-The-Hole" and we all put our steel pots on and cram into our hole. The patch of jungle just below us goes in a huge cloud of debris and black smoke. Little stuff rains down afterwards. When we get up and look out the perimeter is further away and already some guys are getting ready to stretch concertina wire.

"We wanna be sure and get some trip flares out there," Pops says.

"I'll bet Charlie was right there on the edge," Prophet says, "he sure as hell had a bead on our hole. How'd Chicken get hit?"

"After a couple rounds came in he was trying to get to his rifle by his ruck that was only a few feet away and as soon as he got the rifle he got hit. I think it was a RPG that hit him."

"How'd he make it back to the hole? That guy was sniping

us could have hit him again, seems to me."

"I went out and got him," Pops says.

"Maybe you'll pick up a Bronze for it."

"Chicken'll get one. You've got three or four," he says to Prophet, "so why should I get one? Some Lifer will get it. Let him have it."

"Somebody stepped on their dick in this move. They shoulda got us in here a lot earlier yesterday at least. Anybody I know in the bags?"

"That little guy from Alpha Company, y'know? Rhodes."

"So his nickname was right all along, eh?"

"What'd they call him?" My back is killing me and I want to have a smoke.

"Who? Rhodes? Called him Dead End."

And one of the birds that comes in has mail on it. Some guy in the middle of the LZ sees the bags before the bird even lands and begins yelling on his way to the pad and soon there must be forty dudes standing around the pad. The Lifers come up screaming.

"Hey, get the fuck outa here," some red-haired lieutenant yells. He's standing on top of a water blivett and even then he's not much taller than Bull Durham who is standing nearby.

"Hey," Bull says back, "get fucked. We haven't had mail in two weeks.

"If we're all standing around here Charlie can get

himself a bunch of statistics with one round."

As soon as he says "statistics" I know it is trouble. Along with everybody else who hears them, I move up closer to where they are standing. The Eltee must know he fucked up because of everybody moving toward him. He looks nervous.

"Fuckin' statistics!" Bull yells. "That's how you look at it too, ain't it, SIR? And you Lifers are all figuring Charlie's ahead by eight or ten now. Ain't that right, SIR?"

"Who's got a frag?" Somebody from the back of the crowd yells. "Fragging" is the Enlisted Man's catch-all term for killing officers. It is common etiquette to leave a frag pinned and drop it in the officer's hootch, the first time. Then, either they ship him out to another unit, he begins watching his ways, or the next grenade isn't pinned.

The bird with the mail lands and the Lt. is forgotten, is left standing on the water blivett chewing his gum and shaking his head.

There is a letter. The stamp is on upside down. My name is printed so big the address takes up half the envelope. While Pops is passing the mail out to the squad there is a joint going around so when I get my letter I stare at the envelope a long time.

Dear Gabe. Everything is fine here. I pray God is watching over your shoulder. I pray every night. Grandaddy goes to church. He sends his love. He is having a spell and I think his eyes are getting worse but he won't admit it. Linda Harkness got killed in a car wreck up by Dayton. Sam Weber's filly went lame.

Granddaddy says he hopes the Great Uncle is doing a better job taking care of you than us. We have had trouble getting our stamps this month and have a new account at the store, and I don't know how we can pay it off yet. Mr. Telly had to let me go again because business is so slow but I have been to Cincinnati twice and think I can get a job waiting tables there if I have to.

"Gabe, y' wanna hit this?" A big bowl of dope is coming around. The whole squad is sitting on top of bundles of empty sandbags. "*Charlie can get himself a bunch of statistics....*" and although the rain has stopped again it is dark like a storm is coming. Bull Durham didn't get any mail and is quietly whittling a vine into shavings that look like doll hair. The sound of a helicopter beating its way up the valley gets alternately louder and muffled as it flies through pockets of wet air. I take an extra-heavy hit and pass the pipe to CallmeBlack whose letter is written on yellow paper.

I made a big kettle of soup this week and we have been eating on that. My washing is drying on the porch and I've got another load to run so I better get to it. Gabe, I don't understand what you're going through but I do pray every night that you will come home safe. Your father would be proud of you. I'll talk to the chickens for you when I feed them. God bless, Mother.

"What should we do with Chickenfeed's letter, Pops?"

"Send it back on a bird."

"Maybe we oughta hold it and let whoever goes in next take care of it. If we send it back to the rear it might not get to him."

"I'll be back."

"He'll go to Japan. Yeah, save it. Somebody'll be going in the next few days."

We begin digging again but not as fast as before. There is plenty of daylight left and we don't have any trouble getting deep enough to sleep in, but we don't have a chance of getting any overhead on before it gets dark. Prophet is digging and I am holding the bags. Instead of tying them I fold them and build the wall by laying them so the folded part is down. The wall around the hole is about a foot high on three sides now.

"What's in your crystal ball?" I ask Prophet, mostly to make talk.

"I only say this is gonna be a bad LZ," he says. "We haven't seen the end of the shit we're gonna hit while we're here."

"Does that freak you? I mean, don't it bother you to get those feelings?"

"Of course," he says angrily. Then, "but I don't think I am going to get hit here, if that's what you mean."

"I didn't think about it."

Just when we are switching places so I can dig and he can hold the sandbags the Lt. comes by and says Two Squad will be going out in about half an hour.

"I advise you get hold of all the ammo you feel like carrying," Prophet says. "I'm gonna get a couple extra frags, I'll be back."

So I clean my rifle and make sure I've got a full bandolier of ammo. I've got two frags and don't like carrying them through the bush so I don't look for any more. I lace my rucksack together and tie the steel pot on, then settle down to inscribe a calendar on my boonie hat but I'm instead soon daydreaming again.

vii.

The squad goes out in file and as we go the guys digging in nod and give us mock salutes. Prophet is walking Point with his steel pot on and his ruck rides high on his back. Peacock is next with the Sixty over his shoulder like it was a wild turkey. I follow him and even before we are very far out of the wire my legs begin to ache and I wonder if I'll be able to maintain Prophet's pace. CallmeBlack is behind me with his grenade launcher loaded but left open. He wears his boonie hat like a stetson and he's pimping on the block back home. Then comes Bull Durham, and Pops follows him.

We go downhill for a while, following a trail that is pretty clear. I keep switching my rifle from one direction to the other. I strain my eyes looking for movement on our left, which is my side. CallmeBlack watches the right and Pops watches the rear. We are going down at a fairly gradual pace until we come to where two trails branch off the one we're walking, then the walking gets harder and I have to grab at vines and stuff along the way to keep my balance because the

trail is steepdown and rocky. For five dudes going through a jungle we're pretty goddamn quiet. I can hear Peacock slipping ahead of me and I can hear steel pots and rifles clanking against vines now and then, but we're quiet enough. We walk for about a half hour before we get to the bottom of the hill, where Prophet stops and Pops sends CallmeBlack and Peacock out on security. Pops, Prophet, Bull and me look at the map.

"What'd they tell you?" Prophet asks.

"The Lt. just said go out about half a klik and set up an ambush on this trail we're on."

"The Eltee didn't wanna come along for the exercise?"

"Nah, said he'd make it up by climbing in and out of a chopper."

"I'm for going all the way out," Bull says. "We don't want to be somewhere between where we're supposed to be and the LZ if Charlie comes around and they call in Artillery. This is just about where Arty would be dropping rounds."

"Without a doubt," Prophet says. "I think there's a good chance Charlie will be back soon. He knows that LZ is just as fucked up as it was last night, and if we're close to one of his big supply routes or a hospital or somethin', he's gonna keep on fuckin' with us."

"You seen anything looks like he's been on this trail lately?"

"Could be," Prophet says. "Kinda hard to tell because

it rained so much but I saw a couple places didn't look quite right."

Prophet is breaking chunks of mud between his hands, kneeling on one knee on his steel pot.

"Want somebody else to take a turn at Point?"

"Nah, s'okay."

"Well, let's just hang onto this trail," Pops says.

He looks at the trail that disappears a few feet away, then at the map.

"Is the trail on the map?" Bull asks.

"Up to right about where we're at."

Pops gets CallmeBlack who's been pulling watch in the direction we came. My ruck feels heavier. Pops tells me to walk second. We are going up now and it is slick as hell. Somehow Prophet keeps pretty good footage but I have a hard time. I go down on my face a couple times and my rifle jabs into the mud once so I am walking and trying to pick the mud out of the barrel at the same time and instantly I lose track of the trail. It is either clouding up or later than I think. The canopy over us makes it impossible to see the sun. Besides the lack of light, the trail is really faint. I see Prophet has stopped to catch his breath, so I stop too, about five meters behind him. He flips me the bird and smiles, then disappears again through some vines that entangle so right they look braided.

Just when I'm beginning to wonder how far we have gone

and how far we're going yet I walk up on Prophet who is facing me. For an instant I'm weirded because I didn't expect to see him--or anybody--and my confusion must show because he chuckles and holds out his hand. Then I realize I am pointing my rifle his way.

"You'd be so fuckin dead now..."

"Whattaya think? We stopping here?"

"Good place to set up?" he says.

"Christ, I dunno a good place from a bad one."

"Whattaya think, Callme?" Prophet says to Callme who has come up.

His face is the color of dirty oil and is spotted by sweat. His OD's are soaked and he stinks. I don't know him very well because he is so quiet and it seems like the Lifers pick him for Detail all the time so he isn't with the squad very much. He drops his ruck and sits on it, and only shrugs his shoulders to Prophet's question. Peacock comes up too, then Bull and Pops. Everybody is beat.

"Here?" Prophet directs the question to Pops this time.

Pops looks around.

"I don't know," he says, "maybe we oughta find a wider place and something bigger to back our claymores up against." The backblast of a Claymore mine will destroy everything for 25 feet.

"Yeah, you're right." Prophet holds a finger up to quiet us and listens. I get hold of my rifle and begin

eyeballing the jungle, getting darker all the time. We all stand silent for a long five minutes, then Prophet leans to us and whispers.

"Anybody else hear anything?"

Nobody did.

"Let's go on until we find a bend in the trail and let's hurry, it's getting darker fast."

We don't go very far before Prophet stops us again, at a point where the trail curves around a rock face of the mountain. Pops begins calculating where we are and the rest of us get busy setting up. Callme and me dig a shallow trench trying to be as quiet as we can. Prophet and Bull Durham set up Claymores against the rock wall and aim them in opposite directions along the trail. Peacock comes over to help us dig in and the three of us eventually get the trenches scraped out. Pops gets on the radio and has trouble making contact at first so sets it up higher on the rock, then calls in our position. When we are set up it is too dark to see anybody who is more than five feet away. Pops tells me and CallmeBlack not to leave the trench unless we tell somebody. I make sure I know where my frags are and lean my rifle against my ruck with one bandolier of full ammo clips over the barrel. I open the first can I feel in my ruck; it turns out to be beef and potatoes. I'm glad it's too dark to see the grease that is always at the top of the can, but I can taste it. I can't find my water and borrow Peacock's;

it tastes like he put in an extra purification tablet. I'm glad I can't see it too, but I know how purple it is. Soon after I'm done eating, a bowl of dope comes around and after I've hit it twice the edge of everything is gone.

Me and Bull will pull middle guard and there is zilch-point-shit to do in the meantime. Our trench is the one nearest the trail and one of the Claymore detonators is wrapped around a little root at the top of the trench, between us. If we detonated it there would be a blast powerful enough to ruin a concrete wall two feet thick, six feet away. I think about that a couple minutes while I'm trying to get half comfortable in my poncho liner. We've got our ponchos stretched over the trench to shed the water out and as soon as I'm comfortable it begins to rain, but softly, so instead of Claymore blasts I'm thinking of laying underneath a tin roof. It works: I'm almost dozed off when Bull kicks me square in the nuts. For an instant I'm going to scream.

"Sorry, man," he says when he turns over and realizes where he got me.

It is cramped in the trench and I slide over a little to give him more room but I have to move back some because water drips off the poncho and runs down my neck. Bull doesn't get very comfortable either.

"Can you imagine a big feather bed?" he asks after a while.

"Fuckin-A, I can even imagine a blond in it."

"Well, don't imagine screwing her, OK? My ass is sore

enough from six months of using that goddamn C-ration paper."

"Why not try trimming your fingernails?"

"I use my thumb."

Then he's snoring. Plenty loud, I think. I lay there for another hour I reckon, trying to keep from laying on my hardon and trying just as hard to keep from beating it. Then I begin thinking about the whore in Cam Rahn and about the little Vietnamese girls at the convoy point who were eating lice out of each other's hair. Then, even though I try not to, I begin figuring how much longer I'll be here. Over 300 more days, 300 nights. Peacock rolls over in the trench next to us and makes noise. It is raining harder now and I try to imagine what Pops and CallmeBlack are doing on guard to keep awake and dry.

From where we are the LZ is straight down a valley and they are calling in Artillery illumination rounds around it to set up Night Fire Positions. The illumination rounds come down on parachutes, to plot the Heavy Explosive rounds. *Dinks can mark where they land and could plan their routes around them.* So while I am laying there staring at the patterns of illumination that make it through the canopy I begin thinking about *the absurdity of it all. Sometimes it all seems like a game. But guys get killed. Dead.* The jungle seems alive in that weird light. Shapes that change. It is quiet except for distant thuds--probably the artillery pieces shooting from Base Camp or from another LZ a couple

miles off. *It seems so unreal.* Once, I must be on the verge of sleep, I feel like I am seeing it all. Like I am part of a painting. *Paint me yellow.*

I'd like to get up and walk it out but that is impossible. I'd like to that red-headed lifer into a gunny sack and beat it open with a tire iron. I'd like to call ten or twelve rounds in on the Peace Talks in Paris. I'd like to go home. I'd like to be nine years old and playing hide'n seek along the railroad tracks instead of hiding in the jungle somewhere in the area of the Ho Chi Trail. I'd...

A rifle, An AK. Not very distinct and for a minute I'm not even sure I hear it but then I hear it again, from the direction of the LZ. And I begin to hear explosions in pairs, then the sky is arced again and again and I know what is happening, and where. I roll over on my stomach not quite sure what to do other than waking Bull who's awake even before I shake him anyway.

"Yeah," is all he says. I hear him chamber a round and wonder why he does it for a minute. Pops comes back saying "New York Yankees" to be sure we know it is him. He comes to our hole and Peacock and Prophet come too.

"OK," Pops says, "they're getting hit. Everybody know which way the trail is from here?"

Yeahs and grunts.

"Which Claymore is which?"

"This one is the one looking up the trail," Bull says.

"OK, just in case. Come with me, Gabe. You guys stay here, we're going down the trail a ways. Don't panic. I'll take the radio with us. Stay cool, I'll say 'Chevy Super-sport' if I come back. If you hear anybody going by and they're not namin' cars, blow the mines when you think they are in range."

The action seems so far away. Me, Pops, and CallmeBlack go down the trail and get off where we were first going to set up. We can't see shit of course so have to hold onto each other going down. I try to be as quiet as I can but I notice Pops is mostly in a hurry instead of worrying about noise. When we get to our position he sets the radio up and dials it to the emergency push. The LZ is calling in guns and before the voice is done transmitting there is a hell of an explosion and the push goes dead.

"Jesus Fuckin Christ," Pops says. "They might be getting overrun!"

We can see the explosions from where we are and it surprises me that some are white and some are red and some are yellow. There are hand-held flares up everywhere and plenty of M-16 fire putting tracer rounds in every direction.

"Ah'm a gla' mo'fuck' I ain' in tha' shit," Callme says.

"We got hit like that about the third week I was in country," Pops says. "Everybody in my squad was wiped out or shot up but me and Prophet."

"What y' s'pose Charlie is dumping in there?"

"Mortars, RPG's, maybe grenades. Keep fuckin with the radio," he says to Callme, "and see if you can pick up on a different push. If they got through much before we heard them, there will be gunships all over this fuckin' area, and I want to be sure they know where we are, if we can."

Then the big flashes begin to land all around the LZ, some of them coming in groups of five. There is some kind of pattern to the concentration. There must be three different batteries firing and gradually the patterns become confused. It is like a movie and a Fourth of July celebration. There are still some white and yellow flashes around the hill that the LZ is on that must be Charlie's stuff. We can see it plenty clear now because there is enough illumination hanging in the air to make the whole thing look like some distant sports arena. There must be fifty rounds of illumination floating at different heights and now the smell has reached our position. Thick smoke dims the parachuting rounds of illumination and the flashes change color slightly through the smoke so the really big ones that are combing the ridges look purple.

Pops has moved away a little and is trying to set the radio up on higher ground. CallmeBlack is huddled beside me with his rifle pinned underneath his arms. He is shaking and his teeth are rattling. I feel doped.

At first the gunships coming up the valley sound like the outhouse does on the first day warm enough to hatch the

flies. They come in twos, two pair. Blinking lights: red and blue. They strafe all around the base of the mountain the LZ is on, and there is no way to describe it. Rockets and miniguns and even though only about every seventh round is a tracer the air and the ground is lined like a neon screendoor. One Cobra gunship can cover a football field with a round in each inch; there are four Cobras circling and firing. The noise is unbelievable. Artillery rounds are still coming in too and some are coming closer and closer to where we are, walking our way in giant purple steps.

"Callme, you OK?" Pops asks.

CallmeBlack is trembling and his rifle is laying across his lap now but a minute or so after Pops comes back Callme is perfectly calm.

"God a'might," he says through a voice as black and deep as the jungle was before the shit hit, "I couldn't get m' shit gathered there a while lookin' at all them explosions. God a'mighty, I's shakin'."

"Y'okay now?"

"OK, Pops. Ah'm OK now."

"Listen," Pops says. "Charlie ain't gonna stick around there long with all that stuff coming in so there's a chance they might be coming by here. If they do they'll be hustling ass, might even be using flashlights. So stay cool. If you see anything or hear anything, don't move. Just wait until they're past us and fire short bursts after I do. Let me on

that side, Gabe."

"You really think they might come this way?"

"Shhh, there's a chance. Besides, Prophet thinks so."

All my muscles go hard. I think of hiding underneath a car and hearing the cops run by five years ago. I can feel myself sweating. My legs ache but I can't move. I can smell CallmeBlack's BO. Like goat piss. The Cobras have quit firing and are only sounds now, above the clouds or smoke that is everywhere. Rhythmically now, illumination rounds pop above the smoke and drift down and make the whole sky somehow look like a petticoat, just before I see the flashlights.

Coming up the hill like three dirt bikes coming across a pasture at night: lights, then voices. Just now and then, utterances like sows jockeying for place at the trough in the winter time, gasps almost. I hear them like I am listening to a television movie from a different room. It reminds me of opening the kitchen door to a Chinese restaurant I used to have on my garbage route: quick, unreal sounds. They are even with us, ten feet away. They are half-running. Pops opens up. Me. CallmeBlack. Screams and more running and a claymore goes off. Two more M-16's pump short bursts. The Claymore starts some jungle on fire for a minute and I can see spastic movement like a chicken with her head gone. Then it is dark again. And quiet.

Pops is shaking like Callme was before. His teeth are chattering and he is doubled over at the stomach. He pukes

on my boot. I've got snot in my mustache and keep licking at it. I can smell CallmeBlack's goat-piss BO, Pops' puke, gun-powder.

When we get back to the others they are all there smoking cigarettes.

"What time is it? How long 'til it's light?"

"Couple hours."

Now I wonder what we will find when it gets light. I imagine the scene with war bodies. When I think of it I think of seeing civil war paintings in history books. A wounded Yankee standing with a bandage around his head and a crutch at his side, in the foreground. The bodies are always in the background and except for a splotch of blood they always look asleep. I keep seeing a particular painting but it never has a name and I can't know exactly where I've seen it.

Chapter Six

Nobody says much for the next hour or so. I am laying in the trench chain smoking. I am not afraid. I guess nobody is. Not afraid of regiments of enemy. Why not? It is likely there are a lot of them around here. But something way down deep says they won't fuck with us any more tonight. God I wish the night was done. It is dark. I can see the other guys by their cigarettes. Little orange lights. Once I catch the lights of a Dustoff going over, through the canopy. The canopy above us is as thick as raspberries must be to a rabbit or a mole. My mind is working slow, I think. I keep getting stuck on thoughts, like having this rabbit's-eye view of the world all the time. These Dinks...the enemy... they...are different than us. This is their world. This is their war. But, some of them are dead and I'm not. This cigarette tastes bad.

Now I wonder what we will find when it gets light. I imagine the scene with wax bodies. When I think of it I think of seeing civil war paintings in history books. A wounded Yankee standing with a bandage around his head and a musket at his side, in the foreground. The bodies are always in the background and except for a splotch of blood they always look asleep. I keep seeing a particular painting but it never has a name and I don't know exactly where I've seen it.

And I think of a bad wreck that I saw three years ago. Lots of blood and one woman died. I remember standing there afterwards and the redlights all crisscrossing and somebody was sweeping the glass into a pile and somebody else was throwing dirt on the gasoline and the blood. I remember seeing the woman's scarf snagged on a piece of the windshield. I laid it on the end of the stretcher when they loaded her, even though I knew she was dead.

I remember seeing Chickenfeed cry, and seeing his thigh bone like a broken branch. I wonder if he is in a hospital in Japan. I wonder if he could wear his wooden leg backwards if he wanted to. I wonder if he can fuck upsidedown, how he could hold his wife on with just that stub. I wonder if Albert Steven's grave has any grass growing on it yet. I wonder what we'll do with the bodies when it gets light.

"Peacock," I say, "What will we do with the bodies?"

"Let's cut the ears off. When I first came over I remember one short-timer drinking beer in an EM club. He was dipping an ear in his beer and then sucking on it."

"C'mon, I..."

"No shit, man. Guys get that way. We had one in Echo Company when I got here. He wanted a souvenir. He was always talking about cutting some Dink's cock off."

"What happened to him?"

"He fell out of a bird and broke his neck."

I can barely make out Peacock's silhouette. Our trenches

are lined by our rucksacks and the rucks are as big as half a guy so I feel a little like there are more than six of us sitting around. The day sounds are beginning to come back. Birds are making low-down noises from the branches and vines. There are other noises too that don't sound like birds. I wonder if it is monkeys. Pops turns the volume up on the radio and we can hear the LZ talking to the Dustoffs that come in, but the radio is behind a ruck from where I am sitting and I can't understand what is said. No one has to tell me that the reason there are so many helicopters is because the Z took heavy casualties.

"I bet we get a shipment of FNG's," Peacock says.

"I wonder how bad it was last night?"

"I heard twelve KIA's on the radio," CallmeBlack says.

"If you heard it on the radio," Pops says, "then they're talking about enemy KIA's. They never tell how many we took. When did you hear that?"

"Not long after we called in," Callme says.

"There's bound to be plenty of Woundeds," Prophet says.

"Yeah, with all those birds going in in the dark, it's bad. And it makes sense. Charlie was pouring shit into that Z for a good twenty minutes before they got any support, and Charlie makes a lot more rounds count than we do."

"Especially when there's no sandbags on the roofs."

"I never thought I'd be glad to be on a patrol but..."

"If we can't get back to the Z early today we'll be in

the same mess as ever. No overhead on those hootches is like an arcade for Charlie."

A big bird flies over us low and we can hear it beat wings to a stop, then a throaty caw-caw that sounds like a giant crow comes back from where the Dinks are. It is the weirdest, coldest sound I have ever heard. There are some other sounds too. Like smaller birds. It sounds for an instant like three or four roosters eyeballing each other.

"Wha' fuck's that?" Callme says.

"I think some kind o' vulture."

"I know what he's making breakfast on."

"Goddamn, that's gross, man."

"We ought to throw a frag over there or something."

"Fuckit, it's only Dinks. I don't want to look at the sonobitches anyway. Let the buzzards eat em up before it gets light and we can tell the Lifers it was all a mistake."

"Throw a clod of dirt that way, Prophet," Pops says.

Prophet stands up and shouts, but not too loud, then picks up and throws something. The bird takes off.

[Granddaddy said I was left on a buzzard stump. "Out lookin' for mushrooms one day and scared a big ol' buzzard outa th' creek bed, said to m'self, 'What would a buzzard be eatin' on down there?' and when I went on down in the creek I see a ol' sycamore stump there and whattaya know? You were layin' there seckin' your thumb, Gabe, and your diaper full o' filth. May be that's why that ol' buzzard left you."]

"What do you think the Dinks are worried about around here," Peacock says. It is light enough now that I can make out everybody's silhouette. Peacock is sitting on a ruck. Everybody else is still sitting in the trenches.

"Maybe a hospital."

"Maybe we're closer to the Ho Chi than we think."

"We gotta be close to something or they wouldn't be fuckin with us."

The mosquitoes get bad all at once. Big fuckers. I'm swatting at them and so is Peacock. Prophet giggles.

"You fuckers must smell pretty bad," he says, "careful that vulture don't get a whiff of you or he'll be back for lunch."

"The fuckers are eating on you too but you ain't taking your malaria pills," Peacock says to Prophet. "You just want to lure yourself a Anopholes big enough to get you a temperature high enough to get out o' the field, that's all."

"I could take a dose now, for sure. I wish I could get a 103 instant-like. I'd be sitting in ice baths back in the rear tomorrow. And I'd never be back in this goddamn jungle, you can bet on that."

"Buy the medic off."

"Tried it."

"Rub cum on your face. I read once where Anopholes are queer for cum smell."

"Open your mouth and catch me some."

"What did the Lifers say to do when it gets light?"

"Said get a count and call em."

"It's light enough to count."

"No, t'ain't. If them dinks boobytrapped themselves and we can't see good we might all get blown to the buzzards."

It begins to rain again. The sound of it raining on the canopy is peaceful. The rain here sounds different than anywhere else I've ever been; there is absolutely nothing but jungle for it to land on and it sounds loud when it seems like it should sound soft, just landing on leaves. I wonder if the eyes on the corpses are open. I wonder if the rain is landing in their eyes. And as it gets lighter the rain gets worse and worse but most of it is only dripping off the canopy. It doesn't rain hard enough to penetrate.

We are all huddled into our ponchos because it is cold too. All six of us are fastened into our own poncho: CallmeBlack and Prophet are leaning against each other. Pops is curled up at my feet. He has his poncho snapped up all the way and the hood is tied tight and his hat is on top of the hood. It's a classic hat: the brim is shaped as irregular as a dried-up catalpa leaf. He has all the LZs he has been on listed, there must be twenty. He has a calendar I can't make shit of, except I can tell by all the ink that he has been here a long time.

"Pops? How many days you got left?"

"Don't ask me goddamnit, I want to lose track...67."

"You leave in February?"

"Yeah, February 20th, two weeks after Tet."

"Tet's a real mothafucker, ain't it?"

"Tet is when you want to be in a hole with ten layers of sandbags, Birdseye," Prophet says. He has stood up and is taking his poncho lose.

"Tet," Pops says, getting up too, "is when I goddamn want to be in Base Camp, going home."

"You know they're gonna try and keep you out here, man. They want all the good-guys out here they can get when Charlie is hot."

"I went through last year's and the only way I'm gonna be out here is if I'm bound and gagged or if I get blown into pieces too small for youse guys to ship to The World."

"Let's look see what we got out there," Peacock says.

"The sooner we get it done the sooner we can get back building our hole."

I really take my time. I get up slow and take my poncho off. The rest of them are stalling until everybody is ready. CallmeBlack and me are the last. It surprises me that Prophet goes last. Peacock goes first. Pops is dragging the radio in one hand. I take the round out of my chamber but leave the clip in.

Blood.

I didn't really expect it because of the rain, I reckon, or I expected it to be dried maybe: I can't believe how much

there is. It is splattered everywhere, like someone threw it around or shot it out of a fire hydrant. On all the leaves next to the trail; all over the rocks and vines at my feet. Everywhere. As we came up some rodents scampered away and as we are standing there I can see two little eyes watching out from between the rocks.

I think there were four Dinks. Two bodies are only legs and pieces and two are almost whole. One of the most complete ones is mostly detached from the head. The head is hung on by a strip of neck, but it is strung half a foot away and the face is gone.

"Mothafucker," Bull says. I wonder again what the hell we're going to do with this....

The radio is a constant hum of static. There are a lot of flies and some birds are squawking above us. Far off I can hear the drone of helicopter. I have been breathing fast and have to take a deep breath; I smell something besides the wet jungle, but it doesn't really smell dead. I wonder if blood has a smell by itself. I wonder if the blood is what vultures smell. For a minute I feel like my mind is careening way above all this. *I am watching us look at the bodies. I see Pops saying,*

"Four of em. That's all we want to know. Let's go back to the trenches and I'll call in. I don't want to stand around here. Pick up the rifles."

And I can see me lean over to pick up a gun. When I

feel it my mind comes back together. We go back to where our rucks are.

The rifle is an AK-47. I can never forget the sound, as distinct as an M-16 and a .22 caliber. But the rifle doesn't look flawless like it sounds. It is beat to shit. The stock is wired on and there is tape wound around the barrel about half way up where the forepiece is missing. I wonder which of the four it belonged to. I wonder if it had killed any GIs. I wonder if I ever heard it. I smell it to see if I can tell if it was fired last night but there isn't any smell except the metal. It is heavier than my rifle, as heavy as a single-shot coon gun. Its ammo clip is curved. I've heard it called a "banana clip" and now I know why. The more I stare at the gun the more it looks like a toy. The way the stock is wired on, it looks like a kid's homemade toy. It's clip is full of U.S. ammo.

"Greenleaf this is Titbird. How's your copy?" Pops has the radio up on a rock and the way he is standing there talking into the microphone reminds me of a Cincinnati cop calling in from a beat box.

"Goddamn it," he says. Then he switches the push and tries again.

"Good copy," the radio says back.

"OK," Pops says, "we got four rabbits out here. We want to know what to do, over."

The guy on the radio is just a radioman, says he will

check the "Higher-higher" and get back.

"Them Dinks were shot up pretty bad, say the least," Bull says. "Looked like they caught that mine letters-high," Pea says. He is rubbing across the front of his shirt, where a uniform would have the name. I think of taking a hard pitch I thought would break, completely losing my wind, knocking myself half out with my bat, spiking my own leg when I go down, the whole bit...and I almost think of catching fifty pellets out of that claymore, but I can't I won't I don't.

"Titbird, Greenleaf, over."

"Gotcha."

There's a lot of static all at once and the radio sounds dead for a minute then the guy comes back.

"Titbird, how's your copy? Over."

"Good copy. Go ahead damnit."

"We must be getting jammed," the radioman says..."Hello Charlie...anyway, Titbird, Higher says cut a chimney they'll be out. Over."

Prophet slams his hat down on his thigh and Pops bags the microphone with his other hand. Peacock says "fuck" and CallmeBlack and me just stand there. I don't know what's going on. Bull is looking up.

"No way," Pops says to us. "We can't cut a chimney here. Fuck those Lifers."

"All they want to do is make sure we counted right and I

ain't fuckin doin it," Prophet says.

I can't imagine how we could cut a hole through the canopy big enough to let a Loach down, and I can't imagine why.

Like he can read my mind Pops looks at me and says, "They wanna bring a Chieu Hoi out here and see if he can tell what unit these Dinks are from."

"Chieu Hoi" means something like "with open arms." It is what the Army calls enemies who surrender, then become scouts and interpreters. I've never heard GIs say much good about the Chieu Hois with our company. They have only been on our LZ a couple times: evil-looking bastards, I'll say that. Most of the time they are in Base Camp or in the air. Somewhere besides where the shit hits.

There isn't enough left of the four Dinks to tell anybody jack shit, far as I can tell. I'm beginning to wonder how all this will end. It seems like a physical impossibility to cut a chute through the canopy but I know the Lifers are serious.

"Tell the fuckers to walk out here," Bull says.

"We sure as hell did. And then did the work. Let those Higher-higher cocksuckers come out on these SRRPs."

"The next one that comes out with us better be a careful sonofabitch," Prophet says.

"And that's exactly why they quit coming out with us," Pops says. "They're stupid but not too goddamn stupid to

figure out that there's been a few fuckin mutinies in their unit, this war."

"Well do something, for Chris'sakes. We can't cut em a hole, and we sure as fuck don't want to stay here much longer. I'll bet Charlie has us pegged now."

"What the fuck we gonna do?"

"Call and tell em to walk out. They can still get out here before dark."

"Let me talk to the Lima Tango," Pops says.

The voice that comes on isn't our platoon Eltee, I know that. He is from Atlanta and has the accent. The voice that answers Pops sounds like it is from Brooklyn. Must be an Intelligence Man from Base Camp. Or maybe the captain that is on the LZ about half the time. His uniform is always starched and he is a brown-nosing fucker, always kissing the Colonel's ass. Always yelling at us little guys for no reason at all. All the time I see him running around--it seems like he is only there during the day--he has a Car-15 on. That is a faster, lighter rifle. Grunts should have them but assholes like him that never need them do. They look good, in pictures.

"Titbird, this is Beaver."

"It's that Captain," Peacock says. I know he means the one I thought, but he has the code sheet and might have checked it to be sure.

"So what," Pops says. Then he interrupts the voice and

says we need more than a beaver to clear a chimney big enough to get a bird in.

"Titbird," the voice says, "It is important to the cause to identify your rabbits. I am giving you an oscar. Over."

"He is ordering us to dig our own graves, even if we could do it," Bull says.

"Make the cocksucker understand we can't do it!" Prophet says.

"Beaver, I say again, No Can Do."

"Wait one," the radio says. Nobody says anything for the two minutes there isn't any traffic. Everybody looks stunned. And mad. I can't believe it.

"Titbird, transport your rabbits to checkpoint Bravo and a team will meet you there. Out."

Peacock begins stabbing the mud he is sitting in with his knife. I sit up on the edge of the trench and begin jiggling my legs. I'm tense.

"So let's goddamn meet them there and they can court-martial us for not bringing the bacon," Bull says.

"Man, they'll just bust us all and try to send us back out, then if we don't go we'll do bad time in LBJ and they'll send us right back out here."

No shit. If we disobey them we'll all get sent to the slam and then get sent back. I hate Officers for what they stand for. I am as good as them bastards but all they got to do is say the word and I get sent to jail for not doing

something they wouldn't do. I am trapped.

"Are we supposed to call them back when we get there?"

Peacock says.

"All he said was--"

"Yeah," Prophet interrupts, 'Call em and say send a taxi after we dragged the mothafuckin corpses all the way through this damn jungle while they sit back there getting dug in, then fly out to meet us." He stands and is talking louder but not yelling. "Then, goddamn it! Then, they'll turn that helicopter around and we'll goddamn have to walk back too!"

"Those bastards that keep track of the numbers, the real hardcore Lifers don't even think about us having to kill these guys, let alone having to haul around what's left of them, y'know? They probably CAN'T think of it, just have wetdreams about being a hero when they get home. They don't care--"

"Sure they care," Peacock says. "They care enough to make us drag em to that clearing. Meanwhile us taking all the chances. If Charlie is around here close and sees any signs you know he ain't gonna goddamn worry anything about big guns out here. He's gonna have our shit on a stick. He'll be hawking my goddamn watch in Hanoi if he knows what we're carrying and just happens to see us clod-hoppin city boys here in his jungle. Them Lifers care enough about numbers and the glory that goes with a big number, that they're gonna say all these Dinks only had one arm anyway, so we

really blew eight away."

"Peacock," Pops says, "I never heard you be so right."

Jesus, the flies. We have two sets of our ponchos snapped into pairs and are going to gather the bodies onto the ponchos, then split the weight up so four guys can carry the two slings; even then two guys will have to hump the radio, the machine gun, and the extra weapons so really we'll be fuckin-A useless if anything happens. Prophet says he'll go look for the best way [by himself!]. We want to keep him as light as we can because he will be walking Point. He leaves and the rest of us go back to the site together. The flies are so loud I hear them from eight or ten meters away. So loud.

We spread the ponchos out like we're there for a picnic. Nobody talks. We all stand still. Then CallmeBlack begins humming "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" and Pops drags most of a body onto one of the ponchos. The guys drag along between the body's legs. The flies swarm in one extra-loud sound and land again when the body is on the poncho. Pops goes off from us a bit.

Right at my feet is one of the odd arms. It is short but looks like what is there is almost all of what there ever was, like it came off at the shoulder ["letter high"]. There are flies around its bloody end too. CallmeBlack is still humming and has tossed a couple pieces onto the honcho. I pick the arm up by the unbloody hand and it is like I am

shaking hands with the oldest schoolmarm in Ohio, on the coldest Halloween ever. *That cold. More.*

I fling the arm onto the pile that must be most of two guys now. Pops is back.

CallmeBlack sits down and spits a lot but doesn't puke, between his boots. The head that had been hanging onto Pops' body is mostly laying there between me and CallmeBlack and we both see it about the same time. It is most of a face but half of it is turned into the muddy trail so it looks like a mask except for the blood and the flies. CallmeBlack and I both look at it and then at each other and he looks back between his boots and half spits half retches. I kick the head with my boot and it is a good kick; the face sails a foot off the ground and lands at the top of the pile, then rolls over the top. *I'm glad it doesn't end up looking at me.*

Peacock and BullDurham have collected the other parts and are about to fold the collection into the poncho and tie it shut.

"Make sure they're about as heavy as each other," Pops says, "they'll get heavy and awkward as a bitch anyway, even though we don't really have that far to go."

"I pretended I was splitting a hundred pounds of Cambodian Red weed, Pops. I eyeballed it like I didn't know which half was mine. I--," Peacock says.

"OK, OK, OK," Pops says.

Prophet comes back and says he went about half a klik or

so and it's not that bad.

"Maybe fine for a stroll," Bull says, "but I've carried enough bucks out of Georgia t' know this ain't gonna be pud."

"Carrying em beats being them," CallmeBlack says. "All to hell. I'll sing and work for a ride back to The World, even this kind o' work. I'm not proud."

"You niggers are all alike," Peacock says.

CallmeBlack smiles like they have been friends all their lives.

ii.

Prophet takes Point and carries one of the extra rifles and I walk second. Bull has the other end of the poncho I'm carrying; then Peacock and CallmeBlack come, carrying the other poncho. We tried stringing the weight on some vines but it didn't work very well because the trail is too sharp in places and the vines are too long to make the turns without the lead guy having to stop and turn around, which ain't good. So I twist the corner together and use both hands to hold my end on my shoulder. Prophet helped me sling my rifle with shoelaces so it at least hangs in front of me and will be possible to get to, if it comes to that. Pops stays quite a ways back from our caisson train; he has to manage the radio, the Sixty, extra rifles, and pull rear security.

The going is slow and seems noisy to me. For a while we walk on a fairly level trail and our footing is solid. The weight gets heavy though and we have to rest. When we set

the poncho down the flies all seem to catch up and swirl in and out of the holes between where the ponchos are snapped together. The blood still isn't dried so when I pick my end up the blood in the knot I am using as a handle squeezes out and some runs down my arms.

Prophet stops us and says rest because we're going downhill before long and it is steep. I can see the swale the bird will come to below us. It stands out not only because it isn't thick jungle but because it is a different shade of green than everything else. I wonder why. *These odd spots are all over these Vietnam mountains. It doesn't remind me of home because I don't know anywhere there that I can see miles and not see anything manmade. It doesn't remind me of home but there is something familiar about them, these swales, something familiar....*

The goddamn flies. They seem loud enough to call the buzzards or Charlie. When nobody is talking, and nobody is now except Peacock needs a match, the flies seem like they are flying in tune. Listening there I hear different snatches of long-ago songs. I hear nursery rhymes sung; I hear church choirs and classical music. I hear the ditty that is the commercial for life insurance, and it comes to me what the swales remind me of.

The cemetery. All the cemeteries I have ever seen in fact. But the one where daddy's buried is a different color than the rest of Ohio. It is marshy there, no place for a

cemetery. And the weeds grow greener in that marsh than any.... [The Starlings land there every year and people complain about the sound they make.]

"Fuckuva lot of flies," Prophet says. Then, "Let's go."

Pops was calling in as we all got up. I couldn't hear what he was saying or what he was hearing, even though I was only about fifteen feet away. It takes skill to use an Army PRC-25 radio so that it isn't like using one of those speakers in a supermarket. A PRC-25 can wake you up with just its static and using one quietly in a jungle is skill. I shoulder the poncho, glad for Pops. I am getting to be a F.O.G. and the Fear comes and goes. Carrying these pieces of bodies to a helicopter landing in a small clearing makes the Fear come hard and, maybe, makes me fall flat down on my face. I cut my face up pretty bad but never drop my end of the poncho. But as we go more and more downhill, me only trying to stand up and Prophet waiting and scouting up ahead, as we stumble along, an arm works its way out of the seam where a snap has come loose and keeps slapping me in the back of the head with every bounce.

Just as we get to the bottom of the mountain but not yet to the edge of the clearing we can hear the bird beating over the distant mountains. It is no louder that far away than the flies that are still with us. We set the ponchos down and rest. Everybody chambers a round and waits.

"You ever pray?" Peacock whispers.

I nod my head yes and look at CallmeBlack. He looks like he did last time I looked at him this close: his color is still dirty oil and he is sweating. *I wonder if the exact same pores sweat all the time.* His eyes are not that big but they show up like double dome lights in an Oldsmobile. So do his teeth, maybe like a chrome grill in a black limousine. He quits smiling and puts his lips together and I can barely hear him humming.

Then I am humming it, mostly to myself. I think Peacock is too: the helicopter swings into view at just the right chorus of our hum job:

["Swing low, sweet chariooot, comin' for to carry me home. Swing low--"]

The Slick coasts down with its machine guns poling out so directly opposite each other that it reminds me of a dragonfly with a pin through it. It doesn't draw any fire but Charlie could be waiting out of sight just like we are, waiting on us to make slow targets, humping pieces of comrades through waist-high elephant grass, to catch a ride back to that LZ he blew apart last night.

It is muddy enough that every step I make I go into mud up to the top of my boots. I try to hurry but it is impossible. The helicopter is hovering about four feet off the ground and its prop blast works against us, so it is a super mothafucker to lug that weight through mud against the force

of the propeller that sucks the water out of the grass and soaks me, and stings my face and blinds me. They can't land to shut the engine down so none of us can hear anything except Pops who is huddling in the grass talking over the radio to the pilot while the rest of us lift the ponchos up over our heads. The machine gunners help lift them in. Our platoon Eltee and the red-haired lieutenant are inside, so is the Captain--code-name-Beaver--with a headset on so maybe Pops is talking to him.

Pops begins screaming into his mike and flipping "fuck you" at the bird that now picks up a few feet. The extra wind velocity forces us low to the ground and while we're down the bird dips and takes off. *I don't fuckin believe it and neither does anybody else, from their looks.* When the bird is far enough away we can hear him, Pops says get into cover and we begin running low and slow through the mud to the jungle.

All of us are out of breath when we get back and for a few minutes we sit there huffing. Prophet takes the extra rifle off his neck.

"What the hell is happening?" he asks Pops.
"Fuckers...," Pops says, still winded, "Cocksucker says he couldn't take us on the bird. 'If Charlie was out here,' he told me, 'while you guys were loading, he'd sure as fuck be lobbing mortars at this bird, so you guys get back in cover and we'll call you and tell you where to go.'"

"Let me have that radio," Peacock says. "I'll call him and tell him where to go."

"And tell him when he gets there to buy a suit of armor because I may be there before he is, and if I am I'm gonna be juggling his balls sooner or later," Prophet says. He looks meaner than ever. Even his face is a different color: brown as hell from the sun but red now too. Anger so electric and obvious it bothers me even though I know I'm on his side.

"We best take up a collection," Bull says. "I'll put in five to warn him and ten if he gets transferred."

"Same here," Prophet says.

"Me too," Peacock adds.

And it is like CallmeBlack and me are the only men at a quilting bee and one old lady just said she was horny. I feel like I'm a comic strip and can't read my voice balloon. I want to go back and read the first part of the cartoon again. I'm not sure I understand what is going on. I feel like my hat is on wrong. CallmeBlack begins talking. Real slow:

"Y'all waitin on me to say I'm on to a fraggin in the makin? Well, Ah'm on to it. And Ah'm on to how much money's goin to be in the frag man's pocket. An' m' pockets gotta hole in it. Besides, Ah'm tired o' workin an' sick o' dyin' an' gettin sick o' walkin'..." and all of us are laughing then.

For me it was like seeing Lightnin in an "Amos 'n Andy." I love him. The way to tell how long you've been here is by how hard you got to look and how long you have to wait for something to be funny.

iii.

The radio is on low and we've been sitting for fifteen minutes. It has stopped raining completely and there is a lot of sun and a bank of clouds in the West. Below us the mountains are patched in shadow and these different color swales, so looking over the jungled mountains is for a minute like waking up in a sick room with an extra comfoter on the bed, one that's not as familiar, the "sick quilt." I flash a couple times on being in bed and not knowing if I like being sick and waited on or not.

The radio lays in the circle made by all our boots and is almost constant static. Now and then there is a weak transmission and as often the back-chilling "squelch" breaks that eventually begin feeling like fingernails on a black-board but somehow seem reassuring too.

"Titbird, Over."

"Titbird," Pops says, and gets his hand on the volume knob. Then, "Good copy."

"Hump to Coordinates code Zulu and rendezvous with Sierra Delta. How's your copy? Over."

"Greenleaf, Titbird. Wait one, Over."

Peacock has the map but for a while can't find the code

book and it is ten minutes before we determine we know where we're going and that we can get there before dark. Meanwhile the Lifers try to contact us but Pops only breaks squelch to tell him we hear him. *I hope the Captain is listening through headphones and the chill goes all the way down to his asshole.*

We walk about fifteen minutes, then stop to eat. Eating C-rations reminds me of eating cold leftovers. A few times I have heated something up but when I do I usually burn the bottom of whatever I'm cooking, spill about half of it trying to hold onto the can while I'm heating it, and most always get sand in the food or run out of water to drink.

In fifty days I've had about three decent meals. When we stay on the same LZ long enough and if the rains aren't too bad for birds to fly, we get "hots" flown in from BC about every three days. But "hots" are usually warm at most and usually no better than C's, so I'm losing the gut I never got to get until now I have to fasten my utes to keep them from sliding down to my ass. I've had the same pair of pants on all the time I've been here and they're crusty now: dried mud and spilled C-ration grease, sweat and the remains of my shit that I half-washed out with muddy water in my helmet. I lace the bottoms of my trousers just above my boots so the river leaches don't sneak in, and so there's that much less pantsleg flopping around to get caught on stuff along the trails. Above where the legs are laced, my utes are torn.

Everybody is tired and hungry and everybody but Bull is eating. Bull is staring at a beat-to-shit paperback that he never turns the page in. His face is lined there in the sun: lines of grime stuck in his skin, pockmarks like a checkerboard or naugehyde, a mustache like it was trimmed with a lawnmower sticking out under his crooked nose. One of his nervous habits is shutting half his nose with his biggest knuckle and he is doing it now, looking sometimes at the book and sometimes into the jungle. He roars a big fart and, like that's what he is waiting on, he opens a can of C's that look like chopped-eggs-and-ham from where I am sitting, beside CallmeBlack who still smells like goat piss.

Once I think I see movement behind Prophet and I am surprised that when I tense up everybody else does too. CallmeBlack and Pops stop eating and look the way I am; Prophet and Peacock look at me and don't move. Nothing else moves where I thought I saw something for the couple minutes I stare hard at it, feeling like I am shivering inside. When I relax the rest of them seem to too. It makes funny waves in that part of me that is always trying to figure out how I stand in this outfit: the feeling is hard to name, is maybe a cousin to the feeling of unshucking an ear of corn that grew in sight of your window.

When everybody is done eating Peacock lights a big bowl and it goes around extra because Prophet and Pops don't smoke, so when we're up and begin humping up the next mountain the

leaves look pasted along the trail we're on. I didn't mean to get as stoned as I am and I don't want to let the radio antenna remind me enough of parking and petting and watching the Ohio to drag my sense out of the jungle and into the back seat of my old Chevy, but I did, I do, and I am...[*laying there with sweat in our bellybuttons and clothes closeby in case the cops come, smoking, stroking...*] and walk up to about three feet from Bull before I remember where I'm at.

"You awake?" he asks. *the radio.*

I nod and strain to see if I can spot Prophet, maybe even straining to see if I can spot what he is straining to see. The trail makes a bend about five meters away and Pops is standing there, still. The antenna on the radio on his back waves back and forth and catches what little sunlight there is. While I'm looking at him Pops waves us on and disappears around the bend in the trail. *the blue line.*

I tell myself a time or two to get off the stone and pay attention so eventually I am watching along our left and still listening for anything that don't sound like it belongs.

quit We go pretty much up but pretty easy for an hour before we stop to check the map beside a thicket that looks like a giant broom growing upside down. *and we are to meet that*

lost "We're fucked," Bull says. *marker and it is impossible*

to see "Easy, man," Pops says, "we're okay if we no North. Any blue line that wide on this map is gotta be a big enough river we can't miss it, and we ain't crossed any rivers. Might be

a good thing to hustle off this trail though. I'll bet it keeps on going around this hump, what do you think, Prophet?"

Chay: "I'm for getting off this trail if we can catch one going North, but if we don't hit one pretty soon we better either cut one or set up for the night."

"I'm hip," Peacock says, "I don't want to be whistling down no trail along a blue line looking for some dumbass GIS when it gets about half dark."

"We can pick em up on the radio."

"And tell em what? Not to set up any trip flares or mines until after dark because we might be tripping them if they do?"

"Just call in and say we're coming and if we're not there by dark we'll call in."

"Call in bullshit, we don't even know where we are."

"So let's goddamn hump it hard to the blue line."

I'm glad we find a trail in the next hundred meters. It is past the middle of the day and my ass is dragging so until we find the little side trail I'm beginning to come sober quick and the Fear comes with it. I am hoping to be in a trench big enough to stretch in when it comes dark and I'd sure as hell rather be with the squad we are to meet than lost. The new trail is a lot smaller and it is impossible to walk any other way but with my rifle straight ahead, or the barrel snags on every little thing. I think of Bull Durham's rifle pointing at my back. I hope he doesn't have

a round chambered and I hope he doesn't stumble.

While I walk I hope too that the starter gears in my Chevy don't rust up this long year. I hope the rain that is making the jungle darker all the time holds off. I hope I make it home in a big enough piece to watch the rains that make my Chevy rust next year.

I hear water. Like sitting drunk on the Kentucky side and seeing the lights of the ferry boat through the fog, listening: I hear water. I wonder how big the "blue line" is. They are all the same size and shade of blue on the map. All of us hear it at the same time and the whole squad stops for a minute and listens, but soon enough we push on towards the sound. Some of the stuff that we are going through now is sharp. It reminds me a little bit of cattails but is strictly leaves, sharp leaves that rip a couple slits into my hands.

Next thing I know we are there. Prophet is holding us back from the edge a ways with his hand, but I can see through the vines and tell that the water is running fast.

I wish I had a camera: the stream is fantastic. It is maybe fifty feet wide and looks pretty deep. The jungle on the other shore looks pruned and there is about a two foot embankment below that must be the monsoon floods' bite for the year. The earth is red, so red it looks painted. There is not all that much more light at the stream because the canopy reaches across. In that yellow light and with nobody saying

anything I get a flash. BIG. The jungle is Big like a desert is, an ocean. And powerful. I feel like I don't, can't belong.

"Well," Peacock says, "Anybody think Charlie is watching from downstream?"

"Or maybe a nearsighted GI," Bull says.

"So if the first guy out starts taking M-16 fire, yell 'Lyndon Johnson.'"

"Better yell 'Lady Bird,' even I'd shoot at somebody yelling Johnson."

"Make it 'Bird Turd,' they'll know who you mean."

"I'm going first," Pops says, coming up and handing me the radio. He is getting his dry stuff into his hat and taping up the two clips of ammo he has taped to each other for easy unloading and quick re-loading. Prophet comes back to the rest of us too. He tells CallmeBlack and me to go downstream ten yards and the other two guys to go upstream. As Callme and me are leaving I hear Peacock wish Pops good luck and I can tell by the way he says it that things must be more hairy than I figured. It could be me wading or swimming across those fifty feet and not knowing what is on the other side, or whether Charlie is waiting until I'm an easy shot to blow my hat out of the water. I wish I had wished Pops good luck too.

He gets in the water real quiet and without ever taking his eyes off the other side. At the place he gets in, the water is about up to his knees and he begins walking. For a minute

I think he looks like the star in a war movie: walking pretty fast now and the water is getting deeper so that he has to hold his rifle up around his shoulders. When he is halfway across it is up to his neck and I can tell by his struggle that walking is tough against the current. He has still never taken his eyes off the other side except once to look both ways when he was in the middle of the river. He is most of the way across now and the water is getting shallower. When it is only up to his tits a wind blows his hat crooked and he stumbles a little bit trying to keep it on. Then he is on the other side but as soon as he hits the shore he disappears into the jungle. Peacock is next and Prophet signals CallmeBlack to start even before Peacock is across.

I get my drys into my hat. Matches and a little bit of pot, one full pack of cigarettes, my letter and my wallet that is empty. I am looking forward to getting in the water. It seems cleaner than rain, will be like walking through a washing machine, probably good for my Rot that is open sores around my balls and underneath my arms where the straps of my ruck fit. I have the straps padded with my skivvies on one side and part of a towel on the other; still the Rot almost aches most of the time. Right now it is throbbing. Prophet gives me the sign. The water is lukewarm until it gets up to my nuts. When it is up to my neck and I am holding my rifle high I can feel two layers: a fast-moving and warm one on top and a steady cold layer. The bottom is soft.

When I get across and out all four of them are sitting there wringing their shirts out and watching Prophet come. He is fast: when he pulls out of the water some of the slime caught in the roots along the bank clings to his ruck frame. We spread out a little and eat salt tablets. It feels good, almost clean, sitting there in wet trousers with the breeze drying me off. Pops sets the radio up.

"Owlshit, Titbird," he says.

"Titbird," the radio says back. Then, like it is a telephone call, so casual: "Where ya been? Over."

"On a picnic," Pops says just as casual. "Anybody tell you we're coming for dinner?"

"Yup. When's your train due? Over."

"We'll be coming from the Sierra, maybe two hours.

How's your copy?"

"Good copy. We'll have you a hole with a custom rut for your hardon."

"Make the rut a foot long," Pops says.

"Youse been out there a long time...Bring a bottle.

Over."

"Out," Pops says. He is smiling and looking at Callme who is laughing.

"A foot long?" Callme says.

"For you. I useta see you black boys in the showers at the y," Bull says. "We know all about how your mammy pulls on it ever' time she changes yer diaper, make it grow."

"May be," Peacock says, "but I know he couldn't find it on our guard last night because you were sleeping with your mouth open."

And a few more jokes but I don't hear them all because I am squatting over a root or vine as big as a fencepost taking a shit that is somewhere between green and black, about the feel of a rotten banana. I am getting tired and feel about as bored as afraid. I keep thinking of The World, mostly memories but more and more I am beginning to think ahead, to getting back. The World. The World. It seems like living there for twenty years was a movie now. Now. It seems like everything everywhere should hold still for the next ten months. I feel like I am living in a box and playing war.

iv.

Getting to the rendezvous is easy. Mostly level ground and the sun is getting down enough on our left side that we walk through steam some of the time where the sun got low enough to work on the ground that is spongy, so full of water. Every time I step water squeezes out of the ground that is mostly moss, and into the air holes of my boots.

We walk steady for over an hour. My back is a constant ache but I never want to rest because getting up afterwards would be a bitch. I'm tired. And we can't afford to stop and use up the sun. I fall into a rhythm that feels best,

keep pushing my helmet liner around behind my rucksack and take a hit out of my canteen now and then. We keep slicing through the steam, me keeping a good eye on our left side. We're pretty quiet; I try to keep my rattles few.

When we come to a place where the steam seems to quit because the floor is more dirt than moss, Pops calls Four Squad and we must be closer than anybody thought we were because Pops says we'll be there in about five minutes.

The place looks like a hobo camp: set up in a clearing about ten yards across. A couple shirts are hanging on vines at the perimeter of the clearing and they've even got a tiny fire going. The fire is only a couple small dry sticks so there is hardly any smoke. A pair of boots is beside the fire and a guy reading, laying barefooted on his poncho liner. Another guy in another trench has a cassette going but the sound isn't loud enough to hear even from only twenty feet away.

When we come into the clearing I don't know what the hell to do. None of us do, so pretty quick we are all six like cows in a rain, bunched up. It feels plenty awkward. There is one more guy in the clearing and he is leaning up against his ruck with shades on and a joint in his hand that's as big as a 50¢ cigar.

"Hey, Pops," he says, "you guys all waiting on the bathroom, or what?"

"Simpleton," Pops says, "I didn't goddamn see you laid

back there, you blend in with them shades, man."

"They blur everything too," the guy says, "makes it easy to pretend I'm in Hawaii smoking 'MauiWoweese' weed, and any minute now some dancing girl is gonna drop her grass skirt...Need I say more?"

We all make our way across the clearing and into the shade near where the trenches are dug on high ground. It feels goddamn good to drop the ruck and lean against it even though the extra bandolier of ammo that I got tied on jabs me in the kidneys and reminds me I have to piss.

"Where you guys been since Clitoris?" Peacock says.

"If you can goddamn believe it, we've been right fuckin here for almost a week."

"No shit?"

"No shit. They put us in here the day before they moved the LZ. Then we watched em take big hits for two nights now. Where you guys been?"

"Ambush," Bull says, "Ambushed four Dinks and the Lifers made us hump em to a convenient pickup place. Believe that?"

"Heard part of it on the radio, but I didn't know that was you guys."

"Where's the rest of your squad?" Prophet asks, "out on OP?"

"Four of em," Simpleton says. "One guy saw you right after you called us."

"Goddamn good thing you called when you did, the

barefooted guy says, coming up. "If Shit-For-Brains saw you he wouldn't o' kept it together long enough to see it was GIs. He's a jumpy mothafucker, bothers me."

"Who's the FNG's?" Simpleton says. He has his shades tilted down now and is looking at me and CallmeBlack.

"Birdseye and CallmeBlack, this is Simpleton from New York. And that hillbilly fucker there without any shoes is Clemson from Montana. Birdseye is from Ohio and Callme is from Mississippi," Pops says.

We all shake hands and Simpleton lights the stogie joint. Callme goes over to the guy we didn't meet who is Black. Two guys come in off OP. One is from Queens and one is from Alabama. They're Black too and really loaded. Just before the sun is gone the other two guys come so there are thirteen of us sitting around the five trenches. It is going to be three guys to a hole so we decide to pull guard in threes. I'm in the last hole so me and CallmeBlack and one guy from Four Squad will be pulling last guard. The cassette is grinding dead on the old batteries from the radio, so somebody changes the radio batteries and hooks the used ones to the cassette. Joe Cocker. Then Sly and the Family Stone. Meanwhile there is a lot of dope going around so by the time the second cassette is done I can barely roll off my ruck and into my hole.

v.

OP's are Observation Points in the light and Listening Posts--LP's--at night. The three of us follow one of the guards we are relieving back to the LP when he wakes us up at four. We go about the same direction we came from the river. It takes above five minutes to get out there and when we do the other two guards are smoking dope.

"Name is Pantsload," the guy from Four Squad says. His voice is sort of high and he speaks really clear, like he is a teacher or something.

"Gabe."

"CallmeBlack."

"How long you been here?"

"We're FNG's. How about you?"

"Been here about five months. Sometimes I still feel like a Fuckin New Guy m'self though. Were you guys out here when the Z got hit?"

"Last night," I say. "We ambushed four Dinks. But we were on the Z when Charlie hit the day before."

"Bad?"

"Not too bad," Callme says, "Wounded one o' our squad but most of the shit was on the other side."

"A thing just like that, about four and a half months ago, I got my nickname," Pantsload says. "A guy who was short as hell and me got pinned down on one side o' a hill and couldn't get up and couldn't get any support guns in. I shit

my pants and Martin, the guy was with me, said I just got my nickname. Right after that he moved a little and the sniper got him through the shoulder."

"No shit," Callme says. I can tell he feels as uncomfortable as I feel for some reason that has to do with Pantsload telling us this.

"Did he make it?"

"Yeah, he did. I got a letter from him just last mail call. He's back in The World and is out of the Army. Happy fucker, he is."

"To be out...."

"Two hundred days," Pantsload says.

"Ah don't wanna talk about it," Callme says. Me and him are still over 300.

"When do you quit feeling like a Fuckin New Guy here?"

"As soon as you get somebody newer'n you in," Pantsload says. "Soon as you see some newby walking around you know you're a 'FOG' because that new dude can't tell how long you been here. Remember when you first came and everybody was dirty as everybody else but you. When you first get here you don't know how long anybody else has been here, that's the whole reason you feel like a PNG, get it?"

"Next thing I know I'll be figurin when my replacement gets drafted."

"Yeah, you will," he says. "Mine gets drafted next month."

"Maybe the war will be over by then."

"Maybe chickens have lips."

It is getting more and more light. All around us begins to look vaguely like a giant box of see-through macaroni. It is only barely lighter than dark and everything looks the same shape. There are a few birds but they are mostly high up in the canopy and sound muffled. Maybe they are only half awake and weak. Pantsload has nodded out and me and CallmeBlack are watching opposite ways. I could not say what I am watching for. Something moving maybe. Something other than these elbow macaroni shapes that bend away to eternity: there is no wind and the vines are all still. I can hear rats or something running around; some of them sound pretty big. It gets light enough that the blacks and grays turn into greens and yellows and the elbows straighten into vines and jungle plants. The birds get louder and begin to fly around. I think I see a parrot. *A bird as bright as a bought blanket.*

Pantsload wakes up again and when I look at him he smiles boylike, rearranging his hat a little and lights a smoke. But none of us say anything for another ten minutes. More. I'm soaking up the sunrise. Fine. Mostly yellow then blue or white. There is steam coming off the floor again and the light rents the green fog in layers and points that are straight so contrast with the forty-seven-ford shapes of the jungle.

"Let's go back," Pantsload says.

And when we get back we all eat and somehow the rest of Pantsload's story comes up: after the guy he was with got hit Pantsload crawled out to blow the sniper away with a frag. Pantsload is in for a Silver Star and says if he gets one he will pin it through his left nipple, rig up a light to his other nipple and advertise in the LA Free Press as a war-hero turned into pinball machine which is funny until everybody starts picking it apart. "You run on AC or DC?":

[...bells and blinks bent Coney Island Arcade into a nightmare for the first few minutes I was there, drunker than ever before on Kentucky Shine and everything a giant horror chamber/my mind was wrong/while thirty people mostly Hoods crowded all the game machines and some punk whistled at my girl then was copping a feel before I could get my drunk mind around and next I know I lobbed him a round-house that caught the bone in front of his ear and knocked him half across one of the bowling machines. He had a knife and got me light in a shoulder and before the cops came I had his head open by a leg off a stool. In the hospital and under arrest it came to me he would've killed me, and vice versa....]

I go on eating and flashing back to Coney Island. Some of the rest of them are eating too and some are still asleep but it is getting hotter and hotter fast and before I finish eating most of them are waking up sweating. All of a sudden it feels ultra fuckin hot and my Rot begins to really bother me. It itches but the itch is so bad it feels like pain. I

get my clothes off to air my balls out then borrow Pops' salve when he's done, standing there with only his hat on and the salve drying white in an arch from one knee to the other.

"Don't get yourself excited putting that salve on, Birdseye," he says.

"I noticed it was taking you a long time when you had your back turned."

"Picking my scabs," he says.

The salve burns. My Rot is spread down both legs about half way to my knees now and the lowest part isn't scabbed yet and putting the salve on is like getting gas in your eye. I want to scream for the couple minutes it hurts the worst. Two pairs of guys are out on OP and Simpleton and Prophet are talking together by where the fire was. Pops is pulling his pants on like he has a bad sunburn. Peacock, CallmeBlack, Pantsload and two other guys are in the shadows. I can smell the dope they're smoking. Then Prophet waves me over to the big group and Pops comes too.

"There is no use beating around the bush," Prophet says, "the Lifers are pulling some dumb-ass shit, like making us hump them bodies in and leaving you guys in the same spot for this long--"

"I hear y' talkin'," one black guys says.

"Kill some of em," another guy says.

"Killing and fragging don't have to be the same thing,"

Pops says. "There y' go, there'y go, Pops," Simpleton says it and lights another joint.

These guys are talking jive. Almost code of some kind. I get the feeling I've been here before. *Deja vu.* It seems like I've been through this or dreamed it. Maybe I knew it would be like this--or I hoped--and I won't have to say anything. I hope they don't ask me anything. I don't think I could say yes and I know I couldn't say no. Or is it the other way around?

"Man," one guy says, "if we just pin a frag and drop it on the Lifer they'll just send us another one as bad and rotate that guy to another unit."

"Barker's right," another guy from Four Squad says.

"Right now all we wanna know is if you guys will chip in on the bounty," Prophet says.

"It's worth ten bucks to me," Simpleton says. "Even more than that. I'm gettin way too short to be humping out here, let alone being a fuckin bait target."

"I don't think we should chip in until we know what's what."

"What?"

"Like, let's say ten bucks apiece if we fuck the guy over and five apiece if we just warn him. Let's hurt the fucker, maybe throw a trip-flare into his hootch just to burn him."

"He's right, man, we should get a particular dude, or that guy will just go fuck with some other guys like us. It won't do any good unless we teach him a lesson."

"Why don't we just pile on the asshole some night. About ten guys just catch him and beat the shit out of him. I'd like to punch his lights out because he humbled us," Peacock says.

"They don't goddamn treat us human," Bull says.

"Well," Pops says, "for this time, I say we pin a frag and throw it in his hootch, then if we get another gung-ho fucker we'll do something else."

It is slow in coming but everybody eventually agrees. Somebody asks if we are going in to the Z today and nobody knows so Prophet and Simpleton go over to the radio. I am still sitting there naked with my legs apart to dry the salve when Simpleton comes back and says we can head in right away.

So we do and it is sunny and hot as hell most of the way back. Just about the time we can see the Z a fast shower soaks us. When we get back everything is muddy and the hole Prophet, me, and Pops began is six inches full of water. There is nothing to do but pretend it isn't there and go on digging. All afternoon we slop mud into sandbags and by the time we quit to eat the walls around the hole are another three layers high. Callme and Pops disappear a couple times and when Pops comes back the last time Prophet and me are just sitting down to a bowl and some C's.

"Callme is all set," Pops says.

"I hope that Captain Beaver is just beating his meat when Callme drops him the message," Prophet says.

"Yeah, maybe he'll jerk it all the way off."

"I hope they ship the fucker out afterwards. None of us can afford to have him killed 'til payday."

I can't tell if he is joking.

In another hour it is dark but extra warm. The LZ looks like some kind of huge snail in the starlight that is plenty because there aren't any clouds. The hill is longer than round. There are some weak lights here and there on the Z; guys are still digging and a couple hootches are ready for the roofs. I don't feel all that tired but I know there is no use working because we can't get a roof on and a hole is a hole is a hole without a roof. Pops and Prophet are gone somewhere and I am half stoned from a bowl we did at supper.

I can hear the shovels from a hootch towards the middle of the hill. Most of the holes on this side of the hill aren't any deeper than ours and dudes are sitting around. Down lower on the point is the pad and some of the hootches down there have roofs on them. I wonder which one is the Captain's. I wonder who built it for him while he was flying around and we were humping parts of Dinks in the rain. I wonder which hole is the one CallmeBlack is living in. I wonder if he is sleeping and whether he double-pinned the grenade yet.

Glossary

- Short - To most of the men in Vietnam, "getting short(er)" is what it is all about. An ordinary tour of duty during the war is one year. The longer one is there, the shorter he is--i.e. the less time left to serve. A "Shorttimer" is anyone who has completed most of his tour of duty. A "double-digit-midget" is someone who has less than 100 days.
- Grunt - A term for the footsoldier, a man in the Field, one who carries a rifle and is most likely to see action. An Infantryman.
- Lifer - A career Army man. Used to refer to those in command.
- Eltee - A lieutenant (LT.). Sometimes used as a form of address, such as "Eltee Jones." This term is mostly used by EMs (Enlisted Men) and is not necessarily perjorative. "Lima Tango" is radio code for LT.
- Utes - Short for "Utilities." The uniforms worn by GI's in Vietnam are Jungle Utilities.
- Concertina - A kind of barbed wire. The barbs of the wire are razor-sharp and concertina wire is strung around a perimeter as defense, usually in threes, i.e. one roll on top of two others.
- Hootch - A grunt's "house" in the Field. Usually built by digging a hole approximately four feet deep with a wall of full sandbags around the hole and a roof constructed of logs laid across the hole, then covered with two or three layers of sandbags, 3-5 men in each hootch.
- LZ - Landing Zone. The term for the base of operations in the Field. Also called Fire Support Base. An LZ is normally cut out of the jungle on top of a hill or small mountain. Each Field Battalion usually has an LZ and there may be 80-100 hootches for the Infantrymen and an Artillery Battery, which is ordinarily five 105mm howitzers.
- LBJ - Long Binh Jail.

Dustoff - An ambulance helicopter.

V.C. - Viet Cong. Mostly South Vietnamese who are sympathetic (and/or mercenaries) to the North Vietnamese Army (N.V.A.).

Z/DMZ - Demilitarized Zone. Separates North and South Vietnam.

S.R.R.P. - Short Range Reconnaissance Patrol. The patrols made by a squad of men. A squad is a division of a platoon and is at full strength with six men. SRRPs originate from LZs and ordinarily are two or three days. A SRRP would usually travel between eight and fifteen klicks. A "klick" is slang for a kilometer (1000 meters).

Point - The first man in a patrol, the one who leads through the jungle.

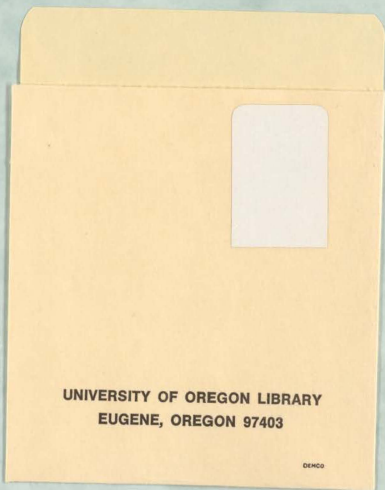
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