Brown water flashbacks

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Brown water flashbacks

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
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Program of Study Committee:
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Preface

The main character in this story is affected by the illness called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Since this is a story about myself, I consider the writing to be a memoir. My purpose is to inform my reading audience of what the illness is like by relating personal stories. Many of the situations are being written from flashbacks from the disorder, which are mental visions of reality to the one with PTSD. Still, as I read the stories written by my own hand from the images formed in my memory, I find them difficult for even me to believe. For the reader, the memoir contains numerous incidents that can only be interpreted as delusional. I have heard it said that, “A rainbow is unique to each person viewing it.” Likewise, the perception of what I thought I was seeing at the time may have been quite different from someone else viewing the same thing from a slightly different angle. However, my illness believes that the information the stories are based on is true.

Victims of PTSD often find themselves isolated from others. I wondered if PTSD wasn’t the same illness that moose occasionally got that caused them to walk south out of Canada and keep going in the wrong direction. I felt like I was under a giant bell in the ocean. I watched other veterans try to escape the illness, but the outside pressure was too great. Yet, I have had some success dealing with PTSD, and that makes this story worth telling. The possibility exists that I may have done something right.

There is dialogue with other characters in the memoir, but the author’s voice is often alone with his own thoughts. This makes describing the illness difficult, because characters are best defined through action with others. Other symptoms are also woven into the narrative to help the audience understand the deep depression of the illness better. Alcohol
dependency, difficulties with family relationships, and societal problems are common among Viet Nam veterans diagnosed with PTSD.

The importance of this memoir is directly related to the times in which we are living. PTSD is a relevant topic today for survivors of 911 and the War on Terrorism. Time is one of the factors to be considered in dealing with this topic. I covered a wide range of years in order to properly show how PTSD can lay dormant and then erupt. Those affected by the events of 911 may not have stress-disorder symptoms for several years.

There were more doctors involved in my treatment that are mentioned in the memoir. Drugs were prescribed at the Richmond Center in Ames, Iowa, the Nevada Medical Center, and the VA. Due to the sensitivity of the illness, one tenth of the prescription was enough to be effective. The VA even reduced one of the drugs according to this ratio. The drugs were only useful for a short time. When the effectiveness diminished, I stopped the usage or tried something else. Anti-depressants were of little help. My recommendations concerning medication for the illness are radically different than currently prescribed treatment. Today, with the exception of blood pressure medicine, I am alcohol, tobacco, and drug free, which was my medical objective.

Although I am optimistic that anyone reading this memoir will find it interesting, I would especially hope that some benefit could come to those who have been diagnosed with PTSD, especially my fellow Viet Nam veterans. I feel very strongly that the illness does not have to be a dead end. The journey is like wading through brown water, not knowing if there is a place to get out on the other side, but I believe that there is.
Barnyard life

When I was old enough to cross the road by myself, I ventured over to see what was in the barnyard. The tractor had pulverized the dirt into a fine powder that was perfect to smooth into roads and racetracks. I loved the broken sickle guides, because they made great pretend racecars or airplanes. The steel metal was worn down to a rounded end from guiding the tough alfalfa directly into the cutting teeth of the sickle, which moved back and forth as the tractor pulled the mower across the field. The movement of the sickle bar had worn the guides until they either broke the welded arms, which fastened them in place, or would no longer allow the sickle blade to slide properly. I searched the pails my father had used to throw junk parts away until I found a sickle guide that had the perfect nose of an airplane or the front end of a racecar. Some still had the attachment bar across the top, which resembled a short wing. My toy invention slid perfectly along the fine dirt, even without wheels. The barnyard was a safe place to play until a cow got out, a tractor started up, or a pickup truck rumbled through. The corn, oats, and beans were in constant motion; the wagons were always going somewhere. Straw and hay fed the mouth of the faded red barn until the sides swelled out.

***

Our old square house sat on the west side of the gravel road. I wasn’t very old when I went up the short lane to the road, and across into the barnyard to see if my dad needed help with the milking. I swung the top half of the barn door open, stood on the tips of my toes, and peered in over the bottom half of the door. The smell of hay and animals mixed together rushed out to greet me and invited me in. Though the barn was never heated when the
weather was cold, the warmth of the milk cows made me feel cozy. Down the middle of the barn was an aisle soft to walk on from an accumulation of alfalfa leaves, spilled grain, and dust.

“Stand here where it’s safe,” shouted my father and pointed to the walkway that was in front of the manger where the cows were to be fed. “The cows are coming into the barn to be milked.” At that, my father opened the door, and in rushed what must have been the largest, meanest creatures alive, and they stampeded straight for me. The milk cows’ drooly mouths mooed their arrival as they pushed and shoved each other to their usual stalls, and slammed their heads through the wooden stanchions to the waiting small pile of ground corn with a powdered soybean protein sprinkled on top. I felt exhilarated as I stood inches in front of the cow’s face, frozen by the huge eyeballs of each of the cow’s “who the hell are you?” look. Above the center of the aisle, where the built up hay was the thickest, was the ladder to climb into the loft. The hay had been stacked to the peak during the summer harvest. The ladder tunneled vertically through a square hole of sweet smelling hay layered to the top of the barn. A tumbling bale down the shaft would crush anyone standing below the hole, so caution was always used when throwing hay down, or when walking underneath the chute when down in the aisle. A loud shout of “coming down” warned of the danger from up above. With the hay in the walkway below, the heifers could easily be fed. The twine that held the bale together could either be pulled off or cut. The chunks of hay, which formed the bale, could easily be thrown along the manger. The Hereford and Angus calves, which were born further west on the prairie, would push and squeeze for position along the manger to have the best mouthful of hay possible.
As my father prepared the milk cows for milking, locking each securely in the stanchion, I would feed the baby calves from a small bucket with a nipple at the bottom. I would fill the bucket with a couple of gallons of water and add some cups of powdered milk from a bag. The fine powder formed a dust that had a milky aroma as it was poured into the water. Once stirred with a stick, the contents both looked and smelled like real milk. The trick was getting into the pen without spilling their breakfast. The calves butted their head into the side of the pail, while their rough tongues groped for the nipple. The bucket was passed around with constant interruptions from calves, which had already been fed but never seemed to get enough to be satisfied.

My time arrived to take a seat beside the milk cow. The stool was short, with a four-by-four for a leg, and a small board nailed to the top forming the letter T. With the milk bucket in one hand, and the stool in the other, I would slide my way between two cows standing side by side, taking a seat on the stool on the cow’s right side. The cow’s udder was stretched tight, and the four nipples were stiff. I placed the bucket directly in front of the cow’s hind legs, grabbed onto the teats closest to me with both hands, and started yanking and squeezing with motions that forced a steady stream of milk downward, hitting the bottom of the bucket with a metallic sound. The cats all turned their heads. The sound could be hushed by directing the flow to the side of the bucket. As the bucket began to fill, the tone was deeper with each stroke. On cold frosty mornings, tucking my head between the hind leg and the udder warmed my ears. In a way, the cow and I became one, feeling each other’s motion. A friendly swat of the tail to the back of my head was a reminder for me to get the left side teats too. They were harder to reach with a boy’s short arms. By pointing one of the teats out at the cats and pulling hard, a stream of milk could be shared with the cats. They
would stand on their hind legs to reach high to catch what they could in open mouths, and then lick each other’s faces. On rare occasions, the cow’s rear foot would try to step in the bucket. If this happened, chunks of manure were added for flavor. Worse still, the cows often shit and pissed in the gutter while they were being milked. There was no way to entirely avoid getting splattered. Still, to avoid the big chunks, I took my bucket and squeezed my way forward between the cow that I was milking and the one standing in the next stanchion. Invariably, the two cows would lean toward each other, pinning me between their stomachs. When the bucket was full and the udder was empty, a little warm milk was poured into an old hubcap gathering every cat in a circle. The little pink tongues slurped the warm freshness into their mouths as fast as possible. The rest of the milk was poured into a can with a strainer funneled on top. With each milk bucket that was emptied, the strainer ran slower. The milk pad in the strainer worked hard, and needed to be changed at least once a day. I leaned against the wooden railing behind my father and watched him milk the last cow, the black one at the end.
The wild frontier

In the fall, the corn began to turn brown. The ears of golden kernels were ready to be picked. My father mounted a picker on the tractor, which started belts, chains, and gears in motion all at the same time. My father sat on the tractor seat controlling all the movements around him. The elevator on the rear tossed the corn from the two rows that were picked together into a wagon, which was hauled through the fields. I sneaked up from behind the moving contraption, and climbed into the wagon when my father wasn’t looking back from his tractor seat. The load was low in the wagon, and I lay down at the front where I couldn’t be seen. The corn bounced down from the elevator into a pile in the middle and then spread out towards the sides. Soon the corn was rolling down at me. I couldn’t stand up or Dad would see me in the wagon, so I lay still. The corn on the cob kept creeping higher until I was covered. “I could still get out if I wanted,” I told myself. But soon, I couldn’t. I could only hear the corn landing and sliding over my head. I couldn’t move, still not making a sound. Finally, the load was full. The wagon was unhooked and left standing in the field. The sound of the corn picker diminished, then there was nothing but quiet, and my game wasn’t fun anymore. No one was going to hear me even if I yelled for help. Finally, I heard a tractor approaching, then backing up and hooking on. My father pulled the wagon I was buried in to the corncrib and drove over a hoist until the wagon’s front tires came to a rest on the hoist platform. The old Case tractor had to be started with a hand crank in front. It didn’t always start, but I was sure glad to hear the fire in the cylinders this time. Once started, the Case was left running and powered both the elevator chain and the hoist by a belt on the flywheel. I could feel the wagon slowly rise in the air. I could hear the elevator hopper being lowered
behind the wagon, the rear door of the wagon opening, and the ears of corn dropping onto the moving elevator chain. The blades on the chain moved the corn upwards toward the roof to a window at the top. From this opening the corn was funneled into bins below. The rear of the wagon would empty first, but with the front in the air, the load would slide down towards the rear. Corn on the cob would not always pour freely out the rear gate. My job was to reach across the hopper, and keep the corn flowing. Dad would certainly wonder where I was by now, I thought. I was missing from my work. I could hear the corn start to slide downwards from above where I lay. I wouldn’t be free until most of the corn was unloaded. Finally, the pressing weight was lightened. I was able to free my legs, raise my hands, and clear my head of the rough husks that enveloped the cobs. I raised myself to breathe the fresh air, climbed up over the front of the wagon and down the hoist. I walked to the rear of the wagon.

“Where have you been?” Dad said. “I about got the wagon unloaded. Might rain.”

I spent a lot of time in the woods pretending to be Davy Crocket, so my father wasn’t really surprised that I hadn’t been at the corncrib. My father was a descendent of the Tennessee Colony, who were the first settlers in Cole County Missouri. His ancestors built their homes near the mouth of the Moniteau River on what is now Jefferson City. Henry McKinney and three of his sons, together with the Inglish, Miller, Chambers, Gooch, and Harmon families were the first settlers. Later, Daniel Boone moved to join the settlement and lived there until his death. Sarah Boone has been listed as Henry’s probable mother in the family genealogy, so it was possible that my father was related to Daniel somehow. My father was born in Houston, Texas County, Missouri, and lived his early years in the hills of the Ozarks, where he graduated sixth grade from Ozark School.
“Playing,” I said. “Let me finish.” That was all that was said. The squeak of the
elevator chains sliding along, the rattle of the pulleys, and the old Case motor roaring its tune
kept me from explaining further. There were nights when wagons full of corn were left for
the next day to unload. I was happy this hadn’t been one of them.

***

After the corn was harvested, the ground was prepared for the spring planting by
chopping the cornstalks, disking, and plowing. My brother and I were not quite old enough to
help with such important but dangerous fieldwork. Dad hired my second cousin, Jim Berka,
to drive the tractor through the fields when he needed extra help. Jim lived in town, but he
worked like he had lived in the country all his life. I admired my older cousin very much.
Cousin Jim was in high school, and he came to the farm after school and on weekends,
besides some summer work. I would take a bag lunch out to him in the field, which my
mother had prepared. She would forget that Jim was Catholic, and she would make a
sandwich with meat in it on Fridays, which was against Church custom at the time. Jim
didn’t complain. I walked out to greet him in the field with the bag lunch and a cool drink.
He pulled the tractor around at the end of the field through a cloud of dust and stopped. Jim
got off the tractor, took the sack out of my hand, and pulled my hat down. “How ya doing,
squirt? Tell your mom, thanks,” Jim said. He took a bite out of the sandwich without even
looking to see what was in it. Mom had made grape Kool-Aid and had filled a quart jar to
quench his thirst. The purple drink leaked from the corners of his mouth, while he gulped the
contents of the jar through his dirty lips. The shirtsleeve on his right arm wiped his chin
clean. “The tractor is running good, the corn stalks are dry, and the disk is working real well;
tell your dad.” Jim turned and climbed back on to the Farmall M tractor with his jar and sack
in hand. The red machine came to life with an upward thrust of the gearshift, a pull on the throttle, and a quick release on the foot clutch. I watched Jim drive away, until he was a ball of dust disappearing over the hill. I turned and headed back to the barnyard to relay the message to Dad.
“Close the doors to the TV and go outside and play, Dennis,” Mom yelled from the kitchen. The long lanky Lew Burdette waved his hat to the crowd, exposing his greasy black hair. My favorite team, the Milwaukee Braves, had just beaten the New York Yankees in the 57 World Series. My father had even come in from the fields to check how the game was going earlier. I turned the new Zenith off and watched the screen shrink until the dot of light in the middle disappeared. I shut the polished wooden doors to keep the picture good.

“O.K. mom,” I said, and skipped outside to the gravel road in the warmth of the September Saturday afternoon sun with my eight-year old imagination.

Bases loaded, game tied. Matthews was on third, Adcock on second, and Crandall on first, two out, bottom of the ninth, and the count was full. Mantle moved deeper in center field. I took a couple of practice swings with my bat, a wooden picket with my initials DAM scratched on one side, and stepped into the box. Whitey Ford was pitching today, game five of the World Series. I stared a hole through him. I threw a smooth round rock that I had picked from the middle of the road into the air. The pitch was coming down right over the plate. I coiled my bat like a snake coming out the back of the New Holland hay bailer. The bat exploded off my shoulder with all the power of all the great players that ever played. My mind recorded the image of the rock meeting the thin wooden stick square on the initials. I knew from the tingle the blast had created in my hands that it had a chance. The rock soared across the road, over the weeds at the edge of the other side of the road, where McDougald and the rookie Kubek rarely allowed a rock to pass, up and over the ditch, climbing still as it cleared the centerfield fence, where sheep grazed. The crowd went wild. I circled the
imaginary bases without looking up or down the road, oblivious to the fact that sometimes a truck with an old farmer waving with one finger would rumble past the farm. I strutted back towards the barnyard, waving to the standing ovation; after all, the sheep were standing.

I never even dreamed of having a real bat or glove. Then, Uncle Vester opened the trunk of his car that was parked behind our 56 Sierra gold and white Chevy Belair in the driveway. He handed me two baseball gloves, one a catcher’s mitt, and the other a regular fielder’s glove. ”Wow,” I said. “For me? Thanks.”

“They were left at the ballpark back home in Kansas; Wichita, that’s where the witches are, ” he said. “And no one ever returned to claim them. I’m sorry that they are the wrong hand for you. You’re left handed like your father, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” I said, slipping the mitts on one at a time. I write left handed, but I can throw right.” I loved my Uncle Vester smiling down at me. He had been a best friend at the Ozark School with Emmett Kelly, the clown.

I had a rubber ball, nearly worn out from throwing against the back of the washhouse. The grass had been worn down to the bare earth on the spot where I pretended to be Lew Burdette, the Milwaukee Braves’ pitcher that had mowed down the Yankees three times in the 57 World Series. I fielded ground balls off the side of the old building and threw base runners out trying to beat my throws from deep in the hole. The gloves brought the imaginary game to life. The ball bounced high off the smooth wood of the mow door near the top of the barn. The glove on my left hand reached out for the catch, while my legs raced over the rutted barnyard to where the ball would land. My skills at the game improved with every throw of my imagination.
As the summer approached, the large mow door was let down on the hinges. Dad backed the tractor with the elevator hooked to the draw bar slowly towards the barn. He stopped, got off the tractor, and hand cranked the long rusty shaft upward toward the mouth of the barn, then continued back until the elevator rested gently in position. The operation was set in motion by a belt that was hooked to a tractor pulley. The wagons of hay would pull up alongside. Dad would stand on top and unload the hay, one by one; the bales would climb their way to the top and drop off the end into the hayloft.

Uncle Victor drove the New Holland baler when it wasn’t broken down, through fields of hay composed of alfalfa, clover, and brome grass that had been cut and dried for two or three days depending on the rain, and rolled into windrows. The baler would pick the hay off the ground and feed it up into a hopper. A plunger with teeth, whose up and down motion through the field resembled a pecking terradactyl devouring everything it could eat, would pack and push the hay out the back. The bales of hay were tightly compacted weighing sixty to seventy pounds with twine holding each of them together. The hay would get pushed out onto the wagon, and I would stack the bales six rows high, laying each one in an opposite direction so that they would form a tight knitted load. The hay would not fall off on the way to the barn, except on rare occasion from a bad stack job.

Baling straw was easier. The baler seemed to digest the yellow shafts of oats better than the tough stalks of hay. Straw was lighter, easier to stack. After the oats were harvested, the straw was baled onto the ground and left to pick up later on skids. Riding the skids was fun. They were made of four or five long planks laid flat on the ground and nailed together by boards across the ends. The skids were then pulled through the field by a tractor. I wasn’t very old, five or six, when I was first placed on the John Deere tractor and told to drive past
any bale that was lying on the ground. All I had to do was push the large metal rod forward and turn at the end of the field. Dad and David would ride on the skids and without the tractor slowing down or stopping, step off the moving wood, pick up the straw and get back on the skid. With just a little driving expertise, the tractor could cut and sway so that the side of the skid would come right next to the bale, making the work easier for the person that was stacking. My pitching arm got stronger with each bale that I stacked as I grew older. By the time I was twelve, bales never came too fast for me that the tractor would have to stop and wait for me to catch up.

With the second cutting of the hay crop in late summer, the barn would fill, forcing the August heat near the top, where the sweat would streak the dust covered faces of my brother David and me. The moving chain screeched a rhythm as each bale from the hayrack made its way up to the mouth of the loft and then plummeted down in a ball of dust in front of us. Each bale was then carried and stacked in layers until the elevator stopped. I would stand on the ledge and look out, breathing the fresh air through hay-filled lungs. The best view of the farm was from the ledge that the elevator rested on in the mouth of the barn. Yet it was a long fall from the top. I gripped the rails of the elevator tightly, carefully swinging myself into a sitting position to crawl, using my hands and feet, down towards the empty hayrack. David and I would take turns under an open water faucet, gulping the cool water, washing the sweat and the dust from our heads, waiting for the next load to near the barnyard.

When the last load was stacked neatly in the barn, it would be time to walk down the lane to the far fields where the creek ran and the cows would be grazing knee-deep grass in the pasture hills. Sometimes the cows would hide in far corners, wade in the creek, or graze
at the bottom of hills making finding them difficult. Often however, they would know that it was milking time and meet me on the way to fetch them. I would trail along behind with our black dog when he wasn’t chasing rabbits, back to the barn. David would try to ride the young bucking calves, but I preferred to walk.

With the haymow door pulled shut, I could let fly the ball again. Sometimes a wagon would be left near the barn. I would bounce the ball off the barn in such a precise pattern that the ball would sail up, just over the side of the wagon. I would jump up and make the game winning catch, just as the ball cleared my imaginary outfield wall. When I somehow missed, I would have to crawl up into the wagon to retrieve the ball from the outfield stands.

The summer of 61 brought change. I left the farm to play baseball. Each town in Story County had a Little League team, and crowds came out to cheer. It was the first time that I played in a uniform, COLO in blue written across the front. I played every position in practices, ending up at first base for the season. As a hitter I had an uncanny sense for what would be called a strike and what would not. In one game, I walked to first base five times. When I wasn’t walking, I was hitting the ball well and was chosen for the leadoff position. My teammates were good hitters, and the team scored many runs. The team began on a winning streak with Al pitching, Dave catching; me on first, Craig played second, Jim at shortstop, Bob on third. The Huntrod twins played left and center, and Mike, now the Treasurer of Iowa, played behind me in right field.

The coach told me that I was to pitch against Collins on the bus trip to the next town south of Colo. I had forgotten my belt, and the end of the shirt uniform kept having to be tucked in as I flung fastballs from sixty feet. We won with the help of some good hitting and slick fielding. The victory left my lifetime pitching career with one win and no losses.
My mother and father couldn’t believe the success we were having. Mom kept saying, “Did you win again?” expecting the answer to be “no.”

“We won again Mom,” I said. The fourteenth win was against a good McCallsburg team for the County Championship. My father came to watch me play. I was making catches like I did in front of the barn. Roger Maris got his 61 home runs, breaking Ruth’s record, and Mantle got nearly as many that year. The damned Yankees thrashed the Reds in the World Series, but the Colo little league team won the Story County Championship. I think dad knew then that I would be hard to keep on the farm. He never watched me play again, because somebody had to do the chores.

With the baseball season over, my mother tried to get me interested in something other than sports. She bought a piano, and I would practice for hours. My piano teacher was Mrs. Mildred Brinkman, Dr. Goodnow’s daughter. She sat next to me in her front room and listened for every mistake that I would make on my lesson. At recitals, ladies in fine dresses and hats with flowers, along with children, mostly girls in pink lace, sat in a circle around the piano and listened to the music I played. They clapped with polite hands; the same hands that clasped together in prayer on Sunday at the Methodist Church. I sang to the congregation in the youth choir to the music Mildred played on the Church organ, while women in fancy dresses listened, and tired farmers rested their chins on their chest. Farmers were involved in the noblest occupation of feeding others and could sleep in Church if they wanted to.

As I grew older on the farm, I was given expanded responsibilities. I helped fill boxes of fresh eggs I had gathered from the chicken house to take to the small grocery stores in Colo or to Abe’s larger grocery stores in Nevada and Ames. Seeing a return for the hard work gave me a sense of purpose to taking care of the animals and cultivating the land.
Everything in the grocery stores came from some type of farm: the bags of flour, boxes of cereal, and the meat in the butcher case. This justified the work that it took to gather eggs, milk cows, and sell hogs, sheep, and cattle. We felt an obligation to work the land. Farming was in our blood, and it was a high calling.
New adventures

Climbing to the top of the hog house looked like an adventure. From there, I figured that I should be able to see all the animals, everything in the barnyard, the shady grove of trees toward the fields, and maybe my bedroom window in our house across the road. The ladder was propped against the front of the hog house, and it tested sturdy enough at the bottom. I climbed towards the roof with a tight grasp on each rung, carefully watching how I placed each foot. Then the ladder started to slip down the steep slope of the hog house roof, slowly at first, and then plummeted toward the concrete hog lot floor. I landed with a thud to the back of the head, and felt the warm blood on my neck. I looked up to see the huge hogs staring down, circling around what was left of my life. The hogs squealed as they jockeyed for position around my head. The last thing I remembered was looking up through the circle of snouts at the top rung of the ladder lying on the wooden fence panel.

My father later related that he had seen the ladder fall to the ground from the road, and he had raced to rescue me. He had jumped over the wooden fence and had fought the hungry hogs back. My father carried me to the house where he laid me on the davenport in the bay windows. The sunlight had warmed the cushions where I lay. I felt confused and dizzy. “Shut the curtains, Mom. The light hurts my eyes,” I said. Just then the phone rang, two longs and a short on the party line; the doctor was returning our call.

“Hello Doctor Goodnow,” said Mom. After some silence, I heard my mother say, “Thank you Doctor, I’ll call if he gets worse. Yes, Ruth, he’s going to be fine. Is that you, Edith? Yes, come over sometime soon.” My mother hung the receiver on the wall box with the telephone bell. She washed the wound to the back of my head with soap and water, and
then she laid the scalp back where it belonged. “The doctor said don’t go to sleep, Dennis. Stay awake. I don’t want you to ever try to climb on the hog house roof again,” my mother said. “You’re going to have a scar on the back of your head for the rest of your life. You’re lucky the hogs didn’t eat ya.”

The bright sunlight through the thin white curtains warmed the back of my head. “I won’t ever climb on the hog house again,” I said. “I promise to stay out of trouble.” Both images of my father standing next to the davenport urged me to keep my eyelids open, but they just wouldn’t.

***

Sometime later, I was awakened in the middle of the night. Our Chevy was loaded for a vacation.

“What’s a vacation?” I said. No one answered.

Mom’s cousin Veda and her husband Mac stood impatiently by the door urging my mother and father to hurry along. Mac and Veda would drive their own car. My older brother David and my younger sister Julie were loaded in the 56 Chevy along with me, and the two cars headed north toward Minnesota. I slept in the back window until the sun came up.

Sunlight peeking through pine trees awakened me in the morning. This seemed to be another world. “Where are we?” I said.

“We’re north of St. Paul,” explained my father. “Go back to sleep, Dennis. It’s a little further.” The trip through the pine forest was like looking down a long mystical tunnel. Finally, my father and mother alerted us three children to look for the water. David and Julie were awake now.

“I’m not thirsty,” said David, “I’m hungry.”
“We’ll be eating soon, David, at a fancy restaurant,” Mother replied. Not having any idea what a restaurant was, us three children settled back in the back seat, and we stared out the window. Then it appeared unlike anything the family had ever seen. Miles and miles of water came to view, so much that you couldn’t see the other side. It was a superior lake.

“Wow,” all three of us children shouted in unison.

David, being the oldest, spoke for the group. “This is better than watching the new TV. I need to go to the outhouse.” David was extremely wise. He could milk three cows while I milked only one. David was just over two years older than me, and I was just over two years older than Julie. Mother would say that Julie was the baby. She rarely said anything on our vacation.

The family followed Mac and Veda to the south side of Duluth and pulled into some strangers’ front yard. The strangers had a long house with a lot of doors and a big window beside each door. My father and Mac got out to visit a spell and returned with something that I had never seen before, a key to the house.

“It’s a key, Dennis, the car has one too. We just never take it out. See.” He pulled the key from the ignition. “Keys is used to lock things up.”

“Why do they keep the house locked?” David asked my father.

My father just laughed. “This is called a motel, David, not a house. Let’s go in, they’ve got indoor plumbing like the church, the school, and Doctor Goodnow. The sign says that they have one of those new televisions in every room.” The motel room did have a television with doors on the front and Zenith written across the top, just like the one at home. The bed was made the wrong way, not across like at home, but otherwise it was perfect for us three children. I checked it out for softness by jumping on it.
“Wow I can almost touch the ceiling,” I shouted.

“That’s enough, Dennis,” shouted my father, the powerful left hand finding my butt.

“Warsh up you’re face, we’re fixin to get some grunts.”

“Where is the pump?” I asked, as I looked out the front window. “I’ll fetch water.”

Mom took me by the hand and showed me how to get water in a bathroom.

“This is a bathtub, Dennis,” my mom said. “You can try it out tonight after supper. Been almost a week since you been cleaned up, hasn’t it?”

The restaurant was a great idea that somebody had, I thought. A person could have anything they wanted, and a lady would go get it. The restaurant had things other than corn and potatoes to choose from, and nobody was eating liver. The milk didn’t have any cream on it, but tasted pretty good anyway. It was the first time I had eaten French food; Mac suggested it. He called the new food a French fry. It didn’t taste much different from a lard potato served with a fancy tomato sauce in a bottle to me.

Duluth was the strangest place. Not one rooster crowed the next morning to awaken me, yet I was the first one up. My father was fixin to head out somewhere with Mac to see something important and to discuss a “proposition,” whatever that meant. Dad wanted me to ride along and told me to get my overalls on. Mac and Veda, who hadn’t brought any of their children along on the trip, both said that I was too young to understand anything anyway. Mom was reluctant to let me go, but she agreed that if I stayed at the motel, I would wake up Julie and David, who were still asleep.

Mac seemed to be different in Duluth. He was cruel, loud, and demanding. I could sense that my father was becoming uneasy. Mom was also nervous about something. Mac slipped behind the wheel of our family car, and turned the key that was still in the ignition.
Mac drove while my father sat on the passenger side. I sat in the middle of the back seat, poking my head over the front seat. I always liked to listen to what was said, whether I understood it or not. The grand tour of Duluth began as we pulled out of the parking lot and headed north into the heart of the city. The sun glared across the calm harbor where huge ships sat loaded with rusty iron.

My father and Mac’s discussion of something important was more like an argument. I noticed that they weren’t exactly seeing eye to eye. Mac’s voice kept getting louder, so there was no further need for me to lean forward to hear. The history of the world was being discussed in the front seat. What the hell was a Nazi anyway? Whatever it was, Mac liked them a lot, and kept saying “superior.” In fact, everything said superior, the street, some businesses, the lake, and even the gas station, so it was hard for me to argue the point. Mac tried to clarify the situation by divulging that it was “a race thing.” This was most confusing to me; even though the cars were moving a lot faster than the traffic on the gravel roads back home, no one seemed to be racing. Mac liked the Fuehrer a lot.

“What’s so great about having fewer of anything? I said, but was totally ignored.

“The Nazi plan is to capture America,” Mac said. In World War II, Hitler’s strategy was to take Northern Africa; and chase the Americans back into the western hemisphere. The attack on the United States was planned through Canada into Minnesota. The defeat in North Africa for the Nazis simply delayed the war objective and changed the method of attack to a subversive one. “Now, we have the capability to do it,” Mac said. The car drove uphill away from the lake, by the north side of Jefferson School, an imposing looking, winged, brick building. “This is our parliament building, where the Third Reich will rule.”

“Pigeons seem to like it,” I said. The car turned and circled the building to the south.
“That building was built to last, but that’s not all, Vernon, there’s more,” Mac said. Vernon was my father’s name. No one in the family ever called him that, but when I was back home, I would walk a half a mile to the corner intersection to get the mail, and his name, Vernon, would be printed on the letters. Driving near the ugliest bridge ever built, Mac bragged, “We have an atomic bomb on a rocket. It’s placed in a silo under that bridge, set to go off in fifty years.”

“The Nazis don’t have an atomic bomb,” my father said.

“The Russians have the atomic bomb. They stole the secret on how to make one right here in the United States. The Nazis are a lot smarter than the Russians. We stole the secret first, and our missiles are better built,” said Mac. “We just loaded the rocket on a ship and stopped it under the bridge to unload.”

“Won’t a rocket hit the bridge when it shoots off if it’s under the bridge?” asked my father. “I thought you said Nazis were so smart.”

“The base of the bridge is mounted on a slide rail; the bridge gets pulled out of the way before the missile is launched,” Mac said. “The Nazis have already infiltrated key government and military positions, and we’ve got the Vice President of America in the palm of our hand; Nixon is one of us. When the big day arrives for our attack, the atomic bomb will wipe Washington D. C. off the map, and we will overthrow the government. It’s a done deal. We already control the women, the doctors, the lawyers, and the clergy. Do you see those iron rods mounted on top of the bridge? They aren’t for protection against lightning. Those are images of missiles, Roman candles actually.”

“I see them. I see them,” I said.
“Clever, don’t you think, rockets on top of the bridge, and rockets under the bridge. The Roman candles were the Pope’s idea,” said Mac. “He works for us, and has for a long time now. Several of the Nazis fled to South America at the end of World War II through the backdoor of the Vatican,” Mac said. “And if the Pope is on our side, God must be too, right?”

“What if I don’t like your plan?” my father asked.

“Those that resist will end up here,” said Mac. The car passed the tall smoke stacks that can be seen along the water’s edge on Duluth’s south side. “This is the crematorium. Are you in Vernon? We have money to offer. Everyone has a price, right?”

“You can keep your money. You’ll never live to see it. In fifty years we’ll both be dead,” my father said.

“We probably won’t live to see the day of the attack, but our children will. The attack is scheduled for right after the turn of the century. The country won’t know what hit them. The plan will remain secret until then. Even when the attack starts, no one will know who it is that is attacking America until the overthrow is complete. In our lives, we will be working for a revolutionary cause. It’s a done deal anyway. Nobody can stop it,” said Mac.

“I can,” I said. “I’ll just remember what you said, and come back in fifty years and tip it over.”

“Ha, ha Dennis, you’re too young to remember this, boy,” said Mac. “You won’t be able to remember it tomorrow. Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha.”

“I don’t want anything to do with Nazis. I’ll work for my living,” said my father.

“The Nazis want you to join. We selected you. You should feel honored. They will give you what you want; money, power, and position. You won’t be just a dirt farmer
anymore, Vernon. You can have any woman you want, anytime you want, they have to go with you. How much money do you need?”

“Not interested,” said my father. The car pulled into the motel parking lot where Mom, my brother, and sister stood waiting.

“How did it go?” Mom blurted out. Her look acknowledged that she was fully aware of what had been discussed on our sightseeing trip around the city.

“You mean what he says is true?’ snarled my father, reading her with just one look.

“Yes,” Mom said. “It’s all true.”

Mac put his arm around Mom to prove his point. “Fuck me, bitch,” Mac said. Mom got all funny looking. My father had seen enough. His left fist closed, and his arm swelled up from years of hard farm work.

“Get your God damned arm off my wife,” said my father, slowly walking towards Mac. Mac backed up, and he disappeared into the motel. With their suitcases in hand, Mac and Veda came out of their motel room, got into their own car, and left in short order.

I resorted to crying on the way out of Duluth, as my mother and father were trying to have a discussion. I kept shouting, “I don’t want to be a Nazi, I don’t want to be a Nazi, I don’t want to be a Nazi.” Burma Shave signs passed. Finally, I was told to shut up and to forget about what Mac had said. I felt confused and tired. The sunlight through the car window hurt my eyes.
But trouble was brewing on the world scene during my teenage years, which I could not avoid. The storm formed on the horizon as the threat of war. Companies were selling bomb shelters at the State Fair, and people were watching the skies for Russian satellites flying over their homes. I didn’t understand the Cuban missile crisis, but the stress of the situation was written on the young President’s face. My mother was in Aunt Virginia’s kitchen when she had a vision of Kennedy’s assassination. She related to the family that something terrible was about to happen to Kennedy. Within the week, an announcement came over the West Marshall High School speakers that “President Kennedy has been shot in Dallas,” and later that “President Kennedy is dead.” No one could be sure of what was happening. The school cancelled classes and sent the students home.

The news jolted everyone, striking hard, and turned the peaceful world of the fifties into the turmoil of the sixties. Everything seemed to turn upside down. The regular television programs on all the channels were cancelled to give coverage of the event throughout the weekend; even the Bear’s game was cancelled. Everyone including the announcers seemed stunned, not knowing what to say to the public. Often the TV had a picture, but no one was saying anything.

The winds of change swept quickly across America in the form of Johnson’s Viet Nam War decisions and the draft boards. No one would ever know what Kennedy might have done about Viet Nam. The assassination of the leaders of both South Viet Nam and the United States ushered in a turbulent time. My piano playing, choir singing, baseball playing, high school sports team membership, and farm boy days were about over. In those days, young
men that didn’t have a school or some other type of deferment were drafted into the Army and sent to Viet Nam.

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After finishing high school, Cousin Jim went to college, graduated at Montana with a degree in forestry, and received a commission in the Air Force. Jim came home to Iowa for a family reunion at his father and mother’s house in Colo. He spoke about his upcoming Viet Nam tour of duty light heartedly. At first, I thought that he was joking, and then I realized he wasn’t.

“What will you be doing?” someone in the room asked.

“I’ll be flying helicopters around Viet Nam dodging bullets,” Jim answered. Perhaps, Jim realized that his cousins would be next; the war was just starting to capture America’s attention. At any rate, he didn’t call me Squirt anymore. I didn’t know what to say.

“Be careful,” was all I could think of.

The next time I saw Jim seemed real and unreal at the same time. A bed had been set up in the same front room; the room where I had heard him tell about his upcoming tour of duty over a year earlier. Jim lay paralyzed on one side; he had been in a coma for months at Walter Reed Hospital, but now he was awake. He wore an eye patch to cover an eye that would not move, and his speech was so slurred that I could not understand much of what he said. His helicopter had been shot down; the war was raging, and growing each month. My cousin Keith had just graduated high school, and Jim’s younger brother Scott, my brother David, and I would soon finish. As we looked down at Jim, Scott said that it would be our turn next. The draft was taking young men without a school deferment or a reserve enlistment, and service in the National Guard was difficult to obtain.
Somebody had to stop the Viet Nam War. With Jim staring up at me, I decided that I wanted to be the one to do it; I had to try. I considered joining the antiwar movement, but their efforts did not appear to be effective. The only thing I could think of was to go to Viet Nam and stop the war from there. I joined the Navy Reserve, July 1967, after high school graduation. I was well aware that a lot of the Navy Reservists were being sent up the river in Viet Nam. I went to boot camp for two weeks in August of 67, and then on a two week cruise on Lake Michigan, where I learned how to wash dishes and scrape paint. I also had a two-year active duty requirement to fulfill later.

The next summer during the 68 Democratic Convention, I found myself in the eye of the American storm. I looked up at the Palmer House in Chicago, where my Navy orders said to report. I had never been in a real big city with giant skyscrapers before, and I rotated around on the sidewalk looking up like a farm boy on his first visit to the big city until I was dizzy. The Navy Pier was not far, just down Randolph Street, past the north side of Grant Park. I walked the length of the pier to the gangplank of the USS Parle, a Destroyer Escort left over from World War II. Chicago was volatile, and the establishment, especially the military, was the target of the sometime violent protests. I was given quite a bit of liberty in the evenings and weekends to walk the Chicago streets and the Grant Park area, where groups of antiwar demonstrations were organizing themselves. The young people seemed angry at everything, even at me, and I was just a weekend warrior on a two-week training duty. The Army had been called up to positions outside of Chicago for direct intervention should the situation get completely out of control. Yet, the Army was camped far enough from Chicago that the soldiers were unable to see the tall buildings, and the troops were never sent into the city. Police walked the streets with clubs maintaining the illusion of order,
but verifying the demonstrator’s claims that justice for all was a mirage. The fascination of watching history unfold was not enough to lure most of the sailors from the security of the ship. I usually walked the streets alone in my cornfield manner, smoking cigarettes, and watched Chicago unravel during the 68 Democratic Convention.

I often found myself in the middle of conflicts and unusual trouble during the two-week assignment. Seaman Brody and I had accidentally stumbled into a social gathering, where the Commandant of the Ninth Naval District and his wife were drinking at a table. We were invited to sit with them, and we had several drinks. After we dismissed ourselves, we lost our shirts in a nearby crowd and were taken into custody on the beach north of Chicago by the Shore Patrol for being out of uniform. Brody was also from the Reserve Unit on Army Post Road in Des Moines and reported to the Shore Patrol that we knew the Commandant. The Shore Patrol didn’t exactly believe him. We were taken to stand in front of the Commandant and his wife at the table, where the Shore Patrol was surprised to find out that we really were telling the truth. No charges were filed against either of us. The Commandant gave us the use of his yacht, which was tied up alongside the dock. Two women accompanied us into the boat, where we drank more beer. However, we didn’t have enough money for both beer and sex so we headed back to the USS Parle.
“Oh well,” I muttered out loud, “I’m not knocking more than twice.” I turned, walked back out onto the sidewalk, and meandered over in front of the next store to see if it had opened yet. “Wouldn’t have been much of a job anyway,” I said to myself as I returned to the window display. She had told me that she would be there; the time was well past ten, and the other stores were open. I peered through the store window of Allbee Office Supply, adjusted my eyes to the dim shadows inside, and focused on the silhouette of a large old-fashioned cash register. The interior of the store suggested another era, perhaps the thirties, or forties. I lit a cigarette and looked down the main street of Marshalltown, Iowa. Richard Nixon was just inaugurated president. It would take God to save us now.

Just then, a knock on the door window startled me. There through the darkened glass of the front door peered a white haired woman with large round gray eyes. She motioned for me to go around back. The store was fairly close to the corner of the next street, so I proceeded on around the sidewalk and into an icy alley to the back door, which creaked open. The rear room was dark and felt colder than it had been in the alley. I made my way to the front of the store through a black curtain. Mrs. Allbee shook my hand like an aunt that I had not seen for years. All that was missing was the “my how you’ve grown.” She apologized for being late to work at her own store.

“I want you to help Dale. He’s not as young as he used to be, and I’m afraid he’s going to hurt himself climbing on the shelves. You can take things off the shelves that he needs and carry small boxes of paper for him. He’s always getting into predicaments, and I want you to be there with him to help him out, alright?”
“Sure, sounds good to me,” I replied. “I’m a student at…” Mrs. Allbee somehow already knew all about me; she skipped the job application and went straight to where I could hang up my coat. Mrs. Allbee was getting up in her years pretty good, maybe into her seventies.

“I live in a big house on West Main Street,” said Mrs. Allbee as she returned to the front door to unlock it for the day’s business. “Sometimes the traffic downtown makes me late.” All I had to do was watch some old guy; how tough could that be? Just then, the back door swung open and slammed against the back wall. It was time to meet my new boss.

In through the cold darkness of the back of the store came a hardy “good morning” and a figure about three to four feet high appeared. Must be a grandchild, I thought. As he came closer, I realized that his childlike demeanor had fooled me. Dale was a middle-aged little person. He reached his little hand up to me, shaking mine vigorously, and said, “Hi, I’m Dale, I’m your new boss.” So it began; I never asked him how tall he was, how old, where he was from, nothing that would infer that I noticed that he was a little different. Before long, we were pretty close friends, but Dale never let me forget that he was in charge.

His name was Dale Paulin, and he had been one of the munchkins in the *Wizard of Oz*. He also had also been one of the “Little Johnnies” in a commercial on television entitled “Call for Phillip Morris.” Dale didn’t say much about the *Wizard of Oz* to me, but what he did say indicated that something terribly wrong had happened on the set, which nobody was supposed to talk about. “You don’t want to know,” always ended the conversation about the filming. The actors in the *Wizard of Oz* had difficulty finding work after the movie was made. Dorothy’s or rather Judy Garland’s life ended in suicide. For Dale, it had been tough to find any more work in the movies. Dale never talked much about his struggle to enter the
business world. He had started in Marshalltown driving an ice cream wagon and selling ice
cream to children on the streets. Dale had moved up to the office supply store when I met
him, but it was apparent to me that Dale had earned his advancement in careers. He was a
slick businessman.

Dale and I often left Mrs. Allbee alone in the store and went out to solicit business.
Dale would take two steps to my one stride, and he would lead the way. This gave the
illusion, as we walked the streets of Marshalltown, that I was chasing Dale. Sometimes I was.
Dale was really a munchkin at heart. He played little tricks, which humiliated me in public.
Dale seemed to know everybody on the street, and the storeowners, workers, and shoppers
loved the little guy’s cheery hello and childlike behavior.

One day, Dale and I went down to Lennox to sell them some desks. With Dale
leading the way, we entered the office of the manager and left the door open. Dale slid the
chair up next to the desk, and proceeded to climb on top and stand right in the middle of the
desk to give his sales presentation. By now, I was used to his salesmanship, and I didn’t see
anything out of the ordinary with such behavior. The manager wasn’t going for his pitch, so
Dale sat down on his telephone. Just then, the phone rang, and Dale wouldn’t get up.

Finally, the manager gave in as the phone continued to ring, “All right, all right, you
win.” Dale stood back up in the middle of the desk and extended his little hand for finalizing
the deal. Dale jumped down onto the chair, then to the floor, turned and thumbed his nose at
the manager, whose ear was now to the phone, and off we went. Dale was trying his best to
make me into a salesman, but being of normal height, I felt uncomfortable standing on a
desk, and I just wasn’t getting the hang of the business world.

“Ya gotta take charge in this business, Dennis. You have to get their attention.”
Dale always drove us around town in his full-sized auto, which had a raised seat and all the controls mounted to fit his small body. I tried not to notice that the gas pedal was raised a couple of feet off the floorboard. Dale always turned right on red, years ahead of his time, for it wasn’t legal to do that back then. Sometimes a red light meant nothing at all. It was like the police did not exist. Dale never even looked to see if the cops were around, and we never got stopped. When he saw something he didn’t like on the road, he would say in his evilest voice, “I’ll get you, my pretty, and your little dog too.”

Dale didn’t have any girlfriends that I could tell, and when I asked him about it, Mrs. Allbee would intercede stating that Dale had a girlfriend, and he had met her at the Little Peoples Convention, which Dale attended every year. I didn’t figure this out until some time had passed, but Dale appeared to have all kinds of girlfriends, regular sized women. I had moved up to making sales in the store and working the cash register, beginning to figure out the world of basic office supplies. The store’s customers were mostly women shopping in the afternoon. Dale would sell boxes of typing paper, and yet I couldn’t seem to sell any at all. No one ever asked me for it, and when I presented reams of typing paper to the customers, they would reply, “I don’t need any today,” or “Dale handles that for me.” But one day a customer came in, who regularly bought typing paper from Dale, and Dale wasn’t around. She was an attractive lady, and maybe I just wanted to get to know her better. “Would you like some typing paper today?” I asked as she laid her supplies on the counter.

“Typing paper?” she said, “I don’t have a typewriter.”

Now, I never had any proof of this, but it sure appeared to me that the women were coming over to see Dale and inviting him over for a good time. I suspected that the typing paper worked as an unspoken invitation for Dale to come over for sex. Viewing Dale as some
kind of sex machine was difficult for me, but the women may have been looking at Dale in a
totally different light. By now, I knew Dale pretty well, and I figured that he was going over
to these women’s houses and walking right on in with his rubbers on. He was probably up to
his knees in women. I stood behind the cash register with Dale as he finalized his next big
typing paper sale. The lady looked seductively at Dale as she tucked her ream of paper into
her bag.

“I’ll see you later,” she said.

“All right, then,” said Dale smiling ear to ear. My suspicions grew, but I really never
knew for sure what Dale was doing. He never offered home delivery as far as I knew. We
never discussed our love lives with each other, and Dale was real upset when I told him that I
had gotten married over the weekend. I had never told Dale that I had a girlfriend, and he had
never met Lois Elaine, my high school sweetheart. Dale’s problem with my marriage was
more along the line that a man should never get married.

This was also when my life on the farm ended, though Lois Elaine and I lived for a
while on land my father rented, in a house that had not been occupied in many years. We
watched from the outside door to the basement as a red grain wagon rolled backwards uphill
in the barnyard when a tornado passed by. Lois Elaine and I shut the basement door, which
left us in the dark basement with the spiders and waited a few minutes until the tornado had
passed. At the next farm down the road, the house was turned on the foundation a foot. The
Ethington family stayed on their land, but Lois Elaine and I were uprooted, and we moved to
Green Mountain, Iowa.

There had always been something to do on the farm, but at Allbee Office Supply
there were times when we didn’t do much of anything. On rainy days, Dale, Mrs. Allbee, and
I would stand around the cash register and read each other’s minds. Dale and Mrs. Allbee had some type of psychic connection. I began to hear their tiny voices in my head. At first, I wondered if I was going crazy. Next, I felt that hearing voices was more of a blessing or a psychic gift, than a curse. Later, I started talking back to them so that they could hear my voice. Finally, I concluded that hearing voices was natural. I had earned their respect and was given increased responsibility. I was trusted behind the cash register, while Dale spent more time climbing on the shelves and carrying boxes in and out of the store.

Somehow, Dale and I both knew that the military was going to send me up the river in Viet Nam, even though I had no orders for active duty at that time. It hurt Dale deeply that I would leave his companionship to go fight in a war that America was increasingly getting upset at, but I told Dale about my cousin Jim being shot down in his helicopter and informed him that I felt obligated to go over to Viet Nam to see if I could stop the war. Dale said that trying to stop a war was foolish and that I could never do it.

“You could end up being killed more than once,” Dale said. “The danger of trying to stop a war is from your own side. The Great and Powerful Oz will be out to get rid of you.”

I reminded Dale, “Remember, there’s nothing behind the curtain. You’re the one that told me to not be afraid of the Wizard.” We argued about Viet Nam, away from Mrs. Allbee, in the front window display, for Mrs. Allbee rarely ventured to the front of her own store. When people walked by, Dale and I dropped the conversation and acted like manikins. The downtown pedestrians never seemed to notice that one of the manikins was trying his best not to laugh. Dale looked frozen in time, but I couldn’t keep my face straight. Once the sidewalk shoppers had passed, our discussions continued. “The damn hippies will never be able to stop the Viet Nam War. Nixon’s a crook,” I argued.
“How do you think you will be able to stop a war?” said Dale. “That’s crazy. But if you insist on going down the Yellow Brick Road, then there’s something I need to tell you. The wizard is a Nazi, Emerald City is Duluth, and there really is a Wicked Witch of the North; she’s the one with the power. Nothing will be as it seems. You see, we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

Finally, we both knew that I had to go. Dale used the feather duster to knight me in the front window display of Allbee’s Office Supply. The time had come for me to leave my friend. Dale couldn’t say goodbye. He retreated to his office and sat with his head on the desk as I walked out. This was the only time I had ever seen Dale sit in his office.

“Duluth,” I muttered under my breath, “I don’t think so; it’ll be hot where I’m being sent.” Static electricity flashed off the black curtain as I walked out the back and into the alley. Mac had been right about me not being able to remember what had been said about the Nazis on our family vacation years before. I did not connect Dale’s story with Mac’s. I had to travel a long way down my own path before I realized that Dale was warning me about a Nazi reality in terms of the *Wizard of Oz*. He somehow knew that I was on a collision course with real trouble, which would end in Duluth. “Witches aren’t real,” I said as I stepped out of the alley onto the sidewalk clicking my heels. The pedestrians turned and looked at me as though I was crazy.
Culture shock

I reported to active duty at Treasure Island in the San Francisco Bay on January 30, 1970. Long lines formed each morning to march to work details. I took my position near the end, and when the line went around a corner of a building, I left without detection. I spent the days at the water’s edge around the island, viewing San Francisco, Berkeley, Alcatraz, and the Golden Gate Bridge depending on where I was sitting. The orders arrived in about a month to an excited group of fifty or more sailors sitting in a classroom together. “All but one of you will be going to Viet Nam,” the instructor said. I was the only one that applauded. One sailor was assigned duty at Big Sur California, but it wasn’t me. I was ordered to report to the command in Saigon.

But first, I was sent to San Diego for a three-week records keeping course for a ships store, entitled Class C Ship Serviceman School. The instructors at the Ship Serviceman School told us with a straight face that we would be working in the mall of Saigon. I knew there would be no mall in Saigon, so all the records keeping knowledge for working in a ship’s store was wasted time. I graduated with top grades in a class C school.

I was then assigned to Survival School in Coronado, California, which provided instruction on what to do in the event of being captured. In one film, the Navy showed captured American soldiers in a line with one soldier near the end of the line taking advantage of the situation by escaping as the line rounded a leafy bush. This was the same method that I had used successfully at Treasure Island. I honed my evasive skills and graduated with the distinction of having never been captured. I spent most of my time on the
beach near the Hotel del Coronado, which had pictures of Marylyn Monroe and the Kennedy brothers on the wall. Marylyn had made a movie there, *Some Like It Hot*.

The Survival School was a good idea, since I’d had no weapons training. I prepared to leave for Viet Nam without a weapon and had never actually shot an M-16. “Survival School will look great on my resume,” I said to myself, “if I live through this.” I went back to Iowa and said goodbye to my wife before leaving for Viet Nam. She was pregnant. I left for Travis Air Force Base in California, May 22, 1970.

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“How long do you think it will be?” I said.

“Maybe another hour or so,” said the old sailor. He was waiting on the bench patiently in his white uniform; a crow was on the sleeve with three lines underneath, indicating that he was a first-class petty officer. “You’ll be in Viet Nam soon enough. This is my third time over. You’ll just want to be right back here when you get there.”

I sat back on the bench and closed my eyes. The San Francisco sun warmed my eyelids. I could see red without opening them. The military bus screeched to a stop in front of the benches. The door swung open without a word from the faceless driver. I entered and took a window seat near the right rear. The old sailor had disappeared behind rows of soldiers in Army hats if he had gotten on at all. The bus made its way down the city’s hills, across the Bay Bridge, and past Berkeley, still smoldering from the antiwar demonstrations. The destination point of the bus trip was Travis Air Force Base, northeast of the bay area in California. A huge commercial jet, with World Airlines printed in large letters on its side, waited at the terminal. A line of mostly Army personnel formed like sheep in the center aisle of the barn waiting to be loaded for market. I wasn’t with any group, and I didn’t know
anyone else on board. I just moved with the line until I passed through the doorway of the airplane, the point of no return, which was guarded by stewardesses with plastic smiles. I took a window seat near the rear on the left side of the plane.

The plane lifted smoothly off the runway and flew north along the Pacific Coast to Anchorage, Alaska, where the green of the Alaskan timber met the blue of the Pacific Ocean. The plane passed Mount McKinley closely on our decent to the Anchorage airport. The runway was cut out of the wild with thick pine trees reaching over the fence surrounding the airport, giving the illusion that the trees were trying to get in. The late May sun at noon shone down from overhead swallowing the shadows, and obliterating my sense of direction. I thought about entering the wild, walking until I was lost between trees, and living off the land without any supplies. I figured that I would have a better chance of survival in Viet Nam. I got back on the plane.

We continued down the Aleutian Islands, around the coast of Asia, and across the South China Sea. Finally, the plane was over Viet Nam, coming into land at Tan Son Knut Air Force Base.

I was greeted in Saigon with a burning, itching stink, which landed on my skin. The bus with wire mesh windows wove its way through the streets of Saigon to the less than majestic, bombed out, Annapolis Hotel. The two-story hotel was the barracks for Navy personnel awaiting further orders upon arrival into country. The wall near the front entry was covered with graphic photographs, which contained scenes of the death of several sailors and building damage from the 68 Tet offensive. Sailors had died there, which made the Annapolis Hotel feel like staying overnight in a morgue. The front entry was covered with a screen to protect the hotel from hand grenades being tossed in. The street was full of traffic,
motorcycles, carts, bicycles, cars, busses, and military vehicles. There didn’t appear to be any traffic laws. I felt uneasy about walking out in the traffic. However, there was no food being served in the hotel, and after two days, a hunger gnarled in my stomach. I followed sailors into the chaotic streets on their way to an Army mess hall to eat, but the crowd soon cut me off from the group.

I stayed close to the storefronts, and entered a bar with a strange sweet smell. A smoky haze oozed through curtains near the back filling the room. I felt dizzy; people moved in slow motion. I asked a strange, painted woman with red eyes for directions, while her thin tongue lured me into a booth, wanting me with little money to buy her one tea. I went back out onto the street, where children pulled on my pant legs trying to sell their sisters. Old men with black teeth were vending strange cigarettes in packages without labels. The storefront signs looked like letters on eye charts. Nothing made sense. Bicycle taxis were parked alongside the street; their drivers promised a safe route with much scenery through the heart of Saigon or into Cholon, a ride worth a few hundred piasters. I was still without money, so I continued on down the street past storefronts with real girls, sprawled out, near asleep in the windows. The girls on display in one called the lady slouched in back “mamasahn.” She liked my Timex watch a great deal. I was assured that I could have my pick of the girls in the window as mamasahn checked to see if the time was correct on my watch. Although the girls seemed like a bargain, I explained that I was lost, hungry, and already late for dinner. Once I had found the mess hall and eaten my first meal in Viet Nam, I felt more at ease and better about my situation. In the days that followed, I would slip into the bars along the way to buy a beer or two with the last of my U.S. currency.
In a few days, I was moved out of the Annapolis, past the railroad tracks where the Vietnamese bus driver reported President Diem had been assassinated while in a car waiting for a train to pass, to an old hotel, whose unguarded stairs rose several stories above the streets of Cholon. At night the sky lit up from explosions in the distance, like lightning flashes, complete with the rumble of the thunder. I lay on the hard bed and looked up at the slow moving French ceiling fan wondering what I had gotten into. Where would I be sent? I was expecting to be stationed south of Saigon on a delta river, where most of the base assignments had been listed on the wall in the Annapolis Hotel. When my orders finally arrived, I was surprised to be sent north to a Navy support detachment in the Qui Nhon Bay. Welcome to the Brown Water Navy.
Life at the water’s edge

The C-130 Air Force plane lifted smoothly off the Tan Son Knut runway and flew north out of Saigon headed for the Central Highlands. The plane touched down at the Qui Nhon airfield after sundown. The Field Hospital stood on one end of the base. It was here that the life of my cousin, Jim Berka from Colo, had been saved a few years earlier. He had flown his helicopter from this same airport on a mission to the southwest of Qui Nhon before tragedy struck. His helicopter was shot in the transmission causing the loss of control and the crash. He was knocked unconscious in the helicopter and did not remember hitting the ground. Jim was rescued, kept alive, and flown back to the field hospital, then to the Philippines, and onto Walter Reed Hospital, clinging to life in a coma, and paralyzed on one side. Now, a second family member had arrived in the provincial capital of Qui Nhon.

Within an hour or two, a truck came to take a few others and myself to the detachment. The ride through the quiet streets of the off-limits city of Qui Nhon was eerie after dark. The shacks and huts lined the streets so closely that a sharp turn at a corner would mean driving through someone’s living room. We came to the water’s edge and the end of the road. A boat was waiting for us to cross the water to the peninsula. The detachment was built along the shore and could easily be seen from across the water. The spotlights from watchtowers moved their beams across the high hills and rugged terrain, so that the hills looked alive.

“Charlie Alley,” said the boatswain mate, pointing to the draw formed between two of the hills. “This base has been overrun before.”

“Are there ever any mines in this water?” I asked.
“Sometimes,” said the boatswain. “Stay near the rear of the boat just in case we hit one.” A lot of things were said in Viet Nam just to make somebody else nervous. The boatswain spit overboard into the watery darkness with the salty breeze. “It’s the sappers ya gotta worry about,” he said. The boat pulled gently into the dock without hitting anything explosive, lowered the ramp onto the beach, and I timidly walked ashore.

I was starving. There was bread and peanut butter in the mess hall even though the time was past midnight. The bread tasted homemade, a little crunchy but delicious. I was given a cot to sleep on the rear porch of a barrack named E4. Mortars were being sent out from a location somewhere nearby. Just as I would drift off to sleep, another round would be fired off waking me back up. There were close to two hundred Navy personnel stationed at NSAD Qui Nhon when I first arrived that May night. The noise didn’t seem to wake anybody else up.

I settled into the routine of life in Viet Nam the best I could. My white sailor suit was replaced with a green Marine uniform and combat boots. Some of my shipmates preferred the Army uniforms, because more cans of beer could be placed in the large pockets. Others mixed the two, wearing an Army shirt and Marine pants, or Army pants and a Marine shirt. Six of the barracks sat side by side in a row, which housed most of the enlisted personnel on base. Sandbags were stacked up the sides to protect the crew from incoming rocket explosions. Bunkers made of thick wooden beams, covered with bags of sand, had been constructed between each barrack. I was later invited to live next door at the barrack building E5. Vietnamese women came daily to clean our clothes, pick up the empty beer cans, shine our shoes a little, have sex with some of the crew, and make the beds. We each paid 500 piasters a month, an amount worth less than five dollars, for the maid service.
I worked hard during the days in Qui Nhon and stood watch many nights along the perimeter. Sirens would go off occasionally during the night, and I would run up the hill to tower number five, which was my general quarters station. The tower was located near the bottom of Hill 131 and fronted an area known as a good infiltration route into the base for the enemy. In the first few months of my yearlong assignment, the sirens awoke me from sleep often. As the months passed, running up the hill became routine, even in the pitch dark of night and with the South Vietnamese running downhill on the same path. The wind swirled monsoon rains into my eyes. I fired pop flares from the tower into the dark downpours by holding the tube in my left hand and hitting the bottom with my right. However, when the flares got wet, they would take weird twists and turns in flight. One flare took a ninety-degree turn in mid air and exploded in front of the next tower. I could hear the Vietnamese manning that position shouting at me in an unfriendly tone. I felt very fortunate that they didn’t fire their guns at me. I tried to keep my M-16 rifle clean and dry, because I not only had never been trained to shoot the weapon, I also had never been trained to properly clean one. When I neglected the rifle, it would stand in the corner of the barracks with its mouth rusted shut. I discovered that I was really good with the grenade launcher, which looked like a sawed off shotgun with a huge barrel. With a plunk from the tube, a grenade was lobbed a few hundred yards like a long punt on fourth down. I practiced landing grenades on a rock near the top of the hill. I was pretty good at hitting the same crack in the rock every time.

The base sprawled along the shore and around the end of a cove, extending about a mile from one end to the other. Concertina wire surrounded the perimeter on the hills and along the beach. Patrol boats were used to search the inland waters and to guard against sappers, which were enemy swimmers. About two dozen Army soldiers were stationed on
Hill 131, which helped protect the Navy base, the ships in the bay, and also overlooked the city. The Hill 131 soldiers often ate and drank with us, and their only road out was through the Navy detachment, and then by boat, so we knew each other well for being in another branch of the military. The rest of the hills were unguarded.

Along the one road that connected the eating and the sleeping end of the detachment to the working end, cages began to appear. At first there were just a few. Then others were added. No one was allowed close enough to see inside the small barred window near the top of the doors. Armed guards from the South Vietnamese Navy prevented anyone from getting near the cages with M-16 rifles ready to fire. Everyone stationed at NSAD Qui Nhon walked or drove by the cages, often several times a day. With the cages out in the open, the general feeling was that they belonged there. No one seemed to be interested in knowing what was inside, except me. Each metal cage was about the size of a porta-pottie. The cages were in full sunlight, and the days were hot, around a hundred degrees by early morning. The late afternoon sun was even hotter as I walked past the cages on my returned to E-5.

The evenings were filled with a trip to the mess hall for supper, drinking a few beers, and playing cards with my roommates. We played a lot of hearts and kept a running tally of our wins on the walls. Bedtime was early, especially if my name was on the watch list, which was about every other night. The watches lasted four hours: from eight to midnight, midnight to four, and four to eight in the morning.

I soon realized that we were not alone in E-5. Rats scurried along the ledge of the barracks, which ran the entire length of E-5, where the round metal roof met the short outside walls. The sound of scratching and clawing on the wood signaled an intended flight in the dark. They dived on my feet and legs in my bed below the ledge, which awakened me to a
partial consciousness. With one mighty kick, their long bodies would float through the dimly lit room, their long tails hooked up as though trying to wrap around an invisible tree. A small screech of excitement filled the night air followed by a thud against the wooden floor. I can still hear their tiny rat legs in action, churning and grasping for traction, until the sound of the scamper disappeared in the distance. I went back to sleep without further stirring, having gotten used to the sounds the procedure produced, until the night the noises stopped.

The General Quarter’s siren blared, which signaled enemy attack. I had time for my helmet, heavy metal jacket, and the rifle that stood in the corner. I ran low up the hill towards number five tower through South Vietnamese soldiers running the other way. The enemy could look down at the small detachment at the water’s edge from the top of the hills. Anyone running up the road to the tower provided an easy target. I was not blessed with great speed to begin with, and the extra weight of the weapon and ammunition, flak jacket, and helmet slowed me down even more. Every stride seemed painfully in slow motion. Still, I was usually the first to arrive at the General Quarters station.

Once I arrived at tower number five, I illuminated the enemy perch on the ridge with pop flares and searched the side of Hill 131. The hill was so named for the number of meters it was above sea level. Sp4 Jerry Duffy was killed at the top the last week of 1971, and nine others were injured, just nineteen days before 131 was to be turned over to the South Vietnamese. Jerry was the only one killed in Viet Nam that week.

I aimed the powerful spotlight, which searched the ascending hills and every gully. The concertina wire snaked through the hills like a Chinese dragon in a parade, intact. No enemy shots were fired that night. There was no explanation given for the siren. Possibly, the
enemy was hungry. They often infiltrated the camp about dawn for a rice and gravy breakfast with us in the mess hall.

I walked back to the barracks slowly, looking down at the road. The danger had passed, and other soldiers were also quietly walking along on the road on the way back to their barracks. A tremendous blast broke the silence of the night. A rifle had discharged close to my face. I turned to stare at the barrel of an M-16 pointed slightly in front of my head from about a foot away, and my eyes followed the length of the black steel back down the barrel to a startled Filipino holding the weapon. The echo of a single shot bounced through my brain. I thought the ringing in my ears would go away. I was wrong. The hole in my hearing was filled with the sound of a thousand crickets. I couldn’t hear the rat’s scratching anymore.

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As the days dragged by, monotony set in. There was plenty of beer to drink, and many of the troops were consuming alcohol heavily. There was a bar or club of sorts on the base, which served both whiskey and beer. Occasionally, a singing group from the Philippines would perform, imitating popular U.S. singers. These men and women harmonized songs in English without being able to speak the language and danced with precision. No one seemed to mind what time of day a sailor might stop and have a few. Usually the bar was pretty full, but I much preferred to drink alone. For one thing, I felt that drinking alone was safer. I thought the danger from an enemy rocket would be directed at a place where many Americans were located. I hadn’t figured that the danger might come from one of us. The Mexican sailor changed my mind.

The Mexican was a sailor in the United States Navy, and he was sitting alone with an M-16 rifle behind the Gomer Pyle building, which was used as a chapel. I was coming out of
the club with an after dinner beer, around noon hillbilly time, when I saw him sitting there speaking loudly to himself. I went over to see what the problem was and sat down besides the distraught soldier. The Mexican became aggressive, and other than “Fuck this shit,” he spoke in Spanish. Suddenly, he stood up and opened fire on the base of the club, which was a wall made of stone. The shots were bouncing off the wall like bullets bouncing off of Superman’s chest and moving up. The Mexican quickly changed clips and aimed higher. I moved in low and from the rear to turn his body like a gate so that the bullets landed harmlessly on the side of Hill 131. The drinkers inside were at great risk. The top portion of the building was thin sheeting. The bullets could have easily put a hole in a keg or a leg. The ammunition clip ran out. I sat back down, and finished my Black Label beer, not having spilled a drop. The Mexican, with his empty gun, took a seat on the ground next to me. He seemed to feel better. Soldiers with armbands soon pulled up in jeeps pointing weapons at us, and took the Mexican with them. That was the last time I saw him. They sent him back to the United States, probably discharged him back to Mexico, too crazy for war. But I wasn’t sent home. The soldiers with armbands and a jeep left me sitting there. They just said I was crazy for stopping a crazy man firing a gun. I began to drink heavily and take chances with my life that would have justified their claim. Soon, I was leaving base at night to find some action in the provincial capital.

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I was sitting in the middle of an off-limits bar, in the middle of a country that was in the middle of a war, drinking another warm beer. The young women circled from a distance like sharks in the water. The vibrations were as strong as energy emitted from a crystal ball, and the air smelled as though someone had rolled a joint in a dirty diaper and was smoking
the shit. I caught one of the ladies by the wrist, and we climbed the stairs, which led to a hallway that was slick in spots, and passed many abodes, until we entered the door of the last room.

In the midst of this hot, hazy, skin itching stink, I neatly laid my green clothes over the back of the chair. I got into the single bed with her listless, uncovered, naked, body. She just lay there, while I was really getting into it. Then my head turned back and to the right to spot the face pressed against a nine-by-twelve pane of glass, staring in from the night.

I rushed the image of the man’s face that would be indelibly painted in my mind, only to watch it vanish. I pounded my underwear on and smashed out the back door to find that a board walkway connected the second floors of all the surrounding buildings. A stairway led down to an empty square courtyard, and I rushed down the steps into the open area. As I slowly revolved, like a farm boy visiting the big city for his first time, inspecting each back door and window, I realized that I was standing unarmed in the center of a courtyard. The next second seemed to be an eternity in the stillness of the dark night. I expected a gunshot from the face at the window to interrupt the silence, but none came. I felt that some unseen force was protecting me.
Trouble starts

The trip along Highway One through the Viet Cong-infested Binhdinh province was dangerous. Even the village beside our detachment was listed as ninety percent Viet Cong sympathizers. The villages further inland were even more so. Maybe I should have taken my gun. The narrow road twisted through the hills of the Central Highlands for twenty or thirty miles. Both sides were packed with pedestrians making their way to the next village or to the provincial capital of Qui Nhon. The people in the villages stared at me. Perhaps they were intrigued with a soldier with a full beard. The truck crept along the road; I waved; yet they wouldn’t wave back.

My Lai wasn’t far to the south, so I couldn’t blame them for having an unfriendly feeling towards Americans. My Lai was the village where a massacre by U.S. soldiers of hundreds of unarmed Vietnamese civilians occurred, mostly women and children. U.S. involvement in the war in Viet Nam lost world support because of the war crimes there.

I rolled into Phu Cat Air Force Base. A tall chain link fence surrounded the perimeter. The place was first class. I passed the swimming pool, two clubs, and modern living quarters on my way to the PX. The inside of the store was shelved with items that could not be purchased anywhere else in the country that I had been. I pulled out thirty-five dollars and bought a camera, a 35 mm. Japanese model complete with film. I bought quite a few $1.20 cases of Black Label Beer, and I stacked them in the truck. I opened one of the cases, grabbed a beer and stood beside the truck surveying the situation, while I gulped the first can of warm beer down. The clubs looked inviting, but I thought that going in might start some kind of scene. Usually the bars in Viet Nam were peaceful when I went in but for some
reason were in an uproar by the time I left. I didn’t have time for such a thing at Phu Cat. I didn’t want to get caught out on the road in the dark, and the afternoon sun would soon be waning. The road would have been extremely dangerous after dark, perhaps suicidal. I headed back towards Qui Nhon. If I got back early enough, I could always get a steam and cream from the ladies there. The pedestrians watched from the side of the road, standing as though they were watching the Rose Festival parade in State Center, as the truck crept back south along Highway One. This time they waved and I waved back. I should have gotten some candy to throw to them. The way things turned out, I should have thrown the camera at them. Not much time passed before I was getting in trouble with the camera.

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The ambulance pulled up in front of the barracks. The Red Cross painted on the side gave clear indication of the intended use of the vehicle. A couple of guys jumped out of the front seats to swing open the rear door. Out jumped about a dozen Vietnamese whores onto the road. Soldiers oozed out of the surrounding bunks to lay claim on this unexpected good luck. Their new girlfriends quickly left the road for more private places behind the doors of one of the seven enlisted men’s barracks. There weren’t enough to go around, but the day was long. Between boyfriends, the young girls would walk across the road to the shower, refresh themselves, and tidy up a bit. They had either forgotten where they had laid their clothes or didn’t think them necessary. I had exposed the film in my new camera the first time that I tried using it. This time I knew that I had only one chance to get the camera to operate correctly. I took a picture, but later saw that I had aimed a little high to get a photographic award. Still, the picture was developed and recorded the event. The ambulance proved to be a fitting delivery truck. All that had shared in the afternoon delight got to visit
the “Doc” with one problem or another about a week later. Burning and dripping were the symptoms reported. Fortunately, I hadn’t taken part. The whole affair looked suspicious to me. “Bad ass,” I thought.

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I stopped going to morning muster. We used to line up in an orderly fashion before starting the day’s activity at attention and then at parade rest. The Commanding Officer would make an appearance, we would return to attention, the flag would be raised, everybody would salute, and all hands were accounted for. But when the cages appeared in the background, the commanding officer rarely staggered out to greet the troops. The perimeter where the concertina wire stretched along the hillside between the towers had become overgrown. Meal passes were given to the South Vietnamese Navy who worked on the boats and on the base. This was a real indication that something was drastically wrong here. There were more people eating in the mess hall than were on the base. Evidently, the enemy was leaking through the perimeter onto the base and eating with us. From time to time, we would catch one in the process. The watchtowers were too far apart to notice everything. There weren’t enough American soldiers on the detachment to man the watch. The sirens in the night subsided. Soldiers on the watch were often asleep from fatigue.

The only things that were well guarded were the cages. The South Vietnamese with rifles, M-16s, were doing this. The first time I looked into a cage, the guard was several feet away from the cage door. I had to take my eyes off of the guard in order to sneak a look through the metal bars. I wasn’t sure if the guard would shoot me or not. I had been expecting the answer to be yes. He didn’t. The guard acted as though he was pleased that I had taken a look. He stood motionless with his rifle at his side. As time passed, the security
guard for the cages became lax, and sometimes, there was no guard at all on duty. I was able to slip by anyone’s attention to look intently into one of the cages. I placed my fingers around the window bars near the top of the cage door, leaned my forehead between the bars, and looked in. The prisoner inside was a tiny man in comparison with members of the South Vietnam Navy. He lay in black pajamas diagonally across the hot metal floor of the cage; his head pressed into one corner and his feet in the other, with slightly bent legs. The days’ sweltering heat had made the exposed skin of the head, arms, and legs seemed detached. He lay motionless in a puddle, melted onto the hot steel floor, yet somehow, still alive, barely breathing. As I looked at the hopeless figure, I began to feel trapped with no possible escape. My conscience told me that this was wrong, and yet there was nothing that I could do. “My God, we’re melting the enemy in cages!” I said, turned back to the road, and acted like nothing had happened. I felt sick inside; I felt like throwing up, but I didn’t. I kept moving, but the sick feeling spread, like a poison, which eventually destroyed all my emotions and brought me down to nothing.

One of my roommates knew about the pictures I had taken. His name was Olan, and he was from Joplin, Missouri. Olan had a “show me” attitude. He wasn’t around the day the ambulance stopped, so I showed him the pictures. We were both too busy to socialize much, even though we lived together. I worked alone, stood watch alone, went swimming alone, drank alone, but I liked playing cards with my roommates at night. My work often took me across the water to the provincial capital. I paid the crew twice a month and handled the detachment money that was needed. The United States Navy and Marine personnel left me alone in fear of offending the person, who was responsible for his pay, and the Vietnamese, who I paid in piasters, treated me respectfully for the work that I was doing. My immediate
supervising officer, Lt. Mariner, also trusted me. One time while visiting the Army, where Lt. Mariner and I received all the money we needed to run the Navy detachment, I was given two thousand dollars too much. Lt. Mariner was with me, and he couldn’t believe that I gave the cash back to the Army after I had discovered the extra amount. We each had our own safe back at the base, and I could have easily stashed the extra bundle of one hundred twenty-dollar bills in mine. The trips through Qui Nhon with a bag of money were rare times when I carried a gun, a grease gun with a silencer that shot fully automatic 45’s, large slow moving bullets. The gun was Mariner’s, and he trusted me with it.

One day was considered extremely dangerous to be driving through the provincial capital with money. That day was called “C Day” for conversion day. The money used in Viet Nam by the United States military was called MPC for “military payment certificates.” The money looked a little like Monopoly game money with each bill amount having a different color background, but larger and more official looking with pictures on the front like regular greenback currency. Some thought that MPC looked like Confederate money used during the Civil War. The government of South Viet Nam had its own money called piasters, but the population would readily accept MPC for goods and services. The MPC in possession of the military personnel of South Viet Nam and the citizens of the country became worthless on “C Day,” because they did not have a way to turn their old money in for the new money. I was awakened before sunup and notified of the situation. All the Navy personnel, the Marines in the area, and the Army soldiers on Hill 131 turned their money into me; I counted each soldier’s money and gave each man a receipt for his total. The bills of money, including the MPC in Mariner’s and my safe, were put into a case that could be carried. The amount was nearly one hundred thousand dollars. Mariner and I took the money
and traveled to an Army compound to exchange the MPC for new money. We waited in line through the night; I didn’t sleep, but Mariner sat and leaned against the wall and slept for a few hours. In the morning, our money was counted and exchanged for new money of a different color. Our trip back through Qui Nhon was uneventful, but I was never more worried in Viet Nam. We were driving past people, whose old MPC was now worthless, with a case of new money. Once Mariner drove the jeep up into the landing craft, and we were out in the water, I felt relieved. I spent the rest of the day giving exact amounts back for the receipts the sailors and soldiers had had in their possession. I had counted exactly right, down to the last nickel, which was also a paper bill. I went to bed exhausted; it had been a very long two days.

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Olan worked in the office, having been trusted with information around the higher-ranking officers. Perhaps I shouldn’t have shown him the pictures. One day after work, Olan became very inquisitive.

“Do you still have that picture of the whore from the ambulance?”

“Yea, I still have it,” I said.

“There is an important hearing on the base,” Olan said. “The Department of Defense is here from Washington, D.C. Some of them are in plain clothes. They want you to bring the picture in tomorrow and testify.”

“How did they find out I had a picture?”

“I told them,” said Olan.

“Thanks a lot.”

“Be careful,” Olan said.
The room was filled with high-ranking officers and civilian dignitaries. My Commanding Officer of NSAD Qui Nhon sat in a prominent position near the head of the table. He looked relaxed yet in command. A person in civilian clothes, a very rare commodity in Viet Nam, directed the hearing. The questions directed at me were focused on the detachment’s operation and the picture they had requested. I had given some consideration to Olan’s advice to be careful. I didn’t mention the cages at first. I figured that if they wanted to know about the cages, all they had to do was go outside and look. The panel was alarmed enough at the picture, though. They seemed to like my stories quite a bit. Soon, the quiet room was filled with old men with wide-open mouths. I mentioned the cages; I couldn’t help it. I opened a can of worms by questioning the prisoner treatment. I was dismissed without getting my picture back. When the smoke cleared, our Commanding Officer had lost his command. Two other officers were also relieved for what Michael Mariner later termed in a letter, “extreme alcoholism.” I figured that the Commanding Officer was sent back home. Later, I found out that he wasn’t. I never heard of another officer in Viet Nam being relieved of his command for misconduct. Had that information leaked out to the world through the press at the time, the cages would have created even more criticism of U.S. involvement in the Viet Nam War. The military put a tight lid on the matter. ***

Basketball relieved the stress of the situation some. I would play guys several inches taller, often against two or three at a time alone. I found a zone where I couldn’t seem to miss. I always seemed to come up with the ball of the opponent’s missed shots by being a half a step ahead. I became very intense on the basketball court. There is no bigger disappointment in life than to have the lead only to have a helicopter land in the middle of
your home court. Throwing the ball at a helicopter windshield just pisses off the pilot. Naismith should have mentioned something about it in the rules for the game. If a helicopter lands on your home court, the game is over, and whoever has the lead should win.

Beer also helped with stress. I didn’t leave home without it. Another hot day in Viet Nam was cooling down slightly in the late afternoon sun. I took a gulp of the warm beer. My eyes looked up at the hillside to scan the perimeter. The five watchtowers stood silent that protected the shoreline base from about a third of the way to the top of the hills. The towers looped around the cove, connected with concertina wire for about a mile. I took off my green Marine hat and laid it on the table. I wiped the sweat off my brow with my shirt sleeve. The rangy bush that grew further to the top made any enemy movement impossible to detect. That was during day light hours. During the pitch dark of night, the land seemed to move like spring earthworms going back down their holes with an approaching step. Spotlights were used to detect movement in the bush further up the hill from the towers. Visions seemed to appear, then vanish.

The last watch of the night was from four a.m. to eight a.m. The sun’s first light of day meant that I had survived another night. Two familiar sights greeted me on these mornings. The first was the women from the nearby village walking on the beach to take their morning shit. Tide really does clean well, washing the beaches clean. The second was the “Freedom Bird.” The “Freedom Bird” was a commercial airliner that flew north along the coast. These jets were taking the soldiers who had served their time in Viet Nam home. The low flying jets originated from Cam Ranh Bay, they appeared to be headed toward Da Nang and then back to the world.
Confrontation with Norman

Rusty was a mountain of a man. He had played outside linebacker at Mississippi State. His rusty beard was the best looking beard on base next to mine, I thought. He wore a black beret with his green army uniform that said “U.S. Navy” above the pocket. This made me wonder about him, a special force guy of some kind.

“Rusty, who do you think that you are with?” I would ask.

“Yeah, who are you anyway?” would always be his reply. He called me Weekend Warrior, since I was just a Navy Reservist, or just Warrior when he was dead serious. I called him Rusty though his real name was Gerald Himebaugh, and we lived together with Olan, Robert, and the rats. There’s no annual reunion.

Rusty acted like he was into some twisted type of reality with the Intelligence Special Forces. “Nixon has sold the country out to the Nazis,” said Rusty. “They control everything, even the Mob in America, and our involvement in this damn war. These are just the hard facts of reality, Warrior. Did you know that all women are whores? You’re mother is a whore. What do you think of that little piece of information? Nazis fuck their own daughters. They control key government positions in the United States of America right now. Nothing is as it seems.”

It was easy to tell when Rusty was dead serious. His voice was low, monotone, and he stared directly into my eyes. Yeah, he was serious all right. I knew Rusty felt that way about women. He would get a blowjob from the cleaning lady when he left the whorehouse in Saigon. He had told me that he shit on the kitchen floor in his girl friend’s house when she
told him that she was a virgin. Yet the Nixon Nazi information gave a different slant on world history. All I could say was, “Makes you wonder why we’re here then.”

Somehow, Rusty knew the Nazis were taking over the country. He also thought that nothing could be done about it. The Viet Nam War made sense to Rusty. “The country is being deliberately weakened by the war by the wasted money being spent here in Viet Nam and the unnecessary sacrifice of the lives of fighting men,” Rusty said. “The war also takes the military out of the country, so there is no threat of a counter revolution.”

I was in total denial. “Bullshit, Rusty,” I said. “My mother ain’t a whore.” Still, I had to admit to myself that the mistreatment of the enemy in cages resembled the methods used in Nazi concentration camps that I had read about in school. Also, I had heard the phrase, “nothing is as it seems,” before, but I couldn’t remember where. Rusty continued to speak with the voice of authority about secret information. Bob would often verify Rusty’s top secrets. I had to admit his knowledge of advance events was always accurate. I never challenged Rusty’s connection to Military Intelligence, whatever it was.

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“He’s coming tomorrow and you better not cross his path,” Rusty said.

“I don’t care; Navy Reservist outranks him doesn’t it?” I said.

Rusty got even more serious. “He’s big, his name is Norman Swartzkoff, and he was in command of II Corps in the Central Highlands. His father was an important man, an Army lawyer that prosecuted in the Lindberg trial, maybe it was the Hiss trial,” said Rusty. I didn’t care who he was. Rusty detected that an Army officer didn’t impress me, so he got right to the point.

“I know you’ve been looking in the prisoner’s cages, haven’t ya?”
“Yes, I know what’s in them, little melted guys in black pajamas,” I said.

“Will you promise to keep away from Swartzkoff? And for God’s sake, don’t mention the cages,” said Rusty.

“O.K., I’ll keep away from him. O.K. Alright, I won’t say anything to him. He isn’t going to want to talk with me anyway. I won’t get near him, promise.”

The next day, I was called to attend Norman’s lecture in the mess hall, which was given to twenty or thirty sailors of the Brown Water Navy. Norman informed us, whether it was true or not, that we were sitting on the “destination point of the war.” The enemy plan was to bisect the country, from Laos to Qui Nhon. Top-secret information had been obtained that indicated an enemy attack through the Iodrang Valley was soon to occur. This information was probably gained by interrogation of the prisoners in the cages. The North Vietnamese planned to win the war by “walking across” the country. The plan sounded arrogant to me. Norman’s presentation was given using a wooden tripod with diagrams and charts on large white paper flipped over the top one at a time. Norman was big, the most out-of-shape soldier that I had ever laid my eyes on. His green army shirt looked like an overloaded tent. I asked one question during the course of the meeting, and he didn’t know the answer. Some of the men, including my friend Robert Anderson, had been sent home before their year in country was completed or to other duty stations outside the country, and I was wondering if there was a chance for an early out for the rest of us. Norman said, “I don’t know, I don’t have any information on that.” I really didn’t think that he did know, so I let it go.

The meeting ended at about dinnertime, which is the noon meal for a hillbilly. I was already in the mess hall, so I thought I would try some roast beef, mashed potatoes and
brown gravy, cooked vegetables, and dessert. For Viet Nam standards, we ate like kings, and afterward we washed it down with as much nickel-a-can beer as we wanted. On Sundays, we had steak and lobster, and on occasion, drank Champaign. I got my tray heaped full with food, grabbed one malaria pill, and walked the entire length of the room to sit by myself at the far end of a row of tables.

Rusty would be proud of me, I thought. Then I looked up and noticed Mr. Big, Norman Swartzkoff. He could have stopped at any one of half a dozen empty tables between us, but no. He and his followers traveled the full length of empty chairs and sat down around me. Swartzkoff grabbed the chair immediately to my left, and Big Minh’s younger brother moved to the end of the table, directly across from me. There were two or three other U.S. Army officers with Norman. Norman introduced them to me.

“How’s it going, aye?” I tried to be hospitable.

Swartzkoff’s eyes gazed slightly above mine, and he cleared his throat. I didn’t get it. This scenario repeated itself. Finally, I figured out that he wanted me to remove my plain, baseball type, marine hat. As I ran my fingers through my beard contemplating the situation, I told Norman “it is customary for me to wear my hat while I was eating,” because “I have work to do. Where ya from?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Georgia, where you from?” he asked. Swartzkoff told me that he had flown out of Atlanta. This was a “special trip” back into country to finish some “unfinished business.” It had been a while, four months or so, since he had been in command of the Central Highlands. I had been in Viet Nam for a couple of weeks before he left, so initially I had been vaguely under his command. But now was different. I was supposed to be there, I was stationed in Viet Nam, but Norman wasn’t.
“Iowa,” I said, but Norman seemed like he already knew that.

The man across from me was the younger brother of the top South Vietnamese Army General, and I tried to briefly engage in conversation with the man. He was tall by Viet Nam standards and quite distinguished. His hair was trimmed neatly; his green uniform was neatly pressed with his name Minh displayed on a patch above his pocket. He looked like a young Clark Gable from the orient. My uniform was washed by mamasahn on the rocks and left to dry in the sun so that by comparison, I looked faded and wrinkled.

“Looks like it might get hot today,” I said. He had shark eyes, and he didn’t seem too interested in the weather being hot, for it always was.

His answer was a simple, “Yes.”

“Should get pretty hot in the cages, don’t you think?” I said. What I said made Norman laugh, and then the conversation got ugly. Big Minh’s younger brother remained emotionless. Either he didn’t think it was funny or he didn’t get it. “Norman,” I said, “I think it’s against the Geneva Convention to put the enemy in cages.” It was clear that we were going to have more than a slight disagreement, so I put both hands on my tray, looked Norman squarely in his eyes and said, “You’re no hero.” I got up and walked out on him. As I walked the entire length of tables, I continued to stare at him until my neck wouldn’t pivot around any further. Norman stared back, a bit startled, but he didn’t say a word in response.

I watched from my room until his jeep drove by, and I waited quite awhile before I headed to work. As I walked by the cages, I looked back between them to see Norman leading a prisoner in black pajamas, and Minh following. They disappeared into a small building that I later looked into. The inside was unpainted and still smelled of new wood. There was a table with chairs, but nothing else.
Rusty wasn’t happy with me. “You beat all, you know that,” Rusty bellowed. “You are going to have trouble with this, do you know that? Later, back in the world it will come back to haunt you, you won’t be able to live through it!”

“I’m a tough son of a bitch,” I said.

“You’d better be,” Rusty said.

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Not long after Norman’s visit, I was swimming on the point. From the point, I could see the green and blue waters of the South China Sea. It was a Sunday afternoon. Ships could be seen on the horizon. In the bay, the nets fastened on poles in the water from the nearby village were full of fish. The tide was out exposing the catch. Fishing boats maneuvered under the nets to pick the fish and small sharks out. I was in the water when a canoe-type boat pulled up with three Vietnamese. A villager standing next to me in the water said, “They’re Viet Cong.” I could see that their boats sat a little lower in the water compared to the local fishermen’s boats. I eased my way out of the water, and I made my way back to the base.

Rusty was in the room when I got back. “Come out here and have a beer with me,” he said. He motioned for me to go outside and stand beside the hut, next to the sandbags. I followed him out opening a beer along the way. We stood and looked out over the bay towards the point where I had been swimming about a mile away. Then a low flying jet appeared from under the cover of the hills. It was coming in from the South China Sea. The plane banked hard and came right at us flying faster than its sound. When the point was passed, two bombs were dropped, and then the jet banked hard to its left and flew over the bay. The bombs tumbled in like barrels straight for us. It was difficult to discern if they
would land left or right of where we stood. The plane’s banking over the bay gave the illusion that the bombs might drift the opposite direction, but they kept coming straight. I walked toward them. Rusty stayed behind the sandbags. I went by a bunker, keeping my eyes on the flight. Then something strange happened. Two light beams formed, both originating from the point where the bombs had been released from the airplane. One light beam came straight to me; the other light beam was also straight but formed a slight angle with the first beam, depicting the bombs’ trajectory. The bombs’ flight, even though the bombs themselves tumbled, followed this light beam without variance. My observation proved correct; the path of the bombs’ trajectory was a little high. The bombs sailed ten to twenty feet over my head, there was nothing written on the sides of either one. The bombs were indeed barrel shaped without a propellant, and they moved slowly enough that if something had been written on the side in big enough letters, I would have been able to read it. They cleared the sandbags where Rusty stood and landed on the perimeter with explosions, which were not as loud as I had expected. Then another plane appeared following the first and released two more bombs. These took a similar path with a slightly higher trajectory. I went to look in the ravine where the explosions had occurred. There was nothing there. A man standing on top of a twenty-foot high water tank, whom I had never seen before, was photographing the event. I had more questions than answers. The air strike happened so fast that there would have been no time to position oneself on the tank to take pictures. How did the man know that the bombs would not hit the tank? I later concluded that Rusty knew about the air strike in advance and set me up to witness the event. We had never drunk beer together while standing around the front of the barracks before, and we never did afterwards. If the military was trying to send me a message to keep quiet about the cages, they succeeded. There was nothing more that I
could do about them without contacting a senator back in Iowa. I figured that might be suicidal. I stopped looking in the cages. Yet the most important unanswered question for me was, did the photographs from the water tank record the two beams of light? The only thing that I knew for sure was that when the light appeared, the plane had banked left and was well past the base over the bay. The light beams had come from some outside source other than the jets. If Swartzkoff was trying to scare me, it hadn’t worked. The photographs would have showed me walking past a bunker towards incoming bombs. “That looked like a warning, like they were firing over the bow of a ship,” I said to Rusty. “Norman must be pissed off.” I finished my beer and went to bed. It was still afternoon sun, but I was having a bad day. I covered my head, flashbacked to Iowa, and went to sleep repeating, “I want to go home.” There were no further harassments. When I woke up from a long sleep the next day, Rusty was there repeating himself.

“You beat all. You know that. You beat all,” he said, but I had no idea what he was talking about. “Who are you anyway, Warrior?” he wanted to know. “Who are you?”

“You’re with the Special Forces, not me,” I said. “But the Viet Cong weren’t on the perimeter, they were on the point.”
Towry had a party the night before he left for home. A selection of special foods was spread out in a screened in back room of one of the barracks. There were grilled hamburgers and chips from cans. Alongside were boxes and boxes of Champaign. I liked the bubbly taste of the brew. This was my first experience with quart bottles with corks. The first six or eight went down pretty smooth. Unlike beer, the Champaign was making me stagger. I kept drinking through the night. I wandered off to the club patio, where I remembered falling on my butt. My roommates told me the next day that I continued drinking after that. They had laughed their asses off when I finally made my way back to the barracks, and reported that I was so drunk that I couldn’t get my pants off. My roommates said that I lay on the floor and hooked the end of my pants on a nail, then crawled out of them. Although I don’t actually remember doing that, I always thought that was pretty clever for a drunken sailor. I never drank any more Champaign. The next day I felt like shit.

Not all my days in Viet Nam were depressing. After about seven months in country, I had my best day. That day was December 14, 1970. It was my twenty-second birthday. I was in my office when about midmorning I got a call from the Red Cross. Jeffrey Allen was born on December 12. I was a father. My wife was doing fine. That was about all the voice on the phone had to say. There was no way that I knew of to call home. If there was a phone somewhere that reached the States, I didn’t know where to find it. I sat by myself for the rest of the morning feeling good. In the afternoon, Olan came over to find me. “Congratulations,” he said. You have been promoted to third-class petty officer.” I had been put in for a field advancement and had also passed the test for a regular promotion to third class petty officer.
So for my birthday I got a promotion, a pay raise, and a new son back in Iowa. This was the only time that I left work in the middle of the day. I sat down by a stone wall and watched the ships come and go in the bay. I drank warm beer alone until the 15th.

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It was a cloudy night, dark even for Viet Nam, January 1971. I had gone to bed around ten with the covers on. I was fast asleep; it was probably well after midnight. The force of the blast blew me sleeping from bed onto the floor, where, yeah, I said a quick, please, no nuclear bomb prayer. There was a strange red glow, like over the whorehouse door on a foggy night, which led me out and down the hallway, where I opened the door to a light intensely bright. The clouds were on fire, burning coals in the sky. The swirling red glow from the source of the explosion over a mile away reflected across the water. Yellow and white light below the clouds shone with an intensity greater than the noonday sun. Others came from their sleep to stand beside me, but they had no words to describe what they were witnessing. The sky was on fire. The ammo dump near Qui Nhon had been hit. A five thousand ton explosion shocked the air in waves. The water sparkled from its fingertips, reaching up in swells. But there was no mushroom cloud like in the pictures of a nuclear bomb. My prayer had been answered. I watched with others as in a trance until the sky started to darken up. I felt mentally fatigued. I went back to bed. I didn’t write home about the explosion; I didn’t want to worry anyone, besides, maybe it had been a dream, I rationalized. I probably should have written. My parents read about the explosion in the *Marshalltown Times Republican* anyway. My mother saved the clipping. They would have wanted to know if I was all right, but I wasn’t sure.
Split memory

So I applied for R and R. I needed a week off to collect myself. Australia would have been nice, but the land down under was booked solid. I chose Taipei. Rest and relaxation was what I needed. The Navy said a time in March 71 would be fine. The early rounds of the “Thrilla in Manila” were blaring from the loudspeaker at the Taipei, Taiwan airport. The buzz of an electric crowd intensified with each bee sting from Ali, and every thundering jolt from Frazier. I felt every blow. My head was ringing. I could hear bells. I was standing still, but the world was spinning around me. The crowd bumped by. Dazed, I tried to get out of the way. A list of hotels was given to the soldiers with their advantages and disadvantages. They were rated like taco sauce, according to their illegal activities, mild, medium, and hot. Groups were forming. Decisions were being made while I continued standing there in my plain Marine uniform and green hat that covered long unkempt hair. I stroked my full beard contemplating the situation. I tried to listen to the announcer from Manila to figure out who was winning.

I wasn’t alone. Another sailor from the Brown Water Navy base in the Central Highlands happened to be with me. Lindsey was a Californian with sunglasses, a black beret, and insignias on his uniform. He was a third class petty officer, but I was unaware of what he actually did on the detachment at Qui Nhon. I didn’t know Lindsey well, but the night before, we had slipped out of Ton San Knot Air Force Base together on the back of motorbikes to find a whore house somewhere in the downtown area of Saigon. We entered through a back alley and were several floors up. The girls we found shared the same room, each having a single bed. We fucked them hard for a while, and then we left for the airbase. We had locked
most of our money with the airport security so we didn’t have enough for the night of
entertainment. Lindsey gave the girls his watch to hold for payment. When we retrieved our
money in the morning, Lindsey went back into the city to get his watch back.

Lindsey knew where we were going. He had been to Taiwan before. I didn’t have a
cue. An Aussie and a New Zealander joined us in taking a break from the war. The four of
us climbed into a taxi, and we left the airport for the Kings Hotel. When we arrived, we were
given the royal treatment. The hotel provided us all rooms on the same floor near the top. All
four of us entered the first room together, where Lindsey was to stay. The door opened to a
very inviting hotel room with a picture window with a great view of the crowded houses, a
TV, and a double bed with a pretty young woman sitting on it. My two down-under friends
were next, and damn, women were sitting on their beds too. Now for some reason, when I
entered my room, I was shocked to find a young woman sitting on my bed. Down at the bar a
little later, the hotel management offered to have the girls stay with us all week for a certain
amount of money. We could even select another girl at the bar if we wanted to trade. I
deprecated the weeklong arrangement, but I was fascinated with the one-day approach. I spent
the rest of the afternoon upstairs on the double bed getting to know my new girl friend.

“Would you like to go home with me?” she said. “I need to get a dress for tomorrow.”

“Sure.” I said.

In the evening, she took me to where she lived. The apartment building was tall and
narrow with an entry door from the sidewalk. Inside, the stairs climbed straight to the top
with twenty doors on each side, one at each floor level, and a single door at the top facing the
staircase. The wooden stairs creaked with each upward step. My girlfriend told me that she
lived on the second floor from the top with two roommates. About half way up the stairwell,
the door at the top opened slowly. A woman with red lips and dressed in black leaned out. The pull towards her got stronger all the way up. Our eyes fixed on each other, drawing each other in. I watched her breathe. I studied her motion, swaying slightly back and forth. Her tongue motioned me on. But I never climbed the last flight of stairs. After all, I was married back in Iowa to Lois Elaine. My new girl friend and I turned aside to enter her apartment. I lay on her bed wanting to go upstairs and meet the neighbor, but I never did. I slipped into a depressed mood.

Back at the hotel, there was plenty of beer and Singapore slings, which could be obtained with a room service phone call. As the first light of the next day appeared through the window, my new girlfriend tapped my shoulder and asked me if I was done with sex. Evidently, I had stopped moving.

“Yeah, I guess,” I said and rolled over and went to sleep.

When I awoke, she left. I always wondered what her name was. She wanted to stay, but I wasn’t feeling too well, and I sent her away. I needed to be alone for a while to sort my thoughts out. I wasn’t thinking very well. I missed the anxiety of Viet Nam. The peace and serenity of the comfortable hotel with the woman on the bed was impossible to adapt to. I looked into the bathroom mirror. I hadn’t looked at myself in quite a while. I didn’t recognize myself. My beard was full, hiding my face, my mustache covered my lips, my hair was long, curling off in a mad scientist style, and my eyes had a shiny glare. It had been a long time since I had taken a bath. It rained quite often in Viet Nam, which kept me fresh. There was also a shower back at the base, but not a bath. I got in the tub, turned the hot water on, and stared at the ceiling. The hot water soothed the painful tension that had accumulated in my muscles. Still, I felt the walls closing in. I washed and got out. I had to get out of there.
From the hotel windows, I could see a barbershop across the street. I decided to cut my beard off. Perhaps, I thought, if I didn’t look so crazy, maybe I could think clearer. I took a seat in the barbershop, and soon, a young lady called my name. I sat down in the barber’s chair, and she covered me with a long cloth.

“You like trim today?” she said.

“Cut it all off,” I said running my fingers through my beard for the last time.

She cut with a scissors and then lathered my face to scrape the skin clean with a straight-edged razor. Then she cut my hair short. I closed my eyes as curls landed on the floor. She pressed her body against my arm sending sensations up my spine. Her hands gently massaged my shoulders, then my neck. Sweet oils were rubbed into my hair, and then it was combed for the first time in months. I opened my eyes and glared into the long mirror that stretched across the room in front of the chairs. I hadn’t remembered the room being that big. The image was of another row of people getting their hair cut. I didn’t recognize myself. I gazed at the guy sitting across from me in the next aisle. But it was just my reflection. I looked pale. I waved to myself. I remembered that guy. Yeah, that was me. “Nice job,” I said and tipped her generously.

I wandered the streets and alleys for a couple of days, drinking as much beer as possible and watching Chinese girls strip in bars. I loved to watch girls dance on stage. The Chinese were great stage dancers. Their eyes told a story much like a hula dancer’s hands. They never got too close to me. I must have looked like trouble to them by staring so deep in their eyes. The Chinese dancers performed for me, but at a distance. I kept drinking until I stumbled out the back door, the night darkness welcoming me. I found myself face down in the alley during the darkest part of the night. The alleys in Taipei were much nicer than the
ones in Saigon. Trashcans were lined tight near the buildings and were well protected behind short fences. Streetlights cast dim rays through the alley’s darkness. The shadows concealed my drunken fall. There weren’t any rats, and no other people. I was able to get back on my feet with the help of the garbage cans that I had named. Towards the darkest part of night, just before dawn, I stumbled through the hotel lobby before falling again, then crawling to the elevator. The desk clerk encouraged me on. “You can do it,” he laughed. “Reach up and push the button. You’re on floor number,” whatever it was. I don’t remember.

Lindsey came to see how I was doing after a couple of days. He was no longer with the bargirl and wanted to know if I wanted to go with him to meet some real nice club girls. “Sure, I said, I want to be laid in Taiwan.”

“Get cleaned up, and I’ll take you somewhere that you’ll never forget. These are fine women, and they won’t just fuck you. If you get laid, you’ll really have to work for it. Got it, are you interested?”

We entered the door of the Mayflower Club to find a horseshoe shaped bar with guys sitting around the outside drinking. Behind the bar, across from every barstool sat some of the most beautiful women I had ever laid eyes on. Lindsey had been there before, and the woman across from where he sat down was radiant by Chinese standards. He motioned to me to pick one out, kind of like judging baby beef at the county fair, I thought. I made my pick and really liked my selection. Her name was Kim. I paid the club about twenty-five dollars each day so that Kim would not have to go to work. She was with me for the rest of the week, and we had fun. Kim taught me how to dance at a disco. She took me to the best restaurants, and we ate to our heart’s content and drank more Singapore Slings. We sailed
Green Lake in a small boat pushed by a man with a pole. The Museum was awesome, except the stuff was really old and probably belonged on the mainland.

One day, the four of us decided to travel by cab to a park in the mountains. There were crystal streams flowing endlessly down from the mountain valleys over waterfalls and through picturesque bridges. As we ascended, the stream alongside the road had cut a gorge into the mountainside. When we arrived at the top, we found that the park was located on the other side of the gorge accessible only by a cable car. The cable car floated out over the deep canyon, bobbing and bouncing like a cork on the ocean. The Chinese passengers sat patiently looking down toward the middle of the cable car, while I nervously stared out the window. Finally, the cable car came over land, and with wobbly legs, we walked into the park on the other side. Small streams trickled through the park that fed pools with colorful fish swimming through lilies. Flowering trees with petals like cherry, peach, and plum blossoms graced the landscape. Kim and I strolled quietly through the park’s majesty. We entered a Chinese restaurant that was placed in the center of the park. I couldn’t read or speak Chinese, so when the waitress stopped at the table, I just pointed at one of the lines on the menu. Kim moved my finger up to a dish on the menu that she knew I liked and could afford. The meal was served with chopsticks, and I tried the best I could to put some food into my mouth. As the afternoon light began to wane, we boarded the cable car and floated back across the gorge.

The theater was packed with a well-mannered Chinese audience. The movie that was showing was Herby, the Love Bug. The language was in English but had Chinese subtitles. The well-mannered audience read along and quietly enjoyed the movie. At one point in the movie Herby, a Volkswagen of all things, ran through a China shop knocking down the front
awning. The owner of the shop ran out and yelled in Chinese at Herby and whoever was in it. The whole theater erupted in laughter. They understood what the shop owner said, and to them, this scene must have been the best part. Kim and I sat near the back and held hands. She laughed too.

Ivy took Lindsey, Kim, and I to visit her mother and father in their home. I felt it was a great honor to meet them. The house was accessible by wooden walkway only. Our shoes clopped in unison as the four of us strolled arm in arm by many homes in hushed conversations with respect for their privacy. Ivy’s parents lived in a modest home by American standards, with just a bonsai tree and some rocks in the small bit of earth for a yard. In the front room, there was a short round table in the middle, a large television with the picture turned off, a rug with a dragon picture and paintings on the wall, and shelves filled with ornamental figures and pictures of people in gardens, temple buildings, and landscapes. Buddha wasn’t very big but took up a corner of the room. The teapot was set in the center of the table with small cups on saucers around. Herbal smells seeped through from the kitchen. Plumes of grasses and wild flowers gracefully bowed from a vase sitting on the floor, reaching toward low ceilings. Kim and Ivy were given hugs from Ivy’s mother, while Lindsey and I shook hands with Ivy’s father, who did not understand English. The three of us men sat down on the floor around the table and had a spot of tea without talking. After a while, Ivy and Kim returned from another part of the house wanting to leave. We thanked our hosts. Lindsey and I followed Kim and Ivy out of the house. From the front door to the board walkway was three steps. We waved goodbye and promised to return, but never did.

When the week was up, and it was time to head back to collect my hostile fire pay, which was $65 a month, Kim was still with me, while the other women were long gone. She
stayed with me until the cab left, waving from the sidewalk. I’d like to tell you about the wild sex we had, but there wasn’t any. She stayed all night a couple of times, and we just slept together in our underwear. As much as I liked Kim, had Ivy been my girlfriend, I probably would have stayed in Taiwan. The plane took off through the clouds, and I tried to capture the image so that I would never forget the memories of my time I spent with Kim, but since I was married, I would never be able to tell anyone.

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When I got back to Saigon, I went the wrong direction. Instead of flying north to Qui Nhon, I took a ride with some Vietnamese on an old bus heading south to the Mekong River. We passed along rice paddies with workers attending their fields. A friend from Newton named Snook, who was another Navy Reservist from my unit on Army Post Road in Des Moines, put me up for the night on the Mekong River. The sailors there weren’t doing too well. A heavy depression pressed down on their detachment. It was hot, a stinking kind of hot, and they were watching porno movies in the mess hall. Everyone was spread out around the lunch tables; nobody was talking. The boat where I slept was cramped and claustrophobic. There was a hint of a bottom of a football locker smell in the air. I left first light next day. I have no memory of how I returned.

I found myself in Saigon near the statue of President Kennedy, and was within walking distance from the Defense Department Building. I decided to make a visit to the High Command and update them on the war. I went in the side door of the Department of Defense Building, and climbed the stairs. Surprisingly, there were no guards to get by. Our old Commanding Officer of our base was carrying coffee on one of the lower floors. My pictures, which I had taken of prostitutes being transported in the back of the ambulance, had
gotten his command replaced, but he had not been sent home. The Commander definitely recognized me as the guy that testified against him. We froze in our paths but said nothing to each other. He was a maverick officer, which was what an enlisted regular Navy man was called after having started out on the bottom and having made the rank of a commissioned officer. We stared at each other for a while, and then I continued my climb in the stair well. The cages must have really bothered him, too. He had the same glare in his eye that I did. Once I got to the upper floor where the Navy Department resided, I told them who I was and where I was stationed. I requested to speak to whoever was in charge. I didn’t have to wait long to enter an office with a higher-ranking officer. I told him that I was having some trouble thinking and that I needed immediate relief. I related my job responsibilities and reminded the officer that I was doing the job of two higher-ranking people. Running a dispersing office was a responsibility of a Chief or a first class petty officer. I was on a roll, so I told the Navy Commander that the Navy could “stick the war up their ass.” I may have been the only Viet Nam Veteran to try something like that. I figured “Why not?” I thought that the Naval Command at the Defense Department Building really believed me about having trouble thinking. The officer left me sitting in a chair while he went and checked something. When he came back, he said that he would try to get me some help. I felt a little better about myself afterwards. I left the Defense Building the same way that I had entered, without incident. I headed back north to Qui Nhon in a C-130 airplane that had trouble getting the wheels down to land. I went back to NSAD to sleep with the rats and see how much trouble I was in. Nobody even seemed to notice that I was gone. Without my beard and long hair, many of the crew didn’t recognize me. I looked pretty regulation. Lt. Mariner learned of what I had done in Saigon, but amazingly, I never even got a reprimand. So, I lay
on my bed, looking at the rats, thinking, who won that fight, anyway? Maybe I had. Changes were being made in my favor.
Isolated delusions

I slouched down in a patio chair beside the brick wall by the club and gulped at a nickel beer alone. The festivities were about to begin across the water at the end of the cove. “It’s too dangerous,” something inside of me was saying. The U.S.O. show featured a redhead American woman from the *Red Skelton Show* and was hard to pass up. I would wake up wet in the middle of the night having dreams filled with round-eyed woman. I had gotten a glimpse from a distance of the star of the show when she had a drink at the club before performing. Vickie Lawrence performed in U.S.O. shows in Viet Nam during those years, and this may have been one of them. These entertainers were courageous to travel to remote bases. No place in Viet Nam could be described as safe, especially one that had already been overrun. “One well placed rocket from the top of the adjoining hills would get them all,” I told myself. “Sitting ducks.”

There were two problems with the U.S.O. show. This was a small Navy detachment with an audience of maybe a couple of hundred, a rather small crowd to have its own U.S.O. show. More important, they were having the show on the exact spot where the cages had been. The cages had been moved to the back of the supply warehouse in a sort of cage junkyard. Now, the fifty or sixty cages weren’t being guarded. I had looked in one and seen that it was empty. For whatever the reason, Nixon, Swartzkoff, or some other high military commander had made a decision to stop putting the enemy in cages in the hot sun. I felt like I had contributed to their change in heart. Perhaps Nixon would stop the war now.

I looked across the stone wall; across the end of the Qui Nhon Bay, I could see a U.S.O. show that was singing and dancing on the very spot where the cages had been. Maybe
I had made a difference. There was no final battle in the Iodrang Valley like Norman had declared. When North Viet Nam captured the South, they “walked across” that area. The only North Viet Nam War Memorial was placed at Qui Nhon, the “destination point of the war,” not far from where the cages had been standing.

Norman never came back to NSAD Qui Nhon as far as I know. I had really hoped that telling him that he “was no hero” would bother his conscience, if he still had one. I never suspected that Swartzkoff would make the rank of General. He just didn’t fit the image of what I thought a General should look like.

When May of ’71 came, my time to leave had arrived. There was no wild party. I left without saying much of a goodbye. I had holed up the last few weeks by myself in a five-by-eight room. I didn’t feel well. I did say goodbye to my old roommates. I flew to Cam Ranh Bay where I tried to leave Viet Nam standby. I slept on the cement in the airport for a few days. Finally, they called my name before the first light of one morning. I took my position at the end of the line, and walked out into the dark to board the “Freedom Bird.” I took a window seat on the left side of the airplane near the rear. I had seen dozens of “Freedom Birds” in the early morning watches at Qui Nhon. Now, I was on one. Our plane was full; I was headed home standby and was one of the last to be added to the manifest. We headed north at sunrise. I looked for the Qui Nhon Bay and easily spotted the detachment where I had just spent about a year of my life. I waved. To my surprise, we didn’t stop in Da Nang. Instead, we headed north along the shore past the rolling green hills of North Viet Nam. Quite a lengthy time into the flight, we passed over a large inland city. There was a river that ran through the city that had been dammed downstream forming a lake or broad body of water with an island in the middle. The river could be seen in the distance from its source in
the hills to the west, northwest. The majority of the city sat on the north side of the river with what looked like an industrial complex to the south. No one else on the airplane seemed to notice that we had passed over a large inland city north of Da Nang. Most of the passengers were asleep. I determined that this must have been Hanoi. The Pan Am jet banked hard right towards the eastern sun, and then crossed land for a good time and distance, until we reached the coast. We were finally out over the ocean and on our way to Japan.

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We stopped in Yakuda Air Force Base in Japan. I had survived Viet Nam, but I was confused and shocked about flying north and inland from Cam Ranh. I was allowed to get out of the plane in Japan. I felt claustrophobic, and I couldn’t breathe. The houses were built against the airport fence as though they were pushing in to greet the landing airplanes. People were shoulder to shoulder on the sidewalks crowding storefronts with vertically hung signs. Did you read the sign from the top or from the bottom? I didn’t know what any of the words in Japanese meant so it didn’t make any difference. The writing resembled the ground around the chicken house after a spring rain. I wanted to go home to the farm. All year long in Viet Nam, I anticipated a personal triumphant return to the United States filled with joy and happiness, but this trip home wasn’t like that. I didn’t feel any joy until the wheels of the Pan American touched land on the Seattle Airport. The quiet soldiers on board, including me, all cheered wildly at that moment.

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I wasn’t allowed to stay on the base in Seattle while being discharged. The Navy said that the base was full. I thought that was a lie. I took a bus downtown and found a hotel in the center of the city. The desk manager looked surprised when I asked him for a room. They
were mostly monthly rentals. I walked the streets for a few days, stopping in many bars, calling home, and watching American women dance. Demonstrations against the war filled the streets. I watched from the second story balcony of a building on the corner. I was dazed, confused, my ears were ringing, and my thumbnail had been lost. Still, I had survived Viet Nam, and the war was over for me. I was awarded the Viet Nam Service Metal and an Honorable Discharge, and then I was sent home to Iowa. Little did I know that my most difficult battles lay ahead.
Two paths

I walked down the ramp in the Des Moines Airport wearing the same smelly uniform I had on when I left Qui Nhon a week earlier. I greeted Lois Elaine with hugs and kisses and saw my son Jeffrey for the first time. I waited until I was back in Colo and bathed before I held my five-month-old son. I closed my eyes and rocked him gently to sleep in a new rocking chair. I should have been overjoyed, but home didn’t feel right.

There were two different directions I could take. I could remember Viet Nam or forget it. I soon found out that my friends, relatives, and the guy on the next barstool didn’t want to talk about the Viet Nam War. That made my initial choice of forgetting the war more appealing. I kept busy with activities that did not require a lot of thinking. Within a week I was working quietly through the nights cutting bones out of pork butts at a meat packing plant. I moved the family to the isolation of an old farmhouse and later to the unincorporated town of Fernald, with a population of one hundred people. The part of me that wanted to forget was often drunk. I made some of my own beer and fermented ten gallons at a time under the steps. The yeast in the brew made the house smell like fresh made bread.

Another part of me wanted to remember Viet Nam. Sober thinking for myself produced memories of my war experiences to be flashed back to my mind. A desire to learn from them guided me back to college. In 1972, I continued my education, which I had started at Marshalltown Community College before the war. I enrolled at Des Moines Area Community College in Boone, Iowa, and I later transferred to Iowa State University at Ames, Iowa, and was classified as a junior in the winter and spring semesters of 1973.
My winter grades reflected a split student personality. I received five hours of A in Statistics, and three hours of F in Accounting. I was on the campus as the weather began to turn warm in the spring of 73, but I couldn’t make myself walk up the hill from the Memorial Union, open the classroom door in Carver, and sit in the auditorium. I didn’t even bother to withdraw from school. I opened another cold beer when I received my grade report for the semester and read the letter “F” in the column beside each of my three classes, with a cumulative GPA of 1.18. I just gave up and took a custodial job at the high school. The only thing I studied was the Des Moines Register as Watergate unfolded.

Within two years of being home from the war, I was having trouble. I couldn’t remember and forget Viet Nam at the same time. In 1973, I wrote the Navy an extensive letter explaining that my Viet Nam experience was bothering me mentally, and that I was now a conscientious objector. Since I had already fulfilled the requirements of my active duty service and reserve meeting attendance obligations, the Navy viewed my request as irrelevant. I did receive the proper forms to fill out for conscientious objector status, and I saved the papers. I felt that telling the Navy was enough, and that it was not necessary to fill out the forms.

I wasn’t feeling very patriotic. The last thing I wanted was to be involved in another war, which started for our family on December 17, 1973 with explosives, airplanes, and terrorists.
A war on terrorism begins

An airplane had been boarded and terrorized at the Rome airport. My father phoned to inform me of the situation and stated his concern for the safety of two of my first cousins. They were on a layover in Rome, Italy, en route to the Middle East, and my father told me that the family had not heard anything from either Muriel Berka or Barbara McKinney since the terrorist attack. Also, nothing had been heard about the safety of Bonnie Geisler of Colo, Iowa, who my first cousins had been traveling with. My father knew that they were on a Pan Am jet, but other than that, he didn’t know if it was their flight or another one that had been attacked. The Associated Press indicated that the plane was a different type of plane than the one Muriel, Bonnie, and Barb were on.

In Baker, Oregon, Jim Berka, Muriel’s son, learned that the number of his mother’s flight was the same as the number of the attacked airplane. Jim contacted a former Air Force buddy, who was a pilot with Pan Am. He in turn made a direct link with Pan Am in Rome and secured a list of survivors, which did not include the name of his mother. Jim relayed the information to the family in Iowa that the three from Colo were involved in the bombing. Bonnie and Barbara were listed as survivors, but Muriel was not. Still, there was no official confirmation of Muriel’s death.

“From that time on we were glued to the television set,” said Barb’s mother Virginia to the Nevada Journal. “Some of the reports were so confusing; we heard one story and then another. Then about 1 p.m. we got a call from Barb. She was hysterical. She didn’t make much sense. She said she was o.k. but couldn’t find her cousin Muriel or friend Bonnie. Barb
said she was running for her life. She was one of the few passengers to escape unharmed. She
broke a strap on her shoe when she jumped from the wing of the jet.”

An article in the *Nevada Journal* included an interview with Bonnie. “The first bomb
went off in the rear of the plane where the three were to have been seated. The plane wasn’t
full so they had moved up into a more forward seating area, or they would have been all
killed by the blast. Muriel was knocked down on the floor, was burnt from the blast in the
rear. Bonnie was picking her up and dragging her forward, when another blast from the front
went off.” People stampeded and Muriel was lost. Barb had been told to get down, and
escaped out a window that was blown out. Muriel and two other Iowans from Marshalltown
were among the thirty-one people killed by Arab terrorists on the Pan American jetliner (*The
Nevada Evening Journal*, Vol.79, No. 221, Nevada, Iowa 50201, Tuesday, December 18,
1973).

Barb was still in shock after arriving back in Colo and wasn’t talking about the attack
or much of anything else. “Muriel got to see the Pope,” was about all Barb said to me.

“Did you see him too?” I said.

“Yes.” Barb wasn’t Catholic, but Muriel was, so it had been an extra special event in
Muriel’s life to stop over in Rome and be among the Pope’s audience.

I attended the funeral service at the Catholic Church with the rest of the family and a
large number of the town’s residents. I was in shock, too, and I felt sick to my stomach. As I
sat in the Church listening to the priest say, “Hail Mary, full of grace,” and tell about eternal
life and the holiness of the Pope in Rome, I was thinking, “I’ve got to stop the terrorists.”

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My wife, Lois Elaine, and I often shopped at Sears in the Merle Hay Mall in Des Moines. I had started working for Sears in the mid seventies at the Ames store, and we received an employee discount for shopping with them. Like other Mall walkers, we went through the other stores to see what they had. I hadn’t known that Dale Paulin worked at the Montgomery Ward’s store so our meeting was strangely coincidental. I didn’t see my old friend at first, but I could sense the strong vibes of someone staring at me. He was standing toward the back aisles next to a tan dryer about the same color as the jacket he was wearing. He hadn’t moved or said anything, but our eyes met. We walked towards each other, and I shook his little hand.

“Am I ever surprised to see you,” I said. “What are you doing here?”

“When Mrs. Allbee died, I came to Des Moines to see what I could find to do. I’m working here for Montgomery Ward’s,” Dale said. He wheeled his ladder over, climbed to the top rung, and showed us the freezer compartment of a refrigerator. “Cold as Duluth,” he said in his munchkin voice.

“We’re not shopping for a refrigerator,” I said. “And I work for the competition, Sears.”

“I’m glad to see that you survived Viet Nam,” Dale said.

“I told you I would,” I said.

Dale reminded me that “nothing will be as it seems” on the road ahead. We said goodbye again to each other.

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I spent a lot of time with my father in his retirement years. I helped keep the family farm clean of fallen trees by cutting them to burn in my pot-bellied stove. We would often sit and visit in the kitchen after I had finished loading the pickup truck. When his health failed, I would listen to him cry. My father said that it was the Nazis causing all the trouble, but I thought he was just paranoid. His illness could not be diagnosed by any of the doctors in the area. My father progressively lost his strength and finally couldn’t walk to the bathroom without help. The symptoms suggested senile dementia or Alzheimer’s disease. The Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota finally figured out the illness. The disease was called Pernicious Anemia, and it was fatal prior to the discovery that it was a nutritional disorder. My father regained his health and thinking ability with the treatment of regular B-12 shots from the town doctor, but the illness had been hard on his heart.

My father and I had watched many of the greatest Cyclone basketball games on TV together beginning with the time Gary Thompson first appeared on our new Zenith in the 1950’s. On December 19, 1987, I sat with my father in the living room and told him that I had two tickets to Iowa-Iowa State game. He had never been to a game, but he didn’t want to go with me. Lafester Rhodes scored 54 points in that game, the greatest Cyclone win that I had ever attended. It was too much for my father watching at home. He told me the next day in the kitchen that he had suffered chest pains during the game. Mary Greeley Hospital in Ames, Iowa admitted him a few days later. He was placed in a room on the third floor in the pediatrics’ ward. Our family was told that he was on the children’s floor because there was no room in the cardiac wing of the hospital. The doctors hadn’t found anything wrong with my father, and my mother was told that he would be released from the hospital later in the afternoon. It was Christmas Eve. My mother had gone home to rest, and my father was alone
when he died. I rushed to the hospital when I heard of his death. I was working only about a mile away. I went into the room to be alone with him, where I found that they hadn’t even bothered to cover my father with his sheet. There was a partially smoked cigarette in an ashtray on the patient table beside the bed, but no emergency equipment. Nothing indicated an attempt had been made to take him to intensive care; my mother later told me that the hospital in Ames didn’t have a heart specialist anyway. When the others in my family arrived, no one went in the room where he lay. My mother cried, “They killed him; they killed him,” next to me on the waiting room sofa. We eventually went back to the farm without him. Many people came to visit that Christmas Eve until late at night. I cried alone in the kitchen where we had often sat together.

The ice and snow kept the attendance down the day of my father’s funeral. I sat on a hard wooden pew of the Colo Methodist Church listening to the Preacher’s words above my father’s coffin about everlasting life, thinking, “Mom was right, they killed him.” I stood and leaned on my memories as I watched the pallbearers place my father’s casket next to his black tombstone at the cemetery. It was the end of the line.
PTSD cohort graduate

A mysterious illness was diagnosed in the post war years, which affected a small percentage of Viet Nam Veterans and was named Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. The veterans with the illness were experiencing a wide range of behavioral problems, which included violence towards themselves and others. I never considered myself a violent person, so the thought never crossed my mind that I might have the illness.

Alcohol reduced my symptoms of a stress disorder and kept me pretty mellow most of the time. The problem was that I had become addicted to it. The more I drank, the more I wanted. I never felt like I had drunk just enough. I was drinking long hours with my brother-in-law or my neighbor Rick and falling down in the alley on the way home after midnight. Something inside me was saying that I had to quit, maybe it was the chest pains, but it was more like there was something else that I had to do in my life and I had to quit drinking in order to do whatever it was. I drank my last beer October 17, 1993, but I had a lot of trouble adapting to a new way of life. I discovered that many of my former beliefs weren’t true at all. I began to question what was real and what was not. I was broken down mentally when I was admitted to the Veteran’s Hospital in Des Moines in April of 1994 for alcohol treatment, although I hadn’t drunk any for six months. I couldn’t think, couldn’t sleep, and walked aimlessly around the hospital for three weeks.

Later, in the fall of the year, I was recommended for treatment for PTSD by the Veteran’s Hospital staff. I was readmitted to the VA hospital for six weeks as one of nine members of a cohort with a similar diagnosis. Roosevelt Hopson and I soon became friends.
We often sat on the loading dock and smoked cigarettes together. I asked him to tell me what
the Army was like after his Viet Nam tour. Roosevelt told me that he had been arrested by
the Military Police when he returned wearing the twenty-six medals that he had been
awarded, including silver and bronze stars, with the lowest military rank possible of E1. The
MPs assumed that a soldier could not have so many honors with such a low rank, but both
the rank and the medals were legitimate. Along with Roosevelt’s heroic actions, he had also
shot at the officers from time to time. His rank of Corporal had been taken away, but not the
medals. All of the other veterans in the cohort had been in the Army, but not all had served in
Viet Nam. Three fought in the Korean War. The graduation ceremony was taped. On the
Friday of our discharge from the hospital, one Korean veteran and I painted the large rock
that sat in the back of the hospital grounds red, white, and blue. We stayed past our hospital
discharge time to finish it. The VA doctors diagnosed me with PTSD in their final report, and
the symptoms progressively worsened in the next three years after my hospitalization. No
one ever came to see me. When I went outside in my yard, the neighbors disappeared into
their houses. If I saw someone I knew in the grocery store, he or she would turn the shopping
cart around in the aisle to avoid going past me. I had to be extra careful not to break any laws
on purpose, because I was being accused of everything. The police stopped occasionally with
unsubstantial allegations of my threat to society, but I was never arrested. I was determined
to survive, though, no matter how severe the depression became, which for many Viet Nam
veterans had proven fatal. I had the advantage over veterans who had died with the same
diagnosis, in knowing that what the others had tried for treatment had not worked. Surviving
the illness would be my biggest challenge in life. The prevailing method of dealing with
PTSD was to medicate the patient until all feeling was lost. There weren’t any directions to
navigate through the illness. If there were a way through PTSD, I would have to find it by trial and error. I believed that there was a way out on the other side of the big depression, but as the symptoms continually worsened, my faith in a way out was challenged to the limit. For the first three years after the diagnosis, I did not even know what was causing the PTSD, or how it was connected to Viet Nam. Similar difficulties of remembering traumatic events were common among the other members of the cohort also. I realized that I was exhibiting many of the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder by observing others in the hospital or through information provided by my counselor, Dave Nelson, at the Vet Center. Dave regularly helped me with problems that I was having in my family and in society. He helped me work my way through a long divorce with Lois Elaine, and encouraged me to cope with my personal problems. As time went by, I flashed back to events of my Viet Nam duty, and they began to fit together like pieces in a puzzle, though I still didn’t have the whole picture. Things worsened as more people became aware of my illness. The harder that I tried to be less threatening in the community, the more fearful others became of me. I was always totally unarmed, and I had never owned a gun. Still, the more I tried to be accepted as a man of peace, the more I was rejected as someone with a violent nature. One of my Fernald neighbors, Ray Robinson, who had always shared a friendly attitude with me and was also a Viet Nam veteran, hurt my feelings. He told me to get back where I belonged when he thought that I had walked too far down the main street. I was just going for a walk in the middle of a public road, and I was quietly minding my own business.
The whole country versus me

The Veteran’s Administration case, number C28 615 763, was listed as “The United States of America vs. Dennis A. McKinney” in the Court of Veteran Appeals. The court case made me feel like I had been expelled from the United States of America. I wasn’t trying to oppose the United States; the case was a petition to obtain my veteran’s benefits that I was qualified to receive. I thought the government was deliberately intending to intimidate me at a time when more stress added to the stress disorder I already had would be more than I could handle. In order to survive mentally, I had to form my own country, a country of one person, me. I named my country “Dennis,” and I hung my flag up on the front porch. The flag was a braided saddle blanket that I obtained at Good Will. Forming my own country in my mind allowed me to continue the legal process on an equal ground with the government. I viewed the situation as country against country. There was no way to beat the Veteran’s Administration for they served in the capacity of both the prosecuting attorney and the judge. The conclusions of the appeal hearings were written to exonerate the military’s actions even if the transcript of my testimony had to be changed from what had actually been said. As the case slowly moved through the VA courts, the government acted as though I was being subversive to the nation, while I thought that the government was being subversive to the nation. The issue came to a head when the VA listed me in their records as dead.

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Rosebud bounced through the front door from retrieving the mail in the rural mailbox next to the street.

“Fuck it’s cold,” she said stomping the snow off her thin shoes.
I sat in the kitchen by the old oak table that had been my grandparents’ and passed down to me. Rosebud and I had gotten married, and we had moved into the ten-room house in Fernald with little to put in it. “Come and sit down by the kerosene heater,” I said. “Did we get any mail?”

“You got a letter from the V.A. I wonder what they want?” Rosebud said.

I took the letter from her outstretched hand and glared at the envelope. “The letter isn’t for me,” I said. “It’s for Lois.”

“Open it; why would they be writing her and sending the letter to you?” said Rosebud.

“I don’t know, she’s remarried and living somewhere in Minnesota.” I tore the end off the envelope and pulled out the documents.

“Read it to me, Dennis,” she said.

I pulled the contents of the letter from the Veteran’s Administration envelope. “This letter is about me, it’s got my correct name, my social security number, and my military identification number. It says, ‘Dear Lois Elaine, We wish to extend our deepest sympathies on the death of your husband who died at the Des Moines Veteran’ Hospital on January 28, 1996.’” Enclosed were VA documents intended for Lois Elaine so she could receive my death benefits.

“You’re the late great now,” said Rosebud.

“Shouldn’t the Veteran’s Administration have notified me first,” I said. “I’m always the last one to hear about what’s going on.”

“It had to be Lois,” said Rosebud. “You look OK to me.”

“I wonder where I’m buried,” I said.
“You’re not dead, you know how to tell?” said Rosebud.

“No, how would a person know?” I said.

“Smoke a cigarette. You can’t smoke when you are dead. It’s a test,” said Rosebud.

“Good idea, Rosebud.” I watched the smoke circle the kerosene heater and mix with the oily fumes it emitted as I exhaled. “Yeah, I’d say I’m still alive.”

“This has got to be something Lois Elaine did. The bitch. I don’t trust her,” said Rosebud. “She lied to you about Jeff being your son all these years, right? She’s pure deception.”

“So what do we do now?” I said.

“Let’s get some gas and meal money out of the bank for a trip to Des Moines and go to the Federal Building. We can tell them that you are not dead,” said Rosebud. “It will be fun.”

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By the look on the faces of the young women tellers, we could tell something was wrong. “Your account has been confiscated by the sheriff,” the teller said. “The money was given to a Lois Elaine Turan, $184. The sheriff got fifty of that for taking it.”

“I died broke,” I muttered.

“Real bitch,” said Rosebud.

I was never able to determine how such a mistake had occurred, and the government didn’t apologize.

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By the time of a Court of Veteran’s Appeals hearing on May 10, 1997, my hair had grown long and curly, and my beard was full, which covered hives on my face and lips. My
legal representative from the American Legion, John Brokens, sat with me in front of a TV monitor. The Judge placed me under oath from Washington D.C. His questioning led me to identify the “stressor.” This was the term that the court used to identify the situation that the veteran encountered in Viet Nam that was currently causing mental problems. I flashbacked to the cages, and my mind finally permitted me to look inside. I stated clearly that the enemy had been melted in the bottom of the cages. There was no emotion, but my mind felt like a tumbler in a lock had fallen into place. In the written transcript of this testimony, the government changed the word “melted” to “baked.” I used the Freedom of Information Act to obtain documents, but the VA would not provide me a requested tape of the hearing.

I had an immediate choice to make in front of the Judge. If I kept quiet, I would win my Veteran’s benefits. By speaking out that the inhumane treatment of the enemy in the cages had been wrong, I would pass my guilt to them. I would be able to regain my mental health, but I would surely lose the money. Would I take the money or my health? I immediately told the Court of Veteran’s Appeals that the United States’ action of melting the enemy in cages was despicable. I knew that I would be denied my veteran’s benefits, but I continued the appeal process; my Viet Nam story is recorded on the pages of sworn testimony from those hearings.

I asked John Brokens if he was on my side or the government. “Your side,” John said. Then he retired, and I never heard from him or the American Legion again. I’m sure that the Legion thought that I would dismiss them as my representative and get somebody else to present the case, but I never did.
For a Viet Nam veteran to receive benefits for service-connected PTSD at that time, three criteria had to be met. First, the veteran had to have been in Viet Nam. Second, the veteran had to have a diagnosis of the illness, and third, the stressor must have been combat related. The VA did not contest the first two. The Court of Veteran’s Appeals denied me benefits because my PTSD was not the result of combat, but I didn’t know that until after I had identified the cages as the “stressor.” It was just bad luck to get the illness in Viet Nam without being qualified for benefits. I accepted that the injury was not combat related.

A pro bono lawyer from Iowa City successfully got the case remanded from the Court of Veteran’s Appeals in Washington, D.C. to Des Moines for consideration on the basis that the three criteria for service-connected disability had been modified by changes to the VA rules to the first two only, so that any Viet Nam veteran with PTSD would qualify for veteran’s benefits.

Senator Harkin inquired to the VA on my behalf, and I was also able to submit the case to a Congressional Liaison. However, I couldn’t defend myself alone against the ridicule of two VA representatives when the hearing returned to Des Moines. The case was dismissed without even an Appeals Court decision. I did not have the strength to appeal the decision any longer, and I focused my attention on staying alive. The process of healing was slow, but after I identified the cause of the stress disorder, both the physical and mental symptoms of PTSD subsided. I began to feel a little better each day. I had disability benefits at work, but with the exception of one three or four-month stretch when the doctor signed a work release and nine weeks when I was in the hospital, I followed an important element of my plan for survival of the illness by staying on the job at Sears.
Rosebud helped me survive the worst portion of the illness, and then she waved goodbye to me in Fernald through the rear view mirror of my car. We weren’t getting along very well, and I was sleeping in the safety of the neighbor’s bean field at night. With little left but the empty rooms in a big house, and ex-relatives for neighbors, I decided that it would be best if I started over some place else. I put the house up for sale, but when I got an offer, Story County wouldn’t allow the house to be sold until a new septic system was installed. Farmers were allowed to spread tons of hog confinement manure on the neighboring fields, but I couldn’t flush my toilet because it was uncertain where the contents went. The Story County Sheriff sold my house at public auction to my old brother-in-law up the street. I hoped that they all choked on their own shit.

In late December of 1998, I was renting a small house in Ames. I had all my money for the January rent in my billfold when I lost it at the Hy Vee grocery store. There was no furniture at all in the house, and I was down to two bags of clothes and twenty dollars in my left jean pocket. I lay down on the kitchen floor to go to sleep with a feeling of being at the end of my rope. It was then that I decided to go back to college. A woman called me at Sears the next day and said she had found my billfold in the parking lot. All the money was still there. I went out to the college a few days later to see about my chances of getting back into school. It happened to be the first day of class for the semester, and I was admitted to Iowa State University as a special student. I enrolled in one course, and I was sitting in class the same day. I moved from the house to a small apartment on Hazel and continued to work full-time to help make college affordable.
Visions

Then he appeared. It wasn’t obvious at first, but someone was following me. Everywhere I went in the city, he would be there. He was not giving me any special attention when I spotted him, but he was constantly where I was. It was impossible for me to guess who had sent the man, or whom he might be with, but as the days and weeks passed, it was clear that whoever he was he watched me very closely. This was perfect. “Maybe help has arrived,” I thought. I realized that the government probably suspected me of being a cause of trouble due to the nature of the testimony at the U.S. Court of Veteran Appeals hearing. I had said that the United States was wrong in their handling of prisoners of war. I didn’t think that the government had taken too kindly to that. Still, I didn’t want to scare my stalker off. Maybe I could use him.

The man following me kept getting closer. Finally, he came into the Sears store where I worked. At first, he just watched TV and drank coffee in the customer lounge without saying much. He had strong vibrations about him that commanded respect, yet his attire was similar to the clothing my homeless friends wore. Indeed, he often collected cans from the garbage in a plastic sack. There were days when he didn’t shave, and when he took his hat off his hair was thin and uncombed, but his clothes were always clean. I didn’t think he was armed, but he had the vibration wavelength of a traumatized soldier. The man didn’t seem to have a job, but he was near retirement age, I thought. One day, I drove home to my two-room apartment; the man was crossing Northwestern Avenue in front of my car on a bicycle, and when he saw that it was me, he hurried on across to the sidewalk. I gave a palm-up hand
signal to him, questioning him as to what it was that he wanted. I introduced myself the next
time he came into the store.

“Hi, I’m Dennis.”

“I’m Rich,” the man said, but this may not have been his name. He may have been
telling me his financial status. Although I never saw Rich drive the car, he brought his
Lincoln Continental in for oil changes on my days off. We rarely addressed each other by
name. I went about my work catching occasional glances from Rich. Some days, but not all,
we would engage in a friendly hello, and if the customers had been taken care of and a break
was due me, I would sit down in the customer waiting area and watch the TV with Rich. If
the channel wasn’t already tuned to CNN, Rich would turn to it. He would stick around for
an hour on most days, but his time spent in the store would vary from a little to a lot. No one
seemed to mind his presence. The Sears Auto Center opened two hours before the rest of the
store. Rich often went under the rope that blocked off the main store and had total access to
the sales floor or the offices of the management in back. No one ever said a word to him that
he did not belong there. He left the store quietly without saying goodbye. At first, he had
seemed almost afraid of me, but as the weeks passed, he seemed more intrigued with me than
frightened. A kind of strange friendship was developing.

None of the other employees suspected that Rich’s interest in being at Sears was to
keep me under his surveillance. My workmates were not with me when he pedaled his
bicycle past my apartment on Hazel Street in Ames. I would wave to him from my chair in
front of the old house, and he would wave back. Rich would often ride through Brookside
Park where I spent a lot of time, and I would see him regularly along the city streets where I
drove the old Buick Riviera. Most of our conversations were at Sears, but I also had
conversations with Rich when he was at the Hy Vee grocery store, and at Ross Hall and the Parks Library on the Iowa State campus. I never told anyone that I worked with that I suspected Rich of spying on me. I almost protected him from that kind of accusation by alluding to his vagabond nature to other employees.

Rich started to inquire of my viewpoints, first about irrelevant information, and then gradually working into what I thought about more important topics. I was glad that he was there, assuming America was responsible for his appearance. After all, I had put the government on notice at the Veterans Administration hearings by reminding them that inhumane treatment of prisoners of war was against the Geneva Convention. I imagined that I was well known in some places. If Rich was with the government, then perhaps I could use him to convince the higher officials that I wasn’t some dangerous radical. “Does the CIA have a card that they show?” I wondered. I never asked Rich for identification because I wouldn’t have known if it was authentic. Our friendship developed into a mutual trust of one another as the months passed. I met his wife and children at Sears, but I did not know where the family lived. His son went to Michigan State University, and his daughter attended Ames High School. Trusting Rich as someone loyal to America was a great leap of faith, because there was no way of distinguishing a government agent from a member of the mob, a terrorist, or a detective. Their eyes all looked the same. I felt a strange sense of security having someone watch me wherever I went.

Rich began to trust me also. By the time the 2000 election rolled around, Rich and I had become good friends. Al Gore’s choice of at least one Iowa farmer to befriend was strange considering my history with PTSD. He chose to visit my cousin Keith’s farm near Colo. Gore filmed a campaign ad there, and he and his wife invited Keith and his wife Sue to
Washington, D.C. I kept my distance, but one of the first questions that I would have thought security would have asked was, “Is there mental illness in the family?” Rich never asked me about my intentions when the candidates came to visit. I did not feel that security precautions were being taken to make sure that my whereabouts were known. I liked Senator Bill Bradley, and I went to see him at the Memorial Union, while George Bush was also there speaking in another room.

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Women kept their distance from me. As the illness continued to circle in my mind, I figured out some secrets by watching the women in the North Grand Mall. They seemed to like me, but not one of them would go out with me. I concluded that someone was controlling them. Each night I slept alone. The tension seemed to mount with each passing day. I felt the strain, and my awareness intensified. Women looked into my glaring eyes; I thought that an enemy had captured them all. If I were ever going to get laid again, I would have to save the country and rescue the women. George Bush took control of the presidency, and Rich watched me.

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A Force that seemed to know everything in advance played with my mind. I saw visions that came true. I didn’t have any control over what the visions were about or when I would have one. This gift of prophecy came gradually to me beginning with the ability to see everyday events in advance. At first, the visions left my brain tingling, but eventually the sensation became so common that I thought the feeling was natural, and I couldn’t understand why everyone couldn’t see the future. I was becoming more aware of the visions, which were becoming more attuned to world events. Rich knew about my ability to predict
the future accurately. Some of these predictions had become legendary with the Sears’
employees, and at least some of them thought I was a prophet.

“That ball stops six feet short of the hole,” I said as I finished my swing. The ball
soared up and over the Skunk River at the Story City Golf Course, arched down straight on
line to the hole, bounced in front of the green, rolled on toward the flag, and stopped six feet
short of a hole in one. People stopped playing golf with me, because the visions were
freaking them out.

Then one day, down at the Brookside Park baseball diamond, the local team was
taking its turn at bat. I stood outside the fence slightly to the third base side of home plate
when the batter hit a foul ball straight back that rolled across the parking lot and stopped near
the opposing team’s school bus. One of the Ames’ coaches trudged out to retrieve the ball
and passed by me as I leaned on the fence. “I would have gone after it,” I told the coach, “but
the next pitch is a homerun to centerfield, and I don’t want to miss seeing it. The ball is still
going up when it clears the fence.”

The coach stopped by me and turned his attention to the pitcher on the mound and the
batter in the box. He skeptically waited to see the next pitch. The pitcher took his wind up
and challenged the hitter with his hardest pitch that he could muster from the strength of his
right arm. The batter with determination and strength of his own met the ball perfectly. The
sound of the crack on the aluminum bat told me that he had gotten it all. The ball sailed on a
low line drive, gradually climbing so that when it cleared the centerfield fence, it had yet to
attain the highest point on its arc. The ball landed well beyond the fence in the lower braches
of an oak tree. It was a tremendous homerun, and I imagined someone would surely measure
the distance it had been hit. I turned to look at the astonished coach.
“Oh I’ve got fast forward,” I replied but suddenly realized that the coach didn’t understand that telepathic powers allowed me to see such a thing. So I explained to him, “I know a bit about baseball, the pitcher was telegraphing his pitches.” Fans at baseball games began to stare at me when I stopped to watch. Women stuck their tongues out at me in grocery stores. My legend grew in the city. Rich’s visits to the store became more regular, especially after I used my gift to stop a bank robber.

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In the spring of 2001, I was standing in front of the Sears Shop taking another unauthorized smoke break and drinking coffee. I had the keys to the next car I was supposed to be working on, and if I hadn’t stopped to take in the sunshine, I would have been test-driving it at that very moment.

A rather large Hispanic man running at full speed came down the sidewalk with a good looking, uniformed, policewoman in hot pursuit. He and his buddies had just robbed the Wells Fargo Bank and decided in the heat of the moment to split up afterwards, when unexpected company dropped by. They should have known that there was a substantial penalty for early withdrawal. As the Hispanic man jumped the three steps at the end of the sidewalk to run in front of the Sears Auto Shop, the policewoman yelled ahead to me, “Stop him.” I nodded to her, but I kept leaning up against the building. So the Hispanic man, still sixty feet away, decided to keep running straight by. The policewoman must have thought that I was going to let the suspect go. I raised my right foot up against the wall so my knee was in a more comfortable position, slurped at my coffee, and then took a drag off of my cigarette. I set the cup on the window ledge next to where I was standing, without looking or spilling. I formed a finger gun and placed the end of my finger in front of my mouth, blowing
the smoke from the cigarette over the front of the finger barrel. Then, I pointed at the policewoman running behind the Hispanic man. It was pure deception; she hadn’t gotten her gun out yet. The foot on the wall was now my starting block; I sprang out towards the spot where we would collide. I’m not very fast so it was a good idea. My timing was perfect, the suspect now had no choice but to stop or run over me. I was heading straight for his thundering knees. He was going to break my collarbone for sure because I had my mind made up to ram my head and shoulders into him like a football player trying to make a game-winning tackle with the clock running down. I hadn’t seen the officer’s gun coming out, but if the fleeing man got on by, the policewomen would have had no choice but to take the wide-open shot. The smoking finger and my determination to make the tackle caused the robber to pull up. There was more of an impact to squeezing Charmin. We ended our collision course by just leaning against each other, my right shoulder to his right, so that we were stuck together like a magnet to steel. The Hispanic man couldn’t move; a powerful force had fastened him tight, and he couldn’t have gotten away if he had wanted to.

“Wish it would warm up,” I said.

“Yeah, me too,” the Hispanic man said.

Just then the policewoman arrived, gun in hand. “You’re under arrest,” the policewoman informed the Hispanic man, while I wondered how she knew he could speak English.

“Put that thing away,” I said as I looked back at her gun, which was pretty close to being pointed at me too, “before somebody gets hurt; he’s not going anywhere.”

The policewoman decided that was a good idea, put the gun away in her holster, and got the handcuffs out. The Hispanic man voluntarily put his hands behind his back as we
continued our conversation. I read his mind and accurately described to him where he lived. He had the same mental image in his mind as a picture of Guadalajara I had seen on a Mexican restaurant wall in Ames. As it turned out, the robber had been married on the bridge that was painted in the picture, and lived only two blocks away from it. I continued to search his mind under the category of “places that we had both been,” and I was surprised to find Coronado, California.

“You’ve been to Coronado,” I said.

“Yeah,” the Mexican said. “You a SEAL?”

“No,” I said. “I’m one of the few, the proud, the totally stupid, the Navy Reserve.”

This information didn’t seem to impress either the Mexican or the policewoman.

As the Mexican was told to lie face down on the ground, it occurred to me that his rights had not been read, and after all, this was a citizen’s arrest. So I proceeded to do so.

“You have the right to DQ,” I informed him.

“Huh?” said the Mexican.

“You have the right to go down to Dairy Queen from the jail and spend an hour or two each day,” I said.

“What did you say?” the policewoman said.

I had to explain to the police officer that I had no idea what Miranda actually said, and was only telling him what I thought my rights would be if the situation were reversed. If I were being arrested instead of the Mexican, I would want my rights to include ice cream everyday. The officer finished her handcuffing, and the Mexican rose to his feet.

“Whoever makes it to the top first, the right way, the other has to give him a job. Is that agreed? I’m trying to take over Sears, but you have to keep me in mind if you make it
big first,” I said. “I’m not going to look at her hauling you away. It was nice to meet you.” I proceeded to walk out to test-drive my next car.

Several of the Sears employees were in shock. “What the hell was that?” they asked each other having seen the whole affair. “Dennis ain’t right,” the Sears management said. “Stay away from him. Pretend that never happened.” I got to be the talk of Sears, all the way to Chicago, but the talk was negative. Not one person said, “Thank you for stopping a bank robber in front of the store,” not even the police. There was nothing in the paper about the incident.

I received a letter of appreciation from representatives of the Psychic Channel in Guadalajara, Mexico for saving the life of the Mexican bank robber named Jose Antonio Lopez Medina. They also thanked me for rescuing a Mexican soldier serving with the United States Navy during the Viet Nam War. The letter informed me that the two men lived in the same area of Mexico, and that they knew each other. No charges had been filed against Jose, and the police had sent him back to Mexico along with two others captured in the robbery attempt.

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Sears sent three company representatives to survey the situation about ten days before 911. Although Bill was introduced to me as an assistant to one of the other representatives, he was older and spoke with more authority than the other two. Bill approached me to talk about the Auto shop for a while, but the conversation was interrupted by a vision given to me. I related the vision to Bill as it was being shown me.

“The twin towers are going to be hit by airplanes on the eleventh,” I said. “If the timing was just a bit different, and the towers leaned toward each other, it would look like a
deck of cards being shuffled as they go down. Have you ever been laid in a motel room?” I asked.

Bill looked confused.

“That’s the guy’s name that’s responsible, Bin Laden,” I said. “But he is just following Nazi orders. Have you ever heard of the guy before?” Bill nodded his head affirmatively.

I then read Bill’s mind. “You were a Nazi Youth weren’t you?”

“Yes,” Bill said as his face took on a different appearance. Only Alan, a tall lanky young man I worked with in the Sears Auto Shop, who was balancing a tire, overheard the conversation. Bill didn’t seem too concerned that I had figured out his Nazi past. His look wasn’t as much a “you’re crazy” look as a “how did you know” look. Alan appeared stunned, and was still balancing a tire on the machine. Bill reported back to the group of three. I watched them form a tight circle and talk to each other for a while. None of them spoke another word to me; they soon left the store, and I never saw them again.

The concept that an airplane could hit one of the towers at just the right spot and cause the building to collapse was beyond my comprehension. It just didn’t seem possible. So the odds against correctly predicting the attack on the World Trade Center were enormous. Rich looked through the picture window from his seat in the customer lounge, and I assumed that he knew about my vision of the attack, because he was so close and had witnessed the conversation. After seeing the vision, I went back to my normal everyday routine. Rich and I hadn’t discussed it at all, and President Bush seemed relaxed in news reports. The President had been spending quite a bit of time down in Texas before September 11, and he was obviously unaware of what was about to happen.
Battle plan

My two-room apartment wasn’t much. The bed in the small back room was nearly wall-to-wall. On Tuesday, September 11, I crawled out of bed without the alarm going off. I was on the late shift for work that day. The front room was nearly as small as the bedroom, with a recliner, a sofa, and a table, leaving only a path to walk through to the kitchen. I made some coffee and checked out the hanging plant in front of the house to make sure it had enough water. The purple flowers poured over the edge of the basket, cascading down toward the ground. Green houseplants hung above the furniture, hiding the yellow smoke-stained walls. I poured the coffee into the cup, lit a cigarette, and flicked on the TV.

The programming was being interrupted; the first picture of the smoking World Trade Center was being shown. I stared at the nineteen-inch screen in disbelief. “Haven’t I seen this before?” I thought. The predictions I had given at work ten days before were only a faint memory. The reality of the event quickly sank in. The idea that some aircraft accident had occurred never crossed my mind. Clearly, America was under attack, and then the second plane hit. I watched the towers burning on television, then the unbelievable collapse. How could one airplane bring down a building? How would that be possible? Then the other fell in an almost identical pattern, just as I had envisioned through my blurred memory. I got cleaned up and headed to work early to see what the others employees were saying. Besides, my apartment wasn’t the safest place to be in case of an enemy attack. There wasn’t even a basement.

Rich was in place in front of CNN monitoring the events. He filled me in on what was happening with worried lines across his dark face. The circumstances of the plane crashes in
Pennsylvania and the Pentagon were unclear. There was no indication of further attacks, but the possibility certainly seemed likely as the day progressed. The Arab world was being blamed. The employees looked at me as though I were somehow implicated, having known in advance. No one, including Alan, repeated my vision to me; there were just confused looks that showed no understanding of the telepathic world. The women wore emotionless faces. I was wondering what Bill was thinking.

The day passed with no further attacks. I took my breaks with Rich in the customer lounge area. Rich studied the events on the television, while I studied the women in the store. Women have a sixth sense, which I felt was more reliable in reporting what was going on than the CNN newscasters. The attack was being blamed on a group that I had never even heard of and their leader by the name of Bin Laden. I had told Rich that President Bush would leave a news conference in the Oval Office in tears, and in the days that followed he did. President Bush obviously needed help. If I was ever going to use my abilities to be of any help to the country, the time was now. “Where do you think this Bin Laden is hiding?” Rich asked.

“He’s just the fall guy,” I answered.

“Who is responsible then?” inquired Rich.

“This is a Nazi attack with the intent of taking over the whole planet. I thought you knew that,” I replied. “The Nazis are behind this. I’ve been on their trail ever since Viet Nam. Bin Laden is just taking the blame for the initial attacks. The Nazis experiments at Auschwitz successfully controlled the minds of women, and then they used the information to capture all of them. We must win them back.”

“What’s your plan?” asked Rich.
“Plan? I thought you had it,” I said. “Don’t tell me that I’ve got to go back and get a plan. It was kind of a rough trip to get to this point. I was just trying to head them off at the pass, but I didn’t bring a plan. I was just trying to alert the President any way that I could to the underground movement of the Nazis. Besides, any plan that I might have come up with years ago wouldn’t work now; it has to be a plan given today’s circumstances. It would have been a waste of time to have a plan.”


“You mean what would I do if I were me?” I said.

“Yeah,” said Rich.

“You mean the President wants to know what I would do if I were in his shoes?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Rich.

I now realized that Rich was a direct link to the President, and he was asking what I would do about the situation; I had to think about it a few seconds. “The Nazis are psychic, and this is a psychic war,” I said thinking out loud. “There is no front; the terrorists have their homes built amongst us. What’s needed is a way to attack them in their own homes individually. What’s needed is a new weapon. I’ve got it! Rich, you know how you can take something and use it for something other than what it was intended? When I was boy I had a lot of fun making toys out of broken sickle guides.” My memories recalled the old barnyard. “Tell President Bush that it would be better to make a weapon out of something that we already have. This new weapon would have to go into their houses so that they can all be attacked. It would have to have a transmitter. I got it! We have such a thing we can use, a television set. A television has never been used as a weapon in a war before; let’s use it
against the terrorists. Pick a channel, say CNN, and start sending messages to the Nazis. Show the Nazis that their plan has been uncovered. Have President Bush link the terrorist activity to Nazi Germany early and often. Let the news people have some fun with this. How about an airplane to represent the Nazi empire? Have the wheels made out of washing machine tubs, and have the nose bend one way or another. This will make fun of the Nazi war machine. Put the pictures of well-known people on the television screen as they become linked to the Nazis. There will be quite an impressive list.

“My plan would be to make fun of Bin Laden in Afghanistan. The public doesn’t know much about him or what he looks like. I wouldn’t use a real picture of him. How would the public know if a picture was really of Bin Laden or not? I would put a beard and turban on someone else; you can use one of my photos if you want, they are in the buffet.” I knew someone had been able to get into my apartment. Whoever was breaking in always left evidence that they had been there. “Misrepresenting Bin Laden by using someone else’s photograph will be demoralizing to the terrorists,” I said. “The American people will not understand these television messages, but the Nazis will. It will be the greatest war never fought. Rich, I’m going to tell you something that President Bush will find difficult to believe now, but he will find out later. There is nothing to fear behind the Nazi curtain. Their powerful and mighty image is a deception.”

My plan was accepted. The reports on the war on CNN may have looked peculiar to everyone else in America, but not to the Nazis who understood that their revolution had been figured out and that they were being attacked by the messages on their own television sets.

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Shortly after 911, I became aware that the genetics class that I was taking was promulgating a Nazi philosophy. The professor was teaching that genetic superiority would determine the survival of the fittest race on Earth. So one afternoon, I stood in front of the auditorium and began a speech as the professor entered the room from the rear of the auditorium. “The only way to pass this course is to walk out of it,” I ranted. “Genetic superiority was used to justify Nazi terror, and the world condemned those responsible. This philosophy does not belong at American universities.” The professor walked down the aisle, seated himself quietly in the front row, and listened to the whole ten to fifteen minute speech.

I stopped speaking to the class when I noticed one young woman yawning, and I took the opportunity to tell her to pay attention. “Nice tits,” I raved. “The Nazis would like to look at them, in a jar.” I concluded by showing the class that the cover page of the textbook stated, “This book cannot be re-exported from the country to which it is sold by McGraw-Hill. The International Edition is not available in North America” (Lewis, Ricki. *Human Genetics, Concepts and Applications. Fourth Edition*). I questioned the rationale of the prohibition saying, “True knowledge can be transported to any country on earth. What’s the big secret? Let’s take a look at the International Edition.” I suspected that the textbook had a more expanded viewpoint of genetic superiority outside the United States. Obviously, the different versions were not to be compared.

I walked up the auditorium aisle without incident. There was no applause, and no one followed me out. The professor stayed seated in the front row until the door shut behind me. I was out of school again, and I had been doing so well. Later I learned that the class was cancelled after my departure. Whatever, my impromptu genetics’ speech was the best speech that I ever gave.
I was asleep in the recliner when I awoke from my dream in a sweaty panic. It was already light, the clock read past 8:30. I reached for the phone and called Sears right away. “Hello, this is Dennis, I’m late. I’ve overslept; I’ll be to work as soon as I can.” “Dennis?” the voice on the other end of the phone said. “Yeah, this is Dennis, I’ve overslept.” “Go back to bed, Dennis. We’re about ready to close the store; it’s the evening, not the morning.” Laugh, laugh, click.

I took off my boots, put my only worn-out porno tape on the VCR, and sat back down in the chair. I lit my corncob pipe. The small apartment was the downstairs of what used to be a carriage house. Birds and squirrels had found a way to inhabit the space between my ceiling and the upstairs floor. They scratched and ran along the floor joists with each moan of the porno movie. Perhaps the little creatures could still smell the horses and buggies that once were housed where I lived. The walls seemed to be closing in. I stood up in a thick haze of smoke that filled the air. I hadn’t watered the houseplants regularly since 911, and the leaves were dry and shriveled. The water stains on the carpet underneath where they hung were hardly noticeable. Fallen tree leaves covered the kitchen floor. I opened the door and stuck my head out the storm door through where the top windowpane had been. I checked what I could see of the perimeter from there, but I didn’t notice anything unusual. The phone rang, and I decided to answer it.

My youngest sister had more information on the terrorist attack, which I took seriously. She worked for an East African Trading Company, where she had overheard some Arabs in the company speaking about another attack. The conversation she reported indicated
that there were supposed to have been two attacks, 911 and 912. My sister wasn’t exactly sure as to what she had heard; she seemed mixed up with such important information. “912 seemed turned around or something, maybe it was 921,” my sister said. She wanted to know what she should do.

“Report it to the FBI. They have their phone number plastered on the television screen for people with information, and get a different job,” I said.

The part of the conversation with my sister that really bothered me was 912, which indicated to me a planned second attack on America. I had to personally report what my sister had told me to the FBI, whether she did or not. I felt like I would be guilty of treason if I didn’t. I took off from work the next day, reported my sister’s story to Senator Harkins’s office on one of the top floors of the Federal Building, and phoned the FBI from the ground floor lobby.

912 and 921, September 12th and the 21st, had passed and nothing had happened. If the numbers were mixed up, the only plausible combination left was 129, that being December 9. If 129 was the planned second attack, I would have to tell Rich, which I did the next day. I informed Rich that I had relayed the information to the two offices in Des Moines, and that the time had come for action. 129 was only a month and a half away.

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“I’m going to need your help, O.K.?” I said.

“What do you need?” asked Rich.

“I need to go back on active duty. Is the power invested in you?” I asked.

“Yes,” Rich responded without hesitation.
“Make me an E-5 this time,” I said. “I can’t receive any pay, because I’m going to have to go in alone, and the time will come when I will need to tell the truth about who is paying me; I will honestly need to be able to say no one. This could get pretty dangerous, but I live through it.”

“O.K.,” said Rich. “What are you going to need?”

“I’m going to need a hat, and I don’t have time to get one. I wore a baseball type green hat in Nam. Get me a baseball hat, from Chicago, not the Cubs, the White Sox. I need to check the northern boundary.” I spoke to Rich as a vision filled me. “I find a Nazi bunker in Purgatory Park. Watch my car while I’m there. Don’t let them blow it up with me in it. I’ll need to be alive to drive the car to Duluth to find their headquarters. For some reason Superior Street doesn’t run into Lake Superior like you would think. I stop my journey at the park in front of the Lake to tell the Indians that I have arrived and then continue on to the end of Superior Street. I get a room at the Super Eight on the south side of town. It’s a two-story motel, and my room is all the way to the far end of the motel on the top floor, overlooking the city. Put a microphone in the television so if I have anything to tell the President I can report it from there. Put a picture of an old German on a billboard out front and put a blue pullover sleeveless sweater on him as a sign so that I will remember that I am not alone. The billboard is across the highway from the motel. You could put messages for me in writing if you needed to.

“I’m going to have to save the government if I am ever going to get my veterans benefits. Once this is over, I expect to get them, say two or three million; make it three; inflation. I deserve three million dollars for saving the country don’t you think? After all, the military gave me PTSD on purpose in Viet Nam.” Rich looked surprised. “Yeah, on
purpose. This injury was no accident, but I have to graduate college first before I can receive that much money,” I said. “If you give me three million before I finish, I won’t go to college, and I have to learn how to write a book about the War on Terrorism, so the Nazi cycle won’t repeat itself in the future,” I said. But I do need some help. Have the VA list me as a disabled veteran so that I qualify for the medical services at the Hospital, and have them send me about eight thousand dollars when I’m ready to go back to college. Otherwise, I won’t be able to financially swing it. I’ll need a better car and some money for tuition and books. Put me on a small percentage for disability for hearing loss in one ear. Later on, give me another eight thousand for the other ear. The VA has denied me all benefits, so you’ll have to change their minds.”

Rich nodded his agreement. I didn’t hesitate. I walked up the main aisle at Sears to find my boss Mark and explained to him that I had to be gone for a while but that I was not quitting.

I loaded my car with survival equipment: my propane stove, a tent, blankets, bags of clothes, pots and pans, and threw in the television set just in case I was near electricity. I took all the money I had out of the bank, about eight hundred dollars, which was all I had to show for my life’s work. The rent was soon due, but there was no need paying for something when I was not one hundred percent sure in my mind that I would return alive. I watered the plants and left a note for anyone entering the apartment to do the same. Early the next morning, I shopped for survival rations, mostly canned goods, corn and beans, some soup, spending over a hundred dollars on rations that should be able to keep me alive for the duration of the attack. The employees of Hy Vee watched in wonder, since I was a regular shopper at the store and had never bought anything in a can before. I had always shopped the outside aisles,
where the freshest foods could be found. The old Buick was loaded down, trunk and back seat full, looking a little bit like the Beverly Hillbillies as I pulled out of the drive in front of the apartment. I was on my way.
The Minnesota invasion

I took the first gravel road north out of the Ames, past the Gilbert school. What would normally be a four-hour interstate trip to the Twin Cities from central Iowa took most of the day. The Force wouldn’t allow me to take a map as it guided the 86 Buick Riviera north. I wasn’t exactly sure where I was all the time. Without planning it, I passed a lake in Minnesota where I had often camped and hunted morel mushrooms in the spring. I drove around the lake and stood in the very spot where years before the morel mushrooms mystically appeared. The park had an Indian name, Sakatah, and I took the time to talk with the Force facing the water. The spirit from the woods strengthened me, and I continued north towards the Twin Cities. It was getting late by the time I pulled into a suburb named Shakopee.

I obtained lodging at a Super Eight Motel, one with a nice pool and a sauna. I relaxed as best I could, and towards late evening went out to a nearby Pizza Hut for a warm meal. I sat in the rear of the restaurant in the smoking area and ordered a pizza. I watched the customers intently going in and out, while trying not to be noticed by any of them. I took off my old hat, which looked a little like something Indiana Jones would have thrown away. I always removed the hat when I ate, unless I was eating on a log or in the middle of some hard work. I noticed the other customers staring my way and hurriedly finished my meal, tipped a few bucks, paid the bill, and left. Even in the dark, I could see it lying on the ground beside the left front tire of the faithful Buick, the White Sox hat that I had requested from Rich. It wasn’t new but it would do. I threw my old brimmed hat in the trunk and put on my
new General’s hat. The baseball hat fit perfectly and looked good in the rear view mirror. I was unshaved but clean, fed, and ready.

I was guided to the Purgatory Park of my vision with Rich. It was in a city north of Shakopee named Minnetonka. The parking lot was nearly full of cars, yet there were no people scattered about to notice my arrival. I pulled into an empty space, shut the car off, got out, and locked the doors. Just then, men appeared, laughing, from the restroom, which was an old stone structure with a clock mounted in a tower on the end nearest the parking lot. The half dozen middle-aged men headed for their cars, which were parked near the restroom. One noticed me, and the group stopped laughing in unison. They pretended not to notice me, standing there beside my car in my black White Sox baseball hat. I lit a cigarette and pretended that I was just visiting the park and watched the group become larger as more men exited the restroom and joined the others. The group looked like they had seen a ghost; I could detect some fear of me in them. The clock read 11:00, the same time that I had checked out of the motel. The trip between the two towns had taken an hour, and the time was noon according to my wristwatch. It was the day in October when the clocks were turned back from day light savings time. Yet, it was very strange that a clock on a restroom would be turned back on time on a Sunday, I thought. I turned my watch back an hour and memorized the license plate numbers of the cars that the group was standing behind. The men finally got into their cars and drove out of the park past me, trying their best not to look at me. When they were gone, I walked to the restroom. I grasped the door handle, finding that the door was locked.

I knew it was risky leaving the old Buick unattended in front of the enemy bunker. I worried that the Nazis might blow my car up. I remembered that I had asked Rich to have
someone keep an eye on it while I was there. With that in mind, I walked towards a trail bridge that crossed over the creek. A woman was standing there gazing at the water. I stopped and looked over the railing with her. “There’s a dam there,” she said without looking at me. I looked upstream where she had fixed her eyes. The beavers had made a dam.

“I know,” I said and shifted my sight to the stone restroom up the path. “There’s a damn there,” I said without looking at her. She looked where I had my eyes fixed. The Nazis had made a damn bunker.

“I know,” she said.

I squared my general’s hat and walked back uphill to the parking lot, where the clock on the locked stone restroom showed perfect time. The car started without blowing up. I really wasn’t too concerned; after all, I was already in Purgatory. The Riviera steered north through Minnetonka.

The stop at the bunker in Purgatory Park had notified the Nazis that I had arrived in the state of Minnesota. Angry faces greeted me at rest stops and gas stations along the way; tough guys and young punks would lean on the old Buick while I was paying inside. I drove through St. Cloud not knowing exactly where I was going. From there, I followed the tree line east. I was looking for the terrorists’ headquarters. The Nazis all stood with their backs to their High Command making it easier to find than I had suspected. The tree line guided the Riviera to the Interstate, where the northern pinewoods opened and welcomed me in. I could smell the scent of Lake Superior before the vast waters came into view.

The Riviera glided through the late evening darkness into the heart of Duluth. The lanes of the Interstate leading into the city from the south converged into Superior Street like a bad dream. I had correctly seen in my vision that Superior Street did not extend to Lake
Superior and stop at the shore as one might suspect. Rather Superior Street ran parallel to the shoreline as a major north-south road in the city. In the heart of the city, the Force led me off the main road to a stop in a small park overlooking Lake Superior. I locked the car, which was still packed full for survival, and lit a cigarette. The water was peaceful and calm, and I was lured to a stone wall overlooking the great watery expanse. I contemplated my journey while I smoked. The moon lit the expanse of water in the October night, but one could hardly describe it as a harvest moon, rather more like a lamp shining through the haze of a fog.

A half dozen Native American youths arrived in their cars, boys and girls in their late teens or early twenties, and chatted away in the gazebo. I walked slowly toward their gathering and upon entering the gazebo spoke directly to the group.

“Tell your people that Dennis is here,” I said and turned away from the group after eyeing the young women, and headed back toward the old Buick. The Native Americans left too; the group eyed me suspiciously in the parking lot. They left in one car. I had told Rich that they would be there when I arrived, and they had been. Their tribe would want to know who it was that was in their midst that knew the Great Spirit. They were the only Native Americans that I would see in the Battle of Duluth.

The night was getting late, and I had no place to sleep. I had seen a motel on the south edge of the city where I had just come from, yet my journey was not over, and the Riviera turned into the north lane onto Superior Street. The Force had directed me to travel to the end of the road, and Superior Street, which is Interstate 35 through Duluth, proceeded north, out of the downtown area. Miles passed, four lanes turned into two, and then finally to a gravel road. The pine trees leaned into the road from both sides, their freshness seeping through the leaky windows and vents. The headlights peered ahead under outstretched branches. Yet the
road signs at the intersections still confirmed the narrow lane to be “Superior Street.” Ahead, the moon reflected off the surface of Lake Superior between the trunks of tall trees. It was the end of Superior Street, a place that even the Duluthians had probably never seen, and the road formed a circle with cabins all around. I stopped briefly to study the scene, but this was a dead end to Interstate 35. I had done what I had been instructed to do by the Force; go to the end of Superior Street, still, not knowing why. The Riviera headed back toward the city.
Bomb under a bridge

The Riviera returned to the south side of Duluth and pulled into the motel parking lot. The desk clerk checked me in and assigned me a smoking room upstairs, which was all the way to the end of the hall. It was the room where I had told Rich I would be staying. There was no pool, but there was a hot tub and sauna across the hall from the main desk. A comfortable lounge area with a television and breakfast bar was located in front of the desk. CNN was the channel of interest after 911, and although over a month had passed, the patrons sat as if they had slipped into a coma and quietly watched the insane messages the cable network was still presenting. Pictures of a lone soldier with a mortar tube hammering an empty Afghan desert, and of the airplane with a bent nose and washing tub wheels were being displayed.

Upstairs in my room, I turned on the TV to study CNN more closely. The President was using my plan to send psychic messages to the Nazis, and the television seemed to be working well as a weapon. The motel room went live on the screen, so that I could see my own movements on the television. The person on the television was dressed in Arab garb as he lay on the ground. When I made movements on the bed, the man in the Arab clothing moved identically. I looked for a camera lense in the thermostat on the wall from the viewing angle of the picture on CNN, but I couldn’t find anything.

The room had a bathtub with hot water and a great view north toward the heart of the city, though the lake was out of sight, obscured by the roads and other buildings. The man with the blue pullover posed on the billboard next to the highway, just as I had requested of Rich, so that I would remember that I was not alone. I slept when the billboard lights were
turned off. The stress of the situation made me sick at times, and I paced back and forth in the motel room on my knees, like a horse that if allowed to lie down would surely die.

An AWAC flew over the motel at low altitude heading north through the city before turning west and disappearing in the clouds beyond the ridge. These types of planes had been ordered for surveillance of the Mississippi River valley for the first time. Normal operations for the aircraft were costal in nature. I had seen them before, flying over the ocean near San Diego, guarding the shores. President Bush had ordered the patrols within the continental borders along the Mississippi Valley, looking for terrorists’ movement. The plane carried a saucer, piggyback style, which in fact housed delicate surveillance equipment. These types of planes were capable of gathering information over ground or water. I imagined that they could detect an ant problem in a given location if they were to focus on it.

Part of a week had passed when I was downstairs in the lobby watching CNN with the woman running the front desk. She had become very friendly and inquisitive about my lengthy stay. Each morning I would come to the front desk and pay for the room for another day with the last of all the money I had in the world. I stayed close to the motel and the nearby restaurant. The female clerk wanted to know what I was doing there.

“I’m on leave,” I said. “I’m helping in the fight in the War on Terrorism on America’s side, and I was sent here to rest. I’m E5 in the reserves, and I am back on active duty because of a specialty that I had in Viet Nam.” That seemed to satisfy the woman to some extent because with the exception of the being sent there to rest, it was true in my mind. She went back to the front desk to attend to arriving guests.

The woman’s husband had stopped in one night and sat in the lobby with the both of us. The woman clerk whispered in her husband’s ear that she wanted to fuck me, and he said,
“O.K. bring the money home,” but it never happened. The woman clerk and I never spoke of the money it would take. We just sat next to each other and undressed each other slowly in our minds; she would have an occasional orgasm.

She wasn’t exactly what you would call gorgeous, thirty-five years old or so, slender, dark hair, and small breasts, nothing to write home about, yet she still had the aura of a Harley girl that excited me. Her tongue was out of her mouth more than it was in. She even wore a leather jacket to work, and my epitaph on my tombstone was going to read, “You gotta love a girl in leather.” I could still smell her in the leather chair after she got up. She was turning me on for sure. As my predicament subsided, I stood, ventured over for a cup of coffee that had been brewing on the breakfast bar, and headed outside for a smoke. The air was cool and the morning refreshing as I held the door open for the new arrivals.

On my return inside the motel, I refilled my coffee and glanced at the pictures of Duluth on the lounge wall. I looked at one of a bridge that I had seen in brochures entitled “Aerial Lift Bridge.” It stood majestically in the middle of the Duluth Harbor that connected the Duluth Bay to Lake Superior by a canal. A large ship was pictured under the bridge. Vehicle traffic on a road from Wisconsin to Duluth crossed the bridge when the lift was down. Next to this picture was another that just focused on the top portion of the same bridge. This enlarged the design at the top of the bridge, and that made me flash back to having seen the upper metal works that were sculpted on either end as a youngster. The artwork displayed missiles, Roman candles actually, which were difficult to identify in the first picture with the ship underneath. It all came back to me that I had been here before. I remembered it all now, how Mac had told my father and me about the nuclear bomb that had
been placed under the bridge by the Nazis, and how it was set to go off in fifty years. The seconds must have been ticking down to nothing.

I set the coffee cup down and rushed almost breathless up the stairs to the second floor; my heart was pounding as I briskly walked through the deserted hallway to my room, where I immediately locked myself in with both the doorknob and the bolt lock. I sat down on the floor and excitedly reported the findings of my flashback, which connected every dot in my brain, to the front of the television. I finally understood why I was in Duluth; everything made sense to me. PTSD was taking me further back in my mind than Viet Nam. I remembered Mac, Dale, Rusty, and my father’s words about the Nazis. I thought that I was walking right down the middle of the two opposing sides in the War on Terrorism.

Not long after my reported flashback, CNN displayed a football team driving downfield to the one-yard line at the end of a game. The clock wound down and stopped when a quarterback spiked the ball with one tick of the clock left to play. The next play was a touchdown pass. I could breathe easier. I believed that the message indicated that President Bush had stopped the Nazi’s missile from being launched from under the bridge with just a tick left on the nuclear clock. America had scored the game winning play.

The Nazis would be furious at me. I stayed locked in the room for the next day, taking hot baths and crawling back and forth in front of the television. While I was on my knees moving across the room, I noticed the large picture hanging over the bed that was very popular in Minnesota. I remembered having seen the same abstract painting before with shades of pink, yellow, and blue blended uniquely together in a mall in Rochester where it had been on a wall between an all-you-can-eat buffet and a movie theater, and I had also seen the same picture in other motel rooms that I stayed in. I looked at the picture upside down
while my head was on the floor and saw an exact image of a nuclear bomb explosion complete with the mushroom cloud. I stood on the bed and tried to turn the picture over, but the frame was bolted to the wall.

I needed a reality check. If Duluth really had had its own nuclear bomb, then I figured the town must also have a lot of bomb shelters. I picked up the phone book and looked in the yellow pages for excavators. There were over fifty excavating companies listed in the yellow pages. Duluth must be mostly underground. I had found all the clues I needed to solve the War on Terrorism in the Duluth Super Eight Motel.

I stayed in the room and ate cold canned food. The television continued the updates on the war in Afghanistan. Taped reports of Bin Laden’s appearances were shown in the mountainous terrain. He seemed to be relaxed and comfortable in his surroundings.

The day was cloudy, making it difficult to ascertain what part of the day it was. I stood looking out the window facing the heart of the city. Another AWAC plane flew at low altitude, taking a close look at Duluth or notifying the citizens of northern Minnesota that they were present. The plane circled to the north and headed back south along the higher ridge west of the city.

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Then it happened, a sight that startled me. I held my breath as the formation started in midair and produced branches downward toward the ground. I soon recognized the shape of the image as a tall evergreen tree. It was mystical in appearance, shimmering, brilliant green, and formed from light. A magical sound accompanied its formation, which made my spine tingle. The image formed near the lakefront, where I had first stopped in the city and said hello to the Native Americans. Just as the lower branches were completed, forming the whole
tree, a circle of light appeared as though it had been hiding behind the moon. It shone higher in the sky over the city, but about the same distance away from me as the tree. The brilliant ring of white light captivated me. I loved this. It was alive, moving in front of the hills toward me, and spinning like a basketball held on an index finger. “Show me your power,” I said. The circle of light made faces at me.

In the distance, where Superior Street ended at the lake, a pillar rose, which was formed out of white light like welders produce. The height was immense, towering over the evergreen, reaching towards the clouds. The pillar of ascending light split and formed a semicircle on each side, which connected at the top to form a complete circle and then rose further in a pillar again. The radiance intensified, spreading outward from the circular section of the pillar. A beam of light formed a straight line from the base of the pillar, passed the evergreen, and extended to the ground below my motel room window.

The AWAC airplane made a ninety-degree turn and headed on a course that would cross the beam of light from the pillar and would take the plane between the motel and the shimmering emerald green tree. I could not be sure of the intent of the airplane. Another sharp turn in a few flying seconds and the plane could be on course to crash into the motel. I kept my eyes fixed on the scene. Surely the pilots could see the images of light but from an even better viewpoint.

“How’s it going, eh?” I said to the circle of light.

The circle in the sky laughed.

“How can you show me true north?” I inquired.

In a moment’s time another straight line was formed from the same point at the base of the giant pillar and extended towards the motel. This north-south line varied only slightly
from the position of the first line, and the two lines together formed a small angle. I wondered how big this angle was from true north.

“Two and one half degrees,” a voice said.

“Thanks,” I said. I wasn’t startled. The lines were identical in form to the lines in the sky I had seen in Viet Nam, which had indicated the path of the bomb’s trajectory. Without moving from the window I reported the plane’s position to the television. The circle of light in the sky formed the face of one of the Power Puff girls. “Smart Ass,” I blurted out. “You’d better turn this off; I’ve got an aircraft I better keep an eye on. I’ll come back to Duluth some day, and you can show the light to me again.” At that, all the light disappeared instantly as though a switch had been turned off, leaving me alone with the aircraft. I spoke loud enough so the television could pick up my voice while I kept my eye fixed on the plane. The plane was nearing the point that if it intended to crash into the motel, it would have to start its turn. The altitude was low enough. I reported that as soon as the plane began to turn towards the motel, that I would run out of the room, down the steps, out into the front of the motel, to lie in the drainage ditch on the other side of the parking lot in order to look up at the plane’s tail as it passed overhead to read its identification number. “You’ll find me out front in the ditch looking up, trying to read his license plate before he bends it,” I said. After it had passed the motel, the plane turned and headed north along the shore of Lake Superior past the spot where the emerald tree had risen. I wondered if they had photographed what they had seen. Surely they would carry a camera on an AWAC, I thought. I felt exhausted. I took a hot bath and headed to bed.

The next day I walked down to pay the room rent and grabbed a cup of coffee. I opened a fresh pack of cigarettes from a carton of Old Golds that I’d had one of the
employees at the front desk buy for me a couple of days earlier. I walked on the sidewalk in front of where the old white Buick was parked, lit the cigarette, and took a drink of the cup of coffee. The cigarette tasted funny. I took another drag, and felt a burning sensation down the center of my chest. I threw the cigarette over by the front right tire of my car and stepped on it. I realized right away that I had been poisoned. Blowing out as much air from my lungs as possible seemed to help. I walked on around the motel, breathing in as much fresh air as possible, but I was starting to feel strange. Once back at the car, I looked for the cigarette, so that I could tear it apart and inspect what was in there. It was gone. There was no mistake. There wasn’t any wind to blow it away, and I remembered the exact spot where I had thrown it. When I got back to my room, I took three cigarettes that were still in the package out and tore them apart. The insides looked like dried hay with seeds throughout. I took them out and placed them in the garbage dumpster along with what was left in the package. I put the rest of the carton in the trunk of the car and returned to my room. I was feeling weaker by the minute; my lungs burned, but there wasn’t a lot of pain. I decided to piss and throw up in the trashcan and then took a hot bath. The vomit and urine mixture would contain traces of the poison, which I thought could be used to determine what had been put in the cigarettes. The hot bath was a bad idea. It didn’t make me feel better like it usually did. It made the poison circulate faster through my body. Crawling for the bed seemed like the only logical thing to do. Maybe I would be able to ride it out.

I felt cold and getting colder. The TV screen became a heart monitor, and I could watch the spikes flash on the screen with each beat. I had total awareness of what was going on around me. I could hear the garbage truck back up and listened as the workers unloaded the dumpster. I could only hope that it was the right people picking up the poison cigarettes.
The burning in my lungs was bearable, but the rhythm of my heart told me that I was in trouble. My heart slowed down, the spikes on the television screen were lower. My heart stopped, forming a straight line on the television screen, and there was no pain at all.

I saw a circular small white light approach outside the window. I was fully aware of my predicament. I realized that I hadn’t been able to say goodbye to anyone but Rich and my boss. I felt sad about that. There were things that I hadn’t been able to accomplish in life that I wished I had. The circle of light took on an extremely small diameter as it entered the room after my heart stopped. From in front of my face, it scanned all the systems in my brain. It moved up and down, monitoring the outside area of my right eye. I asked for one more chance, enough time to finish my education.

With that, I raised my right hand in a fist and explained to whoever was listening that in order for what I was trying to do to work the timing had to impeccapapabull. I had inserted the word papa in impeccable because my timing was slightly off. Even though my heart had stopped, I could still detect the impulse for heart contraction initiated in the sinoatrial node in the right atrium. I was aware that for my final attempt the timing would have to be perfect, because my arms would never have the strength to move again. With the word bull uttered, my fist came down as hard as I could manage, which wasn’t too hard, and struck my chest to the upper right side of my heart. I looked at the television monitor, and sure enough, small spikes were visible. They got higher and stronger, and I could again feel the beat in my chest.

It was then that I realized that paramedics were going about shocking people’s hearts all wrong. The important thing wasn’t the amount of the force of the impact to the chest, but rather the timing in which it was administered. Administering a shock at the wrong time
would be like jump-starting a car whose timing was retarded. It would barely turn over, and wouldn’t start smoothly, if at all.

By the afternoon, I had regained some of my strength, but my body temperature had dropped. It was obvious to me that the Nazis were trying to kill me, and they might try again. I laid all the blankets on the floor and pulled the mattress off the bed on top of them. I propped the middle of the mattress up with an empty pop cooler, which made a one-man tent between the wall and the dresser. I expected explosives to bust through the window at any moment and the mattress and dresser were my best chance of survival of such an attack.

Reports on CNN showed America going back to work, but I didn’t have the strength to leave. Besides, it was too dangerous to leave on the open highway if someone was trying to kill me. I placed a full water pitcher on top of the dresser to drink or throw, and I climbed into the tent, wrapped up in the blankets, and covered myself with the mattress. I rested my head inside the cooler to protect against shrapnel. This provided me with a sense of security, and it also preserved my body heat while I slept for over twenty-four hours. It was afternoon the next day, after I repeatedly ignored telephone calls from the front desk, that the police broke into the room and found me in the “cover position.” An ambulance was called and arrived within a few minutes. I found the strength to stand on my own and walk downstairs to get in it.
The ambulance backed into the hospital emergency entry, no flashing lights, and no roaring sirens. The rear doors of the vehicle swung open to a nonchalant voice, “What do we have here?”

“I’m just going for a ride,” I said. “I’m O.K.” The attendants wheeled the gurney into the Emergency Room. Nurses in emotionless white uniforms took my vitals. My heart seemed to beat all right, but my body temperature was only 95 degrees. The doctor stepped into the midst of the glaring lights. I looked up his nose. “I’ve been poisoned, yesterday around midmorning. My heart stopped for a while,” I said. “I’ve been cold.”

“What was the poison?” The doctor listened intently.

“It was in the cigarette, I felt the poison burn my lungs right away. I took only two drags and threw it down next to my car. I knew I was in trouble right away. I went back to the motel room.”

“Why didn’t you call an ambulance?”

“I never thought about it,” I said. “I breathed as much fresh air as I could, drank a lot of water, and took a hot bath. I didn’t feel so well. I got into bed. That’s when my heart stopped. My lungs burned and then the pain went away when I stopped breathing.”

“The ambulance driver reported that the motel room was all torn up,” said the doctor. “What about that?”

“I put the mattress on the floor and got under it to keep warm. I pissed and threw up in the waste paper can so that you could run a test to see what the poison was,” I said. “The police broke in. They may have messed the place up after I was gone.”
“Ever had near death experiences before?” The doctor scribbled something on a notepad.

“Yeah, a few,” I said. “I have PTSD, and I have felt like I was paralyzed a few times.” The doctor turned to the nurses, “Admit him. Have him sign this.” The doctor looked once more to me. “Can you walk?”

“I walked downstairs in the motel to get into the ambulance,” I said.

The doctor handed instructions to the nurse and left through the white curtain wall. I gave the nurses my insurance card for pre-approval, thinking my heart would be monitored and my body temperature would be raised. A nurse led me up to the second floor, down the corridor, and through a door that locked behind me as I entered. A large nurse’s station with glass windows all around guarded the area beside the door. A large nurse took my belt, watch, billfold, and keys, and handed me thin hospital pajamas. One of the nurses led me to my room, a room with a view of a brick wall out a window. It had two beds, a chair beside each, but no evidence that someone else occupied the room. When I was left alone to change into the pajamas, I smacked the window hard with the back of my fist, but it couldn’t be broken. A dull throb in my hand beat slowly. The room was cold, but there was a white blanket on the bed. I wrapped myself in the blanket, draping it over my head, giving me the appearance of a monk, and slowly walked the hall. I walked the length of the corridor, and grabbed onto door handles, but each was securely locked. I looked up at the camera monitoring my behavior and fingered it. I was in the psyche ward.

I requested to take a shower in order to warm up. That seemed to take the nurses by surprise. I waited in my room until a nurse entered to lead me to the shower. She opened the shower door; and I walked in and looked around to see four shower stalls. Besides the door
that I had just entered, there was a second exit door beyond the last shower stall on the other end of the room. The nurse handed me a towel and shut the door, which I had just entered. The two doors simultaneously clicked. I was locked in the showers alone. I frantically grabbed the doorknob, but the doorknob was solid in my hand. I turned, faced the other door, and walked slowly toward it. My heart was pounding. I reached down and touched the doorknob, then extended my fingers on around. My wrist twisted, my fingers slid around without turning anything. “Oh God, they got me good this time,” I said out loud. I prayed.

I stood between the two doors facing the showers. My back was to the wall. I fixed my eyes on the showerheads and waited for the inevitable. I expected the gas, perhaps green or yellowish fumes to pour out at any moment. Calm came upon me, as though I was standing on the shores of Pine Lake. My breathing slowed. I turned and rechecked the door that I had come in. Locked, the condition was hopeless. I wrestled my pajamas onto the shower floor. I looked down at myself; I was all shriveled like having swum in cold water. I walked into the shower, the first one, and glared at the showerhead. “So this is what Auschwitz felt like,” I whispered. “Give me death or give me liberty.” I turned on both faucets at the same time; only water came out. I soaped myself in leisure; I let the hot water warm my bones. When I shut the water off, an eerie quiet seeped in from all directions. I dried off good, put the pajamas back on, and waited. When the electric door locks clicked open, I left the shower as though nothing had happened. Nothing had.

I awoke to the closing of the door. My eyes fixed immediately on a male figure standing with his back to the room, still facing the door. His movements were slow. He turned around and walked slowly by the empty bed to mine, the one next to the unbreakable window. I had no way of telling what time of night it was, but through the window only pitch
black could be seen. The man pulled up a chair to the foot of the bed but did not identify himself. He sat for a while without speaking. Finally, he spoke. “Who are you? What are you doing here? Whom are you working for?”

“I’m on a mission, I’m alone,” I said. “Nobody is paying me.” I discerned that this was no place to lie about my mission. I answered all his questions truthfully, but my replies sounded ridiculous even to me. Still, the man seemed to already know at least parts of my story. He was cold, calculating, and emotionless. There was no way I could tell if the man believed anything I was telling him. He acted like he didn’t care one way or the other. I figured that whomever this man was reporting to would know that at least some of my story was true. He rose, put the chair back, and left the room without further interrogation or any abuse.

In the middle of the next night, I was again awakened to the door closing. This time it was a doctor in a white smock that approached me. He was thinner, shorter, and summoned me to come with him. “You have been scheduled for an examination in a room down the hall,” he told me. I followed him. We entered a room. A stunningly beautiful nurse stood next to the examination table. The doctor instructed me to sit on the foot end.

“Stick your tongue out,” Doc said.

I complied with the order, and let him stick his pop sickle stick down my throat. The Doctor seemed satisfied with whatever he was looking for. He started hitting me in the knee with his little hammer that he had drawn out of a black bag. The longer he examined me, the more evident it became to me that this was no doctor. He was hitting me on the side of the arm with his hammer. So I confronted him about it. “You related to Grocho Marx?” I asked.
“You sure act like him.” The doctor swung the hammer and missed the side of my leg entirely.

“He was my grandfather,” Doc answered in a startled tone.

“Grocho was always one of my favorites,” I said, staring calmly into his eyes.

“You’re no doctor! Get your scalpel out of your bag,” I demanded. “I’ll be pounding your pretty nurse’s ass, and we’ll both be having orgasms while we watch you take your last breath.” With that, I jumped off the table and chased the doctor in circles around the examination table, no more than a couple of times, maybe three, and then I went back to my room and went to sleep. I noticed the nurses respected me a lot more after that, and there were no more middle of the night examinations.

I met the others in the lounge area next to the nurse’s station. The cowboy was a sight. He was real big, real strong, and so beat up that he could hardly look at you. At first, Cowboy just sat silent and squinted out his anger. I came to find out that Cowboy had been hit in the face and on top of the head by beer bottles of most all of the major brands. Once he confronted a whole posse over a misunderstanding he was having with someone who was not breathing. I warmed up to Cowboy, and found that inside the man was a heart of gold. Cowboy had forgotten more than he could remember, but he still knew about horses. He offered to teach me how to ride a horse when he got paroled.

The nurse I had seen in the examination room asked Cowboy if he was ready for sex again, and he said he was, he’d be down there in a little while. She nodded and went inside the nurse’s station.

“Want to hear a story?” said Cowboy.

“Sure, I got plenty of time,” I said.
“The nurses are in charge here, not the doctors,” said Cowboy. “In the Nazi world, the women are in charge. This is what really happened in Hitler’s bunker at the end of World War II,” said Cowboy. “Eva was calling all the shots, not Adolf.” Cowboy related his story while we worked on our craft projects. We were making birdhouses from a wooden kit and gluing small ceramic tiles of varying shapes and sizes to the side panels and the roof. Cowboy focused on his construction and spoke without looking at me.

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Eva made her way down the long flights of stairs in her high heels and low cut red dress, carrying a large black bag. To her surprise, she found the bunker door ajar and gently knocked. Again she knocked, and the door opened wider. Startled faces in the room greeted Eva. A familiar voice rose from the center of the room. “Eva! What are you doing here?” Silently Eva entered the Führerbunker and approached the group; her high heels announced her entry.

“Hello Adolf. How have you been?” Eva glanced back at the open door; her voice fell slightly. “Expecting somebody, the Russians, the Americans?”

“I thought I told you to stay at Berchtesgaden,” bellowed Adolf. Two men stood by the war table with Hitler and nodded politely. A motion picture recorder was pointed at the three, and the reel was turning slowly.

Eva turned her attention to the children on the sofa, smiled and hugged each one, gave the girls a kiss and squeezed the hands of the boys. Mr. and Mrs. Goebbels looked on with appreciation; they were very proud of their children. Eva tightly held the hand of Mrs. Goebbels.
At that, Adolf whispered instructions to the two men, and they abruptly walked to the door and disappeared up the stairs.

Eva approached Adolf, her high heels clicked across the room. “Where are Goering and Himmler?”

“I had them banished from the party for their disloyalty.” Adolf motioned to the Goebbels’ family to leave the bunker. Adolf and Eva stood alone near the war table.

Once they were alone, Eva said, “You stupid bastard, I told you not to attack Russia until I was wearing the Queen of England’s crown.” Adolf stood silent like a dog with its tail between its legs.

“I should have done as you instructed,” Adolf said, “but that bomb you had dropped off in the briefcase last July was uncalled for.” The room was silent for a time.

“You sold your soul to me and the German women in exchange for the secrets to gaining power, remember?” Eva said. “All you had to do was what we instructed, and the world would have been ours. We can collect your life anytime we want for your disobedience.” The room was again silent for a time.

“The information was worthless,” Adolf erupted. “We obtained the same secrets from out tests in Auschwitz.” Adolf leaned on the end of the war table.

Eva looked at the map of Europe, with its empty beer glasses scattered from the Atlantic to Moscow. “Say Adolf, do you realize that the Panther division that you ordered into Munich to defend against the Allies has been out of existence for two years? Look! Here’s England. This is what I told you to take at all costs.” Eva flicked a piece of crusty goop off of London with her long red fingernail. “Shit Adolf, it’s covered with dried cum, were you beating off on it?” Eva strolled to the Russian end of the table where Adolf stood.
Eva set the black bag on the war table, snapped open the side pocket, and pulled out a set of handcuffs. Adolf kept leaning against the end of the table as Eva slapped his wrists with the cuffs and fastened them to the table legs.

Eva had kept her distance from Hitler’s intimate friends. Few Germans even knew that she was part of Hitler’s life, and she was rarely seen in public with Adolf. She seemed reserved and indifferent to politics. Eva Braun was a loner. She was isolated, living alone in the Fuhrer’s Alpine retreat and later in Berlin. The relationship between Adolf and Eva was vague even to Hitler’s closest associates. Hitler never spoke of his sex life with Eva. With Adolf handcuffed to the table, the exact nature of their relationship became evident. Eva, not Adolf Hitler, was the mastermind behind the German war effort, that is until Adolf decided that he no longer needed Eva telling him what to do, and he foolishly attacked the Russians. Whether anyone knew it or not, Eva was the Queen of Germany and was seated on the throne.

The Nazi hierarchy was a pyramid, with each in their assigned position. The men assumed that Adolf was the top of the pyramid, with the Nazi whores on the bottom. Only one man, the Fuehrer, understood that this wasn’t so. The woman was on the top riding the beast like the book of Revelation stated.

With Adolf secured to the war table, Eva reached around his hips, unfastened the Fuehrer’s belt buckle, and unbuttoned his pants.

“Turn off the reel. Goelbels was filming a propaganda tape.” Adolf said.

Eva laughed in a low tone that rose to a cackle, a lot like the Wicked Witch in the Wizard of Oz. “I’ll get you, my pretty, and your little dog too,” Eva said. At that, Eva pulled down Adolf’s pants and exposed a lily-white ass. Nazis without any clothes lose their aura of
superiority. Eva pulled a whip, which was braided on the end, from the black bag. “Bad Adolf,” she said as the whip cracked. Time and time again, Adolf’s butt took a direct hit. Lily white turned fire engine red.

Finally, Eva dropped the whip, hopped up on the war table, and stood over Hitler on the Russian end. Eva pulled the red dress up in front, covered Adolf’s head, and pissed on his face. Puddles formed near Moscow. Eva swirled the red dress as she turned away from Adolf and affectionately said, “Kiss my ass.” Finally Eva got down off the table, “Was it good for you, Adolf?” she asked; she stretched out on the couch and went to sleep.

In the morning, Adolf wiggled his pants off over his boots, so as not to shit in them. Eva slept late and made herself some coffee when she did get up. She didn’t seem to notice Adolf in his combat boots. The room was quiet.

When Adolf was no longer locked to the table, had gotten clean, and fully dressed, he played on the war table with the tanks in North Africa. Miniature airplanes covered England. Both Eva and Adolf seemed oblivious to the sound of shells as they exploded in the city. Eva made some telephone calls and listened to reports.

“What’s your plan now?” Eva asked.

Adolf answered, “We can turn the tide of the war if we just take back some of the Berlin streets that are being occupied by the Russians. Our scientists are working on an atomic bomb. They say it should be operational any day now.”

Eva bent over laughing. “I’ve heard if they placed one of our atomic bombs under a cow it would cause udder destruction. Your scientist can’t blow the cereal out of a bowl. The war is over Adolf; you lost. The women won’t save your ass now. How do you want to die?”
“So what are we going to do, Eva?” A bomb exploded nearby, shaking dust throughout the bunker.

“When you’re about to be hit from both sides, you simply duck and let the attackers hit each other. We have to get out of the middle now,” replied Eva.

“How?” asked Adolf. “The back door to the Vatican will be closed. Argentina is out of the question.”

“Shave that ugly mustache. We’ll pretend that we have no courage and wear the purple triangle,” stated Eva.

“Jehovah’s Witnesses?” inquired Adolf.

“Yeah, I’ve got plenty of the current issue of the Watchtower, just say God’s Kingdom instead of Arian Nation. You’re a natural.”

“Marry me, Eva, I love you” Adolf pleaded. “What would I do without you?”

“What about your butt buddies?” Eva inquired?

“I had them shot a few sunrises ago, honest,” replied Adolf.

The two men who had been in the bunker with Adolf when Eva arrived were given high-ranking offices. Grand Admiral Karl Doenitz was appointed as president of the Reich and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Adolf named Martin Bormann as his deputy. Adolf took Eva as his bride early on the morning of April 29, 1945, as a crowning award for her loyalty to the end. A local magistrate married the happy couple. A good time was had by all. The marriage document survived. Eva started to sign her name "Eva Braun" but stopped, crossed out the B, and wrote "Eva Hitler, born Braun." Goebbels and Bormann signed as witnesses. The couple decided to honeymoon in the Alps.

“Our doubles are behind the chancellery ready for the fire. Give me your other set
of false teeth to throw in, who knows, maybe they’ll fall for it,” chuckled Eva. “Let the others decide their own fate. Our friends in Baghdad have a German-made Bunker ready. We’ll steal the secret for the atomic bomb once the Americans have it and blame the Russians. We can still win, Adolf.”

“How will we get there, Eva?”

“We’ll run faster than Jesse Owens. Now shave that mustache,” said Eva.

“You’re sure that’s how it happened,” I said.

“My nurse told me herself,” said Cowboy. “I’d better go see what she wanted.”

I looked out the window of the lounge area thinking about what the Cowboy had said. There on the other side of the street was Jefferson School; the same one Mac had driven by when I was young. Pigeons still sat on the upper ledges. There was a day care sign in the front yard. I couldn’t see any children.

Murder was a tall, muscular, dark-haired man, and he confessed to me that he had killed women while having sex with them, something about spooning their eyes out and fucking their brains. I told him that I thought he had crossed the line. Murder thought a long time about it without saying anything.

“What line?” Murder finally asked.

“Improper etiquette, of course,” I replied.

“Oh!” thought Murder out loud.

Red was an old prostitute with red hair. She stopped bitching once, so I sat down beside her in the hallway and asked her what was wrong. She had nowhere to go, so they kept her locked up in the mental ward. She had no friends; none of the other patients would
go near her. She had made some nasty threats to a judge, and he was still missing. She promised to send a Christmas card to me later that year, and she did.

There was also a homeless woman without a coat for the winter in Duluth. She liked me a lot. Alley sat beside me at mealtimes. Having food set on the table before her made her giggle. She was so thankful to be off the streets. The doctors were performing medical experiments on her. She had volunteered for some research so that she would have a place to live indoors with winter just around the corner. I offered to leave my coat for Alley at the motel if I ever got out.

Another fellow, Genius, informed me of the music history of the sixties. Genius seemed to know what he was talking about, and I thought that he was probably just a government agent. He told me all about the real Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz*. Genius knew that Judy Garland’s home was located nearby and showed me pictures of the Judy Garland Museum from a brochure that he had of the area. I told Genius that I knew how Dorothy had felt. I just wanted to go home, too.

Genius just smiled and said, “You should go see her house when you get out. The ruby red slippers are there.” I later read that someone stole the slippers, but it wasn’t me.

In a few days, our group of some of the strangest people ever assembled in one room had become good friends. Though the conversation was strange, and the laughter was insane, the group seemed pretty normal. The cowboy even gave me his ceramic tiled birdhouse. The staff looked pleased. The nurses helped me regain my body temperature.

There was a phone on the wall, but I never even tried to make a call. After a week, the FBI showed up, and I overheard them announce themselves while I sat in the hall with Red next to the nurse’s station. I could hear them talking about me; my last name was mentioned.
St. Luke’s doctors proposed to let me go only if I agreed to have someone drive me to the VA Hospital in Knoxville, Iowa, and admit myself for further psychiatric evaluation. Two days later, the nurses gave me my clothes and they told me to put them on. I could see my oldest son, Jeff, and his wife Brin through the glass windows talking with the nurses at the station and signing for my release. I said goodbye to my fellow patients, and I heard the buzz and click of the door being opened. The look of horror in Brin’s eyes told me she understood the seriousness of the situation that I had been in. Jeff and Brin led me out to their car in the ramp. I didn’t look back.

The old White Buick was fully loaded when we arrived back at the motel. The woman clerk came out and gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek. I had planned to leave my coat with the motel, so that Alley could pick it up when they released her from the mental ward, but I forgot. I felt real bad when I realized that I hadn’t kept my promise to her. The homeless winter in Duluth without a coat had to be difficult for Alley.

The weather in November following 911 was extremely mild. Brin drove my car, and I rode with Jeff. As we headed south on the interstate, waves of Canadian geese from as far as the eye could see flew north to meet us. They sensed a stretch of warm weather and were returning to northern Minnesota before migrating south. Each v-formation honked its greetings.

Off to the right of the interstate and at low altitude, a half dozen military jets appeared flying south in formation. They flew slightly ahead of our two-car procession and at the same speed as the interstate traffic. The nose of each aircraft tilted upwards at more than a 45-degree angle, giving the impression that the planes were hanging in the air. I had no idea that a jet airplane could maintain such a low speed and a near vertical position. I waved to the
pilots, who could see out the side of the airplanes they were flying, but couldn’t have possibly seen down the interstate out of the front window. I’m sure my son Jeff thought the jet escort was some common military maneuver in Minnesota and had nothing to do with his crazy father. We stopped for a hamburger and French fries. When we returned to the interstate highway, the planes reappeared and flew alongside until we crossed into Iowa. The military escort relieved me of the anxiety that I was having about driving safely back through the state.
Further behind enemy lines

When I got to Knoxville, I was taken to B ward and put behind another locked door. I was treated with less respect than I had gotten in Duluth. They acted like I was a criminal, but I hadn’t broken any laws or been arrested. I danced by the windows and painted pictures at the tables to pass the time. I paced the hall at night and tried my best to stay away from the other patients. I was denied access to my blood pressure medicine, and my readings skyrocketed. I was in the hospital voluntarily, which meant that a patient had the right to leave if he wanted to, but when I requested to leave, I was told no. Doctor Orea scheduled a court appearance for me at the courthouse so that it would be legal to force me to stay at the hospital and make it mandatory for me to take the VA prescribed medications.

The air was sweet to smell outside. The police placed me in the back seat of a police car behind a protective metal screen and locked the doors. I enjoyed every breath on the way to the town square. I was provided a lawyer, but there was no arrangement made to speak with him before my appearance at the courthouse. I was paraded in front of a judge who was to hear Dr. Orea’s petition to have me declared mentally incompetent. With a court decision that favored the Veteran’s Administration, my rights and freedoms could be legally terminated. The judge read the verdict on a prepared statement that had been typed before the hearing, ignoring anything that my lawyer, my brother, or I had to say in my defense. The court said that I was schizoeffective, bipolar, and danced in front of windows. That’s when I decided that I wasn’t wild, eccentric, or crazy. The VA was delusional, but I wasn’t. In America, both sides of an argument are heard in a court, and then a decision is made. This court hadn’t done that. I had thought the VA Hospitals were intended to help the veteran. I
was wrong. The doctors were judging my sanity on the basis of what they did not know. I reminded the Judge that dancing was a sign of good mental health, not bad. When I got back to lockup, I lost hope that I would ever get out. The head doctor, Doctor Orea, and the panel of experts wanted to visit with me. I sat at the head of the table. This was an unexpected chance to convince the committee that I did not need to be confined. I would have to tell them what they wanted to hear.

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“Do you hear voices?” Doctor Orea asks. The dozen eyes of those seated judiciously around the table peer intently at you. You meet the doctor’s eyes in mid flight; he looks startled at the shine illuminating your mind’s windows. You’ve been told that sometimes your pupils disappear, leaving your eyes white. Whatever, his mouth drops open. His tongue looks dry.

You’ve been locked up on B Ward for twenty-one days. You are seated in a comfortable chair, so that a committee can judge your every millimeter of movement. The room is hot and dry. There are two women among those seated around the table. You look at them, but they won’t look you in the eye. One seated across the table rubs her nose like a cocaine addict. They stare at your nerves of steel waiting for any hint of movement that can be recorded and translated into a diagnosis. There is nothing, they put their pens down in unison. The second hand on the wall clock slows down. The tick of the clock, which they cannot hear, rests, preparing itself for the next second.

You fix on the breath that the doctor begins to inhale, realizing that you are in the company of morons. Doesn’t Doctor Orea know that the human skull does not corral the brain’s thoughts? Those thoughts can be heard by anybody tuning in, depending on how
strong the wavelengths are and how receptive the brain is. Doesn’t Doctor Orea know that all women communicate on a voiceless channel? In unspoken communication, the blonde woman with the full figure bra at the far end of the table shifts herself in her chair and tells you not to say anything about the ability to talk with each other without words. “The doctor isn’t going to believe you, and you will end up in the room down the hall with the near vertical table, the one with straps. The injections and the little pills will flow hard through your canals and help you remember that it was snowing the day you were born,” the blonde woman said silently.

Doesn’t the good doctor know that there is a psychic hotline that can be used instantaneously with a speed comparable to light? Doesn’t he know that he is only using a fraction of the brain’s capacity? Accepting the existence of mental telepathy is the key to communication. The strength of your inner voice grows so that others can hear you and you can hear them. Doesn’t he know that? And he’s judging you? “Lock the doctor up,” a voice says.

You hear the voice from the Great Spirit. “Take charge. You are playing with mental midgets. Hypnotize them and have them cluck like chickens.” Your power exerts to full throttle. A takeover of the room is within your grasp. The voice instructs you how to turn their mental switches off. The instructions seem simple enough. “Take them back to the time before they were conceived.” You ponder using the voice’s advice. You figure that your chance of escape from B Ward is minimal even with their brains turned off. The door is still locked. Security may have instructions to shoot; if not, the police would. Better not try.

The auras of the four men are dark and refuse to touch each other. Doctor Orea’s is black like coal vapors from a mineshift, dangerous. They speak in delayed wolf tones,
guttural, grinding. There is a film covering the eyes of the doctor that prevents him from seeing reality, perhaps alcohol, perhaps barrels of it. The clock on the wall begins the utterance of the next tick. Around the table, their collective minds begin to focus on your answer, slowly, women first. The men in the room have no inner voice to hear. You would think in a mental hospital that the doctors would have more spiritual awareness than Charlie Manson, but I guess not. The full sound of the second tick rang through the air. No one else seemed to notice.

The two women seated at the table still won’t look at you. They stare into the side of the doctor’s head, watching his reaction. The doctor knows he owns them both. You picture having a threesome with the two ladies; they blush. Perhaps they would let you visit them, but you decide that it is a waste of time to ask. Dr. Orea reaches his full breath. He begins to expect your answer. The clock is silent; one second has passed.

Voices are heard from the hotline. You hear them say, “Tell the good Doctor to fuck himself.” There’s trouble in the Washington psychic network. The enemy is near. “Someone should tell Saddam that he ends up hiding in a hole under a house near his home town eating Spam,” the voice says. You hear the cries of abused women. The devil laughs in an undertone. The hungry voices speak from dry land. The sick voices speak softly from the deathbeds. You hear them thanking Allah and God for finally being able to escape from Hell. Those already on the voyage speak of the intense light in the tunnel as they travel toward it. No one wants to stop or turn back. Happy voices echo back like children’s laughter on a tube slide.
You hear your son’s voice, clear, wanting to know when you are coming home. You tell him soon. You are all right. You tell him to be careful while you are gone. There is no need to visit.

Visual images shared are the pure form of communication. You visualize your sperm coating the woman’s stomach, inside and out. The woman with the cocaine nose shifts her view from the side of the doctor’s head to your eyes. She begins an orgasm. Jesus talked about sex with women without intercourse.

“Jesus, was it good for you?” I made myself laugh.

“You stay in hell,” Jesus said.

The clock begins another tick. The doctor is letting out his breath; his expectation of your answer is rising to a climax. Your timing is everything. Your answer has to be exactly when expected by the good doctor, the pronunciation clear, the content well thought out, and the emotion convincing. He thinks you to be slow; the moment has not yet arrived, but soon. Better wait until the clock is silent between ticks.

The Great Spirit rushes in with energy and gives some to you. It sounds like people running on the roof. You prepare your reply in detail, rehearse the answer in your mind over and over, and look intently into the doctor’s eyes. Your timing is perfect.

The thoughts of the other men seated at the table are even slower than the doctor’s. You wait patiently for them to catch up. The crack of the bat is heard. It’s got homerun written all over it. The women are both getting equally wet. “The doctor is in,” the voice states. A full two seconds have elapsed. Time to answer the question.

“No,” you reply.
I never broke any Veteran’s Hospital rules. I never tried to escape. I’ve never been arrested for a crime, and I have an honorable discharge. I was locked up, treated like a criminal, denied needed prescription medicine, and taken before a court to be declared “court order” crazy. I detected a deliberate pattern to violate my human rights. A real problem existed in America if a veteran with an Honorable Discharge could be mistreated in a VA Hospital. I wasn’t the only patient being abused there either. I was finally released from a three-week lockup on B ward and put in with the general population of veterans being hospitalized. I told Doctor Orea again that I wanted to leave, and to my surprise, I was granted a release after another two weeks. My brother David came to get me and took me back to my sister Julie’s farm, where I stayed for a few days adjusting to my regained freedom and then headed back to Ames before Christmas of 2001.

I had spent most of my money in trying to save the country in Duluth, so I needed my job back. My boss, Mark, couldn’t think for himself, and he had forgotten about our conversation before I left. Mark fired me, which canceled my medical insurance and left me with huge hospital bills. He gave me my job back, but things were never the same.

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Rich was in his chair in the customer waiting area. I sat back down by him.

“That was a close one,” I said. “But I lived through it. I turned the carton of poisoned cigarettes into the Ames police department if you want to know what was in them.”

Rich watched CNN while I reported information of my adventures and watched the women employees at Sears walk by us with smiles on their faces. Still, they kept out of my bed.

“No. I don’t watch the game,” said Rich.

“This is Super Bowl Sunday coming up. Bet the farm that the Rams lose on a final kick to the Patriots. The Rams tie the game late in the fourth quarter only to lose when the ball is kicked exactly over the very middle of the crossbar by the New England kicker as the time on the clock is exactly zero.” I instructed Rich to wait until the fourth quarter in the game to place his bet in order to get the best odds. The Rams were behind two touchdowns with about ten minutes to play and had the ball intercepted, making my prediction look impossible. However, the Rams did tie the score with about a minute and a half to play, so that a game-winning field goal was needed by New England. The Patriots took the ball down the field far enough to try a game winning field goal. The ball went right down the center as the clock moved to zero.

The thought occurred to me that Rich was just hanging around thinking he had spotted a holy man; I wasn’t. Holy men don’t smoke and go out looking for sex, and I did both. I never asked Rich if he had, in fact, bet on the game. I hoped that he had.
Conclusion

Jim Berka and I stood side by side at Cousin Naomi’s funeral. He shook my hand strongly from his once paralyzed side. We were two family members that survived nerve injuries while stationed near the same provincial capital half way around the world. Our recoveries from nerve damage were miraculous. Looking at us together, no one would have guessed our personal struggles against injuries and illness. Neither of us even looked like we had been in a war.

PTSD is a debilitating mental illness. No one is strong enough to defeat it. The courageous men that I had met in the VA Hospital were weakened in their struggle against the stress disorder, which made me feeble too. I lost everything I had during my worst years. Still, I had to keep fighting the deep depression of the mental illness so that I would not also lose my life.

I was fired from Sears without warning in July of 2002. My Auto department manager, Mark, called me to the store manager’s office, while I was in the process of mounting four tires and doing a wheel-alignment on a car. I told my bosses that I was considering leaving the company in a couple of months, because I had been denied a chance to advance within the company. I was told, “Leave now.” After my employment termination, I made reference to their Nazi tactics. They wrote my Nazi accusations down as the reason for firing me, but that was after the fact. I encouraged Mark to keep drinking on the job. Some people deserve a slow, painful, alcohol-related death that first takes everything a person has. I had been a good employee for over twenty-five years. I left Sears alone, and I never even tried for unemployment benefits.
The symptoms of my illness have been especially noticeable during stressful situations. In order for me to maintain a level of stability in my life, I have avoided confrontational people and places where there would be obvious trouble. I do not consider myself a threat to society, but there are a lot of people that don’t believe that. I am well aware that I still have the disorder, but I have tried not to hurt anyone as a result. Instead, I have often used the high sensitivity associated with PTSD to the advantage of other people.

The summer of 2002 was hot in Ames. My clothes were soaked with sweat from hauling the empty beer, wine, and whiskey bottles from bar basements on Welch Avenue. I backed the Ames Area Redemption Center truck up to the loading dock of the Memorial Union and went inside. The bottles were always a mess at the MU, having been thrown randomly into boxes, sacks, or just piled on the floor. Some were partly filled, making the job tempting for an alcoholic in recovery. I stayed sober, but it would have been easy to unscrew the wine bottle caps and properly drain the bottles down my throat. With the last bottle in place in the back of the truck, I pulled ahead by Lake Laverne and got out for a smoke break. I tried to stay away from the students because even I had to admit that the smoke, sweat, stale wine, and beer on my old clothing emitted a strange aroma. I thought about going back to college as I stood before the Memorial Union looking out across Lake Laverne; maybe I could try another class.

I was awarded official entitlement to compensation for a war related loss of hearing. Initially I received about eight thousand dollars from the Veteran’s Administration. Then I received over one hundred dollars each month afterward, civil service ten-point Veteran
Preference, and medical care at the VA Hospital. Surviving PTSD required that no resentments be held, and I had gotten over the disappointment of being denied my VA benefits for PTSD. I no longer had bitter feelings about my confinement in Knoxville, and I appreciated what the VA was doing to help. The money was a pleasant and unexpected surprise. I bought a used car and enrolled in DMACC at Boone, with the intention of working my way back into Iowa State. I was back in school.

The issues of Viet Nam had been resolved in my mind. I no longer spent nights dreaming the same tortured nightmares. I had passed my guilty feelings about the cages to others, including the American Legion and my representative, John Brokens, the VA Court of Veteran’s Appeals and the judges that heard the case, and Senator Harkin. Even though I was able to obtain some closure on the cause of the problem back in Viet Nam, I still had the illness. Emotional damage, like nerve damage, can be permanent. In addition to the hypersensitivity, I still had the ability to flashback, but I was receiving pictures and images of other things than the war. I thought that this type of photographic memory could be used to my benefit at school, and perhaps the school would use my abilities to help others. I could still hear voices, but I considered communication with others in the psychic realm as natural.

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In 2005, I saw Dale Paulin on TV. He was in Kansas taking part in a *Wizard of Oz* munchkin reunion. He looked to be in good health. His determination to overcome obstacles in his life inspired me throughout mine. I confronted my learning disabilities, which could be attributed to the stress disorder. I worked hard at staying focused though my mind wandered constantly. I learned to speak with others despite my isolation, and I learned to read with dyslexia and an attention disorder. For many semesters, one class was all that I could handle.
at a time. With improvement in my abilities to learn, I was able to increase the number of classes I took. Dale would have been proud of me for my accomplishments.

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This is the Spring Semester of 2007, and I’m looking out over Lake Laverne from the stone wall on the balcony of the Memorial Union. I did come back, clean and sober. I am proud to have had some college success despite my disabilities. My acceptance in the college community with a mysterious illness has been wonderful. I graduated with distinction in 2005 from Speech Communications, was admitted into the English Graduate School, and taught English Composition to college students. Every once in a while I click my heels together to make sure I’m really home.