Male bonding and other myths

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Male bonding and other myths

by

Brian Scott De Wall

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"No, tell me again." He leaned forward and set down his beer. "From the beginning."

He was using that voice again, the one you couldn't refuse. What the hell. It needed to be told.

I told him about the Op, and about the lights and noise Carlson heard coming from the clearing down in the valley that night. I told how we snuck up on them, figuring they were the guerrillas we were after, and then watched when it turned out to nothing but a group of about fifty natives. I told it as I remembered it, had never been able to forget it. How the painted one jumped around in front of that vine covered statue while a tall, oiled, young warrior stood nearby. How the people chanted and swayed when the painted one led a young girl to the stone slab in front of the statue. And how Adams, then all of us, lost it and opened up on them when the painted one sawed her chest open with a stone knife. But I didn't tell him about the look I saw in the painted one's eyes when I emptied my clip on him, or the dream I sometimes have, where I'm standing beside him, oiled and waiting.

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He had a small three-room apartment above a tattoo parlor and a bar in the heart of Little Saigon. It was a dump, really, but he didn't need anything more. He'd crammed it full of all sorts of junk from the different curio shops around. Rugs, tapestries, prayer beads, happy Buddhas, sad Buddhas, meditating Buddhas, Buddhas I didn't recognize, Joss sticks, incense burners, and a whole bunch of shit that I didn't know the name or function of. I'm not sure he knew what all of it was for either. Once I asked him why he bought all of the stuff. "I don't," he said. "Average Jack, he might buy this. Not me. It's the Slopes. They give it to me."

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CHASE THE DRAGON

My mother once told me that dreams were places our minds took us when our imaginations had fallen asleep, and that they became nightmares when our imaginations woke up. For some reason, I always thought about that when I came to Little Saigon. Being there, walking around in it, could seem like a dream. Especially at night. Street vendors fill the sidewalks, selling cheap jewelry, wood carvings, or bolts of raw silk, and open-air grills belch a continuous haze of smoke and steam as the cooks serve up dishes of roast dog with rice and Minh Le pork. Nests of panhandlers and small-time grifters lurk nearby, ready to tug at your sleeves and wave their goods in your face, shouting gibberish above the noise of the music and crowd and traffic. Tattoo parlors and herb shops scatter among the bars and whorehouses, and punks the Tong booted out of China Town lounge on every corner, ready to sell or rent you anything you want: women, boys, whatever. Strange sounds and strange smells hang thick in the air. Freaks, geeks, bums and beggars everywhere. And dope. Great dope. Really incredible shit. Not that you need to be bent to appreciate the place. To Average Jack it could be a severe head-trip even when he was straight.

When I think back on it now, I guess that's why Riley lived there. The drugs, the hookers, the unreal weirdness of it all; it was so familiar to him. Probably felt like home. Might've even kept him from wigging out sooner. Who can say? It wasn't exactly a safe place for a round-eye to be wandering around after dark, but the night I went up to see him, I was a long way past caring.

I'd first met Riley a few months before. After I was discharged I came back to San Francisco. I guess I wanted to re-establish old ties with family and friends, catch up on relationships I'd let slip away during the three years I'd spent in Central America. Maybe I thought it would help me get my head together, ease some of the tension and embarrassment
I felt over failing Uncle Sam's drug test. Maybe I... oh, fuck it. Things had changed. The neighborhood was different. Old friends kept that comfortable distance and talked without really saying anything. They told me more by the way they wouldn't look at me than they could have ever said in words. And my parents. The old man couldn't believe any son of his could get shit-canned out of the Army. Mom tried to be understanding, but sometimes she'd shake her head and cry. "You've changed, Danny," she'd say. No shit, Ma. Like after three years down there, hell, after that one night, I was supposed to be the same? I don't think so. Those weeks you spent in the jungle doing stuff you couldn't talk about, the weird shit you saw and heard but couldn't explain. It added up, Ma. It took its toll. But then so did the booze and the grass and the whores that you turned to to forget it all for a while. Each one took a little piece of you, made you over into something that could survive down there. But nothing worked on you like the place itself.

Nights were the worst. If you could keep moving, slipping through the bush doing your job, it wasn't so bad. But when you stopped, crouched alone at watch on the perimeter, then it caught you. Crept up on you and crawled all over, whispered in your ears, clutched at your throat, slipped inside and played with what it found. And never let go, never stopped. So when daylight came and the Exercise or Op was over, you got a pass and went into town to try to shake it off. Only it was waiting there too, in the water and food and streets and alleys. In the people and their talk. In the heat and the dust and the stink and the rain. It kept after you, a little sneakier about it in town than in the jungle, but it never quit. Wore you down. You did what ever you could to keep it off you, but after a while you started to give in to it. Forgot what you were and had been, where you were from and what that meant. Forgot everything except how to keep what little was left together.

I tried to tell you once, Ma, about how it was, how everything in me kept slipping away, until, after that night, I couldn't get any of it back. I tried, but it wouldn't work. You
can't know what it was like, Ma. Not unless you been there. The food, the people, the heat, the memories. It wasn't home, Ma. It wasn't even close.

I suppose I was too hard on her, on all of them. If the shrink at the Rehab Center couldn't understand me, how the hell could I expect anyone else to? The good doctor. I remember him well. His sport coat and tie, the glasses that hid his eyes so well, the ever present pencil tapping against his chin. Leaning back in his chair, ready to make it all so clear. He'd have a heyday with Riley.

Doc was the man with all the answers. At first it was simple. "Your problem, Danny," he said, "stems from your failure to acclimatize to the culture and environment that you experienced while you were training in Panama, and your inability to cope with the subsequent problems." Okay, Doc. Whatever you say. Just help me make sense of that one night. Explain away what happened out there in the jungle, Doc, and figure it out for me. "It's not uncommon for people to be disturbed when first subjected to the practices of primitive religious rituals," he said. "It's natural for someone with a civilized upbringing to feel uncomfortable watching some of these ceremonies. And from what you've told me, you and the rest of the patrol were probably feeling a little spooked already, hiding there in the bushes and watching. I'm sure that had an effect on how you perceived the situation. Now think about it, Danny. Doesn't looking at it in that light clear things up a bit?" Sure, Doc. But I didn't, couldn't, tell you about all that happened, all that we saw or did. I didn't tell you about the nightmares. If I had, would you still have the answers? I don't think so.

I quit going through treatment after three weeks. Doc's answers just wouldn't stand up and therapy didn't cut it. I know, Ma. If I'd just try a little harder. Sorry.

After I bailed out of the Center, things at home got worse. For a while I tried to get a job, but with a Dishonorable hanging around my neck there wasn't much chance of that happening. That made me real popular with the Old Man. "My son," he'd say. "The hippie
bum. Don’t think you can just sit around here forever, living off your Mother and me.” He was good at throwing compliments around, making me feel loved. But there were times when I got the feeling he was more angry at himself than at me. I guess he felt like his plan to make me a man had backfired on him. And I suppose it had.

I doubt that I would have even considered enlisting if the old man hadn’t kept after me to think about it. I don’t think he was ever real comfortable being a father to a boy who preferred reading books to camping, and I know he wasn’t too enthused about having a son that was majoring in sociology and literature. Not “butch” enough for him. He always talked about how the Army would give me some discipline, some direction. He pointed out that the military would pay for my college after I got out, and that I’d have a better idea of what I wanted to do with my life by that time.” When Reagonomics put my academic career on a financial hold, I had to admit that that money looked pretty good. I kind of liked the idea of seeing some of the world, too, getting a feel for what was out there. Maybe I even wanted to assert my manhood a little. I remember thinking that it would be nice to have him feel proud of me for a change.

There used to be a picture on the living room end-table of him with his arm around me when I was back on leave, just before my posting to Panama. When I was shipped home, it had been removed to make room for the T.V. Guide. Subtlety had never been one of the old man’s strong points.

It’s kind of ironic, really. He got his wish. I turned into the type of man he always wanted for a son, did the sort of things he would probably admire. And he can’t stand it.

As things at home got worse, it became pretty obvious that the old place wasn’t good for me anymore. I’d become . . . well, let’s just say I didn’t fit in with it, and I suppose that its simple ordinariness didn’t fit me very well either. I started hanging around the foreign sections of the city, looking for some place that was different enough, strange enough, to feel
normal. The Mission, the Armenian district, and China Town were all easier than home, but it was on the outskirts of Little Saigon that I felt most comfortable. Not inside. I wasn't so far gone yet that I could feel completely at ease in there. But on the fringes things were just bizarre enough to keep life tolerable, and it was there that Riley found me.

I'd been sitting alone in a booth at Mhong's, putting away a few beers, watching the people pass by on the street, and wishing I had a joint, when a man stepped up to the window in front of me and pressed his face to the glass. He stared directly at me for a second, then hurried to the door, pushed his way in and came straight over to my booth. I remember starting to think "Great, some freak's decided to brighten my day," but something about him made me stop. He wasn't intimidating; a little over forty, the small, wiry frame under his wrinkled, baggy clothes looked like it hadn't been getting many regular meals, and he leaned slightly to his right, as if he were carrying a heavy weight on that side. He'd let his hair and beard go, and he needed a bath. But it was his eyes, his eyes and his arms that really got you. He had his sleeves rolled up to the elbow, and the skin of his forearms was covered with tattoos. Freaky eyes. Green, bright green, almost luminous, and unbelievably intense. Riveting. Grabbed you, pulled you in, and saw right through. No escape. He wrinkled his nose and sniffed a couple of times, then sat down across from me.

"You. You're him. You been there," he said. "You ain't Average Jack. You felt it, you still feel it, and you can't get it off you." He stared at me without blinking, picked up my beer, and downed it. "Honduras?"

I shook my head. "Panama. Fort Sherman."

He nodded then, still staring, and sniffed again. "Fresh. You ain't been home long, kid. It's still on you strong."

"Eleven weeks. How'd you know?"

"I smell it on you, boy. I could smell it three blocks away. Only one thing got that
stink. Jungle on a round eye. Jungle on Charlie don’t smell the same, on nobody else either. I know. I been smelling it for almost twenty years.” He turned his left forearm over and stared at the tattoos on the inside of it, and I noticed the “De Oppresso Liber” that surrounded the beret-capped skull. “Only on you and me, kid,” he said, then winced and held his right shoulder. “Time to chase the dragon. Let’s get stoned.”

It wasn’t an offer. He had that way about him. He said something, and you did it, whether you wanted to or not. But that was usually okay, especially when it concerned getting high. I could deal with him a lot better when I was bent.

His name was Sean Patrick Riley, and I got the impression he was Little Saigon’s answer to Lord Jim. We spent the better part of the next three months drunk, stoned, or some happy combination of the two. The man was farther gone than I was, a lot farther, but then he’d seen and been through more shit than any body had a right to and still kept some of his marbles. That’s the main reason I hung around him, I suppose. He’d gone through worse and found a way to cope with it all. I guess I thought maybe some of that would rub off on me, that I’d learn his secret. I think about that now, about me and Riley both grabbing at whatever, whoever, we could to stay afloat, and sometimes it’s almost funny. Sometimes.

He’d been drafted after he flunked out of college, and ended up a medic in the First Special Operations Group in the Nam. Two tours - one in ’69, the other in ’71. After the first he came back to the States and tried to find home again. A year later he was back in Southeast Asia. I didn’t need to ask why. I got the feeling he’d been through some hairy shit that last year and got screwed up good by it. He would never say much about it, and I never asked. It wasn’t important, or at least I didn’t think so at the time. We’d both slipped enough off center that we understood each other, and understood that we would never really understand. That it was best just to stay fucked up. So in general that’s what we did.

For a while there at the beginning it was kind of weird. There were days, like that
first one, when he seemed to need me to be with him. It wasn't in anything he said - he never
did talk much - but in the way he looked at me, like he was scared I'd leave. But most of the
time I'd meet up with him and he'd be real frosty, like he couldn't figure out why he let me
hang around. It bugged me at first, not knowing what he was thinking, but after a while I
figured if he didn't want to get smashed with me, he'd quit buying the booze and the dope.
He never stopped, so I kept keeping him company.

It wasn't until I started talking about Panama that he opened up some, stopped the
North wind routine. Maybe he just needed me to open up first, to show I really could
understand. I don't know. I do know it was good to finally talk about it all with somebody
who knew how easy it was to lose yourself in a place like that, who'd seen and felt some of
the same.

I'd never meant to say anything about it. The things we'd done and seen while each of
us was in the Army always seemed like a taboo subject. But I'd gotten in a fight with Ma
over going back to give the Center another try that afternoon, and I started telling Riley about
the whole program, about how Doc thought he had it all figured out. I was surprised at how
easy it was to talk about it with Riley, at how much I needed to talk about it. He wasn't very
interested at first, but that didn't seem to matter. It was enough just to be able to tell it to
someone who didn't look at me like I was out of it. I told him about how the place got to
you, and how the work made it worse, and about the questions you asked yourself - whether
what you were doing was right or wrong. He slouched back in his seat, nodding once in a
while, paying more attention to his beer than to what I was saying. It all rolled out so easily,
that before I knew it, I was talking about that last night in the jungle. I remember he looked
up when I started talking about it.

"What was that?" he said.

"I shouldn't talk about it," I said. "According to the government, it never happened."
“No, tell me again.” He leaned forward and set down his beer. “From the beginning.”

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They were strange that way. A couple of times I saw one or two of them in front of
the door to his apartment when I came up to see him. They bowed, put down whatever it was they'd brought, bowed again and then hurried past me and down the stairs. Just like that. And it wasn't only the gifts. Sometimes when we were out on the streets, blasted out of our minds, the people would stop and bow to Riley. Once in a while he'd just shake his head and wave them away, but usually it pissed him off to no end, and he'd start screaming at them in Slope talk and would end up trashing some vendor's stand. Once he even tore up the waiting room at Madame Hue's. The worst, though, was the night a couple of them tried to give him their baby. No shit. We'd been at it hard and were considerably bent when these two walked up and stopped in front of Riley. The woman was carrying the kid, couldn't have been more than six or eight months old. Anyway, she dropped down on her knees, bowed her head, and held her baby out to him. She wanted him to take it! Her own kid! And everybody, I mean everybody, around them had stopped talking and bowed. Riley just stood there and stared down at the kid. Then he lost it. Bad. He grabbed the woman's husband and proceeded to beat the living shit out of him. He probably would have killed the guy if I hadn't pulled him off. But nobody else did anything. They just kept bowing, even when Riley started pounding his face into the curb. I think he could have killed that guy, raped the woman, and then butchered five or six more of them and it wouldn't have mattered. That was just it. No matter what he did, or how much damage he caused, nobody fucked with him: not Madame Hue's bouncers, not the pushers, not even the Chinese punks I'd seen knife someone for five dollars. And as long as he was around, they didn't fuck with me. I'd spent enough time with government spooks and Special Ops types in Panama to know that most of them were stone killers, but Riley, Riley was a different breed entirely.

It got to me a few times, the weird shit going on and Riley's crazy mood swings. I even made my mind up once that it was too much, that I wasn't going back there. I stayed away almost a week. Made the mistake of going home one afternoon, and spent an hour the
next night explaining life to a whore who said she wasn't getting paid enough to listen. Riley smiled a little when I told him about it. It was like he knew what I was doing, what would happen. I sure as hell didn't. All I knew was that I didn't need to try to be Average Jack around him, that I could shake off the world for a while and regroup. Riley had it figured. "Reality's a hell of a lot stranger than anything a person should have to go through," he said. "And it ain't got no place for the likes of you and me."

We would usually sit up in his living room and pound a few beers, drink some of his shitty Scotch, and smoke a few bowls of hash. Then over to Madame Hue's. Riley was a hound for women. Had to get laid every day. He told me once that he'd always wanted to be a priest, but couldn't stand to give up sex. He said he didn't even like it anymore, just had to have it. Go figure.

After a throw or two, we'd head back to his place for more booze and dope. Sometimes he'd drag me downstairs and kick in the door of the tattoo parlor, and make the old man give us a tattoo. Riley would strip off his pants and have something put on his leg. He never took off his shirt, not even when we were alone in his apartment. Not even at Madame Hue's.

The tattoos I got were simple, quick and easy. Riley always told me which ones to get. Half the time I was so messed up I didn't remember what had gone on, and it was only when I found a new design on my body that I'd recall bits and pieces of the night before.

I'd begun to wonder if this was how Riley coped. Salvaging his sanity through a permanent haze. I'd thought, I'd hoped, that there was more to it than that, but hey, if it worked, why knock it. And it did the trick. It put my imagination back to sleep. Most of the time.

Some nights, though, things took a plunge and Riley would wig out on me. He'd be jumpy, erratic. Sometimes he'd start breaking things at random. A vase, a lamp, some
bottles. On those nights, Madame Hue always had a different new girl for him. There was a pattern to it. She was always young, and always gorgeous. She'd show up outside the door and knock. Riley would shake his head and tell her to leave, sometimes scream at her, but eventually he'd send her into the bedroom. Then he'd take an old rosary out of a box he kept under the couch, shut off most of the lights, and sit back in the shadows sucking on a bottle and staring at the cross. When the whiskey was about half gone, he'd start talking, barely above a whisper. "We ain't Slopes, you and me, Danny. We don't think like they do. Good, bad, to them it's all the same. Yin and Yang, y'know. Balanced." He'd shake his head or take a pull from the bottle, and then go on. "But not us. We can always tell the two apart, always remember which is which. We know, and we can't ever forget." After a while he'd sit back on his stool and stare at me from across the room. "It was a lot easier when my eyes were blue," he'd say. Always "when my eyes were blue." Then he'd rub his right shoulder and rock back and forth. "Dragon, dragon, damn dragon, gotta chase that fucking dragon!" He'd jump up, knock over a table or stand, and scream "Stop it! I ain't gonna do that anymore! I was an altar boy!", then grab his pipe and some opium, and very calmly say, "Get out. Now." He didn't need to tell me twice.

He never smoked opium when I was around, but I could tell by the way the little bricks vanished and were replaced that he was using a lot when I wasn't there. I'd never tried the shit yet. I don't know why. In the three months I'd been hanging around Little Saigon I'd had several opportunities, but somehow it never seemed like a good idea when Riley was around. That's why it came as such a surprise when he told me to smoke some that night.

He'd called me earlier in the evening and told me to come over. He said he needed to talk and had some things to tell me. I hadn't seen him in two days. He'd told me to stay away for a while. I remember how different he'd sounded on the phone, and even better I remember how he looked when he opened the door. Tired. Nervous. Burnt out. Rode hard
and put to bed wet. His eyes had dimmed and his lean to the right was more noticeable. He looked past me and down the stairs, then pulled me inside and closed the door. His apartment was even weirder than usual. He'd lit candles all over the place and left the rest of the lights turned off. Some bizarre sort of music was playing on the stereo: not Chinese, not Vietnamese. I don't know what. One of the incense burners, a small brass dragon, had a Joss stick burning in each nostril, smoke curling up and perfuming the room. I'd had five or six shots of Mezcal and smoked a healthy joint before I came over, so the effect of it all was pretty wild.

He handed me a beer and pointed to the couch. "Sit."

I nodded and concentrated on the beer. He dropped down on some cushions beside the smoking dragon, picked up a long clay pipe and started to load it with hash. I remember wanting to laugh.

"I thought you wanted to talk," I said. "But you just wanted somebody to get stoned with."

Riley stared at me and lit the pipe. "Average Jack don't need to get stoned to talk." He took a hit and handed it to me. "But we ain't Average Jack. And for what we're going to talk about, it's best to be stoned."

"Ain't it always?" I said. I took a few hits off the pipe and washed it with the rest of the beer. It wasn't long before the edges got hazy. I got up and grabbed another beer. "Okay, I'm here. Now what?"

"Sit. You need something, I'll get it for you."

"Sure, spoil me. My Momma's gonna hate you." My eyes had started to burn and I had a hard time keeping from yawning. "So what's got your ass screwed so tight?"

"Not yet." Somehow Riley had gotten the pipe back and was filling it again, but this time he was cutting tarry, black pieces of opium off of a brick and scraping them into the
bowl. "First, I think it's about time you met the dragon." He passed the pipe and lighter to me. I took it and looked up at him.

"You sure about this?"

He didn't answer, just sat and rocked slightly with the music.

"It's just that I kinda got the feeling you never wanted me to ... I mean, I thought you weren't ever gonna let me smoke this shit around you." I took two, maybe three, big hits and handed it back to him. I remember the smell and taste of the smoke were so sweet, like smoking honey. And the warm, relaxed feeling that slipped up and around me like a living, breathing, loving blanket.

Riley puffed a few times and held the smoke, then unbuttoned and pulled off his shirt. I was already extremely fucked, but it was the first time I'd seen him without a shirt, so I guess that's why the image remains so clear. Riley's chest, stomach, back, and upper arms were bare of tattoos, except for his right shoulder and bicep. There he had the most unfucking-believeable tattoo I'd ever seen. A dragon was coiled all around his arm, claws bared and head snarling on his shoulder. And this thing ... to call it a tattoo is like calling the Mona Lisa a good painting. The colors were so bright and real; the scales on the body actually changed their tint as Riley moved his arm. I knew it was only the effects of the opium, that it was making everything seem like more than it was, but I couldn't take my eyes off of that tattoo.

"Jesus Christ," I said.

Riley blew a stream of the dark, sweet smoke across the thing's face and rubbed lightly at its bright, shining green eyes with his forefinger. "That should keep you happy, you son-of-a-bitch." He cut more pieces off the brick and filled the pipe, then stared up at me. "Really something, huh?" He handed the dope over to me. "Have another hit."

"Yeah. I mean, yeah, it's really somethin'. Never seen nothin' like it. Somebody
'round here do it?' I had another hit. Couldn't see real well.

"Nope. Got this back when my eyes were blue, in Cambodia, a long time gone. Take another."

I took another. I felt great but had trouble concentrating. Severely messed. I handed him, tried to hand him, back the pipe. He took it and started loading it again. When it was full he took a few of the crumbs and popped them into his mouth, then stared down at the knife blade.

"It was on my second tour, in '71," he said. "War gone bad. They had us doing hush-hush missions along the border. Charlie playing sneaky, hiding in Cambodia where he don't think we'll go. Again." He pushed the pipe into my hands. Again.

"Late October, and Charlie's been hitting us regular and slipping across the border. We started following him, spreading a little early Christmas cheer." He rubbed at his shoulder and played with the knife. "So one day it's late afternoon, we'd done the do, and it's time to didi. Flyboy comes in, we jump on, and it's a taxi ride home. Only today, Charlie's got his own ideas about keeping us entertained. Got our LZ staked out. But we don't know that. Bush is heavy and Charlie's using it. And Charlie's smart. He waits till Flyboy sets her down and then opens up. Wiggins' hit bad. So's Bailey and Romano. The Huey's shot to fuck, beau coup dinki daoh. Barely gets in the air, but she ain't gonna stay up long, see? We gotta get her down, and quick. Flyboy puts a river and about twenty klicks of jungle between us and Charlie before he finally gets to a Cambodian village and sets her on the turf. How you doing?"

"Huh?" Only bits of his story were getting through.

"Drink your beer. Nothing I could do about the casualties. They all bought it before we put her down. Radio wasn't whiskered so we got a message off to HQ, but they got bad weather and can't pick us up till sometime the next day. We take inventory and talk to the
head papa-san while reconning the ville. Papa-san hates Charlie and says he ain't seen him for almost two months. Story seems to check out with what with what we could tell from the recon, so we get ready to spend the night. Thought maybe I could catch up on some shut-eye, but about that time, the LT grabs me and drags me over to the papa-san's hooch. Bunch of people all gathered around this little girl. She got stung by a wasp about ten minutes earlier. Bad reaction, you know? Anaphalaxis. All swelled up and choking. Hell, even Average Jack can see if she don't get help, she's gonna buy it. Might even if I do help her. I open up her throat and shove a tube in to give her some wind. She's still kicking when the sun goes down an hour later, so I figure she's gonna be all right. Papa-san keeps looking at me like I'm some kind of special. Great, whatever, just let me sleep. Only now I ain't tired. Papa-san keeps bugging me, think's he's gotta pay me or something, so he gives me this chunk of opium. Just the ticket, I think. I'd done it a few times in Da Nang, and it always made me sleepy. The ville's secure, so I figure no big deal. I didn't have guard duty. Why not? So I slip out into the bush and light up. Only this is better shit than I've ever had before. I start tripping. I hear bells out a ways, so I follow them. End up in front of an old temple, half covered by jungle. Khmer. Least that's what they told me when I described it later. I go in. Really fucked by this time. All seemed like kind of a dream." He caught his breath and grabbed his shoulder, then lit the pipe, took a couple of hits and handed it to me. I didn't need any more. I could barely follow what he was saying.

I took one anyway.

"The inside of the place is all lit up with candles, and there's this little old slope in there that starts smiling and bowing the minute I come in." Riley seemed to calm down as the dope worked on him. "Looks like he's about 600 years old. Got a smile like a monkey. I know I'm tripping bad by now, so what the fuck. Enjoy the show. He starts leading me back into the place, babbling something to me in some language I'd never heard. It didn't matter. I
knew he was saying ‘thank you.’ He took me to this room where a girl was waiting, sat me down and gave me some sort of tea to drink, then lit up a pipe and passed it over. I took a hit. Opium again. He puffs a couple of times and then blows the smoke in my face. I couldn’t breathe. He did the monkey smile and put one finger between my eyes. I fell over backwards, and I knew that I was gonna die. Hell, maybe I was dead already. I don’t remember anything after that. Next thing I know it’s the next morning, I’m back in a hooch in the ville, I got this thing on my arm, and there’s about twenty slopes outside bowing to me. LT wants to know what the fuck is going on and where I was all night. Another hit.”

I could barely stay awake.

“What the hell could I say? I didn’t know what was going on. Couldn’t very well tell the LT I spent the night stoned out in the bush, but gotta tell him something, you know? So I tell him about the temple and Monkey-smile, and he chews my ass good and starts asking questions about who the little slope was that drugged a U.S. soldier. Only the villagers say they don’t know who he is; they’ve never heard of him. Worse yet, they say there ain’t no Khmer temples in the area. We never found one later either.”

Just enough of this was filtering through to convince me that Riley had finally lost it.

“LT had me transferred a couple of weeks later. Said I was bad for the team, lacked discipline and had a negative effect on the indigs. I was getting short, so it wasn’t no big deal. I pulled duty at HQ back in Saigon for a while, but the CO had me restricted to the base when I slipped into town one night and all the slopes started kowtowing. Bad for relations, bad for morale. Couldn’t stay on the base long, though. Ran out of dope after about a week. I’d been smoking a lot of the shit since I met Monkey-smile. Booze and grass just didn’t take the edge off any more. And this thing on my shoulder felt like about fifty pounds unless I’d had a few hits. Anyway, got caught slipping into town one night. Only had two weeks left, so it was easier to give me an Early Out than to go through the hassle of
tossing me into the stockade.” He tapped the ash out of the pipe and stuffed a few more pieces in the bowl. “I stayed in Saigon for about a month after I got out. Would’ve stayed longer, but one night a bunch of Marines jumped me in an alley in a bad part of town. Maybe thought I had money. Maybe just wanted to roll another burnt-out ex-G.I. Maybe thought I was Average Jack. I was drunk and stoned past knowing. Could barely stand up. Three of them, I do know that, and they threw me into some crates and garbage. That’s the last thing I remember before I passed out. You close ain’t you?”

“Close? What? Close?”

“Yeah, you close,” he nodded, then pulled one of the Joss sticks from the dragon’s nose and blew on the glowing tip, looking past it at me. “When I woke up, they was dead. They was torn to pieces. That was about the same time the girls started showing up.” He crushed the Joss stick out on the table. “I wasted eight months in Cambodia trying to find that temple, and spent some time in Hong Kong after that. Then Bangkok. Somehow or another, it always ended up the same.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say. How do you tell somebody that they’ve finally fried their onions, especially when you’re so stoned that you’ve forgotten how to talk? He lit the pipe and took a long slow draw.

“What you know about dragons, Hayes?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“You know, they show up all over the world. Everywhere. To the slopes, the dragon’s a protector,” he said. “Average Jack, he don’t know that. Slopes say he lives off opium. That if you smoke enough of it, you might see him. You see him yet, Danny?” He handed me the pipe.

I didn’t need any more.

“In the Middle Ages, people used to send them virgins as a sacrifice. Supposed to
keep them from destroying everyone. Kind of strange, you know. Christians made the
dragon a devil, and the slopes made him a god." He stared over at me. I know he wanted me
to take another hit. I was sliding, slipping down against the end of the couch. Couldn't sit up
any longer.

"Sixth commandment, Danny. 'Thou shalt not kill.' Mortal sin, murder. You know
how many people I killed, Danny? Two hundred and five. I used to be an altar boy. Sister
Margaret said I knew my catechism better than any of the other boys. Never dreamed I'd get
this way," he said through the candles, the Joss, the opium. "Back when my eyes were blue."
He rubbed his shoulder. "Which one am I, Danny? Devil or god?"

He was going again. I didn't want to watch. I burned the rest of the bowl. Someone
was knocking on the door.

He smiled and touched the dragon's eyes. "This thing is getting too damn heavy,
Danny. I can't carry it any more."

I was slipping away and welcoming it. "Riley, go to hell."

When I woke up he was dead. Slumped over on his right side in the pile of cushions,
his eyes closed and mouth open. I should have done better by him, I suppose. Stayed with
him, or at least made sure someone took care of the body. But I guess I was freaking.
Waking up with him dead, in a room full of drugs and who knows what wasn't a situation I
wanted to try explaining to the cops. It was too much for my brain to handle. Opium
hangovers are bad news. Excuses, I know. I leaned over him, realized he was no longer
amongst the living, and got the fuck out of there. Through the door, down the stairs, and
home.

That was three weeks ago. I haven't been back to Little Saigon since. I've managed
to get some decent opium in the Armenian district and the Barbary Coast; not as good as the
stuff Riley had, but it does the trick. I'm not ready to go head back yet. It's too soon.

I haven't quite gotten used to the tattoo, either. It reminds me of Riley. Just like his, even down to how the scales change color. I didn't think the old guy downstairs had this kind of talent. It's certainly much better work than any of the other stuff he put on me. He must have worked fast, too, to get something like this done in one night. I don't like not remembering him doing it, though. I'll have to ask him about that, and if he remembers Riley saying anything after I passed out. Sometime. Not now. Not yet. I couldn't handle it if he bowed.
AFTERWARDS

It might have been anything. Natalie and Nat singing to each other on the big screen, or one too many Dewars, or maybe just because I'd never before. I really don't know. There was just something about her, about her laugh, her look, her attitude. About her pearls. Rachel has pearls just like that, though I haven't seen them on her in years. She's wearing them in the photo, a single strand glowing softly at her neck. It was a good shot; the photographer really knew his stuff. Her shoulder is tucked snug up under my arm, and the train of her gown pools about our feet and spills down the church steps. We're holding hands behind her bouquet. The kind of print you see framed and hanging on the wall as an example of the studio's work. Picture perfect. The photo is old and worn now, its edges are curled and wrinkled and the gloss is dulled from fourteen years of being carried around in a wallet, but it still shows the happiness in Rachel's eyes. And in mine. Everything we felt is still there in our faces. The confidence. The excitement. The trust. Both of us standing there, tense and happy and so sure about how right it was, so certain of our future together. When the photos were over she leaned close and whispered to me, and I told her that I did too, and it was true, I didn't have any doubts then. That night, after the reception, I held her as she drifted off to sleep and knew how lucky I was and what a good husband I'd be, knew that nothing and no one could ever tempt me or come between us.

"You better put that picture down and decide what you're going to order," Bill says. "The waitress will be back soon." He closes his menu, lights a cigarette, and stares at me.

I look at the photo now and wonder about those feelings, about my conviction to them and to her, trying to remember what it was like to be that way. I can remember having the feelings, but not the experience itself. I doubt Rachel can either.
"Eggs for me," says Ray, "eggs and about two more gallons of coffee." He rubs his eyes and yawns.

"You look like hell." Bill exhales a thin stream of smoke and leans forward to fill Ray's cup. "Did you get any sleep?"

Ray smiles. "I think I might have slipped in ten minutes here or there. Lisa, right?"

"Don't ask me. I don't even remember the name of mine. I make it a point to forget their names the minute they walk out the door."

White Shoulders. That's what I noticed first, when I waited beside her at the bar to order a drink. Nothing else smells like it. Rachel used to wear it. I'd forgotten how much I liked it. She noticed me looking at her later and smiled, and after I caught her looking at me, I went over to her table. To talk. Bill and Ray had already abandoned me in pursuit of two unaccompanied ladies, and I didn't feel like spending the rest of the evening laying in a hotel room watching a bad movie and thinking of a perfume.

"Lisa. I'm pretty sure it was Lisa." Ray sips his coffee and looks around the restaurant. "Yeah, she worked me over but good. She needs to trim her nails, though. You should see my back. Stung like hell in the shower."

Bill nods his head slightly. "That can be a problem."

Ray chuckles and runs a finger along the brim of the cup. "I can endure those kind of problems. I'm not sure I could put up with her talking, though. Reminded me of my old fiancée."

"Maybe that's why you picked her up."

"No. Apples and oranges. The only thing they have in common is that neither one of them was ever at a loss for words. But then I suppose no woman ever is."

* * *
We talked, or, at least, I did. She smiled and laughed at the right times. A great smile. Big and bright and contagious. Like Rachel used to have. The one in the photo. I've always loved the way that she smiled that day. It was the very same smile she gave me the first time I said I loved her, and on the day I proposed. A smile she saved for me. People couldn't look at her that day, at us, and not smile too. Everyone was so happy. My father, smiling as he leaned in close to my old neighbor, Marjorie Phillips, and her smiling back. My mother, rapt in conversation with old acquaintances and smiling more than I'd seen her in years. We walked around arm-in-arm at the reception in a euphoric trance, unable to remember why we were smiling, but so used to it that we were content to continue. The idea of not smiling, of our faces ever assuming a different expression, was a possibility that we couldn't imagine. That same smile is there in the pictures of our honeymoon, and of our first Christmas as husband and wife, and in all the other photos of events that seem so important when people are first married. It was there for a long time, through Ethan and Abbey and Amanda. I don't know when or why it stopped. I got back from a business trip one day, and noticed that her smile was different, realized it had been different for a while. It was the smile she gave to everyone. After that I didn't see her special smile as often. I missed it and the way it made me feel, but I came to accept that it was just another eventuality of marriage.

Bill flicks ashes into the tray and stares at me.

"You're pretty quiet this morning," Ray says.

"Just tired, I guess." Bill shifts positions and glances away.

It was good to talk, to open up again and feel like someone was really listening. After a while the conversation slowed and I asked her if she wanted to dance. She talked more while we were dancing than she had at the table, probably because I was finally being quiet and giving her the chance. I listened and thought about how good it was to be seen and
spend time with a woman like her. Young. Beautiful, in her own way. It gave me a
sense of self-confidence that I hadn't felt in years. I felt more... capable, more adept. Not
like that self-confidence that's visible in the photo, of course, but then she wasn't squeezing
my hand and smiling and saying her new name, my name, like Rachel had. There was
something about that that had made me feel like a god. You can see a certain amount of that
assurance and composure etched in my expression, the way I stood and held her. I could do
everything, everything, and if anyone would have told me that someday that feeling would slip
away, I'd have laughed in his face and known him for a fool.

"You know, even with all the talking she did, I kind of liked her. I made sure to get
her number, in case I happen to be in town. We're back again in December, right?"

"Probably," Bill nods.

"I'll look her up again then. Put some Christmas cheer into the trip." Ray sprinkles
some EQUAL into his cup and glances over at me. "Okay, Mike. You've kept us in
suspense long enough. I've gotta know. What was she like?"

I realized after an hour or so that, in many ways, she reminded me of Rachel. The
Rachel of six years ago. Their hair was much the same, though Rachel's was slightly darker,
and they had many of the same mannerisms - the way they held their heads, the way they
walked, their smiles, and that haughty, seductive look in their eyes. Rachel was more of a
classic beauty, of course, at least she was when she was twenty seven. I've never seen a more
beautiful bride. Stunning. The bouquet hides how slender she was then, and how tightly the
dress fit around her waist and hips, but you can clearly see the deep, luscious tan she had
spent so much time that spring building up. It looked great against the white of her dress.
When we stood in the receiving line, all that anyone could say was how lovely she looked,
and how fortunate I was to have such a beautiful bride. And they were right, I knew it. For a
long time I found myself just staring at her, at the way she looked - her carefully arranged hair, the perfectly applied make-up, how the light seemed to cling around her. At her dress. I hadn't thought it was that important of a thing before the wedding, but seeing her in it, I was glad she'd spent all those weeks paging through copies of BRIDE and MODERN BRIDE in search of it. The photo doesn't do it justice. It doesn't show how intricate the lace-work of her sleeves was, how the patterns swirled and joined over the gauzy film, or the tiny seed pearls that were sewn into her bodice, and the years and miles have faded the blinding sheen of the silk and the creaminess of the applique. That level of detail is left for memories.

"As good as she looked?" He stirs his coffee and shakes his head. "Man, you hit jackpot with that one, Mike. Lisa was cute, but yours ..." He whistles through his teeth and licks his spoon. "Hot. With a capitol H. Chapped my lips just to look at her. I'll bet she turned you inside out, huh?"

The dress is packed away now, wrapped in a sealed plastic sack and tucked in a box that sits up on the top shelf of the bedroom closet. The kids have each left their mark on her, and there's little chance she'll ever fit into it again. She's put on twenty-two pounds in all the wrong places and her bust and ass are starting to hang. The care and attention she used to give to her appearance has gone the same route as her figure. She cut her hair for simplicity's sake, and she looks tired most of the time. The rituals of make-up and hair styling are now only observed for guests, business dinners, or a rare evening outing, and shapeless dresses, oversized tee-shirts, and baggy sweat pants have become the clothing of choice. You wouldn't recognize her as the same person in the photo. Sisters, maybe. Or cousins. Am I any better, though? Thirty pounds heavier and favoring battered old LEVI'S and tattered polos. I know I shouldn't be disappointed in either one of us. After fourteen years of marriage, comfort and convenience have a lot more appeal than little things like pleasing
your spouse.

"Come on, Mike. You can tell us." Ray grins over at Bill and leans towards me.

"How many times?"

Bill rolls the cigarette back and forth between his thumb and fore-finger and stares at me.

"Three? Four? Man, I bet that's a change from what you're used to getting at home."

"Leave it alone, Ray," Bill says. He's still watching me.

"What's the big deal? I mean, it's not like we're going to run back and tell Rachel. We're your friends, you know? You're supposed to tell us about it."

"Drop it."

Ray looks at Bill for a few moments, then drains his cup and gets up. "I'm going to see if I can find a paper somewhere."

"Try the lobby," Bill says. "I saw some vendors there yesterday."

"Yeah, I know. If that waitress finally decides to come back -"

"I'll order for you. Eggs. And," Bill fishes in his jacket pocket and hands a key to Ray, "run up to my room and get my briefcase. There are some figures and projections I want to go over before the presentation, and we might as well do it now."

I'm not sure what pushed me over the edge, but when she smiled at me from across the table, nibbling on her necklace, teeth biting gently on the pearls, something inside of me wanted, needed to be with her, to remember those feelings and experience that excitement again.

Bill shakes his head as Ray walks away. "Don't pay any attention to him," he says. "He's still young. And he's not married." He stubs his cigarette out and lights another. "It's
at first." He watches the glowing end of the cigarette slowly eat its way further up the shaft. "That first time. God. For a while there I thought I was going to be sick. I just sat in my room and stared out the window. I didn't know how I would face her. Or the kids." Bill nods and raises the cigarette to his lips. "See. I really do know what you're going through. So trust me on this." He inhales deeply and sighs a cloud of smoke toward a nearby table. "I suppose it sounds ridiculous now, but the best thing you can do for yourself is to pick up another woman and do it all over again tonight. I'm serious. Look, right now you're thinking that you've committed some mortal sin, or that you've broken your wedding vows. But that's all just in how you're perceiving things, and your perception, in this case, is pretty naive. Think about when you had sex for the very first time. You felt guilty afterwards, didn't you? But the next time, not so guilty. And even less after that. Because your understanding was growing as your experience increased. It's the same situation here."

I tried to think of the things that had gotten in the way - our jobs, business trips, parenting, our differing social lives. Did we still love each other? It wasn't a question that had come up very often in the past few years. But, yes, when I thought of it, I was sure that I still loved her. Would that be enough? Did we need more? I thought of the things we used to do to keep ourselves reminded of our love for each other.

Bill taps the table with his finger and licks his lips. "The important thing is to remember that it's just sex, it's just physical." He nods his head and rolls his eyes. "I know, I know, that's a tired old cliché, but it's also true. Look, you still feel the same about Rachel today as you did yesterday, don't you? You still love her, right? What about what-ever-her-name-was from last night? Do you love her? No. She's just some bimbo you picked up in a bar. She wanted a good time and so did you. Did you promise each other anything? No. So where's the harm? You have to tell yourself, admit to yourself, that there isn't any."
The waitress pads up behind Bill and pulls out her order pad. "Have we decided what we're having yet?" She smiles and looks from me to Bill.

"I'll have the three-egg platter, over easy, with hash-browns, sausage, and pancakes on the side." He hands her his menu and glances over at Ray's seat. "Make that two orders. Our friend will be back shortly."

She scribbles on her pad and nods. "All right. And you sir?"

We had breakfast in bed the morning after the wedding, steak and quiche, with smoked salmon, breakfast potatoes, and English muffins covered with marmalade. Room service brought the covered trays up to the bridal suite along with a bottle of champagne. I pulled on some pajama bottoms and let them in while Rachel hid under the covers. After the servers left we fed each other beef and eggs, and got creative with the champagne and marmalade.

"Do you need some more time, sir?" The waitress tilts her head and blinks. "I can come back in a moment, if you'd like."

Bill stares at me, then glances up at the girl. "He'll have an order of the same."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Okay. That's three three-egg platters, with hash-browns and sausage, and pancakes on the side." She gathers up the other menus. "Can I get you anything else? Juice or-"

"Coffee. Another pot, please."

For the next six years we took turns making breakfast on our anniversary - always steak, quiche, muffins with marmalade, and champagne - and served it to each other in bed, until the business of getting the children up and off to school, and preparing for work, took
precedence over little sentimentalities. We told ourselves that we'd renew the custom when the anniversary fell on a weekend, but somehow that got put aside in favor of the luxury of sleeping in.

Bill crushes out his smoke and slouches back in his chair, crossing his legs. "Maybe you should talk about it, Mike. Come on. Tell me what you're thinking. It'll help." He pulls out another cigarette and taps the filtered end lightly on his knee. "It will. I've been there, I know. You've got to let some of this out, talk about it with someone who understands, whose been down the same road. I tried to tell my cousin once. He hadn't been married long, hadn't even thought about cheating yet. He couldn't relate."

It's an old photo. We look different now. She's lost the smile and the light in her eyes. I've lost the resolve, the confidence, and the certainty. We're not the same people.

"He just said, 'if it bothers you so much afterwards, then why do you do it?' He couldn't understand. He'd never been there. I didn't even try to explain it. I knew he'd never understand."

I look up at Bill, and he glances away.

The two people in the photo would never forego the little sentimentalities. They would get up earlier, make breakfast the night before, or call in late to the office. They would never forget what was important to each other, would never let a day go by without letting each other know they still felt it.

"Forget about it." Bill shifts in his seat. "Brooding on it isn't going to change things. Let it go."
The people in the photo haven’t lost it yet. They haven’t pushed it too far. Things can still be the same for them.

“Listen, Mike, you’ve got to stop tearing yourself up over this.” He scratches his chin and leans forward on his elbows. “You’re making too much of this. So you cheated on your wife. You think that ruins things between you and Rachel? God, Mike, ninety percent of the guys in this country have stepped out on their wives. I’ve done it. The old man’s done it. Now you’ve done it. It’s what men do. It’s not that big of a deal.”

Everything that they felt and meant to each other is still there in their faces. The photo remembers all the promises and good intentions.

“Mike, I know you’re thinking about calling her and telling her about it, but believe me, that’s the worst thing you could do. You’ll just end up hurting both you and her more. Really. It’s best just to forget it. Leave it behind and move on.”

We always meant to become those people again. “Next” year. After the kids were all in school. After the mortgage. After the promotion. Maybe, with patience, we would have, could have rediscovered those things in each other again, instead of looking for them somewhere else.

Ray strolls back over and drops a briefcase on the empty chair beside Bill, then sits down and unfolds a newspaper. “Sorry I took so long. They were sold out of papers in the lobby. I had to go across the street.”

Bill reaches forward and touches my hand. “She doesn’t need to know. Put the picture away and forget about it.”
"The Twins dropped two to the White Sox last night," Ray says. He glances over the top of the paper at a passing waitress. "Have we ordered yet?"

Bill leans close and lowers his voice. "Think about it. What it would do to the kids, to your life. And what if she talks to Grace? What am I going to tell her?"

Maybe we still can.

"Mike. Please."
PIG'S FEET

They were arguing now, that much was obvious. I could tell by how he jerked his head and hands when he spoke, and from the way she kept looking at everything but him and took deep, rapid puffs at her cigarette. Jim - the bartender had called him Jim - leaned across the table with his back to us and whispered at her, and when his voice raised above the sound of the jukebox he glanced around the back of the tavern to see who had looked up from the pool table, or to the front to see which of the seed-capped heads had turned from watching Friday Night Football. He glared at Michael and me before turning back to the girl.

"Ain't love grand," Michael said. "If that's what it's like, you're better off."

"Yeah," I said, "I know that now." I shifted on my stool and looked across the bar at my reflection. The edges of the mirror were lined with snapshots of locals holding stringers of fish and smiling, and to the left of it an old Hamms Beer sign winked on and off. The sparkling, rock-filled stream and tall pines that covered its plastic face slipped in and out of twilight with every flicker of the bulb.

"Maybe you'd better go call and tell him you'll be late," I said.

Michael lowered his glass and shook his head as he swallowed the beer. "Fuck him. He'll figure it out." He nodded to the bartender and tapped the glass. "Two more."

"He was expecting you over two hours ago. He might be worried."

"Not hardly," he said, pulling at his cigarette and exhaling at the reflection across the bar. "You don't know Frank. He's never had much time or concern for anybody. I doubt he's even given it a second thought."

"Well, maybe you should let him know you're bringing me," I said. "He might not like it if you show up with a stranger without giving him some warning."

"Christ, Lewis, give it a rest," Michael said. If it doesn't bother me, I don't know why
He'd been irritable like that all evening. It had taken us well over an hour to finally get on the road. He kept finding things that needed to be done before we could leave; a few last calls to clients, market closings or stock options to check on. And when I eventually did get him into the car he sat there without starting it, looking back at his condo like he'd forgotten something. During the entire two hours of the drive up here his fingers had drummed along the top of the steering wheel while he stared out into the black beyond the headlights, responding to my questions with hard, short answers. After a while I gave up trying to talk to him and watched the dark shapes flit by on the side of the road. But that was no good either - it reminded me of the long trips to visit Rachel's parents and made me think of her, hating her, and hating being alone - so I closed my eyes and tried to imagine tomorrow's hunt. When we'd finally reached Millerville, Michael's suggestion that we stop for a beer before heading out to the farm seemed a welcome break from the thoughts and the silence.

Michael peeled two dollars from his money clip as the bartender turned from the taps with the foaming draws, tossing the bills out with the same tired resignation I'd seen in him when he'd had a long losing streak on a Wednesday poker night. The bartender slipped a cardboard coaster in front of each of us, then set the glasses down and dropped a hand over the money. He was heavyset and the front of his shirt stretched tight across his paunch. He glanced at me, then stared at Michael.

"Aren't you Frank Higgins' boy?" he asked.

"His step-son," Michael said.

"Yeah," the bartender said, smiling and nodding. "I remember you. Marty, right?"

"Michael."
“Sure, Mike. I remember. I thought you looked familiar. George, didn’t I say he looked familiar when he walked in here?” He looked down three stools to where a man and woman in their mid-sixties sat eating breaded strips of chicken and french fries from a plastic basket.

“That’s what he said,” the old man agreed. His wife brushed crumbs from her fingers and nodded with him. “The very words he said.”

The bartender pushed the money back at Michael, waving his hand briefly over it. “Don’t worry about it, Marty. These two are on the house.”

“Thanks,” I said. Michael didn’t respond, just lifted the glass and sipped at the beer, and when the bartender moved away to take another order Michael chuckled and crushed his cigarette into the ashtray. “What’s so funny?” I asked.

“Nothing. Nothing at all.”

After a few minutes the bartender wandered back our way. He pulled a dingy towel from behind the bar and wiped the spill rings from around our bases of our glasses. “So you’re going after some pheasants tomorrow?” he said, then grinned when he saw the question in Michael’s eyes. “Your dad was in last week and said something about you coming up for opening day. Didn’t think of it till a little bit ago, or else I would of recognized you sooner. First time in quite a few years, huh? Well,” he leaned back and tugged at his belt, “you couldn’t of picked a better year. Wouldn’t you say, George?”

“Gonna be the best season in 20 years,” the old man said, thumping his fist lightly on the bar top for emphasis. He and the woman had finished with the chicken, but a small smear of ketchup still clung to one corner of his mouth. “A real big hatching last year, and a mild winter. Ditches and fields are full of roosters. You won’t be disappointed. Lots to shoot at, oh my, yes.”

“Seems to me I remember your dad was saying you’re a stock broker or something,”
the bartender said. "Down in Mankato, wasn't it?"

"Frank comes in here quite a bit, does he?" Michael asked.

"Oh, once or twice a week, I guess. More often than he used to," the bartender replied. "But I suppose that's to be expected, what with your mother last spring and all. I want you to know we're all real sorry about that. It's always hard, but at least she didn't suffer long."

"No, not long," Michael said. "She was only married to him for twenty eight years."

"How's that?" the bartender asked.

Michael emptied his glass with a long swallow and slid one of the bills forward. "Better give me some change for the phone." He glanced over at me and shrugged. "Maybe I'll get lucky and wake him up." He scooped up the quarters and dimes and headed for the pay phone near the front door.

Jim and the girl were still arguing. She was shaking her head now, closing her eyes and mouthing "no," while he leaned towards her, opening and closing his hands.

At the other end of the bar, opposite the old man and his wife, three men were playing a game with a handful of dice and a small cup. They made their wagers with cashews. Two of them glanced up at me from time to time during lulls in the game and murmured to each other. Then one would gather up the dice and make his toss and they'd resolve the bets.

It was a game Rachel would appreciate - clear and simple and random. "Sometimes there's no right or wrong to it," she'd said. "Either things work or they don't, and if they don't, it's not necessarily someone's fault. It's just life. Why can't you understand that? Why does someone have to be blamed?" Why? I knew why. I understood it implicitly.

Because.

"Again?" the bartender asked, lifting Michael's empty glass. I looked over at the phone. A short man in a green Pioneer coat had Michael cornered by the door, smiling and
clapping him on the shoulder. Michael said a few words to the man and stepped around him to pick up the receiver. I pointed to the glass when he glanced my way and he nodded and turned toward the phone.

"Yes," I said. "And for me as well." I swallowed the last of my beer and handed him the glass.

"You from Mankato, too?" the bartender said as he set down the beer.


"Sure, I heard of them." The bartender nodded and tugged at his belt loops. "They got one over in Alexandria. Never been there, though. I don't get much chance to read, what with taking care of this place and all."

"No, I suppose not."

"I like Louis Lamour," George said. "You ever read any of his stuff?" He frowned when I shook my head "no" and shifted in his seat.

"His books are pretty popular, though," I added. "We sell quite a few of them."

He nodded and took a sip from his beer. "Arlene," he said, cocking his head towards the woman, "reads a lot. Romances, mostly. She's always going on about Danielle Steele."

The woman smiled. "She's my favorite."

"Sounds just like my wife," the bartender said. "Can't get enough of them. Buys a new one at the drug store every week. I suppose it's like that down in Mankato, too."

"Yeah, romance novels always do well." I pointed up to the shelf. "Could I get some of those pretzels?"

"We was in Mankato two months ago," the old man said. Arlene leaned forward and looked around him at me.

"George needed to have his back adjusted and I needed a new coat," she explained.
"And I couldn't find anything I liked in St. Cloud."

"They got a chiropractor down there named Dr. Fouschin that can take care of you with one visit," George went on. "Not three or four like some of them other ones. You ever see him?"

"I'm afraid I've never heard of him," I said.

The old man frowned again and shifted in his chair. "Well, I guess that shouldn't surprise me none. Mankato's a big city and a person can't be expected to know everybody. Still, you ought to make a point of looking him up if your back starts to bothering you. He can set you right."

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind." I dug some change out of my pocket to pay for the pretzels and glanced up when the bartender didn't take it. He was looking past me to the back of the tavern.

Jim had half-risen from his seat and leaned across the table. I heard him say, "just what the hell do you want of me," in a harsh, hoarse whisper, and then she gave a short, sobbing laugh and rested her forehead in one hand. He said, "I don't fucking understand you," and walked back to the men's room. I watched the girl wipe at one eye, then shake and crumple her empty pack of cigarettes. She slipped out of the booth and came up to the bar a few stools down from me. The bartender stepped over to her.

"Some smokes, Lisa?" he said. She nodded and set her handbag on the counter as the bartender turned to the small shelf holding the stacks of cigarettes. After a brief search, she pulled two rolled-up dollars from her coin purse, stripping them from one another with a slow consideration. When she noticed me looking at her she gave a slight, quick smile, then paid for the cigarettes and started back for the booth as Jim emerged from the restroom. I shook my head and looked over at the bartender.

"What's that all about?" I asked.
"Who knows?" he said. "I don't think they even do. They do this all the time. They get liquored up, they fight, make a scene, call each other names. Can't either one of 'em be happy. But for some reason or other they stick together." He punched the sale of the cigarettes and pretzels into the cash register as Michael dropped back down on the stool beside me.

"He was still up," he said

"What?"

"Frank. He was still up."

I nodded and held out the bag of pretzels, shaking some onto the bar in front of him.

"What did you tell him?"

"The truth." He leaned back in his stool and looked up at the football game on the TV, rocking back and forth slightly. "That we'd stopped at the bar in town for a beer and that we'd be coming out to the farm later. And I told him that I'd asked someone to come along, so now he's expecting you and you don't have to be worried about upsetting him by surprise."

"And what did he say?"

"Nothing much," Michael shook his head. "Just that dawn comes early and he's waking us an hour before it regardless of what time we get home. And he wondered if you had a hunting license."

I tossed back the rest of my beer and started to get up. "We'd better go then."

"What's the hurry," he said. He bit a loop off of a pretzel and chewed slowly. "The beer's cheap here. Let's have a few more and watch the rest of the game."

"Putting this off as long as possible, aren't you?"

"What if I am?" He lit a cigarette with one of the complimentary books of matches.

"Is that a problem?"

"I don't know," I replied. "Is it?"
He took a long, deep pull from his glass, draining half of it, and turned toward me.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Look, you've been out of sorts all evening, and it's pretty obvious why." I shook my head and looked at the smoke spiraling upward from the end of his cigarette. "If this has got you so upset, I don't understand why you just don't tell him you don't want to go hunting. Call it off."

"It's that fucking simple to you, huh?" He laughed and cocked his jaw and turned his head away.

"Yes," I nodded. "Why isn't it?"

"You've got no idea," he said. "Because he's Frank. Because he asked me."

"So tell him no."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Listen, Lewis, I didn't get on your back about the way you acted when Rachel left you, so don't give me any shit about the way I handle things with my mother's husband!"

Michael's voice had become quite loud and we both noticed that several people - the bartender, George and Arlene, the dice players, and even some of those watching football - were looking at us. Michael finished his beer and set the empty down in the direction of the bartender. "Another," he said, then, "Oh, Christ, just get us a damn pitcher." He picked up a pretzel and cracked it in two, scattering crumbs and stray crystals of salt on the flat surface in front of him.

"I'm sorry," I said after a few moments. "I didn't mean anything."

"Forget it," Michael said, too fast. He handed the bartender five dollars and slowly refilled his glass. "Drink some beer. Come on. Really."

I looked across at the mirror and its collage of photographs, then up at the shelves that
flanked it. On one of them, a jar labeled "75¢ each" on the shelf stood above the rows of bottles that lined the wall behind the bar. It was wedged between bags of Beer Nuts and clusters of beef jerky, and inside it a school of pig's feet slowly swam through a cloudy, pink-orange brine.

"Pig's feet," I said. "Why would anyone ever want to eat the foot of a pig?"

Michael stared at the pitcher, his fingers tapping lightly at the trail of bubbles that streamed up from the bottom. "Who knows why people do anything?" he said. "We're just stupid, I guess."

I tipped my glass at an angle until the level of the beer touched the ring of dried foam near the top, then rolled the glass in my fingers. "You know, I hate her. I really do. Sometimes I think about her, about how much she hurt me..."

"Yeah," Michael said. "But you love her, too. And you hate yourself." He shook his head. "I used to think I'd figure life out."

"Pig's feet," I said. He didn't say anything then, but sipped at his beer and stared across the bar at the mirror.

The bartender and the old man and his wife had moved away after Michael raised his voice and were involved in conversations with some of the other patrons. George's wife sat talking to two younger women and George and the bartender had taken up with one of the men who sat watching the game. I looked back to see if Jim and the girl had resolved their differences.

The girl, Lisa, was standing up now, holding her coat and purse, with Jim clutching at her wrist. And as I watched, she jerked her arm free and hissed "you can't stop me," and ran past us out the front door.

When I glanced back at Jim, he'd stood up and seemed to be talking to himself. He ran one hand through his hair and looked around at the faces turned towards him. "I don't
care," he said. "Hell, I'm glad she's gone." He grabbed his bottle and sat down on a stool between me and the dice players. A few minutes later he left, his beer still half full.

Michael and I drank the last of the pitcher without saying anything more to each other. After a while the bartender drifted back.

"You guys all right back here?" he asked. "Another refill or anything?"

Michael pushed away from the bar and glanced over at me, then back at the bartender. "I need some air," he said. "Get me a six-pack to go."

"What kind?"

"I don't care," Michael said. "Whatever. No, something expensive."

"I got Michelob."

"Fine." He threw a ten out, snatched up the bottles and his coat, and headed for the door. I started to get up to follow, but for some reason thought it best to give him a little time alone.

There were a few pretzel pieces hiding in the salt at the bottom of the bag. I finished them, and walked back to the restroom. It was small and simple. A sink, a urinal, and a toilet. The wall behind the urinal was covered with jokes and names and phone numbers and as I stood there I noticed someone had written in small letters just above the flush lever, "'Remember - no matter where you go, there you are.' Dr. B. Banzai." The ink was faded and half obscured by other scrawlings, but it was visible. I washed my hands and left, grabbing my coat as I passed the bar on my way to the door. "Thanks again," I said to the bartender and then to George and the woman. "Thanks." A few of the other patrons glanced away from the football game as I opened the door, raising two fingers in acknowledgment before turning their attention back to the TV.

I stepped out into the cold October night and gazed up and down the street. Except for the dozen or so cars lined up in front of the tavern, it was empty. Michael's car was
running, two gray-white plumes of exhaust trailing away from its rear like winter clouds racing in the stark streetlight, and I could see his dim shape hunched behind the wheel. I hurried toward it across the sidewalk, struggling with my zipper. The defrost was on and when I crawled in beside him the warm breeze blew back off the glass into my face. Cat Stevens crooned low on the tape deck and Michael sat staring at some point beyond the clear plastic of the instrument panel. He twisted the cap off a bottle and passed it to me without looking. “That guy was an idiot,” he said finally. He was shivering and it made his voice waver. “He should’ve just let her go and forgotten about it. He’d have been happier.”

“Maybe,” I said.

“That’s what’s wrong with the world. We end up caring about shit, about people, that shouldn’t matter.”

I rubbed a thumb along the top of the bottle and nodded.

“It’s just that he’s my father,” Michael said after a few moments. “He’s not, but he is.”

“You don’t have to explain,” I said. “I think I understand.” We sat for a long while finishing the rest of the beer and watching the slow advance and retreat of the fog on the windshield.
"Are you feeling any better?"

"Some." Jean pushed back from the table and lightly massaged her eyes and forehead. "The aspirin helped. The headache's almost gone now."

"Good, that's good," Parker nodded. He stirred the ice through his Scotch and glanced around the piano bar. Though the pianist had taken a break, the noise had started to pick up as the overflow from the main ballroom spilled out into the halls and lobby. Small packs of professionals, trailing clusters of husbands, wives, or lovers, roamed in to take up stations at the bar or at the tables along the walls. Scattered singles drifted together and apart, exchanging business cards and quips about the convention while their eyes swept the room. Parker nodded to a few he recognized or had met the day before, then drained his glass, motioned to the waitress, and turned back to his wife. "Some wine? Maybe a spritzer?"

Jean shook her head and sipped at her water. "No, not yet," she said. "I don't think that would be a very good idea." She carefully placed her glass back down on its napkin and turned it slowly, watching the beads of water clinging to its side, catching the light from the table lamp.

"No, I suppose it wouldn't. You had more than enough last night. I'm just glad I didn't have to take care of you. It was worth every bit of the fifty you had me pay the night manager after he brought you back to the room."

She looked up at him for a moment, then went back to rotating the glass.

He leaned forward on his elbows. "Look, I'm sorry. I know it's probably partly my fault, it was a misunderstanding, and I'm sorry."

"I know. You've said that already."

"I wasn't hitting on her. I guess it could have looked that way, but I wasn't."
"Yes," she said. "You've told me that, too."

"So why won't you believe me? Because I'm not wearing it?" He glanced down at the spread fingers of his left hand, then back at her. "Jean, we've gone over this. I forgot it. I took it off so I wouldn't have it on during the flight and I forgot it on the bedroom dresser. That's all there is to it. Really."

People continued to wander in from the lobby, and the piano started up again, an old Nat King Cole tune cutting through the murmur of the crowd. Parker paid the waitress for his drink and glanced up as two men slowed beside the table. They smiled over at his wife, then at him. Jean stared at them for a moment, then returned to her study of the glass. The taller of the two winked back at Parker and laughed as they made their way toward the bar.

"It's just like you to read all of these things into it," Parker said. "That's why I didn't want you to come in the first place. I knew you'd misunderstand things and we'd fight over nothing." He ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. "Oh, I'm sorry. But it wasn't like it looked and I wish you hadn't let it get you so upset."

Jean drew her finger up the side of her glass, catching the water on its tip and wiping it on the rim. Her other hand rubbed at a temple. "What makes you think it was that that upset me?"

"The five white-wine spritzers you put away after you saw me talking to her were a pretty good clue. You don't usually get that drunk," he said. "That, and the disappearing act you pulled. I looked for you for over an hour. Now, come on. Talk to me about it. You haven't said anything about it all day, and you know you won't feel better till you do."

She turned her head towards the bar, then blinked and looked back at the glass, shaking her head. "There's nothing to say."

"Nothing to say." He pulled at his drink, wincing at the smoky bite of the Scotch. "Nothing. The manager brings you back to the room at three a.m., drunk and puffy eyed and
bruised. You'd think there would be something."

"I was drunk. That's all. I fell down and I'd been crying and I was drunk. Even the manager told you. I'd had too much to drink." She glanced over at the bar and blinked. "There's nothing more to say."

"Then you're not mad at me?"

She bit her lip and tilted her head back, then pressed her fingers against her eyes. "This headache is killing me."

He reached across the table and touched her arm. "I thought you said it was almost gone," he said.

"Well, it's come back."

The waitress stepped up beside his wife, placing a white-wine spritzer on the table in front of her, then leaned over and whispered something in her ear. Jean stared down at drink, her lips slightly parted. She began to turn her head, a half-turn, before she stopped and looked back at him. "I don't feel well," she said, rising from her chair. "I think I'm going to go back to the room and try to sleep. I'm sorry. It must be the hangover." She turned and hurried past the bar out into the press in the lobby.

Parker sat still, watching as she left, then shook his head and sipped at his drink. The ice in the spritzer glass settled, shaking it slightly and sending water droplets trickling down its sides. He looked over towards the bar, to where she had begun to turn her head. The two men who had paused by his table were there, looking back at him. One shrugged and leaned away to order a drink. The other smiled and lit a cigarette and turned to speak a few words to his companion. Parker stared at their backs. After a few moments, he walked over to where they stood joking with a bartender. The tall one glanced over as Parker slipped up beside them. "How's it going?" he said, nodding.

"That woman I was with," Parker said. "You bought her a drink. A White Wine
Spritzer.”

The tall one cocked his jaw and smiled. “Yeah, well…”

“Do you know her? Is that it, you’ve met her before?” Parker stared at him.

He smiled and looked over at the other one. “Yeah, we know her. We met her last night. She was pretty drunk.” His friend chuckled and shook his head.

Parker stared at them.

The tall one tossed back the last of his drink, signaled the bartender, and pointed at their glasses. “Listen,” he said, “I think I know what this is about. I shouldn’t have cut in on your action like that, I know. Let me make it up to you. What is that, Scotch and water?” He took a last pull from his cigarette and exhaled a thin stream of smoke. “It’s just that it didn’t look like you were having much luck with her anyway, and, well, when opportunity knocks…”

“She was wearing a wedding ring,” Parker said.

The tall one laughed and stubbed out his cigarette. “Hey, don’t let that hold you back, guy. Like I said, when opportunity knocks.” He tossed out a ten as the bartender returned. The glasses were filled to the brim, and as the bartender set the drink down in front of Parker, it spilled over the lip and down the sides, seeping along the base of the glass until it joined with itself in a circle.
Handjob is out there. Hiding in the shadows somewhere out beyond the light, hunkered down in the bush with his back to the rain, waiting. You can't see him - he was always good about laying low and keeping out of sight - but he's there, he's close. I can feel him. I opened the front door a little over an hour ago, thinking maybe I'd set Blue out after him, and when I realized how pointless that would be, I just stood there and looked out into the night and the wet, trying to get a fix on his position. Handjob gave no clues. There was nothing except the sound of the rain on the porch roof, the gurgle and splash it made as it ran through the gutters, and the shrunken halo it left high around the yard light pole. Blue yawned and wagged his tail, and looked up at me until I closed the door and sat down. He's not worried, but then, why should he be? Handjob's not after him.

I sent Angie and Chad to her mother's two days ago, when I realized he was getting close. I didn't want them around when he finally came for me. It's not that I thought he would actually hurt them, but why take chances. She made a pretty big stink about me not telling her why I wanted her gone, but she finally gave in. "This has something to do with those guys you saw last month, doesn't it?" she said. "From the war."

"No. I just need to work through some things. You know, by myself."

"I could help," she said. "I'd like to."

I shook my head. "You're not listening."

She folded an arm under her elbow, chewed at the side of her finger, and looked out the window. After a little bit, she turned back to me and opened her mouth.

"Really," I said.

She seemed to understand then, and didn't ask any more questions or press me any further on the subject. Later that afternoon she loaded Chad and a few days worth of clothes
into the car. "Call if you need us," she said.

I did call later, but not to her. She wouldn’t have understood. Later that night, when I could tell he had shown up and was waiting for me, I called Lopez. It wasn't raining, so I knew Handjob wouldn’t make his move that night, but I thought someone should know. Someone who could appreciate it. I thought Lopez would, but I guess I was wrong.

"Books, man," he said, "Books, think about what you're saying."

"I'm serious, Paco," I said. "He's found me. He's finally come."

"Think about what we talked about at Hippie's. Remember?" He said a lot of things, about how I was reacting to Hippie’s death, about the fine line, and about how he thought maybe he should fly in and spend a few days with me, and finally I said that no, he didn’t need to do that, and yeah, I guess he was right about the rest and that I didn’t know what I was thinking. I thanked him and told him I was okay, and then hung up the phone and thought about how fucking stupid I’d been to think that anyone could understand the situation. Lopez was wrong. Handjob was here, in the dark outside my house, waiting for me to weaken, to get tired and sloppy so he could slip in and finish in a Missouri farmhouse what he’d meant to do in a jungle near Quang Tri.

Time was when it was a comfort to know Handjob was somewhere out in the dark. He was the guardian angel that watched over all the sad sacks that were unlucky enough to draw a Lieutenant fresh out of the Point for a platoon leader. Didn't matter whether you were patrolling near Phu Bai or busting bunkers around Ban Me Thuot, if your platoon suffered from a terminal case of Lousy Leadership, sooner or later Handjob would show up to set things straight.

For a long time I thought I'd put Handjob and that entire goat-fuck of a situation
behind me. Not that you can ever forget someone like him, even partially, but you can put up enough walls, a strong enough perimeter, that you don't see him in every face in a crowd, that eventually you become convinced that he was finally gone and you can get on with your life. It had taken me a long time to get to that point.

He'd cost me my first marriage. I'd wake up in a cold sweat at night, looking into the corners of the room, expecting to see him there, but all I'd see was Carol, huddled on the other side of the bed with the covers pulled up tight at her mouth, staring over at me with wide eyes. It didn't last long, a little over six months. I changed my name a few months later. Ted Payne became Eddie Peyton, and nothing was left of "Books" except the contents of my foot locker. I didn't get married again until I'd mined my memories and laid so much Concertina Wire between me and my past that I thought Handjob would never get through. Up until the day Cookie called, I'd only thought of him a few times in the twelve years Angie and I had been married.

I hadn't talked with Cookie, with any of them, in nearly twenty years. He called me once, right after he'd shipped back Stateside, but it had been a short, difficult call, neither of us knowing what to say, what questions were safe to ask. It wasn't much different now. For me, at least, time hadn't made things any easier.

We stumbled through the typical questions and answers - how things were, what we had each been doing - and when we'd exhausted them and the pauses between our words bordered on embarrassment, he finally got to why he'd called.

"Listen, Books," he said, "Hippie called me last night. He'd like us to come and see him, to get together one last time and talk, and he wanted me to call you. I guess he was afraid you might not come if he asked you himself."

I didn't say anything for a little while, just held the phone and tried to think of a reason to tell him why I couldn't go. Eventually I just said, "Hey man, you know, I don't-"
“Hippie's dying, Books. Doctors only give him a couple of months.”

That ended it. I couldn't come up with an excuse I could live with after he told me that.

I explained things to Angie as best I could, and when the day came, I crawled into the car and headed north. Des Moines is only a three and a half hour drive up the interstate from the farm. It took me almost an hour longer. Hippie and his sister had moved there to be closer to the VA Hospital in the mid-seventies. There were a series of operations that the doctors wanted to try, to remove some of the scar tissue inside, rework some of the plumbing, something. I don't remember much about the details, other than that none of it did much good. He'd written me a letter on the Hospital stationery once a few months after the move, giving me his new address and letting me know what was new with him. It was a long letter, 5 or 6 pages, and I never finished it. At the bottom of the second page he started to tell me how it wasn't my fault and that I shouldn't blame myself because he didn't, it was just that Charlie had his number and shit happens. I folded the letter back up, stuffed it in the envelope, and lost it in the bottom of my foot locker. It's still there. I saw it last night.

I'd managed to keep from thinking much about Handjob, about anything from 'Nam, in the days after Cookie's call, but on the drive up, I let some of the memories leak back in. I had to. In a way, the get-together was one last patrol, one last jig out beyond the wire, and when you were in the bush, it paid to be prepared.

It was the slough that started to bring it all back. It was big, stretching almost a half a mile along the east side of I-35, a jumble of reeds and sedge and tall grass among the pools of standing water, and it reminded me of the day Biggs got 'Coon killed.

During the second month of my tour, our Lieutenant stepped on a rigged mortar round and lost his leg below the knee. Roscoe, our ranking NCO, took over until HQ
shipped us a new Platoon Leader. His name was Biggs, and he was young and green and clueless. Two days after he was posted as our new LT, he led Fire Team Alpha into an L-shaped ambush. An open trail leading straight into a patch of elephant grass and creepers. Roscoe saw it coming and tried to warn him, but Biggs told him to keep his comments to himself and remember who was in charge. Less than three weeks in country and he figured he knew more than a two-tour sergeant. Walked them straight in. ‘Coon paid the price. No one said much about it later, but we had all started wondering if Handjob wouldn’t end up paying a visit. The next week, after Biggs called Artie down on Bravo and blew up Jentz and Buckley, the wondering was over. The question was when.

After the fire fight, Roscoe detailed Sparks and I to police up Jentz’ and Buckley’s remains while the rest of the Team cut an LZ for a dustoff. They’d both been close to where the round hit, and it was messy. I remember Sparks asking me how we were supposed to know which piece to put in which bag, what belonged to who. They don’t teach you that in boot camp. I remember picking up the pieces, thinking that each one had to be the last, only to look down and see another. I remember how red and sticky my fingers got in the heat of the afternoon, and how it didn’t seem I could wash the smell off, even with soap. I couldn’t sleep until I poured kerosene on my hands.

I was out watching the wire the night Handjob showed up. It was May, and the monsoon rain was heavy that night. Mud-soaked and shivering, I hunkered down in the wet clay at the bottom of a slit-trench just inside the wire, staring out at the black wall beyond it, and hugged the 60 close to me, stroking the linked cartridges. In the dark, in the jungle, happiness is a belt-fed weapon. I was sure that at any moment, 10,000 heavily armed, opium-crazed Communists would come screaming out of the fog to sell me a body bag. Clark sat in a sand-bagged bunker twenty meters to my left, but he didn’t inspire much confidence. He’d burned a joint or two before coming on duty. I could tell by the way he’d
scream out something stupid every three or four minutes and then start laughing. "Whites of their eyes, Books! Wait 'til you see the whites of their eyes!" I just wished he'd shut up. Nights like this were a VC sapper's wet-dream. They'd slip in under the wire, set satchel charges and turn our Claymores around. We'd strung the wire with cans and noise-makers to let us know if anything was moving through it, but Charlie could be pretty damn quiet when he wanted to be. Handjob was even quieter. In the lulls between Clark's ravings, the only sounds were the creaking of the frogs and the drumming of the rain on my helmet.

He came to me at a little past midnight. You think about a lot of things when you're sitting out on the wire at night. I was thinking about red, sticky fingers and the weight of the bags when we hoisted them onto the Huey, and suddenly he was there, whispering softly out of the dark. "Comin' in, soldier boy. What I gotta do, and you know it's right. Don't be stoppin' me." I didn't even consider it. I thought about Jentz and Buckley and 'Coon, and kept my eyes on the blackness beyond the wire.

They found Biggs in his tent the next morning, a thin, fine line across his throat just above the Adam's Apple. The back wall of his tent was slit open from bottom to top. Roscoe gave the watch a token ass-chewing, and then radioed it in and reported it as Charlie's kill. But there wasn't any doubt in anyone's mind that Handjob was watching over us.

To the best of my knowledge, no one was ever really sure who Handjob was. There were a lot of stories, a lot of guesses, made about him.

Around Huế, talk had him pegged as a rogue LRRP who'd gotten fed up with the inept leadership that plagued the Army. Troops in the A Shau Valley were confident that he was really a team - a sniper and his spotter - out to save grunts' asses. And near Cu Chi, he was a Montagnard that was just trying to keep the U.S. from pissing the war down its leg.

But deep down in each of us, we all knew that he was really just one of us, scared and
tired and sick, and brave enough to do a dirty job. Who understood how serious it all was, and knew there wasn't room for slackers or idiots.

And down inside, we all admired him.

It took HQ almost two weeks to sky another LT up our way, so Roscoe mothered us in the interim. Things went pretty smooth with him at the helm. We staged an ambush of our own, burned a ville, and destroyed three VC supply caches. Best of all, we suffered no serious casualties and had no major screw-ups. Handjob laid low and waited for the new platoon leader to arrive.

This one wasn't bad - he'd had some experience near Khe Sanh, and was smart enough to listen when Roscoe had a suggestion. But he was clumsy, and ended up jumping into a shell crater for cover and breaking an arm and some ribs. They med-evaced him out less than a month after his arrival. Roscoe took over again for a few days, and things were apple pie. It rained quite a bit, and Charlie made a probing attack one night, but we stood them off without any problems. The next day Roscoe had us hang a bunch of the Confirmed Kills on the wire. The little yellow fuckers were damn effective as visual aids, and Charlie left us alone for several nights running.

We knew the next Platoon Leader, Weintraub, was trouble the minute he jumped out of the Huey. He choppered in, along with half a dozen new guys fresh off the replacement pipeline, four days after we hung our trophies. Another green 2nd Lieutenant, the first thing he did was make us pull down the bodies. Roscoe started to give him a SitRep, but the LT would have nothing of it. “It was behavior,” he said, “unbefitting of soldiers of the United States Army.” Charlie hit us that night. Sappers blew a hole in the wire and a small force got inside the perimeter and shot us up pretty good. Critter and Smitty were wounded, and
two of the new guys bought it. They tried again the next night, but when we’d restrung the wire, Roscoe had had us place an additional pattern of Claymores, without the LT’s permission. He was ready to have Roscoe’s stripes, but there wasn’t much he could do since the Claymores pretty much stopped Charlie’s attack before it began. On a patrol a week later, Weintraub almost directed us into a mine field. Fuzz started taking odds on when Handjob would make his move.

Handjob was the symbol of all that remained of nobility, honor, and sacrifice in that war. Someone that could take on the burden that he had was to be revered and respected for his strength of purpose and his conviction. Weintraub got it in the latrine. Booger found him in a stall, his pants around his ankles, the front of his shirt a wash of red from the cut at his throat.

It wasn’t my watch that night, but Handjob came to me anyway. It was raining again, and he crouched low in the red mud outside my tent and hissed at me until I woke up.

“I’m back, soldier boy,” he whispered. “Done did the deed. Tell the others I’ll keep ’em safe as I can.”

“Did you have to do it?” I asked. “He might have come around, in time.”

“Never happen. Least, not till he’d killed a bunch of you.” He didn’t say anything for a long time, and after a while I realized he’d slipped away into the darkness.

There was no sign of how he’d gotten in - no obvious tracks, no tripped flares, no blood on the razor wire, no disarmed Claymores. Lopez, Hippie, Sparks, and Jew Boy had the wire, and they all swore that they hadn’t heard or seen a thing. Roscoe questioned everybody in the platoon, but we were all as deaf and dumb as the watch. In the end, I think he actually started to get pissed. He just looked around, shook his head and said, “Either Charlie’s gettin’ a lot sneakier or you guys are spendin’ too much time fucking off. Be
advised. When you are on watch, you will not think about Peggy Promqueen and her pretty pink panties. You will not dream about Mama's apple pie. You will do nothin' but concentrate on the wire and on killin' Charlie! Is that understood!"

We didn't question the fine line between the right or wrong of what Handjob did. The dead, needlessly killed through mistakes or poor judgement, demanded it. It was necessary. It was just.

Roscoe made us comb the jungle for two days. He wanted Charlie's head on a stick, something he could show the brass back at HQ to convince them that VC were responsible for Weintraub's death. As a Corporal, I was sent out with a detail of five men to check over a sector. We found what appeared to be a sniper's nest in one location, and a VC body in another. But Luke the gook looked to have been dead for over a week. Roscoe had us haul him in anyway, and reported that "the body of the suspected assassin had been located and seized."

HQ sent up an investigator a few days later to look into what they termed "the questionable circumstances surrounding 2nd Lieutenant Weintraub's death." He poked around for about a week, checking into everyone's story, and eventually left after filing a report stating that "insufficient evidence could be found to justify further exploration of possible criminal actions." In the meantime, HQ found us a ball-buster of a Platoon Leader. He was a 1st Lieuey who'd been promoted up from the enlisted ranks, so everybody felt pretty comfortable with him. Under Lieutenant Evans, we conducted a successful series of S&D patrols, and began to consolidate the power in Quang Tri. We suffered casualties, of course, but nothing unreasonable or excessive considering the circumstances. We stuck it to
Charlie a lot more often than he gave it to us. I hadn't heard from Handjob for a long time. Talk put him further south, taking care of a growing problem there. I didn't think I'd ever meet up with him again.

But then, when I was getting short, about a month before I was due to ship home, Charlie started to hit back harder than before. NVA regulars started moving through the province in larger numbers, and the VC seemed better stocked and supplied. HQ became more demanding, and Evans started taking more chances. In a two week period, we sustained twenty-one casualties. We were averaging five patrols a week. Roscoe tried to get Evans to ease up, but the LT told him there were more important considerations at stake here than just the welfare of our platoon. A counterattack was being planned that required our troop to hold the area and threaten any enemy presence. We were to do anything and everything in our power to prevent any further enemy advances. Even if it meant sacrificing the platoon.

Four days before my tour was up, Handjob killed Evans. We all heard it - a grenade blast about an hour before dawn. Scared the hell out of the watch. They started firing at random out into the dark, and it took Roscoe almost ten minutes to shut them down.

Two days earlier, the LT had moved the platoon down to the base of a valley in an attempt to ambush a supply caravan that Intel had word was going to be moving through the area. The "caravan" turned out to be a regiment of NVA reinforcements. Evans could have let them pass right on by - we were hidden well enough that we didn't need to worry. Roscoe tried talking reason with him, but Evans popped off a bunch of smoke grenades and started firing on the column. We lost half the platoon before the F4s came in and deep fried Charlie's position. Evans survived, and Roscoe, and me, but all the other NCOs were killed or put out of action for the long term.
Handjob didn't even bother explaining it to me. The fire had pretty much burned up his tent by the time we got to it and charred him good, but the frag had taken him out before the smoke or flames ever got to him. I'd never really figured out why Handjob used a grenade instead of his characteristic throat-cutting. Respect for what he'd once been? Or hatred for how many he'd killed? I didn't know.

I told myself it was better this way, that the rest of the platoon was safer now, less likely to fall in harm's way. I knew Roscoe could take care of us just as well, if not better, than Evans had, and we could count on him to be more concerned with our lives than any stupid ideas about duty. I guess that's when I should have started worrying - when I thought I had it all figured. The war has a way of sneaking up on you when you've got it all worked out. It raps you on the side of the head and gooses you as a reminder of how little control you really have. It goosed me good.

There were several cars parked along the street in front of Hippie's house, and for that I was thankful. I didn't want to be the first, or even the second or third. In a group, even a small one, I'd be less conspicuous, less likely to be forced into difficult conversations.

Hippie's sister came to the door on the second knock, but when she saw it was me, she turned and walked down the hall out of sight. Hippie wheeled into view from a side room and looked after her, then rolled down to the door smiling.

"Books," he said, opening the door. "Man, it's great to see you." He reached up and gave me a long hug, then said, "Come on. Everybody else is already here."

Cookie was in the living room, and Sparks and Lopez and Fuzz and Backdoor and Critter. They were all busy talking when I walked in, but broke off their conversations and glanced up at me. It was quiet for a moment, until Cookie walked over and threw an arm around me, and then everyone was grabbing my hand or slapping me on the back or hugging
We spent most of the afternoon drinking coffee and catching up on each others’ lives, asking the same tired questions that, for once, didn’t seem so tired. Cookie was an accountant now, divorced with three kids. Sparks sold Life Insurance in Chicago, and Fuzz trucked for a company out of Omaha. Lopez managed a Super Market in Kentucky. Backdoor was out of work and living off his wife, and Critter taught High School in his home town. All of them had finished their tours and come home, except for Lopez. He’d gotten his sergeant stripes and re-upped for a second tour. When Critter asked him why, he just shrugged and said, “Somebody had to watch out for the platoon.”

After a few hours, we’d exhausted most of the questions and were running out of safe subjects to talk about. Hippie had disappeared into the kitchen and came out a short time later to announce that the food was ready. He rolled up next to me as everyone started to file into the kitchen, and put a hand on my arm.

“Sit down for a minute, okay?”

I dropped down on the couch beside his sister’s cat. It was a mottled gray tabby, and had been prowling the room all afternoon, anxious about the attention available to it. It was tired now, and lay with its head on its paws, its eyes thin slits staring up at me. I stroked the fur on the side of its neck and it began to purr.

When everyone else had left the room and we were alone, Hippie rolled over and sat watching me pet the cat. Finally he said, “Books, I don’t know the right way to say this, so I’m just gonna say it. It wasn’t your fault, man, really. Lopez, me and Sparks were talking this over earlier, and none of us blame you.”

I moved my fingers to the top of the cat’s head and scratched at the fur between its ears. It stretched its neck back and up, pushing into my fingertips, and turned its head to gaze up at me.
"It was just the 'Nam, Books. That's just the way things went down. You did the best you could."

The cat purred and rolled its head up so my fingers could tickle its neck. Hippie didn't say anything more, and after a few minutes wheeled himself into the kitchen to join the others.

After the meal, we switched from coffee to beer and hard stuff. Everyone's mood improved, and it wasn't long before we were laughing about different things we remembered. Hippie pulled out a photo album full of old pictures he'd kept, and we sat around looking at them and letting them pull back memories. The booze and the pictures made things easier to talk about for some, and subjects that had been taboo were alluded to, and when a picture of Weintraub came up, Handjob was one of them.

There was nothing specific, just a lot of old stories about him, about things he'd done, and guesses as to what happened to him after the war. Hippie was pretty quiet throughout the whole thing, and after the page had been turned and the talk started about the little whorehouse in Binh Diem, he started crying. We all shut up and looked at the floor or at our hands while he rubbed his eyes and sniffed. "I'm sorry, guys," he said. "But I gotta tell you about this, 'cuz I don't wanna go out with this on my conscience." He wiped at the tears that hung on his chin, took a deep breath, and shook his head. "I was Handjob on Evans."

No one said much for a long time. Then Backdoor said thanks, that it was okay, and that no one would hold it against him. And that seemed to make it all right.

Then we came across a picture of Roscoe, spanking a Vietnamese kid. Lopez remembered it was because the little slope had stolen Roscoe's chocolate bars. Critter remembered the time he chased a water buffalo across a minefield to try to clear a path, and Hippie talked about how Roscoe had kept him from wigging out during his first few weeks in country. We all had our stories about him, real and imagined, and finally Sparks added, "It
was the only way Charlie ever could have got him. Charlie could never get him in the bush. Roscoe was too smart."

Cookie nodded and held up his beer. "Roscoe!" and we all tapped glasses and bottles and drank.

On the afternoon of Evans death, Roscoe had Lopez and Smalls and Backdoor start stringing another line of concertina wire inside the perimeter to draw our lines in closer, in case Charlie made a push that night. He had me busy with Booger and Cookie, hauling extra Claymores and flechette charges out of the bunkers. I saw him start over towards us and wave his arm. "Books, get over he-"

The bullet caught him just under the nose and pitched him backwards onto the ground.

"SNIPER!" I didn't need to have yelled. All of us knew that already and were pitched down on the ground.

Roscoe lay on his back. He wasn't moving, and I didn't need to look twice to figure out he was dead. Which meant I was in charge. Which meant we were fucked.

When Hippie died two weeks ago, Cookie called again to let me know. Hippie's sister had gotten a hold of him the day after it happened to let him know about the funeral, and had told him to ask me not to come. I started thinking about what Hippie had said, after that, about how it was just the way things went down and all. I didn't buy that, and I knew Handjob didn't either.

During the Board of Inquiry hearing, the panel told me that it was very likely that if I had ordered the men to stay put and hold their positions, casualties would have been relatively light. We were fortunate, they concluded, to have had as many survive as did.
They cleared me of all charges, however, in consideration of the rash of events that led up to my hasty command.

I knew he was coming for me early this week. I'd felt it ever since the call. Maybe Hippie's sister put him back on my trail. Maybe he'd been keeping tabs on the survivors, and sniffed me out when we had the get-together. It's hard to tell. Deep down inside, I guess I always knew he'd find me eventually. It's his sacred trust, his obligation to the needless dead.

He knows too, though. He knows I'm not going down without a fight. I brought my old foot locker down from the attic. You can still smell that red clay on the fatigues. There's even some of it still crammed in the seams of my boots. And the old knife is still pretty damn sharp. Maybe not quite as sharp as in 'Nam, but a few licks on the stone will take care of that. He'll see. I'll be ready for him when he comes.
MALE BONDING

There is something painful about the sound of golf shoes on a gravel drive. The crunching and popping of spikes on crushed rock can alternately resemble the crackle of distant fireworks on a clear July night, or the noise of bones being systematically and deliberately splintered and ground into powder. Sort of a tantarra for how the game can make you feel.

I shifted the weight of the bag higher onto my hip and concentrated on the crunch/pop underfoot, trying to discern which it would be today, fireworks or broken femurs. Fireworks, I decided, if the day was any indication. The sticky-muggy thickness had retreated from the air as the sun sank past 5:00 and left the day's humidity tolerable. Crows and grackles pecked grass seed off the practice green outside the Clubhouse. Out on the No. 2 fairway, a woman in beige shorts and a red blouse made a clean, sweeping cut, the "tink" of the contact floating back at me as her fuscia ball disappeared into the heat of the late-afternoon sky.

Mitch claimed that golf was "a ritual of self abuse and torment made tolerable only through the company of others." He said that in that respect, it was a lot like life. "You find the right people to do it with," he said, "and it can sometimes even prove to be enjoyable."

Mitch is like that. Half the things he says prove something. For as long as Davis or Greg or I have known him he's tossed out little nuggets of wisdom that left us grokking at their importance if we stopped to consider them. He's got five years on Greg and me, seven on Davis, and it shows in everything he does, from the way he considers life to the way he plays golf. Davis and Greg have handicaps in the upper teens. I'm an eleven. Mitch is a two.

We played a round of nine for beer every Tuesday and Thursday after work, 5:30 sharp, at the Country Club. We never phoned one another to confirm our tee time. As our
male bonding ritual, it was understood - be there or be excommunicated. Mitch and Greg
were always early. I was usually on time. Davis was always late. I knew Davis liked to get
a quick supper in with Beth before he hit the links, but Mitch thought he'd be late even if he
wasn't married. He claimed it was Davis' role within our little clique of friends. “He's the
scapegoat,” he said, “the innocent. He's that way because we need him to be. Just like we
need Greg to be the skeptic and you to be the idealist.” People were basically just individual
organs within a body, he said, and that they needed to join up with others in order to become
whole. Innocents were the stomach, skeptics the rectum, and idealists the heart. When I
asked him what his function was, he grinned. “I'm the experience,” he said. “The thinker.
The head.”

The crunching of the gravel gave way to a soft hiss as I turned onto the grassy path
that led to the first tee. As usual, there was no sign of Davis, but Mitch and Greg sat on the
bench by the ball washer, arguing in the shade of the two spreading beeches. “I don't know,”
Greg said as I walked up. He shook his head and squinted. “I don't spend a lot of time
thinking about stuff like that. Ask Alan. He watches NORTHERN EXPOSURE. He
probably thinks about obscure shit all the time.”

“You know, I really love it when you talk like I'm not here.” I slid the clubs off my
shoulder and glanced over at Mitch. “Ask me what?”

Mitch was leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, flipping his black and gold
ZIPPO end-for-end and staring out towards where the red-bloused woman searched for her
ball. After a moment he pulled out one of the unfiltered CAMELs that had tarred his voice
over the years and tapped its end against the lighter. “Swim,” he said. “How long can you
swim?”

Greg rolled his eyes and flashed a “he's in one of his moods again” look at me. He
gave a slight shrug, then tugged at the cabretta leather glove on his left hand.
"If your life depended on it, I mean," Mitch said. He lit the cigarette, took a deep pull and exhaled slow, letting the streamers of smoke seep out the corners of his mouth to hug his cheeks as they crept past his temples, then blinked and looked up at me. "Say you're out on the ocean and your boat sinks. How long? Keep the arms moving... life. Get tired and..."

"Is this another of your stupid quizzes, Mitch?" I asked.

"It's a simple question. How long can you swim?"

"Do I still get to play if I answer wrong?"

"No." He stood, yanking the one-iron from his golf bag, and took a practice swing. He swung hard, his hairy, ruddy hands snapping past his shoulder to the back of his neck.

"Swim or sink. Sink and croak," he said. "Drowning's a slow death. The brain dies last, you know. I don't know what thoughts a drowning man might have," he took another swipe, "but I'll bet they aren't pleasant."

Greg grunted and stepped over to the ball washer. "Can we talk about something else? Where the hell is Davis?"

"A mile," I said.

"What?" Mitch looked back at me over his shoulder. "What?"

"I think I could swim a mile."

He shook his head like I was hopeless. "Duration, Alan. Duration, not distance," he said. "If I wanted distance, I'd ask Diana Nyad. How long can you swim?"

"An hour, then," I said. "I can swim for an hour."

"Think so? You go under and you suck salt and it scares you," Mitch said. "Shit leaks out your butt, that's how much it scares you."

"Good Christ." Greg winced and stared out toward the parking lot. "Give it a rest, Mitch."

"Nothing leaks out of my butt," I said. "I never eat before I swim."
"How long?"

"We don't know, Mitch," Greg said. "Suppose you tell us the answer and we play golf?"

Mitch glared at him, planted a ball, and hit a long, low one-iron at the first fairway. It drifted out beyond the one-fifty marker, bounced, and rolled to a stop short of the rough.

Greg whistled between his teeth and rocked on his heels. I nodded. "Not bad," I said. "Not bad at all."

"For an old man," Greg added.

Mitch picked up his tee and stepped past me to slide the iron back into his bag. "You know, Greg," he said. "Your head's like that Maxi-Fli you hit."

"How's that," Greg said.

"Dimpled on the outside, hard and featureless on the inside."

"My, aren't we in a good mood today," I said.

Mitch looked out at the receding figure of the red-bloused woman, took a last pull at the cigarette, then tossed it down and ground it out with his heel. "A rat can swim for seven days," he said.

Greg shook his head and pushed his ball and tee into the ground. "A rat?"

"A rat," I said. "Does shit leak out of its butt?"

"A rat in a trap will eat its own legs off," Mitch said, "He'll chew its way into a pig's gut and get its dinner that way, if that's what it takes. He's a survivor. He's smart. Stick a rat in the middle of the ocean, with no hope in sight, and he'll drown in an hour. Give him a chance, though," he scuffed the ground, his cleats making shallow furrows in the damp turf, "say, in a flooded culvert with the water level dropping a little every hour, and he'll swim for seven days."

"You're senile," Greg said. He cranked back and let loose, his ball hooking slightly
and skipping into the left rough well short of the Mitch's shot.

"Seven days," Mitch said. "A man could learn a lot from a rat, if he wasn't so damn smart."

I dug out a ball and my 3 wood and stepped up to the tee. "I hope that rat doesn't eat his legs before he swims," I said. "He'll get a cramp." I took my swing and watched the ball come safely to rest near one of the fairway bunkers along the right side. I grinned and looked back for Mitch's approval. He stared at me, unsmiling, then at Greg.

"You're idiots," he said, quietly. "You're completely clueless. I don't know what I must have been thinking." He shouldered his bag and started for the green.

I dropped my wood back into the bag and glanced in the direction of the parking lot.

"Shouldn't we wait for Davis?"

Mitch kept walking and didn't reply.

Greg heaved his oversized bag off the ground and rubbed at the side of his nose.

"What time is it?" he said.

"I don't know. 5:35?"

"Fuck him, then. He's late."

I usually tried to talk them into waiting for Davis. Sometimes they would. But more often than not - and especially when Mitch was in one of his moods - they'd play ahead. They said he could catch up on the second hole, but that he got an X on No. 1 and started the day one beer down. Davis bitched about that a lot and said that he should just be able to tell us what his score for the hole was, but it never did much good. Greg wouldn't accept your score unless he witnessed every shot, and Mitch agreed with him. One night after we'd had a few, I told him that, scapegoat or no, sometimes he was too hard on Davis, that he should understand better than either Greg or me, since he was married too. "That's got nothing to do with it" he'd said. "The four of us have an obligation to each other. We're not just friends.
We're guys.” I told him I didn't see what difference that made. He stared at me for a moment, then started to explain how women who live together naturally synchronize their menstrual cycles. When I failed to fall over in awe at that tidbit, he shook his head and said, slowly as a dog trainer, “it proves they’re in league against us. That’s why we’ve gotta hang tight. The game’s not the thing, Al,” he’d said. “It’s the doing it together.”

I birdied the first hole. Mitch parred it after pitching on and missing his first putt, and Greg three-putted for a bogey. Davis was on the fairway when we replaced the flag, so we bought a few beers from the beverage cart at the second tee and waited for him to catch up. Mitch sipped his at the women's tee and stared out toward the distant green.

“Thinking about putting on a dress and trying your luck from here?” I said. He turned as I stepped up beside him.

“Don't even joke about that, Alan. Don't even smile.”

I popped the tab on my beer. It hissed and foamed for a moment, then died down. “A bit more pensive than usual tonight, huh?” I said.

“Observing or asking?” he said.

“Both.”

He took a long gulp of beer and tossed the can into the trash container. “Then I'll take the safe route and refuse to comment,” he said. He didn't wait for me to ask what he meant, but walked over to tee up as Davis clattered towards the tee, dragging his pull cart.

“Sorry I'm late,” Davis said. “It was my night to make supper, and it took a little longer than I expected.”

“Yeah,” Mitch said. “I'm sure it did.” He looked at Davis' cart and made a wry face. “Training wheels. Twenty-nine and he needs training wheels.”

“It's my back,” Davis said. He winced and leaned to one side, stretching. “It's been killing me lately.”
"So has mine." Mitch stepped up to the ball and fired it out to the bottleneck where the fairway funneled towards the pin. "But I ignore it. Do you know what makes my back worse, Davis?" he said. "Watching you and that damn cart. If you can't lug your sticks like a man, don't play."

Greg and I both hit safe, unremarkable drives while Davis got busy with his clubs and launched into a description of the one-over-par round he claimed to have posted the weekend before. Mitch pulled a small, silver whiskey flask from his bag and lit another cigarette. He told Davis to shut up and let his club speak for him.

"All right," Davis said, "I will." He took two practice swings that bore no resemblance to his true swing, then wrapped the driver around his neck, aimed his chin at the sky and jabbed the ball out of bounds.

"Well," Greg said, "I'd say that shot definitely speaks for itself."

We waited while Davis hit another, a blooper that dribbled halfway to the hole before giving up the ghost, then set out after our balls. Davis tried to argue that he shouldn't suffer a penalty for his first swing, since he felt we were rushing him. Greg laughed and told him if he wanted sympathy, he could go home and complain to his wife. Mitch walked in front of us, taking regular hits from the flask. When we reached Davis' shot, he pushed on ahead to where his ball lay. Davis yelled that it would be nice if he'd observe some game etiquette.

"Etiquette," Mitch called back over his shoulder. "A French word. The language of losers. The lingua franca of the weak and insipid." He didn't slow or change direction; he just kept walking, his bag of clubs swinging on his hip like a sword and scabbard.

"Looks like I've got competition," Greg said. "He's being a regular asshole today."

I nodded. "Something's got him going, that's for sure."

"Any idea what it is?" Greg asked. I shook my head. Davis didn't say anything.

Mitch chipped on, putted in, and started for the next tee. By the time we'd finished
with the second green, he was 220 yards down the fairway, pulling out a club for his second shot.

"Fine," Greg said. "If he wants to play by himself, let him. But he gets an X on every hole. I'm not paying for his beer unless I see the ball drop into the cup."

We crisscrossed the next two holes as the sun burned down to a bright yellow-orange above the trees that flanked the western edge of the coarse, catching up on each other's jobs and discussing the CUBS, our opinions of the latest cars, and our luck with women. Guy stuff. Mitch continued to play ahead, but he was slowed by having to wait at each hole for the red-bloused woman to finish. I spotted him from time to time, paused, tipping his flask back and looking out at her. I thought maybe he was considering joining her, or asking if he could play through.

I hit a solid shot on the No. 5 tee, an arching 3 wood that dropped along the left edge of the fairway. Greg drove near the oaks on the right side, and Davis hooked his TOP-FLITE into the heavy rough just short of my ball. He and I spent five minutes looking for it, raking the deep pampas grass with our spikes and batting away the mosquitoes. Finally I told him to forget it, the ball was history, one of the disappeared. "Take a drop," I said. "I won't say anything to Greg."

"I suppose you're right." He tossed another ball out into the short grass, pulled a seven-iron, and duffed the ball ten yards. He dropped his club and ran one hand through his hair. "I give up," he said. "I can't hit tonight."

"Keep your head down and swing through the ball."

He shook his head. "That's not it. It's Mitch."

"Don't worry about him," I said. I glanced up to where he stood on the green, studying his putt. "He's just in one of his moods. He'll get over it. Besides, I like the cart. I wish I had one."
"No, no, you don’t understand. He’s not going to get over it. He’s got big problems at home. Beth told me Carol’s leaving him."

"Divorce?" I looked away when he nodded. "You’re kidding, right?"

"I wish I was. Beth got a call from her at work today asking if she could use our truck this Saturday to move her things."

"But why?"

He tapped at one of the cart wheels with the toe of his shoe and shrugged. "I don’t know. She didn’t say."

I stared up at the green. Mitch leaned over and retrieved his ball from the cup. He took another pull from the flask, then slipped it back into one of the pouches in his bag.

"Christ," I said. "You’d think he’d have said something."

"Would you?"

I glanced at Davis and chewed on a lip. "Play the rest with Greg," I said. "I’m going to see if I can catch up to Mitch." I grabbed the nine from my bag and knocked my ball to the green. After two quick putts I joined Mitch at the sixth tee.

No. 6 at the Country Club is a short par four, the pin guarded at the front by a water hazard. Its long green is driveable with a 1 wood - a club I never use - but it’s a risky shot at best. The safe play is to lay up with an iron. Mitch was spinning a wood in one hand as I came up. Beyond him, I could see the woman slipping the putter back into her bag.

"Playing the lone wolf today?" I asked.

He bent over, pushing his ball and tee into the soft, scuffed earth of the box. "I don’t feel like dealing with the elementary organs today," he said, nodding back at Greg and Davis.

"Don’t you mean ‘alimentary?’"

"Same difference." He whipped his club, the ball sailing up and out, bouncing near the pin and rolling to the back fringe.
"How about me," I said, planting a ball. "Do you feel like dealing with me?"

"The heart?" He gave me a slight, whiskied smile. "You can stay. The head has no problems with the heart."

"You sure about that?" I drew out a three-iron, and when he didn't reply, I said, "What's going on with Carol?"

His smile disappeared. "What do you know about that?"

"Very little," I admitted. "But I'm willing to listen if you want to tell me more."

He rocked back and forth on his heels, then pulled the driver from his bag and held it out to me. "Match my ball," he said. Match it and we'll talk."

I took the club from him and passed back the iron. "Okay," I said. "You've got it." I took a couple of practice swings, the clubhead skimming above the grass. "I can do this."

"Blub, blub."

I looked back at him. "What?"

"Famous last words," he said.

"Whose, mine?"

"No. Houdini's." I smiled and whacked the ball. It hooked as it climbed, losing speed. We watched it splash. "That's wet," Mitch said. "Unless that ball's a rat, it's drowned."

I handed him back his club and followed him to his ball. I knew better than to push the issue. I'd wait for him to breach the topic again. He two-putted for a birdie while I held the flag. "Don't feel bad, Alan," he said, bouncing the ball in his hand. "It's a dumb game. We're stupid to play it." He lifted his bag by the strap and took a few steps towards the par 3 seventh. "But, hey. We're men. It's our nature to do stupid things, right?"

"Women play it too," I said.

"Not for the same reasons men do." He pointed down to where the woman in red
fidgeted near the edge of the green, preparing her chip shot. “Look at her. She’s out here intent on getting a piece of plastic and rubber in a hole. Alone.”

“So?”

“The group isn’t important to them. They play for themselves, they don’t need anybody else.” He dropped a ball onto the grass. “Shit, I’d bet they can swim for seven days.”

“That sort of ‘woman hater’s’ attitude is a little old and tired, isn’t it?”

“Einstein’s dead. Does that make him wrong?”

“You probably know his last words,” I said.

“No. Nobody does. True story: Einstein croaks in Princetown, New Jersey. On his deathbed, he whispers his final words to his nurse, the last words of the best mind of a century, in his native tongue. And the nurse doesn’t know German.”

“Yet another slam on women?” I asked. “How about you drop this misogynistic bullshit and talk to me.”

“Actually,” he said, “I believe the nurse was a man. And that wasn’t misogyny. This is.” He took a quick, hard swing, hitting straight at where the woman stood bent over her putter. I stood there, stock still and blinking, watching the ball crest, then shouted “four!” The woman threw her arms up over her head and hunched as the ball dropped, impacting a few feet away from where she stood. She whirled around and gave us the one-fingered salute.

“Yeah, I love you, too,” Mitch said, shoving the iron back in the bag. He snatched up his clubs and started walking towards the Club House. I looked out to the green, the woman, and his ball, then back at him.

“You’re not finishing up?” I asked.

“The game’s over, Alan. I’m heading for the bar.”
I watched him stride away for a few moments, then waved to Greg and Davis that I was heading in. The woman replaced the pin and glared back at me before marching off the green. I didn't know how to apologize from 140 yards away, so I turned and hurried after Mitch.

The lounge at the Country Club is a long, low, redwood affair that plays soft jazz and has golf scenes on the walls. Framed posters of Pebble Beach, Harbour Town, Firestone, and Augusta hang scattered amidst the ferns, and a huge Nieman print of Palmer, Player, Snead, Nicklaus and Trevino - all caught midswing in powdered pastel blasts - faces the brass-railed bar. The “after eight” crowd hadn't stumbled in yet, but a few members were bellied up and busy telling golf lies to each other. Mitch had staked out a table in the back, away from the people, and was sitting down with a bottle of ST. PAULI GIRL and an empty glass when I walked in. I ordered a COORS and went to join him.

He finished filling his glass as I sat down, frowning in disapproval at my beer.

"American beer. You know how American beer is like making love in a canoe?"

"You've told me," I said. "They're both fucking close to water." Now how about letting me in on what's going on with you and Carol."

He lit a smoke and leaned back in his chair, studying the label on his bottle. "Drink your shitty beer, Alan," he said, finally. "Finish it and I'll buy you another shitty one. I owe you for the first hole."

"I'll let you buy me a good one if you tell me."

"Tell you what? What's going on? You don't want to know what's going on. You just want me to smile and forget and for things to get comfortable again. Normalcy. That's it. But not the truth."

"Come on, Mitch. Talk to me. I'm your friend. Hell," I grinned, "I'm one of the 'guys.'"
"Exactly," he said. "And that's the problem."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He scoffed into his beer. "Just that. It's precisely because you're one of the 'guys' that I can't tell you."

I pushed back from the table and fingered my glass. "Why not?"

"Because, Alan." He chuckled and shook his head. "Because I'm 'Mitch' and you're 'Alan.' Because we're 'guys.' Comprendé? We're men."

"You're losing me," I said. "What does the fact that we're men have to do with it?"

He drew a long breath and rubbed at his eyes. "'Pity the man who has eyes but cannot see.' Okay, listen close, Alan, because this is important, and I'm only going to say it once. Once, and then I'm never teaching any of you anything again." He emptied the last of the import into his glass and lightly thumped the bottle down beside it. "How many male bonding rituals do you know of?" he asked.

"What's this got to do with -?"

"Everything," he said. "How many?"

"Lots. Golf, poker nights, hunting and fishing trips..."

He nodded. "The list goes on. Now," he turned his bottle so that the label's beer-laden Bavarian girl smiled and swaggered towards me in her blue and white peasant's dress, "how many female bonding rituals have you ever heard of?"

"I don't know," I said. "None to speak of."

"Why is that?"

I shrugged. "I guess because women don't bond like men do."

"That's right," he said. "That's exactly it. They don't because they don't need to. Women aren't parts of people like men are; they're complete, whole, functioning individuals who have their shit together. They can talk to each other, be real and honest with
themselves." He took a long draw of beer and flicked the ashes from his smoke.

"And men can't?" I asked.

"No. We're all tied up in knots, trying to deal with being 'men.' We don't talk, we don't open up, because we don't know what's safe to say or show. That's why we bond."

"So we can get comfortable enough with each other to start being ourselves," I said.

"Yeah." The end of his cigarette brightened, then faded, and he exhaled a long, thin stream of smoke. "But it's a lie, Alan. A myth. We go on and on about how close friends we all are, but none of us really knows the others. Look at what we talk about when we're together. Important stuff? Anything that really means something to us? No. We talk about getting laid and our jobs and sports and everything we're expected to talk about. And in the end we don't know each other any better than we know ourselves." He tipped his beer bottle onto its side and gave it a slow spin. "And you know what's the kicker?" he said. "We like it that way. Because, deep down inside, we really don't want to deal with all of those uncomfortable things."

I watched the bottle turn, end for end, between our beer glasses. I glanced up as Davis and Greg came in, stopping to order beers at the bar, and when I looked back the spinning had stopped. The bottle rocked gently from side to side.

"I think you're wrong, Mitch," I said. "When you're friends, the uncomfortable shit doesn't matter. We'd see past that. We'd understand."

"You think so, huh?" he said, staring across at me. "You don't think your opinion of me would change if I told you things?"

"You're not going to tell me you're gay, are you?"

"No. I'm not. Carol is." His breath came out in a short "huff" and he tried to smile. "Yeah. She's leaving me for another woman. She said I 'don't satisfy her, either emotionally or physically, like her lover does.'" He blinked and cocked his mouth to one side. "So, you
okay with that admission? A real man never admits to being inadequate in that area, does he? No, he leaves ‘em sweating, sleepy, and out of breath, right?” He took a last puff from his cigarette and leaned in close. “Now tell me you’re comfortable knowing the real me.”

I looked away. At the ferns. At Augusta. At St. Jack, St. Sam, and St. Arnie, holding their clubs strong and high. There was nothing to say.

“I didn’t think so,” he said.

He shook his head and stood up, bumping past Greg and Davis, foaming their bottles. Greg turned and scowled after him, shaking the beer from his hand. “What’s the problem with him?”

I stared down at the rocking St. Pauli Girl, so carefully balancing her steins of beer.

“Carol’s left him for another woman.”

Greg looked at Davis and me for a moment, then sipped his beer, nodding as if he actually understood.