

# **POWMIA AMONG THE DRAGONFLIES**



**by Steven Leech**

# **Powmia Among the Dragonflies**

**by Steven Leech**

**Pinhead Press**

**Dedicated to the memory of all  
those who never made it back to  
the world, and to those who did  
but never found peace**

**©2011 by Steven Leech  
Pinhead Press  
P.O. Box 4593  
Newark, Delaware 19715**



## A SLOW BOAT TO CHINA

They all looked angrily at Freddy Powmia and the rest of the company as they trooped through the San Francisco airport in full battle gear. All the people looked angrily at them, people on their way to commute to work. It was the crack of dawn with green and yellow and all of the company in olive drab, hard hats and empty M-16's.

Eight months in the Army and Powmia was on his way to the wharf in that famous California sunshine, out to sail beneath that Golden Gate and across the wide Pacific toward a south sea country, a beach and moonlight in exotic Vietnam from a voyage beneath the stars from storming sea and Golden Gate. Powmia was full of the knowledge of tear gas, of cordite and gunfire. He had lived with the snakes and with the constant and quick deliverance of death, final and instant.

The General Pope was a trans oceanic ferryboat with galleys and cots, lots of them,

hanging by nothing more than poles in dark holds lit only by naked light bulbs. Powmia kept but one pair of socks for the whole trip.

The General Pope moved out slower than a train. There was no one waving on the pier, no balloons or streamers or signs proclaiming, "Go Yanks" along with a multitude of smiling, cheering faces. No, none of that.

But there was a gal at the apex of the Golden Gate as they went under it on the ship General Pope. A chill wind blew in from the mouth of the great west's bay. The gal waved a kerchief in big slow waves against the clouds gathering in late afternoon. The ship began to cast to and fro.

But outside the mouth of the great west's bay, in the ocean of peace, the ship began to cast up and down as well as to and fro and by night there was water everywhere and everyone was sick.

Powmia would remain sick for two weeks, until they sailed in the more placid

waters of the ocean of peace. But for three days the rail was too treacherous and everyone puked inward, on deck, in each other's sliding tray of food down in the dark galleys. They all shat into troughs of running seawater as if it was the Jordan flowing through puke and mire where Powmia hardly ever went.

Powmia decided to stay on deck after the storm subsided, his only pair of socks cooking mold in his boots. He decided to read *Catch-22*. All through his training Powmia remembered the advice given to him most often by the folks back home. The advice was to keep a good sense of humor. And Powmia heard that *Catch-22* was a funny book about war so he decided to read it while he had the time. He also watched the scenery.

After two weeks Powmia was half way through *Catch-22* and not too sick. The weather was warm enough to go out on deck at night. The storm clouds had peeled back and left clear skies. The first night out Powmia was surprised by something he had never seen

before in his life. It was the Milky Way stretched across the sky with millions of stars all over the place, each one of them sharp and defined like a speck of self illuminated glitter. Powmia remembered a science lesson from somewhere out of his past school days. He had been told about the Milky Way, that it had been up there but that there were few places on land where it could really be fully seen. At sea, now, Powmia could see the entire galaxy and he remembered from that lesson that the sun was somewhere near the fringe of it. He told himself that he was looking up and through a disk of stars billions of light years deep and each of those stars were hundreds of light years from each other. Standing with crooked neck at something as stupifyingly big as the Milky Way Galaxy gave Freddy Powmia a headache.

Suddenly Freddy saw what the ancients must have seen. Suddenly he saw what he could only call heaven. Powmia simply could not find any other name for it. True, he had

heard about the constellations and had seen their skeletons traced out with prominent stars in the pages of science books. But the more Powmia looked at the stars the more he could see them; bears and horses and huge beautiful men and women dancing subtle with the glimmer of billions of celestial jewels at the edge of that cosmic merry-go-round.

After one single night of the spectacle in the night sky, which no one else seemed to notice, Powmia suddenly had a strange notion of who his true companions were, in spite of the fact that there were a thousand other G.I.'s just like him on the General Pope. At night he had the stunning sky. At day he got a few chuckles from *Catch-22*.

The moon had just begun to blossom into its fullest. Powmia never realized the moon could be so bright or that moonlight could be so rich in luster. Standing one night, his socks growing stiff in his boots, alone on the midnight deck, Freddy watched it happen. Powmia watched the silhouette of the earth,

upon which he floated to and fro, pass slowly across the moon. It passed across the moon as Powmia passed across the ocean of peace. The water of the ocean constantly and tirelessly moved and subdued its dance of moonlight between the times of the two facing interplanetary crescents passage. Then Powmia went back below, removed his boots and his outer fatigues, climbed up to his rack a few feet from the ceiling, and being careful that his feet met the feet of the G.I. who slept at one end of him, went to sleep; the G.I. in the next cot snoring in his ear.

A few days later Powmia finished *Catch-22*. Powmia had got to know two other guys from his company. One was Kermit who always seemed to be very angry. The other was DiCarmello. Powmia gave the finished copy of *Catch-22* to DiCarmello because DiCarmello seemed to be a cheerful happy-go-lucky sort of fellow and Powmia thought he would get a kick out of it.

For the next few days the passage was dull. Powmia saw one ship, a freighter, rocking far away on the horizon. Otherwise, all that there was to look at, besides the sky, was the water everywhere in turgid motion. One morning Powmia ran into DiCarmello and he asked him how he liked the book he had given him.

"It was okay," DiCarmello replied. "It was kind of simple til about the middle. Then I couldn't understand it. All those financial transactions. I couldn't go on. So I threw it in the drink to try to attract some gulls."

DiCarmello smiled that toothsome smile of his and added that he had hoped that Powmia didn't mind. Later that day birds began to appear in the sky, gulls mostly. The very next morning Powmia got up before dawn to walk on deck and get a breath of fresh and warming air before his last chance to get breakfast. As he was walking toward the stern of the ship upon the deck that was getting

increasingly greasy, he was startled by the spectacle he saw.

Large billowy cumuliform clouds had built up on the horizon in the east. It towered maybe 60 degrees from the horizon, billowed white with streaks of grey and touches of blue. The sun was rising inside it, in the cave like openings made snug upon the horizon, a mountain waiting for the fire. And the fire, it came.

Powmia saw the brilliant and rich golden light vibrating with deep orange clouds touched with shimmering yellow. It was like a benign furnace of the ocean of peace built of clouds gathered from all waters. It was the very furnace of the earth itself.

Silk smooth rays of gold and orange light through the clouds' formation added incredible depth with streaking silvers on the verge of glowing light blues on crests here and there. Sometimes there would be a flash of light specks to make the suggestion of a dazzling. If Powmia had seen heaven during

clear nights, he had now been blessed with the gift of seeing heaven's throne.

Powmia stood on the stern and watched the spectacle play out into full-fledged day. By that time Powmia realized he had missed breakfast. But almost immediately realized that he had his breakfast after all. It had done more than fill him, it fulfilled him.

Then Powmia strolled to the bow of the ship and there he saw his next surprise. Far on the horizon he saw the land, low and green in grey mist. It was the Philippines.

The plan had been announced to them. They would be docking later that afternoon at Subic Bay for an overnight stay. The next day everyone would be allowed to touch land for the day. Near noon the ship began to enter the Luzon Straits. After almost 25 years, Powmia would see the grand battlefield of his father's war.

The water began to calm as land masses began to flank the ship far off. They saw a ferryboat in the distance. Powmia looked over

the side of the ship. There were hung masses floating in the water. Their colors were bright and varied. Then Powmia realized he was looking at giant jellyfish. They were all over like multicolored lily pads just below the surface of the water. Then suddenly something caught his eye. A small fish popped out of the water and zipped across the surface. A flying fish, Powmia said to himself amazed. Then he saw more zipping in and out of the water, here and there and sometimes in pairs.

Not too far off were the rolling landmasses of the Philippines. Sometimes Powmia could see a thin column of smoke rising out of the thick jungle, which completely covered everything. Soon the water became very calm and without motion. It had become smooth like green tinted glass. And the ship moved slowly almost with no sense of motion.

Powmia decided to sit on the edge of the deck, his elbows propped on the second rail with his legs dangling over the side. Hawaiian music could be heard clearly

somewhere on board. The calm lilting sound of the steel guitars suffused the environment with peace. Now, Powmia understood south sea music in the isles of the ocean of peace.

The flying fish multiplied along with the giant jellyfish until the smooth unmarred surface was rhythmic with activity; rhythmic to the unhurried sound of Hawaiian music. A profound feeling of peace came over Powmia. Out of the thousand grunts aboard the General Pope, could he hear any other single sound? Powmia was stupefied by the silence.

Powmia found himself remembering. He couldn't explain it but he found himself thinking about Weldin from basic training. Through all the shit the D.I.'s had thrown at them, the tear gas, double time and Green Berets, Weldin always smiled and had been able to find that glint which he would pick up in his metal rimmed glasses. Weldin was always laughing, not taking anything seriously.

Then Powmia remembered Glover, also from basic training. Glover was a strapping Afro-American who sweated profusely and with great honesty during times of heavy physical activity. Unlike Weldon, Glover took things with a genuine and sincere seriousness.

One Saturday back at Ft. Bragg while everyone was lazing around the barracks, a report came over someone's radio that preliminary peace talks had begun in Paris. Suddenly hearing the report, Glover let out a shout and started dancing around the barracks with joy, that he might yet hope to live out his tour of duty in the Army in peace. But Glover's hope would not be so. Both he and Weldon, as Powmia would later learn, would be also sent to Vietnam and neither would make it back. Glover died on Memorial Day in 1967. Weldon died when he was short with only a couple weeks left to serve.

Powmia found himself thinking about Freddy Smith, a friend from back home in high school. Freddy hadn't made it. Powmia had

read the report in the newspaper about six months before being drafted.

Why, thought Powmia, were the ones who always smiled like Freddy and Weldon the ones who didn't make it? It always seemed like war sought out the happiest of people. Or perhaps it was just easier to order someone with a pliant smile on their faces into the teeth of death. It was then that Powmia decided he would avoid smiling when he got to Vietnam. It might very well save his life.

Thinking about Freddy Smith, beautiful blond and wholesome Freddy, led Powmia to think about high school and the two years of junior college that followed. And the sad countenance that he decided to adopt led him to think about some of the girls he had left behind. He thought about Sally, from high school, Janet and Sandy from junior college and Angie from his neighborhood. He had had a crush on all of them at one time or another. Some of the crushes had been more intense than the others, particularly with regards to

Sally and Sandy. He remembered how broken hearted he was when he discovered he'd been chasing rainbows or was otherwise either rebuffed or rejected. But now Powmia felt relieved a little that it had turned out that he had not left a sweetheart back in the states. There would be no risks of getting "Dear John" letters wrecking a relationship that would span 12,000 miles.

But having no one to have and to hold suddenly made Powmia sad in the midst of all the awful calm and solemn peace of the Luzon Straits.

"Somewhere out there," Powmia said to the huge expanse of ocean beyond the straits, "somewhere back home, someone I haven't even met, someone who doesn't even know I exist will some day love me. I wonder whom, perhaps, I will one day marry. I wonder what she's doing, right at this very minute?"

It was surprising to Powmia, at that moment his eyes began to well up with

moisture as he gazed at the huge jellyfish floating by far beneath his feet.

A burst of flying fish popped out of the water near the point of Powmia's blank stare. He watched their short trajectory. There might have been five or six of them, all flying in precise formation. Then something told Powmia to look up in the sky. In that high blue cloudless sky he saw them. There had to be at least twenty-four of them. Powmia did not count. But they were coming home — home to Guam. They were unmistakably B-52's in precise formation. He could easily see the four streams of jet exhaust extending back from each's wings. And he could hear them too; Powmia and the rest of the G.I.'s aboard. They were getting close to Vietnam. The war had found them.

The next morning Powmia wobbled on the dry land upon which his father fought to liberate from Japanese imperialism. And while all the other G.I.'s ran to find a pliant woman or buy up junk souvenirs at the PX or find a good

stiff drink or all or any combination of the three, Powmia was satisfied to walk the stiffness out of his socks and to wonder at the age of the palm trees, the likes of which he had never seen before. When it had come time to leave, Powmia only took with him his first impression of the orient.

Another thing that impressed Powmia was the United States' Naval Armada at Subic Bay. The ships of war, which almost seemed to tower over the General Pope, stood grey with an almost spanking new luster. Some things don't change after all, thought Powmia remembering the old "Victory at Sea" series on television. Those ships looked just like the ships from World War II.

Three days after leaving the Philippines they spotted land again. This time the land was Vietnam. A lump formed in Powmia's throat. When they got close enough they saw that it looked a lot like the Philippines, hilly and dense with jungle. But the coast of Vietnam was shrouded more in an ominous grey mist;

shrouded by a mixture of mystery and apprehension brought on by deep canyon inlets and no sign of the war raging inland.

They would soon be at Da Nang, the first of three stops. The second stop would be Cam Ranh Bay and the last would be Vung Tau. Vung Tau was where Powmia and the rest of his company — D Company — would disembark for an ultimate destination that had only been told to them when the ship had been a day out to sea. The name of the place was Cu Chi.

Powmia and the remaining passengers never saw Vung Tau from the General Pope. All morning of the day of their arrival they had been ordered below decks in order to ready their gear for entry into the combat zone. Finally the company was mustered for debarkation and led in a formation through the increasingly empty labyrinth of the ship's insides until they came to the grey light in the opened hatch in the side of the ship. But they saw nothing but the wall of heavy rain around

the edges of the large concrete raft that had been tied to the side of the ship. An LCM was tied and waiting to the opposite side of the raft. The intensity of the monsoon downpour had rendered unseen the coastline of Vung Tau.

In ones by twos they leaped from the hatch opening onto the surface of the raft while the steady rhythm of the downpour soaked them to the bone almost instantly. The tall grey side of the ship behind them created an illusion of being in a large grey room with a high ceiling obscured by dense grey din.

Once the company was standing in formation on the raft, the raft rocking against the ship, the LCM rocking against the raft, the company was ordered into the LCM in an orderly fashion.

When everyone was in the LCM, Powmia thought of D-Day and he remembered the photos and newsreel pictures of G.I.'s standing under a surface created by their helmets that each had worn. They were waiting to wade ashore, each one wondering if

his life's end might soon. Powmia looked up at the driver of the LCM. It had been what his father had done during the war, during the invasion of the Philippines at Leyte Gulf. Now Powmia would have the same experience of entering a war via LCM.

After about five minutes out where absolutely nothing was visible including the ship that had sunk into the monsoon, the LCM got stuck on a sandbar. But after a few minutes of maneuvering the engines and rudder the driver got the LCM loose. It was during these maneuverings that the sun broke out. Because of the high sides of the LCM no one could see the shore, but the sun felt high and warm.

When the door of the LCM finally fell upon the surf Powmia could see a bunch of Vietnamese squatting at the edge of the road that ran along the beach. They squatted under a palm tree. The color of olive drab hued the sand in Powmia's eyes.

By the time the company piled into the deuce and a halfs, everyone was dry from the

monsoon soakings. The asphalt roads had no sidewalks. Brown children walked barefoot and adults walked around in black and colored silk. Powmia thought about his socks, drying and cloying.

The convoy rode along to the airstrip in the distance. Concertina wire had been installed regularly among spaced shade trees on one side of them, a rich smell of jungle on the other. It was Powmia's first sniff of the land.

Beyond the airstrip Powmia could see the Chinook hovering low. A deuce and a half was suspended 40 feet up on a long tether from the Chinook. The deuce and a half hung still enough to examine its underside.

When the company got to the far end of the airstrip they piled out of the deuce and a halves and into the cargo bay of a C-130. Powmia saw two F-104's zip by overhead. Strange, he thought, F-104's are interceptors. Maybe they belonged to the Aussies. F-104's

don't stand up when they're loaded down with heavy ordinance.

Stand up is what the company did in the cargo bay of the C-130 from the time it fired up its turboprops to the time it landed at Tonsonhut. Everyone got thrown one way during take off and the other way during landing. During the flight things were getting real hot and funky. Then finally the vents were opened and in came steamy frigid air. It felt real good, at first.

After they got off the plane they were piled into another convoy of deuce and a halves for the trip to Cu Chi. The intensity of the heat had doubled.

"Don't shoot just anybody in the fields if we get bushed. It might be just a farmer," the company was told. "It might be bad for relations."

Powmia had expected an escort of Hueys with the convoy, but there was none. Kids lined the way and watched the troops go by. There were no cheers, no confetti, no

waving hands hailing liberators. Half the kids held a hand out to the passing convoy, looking for candy or cigarettes. The other half flipped the convoy the bird.

After an hour and a half's ride the convoy turned a corner past what looked like a rubber plantation and went through an entrance in heavy concertina. It had been an exotic trip.

## **HO CHI MINH'S BIRTHDAY**

When the convoy dropped Freddy Powmia and the rest of Company D at their temporary area at Cu Chi they were met with three things. The first was a neat line high across the jungle side perimeter with bug eyed and leathering skinned corpses of Vietnamese victims. Some of them were freshly dead and some were old and bloating. Each had been given the sacrament of death in order to frighten away their compatriot brothers and sisters who might want to attack the American base at Cu Chi.

The second thing was a monsoon downpour that everyone used as an instant shower, stripping where they stood, breaking out the soap bars and scrubbing down under grey sky.

The third thing was a barrage of a single rumor. It was May and Ho Chi Minh's birthday was a week away and a combined NVA and Vietcong offensive would be occurring to mark

the event. It was precisely then that the fatigue disappeared and the fear set in.

The G.I.'s said the Vietnamese were superstitious. They would never cross a line of stale and displayed dead bodies. Then all the G.I.'s were handed an ace of spades to stick into their helmet bands. Some did and some didn't. Powmia stuck his in like a press card for a while but took it out. It had begun to look more and more like a bull's eye to him.

Not much happened for a couple of days. He learned not to jump at the sound of artillery. And he learned to discern the sound of outgoing and incoming shells his first night, subliminally, while asleep. He had awakened the next morning to find he had peed in his cot.

During daylight Powmia went around taking photos with the best camera from Japan he could find in the tax free, duty free PX. Many of the photos were of buddies from the slow boat. The PX developed the photos quickly. But the PX fucked up in their haste.

All of Powmia's snapshots were there along with many of some one else's:

**BLACK & WHITE SNAPSHOTS:**

Jenkins who was short. A sandbag wall against canvas side of a hooch. Kennedy in G.I. issued glasses operating a two-tiered switchboard, a pack of Pall Malls leaning against an inserted plug. A Huey flying low over hooch tops, over the canvas of war. Riga's back, a small fan spinning at his face blowing smells of canvas, fresh cut wood and jungle sweetness. An Angry -47 hiding between a hooch and a freight conex. Tall grass, pools of ground water, sparse trees. A high straight and long dirt road, graded dirt bank, ditch with still muddy water, rows of heavy oil and chemical drums on their sides in a wall.

All of the photos were ones that Powmia had taken. But the next one obviously belonged to someone else:

**BLACK & WHITE SNAPSHOT:** A lot of glare in narrowed eyes. Dockside. Some of the shops were still wood hulled with sailing

masts, their rigging without sales. The machinery on steam vessels looked 1910. A Vietnamese man squinting under the sun with high collar, slick hair and new suit. A canvas sea bag at his feet. The prow of the ship over his left shoulder stamped Latouche Tréville. Smells of tar and South China Sea. Hand printed in pencil on the back of the snapshot Powmia found the words, Van Ba ta dao.

BLACK & WHITE SNAPSHOT: Young woman looking relaxed into viewer's eyes, her face full of lingering sadness mixed with glee. She is Vietnamese and her black hair dips under her chin. She sits in a folding chair looking up. An empty Planter's Peanut tin is on a dingy table at her left, a passageway outdoors at her right. The tops of empty coke bottles in the corner under the passageway where white of sunlight washes out toward the back of her white blouse.

BLACK & WHITE SNAPSHOT: Milo DiCarmello grinning, looking down at the viewer who is taking the picture, and who is

also the young woman in the previous snapshot. DiCarmello's face has a foolish grin on it. Corrugated metal ceiling above him is supported by two by fours and poles. His moustache is sparse and just started. The brim of his baseball cap bowed acutely. A pale elbow stuck out under rolled up sleeves.

Obviously, a couple of DiCarmello's snapshots had got mixed in with his. Powmia would make sure DiCarmello got them.

BLACK & WHITE SNAPSHOT: A city street with signs of construction all around. Old time machinery, apparently steam driven, large exposed gears and heavy metal cable. Laborers are mostly oriental, their flat straw conic hats protecting them from the sun. A group of four of them are posing to have their picture taken against a pile of stacked Belgium blocks that are being used as paving stones. Two men in clean coveralls with cigars clenched in their walrus moustache covered mouths are standing upon the pile of blocks. They are native New Yorkers, probably of

English descent, and they look impatient.  
Obviously they are supervisors.

Powmia turned the snapshot over for a clue as to why new prints from obviously old negatives should be mixed in with his own snapshots. On the other side he found the word, Brooklyn. Brooklyn was DiCarmello's hometown.

BLACK & WHITE SNAPSHOT: A sandy plot of sparse grass bordered with buried helmets; every other one painted white. There was one simple sign in a scattered complex of large office hooches. Stenciled over an emblem of a blue arrowhead embossed with a bolt of yellow lightning were the words: "Special Services Officer." Stenciled below the list: "1. R&R, 2. 16MM Motion Picture, 3. Entertainment, 4. Community Center, 5. Athletics & Recreation." There was not a single person in the entire photo. It was a photo that Powmia had taken.

BLACK & WHITE SNAPSHOT: It was beginning to come clear to Powmia. The

oriental man in the snapshot was the same man in the two other snapshots. And the man had to be Vietnamese. Powmia could almost guess the man's identity because added to the slick and neatly combed black hair was the definite appearance of chin whiskers. He had seen those eyes before. It had to be none other than a young Ho Chi Minh. In the snapshot Ho was wearing a simple tunic, the kind of which he had seen pictures of Mao Zedong wearing. Ho was sitting with a clean-shaven European man who was wearing a crumpled touring cap and a rather worn jacket. Beside the young man sat another man with a beard that was just beginning to look bushy and accompanied by a moustache with slightly twirled ends and eyebrows that nearly seemed groomed. All three men sat comfortably in wicker chairs. A short space of lawn was behind them which ended at a tall and well manicured hedgerow.

Powmia flipped the snapshot over. On the back was neatly printed in pencil: Ai Quoc, B. Shaw, M. Collins.

BLACK & WHITE SNAPSHOT: Casper was his name. He was the first to kill in combat; an act of panic and self defense. He stood on the weight of his right leg wearing a white T-shirt and Aussie slouch hat. He smirked smartly. A corner of the last hooch in the row was on the right. Power lines ran across the packed sand. A generator under a small roof, a larger compressor unit and a flood lamp on a pole stood together in the distance past his left elbow. The dot of a wristwatch caught sunlight on his wrist. Looking west. Scattered cloud-ships pregnant with monsoon hanging low against empty sky.

BLACK & WHITE SNAPSHOT: It was a train wreck. A large steam locomotive sat on twisted rail, railroad ties askew underneath and in the foreground. The locomotive's tender was twisted and propped up against its cab. But something was wrong. Foliage and shrubs growing along the rail bed seemed dead, wilting. They seemed to be contrived like props. But what really seemed wrong was the

people in the snapshot. They did not seem traumatized even though their clothes were torn and smeared as though they had been in a wreck. They were calm and listening to a man toward the left in the photo. The man had wavy hair that was combed back. His suit, in contrast with everyone else's clothes, was neat, intact and well tailored.

Powmia spotted Ho. He was standing next to another man and they seemed to be a pair. The other man had hair that was closely cropped; his forehead seemed sloped forward slightly. A dark moustache was beginning to grow out, walrus like. Powmia turned the snapshot over. Again he was confronted with printing neatly done in pencil. The words were: La Roue, Guy N'Qua, Georges G.

BLACK & WHITE SNAPSHOT: Taken from the top of a sandbag covered freight conex used as a bunker, musty smelling inside. In the distance across sheet metal roof tops of the orderly room hooch and mess hall is a dirt road and a single line of telephone poles going

to a flat horizon. Clouds, like the undersides of a floating conspiratorial chorus are low in the sky. The snapshot was one of Powmia's own.

**BLACK & WHITE SNAPSHOT:** Straight up a cloud covered sky at dusk are the bottoms of seven Hueys in formation. They are hugging the cloud bottom and are at a 45 degree slant line of five with two flying tandem at the same angle some distance behind. All the rotor blades have been caught exactly synchronous by the camera's shutter. The snapshot was also one of Powmia's own.

**BLACK & WHITE SNAPSHOT:** A large room with expansive polished floor and the bases of tall thick columns between windows that run from the floor to, presumably, the ceiling which is not seen. The light coming through the window reminds Powmia of sunlight glare off snow. There are a group of well-dressed men, some wearing suits with ties and some are wearing tunics. All the men are standing. Powmia spots Ho immediately. He is wearing the same tunic as from a previous

snapshot. He is standing in the foreground with three other men. One of the men is wearing a military looking uniform. He is wearing pince-nez glasses, has a thick moustache and small bottom lip whiskers and goatee upon bulging jowls. He is holding a cap in his hand by his side. His hair is thick and tangled. He is speaking to Ho. Another man is standing close by listening and is wearing a coat and a tie. But the coat and tie are casual and loose on him. This second man is also wearing pince-nez glasses, but his hair is neatly groomed and his moustache is thinner and his goatee is smaller and more pointy. The third man is also wearing a tunic. He is thin and clean-shaven except for a broad and well-groomed thick moustache. His hair is combed back straight and high. He is smiling slightly at the remark being made by the first man. There is a strange glimmer of glee in his eye.

Powmia turned the snapshot over. The penciled printing was there. The words were:

Ly Thuy, L. Bronstein, J. Djugashvili. None of the words seemed familiar to Powmia.

**BLACK & WHITE SNAPSHOT:**

Looking directly from the photo at the viewer, he had that look that only the devil might have in a cosmic drama. His name was Kermit. His face was calm and determined. His eyeballs were filled with a well-settled rage that had long ago done its damage. A plastic canteen hung down from a nail into blazing sunlight behind the silhouette of his left ear.

Kermit had come home one day from high school in mid-west America in time to witness his mother die in drunken stupor on the living room floor. Kermit was the only son. Powmia could still not understand why Kermit had insisted in coming to Vietnam.

**BLACK & WHITE SNAPSHOT:** A woven bamboo screen behind standard wire mesh screen. A pattern of sunlight like rows of cracked dominoes lying flat runs across at an angle. A corner of webbing made of woven gimp on a chair frame peeks out from behind a

large cardboard box and takes a small space of sun pattern away from the multiple screening. An empty plastic ashtray sits on top of the box.

**BLACK & WHITE SNAPSHOT:** Ho is still in his tunic, like two previous snapshots. He is standing next to an occidental man who is just beginning to bald. Both are grinning wide for the picture. The locale is outdoors with barren surroundings of Asia and big sky. It looks dusty and there is the hint of a mountain range far in the distance.

Powmia turned the snapshot over to read the penciled printing on the other side he expected to be there. One set of words were the same as the last photo of Ho, Ly Thuy. Powmia presumed the other word he found there was the name of the man standing with Ho. It read: M. Borodin.

**BLACK & WHITE SNAPSHOT:** Looking down the front of a row of hooches on the right side of the photo. Telephone poles spaced at every fourth hooch with four lines stacked up at the poles' tops. On the left side is

half of the white outdoor movie screen, a single hooch behind it. Low grey cloud bottoms are in the big sky. At the end of the row, at the edge of the hill about 50 yards from the first perimeter fence, is the plywood barricade for the piss tube. In the distance, a mile or so away, is the next hill covered with jungle. There is not a single person in the photo.

**BLACK & WHITE SNAPSHOT:** The back of the same row of hooches as the previous snapshot. All the canvas flaps of the hooches are propped up over waist high sandbag walls. An oil drum stenciled "fire only" sits in the foreground among puddles left by monsoons. Halfway into the distance at the right is a large sandbag bunker, a high sandbag wall stands a few feet in front of its entrance. Again, there is not a single person in the photo.

**BLACK & WHITE SNAPSHOT:** This time Ho is alone, like the first photo in the series. However, unlike that first snapshot, Ho's head is shaved and he is wearing the robes of a Buddhist. He is smiling serenely at

the viewer. There are carved stone and masonry walls behind him. Some shrubs in a cement planter are to the right of his sandaled bare feet. The sunlight seems soft as from a veiled sky. There is a scent of lotus and jasmine.

Powmia turned the snapshot over. On the back, printed in pencil, were the words: Phât - Giáo.

TWO BLACK & WHITE SNAPSHOTS: These two were designed to be laid side by side to show a panoramic view, from left to right, of the detached mess hall pantry, the mess hall and the BOQ, which was completely enclosed by high wood paneling and air conditioned by units requisitioned from avionics and commo.

Powmia would suffer a bad case of dysentery while on KP duty washing pots and pans in that open space between the pantry and the mess hall while monsoon downpour thunders all around him. There was not a single person in the snapshot.

Powmia could not figure how those strange photos of Ho Chi Minh got into and among his own photos. Was it a trick to frighten him? Did some VC tunnel up to the PX in the dead of night and plant them there? Was it all a part of Ho's birthday present?

\* \* \*

It was time to take on two of the pleasures available to the everyday of war. These pleasures had not been indicated by any of the old and yellowed photos of the war he had found back at home, or among the old ribbons and metal insignia. These pleasures were now the secrets. They were the secrets of war. Their smells, which Powmia smelled in the Vietnam air, had to lead somewhere. Powmia had filled himself already with the smells of all the other scenes blowing in the wind of the South China Sea, from Iwo Jima, Guadalcanal, Luzon, Leyte; all the way from America.

Freddy Powmia took one smoke of con sah and stayed scared straight for about a

month afterwards. He hadn't needed con sah to see through the eyes of time past. The palms were still waving in breezes above olive drab and khaki carrying smells of motor oil and cordite of foreign army. The familiar names and shapes in the land called Vietnam were still co-existent with strange names and oriental colors and arabesque smells and chatter. All of it came through for Powmia in the little town just outside the perimeter.

Powmia did not know if the town was Cu Chi. or not. The town seemed newly constructed and temporary. Just one street made up the town and Powmia could see both ends of it from any point. There were no sidewalks, no pavement, just the dusty packed clay of high ground.

Powmia walked down the center of the street before testing the opened and curtained building fronts. He thought of home, the fresh green of summer leaves in the trees, the fire hall and its poolroom downstairs, the drugstore soda fountain with its spinnable

stools and chrome seltzer handles and whirring of the milkshake mixer. He thought of the radio programs of early evening; first the Lone Ranger, then the Jack Benny Show followed by an evening of Glen Miller and Benny Goodman. Somewhere in LIFE magazine people back home would see his picture. He'd be near the end of an airstrip, an army truck as a backdrop, a South China Sea tan exotic in his face. An ad for Campbells Soup in color contrasted to the black and white war photos would be on the opposite facing page: "Campbell's Soups are Condensed to give you Double value." A woman with high fur collar and felt hat listens to an elderly storekeeper with white hair, white shirt, white apron, white lab coat and green tie who is pointing out a can of Campbell's Vegetable Soup with a yellow pencil. Rows of Campbell's Soup are behind them.

Here and there old Vietnamese women were trying to sell pieces of colored silk to the G.I.'s. There were a couple of open bars and

some with their fronts partially boarded to make their entrances smaller and more exclusive. Some of the larger buildings had large entrances where colored silk drapes hung from the ceilings. Smells of sweet incense enticingly emanated from their mysterious interiors. Young Vietnamese women wearing jeans and tight skirts accosted. G. I. 's wearing fatigues and pale washed out civies.

Powmia decided he wanted to check out a bar and he walked to the one that was closest to him. A young girl in jeans at the door wearing heavy make-up tried to get his attention.

"Hey, G.I. You want short time? One hundred pee," she said quickly. But Powmia walked past her through the entrance.

The place was empty. A partition wall dividing the interior of the building was made of cheap wood paneling. The wall had a dark opening cut into it with a knotted orange curtain hanging from the top ridge. Identical posters were nailed to the wall of either side of

it. They depicted a young oriental woman in flowered print robes sitting reclined under a garden display of blossoms. She was smiling and wistfully looking over her left shoulder.

There were metal frame canvas bucket chairs here and there. They were scattered around flimsy plastic top coffee tables. Each table had a stainless steel ashtray on its surface. A post in the center of the room had been wrapped with the same shiny corrugated stainless steel from which the four walls of the whole of the building had been made. A glass case with thin wood framing stood in the foreground. A few partially empty bottles of black market whiskey stood inside of it.

Powmia was about to leave when a woman entered. She was wearing a silk flowered kimono. Powmia had a feeling she was wearing nothing underneath it. A wave of incense rolled into the room with her. Powmia sat down. The woman came over to him smiling.

"G.I. would like whickie," she said, "ba mi bah, or maybe a coke."

"Thanks," Powmia said almost smiling back at her hesitating for a moment. "I'll take a coke."

The woman returned to the other room, the knotted orange curtain swinging into the room in which Powmia sat waiting. She quickly returned with a tall uncapped bottle of Vietnamese manufactured Coca Cola. She sat down opposite the flimsy coffee table placing the coke in front of him. It was ice cold.

"My name is Mua Xuân. What's yours?" she said.

"Powmia," Powmia replied.

She was nice to him and Powmia could not help thinking she didn't need to be. She asked him innocuous questions which he answered with few words. The coldness of the coke helped to cover its peculiar taste.

Powmia watched Mua Xuân as she talked. She looked maybe ten or twelve years older than himself. Her eyes looked tired with

dark circles and her black hair was short but thick and wavy. Her kimono was open below her throat and the skin was younger, smoother. Powmia found himself trusting her because the place was empty.

As if on cue, when Powmia finished the tall bottle of coke, Mua Xuân asked, "G.I. want short time?"

Powmia shook his head impassively.

When Mua Xuan saw his Japanese camera she asked, "You want take picture? We go next room."

Why not, Powmia told himself. After all, he had the camera. His buddy in Germany wanted pictures of a Vietnamese brothel. Thus, he might capture the smell of strange food upon her breath and scented French soap that accompanied some jungle herb pressed in her hair. In her face would be reflected the memory of an adolescent lover who had disappeared into the jungle long ago and who remained her secret.

Mua Xuân posed against shined corrugated steel. Fixtures of a brass bed's foot rail in the foreground. She had been naked under her kimono. She smiled brightly for him. He shot her eight times.

\* \* \*

Powmia had wanted to find out more about the rumor about Ho Chi Minh's birthday, so he volunteered for interrogation duty. It was his first combat action. He would be used as a strong arm to throw around live, small and warm bodies that had their arms tied behind them; making them stay in line for inquisition.

The prisoners chattered like hell directly at the G.I. duty of four men. Jenkins was one of them.

"What are they saying?" Powmia asked, swearing to himself that no one had heard him.

"They're telling us where we can go," replied the very strak and properly tailored young warrant officer. "I can't keep up with all this jungle rot they're giving us, so I'll spare

you the details and finer points." He winked at Powmia and smiled.

Powmia, the two grunts who included Jenkins, and the warrant officer jumped out of the 3/4 ton truck and walked the chopper blade's length to the opened side of the UH-1D Huey with the two bound prisoners on leashes. A young Vietnamese man and woman were red with fire against the delicate color of Asia in their faces. It was Powmia's first ride in a chopper. Excitement overtook the dread of what unknown procedure was about to occur when the single bladed chopper streaked off with the top leaves of trees slapping at the landing runners right below the opened sides of the Huey. Powmia, Jenkins, the warrant officer and the 4th G.I. had belted themselves; two against the rear wall and two behind the pilot and co-pilot. The warrant officer had taken a seat so he could communicate with the pilot. The two prisoners were left to scramble upon the slick metal floor of the Huey's flight deck.

After the Huey gained some altitude as well as some distance from the base it was set into a circling path, an orbit, about a thousand feet over a complex of rice paddies.

The warrant officer began speaking to the young man in Vietnamese. The young man, bound and leaning forward on his knees to keep balance, answered with terse denials.

"What's going on?" Powmia asked Jenkins.

"He's asking him about the Ho Chi Minh birthday offensive," Jenkins replied while watching the Vietnamese man intently with wide eyes. Jenkins had been licking his lips. They were wet and plump.

The warrant officer kept up his questions becoming more insistent. The young man, wearing only black pajamas like the young Vietnamese woman, gave answers that were shorter and shorter with each question. Powmia began to recognize some of the same Vietnamese words couched in the warrant officer's questions. He shouted the most

familiar of those words, finally, at the prisoner. The prisoner turned his head for a moment. In a flash he twisted his head and face back at the warrant officer and spat a mouthful of saliva and blood, hitting him across the neck. The warrant officer was calm. He turned behind him and said, "Okay," to the pilot who brought the Huey into a hover.

"Okay" Jenkins said to Powmia while unbuckling his seatbelt, "Now we go to work."

Powmia dutifully unbuckled his own seatbelt.

The 4th G.I. had stood up. He was very fast. He had one boot in the back of the female prisoner while holding onto the webbing behind the pilot with his left hand. Powmia heard the click and saw the flash of the blade of the switchblade the 4th G.I. had. He cut the rope that was around the prisoner's throat and tied it to a seat brace.

"Okay," said Jenkins with a tired sigh, "let's give him the heave ho."

The prisoner's eyes were wide and bulging. But there was a strange smile on his face. Somewhere in the back of his mind Powmia had known this might happen. He had told himself that it would be a bluff until a confession could be secured. If worse came to worse, Powmia had told himself when he first realized the situation might come to this, he would tell himself the warm body was already dead, like a sack of potatoes, and that after it was all over no one else but the three others with him would ever know. It would be one war story he would not tell when he got home.

The warrant officer wiped the spit and blood off his neck with an olive drab towel. Powmia had followed Jenkins' lead. They had got on either side of the bound prisoner. It was not difficult. He was light and immobile.

The prisoner turned his head at Powmia and looked him in his eyes for a moment. Powmia was afraid he would spit blood at him also. He realized he would be the last person the prisoner would ever look at so intently.

Then the prisoner said in English, "I win G.I. I win."

It had made Powmia hesitate at the opened side of the Huey. But Jenkins had not hesitated. Powmia had to either hold onto the prisoner or go through with the final shove.

"You remember what I say G.I.," the prisoner said just as Powmia shoved him out, if only to keep himself from following him. And Powmia shoved him in order to let go of the fear he suddenly felt. The fear had left Powmia stunned motionless as he and Jenkins watched the prisoner's twisting descent, wind violently rippling at the black silk. Powmia noticed the prisoner's bound hands automatically grabbing, opening and closing each time his body turned over and around. They watched him as he hit the surface of the rice paddy. They turned away as soon as he disappeared below the quick splash in the distance below.

"Let's try for a better aim next time," the pilot shouted at Powmia and Jenkins, then

laughed. Powmia didn't understand. He turned back with Jenkins. Dread filled him strangely with the swelling feeling of sudden panic. He wanted to undo his belt and his fly and the buttons of his shirt. But with the Huey hanging motionless in the air there was no escape. The space inside seemed tiny against the vistas on either side of the Huey. The noise from the rotor blades was suddenly deafening.

"Okay, baby-san," the warrant officer shouted, "if you don't wanna follow your boy friend, you'll talk! Bic?!"

Then the warrant officer broke into Vietnamese. But in spite of the increasing fervor of the questions the young woman said nothing, her face slowly moving from tense anger and determination to the soft impassive look at certain death. Bound and leaning forward on her knees, Powmia suddenly flashed on the image of the young male prisoner who had been forced down into the same position. Both had worn the same black pajamas.

"You better talk, bitch!" the warrant officer suddenly blurted out in English, "or maybe our aim'll be better this time. Maybe we'll bust your body up when it hits a dike or smashes in a thousand pieces when it hits the road! You bic?!"

The warrant officer went on berating the woman in Vietnamese. He was not asking questions. Perhaps he was saying the same things he had just said in English. A pale of realization flushed the prisoner's face. She tensed up again and determination came as the warrant officer fired questions at her repeatedly in Vietnamese.

Her fate was certain, thought Powmia. Evidently she had been saved for second to be interrogated because it was assumed she would be weak because she was a woman. But she was tough with her silence. For however soon her fate would be consummated would be up to her. Suddenly she made her decision.

"Du miami!", she blurted out screaming, her eyes squeezed shut. "Du miami! Du miami!"

Jenkins shot up with the same motion he used to unbuckle his seatbelt. The Huey rocked sideways slightly. His face was red. The moment was his.

"Fuck yourself!" he shouted at her. "You don't tell no G.I. that! "

He grabbed her with bunches of silk blouse in one of his fists and threw her against the wall next to Powmia. Powmia jumped up and scrambled after the webbing with quick searching hands.

"Fuck yourself!" Jenkins was yelling at her. "I'll fuck you! I'll flying fuck you!" he yelled red with rage and lust as he forced himself between her legs.

It was happening so fast that Powmia lost himself; forgot they were all hanging in air. She began to squirm to avoid what would be worse than the death that was now inevitable. And Jenkins yanked the rope that was around

her throat and jammed his knee into her solar plexis.

"I like fuckin' cold commie gook cunt!" Jenkins yelled as he tore the pajama bottoms off her.

The images hit Powmia like flashbulbs going off in rapid succession. A delicate sprig of pubic hair between her legs. The impassive backs of the flight helmets and necks of the pilot and co-pilot who were busy holding the Huey still in the air. Jenkins fumbling frantically with the buttons of his fly. The warrant officer nonchalantly examining the contents of unrolled papers. The clicking invisible opening of the switchblade. The blur of spinning rotor blades outside and above the opened sides of the Huey. Her thin bare legs on either side of Jenkins' jerking fatigue pants; her legs nearly the same color as the pants though several shades lighter. Her face squeezed tight and knotted with pain. Jenkins' face, open mouth with green and yellow vapor of his panting lust, sweating, his eyes bulging.

"You pig!" she screamed edged with searing pain. "Number ten thou pig! Pig! Filth and shit eating pig! Pig! Pig! May you die ten thou times! Piiig!!"

Powmia saw the knife's blade cut the rope that ran between the noose around her neck and the frame of the seat. Jenkins did not motion for Powmia's help. With unspent rage he flung her at the opened side door. And still being bound, nothing obstructed her from bouncing once at the edge of the deck and continuing into a thousand feet of air.

Powmia and the other three watched her descent. But unlike the frantic grabbing of the male prisoner, the woman turned over and over almost gracefully with her long black hair flowing in and out of the end of the rope still tied around her neck. Each time her face came around into view she displayed a peaceful look that was combined with some kind of weird determination. Her thin bare legs swam freely against the restraint of her arms bound behind her.

Their aim had been better this time. Far below she had hit the hard packed surface of a roadway. But the gleeful expectations of those aboard the Huey were not to be satisfied. As soon as she hit the road she did not splatter like a balloon filled with red and grey paint. Instead she sank into the surface of the road, as if it had been semi-liquid, and disappeared into the soil, which reconstituted itself into its former hard clay appearance. Then at once the Huey slid out of its still hover and banked a trajectory back to base.

\* \* \*

Powmia stood at the piss tube looking out past the perimeter into the valley toward the next hill. He always felt vulnerable to sniper fire at the piss tube. In order to seek cover would probably mean that he would have to piss allover himself in the process. Putting the piss tube at the edge of the perimeter seemed like an idea that was playing into the hands of the enemy, Powmia thought.

Every time Powmia stood there taking a leak he would notice that the jungle line in the valley had receded a little more. Yet, he never saw anyone out there hacking away with tools. It had appeared as though the jungle receded on its own, slowly recoiling from foreign occupation.

For a few days Powmia contemplated both the receding jungle line as well as from where those strange snapshots of Ho Chi Minh had come. And he wondered what had happened to the young woman when she hit the ground. Did she fall into a booby trap? Was the road a camouflage for a tunnel entrance? The questions and doubts came at him, clinging like sweat under invisible humidity. He could not answer the questions. But he could absolve the doubt.

It must have been one of the secrets of war. No one could tell you how to do it until something happened to make you do it. The very fact that you *could* turn off your feelings was, now for Freddy Powmia, the why and the

how to turn off your feelings. It was as simple as that. The something that had happened had been that summary execution of the two prisoners. The price of war was doing what had to be done. No wonder his army training had instilled in him a profound sense of doing what had to be done.

When Casper had told that story about killing their first "gook", that sense had come home to roost. From the very beginning of that incident, Casper had known he had to make the kill and make it fast. Hesitating for even a split second too long would translate into that much more time his back was uncovered. The moment he pulled the trigger, Casper had reported, was the very moment he had thought about his back being a target. One had to do what one had to do.

There were the rewards. One of them was supplied free of charge by the U.S.O. A flat bed truck had been rolled up in front of the outdoor movie screen to be used as a stage. A small generator had been tucked underneath.

Expectation for the evening was running high. Folding chairs were provided for a good turn out. In the place of turned off feelings were cheap thrills. And when the sun had set and most everyone had eaten and was off duty the show would begin.

It was an all girl Korean rock and roll band. All the girls were young and wore tight satin textured red and pink jumpsuits. They played some of the latest rock and roll hits from stateside. Many of the G.I.'s appreciated the familiar songs played live for them. But the band's amateurish style and the obvious tin ear of the lead vocalist, who was up on stage more for the shape of her body than the quality of her voice, only hastened the expected moment. The expected moment was a dance of colored veils, a dance of Asian ecdisia.

Powmia was struck more by the reactions of the G.I.'s than the actual main event. And even though the young rosy-cheeked Korean exotic dancer availed herself well of plenty of her own skin right down to

her G-string and tasseled pasties, Powmia couldn't help thinking about how alive she looked and how quickly and easily she could be rendered dead. Powmia watched Jenkins leer at her steadily as she jumped off the truck to pull the purple veil she had been waving across his head and face. Jenkins was open mouthed and sweating just like he had been a few days before, during interrogation duty aboard the Huey. And then, after rubbing a bare thigh up against him, Jenkins made his grab. But she twisted away like a lithe halfback in tune to the steady beat of the musical accompaniment. She glided over to tease the next G.I. It was not Freddy Powmia, though he oddly began to think he had deserved it the most.

She swooped down on Buchanan, who was sitting alone and forlorn. She writhed close to him, her flesh grazing the bare dark skin of his arm. Her delicate hand with long glossy red nails played in the black crisp hair beneath his unbuttoned shirt, her other hand

toyed with the closely cropped nap of his hair. Buchanan looked into her almond shaped eyes with an almost dreamy look as she danced around him. It was almost like the gaze of a true romantic, thought Powmia.

Buchanan had contracted "brand-X", an incurable and unknown strain of the clap. He had been awaiting orders to go to a hospital in Taiwan. Rumor had it that Buchanan would be sent there to die.

\* \* \*

It was Powmia's second chopper ride as well as his second combat mission. And he was right in the middle. He was in D Company in War Zone D, and Powmia kept thinking that D stood for death.

At Powmia's left, all decked out in the latest war webbing strapped around his shoulders and waist, was Fillmore. He was quiet with eyes closed and meditative. His jaw muscles worked slowly, regularly pounding out some long forgotten beat of some slow African dirge. It was Fillmore's first mission.

The tension Powmia felt from Fillmore through the touching of their fatigue clad bodies was a smooth even hum in contrast to that which he felt from Jenkins, who was sitting on his right side. Jenkins seemed to get more pale the more he sweated. He kept licking his red and plumping lips. The rigid form of the sheathed machete that Jenkins carried pressed up against Powmia's leg. He was more frightened about why Jenkins carried the machete than what awaited them when the choppers landed. That fear confused Powmia.

Jenkins acted as crew chief and would give the orders. The mission was simple and had been planned out in advance.

Across from Powmia sat four black G.I.'s: Washington, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe. It was their first mission also. Each's knees touched the other's as they spread their legs to make room for each's M-16. Washington and Jefferson stared out the door at Powmia's left and watched them fingering their M-16s'

plastic stocks to steady the butts on the slick flight deck. Madison, who sat in the middle next to Jefferson, had struck a pose like Fillmore; helmet resting on the webbing behind him, eyes closed meditatively. He was not chewing gum. The muzzle of his M-16 rested in the crook of his elbow. Powmia thought he held the rifle as if it were an infant. Monroe, who was at the other end, at Powmia's right, held his M-16 across his lap. He earnestly watched the ground go by below as if to be ready to respond to gunfire.

Suddenly Powmia heard the sound of the chopper blades changing pitch and immediately felt a slight lowering in altitude. He quickly looked across toward the other Huey about 50 yards from the right side door. The rest of the platoon: Kermit, Kennedy, Jackson, Harrison, Tyler and Taylor were gliding into a lower altitude with them. Suddenly Pierce and Polk, two more black G.I.'s in D Company, opened up with their M-60's right behind Powmia. Powmia lurched.

Pierce and Polk were experienced door gunners, who along with Jenkins, the 4th G.I. and Buchanan had been ordered to D Company so as to supply some combat experience. The 4th G.I., who was the door gunner on the other Huey, was breaking in Van Buren. Van Buren was new, like Powmia and the rest, and was from East St. Louis. Buchanan had been prohibited from combat duty because of his brand-X affliction.

The roar of the M-60's became deafening against the beat of the rotor blades as they got closer to the ground. The gunners had been throwing lead at clumps of trees and high shrubbery that would be lying at the rear and along the flanks of the LZ. Powmia had only glimpsed the village that was their objective as the Hueys spun above the LZ in order to give the door gunners full access to their targets.

After the Hueys landed, deposited the platoon and had taken off they slowly advanced on foot to the hamlet, the objective. It sat there waiting, looking almost deserted. It

was just a few wood and straw thatched huts and flimsy animal pens. The first life Powmia saw were some chickens placidly scratching at the soil. A dog barked a warning somewhere.

"Destroy everything," Jenkins had ordered them. "Drive the stubborn gooks out! Teach 'em they got to get with the program! You bic?!"

"No sweat," someone behind Powmia had responded. It had been Kermit, who was ready for action.

There had been no resistance when the platoon entered the hamlet. It looked like an easy mission. They broke up into pairs. Powmia went with Fillmore. Washington and Jefferson went off together as did Madison and Monroe. Jenkins simply disappeared.

Powmia and Fillmore entered the first hut they came to. Inside the floor was packed dirt, a mat here and there, a small wood stove, some simple shelves packed with jars filled with mysterious things. The inhabitants were an old woman with thin grey hair, black baggy

silk pajama pants, teeth blackened by years of chewing betel nuts; and a little boy who wore elastic shorts and a white T-shirt stained brown by the soil. A small spotted dog barked and lurched at Powmia and Fillmore. Fillmore squeezed off two rounds which sank into the dog's breast splattering white fur with dark blood. The dog dropped instantly in mid-air.

"Vamos!" Powmia barked at them. "Get the fuck out of here before it's too late!"

The two Vietnamese didn't understand. Powmia fired a neat three round burst into the ground in front of them. The exploding soil shook the two inhabitants and they ran in quick panic chattering a mile a minute.

"Damn gooks," muttered Fillmore.

They began to hear more gunfire as they left the hut. And just as they began to set the thatched straw roof on fire, the sound of an explosion jarred the ground below their feet. A grenade had gone off somewhere.

The gunfire was constant now. Suddenly Jenkins emerged from the opened

entrance of a hut close by. His face was oddly soft. His machete was unsheathed in his right hand. There was a red smear of blood across the bare glint of its blade. His left hand was a fist full of straight black hair below which was the head of a young girl of maybe thirteen or fourteen years of age. Her lips were parted alluringly. Her eyes, glazed in death, looked far away and still. Blood dripped steadily from the severed neck along with dangling bits of torn flesh. There was a hot smell all over the place. She looked a little like the Korean strip teaser in the U.S.O. show.

Jenkins flung the head in front of him. It hit the hard ground with a weird combination of sounds; a splat mixed with a dull hollow thunk-like the sound of a dropped watermelon. It rolled over past Powmia scattering globs of clotting blood. When it finally came to a rocking rest Powmia saw her eyes fall into focus. Her eyes settled on Powmia.

"Fuckin' cold commie gook cunt!" growled Jenkins as he jammed the machete, blood and all, back into the sheath. "One more scalp and another notch on my dick!"

The gunfire quickly subsided and the only sound for a moment was the crackling of the fires the platoon had set. The smoke slowly twisted up in the windless air.

The short silence was suddenly shattered by the cringing, bloodcurdling sound of a scream followed immediately by a single gunshot. Then there was ominous silence.

In the aftermath of the mission the consequences were discerned. Of the four casualties, two were Washington and Jefferson who were wasted in the same single instant. Piecing the event together, what had happened was that either Washington or Jefferson had noticed an empty can of Budweiser sitting on a fence post. No one bothered to tell them they should have left it alone. The bottom of the Budweiser can had been neatly cut out and inserted in it snugly, as if expressly designed

for the purpose, was a captured American hand grenade with the pin pulled out. The confines of the Budweiser can had kept the lever of the grenade in place to keep the four-second fuse from being activated.

Without thinking, either Washington or Jefferson had knocked the Budweiser can off the fence post. Evidently the two had frozen in panic for maybe two seconds before deciding to run in opposite directions. Neither made it. Both were found face down in almost identical conditions. The cloth back of their combat fatigues had been disintegrated by the blast. Tiny irregular holes from the fragments of the grenade were imbedded in the backs of each head. Their backs were deep red torn flesh and muscle. Both had died almost immediately. The Budweiser can lay close by completely unmarked except for a small dent from the initial impact.

The case of Madison and Monroe was more freakish. Monroe had stumbled into a camouflaged pit of shit smeared pungi sticks.

When the platoon found him he was suspended irregularly and impaled with four of the sharp-ended bamboo sticks. The stench was unbelievable from the shit that was slick over each pointed end. On the point of the pungi stick that had speared Monroe through the stomach was the half digested residue of his breakfast. Powmia readily recognized the yellow powdered eggs and the almost whole morsel of pale sausage. Powmia suddenly remembered the incident about Snowden in *Catch-22*, about his guts spilling out along with his supper after Yossarian unzipped his flight jacket in the back of the B-25. A flush of frigid cold infused Powmia's whole body.

Monroe, who had kept his finger on the trigger of his M-16, even during the flight to the LZ, had inadvertently squeezed off a single round the moment he sank down onto the pungi sticks. The round had caught Madison squarely below the nose and blew his front teeth and brains into his helmet. Madison lay dead on his back a few feet away with a

strange amused grin across his lips, as if amused by the freakishness of the whole incident.

The remainder of the platoon walked slowly through the burning hamlet. No one said a word except for Kermit, who radioed for a Dust Off to take away Washington, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe. Then they all lit cigarettes and waited for the choppers.

\* \* \*

Powmia had begun to find a liking for Fillmore. Perhaps it had been because they had buddied up on that last mission. Each had different backgrounds stateside. Powmia was more middle class and suburban while Fillmore was urban and less middle class. Yet they found more things in common than the make up of their neighborhoods or the difference in the color of their skins.

Fillmore had a girlfriend back home. He had shown Powmia a picture of her. She was still in her senior year in high school. And

though all the talk about "Jody" sometimes got to Fillmore, Ronette's letters always had made him feel she was waiting for him. It made Powmia feel glad he had not left a girlfriend stateside to worry about all the time.

Fillmore's attitude was strange to Powmia. Fillmore kept saying, "I don't care if she plays with Jody. Just don't let him steal her heart."

A real romantic, thought Powmia when he would think about Fillmore's stories about Ronette. Maybe Fillmore harbored his attitude about Ronette because at least once a week he would sneak off the base at night through the precariously narrow and dangerous passageway through the perimeter to visit a woman in the small town outside the base.

"Only because she reminds me in so many ways of Ronette," Fillmore would say. Powmia was afraid he would fall in love with her.

The only other person to whom Powmia began to feel somewhat close was Buchanan.

Maybe it was because Buchanan had been waiting for orders to be sent to that hospital in Taiwan in order to die of brand-X. Or maybe, while on night duty, Buchanan had been ordered to share time in that sandbagged conex while Powmia sat by the radio waiting for Tiger 65 to call them with a warning of incoming rockets or mortars.

Buchanan had not been very talkative. After the first ten minutes of duty time, Buchanan would excuse himself, saying he was going to the latrine and then disappear for twenty or thirty minutes. When he returned, eyes all red and glazed over, he'd let Powmia take off for a little while. When Powmia would return he would always find Buchanan asleep.

One morning after night duty, Powmia found a small plastic bag filled with con sah, all bound up with rubber bands. He held onto it and when he ran into Buchanan he returned it to him. Buchanan looked at him quizzically and thanked him.

The last day of night duty for the week sitting by the radio was the eve of Ho Chi Minh's birthday. When Powmia emerged at dawn on Ho's birthday, he went to breakfast. After breakfast, as he was heading for his hooch to go to sleep, the ground beneath his feet began to shake. There was no noise, just a steady quaking of the ground. After a few minutes the strange sensation of quaking stopped. Then Powmia went to sleep, a deep dark dreamless sleep.

Some boredom had set in. It had been worse during the day than during the night. At night it had been either sitting by the radio in the sandbagged conex waiting for the rockets and mortars, or serving perimeter duty. Night duty was as boring as duty in the day. But at night Powmia could at least engage in something of his own to interest himself, like read a book or catch up on letter writing or daydream, which had become more intense than he ever thought it could be. But during the daytime there were too many officers and

NCO's around and it was easy to end up doing some mickey mouse shit job. It was also difficult to look gung ho during the day.

To keep his spirits up Powmia would often whistle, or sing if he had known enough words, one of the many Beatle songs that had flooded stateside ears just before he had been drafted.

How four lovable Liverpudlian moptops had cleared away the gloom that followed the Kennedy assassination was a blessing. Traumatic social change would always end with shock and psychic immobility, like the aftermath of a nuclear war, sudden and quick. But the Beatles had kept a song in the heart and had kept the carefreeness of Cold War culture going almost unimpeded. Yeah sure, Powmia had been apprehensive about Strontium 90 from the fallout of the tests getting into his milk. But the guys that ran the Cold War had been looking out for him and had come to an agreement to fine tune, to

engineer the rules of Cold War and stop the atmospheric tests.

Maybe after Vietnam was over they'd get their act together and keep war where it belonged in this day and age, in the armchair, on television and in the movies. In fact, thought Powmia strangely, Kennedy seemed like he was a casualty on the Cold War battlefield in this new age.

Yeah, thought Powmia surprising himself a little, if people want to set themselves up to go die in a war, well let them just go ahead.

Powmia's boredom began to ease into entropy. He did not wish for longevity of time like Dunbar in *Catch-22* by cultivating boredom. Powmia needed action.

Then Powmia thought about Orr from *Catch-22* who was not afraid to fly a dangerous mission and who had got killed anyway. But Powmia had thought that *Catch-22* was just a funny book about war. He shrugged off the thought and volunteered because it came time

to do what he had to do. He decided to go out on a dawn patrol.

\* \* \*

The jungle steam rose with the sun, which creased the horizon with pink and lavender. The quiet was heavy, laden with humidity enough to form funk in the cloth of their fatigues. The patrol consisted of Powmia, Jenkins, Casper, Kermit, Kennedy, Fillmore, who Powmia was glad to see, Pierce and Polk who, just as they had done during the chopper mission, handled the M-60's mounted on each jeep. The fourth G.I. drove one of the jeeps. Harrison drove the lead jeep with Fillmore, Casper and Powmia with Pierce standing between the latter two in the back manning the M-60. Powmia was also glad to see Casper beside him because he had drawn first blood. Casper would not hesitate to shoot, thought Powmia, as he himself was afraid he might.

The two jeeps wound slowly on the road, a band of desperados, thought Powmia, rifles poised with their muzzles pointed in the

air in unsymmetrical array. They moved along the line of defoliation, sometimes dipping into a blind valley where they could not see the perimeter fence, which made the men tense up a bit.

They had just dipped into a narrow corridor where the strip of defoliation was not as wide as it was on the eastern side of the base and where the dawn had not completely sought to root out the shadows. The patrol was just below the line of dangling Vietnamese corpses. Powmia heard a cracking sound somewhere in the jungle and a sound like a stone hitting the side of the jeep near his leg.

A burst of wind hit them. Casper shot up.

"Ambush! Ambush!" he yelled. "Hit it!  
Hi . . .!"

Casper fell, hitting the edge of the jeep before bouncing out to the ground.

Then the noise came, like being up close to an unmuffled engine. There was also the sound of wind. And ear shattering screeching

sounded all around. The whole plane of vision suddenly became exaggeratedly horizontal. Powmia saw them scatter. They floated through the air slow and flowing. The sound of the wind picked up with a deafening roar. Powmia couldn't believe that his life was finally being threatened.

Powmia saw Harrison's head explode gracefully like the burst of fireworks in red and grey flame. Then he danced a step in mid air and fell limp on the ground bouncing easy. Powmia was flying next to Pierce whom, because he had been standing behind the M-60 mount, had the furthest to go. Powmia had hesitated after all, flying next to Pierce who was disintegrating before his eyes. Blood and bits of atomized flesh splashed against Powmia's face and neck. Bits of olive drab garment spun in the air. The sound of the wind roared in his ear. There was an odd combination of surprise and resignation in Pierce's face. They hit the ground at the same moment.

"Red dog. Red dog," Powmia heard Kermit calmly saying into the radio mike, "this is Morning Minion."

There was a rich hot smell. Was it the earth in Powmia's face? No. Powmia remembered the same smell from the village they had burned, right after Jenkins tossed the head onto the ground. Powmia began thinking it was a smell one might learn to like, perhaps even crave. He could understand how one might even kill for the hot smell or even risk one's life. Then he felt ashamed of himself.

Powmia tried to press himself into the earth. He discovered his hands clawing at it. The ground was exploding all around him. The wind increased its roar. He averted his eyes from the spraying of dirt and blood by turning his head. He could see Kennedy from under the jeep on the other side. He was twisted and mangled. Shattered pieces of pinkish bone lay bare under torn flesh, his face screwed up in pain. Powmia could not tell whether he was dead or alive.

Just as suddenly as the fire started in stopped. Powmia could now hear the faint transmitted voice of Red Dog on Kermit's radio. Kermit radioed their position.

No one moved. Everyone who still could move dared not for fear of the resumption of enemy fire.

Powmia's vision was blurred. He chanced a look skyward. He saw dragonflies skimming and hovering, red and yellow dragonflies, thousands of them. But as his vision cleared and came into focus again the dragonflies were gone. They had suffused into the red mist in the remaining stilled and silent air. Then he heard the beat of rotor blades coming low and closer.

"All clear," Jenkins yelled. "On your feet."

Harrison, Pierce and Kennedy were dead. All eight tires of the jeeps had been shot flat. Casper had been wounded by a round that had passed through one cheek and out the other as he yelled his warning, doing not much

more than chipping a few of his molars. A few stitches and some salve and he would be ready for the line again, wherever that was.

\* \* \*

A new first lieutenant came to D Company the day after the ambush. The looie needed breaking in, so it was decided to launch a relatively safe and easy search and destroy mission into a sector that had just been scorched the day before by a little bit of nasty warfare by a unit of the 1st Cavalry. But some rockets had been lobbed in the night before from the same sector. So Powmia's platoon was chosen to take the new looie out to check around.

A few hours before the previous night's small rocket attack Fillmore had sidled up to Powmia slyly while the two were off duty. "You wanna take a walk out yonder?" Fillmore had asked low.

"Huh?" Powmia replied.

"I got some shit here'll bust your brains out."

"You twisted my arm," Powmia nearly smiled.

The two walked out into the supply yard among the stacked lumber and downwind from the avionics van. They settled in the darkest corner.

"This shit's from Cambodia," said Fillmore opening up a small loose package made up of part of a newspaper page with Vietnamese printing. "Puts Vietnamese shit to shame."

Powmia saw the J's. They were shaped like cones. Fillmore gave one to Powmia, took one for himself and shoved the three or four remaining ones into his Hawaiian shirt. Fillmore lit Powmmia's then his own. They smoked together in friendly silence.

After comparing the virtues of con sah with the Cambodian hemp, which Fillmore referred to as "rockets", the conversation turned to familiar subjects. The stars sparkled excitedly in the sky. The dim illumination around the two took on an eerie glow. The

stack of boards upon which Powmia and Fillmore sat took on a waxy luster.

Fillmore talked about Ronette who was waiting for him back in the world. As Fillmore spoke about her Powmia began to feel as though he had known Ronette all along, that Fillmore had introduced her to him during a high school dance. Powmia could remember Ronette's voice. It was tiny and almost squeaky and she had a way of letting her eyes linger at the end of her sentences while awaiting response. She had seemed frail to Powmia, almost too delicate for Fillmore.

Then almost as if she had been the same person as Ronette, Fillmore began talking about Bon, his baby san who lived in the town outside the base.

"She's got nice dark skin," reported Fillmore. "That's 'cause she's from the Mekong Delta. Everyone from down there is darker. I'm now sleeping with her twice a week."

"During the day?" wondered Powmia.  
"Nah," retorted Fillmore quickly, "at night."

"By sneaking through the perimeter?"

"Yeah," replied Fillmore with a touch of smugness. "If you ever want 'to go out with me some night I'll take you, that is if you get yourself a baby san of your own. I'll show you the way out."

Powmia made no reply. He suddenly thought of Mua Xuân. He was surprised she had entered his mind. He felt a sudden wave of warmth flood up from his belly.

After a while the two trudged back to the hooches, which seemed far away and floating like a tethered houseboat. When they parted company Powmia decided to turn in. Once in his cot he giggled himself to sleep. He never heard the siren go off that warned everyone of that night's rocket attack.

The next day's mission was uneventful as far as combat was concerned. The new first lieutenant certainly got a good taste of the consequences of war. The 1st Cav had left a score of dead mangled bodies rotting and stinking in the hot sun in their wake from the

day before. Powmia's platoon had found a few tunnel entrances for the first looie, which had all turned out to be cul-de-sacs. But they blew them out anyway. And for the first time no one got wounded or killed.

The bodies of the Vietnamese the 1st Cav had left in the field didn't even have guns. They didn't even look like soldiers. But as Powmia had known and had never questioned, they were the enemy. Even though each body had a face, they were part of a faceless enemy among a people of a million faces. They were a people who kept saying, "We're here. We can't help being here. We're here in spite of how the guns roar."

Maybe it had been the strange smoke Powmia had ingested the long night before. But that proclamation the Vietnamese had constantly been making in Powmia's inner ear of conscience spoke again in that field of dead bodies. The message had spoken from each who was lying still and grotesque.

Collectively at first had been the chorus:

"We are sleeping. We are resting from  
the war and because the sun is high."

Each spoke to Powmia as the platoon  
stealthed past in the openness of the day.

"See how my insides are blown out,  
how the sun makes their delicateness glisten  
with the sunshine, even now."

"You see, when my head is broken like  
the shell of a pumpkin by a fifty caliber  
projectile, the insides spill out like a grey and  
scarlet soup. See how it has dried and dyed the  
ground with my own mark."

Powmia, seeing one in its last fleeing  
frozen stride, had heard in that inner ear the  
voice say, "See how better than a ballerina I  
am. Don't I hold my pose with the finesse of  
many years of cultured concentration?"

Another said, "In my still gaze upon the  
horizon I can see the sky and far beyond. But I  
can no longer see the soldiers who visit me  
nearby today. They move too swiftly by now  
for my eyes to follow in my sleep."

Powmia had come upon the body of a woman. For a split moment he was surprised because she was wearing a colorful ao dai. Powmia heard his own voice say, "No wonder she caught lead. The color of that thing is like a magnet."

He could not see her face because it had met squarely with the earth. Her long black flaxen hair had been splayed with the sign of the impact. A neat little hole in the back of her head did not burn her hair like the one through her shoulder blade which had burned the thin fabric of her ao dai near the print of a pink flower and a green leaf. The pale earth had turned ochre beneath both spots. Powmia could see she was probably young. Her silk pants had settled with her long stillness deep against her legs and buttocks.

"Touch," she had said in Powmia's inner ear. "Touch anywhere. I will not move. I will not scream. I will not yell rape."

No, Powmia thought, her body would be cool like the plastic stock of his M-16.

Almost before the platoon had crept past the chorus of those asleep, the foliage had begun to thicken and the ground got damp.

No, it wasn't the rainy season any longer, Powmia had thought, it must be some kind of watershed area.

The ground had got spongier under the soft steps of the platoon. The first lieutenant hadn't noticed. No one noticed except Powmia. Kermit had spoken softly into his mike to coordinate the pick up by the Huey on the other side of the grove of trees into which they had been advancing.

The ground had got so spongey that the boots of the G.I.'s had begun to produce a cacophony of quiet sucking sounds. Powmia had looked down. He was afraid of quicksand.

Mighty rich earth, he had told himself. Moisture had begun to seep up around his boots. It had the same ochre color as the earth around the Vietnamese he had seen sleeping with their wounds.

The grove had nearly thickened into a thicket. The ground had dampened into mud, no longer able to hold its moisture. The sucking sounds of the boots of the advancing men had become more pronounced. The going seemed to have been slowed.

Powmia had glanced down once more. Visible liquid had, with each step, swirled over the toes of his boots. The liquid was red, deep rich red. No wonder, Powmia had thought, the vegetation had grown so think.

Suddenly Powmia had felt dirty and grimy. His fatigues cloyed to the point of suffocation. Faceless men, Powmia found himself thinking in a strange mix of his own thoughts and that voice in his inner ear; faceless men stateside, who never dirtied themselves with so much as auto grease, had combed out plenty of profit to cover their risks and who held privy to the glory in their heads. They now coveted that glory within the boundaries of every day life in the American Dream. Powmia realized in a flash that he was

slogging through the bleeding mire wondering what he could get out of all the risks that had been thrust upon him.

\* \* \*

Powmia decided to ask Fillmore to guide him through the perimeter the next time he planned to spend the night with his Mekong baby san.

Two nights later Powmia and Fillmore sneaked their way through the perimeter under cover of pitch darkness. It was perfect. It was one night before his turn on guard duty out in the yard where he and Fillmore had smoked the Cambodian weed. Something assured him Mua Xuân would be there. He had no fear.

When Powmia found Mua Xuân's house in the dark, the door was closed. He knocked only three times. He heard her noises inside and Powmia's pulse of anticipation quickened. Finally she opened the door a crack. He saw her dark eyes with the dark circles. Then he

saw her broad smile and her disheveled thick black hair.

"Ah, G.I.Powmia," she whispered with excitement in her voice. "You come to sleep with Mua Xuân. Come in. Quick. Be quiet."

She opened the door just wide enough for him to enter. They passed through the familiar outer room in darkness, Mua Xuân leading the way past the low coffee tables over the bare cement floor. In the back room beside the brass bed that Powmia had thought he would never want to see again, she slipped out of the kimono and with almost a single fluid motion slid under the several layers of sheets. She waited motionless for Powmia to remove his clothes.

Powmia did not have sex with Mua Xuân, nor did she ask or expect him to. It was enough to feel the warmth of her bare flesh next to him, warm with life and promise and to wonder at the smell of her breath and the smell in her hair and to let the wonder bleed into rich

vibrant dreaming that comes with truly restful sleep.

An hour before dawn Fillmore came to wake Powmia and he showed him how to sneak back onto base.

Powmia had the afternoon off because of guard duty the upcoming night. The following day, after Powmia pulled guard duty, he slept a couple of dreamless hours and he and Fillmore sneaked out again that next night. Mua Xuân was waiting for him. But this time her warm and live body brought his own into hers. And they moved and floated in the strange new unison created by the sounds of their different cultures. Her tired eyes turned soft and sultry. She spoke endearing words to him that he did not understand. She brought him into her again and again throughout the night. He found it easier to let himself go, pouring into the sanctuary of her body all that had been pent up in him since he had left on that boat from San Francisco. She kissed his face often and softly like the lingering lighting

of a dragonfly. Neither slept at all during the night. An hour before dawn Fillmore interrupted them with a quick knock and the two sneaked back through the perimeter.

When Fillmore and Powmia got back to the base camp, Powmia was surprised to find he had been ordered to pull guard duty again that night. He tried to get some sleep that afternoon but it was not enough. After his turn guarding the same yard he had guarded only two nights before was over, Jenkins had come out to relieve him only to find him asleep. Jenkins promised him the C.O. would be informed.

"Our lives depend on you," Jenkins explained in a way of justification.

Powmia wasn't treated too badly. It could have gone much worse for him. He just got a good dressing down by the C.O. and assigned to a week of K.P.

There were three consequences of his K.P. duty. On the first day during a freak monsoon downpour Powmia got a bad case of

the hot shits while washing pots and pans in the narrowly covered passageway between the mess hall kitchen and the pantry. It had been the most trapped Powmia had ever felt; rain pounding down only inches away from either side of him while bending over with his head and a hose crowded into a giant pot trying to scrub off some impossible burnt matter, water and suds splashing all over him while trying to keep a tight asshole and fighting off a numbing chill at the same time. Suddenly, without informing anyone, Powmia had to drop everything to run through the pounding rain toward the latrine with shit beginning to dribble down his legs. When he got to the inside of the latrine he ripped his fly open, buttons flying everywhere, sat down over the wooden hole soaked beyond the bone and crapped loads of hot shit out of his guts while strange insects he never before knew even existed buzzed around his face drenched with pasted hair.

The second consequence of K.P. duty turned out to be kind of good for Powmia, but bad for his buddy Fillmore. Fillmore had got caught the following dawn making his way back through the perimeter. If Powmia had been caught it would have probably meant an Article 15 as well as extended K.P. or a bust in rank or both. As it turned out Fillmore was slapped with an Article 15 and ordered to latrine duty indefinitely. Latrine duty was about as low as one could go before getting a summary court martial.

The third and final outcome of his K.P. duty was simply that he no longer had time, energy or opportunity to go and see Mua Xuân; day or night. Of course, this third outcome was compounded by Fillmore's demise.

Then suddenly Powmia remembered ex-PFC Wintergreen from *Catch-22*, who each time after going AWOL and subsequently getting caught was made to dig holes and fill them again. At least while digging and filling

holes, ex-PFC Wintergreen avoided the war. Powmia discovered a source of inspiration in his recalling of ex-PFC Wintergreen from *Catch-22*. He decided two things. One was to tell Fillmore he wasn't so bad off after all. The second was that he decided he would go see Mua Xuân again.

\* \* \*

A wild party for Jenkins was going on when night came. Jenkins was going home the next day and everyone was determined that Jenkins would get on board the big bird as drunk as he could possibly get. Everyone was sopping up beer and every now and then a whiff of con sah perfumed the night air. An uncanny coincidence gave Jenkins' send off party an extra high light. Just as Powmia was passing behind all the drunken G. I. 's sitting in lawn chairs and shouting their drunken babble, the horizon suddenly exploded with brilliant napalm flame almost as if it were an expected event just for the occasion of Jenkins' departure; out there just on the other side of

the perimeter where Powmia and Fillmore had sneaked through in order to sleep with their baby sans.

After a long hard day of war, it was good to relax in the cool of the night, stretch out on a lawn chair with a can of stateside beer and perhaps a pipeful of can sah and let the exotic smell of countryside fill one's head. And that was the way it had been that one night outside their hooches as they all lounged aghast like it was the 4th of July at the display of Yankee pyrotechnics.

The single Huey seemed to have had an almost inexhaustible supply of firepower. Two interweaving streams of tracers, like two streams of flaming urine, covered the ground by working their way back and forth over it. Occasionally Powmia could see the floaring discharge of rockets from the rocket tubes mounted on the Huey's sides. A moment later the rockets' trajectory would end in impact upon the ground with a swath of boiling

flaming napalm or a bright puff of Willie P — white phosphorus.

Powmia just stood there looking aghast, gaping at the incredible amount of fire and lead being spewed at the ground by the single circling Huey. He thought about Mua Xuân. She was out there, closer to the conflagration than Powmia.

Deep in the dead of night Powmia reached into his footlocker and took out the snapshots of Ho Chi Minh. He was less troubled about how they fell into his possession and more impressed with the growing awareness that Ho Chi Minh and Mua Xuân were natives of the same country. Why, she could even be a distant relative of the man who, at various stages of his life, was in the series of snapshots.

Powmia put the snapshots away, left his hooch and went out into the darkness. He took his pipe with him. He stopped at the hiding place where Fillmore had hidden his stash on the way to the supply yard where he

proceeded to get stoned obliterated. Then he came back to his hooch and, after undressing and crawling into his cot, giggled himself to sleep. The sleep was dreamless and black.

In their shanty, sleep was spotty for Fillmore and Bon. Each was awakened in unison to a flash of white. It was a white they had seen before that night just far enough away to keep it from burning their skin with its white-hot poison. They dreamed of new roads being laid in lead by the flaming hands of alien invaders. And indeed, each had seen the lead piling a swath in the ground from those hovering lights in the sky. But the flames and acid that had swallowed the night in hell had not consumed any flesh.

As the sky lightened by the east's early horizon, Fillmore began the way back, balanced by memory of marks nearly visible. But shortly before that evening's pyrotechnics, a committee had convened to change those marks in order to steer a different course.

Fillmore took the same course as he had before. He failed to interpret the subtle change in the marks that guided him through the perimeter. That evening's committee had booby-trapped the path. Fillmore was consumed by the explosion, which sent parts of him all over the no man's land made of barbed wire, sand and canvas.

Fillmore was gone and so was Jenkins, gone on the big silver bird drunk and forgetting. Buchanan was gone too, off to die in some hospital in Taiwan of brand-X. Everyone got the send off party. Everyone except Powmia who had only passed through.

Neither Buchanan nor Jenkins would know what Fillmore would never know, that Fillmore's old job at latrine duty would fall by default to Powmia.

Emerging from his hooch, where he had left his damp bunk, he stumbled the few feet to the galvanized steel trough. His head hurt. His eyes were bleary and red in the rough reflection of the tiny metal mirror. Slowly

Powmia shaved, rinsing the razor in the muddy looking water in a can of bah mi bah. He brushed his teeth and spat the paste onto the metal side of the trough.

Though the impulse was strong to quickly eat the breakfast of powdered eggs and nearly uncooked sausage, Powmia forced himself to eat slow. He didn't want the day to begin. And he didn't want the day to begin again in another forty-five minutes. But it was Powmia 's auspicious duty to make the day begin again.

At every base in Vietnam, in every company area, the dawn came twice; once as the sun rose over the steamy jungle and once again after those black clouds that slowly rose to blot out the sun had dissipated.

After breakfast Powmia and the rest of the motley dregs who had been busted in rank for sleeping on guard duty or some other unforgivable infraction like getting crazy drunk or high to escape the drudgery of war would line up for morning police call.

"All I wanna see is assholes and elbows!" shouted a newly promoted and puffed up buck sergeant who had replaced Jenkins.

Powmia, along with the rest, started his sweep across the field separating the two rows of hooches, picking up all the cigarette butts left from the open-air movie the night before. The movie was *Dr. Zhivago*. But Powmia could not see the movie. He had been scrubbing out garbage cans.

While Powmia walked bent over searching the ground, he looked for those distinctive ones, the ones from which he might be able to squeeze a few strands of strong Vietnamese can sah. Powmia had discovered that in his stoned condition, he had misplaced Fillmore's stash. Now looking for roaches would be the only way to save up a little bit of enjoyment for the end of another wasted day.

Policing up the flicked away cigarette butts and roaches, the latter of which went into his shirt pocket, was just the first of Powmia's

nasty duties. The next assignment was exclusively his own. That duty was downwind and at the latrine from whence one of those black clouds inaugurating the second dawn would come.

Freddy Powmia carried a long metal rod. One end was fashioned into a hook. He went to the leeward side of the latrine building. Doors opened from the bottom of its rear wall. Powmia pulled them up like flaps. He reached in with the hook. A clank of metal sounded; three times the clank of metal. Powmia pulled out the three chopped down oil drums, one for each black hole in the latrine. He pulled the three chopped down oil drums into the open filled to the brim with human excrement topped with an icing of wadded toilet tissue.

One by one the three were dragged across the ground to the middle of a large field. Powmia had a can of kerosene and sprinkled the contents over each of the three drums. He lit a match and threw it into one and with a

"flunf" a hideous black cloud rose to heaven. Three time there was a "flunf" and three times a hideous black cloud rose to heaven. Powmia moved away from the heat and lit a cigarette at the dusk he'd just created descending just after breakfast.

Latrine duty did not mean that Powmia did not still pull K.P. To the contrary, he was ordered to pull K.P. after dinner indefinitely. After scrubbing pots and pans he scrubbed down the insides of the garbage cans until they shined. By the time everyone had been off duty for three to four hours Powmia was trudging back to his hooch.

Powmia had decided he wanted to look at the snapshots of Ho Chi. Minh. They were beginning to slowly get under his skin in some strange way.

When he got back to his hooch he opened his locker to remove the snapshots, which he had separated from the others and held together with a rubber band. But he couldn't find them. He began feeling into the

dark corners of the locker with hands of irritation. Still he could not find them.

Suddenly Powmia felt a presence behind him. He looked around. He saw the 4th G.I. with two MP's behind him. The 4th G.I. held up the small clear plastic bag.

"Looking for this?" he asked flatly.

"Huh?" replied dumfounded raising himself with much fatigue.

"We found it in your locker," the 4th G.I. said. He seemed to be in charge. With his free hand he held up a slim billfold. He flipped it open. Powmia read it. The pertinent information was clear:

Joseph F. Welch, Criminal Investigation Division

"Cid," Powmia muttered unbelieving.

"Brilliant deduction," the 4th G. I. replied flatly with an hint of impatience. "And you're under arrest."

In his other hand the 4th G.I. held up the familiar small plastic bag bound up with

rubber bands. Powmia could see the tiny sticks and seeds inside. It was Fillmore's stash.

## THE SHITPIT

Colonel C.S. Poole strode toward the door. There was a meeting with General Feuds, who was the head of the works, and several other lackeys who would never get anywhere because their heads were mounted on springs.

Colonel Poole was disturbed by a mounting problem. He was downwind and a regular person. "Two mornings! Unheard of!" Colonel Poole muttered to himself.

He strode toward the door and opened it. There was brass all over the place. No one was lower than a major. They all wore dress uniforms all chock full of ribbons and shined metal.

"Yer late!" barked General Feuds.

"Sorry sir," replied Colonel Poole. "I woke up at the wrong morning. So I got a late start."

"Very well Colonel. Sit down. But if it happens again I'll have your leaf. And you'll have a hard time pickin' up the pieces,

understood?" General Feuds was a man who believed in understanding.

"Understood," said the Colonel snappily.

"Very well," barked General Feuds, "let's get on with it. First, introductions. Clockwise from my right: Brigadier General Shad, Colonel Poole, Colonel Rotor, Major Beans."

General Feuds believed that no gestures were necessary. He also believed that being a full fledged General with four stars on the lapel gave a certain weight to the body so that the only function it served was to get from one place to another. A piece of brass separated one from the run of the mill grunts and the grunts were the warm bodies used to do the actual work. The brass was endowed with the mental facilities. The Army was one big, well-oiled machine and the highest rank attainable in it meant that there was little use for the body left, which everything could be done by the mind. Why point a finger when there was the

old age tested method of speaking from the mouth. Thus was General Feuds' belief.

"The problem," shouted General Feuds sitting still and constipated, "is this: The size of the present facility has grown at an impressive rate over the last couple of years. It has grown at such a fantastic rate that this base is a polyglot of a lot of fuckin' things. Fortunately, we've been able to maintain order. However, by the sheer size of this base we find it necessary to consolidate several separate facilities. Our likable Colonel C.S. Poole has suggested a starting place. And since it involves the existence of a personal problem to Colonel Poole, we should eliminate the problem so that the elite sitting in this room with me can function as a unit.

"Let me briefly outline the problem to you, though most of you have some wind of it anyway. Colonel Poole has this problem getting up in the morning. It is because, he says, there are two mornings and Colonel Poole always manages to wake up at the

second morning. By that time the day is shot. Of course, if it weren't for the odor of this second morning I don't think Colonel Poole would ever get up. At any rate, gentlemen, the problem is this: Each company has been assigned the duty of disposing of issue, according to the standard method. That means the sun shines only between the time of the first dawn, or about 0530, and the second dawn 30 minutes after 0930 hours when each company disposes of a day's and a night's supply. As a result, gentlemen, we find that the dense smoke blots out the sun. Also, and this is the major brunt of the problem, because these issue burning areas are dispersed over the entire base, much of this black heavy smoke carries a heavy pungent aroma down wind over much of the camp. There are even rumors, mind you gentlemen, that the Viet Cong move under cover of it. In plain English, gentlemen, the second night, which is just before the second dawn that manages to break through at about 1000 hours, stinks to high heaven.

"I have consulted with several high ranking engineers. They tell me the best solution is to burn the issue in a central, consolidated location, downwind from the entire base. We have found an ideal location. Let me briefly outline what this operation entails:

"It has been proposed that we continue to burn the issue. Most efficient. However we will not do it on ground level, but use a pit dug to specifications of one hundred yards by twenty-five yards and four feet deep. One end will have a ramp so that a truck can drive in. A fleet of trucks manned by nationals will be sent out every morning. These will go to the specific company areas and pick up the receptacles in which the issues have been deposited. They will leave empty receptacles in their place, thus keeping receptacles circulating. After each truck is loaded, it brings its load, or loads . . . , "General Feuds chuckled. But when, under the pretext of being intently interested, no one caught the joke, his chuckle turned into a

frown. He continued, "... they bring their loads and drive them into the pit, dumping the contents, eventually filling the entire length, width and depth. When it is filled to the brim," and General Feuds' face once again turned into a smile with a child's glee in his eyes and a flush in his cheek, "it is set on fire."

"I see," said Colonel Poole. He blew out his cheeks.

"One question sir," piped Major Beans. "Where does the Army plan to build this facility?"

"Oh, yes," replied General Feuds. "The area we have selected will link up with the stockade facility and will work as a combined operation with it."

Everyone looked at each other quizzically. There were suspicions in everyone's mind but only Major Beans had the courage to expose his own.

"Is there any reason behind combining the facilities, sir?"

"Yes there is," barked General Feuds. "By combining the two facilities we can utilize manpower from the stockade, at no extra charge to the Army. Also it would allow us to employ gooks for only half a day. That means further savings. And, if I may back up for a moment, it is by a process of elimination the only downwind location left. Furthermore, there's no way we can get the gooks to man this facility because they simply won't do what has to be done."

"And what is that, sir?" interjected Major Beans.

"My engineers have told me," began the General, "that the issues will burn down only half the depth, about two feet. At that point it will smolder out, leaving half the total amount of issue unburned. Our plan is to utilize inmates from the stockade, have them form a single line and go into the pit and turn the issue 'over with shovels, thereby bringing the bottom half up so that it, too, might be incinerated."

At this point Colonel C.S. Poole's complexion turned olive drab. He shot up and holding his hand over his mouth ran, puffy cheeked, from the room.

\* \* \*

Freddy Powmia stood under the torrid Vietnam sun wearing rubber pants. He had a shovel in his hands. The air closed in on him. The first couple of days he had wretched horribly. He had to be helped away. But he learned that if he could control the nausea he would be rotated off the detail more often. The object of the game was to give as many inmates a taste of the shitpit as possible.

Powmia had been on the shitpit detail for a week. This would be his last day until his turn came up again in about two weeks. He had gained control of himself by gritting his teeth and locking his jaw muscles.

The sergeant gave the order to move out. Everyone jumped in as if into the shallow end of a swimming pool. Powmia started slowly to work. Everyone in the line knew to

move slowly because to sweat meant that more shit would adhere to the skin. Each step made a sucking sound and slowly the brown thick paste replaced the putrid liquid ashes.

Powmia heard the sound of the Huey in the distance and paid little attention. But the sound grew louder and soon the blat blat blat blat of the rotor blades was becoming deafening. He quickly looked over his left shoulder and got hit with a soft turd that ran evenly down his cheek. The Huey was directly overhead and the rotor blades were roaring in Powmia's ears. Shit started swirling upward in the wash of the blades. For a minute Powmia could not breathe. He closed his eyes and tried to bury his chin in his chest.

"Keep moving. Keep moving!" blared the loudspeakers. Powmia could not see. The sound of the Huey started to fade but he could still feel the wash around him, his skin covered with a fine brown film.

"Keep moving! Keep moving!" blared the loudspeakers. Then a laugh blared into

Powmia's ears. "Keep moving, motherfuckers!  
Keep them shovels moving!"

Freddy Powmia wretched horribly.  
Everyone in the pit did.

## THE DAMNATION OF SERGEANT TERRENCE

Sleep had become odd for Powmia when he got to Vietnam. More often than not, sleep was black and dreamless, quick and deep. But every now and then sleep and waking infused each other, like that first night in Vietnam when he pissed the bed during a rocket attack which he never remembered.

At times sleep seemed to be protective to Powmia, both in its ability to completely blot out an occurrence or to either transform reality into a dream state. In at least one instance, sleep provided more illumination, a greater sense to reality, than reality itself. Reality had by then been altered by a consciousness that had adjusted to the facts and consequences of warfare.

One morning after breakfast, and a night on duty sitting by the radio waiting for warning of rocket or mortar attack, Powmia hit his cot like that proverbial lead sinker and fell into a quick deep and dreamless black sleep.

When he awoke around five in the afternoon, all sticky and sweaty and ready for a shower whether stone cold or not, he learned that there had been a daylight airstrike about three quarters of a mile from the perimeter that bordered their unit. Powmia also learned that the F-105's had nearly scraped the tops of the company's hooches during their bombing approaches. Powmia had a hard time believing the reports of all the excitement. And with the concussion of clusters of bombs going off as near as they did, combined with the screams of turbojets just beyond the reach of an upward extended hand, nobody quite believed that Powmia could be completely ignorant of the incident either.

During another incident, again at Cu Chi when Powmia was again on night duty, he was taking his turn in rotation for perimeter duty. It had been a quiet night, relatively. Powmia and a few of the other G. I. 's had been taking turns watching the activity in the darkness out yonder through the starscope.

They were watching some Vietnamese disappear into a tunnel entrance in the chemical desert around Cu Chi that, during daylight only a few hours before had looked sterile and barren with only lifeless stubble of the one time jungle.

When morning came Powmia had expected to be given the opportunity to sleep. But he was kept awake and waiting. Right after lunch he was assigned to a search and destroy mission to comb the area he had been watching the night before and blowout the tunnel entrances. But no one could find any tunnel entrances in the particular area they had watched the night before.

Fatigue had confounded Powmia's confusion on the way back. It was all he could do to search the dank interior of the APC that had carried them outside the base. Among all the space age technology, that cold and indubitable science that provided all these new tools of war, there was something mystifying going on that Powmia could not fathom. But

by the end of the day Powmia was too tired to try and figure anything out. After supper Powmia hit his cot fully expecting a deep, black dreamless sleep. Sleep would come quick but not as he expected it would be.

Freddy Powmia had a dream. He dreamed he awoke the next morning and he couldn't find any American G.I.'s in his immediate company area. It was dead quiet. No periodic artillery booms, no sound of aircraft. He sensed that something was terribly wrong.

Coming around the corner of his hooch, the corner that had the greatest cover provided by a sandbagged conex and an Angry-46 perched up on cinder blocks, he caught sight of a uniform before reflex made him duck back. The uniform was of a different color than his olive drab one and was cut differently, which meant it belonged to a different country and a hostile one at that. Most friendly countries used U.S. uniforms or ones that resembled U.S. uniforms. Powmia got a closer look and saw

that their guns were different; that they were carrying AK-47's and not those friendly M-16's.

The strange looking soldiers were silent, the kind of silence that accompanies diligent searching. But Powmia knew these soldiers spoke only Vietnamese and they were searching for him. He must have been the only one or, at best, among the last remaining Americans. Powmia had not known where the others were, whether they had all bugged out in the night, or whether all the G.I.'s had been executed at dawn in a quick frenzy of small arms fire that Powmia slept too deeply to hear.

Powmia knew they were closing in because there were more and more of them. As he crept around each hooch it began to get harder and harder to elude them. It was almost as if they had come right out of the ground, silent and sudden and had taken everyone by well-coordinated surprise.

Powmia was in the process of barely succeeding evasive action against a Vietnamese rifleman behind him when he turned the

corner of a hooch and nearly fell into the lap of one of the strangely uniformed men.

"That's it," he nearly spoke above a whisper when he snapped into waking. It was quiet all around him in the night. It was a quiet that was not only uncommon, but also downright spooky and ominous.

But after Powmia had got busted when CID found the con sah in his locker, sleep ceased to be as illuminating. Nor did sleep protect him from overly threatening happenstance.

After the endless green rooms of incarceration that surrounded all the deliberations, hearing and final court martial proceedings, the gloom of reality was infused with a comforting dreamlike surrealism, almost as if magic were somehow seeping right out of the ground.

Three months of incarceration at LBJ was marked by timeless boredom, marked by duty that was not a welcome relief. Powmia understood better Dunbar's contemplation of

boredom in *Catch-22*. Time had become as distorted as reality itself.

But if waking sleep had protected Powmia during the rigors of incarceration, the same waking sleep, like an inversion of that dream in Cu Chi, illuminated Powmia when he was released from confinement and assigned to pick up the dead. Powmia was assigned to a unit without name, populated by G.I.'s without names or faces in which to remember, that made runs to used battlefields in a "shithook" filled with empty body bags.

When the "shithook" would begin to descend into an area where the dead G.I.'s were to be picked up, a stench would reach up out of the earth and seize him even before touchdown. Beneath him the olive drab fatigues the G.I.'s had worn would have become faded by the searing sun and the fabric weakened by the bodies bloating out of proportion.

It had no longer become a fact that someone else had no life any longer. There had

no longer been any notion in Powmia's mind regarding whatever a G.I., whose side had been blown away or who had been booby trapped in a pit of shit smeared pungi sticks, might have become if this whole nasty experience had never come along.

Taking the bodies of his countrymen who had died over here in Vietnam and shoving them, or pieces of them, into rubber bags and stacking them in neat rows in the cargo bay of the Chinook day after day made Powmia search for the wounds on himself; search for what he had been deprived of. All the G.I.'s have gaping bloodless wounds or missing parts and Powmia had none of that.

Powmia had begun to feel naked and alone. The whole experience had begun to feel as if it had lasted an eternity and that it would continue to last an eternity because, ultimately, Powmia had come to believe that the only reason for living was to carry away those who departed from the living.

The constant stench of rotting American carrion had begun to work its spell upon Powmia. He began to devise a plan; a plan to seek the place to which that stench of death had drawn him. Powmia had decided he would re-enlist. He would take his 30 days leave in some authorized R&R location and sacrifice reckless acts and heroic status to some sort of release and then to a forgetting oblivion. There would be those back in the world, he would make sure, who would never forget him.

After spending what Powmia had thought would be his last free 30 days in Sydney Australia, running after every illicit pleasure he could find and cram into an all too short a leave, he headed back to Vietnam prepared to sacrifice his life to that release from the burden of life.

Powmia had slept all the way on that return flight from Sydney. But the irony of fate had had another twist when Powmia's new orders had read: Vung Tau. At first he did not

feel that lucky. Six more months of duty in Vietnam. And it pissed Powmia off that they would be served in the safe haven of Vung Tau, the "in country" R&R center which stuck out into the South China Sea with a huge build-up of American, Australian, ARVN and ROK troops to insulate the city from the war raging further inland.

Not only had his presence in Vung Tau stymied Powmia's search for the death, of which he had grown jealous and envious, but he began to discover slowly that he liked the licentious life. It was like having his cake and eating it too. It was a kind of life that contained within it a wasteland of no promise whatever of the future.

Freddy Powmia ended up in Vung Tau where the dreamland of the subconscious really began to ooze up into waking reality. Had the numbing routine of combat completely twisted his perceptions, or did Vietnam wash everyone with some sort of

peculiar malaise that would persist right along with the jungle rot?

\* \* \*

### Powmia's potential buddies in Vung

Tau were struck with awe over the fact that he was from the boonies by way of LBJ and dead body duty combined with a crazed and lost 30 days in Sydney. Powmia was struck dumb by Vung Tau. He didn't understand why he had ended up in Vung Tau and why he was ordered to a commo section of a transportation company. He could only conclude that the Army had put itself into a quandary over where to put him as a result of his decision to re-up. Someone needed a floating grunt and Powmia had been in the right place at the right time to fill the bill. That was how Powmia figured it.

Two of Powmia's first acquaintances were from the commo shed, which was actually a room in the rear of the building containing the orderly room and the

commanding officer's office. One was the NCO in charge, a buck sergeant by the name of Terrence and the other was a full blooded Sioux Indian by the name of Redhorn. Redhorn and Powmia would be Sergeant Terrence's main grunts. Redhorn was a Spec / 4 and Powmia had just been given back his PFC stripe for either schlepping dead bodies or re-enlisting, he wasn't quite sure. Powmia, though older and tempered by the crucible of combat, would turn out to be Redhorn's main grunt; a kind of Pancho Sanchez to Redhorn's brand of quixotic engagements.

As an introduction to Vung Tau, the Sarge and Redhorn stuck Powmia into a jeep and with the Sarge madly behind the wheel they gave him the grand tour.

"You may have action out there in the boonies, but we've got action here too," Terrence grinned slyly and slyly betrayed the crew cut gung-ho portrait that had earned one draftee the rare stripes of a sergeant. Redhorn, laughing, slapped Powmia on the back and

chided, " . . . just what an old war horse like you can use."

Neither was kidding. Under the high trees that grew over the buildings of Vung Tau were colors Powmia had not seen in quite some time, with the recent exception of his foray into Sydney, Australia. Those colors gave the subtle darkness of mid-day under the trees a strange glow. Exotic smells exuded from almost nowhere; sweet and lightly spicy smells that mingled with the salt sea flavor of the South China Sea at the end of town. Such smells Powmia would never smell anywhere else on earth and never be associated with any other name other than Vung Tau.

Then Powmia saw something remarkable, something that stunned him. He saw girls. They were not the slight brown young women he had been used to seeing in brightly colored ao dais, or some variant of "native dress". Powmia saw young girls as he had remembered them from a past a little more distant. It was a memory of America; a not

long ago time of high school and summer nights. Small groups of young Vietnamese women wearing American clothes in colors that verged on garish parody were gathered on the corners of the streets of Vung Tau. Near the groups were signs that said things like; Miami Lounge, New York Bar, Lilac Bar, The Dragonfly, and Spring Flower Lounge.

"You like that?" Terrence grinned upon seeing Powmia aghast and staring at one woman in a mini-skirt that he hadn't as yet even seen an American woman wearing. Powmia had only just heard of the mini-skirt fad sweeping England and the United states.

Powmia grunted something non-committal and slowly swung his gaze toward Redhorn behind him. Redhorn was smiling at him with a steady knowing look. But Powmia did not know what Redhorn knew.

"Anything you want," Terrence began, "anything at all you can get in this town."

"Including a bad case of brand X," piped Redhorn.

Terrence headed the jeep toward the outskirts of town, but not in the same direction from which they had come. As Terrence weaved the jeep deftly among the bicycles, ox and pony carts, the slower moving lambrettas and the Vietnamese walking in the street he pointed to the tallest building in Vung Tau that suddenly became visible in the distance, over the low roofs in a clearing through the trees.

"See that?" Terrence said. Powmia nodded. "That's the Sea Horse. Whatever you want; blackjack tables, roulette, craps, choice baby sans, exotic sex. All number one place. If it's not there, it doesn't exist."

Redhorn was ominous in his silence.

Terrence took the jeep out of town on a road that was closer to the coastline than it was to the huge sprawling military base and airport that sat a little deeper into the peninsula. The Sarge reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a pack of Salems and steadyng one hand on the wheel zipped open the pack with his teeth. He popped a few of their filtered ends

out rapping the pack across his finger on the wheel. He offered the pack toward Powmia. It was a customary gesture so Powmia took one. Redhorn was ominous in his silence. Powmia could just feel him back there. He took one not thinking the taking of the offering was why Redhorn waited without anxiety but with objective and patient curiosity at what the white man does and how he does it.

Suddenly Powmia saw the obvious. There was no sharp cut end at the tip of the butt he pulled from the unsuspecting pack. Instead the end was twisted in order to not let the contents spill out. Redhorn leaned back in the jeep where he liked to sit satisfied he's being entertained. The Sarge smiled.

"Go ahead," Terrence smiled taking out one for himself, "just smoke it like a cigarette. Ditch it if you need to." Powmia was soon to learn that one could not get a legit pack of Salems anywhere, including the PX.

Powmia took that familiar long drag from the "ready roll", as Terrence called it, after

Terrence lit it with the clack of his Zippo. He handed one to Redhorn and he smoked away in silence. From that point on none of them ever came down again in each other's company.

After Powmia, Terrence and Redhorn finished their respective smokes, timed just right, they stopped at a roadside stand overlooking a valley of dragonflies by the beach far below. They drank coke that tasted a little different because it was made in Vietnam and not shipped from the states Powmia looked down the road he had just traveled to see a determined face of an olive drab deuce and a half lumbering toward them. Dragonflies waited, hovering still as it passed not seeing them, its crew frowning vigilance. Olive drab protected the three from danger of a rough inquisition. Dragonflies sought peace, and peace war motionless.

The three finished their cokes, underpaid the proprietor, and climbed back into the jeep with Terrence behind the wheel

being as crazed as ever peeling out up the dusty road. A Huey blat-blatted toward them its spindly runners readied to light upon any place with secret indefinable motivation of an insect. On a knoll along the descent of a hill a ruin stood indefinable left by French eons ago. Land flattened out rotting smells creased their nostrils.

"Coming around to the city dump," Terrence chuckled. "Maybe we'll see some gook out there getting the week's groceries."

Powmia almost laughed looked at Redhorn waiting for him.

The large concrete building in ruins like an old Roman or Greek temple nearly hung low in the air. Large chunks of the edifice had crumbled off it and so had the ground around it like the sea had come in and washed away everything but a perilous pedestal upon which it stood. Gulls flew their lazy scavenging circles everywhere laughing hawking. Strewn across turgid trampled sea of sand all around the ruin standing almost majestic and

dignified, garbage stewed fetid under a hot sun. The Sarge drove the two passengers silent and barely breathing past a bazaar of shit encrusted newspapers, rinds of tropical fruits, blood clotted rags dark as oil, dead premature fetuses, rags of clothes worn out by sweating nights, broken glass from myriad broken bottles of ba mi ba. The road obsidian reflecting no light. A fresh wave of sea breeze hit them as the Sarge steered the jeep around gentle turn past dump the road still obsidian smoothed by millions of years of use. Level now with surf close by beach houses off limits to G.I.'s open and airy for lounging Vietnamese in distance. Then the road bent back inland toward the base the tour reaching a lazy end.

"Anytime you wanna catch a cool smoke," Terrence said, "just grab a jeep and take this road. It'll iron you out just fine."

Powmia looked back at Redhorn who smiled slight and sly and nearly winked.

"And tonight," the Sarge continued, "we'll show you around, introduce you to

some baby sans who'll treat you just right,  
won't they Redhorn?"

"That's right," Redhorn replied talking  
nearly for the first time since getting high.  
"Anything you want as long as you got the  
money to buy it and sometimes if you work it  
right you can get it for free."

Powmia was to later learn that Redhorn  
got it for free more than often being that many  
Vietnamese considered Redhorn as one of  
them.

The Sarge brought the jeep back  
through the base through the back way near  
the Vietnamese cemetery the stones overturned  
by vandals.

Still there was work to be done stringing  
new wire along the perimeter connecting  
unused bunkers their sandbags dry rotting  
machine gun mounts rusting in dead still  
sunlight. A good time to play "rat patrol"  
spinning the jeep around crazy in loose sand  
like old movie North Africa daredevils in  
World War II shootout.

"It had been a long and varied sentence." Powmia said to himself when he found a moment when he was alone back in the company area. He said it for no other reason than the fact that he was stoned. He said it in reference to the past months since he was arrested in Cu Chi. He had told himself, particularly since reenlisting, that he would take every advantage of every free moment the Army could give him. That small blessing began that evening when he and Redhorn and Sergeant Terrence went to town.

It was the kind of nighttime in Vietnam that Powmia never thought he would ever experience. Before the nights had always been within the perimeters while the deep settling funk from the jungle would roll in and fill the darkness with its smell.

Powmia, Terrence and Redhorn jumped out of the three quarter by which they had hitched a ride. Vung Tau at night was like a dull carnival and the night smell of the jungle was mixed with the smells of the juices of vice

and spice, oriental spice. The young girls who had looked grotesque in the daytime had taken on an exotic luster in the nighttime. The indirect lighting in the streets had proffered everything with a sense of mystery. It was a mystery conjured up with the influence of a liberal dose of the con sah they had smoked.

Powmia, Terrence and Redhorn clomped into the Miami Lounge, sat down against the dark velvet red wall, colored light infused smells of orient and South China Sea.

"G.I. buy wickie for baby san?" each was asked almost the instant they sat down. Each said yes because each wanted the company of a woman.

After Powmia said he would buy her a drink she hopped up from her seat and sat on his lap. She read his name ff the top of his left breast pocket.

"Hi, Powmy," she said, her face close to his, her eyes deep inside their oriental shape, "my name is Meo. I think you number one G.I."

And with that she planted a lingering kiss upon his mouth, a wet kiss that spread across his face sucking it into some recess of her being that Powmia initially feared.

After a little small, really small, talk she asked, "You wan' to go movies with Meo?"

"No," replied Powmia afraid of the dark in a theatre where he might be killed or kidnapped and never come out free to go back to the security of the base.

"You wan' come home with Meo?" she asked. Powmia liked the idea. He felt a strange tug of curiosity inundated with sensuality. She hadn't asked him after all for a mere short time. But Terrence and Redhorn must have been bored.

"Come on," Terrence commanded and Powmia, not feeling confident enough to try the town on his own and wanting the promise of the guided tour would provide, began to get up.

"You come back?" Meo asked, a genuine look of disappointment in her eyes. "You remember Meo?"

"Sure," Powmia said parting on Terrence's and Redhorn's coattails and thinking she was a good little actress.

The three had ended up in the Spring Flower Lounge. It was 9 PM. Curfew was at 10 when they had to be back. Terrence had found someone with whom he had been before. She had a skinny face and long hair. She wore an ao dai, not the mini skirt or jeans all the others in the bars wore. At twenty minutes after nine Terrence and the girl he had kept referring to as Bon Bon, Redhorn and Powmia, and two other girls who Terrence and Redhorn had not seen before piled into a lambretta and sped back on the road toward the base. But they stopped somewhere along the way and everyone got out. It was dark and Powmia followed the entourage.

Powmia had learned something about Terrence. In the end he would always get his.

Earlier in the day Terrence had told Powmia that if he, " . . . played it by ear," he could get it for free. It hadn't taken much to learn that Terrence was a sex fiend so Powmia knew what "it" was and since he believed that he could "play it by ear", Powmia didn't take any more money than what he thought he might need far a few drinks. By 10 PM Powmia was nearly broke. All he had was a few quarter and dime coupons, colored orange and blue with portraits of dressed up ladies of stateside generals and colonels on them.

Terrence's acumen for hearing must have been different than Powmia's. Or perhaps Powmia was stone deaf. The two young women who had ridden back with them in the lambretta didn't quite seem to hear either. One was scrawny and the other had big hands for some one who was as tall and thin as she. Redhorn said he would take the latter one leaving Powmia the scrawny baby san. But neither baby san would hear of it unless either

Redhorn or Powmia forked over at least 200 pee.

"Lend me a couple dollars," Redhorn said turning to Powmia. "I was about to ask you for the same thing," Powmia replied. The two baby sans caught on quick for being deaf. Play it by ear indeed. The two baby sans disappeared into the deeper interior of the building for a good night's sleep.

"I guess they're too tired," Redhorn rationalized.

Terrence, Bon Bon, Redhorn and Powmia stood in Bon's room knowing that Redhorn and Powmia could net step outdoors after curfew. Nor could either get back into base. There was only one bed and Terrence, taking grave liberty with Bon knowing it was hers, felt sorry for Redhorn and Powmia; sorry they had been out after curfew and that he was responsible and that Powmia, at least, couldn't play it by ear. Terrence had an inkling of what Redhorn's excuse might be. So Terrence gave Powmia and Redhorn the use of the bed for the

night, in which they both slept comfortably back to back, while Terrence and Bon Bon set up a mat at the bed's foot. It was upon this mat that Terrence pumped and pummeled Bon Bon for several hours before getting a few hours of sleep.

\* \* \*

Powmia soon learned the morning routine, for soon it would be his sole duty after his initial introduction to it. Simply, Powmia was to grab a deuce and a half from the motor pool and drive it right outside the gate where the Vietnamese employees, mostly older women, called mama sans, and young girls, called baby sans, plus occasional pre-draft male adolescents, called boy sans, gathered to be picked up. Terrence and Redhorn came along to show Redhorn the routine which consisted of taking each's security badge as they climbed into the back of the deuce and a half with large bags of laundry they had done during the night for the G.I.'s. Then he would take them to the company area, drop them,

take the deuce and a half back to the motor pool, which was a quarter mile hike up to battalion HQ if no ride could be hitched. Then he would come back and hang the badges on a board to see who was absent.

Also, if desired, he could buy a loaf of Vietnamese bread while picking up the employees. The bread was always warm and moist and tasty without butter. Terrence, who that morning felt a mixture of hangover and good will, bought a loaf.

The second part of the duty was to go around and check on the mama sans, as they were constantly referred to regardless of their composition. This largely unnecessary and frivolous task was carried out around 10 AM. It was a non obligatory duty as much as it was a sanctioned excuse to goof off. And since Vietnamese were supposed to be stupid, ignorant and dirty, it was one of the ways designed to support, in the hearts and minds of the G.I.'s, that the Vietnamese were a lower

order of humanity suited to duty on U.S. facilities as domestics.

So Redhorn and/or Powmia would make the rounds, not so much to act as supervisors, but just to have some fun and joke around a little until lunch time. It was during these morning forays that Powmia got to know Xuyen, a woman in her mid twenties, Sinh, a girl of fifteen, and Ky, a boy who liked Redhorn's playfulness and who seemed wholesome and was always smiling.

Around three in the afternoon the mama sans would come and pick up their badges and then gather out along the street and wait for someone, almost always Powmia, to transport them outside the gate with their bags of dirty laundry, reversing the morning routine. After bringing the deuce and a half back, Powmia was off for the day to either wait for supper or to get an early start downtown.

Powmia wanted two things; his own pack of ready rolls and a little short time even if he had to spend five bucks on each. Terrence

had been good enough to tell him how to score.

"Ask any boy san you see," Terrence had said off handed.

Before heading out Powmia got a mild surprise. Evidently DiCarmello, form his day in Cu Chi, had traveled in different circles than Powmia had for some odd and inexplicable reason, which was alright with Powmia because he wasn't sure he could or would be able to get along with DiCarmello after he had thrown the copy of *Catch-22* that Powmia had given him, with good intentions, into the Pacific Ocean. But Powmia would have to make up his own mind about how he felt about DiCarmello because he was to be assigned to the commo shack the very next day. It never occurred to Powmia to be surprised by the apparently inexplicable event.

Anyway, Powmia didn't care to think about how he felt about DiCarmello. He was too anxious to get to town and score on a couple of accounts. He hadn't really had a

good piece since Cu Chi. There hadn't been any action at LBJ naturally, just a red headed kid who liked to suck dicks every now and then. And no baby san wanted to short time Powmia while he was cleaning up used battle fields. They didn't like the smell of Yankee dead. And his lost 30 days in Sydney was just that. He had only vague recollections of some fleshy porcelain skinned woman with the pupil of one eye larger than the other. So Powmia was anxious to get to town and get stoned and laid, especially after Terrence's disappointing "tour" from the night before.

Powmia asked the first boy he saw, "G.I. want to buy con sah."

The boy, a streetwise urchin of about nine or ten, motioned and led him back into an alley.

"G.I. wan' meet sister?" the boy asked.  
"She fi' teen and virgin."

"No ", replied Powmia, "just con sah."

The boy san got Powmia a pack of Salem, all sealed as if they had come straight

from R.J. Reynolds. Just zip off the cellophane and pop out one of twenty mentholated joints. Powmia gave the boy 500 pee, which was equivalent to five bucks.

Powmia found the brothel Redhorn had told him about. He had suspected that he and Redhorn would get along famously.

"It's a number one place," Redhorn had said grinning. "It's no sweat. A 500 pee note will fix you up with a nice baby san who'll get your rocks off just fine. Just remember to wear a raincoat and don't forget, it ain't the size of the ship that counts. It's the motion of the ocean." And he laughed, almost as if he was laughing at Powmia.

The brothel was in what might have been several back storerooms. The boy led Powmia through the alley to the large cement rooms partitioned off with poles and curtains. A few incandescent bulbs lit the layout unevenly. Nearly naked baby sans, their laughter and language twittering, hung close to Powmia. Their thin bare arms and legs

would open to embrace him gladly. As he looked into the eyes of the woman he would hold as close to himself with his arms as humanly possible and to whom he would totally loose a few seconds, and realized he would then never see again, Powmia noticed she looked familiar. But Powmia wore a raincoat so their juices would not mix. He did not want to know her name nor did he need to. Not knowing her name warded off the familiarity he was feeling grow stronger. Not knowing kept a name from naming someone from his past. He did not want to yell out "Barbara" or "Debbie" behind her and make her turn around to smile at him.

She lay still and gracefully relaxed as he pummeled her, working out his orgasm in the curtained enclosure somewhere in a large concrete room. He listened to the cot squeak rhythmically under her and listened for sounds of others, squeaking maybe to some different and idiosyncratic rhythm in some other parts of the room.

When Powmia got back to base after leaving his wad in a raincoat on a damp concrete floor downtown, he found a good spot. After leaving the pack of ready rolls under the second sandbag beneath the second eave brace from the back entrance of the stateside style two floor barracks, he found the best of all possible spots to smoke the single joint he extracted from the pack. Night had finally fallen black enough.

About fifty yards behind the commo shack and about fifty yards before the abandoned tower along the rickety perimeter facing toward the South China Sea and the city of Vung Tau was a large open concrete lined cesspool. Through the middle of the cesspool was a wide concrete partition wide enough to walk upon, as did an occasional NCO on his way to or from the NCO club. Powmia chose a spot on the partition, sat down and lit the joint. After all, the smell of fermenting sludge no longer bothered him. Besides, if someone

happened along he could just flip the shit into the shit.

It was tropical wartime at night time. No breeze. The sludge reflected no light. The guard tower took on its own silhouette against the sky lit a shade lighter by illumination of Vung Tau. Sound of papa san's shit pump invaded Powmia's ear. Huge sandbagged and never used bunker behind his right shoulder sank in darkness. Huge insects with lights flew into the base airstrip each calling a mechanical call. Red light on microwave dish on VC Hill winked incessant greeting to metal strip insects bearing Yankee venom.

Don't fuck with us. We sting unto death. Globes of gas and incandescent filaments pointed out what Powmia had learned. Over there was Crapshooter, champion go-getter of downed Hueys. Over there screaming C-123's were silent next to empty machine gun mounts of decrepit perimeter defense bunkers where spanking new Huey Cobra sat exposed to view.

Powmia flipped the filtered roach with some shit still in it into the shit and got up to return to the commo shed. He could see a light on like a light of a beckoning summertime back porch. The sand gave under his boots making the short trudge back laborious. He could hear laughter in the light. Music too.

Terrence and Redhorn had come back from downtown. A portable transistor radio tuned to Armed Forces Radio was playing: Beatles, Vanilla Fudge, Strawberry Alarm Clock. Stateside sounds. Wholesome colors and flavors filled Powmia's memory.

Redhorn and Terrence just back from town laughing and jabbering about bar hopping antics. Terrence, eyes spaced wide apart with neat moustache and scrub brush flattop all teeth. Redhorn skin almost same color as Vietnamese smooth as baby's never need to shave high cheeks dark knowing eyes watch impassive as he laughs with Terrence. DiCarmello is there too. But he stands back from them wide grin on his face silent with red

eyes and red lashes. Powmia knows now what he did not know before about DiCarmello, that they would get along famously.

Suddenly Sp/4 Turner, who was Terrence's buddy and roomie in room connected to supply room building concrete left by French along main drag exploded into commo shed. Turner was super clean cut all the time with sharp shaped nose and sneaky smile.

"You wanna go down to the Spring Flower tomorrow?" Turner asked Terrence not planning to stay. "Old Hodge says he's got something for us." Old Hodge was the company's 1st Sergeant.

Terrence seemed to know what Turner's offer meant. Terrence's acceptance of the offer seemed to come at supersonic speed.

Powmia spent half an hour laughing with the reports of Terrence's and Redhorn's antics, dug the music, struck up a much needed yet silent rapport with DiCarmello,

then retired to his second floor upper bunk and giggled himself to sleep.

\* \* \*

First thing Powmia did the next morning, even before going to battalion mess, was to jump into the Angry-46, where Redhorn had spent the remainder of the night banging out EDP's on the teletype, and lit up another joint before the sun would make it unbearable inside. He decided by mid-morning he could hide under the guard tower and smoke his second ready roll between picking up the mama sans and making the rounds to "fuck around" with them while they were on the job.

"What the fuck over," Sergeant Terrence said in his best radio delivery parlance when Powmia dropped the handful of badges in front of him on the desk. Terrence lit up a Winston before going through the badges. Perfect attendance was indicated after he filled the board with each badge displayed.

"We got a new duty for you tomorrow," Terrence said. "You *will* go."

For the next few days while sitting on the deck of an old baby aircraft carrier with a set of earphones clamped to his head and worrying about his pack of ready rolls under the sandbag, Powmia would be acting as ship to shore communications for an import operation. In the morning he would board a Huey with a crew from the maintenance shop to ready a new shipment of Hueys, Chinooks and other assorted aircraft. And while Powmia sat and watched, waiting to be called on the radio, the crew would bleed out the preservative from each chopper's engine, replace it with aviation fuel, attach the rotor blades and fly each one off across the bay toward the airbase. Powmia had been chosen for this duty because he was the lowest in rank. But at least the food would be good; almost gourmet, and the showers would be good and hot.

One other benefit provided by this new duty was that it saved Powmia from one of his greatest fears. For a few days the Sarge had

been hinting that they would have to replace some of the wires strung between poles. It would mean that everyone in the commo section would have to don spikes and climb the motherfuckers. Powmia knew in his heart of hearts that he would not survive and that one of the spikes would slip. He knew he would dangle on the pole for a split second from the remaining spike and then fall on his head and break his back and crack his skull. It would mean that he would spend the rest of his life as a brain damaged paraplegic and for Powmia that was a fate worse than death.

Again, Powmia had lucked out. When he returned he found out that the rest of the commo crew had all donned spikes and had climbed the poles upon which there were wires that needed replacing. There were no accidents and Powmia was glad for the rest of the crew.

The new duty also made Powmia decide that he had to return to the Miami Lounge that night to see Meo.

After supper in battalion mess Powmia caught a ride downtown from Terrence and Turner. Terrence chided Powmia about being careful to not get in trouble. In between he was talking to Turner. But Turner only looked at Powmia suspiciously not talking to him. It was a look Powmia had seen before while doing AIT at Fort Polk. It had come from a sergeant named Dukker who would eventually give Powmia a very hard time. Dukker had even got to the point of threatening to take Powmia behind the barracks and summarily execute him. That look from Turner made Powmia a little apprehensive.

When Powmia walked into the Miami Lounge Meo spotted him right away and led him over to a table by the red velvet finished wall under a gas lamp styled light fixture with a dim bulb in it.

Meo wore her hair cut just below her chin with long bangs that hid her eyebrows and accentuated her eyes, which were deep under smooth lids.

"Powmy!" she squealed, "you remember to come back see Meo."

Powmia nodded and smiled. The smile felt strange on his face. After buying her the drink for which she asked and taking a couple of sips she did not wait to ask him if he wanted to go to a movie. Powmia shook his head.

"You wan' come home with Meo? I ask boss san if I can go for while," she said close to Powmia's ear, punctuating her speech with flicks of her wet tongue.

"I got no money," Powmia lied.

"Need no money. For free because I like," she said looking into his eyes, a slight anticipatory pout upon her lips.

"Okay," Powmia replied.

Once outside Meo attempted to make things as romantic as possible by hailing a ponycart rather than a lambretta. Powmia got in after Meo, and after giving the driver the address, they clopped off.

As the ponycart made its way slowly under the dark trees of night while the

lambrettas, cowboys on motorbikes with their baby sans riding side saddle behind them, old cars and jeeps sped by them, Meo nuzzled close to Powmia. They rode on in silence. Meo had taken his hand and was slowly stroking her shoulder against his body. Finally Powmia responded by stroking her little hand with his thumb. She giggled softly.

"You nice," she purred simply.

Powmia wondered at how easy it was to please her. Was she just being a good actress for some ulterior motive? Could she really like him that much? His wonderings turned to bafflement when, on some dark stretch of road between distant street lamps, the driver stopped and she paid him. His puzzling thoughts continued as she led him across a scruffy plot of ground toward a light bulb about thirty feet away. The path was narrow and worn down to hard packed earth. Outside the panel door by a single low concrete step she squatted to pee. She looked up at him with an affectionate smile and let out a single

embarrassed giggle. She produced a key from her small purse and let them into the darkened interior. She led Powmia by the hand through a couple of darkened rooms until she came to a room with red wallpaper. Suddenly Powmia realized she must like to be surrounded by red. The wallpaper was much like that which covered the walls of the Miami Lounge. The room was just large enough for the bed with black padded plastic headboard and a wooden dresser and small mirror. The only light in the room was the small table lamp next to the bed.

Immediately Meo began to disrobe and Powmia took the cue doing the same. As soon as she dropped her mini skirt Powmia saw the black and white checkered underpants with the big gold button. He laughed.

"You like?" she laughed.

"Yeah," Powmia lied.

They crawled between the sheets together, Powmia following her. And as her arms and legs embraced him that same wet kiss of hers covered his mouth just as her vulva

covered the crown of his erect penis. And he slid into her. As he was working to increase his feelings of passion she began to pant heavily in his ear, which he could feel next to her hot mouth. He could not believe it. No woman ever panted in his ear like that, not Mua Xuân, not anyone.

My, she was good, he thought, and the distraction almost took him away. But almost as if she knew what he was thinking she tightened her embrace and his passion lurched and he could feel her getting softer inside.

"Come on," she groaned.

Powmia was distracted again. Was she getting impatient and wanted to get it over with? Or was she impatient for his orgasm, some form of twisted syntax to tell him to cum?

But her panting got deeper and her body heaved against him luxuriantly.

"Come on," she groaned. "Oh, come on!"

She kept repeating it while Powmia climbed steadily toward orgasm. Finally the

spasms came and Meo opened up to them with long guttural moans, her wet mouth plastered at his ear. After a moment Powmia dismounted her to find her smiling soft at him, her eyes sparkling. Powmia did not understand.

"I'm sorry I took so long," he said not knowing what else to say.

"No sorry Powmy," she said to Powmia's puzzled face. "No need be sorry. I like long time."

Powmia's confusion was suddenly compounded.

"Why you say I no like?" she asked.

"You kept saying 'come on, come on'."

Meo burst out into a laugh.

"I say, 'cam ón'. Mean in Vietnamese thank you." And she laughed some more.

Meo wanted Powmia to come back after work, after curfew, but he declined electing to go back to the base to sort things out. They caught a lambretta back. There were no pony carts, as she might have preferred. But she was

no less friendly on the bumpy ride back to the Miami Lounge. She crowded him up against the enclosure where papa san took control of the handlebars, her arms holding him as if he were a huge teddy bear. The jostling around only served as an excuse for her to hold on tighter, cuddling. Powmia had one arm around her shoulder while telling himself that her silly smile was all a part of a good act.

When the lambretta stopped in front of the Miami Lounge a warm feeling of guilt flushed through Powmia and he reached through the enclosure and gave the driver a 500 pee note, which surprised the driver so much that he thanked Powmia profusely.

"Cam ón. Cam ón," he kept saying, bowing with each utterance. Meo planted a long passionate kiss upon Powmia's mouth while the papa san chattered away at him smiling and bowing.

"You come in have 'nother wickie with Meo. You really number one G.I. I like you

very much," she pleaded with furrowed brow that peeked through her long bangs.

"No," Powmia replied still thinking she was really a good actress. "I got an early call in the morning."

"You come back. Maybe we spend night?"

"Maybe," Powmia said. "But I'll come back." But he wasn't sure if he would.

Powmia walked around Vung Tau for a while smelling the sweetness in the night air before hitching a ride with a bunch of drunk Aussies heading back in their landrover.

After they dropped Powmia off near the old whitewashed concrete building left over by the French that his company used for barracks, supply room and which also housed the battalion mess hall, he ran into Redhorn, who was drunk.

"Hey buddy," Redhorn said slapping Powmia on the back, "you got one of them ready rolls you got hidden away somewhere?"

"Yeah, sure," replied Powmia smiling and glad for his friendliness.

Together they went to the hiding place and Powmia pulled two joints from the pack. After the two went to sit down on the partition in the cesspool Powmia lit Redhorn's then his own. After a couple tokes they began to talk about their lives stateside.

Powmia learned that Redhorn could have stayed out of the Army if he would want to stay on the reservation. But Redhorn wanted to ride the rodeo circuit, which would necessitate leaving the reservation, so he volunteered for the draft to get the obligation out of the way. He then went on about his relationship to the white man.

While Redhorn resented the white man and the white man's restrictions on the Indians, he was willing to work around things and gain the white man's respect.

"Not like Shavinaw," Redhorn said concerning the other Native American in the company. "He gives us a bad name in the eyes

of the white man. Being rebellious and gettin' into trouble and bein' drunk all the time ain't helpin' him. He'll never do any good to his people. That's why I don't associate with him."

Powmia had encountered Shavinaw a couple of times. Redhorn was right on one account. Shavinaw smelled and was wild beyond anyone's ability to understand the source of his wildness. He had been busted down to private and he wore no rank on his arms. His fatigues were soiled and rumpled, not clean and pressed like Redhorn's.

"Shavinaw's just a crazy Indian," Redhorn repeated in drunken meandering, "carrying around all this poison in his belly with his hate of the white man. Not me. I know what the white man did to my people. But I'm still an Indian. I will survive because I watch the white man and learn his ways. I'll be around when the white man's long gone. An' I'll have a clear head. Not like Shavinaw."

Suddenly Powmia remembered Chief White Halfoot from *Catch-22*. The Chief had

been a mess of contradictions as well as Powmia could remember. It was natural that he'd remember Chief White Halfoat, Powmia figured. But he couldn't figure who reminded him more of the Chief, Redhorn or Shavinaw.

The next morning before boarding the Huey for several days' duty aboard the baby carrier, the Croton, Powmia heard that Turner had just been promoted to Spec/5. It provided Powmia with a quick worried feeling and then it passed.

\* \* \*

Days passed.

DiCarmello was gone on a seven day leave. Besides taking a couple of R&R's a G.I. could also take seven day leaves in any of the authorized places which included: Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Sydney, Taipei, Tokyo, Honolulu and Bangkok. Powmia learned that DiCarmello was in Tokyo.

\* \* \*

Days passed.

DiCarmello had gone on a seven day leave again. This time he had gone to Bangkok. He would be back the next day. But in the days that had passed Powmia had made friends with a fellow grunt by the name of Flynn. Flynn had gleaming white teeth when he smiled that were accentuated by yellow hair groomed in simple fashion. Flynn liked to get high as much as Powmia did. Redhorn and Terrence enjoyed a joint now and then but they were not into con sah as much as Powmia or Flynn.

\* \* \*

The afternoon before Flynn and Powmia had taken an afternoon off so that he could show Powmia the opium den he had discovered, the two sat at one of the metal white tables under an umbrella in the enclosed cement slab area along side the stateside style wooden barracks. They had both just sneaked off together.

"This war stinks," Flynn said flashing teeth. Powmia was surprised to hear the nature

of his utterance. It was the first time, except for some nearly verbal thoughts of Powmia's own making, that he heard another soldier say such a thing. At worst, most soldiers had accepted their situation as something to be taken for granted. Even Powmia had entertained such sentiment.

"Has anyone," Flynn continued, "bothered to tell us why we're here, man? These people don't want us here. Not you, not me. They'll take our money but we're intruders, intruders into some internal problem. We don't belong here, man. I feel like something really bad is going to happen. There's a deep evil here, a deep evil . . ."

Not since his dream in Cu Chi did Powmia feel the same kind of foreboding fear he felt responding to Flynn's notions.

"I'll tell you, man," Flynn said, "we're doomed if we stay here. The whole United States is heading for something it will never be able to change, something bigger than the whole fuckin' Army or Air Force, man. This

little country has something here that's beyond us all. We just better wake up before it's too late, that's all, man."

Powmia remained silent. Flynn was on a roll of something. After a brief pause Flynn went on:

"I was downtown the other day and I suddenly realized these people ain't what they say they are, you know man. They're not ignorant or dirty. They're decent: Like the other day I met a girl on the beach. Not one of those girls you meet in a bar, you know man?" And Flynn grinned toothily. "I mean she was wearing silk, man; Vietnamese clothes without all this make-up. And she was beautiful, man. And we talked about painting and music. Rock music. Can you dig it, man? We fuckin' talked about fuckin' art, man . . . "

The next afternoon DiCarmello had returned with some gems he had brought back from Bangkok. He was showing them around, telling people he had got them cheap in Bangkok and could sell them for a better price

in Saigon, for which he had just procured a three-day pass for the next weekend. Powmia displayed a passing and pretended interest. But he was too anxious to get a start downtown with Flynn.

Flynn led Powmia up a narrow alley next to a shady tree. They went under a wooden stairway that led to the rear of the building on their right where there was a small courtyard of packed bare earth. On the far side of the courtyard was a shack with a wire fence around one side. The front door was a tattered green blanket.

"In here, man." Flynn grinned knowingly.

The room was just large enough for the twin size polished wood surface platform type bed. A few pillows were scattered here and there. A young woman wearing Vietnamese clothes was just finishing up with papa san. When she left Flynn gave papa san a 100 pee note and lay down on one side of the bed

opposite papa san. There was a hurricane lamp between them.

Powmia watched the routine as papa san prepared the opium on the end of the long needle, spinning it against the bowl of the pipe over the flame of the pipe. Then after shoving the prepared opium that was on the needle into the pinhole in the pipe's bowl and pulling it out clean, he handed the intake end to Flynn. Flynn put the bowl over the hurricane lamp pressing the pipe against his lips and drew in the smoke as the pipe made a bubbling sound inside. He took three or four good hefty hits.

After Flynn was finished he got up. It was Powmia's turn and he handed papa san a 100 pee note and the routine was repeated for him. The taste of the smoke was a full-bodied taste that Powmia would never be able to forget. He drew four times from the pipe and four times exhaled luxurious streams of blue smoke.

Afterwards, papa san bade them to come sit with him in the lawn chairs in his little

yard. He gave Flynn and Powmia each a joint of con sah. It was not a ready roll but a Cambodian rocket. Powmia had not seen a rocket since he was in Cu Chi. The three of them sat in the lawn chairs and papa san watched the two smoke their joints. Powmia felt very close to papa san, as if he were a good friend. Powmia felt at peace. For the first time since he came to Vietnam, he felt truly at peace.

\* \* \*

Days passed.

Powmia had been out under cover of night on the concrete partition smoking a ready roll. He was on night duty and was waiting until midnight before climbing into the Angry-46 to type out that evening's EDP's for later transmission to Saigon.

He was sitting at the desk, under the harsh vibration of the florescent lamp reading a biography of Ernest Hemingway entitled *The Movable Feast* when Sergeant Terrence banged his way in stumbling drunk.

"I don't believe it," Terrence said, his face red and aglow, his eyes wide and bugged out of his head. "I can't fuckin' A believe it."

"What's that?'" replied Powmia to Terrence's wavering figure against the lusterless texture of night behind him in the doorway.

"I can't believe it," Terrence muttered again, his eyes still wide in disbelief, "it's out there. I fuckin' left it out there in the sand. I was comin' back from the NCO club. I was walkin' across the cesspool and I smoked a . . . you know . . . an' I threw up . . . fuckin' threw up. An' there it was, right there. I threw it up. It looked jus' like a fuckin' American bald eagle . . . same same. Colors and ever'thing. I could see the beak an' wings all spread out, jus' as sharp as on . . . as on a quarter, the claws an' . . . an' the arrows. I swear . . . it was a fuckin' bald eagle!"

Terrence looked right at Powmia, his eyes slightly walled and out of focus. Then suddenly Turner came through the door, his

new Spec/5 insignia still a little stiff on his starched uniform.

"Hey roomie," Terrence said turning when he saw Turner, "hey I got sompin' to tell yer ass . . . "

"What's that?" Turner said grinning at Terrence and his condition.

"Come on," sputtered Terrence, "come on, let's go back to the room an' I'll tell you."

Terrence, forgetting Powmia, turned and stumbled into the night. Turner began to turn to follow him but hesitated. Now alone with Powmia in the room Turner stood for a moment looking at him and at the book still in his hand.

"Hey soldier! You don't read on duty. You got work to do and you're expected to do it!"

Turner's face appeared too shrill to Powmia.

"And unless you want some extra duty you better put that book away and get to work!"

Powmia was dumbfounded as he closed the book and put it aside. A wave of anxiety mixed with anger filled him.

\* \* \*

Days passed.

Redhorn had been drinking since Wednesday. It was now mid afternoon Friday. Powmia was waiting for the mama sans to come and pick up their badges when Redhorn and Terrence broke through the door. Redhorn was cut up and bleeding from scrapes and cuts on his arms and face. Both were laughing.

"You shoulda seen him," Terrence blithered. "This motherfucker gets on this poor farmer's water buffalo thinkin' he's back in Wyoming or somethin'."

"I got thrown," Redhorn added sheepishly.

Later, after night had fallen and Powmia was sitting in the commo shed, Redhorn and Terrence came back. Redhorn had that knowing look in his eyes and a bottle of tequila in his fist. If American Indians were susceptible

to fire water, Redhorn was an exception because Terrence was beginning to stagger uncontrollably while Redhorn was remarkably rock steady.

"Pullout those joints you got," Redhorn said as Terrence tuned in one of the radios to Armed Forces Radio. Chris Noel was playing stateside rock and talking sultry to lonesome G.I.'s. Powmia went to get the pack from their hiding place under the sandbag.

When Powmia came back the Beatles were getting into "All You Need Is Love". Powmia gave a joint to Redhorn and one to Terrence. Terrence clacked open his Zippo, lit Redhorn's then lit his own. Powmia lit his own while closing the commo shed door to the outside world. John Lennon crooned:

*There's nothing you can do that can't be done.  
Nothing you can sing that can't be sung.  
Nothing you can say but you can learn how to play  
the game. It's easy.  
Nothing you can make that can't be made  
No one you can save that can't be saved*

*Nothing you can do but you can learn how to feel  
inside*

*It's easy  
All you need is love . . .*

After Terrence stumbled out Redhorn was still standing. Powmia had a couple sips of tequila Redhorn had offered him and he loosened up to ask a question he had been wanting to ask Redhorn for some time.

"Did you ever eat any peyote?" Powmia asked.

Redhorn fell silent looking steadily at Powmia with eyes that were beginning to cross in drunkenness. He began to unbutton the top button of his jungle fatigue shirt. He reached in and pulled into view a small leather pouch attached to a leather string around his neck.

"This is a peyote button. It's Indian magic," replied Redhorn. Then he went on to tell how, about once every year, his uncle would drive his pick-up truck down to Texas and fill it up with peyote buttons and bring it back up to South Dakota for the celebration. He told Powmia how his family and all the

tribal members would sit all night in a teepee around a fire eating peyote buttons and chanting prayers.

"But I've heard," Redhorn was saying, "about the hippies taking peyote and seeing things. But I never saw anything except . . ." and he laughed, "once I saw a fireplug laughing at me."

Then Redhorn rambled on about riding the water buffalo and how they don't bronk like stateside bulls and how he had to watch out for the water buffalo's horns. He had come close to getting gored.

\* \* \*

Next morning, before taking the rounds to "fuck with the mama sans", Warrant Officer Ettinger, a savvy chopper pilot in the company, stopped by the commo shed. Sidling up he said, "You better cool it. CID's been on your track if you know what I mean. You're real close."

"Thanks," Powmia said simply.

Ettinger gave a friendly wink and exited.

Powmia, naturally, never liked officers. He would always casually walk to the other side of the street to avoid having to salute one if he saw one close by. The only exception Powmia made in saluting officers was that he'd make sure to salute ARVN officers, simply because no one else did, grunt or no grunt. The gesture usually took the officers of South Vietnam's Army by surprise, but Powmia was glad they returned his salute.

Powmia was grateful for Ettinger's warning, and as time passed he realized how much an obstacle his aversion to officers played in a friendship that couldn't be. Powmia certainly did not want to do another stint at LBJ turning shit.

When night came Powmia and Redhorn headed for town. Powmia had a strong yen to see Meo and to stay overnight with her. He had begun to entertain the thought that maybe in some strange way she really did love him.

As soon as they entered the Miami Lounge Redhorn went to the bar to, as he had said to Powmia, "... to give you a chance to be with your honey . . . "

But the moment Powmia sat down at an empty table a strange woman sat on his lap and immediately planted a wet kiss on his mouth.

"Where's Meo? " Powmia asked as soon as he could.

"She go Saigon," said the woman, who was thinner and taller with high cheeks and long hair combed back. "She say I be your baby san now."

"But why did she go to Saigon?" Powmia asked.

"She go have baby," the woman said and planted another that included her searching tongue, as if it were a gesture to help him forget bygones.

Suddenly there was a loud crash accompanied by the sound of breaking glass. It

was enough to interrupt her amorous explorations.

Redhorn had just smashed some grunt's face with an empty Ba Mi Ba bottle. The grunt was reeling back along the bar. Redhorn turned, ducked to avoid a broken bottle swung at him by a grunt in civvies on the other side of him.

"Is the baby my baby?" Powmia asked her.

"No," the woman replied. "Baby Vietnamese baby."

Redhorn was pounding the second grunt down to the floor then turned half way to kick the initial opponent, who was making an effort to rise, hard in the gut. Then Redhorn grabbed Powmia and pulled him off the chair spilling the woman onto the floor square on her ass.

"Let's get the fuck outa here!" Redhorn shouted at him. "No time for fun! Hurry, while we can!"

Redhorn was pushing Powmia through the door into the night, which had just conveniently fallen.

"Run! Before you get yer ass killed!"

Redhorn was pushing Powmia in front of him through a maze of alleyways and narrow streets finally hopping into a three quarter ton where both smoked a ready roll.

"Don't you ever go back there again," Redhorn warned.

\* \* \*

Neon. Neon caught him in the eyes nearly slashing them. Spice and musk on breeze of South China Sea as sweat of mad dash dried in nighttime air. Puddles of monsoon rain reflected neon. Mud of lambretta exhaust and cowboys scooting smart-ass and young. Heavy knives in silk.

Easy to find big room of baby sans writhing with brand X incense funked curtain between poles. Easy to labor birth of seed in her. Easy to cough up a few hundred pees to buy influences, cigarettes. Easy vulva pounded

condomed and stretched to just beyond a short time allotment. Outside scrawning oaks swelter in nighttime. Powmia tastes it, tasted it in her black hair, neon and spice and distant VC Hill.

"You beaucoup sigh," she chuckled after many minutes her naked body oiled in Yankee sweat unbathed teeming.

\* \* \*

Days passed.

Powmia hit the other side of the bunker before breakfast before waking. After breakfast took long way with deuce and a half smoke another before picking up mama sans. Zero eight hundred hours Powmia all red lashed behind cool shades showed up at commo shed. Learned Turner just promoted to staff sergeant. Lead weight of apprehension sank in Powmia's guts. For days Turner' d been on Powmia's ass straighten that gig line get a haircut report for police duty can bust Powmia's ass line him up for Article 15.

Powmia decided Turner had to go and find a way to kill him. Like drop a grenade into his gas tank all wrapped up with rubber bands with pin pulled out. Like to see him take the CO's jeep to foray brown nose to Saigon the gasoline eating away rubber bands' hold on quick death exploding somewhere outside Saigon.

But Powmia shoved into world outside of pipedreams figured he'd hafta kill him with a gun. But every gun was stored in the supply room and Turner had climbed at dizzying speed to be its sergeant. Turner sat on all the guns and can't get one to shoot his ass off. Imagine that? In Nam and can't get hold of a fuckin' gun.

Powmia remembered Dobbs and Yossarian *Catch-22* conspiring to kill Colonel Cathcart being thwarted by a contradiction. Just wasn't meant to be thought Powmia remembering Sergeant Dukker at Fort Polk. Dukker had also driven Powmia to point of seriously considering murder.

Once when Dukker had Powmia up against impossible wall Powmia came down with case of psychosomatic measles. Germ agent had saved Powmia from dire stateside circumstance for cosmic drama in Vietnam yet to come. Clerks in orderly room smiling knowingly had backed away when Powmia had asked for sick leave, showing them the mystery red marks. After spending weekend in hospital only case of measles resting easy Dukker never bothered Powmia again.

At noon Powmia ventured downtown for lunch at papa san's opium den taking long drafts off bubbling pipe sat outside afterward with papa san shooting breeze and smoking rockets. Walked out down alley cool in cloud floating dreamtime. Grabbed a three quarter ton back to base appearing like magic. Be in time for sandwich on duty then take mama sans for a ride.

Powmia sat waiting for deuce and a half with mama sans all of them sitting on bags of cush laundry. High sun shined down gentle

delicate warmth on million ice crystals inside Powmia. Powmia's eyes shaded in dark red glass. Olive drab vehicles pass at child's eye level nostalgic in rhythm established by light year span of time. Mama sans lucid to Powmia's every thought. Language of the breath rendered forgotten and useless. They converse using ancient telepathy. Powmia smiled knowingly at peace they conjured summoned among their coven. Again Powmia felt peace all around. Finally peace. Peace and benevolence of sunshine angels everywhere.

That night Powmia found Redhorn at commo shed his evening's first firewater consummated. Powmia stoned seeing colors splashed against night black sky.

"So you want to try peyote," Redhorn said deadpan. "Here I'll show you Indian magic."

Redhorn reached into his wallet searching obscure compartment with ginger forefinger. He pulled out a round white wafer about the size of a quarter.

"This," Redhorn proclaimed deadpan, "is Indian magic. I carry it everywhere. It guards me. It's only rawhide. But no white man has ever touched it. Only red man. Here," he extended it toward Powmia, "here, touch it. Go ahead."

Powmia hesitated a moment. Then he extended a finger toward it but it only allowed his finger no further than six inches from it. Powmia's whole arm was immobile of intent to reach.

Just then DiCarmello walked in. Earlier at mail call DiCarmello got a letter with a dot of LSD for a postscript. DiCarmello completely transformed flower child colors glowed in his cheeks iridescent day glow aura under tropical holiday in black of Vung Tau. His eyes red glazed dilated kaleidoscope grinned like Smilin' Jack in funny pages, sheep skinned against leather smell of motor oil.

Next day DiCarmello said he got this place drop a pound of con sah into a coffee can just scoop your pipe into it. With five dollar

coupon Powmia went into town late afternoon to buy it, head for hotel down the street from the Spring Flower Lounge. The hotel was the second tallest building in Vung Tau next to Sea Horse Club. Powmia headed for fifth floor via creaky musky elevator single light bulb dull yellow near brown. In room behind louvers of door ceiling fan rotated slowly whirling day glow spiral painted across its blades spiraled hypnotic inward.

Before picking up pound of con sah under jungle fatigue tunic Powmia decided to smoke two ready rolls stop off in second of three floor brothel with private rooms to get a little atmosphere in sunshine through windows. Slender young cowgirl in ao dai came in with long black hair small breast.

Powmia rotting like jungle in Yankee fatigues all funk and olive drab waited for baby san to touch the reach of his trigger finger. Each hook of her ao dai like delicate clasps in lace silk sachet in cool dark corners softened moist nasal passages with exotic

mystery scents. For many minutes Powmia was embraced naked by all things not Yankee; Vietnamese wet, Vietnamese soft, Vietnamese sigh, Vietnamese moan, Vietnamese scent soft in sunshine where can be seen the true expression in the face. Her face was young and the color of the sunshine.

Down by sea night creeping in from it Powmia walked by low picket fence cowboys zipping by lambrettas jeeps midget Chevies, past girls nipple high to him watch them zoom flap flap while slowing their walk past him. Under low trees their trunks gnarled bonsaied behind picket fences painted dark colors. Next block where Powmia with two half pounds approximate in each cavern of sucked breath on curbside lined with PCP their ends jammed in ground and head high. Powmia all loosy baby san treat him right hour earlier. PCP painted white in last of sun and braced by low wall of cement construction blocks. A thin marquis covered the interior. Hotel somewhere far inside. Spacious lobby dark with heavy

smell. Papa san behind desk unshaven in white dress shirt. Block tile floor. Up on fifth floor DiCarmello waited under day glo spiral inward on ceiling fan.

Inside Powmia and DiCarmello smoked pipe after pipe of con sah for hours until dark set without lingering dusk. Smell of street reached into fifth floor room. Powmia and DiCarmello at edge of alien reality. They smoked a couple more pipefuls, each having separate pipes. Each's face glowed like lantered wax.

Bang! Bang! went the shutters of the window. Powmia and DiCarmello jumped. They heard no shouted words only silence. Silence spoke its fear. A knock at the door the first time casual the second time incessant.

"Who's there?" Powmia asked the door trying to sound hard rough.

There was only silence no footsteps shuffling around nothing.

"Who's there?" Powmia asked cursorily knowing there would be no answer in any language.

Powmia and DiCarmello looked apprehensively at each other.

"Open it," DiCarmello urged indicating the door not even a shadow through the louvers.

Powmia disengaged the knob letting the door swing open. Hall lit with yellow bulb looked like no one ever was there, floor tiled blue and white yellow walls.

DiCarmello with grin baseball cap cocked like Smilin' Jack's mechanic set out to find Dragon Lady in her lair at Sea Horse another room in sky over Vung Tau.

DiCarmello was hot for blackjack table high in sky over Vung Tau in steamy secret Asia confluent with exotic Yankee decay in colors dark and old as in *Terry and the Pirates*.

In open bay of three quarter ton Powmia and DiCarmello glide past sidewalk close as fingertips extended and fragile too. Young girls

speak with their thighs under mini skirts  
meshed stockings gartered high and fancy,  
tender skin between spaced blouse buttons  
radiating funk from bare pussy pumped  
Yankee crazy all day all of it as fragile as thin  
delicate china. At nipple height felt them  
zooming in their eyes immobile so you catch  
them. Candy stuck in baby san's hair scent of  
hard candy dropped in cup of tea. Sea salt  
heavy in night air. Cowboys zipped by lone on  
motorbikes. All the losers are grooving.  
DiCarmello grinning chest out baseball capped  
cocked in the funny pages. It seemed like a  
Sunday in some ways. Powmia eased in exotic  
lighting of lobby plush like class stateside  
casino even air conditioning. Smell of Vung  
Tau isolated in cool Yankee atmosphere.  
Everyone was waxed lightly and made up for  
space age light all exotic among palmation.  
South China Sea glare moonlight hue seventh  
floor Sea Horse penthouse blackjack tables  
managed by a pro, waxed sharp savvy  
deadpan. DiCarmello sat at the table where

dealt was the common language of the alien in clubs hearts spades diamonds. Dealer was impatient exercising complete control, Yankee heat fevered in his cheeks. Young baby sandates of roller boys at tables dressed to kill right out of Terry and the Pirates, tattooed men and women painted native with rare jungle nectar Barbary shore. A parrot monkey taciturn watched stilled spectacle of it like slow burn of phosphorescent like Willy P blue green smokeless.

Back at base in Angry-46 where Redhorn was halfway through EDP's . Powmia and DiCarmello like alien invaders have sought company of their own kind pale giants olive drab talking cool from con sah and jungle secretions. Smell of shit in cesspool floodlit edged by Seabees' lumber pile and barracks under construction.

Sergeant Terrence stumbled in from downtown where he had been since afternoon when he went to Xuyen's house for more frequent visits. Terrence had been taking the

responsibility of checking on the mama sans every mid morning taking the opportunity of giving Xuyen his extra treatment. Soon he was showing up at her house somewhere in resident area between the city and the base. Spending whole weekends there too.

Sergeant Terrence stumbled in wearing a bra across his head cups like ears bandaged bashed up high on his head wall eyed drunk looking more and more like Ollie the Dragon. The Sarge more and more telepathic telling DiCarmello Powmia Redhorn the bra is a pretty important trophy. The Sarge drunken jibbered incessant gibberish to their ears, yet DiCarmello Powmia Redhorn grasped the bra was Xuyen' s. Redhorn straight took deadpan delight watching revelation come to DiCarmello and Powmia's eyes.

A little later DiCarmello fell on his cot in full jungle attire. Powmia managed to strip to his olive drab underwear and crashed giggling himself to sleep to colors dancing and carnival

barker with big jaw big grin red lashes straw  
hat cosmic looney tune in his head.

\* \* \*

Days passed.

Redhorn came in that morning bragging about Tom Lin. Redhorn had discovered the special service that could be procured in a barbershop.

“Ooooh,” Redhorn groaned while he related the incident. “Tom Lin is the greatest. She just kept on it till I shot. She just polished that apple right off. Then she rolled over so I could fuck it. I just couldn’t believe it. Powmia, you got to try her. I’ll tell you how to get there. Just ask for Tom Lin. She’ll treat you real good!”

It was a Monday morning and not much was doing. As soon as Redhorn had finished talking about Torn Lin Sergeant Terrence walked into the comma shed with a hangover bad enough to make him less than enthusiastic

about diving into important duties. He hadn't wanted to check on the mama sans for several days because he didn't want to run into Xuyen, who was as mad as a wildcat at him. So the Sarge decided to take off and check out VC Hill before too much more time went by. So they all took off, Powmia, Redhorn, DiCarmello with the Sarge behind the wheel of the First Sergeant's jeep.

VC Hill was off at a different angle from the road to town, at a 90 degree angle to the right. They surveyed the part of the peninsula, greater Vung Tau that they had never seen before. One little yard after another was along the tree lined main drag. Sometimes there was a concrete wall. Jungle thickened as the road began to go up the hill. The road narrowed close up to the jungle.

Near the top, respectfully far enough away from the two microwave dishes, they found the last of the side roads. There had not been that many. At the end of the road behind a thin veil of jungle they found a mason wall of

large stones. As they followed roots and vines with which the jungle was reclaiming the ruin of man's order they discovered the wall was connected to a building that expanded before their eyes. Inside it had either been a barn or a temple. The four had just entered a large room where the sky fell through a network of braces and trusses. Powmia did not like the vibes but the Sarge took a piss against one of the walls and wondered where he was.

By late afternoon there was nothing to do. The four had smoked half a pack of ready rolls on the way down the hill. Then after lunch Powmia smoked another in the swelter tank Angry-46 then joked around with Redhorn and DiCarmello in the commo shed. After Powmia had taken the mama sans outside the gate Redhorn was waiting to introduce Powmia to Tom Lin, about whom Redhorn had been praising all afternoon long.

"Wheeew," Redhorn exclaimed. "You just won't believe it. Just lay back and ride. Oh Tom Lin! She'll polish it off just right."

Redhorn waited outside the barbershop for Powmia. Powmia had gone through the main part of the barbershop, which looked like most stateside barbershops. He had been led up the steps in the back of the shop by Tom Lin. Redhorn had told Powmia to ask for Tom Lin and she was waiting in the back room with the rest of the stable of baby sans.

Upstairs the rooms had been subdivided into enclosures with poles and curtains. As Powmia took his pants off for Tom Lin he thought about the headlines as he might see them on some thumb smeared page in *Real Man* magazine back in the states: "House of Unmentionable Acts. Southeast Asia Snakepit of Poisoned Delights."

Powmia lay back on the cot naked from the waist down and watched Tom Lin.

Tom Lin was young, maybe even a teenager. She had developing breasts with long hair almost to the small of her back and thin but well shaped legs. Powmia watched her bobbing up and down, her head impaled by

her mouth around his cock. He was in a realm somewhere between dispassionate interest and mounting and somewhat clinical pleasure being rendered to a single part of his body.

Powmia thought to himself: so this is what Redhorn was raving about all day long. But maybe Tom Lin had included something that she wasn't including in her session with Powmia, perhaps because Tom Lin had felt an affinity for Redhorn because he had the features of an oriental, because Redhorn had represented something meaningful. Or maybe it had simply been because Redhorn responded differently than Powmia.

Powmia began to latch onto a notion of himself laying there lazy watching himself in the process of inoculating a youthful Vietnamese woman with microbes invading her with Yankee lifestyle, Yankee fashion, Yankee wants and desire, Yankee subjugation, Yankee corrupted wealth, Yankee genocide, Yankee poison.

Finally in a burst of orgasmic spasm separated from embrace, Powmia blew his jism flooding into her mouth, which melted into the crown of his cock. And as soon as he was spent Tom Lin spat the mouthful of his jism violently to the floor. It hit the floor with a loud splat as Powmia got up from the cot. The loud splat was immediately followed by a sizzling sound followed by a whiff of white smoke levitating from that spot upon the floor.

As Powmia reached for his pants Tom Lin laid down on the cot where he had been and spread her legs at him. The lips of her pussy separated slightly, her vulva peeping her intent and punctuating her question:

"G. I. like short time?"

"Naw," said Powmia. "Thanks anyway."

Tom Lin left the room without further comment as he laced up his boots.

Outside Redhorn was waiting.  
"How'd ya like it?" Redhorn asked grinning.

"Nice. Really fine. Number one," Powmia grinned back at him. It was the first and only time he lied to Redhorn.

Redhorn decided to stay in town but Powmia wanted to go back to base so they separated. After supper and night had fallen he went out to the concrete partition in the cesspool and chain smoked a couple of ready rolls. Then he went down to Sergeant Terrence's room because he had told Powmia he could use his stereo any time he liked.

Powmia put on the second side of Donovan's *Mellow Yellow*. It had, been one of Powmia's favorites. He turned the lights out and listened as the eyelid movies danced with Donovan's rock melodies. When the record got to "Hampstead Incident" the eyelid movies began to assume definite shapes; fog, a bare mast of sailing ship, night caressing wooden ship's rails, glitter and sparkles of stars in the fog which began to constitute itself into a wreath leaving bare and starless night sky behind it mixed with sparkling falling raindrops, all of it

dripping sliding down the black wall of the sky  
and against the void, the stars' spangle  
returning close by like sparkle in his eyelashes.  
On the ground the sand arranged in small and  
gentle dunes Powmia's name was etched in the  
sand disappearing as imperceptible winds  
blew away, grain by grain into sparkling air,  
the inscription.

Powmia could see the young  
Vietnamese girls from downtown. Bits of  
colored hard candy were stuck in their straight  
black flaxen hair, their eyes like radar screens  
tuned to his face. They seemed to want  
Powmia only because he had had some kind of  
unique vision of them.

"Hampstead Incident" ended snickering  
at Powmia slyly with a prolonged cosmic  
wink. He listened to the final cut, "Sunny South  
Kensington", its tutti-frutti flaked psychedelic  
colors dancing. After it was over he got up, put  
the record away, turned the stereo off and  
went back to his bunk in the barracks. He

giggled himself to sleep as visions of sugarplums danced in his head.

\* \* \*

After breakfast while on the morning check of the mama sans Powmia ran into Flynn. "Let's go out behind the bunker and smoke a joint. I got something to tell you," Flynn said to him.

When they got back from behind the bunker where they had shared only small talk they sat down under an umbrella on the concrete patio beside the barracks. Sun streamed down around them.

"I told you about Nam," Flynn began referring to the young girl he had met. Nam was her nickname. In Vietnamese the word Nam meant "five", because she had been the fifth child in her family. Flynn relished the irony of it.

"Last night," Flynn continued, "I did something I never did before. Nam and I were walking along the beach. The moon was

shining real nice, man. Then we decided to lay down in a grove of palm trees. It was real nice, you know man? Real nice, the waves beating on the sand and the breeze off the sea. Then we made out for a little while. Then I asked her if I could eat her out. Just like that, man. At first she didn't understand but soon she caught on. And she smiled and said yes and pulled off her pants.

"I gotta tell you, man, it was nice. You dig? It didn't smell or anything. It was clean and real delicate, man, you know? And she squirmed like crazy, moaning softly the whole time, like music to my ears. It was exquisite, man, real exquisite. And then after it was allover she thanked me, man, can you fuckin' dig it? She thanked me and gave me a long kiss right on the mouth, man, right on the mouth."

\* \* \*

Days passed.

One evening Powmia was wandering around downtown digging on things in stoned boredom when he heard his name spoken near

by. Then he spotted Flynn sitting in a lawn chair in the little yard outside the Spring Flower Lounge. The little locust tree had nearly shaded Flynn in complete darkness and Powmia would not have seen him had not his name been called.

"Have a seat, man," Flynn asked as soon as Powmia sat down. In the palm of his hand Flynn had three Cambodian rockets. Powmia's eyes went wide.

"Yeah, sure," exclaimed Powmia reaching for one. He had only encountered rockets when Papa san would give him one after a visit to smoke opium.

"I found a source," Flynn grinned gleaming in the shadows. "Biggest whorehouse in town."

"I know the place," Powmia replied lighting the mutha. Flynn shook a Newport out of his pack. They smoked together in silence, though in different manners and at a different cadence.

Soon the people, Yanks and Vietnamese who were walking by on the sidewalk a few feet in front of them, began to flatten out against the traffic in the street and the buildings on the other side. Everything began to take on that characteristic glow against the din of night.

"Just waitin' for Nam, man," Flynn grinned. Then he quickly changed the subject:

"Ever notice what we're told about gooks," Flynn began, "like how they're dirty and stupid and ignorant? Ever hear anything like that before, man, like before we came over here to this stinkin' war? Yeah man, well I heard it. They said the same thing about colored people back home. Dig? Gooks, niggers, same same. They're worthless, man. Waste a fuckin' life, man. Doesn't matter. Just a gook, just a nigger. It's no wonder some people over here only associate with black soldiers. It's a disease. It's kindred spirits. You dig, man? Fools, man. The Americans are fools just like those whores back there."

Flynn thumbed back at the Spring Flower.

"I tell you man," Flynn went on, "we better get the fuck outa this country before it's too late and leave these people to settle their own problems. They can figure it out. They're smart enough, man. We're the ones who're stupid and ignorant."

\* \* \*

Next morning Powmia was sitting behind the Sarge's desk. Terrence was beginning to make it a habit of coming in late. He was getting short.

Suddenly Little walked in. Little was someone who wasn't little. Little was a plump jolly elf grunt Afro American who worked in the motor pool and who knew Powmia from the times he'd have to find a vehicle to take the mama sans out of the compound in the afternoon.

"I got something for you," Little said handing Powmia a black and white snapshot. "I thought you might like it."

Sitting up against the white concrete wall Powmia could see himself from the chest up wearing sunglasses, baseball cap and wide wholesome grin. The snapshot had been taken the day when he had taken lunch at the opium den. He was reclining upon one of the mama san's laundry bags and mama sans were surrounding him on all sides. It had been the day he had been inundated with the vision of the peace.

"I thought you'd like to remember the moment," Little added, " 'cause y'look so happy."

"When and how'd you take this picture?" Powmia asked.

"I was passing by in a truck and there you all were," replied Little.

Later, after lunch, Powmia and Redhorn decided to go downtown. Powmia had been feeling down and lonely. He was beginning to get a little short. Evidently Redhorn had decided to help. It was then that Powmia

realized that Redhorn was probably his best friend in all of Vung Tau.

Redhorn led Powmia to a back street near the center of Vung Tau. After walking across a small plot of packed earth Redhorn took Powmia into what appeared to be a kitchen. Inside was a middle aged woman and a young woman. She was one of the most attractive women Powmia ever saw.

She shook her head in response to Redhorn's pleadings. But after a few moments she said, "Okay, I'll do it but only because you ask."

She came over to Powmia and led him to a raised area behind a curtain. Behind the curtain was a single bed with a wooden frame. She began to disrobe. Her breasts were full and her hips and ass were filled with youth. Her scent was delicate soap and spice made rich with light sweat. It was her sweat, her juices, that Powmia all cold shower clean partook.

"You know," she had said to him while dressing, "Redhorn very very good friend of yours."

He did not lie to Redhorn when Redhorn asked him if he enjoyed the experience. Powmia nodded smiling afraid to show too much satisfaction.

Later on, after the sun had set, Powmia met DiCarmello, who had just got back from Taipei and feeling blue because business was bad in Taiwan. Evidently most everybody had gone to town because everything was quiet. Soon the only sound they began to notice as they leaned back in chairs near against the front entrance of the bunker was the sound of Papa san's shit pump.

DiCarmello's exploits in Taiwan were not as successful as in other ports of call. Powmia remembered that horse choking wad of Army dollars DiCarmello had after coming back from Singapore. He had translated a handful of gems that were set into a variety of rings and amulets along with several bracelets

made of stainless steel Huey tail rotor timing chains into cold cash, part of which he gambled away at the Seahorse and part of which he used to buy a few choice items to parlay on the market.

DiCarmello had reminded Powmia of Milo Minderbender from *Catch-22* regarding their kind of geopolitical techniques. But DiCarmello operated on a smaller scale and without organizations or at least organizations that Powmia could see or was aware of.

DiCarmello did seem to be a conduit for cold cash but cold cash that merely changed hands. He was a translator of wealth and whose paltry commission was just to feel it run through his hands. It did elevate his station on benders and binges. He had that ability to take leave at will. There was a certain thrill behind his exploits and adventures to ports of the Far East. It was a nice fetish, Powmia thought.

After Powmia and DiCarmello smoked three or four of DiCarmello's ready rolls apiece, their light conversation free associated

from exotic locations that were near yet far away to those exotic locations far away yet near, as near as papa san's shit pump pounding the air rhythmically.

"It sounds like Mrs. Miller is doing a laundry tonight," DiCarmello said toned matter of fact.

"Yeah," added Powmia hearing her washing machine cranking in basement of Levittownsque boxhouse that ran a row in an angle away to their right.

"And I see that they opened the gym," Powmia commented indicating the high concrete walls of the 56th Trans Company's consolidated latrine that stood near the end of the row of houses down to the end of the nearest corner.

Powmia knew that Thompson's Grocery Store was one block beyond the corner with its little brick wall and big picture window on either side of the main door banging shut on a taut spring on the hot night. Next door Doering's Pharmacy with its mixed smell of

cosmetics, patent medicines and chocolates and candy wrapped in cellophane. Powmia enjoyed going in for a milkshake and a pack of cheese crackers.

Then Powmia and DiCarmello talked a little about Mike Cerwinski's pigeons referring to papa san's little shack at the far end of the yards near the pool on a summer eve in suburbia. The pigeons were roosting and silent.

\* \* \*

Next morning the Sarge came in early surprising everyone. He had a funny story. He was no longer spending nights at Xuyen's house. For some reason no one was divulging, Terrence's affair with Xuyen was dead.

The night before Terrence had been drunk and stoned. He had decided on impulse to check out 100 pee alley. While there he had encountered a woman in one of the seedier joints along that notorious dirt path. She had been deaf and therefore dumb.

"I really played it by ear," Terrence laughed as he described how he had grabbed her deaf ears and forced his cock up into her asshole.

"Fucked her right in her ass. When I finished this huge turd . . . Vietnamese shit shot right out of her ass. Must've been a yard long maybe right up to your elbow," Terrence laughed. But he was the only one.

"What did she say?" Redhorn asked matter of fact watching coolly for Terrence's reaction.

"Bef, mef, fa, fe," reported Terrence laughing heartily. Powmia almost laughed but caught Redhorn's deadpan scrutiny of Terrence.

Later on that morning Sinh, a young friend of Xuyen who spoke fluent French and English, stopped by the commo shed. She had come by often after her morning chores to joke with Powmia, Redhorn, DiCarmello and Terrence. But this time Sinh came right to the point.

"You know what Terrence did last night?" she asked Redhorn and Powmia. Both nodded.

"She went," Sinh continued, "to see a dong cot, you know like what you call a witchdoctor? She not like what Terrence do to her. So now Terrence has a curse put on him. In three days his head falloff."

"What Terrence did was very bad. Xuyen say she will never talk to him again. She say if he tries she will kill him, you better tell him. Xuyen say Terrence is really through this time. Finnie."

When Terrence came back just before lunch Redhorn told him what Sinh had told them. This time Redhorn and Powmia laughed at the unlikely prospect of Terrence's head falling off. But Terrence did not join them going about his official business with military demeanor. When Redhorn told Terrence that Xuyen was as mad as a wildcat, he ignored them.

That night Powmia had a very vivid dream that Terrence's head fell off and that it rolled down the street and out of the compound and rolled downtown right into the Spring Flower Lounge everyone laughing at Terrence's remaining body running with arms outstretched after it. In the dream Terrence never returned and no one asked any questions about his disappearance. Everyone just seemed to forget about Terrence. Redhorn became the new commo sergeant.

When Powmia awoke the next morning he was confused. The dream had frightened him. It had been as intense as the one he had had at Cu Chi. But he knew it was physically impossible for Terrence's head to really falloff. The whole nocturnal episode made Powmia decide to go downtown at the closest opportunity in order to try and score some of those Cambodian rockets.

Powmia knew the place. He had been there before. It was the classy brothel with the blue and white tile floor and where the sun

shone into the rooms. After asking the proper questions Powmia was told to tell the woman on the third floor what he wanted.

On the third floor Powmia encountered a woman who seemed to be a year or two older than himself. Most women who were at the service of the American G.I.'s were young, sometimes very young. Her hair was cut to her shoulders and parted on one side and combed straight over to the other. Her eyes seemed close together and penetrating as she looked at Powmia's face. She began to unbutton her plain white blouse.

"Don't want short time," Powmia blurted, "want con sah, you know, not like Salems."

The woman rebuttoned her blouse and told Powmia to wait. Then she left the room. While Powmia waited he looked around. Indeed it had been a snazzy set up; a single canopy bed, a small embroidered divan, a plant sunning itself near the window, louvered shutter swung half open, slanted ceilings.

The woman returned and handed Powmia a package made of folded newspaper. Powmia gave her a 500 pee note and stuffing the package in the large pocket of his jungle pants, departed.

\* \* \*

The third day arrived.

On the morning of the third day Terrence did not show up at the commo shed at the appointed 1000 hours. Instead Powmia, Redhorn, DiCarmello got a visit from the CO, Major Osworth. He summarily informed them that Sergeant Terrence had got a cablegram from home in the United States informing him that his father, while in good health, had suddenly died a few seconds after getting up from a good night's sleep.

That afternoon Powmia took off for downtown to satisfy the urge to take up the offer of a short time from a woman who had sold him the rockets. All Powmia could figure was that it had something to do with the setting and decor in that sunny room, maybe

something close to memory even. Powmia also found himself wanting to know her name.

Powmia went to visit the woman who had sold him the Cambodian rockets in that sunny third floor room with the plants sunning themselves. He had found himself becoming afraid she had disappeared into thin air, much as Meo had. But she was there and she was glad to see him.

"You want more con sah?" she asked tentatively.

"No," Powmia replied. "Want short time."

For a short time, as clinical as short times usually ended up being, there was such an intensity of sensual feeling during their sex together that the time it took for Powmia to consummate the act was indeed very short. Powmia was surprised at himself as well as with the woman. For attaining sexual satisfaction so quickly, Powmia was oddly dissatisfied. This time Powmia had met a

woman to whom he really wanted to return, in earnest. He asked her for her name.

"My name Voun," she said beaming at him.

"Will you be here if I came back?" Powmia asked.

"If you come back soon," Voun replied without hesitation.

As for Sergeant Terrence, he had been sent back to the states. And since he was already short, there was no need for him to return. Soon Sergeant Terrence was forgotten and nobody even bothered to talk about him. There was simply nothing to say.

\* \* \*

Days passed.

There had been two benefits of Sergeant Terrence's demise. One was that Redhorn was promoted to Sergeant and Powmia was promoted to Spec/4. But when Powmia learned that Staff Sergeant Dennis Turner got stateside orders, he was even happier.

Later that day Powmia would go and visit Voun who was the woman he found downtown.

\* \* \*

Days passed.

Tet 1968 came along and so did the panic along with some gunfire. Powmia was stranded among a company of Seabees. It was a matter of being at the wrong place at the wrong time. After Powmia flagged down the new supply sergeant replacement for Turner, he learned that Redhorn almost shot, while drunk, an American G.I. who had hesitated giving a password.

After a day or two the mama sans were allowed to return to a ton of work. The first thing Powmia, Redhorn, DiCarmello noticed was how big Xuyen's belly had grown. Everyone knew that Terrence was responsible.

## **AGENT ORANGE**

Tet had changed things, subtly at first. The ferocity of Tet was not as great in Vung Tau as it had been every place else. There were no massive rocket or mortar attacks, no battalions and regiments of Vietnamese coming out of the ground, like the fabled resurrection stories of the last days, to lay siege to the inner sanctums of U.S. power. But there were instances of enemy sniper fire in Vung Tau with a few rockets and mortars thrown in. The main outward sign was the consequence of surprise and the consequence was the shock that even Vung Tau was not completely impregnable.

For the first time in a little more than six months Freddy Powmia saw substantial numbers of G.I.'s carrying their M-16's, an experience which, for some, was a brand new one, having been no where else in the country beside Vung Tau. Powmia knew that it gave the greenhorns of war, which included Redhorn, a kind of illusion of the experience of

war. And then there was real war; the traditional form of warfare that Tet provided in the hand-to-hand street combat that was destroying Hue. It was the real war that was being watched on Armed Forces television by the soldiers of Vung Tau. Powmia knew that the memory of their part in the war would consist of having watched the war reports on television in the orderly room with their M-16's leaning up against their chairs. No one could go downtown. The city of Vung Tau had been declared off limits.

However, only two things worried Powmia. One thing was the worry concerning a weapon. Because he had been delayed in joining his company at the onset of the Tet Offensive by getting stranded with the Seabees, Powmia found that when he was able to join his company all the M-16's had been requisitioned. Absolutely everyone didn't want to miss out on the experience of carrying one at least once during their stay. Powmia laughed to himself at the folly. In fact, all that was left

was a .45 automatic that no one wanted. In Powmia's slight apprehension he took it by default. With everyone packing a piece, he didn't want to be without one; like in the Old West. But Powmia had never really used a .45 and he had heard stories about it; its relative inaccuracy except at close range, as well as other idiosyncrasies it possessed. Those factors worried Powmia. But after a few days when it became clear the U.S. forces would eventually beat back the Tet Offensive this particular worry dissolved.

Powmia's main worry concerned Voun, however. In the week before Tet Powmia had gone downtown every night to see her, staying overnight and returning to base the following morning. It had been during that week that Powmia rented a house for them in which to live together. But during the total curfew Powmia was not sure Voun would still be there, or whether their house might be taken from him for some unforeseen reason. Powmia had no way of knowing how long the total ban

on traveling downtown would last, which made Powmia miss Voun very severely.

After about a week and a half the off limits orders were rescinded. The mama sans were allowed back onto base to tons of dirty laundry, as well as the warily distrustful eyes of the G.I.'s. And travel downtown resumed much in the way it had before Tet. The first chance Powmia got, he rushed to Voun. She was waiting anxiously for him.

It wasn't long before Powmia, on occasion, would not return to base the next morning. They began to spend more and more time in the little two-room house he had rented for them. Sergeant Redhorn proved how much of a friend he was to Powmia by remaining as tight lipped as ever. Every other or third day Powmia would show up at base and Sergeant Redhorn would wink grinning deadpan in his eyes and ask after Powmia "honey." Then that numb feeling would touch him low in his forehead between his eyes.

After Tet 1968 there was a taste of panic mixed with little resolve. Powmia felt that taste of panic, being so close to both sides of the Vietnam conflict. He was an agent gliding between the borders of neutralized turf. The way to survive was to achieve technological surreptitiousness. Rule number one: never make routines. Rule number two: amalgamate frequencies, all frequencies. Liberal con sah and a .45 automatic under the pillow assured Powmia the security he needed in Neutralityville.

Powmia began to see himself reflected in windows as if held to only every fifth frame in the 24 that constituted his own movie. He was getting closer and closer to invisible. And the closer to invisible he got the more he learned of evening hours. Daylight was inadequate to light his pallor.

He would still slip into reconnoiter mode and hang in the shadows of the shadiest of Vung Tau bars, the dregs on 100 pee alley. He would report to Voun, who understood.

"I went to the 69 Club on 100 pee alley last night," Powmia told Voun, who had told him to call her "Hai". "You've never been there. You could've never gotten out if you ever had. A real cruddy place, pestilence, a roach could land on your Ba Mi Ba, the only thing they sell at their dingy bar on dunce stools."

Powmia stayed away from the Miami Lounge as well as the Spring Flower Lounge. He did not know what it was about the Spring Flower Lounge that gave it such bad vibes. Perhaps it was only because some guys from his company had frequented the place. But both Terrence and Turner were gone. He trusted Redhorn and Flynn. And diCarmello was too short to matter. Even then Powmia avoided the Spring Flower.

"There were two guys in there," Powmia went on. "One said his name is Tex and there's a 'Hyde' on his nametag over his pocket. The other one had 'Jethroe' over his pocket. Tex

kept calling him 'DJ'. I ask DJ what it means.  
He says it stands for Doctor Jekyll. Ha!"

But Voun did not laugh.

"This country twists people like that. It makes 'em act out some cultural memory. I dunno."

Voun remained silent. He imagined she was being pensive. One day she would understand. But for now Powmia had transformed himself into an agent for the love of Voun. His transformation had begun to help him understand for himself. Powmia went on:

"They jump like the Aurora Borealis," said DJ talking a mile a minute. Maybe on speed some betel nut fix or somethin'. They're from Tay Ninh and how boonie can you getting. And they're crazed from battle and they tell some heavy duty stories about they came close to losing it during Tet. It's like they saw death certain and final all too soon and final. And these two, Jekyll and Hyde, they're looking for death in the first place and finally,

finally they get a look at something they can't walk away from.

" 'I got my chance at behest of Tet,' DJ said, 'to watch it happen in a corner, my back after weeks of battle finally covered. The eyes of humans change color too, seein' the promised land among the living still reflectin' light of Aurora Borealis and the demons in this soil. I saw that in his eyes, same as that old bear up 'til his brains exploded. This time I watched the light go out. Some shit really some real shit here.'

"I was reminded of that picture of the face of Che Guevara after they killed him," Powmia told Voun. "Both laughter and peace there alright. I know these two are hip to the intelligence of play here. I know 'cause of that reference to the Aurora Borealis. They dance in your consciousness like that. As if they were flames flashing some idea into your head for the play of it. These two grunts are already convincingly spooked by it. I know, it'll set you right and make the rules.

"This DJ grunt keeps talkin' like banshees hot on him. This Tex grunt nods every second to fifth time. They're trying to get on my side of invisibility. And he's saying he's gonna purge shit in Death Valley if he gets back both of them gonna shoot an eagle purging shit in Death Valley.

" 'Eagles'll snatch the balls off a wounded caribou, gloat for pure sport then pluck out his eyes for dessert. Worse scavengers than crows,' this Tex grunt piped," Powmia said as Voun listened patiently. He knew she wasn't getting it all, his soliloquies in an invisible language, invisible because fewer and fewer could hear it in the way he had begun to speak it.

After running into Jekyll and Hyde in the 69 Club two things began forming in Powmia's head. One was that Tet had really fucked things up in the hearts and mind category. The second thing was that he better start packing that .45 again.

To Powmia's amazement it looked, at least, like luck smiled again. It turned out that Voun had a reason to get her first posh big city job on the third floor of the best exclusive cathouse in Vung Tau. And it had to do with relations. He was an uncle and he went by the name of Kookie Con khi and he was in business. But when she took up with a G.I. willing to pay rent on one of Kookie's houses, special measures were made to find better provision for Voun.

Powmia still collected his check. Redhorn kept an up and up going smooth across the pay table. For four weeks Voun waited between paychecks while they screwed non stop. Kookie Con khi, strangely enough, was one of the few who could dig Powmia in his own language. But not for sustained periods of time beyond an hour's duration.

Kookie Con khi was a renegade Hoa Hao dignitary who brought up a bundle from the farm in Can Tho and parlayed it in con sah and choice cunt. He enjoyed talking to discreet

informed class Americans with some where with all for self interest binding trust. Boring officer types mostly. But Con khi dug Powmia. For Powmia knew the grunt life well.

Kookie Can khi was a class act. A scent of Bao Dia all stinking royalty funk and grease and polish. Kookie wore a cute little white suit with wide lapels. They matched his ears. He smelled like he just had a haircut sipping fine rare liquors off an ice cube.

Kookie had the goods smuggled goods: *Magical Mystery Tour*, *The Crazy World of Arthur Brown*; a thing from America called *Music From Big Pink*. There was also one called *Big Brother and the Holding Company* and an album by a guy named Jimi Hendrix. In return Kookie wanted Powmia to tell him why this music represented strange changes going on in America. Powmia said it had something to do with con sah, but Kookie didn't believe him.

"It's not so much the change," Powmia tried to explain, "as it is the fact that it happened at the same time for a whole lot of

people the same age who are doing the same sort of things."

But the explanation seemed inadequate for Kookie.

The records were the only things Powmia could want from Voun's Uncle K. There was plenty of con sah around. Powmia was even in training to meet the expansion of Kookie's rocket factory where Powmia could earn a dong or two rolling 'em out with outward twists of his wrist; sort of the same wrist action he used when he used to try and throw a screwball on the diamond. It was said you could get high sucking on the base of your thumb after a couple of hours rolling 'em out.

\* \* \*

After a couple of months had passed the familiar acquaintances from the base began to recede into memory, into invisibility.

DiCarmello had been just as short as Powmia might have been so he had long gone stateside. Redhorn was still around but he was days short so he might as well be gone. Flynn just

disappeared and Powmia never knew much about who Flynn was. Flynn might even be sharing a similar fate as Powmia, who knows? Powmia had simply disappeared while Voun, through connections that both Kookie Con khi and Powmia had come up with together, had got a job as a domestic at the U.S. base in Powmia's own company. She would never hear Powmia's name mentioned in all the time she worked there.

\* \* \*

Late in 1968, when Powmia was able to exist only in occasional slivers of reflection in plate glass windows he would venture forth into the night wearing his soldier suit.

On 100 pee alley he went one night into the Blow Bar. Inside young Vietnamese girls cruised wearing lacy garters with G-strings. A few G.I.'s sat drinking Ba Mi Ba, sometimes openly smoking con sah and sometimes smoking black liquid off the ends of their Marlboros, Winstons, Pall Malls, Kools.

Powmia had got to the point where he knew the kind of units stationed in and around Vung Tau. In the Blow Bar none of the insignia he saw belonged to any of the units in and around Vung Tau. The place was ripe, therefore, for all kinds of news from the front, which seemed like everywhere except, at times, Vung Tau. After Tet, the ferocity of the war changed tempo and the grunts of war were more likely to go to the officially off limits places like the Blow Bar. But Powmia was Neutralityville's slick agent.

"Yeah, it's true," the guy who had called himself Dagwood said slurping at the can of Ba Mi. Ba. "It's a whole new ball game. Gotta play for keeps now. No more search and destroy's or popping a gook or two every night. Uh-uh. Heavy bombing, that's what's gonna go on. Droppin' bombs out of C-130's. Scorched earth. No. More than scorched earth. Turned earth. Yeah. Earth turned into pure hell. We got a new regime that's got a thing for returnin' to the stone age."

Dagwood's fatigue uniform bore naval markings and insignia.

"You a Seabee?" Powmia asked.

"Shit no," Dagwood nearly squawked with disdain. "I'm in the Seals and with Dithers."

"Who?" Dagwood slurped again at his Ba Mi Ba. He'd been drinking since early afternoon, Powmia figured.

"No," Dagwood drawled drunkenly, "us Seals go in with the Company at night blow away a dignitary from Charlie. Wave of the future. The battlefield's, the classic battlefield, that is, near obsolete.<sup>it</sup>

"What company's that?" Powmia persisted.

"Dithers," replied Dagwood clipping on. "Last mission before this pass we were in Tay Ninh Province. Gonna drop in . . . I mean really drop in on a village chief suspected of being a Charlie in dubious turf and kill him. Only the bastard wasn't there. Finally found out from his ol' lady he's probably at a

meeting. So we blow her away and put a blossom in the heads of her teenage daughters execution style. Just last night we did that and, imagine, now I'm here in Vung Tau sipping Ba."

"Who's this company you call Dithers?"

"Let me tell you a story," Dagwood said popping off another top of Ba Mi Ba. "One night we were out to set up a piece of equipment and we got caught in an ambush deep in enemy territory. Way out in the boonies. We had this Company man with us. Well meaning but capable of turning green in the heat on you. That night, though, even I didn't think we'd get out. Gunfire kept us pinned dead still in the pitch black. Rendezvous still 30 minutes away. Time enough to die without even again seeing the light of day.

"So this chump from Dithers turns to me and says, 'Look, it's only because we're goners and I been achin' to tell someone as soon as I knew for sure.' 'What's that?' I say. And he

says, 'Remember the Kennedy assassination?' I nod. And he says, can you dig, with a barrage of bullets creasing our scalps," and Dagwood leaned closer and nearly whispering, quoted dramatically, " 'We did it.' "

"How'd you get out of that mess?" Powmia asked anxiously.

"Quite by accident," Dagwood groaned.  
"Quite by accident brother. "

"But you ain't seen the last of it," Dagwood continued. "Shit goin' on right now the Company's not in a hurry to take credit for. Stuff you absolutely won't believe. You know they tried to kill Castro with a poison cigar. Got hit men, everything. They had better luck with Lumumba. That's the new kind of warfare. No more battlefields. Now we know who our enemies are and there are ways of poppin' the main man along with some other key nobodies."

"But why Kennedy?" Powmia asked.  
"This chump says we're gonna hear of all kinds of reasons why. And all of 'em are

true 'cause no decision like an assassination is done for just one single reason. He's talking fast 'cause his ass is about to die. He says the real reason is 'cause Kennedy was liable to change his mind under public pressure. And that in itself, regardless of the other reasons why, was the biggest threat to what they'd been building ever since the thirties. That's how big the stakes are, motherfucker.

"Right now, up in Laos they're puttin' in some nice techniques. No one knows it. That's the war of the future and the wave of the future. Blow 'em away only if you can do it fast and can get away with it. Otherwise it's technique, all kinds of technique; political, psychological, chemical, biological. Stay loose my man, you ain't seen nothin' yet. This war's gonna go past Phnom Penh, all the way to Bangkok. And it's all gonna be agents. Motherfuckin' bloodthirsty agents and techniques."

"Is that what Dither's all about?"  
Powmia asked in his best Vietnam cool.

"Dither's all over the world, even in the alleys of Warsaw. Same same. They're always thinking about gettin' out of this stinkin' country. They're just holdin' the line a bit 'til they can slip out the back and slip into someone else's back door and do the job right. They've got a contingency plan for everything. They'll leave their operatives. Some of 'em won't even know it, that they're being used as an operative. Besides, there's lots of gook labor sittin' on a pool of oil. See, fightin' this war to a standstill, like Korea, would be a victory, if we can get to the point where we're standin' still. But there's gotta be an easier way and there is.

"Shit man, there's things goin' on you wouldn't believe. You ain't seen nothing yet. All you need is a patsy, a candidate, a fall guy, a fall guy like Oswald. Nearly fucked up that one. Then things will be done with finesse, with good theater. You know, phony left groups to discredit the commies, financing low grade wars off the poppies in the field and making deals with the shadiest of national

leaders or tinhorn dictators. And don't forget chemistry and technology. Low grade wars are good for that. The hippies back stateside are already eating BZ. They'll get benny's two bigger brothers and PCP next."

Two afternoons later when Voun came home from work at the base she had a message for Powmia.

"I run into Ettinger today," she said, her brow close to pleading. It was a name out of the past. He couldn't figure how Ettinger could have been one of the last to be rotated out of the old company.

"He tell me to tell you to cool it. He say night time not cool."

Powmia never really understood Ettinger's motives. First Ettinger slipped him the word when he was getting too open about smoking con sah. Then he obviously didn't squeal on Powmia when he stayed away for extended periods of time. But now that he stayed past his ETS, Ettinger was still keeping a protective eye on Powmia, sometimes

through Voun and sometimes with a suspiciously keen eye that reached into the darker hidden corners of Powmia's life. Why Powmia's status never was reported as AWOL or even desertion, was something that would nag Powmia's thoughts more and more as time went on.

Powmia had been spending late afternoons cooled out listening to sounds in the cush earphones Kookie got him and beginning to dig more and more Hendrix, Arthur Brown and *Music From Big Pink*. Two to three nights a week he'd cruise the shadows in the neon light. The rest of the time, including full time weekends, he'd spend with Voun at the behest of something sucking for him from deep inside her. It made the embrace of her limbs light and ticklish to every touch upon his skin.

Powmia had dreamed the night before, a dream that had blended into an encounter from which he had overheard a conversation in the Groupies' Lounge earlier that same evening. Powmia had talked to nobody,

exercising his best acumen for invisibility, achieving only his own reflection in the glass of an obscure door in the corner. Powmia had been all ears, nearly only ears.

Perhaps the dream had occurred because of this moody guy who did not talk but had only listened. The name "Berlin" was tagged above his pocket. His motionlessness and his listening had made him dreamlike to Powmia, who had been filling up fast with invisibility.

Both grunts had smelled strong of the jungle in the night air. They were from Quangnai Province but were from different units. Their conversation sounded like a lot of shoptalk on the subject of similar and familiar turf. The guy without a name tag above his pocket and who was doing all the talking had only a lone camouflaged American emblem on his arm.

"My Lai," he said. "It was so peaceful during the aftermath. I mean we don't ordinarily get to see aftermaths so we can't

always enjoy the peace we create. I mean all we know is bombing and smoke without fire and sometimes if we're lucky, we get in some fresh killing from the spout of our M-16's. But not like My Lai. In My Lai we got the chance to watch them die. You can't escape it man. You might as well dig it, like it or not. Me. I'm ambivalent.

"Get a good look at where you are, man. There's fighting and war all around you. But you don't completely understand until you've been to a place like My Lai. There we watch them die at our own hands and then we enjoyed the peace. Yeah," he laughed, "we burned the place down in peace, everlasting peace in this everlasting war.

"It ain't what you think y'dig, watchin' someone die. Fast or slow, it don't matter 'cause a thousand times you might make someone's head explode but you don't see 'em die. You're just erasin' out. No. You may see someone smoldering on the ground, their eyes clinging to consciousness. But that's slow death

and you always got to be movin' on. You may blast some mama san's titties off. But you've lost the moment of death in the discovery of something tender being blown into wet dust. You see, death is not within the body as much as it is within the eyes. Seeing eyes that watch life flash by, a life that belongs to someone just as alive as you; that's what My Lai was like, if you can dig it. I watched a lot of Vietnam pass by a lot of the eyes in My Lai.

"Revenge, that's what drove us. Good ol' revenge. Just like a fuckin' gang fight, like a rumble back in the world. We all got on one side of the town and each platoon took a different route through the place. First person I shot was a little boy maybe seven or eight years old. Just for revenge. He died fast. It don't take much to kill a kid. Splattered his insides out against the wall of his own parents' shack. That made them real co-operative. It made it easier to round 'em all up . . . like cattle. Then when the crowd got too big to handle we shot 'em all down where they stood.

It was a good thing we brought extra clips with us. Not every bullet is fatal you know, unless you hit a kid, that is," he took a swig from his bottle of Ba Mi Ba.

"Anyway, right after that first group of twenty or so that we wiped out and seein' all that blood spillin' out into the soil, a weird thought occurred to me right after we began to round up the second batch. Yeah, more cattle to slaughter in the name of revenge. I suddenly flashed on the stretchers carrying wounded being yanked off the Dust-offs as they came into the hospital, the blood dripping off the stretchers and I thought to myself, why couldn't we use all that blood just spillin' on the ground to save our buddies comin' off the Dust-offs? Then I thought, shit, don't want no gook blood in my veins. It's better off soakin' into the ground. Then it made me mad, real mad. I decided to vent it off an' I spotted the youngest baby san in that second group we was gatherin' an' decided to see what it'd be like to fuck her just before I killed her. A few of

the others were doin' it anyway, sneakin' off to get a little, I mean. So I decided it was my turn. So I grabbed her by the hair and took this babe to an empty shack. She was pleading all the way to me not to kill her, said she'd do anything just don't kill her. Well I took that as the invitation I wanted. An' you know what, man?" the G.I. tapped Berlin on the upper part of his arm with the back of his fingers. He leered. "She was a virgin, a fuckin' virgin about to get her first and last piece 'cause just as I was about to shoot my rocks I decided to blowout her brains with a nicely placed round right under her chin. It was beautiful, perfectly timed. An' it felt real good too. Right out of the top of her head at that range.

"Then the thoughts in my head began gettin' real weird. I mean strange things happen, you know, when you're killing like a crazy person. I began to thinkin' that baby san I just wasted could've been like, you know, her daddy's favorite girl, the most popular girl in her school class, you know like back in the

world, a cheerleader or somethin'. I must be away from home too long. Shit man, it only made me madder 'cause the more I tried to shake them thoughts taking control of me the madder I got.

"Revenge and death. Death and revenge. I couldn't figure out which we was after. One began to eat up the other. I was beginning to get crazy, real crazy. An' finally I caught up with the rest of my platoon at the edge of town an' they had the rest of everyone in a ditch; old men, mama sans, kids. An' we'd all gotten so crazy that we opened fire on all of 'em 'til our guns were near empty an' we had no clips left. An' after the ringing, man, an' everything got real bright to me, you know, like some kind of fuckin' transfiguration or something. That's when we watched 'em die. Watched the light go out in their eyes, one by one, while everything got bright and ringing.

"Revenge man, well maybe we didn't get revenge that day. Maybe we won't get revenge 'til we kill every gook in this goddamn

country. What the hell, man, war's gonna go on. As long as there's life there's gonna be war. I mean, shit man, war's already breakin' out back in the world, so we might as well finish the job 'cause we're gonna be takin' this war here in Vietnam back to the world with us. An' guys'll continue to die from this war back home. An' there'll be casualties from this war long after we're out of this country 'cause we'll be taking it back to the states with us. Yeah man, guys'll be dying from this war for years to come, dying in bed too. So what's a few gooks, or a whole country? It didn't matter that much when we dropped the big one on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. If it takes the 350 we wasted in My Lai or a half a million, we got to do it to get our way."

After Powmia had got back in their house and had gone to bed he had the dream. The dream contained something he had hardly seen in seven years. It was a newscast on network television:

"This is John Cameron Cameron downtown in Kiev deep in the Ukraine. I've been talking to Oberfuhrer Creighton of the Waffen SS. I understand, mein herr, you've been making historic progress?"

"Ja, ist true," Creighton replied. He wore an impressive Nazi officer's dress uniform. Behind him men, women, young, old, thin, fat, about half and half, were dangling in the wind at short, long ends of rope stretched across wide beams between poles.

"Our latest projections indicate dat it vill require about twenzig million to achieve der directive to halt der Bolshevik aggression. Our purification of der lant of this new Greater Germany ist veill under vay."

"Wow!" Cameron exclaimed, "twenty million! That's an impressive number. And of course, that's twenty million on top of the projected six million liquidated in the camps."

"Ja John," Creighten replied calmly. "Unt ve couldn't have accomplished our goals vithout der support from all of you unt der

leaders unt industrialist unt bankers of your vonderful country. Even your own Senator Harry Truman declared before your Congress dat Americans should vatch vich side was loosink before declaring sides und joining der combat. You know ve both share der same objective of exterminating der Bolshevik vermin. Vell, by now, it should be obvious dat der Nazi war machinery ist far superior. It hast been proven all over Europe. It's time for you Americans to give us your full support. It would make it dat much sooner dat der disease of Bolshevism vill be rid from der earth forever. "

"Thank you, Oberfuehrer Creighton, for your inspiring comments," John Cameron Cameron replied. Then turning toward the television audience, the camera slowly zoomed in on him alone. "Well, you've heard it for yourself, folks. Our Nazi compatriots are well on their way toward not only ridding humanity of Jewish vermin but of Bolshevik vermin as well. Perhaps it won't be too much

longer before the world is really safe for democracy, thanks to the vanguard effort and vision of modern Nazism. Chet?"

In the dream the scene shifted. All that could be seen were human bodies, grey corpses stacked, naked with limp arms and legs and torsos. The scene moved, as before a slowly panning camera. The stacked naked grey dead bodies without sex or eyes constituted a pile of many piles, maybe twenty, maybe fifty or a hundred or more. There was silence and desolation. There was no sign of anything living, no people, not even an occasional bird or rat. There was silence except for the sound of the wind, yes the wind; movement without life. Bare naked movement moving slightly the limp hair on dead bodies blowing dust and scraps of fabric.

Like something becoming obscene through emphasis, the silence began to get louder with the sound of the wind. The wind got louder and louder in Powmia's ears as more and more piles of dead grey bodies

passed before his eyes. Finally the sound of the wind started to howl, screaming in his ears. Suddenly he realized the wind screaming in his ears was intermingled with the sound of his own screaming until the two sounds were indistinguishable. And just as the sound was reaching an ear-splitting apex, reverberating a ringing sound in his head, Powmia awoke.

In the darkness of waking the ringing in his ears was still there but the screaming had been confined to his dream. As the sparse light began to help his eyes to see he looked at Voun sleeping soundly beside him, her eyelids and face soft with deep sleep, her lips slightly parted with the hardly audible sound of her breathing. She was so still and her stillness sent a shudder of fear through him.

\* \* \*

The experience of that night at the Groupies' Lounge kept Powmia inside and out of contact with American G.I.'s for about eight or nine months. He didn't need any more messages from EttINGER to "cool it." Instead,

Powmia was satisfied to keep the company of Voun, listen to new rock albums that Kookie Con khi slipped him and stay nicely mellow on the free flowing and liberal quantities of con sah that came his way. The money Voun was making on the base combined with occasional hours that Powmia put in at the rocket factory kept them above water. Other than that Powmia's and Voun's love for each other sustained them.

It was October 1969 that Powmia began to long for contact with American G.I.'s. The notion that contact with the Yanks was contingent upon his invisible agent status had begun to fade as more and more of himself became visible to Voun and he began to understand her more and more and she began to influence him in ways he never knew she could.

Powmia's visit to the Mescaline Lounge on a night in October 1969 was more of a "testing of the waters" as well as of his own responses; a kind of measuring old self against

his growing self. He put on his old jungle fatigues, on which Voun had replaced his nametag with another that read, "Jones". Then he went out to engage in some free flowing conversation in the American idiom.

"It was an ugly night," said the lone G.I. in the paisley shirt in the Mescaline Lounge.

"How's that?" Powmia asked.

"Well, first of all," the G.I. replied, "we were on night patrol. We were securing the area to make sure there was nothing living where there was supposed to be no life, you understand. That area, that night, in Binh Phouc was our responsibility. We were getting ready to set up an ambush and we decided to use this house in a village called Phouc Tan Hung as a base of command. There was a family in the house, a woman and probably a couple of her daughters. But then we found this young guy in the back of the place. That made the lieutenant go a little crazy. He thought he'd just captured a V.C. and he

wanted to shoot him. He wanted, he insisted, to shoot him right between the eyes."

"Did he?" Powmia replied when the G.I. paused plaintively to take a swig of the Ba Ml. Ba.

"Not yet," the G.I. replied. "We tied the bastard to a tree outside so we could interrogate him. We found some documents. One was an ARVN I.D. card with his picture on it. He also had what I thought looked like a pass from this dink hospital in Saigon. I just recognized the name, that's all. And this kid we had tied up had fresh stitches up and down his belly and I'd say he was recovering from some wounds. But the lieutenant decided to tear up the documents. Then he slaps the prisoner around and he goes to the captain and tells him the kid's uncooperative and insists he's a V.C. and he fuckin' begs the captain to let him kill the kid. Let him shoot him at dawn."

"Shit," said Powmia, a flush of numbness spreading across his shoulders. The

G.I. went on as if not having heard Powmia's comment.

"The lieutenant wasn't the only one begging that night. That's what made things so ugly, unabashed slobbering begging offering everything up. The mama san and the two girls got down on their knees in front of us wherever we went in the house. All night, up and down, begging on their knees. Beggars begging in the presence of beggars.

"There was a lot of twisted faces and tears that night from the lieutenant as he tried to convince the captain the kid was a V.C. Can you imagine that? Jesus. This kid's fightin' along with us in the fuckin' ARVN and he gets wounded in battle. But that doesn't matter to the lieutenant. He wants to pin the V.C. rap on him just so he can shoot the poor motherfucker."

"Goddamn," was the word that involuntarily issued from Powmia's mouth.  
"What happened?"

"By the time dawn rolled around the captain gave in and the kid was doomed. And when we untied him from the tree the kid knew it. I guess he'd been exposed enough to his brothers in arms to read the handwriting on the wall. And the poor bastard started crying.

"When we got a little way from the house we stopped. It was time, said the lieutenant. So without any fanfare the lieutenant stood in front of the kid who had tears streaming down his face, and the lieutenant pumps a single round from his M-16 right between his eyes and instantly the kid drops limp to his knees and flops over still, blood rushing out of every opening in his head and soaks right into the ground like it was a sponge. Then a couple of the other guys pumped a few more just to make sure. Ha! To make sure things would look good on paper."

Suddenly Powmia remembered something from a year or so back. He suddenly thought of Jenkins from Cu Chi. Jenkins had been back in the world now for more than a

year. Powmia began to wonder at how Jenkins had made out, how he had adjusted to stateside living. Powmia wondered what effect Jenkins had on people living "back there" and what life "back there" had upon Jenkins. Powmia now knew in the pit of his guts that Jenkins was a walking time bomb. Powmia found himself feeling sorry for whomever might get in Jenkins' way and rub him wrong. Strangely, Powmia found himself feeling sorry for Jenkins. But he couldn't figure out why.

## THE TURNING POINT OF THE TURNING POINT

Powmia had not visited a bar in Vung Tau in four years and six months to the day. It was one of those days when the salt sea breeze of the South China Sea made him realize fully the meaning of what time had done to him. The rear section of his and Voun's house, which was near 100 pee alley or, as he had begun to refer to it, Tudo Street was shaded and cool in the afternoon. Powmia had taken to sleeping naked all morning long.

He had learned speaking Vietnamese, but the many intonations of its tongue and vowel sounds gave him inhibition and he was more apt to find the hearing of it more useful and accessible.

Since 1972, when the American G.I.'s left en masse, there was still a danger of encountering one of the small units of gendarme left behind. The ARVN were beginning to get daffy and edgy and that made them even more dangerous. Powmia could in

no way trust any of the PA&E guys that dotted the population. Powmia had to stay undercover while the LP's that Kookie would send his way were getting thin since Hendrix and Janis Joplin were dead and the Jefferson Airplane had lost some zip with Marty gone and having become the Jefferson Starship. Con sah was now more readily available since the demand had fallen off and prices had plummeted to token penance. Powmia began to gravitate to listening to more John Lennon and Bob Dylan. More and more Powmia would have Voun procure a curtained labretta. She would use it to sneak him off at dusk to a beach house in order to charge up on some sea breeze followed by fresh night air and a psychedelic sunrise after a quiet and spangling night. Voun would gently guide him.

A strange synthesis had been going on inside Powmia during the first three years of the 1970's. He had begun to understand more about Vietnamese history and culture and his understanding began to mix with all that

continued to seep into his consciousness from what had been and was currently happening in the United States. Powmia knew that the war was going home. He wondered at how much of Vietnam's culture was going home with it. Probably none. The U.S. Army was more intent on destroying Vietnamese culture. But more and more of the idea of a counter-culture in the United States was entering into Powmia's thoughts and it made him homesick. His and Voun's love for each other was stronger than his longing.

Every now and then Kookie would bring Powmia some truly interesting reading matter from the states among the Hong Kong editions of *Time* and *Newsweek*. Powmia had procured a couple copies of *Evergreen* and *Ramparts* magazines along with a single copy of the *Realist*, which had a spurious Beetle Bailey cartoon strip depicting Beetle Bailey getting killed in Vietnam. The magazines had given him a good perspective on the counter-culture. He had even managed to get his hands

on single copies of the *Village Voice*. He asked Kookie and got copies of *Nova Express* by William S. Burroughs, *Desolation Angels* by Jack Kerouac, *Howl* by Allen Ginsburg, *Pictures of the Gone World* by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and a book by Thomas Wolfe entitled *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. He read everything he could get his hands on, sometimes reading them two or three times.

His increased reading of the most contemporary writings from the United States coupled with his developing and deepening relationship with Voun began to make Powmia more human. And as Powmia began to become more human a strange question arose in him. It was strange not because he had found himself intimately linked to a Vietnamese woman in her own country. It was strange because he needed to know why his country, the United States, brought him to Vietnam with thousands of other Americans. It was also a strange question because he had previously thought he knew the answer. But after six years in

Vietnam those old answers seemed ridiculous to him. The answer to the question seemed more accessible if instead of asking the question, "Why am I in Vietnam?" he would ask, "What caused me to be sent to Vietnam?" But as accessible as the answer seemed to be, that answer continued to elude him. He didn't expect to find the answer in *Time* or *Newsweek*. Some of the other periodicals he was able to obtain, which were representative of the counter-culture, only suggested a glimmer of the answer. But they seemed to be missing something essential, almost as if they had had a blind spot in their analysis or understanding of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. And of course, after 1972 when direct military engagement in Vietnam had all but ended, the American periodicals critical of the U.S.' role diminished in number as well as in fervor. Yes, concluded Powmia, there had been a blind spot and the blind spot was the United States itself.

Powmia's conclusion that even the critical stance in the U.S. toward the war was somehow bound up in national self interest did not relieve his nagging feeling of frustration.

After tussling many months over the questions in his mind and after he felt he had a grasp of the expression of the problem he decided to broach the problem with Voun. But Voun could only say that the Vietnamese have been a subjugated country for hundreds of years; that the Chinese and French had for a long time exploited them, followed by the Japanese and finally the Americans. Voun told Powmia that there had always been brave Vietnamese who fought against foreigners who wanted to control her country.

Voun knew she could not answer Powmia's questions adequately enough to satisfy his need to know. She knew his need to know the answers would help him to feel more and more that he belonged in Vietnam and, more importantly, that he belonged with her.

On the evening when they both realized the answers could not come from within them, Voun held Powmia close to her breast like a helpless baby as she stroked his hair and spoke endearing words to him in Vietnamese which he understood. She could not bear to feel him slip away. She began to hate the questions he posed. She began to wish she had never left Can Tho. In Can Tho she could have become a minor official with the Cao Dai or Hoa Hao and lived happily ever after ministering to the needs of the community.

One evening Voun came home and found Powmia gone. His absence drove her into a sudden panic. Since 1972, when the G.I.'s had gone and almost all the bars had dried up, it would be suicide to go into any of the ones that remained. The only place she could think where Powmia might have gone was the beach houses north of the city. It wasn't like Powmia to take off on his own. He knew the risks. The beach was the only answer.

"Yes," said their mutual trusted friend Thon, a young man who had received some education in France and who enjoyed talking with Powmia about Paris life and other matters of European and Vietnamese culture, "he was here a few hours ago. Certainly I was surprised but he assured me he'd taken necessary precautions. Then after I went upstairs to prepare some tea he was suddenly gone. I thought he went back home."

"No," replied Voun, "he's not there. I'm so worried. He should never do such a thing."

"Have you tried the bars?" asked Thon in his calm, soothing manner.

"No," replied Voun, "he'd know that would be a stupid thing to do."

"Just the same, if he's brave enough to venture out alone you never know what he'd do. It's worth a try. You might hate yourself if he was there and you hadn't looked." "I suppose," Voun replied a little rejected and turning to go.

"By the way," Thon said stopping her, "when you catch up with him tell him Comrade Su Thang Tran will be in town in a few days on business. Tell him to stay in touch so I can set up a meeting."

"Okay," Voun muttered.

For the next few hours Voun did what she never expected to do; she went barhopping. She did not ask any questions for fear of raising suspicions. She just walked into each bar, quickly looked around and left. When all the bars had closed she did not know where else to look. Actually, there was no other place. She went home hoping that Powmia would be there waiting for her with a reasonable story for his absence. But when she got there the house was silent, dark and empty. She collapsed on their bed and she began to cry. She could feel the convincing feeling overcome her that she would never see him again. All kinds of scenes passed through her head; that he was lying bleeding in some hidden grove along some obscure road

muttering her name and crying for help hardly above a whisper. Perhaps he had been kidnapped and was being questioned by patriots who could not know and did not understand. Perhaps he had been discovered and arrested by the Americans and was sitting in some lonely stockade waiting to be shipped back to the United States far far away from her, gone and gone forever.

The more the unthinkable raced through Voun's mind the more fervently her tears flowed. But the fatigue produced by her frenzied running all around town looking for Powmia had finally caught up with her in a wave of sudden falling. She fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Next morning she woke suddenly. It was about a half hour past the time she needed to wake so that she could adequately get ready for work at the PA&E depot just south of the city where she now worked. But the shock of Powmia lying next to her still dressed in the

black "pajamas" he had obviously worn to disguise himself jolted her into full wakefulness.

"Freddy oy," she nearly screamed.

He seemed spacey and vague when he slowly woke. He reached out to touch Voun's arm and it seemed tentative and light to her.

"What's wrong?" she implored. "where have you been?"

Powmia began slowly. The words were fresh and new, tinged with a sense of unfamiliarity. "I decided to eat that blotter of LSD that Kookie got for me. I snuck down to the beach and by the time I got there I felt as though I had been there for as long as the ocean itself. It's so relentless beating out a rhythm no one notices, speaking a language so simple no one understands."

Powmia paused. Voun did not rush in to say anything more. Her panic and concern was quelled by his presence as well as the sense that he still cared for her. She also sensed

that he had more to say as soon as he collected his thoughts upon his tongue.

"I swam in the shallow water under the ceiling of the whole of the sky," Powmia snickered at some inner cosmic joke and continued, "I began to understand why life originally developed in the water because it's all there. Everything is in the sea. I floated in and out with the surf, like flotsam, a piece of turf in the surf." He giggled, pausing to take in all the ramifications of his rhyme.

"Late afternoon, I think late afternoon, yeah, late afternoon I hid in an obscure cove with the sun in the sky behind me. I looked up and watched a swarm of dragonflies. It all makes sense, Hai. It all fits together only if you look. You don't need words. Our language, English or Vietnamese or French, just gets in the way and clogs up what's important. The dragonflies know. They know the importance of peace. They told me.

"I came back after everything closed up. I brought the peace home for you, a companion

for my love for you." Voun's searching face broke out into a broad warm smile. Her eyes glimmered.

"Now I know I belong here, here with you," said Powmia lying down, gentle fatigue overcoming him. Voun rubbed her hand over his arm caressingly. A slight glad smile was on her face.

"I've got good news for you," Voun told him. "Thon says Su Thang Tran will be in town. He says you should make arrangements with him."

"Okay," Powmia said as sleep covered him billowing like light settling into a silken sheet.

\* \* \*

Thon led Voun and Powmia to an obscure dirt street in the south suburbs of Vung Tau. From outside the place looked like any number of corrugated metal shacks he had remembered from Cu Chi. But the place

seemed more extensive than a mere shack. It seemed some kind of makeshift warehouse.

Inside the floor was packed hard clay and the labyrinth of walls were a combination of thin plywood and burlap curtains. All the rooms were in semi-darkness of residual light from outside somewhere seeping in. None of the rooms seemed designed for any useful purpose, except to blunt curiosity. Finally somewhere deep in the building the three came to a room dimly lit with low lantern light. Only a few rickety chairs and small tables furnished the room along with a small wood-burning stove. A small metal pipe ran from the stove to a ceiling hidden in darkness.

By his presence Powmia knew he was Su Thang Tran. Tran sat in one of the chairs, one with arms. A man squatted near him dressed completely in black "pajamas" and was slowly chewing betel nuts. As soon as the squatting man noticed Powmia he spat out an extended stream of red juice onto the packed clay floor. There were figures of men in the

recesses of the room. They seemed relaxed, yet vigilant. Powmia figured that they were armed and he found himself giggling silently at the prospect. How many American soldiers had feared they might end up in a similar situation as the one in which Powmia had put himself?

Thon took a step forward putting himself between Su Thang Tran and Voun and Powmia.

"Comrade Tran," Thon said in English, "this is Freddy Powmia and his friend of six and a half years, Nguyen Thi Voun."

"Nice to meet you," replied Tran, his eyes exceptionally clear and alert and remaining steady on Powmia's face. Tran was dressed in the western style, A white short sleeve shirt and khaki trousers.

"And this," Thon continued, "is Comrade Su Thang Tran."

"And may I introduce my assistant," Tran added, "Ta Dao Giao. Giao is a former member of the more progressive sectors of the Tay Ninh Cao Dai. Between the two of us, we

represent the broadest sentiments of the Vietnamese people."

Powmia was, in spite of his expectations, a little astonished. Not knowing how to reply he reached back, as Voun had taught him, and expressed the foremost thought in his mind.

"This is hard for me to accept," blurted Powmia as he sat stiff in a chair across from Comrade Tran. "It seems so much like a fiction."

"I'm afraid," said Tran laughing a little, "the only fiction that will come out of this struggle here in Vietnam will resurface in years to come in the United States. America is so inundated by the sense of Hollywood that their experience in Vietnam will be like a bad movie, complete with all the paradoxes and contradictions provided by hasty revisions of the original script. Nonetheless, because you Americans have been conditioned to swallow, shall we say, the portrayals manufactured by your mass culture industry, many will be led

down the garden path and many will be harmed by, as you Americans say, not coming clean."

Powmia knew that this was the opportunity to ask the questions for which he sought answers, but he was still a little dumbfounded.

"You know a lot about America," Powmia said after a quick search for something to say. His quick comment seemed a bit hasty, without the benefit of full judgement and perhaps a little rude.

Tran smiled.

"I went to school for many years in Paris. Not only did I learn English well but I studied many examples of your mass culture."

"I think I know," Powmia interjected as soon as he diplomatically could, "what you mean by experiencing something as if it were a fiction. Sometimes the line between fact and fiction becomes blurred. Maybe it's because there are two perspectives to the same truth in both fact and fiction. A good example is when I

was on the ship coming over here. I passed the time reading an American novel entitled *Catch-22*. I read that book thinking everything in it was so crazy that it could never happen in real life. But in a short time I found that nearly everything crazy that occurred in *Catch-22* happened to me in some parallel way here in this war."

Su Thang Tran laughed.

"Of course," he responded to Powmia, "Any war without just cause will result in all manner of illusions enough to drive one crazy."

Suddenly Ta Dao Giao piped up and spoke rapidly and sneeringly in Vietnamese, "One day your war will make a bad movie. It will be a movie that will go on forever as if it were reality itself because no one will know that they are part of a movie. Like this war, the movie will go on because no one will like how it really ends."

"By the way," said Tran, "I read *Catch-22* a few years ago when I was studying in Paris.

There are many lessons to be learned from reading that book. That is why in your country it may be considered an anti-war novel."

A long moment ensued. Powmia felt pressured by the silence. He also wanted to take fullest advantage of the time and opportunity to seek answers from some one whom he had been told could provide the answers. Powmia decided on a beginning point.

"I have been in Vietnam now for six years. For more than a year I had experienced combat from perspectives that have caused me to pause. At first I sought relief in my mind and heart by escaping into licentiousness and intoxication. And that landed me in jail. Then when I got out of jail, they made me clean up the dead until I was nearly dead myself. Not dead physically, but dead spiritually. I can't believe that I wanted to finish the job. So I joined up again. That's when a miracle happened to me. I saw . . . no, I experienced

America fading. Right in front of me. I saw things pass in front of me like a . . . "

Powmia paused and looked at Ta Dao Giao and snickered at the irony before going on:

" . . . like a movie. How could the behavior of the Americans, I only realized in retrospect, have been so unlike what I expected. My only real friends, I realize now; the only persons, the only Americans, who I related to in a decent way were an Indian and a guy who felt an evil presence so great that he found ways to alienate himself from nearly everyone. Now they're gone, back to the states, almost like they died . . . dropped off into oblivion."

Tran watched Powmia impassively, almost as if he were trying to make up his mind, or give himself time to make a judgment about Powmia. Giao was still, while leaning forward slightly against his thighs, chewing calmly on the betel nut and staring contemplatively as in a trance.

"Then," began Powmia, feeling compelled to hasten Tran's assessment of himself, "the real miracle happened."

Powmia turned to Voun and smiled soft at her. Her eyes were kind as she watched him.

"I walked away," Powmia said and paused a moment. "I think if I'd gone home, back to the states like everyone else I wouldn't have learned what I've learned. I mean I'd have just gone home and been ignorant and confused. In the last five years I've got to see the war from the other side."

Suddenly Powmia realized that both Voun and his friend Thon were watching him. He felt a little embarrassed, like he was going through some confession ritual. Then just as suddenly he turned to Tran.

"It's almost as if everything I believe in about America is alive, but alive over here. I mean, living here I can't get away from the feeling that I really am in the United States and there's this disaster going on all around and these people all around me are pulling it

together, or at least suffering honorably, like those Americans in the Great Depression or something like that. I just can't get it out of my mind sometimes that I really am in America, right here, right now."

"That's interesting," Tran said after a moment's contemplative pause, "but not totally surprising. It's not surprising certainly to learn that in many ways all people are the same, both in their humanity toward one another but in their capacity to behold moral ideals.

Americans, by no stretch of the imagination, hold a premium on such capacities. You have found your vision of America here. The American Dream is not that far away, nor is it that unique. But for the depiction of the American Dream, well . . ." and Tran paused again staring briefly into the dark of the ceiling, ". . . that may not be as unique either as developing countries become more developed."

"What do you mean?" Powmia asked.

"To the winners go the spoils," Tran smiled. "But when others hanker after our spoils, we realize the spoils have been good after all. Then we realize we want them back. Eventually the spoils need to be shared among those who made them in the first place, along with those peculiar national visions they can provoke among the masses. That is the dream."

Powmia paused to mull over Tran's utterance. Secretly Powmia was hoping that Voun or Thon would say something, or ask an appropriate question, on Powmia's behalf. But it was Tran himself addressing himself to Powmia.

"I understand you like to read a lot?"  
Tran asked.

"Well, I've learned to want to read a lot. I'm not sorry though," Powmia replied. "I've brought a couple of books in English for you. They don't constitute a lot of pages, I'm afraid, but they will guarantee to raise plenty of questions for you, questions that will prime the pump for seeking answers from many more

sources. Here . . ." Tran said handing the thin volumes to Powmia.

"It is not only for material products that such wars are perpetrated," Tran said while placing his fingers splayed in prayer, like a spider hovering on glass, like a dragonfly lighting upon water. Then under thoughtful brow he said, "There are other products that yield new kinds of colonial relations among countries like Vietnam. This book will show you that other product, which is the only product you produce as an individual; and the one that, in turn, produces all other products. But this prime product produces all that capital which is in the coffers and scripts. It is all of these products that the Yankees wish to reap from countries like Vietnam. The other book will tell why and how the Yankees are reaping capital from countries like Vietnam. These small volumes will help you to understand a little more this war in Vietnam from yet another perspective, that is, since you're involved in experiencing perspectives," Tran

declared through a persistent underlying chuckle.

Powmia smiled in response. It was a smile of appreciation for the gift as well as a gesture of acknowledgement of Tran's insight into Powmia's character.

"What do you think will happen now?" Powmia asked growing mentally weary enough to have totally relaxed.

"As you watch," Tran patiently began, "as countries, like Vietnam, cast off the burden of the United States controlling their economic and social lives, you will see American lifestyle diminish in the quality it has enjoyed. The progress that has been made in American lifestyle will be reversed and perhaps you'll realize that the American dream has been a nightmare for less developed countries and that much of the wealth in the United States had come about because it has been feeding off the wealth of countries whose economies and governments it controls."

Powmia was speechless, as was everyone in the room. He looked at Voun sitting a short distance away from him. Her face was divided into two separate expressions. While her mouth smiled with approval that Powmia had asked so many questions that had prompted extended answers from Tran, her eyes contained a concerned questioning look as if to wonder whether Tran's answers had settled well within him. His smile was meant to reassure her.

Suddenly Giao piped up speaking rapidly in fervent Vietnamese. Everyone was still as Tran, Thon, Voun and Powmia listened to his words. When he finished Tran turned to Jim. There was a slight frown on Tran's face.

"Giao is not as optimistic as many of us," Tran began. "He says the Yankees have embodied all the empires gone before it. Even after the Great War your country has come away with immense wealth. He reminds us that wealth, once acquired, never disappears. It just changes hands. For the winners war is no

more than a mere investment if damage to private property is kept to a minimum, or at least weighed on a scale among victors. He also reminds us of the great cost incurred by the Socialist community, especially the Soviet Union. We, in our war here against the imperialist, are but an ember in the greater war going on all around us. When you have capital to invest in places where there is none but only the potential of labor and natural resources, capital can make all the rules, which are the only rules. Giao warns us of two things, which I have to admit myself are within the realm of possibility. He says if the capitalists, especially those who operate beyond the bounds of any of the capitalist giants or countries, find a way to expand the ability to expropriate still struggling nations, both in a qualitative and quantitative sense, these capitalist giants may have the means to perpetuate their rule indefinitely. Time is running out quickly, Giao says.

"He adds that capital has a greater grasp of technology, which has been demonstrated by their war against us. It won't be long before technologies will provide the means to expropriate the hearts and minds of the people. Even those weaned on the ideological fruits of Marxism Leninism. He says the capitalists will win the hearts and minds of people through the use of television if we are not careful."

Both Tran and Powmia chuckled a bit at Giao's notion. Thon and Voun volunteered obligatory snickers.

"He also warns," Tran continued, "that if men of principle betray the trust of the people, if they do not apply that trust and socialist science and ideals to what is a dynamic revolutionary process they could find themselves alienated from the great masses of people, especially if the capitalist have begun to win the people's hearts and minds with television.

"But the greatest warning Giao gives is that if both betrayal by our leaders coincides

with the capability of greater aggrandizement by the capitalist giants things could get very bad indeed, even for us who are winning the battle with great sacrifice here in Vietnam."

Thon was gazing at Powmia with a deadpan yet knowing look. It seemed as though Thon were saying, "Now you know the things that will help you to understand the Vietnamese mind a little better." Powmia smiled at Thon too, nodding slightly.

"Tell me," Su Thang Tran broke the silence, "where else in our country have you been."

Powmia turned. "Besides a few times in Saigon and that rather confining stay at Long Binh, I spent a few months of duty time at Cu Chi."

"Ah, Cu Chi," Tran savored the name. "Famous Cu Chi. There are some extraordinary things about Cu Chi. You might be surprised to know that Cu Chi was not a very safe place for American soldiers because one of the most heavily concentrated networks

of tunnels was right under the U.S. base there. That hill on which it stood was a virtual hive. You might say there were two bases there; one above the ground and one below. Of course, the one above ground was totally ignorant of the extent of the one below the ground."

Powmia remembered the vivid dream he had had in Cu Chi and a flood of memories flushed through his consciousness.

"Yes, some ugly things happened there," Powmia confirmed matter-of-factly. He was nearly afraid to go on, afraid and ashamed. "My first doubts about what I was doing here came to me when I was in Cu Chi. There were some truly unexplainable things that happened there."

"True," added Tran, "and we tried our best to exacerbate the ugliness there, to get under the skin of the American soldiers. We would try many things. Once some enterprising students of psychological warfare tunneled up under the American PX and shuffled in some photographs of Ho Chi Minh

with some newly processed snapshots some of the soldiers had taken. The idea was that it would undermine the soldiers' mental stability. Undermining their confidence was the reason it was tried. But we stopped it for a couple of reasons. One was that we thought the plan might give us away and give the American authorities an idea how easy access was to the inside of the base there. The second reason we stopped was because we had no way of determining the effect. Greater certainty soon took greater priority."

"I know what you mean," Powmia said quickly. "I really know what you mean. I was one of those who received those photos and it really shook me up."

Tran burst out laughing. "Well then, I'm gratified that I'll be able to make a report on this particular success story. Your prospect of becoming the talk of the Party has just increased."

The idea suddenly occurring to Powmia that his encounter with Tran would become

generally known to people who he had once been told were his enemy made him feel strangely secure. Other had told him, G.I.'s and Vietnamese alike, that if the communists took over, there would be a bloodbath to follow. The last wisps of credibility to these stories of terror evaporated with the effortless tone of Tran's stated intentions.

"There was one other thing about my stay at Cu Chi that I've always wondered about. My first mission was as part of an interrogation detail aboard a Huey . . ."

"Please," Tran broke in holding up a solemn hand to halt Powmia, "spare me the details. I know those nasty sessions were carried out more as a slow means of torture and execution rather than to interrogate."

"I was hoping," replied Powmia, "that you'd know what I was talking about so I wouldn't. The experience was bad for me too. But if I may go on because there was something strange that happened that I don't understand.

"We threw this young woman out and she never hit the ground. It was more like she disappeared into it . . . "

Powmia trailed off when he saw Tran's eyes go wide. Shit, he thought. Had he said something wrong?

"Small world," exclaimed Tran astonished. "One thing we tried was to enlarge some openings to tunnels and camouflage them. We did this in the hope of catching former prisoners thrown out of helicopters and airplanes. Except in one case did it work and we realized, tragic as this American practice was, that the effort was not producing enough results. Except in one case and you saw it.

"The woman's name is Dan Nha Tho and she lived through the experience. She's now a colonel commanding a regiment of patriots and has been made a hero of Vietnam."

Powmia could not believe Su Thang Tran had heard so much about the same incidents that he had himself experienced.

"Did you say you were from Tay Ninh?  
You know a lot about Cu Chi."

Suddenly Tran stared away into space.  
He paused before speaking.

"Tay Ninh and Cu Chi are not that distant from one another. But like you, I have left what you Americans call 'War Zone D'. Tay Ninh has sad memories for me and it is hard for me to stay there for long periods of time, especially near my home village. You see, one night many years ago I came home and found my wife and my two daughters slaughtered. I found out later that a team of your Navy's Seals had been in the area looking for me that night. Many times since I have wished they had found me, for had they, my wife and children might be alive today. I cherished my family very much. It will be a long time before I will be able to return for long in Tay Ninh."

Powmia turned and looked at Voun. He remembered telling her of his encounter with Dagwood in the Blow Bar. Powmia saw she had come to the same conclusion of

recognition as he. She knew. Voun and Powmia registered their discovery in one another's eyes. Then they both turned to gaze absently at each's own hands in their lap. Their faces reflected grief, which was compounded by the shock of surprise.

Su Thang Tran snapped out of his trance.

"So," he resumed, obviously trying to lighten the mood, which resulted from his long discussion on the war. He wanted Powmia to talk more about himself. "How do you spend your time?"

"Well," Powmia began while searching for a place to begin, "I'm afraid not with much that's really constructive, except for my life with Hai"

"That's constructive enough," mused Tran.

Powmia went on.

"I manage to get in a few enlightening conversations with our friend Thon here."

Both Thon and Tran smiled with the same kind of mild satisfaction.

"And," continued Powmia after a short pause of acknowledgement of Thon's and Tran's gestures, "I manage to procure some reading materials in English and some records from America. I'm still trying to get the hang of speaking a more fluent Vietnamese. And . . . ah . . . well, I manage to earn a few piasters doing . . . ah . . . small jobs for Hai's Uncle Kookie Con khi."

Suddenly Giao, who had been quietly chewing his betel nut came to life while not altering his squatting position. He began speaking in Vietnamese, first addressing Voun, then Su Thang Tran. But as his remarks became more intended for general consumption, including Powmia, they became more couched in an angry tone. When Giao paused, Tran translated for Powmia's benefit, addressing him directly:

"He begs Voun's pardon as well as my own and does not intend any disrespect to

either of us. He says that he knows Kookie Con khi from many years ago. He says he knew him from their involvement together as young men . . . almost adolescents . . . he says, when they got involved with the Cao Dai. He says Kookie did much damage to the Cao Dai and its purpose when he sided with those who felt that Japanese occupation of our land during the years of Japanese expansionism would free them from the yoke of the French. He says Kookie should have learned his lesson when the Japanese formed an Axis with the Nazis and the French became aligned with the Vichy and co-operated with the Japanese in exploiting our land."

When Tran finished his translation, which he delivered with a calm voice as compared to Giao's building tirade, Giao spat out the plug of betel nut from his cheek and resumed. As he built into a quick rage, a cat that had been hiding under a nearby table padded over to take a quick sniff of Giao's spent betel nut plug, red and oozing in its

mauled leaf. After checking out the plug, the cat dropped its jaw a bit to clear its nasal passages, slapped its own nose with a flick of its tongue and slinked back under the same table from which it had come.

Powmia looked over at Voun to see her reaction to the steady discourse issuing from Ta Dao Giao. Her face had assumed an expression Powmia had never seen before; one that was between stone deadpan while showing surprised enlightenment. Thon's expression indicated calm acceptance of Giao's remarks.

"He says," Tran said when an opportune time presented itself, "that after the Cao Dai realized its mistake Kookie left with shame and went to Can Tho with money he was suspected of taking from his associates in Tay Ninh Province. There he used the money to help himself buy some land. He then joined the Hoa Hao. But soon, Giao says, Kookie's conscience got to him and he couldn't live with himself and the Hoa Hao. He says he's not surprised

that Kookie would end up in Vung Tau living like a parasite off filthy Yankee lucre."

Voun had aged when Powmia looked back at her, as if she had just lived out her lifetime as Giao resumed talking, this time in a calmer tone. The Giao stopped suddenly and Tran came in immediately with the translation.

"As the end of time approaches, he says, everything believed by our most devout faithful will find fruition. The lives and work of Lao Tzu and Confucius and Buddha will be fulfilled. The meaning of the martyrdom of Jesus and Joan d'Arc will be known and understood. But Kookie Con khi is blind. He may think he has the best interest of his people in mind. But he is wrong, and he is blind. He has repeated the mistake of siding and believing the Americans are his friends, just as he believed the Japanese were his friends. He has not grown, nor has he learned anything. He is blind and he is deaf to the teachings of the Cao Dai, even the Hoa Hao, that this is the historic struggle which will end time and for

which we have had taught to us and for which we have waited. Time is measured by edicts of mortal men who see too much the beginning and end of their lives in their own vanities.

Time is measured, also, by war and tragedy. It is the means by which we count the dying and ignore the living. But Kookie Con khi is blind and deaf. The Bringer of Light is among our people, but Kookie Con khi denies him. The Bringer of Light is Vietnamese and yet Kookie Con khi declares that he is the enemy of the Vietnamese. Kookie Con khi's blindness and deafness has made him profoundly ignorant. And his ignorance is a disease among our people, even they who today say they are adherents to the Cao Dai. The end of time is near when Vietnamese will no longer suffer death at the hands of aliens. But woe to the likes of Kookie Con khi. When we are finally rid of the last of the Yankees, and their traitorous running dogs are without the corrupt power they hold over our nation, people like Kookie Con khi will not

understand. They will look around about themselves and they will not understand. They will not even know that they are doomed. And no matter where they will run they will not escape."

Powmia looked over at Voun. There was a flickering in her eyes. The flickering was orange and red. When he noticed the orange and red flushing across the flesh of her face everchanging, Powmia realized Voun was reflecting the fire. But from where the fire came, Powmia did not know. Perhaps it was napalm or perhaps the execution pyre of Joan, the last and holiest of martyrs. Perhaps both. Powmia saw the flames licking up toward her face, her hair singed by the heat of the flame, kinking it before evaporating. Her face expressed what only Powmia could call profound pity.

"My heart," Powmia heard Voun say, "has turned so cold that it will not burn. Not any longer will it burn."

Powmia looked back at Thon who  
smiled knowingly and nodded.

## SPRING FLOWER

Freddy Powmia waited cool in black silk while lying in the darkened room out of the hot sun. He was waiting for Voun to return from chores in order that she might rest with him in the leeward side of the day with the afternoon light in the open end of the house.

Powmia had taken to the night café life three years before but only on that long north road out of town. In that place where sea breeze brings cool winds with the stench of Yankee commerce, Powmia still practiced his high. Except now he was in silk and straw.

Voun had learned the skills to work quiet among the American G.I. 's, whether they be in olive drab or in plain dress like off duty policemen. But those soldiers, who used to tie up the lambrettas with their bulk and who would growl their language to the bone and hungry gut, had left the country and had been gone for a little more than three years. Powmia still had to lay low because an occasional American who posed as a civilian might spot

him. Freddy Powmia now lay upon the mats of his and Voun's bed.

The day was beginning with strange electricity in the air. Voun now lit punk and incense in the open front of the house to let demons collecting in the courtyard during the day to go forth and away with the night.

There was a lot of fear in the city of Vung Tau, a fear that had been long nurtured by the propaganda mill of the Yankee invaders. But there was also a sense of relief in the air that mixed with the fear like gasoline mixes in water.

In his most intimate moments with Voun, Powmia could not forget the memory of that dead girl in that field near Cu Chi seven years before. If only for a fleeting flash, each time he lay with Voun in the tender quiet moments of their love for each other, his gentle nature toward her and her preciousness seemed to be generated by some need to pay the price for the brutality that had ended one's life, which had been stilled in the ripening of

youth. How tragic it would be if Voun's soft doe like eyes were stilled, or if the tremor in her lips were made hard by the hairline squeeze of one of her own countryman's trigger finger. How great a loss to her own country if some empty minded ARVN soldier had earned some time off from the war by pumping hot stateside manufactured slugs into her alive and supple body and had stilled her beaming joyousness.

Powmia remembered all of it and all the memories now seemed to fit into a neat package inside his head. Everything up to and including his court martial and three month incarceration at LBJ made sense to him and constituted the circumstances of that weird and quirky grace that led him to Voun and his conversation with Su Thang Tran only a few months before.

Powmia missed that part of his former life during daylight when he could hop into a spare 3/4 ton truck or deuce and a half and head out on the road north of Vung Tau along

the coastline then round the mountain and head back on the road that ran along the airfield. He missed allowing the magic that exuded from the land to seize him during those absent rides. He lay in the dark waiting for Voun to return by watching the daylight light up the open side of the house. He laughed at the irony of the thought that passed through his head, "They control the night and we control the day."

There was little "day" to life anymore. Powmia had to settle for controlling his own nights.

As he continued waiting for Voun the vision of past remembered sights that had occurred in the daylight passed by his mind's eye: the dragonflies filling a cove along the coast, the monsoon storms like islands of dark cloud rafts floating suspended above the South China Sea. He remembered how he could look at things as if he had been suddenly projected into the future and the war had become a distant memory and everything around him

that was not Vietnamese in origin; the French remains of buildings and American machines blistering in the sun, had become the refuse of a bygone age. It had nearly become that way now.

Suddenly Powmia heard the familiar sound of Voun's footsteps nearing the opening of the house.

"Hai," he yelled out before she appeared in the opening of the house.

Voun, appearing at the front of the house, did not say anything. She only moved steadily and gracefully toward him. She was like a flower bursting into blossom as she came closer to earshot range for quiet talk. She was wearing that robin's egg blue blouse with embossed embroidery that he liked so much over her loose and cool black silk pants. As her face became visible from the glare of the sunshine outdoors, he could see her smile with her even white teeth giving delicacy to her eyes. Powmia had noticed that her smile contained something special that morning. He

didn't want to spoil what her smile was waiting to tell him. He waited as she sat next to him on the bed. He waited as she slid her hand into his and he looked at the two hands holding one another, one dark and his own white from not enough sun.

"Freddy oy," she spoke to his waiting ears, "soon you will be able to walk free in the sun."

Powmia looked up into her brown eyes. He knew what she was about to say. He had already heard some of the story from here and there in the chatter in the courtyard outside.

"Saigon has fallen to the patriots," was all she said with smiling gleaming eyes. "I have heard that the American Embassy is being mobbed by traitors and that the Americans are beating them away, betraying them and burning their own money because they can't take it with them. I have heard there is a steady stream of helicopters leaving the rooftop of their embassy and that they are so crowded

that people are hanging from the landing runners."

Powmia listened to Voun with a heavy feeling of relief and sadness. But he felt a sudden pang of gladness and joy as he looked into Voun's eyes in the silence she had provided for him. He had done it. He had gone past the point of no return, past the turning point of the turning point and toward the end of time. But he and Voun had come a long way together since that day when they both left a way of life that they had since learned could lead to each's own destruction. They had done it together and nothing could ever change that. Their lives together had been each's sacrifice to the other.

"Do not be worried. Do not be sad," Voun whispered to him, touching his cheek lightly with her lips. "The ones who we have feared are fleeing with frenzy to the sea. The patriots will be here tomorrow and those who have died in vain at the hands of the

U.S. war machine have risen from their graves.  
Our life will begin anew and your sadness will  
dissolve in the light and joy of our revolution."

Powmia managed to smile a little at her.  
Then the smile grew and he felt himself  
beaming. He realized that now she really had  
become his whole life and he took her in his  
arms and she embraced him and they held  
each other until they both fell into a long and  
restful sleep in the midst of a frazzled  
wakefulness in the city of Vung Tau that lasted  
all through the night.

**Steven Leech served in Vietnam in 1967 and 1968, during which he experienced the Tet Offensive. He considers himself lucky having made it back alive and in one piece. Three fellow Delawareans with whom he served didn't. He still has friends who are among the wounded. He is glad the lesson of Vietnam kept the succeeding generation from experiencing the same fate, while saddened that the current generation will suffer the harsh results of a war at the behest of the Military/Industrial Complex and its Capitalist handlers.**

