WHEN YOU'RE IN IT

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Introduction

In the *The Performing Self*, Richard Poirier asserts that "No book [or story] can, for very long separate itself from this world; it can only try to do so, through magnificent exertions of style lasting only for the length of the exertion" (Introduction x). It follows, then, that one must look at a work of art, whether it is sculpture, dance, painting, a piece of fiction, and decide for one's self if the performance is rendered in a style consistent with the intended expression. But how does a writer arrive at that stylistic expression? Susan Sontag notes that "A more complex stylistic convention--say, one taking prose farther away from the diction and cadences of ordinary speech--does not mean that the work has 'more' style" (545). Sontag, it seems, refers to a broader definition of style, one that is marked by something *more* than an acute vocabulary; style, rather, is a complex of technique, an object of art which "overrides our petty judgments. . . our facile labeling of persons and acts as good or bad. And that this can happen is all to the good" (554); therefore, a complex of technique only functions aesthetically when all the elements of style work together. If these elements are handled properly and convincingly, the style will not draw attention to itself. It will, however, draw the reader into the fiction, and hold

the readers attention for the duration. John Gardner reiterates this point when he writes:

> Both for the writer and for the careful reader after him, everything that happens in a well-constructed story, from major events to the most trifling turn of phrase, is a matter of aesthetic interest. . . Every character is sufficiently vivid and interesting for his function; every scene is just long enough, just rich enough; every metaphor is polished; no symbol stands out crudely from its matrix of events. . . . (77)

These elements, then, are available to the author when he makes his stylistic choices. Nothing should be arbitrary, nothing should occur without having been clearly thought out by the writer. The narrative personae in this collection, whether Clarence Heinrich in "As Luck Would Have It," Micky Mickiewicz in "Unfinished Business," or Randy Kodoski in "When You're In It" are introspective characters attempting to situate themselves within their personal histories, which they ultimately need to talk about. Though *they* do not necessarily experience epiphanies, that is--perceive meanings or realize profound revelations--a *reader* may; thus, the necessity for writing these stories is to create a "voice"--one showing the "self's" relationship to its own narrative, a voice revealed through consistent and sustained stylistic choices which focus on aspects of history and memory. What I have achieved, then, which is

a challenge for any developing writer, is to disassociate my obtrusive authorial self from my stories, avoiding sentimentality and didacticism which would only alienate my readers, and break the illusion of listening to a convincing voice.

Obviously, no writer creates in a vacuum; he shares his experiences with readers, and the sources from which he gathers material are many and varied. Two things come to mind: To begin with, the discourses of humanity, including fiction, are derived from one's desire to repeat events--to historicize. The epigraph to Graham Swift's *Waterland* opens the novel with a definition: "*Historia, -ae* f. I. inquiry, investigation, learning. 2. a) a narrative of past events, history. b) any kind of narrative: account, tale, story." Readers can use this definition effectively because it functions as a kind of paradigm for thinking about storytellers; it suggests several things about our need to tell stories: the desire to find things out, perhaps about ourselves, or the world around us; to create a documentation; or simply--to tell a story.

With this in mind, the stories in this collection, though not in the least autobiographical, reflect what I have read and lived; they are an amalgam of experience to which I have lent my imagination in order to create fictions which are consistent, convincing, and compelling narratives. But just as important, my stories represent a desire to place an imagined contemporary "self" in conflict with

contemporary life. In order to accomplish this task, quite obviously, I created a speaker, invented a history and personality for that speaker, and placed my narrator in a contemporary environment.

When I refer to contemporary, I am referring to the epoch beginning with 1945. This literary period is influenced by such events as the end of World War II, the advent of the atomic bomb, Korea, Vietnam, race riots, student riots, the wide-spread use of drugs, sexual revolution, etc. All these and more have contributed to one's sense of living in a violent and chaotic society for which there are seldom explanations for what happens. One need not look too far into the past for a variety of disconcerting and absurd events to see how these events have been mythologized in some form or another to account for the dark absurities they are. To this end, my narrators are in a constant state of "self" examination, experiencing a kind of ontological confusion while trying to find a foothold, that is, their place in a history dominated by contingency.

This is precisely where Clarence Heinrich--the viewpoint character in "As Luck Would Have It"--finds himself. As the title indicates, contingency is an important motif to the story and is revealed through a number of absurd occurrences; for example, the sinking of the *Bradley* on the same day Heinrich's son, Earl, is born; Heinrich sleeping with "Lady Luck" the night before he is supposed to ship out on the *Fitzgerald* and narrowly escaping death. Not only are

these events absurdly coincidental, they contribute to Heinrich's disorientation and confusion, in which he finds himself "off-balance," shaking his head "like a man lost in a strange city on a busy street". Heinrich's preoccupation with his own place in history shows an attempt to create his own narrative, a narrative which he thinks he is governed by, a logic he adopts in an attempt to affirm his existence, but which is based on chance and luck.

These exaggerated moments in Heinrich's history serve a purpose. In one sense they burlesque everyday life, life's chance happenings for which cause and effect have no basis, for which there is seemingly no rhyme or reason. In another sense, the incidents are meant to be a parody of historical fact.

Most North Americans have heard of the *Edmund Fitzgerald;* the ship was immortalized, mythologized by song, and continues to intrigue investigators to this day, but surely there was never a seaman named Clarence Heinrich who missed an ore boat because he happened to be celebrating his impending retirement at a topless bar. What could be more historically absurd? In *The Politics of Postmodernism,* Linda Hutcheon calls this effort on the part of authors a "self-consciousness of the fictionality. . . and the calling into question of the factual grounding of history-writing" (35). Similarly, a narrator's effort (in a fictive sense) to ground himself in a past, and therefore reveal some hidden "truth" about his own existence, is extremely

selfconscious and self-absorbed, and is frequently disjointed and unattainable; too often history is manipulated by whatever forces control the act of history-writing. "We only have access," Hutcheon writes, "to the past today through its traces--its documents, the testimony of witnesses, and other archival materials. . . we only have representations of the past from which to construct our narratives or explanations" (58). My narrators, therefore, in their desire to order past events (their histories), seek to define themselves, situate themselves in history in order to make sense of their lives. This attempt, however, is thwarted by history's elusiveness, for history depends on whose eyes it is seen through.

What I am drawing on in this instance (Can we call it a tradition yet?) is literature beginning with the 1950s to the present. This period is marked by what Malcolm Bradbury refers to as "the absurd situation of the self, the individual's need to withdraw from a history which silences, makes invisible, and is beyond his or her capacity to control or master" (166). Heinrich is aware of history, intrigued by his place in history, fascinated by the sheer luck which has kept him alive, but he cannot make sense of it, though he tries to situate himself in a series of absurd events.

For Randy Kodoski, the narrator of "When You're In It," the ability to make sense of his own past is negated by the illogical circumstances in which he finds himself. Kodoski does not think about the injustice of confinement because it

is one more example of a senseless life he cannot piece together; he may just as well be imprisoned or have been sent to Vietnam; it makes no difference. Bradbury calls this ironic nihilism, and presents Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* as an example; he notes that "Heller's voice is a direct response to a world dominated by military institutions and systems" (212). Another example of ironically absurd nihilism can be found in Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*.

The events populating O'Brien's novel are as ridiculous as those occurring in *Catch 22*, and appropriately take place in Vietnam. We read about Cacciato's desertion, leaving a trail of candy wrappers through the jungle; about soldiers carrying a basketball through fourteen different villages, and destroying those villages as they pass through them; about the members of Cacciato's squad as they pursue him across several national borders without passports, money, and train tickets--the necessities of travel.

O'Brien juxtaposes these events with Paul Berlin's perception and desire to find order in them; ultimately, an act of futility. O'Brien shows that chaos cannot be ordered, nor can one order his place within the chaos. And history *is* chaos:

> The facts even when beaded on a chain did not have real order. Events did not flow. The facts were separate and haphazard and random, even as they happened, episodic, broken, no smooth transitions,

> no sense of events unfolding from prior events. (248)

As O'Brien's absurd character the "history-teller" remarks to Paul Berlin: "You are young, come to me when you have had time to make a real history for yourself. I cannot tell unmade histories" (217). The implication here is that one *can* "make a history" for one's self, order events, give them meaning. But as my stories also reveal, this activity may be impossible.

As I have said, my narrators have a strong desire to repeat their stories, to somehow order their lives through repetition. The premise for "When You're In It" depends heavily on Fenton, Kodoski's psychiatrist. Fenton probes Kodoski's life, asking him to present the events of his life in chronological order: "Ask yourself. What have you learned, Randy Kodoski, after ten years in prison?"; "Tell me what happened after Vietnam?"; "When did you and Micky decide to rob the liquor store?" These questions are an attempt by Fenton to somehow liberate Kodoski from random, violent, and chaotic experiences. Though a flat character, Fenton is central to the narrative; he provides Kodoski with the illusion that one can create a narrative of one's life--that he can organize events and re-present them to make sense out of the irrational. As the history teacher in *Waterland*, Tom Crick, tells his students:

> Wherever he [man] goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the

> comforting marker-buoys and trail-sign of stories. He has to go on telling stories, he has to keep on making them up. As long as there's a story, it's all right. (63)

We should, therefore, look at all forms of representation, including history, according to their specific manifestations within the context of the social and cultural milieu in which they occur. Sigmund Freud thought that what was true for the ancients in Western culture must also be true for succeeding generations, and this, of course, is based on an accepted aesthetic and narrative tradition.

In other words, Freud suggested that a particular history was true if it validated social and cultural norms; his theory of the Oedipus complex is a perfect example, a theory he gleaned from Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. As Donald Spence tells us, Freud was able to piece together a coherent narrative from his patient's dreams, which allowed him to make "important discoveries about the patient's life and to make sense out of previously random happenings" (235).

But in Kodoski's case the endeavor only leads to more chaos, more questions, then silence: "So if they want to know what I'm going to do on the outside, I won't tell *them*. I won't talk about the war or what happened afterwards". No longer can Kodoski define the line between reason and absurdity; the line is blurred and eventually erased. Ironically, he continues to listen to Fenton's

questions, hoping to discover a personal narrative--a reality that will lead him to self-understanding. But reality, as Crick the history teacher observes, is

> that nothing happens. How many of the events of history have occurred, ask yourselves, for this and for that reason, but for no other reason, fundamentally, than the desire to make things happen? I present to you History, the fabrication, the diversion, the reality-obscuring drama. (Swift 40)

My intention throughout each story in this collection was to control ironic distance between narrative persona and reader, between each speaker's desire to create a personal history, and the reader's knowledge or perception of that history.

For this reason, in each story, I down-played the intellectual capacity of these personae, placed them in hostile environments (e.g. Detroit--the "Murder City"), and gave them moral qualities possibly distant from a reader's norms. I presented their thoughts and dialogue in unsophisticated language, therefore allowing the reader to ascertain potential ironies while listening to unsophisticated voices speak about complicated matters.

Such ironic distancing, for example, occurs in the opening paragraph of "Unfinished Business" when Micky Mickiewicz says,

> It seems like a lot of us can't see too far ahead,

> don't really seem to know if decisions we make, good or bad, will make a difference in our lives, maybe take us where we've never been before, maybe without ever knowing what it was that took us there in the first place.

Intellectually, Micky is unable to articulate what his experience at the spillway reveals to him, but he attempts to understand, and does so in unemotional language consistent with his intellect and moral stance. The reader, however--who always knows more about what is occurring in the narrative than the narrative persona or any of the characters--is aware of Micky's emotional detachment.

Furthermore, because of this vantage point, because Micky ultimately generates a voice that is intellectually and morally ironic, the reader is not burdened with the task of bringing his or her own interpretation to the irony. The irony, of course, is that Micky cannot determine whether his decisions mean anything or have any consequences. To most readers, I assume, the idea of Micky shooting his friend is morally unacceptable, and subsequently creates a moral distance in the minds of readers.

An operative word, it seems, is *choice;* the tragedy is the narrator's resignation to the meaninglessness of his own decision-making process. Readers, however, understand the significance of this decision-making process--the possible outcome; thus, the irony. One thinks of Todd Andrews, the

solipsistic narrator of John Barth's *The Floating Opera*. "It occurred to me, for example," Andrews says,

> that faced with an infinitude of possible directions and having no ultimate reason to choose one over another, I would *in all probability*, though not at all necessarily, go on behaving much as I had hitherto, as a rabbit shot on the run keeps running in the same direction until death overtakes him. (251)

Todd Andrews may sound as if he has exhausted his choices, giving in to the inevitability of death, but the irony is that he has raised more questions--questions about the act of decision making itself, its moral and ethical considerations beyond deterministic absolutes with which readers are familiar. Barth manipulates the narrator's attitude, and the reader's reaction to that attitude is one of ironic dismay. What, if anything, does it mean to make a decision?

For me, controlling these distances between speaker and reader was a conscious decision, a stylistic endeavor to avoid--as Susan Sontag notes--"sentimental intervention and emotional participation, which are functions of 'closeness.' It is the degree and manipulating of this distance, the conventions of distance, which constitute the style of the work" (555).

As my readers will conclude, in some form or another

--whether it is Heinrich staring at his reflection in the countertop of a bar; Micky Mickiewicz checking his appearance in a Mercury's rearview mirror; or Randy Kodoski looking at his reflection and asking: "What does a hungover out-of-work vet in an apartment in Pole Town have to do with anything?"--mirrors become obvious indicators of solipsism. Though subtle, my intention was to present the reader with a thematic element, one that invites the reader to think about the "self's" place in its environment.

The effect I strove for, both in third-person and first-person, was to create an internal dialogue within the consciousness of the narrator--a dialogue which does not resolve or conclude, but continues in the mind of the narrator, and I hope, in the mind of the reader as well. John Gardner observes that "fiction has for centuries existed on a continuum running between authoritarian and existential" (85). Jean-Francois Lyotard's rational for separating "authoritarian" and "existential" is appropriate. "The decline of narrative," he writes, "can be seen as an effect of the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War, which has shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means" (37). Lyotard is, of course, talking about the decline of "grand narratives"--authoritarian narratives like Christianity, Marxism, and historical documents which have relied on presupposed "truths" to further their cause. These have been replaced by "essentially provisional and indeterminate narratives"

(Bradbury 207)--narratives left open-ended and unresolved; therefore, I would place myself in the second camp--one concerned with ontological conditions left open-ended rather than resolved.

I do not view this stylistic mode as necessarily bleak, pessimistic, or apocalyptic; instead, the process opens doors rather than closes them; it is a style which allows me to render a specific consciousness searching to validate itself, a consciousness whose concern is to *try* and answer a myriad of questions raised within the internal dialogic carried on incessantly in the narrator's mind, searching to ground itself in a contemporary milieu. This, to me, seems like a positive endeavor rather than a negative one.

Linda Hutcheon notes two strains of contemporary literature: "one of apocalyptic despair and another of visionary celebration" (10). I choose the latter; my narrators continue to question their existence, continue to live out their lives no matter the consequences. The narrator of "When You're In It," Randy Kodoski, is in a process of awakening, and though his awakening is slow and stilted, it is the *process* of questioning and self-analysis which takes precedence. When asked by his psychiatrist, Fenton, to articulate what he has learned in prison, Kodoski replies:

> "A house of cards, I told him, because I didn't know where to begin, because I didn't know if there was anything important to tell. . . The rule

> is there is no rule, and you'll be shuffled around, kept off your feet. There's no apparent reason. If you look for one all you'll find are dead ends."

Naturally, the irony here is that Kodoski does not heed his own logic. Instead, he presses on, searching, like the unnamed narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, who says:

> So why do I write, torturing myself to put it down? Because in spite of myself I've learned some things. Without the possibility of action, all knowledge comes to one labeled 'file and forget,' and I can neither file nor forget. Nor will certain ideas forget me; they keep filing away at my lethargy, my complacency. (579)

It seems there are three choices Ellison's marginalized narrator can make: he can allow himself to be programmed; he can embrace the chaos, join the Brotherhood, and blow everything up; or he can attempt to operate within the chaos. Although Ellison's narrator may not fully understand how any one decision might affect him, he celebrates the "possibility of action" rather than giving in to his "lethargy" and "complacency." The key word is *choice*, which represents, if I may use such an abstract word, the narrator's *freedom*. Of course, an author cannot make use of his stylistic tendencies to show attributes of his narrator without the appropriate language, whether the sophisticated

and educated language of Ellison's marginalized narrator; Swift's sardonic history teacher, Tom Crick; Barth's solipsistic narrator, Todd Andrews; or my own extremely inarticulate narrator, Clarence Heinrich.

Like William Gass, Poirier is acutely aware of literature's "primary resource"--language. "Those who write," Poirier says, "simply ask us to take their language in one rather than in some other form" (81) and, I would like to add, create a consistent and compelling voice (narrative persona) to which readers will give their undivided attention for the duration of the narrative. The narrative personae, whether Clarence Heinrich in "As Luck Would Have It," Micky Mickiewicz in "Unfinished Business," or Randy Kodoski in "When You're In It" are characters who speak in unsophisticated voices about complicated concerns. "For instance," as Sontag writes: "every style embodies an epistemological decision, an interpretation of how and what we perceive. This is easiest to see in the contemporary, self-conscious period of the arts, though it is no less true of all art" (559). Poirier makes an interesting and similar point when he says, "Substance for the writer consists in part of those realities he thinks he has discovered for himself; even more it consists of those realities impressed upon him by the literature and idioms of his own day. . . One way a writer can reveal his feelings about this substance is stylistically" (51). An author's style should

not be judged simply by whether or not the language is colloquial, educated, or sophisticated, but rather by whether or not the work is rendered in a style appropriate to the author's overall design.

In fiction, therefore, an author's style is a conscious decision based on his intended design rather than an accident of prose, and is governed by the language of a narrative persona for whatever purpose. Style, as Sontag reveals, is "the signature of the artist's will. And as the human will is capable of an indefinite number of stances, there are an indefinite number of possible styles for works of art" (557); consequently, these stories are presented to readers in a style intended to create fictional worlds dominated by chaos, contingency, and random acts of violence. From these environs come characters who are locked into a kind of solipsistic circle, unable to escape a "self" desperate for answers to their existence.

A writer may gather material from innumerable sources --life, literature, critical theory--and from them build a fictional reality he hopes will best exemplify the "substance" of his artistic performance.

As I have said, chaos, contingency, and violence, three terms one frequently associates with a postmodern critique of literature, are the dominant thematic elements in these stories. However, I would add history and one's sense of "self" within history to this schema, for my studies in contemporary literature have necessarily influenced my

writing process and, I believe, have contributed to the overall style of each story.

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As Luck Would Have It

Clarence Heinrich was a seaman, but there wasn't much work available anymore in the Upper Peninsula for an old retired sailor. It was probably best he'd gotten out of the shipping industry seven years earlier; it was maybe the smartest thing he'd ever done. He missed it sometimes, but the iron mines were about played out anyway, and Great Lakes shipping wasn't what it was forty years ago. So he took what he could get, and that meant working at the Shoreland Bar for his nephew, Albert. Anyway, he had a lot of stories to tell.

He put on an apron, rolled his cuffs to keep them out of the wet, and noticed his muscled forearms covered with blond hair. The hands and wrists bulged with veins. He'd done some heavy work on the ore boats at one time. His arms and wrists seemed too large for the kind of work he did now. Ten years ago he could beat his own kid at wrist wrestling, and Earl was bigger than he was.

He emptied ashtrays into the trash under the bar, cleared away empty bottles and glasses, and sopped up spilled beer and liquor. He wiped the whole mess clean from one end to the other, bringing out the luster in Albert's recently varnished bar. Wouldn't it be something if a

person could do that with his life? He could see his reflection in the counter top.

He was glad to be working indoors if nothing else; it was cold outside, snowing so hard he could barely see the bright blue sign in the window of Doc's Party Store across Front Street. It was like looking at a TV with lousy reception. Snow. Maybe his old friend Ski-cat would come in and break the monotony.

Weekdays the Shoreland opened at 7:00 a.m. Clarence came in at 6:30 to get things ready. The first thing he did was flip a switch, turning on the electric signs hanging in the window; one blinked *Shoreland*, and the others advertised Stroh and Pabst beers. It made the bar feel comfortable--like somebody's living room. Albert said the signs weren't very classy. He was going to get rid of them soon as possible. Clarence hated to see them go.

Some midnight shift workers from the Empire Mine and the prison in Marquette still came in; they said it was hard these days to find a place open early in the morning. Clarence could set his watch by them. He wondered where they'd go once Albert turned things around to his liking.

He didn't mind setting up their drinks and cleaning up after they'd gone, but their stories lingered in his head, and he got confused sometimes, mixing their stories with his. He knew he'd hear the stories all over again, though, and be able to sort them out. They almost always cleared out of the Shoreland by 10:30. When they were gone,

Clarence took his usual stool at the corner of the bar opposite the cash register, and waited for Albert to come out of the kitchen, where he was getting ready for the lunch crowd.

Albert Bowers hated the morning crowd. It was his idea, an obsession Clarence called it, to make the Shoreland into a "first-rate" restaurant. Dirty miners and filthy-mouthed prison guards didn't fit into Albert's plan.

Albert was tall, kept his blond hair cropped short, a clean shave revealed little red bumps on his chin; he loomed over Clarence slouched on the barstool. He poured Clarence a shot of Hartley's brandy into his coffee mug. He did it without asking Clarence if he wanted another. It was automatic.

"Maybe I should've been dead years ago. Like Earl, eh?" Clarence said, cupping his coffee mug with both hands. Then he ran one hand through his thin, gray hair to comb it back. He smoothed his mustache in a downward movement with his thumb and index finger.

Albert frowned. "You're not starting again, are you? It was an accident. You're lucky. Earl wasn't." Clarence wanted to ask Albert certain questions about Earl, but Albert brushed him off, didn't like talking about it.

Snow came heavier. Clarence could see big wet flakes drifting by the brand-new windows at the back of the bar. Albert worked hard to make the area into a dining room. It took him a year to strip away layers of paint, tear out the

plaster, and remove the wooden slats underneath, exposing the original red brick. He had thermal-pane windows installed, and rough-hewn beams went across the ceiling. Clarence thought he was foolish spending all that money, but it did give Albert's customers a good view of Lake Superior; he was willing to admit that.

It was November already--he could see low clouds moving in over a breakwater sticking out into the lower Marquette harbor. Ice formed along the rocky shore and concrete pilings of an abandoned ore dock.

As much as he disliked tourists, he understood it was Lake Superior that drew them; it was always changing. Unpredictable. Some days it was calm, flat as a sheet of ice, then other times it boiled. Waves crashed over the breakwater. White sprays of water ten to fifteen feet high had washed more than one college kid off the wall. There was a memorial plaque put up to prove it. He figured he knew the Lake about the best anyone could, having spent thirty years working the ore freighters.

Clarence guessed Albert would make a bundle off the tourists--Fudgies and Apple Knockers he called them--but Albert didn't know squat about luck. He was a businessman. Luck wasn't part of the deal. There were numbers to consider, no room, as Albert frequently reminded him, for taking chances or making mistakes. Clarence never doubted Albert would get rich, but as far as he could tell, Albert

would go through his life without ever owing any of his success to a bit of luck.

If he wanted to turn the Shoreland into a fern bar, one of those meeting places with stained-glass in the windows, local art hanging on the walls, and Boston ferns drooping from the ceiling, then let him. Clarence thought Albert was a foolish kid for believing everything could be cut and dried.

Albert washed a few glasses in the sink, toweled them dry, slid them into a slotted piece of polished oak he recently added over the bar. "Time was on your side, eh. You missing the *Fitzgerald* and all."

"Pshaw. What does a youngster like you know about time?" Clarence stared at two watercolors recently hung on a wall opposite the bar. Albert's wife painted them. They were pretty realistic looking. In one, a freighter moved through the Sault St. Marie locks; in another, the *Fitzgerald*, slammed by heavy winds, straddled a thirty-foot wave. The *Fitzgerald* looked like it might burst from its huge silver-metal frame and take him down with her into Superior's icy water.

"Know bullshit when I hear it," Albert said, and turned his back on Clarence to count the morning's checks in the till. The register clicked, made a grinding sound.

"Stories? You mean lies? Tall tales? You want tall tales? I got plenty."

"I need Scotch from the cellar," Albert said. Taking a ring of keys off a hook above the register, he flipped them to Clarence. He managed to get hold of them before they hit the floor.

Switching on a bulb that threw a dim light down the stairs, Clarence brushed away cobwebs in the stairwell; he took his time on the steps. He didn't want to become a statistic, fall down like some old geezer who'd break his hip, lie in a hospital bed for a week, then die a few days later. He'd heard the stories, and wasn't going to let it happen to him.

Since Earl's accident, though, he felt unsteady, as if he were losing his sea legs for good. He couldn't put his finger on it, but for seven years now he felt like he was off-balance, disoriented; it scared him a little not knowing what to expect. When he finished work at the Shoreland, he needed several stiff ones just to stay on an even keel.

Removing two bottles from a case of Cutty Sark, a headline he'd read in the *Mining Journal* a long time ago occurred to him: *American Ore Boat Founders Near Point Abbaye*. Climbing the stairs, he remembered the ship's name. *Carl D. Bradley*. It sank in eighty feet of water during a northwester, a crew of thirty-three rescued by a Coast Guard cutter out of Houghton in the Keewanaw Peninsula. Then it suddenly occurred to him why he was thinking about the *Bradley*.

On a night when he'd met up with his friend, Ski-cat, he stopped at the North End to have a drink. Together they celebrated Earl's birth, drinking boiler makers until 2:00 a.m. Ski-cat showed him the newspaper. He stuffed the paper into his coat, and took it home to put into his scrapbook. Like his father, he liked to save anything having to do with ore freighters and Great Lakes shipping. The date on the *Mining Journal* was November 11, 1958.

Handing the Scotch to Albert, Clarence said, "Did I tell you a ship called the *Bradley* sank the night Earl was born? Damnedest thing. Same night the *Fitzgerald*--"

Corking a shot dispenser into a Scotch bottle, Albert blurted, "How do you know?"

"I read, smart ass."

The date was clear in his mind. The morning he'd gone down to make sure he'd missed the *Fitzgerald*, he remembered a parade of World War II veterans marching down Grand Avenue. He stood in a hard rain. The rain turned to sleet. The Duluth Senior High School band followed. The brass section blared; a drum roll caused his heart to pound and made his head split. He was wet and cold.

Albert untied the apron he was wearing and tossed it under the bar. "Jesus. Don't have to get testy about it." Clarence watched. He could see Albert's reflection. Albert combed his hair and parted it, then he squeezed one of the

little red bumps on his chin until a small white spot of pus showed.

"Forget twenty-nine dead men. Just like that, eh," Clarence said.

"Let it be is all I'm saying." Albert wiped his chin with a cocktail napkin.

The families of those dead sailors never had much choice in the matter. After learning the *Fitzgerald* went down in the storm, Clarence took a Greyhound the following week from Duluth to Detroit. He attended a funeral service for the *Fitzgerald* crew, bowed his head during a moment of silence, listened to a bell ring twenty-nine times in the old Maritime Cathedral. He pictured drowned sailors, saw their bodies trapped inside the freighter, imagined fish feeding on their eyes. It was better if their families wouldn't have to identify them--too cold and too deep to ever bring them up. Kneeling in one of the pews during the service, Clarence thanked whoever it was who decided he should live. Maybe he *was* lucky.

After leaving the Maritime Cathedral he took a cab to the Columbia Steamship Division of Oglebay Norton Company on Jefferson Avenue, an old high-rise near the Belle Isle Bridge. It was as good a time as any to begin retirement, he'd thought. Why put if off? He still wondered what he'd do with himself even though Albert guaranteed him the job at the Shoreland.

He went into the building, greeted a receptionist, and was directed down the hallway to an elevator. Inside he pushed a button for the tenth floor. Then he walked down another long hallway until he found himself in front of an office with *Personnel* stenciled on the door. He went into a room overlooking the Detroit River and waited there. The room was small, but seemed larger because it was a corner office. There were plenty of windows. It reminded him of the waiting room in the Marquette City Hospital where he paced the floor waiting for Earl to be born. Then he heard a young man's voice. "Mr. Heinrich?" and turned to find himself shaking hands with a company representative in a three-piece suit.

Spreading Clarence's retirement papers across a large metal and glass desk, the young man said, "If you'll sign these forms everything will be in order, and we can begin sending your checks on the first of every month. Do you have any questions?"

You betcha, he thought. He wondered if the young man was aware of who he was--the only survivor of the *Fitzgerald*. Had the young man ever heard of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*? In the end, it didn't much matter if the young man understood or not, but he still wanted to ask if he ever thought there was a time when he'd been lucky; instead, he shook his head, and looked like a man lost in a strange city on a busy street. "Are you all right, Sir," the young man asked, holding out a pen. Clarence took the pen and signed

each paper, then gathered his copies and quickly left the room. He fled the building.

Albert stared at him, placed both his palms flat on the bar. "We gotta talk. You've got to lay off those stories --"

"I was sleeping with a dancer--"

"That's exactly what I'm trying to say," Albert butted in. "Those stories might be okay for your pals, and the cronies who come in every morning to drink themselves silly, but the other customers. . . it scares them."

"All I'm saying," Clarence continued, "is if it hadn't been for Sheri up in Duluth I would've been dead a long time ago."

"I sure wouldn't brag about no whore saving my ass," Albert said.

"You shouldn't talk to me like that. You aren't Earl."

"You're right. Earl's dead."

"It isn't right for a man to outlive his own son." Clarence said, certain about at least that much, and right, too, about Albert being no Earl, even though they'd been raised together by Bruce and Libby, his brother and sister-in-law.

The arrangement had been made when Clarence's wife drove off in a cherry red Lincoln with a Ford salesman from Detroit she met at the Shoreland before Albert was old enough to buy the place and fix it up.

Earl got his spirit from his mother, Clarence figured, who'd done a good job of keeping the family together until Earl was almost sixteen--Clarence had to give her that. But none of Earl's good qualities rubbed off on Albert.

Earl was already a big kid at eighteen, strong enough to run a chain saw with one hand. Clarence watched him do it once when he was working on a cabin up near Hogback Mountain where Clarence planned to retire. He could rev a sixteen-inch Jonsered with one hand clenched around the handle, his finger pumping the trigger. The chain spun wildly when he lowered the saw into a notch he'd cut earlier; then Earl bore down with all his weight, all six-foot, two hundred and thirty pounds of it, showing off for Clarence. The chain saw made a high-pitched ripping sound until the log separated in two neat pieces, both ends clean and straight as could be.

Clarence removed a pack of Bugler from his shirt, rolled a cigarette, inhaled deeply. Then he saw Ski-cat crossing Front Street. A cold wind blew across the room when Ski-cat entered the bar, brushing snow from his mackinaw, and stamping his feet in the entrance on a large, rubber Welcome mat. "Damn! Some storm," he said. Ski-cat wiped a string of snot on his mitten.

"You betcha," Clarence responded.

Ignoring Ski-cat, Albert picked up a remote and pointed it at the TV, switching the channels until a National

Geographic special came on. Something about mountain climbers. Two men were hanging from ropes like spiders.

Ski-cat took a stool next to Clarence. Removing his watch cap and choppers, he set them down where they thawed and made a puddle of water on Albert's bar. "Whew! I get dizzy when I put on an extra pair of socks!" Ski-cat announced, looking up at the TV. "Lucky I don't fall."

"That's what I'm trying to talk to this youngster about," Clarence said.

"Falling?"

"No, you old fart. Luck."

With eyebrows raised, Ski-cat tapped himself on the chest. "I know all about luck. Ever hear of Lena Bourget? Married Leonard Bourget, that Ojibwa fella lives on Big Bay Point."

"Course I did. Went to school with her. Except she went by Bergstrom," Clarence said, watching Albert pour himself a cup of coffee and add a shot of brandy to it. He could tell Albert was trying not to listen, pretending to watch the nonsense about the mountain climbers, but Clarence saw Albert couldn't help himself.

"Right," Ski-cat said, gulping a shot of whiskey and washing it down with beer. "Then you know her problem."

Clarence thought for a minute. "Something about hearing?"

"Hey, Albert. How come you don't have those pickled eggs no more," Ski-cat asked.

Clarence said. "Get to the point."

Ski-cat chuckled. "Terrible. Terrible. She was a good-looking Swede, but you couldn't talk to her. Come to my cabin one night a number of years back."

"You shagged her?" Clarence said.

"Listen to the damn story. She come to the cabin like I said." Coldest January in five years. Me sittin' in there day after day goin' shack-wacky. She started a nice conversation, and one thing led to another. After, she starts cryin', thinks maybe she'll get pregnant, wonders what Lenny's gonna do. Now I gotta think fast. Got to get rid of her 'cause I figure she can't be trusted. So I says to her, 'Lena, you're a pretty woman, but you got insufficient passions. If you have a baby it'll be a miracle.' She stops cryin', says, 'What?'

"Next day Leonard comes round. 'What's this 'bout my wife having a fish in her passage,' he says, 'and it being a mackerel?' 'Leonard,' I says, 'it was just a joke I told to some fellas at Mac's Shell. I wasn't talking about your wife.' He was scratchin' his head, didn't know whether or not he wanted to beat the hell out of me or laugh. You want luck? Got plenty enough for both of us."

Clarence nodded, stared at himself in the back bar mirror, smoothed his mustache with thumb and index finger.

"Saved a man's life once," Clarence said. Albert didn't look at the TV. He kept glancing at the clock. "Most irritating sonofabitch I ever knew. Name was Fodel.

Always whining about being away from his family. Pissing and moaning about his wife not writing. Worried when he'd see his brats again. Wouldn't shut up. Sometimes I wished the poor bastard would fall overboard and drown so I didn't have to listen to him.

"One day we're waiting for ore from the Empire. I seen the boom swing into place over Fodel's head. We're all watching, figuring he'll get out of the way, but he doesn't. We hear the ore coming down, roaring like water over a cliff. I'm trying to picture what Fodel's going to look like under ten tons of ore pellets, but my legs start moving, running. Took him by the arm and before I knew we're falling into the water. Sonofabitch never thanked me for saving his miserable life."

"You'll have that," Ski-cat said. "Some can't be educated."

Clarence looked through the window at the snow, thought about the warehouse district in Duluth; he wondered if he'd ever learned a damn thing himself from all the experiences he'd had. He wished there was a memory solid enough to stand on, something to learn from, and remembered the Club Saratoga, its burned out neon letters--the only ones left to spell C-L-U-B R-A-T. He enjoyed talking about Sheri and the Club Rat, but knew it made Albert mad. So most of the time he kept his thoughts to himself.

One night in Duluth stayed in his mind. It was a clear night. The sidewalk in front of the Club Rat was glowing

blue from the neon light. He could see houses and streetlights lit up in the hills behind him. Normally he would've felt good going into the Club to meet Sheri and some others who hung out there, but Earl, who was dead seven months then, was on his mind.

At the time Clarence felt as if his stomach were being gnawed through by thoughts of Earl. He wished the memories would leave him alone. But details kept coming up in his mind: it was up at Ski-cat's place on the Big Bay Road where Earl was cutting firewood. A neighbor called Sheriff Daugherty because Ski-cat was drunk, and didn't know anything about it until the ambulance had already taken Earl to the hospital. Clarence could tell Daugherty didn't want to tell him how it happened, but he pressed him. Daugherty took off his glasses, rubbed his pouchy eyes, and said, "Sure you want to know?"

He was sure he had to know, thought he'd want to remember every detail; it was his son they were talking about. Daugherty described a spilled can of beer, a trail of blood in the snow. Daugherty said it had been let out of him so fast you could tell he'd been running, then stumbling, crawling the last few yards to within a few feet of his pickup. "A ragged cut," Daugherty said, shaking his head, "up one side of his throat to the back of his ear."

In the Club Rat entrance, Clarence saw Big Farmer checking a skinny, buck-toothed kid's identification.

The kid's leg vibrated to the music. Dressed in Oshkosh overalls, one strap missing, and the other crossed over his chest, Big Farmer leaned toward Clarence. "You're late, Captain. Sheri's gonna have your balls."

Clarence looked over the kid's shoulder. "There's always hope," he said, trying to get a glimpse of Jasmine, the evening's first dancer.

Jasmine's shiny white ass shook to the beat of "Proud Mary" blaring from two enormous speakers mounted above the stage. The music faded, and Jasmine disappeared behind a column of mirrors and a red velvet curtain. Men hooted and clapped. They whistled. A gravelly voice came over the speakers, *That's Jasmine! Let's hear it for the beautiful Jasmine!*

Inside, Clarence began to relax a little. He liked the old mahogany bar, its curves like a brown water snake, its giant back bar supported by two columns on each end. Above the bar hung faded and yellowed signs that read: *Tomorrow All Drinks Ten Cents, Henweigh For Sale, There are Two Rules In This Bar. Rule Number One: The Bartender is Always Right. Rule Number Two: See Rule Number One.*

Ever since Clarence could remember, an aquarium, one of the biggest he ever saw, sat on a counter surrounded by liquor bottles. Inside were tiny stuffed ground squirrels set up in a western saloon scene, complete with bar, tables, and stage. Clarence didn't know why it was there. The bartender, Miss Schenk, said some college kid called it

a di-or-rama. Whatever it was called, Clarence enjoyed looking at it, found himself getting lost in its details, began to imagine what the squirrels might be saying to one another. It was a story all right, made up of squirrels dressed in blue jeans, cowboy shirts, ten-gallon hats, and snakeskin boots. Bellied up to the bar, some of the squirrels hoisted beer mugs. Others shot pool and played poker. Then he heard Sheri whispering in his ear. "Hello, Captain. Buy a thirsty girl a drink?"

He saw Sheri's red hair, thick mascara eyelashes, ruby lips; he smelled lavender. She wore black hot pants, a red lace bra, and a black see-through lingerie blouse split midway to her navel. A few guys over by the pool table were staring at her. For a forty-year-old broad, she looked pretty damn good. "You betcha, Love," Clarence said, shaken from his daydream about squirrels. "Miss Schenk of the Evening!" he shouted, "two mescals with beer chasers."

Schenk poured a good drink. Clarence watched her set out two shot glasses into which she poured mescal without spilling a drop. Moving her arm gracefully up and down over each glass, Miss Schenk smiled at Clarence. He'd always thought she had a soft spot in her heart for him. Reaching under the bar, Schenk took out two frosted mugs, filled them with draft beer. Clarence raised his shot glass. "Here's looking up your old address," he said, drank the mescal, then fished a twenty dollar bill out of his trousers.

"Forget it, Captain," said Miss Schenk. "It's on the house." They all knew he was about to retire. Two shots remained in the bottle of mescal Miss Schenk held. From the last of the bottle an agave worm fell into Clarence's glass.

He eyed the worm, drank the mescal, let it come back out between his teeth, smiled, then swallowed. "Just like an angel peeing in your mouth," he said.

"Disgusting," was all Sheri could say.

"What're you gonna do when you retire, Captain?" said Miss Schenk. "Sit on your ass all day drinking mescal?"

"Going into the fern bar business with my nephew," Clarence said. "Watch Fudgies make fools of themselves." He was listening to "Mustang Sally," waiting for the next dancer to come out on the stage. Then Madame Sadie came out.

Madame Sadie was a has-been seventy-year-old stripper and long-time manager of the Club Rat dancers. She pranced across the stage in a black cowboy hat, shorts stretched over her mid-riff bulge, and white cowboy boots partially covering varicose veins. They reminded Clarence of blue roads in a Rand McNally. A wide bandanna covered her swinging and wrinkled breasts.

Gyrating across the stage, Madame Sadie gave Clarence a look, licked her upper lip, and drew pearl-handled cap pistols from their vinyl holsters. She pointed the cap pistols, firing at random at men in the crowd. Then she puckered her lips and blew on the end of each gun barrel,

did a short dance, grinding her wide pelvis as best she could. "Let's hear it for Pepsi!" Madame Sadie shouted. She swung her arm like one of those game show women showing off merchandise, and motioned toward to a black hole in the curtain where Pepsi was supposed to come out. Each man in the audience, relieved Madame Sadie didn't take off her get-up, cheered when Pepsi sashayed in front of them, losing bits and pieces of her clothing as "Mustang Sally" finished playing, and another song began.

Sheri leaned into Clarence's shoulder, ran her fingers through the hair on the back of his head. "Fudgies?" she asked.

Clarence motioned to Schenk for her to pour him another shot of mescal. "Shit-faced tourists," he said.

Miss Schenk, swaying back and forth to the music, said, "They bring in the bucks. Can't complain."

"Like hell," Clarence said, shaking Sheri's fingers loose from his hair.

"Miss Schenk is right," Sheri said. "Daaluth is full of them." Clarence hated the way she said Duluth. She sounded like a dim-wit. "Alls you gotta do," she continued, "is look across the street."

Across the street from the Club Rat a brick red warehouse had been gutted out and turned into a glitzy restaurant. Clarence walked into the place once, ordered a drink, looked around at antique furniture, Coca Cola, Bull Durham, Texaco, and Speedway 79 signs made to look like they

were from the places they'd advertised fifty years earlier; but it was all a fake. Even the people didn't look real. They were too young. Their baggy clothes and long hair made them weird looking. Where were the sailors and dock workers he'd once known? His friends? These people didn't make sense to him, surrounding themselves with things from the past. If that's how they wanted it, then why didn't they leave well enough alone? It was too complicated. He didn't understand any of it.

At 2:00 a.m. Schenk called a taxi. Clarence and Sheri stumbled out of the Club Rat and into the waiting cab. He was too drunk, and Sheri, who passed out as soon as she got into the taxi, no longer seemed pretty to him. Resting on his shoulder, her head felt like a chunk of lead. Her lavender smell was lost in an odor of oil, seaweed, and churned mud carried on a wind up from the Duluth harbor.

Before the cab left the parking lot, Clarence heard water slapping decayed timber pilings, waves breaking against the warehouse docks. Lake Superior was cold and dark. A northwester was blowing. The smell of churned lake bottom followed them up Highway 35 all the way to the Sleep Tight Motel.

In the morning he could barely lift his splitting head off the motel pillow. Sheri, snoring next to him, didn't stir. The *Fitzgerald* had already left the harbor, but he'd check on her anyway. He called the desk to ask if he could get a taxi. The desk clerk's foreign accent told him it was

no problem. The taxi driver couldn't get down to the docks until the parade ended, so he paid the driver and walked the few blocks. Soldiers marched on the street, then a band passed. His head roared. He waited for them to go by.

The next day he realized he'd been sleeping with Lady Luck. The *Fitzgerald* was at the bottom of Lake Superior, her entire crew lost off Whitefish Point in the worst storm on Superior in twenty-five years.

Suddenly Ski-cat was talking. "You don't look so good," he said.

The brandy worked on Clarence. Albert moved around the dining area, setting out red napkins with forks, spoons, and knives rolled inside, setting up pieces of cardboard just so; they looked like little tents with drink specials written on them. "You fellas best get a move on," Albert shouted from the dining room. "The road up to Big Bay might be getting worse."

The clock over the bar showed 11:40. Not even noon yet. "What's your goddamn hurry, you--" The words came out loud, louder than Clarence intended.

Ski-cat shifted on his stool. "Hey now," he said quickly. "No need for that now."

"Shut up, you old rummy," Clarence said. He was sick of Albert, Ski-cat too for that matter. He wished Ski-cat had been there to help Earl when he got his throat cut, like he'd managed to do for that whiner, Fodel. "For god's sake, Ski-cat!" He stood bolt upright, balancing on the rungs of

the stool. He stared around as if daring someone to fight. There was no one else in the bar.

Fidgeting, Ski-cat said, "Come on. Let's go, Clarence. Have one more at the North End on the way home."

Albert rushed from the dining room, looked at the clock. "Both of you," he said. "Outta here. I got a living to make."

Living, Clarence thought, and repeated the word several times in his head. The word sounded strange. Yes. He was thinking now. Everything much clearer than it had been just a few hours ago. He didn't really hate Ski-cat, did he? Even if the old goat never bothered to chip in for Earl's funeral, except to loan his front-end loader to break up the frozen ground in the Green Garden Hill Cemetery where they buried him. He didn't hate him, did he? Didn't hate Albert, either. His only link now to family.

The door opened. A young woman came in, followed by a cold chill. She looked around the bar, removed her beret, coat, and gloves. Albert rushed over to her, showed her into the dining room, and asked her if anyone else was going to meet her. As they passed, Clarence said, "Excuse me, please. Excuse me." She didn't look at him. His luck was holding out.

Unfinished Business

It seems like a lot of us can't see too far ahead, don't really seem to know if decisions we make, good or bad, will make a difference in our lives, maybe take us where we've never been before, maybe without ever knowing what it was that took us there in the first place. Maybe that's why Jean thought we'd be better off someplace else. I'm not sure.

I suppose the real reason I left for Gabriel's after arguing with Jean was I knew Randy Kodoski would be in the bar, like always, and I needed a drink. Jean didn't want me to go out, made a big fuss about it, said I was going to end up a drunk like Kodoski if I wasn't careful. They'd been together for a time before I came home from Vietnam. I never thought much about them because that's the kind of thing that'll make you crazy. . . make you say and do things you'll later regret. It might not hit you until you're down the road a year or two, but sooner or later, when you least expect it, a feeling from deep in your gut will have its say, get right in your face, make a fool out of you.

After last night, north of the suburbs where I'd been with Kodoski and Kasia, I guess I wasn't surprised to find a note from Jean on the refrigerator door:

Micky, I know you'll understand because I'm just like you. I'll call when I get settled. Love, Jean.

That was it.

Thinking we all had to make it in this world any way we could, I ripped the note into little pieces, tossed it into the kitchen waste basket. Wondering where your life was going to take you, like I kept telling Jean, wouldn't make your life any easier. You just had to take care of business, do whatever was necessary to keep going.

That's what my old man taught me, how to take care of business, which he did up until he died after I'd come home from my tour. He worked for thirty years on the Chrysler assembly line, and eight weeks after he spot-welded his last fender onto a '70 New Yorker he had a heart attack at the dinner table. His face was already a shade of grey by the time two EMS attendants wheeled him into the ambulance. I'd seen that look in Nam so I knew he wouldn't last long. His dying scared me, not because I was afraid of death, but because I didn't feel a thing. It wasn't until later, years later, like most everything that's happened to me, I realized I didn't have a father anymore. He was gone for good.

*

When I finally closed the apartment door and backed out into the hallway, Jean glared at me like someone ready for a fight. I heard the lock turn, the security chain slide into place. On the street I looked at my watch. It was

midnight. Plenty of time to have a drink with Kodoski, I thought. When I got into the Mercury, where it had been parked on Gray Street, I took a bottle of whiskey from the glove compartment, had a good swallow, and felt my parched throat go numb. After another good hit on the bottle I lit a cigarette, looked into the rearview mirror at my blood-shot eyes. Even then I liked it when the whiskey leveled out in my brain. The whiskey plateau.

The Merc came to life with a roar; the engine rumbled, vibrated. I rolled the windows down, felt the engine's power under my foot, and a breeze like hot breath coming into the car. It was good to be out of the apartment. I felt like a swallow who'd found its way out of a chimney, covered in soot, flying blind over houses and trees.

The traffic on the Edsel Ford Expressway was heavy, the air coming in dry as dust. I changed lanes and took an exit ramp up to Chalmers Avenue. At the next green light I turned a corner and drove past the abandoned Conner Park Projects. The buildings looked like the ones I'd seen in Hue after Tet--vacant windows, crumbling walls, partitions held together by who knows what.

I was anxious to get to the bar so I hit the gas. After a few more blocks, I pulled into the parking lot behind Gabriel's, and slid the Merc in next to Kodoski's truck. My T-shirt was soaked. I had a short-sleeved shirt in the back seat so I put it on. The parking lot was empty,

but I looked around before getting out of the car and going into the bar. Several people turned to look at me when I opened the door. Two guys were standing next to a pool table in the light overhead. I heard a sharp *crack*, a ball drop, then swearing and laughter mixed in with rock and roll coming from the jukebox. At first I didn't see Kodoski, and thought about leaving, then I spotted him at the end of the bar. He wore a fatigue jacket which I thought was kind of odd, it being so hot and all. I took a stool next to him, put my hand on his left shoulder where half his jacket sleeve was pinned. "Not too shabby," I said, and pointed to the barmaid who was drinking at the other end of the bar, something clear, vodka or gin. Her shrill laugh exposed her bucked teeth, her lips were turned up in a pout under a small rounded nose, almost rodent-like in a cute sort of way.

Kodoski leaned over, slid a quarter off the bar. "She's new," he said. "Her name's Kasia. C'mon, I'll flip you for her." Kasia watched us, then came down to our end of the bar; she stood in front of Kodoski, wiped her hands on a towel. "We don't allow no gambling in here," she said.

Kodoski smiled. "We're not gambling. Ever since Nam I haven't been able to tell my head from my tail." He had his hand over the quarter. The wannabe pool sharks argued about whose quarter was up for the next game.

"Are you one of them Vietnam vets?" she asked, looking at me.

I shrugged, thinking about the bad time Kodoski had gone through on Firebase Henderson. That was in Nam during monsoon. After the attack, we found NVA skeletons lying in craters left by mortar rounds exploding all over the red clay hilltop; it was a mass grave no one knew was there. When Doc and some of the other medics stumbled onto Kodoski under shattered tent posts, rib cages and skulls, he was knocked out, covered in mud and oblivious to rats the medics had to chase off so they could pump him full of morphine. He was dusted-off in a chopper that same night, taken to a hospital ship anchored off Cam Rahn Bay. I didn't see him until we were back in Detroit.

"He don't talk much," Kasia said, then walked away to wait on a woman who'd had too much to drink, who wore too much make-up to cover the miles, her clownish face a smear of ruby lips, dark rouge, and deep lavender eye shadow. She tried to talk, tried to say something, but it all came out in a slur--*I'd never let my daughter come into a dump like this*, she said. *It ain't a place for no lady*. Then she lit a smoke, looked at the ceiling, waited for an answer. She got on my nerves.

Once Kasia was out of earshot, Kodoski said, "I've got something." He pulled his fatigue jacket up to show me a .45 automatic, its barrel tucked into his pants.

I looked around the bar. "Are you crazy?" I said.

"Some rats are going to die at the spillway tonight."

"I didn't plan on this," I told him.

"We're not robbing a fucking bank for Chrissakes," he said, "Just a little hunting is all."

It was closing time when Kodoski asked Kasia for another drink, but he wanted her to have one with him, leave the bar, go someplace quiet. "Don't worry," he said, seeing the look on her face. "He can't get it up," then motioned to me. "Nothing to be afraid of."

"Looks healthy enough to me," Kasia said. I was glad she had a sense of humor. I'd thought about leaving, but in spite of the lousy feeling I had after the fight with Jean, and the fact Kodoski was carrying a gun, I thought everything might turn out all right.

*

The Clinton River spillway drains into Lake St. Clair about fifteen miles outside Detroit. I'd gone out there with Kodoski when we were kids. All night we fished, kept a fire burning near the river until the sun came up, watched it rise over cattails and reeds in the shallows near the river's mouth; at dawn the sky was burnt orange, the same sky over Firebase Henderson when Kodoski got hit.

I heard the walk-in cooler door go *thunk*. Kasia came out with a six pack of beer in a grocery sack. "Take this," she said, "and wait for me outside. I'll be out in a minute."

Kodoski nudged me and we left the bar. Outside, I felt tar sticking to the bottoms of my tennis shoes as I walked across the parking lot to get the whiskey from the Merc.

"She's not coming," I said after a while, and gave Kodoski the bottle. "She'll be out," he said.

Kodoski's appeal to women, the way he had with them, amazed me. I wondered what it was Jean had been attracted to. He knew how to talk to women, seemed to know when he had the edge, when he was about to get into their pants. He bragged about getting laid as if he'd solved some problem, as if he knew everything there was to know about fucking, as if there was anything to know. These women were just curious, I think. Maybe they wondered what it would be like to ball a guy with one arm. But he made them laugh, and they actually seemed to like him until they figured out he was mostly a fake, and wouldn't stay with them for more than a few days.

"How's Jean," Kodoski asked.

"Fine," I lied. We never talked about Jean, not in a way I thought settled anything. I wanted to tell him about the look on Jean's face when I'd gone out the door, but decided against it.

*

Jean never said where she'd been, except to say out with her girlfriends. They'd go somewhere a few times a week, on Saturdays when they worked the late shift at Polanski's Vegetable Warehouse over on Mack Avenue. I didn't care, but her boss, this fat Polack name Louie Polanski, made time with all the girls who worked there, married or not. He invited them into the back room to show

them the biggest cucumber he said they'd ever see. Jean told me all about it. I was worried, accused her of being with Polanski when she wouldn't tell me where she went with her friends. When I asked her to quit her job, she said, "You are such an asshole. I thought you had more class."

"Asshole?" I said. "The asshole is that disgusting vegetable Polack."

Jean said I had double standards. I told her I didn't hate anybody who didn't deserve it.

*

"Don't look so glum, hero." She was standing near the door of the truck. I smelled her. Stale booze and cigarettes. I got out and let Kasia slide across the seat. She'd changed into a skirt, and it rode up her thigh, showed her tanned legs where they rubbed against the shifter.

Kodoski started the truck, put it into gear, his hand brushing her legs. "Your legs remind me of Grand Boulevard," he said.

Kasia cocked her head. "How's that?"

"They go all the way to Joy Road," Kodoski said, then laughed.

We left the parking lot where a few noisy stragglers had come out of the bar to find their cars. Once on Jefferson Avenue we drove north, passed the Old Grosse Point mansions, the yacht club, and followed the Detroit River shoreline to Lake St. Clair until we came to the Clinton River. Kodoski turned onto a two-track road paralleling the

river; he steered over potholes and ruts, down shifted. Finally we stopped, and Kodoski killed the engine.

The spillway was different, not at all like it was when we were kids. In front of us was a '57 chevy full of bullet holes, its sharp chromed fins visible in the headlights. Behind the chevy was a mountain of trash: rusted bed springs, dirty mattresses, pieces of twisted steel, fifty-five gallon drums, cans, tires, you name it.

A hot wind blew in from across the lake. Some rain clouds moved in. The spillway was lit in moonlight. The water seemed like a sheet of aluminum foil. Far off a roll of thunder. Kodoski jumped out of the truck, the headlights still shining on the junk pile. "Did you see that," he said, then pulled the automatic from his belt, pointing to a spot near a charred, smoking tire. The truck's engine cooled, ticked in the night air.

"See what?" Kasia said.

"There!" shouted Kodoski. He waved the pistol at one target, then another. "A fucking rat!" He fired.

When the echo died in the canal, Kasia climbed out of the truck, and said, "Looked more like a cat." Her voice was calm, collected. It was not what I expected from her, especially since she stood between two strangers, between one shooting imaginary rats, and the other feeling nervous as a cherry walking point. I didn't know whether she was brave or just plain stupid, the two traits being so close together if you think about it.

"I know what a rat looks like," Kodoski said. He waved the gun around. "Missed that son-of-a-bitch, too. What we need is a goddamn dog. You want to be my dog?"

"Woof," Kasia said. "Give the gun to our hero. Let's you and me take a stroll." Kodoski slapped the grip into my palm as if he were handing off a baton. "Don't hurt yourself," he said.

I turned off the headlights, sat in the driver's seat, smoked a cigarette, examined the automatic. After moving concrete all day the gun was light, hardly noticeable except for its warm feel in the palm of my hand.

*

Jean never liked the guys I worked with, didn't trust them, didn't like the fact I'd sometimes stop at Gabriel's to have a few drinks and shoot a few games of pool with them. Even though I looked forward to working for the Giovanni brothers about as much as I looked forward to the headaches I'd get some mornings pressing down on me like a load of concrete, I crawled out of bed, and drove to Eight Mile Road and Gratiot Avenue at seven a.m. to pick up drunks and welfare bums waiting on the corner for a day job. I never thought of them as bad men, not in the sense they'd hurt anyone. They were no worse than some of the guys I knew in Nam. But Jean wouldn't have anything to do with them. She thought they were the same ones we saw every night on the eleven o'clock news, poor schmucks caught in

a gangland cross-fire or a liquor store hold-up. Maybe they were.

*

I got out of the truck and walked over to the smoking trash heap where it seemed to move in the dark, dotted with glowing embers. I pulled out a coffee can wedged in between a tire and some old bed springs. The can was warm; it still had its plastic lid. I walked over to the water's edge, threw the can into the spillway where its bottom turned up to shine in the moonlight. I heard Kasia laugh, Kodoski's muffled voice in the darkness behind me.

Taking aim, I shot three times. Each time a cartridge ejected from the .45 I felt the recoil radiate up my arm, into my elbow and shoulder; each time a silver spray hung over the spillway, then the coffee can sank before I could get off another shot. It felt right because I was always a damn good shot, hardly ever missed, and it was okay knowing there was still something I could do the way it was supposed to be done.

*

In those days I wanted Jean to appreciate me because I worked hard to keep us going, tried to save some money to move out to the suburbs where she thought it was safe. She stayed with me in the Gray Street Apartments for three years, on the east side, near Jefferson Avenue, not far from the Chrysler Assembly Plant and the Detroit River. When it's clear, which it hardly ever is, I can still see across

the roof tops of other houses, watch lake freighters go up and down the river.

At first, Jean was pretty excited about the apartment, the hardwood floors, tall windows in the living room, a fireplace that didn't work because the chimney wasn't safe. But more than anything she hated coming home after dark. There were only a few worn-out locks anybody could open if they wanted to. When we first moved in, though, I felt good about the place because I'd started to work steady. After we hauled all our stuff upstairs, and Jean arranged everything the way she wanted, we'd watch the river freeze, then in the spring we saw the ice break up, the ore boats begin to move slow through the channel.

*

At the spillway, a quarter mile downriver, a car passed over the Jefferson bridge. A few lights were on in the new condominiums near the river's mouth, and a freighter beyond inching upriver. I thought someone might've heard the shots. I got nervous thinking they'd call the police, but it was quiet except for the hum of an outboard motor somewhere out on the lake.

I walked back to the truck, dropped the tailgate, let the clip slip out of the automatic. There were two cartridges left. One in the clip and one in the chamber. I sat on the tailgate, put the clip back in and made sure the safety was on when I saw Kasia and Kodoski coming. She

looked ruffled, her hair was matted in sweat against her forehead. "Did you get off on that gun?" she asked.

"Sure he did," Kodoski intruded. "He's Pointman, the killer--that's what we called him in the Nam'"

I didn't like it when Kodoski talked about Vietnam; it made me think of guys in our squad--Pineapple, Hippie, Tennessee--we all had nicknames; it didn't matter what anybody called you because you were in a fantasy world that didn't matter. One day you were joking and getting stoned with your pals; the next, you were calling in a medevac, and you never saw them again. Like Bobby Strong, a skinny black kid from Chicago, a cherry we called Face because his was unusual: pock marks, deep set eyes, thick lips stretched across a wide set of teeth in a mouth with more teeth than a mouth is supposed to have.

One night Kodoski told Face he was the horniest bastard he'd ever seen, said Face would fuck a snake if he could get someone to hold its head. We all laughed, even Face. The next day on point Face set off a trip-wire rigged to a Claymore mine the gooks probably took off some dead grunt. It blew his arm and leg off. Before the dust settled, Face was on a chopper headed for a Da Nang hospital. He might be wheeling around Chicago right now.

"Here," Kasia said. "This will cool you down." A bottle of beer fizzed in my hand.

Kodoski set his beer on the tailgate, picked up the

.45, and said, "You know, people are a lot like animals . . ."

"You're stoned," Kasia interrupted, unbuttoning his shirt, running her hand inside.

"We're all animals," Kodoski said. "Right Pointman?" Then he put his arm around Kasia, the muzzle of the .45 pointed at her back. Slowly, moving out of Kodoski's grasp, she began to undress, unzipped her skirt, let her blouse slip off her shoulders until most of her clothes were around her ankles. She stepped out of them, left them in a heap in the dirt.

*

I slid out of my own clothes one morning after drinking all night at Gabriel's, and got into bed with Jean, trying to be quiet. For a while I listened to a fan running on top of the dresser; it squeaked and hummed, vibrated as it rotated back and forth circulating a room full of humid air. I heard a siren not far away, voices in the alley, the city getting louder. I couldn't sleep so I turned on a light next to the bed, Jean sighed and rolled over. The light made her squint. "It's early," she said. "When did you come in?"

"Just a few minutes ago. Couldn't sleep."

Jean sat up and stroked the back of my neck. "Where were you, Micky? I was worried."

I let my head rest against Jean's hand; her hand felt good on the back of my neck. Then she got on top of me. I

put my hands on her hips. "I've got to get ready for work," I said.

"Take a day off."

"I can't, Jean. You know that." I rolled her off to one side. In the shower I wondered how much money it was going to take to move out to the suburbs, how much it would take to raise kids where Jean wanted to.

*

"I want to be an otter," Kasia said, "and swim in the river." She turned and ran toward the water. We followed her down the embankment. When she got to a concrete retaining wall, her bra came off. She climbed down a ladder built into the wall, and quickly disappeared from sight.

Kodoski set the gun down on the ledge and took off his clothes. I wondered if he was right about us being animals. When I eased into the water, I noticed the current didn't pull much in the river where it flattened out the way it did close to the mouth. I watched Kodoski float on his back as he drifted in and out of light coming and going behind the clouds. Kasia dog-paddled towards me. Her forehead made a V through the water, her slicked-back hair tucked tightly behind her ears. I tried to float, but booze pounded in my head. The air felt thick and still. Kasia come up against me then, her small breasts pushed into me, drops of water slid down her face. I held her for a minute, tried to kiss her, but she went under the water, breaking the grasp of my

arms around her neck, laughing when she came up for air a few feet away.

Thinking it was too late to go home, too late to make things right with Jean, I swam back to the wall and climbed out of the spillway. I reached for my pants, stubbing the .45 with my toe, catching it just before it fell into the water.

The gun was still warm when I picked it up, pointed it at the water, watched Kodoski swim towards me. His face was pale in the moonlight, all the blood gone out of it as he struggled to make the last few yards. Kasia trailed behind. I looked down the barrel, caught the moon reflected on the water, sighted down the barrel at a shiny, bloodless face.

"You know that feeling, Mick," I heard Kodoski shout, "the one at the end of a high? You think you're supposed to take care of some unfinished business, but you never know what it is."

"Yeah," I said, "I've noticed it," and threw the gun over their heads. It splashed in the water.

Kasia came out of the spillway, shivered in the morning air, water glistening on her stomach. I put Kodoski's field jacket around her shoulders. She held it tight against herself. Half dressed, we stood there a minute, all of us, I guess, wishing we were home in our beds.

The rain clouds let loose. Big plops fell around us as we walked up the embankment towards the truck. When Kodoski and Kasia let me off at Gabriel's I said I'd see them again,

but I knew it would be a long time before I ever went back to Gabriel's.

When I parked the Merc in front of the Gray Street Apartments, I stood on the sidewalk for a minute, letting the rain soak me. A cool breeze blew in from downriver. I felt it coming from places I'd never been, would probably never go. The wind whistled through broken windows of abandoned buildings and decayed warehouses near the river front. I stood there, listening, then I went up to the apartment to discover the door unchained, unlocked, Jean's closet empty of clothes.

When You're In It

Still but a child, I admired the intractable convict on whom the prison doors are always closing.

--Rimbaud
A Season in Hell

Ask yourself. What have you learned, Randy Kodoski, after ten years in prison?

I knew Zeke Fenton was a good psychiatrist, if being good meant helping people. I could learn from him. He tried to understand me, and the others in the group, wanted to know why so many Vietnam vets were in prison, said he was going to write a book. I don't know if he wrote that book, but he asked questions, a lot of them. Later, when the group split, he saw me on an individual basis, wanted to know about people I knew after the war, places I'd been in Vietnam, how it was I'd been convicted of manslaughter and armed robbery six months after my best friend was killed one summer morning in 1971.

I said: "It's all jumbled."

"Explain," Fenton said.

"A house of cards," I told him, because I didn't know where to begin, because I didn't know if there was anything important to tell.

When I'm transferred from Jackson to the Marquette State Penitentiary next month, it will be like starting

over, but the system will be the same. I don't have a reason for the transfer, except my parole was denied a few months back. The rule is there is no rule, and you'll be shuffled around, kept off your feet. There's no apparent reason. If you look for one all you'll find are dead ends.

I won't see Fenton anymore. We had our last session three months ago, but I still hear his voice, questioning. When they put me on the bus and move me north, I'll keep listening.

Have you adjusted?

In prison you have time to think. You can bargain with cigarettes, pornography, drugs, anything you can acquire inside or smuggle from outside, but you can't buy time, get back what you've lost. So you try to remember details, hope you don't use up your memory, clam up like an old-timer doing life. If you shut down, forget what you were before coming inside, you might as well be dead.

I never thought I was worse or any better than the next man, but when I stood before Judge Petty in the Wayne County Courthouse, he called me a virus, a blight on society, a cancer. Since I'd done nothing wrong, I thought Petty's words were pretty harsh. My court appointed lawyer--a fat, middle-aged bald man named Henry Zuckerman--was more interested in where he was having lunch the day I was sentenced than he was in how long I went to prison.

I remember what Zuckerman said. Word for Word. "What we have here, Your Honor, men and women of the jury, is a

decorated soldier who served his country in Vietnam. He is a victim of circumstances, not hardly a criminal." It was all Zuckerman had to say, but it wasn't enough to convince the jury. During sentencing, the look on Petty's face told me it was over. He curled his lip when he spoke, tried not to snarl. "What we have here, Counselor, is an armed enemy of society. Not a hero. Mr. Kodoski, are you understanding me?"

Petty went on to say crime in Detroit was an epidemic, gave me ten to twenty without parole until I served half my sentence. I was removed from the Wayne County Jail the following week, and sent to Jackson.

I didn't think prison would be easy, but thought I could do the time if there was somebody to help me. I needed to order events, sort memories, work from some kind of foundation I didn't know how to build. Fenton could help me, though he seemed to wear down those last months he treated me, and looked like LBJ when LBJ came on TV to tell his fellow Americans he would not run for a second term.

Fenton's jowls sagged, the bags under his eyes grew heavy, his ears bigger, fleshier. After I told him my parole was denied, he said, "I won't be able to help you when you go up to Marquette. But I can line you up with another psychiatrist. A guy I know up there. He's good. You'll like him."

"No thanks," Doc, I said, and felt like I was letting Fenton down instead of the other way around.

Then he said he had a job at a university where he'd have time to work on his book. I didn't exactly know how much strain Fenton was under, but it started to show. He never admitted it, but I knew why he was getting out; it was a waste of time treating men who were more disoriented by therapy than helped. I came to the conclusion that psychiatric care, group therapy, and all the rest of it, was for people who couldn't handle their own freedom. They didn't know how to take responsibility for themselves; they needed someone to tell them it was okay to think strange thoughts, and not feel guilty for thinking them.

I wondered. What did Fenton feel? Sympathy? Disgust?

For several years after my trial, Fenton was my only contact with the outside. Kasia disappeared after testifying one afternoon in the Wayne County Courthouse. I didn't blame her. The prosecution said: "So you didn't know Randy Kodoski or his friend, Carl Mickiewicz?"

"I knew them," Kasia said.

"But not very well. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Yet you accompanied them to Mr. Kodoski's apartment above the Dom Polski Club before the shooting, and had sex with the defendant."

I tried to catch Kasia's eye during the trial, and twice she looked at me, but they were blank, unknowing, scared. No understanding passed between us. I tried to find her, wrote some letters, and Fenton made phone calls

one time, but she was nowhere to be found. It doesn't matter now, not after all these years. I wouldn't know what to say to her.

That's how Fenton was, always willing to help, even if it meant putting in his own time. I felt good when he came to see me. I needed to talk to someone from the outside, someone who'd listen. He kept me going, made me realize how much I wanted to be back on the street and start over; it was the same feeling I had in Nam, knowing The World was just months away, and all I had to do was survive.

I waited for those meetings with Fenton like a little kid waits for Christmas, even counted the days. I never said anything to him about how I felt, how I paced in my cell at night, waiting for morning when I was scheduled to see him.

One of the guards led me to the end of my block. We passed through several lockdowns, then took an elevator. I was taken to a room where Fenton sat behind a desk, wearing a herring bone jacket, pressed slacks, shiny brown wingtips. He was my ticket out.

The room was built into one corner of the prison. It was on the top floor, six stories high. Inside the prison walls I was lost, but the room helped me get my bearings. I sat facing a row of windows covered by wire mesh. I saw new homes being built in the countryside, suburban neighborhoods popping up in farmer's fields, streets coming out from a center like spokes on a wheel, and then leading to a dead

end. Cars moved on main highways, trees and shrubs stretched farther north to a woodline. Beyond, highrise buildings came up out of the landscape.

The other windows faced the prison yard, a baseball diamond, volleyball courts, men standing in the yard. Across the yard was another room. From the outside it looked like the same kind of cubicle, maybe the warden's office, a meeting place of some sort. It too was mirrored, windows reflecting bright sun, prisoners in the yard below.

The room was painted yellow, carpeted, and quiet. A mirror was part of the wall. A two-way, I guessed. Above, there was a closed-circuit camera. I didn't mind. I knew the Man could watch me from any direction he chose, and at any time he chose. He could see me, but I couldn't see him. There was a water cooler and two bookshelves behind Fenton's desk. I borrowed a few books, read the first couple pages. If one of the books got me going, if I thought it was a good story, I was hooked.

"What are my chances?" I asked, thinking about my parole.

Fenton leaned into a leather backed chair. "Pretty good. You're making progress," he said, but something bothered him. I could see it in his face. Maybe he knew my parole would be denied and I'd be transferred, or maybe he struggled to find some way to tell me he couldn't help; it was over.

I stared at his tie. "We've come a long way," I said.

"Yes," he said. "A long way."

The parole board heard my case in January, 1981.

The last time I met with Fenton, we were both edgy, both side-stepping what we thought might've gone wrong at the hearing.

"Did you tell them everything? How it happened, how it changed your life?" he said.

"Everything," I said.

"What did they say to you?"

"They don't give reasons, Doc, you know that."

"I don't understand why they didn't believe you.:

Fenton's recommendation was good. He let me read it to reassure me he was doing everything he could for me; it was several pages long; it explained how my psyche was altered after the war, unable to completely adjust after the trauma I'd suffered, and noted I was a victim of PTSD, a disorder common among soldiers in combat, but he didn't think I was violent. He noted how I would have eventually adjusted to life if Micky hadn't upset the balance, tipping the scales against me. The letter was very good, I thought, more intellectual than anything I could ever write, but it didn't work.

After I found out I was being moved, I said, "When I read those books everything outside gets kind of fuzzy. All I can do is focus on a page." I wasn't sure Fenton understood what I was trying to say, but he did.

"It's not unusual," he said, "to distract yourself from a situation like this. Perfectly healthy. You're experiencing a pleasure you would have gotten on the outside had you thought of it sooner."

I thought about what Fenton said. I knew then I'd found things out too late, always locked into the present instead of the future, but it was impossible to predict the future, wasn't it? Yet I tried to make sense of it, looked for answers to questions I still hear Fenton asking.

Tell me what happened after Vietnam.

My DEROS from Vietnam was November 15, 1970, a few days after Veterans Day. The Freedom Bird took me to Fort Lewis, Washington, where I landed at night in a Seattle fog. I didn't realize it then, but now I understand why all the flights returned from Nam at night. The military wanted to avoid anti-war protesters who waited outside the gate, hippies shouting obscenities at returning soldiers.

A commercial jet flew me out of Cam Rahn Bay; it was a rough take-off, but once we cleared the tarmac, everyone cheered, stood up out of their seats, shook hands, slapped each other five. We were going back to The World.

In Fort Lewis I spent two boring days processing, and took my papers for a thirty- day leave. I stopped in the mess hall for a meal. A Welcome Home banner stretched across the chow line. The mess tables were covered in cloth, silverware rolled inside white napkins. I ordered

a steak, was told I could have it any way I wanted--rare, medium, well-done. I filled my plate with baked potato, salad, vegetables, and bread, but I couldn't eat all the food, my stomach no bigger than a peanut, too small from eating C-Rations in the bush. I found it hard to believe anyone could eat so much food, and thought about Vietnamese peasants who'd pick a garbage truck clean searching for scraps. I dumped the rest of my food in the garbage and left the mess hall.

I was in the Seattle airport sixteen hours later, and twenty-four after that aboard a 747 to Detroit, unable to believe it could fly. I sat between two businessmen dressed in three-piece suits, their banking portfolios stretched across their knees. I felt small in my uniform. They were polite, but had no way of knowing what I knew, what I'd seen. They must have been thinking about stocks, bonds, or the piece of ass they picked up at a convention, stuff like that. I ordered a drink, a double vodka. They paid.

My mother and father fussed, but I was patient. If nothing else, the army taught me to be patient. I understood routine, waited in line at the unemployment office every second Tuesday of each month with other losers who couldn't find work. I didn't have to work. Not yet. The government owed me is the way I figured it. I took advantage.

I made up for lost time drinking in clubs and bars on Detroit's east side. Once in a while I'd go to Hamtramck,

Pole Town the Polacks called it, to see my friend Mickiewicz, who lived near the corner of Seven Mile Road and Joseph Campo, three blocks from the Dom Polski Club. Micky was a gunner on a Huey, had seen his fair share. In a way, he introduced me to Kasia. She worked at Gabe's, a bar on the east side we'd gone to a few times.

That summer, one Tuesday afternoon after picking up my check at the unemployment office, I stopped into Strohshiems on Gratiot Avenue to have a beer and cash my check. It was a small place where guys came to kill time after a shift in one of the small machine shops scattered up and down Seven Mile Road. I ordered a drink, heard a joke about a guy who found a genie in a bottle. He wished for a twelve-inch prick, and ended up with a little man on his shoulder; the little man ran down the bar to knock over other peoples' drinks. The guy who made the wish had to keep buying everyone a round.

I left a tip on the bar and walked into the hot sun. I drove a couple miles in a pickup I'd bought from an old highschool buddy to a liquor store called Farduls. I walked in to buy a pack of smokes. Behind the counter, two guys jabbered. I couldn't tell what language they spoke, didn't really care. They both had dark eyes, black mustaches, and looked as if they needed a shave. The Fardul brothers, I thought.

Earlier in the week I'd been in a store near downtown Detroit. It was the first time I'd seen plexiglass an inch

thick where a counter should have been. A black guy with an Afro worked behind the plexiglass, wore a T-shirt that read: ***Detroit. No Place For Wimps*** in bold black letters. The safety measure was extreme. What was everyone afraid of?

"How you today, sir?" the darker Fardul brother asked. The other one, thin and slimy, kept running his fingers through greasy hair, then rubbed his hands on his polyester slacks.

"Gimme a pack of Kools," I said, not wanting to encourage a conversation.

"No problem. Anything else?" the darker one said.

The slimy one looked up, smiled, said, "Have a good day, sir." The first three buttons of his purple silk shirt were unbuttoned. A gold chain hung around his neck, rested on a hairy chest. I took my change, and walked out wondering how it was these two towelheads could own a liquor store when I had to live on unemployment.

Walking back to my truck, I stared at the ground, thinking about nothing in particular, daydreaming, when I saw a dirty fifty-dollar bill next to the curb, Grant staring blankly up at me. I picked it up, felt heat rising from pavement, smelled exhaust fumes from passing cars. For the first time I noticed the sky over Detroit's skyline; it was orange, outlined by a thin, dark shadow. I liked the way it looked. For the first time I felt like I was home. It was my lucky day.

The fifty looked like it had been in someone's pocket for a long time, rolled and unrolled, crunched, squeezed. I felt better thinking maybe one of the Farduls dropped it. Tonight Micky and I would drink at the Dom Polski Club, on the Fardul brothers.

I called Micky, asked him to meet me at Dom's, and drove on Seven Mile, looking at small shops, some stores ready to go out of business, a few topless bars advertising cheap drinks and good-looking girls. I didn't think much about it then, but they always called them *girls*. After a tit bar called Le Chez Emile, on top of a building next to it, a large billboard displayed a woman's face. She smiled at me out of a sign for Chance Bail Bonds. The caption read: *Helping To Set The Captives Free.*

At Dom's place, I noticed an Apartment for Rent sign in the window next to the door. I'd been thinking about a place to live, give my old man and mother a break. I pushed a button next to the door, saw an old Polack look up from his euchre game, then heard the buzzer lock. I walked in.

Dom Polski didn't allow trouble in his place, hated hippies, queers, and niggers who tried to come in. He kept them out by ignoring them. People thought Polski's was private, but it wasn't, just selective.

Is there anyone you've been able to talk to? A friend?

One thing I've noticed in prison is you can, given time, learn about yourself, and believe it--time is all you've got. If you're lucky, you might even figure out what

the parole board wants to hear; that is, if you're not a lifer, but someone who has picked up some legitimate understanding of himself.

Not like this guy called One-eyed Crane in a cell directly across from mine, on the second tier. He's dead now, but when he was alive I kept an eye on him, didn't trust him, no one did. Perched on his bunk like some kind of goddamn owl, Crane saw everything. His head turned on his shoulders, rotated, as he looked up and down the cell block. He watched me. I watched him. One night I saw big round eyes in the dark.

Crane gathered information. He knew the dealers, the jockers, and he sold his story to the guards he knew had something he wanted. He was an informer.

After Vietnam my sight got worse. The prison doctors called it myopia. I turned it into an advantage. If I don't want to see what's about to go down, I put my glasses away, stuff them in my shirt pocket. The Man knows I can't see too well, leaves me alone. Without my glasses everything is out of focus. But with Crane it was different. He saw too much, and was attacked twice in Jackson. The first time Homeboy put one of Crane's eyes out with his thumb; the second time, two years later, Tagget shoved a plastic shiv under Crane's ribs and into his heart.

Homeboy was Special Forces in Vietnam. He did ninety in confinement after Crane talked to the wrong people about Homeboy's score. I saw Homeboy's black muscled arm come out

of a clean, white T-shirt, reach across the table and grab Crane by the throat. I heard Homeboy's voice. "If your eye offends me," Homeboy said, "I'll pluck it out."

Crane screamed, "The nigger's got me!" His eye fell on his plate; it looked like a grape. For a long time, until Tagget finally cornered him in the laundry room and murdered him, Crane could not keep his mouth shut. At first, when he returned from the hospital, he kept quiet, fluttered in his cell like a wounded bird, rubbing his hands together. Then one evening I saw Crane's one eye searching the second tier, calmly looking across at me until two guards stopped in front of his cell, talked for a long time. In a week Crane was dead. Tagget put him out of his misery.

Homeboy got ten years added for aggravated assault. It didn't matter to him because he was doing life for breaking a white man's neck in a bar called Sexy Sadys down on Mack Avenue. I'd been to the place myself, probably crossed paths with Homeboy once or twice. He took me under his wing. Homeboy was someone I wanted on my side. He acted before he thought. He reminded me of Delbert, a short, muscular brother who saved my ass in Nam. After spending two tours ambushing gooks in the Central Highlands, dodging back and forth across the DMZ, Homeboy said he tired of the whole thing. "Killed plenty of gooks, man. NVA and civilians moving shit on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Picked them off with an M-14 from a hundred yards away." He said he

made bets with other LRRPS to see who could get the best head shot, drop a gook like a sack of flour.

"Like pumpkins on pavement, man," Homeboy said. "Brains flying in the cross hairs."

After the fifteenth month of his second tour, he requested a transfer, and was refused. It was then he started to use heroin. "Had to bring the adrenaline rush down, man. That shit'll kill a nigger and a white man both."

"I know," I said, thinking about Delbert, and the time we kept moving farther north from Hue. I told Homeboy it seemed like we were out of our field, maybe across the DMZ ourselves, but there was no way to tell.

"Shit," Homeboy said. "Nobody knew where they was, man."

I talked to Fenton about what happened to Delbert. He encouraged me to tell the story in group. So I told it to them like this:

I figured we were at least eighty-five klicks from Hue, working our way through dense jungle to an LZ where we were supposed to get on choppers and fly to Da Nang for a three-day R and R. We had it coming, had been in the bush for six weeks without a break, and all of us looked like rags, monsoon soaking us to the bone. The mountains kicked everyone's ass, except for Delbert, who went up and down those hills and never got tired. Guess he wanted to get where he was going, start R and R as soon as possible.

Everyone slipped in the mud, packs rattling, M-16s slapping the ground, men grunting and swearing. We were noisy. The gooks could hear us a mile a way, but we hadn't seen any dinks for two weeks.

Lieutenant Connelly sent word up the line to take five. I walked point. Delbert was second man. In front of us there was a steep hill. Slippery. We sat down in whatever shade we could find when the sun came out--under big leaves or bamboo growing on the side of the trail. The jungle closed in. Water came down the trail, worked its way around black rocks stuck in red clay. Delbert cupped a cigarette. The smoke curled around his face. Sweat dripped from his chin. I leaned over to get a light off his smoke so I could burn a couple of leeches off my ankle. Delbert put his boot square in my chest and shoved me. "What the hell," I said.

Before I knew what was going down, Delbert fired rapid bursts from his M-16. Rock and roll. I hugged the ground, and fired at nothing, my cheek planted in the dirt. I looked at Delbert. He pulled a pin from a frag, then another, lobbed them down a slope away from the trail's edge. Splinters of bamboo came down on our heads. AK-47s popped. Mud splattered trees. It was over.

Delbert said, "I got two, man. I know I did."

I never saw them, looked down at my feet, couldn't see any blood. "You got them," I said. It was all I could think of to say.

Farther up the trail a third NVA was lying behind a boulder. We could hear him moan, a sorry thing I'd never heard before. We listened. "We've got to put him down," I said. The sound got on my nerves, couldn't stand listening to it. Delbert nodded. He crawled about 15 yards up the trail, threw a frag, stopped the gook from making any more noise. Then it was as quiet as could be, except for a trickle of water with a trace of blood in it. I'm no *liet si*, no hero, I told Homeboy, but Delbert was.

At Eagle Beach Delbert went his way, I went mine. I saw him walking on the beach with a few brothers from another platoon. They were laughing, talking shit, slapping hands.

We had our first hot meal in weeks that night, and waited in hooches on the beach for a Filipino rock band to set up. Most of the grunts were getting high, drinking beer, smoking dope, waiting for the Filipino girls in their mini-skirts. Nobody wanted to miss the pussy they couldn't have.

It was nine o'clock when Delbert came in. Two brothers I didn't know followed him into the hooch. They looked lost. Delbert was stoned, a shit-eating grin on his face. I was lying on a cot near the door. Delbert held out his hand. I slapped him five. He sat down next to me. "Peace," he said. "Meet Mr. Brown and Mr. Gunner." Mr. Brown stuck out his hand to shake mine, started with some hand jive I didn't know how to do. "Don't know it," I said.

Mr. Gunner looked at Delbert, "Who this dude?" he asked.

Sergeant Sprag and some others played poker. In the group was a good old boy we called Tennessee, O'Brien, a wiry red-headed kid from New York, Burton, and Semrau. They were loud, drinking heavy. They made a pyramid of beer cans in the middle of the floor. Sprag looked up from the card game. "Hey, Kodoski," he said. "Get in the game with us." The light inside the hooch was bright, bare bulbs strung across the ceiling. For a young man, now that I think about it, Sprag had a hard-lined face, looked older than his twenty-four years. He was one of the old guys in our platoon.

I thought I heard Burton say something about monkeys in the bush. Tennessee and O'Brien didn't laugh, but Semrau made a chimp face, and Sprag laughed.

Mr. Brown stiffened. Delbert touched his arm, said, "Let's check out the bitches."

Outside we could hear the China Sea, waves crashing on the beach. The Filipino band warmed, drums and guitars mixed with the sound of waves. I followed Delbert out of the hooch. We walked on the beach. There was a breeze coming in off the ocean. I felt wet sand between my toes. We listened to music, passed joints. Yellow, green, red, and blue lights from the stage stretched across the beach. The lights made long narrow paths of light. Each white foamy wave changed colors when it broke on the shore.

But there was something else in the water. Delbert saw it first, something dark, drifting toward shore. At first we thought it might be a sail from a Vietnamese fishing boat, maybe lost in a storm.

"It's a damn parachute," Delbert said. The chute was getting closer, floating, rolling toward us. I could see green nylon cords trailing in the water.

"We got to get it," Brown said. "It might be worth something."

"Made of silk, ain't it," Mr. Gunner said, high on the pot we kept going between us. "Maybe the dinks'll trade us beaucoup dope for it."

We waited for it to come closer. "Ain't goin out there too far." Brown said. "Sharks out there."

The chute turned round and round in the waves. We waded into the water, took hold and pulled. Then we realized how heavy it was--there was something inside. "What the hell," Delbert said.

"A fish?" I said.

Delbert found an end, turned the chute over, unraveling and untangling the cord as he went. We all helped. Inside was a man--an American pilot. He was bloated, and looked like a fat guy inside a fighter pilot's G-suit, his skin rubbery where it wasn't peeled away. It was impossible to tell how he died. I heard sometimes a fighter pilot could be killed when he ejects, the blast from the ejector seat

snapping his neck or breaking his back. He might've drowned, tangled in his parachute like a fish in a net.

What about Micky? Your friend.

Micky had his own problems. His wife, Jean, took off one night, left him alone in their apartment on Gray Street. Later on he moved back to Hamtramck, returned to the old neighborhood where he grew up, where his parents owned a store once, but sold it. They had a house, too, across the street, where I'd gone when I was a kid, probably no more than eleven years old. I don't remember anything unusual about his mother and father.

His mother worked in the store a few hours each day; his father opened at six o'clock and didn't leave till nine at night. Micky's mother took care of his grandmother who came to the store once in a while. She was old, heavy, always wore an ankle-length dress and a babushka, even in the summer. She spoke Polish to Micky's mother and father, but Micky couldn't understand her, except for a few words.

What I remember most about the Mickiewicz house was their basement. I helped Micky build model airplanes in a coal room his father converted to a workshop, but I didn't have the patience for it like Micky did. He was pale, skinny, didn't go outside much except to fly his balsa wood airplanes. Flying was all he talked about. He wanted to be a pilot, took a test in the army when he was drafted and failed it, then settled for gunner on a Huey. It was the closest he'd ever gotten to flying.

The night Jean walked out, I met him at Gabe's place, where Kasia worked. It was the first time I saw her. The three of us--me, Kasia, and Micky--drove out to the suburbs in my pickup to swim in the spillway. It was really the Clinton River. We were all drunk, everybody flirting, talking trash. I had a .45 I smuggled out of Nam and usually kept underneath the seat of my pickup. We had some fun shooting at cans we tossed in the river, things like that. Micky was edgy, acting weird after an argument he'd had with Jean. He was more quiet than usual, like he was thinking hard, but wasn't coming up with much.

Kasia and me were swimming in the spillway. It was a hot night, and the river felt good. I couldn't see Micky too well in the dark, except when the moon came out from behind some clouds. He pointed the gun at the water where he shouldn't have been pointing it. I didn't say anything, but Kasia asked me about it later, and I down-played her worry so she wouldn't be afraid of Micky. I knew he wouldn't hurt anyone, was just going through a bad time with his wife and all.

Jean was gone when he got home that night. Micky found a note on the refrigerator, Jean's clothes cleaned out of their apartment. I knew Jean before Micky, even slept with her. He knew about it, didn't bring it up. We both forgot about it. No big deal. It was the '70s.

I get ahead of myself putting together these pieces, because they don't fit into a logical pattern. What I think

I remember is sometimes what I think I've dreamed. Makes me wonder if what happened really took place. Like the war, now that I think about it. Ten years is a long time in anyone's book to recall one thing, like a war. It only seemed real when I was in it, but I was young, nineteen, and maybe I'm no different in that respect than anyone else who talks about their past. Fenton said it was easier to make history than it was to explore what really shapes the way you think. I don't exactly know what he meant, but I think about what he said, roll it over in my mind at night when the lights go down.

As I walked into Polski's I took out the fifty, snapped it front of Dom's face, and laid it on the bar. Dom whistled. "You find a job, Kodoski?" he asked. "Gonna stop leeching off us taxpayers?"

I smiled, lit a cigarette. "It'll take you a long time to pay me back for what I did in Vietnam."

Dom was in his mid-fifties, but looked older. The wrinkles around his eyes and mouth were set deep, entrenched. His belly hung over his belt, and bent over a cooler behind the bar the crack of his ass showed. "You forgetting the big one, wise ass?" he said.

"I guess we're even," I said. "Buy you a drink? Get one for those guys." I pointed to the euchre players.

The Polski club opened at 2:00 p.m. The same old Polacks in every afternoon to play euchre, drink whiskey,

and wash it down with cold beer. I remembered the For Rent sign. "Hey, Dom," I said. "What about that apartment?" I was positive Dom liked me enough to let me have the place.

He sipped his whisky, then tapped himself a cold Strohs. "The sign ain't there for my health. You gonna pay me on time--the first of every month? I got a living to make, you know?"

"I'll pay you," I said, and got the key to go upstairs to take a look. I left the change from the fifty on the bar, and told Dom if Micky came in to get him whatever he wanted. The apartment had two entrances, one on the street, and another from the alley. I went up a narrow stairwell. The walls needed painting. The steps creaked.

I didn't think about this then as I stepped into the apartment, but when I think about it now, I realize the apartment was no bigger than my cell, except I had a key. I unlocked the door and went inside. Standing on the hard wood floor I could see into each room: kitchen, bathroom, a small closet next to the entrance. A couple of windows overlooked the street in front of Polski's. Two yellowed Venetian blinds covered the glass. The small living room contained a sofa, a coffee table in front of that, an easy chair.

I had a view of St. Andrew across the street, an old Catholic church, probably one of the first built in the city. The street was wide, but the church darkened part of the street, blocked out the morning sun.

Dom furnished the place with other things, too--a small table next to the easy chair, a lamp with a dingy, worn shade, a TV stand but no TV. It was five steps to the kitchen. I counted them. It was just barely large enough to turn around in. There was a small stove and refrigerator. The bathroom had an old tub with claw feet, a sink stained with dark brown streaks running down the porcelain. The hot and cold water faucets in the kitchen were replaced with two pieces of hose clamped on a copper T so the water could come out in one place instead of two. The apartment smelled like old people, musty, like it had been locked up for a long time. It was perfect.

I pulled one of the Venetian blinds, saw Micky walking on the sidewalk across the street. He crossed and I heard the lock buzz. He'd gone into Polski's.

He was chalking a pool cue, and already ordering a shot of whiskey to go with the beer he had by the time I got downstairs to see how much of my fifty was left. He looked up from the pool table, bent over in the middle of a shot. "Saw Kasia last night," he said. I wondered what he meant by *saw*.

"Yeah. Where?" I said. I knew where, but I wanted him to say it just to make sure.

"Where do you think?" he said. He was playing games.

I watched him break, took a cue off the wall and waited for him to finish. Two balls dropped, one solid one striped. He had his pick. "What did she say?"

"Said she wants to see you. I think she's hot for you, man," he said. Micky thought for sure she'd taken me home after our night at the spillway, but nothing happened. Truth is, now that I think about it, Kasia and I were both worried about Micky. The way he kept fooling with the .45, and pointing it where he shouldn't have, made us nervous. The whole thing was weird. Micky sat on the edge of a concrete retaining wall with the .45 in his hand, the moonlight catching the metal just right, and making it shine. I'd heard him shooting earlier, and wondered if the .45 was still loaded.

After climbing out of the spillway, Kasia just wanted to go home and forget the whole night. All night long I kept thinking Kasia knew she'd made a mistake hooking up with a couple of crazy Nam vets. I didn't think she'd have much to do with us after that, but I knew I wanted to see her again. It was too bad things didn't work out. Everything started out okay, but didn't end up that way.

"She's got a friend coming down from some college up north," Micky said. "I told her to come by next Friday."

"To Polski's?" I said.

Dom threw a bar rag at me, hit me in the chest. "You want to rent my apartment, drink my liquor, but you're afraid to invite a nice girl?" he said. "You got to have a place to take her, you know."

I wasn't thinking about the apartment being a place a woman might like, but I had privacy there, which was a hard

thing to come by when you're young. At first, I thought I just wanted to be left alone, give myself time to figure out where I was, where I fit into the picture that was home. I took a month's rent from my pocket, gave it to Dom, moved in the next day.

Do you want to be in a group? You and Homeboy? A few others?

My only friend at Jackson was Homeboy. He was in the group Fenton started for Vietnam veterans. Two others were in the group besides me and Homeboy. Dexter Reader and Carl Rainy.

Reader, a black from Chicago, was the only survivor on a perimeter of a firebase got hit outside Khesahn. They found him inside a bunker. He'd covered himself with dirt from sandbags he knifed open, crawled under so the gooks couldn't find him. Buried himself. He stayed there until the dinks left, and he heard American voices calling out.

Late at night Reader screamed *cocksuckers, bitch gook whores* until guards finally came to shut him up. They beat him with night sticks, and wrote him up for causing a disturbance with intent to riot. It looked good on paper. Soon as Fenton found out, he put his foot down, told the warden it was unacceptable. After they beat him, Reader was quiet for the rest of the night, went around the next day apologizing to everyone, including the guards who'd beaten the shit out of him. In group he said he thought they were NVA trying to kill him.

Rainy was middle class, grew up in a suburb north of Detroit, was drafted right out of highschool. Mostly, he kept to himself, didn't say much. He did tell us what happened to him after Vietnam. He married and started a family. But it was over pretty quick, his whole life changed during a night he couldn't remember.

He doesn't know why, but he can't remember going from room to room with a shotgun, can't remember what time it was he shot his wife, his two kids asleep in their beds. The police found him in a closet. When they asked him about it, he said he'd been to a bar with friends. They told war stories, had a few laughs, then he went home, took a shotgun from its case, cleaned it. He remembers nothing else. Rainy thinks he's innocent because he can't imagine he'd do such a thing, can't remember it.

After a year, Fenton split the group. He said he wanted to treat us individually. Only two of us agreed to continue treatment. Reader was one. The others dropped. The last meeting Fenton's questions went something like this: "I've noticed a pattern," he said. "In one way or another each of you were found hiding somewhere. Can anyone tell me if this has any significance?"

"It's like not wanting to be seen, man," Reader said. Homeboy laughed. Reader frowned. "Shut up, man, I got a point here. Everybody can see you, like prison. Everybody watching you, waiting for you to make a wrong move."

Rainy straightened, moved forward on the edge of his chair. "I think I know what Reader's saying. It was that way in the military. They'd always--"

Fenton interrupted. "Who's *they*?"

"The people in charge," Rainy continued. "The officers, NCOs, people from the top down. They'd breathe down your neck, wait for you to screw up so they could put you on some kind of shit duty."

"And teaching you about weapons, man," Homeboy said. "They make you angry, then give you a weapon to do something about it. But they be watching you. Waiting to see what you gonna do."

I could tell Fenton thought he was on to something. "Are we talking about control here?" he said.

Homeboy's eyes were milky, red veins closing in on his dark pupils. "I'm talking about bullshit. What they feed you."

"Can you be more clear on that," Fenton said. He leaned back in his chair, perfectly comfortable, like he was in somebody's living room having a normal conversation instead of talking to a group of convicted murderers.

Rainy lit a cigarette. "I've got it," he said. "Manipulation. Unless you know it's happening you can't do a thing about it. It's like Homeboy said, they're watching. They've got the angles covered."

Fenton tried to guide us. "Would anyone like to comment?" he said. "Add to what Mr. Rainy's said?"

Reader lit a cigarette. We all smoked. The room filled with smoke. "Yeah," Reader said. "The whole fucking thing, man. You can't fight it. Like prison. Look around you--towers, cameras, mirrors--the Man is watching you, man. He sees it all. He knows when you're taking a shit."

"You got that right, brother," Homeboy said. "You locked in."

"Shakin the bushes, boss," Reader said.

Homeboy laughed.

When the group split, Homeboy decided not to see Fenton again. "You still seeing that shrink," he said in the yard one day. "What's he gonna do for you, man? Nothing 'cept make your head spin. You got enough shit surviving this damn place. You gonna get out of here if you keep your gig straight. They got nothing on you, man."

I thought Homeboy was wrong. There had to be reasons for why things happened the way they did. It was common sense. A man could change his life, I thought, just like Delbert tried in Vietnam. I thought about him, about how he'd lost his life trying to change it.

When you were there--in Vietnam--how did you feel about what happened to Delbert?

It was the last day of R and R at Eagle Beach. Connelly called a formation in the morning, sent a couple of E-5s to roust us out of our hangovers. My squad and the rest of our platoon would fly to a small village in the lowlands, then hump ten klicks to Firebase Henderson in the

Central Highlands. Henderson was hit a month before, every LZ hot. It was bad.

My platoon gathered on a strip of tarmac in front of hooches where we spent two days drinking beer, smoking dope. Connelly wiped sweat off his face in the morning heat, finished what he had to say, ready to dismiss us when Delbert broke ranks, walked right to the front, and saluted. "I'm not going back to the field, sir," he said. Everyone heard him say it. Loud and clear.

I don't know how I felt about it at the time, but Connelly looked at Delbert like he was one more stupid nigger grunt he'd have to deal with. He looked tired, stared at the ground, an Oklahoma State ROTC who didn't like being made a fool by a Philly nigger.

It was that night we found the pilot wrapped in the parachute like a cocoon, floating in colored waves while rock and roll blared from a Filipino PA in the background, interrupted by lyrics sung in broken English. I knew it meant something, that it was no coincidence a pilot somewhere in the South China Sea ejected at the right moment to land in a current, and drift to the exact spot of beach where stoned grunts could find him. It was more than chance, because too much had to fall into place: wind and water, the mission he was instructed to fly off some Navy carrier--it was a plan, some kind of military design.

On the last day waiting for choppers to fly us into the field, Sprag came into my hooch with Burton, a skinny farm

kid from Iowa who stuttered, and Semrau, the huge, broad-shouldered beer-drinking Kraut from Milwaukee. It was morning. They were drinking. Sprag crunched a beer can in front of my face, spilled beer on my chest. "Where's the nigger?" he said. He threw the can across the hooch, drew a .45 from his holster like he was in some kind of shootout at the OK Corral, pointed it at the can, made popping sounds with his mouth.

Burton's Adam's apple worked up and down. "We're g-going to put that coon on the ch-chopper," he mumbled. His mouth smacked with saliva, like a dog when he's getting ready to puke.

I had my hands behind my head, tried to act casual. "Don't mean nothin, man," I said.

Semrau flopped down on my cot, pinning my legs. He rested his chin on the butt end of his M-16, the barrel pointed at the floor. "Connelly said to make sure *everyone* goes in the field. That includes your nigger friend. You gonna help?"

I turned on my side, ready to kick Semrau in the head if I had to. Then I saw Delbert coming toward the hooch. He was moving slow, the way junkies do when they're trying to maintain, crossing the steel corrugated chopper pad.

"The hell it don't," Sprag said. "We're in this together--a fucking team. Pull one man the team doesn't function."

Semrau stood, tried to steady himself, leaned against the canvas wall of the hooch, looked up and saw Delbert on the pad. I tried to get their attention, hoped they'd go out the other end of the hooch before Delbert came in, but Semrau saw Delbert coming. "There's the black bastard," he said.

The three of them rushed out. Delbert didn't see them, probably couldn't see more than two or three feet in front of his face. He walked through a dream, whatever it was. They grabbed his arms and legs. I heard choppers coming in, men gathering equipment, rushing to meet their squads. I watched from the hooch, saw Sprag and the others grab Delbert, who stiffened soon as he felt their hands. I thought those white boys were *beaucoup dinky dao*, which is French and gook for very much crazy, for going after Delbert, thought they'd be hanging in the wire like sappers after a mad minute on the perimeter.

Delbert looked at some distant point, a place in the sky, then kicked high, sent Burton sprawling. Semrau swung the butt end of his rifle, hit Delbert in the face, and a red splotch of blood showed. Sprag hung back until Burton and Semrau got hold of Delbert's arms and legs; they had him, carried him to the chopper. The choppers were coming in fast. One by one. There were machine gunners on each side of bay doors; they looked like insects, their heads under helmets, their eyes concealed by shaded visors. They swung their guns back and forth, watching grunts rush for

the Hueys. Dust swirled around the pad, men waited to board. I gathered my own equipment, rucksack, water, ammo, and ran into the heat to join my squad. I was close enough to see Burton's bruised cheek, Semrau hunched over, rubbing a spot between his shoulders.

Next to Burton and Semrau, Delbert lay on his side, his faced pressed against the metal flooring of the chopper. I wanted to help him, but there wasn't anything I could do. The Huey carrying Delbert and the others was ten feet off the ground when Delbert rolled to the other side, let his body fall out of the bay door. For a moment he hung from a landing runner by one arm, then hit the ground, jumped to his feet, ran across the company area toward a bunker where a group of brothers were positioned on a quad-fifty.

Semrau and Burton saw him run, motioned to Connelly who was already off the ground with his command squad in another chopper. Connelly leaned into the pilot, pointed at the ground. The pilot waved him off like a fly.

I remember something Delbert said the night before, when the pilot drifted up on Eagle Beach out of nowhere in the South China Sea. We all stood there in the dark looking at this strange thing, this bloated man, this thing which no longer looked human. "Nothing happens without something gonna make it happen," Delbert said. And at the time, I believed him.

My squad was the first to jump off in a small field near a rice paddy outside a ville called Vinh Loi. Cobras

circled the area, made a ring around us as we landed one by one on a spot marked with yellow smoke. The smoke swirled in the wind made by chopper blades cutting the air. I jumped from a Huey, got down on my knees in tall grass, watched my platoon come in. We formed a perimeter, tried as best we could to stay on high ground, out of paddy water, to keep our feet dry. It was late in the afternoon. More rain was coming over the mountains. I saw clouds over Firebase Henderson. The mountain top was stripped. I could barely make out 155s sticking out of its top. The next day I'd lead my squad up through the canopy, then we'd be safe inside Henderson's perimeter, pulling guard for artillery. Gravy duty.

When did you and Micky decide to rob the liquor store?

First of all, it wasn't a robbery. That's what the police called it, what the court decided it should be, but that's not what it was.

About two weeks after I rented the apartment from Dom, Kasia and her girlfriend came into Polski's. I got there around seven, wanted to have a few drinks to loosen up because I didn't think they'd come. Besides being a lousy pool player, Micky didn't know the first thing about women. Jean was proof enough. So I wasn't going to count on Kasia showing, especially after what happened at the spillway.

Micky was lining up a shot on the pool table. "I think Kasia used to work for my old man," he said. "Before the

neighborhood went bad. Nothing but drug dealers and whores cruising the streets."

Some Latvians, Hungarians, Yugoslavs, I don't know which, bought the place and reopened it. I don't remember where they were from, why they were in Detroit to begin with. Micky's people moved to Florida. He never got a cent from the store, went to work for the Giovanni brothers, some big-shot dagoes who made a lot of money pouring concrete on the upper east side for one of the city's new housing projects.

When Micky said he knew Kasia, I said, "Bullshit."

"No, really, man," Micky said. "I know her. She don't remember me cause I was away. You want to see her, right." Micky looked at the door, nodded toward it.

"Howdy Doody have wooden balls?" I said, and heard the door buzz, saw Kasia and another woman come in. Micky miscued. Kasia looked better than she had at the spillway where the three of us swam naked in the river. I liked her jet-black hair. It was cut short, curled around her face. She had a small mouth, teeth showing slightly when she didn't try to hide them. She wore a paisley halter top, tight jeans showing her curves. She *was tight*. She waved, went up to the bar to order drinks. Her girlfriend followed.

Micky let out a low whistle, stared at the girlfriend who looked a little like Eva Marie Saint in *On the Waterfront*, blond wavy hair, green eyes big enough to stop a

ship, a full body. "Real class," Micky said, a stupid grin on his face.

"Educated," I said. "She's got her mind somewhere, but not in Pole Town."

"You're wrong, man. She's glad to be in a familiar AO," Micky said. "Everybody comes home."

Kasia introduced us, then went over to the juke box and selected a few numbers. Her name was Annette Kosciusko.

"Annie," she said, and held out her hand, showed even white teeth. Her hand was soft, warm. Dressed in a short skirt, loose fitting blouse, and hair tied in a pony tail, she looked clean, washed. She reminded me of the Catholic highschool girls in uniform who walked passed my parent's house before we moved away from Washburn Street. I saw them pass on their way to Sacred Heart. They wore white ankle socks, pleated skirts, white blouses. I remembered their firm legs, delicate arms, shiny scrubbed faces.

Annie chewed gum. "What do you guys do around here?" she said. "Play sports? Go to school?" I was looking at her blouse. Above one pocket was a monogram. *Northern Michigan University Wildcat*. The letters were small, dark green, trimmed with gold.

Micky was no Brando even if he looked a little like him. He tried to do Brando without knowing how. He was self-conscious around women, worried he was too short, his nose too big, his forehead made too high by thin, receding hair. Most times he shut up around women, got real quiet.

This time he said, "Too busy looking for work. Got laid-off."

"It's terrible," Annie said. "You shouldn't be without a job. God. You went to Vietnam. I don't want those boys at school to go. Nobody cares about that silly war. A wrinkle crossed her forehead."

Kasia came over to the pool table with a little tray full of shot glasses. "What're we talking about?"

"Vietnam," Annie said.

Kasia passed shots around. We all took one. "Oh, that," she said.

Micky downed his shot, took in a breath like he was going to inflate a balloon. "We could've won," he said.

Kasia's eyes were clear, bright, her pupils large from whiskey. "Nobody will win," she said. "They're just killing innocent people."

"They? You mean me and Kodoski?" Micky said.

"Relax, Micky. You were drafted--it's not your fault," Kasia said, then put her arm around Micky's neck, hugged him.

Micky looked at the floor, stared at something, maybe thinking about the war or how he'd lost his job. He wasn't talking, but I knew what happened.

He told me Giovanni's youngest son, a long-haired freak, called him a baby killer. Micky said he wouldn't allow it, sent the kid to the hospital. Without thinking, he threw a trowel at Giovanni, hit him below the left eye.

"Funny thing," Micky said after it happened, "I don't remember throwing anything," then his Uncle Tony is on my ass, calling me a piece of shit.

He looked up, surprised me by asking Annie to dance. The four of us hop-stepped-close-stepped around the bar to some polkas Kasia played. That was the way with Mick, down one minute, up the next. You could never tell.

Afterwards we sat under one of two ceiling fans Dom kept going through the summer, in a booth next to some photographs hanging on the wall of fighters and baseball players, an air-conditioner in the wall working hard in the heat. Next to it was a picture of Joe Louis and Rocky Marciano in the ring when Marciano knocked Louis down--nobody had done it before. There were some other boxers I didn't recognize who stood with their arms raised, fists clenched in boxing poses. Autographed pictures of Al Kaline at bat, and Bill Freehan crouched behind home plate were on the wall next to the boxers. A Briggs Stadium pennant, frayed and faded, was pinned next to a Tiger Stadium logo, a growling Bengal showing its pointed teeth. Our beer bottles dripped on the table, made puddles we sopped up with cocktail napkins.

Kasia and Annie excused themselves, got up to go into the Ladies. Micky said, "Not bad, huh. I'd like to get a look at her mother. You can tell exactly how the daughter will look in twenty years if you get a look at the mother."

"I'm almost drunk enough," I said, "to believe you, Mick."

Wondering how to ask Kasia and Annie if they wanted to go up to the apartment, I kept thinking of things to say without giving the impression Micky and I just wanted to get laid, which we did, but there was no subtle way to ask.

Then Annie said, "Do they serve Southern Comfort here? I'd like a tall class of Comfort mixed with Seven-up."

It didn't sound good to me, too sweet, thick. "No," I said. "This is a beer and straight whiskey kind of place."

"We could get a bottle," Kasia said, "Take it somewhere."

That was my cue. "I live upstairs," I said. "Why don't you go up while me and Mick go get one."

Shaking her hair loose, then pulling it back again into a pony tail, Annie said, "Think it'll be all right, Kasia?"

I slid my apartment key off a ring, gave it to Kasia. "It'll be fine," I said. "Kasia's got the key. You can leave whenever you're ready."

Nothing gonna happen without something gonna make it happen.

When I went to Jackson in August 1971, I knew it would be the longest haul I'd ever do. I'm not ashamed to admit I was scared. Jackson was filled with badass men. In Nam it was easy to be a badass; everyone carried a weapon. It took a long time for me to adjust to prison--if that's possible.

Everyone talks louder than necessary, men shout and scream, trying, I guess, to be heard above the next guy. Each tier and block echoes with voices, voices that don't always sound too human. They threaten, scream obscenities. It's a way to be noticed, I guess. But it's sometimes impossible to single out a voice--all blending into a kind of unified sound, a roar.

Over a year or so, I had to focus elsewhere, block out what I didn't want to hear. I kept to myself, read some, looked forward to Fenton's group. It was the only place we could talk about prison, Vietnam, how we felt.

Fenton asked more questions: "Rainy. You said something about manipulation. What did you mean?"

"It starts from day one. Think about it. From the top down," Rainy said, "Doesn't matter if it's school, church, the military. You name it. Somebody's trying to make you conform, trying to control you."

Reader leaned on the edge of his seat to tie a shoelace. He looked up at the group, said, "White boy's got something. They don't call no master sergeant, *Top*, for nothing."

"Shut up, nigger," Homeboy said. "Think about where you're at. It don't start from the top. It starts from inside you. Inside out. That cell you in gonna be the closest you get to figuring out who you are."

I didn't talk much in the group, thought if I listened

I'd learn more, but I said, "Trouble is, man, when you're in it you don't know it."

"You making no sense now, man," Reader said.

Homeboy said, "Hold on. That's what I'm saying. On the outside you always thinking. Wham bam, thoughts flying. Where am I gonna get money to buy me some clothes, a nice car. Find me some pussy. Why's this guy or that girl trying to fuck me. Who's trying to get me. Why? You go on the defensive, man, because that's the world it is."

"In here," I said, "you're on the defensive, and you know why, but out there you don't."

"So if you knew on the outside," Fenton said, "what you needed to plan, you'd be able to keep ahead of these controlling forces you've been talking about? And that way exercise personal freedom."

"Plan what?" Reader said. "Ain't no fucking plan gonna do you no good. The Man's decided for you."

We'd come to a dead end, like one of those streets going nowhere out there in the suburbs. A guard came in, said our time was up. Across my block in a half-lit cell on the second tier, I saw Crane staring at me. It struck me Crane was no different than the rest of us, except he was an informer, labeled, probably hated by most. I wondered what forces controlled Crane. Had a teacher, foreman, or priest made him tell on other students, snitch on his co-workers, confess?

I turned to the wall that night so I wouldn't have to

look at him, and thought about Delbert, how he'd had enough of the war, tried to escape. I wondered if he'd thought out his decision to end the war, or if he was so far in it, maybe inside himself, it didn't matter if he had a plan or not. I thought about Firebase Henderson where he'd been killed by friendly fire.

How did your friend, Delbert, die?

Delbert came back to us without his weapon. Our squad was on a ridge about a hundred yards from a 155 emplacement. We had a decent bunker, room enough for my squad, five or six men. Empty shell boxes filled with dirt lined a long trench in front of the bunker. We found beeswax used to separate artillery shells packed in long wooden boxes, and rolled it into candles, burned them at night, smoked some of the dope we had left over from Eagle Beach in the weird shaky light of the candles. The bush would come again soon enough, so we took advantage of the down time.

We pulled guard in a sandbagged hole above the trench in front of our bunker, set up the M-60 Tennessee carried, unloaded the ammo the rest of us humped, coiled it next to the machine gun, pointed it down the ridge at a trail weaving in and out and around tree stumps.

The ridge was one of a number of ridges spread out like fingers. They ran out and down in all directions from the mountain, steep hills falling away on each side. Through the night we doubled up in the hole to keep each other awake, fired flares over the razor wire, looked for

movement, dink sappers coming through the perimeter. The hill was defoliated. The rain cut gullies into red clay, eroded the hill until it looked like something had made giant claw marks in the clay. Mud everywhere.

Each night the CQ ordered a mad minute--illumination flares exploded in the sky around the perimeter, turned night into day. Arty leveled 155s, fired shells packed with shrapnel, quad-fifties sent red tracers down the mountain side. We put our M-16s on rock and roll, fired 25mms into the jungle. Charlie knew who had the power, the control; we couldn't see him, but he could see us, so we knew he got the message.

At Eagle Beach, Delbert was loaded down with a radio, ropes, an entrenching tool, smoke canisters, anything the lifers could find to add weight to his rucksack; but he carried no rifle, no ammo or frags, and not one Claymore. That afternoon, the second day on Henderson, I saw Delbert walking toward our bunker, smiling, light on his feet. "More gravy duty here," he said.

Tennessee and O'Brien came out of the bunker. "Damn. Look who's back," Tennessee said in a high-pitched drawl.

O'Brien said, "Good to see you, man. You coming in the field?"

"Fat dog fart?" Delbert said.

Truth was we were a squad. We depended on each other. When we were in it, we counted on the next man. It didn't need to be said. We just knew that's how it was, but we

were curious about Delbert, wondered what he'd do without his weapon. He saw the looks on our faces. "The lifers, man, they don't know what to do with me. They're scared, trying to scare *me*, but before it's over I'll be back in Chi Town chasing tail, thinking about the wonderful time you all be having back here. Here comes the man now," Delbert said, pointing at Sprag.

He was on a mission, making a bee line for our bunker. Sprag stopped short, stood on sandbags surrounding our hole, stared down at the rest of us in the trench. "Kodoski," he said, not looking at me but glaring at Delbert. "Ready your squad. I want an observation point on that ridge by late afternoon. I'm sending Burton and Semrau with you. Delbert. You're radio man. You got that?"

"Got it," I said; I didn't look forward to setting up outside the wire. The gooks mortared Henderson regularly since it was built, kept up the harassment for months. In silence, we packed what we'd need: trip flares, extra ammo, frags, Claymores. One night outside the wire then we'd be back inside.

Why did you go back to Farduls?

It was Micky's idea. He said it was the closest place to get a bottle. Then we left the Polski Club, carried two beers out in a paper sack. Drank them on the way to the liquor store. One towelhead party store was as good as another, I figured.

Micky put a bottle of Comfort on the counter. I

grabbed a bag of ice, a bottle of Seven-Up from one of the coolers. The same two guys were in the store. The skinny one worked the cash register while the older Fardul brother stocked beer in a cooler. He saw me and waved. I waved to him, said hello.

"Twelve dollars and ninety-five cents. Is that all, sir?" the skinny one said.

Micky reached for his wallet. "That'll do it," he said.

"Please. Can I see ID, sir."

Still fishing for his wallet, Micky said, "Don't I look twenty-one?" He couldn't find his wallet, must have left it in my truck or at Dom's.

The skinny brother smiled. "Sorry, sir, but it's law."

"Look, I forgot my wallet. Here's a twenty." He took a bill from his shirt pocket.

"Sorry," he said, still smiling.

I reached for my wallet, said, "I'll get it--"

"No," Micky said. "Listen up, *Bro*. You just got off the boat, right, so you probably don't understand protocol."

The older brother set a case of beer down, came behind the counter. "My brother is very sorry. He is doing his job," he said. "If your friend has ID, no problem."

Micky balled the twenty, threw it at the skinny guy, hit him in the chest. I gave my ID to the older Fardul, started to leave when the skinny brother said, "Your change, sir."

"Thanks," I said, left the store, saw Micky sitting in the truck staring straight ahead.

When I got in the truck, I said, "Why'd you give those guys such a hard time?"

"C'mon, man. It was them giving me a hard time. What's with you? Isn't this *our* neighborhood? Can't even get a drink in your own neighborhood? You think Dom put up with crap like that when he came home from the big one? Who do you think made it possible for them to come here in the first place."

"Things are different. It's not their war. Maybe not even ours, was all I could think of to say."

"My ass. Who's in control here? There's nobody to look out for us except us," he said.

I didn't know who was in control, wasn't sure I even cared. Micky drank the rest of his beer. I thought about Kasia and Annie waiting for us in the apartment. We drove on, passed a number of shops and stores crowded in on Seven Mile Road. Some of them were boarded, others had bars over their windows. A block from my apartment, four blacks hung on the corner, doing some kind of dance routine, passing a paper bag between them, laughing and jiving each other.

Micky loosened up, finally realized he hadn't been with a woman since Jean walked out eight months earlier. "Think those chicks will still be there?" he said.

"Sure they will. They're waiting for Polish studs," I said. Micky laughed.

Four people in my apartment was a crowd. Annie fixed drinks. A window fan hummed. "How do you stand this place? It's not much bigger than my dorm room at college," she said, then sunk into an easy chair I'd bought at Goodwill for fifteen bucks; it was comfortable, almost big enough for two people. You could get lost in it.

"The view is great," Kasia said.

Micky said, "If you like brick."

She leaned close to the window, raised her eyes, looked the building over. "Look how those arches and spires point toward the sky--like a castle," Kasia said.

I never paid much attention to St. Andrew. To me it was just another Catholic church; they all had the same gloomy, dark appearance, priests hidden inside confessionals, handing out Our Fathers and Hail Marys to people who felt a need to spill their guts.

St. Andrew blocked the morning sun, which I didn't mind at all, because I didn't like waking too early. I used Polski's for an alarm. Sometimes I heard Dom opening the club, heard the old-timers from the neighborhood come in to the bar, talking loud, giving one another a hard time. They played cards every afternoon, shouted *Euchre*! so loud it woke me. I counted on them. I never went to sleep before three or four in the morning, looked for parties after the bars closed, then usually went to a restaurant to drink coffee and sober up. It bothered my mother and father; they didn't understand how anyone could stay out so late and

sleep all day, why anyone would want to waste his life in a bar. My father said they couldn't live like that. So I moved.

Annie made more drinks. The third one, straight, tasted better. Micky moved over to the chair, sat on the arm, watched the monogram on her blouse rise and fall with her breathing. He lit a joint, passed it to Annie, leaned close to her.

Annie said, "Don't you get tired of Detroit? It's such a stink hole." She put her hand on Micky's thigh, squeezed him. "All these buildings make me dizzy."

"Hold on," Micky said, and we laughed.

Kasia moved into me. Her hair smelled clean, like she'd just stepped out of a shower. We had the sofa to ourselves. "Try working in a bar," she said, "putting up with drunks every night."

"I'd rather not," Annie said. "Up north I feel free. I've got my own room. I have to share it with a roomy, but we get along. Besides, you can't learn anything working in a bar."

"I get all kinds of good advice," Kasia said. "Like Sally--she's this drunk comes in everyday at noon, stays till three, looks about forty, but she's only thirty. She said to remember two things: don't get pregnant, and don't go out with Vietnam vets."

The apartment got smaller, seemed to move in around us, forced us to touch; it made me feel close to Kasia, Annie,

and Micky. I liked the feeling--all of us getting drunk together, getting to know each other. "Sound advice," I said.

Kasia raised the Southern Comfort off the floor next to her, topped off our glasses. "I've got the first one covered," she said, turned her head toward me. I kissed her.

It isn't always easy to tell how some things happen, but Micky took Annie's hand, sort of pulled her into the bedroom as she unbuttoned her blouse with her other hand. Kasia and I followed them into the room, and got on the bed. I felt numb and silly from the liquor. I couldn't focus on Micky and Annie next to us, could barely see Kasia looking up at me. We had our clothes half off, too drunk to undo buttons and zippers, but we found each other. I said I loved her, might've even meant it.

Then before I knew it the clock on my night stand said 10:00 a.m. I heard Micky stir. My head felt heavy, numb. I could barely open my eyes. Kasia and Annie slept. Micky got out of bed, bumped into a door jam on his way to the bathroom, turned on the light. The toilet flushed. I tried to raise my head, saw him standing next to the bed. I said, "What're you doing?"

"Going out for smokes. Want to come?"

"I think I did," I said.

"C'mon. We'll get some vodka, make some Bloody Marys. They're going to need it."

Micky took the truck keys from my pants, dressed and was through the door before I stumbled into the bathroom, splashed water on my face, made an attempt to brush my teeth. My mouth was thick and dry. I looked in the mirror at my reflection, asked myself: What does a hungover out-of-work vet in an apartment in Pole Town have to do with anything? I didn't have an answer. My head was pounding. I could hear it. I barely had enough energy to hold my tooth brush.

I don't know why I agreed to go with Micky, guess it was too much work to argue with him. He was already in my truck where it was parked near the curb in front of Polski's. So I drove east on Seven Mile, passing the Chance Bail Bond sign--the same woman smiling her helpful smile, and the shops and stores with their steel accordion-like gates pulled back away from their windows--to the closest place. . . the Fardul brothers liquor store.

Micky didn't talk, smoked his last two cigarettes. His eyes were clear, not red and swollen like mine. He wasn't sick at all, or at least he put up a good front. My stomach churned. My head throbbed. The pickup lurched and bounced. The apartment, my bed, and Kasia were just a few blocks away, but could've been in another city by the way I felt. I tried to imagine Kasia and Annie, their naked arms around each other in sleep, but the picture didn't work. I wanted the real thing, wanted to get back into bed with Kasia and sleep it off.

I pulled up to the curb in front of the store, said, "You got your wallet this time, asshole?"

"No sweat."

My head fell back on the seat, my eyes closed. The sun came through the windshield, felt hot on my skin; it burned my eyes. It all came up in a flash. I opened the door and puked in the street, found a rag under the seat and wiped my face. Lights flashed in my head. *Never again*, I thought, and knew it was a lie, all pain forgotten when it's gone. I needed something to drink, was getting ready to go into the store when I heard two loud cracks followed by a blast.

I don't really remember what I was thinking. Gunshots? Backfire? My pounding head? But I had the truck door half open, reached under the seat for the .45. It was gone. *Shit*, I said to myself, ran inside, saw Micky lying on the floor. His eyes were focused on the ceiling, like he was concentrating hard on some kind of problem, his mouth slightly open in a half grin. His white T-shirt was covered in blood. His chest made a sucking sound I'd heard before. *Sucking chest wound.*

One of the Fardul brothers, the skinny one, was already dead. I could tell the way you know something for sure but don't want to believe it. He sat on the dark brown tiled floor against one of the coolers, chin resting heavy on his chest, a shotgun in his lap, the cooler and a sign taped on the door advertising *Pabst Twelve Packs for $7.95* smeared with blood. The older brother, the friendly one, slumped

over the counter, fingers wrapped tight on the counter edge. He held himself there, moved, but didn't look up.

Micky's chest bubbled. I got down on the tiled floor beside him to apply pressure to his chest, like I'd been taught in the army, but his mouth kind of snapped open, blood ran down his chin and neck, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. I backed off.

There was blood on my sneakers but nowhere else. I don't remember if any one saw me leave the store, but I had a feeling someone was near, watching. I walked out, and for some reason remembered the fifty dollar bill I'd found in the gutter. It seemed like a long time ago--like something you might remember from childhood, something you couldn't decide had actually happened to you or if you had dreamed it.

I drove back to the apartment, parked behind Dom's, used the back stairs to go up. I looked at the clock. It was 10:50. The living room smelled like booze, glasses tipped on the floor, ashtrays full. The bed was unmade, sheets tangled. Kasia and Annie were gone. The apartment was quiet. I don't why, but I started to clean the place, and by afternoon finished up, each room swept, dishes washed, bathroom scrubbed; there would be no mess for Dom to clean. I showered, shaved, sat on Dom's sofa in the shade of St. Andrew, and knew I was in it. Something would happen, and when it did, I didn't know what I'd do. I heard

sirens, waited, fell asleep in the easy chair. Annie's perfume filled my nose.

What woke me was a garbage truck in the alley, metal banging against metal, the hydraulics of a truck emptying a dumpster, men shouting to one another as the garbage truck moved through the alley. They worked late, trying to beat the heat, I figured, working a night shift to stay out of the sun.

For a while, sitting there, I thought about leaving Detroit, but it was a stupid idea. Micky was dead, one of the Fardul brothers was dead, and the other one dying, and none of it my fault. I wasn't involved, wasn't responsible for what other people did, but I needed time, and couldn't decide if I should go to my parents' house or Gabe's to see Kasia, try to explain, tell the truth before someone had a chance to distort what really happened, and make up their own story about me.

Even then, not thinking as clear as I should have, I knew the police would be looking for me. I understood them, their routine, that is. I didn't want to get back into the pickup, drive across town with Micky's blood sticking to the floor mat. I didn't want to be sick again.

Leaving my apartment through the front entrance, I decided to take a bus, walk a block to the nearest stop, and go to Gabe's, hoping Kasia would be at work. My legs were heavy in the heat even though the sun was down. The

neighborhood had a blue dusty look, and reminded me how a night might look on film, in a movie, filtered and soothing.

Exhaust and gasoline filled the air when the bus driver pulled to the curb and stopped. I boarded, took a seat and stared out the window. Inside the bus smelled like burning rubber, cologne, aftershave. A number of people read newspapers and magazines under lights too bright and harsh, their fingers stained with newsprint. No one spoke. They ignored me.

I was headed somewhere, but I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do when I got there. The driver took us by old neighborhoods, houses condemned and boarded up, a few people, mostly blacks, walking aimlessly along the street. Then I heard a bell ring, and the bus came to a stop; it was my stop. I stood and waited for the side door to open, followed two people out. I stood on the sidewalk, saw two men walking toward me on the sidewalk. I knew who they were, could see routine written on their faces and in the way they walked. They wore suits, and spoke in matter-of-fact voices, asked me my name. Did I know Carl Mickiewicz?

"He was my friend," I told them.

"You were with him?"

They knew the answer. I nodded, heard the rush of engine as the bus driver went on to his next stop, leaving us in a trail of black exhaust. It was darker when they handcuffed me. One of the detectives put his hand on top of

my head so I wouldn't bump it when they put me into the police car.

What will you do if you're released?

There are things you can rely on in prison. You know someone is keeping an eye on you. So you learn to keep your mouth shut, and obey the rules. On the outside it's no different. The next time I go before the parole board I'll keep quiet, let them do the talking because I know they hold the cards, just like the army did the night Delbert got killed after Sergeant Sprag ordered us out to the observation point.

I have no intention of telling them our own artillery, friendly fire they called it, bombed the ridge while Delbert shouted coordinates into the radio. Then a shell exploded thirty yards in front of us, and a piece of shrapnel the size of a dime hit Delbert in the forehead--a small hole going in, a larger one coming out through his neck. At first light we carried Delbert up the trail back to the firebase.

So if they want to know what I'm going to do on the outside, I won't tell *them*. I won't talk about the war or what happened afterwards.

I won't tell them about Micky, Kasia, and the Fardul brothers, or how Crane was found murdered in the laundry room, or how Tagget wrapped a towel around Crane's head and face so he wouldn't have to look at his one eye before he stuck the shiv into his heart. I won't say anything about

how I thought Tagget did Crane a favor, put him out of his misery like Delbert did when he wasted the NVA gook. I won't ask anybody if they understand Micky's war, not just the one he fought in Vietnam, but the one he thought he was fighting at home, the one inside his head.

But I'll listen--like Fenton did before they sent me away.

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