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SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

A Novel

By

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Date
PROLOGUE
Hanson was running the bluffs. Sixty feet below him the surf bore in on the cliffside, booming into the grey rock. To his left, past the breakers and beyond the kelp beds, the sea folded into the horizon. The land rose slowly on his right. Tall blond grass covered the hill, curling away from the sea and up into the shadows of gnarled evergreen windbreaks. He ran the winding lip of the bluffs at a steady pace, head slightly back, relaxed from the waist up. He ran into the pain. It came dully at first, in the calves and chest, swelling until it pumped through his blood, until he was full of real pain. He smiled, his eyes the color of the ocean, and began chanting softly,

Here we go
All the way
Airborne, huh!

All the way,
Airborne.

I can run...Airborne
I can jump...Airborne
I can kill...Airborne

Huh! I can kill,
Airborne.

I can kill Airborne, Airborne, Airborne until the pain began to fail and fall away, and was at him like ragged gusts at the edge of a powerful wind, and then he was through it into the pure violence that breaks just beyond pain. It was raw oxygen and adrenaline
and he could run forever.

"Airborne Ranger, Green Beret--Make my money blowin' gooks away, here we go, all the way...." When the whole team ran together they slowly increased their speed, almost sprinting the last lap. "Come on, ladies," Quinn screamed, "pick up the step. Charles' gonna have your ass for sure, you that slow. That sly little rice burner gonna be runnin' behind you with his hand in your panties!"

M/Sgt. Polk, out of breath and laughing at Quinn's accent, shouted, "Quinn, quit playing nigger drill sergeant and slide your paddy ass back in formation. That accent was so bad I ain't even gonna say anything about it. Don't nobody talk like that. People might talk like that in some weird place, like...Tasmania, maybe."

No one got out of step, and the pace kept getting faster, "THUMP thump, THUMP thump, THUMP thump, every left jump boot coming down harder than the right one to keep time. Sometimes it sounded like kettle drums and percussion taking over a movement in a symphony, but most of the time it sounded like the drums the old Legions used when they marched over their enemies. The team ran in four columns, three men in each column--twelve men in tight formation.

"I'll double-time down Tu Do Street, Kill more Cong than I can eat, Ha! Here we go, all the way...."
Running with the team was like being one of the bricks in a flying wall that could crush anything that opposed it, miles of slamming that left jump boot down, running beyond endurance, not through knowing, but through the assumption held so long and confirmed with each thump of that high-topped, spit-shined paratrooper boot that it was never even put into words, certainly never questioned, that none of them would ever die.

M/Sgt. Polk yelled back over his shoulder. "Hey, Quinn. I take it back. Probably some people talk that way in California."

Hanson eased his pace, watching one of the small hawks that can hover against the offshore winds. The hawk's wings and splayed tail feathers quivered like a paper kite as it held in one spot, searching for movement in the seagrass. As Hanson slowed to a walk, the wedge-shaped bird tipped one wing, tucked his talons, took the wind and was gone.

Hanson walked halfway up the hill, and lay down in the waist-high grass. He tore a crescent piece from one of the broad blades, and put it in his mouth. It tasted of sea salt. He bit into it and the saltiness gave way to bitter juice. Hanson thought of the two tastes as a fragile sandy brown suddenly covered by a thick wipe of dark green.

There was a rustling in the grass, and he cut his
eyes toward the sound. Something was moving toward
him, not a field mouse or thrush, something much bigger
than that. Tips of grass dipped and popped back up as
it moved.

A badger pulled himself out of the grass, his
head weaving strangely from side to side, and started
across the little clearing Hanson had beaten down. He
staggered into Hanson's foot, then lurched on out of
the clearing.

Hanson rose slowly, wondering what was wrong with
the normally vicious animal, thirty pounds of muscle,
teeth, and claws that even bears go out of their way
to avoid. Hanson had read about one species of badger
that was the only known animal, except man, known to
kill for no apparent reason. Not for food, nor defense,
but out of some sort of anger or simple ruthless joy.
"He is a puzzle to scientists," the article had said.
Hanson smiled as he recalled the phrase, and followed
behind the badger as it floundered through the grass.
Clusters of swollen ticks hung like dusty grapes from
the badger's neck and throat.

Hanson ran to the cottage for a pair of heavy
leather gloves, and found the badger again. Weak from
loss of blood and the toxic anti-coagulant ticks pro-
duce to keep blood flowing, the badger looked up at
Hanson and hissed. All his teeth were fangs. An animal
with teeth like that has no fear, no mercy, and no regret, thought Hanson.

Hanson held him down with his left hand and began pulling the ticks off, carefully working them loose so as not to leave the head in the badger. One by one, he pulled them out of the brown fur, their tiny black heads and pincers flailing blindly, and squeezed them between his thumb and forefinger, slowly, till they popped. When he'd removed them all, the glove was sticky with black blood, pale shards of burst bodies, and scattered everywhere like seeds from crushed berries, the black flesh-boring heads of ticks, still alive, and groping for purchase on the heavy leather glove.

The cottage was chilly and damp. She was in the bedroom reading. Though it was getting dark, she still wore the grey-tinted wire rim glasses. She had a handsome though somewhat sharp-featured face. She was wearing a long dress and hand knit shawl. Everything about her—the tasteful, expensive-looking clothes, her calm voice and easy logic, reflected a life in which there had always been plenty of money, and time, and room to move away from anything unpleasant. She had spent the summer at an artist's colony in Taos, where a woman aura balancer read her Tarot. "You will always have many young lovers," the woman told her.
Her husband, a college English teacher in Pittsburgh, sent her a check every two weeks. She wrote poetry, short competent poems that went nowhere, composed of soft vowels and casual speculation. Hanson had gone home with her one night two months before when he'd been drunk, and had been living with her ever since.

The money he'd saved in 'Nam was gone. He'd drunk it up, given it away, spent it on airplane tickets and hotel rooms. The cottage had been good at first. He'd been glad to be away from the cities where there was too much noise, too many people who talked too much and got in his way. In cities he'd provoke fights with strangers whose faces he couldn't recall, for reasons he didn't remember, and find himself sobering up on a bus or plane trying to remember what he'd done. If it did come back to him, he'd try to forget again, glad to be clear and not in jail. Two assault charges, one in Denver, the other in Palo Alto, were by now gathering dust in the "suspended" files of the two police departments, the "SUSPECT INFORMATION" boxes empty except for the words, "MALE, CAUCASIAN, 5'10", 150#, MEDIUM LENGTH BROWN HAIR, DARK JACKET, LEVIS." Another box on the police form asked, "WEAPON/FORCE USED", and was filled in, "HANDS/TO HIT, FEET/TO KICK."

It had been better since the cottage. He'd begun
to watch himself, watch for the signs and avoid people when he felt it coming on. The Northwest winter rains were beginning though, things seemed to be closing in, and the omens were plainly unfavorable.

Hanson cleaned the ashes out of the Franklin stove, even sweeping it clean of soot. He stuffed newspaper under the grate, carefully laid Xs of small kindling, crossed and interlocked sticks of larger kindling on top of that, balanced two wedges of dry fir on top, and touched it off.

The paper flared, burning away a full-page ad for power mowers, the kindling caught, and in a minute the big chunks of fir were flaming. The logical progression always pleased him. A slow controlled explosion.

Then she was in the room talking about her weekend, another encounter group "mini-marathon", two days without sleep in a geodesic dome back up in the redwoods, with twenty other people and the group leader, "Jonathon".

"God, it was fantastic. Really. Something very real happened this time, places opened, you could feel the space open. Really."

She laughed, took a drag on her cigarette, and flung her arms wide, her shawl swirling gracefully.

"It was real. Surrounded by people attacking me
because they cared about me...as me. Then that space opened and it was full of support, sharing with them, getting in touch with ourselves and our feelings. Like...even if I don't like someone, that's fine because it opens things up for honesty.

There I was the first afternoon, everyone watching, and Jonathon asks me, 'What do you feel?'

She was smoking furiously now.

"And I thought, and said, 'nothing. I feel nothing real.' And Jonathon just smiled—he has such a wonderful supportive smile—and he said, 'We hear what you're saying, and that's how we begin to really feel, by admitting that we feel nothing.'"

As he turned to go into the kitchen, Hanson said, "Jonathon really wants to get into your britches, really."

He walked through the kitchen door, and a cluster of earwigs broke like half a sunburst, fanning out as they ran for safety behind the sink.

Hanson spoke to the dark space between the sink and the wall, "Nice maneuver, earwigs. Effective and precise, I've got to give you credit."

The cottage was infested with earwigs, and Hanson didn't like them, but he felt that since they had been there before he'd moved in, they had as much right to stay as he did.
He did like the snails that had invaded the cottage when the winter rains began. He kept track of their slow, sure movement across the windows and redwood walls. When they found their spot they sealed off the edges of their shells. Scattered across the walls, they looked like little knots of muscle pulling the house tight. Even in the heaviest rain the cottage no longer leaked as it had before they'd come. Their shells were all slightly different, striated earth colors, creams and browns, very delicate. She had wanted to put them back outside, but even being careful, trying to gently slide them off the wall after they had sealed off, the shells cracked and they died. Hanson had told her to leave them alone. He had been better since the cottage, and the snails held the cottage together.

Hanson glanced in to see how the fire was, and suddenly smiled.

"Really real, really real, oh really really really really really ree-al," he sang. He turned, and looking through the empty doorway into the empty kitchen, smiled, nodded his head, and said in a hearty salesman's voice, "Hi, I'm Hanson. If your encounter card isn't already filled, I'd like to spill my guts to you. If you don't mind, sir.

Really? That's awfully supportive of you, sir."
Hanson looked in the cupboard where he kept his wine glass, but it wasn't there. His wine drinking glass was a tall thin jelly jar with fluted sides and a flaw running from lip to base like a transparent scar. He looked in the sink and through the other cupboards.

"Where's my glass?"

Reaching farther back in the cupboard, he knocked a dime-store coffee mug off its hook with his elbow. The heavy white mug dropped harmlessly to a shelf.

"God damn!"

White dust and slivers of glass burst from the far wall.

"Where's my fucking glass!"

He burst through the bedroom door as if an enemy was waiting for him. She was lying on the bed reading an orange paperback with the title, "ATLANTIS: The Third Eye?" in block letters on both covers.

"You really are childish sometimes," she said coolly.

He slapped the book out of her hands and it flapped across the room into the wall. "That's right. I'm one childish son of a bitch." He turned and drove his fist through the cheap hollow-core door, gashing his hand.

He smiled at her, and asked in a pleasant voice, "Well now, that was even more childish, wasn't it?"
His voice hardened, "Wasn't it?" he asked. "Isn't that right?"

He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her.
"Right? Say it. Right. You goddamn well better say it. Say it now!"

She said the word, "Right," and he let go of her.
"Right. That's right. Absolutely. Right. Aren't you pleased that we were able to clear that up? And you don't know anything! Nothing!" he yelled, splintering the door again, then again, "Nothing!"

He stepped back from the ruined door, out of breath, and stood looking at his bloody hand.
"I know that I'm tired of your moods and rages," she said softly.
"So am I, lady."

Hanson sat with his face close to the fire, drunk on Red Mountain wine. He thought how fire was like the ocean, colors changing and flowing into one another. The fire was hot on his face, and the lump on the bridge of his nose throbbed, still tender where it had been broken when a Gypsy Joker sucker punched him in a Palo Alto bar. The iced white wine made his chipped tooth ache. He'd gotten that in a fight with a black staff sergeant, a fight that had grown out of a drunken argument about what Hanson had called the "realities"
of integration.

The crescent scar over his right eye seemed to pull tight. An old friend had thrown a full Budweiser across the kitchen at him, the lip of the can splitting the skin. It had been a party for one of her visiting poets, a man in his forties who still wrote about "the revolution", lines like "Be warned, amerika, your friends/enemies wait to bring you down."

The cut had bled a lot, down over his eye, the blood dripping from his chin. Hanson had cupped his hands and caught the blood, lapping it up like tap water, laughing crazily. He spotted a pretty graduate student, her face smooth and perfect. She had on jeans, hiking boots, and a patched work shirt. She was looking at him in horror, and Hanson realized how gory he looked, the whole side of his face washed in blood from the small cut. "Hey, momma. Hey, my little alternative life-style dumpling," he'd said as he walked toward her, fixing her with a stare from his bloody eye. He snatched her by the hair, bent her head back and gave her a bloody wet kiss full on the mouth, forcing his tongue between her lips. She broke loose and vomited, running for the door.

Now, sitting in front of the fire, Hanson thought, "A person's scars are a dossier of his dealings with the world." He smiled, pleased with the phrase.
He passed out in front of the fire, sweat on his face, dreaming that he was on a hillside in Vietnam, taking a break in the mid-day heat. Beads of sweat like green flies slipping down his neck, fire rustling like elephant grass. He could feel the web-gear harness across his left shoulder, and the compact machine-gun under his right knee. If anything happened he could be up and running with all his gear, sprinting the first few yards in his sleep.

It was winter, the tourists were gone, and the tidal pools were healing after being trampled and picked over by the summer people who clogged the roads with their campers and "rec-vees".

Hanson stepped carefully from rock to rock, crouching, squatting occasionally to study one of the clear basins; starfish, green and purple spiked anemone, small striped fish flashing in the shadows. Pieces of abalone shell shifted and turned in the currents, one side like an old scab, the other side a smooth pearly blue.

Someone watching from the bluffs might have thought he was studying a map, shifting from one leg to the other, inclining his head, studying a highway map for the best route, the fastest, the most scenic, one that would take him through a particular town perhaps. Han-
son was looking for what he called "clues", some pattern in the tidal pool that might explain something, or part of something, might hint at what he should do, or forecast an event. The patterns and movements of larger masses; the ocean, wind in the grass, the quality of the light, hawks and clouds, he called them omens. They were no more or less important than clues, but one studied them differently. Omens moved around and over you, they came and went suddenly, and one could only hope to realize their meanings before they were gone. They could not be studied like tidal pools.

He found a shark's tooth in the sand, a big one, shaped like an arrowhead. Its edges were serrated. The body of the tooth was a glossy dappled grey. The root, the part that had pulled somehow from the shark's jaw, was wedge-shaped, a thick wing, porous, the color of driftwood. Hanson examined it. The tooth was flawless, not a crack or chip in it. He placed it carefully back in the depression in the sand where he'd found it.

On his way back to the bluffs he stopped to watch a seagull peck at the white eye of a large fish head. The head was thick and grey, set in the sand like a lead maul.

The gull pecked mechanically, without malice or relish. He'd tear off a small scrap of eye, tip his
head back to swallow, then peck some more. Hanson walked toward the fish head and the gull sidewardlled to the edge of the surf, fixing Hanson fearlessly with its bright black eye.

The fish had a heavy low-slung jaw. Hanson prodded the mouth open with the toe of his blue track shoe. The jaw flanges were thick with pearly mucous and gave way slowly. Inside were perfect rows of needle-like teeth.

Hanson sat down on an outcropping of rock and looked out to sea. On the horizon a big sea-going tug was towing the hulk of an old freighter north, to the scrapyard up the coast. The freighter had no king posts nor booms, no bridge nor wheelhouse, and it rode high in the water. It was too far to see the tow lines. The freighter seemed to be stalking the tug, maimed and blind, neither gaining nor falling behind.

"Ah," Hanson said, smiling, "the omens are many and confusing this night," thinking of Mr. Minh, his Montagnard interpreter, who had taught him about omens. Mr. Minh's teeth had been filed to points and capped in gold with star-shaped jade inlays. Mr. Minh wore a small amulet around his neck that could keep any bullet from piercing his body.

It was getting on towards dusk when Hanson started back toward the cabin. The gull was still pecking tire-
lessly at the fish head. The lighthouse out on the point winked.

The pile of snails was just outside the back door. They were dying, but still trying to move. Their shells were split and torn like thumbnails, and they grated softly against one another, whispering to Hanson. In the dim light, the pile of snails looked like a single dying creature, its pulse weakening as the snails moved more slowly, and then not at all. Hanson had heard what it whispered to him.

She was sitting at a folding table, writing. As she took a drag off one of the long thin cigarettes, he kicked the table over, catapulting paper, books, and half a cup of tea against the wall. He slapped the cigarette out of her mouth, and then, very deliberately, put one hand on her chest, pushing her and the chair over backwards.

"Don't move," he said.

She was in an awkward position, her legs straddling the back of the chair, braced on one arm, about to scramble back and away from him.

"Don't. Fucking. Move."

He kicked the chair away and stood over her. "Don't you ever fuck with the snails again. They know what they're doing, damnit. They pull their shell
along till they find the place they're supposed to be. They know where it is when they find it, and they stop there and seal off. You start fucking around with shit like that—they been around for a million years, they survived cause they know when to stop and seal off and when to move—you fuck around with patterns, with constants, don't you see." He put his foot on her chest. "Don't you see..." She nodded her head. "...and that is when the bad shit begins."

The tavern, "The Uncommon Good", was crowded and noisy, all the regular winter people were there. Commune hippies in bib overalls were nursing their beers. There were people who ran the boutiques and craft shops, students and teachers at the small but well-financed art center. Always there were a few women, in their thirties and early forties, who had a desperate enthusiasm about everything. They made weekly trips to the post office to pick up checks sent by their husbands during their trial separations.

The kid had a pitcher of beer and a glass in his hands, looking for a place to sit down. He was Hanson's height, but thinner and several years younger. His hair was light brown and shoulder length. He was wearing a brown satin cowboy shirt embroidered with roses, levis, and a wide belt with a big silver buckle. The
buckle had a tractor trailer stamped on it. The only empty chair was at Hanson's table. The kid walked over to it.

"Anybody usin' this chair?" he asked.

Hanson stared straight ahead as if he hadn't heard.

The kid stood there.

Hanson looked up at him, a neutral, almost benign expression on his face, then looked past him. "Nobody's using it."

The kid just stood there.

"It's okay," Hanson said, "Go ahead and sit down. But can't take a hint just took on a new reality for me."

The kid, who had started to sit down, stood back up, spilling some beer. "Look," he said, "I'm sorry, man, if you're into something, I didn't mean..."

"No, it's okay, gypsy cowboy, siddown, I'm not into anything. Sit down! I'm almost out of beer. Pour me a beer."

Hanson drained his glass and held it out for the kid to fill. "See," he told the kid, "I learned this trick, somewhere. You're on a bus, right, and there are two empty seats, one of them next to you. And here comes some big fat woman with a bunch of shopping bags, here she comes now, dragging all her shit up the aisle.
Or it's a wino who stinks, and is gonna tell you what a great guy he was in the old days. Or some pimply-faced PFC home on leave, wearing his baggy uniform with his pants tucked into his boots, all his friends moved away or married. All through basic training he's been thinking how great it's gonna be to come home, and after two days of it he wants to go back to the barracks.

Here they come now, the woman grunting and sweating, the wino sucking his teeth, the PFC tripping over his boots, feeling self-conscious and out of place, all headed right for that empty seat next to you. And you don't want them to sit there. Nooooo, you can do without that. So what you do, see, is just stare straight ahead, not at anything in particular, what you call a 'thousand yard stare', and keep thinking, 'stay away, stay away,' and they'll go past every time. They'll stand up before they'll sit next to you."

"Maybe the lady is tired," the kid began, "the PFC could tell me about the army. The wino might have a story."

"Maybe. Maybe fat lady should stay home instead of spending money on stuff she doesn't need. The PFC isn't gonna tell you the truth about the army, he's gonna lie to make himself look good. All winos have the same story; 'It's a hell of a life, kid.' If only
I was your age again, whole life ahead of me, coulda been something."

Hanson gripped the table and glared at the kid, "Coulda been something," he shouted, "maybe, huh?"

People at other tables looked over.

"You know! Don't ya. Huh. Huh. Yeah, I know you. No maybe. I don't forget."

More people looked over. Hanson made a clumsy grab at the kid, and the kid jumped back, knocking over his chair.

"Yah," Hanson growled, "Dirt son a bitch. Oughta kill ya!"

Hanson started laughing, "That's the wino story. Starts out telling you a lot of lies, then forgets where he is, thinks you're somebody else, somebody who fucked him over once, an' you got a goddamn madman next to you."

"Thanks for the beer," Hanson called after the kid who was edging up the stairs to the second floor of the tavern.

Hanson ordered another beer and carried a chair to the back of the room, setting it down in a narrow space between the jukebox and the doorframe opening to the stairs. He rocked on the back legs of the chair, rhythmically, lightly thumping the back of his head
against the wall, holding the beer in his lap with both hands. He smiled. His back was to the wall and both sides were protected. He knew it was time to leave, but he planned to stay this time. He'd changed from the nylon track shoes into heavy work boots. In his hip pocket was a flat-handled lock-blade knife. The first three inches of the blade would curl the hair off the back of your hand, and lift a grey powder of dry skin. The last two inches were dull so he could pop the blade open with his thumb. A trick he'd learned from a merchant seaman in, where was it now...Mobile. Mean Mobile, Alabama, where a knife was called a "Mobile boxing glove".

"The secret to being a good knife fighter is...never let the other guy know you've got a knife until he's cut."

"If you do find yourself in a knife fight, you might as well plan on getting cut, but you decide where. Offer the other guy your left forearm, and while he goes for it, you can move inside and pick your spot."

"Even if he knows you've got a knife, keep it out of sight just behind your leg. That way he won't be able to kick it out of your hand, and when you move he won't be able to anticipate the angle of your lunge. Besides, it psyches a man, knowing you've got a knife
in your hand, but not being able to see it. Just that much more working for you."

Hanson couldn't recall where he'd learned those things: the merchant marine, Sgt. Foreman, Mr. Minh, Bubba? He'd never known Bubba's last name, the black mason's helper he'd worked with the summer before he went to college. Bubba always carried a case cutter, enough to leave a scar, but not enough to kill anybody and bring the police into it. Just another "social cutting" in niggertown. Where had he seen that nigger get his cheek laid open with a razor? Gorier than a white man. Smooth black skin peeling open, white underneath, and red muscle beneath that, the blood bright and startling against the black skin.

Hanson's eyes had begun to work independently. He closed one and watched people in the bar talking. He couldn't hear what they said though, the jukebox drowned them out, singing about Colorado. Colorado, where the mountains were being cut down into freeways and oil shale, Aspen and Vail, where college kids wore climbing boots and day packs into bars where beer was $1.00 a bottle.

The jukebox paused, whirred, another song began:

"You got yer army an' yer C.I.A...
I got my rainbow an' a sunny day,
You gotta boogie-woogie,
You gotta boogie-woogie..."
Hanson bought another beer and went upstairs. There were two pool tables and a pinball machine in the room. The kid was playing with three other guys in their twenties. The leader seemed to be the one wearing a tee-shirt. It was too cold for just a tee-shirt, but his big arms and chest showed through the thin cotton.

"Vanity before comfort," Hanson thought, "He goes first."

One of them was wearing a plaid shirt, jeans, and logger boots, sixty dollar logger's boots. He didn't look like a logger.

The third one had shoulder-length blond hair, and was wearing a gold ring in his left ear. He had on a denim vest with silver studs across the back, and a wide leather watch-band with three buckles.

A twelve-year-old boy was playing the pinball machine that rang and chattered as Hanson pulled a chair over to a corner where he could watch the whole room.

The boy was good. He knew just how much he could shove and knee the machine before it would shut off on "TILT". The machine was called "ROUND UP", one of the old kind that fires silver ball-bearings with a spring-loaded plunger. Pink plastic flippers, like little stubs of amputated limbs, twitched as if stung, and
batted at the ball as it rolled past. When the ball dropped into one of the holes, the machine would shudder, big-breasted cowgirls etched in the glass would flicker with light, and the box score would add up with mechanical grunts.

The boy had already gotten two free plays when the one in the tee-shirt yelled at him, "Hey, that's enough of that noise. You're fucking up my game. Take off."

The boy looked up from the machine.
"Yeah, you got it. Take off. Now."

The boy left, his two games unplayed.

Hanson sipped his beer and tapped his foot to the jukebox below. The Gypsy Cowboy kid smiled and said to the one in the tee-shirt, "Frank, you're shootin' so bad tonight nothin' could hurt it."

"Hey, punk, when I want your opinion I'll stomp it out of you, okay?"

The other two laughed.
"You got that," Frank said.
"Yeah. Okay. I didn't mean anything."
"Then don't say anything."

Hanson was drunk. The pool table looked like a smooth green parallelogram, and this made the rebound of the balls, the physics of the game all the more interesting. While he watched the players he idly rolled
a cue ball along the top of his leg. He tapped his foot to the music, and sang softly to himself, "...I got my rainbow and a sunny day." He smiled broadly, like a person who is about to buy something that he has waited and saved a long time for.

The one in the tee-shirt was bent over the table, lining up a shot. Hanson walked casually over, as if to watch, and side-armed the cue ball just below his ear. He fell sideways, sweeping a mug of beer off the table, his stick clattering across the floor. The cue ball seemed to stick to his jaw for a moment, then fell to the floor and rolled under the table. Where the cue ball had struck there was now a shallow round depression slowly turning from white to red. Hanson didn't see this. He'd felt the jaw go when he palmed the ball into it, and he knew that the one in the tee-shirt was through for the night. He was already turning towards the plaid shirt who stood facing him, holding his cue stick at an awkward port arms, feet braced wide. Hanson kicked him between the legs and took the stick from him as he fell.

The one in the biker outfit swung his cue stick, but Hanson saw it coming and it glanced off his arm. Hanson snatched a striped ball from the table and threw it at him. The ball hit him high in the chest, and when he flinched Hanson snapped his pool cue into the
wide watch-band. The man dropped his stick and stumbled back, holding his wrist.

"Why..." he began.

"The omens, shithead. The fucken omens, that's why. Somebody had to pay tonight. For everything."

Hanson drove the butt of the stick into the vee of the man's ribs, and he fell, making tight little "whoops" like someone throwing up.

The kid, the Gypsy Cowboy, hadn't moved, he stood staring at Hanson, half a glass of beer in his hand.

Hanson smiled at him, laid down the cue stick, and thumped the heel of his hand a few times on the rubber bumper of the pool table. "Good," Hanson said to the kid, "just don't move too much. Be cool, and you will be okay. Finish your beer. Drink up, drink up, my man."

The kid drank down the beer, watching Hanson over the edge of the glass.

"Set it down," Hanson told him. The kid set the glass down on the pool table.

"Now...you too may wonder why I did what I just did."

The one Hanson had kicked was groaning and pulling himself around on the floor, in a circle, like a crippled bug. "Whoops," Hanson said to the kid, "don't move now." He waited until the one on the floor pulled
himself a little further around, studying him like a piece of defective machinery. He cocked his knee back slightly, then snapped it straight, sending his heel into the man's jaw. "Boogie-woogie, sucker." The movement stopped.

"Now...let's see. Oh yes. The reason. The reason. I don't know. I just get mad sometimes. No, I'm mad most of the time. I think I wake up mad, every morning. Ordinarily I do not trust myself to get drunk in public places. Well, you see what happens."

"Anyway, don't move now, or make any noise, and I won't hurt you, okay?"

The kid nodded.

"Do you believe me?" Hanson asked.

The kid looked at him, then nodded again.

"Good," Hanson said.

There was a quick metallic snap, and Hanson had the knife an inch from the kid's throat. "See, you just never can tell where things will come from. Now listen up. If you cut a man's throat below the larynx, the vocal cords don't you see, he can't make any noise. You take the carotid artery--it's strange, the guy keeps breathing through the hole in his neck, blowing like a bellows--and in a second he faints, and dies. But, you gotta have a sharp knife."

Hanson cut the buttons off the kid's shirt, popping
them off one by one, from top to bottom.

"The throat is pretty tough meat. Friend of mine always called it the 'e-so-fay-gus'. He's dead now, though.

"But that's pretty useless information, isn't it? Interesting, but useless," Hanson smiled.

"Getting cut doesn't even hurt if the knife is sharp enough." He laid open a three inch gash on the back of his own forearm, snapped the knife closed, and slipped it into his pocket. Blood seeped down the arm and in between the fingers.

"Well, I believe it's time for this old boy to move on. I think you best stay up here for a few minutes till I get gone. People are gonna be mad about all this. They will want to, uh, 'take me to task'. So you stay here, okay? If you don't, what with all this stuff I've taught you tonight, I'm gonna be pissed off, and I'll have to get you.

"Do you believe me?"

The kid nodded.

"Good. Bye-bye now," Hanson said, wiggling the fingers of his left hand at the kid, speckling him with blood.

It was a cool night, and the fog collected on Hanson's face like sweat as he walked the unlighted road. He began talking to himself, imitating the introductory
monologue on one of the dozens of blues records he'd left back home, a black blues singer who, when he'd died, had been living off money he made pumping gas in a Shell station outside of Jackson, Mississippi; "Mah name is Fred Mac-dowell. They calls me Mis-sippi Fred Mac-dowell, but mah home in Roys-ville, Tensee. But it don't make any diffance. It soun' good to me, an' I seem like I'm at home there when I'm in Mis-sippi. An' I do not play no rock an' roll, y'all. I just play the straight 'n' natchul blues."

The lighthouse on the point didn't blink. Through the fog he could see the edge of the light, anticipate it as it began to swing around. It would glow brightly for a moment, dispersed and indistinct as though it were behind frosted glass, then fade out and swing away.

Hanson stopped and watched the light.

Out beyond the surf a blowhole boomed and sighed with each wave, like a man who has stopped running for a moment to catch his breath and decide which direction to go.
ONE
A sheet of paper was tacked to the wall over Hanson's bunk. Two statements were typed on the paper:

"EVERY DAY IN THE WORLD 100,000 PEOPLE DIE. A HUMAN LIFE MEANS NOTHING."

--General Vo Nguyen Giap
(Brilliant tactician, and commander-in-chief of the North Vietnamese Army that defeated the French and American forces)

"IN ORDER TO DESPISE SUFFERING, TO BE ALWAYS CONTENT AND NEVER ASTONISHED AT ANYTHING, ONE MUST REACH SUCH A STATE AS THIS - AND IVAN DMITRICH INDICATED THE OBESE MUZHIK, BLOATED WITH FAT - OR ELSE ONE MUST HARDEN ONESELF THROUGH SUFFERINGS TO SUCH A DEGREE AS TO LOSE ALL SENSITIVITY TO THEM: THAT IS, IN OTHER WORDS, CEASE TO LIVE."

--Anton Chekhov

The two statements seemed to present a single question and conclusion that Hanson could never quite grasp. It was like trying very hard to remember something you've always known. Just when you think you may have it, you lose it completely.

Hanson stood just inside the heavy-timbered door of his concrete bunker, looking out. There was no moon yet. The teamhouse was a squat shadow, bigger and darker than the others. The only sound was the steady sobbing of the big diesel generators, but Hanson heard nothing. If the generators ever stopped he would have heard the silence, a silence that would have bolted him wide awake, armed, and out of his bunk.

He stepped from the doorway and began walking across the inner perimeter towards the teamhouse. His
web-gear, heavy with ammunition and grenades, swung from one shoulder like easy thoughtful breathing. The folding-stock Ak-47 in his right hand was loaded with a gracefully curving 30-round magazine. It looked like a huge science-fiction pistol.

As he got closer to the teamhouse he could feel the drums and steel-stringed bass guitar on the back of his sunburned forearms and the tender broken hump on his nose. Then he could hear it.

Hanson smiled. "Stones," he said softly. He didn't have enough to pick out the song, but the bass was pure Stones.

He slid the heavy light-proof door open, and stepped into the bright teamhouse. Jagger was raving from the huge Japanese speakers, "Under my thumb... under my thumb's the squirming dog who's just had her day...under my thumb..."

Quinn was pouting and strutting to the music, one hand hooked in his pistol belt, the other hand thrust out, thumb down, like Caesar at the Roman games, sending the pike into another crippled loser. His small blue eyes were close-set, cold and flat as the weekly casualty announcement.

Hanson shrugged his web-gear to the floor, shouted, "Let me guess," and pressed his hand to his forehead.

He pointed at Quinn and shouted, "Mick Jagger,
"right?" The snub-nosed .357 magnum pistol glinted from its shoulder holster when Hanson raised his arm.

"Wrong, Chump," Quinn shouted back, still pounding the floor like a clog dancer. "Andy Williams. Stick around. Maybe you can catch me when I do Moon River."

The refrigerator looked like a huge battered bomb. It was turned up to "HIGH" in the damp heat, and gouts of frost dropped to the floor when Hanson opened it to get a Black Label beer. The seams and lip of the black and red can were rusty from the years it had been stockpiled on the Da Nang docks. Years of raw monsoon and swelling summer heat had turned it bitter, but it was cold. It made his fillings ache when he drank it.

On top of the refrigerator was a flesh-colored half-gallon jar. Hanson opened it and took out two of the green-and-white amphetamine capsules. He knocked them back with the icy beer.

"Beats coffee for startin' your day," he thought.

He smiled, recalling the double-time marching chant back at Ft. Bragg, "Airborne Ranger, Green Beret, this is the way we start our day," running the sandhills every morning before dawn. There'd been the rumor that one team had run over a PFC from a supply unit who had been drunkenly crossing the road in front of them. The whole team had run over him and left him dead behind, still chanting, every other time their
left jump boot hit the ground, "Pray for way, Pray for war, Pray for war..."

He sat down on one of the big wooden foot-lockers and began paging through the *Time* magazine that had come in on the last mail chopper.

The Stones finished *Under My Thumb*, paused, and began *Mother's Little Helper*. Quinn turned the volume down and walked over to Hanson. He moved with an ominous deliberation, like a man carrying nitroglycerin. People got uncomfortable if he got too close, or moved quickly.

"Keeping up with current events, my man?"

"Yessir. I think it's important for the soldier in the field to have some overview of the world situation. Don't you?"

"Absolutely. How's the war going?"

"Poorly. Our South Vietnamese allies, and even our fellow Americans out there in the...regular army are getting their asses kicked by godless commies who are, no doubt, drugged whenever they go into battle. On the home front," Hanson said, licking his thumb and paging through the magazine.

"Tip of the iceberg, Quinn. The war now, gunships, ambushes, arclights, dead folks, it's having a tremendous psychological and economic impact back on the home front. Let's not lose sight of that, huh. Take this
young man, a 'Cornell Senior', it says here, 'I'm nervous as hell. I finally decide on a field--economics--and then I find I'm number 59 on the draft lottery.'

"Huh? Lotta people over here say they don't know what they're fighting for. By God, I'm fighting so that young man can go to graduate school and study economics. And so you can become an executive trainee when you get back. Undereducated veterans like you can get extra money from the GI Bill for tutoring. Have your own drive-in branch bank."

Hanson kept thumbing through the magazine, singing softly, "...mah candy man, he's come an' gone. Mah candy man he's come an' gone, an' I love ever'thing in this godomighty worl', God knows I do..."

To the west, a heavy machinegun was firing, the distant pounding as monotonous as an assembly-line machine. "POM POM POM POM. POMPOMPOMPOMPOMP. POM POM POM..." Artillery was going in up North. Three guns were working out. They were good, the rounds going in one on top of the other, each explosion sounding like a quick, violent wind, the sound your firestarter makes when you touch off the charcoal grill. Normal night sounds. Hanson read the ads. "...'There's a Ford in your future...Sure, I switched around, but I came back to taste...Tired of diet plans that don't work?'.."

Quinn started laughing. "Then come to Vietnam and
get twenty pounds blown off your ass."

A short wiry man came into the teamhouse. He wore round wire-rim glasses and looked like Wally Cox.

"Silver," Hanson yelled. He almost yelled, "How much weight did you lose on the Vietnam diet plan?" but changed his mind. Silver had lost half his team and his partner was in Japan with no legs. Instead, Hanson asked him, "How's the hole in your ass?"

"I like it a lot. Thinkin' about getting one on the other side. Symmetry, you know. Dimples? A more coordinated limp."

"How long you gonna be on stand-down?"

"Couple weeks. I'll fake it a little longer if I have to. Captain says he's gonna try and get Anadon up here from the "C" team for my partner. I don't want to go out with some new guy."

"...candy man, he been here an' gone. Well I wish I was down in New Orleens, God knows I do."

"An' look here," Hanson said, holding up the *Time* magazine. "President visiting the troops."

Silver had only a slight limp when he walked over. He looked at the two-page color picture spread.

"Shit," he said, then started to laugh, "after they fixed me up, but before they said I could go home. The *troops* down there. . ." He said the word with obvious contempt, "spent three weeks building wooden
cat-walks around all the guns so the Prez wouldn't get his feet muddy. 'Course they weren't able to use the guns for fire missions all that time. They issued the troops brand new starched fatigues an hour before he was due, and made 'em stand around like at parade rest so they wouldn't get wrinkled.

"The Prez gets there, and they start processing these dumb-ass GIs past him, and he, like asks 'em, 'Hi, son, and where are you from?'

"The GI says, 'uh...Mason City. Iowa, sir.'

(Silver knew that Quinn was from Mason City.)

"The Prez says, 'Beautiful state, Iowa.' Then he gives the guy a big handshake and says, 'I just wanted to personally let you know, private, uh...'

"'Private Schmuck, sir,' he says, and turns so the Prez can see his name tag, but there ain't no name tag 'cause somebody forgot to put out the word that nametags had to be sewn on the new fatigues. Some supply officer's military career is over," Silver said, laughing.

"Anyway, the Prez says, 'I just personally wanted to let you know, Private Schmuck, that you boys...'

Silver started to laugh again. "Bunch of blacks standing around me. They all start sayin', 'Boy? You boys? That Honky motherfucker best not be talkin' 'bout boys, one of the brothers up there.'

"'...that you boys are doing one heck of a job, and
you can bet that the people back home are mighty thank­ful for our fighting men in the field. And your Presi­dent is doing his best to get you boys back home soon.'

"I memorized the speech. I just sat there with my hands in my lip, man..."

"Skinny Buddah with a 7.62 dimple in the cheek of his ass," Quinn interrupted.

"I was afraid to leave. I was afraid to move, man. I wouldn't have gone within a hundred feet of that fucker. That was Mr. Death standin' up there shakin' hands. They had gunships flying patterns I couldn't fuckin' believe. Then you got MPs all over, trying to look sharp, nervous and trigger-happy as hell. And these guys, man. All around the Prez. Skin-head haircuts, mirror shades so you can't see their eyes, eyeballin' everything. They didn't look...rational, you know? And they were all packing Uzis on assault slings under their coats. Anything move too fast, or the wrong way, it would've got shot eight hundred times."

Silver looked at the wrist-watch hanging through the button hole of his breast pocket, "Better get down and take the radio watch," he said. "End of the month. Gonna be clearing artillery grids all night. They gotta blow up what's left of the old monthly allotment. I know there's some logic somewhere."

He took a coke out of the refrigerator, then
turned. "Hey, you guys want anything blown up? 5th Mech's set up a new firebase. Got everything—155s, 175s, 8-inch. Play you a tune and plow the ground."

"How about that ridge?" Hanson asked Quinn.

Quinn nodded.

"Yeah, you know, 'bout eight klicks North."

"The one where Charles ate up that company of dumbshit 5th Mech?"

"Yeah. Might as well put a little shit on that. South side, kinda walk it from the valley half-way up the side."

"Okay," Silver said. "You fuckers better get some kills now. I mean some confirmed kay-eye-As.

Silver went down into the underground, concrete-reinforced radio bunker, and relieved Vyers. He sat at a small desk surrounded on three sides by banks of radios, some of them as big as filing cabinets. They all hummed slightly, at different pitches. They radiated heat like a closed stove door. Silver spent his first few minutes studying "call signs", code names for different units and firebasees. The call signs were composed by computers each month, such things as "inside packs", "formal granite", or "recent voice". At times, the nonsense combinations seemed ominous, and units were glad when they were changed.
Silver would be giving artillery units permission to fire into areas contained in the map on his desk. There was always a lot at the end of the month. If a unit didn't use up all of its month's allotment, they would not receive as much ammunition the following month, the logic being that they didn't need as much if they didn't use it.

His glasses flashing in the dim yellow and blue dial-lights, Silver looked demonic, his face the strange color of someone already dead.

Mr. Minh walked into the teamhouse, smiling. All his teeth had been filed to points, as was the custom of the Rhade Montagnard tribes, but his were capped in gold with jade inlays the shapes of stars and crescent moons. He was the Montagnard team-leader. The gold and jade caps were a sign of wealth and respect, and they were part of his magic. He had high cheekbones and quick black eyes, bright with pride and courage, and the joy that a trooper might have seen for an instant in the eyes of an Apache driving in with a knife thrust.

His shoulder-length hair was tied back with a piece of green parachute nylon. He was wearing striped Tiger fatigues, and his Stable-gear was hung with grenades and ammo pouches.
Mr. Minh wore a small amulet, a "Katha", around his neck, that Old Chicken Man had prepared for him. It could keep any bullet from piercing his body. Once Hanson had asked him, "Mr. Minh, I have seen Rhade KIA, and they were wearing Katha. How can this be?"

Mr. Minh thought a moment, shrugged, and said, "Bad Katha."

Mr. Minh knew that he would die someday, and he had no fear of death. If he lived well and fought bravely, he would be reborn as a hawk, or a hill-spirit, or a tiger. All life was the same. Death meant nothing.

"We are ready, Sar," Mr. Minh said to Hanson.

"Okay, Mr. Minh. Maybe ten minutes."

When he went back out the door, Hanson could see the shadows of the three other stocky "yards". Their foreheads and weapons flickered in the starlight like a school of piranha in a dark river.

Quinn was checking his gear. Jagger had launched into Sympathy for the Devil, and Quinn had cranked the volume back up.

"...I rode a tank, held a General's rank,
When the Blitzkrieg rained,
And the bodies stank.
Pleased to meet you..."

Hanson began a last-minute equipment check, more of a confidence ritual than anything else. He'd gone through his AK-47 the day before, checking for worn or
broken parts while cleaning it. Then he'd test-fired one clip. He carried the Communist weapon rather than the M-16 because it sounded different when fired, used different color tracers, and would not give away his position in a fire-fight. Another reason was that they could not carry any U.S. equipment on illegal cross-border operations, lest it be found on their bodies and cause an "incident".

The Stable-gear looked much like a parachute harness. Wide suspenders hooked into a heavy, brass-grommeted pistol belt. Two pieces of nylon webbing ran from the front of the pistol belt, through the inside of the legs to the back of the pistol belt. Attached to the suspenders at the shoulders were two snap-links. A helicopter could hover a hundred and twenty feet in the air, drop nylon lines to attach to the snap links, and pull you out, leaving your hands free to fire or drop grenades. They could pull you out even if you were wounded and unconscious. Even if you were dead.

A man's Stable-gear was as distinctive and recognizable as his face. Each person carries different items where they are most comfortable for his weight and build, taping, snapping, and hooking it to the suspenders and pistol belt. After a while the gear begins to conform to his body, the green canvas begins to
"wear" like an old pair of Levis. Thirty to forty pounds of equipment are carried on the Stable-gear, and putting it on is like stepping into a very heavy overcoat.

Hanson carried four ammo pouches on the belt, three thirty-round clips in each pouch. On each clip was a tab of plastic tape he'd put on so the clips could be quickly pulled free. Every fourth round was a green tracer.

For this operation he carried two canteens, one of them at the small of his back, but knowing that it wouldn't slow down a bullet or grenade fragment enough to keep it from paralyzing him.

A third canteen cover held six fragmentation grenades that looked like green steel tennis balls.

On the front suspender straps he carried a huge "white phosphorous" grenade. He'd painted it flat black so it wouldn't reflect flare-light. It was an awful weapon, and he kept it loosely taped, ready for use. Below that was a smoke grenade, purple smoke. Hanson said, "Grape smoke is by far the most appealing." The smoke grenade was the size and shape of a beer can, and painted flat black. So was the can that held the bottle of blood expander, needle, and rubber IV-tube. A heavy-bladed sheath knife, compass, snap link.

His pill kit contained two morphine stiretes--
like tiny silver toothpaste tubes with needles on the end. Codeine and Darvon. Lomotil for diarrhea. You couldn't afford to have diarrhea on an ambush, prisoner snatch, or if you were running or hiding. Burn salve. Penicillin and tetracycline. Dex-amphetamine ("speed") for staying awake, appetite suppression, and for extra energy when you have to run.

He carried a score of other things in pockets and pouches. Around his neck he wore a small survival compass like a crucifix. In one thigh pocket, wrapped in plastic, having curved to the shape of his thigh, was a thirty-year-old copy of The Oxford Book of English Verse.

The ammo clips were jammed in the pouches with the bullets facing away from the body, in case an enemy bullet detonated them. At the bottom of each pouch was stuffed a plastic-covered pressure bandage. Printed in red on the plastic was a cartoon sequence showing how to unwrap the bandage and apply it. When opened, the bandage is the size of a paperback book, the words "OTHER SIDE AGAINST WOUND" printed in large red letters on the back.

Hanson threw on his Web-gear, put on his forty pound pack, picked up the AK, and tromped to the refrigerator. He dropped another cap of speed in his chest pocket, and stuck a Coke in his pack.
Quinn had his gear on. It was basically the same as Hanson's, except Quinn was carrying the radio. Hanson was carrying Quinn's food to help equal things out. Quinn carried a crude looking weapon that seemed to be made of sheet metal and steel tubing. In his huge hand, it looked like a cheap child's toy. It was a Swedish sub-machinegun with a built-in silencer. Quinn had glued felt to the face of the bolt to muffle the clicking of the firing mechanism. It could kill at a hundred yards, the bursts of fire sounding like someone nearby absently thumbing a deck of cards.

As they went out the door, Jagger was still singing,

"...Pleased to meet you,
Hope you guessed my name.
But what's puzzlin' you
Is the nature of my game,
Aw-right..."

The five dark forms crossed through the outer perimeter and headed west. Another heavy machinegun opened up in the distance, and the big red tracers floated gracefully, like glowing golf balls, across the sky. Scores of them hit a hillside and rebounded in random patterns.

Artillery rounds blinked silver and yellow and bluish-white against the mountains.

Hanson watched them, his eyes slightly dilated. "God damn, Quinn," he said, "it's always springtime in
Vietnam."

Before dawn, they would be across the border.

Most of the NCO clubs in Vietnam had plywood walls and a sheet-metal roof that kept out the rain, but not the heat or the stink of the piss-tubes out back.

The Special Forces NCO club looked like one wing of an exclusive mountain resort. The walls were stone. The bar was stone and hand-carved mahogany, and the big mirror was tinted a pleasant cool green. A huge green beret was set in the flagstone floor in thick glass bricks. The Special Forces crest was inset in Chrome and Brass. The club was air-conditioned, the Vietnamese bar maids were pretty, and Chivas was thirty cents a shot.

It was almost five and the bar was filling up. A group of "Non-Special Forces" people--clerks, radio men, and air force ("zoomies") technicians--kept to themselves at the end of the bar. Janis Joplin was wailing from the juke box, "...so comeoncomeonCOMEON-COMEON an' TAKE IT, YEOW! If it makesyoufeelgood..."

Only two soldiers in the bar were wearing camouflage fatigues. They had gotten off a chopper from the North only ten minutes before. Standing together at the slate-topped bar, they looked like two reflections of the same soldier. The baggy jungle fatigues
were mottled and striped to blend with the brush, the
dead browns and greens of healing bruises, or of a body
left too long in the sun. The backs of their hands were
cross-hatched with small scars, and blood crusted welts,
the fine blond hair had been burned back to brown stub­
ble over hurried cookfires, the hot yellow flame of
C-4 explosive. They both had an easy, tireless concen­
tration, like one soldier doubled so he could watch
everything at once.

But they were not at all alike.

Quinn was much bigger than Hanson. He was bigger
than anyone else in the bar. His features were small
and blunt as his eyes. It was a face that could take
a lot of damage and still function. He rarely smiled.
When he did smile it was not a comforting expression.

He'd been a linebacker in college, until he'd got­
ten into that last fight. During the fight, the crowd
had gathered, laughing, shouting, and making bets,
slowly quieted and then began to boo Quinn, who kept
working with the same cold rage that had filled him
when he chopped wood, or stacked bales of hay at his
father's farm, that drove him to study the dog-eared
textbooks full of useless facts that would get him off
the farm and into college, where five afternoons a week
and every Saturday he would trade blow for blow with
others like him for the entertainment of people like
those who were booing him in the dim yellow light just outside a college beer joint.

Suddenly Quinn had stepped back, let the semi-conscious man fall to the ground, kicked him once, viciously in the ribs, and walked away.

"That was the night," Quinn had told Hanson, "I realized I'd been doing shit I hated all my life. I hated the farm, I hated those god damn books, and I hated football. I didn't want to tackle those motherfuckers. I wanted to kill 'em.

"Of course, three months later, three months after I stopped hurting quarterbacks and ends as bad as I could, blindsiding running backs right out of the game, while those pudgy little assholes up in the stands held their wienies, and their beer, and their date's tit, three months later the army had my ass." Quinn almost smiled when he told that story.

Hanson smiled a lot. He often seemed to be debating something with himself; nodding his head, narrowing his eyes, smiling. At a glance, his eyes seemed full of humor, and they were. But if you did more than glance you found yourself looking a depth of humor that went on and on and got blacker and darker, and it was like peering down into an abandoned well and feeling the edge begin to crumble beneath your feet.

Hanson had a powerful chest and shoulders, thanks
to the way he walked, a cross between a bounce and a swagger. It made him look cocky. He was, but he would have changed his walk if he could have. He couldn't march. His drill Sergeant would scream, "HANSON! QUIT BOUNCIN' AN' MARCH. HANSON, YOU' FUCKIN' UP MY MILITARY FORMATION," he'd scream. Then he came up close to Hanson, who continued to march and stare straight ahead, and ask him in a fatherly voice, "Don't you like me, Hanson? Is that it? Is that why you're messin' up my military formation? Sergeant Collins told me that my military formation looks bad. Is that it? Don't you like me?

"I ASKED YOU A QUESTION, HANSON. DO YOU LIKE ME?"

"YES, DRILL SERGEANT."

"You LIKE me. YOU IN LOVE WITH ME YOU A FAGGOT YOU WANTA GIVE ME A BLOW JOB."

"NO, DRILL SERGEANT."

"NO. GET OUT HERE DROP FOR FIFTY AN' I WANNA HEAR YOU SOUND OFF LIKE YOU GOT A PAIR, HANSON."

Hanson would drop out of the formation and do fifty push-ups, "sounding off like he had a pair" with each one, "ONE THOUSAND, TWO THOUSAND, THREE THOUSAND..."

If he told the drill sergeant he didn't like him, he'd be screamed at, and do fifty push-ups. If he smiled when the drill Sergeant screamed, he'd be accused of thinking it was funny to fuck up the formation, and
do fifty push-ups. If he tried not to bounce, he looked worse, and the drill sergeant would say he looked like a monkey trying to fuck a football, or that he marched like he had a Baby Ruth bar up his ass, or he marched like some of the other faggots in the company had been butt fuckin' him.

For eight weeks he did at least a hundred push-ups a day. At the end of the eight weeks, he was the only man in the company who was given PFC stripes. When he was getting on the bus for Infantry training, the drill sergeant said, "Don't get your ass blown away, Hanson."

Hanson smiled. "Okay, Drill Sergeant."

After infantry training, airborne training, and Special Forces school, he'd spent eighteen months in Northern I-Corps pulling long range and cross-border recon missions without getting his ass blown away. He still smiled a lot, at things that didn't seem funny to most people. His sense of humor had adjusted well, along with his values and his instincts.

He was still alive. In two days he would be on his way home.

Quinn finished his Budweiser and looked at Hanson in the big bar mirror. "You'll be back..." he began.

"Do me a favor. Shoot me in the head when I step off the plane, okay? Save me the trouble of humpin' the hills waiting for Charles to do it."
"You'll be back. You know those killer guard-dogs the zoomies use to guard their airplanes, 'cause the dogs are tougher and smarter than their handlers? They don't let those dogs go back to the states, they just blow 'em away when they're through with them, 'cause they're just too...."

"Not bad, Quinn. A nice little analogy there. You have the makings of a poet. I don't read much poetry. It's mostly written by women and queers, and doesn't make much sense. I think you've got what it takes."

"Don't interrupt me again, little man, or you'll spend the first two months back home layin' in bed listening to your broken bones knitting. You're gonna sound just like a bowl of rice crispies if somebody listens real close."

Quinn cupped his ear and cocked his head.

"Before you start making violent threats against my person, Sgt. Quinn, sir, I think you ought to go out and recruit a little help."

The snub-nose .357 was pointing directly at Quinn's belt buckle. Hanson was holding it just below the bar. He was beaming. In a heavy accent, he said, "Hey. Gringo. Meet my fran's. The six bullet brothers. Estan poquito...uh, ees leetle mens, but ees very mean."

The pistol vanished, and Hanson continued, "I
always wanted to play a bandito in a movie, get to say shit like that."

"You dirty little bastard," Quinn said like a proud father, "where am I gonna find a new partner as good as you?"

"Nowhere."

Hanson wasn't quite average height. He wasn't exceptionally strong, or fast with his hands. He didn't know any Oriental fighting techniques. But he adapted quickly, and that is how some animals live on, while others die out. He learned how tough he could be, and how ruthless he had to be to survive outside of the tolerant, comfortable academic subculture of the mid-sixties, where "sensitivity" and "understanding" were, at least in theory, prime values. To survive in a world where there are people who will hurt you or kill you for no reason at all.

One night in Fayetteville, a "good old boy" weighing seventy pounds more than Hanson, threw him into a throbbing neon juke box. Threw him into it. He was wedged into the chrome, plastic, and shattered glass, and for just a second, Hanson almost laughed, thinking that it was like having been in a traffic accident with Dolly Parton and the impact had silenced poor Dolly in mid-song.
But then he pulled himself out of the wreckage, stacks of C&W .45s clattering behind him, some of them wheeling away across the dance floor. Hanson, trailing shards of red and blue plastic like sparklers, started for the good old boy.

That was when the good old boy lost the fight.
Not when Hanson, head down, was pumping quick lefts and rights into his belly and kidneys, braced and digging left-right like a machine. Not when his legs were swept out from under him and he hit the floor like a bag of brixment. It wasn't even when Hanson started putting the boots to him, playing a tune on his ribs.

It was when that good old boy saw Hanson pry himself out of the jukebox; when he realized that the only way he could stop that little sombitch was to kill him (and he didn't have his gun with him), and that little fucker didn't care about a thing in the world except kicking his two hundred-twenty pound peckerwood ass. It was then that his guts went flabby, and he just gave up and waited for it to happen and get it over with.

If you don't care about anything but winning, don't care about pain, don't even care about dying, you've already won the fight before the first blow falls.

"You gonna move to another town, then?" Quinn asked him. "From what you told me, if you hadn't gone
to 'Nam, people would have been shooting you there."

Hanson smiled. "True, I have had my problems in
the past with my good friends in the academic sub-
culture—an occasional show of temper, an ill-considered
liaison, diddling a faculty wife—but that's all over
now and forgiven.

"Liberal guilt, Quinn. I'm the only person they
know who's over here participating in this unjust war.
The only other people over here are rednecks, under-
educated, racist, politically naive—much like yourself,
Quinn—a burden we must bear. And...there are niggers
over here. Some of my friends back in America have
helped black youngsters in 'Head Start' or similar pro-
gams, given their time because they are concerned
liberals. Not just talkers, nosir, they got right down
there in the muck themselves. For several hours a
week. They know that the blacks have been fucked over
for three hundred years, and that is the reason they
conduct themselves in an otherwise unacceptable manner
at times. Like mau-mauing the pee out of good liberals
every chance they get. But it's okay, Quinn, it's okay.

"I'm over here. I'm an honorary nigger now, and
it's okay."

Hanson drank the last of his beer with a flourish,
laughed aloud, and said, "It's Oh-Kay!"

"Please, two more Budwi', Co," he called to the
bar maid.

"What makes you think you'll get along any better now?"

"I will make an effort. Okay, I'll watch myself closer. And," Hanson said, "no lies. If I just tell the truth, things will be simple."

Quinn laughed and spit out half a mouthful of beer. "I like that. That had to be in a movie. You dumb shit," Quinn said, grabbing Hanson, pinning his arms so he couldn't get to the pistol. "You know what those fuckers'11 do if you tell 'em the truth?" he whispered in his ear, "They'll lock you away." Quinn laughed like someone who's broken your legs and is walking toward you with a knife in his hands. "You like it here, my man, just like me. You have found a home."

"Goddamnit, yeah, I like it here. Why do you think I stayed six months longer than I had to? You think I stayed so I could save more money to buy a new car like some dumbshit in the 5th Mech? Yeah, I like it here, but I'm gettin' out. I have heard the Divine Guffaw. Three times. Three times I knew I was dead. Not one of those, I might get killed, or things look bad. I'm talking about those times when you look up and say, "Oh shit. I'm gonna die now. I hope it doesn't hurt too much." And for some fucking reason you don't die. That slimy bastard up there, the Great Divine
Oversould, is gonna audit the books one day, and come police my ass up. It's been too many times.

"Now, I ain't fool enough to wait here," Hanson said, jabbing his finger at the floor, "for him to take me. I'm gonna be a lot harder to find back in the states."

"I think the percentages drop back to the baseline every time, but...you will be back...." Quinn began.

Hanson slowly began to shake his head.

"...because Chicken Man said you'd be back."

Hanson stopped shaking his head. "When?"

"When, what?"

"When did he say so?"

"Mr. Minh asked him before we left the launch site."

"Why did Mr. Minh...." Hanson began, looked at Quinn, and asked, "What were his exact words?"

"Mr. Minh told me Chicken Man said, 'Hanson will be back before the monsoon, and Hanson and Quinn will leave...they will fly out of Vietnam together.'"

Hanson looked at his eyes in the mirror.

"There it is, my man," Quinn said. "Chicken Man is never wrong. You know that. If he ain't sure, he says that he doesn't know."

"Anyway, it's only twice."

"Twice what?"
"One of those times it was me that saved your puny, bloody ass, carryin' you three klicks to that LZ. Me, John Quinn, and if I ever want to collect, I won't have any trouble finding you.

"Me and Mr. Minh who ran dead into that RPD fire and took it out. He's the one who should be dead about fifty times. Maybe we ought to ask Chicken Man to make Kathas for us."

"I don't think it would work for foreigners. The spirits wouldn't pay attention. We'd do better with something more central to our own culture, like one of those pink rabbit's feet from Woolworth's." Hanson smiled, "Or...a hippie's ear." He waited.


"The owner might object."

"Shit. Those candyass motherfuckers. Just tell 'em, 'I gotta get three hippie ears. If you shape up, all you gotta lose is one. If you give me any shit, or fall down and start whimpering and crying, I'm gonna sit on your head and take both of 'em.'"

"They're gonna pay, those motherfuckers." Quinn started saying "motherfuckers" like a chant.

"Wait till you get back there," he said. "Remember when I went back with Polston, took his body back to Kentucky. His old man was dead with black lung."
His mother and sister were living in this shack with a fuckin' space heater. Livin' like dogs. No wonder Polston left. They didn't even cry, man, they're so used to it. I told 'em that he was a hero, a goddamn hero, and his uncle said that he 'was right proud of him'."

Donovan was singing from the jukebox, "They call me mellow yellow...quite rightly...."

"The ground was almost frozen, they got a backhoe from the mine to dig the grave. I spent the night in a motel outside of town gettin' drunk and watching fuckin' color tv. When I finished the bottle I threw it through the screen. Fuckin' Johnny Carson laughin', everybody laughin'.

"Then I went home for a thirty-day leave.

"What was that you said about telling 'the truth'? Those punk-ass anti-war people, all so pretty and pink-cheeked, having a good time marching around, never had to do shit all their lives. Never had to bury a friend, why don't they shut the fuck up? They don't know anything, man. I don't want their fuckin' help. They don't wanta know anything. They want to talk about how bad it is, but they don't want the truth. Hey, I had one girl tell me that she didn't want to 'hear' about things like that--like killing and shooting folks, and dying. Goddamn, and she was protesting the war. Didn't
want to hear about it. Just like those, uh, concentra-
tion camps. They say, 'Oh, how awful,' but they don't
want to hear about it. 'Bummer.' 'I don't want to
hear about it, man, it's such a bummer. It bums me
out.'"

Quinn started chanting again.

Drums and guitar started thumping from the jukebox,
then voices, "Yah, shoopshoop yah, shoopshoop yah,
shoopshoop yah... everybody's gotta dance to the feelin',
awright. Shoopshoop yah...."

Quinn shrugged, then snorted, "What the fuck, huh.
I saw an old movie once about this guy who gets put in
a mental hospital by accident, and he says, 'I'm okay.
I'm not crazy.' And everybody looks at each other side-
ways, and say, 'Sure, you're fine. You just need a
rest.' And the guy says, 'No, really. It's all a mis-
take. I'm not crazy.' So pretty soon he's screaming,
'I'm not crazy, I'm not crazy,' and by then they got
him in a straitjacket.

"That's how I felt back home. At least you know
where you stand here. Who your friends are. Who you
can trust.

"But when this stupid war is over, those fuckers
are gonna pay. For Polston and for 'the Kahuna' and
for all our people. And when the next war shows up,
it's gonna be their war, 'cause they don't want to hear
about this one. They don't know shit about war. 'War is unhealthy for children and other living things.' Ain't that cute? That's all they know. Goddamn, Goddamn, Goddamn, I hope the next war is in the states, 'cause they'll have to fuckin' eat that one, and then they'll know what it tastes like. Those chickenshit fuckers.

"Anyway, I'm staying here. If I went back to the States now, I'd kill some...." Quinn started laughing. "Well, at least it's legal here."

"Didn't they tell you about moral courage? There's a lot of that back there."

"Oh, yeah."

"I was thinking about that a couple of days ago. People have always told me how 'moral courage' is far superior to 'physical courage'. I don't know what physical courage is. There's just two kinds of moral courage. The kind they're talking about never caused anything worse than somebody losing his job, or tenure at the university because he stood up and disagreed with some fucking idea. The other kind is when your body wants to fall down and find a hole because bullets are cracking past, but you don't let your body do that because you know that your friends are gonna die if you don't stand up and fight."
Sgt. Major Jackson ignored the air policeman posted at the hurricane fence. The "APs" job was to demand that you produce some ID, to state your business, then they write it down in a log book. They were supposed to "challenge" everyone who entered the air-base, even people who worked there, people they knew, even generals. Especially generals, who would demote them and probably put them in the stockade for not challenging the shiny Cadillac with the red stars on the bumper.

He didn't challenge Sgt. Major. He didn't know him, but he just looked away and pretended not to see him, the way some one in a strange rough bar will look away from a fight that's brewing, acting as though he can't hear the curses and threats. Sgt. Major had the walk and the eyes of someone who would kill you in mid-stride and not even look back. He walked past the AP, who had an automatic rifle and .45, as though he were just one more aluminum fence post.

Sgt. Major Foreman was not a Sgt. Major, E-9. He was an E-7. People called him Sgt. Major because that had been his rank before they busted him down to E-6. The reason for his demotion was officially recorded as "conduct unbecoming a senior NCO". The real reason was classified; the real reason was never recorded. A number of ranking Army Officers had wanted to bust him out of the army and put him in Leavenworth, but the CIA
had told them that a court martial would be "embarrassing" and that it would be best just to "let it alone". Sgt. Major had agreed to accept the demotion quietly. It was a formality that cut his paycheck. His status as a Sgt. Major was affected very little. He knew too much.

Sgt. Major had done three tours of S.E. Asia that were recorded in his Army 201 file. He had done two other Asian tours that were not recorded in any Army files. His 201 file showed that he had been in Okinawa during those periods.

He had a slight Southern accent that was very pleasant. No one had ever heard him raise his voice above the level of polite conversation, even in a fire-fight. In combat he used hand signals to direct his Chinese Nung squad leaders.

There was a knotted rope of scar around Sgt. Major's ankles, like someone who's worn leg-irons for years on a chain gang. All the old S.E. Asia hands had the ankle scars. They are from the leeches.

Inside the Air Force Base was the headquarters of the NCO in charge of routing supplies from the giant Da Nang warehouse complex to smaller camps in "I" Corps. He saw that food and supplies were loaded on the cargo planes, inventoried, and balanced out in the books.
Other officers and enlisted men stayed in Vietnam only one year, then were replaced by others interested in doing their year and going home.

The supply NCO had been in Vietnam four years in charge of supply. Each year's new batch of supply personnel knew only what the main NCO wanted them to know. If anyone began checking manifests too closely, or asking the wrong questions, life became difficult for them; their inventory began coming up short, their civilian labor force began breaking or misroutining things, or not showing up for work. Then the supply officers wrote them bad evaluation reports.

The senior supply NCO had highly-placed Vietnamese friends who owed him favors. He had large bank accounts in several different states.

The supply Sgt.'s office was an olive drab mobile home. Inside it looked like the office tucked way back on the two acre lot of gleaming single-wides, color and chrome double-wides; the office where you take the wife and close the deal. It was air-conditioned, carpeted, and the furniture was walnut. The handsome walnut liquor cabinet had been manifested for a Major General in 1965, but had been misrouted.

He had a pretty Vietnamese secretary. She was more than pretty, she was almost perfect. Like a doll. He had paid for the operation that removed the Oriental
eye folds so she would look more American, a "round eye", and he had paid for the silicone injections in her breasts. She was wearing a mini-skirt and spike heel shoes he'd ordered from Los Angeles.

"Sgt. Major," he said, with the warmth of any successful salesman, "come in."

The supply sergeant was a thief, and would cheat anyone he could, but he and Sgt. Major had an understanding.

Besides being big, and smart, and ruthless, Sgt. Major had the reputation of being a little crazy. He didn't mind that at all. He even did things to keep the rumor alive, like the time he cut the liver out of an NVA captain he'd killed, cut it in five pieces, and he and his four Nungs ate it raw, the Nung's gold teeth flashing, laughing as the blood dripped down their chins.

"It's good to have people think you're crazy," he'd told Hanson one day when he was in a rare talkative mood. "If they've just heard you might be, that's enough. They're gonna be afraid of you, because crazy people aren't predictable--no patterns--and it's dangerous to try and second guess 'em."

In eighteen months Sgt. Major had taught Hanson a lot about staying alive, and Hanson loved him like a father. And Sgt. Major wasn't really crazy--as long as
he had a war.

The roar of cargo planes, helicopters, and "fast movers", F-4 Phantom jet fighters surrounded the mobile home like rush hour traffic on a three-dimensional freeway.

"On the pallet and loaded up," the supply sergeant said. "I got a pilot who's gonna make a "detour" on his way to Quang Tri. Hell of a detour," he laughed, "but I got his flight time and fuel records covered."

Sgt. Major had ordered two pallets of beer for the launch site. Two pallets was roughly thirty times the amount authorized for the camp, but the beer had been "diverted from normal channels" and on one of the thousands of yellowing supply records the number "897" had been changed to "895". The beer no longer existed.

"Real fine," Sgt. Major said. "See you next time." He looked up at the wall. "The SKS looks real good up there."

The SKS was mounted on a plaque in the supply sergeant's trailer. He had traded the two pallets of beer for the SKS rifle. The SKS is obsolete. It is the only Communist weapon you can take back to the States because it is not a fully automatic weapon (a sub-machine gun) like the AK-47. They are rare and sell for three hundred American dollars. Hanson had "captured" the SKS mounted on the walnut plaque in the supply sergeant's
office.

When Sgt. Major walked out the gate, the AP glanced at him. Sgt. Major's eyes seemed focused somewhere in the distance, as though he was mildly interested in something terrible that was about to happen at the far end of a city block.

The SKS had belonged to a survivor of an ambush, a straggler who wasn't in the killing zone when the ambush was sprung. Hanson and Quinn went after him. Hanson gained on him, knowing Quinn was covering from behind, then threw himself onto his stomach, braced his weapon, and fired two bursts. One round from the first burst tore the straggler's calf and he stumbled. Hanson relaxed, and walked the second burst diagonally from hip to shoulder, and the soldier slammed into the ground face-first, bucking like a stunned carp. Hanson ripped another burst across his back to make sure he was dead, then kicked him over like a rotten log that might have thousands of blind white bugs under it. There was an SKS under it. "Food on the table," Hanson yelled.

"Yeah," Quinn said, "and you almost fucked it up."

"What?"

"Shootin' him up like that. Look."

The last burst of brass-jacketed bullets had gone through the body and torn a furrow through the bloody
grey-green grass and sun-baked clay that lay in little piles like bleeding chips of flint.

"A little lower," Quinn said, "and you'd have hit the SKS. Shoulda shot him in the head."

"You're right," Hanson said, "You're right. They always give the SKS to fuck-ups like him, stragglers, guys who run. It's like a, uh, maxim. Wood lore."

Hanson put a fresh clip in his weapon.

"Every profession has its own techniques," Hanson said to the body. He picked up the SKS, and slung it over his shoulder. He looked in the dead man's face.

"I think you were, perhaps, sir, a slow learner. Slow learners just don't last long. Anyway...your troubles are over. You don't have to be afraid any more."

As they walked off, Hanson sang softly under his breath and did a little cake-walk, still listening to the jungle, scanning the trail, cutting his eyes from the jungle floor to the tops of the trees, layer after layer, top to bottom, bottom to top, always aware of where the nearest bomb crater or bank was in case he needed to dive for cover. Passing a point of no return when a crater up ahead became closer than the last one passed, always aware of where Quinn was behind him by the sound. The two of them randomly alternating their relative positions, Hanson holding his weapon so he
could quickly shift his fire to any direction.

Neither of them gave any extra thought or effort to the way they were moving. It was like looking both ways when you cross the street. Hanson hefted the SKS and smiled. "Always shoot fuck-ups in the head," he thought.

Hanson and Quinn often went after bartering trophies when they weren't on recon. They'd take half of the Combat Recon Platoon, all Montagnards and Nungs, the best soldiers in the hatchet team, on ambushes and sweeps. The sweeps through enemy controlled areas—which was everything outside the camp wire—were officially called "search and destroy" operations in the beginning. But when the American public began seeing nightly tv film footage of dead Asians and Americans, they started to consider the implications of words like "destroy".

The army changed the name of the operations to "search and clear". Most search and clear operations took place in free fire zones, large areas of countryside where every living thing was considered an enemy, enemy supporter (farmer), or enemy asset (buffalo, rice, village). You could kill anything that moved. Hanson and Quinn didn't like to kill the water buffalo, they took so long to die, and moaned so, but the Nungs liked to, and it paid to keep them happy and mean.
In a free fire zone you didn't have to wait a fatal second deciding if it was a farmer or an armed enemy breaking through the bush.

The army renamed free fire zones "safe zones".

The worst part of the ambushes was checking the bodies to be sure that everyone was dead. The wounded knew they didn't have anything to lose, and they waited for you, trying not to move or cry out in pain, waiting to kill you. Unless they have some obvious intelligence, there's no reason to take prisoners in South Vietnam. It's dangerous. It costs time and supplies. If you turn them over to the South Vietnamese, they either execute them anyway, or let them go if they have relatives with money. In the earlier years of the war, Sgt. Major captured the same Viet Cong three times. Sgt. Major said that the third time, when the VC saw him, he tried very hard to grin, like it was just a joke and they were old friends. Sgt. Major grinned too, and put a tight pattern of twenty M-16 rounds in the Viet Cong's chest. The VC had had his elbows bound tightly behind him, his shoulders back and skinny chest puffed out.

"Split him in half like an Arkansas fryer," Sgt. Major said.

One day while stripping ambush victims of trophies, on a search and supply operation, Hanson remembered his
Vietnam wood lore, the SKS maxim.

There was a single shot, and Quinn felt a chubby hand pat his foot. He looked down at the flap of brain stuck to his boot, then thrust his foot out and studied it like the ugliest girl in Iowa coyly looking at her new party shoes. With a scholarly frown, he said, "Humm. I wonder what he's thinking about right now."

"That's a nine-oh...nine-oh. At least. Very nice. Performance and degree of difficulty," Hanson said.

Quinn beamed.

On the wall of his hootch, Silver had the front page of the Cincinnati Register framed. The headline read, "GREEN BERETS DESTROY ENEMY HOSPITAL/ NO PRISONERS TAKEN."

Silver usually went with Quinn and Hanson on the search and supply sweeps and ambushes. While the recon platoon set up a defensive perimeter, the three of them would go among the dead, rolling the bodies over, cursing some and praising others for their clothes and equipment.

An officer's pith helmet with an enameled red star was a fifty dollar item. An officer's belt buckle, recycled aluminum from American bombs with an enameled red star, would go for seventy-five dollars. One with-
out the star was worth half of that. They had to fill in with Montagnard cross-bows, plain NVA pith helmets and jungle hats, and the NVA "battle flags" that Co Ba and her daughter manufactured for them.

There were occasional novelty items. Hanson once found a Red Chinese copy of a Scripto fountain pen on a dead lieutenant. It had the word SCRIPTO on the nib. The engraving on the side exhorted the dead second lieutenant to "STEADFASTLY ATTACK AND DESTROY ALL AMERICAN IMPERIALISTS".

Hanson studied the engraving, and pictured the engraver working on the pen, worried that he would not have room to get the last word on the pen that was to be a gift to the young officer from his parents, thinking how wrong and terribly important even little things seemed.

Hanson had kept the pen, planning to give it to Dr. Braxton, who had taken him through all those centuries of British literature, and who had given him, the day he left for Vietnam, The Oxford Book of English Verse, his own copy, bought when he had been a freshman at Duke thirty years before.

Cheaper items, like plain pith helmets, brought much more money if you shot a hole in them and sprinkled them with some chicken blood, but it wasn't wise to do that too often. Not that it mattered so much that the
buyer might suspect that it wasn't an authentic result of a soldier having his head blown open when they showed it off to their wife and friends back in the states, grim or swaggering as they recounted the moment that they blew the enemy's brains out. No one there would know. It was simply a matter of economics. Too many of them on the market would lower the price.

There was a screech behind Hanson and Quinn. They spun around, Hanson going for the shoulder holster.

Sgt. Siebert's monkey was drunk. He was strutting on top of Sgt. Siebert's table in the bar, his arms raised like a furry little acid rock singer, saying, "Awright! Awright! Le's get it on now, one time!" In one of his delicate monkey fists he clutched a french fried potato, in the other, a rubbery red Penrose sausage. He was wearing diapers. It was a club rule that monkeys had to be diapered, or they would not be admitted. The club had few rules, and they were all reasonable.

"Hey, Sgt. Siebert," Hanson asked, "how's the new monkey working out? Heard that the other one did crash and burn."

"Yeah, tragic thing. Furry little fucker just couldn't get the hang of maintaining altitude. Kept a glide angle of just about dead vertical all the way down."
"Well," Hanson said, "as my momma's preacher back home was so fond of saying, 'God sees even the furry little monkey fall.' God's will be done. Do not grieve, good sergeant." He started laughing and went to the bar to get his beer.

Sgt. Siebert's other monkey masturbated whenever it got excited, whenever it got mad, or hungry, or frightened. All the time. Sgt. Siebert's "A" team wouldn't have minded an occasional hand job, but the monkey did it all the time. It was like having a pervert in camp.

The monkey would grab something solid with his left hand—a chair leg, or an engineer stake—and jerk against it like a strap-hanger on a lurching bus, while he pounded away with the other hand, shrieking tirelessly. The "A" team build a wire cage where they could give him a chicken to fuck once a week, like some of the other camps, but he ignored the chicken, grabbed the wire, and began to rock and shriek. It was not considered manly for a Special Forces mascot monkey to jack off when he had chicken pussy available. It was considered even less manly to pull its pud out of fear, but the pleasant flutter of incoming mortar rounds always aroused him.

Sgt. Siebert had the monkey with him one day in a C-130 full of supplies for the camp. He was in the
cargo plane's tail section with the supply bundles that were draped with the huge blue and green cargo 'chutes. He was the "bundle kicker" and wore earphones so the pilot could tell him when they were close to the drop zone.

The four big engines were roaring as the plane went into a steep dive to avoid ground fire, and to level off at four hundred feet to hit the small DZ. The slanted tail of the plane cracked, then slowly opened downward with hydraulic whines and groans, filling with dark green jungle.

Sgt. Siebert knelt by the shining caster tracks watching the small red light, waiting for it to blink out and the next one to flash green. He didn't see the monkey above him jerking wildly at a piece of nylon strapping, his little monkey eyes full of fear, looking out the wind-roaring open tail.

The light flashed green, the plane went into a steep climb, and Sgt. Siebert started the food pallets and rope-handled ammo crates rolling out, static lines snapping past to go taut and snatch each chute open.

Then, as he later phrased it in his Southern accent, "It felt just like somebody had hawked him up a big goober and spit it on my neck."

Without missing a bundle, he grabbed a handful of
fur and side-armed the convulsive monkey out the tail.

"Last I saw of him, the little sombitch was still whackin' it, getting smaller and smaller."

The new monkey was sitting on the table, looking mournfully between his knees like a drunken little king, holding the french fry and sausage like scepters of his authority. He pitched forward and the sausage skittered across the table.

"Goddamn," Sgt. Siebert said sadly, "an' this little dud can't hold his liquor."

He sat back in his chair and began to laugh. "I think we're gonna have to have a team meeting back at camp and decide on a new kind of animal for mascot."

Sgt. Major strode into the club. He was wearing what he called his "fancy fatigues", the ones with the patches: Airborne, Ranger, Special Forces arrow, combat infantryman's badge showing that Vietnam was his third war, master parachutist wings, Thai jump wings. He only wore them when he was in a headquarters area where regulations required that "all unit and award insignia will be properly displayed on the class uniform appropriate for them." At the launch site he wore camouflage fatigues without any type of insignia. All equipment at the launch site was "sterile"; it could not be officially traced back to the U.S.

Sgt. Major and the other old hands referred to all
the patches, and wings, and insignia, as "trash" because they all had them. It made them uncomfortable to wear them off the S.F. compound because they attracted attention, and Sgt. Major had spent twenty-five years learning not to attract attention.

"Sgt. Major," Quinn called, "Step on over and let young Sgt. Hanson buy you a drink. He's buyin' for all of us today."

"I'll do that."

They took their drinks to a table, and Sgt. Major said, "Trooper Hanson, I have advised you that you will find nothing but slack-jawed out-of-step civilians back there with no supervision whatsoever. They're everywhere, and they can't even cross the street without having a light flash on telling them to 'walk'."

Sgt. Major took a sip of Bushmill's, and looked at Hanson. "And here I had plans to mold you in my own image," he said.

They all laughed, but they all knew it hadn't been a joke. Hanson thought it was as high a compliment as he had ever been paid, and he didn't know what to say. They were silent; they sipped their drinks, and were silent again. Then Quinn swung his palm into the back of Hanson's chair, making the legs squeak against the floor. "And who's gonna be the camp intellectual when you're gone?" he said.
"Lieutenant Farr," Hanson said, grinning. "He outranks me, and he has superior intellectual credentials as well. The man has a master's degree, Quinn."

Quinn laughed and began talking to Sgt. Major. He kept slapping the back of Hanson's chair, enthusiastically, as he talked. "Farr pulled rank on him once because he was losing an argument in front of the Captain. They were arguing about Farr's...." He laughed, slapped the back of Hanson's chair, and asked, "What's that fuckin' thing, my man?"

"Thesis."

"...Yeah. Thesis. It was Farr's own specialty, and he was goin' down the tube in front of the Captain, and that dipshit had to pull rank on my man to keep from lookin' like the dud he is."

Quinn laughed and slapped Hanson's chair with a meaty open hand. "What the fuck was the argument about, anyway?"

"I don't know," Hanson said. "I didn't know what he was talking about. Some kind of Sociology, I think. One of them 'Ologys'. Psychology, criminology, one of those. It's a good deal, you get to be an expert in things without having to do 'em. Hey, and the Ology field is wide open--Warology, an exciting new field of scholarship combined with stimulating new research. Peaceology, can be taken before or after Warology in
in the intensive humanities interdisciplinary program, Bulletology, Gunology, computer based and computer verified understanding of courage and endurance.

"Why, there's dead-Gookology--there is a language requirement--but dead Gruntology is similarly structured program and requires only a minimum GRE score plus three letters of recommendation.

"There are basic things, like Tableology," Hanson said, tapping the table with two fingers, "and finally, for those students who care for nothing less than the pure joy and wonder of learning new things, there is," Hanson said, swinging his fist like a hammer into Quinn's chair, "QUINNology. Quit givin' me those fuckin' love taps, Quinn. You want me to start out my civilian career as a crippled civilian? You ain't gonna be there to blow me away if I lose my legs...."

They were silent. All three were thinking that Hanson wouldn't be there to do it for Quinn like the two had agreed. Or be there to know which way Quinn would move if they were ambushed, or go to the edge of suicide--hang over the edge--to get him back across the border alive.

They sipped their drinks.

Sgt. Major spoke. "Ah, TeeWee Farr. I suspect he may not take your place for long. I don't think TeeWee will ever make Chun Wee, even with his master's
degree. He is one of those second lieutenants who seem to die in grade, leaving no chance for promotion."

"Hey," Quinn said, "He got so excited in that little pissant firefight down by Twohills, I thought he was talkin' Vietnamese. Double-clutched his mouth into motion without ever engaging his brain."

"I told you, Quinn, he's an Ologist. They got to be that way. They learn to transform life into theory, then apply the theory to life. It's very difficult to do that, because things start getting self-contradictory and incomplete; your statistics don't check out, an' you gotta keep changing 'em and throw 'em back into the computor. It's hard. So the best way to keep from going crazy, getting nasty rashes and pimples, swollen lymph glands, limp dick, you know, is to keep your brain and your body from interacting."

"My man," Quinn said proudly, "you're really full of shit. A champion. How the fuck did you ever survive this long in Da Nang? Forget the recons, the prisoner snatches, the hatchet teams, don't even think about the war."

"I think," Hanson said, imitating Mr. Minh, "maybe ...Hill Spirits help me."

"Jesus," Quinn said to Sgt. Major, "my man here comes into the club here and works at pissin' people off. 'Appropriate civilian attire' right here in the
club. He shows up last night wearing this fucking Errol Flynn pirate shirt that one of his wierd girl-friends sent him, those goddamn fringed moccasins, his deserter beads--from that girlfriend of his who married a marine deserter--the doper. Yeah. He gets these letters from Canada, and the writing is real big and slants off the page, like a third grader, and...." Quinn turned to Hanson. "Do they make any sense to you, my man? I mean, you were fucking her, maybe you know her better. Like that last letter where she talked about giving the fuckin' power sign to some niggers, and they said, 'Yes, master,' and poured more wine."

Hanson shrugged. "Well, Betty was very active in the civil rights movement. Not to be so hard on her, Quinn. She just did a little too much acid. Her intentions are still good, better than yours. Did you ever have a good intention?"

"Fuck no. I have had three doses of clap, but I have never had no fucken good intention."

Sgt. Major smiled, his pleasant fatherly smile. Hanson and Quinn were his best recon team. When he'd first seen them at the launch site he'd thought it would work out that way. He could usually tell; he'd processed enough of them through and done enough paperwork on the dead ones so he could usually tell now.

Quinn was tough, good and mean too, but he'd never
have been more than just competent on recon if Sgt. Major hadn't put him with Hanson. Some of Hanson's craziness rubbed off on Quinn, and that was what had made the team so good.

More often than not, Sgt. Major thought, the crazies lived through it, even though they took chances that made you think that they were trying to get killed. The crazy ones like Hanson killed a lot of Communists, and brought back a lot of good intel. And they were always the ones who knew, just as well as Sgt. Major did, that none of it mattered at all.

"Anyway," Quinn went on, "he just keeps gettin' drunker, walking around in that outfit, tryin' to fuck with people, flashing the peace sign, asking people if they know where he can hitch a ride to the Bob Hope show. Nothin' new, right, but he always does it to people who don't know who he is, and always the ones who look like bad asses. He walked over to this table where there's a bunch of E-6 and E-7 types just in from Bragg, just got in country. He looks up at the ceiling like he's thinking. They're all looking at him like 'what the fuck' and he says...How did that go, my man?"

Hanson smiled and said, "Special Forces is the nasty, nose-picking nail on the green army finger, on the long arm of American imperialism that digs out all the nasty commie buggers. The green bugger-getter."
Sgt. Major laughed.

"That's what they did," Silver said, sitting down. "They just laughed. They knew he had to be one of us. Who else would do something like that? They liked it. They kept saying, 'The green bugger-getters. Yeah, that's what we are.' They started buying Hanson drinks."

"And the radio sergeant," Quinn said.

"Yeah," Silver said, "that was fucken beautiful. Right up there with your best, Hanson."

Hanson held up his arms in protest. "No, no. It was only above average. You all are being much too kind, too lavish with your praise."

"Shutup," Quinn said. "Tell it, Silver."

"There's this dink radio sergeant. A college graduate, he let everyone know that. He's got all his PFC and E-4 Go-fers who work for him, at the bar. He uses a lot of words like 'heavy' and 'boss' and 'fantastic', and he's talking philosophy about the war. Hanson goes up and starts talking the same shit to him, agrees with him, tells him things like, 'That's a good point,' making him look good to his PFCs. Me and Quinn are leaning on the bar, listening.

"The radio sergeant figures he's okay. I mean," Silver said, cutting his eyes slowly toward Hanson, then once more in a quick double-take, "he don't look
Then Hanson holds up his hand, like he just had an idea, and says to the guy, 'You know what?' The guy kind of tilts his head, waiting. Hanson says, 'You're an asshole,' then decks him. The guy's nose just goes 'BLOOSH' like a big tomato. And the guy goes down.

Silver started laughing.

"Me and Silver dragged him outta the club before anybody knew who he was," Quinn said. "Half the stuff that radio dink said, I've heard you say. Shit like... whatted he say?.. 'do your own thing'."

"I have never," Hanson said, putting his face close to Quinn's, "said 'do your own thing' or any variation of that phrase."

"Awright, awright, don't get all froggy so I gotta kick your ass. The point I was trying to make, is that they don't sound that bad when you say them. He just sounded like a dickhead."

"That's because," Silver said, "if he did use that phrase, he would say," and Silver looked dreamily upward, "'Oh, I think I'll just go off and do my own thing.'" Then he looked down, glared, and snapped, "'And I'll kill any motherfucker who tries to get in my way.'"

"Yeah! You're right," Quinn said. "You murderous
little bastard." He grabbed Hanson's arm with one huge hand, and punched him like a brother. "He's got two more verified kills than I have."

"Three."

"You still claimin' that one in the orchard?"

"What you mean, still?" Hanson said. "He's mine. I burned that little fucker down before your grenade ever blew. And Mr. Minh saw it. Wait. Now you're gonna claim he was still alive and the grenade finished him, the coup de grass. You gonna start dealin' in fractions, in dead gook units? Like old Walter Cronkite, ole W.C. and them little stick men on tv showing how many of them we killed, and how many of us they killed this week. Them little stick men all in rows, 'standing tall an' looking gooood', as my old drill sergeant would say, so that the folks back home can get a quick graphic representation of what the score is this week, and by the way, I hear we're way ahead. Every week."

"Still? That dude was mine."

"Give him the three," Silver said.

"Awright. But I'm gonna get way ahead while you're gone, my man."

The heavy Web-gear slung over Quinn's left shoulder swung up, then back as he walked. He carried the Swe-
dish "K" in his right hand, the fat silencer making the barrel look as though it had grown swollen with constant use. He was wearing his camouflage fatigues and a floppy brown hat he had taken off a dead NVA. They were better than the American issue hats; they had a plastic insert that kept the inside dry.

Hanson looked like a child next to him in Levis and green tee-shirt. He was singing softly, trying to sound like Dylan, "John Wesley Hardin was a friend to the poor, well he traveled with a gun in ev-ery hay-
and....

"Charlie McCoy," Hanson thought. "Damn it, that's right," he thought, smiling, "that's who plays base on that. Those tight little drum riffs are nice too...."

The PFC radio repairman didn't notice Quinn and Hanson approaching. He was watching his baby ducks. He'd bought them from a woman in Da Nang city, paying her twenty times what they were worth, smiling and telling her, "Thank you, mama-san." She'd smiled back with her black teeth, and nodded her head, and that had made the PFC happy for the rest of the day.

He didn't know he'd been cheated, but it wouldn't have mattered if he had known. He was used to being fucked over. He was big, at least six foot three, but pudgy and awkward. At a glance there seemed to be something "wrong" about him. He was pale, and his
stiff black hair grew out in tufts. He looked like the kind of oversize boy who always wore a slide-rule on his belt in high school, and who had no friends.

The five yellow ducklings were swimming in the "Rubbermaid" dishpan he'd bought at the PX.

"The only part I like," Quinn slapped the "K" into his left hand, crouched like a bowler as he swept a duckling from the water, and rose gracefully without breaking stride, "is the head."

He bit down, pulled with a twist—the delicate grinding crack like a precision machine under an enormous overload—and the body came away. He threw it carelessly over his shoulder, and the fuzzy wings twitched madly, as though that ruined, blood-bubbling creature refused to believe it was dead.

The PFC had the same bewildered look that they always have in the newspaper photo. The one with the headline, "MASS KILLER SURRENDERS: Former Teacher Says He was Brilliant Student."

Hanson listened to the erratic little brush and thump of the bird. It sounded like the first whispering of panic.

Once they were out of sight of the PFC's hootch, Hanson said, "The timing. The pathos of it. I think we have a nine-five, maybe a nine-seven here...as soon as you swallow the son-of-a-bitch."
Quinn spit the wide-eyed head out and began to laugh. "You'll be back. You won't get along with those people, my man. They have no appreciation for that kind of talent.

"Well, as you are so fond of saying, I must be 'bout my business. Got a chopper to catch." He turned and began to walk away.

"Hey," Hanson said.
Quinn turned. "Uh, yes?"

Hanson grabbed Quinn by the sleeves of his fatigues and began to shake him the way you'd shake a child you were furious with. Quinn's Web-gear rattled, grenades clacking against each other like pool balls.

"You son-of-a-bitch," Hanson said through clenched teeth, "you bastard. Watch your ass. You go out there and let some fool get you blown away and I'll kill you, man. I'll fucken, I'll...." He let go of Quinn's fatigues. In a calm voice, he said, "Be careful."

"No sweat, my man. I plan to skate till you get back. I have faith in Chicken Man. Have a nice airplane ride, sport."

He turned and walked on. He had picked up the song Hanson had been singing, and sang as he walked, "...and there was no man around, who could track or trail him down, He was never known to make a foolish move...."
Hanson walked down to the wide white beach. It was growing dawn. The black hills across the bay were going to be green soon. Dead grey waves began to flush pink and gold, rising endlessly and patiently, crashing back into the surf.

Hanson heard a faint steady drumming. There was a black dot over the mouth of the bay. The perimeter gun-ship.

The door-gunner in the perimeter ship was bored. The fat Huey helicopter had been circling the huge military complex for four hours. It was like sitting in a windy open wall locker a thousand feet in the air. For four hours he had been watching the dark beach. The other door-gunner had been watching the dark ocean. The door-gunners wore helmets with tinted bubble face shields that covered everything but their mouths. They wore thick, rigid ceramic flack vests that covered their neck and chest. They looked like giant insects. The dead weight of the vest pulled and jerked on its shoulder straps each time the Huey banked around the perimeter.

In front of the door-gunner, the M-60 machinegun hung barrel down, rocking slightly like an oar in an oarlock. The belted bullets draped down from the gun, folding into a box by the gunner's foot.
He leaned out, into his seat harness, and looked down the beach. There was a single speck against the white sand. He pushed down the chrome nubbin into its black plastic handle, and spoke to the pilot through his helmet mike, "Hey, sir. Let's put her down on the deck. Wake that stud up."

The pilot was bored too. He was a Cobra gunship pilot who had come back to Vietnam for a second tour. They had assigned him to the perimeter ship until his orders for a Cobra unit came through. The Cobra was a fast attack-helicopter; flying a Cobra was like driving a Corvette. The Fat Huey was like a delivery van.

The long paddle rotor blades that held the Huey in the air tilted alternately up and down as they spun, stabilizing the helicopter. When the pilot changes the angle of the blades, it is called "pulling pitch", and causes the chopper to go up or down.

The Huey is just a big hunk of iron held in the air by a precise balance and counter-balance of the rotor blades. It is almost impossible for a Huey to maintain an exact altitude when it is moving forward.

The pilot pulled pitch hard, and the Huey dropped like dead weight. He eased back and held it four feet above the sand, bringing his speed to eighty-five knots. He smiled. He could feel it all: the flutter of the
counter-balancing rotors, the staggered interacting gears, and the shriek of the jet turbine.

The pilot was flying too fast and too low. He knew that. He hadn't felt so good since his last Cobra mission. His right earlobe was ragged, as though it had been eaten away by some disease. It had been eaten away on his last Cobra mission by a 7.62 bullet that had smashed through the canopy of the Cobra, meeting him as he dove directly at the RPD machinegun. The pilot had killed twelve people in less than a minute that day.

The pilot was holding the Huey at four feet by instinct, by feel. It was almost as though he was not involved, that he was watching himself fly. He knew that if he even began to admit the possibility of making a mistake, interfered with his instincts, the Huey would twitch, dig a skid in the sand, and go into flaming cartwheels.

Hanson watched the Huey grow, slowly at first, then faster. The larger it was the faster it grew, until it was all he could see. It hung there in front of him, the skids at shoulder height, the rotors driving empty air into wedges of sound, the jet turbine screaming like a pure white light.

Hanson looked up and met the pilot's eyes. The pilot had expected Hanson to jump out of the way, and
had almost interfered with his instincts to avoid Hanson. But he hadn't done that. Hanson thought he saw the pilot nod, and smile, but the Huey was moving at almost a hundred miles per hour.

The Huey was moving, and a huge insect was looking at Hanson. It smiled and held human fingers in a "peace sign".

The Huey was a half mile down the beach and getting smaller.

The ocean was a deep blue now. Hanson watched an aircraft carrier and two destroyers out on the horizon slowly altering their positions. It was like they were trying to spell something out to him in sign language.

The padded seat tipped back and pulled him down into it. A shudder ran through the 707, Hanson's arms lifted slightly from the arm rests, and all the GIs cheered as it lifted off the runway at Tan Son Nhut. Hanson looked up at the ventilation nozzle hissing air like a tiny ball-turret gun. In a seat near the rear of the plane, one GI was wearing handcuffs and crying softly.

Later, Hanson got out his *Oxford Book of English Verse*. It was warped to the shape of his leg. It was mildewed, sweat-stained, and blood-stained, even though he had kept it wrapped in a plastic bag. Inside the
front cover were two names, both of them faded: "Randolph M. Braxton--Duke University, Class of '37", and
"John Hanson--5th Special Forces Group, Vietnam". Some of the onionskin pages were stuck together.

Hanson turned toward the back of the book to Yeats. As he thumbed the pages he suddenly thought of the Auden
poem, *In Memory of W. B. Yeats*. He thought, Good. Now when you think of someone, you think of them being dead.
Yeah." He recalled two lines, "What instruments we have agree/the day of his death was a dark cold day." Hanson
talked to himself, moving his lips, but making no sound.
"Yes, sir, the dials are right on the money. Yes, sir, the gauges are dead on, Confirmed KIA."

He smiled. He turned to Yeat's poem *Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea*. He skipped the first part, and
began near the end where the mighty warrior-king Cuchulain kills his own son, having been at the wars so long
that he did not know him. His own forces are afraid that he will kill them all out of grief and rage, and
so the Druids (Hanson smiled again. Mr. Minh and Chicken Man would understand about the Druids and their
magic.), the Druids chant magical delusions in his ear while he slept, so he would believe that the sea was his enemy:

"Cuchulain stirred
Stared on the horses of the sea, and heard
The cars of battle and his own name cried;"
And fought with the invulnerable tide."
Hanson always pictured him cursing, and slashing with his sword tirelessly at wave after wave as they kept rolling in.
Hanson looked out the dark porthole window at the huge wing of the plane outlined by the blue-yellow glow of the jet pods.
"So," he thought.
"Well," he thought.
The Tokarev was in the carry-on bag between his feet. It was a heavy automatic about the size of an Army .45. A red star was set in the center of the black plastic grips. Much of the bluing had been worn down to bare metal by the stiff military holster, and there was some rust-pitting on the slide, but it had been well cared-for for many years.
The pistol had a yellow tag attached to the trigger guard with a metal seal, authorizing him to take it on the plane. Like everyone's, Hanson's luggage had been searched, and he had been frisked prior to boarding the plane. They always searched for narcotics and weapons, explosives and ammunition. A Spec. 4 glanced at the Tokarev, then stared Hanson in the eyes and barked, "You got any rounds for this weapon, troop?"
For an instant Hanson wanted to kill him. That quick. He was not accustomed to being spoken to in
that tone of voice, especially by someone who was drawing combat pay for searching suitcases. But Hanson only frowned slightly, shook his head, and said, "No."

Hanson's eyes were mild and attentive. The Spec. 4 glared at him the way a cop might glare at someone to scare him into admitting something. "If you do, troop, you're in big trouble."

Hanson shrugged, smiled slightly, and said, "Don't have any."

The Spec. 4 gave him one last hard look, then said, "Okay, troop," and jerked his thumb toward the door. As Hanson walked out, he heard the Spec. 4 say, "Come on, let's move it. Next."

Once outside, Hanson said to himself, "Big trouble." He smiled. He said the two words again, and again, changing inflection. "Big trouble. Big trouble." His smile grew into a grin. "Big trouble." Halfway across the tarmack he was laughing. "Got some big trouble here, Spec. 4. Deep shit, my man." Then he began to get angry, but stopped himself, saying, "No need. No need." He began to sing to himself as he neared the 707, "One day in the black minin' hills o' Dakota, thare lived a young boy name o' Rocky Raco-oooon. One day his woman ran off...big trouble...with another guy, hit young Rocky in thu eye-hi...."

A chubby supply Captain at the replacement center
had offered Hanson three hundred dollars for the Tokorev, but Hanson politely declined. He raised the price to four hundred dollars, and Hanson laughed, then apologized for laughing, explaining that he was laughing at himself for not selling it. The Captain calmed, and said in his best command voice, "I can understand that, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir. I'm glad you understand, sir. Thank you."

As he walked off, Hanson thought, "You fat little fart. I'd throw it in the ocean before I'd let you have it."

It had been so long since Hanson had worried about money, or even thought much about it, that the difference between three hundred and four hundred dollars meant nothing to him.

The NVA captain had been propped in a sitting position against a bamboo grove, badly wounded in the legs. His men were gone.

The hatchet team had been after them all morning; a reinforced platoon. But the Captain had led them well; the hatchet team had taken casualties. It had been a nice morning, not so hot. There had been a slight breeze that made the bamboo grove clatter gently. The brown stalks were the size of a man's leg. As they
got smaller, they lightened and turned green.

The Captain got off one shot with the Tokarev. It blew Hanson's canteen up, snatching him to one side like someone had pulled at his pistol belt. For a moment Hanson thought that he'd been hit, thought the water was blood.

Hanson met the Captain's eyes, and he saw no fear in them. He was a brave man.

Hanson put two six-round bursts into his chest; the Captain looked like he was convulsively clawing his way backwards into the bamboo.

Hanson stripped him of his pistol belt, and picked up the Tokarev that had been flung to one side when the rounds were slamming into him. He had a letter in his pocket, and a picture of a woman and child wrapped in the kind of plastic bag that U.S. issue Long Range Rations come in. Hanson put the letter and picture back in the shirt, wrapping it well because the shirt was soaking through with blood.

He looked at the corpse, and said, "Well...." But there really wasn't anything to say. "So...." he began once more.

Days later Hanson would think how it was the best ones who died. That did seem wrong.

Hanson reached down and popped the clip out of
the pistol. He made his way down the narrow aisle past the rows of sleeping GIs, some of them softly spotlighted by the reading lights; their cheeks and eyes seemed hollow. The plane hit a pocket of turbulence, and all the green-clad GIs leaned to one side, rose slightly, then sank back down into their seats.

When Hanson reached the tail of the plane a pretty blonde stewardess wearing a blue cap looked up. He smiled at her, and she looked back down at the paperback book she was reading. Its title, in large block letters, was "FREE: TO BE FREE."

Once inside the lurching little bathroom, all glaring light and stainless steel, he loosened the web belt. There was a wide strip of white adhesive tape across the inside of his thigh. He slowly pulled the tape away, and the bright bottle-necked bullets dropped one by one into his hand. He threw the tape away, tightened the belt, and pulled the clip from his pocket. Each round made a solid "click" as he thumbed it into the clip; he loaded the rounds the way a man might deposit dimes in a pay phone.

Back in his seat, he slid the loaded clip into the butt of the pistol, and stuck the pistol between the arm-rest and the side of the plane. For eighteen months, not a minute had passed when he did not have a weapon in his hand or within easy reach.
Outside the porthole the huge silver and black wing shuddered slightly. The muffled jets sounded like a waterfall.

"Well," Hanson thought again, sighing. He smiled slightly, then he had to squint to keep his eyes from tearing. He leaned his head against the roaring wall, and was asleep in seconds. He dreamed about the skull.

It had been a year-and-a-half since Hanson had reported for duty at CCN. The gate into the compound was a narrow path cut through the wire: triplestrand and engineer stakes, coils of concertina piled shoulder-high and head-high, two-layered webs of tanglefoot, trip-flares hung in it like beer cans littering the ground cover along a highway. Triplestrand, concertina, tanglefoot all the way in like jagged steel hedges and lawns.

Claymore anti-personnel mines perched on little folding legs facing the gate. Almost jolly-looking, like fat little "keep off the grass" signs. Across their faces were the words "FRONT TOWARD ENEMY". If someone squeezed the firing device at the other end of the buried wire, hundreds of ball-bearings would fire from its face in a slightly concave pattern.

There was no grass in the wire. It had been burned away with Mo-gas so often that the fired red clay
smelled like overheated machinery. Two sandbagged towers inside the compound could rake away the gate and sweep the entire perimeter with interlocking heavy machinegun fire.

But it would not be the wire, or the claymores, or the towers that Hanson would remember about that day; they would soon be as familiar and comforting, and welcome as the outskirts of your hometown after a tiring business trip to the city.

Hanson would remember the skull.

There was nothing crude or clumsy about the skull; it had been skillfully cut out and painted. A huge grinning death head wearing a green beret. Taller than a man, it grinned down from a heavy cross-timber above the entrance to the compound. It was the black-socket eyes that stopped Hanson; the way they pulled wryly down toward the jagged nose-hole. The skull seemed amused at himself. Below, painted in large block letters, were the words, "WE KILL FOR PEACE".

The skull seemed to have looked down at Hanson in a benign, almost fatherly way when he passed beneath it that day.

CCN was under the control of SOG. The meaning of both sets of initials were classified. What they represented sounded harmless enough, "Command and Control
North", and "Surveillance and Observation Group", but the existence of the two units, or the activities of anyone or anything related to CCN or SOG were highly classified under different security acts so that they could not be cross-referenced.

Other units under SOG were called such things as "Project Delta", "B-52", "Project Omega", but the names were changed from time to time. In official reports, the soldiers in these units were referred to as "detection operation systems personnel", or "border control structure components". The units usually consisted of six-man teams, two American Special Forces men, and four "indigenous personnel", usually Montagnards, Chinese Nungs, or Cambodian tribesmen. Vietnamese were not used because they could not be trusted, and all information regarding the activities of SOG was kept secret from them. In fact, much of this information was kept a secret from the U.S. Army, and the U.S. Government.

The six-man teams went into Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam on reconnaissance patrols and prisoner snatches. Eighty percent of reliable U.S. intelligence about enemy troop movements came from these patrols, but the information was attributed to other sources, such as captured documents, friendly villagers, or aircraft spottings, since Vietnam was a "polite war", and
it was against the rules for Americans to cross the borders.

Larger units, known as hatchet teams, though officially referred to as "intelligence exploitation companies", were kept on call like firemen. If a recon team spotted an enemy unit of platoon size (sixty men) or smaller, they called for the hatchet team.

The hatchet teams usually came in two formations of four helicopters each. They sat facing each other, packed tight in the web seats, hung with grenades, their rifles muzzle-up, like grim commuters in a minibus. The choppers deployed around the enemy unit, the hatchet team annihilated the enemy unit except for a prisoner or two, then quickly recrossed the border.

The security precautions were not taken in order to fool the enemy. Hanoi knew when a unit changed its name, or when a new mobile launch site was begun. The baroque, absurd, effective secrecy was necessary to protect the Special Forces Operations from American political and military interference. Special Forces had been in Vietnam from the beginning, funded by the CIA. They had lost a lot of men through Government political blunders and security leaks. By 1967 they had an independent army of professional soldiers and native mercenaries.

Public opinion about the war could not change in
the time it took well-intentioned America to look up from their mashed potatoes to ten seconds of garbled film footage on the six-thirty news, and some hustling young congressman would be out to get the truth on the controversial Green Berets. By the time he got the necessary "secret", "top-secret", and "need to know" clearances to start sorting through hundreds of confusing, euphemistic, and "sanitized" reports—single words and sentences would be razored out, entire pages would be missing, a blank page inserted with explanations, such as: "Pages 12 through 15 have been removed in accordance with letter MACV 246 Hq. U.S. Military Assistant Command, Vietnam, dated 15 June 68, as not being currently relevant to authorized de-briefing components."—looking for some sensational vote-getter, the election would be over, the operations would have a new name and set of initials, and all the information would have been refiled under a category titled, "Terrain Studies Under Monsoon Conditions".

The majority of field-grade and general officers in the regular army wanted the semi-independent Special Forces destroyed, but they had almost as much difficulty as a congressman in penetrating the secrecy.

Their tour in Vietnam was only twelve months, and they had to devote most of their time trying to devise some tactic novel and flamboyant enough to justify their
promotion, or even better, orchestrate an operation big and bloody enough to make the papers and insure a promotion. Besides promotion, they were almost certain to be decorated with the DSC to prove that the battle had been an American victory.

The six-man recon teams sometimes just walked across the border, and other times they were inserted by helicopter near the suspected location of a large enemy unit. If they found the enemy they would direct artillery or airstrikes, then be extracted. Sometimes the enemy found the team, and the team would have to run; wheel through the maneuver to break contact, and run, pull the quick-release on their packstraps and run.

Hanson managed to get himself processed through the Ft. Ord replacement center in a matter of hours. In a windowless concrete building they stripped out of their jungle fatigues, and exchanged them for baggy dress uniforms. On the other side of a low wall another group of soldiers was reversing the process, leaving their dress uniforms in a pile and putting on stiff new fatigues for their flight to Vietnam. Hanson imagined the two groups lining up on the runway and simply trading uniforms.

The wall was just high enough so that neither group could see or talk to the other. Hanson wondered if the
wall was there for morale, or to eliminate unnecessary talk.

"You'll be sor-ree."

A PFC on Hanson's side of the wall kept chinning himself on the wall, looking over at the replacements, singing, "You'll be sor-ree." Hanson tried to ignore it, but each time he heard the PFC's shoes hit the wall as he chinned himself, Hanson stood still and waited for, "You'll be sor-ree." It was like hearing the whump of a mortar tube and waiting for the incoming rounds to hit. There's nothing you can do but lie flat and still, and when you hear the flutter and sigh of the rounds, exhale so your chest and back are a smaller target. Cover your head with your hands. Grind your crotch into the dirt, and wait.

"You'll be sor-ree."

Hanson was trembling slightly when he walked over to where the PFC was hanging from the wall. He grabbed him by his web belt and snatched him off the wall and onto the floor. When the PFC stood up, Hanson grabbed him by the collar and began slamming him against the wall. "You mother-FUCKER. You mother-FUCKER. Shut UP. Shut UP."

A buck sergeant, one of the few men in the room besides Hanson who was wearing a Combat Infantryman's Badge, walked over and put his hand on Hanson's shoulder.
Hanson swung around, his arm already drawn back to swing. The buck sergeant held his hands in front of him. "It's all right," he said, "It's okay. If you keep that up, you'll kill the asshole."

Hanson nodded and shoved the PFC away. He looked across the room and saw that everyone else was silently watching him. His hands and knees were shaky, like they usually were after a fire fight. He felt that he should thank the buck sergeant, but he didn't trust his voice above a whisper. It would be shaky too. It always was afterwards.

The PFC was back in the group, saying, "He's fucken crazy. I mean, he's really nuts."

O'Hare approach control had been tracking Hanson's plane since it crossed the imaginary jurisdiction line that cut across western Nebraska. The plane was one of several blips on the number six radar scope in the windowless, climate-controlled approach control room.

When the sweep hand pulled across the blip, the number six controller pressed a button. The sweep hand stopped, and a readout on Hanson's plane appeared on the face of the scope, green letters and numbers that blinked quickly off and on whenever there was a change in the plane's altitude, speed, distance, or direction.

The number six controller nodded slightly. He
pushed another button and the readout disappeared, the sweep hand moved on.

"O'Hare G.C.A. to Northwest one one eight."

"Northwest one one eight."

In a voice as clear and uncaring as the sweeping radar, the controller continued, "Uh, roger one one eight. Go to one seven point oh five, traffic control for landing instructions."

"Copy one seven point oh five," the co-pilot of Hanson's plane said.

"You have a good copy one one eight, GCA out."

The plane became a green dot on one of the dozen scopes in the glass and steel control tower. The co-pilot changed radio frequency. the FASTEN SEATBELT sign blinked on.

Hanson was thinking about Barker, "The Kahuna". Drunk or sober, he would stride into the NCO club or the team-house and declare, "I am the Kahuna." Then he would demand, "Who is the Kahuna?" Quinn, Silver, and Hanson would shout, "You are the Kahuna," and he would say, "Fuckin'-A, troops, fuckin'-A, and the Kahuna is buying the first round."

Sometimes, back at the base at Da Nang, the four of them would be walking along and Barker would pick out a non-S.F. soldier, walk over to him, and ask in a
confidential voice, "Hey, do you know who the Kahuna is?" He would usually pick out a big soldier; Barker was the smallest man on the team.

"Whathu fuck you talkin' about?" the soldier would say.

"The Kahuna, man," Barker would whisper, looking furtively around. "Who is the Kahuna?"

"I don't fucken know any Kahuna."

Barker would grab him by the shirt and begin shaking him, yelling, "I am the Kahuna, you stupid shit. I am the Kahuna, don't ever forget that."

Usually, the soldier would be so startled by Barker's insane anger, he'd just stand there as Barker walked away, grinning. If the soldier did not take a swing at Barker, the other three would walk up, and Hanson would say, "No one fucks with the Kahuna. You best beat feet outa here, 'cause we're all crazy, and we will proceed to...." and Hanson would glance at Quinn, and ask him, "What is that phrase?"

"Fuck-him-up."

Hanson would smile at the soldier and say, "That's the one." Then he'd drop the smile and snarl, "Dee de mau, asshole, while you can still walk."

They'd stand glaring at the soldier until he was out of sight, then continue on to the club, laughing, muttering, "Who is the Kahuna?"
When Northwest one one eight landed, Hanson looked up for a moment. The seat next to him was empty. He had a trick of narrowing his eyes, setting his jaw, and sometimes muttering angrily to himself, so that people avoided him, and he usually had a double seat to himself on planes and buses.

The plane taxied to the terminal, and rocked slightly as the exit ramp locked onto the door. People began to stand up and get their carry-on luggage.

They'd found Barker the morning after the NVA battalion had tried to over-run the base camp. He was draped over the big four-deuce mortar tube. He'd never gotten his first round off.

The NVA were good. They had all the mortar pits bracketed before the attack. The RPG rocket had hit Barker in the back of the head. There wasn't much blood. The explosion had cauterized most of the veins and arteries. There was nothing left of his head except the lower jaw, hanging from his neck like a huge lip. When they carried him to the team house to zip him up in the talcum-and-rubber-smelling body bag, the jaw flopped like he was trying to say something.

"Well...." Hanson thought.

"Sir."

Hanson looked up. It was the stewardess. The
plane was empty.  
"Oh," he said, smiled and shook his head, "sorry."

He picked up his bag and walked to the front of the plane.

His uniform fit badly. It was tight at the shoulders and baggy at the waist. He felt like he was wearing an older man's hand-me-down suit. No one would know what the ribbons pinned on his coat meant. Only other soldiers understood them. Hanson thought, "What they mean is, I should be dead." He didn't see the stewardess glare at him as he stepped out of the plane.

It was foggy, and the air smelled of mo-gas and hot metal. Beyond the far runway, refinery burn-off tubes flared dirty yellow in the darkening sky. Hanson thought he could hear a faint roar each time the flame pulsed. White smoke boiled under hundreds of flood lights.

A red fan of light swept through the fog like a rotor blade. Hanson could hear it hiss each time it passed over him, and he tried to anticipate it so he wouldn't duck his head.

He hurried toward the terminal. Over the entrance was a banner that said, "WELCOME HOME G.I.S--CHICAGO IS PROUD OF YOU."

The first thing he saw after pushing through the glass doors was a car. A gleaming, metallic blue Ford
LTD. It turned slowly round with a tireless mechanical groaning. The headlights and bumpers winked, the windows flashed, as they turned through blue spotlight beams. Glossy color posters showed elegant men and women gazing at each other across the hoods of automobiles. Muzak droned tirelessly from dozens of speakers.

He turned and began to walk down the concourse, following the arrows. It smelled of sweat, perfume, and cigarette urns. He passed men in suits with briefcases, angry looking women in tailored dresses, bracelets and bright lipstick, exhaling smoke, security guards with pistols on their hips, black men pushing brooms or shining shoes. They seemed to stare at Hanson then look quickly away.

Gift shops, snack shops, AVIS, bars, all cut into the sides of the corridor like bunkers. Arrow-shaped signs saying "R-11" or "SHACKS GIFTS", posters of beautiful women smoking cigarettes or drinking cocktails. A loudspeaker boomed, asking someone to, "...report to the Eastern ticket counter, please." He passed a door that had a bullseye painted on it with the silhouette of a man spread-eagled in its center.

Hanson felt like an immigrant, or refugee in his baggy uniform. Everyone he saw looked healthy and rich, but no one smiled. The last person he'd seen smile was the E-4 from the one seven third when they'd shaken
hands at the Sea-Tac airport and split up to catch different planes.

He saw a young soldier and could tell by the insignia on his uniform that he was on his way to Vietnam. Hanson avoided him.

Hanson went into one of the little bars, and ordered a scotch and water. The bartender was about Hanson's age. He had styled blond hair, and was wearing a loose-fitting silk shirt. He looked at Hanson and said, "Eye-Dee."

"Pardon me?"

"I.D. I've gotta see some I.D."

"Oh. Right. Didn't understand you for a second."

Hanson handed him his army I.D. card.

The bartender looked at it, laid it on the bar, and walked away. Hanson looked at his picture on the card. It had been taken almost three years before in basic training. His head was shaved, and he looked like a zombie from lack of sleep. Hanson smiled, remembering.

He'd been the oldest man in his Company, twenty-four years old when his student deferment ran out during his Junior year. When he got his induction notice he'd thought, "Those fuckers can't make me fight their stupid war. They can't just kidnap me and make me do whatever they want." Then he thought, "Yes, they can."
The bartender set a drink in front of him and said, "One-fifty." Hanson laid some bills on the bar.

He remembered how he'd rejected Canada as an alternative because it didn't seem "honorable". Jail was an honorable alternative, but most unpleasant. Then he thought, "They can't draft me, I'll enlist, I'll be the best soldier they ever saw, then I'll spit in their face. I'll beat them at their own game."

Hanson smiled, and sipped his drink. Beat them at their own game. By trying to beat them, he'd become exactly what they wanted. He'd had all the instincts. What he'd become had been waiting for him all along, for twenty-four years waiting for him to take possession of it.

It was hard for someone with three years of college to get into combat. Clerk-typists are harder to find than riflemen. Hanson had forged orders, broken the chain of command to plead his case to ranking officers, and even called the Pentagon to talk to the woman who handled all Special Forces assignments, and asked her to please put him on the next levy. When he'd gotten to Da Nang, they'd assigned him to Headquarters as an intelligence analyst. He'd walked down the road, past the huge junkyard of rusting trucks; tanks, and APCs that had their turrets sheared away, jagged little holes in their sides, to CCN headquarters to volunteer.
That was the day he first saw the skull.

Hanson was thinking about the skull when the young soldier walked in.

"Okay if I sit down, sarge?" he asked.

He was wearing crossed rifles on his collar. Infantry, eleven-bravo, grunt, sixteen weeks of training. The kind of kid who gets killed in the first two months, before he learns what to be afraid of, what to look out for, before he realizes that there are people out there who are really trying to kill him.

Hanson had over a year's training before he was shipped to 'Nam, and Special Forces people looked out for each other. They ran training patrols in country to break new people in.

"Sure," Hanson said.

"I mean, I'm not bothering you, am I?"

"Naw."

The kid laid a manilla folder on the bar, his 201 file, a record of his sixteen weeks in the army, every uniform issued, innoculations, pay vouchers, unit clearance forms, insurance records, rifle qualifications, and travel orders.

Hanson looked at him in the dim light. He was the basic army-issue dead eighteen-year-old. Hanson imagined what he would look like when he was dead. They all looked alike. After a few minutes their eyes went
flat and gluey. The faint creases and wrinkles around
the mouth and eyes, the dimples, the hundred subtle
details that come from a short life of smiling, frown­
ing, thinking, that made him different from anyone else:
they faded into the skin as it turned yellow-grey and
waxy. Even the nose and cheeks flattened out until
they all looked alike.

Hanson looked at him and saw him dead. It was
too dark to make out the faces of anyone else in the
bar.

"Hey, look," Hanson said to him, "I gotta catch a
plane, but lemme give you some quick, free advice."

"Sure, sarge," he said, smiling, trusting Hanson
because of the green beret and the ribbons on his coat.

"Okay. When you get to your unit you look around
for someone who's been there six or eight months. The
reason he's still alive is because he knows what he's
doing. Try and stay close to him. Don't piss him off
with too many questions. Just watch what he does and
listen to what he says.

"Try and stay in the middle of the column. The
middle is good. And don't be afraid of being scared.
That'll get you killed. People start shooting, you
get down on the ground. Okay? You make the first two
months, and you're home free.

"I gotta get going."
Hanson patted the kid on the shoulder and said, "Don't sweat it, you'll be okay. I can tell." He pushed the bills lying on the bar over in front of the kid. "Lemme buy you a drink. When you get back a year from now you can buy somebody else one. Take care now."

As he walked out of the bar, Hanson heard the kid say, "Thanks a lot, sarge."

"Thanks a lot, sarge," Hanson thought as he walked quickly away. "Thanks a lot for lying to me, for not telling me I'll be dead in six weeks. Thanks for the drink, thanks for not doing a goddamn motherfucking thing to save me.

Hanson wanted to kill somebody. He wanted to take on every zombie motherfucker in the airport. He wanted to do something.

Back in the bar, the bartender walked over to the kid and said, "Eye-Dee."

"Uh, it's in my luggage."

"Uh uh, sport. That won't get it."

"See, that Special Forces guy just bought me a drink, and if I don't drink it, it'll be like bad luck, you know? I'm on my way to Vietnam, and I'd appreciate it. I could drink it down real fast, and then leave, you know?"

"Sorry, sport. I can't serve you. That's the
law. You're not even supposed to be in here. You better take your money and leave."

The kid walked out with the money in his fist. He had to buy a drink with it or he wouldn't make it back. He decided to try as many bars as he could before his plane left. He wished it hadn't happened. But it wasn't the sergeant's fault, he was just being a good guy.

When his plane took off, the money was folded in his pocket like next-of-kin notifications.

As Hanson walked toward his boarding gate, he passed a huge bank of tv screens set into the wall. They were all turned to different channels, mostly game shows and soap operas. The sound was turned off, and the whole wall flickered and blinked like a huge computer screen as the camera angles jumped back and forth. On the game shows people were laughing and jumping up and down, and hugging tvs and ovens.

One screen stood out like a blind eye. It was black and white. It kept showing the time, temperature, humidity, and windspeed; one fact replacing another on the grey screen, tireless and indifferent as time itself.

It was raining when Hanson's plane began to taxi down the runway. The tiny raindrops pulled themselves
across the round window, lurching sideways toward the tail. The domes and spires of the refinery gleamed under thousands of floodlights. They floated in the boiling white smoke and bursts of yellow flame. It looked like a city in the act of destroying itself. Hanson couldn't hear any explosions. He wondered what it would be like if he were deaf. You can feel the explosions that come close enough to hurt you. Your whole body is an ear.

The brakes squealed as the plane stopped. It sat back and shuddered as the engines began to rev. Hanson touched the window lightly with the back of his hand, and felt the pitch of the engines.

They began to move. A black and white sign flashed past that said, "K-4 RUD CLOSED". Then the blue lights were snapping past like bursts of memory, or foreknowledge of events you can't prevent, and the plane was in the clouds.

It was black outside the window. Hanson watched the raindrops drag themselves across the glass. He wondered if it was the jet exhaust or the windspeed that made them act that way.

The pilot announced that it was seventy-two degrees below zero outside the plane.

In the seat behind him a child began to cry. A woman's voice said, "Jason, if you don't stop that,
I'm going to really give it to you when we get home."

He kept crying.

Hanson couldn't remember ever seeing any children cry in Vietnam, not even the ones who were wounded, who had flies crawling on their wounds and faces. He tried to think of at least one, but he couldn't.

As he thought back, recalling face after face, he met the same listless stare each time. It didn't seem to blame him for whatever had happened to them, but they expected him to do something. Most of the time all he could do was wait for the medivac and watch them die.

He was still trying to recall seeing a child cry when his plane became a green blip on the GCA scope at his home town airport.