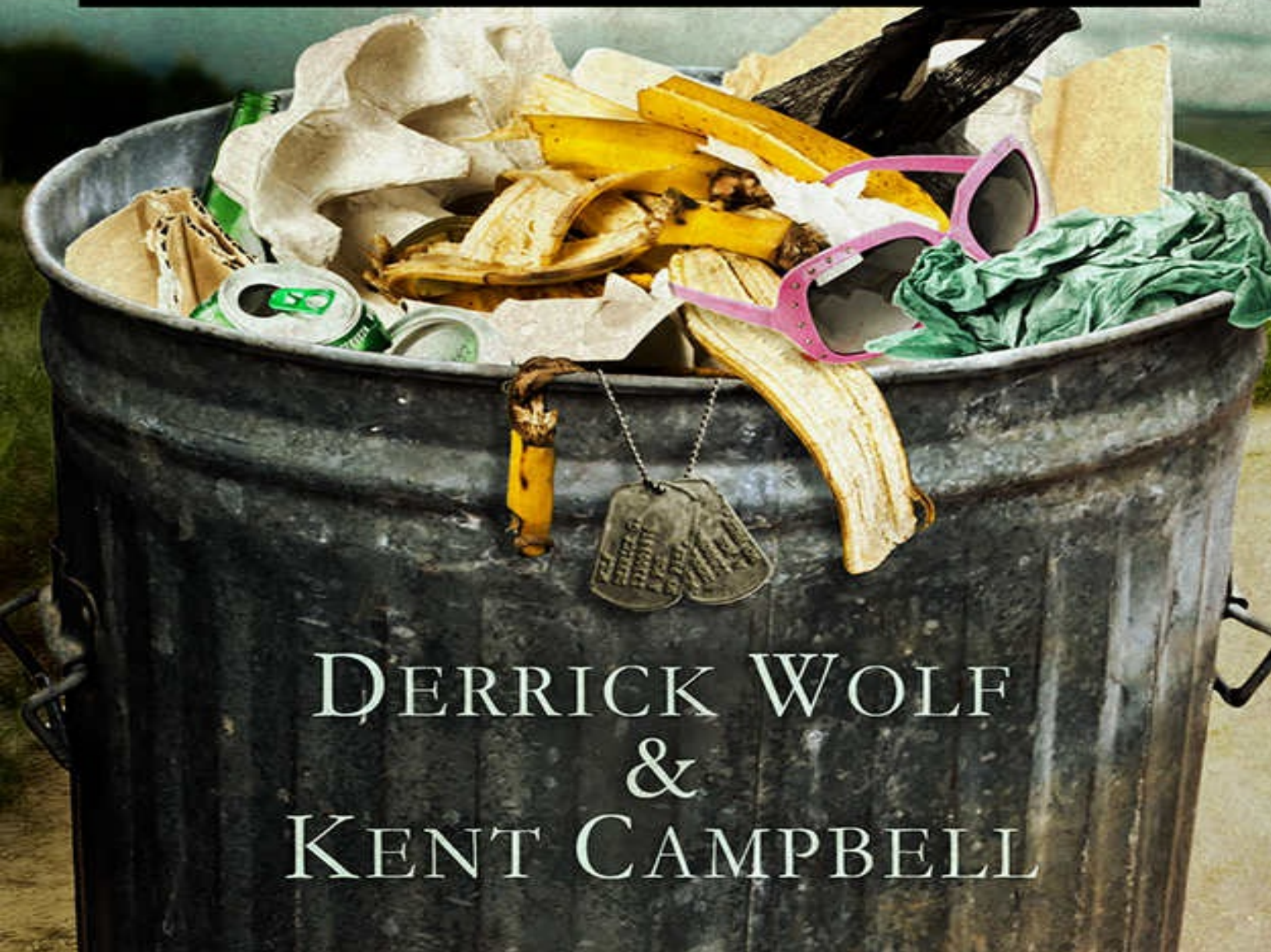
OF NO VALUE

A VIETNAM WAR ERA MEMOIR



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Introduction

Although I felt compelled to write my first book, *Boys for Men,* after reading the Sylvester Waltz Journal of 1876, I did not initially want to. This is the story of my army experience that I really wanted to write about.

So come with me now and witness the absurdity of military hospitals. In most cases the patients themselves are required to clean their wards, make their beds, and perform any myriad of details the lifers can think up – essentially making the patients do what should have been the job of the hospital staff. After my hospital stay, it was off to Ft. Lewis, Washington for the remainder of my army career.

I know I was not the first or the only person to be mistreated by the army after my tour of duty in Vietnam. This is a major part of why I've written *Of No Value*. Many of the homeless veterans that you see living under park benches and highway overpasses do not know they are entitled to benefits from the Veteran's Administration. And there's a reason for that. At the very moment many of us were discharged, we were told we were also signing away our right to any benefits. It wasn't true, but many veterans still don't know that.

The VA does not actively go in search of veterans entitled to benefits. They should. The way the system currently works, you can't even file your own claim. Claims must go through a third party, such as Veterans of Foreign Wars, or some other entity that supports veterans. Call me a cynic, but it makes me wonder if the VA actually wants to help veterans, or if they only do so when essentially forced to.

There is some overlap between the beginning for *Of No Value* and the end of *Boys for Men*. I did this so that *Of No Value,* although technically a sequel to *Boys for Men,* could be read as a standalone book.

Except for Kent and myself, I have changed the names of everyone — to protect the innocent, as they say — but also so the Pachucos don't put a contract out on my life. If there seems to be the name of a real person herein, it is mere coincidence. The events I describe are all true but may not be in the order they happened.

I want to thank my readers for their help in bringing this work to publication. Lastly I want to thank my daughter, Lex, for all her assistance with the actual publication and marketing of this book.

Chapter 1

April 4, 1970
Saturday, My 21st Birthday
Quang Tri Province

Because I'm so tired, the loader has to actually give me a shake when he wakes me at 4 a.m. I'm sure he is loath to do it, since he knows about my hated .45 that is by my side. I'm groggy as I crawl out of my tent.

"Are you awake?" he asks just to make sure.

"I think so," I reply.

I climb up on the turret of the tank and drop halfway into the hatch. I'm so tired I have to keep slapping myself in the face to stay awake. I hate that. All I can think about is coffee and how badly I want and need some right now. I'm still slapping myself around when the first round of sitreps are being reported. I give my sitrep when my turn comes. All the sitreps are negative, and that's number one.

It's hot all the time now, even at night, and by hot I mean the kind of heat where your clothes are always plastered to you as we are all soaked in our sweat. Still, we can't wait for the sun to rise, though when it does, we hide from it when we can. I feel relief when it finally makes its appearance and my stint at guard duty ends.

Normally when I light the C-4 it wakes the rest of my tank crew up but not today. I finish heating my water and pour in the instant coffee and creamer. The noise of the Second platoon moving about eventually wakes Fanelli and the loader. They both look how I felt when I got up this morning, crappy. Not only do they look crappy, but they're both crabby as well. Lack of sleep from pulling extra guard duty is the only thing that makes us miss Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant a tee tee bit, but no more.

There's some horn chatter going on, more than usual because of Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant's absence I think. I'm a tee tee bit ahead of the loader and Fanelli because they slept in. While they finish their breakfasts, I drain the collected water out of the fuel filters, and then I walk around and inspect all the track blocks on our tank. Everything looks tiptop, and the track tension is good on both sides. That's number one.

Fanelli and the loader are barely finished with their breakfasts when the acting platoon sergeant shows up at 2-3. We know this can't be good, and it isn't. We've been expecting to be sent on some number ten mission to maintain our reputation as dog robbers. Two of the Second platoon's tanks, ours and 2-6, along with three of the platoon's PCs, Double Deuce, 2-4, and 2-7, are being sent somewhere about 2 kliks south of the Z for the day. This is a number ten mission in a number ten place for sure. The tanks are to be used as artillery pieces to fire main gun rounds into North Viet Nam. The PCs will guard our rear and act as support, helping with the unloading and unpacking of the main gun ammo and then burning all the packaging. We're supposed to meet up with two deuce-and-a-halfs loaded with main gun ammo that will accompany us to our firing site.

We have to hustle because Fanelli, who knows the location of our mission, says it's boo coo far. I climb into the driver’s compartment, and 2-3 starts right up as it always does. It should, as it's practically new, although it doesn't look it. The layers of mud and dust plus all the gear we have bolted and tied to it makes it look old and used.

Fanelli is chatting away with me as he talks me back. 2-6 is already waiting at the trail head followed by 2-4 and Double Deuce when I pull up. 2-7 pulls up behind us as Fanelli, Steve, and Sgt. Green discuss our route to the firing site. Fanelli and Sgt. Green both know the way, but they let 2-6 lead us to the redball. Steve has Big Al get out front and mine sweep the trail. Because we proceed at a walking pace, it takes about an hour to reach the redball.

Sgt. Green on 2-4 takes the lead of our tee tee procession as we head east to meet the ammo trucks. We get up to 15 mph, and it's probably going to be the only cooldown we get today. The breeze, for now, is number one. We continue heading east for about 3 kliks, and we see the deuce-and-a-halfs waiting at the edge of the redball. Sgt. Green pulls alongside the first deuce-and-a-half and tells the driver to follow us. Fanelli and Sgt. Green have been discussing the expected trail conditions. The deuce-and-a-halfs are fully loaded with ammo, and all parties are concerned about being able to make it there. We know the tanks and PCs can make it, but for the trucks, it might not be possible.

As I listen in on the conversation on the horn, someone points out if the deuce-and-a-halfs can't make it to the firing site, it sort of cancels our mission. But someone else points out we can't just leave a deuce-and-a-half

stuck and loaded with ammo 2 or 3 kliks from the Z.

This is turning out to be a number ten mission. Just like we thought. I'm glad I'm not in charge. Since we are at less than platoon strength, we decide to proceed with one tank in the lead and one tank bringing up the rear. Since Fanelli knows where we're headed, our tank leads the way. When we turn off onto a dirt trail, Fanelli has the loader dismount and start to mine sweep.

It's slow going and although not jungle, it's bush and a number ten place. The guys on the deuce-and-a-halfs are understandably nervous. We are too, even if we are armed to the teeth. The deuce-and-a-halfs only have someone riding shotgun with an M-16. Boo coo pathetic, we think. They won't be much help in a firefight. It's scorching hot with no breeze. Fanelli says there will be no shade where we are going. The trail is boo coo rough in places, so we have to get way ahead of the trucks periodically so they can speed up and drive fast to make it through some of the worst spots.

We break out of the bush onto some open rolling hills. The open terrain means we can break brush through the scrub instead of following an established trail. Not only can we forgo mine sweeping for now, but I can also get the tank up to about 10 mph. We arrive at our destination well before noon.

2-3 and 2-6 are set on the front edge of a small ridge with our main guns aimed at North Viet Nam. We can see the Z a klik or two to the north of us. It's very apparent by the burned and barren ground. The terrain is rolling hills pockmarked with bomb craters as far as the eye can see. The whole area is devoid of trees or vegetation of any kind. An area that looks hard fought over. It looks a tee tee bit the way I imagine Hell would look, but I think Hell would have less bomb craters.

The three PCs set up behind us, so we're arranged in a small circle, sort of a mini-RON. The crews on the PCs start unloading the main gun ammo off of the deuce-and-a-halfs and stacking it up next to 2-3 and 2-6. In the center of our mini-RON, Wack and Smitty start to dig a hole to use to burn all the packaging from the main gun ammo. It's hard rocky ground, and the digging is hard.

It takes till close to noon to unload the ammo and stack it all next to the tanks. It's a boo coo amount of main gun ammo. A sliver of side shade next to the tracks is all we have. Unloading two truckloads of ammo in the sun is an enormous amount of work, and so we break for lunch before we start firing it off.

By opening a fresh case of c-rats, Fanelli, the loader, and I can all have one of the tee tee cans of c-rat cheese we use to slightly improve our c-rat lunch.

After lunch, Fanelli and Steve are on the horn with Higher about our mission this afternoon. Higher has some spotter aircraft observing as we fire our first rounds off at the coordinates given to us. They are having us fire the ammo beyond our field of vision. So after we fire off some shells, the airborne spotters call with new coordinates for Fanelli and the gunner on 2-6 to aim at for the next series of shells.

I'm at the TC's position behind the .50 Cal. While Fanelli is firing the main gun and the loader is loading, I keep a lookout with the binoculars. It's open ground all the way to the Z, so my field of vision, especially with the binoculars, is number one. I don't think Charlie can sneak up on us in our current position, and I want to make sure he doesn't.

We are firing so far beyond our field of view that I can't even see where it's hitting with the binoculars. We're firing HE rounds. The "HE" stands for high explosive, and I wouldn't want to be on the other end of where we are firing. If we don't count the extreme heat and high humidity, it's a beautiful blue sky day with some tee tee white puffy clouds here and there. If you look up and really use your imagination, you can almost feel like you're back in the Real World. Almost, but not.

The scrubby vegetation surrounding us is quite green despite it being the dry season. It's like a vast rolling sea of green that just seems to change to blue at the horizon. The airborne spotters from Higher call with new coordinates for the next rounds to be fired. I'm wearing my commo helmet, so I can listen in on all the horn communication from Higher and the target spotters. This is the first time I've been at the TC position when firing the main gun, and it is boo coo loud. My commo helmet works well to block the noise of the main gun blast when I'm in the driver's compartment, but up here on the turret my ears are ringing.

Because the main gun is so loud, just before Fanelli gets ready to fire the main gun, I drop down into the turret as far as I can. It helps a tee tee bit, but the damage has already been done. My ears will be ringing for a while. That being the case, I climb down from my lookout on the turret and take a turn handing ammo up to the loader when he comes part way out of the loader's hatch for the next round. If I survive my year in the Nam, I'm sure to be deaf or close to it before I'm done.

The afternoon passes slowly as the pile of main gun ammo gets smaller and smaller.

Higher lets both tank crews take a break from firing. The loader and Fanelli and the crew on 2-6 can't wait to get out of the turret, as it is stifling in there. It's hot out here too, but now there's a tee tee bit of side shade next to the tracks, so we all hunker down in it for the only cool off we get. The pile of main gun ammo is down to about the last third. We figure it will take about another hour to fire it off. I give up my place in the side shade to continue my lookout in the turret.

I decide it's time for the loader's first lesson and introduction as to the proper way to load the ammo belts into the ammo box for the coaxial machine gun, aka, the Little Bastard. I start by telling him it's boo coo important that the ammo box is filled exactly right. There is no *good enough*; it has to be perfect. The ammo is pulled out of the ammo box at an extremely high rate of speed when the coax is being fired. The ammo belts have to be put in perfectly so they can come out perfectly. Loading the ammo box is not that difficult during a casual time if you've had some practice. It's filling the ammo box during a firefight and when the main gun is being fired when it's both difficult and dangerous. Not to mention a boo coo important time for it to be done correctly. It's times like that when you're so pumped up on adrenaline that you consider High Alert to be a relaxed state of mind.

The loader appears attentive as I pull several layers of ammo out and then slowly and carefully replace it. He thinks he is ready for his first loading attempt, so we switch positions. Because I am practiced at it, I make it look easy as the loader quickly finds out. I have a good laugh because I knew he wouldn't be able to do it his first try. No one can. Now I tell him the really important part, and that is the recoil path of the main gun. It's painted on the turret floor with wide red lines. As a loader he knows that, as that is the main religion of loaders. It's just that you have to remember not to forget where the recoil path is in all the excitement of a firefight. If you forget, the main gun will remind you when you are hit by the breach block resulting in a serious injury if not death. It would be number ten.

It's too hot and stuffy to stay inside the turret, so we end the loader's lesson for today. We both climb out for some fresh air. Hot air but fresh. Being in the turret with the loader can be a life-threatening situation when he starts farting.

We hunker down in the side shade for a tee tee while longer, and then the

aerial spotters call us over the horn with new target coordinates. It's about 3 PM as we continue to fire main gun ammo at targets beyond our field of view. After we fire off about five rounds and are waiting for sitreps from the aerial spotters, we start to take incoming.

They definitely have our coordinates, as the first rounds land right in the center of our mini-RON. One round hits the pile of main gun packaging in the burn hole and blows all the crating and packaging all over the place. Even though we're used to loud noises and explosions, the incoming sound blast takes us all by surprise. It smells like burned gunpowder from firing all the main gun ammo, but now it also smells like explosives. Just like old times.

Most of us can barely hear after the explosion from the first incoming round. A second round of incoming hits us before some of the guys can take cover. The TC on 2-7 gets hit in the back from the incoming shrapnel. He was taking all the cover he had, but the bullet shield on the tanks and PCs is open at the rear. With the incoming landing in the center of our mini-RON, all the TCs are exposed.

I was tucked safely away in my driver's compartment just by dumb luck. All luck, except bad luck, is acceptable here in the Nam. The TC's wound is a number ten one, and he was bleeding pretty badly until Wack and Sgt. Green got a bandage on him. Doc, our medic, is with the rest of the Second platoon, so we have to do our own first aid. Fanelli is on the horn calling in a dustoff chopper for the wounded TC. We wait for the chopper before we fire anymore main gun ammo at the remote targets.

We are boo coo lucky none of the main gun ammo stacked next to the tanks got hit, especially since it was the high explosive type. That would have been so number ten that there would be no need for the dustoff chopper, as all of us would now be dead. Blown to smithereens kind of dead. The dustoff chopper is here in about 15 minutes, and the wounded TC seems in good spirits as they load him onto the dustoff chopper. Once he is gone, Fanelli calls in a status report to officially notify base camp of 2-7 Tango Charlie's wounding. As he closes his report over the horn, he gives today's date which is April 4th, 1970.

When I hear Fanelli say the date at the end of his report, I realize it's my birthday. My 21st birthday to be exact. In all the excitement and trying not to think about it so as to not jinx it, I have forgotten about and almost missed my birthday. I made it to 21, but I'm currently in a number ten place having survived two rounds of incoming. And we have to stay here to finish our

mission. I hate that!

While we're still taking a break, I grab the can of Planters nuts that I have left from the goodie box my parents sent. I had been saving it, should I actually make it to my birthday. Fanelli and the loader are both hunkered down in the side shade of 2-3 when I walk up and join them.

"What's the occasion?" asks Fanelli when I offer some of the nuts to both of them.

"My 21st birthday is today!" I reply.

Fanelli, always a hard guy to impress, just says, "See if you can make 22."

Twenty-two? I just want to make it out of the Nam alive.

This should at least silence my little inner voice. Now if I get killed, my dying thought won't have to be: I should've eaten the nuts! I feel bad that 2-7 Tango Charlie got wounded. But if that hadn't happened, I would have missed my 21st birthday. Xin loi, 2-7 Tango Charlie.

It seems absurd, but we have to collect all the packaging that the incoming blew all over the place. War is weird. We still have some main gun ammo to fire off, and we hope we can fire it off and didi before there's any return fire like last time. Now that I made it to 21, my next milestone here in the Nam would be R&R. If we make out of here today, anyway. But I better not start thinking about that, or I'll jinx it for sure, as it will be another three months before I can go.

The aerial spotters give us target coordinates and Fanelli and the gunner on 2-6 fire off the first volley, and then we get new coordinates based on where the first rounds landed. After the second round, the aerial spotters tell us to fire the rest of the ammo at the last coordinates, and that's what we do until all the ammo is gone. We then pour diesel fuel on everything in the burn hole. It is an awesome pile of wood, paper, and debris. When we light it, the flames shoot at least 25 feet into the air. There is boo coo black billowing smoke, and as Charlie already has our coordinates this just screams, "Here we are!" So we uncircle and didi mau on the trail we made coming here.

At first it's easy to identify our trail, but once we get to a couple of forks, none of us is sure which trail is ours, so we start to mine sweep. It's getting to be late afternoon, but we proceed at a walking pace back to the redball.

We're still leading the way on 2-3, and to give the loader a break, Charlie Brown has Smitty come up to the front to mine sweep. Because 2-7's TC was dusted off, they are a 3 man crew as well. We're still in a number ten place and two of the tracks are short a crewman. We luck out and find the trail that

we mine swept earlier, so we proceed a faster pace but not much. We just want to make it to resupply and meet up with the rest of the Second platoon before The Scary Time. Although we all agreed this was the right trail, they still all look alike so there is always some doubt. Since I'm in the lead, I worry. When we finally break out at the redball there is a collective sigh of relief.

The deuce-and-a-halfs, now empty, say their goodbyes and then head east to base camp as fast as they can drive. We drive about 4 kliks east before we see the resupply convoy.

It's going to be a three platoon mail call, and because it's my birthday, Fanelli offers to stay behind to man the .50 Cal while the loader and I sky to mail call. It's a large crowd, so at first we can't find anyone we know, but after a while we hear Wack calling us and we meet up with him and the crew of 2-6.

We were together for most of the day, so we have little news to share, but we have another good laugh about what a mess the incoming made when it hit our trash in the burn hole today. Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant isn't here, so I can't ask him if the incoming counts as no longer being a cherry. For the TC on 2-7, the cure was definitely worse than the disease. As much as I was jinxing myself by thinking about my birthday, I made it. And so far haven't gotten wounded either. So far.

My lucky streak ends with the end of mail call, as I get no mail, not even a birthday card. Since my luck has run out, I definitely will not ruin what is left of my birthday by attending the hot chow offering today.

Fanelli and the loader sky over to the resupply deuce-and-a-halfs. Although it was a number ten mission this afternoon, it was number one that we didn't have to shoot off our base load. If we had, we would now be humping main gun ammo to top off our base load.

The resupply site is bigger than two football fields side by side since all three platoons are here. About 30 track vehicles and close to 150 guys to feed and resupply. It takes Fanelli and the loader a while to get back to 2-3 with our supplies and c-rats. In honor of my birthday, Fanelli opens a new case of c-rats and both of them insist I choose first. I mention to Fanelli and the loader that the best birthday present I get is the absence of Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant. Although getting only four hours of sleep at night is getting old.

The other two platoons are still engaged in their resupply duties as we in the Second platoon start bringing in our concertina wire and start to uncircle.

2-5 takes off slowly at first, heading west until all the tracks of the Second platoon are on the redball, before speeding up to about 15 mph. After about 4 kliks 2-5 Tango Charlie then turns south off of the redball and starts breaking brush through the short scrub. Rolling green hills almost as far as we can see. The sun is low in the sky, and that means it will be dark soon. We have a good field of view and the brush breaking is going well, so that we arrive at our RON with enough daylight left, we hope.

We drive in circles more out of habit than any need to flatten anything. I hope for the best in the last few hours of my 21st birthday and we find no tunnels or booby traps. I set out my trip flares, trying my absolute best to make them impenetrable. I put out the claymores next while the loader sets out the concertina wire, and then he and I set up the RPG screen. I set up my tent while Fanelli and the loader tie the tarp to the side of 2-3. We still have a few minutes of daylight left by the time we're finished, so we congratulate ourselves on a job well done.

We take turns sitting behind the .50 Cal. for an hour each until midnight. I decide to try my best to stay up until midnight because I missed most of my birthday. The masquerade is over. I am finally a *Man*, legally, at least. At midnight and the end of my birthday, I head for my tent feeling number one that my inner voice should have no complaints left. I, on the other hand, do have some complaints. I unlace my boots halfway and lay back and put my boonie hat over my face. I wish that for just once, the bugs would leave me alone but of course they don't. Maybe they just want to wish me a happy birthday since no one else did. Xin loi, Wolf.

Fanelli wakes me at 4 a.m.. The four hours sleep at night is really getting to me. It is so hot that I'm in a daze. When I drop half way into the TC hatch, I try to put myself in as uncomfortable a position as possible hoping I don't fall asleep. I really think I could fall asleep standing up. I am so tired, and once again I have to slap myself around to stay awake. I make it to my first sitrep. Only seven more to go until the end of The Scary Time. One of the guards on the other side of the RON reports some noise in front of them. Permission is given to fire a couple of grenades from Thumper.

The explosions don't usually wake the sleeping platoon members. If anything, they sink deeper to sleep, confident that the guards are being vigilant in their task. The guard fires a couple more grenades and receives no return fire so far. My hearing is not completely back to normal after

yesterday's mission. I don't think it'll ever get completely back to normal, but the ringing in my ears has stopped for now. No more noise or activity reported on the other side of the RON, so that is number one, and the rest of the Second platoons sitreps are negative just like mine.

All I can think about is coffee. I need coffee but my mind keeps saying, "Sleep!" I have to ignore my inner voice again as sleep would be number ten right now, as much as I want to.

Someone's canteen is sitting next to the .50 Cal. so I splash my face with some water, and it's almost number one. It keeps me awake and refreshes me a tee tee bit and cools me off some as well. Another round of sitreps pass, and I give mine when my turn comes. Back in the Real World it would be light by now, but here in the tropics we are still waiting for the sun. Another guard is reporting hearing noise in his vicinity and permission is given to fire a couple of grenades using Thumper again. Again the exploding grenades have no apparent effect on the sleeping members of the Second platoon. No return fire and no continuation of any noise. Number one so far. The sounds are probably just some animal that has somehow escaped being killed already. Boo coo remarkable but somehow a tiger and a boar survived. Well, the tiger survived.

The first rays of sunlight finally make their appearance. As exhausted as I am, as soon as I let the sun shine on my face, I feel a burst of energy that I can't explain.

I have been saving my last brand new white t-shirt to wear on my 21st birthday, but having been sent on our dog robber mission so early yesterday morning, I totally forgot about it. I open my thermo chest and get my white t-shirt out and put it on. Clean and white. It feels good and looks even better. It's a good thing Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant isn't here, as he would be having a fit right now about my non-standard-issue-attire and my beard.

Fanelli and the loader are both bleary eyed and a tee tee bit grumpy this morning. So after making my coffee and grabbing a c-rat pecan roll, I get back up on the turret and sit behind the .50 Cal hoping for a tee tee breeze to go with my breakfast.

After Fanelli shaves he looks and seems to feel much better. We both would feel boo coo better if we could get some Ramen again. I'm careful not to mention it out loud lest I jinx it. Now that Fanelli is fully awake he sees my shirt and gives me that knowing look that I still respect. Fanelli is still The Man. He says nothing but just shakes his head. I don't really have a valid

excuse for wearing my white t-shirt today except we're in the tropics, and it's hot and humid. Yesterday, when I actually had planned to wear it, I could at least say I was celebrating my birthday. My excuse today sounds pathetic: I meant to wear it yesterday, but I forgot. Xin loi.

The Second platoon is ordered by 2-5 Tango Charlie to prepare to break camp. When we arrive at the redball, there is a jeep from base camp waiting for us. The passenger is Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant. At least, I think, he was gone for my birthday. He chats briefly with 2-5 Tango Charlie before dragging his gear over to 2-3 and tossing it up on the bustle rack.

I say to Fanelli over the intercom as we get underway, "Just like old times, aye Fanelli?"

After a couple of minutes of getting settled in, Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant orders the Second platoon to follow 2-3, and then says to me, "Head west, Driver."

I start slowly so as to give the rest of the tracks a chance to space out properly. After a couple of minutes, I get 2-3 up to 20 mph. The breeze is number one. We drive for an hour before we stop for a break. The drivers all dismount to stretch our legs and check the track blocks and road wheels.

The break isn't long and was probably more for the smokers than for the drivers. It's the boonies out here with no civilian traffic and no military traffic except us. There aren’t even any farms or rice paddies or villages. After another hour driving west on the hard top, Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant calls a halt. When the rest of the Second platoon catches up, he has me pull off the redball heading south.

The terrain is gently sloping hills as far as the eye can see. We drive at about 5-10 mph for about an hour before Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant has the tracks circle up on a small hill with a good view in all directions.

At least for once we're not sitting ducks. After everyone is properly situated, Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant lets us break for lunch.

We have little to look forward to in our current situation. Our food is horrible, but at least we have it. Our drinking water is warm, but we have it also. No more holidays until Memorial Day at the end of May. Not that there is any holiday celebrated here in the field. Pay day is at the end of the month, but except for the poker players, most of us will probably still have money left from last pay day, so tee tee excitement there. We take an hour for lunch, and then we move out.

Except for the scorching heat, our mission today is going well. We

continue to have an excellent field of view due to the rolling hills and the short scrub. We go from one hilltop to another and try to drive along any ridge lines, trying to always be on the highest ground.

We drive over hill and dale the rest of the afternoon, and we see no other person or thing. For me it is number one. We start heading back north, and most of us expect to hit the redball sooner than we actually do. For a tee tee while it makes us think we are lost. We hate that. Eventually we do finally see the redball off in the distance. We make it there without incident, but Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant isn't exactly sure where we are. However, he is confident resupply is to the east. We're hardly full of such confidence.

We're heading east with the sun mostly behind us, and once I get going, the cool down is number one. After we drive for about an hour, there is a boo coo amount of horn chatter concerning the location of resupply as it is getting late. But Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant has us continue to head east, and finally we can see the First and Third platoons off the side of the redball.

Because we are the last platoon to arrive, it’s almost like a game of musical chairs as the tracks in the Second platoon fill in the open parking spaces left. It takes me a couple of back up attempts under the guidance and watchful eye of Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant before I have 2-3 situated to his exacting standards. He stays up on the turret behind the .50 Cal so he can start playin' soldier again now that he's back in the field.

Fanelli, the loader, and I are able to hump all of our supplies in one trip. We relieve Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant so he can head to the hot chow. I'm the first to finish heating up my c-rats, so I settle in behind the .50 Cal and eat my dinner. The three platoon resupply site is huge, and because of the smoke and dust I can hardly see all the way to the other side. The smoke is from some of the burn holes that have been lit already. Some of the Lifers worry that the locals will score some of our refuse. That happens when we're near Cam-lo but not here. So we have to breathe all the smoke until we sky, as if the heat and humidity aren't enough already.

At least the sun is going down soon, but that just means a tee tee bit less heat and more importantly the start of The Scary Time. Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant returns with today's hot chow offering. I hope it tastes better than it smells, but that would be doubtful. On second thought I hope it tastes even worse than it smells. Xin loi, Sarge! The hot chow is only made worse by being served on wimpy paper plates with little plastic forks. Just like a picnic but without the ants.

Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant, being finished with his modest repast, orders the Second platoon to prepare to sky to our RON. Fanelli and the loader bring in the concertina wire and I light our trash after applying a liberal splash of diesel fuel.

We don't go more than 4 kliks down the redball before Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant has me stop. He has the loader dismount when the mine sweeping equipment arrives, and we proceed north into the bush on an existing trail. Compared to the area we drove around all afternoon, this is a number ten place. Not as number ten as the jungle but still number ten. We hope we don't have to go too far, as it’s getting late.

It's such a number ten place, the ground gets extra scrutiny for tunnels tonight. Even after a thorough search and nothing is found, I'm still apprehensive. Some tee tee bit of luck for us today. We start putting out our night defenses.

I can only think of one good thing about Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant's return, and that is we may get more sleep tonight. I really need it. These last few days of four hours of sleep at night have me near the point of collapse in this heat. We hear Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant announce that after dark, we are having a Mad Minute. We haven't done that for a while, and it just means cleaning all the guns tomorrow morning and humping ammo at resupply. Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant apparently can't wait to start playin' soldier again after his tee tee hiatus to the rear. If he's so hot to shoot, he should have been with us on my birthday.

I try to take a tee tee nap before the Mad Minute starts. We usually use ammo from the driver's compartment for the Mad Minutes so we can keep the turret full of ammo and also so I can practice handing main gun ammo to the loader through the ammo pass-through. The rounds are fragile and each one weighs about 50 lbs, and I have to pass them to the loader underhanded and to the rear. It definitely takes practice, and I for one need it.

I manage to catch a few winks before Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant gets on the horn and says, "Second platoon, prepare for the mike-mike."

I climb out of the driver's compartment and knock down the RPG screen. Just as quickly, I climb back into the driver's compartment, drop my seat all the way down, and close my hatch cover. I put on my commo helmet and start the engine.

Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant next announces over the horn, "Second platoon, prepare to commence fire," followed by the order, "Commence fire."

I hold on to my steering bar as the front of 2-3 lifts off the ground when the main gun is fired. I hand a main gun round to the loader. We only fire four main gun rounds, but Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant is having a field day with the .50 Cal. I guess he really missed playin' soldier.

Eventually, over the horn he orders, "Cease fire, Second platoon!"

At least we won't have to hump much main gun ammo at resupply tomorrow. It's definitely quieter in the driver's compartment than at the TC position, and my ears aren't even ringing after the Mad Minute. With the loader's assistance, we set the RPG screen back up in the dark and then we both climb back up on the turret. The loader gets back inside, but I just stick my head in to verify that I have last shift on guard, which I do. I am so exhausted all I want to do is sleep. I feel my way back to my tent and crawl in. I put my boonie hat over my face and am soon fast asleep. For once I don't even notice the bugs. Xin loi, bugs.

I am not awakened by the loader, but by automatic and main gun fire at about 3 AM. I can tell by the sounds that I am about to be cured of my Cherry Disease for certain, whether I like it or not. I don't really lace up my boots. I just wrap my laces around my boot tops once and quickly tie them, grab my hated .45, and sky up for 2-3.

I make a mad dash for the driver's compartment amid the eerie glow of the lume the mortar crew is already shooting up. I drop in and close the hatch all the way. I start the engine, and then I put on my commo helmet and wait for any orders. Because of last night's Mad Minute, I only have six main gun rounds left next to me. The loader asks me for a main gun can round, and I hand it to him.

I hold on to my steering bar every time the main gun is fired. We fire several can rounds to the area in front of us. If Charlie was out there, he no longer exists on this planet. Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant is firing up the place with the .50 Cal and Fanelli is laying down fire with the coax between the rounds fired from the main gun.

I continue to hand the remaining main gun rounds to the loader until there is nothing left. It's surprisingly spacious in the driver's compartment now that all the ammo is gone.

The firefight has only been going on for about twenty minutes, but we only have about half of our base load left. It's still three hours until daylight. If things keep up the way they are, we're going to run out of main gun ammo.

And with the way Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant is firing up the place with the .50 Cal, we're likely to run out of .50 Cal ammo too. We don't carry much .50 Cal ammo, just a few boxes on the bustle rack.

I'm listening to all of the Second platoon's horn chatter in my commo helmet. It's apparent that the brunt of the firefight is on the opposite side of the RON with the attack focused on 2-6 and Double Deuce. Charlie must have been watching our Mad Minute last night. It makes sense he would attack the wimpy tank and the screw-up PC.

I hear Big Al on the horn requesting help and .50 Cal ammo. Their coax machine gun is inoperable and after firing the main gun once, it is now inoperable as well. All Big Al has left is the .50 Cal, and he says he is getting very low on ammo, and that would be boo coo easy because as I said, tanks don't carry a lot of .50 Cal ammo.

I call Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant over the intercom. Since there is no ammo left in my driver's compartment, I have nothing to do. So I volunteer to go over to 2-6 and load the .50 Cal for Big Al. Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant accepts my offer, so I grab some extra ammo for my hated .45. I put my hated .45 into my holster and strap it on. I also grab my steel helmet and put it on, I think, for the first time. It feels boo coo heavy compared to my lucky boonie hat, which I leave behind.

As I jump out of the driver's compartment, I get away from the front of 2-3 as fast as I can. Not only am I completely exposed to gunfire from Charlie, I also worry about Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant firing the main gun or the coax while I'm here. In the eerie light of the lume, I can tell Our Idiot Platoon Sergeant blew the RPG screen down by firing a can round from the main gun. We'll have to order a new one on resupply tomorrow if we don't all get killed, because this one is fubar.

The RON is at least 100 yards across. I head for the center of the RON, as I would guess 2-6 to be almost opposite of 2-3. It's almost as intense as a Mad Minute as all of the tracks of the Second platoon fire off into the darkness. No one can see much in the light provided by the lume. The lume actually shows our position better than it exposes Charlie.

It's boo coo open ground from 2-3 to the mortar pit in the middle of the RON. When I get to the middle of the RON, I drop into the mortar pit to take some cover before I run the rest of the way to 2-6. I crawl around the edge of the pit, trying to keep out of the mortar crew's way. On the other side of the mortar are several guys who have been wounded, including my friend Steve,

the TC on 2-6. Steve's got a serious stomach wound, and Doc has patched him up as best he can and given him some morphine. Steve is still in boo coo pain, but he is keeping tabs on the situation. He said when he left 2-6, Zack and Big Al were firing the .50 Cal, which was the only operational gun they have. They were low on .50 Cal ammo. Steve confirms the attack was mostly in front of 2-6 and Double Deuce, so I don't waste anymore time. On the way to 2-6, a lume round fired by the mortar crew explodes, lighting up the area as it floats down to the ground with its tee tee parachute. In the bright light, I can see Zack sitting on the bustle rack on the turret of 2-6. He is right out in the open, and it's a number ten place for him to be in a firefight.

I quickly jump up on the rear engine deck of 2-6 and ask Zack if he's OK. He's just sitting there with his helmet and flak jacket on, and he sort of looks OK, but he doesn't answer back. Then I notice a red dot on his shirt in the center of his chest that keeps getting bigger. I grab him and pull him down to the ground behind 2-6 so that he's not right out in the open.

I climb back up on the turret of 2-6 and get behind Big Al. He's been firing the .50 Cal for about thirty minutes or more without any hearing protection. He can't hear anything I say unless I put my lips next to his ear and yell. Being hard of hearing is something I know tee tee about lately. I touch his back first to let him know I am here.

As soon as he realizes I'm here he screams, "More ammo, more ammo! I need more ammo!"

He's not wearing a helmet, so I take mine off and put it on his head before I jump back down to the ground. Zack is still sitting behind 2-6 where I left him, and I can see he definitely got hit in the chest by something. I think he must be in shock, so I figure I better get him over to the mortar pit so Doc can have a look at him. I manage to get Zack to his feet, and we half run, half stumble our way to the mortar pit where I drop him off with Doc.

I run to the opposite side of our circle. Sgt. Green on 2-4 lets me have all the .50 Cal ammo I want. But I can only carry two boxes at a time, one in each hand. It's another 100 yards across the RON back to 2-6, and it's completely out in the open. I try to cross the RON in mostly dark, but when several lume rounds light up the area, I drop into the mortar pit for some tee tee cover.

It's becoming apparent to me that it's number one the mortar crew digs such a big pit. It is getting boo coo full of wounded members of the Second platoon. I'm starting to wonder which we'll run out of first, ammo or platoon

members.

I'm trying to time my runs in the open when the lume is almost out. Although sometimes it is completely dark, the mortar crew tries to not let that happen. This is one time when I'm hoping for the dark time. As the last lume goes out, I make a run for 2-6. I put the ammo boxes up on 2-6 and then climb up. I approach Big Al from directly behind for a tee tee bit of cover in front. I stack the two boxes of .50 Cal up on the turret where Big Al can see them. Then I drop into the turret through the loader's hatch. The first thing I notice, besides the fact that the main gun is embedded in the radio rack, is that the turret floor is covered with cherry juice. That is number ten and would definitely be considered a hydraulic system failure. What is number one and almost a miracle is the horn still being functional so that Big Al was able to call for assistance. I can tell there is nothing that I or anyone else can do about the main gun's disabled hydraulic system.

Well, that's it, we only have the .50 Cal. I better get hustling and go get some more ammo for it. I climb out of the loader's hatch and quickly get behind Big Al. I yell into his ear that I'm going after more ammo and he nods his head indicating that he heard me. I drop to the ground behind 2-6 and decide to try to get some ammo from a PC closer to 2-6. I run over about two PCs and stick my head in the open rear and ask for some ammo. It's all laid out on the floor in two layers, and the TC says to help myself, so I do. I'm running from the rear of one PC to the rear of the next for a tee tee bit of cover. I'm trying to stay out of the line of fire, but there's really no cover out in the open.

I make it back to 2-6, but Big Al is shooting up the .50 Cal boo coo fast and is still low on ammo. I just stack the two ammo boxes next to him and jump down for more. I decide to run across the RON again so I can use the mortar pit for cover and check on the wounded.

Steve is still keeping an eye on the situation and is worried the RON is going to be overrun. The way we set up in a circle is the best defensive position, but if the circle is broken and Charlie gets inside the RON, that would be number ten. The armor around the .50 Cal. on the PCs and the tanks is open in the back, so they're very vulnerable from behind. Although the tank turret can be rotated so the .50 Cal could shoot up the center of the RON, the .50 Cal on the PCs can only fire in the forward direction. It would be a mess if the RON is breached. I decide I can't let that happen, and I run for more ammo. This time I go back to 2-4 and then back to the mortar pit.

On my way back to the mortar pit with two boxes of .50 Cal ammo, I can feel bullets zinging by my head. I drop into the mortar pit next to Steve.

I say to him, "Man, Steve, I'm starting to get an attitude. Someone has been trying to blow my head off all morning."

Steve smiles. I think the morphine is taking effect, and he's feeling a tee tee bit better.

"Yeah," he says, "I've been watching the muzzle flashes from a NVA in front of the concertina wire between Double Deuce and 2-6. He's been shooting at you every time you're in the open."

"That motherfucker!" I say under my breath. I definitely won't be running over to Double Deuce for any .50 Cal ammo.

"Hey man, thanks for the heads up," I say to Steve, and then I make another run for 2-6 trying to keep out of sight of my tormentor.

When I get back to 2-6, Big Al is almost out of ammo again. I just stack the two boxes I brought, jump down, and run for more. I can still feel the bullets flying by my head. It's boo coo unnerving. Two ammo boxes of .50 Cal are boo coo heavy, but I hardly seem to notice. I am so pumped up on adrenaline that I'd consider High Alert to be a relaxed state of mind at this point.

This time I run to the mortar pit and drop in for cover until the lume goes out. I make a run to the PC two over and to the right of 2-6, staying as far away from Double Deuce as I can. I just reach in and grab two more boxes of .50 Cal ammo, no time for small talk. As soon as the lume dims some, I run straight back to the mortar pit trying to use the PC for some cover.

The mortar pit is getting boo coo full. It's hard for me to crawl to the other side dragging two boxes of ammo while staying out of the mortar crew's way and not stepping on any of the wounded. Firefights here in the Nam typically last for a few minutes because both sides can only carry so much ammo. When everyone has automatic weapons, the ammo is gone in a few minutes. I'm realizing that it's number one that the Second platoon is a mix of tanks and PCs. If we were a pure tank platoon, we would be out of .50 Cal ammo by now, as we have been fighting for about an hour. The PCs can carry boo coo amounts of .50 Cal ammo, and right now that's what's saving the day for 2-6.

As soon as the lume dims again, I run for 2-6 and stack the ammo boxes where Big Al can see them. It's been quiet for a few seconds, so I put my head up and have a look in front of 2-6 when the lume lights the area.

There is a pile of dead bodies just beyond the concertina wire. The pile is so boo coo big, the NVA are trying to take cover behind it. It's not working out too well for them though, because when Big Al shoots at them with the .50 Cal, the bullets go right through the dead bodies, wounding or killing the NVA that are trying to use it as cover. They are just added to the growing pile of dead bodies. It's a grotesque and surreal sight. I wish I hadn't looked.

I can tell we're being attacked by NVA, because they are heavily armed, and they all have helmets and green uniforms. I quickly duck back down so my head's not a target again.

The smell of death is all around us, but Big Al is firing the .50 Cal again, and it uses ammo at a right smart rate. I drop off the rear of 2-6 and go for more. I run straight back to the center of the RON and the mortar pit. As soon as I get there, it goes just about dark, so I make my run for the PC where I got the ammo last time. A number one run so far, as I'm timing the dark periods well. I grab two boxes of ammo and run back to the mortar pit. Just as I drop in, the RON lights up again.

The mortar pit is boo coo crowded now. I approach 2-6 from the right side, and I don't feel any bullets zinging by my head. Hey, that's number one. I put the ammo boxes up on the turret and then climb up and stack the ammo boxes next to Big Al. I'm finally staying ahead of Big Al's firing rate. We have three full boxes of ammo and one open box with its belt connected to the .50 Cal. When that box is almost empty, I open a full box and snap the fresh ammo belt to what is left of the last one. The .50 Cal is so loud when firing that both Big Al and myself can't hear a thing. The firefight seems strangely silent and off in the distance.

I drop off the right side of 2-6 and run to the PC next to it for more ammo. The rear ramp is down, so I can just reach inside and grab some. I really don't have time to ask for it. I notice they are getting down to the bottom layer of ammo. That's going to be number ten if this firefight doesn't end soon.

Now I'm wondering how the NVA carried so much ammo here. It's been more than an hour since the start of the firefight, and they still haven't run out. Must be a boo coo lot of them. That's number ten for the Second platoon.

As soon as it's sort of dark again, I run back to 2-6 with the new boxes. I stack it next to Big Al, and we now have four full boxes of ammo and one open box about half full. I hate leaving Big Al alone, but someone has to keep getting ammo. And I really don't want to trade places with him as much as I hate bullets flying by my head.

A thought comes to me. If I can get the coax to work, it would give me more time to hump .50 Cal ammo.

I drop into the turret of 2-6 through the loader's hatch. It reeks of cherry juice in here, and it's almost worse than the loader's farts, I think. Almost. Because the cherry juice is all over the turret floor, I'm slipping all over the place as I try to pull the coax out of its mount.

I'm finally able to pull the coax back far enough to work on it. I remember that Steve and Big Al have been trying to fix this coax for a while now. When I open the breach I can see a shell casing that wasn't ejected. I pull it out with a pair of pliers, push the coax back into position, and reconnect the ammo belt. I reach over to the gunner's joystick and pull the coax trigger. It fires once and stops. I pull the coax back out and open the breach, and there's another shell casing stuck in it. I hate that! I pull that shell casing out, and I see the casing is split. Now I remember. In all this morning's excitement, I forgot Fanelli and I talked with Steve about this coax and told him it needed a new breach block. I guess they weren't able to get a new one yet. It's no wonder everyone calls the coax the Little Bastard.

It's definitely up to the .50 Cal now, so I stick my head up out of the loader's hatch to try to tell Big Al I can't fix the coax, and that I'm going after more ammo. Before I can finish telling him, a bullet zings by my head, narrowly missing it by less than an inch. It hits the bullet shield around the .50 Cal and breaks into tee tee pieces, several of which hit me in the face and eyes. I really hate that!

As quickly as I stuck my head up out of the loader's hatch, I drop back down inside. One of the bullet fragments hit me on the bridge of my nose which not only really smarts, but I'm bleeding from both the wound and from my nostrils. I still have on my white t-shirt from yesterday, and it is quickly soaked with blood from my nose bleed. I use my handkerchief to try to stop the bleeding. Every time I open my right eye I immediately get nauseous, and if I don't close it, I know I'll puke. I've got something in my left eye too, but at least I can look out of it without barfing.

When I finally get my nose to stop bleeding, I take my blood soaked handkerchief and tie it like a sort of bandana eyepatch over my right eye to keep it closed. Now all I want to do is go sit in the corner somewhere and close both my eyes until they stop hurting. But I know I can't do that. The guy that just shot me will be coming for Big Al and me. He may not know I'm still alive, but he'll check for sure.

I pull my hated .45 out of its holster. When the lume goes out, I pop my head up out of the loader's hatch. When the next lume lights up the RON, I can see my guy with my one good eye. He's in a number ten place, and I know this because I have been there. He's caught in the concertina wire, and he is doing exactly the wrong thing. He's thrashing around, and that will just get him caught up even worse. It took both Fanelli and the loader to extricate me when I had my tee tee mishap with the concertina wire, and I wasn't anywhere near caught up like this guy is.

I don't think he'll be able to get loose, but I can see he's still got his AK. So with my one good eye and my hated .45, I shoot at him a couple of times, hoping I can hit him right away. I don't really want to have a shoot out with this guy's AK vs. my hated .45. It goes dark, and when it gets light again, I can see he's still moving. Although he's really caught up in the concertina wire, I shoot at him again. I'm pretty sure I hit him this time, but I can hardly see as my good eye is watering non-stop. Everything looks blurry. The lume goes out, and when it gets light again, I can see he's still in the concertina wire, but he's no longer moving. That's number one. For me, anyway.

Big Al is still shooting at NVA in front of 2-6. As fast as he kills them, more show up to take their place. I don't think the guy in the concertina wire is going to cause me or Big Al any more trouble, so I drop down into the turret of 2-6 and sit on the loader's seat and close both my eyes. It feels number one even though they both hurt boo coo.

It's probably about 5:30 AM now, and there's still another hour of darkness before The Scary Time ends. The firefight continues into the third hour, and I'm still wondering how did the NVA get all that ammo here? Someone's got to run out first, and I just hope it's them and not us. I'm fairly confident that I have been cured of my Cherry Disease, but as is often the case, the cure is worse than the disease.

I can lean into the rear corner of the turret and look out at the stack of .50 Cal ammo next to Big Al. Big Al still has three full boxes, but I can't tell how much is left in the open box. If we get down to two boxes again, I'll have to run for more. A thought I won't worry about yet. Big Al hasn't had to fire near non-stop for a while now. Maybe the NVA are running out of guys willing to face the .50 Cal and certain death. Maybe they're just plain running out of guys. I don't care which, but I can't blame them, as there is no true cover in front of 2-6. It's a macabre sight watching the NVA trying to use the bodies of their dead for cover. It just doesn't work with the .50 Cal. The NVA

who try are just added to the pile of dead. The .50 Cal goes through just about anything at this range, which I guess to be less than 40 feet. Xin loi!

There is still automatic gunfire from around the RON. But my hearing is so diminished, I can barely hear it. I feel the .50 Cal when Big Al fires it off more than I hear it. Big Al has just opened one of the last three boxes of .50 Cal ammo. If I see him open one of the last two, I will go get more ammo, I tell myself. Big Al is still firing intermittently, so I'm hopeful our ammo will outlast the NVA's. They must have humped ammo all night and then attacked us is all I can figure.

It's getting close to 6 AM, and I can still faintly hear gunfire around the RON. Big Al is still having to correct the thinking of NVA who are brave or foolish enough to go head to head with the .50 Cal. The pile of dead NVA continues to grow in front of 2-6. Sometime after 6 AM, the faint rays of sunlight can be seen. Even now, I can still hear gunfire around the RON. I also think I hear the first dustoff chopper arriving. The chopper must have left when it was still dark, and the pilots and crew are boo coo fearless, as this is still a hot location. The dustoff chopper is quickly loaded with wounded, and it didi maus for the base hospital.

At 6 :30 AM, it's light. Not full light, but light. As if a switch has been flipped, the gunfire suddenly stops. Big Al had just opened one of the last two boxes of ammo, and then everything went quiet. Big Al stays behind the .50 Cal, and I stay in the turret as we wait to make sure it is really over. The quiet continues, and that is number one.

Big Al looks down at me in the turret and smiles. I smile back. We're pretty sure it's over. He is saying something to me, as I can see his lips moving, but I can't hear what he is saying. After about ten minutes, one of the platoon members sticks his head into the turret and says something. I can't hear what was said, and then he is gone.

I just stay put, and Big Al stays behind the .50 Cal. The same guy comes back and sticks his head into the turret. I can see his lips moving, but I can't hear what he is saying. I point to my ears and shake my head "no," meaning I can't hear. He climbs into the turret and yells in my ear that the second dustoff chopper is getting ready to didi mau, and I should get on it. I look much worse off than I really am due to my blood-soaked white t-shirt. I tell him I'm OK, and the dustoff chopper should didi without me, so he skys.

After about another fifteen minutes of quiet, Big Al climbs down from behind the .50 Cal, and I pop my head up through the open loader's hatch. It's

near full light now and still no gunfire. I climb all the way out and jump down to the ground. Big Al is in front of 2-6 looking at the huge pile of dead NVA on the other side of the concertina wire. What a suicide mission for those guys, as there was zero cover for them in front of 2-6.

I walk over to the concertina wire between 2-6 and Double Deuce to check on the guy I think shot me. He looks dead, and one foot is messed up boo coo bad. It looks like a corkscrew, so he probably bled to death. My aim was so bad from my eyes being messed up, the bullet from my hated .45 must have ricocheted off the ground, and then hit him in the foot. I feel bad about killing him, but they started it. Xin loi.

I walk over to Big Al in front of 2-6, and we survey the carnage wrought by the .50 Cal. It is the most gruesome sight ever. There are bloody bodies and body parts lying about. At least this time it's not our own guys who got shot by the .50 Cal. When Big Al and I turn to walk back to 2-6, we look at the RPG screen. It looks like Steve tried to blow it down when he fired the first can round, but it only bent over at about a 45 degree angle which turned out to be number one. Being bent down like that, it wasn't in the field of fire of the .50 Cal, but it was still protecting the hull and part of the turret from RPGs. Evidenced by the fact that there are no less than six RPGs caught by their fins in the screen. After looking at the RPG screen, we have a look at 2-6 and can see where an RPG hit the main gun exactly where the hydraulic seal is. It was either an extremely skillful shot or a lucky one. Either way, it broke the seal on the main gun's recoil system, so when Steve fired the main gun the first time, it lost most of its cherry juice and embedded itself in the radio stack.

Big Al and I keep smiling at each other and punching each other to make sure we are really still alive. Neither of us can hear anything unless someone yells in our ear.

The whole battle site takes on a surrealistic view to me with smoke still wafting around. The silence seems strange, because I know there is noise being made. Fanelli and Wack show up at 2-6. They try talking to us, but we are both deaf and so out of it that we understand nothing being said.

Wack finally realizes the problem, so he gets next to me and yells in my ear, "Million Dollar Wound, man! Million Dollar Wound!"

I look boo coo worse than I really am. My beard and white t-shirt are both covered and caked with blood. Mostly from my nose bleed. And then I have my blood-soaked handkerchief over my right eye to help keep it closed.

As I walk across the RON to 2-3, several guys from the Second platoon pat me on the back and yell in my ear, "Million Dollar Wound!"

I get to 2-3 just about the time the last dustoff chopper arrives. There are a couple of guys left like me with minor wounds. I just have time to reach into the driver's compartment on 2-3 to grab my lucky boonie hat. A few Lifers are catching a chopper ride to the base hospital to check on the wounded. And then I'm sure it's off to the NCO club to celebrate not getting killed.

I'm not ready to didi yet, but when the dustoff chopper is almost full, there is one spot left by the sliding door. They just about push me in and close the door behind me. It is packed inside the chopper, mostly with Lifers and one guy laid out in a stretcher. The guy on the stretcher is next to me, and when I see his foot, I recognize the corkscrew wound. It's the NVA that was caught in the concertina wire in front of 2-6. Apparently someone thinks he is still alive. I immediately feel better knowing I didn't actually kill anyone.

That thought is barely out of my head when the wounded NVA on the stretcher sits bolt upright. He is definitely still alive. He immediately starts yelling in Vietnamese and waving his hands around. It's fairly well known that one of the ARVN interrogation techniques is to take prisoners up in a chopper and throw a couple of the prisoners out at altitude. This tends to loosen up the tongues and refresh the memories of the remaining prisoners, who usually tell everything they know, only to be thrown out at altitude as well. Xin loi!

Our wounded NVA probably knows this and is worried that we are going to throw him out. He continues to yell and wave his arms around. Because we are so packed in, no one can do anything to restrain him or calm him down. I pull out my hated .45, and I point it at him until he finally stops yelling.

After he quiets down, I point my hated .45 at his foot and say, "Xin loi, Chieu Hoi."

That seems to ease his mind enough that he lays back down and closes his eyes and is quiet for the rest of the trip. It is a tee tee bit tense in the chopper for the pilots and the passengers, as they probably think I might shoot this guy with my hated .45. The bullet could be number ten so close to the others and not to mention the chopper’s fuel tanks.

If any of the guys responsible for loading up the last chopper knew the history between me and the wounded NVA, it is unlikely they would have put us on the same chopper.

I look out the window with my one good eye and marvel at how

deceptively beautiful the Nam is from the air. It looks like a tropical paradise with all the shades of green and all the palm trees. It is not paradise though. It is the Nam.

It's a short chopper ride to the base hospital. The chopper lands on a pad about 50-60 feet from the hospital entrance. As soon as the dustoff chopper lands, the sliding door I have my back to is quickly opened. I am grabbed by both arms and brusquely lifted up and out of the chopper. I am just as quickly relieved of my hated .45. I hope I never see that piece of crap again.

After I am disarmed, attention is turned to the other wounded, including the NVA on the stretcher. He is carried into the hospital on the stretcher while the rest of us walk in on our own. They put the wounded NVA on a gurney and wheel him away. They make the rest of us stand in line and wait. A pasttime that most of us have honed to a razor's edge. Feeling like the least seriously wounded guy here, and also used to being last in line, I am the last guy in line.

I watch as the doctors and nurses clean and bandage the wounded guys in front of me. Everyone gets an I.V. first thing, and then they attend to their wounds. Because of all the visible blood on my beard and t-shirt, I think for sure they're going to insist on sticking an I.V. in me.

When my turn finally comes, sure enough, they want to stick an I.V. in my arm, but I resist.

"I hate needles," I say, and they let me slide.

"OK," the nurse says. "Sit down here, and we'll get you cleaned up a bit."

I sit down on a stool as she swabs the dried blood off my face and out of my beard with a wet wash cloth. After they clean my face and beard, they pull a chunk of bullet fragment out of the bridge of my nose. When they get it out, it feels number one, even if it does start to bleed again.

Next they take my blood soaked shirt and my jungle fatigue pants and my socks. They weigh me, and I tip the scales at 185 lbs. Forty pounds more than when I was drafted. So I don't have to stand around in my birthday suit, they give me a set of pajamas and a robe. I won't give them my jungle boots or my lucky boonie hat, and they let me slide again.

I still have tee tee bits of metal debris in my eyes, but the doctors and nurses are done with me for now. After they tape my right eye closed, I take a stroll down the hospital hallway. There's still a lot of activity dealing with all the guys wounded this morning. Some guys are still waiting to go into the operating room. I'm looking for friends, and I find Steve right away.

He sits right up to chat, and he is concerned because he heard the wounded NVA talking as they wheeled him by. The NVA was claiming to be an ARVN. I assure Steve that they know he's an NVA, and I tell him about the incident on the dustoff flight here. But I tell him I will talk to someone to make sure they know he is NVA.

Steve goes on to tell me something I didn't know. Our platoon's CO is here in the hospital too. As soon as it started to get light, he led the First platoon towards our RON to help us in the firefight. Since they were in a hurry, they didn't mine sweep. The CO's PC was in the lead and hit a land mine. The PC was thrown up boo coo high in the air from the mine blast. His foot is severely injured, and the doctors think he might lose it. Xin loi, Cap'n! Steve didn't know if his foot injury was from the explosion or from landing on it after being blown into the air 20 or 30 feet.

I'm still on High Alert, but I only got four hours sleep the last few days. It's about 10:30 AM now. After all the excitement, I am suddenly feeling completely exhausted.

Steve is being wheeled into the operating room, so I assure him I will go right now and make sure it is known the wounded guy is NVA, and I do. They knew it already, just as I thought.

I head to my assigned ward, and when my one good eye sees my assigned bed, I can't get to it fast enough. It is so clean and white, and it smells so wonderfully fresh. So unlike our sleeping bags. After stowing my jungle boots and my lucky boonie hat in the compartment of my bedside table, I climb into the bed and bury my face in the pillow, and I am asleep in seconds. So far so good. And no bugs!

When I wake up, the clock on the hospital ward wall indicates it's a tee tee bit after 2 AM. I can see around the ward in the dim night lighting. Normally I prefer pitch dark for sleeping, but tonight I find the night lighting boo coo comforting. As I lay in my bed, I feel number one, with the one exception that I still can't see out of my right eye. I'm trying to figure out why I feel so good. But at the same time realize I am ravenous.

When was the last time I ate, I think? First I have to think of what day is today. Let's see, I think, we got hit on Monday the 6th so if this is the next day, it's Tuesday the 7th. The last time I ate was supper on Sunday. No wonder I'm starving.

I lift the tape off of my right eye and have a look. Still swirls in all shades

of red, and I quickly start to feel motion sick. I tape my eye closed again, and I feel number one almost immediately. I sit up and decide I'll try to find the mess hall, as it's possible it's open 24 hours a day.

I'm still trying to not let my guard down, so I get my jungle boots out of the storage compartment of my bedside table. Hospital or no hospital, it's still The Scary Time. The last time I was here at base camp we took some incoming, so I put my boots on. I don't have any socks, so I have to rough it and go bare. I'm almost fully awake now, and I realize why I feel so good. I'm not hot. This place is air conditioned, and it feels number one.

Everyone else on the ward is asleep, so I walk softly out and into the hallway. My ears, while not ringing loudly, are still ringing. I can't try to listen for some activity and go in that direction. I decide to walk around rather aimlessly and use my sense of smell to find the mess hall, if it's open. I walk around for a while without any luck. I pass a nurses station so I step inside and ask if the mess hall is open. The nurse's lips are moving, but I still can't hear anything. I tell them I can't hear and could they just point me in the right direction.

When I speak it sounds to me like I have my head inside a big metal can, and my voice seems to echo. Maybe that's where the term "Tin Ear" came from. One of the nurses takes pity on me and walks me to the doorway. She points down the hallway and then with her hands indicates a left turn at some point. That should be good enough. Once I get close, I'll be able to sniff my way there, I am so hungry.

When I get close, sure enough I can follow my nose, and there it is. I had forgotten about aromas like this. While it's an army mess hall, it actually smells like there could be some decent food here. I can see 4 or 5 of the mess hall staff sitting around a table, as it's obviously a slow time. But it must be open because as soon as they see me, they wave me over and ask me what I want. I follow one of the cooks to the serving line, and he goes to the other side.

"What da ya got?" I ask and then I add, "Could you speak really loud cuz I can hardly hear."

"We have just about everything. Eggs, hash browns, bacon, sausage, and toast, you just name it," he says, not quite yelling, but close.

"I'll have all of that. Eggs over easy," I reply. “Got any S.O.S?"

"Sure do," he says. "You want it on toast or biscuits?”

Toast or biscuits, I am just about to swoon. Toast or biscuits? I can't even

remember the last time I had any bread.

I can't decide so I just say, "Both! Hey man, can I have a couple of slices of just plain bread while I wait?"

"Ya sure can," he says. He hands me a tee tee plate with two slices of bread on it. It looks like ambrosia. And the plate, it’s a real plate, not paper!

"Were you with that group of guys they brought in yesterday morning?" he asks me.

"I think so," I reply, as I'm not really sure what day it is.

While he gets started making my breakfast, I walk over to the milk dispensers while I slowly savor my two slices of bread. They are number one! The bread reminds me of the Real World. Maybe I really do have a Million Dollar Wound. That would be number one million. I smile. I try to not make myself sick drinking too much milk before my breakfast is ready.

When the cook is done, my breakfast completely covers a huge tray. I take it and sit down. I can hardly believe what is before my eyes. But after I get started eating, I am in heaven. Eggs! Real eggs that are cooked to perfection just the way I like them. I still can't get over it, as I never really liked eggs before. There's one whole plate with both biscuits and toast with everything covered with SOS. The wonderful aromas of real food are almost enough, but I easily polish off the entire tray of food. I am so full I think I might have to call for a wheelchair to get back to my ward. After a couple of healthy burps, I feel I can make it back on my own. Then I look over at the coffee urns.

A cup of java could be number one right now. But after that awesome meal, it would have to be a good cup of coffee. As number one the food is here, the coffee would be *army coffee*. I think I could sleep some more now that I've eaten, and coffee will just keep me awake. It's just after 3 AM, so I decide to saunter back to my ward and try to sleep some more. When I get back to my ward, my bed feels as number one as when I first crawled in, and I quickly fall asleep. Falling asleep seems so effortless when you don't have to continuously fight bugs off.

It's early morning but full light outside when the noise from activity on my ward wakes me. I luxuriate in my bed for a tee tee while. When I'm fully awake, I decide to take a shower. They cleaned me up as well as they could yesterday, but it wasn't even a sponge bath. When they assigned me my ward, they also gave me a bag with a razor and a toothbrush and some toothpaste, soap, and shampoo. I grab it and head for the showers. Wow! Real showers,

clean and spotless. Each cubicle is a private tiny bathroom. There seems to be unlimited hot water and big fluffy towels. I feel like I'm at some swanky hotel after camping out in the bush for three months. Everything is so clean and smells so fresh. No stinky, smelly guys farting non-stop. Man, I could get used to this boo coo quick.

My beard is boo coo awesome, and that's why it has to go. I'm in the rear now and all the army rules apply here, so my beard will be a problem. They take things like shaving and saluting seriously. It is a major ordeal trying to shave my beard off with a double edge razor. I really need to start with scissors, but I have none. It takes me about a half an hour to finally get it off. I hardly recognize myself, plus half my face is tan while the other half is lily white.

I take my shower. When the hot water hits me, I could stay in here all day. The hot water never runs out, but after a while, a long while, I have had enough. I dry off with one of the big fluffy towels. The tape over my right eye came off in the shower, so I have to keep it closed on my own. After drying off and putting on my hospital garment, I slip back into my jungle boots. I'm still roughing it without socks. I hate that. Even though it's light out, I decide I can't be too careful.

I go back to my ward and sit on my bed for a while. When the ward nurse stops by, she gets me another piece of tape for my right eye and I'm feeling number one again. Someone comes into the ward and looks around and then leaves. He returns shortly with the ward nurse, and she points at me. He comes over to me and says my doctor wants to see me. The confusion, he says, was because they told him to bring the guy with the beard. It's number one that I already shaved it off, as it was going to cause me grief.

I follow the orderly to my doctor’s office. My doctor has me lay down, and he puts something in both of my eyes to numb them. Then he starts to pick tee tee bits of bullet fragments out. There are so many pieces of bullet fragments that I have to periodically close my eye so I don't get to motion sick and barf all over my doctor. All I see when I try to look out of my right eye is red swirls that quickly make me nauseous. I have to ask him to stop so I can close my eye and compose myself quite often so I don't puke. He seems miffed and tells me I am being a sissy. I don't like needles, and I especially don't like needles being poked into my eyes. I'd gladly trade places with him so we can see who the sissy is. He does finally finish with me and allows me to didi, so I go back to my ward and sit on my bed.

As I look around my ward, I can barely make anything out. I have to keep my right eye closed and my left eye makes everything look fuzzy and wavy from the near constant watering. I can see the beds all in a row along two walls. The air conditioning makes it feel boo coo good in here. When the stuff my doctor put on my eyes wears off, I am in boo coo pain. Both my eyes feel like someone took sandpaper to my eye lenses and cornea. I have to find the ward nurse for some tape for my right eye, because after my doctor took it off, he didn't give me another piece. It hurts whether my eyes are open or closed, but when my good left eye is open, it tears continuously so I can hardly see. It does feel a tee tee bit better when I keep it closed, so I just crawl into my bed and close my eyes and after a while I fall asleep.

I wake again just after 2 AM according to clock on the wall in my ward. My left eye feels better, and I can look out of it without it watering. That's number one. When I remove the tape from my right eye, it's still all swirls in different shades of red. I re-tape my right eye closed.

I'm hungry again, and now I know where the mess hall is. I put on my jungle boots, just in case, and I sky for the mess hall. The same night crew is there, and they recognize me only because I have tape over my eye as I'm sure I look quite different without my beard. I go for the same breakfast as yesterday, just about everything they have. While they make it up, I content myself by drinking several glasses of ice cold milk. It is number one.

I don't even remember liking eggs, but I love them now. Once again, I finish everything on my tray and everything is number one. I thank the cooks for an exquisite meal, and then I return to my new best friend, my bed.

On my way back to the ward, I pass the nurses' station I got directions from last night. Since it has been a boo coo long time since I've been around American women, I stop in for a chat. I interrupt their conversation, but they are still nice to me. I would be content to stand here and gaze at them with my one good eye, but that would be rude, so I attempt some conversation. Now that I have been wounded, I've had my own personal epiphany. I realize I am no more special than the next guy, and whether or not you get killed or wounded is just a matter of luck. Good or bad luck, but luck all the same.

I stupidly ask them if they were aware that people have been getting killed and wounded around here. They, who see the consequences of this war on a daily basis, are kind to me, as one of the recently aware. They don't laugh at my question, but just quietly acknowledge they are aware of people being

injured and killed as they gently shoo me out of their station and send me back to my bed.

My bed looks and feels as number one as it did when I first saw it. After taking off my jungle boots and stowing them in my bedside compartment, I bury my face in my boo coo soft pillow. It doesn't take long, and I am in blissful and undisturbed sleep again.

My blissful sleep ends around 6 AM as the ward starts its day of taking medication and being awakened for doctor appointments or physical therapy. The TC that got wounded on my birthday is on my ward. When he is healed up, it will be back to the field for him. They have him propped up as if on all fours with his back and his wound exposed. I suppose so it will heal faster. His shrapnel wound is a nasty looking gash about six inches long. It's been stitched up, but it still looks serious. Xin loi, 2-7 Tango Charlie

Everyone is turned out of their beds so the bed linens can be changed. I'm not that hungry after my late night meal, but since I have to be out of bed, I decide to check out the mess hall. Lots of activity in the mess hall and people are even standing in line. Despite my prowess at line standing, I decide to forgo the line and sky for the milk dispensers for a couple of glasses of ice cold moo juice.

I saunter back to my ward, and when I arrive, all the beds have been stripped down and re-made. The ward nurse tells me my doctor wants to see me, so I sky to his office. When I get there, my doctor has me sit down. He removes the tape from my eye and has a quick look at it.

He sits down and starts writing something on a pad while he says to me, "Your eye looks good, so I'm sending you back to your unit tomorrow."

"There's just a tee tee problem with that, Doc, because I can't see anything out of my right eye. When I try to look out of it, I get motion sick, and if I don't close it I'll puke."

He insists my eye looks fine to him. After my continued protest, he finally seems to believe that I can't see with my right eye. As they don't have the equipment here to check my eye, I'll be sent to another hospital in Da Nang this afternoon.

At about 3 PM, I and several other patients board a chopper, and we fly to Da Nang.

The Nam is so exceedingly beautiful from the air with all the terraced and green hillsides and rice paddies. It looks like such a tropical paradise with every kind of vegetation and all the shades of green imaginable. Up here and

looking down, it seems impossible that a war rages down there. But rage it does.

Although the army hasn't figured this out yet, this war is over for me. Now I just have to wait for them to realize it. Something I'm well practiced at. Xin loi, Army.

Chapter 2

Spec-4 Campbell wakes from a dream many guys in the Nam have – a dream where he is in a number one place. Dog, as he is known, is a proud member of the Delta Dewmasters. Double D for short. His mind is a bit fuzzy this morning. It's fuzzy most mornings after toking down to near oblivion the night before with his fellow Dewmasters. But he quickly realizes where he really is.

Still in the Nam.

Fuck!

No matter how many times it happens, it's still a total shock.

Dog pushes his poncho off now that the mosquitoes aren't so insufferable. As he lays in his hammock waiting for the fog in his mind to clear a bit, he starts to think about his upcoming R&R. Only two weeks away. Except that two weeks is two lifetimes here in the Nam.

He tries to remember the name of the cab driver – the one in Bangkok that everyone uses on their R&R. He remembers the massage parlor's name. It's hard to forget: The Happy Happy. Once he gets there, he'll be boo coo happy happy.

Better not think about it took much, or I'll jinx it, he thinks to himself. Definitely better not think about it now that the squad is being led by an FNG Shake 'n Bake. Just a tee tee bit more than 90 days left in the Nam, why did they have to get an FNG for a squad leader?

Some REMFs start their short-timer calendar at six months. Heck, some REMFs start their short-timer calendar on Day 1. Dog is not a REMF. The 173rd is Airborne Infantry, and despite all the jokes about bird shit and idiots falling from the sky, 11 Bravos spend most of their time in the bush. A decidedly unsafe and number ten place to be. Not the kind of place to be starting a short-timer calendar.

Dog finally stands up and looks around. Several of his fellow Dewmasters are also up and everyone is still groggy from the previous evening. Even so, they each fill their pipes.

"Hair of the dog," says JQ as he exhales a huge cloud of smoke.

"Watch it, JQ," Dog says, then laughs.

"Xin loi, Dog. I'm still half asleep, and the dew isn't helping."

JQ rifles through the open case of c-rats for his breakfast with one hand. He shakes his head at the selection. None have any appeal whatsoever.

"Hey Goose, are we gonna sky over to the airbase for lunch today?"

Their squad leader, Goose, is still stretched out in his hammock. Goose has two weeks left in the Nam, and it's boo coo hard for him to think about anything else.

"That's a roger. Unless, of course, Shake 'n Bake tries to mess with us again."

All the Dewmasters groan as they think about their newly assigned NCO. Sooner or later, he will come calling on them. Shake 'n Bake, aka Sgt. Mullet has already tried to enlist the squad for at least two patrols. They politely declined his invitation, thinking it quite foolish. Dog even personally told him so.

Because of their reputation as Heads, their squad is usually left alone. And because they are considered nothing but trouble, their compound is all by itself on the edge of LZ Uplift. Far from the mess hall and far from the outhouses and far from the probing eyes of first sergeants and Shake 'n Bake NCOs. The Dewmasters prefer it that way.

Dog is hoping for more than lunch at the airbase. After all, it is a smokin' hot 2 klik walk to Highway 1, and from there they have to hitch a ride for another 10 kliks to the airbase.

Now that Monsoon is over it's hot and humid every day with no let up. Thus a visit to the Steam and Cream will be called for. After several days of stewing in their own juices in the tropical heat, it will feel number one to get all cleaned up.

The Dewmasters have a slow morning start due mostly to the heat, but also because they have a reputation to maintain as the biggest potheads in Delta Co. It's a reputation they are all proud of and willing to do whatever it takes to keep it. Scoring more pot is one of the only things that will get them to LZ Uplift unless they haven't gotten any mail in the last few days. Occasionally hot chow is brought out to them with the mail. It's only a tee tee bit better than the c-rats, and that's only because they don't have to heat it up first.

They finally get all their gear together and saddle up for their trip to the airbase. Even though they're going to a secure area, it's still the Nam. As such, they are outfitted as if they are going on a short recon patrol: M-16s, a bandolier of 18 clips filled with ammo, and water.

As they pass one of the other squads, someone calls out, asking where

they're off to.

"We're going on a tee tee patrol," says Goose.

"Yeah, you mean nookie patrol," someone retorts.

All the Dewmasters get a laugh about that. As they all still have money from payday, they hope there's not a line at the Steam and Cream when they get there. At some of the larger military bases in the Nam, there are full blown whorehouses affectionately referred to as Steam and Creams. The airbase here just has a small bathhouse, and even though sexual favors are not available there, everyone still refers to it as the Steam and Cream.

That reminds Dog about his upcoming R&R.

"Hey Tennessee, what's the name of the cabbie for the Happy Happy?" Dog asks.

Before Tennessee can answer, JQ pipes up. "Careful, Dog. Ya don't want to jinx it."

All the members of your squad know when your R&R is scheduled because you will be gone. Gone and sorely missed since the squad will be short one guy. They hate that. Also they hate not being the one on R&R.

"Funny what an apt name for a city Bangkok is," says Goose. "Bang. Cock. Says it all."

The sun is beating down relentlessly on them as they make their way to the redball. Everyone is hoping they won't have to wait long to hitch a ride.

First they have to cross a small grassy valley until they get to the rice paddies. Once at the rice paddies, it's a slow, single file walk. Single file because there is very little choice as to where to walk if you want your feet to stay dry.

The walk to the redball is uneventful. In the Nam, uneventful is good. Their luck holds, and they are able to catch a ride after waiting less than five minutes. So far so good, but no one voices that thought. They don't want to jinx it or let their guard down.

It's a hot and dusty ride to the airbase, but they know it will be worth it. The Steam and Cream is always a number one place to visit. After that some chow at the airbase mess hall will be in order. The food at the airbase is the stuff dreams are made of when you eat c-rats every day. Breakfast with real eggs, hash browns, grits, and toast made from real bread. For lunch they have burgers and fries just like back in the Real World. The food is so number one that they would probably make the trip even if there wasn't a Steam and Cream. Maybe.

When they near the airbase, Goose gets the deuce-and-a-half driver to stop and let them off. Technically the Dewmasters aren't allowed on the airbase, but if the guards start denying entry to visitors, the Steam and Cream won't have enough business and would leave for some other base.

The Dewmasters are covered in sewn-on uniform patches that declare "FTA," which means Fuck The Army. Someone in the group flashes a peace sign, and the airbase guards return it with smiles. They're all in the same war. Once clear of the guard shack, they have a laugh about what good sports the Air Force guards were. Professional courtesy. From there, they head straight for the Steam and Cream for some relaxation.

There's no line when they arrive, so all six of them are off to the showers. The term "shower" is used loosely here, as really they are each seated on a stool while one or two of the women give them a sponge bath, and then they are rinsed off with buckets of hot water. Either way, it feels number one. Almost as good as the real thing. Almost.

Since they have nothing other than lunch on their schedule, they are in no hurry to leave the Steam and Cream. The staff are professionals, however, and they *do* have more on their schedules than lunch. So after their sponge baths, the squad is ushered out the door.

The food at the mess hall at LZ Uplift is so number ten that a lot of guys prefer to eat c-rats for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. But the airbase mess hall has boo coo mamasans besides the actual cooks. No one is sure the cooks do anything but stand around directing the mamasans, and no one really cares because the food is unbelievably number one.

Once again, the guys just bully their way into the mess hall. They sign the chow roster as "transients," which technically they are. They are the only armed diners in the mess hall, and they look dangerous in a place known for danger. Their boonie hats are embroidered with a large FTA in front, and they also have bracelets and armbands all declaring themselves as Heads. They are left alone and just as well.

The mamasans chatter away in Vietnamese, and mostly the guys just point at stuff and nod their heads to indicate, *yes*, and the mamasans start to pile whatever it is they want on a plate. Then they hold up their hand like a traffic cop for the mamasans to stop when they have piled on enough. Or enough for now, at least. The Dewmasters know every time here could be the last. Especially now that they have the new Shake 'n Bake to deal with.

"Hey Goose," says Tennessee in his southern drawl, "mebbe we kin turn

the Shake 'n Bake on ta the mess hall here."

"Tennessee, that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard you say. These guys don't want to hang out with their squads. They're here to play soldier. They think war is a game. They're dumb fucks! In fact, this might be your last trip here for a while."

"Ya think so?" asks JQ.

"Shake 'n Bake has been here a week now, and he's just waiting for me to didi. He's bound to want to do something stupid sooner or later," replies Goose. "I can already tell he's an idiot. You know, the kind of idiot where you get killed, and he gets a Silver Star."

"Man, I fuckin' hate that!" says Dog. "He better not fuck up my R&R is all I gotta say."

"More importantly, he better not fuck up my last two weeks," says Goose.

The jovial mood they had after the Steam and Cream and the mess hall food is quickly losing steam. Why did this have to happen now?

They finish lunch, and then slowly start the trek back to LZ Uplift. Once again, they are able to hitch a ride without much waiting. As they take in the breeze on the back of the deuce-and-a-half, they pass by one of the many opium dens strung out along the redball.

The Dewmasters don't have time for opium dreams. As much as they pride themselves on being able to hold their smoke, the opium here in the Nam is as pure as it gets. After a couple of tokes the opium smokers usually fall asleep.

It's another two kliks to their base from where the truck drops them off. It's late afternoon now. Sundown is only a few hours off . Many of the local farmers are walking their water buffalo home after a day working in the fields and rice paddies.

That makes it an extra long walk, as the guys keep having to backtrack to let the water buffalo pass. It's either that or get a soaker from stepping into the rice paddies, because water buffalo don't move for anyone. One of the water buffalo gives Tennessee sort of a hip check on the way past, and JQ grabs his arm to prevent him going into the water.

It's hot, and they are all sweating by the time they reach their encampment. Everyone gets into their hammocks for a tee tee nap before dinner.

Their outpost is boo coo rough to say the least. They have claymores on the far outside edge of the compound backed up by concertina wire. There is one bunker where they take turns standing guard at night. Their sleeping

accommodations are extremely rustic: each guy has excavated a hole, and around each hole are empty wooden mortar shell boxes filled with dirt and then arranged in a semi-circle. Strung down in the holes, the hammocks are somewhat protected from any incoming. Somewhat... but not completely.

Near the center of the encampment are a few more empty mortar shell boxes filled with dirt and stacked up so they have something to sit on. The ground here in the Nam is a number ten place to sit even in the daylight.

At about 4 PM the Dewmasters are starting to wake from their naps, and the deuce-and-a-half from the mess hall at LZ Uplift shows up with some hot chow. The mail clerk is on the truck as well, an unforeseen bonus. Not everyone gets mail, but Dog gets a letter from his girlfriend, Kim. It is so awesome to get mail from the Real World that most guys don't even read their mail right away. They just sort of savor the fact that they have it. Mail from a woman, and a beautiful one at that, is always number one.

Dog decides to wait to read his letter. He joins the rest of the squad as food is spooned onto paper plates. The food is number ten compared to the airbase, and the paper plates do nothing to improve the situation. Actually the food is number ten no matter what it's compared to.

They arrange themselves as best they can on the stacked up mortar shell boxes. Usually they would have toked down before the chow arrived, as it would have slightly improved the food. Because they didn't have the chance, some of them hardly eat the day's offering. Instead they tease Goose and Dog. Dog, JQ, Tennessee, Rondo, and Steven all have about the same amount of time left in the Nam, so they can only tease Dog about his upcoming R&R.

Goose, however, is boo coo short with only two weeks left. He is unfazed by the teasing. Almost a full year in the Nam has hardened him boo coo. After the latest harangue ends, Goose looks up and asks, "We're you talkin' to me? Cuz if you were, I dint hear you. The speed of sound ain't fast enough when yer as short as me. Xin loi."

The guys laugh. They're all going to miss Goose. Especially now that they have a FNG Shake 'n Bake to contend with. Even though Goose is a hard five, he's been a number one squad leader and has always acted in the best interest of the squad no matter what.

Night is coming soon. No matter how safe and secure a place feels during the day, all bets are off at night. That goes double for their tee tee enclave. When they first arrived here, they were all about trying to be good neighbors with the locals and the ARVNs positioned nearby. Live and let live was their

motto.

That was before being shot at. Now their attitude has gone to the other extreme: Don't fuck with us! That is the unspoken mantra of the Dewmasters now.

They take turns standing guard at two hour intervals while the rest of the guys sleep off another toke-down stupor. Fortunately it's another quiet night in the Nam for their squad. Morning dawns hazy as it often does here in the Nam after monsoon is over.

Dog is thinking back about how miserable it was during their stay at the Hawk's Nest. Better not think about that now. He decides to think instead about what a number one day it was starting out to be. For one thing, made it through another night in the Nam. And it's not raining. That may sound trite, but for anyone who has lived through a monsoon, no rain is number one.

He hopes the Coke girls stop by their compound today. They are out of Cokes, so all they have to drink is water. Warm water that tastes like plastic. The trick is trying not to breathe as you gulp it down. When you finally do have to take a breath, the aftertaste hits you like the plastic cover on the seat of a crosstown bus.

They have to drink the Coke warm, but it's still boo coo better than the water. Dog also might have to get a couple more bottles of Obesitol from the Coke girls if they come. Obesitol is sold as a diet supplement, but it is really just liquid speed. Everyone knows that, but this is the Nam, so no one cares. The Dewmasters use the Obesitol to enhance their pot smoking prowess. They don't fall asleep or pass out, because they can't. It's also useful to have something that can turn your appetite off when all you have to eat is c-rats.

It's hot already as Dog lounges for a few more moments. The holes that they have dug out for shelter smell nasty. Damp and musty. But the holes they lived in at the Hawk's Nest during the monsoon make the sleeping arrangements here seem like the Ritz.

They already hit the peak of their week with the trip to the airbase yesterday. Today will be just another same-same, time-waster day. Most days in the army are. Days like this just seem to last forever. They hate that.

Dog is trying to decide between filling his pipe for a few tokes or having some c-rats for his breakfast. Better have a few tokes, as it can only improve the c-rats... if that's even possible. It probably isn't.

How did I end up here, Dog wonders. Last year he was living his dream

life as the bass player in an up-and-coming band. Now he is in the Nam. His friend and band mate, Dean, getting drafted was the impetus for Dog to join the army. He just couldn't wait for Dean to return to the band, especially after Dean re-upped to be a Green Beret. Dog couldn't let Dean have all the fun and excitement. The last time Dean and Dog saw each other, Dean told him what idiots they both were, and Dog knew he was right. Fucking idiots to be exact.

Three more months to get through, three more months. Ninety days is ninety lifetimes in the Nam. At least they are in as number one a place as could be had here at LZ Uplift. But things can change boo coo fast in the Nam, and Dog knows that.

The squad congregates in the tee tee common area near the center of their compound as they eat. Goose, with his two weeks left in the Nam, is finally starting to let it sink in that he may just make it out alive. With that thought in his head, he smiles, mostly to himself.

"Listen up you guys," says Goose. "You're really gonna have to watch the Shake 'n Bake when I leave. Don't let that dumb shit get any of ya fucked up."

"Don't worry about us," says Dog. "The person who needs to worry is the Shake 'n Bake."

As the guys chat and finish their c-rats, a jeep rolls up to their site. It comes to a halt, dust swirling around it.

Speak of the Devil. It's their new Shake 'n Bake and an LT and his driver. Without anyone saying a word, the Dewmasters know this is not a good thing. Goose walks over to the jeep as the LT climbs out. The rest of the squad stays in place as they listen in on the conversation. It's quickly becoming apparent that the LT's visit is *definitely* not a good thing.

First the LT is ticked off because Goose doesn't salute as he approaches. Where the fuck does he think he is, back in the Real World or something? The squad can hear that the verbal exchange between Goose and the LT is becoming heated as they both raise their voices. All the guys stand and move over to surround them.

"There a problem, Goose?" asks Dog.

"No, no problem at all. The lieutenant was just leaving. Weren't you, sir?" replies Goose.

The LT climbs back into his jeep, but before he leaves he says, "Have the squad ready at oh-eight hundred hours tomorrow. You will not be on the

patrol sergeant."

With that he tells his driver take him back to LZ uplift. Sgt. Mullet gives Goose a shit-eating grin just before re-entering the compound.

"What's this all about?" asks JQ.

"Fuckin' Shake 'n Bake can't even wait 'til I leave to try to get you guys killed. Motherfucker," answers Goose. "The LT told me Mullet is the squad leader now, and I'm supposed to start clearing post tomorrow. He wants our squad and a squad of fuckin' ARVNs to go on a patrol tomorrow. We'll see if he can stop me from comin'."

As they walk back to their common area, Dog says, "Ever notice how we almost never see any officers out here or in the field, but when we do it's always number ten?"

Goose replies, "Yeah. That's because ya have ta be fuckin' dinky dao like us to be out here."

This is going to really put a damper on the rest of the day's activities. Dog gets his hammock and ties it up in a bit of shade that won't last long as the sun makes its way across the sky. Better get as much rest as possible today, because once they're out in the bush again, there will be no rest until they get back. That is, *if* they get back.

They go about their day with the heavy thought that tomorrow is going to be number ten. They hate that.

Just when they're all thinking nothing good will come of this day, the Coke girls show up with their goods to sell.

Although all the guys want to buy some Coke, it is also fun to talk and joke around with the girls. They're all young school girls, but because of the war hardly anyone in the countryside and small villages goes to school. Usually the one named Monique does most of the talking while the others giggle and chatter away in Vietnamese in the background. Monique lets her hat hang on her back from the chin string. She is so much shorter than the guys, and she has to look up so far when she talks to them, that her hat would fall off even if she didn't put it there in the first place.

Some of the girls speak remarkably good English, or at least what passes for English here in the Nam. They have to do whatever they can to make a tee tee bit of money, so sometimes the Coke girls have pot for sale. It saves the Dewmasters a hated trip to the rear. They also sell the small bottles of Obesitol.

After the Coke girls depart, the mood is a little happier. Now at least they

have warm Cokes to drink with their c-rats. Tomorrow, while on patrol with their new Shake 'n Bake, there will only be warm water to drink.

There is no joking around and teasing Goose about his imminent departure today. No teasing Dog about his soon-to-be R&R. No, the mood had suddenly grown somber with the new Shake 'n Bake officially in charge. They heat their c-rat meals with C-4 and quietly eat lunch, all thinking about how their tee tee world, which had been mostly out on their own, was over.

After lunch, the guys all move their hammocks into whatever bits of shade they can find around their compound and settle in for a mid-day nap. There will be no naps tomorrow.

They can hear the constant sound of aircraft taking off and landing at LZ Uplift. Boo coo amounts of chopper activity, which isn't atypical. But it's a tee tee bit more intense today. That doesn't bode well for tomorrow's mission. One dustoff chopper flies so low over their compound that it stirs up a swirl of dust. Anyone who is still asleep awakens from choking on the grit.

They spend the rest of the day swigging warm Coke between tokes on their pipes. The daylight will soon be gone, and it will be The Scary Time again. The Dewmasters love their isolated position, except at night. They hope their reputation as the squad not to be fucked with will keep them safe.

Again they choose up their shifts for guard duty tonight. Because there is nothing to do after it's dark, most of the guys climb into their hammocks for the night. Tomorrow will be here soon enough, even though the nights seem to last forever here in the Nam. The nights, just like the days, are almost exactly 12 hours here in the tropics. Twelve hours makes for a short day for people used to the northern latitudes in summer. It also makes for a seemingly endless night.

As the night finally gives way to first light, the guys are all up and moving around. No one, not even Goose, slept well. Not with the impending patrol looming in their minds. Of all the Dewmasters, Goose is the most upset about the patrol. Or more specifically, about being left *off* the patrol. He really has been here too long, Dog thinks.

Dog and the rest of the squad go about gathering their gear. Getting their rucksacks out and blowing all the accumulated dust and debris off them. It's been a while since their last patrol, and everyone feels boo coo rusty about the prospect. No Goose, and Rondo is still on R&R, so they'll be short two guys they know they can usually count on. They hate that.

As always, there is a trade-off when they start to pack: more water or more ammo? Those are the two heaviest things they have to carry, and they want to carry the absolute most of each. The boxes of c-rats aren't exactly light, but everyone opens a c-rat meal box and stuffs the contents into all the nooks and empty pockets of their rucksacks. They throw away anything they know they won't eat to save on some weight.

It's been daylight for about thirty minutes and some of the guys start heating up some c-rats. The air is heavy with heat and humidity, and the hearts and minds of the Dewmasters are heavy with the thoughts of their upcoming mission today. Goose is so visibly miserable that they try to cheer him up. You would think that he was the one going on patrol.

"C'mon Goose, snap out of it. Yer a fuckin' short-timer man. Less than two weeks and a wake-up. We'd all kill to trade places with ya, man," says Dog.

"I know, I know, but I just can't seem to wrap my head around it. Can't let my guard down enough to feel number one about it yet. And that fuckin' Shake 'n Bake has me feeling number ten about the whole situation," replies Goose.

It's not quite the appointed time when Sgt. Mullet arrives with the other FNG NCO, and they want to sky up. None of the Dewmasters are ready yet. It's not 0-8 hundred hours yet, which they are quick to point out.

Dog tries to reason with an idiot and says, "Listen Mullet, if you had nine months here in the Nam you wouldn't be so anxious to get yerself killed. We're all too short to go on meaningless patrols like this one."

Sgt. Mullet ignores Dog and addresses the rest of the squad, "Listen up, men. We move out in fifteen minutes."

The Dewmasters do sky for the bush, but not in the fifteen minutes dictated by Mullet. A small victory. They leave their compound following their new squad leader single file.

First they walk to the nearby ARVN compound, which they normally avoid like the plague. At best, the ARVNs are considered worthless and unreliable. A number ten patrol quickly becomes a number ten thousand patrol. They increase their numbers by nine as the ARVNs join the squad.

The area they are to patrol is boo coo far for a foot patrol, especially if there are any thoughts of getting back before dark. Acres and acres of dry rice paddies the size of football fields with three-foot-tall rice grass. Some of the rice grass has been cut in areas,but there are still boo coo places for the VC to hide.

The patrol enters an area of dense foliage and are moving along slowly. For most of the patrol, Dog's squad has been on the point, even though this is technically an ARVN mission. The ARVNs are finally taking a turn on point when the sound of gunfire erupts. Very quickly the ARVNs come running back down the trail, passing by without stopping.

One of them is yelling loudly, "Number ten! Number ten! NVA! Didi mau! Didi mau!”

Well that gets the attention of all the Dewmasters, who have been in a firefight before. Sgt. Mullet is suddenly on point with Luis Rosa, the radiotelephone operator (RTO), just behind him. A bullet strikes Mullet in the thigh, and he falls to the ground. The RTO is the next to be hit.

This is Tactics 101 for the VC. Shoot whoever looks to be in charge first, and next shoot the radioman so they can't call for help. Some of the bullets fired by the VC hit the ammo the RTO is carrying and it explodes, no doubt seriously compounding his injuries.

Dog and his fellow Dewmaster Steven Multrup move up to the front and lay down some fire with their M-16s. While Steven continues to return fire, Dog tries to stop the bleeding of Rosa's wounds. As he does, he hears someone calling them on the horn. The radio is miraculously still working. Dog immediately gets on the horn and calls in a dustoff for the wounded. He ties a tourniquet on Sgt. Mullet's leg wound and bandages it the best he can.

As the firefight continues, it occurs to Dog that someone's going to run out of ammo if it goes on much longer. The ways things are going today, Dog is boo coo worried it will be them. They are trading so much gunfire with the VC that Dog and Steven don't even have time to take stock of their remaining ammo. They hate that.

The dustoff chopper finally arrives after about fifteen minutes and takes the severely wounded RTO and Sgt. Mullet back to the base camp hospital.

Dog, Steven, and what's left of the squad fall back as they continue to cover themselves by laying down fire to the front and even firing to the rear at times. They've counted nine VC, and though they're confident that they killed or wounded at least six of them, the last three just won't give up the fight. They may be outnumbered, but the VC are seasoned fighters and take advantage of the dense foliage at the edge of the dry rice paddies the squad has to cross to get back to their base.

Dog is still carrying the horn, as acting RTO. So now the VC are focused on shooting Dog. They don't want him calling in any air support, which is

exactly what he is trying to do.

The squad makes it out of the dense foliage and moves slowly through an area of rice grass. They are still taking fire, so everyone is down low, either on their backs or bellies. The attack chopper wants Dog and Steven to pop some smoke so the choppers don't accidentally shoot them too. The problem is they don't have any smoke grenades with them. Around here, if you carry grenades, you carry frags and not smoke. Dog has already thrown the two frags he was carrying, but he has a trip flare somewhere in his rucksack. The chopper pilot says that's good enough.

There's another problem, which is the location of the trip flare. It's at the bottom of Dog's rucksack. And he's got the radio strap part way over one shoulder. Fuck! Stuff like this always happens at the worst time. While Dog digs through his rucksack for the trip flare, he argues with the major flying the chopper.

"This is a bad idea! We're gonna give away our position to the VC if we pop smoke," says Dog into the horn.

"Troop, I am ordering you to pop smoke!" replies the major.

Dog reluctantly complies with the order and fires the trip flare off. And of course they immediately start taking boo coo fire from the VC. Bullets are whizzing through the rice grass on both sides of Dog and Steven. One bullet hits Dog in the bottom of his foot as he lays flat on his back. The impact on Dog's foot from the bullet makes it fly almost straight up in the air. This gives away their position even further, so now Steven and Dog have to scramble through the rice grass, trying to keep themselves hidden.

Dog calls in another chopper for himself and is told it will be fifteen minutes. The squad continues to fall back, but Dog's wounded foot slows him down. As he lays hidden in the rice grass, Dog looks over and makes eye contact with a squad member named Watson. Watson is not a Dewmaster. As such, Dog supposes he shouldn't be surprised when he watches Watson and the rest of the squad didi mau, leaving him and Steven to fend for themselves. Fifteen minutes feels like fifteen lifetimes when bullets are flying by in the rice grass. Even the M-60 gunner left, which would have given them a fighting chance. The last three VC just won't give up, and now it's Steven and Dog who are outnumbered. They really hate that.

Still being pursued, Dog, with Steven's help, continues crawling through an area of rice grass about the size of a football field. They come to the edge, where the rice grass has been cut short. Fuck! Man, nothing's going right

today, Dog thinks to himself. The VC are still firing at them, and Steven is holding them off singlehandedly.

Finally, Dog and Steven hear the sound of the dustoff chopper. They can't help but grin at each other. If they can just get on that chopper and get the fuck out of here, things will be number one, thinks Dog. Steven manages to get Dog on his back and makes a run for the chopper once it lands. Steven more or less dumps Dog through the open side door of the chopper and then steps back. He knows he's a dead man if he stays here on the ground by himself, but not being injured, he's not sure they'll let him on board. The door gunner and Dog keep waving for Steven to get aboard, but Steven hesitates. At the last second, Steven hops in, and they sky up for the base hospital at LZ Uplift.

The medic on board gives Dog a shot of morphine, and the pain subsides enough so he can think about something besides his foot. It takes several minutes, but it starts to sink into Dog's head that this war might be over for him. He digs around in his rucksack and gets his bag of pot and his pipe and throws them out the open door. Not going to need them where I'm going, he thinks.

The door gunner lets out a loud yell, "Hey, why'd ya do that? I woulda took it, man!"

Dog and Steven begin to relax and take in the breathtaking view that is the Nam from the air. It is so hard to believe the paradise you can see from the air has a war hidden within.

The morphine has kicked in, and Dog drifts in and out of consciousness, but every time his eyes meet Steven's, they smile.

As soon as the dustoff lands at the base hospital, they take Dog inside on a stretcher. Steven follows inside, but the place is hectic dealing with all the wounded from today, so he didis back to the compound.

The doctors do a cursory clean-up of Dog's wound after cutting off his boot. That bums him out. He loves his boots. They were well broken in with not a speck of the original polish left anywhere on them.

They decide his wound is too serious to deal with here. They stop the bleeding and bandage his wound, put on a temporary cast, and within an hour Dog is on another chopper on his way to the hospital at Qui Nhon. Another shot of morphine just before leaving the hospital at LZ Uplift has Dog flying high and feeling no pain. I might just have a Million Dollar Wound, he thinks. Might. Better not think about it anymore.

That's easy, because it's boo coo hard to keep your train of thought when the morphine really kicks in.

When they reach the hospital in Qui Nhon, he is taken into an operating room. They give him a Spinal while they prepare to clean and repair his wound. It's a good thing, too, because when they cut off his cast, they accidentally cut too deeply. They end up severing some of his muscles and tendons, thereby worsening his injury. What fucking idiots, Dog thinks.

Dog is awake, but numb, so he at least feels no pain from the botched procedure. They use a wire brush to clean all the debris out of his wound. Out of his foot come tee tee bits of jungle boot, lace eyelets, etc. The bullet, after hitting the steel sole plate in Dog's jungle boot, flattened out from the impact. It created a hole as big as a quarter in Dog's foot. A real mess, is the best Dog can ascertain in his drugged condition. His second toe is oddly out of place. Still, he thinks to himself, it's a Million Dollar Wound.

After cleaning and stitching up the foot, the doctors put on a permanent cast.

“Why a cast?” Dog asks.

“It'll heal faster,” they tell him.

It doesn't really make any sense to Dog, but this is still the Nam and nothing makes sense.

He is feeling the best he has all day as he's wheeled to his ward. And looking around at the other wounded, he is humbled by his minor wound. The guy directly across from him has lost both legs and one arm. If Dog had any doubts left that his is a Million Dollar Wound, they are gone now. And he is in a real bed and will soon be on his way to the Real World, alive! That's the last thing he remembers as he finally lets himself off high alert and falls asleep.

The next day an officer slowly moves through the Orthopedic ward, closely followed by an NCO. They are bestowing Purple Hearts to the guys wounded in action. Dog is one of the recipients. He really doesn't want it, and he makes that quite clear when he says to the officer presenting the award, "You can stick that thing up yer ass!"

Normally officers don't take comments like that very well. As a matter of fact, guys have been sent to the Long Binh Jail for less offensive remarks. Today they let Dog slide.

Afterward Dog is tooling around the ward in his wheelchair. Being the

least seriously wounded guy on the ward, he feels some responsibility to try to cheer the other guys up. He quickly realizes what a boo coo hard job it will be, as some of the guys on the ward are fucked up big time.

Anibal Sanchez, the triple amputee, has to have the dressings and bandages on his stumps changed every day. It's an extremely painful procedure increased by Anibal's refusal to accept anymore morphine. He's worried that he'll get addicted and strung out on the drugs. The doctors insist that he won't, but he still refuses all pain medication. His stumps start bleeding every time his bandages are changed.

After witnessing all this, Dog thinks that Anibal is The Man. It certainly puts thoughts of his injury in proper perspective. Dog has such incredible respect for Anibal and the way he is dealing with his injuries. Each day, after Anibal is brought back to the ward with tears still in his eyes from the changing of his bandages, Dog gets in his wheelchair and moves close to Anibal's bed so they can talk.

Within days they are fast friends. Anibal and Dog are both musicians, and constantly talk about their favorite songs and bands. On the second day they tell each other how they were injured. Dog tells his story first and is almost embarrassed by it. He knows Anibal's story will be horrific, and it is. Fucking horrific to be exact.

Anibal and his unit had taken a hill and were preparing to set up some defenses now that they had the high ground. They started to take some incoming, and suddenly Anibal was blown boo coo high into the air. He could see the world swirling around below him as he spun through the air. He remembers hitting the ground really hard, and then he passed out. They think it was one of the 155mm shells hitting an unexploded 250 pound bomb the VC had buried on the hill.

Anibal's wounds were so severe, no one there expected him to survive. He was one of the last ones loaded onto the dustoff chopper. Just before the chopper took off, someone ran up and laid Anibal's severed right arm on his chest. Anibal was barely conscious, but he heard them say they thought he might want it, as his watch was still attached to the wrist. What idiots!

A few days later, Anibal and Dog fly via chopper to a nearby airbase. They are put on the same plane to Japan. Once in the air and headed for Japan, Dog finally allows himself to let out the sigh that everyone who has been to war and survives lets out. Million Dollar Wound, he thinks. It's definitely a Million Dollar Wound. Fucking Million Dollar Wound to be

exact.

Chapter 3

The chopper flight from the base hospital at Dong Ha is as uneventful as the view is breathtaking. I continue to look out the window with my one good eye the whole flight to Da Nang.

It only takes a few minutes to unload us. We are ushered into the hospital as the chopper takes off. They call out our names one by one, and we are taken to see our respective doctors.

My doctor removes the tape over my right eye and puts eye drops in it to dilate the pupil. Then he has me put my chin on a rest in front of a boo coo complex looking piece of equipment. He looks inside my eye through a series of lenses while shining a bright light directly in it. It does not feel pleasant. As a matter of fact, except for the unpleasant event that got the metal fragments there in the first place, this is the next most unpleasant thing to be done to my eye.

He at least confirms what I already know: that I can't see out of my right eye. Finally, I think, someone believes me. He says the reason for my lack of sight is that the metal fragments cut some of the veins when they entered. It appears the bleeding has stopped, at least.

He is very optimistic that I will get my sight back if I do what he says. His plan is to allow gravity to settle the blood out of my eye. That means I will have to sleep in a sitting position for the next six months. No strenuous activities, no bending over, and no jumping up and down. For now, he wants me on complete bed rest. While that sounds good at first, he also wants me eat in bed and use a bed pan. I don't mind the eating in bed so much, but just the thought of the bed pan, yuck! Then again, if he'd said I needed to stand on my head for six months to regain my sight, I would try.

He makes a call to my assigned ward and gives instructions. When I make it there, I have no doubt which bed is mine, as it's the only one with the back cranked up at 90 degrees. There are several big fat pillows to keep me from falling out of bed after I fall asleep. If I can even fall asleep like that. That remains to be seen. Since I have nothing better to do, I climb in to check it out. Boo coo comfy to sit in, but I don't know about sleeping like this. Better than standing on my head, though.

My doctor stops by my ward just to make sure my bed is set up properly.

He has an eye patch for me. That feels much better than using a strip of tape to hold it closed, and I thank him.

"Remember now, complete bed rest. I know you probably feel good and will want to get up and walk around. But the more you remain as motionless as possible and in an upright position, the faster your eye will clear," he says.

"Like how long are we talking about sleeping like this, Doc? Did you say six months?" I ask.

"It's possible your eye will clear sooner than that. A lot depends on how well you follow my recommendations," he says. "And you'll have to sleep upright for a while after your eye clears, though not quite as upright as the bed is now."

Despite being on complete bed rest, no dinner is brought to me as all the other patients in the ward leave for dinner. The day staff all leave as well, and I'm there alone for a while. I really want to follow my doctors orders, but I also don't want to starve either. Of course, I'm not starving really, but if I don't get some food soon, I may not get any dinner at all. I don't know if the mess hall here is open all night.

This is so army. Put someone on complete bed rest and then don't feed them. Probably hoping I do starve to death, and then their problem with my eye situation just resolves itself. This is also so army.

Fuck it, I think. I've already been walking all over the place since my injury. If I walk around a tee tee bit more, what's the harm?

The hospital hallways are all completely empty of people, and since I don't smell any food, I can't follow my nose. So I wander around. The first person I encounter I ask for directions to the mess hall. He has to yell in my ear since I can still hardly hear anything but ringing.

I eventually find the mess hall, and I am in awe. I thought the last hospital had excellent food, but I can't believe anything associated with the army could smell and look as number one as this. It almost looks like a restaurant, except you do still have to go through the chow line. Hey, it's the army.

There are so many choices, and everything looks boo coo good. It's hard to choose. Such a change from c-rats, when my choice was to decide what I hated the least. I end up with more on my tray than I could ever eat, but I just can't help myself. I eat most of it and have to stop before I get sick. I'm so full I almost have to waddle back to my ward. Though I'm very careful not to waddle too fast in keeping with my doctors orders. Well, almost in keeping with his orders.

Once back at my ward, I ensconce myself on my special bed. I doze on and off as I try to get used to sleeping in a bolt upright position. A few days ago I could have slept standing on my head, but now that I've caught up on my sleep I'm finding difficult to sleep this way. They turn the lights off at 9 pm, but there are some dim night lights that add to my difficulty sleeping.

I wake for a while around 2 AM according to the wall clock. My good eye is accustomed to the dim light, and I have to admit that when I'm awake it's comforting to be able to look around the room just to make sure everything is still number one.

The ward I'm in is packed with patients with only a couple of empty beds. I see a guy, also a patient here, I guess, since he's wearing pajamas, comes walking through the ward. He notices I'm awake and stops next to my bed to talk.

"Hey man, you're new here. I'm Victor," he says. "That ain't my real name. They call me Victor because I like these."

He opens his hand to show me several individually wrapped pills with a red and green wrapper and the letters VT printed on them.

"They call them Victor Tangos," he says.

He tears open one to reveal a small black pill.

"Want one?" he asks.

"Naw, that's OK, Victor. I think I'll pass," I say.

"It'll help ya sleep."

I ask myself, if that's true, why is Victor awake at 2 AM?

"Naw, really. I'm just tryin' ta get back to normal. I don't think that's gonna help, but thanks anyway, man," I say.

He smiles.

"OK man, I'll check on you later. I'm a tee tee bit strung out on these things, so I'm a patient here too. Not doin' too good gettin' off 'em, though," he says as he pops the pill I just declined into his mouth. "They think I'm dinky dao, but they also think I might be faking it, so I'm here for observation. And to dry out from the Victor Tangos."

He chuckles quietly at that.

That's some useful information, I think. I don't know what's in the Victor Tangos, but I know I don't want any. Victor didis, so I try to sleep some more but without much luck. I might have already used up my lifetime allotment of luck here in the Nam.

At 6 AM the ward comes alive as the staff arrives. One of the WACs, a Spec-4, seems to be in charge, as many of the patients here are just about tripping over each other as they jump at her every command. She is an attractive woman and seems quite aware of it. I marvel at the way she gets most of the patients to do her duties while she supervises. I say most, because I alone am still sitting in bed. I wonder if there are hospitals in the Real World that require the patients to get out of bed to do the orderly's job. I suspect not.

As I ponder this, Miss Spec-4 comes over to me. She was smiling and laughing with the other patients on my ward, but now she looks upset. That reason being that it is considered a sin to remain in bed past the 6 AM wake up call. I can tell I'm about to be punished for my transgression. War is so weird that I shouldn't be surprised at this turn of events.

Miss Spec-4 immediately orders me out of my bed, and because of my laziness, I am not only to strip the bed sheets off my bed, but all the beds on the ward.

As a Spec-4, she outranks me. I am a PFC, and she is technically allowed to order me around. However, I mention to her that I am on complete bed rest under orders from my doctor. He, being a Captain, outranks her, and so I tell her she might want to take it up with him.

Miffed at my insolence, she leaves in a huff. I figure that will be the end of it. But, of course, this is the army, so it isn't.

Miss Spec-4 returns shortly with some Lifer E-7. How do I know he's a Lifer? Because all E-7s and those above E-7 in rank are Lifers. Anyway, Lifer E-7 demands to know the name of my doctor.

"Look, Sarge," I say as I attempt to defuse the situation, "I'm blind in one eye and can't see that good out of the other one. The first thing the doctor did was put some drops in my eye, and after that I couldn't see anything. I didn't notice his name, and he didn't say what it was."

My medical history clipboard is hanging on the foot of my bed. Lifer E-7 grabs it and has a quick look at it before he didi maus. Finally, I think, *this* will be the end of it.

But then, this is the army. It is not the end of it.

Lifer E-7 returns, now that his thinking has been corrected by my doctor. In the Real World, when a mistake such as this is made, there is a perfunctory but insincere apology, and it's over and done with. However, this is not the Real World. This is the army.

Lifer E-7 says to me, "So yer on complete bed rest, eh, troop?"

Now when a Lifer calls you *troop*, you know you're headed for trouble. I keep trying to think of what I did wrong. I'm just trying to follow the orders from my doctor. This is so army.

Lifer E-7 continues, "OK, that's good, troop. But just lemme catch you outta that bed, and your next complete bed rest will be at Long Bihn Jail!"

Well he is certainly trying to make it easier for me to confine myself to my bed. Hopefully I'll get the vision back in my right eye ASAP.

They hate me here. They hate all the guys with Million Dollar Wounds. We look so good. In their minds, we're just taking up a valuable bed. Clogging up their system, no longer of any use to them. They really should send us all home. Considering the treatment I'm getting here, I could just as easily sit in bed at home. But this is the army, so that won't happen.

I ate so much at dinner last night, and all I've done is lay around dozing on and off, so I'm hardly hungry. That's a good thing, because although both Miss Spec-4 and Lifer E-7 know I'm on complete bed rest now, no breakfast is brought to me. No bed pan either, for that matter.

Miss Spec-4 is so adept at assigning her duties to others that she is able to didi sometime after 9 AM. Lifer E-7 is not anywhere to be seen after nine either.

I skip breakfast, using the time to make use of the bathroom while no one is watching me. While I'm in there, I take a shower and shave. Lifer E-7 is intent on messing with me, so I need to stay strack.

The rest of the morning I spend sitting on my bed. Man, I think to myself, I really hope my eye clears up sooner rather than later. This is only my first full day of sitting and doing nothing else, and I am already bored to death. There is nothing here on the ward for entertainment. No TV, no radio, no music. No nothing.

Luckily, a guy comes through my ward with a small cart loaded up with some paperback books and a few magazines. Boo coo old magazines, as in two to three years old. I take a couple of dog-eared books, and since I'm the only person on the ward, the guy with the book cart didis.

I haven't tried reading since my injury. It quickly becomes evident that reading with only one eye is extremely tiring. It also makes me dizzy, and my head starts to throb a tee tee bit. Man, I think, this recovery is going to be boo coo number ten if I can't even read.

Noon arrives, and I am alone again on the ward. I wait a while but no food

is brought to me. Fuck this, I think. I want my eye to heal, but I'm not going to starve. I get out of my bed and I carefully walk to the mess hall. No sign of Lifer E-7 or Miss Spec-4 in the hallways or at the mess hall.

I'm still in awe of the food selection here. It's hard for me to believe the army has any connection with the food here.

They have hamburgers, for one. Burgers don't sound like much, but I haven't had one in months. It remains one of the best burgers I have ever had. I go back in line and get another one. Going back for seconds is nearly unheard of in an army mess hall.

After my burger number two, I decide not to press my luck and didi back to my ward, well before 1 PM when I would expect the return of Miss Spec-4 and Lifer E-7.

I didn't have to worry, it turns out. They do make an appearance later in the afternoon, but it is brief. They are probably just trying to catch me out of bed.

During the afternoon, guys from my ward begin trickling back. It must be deemed safe to return now that there is no fear of being assigned to another detail by Miss Spec-4. Though some of the guys seem to relish any work they can do for her as they are certainly smitten by her beauty. What suckers!

It is considered a sin to even sit on your bed during the day, and there are no chairs on the ward. So most of the guys just stand around, milling about. It looks like a pirate convention as almost all of us are wearing eye patches.

Victor makes his way down the aisle of the ward and stops by my bed to chat again. If he's not on the Victor Tangos right now, I think, he might be dinky dao. His mind just seems to ramble on from one thing to the next. We chat for a while, but he makes almost no sense.

After Victor didis, one of the guys on my ward comes over to me and says, "Watch out for that guy Victor. He's fuckin' dinky dao."

"I had that feeling myself," I reply.

No sooner is that said that we hear a commotion in the hallway. Victor comes running through our ward, with two large orderlies dressed in white uniforms in hot pursuit. It happens so quickly and is over so fast, we're almost not sure anything happened until we all start laughing.

The orderlies return, dragging Victor between them. He is swearing up a blue streak, twisting and trying to get away, but the orderlies just tighten their grip. No one laughs this time. That's the last time I see Victor.

Dinner time arrives. Again, no food is brought to me. I wait for my ward

to empty, and then when I think it's safe, I sky to the mess hall. It's a boo coo big facility and is full of patients and staff, so I blend right in thankfully. I'm still impressed with the number one food here, which is one of the reasons I'm willing to forgo my complete bed rest regimen.

My hearing is still not completely back, and the mess hall is so noisy I can't have a conversation with anyone here. No reason to hang around after I eat, so I return to my ward. No one is back yet, so I climb back into my bed feeling a tee tee bit smug about the situation.

They bring another guy into my ward and assign him one of the empty beds. Some of the other guys on the ward start to return from dinner. It must be safe to sit or lay on the beds after dinner, as nearly everyone does so. This is a weird hospital. But it is so army.

The guy on the bed next to me asks, "What happened to you, man?"

"Got some metal fragments in my eye, and now I can't see out of it," I answer. "Plus if I try to look out of it, I get nauseous. If I don't close it right away, I barf."

"Did you get it from a frag?"

"Nah, just some bullet fragments. My doctor thinks I'll be able to see again. What about you, man?"

"Yer lucky, man. Mine is from a frag. They gotta take my eye out and put it back in," he tells me.

"Geez. That's a bummer."

"Yeah. I got a 50-50 chance I'll be able to see again in my one eye," he replies.

"Hey, you got a chance. That's more than some guys here. They're already getting fitted for their glass eye."

We chat a bit more, but after a while my neighbor gets ready for bed and goes to sleep. I try to read for a while longer, but it is so tiresome to read with one eye that I have to stop and rest often. I better take good care of my other eye, I think. It might be the only one I have. It is, after all, an army doctor who thinks I will see out of the bad eye again. I hate that.

They turn the lights off at 9 PM, and I spend the night dozing on and off again. The night lights are on, but it's too dim to read. No visit in the middle of the night from Victor. I am not fully accustomed to sleeping in a bolt upright position yet, so what tee tee sleep I get is very fitful.

When I wake at about 4 AM, I decide to get up to use the bathroom and

take a shower before Miss Spec-4 and Lifer E-7 arrive at six. By the time I finish, it's not even five. Might as well saunter over to the mess hall. And it's open, but there's hardly anyone here.

I have my favorite breakfast: two eggs over easy, hash browns, toast, bacon, and some biscuits with sausage gravy. I could really get used to this, I think. I finish my breakfast and walk back to my ward.

I am back in my bed and almost falling asleep when the staff arrive, turning on the lights and waking any malingerers. As usual, Miss Spec-4 directs her sycophants like a field marshal, and they all willingly comply with her orders. All, that is, except me. She hates that. She and Lifer E-7 will start to wonder where I am getting food soon. That could be number ten, as it will be off to Long Binh Jail for me.

After breakfast, several of the guys on my ward return and mill around as if they are waiting for something. Around mid-morning, an officer arrives, followed by Lifer E-7. The guys who were milling around assemble next to their beds. The officer and Lifer E-7 go down the aisle, stopping at each guy who was wounded in combat to present them with their Purple Heart.

The officer and Lifer E-7 move slowly through the ward, with the officer reciting the award citation to each recipient and then pinning the Purple Heart on their chest. That is, until they get to me. Just before approaching my bed, Lifer E-7 whispers something in the ear of the officer who is presenting the Purple Hearts. He recites my award to me, but instead of pinning the Purple Heart on my chest, he pins it to my pillow. Lifer E-7 gives me a sly smile. Yeah, they hate me here.

Maybe that's just how they award Purple Hearts to guys on complete bed rest. I don't know. The thing is, medals are the army's thing. It's supposed to be how they say 'thank you' for risking your life. The army has a boo coo hard time saying thank you, so it resorts to symbolism. And then they can't even do that right.

In my head, I do an internal attitude check: fuck Lifer E-7, and fuck the army. Just let me go home.

Twice a week during my stay in the Da Nang army hospital, I am summoned to my doctor's office. He asks if I can see yet, and every time I answer in the negative. Usually he dilates my injured eye and then shines the extremely bright light into it while he observes. What he observes, I have no idea. I am right on the edge of power-puking all over him while he does this.

I know it doesn't seem like a boo coo big deal, but my injured eye is boo coo sensitive to light. Any light. So when he shines that bright light in my eye, I am ready to come unglued. Add to that the red swirls of blood clouding my vision. The swirling makes me nauseous, but I can't close my eye to stop it. It's excruciating sensory overload.

During one of my first visits, he dilates my eye and places a large doughnut-shaped magnet next to my right temple. Then he looks into my eye while shining his bright light and energizes and de-energizes the magnet. He is trying to determine whether or not the metal fragments in my eye are ferrous metals, meaning they contain iron.

It seems iron is number ten inside the eye and will destroy the retina in about thirty days. I didn't know this. It hasn't been thirty days since my eye injury, but it turns out it doesn't matter. My doctor concludes the metal fragments are not ferrous. I could have told him that. I'm fairly certain my fragments are from a bullet, so I would expect them to be copper and lead. Copper and lead are not a problem, he says. I don't know if I agree with him, as the copper and lead are causing me plenty of problems so far.

On one visit, I mention that my complete bed rest is still being met by some resistance on my ward. He smiles.

Then he says, "Because of your eye's persistence in not clearing, I'm sending you to Japan in a few days. So your bed rest issue will no longer be a problem. At least not here."

I'm thinking it shouldn't have been a problem in the first place, but this is the army.

Finally, on May 2nd, 1970, I'm put on a chopper and flown to Cam Rahn Bay, along with several other patients. From there we board a C-131A transport aircraft. There are doctors and nurses on board, as many of the patients are seriously injured. The inside of the plane looks like a flying hospital with IV racks and stacks of stretcher-type beds. I manage to get a seat instead of a bed, but they all face backwards. There are a few small windows, but they are far away from the seats. So army.

When the plane finally lifts off from Cam Rahn Bay, I finally let myself sigh with relief. So far so good.

Chapter 4

Dog is a tee tee bit bitter. No, that's not true. Dog is boo coo bitter. The tee tee bit bitter is about his own situation. The boo coo bitter is about the condition, situation, and treatment of his fellow comrades. All are recently wounded; no longer of any use to the military. And once you are no longer of any use, they just herd you around like diseased cattle.

Take, for example, the way he and the other guys from the Orthopedic ward were put on the plane. Dog is quite mobile in his wheelchair. He often entertained the guys on his ward by popping wheelies down the middle aisle. But no wheelchairs are allowed on the plane, and since Dog can't walk, he is put on a stretcher. The stretchers are stacked so close on the plane, there's not even enough headroom to sit up unless you're in the top one.

Dog, already feeling jerked around, makes it clear that he will only accept his stretcher being on top. Anibal Sanchez isn't as lucky, but Anibal can't sit up on his own anyway. Since Anibal is in the next rack of stretchers, they can talk a little during the flight to Japan. The plane is cavernous and extremely noisy though, so they almost have to yell to be heard.

Anibal is still The Man as far as Dog is concerned. Every time Dogs starts to feel bitter or sorry for himself, Anibal's plight brings Dog back to the reality of the situation. Dog has a Million Dollar Wound. He has made it out of the Nam alive.

When the plane lands at the airbase in Japan, the injured are loaded onto buses. Some have seats and some have similar racks for securing the stretchers for the ride to the hospital. Dog can see Japanese war protesters holding up signs on the other side of a fence topped with concertina wire. On the signs are written things such as, “Stop the War” and “Yanqui Go Home.” Dog thinks to himself, hey, no problem. This Yankee wants nothing better than to go home. If he could, he'd gladly join the protesters.

For guys like Dog who have been in the bush for almost nine months, the hospital in Japan looks like a skyscraper. In reality it's probably only about a fifteen-story building.

Dog and Anibal and several others from the hospital in Qui Nhon are taken to the Orthopedic ward. Dog is hoping for some better care than he has been getting. He has been thinking lately that this cast is really not a good idea. It

smells quite horrid.

Complaints to his doctor and staff about how bad his foot and cast reek went nowhere. They just kept repeating that you heal fast in a cast. The thing is that infections are extremely common in injuries here in the Nam. Dog knew boo coo guys with minor cuts or scrapes that turned into serious infections requiring a trip to the rear. Some guys never returned.

Dog's injury, while nowhere near the seriousness of Anibal's injuries, is much worse than a cut or scrape. He saw the hole in his foot before the cast went on, and he knows the cast has to come off so someone can check for signs of infection. He just hopes they can get the cast off without making his injury worse this time.

The hospital in Japan is huge. Dog once again has a wheelchair so he can move around at will. The Orthopedic ward here is several times bigger than the ward in Qui Nhon, and it is practically full with patients. Dog spends the first few days skying around the ward getting to meet some of the guys and looking for anyone he knows. When he gets bored, he and couple of the other patients on the ward go out into the hallway and race each other in their wheelchairs. Dog likes to pop a wheelie at the start of each race, but it's mostly for show. When he does that, he usually loses.

Since most of the patients on Dog's ward aren't as mobile as him, their meals are brought to them three times a day. The food here in Japan is just about the best food Dog has ever eaten. (Xin loi, Mrs. C.) Certainly that line of thinking is conditioned by the c-rat diet that Dog has been surviving on for most of the past year.

Dog and a couple of the guys on his ward are sent down to the payroll office and are given the back pay they have earned since being injured. One guy has already had his disability calculated, and he gets over $5000.

From the payroll office, Dog and the others head to the hospital PX. They have all been there already. Mostly window shopping to waste away some of the long, boring days at the hospital. But now that they actually have money, they can shop for real.

Dog already knows exactly what he wants. He has been drooling over all the stereo equipment available here. In less than a minute, he has ordered his whole system and makes arrangements to have everything shipped to his parents' house back in the Real World. Before he leaves the PX, he takes one last lingering look at the Kenwood speakers he ordered. Man, he thinks to himself, I can't wait to fire those babies up. They are monstrous, and when

Dog gets them cranked up, the whole neighborhood should be able to hear them. (Xin loi, Mrs. C. And xin loi, neighborhood.)

That was the last nagging disappointment Dog had. Just about every guy who makes it out of the Nam alive takes home an awesome stereo system purchased at the PX. With music being such an important part of Dog's life, it made him anxious every time he went to the PX to scope out the stereo systems when he had no money. Now he is starting to be able to think of his future. Especially since they also finally removed that damn cast before his foot rotted off.

"Oh, look at this," they said when they finally cut the cast off. "The injury looks a bit infected."

All Dog could think was, *No shit!*

Dog is boo coo unhappy about the level of care here in Japan. It's a bit better than at Qui Nhon, but so tee tee bit it hardly matters. Just let this Yankee go home, he thinks.

And after a few more weeks in Japan, Dog, Anibal Sanchez, and one other guy from the Orthopedic ward, Billy C., are told they're being sent home. Finally. Since it's just the three of them, instead of a bus ride to the airbase they are going to fly there on a chopper. Dog is sitting in one of the passenger seats while Anibal and Billy C. are on stretchers. They are still waiting on the ground when someone comes to the chopper's open door and hands a package to Billy C.

He immediately rips it open to see what's inside. It turns out to be some of his personal effects that his unit in the Nam forwarded to him here in Japan. He's grinning as he looks through his package.

The doors are closed, and they are off for the airbase. Once airborne, Billy C. smiles again and pulls out a pipe and a bag of pot from his package. Both Dog and Anibal smile, as they know this was a boo coo big mistake that somehow got overlooked. They nod their heads knowingly at each other.

So the pipe is filled, lit, and passed between Dog, Anibal and Billy C. They are practically euphoric and can't help smiling at each other the whole time. Dog thinks, man this is a number one way to go back to the Real World. And he continues to think that until he catches the eye of one of the chopper crew sitting next to the door. He takes another toke on the pipe in true Dewmaster fashion. The look Dog is getting says that he and his buddies are in boo coo trouble. Fucking boo coo trouble to be exact.

What can they do to us? Send us back to the Nam? Nah, they can't do that,

he thinks. But this is the army, so they're going to do something. What that might be, Dog has no idea. In the Nam, smoking pot is such a non-issue, no one would be surprised if it was sold at the PX. Dog thinks, okay, maybe we'll all get Article 15's and have to pay a fine. No big deal. Of course this is the army, so it is a boo coo big deal.

When the chopper lands at the airbase in Japan, it is immediately surrounded by twelve armed guards. Fuck, Dog thinks. Because Anibal and Billy C. are laying on stretchers, they can't see the armed guards.

Dog says to them, "Man, we're fucked. There's a bunch of guards around the chopper, and they ain't here to give us a 21-gun salute before we sky up for the Real World."

Dog is quite right about that. The guards are definitely not here to deliver a 21-gun salute. What can they do to us, is all Dog can think. What?

The “what” turns out to be Dog and his comrades put under armed guard. Dog walks on his crutches while Anibal and Billy C. are carried on their stretchers. And not to the plane waiting to take them back to the Real World, but to an empty aircraft hangar. The stretchers are put on the ground in the middle of the hangar, and the guards then surround and point their rifles at the three of them. Dog wonders, are they going to execute us for smoking pot? Man, the laws must have gotten a boo coo lot tougher since I've been gone.

The guards don't shoot, but they keep their rifles pointed at Dog and his buddies laying there on the stretchers. This is unbelievable treatment, Dog thinks as he sizes up the guards. Dog has seen punk guards like this before. Most recently at the airbase near LZ Uplift. If they don't give ammo to the rear base guards in the Nam, they most certainly don't give ammo to the guards here. He finally comes unglued with fury.

"You guys are just a bunch of fuckin' punks! You don't even have ammo, do ya? Look at these two guys here. Ya think they're gonna crawl away if you stop pointing your guns at us? Where we've been, when you point yer gun at someone, you shoot 'em. Have any of you punks ever shot anyone?”

As he rants, Dog's rage builds.

“Nah, you guys are punks. They don't give punks ammo cuz they might hurt themselves."

He approaches each guard one at a time with his crutches. He gets inches away from the gun barrels.

"C'mon, shoot me! I dare ya," Dog just about screams.

One by one, Dog faces down the armed guards, daring each one to shoot him. In the end, only three guards don't back away, but even they lower their rifles. The other nine stand off in the corner quietly talking amongst themselves.

Dog returns to the center of the hangar and hunkers down next to his friends. They wait. Something they are all expert at. And then it is over. The guards leave Dog, Anibal, and Billy C. alone in the hangar.

Of course this is the army, so it isn't really over.

Six MPs arrive with a stretcher. Four of the MPs pick up the stretchers Anibal and Billy C. are already on. The other two take Dog's crutches away and put him on the stretcher they brought. Now Dog is really pissed. Really fucking pissed to be exact.

At another building, the three of them are frisked and separated. Dog is taken into an interrogation room and set down on the floor. He gets up and sits in one of the chairs.

The door opens and another MP enters with a clipboard. He faces Dog. His look is more than unfriendly; it is menacing. Normally Dog would feel a tee tee bit of intimidation from such a look. But after facing down the armed guards, he is confident that he won't be executed for smoking pot, even if it was on a chopper. Well, fairly confident.

The MP gets right down to business.

"So Troop, got anymore contraband on you?" asks the MP.

It's such a ludicrous question. Dog has absolutely nothing, contraband or otherwise, with him. He is wearing slippers, pajamas, and a robe. He has three pockets: two on the robe, which are empty, and one on the pajama top. All he has in his pajama pocket is his pack of Marlboros.

Dog again goes ballistic. Fucking ballistic to be exact.

He stands up and whips the pack of Marlboros out of his pocket, throwing them down onto the desk.

"This is all I fuckin' got. Or are squares considered contraband now?"

Next Dog picks the pack back up, rips it open, and starts breaking all of the cigarettes apart.

Tossing the loose tobacco and torn papers on the desk as he says, "Guess we better see if I got some dope in my smokes."

As he finishes tearing the last one he says, "Nope, nothing in there. Wanna strip search me now?"

He is just waiting for the MP to insult him one more time. One more time,

and then he is going over that desk to pound the crap out of this fucking dickhead MP.

If I do that, he thinks through his rage, they just might execute me. Might.

Dog has no contraband, and since he wasn't the source of the original contraband, the MP fills out the form on his clipboard with no further insults. Number one for both of them.

Dog does have to suffer one last bit of humiliation when two more MPs arrive and force him onto the stretcher so they can carry him to his plane to the Real World.

When Dog and Anibal meet again on the plane, they smile at each other. So far so good. So far so fucking good to be exact.

Chapter 5

It's a long and uneventful flight from the Nam to Japan. Just the way I like things now. I've had my quota of exciting events. Enough to last me a lifetime, I think. Especially since I also may have used up all the luck for my entire lifetime in making it out of the Nam alive.

When the plane lands at the airbase in Japan, we are met by several buses. I walk across the tarmac, noticing that the war protesters that were outside the perimeter fence on my way to the Nam are still there.

It takes about fifteen minutes to load up the bus I'm on, and then we sky for the hospital. Besides my short stay at the airbase to refuel the plane on the way to the Nam, I have never been to Japan. Most of the houses and buildings have brightly colored roofs in all different colors. From the air it looked somewhat like a patchwork quilt. It makes for a somewhat scenic bus ride.

The perimeter of the hospital grounds is surrounded with cyclone fence topped with concertina wire. I'm thinking if I never see concertina wire again, it will be too soon. There are more protesters just outside the perimeter fence. Most are holding up signs with anti-war slogans on them. Armed guards open the entry gates to let the buses inside.

Inside, I'm assigned to the Eye, Ear, Nose, and Throat ward. Most of us here have eye injuries to one or both eyes. So many guys with eye patches, it looks like the uniform of the day.

It's a bigger hospital than the last one, and all the floors and wards look the same to me. I feel like some country bumpkin who just arrived at the big city. I keep forgetting my floor number after visits to my doctor and often get off the elevator at the wrong floor. I wander around looking for my ward, and by the time I realize I'm on the wrong floor, I can hardly find the elevator. I hate that.

My current eye doctor has me doing the same thing my eye doctor in the Nam had me doing, which is sleeping in a totally upright position. I never thought I would get used to it, but I sleep fairly well now. My main problem is that I'm not supposed to exert myself in anyway, so I'm usually not tired. Regardless, they turn out the ward lights at 9 PM. The result is that I spend a boo coo amount of time sitting in my bed with nothing to do. Boring to say

the least.

Two or three times a week I am sent to see my eye doctor. It gives me something to do, but when he is done with me, I'm a mess. I can't do anything after my pupils have been dilated. It takes several hours for my eyes to return to normal. During that time I'm incredibly sensitive to light. Any light. I can barely find my way back to my ward. When I do get there, all I can do is sit on my bed. At least it's not considered a sin to sit on your bed during the day the way it was in Da Nang.

There is a large PX here and for something to do, we like to go look at what they have to offer. Mostly the stereo systems. I'm waiting for my paperwork to catch up with me, but I have been given some partial pay. Twenty bucks. Not enough to order my dream stereo. Not enough to buy anything here at the PX, except for maybe cigarettes. That's probably the only reason they give us partial pay in the first place. The army seems to be run by cigarette smokers and their smoke breaks.

After one such excursion to the PX, a group of us are making our way back to our ward when we encounter some patients having a sort of drag race in their wheelchairs down one of the hallways. We stop to watch them for a tee tee bit. That shows the level of boredom we suffer here.

These guys apparently take the competition seriously. Some guys make sounds like they are revving up their engines before popping the clutch of their “dragster.” One guy with a cast on his foot is even popping wheelies in his chair. Man, I think, these guys are dinky dao.

My eye doctor thinks the bleeding in my right eye has subsided and possibly even stopped. He says the leaked blood will be slowly absorbed, and my vision should start to clear soon. The swirls in my eye seem like maybe they're not as bright red as they once were. I only think this and don't know it for sure, because I loathe trying to look out of my right eye. It makes me nauseous.

One bright spot here at the hospital in Japan is the food in the mess hall. It is the best food I have ever had in my entire short life. Entering the mess hall, your eyes are drawn to the center of the huge room. There is a long, chilled self-serve salad bar there. The centerpiece is a mountain of large cooked shrimp surrounded by a moat of cocktail sauce. There are piles of fresh vegetables, some of which I've never seen before. Piles of fresh fruit and a section of raw fish and other seafood. I recognize what looks like octopus and

clams, but much of it is unrecognizable to me. I've heard about eating raw fish, and it's apparently boo coo popular here, but I stick with the cooked shrimp. As a matter of fact, on my first trip to this mess hall, I pigged out on the shrimp and ate nothing else.

My only problem with the food is that I'm barely hungry at mealtimes. My regimen of near complete bed rest is causing me to lose weight because of my inactivity and resulting lack of appetite. I'm not even supposed to bend over. If I do stoop down, I'm supposed to rise slowly. No quick or sudden movements, especially with my head.

The doctors here are hoping that my eye will clear quickly so they can send me back to the Nam. So much for my Million Dollar Wound, I think. The real number ten thing is I have been gone so long that I have surely been replaced in my unit. If I am sent back to the Nam, it will be somewhere else most likely.

Just the thought of going back gives me nightmares now. Even though I'm accustomed to sleeping in an upright position, it's still boo coo hard to sleep, because I do nothing that makes me tired. I lay about or slowly shuffle around all day with nothing to do. Even if I had something to do, I couldn't do it. Almost every other day my pupils are dilated, and it's too painful to read or even watch TV. If I do manage to fall asleep, I wake up terrified from a nightmare about being back in the Nam. I really hate that!

In two weeks I'll have been in the army a full year. As I think back on it, it seems like several lifetimes ago that I was in Basic training at Ft. Knox in Kentucky. It is so boring here, but not so much that going back to the Nam seems appealing. Most of the time it was boring in the Nam as well, but here in Japan no one has tried to blow my head off. So far anyway.

Today I'm on cloud nine. My eye doctor has given up on my eye clearing soon enough to send me back to the Nam. Even though this is a huge hospital, I am still clogging up their system, taking up valuable bed space. The war rages on, and there is a constant flow of wounded and injured arriving daily. In a couple days, my doctor says I will be sent back to the Real World.

I'm ecstatic, but careful not to feel complete relief yet. I don't want to jinx it. This is still the army. Until I touch down in the Real World, I'm not celebrating. And so I wait to be notified exactly when I am to didi. Something I am expert at.

One week shy of my one year “army anniversary,” I get on a bus. The protesters are still holding their signs outside of the gate. One sign says, “Go Home.” I think to myself, no problem, that's exactly where I'm going.

The plane is the same type of flying hospital that brought me here to Japan. I'm wearing pajamas, a robe, and slippers. Because I can walk on, I get a seat and don't have to lay in a stretcher. There are so many seriously injured guys on the plane that most of the doctors and nurses are busy getting everyone situated. Someone who looks like a crewman walks by, and I ask him where we are flying to first.

"Alaska to re-fuel, and then we're flying to Fort Dix, New Jersey," he says.

I smile. It's so army to fly us to Alaska in pajamas and slippers. But New Jersey, that's the Real World. We're on the ground at the airbase for about two hours getting all the patients ready for take off. Only once we're airborne do I allow myself to let out a sigh. So far so good.

It's over ten hours to Alaska. It's so cavernous in the plane, I'm afraid to walk around. The ride is bumpy, and I can actually see the inside of the plane shift around as we fly. If we hit some turbulence while I was walking around, there would be nothing to grab onto unless I happened to be near the seats or the stretcher racks. If would be so number ten to suffer an injury of any kind after having made it out of the Nam. Especially on the plane ride back to the Real world.

We finally land in Alaska at another airbase. Technically, Alaska is the Real World, but we arrive at night. And although it is May, it is still technically winter here. The patients that are ambulatory, such as myself, are offered the opportunity to de-plane. Ambulatory is hospital-speak for the ability to walk around. I know that doesn't sound like much, but it is a boo coo big deal for over half the guys on this plane that are *not* ambulatory.

I decline their offer. It's a winter night, and I'm in pajamas and slippers. On the way to the Nam we stopped in Alaska as well, but we landed at a commercial airport. We were allowed to de-plane in our jungle fatigues, and there were shops with things for sale. Expensive watches and jewelry, for instance. Nothing really for guys on their way to war. There were also some small restaurants, but they weren't open.

There are no shops or restaurants at the airbase. The offer to de-plane is nothing more than a chance to stretch our legs. Most of us know some of the guys in stretchers who can't move around, so we cruise around inside the plane instead, chatting with our friends now that it's not too noisy to talk.

It doesn't take long to re-fuel, and in about an hour we are once again airborne on our way to Ft. Dix. I've never been to New Jersey. I've been to Alaska twice now, but so briefly it's hardly worth mentioning.

It is a long and noisy flight. There are no smartly dressed flight attendants offering food and drink. No, it's mostly doctors and nurses and some orderlies and the few members of the flight crew.

I am feeling as good as I will allow myself given the circumstances. This has been and continues to be a grueling and punishing flight. But the next time we land, I will be back in the Real World. I don't want to jinx it, though. I still have a long flight over the Canadian and American wilderness. Since all of us are in pajamas, it would be number ten to have to make a forced landing out in the boonies. Not to mention if we actually crashed.

I try to think of something else to occupy my mind. Conversation is near impossible with the noise of the plane. My hearing has never returned to anything close to normal after my last firefight. I spend the rest of the flight trying to sleep. I am quite expert at sleeping in an upright position now, and that's number one, because the seats don't recline at all. That is so army.

In between dozing off, I look around the plane. I'm near the middle of it and can see from one end to the other as well as side to side. It's bigger than many gymnasiums I have been in. Hard to believe that we are actually airborne in something so huge.

I think we must be near Ft. Dix, because although I hear no announcements, I notice that all the other passengers have returned to their seats. This could be number one. After another fifteen minutes in the air, we land. I am back. I'm totally exhausted from the flight, but I am so happy I can't even explain it.

There are rows of buses awaiting our arrival. It's early morning but not yet light out. Back in the Nam, it would be just the end of The Scary Time. Here in the Real World, I'm not anxious at all that it's dark outside.

The bus I'm on is finally filled with all the patients going to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. I've never been here in New Jersey before, and I'm already on my way to another state I've never been to. It slowly gets light as I ride the bus to Pennsylvania. It looks much like where I'm from in Michigan. It's late spring, and all the trees have leaves on them. The ground is green, and there are flowers everywhere. Funny how I hardly noticed that stuff before. Now I'm looking at it with just one eye, and it seems like paradise.

I hardly slept on the flight here, but once it is full light, I am all the way

awake as we drive through the countryside. I notice I'm not the only one taking in the scenery. Just about every guy on the bus is rubbernecking as they look out the windows of the bus. It feels like seeing the Real World for the first time.

The army hospital in Valley Forge is out in the country, surrounded by what looks like a park with acres and acres of well-manicured green lawns and trees. No cyclone fence topped with concertina wire surrounding this place.

It's late morning when we arrive. The sky is blue with some tee tee white clouds here and there. How come I never noticed how beautiful the Real World is, I wonder to myself. It even smells sublime. Boo coo sublime to be exact.

Chapter 6

Dog and Anibal Sanchez fly from a US airbase in Japan to Travis Air Force base in California.

Dog, who insisted he be placed on the top rack so he could sit up, now finds that he's really thirsty. Being rated as airborne, he knows a thing or two about flying at altitude. One of which is that your body loses fluids faster, and they need to be replaced. He can't seem to get anyone's attention, or maybe he is being purposely ignored as punishment for his past indiscretion on the chopper. Either way, he hates that.

It seems like forever before someone finally offers Dog some liquid refreshment. He had almost resigned himself to possibly dying from dehydration on the flight back to the Real World. It would be ironic, but so army, to have survived the war in Nam and also the ill treatment at two army hospitals, only to die of thirst on the flight back home.

Dog can't really talk to Anibal during the flight, so mostly they lay back and try to sleep. It's hard, knowing that when they eventually land, they will be back in the Real World. It's kind of like trying to fall asleep on Christmas Eve when you're a kid, only better. Boo coo better.

At last they land. Dog and Anibal are loaded onto the same bus. It's a bumpy 45 minute ride to the army hospital in San Francisco. The army buses aren't known for a smooth ride, and the driver of Dog's bus is driving too fast. So fast that they're bouncing all over the place, jostling the patients on stretchers. Some of them, Anibal included, cry out in pain. Dog and several other patients on board ask the driver to slow down. He doesn't listen until they threaten to physically harm him if he doesn't slow down.

Dog is really pissed off now. After the ordeal of the chopper, and then the grueling flight back to the Real World, and now this harsh bus ride. The bus driver is lucky Dog is on a stretcher. If he was able to walk around, he would be kicking the driver's ass right now. This is ruining his homecoming to the Real World boo coo much. He hates that.

The only bright side to the bus ride is that Dog's Shake 'n Bake, aka Sgt. Mullet, is on a stretcher on the same bus. Close enough that they can talk. Not that Dog wants to talk to that asshole.

Shake 'n Bake seems a tee tee bit contrite and says to Dog, "Hey

Campbell. You were right about that last patrol. We shouldn't have gone."

"Ya fuckin' think!" is all Dog can say. He sort of wishes he was close enough to punch the dumb shit, but he probably wouldn't stop with just one punch. He really wants to beat the snot out of him.

The bus that Dog and Anibal are on is the last one to arrive at the hospital, because of the slower ride insisted on by the patients. It does allow them to check out the scenery of southern California in the spring. It's quite beautiful. Dog doesn't think he appreciated just how beautiful before.

They are taken to Letterman hospital in the Presidio, an area even more picturesque than the ride to it.

At the hospital, the bus is unloaded. Luckily Shake 'n Bake is never brought close enough for Dog to get a swing at him. As Anibal Sanchez's injuries are so serious, he is taken off first and sent to a different ward than Dog.

That is a big disappointment for Dog. He and Anibal have become tight friends. Being around Anibal helps Dog not think about his own situation. He is brooding as he makes his way down the hallway in a wheelchair. Separated from his new best friend in a new environment, Dog is feeling number ten. Not the way he expected to feel once he got back to the Real World.

But as he rounds a corner on the way to his new ward, there she is. One of the most beautiful women Dog has ever seen. Even with discounting the fact that Dog hasn't seen many, if any, American women in the last nine months, she is a true thing of beauty.

Dog is awestruck, especially when she comes over to him and asks, "Where ya goin', darlin'?"

She is tan and gorgeous and her WAC uniform fits her like a glove. She is the sexiest women Dog has ever seen. He has been in the Nam too long, but of course he doesn't know that.

Dog is trying to answer her question, but all he can do is stammer and point toward the ward he assumes is his. He's really not sure of anything right now, as he is blinded by her beauty. She takes hold of his wheelchair and pushes him into his new ward.

Dog, who moments earlier, was feeling boo coo number ten, now finally realizes he is back in the Real World. That is number one. Fucking Number One Million to be exact, he thinks and smiles.

Dog's new ward is filled with more guys like him with Million Dollar Wounds. It's a rambunctious crowd, and Dog makes several friends almost

immediately.

On the second day, he looks up from his bed at the middle of the ward and sees his mother, father, and sister coming through the door. He's not sure how this is going to go, as his parents were both against him joining the army. As they draw closer, he can see both his mother and sister are crying. Sandy runs ahead of their parents once she sees him.

Sandy gives Dog a big hug and a kiss, and then his mom and dad catch up. They are all smiles and hugs, and both Sandy and his mom are finally able to stop the tears.

"We thought you were going to be more seriously wounded from the telegram we received from the army," says his mother.

"Really?" says Dog. "What'd it say?"

"Well first of all, it said my husband had been seriously wounded. So we knew there was some mistake. We thought the mistake could be it was some other Campbell," she says.

"We couldn't find out anything from the army," says his father, "just got the run-around whenever we tried calling them."

"Kent," his mom says, "are you OK? You look so distant."

Kent, Dog thinks. Man, when was the last time anyone called me that? Not in the Nam. There it was Dog, or if it was a Lifer, I was Campbell. Kent... man, how many lifetimes ago was that?

"What, mom? Were you talking to me?" says Dog, fumbling with the pack of Marlboros on the table next to him. He was never allowed to smoke at home.

"We'll be back. We'll let you have a cigarette," says Mrs. Campbell.

As Dog watches his parents and sister didi, he realizes how much he indeed needs a smoke. As he lights up, he is swamped by all his new friends. All wanting to know about Sandy, of course. Dog quickly sets his new friends straight.

"Sandy is off limits! Xin loi!" says Dog. In his mind he still pictures Sandy as a little kid with nearly black bread crumbs around her mouth at breakfast, because she likes her toast almost burned.

When Dog's family returns, they go outside and enjoy the Presidio. It's a fantastic family reunion, and they all feel boo coo better. Dog's family in particular don't have to worry as much now that they know the true extent of his injuries.

Dog has been complaining about every cast they put on his foot. He is hoping to get the stinking smelly thing off his foot for good. Also, he is a tee tee bit curious about how well his foot is healing. Boo coo more curiosity than the army is showing in the healing process.

Thankfully, his doctor is so happy with the progress, he tells Dog he can have a walking-type cast. That is number one. Dog was not expecting such good news.

The new cast seems almost like a new lease on life to Dog. The first thing he does is track down Anibal Sanchez. Dog hasn't seen him since arriving here, and he wonders how they are treating Anibal.

Dog is on a ward made up mostly of other guys with Million Dollar Wounds. Anibal, however, is on a ward with other boo coo seriously injured guys. The sight of the incredible injuries suffered by the guys on Anibal's ward brings Dog crashing down to reality. He is once again humbled by his injury, and Anibal is once again The Man.

Anibal is boo coo happy to see Dog, and they promise each other again that they will get together after they are out of the hospital to play some music together.

Dog is fairly confident he will still be able to play his bass. He might be a tee tee bit slow with the toe tappin' part, but he'll cross that bridge when he gets there. Anibal, on the other hand, is not going to be able to play his drums again. He's still refusing all pain killers, and though he has healed much since he was injured, he has a boo coo long way to go for his rehabilitation.

The doctors tell Anibal they will start fitting him for two prosthetic legs and an arm when his stumps are healed enough to handle it. Anibal is doubtful about the prosthetics. He has been on his back for so long, a wheelchair seems like the ticket to freedom, but he doesn't want to get his hopes up.

It is a tremendous effort on his part for Dog to walk around and chat with the other guys on Anibal's ward when Anibal goes for his bandage changing. Some of the guys are so blown apart and disfigured, not to mention boo coo messed up in the head. Dog realizes that even Anibal, with his terrible injuries, is boo coo luckier than the guys who don't even know who they are, let alone recognizing their family and friends.

After they change his wound dressings, Anibal is in such pain he can't really talk much. Dog assures Anibal he will return.

Back on Dog's ward, the atmosphere is 180 degrees different than on Anibal's. There is laughing and joking. Just the fact that most of them are well enough to walk around is something to be thankful for.

After three days back in the Real World, Dog is sitting on his bed when he sees his older brother, Kurt, come through the door. He is followed by a strikingly beautiful woman. Man, Dogs thinks, where were all these beautiful babes when I was in the Real World before? The woman following Kurt turns out to be his girlfriend, Diana. She's a stewardess for some airline, and she is so stunning that every eye on the ward is on her.

Dog is also closely eyeing Diana so that it takes him several minutes to finally notice that Kurt is wearing his jacket. The one with leather fringe that he only ever wore when performing in his band, Sweet Wine.

"Hey!" says Dog, "that's my jacket."

Kurt laughs, "It was always too big for you, Kent."

Kent. There's that name again, Dog thinks to himself. Maybe I can be Kent again. Maybe.

"Was," says Dog, “but check this out."

Dog lifts his pajama top to show off his lean, muscular body. Dog was a skinny wimp when he joined the army, but he has been beefed up by the c-rat diet and a boo coo strenuous nine months in the Nam.

Kurt has a small duffel bag with him. He opens it and pulls out a pan of brownies.

As soon as Dog sees the brownies, it reminds him of something.

"Kurt," he says, "did you get the pillows I sent you?"

Kurt smiles a mischievous smile and winks at Dog. “Yeah, I got 'em."

"So," Dog asks, "is there any left?"

"Well, sort of," replies Kurt.

"Whaddaya mean, sort of?"

Kurt leans close to Dog and whispers, "Those are magic brownies."

Dog smiles a boo coo big smile. He hasn't gotten high since the ordeal on the chopper in Japan. Although that pot was great, and he got boo coo high, he had to come down boo coo fast dealing with the armed guards in Japan. Not the way a Dewmaster wants to come down from a good buzz.

Dog opens the brownie container and offers them to Kurt and Diana. They both decline. Dog takes one out and puts the rest inside his bedside stand for safe keeping. As he munches his magic brownie, he scopes out Diana, just as

every guy on the Orthopedic ward is also doing.

Man, Dog thinks, she is hot! Of course Kurt always has good-looking girlfriends, but Diana is just about over the top. When she calls him "Kent" in her wonderful Southern California beach girl accent, Dog knows he can be Kent again. Well, maybe.

The brownie's effect is already starting to kick in, and Dog starts to feels like his old Dewmaster self again. Yeah!

As he almost shamelessly stares at Diana, he wonders if she is better looking than the WAC he met on his first day here. Miss WAC is also drop dead gorgeous, and every guy on the Orthopedic ward is madly in love with her. Especially when she calls them darlin'. Considering Diana is dressed in a light and breezy summer dress, and Miss WAC has to wear an army uniform, Dog decides he has to award Miss WAC with the title of Best Looking. If she can look that beautiful in uniform, it's no contest.

Dog is high and swooning as he continues to eyeball Diana. He hardly hears Kurt say to him, "Hey Kent, I have another surprise for you."

Kurt opens the duffel bag enough for Dog to look inside, revealing some civilian clothes.

"Wanna go down to Fisherman's Wharf?"

"Fuckin' A!" says Dog as he snatches the duffel bag from Kurt. "Meet me out in the

hallway."

Dog races to the bathroom to change as fast as his walking cast will allow him. He didn't look too closely at the clothes Kurt brought him, but he puts them on and then has a look in the mirror. He looks like a barker at a carnival sideshow. The pants have wide green and white stripes. The shirt is striped as well, and they clash big time. He looks like a country bumpkin going on his first trip to the big city. Dog doesn't care. He just wants to get out of the hospital and check out the Real World again.

When Kurt and Diana see Dog in his outfit, they both smile but neither one laughs. He can tell they want to, though. Off they go to Kurt's car in the parking lot, and soon they are cruising down the road. Dog is feeling number one as they ride with the windows down. All he can do is smile a shit-eating grin from ear to ear.

He's high. He's hanging out with his big bro, and then of course there's Diana. Kurt is lucky, Dog thinks. Dog has a girlfriend or otherwise he just might consider trying to steal Diana away from him. At least he thinks he has

a girlfriend. How many lifetimes ago did he last see Kimberly? Seems like it's been forever.

Dog is brought back to some semblance of reality when Kurt parks his car in a public lot.

"C'mon, Kent," Kurt says. "Let's take the cable car down to the wharf."

There's that name again. He doesn't say anything. All he can do is gaze around San Francisco. It feels like he is seeing it for the first time in his life. And in a way he is.

Kurt and Diana can tell Dog is overwhelmed by the sights and sounds of the city, so they each grab one arm and pull him toward the cable car stop. When the first car arrives, they all get on. It's a weekday, so the tourists are not out in full force, and the cable car is not jam-packed like it is on weekends and holidays.

When he sees the water and smells the ocean breeze, that's when it finally and totally hits Dog in the face full force. He is, for sure, back in the Real World. When Diana calls his name the next moment, Dog realizes he *is* Kent again, and it is number one. Fucking number one to be exact.

After walking around almost like tourists, they decide to get something to eat. Kent is the one to bring it up first. The magic brownie has given him the munchies. It's a tee tee thing but when you're in the army or even an army hospital, there is no snacking. You don't have a refrigerator and cupboards with food in them. And there are certainly no restaurants available.

The smells are so wonderful that Kent can't decide where to eat. In the end, Diana makes the choice for them. The menu just about makes Kent swoon with the choices. He could pick with his eyes closed, as everything on the menu looks number one. First things first, though. Kent says to their waitress, "I would love a beer."

They finish placing their order and then have a good time talking, laughing and of course, drinking ice cold beer. Just like old times, Kent thinks. Yeah, I'm Kent again.

After their lunch they walk aimlessly around Fisherman's Wharf some more. Kent is wheeling around so fast on his walking cast that Kurt and Diana can barely keep up with him.

The day is over way too soon for Kent, but Kurt and Diana eventually have to take him back to the hospital. Almost number ten if not for a number one day.

They drop him off, and Kent slips inside. He changes back into his

pajamas in one of the bathrooms and stashes his civvies in the little duffel bag. He goes back to his ward and sits on his bed. He hasn't been missed. Kent is feeling number one again. Maybe I'll have another brownie before bed, he thinks.

The next morning, Kent heads up to Anibal Sanchez's ward for a post-breakfast visit. After his adventure yesterday, Kent wants to get Anibal outside if they will let him. The staff agrees that it would be good for Anibal to get some fresh air.

His bed is quite small and on wheels, so Kent can just wheel him down the hall to the elevator and down one floor. They find a shady spot, as it's already hot right out in the sun. Just like in the Nam, they both comment.

Kent, having escaped the environs of the hospital yesterday, sort of knows how Anibal is feeling even though they are not at Fisherman's Wharf. Kent lets him take as much of it in as he can before they start to chat. It's a beautiful day, but they all seem beautiful to Kent now. Even when it rains, it still seems wonderful compared to the rain during monsoon in the Nam.

Kent and Anibal stay outside until noon. Before Kent leaves Anibal to go have his lunch, he promises Anibal he will be back tomorrow for another outdoor excursion.

After a week of taking Anibal outside in his bed, the staff get a wheelchair set up for him. It is a big improvement for Anibal to see the world straight on again. Boo coo big improvement to be exact.

Kent is relaxing on his bed one afternoon after taking Anibal for his dose of fresh air when Miss WAC stops by for a chat. She is a shameless flirt to all the guys on the ward. They all want to be her boyfriend, and she knows it. She has a way of making every guy on the ward think that he could be the one.

"Where have you been all morning, Kent darlin'?" she says.

"Oh, I was just takin' one of my buddies outside for some fresh air," Kent says.

He tries to decide which he likes best, the way she says Kent or the way she says darlin'. Before he can decide, he hears his name being called out by several familiar voices.

When he looks up, it's his three best friends from back home, Paul, Dean, and Barry. While Kent talks to Dean and Paul, Barry tries to put the make on Miss WAC. Same old Barry, Kent thinks to himself. Miss WAC doesn't even

give Barry the time of day. As she walks away, nearly every available eye is on her.

"C'mon, Kent," says Barry, “let's get outta here!"

"Let me go put my civvies on, and we can didi mau," says Kent.

"Didi mau?" asks Dean.

"I mean we can go, xin loi.”

"Xin loi?"

"Sorry," says Kent. "Xin loi means I'm sorry.”

Man, being Kent again is going to be a tee tee bit hard, he thinks to himself.

As restrained as Kurt and Diana were about Kent's hideous attire, his friends show no such mercy.

Kent doesn't mind. He is out of the hospital. He is out in the Real World, cruising with his three best friends. And that's not even to mention that he has made it out of the Nam, alive.

To say they are cruising is a tee tee bit of an overstatement, as they are riding in Barry's VW Beetle. Although it's not that old, it is in serious disrepair, barely running on three of the four cylinders. So instead of cruising, they are sort of lurching and chugging along. Same old Barry, Kent thinks again.

He can't believe that they made it from Stockton to San Francisco in this piece of crap. He does appreciate the VW's simplicity of design and function and considers it might the kind of car he would consider owning. Of course, unlike Barry, he would keep it tuned and well maintained.

Barry considers himself the prankster of their tee tee group. The rest consider Barry mostly a dumb shit but usually a harmless one. Barry thinks it will be boo coo funny to take Kent to see the new movie about the Korean War field hospitals, M*A*S*H. Kent could care less. He is feeling boo coo number one right now. They could be taking him to the dentist for a root canal, and he wouldn't feel any different.

The theater lobby is almost too much, too soon. He doesn't remember liking popcorn, but the aroma of it seems so heavenly he can't resist getting a boo coo large bag and a drink. No beer here, but the drinks are ice cold, which is way more than enough for Kent. He is feeling number one.

The movie theater is crowded with viewers. There is quite a bit of laughing from the audience during the movie. Laughter that to Kent seems out of place at times. But overall he likes the movie.

As they leave the theater and walk to Barry's car, Kent remarks on the movie, "The part where the surgeon asks if the patient is an officer or an enlisted man, and when they say he's an enlisted man and the surgeon says, 'Make the stitches big.' Man, I hated that part. That's the way it still is in the army hospitals. If ya don't watch out, they'll fuck ya up worse. Fuckin' bastards!"

After some stops to quench their thirst at a few watering holes on the way, Kent's friends drop him back at the hospital. They promise to come back and take him out to party until he is released.

Kent slips inside mostly unnoticed, though his attire gets some amount of scrutiny by passersby. He changes back into his pajamas in one of the bathrooms and then saunters back to his ward. Nothing to do but relax on his bed which is helped along by one of the magic brownies that Kurt brought him. Number one, he thinks to himself.

Kent remains at the hospital in San Francisco for several more weeks, his foot continuing to heal. Kurt returns, this time without Diana. Kent thinks maybe he was flirting with her too much, but Kurt tells him she had to fly somewhere for her job. Dean, Paul, and Barry also come back for several visits. Somehow they manage to sneak him out of the hospital undetected every time. It is a grand time back in the Real World, going out to restaurants and bars and generally just partying with his big bro and his buddies.

Any day that Kent is left on his own, he takes Anibal outside for some fresh air. Since Kent expects to be leaving the hospital soon, he makes arrangements to connect up with Anibal once he's released as well.

The day before Kent's convalescent leave begins, his doctor and a nurse stop by his bed to give him a final checkup. Kent has just taken the magic brownies out of his nightstand and is eating one. The nurse says the brownies look delicious, and Kent assures her they are, even if they were made by his brother. He still has over half the pan left, so he offers one to his doctor and the nurse. He fails to mention that they are magic brownies, and he has to stifle his laugh as they get visibly high soon after eating them.

The pot Kurt used for the magic brownies was sent to him by Kent when he was still in the Nam. It was the best pot Kent had ever smoked there. Being a Dewmaster, Kent has a high tolerance for strong pot, but the doctor and nurse must not be pot users. It quite amusing for Kent to watch them fumble around trying to remember what they were doing or supposed to be

doing.

They have gotten so high, Kent's amusement turns to worry. After the situation in Japan and having to deal with armed guards for smoking a tee tee bit of pot, he can just imagine what they might do to him now that he's stateside, for knowingly drugging his doctor and nurse.

Kent's doctor and nurse never seem to figure out they are high. As they finish up with his checkup, they are all giggles as if they were on laughing gas. After they didi, they come back twice to check something forgotten.

Man, that was awesome pot, Kent thinks. Hope Kurt still has some of it left. Actually he hopes he has most of it left. He should, as Kurt doesn't smoke. Kent smiles.

The big day finally comes, and Kent is released from the hospital. His three friends come from Stockton to take him home, this time in a style befitting a Dewmaster returning from war. They pick Kent up in Moby Dick, Dean's 1950's GMC panel truck, which has kind of replaced the woodie station wagon as the vehicle of choice for California surfers.

They cruise. They smoke pot. They stop for liquid refreshment along the way, mostly beer, and they laugh. Kent thinks to himself, a better homecoming couldn't be had. Because they stop often for refreshments, they do not arrive in Stockton until late in the evening.

Since they have been together most of the day, Dean, Paul, and Barry decide to drop Kent off in front of his parents' house. Another reason they decide to didi mau is that they are all stinking drunk, and they know Kent's parents don't approve of hard drinking let alone pot smoking.

Kent is blasted, but his parents and sister are so glad to see him out of the hospital, nothing is said about his condition. Kent tries to be the good son, but all he wants to do is go to his old bedroom and check out the stereo he purchased in Japan.

Kurt unpacked and set the stereo up, so all Kent has to do is push the power button on the amplifier, and the system comes to life. Man, Kent thinks, the speakers are boo coo number one. But too loud this time of night. He quickly turns it down. Good thing I got the headphones too, he thinks.

He doesn't even undress. He just kicks off his moccasins, lays back on his bed with the headphones on, and it's the last thing he remembers until his mother wakes him with a kiss to his forehead as she is leaving for work the next morning.

She laughs and says, "Is that the way you slept all night?"

"I was so tired that when I laid down, I fell right to sleep. It felt so number one," replies Kent.

"Will you be here for dinner?"

"Yeah! Man, Mom I can't even remember the last time I had a home cooked meal. I will be right here. Count on it," says Kent.

"I'll see you when I get back, honey."

It is summer in Stockton, and Sandy is on vacation from school. She and her friends have been going in and out of the house all morning, so Kent thinks nothing of the sound of the front door opening and closing. That is, until he looks over at the doorway to his room, and there she is.

Kent had been wondering of late whether he has a girlfriend or not. He hadn't really hooked up with Kim until one week before he shipped out for the Nam. She had written him, boo coo more than he wrote her while in the Nam. But during training and the time in the Nam, guys are always cautioned and teased that the mythical Jody is back home dating your girlfriend or wife, so there is always doubt.

When Kent sees the look in Kim's eyes there is no doubt. She is his girlfriend. That is number one. Boo coo number one to be exact.

Chapter 7

The hospital here in Valley Forge has a large building in front that looks like it was recently built. But attached to that is a long straight section with the different wards coming off at 90 degree angles. The hallway that most of the wards radiate from looks to be at least a city block long or longer. When I step from my ward and look in either direction, the floor of the hallway undulates like a roller coaster.

At first I thought it had been built during the First World War. During training at Ft. Knox, I was acquainted with WWII-era barracks on several occasions, and I think it's older than that. But now that I've had a chance to scrutinize the ward section of the hospital, I have concluded it must have been built during and for the Civil War. We must be stretching our war-making abilities to the extreme if they have to employ Civil War-era hospitals. That thought hardly fills me with confidence that the doctors here will fix my eye.

I am assigned to the EENT ward. That's Ear, Eye, Nose, and Throat, if you didn't know. Again, I am the least severely injured guy on my ward. I like that. The problem is that I am treated like some kind of slacker or faker taking up a valuable bed.

My sleeping arrangements are the same as my previous hospitals. I'm used to sleeping upright now, but my new doctor cautions me that when my eye clears, I won't be able to just start sleeping flat again. I will have to slowly lower the head of the bed over a few months. It sounds a tee tee bit extreme, but I would sleep standing on my head if that's what it took.

If I am the least injured guy here, then the guy across the aisle from me is the luckiest person here with a Million Dollar Wound. Matt, an infantry LT, has to sleep on his stomach. Worse yet, he has to stay laying on his stomach at all times. I know it's not sounding much like a Million Dollar Wound yet. However, Matt should be paralyzed or worse: dead. Matt was laying on his stomach during a firefight. There was absolutely nothing to hide behind, and he was shot with an AK-47 right between the eyes. The only visible evidence of his facial wound is what looks like a big round freckle on the bridge of his nose. The bullet traveled through his sinus cavity and exited at the back of his neck, miraculously missing his spine. He has a stitched up exit wound on the

back of his neck, and that's the only other visible sign of his injury.

The bullet missed his spine on the way out, but it still messed things up in there. His sinuses, for one. Matt has a near-continuous runny nose. Boo coo inconvenient when you spend all your time laying face down. The bullet also damaged the muscles and other important things in his neck, and that's the main reason he has to lay face down. The doctors want things to heal before Matt starts moving his head again. Million Dollar Wound if there ever was one. Fucking Million Dollar Wound to be exact.

Next to my bed is Walter. In my head I call him Walleye, and I have to be careful, or I'll say it out loud. Like me, Walter had some metal fragments in both of his eyes and had surgery to remove the fragments. The operation kind of messes up your eyes muscles for a while, so Walter's eyes just seem to have a life of their own. They move all around, but nowhere near in sync with each other. It's hard to look him in the face without getting dizzy. It's definitely no fun for Walter, because he can't read or watch TV. And it's boo coo difficult for him to walk around with his eyes moving all over the place.

So Walleye, I mean Walter, mostly sits on his bed listening to his record player. He has only one album, *Bridge Over Troubled Water* by Simon and Garfunkel. As soon as one side finishes, he flips the album over and plays the other side. This goes on all day. If I never hear a song from that album again, it will be too soon. Xin loi, Simon and Garfunkel.

The person I really feel sorry for in this mess is Matt. I can and do leave my ward at times just to get away from Walleye's record player. Matt can't leave and so must listen to the same record over and over again. What irony it would be for Matt to die of sound torture after surviving a miracle wound.

My new eye doctor is not exactly a warm and comforting type. He, like all of my past doctors, wants to dilate my eyes and have a look-see inside with his extremely bright light. I'm sure it's all very interesting to them, but to me it is excruciatingly painful. Because they typically dilate my eyes in the morning, I can't see anything until evening. On those days, I am stuck listening to Walleye's record player.

After a couple of days of observing my eyes, my doctor decides to remove the larger metal fragments still left in both corneas.

"There are so many fragments and particles in there still. I won't be able to get them all, but I'll get most of the big pieces out," he says.

Such a comforting thought before he even begins. I know what to expect, because they have already done this to me twice. It's boo coo painful

afterward. He numbs both of my eyes before he starts and has me lay flat on my back. He shines a bright light into my eyes while he alternately scrapes my eye lens and sticks needles into my corneas. It actually doesn't hurt during the procedure. It's afterward, when the anesthetic wears off. But during the procedure, I can feel him tugging on my eyeball at times. While that is quite unpleasant, it's when he scrapes that is the worst. It sounds like someone is scaling a fish.

It make me want to barf. Well, I don't *want* to barf, but if he doesn't stop, I'm going to. When I tell him this, he stops for a while and paces around his office.

As he paces, he mutters to himself, "I've done this to little girls, and they didn't throw up."

At least, I assume he was talking to himself, because if he was talking to me, I would have said, "Let me stick that needle in *your* eye, and we'll see who has to barf!"

After an hour of poking and scraping both my eyes, he is satisfied with his efforts. Even if I was apparently being a baby about the situation.

He says, "I was able to remove all of the larger fragments from your corneas, but there are still a lot of metal particles left. They will just have to remain there. We risk doing more damage to your eyes than it would be worth."

Always such comforting information from this guy.

When my eye doctor is finished torturing me, I am left to find my way back to my ward. The lights in the hallway are blinding, and all I can do is try to shield my eyes from the light and look down. Even looking down is painful as the floors here are buffed to a high gloss that reflects the ceiling lights right into my eyes.

A few missed turns later, and I am back in my ward. It's just before lunch, and thankfully Walter turns off his record player when he didis for lunch. I'm not hungry after my ordeal this morning, which is good since I doubt I can find the mess hall. My eyes are still dilated. They really hurt now, and every time I blink it feels like I'm rubbing sandpaper on both my eyes.

The only thing I can do is try to sleep. I manage to fall asleep after a while only to be awaken by Walter's record player when he returns from lunch. Fuck! How does Matt stand this? He can't leave like I usually can when I get to the point where I want to grab Walleye's record player and throw it out the window.

The next day my eyes are still sore, but it's not as painful when I blink. When I return to my ward after breakfast, Walter already has his record player on, so I just turn around and walk back down the hall. I don't know where I'm going, but at least far enough away that I can't hear Simon and Garfunkel.

As I aimlessly walk the halls, I hear someone call out my name. It's Chuckie Throm, a friend from Basic training. I've been in the army over a year now, and Chuckie is only the second guy from Basic training that I have seen.

Like me, Chuckie is from Dearborn, Michigan, as were about half of our Basic training company. It seems the head of the local draft board in Dearborn, Margaret Garrison, felt it her American duty to draft as many eligible men as she could to feed the meat grinder that was the Vietnam War. It is said that Margaret even drafted her own two sons. Fair is fair, I guess.

Chuckie and I spend a few minutes catching up.

"See anyone else from Basic training here, Chuck?"

"Remember Zeke?" answers Chuckie.

"Yeah, I remember him. He was good friends with Jim Adams, and I've known Jim since the first grade. You haven't seen Jim, have you?"

"Nope, I haven't seen anyone but Zeke since I've been here," answers Chuckie. "Want to go see him?"

"Sure," I say.

Chuckie and I walk down the roller coaster hallway to one of the wards for head injuries.

We enter, and I see Zeke sitting in a wheelchair looking out the window. Chuckie and I walk over to him.

As we approach, Chuckie says, "He doesn't recognize anyone, not even his family."

When we reach Zeke's side, the reason for his lack of recognizing friends and relatives becomes apparent. Half of Zeke's skull is caved in part way. Next to that is a metal plate with some skin pulled part way over it. He is messed up, and Chuckie is right in that he doesn't recognize us. Worse really, is that I don't even think he knows we're here. He just keeps looking out the window, slightly nodding his head once in a while.

We stay and chat, trying to include Zeke in our conversation, but he doesn't acknowledge our presence. We finally leave and decide to head to

lunch together. The food here in Valley Forge is quite number one. Nowhere close to the mess hall in Japan, but still the best food the army has had anything to do with.

After lunch, Chuckie has to see his doctor, so I sky back to my ward. My luck continues as Walter is nowhere to be seen. I try to make a joke about Walter's absence to Matt, but he's asleep, and I don't want to wake him. Probably fell asleep as soon as Walter turned off his record player.

Late in June, my right eye starts to clear near the top of my eye. I can't really look out of it for long, because underneath the part where I can now see are the swirls of red that make me nauseous. It is a tee tee bit comforting to think that I really might see out of my right eye again. Million Dollar Wound.

My doctor is still contemplating some surgery on my right eye, similar to whatever they did to Walter. Now that I am starting to see again, I am totally against anything that involves operating on my eye, and I tell my doctor so.

He says, "Well soldier, you and your eye are army property. We decide what's best, not you."

"There's just a tee tee problem with your plan, doc," I reply. "When the gurney rolls into the operating room, I won't be on it. I'll go AWOL before I let you do that."

My doctor never really liked me, and I can tell by his expression that I haven't improved his opinion. I'm quite used to it, so I hardly care. But he surprises me with his next statement.

"If you promise to continue sleeping upright, I'll send you home for a 30 day convalescent leave, plus your regular 30 day leave. When you return, we'll talk again about eye surgery," he finishes.

I assure him I'll stick with my sleep regimen, and he says he'll take care of the leave paperwork. He also tells me where to go in the hospital to get fitted for a dress uniform and also where someone will help me figure out the best way to get me home.

Everything falls quickly into place, and the next day, decked out in my new dress greens, I take a cab to the train station in Valley Forge. All I really know about Valley Forge is that it's where George Washington and his troops wintered over during the Revolutionary War. It's a sleepy looking burg as I pass through on my way to the train station.

I was able to call one of my best friends from the hospital the night before,

and he promised to pick me up at the airport in Detroit. Just as I arrive at the train station, the waiting train pulls out of the station. Not my lucky day so far. I buy a ticket for the next train to Philadelphia. It's only an hour until the next train, so I wait. Something I am quite expert at.

The train ride to Philadelphia takes less than an hour, and then it's another cab ride to the airport. I'm not excited about the prospect of walking around in a public place in my dress greens. The war is not very popular here back home and many people feel it's their patriotic duty to sneer at soldiers in uniform and call them baby killers right to their face.

I decide to fly military standby, which is the cheapest way to fly. It's also a dicey way to fly, because you don't know until the last minute whether you'll board your intended flight. I buy my ticket and call my friends and tell them of my possible arrival time. I tell them if I get bumped from my flight, I'll call them back with a new arrival time.

Not only do I not get bumped, I get seated in First Class. The stewardess asks me if I'd like something to drink.

"Whaddaya got?" I ask.

"What would you like?" she asks me.

"I would love an ice cold beer. Ya got one?”

"I have several. What kind would you like?"

This is going to be hard. The last beer I had was an ice cold Tiger beer in the Nam. It was the best beer I have ever had in my short life, so I doubt the beers available here can top that

one.

So I say to the stewardess, "Surprise me. Any cold beer will do."

She brings me my beer and, and as she starts to pour it into a glass, I stop her.

"I like to drink it from the bottle."

She smiles and says, "There you go, soldier. It's on the house."

I smile back and thank her. My first beer back in the Real World, and it's free.

We're not on the ground long after I board, and soon we are airborne and on our way to Detroit. So far so good. So far so fucking good to be exact.

Chapter 8

Summer in Stockton is usually hot and sultry. It can also get dusty, since it's in the middle of the San Joaquin Valley with boo coo farming going on. If it's dry when the farmers plow the fields, the dust in the air can almost block out the sun.

Kent could care less about the circumstances of the summer. It is not monsoon, and he is not only back in the Real World, he is back home. He has a beautiful girlfriend, and he is feeling number one.

While most everyone else is off to work early, Kent lounges in his bed listening to his stereo until late morning before arising for breakfast. He has a bacon sandwich, the bread toasted to perfection and certainly not burned the way Sandy likes it. Man, he thinks, I never even thought about bread before. I can't believe how much I missed it, let alone bacon. He smiles.

He hears the front door open. It could just be his sister or one of her friends, but Kent is hoping it's Kim. While it's been quite a revelation to Kent how good-looking certain women in his life and circle of friends are, that does not include Kim. Kent has always been more than aware of how attractive she is.

At first he couldn't figure what she saw in him. He still can't. Although he was in a working band before, he was a skinny wimp with barely any prospects of a decent livelihood. Especially after he joined the army. Because of that, we can also add that he's a skinny wimp *and* a dumb shit. Fucking dumb shit to be exact.

Fortunately, Kent has had his thinking corrected by his tee tee stay in the Nam. Boo coo corrected actually. As he is eating his bacon sandwich and looking out the window, he feels someone come up and hug him from behind. It's Kim, and Kent turns to hug and kiss her back. Especially to kiss her. Man, he thinks, I missed kissing even more than bread.

He needs to figure out what he's going to do with his life, but he still has another year in the army at Ft. Lewis. Why does it have to be there? Kent did his Basic training at Ft. Lewis and hated it. It rains every day. Well, almost every day. So often it might as well be every day. Now, after enduring monsoon from beginning to end in the Nam, Kent loathes rain. Just two years

ago he was quite ambivalent about the hot and sometimes dry and dusty weather here in Stockton. Now he loves the hot and dry days.

The hot days are very conducive to cruising over to his friend Brett's house to drink some ice cold beer. Guess figuring out what to do with his life will have to wait for a while. Probably at least until he gets out of the army. He may have joined the first time, but he is not going to re-up. He knows the army will try to get him to re-up by offering him a ridiculously high amount of money called an incentive bonus. Problem is, to get the bonus you have to go back to the Nam. Ain't gonna happen, Kent thinks to himself. No way. No fucking way to be exact.

One thing that Kent needs to correct now is his lack of wheels. He needs a car to cruise around in with Kim. Sandy has a car, but she is not too keen on the idea of letting him borrow it. Kent lives a tee tee bit of wild lifestyle as far as Sandy is concerned. While she loves her brother, she also knows him all too well. Kent will have to get his own car.

After his ride in Barry's VW, Kent thinks it would be a sensible car. Maybe it would even prove to Sandy that he's getting his act together.

Kent has a few grand in the bank from all his back pay, so he gets Dean to give him a ride to the nearest VW dealer. The *only* VW dealer in the Stockton area to be exact. As soon as Dean pulls Moby Dick into the parking lot of the dealership, Kent sees it.

Sitting off by itself on the corner of the lot is a new, sunshine yellow VW Beetle. It's the nicest looking car on the lot, and that's why they are showing it off. And it worked, because Kent walks into the dealership and asks, “How much for the yellow Beetle?”

He and Dean sky home, and Kent gets his dad to take him to the bank to withdraw enough cash for his new VW. He plunks down the cash at the dealership, and in no time at all he is cruising down the road in the new Beetle. Except for Kim, it is now the love of his life. It's Kent's first brand new car. The new car smell is as intoxicating as the pot in the Nam. Well, almost as intoxicating.

Kent doesn't even have to think where he is going first in his new VW. He heads straight to Kim's house, and she loves the car almost as much as he does. Almost. So they cruise.

Besides the standard AM radio most cars have, Kent's car also has an FM radio. For anyone interested in music, the FM radio stations play the latest and best music. For someone like Kent, his time in the Nam was a period of

musical stagnation. The only music available in the Nam was on the Ground Forces radio station, where they only played about ten songs over and over again.

AM radio isn't much better, in Kent's opinion. You spend most of your time listening to commercials and music you don't like or even hate, just to hear one or two songs you do like.

The Lovin' Spoonful's new song is playing on the radio. It's “Did You Ever Have to Make Up Your Mind?” and Kent thinks it is quite appropriate. He still has to figure out what he's going to do with his life, but there's one thing he has made his mind up on: Kim is the one for him. As Kent drives, he glances over at her. She is such a wonderful person, he doesn't know what she sees in him.

The first place stop is McDonald's for a burger and a shake. And they'll have to get some fries, too. Man, Kent thinks, the fries as so number one, how had he forgotten? As soon as they step inside, the aromas give his nose a workout.

They decide to eat inside rather than in the car. Well, Kent decides they should eat inside. He loves that car already, and if someone spills ketchup – or worse, mustard – in it, he would die. If someone were to bump into it and cause some damage, *they* would have to die. Maybe his thinking isn't completely corrected, he realizes.

Another year in the army is not going to help, that's for sure. He doesn't know what he's even going to be able to do there. Kent's second toe is out of place and kind of on top of his foot. When he left the army hospital, they gave him a sheet of paper referred to as a medical profile. It gives Kent official permission to wear soft-topped shoes in lieu of the standard combat boots. Since the army has no official soft-topped shoes, Kent is on his own to provide his own footwear. So he wears moccasins. The army is going to hate that.

Then there's the part of his medical profile that says Kent can't be required to stand or walk for long periods of time. Standing is just about the main occupation of the army 99% of the time. Can't pull guard duty or KP. They should just let me stay home, he thinks. But of course this is the army, so that won't happen. They're gonna hate me at Ft. Lewis, Kent thinks to himself.

Goose, of the Delta Dewmasters, lives in California as well. Kent contacts him, and they decide to meet in the town of Stateline, which straddles the

border between Nevada and California. Hence the name, Stateline.

They sky to one of the casinos for some partying in true Dewmaster fashion, though they have to substitute beer for pot. Nonetheless, they have a boo coo good time. The only exception being when Goose gets a tee tee bit drunk and starts blubbering about how it's his fault that Kent got wounded.

Kent calms him down.

"Goose, you weren't even there, man. It was that dumb shit Shake 'n Bake's fault that everyone got hurt. Not just me," Kent says. "No one blames you but yourself. If anything, we all think you were the one responsible for keeping us out of trouble. Look what happened the first patrol we went on without you, man. Be cool."

They end their reunion promising to get together again once Kent is out of the army.

Kent is home in Stockton from late July until the end of August when he has to didi for his last year in the army at Ft. Lewis. He has cemented his relationship with Kim, and leaving her is the hardest thing he has ever done. Harder even than going to the Nam in the first place. Well maybe.

As he packs up his VW, he knows he can't take his stereo along, even if it would fit in the car. He loves that stereo, and it's the only good thing he got for his tour in Nam. But it should be safe at his parents house. It occurs to him that it's kind of funny in that the stereo is really the only change that's been made to his and Kurt's bedroom since they both left home. It still has the same plaid bedspreads and matching plaid curtains as when they were kids, and all the furniture is the same.

Before he leaves for Ft. Lewis, he stops by his brother's apartment. He sent Kurt over two pounds of pot from the Nam. By Kent's calculations, two pounds should be just enough pot to get him through a year at Ft Lewis. Just enough but barely. It is some of the best pot he ever scored in the Nam, so he is hopeful it will last.

Kent is surprised by the lavish furnishings at Kurt's apartment when he arrives. He's happy that his brother's circumstances look so promising. Happy, that is, until he finds out that brother Kurt has sold not some, but all of the pot and used the proceeds to furnish his digs.

Well, he didn't sell *all* the pot, Kurt explains. He used some of it to make the magic brownies he brought to the hospital.

"Kurt! Big fuckin' deal! You bring me a pan of brownies after I sent you two fucking pounds of pot, and we're supposed to be even?" says Kent.

"Well, I didn't know you wanted some of it."

"Some of it? Kurt, I wanted all, or most of it. I sent it to you, because I know you don't smoke! I thought I could trust you but obviously not!"

Kurt feels it was just a misunderstanding and doesn't even offer to square up with Kent. Xin loi, Kent.

Kent had planned to hang out at Kurt's for a while, but he is too upset by the revelation that he will have to do another year in the army without his pot from the Nam.

Going to Ft. Lewis for a year was already weighing heavy on Kent's mind. As he drives north out of the San Joaquin Valley, he is feeling low. For most of his leave, he felt he had been given a new lease on life. Now he is not so sure. No Kim, no pot, and another year in the army. Another fucking year in the army to be exact!

It takes about two full hours of driving before Kent starts to unwind some and let go of his anger and disappointment. His new car with its FM radio does boo coo to help. The Underground radio stations play so much music that Kent likes, he finds himself humming and singing along after a while. He loves that.

Kent is coming to realize that music is his life. Maybe I will be a musician when I get out of the army, he thinks. It's a tough life, he knows. It can seem glamorous to people looking at it from the outside, but it's a hardscrabble living for most working musicians. Really it's the non-working part that makes it difficult. Making enough money when you *are* working to carry you over to your next paid gig is the hardest part. Because of this, he is skeptical of the music business. There's so much more to making it than just being a good or even great musician.

It's a long drive to Ft. Lewis. So long that Kent decides to stay at a motel for the night when he reaches Portland, Oregon. He is feeling tee tee better now, though having two pounds of pot with him would have made him feel boo coo better.

Since he is by himself, he doesn't dally long in Portland. He has breakfast at a truck stop restaurant. Two eggs over easy, hash browns, bacon, and toast. Man, I missed bacon and bread, he thinks.

When he orders, he makes sure to tell the waitress, "And don't let them burn my toast. I hate that."

With a hearty breakfast under his belt, Kent is once again skying north on Interstate 5. The countryside in both Oregon and Washington are boo coo

shades of green in the late summer. It reminds Kent of some of the lush areas of the Nam. He still kind of hates that. Hot and dry is all he craves now.

The second leg of his journey is shorter than the first, which is a good thing because there's hardly any place interesting between Portland and Ft. Lewis.

Another year – another fucking year to be exact – of the army's bullshit, he thinks as he waits in the line of cars trying to enter Ft. Lewis. Because he doesn't yet have an entry pass sticker on his car, he has to deal with the MP at the gate.

Even though Kent has his paperwork assigning him to Ft. Lewis, he still has to just about argue his way on to post. He hates that. Do they think I want to be here so badly I would try to sneak in? What morons these MPs are, Kent thinks. What fucking morons to be exact.

Chapter 9

I have not had an actual vacation since I started working when I was sixteen. I've just turned 21, so that makes it five years. Having 60 days off is almost more than I can comprehend. Man, that sounds good. Sixty days. There is a downside though. After the 60 days, I still have a year left to do in the army. Fortunately, the year will not be spent in the Nam. Where it will be spent, I don't know. I am still technically assigned to the hospital in Valley Forge. At least that's where I have to go when my leave ends. I hate that.

The flight from Philadelphia to Detroit is uneventful. Just the way I like things now. I could easily get use to flying First Class, but this is only my fourth time flying in a commercial airplane, so I don't have much flying experience to compare it to. I've actually flown more times in choppers than anything else. And choppers don't have First Class, in case you didn't know.

I really hate having to wear my uniform in public. Things went well in Philadelphia, but I still have to make it through the Detroit Metro airport. I'm hoping my friends are there to pick me up and maybe run some interference should some patriot decide to try to correct my thinking on war. My thinking has already been corrected, so they would be wasting their time and mine.

When I get off the plane in Detroit, I recognize my motley crew of friends waiting for me. They all have shoulder-length hair, and all the guys have beards. Lucky fuckers, I think. None of my friends have been in the military, let alone having gone to the Nam.

I'm sure we make for an unusual looking group: five hippies and me in my dress greens. Among the group waiting for me are the Two Jerrys, Steve, Annette, and Colleen. Annette is the sister of one Jerry, and Colleen is the girlfriend of the other. When I left home for the army, Annette was in the 11th grade. She wrote to me when I was in the Nam. She has now just graduated from high school. Man, I think, how come I never noticed how attractive she is? I might have to keep my eye on her for a while. Jerry won't like that, though. Xin loi, Jerry!

Things go well at the airport. My friends are looking closely at my face, trying to see where I was wounded. I have to disappoint them all by telling them I have some metal fragments in my eyes, and that's it. After the horrifying telegram my parents got from the army when I was wounded, all

my friends expected half my head to be missing. Some of them seem disappointed. Xin loi, guys.

Walking through the terminal surrounded by my laughing and talking friends, I suffer no insults from any patriots. Today. I can't wait to get some place where I can take this ridiculous uniform off.

I am back in the Real World. Well, I've been in the Real World for a while now, but it wasn't the Real World I had been dreaming about while in the Nam. But this... this is the Real World I was hoping was still here. And so far it is.

We cruise to the same house we rented together before I was drafted. One of our friends has taken my old room, but there's an empty room in the attic. It's not really a room, but it has a window and a door, so we refer to it as a room. Compared to my tent in the Nam, this is the Hilton. The fucking Hilton to be exact.

It's like a party going on all the time with the number of people who live here and all the friends who come over to visit. Visit and smoke pot. And drink, particularly ice cold beer. Let's not forget that. I turned 21 in the Nam, so I've never legally had a beer with my friends. Although we are drinking legally, the pot smoking is not. That's a tee tee bit hard for me to get straight in my head. Pot was such a non-issue in the Nam, but drinking alcoholic beverages wasn't allowed in the field. Weird.

The next morning, I'm up early. I make some coffee and sit on the porch watching people drive down Second Street going to work. I don't miss that.

Man, this coffee is number one. I never drank coffee until I was in the army, and army coffee is swill, but we drink it anyway. The Real world coffee is ambrosia. I decide to have a second cup as I walk around the neighborhood.

It's a tough neighborhood in Detroit, but after being in the Nam it seems like a park to me. I feel number one, but it would be number ten for anyone trying to mess with me. Yeah, I realize, my thinking has not been completely corrected. I'll have to work on that.

I had a car when left for the army, which I entrusted to one of the Jerrys. Only I don't see it in the garage. This is not good, I think. And it's not. When Jerry gets up and I ask about the car, he gets a sad look on his face.

"I was backing it out of the garage one day and the garage door started to close on me. It broke out the rear window," says Jerry.

"And so then what happened?"

"The alley was blocked by parked cars one night, so I couldn't put it in the garage. So I parked it on the street. The next morning it was gone. Musta got stolen."

Guess I'll need to get some new wheels.

"So did you get the stuff I sent you in my letters?" I ask.

"Oh yeah, man," he says with a boo coo big smile. "We got it."

"Is there any left?" I ask.

"Well, no. We thought you were going to be brain dead and wouldn't need it from what the army telegram said."

"So what did it say, exactly?" I ask Jerry.

"It said you had been shot in the head and eyes, and that another telegram would follow as to the extent of the brain damage," he replies. "But your parents never got another telegram."

"Fuck!" I yell. The army can never get anything right.

Good thing I got some back pay and advance pay for my two months leave. It's not a lot, but enough to buy a used car. Maybe one good enough to drive it to my next assignment. Maybe.

Later that afternoon, my younger sister, Karen, comes to see me. We haven't seen each other since I've been in the army. We have a nice time catching up, plus she has a car she borrowed from her boyfriend. We decide to cruise down Woodward so I can look at used cars.

My sister has a good laugh when she sees the car I'm interested in buying. Before I was drafted, I was a muscle car guy. Nothing but a big V8 engine and a four on the floor transmission for me. Although the car I want has a four speed transmission, it only has four cylinders in the engine. I'm going to buy a VW Microbus. Karen is surprised at my choice, but she says she thinks it's very cool.

The Microbus is currently *the* hippie vehicle. My sister and all my friends consider themselves hippies. I consider myself one, too, but with my army haircut, I hardly look like one.

We have to go back to the house on Second to get the cash for the VW. Later that day we return to the car dealer, and I pick up my new wheels. It's a 1964 Microbus.

I've been driving tanks in the army for the past year, and because of this, the Microbus – which might be only running on 3 of its 4 cylinders – seems like a rocket to me. It's quite slow to get going and won't go faster than 65

mph, but it's boo coo fast enough for me.

It has the split-style windshield, consisting of two flat pieces of glass. So simple, I think.

It's simple, alright. On the drive back home I find out why VW has changed from the split window. The newer style windshield is one piece and slightly curved. The reason for the curvature is to make it more resistant to impact damage.

I haven't driven two blocks from the car lot when a truck shoots a stone into my windshield on the passenger side. It totally shatters. Because it's safety glass, it doesn't come apart or fall out, it just has a couple hundred cracks in it. So many cracks I can't even see out of it. My Microbus already has the look of an inner city vehicle. I hate that!

Back at the house on Second, my friends check out my new ride.

"Couldn't you find one without a broken windshield?" asks one of the Two Jerrys.

"Hey, fuck you! It got broken on the drive here," I reply. "It's not even insured yet, so I'm gonna have to pay for that myself."

I am pissed, to say the least. Nonetheless, everyone piles in while it's parked in front of the house. We pass a pipe around to christen the Microbus in true hippie fashion. I'm back in the Real World, I think, and the windshield snafu hardly bothers me at all now.

The next day is Friday, and first thing in the morning I'm off in my Microbus to a windshield repair shop. At the shop, they laugh about my story of my windshield getting broken less than two blocks from the car lot. I laugh along with them until the shop owner tells me that twice he has been called by customers who didn't even make it home before their newly replaced windshield was broken again.

"They complained and wanted to come back and have me fix it for free," the shop owner says. "I told them to take their complaints to VW. Why do you think they changed the style of windshield?"

Crap, I think. I have them fix it anyway. There's really nothing else I can do. I decide to give all vehicles, especially trucks, wide berth on the road.

There's a party almost every night at the house on Second, but Friday's party is the big one, as most of my friends work or go to school Monday through Friday. Several friends I haven't seen since my return are there.

Colleen's friend Nancy stops by. I remember Nancy from before being

drafted, but what I didn't remember was how good-looking she is.

Both Colleen and Nancy have long blond hair and fabulous summer tans. They both – like most young women who consider themselves hippies – have given up wearing bras in favor of tight-fitting t-shirts. It's a fashion style I completely endorse.

It is a tee tee bit distracting with all the nipples poking out everywhere, but I decide I can get used to it. Way better than a sharp stick in the eye, I think. And it doesn't hurt my injured eye at all to glance at them now and then.

While Colleen is technically spoken for, Nancy has just broken up with her latest boyfriend. This could be number one. What's number ten is I'm still in the army, and in less than two months I'll be gone for almost another year. Not exactly what women are looking for in a boyfriend.

Nonetheless, I have a boo coo good time chatting with Nancy during the party. Some of our neighbors are at the party. Harry, from next door, is in attendance. We were good friends before I left for the army, and he comes over to talk with me and Nancy.

However, I quickly realize Harry didn't come over to chat with me. He also has heard that Nancy is without a boyfriend, and he wants to correct that problem for her. The next thing I know, Harry has invited Nancy over to his place, and they didi. I am crestfallen but not surprised. The war in the Nam is boo coo unpopular back in the Real World, and soldiers get zero respect. I never had a chance with Nancy, I realize.

In the coming days Nancy spends the night at Harry's house often, so I still get to see her, and we're still friends. And Colleen is a childhood friend of Nancy's, so she likes to tease and play pranks on her.

One night we are up late partying on the front porch. Both Harry and Nancy have to work in the morning and have already gone to bed. Nancy's car is parked right in front of the house, so Colleen decides to play a prank on her by painting it with poster paint. She enlists me to help. It's the high school graduation party season, so we paint Nancy's car up to look as if she has just graduated from high school. A job well done, we think, as we stand back to admire our handiwork.

Now I know Nancy, but I don't know her *that* well. If I did, I would never have gotten involved in the prank.

Nancy, it turns out, loves her car. When she sees it first thing in the early morning light, she thinks her car has been vandalized and is incredibly upset.

Even after she finally realizes it's just poster paint, she is still livid. Plus she has to drive it to work like that and get teased by all her coworkers. She hates that.

When Colleen, who *does* know Nancy very well, realizes how mad Nancy is, she blames it all on me. No mention of the fact that it was her idea, and that she had done most of it. The next morning when I go to have my morning cup of coffee on the porch, I don't see my Microbus. It's bright red and hard to miss. Someone must have stolen it.

It turns out that the reason I don't see my bus is because Nancy, with Colleen's help, has completely covered my Microbus in black poster paint. The window glass, the whitewall tires, and even the hubcaps. Maybe it is number one that Nancy is Harry's girlfriend after all. Xin loi, Harry.

There's no outside faucet at the house, and even if there were, there is no hose. I have no way to wash it. So I leave my Microbus painted black.

After work, Nancy is over at Harry's house. I see her go inside, but she comes back outside after a minute or two. I see her put her hand on my Microbus as she walks by, and she smiles at me. Man, I think, Harry really is boo coo lucky as Nancy is so very attractive.

Colleen, Jerry, and I are sitting on our porch, and Nancy walks over. I have on a brand new white t-shirt. Nancy comes directly over to where I'm sitting and puts her hand on me while she smiles at me again. Man, is she ever good-looking, I think again. And those eyes. She is looking into my eyes ever so sweetly that I don't realize what she is up to. When she went into Harry's house, she purposely got her hand wet. Then she touched my Microbus as she walked by it so she could coat the palm of her hand with black poster paint. She puts a perfect black hand print on my new t-shirt and says, "Now we're even."

Yeah, it is number one that Nancy is Harry's girlfriend.

The Two Jerrys are planning a road trip. One of the Jerrys sold his hippie van and bought an old school bus. They plan to convert it into a sort of camper with a kitchen and bedrooms. Well, one bedroom with bunk beds. Not a lot of privacy, but hippies are known for their lack of modesty when it comes to being naked. Another tee tee change in people's attitudes I'm finding very easy to accept since my return to the Real World. Especially when we're talking about naked women in particular.

So after tearing out most of the seats in the school bus, they are ready to

begin the task of turning it into a camper. They plan to circumnavigate the continental United States. Once they finish converting the bus, their plan is to drive to southern Florida, the Keys specifically, and spend the coming winter there. Then they will cross the southern states to California and then up the west coast to Washington. From there, they will drive across the northern states back to Michigan.

I am so jealous. It sounds like the dream trip to me after spending the last year in the army. I would do almost anything to go with them, short of deserting. I hate the army, but the army hates deserters even more. Should you be caught while AWOL, the army has some special punishment in store for you. Plus all your time AWOL and all your time in the army slammer serving out your punishment is considered Bad Time. Meaning it doesn't count against any of the time you owe the army. Xin loi.

Since Jerry has sold his van, and since I have nothing to do, I am enlisted to help with the school bus conversion. Specifically, driving the Two Jerrys around to collect the things they need to install on the bus for their trip. We have fun cruising around to supply stores and salvage yards. One cool find is a side window from a fighter jet that they plan to use for the missing window next to the driver's seat on the bus.

Several days of driving around for equipment and supplies and then a couple days of installing things is followed by driving around again looking for a refrigerator and stove. The stove will be easy to find. It's the refrigerator that's becoming the difficult part. Gas refrigerators used to be very common in the 1950's – my parents even had one – but now they are rare.

We have driven to several used appliance stores looking for a gas refrigerator with no luck. Our luck gets even worse, or I should say *my* luck gets worse. On one of our salvage-hunting trips, the engine in my Microbus just quits and won't restart. Worse than won't start, it won't even turn over. It appears to either have seized up, or it is completely blown.

I have my VW towed to the house, and we push it into the garage. Our hands are all black. Even though I have washed it several times now since Nancy painted it, she was so thorough there is residual paint in all the nooks and crannies.

I'm really good friends with one of the Jerrys' parents, who live in Dearborn. They have invited me to come stay with them and visit while I'm on leave. Since I find myself again without wheels, I decide to go with Jerry

to his parents' house for dinner.

Annette is there and again I wonder why I never noticed how attractive she is. Maybe because I always sort of thought of her like a sister. I might have to re-think that.

After dinner, Jerry didis back to the Second Street house, but I decide to stay over at Bob and Jean's for a few days at least. I grew up in Dearborn and still have friends here. One friend, Steve, lives right across the alley, and so Annette and I go over for a short visit. Steve is home, which is a surprise, and so is one of his sisters and his mom, Hazel. Hazel and her daughter, Margie, both give me a big hug and a kiss. Steve was with the group that picked me up at the airport, so we just punch one another, but not too hard.

I am thrilled to see Hazel and Margie. They baked some cookies and sent them to me in the Nam. They tell me they never expected the cookies to really make it to me, so they are happy to hear my story about eating every tee tee crumb of the cookies and the popcorn they were packed in.

We sit around for a while in their backyard having a nice chat. Steve goes into the house and soon comes back out carrying two motorcycle helmets.

"C'mon," Steve says, "let's blow this pop stand."

Though I am having a wonderful chat with Hazel and Margie, Steve still lives at home with them, so he wants to didi mau. He gets his motorcycle out of the garage and then we are off. Where to, I have no idea, and I don't really care. I am back in the Real World and hanging out with one of my best friends.

Of course the Where turns out to be the Second Street house. It's party night almost every night, and since it's a warm summer evening, some of the party spills out onto the front porch. Considering it's late, there's a fair amount of traffic on the street.

When the Two Jerrys and I were first thinking about renting this house, we asked Jerry's dad, Bob, what the area was like, as he was familiar with most of Detroit.

"Nuthin' but blind pigs and whorehouses around there," he said.

At the time we thought, Wow, that's the kind of neighborhood for us! We, of course, were idiots.

It shouldn't have come as a surprise then, when several police cars and some paddy wagons show up and surround the house across the street. Shortly after the police enter, people are brought out in handcuffs and put into the waiting paddy wagons and taken away.

"What the heck is going on?" someone on the porch asks .

"Looks like the house across the street was a blind pig," I answer.

In reality, it is a surprise, because we've been in this house for over three years and never suspected anything like a blind pig was operating right across the street.

The police didi after a couple of hours, leaving the doors to the house wide open. At first we are hesitant to go have a look, thinking there might still be cops inside waiting for us to do just that. But after some thought, we think if that was their plan, they wouldn't have left the doors wide open. So several of us walk across the street to check it out.

We are in awe. While on the outside it looks like an ordinary inner city house, on the inside it looks like a fancy bar. It has upholstered booths with tables and chairs and an actual bar to belly up to. Furthermore, as we explore the premises, it becomes apparent that Bob's initial description of the neighborhood was quite correct. We find several bedrooms indicating the blind pig was a whorehouse as well.

Since the doors are wide open, we are concerned people might just come in and steal some of the items of furniture left behind after the police raid. To prevent that, we help ourselves to the booty, some of which finds a new home on the school bus. God helps those who help themselves, as the saying goes, I think.

As the days pass, it becomes evident that it was wise to remove the loose items from the blind pig. The police never return to secure the place, and just as we had expected, it is vandalized day and night until there is virtually nothing left.

It's very late that night before Steve and I head back to Dearborn. I guess I should say it is early when we finally didi mau. Early morning. I do make it back to Bob and Jean's house before they have to get up for work, so that is number one.

When I finally wake up, it is sometime after noon. Bob, Jean, and Annette have all left. I fix myself some breakfast. Man, I forgot how number one it is to have a regular kitchen and a refrigerator full of food. So it's eggs over easy, fried in butter, with toast and bacon. I still don't remember ever liking eggs before, but now I love them.

I barely finish my breakfast when my sister shows up. Good thing, too, since I am without wheels again. Karen has her boyfriend's car again. When I tell her about my Microbus, she offers to buy it from me.

"It's probably going to need the engine rebuilt or replaced," I tell her.

"That's OK," she says. "I love that thing. It is so cool."

"Alright, how about this," I say, "you get it fixed, and whatever it costs, you can take it off the $500 I paid for it. Deal?"

"Deal," she says.

Well, how about that, I think. My Microbus snafu just solved itself. Too cool.

Both Karen and myself had a falling out with our parents when we were in our teens. She has recently reconciled with them and wants me to go with her to their house. It's only a couple of blocks, so we could walk. But of course we don't.

As we drive over, I'm wondering how this will go. The last time I saw my parents was when I was sixteen. We were not getting along, so I was asked to leave. Well actually, they kicked me out. Certainly I was not blameless. As I think back, I was really quite an idiot the way I was acting. Driving my car around like a maniac. Never considering the danger I put myself in, let alone all the other innocent people I was endangering as well. A complete idiot to be exact.

As I reflect on my many past transgressions, I'm not expecting good things when we get to our parents' house. Fortunately I am completely wrong, and my mom and dad seem genuinely glad to see me. They don't even seem to be disappointed that half of my head isn't blown off like some of my friends were. We have a real good laugh about the error-filled telegram they got from the army after I was injured. While not much to laugh about when the telegram first arrived, now it just seems like a bad joke. My youngest brother, Ken, is there too. The only one missing is my other brother, Mark, who moved to California. Xin loi, Mark.

It is a great family reunion. No crying, but a boo coo amount of laughing and joking. I thank them all for the goodie boxes they sent me when I was in the Nam. I tell them several stories about how and when just about every item in the goodie box was consumed, right up to the last can of peanuts that I ate on my 21st birthday.

Karen has to take her boyfriend's car back, so after saying goodbye to my parents and promising to come back, she drops me off at Bob and Jean's house. They are home and just getting ready to go out for dinner at their favorite Mexican restaurant. It's my favorite Mexican restaurant as well. As a matter of fact, it's my favorite restaurant period, Mexican or otherwise. They

invite me to come along, and I can hardly refuse. Why would I?

It's been several years since I have been to the Mexican Fiesta restaurant, and they have expanded considerably. Not only is it boo coo bigger, they also serve beer now. Ice cold beer. What could possibly be better with great Mexican food than an ice cold beer? Bob and I both have one. Jean has a margarita, and Annette has to have a Shirley Temple as she is not yet 21. Xin loi, Annette.

Though she may not be 21 yet, Annette looks every bit an attractive woman. I can't believe I never noticed that before.

Was I gone that long, I wonder. How many lifetimes was it? Three, maybe four? It doesn't matter now. All that matters is that I made it out of the Nam alive, and now I'm back in the Real World. Not only back, but at my favorite restaurant with some great old friends and their rather attractive daughter. Yeah, let's not forget Annette, as if I could the way she's dressed tonight. Tonight and every night it seems.

After dinner we return to Bob and Jean's house. Annette didis to go on a date with her boyfriend. Boyfriend? Well, what did I expect? It's probably for the best anyway, as I really am more like a brother to her. Not to mention I might be ever-so-slightly messed up in the head from my tee tee stay in the Nam. Ever-so-slightly, I think.

I talk with Bob and Jean for a while, but I'm used to going to bed early and getting up early. Being up so late the previous night has me all out of whack, so I decide to go to bed and try to get back on a normal sleep schedule. I'm still sleeping in a bolt-upright sitting position. I'm quite used to it and could probably sleep in any easy chair offered. The beds I've been sleeping in don't crank up like the hospital beds do, so it's piles of pillows for me on both sides. Compared to my stretcher and sleeping bag in the Nam, I am in luxury and don't mind my stringent sleeping situation.

The next morning, I have breakfast with Bob and Jean before they didi for work. Well really they have breakfast while I drink coffee.

"I've never seen you drink coffee before," Jean says to me.

"I never did, but the army changed that," I say. "And army coffee is just horrid, but I drank it anyway. Now that there's good coffee to drink, I can't help myself. I could drink ten cups, easy."

Bob and Jean didi for work, and after a while Annette gets up. She looks like she partied a tee tee bit too hard last night. I take pity on her and make

breakfast for both of us as I have done many times before.

Annette loves my pancakes. Jean fries pancakes with the leftover bacon grease after frying the bacon. I, on the other hand, fry the pancakes in pure butter. They are number one, and we both eat our fill followed by many cups of coffee. Non-army coffee to be exact.

Not long after we finish our breakfast, we hear a loud motorcycle pull into the driveway. It is Annette's boyfriend. After we meet, I can see why Bob and Jean don't really approve of him. Not only is he a biker, he's at least ten years older than Annette.

I like motorcycles, so while Annette gets dressed, we go outside to look at his bike. It's a Harley Sportster. The bike of choice for most motorcycle club members, who would rather be dead rather than caught riding a rice burner. I'm still a fan of British motorcycles, but the Harley is OK, I think as I look it over.

Annette comes out, and since it's a hot summer day, she is wearing practically nothing. A tee tee halter top and some short shorts and sandals. Man, she is hot! I'm thinking her boyfriend is one lucky guy as I watch them ride off.

Just as I'm wondering what I'm going to do with myself – not that I have many choices since I again have no wheels – Karen shows up. She wants to go look at the Microbus. She's ridden in it, but now that it's hers, she wants to see it again.

On the ride to Second Street, I tell her about the blind pig across the street getting busted two nights ago. She's been to the house many times and is as surprised as all of us about what was going on directly across the street.

When we get to the house, we can see people from the neighborhood exiting the former blind pig, still carrying off items left behind. There's not much left, but they are stripping it bare, now taking things like the curtains and carpet. The carpet has got to be gross, but I guess if you live in a cardboard box, the carpet would be number one.

We push the VW out of the garage so Karen can inspect it more closely. It takes both of us to do it, and our hands are smeared with black poster paint residue. Karen gives me a questioning look, and I have to tell her about Nancy's prank.

Karen gets into the driver’s seat, careful not to touch anything. "Man, I love this thing. It's so cool," she says.

"Yeah, I like it too, but I'm not going to have time to deal with it now," I

say.

The Two Jerrys are working on the school bus, so we go sit inside the bus while they work on it. We offer them boo coo encouragement but not much else.

It's a hot summer day so eventually I volunteer to walk to the corner party store to buy some cold beer. I have bought beer there before but never legally. If there's a sign with the store's name on it, I've never noticed it. We just refer to it as "Jack the Ripper's" or "Ripper's" for short. The prices are so exorbitant, we only ever buy beer and wine.

The store owner remembers me from when I used to live down here. He calls me Mr. Boone's Farm, as I used to buy Boone's Farm Apple Wine from him. Of course he called all my housemates Mr. Boone's Farm, because with our long hair and beards, he apparently couldn't tell us apart.

"No wine today?" he asks me.

"Nah," I say. "Gave it up. It gave me a headache. Now I like cold beer on hot days like this."

He smiles. "Yeah, on days like this, I sell lots of beer."

"Well, I might be back for more, so don't sell it all," I joke.

"Don't worry, Mr. Boone's Farm, I will save some for you."

"Thanks," I reply and then I walk back to the school bus.

Two more friends have arrived at the school bus and everyone wants a cold beer. Good thing I bought two six-packs. I know I'll have to go get more later. As a matter of fact, I have to go back to the Ripper's two more times. It's hot out, and the cold beers are boo coo welcome.

Ronnie is another one of the guys that lives here at the Second Street house. He works at a pizzeria and brings home several pizzas. After working at a couple pizzerias myself, I gave up eating pizza. But it's been a while, and I'm surprised how much I like it again. Especially with several ice cold beers.

It hits me again: the Real World is still here, and I'm in it. I'm feeling number one.

It's not that late in the evening, but Karen wants to go over to her new boyfriend's house, especially since she has his car. Since she is heading to Dearborn, I get a ride with her back to Bob and Jean's house. On the ride there, we have the conversation we have both been avoiding.

"Have you seen *him* lately?" I ask.

"No. He was a jerk anyway," she answers.

"Yeah, whaddaya expect from a cake eater?"

"Have you seen *her*?" she asks me.

"Naw, but I don't really blame her," I answer. "The telegram from the army to mom and dad made it sound like I was really messed up bad. Blind in both eyes with brain damage. Who's gonna wait around for someone like that? I wouldn't."

The *him* and *her* we are referring to are Karen's ex-boyfriend and my ex-girlfriend. While I was in the Nam, Karen's boyfriend broke up with her so he could start dating my girlfriend.

"She'll be sorry. She'll find out he's a jerk just like I did. I don't even care anymore. I have a new boyfriend now," says Karen.

In the army, they constantly barrage us with stories of the mythical Jody who is back home dating your girlfriend. Even so, it's a shock when it is *your* girlfriend who has been stolen. I hate that.

We arrive at Bob and Jean's house, and Karen drops me off. I stand by the curb as she readies to sky.

"Call me tomorrow morning, and maybe we can do something together again like today," she says.

She smiles, and I think, Yeah, that jerky cake eater messed up by dumping her. Xin loi.

The next morning is another fabulous summer day in Michigan. Annette and I are having our standard breakfast now of pancakes and coffee when Karen calls. She wants to know if I want to go down to the Second Street house. Her boyfriend has to work, and she has his car again. She's supposed to meet a tow truck driver at the house so he can tow the Microbus to the repair shop.

"Sure, I'll go," I tell her. "Hey Annette, you want to go with me and Karen down to your brother's place?"

"Yeah," she says. "Well, wait. I have to call someone first after you get off the phone."

Gee, I wonder who that could be? Her boyfriend, of course. Who else?

"It's OK, Annette. You don't have to come. Or you could meet us there. With your him," I tease.

"You think you know everything," Annette snips back at me.

Man, she's crabby in the morning. Even after several cups of coffee. Maybe it is number one for me that she already has a boyfriend.

By the time Karen arrives at Bob and Jean's house, Annette has already

left with her boyfriend.

As she climbed on the back of her boyfriend's motorcycle, I said to her, "I guess I do know everything." And then I sort of smirked.

She gave me the look that, while perhaps not meant to kill, was at least meant to poke an eye out. Definitely number one that she has a boyfriend, and it's not me. Xin loi, Annette.

Karen and I drive down to the Second Street house. This 60-day leave of mine is going by so fast. Too fast. Why can't the time in the army blow by like this?

It's just the Two Jerrys working on their school bus when we get there late in the morning. It's hot but technically too early for beer. It is not technically too early to smoke some pot, so that's what we do. Definitely slows down the conversion process on the school bus, but it makes it more fun. Especially for me since all I'm doing is watching with an occasional helpful comment.

The reason I consider it *technically* too early to drink beer is because the army is a haven for alcoholics. There is no "technically too early" in the army. It's never too early, because they never stop drinking. They drink until they fall asleep or pass out, and when they wake up or come to, they immediately start to drink again. I don't intend to go down that road. I'm loath to admit I've learned anything worthwhile in the army, but sadly, I have.

The tow truck shows up, so Karen and I direct the driver to the garage where the Microbus is parked. We push it out into the alley while the tow truck backs in, and again we both get black paint on our hands. Man, that Nancy is thorough.

Karen didis to follow the tow truck to the shop so she can talk to the repairman about the work to be done.

I stay and hang out with the Two Jerrys. Now that it is well past noon, it's time to go down to Jack the Ripper's for some cold beers. I'm going to have to watch myself. So far I've learned the lesson regarding excessive beer drinking vicariously, and I want to keep it that way.

The conversion work slows even more after the beers arrive. The bus is right out in the sun, and even with all the windows open (or missing), it is boo coo hot inside. But not as hot as in the Nam. And we have beer. Ice cold beer to be exact.

At about 4 PM, the traffic on Second Street picks up significantly due to rush hour. Parking on Second isn't allowed again until 6 PM.

The Two Jerrys move the school bus from the street into the alley during

rush hour, so it's in the shade now. Should have moved it into the alley sooner, I think. But something about smoking pot and drinking beer together dulls your thinking ability. Fortunately it's only temporary, I hope.

This coming weekend, there is a rock concert in Cincinnati, and the Two Jerrys are going. The Jerry that sold his hippie van sold it to one of his neighbors, Barry. Barry has offered a ride to anyone who wants to go to the concert.

"You gonna come?" Jerry asks me.

"I would, but I have to go back to Valley Forge on Friday, or I'll be AWOL."

"What? AWOL from the hospital? Come on, no way," laughs Jerry.

When he says it that way, it seems to make sense. How can you be AWOL from the hospital? And so I agree to go to the rock concert in Cincinnati with the Two Jerrys. AWOL from the hospital, how dumb. But of course this is the army, and you can and will be considered AWOL from the hospital. Xin loi, Wolf.

The work on the school bus conversion continues through the week as we all anticipate the fun we'll have at the concert. Now that my Microbus is out of commission, the only vehicle currently at the disposal of the Two Jerrys for their salvage trips is a 1959 Buick La Sabre convertible.

They still need a gas refrigerator and think they have located one at a secondhand appliance store close to downtown. It's summer, and we mostly drive around with the Buick's top down anyway, so we leave it down thinking we can put the refrigerator in the backseat. The refrigerator is the exact model my parents had when I was growing up.

I didn't realize that I would be the one sharing the backseat of the Buick with the refrigerator, or I wouldn't have come. I thought at least one of the Two Jerrys would want to sit with it to make sure the refrigerator didn't fall out. After my year in the army, I'm quite used to getting no respect, so I resign myself to sitting in the backseat with the refrigerator. What neither Jerry has considered is the fact that I don't care if the refrigerator falls out of the car as long as it doesn't fall on me first.

This becomes apparent when the Jerry driving makes a sharp turn, and the refrigerator almost tumbles out.

"Hey! Grab the fridge!" yells the Jerry who is not driving.

"Fuck you! You grab it! It's your damn fridge!" I yell back.

No longer trusted with babysitting the fridge, we change places. I'm riding

shotgun where I should have been all along. The Jerry driving is more mindful of the refrigerator, and we make it back to the house with no other incidents or mishaps.

The next day is Friday, and our big plan is to drive to Cincinnati in time to set up our tent and camp out in a park the concert's organizers have suggested for out-of-towners. Sleeping in a tent is not high on the list of things I want to do on the last few days of my leave, but it will be with friends. And hopefully there will be no one shooting at us.

Friday afternoon the hippie van is packed with eight of us. There's Barry, his girlfriend Renee, the Two Jerrys and their girlfriends Colleen and Jeanette, and Steve and me, who are currently without girlfriends. Xin loi, us.

The van breaks down twice during the drive to Cincinnati, but the Jerry who formerly owned it always knows what the problem is immediately, and we are soon on our way again.

We arrive at the park in Cincinnati just about at dusk. In the Nam I would be freaking out if we were setting up our camp this late in the day. Now I hardly care. Maybe my thinking is almost corrected, I think to myself. The park is in the middle of the city with a river winding through it. It's a beautiful park with lots of trees, some of which are in bloom, and well-manicured lawns.

Although the entire park is covered from one end to the other with tents of every size and shape, it just doesn't really look like a campground. And it isn't. The promoters of the rock concert are out-of-towners like many of the attendees, and they never bothered to get permission from the city to allow camping in the park. Probably because they knew the city would never allow it. That didn't stop them from advertising on the concert fliers that free camping would be allowed at the city park.

The promoters were slick enough to not mention anything about camping on the fliers that were distributed in Cincinnati, so the authorities were caught off guard until it was too late. There are thousands of people camping in the city park before anyone figures out what's going on. Fearing a riot, they decide to allow the campers to stay. Especially once they realize that the campers themselves have been duped. It's lucky that several campers have the fliers on hand when the police show up to evict them.

After dark, the park is transformed. A clear night sky with all the stars out, and the park lit up by boo coo campfires. Illegal campfires, I might point out,

but beautiful just the same. Many small circles of musicians are sitting around playing music for anyone wanting to listen. It's quite a magical night for me, and now I am really glad I came. I am back in the Real World at last.

We arrive so late, there is no place to set up the tent we brought. I'm not concerned. I'm supposed to sleep sitting up anyway, and that's what I do. While two of our group sleep on the roof of the van, the rest pack themselves into the back. Steve and I sleep in the two front seats. Steve doesn't sleep well, and the same goes for the rest of our group. Except for me, that is. Xin loi, guys.

The next morning, the authorities are moving through the park strongly encouraging the campers to move on. They make it boo coo clear that there will be no camping allowed here tonight.

We have no tent to take down, so we sit around the van having breakfast from the food we brought. While nothing special, it is far better than having c-rats for breakfast. We would leave, but there are so many people and vehicles trying to leave at once, there is a traffic jam of sorts. When the conga line of cars and trucks finally start moving, we get in the line and follow it out of the park.

We stay in the line of vehicles since we're all going to the same place: the baseball stadium where the rock concert is being held. It's a slow-moving procession all the way there. The promoters did nothing about parking for the concert-goers, so it is another boondoggle once we get near the stadium. Not that the camp-out at the city park was a total boondoggle, but it was close. It would have been much worse if the police had started to arrest people.

We finally get a parking spot, and then we take our place in the boo coo long line for the people with tickets. Luckily, we bought our tickets in Detroit before leaving. Though after the camping snafu, some of us are wondering if our admission tickets are for real. We will eventually find out but not soon. The line is long, and they haven't even starting letting anyone in yet. Having been ushered out of the city park early in the morning, we are several hours early for the concert.

Even after they start to admit the ticket holders, the line moves boo coo slow. Being quite expert at line-standing, I have no explanation for what happens next. After standing in line for at least three hours, several guys next to us start to climb up a chain-link fence on the side of the stadium. The fence goes up about forty feet before the climbers can actually get into the stadium. Within minutes, twenty or thirty more guys are climbing the fence to get in

the stadium. I watch for a minute or two, and I can see several guys make it to the top and get in.

I have my ticket in hand, so I don't know what causes me to climb that fence, except I hate standing in line. For anything. I put my ticket in my pocket and join an ever-growing crowd of people climbing the fence. What an idiot I am. Half way up, I start to realize my thinking still needs some correction. In case it wasn't already abundantly clear that this was a number ten idea, there are several security guards waiting for us as soon as we get in. They shove us into an open stairwell, and the next thing I know I am back on the street. I go and find the rest of my group, still standing in line.

"What the fuck did you do that for?" asks one of the Two Jerrys. "You've got a ticket!”

"Man, I don't know what I was doing. I just hate standing in line. I guess my head's still messed up a tee tee bit," I answer.

Yes, young Wolf, your head is still messed up, but more than a tee tee bit.

After another hour or so, we finally get into the stadium and into our seats. We're midway up from the front row. We have an excellent view of the stage, so we anxiously wait for the show to start. This is my first attendance at a boo coo huge gathering of hippies. My last rock concert was attended in the Nam. While the one in the Nam was excellent, I have no doubts this one will easily top it. One reason is there are thousands of beautiful young women here, whereas at the concert in the Nam, there were only two women for about 2000 guys. I like the ratio here a lot better.

Since pot smoking was such a non-issue in the Nam, it still feels a tee tee bit odd to have to hide it here in the Real World. It's a pleasant relaxation of the rules as joints start to pass around the stadium while we wait for the music to start. The current protocol seems to be that you light a joint and pass it down the aisle you're sitting in. While you will never see that joint again, another will soon come down the aisle and be offered to you.

The non-pot smokers are quite amiable and accommodating by passing on the lit joints to the next person who then takes a hit or passes it on as well. A nice system, I think. Once you get high enough you just pass the joint along to the next person when it shows up. I am quite buzzed when the music finally starts, and I am able to maintain it throughout the concert as the joints just continue to show up from both directions. It is number one.

There are several bands that perform before the headliner takes to the stage. I've never heard of Grand Funk Railroad, having been away for over a

year, but I think their performance is number one. Of course, by the time Grand Funk Railroad has taken the stage, I am so buzzed Tiny Tim could have performed on his ukulele, and I would think it number one as well.

When the concert ends, we didi for Detroit. The crowd was so peaceful and beautiful. Well the women were beautiful, that's for sure.

Since I knew we would be driving right past Detroit Metro airport on our way back, I brought my duffel bag along with all my army stuff. My friends drop me off at the airport terminal, and I get some hugs and kisses before I didi. I tell them I don't know when I'll return. Maybe not for almost another year, and then it's farewell.

Once in the terminal, I find a public restroom and change into my dress greens. When I look at myself in the mirror, I realize I might not be able to convince the ticket agent that I'm really in the army. I have a full beard, and my hair is covering my ears. I look so weird in my dress greens with a beard, I'm half-worried I'll get arrested for impersonating a soldier.

The ticket seller ends up giving me an excuse for my beard when I buy a ticket for military standby.

She says, "I know the navy guys can grow beards now, but I didn't know the army allowed it."

I am fast with my lie as I say, "Yeah, it's a new rule. They just started letting us grow beards."

I luck out and get a seat on the first plane to Philadelphia. Not in First Class like the last time, but it's a short flight, so I don't mind having to fly among the riffraff on this flight. Speaking of riffraff, there is a navy guy on my flight. He has an awesome beard, and as he passes by, he says to me, "I didn't know the army let you guys grow beards, too."

"They don't," I reply. "I'm probably gonna be in trouble when I get back. I shoulda shaved it off."

He smiles at me and says, "Good luck, soldier. Nice beard, though."

"Thanks," I say. “Yers is number one, also."

It's an uneventful flight back to Philadelphia. I catch a cab from the airport in Philadelphia to the train station. I only have to wait a short while for the next train to Valley Forge, so I don't have to exercise my awesome skill of waiting.

It's been a long day that started in Cincinnati and ends in Valley Forge. I know I should shave before I go to bed, but I am so physically and mentally exhausted that when I see my bed back on my ward all cranked up to 90

degrees and just waiting for me, I climb in and am soon fast asleep.

I sleep the sleep of the dead until the morning when I am awakened by an orderly who says the First Sergeant wants to see me. My first thought is: *First Sergeant? They have first sergeants at hospitals?* Man, I am in trouble, I just know it. Besides my beard, I remember now that I was technically AWOL. When Jerry laughed and joked about how I couldn't be AWOL from a hospital, it sounded so plausible. But now that I am back at said hospital, I know the reason the First Sergeant wants to see me, and it's not to give me a 21-gun salute for actually coming back after my leave.

I really should shave my beard off before going to see the First Sergeant, but it will take too long. First sergeants are not expert at waiting like the rest of us. Plus, I think that being AWOL is the main issue here. My beard will just be a nuisance. I will be told to go shave it off. But of course, this is the army, so while being AWOL is a boo coo big issue, my beard turns out to be even worse.

When I look at myself in the mirror in my hospital pajamas, my beard doesn’t look so bad. At least I'm not wearing my dress greens, as that might give the First Sergeant a heart attack.

To say this particular First Sergeant is strack is like saying the pope is Catholic. The one good thing is that I don't have on my dress greens. It would have surely caused him to blow a gasket. As it is, he gasps and chokes when he first sees me.

"Where the Hell do you think you are, troop?" he screams at me once he catches his breath.

"At the Valley Forge army hospital," I answer.

"Oh. A smart ass, eh?" he asks.

At least I think he is asking, but I decide not to answer, supposing it is another rhetorical question.

"I want you outta my sight! Go get a shave and a haircut, and then come back here to discuss your being AWOL."

As directed, I go to the barber shop in the hospital and get a shave and a haircut. I've only been shaved by a barber a couple of times, and it feels number one. The haircut, not so much, but it will grow back. My beard will have to wait for almost a year. The barber knows the First Sergeant here quite well and knows why I have been sent here.

"Do you want a regulation haircut?" he asks. That means white sidewalls

and almost a buzz cut on top. It's the kind of haircut they give to trainees in the army, and it makes everyone look like a convict. After training they let us grow our hair a tee tee bit longer, but not much. I decide to try to humor the First Sergeant by getting a regulation haircut in hopes avoiding an Article 15. I even let the barber shave off my mustache, though I'm allowed to have it. Well, sort of allowed, if you don't mind having a mustache that makes you look like Adolph Hitler.

When I look at myself in the mirror at the barbershop, I hardly recognize myself. I remember looking like this in Basic training and hating it. I hate it now, but I am hopeful the First Sergeant will forgive my transgressions now that I have a strack haircut and a shave.

But this is the army, so there will be no forgiveness, and the only reason for my return to the First Sergeant's office is so I can sign my Article 15. He's fining me $50 and putting an Article 15 in my record for being AWOL. I couldn't care less about the Article 15 in my record, but $50 is equal to one week's pay in the army. I was AWOL from a hospital for one day of a weekend where all I would do is sit on my bed, so it seems like severe punishment. I am pissed. Mostly pissed that I shaved my mustache off for nothing.

Back on my ward, Wally is still here, and I hear his record player before I even reach the ward. Still the same record. I have a look into my ward and then continue down the hallway. I decide to look for Chuckie Throm, my friend from Basic training. With my recent haircut, he should easily recognize me.

I'm not able to locate Chuckie, but I find Zeke is still on his ward. He still doesn't recognize me even with my haircut. I think Zeke will be on this ward for a boo coo long time. Maybe forever. I realize again that my injury is truly a Million Dollar Wound.

Back on my ward, I luck out a little. Wally is off somewhere, and his record player is silent. I open my duffel bag and rummage around in it, looking for something important. Earplugs. I bought two sets, so I cross the aisle to see how Matt is doing. He is in a rigid position and can only see in one direction. I get into his line of sight and hold out the set of earplugs I brought for him. He smiles so hard, he groans in pain.

"Oh, thanks, man. I thought for sure I would die listening to that fuckin' album of his," says Matt.

"Trust me. I know exactly how you feel. If Wally could see and was able to do something else, I'd break that damn record over his head. But I know how it is to not be able to see, so all you can do is sit and listen for days. It is so boring," I reply.

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I realize Matt is even more expert at being able to do nothing than either Wally or me.

"Yeah, tell me about it. But thanks again for the earplugs, man."

We chat for a while. I've been gone for two months, and both Matt and Wally are still here. I'm not surprised about Matt, as he is boo coo messed up, but I thought Wally would be gone by now. That's reason for concern for me, as Wally had the same surgery my doctor now wants to do to me. I hate that!

After talking to Matt, it's time for lunch. I'm hoping I might be able to find Chuckie at the mess hall. It's a large place with hundreds of people inside. Patients and hospital staff and visitors. It's noisy and crowded, so instead of getting something to eat, I walk around looking for someone, anyone, I know. I find no one, so I finally get in line to get my lunch. The food is quite good, just as it was the last time I was here. Two months seems like two lifetimes now.

After lunch, I sky back to my ward. I can hear Wally's record player, so before I enter my ward, I put in my earplugs. I can't hear a thing hardly, and it's number one. Wally sees me enter and gives me a wave. I wave back. I sit on my bed and relax. I can still hear the music, but it sounds so far away and so faint, it is bliss. As I look around my ward, I see mostly new faces.

My first full day back, and I am already bored shitless. If I have to sit on my bed here much longer, I know I'll go crazy. If I'm not already crazy. Dinner time comes, and Wally and I head to the mess hall together. He still can't see clearly, so it helps if someone walks with him.

It turns out to be a good thing I'm guiding Wally. They are having wheelchair races down the hall, and if you're not watching out, you could get run over. The racers are most certainly not watching out. Because the hallway rolls up and down like a roller coaster, the racers get going boo coo fast on the downhill section. They are able to build enough speed that at the top of the next rise, they just give their wheel a strong downward push, and they glide the rest of the way. I saw wheelchair races at the hospital in Japan, but that was nothing compared to this.

Another big crowd in the mess hall, but still I see no one I know. After we eat, it's back to our ward. I drop Wally off and go see Zeke.

Zeke is in his wheelchair seemingly looking out the window, but if he knows what he's looking at, I'm doubtful. He doesn't even acknowledge the fact that you're there next to him when someone visits. Even so, I tell him about my extended stay at our Basic training company after he and the rest of my friends left for AIT. Zeke had the only record player in our company, and a few guys, including me, had some albums that he would play for us. As each guy finally got their orders for AIT, they left me their albums. In the end I had quite a nice collection, but no record player. I tell Zeke that I wish I had those albums now, as I would give them all to Wally.

Zeke does nothing to make me think he understands what I tell him, but he's the only friend from the army that I have here. So I stay for a while and continue talking to him on the outside chance that he might be able to hear and understand me but just can't communicate back. I only didi after Zeke's nurse comes to take him to bed.

It's back to my ward for me. Before I'm even close, I put in my earplugs, and it makes me smile. I'm bored nearly to death, but I have a Million Dollar Wound, and I have made it out of the Nam alive and am back in the Real World. Well, sort of. The army is not the Real World, but the Real World is close by, so I feel number one. Or as number one as someone can feel in an army hospital.

I've been sleeping in a sitting position my whole sixty day leave, but none of the beds and seats I slept in can compare to the comfort of a hospital bed set up for sleeping upright. After my ordeal with the First Sergeant, I am exhausted. I climb into my bed and with my earplugs in place, I am soon asleep.

After breakfast the next morning an orderly comes for me. My eye doctor wants to check to see how my eye is coming along. I had almost forgotten that my eye doctor was still talking about performing surgery on my right eye. Almost forgot. It seems insane. I actually have regained some sight. When I look out of my eye now, it looks as if I am coming up from being underwater. I can see through the upper three quarters of it, and even though it's not perfectly clear, the world never looked so beautiful. And now they want to wreck it. I hate that!

The lower part of my right eye is still all red swirls. If I concentrate on them, I immediately get nauseous. But I am so tired of just looking out of my left eye that I can ignore the red swirls for quite a while before I have to close

my right eye to let it rest. It is also extremely sensitive to light. All light, but especially sunlight. In the sunlight my right eye squints almost completely closed.

I have some heavy thoughts on my mind as I walk with the orderly to see my eye doctor. When I arrive, I have a new doctor. The eye doctor so intent on performing surgery is gone. My new doctor only knows about my eye from looking at my file. He asks me about my sight and gives me a vision test. He dilates my right eye and examines the back and inside of it. He confirms what I already know, and that is my eye has cleared considerably. He's quite happy about my progress, but not nearly as happy as I am. Because instead of scheduling me for eye surgery, he says he's sending me to Ft. Lewis to finish out my last year in the army.

He gives me what is called a Fox screen for my right eye. It sort of looks like an eye patch made out of a sieve. He says it will help with the sensitivity to light, and he's right. As soon as he puts it on, I don't have to squint anymore, even in sunlight. The Fox screen just has some tee tee holes in it, but it's amazing how much I can see when I have it on.

They are giving me five days to get to Ft. Lewis, so I decide to go back to Detroit for a few more days before going to Ft. Lewis. I call the Second Street house and arrange for the Two Jerrys to pick me up at Metro airport.

They are merciless when they see me with my regulation haircut and clean-shaven face. They are also interested in the Fox screen. Finally, they say, I look like I have been injured. I know they are still disappointed that I didn't get half my head blown off.

Back at the Second Street house, everyone has to tease me about my haircut and lack of beard. I was starting to look like a real hippie just before I had to go back to the army hospital.

Harry and Nancy are both here. It's August in Michigan, and they have fabulous tans. They both have blond hair and make an incredibly beautiful couple. They look like Apollo and Aphrodite. It makes me realize I never had a chance with Nancy, especially now that I look like an army geek again.

When I tell the Two Jerrys I'm going to be at Ft. Lewis in Washington for the next year, they promise to come and get me as they circumnavigate the US in their school bus. How cool is that?

Even though it is a year away, I am ecstatic. I am so jealous of their proposed trip that to be included even in the very end of it makes me feel

number one. Well, as number one as someone still in the army can feel.

Steve stops by the Second Street house, and he too has to tease the shit out of me about my recent haircut. It's fortunate he came by, because all the rooms at the house are taken. I call Bob and Jean in Dearborn, and they say I can stay at their house again before I have to didi to Ft. Lewis.

It's late when we arrive at Bob and Jean's house, and they have already gone to bed. Annette is still up, so I have to suffer one more razzing from her about my haircut. She, however, is still looking boo coo good. Especially now that I can look at her with both eyes.

The next afternoon, Steve picks me up and we cruise back down to Second Street to check on the progress of the school bus conversion. Especially now that I'm included – sort of – in the adventure, I can't wait to get out of the army. It will be so cool to be picked up by a bunch of hippies upon getting out. I realize, of course, that they will tease the hell out of me. Not as bad as being in the army, though.

My five days blows by at light speed, and once again the Two Jerrys and Steve take me to the airport in the Buick convertible this time. With my recent shave and haircut, I actually look like I'm in the army again when I'm in my dress greens. I hate that.

I get a ticket for military standby again, and I wait in the terminal for my flight. The flight to Seattle is nearly full when they finally call my name. I was starting to think I was going to get bumped and would have to wait for another flight. Not only do I make the flight, but I get put in First Class again. Man, I think, I could really get used to this. It almost makes it worth shaving my beard off. Almost.

Chapter 10

I arrive at Ft. Lewis and spend the first two weeks waiting for my new assignment in a barracks full of recent transfers. Finally I am sent to M Company.

While I wait in the day room to see the First Sergeant, I meet a member of M Co. who has just recently returned. As recent as in the last five minutes. We chat briefly as we wait. I casually mention my short stay in the Nam and my much longer stay in several army hospitals. My recent acquaintance introduces himself as Sponge and just as casually informs me that he has just come back from being AWOL. As he is going to see the First Sergeant before me, he apologizes in advance, saying that Top is probably going to be in a bad mood when he's through with him.

After Sponge returns to the day room, I am summoned to the First Sergeant's office by the company clerk. Sponge sits quietly in one of the chairs as I didi. I guess it didn't go as bad as he thought it would.

Top obviously has other things on his mind. He barely looks at me as he scans the orders I hand him.

"Tank driver, eh?" he sort of asks. “Well Wolf, we're an armor company, so it's about time they started sending me some tankers instead of all the grunts I've been getting."

He passes me some paperwork to take to the quartermaster so I can pick up my equipment and bedding.

Just as I re-enter the day room, two MPs show up immediately followed by Top, who motions toward Sponge and says, "That's him. Get 'im outta my sight!"

Sponge puts forth no resistance, but the MPs handcuff his hands behind his back and lead him away. I never see him again.

I meet two more members of M Co. in the day room. Barry “Rocky” Rockwell, who is playing pool with his housemate, Shorty. I really should say “trailermate,” as they both live in a trailer they rent in a trailer park just across the freeway from the entrance to Ft. Lewis.

There are two trailer parks near the base. The closest one is where Rocky and Shorty live. Then there's another larger trailer park further north toward Tacoma where most of the guys who live off base rent a trailer.

On the first Friday after we get paid for the month, one of the Spec-5s from M Co. always has a party at his trailer. His wife is from Hawaii, and she tells all us white boys that we are hated there and are referred to as "Howlees," which is not considered a compliment. Weird, I think, I haven't even been to Hawaii, and they already hate me. Guess I won't be going there.

I meet one of the M Co. cooks at the party. His name is Gomez, and he claims he's a member of some notorious gang in San Antonio, Texas. Not a notorious enough gang that any of us have heard of it, but he seems extremely proud of his membership nonetheless.

The war in Nam has made the army so hungry for manpower that when criminals get caught, many are offered the opportunity to join the army instead of going to jail. Not a bad deal for the criminals, as they get out of a prison term. Another perks is that the army won't send known criminals to a combat zone. That's weird. Guys that like to carry guns and shoot people are considered unfit for war? Go figure. Anyway, it's a worse deal for the army, I think, because many of the criminals continue with their criminal ways, finding the army ripe for picking.

"Hey, rabbit! Gimme a square," Gomez says to me.

"What's a square?" I ask

He gives me a look full of disdain and then says, "A cigarette man, gimme a cigarette."

"I don't smoke," I tell him.

"Fuckin' rabbit!" he says to me and walks away. Most likely to try to hit someone else up for a smoke. What a jerk.

Gomez turns out to be one of the biggest jerks I've ever met.

During the party, he goes around hitting up everyone for money to buy more beer. Never mind that the party isn't even out of beer yet. But most of the revelers are drunk and have money in their pocket, having just been paid. For Gomez, they are easy marks, and several people give him money. Not me.

Gomez now starts working on someone with a car to drive him to the beer store. Since I'm not drinking, and Gomez is a known jerk, several people want me to go along with him to make sure he actually comes back with the beer.

I don't really feel inclined to go anywhere with Gomez. But I don't smoke cigarettes, and that ends up being the real reason I agree to go along and keep an eye on Gomez. There are about twenty people inside the trailer all

smoking cigarettes and pot. Way too smoky for me.

The beer store isn't far. At first I was just going to wait in the car, but I have some partial pay as I wait for my records to catch up with me, so I saunter inside.

Gomez and I are about the same size, about six feet tall and around 160 pounds. But for some reason, he wears a gigantic coat. The reason? I'm about to find out. While the guy who drove us here is buying cigarettes, Gomez stuffs a whole case of beer under his coat and walks out without paying.

Back in the car, I ask, "Why'd ya collect money for the beer if you were just gonna to steal it?"

"Hey, rabbit," he says. "I'm no chump. I don't rip off stuff for free."

When we return to the party, Gomez doesn't offer anyone their money back. Like I said, he's the biggest jerk I've ever met.

Chapter 11

M Co. appears to be in some sort of rebuilding process. Every day some new guys show up. After about week, two guys I actually know arrive. Considering the thousands and thousands of people in the army, I think it quite a coincidence. A good coincidence to be sure.

The first guy, Bob Hodges, is a friend from AIT. We both went to tank school at Ft. Knox in Kentucky. We were even in the same eight-man room of the barracks, so we know each other fairly well having had close contact for two months.

Bob was injured in the Nam when his PC hit a land mine. He was thrown into the air, breaking his ankle so severely upon landing that he was sent back stateside to finish his tour of duty. A Million Dollar Wound for sure.

The next guy is a really big surprise, as he is not even actually being assigned to M Co. It's Steve Seiler from A Troop in the Nam. We were wounded in the same firefight. I haven't seen him since the first day at the field hospital where we were both taken.

He somehow looked me up and found me here. I'm so glad to see him, as he had a number ten stomach wound. He looks like he has recovered, and we have a good time catching up.

"So what'd ya get?" he asks me.

"I got wounded. You know that, man," I reply.

"No, I mean, what kind of medal did ya get?"

"Purple Heart," I answer.

"Big Al got a Silver Star," Steve tells me.

"Hey, that's really cool for him. He deserved it," I say.

"The Captain put both you and Big Al in for a Silver Star, but Higher said they only award one Silver Star for any one action," Steve says.

"Well, ya know, Big Al didn't get wounded, so if he didn't get the Silver Star he might not have gotten anything. And that ain't right," I say. "Plus, the medals are the army's thing. It's how they try to suck us all into their world of war. I don't care about their medals. I've had enough of war and the army."

Steve and I have a great time chatting, and we promise to get together again while we're both stationed here at Ft. Lewis.

Most days start the same, except Sunday which is our only full day off. We get Saturday afternoon off, but it still starts the same, with them waking us up at 6 AM. Some things just never change. After a shower and a shave, I dress and go down to the mess hall for breakfast. The food here, in keeping with the highest military standards of food service, is quite horrid.

After a breakfast best forgotten, we lounge around the barracks waiting for Top's order to fall out for formation and inspection. Inspection? As if we are a bunch of trainees and not veterans of war. Like I said, some things never change in the army. One is lack of respect for the troops in the lower ranks.

For our first insult of the day, we line up for “police call” and slowly walk across the area around our barracks to pick up any litter we find. Usually cigarette butts, bottle caps, and pull tabs. It's mostly cigarette butts, and that is quite irksome for me, as I have never smoked cigarettes in my life and therefore have never thrown a butt on the ground.

Next it's off to the motor pool for me. Since I have just arrived here, I don't have any transportation of my own, so I catch a ride to the motor pool in the back of the company's deuce-and-a-half. Several of the guys going to the motor pool have their own cars, so they usually drive themselves there.

There's really nothing to do at the motor pool except to stand around and bullshit. Some of the tanks may need some maintenance or repair, but we always have to wait for parts, so there's plenty of time to waste. It's great for the cigarette smokers, as we often take breaks to "smoke 'em if ya got 'em." The army seems to revolve around smoking breaks. In the Nam, the army gave us cigarettes for free, and if you needed more it was only $1 a carton at the PX. Such a deal. The cigarettes are still inexpensive at the PX here but not a dollar a carton.

We start the tank engines and let them idle for a while to charge the batteries. We have to charge the batteries mostly from starting them up in the first place. So stupid but so army.

We don't ever drive the tanks around, except for when we occasionally drive them over to the hose spigot to wash the dust off of them. Also so army. Don't let the tanks get dusty!

After a morning of hosing off the tanks with water and smoking lots of cigarettes, it's time for lunch. Back to M Company's mess hall. Nothing worth eating there, but it's really our only choice.

I meet two more M Co. cooks from San Antonio, Adolph Ricondo and Ramon Salazar. Just like Gomez, they proudly claim some sort of gang

affiliation, of which they are most proud. Adolph often displays the four dots on top of each of his knuckles which represent the four hills of the neighborhood of Las Lomas where he is from. They lace their speech with what they refer to as “Pachuco talk.” As long as you're not the one they're swearing at, it can be quite amusing trying to figure what the heck they are saying sometimes.

After lunch it's back to the motor pool to waste the afternoon away as we try to stay out of sight of any of the platoon sergeants, lest we be given some mindless task to perform. At least we are not compelled to fill any sandbags. If this were the Nam, we would be doing that nonstop. I'm half surprised they don't have us throw dirt on the tanks just so we can hose them off again. This is, after all, the army.

After a time-wasting afternoon at the motor pool, we are released from duty for the day. The guys who live off-post take off like they are racing in the Indianapolis 500. I'm still stuck in the barracks, so it's back to M Co. for me. I haven't been paid for about five months, as I'm waiting for my paperwork to catch up with me, so I have almost no money. I hate that.

They serve dinner from about 5-7 PM. The food, if you can call it that, is pretty bad right from the start and only gets worse, so I've never seen anyone go to the mess hall near closing time. That would be near suicidal.

For the guys stuck in the barracks at M Co., our only amusement is the day room. We have a pool table and a well-worn foosball table. In a small room off to the side is a TV set that gets 3 or 4 channels depending on the weather. I've never really played foosball, so I usually stick to pool. The problem is several guys want to play pool, so we line up (something we are expert at) and wait our turn to challenge the winner of the last game. I'm just learning to play, so I get beat often, and after one game, it's back to the end of the line for me. A place I'm quite accustomed to with a last name that starts with W. Especially when everything in the army, and I will repeat that – *everything* – in the army is done alphabetically.

It's a good thing for the rest of us that Rocky lives off-post, as he is one of the best pool players I've ever seen. When he's here, everyone plays their game, gets beat by Rocky, and then gets back in line only to get beat by him again if there's enough time. Rocky only plays pool in the afternoon while we are waiting to go back to the motor pool after lunch. Many of the guys play foosball as they wait their turn to get beat by Rocky. I try foosball a couple of times, but some of the guys here, especially Adolph and Ramon, are

practically professional foosball players. They are as good at foosball as Rocky is at pool.

I know, I know, professional foosball players? That's what I thought, but here's how it works. Virtually every bar and nightclub in the western US has a foosball table, or I really should say tables. It is an incredibly popular game here. The guys that are really good at foosball will only play for money. It is amazingly exciting to watch the really good ones play. They can pass the ball around and keep it from their opponent, and then hit it so hard you can't even see the ball as it rockets into the goal slot. They love to play around with amateurs for a while, but when they finally tire of it, they will finish off their opponent with a fast series of scores.

For me the day usually ends when I get bored of being beat at both pool and foosball. With nothing really worth watching on TV, I go to bed. It can take a while to get to sleep when you sleep in room with about 50 other guys who are listening to their radios, playing cards, laughing and talking, smoking, and farting up a storm. So army. Though I must admit there is boo coo more laughing here then there ever was in the Nam.

After a couple of weeks of wasting time at the motor pool, one of the sergeants tells us we are going to the tank firing center in the Yakima Desert for a month. A desert? So far the part of Washington I've seen has been lush and green, but leave it to the army to find the worst place in the state and send us there.

It will take a month or so to get all the tanks ready to be shipped by rail to the Yakima Firing Center. There are very limited (as in *none*) repair facilities there. If something breaks, it is doubtful any repairs could be made. I don't see that as a big deal. We're not going to war or anything. We're just going to the firing center to shoot off a boo coo amount of taxpayer-paid-for ammunition for no reason other than target practice.

I realize now that it's not only during war that that the military is wasteful. Waste is pretty much the full-time occupation of the military. Of course when we do nothing, which is most of the time, fewer people get killed. Notice I said fewer and not none. That's because even without war, the army has many ways for the unwary to get killed. I hate that.

Top is busy assigning the members of M Co. to tank crews for the excursion to the firing center. At first, I could hardly care about which crew I'm in. That changes when Top announces that it will be contest. The crew of

the highest scoring tank will get a one-month exemption from duty.

One month off just for winning a stupid contest? Now everyone is pumped up to try to win. I'm sure that was Top's intent. I wasn't the only one that was ho-hum about the whole situation.

When the crew assignments are announced, Shorty is disappointed. He wanted to be in whatever crew Rocky is in, and he's not. But I am. I'm as elated as I can be given the circumstances. I am assigned to be the driver, and Rocky will be the gunner. This could be really good for me. Rocky has been in M Co. for a while, and he's been to the Yakima Firing Center once already. Not only is Rocky considered the best pool player in M Co., he is also considered the best gunner. Xin loi, Shorty.

I'm thinking I have a good chance to be in the winning crew for Top's contest. Hopefully we won't have a tank commander like the first one I had in the Nam. If we do, there would be no hope of winning. He was a major juicer, as many of the Lifers in the army are.

In the end, our crew TC turns out to be one of the newest members of the company, Sgt. Elwood Kermit. Even though he's a hard five, I don't think Kermit is a Lifer. PFC Leonard is our loader. We really have a good chance to win this contest now. I'm one of the only guys here besides Rocky and Kermit that have been to tank school. Several of the guys assigned to be the driver have never driven a tank except a little at the motor pool. Driving a tank is not incredibly hard, but it's definitely not easy.

After a couple of days driving around as a crew, we all have our nicknames. Rocky, of course, is already a nickname, and because of Kermit's name and the fact that he has a scratchy sounding voice, we call him Froggy. My last name is always fair game for a nickname, and they call me Wolfy. PFC Leonard is now Lenny. So that's our crew: Froggy, Rocky, Lenny, and me, Wolfy.

A few days later, my paperwork finally catches up with me, and I receive a couple grand in back pay. I can get some wheels now and not have to rely on bumming rides. The state of Washington looks to be a very picturesque place, and as long as I'm here I think I might as well check it out.

When I first arrived at the airport in Seattle, it was cloudy and overcast, as it often is here in Washington. If it's not just overcast, it tends to be raining. So it was a great surprise the first clear day here at Ft. Lewis when Mt. Rainier finally became visible. It's one of those moments where you ask,

Wow, where was that all this time? It's quite beautiful, even if it is a volcano. I make plans, in my head, to go there while I'm here.

Most days start with falling out for formation to be harangued by Top about the previous day's transgressions. Top announces the punishments publicly, probably in hopes that his harshness will deter further infractions.

That would be doubtful, because our company is comprised of boo coo misfits. At least half of us are veterans of Nam and are ever-so-slightly messed up in our heads. (Although most of us would never admit that, even to ourselves.) The other half are a mix of your typical loser Lifers and then some petty criminals who got caught and cut a deal to avoid going to jail by joining the army.

After Top is done chewing us out – even though the majority of us did nothing wrong – we are ordered to police call. If the breakfast here isn't already horrid enough, it certainly won't be improved after we have to pick up cigarette butts and any other debris we find with our bare hands. The same bare hands we have to eat with, as we are never given an opportunity to wash them after police call.

Following a miserable breakfast, all the tank crews are off to the motor pool. Now that we actually have a mission, there is real work to do. One of which is to go to the firing range here at Ft. Lewis to make sure all the weapons on each tank actually work.

I can hardly wait to have to load up the ammo box for the Little Bastard again. It's really Lenny's job as the loader. We are only playing war games and not in an actual war zone, so under normal circumstances I wouldn't care whether the ammo box was filled correctly. However, with 30 days exempt-from-duty as the prize, I do care and will be monitoring Lenny's loading ability closely.

Rocky must be reading my mind, because he asks Lenny, "Have you ever loaded the coax ammo box before?"

"What's the coax?" Lenny asks.

"You haven't been to tank school, have you?" asks Rocky.

"No. I was in Infantry AIT and just finished when I got sick. After I got better they sent me here."

"What were you sick from?"

"They weren't sure," says Lenny. “But they think I'm OK now. I feel much better."

"I'll load the coax ammo box," I say.

I'm pretty sure we won't have to completely fill the ammo box, so it won't be that bad. I just don't want the Little Bastard's belt to jam up in the middle of the contest.

Once again Rocky seems to be reading my mind. "The last time we went to the Firing Center they only gave us 500 rounds of ammo for the coax. So we probably won't have to fill the box all the way. "

Our tanks are M-60s, which have the same turret as the first tank I was on in the Nam. So it also has the same 105mm main gun. The ammo for that only comes from England, and that was supposedly one of the reasons we pawned those tanks off onto the ARVNs. I can almost hear the military brass saying, "Good luck getting ammo for those tanks. Xin loi."

Froggy offers Lenny and me a ride back to M Co. for lunch, and we both accept. Boo coo better than riding in the back of a deuce-and-a-half.

There's a new guy in charge of the sign-in roster at the mess hall, and he looks vaguely familiar. I don't have time for any pleasantries, as there are guys behind me waiting to sign the roster so they can get in the chow line.

Despite the food being horrid, the cooks are all extremely insolent about any negative comments. As if they are all skilled chefs at some swank restaurant. All of them are OJT cooks which means they didn't go to cooking school, if the army even has such things.

Some days it hard to get through the chow line without someone almost getting in a fight with one of the cooks after commenting on the deplorable food. No fights erupt today, and after finishing what I can force down, I head to the barracks to wait for Top to call us out for formation.

We mostly just sit on our bunks smoking and playing cards. Hearts is still the card game of choice for us. We really only play to waste some time before being called out. The other option is standing in line to be beaten by Rocky at pool. Rocky more often than not runs the table, shooting all the balls in before you even get a turn. Most of us are glad that Rocky lives off-post, because we all finally get a chance to play pool once he leaves for the day.

Top finally calls us out for formation. Before we are sent back to our assignments, Top informs us that this coming Saturday afternoon we all have to attend a parade for some retiring Lifer. This is so army. We're supposed to get the afternoon off on Saturdays, so it is just like them to make us do something we hate. The parade means we all have to go over to the parade grounds and stand out in the hot sun for most of the afternoon listening to

someone extol the virtues of some guy we've never even met. (And that we never want to meet, either.)

Back at the motor pool, Froggy pulls out his bag of chewing tobacco. He offers it to both Lenny and me, as he usually does whenever he pulls his bag out for a chew. We always turn him down. I've never smoked or chewed tobacco, so I've often wondered what chewing tobacco is all about. Froggy is a tee tee bit surprised when he offers his tobacco pouch around, and I take it.

"So what do I do?" I ask.

Froggy laughs and says, "Just get a wad of it and stick it between your cheek and your gums."

I take a big pinch of tobacco and put it in my mouth as instructed. There is a faint licorice taste that quickly turns bitter.

"I'm not supposed to swallow any of the juice, am I?" I ask.

"Nah, don't swallow anything. Spit out all the juice," cautions Froggy.

Not only do I spit out all the juice, but I spit the wad of tobacco out as well. It tastes like shit. The faint licorice taste, which was the only redeeming quality, was boo coo faint.

"That was horrid, man. How do you chew that shit?"

"Whaddaya mean?" says Froggy, smiling. "This stuff's great."

Rocky arrives just as I'm spitting it out and asks, "Are you chewing that crap, too?"

"Fuck no," I answer. "I was just tryin' it. Man, my throat is burning now."

Froggy laughs again. "I told you not to swallow any of it."

"Believe me, I wasn't trying to. It just went down."

I am spitting remnants of the tobacco taste from my mouth for the rest of the afternoon.

Another wasted afternoon slowly passes by at the motor pool, and finally it's quitting time. Well, it's quitting time in the Real World. In the army you are considered on-duty 24 hours a day. So technically we're off now, but some guys will be assigned to some extra duty, such as KP or guard duty.

Back at M Co., it's off to the mess hall. I have some money but no wheels, so I can't really go anywhere off-post to eat. At the mess hall the familiar-looking guy is still manning the roster. There's no one in line behind me, so I stop to question him.

"Hey man, you look familiar. Do I know you?"

He gives me a looking over and then says, "Nah, I don't think so, man."

"You look so familiar to me for some reason. Where you been lately?"

"Well, I was in the Nam until I got wounded," he answers.

"Yeah, so was I," I say. "Then what?"

"Then I was in a hospital in Japan for a while," he says.

"Me too!" I say, and then something occurs to me. "Were you in a wheelchair?"

"Yeah, I was."

"Did you ever race down the hallway with some of the other guys in wheelchairs?" I ask.

"Oh yeah, I did that boo coo," he answers, grinning.

"That's where I saw you," I say. "I used to get fuckin' lost in that hospital, and one day when I was wandering around, I saw you and some other guys racing in your wheelchairs. It looked like fun but honestly, I was glad I didn't need one."

"Yeah, I was boo coo happy to get rid of that thing myself."

I introduce myself. "I'm Derrick, but most guys call me Wolf."

"My name's Ken," I think I hear him say.

"That'll be easy to remember. That's my brother's name," I say as I walk away to get in the chow line. "Talk to you later, man."

I have to suffer insults from the cooks, but since they control the food, I decide it's best not to mess with them. They'd as soon spit on your chow when you aren't watching as look at you.

Chapter 12

Saturday morning is a typical work day for us at the motor pool as we prepare for our month-long trip to the Yakima Firing Center. Normally after lunch, we're released from duty until Monday morning. But not this Saturday. I forgot that Top told us earlier in the week that we had Parade Duty. We hate that! Evidenced by the loud groans from everyone, including me. I do have a plan, though. My plan will make Top hate me, but eventually he will hate me anyway if he doesn't already. Xin loi.

Most of the members of M Co. fall out at 2 PM looking strack with their shined combat boots and well-pressed fatigues. We are loaded onto several deuce-and-a-halfs and driven over to the parade grounds.

Once there, Top has us form up alphabetically. This is, after all, the army. After we're in place, Top goes from person to person, inspecting and scrutinizing each one of us as if we were waiting to meet the Pope.

I hear Top address someone in the front row, yelling something about the guy's boots.

I can't hear the guy's answer, but I can hear Top when he screams, "Get outta here!"

Top continues with his inspection until he finally gets to the last row where I am. I'm actually the last guy in formation.

As he gives me a look of utter disdain, I know for certain that he definitely hates me.

"Where in the fuck do you think you are, troop?" he asks.

I know better than to say where I actually am. I've made that mistake once. He's not really interested in where I think I am anyway. So I wait. Something I am quite expert at.

"Get those fucking things off now, troop!" he shouts.

I know I'm in trouble now, but I have an ace in the hole.

The “fucking things” Top is referring to are my sunglasses. I say nothing and I make no move to remove them.

Because my injured eye is extremely light-sensitive, I have what is known as a medical profile that gives me permission to wear sunglasses when outdoors. But because I still have 20-20 vision, the army will not issue me regulation sunglasses. I had to buy my own. Since I had to pay for them, I

chose some rather ostentatious pink sunglasses. Women's sunglasses. They definitely are not regulation. I expected this, so I pull my medical profile from my pocket and hand it to Top.

When he finishes reading my medical profile, I think his head might explode. He turns beet red in the face.

"Get outta my sight!" he screams at me.

I have no problem getting out of his sight, but the thing is, we've been driven to the other side of Ft. Lewis. It's several miles back to our barracks. I know better than to ask Top for a ride back, as that would surely cause him to have a heart attack.

As I start my boo coo long walk back to M Co., I notice the other guy who was dressed down by Top and kicked out of Parade Duty. It's my new acquaintance, Ken.

"What'd you get kicked out for?" I ask.

"I can't wear combat boots," he answers.

I look down to see he is wearing moccasins. Fringed buckskin moccasins. Definitely not army issue. I smile. He doesn't have to ask why I was kicked out, as I'm still wearing my pink sunglasses.

"So what happened to you?" I ask.

"Got shot in the foot," he answers. "What happened to you?"

"Got shot in the eye."

"Really? And you can still see?" he asks.

"Well not exactly shot in the eye. I got some bullet fragments in both eyes. I can see pretty good out of my left eye, but my right eye, not so good. That's why I get to wear sunglasses. My right eye hates bright light, especially the sun."

He nods in understanding.

"I'm gonna walk back to the barracks, Ken. Can you walk that far?" I ask.

"Man, if we're gonna be friends, you gotta get my name right. It's Kent, not Ken!"

"Xin loi, man. Besides getting shot in the eyes, my hearing got totally fucked up in the Nam."

We begin our trek back to M Co.

"So where are you from?"

"California," he answers.

"Cal, eh. Are you a surfer?"

"It's California, not Cal! And no, I'm not a surfer. I'm a diver."

"Whoa, whoa. Man, you're touchy," I say. "I'm almost afraid to ask what kind."

"Huh?" Kent says.

"Ya know, what kind of a diver are you? A muff diver?" I joke.

We both chuckle.

About halfway back to M Co., we pass a lieutenant. Kent and I are talking and joking, and we don't really notice the LT. But he notices us. He especially notices that we don't salute him. Being somewhat fresh back from the Nam, we are both a tee tee bit out of practice when it comes to saluting.

The lack of a salute is what initially gets the LT's attention, but then he zeroes in on my sunglasses and Kent's moccasins.

"You troops are out of uniform."

We are only half-cognizant that he is talking to us.

"Pardon me, sir?" I say.

"I said you two are out of uniform," he repeats.

In unison, Kent and I pull out our medical profiles and hand them to the LT.

He sniffs at them and hands them back. "You two better get used to saluting."

"Yes, sir," we both say.

We laugh as we walk away. What a dumb fuck, we both think. I know this because as soon as we're out of earshot we both say, "What a dumb fuck!" and then we laugh out loud. Yeah, we're gonna be friends.

It turns out that Kent and I are both Heads. There are several cliques in the army, usually based on ethnicity. But the only requirement for being a Head is smoking pot. Since most of M Co. are vets from the war in the Nam, almost all the guys in the company are Heads.

We finally make it back to M Co., and we are not back for even fifteen minutes when the rest of the Parade Duty contingent returns in the deuce-and-a-halfs. Although we could have waited for the Parade Duty ceremony to be over to ride back with the rest of the guys, it is in the realm of possibility that Top would have made us walk back anyway. Well, he could have made me walk back, but Kent's medical profile wouldn't allow it.

Kent has a car here at M Co. I knew we were going to be friends, but this definitely clinches the deal for me. He invites me to go along with him and his two friends, Farkas and "Flemmy" Coffer, to McDonald's for dinner. I'm more than happy to go. The mess hall food pretty much sets the standard for

army food, which only varies from horrid to worse. Not to mention the grief you get from the cooks when you go through the chow line.

Kent's car is a brand new, bright yellow VW Beetle. I smile when I see it, and Kent notices.

"What's the matter? Don't like my wheels?" Kent asks me.

"No, I just thought it was funny, because when I got back from the Nam I bought a VW, too." I answer. "I bought a Microbus, but it's a VW just the same."

Farkas and Flemmy are Heads as well, so on the way to McDonald's, we smoke. The closest McDonald's is in Tacoma. We don't care. We are off duty until Monday morning. We're cruising, we're listening to music on the radio, and we're smoking pot. I'm back in the Real World, and I'm feeling number one. Well, as number one as you can feel when you're in the army.

Chapter 13

Even though this is the week we are supposed to have all the tanks ready for shipment, when Top announces the names of the guys on Regimental Guard duty tomorrow, I'm one of them. Punishment for getting kicked off parade duty, I'm sure.

Regimental Guard is a blatant make-work detail. We are assigned to guard the Tank Museum, which is just an old and nearly empty WWII era barracks with an old tank parked in front. We also guard some rusted oil and fuel tanks out in the boonies referred to as the Tank Farm. Some shifts are for 12 hours, but some, like the Tank Farm, are 24 hours. Guards go out for two hours, and then come back to the guard shack for two hours of rest. The biggest joke for Regimental Guard is that although we are issued M-16s, we are not given any ammo. Why even give us the guns if they're not going to give us any ammo? Not to mention the fact that is made so obvious by the made-up work assignments they give us: We are not needed here. Why not just send us home?

When we arrive at the motor pool on Monday, we actually have things to do instead of inventing ways to waste time. I often bring a book with me so I don't die of boredom. This week there will be no time for such slacking.

The first half of the week is spent on last minute adjustments and repairs, and then we are going to the firing range here at Ft. Lewis just to make sure all the weapons and their systems are functional. Such a prudent move by the army surprises me.

On Thursday morning, several deuce-and-a-halfs show up at the motor pool loaded with crates of main gun ammo. As we unload and unpack the crates, I remember that the last time I had to help do nearly the exact same thing was on my 21st birthday in the Nam. We had taken some incoming that day, seriously wounding one of the guys in my platoon.

I expect no incoming today, but it is number one that I'm thinking about that. Even though we're just going to the firing range to test all the weapons, it's still a tee tee bit dangerous. Especially considering we won't be going to the firing range until after lunch. Most of the Lifers take lunch at the NCO club. That means a mostly liquid lunch for a lot of them, so they will be drunk when they start to shoot up the place with the .50 cal.

Lenny, Froggy, and I are back at the motor pool after an abysmal lunch at the mess hall. We're waiting for Rocky to show up. We're actually mainly waiting for all the Lifers to show up. While we wait, Froggy pulls out his pouch of Redman chewing tobacco. As always, he politely offers some to me and Lenny, and we just as politely decline. I learned my lesson about chewing tobacco.

Froggy opens the trunk of his car to look for something, and I notice he has a bowling ball bag in his trunk.

"Do you bowl?" I ask.

"Oh yeah, I love to bowl," he answers. "Do you?"

"I tried a few times, but I'm left-handed."

"I'm left-handed," responds Froggy.

"Hey! So am I," says Lenny.

"Maybe we should call you Lefty instead of Lenny," I say. "But then if anyone said, 'Hey Lefty,' we wouldn't know which one of us they were referring to."

I look back at the bag in the trunk.

"So is that a left-handed bowling ball?"

"Of course," he answers.

"If we go bowling sometime, could I try using your ball?"

"Sure," he says, but he smiles a sly smile. Just about the way he smiled when I took him up on his offer to try his chewing tobacco.

Rocky shows up then, so at least our crew is ready to go.

"Hey Rocky, are you left-handed?" I ask.

"Fuck no! Why?"

"Cuz we're all left-handed," I answer. "I guess that would be too weird if you were, too."

"Really? All of you?"

"Roger, Dan man," says Froggy.

"Jeanette's left-handed," says Rocky.

Jeanette is Rocky's live-in girlfriend and the main reason he goes home to his trailer for lunch. She's a dancer at some bar in Tacoma, and while she's not the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, she has a body some guys would kill for.

"Hey! I vote we replace Rocky with Jeanette. Not only will we have an all left-handed crew, but Jeanette's boo coo better looking than Rocky. Especially in the dark and close confines of the tank turret," I say.

We laugh.

"She definitely smells better than Rocky," Lenny adds.

"Fuck you guys!" says Rocky, but he's laughing too.

The rest of the tank crews show up, and finally, in ones and twos, the Lifers arrive. I can tell they're a mess by the way most of them are staggering their way to the tanks.

I will definitely not be getting out of my tank on the firing range, that's for sure.

Without any wheels, I haven't seen much of Ft. Lewis. The areas of housing, barracks, and the Madigan army hospital occupy one small corner of a boo coo huge army base. As we drive to the firing range, I finally get to see some of the countryside of Washington state. It's quite pretty and green. It reminds of both the Nam and my home state of Michigan, depending on the location. The Michigan parts I like, the Nam parts not so much.

When we get to the firing range, it becomes quite apparent to me that Rocky is definitely the best gunner here. It only takes him two main gun rounds to zero the main gun and two bursts of fire on the coax machine gun to zero the coax. Man, he's good, I think to myself. We just might win this stupid contest.

There is no zeroing of the .50 caliber machine gun needed, so Froggy just test fires it. The .50 Cal is such a pee bringer, you really just start shooting at your target and watch for stuff to start flying around. That tells you where the bullets are hitting, so then you just move the .50 Cal so all the stuff flying around is in the target area. I made that sound easy, but it's not.

Our crew finishes quickly, but we have to wait for the rest of the crews to zero their sights. Even though I have only been in the army a year, I have the advantage of having been to several firing ranges very recently. Shorty is the only other guy that has actually been a driver on a real tank crew. We really have a boo coo good chance to win this contest.

After we wait, something we are expert at, it's back to the motor pool. We're somewhere in the middle of the line of tanks. Top and Captain Heberle are both acting as TC for their crews, and they are leading the procession so they don't have to eat dust like the rest of us. I can't wait to see what the dust will be like at the Yakima desert. No, that's not correct. I could wait *forever* to find that out, as I know the dust will be the worst ever.

We park the tanks in the motor pool and are told we have all day tomorrow to correct any weapon system deficiencies. Everything on our tank is

functioning fine, so that means I will have a whole day to waste at the motor pool tomorrow. Just another same-same day, as we would say in the Nam.

So after wasting the day through Thursday, we start loading the tanks onto the railroad flatcars Friday morning. Or I should say that Shorty and I begin loading the tanks onto the flatcars. The tanks are twelve inches wider than the flatcar's width. The result is that the tank tread overhangs the flatcar decking six inches on each side. It looks scarier than it really is, but because of that, no one is willing to drive the tanks onto the flatcars.

They have good reason to be cautious, really. Even though it looks scarier than it is, it's still possible to drive the tank off the edge of the flatcar. That would be number ten, mostly because the driver would be razzed and never allowed to forget it by the rest of us.

Since most of the drivers here haven't driven tanks much, the hardest part for them is getting used to not being able to see where they're going. The seasoned drivers, like me and Shorty, don't worry about that much. When you are driving the tank, the worry belongs to anything (or anyone) that doesn't get out of the way. It's that or be crushed.

Shorty and I take turns driving all 25 tanks onto the flatcars. After each tank is loaded, the other crews secure each one in place. We manage to load all the tanks without mishap. Shorty and I feel it a job well done. He's a good driver, I realize, and if his crew has a good gunner, they will probably be our strongest competitor at the contest.

The reason having a good driver matters for the contest is twofold. The first part is the actual driving. Not being able to see, you have to rely on the TC for directions so you don't end up driving off the course. Secondly, there is the stopping. If you stomp on the brake when the TC tells you to halt, the main gun barrel will bob up and down for what seems like forever. This is at the same moment the gunner is trying to get a bead on the target. Conversely, if you don't push on the brake hard enough, you can roll right past the designated stopping point. Knowing the right amount of pressure to use when braking takes practice. Something that Shorty and I have and the rest of the drivers don't. Xin loi.

Yakima is on the other side of the Cascades from Ft. Lewis. Most of the crews and our gear are loaded onto two large buses for the drive to the Yakima Firing Center. I say most, because Top, Captain Heberle, and a few other guys are driving their own cars there.

The trip takes several hours, but it is quite comfortable on the bus, and the scenery is spectacular. Especially when we are driving through the mountains. It's late September and still summer at Ft. Lewis, but there's snow on the mountain tops as we cross them. The other side of the mountain range is hot and dry. The Firing Center is out in the actual desert, several miles from the town of Yakima. There is just one barracks open for the 25 tank crews, or 100 guys, not counting the support staff, which is just three cooks and the company clerk.

It's afternoon when we arrive, and as we wait for dinner, we play Frisbee in the center aisle of the barracks. The aisle is wide enough for three guys at each end to throw their Frisbees back and forth.

Almost everyone takes a turn.

Well before dinner time, Top shows up at our barracks looking a tee tee bit upset. I hate that. Especially when he comes directly over to me and asks if I loaded the tanks onto the flatcars.

"I loaded some of the tanks on," I admit.

"Then come with me," he says.

This can't be good, and it isn't. One of the tanks was not fully secured in place and shifted around on the flatcar. It is hanging so far off the flatcar that the train had to stop at one of the tunnels, otherwise the tank would get knocked completely off the car.

He has his driver take us to the train tunnel opening. It's about fifty miles to the location of the tank snafu, and on the drive there, I'm wondering what Top wants from me. He hates me, so this could be number ten. If we can't get the tank back on the flatcar, someone might have to drive it all the way to the Yakima Firing Center down the roads of Washington state. And that someone would most likely be me, as I don't expect Top will do it.

We arrive at the train tunnel, and sure enough, there's the tank spun almost halfway around and sticking out so far there is no way it will make it through the tunnel. The train's crew and several company Lifers are standing next to the flatcar.

Top and I walk down to have a look, and it's not looking good. I'm glad it's not my tank, that's for sure.

"Do you think you can drive it back on?" Top asks me.

"I doubt it, Sgt. Popoff."

"You did help load them, didn't you?" he asks.

"I did, but the other crewman tied them down. Shorty and I just drove

them on.”

"So what do you think?" he asks again.

"About what?"

"About getting that tank back on.”

"I already told you. I doubt it. It would be way easier to just drive it off the way it is right now. If I try to straighten it, and the tread on one side slides off the flatcar, it's gonna be a bitch to deal with," I say.

"It's a long way down to the ground," says Top.

And that's exactly what I'm thinking. If it slips and falls off the flatcar with me inside, it would be number ten. Yeah, Top definitely hates me, and that's why I'm here now.

Top is quite right about it being a long way to the ground. The train tracks here are on a typical railroad track bed, which is a rise above grade of about four feet. The ground then levels out for about eight feet at the track access road. Then the grade from the road drops off another five feet to the level of the main road.

"It's a fuckin' tank. It's made for stuff like this," I say, sounding more confident than I feel.

"OK," says Top. "Drive it off."

I climb up on the flatcar and into the tank. What the fuck was I thinking? Once seated in the driver's compartment, I start the engine. All I can see is sky. Fuck, I'm an idiot. I could get my front teeth knocked out or worse if this goes wrong. But since I'm quite used to driving a tank and not being able to see anything, I put the tank in gear and step on the gas.

There's a boo coo loud *kaboom* when the last of the tank tread comes off the flatcar, but the tank is none the worse for wear upon landing. I shoot down the railroad embankment, across the access road, and into an open area next to the shoulder.

I get out to have a look at the track. Everything looks good, and now I'm just dreading having to drive this thing 50 miles down civilian roads where I won't hardly be able to see. As I'm still pondering the situation, it becomes apparent that several of the Lifers are vying for the opportunity to drive the tank to the Firing Center. Alright, I think. What dumb shits.

It's going to be a bitch of a drive. The commo helmets aren't on the tanks, so whoever drives will not be able to get any directions from whoever sits in the TC position. They realize this problem, so Top has one of the Lifers follow his jeep with the tank.

For me, it's a slow ride back in Top's jeep. Being in such close proximity to him, I can almost feel his hate for me. Still better than having to drive the tank to the Firing Center myself.

We get back just about dark, and I've missed dinner at the mess hall. I know I didn't really miss anything. Plus, as I walk into the barracks, Rocky and Shorty are just leaving to go into Yakima. They want to see if there's a McDonald's in town, as dinner at the mess hall was grim. They invite me to come along, mostly so they can hear about the tank fiasco.

So on the ride into town, I tell them about having to drive the tank off the flatcar and about how I was worried I'd have to drive the damn thing all the way back to the Firing Center. They both laugh when I tell them how the Lifers were fighting over who was going to get to drive it back. What dumb shits, we agree. What fucking dumb shits to be exact.

The town of Yakima is only about two city blocks long. There are also some neighborhood areas of houses, but the business district, if you can call it that, is quite small. There is no McDonald's, but there is a bar that has food of sorts. It doesn't take much to surpass army food. Plus, they have beer. After the dry and dusty 100 mile round trip riding in the back of Top's open jeep, I am parched. We order our burgers and beer.

"Bring me two beers please," I say to our waitress, "cuz I'm gonna chug the first one."

She laughs, but as it's a bar in the desert, I'm sure I'm not the first to make that request.

"So whose tank was it?" asks Shorty.

"I don't know. I wasn't really paying attention once I was sure it wasn't mine. Fucking Top tried to infer it was somehow my fault the tank came unsecured. I corrected his thinking on that asap. I told him you loaded that tank," I lie.

Rocky starts laughing while I try to maintain a straight face, but soon I burst out laughing too.

"Fuck you, Wolf!" says Shorty.

"I'm kidding," I say between laughs. "How would I know that anyway? I didn't mark the ones I drove on. Plus, like I told Top, we only drove the tanks on. We didn't secure any of 'em."

Our beers come, and I chug the first one down in two boo coo big swallows, as promised. Man, that was number one. I drink my second beer in the normal manner as we wait for our burgers. When the food arrives, I catch

a whiff and realize I am famished. I'm already thinking I should have ordered three burgers instead of two. In the end, my eyes are bigger than my stomach. The two burgers, along with the two beers, manage to fill me up.

Rocky and I tease Shorty about how it's too bad he won't be able to win Top's contest. Shorty was more worried that he was going to have to drive for Top, but that didn't happen. It's something I can fully and completely commiserate with, having had to crew for an asshole platoon sergeant myself in the Nam.

There is really nothing much to see here in Yakima, and both Rocky and Shorty were here last year, so we drive back to the Firing Center in Rocky's Mustang. The guys are still up in the barracks, and everyone is in a bitchy mood now that they realize there is no day room here. No pool table, no foosball table, no nothing. Some of these guys are practically addicted to playing foosball.

Since there is nothing to do here, no one complains when they turn the lights out at 10 PM. We have to get up at 6 AM, and it's hard to get eight hours of sleep in a barracks with a hundred other guys who are snoring, farting, and worse.

Reveille sounds at 6 AM, and the barracks comes to life. Guys are smoking, shaving, showering, and then strolling over to the mess hall. I'm not expecting much after listening to the dinner complaints last night, so I'm not disappointed. The three cooks do their best to maintain an extremely high level of disdain for all who have caused them to have to get up early to fix breakfast. *Really, you shouldn't have*, I think. And I really mean that.

I'd be happy with a decent cup of coffee and a couple boxes of cereal. But of course, this is the army. While there is no cereal, there is coffee. Boo coo coffee. Unfortunately, the reason there is boo coo coffee is because the army way of preparing coffee is to make one huge urn, and that urn can last days sometimes. By the taste, I'd even say weeks. So I think it goes without saying that the coffee is horrid, but we drink it anyway.

After a breakfast best forgotten as soon as possible, we head back to the barracks. Why? We don't know, but there is really nowhere else to go. We mill about for a short while, and then Top shows up. He says there will be no formation this morning, and after he fills us in, we're all going to the motor pool to unload the tanks. Well, I highly suspect Shorty and I will unload the tanks, as driving them off the flatcars will be scarier for some guys than

driving them on.

Top wants to talk about his contest. He says he wants to sweeten the deal. The winning crew will not only be exempt from duty for a month, but they will also get a limousine ride back to Ft. Lewis. I am hardly impressed with that part. The bus ride was quite pleasant, I thought, so the limo ride isn't much of a motivator. But thirty days exempt from duty... now that's still something worth winning, I think.

At the motor pool, each crew starts to remove the cables and chains securing the tanks. Shorty and I are once again pressed into service. What a bunch of chickens.

In their defense, half of the tank crews here are from the infantry. They've had zero training on tanks. They hate tanks and some are even afraid of them. It's not a bad idea to have a healthy amount of respect for the tanks, but being afraid of them is a weird attitude. I attribute that to how tanks are portrayed in war movies. There are so many scenes of a lone infantryman sneaking up on an unwary tank crew and dropping a frag into the open loader's hatch and then slamming the hatch closed while the grenade detonates, killing the tank crew. Believe me, that only happens in the movies. Short of a miracle, that guy would get killed five times over before he even got close to a tank in real war.

Shorty and I manage to drive all of the tanks off the flatcars with no disasters. Another job well done, we feel. Of course, we get nothing from Top indicating he feels the same, but then we never expected that. Truthfully, if he'd said something even remotely positive, I would have passed out from the blood rushing to my head as I blushed.

It takes all morning to unload the tanks and line them up and then for the crews to install the .50 cal and the coax machine guns. Top says we're going to drive the contest course without ammo the first few times for practice. That's the first good idea I've ever heard from Top. Xin loi, Top.

After our morning at what passes for a motor pool here, we saunter back to the mess hall. It's going to be horrible, I know, but we have nowhere else to go. The cooks, as always, are both full of themselves and full of insults for the diners.

The food here is so horrendous, if they offered us c-rats instead, we would gladly accept. At least they have the one thing that army mess halls always have: unlimited supplies of ice cold milk. Weird, sort of, if you think about it. Milk. Supposedly we're trained killers, but we drink milk by the quart.

After another lunch best forgotten, we head back to the motor pool. Again, there's nowhere else to go. We climb into the tanks, and after a few minutes of horn chatter, Captain Heberle orders the TCs to follow him in his tank. The Captain is followed by Top, and then the rest of the tanks get in the conga line heading into the desert. It soon becomes apparent that this is truly a desert with sand dunes and cacti.

The tank treads throw the sand into the air, creating a cloud of sand. I wish I would have thought to bring a dust mask. Not that I have one, but man, do I need one. The tank drivers are getting the sand job much worse than the rest of the crewmen, who are mostly out of the direct path of the dust. Only the Captain's driver has it number one. For now.

The collar of my fatigue shirt is quickly embedded with sand, so every time I move my head it feels like my neck is rubbing against sandpaper. My neck is already raw, and this is just the first of thirty days here. Either I will have a leather neck by time I'm done here, or my head will just eventually fall off as my neck is slowly sanded away to nothing.

We spend the entire afternoon driving the contest course, and since I have every intention of winning this thing, I am totally focused. By the end of the afternoon, I have the course memorized. Froggy is proving to be an adept TC for our crew. One of the things the TC is graded for in the contest is the time it takes him to make a command to the crew and whether it is the correct command. Froggy isn't a juicer like most of the rest of the Lifer TCs, so his mind is clear and sharp.

Even though there is no PX here, there is an informal NCO club. The Lifers have to be able to drink at lunch and sometimes before lunch or there would be no reason for them to remain in the military.

I can't wait to get back to the barracks so I can rip my shirt off and rinse my raw neck with some cold water. Although the cold water feels number one on my neck, when I stop pouring water on it, the skin burns and smarts. This month is going to be brutal, I can already tell. I totally expected it.

Rocky wants to go into Yakima for dinner instead of the mess hall, and I'm all for that. Froggy and Lenny also come along. Now that the contest here is officially started, the crew Shorty is in doesn't want him fraternizing with the other contestants. Xin loi, Shorty. Plus there is really only seating for four in Rocky's Mustang. We could probably squeeze one more person in the backseat, like maybe Jeanette, as she would have to sit on someone's lap. That would be number one. No one wants to let Shorty sit on their lap, even

if his crew would let him hangout with us.

We go to the same bar we ate at last night. As we are placing our orders, the waitress remembers me and asks if I want two beers to start again. I tell her yes, and I'm almost thinking about pouring the first one on my raw neck. But I opt to chug it almost all the way instead. The desert really gives you a powerful thirst. I have the same dinner tonight: two burgers and two beers. And it's number one. It's going to be a real lifesaver that Rocky has his car here. If we had to eat at the mess hall for every meal some guys would surely go AWOL.

We were warned before coming here that at least one guy would get married to some woman from Yakima. Two guys got married to women from Yakima last year when M Co. was here. It's going to be difficult for whoever it is, because almost no one brought their personal vehicles. To get into town, they have to call a cab. That could get a tee tee bit expensive after a while.

Back at the barracks, the Frisbee tossing is going strong. So strong that if you want to move about the barracks, you have to go up one of the two side aisles along the windows. It's nearly impossible to cross the center aisle without getting hit by a Frisbee. Because space is so tight, there is only one way to throw the Frisbee in here: underhanded and with all your might. If you get hit by one, you know it.

Out of a hundred guys, I'm the only one with a radio. As soon as I walk in, there are numerous shouts for me to get my radio out. Actually they say to get my *fucking* radio out, but I'm personally trying to cut back on my use of the "F" word.

Anyway, I get my radio out. There is one, yes I said one, radio station here that we consider worth listening to. This is going to be an agonizing month. Crap! (See?)

Lights out at 10 pm, and the next thing I know, it's Reveille again. Man, I hate that. Another horrid breakfast at the mess hall with the cooks swearing up a storm. They tend to swear at us in Spanish, so while I don't know exactly what they're saying, I know enough to know it's not a compliment. The coffee is only two days old today, so I should count my blessings, I guess.

After breakfast it's straight to the motor pool, and then we set off for the contest course. As we drive the course, I am focused. Froggy is on top of it as well. Lenny, being infantry, was my only real concern in terms of our chances of winning. The loader's job isn't that hard, as long as you can keep your head while in the turret when the main gun is fired.

My concern has now shifted to Rocky. Rocky ETS's three weeks after we get back to Ft. Lewis. Lucky fucker. He will spend the last two weeks clearing post, as everyone does when getting out of the army. So if we win Top's contest, Rocky will only really have one week exempt from duty. And since Rocky drove his car here, he definitely doesn't care about the limo ride back to post.

The one thing in our favor is that Rocky is a born competitor. Besides hating to lose at pool, he and his brother build and race cars for a living. Plus, because he won the contest here last year, some guys have been challenging him. It doesn't help that I brag to anyone willing to listen that we are winning this thing so they might as well just forget it. I'm kind of amazed at the competitive nature expressed for this stupid contest.

The Firing Center is like a tee tee oasis in the Yakima desert. There are a couple of acres of lush green lawn they keep mowed by a flock of sheep, and there's a grove of shade trees about 20 feet high on one side of the entry road leading into the complex. Although the lawn looks like a park, it is covered in sheep manure, so you can't really sit or lay in the grass. You can only walk on it, and that's only if you don't mind stepping in sheep shit every step of the way.

It's definitely deceiving, as the place looks quite pleasant when you first drive in. However, once we leave the motor pool area and head into the actual desert, the change is dramatic. The sand and the aroma of sage is omnipresent. We're all sweaty from the heat, and even though it's the so-called "dry heat," it doesn't stop the sand kicked up by the tanks from sticking to every square inch of exposed skin. The sand is also very adept at sticking to our clothes and boots as well.

After a morning driving around the contest course, we head back to the mess hall for lunch. It's so horrid out on the course that lunch at the mess hall sounds sort of appealing. Sort of. Still have to consider dealing with the surly cooks to get our lunch. You do not want them to perceive any type of insult, as they would happily spit on your food or worse when you're not looking.

When we first return to the barracks to clean up some before lunch, it's reminiscent of Basic training, as all 100 of us line up at the one drinking fountain. We're all so thirsty, we feel we could drink a gallon of water. While you have your drink, you have to suffer the complaints of almost 100 guys yelling for you to leave some water for them. Much encouragement is given

to hurry up and finish drinking already!

I make sure to leave some room for the only thing worth going to the mess hall for: ice cold milk. The food, as expected, is terrible. It must be considered some type of punishment to be sent here to the Firing Center so they have also sent the three worst cooks in M Co. to feed us.

After lunch, it's back to the contest course. I'm fairly confident of my ability to drive the course properly, but if we keep practicing, more and more guys are likely to get in their groove. The competition could get fierce in the end. I hate that.

Since we're just playing at war, we have a good time chatting and teasing one another over our tank intercom. We can also tease the other crews over the horn when one of them messes up. Heck, we tease the other crews even when they don't screw up. Top keeps getting on the horn to chastise us about improper radio etiquette. I can't believe the Lifers take this make-believe stuff so seriously. It's a stupid game. It's a fucking stupid game to be exact!

After another hot and dusty afternoon, it's back to the barracks. There is no air conditioning, so while the barracks offers shelter from the sun and sand, it's still hot long after the sun goes down. I have my radio out for our only entertainment, and some of the guys are once again in the center aisle throwing the Frisbees. Lots of complaining going on, and this is just the first week of a month long stay here.

Someone is upset by the lack of a day room. More specifically: no foosball table. Overhearing that, I remember that I saw a foosball table at the pool room connected to the bar that Rocky and I went to.

"Hey Rocky, what's the name of that bar?" I ask.

"Curly's," Rocky answers.

"Hey guys, there's a foosball table in the pool hall next to Curly's bar in downtown Yakima," I mention. I laugh to myself as I say "downtown," as Yakima is so small.

The way some of the guys run to the barracks payphone to call for a cab, you might have thought I had just said that there was free beer and naked women at the pool hall in Yakima. As I've already mentioned, some of the guys here take foosball *seriously*. In the end, enough guys want to go to Curly's that three cabs are called. I'm thinking there might even be a fight as the cabs arrive if they don't arrive all at once. I have to admit I'm a tee tee bit surprised there are even cabs here, as you could walk from one end of Yakima to the other in less than five minutes. It's just that the Firing Center is

several miles out in the boonies, and in this heat it would be near suicidal to try walking into town.

With three cabs full of foosball fanatics I would hardly get to play myself, so I decide to stay at the barracks this evening, though a few cold beers from Curly's is enticing. We have nothing to cool us off in the barracks, not even a fan. Not quite as number ten as the Nam during the dry season but so close it hardly matters. At least I'm not boo coo worried about being killed here. Although it would certainly be possible. I'm mostly focused on finishing my time in the army so I can go home. I hope.

Saturday is another morning on the contest course. Geez, this is really getting boring. The good thing is we only have to work half a day on Saturday. Except for the cooks. They have to work a straight seven-day week for the whole month. No wonder they have a bad attitude. Xin loi.

After lunch, Rocky asks if I want to go for a cruise into town.

"Thought you'd never ask," I reply.

"We can get a bottle of wine in town and then head out into the desert," says Rocky.

"Sounds like heaven to me."

We drive into Yakima to the only grocery store in town.

"I'll buy since you're driving," I say as I get out of Rocky's Mustang and sky into the store.

They actually have wine in their coolers next to the beer. One thing about the desert is everyone appreciates cold beverages. The beer looks so appealing, but Rocky said wine. Since he's supplying the car, I buy a bottle of Boone's Farm Apple Wine. It's quite popular, and Rocky seems happy with my choice.

Rocky's Mustang is boo coo fast. He doesn't speed out of town. He just runs smoothly through the gears until we are out in the boonies. Then he downshifts and really cranks the RPMs up. In seconds we are going 100 mph, and with the windows down, we quickly cool off.

The car is kind of a sleeper. To look at it you would assume it's just a stock Mustang, which is a fairly fast car, but Rocky obviously has some extra goodies under the hood. This thing is a rocket. When he first downshifted and stepped on the gas, I could feel myself being pressed back into my seat by the G forces. Boo coo awesome.

We pass the bottle of wine back and forth so we can finish it before it gets

too warm. We are far out into the high desert before Rocky decides to turn around. We stop for a few moments so we can appreciate how cool it is when we're going 100 mph compared to sitting still. I can tell it's easily over 100 degrees out here even without a thermometer to verify the temperature. We don't stop for long before Rocky runs his Mustang through the gears again. He drives it smoothly even though he is flooring it every time he shifts the gears. This thing might be the fastest car I've ever ridden in.

We are soon back at Yakima. Amazing how quickly you can get somewhere when you drive 100 mph. As we cruise the downtown strip, all two blocks of it, we notice an empty lot between two stores. There are some locals gathered, cars parked with the hoods up, checking out each other's mills. We drive past at first until Rocky notices a couple of young women. He turns around, and we park next to a 1949 Ford. I know it's a 1949 Ford because that is the year I was born. I know what every 1949 car looks like, since one of my life dreams is to own a car made in 1949.

The guys seem oblivious to our arrival. The two young women turn out to be sisters and the 1949 Ford is their car, which they have to share. After my ride in Rocky's car, and without even looking at what the other guys have under their hoods, I am quite sure that in a race, Rocky's Mustang would blow the doors off any car here.

Rocky seems more interested in chatting up the two sisters than racing. I'm half-surprised since Rocky has his girlfriend back at Ft. Lewis. The sisters are surprised that I actually know it's a 1949 Ford. In 1970, it's just considered an old car of no interest.

As I look more closely at the '49 Ford, I notice that while the body is in excellent condition, the paint job is boo coo rough. Back in Michigan, they salt the roads in winter, and the cars rust out boo coo fast. Here in Washington, they don't use road salt. The car bodies are in great shape, but the desert sand and sun does a number on the paint job.

As I get a closer look at the '49 Ford, I start to laugh. I can see obvious brush marks.

"Whadja do," I ask, "paint this car with a broom?"

Both sisters and Rocky laugh at my question.

"No," one of the sisters says, "my dad painted it with a brush."

That statement elicits a belly laugh from Rocky. I can tell their feelings are kind of hurt, so I try to make amends. First I introduce myself and Rocky, and then I tell them we're at the Firing Center for the month. They already

know we're out-of-towners, as they both know everyone in Yakima.

The two sisters are Cheryl and Diane. Diane is the oldest. I would guess she's probably about 21. I don't ask their ages. I know better. They are both quite good-looking and seem friendly. An unusual attitude when people find out you're in the army.

I have a walk around the '49 Ford looking for anything positive I can say about it. They both follow me as I have my walk around. The body is near perfect, and I say so. Even the interior, which is another thing the sun and desert destroy, is near mint.

"The seats are like new because my dad always had seat covers on them," Diane says. "He really didn't want us to take the covers off, but we did anyway. We thought, how much longer can this car last?"

Rocky and I have a fun time chatting up Diane and Cheryl, and before we didi, Diane gives me her phone number. I didn't even ask for it. So far so good, I think. I will have to be careful though, as I don't want to be the guy who gets married to someone from Yakima just to keep the statistics true.

On the ride back to the Firing Center, I tease Rocky about flirting with the two sisters, and I promise him I won't mention it to Jeanette.

"Oh man! You just had to bring that up."

He sounds somewhat upset.

"What? Fuck, Rocky, you're gettin' out in five weeks. You're a lucky fucker."

"I got a boo coo big problem," says Rocky.

"Like what?"

"Like Jeanette wants to come home with me, and I kind of told her she could. But I can't take her with me," answers Rocky.

"Yeah, you got a problem alright."

"Man, when she wants something, she knows just how to get it," says Rocky.

As a guy having observed Jeanette being provocative, I completely understand. Rocky never had a chance. Not a fucking chance to be exact.

"So what are ya gonna do?"

"Lie," he says. "I'm gonna tell her I get out a day later than I really do and didi before she knows I'm gone."

Good luck with that, Rocky, I think. You'll need it.

When we get back to the barracks, all the windows open, but it's still warm. At least it's not stifling hot. The guys stuck in the barracks are still

playing Frisbee even though it's just about time for lights out. Once some of the guys realize I'm back, they scream for my radio to be turned on. I get it out, but within minutes the lights are turned off.

One week down and three to go. It's going to be a long month here. I hate that.

Sunday morning I notice that several of the guys who drove to the Firing Center from Ft. Lewis have taken off. Most of them are Lifers who have family back in Tacoma or on the base, so that's where they went, I assume. I'm surprised Rocky didn't go back to his trailer to see Jeanette, but I'm glad he didn't or I would have been stuck here myself. It feels number one to just lay around in the morning and not have to suffer all the sand on the contest course. We do have to suffer the constant aroma of sage, though. I like to cook, and I swear I'll never put sage in or on anything I cook for the rest of my life.

It starts to heat up in the barracks once the sun starts to get high in the sky. It also doesn't help when there are about 75-80 guys packed inside, and Frisbee is already going strong. I have my radio on, but the only station here that plays music we're remotely interested in is boo coo lame. It's a tee tee bit better than the one radio station in the Nam that only played about ten different songs over and over again. The station here in Yakima plays about twenty songs over and over. I really only like a couple of them. I guess it's better than nothing.

After a pitiful lunch, Rocky asks me, Froggy, and Lenny if we want to go into Yakima and have dinner at Curly's. Of course we all say yes, and we pile into Rocky's car and make a beeline for Yakima.

We're all hungry. The food was so bad at the mess hall, we hardly ate a thing all day. The waitress at Curly's remembers me, and without having to ask me, she brings me two beers before she even takes our order. She smiles and gives me a wink when she sets them down in front of me. I'm starting to like this place, and I'm starting to see why some guys end up getting married to the women here.

While we wait for our food, Rocky looks into the pool hall to see what's happening in there. Several of the guys from M Co. are already in there playing foosball. No surprise there. Some guys are playing pool and others are waiting their turn to play.

Back at M Co., Rocky is The Man as far as pool is concerned. He is the

guy to beat. Or I should say *try* to beat, as I have never seen Rocky lose. Rocky hits the cue ball so hard on the break that he almost always sinks a ball and then proceeds to run the table. It happens so often that several times I've watched the guy Rocky was beating just hand the cue stick to the next guy in line. Once or twice, when Rocky missed a shot, the guy who gave up his cue stick almost had to fight the next guy to get it back.

Since Rocky is not used to having to wait to play pool, he comes back to the table and sits down. He is also very pragmatic and astute about playing pool in a small town where everyone knows everyone and Rocky knows no one.

"Ya gotta be careful about just walkin' in and beatin' some local at a game of pool. They'll almost for sure want to play for money. It doesn't matter how much or how little the bet is, they hate to lose. Especially in front of their buddies. Or worse, their girlfriend. So you can expect to get yer ass kicked if you win."

"A good reason to play foosball," I comment.

Rocky laughs and says, "That shows what you know, Wolf. The guys that play foosball are even worse. They're fuckin' fanatics. You beat the wrong guy at foosball, and he won't just beat yer ass, he'll kill ya, too."

“No shit?"

"No shit," replies Rocky.

I'll have to remember that, as I'm getting quite fond of playing foosball. I'm not very good at it, so no one wants me on their team. When they have to let me play because I'm the next guy in line, they only let me be the goalie.

Our food arrives, and there is not much further talking as we chow down. The mess hall food is so abysmal that burgers at a bar seem like high cuisine. Curly's is a noisy and smoky place, so after we finish our dinner, we sky.

Back at our barracks, the only thing happening is Frisbee. I get out my radio even before the outcry for me to do it. Soon it's lights outs and the end of our weekend.

The second week here is almost a complete replay of the first. We get up at 6 AM to have our meager breakfast at the mess hall, and then for most of us, it's off to the motor pool. Mornings and afternoons are spent driving around in the sand and scrub that is the Yakima desert. The smell of sage is so overpowering, I hate every breath I take. It also doesn’t help that every breath is accompanied with a blast of sand. I knew this place would be

miserable, but I couldn't fully imagine how number ten it would be until actually experiencing it firsthand. So army.

The week seems to drag by, but the weekend finally arrives. Most of the guys who have their personal vehicles here take off. Rocky can no longer stand being away from Jeanette, and he didis for home.

Froggy, Lenny, and myself are pretty confined to quarters. When some of the foosball fanatics decide to call a cab for a ride into Yakima, we decide to get in on it.

As we pass the empty lot that serves as a sort of staging ground for all the motorheads in Yakima, I spy the '49 Ford. I'm tempted to get out of the sun and heat like the rest of the guys heading into Curly's, but I walk down the street to chat with Cheryl and Diane instead. They seem glad to see me, and I am more than glad to see them.

We talk for a while, but it's the hottest part of the day. I haven't eaten yet, so I offer to buy them lunch at Curly's, and they accept. They offer to let me drive the two or three blocks there. Since it's what I consider my “birth year car,” I have to accept.

We head inside, and I see that Froggy and Lenny have a table to themselves, so we join them. Froggy isn't aware that Rocky and I already met Cheryl and Diane, so he is quite impressed that I have managed to pick up two good-looking women on my own in such a short time. I don't want to wreck his impression of my pick-up style so I say nothing and just introduce them.

Our waitress arrives and knowing both Cheryl and Diane, she says hi to them and sets two beers down in front of me without saying a word. She gives me a wink again and says she'll be right back with the menus.

"Do you know her, too?" Cheryl asks.

"Only casually," I answer.

"The Wolfman seems to know all the good-lookin' ladies here in Yakima," adds Froggy with a sly smile.

"Hardly. As a matter of fact, all the women I know in Yakima are in this bar right now, with two of them sitting at this table."

After perusing the menu, I ask, "Is there anything besides the burgers worth eating here?"

The sisters both smile and Diane says, "When you've lived here as long as us, even the burgers aren't really worth eating. The cheeseburgers are a little better."

Obviously they have not eaten in an army mess hall. When our waitress returns, she chats briefly with the sisters before taking our orders. We all takes Diane's suggestion and order cheeseburgers. Two for me, but the sisters only order one each. Froggy and Lenny make up for their slack by ordering three each. I hope they're really that good.

Cheryl asks me how I know the waitress here.

I laugh and say, "I don't. She must remember me from the first couple of times we came here. I was so thirsty I ordered two beers right off. Actually I wanted to order six right off, but I knew they would get warm before I could finish them."

Even though it's noisy and smoky inside Curly's, we have a good time talking and laughing with the two sisters while we eat and drink. They offer us a ride back to the Firing Center in their Ford, and we readily accept. They even want me to drive again, so I do. Froggy and Lenny get in the back while the two sisters sit up front with me. I kind of like that.

They suggest we drive around town a tee tee bit before heading out to the Firing Center. We get the grand tour from the two sisters as we drive the neighborhoods of Yakima. It only takes about twenty minutes, as it's a very small town. I don't really want to go back to the Firing Center, but I don't know what else to do, and besides, it's not my car.

We return to the barracks around 5 PM, and Diane asks me what I'm doing tomorrow.

I laugh.

"Watching the sagebrush grow until it gets dark."

"Do you still have my phone number?" she asks.

"I do."

"Call me tomorrow afternoon, and maybe we can go on a picnic out in the desert," she says.

Now normally the thought of going out in the desert for a picnic would have as much appeal as poking myself in the eye repeatedly with a sharp stick. However, I decide to have an open mind, despite my hate of heat and direct sun, not to mention the sand and sagebrush. Not to mention that Diane has been nothing but nice to me since we've met, and when you're in the army, that doesn't happen often, if at all.

After the girls didi, Froggy is trying to tease me about hustling all the good-looking ladies in Yakima.

"Hey, she asked me."

"I know, you lucky bastard," says Froggy.

"If you want, when I call her tomorrow I'll try to set you up with Cheryl," I say. "You know, sort of a double date."

"You're OK, Wolfman. That would be number one," replies Froggy.

So the next day, after lounging around the barracks all morning dodging the Frisbee, I call Diane and make plans for the picnic. Cheryl agrees to come along as Froggy's date.

Around 1 PM, Froggy and I see the '49 Ford pulling up the entrance drive. A car never looked so good. It's our passport out of here, plus there are two attractive young women inside.

We chat briefly, but we want to didi mau before the rest of the jerks in M Co. realize there are women here. Women with a car no less. Diane and Cheryl have packed a picnic basket with things to eat, but they weren't sure what we wanted to drink, so we head into Yakima to the grocery store to get some refreshments for our tee tee picnic.

We leave the sisters in the car while we head inside. It's smokin' hot out, and I want beer, but Froggy vetoes my plan.

"Most women don't like beer," says Froggy. "Didn't you notice they both only had one beer at Curly's last night?"

"You only had one beer," I answer.

"I don't drink much beer, either," he says.

"So what should we get?"

"Wine would be good," says Froggy. "It doesn't have to stay ice cold to be good like beer."

We get three bottles of the Boone's Farm Apple Wine, and then we're off for the desert. I'm still not quite sure as to the wisdom of picnicking in the desert, but Diane and Cheryl live here. Maybe they know something I don't.

It turns out they do know something I don't. Yakima valley has a river flowing through it. There are many farms of mostly orchards that are irrigated by the river. The sisters know a farmer that doesn't mind them having a picnic under some of his apple trees. Very appropriate, I think, as we sit in the shade under some apple trees drinking cool apple wine.

Diane and Cheryl have packed a fantastic lunch for us, and we spend the afternoon eating, chatting, and telling stories. Well, mostly I'm telling stories, because once I start, one story just seems to lead to another.

"Wolfman!" says Froggy, "Yer not letting the ladies get a word in edgewise."

"Xin loi," I say. "I know, I do that all the time."

"What's that mean?" asks Cheryl.

"I guess it means I should shut up more often, but I can't seem to help myself."

"No, not that. You said something that sounded like, 'sin loy.'"

"Oh. It's a bad habit I still have of speaking Vietnamese when I shouldn't. Xin loi means 'Sorry about that.'"

"Were you in Vietnam?" asks Diane.

"Only for a short while. Less than four months."

"So what happened?" she asks.

"I got wounded, but it was what they call a Million Dollar wound."

"Why do they call it that?" Cheryl asks.

"I'm not completely sure. I think it's because you wouldn't trade it for a million dollars. Do you know, Froggy?"

"I think you're right," Froggy says. "Like if you can have a million bucks and stay in the Nam, or you can trade the money for a minor wound and go home, you'd take the wound."

"Froggy, that's not your real name, is it?" asks Cheryl.

Both Froggy and I laugh.

"His real name is Elwood. I started calling him Froggy, and now we all have nicknames on our crew," I answer.

"So what's your nickname?" asks Cheryl.

"Wolfy mostly, but sometimes Froggy likes to call me Wolfman when he's trying to get my attention."

An unexpectedly good time is had by all. Probably unexpected only by me, since I thought we were going out to swelter in the desert as we do nearly every day on the contest course at the Firing Center.

Instead we sit on a couple of blankets the sisters have brought in what looks like a sea of shade. The apple trees in this orchard are all almost exactly the same height. The trees, while not touching each other, are closely spaced. The effect of this is that the slight breeze comes through several acres of shade before reaching us. It's like our own private world, and it's cool and quiet.

I do finally shut up so that Froggy and Cheryl and Diane can talk some as well. Froggy tells them that he's an old car enthusiast like them. Back at Ft. Lewis, he has a 1955 Chevy with something special under the hood. I know this because I've ridden with Froggy to the motor pool often. He never gets

on it to impress us, but by the way it sounds, it's got something more than the original engine.

The sisters both laugh.

"We hate old cars," says Cheryl, "but it's the only car we have. We'd love to have something new or even just newer. Don't think that you're the only ones that noticed our dad painted it with a brush."

"Still looks like he painted it with a broom and then sprinkled it with buttermilk to me," I tease.

"Hey! I like that part. The white sprinkles. Because of that lots of people don't notice the brush marks," says Diane.

I haven't had such a good time since getting to Ft. Lewis, and I hate when evening arrives. The sisters need to go home for dinner, and they both have to work tomorrow. So do we, if you can call what we do in the army “work.” It's definitely something unpleasant, so I'm sure the Lifers consider it work. I consider it a waste.

Between the four of us, we have consumed all three bottles of wine and most of the food the sisters brought. We are all feeling number one as we pack up the few things left over from our picnic. Again the sisters insist I drive, but this time Cheryl sits in the backseat with Froggy. He better watch out, or he'll end up as a statistic. I should talk with Diane sitting next to me on the ride back to the Firing Center. I'll have to watch myself.

Chapter 14

The guys at M Co. that stayed behind at Ft. Lewis are having a tee tee bit of vacation from Top. He has only returned to Ft. Lewis once so far to check on things and to hand out the duty roster for Regimental Guard and KP.

So the vacation goes double for guys like Kent that have a medical profile that prevents them from being assigned to such mundane and insulting tasks such as KP and guard duty. There is really nothing for Kent to do officially or unofficially with half the company absent in Yakima. So he entertains himself by cruising into Tacoma with Farkas and Flemmy.

The civilian population of Tacoma is surprisingly friendly to the soldiers stationed at Ft. Lewis, and Kent and his two buddies have made several friends and been invited to numerous parties. They find it hard to return to the base every night when the parties end, so one of their new friends suggests a house to rent. It's owned by a retired Lifer who lives in the house directly behind it. Not the best scenario, but it's got four bedrooms and a huge living room. Great for parties.

With Top still away most of the time, the trio is slacking with a vengeance. They rarely even stop by the barracks at M Co. Instead, they pretty much party from the moment they get up until they go to bed or pass out, whichever comes first. The good thing about having so many civilian friends is that it's much easier to score pot in Tacoma than back at Ft. Lewis. Not that you can't get pot at the base, but it's crap and hardly worth smoking. Their house has suddenly become party central for both their army and civilian buddies.

Since moving in, every Friday evening and all day Saturday is non-stop revelry. Even their landlord stops in to join the weekly festivities, drinking his share of the cases of beer people bring. He doesn't get in on the pot smoking but doesn't seem to be offended by it either.

The kitchen is seldom used as most of their meals are taken at the McDonald's a few blocks away. It seems like gourmet cuisine compared to what they'd have to eat on base. The McDonald's is close enough that they could walk there, but they never do. Why would they? They have Kent's VW at their disposal.

Farkas is from New York City, and for today's party, he is planning on

having a “mustard taste” for the guests. Apparently in parts of NYC, the bars all have their own particular mustard on all the tables with all the free pretzels you can eat. Of course the idea behind the free pretzels is that the saltiness will cause the patrons to drink boo coo beer. On top of that, the bars make sure their mustard is *hot*. That way they ensure even more beer will be consumed.

Farkas' main problem with his Mustardfest plan is that he is in Tacoma. The only mustard he has been able to find so far is bright yellow, which looks and tastes like baby shit according to Farkas. It's not even hot, which is really the whole point of eating it in the first place: to see who can eat the most pretzels slathered in smokin' hot mustard.

So they didi mau in Kent's VW, looking for a delicatessen or another grocery store on Farkas' quest for hot mustard. They find no delicatessens, but they locate a couple of much larger grocery stores where Farkas scores a few mustards purporting on the labels to be hot. We'll see about that, Farkas thinks as he's waiting in line to pay for his jars of mustard. He knows he should probably buy more. If his mustard tasting is a success, they will easily consume several jars. Especially after they get drunk and start to dare each other to eat a pretzel with more and more hot mustard slathered on it. Just the thought of watching some of his guests with tears pouring out of their eyes from overloading on spicy mustard makes Farkas smile. He can hardly wait. He's a bastard, and he knows it.

Kent and Flemmy are waiting in the car, listening to the radio.

"Git anything hot enough for yer contest?" asks Kent when Farkas climbs in the VW.

"Not sure yet," Farkas answers. “Have to wait to get home and taste them. Besides, it's not a contest. At least not until guys get drunk. You watch, it'll be fun."

"Watching is what I fuckin' plan to do. I'm not eating any hot shit mustard. I know about hot stuff. It burns you twice. It burns goin' in and it burns comin' out," says Kent.

He laughs and lights up a Marlboro.

"Hey gimme a square, man," Farkas says.

Kent hands Farkas his pack of smokes. After lighting up, Farkas peruses his recent purchases, pulling a out a small jar.

"This is the one I have the highest hopes for. Chinese mustard. I've never seen it before. Pretty expensive, but it said it was extra hot.”

Kent looks over at the jar of mustard Farkas is holding. "Oh yeah, I had some Chinese mustard in the Nam. It's fuckin' boo coo hot man."

"Cool," says Farkas as he puts the jar back in his bag. "We just need to get a couple of cases of beer, and we're ready to party."

They return to their crib in the afternoon, and to make sure they all get their fair share of beer, they start drinking.

Farkas is also tasting all the mustard he bought. He's quite pleased, as the Chinese mustard is indeed extra hot, just as the label proclaims. Should have bought two jars of it, he thinks, but it's too late now.

"Anyone want to try the mustard?" Farkas asks.

"Fuck no!" the other two say in near-unison.

It's not long before the party guests start to arrive. First come the major slackers, who know how to game the system and therefore don't do squat at the base. They skip out early on Friday. Heck, the major slackers usually skip out early every day.

Next to show are the friends who live in and around Tacoma, who come as soon as they get off from work. That is, the residents that have a job, as Tacoma is currently gripped with a very high unemployment rate, as the huge Boeing plant laid off most of their workers. Things are so bad in that the Tacoma schools only operate for half a day. It always seems like summer vacation with kids playing in the yards and parks every day.

Lots of women, young and single, are in attendance. This is the life, Kent thinks. He takes a toke of the joint going by and then passes it to someone else. Yeah, smokin' pot just like in the Nam, except there's cold beer and good-looking women, and no one shootin' at us. What could be better?

Farkas tries to gets his mustard tasting going, and since there is no other food available, many of the party guests are eating the pretzels. Most find the thought of slathering the pretzel with mustard unnecessary. Not exactly what Farkas had hoped for, but no one is really drunk yet.

There is much laughing and talking going on. Some guys, who apparently haven't gotten to play with guns enough in the Nam, are talking about going hunting here in Washington. Someone named Frank is asking if they can hunt on Ft. Lewis. It's a huge area, but no one here knows if hunting is allowed there.

The conversation returns to guns: what guns they own and what guns they wish they owned. Kent has his personal shotgun here at the house. Mostly for their protection, as the house is in a rough neighborhood. So Kent gets out his

shotgun to show it off. He is quite proud of it. The gun is passed around to some of the hunting enthusiasts, and everyone thinks it a fine weapon. Worthy of the hunt.

Frank asks if he can borrow Kent's shotgun to go hunting. Frank is a recent acquaintance to him, but Kent – having started drinking long before the guests arrived – is quite drunk. Being in a generous mood, he agrees to his new friend's request. Frank is a Head, like most of Kent's army friends. He smokes pot, so he must be cool, thinks Kent.

Finally, some of the guests in attendance are drunk enough for Farkas to sucker them into trying the hot mustard. Mostly they are a tee tee bit hungry, and the pretzels are appealing. However, only a few of the drunkest are interested in the mustard. Several guys eat enough of the hot mustard to make their eyes water, so Farkas at least gets what he wanted. No one gets into it enough to challenge or dare each other to eat more. That must be a New York thing.

When Kent wakes the next morning and his mind clears a tee tee bit, he already knows he has done something wrong. Even Flemmy and Farkas were taken by surprise at Kent's willingness to loan Frank his gun. They both know how much Kent cherishes his shotgun, and he hardly knows Frank. Not to mention that they liked having it in the house. Like many vets of the war in the Nam, they still can't seem to shake the notion they might come under attack. Even in Tacoma.

"How well do you know this Frank guy?" Farkas asks Kent.

"Well, he's a friend of Mark and Rick's," answers Kent.

"So you don't really know him," Farkas says.

"Well no, not really. But he's a Head. It'll be OK."

"You fuckin' hope!" says Farkas.

It's Saturday morning, barely, as it's already after 11 AM. Technically a workday in the army. But with Top in Yakima, there's no reason to go into M Co. unless they want to play pool or foosball.

Instead, they hang out at their new house, watching John Wayne movies on a small black and white TV while they smoke pot and drink some of the beer left over from last night. That doesn't happen often. Having leftover beer, that is.

"Must be because we didn't invite Gomez," says Farkas.

"What's because we didn't invite Gomez?" asks Kent.

"Why we still have some beer left.”

"Didn't invite him cuz he's in Yakima," says Kent.

"Just as well. When are they comin' back? Do you know?"

"Two more weeks, I think," answers Kent.

Their slack afternoon is interrupted only by a quick trip to McDonald's for a late lunch, and then it's back to the crib. On the way, they grab a couple of six-packs of beer.

Back at the house, their landlord stops in for a visit. He accepts the offered beer and sits down to join the guys while they continue to watch TV.

Although they don't smoke any pot while their landlord is present, they don't put the bag of pot laying on the coffee table away or bother to empty the ashtray, which is full of roaches. He's been at their parties and has never said anything about it, so they assume he's cool.

He doesn't stay long, just long enough to polish of 2 or 3 beers, but who's counting? The rest of the afternoon and evening slowly pass. A couple of army friends stop by, and the pot smoking picks up a tee tee bit, and the friends brought beer so there's that as well. A mini party of sorts, and it lasts until the last person falls asleep or passes out.

When it comes time to pass out, their friends have to make do since there are no extra beds. They are sprawled all over the living room on Sunday morning. There's no food in the house, except pretzels and some mustard, so their guests sky back to Ft. Lewis for breakfast at the mess hall. Kent, Farkas, and Flemmy have pretzels. Farkas even dips his in mustard.

"Yer fuckin' sick, man," Kent says.

"What?"

"Fuckin' mustard for breakfast.”

"You should try it," says Farkas.

"Fuck you! The pretzels are bad enough," says Kent.

No one stops by the rest of the day. Not even their dear landlord. They spend the day lounging around their crib with nothing really to do and nothing to watch on TV. They're bored, but being in the army, they are expert at it.

Chapter 15

Arriving back at the Firing Center, I get out of the car to let Froggy out of the backseat. As I stand beside the car and chat briefly with Diane, Froggy has yet to emerge. When I check the backseat, I see he is otherwise engaged with Cheryl. I'm thinking he better be boo coo careful, or he'll be the first statistic of M Co. while here in Yakima.

Froggy finally exits the car with an impish grin on his face. I guess things are going well for him and Cheryl. We say our goodbyes and head into the barracks. Inside, all is quiet. It's past lights out already, so I waste no time getting to bed. Tomorrow it will be back to the desert and the contest course.

They wake us at 6 AM. The cooks are as insolent as ever, and the food is also worse than ever. Scrambled eggs made from powdered eggs resemble the real thing but in looks only. I think powdered eggs might be satisfactory when used in baking, but eating them straight is awful. I don't like scrambled eggs even made from fresh eggs. I pass on the powdered eggs and instead have some cereal. As always, there is boo coo ice cold milk here, and I make sure to get my share.

Top informs us that on Tuesday and Thursday, we will have the day off. Sounds good, except we only get the day off because we will be going out at night to practice the course in the dark, as part of the contest will be at night. It's usually cool at night, so that will be number one at least. The number ten part is the only thing we'll have to pass the time on Tuesday and Thursday will be sweltering in our barracks.

After our morning and afternoon in the desert, we return to our barracks. Rocky suggests we go into Yakima for dinner at Curly's. I know Froggy is hoping to cross paths with Cheryl. As we drive down the main drag in town there are several cars in the empty lot, but the '49 Ford is not among them. I know Froggy is disappointed, because I am as well.

However, the food at Curly's is much appreciated after breakfast from the mess hall. The waitress who has served us in our previous visits is not here today, so I have to actually order my beers instead of having them just arrive as if by magic.

We can hear several other guys from M Co. playing foosball next door. They are making quite a racket, just as they do when playing in the day room

back at Ft. Lewis. Rocky is right about the foosball players being fanatics. Fucking fanatics to be exact.

Our food arrives and we chow down. We lounge around a tee tee bit after eating since we don't have to get up at 6 AM tomorrow. Froggy takes a walk down the street to see if the sisters and their '49 Ford have showed up while Rocky, Lenny, and I go into the pool hall to watch the guys playing foosball. It really is more about watching the players than the ball. They hit it so hard, you can barely see the ball at all. It's fun to see the look on a guy's face when the other team scores, because he often didn't even see the ball. Two of the current foosball players are the beloved M Co. cooks, Ramon and Adolph. They are excellent at foosball. If only they could cook that way, too.

Froggy returns empty handed, so to speak, as the sisters are nowhere to be seen. We have a few more beers as we watch the cooks beat all the other foosball players there. Man, they're good, I think, but Rocky might be right about the dangers of beating too many guys on what they consider their home turf. Because of that, we decide to head back to the barracks and leave the cooks to fend for themselves.

Rocky hot rods it a tee tee bit after we are out of the town proper. He does it mostly because we have the windows down, and it's still hot outside. Better to cool off a tee tee bit before we get to the barracks.

The only thing happening when we get back is the Frisbee toss that's been going just about non-stop since we got to Yakima. I get my radio out and turn it on, despite the fact that the only radio station we can get seems lamer and lamer. The songs they play here are awful. One song I find particularly distasteful is by a band named Bread. How sorry can you get when the best name you can come up with for your band is Bread? Why not Butter or Jam or even Dirt? No, just Bread. How pitiful.

We don't have to work until tomorrow evening, but they turn the lights out at the same time anyway. It is, after all, the army. Everything is run by the clock and usually on the hour. Nothing starts at say, 10:15 AM. It's 10:00 on the hour. Xin loi.

We are awakened at 6 AM, I assume mostly so we can have our abysmal breakfast served up with a side of abuse from the cooks. They're probably feeling justified in their insolence too, since they beat all comers at foosball at Curly's last night. They beat all comers *and* didn't get beat up themselves for doing so. Now if they could just transfer a tee tee amount of that foosball

skill to cooking, I would be appreciative. Actually I would be boo coo appreciative, and so would everyone else.

This is going to be a screwed up week for the tank crews. Even though we have to stay up late or most of the night on Tuesday and Thursday, we still have to work on Wednesday and Friday. Just like when we have guard duty and have to stay up all night, we still have to work the next day. It is so army. They act like we are machines that just need to be fueled up, and we're ready to go.

The day passes slowly and hotly as most of us hang out in the barracks. Some guys are talking about calling a cab to go into Yakima for lunch. Knowing the guys that plan to do this, I am confident they will be drinking with their lunch. Actually, knowing these guys, some will be just plain drinking their lunch. Too bad the contest isn't tonight, as it would probably be an easy win for my crew.

I stay at the barracks myself even though I am invited by several groups going into town by cab. As expected, when most of them return just before dinner, they are drunk. Top is sure to notice, and he isn't likely to let it go without punishment.

Not surprisingly, when we fall out for formation that evening, Top is visibly annoyed at the condition of some of the crews. What is surprising is that he doesn't say anything. That's probably worse, when I think about it. He will have longer to think up a punishment.

Top tells all the drivers to report to the quartermaster building to pick up our night vision block. I hadn't thought about that. The night vision block is similar to a starlight scope except it's mounted in place of the regular vision blocks. The vision blocks are a type of fixed-in-place periscope, like on submarines, and a tank has three of them for the driver to look through. Only having three vision blocks means there are huge blind spots, which is why the drivers have to rely on the TC to give them directions.

When we get to the quartermaster's, he only give us one night vision block each. I know they're expensive and probably cost as much or more than a starlight scope, but we can barely see much out of the three vision blocks during the day. Now they expect us to drive the contest course at night with a single vision block to see through? Plus, I'm being kind when I say we can see. The night vision block gives no indication of depth perception. A hole the size of large bomb crater will appear as a mere shadow through the night vision block.

I suppose this also may work in my favor, because the only ones to know this are Shorty and me. Xin loi, other drivers.

On the plus side, there are no large bomb craters here at the Firing Center. At least not in the areas we've been operating in. There are, however, some boo coo high drops should someone stray from the contest course. That would be number ten for the whole tank crew.

The rookie tank drivers say nothing in the way of a complaint about being given only one night vision block. They don't know enough to be angry, but Shorty and I are pissed off. It's only a contest course, but driving around in a tank in the dark when you can barely see where you're going is dangerous. And that's really my point. It's a contest. A game. It's not important enough to be risking lives.

It only takes about one minute to unlatch the center vision block and remove it. The night vision block slips right in and latches in place. It also has a power cord to plug in. After that, all the tanks are ready for the contest course at night.

We never drove around in the dark in the Nam, so the last time I did this was in training at Ft. Knox. We didn't drive around in the dark much there, but we did have all three night vision blocks in training. I remember it was still boo coo hard to see. The only driving cues the driver gets are two barely discernible lines, one on each side of the road or trail, indicating the edge. And it's easy to get off the trail, because the TC has no night vision device.

We arrive at the contest course before full dark, so all the crews get one chance to drive in the failing light. Top has picked a night when the moon isn't out yet, so after the first dry run on the course, we all start driving the course in pitch black.

It's one tank crew at a time doing the course, as it's scored on the length of time it takes and the accuracy of the target engagements. There's a lot of horn chatter by the crews waiting their turn. We can also hear the first few crews talking over the horn as they progress through the course and hear what they're having problems with. It's mostly the drivers talking about getting off the course and trying to find their way back on when no one can see shit. So dumb and so army.

"Hey Froggy, don't let me get off the trail when it's our turn," I say over the intercom as we wait.

"That's a roger, Wolfman, but I didn't bring my X-ray vision glasses."

"Just try not to drive too fast and stay as close to the middle of the trail as

you can make out," offers Rocky. He did this course last year, so he would know what's best, I hope.

The only person who has it easy is Lenny, our loader. The inside of the turret is lit by the red night light. He can easily see what he's doing, but it is a tee tee bit eerie in the turret with the red lights on. Since tonight is just a trial run of the course in the dark, we won't be firing at any targets. Lenny doesn't really have to do anything but hang on and not go bouncing around inside the turret when we hit a bump or dip in the trail.

Finally it's our turn. I thought I had the course well memorized, but once we get out there in the dark with zero visual cues, I am lost. I try to stay in the middle of the trail as Rocky advised. It's boo coo easier said than done. The night vision block looks like a small TV screen where everything is in different shades of green. I can't see much of the trail, just a faint line at what looks like the trail edge, but it disappears in places.

Froggy has his head and chest out of the turret, but it's pitch dark out, and he can see virtually nothing. We do have our blackout driving lights on, but they are zero help for seeing ahead of us. The blackout lights are mostly there so we don't run into each other as we drive around in the dark.

It's still very warm even though it's night. It will cool off eventually, but not until we finish practicing I suspect. So army.

I only stray from the course trail once, so I still feel good about our chances of winning. Some of the other drivers got so disoriented on the course they had to turn their regular driving lights on to get back on the trail.

We return to the motor pool before it cools down, which is actually good for two reasons. It actually gets downright cold late at night out in the desert. But also, we have to work a regular day shift tomorrow even though we were kept up late. The sooner we finish, the better.

When we get back to the barracks, I am covered in sand. I want nothing more than to take a shower and go to bed. The problem is there are a hundred other guys in the barracks that want the same thing. There are only four showers, so it takes a while for everyone to get a shower that wants one. And I do want one, but I want to sleep even more. So I just go to bed covered in sand, hoping to shower in the morning. Hoping.

It was after midnight before we got back to the barracks, but they still wake us at 6 AM. By the airs the cooks put on at breakfast, you'd think they were the ones that were up late last night. Come to think of it, they probably

were, but that would have been playing foosball at Curly's in Yakima. Not out in the desert.

After breakfast we sky out to the desert to drive the course again. At least this time it's light, and we can see. As we drive our first practice run, we can see the tank tracks in the sand where several of the drivers got off course. I'm pretty sure I know where I went wrong last night, so I make a mental note so I don't let that happen again. After a few runs through the course, we didi back to the motor pool for lunch.

Getting out of the desert sun at noon is more of a pleasant thought than the food we can expect. Lunch is almost abysmal enough to make me wish we had a couple of cases of c-rats. Almost.

After lunch, we have mail call. I'm expecting nothing, so it is a pleasant surprise for me when I get a large goodie box from my parents, brother, and sister. What fantastic timing. Just when I was thinking I couldn't possibly stand two more weeks of the M Co. cooks feeding us, my family rescues me.

Unlike in the Nam where I would have been given incredible scrutiny as to the contents of my goodie box, here in Yakima it barely creates a stir. Oh, there are some curious platoon members, but none of the merciless and non-stop chiding and teasing I would have been subjected to in the Nam. Though I *am* concerned about opening the goodie box and then leaving it unmonitored in the barracks.

Curiosity gets the best of me, plus it's just a cardboard box. Even if I don't open it, someone else could have a look in my absence. So I tear it open. The last goodie box my parents sent me was when I was in the Nam, and it was a lifesaver. This box is boo coo full of great things. Just like the last time, it makes it seem almost like Christmas. Almost.

The box contains several cans of sardines, which I now love. There are some cans of Vienna sausages, which I could do without. Then again, compared to the food here, they are high cuisine. Also in the box are crackers and cheese, boxes of cookies, and black licorice – my favorite – and a couple dozen of different kinds of chocolate bars, along with some cans of fruit and puddings. The canned fruit reminds me of how I was just wishing for some cases of c-rats. Like they say, be careful what you wish for. In the future I will set my sights a tee tee bit higher when I decide to wish for something. However, this goodie box will do nicely. I'm definitely not complaining.

After mail call, it's back to the motor pool. I have a package of black licorice with me as I walk up to our tank. Froggy, Rocky, and Lenny are there

already, so I pull out my black licorice and offer it around like Froggy does when he gets his chewing tobacco out. Everyone laughs, and even Froggy has a chaw of licorice. We stand around waiting for the rest of the tank crews to show up, and we spit black expectorant on the motor pool pavement. The licorice makes a boo coo more impressive black stain on the ground compared to real chewing tobacco. And it tastes number one, unlike the real thing. It's a good thing that chewing tobacco doesn't really taste like black licorice, as I would be tempted to chew it.

It's hot, dry, and dusty as usual on the course, but we wait our turn to eat dirt. The night time practice was an eye opener for me, as I thought I knew the course extremely well, but I still lost my way once. Now I'm trying to really get the course layout in my head when I can see it in the light. It's boo coo hard as there are barely any visual landmarks to see, even during the day.

By the time we finish and head back for dinner, I have already decided to have sardines and crackers for my dinner. But Rocky wants to go into Yakima and have cheeseburgers at Curly's. He's already invited Froggy and Lenny, and he wants me to come too. I agree to go as the sardines won't spoil. Plus, while I love sardines, I like a good cheeseburger a tee tee bit more. Not to mention Curly's has ice cold beer.

The next morning, we are again awakened at 6 AM. Why? We really don't know. We don't have to be on the contest course until tonight. When I think of food, I remember my goodie box, but although I love sardines I don't want them for breakfast.

I while away my day by writing letters to my family and some friends. I find it hard to convey in words how much the goodie box my family sent means to me. I read for a while, and I also join in the Frisbee-fest for a while. Some of the Frisbee tossers are getting as fanatical as the foosball players.

Although it's smokin' hot outside, I decide to walk around outside of the barracks just for something to do if nothing else. I notice the three cooks trying to stand just out of sight of the barracks behind one of the buildings here. I know all three of them, especially Gomez, whom I really don't like. But I decide to walk over to see what they're up to. What they're up to is smoking pot. This could be good. Of course, Gomez starts right off trying to hassle me.

"What the fuck do you want, rabbit?" Gomez asks.

"I want some of that joint there," I answer.

"Fuck you, rabbit. Go git yer own."

One of the other cooks, Adolph, hands the burning joint to me.

"Cool yer jets, Gomez," he says.

I take a hit on the joint, and then I hand it to Ramon.

I've played foosball with – or I should say I've been creamed by – Adolph and Ramon. Gomez is a good foosball player as well, but it's usually Adolph and Ramon who team up and beat everyone back at the M Co. day room.

Both Adolph and Ramon can quickly and accurately pass the ball around to their different players and to their partner. They easily beat most competition, but just like an animal playing around with its kill before eating, they like to toy with the other foosball players before beating them. They also can get quite animated when playing, and it's not unusual for the foosball table to get moved all over the day room during the game. That's probably why the foosball table at Curly's is bolted securely to the floor, I realize.

We finish smoking the joint, and I ask them what's on the menu for lunch.

"What?" asks Ramon. "Do you really care?"

He seems somewhat surprised.

"Nah, I was just being polite," I answer.

"Can't wait to git back to Ft. Lewis," says Ramon. "It's a bitch cookin' for a hundred guys for a month when there's just three of us."

"Is that what you call it?" I ask feeling a tee tee bit cocky now that I've got a buzz on.

"Call what?" asks Ramon.

"Cooking," I answer with a laugh.

"Told ya he's a fuckin' smart ass rabbit," says Gomez.

Adolph at least gets the joke and laughs with me. He apparently isn't as thin-skinned as Gomez.

The four of us walk back to the barracks. It's hot in there but not as hot as out in the sun. That's why I knew the three cooks had to be up to something to be outside in this intense heat.

"You guys just want to get back to Ft. Lewis so you don't have to pay to play foosball at Curly's," I say to them.

Ramon laughs and says, "We don't pay to play foosball, *pendejo*."

"Really?"

"Shows what you fuckin' know, rabbit. We make the punks pay, plus we make 'em bet us, and we always win," says Gomez.

"Rocky thinks you guys should be careful about beating all the locals."

"Fuck Rocky, and fuck all the rabbits in Yakima," says Gomez.

"I'm just giving you guys a heads up. Believe me, Gomez, it wouldn't bother me at all if someone beat your ass."

I'm left in the barracks alone when everyone else didis for lunch. Today, I dine on sardines and crackers from my goodie box. Just as number one as I remembered them, too. The last time I had them was only a few months ago in the Nam. But it seems like several lifetimes.

Like they say, "Time flies when you're having a good time." Not that I'm even remotely having a good time, but I wouldn't trade anything to go back to the Nam. Nothing. Period. A million dollars? Xin loi, not enough. Not ten million, not a hundred million.

When you finally come to the realization that doing something like going off to war can result in your death, there is not enough money in the world to convince you to do so. If there is, then you're an idiot. Though from what I've seen in the army, there is no shortage of idiots. Money nor anything else does you any good when you're dead.

I'm going to have to be careful with this goodie box, though. If every time I eat something out of it I start to think about the Nam, I may have to eat at the mess hall after all. That would be number ten.

Mindful of the memories my goodie box can set off, I reluctantly decide to subject myself to the mess hall for dinner. Plus this will also make my goodie box last a tee tee bit longer. Dinner is horrid enough that I feel I need to cleanse my palate with something from my stash. The canned pudding makes an excellent dessert, I think.

Finally it's time to fall out and head to the motor pool. When we get there, we are greeted by several deuce-and-a-halfs loaded with crates of ammo for the tanks. They're going to have us actually shoot at the targets tonight for our last night practice before the actual contest next week.

We have a boo coo lot of work to do before we even start running the course. We have to unpack, unwrap, and stow all the main gun ammo inside the turret. The only thing that makes it easier here than in the Nam is we don't have to burn all the crating and packing materials.

After that, it's hurry up and wait for our turn to run the course. So far I'm staying on the trail even though I can barely make out the edge. When Froggy gives the command for me to halt, I can't always see the target. Rocky is boo coo good and hits the bullseye on every target I can see during our turn. And for his part, Froggy is awesome on the .50 Cal.

After our turn, we congratulate each other over the intercom on a job well done. At least we think it was. After all the crews finish, the scores are tallied. It doesn't count towards the actual contest, but we have the highest score and are now considered the crew to beat. Xin loi.

Our tee tee reward is that we are allowed to lead the procession of tanks back to the motor pool. For once, I only have to eat the dust coming off my tank's treads and not the rest of the tanks normally in front of me. It's a small thing, but much appreciated after almost three weeks here eating dust and dirt. I hate that.

They wake us on Friday at 6 AM yet again. It's things like this that make it so easy to not even remotely consider re-upping when my tour ends.

I go to the mess hall fully intending to have my usual cereal and milk. But when I get there, Adolph and Ramon are manning the food line, and they wave me over. They apparently have some breakfast goodies under the counter that they save for their friends. It's the best breakfast I've had here at the Firing Center mess hall. Perhaps in part because Gomez is absent this morning.

I just assume it's his day off, but when I finish my breakfast, I stop by the kitchen to thank Adolph and Ramon for the special treatment.

"So where's Gomez?" I ask.

"Didn't you hear?"

"Hear what?"

"The fuckin' punks in Yakima jumped us last night after Curly's closed," answers Ramon.

"Check it out," says Adolph, and he shows me the bruise on his forehead where he was punched. "Gomez got the shit beat out of him. Probably cuz he sort of started it. Shooting his mouth off after we beat some punks at foosball. He wasn't even playing. It was me and Ramon that beat them."

"Man, I tried to warn you guys."

"I know," says Adolph, "and Ramon knows. But ya can't fuckin' talk to Gomez. He don't fuckin' listen to no one. When he gets drinking, he thinks he's back in San Antonio with his gang backin' his ass up. Ramon got away clean, and I only got hit once, but Gomez was so drunk he thought he could kick all their asses. What a dumb fuck."

"That sounds about right," I say.

It's another hot dusty day on the contest course. One more week here in the

desert. I never thought I would be so anxious to get back to Ft. Lewis, but the three weeks in Yakima have corrected my thinking on that.

As always we spend most of our time waiting for our turn to drive another practice run on the course. Wait. Wait. And wait some more. OK now hurry, hurry! Come on! Get the lead out and get movin', troop!

No ammo today, so we amuse ourselves by shouting "boom boom" into the intercom as we pretend to fire the main gun.

After lunch Top has us form up for our walk to the motor pool. He tells us we are using live ammo this afternoon, and if no crews bolo the course today, we will get all of Saturday off instead of having to work in the morning. I'm not counting on getting tomorrow off. There are some boo coo lame crews in the company. Not that it's entirely their fault, having little-to-no prior tank experience.

Instead of teasing the other crews, today everyone is encouraging the other guys to do their best and pass the course. They won't be doing that next week when we have the contest for real.

It turns out to be a remarkable day in that all the crews pass, and there are no bolos. On the drive back to the motor pool, Rocky suggests dinner at Curly's.

"Did you hear about Gomez?" I ask him over the intercom.

"No. What?" Rocky asks.

"He got his ass beat after closing last night. He was mouthing off after Adolph and Ramon beat everyone at foosball."

"See, I told ya," says Rocky.

"Hey, I even warned them."

"Gomez is a dumb fuck," replies Rocky.

"That's exactly what Adolph said."

Friday night is a busy one for Curly's. Besides many of the guys from M Co., lots of locals are there to celebrate the end of the work week. The place is jammed, but we don't wait long for a table. It doesn't hurt that the waitress that my crew teases me about is working, and she waves us over to her first empty table. She quickly returns with two beers which she sets in front of me. I thank her and since I have had to suffer my crew's teasing, I just smile smugly at them as I chug my first beer down in one long thirst quenching gulp. Man, I'm gonna miss this place. Well I'm gonna miss this waitress, that's for sure, and I don't even know her name.

When she returns I correct that tee tee oversight. She takes our orders, and

when she gets to me she says, "So what are are you havin' tonight, darlin?"

"I'll have my usual, two cheeseburgers," I answer. "By the way, what's yer name?"

She smiles at me and says, "Darlene."

After she didis, Froggy says, "A pretty name for a pretty woman, Wolfman."

We all agree that Darlene is a good-looking woman, but I say, "We're going to didi mau next Friday, so I see no reason to get boo coo involved with the women here. Good-lookin' or otherwise."

Froggy smiles a sly smile, but I don't know why, and he says nothing further on the subject.

Since we have the morning off, we drink as many beers as we can afford before we sky back to the Firing Center.

I usually don't let myself drink as many beers as I had tonight, so when we make it back to the barracks I have no trouble falling asleep.

It's quite late in the morning when I finally wake from the noise of the Frisbee players and the sunlight streaming in the barracks windows. This might be a record for the latest I've ever been able to sleep in since I've been in the army. I missed breakfast, I slept so late. Even with my newfound connections, I am unconcerned about that.

I shower alone for maybe the first time since being at Ft. Lewis. I could get used to this. After I shave and get dressed, I mill around the barracks with nothing on my mind. I'm surprised when I look out the window and spy the '49 Ford coming up the drive. I am quite happy about it, too, until I notice Froggy all spiffed up and looking like he's ready to go on a date. Which is exactly what he is ready to do with Cheryl.

"Xin loi, Wolfman, but you just talk too much. Cheryl thought we would go out by ourselves," Froggy says.

"Just be careful when yer talkin' that you don't do no proposin'," I reply.

Froggy smiles that smile again and says, "Doncha worry 'bout me, Wolfman. I got it all under control."

The Lifers knew what they were talking about, as one of the guys has already announced he's getting married to a woman here.

Froggy knows this, and I call out to him as he didis, "You don't want to end up as the second sucker in M Co."

Froggy says nothing, but he flashes me the mischievous grin again.

So once again I have nothing to do but lounge around the barracks while it hovers at about 85 to 90 degrees inside. The Frisbee games are going strong. The rules change by the day, but currently they are: you have to give up your spot if you miss a catch. Or, if you have to jump over a couple of bunks or foot lockers to get it and you miss it, then the thrower is out. Xin loi.

Rocky doesn't look any better than I feel after over-indulging last night, but he is already thinking ahead about this evening, apparently. I am curious why he didn't drive back to spend the weekend with Jeanette, but I say nothing.

"Wanna go cruisin' tonight?" Rocky asks.

"Fuckin' A," I say.

"Where's Froggy and Lenny?"

"Lenny's on sick call, and Froggy already skyed up on a date."

"Froggy? On a date. Really?" asks Rocky.

"He's with Cheryl, one of the two sisters we met," I answer.

"No fucking shit. Well he better be careful, or he'll end up married," says Rocky.

"I warned him, but he gave me that shit-eating grin of his when he left."

"Well then it's just you and me, Wolfy."

"Sure not going to be anything happening here tonight. Except Frisbee."

We actually didi in the early afternoon, mostly because we have no reason to stay.

On the drive into Yakima, I finally ask Rocky about Jeanette in a round-about way.

"I can't believe you stayed here the whole weekend. You could have left on Friday night and had the whole weekend with Jeanette," I say.

"I know, but I gotta start preparing myself for leaving her. I can't take her home with me. All she talks about now is going California and wants to know what everything is like there. I hate lying to her non-stop. It's already going to be bad enough."

"Not as bad as the Nam," I say.

"No, not as bad as the Nam, but boo coo close," replies Rocky.

Rocky pulls into the parking lot of the only large grocery store in Yakima. They sell just about everything, but all we need is beer or wine. Rocky doesn't want to leave his Mustang unattended even in a backwater town such as Yakima, so I get out.

"Yer drivin' so I'm buyin'. Whaddaya want?"

"Wine. I need some wine to forget about Jeanette," answers Rocky.

I go inside, and after looking over the wine selection, I buy two bottles of their finest Ripple brand wine. There is a rather striking looking woman with blond hair also looking over the wine selection. She's tall and dressed in a way that I'd expect if she were maybe partying in Vegas. Definitely not what you'd expect to see someone wearing out here in the middle of nowhere.

Even more surprising is that while she's standing behind me in the checkout line, she starts to talk to me.

"Are you goin' to a party?" she asks.

She must be referring to the two bottles of wine I have. Unlike her, I am hardly dressed for a party.

"No. I don't know anyone here."

A lie, I suppose.

"Well, my friends and I are having a party. You can come if you want. Bring your wine," she replies.

I am so stunned, I almost don't know how to answer. This woman, I notice, is at least two or three inches taller than me, but she does have high heels on so we might be about the same height. She's quite attractive in a certain way. I think I'm starting to understand why so many guys from M Co. end up getting married to women from Yakima. They are so forward, not to mention good-looking. For guys in the army who can't get a woman to even talk to them, it's a pleasant change.

There is something different about her, and I can't put my finger on it. Of course, I'm also trying to think of a reply to her invitation.

"My friend is out in his car. Can we both come?"

"Oh sure, darlin'. The more the merrier," she replies. "My friends are out in the parking lot too, so you can just follow us."

"OK, thanks."

I get into Rocky's Mustang about the time she is exiting the store and crossing the parking lot.

"See that woman?" I ask Rocky. "She just invited me and you to a party with her and her friends. Wanna go?"

"Man, she looks familiar," says Rocky. "Why do I feel like I know her?"

When she gets to her car, she waves over to Rocky and me. The two other women in her car wave to us as well. They are parked next to a car with four guys from M Co., and I can see the women talking to them as well. They call over to us to follow them to the party, and we form up in a line as we exit the

parking lot. While we drive, Rocky continues to mull over the woman's familiarity.

When we get to the first and maybe only stoplight in downtown Yakima, the car with the three women goes straight ahead when the light turns green. The car with the four other guys from M Co. follows, but Rocky turns right.

"Where ya goin'? I ask.

“I just remembered where I know her from. She and the other two in the car aren't women. They're dudes."

"No shit? I was standing right next to her in the store, and she looked all woman to me," I say. "She had awesome tits, and you could see most of 'em in that dress she was wearin'."

"I'm tellin' ya, they're all dudes," says Rocky. "And yer right. They can fool ya. It's kind of what they're all about. The reason I know them is they used to work at the club that Jeanette worked at. They used to start fights all the time. They'd come on to straight guys, trying to fool them. When the guys figured out they'd been had, they wanted to beat the impersonators up. Of course, the bouncers didn't allow that. Probably part of the reason they all got kicked out of Tacoma and are working here now. Too many fights and boo coo pissed off guys."

"Now that I think about the way she sorta showed me her boobs, it was like she was showing off a new pair of shoes,” I say. “She bent over pretending to pick some lint off her dress to give me a good look. I'm an idiot."

To keep us cool, Rocky lets his Mustang unwind a tee tee bit with the windows down part way. The air coming in is sublime. It reminds me of the only cool down I would get back in the Nam when I would drive my tank about 20-25 mph on the redball. Of course Rocky is easily going 100. Rocky continues driving for about a half an hour, and then he slows down and pulls off at the first dirt two-track we find. Considering our speed, we must be at least 50 miles out of Yakima.

"Thirty days and a wake up, and yer outta here Rocky. Lucky fucker," I say as we open our two bottles of wine and start to drink.

"It will be good to get back into the Real World again. Weird isn't it, that when yer in the Nam ya dreamed of gitten' back to the Real World alive. Then if ya do make it back, you're still in the army, so it's not really being in the Real World at all.”

"That's no shit about the army not being the Real World," I say.

"I can't wait to get back to building cars with my brother. Not only do we love to build the engines, working out all the kinks, but driving them and racing them is awesome too. And the women that hang around are the most beautiful in the world. And that's why Jeanette can't come home with me."

As we drink our wine we continue to chat.

"So what kind of race cars do you build?" I ask. "Cars like this?"

"No, we build Funny cars," answers Rocky. "You know, they look kind of like a production car, but it's all fake. They have a boo coo light, one-piece fiberglass shell body, and the engines aren't even close to stock. They have so much power that they're all automatic transmissions. The stick shift trannys can't take the power shifting. Plus, the way you have to sit in it is you're all crammed into the corner where the door would be if there was a door. You couldn't possibly shift sitting like that."

"I never knew that," I say. "It must be a rush driving one of those."

"Oh, it is," says Rocky, smiling. "It is."

By the time we finish our bottles of wine, it's dark out and cooling down. Rocky starts up his Mustang, and we sky back to Yakima. Rocky and I stop in at Curly's, as we expect some guys from M Co. to be there, and there are. It's not as crowded as it was on Friday night, but it's still boo coo noisy.

From what seems like out of nowhere, two beers appear in front of me. I hadn't seen her yet, but obviously Darlene is working tonight. I am definitely going to miss this place. I'm am thirsty but not as much as usual, so I slide one of the beers over to Rocky.

"It's on me, Rocky. I hope when ya git out, it all works out for ya, man."

"Thanks, man. Me too," says Rocky.

Sunday morning I notice no Froggy. He must have gotten lucky with Cheryl last night. Let's hope he only got lucky and not engaged. Well, even if he did get engaged, it's his problem, not mine.

The four guys that went with the alleged female impersonators last night are standing in one corner of the barracks talking and laughing. I walk over to find out if Rocky was right.

"So were those women or dudes last night?" I ask.

"It depends on what you consider a dude," says Tony.

"Yeah," says Pete. "Two of 'em had complete sex change operations and are really women now. But one, the black dude, he's already got his tits. He still has his dick and balls, but he's gettin' 'em cut off soon."

"That sounds so pleasant, but I think I'll keep mine for now," I say.

Pete can't stand it anymore and laughs. "Tony fucked the blond."

"Hey, fuck you guys," says Tony. "I was drunk, but even so, she's a woman now. Trust me."

I hang at the barracks most of Sunday morning, and still no Froggy. I had planned on lunch from my goodie box, but Rocky wants to go into town again. I wouldn't want him to have to eat alone, so I agree to go along.

It's just after noon when we arrive and, bingo, there's the '49 Ford parked in Curly's lot. We spot Froggy and Cheryl at a far table. Rocky starts toward them, but I grab his arm.

"They might want to be alone," I say.

But just as I finish, Froggy spots us and waves us over.

It's quite apparent they are both smitten with each other, and I'm surprised they even noticed us come in as they hardly notice us now that we are sitting with them. We really should have sat somewhere else.

Our waitress arrives, and it's not Darlene, so I actually have to order my two beers and my two cheeseburgers instead of being able to say, "I'll have my usual."

Both Rocky and I make faces at each other as Froggy and Cheryl smooch and hug as we wait for our order. They are somewhere in la la land and totally oblivious.

The food arrives. Rocky and I eat, but Froggy and Cheryl don't seem to even notice their food. Surviving on love, it seems. Rocky and I bolt our food down and then make a hasty exit. We are hardly missed.

When we return to the barracks, I notice the cooks hunkering behind one of the other buildings again. Of course they are doing exactly what I thought. Smoking some pot. Even though Gomez is with them, he says nothing to me when Ramon hands me the joint. Adolph's forehead bruise looks much better, but Gomez still has a boo coo black eye and some cuts on his face.

"I hope you got your money before you got beat up," I say, trying to tease him.

"Fuck you, rabbit!"

"Such a friendly sort of guy," I say. "It's a wonder you got yer ass beat."

"Just keep it up, and we'll see who get's their ass beat," Gomez says to me. And then he adds one of their standard insults, which sounds something like, "Mama-ceeta-too-wah-leeta."

"Ya know, Gomez? Yer a fuckin' punk. If you weren't already fucked up,

I'd kick yer ass right now just to shut you up," I reply, as I'm getting a tee tee bit pissed.

"Come on, man. You guys need to lighten up and smoke some of this joint," says Adolph.

So Gomez and I both toke down with Ramon and Adolph, and we do cool our jets. Pot is definitely good for defusing situations like this.

When lights out comes, Froggy still isn't back. I'm only concerned because I want to win Top's stupid contest. We need Froggy to be in tip-top form, not hung over from staying up all night. He'll really be a lucky fucker if he doesn't end up engaged or married.

I needn't have worried, as Froggy is back in the morning. He must have come in after I fell asleep, not that I was waiting up for him.

"So are you engaged yet?" I ask.

Froggy laughs and says, "I told ya, Wolfman. I had it all under control. I just needed ta git some gash."

"Gash?" I ask.

"Wolfman. You know, some nookie."

"Never heard that term before," I say.

Rocky has been listening in on the conversation, and he laughs. I assume because I've never heard the term "gash" before. I have to admit, I've learned lots of things in the army, but most of it is of tee tee use in the Real World.

We saunter over to the mess hall, and I tell Froggy and Rocky to follow behind me in line to see if they can get in on the special treatment from Adolph and Ramon. It works like a charm, and we are all smiles when we sit down at our table.

"Where'd that stuff come from?" asks Froggy.

"I don't know, and I don't care as long as I'm one of the ones gettin' it," I answer.

After breakfast we sky back to the barracks to wait for Top to call us out for formation. I should make it clear that while I often refer to Sgt. Popoff as Top, I would never *ever* call him that to his face. You have to be an inny and on his good side to be able to call him Top. For instance, Rocky and Shorty have been at M Co. for over a year, and as such they are both allowed to address Sgt. Popoff as Top.

What I can't figure out is that even after being kicked off of parade duty just like me, Kent is still allowed to address him as Top. I would be

considered insubordinate and probably given an Article 15 for such at transgression, I'm certain.

Roll call is taken, and we note that Lenny is missing again. We find out they took him back to Ft. Lewis when he went on sick call. They must think he's boo coo sick to do that. We're fucked. The contest is this week, and we might not have our loader. They tell us that if Lenny doesn't return, they'll send a replacement from Ft. Lewis. The problem for us is that the only guys left at Ft. Lewis are all infantry and have never even been on a tank. This really could mean we won't win now. I hate that.

Top tells Froggy we can practice today without a loader. He says we're not using real ammo, so we don't really need one today anyway. Right. Never mind that it would be nice to get a temporary replacement just in case the temporary loader becomes the permanent loader. This is so army.

When we fall out the next morning, Lenny is still absent. This doesn't bode well. The contest is supposed to start tomorrow. We're confined to the barracks tonight, as Top doesn't want the tank crews going into Yakima and getting drunk or worse. I wasn't planning on going anywhere, so I hardly care.

It's finally contest day. We have been practicing for it for almost a month. I am boo coo disappointed because I thought we really had a chance to win, but with Lenny out, I don't see how that's going to happen.

Just as we're lining up after breakfast, a jeep pulls into the parking lot. Lenny jumps out and walks over to get in line with the rest of the crews. Alright, I think. We are back in the running!

On the walk to the motor pool, we quiz Lenny on his absence.

"I started to feel sick again, like I was before I came to M Co. They decided to take me back to Ft. Lewis for testing and treatment. But I started to feel better on Sunday, and I still feel good now," he says.

"What were you in the hospital for?" I ask.

"They never figured it out. I got better, so they sent me to Ft. Lewis," Lenny answers.

We get to the motor pool, and we load up the ammo and sky to the contest course. No more practice runs. Today it's for real. Well, as real as a contest can be. So we do what we do best. We wait. And we wait. We listen to the horn chatter of the crews on the contest course hoping to hear where it sounds like they're having trouble. We have practiced this course so much everyone seems to be doing well. It may come down to who does the best in the dark.

Our turn comes. I really feel I could just about drive the course with my eyes closed. Since that's just about what I'll be expected to do tomorrow in the dark, I drive with my eyes wide open today. Rocky and Froggy hit almost every target with a bullseye. When we finish, we have the best score so far, but there are a couple more crews to go still. I did my part, at least: we ran the course in the fastest time.

At the end of the day, we are still in the lead. Yeah, we're going to win this thing. Xin loi, Top.

We are still confined to barracks tonight, but we get the day off tomorrow. Top is probably giving us the day off hoping my crew goes on a bender so we blow our lead. Many of the guys do go into Yakima for the day, but Froggy, Rocky, and I hang out at the barracks in the morning. Lenny doesn't look as good as he did yesterday, but he insists he's OK.

Rocky wants to go to Curly's for lunch. This might be our last trip to Curly's, as we didi tomorrow sometime. When we get to the restaurant, there is a large contingent of M Co. already there. Many already drunk. I don't mind the drunks at all. They'll be easier to beat tonight.

We find an empty table and sit down, and my two beers appear seemingly out of nowhere. Darlene is working today. Lenny looks surprised.

"Where'd those come from?" he asks.

"Yeah, the Wolfman always seems to get special treatment these days. Try gettin' in line behind him at the mess hall if you want to get something worth eating," says Froggy.

I'm not sure I should be drinking at all, but the contest isn't for another ten hours or more. Darlene returns and takes our order, giving me a boo coo big smile before leaving. I'm going to miss this place.

It's starting to get really rowdy, so we eat and then didi mau before we get caught up in the partying. Rocky doesn't care much whether we win the contest or not since he's getting out in about three weeks, but he wants to help the rest of us win. Plus some of the guys have teased Rocky about how they're going to beat him this time. They really shouldn't have done that. Rocky hates to lose at anything.

We sky back to the Firing Center, and the rest of the crews trickle back to the barracks throughout the afternoon and evening. Quite a few of them are fucked up big time. Just increasing our chances.

Top arrives late in the evening and assesses our condition. He doesn't seem to mind that a bunch of drunks are going to go out on the contest course and

shoot up the place. We fall out and then we have to deal with the main gun ammo at the motor pool. Lots of confusion among the juicers who are still drunk. So army. Things will only get more confusing for them once we're out on the course in the dark.

We spend most of the time on the course waiting for our turn. Finally, Froggy gives the command, "Move out, driver."

The hardest part for me, and all the drivers really, is the stopping. Because we're all pumped up, when the TC gives the order, "Halt, driver!" there is a tendency to stomp on the brake. If you want to win you have to overcome that tendency.

I can't tell how many of the targets Rocky and Froggy hit in the dark. But I still feel number one when we finish our turn on the course, because I didn't wander off the trail this time. We won't know the results until everyone else finishes, but I can tell we are in the running.

It's almost midnight when we get back, and then we have to stand around waiting for the scores to be tallied. The waiting turns out to be worth it, because my crew is declared the winner. Good thing, too. I have been bragging all month to anyone willing to listen that we were going to win. A month of exemption from duty is pretty much a month's vacation. It almost too good to be true... and in the end it is.

Top comes into our barracks the next morning, mostly to tell Froggy, Lenny, and me where our limousine will be waiting. Rocky drove here, so he of course is driving his car back. Although Shorty does volunteer to drive the Mustang back to Ft. Lewis so that Rocky can join us in the limousine.

"In your dreams," is what Rocky says about that.

I hardly think much of the limousine ride, as the buses were quite satisfactory, I thought.

That's probably what everyone thought. If Top really wanted to motivate us to win, he should have mentioned that all the losing crews would riding back on several deuce-and-a-halfs. Xin loi, losers.

But then Top also screws us by changing the award for first place. We now are getting a one month exemption from *extra* duty. Extra duty is stuff like KP and guard duty. He specifically said exempt from duty, but he denies it now.

After being informed that they will be riding in style in a bunch of deuce-and-a-halfs, none of the other crews feel any sympathy for our plight of being

ripped off of the true prize for winning Top's stupid contest. Fucking stupid contest to be exact.

They might have felt a tee tee bit of sympathy if they had actually seen the limo. While we do have a personal driver, the limousine is a Rambler station wagon. We laugh for at least twenty minutes on the start of our drive back in our "limousine."

"Hey, man! Can we stop somewhere along the way for beer?" I ask the driver.

"No problem. Just tell me where," he answers.

So this turns out to be not so bad. We have him stop at a small party store, and I go in and buy two six-packs. When I exit the store, the deuce-and-a-halfs go rumbling by. Man, the losing crews got fucked boo coo big time. They are going to have to cross over a mountain range riding like that. There was snow up there when we crossed over on our way here. With no heat in the back of the deuce-and-a-halfs, those guys are all going to freeze their asses off. So army. So fucking army to be exact.

Chapter 16

On the drive back to Ft. Lewis, we have to inhale the diesel exhaust from the deuce-and-a-halfs for about two hours until they finally pull off at a rest stop. It puts a bit of a damper on the limousine ride, beer or no beer. But once we are free of the stench of the exhaust, we get into a tee tee bit of a festive mood. A tee tee bit. We are, after all, just going back to Ft. Lewis which only seems better now because the desert was so harsh.

Froggy, in particular, can't wait to go bowling. There might have been a bowling alley in Yakima, though I didn't notice it if so. Even if there was, Froggy is left-handed and didn't bring his bowling ball. Bowling alleys apparently are unaware that at least ten percent of the population is left-handed and rarely have any left-handed balls for their patrons to use. Almost as dumb as the military, which has no left-handed weapons for their left-handers. Probably only a few hundred thousand left-handed soldiers end up having to use right-handed weapons. So army.

Once we are out of the mountains, I am awestruck by the lushness of the landscape. It only took a month in the desert for me to really appreciate how wonderful the trees and bushes and flowers are again.

The M Co. barracks looks just the same as when we left it. No welcoming party or anything like that for the winning tank crew. Not that we expected a ticker tape parade or anything. We grab our gear and thank our limousine driver, then head to the day room to see what's happening. The guys in the day room groan when they see us. Such a welcome. They know that their tee tee vacation, due to Top's absence, is now over. Not to mention that the guys playing pool realize Rocky is back to rule over the table again. They hate that.

I sky up to my bunk on the second floor to stow my gear. More groaning ensues. I'm so glad to be back. I really am glad to be back, though, even with tepid reception from the rest of the M Co. members.

For one thing, it does not smell of sage here. I take a deep breath. Nope, no sage. Hallelujah! Not that the barracks smells overly pleasant, but it doesn't smell like sage.

It's late Friday afternoon. We might not have to do anything until tomorrow morning if we can stay out of Top's sight when he gets back, which

should be soon. I'm just trying to figure out how to do that when Kent walks in.

"About fuckin' time you guys got back," he says.

"Fuckin' A," I say. "Man, it was a bitch there. Hot, just like the Nam, but dry. And I mean fuckin' dry. It looks so green and lush here I almost want to go roll around on the lawn."

"Yeah, well if ya do that Top will probably put ya on guard duty tonight. I just saw him pull into the parking lot. Kinda why I came up here."

"Oh, so you didn't come up just to see me."

I pretend to pout.

"Fuck you, *pendejo*," replies Kent. "Hey, wanna go have dinner at McChord?"

"The Air Force base?"

"Yeah."

"We can do that?"

"Sure," says Kent. "We just sign the roster at their mess hall as 'transients.' I do it all the time."

"I'm in," I say. "Got any tokes?"

Kent grins. "Of course."

"Then I'm definitely in," I say. "I only got to toke a couple of times at Yakima with the cooks."

"With Gomez?" asks Kent.

"Yeah, though he was all pissy about it."

"He can't be too bad. He's a Head."

"More like a headache," I say. "He got his ass beat in Yakima for being mouthy when the other guys won at foosball at a bar there. I even warned them about it ahead of time."

"Let's git outta here before Top sees us and puts you on guard duty," says Kent.

"I don't have to worry about that. I'm exempt from guard duty and KP for a month. My crew won the contest at the Firing Center."

"No shit?" says Kent. "What'd you do?"

"I just drove. Froggy and Rocky did all the shootin'. And they were fuckin' good so we won. Got ripped off, though. At the beginning, Top said the winning crew would be exempt from duty for a month. Then after we won he changed it to exempt from extra duty. Top hates me," I finish.

"He ain't exactly in love with me, either," says Kent.

"You at least get away with calling him Top," I say. "If I did that, he'd put me in the slammer."

"Oh he wants to put me in the slammer, too. And believe me he hates it when I call him Top. That's why I do it." Kent laughs. "Hey, we got a crib in Tacoma. Party tonight if ya wanna come."

"Of course I wanna come, but I don't know how I'll get back here."

"You kin stay over. We gotta an extra bedroom. Just don't be the last one awake, or you'll have to sleep on the couch, or worse, the floor."

Farkas and Flemmy show up, looking edgy.

"Let's sky. Top is back," says Farkas.

"Wolf's comin' too," answers Kent.

"No problem. But let's didi before Top starts cruisin' around lookin' for guys to put on some fuckin' detail," says Farkas sounding a tee tee bit urgent.

"OK, OK," says Kent. He looks at me. "You ready?"

"Ready and able," I answer.

We take the stairs the farthest from Top's office and manage to skate over to Kent's VW unseen. We are gone before we're even missed.

"So you guys are still coming into the barracks tomorrow morning, aren't you?" I ask.

"Why would we fuckin' do that?" asks Flemmy.

"Cuz it's fuckin' payday."

"Oh man. I was so excited about Top bein' back, I almost forgot," says Kent. "No wonder I'm so broke. Kinda why we're goin' to the mess hall at McChord instead of McDonald's."

As soon as we pass through the gates of Ft. Lewis, Farkas fires up a number and hands it to Kent. Kent passes the joint to me. I take a hit and hand it to Flemmy. We have the radio on, we're getting high, and after dinner we're going to party down. Things are finally seeming to be number one after my month in the desert.

McChord Air Force base is only a few miles away from Ft. Lewis. Kent pulls up to the entry gate, and when the guards see all of us wearing fatigues, they just wave us in.

"That was fuckin' easy," I say.

"Yep," says Kent, "Boo coo easier than it was bluffing our way onto the airbases in the Nam."

"Is that where ya learned how to do this?"

"I guess so," says Kent. "Been doin' it so long I can't really remember for

sure.”

The mess hall is huge but largely deserted on a Friday evening. I can see all the cooks are little old ladies. It's like having dinner made for you by your grandmother. How cool is that? And the food is number one. They have whatever you want just about and will cook it just the way you like.

"Man, how often do you come here?" I ask.

Kent smiles and says, "As often as we can. When the rest of the company and Top were gone, we were comin' twice a day sometimes."

“I'd be comin' three times a day if I had some wheels,” I say.

Kent chuckles.

"If ya did that ya might wreck it. We sign the roster as transients, so we're supposed to be just passin' through. If you show up all day long they might start to wonder what's goin' on.”

"Well, I wouldn't want to do that," I say.

After one of the best meals I have had since being in the army, Farkas says, "Come on, let's didi mau.”

So we all get up and sky for the party. As soon as we get to the house, they all change into their civvies. Kent mentioned I should keep my fatigues on for our trip to McChord, but I didn't think to bring alternate clothes. Now I'm going to have to party in my fatigues. Oh well, still boo coo better than being in the desert

To kind of get my party head on, I take my fatigue shirt off. I have on a white t-shirt, so at least now I don't look like I'm getting ready to salute someone. I hate that.

After we smoke another joint, Farkas points out that they're out of beer. Kent doesn't like to loan his car to anyone, and Flemmy volunteers to stay at the crib in case someone stops by, so the rest of us head for the beer store to grab a few six-packs.

By the time we return, the party is already going. The air is dense with the smoke from several joints being lit all at the same time. The party is a number one time for me and everyone else from what I can tell.

Mindful that I have to work tomorrow morning, and also of Kent's warning not to be the last one awake unless I wanted to sleep on the floor, I make my way upstairs to stake my claim on the spare bedroom. It's just past midnight, and no one is there, so I guess it's mine now.

When you sleep in the barracks, you needn't worry about oversleeping, as

we are always awakened at 6 AM sharp. If I sleep past six, I usually wake soon after out of habit. That's exactly what happens this morning. There's no curtain or shade for the window of the room, so the light coming in probably has something to do with it, as well.

By all the bodies on the floor downstairs, I made the right decision to go to bed before anyone else. My walking around wakes some of the sleepers. Almost everyone here is in the army and needs to get back to Ft. Lewis this morning. Also, because it's payday, everyone actually wants to go back. I roust Kent, Farkas, and Flemmy from their beds.

They are all quite sullen this morning, having been gracious hosts last night by staying awake until the bitter end. After getting all the party-goers to didi, we get into Kent's VW and head for Ft. Lewis. I suggest stopping in at McChord for breakfast.

"Good idea, Wolf," says Kent.

He pulls off the freeway onto the exit ramp for the Air Force base. And again, since we're all in our fatigues, the guards at the entry gate just wave us in.

The mess hall is nearly empty again, and the grannies cook up our requests in a matter of minutes. I have what I consider my usual now of two eggs over easy (and don't break the yolks, please) with hash brown potatoes, sausage, and toast.

We make it back to Ft. Lewis just as the rest of M Co. is falling out to line up. After roll call, the tank crews are sent to the motor pool to deal with all the tanks that are waiting for us on the train flatcars.

Rocky is driving his Mustang to the motor pool and wants me to ride with him and Shorty.

"Only if I can ride shotgun," I say. Shorty reluctantly agrees to sit in the backseat which is a tee tee bit cramped, even for someone of his height.

A thought occurs to me then, and I turn back to face Shorty.

"Did you have to load all the tanks onto the flatcars at Yakima by yerself?"

"Yeah, all the other drivers were still too chicken to do it," he answers.

"Xin loi, man. I would have helped, but in all the excitement of the limousine ride, I completely forgot."

"You can unload them all if ya really want to pay me back," Shorty laughs.

"I would, but they're probably going to wanna git 'em off the flatcars as fast as possible. It's payday, so you know the Lifers will be boo coo anxious to get over to the NCO club for refreshments."

And that's the way it is. Everyone seemingly in charge just wants the tanks unloaded as quickly as possible so they can go back to M Co. and get paid.

It takes the whole morning for Shorty and I to unload the tanks. We finish with the last one just before noon. After the breakfast made by what seemed like our grandmothers, the lunch at M Co. is horrendous in comparison. I get in line when it's full of guys jostling for position, so I don't get any special consideration from my friends dishing out the food.

As always, no one lingers in the mess hall especially today as everyone is focused on getting paid. I really hate only getting paid once a month, and the only thing I hate more is the tee tee bit I get paid.

We line up down the hallway, just outside the door of the XO's office. We enter the paymaster's office one at a time, salute, give our rank and name, and then we are paid in cash from a pile of bills on the desk. On the opposite side of the XO's desk from the money is his Colt .45. It must be a holdover from a time when the paymaster was worried about being robbed. In this day and age, it seems quite absurd. Anyone robbing the XO would have to make their way down a narrow hallway filled with guys waiting to be paid, carrying money that should have been theirs. No prospective thief would make it out of there alive is all I can tell you.

Since we get paid alphabetically, I am last. But I get a boo coo big surprise. It turns out I was promoted to Spec-4 last March, so I get some back pay. Enough back pay that I really can buy some wheels now. I am elated and can't decide whether to buy a car or a motorcycle. It's winter here in Washington, but compared to where I'm from it's quite mild for winter weather. If it snows, which it seldom does, it melts before noon.

I catch up with Kent. They are going back to their crib, and Kent invites me along. I ask if he minds taking the main drag going into Tacoma instead of the freeway.

"Why do ya wanna do that?" asks Kent.

"Cuz I gotta bunch of back pay, and I wanna look at some cars at the used car lots," I answer.

He shrugs.

"OK. It doesn't take that much longer to git ta town that way, anyway," says Kent.

On the way, we see a soldier in his fatigues hitchhiking into town. We don't really have room for him unless we squeeze him into the backseat, but Kent slows down to pick him up anyway. As we start to slow, the soldiers

notices and gives us a very subtle but noticeable wave to keep going. A block past the hitchhiker, we notice a police car sitting out of sight in a parking lot. It's illegal to hitchhike in Washington state, but most people will still pick up soldiers. The cops know this, so they get soldiers to act as bait and then ticket people for picking them up. What the cops don't realize is every bait hitchhiker from the army I have ever seen Kent try to pick up waves us off. Professional courtesy. Xin loi, cops.

We stop at several used car lots on the way into Tacoma. I like one car I look at, a Chevy Greenbriar van. It's has an air-cooled Corvair engine similar in style to the VW van I had to sell to my sister. The used car lot is closed today, so I'll have to come back to take it for a ride on Monday. We also stop at a motorcycle shop, and I see a BSA that I also like. Even if it doesn't snow a lot, it's boo coo rainy here. I really should buy a car, but the motorcycle is so appealing for some reason.

Because we are all flush with cash, we stop at the party store before heading to the house, so we are ready to start partying again the moment we arrive. Joints are rolled, lit, and passed around. We start drinking beer and soon our friends from M Co. and Tacoma start to arrive. I'm still amazed at the number of women in this state willing to hang out with soldiers. Everywhere else I've been since being drafted, if people weren't shooting at us, then they were spitting at us. I hate that.

Unlike in Yakima where the weekends seemed to last forever, the weekend spent at Kent's seems to be over soon after it started. On Monday morning we all have to be back at M Co. for formation and roll call now that Top and the rest of the tank crews are back from Yakima. We are up early enough that we can once again stop for breakfast at McChord. The little old ladies who run the kitchen are so nice to us, in addition to the excellent food.

Back at M Co., Both Froggy and Rocky are there for roll call, but I notice that Lenny is missing. He must be sick again, I think. As usual, the tank crews are sent to the motor pool. Just like old times.

It's a good thing I brought a book, because once we get to the motor pool, the Lifers just stand around in the middle of the parked tanks and smoke cigarettes. The army is often the perfect life for unmotivated slackers. I open the hatches and climb into the driver's compartment of our tank to read. My seat is the only comfortable one, which is good since I spend the whole morning reading.

We lunch at the M Co. mess hall, once again at the mercy of the surly cooks. Lucky for me, I notice Adolph dishing out food. I hang back and let the everyone else go ahead of me. When the others are gone, I go through the line and get the "Special of the Day." Sometimes it's who you know.

I sit down with Froggy, who notices I have something better than he got and frowns.

"Ya shoulda waited and gone through the line with me," I say.

"Yeah, I know. I forgot," he replies.

"So whadda we gonna do now that the Yakima ordeal is over? Just go to the motor pool and stand around all day?"

"I don't know. Top hasn't said anything to us about what we're doin' next."

My prediction turns out to be correct, and I end up reading for the rest of the afternoon as well. Good work if you can get it.

I catch up with Kent back at M Co.

"Kent, my man," I say.

"Yeah, whaddaya want?"

"I wanna go check out that Chevy van I looked at on Saturday. Take it for a test drive," I answer. "If someone else besides you has a car, less people will be hitting on you for a ride. Like right now."

"I hear ya," Kent says. "Ace and Beaudeen, want to go to McChord for dinner, so we can do that, and then go look at yer van."

"That's number one, man."

We find Ace Appleton and Billy Jeff Beaudeen and sky for the airbase. The food here would almost make it worth joining the Air Force instead of being drafted into the Army. Almost.

At the used car lot, Kent, Ace, and Beaudeen come along for the test ride. I'm glad, too. If I had driven the van by myself, I might have bought it. It can seat eight, but even with just four guys, it is unbelievably slow. With eight passengers, someone would have to get out to push this thing, it is so doggy.

I tell the salesman I'm not interested in the van after my test ride.

"Are you sure you don't want it?" Ace asks.

"Yeah," I say, "it's too slow. I had a VW van, and it was so much faster."

"You don't mind if I buy it, then?" Ace asks.

"Not at all."

So Ace makes arrangements to buy the van, and then we sky to the motorcycle shop. If Ace's going to have the van to haul around our tee tee circle of friends, I am much more inclined to buy the BSA now.

Because we get paid in cash, I am able to pay for the bike on the spot after my test ride. I purchase a helmet from the shop, and then I ride off, following Kent back to his house. We're all quite happy and proceed to celebrate our purchases.

I noticed on the drive to Kent's that there are boo coo more people walking around in Tacoma than usual. It's not until people start knocking on the door that we all realize it's Halloween. Trick or treat. We have no candy, but the guys have a penny jar for their loose change, so we give each kid some pennies.

After we finish our tee tee celebration I realize I can didi mau anytime I want. Before it gets too late, I ride my motorcycle back to M Co. I discover that while it's quite mild temperature-wise during the day, it gets boo coo cold at night. It feels even colder when you're riding a motorcycle.

By the time I get back to Ft. Lewis, my knees feel frozen. They even resist my first attempt to straighten my legs out when I get off. When I finally warm my knees up enough to walk, my knees make a strange sound that I've never heard before. That can't be good.

The big news the next day is that someone wearing army fatigues held up the Regimental Guards with a shotgun. It was quite a brazen robbery, too. Right in the middle of Ft. Lewis at the Tank Museum, which is where all the activity and buildings are. If I wanted to hold up the Regimental Guards, I'd go for the guys guarding the Tank Farm. It's out in the middle of nowhere.

Apparently the masked robber got out of a civilian vehicle with the shotgun. He chambered a round, pointed it at the guards, and demanded their M-16s.

"I've been on Regimental Guard," he said, "so I know you don't have any ammo. Don't make me kill you!"

The guards complied with the robber's demands and surrendered their M-16s. The most disturbing part of the story is that the army is court-martialing the two guards for surrendering their M-16s. Given the fact that it's such common knowledge that the guards don't have ammo and that black market M-16s can fetch $1500, it's surprising this hasn't happened sooner. So army.

Since I'm exempt from extra duty for the month, I at least don't have to worry about being assigned guard duty any time soon. So I don't think much about it, except how unfair it is to punish the robbery victims.

During our morning formation and roll call, Top reiterates the story of the

robbery. Since they think a soldier from Ft. Lewis is the perpetrator, Top says if anyone knows anything they should come talk to him. We're also told that all the first sergeants have gotten together, and they are planning on changing the Regimental Guards into a permanent assignment.

I'm totally uninterested in the prospect of being on permanent guard duty since we all hate it like sin or worse. That is until Top says the guards will be on duty for one day and then two days off. That could be an especially good deal if you got one of the twelve-hour assignments.

Top says the details haven't been completely worked out yet, but he will take the names of anyone who wants to volunteer for the permanent Regimental Guard positions before he starts assigning guys to it. In the army, Rule Number Two is: Never volunteer for anything.

Good thing I'm exempt, otherwise I know I'd be one of the first guys assigned. Even with the one day on and two days off, I'm not really that interested. I don't want to be held up for my M-16 and then court-martialed. Since the guards carry unloaded M-16s, Regimental Guard also breaks Rule Number One for the army: Take as much ammo as you can carry.

After roll call, I'm off to the motor pool again. It's still quite cool, so I decide against riding my motorcycle and hitch a ride with Froggy instead.

It's another day of sitting around, apparently. I freeze my butt off while I read inside the tank. I finally start the 1000 HP engine and let it idle, just so I can turn the heater on. So wasteful, I know, but I'm just getting with the program.

We go back to M Co. at lunch time. In the mess hall, Kent is in charge of the meal roster everyone has to sign before we get fed. If we looked closely at what we have to sign, it's probably some sort of release form relieving the army of any responsibility should any of us get food poisoning. Since I have already been poisoned at least once at an army mess hall, it is a distinct possibility.

I'm hanging back as the crowd of guys go through the chow line, hoping to get something special for my trouble.

I chat with Kent, and he says, "As soon as the last guy signs the roster, I'm skying up to McChord for lunch. Wanna come?"

"Fuckin' A, I wanna come," I answer. Even with getting special treatment, the difference in the quality of food is still no contest.

On the ride to McChord, we discuss the robbery. Kent seems strangely uneasy about it, but he doesn't say why.

It's back to M Co. after lunch, and back to the motor pool for me. It's warmed up now, so I take my motorcycle this time. It's going to be number one having some wheels. I won't have to be bumming rides all the time. Plus it's quite green here even in winter. It's feels like a joy to ride down the road on my bike with the wind in my face. Wind without any sand in it.

When I get to the motor pool, some of the guys come over to check out the BSA. One of my friends, Pete O'Reet, seems really excited about it. We had our bunks next to each other in Yakima and chatted all the time.

"Where'd ya get yer bike?" Pete asks.

"There's a cycle shop on the main drag going into Tacoma."

"How much was it?"

"Six hundred bucks out the door," I answer. "They had one more used bike there for five hundred bucks. A Triumph someone made into a chopper. Not as nice as the Beezer, though."

"Really?" says Pete. "I love choppers. Would ya gimme a ride to the bike shop sometime? I got five hundred bucks if that Triumph is still there."

"Sure, but I need another helmet first."

"I saw some helmets at the PX," Pete says.

"OK. I'll grab one today. I'm gonna need one ta give anyone a ride."

I run into Kent in the parking lot that afternoon after I stop off at the PX.

"Headin' to McDonald's for dinner and then back to the crib. Wanna come?"

"Sure," I answer. "I'm just gonna put this extra helmet in my locker. You don't have to wait for me."

"See ya there," says Kent, and they didi mau.

I head into the barracks to stow my new helmet, and I run into Pete on my way in.

"I got that extra helmet," I tell him. "Whatcha doin' right now?"

"Goin' to chow at the mess hall."

"What do you say about having dinner at McDonald's and then skying over to Kent's crib to get high?"

"Fuckin' A! Let's go," answers Pete, now with a boo coo big smile on his face.

It's November, but it's about 55 degrees outside and still green everywhere. Hard to believe it's winter.

After our modest repast at McDonald's, we sky over to Kent's house. As soon as we sit down, Kent starts rolling a joint.

"My man," I say in approval.

We drink a few beers and smoke several joints. Laughing and joking and feeling no pain, all of us having by now forgotten that we are still in the army. The fucking army to be exact.

Suddenly it feels as if something – a car possibly – has run into the house, as the whole place seems to shake. We all stop talking and laughing at once and give one another questioning looks.

"Did I just feel something or am I just too high?" I ask.

"No, I felt somethin' too," says Farkas.

"What the fuck was it?" asks Flemmy.

It really did feel like something collided with the house, but there was no noise of a crash. We all step out onto the porch. Several of the neighbors are also out on their porches looking up and down the street searching for the source of the disturbance. Finally, we can hear someone say, "earthquake."

"Hey, my first earthquake," I say, "and I survived."

"Mine too," says Pete.

Kent laughs and says, "You guys obviously don't live in California. That was prob'ly my one thousandth earthquake, easy."

Outside on the porch, I realize it's getting late and therefore cold.

"Come on, Pete. We better git goin'. It's already gettin' cold, so we're gonna freeze our asses off," I say.

In actuality, I freeze my ass off. Pete is sitting behind me, so I block most of the wind for him.

When we get back to M Co., Pete remarks, "Hey, that wasn't bad at all."

"Speak for yerself," I say as my frozen knees once again make a scary sound when I can finally straighten my legs out. Maybe I should have bought the Chevy van, I think, as I hobble my way up the stairs of our barracks.

The next morning it's still too cold for me to want to ride my motorcycle to the motor pool, so I ride over with Froggy in his car.

"So are we still just fuckin' off at the motor pool?" I ask.

"Don't know, Wolfy. Top hasn't said anything yet," answers Froggy.

"Gettin' ta be boo coo boring."

"I know whacha mean, Wolfman," says Froggy.

So I spend another day reading at the motor pool while the Lifers smoke and smoke and smoke.

Pete wants to check out the Triumph motorcycle I told him about, so we skip dinner at M Co. and sky up for the cycle shop.

Pete falls in love with the bike on sight and buys it before he even takes it for a test ride. His mistake, as we've only ridden a couple of blocks from the shop and his gas tank starts to fall off. Upon closer examination, we see the tank is only held on with some wire. Pete tightens up the wire and the problem, for now, is fixed.

We drive all the way to the McDonald's near Kent's place, mostly so we can ride our bikes somewhere. After we eat, we stop over at the house. Kent and Farkas are there, but Flemmy and Kent's VW are gone.

"We fuckin' smoked all our dew, so Flemmy went to score some. Should be back soon," says Kent.

Pete and I hang out for a while, but it's getting dark. We end up heading back to Ft. Lewis before Flemmy returns with the pot. This time I'm not the only one freezing my ass off.

"So howda yer knees feel?" I ask once we get back to M Co.

"Man, they're fucked up boo coo big time," says Pete.

At breakfast the next morning, I hang back out of the chow line, chatting with Kent. Something seems to be bothering him. He's normally in a joking mood since the only job his medical profile allows him to do is monitor the sign-in roster for the mess hall three times a day. So when he wants to go to McChord for breakfast, I agree to go along. Why not? Boo coo better food.

Once we get on our way, I ask, "So did Flemmy score last night?"

"Oh, he scored, alright," says Kent. "He scored boo coo big time."

He finishes with a sarcastic tone in his voice.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask.

"He was just supposed to score some pot, but he came home with some woman."

"Did he score the pot?"

"Yeah, he got it," answers Kent.

"So where's the problem?"

"We don't need no woman livin' with us," says Kent. "Flemmy says she can cook and clean for us. We got nothin' to cook or clean with. We don't even have a fuckin' broom. She also don't look like the cookin' and cleanin' kinda woman."

"So I ask again, where's the problem?" I say.

"Yer a fuckin' idiot. Farkas and I hadn't even agreed to it yet, and she was already acting bitchy. It's a problem, or it's gonna be a problem. You just

wait.”

"You do have a spare bedroom.”

"That's your room, ya know," he says.

"Hmm, yeah I just thought about that," I say with a wicked smile.

"Ferget it. She ain't gonna let you sleep with her.”

I shrug.

“I got my bike now, so I don't have to sleep over anymore."

"So no problem for you, just for me and Farkas," Kent says.

"I'd say it's fuckin' Flemmy's problem. He brought her home. Let him deal with it," I say.

Breakfast at McChord seems to bring Kent out of his foul mood, or maybe it was the four cups of coffee he drank. We chat on the way back to M Co. and Kent is his old self again.

"Your profile makes it so they can't make you do squat. Why don't they just let ya go home?" I ask.

"They're supposed to operate on me and fix my toe before they let me out. Still gotta wait a couple months for my scheduled surgery," he answers.

"Fuck!" I say. "I wouldn't let the fuckin' army fix a hangnail if I had my say."

"My toe is boo coo fucked up, so I kinda want it fixed," he says.

We arrive back at M Co. in time for roll call, and then for me it's back to the motor pool. Pete hasn't gotten over the novelty of his new bike yet, and he wants me to share in the ass-freezing. For some reason, I agree, and we both ride our bikes to the motor pool.

We are quite the sensation at the motor pool as we ride up on our bikes. You'd think by the way some guys are acting that they'd never seen one before. Another guy, Brent, asks where the cycle shop is, as he wants to buy a bike too. I tell him where it is, but I also mention Pete bought the last used bike there, though they did have some new ones.

It's another day spent reading in my tank since we are assigned no real tasks. I'm starting to think Top has forgotten about us.

After dinner, Pete and I decide to take our bikes out with the plan to get back to M Co. before it gets dark. We drive into the center of Ft. Lewis on some of the most unused roads on the base. It's boo coo fun to ride mile after mile with no other traffic to contend with. For the moment it seems like heaven. Eventually we have to turn around so we can make it back before it starts getting cold. I don't think my knees can stand being frozen many more

times.

By Friday there is another motorcycle in the parking lot at M Co. Man, I think, I really started something. Brent bought a brand new Kawasaki 500. It is super fast. Fast enough to get you in trouble faster than you can get out of it. To me, a motorcycle is a motorcycle no matter where it came from, but some of the guys are teasing Brent for buying a "rice burner" because his bike is made in Japan.

When I see Kent manning the roster at lunch, he seems sullen again.

"What's up, my man?" I ask, sensing his condition.

"It's that fuckin' woman. I told ya I thought she was a bitch, and she is."

"So make Flemmy tell her ta leave."

"I'm gonna. Farkas doesn't like the situation either. It's two against one," he says.

I grin.

"Well two against one if ya don't count her."

"Always with the fuckin' negative comments from you," Kent fires back.

"Touchy, touchy. Man, yer in a good mood."

"You'd be inna bad mood too. Last night I'm goin' to the store, and she says to me, 'Git me some rags while yer there.' I knew what she meant, but I wasn't goin' to admit it," he says.

"And that's what yer all upset about? Cuz she wanted you to git her some Tampax?" I ask. "Yer bein' the fuckin' idiot now."

"We're havin' a party tonight. Come on over tonight and meet her. You'll see what I mean," says Kent.

"I'll be there."

After another day spent at the reading room, I mean the motor pool, we are back at M Co. It's Friday, so lots of guys are off to party even though we have to work half a day tomorrow. I mention to Pete that there's a party at Kent's crib, and that we could ride our bikes there. He thinks it a number one idea, so we put our civvies on and jump on our bikes.

Along the way, Pete and I get to feeling adventuresome, so we get off the freeway and ride into the countryside. There's hardly any traffic, so we can ride side-by-side for a boo coo long time. It's quite picturesque. We don't even know where we are, just cruising with no particular destination now. We ride until almost dark before we turn around and sky back to M Co. It's too cold now, so we decide not to attend the party at Kent's.

When I run into Kent at the mess hall the next morning, he asks about our

absence.

"Thought you were comin' to our party last night."

"We were, but we got distracted driving down some of the country roads here. The next thing we knew it was dark and getting cold. Xin loi, man. Was it a good party?"

"It was OK. It didn't go late cuz most of us had to work today. We're havin' another one tonight," he says.

"I'll be there. Nothin' else goin' on, plus I wanna meet yer new roommate," I tease.

"She ain't my roommate or won't be fer long!"

"Man, you are so touchy in the morning," I say with a laugh.

"I told ya, she's makin' me crazy. She's gotta go," says Kent.

"You were crazy before she moved in. I think just about everyone here at M Co. is crazy. That's why we're all really here. Easier to keep an eye on us if we're all in one place," I reply.

"Everyone here? So yer crazy too?"

"*Almost* everyone," I answer.

"Yeah, fuck you, Wolf. Yer crazy, too!" says Kent.

I smile but say nothing.

"Fuck you," Kent finishes but then he grins too.

Yeah, were both crazy, and so are the rest of the misfits here at M Co.

The rest of the morning passes by, uneventful. I need to find another gig. I'm getting bored just sitting around reading while we waste the day away in the motor pool.

After lunch, Pete and I ride our bikes into the countryside again with no destination in mind. After several hours of exploration, we end up at a ferry crossing on Puget Sound. There's a tee tee snack shop for people waiting for the ferry. Normally the food wouldn't be considered exceptional, and it's not, but it is boo coo better than anything the cooks at M Co. make, so Pete and I have dinner at the snack stand. We sit at a picnic table and watch the boat traffic on Puget Sound while we eat.

A great afternoon spent exploring the area on our motorcycles, and now we're off to party. Pete and I stop on the way and each buy a six-pack of beer so as to not show up empty-handed. It's not the easiest thing to ride a motorcycle up and down the steep hillside streets of Tacoma with a six-pack between your legs, but we manage.

When Pete and I arrive, there are already two other motorcycles parked

outside. Mark and Rick are the bikers' names, and Kent introduces us. Rick only has one arm, having been injured in an auto accident. I can't figure out how he can ride a motorcycle with only one arm, so he offers to show me his trick. We go out front to look at his bike, and he has taken the front brake handle and put it next to the clutch handle. He uses two fingers for the front brake and two fingers for the clutch. Very ingenious, I think. It's still tricky, and he admits it took some practice.

The party is crowded and noisy with much beer drinking and pot smoking going on. There are so many people there to talk to that I had almost forgotten about Kent's new roommate.

"So which one's yer new roomie?" I ask Kent as I look over the room full of people.

"None of 'em," answers Kent. "She's upstairs sleeping, said she didn't feel good after partying all last night."

"Guess I'll never get to meet her now since yer kickin' 'er out," I laugh.

"You ain't missin' nothin'. Trust me."

The party is going quite strong until about 11 PM, and then most people didi. Even Pete decides to take off. It's already as cold as it's going to get, so I decide to stay for a while longer. There's just Kent, Farkas, Flemmy, and myself left.

We're just lighting up a joint when their landlord comes in through the rear door, unannounced. There's still some beer left, and he helps himself to one. He sits down with us as we smoke and chat. They introduce me to the landlord and mention he is a retired Lifer. I'm a tee tee bit apprehensive about smoking pot in front of a Lifer, retired or not, but they all assure me he's cool.

We joke around for a while, and then Flemmy, who is very drunk, decides to jive their landlord.

"We got us a live-in woman now. You know, she cooks and cleans and anything else we want, if ya know what I mean," he says with a smile.

"Yer a fuckin' liar," replies the landlord.

"No, he ain't," says Kent. "Go look in the first bedroom upstairs where she's sleepin'."

So the landlord goes upstairs and has a peek in the bedroom, seeing that indeed there is someone sleeping in the bed. He comes back down and finishes his beer without saying anything further and then didis.

It's nearing midnight now, and we're all hungry after smoking so much pot. The McDonald's near the crib is open until midnight so we sky up in Kent's

VW and grab some burgers and fries before they close.

As we drive up their street, we notice some activity near their house, including several police cars with their light flashers on. We're all still stoned from smoking pot and are not thinking clearly to say the least.

"What the fuck's goin' on?" asks Kent, as if any of us would know any more than him.

We continue driving toward the house, and it's not until we actually pull up in front that we realize the commotion is not *near* their house. The cops are swarming all over and inside their crib. There are three cops and a woman on the front porch.

Just as it sinks in that their place is being busted and maybe we should didi mau, the VW is surrounded by cops shining flashlights at us and pointing their guns as they order us out of the car. Man, we're fucked.

As we stand outside of Kent's VW with our hands in the air, we are patted down, and then they let us drop our hands. I notice their landlord standing next to the house, but he didis when he sees us. Flemmy should not have been jiving with him, I think. And the house is full of pot, so we're in boo coo trouble.

One of the cops examining the interior of Kent's car comes out of the backseat with a small pill bottle containing several roaches and some pot.

He holds it up for all of us to see and asks, "Who does this belong to?"

It's not mine, so I say nothing. No one else speaks up. Since Flemmy and I were in the back, I assume it's his.

"OK, we have you guys for possession of a controlled substance, so we'll take you all in until we figure out who this belongs to," the cop says.

A paddy wagon arrives, and we are all put inside, including their new roommate.

"What happened, Connie?" Kent asks her on our ride to the police station.

"Fuck, I don't know. I was sleeping, and the next thing I know the cops are waking me up and asking me if I'm OK," she answers. "Yer landlord told them I was being held captive."

"Way ta fuckin' go, Flemmy!" I say.

"I was just jokin' with him."

"Yeah and look where yer jokin' landed us, dumb fuck!" I say. "With all that pot in the house, and yer goddamned pill bottle in the car, we're fucked!"

The Tacoma city police station is only five or six blocks from the crib. All of us are put in a holding cell. Considering that the cops were called because

they thought Connie was being held captive, it is surprising to me that they put her in a cell with us.

It's well past midnight, maybe even past 1 AM when we are put in the cell. One by one we are taken to be interrogated. When my turn finally comes, I'm asked by the interrogator how long I was in the house.

"I was never in the house," I lie. “When I got there, they were just leaving for McDonald's, so I got in the car and went with them. When we returned, the place was crawling with cops, they arrested us, and here I am.”

At least the end is true.

"So whose pill bottle is it?" the interrogator asks.

"It's not mine, and it's not Kent's is all I'm gonna say," I answer. "If Kent wants to tell ya who it belongs to, he will."

"It's his car, so he's taking the bust if no one speaks up," he replies.

"Well, it's not mine.”

After some back and forth with the interrogator trying to get me to admit I was inside the house, he finally gives up. I am put in a jail cell by myself. It must be about 3 or 4 AM now, and after about a half an hour, they bring Kent to the same cell.

We chat about our situation.

"So what'd you say?" Kent asks.

"I fuckin' lied and told 'em I was never inside the crib.”

We talk a tee tee bit more, but I am suddenly feeling exhausted.

"Here, take these," says Kent, handing me his key ring with the keys to his beloved VW.

"What're you givin' 'em to me for?" I ask.

"Cuz if anyone one of us can talk their way outta this, it's you.”

I am not as optimistic as young Kent, but at his insistence, I take his keys and put them in my pocket.

"If they letcha outta here, go get my car and take it back to Ft. Lewis. Just be careful cuz there's a whole lid of pot in the glove box.”

"Somehow I knew there'd be a catch," I say with a laugh.

The lights in our jail cell are on full brightness even at night, but I am so tired I lay down on one of the two steel bunks hanging off the wall. No mattress or pillow, just some cold painted steel. Still I manage to fall asleep until 6 AM when I am awakened. I'm quite used to being awakened at six, just not in jail, and it takes me a few seconds to remember where I am.

Kent turns out to be right, and they release me. I am allowed to walk out of

the police station around 6:30 AM. I'm not exactly sure where I am, but since I'm out of jail I hardly care. It's not light yet, but the streetlights are still on as I make my way toward the house. At least I hope I'm going the right way. Soon I'm able to figure out where I am, and it doesn't take me long to get back to the house.

Once I'm there, I'm not sure what to do. One thing for sure, although I have the keys to the house, I am not going in there. No way. No fucking way to be exact. Now I need to decide if I'm going to do as Kent asked and get his car out of here before the cops look at it more carefully. My bike is parked directly in front of Kent's VW. No pot there, I think. I really should just jump on my bike and sky for Ft. Lewis. It is, however, still dark and cold out. The VW has a heater. In the end I decide to do what Kent asked. I get into his unlocked car after looking closely up and down the street. I'm expecting the cops to have his car staked out, just waiting for me to get in it so they can arrest me for the pot in the glovebox. Especially since the car is unlocked. I look in the glovebox to see if the pot is actually still there. It is. And it's in full view had anyone cared enough to have a look. The cops must have been so excited to find Flemmy's pill bottle with the roaches in it that they looked no further.

I sit in Kent's VW and wait. I'm surprised the car is still here, let alone the lid of pot. More and more reason to think the cops must have the car staked out since it was unlocked, and no one messed with it all night. Finally I get my nerve up and start the VW. Still no cops, so I drive away, fully expecting at any moment to be pulled over and arrested, but it never happens. That is, until I make it all the way back to Ft. Lewis.

Shortly after being waved through the entrance gate, an MP patrol car follows me and turns his flashers on. Crap, I think, the cops must have alerted the MPs to be on the lookout for Kent's VW. With the lid of pot still in the glovebox, I'm fucked. Why didn't I just throw it away? It's not mine. I'm an idiot!

As I sit and await my fate, I can see the MP in the rear view mirror walking toward me. I roll down the window. I wasn't speeding or doing anything wrong, so I'm really wondering why I've been pulled over. The only explanation is that the cops tipped him off.

"Hey, where's Kent?" asks the MP.

I turn and look at him, and I realize I know him. It's Mark, and he's a friend of ours from M Co. He hated all the crappy make-work details we got

sent on, so he applied to be an MP.

He must be able to sense that I'm still a little tense about being pulled over.

"I pulled ya over cuz I thought it was Kent, and I just wanted to fuck with him," he laughs. "So where is he?”

"He would much rather be here having you fuck with him than where his is right now, which is jail," I answer. "I'd tell ya all about it, but I've been up most of the night and just want to go to bed. I'll fill you in the next time I see ya though."

"I can wait. See ya, Wolf," he says.

"Later, Mark," I say and then I drive off still a tee tee bit nervous about the lid of pot in the glove box. I'm not sure if Mark is a Head or whether we are friends enough that he'd have let me slide.

Chapter 17

Sometime after noon on Sunday, Pete wakes me. When I got back to the barracks, I was so tired I just climbed into my bunk. Although no one was being quiet for my benefit there weren't very many guys hanging around the barracks, and I fell right to sleep.

"Where's yer bike?" Pete asks me.

I wasn't thinking about my problems, but Pete's question reminds me of it. Actually I only have one problem and that's how to get my motorcycle back to Ft. Lewis. Compared to the problems Kent, Farkas, and Flemmy have, mine is trivial.

"It's a long story, but you were smart to didi mau from the party last night when you did," I say.

"What're ya doin' right now?"

"Why?" asks Pete.

"Cuz I need to go get my bike. I had to leave it at Kent's, but I have his car. We can drive there now, and I'll let you ride my bike back here while it's still warm outside. On the way I'll tell ya about everything ya missed out on last night."

Pete agrees, so I get dressed, and Pete grabs his helmet.

When I finish filling him in, he says, "Man, it was a good thing I left when I did."

"A boo coo good thing. I wish now I'd left with you. I think I'm off the hook, but I would have preferred not to have spent the night in jail."

"Flemmy is such a punk. Lettin' Kent take the bust for his roaches," says Pete.

"Especially because it was his jiving with their landlord that brought the bust on," I add.

I'm half-worried that just when I think I'm out of trouble my motorcycle will have been stolen. That Kent's unlocked car was still there with pot inside is a near miracle. Because I first thought about riding my motorcycle back to Ft. Lewis instead of driving Kent's VW, I am even more nervous. I surely jinxed it.

When we turn onto the street, I am relieved to see my bike still parked in front of the house. I see no visible activity inside, but I'm not going up to the

door, that's for sure. There's still pot inside unless the cops confiscated it. Pete gets out and climbs onto my bike, starts it, and gives me a wave goodbye.

Just before I pull away from the curb, I decide to blow the VW's horn a couple of times just in case Kent talked his way out of jail. No one opens the door, so I didi mau for Ft. Lewis.

Three familiar faces meet us at M Co. when we arrive.

I hand Kent his key ring.

"Was the pot still in the glove box?" he asks.

"Yeah, it was still there. I put it in one of the empty lockers here and locked it," I answer.

"Let's go get it. I need some dew after last night."

Kent seems to hold no grudge against Flemmy. I get the pot from the locker, and Kent sits down to roll a near perfect joint. We toke down right in the barracks.

As we're smoking, I ask, "So did you all get busted?"

"Nah, just me," answers Kent. "It was my car. I gotta go ta court for the bust. I just hope I kin talk my way outta it."

"But it wasn't even yours," I say and give Flemmy a look I reserve for assholes.

"Yeah, but if the cops hadn't found that, they probably would have eventually checked the glove box. And we wouldn't be tokin' down right now if I'd been busted for a whole lid."

"So how'd you guys get back?" I ask.

"We had ta take a fuckin' cab cuz you weren't here when we called," answers Kent.

"Xin loi. I had to go get my bike, and I didn't think they'd let ya go 'til tomorrow."

"I didn't expect ta get let out on Sunday either. They didn't let Connie go though. The reason she was lookin' for somewhere ta stay was there was a warrant out for her. She was trying ta stay away from places the cops knew she might be. She'd been arrested so many times, they knew her by name at the cop shop. Kinda funny that the cops came to rescue her, and then she gets in more trouble than us," says Kent.

"So what was the warrant on Connie for?" I ask.

"Hookin', I think, but I'm not sure."

"What interesting friends you have, Kent," I say and then laugh.

"Does that include you?" Kent asks.

"I guess," I answer. “So you goin' back to the house? Not that I'll be comin' over."

"Fuck no! The fuckin' landlord dropped a dime on us. We took the cab to the crib first and grabbed all our stuff. We didn't really have much there. Gonna be livin' in the barracks for a while, I guess.”

"Gonna be hard after livin' on yer own. Never knew why you guys thought ya could smoke pot in front of a Lifer anyway," I say.

"He seemed cool but yer right. Shoulda never trusted that motherfucker," says Kent.

"Pretty sure I saw him standing around watching when the cops arrest us," I say.

"Yeah, I saw him, too. Motherfucker," says Kent. "Rent was due tomorrow so that part worked out. Way cheaper livin' in the barracks."

"I can tell yer high, talkin' that way about livin' in the barracks like it's number one. It's one of the worst things about bein' in the army. No privacy, and if you hang around when most everyone else is gone, they are just waiting to put you on a detail because someone else skipped out.”

"Yeah, I hate that, but my profile keeps me off most crap duty," says Kent.

"Lucky fucker," I say.

It's near dinner time and another one of the number ten things is about to happen. Sunday dinner in the mess hall. Even with the special treatment I can sometimes get, it's nothing to look forward to, and I say so.

"Then let's go to McChord," says Kent.

"I thought you'd never ask, man," I reply. "I could ride my bike over, but I hate to eat alone."

On the way out, we run into Ace and Beaudeen.

"Wanna sky up to McChord with us for dinner?”

"Fuckin' A," they say in near unison. "Just gotta put our fatigues on.”

Kent and I sit in his car and listen to the FM radio and play a game of Name That Tune while we wait for Ace and Beaudeen. We're both actually pretty good at naming the song and the band that's playing it, and we often say it at the same time. So our rivalry is a tee tee bit intense. Pretty lame, I know, but when you're in the army you have to entertain yourself somehow.

"So did ya have breakfast in jail?" I ask Kent on the way to the air base.

"They brought me something, but I didn't eat it. Looked horrid. Probably the reason Farkas and Flemmy stayed at M Co. for dinner," answers Kent, not realizing I was teasing him.

He's probably tired. I got some sleep back at the barracks but Kent only got to sleep in jail. I can testify that jail sleep is hardly restful.

We have a fabulous dinner at McChord once again made for us by our grandmothers. Well, they look like them anyway. I can't believe no one has caught on to us yet. We're often just about the only ones in the huge mess hall. I suppose they might like us, because if no one ever came, they'd be out of a job. So I'd like to think we are providing a service for them. They certainly provide a service for us.

It's still early evening when we return, so we all head to the day room to play pool and foosball. We can actually play pool because Rocky usually stays at his trailer with Jeanette on Sunday. Lucky fucker. Actually we're the lucky fuckers because we actually have a chance at winning a game or two.

Adolph and Ramon are dominating the foosball table, so we really have no chance to do anything but play one set and get pummeled before we get back in line for another beating. The guys waiting their turn to play foosball try to insult and distract the cooks. I guess their hope is that when it's their turn to play, it won't be against them. It never happens though.

Kent and I partner up for foosball. I'm starting to get the hang of it finally. They still only let me play goalie, but Kent is quite good. Not as good as the cooks, but still it takes them a long time to beat us, and they don't skunk us like they do most everyone else. They hate that. Xin loi.

The next morning during roll call, Top is calling the names of the guys on guard duty. Both Farkas and Flemmy get called. I'm smirking to myself when Top calls my name. Not for guard duty, since I'm exempt from that, but for something even worse. A detail to cut down trees. Man, Top does not like me.

The thing about cutting down trees is the chainsaw. I consider myself a tool kind of guy. As a tank driver especially, I have to be adept with tools. However, if there is one tool in the whole world I hate and avoid, it's the chainsaw.

Once again the army is giving me a dangerous right-handed-only tool to use. It starts at the very beginning of operation. To get the chainsaw started, you hold it with your left hand and pull the rope starter with your right hand. I can hold the shit out of it with my left hand, but trying to start a two cycle engine with my right hand is near impossible. Two cycle engines tend to not start for shit as it is.

At least Adolph is serving on the chow line, so I get the "Breakfast Special" which I'll need since I'm on lumberjack detail today. I always thought the army had guys specifically to do stuff like this, but now for the second time in my army career as a tank driver I find myself assigned to tree removal.

The last time we were blowing trees up with C-4. Makes me wonder why we're cutting trees down at all instead of blowing them over with C-4. Maybe, I think, they might want to use the wood for something. From the looks of things, lumbering is big business here in Washington state. At least today I won't have to worry about the possibility of someone shooting at us. I hope.

I, along with Pete and Beaudeen, get on the back of a deuce-and-a-half for a ride out into the middle of the forest on Ft. Lewis. The main body of the detail are already there, gassing up their chainsaws and checking the chain tension.

"Where's yer saws?" is the first thing said to us.

"We don't have saws. We're tankers," I answer. "Where's the C-4? If we can't knock 'em down with our tanks, we blow 'em over with C-4. Then you guys can cut 'em up."

I finish with a laugh. Pete and Beaudeen laugh along with me.

The lumberjack detail just sneer at us.

"Well ya can't use our saws," says the Sergeant of the detail.

Oh darn, I think. No tree cutting for me today. And there isn't.

Pete, Beaudeen, and myself spend the whole day bullshitting. The worst part of the day is lunch. We are so far out into the forest that they send lunch out to us. C-rats. I knew I shouldn't have thought about c-rats for lunch while in Yakima. At least I don't get Ham and Eggs.

When the detail finally ends, we return to M Co. in the back of a deuce-and-a-half. Kent is at his station, manning the sign-in-roster for the mess hall when I arrive.

"Where were you all day?" laughs Kent, as he knows full well where I was.

What he doesn't know is that we skated all day.

"You would have been boo coo proud of us, Kent. We did nothing productive today. Had to eat c-rats for lunch, though. I didn't know they could do that to us anymore."

"No shit? C-rats? Man, that's cruel," Kent says with a smirk.

"Worse than cruel. It's inhumane."

"OK, you got me feelin' sorry fer ya. Wanna go to McChord for dinner when I finish here? My treat," says Kent.

"What's that supposed to mean? You gonna drive?" I ask.

"Don't I always?" he answers.

And he does drive. We end up with several more dinner guests, as Pete, Farkas, and Flemmy want to come along. It's tight in the backseat, but since I was the first invitee, I get to ride shotgun. There's really not room for three guys in the back of the VW, but we cram them back there all the time. Sometimes four guys, as Kent always wants to pick up hitchhikers.

We are waved through the gate at McChord as usual and line up as our pseudo-grandmothers make us a fine dinner. I would love to come here three times a day, but as Kent has pointed out, they would surely figure out we weren't transients if we did that. We don't want to wreck a number one thing.

After dinner we decide to cruise around Tacoma a tee tee bit since we're almost there.

I'm now in the backseat, as I was so pleasantly full after our dinner at McChord, I let my mind drift a tee tee bit. While I was thinking pleasant thoughts, Farkas called "shotgun" first. I hate that.

We are cruising down one of the main drags, and we get stopped by a red light. Next to us at the stoplight is a lone guy in his hot rod. He's revving up his engine and letting up on his clutch a tee tee bit, making his car lurch forward slightly as he anticipates the light turning green. When it does, he pops his clutch and spins his tires as he burns out. We all have a good laugh that this idiot wants to race us. Five guys crammed into a VW. A VW, like all VW's, with a four cylinder engine. Hardly racing material.

At the next stoplight, we are again next to the idiot hot rodder. Again he revs his engine trying to get Kent to race him. This continues on for another two red lights. When we stop at the last light, he and I make eye contact. I flip him the bird. He gets an enraged look on his face, and then he takes off again when the light turns green.

He slows down enough on the stretch of road ahead that we pull up beside him. As we do, he sideswipes Kent's VW and then speeds off.

Did I happen to mention that Kent loves his VW? Kent is furious, and he takes off in hot pursuit. Even with five guys in the car, Kent is able to keep the guy in sight. We drive out of town into a sparsely populated area, and even though the hot rodder is well ahead of us, he pulls over and gets out of

his car. This is Kent's dream, because all he wants to do is beat the crap out of this guy. The fucking crap to be exact.

So the guy actually stands his ground, ready to fight five guys, I guess. We all pile out of the VW should Kent need some assistance. Man, I'm thinking, this guy really is a fucking idiot. It becomes apparent that besides being an idiot, he is also very drunk. After Kent punches him a couple of times to sort of correct his thinking, he takes pity on him and stops.

"C'mon, I'll take all of you on," the idiot says as we're loading back into the car. Kent pauses to survey the damage, and I can tell he almost goes back to punch the guy a few more times. But he doesn't.

"What a fuckin' asshole!" says Kent. Up until a few minutes ago, his beloved car was perfect. No dings or scratches. Now it has several large and small dents, and the paint is scratched. He hates that.

I decide this is not the time to inform Kent that I flipped said asshole the bird. Oh, I'll tell him sometime, just not right now. I am feeling a tee tee bit of guilt, so I sit in the backseat again, this time with no complaining. Xin loi, Kent.

We were joking and jiving as we cruised Tacoma, but our encounter kind of ruined the merriment. As we start on our way back to Ft. Lewis, Farkas lights up a joint and passes it to Kent. After we all have a couple of hits, we are back to laughing and joking around.

"Can ya fuckin' believe that guy?" says Farkas. "Wanting to race a VW packed full of guys. What a dumb fuckin' shit."

Driving south on the freeway toward Ft. Lewis, there is a three-foot-high steel guard rail that separates the north and south bound lanes. We are high and feeling no pain when on the northbound side of the freeway a Greyhound bus blows out a front tire. The bus veers toward the guard rail and then through it, as if the guard rail isn't even there. It all happens so fast, Kent doesn't even have time to step on his brakes. The bus crosses right in front of us, but we somehow miss it.

The bus continues on the southbound lane, crashing into several nearby cars. We are all spellbound.

I'm the first one to speak after what feels like several minutes of tense silence.

"Did what I think happen just happen?" I say. "Did a fuckin' bus just miss creamin' us?"

"Fuckin' A!" says Pete.

"My god, that was close!" says Farkas, who now wonders of the wisdom of wanting to sit in the front seat. Although if the bus had hit us, it wouldn't have mattered much whether you were in the front or the back. Watching the way the bus went through the steel barrier, it would have crushed the VW flat.

"Man, that's enough for someone to suddenly get religion," I say with a laugh.

We manage to get to Ft. Lewis with no further incidents that might cause us harm. We still can hardly believe what happened. All five of us saw it, but there is still doubt in our minds. We continue to mumble and look at each other, nodding our heads up and down. Yes, that really did just happen.

The plus side of the bus snafu is that Kent is able to put the dents and scratches on his beloved VW into a tee tee bit of perspective. He actually seemed to have forgotten about them until we get back to Ft. Lewis.

"Motherfucker!" he says, seeing the damage again when we get out of the car.

"Hey man," I say, "that's fuckin' nuthin' compared to bein' dead."

"Yer right, I know but...," his voice trails off as he shakes his head. He loves that car.

"Kent, the important thing is that the radio still works," I say with a laugh.

"Fuck you ,Wolf," he says and punches me on the arm. Not too hard, but hard enough.

We all sky to the day room so we can brag about our brush with death. Most or all of the guys in M Co. have had brushes with death, and so our story and the possibility that we might all get religion falls on mostly deaf ears. They could care less. What they want to know is: are you in line to play pool or foosball?

I'm better at pool than foosball, and since Rocky isn't here, I should play pool if I want to keep my game. However, foosball is boo coo more exciting than pool. Also, Kent doesn't completely hate it when I'm his goalie. Adolph and Ramon are ruling the foosball table, as usual. Kent is really good, so the real reason we lose is because I'm *not* really good. But I'm getting better. I can actually see the ball now. In the past, the ball was mostly a blur I saw as it shot through my goal slot. I hate that.

We cycle through the challenger line for foosball a few times until I finally decide to call it a night.

While I wait around in the barracks the next morning, I'm watching Howard Wright, aka Orville. I'm trying to figure out what he's doing. He keeps going back and forth to the bathroom, and then he comes back after a couple of minutes and sits on his bunk with a sponge on his head.

Finally I can't take it anymore, so I ask, "What the fuck are ya doin' man?"

"Bleachin' my hair," he answers.

"With what?"

"With bleach. Whaddaya think?" Orville says.

"What? Like laundry bleach?"

"Yeah, Clorox. Why?" he asks.

"Yer not supposed to use Clorox to change the color of yer hair, ya fuckin' idiot," I laugh.

"I do it it all the time," he says.

"I repeat, yer a fuckin' idiot."

Orville's hair, formerly light brown, is now an orange color I've never seen before. He's one of many guys here from California. Most of them claim to be surfers in civilian life. Actually, I think Kent is the only guy I know from California that doesn't claim to be a surfer. I guess Orville was trying to dye his hair blond so he could look more the part. That didn't happen, but one thing I can guarantee is that if he keeps using laundry bleach on his hair, he won't have to worry about what color it turns. He'll be bald.

Orville isn't the only idiot in M Co., that's for sure. This brings to mind a guy we call Imperial. Imperial is short for Imperial Dragon. I've already forgotten his real name, if I ever knew it. Pete and I were talking about our motorcycles, no doubt boring the crap out of everyone in earshot of our conversation. Pete's bike needs some repairs to the poor modifications someone made to the bike when they converted it to a chopper. As we chat, Imperial jumps into our conversation, claiming to have been in a motorcycle club back home. While not necessarily the least likely guy in M Co. to have been in a motorcycle club, he would certainly be in the top ten least likely.

Pete can't resist questioning him.

"So what's the name of your club?"

Imperial seems caught off-guard by the question, but quickly recovers.

"The Imperial Dragons."

Pete and I and several others who hear him all laugh. And that's it. His name is now and forever Imperial Dragon, Imperial for short. When he first says it, he quickly realizes his mistake, as he gets some pointed stares from

several of the Brothers in the barracks, Imperial Dragon being the supreme rank in the Ku Klux Klan. He won't admit his lie though, and that just makes it easier for the rest of us to continue calling him Imperial.

After we fall out for formation, Top informs us that we have been selected to train for riot duty starting today. Just when I think it can't get worse, it does. Since there have been anti-war demonstrations all over the US, we are almost guaranteed an opportunity to shoot at some protesters. I really thought after making it back from the Nam that I would be done with trying to kill people. Apparently the army has other ideas. I hate that.

So today we start classes on what we need to do to prepare for riot duty. And I thought Regimental Guard was number ten. All we learn today is what we are expected to pack in our duffel bags to be ready for quick deployment. Although there have been anti-war demonstrations, I doubt they'll actually send us anywhere. This is just another task to keep us busy, I think.

That is until I'm riding over to McChord Airbase for lunch with Kent, filling him in on the current lunacy I am caught up in.

I laugh and say, "Just more wasted energy by the army. They're never gonna send us anywhere to shoot Americans."

"Don't be so sure," says Kent. “Just think about Kent State."

"Kent State?" I ask.

"Didn't ya here about the massacre at Kent State in Ohio?"

"Nah, I haven't heard nuthin' about that.”

"Really? There was a protest on the Kent State campus, and the Ohio National Guard got sent in, and they shot and killed a bunch of the anti-war demonstrators," says Kent.

"No fuckin' shit?"

"No fuckin' shit," Kent answers.

"I must 'a been in the Nam when it happened, or I woulda heard about it.”

"It happened the beginning of May, I think," says Kent.

"Yeah, I was still in the Nam then or on my way to Japan," I say. "Can ya believe they gave the fuckin' National Guard ammo, but they won't give us ammo when we're on guard? Man, that's bullshit! It makes me think they'll send us on riot duty, but they ain't gonna give us any ammo. Don't want us killin' anyone. But how ya gonna stop a riot with an unloaded weapon, I dunno."

After lunch, we have riot duty class for the rest of the afternoon. More time is spent on smoking breaks than on any riot control measures we might

need to know. So army.

"Are we going to be issued ammo?" I ask one of our instructors.

"It would depend on the situation," he answers.

"The situation!" I repeat. "The situation is a fuckin' riot! The Regimental Guards here have had their M-16s taken away by armed robbers. Are you guys really gonna send us into a riot unarmed?"

"Like I said, it depends on the situation," he repeats sounding a tee tee bit annoyed.

I'm the one getting annoyed now, and I'm not alone. Several other M Co. members also voice concern about our riot control duty with or without ammo.

We waste the rest of the week in our riot duty classes. Finally it's Saturday, and Kent knows of a party happening in Tacoma. I should point out that Kent is a "babe magnet." So if he invites you to a party, and you like to be around women, you should go. So of course I accept his offer.

As we are getting into Kent's VW, I think I notice some new damage to his beloved car. I am not sure I want to bring it up since, unbeknownst to Kent, I'm sort of at fault for the first tee tee bit of damage to his car. As we drive to Tacoma, I fire up a joint and hand it to Kent.

After Kent has a buzz on, I ask, "Did I see a new dent in your car?"

"Fuckin' A!" he answers. "Had a tee tee fender bender getting on the freeway yesterday. Cops even had to come. Had ta get a pry bar cuz the fender was rubbin' on the tire."

"Man, yer tough on cars. Maybe otta think about drivin' a tank."

"Fuck you," says Kent.

"Yer so fuckin' touchy at times, young Kent," I laugh.

"Young? So how old are you?" Kent asks.

"I'm twenty-one," I answer. "Turned twenty-one in the Nam. Got wounded two days later which is kind of funny, cuz I was so worried about getting killed before I made it. How old are you?"

"Twenty," he answers. "I'll be twenty-one New Year's day."

"No shit. Yer birthday is on New Year's day?"

"Yeah, it's a bummer though. The holiday kind of overshadows my birthday."

"So you can't even legally drink, ya fuckin' punk," I joke. "Young punk. Lucky for you we're already breaking the law smokin' pot, or I wouldn't be able to hang with ya."

"I kin let ya out right here if ya want," says Kent as we drive down the freeway to Tacoma.

"Like I said, sometimes yer so touchy, young Kent. Where's this party anyway?"

"It's at Terry and Marcia's house."

"I remember them. They both have boyfriends don't they?" I ask.

"Yeah, for now," he answers.

"What's that supposed to mean? You know somethin' I don't?"

"Nah, just that Marcia's boyfriend is a dumb fuck," he answers. "Terry and her boyfriend just got engaged I hear."

"I know you, Kent. There will be other women there, won't there?"

"Better be," he answers.

"Like I said, young Kent, I know you. We wouldn't even be goin' if there weren't going to be girls there."

We are among the first arrivals at Terry and Marcia's house party. This group of Kent's friends are all Heads and one of the guys sells pot to us. Kent and I bring a couple of six-packs of beer and some wine, so as not to show up empty-handed.

Pete comes through the door and asks, "Why din't ya ride yer bike here?"

"For two reasons. One, I didn't want to freeze my ass off riding back to Ft. Lewis, and secondly I'm sort of hopin' I won't need to go back to Ft. Lewis tonight," I answer with a sly smile.

"What a fuckin' softee. Afraid of a tee tee bit of cold when ya could be ridin' yer bike," teases Pete.

"I'm not afraid of the cold, or I woulda never bought my bike in the first place. However, if presented with the choice to ride my bike in the cold or sleep in a nice warm bed, especially after sleeping in a water-filled hole in the Nam, I'm goin' for the warm bed."

Pete surveys the room of revelers and asks, "So which babe here has asked you to stay over?"

I laugh and answer, "No one. Yet. But I'm hopin'. Though the warm bed I'm hopin' for will probably turn out to be my bunk back at M Co."

"Hey, Brent wants to go ridin' tomorrow. He wants us ta show 'im where we ride our bikes."

"We should take him to Point Defiance park. I love that winding road that runs through it. A real pretty place and boo coo fun on a bike," I answer.

"Oh yeah. I love that road," says Pete with a wistful smile on his face.

While I party with Pete and the rest of the attendees, Kent disappears. Not that I was watching him, but near the end of the party, I'm looking for him since he's my ride back to M Co. I look in vain, and after the party officially ends I find myself alone in the living room. Guess I jinxed myself, I think. I'm quite high from smoking boo coo joints, so I lay down on the couch to wait and see if Kent shows. It's a nice soft couch, and the next thing I know, it's morning, and Kent is shaking me awake.

"Come on, man. Wake up," he says, as if he's in a hurry.

"What?" I ask. I'm still half-asleep. "What's the hurry? It's Sunday isn't?"

"Yeah, it's Sunday, but we need ta get goin', or we'll end up here all day," he insists.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Trust me, we wanna get goin'," he says. "Come on, we kin have breakfast at McChord on our way back."

"Why dincha just say so?"

I also remember that I want to go riding with Pete and Brent today. As we step out into the morning air, it's already warming up with the sunrise. Looks like it's going to be a clear, sunny day. That's a rarity here, so a number one day for a bike ride. Three of us have motorcycles now at M Co. Maybe we'll have to start a club if more guys get bikes. If we do, we sure won't name it The Imperial Dragons.

Kent is in a good mood as we drive to the Air Force base for breakfast. A song comes on the radio, and he says, "Funk #49, James Gang."

"Who's the guitar player?" I ask.

Without hesitation he answers, "Joe Walsh."

"Very good, young Kent. Very good," I reply.

"Yer not so fuckin' old, ya know," says Kent.

"Twenty-one, young Kent. Twenty-one. And as I told ya, turned twenty one in the Nam, and I ain't dead yet," I say with a laugh.

"Big fuckin' deal."

"It's a boo coo big fuckin' deal, young Kent. You just see if ya can make it ta twenty-one before ya kill yerself. The way yer bangin' up this car doesn't look good for ya, either." I laugh some more.

Even though we're wearing our civvies, we come so often now that the guards at McChord recognize us and wave us through. Professional courtesy.

"So what would ya like this mornin', darlin'?" one of the grannies asks me.

"Oh, I'll have my usual," I answer. "Two eggs over easy, hash browns,

toast, and some sausage gravy on biscuits,"

"You sure ya kin eat all that?" she asks.

Kent, who is standing just behind me, laughs and says, "Ya better believe it. He can eat all that and seconds if ya make it for 'im."

"If ya say so, darlin'," the grannie replies with a smile.

I just smile too and say nothing as I wait for my breakfast to be prepared. Our wait is short, as the grannies are as expert at cooking as we are expert at waiting.

"Hey man, wanna come on a bike ride today? Pete and I are gonna take Brent to Point Defiance park in Tacoma," I ask. "Ever been there?"

"Don't think so," replies Kent.

"It's an awesome ride once yer in the park. A sweet winding road with giant redwoods all over the place. There's not a lot of traffic, so we can really let the bikes unwind. I wanna see how that Kawasaki of Brent's goes. I got an extra helmet. You ever been on a bike?"

"Yeah, we had one back home."

"Good, then ya know how ta ride on the back without having to put yer arms around me like a girl. I hate that. I mean, I like when a girl does it, but not guys. And especially not you, young Kent," I tease.

"What's that s'pose ta mean?"

"Nuthin' man. Just jokin' with ya," I answer. "So you wanna come or not?"

"Yeah, I'll come."

"Cool. Pete and I know a tee tee snack shop at the Steilacoom ferry crossing we can stop at for lunch. Couple of fine lookin' young ladies to flirt with that work there, too," I add.

"That's number one. I always like good-lookin' girls. Hey, have ya ever noticed how when ya got back from the Nam, it seems every women ya look at is good-lookin'?" Kent asks.

"Yeah, and I like it. Wonder why we never noticed that before?"

"Don't know and don't care as long as it stays that way," says Kent.

"I thought it was just me," I say. "I couldn't see outta my right eye for a while, so when I could finally see, man... The whole world looked beautiful, not just the women. Well guys looked pretty much the same, but everything else was quite improved."

We wave to the granny cooks after finishing our excellent breakfast. They wave back to us.

"Come back soon, darlin'," one of them says.

She's probably talking to Kent. For some reason women just love him. I don't know why, and I don't really care. Probably his eyebrows. That and his boyish smile. He is, after all, not twenty-one yet. I just stand near him and wait for the cast-offs that come my way. Xin loi.

When we pull into the parking lot at M Co. Pete is already tinkering with his bike. Pete's bike needs more than tinkering as it was modified by a hack. It is road-worthy but just barely.

When you're in the army and just biding your time until you get out, riding a motorcycle out in the countryside here in Washington is a taste of freedom we much appreciate. Especially Pete. When we ride our bikes together, Pete has this ear-to-ear grin plastered on his face the whole time.

As Kent and I approach Pete, he is already all smiles.

"We're ridin' today, aren't we?" he asks.

"That's a roger. Kent's comin' too."

"Cool," says Pete. "Bart's comin' on Brent's bike."

"That'll let us keep up with him a tee tee bit. His bike may be a rice burner, but it's a fast rice burner. I need to shower and change my clothes. Did you and Brent set a time to sky?" I ask.

"We thought about eleven or so."

"Sounds like a plan. That good with you, young Kent?" I ask.

"Yeah, cuz I wanna shower up too," he answers.

There's a big shower room in the bathroom of each barracks, so Kent and I can take a shower at the same time. If modesty is a concern for you, then army life is going to be a boo coo big problem, as there is zero privacy at almost all times. Even less than zero as you end up becoming aware of things you would rather not know.

Because of this lack of privacy, I actually see Kent's injured foot for the first time.

"Hey man, your foot don't look so bad," I comment.

"Yeah, looks pretty good now. Had a hole as big as a quarter for a while," Kent replies.

His second toe is out of place and looks like it's just sitting on top of his foot about 3/4 of an inch back from where it should be. It appears to be held there by skin only.

"Ya know, Kent, after we get dried off I could take care of that toe snafu for ya with nuthin' more than my toenail clippers. Be done with it once and for all," I joke.

Kent grabs his injured foot and cradles it next to his chest. Impressive agility, I must say.

While still cradling his foot, he whines, “No way, man. They're gonna put in a plastic bone where mine is missin' and put my toe back where it belongs."

"If they do that, it will be number fuckin' one. But you and I have both been in the army's hospitals. Young Kent, you should start preparing now, in your head, for the moment you wake up after coming out of surgery. The moment when you look down and realize that the fuckin' army has cut off your toe. You know that, don't you?"

Noooo!" Kent wails, still cradling his foot.

I laugh and say, "Really, Kent, I hope they do ya right. But it's the army, man."

It's well before 11:00 when we all meet up in the parking lot, but we decide to didi mau early so as to not waste a beautiful day standing around M Co. Both Pete and I have had a bike in the past and are fairly experienced riders. Not that riding a motorcycle is hard, but it is quite different than a car or a bicycle. This is Brent's first motorcycle, which he's only ridden a few times so far and never with a passenger. Because of that, Pete and I take turns leading our tee tee procession.

The most important thing for new riders to learn is to watch out for cars and trucks. Many drivers don't see bikes if they're not really looking for them. They think the bikers need to look out for themselves, and I agree with that. If you don't pay attention, sooner or later someone will pull right out in front of you, expecting you to be able to stop. Sometimes you can, sometimes not. And the bikers are always the ones that lose in accidents with cars and trucks.

We sky on the freeway to Tacoma and then onto 163 through town to North Waterfront Drive where it enters a peninsula that extends into Puget Sound. The park there is incredibly beautiful with many virgin redwood trees. They are just gigantic. Kent, being from California, has seen redwoods before, but even he thinks the park is a number one place. We stop often to make it last.

"Hey Brent, just up ahead, the road makes a sharp 90 degree turn to the left. And I mean *sharp*. We usually slow down to 15 or 20 miles per hour on that turn. You'll see what I mean when we get there. You'll see it comin' cuz at first it looks like the road just ends at one of the giant trees, but then it

turns to the left," I caution.

"Thanks for the warning, man," Brent says.

We continue on the drive through the park, and when we get to the sharp turns, we all navigate them with no mishaps. Brent's bike is super fast, even with two guys on it. The couple of times Pete has gotten side by side with Brent and challenged him to a short race, Brent has blown Pete's bike away by boo coo bike-lengths.

After we finish our ride through the park, we head for the ferry crossing in Steilacoom. The food at the snack bar here is surprisingly good for such a small place out in the middle of nowhere. The last time Pete and I were here, there were a couple of young women running the place. We are not so lucky this time. It's being operated by two guys today.

"What're prawns?" Kent asks, reading the sign.

"I had 'em last time, cuz I was curious what they were, too. Look and taste just like shrimp, and they were number one. Maybe just a different name for shrimp here in Washington. That's what I'm gettin'," I answer.

"Guess I will, too."

While we eat, we watch the brief flurry of activity when the ferry arrives and unloads the vehicles aboard. The cars and trucks waiting for the ferry are quickly loaded on, and then it departs again. We have a good view of Puget Sound, so we can watch all manner of boats and ships navigating its waters. Freighters, sailboats, fishing boats, and power cruisers just to name some.

It's hard to believe it's winter. It's at least 60 degrees, and the sky is blue with tee tee puffy clouds here and there. We can see Mt. Rainier it's so clear today. We chat as we watch the boat traffic on the Sound and eat our lunch.

"So did the army fuck up the telegram it sent your parents when ya got wounded, Kent?" I ask.

"How'd you know that?"

"I didn't. I was just guessin' cuz they fucked up the telegram to my parents, too," I answer. "What'd yours say?"

"It was to my mom, and it said, 'Your husband, Robert Campbell had been wounded in combat.' That was all. So they didn't know if it was a mistake and was some other Robert Campbell. Of course, right off they thought it was me, and it was. My dad had to go to some veterans organization to plead his case to find anything out. Fucking army!" says Kent a tee tee bit heatedly.

"Robert? I thought yer name was Kent," I say.

"Kent's my middle name. Robert Kent Campbell is my full name."

"Bobby!" I say.

"Yeah, you kin bob-up and kiss my ass," says Kent, obviously not for the first time.

"Man, you are so fuckin' touchy sometimes, young Kent," I say and then laugh. "Maybe ya need to do some dew? Hey Pete, didja bring a number?"

"Naw," says Pete, "I'm all out."

"I got one," says Kent.

"Well, better light it up before ya blow a gasket, Bobby K."

And then I add, since he is looking a little annoyed, "I'm only jokin', young Kent."

Kent lights up his joint, and we pass it around as we laugh and joke. We're the only ones sitting out here which is sort of why we feel free to smoke pot out in the open. After being in the Nam, the threat we feel about getting caught smoking pot is minimal. No bullets whizzing by our heads, so things are number one, we think.

"So what was the fuck-up in your telegram?" Kent asks.

"Mine's a boo coo bigger fuck up. The telegram said, 'Your son, Derrick Wolf, has been shot in the head. More information as to the extent of brain damage will follow in another telegram.' They also never got another telegram and knew nuthin' more for several weeks until a friend I wrote to told them I was OK."

"No shit?"

"No shit," I answer.

"Fuckin' army," says Kent and we all shake our heads in agreement.

"So what was the extent of the brain damage?" Kent asks jokingly.

"Fuck you, Bobby!" I answer with a laugh. "Actually it was so severe that now I have a terrible case of Bad Attitude. I'm sure you've noticed."

"I have, but usually it's only when yer not high," laughs Kent.

"Yer a tee tee bit edgy when yer not high as well, young Kent," I add. "I definitely like to smoke some dew before bedtime. It keeps me from dreamin'. I used to like to dream but not anymore. Too scary."

"Yeah, I'm not much for dreamin' anymore, either," says Kent.

"So where to next, Pete?" I ask, then I turn to Kent. "You still want to ride or were you up all night and need a nap?"

"I don't need no fuckin' nap, punk!"

"So touchy. Which reminds me, yer so fuckin' touchy about being called Kent, and it ain't even yer real fuckin' name. Makes me wonder what else I

don't know about ya," I tease.

"What makes you think ya know anything about me?"

"Yer right, man. Now that I think about it, I don't know shit about you. That might be number one."

"How about we take one of the exits off the freeway before we get to Ft. Lewis like we did before? Just ride until it ends, or we decide to turn around," Pete suggests.

"Whaddaya think, Brent, wanna keep ridin' with us?"

"Sure. You up for it, Bart?" Brent asks.

"Are you kiddin'? Of course I wanna keep goin'. I never wanna go back to M Co. if I don't hafta," answers Bart.

So we sky for the freeway with Pete in the lead. One bonus is that I don't have to look at Pete's omnipresent shit-eating grin the whole time. We get off the first exit we remember from our exploration of the area. Long straightaways with almost no traffic most of the time. Mile after mile of forest in all shades of green. I keep forgetting it's winter. If we ride too long and get caught out in the dark, we'll all be quickly reminded that it is indeed winter.

Brent and Pete keep racing each other as we cruise. They're both a couple of speed demons, and Brent's bike is so fast it's almost unbelievable. Brent's engine is 150 cc's smaller than my BSA and Pete's Triumph, yet his bike is boo coo faster. On the down side, it doesn't stop for shit. Especially with two guys on it.

Back in the mid-1950s, there was a bike that was imported into the US from England called the Vincent Black Shadow. Right out of the box it could go over 150 mph. The problem was it had such weak brakes that guys who bought them were getting killed. They'd get going so fast they couldn't stop in time. It's rumored that the Black Shadow was made illegal to import for that reason.

Brent's Kawasaki makes me think of the Black Shadow, because already once today he rolled halfway through an intersection before he could stop.

There's virtually nothing out here but trees. Not even a gas station, and that's why we have to end our exploration. My gas tank only holds two gallons, so I have to turn around, or I'm going to run out of gas. Both Brent and Pete decide to turn around as well. Off they both go, racing likes bats out of hell as soon as we have reversed our direction.

"Hey let's eat dinner at McChord on the way back," Kent says me as we

ride. "Ever go to McChord on the bike?"

"No. They might not recognize us out of uniform and not in yer VW," I answer.

"Only one way ta find out," Kent replies.

When we get on the freeway, Pete and Brent take off in a racing frenzy so quickly we don't have a chance to tell them we're heading to McChord, and they are nowhere in sight when we get to the exit for the air base. Xin loi.

Our question of being recognized by the guards is quickly answered as we are immediately waved in. Professional courtesy, of course. Even when out of uniform, guys who are in the military can spot others. Your haircut and the way your mustache is trimmed are dead giveaways, for one. Plus, even when out of uniform, guys usually have something of their uniform on. Their military dress shoes or combat boots or their field jacket or hat are common items worn. Even though Kent has his moccasins on, I'm wearing my combat boots, and we both have our field jackets on.

There's another kitchen crew here for dinner, so they don't even know we were here for breakfast. The grannies are, as always, sweet and wonderful to us. Asking, yes asking, what we would like instead of the cooks back at M Co. who (at best) refrain from openly insulting us while dishing out horrid food.

It being Sunday, the choices are awesome, and there's hardly anyone here but us. Too bad Pete, Brent, and Bart are missing out on this. Kent and I make our way to a table with our trays piled high with roast beef and mashed potatoes with boo coo gravy. We also have fresh vegetables and some hot biscuits. We are in heaven, and now I'm the one with the shit-eating grin on my face.

"Man, I'm gonna miss this place," says Kent.

"Why? Are ya gittin' out that soon?"

"I'm gittin' an early-out after I have my toe operation," he answers.

"When's that?"

"The operation is in February or March. After I'm healed up, I get out sometime in May."

"You lucky fucker. I got until the first week of next June before I get out," I say.

After we finish our magnificent dinner, we both wave to the grannies. They wave back to us with smiles on their faces. I love this place. I'm going to miss it too but not until June. I hate that part.

When Kent and I get back to the barracks, Pete wants to know what happened to us.

"Ya shouldn't have took off so fast. We went to McChord for dinner."

"Fuckin' bummer, man. We fuckin' ate here. The food sucked. Gomez was cookin', and it was number ten," says Pete.

We do the only thing we can do here at M Co. besides sitting on our bunk staring off into nowhere: pool and foosball.

Kent and I get in line to play a game of foosball against Adolph and Ramon while Gomez watches and tries to insult and intimidate us. I am improving so much that for the first time, the score is 9-9 before they finally beat us. We almost won! Too much.

"Kent, we can beat them, man! We can beat them."

I am as exalted as if we had beat them.

"We!" repeats Kent. "*We* would have beat them if you weren't such a lame goalie."

"Come on, man. I've only been playing foosball for a couple of months. I never even knew it was a serious game 'til now. You guys have been playin' yer whole life. Now pool, on the other hand... see if you kin beat me at pool while we wait for our next turn."

We play pool and foosball until we decide to call it a night. Tomorrow is Monday. I'm already wondering what Top will have us doing tomorrow. Whatever it is, it won't be fun.

As Top is handing out assignments the next morning, he calls off the names of the guys who are being sent to the firing range to re-qualify with the M-16 we will carry during riot duty. Farkas, Flemmy, Pete, and I are all on the list. We hate that.

A bigger shock is when Top calls out Kent's name for some make-work assignment over at the quartermaster's warehouse. Kent has such a great medical profile, it's near impossible for Top to find anything he's allowed to do. But Top is an expert at finding or making up ridiculous work details, and young Kent has no choice but to go to the quartermaster for the day.

There's a deuce-and-a-half in the parking lot waiting to take all the guys re-qualifying on the M-16 to the firing range. We watch as several guys climb in the back of the deuce-and-a-half. It's still cool outside and will be downright cold riding back there.

Sgt. Black, who is charge of the firing range detail, is nowhere in sight.

We decide to take advantage of the situation and also be nowhere in sight until the deuce-and-a-half didi maus for the firing range. What are they going to do to us? Can't send us back to the Nam. Can't even send us on riot duty if we're not re-qualified on the M-16. Xin loi.

There's a satellite PX a couple of city blocks from M Co.'s barracks, and that's where we sky to hide out. The tee tee PX has books and magazines and a complete line of toiletries and stuff guys need to survive in the army. Like shoe polish. I swear, if I ever get out of the army I will never ever shine my shoes or boots again.

The PX is quite well stocked for such a small space. In the center there is also a snack bar typically being run by one of the Lifer's daughters. The one today is a very good-looking young lady. They really shouldn't let these young women work in these places with a boo coo bunch of degenerate GIs hanging around trying to hit on them for a date. Like we are all doing right now.

"Sorry guys. My daddy's a colonel, and he won't let me date enlisted guys," she says with a smile. A beautiful smile, I might add.

"Well then, I don't count," I say. "I didn't enlist. I got drafted,"

She laughs and then says, "To my dad that's even worse."

Man, I think, the one time Kent's not here. If Kent were here, he could get her to skip out on her job, and go smoke a joint with us. But Kent is otherwise occupied for the day.

When we get back outside, the deuce-and-a-half is gone, so we sneak back to M Co. and sky into the barracks to slack. The last place they'll look for us is here. Also we can say, "What ever happened to the deuce-and-a-half for the firing range? We were right here, and the next thing we knew, it was gone! Xin loi."

Top will know we are lying, but his problem is proving it. Plus, we're not the only screw-ups he has to contend with. I would say out of the 200 or so guys here in M Co., about 199 of them are screw-ups. That's not counting me, of course.

We have to lunch at M Co. since Kent is off on some detail in his VW. I'm glad I'm not the only one who skipped out of the firing range today. When we fall out for formation after lunch, we do a great job of feigning innocence when Top rails at us for missing the firing range re-qualification. We better be there tomorrow, he warns, or we will be in boo coo trouble.

Kent returns from his detail after 5 PM. He was sorting used jungle boots

all day. He has with him a near perfect pair of boots for his trouble.

"You can't even wear those," I am quick to point out.

"I will when they fix my toe."

"Ya know, my problem is whose boots are they? A short-timer or a dead guy? A Lifer? Shit, I'd rather have some dead guy's boots than some REMF Lifer's," I joke.

I pause briefly and then ask, "So can ya get me a pair?"

"After what you just said?"

"I was jokin', man. Couldn't ya tell?" I laugh.

"OK. If I get sent again tomorrow, I'll get ya a pair. What size?"

"Eleven, and not too wide if ya don't mind," I answer.

"Hey! I wanna pair too," whines Farkas.

"Me, too!" chimes in Ace.

"OK, OK, what're yer sizes?" Kent says.

Soon it's lights out in the barracks. Boo coo guys sit around smoking and chatting in the near dark. It's not like during training where you are so sleep deprived that as soon as the lights are out you hit your bunk. Although the bay lights are out, the hallway lights are always on. For the guys sleeping closest to the door, it's never completely dark. That's where my bunk is. I don't mind. I'm not that fond of complete dark these days.

While a day in the army just seems to drag on forever, the nights fly by, especially if you get to sleep.

The next morning, Kent is off to the quartermaster's warehouse again while all of us who skipped out on the firing range have to go today. Sgt. Black, who is in charge of the M-16 retraining detail, must have gotten a talking to from Top, as he is keeping all of us in his sights. I hate that.

The deuce-and-a-half arrives, we all climb aboard, and then we sky for the firing range. It's boo coo far and takes over half an hour to get there. Now normally something like this should take about thirty minutes or less. For all practical purposes, it's a mere formality. We have all qualified with the

M-16 before. Plus most of the guys here, with the exception of me, shot an M-16 for a boo coo long time in the Nam. But of course this is the army. So first we have to have a chat about safety, such as not shooting when anyone is down range.

Instead of thirty minutes, it takes all morning, in part because they hand the ammo out one round at a time. I'm surprised we don't have to sign a roster

for each individual shell.

With my medical profile, I shouldn't have to shoot guns anymore. Technically I shouldn't have gone to the Yakima Firing Center, but apparently Top feels he can ignore the specifics of my profile when he wants. He's probably sorry he made me go there now since my crew beat his at his stupid contest. Xin loi, Top.

Pete and I decide to ride our bikes over to McChord for lunch. It's warming up now but still cloudy and overcast. When we get to the air base, we park next to what looks like Kent's VW. After I see the dents, I know it's Kent's VW. Inside, I saunter to over to chat with him.

"Looks like they let any riff-raff in here these days," I say.

"Hey, fuck you. Is that how ya talk to someone who just scored ya a number one pair of jungle boots?"

"Xin loi, young Kent. Xin loi."

"This is Billy and Fred, we're on detail together. They never been here before. This is Wolf," he says, sort of introducing me to the guys he's sitting with.

"How ya guys like the food here?" I ask.

"Man, it's fuckin' number one," says Fred, and Billy nods his head in agreement.

"Speaking of the food, I better go get in line," I say.

Pete and I arrive back at M Co. in time for the afternoon formation. Top was expecting us to be occupied at the firing range all day and doesn't know what to do with us. He has us hang loose in the barracks while he thinks up some task.

We're not necessarily confined to the barracks, so Pete and I plan on tinkering with our bikes while we wait. That is, until we are getting our tools out of our lockers, and Farkas lights up a joint. No hurry, we think. Pete and I get in the tee tee circle forming around Farkas as all the Heads present pass the joint around.

"Ya know Top might come up here to assign us to some detail," I say as I finish taking a hit as the joint goes by.

"Whoever has the joint kin eat it if Top shows," says Farkas. "He may know for sure we were smoking, but he won't have any proof."

"Man, Farkas. you just haven't been here long enough. Top is a motherfucker. Once he decides he don't like you, yer fucked. He hates me, and the only thing saving me is my profile. And that ain't workin' too good so

far.”

The joint is finished, so Pete and I didi mau for the parking lot to play with our bikes. It's a number one thing we did, too. As I predicted, Top cruised around the barracks after we left. While he didn't catch anyone smoking, Farkas and Flemmy were the only guys left in that part of the barracks. Top knew by the smell they'd been smoking, and he told them so.

"He didn't say we were in trouble," Farkas tells me later.

"Don't be an idiot," I say. "Of course yer in trouble, and the worst kind. Yer unofficially in trouble. Just watch the kinds of details Top will single you and Flemmy out for. You'll be getting the details he usually sends me on.”

Then I laugh. “Thanks man, I guess I owe ya one."

"Well that makes it easy for me to make up my mind. I'm gonna transfer over to Transportation and be a truck driver 'til I get out. Drive around and smoke pot all day," says Farkas.

"If they'll still take ya after Top tells 'em yer a pot smoker," I joke.

"He won't tell 'em that if he wants ta git rid a' me.”

"Yeah, yer probably right there," I say. "I wonder if I should try to transfer. Not ta Transportation, though. I hate everything about those deuce-and-a-halfs they hafta drive. They just reek of diesel exhaust fumes. I hate that smell. It just reminds me of number ten things every time I smell it. And I'm definitely not transferrin' to the MPs like Mark did."

The work day ends and Kent arrives back at M Co. after another day at his boot-sorting detail. He has scored boots for me and everyone else who wanted a pair. Mine are almost new, with no visible heel or sole wear. I still have my jungle boots from the Nam, but I left them home because I didn't think I'd want to wear them. I'm still not sure why I wanted these. It's boo coo easy for me to start thinking about the Nam, so I really *don't* need them in that respect.

Kent wants to drive into Tacoma to have dinner at McDonald's. When we get near the restaurant, I start to tease Kent, Farkas, and Flemmy.

"Hey doncha wanna cruise by yer ol' crib? Ya know, just for ol' time’s sake. Maybe even say 'Hi' to yer old landlord.”

"Fuck you, Wolf!" they all say in near unison.

They're all too hungry to joke around, I guess. I should have waited until after we ate.

McDonald's is jumping with customers when we arrive. We like that, since it usually means girls. So we go inside to eat, not that Kent allows eating in

his beloved but somewhat dented VW.

Of all of us, Kent looks the least like he is in the army. His hair is too long, and he is wearing moccasins and a pair of boo coo worn blue jeans. His jeans are so worn and patched that there are probably more patches than actual denim left. There are holes all over the place, including a rather big one in the crotch. After being in the Nam, most guys don't wear underwear anymore, and that would include Kent.

Because of the hole in the crotch of his pants, Kent is forever inadvertently exposing himself, and we are constantly advising him of this. As members of the army, we have seen enough of each other to last us a life time. It hardly bothers us, except when we're eating, which is what we are trying to do right now.

"Kent! Yer fuckin' nuts are hangin' out again, man. I'm tryin' ta eat here," I say.

Farkas and Flemmy have a tee tee laugh.

Kent just smiles as he readjusts himself. Sometimes I think he lets them fall out on purpose.

Despite Kent's total lack of modesty, a couple of young women saunter over to our table to see what all the laughing is about. They ask if we're in the military. Although Kent has great cover in his outfit, the rest of us don't. Flemmy and I are wearing our field jackets, so it's a dead giveaway. We admit to being in the army, which normally would be the kiss of death, but they don't seem to mind. Once they get a closer look at Kent's eyebrows and that boyish smile of his, they are in love. It also doesn't hurt his cause that Kent is an insatiable flirt.

I have seen the situation play out so many times before that I just go back to eating. The VW is full, so if we pick these young ladies up they will have to sit on our laps. Not that we'd protest. They sit with us while we finish eating.

It turns out they don't need a ride, and we have to work tomorrow, so we say goodbye to our new friends in the parking lot.

It's not that late when we get back to M Co., so we go to the day room. Barry Rockwell is ruling over the pool table, so Kent and I get in line to play foosball. That Rocky is even here is a bad sign.

"What's up, Rocky?"

"Oh, I just had ta get outta the trailer. All Jeanette can talk about is California. She has an endless list of questions," he answers.

"Sounds like a personal problem, Rocky. You should go see the chaplain," offers Kent.

Rocky ignores Kent's razzing, as he's occupied with running the table on his current challenger.

Kent couldn't care less about Rocky's personal problems, of course. He just wants to be able to play pool while we wait our turn to play foosball. Instead, we watch Rocky run the table several times. Most of the pool players here are happy Rocky is ETSing soon. It will give everyone else a chance to play pool and the possibility of winning a game instead of always getting beat.

"So Rocky, have ya started clearing post yet?"

"Yeah, started Monday," he answers. "Less than two weeks, and I'm outta here!"

"Lucky fucker," I say.

Finally it's our turn at the foosball table. Adolph and Ramon are the reigning champs tonight. They are considered the best foosball team here at M Co., so they are the reigning champs most nights. We almost beat them last time, so Kent and I are pumped up, anticipating our possible first victory over them.

It is a heated game with every point a long fought affair. We are shuffling the foosball table all over the day room. So much so that the pool players are complaining of our interference. It's a professional-grade foosball table, and it's quite heavy. But we lift it and tilt it, trying to get the ball to go where we want it to.

And then it happens. We are actually ahead, 9 to 8, when the ball gets stuck under one of Ramon's front linemen. This situation doesn't happen too often, but it's frequently enough that most good foosball players have their own particular technique for unsticking the ball. In this case, Ramon's method is to sharply rap the handle. That's what most guys do, and it usually causes the ball to shoot straight out at what seems like lightspeed. The ball shoots right past my goalie, tying up the score at 9-9.

The game comes to a halt then, as it turns out that Ramon rapped the control handle so hard he broke it. There is an immediate uproar from all the guys waiting their turn to play, and some of them are actually threatening to beat Ramon's ass. As I've mentioned before, some of these guys take foosball very seriously.

I'm examining the broken control rod to see if we can repair it. I can tell

already it has broken in the same place before and was poorly welded back together.

"Hold it! Hold it! Before you hang Ramon, let me point out that it wasn't his fault. Some hack has already welded this back together once. We'll go to the motor pool right now, fix it right, and then come back and finish the game. It shouldn't take more than half an hour."

The outrage calms down, and Kent and I sky to Top's office to get the keys to the motor pool from the Sergeant of the Day.

"I can't give ya the keys, Wolf. Yer only an E-4. Gotta be E-5 or higher," the sergeant says.

"OK, I'll be right back."

Back in the day room, I head straight for Rocky.

"Rocky, my man, help us out here. We need you to get the keys to the motor pool. They want at least an E-5. Plus, I've seen you weld, and yer better than me. If I have to do it, I'll probably have to braze it. Otherwise I might melt it or burn right through."

I say all this knowing how Rocky hates anything done second rate.

"If ya fuckin' braze it, it'll just break when somebody pounds on it again. I'll show ya how ta do it right."

Like I said, Rocky can't stand even the idea of something being fixed half-assed.

"Thanks. It'll be quick. I'll cut some round stock to put inside the tubing so when you weld it, it'll never break again, no matter what."

Kent offers his car, and it's a quick drive. Just a couple of city blocks from M Co. We have to unlock the gate and lock it behind us, as the motor pool is officially closed at this time of night.

As we walk to the shop, we pass a line of tanks.

"Man, those things a boo coo huge," says Kent.

"Yeah, these are M-60s. They're the biggest ones the army has. Fifty-two tons of mean fightin' machine," I say.

We unlock the shop and go inside. While Rocky locates the welding rig and decides on which tip to use, I get some 1/2 steel round stock. I cut a three-inch piece and then grind the rough edges off. It only takes Rocky about three or four minutes to weld the rod. We wait longer than that just for it to cool before I grind the weld down some so the foosball player will fit in place. I try sliding the player on the rod after grinding, and it fits perfectly.

"That's why brazing wouldn't be good enough," say Rocky. "You have to

grind so much of the weld off to get the player to fit back on, there's hardly nuthin' left.”

"Just need to drill a hole for the screw, and we're done. Told ya it'd be quick," I say.

When we get back to M Co., we almost have to fight to get the guys who are playing on the broken foosball table to stop long enough to put it back together. I told you these foosball players are fanatics. They were giving the guys playing on the side with the missing rod a five-point handicap, and they like their new game so well, they almost don't want us to fix it. What idiots.

With the table fix, Adolph, Ramon, Kent, and I want to finish up our game. There is some resistance from the guys who were playing on the broken table when we returned. When we point out that one side or the other only needs to score one point to end the game, they relent.

This is it, and Kent and I know it. We smile at each other, getting ready for the kill. Ramon drops the ball through the serve hole, and the game is on. It's takes all of us a few seconds to get our game on after the hour or so break we had, but soon the ball is flying back and forth over the table. It goes on for what seems like forever, especially to the guys waiting for the game to end.

The ball comes straight at our goal slot, and I quickly slap the ball right back with a snap of my wrist that is perfectly timed. The ball shoots in the opposite direction faster that it came at me, zooming right past Adolph and into their goal slot. Pure luck on my part, but we win.

We won! This victory, for me, is even sweeter than winning Top's contest at Yakima.

"I am so pumped I dunno how I'm gonna sleep tonight," I laugh.

"I know what I'm gonna do to correct that tee tee problem," says Kent.

"OK, I'm in," I say, already knowing what Kent is up to.

"Hey, let's catch up with Adolph and Ramon and have them join us. Don't want no hard feelings or anything. Plus I sort of owe them as they let me in on their toke downs a couple times in Yakima.”

"Wait. You owe them, so yer gonna pay 'em back by letting them smoke *my* pot. Is that right?" asks Kent.

"Well kinda, I guess. Su casa, mi casa.”

"Ya got that assbackwards, ya dumb fuck.”

"Nah, I got it right. Yer house is my house, pal," I laugh.

"Alright, you go talk to 'em while I go twist one from my house," says Kent.

So I chat with Ramon and Adolph to make sure we're still friends.

"Nah man, we don't mind bein' beat. We like a challenge sometimes. Just make sure it don't happen too often. Like never again," says Adolph with a laugh.

"Hey, we should toke down in our room," says Ramon, referring to the cooks room.

The two other cooks that are supposed to be their roommates have a trailer at one of the many trailer parks around Ft. Lewis, so Adolph and Ramon share a four-man room and have boo coo space. Enough for a bunch of pillows and cushions to be scattered about on the floor. A number one place to toke down.

Just as we settle into the pile of cushions, there is a knock at the door. It's Kent with the joint. Perfect timing.

Chapter 18

I've toked with Adolph and Ramon before, but this is Kent's first time. Normally getting high in the barracks would be an unthinkable thing when you're in the army, but after being in the Nam, we can't imagine anything they could do to us that really scares us. Most of us think that if no one is shooting at us, then everything is number one, no matter what else is going on.

Ramon has a record player and some albums. He puts one on. It's by Santana, who are extremely popular since they played at Woodstock. Both Kent and I like Santana, and we say so.

"Yeah, now that they're famous you like them, but we knew them when, white boy," says Adolph.

"What?" says Kent, "just cuz they're Chicano, only you can like them?"

"No, but we liked 'em first."

"How do ya know that? I know lots of bands. White, black, chicano. I might've known about them before you," challenges Kent, getting a tee tee bit snippy.

"Boys, boys," I say, "C'mon we're gettin' high here, not playin' foosball. What does it matter who knew about who first? We all agree that Santana is number one."

We listen to the rest of the album without incident, and then Gomez shows up. Adolph lets him in. When he smells the pot, he immediately wants someone to light up a joint. The problem is we already smoked the joint we had. No one likes Gomez enough to offer to roll another one. That makes him a tee tee bit sullen.

"Hey, rabbit, gimme a square," Gomez says to Kent.

Kent smokes, and so he hands Gomez a Marlboro, who doesn't even thank him.

"Better watch that rabbit shit if ya wanna bum a smoke off me," says Kent to Gomez.

It's number one that Gomez hits on Kent for a smoke and not me, as I've pretty much had it with him.

Gomez has taken the fun out of our tee tee toke down, so Kent and I didi. We have to work tomorrow anyway. Well, *I* probably have to work

tomorrow.

When we enter our sleeping bay, I look out the window while I undress.

"Hey, Kent. Why would there be a Washington State police car in our parking lot?" I ask.

"For real?"

"For real," I answer.

Kent comes over to the window to have look. The police car is parked right at the entry door to M Co. This can't be good. Kent looks extremely worried but says nothing. After fifteen minutes or so, a state police officer exits the barracks, gets in the car, and didis. Kent seems to let out a sigh of relief.

"You OK, man?" I ask. "You didn't rob a bank or nuthin' didja?"

"Nah. I ain't done nuthin'."

"Wonder what the fuck they wanted? Good thing they didn't come upstairs, or it coulda been number ten for someone," I say.

"We'll find out in the mornin'. I guarantee they didn't just stop by ta say 'Hi.'"

Kent is quite correct in that the state police didn't just stop by to say 'Hi.' They stopped by to tell whoever was Sergeant of the Day that Brent had run his motorcycle into a tree at Point Defiance park with Bart on the back, and they were both killed instantly. They calculate he was going over 100 mph before trying to stop when he hit the tree.

We are told all this by Top during roll call this morning. He acts as if he hardly cares. Moreover, he uses the deaths of Brent and Bart to chastise the rest of M Co. for reckless behavior. He says he hopes it will be a lesson to the rest of us to be more careful, especially for the other motorcyclists in the company. That would be Pete and me now that Brent is dead, although he doesn't specifically name us. Since there are only two of us, he doesn't need to. We know exactly who he's talking to.

Pete is taking the news of Brent's and Bart's deaths boo coo hard. Although I was friends with both of them, Pete was very close friends with Brent. The main reason why Brent bought a bike was so he could going riding with Pete, so Pete is having a major guilt trip about the situation. That's really number ten, because if the army has done nothing for any of us whose heads are a tee tee messed up from being in the Nam, they are going to do exactly zero about the effect of the deaths of Brent and Bart on M Co. members.

Wait, I'm wrong, so let me correct this right now. The army is going to do *less* than zero in this situation. If anything is done, it will be of a punitive nature. They can't punish Brent and Bart for damaging “government property” – which is what they consider every soldier – so they will do something to us. I can't wait to find out.

No time for mourning the dead as we fall out for formation after breakfast. There is no more mention of Brent and Bart, just the names of the guys on the different duty rosters. Most of us have riot duty training again. Another wasted day in the army. To me they all seem wasted.

I walk to our classroom with Pete. He is normally smiling and joking around all day long. He's even more happy when we ride our bikes together. That is going to be the worst for him now, I think.

"Man, it's really all my fault," says Pete.

"No way, Pete. There are two parties at fault here, and yer not one of 'em," I say. “That bike shouldn't even be legal. When ya make somethin' that goes that fast, ya gotta do somethin' about makin' it stop. The brakes on that thing were a joke. And the other guilty party is Brent. He rode that thing like a fuckin' maniac. He barely knew how to ride. I know it's a bummer, man, but it's not yer fault."

"You kin say that all ya want, but I still feel boo coo number ten about it," says Pete.

"Man, we all feel bad about it. For me the worst of it is that those guys both made it back from the Nam alive and then check out doin' somethin' stupid. Seems like too many of us have a fuckin' death wish."

We arrive at our classroom and start our day of riot duty training being lectured by Sgt. Black. To say that most of the guys in M Co. have a bad attitude would be a boo coo understatement. We hate and loathe the army and are just marking time until we get out. We are an unruly group and give our instructors grief the whole time.

Mostly we continue to badger them on the issue of ammo. We want to know if we will be issued ammo for riot duty, and they won't tell us. We are near outrage because if they won't tell us that we will definitely have ammo, it's because we won't. Since the incident where the Regimental Guards were relieved of their M-16s at gun point, we are boo coo sensitive about the issue. It would be exactly like the army to send us off to face an angry mob with unloaded weapons. So army.

I decide to weigh in on the issue.

“Here's our problem. Rule #1 in war: Take as much ammo as ya kin carry. Runnin' out of ammo is a sin that kin kill ya. We don't relish the thought of shootin' people. Ya hate shootin' people even when they're the so-called enemy, but now yer askin' us ta go to a riot with no ammo cuz some weekend warriors with the Ohio National Guard killed some protesters? It's like we're bein' punished. If anyone gets killed next time, it'll be us. We din't do nuthin except *not* get killed in the Nam. Now you treat us like that's a sin.”

“Are you done now, Wolf?” asks Sgt. Black.

“Yeah, I'm fuckin' done. I was fuckin' done the minute I got outta the Nam. It's just you guys won't let me be done.”

After lunch we are sitting around the barracks waiting to be called out for afternoon formation. Virtually everyone is in a huff about our riot duty assignment. The day started out horrid as we got the news of Brent and Bart's death and has gone steadily downhill from there.

Several of us are venting about our main cause of displeasure in terms of the riot duty assignment. Of course the main issue we have is the task in the first place. All or most of us are boo coo tired of war and killing, and now they want us to go and kill fellow Americans. Well, maybe... I guess it depends on whether or not we will be issued ammo. If not, we might be the ones killed.

I really thought that now that I made it back from the Nam alive, I at least wouldn't have to face death anymore. The death of Brent and Bart and my assignment to riot duty has corrected my thinking about that.

Orville and Imperial are pacing up and down the center aisle cussing up a storm about riot duty.

"Man, we gotta do somethin'," says Orville.

"Like what?" I ask.

"I dunno," he replies. "Maybe refuse to go to the riot."

"Like a strike?” I say, considering it. “I guess if we all just sat down and refused to get up, there's nuthin' they could do. With all our gear on and our full duffel bags, we would be too heavy to pick up and put on the plane.”

"Yer right. No way could they force over a hundred guys who don't want ta go," says Orville.

So we think we have a plan for action, at least for now.

The afternoon is spent in the classroom again. Our attitude has not improved. If anything it has gotten worse. We are finally dismissed, and we sky back to the barracks. Normally Pete and I would be talking about going

on a bike ride, but Pete is visibly depressed, and I think even mentioning the bikes would just make things worse. We joke all the time about personal problems and going to talk to the chaplain, but this time I think Pete really does need to go talk to someone. Just about anyone might help. Except Top, of course. Top already thinks the deaths are our fault. Fuck Top.

I catch up with Kent, who has been on roster duty for the mess hall all day.

"Let's go ta McChord for dinner. Already seen and smelled the dinner here, and it's awful as usual" says Kent.

"Ya prob'ly don't wanna ride over there on my bike?" I try to joke.

"I woulda thought Top took yer bike away."

"He hasn't yet, but it wouldn't surprise me if he does. Or tries to, at least," I say. "I'll buy if you fly."

As we approach Kent's VW, the dents and scratches are quite apparent. I'm feeling a tee tee bit less guilty about half-causing the first damage by flipping that dickhead hot rodder the bird. But not enough to tell Kent about the incident... yet. Kent's in a good mood, having gotten his slack detail of mess hall roster monitor back. Sorting jungle boots for a couple days has corrected Kent's attitude somewhat.

It's a short ride over to "grandmother's place" aka McChord. We listen to the radio and play our lame Name That Tune game.

A song comes on and Kent quickly says, "Cold Blood with Lydia Pense," beating me to the punch.

"Ya ever seen Lydia Pense?" Kent asks me.

"Nah, I don't think so."

"Man, she's real good-lookin' with fine hooters and a tee tee butt," Kent says with a wistful look on his face.

"Someone's in love L-U-V," I laugh, and then I ask, "What are hooters?"

Kent starts to laugh at my question, and then says through his laugh, "Man, you don't know nuthin'. Where was it ya grew up again? Some monastery in Tibet?"

"I grew up in Dearborn, Michigan. What are hooters?" I ask again.

Kent is really laughing now and can't even talk. He's crying, he's laughing so hard. He can hardly catch his breath. When he can talk again he starts to tell me but keeps laughing. Finally he composes himself and says, "You are so fuckin' dumb, man. Hooters are tits. You know... boobs."

"Never heard that before. Maybe Dearborn is Tibet," I joke.

We arrive at McChord and are waved through the gate as always. No wait

or even a semblance of a line when we get inside the mess hall. The grannies seem happy we're here. After we tell them what we would like for dinner, we chat with them while we wait.

"So where ya off to, darlin'?" one of the grannies asks Kent.

"Sorry ma'am, it's top secret so I can't say," Kent answers with a wink and a smile.

"How 'bout you? You doing something top secret?" Kent's grannie asks me.

"Nah, no spy stuff for me. Just bein' sent off on some riot duty," I lie, but just for fun.

"Riots ya say, dear? Where are the riots?" she asks.

"Won't know 'til I get there. That part *is* top secret." I laugh.

"Yer kiddin', aren't ya, darlin'?"

"I'm kiddin' about today, but they are talkin' 'bout sendin' me to a riot whenever one happens," I answer, truthfully this time.

Our dinners are ready, and we thank them and make our way to a table. This is one of the largest mess halls I've ever been in, and yet there have never been more than four or five other people here whenever we come. It can probably seat 200-300 people at least. Typical of the military waste we see every day.

"Top Secret mission, young Kent?"

"Just like to kid with 'em," says Kent. "Don't want them ban us from here."

"Fuck Kent, I think we're just about the only people who eat here, so why would they do that?"

"Cuz even though it's not the army, it's still military," he answers. "Need I say more?"

"Nah, 'nuff said."

After dinner we say farewell to the grannies and sky back to M Co. Kent and I have a real mission tonight. We want to beat Adolph and Ramon at foosball again.

Back in the day room, Kent and I wait our turn to play. Pete is sitting on one of the couches. He usually teams up with someone to play foosball, but I can tell he's still depressed about Brent and Bart, so I chat with him while I wait for my turn.

I know it's boo coo too soon to get over the deaths of Brent and Bart. I am feeling saddened by it myself. Pete's got a point in that it was he and I that took Brent to Defiance Point the first time.

I can barely get him to talk to me, and then he just answers back in monosyllables. I'm ready to give up when Kent calls me to play foosball.

"This shouldn't take long. Kent and I kicked their asses last night, and we plan on doin' it again right now," I say, trying to lighten the mood.

"Go ahead, I ain't goin' nowhere" says Pete.

"Remember what I said last night about not lettin' that ever happen again," jokes Adolph as I approach the table.

"Fuck you, punks," says Kent. "We're beatin' ya again. Don't care what kinda deal ya got. Let's play."

True to my words, it doesn't take long. We lose 10-8. We at least save face by not getting skunked. Our repair to the broken control rod seems to be holding up well. Adolph already got the ball stuck under one of his players on the repaired rod, and it withstood his sharp rap to the handle. That's maybe the only thing I'm feeling good about so far. I walk over to continue my chat with Pete.

I'm not a shrink or even close to one, so I really don't know what to ask or say to him. This is not the Pete I know. Normally he's always ready with a smile, especially if we are on our bikes. But now he's just sitting alone with a forlorn look on his face. I can tell if he stays this way, he really will need some type of professional help. But just because he needs it means nothing in the army. No one except me will even notice, so it is unlikely he will get help, even if he actually sought it out.

Kent and I get another chance for a rematch. While it is an exciting and heated game with much back and forth on the scoring, we get beat again. Gomez can be quite distracting when he starts hurling his insults from the sidelines. Both Kent and I are masters of ignoring him.

We get in line for another try. We have all night and nothing else to do. Pete disappeared during the last game, so I take the downtime to tease Kent about living in the barracks again instead.

"Never had such excitement at yer crib, aye Kent?" I ask somewhat rhetorically.

"Yeah, right," sniffs Kent at the very idea. "No babes, no pot smokin'."

"But it's all free, my man. Three squares a day, and a roof over yer head. Yer right, no babes... but we can go smoke some pot."

"Yeah, but first let's play Ramon and Adolph again," says Kent.

"OK, but if we win, we have to play the next challengers," I point out.

"If we win, I kin wait ta git high."

"*If we win*?" Gomez scoffs, overhearing Kent's comments. "Didja here him, Ricondo? If we win... ya ain't gonna win, rabbit!"

"Fuck you, Gomez," I say.

I'm pumped now and ready to trounce Adolph and Ramon in our next rematch.

It's another hard fought game. Even the guys waiting their turn to play like to watch a good match as they wait, even if it takes longer. The score seesaws back and forth. First they're ahead, then we are. Finally it's 9-9, just like the first time we beat them. Everyone in the day room, with the exception of Gomez, is rooting for us to win. Probably because they think we will be easier to beat.

It is high drama with all the screaming and yelling going on over a stupid foosball game. Back and forth the ball careens around the table. The ball even flies off the table once and has to be re-served. And then the sweet moment comes when Kent shoots the ball straight into the goal slot.

I am almost as high as if I had just smoked a number. Kent and I are beside ourselves, but we are quickly brought back down to earth by the next challengers. They want us to settle down and play them, which we do. They are boo coo easier to beat, and indeed we go through the whole line of challengers until Adolph and Ramon are up. We don't mind. We like the challenge. In the end, they beat us and reclaim their title.

It hardly matters. If this were the Mafia, Kent and I would be "made men," as we are the only team to ever beat them. Twice now.

So Kent and I sky upstairs to our bay in the barracks. Pete is sitting on his bunk, staring off into nothingness. I know that look, as I have done it myself. It's not a number one thing.

"Pete, you OK, man? We're gonna twist up a doobie. C'mon, it'll prob'ly be good fer yer head, man."

"Yeah, sure, count me in," says Pete with all the enthusiasm as if I had said, 'Pete, c'mon over and poke yourself in the eye with a sharp stick.'

Kent hands me the joint. It's perfect and looks exactly like a cigarette. We often smoke pot when we drive around in Kent's VW. Whenever we are being scrutinized by any cops, whoever has the joint holds and smokes it as if it were a cigarette. So far it has worked every time we needed it too. So far.

After the joint is lit, a few of the other Heads show. Ace and Beaudeen arrive and get in on the number.

"So Kent, hows our house stash doin'?" I ask.

"Our house?" he snorts. "Our house is gittin' low on dew."

"So what are we gonna do?"

"We're gonna git more if you got some scratch," he replies.

"I got some."

"Number one, we kin git more on Saturday afternoon after we get off."

"Can ya git me some too?" asks Ace.

"Prob'ly. Git me the money before we didi on Saturday afternoon," answers Kent.

After we get stoned, we chat a tee tee bit. Too noisily for the other guys trying to sleep, apparently, and they tell us so. Nothing else to do but go to bed and hopefully to sleep as well. Tonight, the pot works for me. No dreams, let alone nightmares, so it's number one.

The next morning at roll call, Top seems agitated. It isn't far from his standard demeanor, but while we wait for our morning assignments, I can tell something is up.

Finally Top says, "Get yer gear for riot duty, and fall back out here in fifteen minutes."

Fuck! I think to myself, but I hear several guys say it out loud. I was only joking about riots with the grannies at McChord. I didn't think there really were any. Crap!

I have all my riot gear packed already, so mostly I wait in line to get my M-16 from the armorer. All the time I was in the Nam, I begged my armorer for an M-16 only to be turned down. Now that it's the last thing I want, I am being forced to sign one out. I hate that.

We, as expected, are given no ammo. So as we fill out our formation as the members of the riot duty squad, we grouse and bitch about the situation.

"Anyone know where the fuck the riot is?" Beaudeen asks.

No one claims to know. We're not much into knowing the news. The only time we can watch the news is late at night on the day room TV. Most of the time the news is number ten stuff about the Nam, and we're boo coo uninterested in watching that. While we continue to wait, I see Kent at the top of the stairs leading to the entry door. He is surveying the situation and looks over at me. He pulls his always-at-the-ready copy of his medical profile out of his top pocket, waves it at me, and smiles. I mouth back to him, 'Fuck you!' That just makes him laugh out loud.

I have so much gear with me, I actually have my helmet on. I never wore

my helmet in the Nam, and neither did anyone else. We'll, except my LT until he killed himself accidentally. As I think about it, the last time I wore a helmet was the day I got wounded in the Nam. I gave my helmet away, which probably would have prevented my injury. On the plus side, if I hadn't been injured, I'd still be in the Nam. They don't call it a Million Dollar Wound for nothing.

I look around at the riot duty squad. We all have our helmets on and our M-16s slung over our shoulders. I can't believe the scene I am witnessing is in the Real World. Well, the army is not the Real World, but wherever they send us for our riot duty will be in the Real World.

The deuce-and-a-halfs arrive, and we load ourselves on as Top watches from his jeep. He's got his helmet on, too, so I guess he's coming along. What a pleasant thought that is. We drive over to the airfield. They have us unload about half a mile from the runway. We can see a large transport plane with the side doors open and the rear loading ramp down.

We all have about 80-100 pounds of gear with us. There seems to be no reason to make us walk all the way to the plane, as there is a paved road running directly there that we walk on. We grumble as we march. It's winter, but it's about 65 degrees outside, and the sun is shining down on us. With our field jackets on and carrying our gear, we are all getting hot and sweaty. Top drives alongside us in his jeep. I swear I see him sneer at us. Something's definitely up, but what, I don't know.

We are in no hurry to get to the plane, so we shuffle along as slowly as we can. When we reach the plane, we wait. Something we are all expert at. We continue to wait for an hour, standing out in the hot sun as if we are being punished.

Then the order comes, not to board the plane, but to return to the deuce-and-a-halfs. Riot duty has been canceled. As we slowly walk back to the deuce-and-a-halfs, it becomes apparent to some of us that we are indeed being punished. There's no reason the deuce-and-a-halfs couldn't have driven right to the side of the plane in the first place, and now with riot duty being canceled, there's no reason why they can't come to us instead of the other way around. So army.

Back in the M Co. barracks, we stow our riot gear after turning in our M-16s. Everything is falling into place now. They didn't give us any ammo because we were never going anyplace anyway. What I am still trying to figure out is *why* we're being punished.

Kent shows up in our bay. He comes right over to me, smiling.

"There's a snitch here," he says.

"What? What're you talkin' about?"

"There's a snitch, man. I heard Top talkin' to the Captain. I only heard part of what he was sayin', but it was that he was gonna teach all you guys a lesson 'bout discipline," says Kent. "Someone told 'em you guys were gonna refuse ta go on riot duty."

"No shit? Yesterday we were bitchin' in the barracks about it, and Orville and I said we could have a sit-down strike. We'd just refuse to go if they tried to send us to a riot. Someone musta squealed on us," I say.

I am shaking my head.

"After all the number ten things the army has done to all of us, that someone would still take the army's side."

This is the most disappointing part for me. I am crushed.

I add, "It just ain't right for them to try to make us kill Americans, man, it just ain't right."

"I'm with ya, man," says Kent. "Lucky for my profile."

"Yer so fuckin' lucky man. My profile ain't doin' squat fer me. I shoulda never had to go to Yakima, and I shouldn't hafta go on riot duty either. But Top hates me so much he just ignores my profile," I complain.

Several of my fellow riot duty squad members enter the bay, including Orville.

"Hey, Howard, c'mere a sec," I say.

When he comes over to where Kent and I are standing, I fill him in.

"Remember when we were bitchin' yesterday about riot duty?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Cuz apparently someone told Top 'bout it. We were bein' punished this mornin'."

"Fuck! We weren't serious. We was just lettin' off a tee tee bit of steam," replies Howard.

"I know, I know, but someone snitched on us anyway," I reply. "We might want ta keep this to ourselves. The rest of the riot duty squad might be a tee tee bit upset if they find out they were punished cuz of us."

"C'mon, after I finish with roster duty, let's sky over to McChord," says Kent.

"I'm all for that," I reply.

"You comin', Howard?" asks Kent.

"I dunno. What's at McChord?"

"Oh man, ya never been ta McChord's mess hall?" I ask.

"Nah. Why? Is it good?"

"Better than good, Howard, it's number one," I answer.

"Sure, I'll come," he answers. "How we gettin' there?"

"My man Kent here has offered ta drive us. That still right, young Kent?"

"Yeah, but ya kin quit the 'young Kent' crap."

"Touchy touchy touchy, and ya din't even hafta stand out in the sun all mornin' while basking in the glorious gaze of Top," I joke.

Every time we approach Kent's VW with all its dents and scratches, I still feel a slight twinge of guilt about my part in some of the damage. Still not enough to reveal it to Kent, but someday I will. Xin loi, Kent.

We are waved past the entry gate at McChord and park next to the mess hall. We come here so often now, there's no way the grannies haven't figured out that we're not really the "transients" we claim to be when we sign the meal roster. Still, no one ever challenges us. On the contrary, they are so sweet and nice to us, we might consider coming here even if the food was number ten.

"So darlin', another top secret mission for ya today?" one of the grannies asks Kent.

"Ya know I can't say nuthin' 'bout that stuff. It's all hush-hush," Kent replies with a wink.

"How 'bout you, darlin'? You and yer friend go to a riot today?" she says to me with a slight smirk.

"Well ma'am, as a matter of fact we did have a riot duty mission today that got canceled at the last minute. Ain't that so, Howard?"

"That's true," says Howard with a straight face.

"Normally, we couldn't tell ya nuthin', but since it got canceled, I think no harm done mentionin' it, aye Howard?" I say.

"Yeah, no problem," answers Howard who is just now focusing on the food available here.

When I notice I say, "Number one choices here, doncha think?"

"Man, I guess," answers Howard. "You guys come here often?"

"Shh! I'll tell ya 'bout it after we sit down."

After we collect our lunch, we sit down at one of the boo coo empty tables.

"As you can see, Howard, we do these sweet ladies a service by coming here as often as we can, otherwise there might not be anything for them to

do," I say.

“Is it always this empty, and the food this good?" asks Orville.

"Yep," answers Kent. "Number one, aye?"

"Ya got that right," answers Orville as he dives into his lunch.

We finish lunch and then drive back to M Co., playing another round of our Name That Tune game. Kent's almost as good as me. Xin loi, Kent.

"Spooky Tooth," says Kent, beating me this time.

"What station is that?" asks Howard.

“It's the FM station outta Seattle," answers Kent. "Music on it's number one. It's what they call an 'underground station'.”

"No commercials, just music," I add.

"No shit?" asks Orville.

"No shit," says Kent.

Everyone is just starting to fall out for the afternoon formation when we arrive. Top has an announcement about Regimental Guard duty. As he suggested previously, it will now be a permanent assignment. One day on, two days off, and the guards will be issued pump shotguns and ammo.

While most of us would rather stab ourselves repeatedly in the eye with a sharp stick rather than perform guard duty, this new permanent Regimental Guard might be a good detail. Guarding the Tank Museum, for example, is a 12-hour rotation. So it's really half a day on and two-and-a-half days off.

It seems like it could be number one, but still not many of us are willing to volunteer for it. I try to live by one of my rules for surviving the army, and that is: Never, ever volunteer for anything, period. Top hates me so much he probably wouldn't even let me be a Regimental Guard.

The guards will be made up of volunteers from all units at Ft. Lewis. Top has to come up with at least a dozen guards for M Co.'s commitment to the program, and so far only ten of our guys have volunteered. I need to get a new gig here myself. The motor pool assignment is boo coo easy, but so boring. Plus it's a 5 1/2 day work week. I decide to go against my instincts and volunteer to be a permanent Regimental Guard.

I can tell by the look on Top's face that he doesn't want me to be one of the Regimental Guards. Just as I thought. It's supposed to be some sort of an honor. Right. But he needs to provide twelve bodies, so I'm in.

The twelve volunteers, including myself, are sent back to the firing range this afternoon to qualify with the pump shotgun. It's a long ride in the back of a deuce-and-a-half, and again, something that should take about fifteen

minutes takes most of the afternoon. After the qualification round, a couple of the guys shoot up the leftover ammo just to see how fast they can fire off the pump shotguns.

We return to M Co. just about quitting time. Top meets us as we return and assigns four of the new permanent Regimental Guards to guard duty tomorrow. I am assigned to guard on Friday. Normally I would have expected Top to assign me to the first day seeing as he hates me.

I catch up with Kent in our bay of the barracks. He tries to insult me in my new capacity as a Regimental Guard by saluting me. I return the favor by giving him what we call "The Airborne Salute." After your hand is brought to your forehead, you form a small upside-down cup with your hand, pretending it's a parachute, and you move your hand down back and forth as if you were landing with a parachute. Kent really hates when we do that, so we only do it when we are really trying to jerk his chain.

"I can't fuckin' believe that you volunteered for guard duty. What were you thinkin'?" asks Kent.

"I know, man, but I had to get a different gig. The motor pool was just so fucking boring."

"Guard duty is THE most boring thing the army has ta offer man."

"Yeah, but two days off for one day on is a good deal, especially if ya get a 12-hour guard post," I reply. "I already got tomorrow off."

"Really?" asks Kent. "Ya wanna come with me to court tomorrow? I gotta go and try to beat my drug bust."

"Sure, I'll come. Not that I wanna sit in court, but I kinda wanna see how this all shakes out. Ya know the one who should really be goin' is Flemmy since it's really his bust," I say.

"He's comin' and Farkas, too."

"I definitely better come then, just to make sure you guys don't smoke pot on the way to court and show up with a buzz," I joke.

"Hey, check out my duds for tomorrow," says Kent, holding up a set of dress greens with all the medals and ribbons he has been awarded.

"Strack. Where'd ya get those?"

Kent smiles, "Top got 'em for me."

"No fuckin' shit? He got ya those ta wear court?" I ask. "I thought ya said he hates you?"

"He does. He didn't get these for tomorrow. He had to get them for me a couple of weeks ago when we went over to headquarters to get awarded my

Bronze Star. This little baby right here," says Kent as he points to one of the medals on the coat.

"I can't wait to see how ya look in that with yer fuckin' moccasins on," I laugh.

We decide to hang out the rest of the evening at M Co. We even have dinner here. It isn't even that bad, but it is truly awful in comparison to lunch at McChord. Adolph is working the serving line dishing out the food. He gives me a nod. I hope that means I'm still his friend even after beating him at foosball. Just in case, I wait until after I get my serving before I let him know Kent and I will be here to play foosball this evening.

"Just two more chumps ta beat," Adolph says with a smile.

"Yeah, you hope," I joke back. "Just try to not let Ramon break the table again."

"Hey! Are you talkin' about me?" asks Ramon, who's just down the serving line.

"I was just tellin' Adolph to not let you break the foosball table. Again!" I laugh.

"Fuck you, *pendejo*!" Ramon laughs back.

"Don't worry, that control rod ain't never gonna break there again. Now, I'm not sayin' it can't be broke, cuz obviously it has been broke before. It just ain't gonna break where Rocky and I fixed it," I brag.

I'm probably jinxing myself or the foosball table for talking like this, but I'm really just joking around with Ramon and Adolph.

After Kent finishes his roster duty, he comes and sits with Pete and I with his dinner.

"Shoulda gone over ta McChord," laments Kent.

"I know. Why didn't we?" I ask.

"Dunno. We can still go if ya want."

"I already ate so much of this crap that I'm not hungry anymore. Matter of fact, sometimes all I gotta do is walk through the mess hall door, and I'm not hungry anymore. Could be a number one weight loss program if someone was a tee tee bit overweight."

That gets me thinking. "I just realized there are really no obese or even just plain fat guys in M Co. Apparently my weight loss theory has some merit."

"You and yer theories are just plain bullshit if ya ask me," says Kent.

"Yeah, maybe so," I admit. "But that reminds me of Basic Training. Our senior Drill Instructor, Sgt. Hazelip, put all the overweight guys in what he

called the Fatty Squad. At mealtimes he walked them all to the head of the chow line. Jus' that got everyone pissed off, cuz we had ta wait longer to eat. Then he'd push all the line cooks out of the serving positions and had the overweight guys go through the chow line while he dished out their food with a teaspoon."

I continue, "He would laugh really loud as he spooned out the tee tee portions of food while saying, 'I'm puttin' you boys on bird rations,' and then he would laugh some more. He was one mean motherfucker. He had a scar from what looked like a knife wound to one of his eyes that started above his eyebrow and went straight down across his eyelid and ended at his upper cheek. I know nothin' 'bout how it happened, except whoever did that to him no longer walks this earth, I can tell ya that.

"I once watched two assistant DIs sneak up behind Sgt. Hazelip when we were having a lesson in hand-to-hand combat. They came at him from behind, and they both jumped at the same time from both sides. It all happened so fast, and there was a flurry of dust obscuring my view, but when the dust cleared, Sgt. Hazelip was standing in the same spot. He still had his Smokey the Bear hat on while both the assistant DIs were laying flat on their backs. He even still had his clipboard in one hand," I relate.

Kent feigns a yawn at my story.

"OK, OK, no more Basic Training stories. Xin loi," I say.

"Thank God!" says Kent.

“You still believe in God?”

“Yeah, but not like I use ta,” replies Kent.

Throughout my discourse and dinner, Pete has been all but silent. I know he's still upset by Brent's death, but I haven't a clue as what to do about it. It's easy to say, "C'mon Pete, snap out of," which I pretty much said to him already, and it did no good. It is, however, boo coo more than the army has done. As a matter of fact, after the initial announcement of Brent and Bart's death, there has been no further mention of the incident and nothing about a funeral or a memorial or anything. Apparently the way Top looks at it is: shit happens, get over it.

Pete and Kent and I make our way to the day room. It's past the middle of the month, and a lot of guys in M Co. are hanging out at the barracks. It's boo coo hard to budget the meager pay we get for a whole month, so most of us are out or almost out of money. Hanging around the barracks is free, whereas going out anywhere, whether it's a bar, restaurant, or movie, costs money.

Two challenger lines have already formed for the pool table and the foosball table. Adolph and Ramon are still occupied at the mess hall, so Kent and I are confident we can beat whoever the current champions are when it's our turn. Pete gets in line to play pool. That's actually an improvement compared to what he's been doing, which is either sitting silently in the day room or laying on his bunk looking out the window. He's still not smiling or laughing at all. Maybe if we ride our bikes this weekend he'll finally snap out of his depression.

It's our turn to challenge the foosball champions. Kent still won't let me play the front line, but I like winning so I play goalie without complaint. We win in an effortless game and continue undefeated until Adolph and Ramon arrive. They have to wait their turn though, so Kent and I go through the line of challengers once more. We are feeling smug when we start our game with Ramon and Adolph.

We shouldn't have been so smug, as they quickly run the score up on us. They haven't won yet, but they are several points ahead. Gomez shows up and starts his diatribe about rabbits that think they can play foosball. His remarks have the opposite effect than what he intended: it only inspires us to knuckle down and get focused on the game.

The score goes back and forth for a while, and then it's 9-9. Even if we lose now, at least we went the whole way.

Ramon does one of his special moves where he hits the ball sideways back and forth with his front row of players. He can do it for as long as he wants, and then in a blink of an eye he hits it straight ahead, and it goes right into our goal slot. Rats, he caught me looking. We lose. But at least it was a number one game.

Kent gives me the high sign, our tee tee secret code that he wants to go smoke a number. I give him a nod back. Pete is back in line for pool after he got beat. I shoot him the sign, and he follows us out of the day room. Another good sign that maybe Pete is starting to come around. Maybe.

The next morning after roll call I am officially off for the day. Maybe this new Regimental Guard duty I volunteered for won't be so bad. I watch the rest of M Co. fall out for formation to get their assignment for the day.

Kent is getting into his greens for his day in court. I'm looking out the window with my back to him so I can wait until he is completely dressed for the full effect.

"OK, I'm done," he says.

I turn around and have a look. It's all I can do to stop from laughing. He looks like some hippie impersonating someone in the army. His hair is boo coo too long and the moccasins, well, they just scream Hippie.

"Better let me walk into the court room in front of you. If we can sit up close to the judge while we wait for yer case to be heard, maybe he won't be able to see yer moccasins," I offer.

"Ya think it matters?" Kent asks.

"Apparently you think so, or what do ya got yer greens on for?"

"Guess yer right."

"You don't got a lawyer?"

"Nah, couldn't afford it even if I wanted one."

"Might be a boo coo big mistake," I say. "I went ta court one time without a lawyer, and the next thing I knew was I was in jail fer a week. It was number ten, but now that I think about it, not as number ten as the army."

"Ya done trying to lift my spirits? We gotta get going."

"Xin loi," I laugh. "I'm ready if you are."

Farkas and Flemmy arrive at our bay, and we sky for Tacoma. We have the radio on in Kent's VW, and we play Name That Tune all the way to the courthouse. Farkas and Flemmy are boo coo lame, so it's really just Kent and me naming the songs.

"'Ivan the Ice Cream Man' by Ivan Uhls," I say at the start of the song.

When we get to the courthouse, the judge is occupied with another defendant and doesn't seem to notice our entry. That's good for Kent with his shoe situation. We are also able to sit near the front. It seems that most people here want to sit as far back as possible, so there are boo coo empty seats up front, and we have that area of the courtroom mostly to ourselves.

I look Kent over. Man, he really should have gotten a haircut, but it's too late now. After a short while, Kent's name is called. He steps before the judge.

"Did you bring counsel today?" the judge asks.

"No, yer honor. I'm representin' myself."

"And how do you plead to the charges, Mr. Campbell?"

"Not guilty, yer honor," Kent replies.

"Let's see," says the judge. "You are charged with possession of a controlled substance. Is that correct, Mr. Campbell?"

"Well, yeah, that's what I was charged with, but it wasn't mine. It's just that

the car that it was in is mine. I didn't know it was even there.”

Now if I had been the one in front of the judge right now, I would be turning around and pointing at Flemmy and saying, “It was his."

Thankfully for Flemmy, I'm not the one before the judge at this moment.

"I see you are in the army, Mr, Campbell.”

"Yes, yer honor. Stationed at Ft. Lewis," says Kent.

"Have you been overseas, Mr. Campbell?"

"Yes yer honor, I was in Vietnam fer 'bout nine months 'til I got wounded.”

"Well, Mr. Campbell, we appreciate your service to our country. Your record appears to be clean, so I will take you at your word that the drugs were not yours. Just don't end up before me again. I won't be so lenient next time. You may go now, Mr. Campbell. Just remember what I just said," the judge says.

"Yes, yer honor. Thank you," says Kent.

He quickly didis with me, Farkas, and Flemmy following.

When we get outside I say, "Man, young Kent, yer one lucky fucker. The uniform definitely did the trick. And you," I say as I turn to Flemmy, "yer a lucky fucker too. If I had been in front of that judge I would have dropped a dime on yer ass. But to show no hard feelings, let's find some place to go celebrate young Kent's skating on the bust. I'm buying.”

It's not hard to find a bar in Tacoma. The hard part is deciding which one. It's near lunch time, so I'm hoping we can decide on a place with some decent food. Of course, we could go to McChord for a number one lunch, but they don't have beer. Xin loi, grannies.

After spending the afternoon celebrating the outcome of Kent's court case drinking beer, we head back to Ft. Lewis, stopping at McChord for dinner first. Kent makes the most of his dress green uniform when the grannies question him about it.

"Ya know I can't talk 'bout what I'm doin', ma'am," he says to one of the grannies making our dinner. "What I can tell ya is I had a big meetin' with some important gov'ment official about some case I was involved with. The rest is all hush-hush, ya know."

We all smile as we listen to Kent's spin on today's events. He tells no lies as far I as I can tell. Our dinner is superior to our lunch despite the fact that there's no beer available.

All four of us head to the day room back at M Co. Ramon and Adolph

make short work of us when Kent and I get our turn at the foosball table. Guess we shouldn't have celebrated so hard this afternoon. We return to the end of the line only to be beaten again. We hate that.

Kent gives me the high sign, and I relay it to Farkas and Flemmy. We sky up to our bay in the barracks for a tee tee night cap. I have my first day of Regimental Guard tomorrow, and it could last for 24 hours depending on my assignment. What was I thinking? Kent is right about guard duty being the most boring duty we have here at Ft. Lewis. It's going to be a long day, so after we finish the joint, it's off to bed for me.

In the morning, when I'm thinking a tee tee bit more clearly, I realize I don't have to show up for Regimental Guard until 5 PM. I basically have the day off again. After Kent finishes with the sign-in roster at the mess hall, he is done until noon.

We decide to walk over to the PX. I've been telling Kent about the awesome bean and cheese burritos you can get there and also of the boo coo good-looking young lady who makes them. We are not really going for the burritos.

"She won't date anyone who's not at least an LT," I tell Kent. "But if there's one person who can talk her into breaking that rule, it's you."

Kent loves this kind of a challenge.

"She jes' better be good-lookin' after all this walkin'," says Kent.

"Good exercise fer ya, young Kent. Just don't let Top see you kin walk this far," I joke.

We arrive at the PX, and go inside. The young woman is at her station in the center of the small building where the kitchen is. She recognizes me from my last visit. She has a spunky attitude which she needs given that virtually every guy that walks in the door tries to hit on her.

"You again?" she says.

"Yeah, but this time I brought reinforcements," I joke back.

"What's yer friend's name?" she asks.

This is already turning out to be number one.

"His name is Kent. And Kent this is, hey I never got yer name," I say.

"Marilyn," she answers.

"Marilyn. Why, that's a pretty name," says Kent.

How lame. I can't believe my ears. Kent, the babe magnet, is talking to this girl like it's the first time he's ever talked to a woman. Why did I think he was

such a mover?

However, his lame approach is hardly noticed, it seems.

When Kent starts talking to a woman, they just fall in love with him. Marilyn is no exception. She is entranced as he jokes around with her. She doesn't even notice I'm here. I could walk around this place and steal anything I wanted, and she wouldn't even notice. Fortunately for Marilyn, there's nothing in this place I want. Well, except for her.

Kent and Marilyn chat and even let me in on the conversation once in a while when they remember I'm still here. Eventually we didi to let her get back to work.

After we sky I say to Kent, "Ya didn't even ask her out."

"I took pity on her. She'd be in boo coo trouble with her daddy if she went out with me," he answers.

"When did you get so moral?" I ask.

"Jes' now," he laughs. “Plus I wanna toke down before my lunch duty at the mess hall. You in?"

"Of course I'm in. All I got goin' today is guard duty. Man, what was I thinking?"

Kent smiles and says, "Told ya, dumb shit. Not only guard duty, but fuckin' permanent guard duty!"

So we smoke some of our "house stash" in our bay of the barracks, and afterward Kent assesses our inventory.

"Gonna have to sky up ta Tacoma tomorrow to stock up. Yer comin' ain't cha?" Kent asks.

"If I'm back. I could get a 24-hour post, so don't wait fer me. I'd rather miss out on goin' than have you miss out on scorin'," I answer.

Being quite high gives me the false hope that the mess hall lunch can't be that bad. Of course I'm wrong. I spend the rest of the afternoon playing foosball in the day room with Kent, Ace, and Beaudeen. Ace and Beaudeen have also joined the new permanent Regimental Guard. We play for about three hours straight. If I get to do this a couple of days a week, I'm going to really get my foosball game in order.

Eventually, the three of us have to get ready for our assignment, so we didi and leave Kent to amuse himself. A truck drives us to the guard shack where we wait around until 5:30 for a cursory inspection. I luck out and get the Tank Museum assignment, which is a 12-hour post. So far so good. The Officer of the Day sends the first group of guards out to their posts, which

includes me.

The Tank Museum was the guard post where the Regimental Guards were relieved of their M-16s. Their unloaded M-16s, that is. We, on the other hand, have loaded shotguns. Well, sort of loaded shotguns. They give each of us three rounds of ammo. We don't expect to get into a firefight, but three rounds seems a tee tee bit light. It's better than nothing, though, which is what we got before. Also, it's doubtful anyone would want to shoot it out with us for our shotguns. They can be had for fifty bucks at a pawn shop.

After arriving at our guard post, Ace and I walk around the Tank Museum building for two hours. What did I get myself into? This is going to be boo coo boring duty, and this is only my first two hour shift. After two hours, replacement guards arrive, and we head back to the guard shack.

The guard shack has an office for the Officer and Sergeant of the Day and one open bay full of bunk beds for the guards to nap on. No sheets or even pillows on the blue striped mattresses, which look like they have been dragged through the mud before being placed on the beds. The reason being that most of the guards just lay down on the bunks fully clothed and with their boots on. Sometimes their muddy boots. After that's gone on for a while, no one in their right mind wants to lay down on the beds any less than fully clothed. It's only a tee tee bit after 10 PM, but with nowhere to go and nothing to do, I try to nap. I'm not very successful, as some of the guys are talking or playing cards and otherwise making noise.

At midnight, Ace and I are off to the Tank Museum for another shift. Boring, but now it's also cold outside, so it's easier to stay awake. After our last round on guard, Ace and I are released. In the end, I decide guard duty isn't so bad, and Ace and I walk the several blocks back to M Co.

Inside the guys are already up and getting ready for the half day we have to work on Saturday. Well, except for the Regimental Guards. At first I thought I'd just stay up and enjoy a whole Saturday off, but it gets boo coo quiet after most of the guys didi, and my bunk looks so inviting after the nasty number ten bunk at the guard shack. I decide to at least take a nap.

The next thing I know, I'm awakened by the noise of the guys returning from their half day of duty. It's a tee tee bit after noon, so I get up and shower. All by myself. This might just be number one after all, I think.

Soon after I'm dressed and trying to decide what to do, my good friend from my unit in the Nam, Steve Seiler, shows up. I was going to go with Kent today to score some pot, but I can see his VW is gone already. He must have

left without trying to wake me.

"Steve! Good ta see ya again, man," I say when I notice him walk into the bay.

"Hey, Wolf," says Steve.

I can see it's a nice sunny day outside even though its November. Probably already over 60 degrees.

"Wanna go for a ride on my bike? We can ride over to the Steilacoom ferry crossing and have some lunch at the tee tee snack bar there. Then maybe we could cruise into Seattle for a look-see. What's left of the 1962 World's Fair is still there. We could go up in the Space Needle."

"Sounds like a fun time, man. Let's sky," answers Steve.

I hand him my spare helmet and on the way out, we run into Pete.

"C'mon, Pete, we're going for a bike ride. Headin' to Steilacoom to grab some lunch."

"Nah, I think I'm just gonna hang here today," answers Pete, still looking and sounding boo coo depressed.

"OK man, suit yerself," I reply.

As we walk to my bike, I inform Steve of the situation.

"Two guys in our company got killed in a motorcycle accident. One of the guys was a good friend of Pete's, and he feels responsible cuz we got our bikes first, and after Brent got his bike, we took him to Point Defiance park. That's where they got killed."

"What happened?" asks Steve.

"They were fuckin' idiots. They ran into one of those giant redwoods goin' 'bout a hundred miles an hour. Killed 'em instantly," I answer. "I can't believe the number of guys here that made it back from the Nam, and they seem ta have a fuckin' death wish. It's weird."

"Yeah, I kinda noticed the same thing where I am," says Steve.

"We're burning daylight, man. Let's get goin'," I say when we get to my motorcycle. We climb on and sky for Steilacoom. It's not far, and that's number one because I missed breakfast. Though breakfast at M Co. is not much of a loss.

The two young women are working today when we arrive at the snack bar near the ferry crossing. Xin loi, Kent. It's a clear blue sky day, which are so rare here in the winter. We get our lunch and sit down at one of the tables.

"So didja git anything yet?" Steve asks.

"Yeah, a boo coo fuckin' hard time from my First Sergeant. Man, that guy

hates me.”

"No. I mean didja get a medal yet?" he asks.

"Just the Purple Heart, like I toldya. Top hates me so much, if they sent over a medal from headquarters, he'd throw it in the trash before he'd give it ta me," I laugh.

"It don't seem right to me, man.”

"Really, Steve, I don't care. Toldya before, the medals are the army's thing, not mine," I reply. "Hey, a couple of guys in my company said the World's Fair stuff in Seattle in boo coo cool. If we're gonna go, we should get to it. It gets dark so early here. Almost like in the Nam, but at least when it gets dark here, it ain't scary."

"Man, ya got that right," says Steve. "Never thought I'd be able ta sleep in the complete dark ever again, but I'm just startin' to be able to."

We finish our lunch and sky up for Seattle. As we approach the city on the freeway, we can see the high-rise buildings in the downtown area, and that's where we head. The Space Needle is visible from most places, and it's one of the sights we want to visit.

The first thing we come across is the International Fountain. It's a rare warm and sunny day here, so there are actually some hardy souls flirting with the jets of water pulsating to some pre-recorded music. Steve and I stand off to the side and watch. We've had a lifetime's worth of being wet during monsoon, so we content ourselves with watching the action. I can see that in the summer the fountain would be quite awesome to play in.

Next we sky over to the Space Needle. There's an elevator you need to take to go to the restaurant near the top or the observation platform which is at the very top. We are surprised to find out you must buy a ticket to ride the elevator, even if you're going to the restaurant. Since I drove, Steve insists on paying for the elevator tickets. That's fine with me, and we ride to the observation platform.

Wow, what a magnificent view, I think. Well worth the cost of the ticket, though I didn't pay for mine. Mt. Rainier is visible today, along with many of the surrounding mountain ranges. But Mt. Rainier is the most spectacular of the mountains visible. It's very obviously a volcano.

"Hey, Steve, do you know if Rainier is dormant?" I ask.

"Nah, I don't know, man," he answers.

"When I first got ta Ft. Lewis in August, it was cloudy for several days straight. Then on the fifth or sixth day, it cleared up. I went outside, and Mt.

Rainier was visible to me for the first time. I remember thinking, *Whoa, where the fuck was that hiding*? If it ain't dormant, there's a boo coo lot of optimistic people living here. That or boo coo stupid.”

"Prob'ly stupid," says Steve.

"Yeah, prob'ly.”

We spend at least an hour looking around Seattle from the top of the Space Needle. Back on the ground, we explore the area some more and check out several of the remaining exhibits from the fair. The food court is still here, and we decide to get dinner.

"Hey, I forgot ta tell ya, I got a letter from Wack. He made it back from the Nam alive. He's outta the army and livin' somewhere in Oregon," I say.

"Man, that's good ta know," says Steve. "Ya heard from anyone else from our unit?"

"Nah, 'course I never wrote ta anyone except Wack. Prob'ly shoulda wrote ta Fanelli but I never did.”

We chat a while more but decide to didi mau back to Ft. Lewis before complete darkness. I drop Steve off at his barracks, and we promise to get together again, but we never do. I never see or hear from Steve again. Xin loi, Steve.

I sky back to M Co. to see if Kent has returned from his quest to score some pot. When I enter the day room, Kent is playing foodball.

"Where ya been, *pendejo*?" Kent asks with a laugh.

"Went in ta Seattle to the old World's Fair with a buddy of mine from the Nam," I answer. "Didja score?"

"Was there ever any doubt?" Kent answers.

"Not on my part. So didya do any quality control testing on it yet? Ta make sure it's up to our boo coo high standards?"

"What high standards would that be?" Kent asks.

"If it burns and stays lit after ya pass it, mostly," I answer.

"Yeah, then it passes," says Ace with a laugh. "Din't ya think, Billy Jeff?"

"Definitely passes,” Beaudeen says. He and Pete both laugh..

Well, I think, Pete must be feeling a tee tee bit better as this is the first time I've seen him laugh, let alone smile, since Brent got killed.

"Let us finish this game, and then we can do whatever it was ya said, quality control?" says Kent.

Kent is playing goalie with Pete playing the frontline men.

I turn to Kent and pretend to pout.

“How come yer lettin' Pete play the front line when you never let me?”

"Cuz he's better'n you," laughs Kent.

That comment makes Pete smile. Maybe he is coming out of it after all, I think.

The game finally ends, and the guys waiting to play are boo coo happy because all four players didi with me to toke down. We sky up to our bay in the barracks and Kent gets out our new “house bag” of pot.

None of the pot we score here in Washington is comparable to the pot in the Nam. On the plus side, we don't have to endure being shot at.

Kent rolls a joint and hands it to me. Professional courtesy. Before we fire it up, I pass it around for scrutiny by our tee tee circle of Heads. We are more particular about the quality of the joint rolling than the quality of the pot. We can't do anything about the pot, but we can control the rolling. We all agree this joint meets our standards, and so I light it.

"Not too bad, my man," I say to Kent as I exhale my first toke. "And the pot's almost number one."

“Hey!" exclaims Kent. "Next time you kin do the scorin' then.”

"Young Kent. Yer so touchy. Lighten up. Maybe yer the one with a personal problem that ya need to talk to the chaplain instead of Rocky," I laugh.

Everyone else laughs a tee tee bit except Kent who says, "Fuck you, Wolf!"

"Hey, any of you guys been to the World's Fair stuff in Seattle?" I ask mostly to change the subject.

Kent's been there, but none of the other guys have. We plan on an excursion there soon. Ace offers to drive any of us that want to go in his van.

When we finish getting our heads in the right place, we didi back to the day room to get in line for more foosball. After we play a few games and get our asses soundly beat, I realize that being stoned does nothing to improve my game. Quite the opposite, as Kent and I get creamed several times, even by guys we have beaten in the past. Although Kent let Pete play the front men, he still won't let me. As the goalie, it's primarily my job to keep the other team from scoring, so when we lose Kent blames me.

"Shouldn't have got me so high," I laugh when he whines about our last loss.

"No problem. Next time I'll just cut ya off.”

We while away the rest of the evening playing foosball and pool, and then

call it a night with no plans for tomorrow.

Chapter 19

I wake with a start on Sunday morning and sit bolt upright in my bunk. It's already light outside so I decide to get up and not waste anymore daylight on one of my days off. What made me wake in an uneasy state of mind was a bad dream. I really try not to dream now, as they often turn out to be number ten affairs. I hate that.

When I walk into the bathroom, Kent is shaving. He really doesn't need to shave. I should amend that. Kent wouldn't really need to shave in the Real World, but we are in the army. He doesn't have hair one on his chin, so he doesn't need to shave there. He does, however, have some light fluff on his upper lip. You can hardly see it. Unless, of course, you're a Lifer. To be allowed to grow a mustache while in the army, it must be visible from 25 feet away. Kent's is hardly visible from any distance, so he is stuck with shaving.

I walk over to Kent and say, "Well, the pot ya got ain't good enough. I had a fuckin' number ten dream just before I woke up."

"No problemo," he says. "We'll just smoke two numbers tonight."

"Kent, my man!" I say, "I knew there was a reason I hang with you. Yer always so fast with a fix for a problem."

"So what was yer dream, man?" Kent asks.

"Oh man, I almost don't wanna talk 'bout it," I say as I think back. "So I'm in a big room with a bunch of old guys, and I'm one of 'em. Most everybody has long hair and a beard. I remember saying at one point when talking with one of the other old guys there that I had not shaved my beard off since I got outta the army. That was the only pleasant thing in my dream: apparently I do get outta the army. Ya know, the endless made-up work details are really such a waste. They would save boo coo money if they just let all us Nam vets go home. But of course then the Lifers wouldn't officially have anything to do which now is mostly watching us."

"Man, Wolf, will ya fuckin' get back ta yer story? You do this all the time. Jus' driftin' from one story ta another and never finishin' nuthin'," says Kent.

"OK, OK, jeez you are so fuckin' touchy, man. I toldya I hardly want ta think 'bout this dream. OK, so we're in this big room and some of us are startin' ta wonder what the fuck we're all doin' there. It was sorta like, am I dead and this is heaven? Or purgatory? I don't feel dead, whatever that feels

like, if anything. Anyway, a door opens and in walks a woman in an army uniform. Very strack lookin' and all business in her demeanor. As soon as I see her in my dream, I'm thinkin', 'What the fuck is goin' on?'

“She tells us to line up. At first we grumble and moan but she says for us to line up, and then she'll tell us why we're there. So still we grumble, but we eventually line up to her satisfaction. She addresses us as a group and tells us we are now back in the army. We gasp and really say nothing else. We are all in shock.

“She has a clipboard in her hand, and she starts at one end and moves down the line addressing each of us individually. When she gets ta me she says I owe the army nine months of combat time cuz I was only in the field in the Nam for three. Also, I was in the army hospital malingering from a Million Dollar Wound for about three months, so the total time I owe the army is one year, but only nine months in combat. Such a comforting thought.

“I look at this woman in astonishment, and I say to her, 'What the hell are ya talkin' 'bout lady? You can't do this, I'm in my sixties. I'm retired. I'm collectin' Social Security. You can't put me back in the army. If ya do, you'll be fuckin' sorry, cuz I have a boo coo bad attitude.'

“She smiles at me so sweetly, but then she turns ugly so fast it's boo coo scary. She just 'bout snarls at me, 'Jus' watch me, Specialist Wolf, jus' watch me!'

“Man, I'm thinkin', she's fuckin' scary. I hate that. After a while she has told everyone what they personally owe the army. We are livid. We form up in small groups and unanimously agree we will stick together and refuse to cooperate with this ridiculous situation. We're gonna show them bad attitude like they ain't never seen bad attitude.

“Miss Scaryface returns shortly after we have had our tee tee *tête-à-tête*."

"What the fuck is that?" Kent asks.

"What?"

"Tet-aw-tet," pronounces Kent.

"Xin loi, man. It's French for 'gettin' yer heads together'," I answer.

"Ya do that all the time, too, *pendejo*. Usin' words no one unnerstands.”

"Hey, I said I was sorry, man. You wanna hear the end of my dream or no?"

"There's more?" asks Kent.

"A tee tee bit more. Are ya gonna listen or not?"

"Yeah, yeah, go ahead and finish it, for once. If ya kin," he answers.

"OK, so Miss Scary Face comes back into our room and says to us that because of our recent insubordinate action, our threat of having a bad attitude, that all of us now owe the army double the time that we originally owed them. Did we want to try for triple the time?"

"Fuck, what happened then?" asks Kent.

"I dunno, the thought of two years in the army was so scary I woke up."

"C'mon, I wanna know what happened," pleads Kent.

"Kent! It was a fuckin' dream! I toldya what happened. I woke up," I answer.

Guys start to file into the bathroom then, and I jump into the showers before they are all taken.

Ace calls to me across the shower room.

"We're talkin' 'bout taken my van ta see the old fair you mentioned yesterday. Wanna come and show us where it's at?"

"Sure," I answer, "but it's boo coo easy ta find. You kin see the Space Needle from the freeway, so you just get off and drive towards it. At least that's what I did."

Back in my bay, I tell Kent of the planned trip into Seattle, and he agrees to join us.

"We kin have breakfast at McChord," offers Kent.

"No problemo for me," I say.

Kent and I join up with Ace, Beaudeen, Adolph, and Pete. Everyone is for breakfast at McChord. Adolph has never been, so maybe it will help him set some goals for himself and the other cooks to improve their cooking skills, or lack thereof.

To make sure our taste buds are honed to a razor's edge, we smoke a joint on the way to McChord. We are waved through the gate, even in our civvies.

There are even fewer people at the mess hall at McChord on Sunday morning than on weekdays. The grannies in the kitchen, as always, seem happy to see us. I'm watching to see the look on Adolph's face when he sees the food coming out of the kitchen. Since there are six of us, it takes a tee tee bit longer for them to prepare our food, but not much.

"So Adolph, a tee tee bit better having some one else cook for ya, don't ya think?" I say.

"Yeah, looks good, man. You guys come here much?" asks Adolph.

"Shhh... I'll fill ya in after we sit down."

We all get our breakfasts and sky to one of the many empty tables in the cavernous room.

As always, it's a fabulous meal, and we only don't hang around to savor it because we have an adventure planned. It's pretty much, for me anyway, a replay of yesterday. Everyone whines about having to buy a ticket to ride the elevator up to the observation platform at the Space Needle. Since Steve paid for my ticket yesterday, I don't mind as much, and I know it's worth it. It's cloudy today, but we stay up on the observation platform long enough to get a glimpse of Mt. Rainier. No matter how many times you see it, the mountain is impressive.

"Anyone know whether or not Rainier is dormant or not?" I ask.

No one knows for sure. It is definitely a volcano though, active or not.

We cruise around the fairgrounds until about noon. Lunch at the food court, while not as good as the food at McChord, is still boo coo better than army food, even if we have to pay for it. When we walk around the International Fountain, there are no revelers playing in the water. It's not sunny like it was yesterday, but at least it hasn't rained.

We decide to go see some more of the sights of Seattle and sky back to Ace's van. We quickly realize that Seattle is a difficult town to drive around in if you don't know where you are going. We are soon lost. And I mean *lost*, which is hard to do if you aren't going anywhere in particular. There's Puget Sound and Lake Washington on each side of Seattle and Lake Union in the middle sort of connecting the two. Many roads just simply end when they get to one of the bodies of water. There are bridges, but not everywhere. Often we can see where we think we want to go, but we just can't seem to get there.

Fortunately we aren't going anywhere in particular. It's a bustling and vibrant city despite the current poor economic situation here and in Tacoma. There is boo coo traffic and large numbers of people walking around. After several hours of exploring, we see an entrance sign for the freeway. We are saved. Soon we are heading back to Ft. Lewis. It was a fun day even if we didn't know where we were most of the time.

Back at M Co. most of the guys decide to suffer an abysmal dinner at our mess hall. What are they thinking? Kent and I head over to the satellite PX for a couple of burritos. And to flirt with Marilyn.

The other guys tag along, and I regale everyone with tales of how number one the burritos are. So even though they've already eaten, they order burritos, too.

Marilyn is so busy making all our burritos she can't flirt with Kent. Xin loi, Marilyn. She is amazingly efficient and soon all our burritos are ready. Although the place is small compared to the main PX, it is boo coo big to be run by one person. The snack bar is Marilyn's base of operations with seats and counters on three sides. It's stocked like a convenience store, but it also has books and magazines. Customers just help themselves, carrying their purchases to the counter where Marilyn takes their money.

I don't know how they turn a profit here, because it's really run on the assumption that all the customers are honest. When there are several people in the PX, Marilyn can't watch everyone. She can't even see the whole store from her position. Guys like Gomez know this, and they come here often to steal the place blind. The one intelligent thing they do is that they keep the cigarettes behind the counter where Marilyn can keep close tabs on them. If they didn't do that, Gomez probably wouldn't need to bum squares all the time.

Everyone agrees with me that the burritos are number one. Everyone except Adolph, that is. He thinks they are so-so compared to his mother's burritos. I would hope so.

After our burrito dinner, we play foosball and pool to finish off the end of the weekend. When most of the guys didi to hit the sack because they have to work tomorrow, I realize I have tomorrow off as well. I'm almost starting to like this detail of guard duty.

By the time I wake Monday morning, everyone is gone, even Kent. He must have gotten sent on another ridiculous make-work detail. Top has to be boo coo inventive to come up with a detail he can send Kent on. And while the details may be inventive, they are usually blatantly pointless.

While not a sunny day, it's not raining. It's a pleasant temperature outdoors, so I grab my helmet and sky for my bike. I head to McChord for breakfast, and soon I'm in line chatting with the grannies as they make my breakfast.

"So has my buddy James Bond, been here today?" I ask.

"Ya mean that spy feller?" she asks with a laugh.

I laugh too, "Yeah, he's the one."

"Nope, haven't seen 'em today. Must be on a secret mission or somethin'," she says with a wink.

"Yeah, could be. He can't talk 'bout it, of course," I reply with a wink and a

smile. I love this place. I take my tray to one of the boo coo empty tables and have my breakfast alone. I hate that, though.

After I eat, I get back on my bike to go exploring the area. I get on the freeway and head north toward Tacoma and Seattle. I think I know where I am, and I exit the freeway. When I get to the crossroad, I notice two things. First, there is a Washington State cop right behind me. I wasn't doing anything wrong, so I'm not concerned. Secondly, many of the freeway exits look the same here, and I realize I have gotten off at the wrong exit. I drive across to the freeway entrance on the other side to get back on the freeway.

The state cop follows me and quickly puts on his flashers, pulling me over before I get on the freeway. I'm concerned now, because although I have my Michigan driver's license on me, it has been revoked for excessive points on my record for boo coo tickets. Man, I think, how long ago was that?Seems like 50 or 100 years ago after being in the Nam. In reality it has been just a year. I used to do the same thing that got Brent and Bart killed. Driving my previous motorcycle and car around like a maniac. Like a fucking maniac to be exact. When I was home on leave, I meant to go and get my license situation straightened out, but I never did.

After I hand the cop my revoked license he asks, "Do you know why I pulled you over?"

"No," I answer.

"You can't get off the freeway and then cross over to get right back on," he says.

"Oh. I didn't know that. I'm from Michigan, and you kin do that there," I reply.

"Well, son, yer not in Michigan now, so I'm givin' ya a ticket," he says almost with a growl.

I have my field jacket on and the jungle boots Kent got me. That, along with my haircut, must make it quite apparent to this cop that I'm in the army, but he doesn't ask. No professional courtesy like I'm use to from the MPs at Ft. Lewis and McChord.

Apparently my name doesn't come up with any known infractions when he radios in to headquarters. He writes me a ticket, hands it to me, and I am once again on my way. Although I just got a ticket for a boo coo stupid law, I hardly care. Once he pulled me over, I was expecting to be taken to jail for driving with a revoked license. I am ecstatic. I already talked my way out of jail once. I don't know if I'd be able to pull it off again.

As I pocket my ticket, I'm not sure what to do. The cop just told me I can't cross the road and get on the freeway. Should I get off my bike and walk it back to the road? And then what? Drive down the road a tee tee bit, turn around and come back and get on the freeway? Maybe that's illegal, too. What a dumb fucking law.

While I try to decide what to do, the cop drives around me and proceeds towards the freeway. I wait for a while, until he is well out of sight. And then I do what he said I couldn't. I get back on the freeway anyway. What a dumb fuck law.

The next exit is the one I was looking for. I half expect to see the state cop waiting there for me to make the same mistake. But he is nowhere to be seen. This is one of the roads that leads off into the forest that surrounds this place. Pete and I went cruising down this road once when we were first exploring on our bikes, and this was one of the most scenic routes we found.

As I start down the road, I quickly forget about the hassling I just received and enjoy the surroundings. I have to be a tee tee bit mindful because I only have a two-gallon gas tank. I'm soon out in the middle of nowhere, so I have to make sure I save enough gas to make it back to Ft. Lewis. I'm still thinking this when I see a sign for a town up ahead called Puyallup. There are several gas stations in town, so I stop and top up my tank, then sky south on road 161.

About 3 miles south of Puyallup, I drive through the small village of Graham. As I proceed south, I can see a beautiful snow capped mountain range on the left side of the road. I can even see Mt. Rainier periodically. It seems so close, but I've driven down this road before, and we never got to Rainier even though we drove for at least an hour.

I sort of miss having Pete along, as he always has his shit-eating grin on full time. Pete hasn't been smiling much as of late, so this might have helped. There is barely any traffic on 161. Probably in the summer months there are boo coo tourists, but in November I rarely even pass another car going in the opposite direction.

The road here is straight as an arrow, so I don't have to be so mindful of where I'm going as I keep getting distracted looking at the mountains. It sure looks like winter up there on the mountaintops, but down here it's quite pleasant.

I ride for an hour or so before I stop for a tee tee break to stretch my legs. I pull off at one of the lookouts at the roadside and park my bike. There's a

couple of picnic tables, so I have a seat and enjoy the view.

While I'm resting, a guy in a pickup truck slows and stops. He asks me if I need some help, but I assure him I'm just taking a break and enjoying the view. I thank him for his concern.

"No problem," he says, and then he drives off. Boo coo more friendly than the state cop was.

I could keep going but even if I get to the turn-off for Mt. Rainier, it would still be a long drive to get to it. Instead I get on my bike and start to sky back. It's so picturesque I could just drive up and down this road all day.

When I get back to M Co. I head into the day room. Pete, Ace, and Beaudeen are the only guys there. With only the three of them, they have been forced to play singles foosball. They are boo coo happy to see me, because now they can play doubles. So happy that Pete lets me play the front men. Never having been allowed to play the front line, Pete and I get creamed by Ace and Beaudeen. Mostly my fault for sure, though Pete is not as good as me at goalie. I'm definitely not as good as Kent playing the front row. We switch positions.

Our strategy works, and we score and continue to score until we are well ahead. Ace and Beaudeen manage a tee tee comeback, but we are too far ahead and win. It's not as sweet a victory as when beating Adolph and Ramon, but close since they whipped us in the previous game.

We all have guard duty again tomorrow. I mention that I'm hoping to get another 12-hour post. Because the Tank Museum guards were the ones to have their M-16s taken away at gun point, no one really wants to guard there. I'll volunteer for it, if they'll let me.

We play foosball all afternoon. This situation might really improve my game. Normally I have to wait thirty minutes just for a chance to be beaten, and then I have to get back in line to wait for another beating.

As I'm getting ready to hit the sack, Pete stops by my bunk to ask if he can borrow my radio for the night.

"I jus' can't seem ta git ta sleep at night," says Pete. "Even after we toke a coupla numbers. Maybe listenin' ta some music might help."

"Sure, Pete," I answer.

I get the radio out of my locker and hand it to him.

"Thanks, man," he says, and he didis.

The next morning when I see Pete, he is visibly upset.

"What's a matter?" I ask.

He hands me the radio and apologizes, "I'm boo coo sorry man."

"Whaddaya sorry 'bout?"

"Yer radio, man. It fell on the floor from my bunk. Still works, but it got biffed bad," he says.

I look it over. One corner is a tee tee bit smashed, but other than that it looks OK.

"Looks OK to me. Don't worry 'bout it," I say.

"Yer sure?" he asks.

"Yeah, Pete, really. No problemo," I answer.

Pete didi maus, but he still looks spooked for some reason.

We spend another morning and afternoon working on our foosball game with Ace and Beaudeen. Then we didi by truck to the guard shack for Regimental Guard duty. After roll call and inspection we get our assignments. Crap! This time I get the Tank Farm post, which is 24 hours. Fucking crap to be exact.

To make matters worse, Beaudeen and I are sent out on the first shift just as it starts to rain a tee tee bit. The Tank Farm is out in the middle of nowhere on the base. As soon as the guard truck drops us off, it starts to rain for real. We have our ponchos, and we quickly put them on. I immediately get a flashback of the last time I had my poncho on, which was during monsoon in the Nam.

Man, what have I gotten myself into? We slowly walk around the Tank Farm on a path worn through the weeds. It follows along the outside of the cyclone fence topped with concertina wire that surrounds the looming and rusting hulks of storage tanks that comprise the Tank Farm. What we're guarding them against isn't quite clear. It is doubtful to me that the tanks are in use. If these tanks contained anything of worth they would not be sitting here rusting away. They would have been wire brushed or sand blasted and painted. Painted ten or twenty times more than necessary just to have another task to assign us.

By the time we are relieved from our first shift, our boots are soaking wet. Back at the guard shack all the returning guards are taking their boots and socks off and setting them on the heat registers to dry. You can imagine how number one that smells. The guard shack already stinks from all the unwashed guys. All the wet gear just adds to it.

Beaudeen and I endure our post through the night and into morning of the

next day. During our last shift on Tuesday afternoon, I decide to investigate. One of the gates in the fence surrounding the tanks has boo coo slack in the chain, and the gate itself is bent. I squeeze in easily, but Beaudeen decides to continue on the rounds while I have a look-see. I kick several of them, and they make that hollow gong-like sound of empty tanks. One tank even has a loose inspection cover with large gaps around its edge. I could easily remove it to look inside, but if there was anything inside it would pouring out right now.

I wait outside the gate for Beaudeen to return, and we resume our rounds. Why? We don't know. For something to do to help us while away our last two hours out here, I guess. The guard truck finally arrives to pick us up. The one good thing about being sent out on the first guard shift is that we are released first.

It's about 2:30 PM when Beaudeen and I make it back to M Co. I can see Kent in the day room when we enter the barracks. He waves me over and wants me to play goalie.

"Let me get out of my wet clothes, and I'll be right back," I say.

However, once up in my bay and out of my wet boots and fatigues, my bunk looks so inviting. I decide to just lay down for a few moments to rest my eyes and warm up a tee tee bit after being the coldest and wettest I've been since monsoon in the Nam.

The next thing I know Kent is shaking me awake.

"Thought you was comin' back ta play foosball."

As I become cognizant of where I am, I say, "I was, but I laid down ta rest my eyes and musta fallen asleep. What time is it?"

"Time ta go have dinner at McChord."

"Fuckin' A," I say.

"C'mon then. Get dressed, and let's sky up."

But before I can didi, the company clerk tells me the captain wants to see me. Now what?

I saunter down the stairs of the barracks and walk toward the hallway to the captain's office. The door to his office is open, and I can see Captain Heberle sitting at his desk. I knock on the door jamb. The captain looks up and waves me in.

"Come in, Specialist Wolf. Have a seat," he says to me. "Weren't you on the winning tank crew at Yakima?"

"Yes sir, I was the driver."

"I thought I remembered your name from somewhere," he says. "Listen Wolf, as part of a community outreach program here at Ft. Lewis, M Co. is working with one of the local charities in Tacoma. We're hosting a Christmas party here in December. The charity is in need of toys and other presents for the children attending the party. They asked if perhaps we had some con artists here that could help them out. I told them I didn't think so, but I would find out and get back with them.

"When I went to Top and asked if we had any con artists in M Co., he didn't even look up from what he was doing. He immediately said, 'Wolf and Campbell.'"

"I find that interesting, sir. If there's a con artist here, I think it would be Top," I say.

"Why do you say that?"

"You mentioned the contest at Yakima. Top initially said the winners would be exempt from duty for a month. But once we won, he changed it to exempt from *extra* duty. A boo coo big difference," I answer. "We felt conned big time."

"Well, I apologize if there was some misunderstanding about the contest," he says.

He hands me a slip of paper.

"This is the address of the charity in Tacoma. Tomorrow is Thanksgiving. On Friday, I want you and Campbell to go there and see if you can help them out," he finishes.

I take the slip of paper. "I don't know sir. Top might think we're con artists, but I don't," I say.

"Nonetheless, I expect you do your best to help them out. Inform Specialist Campbell of the assignment for me, would you?"

"It would be a pleasure, sir," I answer with a big smile.

As I leave the captain's office, Kent is just coming down the stairs.

"Where ya been now, *pendejo*? I been lookin' all over fer you," Kent asks sounding a tee tee bit ticked off.

"Ya won't fuckin' believe where I've been, young Kent," I answer.

As we walk to his VW I tell him of our assignment for Friday.

"I'm havin' such a number one time on Regimental Guard, I didn't even remember that tomorrow is Thanksgiving," I say.

"So let me get this straight. Top told the captain that we're con artists?" asks Kent.

"That's what Heberle told me," I said. "I didn't agree, but he didn't care. He wants us both to go help out at the charity. Could be better duty than Regimental Guard. You know all those fuckin' tanks that they have us guarding are fuckin' empty?"

"Big surprise," says Kent. "Or did you just figure out that all these work details are made up ta keep us busy?"

"Yeah, I fuckin' knew that, but now I have proof. Well, proof enough fer me. I din't have a camera or nuthin' with me," I answer.

"Here, maybe this will help ya feel a tee tee bit better." He hands me a perfectly rolled joint. "Fire that mother up."

"I knew there was a reason I keep ya 'round."

When we get to the gate at McChord, we are waved in without any hesitation by the gate guards. Good thing for professional courtesy, as the inside of Kent's VW is a cloud of smoke.

As always, the grannies are glad to see us.

"What's it gonna be today, darlin'?" the head granny asks Kent.

"Well ma'am, I'm powerful hungry today, so ya jus' gimme whatcha think a hungry man needs ta make it ta the end of the day without starvin' ta death," Kent answers with a smile and a tee tee twinkle in his eyes.

He loves to flirt with them, and they love to be flirted with.

"How 'bout you?" she asks me.

"I'll have whatever ya give him," I answer nodding toward Kent. "Don't wanna miss out on somethin' number one."

Where to sit is the hardest choice here, as there are boo coo empty tables.

On the ride back to M Co. Kent says, "Damn, I meant ta ask 'em if they was gonna be open tomorrow since it's Thanksgiving."

"Course they will. The military is always twenty-four-seven. Our mess hall will be open tomorrow," I say.

"I know that. That's why I wanna know whether McChord's gonna be open tomorrow. I don't wanna have Thanksgiving dinner at M Co.," moans Kent.

"Fuckin' tell me about it. Last Thanksgiving I was at tank school at Ft. Knox. Some of the guys had cars and didn't live too far away, so they got passes to go home. But about half of us stayed in the barracks for the holiday. We were technically off duty, but we were in a month-long training session on a new tank they were just introducing in ta Nam. That had us in some ol' WWII barracks at some out of the way place on post, so unless we called a cab or walked a boo coo long way, we were stuck in the barracks. No day

room. No pool or foosball table. No TV. Fuckin' nuthin' and nuthin' ta do.

"So of course we ate dinner at the mess hall. The main cooks and the mess sergeant were all on leave for Thanksgiving, so the OJT cooks were running it. Dinner was fucking horrible but not as horrible as what happened later," I say.

"What the fuck happened later?" asks Kent.

"Everyone of us that ate at the mess hall got food poisoning," I say with laugh. "Kinda sounds funny now, but it didn't seem funny then. The next day was a full training day and all the guys that had leave were back and ready ta go. All of us that got poisoned were puking into the butt cans and moaning in our bunks. The drill sergeants came in and tol' all the guys who got poisoned that the only way ta get excused from duty that day was ta report to the dispensary for sick call. The dispensary was four or five city blocks from the barracks, so about fifty guys, including me, crawled along the curb on the street pukin' all the way ta the dispensary. Plenty of people drove by us, but no one stopped ta help.

“Once there, we waited outside, laying around on the ground puking. It's November and winter, it's freezing cold, and there's snow in places on the frozen ground. They only let us in the dispensary one at a time. Prob'ly hopin' most of us would die waiting so they wouldn't have ta deal with us. After 5 or 10 guys got in the dispensary and left, still crawlin' along the curb, the dispensary clerk comes outside and tells the rest of us still laying around pukin' that the dispensary doctor is still on leave and that he, the clerk, didn't have any authority to excuse us from duty. Xin loi.

"So the rest of us crawled back ta the barracks, still pukin' the whole way. Once again, people drivin' by and lookin' at us, but no one stops. No one offers help. Back at the barracks we all just crawl back in our bunks with a butt can handy to barf in. A tee tee bit before noon, one of the drill sergeants comes into the barracks ta sorta check on us. He wants ta know if we got excused from duty. We tell him, 'No, but if ya try ta make us go ta the motor pool, ya kin just shoot us all right here in our bunks.'

"Good thing the next day was Saturday, cuz most of us were still kinda fucked up, but we managed ta make it through half a day at the motor pool. I think I just got in the driver's compartment of my tank and slept all mornin'.”

"Thanks fer sharing that story!" Kent says with a frown. "Now I know fer sure I don't want ta eat dinner at M Co. tomorrow."

"Xin loi," I laugh. "So where we gonna eat?"

"We? We?"

"What? Ain't we friends no more?"

"Yeah, we're still friends. Unless ya keep tellin' stories 'bout the army," he answers with a grin.

When we get back to M Co., there's nothing to do but sky to the day room. Adolph and Ramon are ruling the foosball table, but Kent and I plan to end that. It seems early for the cooks to be off already.

"Din't you guys have ta work today?" I ask.

"Nah, we gotta work tomorrow," answers Adolph.

Kent was right. We should have found out for sure if McChord's mess hall is open tomorrow. Damn!

Adolph seems to sense a certain amount of unease in my demeanor after he reveals that they are cooking M Co.'s Thanksgiving meal.

He says, "Hey man, it's gonna be a number one dinner. We got everything, turkey, stuffing, pumpkin pies."

Yeah, I think, they've got everything except the skill to cook a number one dinner. Fuck! Kent says nothing but he gives me the look that says, 'I toldya so.'

Even though Kent and I were confident of our victory over Adolph and Ramon, they win by one point. At least we made them work for it.

Kent gives me the high sign. When we get to the top of the stairs, we realize that even though they won, Adolph and Ramon have followed us.

When I notice we are being followed, Adolph smiles and says, "Hey man, you owe us. Wanna toke it in our room?" he asks.

Kent goes into our bay and unlocks one of the spare lockers that we all use to keep contraband in. We each have an assigned locker, but there are boo coo spare ones. If they ever come through our barracks looking for contraband, they'll cut the locks off the spare lockers, but they won't be able to prove who the contraband belongs to. At least that's what we all think and hope.

I chat with Ramon and Adolph as we wait for Kent to roll the joint. He's very picky about the quality of the joint rolling, and I should add that I am, too. As protocol calls for, Kent hands me the joint for examination, and if it's good enough I will light it. It is, as always, a perfect number. It looks just like the Marlboros Kent smokes. I light it and pass it to Ramon. We are listening to Santana on Ramon's record player.

"So whatta we gonna do about Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow?" I ask

Kent.

"Whaddaya mean 'whatta ya gonna do?'" says Adolph. "I toldya man, we're gonna have a number one turkey dinner."

Kent and I smile at each other.

"Adolph," I say, "we took ya over ta McChord with us, didn't we?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"Well ya might be able ta beat Kent and me at foosball once in a while, but ya can't beat the grannies at McChord when it comes ta cookin'," I answer.

"Once in a while? Fuck you, *pendejo*!" laughs Ramon.

"OK, twice in a while," I say as I laugh along with him.

"C'mon, man. Dinner's gonna be number one tomorrow. Don't I take care of ya when I'm on the servin' line?" says Adolph.

"Well, we don't even know if the mess hall at McChord is even open tomorrow, so we might come," says Kent.

"Hey, man, don't do me no favors. I'm tellin' the straight shit. Don't come, see if I fuckin' care," huffs Adolph.

"Whoa, looks like somebody's gotta personal problem. You need ta go talk ta the chaplain 'bout that, Adolph," I laugh.

We all laugh. We're all high now, so it doesn't take much. Good thing, too, because there's a knock at the door and when Ramon opens it, there stands Gomez. Things were going so number one, and now Gomez is here. He smelled us smoking pot, and he wants some, but we already finished the joint. Xin loi.

Gomez doesn't go away or give up easily as he whines about being left out. He hits Kent up for a cigarette. Ramon and Adolph smoke menthol cigarettes, preferably Kools. Gomez smokes Marlboros, as does Kent. Although I've seen Gomez smoking frequently, I've never seen him with his own pack of cigarettes, so I'm really just guessing he's a Marlboro man. Because he works with Adolph and Ramon, it's possible he has hit them up so often that if any other smoker is present, he hits on them first. Professional courtesy of a mooch.

Kent pulls his pack out and hands a cigarette to Gomez. Kent gets no thanks.

"C'mon, Wolf, lets sky. Mebbe we kin beat Adolph and Ramon back ta the day room and git in line first," says Kent with a laugh.

"Fuckin' Gomez. What a jerk. Didn't even thank ya fer the smoke," I say as we head back to the day room.

"Yeah, but did ya notice he don't call me rabbit?" Kent laughs.

"And didya notice he din't ask me for a square?" I laugh too.

After our wait in the foosball line, we beat Orville and Imperial, who are the reigning champions at the moment. When Adolph and Ramon return, they have to wait in line to play us. They hate that.

Our title as the new champions doesn't last long, but we at least make Adolph and Ramon work for their win. Kent for some reason skips out of the day room without saying anything. I watch him walk down the hall and into Top's office. A short time later, he comes out smiling.

"What're you up to, man?" I ask.

"Jes' called over ta Marcia and Terry's house and got us invited ta Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow. Only it's not really dinner cuz they wanna eat 'bout two inna afternoon," Kent answers.

"Hey, motherfuckers!" says Adolph, overhearing our conversation, "Ya gonna skip out on our dinner here tomorrow?"

"Nah, Adolph. Din't ya hear? Marcia and Terry's party is in the afternoon. We'll be back. Won't we, Kent?" I say with a wink to Kent.

"I saw that," Adolph says and laughs.

Kent and I decide to sky up to our bay in the barracks to celebrate our recent good fortune. It also serves as a tee tee bit of a nightcap since we hate to dream these days.

For once I sleep peacefully and feel well rested when I awaken on Thanksgiving morning. My second Thanksgiving while in the army. If all our celebration plans go well today, it will easily surpass the last one.

Kent is already shaving when I enter the barracks bathroom.

"C'mon, get a move on, will ya," says Kent.

"What's the hurry? Not eatin' 'til two."

"Yeah, but let's go ta McChord for breakfast. Be a number one day right from the git go," he answers.

"What if they're not open?"

"Yer the one that said they'd be open, din't ya?" he asks.

"Well, I think they'll be open. Whatta we do if they're closed?"

"Go ta McDonald's, I guess."

"Ya think they're open today? Never hearda any turkey burgers there, man," I say with a laugh.

"We'll find somethin'. You comin'?"

"Fuckin' A, I'm comin'," I answer as I sky to the shower room.

Lucky for us, McChord is open. The mess hall is even more desolate than usual, aside from the grannies. They seem genuinely happy to see us, and of course we are even happier to see them.

"What's it gonna be, darlin'?"

"I'da thought you'd know by now what I want fer breakfast, ma'am," laughs Kent.

"Well darlin', I know what yer friend there is gonna have, but not you." She smiles.

"Why? What's he gonna have?"

"He always has the same as you. So what's it gonna be?" she asks.

"Two eggs over easy, toast, sausage, gravy on biscuits. That otta do it fer now," he finishes.

"Ya gonna be here fer dinner? Or do ya got a secret mission or somethin'?"

"No missions today, but we din't know fer sure if ya were gonna be open today, so we got ourselves invited ta two turkey dinners."

"Of course we're open, darlin'. We're always open. But you have a good time today," says the head granny.

"That's good ta know, ma'am," replies Kent.

We get our breakfasts and then sky to the nearest table. I love this place. After a leisurely repast, we sky for Marcia and Terry's house. I haven't had many leisurely meals while in the army, so it's really number one. We wave goodbye to the grannies as we didi, and they all wave back. I think they like us. I hope so anyway.

Not many places are open today, but on our way to Marcia and Terry's house we find an open store. We stop to buy some goodies for the party. We brought some pot, and that in itself is usually enough, but since they're providing the dinner, we feel we should bring something extra.

We're early, but there are several friends here already starting some of the dinner preparations. The turkey is already in the oven, and the aromas wafting from the kitchen are too much for me to bear. I saunter into the kitchen while Kent busies himself rolling joints at the dining room table.

Marcia and Terry are hard at work. They are both very good-looking women. I know Terry has a boyfriend and is even engaged, but Marcia, according to Kent, is unattached at the moment. I know she really likes Kent, but then all women do.

"I used ta work in a restaurant," I say to them as I walk over to where they

are making pumpkin pies in the center of the kitchen. "Also, the army has made me quite good at taking orders from just 'bout anyone. Maybe I can help.”

Actually I'd be happy to just stand around and watch Terry and Marcia cook, but that would be rude.

"Kin ya carve?" asks Terry.

"Ya mean the turkey?"

"Yeah," answers Terry.

"I guess. It's supposed ta be some sort of honor, though. Doesn't anyone else wanna do it? I've never done it, but I've cut up hundreds, maybe thousands of chickens when I worked in the restaurant.”

"Yeah, someone else wants ta do it, but he'll prob'ly fuck it up. You kin carve if ya want," says Terry.

"OK by me, but I don't wanna piss anyone off," I reply.

I think again that Terry is boo coo good-looking, and it looks like she can cook. Her fiancé is a lucky fucker.

Speaking of which, we hear the sound of a motorcycle in the driveway. When we look out we can see that Rick and Tony, Terry's fiancé, have arrived.

Even after seeing for myself how Rick rigged the clutch and front brake controls so he can ride his bike with one arm, I am still amazed by it. I ride my bike one-handed now and then to let my hand relax, but riding one-handed full time would be too much for me.

Rick and Tony are soon followed by two brothers that drive up an old milk truck. Neither of them are milkmen, but when they saw the milk truck for sale, they just had to have it. It's kind of cool. When I get a closer look at it, I realize it's basically a tank. It's OK for skying around town but wouldn't be good for long trips. One reason why is there is only a seat for the driver, and it's only really a jump seat. It flips up so the driver can drive while standing, which is the way most milkmen drove their trucks around on their route.

Tony comes into the kitchen just as Terry is taking the turkey out of the oven for a tee tee basting. He comes over to watch and drool. I'm already next to the stove drooling myself. Tony looks a tee tee bit like he might have been drinking. And I mean boo coo drinking.

Terry notices as well and says to Tony, "Have you been drinkin' already?"

"It's Thanksgiving, of course I been drinkin'. Whaddaya mean, already?" Tony says a bit testily.

Oh man, I think, I wouldn't cop an attitude so early in the day, especially with my fiancé, that is if I ever have one. And while she's basting a number one looking turkey no less. Tony is starting to remind me of that asshole Gomez. Xin loi, Terry.

Kent enters the kitchen with a lit joint and saves Tony from further embarrassment as we pass the number around.

"You guys always smoke this much pot?" Terry asks Kent as she declines the joint when offered to her.

"More if we kin git it," answers Kent as we both laugh.

"That ain't no lie," I chime in. "We'll smoke before breakfast, after breakfast, before and after lunch, before and after dinner and then just before we go to bed. But as Kent said, 'more if we can git it' which we sometimes can't. Ya know after I say all that, young Kent, I think that you and I may have personal problems. Maybe we need ta see the chaplain."

"You kin go if ya wanna, but I ain't," says Kent.

The turkey goes back in the oven, and everyone except Marcia and Terry didi from the kitchen. Kent has rolled several joints and now, out of Terry's sight, he lights another one and passes it around. It's a large room and several more people have arrived. Bill and his girlfriend are on the other side of the room. They're talking to the two brothers that came in the milk truck.

Kent says to me as he motions across the room, "You met Bill before at my old crib, and that's his girlfriend, Squeaky. The two giants they're talkin' to are the Johnson brothers, John and Jim. But everyone calls them Johnny and Jimbo."

Kent's right about giants as one of the Johnson brothers has to be over six-foot-six, and they both have huge bodies and are built like Neanderthals. I make a mental note to myself to never even think about messing with these two guys.

I think Squeaky sounds like a funny nickname, but the first time I hear her speak I fully understand it. She has the highest voice I have ever heard. She sounds just like Betty Boop. Her voice is so high-pitched, the first couple of times I hear her speak I almost have to bite my tongue to keep from laughing. But she's long and lithe, with one of the most enchanting smiles I've ever seen.

I go back to the kitchen to see if I can help. What a spread they are planning. Everything you would have at Thanksgiving dinner at your grandmother's house. Both mashed and sweet potatoes. Green bean casserole

that we all like to joke about but secretly love. Of course the turkey with stuffing. Marcia and Terry are baking pumpkin pies but several guests bring pies too. This Thanksgiving has already surpassed my last one while in the army, and it just keeps getting better.

And then Tony comes back into the kitchen. He's even drunker than when he arrived. Thankfully Terry just shoos him out of the kitchen.

"See why I want ya ta carve the turkey?" she says to me and then laughs.

"Yeah," I laugh back. "I'll try ta pace myself so I don't git too high to help out."

There is a final flurry of activity in the kitchen just before we're ready to eat. The potatoes are mashed and the gravy is made, and then we start bringing everything into the dining room. The turkey is a commanding presence at one end of the table. I'm still not sure about carving it. I've never really done it before, and there are about twenty people watching. Tony is obviously beyond hope, though, so at the urging of the rest of the guests, I start carving.

It's not that hard and the carving knife is boo coo sharp. With much encouragement from everyone there, well except Tony, I slice and cut up the turkey. A job well done, I think, and we all start to pass the serving plates around.

Bill and Squeaky are vegetarians, so they pass on the turkey. There are so many other wonderful things to eat, it won't be a problem for them. And it wouldn't have been, except that Tony is one of those drunks that get wicked when they drink.

Bill puts some dressing on his plate and asks that someone pass the gravy.

"There's turkey juice in the dressing and in the gravy, so you can't have it," says Tony as he passes the gravy away from Bill and Squeaky.

I'm again thinking how much Tony reminds me of that asshole Gomez, and I'm just about to speak up on Bill and Squeaky's behalf when Kent does it for me.

"Tony!" says Kent. "Mellow out, man. It's Thanksgiving. Don't be comin' down on people. S'posed ta be a dinner everyone is thankful for, not hassled 'bout."

From the look Tony gives Kent, I think I'm going to have to break up a fight before we even get to eat, but then Terry gives Tony one of those looks guys often get from their girlfriends. He knows he is in trouble and changes his facial expression to one of remorse and says, "Yer right. Sorry, Bill."

Well, I think, maybe Tony's not as big an asshole as Gomez after all. But only maybe, so I weigh in too, feeling a tee tee bit wicked myself.

“So Tony,” I ask, “when you get out of Food Cop school, do ya git a badge that says 'Chicken Inspector' or something like that?”

That gets quite a laugh, and even Tony understands he is being allowed to save face and says no more.

The rest of the Thanksgiving dinner goes smoothly, and a fantastic time is had by all. The football games are soon being watched while most of the women clean up the aftermath in the kitchen. I'm not much for watching sports on TV, so I volunteer to help out in the kitchen. Mostly so I can hang out with some good-looking babes. Being in the army I can hang out with guys all I want and more.

Every time I look at Squeaky, I am enthralled by her great beauty. And then she says something, and all I can think of is Betty Boop. I don't have that problem with Marcia. She is both good-looking and has a soft and provocative voice. I'm having the best time I can remember when Kent enters the kitchen.

"Prob'ly should git goin'," he says to me.

"Why, man? We're just startin' ta party down in here," I say.

"Yeah, Kent. What's yer hurry?" says Marcia in her sultry voice as she gives Kent 'the look.'

That would have been enough for me. If Marcia looked at me that way I would have told Kent to didi mau without me. Even if I'd have to crawl over ten miles of broken glass to get back to Ft. Lewis.

But Marcia is not looking at me that way, so we say our goodbyes to the rest of the party-goers and sky up for M Co.

"Fuck, Kent," I say. "We just had two fantastic meals today. The last of which won't be topped anytime soon. How can we even remotely expect Adolph and Ramon to come close to our last dinner? Plus, I am so full I don't even wanna think 'bout food right now. Why'd ya wanna didi so soon?”

"Fer two reasons: One, if I'da stayed any longer I prob'ly woulda had ta beat the crap outta Tony. And two is Marcia ain't gotta boyfriend no more. I like her and all, jes don't wanna be her boyfriend. Didja see they way she was lookin' at me in the kitchen before we left?" he asks.

"Fuckin' A, I saw the way she was lookin' at ya, ya lucky fucker. If she had looked at me that way I'd still be there," I laugh.

We pass the freeway exit for McChord Air force base as we drive back to

M Co. After being invited there by our pseudo-grannies this morning, it would normally be inconceivable that we would pass it up. But this is not a normal day. So far it's been an extraordinary day.

Back at M Co. we go straight to the day room. Pete is there and so are Ace and Beaudeen. Because it's a holiday, many of the members of M Co. have gone home on leave, even with the prospect of a number one Thanksgiving dinner made by our loyal cooks.

For me the only saving grace for the M Co. dinner is that I won't really be hungry or need to eat, so I can just go to have a look and socialize with my friends. We also don't want to insult Adolph and Ramon. We hang back a tee tee while before going to the mess hall, mostly because we aren't really hungry. Eventually we saunter over. It smells number one, which is shocking. Almost as good as Marcia and Terry's kitchen earlier today. We get trays and start through the serving line. Having to use trays instead of plates is already ruining it for me, but I press on. Ramon and Adolph are the servers and seem boo coo happy we came.

"Hey, *pendejo*! You came," says Adolph greeting us with a big smile. "Ya want somma everthin'?"

"Why not?" I answer.

Adolph proceeds to fill my tray. The turkey is from sliced turkey rolls. Not quite as number one as our first turkey dinner today, but they surely would have destroyed a real turkey trying to carve it. Normally the army serves instant mashed potatoes, but today they are real. I know this because I overhear one of the KPs complaining about having to peel potatoes for the first time in his life. Sweet potatoes as well, but they're calling them yams. They look like sweet potatoes to me.

Kent and I join Pete, Ace, and Beaudeen, and we all dig in. Considering what we have to endure most of the time here, this meal is number one. If I wasn't so full still from the first dinner today, I would probably go for seconds. Most guys do go for second helpings. The cooks are feeling number one, and so are we. It's official. Today was my best Thanksgiving since being in the army.

Later that night, just before we are going to bed, Kent asks me, "So where we s'posed ta go tomorrow for the Cap'n?"

"Dunno fer sure. I got the address on a piece a paper he gave me. It's in Tacoma somewhere. Shouldn't be too hard ta find. Prob'ly only be a coupla blocks from one a yer old girlfriends' houses," I laugh.

"Fuck you," he replies.

"Hey! You be nice there tomorrow. Remember, you are representing M Co. and the US Army, so ya better look and act strack," I laugh again.

"Man, you are so fulla shit," he laughs back. "I dunno why I hang with you, man."

"Ya don't? I think I know why," I answer. "We're both fucked up a tee tee bit in our heads. Once in a while we kinda lose it but so far never at the same time, so one of us can always get the other one to correct their thinking before things get out of hand. 'Course yer a tee tee bit more fucked up than me."

Kent flips me the bird, shaking his head. "Like I said, yer so fulla shit."

The next morning, Kent and I prepare ourselves for our assignment at the charity in Tacoma. By prepare, I mean we smoke some pot in the barracks while everyone else is at breakfast. We fall out for formation, and when everyone didis for their day's assignment, Kent and I sky to McChord for a late breakfast.

The grannies are again curious as to what we are up to today.

"Another secret mission?" the head granny asks.

"No, ma'am. Nuthin' secret today. Goin' inta Tacoma fer a little community service at one of the charities there," Kent answers, actually telling the truth for once.

"That so?" she replies with a sly smile. "So what's it gonna be today?"

"The usual," answers Kent.

"And what might that be darlin'?" she asks.

"Whatever he's havin'," says Kent motioning at me with his thumb.

She smiles, finally getting Kent's tee tee joke, and she asks me," So whatta you havin' darlin'?"

We could be here all day playing this game, so I tell her what I want, and Kent has the same.

After breakfast we sky to Tacoma. Kent knows his way around here pretty well having been stationed at Ft. Lewis twice, so it doesn't take us long to find the charity's building.

It's similar to a Salvation Army outlet in that they have secondhand clothing, furniture, and household items for sale. There are some staff members at the back of the store, and we also notice two women standing off to the side of the checkout counter and register. One of the women is a rather

tall and attractive blond.

Under my breath I say to Kent, "Dibs on the blond."

Kent laughs but says nothing. He doesn't have to because he knows if the blond has her way, she will choose him. Lucky fucker.

We approach the counter and introduce ourselves to the manager.

"Excellent," he says to us. "Does one of you have a car?"

"Yeah, I gotta car here," answers Kent.

"Great, Kent. You take Linda here with you, then," the manager says, indicating the shorter of the two women. "Sue can take Derrick. Here's a list of businesses that have agreed to donate items. If your cars get too full, you can stop back here to unload."

I can't believe my luck as we all sky out to the cars. Actually Sue has a pickup truck which will probably hold boo coo more stuff than Kent's VW. Xin loi, Kent.

I give Kent a wink and say to him, "May the best man win."

"Then I already won," laughs Kent.

I silently mouth to him, "Fuck you," then I laugh too.

Sue and I get into her truck and go over our list. As we drive to our first donor, we chat. I can already tell she's a "bad girl" meaning she probably smokes pot. We hit it off right from the start and are soon laughing and joking around as we drive.

We make our first stop at one of the listed donors. It's a big hardware store, so we go inside and look for the manager. It's just happenstance that Sue is walking in front of me when we find the manager. He doesn't even notice I'm there. As I mentioned, Sue is quite an attractive woman, and the store manager is obviously smitten. He takes us to the store room and indicates several gift wrapped boxes that are for us to take.

Sue gives the store manager a big smile and thanks him so profusely that he offers us a few more items that aren't yet gift wrapped. She is being so charming that if I were the manager, I would be walking her around the store right now telling her she could have anything and everything. But I am not the manager, so we content ourselves with the extra items we receive.

When we get back to Sue's truck, I say to her, "Wow, that was a lot easier than I thought it would be. If the next store has a guy for a manager you are definitely the one to do the talkin'." I laugh.

"I thought you guys were supposed to be the con artists," Sue says, laughing as well. "We expected a couple of guys with dark sunglasses, and

their collars all turned up like some hoodlums.”

"Hey, I have sunglasses," I reply pulling out my pink sunglasses and putting them on.

We are just starting to pull away from the stores parking lot when Sue looks over to see my sunglasses. She bursts out laughing when she sees them.

"Not exactly dark," she says after she manages to compose herself.

"I can explain," I say while laughing a tee tee bit myself. "OK, here goes. I have some metal fragments in my right eye from an injury while I was in the Nam. It causes my eye to be boo coo sensitive to light, so I have what's called a medical profile that gives me permission to wear sunglasses. But the army will only issue you sunglasses by prescription. Even with my eye injury, I still have perfect vision, so I have to buy my own. So here's why they think Kent and I are con artists. The army has this inane thing known as parade duty where they honor some retiring Lifer by makin' us stand at attention for 'bout an hour out in the blazing sun while they bestow some more medals on the guy. We already have to work a half a day on Saturday, and then once a month they make us spend the afternoon doin' that. I got kicked off parade duty because of my sunglasses, so my First Sergeant thinks I'm some sort of a scammer."

"What about Kent?" Sue asks.

"Pretty much the same reason. He got shot in the foot, so he has a profile that says they can't make him walk or stand much, and it lets him wear moccasins. Didn't ya notice?"

"No, but then I wasn't looking at his feet," she confides.

Yeah, no surprise there I think.

"Kent and I both get kicked offa parade duty for being outta uniform. So Top hates us and prob'ly thinks making us come here today is punishment," I chuckle.

"So is it?" she asks.

"Heck no! I'm having a fun time, and we just started. But we gotta get more toys than Kent and Linda. You jus' keep turnin' on the charm with the guy managers, and I'll see what I can do with the lady managers," I answer.

"You are a con artist!" Sue laughs.

"Look who's talkin'. I saw the way ya hustled that hardware store manager.”

By the time we finish about half of our donor list, the bed of Sue's truck is full.

"Let's go back and unload our loot. Also I'm gettin' powerful hungry. Since you've been driving, I'll buy lunch if ya want," I offer.

"OK, but nowhere fancy," she answers.

"How 'bout McDonald's? Or is that too fancy?"

"McDonald's is fine," she says, smiling.

Since Kent and I had breakfast at the same time, I'm not surprised to see his VW in the parking lot of McDonald's when Sue and I pull in to park. I can see the backseat of the VW is packed full with wrapped toys, but it doesn't look like anywhere near as much as Sue and I have gotten so far.

"Pretend we're not having any luck getting stuff when we get inside," I say to Sue.

"If you say so," says Sue.

Kent and Linda see us and wave us over.

"So how ya doin', *pendejo*?" Kent asks me.

"Young Kent, I saw all the stuff in yer car. Guess yer the con artist after all. We're not havin' much luck. This town's on hard times," I say, pretending disappointment.

"Ya jes' gotta know how ta act," laughs Kent.

"Guess yer right. I better quit bein' honest and start actin'" I laugh. "So how am I s'posed ta act?"

"Like the dumb shit you are," answers Kent with a bigger laugh.

I give him the finger in such a way that Linda and Sue won't see. I don't want to be impolite in front of company.

"What's pen-day-ho mean?" asks Sue.

"Hmm, I think it means something like 'punk,'" I answer. "But it can also mean someone who is slick or sly, kinda like a con artist," I finish with a laugh. "Whaddaya think Kent?"

"Well ya got the 'punk' part right in regards ta yerself," he laughs, and we join in. I don't know why I'm laughing, though.

We finish our modest repast, nothing fancy just as requested, and sky up to finish collecting gifts from our list of donors. Sue and I polish up our spiel, and it works like magic. She is better at it than me, but of course she has the advantage of being boo coo better looking. Wearing my uniform seems to be doing me little good since Tacoma is a military town. It's residents are accustomed to seeing guys in uniform. Still we work what tee tee magic we have, and as we fill the bed of Sue's truck to the brim a second time, we realize we are also finished with our list. Number one, I think.

We sky back to the charity's center and are just about finished unloading all our loot when Kent and Linda return. His car is jam-packed, so much so that he has to open the passenger side door and take some stuff out that he had crammed around Linda. It's an impressive haul, but I'm pretty sure we beat him. But I don't want to wreck my sweet victory yet, so I say nothing.

Kent has a look in the bed of Sue's truck as he walks past with an armload of gifts.

"Is that all ya got?" he sniffs a tee tee bit arrogantly.

"Nah, we got a tee tee bit more inside," I answer, lying through my teeth. "Want me ta help ya with yer stuff, man?"

"You jes' keep yer hands outta my car. Don't wancha tryin' ta get credit fer my stuff."

"Kent, Kent. Remember, man, it's s'posed ta be 'bout the kids," I tease.

When we both walk inside, and he sees Sue standing next to our huge pile of gifts, Kent says in a low voice, "Ya lyin' fuckin' punk."

"Ah ah, remember the kids now and keep it down. Remember, yer representin' M Co."

"Fuck M Co.!" he whispers.

"Not so loud, man. They're gonna hear ya."

As we approach the counter, the charity's manager comes around to thank us.

"Fantasic job, gentlemen. This will be a record that will stand for a while. I will personally thank Captain Heberle for allowing you to help us. I hope to see you both at the Christmas party M Co. is hosting for the children."

He shakes both of our hands with great sincerity.

We say goodbye to Sue and Linda and start to leave. About halfway out, Kent asks me if I got a date with Sue.

"No, man. In a week it'll be December. I can't ask someone to go on a date on the back of my bike in the middle of winter," I answer.

"I'll let ya borrow my car," says Kent.

"Really?"

"Yeah, if I kin borrow yer bike."

"Deal. Hang on a minute," I say. I walk back over to Sue and ask her if she'd like to have dinner sometime.

"Sure," she answers, and she gives me a smile. I get her phone number, and I say goodbye again. I really didn't expect her to say yes, so I'm on cloud nine as I catch up with Kent and we sky.

"So whadda we gonna do now?" I ask.

"Don't know," Kent answers. "Mebbe we could go back over ta Marcia and Terry's. See if there's any leftovers from yesterday."

"Sounds good ta me."

We are both boo coo low on funds since we don't get paid for a few more days, but we buy some refreshments so as not to show up empty-handed.

When we arrive, the milk truck is there. This could be good since Kent has told me that the Johnson brothers are the biggest stoners he knows. We go to the side door off the kitchen and can see several people inside. They wave us in, and as we hoped, they are smoking pot.

"Do you always smoke this much pot?" Kent says to Terry as he takes the lit joint from her.

"What?" she answers, and then she laughs when she realizes he's teasing.

Johnny and Jimbo are both sitting at the small kitchen table rolling joints from an open bag lying on the table.

"Ya need some dew, Kent?" asks Jimbo.

"Yeah, but I ain't got no scratch yet. We get paid inna coupla days though. Kin ya save me a bag?" asks Kent.

"Johnny, go git Kent a bag outta the truck. We'll trust ya 'til ya git paid."

"D'ya use the milk truck to deliver pot?" I ask.

"Yeah," says Jimbo, chuckling. "It's almost perfect. One of us drives while the other one runs up to the house. We're driving slow and stoppin' a lot, so it almost looks like we're really deliverin' milk. We even scored an old milk bottle basket we use to haul the pot around."

Johnny returns with a small bag of pot which he tosses to Kent.

"Thanks man, I owe ya."

Jimbo lights the joint he just finished rolling and hands it to Kent. Kent passes the joint to me and after taking a hit I pass it to Terry. When it's finished, Johnny and Jimbo prepare to leave.

"Hey, you guys wanna go for a little ride in our truck?" Jimbo asks us.

Terry says she is waiting for Tony to get there, but Kent and I accept the offer. The four of us climb into the milk truck and take off. There is only a seat for the driver, so it's every man for himself as Jimbo drives. There's a pole to hold onto, and it's number one because Jimbo is driving like a maniac. It's also a good thing the truck can't go very fast, otherwise we'd all probably be thrown out the open door. The neighborhood we're driving around in is all curving streets that go up and down the hills. Most of the time we're clinging

to whatever we can for dear life. Man, what was I thinking when I agreed to go for a ride?

"So Kent, what happened with yer crib?" asks Johnny. "You guys had some good parties."

"We got busted. Our landlord dropped a dime on us, so we're all livin' back in the barracks," answers Kent.

"Bummer, man. Are ya gonna git another place?"

"I hope so man," answers Kent.

After cruising the neighborhood for a while, we end up back at Marcia and Terry's house. I realize that Jimbo was probably driving like a madman on purpose, trying to scare the crap out of Kent and me. In that he succeeded. For me, at least. It takes a tee tee bit more to scare Kent, so he was probably having fun. Having probably used up my lifetime supply of luck in the Nam, I was not having fun. I hate that.

Without even having to consult with each other, we end up at McChord for dinner. It's even more deserted than it was yesterday. The grannies seem happy to see us, and it's a different crew here for dinner, so they are unaware of our day's escapades. As we wait for our food, Kent regales them with tales of con artistry and the procurement of toys for our Christmas party. He almost makes it sound like something exciting. Almost.

We sit down at our table and start to eat.

"And you say I'm fulla shit. What was that all 'bout?" I laugh.

"Jes' tryin' ta spice up their boring life a tee tee bit."

"We spice up their lives just by comin' here, man. If it wasn't fer us they'd prob'ly close this joint," I say.

"Don't say that, man. Ya tryin' ta jinx it or somethin'?"

"I definitely don't wanna jinx it. I love this place," I answer.

We have another leisurely meal courtesy of our grannies and then we sky for M Co. Why? We don't know. It's Friday night so there won't likely be anyone there. Except that it is only a few days until payday, so there might be some guys hanging out for lack of spending money.

There are more guys hanging out in the day room than expected, so Kent and I have to wait a tee tee bit to play foosball. Barry Rockwell is ruling the pool table. He's only got a couple more days until he gets out. Lucky fucker.

"Whaddaya doin' here, Rocky? Tryin' ta get in yer last tee tee bit of free pool table action before ya didi mau?" I ask, half joking.

"Nah. Shorty said Top wanted ta see me. They finally figured out what's

wrong with Lenny. He has TB. That means everyone from M Co. that went ta Yakima has ta go over ta the hospital tomorrow for testing. They want you, me, and Froggy to get tested first cuz we were closed up inside the tank with him for a whole month jes' 'bout," answers Rocky with a shake of his head. "Man, I'm gonna be boo coo pissed if I got it. Gonna fuck up my plans fer gittin' out big time."

"What's he talkin' 'bout?" asks Kent.

"He said we all got exposed ta tuberculosis at Yakima so we hafta go over ta Madigan tomorrow for testing," I repeat.

"Well, I don't gotta go, cuz I din't go ta Yakima," says Kent.

"No, but I gotta go. Fuck man, if anyone got infected it's prob'ly us," I say.

This is a number ten turn of events. This is just so army. They knew something was wrong with Lenny, but they couldn't figure out what. So they exposed over half of M Co. to TB rather than keep Lenny in the hospital. So fucking army to be exact.

Kent, sensing my distress, gives me the high sign. I nod back to him. If there was ever a time in my military career that I needed to smoke a joint it is right now.

I'm up early Saturday morning, hardly being able to sleep with worrying about having TB. I have a hard time sleeping as it is. There is boo coo talk in the bay and in the bathroom among the guys who were exposed. We're more pissed about this than the riot duty situation. Just when you think it can't get any worse in the army, it does. I hate that.

Rocky shows up after breakfast and offers to drive me and Froggy to the hospital. Probably my last ride in Rocky's car. We chat on the ride to the hospital.

"Wolfman," says Froggy, "we should do somethin' with Rocky. You know, sort of a goin' away party."

"I ain't gonna feel like partyin' if they tell me I got TB," says Rocky.

"Me neither," I say, "but I don't think they'll know today whether we have it. It took 'em months ta figure out Lenny has it.

"Yeah, I think yer right," says Froggy. "So you guys maybe wanna go bowlin' tomorrow? Ya know, before we die and all."

"Can I try yer ball?" I ask, just now remembering that Froggy has a left-handed bowling ball.

"Yeah you kin try it out," Froggy says with a smirk.

Whenever Froggy smirks like that, I know something is up.

"How 'bout it, Rocky? Wanna go bowlin' with us?" Froggy asks.

"Yeah, OK. Jeanette's gotta work tomorrow so might as well," answers Rocky.

We get to the hospital and go inside. They are expecting us. The TB test is quick, and we're already walking back out when the trucks with the rest of the guys from M Co. start to arrive.

"You guys done already?" asks Sgt. Black.

"Jes' goes ta show, it's who ya know," laughs Froggy.

We get into Rocky's Mustang and sky back to M Co. There is no one in the day room besides Rocky and me, and I can't play foosball by myself yet.

"C'mon," says Rocky handing me the cue stick, "I'll let ya break."

I have never beaten Rocky at pool. I have never seen anyone beat Rocky at pool. I have been practicing, but not as diligently as I have at foosball. However, I've never gotten to break playing Rocky, so this will be my one and only chance to beat him at pool. I luck out and sink a ball on the break. I get several more before I miss a shot. It's all over now, as Rocky will almost surely run the table on me. He was certainly challenging himself or just taking pity on me by allowing me to break.

As expected, Rocky runs the table, but then something surprising happens. When he sinks the eight ball, the cue ball just follows it right into the pocket. While I win, it was really Rocky who beat himself. I am still delighted, even if he probably scratched on purpose as a tee tee going away present to me.

"Man, Rocky, I guess your mind is elsewhere," I laugh. “Though if I was gitten outta the army on Monday, my mind would be elsewhere too."

"I gotta tee tee bit on my mind fer sure," says Rocky. "Between not knowing if I got TB and knowing that Jeanette is goin' ta be a problem on Monday, it's ruining my ETS."

"Yer still a lucky fucker. Two days and yer out," I reply.

Man, I envy Rocky. Heck, I envy every guy who's gettin' outta the army.

We play pool for the rest of the morning until the rest of the Yakima guys return from the hospital. I don't beat Rocky again, so I'm more confidant than ever that he lost the first game to me on purpose. Yeah, I'm going to miss Rocky. He's been a number one friend.

Shorty wants to go back to the trailer that he and Rocky share, so they didi mau. Lots of guys pour into the day room after their half day of work. Still no Kent, but Beaudeen, Ace, and Pete have returned. Pete and I team up for

foosball, and he lets me play the front men to get some practice. Because of that, Ace and Beaudeen beat us soundly. We get back in line, but before we have a chance to play another game, Kent shows up.

"Hey man, let’s go upstairs to correct our thinking."

We follow Kent up the stairwell to our bay. Kent gets our bag of pot from our "house" locker and rolls a perfect joint. As I scrutinize it, some guy I've never seen before walks into our bay and heads right over to Kent.

"Hey, Frank," says Kent, "Howzit goin'?"

"Good, man. I brought yer gun back," he says as he hands a rifle case to Kent. "Thanks."

"So, didja' get anything huntin'?"

"Nah, din't git nuthin'," answers Frank.

Just as quickly as he arrives, he's gone.

“Who the fuck was that?” I ask. “I've never seen him before."

"Just some guy who use ta come party at my ole crib," answers Kent.

"So what's in the case?" I ask.

"Jes' my shotgun," answers Kent.

"You gotta a gun? Here?"

"Yeah. Why? Doncha gotta gun?"

"Fuck no. Why would I wanna gun here? I already got a M-16 and a shotgun. I got more guns here, courtesy of the army, than I had in the Nam.” I say. “Why'd ya let that guy borrow yer shotgun?"

Kent shrugs. "Said he wanted ta go huntin'.”

"So ya let 'em borrow yer shotgun?" I am a tee tee bit incredulous.

"Hey, I got it back din't I?" he answers.

The conversation about the shotgun ends when Pete lights the joint.

When we finish toking down, Kent says, "Lets sky.”

"Where to?" I ask.

"Ta McChord. Then into Tacoma.”

"Sounds good ta me," I reply. "What about you, Pete?”

"Nah," says Pete. "I got somethin' ta do with Imperial."

"Imperial? Yer hangin' with Imperial?"

"Yeah. Why not?"

"Cuz Imperial is a dumb fuck," I offer.

"Aw, he's not so bad," says Pete.

I shrug.

"OK, if ya say so.”

As always, we are just waved through the gate at McChord. Good thing, too, as it would have been a tee tee bit inconvenient if the gate guards wanted to look in the trunk of Kent's VW where he put his shotgun. He can have it at M Co., but he would need to have the armorer store it for him under lock and key.

The grannies are chatty as usual, and they tease us a tee tee bit before giving us our lunch. After lunch, we sky into Tacoma. Kent seems to have a destination in mind. He pulls into the lot of a pawn shop, gets the gun case from his trunk, and we both enter. I love going into pawn shops. They always have musical instruments, and I go right over to check out the guitars. No left-handed ones, so I walk over to Kent. He has just finished haggling over the shotgun. He gets the cash for it, and we didi.

Once we're outside I confront him.

"OK man, what the fuck is up?" I ask.

"Whatcha talkin' 'bout?" says Kent, feigning ignorance.

"What am I talkin' about? I'll tell ya," I say. "I saw the look on yer face when the state cops came ta M Co. that one night after the Regimental Guards got robbed by a guy with a shotgun. Then today some spare swingin' dick comes ta M Co. ta give back yer shotgun, and the first thing ya do is pawn it. Did I fergit anything?"

"Still don't know whatcher talkin' 'bout. I always pawn my shotgun near the end of the month for some extra scratch 'til we git paid."

"Well ya didn't pawn it last month, cuz that guy had it ta go huntin'. Huntin' fer M-16s is my guess."

"You don't know that," huffs Kent.

"I remember reading in a mystery novel one time, a detective sayin' there ain't no such thing as a coincidence when a crime has been committed," I say. "Of course if there was no such thing as a coincidence, there wouldn't be a word for it."

"Yer so full of shit most of the time I don't know why I hang with ya," chuckles Kent.

"I toldya why. We're both fucked up in the head. But as this incident proves, yer boo coo more fucked up than me," I laugh. "So now what are we gonna do?"

"Let's stop by Terry and Marcia's. If the Johnson brothers are there, I kin pay 'em fer the pot they fronted me. I mean, our house," Kent says acting a tee tee bit wise.

"Ya sure ya wanna git that near ta Marcia?"

"I know you do," he laughs.

"Ya got that right," I laugh back.

We sky for Marcia and Terry's house. When we arrive, there are a couple of cars we recognize. Not really a surprise as it's Saturday afternoon. A typical time to party for a boo coo bunch of stoners.

We knock at the door, but it becomes immediately apparent that there is not a party going on. Everyone is subdued and red-eyed, and there is no pot being smoked. I know something is wrong. Boo coo wrong to be exact.

"Didja hear what happened?" asks Terry. She is obviously distressed.

"No," says Kent. "We jes' came in ta town and thought we'd stop on by."

"Jimbo got killed this afternoon," sobs Terry, just barely holding back tears. "He and Johnny were drivin' around in their milk truck, and Johnny made a quick turn. Jimbo flew out the doorway on the opposite side and landed on his head. He was dead before the ambulance could get there."

"Fuck!" says Kent.

I say nothing. I hardly knew Jimbo, having just met him, but I am still almost in shock. I really thought that once I made it out of the Nam, the dying would end. If anything, it's getting worse. I hate that.

Even while almost in shock, I'm not really surprised, having just experienced firsthand the way they drove that truck. I was scared for my life during that ride. Still, no reason to talk about that now. Mostly I just listen to the others talk about the Jimbo they knew. Hearing their stories makes me realize he was a great friend to many and will be boo coo missed. More than can be said about me, I think.

Rick shows up, having somehow heard of Jimbo's death. He, like most everyone here, was a close friend of the brothers. They even helped Rick modify his motorcycle so he could ride it one-handed after he had his own accident where he lost his arm.

Kent and I stay for several hours, but eventually he catches my eye at one point and gives me the look that means it's time to didi mau. I was ready to sky five minutes after getting here, but that would have been boo coo rude. Instead of saying any goodbyes, Kent and I just kind of fade out when several other friends arrive.

"Man, I am so weary of people dyin' and being killed," I say as we drive. "Where we goin' anyway?"

"Dunno, jes' had ta get outta there. I'm boo coo tired of people dyin' too.

Might as well go back ta M Co., I guess," he answers.

We arrive back just in time for dinner. Adolph is serving so we at least get the "Special of the Day." It's close to the end of the month, so there are boo coo more guys hanging around the barracks than usual when off duty.

After dinner it looks like it's going to be another exciting night in the day room with Kent and I playing foosball against Adolph and Ramon as we try to unseat them as the team to beat. Although we ourselves are boisterous and noisy, it's not as loud as usual. I attribute that to the fact that Gomez isn't here to hassle everyone from the sidelines. We miss him not, and I pity whoever he is with.

The next morning is Sunday. Everyone, including myself, sleeps in a tee tee bit. Not too much, or they'll miss breakfast. Not really much to miss, especially when Kent and I will probably sky over to McChord for our breakfast.

I'm getting dressed when Pete stops by.

"Hey Wolf, kin I borrow five bucks 'til payday?" Pete asks.

"Sure, man."

I get my wallet and hand Pete a five spot.

"Thanks. I'll pay ya back Tuesday when we get payed," Pete says as he walks away.

He returns after a few minutes and hands me a pistol.

"Here, hold this 'til I pay ya back."

"No, man. I don't need that," I reply.

"No, no. Take it, man."

"I trust ya, Pete. We get paid in two days."

But Pete is being boo coo insistent that I hold the pistol as collateral for the five dollar loan.

"OK," I say finally.

Even though I accept it I am reluctant to. For one thing, it should be given to the armorer to store for safe keeping. Even though I only need to hold it for two days, if I get caught with it, I will be in boo coo trouble even though it's not even mine. With that thought in mind, I decide to stash it in the spare locker Kent and I keep our pot in.

I look it over just before putting it in the locker. It's a German Mauser in very good condition. It's worth way more than five bucks, that's for sure. I still don't really want it or anything to do with it. Especially after all the grief

I gave Kent about his shotgun.

Speaking of the devil, Kent shows up just as I am about to close our locker.

"Not so fast. Let's twist one up for the ride over ta McChord."

"Good idea," I reply.

Kent sees the Mauser in our locker and asks, "What the hell is that?"

"Pete borrowed five bucks, and he gave it to me ta hold," I answer. "Din't really want it, but he fuckin' insisted. Maybe I should pawn it."

I laugh.

"Fuck you," he says. "But yer right about stashing it. Ya don't wanna get caught with that."

We sky for McChord and on the way there, we smoke a joint. Maybe we do smoke too much pot, as Terry has pointed out. Maybe. Well that's the army's problem, and they seem unwilling to do anything about the guys who are messed up in the head in M Co. Actually, it's not just M Co. The army isn't going to do anything about the guys who are messed up in the head in the whole army. "Suck it up," is what they would say. "Just suck it up, you pansies." I hate that.

At McChord we are waved through the gates, and we drive to the mess hall. This morning Kent gives the granny his breakfast request first, so I get to say, "The usual." Xin loi, Kent.

We get our food and grab a table to eat.

"Wanna go bowlin' with us later today?" I ask Kent.

"Who's 'us?'"

"So far Froggy, Rocky, and me. I wanna try out Froggy's left-handed bowling ball. I hardly ever bowled cuz I'm a lefty, and they only ever have right-handed balls."

"I haven't tried bowling since I got shot in the foot. Tried diving, and it didn't work out so well. Anyway, Marcia asked me ta go horseback riding this afternoon," Kent replies.

"Horseback riding! Why you sly fox. Thought ya didn't want ta encourage Marcia?" I tease.

"I don't, but I haven't been on a horse in so long I just couldn't refuse."

"I totally understand. If Marcia asked me to go horseback riding, the bowling would have to wait. Even if it's Rocky's last day in the army," I reply.

"Really? Rocky's gittin' out tonight?"

"Yep, the lucky fucker," I answer.

After finishing our breakfast, we head back to M Co. Soon after our return, Kent didis to go riding with Marcia, and I catch up with Pete in the day room. We team up at foosball, and he lets me play the front line even though it causes us to lose.

"Wanna go bowlin' with me and Froggy and Rocky today?" I ask him.

"Shit yeah, I love bowlin'," answers Pete.

Froggy shows up, and we all ride over to Rocky's trailer to pick him up. From there we sky to the bowling alley on base. When we are getting our shoes, Froggy chats with the manager. Apparently Froggy is a regular and well known here. Besides having his own ball, he also has his own bowling shoes. He waits while the rest of us change our shoes and pick out a ball. Except for me, since I plan on using Froggy's ball.

"I've bowled so little in my life, I don't even know how ta keep score," I laugh.

"Thas' OK, Wolfman," says Froggy, "I'll keep score fer us all."

"Cool," I say.

I am anxious to try that left-handed ball.

After changing into his bowling shoes, Froggy gets out his ball. It doesn't look special or anything. Just the basic black color that most bowling balls are. He hands it to me.

"Try it out, Wolfman," he says.

It feels like it weighs a million pounds. Well, OK, fifty pounds. Since I have only used right-handed bowling balls in the past, this is the first time the finger holes are in the right place. Sort of. I should mention that while Froggy and I are about the same height, he is much heftier than me. I weigh about 155, but Froggy is closer to 180 pounds or more. His hands are huge, with fingers almost as thick as sausages. Xin loi, Froggy.

I can barely span the distance between the finger holes in this ball. Even if I could, the holes are barely half an inch deep. I can't believe Froggy can hold this thing, let alone throw it. I'm boo coo doubtful I can use it at all, and now realize why Froggy smirked when he offered to let me try it out.

"C'mon, Wolfman. Give it a try," encourages Froggy.

"OK, but this is just a practice throw and doesn't count," I say as I'm doubtful I can throw this ball. It turns out I'm correct. As I start swinging my arm back, I lose my grip and the ball falls loudly to the floor just behind me. The manager gives me a look of concern but nothing compared to the cry of

dismay from Froggy.

"Wolfman! Whaddaya doin' ta my ball?"

"Xin loi, man. I shoulda known I couldn't throw it. It's too heavy for me."

I wipe it off with my shirt and hand it back to him. Both Rocky and Pete are trying to stifle their laughs, because they don't want to antagonize Froggy in his moment of distress.

"Here," says Froggy, "this is how it's done, Wolfman."

He throws the ball down the alley. I have to say I don't think I have ever seen anyone throw a bowling ball harder than Froggy does. Not only that, but he gets a strike. He throws the ball so hard he could probably get a strike even with a gutter ball.

Rocky and Pete, after seeing Froggy bowl, both want to team up with him. I content myself looking through the bowling balls here at the alley. I've done this before, and it's why I have never bowled much. Because I have to use a right-handed ball, I need as light a ball as possible. I go through the balls for women, and I finally find one light enough that I can hold it. I still have a tee tee problem in that the finger holes are sized for someone with much more slender fingers than me. The result is I can just barely get my fingers and thumb into the holes.

Froggy picks Rocky as his teammate, so it's me and Pete against them. Xin loi, Pete. Froggy bowls first, and once again he throws his ball harder than anyone I've ever seen. He gets another strike, though the first one didn't count as it was a practice throw. After watching my first attempt, Pete wants to go next, and I agree. I'm not dying to embarrass myself any further today. Pete is obviously a bowler. While he doesn't get a strike, he does get a spare. We are hanging in there. So far, anyway.

Rocky bowls next, and it becomes apparent that he also knows how to bowl. He gets a spare as well. I should have expected Rocky to be good at bowling since he doesn't like to do anything half-assed. It's now my turn.

My ball is boo coo lighter than Froggy's, so I can really throw it hard. Though still not as hard as Froggy. My problem is not the throwing but the letting go. The holes are so small that when I try to let go, my thumb gets stuck for a moment. The ball hooks upward and to the right in a high arc. It crosses over two alleys next to us before it crashes down on the third lane over, then slams into the gutter making another loud bang. The ball then continues down the gutter and smashes into the pin sweeper which is in the down position. I hate that.

Apparently so does the manager, who comes over to yell at me. It's a number one thing that he knows Froggy, because as soon as Froggy tells him I'm left-handed, the guy smiles and chuckles a tee tee bit. He's seen this before.

"You need to git yerself a ball like Elwood. He's left-handed," the manager says and then didis. This is the first time I've heard anyone refer to Froggy as Elwood, which is his real name, of course. It takes me a moment to realize who he's even talking about.

I go look for another ball while everyone waits. Something they are all expert at. Since Rocky gets out a midnight tonight, this might be his last time ever having to wait. Lucky fucker.

When I return, the game resumes. My new ball has slightly bigger finger holes but not by much. My plan is to not try to throw it anywhere near as hard as Froggy throws his ball. On my first attempt, it works about as well as it ever has. Throwing a right-handed ball with your left hand causes the ball to curve as it rolls down the alley. For some reason they call it the "natural left curve." There's nothing natural about it, and I have no real control over it. I do occasionally get a strike or a spare, but only occasionally as in not too boo coo often.

"Rocky, the lucky fucker. You know, yer the first friend I've had in the army that I'm actually going to see ETS," I tease.

"Ya wouldn't think I'm such a lucky fucker if you had ta deal with Jeanette," he replies.

Ah yes, Jeanette. I had almost forgotten about her. No way could I completely forget about her, though.

"Are ya still gonna dump her after ya git out tonight?"

"Yeah. This tee tee bowling outing works out number one for me. I'll go back tonight, and after I take Jeanette ta work tomorrow, I'll didi mau for California," answers Rocky with a sly smile.

"Yer still a lucky fucker."

We bowl several games and Froggy and Rocky cream us. Mostly because of me. Half the balls I throw end up in the gutter. When we go to the counter to pay for our games, Froggy insists on paying for all of us.

"I love bowlin' and can't hardly ever git anyone ta go, so it's on me," says Froggy. "Plus Wolfman, if I'da known how entertainin' y'all are when ya git a bowlin' ball in yer hands, I'da brought ya here before now."

He laughs.

We sky back to M Co., the last time for Rocky. We head to the day room so Rocky can rule the pool table for one last time as well. Kent is back from his date with Marcia, and playing foosball without me as his goalie. I walk over to the foosball table and pretend to pout.

"Where ya been?" Kent asks when he finally notices me.

"We went bowlin', remember?" I answer.

"Oh yeah, I forgot. How'd that go lefty?"

"Don't ask."

But Rocky and Pete are already laughing at the question.

"What's so funny?" Kent asks.

"Oh, it's just that I kinda threw the bowling ball all over the place. Almost got us kicked outta the bowling alley, but luckily Froggy knew the manager so he let us stay as long as I didn't try ta bowl any more."

"It wasn't as bad as all that," laughs Rocky.

"But boo coo close," adds Pete, still laughing

"So how was yer date with Marcia?" I ask.

"Oh man, I screwed up big time," he answers.

"What? How'd ya do that?"

"Marcia had it all planned out. She packed a lunch and rented the horses and everythin'. Even had a bottle a wine," he says. "But I knew what she was up to, so I din't wanna stop or nuthin'. I jes' wanted ta ride. It's been so long since I been onna a horse. That part was number one. Anyway, I think she's pissed now cuz I wouldn't stop fer her picnic."

"Ya think?" I laugh.

Actually I'm quite happy she's mad at him. I just hang with Kent and pick up the pieces of his failed relationships. It's a thankless job, but someone's got to do it. So far, Sue from the charity in Tacoma is the first woman I have beat Kent to. Xin loi.

Kent and his current foosball partner, Beaudeen, get beat. Kent gives me the high sign.

"Hey, Rocky, when ya git done beatin' whoever yer playin', c'mon upstairs to our bay fer a tee tee send off if ya want," I say as we didi.

"I'll be up in a sec. Won't take me long ta finish 'em off," laughs Rocky.

It's my turn to roll the joint. I'm just finished when Rocky and Pete arrive. I hand the joint to Kent for his scrutiny.

"C'mon, whaddaya waitin' for?" asks Rocky.

"Rocky, Rocky, relax," I say. "Yer a lucky motherfucker and this is yer

send-off joint, so we wanna make sure it is up to the highest military standards of joint rollin'.”

After careful examination of the number, Kent deems it satisfactory and passes it to Pete to light who then hands the lit joint to Rocky.

"Congrats, man," Pete says to Rocky.

Rocky takes a big hit and then exhales with a boo coo big smile on his face and says, "Thanks, guys. I'm gonna miss ya all."

"Fuck you. You ain't gonna miss none of us 'cept maybe Jeanette," I laugh.

Rocky laughs too and then says, ”Ya jes' had ta bring her up. I am gonna miss that number one body of hers, that's fer sure."

"Man, yer a lucky fucker, Rocky," I repeat.

After we finish smoking the joint, Rocky didi maus. That's the last time I ever see him.

The next morning after all the excitement of Thanksgiving and our so-called con artist mission to the charity in Tacoma I almost forgot I'm a Regimental Guard. I'm am quickly reminded when Top calls my name among those assigned to guard duty today. Crap!

I don't have to be ready until 5 PM, so I have the first part of the day off. Kent is off until noon so we're playing foosball with the rest of the guys who are on guard today.

Shorty shows up, and I ask, "Did Rocky didi?”

"Yeah, he's gone," says Shorty more than a tee tee bit glumly. Shorty and Rocky have been best friends and roommates for over a year.

"When'd he sky?"

"He took Jeanette to work this morning, came back to the trailer, packed his shit, and skyed up," answers Shorty. "She's gonna be boo coo pissed when he doesn't pick her up from work like she's expecting. And when she finally does git home and sees he left, well I ain't plannin' on bein' there, I kin tell ya that. I've seen her mad before. It ain't a pretty sight."

At 5:30 PM, I get dropped off at the guard shack along with the rest of the guys on duty. We wait around a tee tee bit, and then are called out for inspection and our guard post assignments. Many of the permanent guards are starting to look a tee tee bit shabby which has already been noticed by the past Officers of the Day.

So much so that they are instituting a new guard position called the supernumerary. The Officer of the Day, during his inspection, will determine

who is the strackest troop there. That troop is the supernumerary, and he gets out of guard duty for the day. His only assignment is to take the place of an injured or ill guard. That almost never happens, so the supernumerary is usually excused to return to his barracks.

I didn't even polish my boots today, so I know I'm not in the running, but I plan to make a play for it next time. I at least luck out and get a 12-hour post assignment. And it doesn't rain during my time on guard, so I'm feeling number one when I get off the next morning and sky back to M Co.

As always when I get back, I plan on just staying up. But it's so quiet in the bay, and my bunk looks so inviting compared to the nasty looking bunks at the guard shack, I can't resist a tee tee nap.

Kent wakes me up a few hours later.

"What time is it?" I ask, just starting to come around.

"It's fuckin' lunch time, *pendejo*! You comin' or not?"

"Yeah, yeah, of course I'm comin'. Jes' needed ta wake up a tee tee bit. Couldn't figure out where the fuck I was for a minute there," I answer. I hate that. Wherever I was in my sleep, it was not the army.

"Well hurry up. We don't wanna git back too late. It's payday."

Oh yeah, payday. I kind of forgot in all the excitement of the prospect of being off for 2 1/2 days. I'm still a tee tee bit sleepy when Kent hands me a lit joint in the VW, but I jump on it in true Dewmaster fashion. I don't want to waste my time off.

"What size shoe do you wear?" I ask.

"I don't wear shoes," he answers with a smirk.

"I know that. What size did you used to wear?"

"Nine, I think, if I remember right. It's been a while," he finally answers. "Why?"

"Damn, that's too small for me. They started this thing called supernumerary on Regimental Guard. The strackest guy gets out of guard duty that day. Is that number one or what?" I say.

Kent laughs a tee tee bit before saying, "You, my man, are hardly what I would consider a strack troop."

"I fuckin' know that. But I know what a strack troop looks like. That's why I wanted ta borrow yer jump boots. But yer feet are too small," I reply.

"My feet are an excellent size, I'll have ya know. It's just that yers are big as fuckin' gunboats," Kent says in a tee tee huff.

"You are so touchy sometimes. Good thing we're friends," I laugh.

The grannies seem glad to see us as we weren't here for breakfast, or at least I wasn't. Kent makes me go first in our tee tee game of asking for our usual, but really that's just for breakfast. He wants me to figure what to have for lunch, so he can say he'll have the same. And that's just what he does.

"Copycat," I joke.

"Fuck you," he replies.

"Shhhh! Keep it down. Ya don't want 'em ta know what a lowlife you are, talkin' like that in front of ladies old enough ta be yer granny," I tease.

"You are jes' so fulla' shit," says Kent.

"Shhh! There ya go swearin' again. So uncouth. Obviously you were not brought up in a monastery in Tibet like me."

We get our lunch and sky for one of the boo coo empty tables to eat. Usually we're in no hurry, but we don't dally since we get paid today.

The line of guys is already forming up in the hallway when we get back. Kent and I take our place and wait. Something we and every other swinging dick here in M Co. are expert at. Which is good, because it takes most of the afternoon to pay everyone in the inefficient way the army chooses to do so, which is one by one, in cash. We like the cash part, we just hate the waiting.

We celebrate by smoking more pot. Maybe Terry has a valid point about our pot consumption. Maybe. Kent finishes rolling the joint and hands it to me for inspection. Pete shows up and gives me my $5 back. Our pot locker is still unlocked, so I get Pete's pistol out of it. I try to hand it to him, but he refuses.

"No, man. You keep it," says Pete.

"I don't want it, really," I protest.

"You keep it. I messed up yer radio so just keep it ta pay ya back fer that."

"My radio works fine, Pete. Jes' gotta tee tee biff on one corner. It's no big deal."

He still refuses to take the pistol back.

"Alright, but here take the five bucks back," I say, and I just about have to force him to take it back. "The pistol's worth boo coo more than five bucks."

I finally light the joint and hand it to Kent.

"Well I'm glad we got that settled," says Kent, who is obviously perturbed at having to wait.

"Yer startin' ta sound a tee tee bit like Rocky now that he's gone. Ya might have ta give up yer 'expert badge' fer waitin' if ya keep it up," I tease.

Kent flips me the bird so I return the favor with an airborne salute. He

hates that.

Chapter 20

I have been wondering since volunteering to be a permanent Regimental Guard whether or not that makes me exempt from extra duty. There was no way I was actually going to ask Top, so I contented myself to wait for the extra duty roster for the month of December. It is a boo coo disappointment. Not only am I assigned to KP, I am assigned to it on the very first day that my “exempt from extra duty” status expired. I hate that.

I am awakened by the Sergeant of the Day at 5:30 AM so I can report for KP at 6. When I get to the mess hall, I am the first to arrive for KP. The result being that I can choose which job I want for the day. Dining Room Orderly or DRO is considered by most to be the plum assignment. Back when most of the officers ate in the mess halls, it was the job of the DROs to go through the chow line for them and act as sort of waiters for the officers as well. Getting them a glass of milk or a cup of the famous army coffee.

Nowadays the officers eat at the Officer's Club or their home, so the DRO duties are mostly ceremonial. They have to keep the milk dispensers full, and they wipe off the tables after each meal is served. The downside is that the cooks act like Nazis and seem fixated on catching the DROs slacking. The punishment is having to trade places with the KP assigned to Pots and Pans, which is the job considered the worst. So all day long the DROs have to pretend to be busy or risk losing their plum job. Though I will admit, it can be quite a task to keep the milk dispensers full at all times. It does seem funny to me how much milk veterans of war drink.

I've been DRO in the past, and I shock the cook in charge this morning when I choose Pots and Pans right from the start. He even asks me if I'm sure. I used to work in a restaurant. I started out as a dishwasher and worked my way up. I've washed my share of pots and pans, and I know a few tricks.

One reason no one wants to be the Pots and Pans man is that there is already a big pile of dishes to be washed at the start of KP. The night baker works all night baking for the next day, so while the rest of the KPs wait for their job to start, whoever is on Pots and Pans is already hard at work.

The second best job on KP is the Outside man. His job is to empty the garbage cans filled with the debris from each meal into the dumpster, and then wash and rinse out the garbage cans. Mostly the Outside man stands

around outside all day smoking cigarettes. I don't smoke, so it has no appeal to me. Plus in the winter and when it's raining, which is often here in Washington, it's an unpleasant assignment.

One of my tricks for washing dirty pots and pans is to put some hot water in each one and let it soak for a while. I have all day. There's no hurry that I'm aware of. While I soak the pans, I look out my window, somewhat oblivious to all the noise. Someone puts their hand on my shoulder, and when I turn I see it's Adolph.

"Hey, man. Whatcha doin' here?" he asks.

"What does it look like I'm doin'? I'm on KP."

"Thought you was a permanent guard."

"I am, but I guess I still gotta do KP," I say.

"Bummer, man. Shoulda got here earlier and been the DRO."

"I was here early. I volunteered for Pots and Pans man."

"Fuckin' crazy. Why'd ya do that?" Adolph asks.

"Cuz I hate the way guys like Gomez fuck with the DROs. I got the worst job already so no one is gonna fuck with me," I laugh again.

"Suit yerself, *pendejo*," Adolph says as he didis to get to work.

My sink station is surrounded by the racks that the pots and pans are stored on when not in use. As I start to wash the pots and pans and set them in the racks, I become surrounded by a tee tee world of sparkling clean cookware. So enclosed in fact that I can stand gazing out my window like a prisoner let out of solitary for a brief respite for much of the day. Normally a KP caught slacking is quickly assigned to some task the cooks are responsible for. I escape any scrutiny in my little hidden fortress. No one is really going to check on the Pots and Pans man anyway. My biggest worry is one of the DROs will get caught slacking, and I'll have to trade places with him.

The KPs are allowed to have breakfast, lunch, and dinner just before the mess hall is opened. It's hard to comprehend this tee tee consideration. The way the KPs are usually treated, we wouldn't be surprised if we weren't allowed to eat at all. With the food being so horrid, that wouldn't be much of a loss. It only works out for me because whatever Adolph and Ramon make for their own meals, they share with me. Professional courtesy, of course, now that I'm working in the kitchen too.

I finish my job as Pots and Pans man so early that when I didi mau, the cooks applaud me and some even make exaggerated up and down bowing motions like I'm some sort of Pots and Pans god. I don't let it go to my head.

Usually the KP assigned to Pots and Pans is so lame that someone has to wait for him to finish before they can lock the place up.

I sky from the mess hall to the day room. Kent is already playing foosball with Pete. Just playing one-on-one. I watch them play as I wait for someone else to arrive so we can play a proper four-man game. Shorty walks in to the day room, sees our dilemma, and comes to play. As usual, Kent and I team up with me being goalie. I finished my job on KP so soon that the cooks are still at the mess hall working. That means we will be the team to beat, at least for now.

As we start to play, Shorty tells us the end to the saga of Rocky and Jeanette.

"So Rocky takes Jeanette ta work, comes home and gets his stuff and didi maus. Jeanette was already boo coo pissed when Rocky didn't pick her up from work. So she was steamin' and fumin' when she got back ta the trailer. When she saw Rocky and his stuff were gone, she just grabbed her case of hair curlers and walked over ta the freeway and started hitchhikin' after Rocky. She didn't even change outta her work dress. Prob'ly why she got picked up in less than a minute. Her dress was so short that with her coat on it din't look like she had a dress on at all," laughs Shorty.

"Oh man, I can just picture them long legs of Jeanette's standin' there with her thumb out. Yer right, the first car that saw her would stop," adds Pete.

"Man, all I kin say is I thought Rocky was one lucky fucker ta make it outta the army alive and in one piece, but I pity him if Jeanette ever catches up with him," I laugh.

Talking about Jeanette's legs reminds me of something.

"Hey Pete, what size shoe do ya wear?" I ask.

"Eleven," he answers.

"Did I see a pair of jump boots on top of yer locker?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I'll spit shine the toes on 'em if I kin borrow 'em for my shot at Supernumerary tomorrow on guard duty," I say.

"Yer not gonna wear 'em out inna rain if ya don't get ta be Supernumerary, are ya?" he asks.

"Nah, I'm takin' a complete set of clothes just for the Supernumerary inspection. If I don't get it I'll change into my regular fatigues and my combat boots."

"OK, ya kin use 'em," he replies.

The next day I'm off until 5 PM when guard duty begins. After breakfast with the grannies at McChord, I get Kent to swing by the base cleaners so I can pick up my set of fatigues that I left there for some special treatment. I had the cleaners put extra starch in the pants so they are as stiff as a board, and I had them put military creases on my shirt. Military creases consist of three vertical creases on the back of the shirt which all end at a horizontal seam across the shoulders.

Back at M Co. I grab Pete's jump boots from the top of his locker and take them to my bay. I get out my black shoe polish and give Pete's boots a shine like they ain't never had. I especially work on the toes of each boot to get them to sparkle.

Now that I have my strack outfit ready for guard duty, I sky to the day room to see what's going on. I spend a leisurely morning and afternoon working on my foosball game until I head out to catch the truck to the guard shack. My plan is to wait until just before they call us out for inspection before I suit up in my strack outfit. My pants are so stiff that if I sit down it will totally wreck the creases on the legs.

Just before 5:30 PM, I get into my outfit. I walk stiff legged out to the inspection so I don't bend my knees and wrinkle my leg creases. The shirt with the military creases and the jump boots complete my strack look. I notice that a few of the guards have polished their boots, but that's it. No one is even close to me. The Officer of the Day and the Sergeant of the Guard confer for less than fifteen seconds before announcing that I'm Supernumerary and excused from guard duty today. Before I didi, he has me stand in front of the rest of the guys and says, "Take a look, men. This is what a Supernumerary looks like."

I do my best not to smirk. The downside is I have to walk back to M Co., but it's less than five city blocks. I'd almost crawl that far to get out of guard duty, though not over broken glass.

I find Kent at his station in front of the mess hall with the sign-in roster, as usual.

"Hey, *pendejo*," I laugh

"Thought ya had guard duty."

"I do, or should I say *did*. I'm the Supernumerary." I laugh and Kent joins me since I would hardly be considered a strack troop. But, as I told Kent, I know what a strack troop looks like.

"Lets celebrate and have dinner at McChord after I finish here," Kent offers.

"I'll buy if you fly," I reply.

"Always so fulla shit," Kent laughs.

On the drive to McChord, we elevate our celebration by smoking a joint on the way.

"How's our house doin' on pot?" I ask.

"We're OK for now, but we always need more, just in case," he answers.

"I only ask because now that I'm Supernumerary, I'm off 'til Monday. And since there will be a different Officer of the Day and Sergeant of the Guard, I can easily do it again," I laugh. "Also, I think I can get a date on Saturday with Sue from the charity. Yer still gonna let me borrow yer car ain't cha?"

"Don't git yer hopes up. Ya don't think somma the others guys are gonna copy you now?"

"Their gonna hafta git some jump boots to beat me. The spit shine I did on the toes of Pete's boots was flawless. Back ta yer car. Are ya gonna let me borrow it?" I ask again.

"Yeah, yeah, you kin borrow it," he answers somewhat hesitantly.

"What? Ya want me ta see if we can double date? When I call Sue, I kin ask her ta ask yer friend Linda if she wants ta go out with you," I tease.

"My friend Linda!" Kent snorts. "No, I don't want ya setting me up fer a date."

"Suit yerself. Gonna be fuckin' cold ridin' my bike, but yer welcome to it," I say.

"Prob'ly just hang with Ace and Beaudeen. Ace's got his van so at least I won't be stuck at M Co."

On Friday I call Sue and set our date for Saturday evening. She tells me to just pick her up at the charity at the appointed time. That works OK for me as I don't know Tacoma very well. Whenever we cruise Tacoma, Kent usually drives so I don't need to pay attention. But I think I can find my way back to the charity.

On Saturday Kent hands me the keys to his beloved VW.

"Be gentle on her," he says with an earnest look on his face.

"Are ya talkin' 'bout Sue or yer car?" I laugh.

"My fuckin' car, man!" he answers.

I'm quite sure that if Kent's VW didn't have several dents, biffs, and

scratches already, he would not be letting borrow it. Also, I still see no need at this time to fess up that some of the damage was inadvertently caused by me. If I did that now, not only would he not be letting me borrow his car, he would be pounding on me. Xin loi, Kent.

So finally I'm off for my date with Sue. I find the charity with no difficulty. It's almost closing time but the manager is there. He remembers me, and so we chat while Sue gets her things.

Once outside I say to Sue, "I still hardly know my way around town, so I'm hoping you know of a good restaurant. It kin even be fancy since we are on a date," I joke.

She smiles at my attempt at humor and replies, "I do have a favorite restaurant. It's very nice, but I'm not sure it would be considered fancy."

"That's OK with me. Doesn't have ta be fancy if it's yer favorite."

The restaurant isn't far, and though it's busy, we don't have to wait long. It's an Italian place, so I'm feeling in my element having worked in an Italian restaurant for several years.

After looking over the menu, we order. We chat while we wait.

"So how long have you worked at the charity?" I ask.

She gives me a look I'm not sure how to interpret and then says, "I don't really work there. I'm kind of a volunteer. It's part of my probation agreement."

"Probation. Yer on probation?" I ask.

"Yeah, for two more years. Do you know what meth is?"

"I think so. It's speed isn't it?" I answer.

"Yeah, it's speed alright, but super strong and super addictive. I used ta be pretty good-lookin', so people said, but that was before my accident," she says.

"Yer accident?"

"Yeah, I was all strung out, and I got in a head-on collision on the Tacoma Narrows bridge. I went through the windshield of my car. Messed me up pretty bad. I was in the hospital for several months, and then when I got out they put me right in jail until my trial. Because of my injuries, the court kinda felt sorry for me and thought I'd been punished enough, so I got probation instead of jail."

While she's talking, I look at her face closely. I can see boo coo extremely faint fine lines where the doctors put her face back together. Her doctors were good. Sue says she used to be good-looking before her accident. I think she

still is. Of course I never saw her before her accident.

"That accident probably saved my life. I know that sounds weird but the drugs had just taken over my life. I'd be dead by now, I think," she says. "I lost just about everything. My boyfriend, my job, my car. I almost lost custody of my son."

Man, I'm thinking, and I whine about how tough my life is being in the army.

"I'm living with my parents, trying ta get my life back together. They took care of my son while I was in the hospital and jail. If it wasn't for them, I'da lost custody of my son. Even the pickup truck is my dad's. He just let's me borrow it."

"So how old is your son?" I ask, trying to talk about something a tee tee bit more pleasant.

"He just turned two," she answers giving me the first smile since she started telling me her story. "My ex-boyfriend is the father, but he was a drug dealer. When I got busted for the meth in my car after the accident, they were able to track him down, too. Now he's in prison. I'm all my son has now. Well, except my parents."

Once again I feel like I'm the luckiest guy in the room. Sue and I have a great dinner and a nice talk, but since she has worked all day before our dinner date I offer to take her home and she accepts. With nothing left to do, I sky for Ft. Lewis.

The day room is almost empty when I get back, but there are a few guys playing pool and foosball. Kent must have taken off with Ace and Beaudeen.

Orville is here so we team up for foosball. When our turn comes, he lets me play the front men. We aren't that good a team, but the guys we play against are worse, so we win.

When Kent arrives some time later, he immediately comes over to chastise Orville for letting me play the front men.

"Now he's gonna have an attitude about bein' goalie all the time."

"He's doin' OK," Orville says in my defense.

I smile. Perhaps prematurely, as Orville and I are soon beat.

"C'mon, man. Let's get high," Kent says to me with a laugh.

"Thought you'd never ask," I reply.

Up in our bay, Kent opens our pot locker and rolls a joint. He hands it to Ace for inspection who deems it worthy. He lights it and passes the number to me.

"So whats on our agenda for tomorrow?" I ask, looking at Kent.

"I dunno. I saw my car out there. No problems I hope?"

"No, no problem with yer car," I say as I return his car keys.

"How'd yer date go?" he asks.

"It was fine, I guess. Just that Sue's got a ton a baggage to deal with."

"What kinda baggage?"

"Well fer one she's got a two year old son. And she doesn't really work at the charity. She's on probation, and it's part of her community service requirement," I answer.

"Probation fer what?" asks Kent.

"Meth possession, among other things."

"Meth! Oh man, she's a bad girl," laughs Kent.

"Tell me 'bout it, I hardly even know what meth is."

"Yer a dumb fuck, that's fer sure," adds Kent.

"Back to tomorrow," I say. "Whatta we doin'?"

"What am I, yer social director?" Kent asks.

"Fuckin' A! Whaddaya think I hang with ya for? Well, besides yer car," I laugh.

"Fuck you," Kent says while we all continue laughing.

When I head to the bathroom to shower in the morning, Kent is already shaving which always makes me laugh.

"I think ya get in here early ta shave so no one will see ya wastin' yer time. Or are ya just practicin' for the day when yer really a man and actually have something to shave?" I laugh.

"Fuck you! Better not dally in the shower, or I'll didi mau fer breakfast at McChord without ya," he replies.

"Whoa, whoa, hold on young Kent, I'm comin' if ya wait long enough," I say.

"Thought ya might wanna change yer attitude a tee tee bit."

"So whaddaya got planned fer yer twenty-first birthday? Less than a month and you'll finally be a man like me," I joke.

"If bein' like you is bein' a man, I kin wait. Forever!"

The bathroom starts to fill as more guys start to wake. Beaudeen and Ace enter.

"Hey! We're goin' ta McChord fer breakfast. You guys wanna come?" Kent asks them.

"That's a roger," answers Ace. Beaudeen nods his head up an down

"I kin drive if it's too crowded in yer VW," says Ace.

"We'll see who ends up comin'" answers Kent. "Kinda gotta check out my car after Wolf had it last night. Ta see if it's all there still."

I'm in the shower but I hear Kent, and I yell back, "How would you know? Yer cars got so many dents and scratches you'd never notice nuthin' new."

"That's what you think," he replies.

Adolph and Pete show up in our bay as we're getting ready to leave. They want to come along, so we decide to go in Ace's van. Kent has already rolled some joints for the day, so we sky. Professional courtesy.

We're probably the biggest crowd to show up all at once at the mess hall at McChord, but they are well practiced here. We get our breakfasts in short order and just the way we like. As far as I know, this is only Adolph's second trip to McChord.

"I hope this is causing you to set some goals, Adolph," I tease.

"What the fuck you talkin' 'bout?"

"What am I talkin' 'bout? I'm talkin' 'bout the food here. It'd be fuckin' number one if we din't hafta come all the way here for some decent chow."

"Still don't know what yer talkin' 'bout. I take care of ya when I'm on the servin' line, don't I?" he asks.

"Yeah, yer cool 'bout that man. Jes' be cooler if the food at M Co. was more like here."

"Ya need ta talk ta the mess sergeant 'bout that. I'm just a cook," replies Adolph.

"Is that what ya call it?"

"Fuck you!"

"Now yer actin' like Gomez again," I shoot back.

"Oh man, Gomez," says Adolph. "Didja hear what happened to him?"

"No. Now what?"

"Got inna fight in some bar in Tacoma. Got himself arrested."

"Why am I not surprised?" I say.

"MPs hadda go get 'em from jail in Tacoma and bring 'em back ta M Co.," says Adolph.

"He'll be in boo coo big trouble when Top finds out on Monday," I add.

As we file back out to Ace's van, Beaudeen asks, "So whadda we gonna do now?"

"We kin drive into Tacoma," offers Ace. "Anyone wanna ride back ta M

Co. first?"

A loud chorus of "Fuck no!" answers that question.

So we didi mau for Tacoma, cruising somewhat aimlessly until we find a park. It's quite pleasant outside, given that it is December, so we decide to walk around the park throwing a Frisbee Beaudeen brought along as we go.

I have to say, for a guy with a profile that prevents the army from making him stand for long periods of time or to walk a long distance, Kent is very nimble on his feet.

"Better hope Top doesn't ketch ya runnin' 'round like this," I tease Kent.

He gives me a look of disdain, as if I might rat him out.

"What?" I say. "I don't even talk ta Top unless he speaks ta me first. Ya think I'm gonna go run ta Top and say, 'Top! Top! Look! Campbell's runnin' 'round!' Besides, he likes you anyway."

"He don't like me," replies Kent.

"He likes ya enough to let ya call 'em Top," I laugh. "I'd be in the slammer if I ever called him Top to his face."

"Big fuckin' deal," says Kent.

"Guess yer right. I wouldn't call him Top to his face even if I could cuz it might make 'em think I like him."

After a couple of hours walking around playing Frisbee in the park, we decide to explore some more of Tacoma. It's warming up nicely for December and is probably in the 50s. We once again ramble around with no destination in mind until Ace suddenly pulls over to the curb.

"What's up?" asks Kent.

"The van's overheatin'," answers Ace. "The overheat light just came on."

That's weird, I'm thinking, because it's an air-cooled engine, so it's not like it's got a leak and is low on antifreeze. The only thing I can think of is maybe the fan belt has broken. The problem with that scenario is the generator light should have come on before the overheat warning light. Being a former tank crewman, I'm the closest thing to a mechanic of everyone in Ace's van. I'm also silently glad I didn't buy this thing when I had the chance.

We get the engine compartment cover off and have a look. No visible leaks, but the only liquid it can leak is oil since, like I said, it's an air-cooled engine. We check the oil level and the dipstick indicates it's full. The fan belt isn't broken. I have Ace start the engine while we watch the fan belt. It doesn't appear to be slipping as there is no squealing or any obvious belt noise. Ace mentions the overheat warning light is out already. Maybe the

cooling air inlet is blocked by something, but we can't tell.

I put the engine cover back on, and we didi mau. We only get a block before the overheat light comes on again. Ace pulls over to the curb and turns the engine off. We sit and think.

"Lets open the engine compartment again and see if it cools down enough ta drive," I offer. Since no other alternatives are voiced, I remove the engine compartment cover and have Ace start the engine. After it runs about a minute, the overheat light go out. So far so good. The two side rear windows will open for ventilation, so I open both of them for some extra cooling air.

"OK, lets try it again," I say after getting back in the van. We drive a block and this time the overheat light stays off. Same for the next few blocks. We are feeling a tee tee bit confident we can make it back to M Co. and then the problem will be Ace's. Xin loi, Ace.

When we find the entrance to the free way, the question is will Ace's van go at highway speed and still not overheat? Only one way to find out. Ace enters the freeway ramp. Everything is going fine at 55 mph, so Ace takes it up to 65 mph and still the light stays off. It is, however, extremely noisy inside the van going 65 mph with the engine compartment open. But it's boo coo better than walking.

Monday morning arrives and I have Regimental Guard duty today. Even though I didn't have to be a guard last time and essentially got three days in a row off-duty, it still feels like it was just yesterday that I had guard duty. I hate that.

Soon enough it is 5 PM, and we are taken to the guard shack. I have my Supernumerary kit at the ready, and just before falling out for inspection, I put it on and walk stiff legged out for inspection. Kent was quite correct in that several other guys who saw what I did last time are trying for Supernumerary with a vengeance. I'm still confident of winning again. The reason for this is no one noticed my military creases on my shirt because they didn't see my back. Even if they did, they probably don't know what they're called.

The Officer of the Day and the Sergeant of the Guard confer a tee tee bit longer this time, but the result is the same. I am named the Supernumerary. I make it back to M Co. and catch up with Kent as he is just finishing his mess hall roster duty.

"Dinner at McChord?" he says when he sees me return.

“Do you even need to ask?”

"Better get our heads in the right place," Kent laughs.

"My head's always in the right place if we got pot," I laugh along.

My week just seems to blow by at light speed, and then it's Friday again. Crap! Because I had actual competition for Supernumerary last time, I am even more inclined to be concerned about winning.

As I'm just getting my Supernumerary kit together, Kent comes up to the bay.

"I figure I'll be back around 6 or so. What are we doin' tonight?" I ask.

"You better get yerself ready ta be on guard duty, man. They're not gonna let ya be it all the time," Kent teases.

"There's a different Officer of the Day and Sergeant of the Guard, so they don't know I got it last time," I say, sounding a tee tee bit more confident than I really am. "So what are we doin'?"

"You ain't outta guard duty yet," Kent laughs.

"That's what you think. Just wait 'til six o'clock before ya sky up. I'll be back by then if I get Supernumerary again.”

I collect my gear and didi mau. Once again there is some strong competition. I make sure to keep my back out of view of the other guards. When we line up for inspection, I take care to be in the last row so no one but the Officer sees the creases in my shirt. It works like a charm.

I hustle back to M Co. and run into Kent just as he is leaving the mess hall.

"Well, well. Lookie who's here," Kent laughs. "Maybe yer a con artist after all."

"Was there ever any fucking doubt, young Kent?"

We both sky up to our bay to get out of our hated uniforms and into our civvies. Then to get our heads in the same place as our clothes, we prepare to smoke some pot. It does, however, have to be done properly. I roll the joint this time and pass it to Kent for scrutiny. He carefully examines it for any perceived flaws whether real or imagined. It's perfect, so I'm not concerned.

"So what 'er we doin' tonight? And what I really meant ta say is, what 'er we doin' this weekend? I'm off 'til 5 o'clock on Tuesday.”

"We kin sky in ta Tacoma. Stop by Marcia and Terry's, see what's up," answers Kent.

"Yeah, I guess. Last time was a fuckin' bummer. Don't imagine anyone got killed this time though. At least I hope not," I say.

"Better roll up some numbers in case there's a party goin' on.”

"It'll go tee tee faster if we both roll some. Notice I said *tee tee* faster cuz while ya roll a number one joint yer kinda slow," I joke.

"As usual, yer fulla shit. Ya wanna race and see who's faster?"

"And as usual ya wanna make a contest outta everything," I laugh.

The joints are rolled, and we sky for Tacoma.

"Let's eat at McDonald's tonight," offers Kent. "Kinda got a hankerin' fer a coupla cheeseburgers."

"And fries, let's not forget them fries," I add. "Funny how all the stuff ya couldn't get in the Nam is so fuckin' number one now, especially food."

"Let's not ferget about those of the female persuasion," laughs Kent.

"O,f course not. Missed women boo coo more than cheeseburgers that's fer sure. But tonight, if we're lucky we might git both."

"I don't need no luck," counters Kent

"And a damn good thing too, cuz if yer like me ya ain't got none left. Used it all up in the Nam," I laugh.

Kent laughs too.

"Fuckin' A, got that right. For once at least."

The lights are on at Marcia and Terry's, and there are several cars parked around the house. Looks like a party, and it is. We are cheerily greeted by the party goers. By the clouds of smoke, they are getting high with a vengeance. Our kind of party.

Both Marcia and Terry are here. I'm good enough friends with them now that they both give me a hug and a kiss. Terry's fiancé is also in attendance, and so far seems to be behaving himself. Though by the look on his face, he wasn't happy about Terry greeting us with a kiss. It was just a tee tee peck too. Tony might have a personal problem but – not being in the army – he can't talk to the chaplain about it. Xin loi, Tony.

Quite a boisterous crowd here tonight. Maybe because everyone is trying to let loose after the sad events in the past weeks. Bill and Squeaky are in attendance, and so is Rick. There are boo coo joints being passed around and Kent takes the joints we rolled and tosses them onto the coffee table we are sitting around. Professional courtesy.

The party goes late, and since I rode here with Kent, I can't didi until he's ready to go. I never noticed him sky and as the last of the party goers didi mau, I am left alone in the living room. I relax on the couch for a while. When I wake and find I'm still alone, I take my boots off and fall asleep again. I've done this here before, and while crashing on a couch wouldn't be

my first choice, it's boo coo better than sleeping on a stretcher on the ground like in the Nam.

Morning comes and I am awakened by Kent. I am still half asleep when the brisk morning air of December in Washington state hits my face, I am startled wide awake.

"Man, I must be gittin' soft or somethin'," I say as we climb into Kent's VW. VW's aren't known for their heaters, but after several miles of driving it starts to warm up, and I can stop shivering.

"So where we havin' breakfast?" I ask.

"Where d'ya think? Sure not goin' ta M Co.," Kent replies.

The grannies give us cheery greeting as usual and take our breakfast order. There's a tee tee bit of teasing Kent about what secret mission he might be on. When they turn to me I tell them, technically, I am on duty this very moment as a Supernumerary.

We have a fantastic breakfast and after saying goodbye to our grandmothers we sky. We drive back to M Co. and go up to our bay to shower and change our clothes. We are hanging out in our bay waiting for the rest of our friends to get off at noon. Ace and Beaudeen finally show up soon followed by Pete. We have nothing to do and no ideas.

I remember something. "Hey, when we were driving around the outskirts of Tacoma, I noticed a furniture store that had a tee tee BSA sign. I'm assuming that they sell motorcycle parts. I need a couple of things for my bike. We could go check it out. And it's better than hanging here all day."

That going to the BSA shop would be preferable to hanging out here is agreed upon, and Ace offers to drive us in his van.

"What about yer overheatin' problem?" asks Kent.

"Well it hasn't done that again since the first time. Beaudeen and I have taken it out for a couple of cruises with no problems," says Ace.

"We could all fit in my car," offers Kent.

"Yeah, but it would be boo coo tight," says Beaudeen.

"Wouldn't be so bad if it was a tight fit with some ladies in there but I hate sittin' close to a bunch of guys," laughs Pete.

It's settled, and we didi mau for Ace's van.

When we enter the furniture store there is no evidence of motorcycles, just boo coo furniture. We all look a tee tee bit scruffy, especially Kent with his patchwork blue jeans, so no one comes to ask if we need any help. We explore some until I see another BSA sign with an arrow pointing down a

stairway.

At the bottom of the stairs is a large show room with several new motorcycles displayed around the room. There are no BSA motorcycles, but as I suspected, they do sell parts for them. Nothing that I want is in stock, so I have to order what I want and come back for them later. Pete is more fortunate than me and is able to pick up some things he needs for his Triumph. Lucky fucker.

I check out one of the new motorcycles on display. It looks so familiar. As I continue to scope it out I realize why it looks familiar. It is an Italian motorcycle made by Laverda. I never heard of the brand before, but Honda must know of them as my last motorcycle, a Honda 250, looked like an exact copy of the Laverda only smaller. Why spend all that time designing a new bike when you can just steal the engineering for free? Well not exactly free, but for just the cost of one motorcycle, they could get everything they needed.

One of the Laverdas on display is a road racing model with down turned handle bars and foot pegs placed well back so you just about lay face down when you drive it. It's so cool I have to get on it and check it out. Boo coo big mistake as one of the sales staff rushes over to try to sell it to me. Once he realizes I not interested in buying it, he strongly suggests I should get off of it. Actually I *am* interested in buying it, I'm just not able to.

After we're done in the motorcycle shop, we aimlessly explore until the engine overheat warning light comes on in the van again.

"Toldya we shoulda gone in my car," says Kent right away.

While Ace continues to drive, I jump in the back and open the engine compartment hatch and prop it open. Then I open the two back vent windows. In a few minutes the warning light goes out. Not wanting to press our luck, we head back to M Co. It's also extremely loud inside the van when the engine cover is off, so not much fun just riding around. That makes twice now that I am glad I didn't buy the van. Xin loi, Ace.

We make it back to M Co. with no further incidents and spend the rest of the day playing pool and foosball in the day room. Once in a while we sky up to our bay to toke down. Every time Kent and I play Adolph and Ramon at foosball, we lift and drag the table all over the place. There is so much screaming and laughing going on, you'd think it was a cockfight or something. Now that I think about it you could say it's a cockfight in a way.

With all the extra practice we get now, Kent and I can beat Adolph and

Ramon at least half of the time. They hate that.

During one of the breaks with take with the cooks, we meet their room mate, Perkins. He's the night baker. I didn't even know we had a night baker until I was on KP and had to wash all the pots and pans he used the night before. Perkins is a head, so he joins us as we toke down.

Ramon and Adolph like to tease Perkins, because they think he has the best job at M Co. He works by himself on the midnight shift and only has to stay in the mess hall until he's finished with his assignment for the night. So he usually works 2 to 3 hours each night, and he only has to work five days a week. No guard duty and of course no KP. I think they're right about it being a number one job. Not quite as good as my current Regimental Guard gig, but that's only if I can continue to be the Supernumerary.

Perkins has just gotten up and dressed so the window shades are stilled pulled down. Instead of pulling the shades up, Ramon turns the ceiling lights off and says, “Check it out, man.”

He turns on their black light. I had noticed the posters that Ramon and Adolph had on the walls, but I didn't realize they were black light posters. There's a Woodstock poster, a Grateful Dead poster, and several more bands including Santana, of course. One in particular is a sly Walt Disney poster that seems OK until you realize what is going on. Mickey is doing Minnie Mouse and Snow White is getting it from Dopey while the rest of the Seven Dwarfs are lined up, waiting their turn to do Snow White. That poster is almost a sacrilege but we try not to have any serious religious conversations.

Sunday morning finds us all at M Co. with once again nothing to do. I try to get some interest going for a trip to Mt. Rainier, but no one is willing to go.

"Looks boo coo closer than it really is," says Kent.

Since his car is the one I was hoping to ride in, I drop my suggestion.

So we do what we always do if we have pot when we're bored. We toke down. Our small group of Heads this morning includes me, Kent, Ace, Beaudeen, Adolph, and Pete. It's always warm in the barracks so we are all just wearing t-shirts. My dog tags are hanging out of my shirt.

"What's No Pref. mean?" Kent asks me.

He is referring to one of the lines on my dog tags where your preferred religious affiliation is listed.

I laugh at the question and then answer, "I got them to put No Pref., which

stands for no preference. Mostly because the guy making my dog tag said he didn't have Buddhist on his list of religions. I'm not really a Buddhist, and I knew that they wouldn't put it on there. I was jus fuckin' with 'em, but I kinda like the No Pref. even more than if they woulda' put Buddhist on 'em."

The question causes me to look at Kent's dog tags. "What's Latty Day Saints?"

"Latter Day Saints. They misspelled it," answers Kent.

"Never heard of that," I reply.

"What?" Kent laughs. "Ya never heard of Mormon?"

"Oh yeah, I know a little about Mormons."

"Well that's the real name for Mormon. Latter Day Saints," replies Kent.

"Geez, what else is on there I don't know about you?" I ask as I scrutinize his dog tags some more.

I can barely believe what I see next.

"Holy shit! What the fuck? Yer a fuckin' RA! Regular army? Not to mention a fucking Mormon! Man, Kent, I don't know if we can still be friends. Regular fucking army. That is too fucking much!" I say with some fake haughtiness in my voice.

"I kin explain! I kin explain. Really, I can," pleads Kent.

"OK, 'splain it to me, Lucy," I laugh.

"My band broke up cuz the guitar player joined the army. I was jus' livin' on the street. Jes' 'bout starvin' ta death. I was down ta 'bout 95 pounds, so I moved back to my parent's house for a while. But that didn't work out, so I joined the army. Jes' ta show ya how fuckin' dumb I was, my main reason fer joinin' was I didn't want Dean, the guitar player, ta have all the fun," relates Kent.

"Man, you got that right," I laugh. "So did ya have yer fun, dumb fuck?"

"Whaddya think?" he answers as he holds up one of his moccasin-ed feet.

"Fuckin' RA. Man, I almost can't believe that with the 'fuck the army' attitude ya got," I laugh some more.

"Toldya man, I was starvin'. And when I moved back home, it jus' wasn't workin' out. My dad was always pissed off cuz I was smokin' pot in his house."

"Dumb shit. Should of smoked pot out in the backyard," I offer.

"It woulda been the same for my dad. I figured if he was gonna be mad no matter what, then why take a chance gettin' caught by smokin' outside?"

"Well, are you still a Mormon?" I ask.

"Yeah and no," he answers.

"What the fuck's that s'posed ta mean?"

"Well I don't think I'm a Mormon, but ya can't really get out. You kin, but it's really hard and almost not worth it. So while I don't consider myself a Mormon, the Mormons still think I'm one. When I go back home, they hassle me about trying ta git me ta come ta the temple," Kent explains.

"Sounds more like a gang than a religion," I laugh. "So d'ya know much about Joseph Smith?"

"Not really. Jes' the stuff I learned in Sunday school. But that woulda' only been the good stuff cuz they wouldn't tell us anything bad 'bout him," he answers. "Why? Whaddya know 'bout 'im?"

"When I was on complete bed rest in the hospital and wasn't allowed ta walk around, there was a book cart that came 'round my ward. It was such a fuckin' pitiful selection and in a short while I had read every book the book cart guy brought around except one 'bout Joseph Smith. If it wasn't the only book left I wouldn't have read it, that's fer sure," I answer.

"The guy was a snake oil salesman and a con from the git go. He actually was in a traveling medicine show for a while so he may have really sold snake oil," I laugh.

"Anyway he got caught peeping in a window of a woman's bedroom and was convicted at his trial. After that, he proposed marriage to the woman he got caught peeping on, but her father wouldn't allow the marriage. So Joseph Smith eloped with her. Guess he liked what he saw."

We have a tee tee laugh over that.

"They came back to their hometown a while later. Musta ran outta money or snake oil or both. His wife's father took pity on them, and he set them up in a small house that he owned. Joseph Smith didn't work or do squat for 'bout a year or so, hardly even coming outta the house. So one day his father-in-law went to the house to find out what the slacker was fuckin' doin'. He found Joseph Smith and the wife sitting in the dining room. Joseph Smith had a blanket over his head and was supposedly translating the Book of Mormon to his wife from the gold plates that the angel Maroni gave him. The gold plates had the Book of Mormon in some old version of Egyptian. At least that's what Smith said, and his wife was writing down the English version of the Book of Mormon as Smith read it out loud to her. He had some sort of a breast plate that he said allowed him to translate the old Egyptian and also protected him from the gold plates.

“Now right there I'm having boo coo problems with his story. For one, Maroni. That's the angels name? What was his first name? Boney? Boney Maroni. Fucking please. So of course the father-in-law wants to see the gold plates. Smith says to him that if anyone, besides Smith, looks at the plates it would kill them. Why the father-in-law couldn't wear the protective breast plate was never explained as far as I know."

"That sorta sounds like the old one about, 'I could tell ya the secret formula, but then I'll have ta kill ya,'" laughs Kent.

"Ya fuckin' got that right," I join in the laughing.

"So, Kent, where are the gold plates? D'ya know?" I ask.

"Nah. I know about the gold plates, but don't know nuthin' 'bout what happened to 'em."

"And really, that's my biggest problem with his story. Anything like that, something that would kill ya jus' lookin' at 'em. How d'ya keep or get rid of somethin' like that? Those plates would be famous in one way or another. Number one famous or number ten famous, but their whereabouts would be fuckin' known. Ya wouldn't want somethin' like that just layin' 'round yer house would ya? Cuz someone's eventually gonna get curious 'bout 'em. Yer kids, the maid, yer father-in-law, someone is gonna look at 'em. You know Smith was only fifteen years old the first time he supposedly saw Maroni. That's prob'ly why his story is so fuckin' fulla holes. If he made it up when he was a kid he was always trying to keep his story straight after tellin' so many people different versions. And so, just where the fuck are them gold plates?" I finish with a laugh.

"Man, Wolf, you are so fulla shit.”

"Me? Least I ain't no Mormon or worse yet, a fuckin' RA," I reply still laughing.

"Fuck you!" says Kent.

"Yeah, you just keep that up, young Kent, and you ain't gonna have no friends left. Except maybe Boney Maroni," I chuckle.

Later on we decide to lunch at our grandmother's place at McChord. At first Kent is acting a tee tee bit morose, so I try to cheer him up some by playing our "Name that Tune" game as we drive over to McChord.

"Talking Vietnam Potluck Blues by Tom Paxton," I say as the song starts to play on the radio.

"I ne'er heard that one before," says Kent.

"Really? Shit, I got it memorized. You sure ya were in the Nam young

Kent?" I tease.

"If I didn't need my foot to drive I'd show it ta ya just before I shove it where the sun don't shine," he vehemently replies.

"You really got an attitude problem ya need ta work on a tee tee bit, especially for a fuckin' RA," I laugh.

While we eat, I consider what to do with the rest of my time off.

“Too bad you got mess hall roster duty. I'm off until Tuesday, but then of course I'm planning on being Supernumerary again. We could take off fer a coupla days.”

"Yer dreamin' again," replies Kent.

"Whatcha talkin' 'bout, Leroy? I been Supernumerary every time I tried fer it. I'm fuckin' golden, doncha know.”

"Man, Wolf, sometimes I dunno why I hang with ya," says Kent.

"Look 'round, RA. You see anyone else hangin' with ya?" I ask rhetorically. "Yer buddies Farkas and Flemmy already jumped ship and left M Co., so I'm 'bout all ya got left."

We can't think of anything to do, so we sky back to M Co. and head to the day room. The cooks are not here, so when Kent and I walk in, the guys holding on as champions at the foosball table know their time has come.

We cream the current champions and rule the table until dinner time. When I play with Kent as my partner, he still insists on playing the front line. Since I like winning, I'm willing to play the goalie, for now. Our game style is boo coo sedate compared to when we play Adolph and Ramon. There is no lifting and tilting the foosball table or dragging it around the day room.

Gomez shows up and immediately starts to shoot his mouth off.

"Hey, where'd ya come from? We heard ya were in the slammer," I laugh.

"Fuck you, man!” he spits back.

Since Adolph and Ramon aren't here, he has no one to cheer for and after a short while, he didi maus.

"Such a friendly guy," I say.

"He's a fuckin' dickhead, that's fer sure," Kent agrees.

When we decide to dine at the M Co. mess hall for dinner, Adolph and Ramon are holding court on the chow line. Now we know why they weren't playing foosball today. This is going to be tricky because although Adolph is on the serving line, so is Gomez. Fortunately Adolph is the first server. After he loads my tray up, I can ignore Gomez. Gomez is the kind of guy who would spit on your food when you're not looking. I hate that.

After dinner Kent and I sky back to the day room before Adolph and Ramon get off work. This way they'll have to wait their turn in line to try to beat us. It's not a sure thing for them anymore, especially because Kent and I get boo coo practice now with our slacker assignments. About an hour after we return to the day room, the cooks show up. They don't have to wait long for their turn to play because there are not many guys here.

It's an intense game as usual. We scream and swear at each other, even at our own team mate. The foosball table is dragged and lifted and shoved all over the day room. It's probably against the official rules of foosball, but we don't care. We are playing "M Co. foosball" which is almost a contact sport. It really is a contact sport if you count the times Gomez has gotten a beating for shooting his mouth off during or after a heated game. For as big as his mouth is, Gomez is not really that good at foosball and only plays when Adolph or Ramon are here alone and need a partner.

When you're off work in the army, the time seems to fly by. The next thing I know it's Tuesday, and I have guard duty again. Well, I have guard duty if I don't make Supernumerary. Once again I act more sure of being Supernumerary than I really am, so all day I am filled with dread at the possibility of actually having to do guard duty. To take my mind off it somewhat, I get Pete's jump boots and give them a going over. The toes are almost brilliant when the light hits them right. That makes me feel a tee tee bit more confident.

That is until Kent comes up to the bay to get his head in the right place. When he sees what I'm about, he tries to tease me.

"Yer gonna get stuck on guard sooner or later, man."

"I know that. I'm just hoping it's later rather than sooner."

Perkins, the night baker, saunters into our bay, attracted by the smell of pot being smoked.

"You guys sure it's OK ta toke in here?" Perkins asks as he takes the lit joint from me.

We both laugh at the question.

"Of course it's not OK ta toke in here," answers Kent. "We just don't fuckin' care."

Orville and Pete also catch a whiff and show up in our bay. Pete and I are both Regimental Guards, but we aren't assigned on the same day which is why he lets me borrow his jump boots.

"Ya know Pete, with these boots of yours you really should try out for

Supernumerary," I say. As the words are coming out of my mouth, I realize the absurdity of my statement. Pete is one of the most slovenly guys here at M Co. Besides that, he can't even stand up straight and motionless during the brief inspection. Xin loi, Pete.

When I get to the guard house, I notice several guys with thoughts of being Supernumerary by their strack uniforms. Still, no one has military creases on their shirts, and all of them wore their outfits here so they have wrinkles and creases on their shirts and pants. I am always careful to wait until the last possible minute before getting into my own strack uniform.

Even though I have a tee tee bit of doubt, mostly instilled by Kent's teasing, I am named Supernumerary. I am so happy and pumped up, I almost float above the ground as I walk back to M Co.

When I catch up with Kent, he doesn't say anything. He just smiles his shit-eating grin. At least he won't have to eat dinner alone today.

On the way to McChord, we stop by Farkas and Flemmy's new company barracks. It's a transportation company, and they are both truck drivers now.

"*Que pasa, pendejos*?" Kent laughs. "Wanna come with us ta McChord fer dinner?"

"Hell yeah!" answers Farkas for both he and Flemmy.

Farkas, always a boo coo big teaser, gets right on Kent's case about the sad state of his VW with all its dents and scratches.

Kent is in no mood for it.

"Didja wanna walk ta McChord? Cuz if ya do, I kin let ya out right here."

Right here being the freeway between Ft. Lewis and McChord.

"Man, Kent, we don't see ya fer a while and ya get all sensitive," Farkas says.

We make it to the mess hall at McChord with no further teasing or threats to be thrown out of the car. We're the sole diners as we wait for our food to be prepared.

"Who're your friends? More spies?" asks the head granny as Farkas and Flemmy haven't been here as often as Kent and myself.

We laugh at the suggestion.

"What's she talkin' 'bout?" asks Farkas.

"It's a long sad story, so wait 'til we sit down and we'll fill ya in'" I answer still half-laughing.

We get our food and choose a table from the empty mess hall.

"So what was that spy stuff about?" asks Farkas once we are seated.

"It's nuthin', man. Jes' Kent bullshitting the grannies here 'bout what we do which, as you are well aware, is nuthin'."

"Speak fer yerself," says Kent.

That comment makes me laugh hard.

When I'm done I say, "Maybe now, but you were once my role model for slacking. Not my fault that I'm better at it than you."

"Fuck you, man," laughs Kent.

"Hey!" I say to Farkas and Flemmy, "didja guys know young Kent here is an RA?"

"No fucking way!" answers Farkas. "Not with that attitude."

"Fucking way. I saw his dog tags. He's a Mormon, too."

"I'm not a fuckin' Mormon!" says Kent a tee tee bit heatedly.

"Notice how he didn't deny bein' a fuckin' RA," I laugh.

"RA, huh?" says Farkas. "What else don't we know 'bout cha Kent?"

"That's what I was wonderin' myself," I add. "Plus, young Kent, you were the one that said yer a Mormon cuz they won't let ya out."

"So what? Jus' cuz the Mormons think I'm one doesn't make me one."

"You fuckin' hope. You guys know much 'bout the Mormons?" I ask mostly to Farkas and Flemmy, as I would expect Kent to know more than me.

"Nah, don't know nuthin' 'cept they went to The Great Salt Lake and ate locusts," answers Farkas.

"Where'd the fuck didja hear that?" asks Kent while Flemmy and I laugh our heads off.

"Saw it inna movie 'bout Brigham Young when I was a kid," answers Farkas. "It was fuckin' gross."

"Hey! I saw that movie, too," I say, still laughing.

"That was jus' a bunch a bullshit," says Kent.

"Maybe so, but the guy that started the Mormons was a scammer before there was even a word for it," I add.

"Like what?" asks Farkas.

"Kent is goin' ta be bored ta death talkin' 'bout 'im, but since ya asked, I'll tell ya," I say. "Before he started his form of religion he was a treasure hunter. He said he had somethin' called a "seer stone" that he put in a white stovetop hat, and then he looked at it. Supposedly then he'd have vision of where there was some treasure buried. Although he never found any treasure he got several suckers to pay him to look for it. They musta been boo coo big suckers cuz one time he got them to dig a hole 'bout 22 feet deep lookin fer

treasure. As members of the infantry, I don't need ta tell ya what it would take ta dig a hole that deep by hand. All they found that time was another "seer stone" although it sounds more like a "sucker stone" ta me. If that ain't scammin' I don't know what is.”

"Wolf, yer always so fulla shit, I don't know what to believe," says Kent.

"What do you care? You said ya ain't no Mormon din't ya?"

During all this discourse, Flemmy has been unusually silent.

"Why so quiet?" I ask him. "You a Mormon too?"

I laugh mostly because Flemmy, being black, would be an unlikely Mormon.

"No way!" Flemmy snorts.

"Then what? You a fuckin' RA?"

Flemmy is again silent.

"My God! You are!"

"So what?" he finally answers.

"So what? So what?! I'll tell ya what," I say. "Ya better have as good an excuse as young Kent here is all I gotta say."

"I joined so I'd get a better MOS," he says defensively.

"A better fuckin' MOS! Yer a fuckin' 11 Bravo, fuckin' infantry," I laugh. "Jes' 'bout every draftee is a fuckin' 11 Bravo, 'cept me.”

"Hey! Better watch what ya say 'bout infantry," says Kent.

"Yeah," chimes in Farkas.

"Oh right. Let me correct myself. Fuckin' airborne infantry," I add, giving Kent the 'airborne salute' he hates.

"Ex-Mormons, fuckin' RAs, and infantry, did I leave anything out?" I ask. "Man, I'm really startin' ta wonder why I hang with you guys.”

"Well, ya kin start wonderin' right here by walkin' back ta Ft. Lewis if ya want," huffs Kent.

I know Kent is just kidding about making me walk back to Ft. Lewis. Pretty sure anyway. So I try to change the subject to what we are going to do now that we have been fed. And fed well.

"Why is it always my problem of what we're gonna do?" asks Kent.

"Cuz it's yer fuckin' car, as ya like to point out so often," I can't help but tease.

"Ya really do wanna walk back, doncha?" says Kent.

"So we're goin' back?"

"Maybe. Unless you got an idea, smart ass.”

"We're gittin' boo coo low on dew. Maybe we should stop by Marcia and Terry's house to see if we can score," I offer.

"Got any scratch, big talker?" Kent asks.

"Yeah, I got some bucks. Especially for some smoke."

"What 'bout you guys?" Kent asks Farkas and Flemmy. "Ya wanna come with us or go back ta Ft. Lewis?"

"What kinda question is that?" asks Farkas. "Of course we don't wanna go back there. Ever!"

"Attitude check," I say.

"Fuck it!" is shouted loudly by all. Professional courtesy.

The lights are off at Marcia and Terry's, and it looks like no one is home. To make sure, we knock on the door and make some noise as we wait at the side door. No response to our knocks, so we didi mau.

"What now?" asks Farkas after we get back into Kent's VW. "We could check out somma the bars, ta see if any of 'em got hot mustard."

"No way!" moans Kent. "Had enough of it at our crib fer the rest of my life."

"Hot mustard? Hey, I like mustard," I say.

"You fuckin' would," says Kent.

"What's wrong with mustard?"

"Nuthin' if it's onna sandwich, but Farkas just puts it on fuckin' pretzels," answers Kent.

"Doesn't sound too bad, 'specially if ya got some ice cold beers," I reply.

"Like I said, 'you would'," says Kent.

"My favorite is sardines with mustard," I say somewhat wistfully.

"Oh yeah, now we're talkin'!" chimes in Farkas. "I second the ice cold beer."

"Fuckin' sardines and mustard. You guys are sick."

"Compared ta somma the chow the M Co. cooks make, sardines are high cuisine," I laugh. "I got a goodie box from my parents when I was at Yakima. There was several cans of sardines, some with mustard, so sometimes I just ate sardines and crackers in the barracks rather than subject myself to the mess hall crap. Especially since Gomez was one of the main cooks."

"Nuff said 'bout that," adds Kent.

We sky, nowhere in particular. We pass a bar sign that says: *Girls! Girls! Girls!* For four guys with nothing to do and nowhere to go it is boo coo better than hot mustard. After we get inside and grab a table I look around a tee tee

bit. There's a stage and some spotlights, so I assume that's where the Girls Girls Girls dance. As I take in the surroundings, I realize this might be the club that Jeanette, Rocky's girlfriend, worked at. I say worked but I could be wrong. I don't know if she ever caught up with Rocky, but if we stay here long enough to see all the dancers I suppose I'll find out.

The waitress arrives to take our order. We all get beer. There are no pretzels, let alone hot mustard. Xin loi, Farkas. There is, however, a scantily clad young woman dancing now, so that sort of makes up for it, for me anyway. I also hear no complaints from my tablemates. I've never been here, but if it's the place I think it is, Rocky has talked of it often. He couldn't come here anymore after he and Jeanette started living together. Clubs like this usually ban the husbands and boyfriends of the dancers who work here. No matter how open-minded they may be, eventually they'll cause a fight or beat up some club patron who they think went too far with their woman.

The dancers here dance for tips, and so they bump and grind and otherwise move around boo coo provocatively as the patrons shove folded bills in what passes for panties on the dancers. It would be boo coo hard to watch your girlfriend flirting and teasing other guys while they pull on her panties. Boo coo hard.

The beers are ice cold, and just the way I like them, but incredibly expensive, even if you don't put your money in the dancer's panties. We don't stay long enough to see all the dancers, so I don't find out if Jeanette is here or not.

Nothing to do now but return to Ft. Lewis. We drop Farkas and Flemmy off before heading to M Co. We run into Shorty in the day room.

"Hey Shorty, did Jeanette ever come back?" I ask.

"Nah, haven't seen her. If she was back, she would of stopped by cuz she left a lotta her stuff at the trailer. Speaking of which, you wanna rent Rocky's room?"

"Fuck no! I know it's convenient and all livin' so close ta the base, but it's too fuckin' close. Like living on base but payin' for it. At least the barracks are free, so ta speak," I answer.

"What about you, Kent?”

"Nah, I fuckin' hate trailers. Xin loi, Shorty," says Kent.

And so another boring day comes to close at M Co. as I finally have my fill of foosball and head up to my bay to hit the sack.

The next morning we are smoking what's left of our pot stash, when Kent remarks, "Gonna hafta score soon, like today.”

"Man, I hate it when we're even low, let alone out, of dew," I admit. "So what's the plan?"

"It's always my job, eh?" asks Kent, sounding a tee tee bit perturbed.

"You have the car, my man. But I have the scratch," I laugh.

As we smoke almost the last of our pot we chat.

"So you're not a Mormon, so you say, but do you still believe in God?" I ask.

"Of course," says Kent. "Don't you?”

"Nah, not any more, 'specially after the Nam," I answer.

"Really?"

"My one brother is almost a year younger than me. We had some boo coo sibling rivalry goin' on when we were young, so whenever I learned 'bout somethin' before him, I always tried ta ruin it fer him. When I first realized that the Easter Bunny wasn't real, after my initial disappointment, I just had to tell my brother. At first he didn't believe me but when I said, 'C'mon, just think about it. A 6-foot-tall rabbit that lays chocolate eggs and can go around the whole world in one night putting the chocolate eggs in all the kids' Easter baskets?', and then I laughed.”

"Man, yer a fuckin' bastard," retorts Kent.

"Was. I wouldn't do that anymore," I say in my defense.

"Anyway, I got my payback almost immediately. As the words were coming outta my mouth about the Easter Bunny not bein' able ta go around the whole world in one night, I realized that Santa Claus, even though he was a guy and not a rabbit, couldn't go around the world in one night either. I was crushed. And I brought it all on myself too.”

"Ya fuckin' deserved it," says Kent.

"It gets worse. After the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus fell by the wayside, all that was left was God. I din't really completely stop believin' in God but I had boo coo strong doubts, 'specially cuz of the way the Catholics depict God. Once I got ta the Nam and was there a tee tee while, I realized, for me, there was no God. The God I had believed in wouldn't let stuff like war happen. Not if he was all powerful like they say," I say. "But even after what you saw in the Nam, ya still believe, eh?"

"I toldya I did, din't I?" answers Kent.

"Yeah, so do ya believe in Santa Claus too? Cuz if ya do, come Christmas

morning in a coupla weeks, someone is gonna be boo coo disappointed when they don't git nuthin' from Santa," I laugh.

"Full of shit, as usual!" says Kent. "C'mon, let's didi mau before Top sees me and tries ta send me on some bullshit job."

We manage to slip, undetected by Top, out of M Co. and over to Kent's VW. On the way to McChord we play our radio game.

"Ivan the Ice Cream Man," I shout as the song starts, "by Ivan Uhls. Whenever I hear this song now, and the part that if ya turn him on he'll give you an ice cream for free, it makes me think of the Johnson brothers deliverin' pot ta their customers in that milk truck."

I half smile. "Man, really number ten that Jimbo got killed. Especially like he did. A bummer and a half."

"Yeah, a bummer, no doubt 'bout it. Jimbo was a number one guy not ta mention he always had some number one pot ta sell," laments Kent.

The rest of the week seems to fly by with no duty, but I am awakened by the Sergeant of the Day on Friday morning for KP. I hate that. Even though I don't need to try to be the first one to the mess hall, I get up anyway and take a shower and shave. Once I'm awake I can never get back to sleep anymore. Or more importantly I don't want to, because I don't want to dream bad things. I don't even want to dream good things because it is so very disappointing to have a wonderful dream only to wake up still in the army. The fucking army to be exact.

I am the first KP to show up. Again I get to amaze the cooks by taking the Pots and Pans.

"Yer crazy, man," says Adolph.

"I toldya. Bad enough bein' on KP, but worse when assholes like Gomez are tryin' ta boss ya around all day, threatening to make you the Pots and Pans man. The Pots and Pans man is near untouchable. You guys act like you'll get leprosy or something' washin' a bunch of dirty pans. Yer fuckin' idiots," I laugh.

"Suit yerself, man. I tried to set ya straight."

I have finished washing all the pans left by the night baker and am taking a break when I see Kent enter the mess hall and assume his position near the door. His job as roster honcho is just a make-work job Top dreamed up to keep Kent from getting too bored. Kent knows this, so he doesn't take his job so seriously that he would fuck with anyone signing the roster as Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck.

"No breakfast at McChord for ya, eh?" chides Kent.

"Don't need to. Gonna get somethin' special Gomez is cookin' up jus' fer the KPs," I laugh.

"I hope yer kiddin'. I wouldn't eat nuthin' Gomez touched," cautions Kent.

"Course I'm kiddin'. They don't let him cook do they?"

"Not that I've seen, but I try not ta spend much time here," answers Kent.

The guys of M Co. start to file in for breakfast so Kent has to pretend he is doing something. I saunter back to my empire of clean pots and pans stacked around my sink and look out my window. Being from Michigan, it's hard to believe its the middle of December. Outside my window the lawn is quite green, and the trees are mostly green as well. Back in Michigan there would be several feet of snow on the ground by now, and it would stay there until the end of March or even maybe into April.

I can see my motorcycle out in the parking lot. It reminds me the parts I ordered might be at the bike shop by now. Pete's bike is parked next to mine and there seems to be an empty space where Brent's bike used to be parked. I really thought that people around me would stop getting hurt or killed once I made it out of the Nam. Sadly, that has not happened.

After a day at the bottom of the totem pole, my stint at KP ends. Once again the cooks are in awe of my prowess as Pots and Pans man as I finish long before any of the other KPs. Good thing, too, because Kent is also finished and is hot to didi mau to McChord.

When we get there we are waved through the gate as usual. It's Friday and even more deserted than M Co. The grandmothers are extra excited about our arrival.

"So Mr. Bond, any secret missions lately?" the head granny teases Kent.

"Now Ma'am, ya know I can't talk 'bout that stuff."

"And you, young man, goin' on riot duty are ya?"

"No ma'am," I answer. "Matter of fact I was workin' in the kitchen myself today."

"Cookin' were ya?" she asks.

"Not exactly," I answer as Kent starts laughing.

"Hey!" I say in my defense. "I kin cook, sort of. But today I was jus' washin' pots and pans. Ya know, kinda workin' my way up."

"Yeah," says Kent, "workin' yer way up ta Outside Man." We both have a good laugh.

Chapter 21

Today is the official First Day of Winter, although it hardly looks it here in Washington. If it even snows, it warms up once it gets light out and all the snow is melted before noon. I'm still on a roll as far as being a Regimental Guard. Last Saturday I was made Supernumerary again, and so I'm still off duty until tomorrow.

The Christmas party for the M Co. sponsored charity is this coming Thursday, so Top's clerk and Kent have been assigned to put up and decorate a tree in a large room next to Captain Heberle's office. I don't think I've ever been in this room as it's usually kept locked.

There are a few small tables with some chairs placed around the area. A couple of couches and some floor lamps round out the furnishings. We probably wouldn't even have a Christmas tree if not for the fact that we are hosting a Christmas party. I sit on one of the couches and offer my full support and numerous recommendations on the decorating of the tree.

"Hey," says Kent, "if ya know so fuckin' much about tree decoratin' then git yer ass over here an do some of it."

"Xin loi, young Kent, but it's prob'ly against Regs fer me ta get involved in somethin' so official lookin' when I'm technically off duty as a permanent Regimental Guard. Prob'ly hafta get a dispensation from the commandin' General just fer bein' outta uniform. Come ta think of it, I don't even know who our General is cuz, as ya know, I keep missin' outta Parade Duty just like you."

"Does it ever end with you?" asks Kent.

"Nope. Not 'til I'm outta the army," I answer. "So, young Kent, do Mormons believe in Jesus or just Boney Maroni?"

I am mostly asking to tease him.

"Course they do, dumb fuck. Why?" he asks.

"Cuz Christmas is all 'bout the birth of Jesus, so if ya din't believe in Jesus ya could prob'ly git outta doin' whatcher doin' right now. What about the Holy Ghost? Do Mormons b'lieve in the Holy Ghost?"

"I toldya, Wolf, I ain't no Mormon," answers Kent. I can tell he's starting to get a tee tee bit agitated now.

"Cool yer jets man. Ya git so fuckin' touchy when we're outta pot. So, OK,

yer not a Mormon, but do you know if the Mormons believe in the Holy Ghost?" I ask again.

"I dunno. I been trying ta fergit all that stuff," answers Kent.

"Well if ya ever want ta have some fun puttin' a Catholic on the spot, 'specially a priest or a nun, ya just ask 'em to explain what they think the Holy Ghost is all 'bout," and then I laugh.

Top's clerk, who has been listening to our conversation as he and Kent decorate the company's official Christmas tree finally can't stand it anymore and asks,"What the fuck are you guys talkin' 'bout?"

"Exactly," says Kent. "I never know what this motherfucker is talkin' 'bout. Ya see, it's not just me!"

I wouldn't be hanging around here except I can't play foosball until Kent gets done with his current assignment. Top is very likely to pop in here to check on his clerk and Kent's progress, and it wouldn't be wise for me to let Top see me slacking, or he might get the wrong idea. Actually he might get the right idea, which is what I really worry about. Regimental Guard duty has been a number one assignment for me so far, and I don't want to mess that up. So I sky to the day room on my own.

We are officially out of pot and are berating ourselves for throwing away the roaches from the joints we smoked. If we had saved them we would at least have something to smoke. We tease guys like Flemmy who always save the roaches saying they are just setting themselves up for a bust if they ever get caught with them. Something Kent knows something about having gotten busted for Flemmy's pill bottle with a couple of roaches in it.

Not having any pot to smoke might be one of the reasons Kent is acting so testy when I tease him about trimming the Christmas tree. We usually tease one another non-stop all the time without either of us getting pissed off. Usually. Christmas is this coming Saturday, and it's not going to be much of a celebration if we don't score some pot by then.

I know that one of the reasons Kent is crabby is because when we are out of pot, we dream when we sleep. We hate that. I say dream but I should probably say nightmare. They might start out as a nice dream at first but they go bad boo coo fast and the next thing you know you are sitting bolt upright in bed breathing real hard, sweating, and wondering where the fuck you are. Then you remember: The army. It's almost worse than the bad dream, realizing you are still in the army. The fucking army to be exact.

When I enter the day room, there is a new guy sitting in one of the chairs.

The first day I got to M Co. I was sitting in that chair myself when I met Sponge. Come to think of it, I haven't seen Sponge again since Top had him hauled off to the slammer for being AWOL.

"Yer not just comin' back from bein' AWOL, are you?" I ask the newcomer.

He laughs and then says,"Nah, jus got back from the Nam, but they won't let me out yet."

"Well, yer in the right company then. Jes' 'bout all of us here at M Co. been ta the Nam and are jus' waitin' to git out. Welcome ta the club," I laugh.

"Thanks," he says laughing a tee tee bit.

"So whatcher name, man?" I ask.

"Bert. What's yers?"

"Derrick, but most guys call me Wolf. Yer choice."

"So Bert, bein' ya been ta the Nam, I normally wouldn't ask this question cuz I already know the answer. But because of extenuatin' circumstances I need ta ask ya somethin'," I say.

"Go ahead, shoot," says Bert.

"You a head?" I ask.

"Of course, aren't you?" he asks.

"Yeah sure, it's just that I can't do the thing that Heads do cuz we're outta pot right now. Maybe you could help us out?"

"I'd like ta, but I don't have nuthin' either," says Bert.

"That's OK, man. Really couldn't expect someone ta be supplyin' the pot on their first day here. Jes' a head's up fer ya, while mos' guys here are Heads, Top ain't, and he hates Heads more than the Pachucos and the Soul Brothers," I say.

"I know what the Soul Brothers are but what are the Pachucos?" Bert asks.

I laugh first and then I say, "I don't know what the Pachucos really are, but here, they're mostly a bunch of Chicano punks who claim to be gang members from San Antonio. Watch out for the one named Gomez."

Just about then Adolph and Ramon Salazar walk into the day room.

"Speak of the devil. I was just talkin' 'bout you guys," I laugh.

"Yeah, I bet," says Adolph. "An' just what was ya sayin' 'bout us?"

"Oh, just that if ya wanna git high, Adolph is da man."

"Got that right, *pendejo*," laughs Adolph. "Where's Kent, man? C'mon, we want ta beat yer ass at foosball."

"He's decoratin' the tree for the Christmas party. Should be here soon."

"What Christmas party?" asks Adolph.

"M Co.'s Christmas party. Where ya been?" I answer.

"A party for us?"

I laugh big time, and then answer, "Fuck no! Why'd we have a party fer a bunch of jerks. It's fer the kids from a charity the company sponsors in Tacoma."

I realize I have left my new friend Bert out of the conversation, so I quickly correct my mistake.

"Bert," I say, "this is Ramon Salazar and the skinny, ugly one is Adolph Ricondo."

Kent arrives so I continue, "Young Kent, meet the newest member of M Co. Bert, that's Kent. I just noticed in one of the display cases here it says that M Co.'s nickname is 'The Mad Dogs.' I think that should be changed to 'The Misfits.'"

"I just git here and yer already fulla shit again, Wolf," says Kent.

"So did Boney Maroni show up and help ya finish decoratin' the tree by performin' a miracle?" I tease.

"The only miracle is no one has killed ya yet fer bein' such a smart ass," Kent says to me.

"Who's Boney Maroni?" asks Adolph. I burst out laughing followed by Kent.

"See what ya started now," says Kent still laughing.

Top's clerk enters the day room to hand out mail. I get a letter from one of the Two Jerrys, who have finished retrofitting the old school bus and have driven it to the Florida Keys to spend Christmas and most of the winter. Lucky fuckers. I quickly skim over the letter, because everyone is waiting on me to play foosball. I just want to make sure there's nothing important. If all goes well, says the letter, they should be in Washington state about the time I get out of the army. That would be sweet timing for me. But still almost six months away. Six more months in the army. It seems like it will never end.

"We gonna play or not?" asks Kent.

"Yeah, yeah," I answer as Kent brings me back to the here and now. We start our first game.

"So Bert, you play?" I ask, meaning foosball.

"Yeah, a little."

"Better practice, then. The guys here live only for foosball," I laugh. "And pot when we got it."

I tell them about my letter as the game begins.

“So my friends with the school bus are in Florida for Christmas and then on a slow crawl on the way here to pick me up in six months.”

"I went ta Florida fer Christmas once," says Kent. "I was in Georgia and had ta take a bus ta my aunt's house in Florida. Took for-fuckin-ever. The bus stopped at every town and wide spot inna road. The heat wasn't too bad in Georgia, but once I got ta Florida I thought I was gonna git heat stroke on that bus. I was still a dumb fuck and thought I had ta have my dress greens on when I was off post."

"And when was it exactly that ya stopped bein' a dumb fuck?" I laugh.

"Always a wise ass," Kent says to me, ignoring my question.

Because of our tee tee bickering, we are not paying full attention to the game at hand and lose to Adolph and Ramon. It's probably for the best, as I'm hoping Adolph has some pot to share.

"So Adolph, how 'bout a tee tee victory celebration up in yer room?" I ask.

"Ya din't throw the game on purpose did ya?" Adolph laughs.

"Maybe.”

"Fuck you," says Ramon, "we beat ya fair and square."

"See what I meant about foosball, Bert? Anyway, c'mon with us and we'll give ya a proper welcoming ta M Co. for a head," I laugh.

“I need ta hit the john first,” replies Bert.

“Sure Bert. The cook's room is the first room from the stairs on the right side. Think ya can find it?” I ask.

“If I can't, I'll just follow my nose,” Bert replies with a smile.

So we all race up the stairs to the cook's room.

“We should initiate Bert into out tee tee club of Heads. Do you guys know about Visine?” I ask.

“Visine! Yeah, we know about Visine. Gets the red outta yer eyes,” replies Kent.

“Yeah, but didja know it glows yellow under black light?” I ask.

“And so?”

I pull out my bottle of Visine and say, “C'mon, I'll show ya.”

I use the Visine to make circular and swirling designs on everyone's face very reminiscent of the Maori warrior's of New Zealand. I tell everyone to try to act nonchalant. I finish just in time, as there is a knock on the door. It's Bert, and we let him in.

Adolph rolls a couple of joints. He hands one to Kent who immediately

throws the joint back to Adolph.

"What the fuck is that s'posed ta be?" asks Kent. "A pregnant toothpick?"

"Whatcha talkin' 'bout?" Adolph asks.

"Put some fuckin' dew in there, man. That thing's mostly paper. I wanna smoke some pot!”

To diffuse the situation, I take the joint from Adolph and carefully pull it apart and re-roll it using the original paper. Professional courtesy, plus we hate to waste rolling papers. I hand the re-rolled joint to Kent who deems it worthy now. He lights it and passes it to Bert, in honor of him being the newest member of our tee tee head clique.

"Yer so fuckin' particular," Adolph says to Kent.

"Nah, Adolph, he's right. I've toldya this before. It's gotta be done right. Plus Bert's new here and we don't want 'em ta git the wrong idea.”

To keep things going well while the first joint is being passed around, I take the second joint and re-roll it as well. I hand it to Bert when the first joint is finished. After some close scrutiny, he lights it and passes it on. Bert is turning out to be a quick learner.

Ramon puts his Santana album on, and we all groove to the music. Especially Kent and me, as it's our first buzz of the day.

Now that everyone is high, I say, “C'mon Ramon, turn off the lights an turn on yer black light so we kin git the full effect,”

“Oh yeah, I almost fergot,” replies Ramon. Everyone, except me, has already forgotten about the Visine on our faces. But when the black light is turned on, the look of astonishment on Bert's face is so complete that we can't help ourselves, and we all start to laugh.

It's takes Bert a few seconds to realize it's a prank, and then he joins in.

“So,” I ask Kent, “is the Visine number one or what?”

“Yeah it's number one,” answers Kent.

We haven't listened to all of one side of the album before there is a knock at the door.

"C'mon man, let me in. It's Gomez," he says from the other side of the door.

“Quick,” I say, “turn off the black light.”

Adolph gets up, turns the overhead lights on and then lets Gomez in

"You fuckin' tokin' down without me?" accuses Gomez as he enters.

"Couldn't find ya, man," answers Adolph.

"Fuck you. You din't even look or ya woulda found me," says Gomez.

"C'mon, roll another joint."

Before Adolph even starts to roll the requested joint, Gomez says to Kent, "Hey man, gimme a square."

I laugh.

"Whatcha laughin' 'bout, rabbit?" Gomez says to me.

"I'm laughing because now I don't have to beat yer ass fer askin' me fer a smoke," I say hoping he calls me rabbit again so I can feel justified if I do decide to beat his ass.

Gomez looks at Kent, waiting for his requested cigarette. Kent just ignores him. I watch and wait. One of us is going to beat the crap out of Gomez if he keeps it up.

Finally, with boo coo false politeness in his voice, Gomez says, "Kent, may I please have a cigarette?"

I laugh again. Kent hands Gomez a Marlboro.

"Whatcha laughin' at now?" Gomez asks me.

"Cuz I din't even know that ya knew Kent's name is all," I answer.

We stay to get in on the joint Adolph rolled for Gomez. Gomez, having missed out on the first two joints, feels justified in bogarting the joint every time he gets his hands on it.

Once Gomez is high, I say, “C'mon Ramon, put yer black light back on.”

As soon as the black light is turned on, Gomez looks around at us, seemingly in awe, as we all strain to keep a straight face. It's not long before we all start laughing again. It takes Gomez a tee tee bit longer than Bert to realize he has been pranked.

As soon as the number is finished, Kent and I stand up in unison to didi mau.

On the way to our bay, Kent says, "Man is Gomez ever lucky. I was just waitin' fer 'em ta call me rabbit when he asked me fer a smoke, and I was gonna kick his ass."

"I was just thinkin' ta myself that one of us is gonna end up beatin' the crap out of him one of these days.”

With nothing really to do, we sit on our bunks waiting for something to happen. Anything.

"I used have ta have a theory when I was a kid and had a paper route," I say.

"Spare me yer fuckin' theories.”

"No wait, it pertains to dumb fucks like Gomez," I say.

"Enough 'bout Gomez already," Kent pleads.

I say nothing. Silence.

"OK, whatcher fuckin' theory?" he finally asks.

I laugh, "I know you must be fuckin' bored ta ask that."

"Are gonna fuckin' tell me now or not?"

"OK, I'll tell ya," I answer with a laugh. "So I had a paper route from when I was 10 'til I was about 15. When I first started, the paper cost 8 cents for a daily paper and 20 cents for the Sunday paper. If ya bought a paper every day at a news stand, it cost 68 cents a week. But if ya had it delivered it only cost 65 cents a week. Cheaper by 3 cents and the delivery was free. Kind of. So as a paper boy I made 2 cents on every daily paper I delivered and 5 cents for the Sunday paper, so 17 cents a week to deliver the paper to each customer 365 days a year. No days off, no vacation, no holidays. I had to deliver my papers on Christmas and Easter morning, New Year's, my birthday, you name it. So as a young man I was introduced to the real business world at a tender age. As I said, the weekly paper was 65 cents delivered to your door. When I went around collecting the money from my customers, at least half of them would give me three quarters and tell me to keep the change. The 10 cent tip that 'bout 25 customers gave me added up ta an extra $2.50 a week when I was makin' 'bout $5.00 a week. Around the third year I had my paper route, the newspaper company decided to raise the price of the weekly paper by 5 cents a week. When I collected my money the first week of the price increase, several of my customers gave me grief as if I had personally increased the price. I didn't, and although the price of the paper was increased, the paper boys got zip. Worse, besides having to endure the complaints from my customers about the price increase, some of them still gave me 3 quarters and told me to keep the change. I quickly realized the newspaper company had taken about half of my tips."

"I thought ya were tellin' me 'bout some theory ya had," says Kent.

"I'm gittin' there," I answer.

I continue, "So in one fell swoop the newspaper company had basically stolen half of my weekly tips. I was fuckin' pissed, but there was nuthin' I could do 'bout it. I thought 'bout quittin' my paper route, but I needed the money so I couldn't. All the paper boys were pissed, but again there was nuthin' we could do. The customers were also pissed off and expecting we would go back to the old price. And then, the worst happens. Not three months after the first increase in the price, they did it again. This time making

the price of the weekly paper 75 cents. The same thing happens. My customers blame me for the price increase. Now everyone gave me the three quarters, but there was no tip. It caused me to realize how dumb most people are. How could anyone blame the paper boy for the price of the newspaper goin' up? I was the one footin' most of the cost. What fuckin' idiots. So I came up with my 80-20 theory, which is that 80 percent of the population are dumb shits, and only 'bout 20 percent of the population have it together. That 20 percent is what keeps the world rolling along."

"So that's it? 80-20," asks Kent.

"Well no, I had ta tweak it some," I answer.

"Huh?"

"Bein' in the army has caused me ta be more pessimistic about people."

"What the fuck's pessimistic mean?" asks Kent.

"It's the opposite of optimistic."

"Yer always showin' off usin' them big words," says Kent.

"Xin loi, din't know pessimistic was a big word," I say. "Anyway, bein' in the army and around dumb fucks like Gomez has caused me ta adjust my numbers. Now it's my 90-10 theory with only 10 percent of the people who have it together. That's why I try ta stay away from dickheads like Gomez. I don't wanna hang out with any of the 90 percenters."

"I can't b'lieve I sat and listened ta all that," says Kent. "As usual yer jus' fulla shit."

"Maybe, but not as fulla shit as guys like Gomez," I laugh more.

Another day ends at M Co. as we all wait for our turn to be let out of the army. If we can live long enough.

When I wake the next morning I could sleep in since I'm off duty until five. The problem is that with about 100 guys all going to and from the bathroom, getting dressed, talking amongst themselves, and smoking boo coo cigarettes, there is no way I can fall back to sleep. At least I can lounge around in my bunk until the rest of the guys have to fall out for Reveille.

After the rabble have left I get up and saunter to the bathroom. Kent is there already, shaving.

"Practicin' again for the day when ya got hair one," I say laughing.

"Fuck you," says Kent as I head to the shower.

He has to get moving, or he'll be late for roster duty so I let him be. I'm not sure what to do with myself today. Not really interested in having breakfast

here. The tee tee PX doesn't open until 10 AM. Can I wait 'til 10 for breakfast, and do I really want a bean burrito first thing in the morning? While I wonder, Kent returns.

Normally we would smoke some pot and then go to McChord for breakfast, but we are out of pot.

"Good thing Adolph got us high last night, or we'd both be a mess right now," I say.

"I am a mess," laughs Kent.

"I mean more of a mess than we are," I correct myself.

We turn the radio on when we get to the VW.

"Big Yellow Taxi by Joni Mitchell," I say when her song comes on. "You shoulda beat me ta that one, Young Kent. She's from California."

"Now, but she's really from Canada," answers Kent.

"So is Neil Young and ya like him."

"Din't say I din't like her, just that's she's not from California," he replies.

"You jus' said she's from Cal, *now*," I tease.

"It's California, not Cal. I keep tellin' ya."

"Yeah, yeah, I just fergot. Xin loi," and then I laugh.

"You din't fergit. Yer jes' tryin ta fuck with me."

"We're both just a tee tee bit bitchy cuz we're outta pot," I say. "So Young Kent, when we were talkin' 'bout the stuff on our dog tags, you said ya was inna band before joinin' the army."

"Yeah, why?" asks Kent.

"So what didja play in the band?"

"Played the bass."

"Really? I played the bass in grade school and junior high until I got kicked outta band and orchestra," I say with a laugh. "So what kinda bass didja play?"

"'Lectric bass," answers Kent.

"I played the stand-up bass in orchestra and the Sousaphone in band. But I never really learned ta play the Sousaphone much, and that's prob'ly why I got kicked out. The bummer was I didn't even want ta play the Sousaphone. I got pressured to play it by the band leader. I liked playing the bass but the same guy taught orchestra and band, so when he kicked me outta band, he kicked me outta orchestra too. Since I din't have a bass of my own I've never played it again," I finish.

We arrive at McChord and are waved through the gate.

"So when didja start playin' the bass?" I ask Kent.

"Started playin' in a band at church."

"Really? Ya had a band in church with an electric bass?" I ask.

"Yep," Kent answers.

"Didja sing too?"

"Nah, jus' played my bass."

"When I was in fifth grade the music teacher gave all the fifth graders a demonstration of all the orchestra instruments. Now that I think 'bout it, he was an amazing guy cuz he could play every instrument in the orchestra. I was already interested in playing the violin cuz we had my grandfather's violin, but during his demonstration he played the stand-up bass the correct way, and then he played it with his nose. I should mention that he had a rather big nose, and he brought the place down when he got done. All the kids were laughing their heads off. So I changed my mind and signed up for bass. I thought playing it with your nose was so cool," I laugh.

"You fuckin' would."

"Well anyway, we all started getting lessons from Mr. K, as we called him. His name was really Mr. Kazsakavich but hardly anyone could say that. So one day after having lessons for about 5 or 6 months, I said to him, 'So Mr. K, when do we get to play the bass with our noses?' Man, I never heard anyone laugh so hard."

"Yer a dumb shit," laughs Kent.

"Was," I say laughing too. "I hate to admit it but bein' in the army has smartened me up boo coo."

"Well that wouldn't be too hard bein' yer such a dumb shit!" Kent says and laughs some more.

"Was!" I correct him again.

We are, as usual, the only diners at the mess hall at McChord. We would be so devastated if they ever closed this place, I'm thinking. Almost six more months of having to the dismal food at M Co. is too awful to contemplate.

This must be even more evident to our grannies, as they are here all day, and it often seems like they'd have nothing to do if we didn't come. They know us so well now we have to chat them up quite a bit before they make our food for us. We don't really mind, and Kent loves to spin tales of espionage to keep the grannies entertained. They know he is bullshitting them, but he is expert at it so they smile and laugh while I look on with a bemused smile on my face too.

"What about you, young man?" the head grannie asks me.

"Got Regimental Guard again today," I answer, "but prob'ly be named Supernumerary."

"You fuckin' hope," says Kent, but not loud enough for the grannies to hear him swear.

"Not so loud man, ya don't want them ta know what a bastard you are," I caution.

"You my mama now?" he replies.

"Doubt that, young Kent. Word 'round M Co. is ya were sun-hatched onna rock which could explain yer bad attitude," I laugh.

"Ha ha, yer so funny sometimes I fergit ta laugh," says Kent, apparently tiring of my lame attempts at humor. That or the fact that we are still in the army but out of pot. We are both a tee tee bit crabby. OK, more like boo coo crabby.

We are quickly brought out of our despair by the arrival of our food.

"Ya know, ya better wrap yer head 'round the fact that sooner or later yer gonna actually have ta do guard," says Kent.

"Maybe. But here's where my theory goes ta work," I say,

"What theory?"

"My 90-10 theory," I answer. "I only have ta beat out a bunch of 90 percenters ta be the Supernumerary."

"No use talkin' to ya I guess," says Kent.

"What else kin I do man?" I ask.

"Be ready to hafta do guard is all I'm sayin'," he answers.

"Ya want me ta worry about bein' on guard duty? That would just kinda wreck it fer me. Not only do I get to be happy when I'm named Supernumerary, but I get to feel happy before, in anticipation of it. Well, as happy as ya kin feel when yer in the fuckin' army," I say. "Yer not jealous, are ya?"

"Jealous! Of you? Fuck no!" he answers.

I laugh first and then say, "Jes' checkin'."

After we eat it's back to M Co. It's late enough in the month that we are low on funds, not to mention out of pot. We spend the rest of the day honing our foosball skills. At 5 PM I and the other Regimental Guards are trucked to the guard shack.

I'm going to have some stiff competition again, but I still have Pete's jump boots with their spit shined toes and the military creases on my shirt to give

me an edge. No one, it seems, has figured out my trick of waiting until the last possible moment before getting dressed so as to not get unsightly creases in the pant legs.

Although I put on a great show of acting like I'm confident that I will be named Supernumerary, it's not until it really happens that I can sigh with relief. Almost like when the sun came up in the Nam. I head directly to the mess hall to gloat.

"Wunna these days, yer gonna be boo coo disappointed," he laughs.

"But not today."

Adolph is on the serving line and gives me a knowing nod. This is usually reserved for giving someone a non-verbal heads up that a joint is going to be toked, but I suspect he's indicating the food here today might be worth eating. Might.

"I see Adolph thinks we should dine here for dinner," I say.

"Not gonna be as good as McChord," cautions Kent.

"I know, I know. Thing is, Adolph is still holding. So we let him and Ramon beat us in a coupla games of foosball, and then we smoke somma Adolph's pot," I laugh.

"Man, yer a fuckin' scammer."

"An' yer not, Mr. Roster man?" I say while still laughing.

The food is not horrid. Close, but not. After dinner, Kent and I sky to the day room to dominate the foosball table until Adolph and Ramon are finished working. It is near the end of the month and many more guys from M Co. are hanging around because they have little or no money.

There's really nothing to do except smoke pot, if you have it. There are some movie theaters on post. Some are real theaters but some are incredibly makeshift. Also, since I've been here, they have shown only two movies, alternating between the two the whole time. Woodstock the Movie and Kelly's Heroes starring Clint Eastwood. Woodstock, I can understand. It's about everything that is not the army, and it's hard to believe they even allow it to be shown. Why Kelly's Heroes is popular is beyond me. It's your typical Hollywood war movie, which is to say it's nothing like real war. Maybe the reason we like it is because it's not real. Watching a movie that truly depicts war would be stressful to say the least.

For the rest of the evening, we play foosball and smoke Adolph's pot and manage to while away another day in the army without getting into trouble. Tomorrow is the M Co. Christmas party. I can hardly wait. Actually it might

be fun, but I'm only cautiously optimistic about that. This is, after all, the army. The fucking army to be exact.

Once again I lounge around in my bunk before getting up in the morning. As Supernumerary I'm off duty until Sunday. No reason to fight my way into the bathroom with the guys who have duty today. Saturday is Christmas so everyone gets that off. As I think about the Christmas party scheduled today, I remember that it's really for the children and not the members of M Co. However, as Kent and I were instrumental in the procurement of the toys, we might be invited. Might.

By the time I make my way over to the mess hall Kent is at his station.

"Good morning, young Kent," I say with a smile. Kent, no doubt, has been hassled already this morning so no need for me to add to that.

"Excited 'bout the big party today?" I ask.

"Fuck no. I already done boo coo more for it than anyone," replies Kent.

"I know that. Thought you'd wanna see all the kids get the toys we got 'em."

"Nah, I ain't goin' 'less Top makes me go," says Kent.

"Really? We're 'bout the only guys who could go if we wanted. I don't think they'd let the riff-raff like Gomez, go even if they wanted. It'll just be the officers and the Lifers."

Kent looks at me while he slowly shakes his head and finally says," My fuckin' point exactly. Ya really wanna hang with them?"

"Yer right. But Sue might be there. Someone should be there ta run interference for her when the officers try hittin' on her," I say.

"An' yer not plannin' on hittin' on her?" laughs Kent.

"Hey, I've been nuthin' but a gentlemen in that regards. Plus, we're friends now. I toldya man, she's tryin' ta straighten her out life. She's got a kid. She doesn't need ta be gettin' involved with someone in the army who's gonna be gone in a few months."

"You hope," says Kent. "She was already involved with someone worse than you."

"Man, Kent," I say. "Didja just compliment me?"

"Don't let it go ta yer head."

True to his word, Kent didi maus in search of pot when the Christmas party begins. I probably will have to talk my way into the party, but if Captain Heberle is there, it won't be hard.

I wait for it to get going before I slip in. There are about thirty children and almost as many parents in the room when I enter. There is so much noise and activity I am not even noticed. As predicted by Kent, it is just the Lifers and some of the officers in attendance. I can't tell yet who they have playing Santa Claus but I know this: It ain't Top. I spy the director of the charity talking to Captain Heberle, and then I see Sue talking with a small group of the children.

I walk over to say hi. Sue looks up when I arrive and smiles.

"I was sorta hopin' you'd be here," she says to me.

"Really?"

"Of course. We're friends aren't we?"

"Absolutely," I answer.

The words are no sooner out of my mouth, and Lt. Bonner walks up to me and says, “Wolf, whaddaya doin' here? Yer outta uniform. Leave now before I hafta write ya up."

I am in my civvies, but since I'm kind of crashing this party I didn't think it would matter. I was wrong. I give Sue a goodbye wave and say, "I'll be back."

I hustle up to my bay and change into my uniform, and then I return to the party.

Lt. Bonner has Sue cornered on the far side of the room. I know he pulled rank on me once already so he could try to hit on Sue. He'll probably try to do it again.

"Wolf, what are you doin' back here?" asks Lt. Bonner when I walk up.

"I'm in uniform now," I reply knowing full well it's not going to be enough.

"Who invited you?”

"No one.”

"Exactly, so leave," says Lt. Bonner.

I give Sue a tee tee look of despair and am about to didi again when Captain Heberle and the charity director walk over to us. The director, remembering me, grabs my hand to shake while thanking Captain Heberle for loaning Kent and me to him for the toy collection. We chat for a while, and I'm starting to think I better didi soon or Lt. Bonner will have it out for me more than he already does.

Before I have a chance to sky Lt. Bonner didi maus instead.

"What was that all about?" Sue asks once he's gone.

"That was what we refer to as Pullin' Rank," I laugh. "It's prob'ly the thing I hate the most 'bout the army. Jus' cuz some jerk is higher in rank they kin order ya 'round. Even if they're a dumb shit like Boner. He was jus' pullin' rank on me so he could try hittin' on ya. He prob'ly even asked you out."

Sue laughs and says, "Yeah he asked me out but he was bein' such a jerk that I said no."

"I'm gonna be in trouble with him now. Good thing I'm still a permanent Regimental Guard, or he'd put me on some shit detail, that's for sure," I say.

"That's not fair," replies Sue.

"Life's not fair, and the army is even worse in that regard."

"So, are we goin' out again?"

"Are you asking me out?" I laugh.

"We *are* friends," she answers.

"We are. The thing is, the last time I was able ta borrow Kent's car for our date. I only have a motorcycle. I couldn't expect ya ta ride on my bike in the winter," I say.

"Well, since I'm the one asking, I can drive. What about tomorrow night? I could come and pick you up now that I know my way around here."

"You're really asking me out?" I ask somewhat incredulously.

"I am," she replies.

"Well of course I'll go," I say. I'd have to be a complete idiot to say no.

Santa Claus starts to hand out the presents to the children. I've been wondering who is playing Santa, and I can tell now it Sgt. Black. He's not really old enough, but he's got the right belly to play Santa. Xin loi, Sarge.

The children seem to accept Santa as the real thing, and that's all that's really important. Kent is really missing out on something I hadn't even thought about until now. The laughs and squeals of delight from the kids as they receive a present makes me realize I helped make that happen. I can't remember the last time I did something, while in the army, that made me feel good, really good. Certainly not while in the Nam.

The party seems to be over boo coo too soon, and I doubt I'm the only one sad that it's over. As the children file out of the room, the charity director once again shakes my hand and thanks me for my help.

Sue is just behind him, and she gives me a hug and a tee tee kiss and says, "See ya tomorrow. How 'bout I come by and get ya 'bout 6 o'clock?"

"Six is fine," I answer. "I'll try ta be outside already so ya don't hafta suffer all the jerks hittin' on ya if ya had ta come inside looking for me."

The first thing I do when the party is over is to get out of my uniform as fast as I can. Lt. Bonner didn't fool me one bit when he kicked me out of the party for being out of uniform. He was just trying to get rid of me so he could try to hustle Sue. As I reflect on it now, it's probably a good thing I was in my civvies, as it gave him something easy to kick me out for. If I had been in uniform he would have probably made up some nasty detail to send me on.

I hang out in the day room for the remainder of the day. Kent's still not back yet so I have been teaming up with our new friend Bert. I'm quite good at foosball now, if I do say so myself, so Bert willingly plays the goalie while I continue to improve my skill at playing the front men.

Kent returns around 9 PM, and by the look on his face I can already tell he was not able to score any pot, but I ask anyway.

"Nah, no one had squat," relates Kent.

"Bummer, man. Christmas is only one day away. Bad enough being in the fuckin' army on Christmas, but ta not have any dew? I can't even think 'bout it. Specially now cuz we're gonna have to go ta sleep tonight without our tee tee night cap," I lament.

"Still got another day to find some," says Kent. "So how was the party? Didja really go?"

His question makes me laugh.

"What?" asks Kent.

"Oh I went, and it was good for exactly the reason I said. Lt. Boner was all over Sue the moment he saw her."

"So whadja do?"

"Not much, the motherfucker kicked me outta the party cuz I wasn't wearin' my uniform," I answer.

"I know you, man. That wouldn't fuckin' stop ya," laughs Kent.

"Course it din't. I went and put on my uniform and then went back. That motherfucker was just gettin' ready ta kick me out again when the charity director came over ta talk ta me and ta thank me again for helpin' out. Man, Kent, ya shoulda been there. The kids were so excited 'bout the toys we got fer 'em. It was boo coo touching man. Even if Sgt. Black was the worst Santa I ever saw. Thought I was gonna cry fer a moment," I say.

"You lyin' bastard," laughs Kent.

"OK, OK. I din't almost cry but it made me feel boo coo good. Better than I can remember feelin' inna boo coo long time," I fess up.

"So Boner din't kick ya out the second time?"

"He was gonna try again, except after the director came over ta chat, Captain Heberle came over too. Really Young Kent, shoulda been there. The director was boo coo complimentary of our help, 'specially considerin' that we went there as supposed con artists," I answer with another laugh. "Anyway, Boner finally left, and so I had Sue all to myself."

"So how'd that work out fer ya?" Kent asks.

"Worked out number one. She asked me out fer a date tomorrow night," I answer with a smile.

"No way," says Kent.

"No, really."

"Nah, what I meant was, you can't borrow my car tomorrow. I need it ta try ta score some dew."

"Don't need it," I say.

"Whatcha gonna do, take her on yer bike?" he asks.

"Nope, she's comin' ta get me in her dad's truck. Said since she asked me out she'd drive," I answer.

"No fuckin' shit?"

"No fuckin' shit," I reply.

"Somma my magic mus' be rubbin' off on ya is all I kin guess," laughs Kent.

"That's my guess too. Sure ain't nuthin' I did," I laugh along.

The magic gained from the Christmas party only goes so far, as it is a night filled with nightmares and bad dreams for Kent and I. We really miss our nightly toke down just before bed.

Today is Christmas Eve Day but it's not really a holiday or a day off in the army. I'm only off myself because I'm a Regimental Guard and am officially off duty until Sunday. At which time I will try to do my magic again to be the Supernumerary. I hope.

Because I slept so fitfully, I try to sleep in a tee tee bit. All but impossible with all the talking and noise made by the guys on duty.

Every day seems almost the same in the army, and when Sue asked me out I wasn't really cognizant of the fact that it would be Christmas Eve today. No big deal for me, but I know Sue has a young son. Christmas Eve is important for both of them I'm sure.

Close to 6 PM Sue drives up. We chat for a few minutes about what we should do.

"I didn't really realize tonight is Christmas Eve when we talked 'bout going out tonight," I admit.

"Oh, it's OK. Though it would be good if we aren't out late," replies Sue.

"That won't be hard. It'll prob'ly be harder ta find some place open on Christmas Eve," I say.

"We could go to the restaurant we went to last time. I'm pretty sure they're open," says Sue.

"Works for me. Since yer doin' the flyin' I kin do the buyin'," I offer.

We chat on the ride there.

"You know, I was at the meeting with your captain and the director when they were discussing having some of the guys from M Co. help with getting toys for the Christmas party," Sue tells me. "When the director said he thought guys considered con artists might be useful, your captain started laughing. He stopped when he realized he was the only one laughing. Then he said, 'You're serious aren't you?' The director laughed then and said, 'Things are very bleak economically in Tacoma right now and have been for a while now. We didn't get many toy donations last year so it could hardly hurt trying something different this time.' Your captain said he wasn't sure if there were any con artists at his company but he would ask his First Sergeant and get back to him. I told you on the day we met that we were expecting some guys with sunglasses and the collars turned up."

"I remember. I showed ya my pink sunglasses," I laugh and so does Sue.

It's a slow night at the restaurant so we spend a quiet evening talking before Sue takes me back to M Co. When she drops me off, she thanks me for cutting our evening short.

"Really not a problem, and I completely understand. When I was two I wanted my mom home on Christmas Eve. Plus I want ta make sure I get ta sleep before Santa gets here," I joke.

"You would," Sue laughs.

When I get out of the truck Sue gives me a nice hug and a tee tee kiss. "Merry Christmas, Wolf," she says.

"Merry Christmas, Sue."

Before she leaves, Kent pulls up in his VW. Sue waves to him and waves goodbye to me and she didi maus. It's the last time I ever see her.

I can tell by the satisfied grin on Kent's face that he scored. At least I hope so.

"Whatcha doin' back so early?" asks Kent. "Thought my magic was rubbin'

off on ya."

"It's Christmas Eve. She's gotta two-year-old kid, remember?" I say.

"Oh yeah, xin loi," says Kent.

"Really can't see how this could work out. She's on probation. She's got a kid. The kid's dad is in prison, but I assume he'll get out someday. What a fuckin' mess that would be. Doubt he'd wanna be pals with me," I muse.

"Definitely a boo coo fuckin' mess," replies Kent. "Ya don't see me gettin' involved with no one, do ya?"

"That would fuck up yer deal that's fer sure. Every woman ya meet wants ta be yer friend. Or more. Usually more, so you'd be missin' out on a lotta fun or nookie or both."

"Is it always jus' 'bout sex with you?" asks Kent.

"And it's not with you? Isn't that why ya go 'round with yer nuts hangin' outta that hole in yer pants?"

"Fuck you."

"Oh man, I get it now," I laugh.

"Whaddya talkin' 'bout now?" he asks.

"There's boo coo patches on yer pants, and I've never seen ya with a needle and thread workin' on those pants. Matter of fact, as I look at 'em now some of the patches were very skillfully done, and not by you," I answer.

"So fuckin' what?"

"You said lately that you know me. Well young Kent, I know you too. 'Oh look, your pants have a rip in them,' some sweet young thing will say. 'Jus' let's take 'em off, and I'll sew 'em up for you,'" I laugh.

Kent gets a sly smile on his face but says nothing.

"Yeah, I know you. Now let's go try out the dew ya got ta make sure it's up to our high standards. Plus, we don't wanna miss Santa by stayin' up too late," I say. "Man young Kent this is turnin' out ta be a number one Christmas, and it ain't even Christmas yet."

Christmas dawns at M Co. but there is no white Christmas in this part of Washington. So with being in the army and the lack of snow on the ground it hardly seems like Christmas to me, aside from having the day off.

I bought no presents for any of my friends, and no one got me anything either, so we're all even on that account. At Adolph's urging, we have breakfast at M Co. No matter what he promises for Christmas dinner, Kent and I plan on going to see our grannies for dinner.

After breakfast, we sky up to our bay to get our respective heads in proper form for the day. It's a large group of us, so many in fact that all of us can't fit inside the cook's room, so we plan to toke down right out in the open of our bay. It's Christmas, so the Lifers should all be gone.

There's Ace and Beaudeen along with Pete, Adolph, Ramon, Perkins, Kent and myself and our new friend Bert. Most everyone scored some pot for Christmas, so there are boo coo lit joints being passed around after each is given careful scrutiny and deemed fit to toke. A couple have to be re-rolled to satisfy Kent or me, but no big deal. It's all in fun.

Beaudeen has the biggest problem with rolling acceptable joints. He bites his fingernails so the ends of his fingers are a mess. I wouldn't want to stick his finger in my ear let alone my mouth.

Now comes the biggest problem to solve. What to do today.

"Hardly seems like Christmas to me with no snow on the ground," I say.

"Never had snow for Christmas in my life," says Adolph. "Matter of fact never even touched snow before."

"No shit?" I gasp. "We gotta do somethin' 'bout that."

"Like what?" asks Kent.

"There was snow on Mt. Rainier the last time we could see it," I say.

"It's far," cautions Kent.

"We got all day," I reply.

Bert offers to drive. Pete and Ramon decline, but the rest of us decide to go. I have been trying to see Mt. Rainier up close since I got here, so I am excited.

We roll some joints for the trip and then we head out to Bert's '57 Chevy Nomad station wagon. It's a cool ride, and we compliment Bert about it.

Kent is quite correct when he says it is a boo coo long drive to Mt. Rainier even though it looks so close. On the plus side, we're a group of friends on Christmas day going on a fun adventure. When you're in the army, this doesn't happen often. Especially when adventure usually means you are being shot at or taking incoming.

It is turning out to be a beautiful clear day with a blue sky and just a few white puffy clouds here and there. Being out in the country on Christmas day there is virtually no other road traffic besides us. We smoke pot with impunity as we drive. It's a boo coo scenic drive because of the clear sky. All the peaks in view are snow covered and it is wonderfully picturesque.

After almost two hours of driving we come to the turn off for the road that

goes near the top of Mt. Rainier. We're not really planning to go all the way to the top. We just want to get to the snow. There is a sign declaring no vehicles should proceed any further if they do not have tire chains with them.

"I got chains. I'm from Oregon," says Bert. "If ya don't have tire chains ya can't get nowhere in the mountains."

The scenery is lush and green as we start our ascent. The access road winds and twists and we can't see the peak of the mountain. When we can see it, it is quite awesome. While it's not my first time playing in the snow, it is my first time going up a mountain. And not just any old mountain, but Mt. Rainier. A dormant volcano. At least I hope it's dormant.

At first we see wisps of snow cover here and there, but we finally get up high enough that the ground is completely covered with it. It's what we've been waiting for. Bert pulls to the side of the road and parks at the first place he can.

It's fairly mild and warm enough that the snow is perfect for making snowmen and snowballs. Adolph is very fortunate that the first snow he encounters in his life is good for making snowballs.

The snowball fight turns into a free-for-all melee with no established sides or teams. Just every man for himself. Ace, Bert, and I have boo coo snowball-fighting experience and are pummeling the rest of the guys without mercy. Adolph, Beaudeen, and Kent – the three who haven't had much snow experience – are getting creamed. Xin loi.

In the end we all take a few hits. Enough that we are all soaking wet and laughing until our sides hurt as we get back into Bert's car for the ride back.

"That was a blast and a half," laughs Adolph.

"Thought you'd like it," I say. "See what ya missed when you were a kid?"

As we drive down the mountainside, we laugh and joke and toke pot.

"We're still goin' to our grannies fer Christmas dinner aren't we?" I ask.

"Where else would we go?" Kent answers.

"Jes' makin' sure."

We decide to go back to M Co. to change into some dry clothes before hitting McChord for Christmas dinner. So far so good for a Christmas in the army.

Even though this is our first trip through the gates of McChord in Bert's car, the guards must recognize some of us from past visits, and they just wave us through. It's worth mentioning that the military brass would be up in arms if they knew how easily and casually people can get onto the bases during a

time of war. Xin loi.

The mess hall is completely deserted as we expected. We can hear tee tee shouts of joy coming from the kitchen when we first enter. Our grannies are obviously boo coo happy to see us. Apparently no one has been here today, and our visit is greatly appreciated.

We laugh and talk for a boo coo long time before the grannies get down to the business of dinner. They shoo us away and tell us to go grab a table and wait. Everyone gets the Christmas dinner, and it's boo coo awesome. Not only turkey with all the trimmings, but ham and roast beef. We are each given two plates just overflowing with food.

"C'mon back for seconds when yer ready," the head granny says. We all laugh.

If I can just eat everything I already have, it'll be a miracle. But I plan on trying my best. I would hate to disappoint the grannies. The head granny and two of her assistants come out of the kitchen to our table to see how we're doing so far. They're acting just like real grandmothers as they chide some of us for not eating our peas.

"No dessert if ya don't finish yer peas, young man," says the head granny.

"And what might that be, ma'am?" asks Kent. Kent is quite lean, but he can put down an amazing amount of food for someone who looks so trim and fit. I have to admit that I can eat my share as well. Especially when I missed lunch, like today.

"We have three kinds of pie today. Apple, cherry, and pumpkin."

"Oh man," says Kent, "I like 'em all.

"You kin have 'em all if ya want," she laughs.

In the end everyone who wants dessert gets it, whether or not they finish theirs peas. I haven't done this since being in the army, but today I ate boo coo more than I should have, and now I hurt. Getting stuck in the backseat of Bert's car with three other guys is a tight fit. We're always joking around with each other, and no matter how hard I try not to laugh, eventually I have to. It just adds to my pain. I hate that.

Having had enough excitement and adventure for the day, we sky back to M Co. There's virtually nothing open, being it's Christmas, and we know of no parties or celebrations to crash.

When we get to the parking lot, there is a mad dash to the day room to get in line to play foosball.

"Remember what I tol' you 'bout the foosball fanatics?" I say to Bert as we

watch them run. We both laugh.

So the best Christmas I have since being in the army ends as most days at M Co. do. Playing foosball until we tire and then a tee tee nightcap before bed.

I wake up the Sunday morning after Christmas because my head hurts. Once I'm fully awake, I realize my head hurts because I have a boo coo bad toothache. This couldn't happen at a worse time or day. There is no sick call on Sunday. I will have to wait until tomorrow to go to the dentist. Almost worse than that is that I have guard duty today. If I don't make Supernumerary again, that is. I hate to count on that. Then again, if I don't make it and can't perform guard duty because of my toothache, the Supernumerary will have to take my place. Xin loi.

I pretty much just lay in bed all day with an agonizing toothache until it's time to take the truck to the guard shack. I don't think I have ever been so thank full to be named Supernumerary as I am today. I am in incredible pain, but during my walk back to the barracks I'm feeling a tee tee bit number one that I can now just wallow in pain in the comfort of my own bunk.

The next morning after roll call I am allowed to go to the dentist. Luckily there is no one ahead of me and the dentist has a look at my aching tooth right away.

"Your tooth looks OK," the dentist says. "It's hurting because one of your wisdom teeth is coming in sideways and is pushing up against it. We'll just take that wisdom tooth out, and the pain should eventually go away."

"Eventually?"

"Well the tooth being impacted by the wisdom tooth should stop hurting, but you will have some residual pain from the surgery. Don't worry, I'm going to numb you up right now, and then I'll give you some pain medication before you leave."

My tooth stops hurting soon after the dentist numbs my mouth. He waits a few more minutes before trying to extract my wisdom tooth. I can't see what he is doing, but my pain has stopped, so I'm hopeful. Why? I don't know, as I'm counting on an army dentist to correct my problem. I should know better by now.

He works on me for several minutes. He is pushing and tugging on me, but so far the tooth won't come out. So he gets his drill ready and shows me what looks like a miniature breaker bar we use at the motor pool to break loose

recalcitrant nuts and bolts.

"I'll just drill a few holes in your tooth, and then I'll break it apart with this," he says indicating the breaker bar. "No big deal. I do it all the time."

Easy for him to say.

Although the breaking apart of my tooth doesn't hurt, the sound of it, similar to that of a breaking bone, makes me flinch more than once.

"Does that hurt?" the dentist asks.

"No, but the sound is almost unbearable," I answer.

"I'm just about done," he says.

After he stitches me up, I am given some pain pills, and he also fills out a form making me exempt from duty for the rest of today and all of tomorrow.

"Give this to your First Sergeant when you get back to your company. You will probably start to feel better soon, but you just had surgery so I want you to take it easy until Wednesday," the dentist says.

As I walk back to M Co. I am starting to feel better, especially when I remember I am supposed to be on KP tomorrow. I'll know whoever it is they assign in my place, as he will most likely be pissed off at me. Xin loi.

Back at M Co. I go to Top's office to give him my exempt-from-duty form. Top is not there, but his clerk is. I'm happy that Top isn't here, because he would probably try to get my exempt status canceled.

"I'm exempt tomorrow, so you'll need to get a replacement KP," I say to Top's clerk. Then I didi mau up to my bay and into my bunk as quickly as I can undress.

Kent wakes me some time later.

"Whatcha doin'?" he asks.

"Oh man, I had a wisdom tooth pulled. Now I'm just tryin' ta catch up on my sleep a tee tee bit," I answer.

"Ya prob'ly don't wanna go ta McChord for dinner then?"

"Nah, I'm just gonna lay here and feel sorry fer myself fer a while."

"OK. You do that," says Kent before he leaves.

I fall back to sleep and don't wake until the next morning. As the rest of the guys are awakened and start to get ready for the day, I start to join them but quickly remember I'm off today. I actually feel number one, but I am under strict doctor's orders to take it easy. I lay back down and wait for the rest of the guys to leave.

By the time I saunter over to the mess hall, Kent is just finishing with his roster duty.

"Speak of the dead. Feelin' better?" he asks.

"I'm feelin' number one," I say, keeping my voice down. "But I was supposed ta have KP today so I have to look like I'm still in pain."

"Man yer a slacker," laughs Kent.

"Learned most of it from you, young Kent." I start to laugh, but then I grimace. "Oh man. That hurt. Hope I din't pop a stitch laughin'."

"So kin ya eat yet? Wanna go ta McChord?"

"Yeah, if I stick ta porridge and mashed potatoes."

"Jes' what the fuck is porridge anyway?" asks Kent.

"I thinks it's oatmeal," I answer with a tee tee laugh so as to not hurt myself again by laughing harder.

When we get to McChord, instead of my usual order, I ask one of the grannies if they have any oatmeal.

"Sure do, darlin'. Whatsa matter, you not feelin' well?" she asks.

"Hadda tooth pulled yesterday, and it's still kinda sore."

"Poor thing. Well you jes' go grab yerself a seat, and I'll have James Bond here bring yer oatmeal to ya," she says with a smile.

So I go and select a table for us and wait. Not too long, even though I'm quite expert at it. Kent obeys the head granny and brings me my bowl of oatmeal as directed.

"Thank you, James," I say.

"You want some milk with that, poor thing?" says Kent, more than a tee tee bit sarcastically.

"That would be great, James," I answer.

"Well the fuckin' milk dispensers are right over there, *pendejo*," says Kent pointing to the dispensers.

"You don't make a very good nurse."

So I get my own milk, and we have our breakfast. We say goodbye and wave to the grannies before we sky.

Back at M Co. we head to the day room to continue working on our foosball game for the rest of the morning.

After lunch, I decide to take advantage of my time off to work on my bike. My bike is parked in full view of the window where the pots and pans man works during KP.

I'm engrossed in my task, so I don't notice Sgt. Black as he walks up to me.

"Whatcha doin'?" he asks.

"Puttin' a new stator on my bike."

"No, I mean whatcha doin' out here?" he says. "Yer supposed ta be sick."

"I had a tooth pulled so the dentist made me exempt from duty. I'm feeling pretty good now but he told me to take it easy, and so I am," I answer, knowing somehow my explanation will not be good enough. Of course this being the army, it's not.

"Doesn't look like yer takin' it very easy ta me," says Sgt. Black.

He is not looking or acting like Santa Claus like the last time I saw him.

"Seems like if ya kin work on yer motorcycle, ya coulda done KP."

So that's what this is all about.

"Look Sarge, the dentist made me exempt from duty. What idiot would go on KP when they're exempt?"

"I'm not gonna argue with ya," says Sgt. Black. "Git yer stuff and git back in the barracks."

I'm pissed, but there's nothing I can do about it. Seems like every time I turn around now, I have some Lifer pulling rank on me. So I collect all my tools and my motorcycle parts, and I head back inside.

After I put my stuff in my locker, I sky to the day room. Kent is playing foosball with Bert as goalie.

"Breakin' in a new goalie? Ya worried I'm not good enough any more?" I tease.

"You weren't here. I thought ya was workin' on yer bike."

"I was, but whoever had ta take my place on KP musta complained ta Sgt. Black."

"No fuckin' shit?" asks Kent.

"No shit," I answer. As I look down the hallway from the day room I see Sgt. Black coming my way. Now what, I think?

II know this won't be good and it's not.

"What're you doin' now?" he asks.

"Watching a foosball game," I answer. "Takin' it easy enough fer ya now?"

"I wancha up on yer bunk," he replies.

"Then yer gonna hafta carry me up there kickin' and fightin' the whole way," I say half-joking but also half-serious. I'm really tired of him trying to fuck with me, and that's what this is all about.

"I wancha to go up ta yer bunk," he repeats.

"Look Black," I say, dropping his title to indicate I'm getting pissed, " I'm exempt from duty, not on complete bed rest." Which is something I know a

tee tee bit about. "If yer gonna write me up, go for it. I ain't leavin' here."

Kent and Bert suspend their game to see how this all plays out. Sgt. Black turns and didi maus in a huff. He goes straight to Top's office.

"Yer in fuckin' boo coo trouble now," laughs Kent.

"Yeah, fuck him," I say. "I'm exempt from duty. What fuckin' more do they want?"

Apparently nothing. I watch as Sgt. Black emerges from Top's office and walks the opposite direction of the day room. What do you know? What the fuck do you know to be exact. I smile.

I eventually play some foosball, but though I feel boo coo better, I decide to go to bed early to catch up on some missed sleep.

So much missed sleep apparently that I am still sleeping some time after noon when I am awakened by Lt. Bonner.

"What're you doin' sleepin' in the middle of the day?" he asks.

I'm still half asleep and barely know where I am before his question finally registers with me.

"I'm a Regimental Guard. I'm off duty now," I answer.

He turns and almost sprints out of the bay and down the stairs. Good thing I'm telling the truth because I know Lt. Bonner is going directly to Top's office to find out. Fuck him. He's just trying to fuck with me because of the Christmas party. What a jerk. It's a boo coo good thing for me we're not in a combat situation because he would be sending me out on suicide missions until I got killed. I hate that.

I decide to get up, shower, and get dressed. I have the bathroom and the whole bay to myself. A rare luxury when living in the barracks on post. When I step out of the barracks I can see Kent's VW is not in it's usual parking spot, so he must have skyed up somewhere.

Lunch is already over in the mess hall. I could ride my motorcycle over to McChord, but I'm not really that hungry. I decide to saunter over to the satellite PX and have one of Kent's many admirers make me a burrito.

Marilyn is on duty when I get there. I only know her name because she told it to Kent, and she seems somewhat surprised when I say hello and say her name.

"You again?" she smiles.

"Yeah, me again. Hey, be nice and I'll put in a good word for you with Kent," I say with a smile.

"Where is Kent?"

"I don't know. That's one of the reasons I'm here for one of your tasty burritos."

"So what other reason are you here for?" she asks.

"Ta see if ya changed yer mind 'bout goin' onna date."

"I already toldya I can't date enlisted guys," she answers.

"'cept Kent," I laugh.

"Is he enlisted?"

"Of course," I laugh. "He's even more enlisted than me. He actually joined."

"I thought he was your lieutenant," she says obviously disappointed.

"Yeah, he thinks that sometimes too," I laugh.

She makes me my burrito without any further conversation. I pay and head back to the barracks, eating my burrito on the walk. As the parking lot comes into my view, I see Kent has returned. I find him where I expected. In the day room playing foosball.

"Lookin' alive and well," he laughs when he sees me.

"Feelin' number one now."

"Ya looked dead ta the world this mornin' so I din't wake ya when I left," he says.

"That's OK, Lt. Boner came up ta wake me."

Kent looks at me waiting for me to say more. "So what'd he do?"

"Ran off, probably to tell Top I was sleeping in the middle of the day. He never came back. I'm off 'til tomorrow, so nuthin' he can do."

"You hope."

"Got that fuckin' right. Now I got both him and Black both givin' me special attention," I say. "I can't wait ta get outta the fuckin' army. All they do is fuck with us. Like they're tryin' to make us refuse some order so they kin charge us with insubordination and put us inna slammer. Why don't they jus' let us go home? We're jus' problems for them but they jus' won't let us go."

"Sounds like somebody's got a personal problem," laughs Kent.

"Yeah yeah, just fergot who I was talkin' to." I laugh too.

The next day arrives, and at the appointed time, we are trucked over to the guard shack. I'm a tee tee bit nervous at my prospect of being named Supernumerary as always. At least I feel back to normal after having my aching wisdom tooth removed. If I have to pull guard duty at least I'm up to

it.

This group looks surprisingly scruffy, so I'm starting to feel more confident. The Officer of the Day and the Sergeant of the Guard confer briefly after inspecting us. Neither of them have been on duty in the past when I was named Supernumerary. The Lt. in charge walks over to me and says I'm excused. I smile.

I spy Kent, Adolph, and Ramon sitting together when I get back.

"Enjoy your tee tee scam while ya can," Kent says to me.

"Whaddaya talkin' 'bout, young Kent?"

"You didn't hear 'bout it at guard duty?"

"Hear what? I'm Supernumerary so I left right away."

"Yer last time as Supernumerary," laughs Kent.

"What are ya talkin' 'bout, man?" I ask.

"Permanent Regimental Guard is history. The first sergeants ended it today. Said too many guys were gettin' over," Kent says with a laugh. "You prob'ly din't help by gettin' caught sleeping in the afternoon."

"Fuck!" I cry. "So it'll be back ta the motor pool for me. Crap!"

"Toldya it couldn't last," says Kent.

"Yeah yeah, but what could I do 'cept go back ta the motor pool?"

As I commiserate about my current situation, Perkins comes over to our table and sits down. He rooms with Adolph and Ramon, and we all notice he seems somewhat sullen. As the night baker, he has what is considered by all of us to be the best job at M Co.

Finally Adolph asks Perkins, "Whattsa matter, man?"

Perkins replies, "I just got transferred ta Ft. Ord."

"No shit!?" says Adolph.

"No shit."

I immediately get up and walk into the kitchen. I see the Mess Sergeant sitting in his office, and I walk over to the open doorway.

"I just heard your night baker is getting transferred," I say to him. "I used to work as a baker in an Italian restaurant and bakery."

It's a half-lie. It was really only a restaurant and not a bakery. But I *was* a baker. I made and baked pizzas and was a line cook for a while as well. A closely guarded secret I have kept from the army until now. After working for several years in the restaurant business, I hated the thought of being a cook in the army. And now here I am trying to talk my way into being a cook in the army.

"Really?" he asks. "So what are ya doin' now?"

"Nuthin'. I was a permanent Regimental Guard but that jus' ended today."

"OK, what's yer name and I'll go talk ta Top about it," the mess sergeant says.

"Wolf," I answer.

"OK Wolf, let's see what Top says."

I walk back to the table and sit back down with what can only be described as a demonic grin on my face.

"What'd you just do?" asks Kent.

"Went and talked ta the mess sergeant 'bout bein' the night baker."

"No fuckin' way!" scream both Ramon and Adolph almost in unison. "I want that job!"

"When did ya become a baker?" asks Kent a tee tee bit suspiciously.

'"bout when I found out M Co. needed one," I laugh.

"Man, yer a fuckin' scammer." Kent shakes his head.

"An' yer not?"

Kent addresses Adolph and Ramon, "You guys kin fergit it. I've seen 'em in action. He's King Schmooze."

Then he looks at me with a devious smile and asks, "So how ya gonna pull this off?"

"I used ta work inna restaurant. Started out as a dishwasher. Then the woman who made the pizzas got pregnant and quit so they taught me how to make pizzas. I did pretty good so they taught me how ta do everything else. Prep the plates, work the grill, and the deep fryers. I never told anyone 'til now cuz I never wanted ta be a cook in the army. Still don't, jus' wanna be the baker is all."

"Every one of us wants Perkins job," says Adolph. "Anderson, the head cook, thinks the job is his already. He'll really be pissed."

"Seems like no matter what I do these days someone is pissed at me," I lament.

"Poor baby," says Kent. "Better go eat some worms."

"What? No trip to see the chaplain?" I laugh.

"They don't got a No Preference chaplain, dumb fuck."

I can't wait for tomorrow. It's payday and New Year's Eve.

The next morning when we fall out for roll call, Top addresses us.

"Some changes that take effect immediately," says Top, "are the end of the

Regimental Guard program, and the end of working a half day on Saturday."

Shouts of "Hooray!" immediately go up from the members of M Co. about getting Saturdays off. They are not cheering about the demise of permanent Regimental Guard, that's for sure. Now guys will once again be assigned guard duty. We hate that.

Top continues, "There were certain individuals who were taking advantage of the system of permanent Regimental Guards, so we had to end the program." I swear he is looking at me while he talks. Fuck him. I didn't create the Supernumerary position.

"The XO is paymaster today and will start right after lunch today," he finishes.

When he hands out assignments, I am sent back to the motor pool, as expected.

I catch up with Froggy on the walk to the parking lot. I was planning to ride my motorcycle to the motor pool, but Froggy offers me a ride in his car, and I accept.

"Jes' like ole times, eh Wolfman?" Froggy laughs as we get into his car.

"Except there's jus' you and me left now that Rocky and Lenny are gone."

"So how was bein' a permanent guard?" he asks.

"It was number fer me cuz I was the Supernumerary every time. What's happenin' at the motor pool these days?"

"Same as before. Nuthin'. And probably more nothing 'til maybe next year if they go ta Yakima again," answers Froggy.

"Well I got five more months until I'm out. Guess I'll just hafta read a lot," I laugh.

Not having brought a book today, I hang out with Froggy and a couple of other friends bullshitting the morning away. So army

Kent is at his station commanding the sign-in roster when we arrive for lunch. He sees me and says, “Mess sergeant wants ta see ya."

I find the mess sergeant inside with the door open. When he sees me, he smiles and waves me in. This could be good.

"Have a seat," he says to me. "I talked to Top about you. Man, Wolf, I didn't know Top could laugh like that. He said I could have you but with one condition. I can't give you back."

He gestures towards the kitchen and says, “Ya see all those guys out there?"

I nod my head indicating yes.

"They all want this job, but none of them is good enough. That's why I'm willing to take a chance on you. Here's my offer: I'll give you two weeks to show me yer stuff. The first week with Perkins as a kind of OJT of how the system works here, and then a week on yer own. If it turns out you can't do it, you have to take the place of one of those guys out there in the kitchen. Is it a deal?" he asks.

"It's a deal," I answer, and we shake hands on it.

By the time I get done talking to the mess sergeant, Kent is gone. Froggy is still having lunch so I join him.

"Guess I won't be goin' back ta the motor pool with ya this afternoon," I say.

"Why's that?"

"I just scored the Night Baker job here in the mess hall," I answer with a smile.

"Bummer, Wolfman. I thought it was gonna be just like ole times," whines Froggy.

"Yeah, the boo coo boring ole times," I laugh.

We finish lunch and join the rest of the guys standing in line waiting for our turn to be paid. It's a jocular and jovial time as we wait, laughing and joking. When you get paid once a month, it's a boo coo big deal, and it's New Year's Eve. Plus, we don't have to work tomorrow as we get Saturdays off from now on.

I'm near the end since we line up alphabetically. Kent, who was near the front and already got paid is looking for me. When he sees me, he says, "So?"

"So what?"

"What'd the mess sergeant say?" he asks.

"He said Top din't like me very well."

"And so? Didja get the fuckin' job?" he asks getting a tee tee bit annoyed.

"Of course I got it. Din't ya call me King Schmooze?" I laugh.

"You know I did."

"So we gotta celebrate," I say. "Yer gonna be twenty one, and I finally got a skate job like you," I laugh. "Hey, we both work in the mess hall now. Although what you do would hardly be considered work."

"Fuck you, man."

"What?" I say. "That was a compliment. I'm going to have to actually work one way or another. Top let the mess sergeant have me but he can't give me back. So if I can't cut it as the night baker, I have to take someone's place

in the mess hall.”

"Whatcha worried 'bout? You said ya were a baker din't ya?"

"I am a baker, sort of," I laugh. "I'm not worried. Especially if my only competition is Ramon and Adolph."

I laugh more. "So it's gonna be yer birthday, young Kent. Where d'ya wanna go?"

"I wanna good steak dinner with all the trimmings, and then finish it off with some beers," says Kent obviously having thought about this.

"Sounds like a plan. Guess I'll have ta stop callin' ya young Kent from now on. Yer a man now, I guess," I laugh.

"Could of stopped a long time ago," says Kent. "While yer gitten paid I'm gonna go roll some numbers fer the celebration, so head up when yer done.”

"Wilco," I answer as Kent skys.

I'm not the last guy to be paid, but almost. So much so that there is hardly any cash left stacked up on the XO's desk when it's my turn to be paid. It makes it even seem more absurd for the XO to still have his loaded .45 sitting on his desk. Do they really think any of us would try to rob him? So army.

After getting paid I sky up to find Kent. Almost as soon as he exhales the first toke, guys start to show up. Ramon and Adolph are first to arrive, quickly followed by Beaudeen and Ace.

"We better make this fast before Gomez shows up," I laugh.

I jinx it as the words are hardly out of my mouth and Gomez walks into our bay. He no doubt just followed his nose. He makes a beeline for us and just about grabs the joint from Ramon.

"Ah, Gomez," I say. "We was just talkin' 'bout you.”

"Like what?"

"Like it was number one ya weren't here bogarting the joint." I laugh more.

"Fuck you, rabbit!" hisses Gomez at me.

I pretend to not hear him and ask, "Were ya talkin' ta me?"

He's in my face, and there are just inches separating us. I'm pretty sure this is it. I'm going to finally have to beat the crap out of him. Unless he has a gun. Or more likely, a knife.

Kent apparently thinks the same thing. He steps or rather forces himself between us, saying, "C'mon motherfuckers, cut it out. Whatcha tryin' ta do, wreck my birthday before it even fuckin' starts?"

Gomez and I slowly move away from each other, but it is still somewhat tense. Kent lights another joint and starts passing around. He skips the

formality of having the joint inspected, trying to quickly calm things down a tee tee bit. As usual it works quite well. One of the great things about pot is how well it can calm an explosive situation.

Soon things seem back to normal as we finish smoking the joint while teasing each other. It seems everyone has plans for New Year's Eve, and when the joint is finished we all didi mau.

Kent and I sky for his VW and drive over to Farkas and Flemmy's new company. They are, of course, more than willing to come celebrate Kent's birthday and the new year with us. Especially since we have pot, and they don't.

We pile into Kent's VW and sky for Tacoma. I somehow manage to score riding shotgun. It's hard to beat Farkas to the shotgun position, as he hates to sit in the backseat of Kent's VW.

Having already thought about celebrating his birthday, Kent knows exactly where he wants to go. Or I should say wanted to go. When we get inside there is a boo coo long line of people waiting. The only thing we hate more than waiting is standing in line. We only willingly do it to get paid, which we already did today. Without a word said between us, we leave.

Once outside Kent says, "We gotta find someplace not so fuckin' popular."

"Ya mighta forgotten it's New Year's Eve," I laugh.

"Oh I remembered alright," says Kent. "I've been ripped off on my birthday almost my whole life."

"Poor baby," I feign sympathy for Kent. "Where was that ya said I needed ta go? Oh yeah, I remember now. To the chaplain. Do they even got a Mormon chaplain here, young Kent?"

"Thought ya were gonna quit callin' me that," says Kent.

"It's not yer birthday yet," I laugh. "You know, findin' someplace ta go have some cold beers and a steak dinner might be a problem. Prob'ly gonna need reservations."

"C'mon then, let's see what we can find," answers Kent.

We sky back to the VW and true to form, Farkas calls for shotgun before I think about it. I would think Kent would make Flemmy sit up front so he can keep an eye on him considering his past actions.

We drive around and Kent eventually finds a steakhouse to his liking. Meaning there is no wait to get in. It's the kind of steakhouse that's like a cafeteria. You go through the line picking the side dishes you want and ordering the kind of steak you want and how you want it done. Then you grab

a table and wait for your steak to be brought to you. Being in the army, we are well practiced at going through the serving line. What is a nice departure from that is the part where they bring our steaks to us, cooked to order.

While we wait, we discover, not surprisingly, that we are all twenty-one years old. Well, except Kent, who has a couple of more hours to go before he joins our ranks. Xin loi, young Kent.

Kent has been drinking in bars illegally for some time now, so having some beer is not a big deal. While there was no wait to get into this steakhouse, it is still boo coo busy being New Year's Eve. It's mostly self-serve here except for the steaks, but they do come around to take drink orders. I order four beers so we can toast Kent's birthday.

When the beers come, we all hoist our glasses to Kent and wish him a happy birthday. When the steaks arrive the celebration really gets going. We don't get steak dinners in the army, at least I never had one, so this is a much welcomed treat.

"Young Kent, you should turn twenty-one every day so we can party like this all the time," I laugh.

"I'll work on that fer ya when ya stop callin' me young," replies Kent.

"Ya just got til midnight, young Kent, and then you'll be a man just like us." I laugh some more, finishing off with the "airborne salute" which Kent detests.

After what could only be termed as a fabulous birthday dinner we sky up in Kent's VW to find someplace to continue celebrating. It's not hard finding someplace to go. What's difficult is deciding on which place to go. We all consider Kent our resident "Babe Magnet," so we give him free reign as to where we eventually go to party down.

Chapter 22

I wake because the sun streaming through the barracks window is shining directly on my face. It's Sunday and New Year's Day so most of us are off, and that's why we're all still in our bunks.

Another reason most of us are still lying around is the result of too much celebrating. My head hurts and every time I try to open my eyes the pain is even worse. Bordering on excruciating, I think. What did I do last night? I'm trying to remember but all I can recall is bellying up to the bar at some club Kent had chosen, and that's it. I don't even remember getting back to M Co.

One by one the guys from M Co. wake and start moving around albeit boo coo slowly. No one moves far, and at first it's mostly just the cigarette smokers sitting on their foot lockers having their first cigarette of the day.

"What the fuck did we do last night? My head hurts," I moan to Kent.

Several other guys laugh at my question, but it is followed by some cries of pain as it hurts even to laugh.

Kent is not in a laughing mood yet. He looks at me and takes a drag on his Marlboro.

"What's the matter? Can't party with the big boys?" Kent says with a wry smile.

"I guess not. I don't even remember gittin' back here last night," I answer.

"You mean this mornin'."

"Was it that late?" I ask.

"Almost startin' ta git light."

"Fuck! No wonder my head hurts. Ain't ne'er doin' that again."

"C'mon baby, quit bein' such a softy," Kent chastises.

By the time I am finally able to stand up and walk around without my head exploding, it's late afternoon. I take a shower and dress and start to feel my old self again. So much so that I'm getting hungry. The last food I had was the steak dinner the night before.

"Hey Kent – and notice I din't say 'young' – we should sky over ta McChord and have the grannies make us dinner now that it's really your birthday. Oh, by the way, happy birthday! Can't remember if I said that last night. Can't remember nuthin' for that matter," I say with a laugh.

Since it's Kent's birthday, I do the honors of rolling some joints. As if on

cue, Adolph shows up. Like most of the cigarette smokers, he tends to bogart the joint. Smokers are so used to holding a cigarette in their hand that once they get high, they just naturally want to hold onto the joint like it's a cigarette.

"C'mon Humphrey, pass me that joint," I say.

Adolph finally passes the joint to me.

"Why'd ya call him Humphrey?" Kent asks.

"Cuz he was bogarting the joint," I answer with a laugh.

"So what's that got ta do with Humphrey?"

"Humphrey Bogart, that's who bogarting is named after."

"Howdya know that?" Kent asks.

"Do ya know anyone else famous named Bogart?"

"But why do ya think it's 'bout him?" Kent persists.

"I don't know it, but I think it cuz of a movie I remember seeing with Bogey in it," I answer.

"And so?"

"It was a movie, prob'ly made in the 20's, I think. Bogey and Jimmy Cagney are soldiers in a trench during WWI. Cagney's got one cigarette left, and he offers ta share it with Bogey. So Cagney lights the cigarette and hands it ta Bogey, who smokes the whole thing. Cagney, other than the first drag, doesn't get any of it. If that ain't bogartin' I don't know what is," I laugh.

"Wolf, yer so fulla shit most of the time. I dunno why I should believe ya now," says Kent.

"I toldya, I don't know it, I jus' think it. Could be wrong."

I shrug and turn to Adolph.

"So, Humphrey, ya wanna come with me and Kent over ta McChord for dinner?" I ask.

"Sure, but you better watch whatchoo call me, or I might hafta cut ya with my knife," answers Adolph with a sly smile.

I burst out laughing. "Yer knife!"

I stop when he pulls out his knife and opens it with a flick of his wrist.

"You two fuckin' cut it out!" admonishes Kent.

"Hey, let me see that," I say to Adolph.

"You kin see it after I stick ya with it. Gitcher own," he says as he folds his knife and puts it away.

"I got my own," I grin and pull out my key ring and brandish my opened P-38.

"What the fuck is that s'posed ta be?" laughs Adolph.

"You laugh. Tell 'em, Kent. Tell 'em what a nasty gash it kin make, and it ne'er heals either," I answer.

"Are you two done now?" asks Kent sounding a tee tee bit annoyed.

So with the knife-play over we head to McChord. When the grannies see us entering, they start chattering amongst themselves and calling out "Happy New Year" to us.

"Was wonderin' if you boys would be here today," says the head granny.

"Wouldn't miss it fer nuthin', ma'am," Kent replies. "Got the day off, bein' it's a holiday and all."

"Not ta mention it's his birthday. His twenty-first birthday, no less," I announce.

"Is that a fact?" says the head granny. "Well, just like on Christmas, today we only have the dinner special. You boys go sit down, and we'll bring it out ta ya."

We grab a table near the kitchen so as to not make the grannies have to walk too far. It's a fantastic holiday dinner with turkey and stuffing with mashed potatoes and gravy. There is also roast beef, sweet potatoes, and peas.

"You boys eat up now, and if ya need more, jes' holler," says the head granny with a big smile.

Kent, Adolph, and myself dig into our dinners. It's better than the steak dinner last night, and it's even free. I remember being teased on Christmas about finishing my peas or I wouldn't get dessert, so I make sure to finish my peas today.

The grannies monitor our dining progress from their places on the serving line. "You boys ready fer dessert yet?"

"Yeah," says Kent. "What kinda pie ya got today?"

"No pie today, Mr. Bond," says the head granny. "But we got somethin' special fer ya."

We look over towards the kitchen and see three of the grannies walking towards us, each carrying a cupcake with a lit candle in it. They start to sing the 'Happy Birthday' song to Kent as they walk toward us. How cool, I think. Should have told them it was my birthday, too.

When they put the three cupcakes down in a row on the table there are 0's on two cupcakes and a 7 on one for .007. I'm singing along though not much of a help, but I burst out laughing as does Kent when we can read the

cupcakes. Adolph smiles, but he doesn't get the joke yet.

"Happy birthday, Mr. Bond," says the head granny.

"Thanks ma'am, er, I mean Miss Moneypenny," laughs Kent.

The grannies hang around for a few minutes laughing with us, and then they return to the kitchen.

"What's the James Bond stuff all 'bout?" asks Adolph.

"Oh, Kent likes to exaggerate a tee tee bit 'bout what he does, and the grannies like ta tease him 'bout it cuz they knows he's fulla shit," I answer.

"An' look whose talkin' 'bout someone bein' fulla shit," says Kent.

"Don't talk ta me. I'm usually straight with 'em 'bout what I do. Mostly."

"Yeah, mostly bullshit," adds Kent.

"Hey, who was the one that tol' the grannies it was yer birthday?"

"OK, OK, fergit it," says Kent.

Having been paid recently, we all have some money, but there isn't really much open because of the holiday. Besides, all of us are still nursing our hangovers from last night.

A song comes on the radio, and I shout, "'Sweet Lorraine' by Uriah Heap."

"Ow! My head hurts man. Not so fuckin' loud," says Kent.

"Xin loi. Jes' gotta tee tee bit excited cuz I love that song and haven't heard it fer a while."

"Don't think I ever heard before myself," says Kent.

"It's just the kinda song ya like man. 'Bout a good-lookin' woman named Lorraine."

When we get back to M Co., we sky up to our bay. Beaudeen, Ace, and Pete are just returning, so we all get together in the far corner of our bay to toke and joke for a while.

"So, Kent," I ask, "what'd ya do on yer last birthday in the Nam?"

"Don't fuckin' remember and don't wanna remember either," he answers.

"Can't blame ya fer that."

"Why? D'ya remember yer birthday inna Nam?" Kent asks me.

"Fuckin' A, I remember it. Almost got killed on my twenty-first birthday, so I kinda of got it burned in ta my memory," I answer and say no more.

"So? Ya gonna tell us 'bout it or not?" asks Kent.

"Thought you'd never ask. It's kind of long," I caution.

"Aren't they all with you?"

"OK. So ya need a tee tee bit of background," I start.

"Ahhhh! C'mon, Wolf. Can't ya just tell the fuckin' story fer once?" pleads

Kent.

"I am tellin' the story. Whatcher hurry? Ya got an appointment with the chaplain or somethin'? I laugh.

"Ahhh! Never fucking mind. Tell it yer way."

"How else could I tell it?" I laugh. "Alright, so I was the driver on the platoon sergeant's tank. I was assigned to be his driver by our late LT. I had no choice 'bout it. So there were two things against our crew. First off, the guys in the platoon hated the platoon sergeant and so by extension, his crew members too. At that time my platoon consisted of 7 PCs and 3 tanks. The tankers din't hafta dig a foxhole every night when we set up our RON, so the PC crews were jealous 'bout that.

"One payday, the platoon sergeant din't get what he was expecting, so he went to the rear on resupply to try to straighten it out. The next morning, the acting platoon Sgt, trying to even the score with the tank crews, sent my tank and one other tank to a ridge overlooking the "Z" and clear ta North Vietnam. They also sent 3 PC's and a deuce-and-a-half loaded with ammo.

"Our mission was to unload all the ammo and shoot it over the "Z" ta North Vietnam. We were getting target coordinates over the horn by spotters in some observation aircraft. It was the dry season and smokin' hot out. We were right out in the open in the tropical sun. It was a bitch of a detail. The ammo is all crated up and boo coo heavy. Every main gun shell had to be uncrated and then unpacked and handed up to the loader in each tank.

"We were piling all the empty crates and packing material in the center of our tee tee Ron. We were set up in a small circle on the top of the ridge with the two tanks and their main guns facing North Vietnam and the three PC's facing south. We would shoot ammo at the given targets until we were told to cease fire, and then we would get new target coordinates and do the same thing over again.

"We had unloaded all the ammo from the deuce and a half and stacked it up next ta the two tanks. We'd shot off 'bout half of it when we started taking incomin'. We were right out in the open with zero cover for miles. We were fucked. I only lucked out ta be in my driver's compartment cuz there was nuthin' else fer me ta do after we unloaded all the ammo. Dumb luck, but when yer next ta the "Z" any luck is good.

"So the first coupla incomin' rounds hit the piles of crates and packin' material and blew it all over the place. Made a fuckin' mess of our nice neat burn pile. The next round of incomin' wounded the TC on one of the PCs.

The bullet shield on the tanks and PCs have a gap in the rear. Boo coo bad design in my opinion.

“So the gunner on my tank, Fanelli, gets on the horn and calls for a dustoff for the wounded TC. When he signed off, he gave the day's date. When I heard him say, 'April Fourth, 1970,' I realized jus' then it was my fuckin' birthday. My fucking twenty-first birthday no fucking less. When Fanelli told higher we were still taking incoming and asked if we could abandon our mission, they said no. We still had boo coo ammo sitting on the ground, and they said we couldn't just leave it. We couldn't repack it either, cuz all the crates and packin' had been blown to smithereens. We were fucked.

“Now that I knew it was my birthday and that we couldn't didi mau from our suicide mission, I thought I was jinxed for sure. It seemed like complete insanity. They made us go pick up the blasted apart crates and packin' and pile it back up during lulls of incomin'. So army. We continued to take incoming while we finished shooting off the last of the ammo. All I could do was sit in my driver's compartment with my fingers crossed for good luck. I think the incoming only stopped cuz they ran out of ammo. They sure the fuck had our coordinates and near the end when we lit off the burn pile the flames were shootin' 30 or 40 feet inna air and the billowin' smoke had ta be visible fer miles," I finish at last.

"So didja get killed?" asks Kent acting a tee tee bit bored.

"Yeah, but not on my birthday. I'm just a ghost now," I laugh.

"That explains a lot.”

"Such as?"

"Why yer such a dumb shit. Ghosts don't have no brains," laughs Kent.

"Do Mormons even b'lieve in ghosts?" I joke.

"How'd I know?"

"Cuz ya were a fuckin' Mormon fer a while, that's why. I ain't no Catholic now, but I know they b'lieve in ghosts," I say. "OK, OK, how 'bout this: Do *you* b'lieve in ghosts?"

"Well sure. Yer one, ain't 'cha?" Kent laughs.

After our tee tee tokefest we sky up to the day room to play foosball and pool, now that Rocky is gone.

Perkins is here in the day room and comes over to chat while I wait in line.

He says, "We're gonna be workin' the midnight shift and the week starts Sunday at midnight. Ya might wanna try sleepin' in tomorrow morning as long as ya kin."

"I always try to do that. It's just that sleepin' up in the bay is boo coo hard when guys start gittin' up and makin' noise," I reply.

"After I'm gone you kin have my spot in the cook's room with Adolph and Ramon," says Perkins.

I hadn't thought about that aspect of being the night baker.

"Oh man," I say, "this is going to be a number one gig for sure."

Well, for sure if I can manage to keep it.

The next morning, try as I might, the noise in the bay wakes me. I lay in bed as long as I can but eventually I get up and get ready for the day. Kent is sitting on his footlocker, smoking his first of many Marlboros of the day.

"So Kent, now that yer twenty-one do ya feel more manly?" I ask teasingly.

"Manly 'nough ta beat yer ass, punk," he replies, not being ready for any teasing until he has finished his cigarette.

"OK, how 'bout taller? When I was a kid, on the morning of my birthday, as I took my first whiz of the day it always seemed ta me that I was taller than the day before," I finish with a laugh.

"You really are the biggest dumb shit I ever met," replies Kent, still not finished with his Marlboro so still not ready for any teasing.

"You din't answer my question. Didja feel taller yesterday morning?"

"That's cuz when ya ask a question ya usually go on spoutin' off fer another ten minutes. But ta answer yer dumb fuck question, no, I din't feel taller on my birthday."

"Maybe when ya kin wear shoes again you'll feel taller," I offer.

"Yeah, mebbe, don't really care. I like wearin' my mocs," Kent replies.

"So ya don't care whether or not the army fixes yer foot?"

"Fuck yeah, I care. I want 'em ta fix my toe," he answers.

Kent is just wearing his patchwork blue jeans and is barefooted.

"Ya told me a while ago what they were gonna do, but I kinda fergot," I say as I examine the foot that was injured in the Nam.

He points at his feet. "They're gonna put a plastic bone in my toe and git it back in line with the rest of my toes," answers Kent.

After I hear his explanation I say, "C'mon Kent, just lemme git my P-38 out, and I'll just whack that toe off and ya kin be done with it."

I let out a wicked laugh.

"Stay away from me, man," whines Kent as he hugs his foot to his chest.

He's surprisingly limber and could probably kiss his toe if he wanted. As we've sort of had this conversation before, I'm not surprised by his reaction.

"You and I have both suffered time in the army's hospitals and dealt with their doctors. Ya gotta have yerself prepared for the possibility that when ya wake up from surgery that they're just gonna have cut yer toe off anyway," I say in earnest.

"Nooooo!" he howls, again cradling his foot.

"Now who's bein' a dumb shit?"

Because I couldn't really sleep in much I decide to try to pace myself today so I still have some energy left for my first shift as the night baker in-training. We dine at McChord for breakfast and spend the day playing pool and foosball.

As we sit up in our bay of the barracks smoking a joint Kent asks, "So when didja git wounded inna Nam?"

I smile. "I got killed, remember?"

"Yeah yeah, ya don't hafta tell me," says Kent. "Don't really like talkin' 'bout it myself."

"Ya know Kent, I just had a flash of insight from ya sayin' that just now. It's 'bout why we like smokin' pot so much. Pot makes ya ferget just 'bout everything fer a while. Even that yer in the fuckin' army," I laugh.

Kent laughs too and then asks, "What were we talkin' 'bout?"

"Oh, I remember, when I got wounded," I answer.

"Killed, I thought," chuckles Kent.

"Man Kent, close, so fucking close. I could feel the air move as the bullets jus' missed my head. Could hear 'em kinda zing as they went by."

"Yeah, I heard that zing myself," says Kent.

"OK, ya want me ta go first and I'll tell ya how I got hurt?" I ask. "An' then, if ya want, you kin tell me how you got wounded."

"Maybe I should go first or by time yer done tellin' yer story it'll be tomorrow," teases Kent.

"No can do, amigo. I start my new schmoozin' job at midnight so I hafta be finished tellin' my story by then," I joke.

"OK OK, King Schmoozer, ya kin go first."

"As I already toldya I almost got killed on my birthday and then two days later I got wounded in my first firefight. Good thing too cause bein' in that firefight made me realize anybody could get killed there. Up 'til that time I thought just the dumb fucks got killed," I say. "So 'bout 3 o'clock in the

morning, two days after the story I toldya 'bout my twenty-first birthday, I get woke up by loud explosions and gunfire. I hate bein' woke up that way but I quickly wrapped my boot laces around the top of my boots, tied 'em, grabbed my hated .45 and made a run for my driver's compartment.

“The RON was lit up by all the lumes the mortar crew had shot up and now were floating back down with their tee tee parachutes. My platoon sergeant had already blown down our RPG screen by firing off a can round from the main gun, so as I ran to the front of my tank it was almost as light as day, and I had zero cover. Coulda got killed right there.

“We had a Mad Minute the night before so I only had a few rounds of main gun ammo left in the driver's compartment ta hand ta the loader. After I gave the loader all the ammo I had I din't have nuthin' else ta do 'cept pray that we din't get hit by a RPG in the front of the tank where I'm sittin'. Ain't it funny how all of a sudden ya get religion when ya find yerself inna jam and start prayin' when ten minutes ago ya din't even b'lieve in God?" I laugh.

"Yeah, but not 'funny ha ha,'" says Kent.

"Got that right," I say.

"So when I git done prayin', I'm listenin' ta the chatter over the horn. The three tank crews are tight since we are treated like outcasts by the PC crews. I can hear one of my friends, Big Al, who is the last guy left on his tank, as everyone else is wounded, pleading for help. They're gittin' hit hard on his side of the RON. The only gun still workin' on Big Al's tank is the .50 Cal. and he's runnin' outta ammo. That's boo coo easy ta do cuz we hardly carried any .50 Cal. ammo. Not that we din't want ta carry it, it's just we din't have room fer it.

“I din't know what ta do. Goin' over ta help my friend is a fuckin' suicide mission fer sure but sittin' right where I am, inna front of the tank, with no RPG screen, ain't much better. I ask the platoon sergeant if I kin go help Big Al, and he gives me permission. Fanelli, the gunner on my tank tells me not ta go. He says that I'm a fuckin' idiot ta git outta the tank in the middle of a firefight. I know all this, especially 'bout bein' a fuckin' idiot, but if no one goes and helps Big Al the RON could git breached and overrun. If fuckin' Charlie got inside the RON, we'd be fucked. Worse than fucked, dead.”

"Thought ya were dead," says Kent.

"Let me finish and mebbe you'll find out.”

"OK, OK continue," says Kent.

"I'm not borin' ya, am I?" I ask.

"Nah, not yet."

"I am as fulla dread as ya kin be while I grab my hated .45 and my two loaded clips fer it," I say.

Kent stops me. "That's all ya had? Yer .45 and two clips of ammo?"

"Yeah, that's all I ever had," I answer.

"Fuck!" says Kent, "I wouldn't even go ta the shitter with that."

"I din't know no better then."

"Like ya know any better now?" Kent asks rhetorically.

"Considerin' Regimental Guard, ya got a point, but that's over. I'm a non-combatant now. If I would of thought about it more when I first got drafted, I woulda told 'em I was a cook. No guard duty and no playin' with guns in general. Of course ya miss out on all the fun of bein' shot at or gitten blown up. It was just that ya git no respect bein' a cook, but I'm boo coo prepared fer that as I ain't noticed much respect bein' paid ta me anyway."

"There ya go again with yer personal problems. Ya jes' need to go see the chaplain fer that. Ya gonna finish yer story or what?" Kent asks.

"So still not borin' ya?"

"Yer startin' to now," replies Kent.

"OK, OK, where was I?"

"Jes' 'bout ta go actin' like John Wayne and goin' ta try ta git yerself killed," prompts Kent.

"Oh yeah. OK, so I git outta my driver's compartment and run to the rear of my tank ta kinda be out of the line of fire from our front. The next time the lume lights the RON up, I try ta git my bearings ta see where Big Al's tank is located. When we set up the RON at night the three tanks are 'bout 120 degrees apart and the gaps between them are filled in by the PCs.

"I see Big Al's tank on the other side of the RON 'bout 100 yards away. A fuckin' boo coo long run completely out inna open. Man I'm a fuckin' idiot, I think ta myself. I'll prob'ly git killed just tryin' ta git ta Big Al's tank. I decide ta run ta the mortar pit in the middle of the RON. It makes my run a tee tee bit longer, but I kin take some cover in the mortar pit while I wait fer the lume ta go out for a few seconds.

"While I'm in the mortar pit, I see another friend of mine among the wounded, Steve. Steve's the TC for the tank that Big Al is now holding singlehandedly. Steve's inna a lotta pain from a stomach wound, but he's able ta fill me in onna situation. Right at the start of the firefight, they took an RPG ta the turret that hit it right where the hydraulic seal for the main gun's

recoil system is. Steve said he din't realize the hydraulics were gone until he fired the main gun. With the hydraulic system bein' fubar, the recoil of the main gun caused the breach to come all the way into the turret and embed itself in the radio stack. It was a fuckin' miracle the inter-platoon radio still worked so Big Al could call fer help.

“Steve got wounded near the start of the firefight, tryin' ta git some .50 Cal. ammo outta the bustle rack which is right out in the open. There's another machine gun, called the coax, but theirs was fucked up. With the main gun bein' outta commission, all they had left was the .50 Cal. Didja know ya can't shoot at people with the .50 Cal.?"

"Nah, din't know that. So whadja do?" he asks.

"Whaddaya think, man? It's all we fuckin' had. Plus, when ya think 'bout, not at the time of course, but when ya think 'bout it, we kin shoot the boo coo massive main gun at people but not the .50 Cal? How fuckin' dumb is that?"

"Fuckin' dumb. Sure know what I'd do," answers Kent.

"So after chatting with Steve in the mortar pit, the next time the lume goes out I make my run for Big Al's tank. I git there 'bout the time the next lume lights up the RON. I can see their driver, Zack, also a friend of mine, sitting right out in the fucking open on the bustle rack. Jus' sittin' there like he's waiting fer a bus. So I climb up on the tank from the rear, which is a bitch ta do, but better'n gitten shot fer bein' out inna open. Zack looks OK, but he barely seems to realize I'm there and what's goin' on. I think he must be in shock or somethin' and if I left him up there, he'd get shot if he wasn't already.

“He's about my size which was 185 lbs. at the time, so a big guy to try ta git down from the tank in the back. It's 7 feet or so ta the ground, but I somehow manage ta git 'em down ta the ground without breakin' either of our necks. That's when I notice a red dot on his t-shirt inna middle of his chest. It was tee tee small when I first noticed it, but it was gitten big fast so I decide ta try ta git 'em ta the mortar pit with the rest of the wounded.

“Zack is still boo coo out of it so I grab one of his arms and put it 'round my neck, and we half-run half-trip and stumble 'bout 150 feet ta the mortar pit. I jus' dropped Zack in ta the mortar pit and the next time the lume went out I ran back to Big Al's tank.

“When I git there, I climb back up. Still a fuckin' bitch but boo coo preferable than bein' out inna open and feelin' the air move when the bullets zip past yer head. When I approach Big Al from behind, I reach forward and

put my hand on his back to let him know I'm there. After shootin' off the .50 Cal. for 'bout 30 minutes Big Al can't hear shit.

"As soon as Big Al feels my hand on his shoulder he screams, 'More ammo! More ammo.' He doesn't even turn his head to see who it is. He jes keeps shootin' the .50 Cal. in short bursts, tryin' ta conserve his ammo. He's not wearing a helmet, so I take mine off and put it on his head. It's so heavy, it's just goin' ta slow me down.

"So I jus' move straight back and drop off the back of the tank. I start making a series of runs to the PC's to get more .50 Cal. ammo. At first I make long runs to PCs on the other side of the RON so I'm less noticeable when I'm out inna open. But the .50 Cal. ammo is boo coo heavy. As I got tired I started ta git ammo from the PCs on one side of Big Al's tank. That's when I felt most of the bullets zipping by my head.

"The .50 Cal. ammo is so fuckin' big there's only 'bout a hundred shells in each box when they're linked together. When I first got there, Big Al only had a coupla boxes of ammo left, and as fast as I could git more Big Al shot it off. And even though he was alone most of the time and considering everything, he never lost his head an froze holding the trigger down.

"That'll overheat the barrel. Now we carried spare barrels, and although it's not hard ta change the barrel if ya don't consider the facts that it's liable to be fuckin' red hot and it's a tee tee bit inconvenient to change it out in the middle of a firefight.

"Anyway, I catch up a tee tee bit with Big Al's firing rate of the .50 Cal. I drop in ta the turret ta see if I kin do something 'bout gitten the coax workin'. Usually got a coupla thousand rounds in one boo coo big ammo box for the coax. Real handy for keepin' Charlie's head down when yer re-loadin' the main gun or changin' barrels on the .50 Cal.

"When I talked ta Steve in the mortar pit he said the main gun's hydraulics were gone, so I'm not surprised to see cherry juice all over the interior of the turret and the turret floor. A slippery mess to try ta work in. The main gun's breach is all the way in ta the turret and smashed in ta the horn stack. The main gun is fubar. No way can it be fixed here.

"I pull the coax outta it's mount ta have a look at it. Lotsa guys call the coax "The Little Bastard" cuz it's so finicky and prone to fuckin' up. I see it's got a shell casing stuck in the breach, and I pull it out with a pair of pliers. The shell casing is split, which explains why it got stuck. So I put the coax back in the mount, hook the ammo belt back up ta it and pull the trigger. It

fires one round and stops. I pull the motherfucker outta the mount again. Another stuck shell casing and when I pull it out, it's split too. Then I remember something forgotten in all the excitement of the mornin'. A coupla days earlier I had talked with Big Al and Steve about their coax snafu. I tol' 'em at the time they needed a new breach block. Guess they never had a chance to get it replaced.

"My work bein' done in the turret, I poked my head up outta the loader's hatch ta tell Big Al that I couldn't fix the coax. I din't have any time ta react when I felt the air move by my head. The bullet that just missed my head hit the bullet shield and shattered, hittin' me in the face and eyes.

"Man Kent, I dropped back down in the turret ten times faster than I stuck my head up. It took me a coupla seconds ta realize what happened, and that I got hit. The bridge of my nose hurt big time and blood was just gushing outta my nose. I got out my handkerchief and kind of got my nose ta stop bleedin'. Every time I tried ta look outta my right eye, all I saw was red swirls. It made me want ta puke so once I got my nosebleed stopped, I took my blood-soaked handkerchief and rolled it up to make an eye patch ta keep my right eye closed.

"So now that I got my nosebleed stopped and my eye taken care of, I start ta think 'bout my situation. I'm thinkin' maybe the guy that shot at me might be comin' ta try ta kill Big Al next. He's sure ta have a look inside the turret ta see if I'm dead. I'm thinking 'bout closing the loader's hatch, but I need ta reach outside ta do that. I decide ta have a look-see the next time the lume lights ups. When I do, I can see an NVA coming through our concertina wire. He's caught up in it and is kinda strugglin'. Prob'ly the worst thing ya kin do.

"I git my hated .45 and I shoot at the guy in the wire until the lume goes out. When the lume comes on again, I see he's still movin' so I shoot at 'em some more. I can't really aim cuz I can't see shit. Although I can sorta see outta my left eye, it's got bullet fragments in it too and is watering almost like I was cryin'. Come ta think of it maybe I was cryin' I was so fuckin' scared. Anyway, the next time the lume came on, the guy in the wire had stopped movin' so I returned my attention to the ammo situation fer the .50 Cal.

"I kept tellin' myself that when Big Al got down ta two boxes of ammo I was gonna run fer more. From the corner of the turret where I was sittin', I could look up through the TC's hatch and see how many boxes of ammo were left.

"The last half hour or so the firing started to be boo coo more sporadic and

even stopped at times. During the lulls in firing, Big Al and I would look at each other through the TC's hatch and smile at one another. We din't talk cuz neither of us could hear from bein' so close ta the .50 Cal. when it was bein' fired.

“Finally the shootin' stopped and after I waited a while ta really make sure it was over, I got out and Big Al came down from behind the .50 Cal. We were both smilin' from ear ta ear and punchin' each other ta make sure we were both still alive. There was a fuckin' huge pile of dead NVA just on the other side of the concertina wire in front of Big Al's tank. The NVA that took the place of the ones Big Al had already killed tried ta use the dead bodies fer cover, but the .50 Cal. just went right through the bodies and killed the replacements too. Man it was a fuckin' gruesome sight. The .50 Cal just blows everything ta pieces. There were fuckin' body parts layin' all over the place. Ya kin just never fergit somethin' like that and so far I haven't," I finish, heaving a huge sigh trying to ward off the inevitable trembling that happens when I talk or think about the Nam at all.

"Man Kent, after that I need ta smoke some dew.”

"Me fuckin' too," says Kent.

We take a tee tee break from our storytelling to smoke a joint. When we finish, Kent tells his story.

“My squad was known as the Dewmasters. We got in a tee tee bit of trouble when we was stationed at the Hawk's Nest. So we got transferred ta LZ Uplift, and they were starting ta break up our squad. Goose, our squad leader, was gitten out in 'bout two weeks, and I was just 'bout ready ta go on R&R," says Kent.

"The Dewmasters huh? Shit, I was always ready ta go on R&R, but I never got ta go," I interrupt with a laugh.

"Well, I never got ta to go neither and if ya quit interruptin' me I'll tell ya 'bout it.”

"'Scuse me, Mr. Polite, please continue.”

"OK, so I had three months left and Goose is bein' replaced by a FNG Shake 'n' Bake platoon sergeant. He can't wait ta git his opportunity ta git killed and wants ta take the platoon onna patrol. Goose is tryin' ta stop it or at least ta go on the patrol himself. But our LT backs Mullet, the Shake 'n' Bake, and we end up going on patrol with a platoon of ARVNs." relates Kent.

"Fuck man, sorry ta interrupt again, but ya almost don't need ta say no more. You were fuckin' jinxed from the git go being next in line ta go on

R&R and then havin' ta go on patrol with the fuckin' ARVNs. That's the worst," I lament.

"Got that right. It was s'posed ta be a fuckin' ARVN operation and we was jes' s'posed ta be support, but ya know how that works when yer dealin' with the ARVNs.

“They wanted us ta go boo coo far. So far that we'd be lucky ta make it back before dark if everything went well. Which, of course, it din't. Monsoon is over so the rice paddies are dry. Some of the rice stalks had even been cut close ta the ground but there are boo coo places that haven't been cut yet. Perfect for some VC or NVA ta hide in and ambush us. It was a suicide mission with no real purpose other than Shake 'n' Bake trying ta git us all killed. We are jes' startin' ta git in ta some jungle vegetation and we know that's even boo coo more dangerous. The fuckin' ARVNs are finally on point of the patrol and my platoon is following them with Shake 'n' Bake Mullet on point for us. He's followed by Luis Rosa, the RTO," says Kent.

"What's and RTO?"

"Man, you don't know nuthin' do ya?" says Kent. "He's the radioman.”

"Fuck, I was hardly in the Nam. Less than four months and I got wounded in my first firefight," I explain.

"OK, so Mullet is on point and Rosa is right behind him. The ARVNs suddenly come running back and just keep runnin' right past us," says Kent.

"Man, that ain't a good thing.”

"Fuckin' A! So the last ARVN ta run past is screaming, 'Number ten! Number ten! Didi mau! NVA! NVA!' Mullet is now on point, and he's immediately shot in the leg, and then the NVA shoot the crap outta Rosa, the RTO. They shoot up Rosa so boo coo much that his ammo blows up, adding to his injuries. I'm next in line, so I lay down some fire as I move up ta the front," says Kent.

"Thought you said I was a dumb fuck?" I interrupt to ask.

"Yeah yeah, but I din't have no choice if we was gonna git outta there. We needed that fuckin' horn.”

"Xin loi, continue," I apologize.

"So I get the horn and it's still workin'. A fuckin' miracle considerin' Rosa's ammo blew up while he was carryin' it. I call a dustoff for Rosa and Mullet while my buddy Steven lays down some fire to our front. I bandage up fuckin' Mullet while Steven tries ta bandage up Rosa. Rosa's a fuckin' mess. His intestines are all tangled up in the springs of his blown apart ammo clip.

“We manage to hold our ground until the chopper got there which was 'bout 15 minutes," say Kent.

"Fuckin' 15 lifetimes in the Nam," I add.

"It seemed like forever and when the NVA figured out the horn was still workin' and that I had it, they was trying their best ta kill me. Steven and I took turns laying down fire in all directions. Before the dustoff got there, my platoon killed six of the nine NVA. After the chopper took Rosa and Mullet, we started fallin' back, tryin' ta git back ta our base camp. Even though they were now outnumbered, the three NVA left jes' kept comin' after us. We had ta lay on our stomachs as we crossed the rice paddies while we could feel the bullets zipping by.

“I used the horn ta call in a gunship, and when they git there, some dumb fuck major on the gunship wants us ta pop smoke so he doesn't end up shootin' us. We din't have no fuckin' smoke grenades with us. Here we are, pinned down, layin' on our backs in the rice grass with bullets zippin' by, and I'm havin' ta argue with this fuckin' major 'bout poppin' smoke before he'd help us. Motherfucker! Finally I remembered I had a trip flare in my ruck, and the fuckin' major said that was good enough. Problem was, the flare was at the bottom of my rucksack, not to mention I had the horn strapped on, too. While I'm digging 'round in my rucksack fer the fuckin' flare, I try ta talk this asshole major outta makin' me pop it. I tell him Charlie will know right where we are, too. But he won't fuckin' listen to me. So I set the fuckin' trip flare off and throw it. Sure fuckin' enough, the NVA see it too and really start lightin' the place up.

“I was layin' on my back and the next thing I know my foot and leg just go flyin' up in the air. When the bullet hit the sole of my jungle boot, my whole body got lifted up. Steven and I had ta crawl outta there hopin' the gunship din't go shootin' at us too.

“Although we're spread out what's left of our platoon is still together. I call in a dustoff fer myself and git the same 15 minutes 'til pick up, jes' like the first time. I look around fer the rest of the platoon. Everyone one is keepin' low cuz of the NVA shootin' at us. They are fuckin' relentless, even though they're outnumbered. As I scan the far side of the rice paddy, I see what's left of the platoon creeping away. The last guy, Watson, who's carrying the M-60, turns and looks right at me. We have eye contact and then he jes' turns 'round and didi maus.

“Fuck! Now it's me and Steven that are outnumbered and the

motherfuckin' NVAs just won't let up. We crawl until we git ta the end of the rice grass. We're fucked now, running out of cover, but just then we hear the chopper comin'. I lost so much blood and was in boo coo pain, and I couldn't git up ta run so Steven picks me up and carries me on his back ta the dust off," finishes Kent.

"Yer own guys fuckin' left ya?"

"Yeah, they was breakin' up the Dewmasters and no one liked us cuz of our reputation. This was our first patrol as a platoon," replies Kent.

"Listen, man. You were fuckin' lucky to git wounded right away. If ya had ta keep goin' on patrol fer three more months with guys like that, yer bound ta git killed sooner or later and mebbe by yer own fuckin' guys. Not on purpose mind ya, just accidental like. But the outcome is the same: Yer dead. I always felt my injury was luck, good luck. Still can't imagine a whole motherfuckin' year in the Nam," I say.

"Yeah, I guess gitten a hole 'bout as big as a quarter blown inna bottom of yer foot is boo coo
better'n bein' dead, that's fer sure," replies Kent.

Kent and I, having talked more than enough about the Nam, waste the rest of the day in typical
M Co. fashion by playing foosball until midnight when I start my new job as the night baker.

Surprisingly, I'm actually kind of excited. At least more excited than for anything else I've ever had to do in the army.

Perkins has a key to the mess hall, and he unlocks the door and then locks it behind us.

"Why'd ya lock the door?" I ask.

"It's a new rule. Too much food is gitten stolen. There's even a guard sleepin' in the mess sergeant's office," answers Perkins. "He ain't s'posed ta be sleepin' but since we're here he might as well."

"OK, so here's the first thing we do," says Perkins as we walk to the work area.

There's a menu for tomorrow's meals and a huge three-ring binder with all the army's recipes. I don't expect anything in there would be considered Cordon Bleu.

"After ya see what ya hafta make fer tomorrow, ya check ta make sure ya got everything ya need ta make it. If ya don't, then all ya hafta do is make Jello," Perkins says with a smile.

"Really?"

Perkins nods. Now I understand why we have Jell-O so often. I silently vow to myself that if I mange to score this job, I will never ever make Jell-O. If only because I hate the stuff.

We are suppose to make twenty apple pies for dinner tomorrow. After checking to see that we have everything we need, we start to make the pie dough. It's when we start to roll out the dough that I realize I really will be able to do this job. I had to roll out dough to make pizzas, and although the dough is different, the technique is the same.

Perkins notices it looks like I know what I'm doing and says, “You've done this before?"

"Well, not with this kind of dough but, yeah I've done it before.”

The ovens are the exact same kind we had in the restaurant where I worked. After rolling the dough out and filling the pies and putting the top crust on, we put them all in the oven to bake.

"Now comes the part I like best 'bout bein' the night baker," says Perkins.

We walk over to the walk-in box, also the same as the restaurant where I worked, and open the door. The shelves are lined with more food than I have seen in all the time I've been in the army. One of the things you really miss when living in the barracks is having your own refrigerator full of food. I'm surprised to see white pepper among the spices on the shelf. White pepper seems an odd spice to find in an army mess hall kitchen. I know about it from working in a restaurant, where we only used it when the black pepper flakes would be noticed in something and might be considered unsightly. Something the army would hardly be concerned about, I would think. Perkins corrects my thinking when I ask about it.

"Oh yeah, they use it in the SOS," Perkins informs me. "Ya like ham?"

"I fuckin' love ham," I answer.

Perkins grabs a whole boneless ham off one shelf and a large loaf of cheese and hauls them over to our work counter.

"Go get some bread," Perkins directs me as he puts the ham on the meat slicer.

We make ourselves a great ham sandwich. The first sandwich I think I've had since being in the army. It is number one.

As we eat our sandwiches, we open the ovens to check on our pies. They have already begun to smell delicious. I made half of the pies and now that they're baking, I can't tell the difference between my pies and the ones

Perkins made. I smile.

I noticed that although Perkins said we needed to make 20 pies, he made 11 and told me to make 10. We take the pies out of the oven and let them cool for a while. I still can't tell them apart.

"You did really good fer yer first day," says Perkins. "Here's another thing I love 'bout this job."

He picks up one of the pies, divides it in half, and offers it to me.

"Gotta make sure it's good," he laughs. "An' now cuz yer a cook, ya kin come in ta the mess hall anytime durin' the day and cook yerself somethin'. Heck, since you have a key, you kin come in at night durin' the weekend when yer off and make yerself a sandwich or somethin'."

"No shit?" I ask.

"No shit," answers Perkins.

This really is the best job here at M Co., and I intend to do whatever it takes to score it.

We finish at about 3:30 a.m. and sky up for bed. It only took us three and a half hours of work. I can see once again why every one of the cooks wants this job. Xin loi, cooks. This job is mine.

I try to sleep in because essentially I'm working the midnight shift, albeit a short shift. But trying to sleep in a bay with fifty other guys that are getting up makes that impossible.

I'm just about to get up when Kent arrives.

"Ya gonna sleep the day away?" he laughs.

"Tryin' ta git swung over ta the midnight shift but it ain't workin' out."

"Didja hafta work all night?" Kent asks.

"Nah, just 'til 'bout 3:30 or so," I answer. "It's a fuckin' number one job. Not quite as good as Regimental Guard, but there are perks that kind of make up fer it."

"Didja make some of the pies I saw in the mess hall?" asks Kent.

"Yeah, I made half of 'em."

"Well I think yer in, then. They all looked good ta me. I saw the cooks all checkin' 'em out."

I pace myself for the rest of the day and again at midnight Perkins and I sky to the mess hall to start our shift. Tonight we have to bake 20 chocolate cakes. It's only my second day, and I love this job already.

Again I make half of the request and Perkins makes the other half. He

shows me the proper way to stack the two layers so the cake is stable and has a perfect flat top. Perkins also shows me a tee tee baker's trick to use a teaspoon to frost the cakes. When we finish, I can't tell my cakes from his.

The rest of the week Perkins teaches me the other recipes I'll be expected to make as the night baker. I learn how to make cinnamon rolls and turnovers. About the only thing I had to make but didn't really care for was the apple crisp. The mess sergeant makes the menu, so not much I can do about that.

On Thursday night, which is really Friday morning, and the last day of my work week, Perkins tells me to try to go to bed early, and he'll come wake me about 3:00 AM. We have to make doughnuts for Friday's breakfast and the doughnuts are best when they're still warm. He gets no argument from me. I love fresh hot doughnuts.

Friday morning we are manning the deep fryers and churning out piles of fresh doughnuts when the mess hall opens for breakfast. Kent arrives early for his roster duty and comes right over to see what I'm up to. Using tongs, I hand him a hot doughnut just out of the fryer.

"Ow ow ow! Hey it's fuckin' hot man!" complains Kent.

First I laugh, and then I apologize, "Xin loi, I thought ya were tough."

"I am, jes' don't like gittin' burned is all," replies Kent. When his doughnut has cooled sufficiently he has a bite.

"Whaddya think?"

"Pretty damn good," Kent answers. "I guess ya really are a baker."

"Why would I lie ta ya?"

To which Kent just laughs as he walks away to take up his official station at the roster sign-in.

After Perkins and I finish with making the doughnuts for breakfast, I'm officially off until midnight Sunday. I realize that I will be on my own the next time I bake. On the plus side, no one is shooting at me.

Even though I got up at 3 AM, I'm too pumped up to go back to sleep. Kent and I ate so many doughnuts, we are now too full to go to McChord for breakfast.

"So Kent, ya tol' me how ya got wounded. I'm bettin' ya remember the first guy ya saw git killed doncha?"

"Yeah, I remember all right. Stuff like that ya kin never ferget," he answers with sad look on his face.

"Yer right there. Ya know, my story is so fuckin' gruesome and I went first

last time, so you kin go first this time if ya want.”

"Mebbe we outta smoke a tee tee bit more dew before we start talkin' 'bout the Nam again.”

"A number one idea," I concur. "I'll roll it.”

"It was monsoon and we were up in some highland area. We was on top of some boo coo big hill they called The Hawks Nest. It rained all the fuckin' time. Nuthin' but mud and rain fer the three months we was there. Most of the time we wouldn't even do perimeter guard. Our thinkin' was Charlie could have the fuckin' place if they wanted it. We mostly just stayed in our hootches, tryin' ta keep dry and smokin' dew.

“On some of the few clear days we could see the China Sea from our position. It looked so fuckin' boo coo beautiful after all the damn monsoon rain. Anyway, one of the guys in my unit, Gary Batcher, was a surfer. Every time we could see the waves breaking, Gary would jus' 'bout go crazy wantin' ta go down there and ride them waves. The China Sea looked boo coo closer than it really was. That's what kept us from goin' there but we made plans ta go there as soon as monsoon ended.

“So when monsoon ended, Goose got us permission ta go onna long patrol all the way ta the China Sea. Gary was so fuckin' pumped 'bout it he could hardly contain himself. As I said, it was boo coo far ta the China Sea, so we even had ta camp out one night inna jungle with just us guys on the patrol. That was fuckin' scary but shows ya how bad we wanted to git there.

“So we're up at sunrise and start fer the sea. We came ta the side of a village that was near the beach. The people of the village were just startin' ta git up fer tha day. Because the base near here is on the other side of the village, we kind of surprised the villagers when we arrived from the other direction.

“The first hootch, which was like a open gazebo, had a coupla papasans, an older kid, prob'ly 13 or so, and another guy who was in an NVA uniform. The direction we came from must of caught 'em by surprise. The kid pushed the NVA in one direction while he ran in the other.

“As we was approachin', we jes' automatically formed into "L" from our single file formation. Tennessee was on point and Goose was at the other end of the line. I was somewhere in the middle but closer ta the front than the rear. The NVA, who was just wearin' his pants, grabbed his fatigue jacket when he took off, leavin' his AK behind. Boo coo big mistake. We all shot 'em up and killed 'em. Goose din't wanna kill the kid, so he shot him inna arm

with a can round from Thumper. Jes' 'bout took his arm off though. After it was over, we had a dustoff come and pick 'em up. Pretty sure he lived."

"But first we come ta realize the papasans had didi maued. After seein' the NVA's AK, we thought the two papasans were goin' to git theirs. So we lit it up the surrounding hedgerows with our 16's on "go-go". It was over pretty quick, but inna end we injured some civilians that we din't see on the other side of the hedgerow.

"So when it was all over, Goose called in the chopper fer the injured and radioed in a report of the firefight, and then we skyed up fer the beach," Kent says.

"Man, you guys were cold. Ya fuckin' hurt a bunch of civilians and then sky fer the beach," I interrupt.

"Yeah, we were fucked up in our heads but din't know it," Kent replies. "So the unit stationed on the other side of the village heard 'bout our firefight and they came ta meet us on the beach. We had a tee tee pow wow with 'em. When we tol' 'em we was gonna go fer a swim inna China Sea, they said, 'No man, ya don't wanna go in there, it's fuckin' nasty.' But we wouldn't listen to 'em. Especially cuz Gary was goin' in even if we din't.

"So we ignore their warnings and we go swimming in the China Sea. It was fuckin' fantastic, 'specially after makin' it through Monsoon. With blue sky, blue water, and boo coo sunshine, we swam 'round 'til we couldn't take no more.

"Later that day we camped on the beach with the guys we just met. We made arrangements ta git picked up by a chopper the next morning fer a ride back ta the Hawk's Nest. Mostly they were sendin' a chopper ta pick us up cuz we was in trouble fer injurin' the civilians. At least Goose was in trouble since he was in charge.

"While we camp out with our new friends we ask them why they tol' us not to go swimmin' inna China Sea as it was number one. They wouldn't tell us. They jes' kept sayin', 'You'll fin' out inna mornin'.'

"An' we did cuz just at daybreak, we saw all the villagers from the nearby village come down ta the beach where we went swimmin' the day before. There was no plumbin' inna village, so they all come down at low tide ta piss and crap onna beach," finishes Kent.

"Oh man! That's fuckin' gross," I say. "Man you guys gotcher payback boo coo quick."

"Yeah, plus after we got back ta base, Goose was in boo coo trouble and

eventually we all got sent to LZ Uplift which is where I was when I got wounded," replies Kent. "So what's yer story?"

"Oh yeah." I take a deep breath to compose myself.

"OK," I say, "I'd been in the field a tee tee bit longer than a month. The platoon sergeant usually did the first shift of guard duty at night. But that night he got so drunk he passed out, so we had ta cover fer him. We jes' got an FNG in the platoon that evening on resupply, and he was on the PC parked right next ta us that night.

"Sometime after 2 AM when I was sittin' behind the .50 Cal. doin' my stint at guard, some trip flares in front the PC next to us went off. It jes' so happened the FNG was sittin' behind the .50 Cal. and bein' his first night inna field he was understandably a tee tee bit nervous. Fuck, when them trip flares went off, I was boo coo more than nervous I kin tell ya.

"So the FNG opens up with the .50 Cal. and from that the rest of the trip flares go off and I kin see guys runnin' away from our RON. I see guys getting hit by the .50 and it just picked 'em up and threw 'em down like ragdolls. I grabbed the joystick and I swing the main gun around ta where all the action is. We always kept a can round in the main gun, and I was just gettin' ready to fire it off when the .50 Cal. stopped fer a coupla seconds. As soon as it stopped, someone stood up in front of the PC and begged us ta stop shootin'. It turns out it was an Ambush Patrol from a different platoon. Their horn battery died and they was tryin' ta find their way back ta their RON inna dark. Boo coo big mistake.

"So after it was over our medic, Doc, and me and several other guys tried ta help the wounded as best we could, but there wasn't much we could do fer most of 'em. Most of 'em died, and the guys that din't were boo coo fucked up and had ta make it ta first light fer the dust off," I finish.

"Really shook me ta the core. Seein' our own guys gitten killed by us. Only thing worse is gittin' killed yerself. Already knew Charlie was tryin' ta kill us and the fuckin' Lifers seemed intent in putting us in harm's way fer no good reason. And now I needed ta add the FNGs to that list," I add.

"Least ya din't fire off that can round," says Kent.

"Thought 'bout that 'bout a million times," I reply. "Din't help much, but I was always boo coo glad I wasn't the one pullin' the trigger on the .50 Cal."

Chapter 23

Now that I'm off duty for the whole weekend, it seems to fly by at lightspeed. I spend some of the day on Sunday moving my gear into the cook's room.

On Sunday evening I try to get some sleep in the privacy of the cook's room while Adolph and Ramon are working. That's another reason all the cooks want the night bakers job. It's the only mess hall job that is off on the weekend.

Ramon and Adolph wake me with their talking and laughing when they finish work around 7 PM and come back to the cook's room. The first thing Adolph does is roll a joint and light it.

"Man, Adolph, it's a good thing I moved in here," I say. "There is such a thing as proper etiquette when it comes ta smokin' pot, doncha know?"

"What the fuck ya talkin' 'bout, white boy?" asks Adolph.

"White boy!" I say. "Is yer last name Gomez now?"

“OK, OK, sorry dude," says Adolph.

"That's better. At least ya din't call me rabbit," I reply. "So now, when ya roll a doobie ya got ta offer it ta someone fer scrutiny. Xin loi, but that's just the way it is, professional courtesy. If it's considered worthy of sacrifice, it is lit and passed on.”

"It's jes' like Kent says all the time, 'yer fulla shit'," replies Adolph with a smile.

"Mebbe on some things, but on this even Kent will agree with me.”

"It's my pot, I'll smoke it the way I want," says Adolph.

"You kin do that, Adolph. I was just trying ta show ya the respectful way ta burn the sacrament, that's all.”

"Hey, mentionin' Gomez made me remember ta tell ya somethin', but yer so fulla shit all the time ya almos' made me fergit ta tell ya," says Adolph.

"Better tell me before ya fergit again.”

"Gomez and Andersen are pissed they got passed over fer the night baker's job, so I heard 'em sayin' they was gonna do somethin' so ya couldn't bake tonight.”

"No fuckin' shit?" I ask.

"No shit," confirms Adolph.

"So what were they gonna do?"

"Don't know fer sure. Wasn't my day ta watch 'em."

"I kin always make Jell-O," I say, "but I really don't wanna do that on my first night by myself. Thanks fer the heads up."

"Yeah yeah, jes' don't tell Gomez I toldya," says Adolph.

I'm curious to find out what Gomez and Andersen have done, but I decide to wait until the appointed hour to go to the mess hall to start my first shift on my own as night baker.

At midnight I head to the mess hall in my whites. Perkins not only left me his bunk, but he also gave me two sets of cook's whites. I really feel like a baker as well as looking like one. My euphoria is short-lived. It quickly becomes apparent as to what Gomez and Andersen did.

Just like my first day baking with Perkins, I'm supposed to make 20 apple pies. The problem is there is no shortening to make the pie dough. Those motherfuckers must have thrown it all away or hidden it, because I can't find it anywhere. I am pissed. I cannot make Jell-O on my first night as baker. In my fury, I pace around the mess hall trying to figure a way to solve my dilemma. For one thing I intend to get even with Gomez, but first I need to figure out what to do about the pies.

As I pace, I walk by the deep fryers. They had pork chops for dinner today. The army's method of cooking pork chops is to deep fry until almost done and then throw them on the griddle to keep warm before serving. Need I say the outcome is severely overcooked pork chops as tender and appealing as shoe leather.

The deep fryer grease has cooled and congealed and looks very similar to shortening. I've even heard of people making pie crust with lard, which is just rendered pork fat. I decide to at least try making my pie dough using the deep fryer grease. Nothing to lose really. If the dough doesn't work out, I'll just have to make Jell-O. I hate that. After removing the grease, I turn the fryer on for several minutes to let it melt away the evidence.

The pie dough works out fine. So far so good. When the ovens are hot enough I put the pies in to bake.

I'm feeling boo coo good now that I have seemingly thwarted Gomez's prank. So good that I sky to the walk-in box to get some ham to make my lunch. After I eat my ham sandwich, I go and check on my pies in the oven.

Holy shit, I think when I open the first oven door. It smells like I'm baking an oven full of hams. Fuck! They're going to know what I did. That being

said, I have to say that although they smell like hams, they look beautiful. A perfect golden brown crust on everyone of them.

I finish baking them and take them out to cool. While they are still hot they smell so much like ham, but there's nothing I can do now but wait and see what happens.

I finish at about 4 AM and sky to the cook's room to go to bed. I don't even hear Adolph and Ramon get up for their work day, but because I'm uneasy in my head, I wake early and decide to get up. It's still breakfast time when I saunter over to the mess hall. Kent is at his station at the sign-in roster.

When he sees me he smiles and says, "The mess sergeant wants ta see ya."

"Is that a good thing?"

"I dunno, he din't say anything ta me 'cept he wanted ta see ya," answers Kent.

I walk into the kitchen. My pies are still sitting out. They look number one, and as I pass them I don't notice even a tee tee bit of ham aroma. I'm encouraged by that, but if there's an issue with them I plan on pressing for the deal we have that I get a week to prove myself. I can see the mess sergeant on the phone in his office, and he waves me over.

When I enter his office, I see one of my pies sitting on his desk with one piece missing. He finishes his phone call and turns to me. "Mornin' Wolf," he says. "Hey, I know I said ya had a week ta prove yerself...”

Fuck! Here it comes, I'm thinking. He's not even going to give me my week, so I prepare to argue my case.

“...but yer pies were better than anything Perkins ever made. Hell, yer pies are better than my mama's, and that's my benchmark. The job is yours."

Wow! I am stunned. I was really hoping to get this job, but I never expected to get it on day one. And definitely not after having to improvise with the deep fryer grease.

"Thanks, Sarge, " I say. "I'll do my best."

"The funny thing is when I left last night I expected you'd make Jell-O. I checked ta make sure we had everything you would need, and I saw we were outta shortening, but the commissary is closed on Sunday so I couldn't get any. How'd ya make the pie dough without shortening?"

"Well, Sarge, as a cook yerself, ya know ya gotta have yer tee tee bag of tricks," I smile.

"Yer not gonna tell me?"

"If I toldya I'd hafta kill ya," I joke.

He laughs and says, "Yer really not gonna tell me?"

"It's my secret recipe, and it's why them pies are so good," I answer with a smile.

The mess sergeant smiles back and says, "I understand. The job is still yers, congratulations,"

"Thanks again, Sarge. I won't let ya down," I finish.

As I walk out of the kitchen I feel like I'm walking on clouds. This was totally unexpected. I stop and linger a moment to admire my pies. Adolph notices me and gives me a thumbs up as he points to the pies.

"So what'd the mess sergeant wanna see ya fer?" asks Kent.

"Kent. It was fuckin' unbelievable. Not only did he say I got the night baker's job after only one night, but he said my pies were better'n Perkins' pies."

"Guess we gotta go celebrate," replies Kent.

"I'm already high an I ain't smoked nuthin' yet," I laugh as I reflect on what just happened. Too much. Too fucking much to be exact.

The rest of my work week sails by. Buoyed by my success with the apple pies, I continue to make everything just as Perkins has shown me. Not once am I even tempted to make Jell-O. On Thursday night I check the menu and see I have to make doughnuts for breakfast, so I head off to bed early and get up with Adolph and Ramon on Friday morning.

While I fry a second batch, I take a couple that have cooled down over to Kent.

"Not tryin' ta burn me today?" he asks.

"Hey! That was an accident," I protest. "Never made doughnuts before last week."

"So whadda we doin' today?"

"I dunno."

"Let's go toke down and I'm sure somethin' will come to us," Kent suggests.

We head off to my new room for some privacy while we get high. We run into Ace and Beaudeen and invite them to join us. They happily agree.

"We're tryin' ta stay outta Top's sight. He din't have nuthin for us ta do after roll call and he tol' us ta hang loose while he thought of somethin'," says Beaudeen.

"Well you'll be clear outta sight in my room," I laugh. "Kent were ya gonna grab the house bag?"

"Always gotta do yer shit work," replies Kent.

"Watch it now, roster boy, yer talkin' to one of yer superiors in the mess hall now," I laugh even more.

"Boy? I know ya din't call me 'boy' just now didja?" asks Kent.

"Young Kent, where the fuck d'ya think ya are? Back in the Nam?" I ask laughing the whole time.

Kent starts laughing too and says, "Almost forgot. Musta been all the OD green aroun' me."

After we finish burning the sacrament we start to discuss how we are going to fuck off for the rest of the day in earnest.

"First thing fer sure is lunch at McChord," is offered up by Kent.

"Roger on that," I say. "You guys wanna come too?"

"Yeah we're in if we kin stay outta Top's sight 'til lunchtime," answers Ace.

"We kin jus' hang in here 'til then. That is if we don't don't run outta pot first," I laugh while Kent frowns.

"We jes' might run out if we let Gomez in," says Kent.

"Hey, now that it's officially my room, well part my room, I ain't lettin' that motherfucker in ever again." This is in part because of his prank but mostly because I dislike him boo coo.

We play some of Ramon's records on his phonograph and while away the morning. Kent didis for his roster duty and so we wait until he finishes and then we sky for McChord for lunch. I can't wait to tell our grannies at the McChord mess hall that I'm a baker now.

"Better not do that," laughs Kent. "Remember, we're suppose ta be transients."

"Kinda fergot," I say. "Ya really think they don't know we're crashing the place?"

"Prob'ly they know but ya can't just come out and tell 'em," replies Kent. "Ya don't wanna fuck up a number one thing do ya?"

"Guess not," I answer immediately followed by, "'Rippin' Off the A & P' by Ivan Uhls," naming the song on the radio.

"No fair," says Kent, "You were talkin', as usual, so I couldn't git a word in edgewise."

"Tough shit," I laugh. "Besides, I wasn't talkin'. I was answerin' yer question, Leroy."

"Are ya callin' me boy again?" asks Kent.

"Young Kent, yer so touchy today. I called ya Leroy."

"Same same."

There is nothing on today's menu we don't like so the hard part is deciding what to have. We could have everything on the menu we just wouldn't be able to eat it all. Kent and I jostle around trying to get each other to order first just so the second person can say, "I'll have the same."

I'm half tempted to ask for liver and onions just to watch Kent eat it. I personally hate liver with or without onions so I wouldn't really eat it. Instead I order today's special which is meat loaf with mashed potatoes and gravy.

Kent lucks out for now as he gets to say, "I'll have the same."

One of these days, when he's chatting up the grannies and not paying attention, I'll order liver and onions and see if he eats it. Xin loi, Kent.

After lunch, we try to decide what to do once we're free tonight.

"Ain't been over ta Marcia and Terry's lately," says Kent.

"That's cool with me," I say. "Plus, we're always lookin' fer some dew, ain't we?"

"Ya got any scratch, big talker?" Kent asks.

"Always got scratch fer dew, even if I gotta borrow it from you," I laugh.

"I ain't got nuthin' to loan."

"Well, I've got bread so ya don't have ta pawn yer shotgun. Oh, almost fergot, yer shotgun is still in pawn, never mind," I tease.

"Ya should just fergit 'bout that shotgun, dumb shit." Kent is starting to sound annoyed now, so I let it go.

"Tell ya what, I'll buy ya dinner at McDonald's later."

"Oh thanks big spender," replies Kent, a tee tee bit sarcastically.

"Jes' can't please ya today," I laugh.

When we arrive at Marcia and Terry's, the lights are on in the house and several cars and a motorcycle are parked on the street and in the driveway.

"Looks like a party," says Kent.

"Great timing on our part, my man," I add.

"We fergot ta bring somethin'," remembers Kent.

"Let's sky ta the store and buy some beer an' wine," I offer.

We jump back into Kent's VW to the closest store, and we are back at the house in less than fifteen minutes.

As we walk up the driveway, someone is just leaving the party. It's Rick. We chat briefly, but Rick wants to get going before it gets too cold to ride his bike. It is after all, January. We say goodbye as Rick gets on his motorcycle

and disappears down the road.

It's a small party, but everyone is laughing and joking, and we soon join in the merriment. Our beer and wine is welcomed, and we are quickly offered a lit joint to get our heads in the same place. We are told, sadly, that there is no pot available now, but maybe on Saturday there will be some. Some consolation at least.

Not to mention that we like to hang out with Marcia and Terry. Well I do anyway, as Kent is Mr. Playing-the-field currently, since right off most women want to be his girlfriend. Poor guy. It's such a burden.

I don't need to be back at M Co. till 2 or 3 in the morning, but Kent has roster duty tomorrow morning, so we don't stay too late.

Tonight I have to make cinnamon rolls. This should be fun. I remember going to the neighborhood bakery early in the morning when I was a kid. The aroma of cinnamon rolls being baked was mouthwatering.

It's no different here. After letting the dough rise twice and rolling out the dough and making the cinnamon rolls, the first batch are baking. The smell just takes me back to my childhood. Even after my ham sandwich lunch, I still eat a couple of the cinnamon rolls. Professional courtesy. I have to ensure they are good enough, after all. They are, and I smile to myself as I finish off one more. This is turning out to be a number one job.

I finish around 3:30 AM and head for bed.

Being up so late, I sleep in some. It's much nicer to shower and shave in the morning after all the riffraff have left. Xin loi, guys.

It's some time after 10:30 AM when Kent comes looking for me.

"Ya missed breakfast at McChord."

"That's OK, I kin go make myself some breakfast in the mess hall now. I might just have a couple of cinnamon rolls if there are any left," I reply.

"Ya might luck out. There were a couple left when I went over ta McChord. They were good. I think yer solid for the baker's job."

"Cool with me, that's fer sure, " I say. "I realize now what an idiot I was for not telling the army I know how to cook. No guard duty, hell, no playin' with guns at all. No KP either.

"Yer just figurin' out somethin' I've known all along. Yer a fuckin' dumb shit," laughs Kent.

"Yeah, well at least I've corrected my thinking for the best I hope," I retort.

"You hope."

"Hey, I only got four and a half months left anyway," I say.

Our conversation is interrupted by Beaudeen.

"Someone from the barracks next door just came over and said the CID are going through all the barracks with a drug sniffing dog," he says with some urgency in his voice.

"We're OK cuz our stash is inna spare locker," says Kent, not quite thinking things through.

"Yeah but they'll still take it," I say. "An' we ain't got much left. But I got an idea. Get our stash and put it in yer car while I go ta the mess hall fer somethin'."

"I don't wanna put it my car, man!"

"OK, then go stick it under the seat of my bike if yer so worried," I say and then trot off to the mess hall.

I grab a cinnamon roll and eat it as I stroll around the mess hall. No one's paying any attention to me since I'm a cook now. I open the walk-in box, enter, and grab the container of white pepper. I put some in my hand and then I put it in one of my front pockets. I put the pepper container back on the shelf.

Back in the barracks I go into both entryways and sprinkle the white pepper on the floor, especially right around the doorways. White pepper isn't really white. Well the peppercorns are whitish. but when it's ground up it's really gray. Being an army barracks, the floor is nearly immaculate. However, people have being going in and out all morning, so when I sprinkle the white pepper on the floor it blends right in with the tee tee bit of dust. This should be interesting.

They are sitting around waiting for the dogs when I enter the bay.

"So whaddaya do with our dew?"

"I put it in my fuckin' car. When I stuck it under the seat on yer bike ya could see it," Kent laments.

"Shouldn't be a problem," I smile. "C'mon downstairs and watch. If they bring the dogs in our barracks it should be funny."

"What didja do now?" Kent asks.

"Jes' come and watch," I answer with a sly smile.

As soon as the door opens and the dog enters, it is instant pandemonium. The dog lets out a boo coo loud howl and almost jerks his leash out of his handler's hand as it whirls around. At times all four of his feet are off the ground. Xin loi, dog.

We try not to laugh, but we can't help ourselves.

"Look Kent," I say through my laugh, "he's givin' ya the 'airborne salute.'"

The CID handler finally manages to get the dog back outside while we sky up to the bay so as to not look so obvious.

"So?" asks Kent.

"I sprinkled white pepper all over the floor in front of the entry doors. Prob'ly not the best time to fire up a victory number anywhere near here," I say.

"Let's take a tee tee ride in my car. The dew is already in it."

"Whadda we waitin' for?"

"Ya wanna come along?" Kent asks Beaudeen.

"Yeah if I kin stay outta Top's sight when were leavin'," he answers.

Since Ft. Lewis is 90% forest and for the most part vacant, we just sky into the interior of the base and turn on to one of the first dirt roads we come to.

Kent pulls into a small clearing. I hand him the joint I rolled while we drove. He inspects it carefully and after scrutiny he lights it.

We have some time to kill before Kent has roster duty again, and there's no one to play foosball with, so Kent and I have to play by ourselves. It's one of the few times I get to play the frontline men. I also have to play goalie too. It's boo coo harder to play all four rows by yourself so Kent annihilates me. He's quite satisfied with himself. I take solace in the fact that in a few minutes he has to go do roster duty. He'll get boo coo teasing from all the guys in line with all their reasons why they don't want to sign the roster , which is all just to hassle Kent.

"Gotta go," he says. "Wanna git a burrito at the tee tee PX when I git done?"

"You just wanna go flirt with Marilyn. But sure, I'll come along just ta watch ya work yer magic."

He says nothing but flips me the bird as he didis. He has a number ten attitude whenever he has duty of any sort.

I'm alone in the day room until Bert shows up.

"Wanna work on yer foosball game?" I ask him.

"Sure, got nuthin' better ta do," replies Bert.

As lame as I am playing foosball by myself, I am better than Bert, so I beat him handily.

"Man, yer pretty good," says Bert in reference to his loss.

"Thanks fer the compliment but never say that in front of Kent. He will certainly not agree," I say. "Top hasn't figured out what ta do with ya yet?"

"Nah, I git out in two months, and I'm 11 Bravo. Don't know nuthin' 'bout tanks."

"Well yer not alone there, my man. I think half or more of the guys here are infantry," I laugh. "So fucking army. Plus, they're done playin with the tanks until next summer so there's nuthin' ta do at the motor pool. Kind of why I tried so hard ta get out of there. It's so fuckin' boring standin' or sittin' around all day. If ya don't smoke or chew there's nuthin' fer ya ta do but watch the other guys smoke and spit.

"Well I don't smoke or chew," replies Bert, "so I guess I'll just hafta watch too."

After we play for a while, Kent returns from roster duty.

"Ready for lunch?"

"Jes' lemme finish creamin' Bert here and we can go," I answer.

"Finally found someone ya kin beat," teases Kent.

I ignore him.

"Hey Bert, ya wanna git some burritos with us after this game?"

"Sure. I kin even drive," offers Bert.

"Don't need ta drive. It's just a short walk from here."

I clue Bert into the situation as we walk to the PX.

"So the babe that runs the place can't date guys unless they're an officer cuz her daddy's a colonel, and he won't allow it," I chuckle. "She somehow, and I can't imagine how, got the false impression that Kent is an LT. I had ta correct her thinkin' on that. So now she's thinkin' 'bout makin' an exception in his case. Ain't that right young Kent?"

"As always yer jes' fulla shit, Wolf," says Kent.

It quickly becomes apparent as to who is full of shit when we enter the PX. As soon as Marilyn sees Kent, she comes right over to us. She totally ignores Bert and me as she burbles away chatting with Kent.

I look at Bert and give him the look that says, 'See what I mean?' and then we both laugh.

"What's so funny?" asks Marilyn.

"Oh nuthin', darlin'," I answer.

"Jes' ignore them jerks," says Kent.

We have to wait for Kent to work his charm on her before we can order our burritos. I'm impressed with Marilyn and her refusal to go on a date with

Kent. I can tell by the way she looks at Kent that she wants to, but her father's edict is too much for her to disobey. I have never seen a women turn Kent down. Ever! I feel boo coo better now since she turned me down first.

"What are you havin'?" she asks us when she finally manages to pull herself away from Kent.

"I'll have a bean burrito," answers Bert.

"He doesn't know how good they are yet, Marilyn, so you'll have to forgive him this time. I'll have two," I laugh.

"Hey! What 'bout me?" whines Kent.

"I wasn't forgettin' ' bout you, darlin'. I was jus' savin' you fer last," she says with a mischievous grin.

I look over at Kent. He's enraptured. I've never seen him like this. It's probably just because she's seemingly unattainable. For now. She's so naive about guys like Kent and me. Growing up on a military base has allowed Marilyn to be wise beyond her years about men. But she hasn't been to war and doesn't really understand how messed up in our heads we are. Why would she? We hardly know we're messed up in our heads.

We watch Marilyn make our burritos and try to tease her while she cooks. She's quick to return all of our teases. I'm starting to like her even more. She's obviously more than just another pretty face. She's going to be a real challenge for Kent. Xin loi.

There are a few tables and chairs, so when we get our burritos we sit down at one of the tables. Marilyn comes out from behind the counter and sits with us while we eat. This is working out number one for Kent.

"Marilyn, this is Bert. The newest member of our tee tee bunch of Heads," I laugh.

"Nice ta meet ya, Bert."

"Likewise, I'm sure," says Bert. "I've been in here a few times but ya prob'ly din't notice me cuz there was always a crowd of guys talkin' to ya."

"Now don't be gitten' jealous, young Kent," I tease. "Not her fault 'bout all the lowlifes chasin' after her. Yerself included."

Kent gives me the middle finger salute under the table so as no to have to swear in front of Marilyn. Such a gentleman. Well sometimes, anyway.

"So what do you guys do?" asks Marilyn.

We all laugh pretty much in unison to her question. Bert even chokes a tee tee bit on his burrito but he manages to clear his throat and starts laughing again.

"What's so funny?" she asks.

"Nuthin'," I finally manage to say after composing myself. "And by that I mean, that's what we do: nuthin'. Well 'cept me. I'm the night baker now, but Bert and Kent are just schmoozin' these days. Jes' waitin' ta git outta the army. Of course I'm just waitin' ta get out, too."

"You guys have all been ta Nam, haven't ya?" says Marilyn with a knowing look.

"How couldja tell?" asks Bert, laughing a tee tee bit.

"I've lived on bases my whole life. You guys from Nam are all alike," replies Marilyn. "Yer hair is always too long and yer boots aren't shined. That is if ya even wear boots."

She winks at Kent.

Before she can finish with her diatribe, several guys enter the PX and Marilyn has to attend to them. She and Kent make goo-goo eyes at each other when we leave. I'm betting on Kent to be the one that gets Marilyn on a date before anyone else, officer or not.

We slowly walk back to M Co. No reason to hurry. We joke about Marilyn and her dad. Like many fathers who think they can control their daughter's choice of boyfriends he will find, in the end, that he had no control at all. Xin loi, Colonel.

Tonight's menu calls for me to make apple turnovers. This is even easier than the apple pies. After I have them in the oven, I have a sandwich.

I can already smell the turnovers so I check them, and it's a good thing because they are done. It didn't take any time at all compared to the apple pies. I'm done, and it's not even 2:00 AM yet.

It's off to bed for me. Man, I love this job!

The next morning I'm up a tee tee bit earlier than my usual. I want to get over to the mess hall so I can have some turnovers before they're all gone. It's a good thing too because there are only three left when I get here.

I grab the last three and a glass of milk and basically have breakfast by myself. The DROs are here, trying to look busy. I try not to watch them too much. I don't want them to think I'll force them to be Pots and Pans man because they're slacking too much. I could, of course, but I don't want this awesome power go to my head. Not yet, anyway.

The week slowly ticks by as all time in the army seems to do. On Friday evening I'm waiting in my room for Kent to finish his mess hall roster duty so

we can sky up to Tacoma. I'm done working until midnight or so on Sunday.

I just finish rolling several joints for our evening adventure, whatever it may turn out to be, when there is a knock on my door, followed by Kent saying a tee tee bit too loud, "C'mon, open the fuckin' door!"

"Always in a huff, young Kent. Ya need ta slow down a tee tee bit," I say as I hand him one of the joints.

"Yeah, yeah, mister know-it-all," he says as he fires up the first doobie, takes a big hit, and hands it back to me.

"You din't hardly give my doobie a look ta make sure it was up to yer high standards," I reply with a fake pout.

"It never ends with you, man," says Kent sounding a tee tee bit peeved.

"Did we have a rough day at the office, dear?" I tease.

"Fuck you, dickhead!"

"Oh, was it that bad, hun?"

"Don't fuckin' call me hun!"

"OK, OK," I laugh. "Tell me all 'bout yer day, darlin'"

"An' don't go callin' me darlin' either," says Kent now starting to fume.

"Kent, Kent. Cool yer fuckin' jets, man. We're friends, remember? At least I think we're friends."

"Yeah, yeah. We're friends," he answers after taking another long toke on the lit joint. It must finally be taking its intended affect which is to relax a tee tee bit.

As he hands the joint back to me I ask, "Dinner with our grannies?"

"Yeah, why not?" he answers.

"You OK, man?"

"Yeah. Just one of those days that it's so crystal clear that the army has zero need fer us but won't fuckin' let us go home. and worse yet, they fuck with us and fuck with us jes' tryin' ta git a reaction so they kin put us in the slammer for insubordination."

"Glad yer not just figurin' all this out fer the first time. C'mon, man. Let's go eat."

When we get to McChord, Kent is purposely hanging back, trying to make me order first. He's also chatting up the head granny about his current exploits. So much so that he is not paying attention to me. Now is my chance.

"I'll have liver and onions," I say quietly.

I look over at Kent. He's still chatting up his granny.

"Whatcha havin', young man?" the granny on the serving line asks Kent.

Kent says, "I'll have the same as him."

I smile. Not so much as to give it away, but I do have to stifle myself so I don't just burst out laughing.

When our dinners are ready I take my tray and head for a table. Kent finishes his conversation and grabs his tray with hardly a second look.

But once he sits down and really has a look at what's on his tray, he gets a bewildered look on his face and then yells, "What the hell is this!?"

I'm already laughing so hard I can't answer him for a few moments. I finally compose myself enough to talk and say, "It's liver and onions. It's good fer ya. Got boo coo iron in it so ya kin grow big and strong like me."

"Well if it's so good fer ya, lets see ya eat some," Kent challenges.

Being somewhat expert at eating things that taste like shit is just part of army training if you didn't know. If they gave out badges for that, I myself would certainly have an expert rating. I managed to force down the dreaded Ham and Egg c-ration once when we had just about run out of food in the Nam, all the while acting as if it were the tastiest meal ever.

From my years in the restaurant business I even know how to cook liver and onions myself, but I have hated liver my whole life. Starting when my mother would make it for dinner. After several years of trying to get me to eat it she finally relented, and I was allowed to have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich instead.

One time during my restaurant career, we had liver and onions as the special of the day on our menu. One of our longtime regulars came over to the window into the kitchen to tell me that it had been the best liver and onions he had ever had. It caused me to think perhaps my mother just didn't know how to properly prepare liver. I had to admit it smelled quite good during the cooking process.

When things slowed at the restaurant later in the evening, I decided to give the liver another try. It had a wonderful aroma when being cooked, especially near the end when a small amount of wine is poured into the frying pan. I was about to give myself a good talking to for missing out on liver and onions nearly my whole life. But when I actually had a taste, it was no better than my mother's liver and onions, and I didn't even end up eating it.

With that thought in mind, and with Kent watching, I smile and have a bite of the liver. Quite horrid and pretty much as I remembered it. However, if I imagine the foul taste of the c-ration Ham and Eggs while eating the liver, it is somewhat palatable. Kent it watching closely, so I have another bite. I'm

still able to disguise my distaste for it and even manage a tee tee, "Yum yum, really good."

I take another bite.

“Now don't let it git cold. It loses some flavor if it gets cold."

Kent, still skeptical, pokes his liver with his fork.

"Good fer ya, aye?" he says.

He has a tee tee bite and then says, "Well if it loses some flavor when it's cold, ya prob'ly should eat this shit frozen."

Kent goes back to the mess hall serving line and orders a cheeseburger and some fries. I really want to join him, but instead I force myself to eat most of it. Joke's on me in the end. Xin loi, Derrick. It is better than the c-ration Ham and Eggs, but not by much.

When Kent returns and has a bite of his cheeseburger, he says, "Now this tastes number one. Not like somebody just punched ya in the nose."

I have to admit, especially after the liver, the cheeseburger smells wonderful. Lucky fucker.

"Friday night, young Kent, and we don't hafta work tomorrow. What 'er we gonna do?"

"Thought ya was gonna quit callin' me that?"

"Xin loi. Kinda forgot in all the excitement of bein' off duty fer a while," I laugh. "So back to the plans fer the evening ahead.”

"Why is it always my problem?"

"Why do ya consider it a problem? Ya get to do whatcha want. Where's the problem?"

"Yeah, but I gotta bring you along," he snorts.

"Not my fault yer a RA and bin inna army longer than me so ya know more people in Tacoma," I say in my defense, careful not to smile this time.

"Do ya even know anyone in Tacoma that I din't introduce ya to?" Kent asks.

I have to think for a moment.

"I know Sue," I answer, feeling a bit smug.

"One person. One fucking person.”

"Why is this suddenly a popularity contest? Also, notice I didn't say young?"

"Ya jus' did," he says.

"Did fucking what?" I ask.

"Called me young," he answers.

"You are so fucking touchy, man. It amazes me you have any friends at all with yer attitude," I laugh. "Now can we git back to our plans for the evening ahead?"

“Not s'posed ta be any pot at Marcia and Terry's but we could stop by to party. It is Friday so somethin' prob'ly goin' there," Kent finally answers.

"No argument from me. Yer usually the one tryin' ta stay away from Marcia, not me. I like Marcia," I reply.

"I like Marcia, too," says Kent. "Jes' not the way she wants is all."

The lights are on when we pull up in Kent's VW which he parks behind one of the many cars already here. Must be something special going on by the number of cars. We knock and are let in, and it is immediately apparent that while this is definitely some sort of a special event, it is not a number one event.

Kent and I both notice the somber mood.

Kent speaks up first and asks, "What happened?"

“Rick's missing," answers Terry. "He left here a couple days ago and hasn't been seen since."

Right away I'm thinking what I have always thought and that was how Rick ever managed to ride his motorcycle with just one arm. Tacoma and the surrounding area is really difficult bike riding. Tacoma has many steep hills and curves to navigate. Once you're out of town, the roads twist and turn with deep ravines and gullies, many of which lack any sort of guardrails. If you go off the road in many places, you're dead, and that's all there is to it. I don't say it, but since Rick hasn't been seen or found for over two days, I'm sure he's dead.

We stay for a while, and when we are leaving, we tell them we'll come back tomorrow to help look for him.

Once outside and out of earshot of everyone I say, "He's a goner, that's fer sure."

"Yeah, fer once ya got that right. Fuckin' bummer," replies Kent.

And of course that is the truth of the matter as we find out upon returning the next morning. At first we think the numerous cars parked around are just a lot of Rick's friends here to help search for him.

But as soon as we see Marcia's face when she answers the door, we know that Rick has been found, and that he's dead. As I thought, he was found at the bottom of a ravine next to the road in a place where there was no guardrail. It wasn't far from Marcia and Terry's house, and it's possible that

Kent and I were the last people to see and talk to him before his death. Lucky us.

Another wake is taking place with numerous joints being passed around already. Still before noon, so in respect to Rick we hold off on drinking any alcoholic beverages. And although everyone is quite high already at the stroke of 12 someone didi maus for beer and wine.

We stay most of the day and into the evening. Marcia looks like she needs some extreme comforting, and Kent knows this. On the plus side, we do mange to score some pot at the wake. Not long after that Kent gets my eye to let me know he's ready to didi. Xin loi, Marcia. But more importantly, xin loi, Rick. It was nice knowing you.

Back in the VW, Kent tosses the bag of pot onto my lap.

"Roll a doobie. A big fat one cuz I'm so bummed right now I jes' gotta stay high," laments Kent.

Back at M Co. on a late Saturday evening there are boo coo guys here as it's still over a week until payday. Most guys do not budget their pay to last all month. Their food and lodging are already supplied, so why would they?

We make for the day room and take our place in line to play foosball. Kent and I are in a somewhat subdued mood from the death of yet another friend. No one notices that we are being quiet and not cheering for or antagonizing the current foosball players. The army is not a touchy-feely kind of place, especially with all the dying going on. Back in the Nam if you were to cry every time someone got hurt or killed, you'd be crying all the time.

When our turn to play finally comes Kent and I are so distracted that we are quickly beaten. We hate that. We decide to sky up to my room to lick our wounds but mostly to smoke more pot. If the army only knew and understood how smoking pot makes it so much easier to handle our grief they would give us pot rations much like the British Navy gave out rum rations to their sailors, trying to prevent scurvy. And the rum itself didn't even work at preventing scurvy.

Usually we make the most of our weekends, especially now that we have all of Saturday off. But this weekend Kent and I just mope around. We just can't seem to bring ourselves to want to do anything.

That changes for me at midnight on Sunday. I have to go bake. I don't really mind as it gives me something to take my mind off of the death of yet another friend. When does it end, if ever?

Tonight, or I guess I should say, this morning, I have to bake pies again. Not apple this time, but blueberry. Just about my favorite so this will be fun. Well as fun as anything in the army can be.

I'm glad it's not apple pie so there won't be any comparison to my last apple pies. I fleetingly consider adding some deep fryer grease to my shortening when I make the pie dough but quickly dismiss the idea. While poking around I find a large tub of lard in the walk-in, so I just add some of the lard to my pie dough. I'm sure some bakers would use just lard, but there's not enough to do that.

The pies turn out a beautiful golden brown and no baked ham aroma either. Since I'm alone, I don't make an extra pie for myself. I have lunch while the pies bake, and when they're done I'm off to bed.

The week slips by. It's the last weekend of the month and because we don't get paid until Monday almost no one has any money left. This is a hated weekend for guys in the army.

That goes for Kent and rest of my friends. I still have some money in my bank account from getting several months of back pay. I don't mention or brag about that fact or I would be asked to lend several people money. Some of whom would not pay me back. Xin loi, guys.

Monday finally arrives, but we have to wait until after lunch to get paid. After getting paid, the week just drags on again as we wait for the weekend to come. Kent and I have been making plans all week to go bar-hopping on Friday night.

Orville has been hanging around the day room more than usual. He's even been toking down with us whenever we take a break. When Orville mentions he's got nothing doing this Friday night, Kent invites him to tag along with us. I don't mind. Orville's an OK guy if you don't mind the fact that he bleaches his hair with laundry bleach so it's an odd shade of orange most of the time.

When noon on Friday rolls around, I take an opportunity to mess with Kent a tee tee bit when he tries to get me to sign the roster.

"C'mon, man," I say, "Ya know I'm a cook."

"Why does every swingin' dick that comes through that door want to fuck with me 'bout signin' the damn roster?"

"So touchy sometimes, you know. You wouldn't think it was almost Friday night and time ta party," I laugh.

"Speaking of that," replies Kent, "I invited Gomez ta come along with us

tonight."

"What! Are you fuckin' crazy? He's a fuckin' jerk, not ta mention he's confined ta base," I loudly complain.

"That's his fuckin' problem," replies Kent.

"And he'll make it yer fuckin' problem. Listen man, I saw 'em in action when we were in Yakima. He just goes around tryin' ta pick fights with everyone. He's the biggest fuckin' jerk I know. If ya let him come, I'm not goin'."

"C'mon. He's a head," says Kent.

I laugh then say, "You mean dickhead, doncha? Kent, jes cuz someone smokes pot doesn't mean they get ta hang with ya. Fuck man, the only reason Gomez wants ta hang with us is ta smoke our pot and your Marlboros. Ya ever see Gomez come up with a number or even a smoke?"

Having said my piece, I head for the kitchen to make my lunch. After lunch it's back to the day room for Kent and I while he waits for Orville and Gomez to finish work.

"C'mon, you should come with us," says Kent as he tries to convince me to go out with them tonight.

"Not a chance in Hell, young Kent," I answer.

Later that evening, Kent tries one more time to convince me to come along. I continue to refuse and as they are leaving, Gomez sneers at me. Fuck him, I think, but I say nothing.

I'm starting to rethink my position as virtually every guy from M Co. didi maus to go party somewhere other than here. The day room is totally deserted and the only ones in the barracks besides me are the Officer and Sergeant of the Day. It's too late now though.

Later in the evening I decide to sky over to the tee tee PX to tease Marilyn and have a burrito. When I arrive it seems that the whole base must have skyed up and left Ft. Lewis. Marilyn is standing behind her counter when I enter, looking somewhat forlorn.

"Gee Marilyn, doncha ever get a day off?" I tease.

"Not really," she replies, "sometimes I work seven days a week."

"Yer a workaholic if ya work that much."

"Yeah, yeah, so whaddya want, Wolf?" Marilyn asks me.

"You know my name? Wow, we are making progress here," I laugh.

"Don't git yer hopes up, wise guy. Now, whaddya want?" she asks again.

"Bean burrito. Just one this time. I already had dinner, but it was horrid," I

answer.

When Marilyn finishes making the burrito she puts it on a paper plate and actually brings it over to me. The place is empty so she joins me and sits down. Definitely making progress I would say.

Then she brings me back to earth with a question.

"So where's Kent tonight?"

Now the real reason she is talking to me comes out. It's OK. I'm quite use to it as all women are almost instantly smitten by him. Why? I sure don't know as he's a dumb fuck if there ever was one. Proof is here right now as he could be canoodling with Marilyn instead of bar-hopping with that jerk Gomez. Xin loi, Kent.

"Marilyn, Marilyn, Marilyn. Kent's only a Spec-4 like me. Yer daddy ain't gonna let you date him. Besides, ya can take it from me as a near constant observer on the sidelines, Kent just ain't a one woman kinda guy. Yer just settin' yerself up fer a broken heart," I warn.

"So are you a one women kinda guy?" she asks with a smirk.

Maybe I am making progress here. She is a looker, no doubt about that. And she knows it.

"So are ya gonna answer me or what?" she asks again.

"Oh sorry, darlin'. Musta got carried away with my thoughts. What were ya askin'? Whether I was a one women kinda guy?"

"Yes," she replies.

"Heck Marilyn, I'm a zero woman kinda guy at the moment," I laugh. "Why ya askin'? You wanna be the one?"

She gives me a knowing look and then smiles and says, "I'll hafta think about that."

She then stands and with no further comment, skys back to her position behind the counter.

A heartbreaker for sure. Probably shouldn't have warned her about Kent. Probably should warn Kent about her, if anything.

I finish my burrito as Marilyn busies herself cleaning up the grill area. It's getting late and near closing time. Feeling I've already wasted too much of her time, as soon as I finish eating I start to didi mau.

When Marilyn sees I'm getting ready to leave, she makes a fake pouty face and says, "Leavin' so soon?"

"I kin see yer busy cleanin' up, so I din't want ta bother ya any more than I already have," I tease.

She smiles a provocative smile and says, "No bother at all, Wolf.”

Then she purses her lips and pretends to blow me a kiss. I smile back. Man , she really is a heartbreaker, big time. I better keep our relationship on a friends-only basis, I think. But I still half float, half walk back to the barracks. Did she really blow me a kiss when I was leaving?

Back at M Co. I am the only one in the day room. Can't even play foosball, so I play pool by myself until I get bored with that. Finally I watch TV until I am sleepy and then head off to bed.

It's so quiet with everyone gone, it's almost 9 AM before I wake and decide to get up. Before taking a shower, I amble to the room of the barracks where Kent bunks. His bunk is empty and hasn't been slept in. Knowing Kent, he probably got lucky and didn't come back last night. A look out the barracks windows confirms that Kent hasn't returned as his VW is not in its usual parking spot.

When leaving the room I notice that Gomez is sleeping in his bunk. As I try to shake him awake, he screams out in pain, "Oww! What the fuck ya doin', man!?"

"Whatsa matter with you? Jes' tryin' ta wake ya ta find out where Kent is," I answer.

"Fuck, I dunno where he is. We got in a accident, and I had ta go fer help.”

"Got in an accident? Where the fuck did that happen?"

"Fuck man, I dunno. It was fuckin' dark," he answers.

"Well ya found yer way back here alright, so where'd it happen, dumb fuck?" I ask again.

"I tole ya man, it was dark. I don't know where it happened.”

"Then how'd ya tell them where Kent was?" I ask, now getting annoyed.

"I didn't.”

“What?!” I almost can't believe what I'm hearing.

“I couldn't, man. I'm confined ta base," he says between moans.

"Sure din't let that stop from goin' off base, asshole," I reply, tightening my grip. "Listen, you little shit. Ya think ya hurt now? You jus' better hope ya din't let Kent die. Cuz if ya did, just wait until I get back. If ya let Kent die out there cuz ya was afraid of gitten in trouble, I'm gonna beat ya to death, ya fuckin' punk!”

I am so fucking pissed off. I storm out of the barracks, half wanting to just go back in there and beat Gomez to death right now. I find the Sergeant of the

Day in Top's office.

"Did anyone call to say that Campbell got in an auto accident?" I ask.

"Yup," answers the sergeant. "Got 'em over at Madigan. They said he's messed up pretty bad, and we shouldn't expect he'll be back anytime soon."

Well at least he's alive so I don't have to go back upstairs and beat Gomez to death. Yet. I get his ward number from the Sergeant and go back upstairs to get dressed. I knew he should have listened to me, but then no one ever does.

It's cold this morning, but at least it's not raining as I ride my bike to the hospital. It's only about a half mile away, so it doesn't take long to get there. It takes me longer to actually find Kent once I get inside.

After my months of rehab at several army hospitals, I'm not really anxious to go inside and see all the guys who got fucked up in the Nam. Man, I hate that.

The ward Kent is supposed to be in is big, and virtually every bed is occupied. I walk down one aisle to the end, and not seeing Kent, I walk back toward the door on the other aisle. I don't see him anywhere. Not knowing what else to do, I walk back down the first aisle, this time a tee tee bit slower. I look at each guy as I pass them. One guy manages to sit up and sort of motion me towards him. Doesn't look like Kent, but maybe he knows where Kent is.

When I reach the motioning guy's bedside, he slumps back against his pillow but says nothing. Holy shit! Once I get a close look at his face and see those eyebrows, I realize it's Kent.

"What the fuck didja do to yerself, young Kent?" I ask.

He sits up a tee tee bit, but again says nothing. He shakes his head slowly, very slowly, from side to side and then lays back against his pillow and lets out a sigh. His head is huge and round, and his face is so swollen that if it weren't for those eyebrows, I would never have recognized him. Even now that I know it's Kent, I don't hardly believe it's him.

"Toldya not ta go out with that fuckin' jerk, man. He mighta toldya he was goin' fer help, but all he did was hitchhike back ta M Co. He din't tell nobody that ya was layin' out on the road all fucked up. Nice fuckin' guy, eh?"

Kent just shakes his head slowly from side to side. The ward nurse comes over to check on Kent, as he has only been here a couple of hours since he got out of surgery.

"Your friend has a broken jaw, so it's wired closed. He can't talk right now,

but after the swelling goes down, he should be able to talk some," she says.

"Man, Kent. Whaddaya hate yerself or somethin'?" I ask, knowing he can't answer. This part might work out for me as now he can't argue with me. He'll probably spend boo coo time with his fingers in his ears so he doesn't have to listen me. Xin loi, Kent.

Chapter 24

Since Kent is unable to speak, I do all the talking during my visit at the hospital. As he was up late last night partying and got little sleep waiting in his smashed up VW for help to come, he starts to nod off occasionally.

"I must be borin' ya," I say when he wakes briefly. "You need ta catch up on yer sleep. Ya think ya kin stay outta trouble while I'm not here ta kept an eye on you?"

He's so out of it that he doesn't get that I'm just joking with him. He gives me a bewildered look to my question. Like he's going to get in trouble here. Although I will say, if anyone could get in trouble here, it would be Kent.

It's about noon when I sky back to M Co. Back in the day room I inform all of our friends of Kent's accident. We all decide to go visit him tomorrow.

After breakfast on Sunday, several of us cram into Ace's van, and we drive over to Madigan. We crowd around Kent's bed once we get to his ward.

He can actually talk today. Some of the swelling has gone down, but his head is still huge and kind of round.

Now that he can speak, I ask, "So, what didja do ta yerself?"

"Fuckin' broke my jaw and knocked out my front bottom teeth eatin' the steerin' wheel," he answers in a soft, muffled voice.

I can hardly believe how well he can talk with his mouth wired shut. He has trouble with some words, but considering the situation he's fairly understandable. He kind of sounds like he's trying to be a ventriloquist.

"How'd that happen?" asks Ace.

"Howard and Gomez fell asleep on the drive back, and I guess I musta fell asleep too. Drove into an embankment on the freeway. Pretty sure my VW is totaled."

We hang around Kent's bedside until they start bringing lunch into the ward. We're already all packed in, but with all the food carts and servers taking lunch to the guys that are bedridden, we decide to sky for lunch ourselves. Kent gets some sort of a nutritional shake with a straw. He shoves the straw into his mouth where his bottom teeth used to be. So convenient. We tell Kent we'll be back tomorrow to bother him some more, and then we didi mau.

We sky to McChord for lunch, and even though we're not in Kent's VW

the gate guards just wave us in. Inside the grannies as always seem happy to see us. The head granny inquires about Kent.

"So where's James Bond today?"

"Oh ma'am, it's quite sad. He was injured while on some special mission early on Saturday morning," I say with a nearly straight face. "We just came from the hospital after visiting him."

All the grannies suddenly look horror-stricken in response to the news of Kent's situation. Maybe I overdid it a tee tee bit, so I make sure to add, "He's already looking much better, and the doctors expect a full recovery. He was even talking today."

We finally order our lunches after a little more small talk and proceed to our table to eat.

"Man, I thought they were gonna cry when they heard 'bout Kent," says Beaudeen.

"Me too. Guess I laid it on a tee tee bit too thick," I snicker.

After lunch we sky back to M Co. Doesn't seem right to go party somewhere without Kent. We'll have to sneak him out of the hospital as soon as he's able. He'll probably want to try to slip out tomorrow if only to smoke some pot if I know Kent.

Back at the day room, I come to a full realization of what Kent's absence means for me. He was my foosball teammate. I have hardly played with anyone besides him. On the plus side, I'll probably get to play the front line now. A lot of good that turns out to be, as I'm not very good playing the front men. No matter who I team up with, we get beat. I'm not used to waiting in line just to get beat. I hate that.

I decide to play pool until it's time for me to head to the mess hall to bake. The menu calls for apple pies again. No worries there, as I'm sure I can repeat my last apple pie performance. Especially if there is some lard in the walk-in box and that's the first thing I check on. Sure enough there's plenty of lard, so I grab a tub of it.

I eat while the pies are cooling, and then I wake the mess hall guard to ask him if he wants some hot apple pie. He just about leaps up from his makeshift bed on the floor of the mess sergeant's office.

"Yeah, I want some," he says, "Man, I could smell 'em in my sleep."

I cut one whole pie in half. It's almost still too hot to eat, but we manage somehow.

When we're done, the guard says, "Man, that was fuckin' number one. Thanks."

He goes back to his bed, and I sky up to my room. It's near 3 AM, and I sleep 'til almost noon. After showering and shaving, I sky to the mess hall to make my breakfast.

The mess hall roster is just sitting on a podium that was, until recently, manned by Kent. There is no one manning the roster position now. Just some added proof that Top made up this job to keep Kent busy. Many of the guys are disappointed at Kent's absence. No one to tease and hassle about not wanting to sign the roster. Xin loi.

I ride over to Madigan, where Kent is just finishing one of his nutritional shakes.

"I got some special medication that might make ya feel a tee tee bit better. If ya think you kin git up and step outside fer a bit of fresh air, that is," I say.

He smiles as well as he can and says, "Fuckin' a!" through what's left of his teeth. When he stands, he's a little wobbly on his feet at first. Probably from trying to balance that watermelon he has for a head. He grabs his robe, puts it on, and we amble to the door at the end of the ward.

Despite his injuries, Kent closely examines the joint I hand him before lighting it. When he exhales, he smiles as well as he can through the cloud of smoke and says, "Man, did I fuckin' need that."

As I take the joint from him and take a hit I look at Kent's face and head in the sunlight and say,

"You really fucked yerself up big time. I can't take my eyes offa ya fer one night without ya fuckin' yerself up."

Kent saves his words and just flips me the bird.

"You might wanna save that fer yer buddy Gomez. That is if ya ever see 'em again. If I was you, I'd wanna pound the shit outta that fuckin' punk. Then again as ya said, he is a head," I chuckle.

Another middle finger salute from Kent.

"Well, one thing's same-same 'boucha. Still fuckin' touchy. You gotta get a grip, young Kent. Ya make it outta the Nam alive only ta come back ta the Real World ta try ta kill yerself. What's that all 'bout?"

Probably because of the effort it takes for him to speak, Kent just slowly shakes his head. He gets a rather forlorn look on his face. At least I think it is. He head is so huge, the forlorn look might just be a product of the swelling.

"Ya know, Kent. I'm startin' ta think we're kinda messed up in our heads a

tee tee bit. Well a tee tee bit fer me. But you, my man, seem ta be borderin' on boo coo rather tee tee," I say with a straight face, hoping to avoid another middle finger salute.

We're finished with the joint, so we go back inside the ward. It's not freezing out, but it is February and still winter. Nice and warm inside, so Kent gets back on his bed, and I stand around while we chat.

"They pushed back the date for my foot surgery until I heal from this," Kent reveals.

"Fuck, Kent, that pushes back yer release date," I respond.

Having to stay in the army, even one minute longer than your hoped-for release is always our worst nightmare. Well, second worst nightmare. Being back in the Nam is always our worst nightmare.

"O' course ya bein' an RA and all you prob'ly wanna stay in as long as ya kin. D'ya get some sort of pension or somethin' when ya git out?"

"Fuck no," Kent just about seethes at me. "I'll git the same as you. Nuthin'."

I hang out until dinner time, and then I sky, promising to come back tomorrow. Why not? I have nothing else to do now that my partner in crime is laid up for a while.

Baking at night and then hanging out at Madigan every afternoon during the week and most of the day on the weekend is about all I do now.

On my weekend visit, he and I cruise around Madigan looking for a day room with a foosball table. We look and we ask, but to no avail, as we find no foosball table. We hate that.

On Sunday morning just before noon, I sky over to Madigan to check on Kent. When I get to his ward, his bed is empty. Now where in the heck would he go on a Sunday? I'm standing by his bed trying to decide where to look first when one of the nurses notices me. I've been here so often she knows I'm here to visit with Kent.

She says to me from across the room, "Your friend's mother and sister are here visiting, and I think they all went to the cafeteria."

"Thanks," I say and didi mau for the cafeteria. As I make my way there I think, "Sister, eh?"

Kent never mentioned having a sister. There's probably a reason for that. And sure enough, when I get to the cafeteria and spot them I realize why. His sister is very attractive, and Kent would not approve of any of his lowlife

friends trying to hit on her. That would undoubtedly include me, since Kent and I have shared much about our lives with each other, and he has never mentioned his sister at all.

As I approach their table, I come up from behind and out of sight of Kent. Both his mother and sister are sitting across from him. I take a seat at their table, uninvited, just across from his sister. But far enough away from Kent that he can't punch me.

I totally ignore him and address his sister, "Young Kent never mentioned having a sister, and now I see why," I say with a knowing smile.

"Just ignore him, Sandy," Kent says without even looking at me.

"Sandy?" I repeat. "I guess I'll have to take that as an introduction."

"Ignore him, and maybe he'll go away," says Kent again.

"Go away? Young Kent, I'm 'bout the only one that comes ta visit ya every day and this is how ya treat me?"

Sandy smiles at me and says, "You must be one of Kent's crazy friends."

I'm encouraged, and so I say, "Well I'm not sure now. I mean sure we're all crazy at M Co. that's why we're there. But friends... hmm, I thought we were friends, now I'm not sure. And despite the lack of a proper introduction, it's encouraging to meet you too, Mrs. C. Especially because of this lack of good manners, there has been conjecture back at M Co. that Young Kent here was sun-hatched on a rock. So today when I return to M Co. I can assure everyone, after having met you, that he does, in fact, have a real mother."

"See what I hafta put up with? He is so fulla shit, and he's this way alla time," complains Kent.

"Kent!" his mother chides.

"Kent, Kent, Kent. Is that any way ta talk in front of your mother, let alone yer little sister?" I tease.

To which Kent responds with the middle finger salute, and I return the hated "airborne salute." Xin loi Kent.

"I might point out that it's you who is in the hospital and not me. If ya would've listened ta me, ya prob'ly wouldn't be here now."

I look at Sandy. "It just backs up my theory."

"Oh geez, look out. This guy's got more theories than Einstein," cautions Kent.

"C'mon, Kent. We talked 'bout this one not long ago. It's pretty simple and just common sense. It's just the longer yer in the Nam the more messed up in yer head ya are. Simple as that. So you were there 'bout six months longer

than me. That's 'bout equal ta six lifetimes or more.”

Kent just shakes his still swollen head from side to side and says, "Why do I hang out with you? I sure don't know."

"If ya had been hangin' with me last Friday, ya wouldn't be here," I reply.

Kent shaking his head makes me comment on how swollen it is. But certainly not as bad a when I first saw him, and so I say to Sandy, "The first day I came ta visit yer brother his head was even bigger than it is now, if ya kin believe that. 'Bout the size of a basketball I'd guess. I just walked right past 'im. Didn't even recognize 'im until I got close enough ta see them eyebrows of his. Yeah, ya just can't miss them things, or is it jus' one uni-brow now?”

Kent ignores my teasing and says, "Sandy and mom both jes' walked right past me on the ward too."

"Really?" I chuckle. "I just can't take my eyes offa him, or he's off tryin' ta mess himself up. You two must be gitten used to visitin' Kent while he's in the hospital. Either that or gitten tired of it.”

We spend the rest of the afternoon chatting away in the hospital cafeteria. I would have stayed there all night, but Sandy and Mrs. C. leave before dinner is served. No reason to hang around only to have Kent try to make it as crystal clear as possible that Sandy is off limits.

After another week of recuperating at Madigan, I hatch a plan to help Kent escape from the hospital for the day. His head is nearly back to normal so he doesn't look like some medical experiment gone wrong.

I enlist Ace and Beaudeen to help with the caper. I have to break into Kent's locker to get his civvies. Then we sky over to Madigan in Ace's van. Ace and Beaudeen wait in the van near the emergency exit on Kent's ward while I go inside with the bag of his clothes.

When I enter Kent's ward he is chatting with a couple of nurses. Now that Kent's head is near normal, the ladies are taking notice of him again. Just like old times, I think as I walk to his bedside.

"I see yer keepin' yerself busy, young Kent. I brought ya a tee tee present."

Kent takes a peek inside the bag.

I turn my attention to the nurses and say, "I hope Kent here is mindin' his P's and Q's. Forgive him fer not introducin' us ta each other, but he's a tee tee bit lax on the social graces. I'm Derrick, by the way."

"Just ignore him, girls. He's always hangin' round me, and I jes' can't seem

ta git rid of 'em," teases Kent.

"The way ya talk ta me ya wouldn't think we was friends, Kent. But I'm willin' ta jus' ignore it for now as yer still recoverin' from yer injuries. Hittin' yer head like that musta messed up yer mind a tee tee bit more than it already was. The reason I brought that present was so we kin step outside and have a smoke break with Ace and Beaudeen," I tell him.

"Well why din't ya say so?"

Kent didi maus to the bathroom and returned a few minutes later wearing his patched up blue jeans with the hole in the crotch. Just like old times.

"Good thing ya got dressed up fer yer night out or ya might of messed up yer jeans by gitten yer blood and guts all over 'em," I tease Kent.

Kent says nothing. It's an extra effort for him to speak and he might have tuckered himself out a tee tee bit flirting with the nurses.

We head for where Ace's van is parked at the curb. As soon as we're inside, we take off for the McDonald's in Tacoma.

Beaudeen produces a joint and hands it to Kent. It's not perfect and both Kent and I often have to throw Beaudeen's joints back to him for re-rolling. This time, however, Kent hasn't been able to toke down for a while, so lights the number and then passes it to me.

It doesn't seem to make any sense to take someone with their jaw wired shut to a restaurant. But after we order our food and grab a table, Kent seems happy enough to be out of the hospital. Anyway the shakes here at McDonald's are probably tastier than any nutritional shakes the army mess halls can come up with.

"How much longer ya gonna have yer trap wired shut?" I ask.

"Prob'ly a couple more weeks at least. Soon as my X-rays look good they're gonna take the wires out. Then I git a 30 day convalescent leave," he answers with a smile.

"Ahh, you sly fox. You prob'ly did this all on purpose."

"Yeah, right. Knocked my teeth out jes' fer a fuckin' 30 day leave. I fuckin' doubt it."

"Well I'm sure you'll be glad ta hear that the mess hall is still runnin' smooth despite the fact that the main roster rider is missin' in action. Always kinda thought, in the back of my mind, that Top just made that job up as a special favor fer ya ta try ta keep ya outta trouble. Din't work though did it?" I laugh.

Kent just flips me the bird. He's getting a lot of use out of that finger now

that his jaw is wired shut.

When I visit Kent on Wednesday afternoon, he tells me I just missed Marcia and Terry who came to see him after they learned of his accident.

"They invited me, and you too I guess, ta Terry's wedding on Saturday."

"You only guess I'm invited. Why? Was they gonna come and git ya ta take ya there or was ya thinkin' mebbe we could go on my bike? Cuz if ya was ya better be prayin' ta yer Mormon god fer some warm weather on Saturday. 'Specially if yer gonna wear yer pants with the ventilated crotch," I finish with a laugh.

"Man! The way ya talk ta me. Here I invite ya to a wedding and yer jes' 'bout insultin' me," replies Kent.

"Yer callin' that an invitation? Ain't even yer wedding."

"Don't come, then. See if I care."

"An' yer gitten there how? Hitchhikin'? It's illegal here as ya well know."

"I kin git there if I want to," he insists.

"Do ya wanna go on my bike or not?" I ask.

"Not if yer gonna be a fuckin' jerk 'bout it."

"Who's bein' a jerk?"

"You are," he answers.

"Me? I just came here ta visit with ya. But I'm the one bein' a jerk?" I say in my defense.

He says nothing, most likely because of his difficulty talking, not because he has nothing to say.

"I know whatcher problem is. Don't know why I din't think of it right off. C'mon, let's step outside. I got somethin' that'll git ya smilin' again."

"'Bout time ya started bein' nice ta me," Kent answers.

"Whatsa matter? Yer nurse girlfriends din't show up ta flirt with ya today?"

"There ya go. Say one nice thing and then back ta fuckin' with me," Kent complains.

"Well. Did yer girlfriends come or not?"

"O' course," he answers with a sly smile.

"Too bad ya don't need ta use a bedpan. Then ya could give yer nurses somethin' ta squeal 'bout," I tease. "Hey you got your eyebrows back. That unibrow was kinda weird. Or didja hafta pluck some out?"

He just gives me the finger as we exit the ward and step outside. I hand a

joint to Kent who gives it extra scrutiny since I've been teasing him. It's perfect, as all the joints I roll are, so I wait. He finally deems it satisfactory and lights it up.

"You know, Kent, if ya hadn't knocked yer teeth out ya wouldn't be able to smoke yer Marlboros or even worse, not be able ta toke down. Well I guess ya could stick 'em up yer nose, but I imagine that would kinda ruin it fer ya. I'm talkin' 'bout the Marlboros now. Stickin' a joint up yer nose wouldn't be nuthin' more than doin' a shotgun," I muse.

Kent pretends he's ignoring me, and to show his disdain he bogarts the joint for now. I ignore his disdain.

"What is it 'bout Marlboros? D'ya know?" I ask.

Since it seems to be a safe subject and not more teasing, Kent finally hands me the joint, exhales, and says, "Now what the fuck are ya talkin' "bout?"

"I'm talkin' bout the fact that 'cept for the chicanos and the brothers smokin' Kools, just 'bout everybody smokes Marlboros. Couple year ago my friends that smoked, they all smoked different kinds. Camels, Winstons, Lucky Strikes, Chesterfields. Even Pall Malls. Doncha think that's weird?" I ask.

"The only thing that seems weird ta me is that anyone would smoke Pall Malls in the first place. And fuckin' Chesterfields. Fuck, jes' thinkin' bought that crap gives me a headache."

Just talking about cigarettes makes Kent want one and even though the joint is still going he pulls out his pack and lights one up.

"Ya see what I'm talkin' 'bout? Jes' talkin 'bout Marlboros makes ya gotta have one. Ya don't think that's weird? I mean, even women smoke Marlboros now. Used ta be they smoked Winstons or Salems."

"Don't know," says Kent as he exhales his drag. "Never really thought 'bout it. Now gimme that number. Yer bogartin' it."

"I ain't bogartin' shit. Jes' keepin' it goin' while yer wastin' yer time smokin' that crap. Don't know whacha git from smokin' squares. Sure don't git ya high. Mus' be how cool it makes ya look." I pause and then say with a sly smile, "When yer 13 or 14."

"Full of shit. Ya jes' can't stop," says Kent as he shakes his head in disdain again.

"I'm fulla shit? OK, defend yer smokin' habit. Whacha git from it?"

"Man, like I toldya mebbe a thousand times or more, you don't know nuthin'. When ya git done screwin', then ya lay back and share a smoke. Man,

there ain't nuthin' like it."

He smiles as best he can given his situation.

"Yer kiddin' aren't ya? Ya don't really smoke just so ya kin smoke a cigarette after fuckin' do ya?" I ask.

Kent says nothing, he just smiles again.

Saturday morning arrives and it is no small miracle that the sky is clear blue it's already above 50 degrees. A lucky day for me and Kent if we're going to ride around on my bike today.

When I get to Kent's ward, he is dressed and waiting.

"So when is the wedding?" I ask.

"Don't know. We're not goin' ta the weddin', we're jes' goin' ta the reception. You din't wanna go to the churchy thing didja?"

"Fuck no. I hate churchy stuff," I answer.

"So whaddya say we go see our grannies at McChord? I'm sure they kin make ya somethin' special ta drink. I did mention yer tee tee injury to them and they was concerned 'bout cha. Prob'ly be happy ta see yer alright. Well sort of alright."

"Yeah, OK," answers Kent.

"I got my bike parked on the sidewalk."

When outside we look around in half wonder of the beautiful day it is. Mt. Rainier is visible for the first time in weeks. No matter how many times you see a volcano – dormant or not – from any distance, you can't help but look at it in awe. Even though we're probably 50 miles away, if it erupted right now Kent and I would be toast as would everyone at Ft. Lewis and in Tacoma and Seattle. Xin loi.

My spare helmet is what we call a half-shell, and it turns out to be a good thing for Kent. His head is still swollen from his accident and the helmet just barely fits.

"Looks a tee tee bit tight," I say.

"It's OK. It's tight but it don't hurt none," he answers.

I kick start my Beezer, Kent gets on, and we're off.

The grannies are besides themselves in fawning over Kent about his injuries. The head granny even comes out from behind the counter to give him a hug and then asks, "So what can we make for ya, Mr. Bond? Doesn't look like ya can eat solid food."

"A chocolate or strawberry shake would be OK," answers Kent.

"We got both, darlin'. Which one ya want?"

"Chocolate, please."

No surprise as that's what he always gets at McDonald's. This might spoil it for him. I'm quite confidant the grannies can make a boo coo great shake compared to what he gets at McDonald's.

While we wait Ken chats up the grannies. He can speak surprisingly well considering his jaw is completely wired shut. He's especially adept at telling me to get fucked quite often.

It's a fantastic day to be outside on a bike ride. Blue sky with a few scattered clouds. For the end of February this is great weather. We are so enthralled with the scenery that we go right past the rental hall where the reception is.

Kent leans forward and says to me, "Ya just went past it, man."

"Xin loi," I reply, "Guess ya caught me rubberneckin'."

Our timing is good in that there is still a short line of guests waiting their turn in the receiving line to be greeted by the bride and groom. Kent and I are hardly dressed for this affair. He's in his moccasins and his patched together blue jeans, at least I think there is a pair of blue jeans under all the patches. I'm also in jeans, though in much better repair than Kent's, and my jungle boots. Most everyone went to the churchy part and dressed accordingly.

Terry smiles wide when she sees us. Tony doesn't smile, but he doesn't sneer either. We aren't the last in line, so after a hug from Terry and a handshake with Tony, we go into the hall's reception room.

Fortunately we spy a table where the other friends of Terry and Tony are sitting, so we join them. Marcia is sitting next to an empty chair so I sit next to her. If Kent says anything I'll pretend I was just trying to help him keep Marcia at a safe distance.

Everyone is in a party mood. After having two members of our small circle of friends die rather tragically in the recent past, it is really number one to be getting together for a celebration of life instead.

I say something to Marcia that makes her smile, and I think how attractive she is especially when she smiles. Better watch out, young Kent. I think she likes me. Kent must be reading my mind when he catches my eye and gives me the high sign we reserve for indicating it's time to go somewhere and toke down. I nod. I ask Marcia if she wants to go outside for a smoke break but she declines.

Johnny knows what's up and joins us as we didi for the parking lot. Johnny

is even already prepared. As soon as we are outside and far enough away to conceal what we are up to Johnny produces a joint, lights it, and passes it to Kent.

As he exhales he says, “Man, Johnny, we were so bummed out to hear about Jimbo. I know you guys were real close.”

Johnny just nods his head in agreement.

Then Kent turns to me and says, “Be careful, *pendejo.* Marcia is looking for a boyfriend, big time. Jes' make sure ya wanna be it.”

I laugh.

“Kent, as long as yer around I don't hafta worry about that. All the women wanna be *your* girlfriend.”

And then we all laugh. We finish the joint, and then sky back inside to the party. The seat between Marcia and Mark is still empty, so I take it again.

Mark is a navy vet and knows that both Kent and I are sort of short. I'm telling Mark that I already think I'm not going to be able to get a 90-day early-out to go to school, because back in Michigan the next semester won't start until June. Mark tells me that in Tacoma the schools run on quarters instead of semesters.

“The next quarter at the Tacoma Community College starts at the end of March,” says Mark.

I can hardly speak after hearing this tee tee bit of info. If I can get accepted to the college here in Tacoma, I'll be able to get out of the army in less than a month. That's even before Kent now that he fucked himself up.

I try to stifle my joy at possibly being able to get out of the army 90 days early. Since I know Top hates me, he'll probably help me get an early out. Wait, who am I kidding? Top hates me. He'll probably stall just to fuck with me.

Kent and I leave a little before dark. As we walk to my bike I mention to Kent what Mark told me about the Tacoma Community College.

“Do ya think Top is gonna want ta git rid of me or is he gonna' fuck with me as usual?”

He seems to think for a moment and then replies, “Man, I can see him going either way on this.”

“That's exactly my thought. Maybe I can get Captain Heberle to intercede in my behalf. We did bail him out at the charity as his so-called con artists. He fuckin' owes me.”

This causes Kent to laugh a tee tee bit.

“Yeah, jes' try collectin' on that,” says Kent.

To which I shake my head in dismay.

“What do they want from us, man? We've done everything thing the army has asked, and still there's doubt they'll let me go home.”

Nothing left to do but climb on my bike and head back to Ft. Lewis.

The next morning I meet the newest member of M Co. as I'm shaving. I introduce myself to the new guy. He says his name is Melvin, but most people call him Mel.

“My name is Derrick, but most people call me Wolf,” I reply.

Mel notices my tube of toothpaste. It's a mess, and when I can't stand it anymore, I just throw it away. Just a good excuse to sky over to the satellite PX where Marilyn works to buy another one.

Mel holds up his tube of toothpaste. It's rolled up rather neatly with some sort of clip at the end.

“You need ta git yerself one of these,” says Mel as he points to the clip.

“You haven't been ta war. Once ya been there ya don't give a fuck 'bout yer tube of toothpaste lookin' strack,” I say rather mockingly.

Mel says nothing else as he grabs his stuff and didis. Maybe I insulted him. I notice as he takes his shirt off the hook, his rank is Spec-6. What makes me notice his Spec-6 insignia is that it's there at all. Most guys like me and Kent don't wear any rank insignia. Guys only wear it so they can pull rank on anyone of a lower rank. Spec-4's can't order anyone around, so why display it? I didn't know the army even had Spec-6's. I had always assumed the army created the Spec-4 and Spec-5 ranks so they didn't have to make any of the draftees NCOs.

I should probably be a Spec-5 by now, given my past combat duty and being on the winning tank crew at the Yakima Firing Center. But Top would have to put me up for promotion to E-5, and I can't imagine him doing that. I hardly care except as an E-5, I would get paid slightly more.

With nothing else to do, I sky over to Madigan to check on Kent. When I get there, he's wearing a nice burgundy-colored robe and has a couple of student nurses with him. He is so engaged chatting them up that at first he doesn't notice me.

When he does, he greets me, “Hey, *pendejo*. Where ya been?”

No introduction to his new friends.

“Gotta bake tonight, so I slept in to get myself back on the midnight shift,”

I answer.

Since no introduction is apparently forthcoming, I introduce myself to the two candy stripers.

“Hi ladies, I'm Derrick.

“Ignore him, girls. He'll jes' try ta hit on ya,” replies Kent.

I laugh and then say, “This is the way ya treat me when all I did was come over ta take ya outside to git a tee tee bit o fresh air?”

Then I give him the high sign to let him know I have a joint with me.

Kent smiles knowingly and says, “Well, why din't ya' say so? Sorry girls, but I gotta go now. But I'll be back.”

Then he gives them that famous heartbreaker smile of his. He's quite amazing. His jawed is wired completely shut, his bottom four teeth are knocked out, and he still can hustle any babe he wants.

As we sky out the side door of Kent's ward I ask, “Where didya git the robe?”

“Is it number one or what?” he replies. “It's an officers robe instead of the ratty blue robes for the enlisted guys. What's a kick is all the lifers salutin' me an callin' me sir when I walk around the hospital,” he laughs.

“Ya know if ya keep it up they're gonna figure it out. Yer hat covers yer long hair pretty good on the outside but here with no hat on someone's gonna make ya git a haircut,” I say. “I'm going to Tacoma tomorrow afternoon ta fill out an application at Tacoma College. Wanna come?”

He thinks about it for a second or two and replies, “Guess so. But only if it's a nice day. I love gittin' outta this place, but I don't wanna freeze my ass off.”

“Well, if it's not snowin' or rainin' hard, I'm going. I want that early-out,” I say.

We finish the joint we're sharing, and then I sky back to M Co. The barracks are packed with guys waiting around for payday again.

As I think about getting paid tomorrow I realize my plan to ride into Tacoma to apply for acceptance at Tacoma Community College might be in jeopardy. I'm going to get paid almost dead last, so I might not have enough time to make it before the admissions office closes. On a positive note, if I can pull this off and get a 90-day early-out, tomorrow will be my last payday in the army. That makes me smile. I might really get out of this madness alive.

The cooks are quite busy the next morning when I come in to make

breakfast for myself. They are one cook short with Gomez in the hospital. It's seems fitting that Gomez had to suffer from his injuries for two days before he asked to go to the hospital because he was still so worried about admitting to being off-base. As if having two broken collar bones and several broken ribs aren't trouble enough. But then I already knew Gomez was an idiot and totally untrustworthy.

After breakfast, I'm just wasting time until we get paid. Another great thing about being a cook is that I don't have to fall out for formation twice a day. Even more important, no more police call. It is so unlike the army to do something sensible like not making the cooks pick up cigarette butts with the hands they will be cooking your food with, but that's the rule. I just follow orders.

I walk over the to PX to see Marilyn.

“Wolf! Where ya been? I thought ya might of got out,” she says.

“If everything goes as planned, I will be out in two weeks,” I reply with a smile.

“Really? I'm happy for ya. I'm gonna miss ya. You're one of my nicest customers.”

“So Marilyn, I know ya can't date enlisted guys,” I start.

“It's jes like I toldya, Wolf, my daddy won't let me,” she interrupts.

“I know, I know,” I say, “but can ya date a college student?”

“Sure, why?”

I smile a moment then I say, “Because in a few weeks, if I do get out, I'll be a college student at Tacoma Community College.”

She changes the subject and asks, “Where's Kent?”

“Oh yeah, that's one of the reasons I stopped by. Kent got inta a bad car accident. Totaled out his VW, broke his jaw, and knocked out his bottom teeth. He's OK now 'cept he's still got his jaw wired shut while it heals. He can't eat anything solid so that's why we haven't been by for one of your sublime burritos.”

At first she has a look of deep concern on her face, but after I tell her he's OK it changes to a look of relief.

“Is he at Madigan?”

“He is,” I answer. “He's in the Head Trauma ward if ya wanna visit 'im. But he's goin' onna 30 day convalescent leave so you'd need ta go soon.”

I think to myself, of course she wants to visit him. As I make my move to didi, she motions me back.

“Here,” she says as she hands me a folded scrap of paper.

When I get outside the PX I unfold the piece of paper she gave me. It has her name, Marilyn, followed by her phone number. Too much. Boo coo too much. I put her phone number in my wallet for safe keeping. Xin loi, Kent, but I told you not to go bar hopping with Gomez.

While waiting in line to get paid that afternoon, I see Howard Wright. He's got one arm in a sling. He broke his shoulder when Kent totaled his VW, and I haven't seen him since the accident.

“Didja just get back?” I ask him.

“Yeah, could of stretched it out a tee tee bit longer at Madigan, but the hospital is such a boo coo depressing place. And with my arm still inna sling, I gotta profile so Top can't make me do nuthin' 'til I get out.”

He smiles.

“You fuckin' better hope, Howard, cuz I gotta number one profile that Top just totally ignores. Plus if ya remember the riot duty fiasco, he hates us for that,” I say. “So do ya remember the accident at all?”

“Yeah, I remember some. We were all drunk. Kent had the radio on boo coo loud tryin' not ta fall asleep, but it musta not worked. When we went up the embankment, we hit a boo coo big tree dead fuckin' center. The front of the car looked like a fuckin' horseshoe. Kent hit his head on the steering wheel and was out cold for a couple of minutes, maybe longer. Gomez and me were both fucked up, but he wanted ta go fer help cuz he didn't want ta be there if the cops came. After Gomez went fer help, I was tryin' to reach inta the front seat ta turn the radio off or at least turn the volume down. So Kent comes to, and he's totally out of it. Musta had a concussion or somethin' cuz when he comes to, he starts tapping his fingers on the steering wheel to the music just like nuthin' was wrong. It was fuckin' freezin' in there, and after no one came ta help us, I decided ta go myself,” says Howard.

“Number one thing ya did that cuz Gomez never went fer help. He just hitchhiked back here and went ta bed. Din't tell anyone about you guys being out there freezin',” I inform Howard.

“Didn't know 'bout that. I just saw Kent today before I left Madigan, and he didn't say nuthin' 'bout it.”

It's almost 2:30 before I get paid. Fortunately for me and Kent, it is another blue sky day with temperatures in the 60's. I change into my civvies and sky over to Madigan on my Beezer.

He's sitting on his bed in his civvies already waiting for me, it seems.

“Hey, *pendejo*! About time ya got here,” he says with a wide, mouth open, smile.

“Number one! They finally let yer tongue loose again,” I say. “I saw Howard, too. He's back at M Co. He mentioned he saw ya before he left.”

“Yeah, he had his arm inna sling. He wasn't pissed at me about the accident or nuthin', so we're cool,” replies Kent.

“So young Kent, check this out,” I say as I pull my wallet out. I get the folded piece of paper Marilyn gave me and show it to him

He looks at it and says, “I thought she couldn't date enlisted guys.”

“She can't. But she can date college students.”

“You ain't out yet,” Kent reminds me.

“I know that, but I can hope, can't I?” I reply. “I mean that's what we're gonna do right now. Gonna start the gears in motion. Come on, Kent. You've watched me up close for almost a year now. Do ya really think I can't pull this off?”

“Well, I ain't gonna be here ta see it cuz of my 30 day convalescent leave. They want me ta git fattened up by some home cookin' before my toe operation. I didi mau tomorrow.”

“No fuckin' shit?” I ask.

He just nods his head in the affirmative.

“Ya lucky fucker. Well yer gonna miss all the fun of watchin' me git out. Before you, I might add.”

When we get to the college, I park my bike outside of the Admissions Office.

“Ya wanna come inside and watch me work my magic?” I ask, waving my ink pen around like a magic wand.

“Any magic ya got, ya got from me so I'll jes wait out here and enjoy the outdoors,” Kent replies.

“I might be a while. I'm gonna fill out the application and turn it right in if I can.”

I look around the campus from the parking lot. It's a rare beautiful day for the end of Winter here in Tacoma, so lots of students are taking advantage of the weather and are walking and sitting around on the campus.

“You just wanna work your magic on somma the ladies I see walkin' round,” I tease.

“Ya know I never thought 'bout goin' ta college. Never felt smart enough,

but now that I see all the babes here I might hafta correct my thinkin'."

"Kent, yer missin' the whole point of goin' ta college. Ya don't have ta feel smart ta go ta college. Ya go ta git smart," I say.

"I said I might reconsider."

I sky up the walkway to the Admissions Office and my luck is still holding as they haven't closed yet. I enter and approach the counter.

"I'd like to apply for admission," I say to the receptionist.

She hands me the application and says, "Fill these out, put them in this envelope with your check for the application fee, and then mail it back to us."

"Kin I fill them out now and just pay ya cash?"

She thinks for a moment and replies, "Well ya might need some of your records to fill everything out."

"Well let me try and if I can't remember everything I'll jes hafta mail it in," I answer.

I sit in one of the chairs and start filling the application out. Nothing to fill out that I don't know, so I finish in about 15 minutes. I go back up to the counter and hand the application in.

"How much ya need?" I ask in regards to the fee. Since I just got paid I have more than enough. She gets me a receipt, stamps it paid, and hands it back to me.

"Thank you so much," I say as I turn and didi mau.

Once outside I am nearly floating along as I walk back to my bike. I really am going to make this happen, I think.

When I get back outside, I say to Kent, "Man Kent, I really wanted ta go back ta school in Michigan rather than stay in Tacoma. But I thought bein' outta the army is the important thing, and as I look around this place I think I'm gonna like it here boo coo."

"If ya git in," teases Kent.

"Kent, I already went ta college for a year before I got drafted. That's not gonna be a problem. My problem is gittin' my early out past Top," I say. "Hey, since yer gonna didi mau tomorrow, wanna stop by McChord and say goodbye ta the grannies?"

"Fuckin' A! They jes cut the wires off this afternoon and I ain't ate yet. I was only hopin' fer McDonald's."

We get on my Beezer and sky to McChord. It's payday here as well so there is no one in the mess hall at dinner time.

"So James, are you still on yer liquid diet?" the head grannie asks Kent.

“No Ma’am, I jes got my jaw unwired and this'll be my first solid food inna while,” answers Kent.

She turns her attention to me and asks, “How 'bout you? Yer not onna liquid diet are ya?”

“Well that depends on what the liquid is.” I laugh. “But I came for real food.”

“We got that, darlin'” She replies to me. “And you, Mr. Bond?”

He says, “Let him order first while I think a tee tee bit.”

I know what he's up to, but it's his first solid food, so I let him slide.

“I'll have what he's havin',” says Kent after hearing my order.

“Copy cat,” I whisper.

He gives me the finger and I respond with the “Airborne Salute,” and we both laugh. Good thing we're friends.

After I've given my order I say, “So Ma'am, this might be James and my last visit here. He leaves for a 30-day leave tomorrow, and I should be out in two weeks. We both will truly miss all of ya and yer wonderful cooking.”

By the instantaneous look of sadness on all their faces, you would have thought that I just told them that Kent and I face a firing squad tomorrow.

“So where ya off to, Mr. Bond?”

“Stockton, California is my hometown, and that's where I'm goin',” answers Kent.

“What 'bout you, darlin'?” the head granny asks me.

“Well, ma'am, I'm from Michigan, but if I get out in two weeks I'm stayin' in Tacoma and goin' back to college here.”

“We'll miss ya both,” the head granny says.

We chat a tee tee bit more while we wait for our food. By the look on his face when they bring our trays, I can tell Kent really missed solid food.

We take a table and sit down to our dinner.

“I've never asked ya what yer gonna do when ya finally git out,” I say.

“Kinda hopin' ta git my band back together,” he answers. “Dean, the piano player is already outta the army, and they're jes' kinda waitin' fer me ta git out.”

“Right, ya said ya played the bass, I remember now,” I reply.

I see some commotion at the counter to the kitchen. The grannies have assembled up and are walking toward us. The head granny has a tray with what looks like two martini glasses on it.

When they get to our table she says, “Stirred, not shaken, Mr. Bond so we

didn't bruise the ice. Is that the way ya like it?" she asks.

Kent smiles and says, "Why thank you Ma'am. You din't hafta go ta all the trouble fer us, but since ya did, we won't let 'em go ta waste."

I take a sip of my martini. I'm not a major hard stuff drinker, but the martini is boo coo excellent. We raise and clink our glasses and I make a toast, "To you beautiful ladies for all the great food you've made for us. We will never forget you." I take another sip, and it's true. I have never forgotten them.

They curtsy and bow and blow us kisses as they walk and sashay back to the kitchen giggling and laughing.

"Man, I am imaginin' there is boo coo going on in that kitchen that we din't have a clue 'bout," I say with a smile.

Kent just shakes his head from side to side, smiling all the while.

"So gimme yer phone number and address in California," I say.

"What for?" he asks.

"Cuz as soon as I know fer sure I'm gittin' out, I'm gonna rent an apartment or maybe a house. I'll send ya my address, or maybe even call ya ta make sure yer behavin' yerself."

"Got somethin' ta write it down on?"

I take out the receipt from the college to write on.

"OK, I'm ready," I say, and Kent recites his phone number and gives me his parents address.

"Might not be at my parents house much," he adds.

"That's OK, if yer not there I'll jes chat with Sandy."

"You kin fergit 'bout her. She's a Mormon and already gotta Mormon boyfriend too," he replies. "I ain't worried 'bout you and Sandy."

We finish our dinner and drinks. Kent is holding his stomach and says, "Oh man, I ate too much. Shoulda paced myself better."

We get up and walk towards the counter to say our farewells. All the grannies come out of the kitchen to say goodbye. Hugs and kisses all around and a couple of them even have tears in their eyes. It is so touching I can't fully explain how emotional it makes me feel. If I do get out of the army in the next few weeks I know this: there will be no tears in Top's eyes when I didi mau.

As we walk outside and over to where my bike is parked I say, "Man, Kent, I think they really like us. I am gonna miss this place boo coo."

"Me too, *pendejo*, me too," replies Kent.

We climb on my bike and we sky.

Chapter 25

By the time I get up on Tuesday morning I realize Kent has probably already skyed up on his way home. As I finish getting dressed I am thinking about what I'm going to do today since normally I would go visit Kent.

Before I can think of something the company clerk knocks on my room door and says, “Top wants ta see ya when yer done.”

I tell him I'll be there in a couple of minutes. Now what? Now fucking what to be exact? I haven't told anyone in M Co. that I trying for an early-out, so it can't be anything about that, but what?

I make my way to Top's office and report.

“Wolf,” Top addresses me, “Captain Heberle wants ta give ya yer re-up talk after lunch today at 13 hundred hours sharp.”

He notices I am trying boo coo hard to stifle a laugh. It's causing my sensitive right eye to water so it sort of looks like I'm crying, I think.

He smiles, something I have never seen him do when dealing with me, and says, “I know it's a waste of his time but he insists on talking to you anyway.”

Fortunately I have nothing pressing on my agenda.

I'm a couple minutes early when I arrive at the Captain's office. His door is open and I see he's at his desk so even though I'm early, I knock on the door frame. He looks up and says, “Come in, Wolf. Have a seat.”

He has my military record file on his desk.

“I've been going over your record, and I think we may have misjudged you here at M Co.”

I wasn't in the least worried that he would be able to talk me into re-upping, but if this is all he's got, it will be easy telling him no way, no how.

He looks down at my file and says, “I know you were on the winning tank crew at Yakima, and you and Campbell did a good job representing M Co. with our charity event. But your combat record is impressive as well. Purple Heart and a Bronze Star.”

“I got a Purple Heart sir, but I didn't get a Bronze Star.”

“No, it's right here in your file,” he says. “Bronze Star with V device. That's the highest Bronze Star. The “V” stands for valor.”

I couldn't care less about what the V stands for, to be honest. I just want to get to the part of the re-up chat where I say no thank you.

“Sorry, sir, but I never got a Bronze Star, with or without the V device.”

“Well I'll have that corrected ASAP. After your interview I'll have Top get right on that,” he replies.

“Oh man, Captain Heberle, couldn't ya jes send it ta me after I get out?”

“No, Wolf. I don't think you understand. This is an honor due you, and I'm going to make sure you get it,” he answers.

“Captain Heberle, Top doesn't exactly like me, as ya prob'ly know, so it will most likely not feel like much of an honor ta me,” I reply.

He won't change his mind about the Bronze Star, but we get through the rest of the exit interview, and I finally get to say no thank you to his offer to re-up. He shakes my hand and thanks me for my service. First time this has happened since I've been in the army, so I hardly know how to act, but I manage to say, “Yer welcome sir.”

I'm not back in my room long when there is a knock on the door.

“C'mon in,” I say.

The door opens, and it's the company clerk.

“Top wants ta see ya.”

“Yeah, OK,” I reply. I knew this was going to happen.

We get down to Top's office, and he says, “Wolf, be here tomorrow at oh-nine hundred hours. You and I are going over to HQ to have your Bronze Star awarded per Captain Heberle's orders. Do you have a decent set of fatigues to wear over there?”

I smile, something I rarely do, if ever, in Top's presence and say, “Not only do I not have a decent set of fatigues, I don't have *any* fatigues.”

Top has a quizzical look on he face.

“I'm a cook now. All I have are the cook's whites that Perkins gave me when he left. My fatigues were almost two years old, and I threw them away months ago.”

Apparently he doesn't believe me because he says, “Let’s go up to your room.”

I smile again and shrug. “OK.”

When we get to my room, I open my locker to reveal two sets of cook whites, a pair of blue jeans, my winter coat, and my rather worn fatigue jacket.

“I guess I could wear these,” I say pointing to my blue jeans.

Top sneers at my suggestion.

We didi mau back down to his office and he says to the clerk, “Take Wolf

over to the Quartermaster's in my jeep. I'll call over there right now and tell them to fit him a set of dress greens."

So the clerk and I sky over to the Quartermaster. It doesn't take long. It's not like they tailor the dress greens for me. They have many sets of every size, so they start by having me try on jackets until one fits. Then the pants are tried on. I get a shirt and a tie, and I'm done. I still have the belt and the dress shoes they gave me in basic training.

"Yer gonna need a hat," says the Quartermaster clerk. "What kind d'ya want?"

"None," I answer.

He laughs and then says, "Yer gonna need a hat if yer gonna wear that outfit anywhere on base."

He hands me a hat with a brim in front, and I try it on. It's way too big.

"Jes' gimme the smallest one ya got," I say. He gives another hat and it fits good enough for the 10 or 15 minutes I'll have to wear it.

"Thanks," I say, "this'll do."

The company clerk and I sky back to M Co. and I go up to my room to hang up my dress uniform for tomorrow.

I go to the mess hall right at midnight to bake so I can get to bed as soon as possible since I have my 9 AM appointment with Top. I just knew it would turn out this way. I only hope we can get it over boo coo fast.

The next morning, I show up at the appointed hour and Top has the company clerk chauffeur us over to HQ in his jeep. I'm sure Top's biggest disappointment is that we are headed to HQ so they can award me a Bronze Star when he really wants to be driving me over to the base slammer for a couple of months of hard labor and maybe even bread and water to eat.

We arrive at HQ and Top and I go inside while the clerk stays in the jeep. All this time Top has said nothing to me. Top informs some orderly why we're here, and we are shown to a room. We wait. Something I am well practiced at, but hopefully that will be over soon.

I am wondering if there will be a replay of the way I was awarded my Purple Heart. The only way they could have insulted me more was if they had thrown the Purple Heart on the floor. Top has still not said one word to me. Good thing, too, because when I put the hat on they gave me over at the Quartermaster I realized how long I let my hair get. I'm mostly out of Top's sight now that I work the night shift. When we enter HQ, I have to take my

hat off, and my hair just spills out all over the place. Top is probably holding back blowing a gasket right now, because I am making him look bad right now. I tried to warn Captain Heberle that this might happen.

Some Colonel enters the room, and Top and I both salute him. He knows Top, and they exchange some pleasantries. Then it's my turn. The Colonel turns to me and congratulates me for the Bronze Star. He removes it from the case and pins it on me. He shakes my hand, and then we salute each other. He hands me the empty case for storing the Bronze Star. Good thing, too, because that's where it will be. Can't imagine any reason I would ever wear it. So it wasn't so bad after all as at least I didn't feel insulted this time.

As soon as we are back to M Co., Top speaks to me for the first time today and says, “Wolf, go get that uniform off ASAP and bring it back down here to me.”

I reply, “Ya know, Sgt. Popoff, the one person who wants that to happen quicker than you is me.”

I sky up to my room, change into my civvies, and take the dress greens back to Top. When I get there, Top hands me a used pair of fatigue pants.

“What're these for?” I ask.

“I need ta supply one volunteer for a disaster simulation tomorrow at Madigan,” replies Top. “I thought it would be perfect for Campbell, but they called me today and told me he's on leave, so I'm volunteering you instead. I'm sure you'll get ta thank him when ya see him next.”

He flashes another rare smile.

“I work midnights. Doesn't that mean I'm off during the day?” I ask.

“Wolf, ya been inna army long enough ta know we work 24/7. Didja get the next day off after bein' on guard all night?” he asks somewhat rhetorically. “Be down here at nine hundred hours tomorrow morning, and I'll have my driver take ya over ta Madigan.”

I knew there would be repercussions from the Bronze Star situation, I just didn't think it would be so soon and so obvious. So army.

That night when I go to the mess hall I am inclined to make Jell-O, but something just won't let me do it. Weird. If all goes as planned, this will almost be my last night as night baker. I check the day's menu and bake what is requested. Afterward, I sky up to bed to get some sleep before my punishment.

I show up at Top's office at the appointed hour and am quickly driven over

to Madigan. There's a sign with an arrow indicating the volunteers to enter what looks like a huge gymnasium. The floor is completely lined with stretchers. A lot of people moving around with white lab coats and nurses outfits.

There's a line for the volunteers to get into. So far I'm highly qualified for this assignment, being expert at line standing. Quite expert, as a matter of fact. I wait, another thing I'm expert at and after a while I am directed to a stretcher and asked to lay down on it. So far I am probably the most qualified person in this boo coo big room full of people to be volunteering for this disaster drill. After a short while, a guy with a small suitcase kneels down next to me and asks, “Is it gonna be OK if I cut yer pant leg all the way up ta yer thigh?”

“Sure” I answer, “They gave me these pants just for this.”

He uses some scissors to cut my pant leg open. He is apparently a makeup artist, and he starts by applying some skin protector on my leg. He then starts putting what looks like putty on my leg. He shapes it with his fingers until he is satisfied. We wait a short while for the putty to harden, and then he starts to paint it. The effect of his work is that my leg looks like it is split open to the bone from my shin all the way up my thigh. It is so realistic looking, I can't stare at it without starting to feel woozy. I'm impressed.

It takes about two hours to put all the makeup on my leg, but when finished I am picked up and carried into another room for simulated treatment. There are several volunteers taken in at a time and after they set me down I hear two female voices call out, “Derrick.”

When I look up, it's the two candy stripers from Kent's ward. Hey, they remembered my name!

“Are you OK?” they ask.

“It's just makeup, but it looks real doesn't it?” I ask. “I can't even stare at it, or I get dizzy.”

“It does look real,” answers one of the girls.

“So since Kent's not here to interrupt us, maybe you can tell me your names,” I say.

They smile and then one says, “I'm Jenny and this is Jackie.”

We hardly get the introductions finished when a guy in a white lab coat shows up and says, “I'm Dr. Smith, lets get you fixed up soldier.”

He gives Jenny and Jackie orders, and they hook me up to a fake IV and do fake injections, for pain, I guess.

They don't play with me for long considering the seriousness of my fake injuries. It took the makeup artist two hours, and they looked at me for less than ten minutes. On the plus side, when they are done, I am dismissed and can didi.

The down side is it's a long walk back to M Co. It's not raining but it is cold outside and my pant leg is cut all the way up to my thigh so my walk back is quite brisk to say the least.

After a while I kind of forget about the fake injury and am only thinking about the torn pant leg and that my leg is cold. I can't bend my knee much, so I have to walk a tee tee bit stiff legged. A woman walking past sees my leg and the way I'm limping and gasps.

“Are you OK?”

“Yeah I'm fine. Jes' a tee tee bit cold,” I answer.

“What happened to you? Really, you're going the wrong way. The hospital is in the other direction,” she says rather emphatically.

Finally I realize she doesn't know it's fake, and I laugh.

“It's OK, really. I was just a volunteer for a disaster simulation at the hospital. It's just makeup.”

She examines it closely and smiles. “That looks so real.”

“I know,” I reply. “I can hardly look at it myself. Thanks for yer concern, though.”

As I continue on my walk back to M Co. the same scenario plays out as everyone I pass offers to help or assist me. More than once I take advantage of the situation, pretending I really have been injured and act disoriented and don't know what happened me when they ask.

Each time, just before the situation goes too far, I start laughing and confess my injury is fake. No harm seems to be done as each time there is great relief expressed by the Good Samaritans that I'm not really hurt. Some of them even laugh along with me when they realize they have been pranked.

Thankfully the makeup artist put some sort of a makeup release on my leg. After I take off the sacrificial fatigue pants, the fake wound just peels off in one big piece. It does pull some of the hair off my leg, but not too boo coo much. My tee tee prank almost made the whole thing worth it. I roll up the cut up pants, and put the whole lot of it in my locker for later use.

I sky down to the day room to see if there is some foosball action happening. Pete is off duty and hoping someone would show up to be his partner. We wait for our turn to play Ramon and Adolph. I consider Pete,

Adolph, and Ramon good friends. I am dying to tell them I am so close to getting out. In the Nam I would have been saying rather loudly if not yelling, “SHORT!!!!” whenever anyone said anything to me. But I say nothing. Until I know I've been accepted to Tacoma College, I need to keep this to myself.

This is it, I think as I unlock the mess hall doors for what I hope will be the last time. Even so, I plan on making whatever is on the menu. I'm sure every past night baker made Jell-O on their last night.

But I've realized I like cooking and baking, so for me Jell-O would be a cop out. It's such a pleasure to work with the raw ingredients, mixing them together, and putting it in the oven. Then there's the wonderful aromas wafting around the kitchen, hinting at even better things to come. I doubt anyone who follows me here will care as much. But that is not my problem. It's going to be the mess sergeant's problem. Xin loi, Sarge.

After I wake and get up on Friday morning, my only thoughts are mail call. Well, more than mail call, but getting an early out and getting out of the army. Now that we don't work a half day on Saturday, there is no mail call on Saturday anymore. My hope is that my letter of acceptance comes today so I don't have to wait over the weekend.

I have never waited for my name to be called at mail call with such trepidation. Finally the clerk calls my name and sure enough, I have a letter from Tacoma Community College. I hold the envelope for a moment before I open it. Just like not looking at the numbers on a lottery ticket after the winning numbers have been revealed. Until you actually look at the numbers, you can still think you may have won. My odds are boo coo better than any gambling lottery, though.

As I told Kent I've been to college for a year, and now I'm even a veteran, so they should let me in with no problem. And they do. I take a deep breath and think about my next move. It's Friday afternoon. If I want to get my early out, I need to ask Top.

As I walk to Top's office, I notice Captain Heberle's office door is open. Instead going to Top, I decide to go right to the captain, which is breaking military protocol. Xin loi.

I knock on the captain's door frame.

“Come in, Specialist Wolf. Can I help you?” he asks.

“Well sir, since you asked, I do need your help with something, I think,” I reply.

“What's that?”

“I just got accepted to Tacoma Community College, and I have less than 90 days left, so I was hopin' I could get an early-out. But I don't know if Top will give me one.”

“When do classes start?” he asks.

“March 28th.”

He stands up and says, “C'mon, we'll go talk to Top right now.”

We enter Top's office. He sees the Captain and asks, “Yes sir?”

“Top, Specialist Wolf has been accepted to a local college, and since he has less than 90 days left on his enlistment, I want you to process his early out ASAP so he can start clearing post on Monday. Is that going to be possible?” he asks.

“Yes, sir, I don't see a problem with that,” he replies. With that he turns to his clerk and says, “Pull Wolf's file so we can get the paper work started. Anything else, sir?”

“That's all. Thank you,” Captain Heberle answers and then he didis back to his office.

Top turns to me and says, “OK, Wolf, be down here at nine hundred hours on Monday, and you can start clearing post.”

I am nearly floating down the hallway as I leave his office. I never ever expected it to be so seemingly easy to get my early out. My fucking early out to be exact. I almost can't comprehend that I'm going to be out of the army in less than two weeks. I want to scream “short” as loud as I can but don't.

Instead I go to the mess hall to see the mess sergeant.

“Hey, Wolf, what's up?” he asks.

“I just got an early out, and I start clearing post on Monday. I came to say goodbye,” I say with a smile as I hand him the keys to the mess hall.

Well, I'm gonna miss ya, Wolf. Yer one of the best bakers I've had, but I never said nuthin' ta Top cuz I thought he'd want ya back.”

I laugh. “Oh ya never had ta worry 'bout that. Top was boo coo happy ta git rid of me.”

“And don't think I didn't notice ya never made Jell-O,” the Mess Sgt says.

“Thanks, Sarge, I appreciate that. First time, I think, since I've been in the army that someone gave me a compliment.”

As I walk out of his office he pats me on the back.

“Thanks again, Wolf. Would you tell Anderson to come see me?”

“Sure, Sarge,” I reply.

As I walk through the mess hall kitchen, I see Adolph and Ramon are still preparing some of the M Co. dinner.

I can't help it now, and I say rather loudly, “Short!”

“Short what, motherfucker?” asks Adolph.

“Short on time left inna army, *pendejo*. Jes got my early out OK'd by Top and the Captain,” I answer. “I can still hardly believe it.”

“Fuck, we're gonna' miss ya man.”

“Nah ya won't,” I say, “I'm gittin outta the army but I gotta stay in Tacoma for a coupla months while I go back ta school. Couldn't find any college back home in Michigan, so I have ta go to school here. I don't care as long as I'm outta the fuckin' army.”

“Dis calls fer a celebration,” says Adolph. “Soon as we finish this stuff, we can take a break. Let's meet up in our room inna coupla minutes.”

“Man, I am so fuckin' high just knowin' I'm gittin' out. I din't even think 'bout smokin' some dew, but now I can't wait. I'll go roll some numbers so don't dally,” I say.

I sky up to our room and as I enter the hallway from the stairwell, I notice a foot locker and some bedding next to the door to my room. I quickly realize it's my foot locker and bedding. Inside I find Anderson making what had been my bed.

“What the fuck are ya doin'” I ask.

“I'm the night baker now, so this is my bed,” he says with a smile.

I hardly care. I'm getting out of the army in one piece, sort of.

I open my locker and get my stuff out. I throw my cook's whites right into the trash can. I don't need them anymore. I take my stuff and pile it on my foot locker and slide everything down the hall to the bay. My old bed is still empty, so I put the bedding on it and put the rest of my belongings into an empty wall locker. First I make my bed, and then I sit on it and start to roll some joints. I smile. I'm almost most done with this insanity, and they didn't make me crazy, though they sure fucking tried.

While I'm rolling joints, Ace and Beaudeen arrive. It's Friday afternoon and they are trying to stay out of sight, as usual.

“A tee tee bit early fer celebratin' the weekend, ain't it, Wolf?” teases Ace.

I smile and say, “I'm out, well almost out. Gittin' a 90-day early-out ta go ta school in Tacoma. I start clearin' post on Monday!”

“Better git them doobies lit then, bro,” says Ace.

“Whatcha doin' out here, man?” Adolph asks, when he and Ramon find us

in the bay.

“Fuckin' Anderson took my spot in our room already,” I answer.

“No! What? Fuck! Anderson? He don't toke man!” says Adolph. “Ramon, what the fuck we gonna do?”

Ramon just shakes his head. Our sweet club house, gone in a moment, I think. I don't really care that much since I'm just about out.

“First thing I'm doin' tomorrow morning is going lookin' fer an apartment or somethin'. Once I git somethin', yer all invited to a party,” I announce.

After we finish, I sky to the day room. There's usually a recent Tacoma newspaper there, and I want to look through the want ads for an apartment.

Sure enough there are a couple of recent Tacoma newspapers, and I grab them and sit down to check the want ads. Right off I find what might be the perfect place for me. It's a small garage that's been converted into a one bedroom apartment. I write the phone number down so when Top didi maus today, I can use his phone. Xin loi, Top.

I hang out in the day room playing pool, mostly because my foosball partner isn't here. From the day room I can look right down the hallway to Top's office. As soon as he didis, I saunter down the hall and poke my head in. My luck is holding boo coo big time. The Officer of the Day hasn't shown up yet, and the Sergeant of the Day is Froggy.

“Wolfman! Howya doin'? Ain't seen ya lately,” says Froggy.

“Froggy! I'm fucking out! Well almost out. I start clearin' post on Monday!”

“That's number one, Wolfman,” says Froggy.

“You don't mind if I use Top's phone ta make a call, do ya?” I ask.

“Nah, yer allowed ta use it. Jes' don't make no long distance calls is all.”

I call the landlord, and we make arrangements to meet on Saturday. So far so good.

“Thanks, Froggy. Hey, once I get settled in Tacoma, I'm gonna have a tee tee celebration at my place. Yer invited, of course” I say.

“Thanks, Wolfman. I can't wait. Kin I bring a date?” he asks.

“Of course you kin bring a date,” I reply.

I really hoped he would come, but I never end up seeing him again.

The night seems to last forever. Every time I wake up, it's still dark outside, so I try to go back to sleep with much tossing and turning. I am so pumped up about getting out of the army that at least when I do manage to

fall asleep I haven't had any nightmares, yet.

As soon as the sun warms it up some, I go out to my Beezer, and sky up to Tacoma. I'll have breakfast at the first place that looks decent, and then I'll just cruise around Tacoma until my appointment. Now that I don't have Kent along to navigate for me, I need to start learning my way around Tacoma a tee tee bit better anyway.

I get off at the main drag running through Tacoma and look for one of the many 24-hour restaurants that usually serve breakfast all day. Since I'm in no hurry, I look for one with lots of cars and trucks in the parking lot. I find one, and I sit at the counter since I'm alone and don't want to hog a booth or table when they're so busy.

The waitress working behind the counter hands me the menu and asks, “Some coffee?”

“Yes, ma'am,” I answer.

“Cream with that?”

Cream! Oh man, cream. For my coffee. I don't know how to act so I just nod and say, “Thank you, ma'am,” after she sets the tee tee creamer next to my cup of coffee.

This will be number one. I can see the coffee makers behind the counter with the small carafes of freshly made coffee. Not like the huge urns of coffee in the army mess hall that can last for days or maybe even weeks with nothing but milk to put in it unless you like it black.

I take a sip. It's like ambrosia. Even the smell is hypnotic.

“Can I gitcher order?” my waitress asks.

“Two eggs, over easy, hash browns, rye toast, and some sausage.”

“Link or patty sausage?”

“Links, please,” I answer.

“Yer welcome, darlin',” she replies.

So unlike the back and forth when in the chow line back at M Co. Definitely no, “Yer welcome,” from the army cooks.

When my breakfast arrives I have to take a moment to take it all in. Soon I'll have my own kitchen with a stove and more importantly, a refrigerator. It doesn't sound like much but when you've been living in a barracks for almost two years, being able to buy your own food and cook it when and how you like it is boo coo important.

After my breakfast I get on my Beezer and follow the directions my future landlord gave me. It's still too early to meet him but I want to go there and

scope out the neighborhood. I want to find a good grocery store and where the closest party store is to get some beer, of course. Once I get on Anderson street, I find the alley that dead ends right behind my garage apartment. This is the perfect place for me. No one around yet, so I park my bike and have a look at my new place through the windows. Nothing fancy, but all mine.

I notice a path at the very end of the alley going down into a wooded area right in the middle of suburbia. I'm already sold on this place, so I hope the landlord finds me an agreeable tenant. Because of my military haircut, I look pretty clean cut, and I have cash in my pocket for any deposit he might want, plus the rent.

I get back on my bike to explore the neighborhood. I find a couple of grocery stores nearby and even a specialty Italian grocery. I can hardly wait to get my own place and cook anything I want. On the way here I also passed a restaurant supply store with a rather long name of Bargreen Ellingson. It looks like a place I can get some high quality cookware.

It's still not 11 AM but close, so I ride back to the garage apartment. After a short while, a car comes down the alley and parks next to my bike.

The landlord gets out of his car and asks, “Are you Derrick?”

“I am,” I answer.

“Well let me open up the place and you kin have a look.”

We both enter, and I have a look around. His ad said fully furnished, and it is. A small kitchen table and four chairs. A couch that folds out into a bed in the small living room. A double size bed in the very small bedroom. A shower, but no tub in the bathroom. The army didn't haven't any tubs, so I'm fine with that.

“Well, I was kinda hopin' I could move in right now. I brought cash,” I say.

“Cash is always good,” the landlord says with a big smile.

So I give him a cash deposit and enough money to pay for the rest of the month, and he gives me two keys to the front and only door.

The landlord takes off and so I sit down on my couch and survey my situation. This is really turning out number one. I really wanted to just go home to Michigan when I got out of the army, but having to stay in Washington for a couple of months is boo coo better than being in the army no matter where I am.

Since I have nothing here, I am quickly bored. Nothing in the fridge to eat or drink and no radio. It's going to take me a couple of trips to bring the few

things I have on my bike.

It's lunch time so I see If I can find the McDonald's we eat at all the time when we come into Tacoma. I know I'll be going there often once Kent gets back, so might as well find the best way there now. As I navigate my way to McDonald's, I start to realize I know my way around somewhat.

When I find the McDonald's, I spy Ace's van in the parking lot. I go inside to find Ace and Beaudeen having lunch. I join them and fill them in on the fact that I just rented an apartment.

“What're you guys doin' this afternoon?”

“Nuthin' really,” says Ace.

“Wanna come over and christen my new crib?”

They both smile and say in unison, “Fuckin' A!”

“We need ta do some shoppin' first. Some party supplies. Havin' yer van here could really help me out, Ace. Kin ya follow me, and we'll load up yer van with the stuff we need?” I ask Ace.

“No problemos,” he replies.

I take off on my bike, and Ace and Beaudeen follow me in the van. First I go to the restaurant supply place I saw. It's pretty big and they are sort of geared to deal with restaurants and chefs, but I have cash, and that seems to be the deciding factor here. Ace and Beaudeen just mill around aimlessly, but I know what I want and walk around picking out pots and pans and a couple of chef's knives.

Next we sky to a grocery store. I buy things I haven't bought in two years. Bags of potato chips, ice cream, and a case of beer. I don't think I've ever bought a whole case of beer for just myself. A couple of frozen pizzas, and we sky up for my crib.

I'm glad Ace can just follow me to my place, as it is so much easier than trying to give directions to a dead end alley with no sign or anything. It only take a few minutes to put everything away, and I give them a tour of my digs which takes even less time.

I roll several joints and I hand one to Ace for scrutiny. He deems it worthy of sacrifice, lights it, and passes it to Beaudeen, who hands it to me. Finally I get to toke in my new apartment. This place is definitely going to be number one.

It's a mild Spring day in Tacoma, and it's still light outside, so I say, “Let's go for a tee tee walk. The reason that Anderson street and the alley are dead ends is cuz there's a ravine with a path running down ta the bottom of it.”

We follow the path to the bottom of the ravine. Once we get to the bottom, we realize what a wonderful place it is. There so many green plants, it's almost like the jungle. Almost, but not, thankfully. Boo coo canes of something that might be similar to raspberries. Once down at the bottom of the ravine, all the noises of the city are blocked out. It's an incredible oasis of green in the middle of the suburbs.

The one thing that remains though is “The Smell”.

“Do you guys know what that smell is?” I ask. “I've really started to notice it now that I'm mostly riding around Tacoma on my bike.”

“I don't know what it is, but I know whatcher talkin' 'bout,” answers Ace. “I kin smell it right now.”

“Yeah, me too,” I reply.

Once all the city noise got blocked out, it's like the smell just took over. What the fuck can it be?

The trail runs in both directions, so we turn right when we get to the bottom of the ravine and start our walk. Amazing solitude right in the middle of town. I wonder what this ravine is all about. It doesn't look man-made, as it zigzags back and forth. I'm guessing a dry creek bed, though it must be getting boo coo moisture from somewhere considering how lush and green it is.

We hike a couple of miles at least, and the ravine still doesn't end. We decide to turn around and head back. We can save the mystery of where the ravine goes for our next expedition.

When we get back, I try to play the role of a proper host.

“You guys getting' hungry? I bought a coupla pizzas, and I kin toss 'em in the oven.”

They both nod their heads. Of course they're hungry. We went for a long walk and have smoked several joints, so we all have the munchies. I heat up my oven and toss the pizzas in. After using the professional ovens in the mess hall, mine seems so wimpy. But after 10 minutes or so, I can see the pizzas are baking nicely. In reality I know boo coo more about baking pizzas than anything else.

When the pizzas are done, I let them cool a tee tee bit so we don't burn our mouths. I open some beers and pass them around. And it's good thing about the beer, as the pizza is almost the worst I've ever had.

“I promise the next time I make pizza fer you guys, it'll be number one and not this frozen crap,” I say.

“It's not so bad,” offers Beaudeen, “ I've had way worse at the PX.”

“Well good thing we got beer. Beer kin improve anything if it's cold enough,” I reply. “So don't wait fer me. The fridge is full, so help yerself. Man, this is so number one already. I just rented this place today and we got it properly christened and explored the area. I totally fergot how number one livin' is when yer not inna army.”

Ace, Beaudeen and myself finish celebrating the acquisition of my new crib by smoking more pot and drinking beer. Since we have zero entertainment except our own chatter, at about midnight we are all talked out.

“C'mon, let's sky back ta M Co.,” says Ace.

Although I offer the sleeper couch to them, they politely decline. I don't mind at all. It will be number one to spend my first night here alone so I can start to savor the privacy that is boo coo lacking in the army.

As I lay there in my new digs collecting my thoughts the next morning, I realize I should have gotten a coffee pot and some coffee when shopping yesterday.

I decide to have breakfast at the same place I ate at yesterday. If I go often enough, I'll be able to say, “my usual,” when asked what I want to order. Just like breakfast by the grannies at McChord. I miss them already, and although I am still in the army, I just couldn't go back there, or I'd cry for sure.

I try out my new shower, and it is number one if only because I don't have to shower and shave with at least ten other guys in the bathroom. And only another week of having to shave. I hate it like sin. Maybe even more than sin, as after being in the army some sins don't seem so bad now.

When I grab a stool at my new preferred restaurant there's a different waitress behind the counter. No chance to say, “my usual” this morning, but I do have my usual.

Once again I just about swoon when I pour the cream into my coffee and have a sip. It is so number one. I have to remember to get both coffee and a coffee pot today.

After my breakfast I start running some errands. I find a sporting goods store and get myself a waterproof bag so my stuff won't get when it rains. Next I'm off to the grocery store and after filing my bag, I sky home to empty it.

The Salvation Army here in Tacoma has some nice matching plates and cups and silverware, and I find a nice used percolator coffee pot. I think I'm

set.

When I return to my apartment I put everything away and step back to survey my new place. Looks number one to me. I lock it up and sky up to M Co. I have to start clearing post tomorrow so I might as well spend the night there in case it rains. We are due for some rain as it has been clear for several days. As I ride through Tacoma on my way back to Ft. Lewis I wonder again, what is that horrid smell?

When I get to M Co. I sky to the day room. Pete is playing Bert at two-man foosball.

“I got myself a number one crib in Tacoma,” I tell them. “Yer both invited to my place fer a party on Friday. I start clearin' post tomorrow and don't really git out til next Sunday at midnight, but I should be done clearin' post on Friday, so I'm partyin' then. Ace and Beaudeen have already been there, so you can follow them or follow me there on Friday.”

“I din't know ya were gittin' out, Wolf,” says Bert.

“That's cuz I just got my early out on Friday. I scored big time. My crib is at the end of a dead end alley next to a dead end street. Plus at the end of the alley there's a path that goes down into boo coo cool ravine that seems ta run fer miles and it's right in the middle of town. Ace and Beaudeen and I went fer a hike down there, and we walked a coupla miles and never got ta the end. A number one place ta smoke some pot and not have ta worry 'bout doin' it outside while in town.”

As we chat, Adolph enters the day room and makes a beeline for the foosball table. Both Pete and Bert zero out the score keepers on each end of the table, indicating their game is over.

“C'mon Pete, we kin be partners,” I offer, mostly because Pete will let me play the front men sometimes whereas Adolph won't. Plus, Pete is better than Bert at foosball. Xin loi, Bert.

It's a hard fought game, which is really the way we prefer it. Pete and I win, ending what could be my last foosball game here on a high note.

After a leisurely shower the next morning, I shave. Won't be long now, and I won't ever have to shave again. As I get dressed I wonder if I can clear post in my civvies.

I sky down to Top's office at the appointed hour. I'll find out right away if I can wear them. He says nothing, probably just wanting to be rid of me.

When he hands me a clipboard with my post clearance record, in triplicate,

he smiles. It's only the third time I've witnessed him smiling in my presence. The last two times he smiled at me, it was number ten. I'm already guessing this won't be good, and it isn't.

“You got til Friday ta git all the boxes on this sheet signed off or stamped,” he says. “When yer done bring it ta me or give it ta my clerk.”

I look the clearance sheet over. There are at least 25 boxes that need to be signed or stamped. I have no idea where some of the offices I need to clear even are.

“What happens if I don't git all the boxes stamped or signed by Friday?”

Top smiles again. “Then ya don't get out next Monday is all. You'll have ta wait another week.”

It took one step forward, raising your right hand, a short pledge and saying, “I do,” to get in the army. In all it took less than 30 seconds. But to get out, it's like a five day scavenger hunt with no directions or hints as to where to go. This is so army. So fucking army to be exact!

As I stand in the hallway outside of Top's office looking over the post clearance sheet, the company clerk steps out into the hallway. Unlike Top, I don't think he hates me. I kind of pity this guy. He has to work with Top every day, usually in the same room. That would be my Hell, being in the same room with Top for eternity. Having been considered a dog robber myself when I was our platoon sergeant's tank driver in the Nam, I think I can commiserate with the company clerk..

He says, “On Friday I'll bring yer shipping box up ta yer bunk. Everyone gits a box shipped ta where ever ya want for free.”

“Really?” I ask, as this is so unlike the army.

“Yeah, really,” he answers.

“So, ya got any idea where some of these places are on this clearance sheet?”

He looks over the sheet.

“OK, this first place, the education center, is over by the theater. You should be able ta find some of the places when yer driving around ta the places ya do know. After you do that if ya can't find someplace, come back and I'll see if I kin help ya,” he answers.

“Good enough ta git started,” I say, and I sky.

This is going to be a pain in the ass, but no one is shooting at me today, and no land mines in the road. Most of all, when I finish this, I will be out of the army. Not to mention it is not raining.

I look at my clearance sheet again. The second place I need to clear is the post chaplain. Apparently no one looked closely enough at my record indicating my religious preference as “none,” so it should be a mere formality for the chaplain to sign off. But of course this is the army, so it might not.

I sky out to my Beezer to get things started on my final push. It's not far to the education center. Once I get there I realize it's where we had our riot training classes.

Riot training? Right. Nothing but smoke and mirrors when they won't even tell you if you will be issued ammunition when being sent into harm's way. Not that I have any desire to shoot my fellow Americans on the orders of some dumb fuck like Sgt. Black or Lt. Bonner. But if I'm not going to get any ammo, could I have a bayonet, a billy club, or something? Probably not.

The clerk in the office looks up my file. Apparently nothing is there to prevent him from signing off on my clearance record. I thank him and as I walk back to my bike, I think, OK, that wasn't too bad. I can do this.

I look around and see the sign of the cross and a small sign that says Chaplain. His door is unlocked, and so I enter. There is an open door to a room that has a light on, so I saunter down the hall and peer inside. I've never met this chaplain, but there is a guy sitting behind a desk with an all black chaplain uniform. Must be him.

“Are you the base chaplain?” I ask.

“Why, yes I am. And you must be clearing post since that's about the only reason people come here on their own.”

“Really? Cuz I know boo coo guys that need ta talk ta ya. But then the rest of the guys would think they're softies, if they did,” I say with a smile.

“How 'bout you? Do you need ta talk ta me?”

“Nah, I'm prob'ly the last guy here that needs to. I haven't believed in God for a boo coo long time. Before I got drafted even.”

“Maybe we *should* talk, then,” he replies.

“Nah, really. I only gotta week ta clear post. Yer already holdin' me up,” I say.

“So you don't believe in God? What do you believe in?”

“Not sure. Jes don't believe in god is all,” I answer. “Why do you believe? Ever seen 'em? Or does he talk ta ya?”

“No, but I'm hopeful,” he answers. “It's a matter of faith

“Hopeful? D'ya believe in magic?”

“Of course not.”

“But I bet when ya were a kid ya believed in magic, din't ya?” I ask.

“Sure, for I while I believed in magic.”

“So did I, *when I was a kid*, but then I wised up and realized I was bein' an idiot. There is no magic or Santa Claus or an Easter Bunny. There are no ghosts, and there is no God. Even if I hadn't come ta that conclusion before, I definitely woulda after bein' to the Nam, 'cuz no God would let that happen. So now that we got that all straight, kin I gitcha to sign off on my clearance record? Cuz if I don't git it all signed off this week, I gotta stay inna army another week. And while I don't believe in God, I kinda believe in Hell, cuz I been there and another week inna army would be my Hell fer sure,” I finish.

He says nothing further and signs the tee tee box on my clearance form. As I get ready to didi he says, “Good luck with civilian life.”

“Thanks, Padre, that'll be easy.”

Geez, I think, if every place is like this, it'll take at least two weeks or longer to get his done.

I survey my clearance sheet. The hospital isn't far, and I know where it's at. And the MP headquarters, I know where that is too. I didi mau to Madigan first.

I'm not sure where exactly to go, so I ask the first person I see and am pointed toward a sign saying “Records.” That looks promising, and it is. So far so good. A quick look through their files on me, and they stamp my box, and I am out of there.

The MP shack is just down the street, so I sky there next. Normally I would stay as far away from this place as possible, but today I have no choice. When I step inside I hear, “Hey, Wolf.”

When I look over, it's Mark. A former M Co. member who, like most of us, was so bored with all the made-up work details we had to perform that he volunteered to be an MP just to have a real job.

“Hey, Mark. I'm tryin' ta clear post. Gittin' out next Monday. Who signs this clearance sheet here?” I ask.

“The Sergeant right in that first office there,” he answers. “So yer gittin' out, ya lucky fucker.”

“Yeah, I kin still hardly believe it. Top din't want ta let me have an early out, but the Captain pulled rank on him for me. Course I'm still not out yet, and clearin' post is a bitch. Everyone wants ta chat,” I complain.

“OK, I won't bother you anymore,” says Mark.

“Not you, man. More like the chaplain. Thought he was gonna make me

convert ta Christianity ta get him to sign off for me."

We both laugh.

"Prob'ly won't see ya again unless ya pull me over for speedin' on my bike when I didi mau outta here next Monday," I tease.

Mark smiles, and I go into the first office and get my box stamped. Outside I take stock: four down, twenty one to go. I might get this done by Friday. But man, this is just so army.

Tuesday and Wednesday zip by, and I am able to get seven stamps and signatures each day on my clearance record. I have never had time in the army go by so fast. Some of the places I have to clear go fairly fast. The library was a quick in and out, as was the post office. I didn't even know we had a post office on base.

On Thursday, I make the big push to finish clearing post. All goes well until the last one. Financial Data Records is a large office with boo coo desks, nearly each one occupied by a clerk. When I enter, I am told to wait. So I wait. This is my last task, so I am content to be patient and wait until called.

A clerk motions me to his desk. I hand him my clearance sheet, and he says, "Let me get yer file."

He returns with a folder, and he goes through it. I can tell by his frown that something is amiss. Wouldn't you know it?

Finally he asks, "Did you ever get an Article 15 for being AWOL? Looks like something from an army hospital in Valley Forge. Were you a patient there?"

"I was a patient at Valley Forge, yes."

"I can't see how you could be AWOL from a hospital as a patient," he concludes.

"That's what all my friends said when I told them I'd be considered AWOL if I got back late," I say.

"And there's only one copy of the Article 15 in your record here. Should be two copies for it to be official," he says.

"So what kin we do about it?"

"We can do this," he says, as he wads up the Article 15 copy and throws it in his trash basket. And with that, he signs my clearance record and hands it to me.

And that's it. Tomorrow morning I can give my clearance record to Top, and I'm done.

To say I have a boo coo hard time falling asleep would be an

understatement. Just being back out in the bay with all the talking, smoking and joking going on makes it hard enough. But when you're actually getting out of the army, the happiness is overwhelming. So while I lay there awake for a long time I really don't mind.

The next morning when I awaken from the all the activity of guys getting ready for duty, I smile to myself. I'm out. Well, almost. All the hard stuff is done, now I just have to wait for midnight Sunday. Being the night baker for the last couple of months has gotten me quite accustomed to being up at midnight. As for waiting, I'm quite expert at that.

After the riffraff leave for formation, I shower and shave, maybe for the last time. Shaving that is, not showering. I take my clearance record down to Top's office. He's still outside giving out the daily duties, so I wait in the day room. I look at the foosball table. I'm going to miss that. I never saw a foosball table until I got in the army. Every barracks day room I've ever been in has one.

I see Top and his clerk go into Top's office. Might as well get this over with, just in case Top wants to try to fuck with me one last time. I hand him the completed clearance sheet. He looks it over with the same scrutiny we give all the joints we smoke just before we light them.

“Everything looks in order,” is all he says. He hands me a small sheet of paper with a base address on it. “Go to this address at 23 hundred hours on Sunday night, and they'll sign you out.”

After Top is finishes with me, his clerk says, “I'll bring yer shipping box up in a coupla minutes.”

And that's it. I'm out on Sunday night, and I never see Top again.

I have almost nothing to put in the boo coo big box the clerk brings to me. One reason is I'm not going home yet and want some of my stuff for my apartment, like my radio for one.

I have some records, and I put those in the box. What else? Because my MOS is tank driver, they gave me a shoulder holster for a .45. When clearing post no one asked for it back. I have Pete's Mauser pistol, and he still won't take it back, so I put it in the holster before adding both to the box. I know someone who will appreciate it. I add the jungle boots Kent got for me. A few other odds and ends go in, and I'm done. I have this urge to go down the motor pool and see if I can “borrow” a small anvil to put in my shipping box to somehow get the most out of this perk, but I decide against it. Mostly

because I don't need an anvil.

Ace and Beaudeen show up in the bay. They're trying to stay out of Top's sight again.

“Hey, I'm cleared of post. Jes gotta sign out somewhere at midnight Sunday. I promised ya some decent pizza, so I'm havin' a pizza party at my place today. See if ya kin git Adolph and Ramon ta come along if you see 'em.”

“We'll be there, and we'll bring anyone who want's ta come,” says Ace.

My duffel bag is completely empty now, so I can use it to carry the stuff I'll need for my pizza party. Lastly, I get my pink sunglasses and my razor, and I roll them up in the cut up fatigue pants I wore for the disaster simulation and put them all in one of the spare lockers.

My first stop in Tacoma is at the restaurant supply place. I get four pizza pans and commercial grade cheese grater. Next stop is the tee tee Italian grocery store near my crib. I'm able to get everything I'll need for tonight. Baker's yeast, bread flour, a couple of cans of Pomodoro fini, which are the best plum tomatoes from Italy. I get a few jars of spices, including Italian oregano and some dried basil.

“Let me have 'bout a pound of the Cudahy pepperoni and also a pound of the pepperoni right next ta it,” I say at the meat counter.

“Anything else?” the meat counter guy asks.

“Yeah, let me have a coupla pounds of the full cream mozzarella too, please,” I answer. “An' gimme a nice chunk of that Parmesan cheese.”

“Looks like somebody's gonna be makin' pizza tonight,” he says. “An' it looks like it'll be good.”

“I just got outta the army,” I say, though technically I'm not out yet. “But before that I worked in a few restaurants as a cook and a pizza maker. Making good pizza is easy, ya just use the best stuff ya kin git and make sure ya don't let any cheese burn in the oven.”

He nods and asks, “Anything else chef?”

“Nah, that's it fer now,” I reply. “An' thanks.”

My duffel bag is so full, I have to stop by my crib to drop stuff off, and then I head back out for the regular grocery store. I was just going to grab more beer for my party, but I decide to also get more groceries for the coming days ahead now that I have a refrigerator. I almost buy cream for my morning coffee, but instead get some condensed milk. I love the cream, but it's almost an overload on my taste buds when compared to army coffee with

milk. I buy eggs and bacon for breakfast tomorrow.

When I return to my crib I celebrate my success of surviving the army despite the army's boo coo attempts to harm me or worse. I have an ice cold beer while I make the pizza dough. While the dough rises, I make the pizza sauce from scratch. I never had to make the dough very often, but I watched it being made often enough to know what to do. The pizza sauce was usually one of my duties, and I know a killer sauce recipe. This is going to be the best pizza I've had in a boo coo long time. Maybe the best pizza ever. Maybe.

Ace and Beaudeen arrive with Ramon Salazar and Adolph. As they pull down my alley, I hear Pete's Triumph motorcycle following behind. Well all my toking buddies are here, with the exception of Kent. Kent is going to miss out, and it's his own fault.

I roll joints and say, “Beer's in the fridge, help yerselves.”

I hand a joint to Ace since he was here first. While he scrutinizes it, I get myself another beer. Hey, I'm celebrating! Even so, after getting drunk with Kent for his 21st birthday, I swore that would be the last time, and so far it has been. I'm not letting up now that I'm so close to being out of the army.

I check my pizza dough and find it is rising nicely, so I punch it down once before I cut it up and form it. I check out my professional grade cheese grater. It is awesome. At all the restaurants I worked in, they always bought the cheap household graters that would bend or break as we grated boo coo cheese for the pizzas. I can hardly wait to get started making pizzas, but I need to wait on the dough if I want it to be the best.

It's still light out, so I say, “Let's go fer a walk while we let the pizza dough rise.”

“Pizza? You makin' pizza tonight?” asks Adolph.

“Yeah, last week I made some horrid frozen pizza, so I promised Ace and Beaudeen I'd make up for it tonight.”

I lead the way to the path going down into the ravine. When we reach the bottom, everyone is in awe.

“It's even nicer than I remember,” says Beaudeen. “Let's walk the other way and see where it goes.”

Once again the quiet is so enveloping as is all the green of the surrounding vegetation. But as our sense of hearing seems to fade, the mystery odor starts to manifest itself again.

“What's that number ten smell? Anyone know?” I ask.

Again no one knows but it is quite agreed upon that it is unpleasant. We

walk for just under an hour when we come to the end of the ravine. Well at least we know where the trail starts now.

“Let's walk back. I need to form up the pizza dough, but also that's where the cold beer is,” I suggest.

Back at my crib the dough is just starting to peek put from under the towel. Perfect timing. I cut the dough into six pieces and form them up. They need to rise once more, but it will be quicker this time.

While the dough rises again, I grate the mozzarella and some of the Parmesan.

“OK, I'm going to have to show off a tee tee bit because I don't have a rolling pin,” I say as I start to flatten my first dough ball on my counter. Once I get it stretched out some, I pick it up, dust off most of the flour, and throw it up in the air spinning it like a Frisbee.

Some of my guests clap when I'm done.

“Fuckin' show off,” teases Adolph.

“You wanna do the next one, wise ass?” I ask Adolph. “But before ya try, lemme tell ya this, I'm left-handed. The guy that taught me how ta make pizzas was also left-handed, so throwing the pizza back and forth up in the air didn't matter. But it did when I went to work in another pizza place. The other pizza maker there was right-handed, and we made the pizzas right in their front window, kind of like a show.

“So on day one of my employment there, I stretch out the dough for a pizza, and I throw it up in the air. When it got big enough, I threw it over to Al, the other pizza maker, to put it on the pan. He was going to give it one more spin before putting it on the pan, except it was spinning in the opposite direction he expected. So right there in front of several customers and employees, the pizza dough just wrapped all around his arms. Everyone laughed, and Al thought I did it on purpose to embarrass him.

“'Whaddya left-handed or somethin'?' Al asked me.

“I told him I was, and he said, 'Well you better learn how to spin it inna other direction.' Which I did, however whenever Al or I got bored, we would periodically throw the pizza dough to one another spinning the wrong way just to fuck with each other.”

I start putting the first pizza together and get it into the oven. While it bakes, I stretch out the dough for the next one.

“Adolph, wanna play catch?” I ask when throwing the second pizza dough. He just gives me the finger. Not a very good attitude for an apprentice pizza

maker. When the first pizza comes out of the oven, the second one goes right in. I let the first pizza cool just a tee tee bit. While it cools the third pizza gets put together.

I cut the first pizza in six big pieces, and we all have one.

“I know you said it would be a good pizza, but this is so number one. Prob'ly the best pizza I've ever had,” compliments Ace.

I thank him and admit the reason for the long walk was to get everyone hungry so no matter what, the pizza would taste good.

The second pizza comes out the third goes in.

“C'mon, Adolph,” I say as I stretch the next dough ball, “See if you kin catch this one.”

He quickly grabs another piece of pizza, “I'm busy. You jes' keep makin' 'em until we say stop.”

And that's the way it goes for my first pizza party. I make pizza from all the dough I made and only have about half a pizza left over.

It's after midnight before they all didi mau for Ft. Lewis leaving me alone in my new crib. I meant to just lay down and rest my eyes for a few moments after taking my shoes off. The next thing I know it's getting light outside.

I have to think for a moment as to where I am and what day is it? I finally become aware of my surroundings and I smile. Almost out, yeah, almost out. It's Saturday, and I have nothing to do until Sunday night. I hardly know how to act.

I finally get up after lounging around in my bed for while. I open my can of coffee and inhale. Wow, it smells so wonderful. I put my coffee pot on the stove and then sit next to my window at the kitchen table watching it get lighter outside. After the coffee finishes perking, I pour a cup and have another smell. It smells so good, and I haven't even had a sip yet. I pour some condensed milk in and have my first sip. Ambrosia, I think, even without cream. I'll have to save cream for special occasions like Easter. Maybe.

While I sip my first cup of coffee, I open the window so I can listen to the birds. Man, I really missed that while in the army. Even if you open the windows in the barracks, the only thing you'll hear is deuce-and-a-halfs rumbling around in the distance. I still can hardly believe that tomorrow night I will be officially out of the army. Out of the fucking army to be exact.

I make my breakfast, and after I finish eating, I clean up. So much easier than KP in the army.

Later but still morning I hear what sounds like Ace's van coming down my

alley, so I step outside to have a look. It's the whole crew. Pete even rode with Ace instead of riding his Triumph.

“I figured I wouldn't see you guys til next Friday,” I laugh.

“Right,” says Ace, “when we was tryin' ta figure out what ta do today it was stay at M Co. and play foosball all day or come ta yer crib and party down. Ya see what won.”

“It was more like do we wanna stay at M Co. and get our asses beat playin' foosball against Ramon and me or come and party at yer crib,” jokes Adolph.

“Also, we were kinda hopin' maybe you'd make pizza again,” confesses Ace.

“Really?” I ask.

“Really,” replies Beaudeen.

“I can do that. Let's got ta McDonald's and have lunch, and then we can go to the Italian grocery and get stuff fer pizza. This time I'll make our famous Pizzaburger and Nino's Supremo, which has just 'bout everything on it.”

“Let's go!” says Ace. “I'll drive.”

So we're off to McDonald's for lunch. I don't want to have any real competition against my pizza, so it's a good choice. Being a Saturday afternoon the place is jumping. Boo coo good-looking babes here. If Kent was with us, they would be all over him. I really don't see what it is about him that attracts all the babes. He doesn't overtly do anything that I'm aware of. It's a mystery, but I'll just continue to stand next to him when he gets back.

We must appear too scary as none of the ladies try flirting with us. Adolph does look like a ruffian of sorts. Xin loi, Adolph.

The meat counter guy, Frank, greets me with a, “Hey chef, whatcha need today?”

“I need a bunch of stuff. Gonna make more pizza for my fans tonight,” I answer.

While I tell Frank what I want, Ace and Beaudeen cruise around the store. It's an interesting place with all kinds of imported stuff, some of which I haven't even seen before. They pick out some snacks and nibbles to eat while I'm making the pizzas.

We grab some beer and then head back so I can start preparing my pizza dough and secret pizza sauce.

“If you guys thought last night's pizza was good, tonight's pizza is gonna knock yer socks off,” I laugh.

“Is that a good thing, havin' yer socks knocked off?” asks Ramon.

“It's the best thing, Ramon, the best thing,” I answer with a big smile. “Tonight I'm gonna make the Nino's Supremo and Pizzaburger. We used to make a large Pizzaburger just after closing Nino's restaurant at night with a six-pack of Colt 45's. I was just sixteen years old, so two 16 ounce Colt 45's just 'bout did me in. It was a number one thing I only lived 'bout 3 city blocks from the restaurant, cuz I had to walk home at three o'clock in the mornin' after workin' ten hours and drinkin' them two beers.

“The Pizzaburger is just made fer havin' a coupla ice cold beers when ya eat it. Jes' talkin' 'bout it almost got me droolin'.”

After I make the sauce, we decide to explore the ravine again.

“I'll roll a coupla travelers for our tee tee walk,” I offer.

“Sounds like a plan, Sam,” replies Ramon.

We start our walk, and as it is so quiet, we have some interesting conversations along the way.

“So what didja give up fer Lent?” Adolph asks.

“Are ya askin' me that?” I ask.

“Yeah, *pendejo*,” he answers.

“Why d'ya think I'm Catholic?”

“Cuz ya said you were when we was all talkin' 'bout our religions.”

“*Was* a Catholic. I'm nuthin' now. Remember the “No Pref” on my dog tags?” I say. “Oh man, I just realized tomorrow I can take my dog tags and throw 'em inna trash. I hate these fuckin' things round my neck.”

“So, white boy, whatcha givin' up fer Lent?” Adolph asks me again.

“Ya know, I wasn't gonna give up nuthin'. But now, as I been listenin' to myself cuz it's so quiet down here, I think now that I'm gitten outta the army, alive and pretty much in one piece, I'm gonna git rid of my bad attitude and stop swearin' so much. No reason ta have a bad attitude and so no reason ta swear.”

“Fuckin' liar,” laughs Adolph.

“What're you givin' up fer Lent? Sure ain't swearin'.”

He still says nothing.

“Mebbe ya gave up knifin' people, inna back,” I tease, only to see Adolph pulling out his knife. I knew this would happen.

“Adolph, ya just ask me what I gave up fer Lent and now yer pullin' yer knife on me. What kind of a Christian are ya anyway?” I laugh more, as does everyone except Adolph. “As long as ya got it out, lemme have a look at it.”

“Go gitcher own, motherfucker,” he sort of sneers, but then smiles, folds his knife up, and puts it away.

“OK, be that way.”

“I'm givin' up the army fer Lent,” says Adolph.

I think about it and than say, “Hey I'm givin' up the army fer Lent too, but fer real tomorrow night.”

We continue our walk with no further incidents of knife play. We go past the spot where Ace, Beaudeen, and I turned around the last time we walked in this direction. I recognize the place because there is a curious vertical concrete tube of some sort. It's about 4 feet in diameter and maybe 25 feet high. I guess if this ravine ever had 25 feet of water flowing in it, some water could go down that tube. I wouldn't want to be down here if that ever happened. I wonder how fast this ravine could fill with water? Boo coo fast! Maybe that's why we've never seen anyone down here.

We still don't get to the end of the ravine going in this direction when I call a halt.

“If we're gonna have pizza tonight we need to turn back. The dough is prob'ly ready ta be punched down soon,” I say. “Plus, I'm sure yer all as thirsty as me and back is where the beer is.”

So we backtrack to my crib. Now that I've considered it might be dangerous to be down here, I look around for any sort of warning signs and see none. In many places it would be quite difficult if not impossible to climb up to the top. I notice no other entry or exit points except the path behind my apartment.

When we get back, I busy myself with pizza dough while Ace does the honors of rolling some joints. We drink, we smoke, I make pizzas. This time I'm much more well practiced, and I'm making the two best pizzas I know how to make.

There are no complaints and many accolades once again.

“You should open a restaurant,” encourages Pete.

“I already did that. I was partners in a restaurant when I was seventeen and still in high school. Never doin' that again. It's boo coo hard work for tee tee money. The army has made me realize ya kin do almost nuthin' and still git paid,” I say and laugh.

I wake in the morning to the natural rhythm of my body. How cool is that? No one snoring. No noises of people getting up and walking around talking

and smoking. I just lay there for a while letting my eyes adjust to the morning light. I think, this is it, my last day in the army. I still can hardly believe it. Maybe I shouldn't believe it until midnight when I really get out. This is, after all, still the army. What could they do to me now at the very end? It's going to be something, but what?

I make my coffee and sit by my half-open window drinking my first cup. The birds are in full swing and singing their heads off. The day is starting off with some blue sky. I decide to go to my new regular breakfast restaurant after I shower and dress. I forgo shaving. While I think the army might pull some bullshit on me tonight, whether or not I need to shave will not be the problem.

When I get a seat at the counter at my new favorite restaurant, the first waitress I met here is back. She doesn't remember me, so I can't say, “My usual,” yet. The coffee is almost too much with the cream. It's Sunday morning, and the place is really busy.

I decide to explore Tacoma some more. First I need to find my way to TCC from my apartment. When I find the campus, I drive around it to see what there is. Some really nice park-like grounds surrounding the place. Boo coo nicer than Ft. Lewis. I decide to come back tomorrow and sign up for my classes.

I mess around my apartment for the rest of the day and do some cleaning up from my party. Before dinner I sky to Ft. Lewis for the last time, I hope. When I get there, Adolph and Ramon are working the serving line. I don't know why I'm doing this to myself. That is, subjecting myself to the mess hall food one last time. Maybe because after this, nothing will seem bad.

“Whacha doin' here? Thought y' was gitten out,” teases Adolph.

“I am. Thought I'd give ya one last chance ta poison me or maybe even a final chance to beat me at foosball,” I joke back.

“I kin take care of both them things fer ya,” laughs Adolph.

“Yeah I know ya could poison me, but yer gonna hafta work at beatin' me at foosball.”

“Kent's not here, man,” challenges Adolph.

“I know, but Pete is,” I remark.

“Won't matter, me and Ramon will still beat yer ass.”

“You know, Rocky let me beat him at pool on his last day as a goin' away present.”

“No can do, man. Don't care if it's yer last day, we're beatin' yer ass no

matter what," replies Adolph.

I don't know what I was thinking, eating here. The food really is horrific. At least I'll have that memory, I guess. Before I go to the day room, I go upstairs to my old bay. I get the cut up fatigue pants Top gave me. I check that my razor and pink sunglasses are still rolled up in them, and then I sky to Top's office. Sgt. Black is Sergeant of the Day. We don't like each other, but I don't care any more.

"Top let me borrow these fatigue pants for the disaster simulation over at Madigan, and he wanted them back. Can I just put 'em here on his desk?" I ask.

"That's fine," answers Sgt. Black.

I sky to the day room for the last time. Ace and Beaudeen are playing two-man while Pete watches. They are boo coo happy to see me.

"What the fuck are you doin' here? Thought you would never come back," asks Pete.

"Wanted one last blast of foosball, and I had somethin' fer Top that I wanted give 'em before I left."

We play play foosball for several hours before Adolph and Ramon get off duty. They show up ready to defend their honor, however pitiful it is.

They have to wait for Pete and I to beat Ace and Beaudeen. We're not as good as when Kent and I team up, but we do win in the end. Only to be beat by Ramon and Adolph. So Ace and Beaudeen get to play them. Pete and I watch. I don't mind. I'm just wasting away my last few hours in the army. Something I am quite expert at.

As I watch the game play out, I think that this will be the only thing about the army that I'll miss. But I'll survive, I'm quite sure. Still, I get to spend my very last evening in the army doing one of the few things I liked doing here.

When it's finally late enough, I sky over to the building where I am supposed to ETS. I'm sure you can't get there too early, but you could be considered late. I plan on being early even if I have to exhibit my awesome skill of waiting. Even if waiting for nothing.

I ride my Beezer over in the rain. Another thing I am expert at is doing things in the rain. Fortunately for us early birds, there is a tee tee roof overhang at the entry door where we are able to stand out of the downpour. I don't know any of the other guys ETSing, but we immediately form a common bond of those making it out of the army ALIVE!

A jeep shows up and three NCOs jump out. They quickly open the door, and we all enter. They shuffle their papers around a tee tee bit and then make some announcements. As soon as this starts, I realize my worst nightmare about them fucking with us at the last possible moment is coming true.

The first bomb they drop on us is that our military responsibility won't be over when we are released tonight. We will have four years of active or inactive army reserve duty. Activity depends on your MOS, and whether they need that particular skill. Of all the training and classes I've had, not once has our four years of army reserve responsibility ever come up, and certainly never discussed at any length. We are told not to throw away our combat boots once we get home. We might need them.

All of us in the room look at each other in disbelief. We complain that no one has ever told us this before. They insist, yes, we were told all of this on the day we were inducted into the army. We probably just forgot.

We probably did. When you feel your life is being taken away from you for the rest of the foreseeable future, you really stop listening to anything else being said.

We are all pissed. I see why they send three guys over here to do the army's dirty work, as one guy could easily sign everyone of us out in a few minutes, but one guy might get beat up too often.

So now we all spend some time filling our reserve duty forms with the address where we will be living after our discharge. I put down my new address in Tacoma. I plan on being long gone from there before the Reserve starts looking for me. Xin loi, army.

At about five minutes before midnight, they drop the second bomb. And that is the fact that if any of us were injured while on duty and think we may have some sort of disability for which we would receive compensation from the Veterans Administration, we will not be eligible to ETS right now.

“You will be sent to the hospital here at Ft. Lewis to determine your degree of disability. It could take a couple days. It could take a couple of weeks, maybe even months, depending on your particular disability,” we are told.

Again, we look at each other in disbelief. We have all been here at Ft. Lewis for months, some over a year, and they couldn't have had us examined for our degree of disability until now? One minute before we are supposed to be let out? We are near outrage. Yeah, that's absolutely the reason they send three guys over here to do the army's dirty work.

As we seethe, one of the NCOs says, “Of course, if ya wanna git out right now, all ya gotta do is sign this release form, thereby releasing the VA from any further responsibility for your disabilities.”

I'm the first to step up to their desk and say, “Where do I sign? I never want anything to do with the army or their hospitals for the rest of my life.”

All the rest of the guys in the room also sign off. Never have I heard guys saying, “Motherfuckers!” like I do this night. So army. So fucking army!

I'm the first to didi. It's not raining hard, but the road is wet so I don't speed, though I'm tempted to. Riding off post for the last time. Well, maybe for the last time. I might have to come back to get Kent if he does return from his leave.

I reflect on the way the army handled our discharge. How disgraceful. Especially when I think back to Captain Heberle correcting my thinking about being awarded the Bronze Star. It being an honor owed to me, he said.

I can't say I felt any honor being bestowed on me, certainly not when they chose the last possible moment to try to deny us any benefits as wounded combat veterans. So fucking disgraceful. And so much for my giving up swearing for Lent. I smile at that. I'm riding my bike in the rain, and in the dark, but I smile again. I'm out of the army. The fucking army to be exact!

Chapter 26

I again just wake up, naturally being fully rested I guess. I could really get used to this. I make a mental note not to schedule any classes early in the morning. I don't lounge long, as I am out of the army and don't want to waste any of my day.

Since I want to see what classes are offered at TCC, I think I should consider what I want to do now that I'm out of the army. I realize I was afraid to even think that far ahead. Thinking I would jinx my chances of getting an early-out. But now I am. What do I want to do? That is the question I ponder as I sip my first cup of coffee. So good.

Top should have gotten the tee tee present I left for him by now. Hope he's got a sense of humor. Probably not. Probably shouldn't have done it because now I can't ever go back to M Co. There are worse things in life.

Back to my future. What do I want to do? I can't believe I'm having such a thought. No Top, no army, ever again. Well, four more years of possible army interference, but we veterans have such a bad attitude it would be crazy to put us back on duty. But that would be so army. I'm not going to swear but I want to.

It's not raining at the present so I ride over to TCC to see about scheduling my classes. It must be a slow day on the campus, as when I inquire about classes, the receptionist asks if I want to talk to a counselor. I agree and am pointed to an office down the hall. It's good that I'm doing this as my counselor informs me of several requirements. One is that I need to take a physical education class. Seems pretty dumb, but one of the choices is tennis. I like playing tennis so I can get a credit doing something I like. So far so good.

We discuss my interests, and I am still not sure. My counselor suggests a liberal arts major to help decide on a future career direction. Sounds like a plan. Because I like to read and am interested in writing, I sign up for Introduction to Fiction. We talk a tee tee bit more, and I choose two more classes. That was easy. Easier than getting out of the army.

I have a full two weeks before classes start. I'm out of the army and I already have two weeks of vacation. I stop at a gas station to fill my Beezer up. A whole two gallons is all my gas tank holds, so I can fill it up for less

than a dollar.

When I'm paying for my gas, I notice several travel maps next to the register. I get one for Washington, and one for Oregon. And one for California, just in case I decide to visit Kent. I have two weeks, so it would be easy to ride to California and back before classes start.

On my way home it starts to rain. It makes my decision about riding down to California even more tempting. When I get home, I spread my maps out on my kitchen table and see what I'd be getting myself into. For one, lots of riding along mountain ranges, over mountain ranges, and through some mountain passes. And that's before even getting to California. On the plus side, there won't be anyone shooting at me. Or worse, land mines.

If it continues to rain as it is right now, I will go crazy sitting in my apartment for two weeks. I count the mileage between the freeway exits and quickly realize some of them are more than a hundred miles apart.

The BSA will only go 100 miles before I run out of gas. As I check the distances, none are over 150 miles. If I get a one-gallon gas can to carry with me, I can make it to the next exit before running out of gas. A tee tee bit iffy, I know. But compared to the Nam, this seems like an adventure.

I think about how jealous I was of the Two Jerrys and their converted school bus traveling around the US while I was still stuck in the army. What have I got to lose? I have two weeks and essentially nothing pressing to do. I already have my classes scheduled. I'm going, and that's that.

When there's a break in the rain, I get my tool bag and go check if my bike is ready for a road trip. The oil level is right up to the full line on the dipstick, and the oil is still quite clear. I don't think I've even put 500 miles on it since I bought it. I take out both spark plugs. They look almost new and the gap is correct. The tires, while not brand new, are in very good condition. It has consistently started on the first kick. Ready enough for me, I think.

Back inside I get the maps out and start to plan a route. Seems easiest and shortest to get on US 5 here in Tacoma and take it all the way through Oregon and right into Northern California. Once I get into California, I might want to take some of the scenic routes through the mountains.

I get my wallet out and look for Kent's phone number, and I notice the scrap of paper Marilyn gave to me. The reality is, I need to make a clean break from the army and not think about it at all for a while. I wad up the scrap of paper with Marilyn's phone number and toss it in the trash. Xin loi, Marilyn, but it's for the best.

I write down Kent's parent's phone number and put it in my wallet. I'll call him once I get close to Stockton. How far is it, I wonder? It takes me several minutes to add up the mileage markers on my maps.

Looks like 900 to 1000 miles depending which route I take once I'm actually in California. If I can make 450 miles a day, it's a two day trip there and two days back. Going 70 mph for seven hours is almost 500 miles, so it's doable. Depending on the weather, of course. Still technically winter, and going through the mountains in Oregon and Northern California is going to be real winter. I might freeze my ass off or worse. But once I get out of the mountains in California, it's going to be like summer. I hope.

I decide that if the weather looks inviting for the start of my trip in the morning, I'll didi mau to California. I pack my tool bag with a couple of change of clothes, and I'm ready to go.

I sleep fitfully during the night with the excitement of my upcoming adventure. When I finally give up and get up at first light, I can't think of any reason not to go. The weather is good this morning, and if the trip or the weather head south on me, I can always turn back.

I decide on a boo coo big breakfast at my favorite restaurant. Still not considered any kind of a regular at my restaurant. Besides my two eggs, hash browns and sausage, I also get an order of biscuits and gravy. When I was in Kentucky for basic training, I acquired a taste for some southern delicacies such as grits and biscuits and sausage gravy.

I almost hurt from eating so much for breakfast, and I worry I won't be able to kick start my bike. My worry is unfounded and it starts on the first kick. I'm right off a US 5 entrance ramp, so I get on and didi mau South. So far so good.

I quickly pass McChord and then Ft. Lewis. I'll never miss Ft. Lewis but the grannies at McChord, I think of them often.

When I pass Olympia, I remember that we made a tee tee road trip here in Bert's station wagon just to try some Olympia beer in its local environment. It sadly seemed to make no improvement whatsoever to the beer, as it tasted just as bad as it usually does.

I luck out as my first day on the road has nearly clear skies and the temperature is easily in the 60's. It's a scenic tour of a lifetime. It's not long after I pass Olympia that I realize I'm going through a beautiful part of the country that I have never seen before. There are lush green forests and snow-

capped mountains in the distance. I should have bought a camera, but stopping to take pictures would really slow me down.

As Mt. Rainier fades from sight, Mt. Baker comes into view on my left. Next is Mount St. Helens. They are all stunning to look at, but I don't know how people can be so optimistic as to live in sight of a volcano. I certainly don't plan on lingering in Tacoma, at least in part for that reason.

I finally cross the Columbia River, and I'm in Portland, Oregon. I never made it to Portland while at Ft. Lewis. It's a big city, and the freeway here is jammed with cars and trucks. I really have to pay attention because drivers, especially truck drivers, totally ignore motorcyclists. You are on your own and need to keep a watchful eye on the road situations.

After all the vehicle traffic in Portland I am boo coo happy to get out in the countryside again. The freeway runs in between the coastal mountain range and the Cascades off to the east. I'm not on the mountain peaks, but I'm definitely at some elevated altitude. I can tell by two things. One is that my Beezer has noticeably less pep when I give it some throttle.

The second reason is I'm freezing my ass off. Well not freezing, but I'm sort of cold. The cold air causes the tears from my eyes to freeze on the inside of my helmet's face shield. I have to stop periodically to clean the inside of it just so I can see. Luckily I brought my army issue wool long johns. On one of my helmet cleaning stops, I put my long john top on, and I'm now warm enough to continue.

I can see Mt Hood off to the east now. I'm not sure as to its dormancy status. Should have gotten a camera, I think again.

I make good time, and it's late in the afternoon when I have to stop and pour my reserve gallon of gas into my gas tank for the first time. Now I'll find out if I counted the miles between exits closely enough. I get to the next exit before running out of gas. So far so good.

The sun is low in the sky and shines right into my eyes at times. Probably shouldn't have given my pink sunglasses to Top after all. They weren't very good sunglasses, but they would be better than nothing, which is what I have right now.

At about five in the evening, I get off the freeway at Grant's Pass to fill my gas tank and get some dinner. My distance vision is fine, but when I try to pay for my gas, I can't focus my eyes to be able to read the denomination of my cash. I have to ask the clerk verify I'm giving her a one dollar bill.

There is a motel across the street from the gas station, so I go and rent a

room for the night. I was hoping to make it to California before stopping for the day, but my eyes evidently need some rest. After getting my room, I walk to the McDonald's for a couple of cheeseburgers and some fries. They still taste awesome after army food.

Back at my motel room I realize how exhausted I am. I rode close to 400 miles, some of it in the mountains. I lay back on the bed and close my eyes. It feels so number one. I give them a gentle massage with my eyelids closed. That also feels number one.

The next thing I know, it's morning with the sun shining in my room window. I didn't even undress, I just fell right asleep.

My eyes feel boo coo better. I grab my wallet and look at my money. I can read it. So far so good. It must have been something like going snow blind from being out in the bright sun without sunglasses. I take a shower and have a look at my beard. It's only been four or five days since I stopped shaving, and it's finally looking like I'm growing a beard and not like I forgot to shave.

Because I stopped earlier than I intended last night, I decide to sky up first thing and maybe have breakfast in California if I can wait that long. After my eye situation last night, I thought I might have to turn back. But now I am enthused about my trip again.

Grant's Pass is just that, a mountain pass. I am once again riding along the mountain ridge line. Close enough to the top that it's cold. I dressed for it this morning, but I'm getting really hungry and feeling the cold because of it. I'm hoping for a freeway exit soon to at least clean my face shield, but breakfast would also be number one.

When I get to Medford, Oregon, I get off at the first exit and have my breakfast. Afterward, I get back on the road. I'm getting close to California according to my map. US 5 is still in the mountains, so I am attributing the noticeable loss of power from my bike to the high altitude.

However, before I get to California, and seemingly out in the middle of nowhere, I proceed up a steep grade. My Beezer just keeps going slower and slower, but I make to the top of the grade and am able to pick up some speed on the downhill turn. At first I think it's OK, but as the hill flattens out, my Beezer starts to slow down again.

Pretty soon I'm going so slow I'm driving on the road shoulder even though there is no traffic except me. I see a freeway exit sign and decide I better get off there. As I slow to exit the freeway, my engine stops running. I

come to a full stop on the exit ramp and give it a kick. Nothing. This is not good. I try again. Still nothing.

I look around. The freeway exit has no signs indicating that fuel or food or any type of service is available. As I continue to look around, I can see a small building off in the distance at what looks like where the exit ramp meets a side road. Since there is absolutely nothing else visible, I put the bike in neutral and start walking along the exit ramp. It looks to be about 3 to 4 city blocks to the building.

As I get a tee tee bit closer to the building I can make out an orange flashing sign. That's a hopeful indication I think. Must be something there, or there wouldn't be a flashing sign. Although my vision seems to be back to normal, at first I can't make out what the sign says. I can only tell that it's orange.

And then as I walk toward the sign I can finally read it. It says: GOD, in all capital letters. I smile and think, Right... God, I'm sure. I keep walking and the closer I get it still says: GOD blinking off and on. This is so weird, and it's making me think back to whenever missionaries of some religion would come knocking on my door to try to get me to join their particular religion or church.

My favorite thing to say to them was, “If your religion is so good, you wouldn't have to come knocking on my door. If your religion is so good, people would seek you out and would wait in line to get into your church.” There is no one waiting in line at the building with the flashing GOD sign.

Maybe God wants to talk to me, I muse. He could have performed a miracle of sorts to make my engine quit running. If that's the case, I'm sure he can make it run again after we chat.

As I'm thinking this, I stop walking for a moment. What am I thinking? I don't even believe in God any more. There's no reason God would want to talk to me, a non-believer. It's almost like I'm high, but I haven't smoked any pot or even drank one beer since I left Tacoma on my adventure. Must be the altitude. Maybe even why my engine quit, not enough oxygen in the air.

So now I think, what if it really is God? To drop in, unannounced, and ask God to perform a miracle and make my engine run again... that is so trivial compared to the problems of the world. But then there's the sign, blinking on and off. That does seem like some sort of an invitation.

I remember a play I saw once about the devil and an angel in a small town trying to convince the local townspeople which one was the devil and which

one was the angel. But the sign here says: GOD, not angel. Could be the devil. I really am high or whatever happens to your brain at high altitudes.

Really, asking God to fix my motorcycle would really be overkill. I really only need a motorcycle mechanic. A BSA motorcycle mechanic would be ideal, but I'm not going to be picky given my circumstances and location.

I look up as I start walking again and the sign goes from blinking: GOD to blinking: BSA. I stare at it. No way, I think. No fucking way. But that's what it says now. Too weird. Almost enough to make someone get religion. Not me, though. I've been to war, and I just don't believe in God any more. But I will say this, “Nice try.”

It's about 10 AM or close to it when I finally arrive at the BSA shop. I'm wary, even for a non-believer. I can explain the misreading of the blinking sign to leftover eye strain. Sort of. It sure looked like it said GOD. But in reality BSA is even better for me.

I enter, and the proprietor greets me and asks how he can help. I explain my problem and he has me wheel my bike into his shop. A couple of tweaks, and it starts up on the first kick again. Still not enough for me to get religion. Especially when I take it for a test ride, and it starts to misfire at higher rpms, almost like before but not as bad. He's definitely not God.

When I get back and tell him what it's doing, he inspects the spark plug wires more closely, and when he does they both just pull right out of the coil. They shouldn't. It also looks like they were not all the way in. He corrects that, and I go for a test ride, and it's fixed. Not God, but possibly an angel in training I think.

When I get back to the BSA shop, I park my bike outside and go in to pay for the fix. He laughs and says he didn't really do anything I need to pay for. He is quite adamant in refusing all of my offers to pay for getting my bike running again. Maybe a full-fledged angel after all.

As I get up to speed on the freeway, my Beezer is really running strong again. The mechanic reset the needle valves on both of my carburetors for the high altitude here and showed me how to readjust them when I get out of the mountains once I get to California. I don't believe in God, but I might believe in angels, so I will for sure be stopping there on my way back. Too weird.

I finally cross the border into California. To the east, I see the Shasta mountains and to the west, the Trinity mountains. Not long after crossing the border I get to Yreka, the first town of any size in California. I stop for a late lunch.

When I get back on the freeway, I realize I am on the scenic route that continues on all the way to Redding. After I pass Redding, I stay on US 5 until I get to Red Bluff where I get on Route 99.

It's just as scenic, with the additional bonus of not as many big trucks blasting by me like on the freeway. After a while I pass through Chico. I think I can make it to Stockton sometime tonight. I'll try to call Kent when I stop for dinner. Hopefully he'll be happy to see me. As I begin to leave the mountains behind, I realize it's really warm, maybe 70-75 degrees, so I take make winter gear off.

This is one of the reasons I wanted to ride to California in March. I'm ready for some warm weather. I pass Yuba City. Just before I get to the next exit, my ears pop now that I'm at a much lower altitude.

When that happens, the first thing I notice is that my bike is making a loud knocking sound that it never made before. The exit for Marysville is just ahead, and I make it into the parking lot of the service station at the end of the exit ramp.

My Beezer doesn't stop running, but the knocking sound is still there, and it's vibrating a lot. I turn it off. I give it a kick, and it starts right up. Still knocking and vibrating, though. This is number ten. Of all the things I was worried about on this trip, my bike failing me was not one of them. Rats!

I needed to call Kent to first of all let him know I was coming, and more importantly to get directions to his house, but now I have another reason. There's a phone booth next to the gas station.

When I call the number he gave me for his parent's house, Kent answers.

“Hey, it's Derrick. And I'm outta the army,” I brag.

“Congrats, *pendejo*,” Kent replies.

“Man, I'm glad yer the one that answered the phone.”

“Why? What's up?”

“Well I was on my way ta visit ya, and I kinda got a situation goin' on,” I answer.

“What kinda situation?” Kent asks.

“My Beezer ain't gonna make it there. I was kinda hopin' ya could come and git me. I'm not too far, maybe 80 miles or so,” I say.

“I don' have any wheels, man. You know that.”

“Maybe Sandy'll letcha borrow her car,” I offer.

Kent laughs and then says, “She's right here, I'll ask her. Hey Sandy, can I borrow yer car ta go rescue Derrick?”

“No way!” says Sandy loud enough that I can hear her over the phone.

“You kin jes' hitchhike here, can't cha?” Kent asks.

“Yeah, that's what I planned ta do, but was hopin' ya could gimme a ride. So I'll be there inna coupla hours maybe,” I reply.

“Where are ya?” Kent asks me. “I'll give ya directions.”

“I'm at the Marysville exit off Route 99 at the only service station here.”

“Didja say Marysville?” asks Kent.

“Yeah, Marysville. You know where it is?”

“Yeah I know where it is. It's been in the news lately,” he answers.

“Why's that?”

“It's a long story. I'll tell 'bout it when I git there. Is it well lit where yer at?” he asks.

“Thought ya said you weren't gonna come git me.”

“Well I changed my mind. Is it well lit where yer at?” he asks again.

“It's a 24 hour gas station right off the freeway, of course it's well lit? Why?” I ask.

“I'll tell ya when I git there. Jes' stay where it's light, OK?” Kent demands.

“Wilco,” I reply jokingly.

“Always a wise guy.”

I go inside the service station to ask if I can leave my Beezer here for the night, and that I'll come and get it tomorrow. How, I have no idea, but I don't tell them that. They say it's no problem and even point out a good spot to park it so it's out of the way and doesn't get accidentally biffed.

It's about two hours before Kent arrives, being chauffeured by Sandy in her Mustang. I grab my tool bag, and Kent lets me into the backseat of the Mustang. Not a spacious backseat, but I don't complain.

“We must really be friends fer ya ta come all this way to git me,” I tease.

“Ya jes' think that if ya want to. But the real reason we came ta git cha is that there's a serial killer here in Marysville. Found somethin' like twenty bodies so far. All in shallow graves all around Marysville,” answers Kent.

“Well that even makes me happier that ya came ta git me,” I laugh. “So Sandy I want to do something ta pay ya back fer comin' ta rescue me from near certain death. Maybe take ya ' out fer dinner or somethin' if ya want.”

“Didja see what he jes' did? You already did him a boo coo big favor, and now he's pretendin' to be payin' ya back by askin' ya out onna date,” snickers Kent.

“I am not!” I say in defense, “You kin come along and chaperone if ya

want.”

“He is not coming!” says Sandy.

“All I kin say is, I warned ya Sandy,” says Kent to which Sandy laughs. I'm really starting to like her. Xin loi, Kent.

“So it bein' St. Patrick's Day and all, it would have been nearly impossible fer the serial killer to kill me today. See, I think I met God today, or mebbe just an angel.”

“You see what I hafta put up with most of the time?” Kent asks. “Yer a fuckin' atheist, why would God talk ta you?”

“Man, that's what I wanted ta know, bein', as ya just said, a non-believer,” I reply. “But I was still in Oregon and in the mountains, and my Beezer started to lose power on the uphills. At first I thought it was the high altitude and lack of oxygen, but as I came down a from one mountain onto sort of flat road, my bike started going slower and slower, and since I just happened ta be at an exit, I got off the freeway. As I came down the exit ramp it altogether quit runnin'. I gave it a coupla kicks, but it wouldn't start,” I tell them.

“So I'm really out in the middle of nowhere. The freeway exit sign had nothin' on it 'bout gas or food. I'm lookin' around, and I can just make out a small building where the exit ramp meets the side road. What caught my eye ta even notice the building was an orange blinking light.”

I tell them about walking closer to the sign to where I can make out it's blinking the word “GOD” when it's on.

“So I stop for a moment. If God was really in that building, there would be a line a mile long of people waitin' to see 'em, wouldn't ya think?” I ask.

“Are you on somethin'? Acid, peyote?” Kent asks some what seriously.

I laugh. “Man Kent, that's what I was wonderin'. I hadn't smoked any pot or even drank a beer since I left Tacoma, so I was thinkin' maybe it was the high altitude.”

“I don't mean then, I mean now. Are ya on somethin'?” Kent asks again with a laugh.

“No, just like I said, I haven't smoked or drank anything since I left Tacoma. Though that reminds me... Ya got any pot?”

“O' course I got some dew,” Kent answers with a smile.

“Not in my car!” cautions Sandy.

“I kin wait. So ya wanna hear the rest of my story? Don't wanna bore ya talkin 'bout God and stuff.”

“Whaddaya think, Sandy? He's always so fulla shit ya never know what

he's gonna say," Kent says.

"Let 'em finish," answers Sandy.

"OK, so where was I?" as I think back. "Oh yeah, so I'm lookin' at the blinking sign that says GOD. If God were really there, he's gonna severely chastise me for bein' a non-believer, I'm thinkin'. There's no line, so the sign must be just fer me. So Sandy do ya know much 'bout Joseph Smith?" I ask.

"Whaddya doin' now?" asks Kent, "You were talkin' 'bout God, and now ya changed it to Joseph Smith! You always do that, git goin' on one story and then change it."

"Kent, kin ya just let 'er answer. I have a reason I'm askin'," I insist.

Sandy answers, "I know some things about him."

"OK, do ya know 'bout the golden plates that the angel Maroni gave ta Joseph Smith?" I ask.

"Yeah, sort of?"

"And how only Smith could look at them with a special viewer or somethin'?" I ask. "Cuz if someone looked at the plates with the naked eye, they would just disintegrate."

"Vaguely," answers Sandy.

"That's good enough," I continue. "So I 'm thinkin', I could get disintegrated fer bein' a non-believer. I mean all I wanna do is git my bike runnin' again, and I really don't wanna hafta covert just fer that. Then I think, just like ya pointed out Kent, why would God wanna talk ta me? Could be the devil, wantin' me ta sell my soul ta git my bike runnin'."

"C'mon Wolf. Yer on somethin' aren't ya?" Kent asks once more.

I ignore him.

"Plus, if God were really there, how could I go in and say, *Oh God, if yer not too busy with war, famine, and pestilence around the world, do ya think ya might be able ta git my bike runnin' again?* I start walking towards the building, and as I look up at the sign again it says: GOD and then it blinks off. But when it comes back on, now it says: BSA, and in my head I'm goin' *No fuckin' way!* Kin ya believe that?" I finish.

"What? That's the end? Was it God or the devil?" Kent asks.

"Now yer the one that sounds like yer on drugs," I laugh. "It was a BSA shop, and the guy got my bike runnin' again and din't charge me nuthin'. Not even my soul," I laugh.

"Ya really expect us ta believe all that?" asks Kent.

"Nah, I din't think ya would. I hardly b'lieve it myself, and I was there.

Too weird, is all I kin say," I answer. "So Sandy I already asked Kent 'bout this, and he din't know the answer. Do ya know what happened ta the gold plates that the angel Maroni gave ta Joseph Smith?" I ask.

"Ya mean Bony Maroni?" interrupts Kent with a laugh.

"Kent! Don't talk like that!" admonishes Sandy.

"Why? I ain't a Mormon no more."

"Are too," replies Sandy.

"See what I toldya 'bout Mormons?" laughs Kent. "They jes' won't let ya go."

"OK, back ta the gold plates, Sandy. Ya know anything 'bout them? Like where they are now?" I ask.

"No," answers Sandy.

"And that, for me, is the weird thing. Somethin' like that, somethin' that would incinerate ya fer just lookin' at it, that thing's whereabouts in the world would be widely known."

I pretend to read a recent news release, "Two people on the lower east side were incinerated this morning after looking directly at some gold plates they had just found in the trash."

I laugh.

"Are ya done yet?" asks Kent.

"Well sort of. I was thinkin' 'bout my Beezer. Got any friends with a pickup truck?" I ask.

"Nah, but I got somethin' better. My friend Dean's got the White Whale. A boo coo big panel truck. Gonna have ta take us out fer breakfast first though."

"That's more than fair," I reply, considering it'll be at least 160 miles round trip. "I'll buy lunch and gas too."

"Dean'll appreciate that," replies Kent.

We chat while we head south to Stockton.

"Kent, ya won't b'lieve where my new crib is. It's at the end of a dead end alley at the end of a dead end street. It's inna middle of Tacoma, but it is so secluded. Already had a coupla parties ya missed out on," I tease.

"I'll see it when I get back inna 'bout two weeks. What I wanna hear is how ya got yer early-out past Top," he asks.

"Jes' like I toldya I would. I went right ta Captain Heberle. He owed me and knew it, so when I got accepted ta TCC, I went straight ta his office and asked him ta get Top ta let me out. It worked, I'm out."

"Whatcha takin' in school?" asks Kent.

“Tennis,” I answer with a chuckle.

“Tennis!” queries Kent.

“Phys ed is required.”

“What else?” Kent asks.

“Introduction to Fiction,” I answer. “Thought I might wanna be a writer.”

“That's the first sensible thing I've heard ya say since pickin' ya up,” says Kent. “Heck, maybe ever. Yer the boo coo biggest bullshitter I know. Writin' should be easy fer ya.”

He starts to laugh.

“As long as ya don't hafta tell the truth.”

“I'm takin' that as a compliment,” I reply.

When we eventually reach Kent's parents' house in Stockton, he shows me to his childhood bedroom. It still has the plaid curtains and matching plaid bedspreads on both beds, as it did when Kent and his brother shared the room as kids.

But the center piece is a new addition: the stereo Kent bought in Japan and had shipped home. When it arrived, Kurt unpacked it and set it up so that when Kent got home from Vietnam, all he had to do was push the power button. It is the dream stereo of all Vietnam veterans.

I'm a tee tee bit jealous. My pay records never caught up with me in Vietnam and Japan, so while the opportunity to buy a dream stereo was in reach, I just didn't have the money.

“Lucky fucker,” I remark.

“Here,” says Kent. “Jes' take yer boots off, lay down on Kurt's bed, and put these headphones on.”

I follow his instructions. Kent starts the reel to reel tape player, and the music starts flowing into my head. I had a long day riding in the mountains at high altitude and I didn't realize how exhausted I was until I laid down.

The next thing I know, Kent is shaking me, “C'mon, *pendejo*. Time ta git up. Dean's comin' over inna tee tee while so we kin go out ta breakfast. Remember?”

“Yeah, I remember. Man, I needed that. I was fuckin' tired.”

All I really need to do is put my boots on, and we soon hear a horn blowing out on the street. It's Dean and his panel truck. It's huge, just as Kent said it was. My bike will easily fit inside.

It is not a limousine and rides like the truck it is. But having ridden is the

army's deuce-and-a-halfs and several different tanks, I am quite accustomed to rough rides.

When we stop for breakfast, I can tell Kent is planning on riding on my order as usual, so I consider ordering something different to mess with him again. However, he rescued me yesterday, and today he orchestrated the rescue of my Beezer, so I owe him, sort of.

“Two eggs over easy, hash browns, rye toast, sausage,” I say.

As I predicted, Kent says, “ I'll have the same,” and then smirks.

“Whaddya guys, a coupla Siamese twins?” asks Dean.

We both laugh.

“Nah, we're just brothers from a different mother,” I answer.

After breakfast we head to Marysville. Dean's truck is quite noisy, but he does have a radio. He likes country music so much, he has a large patch that says “Country” sewn across the ass of his blue jeans. Dean is a pretty big guy, over six feet tall, with a full beard. He looks more like a hippie than a country music fan.

Normally I would be teasing the shit out of Dean for his music preference, but he is doing me a boo coo big favor, so I say nothing. Kent and I can't play our lame “Name that Tune” game, because I don't know any of the songs. Kent is pretending he doesn't either, but I doubt it.

After we load my Beezer in Dean's truck and we're rolling down the road, Dean asks, ”So where we takin' it?”

“That's a good question,” I answer.

“The reason I ask is cuz ya kin leave it at my place if ya want. Got plenty of room in the yard ta park it if ya don't got no place else,” offers Dean.

“That would be awesome,” I reply. “Thanks, man.”

We drive back to Stockton and over to Dean's house where we unload the Beezer and park it in his side yard.

Dean's housemate Barry is hosting a BBQ when we arrive. Barry is also an old friend of Kent's, and Kent warns me that Barry likes to play pranks on people. I get introduced to some of Kent's old bandmates. There's another Dean, the keyboard player, and Tim the guitarist. Then there's Tim's girlfriend, Tee Tee Butt. I remind myself to chat with Kent later, as I have a feeling I know who gave her that nickname.

We have only been here a five minutes when Barry comes over to me to ask what I like on my burger.

“Ketchup?” he asks.

“Yeah, ketchup is fine,” I answer, already a little suspicious.

In moments Barry is back with my burger. I'm wary. I don't know this guy, yet he is waiting on me like an old friend. I lift the bun, mostly to see if it has too much or not enough ketchup. It has boo coo too much. Barry is watching intently. I scrape some of the excess ketchup off, and it becomes apparent the burger is raw. So lame, it doesn't even rate a, “Nice try.”

After the BBQ, during which I do manage to get a burger that was cooked to my liking, Kent and I walk back to his parents house. It's a long walk, and we're tired when we get back. Kent gets two headphone sets and starts his Teac reel-to-reel on play. This time I know better. After taking my boots off, I get undressed and into bed. Sliding the headphones on is the last thing I remember until I awaken in the morning.

Kent is not in his bed. He must have gotten up early, as the clock says 8:30 AM. I take a shower and dress and amble into the kitchen. Still no Kent, but Sandy and Mrs C. are there. Mrs. C is getting ready to leave for work, and she says to me, “Kent says you're a good cook.”

I'm taken aback slightly and I say so.

“Kent said that?”

“Yes. Is it true? Are you a good cook?” she asks again.

I laugh.

“Xin loi,” I say, “I'm not used to hearing that Kent has complimented me. Usually he tells anyone that will listen that I'm full of it. But to answer your question, yes I can cook.”

“What was the first thing you just said?” asks Mrs. C.

Sandy answers for me, “He said 'I'm sorry' in Vietnamese. Haven't you noticed that he and Kent almost have their own little language? There were times on the drive back from Marysville that I wasn't sure what they were talking about. But it's not all Vietnamese. It's something else too.”

She squints at me.

“What does *pendejo* mean?”

“That's tricky, cuz it can mean two things dependin' how ya use it,” I answer with a smile. “If you want to tease or chastise someone, then you say '*pendejo*' as if you are yellin' at 'em. However, if you say it in a normal tone of voice but really stretch out the end, so it's '*pendejooooo*,' then it's sort of a compliment of how clever or wise someone is.”

“This is all very interesting, but I need to get to work. Derrick, would you

like to cook dinner for us tonight? Sandy will help, and she can drive you to the store for anything you need," says Mrs C.

"It would be my pleasure, Mrs C."

"Please, call me Peggy."

"OK, Mrs. C... I mean Peggy," I reply. "What should I make?"

"What can you make?" asks Peggy.

"I worked in Italian restaurants mostly. I could make lasagna," I offer.

"That would be fine," answers Peggy. "I gave Sandy money for groceries, so I'll see you both tonight," says Peggy as she leaves.

I turn to Sandy.

"Kent just left me here, eh?"

"I heard him leave on my Dad's motorcycle before I got up," says Sandy.

"Yer Dad has a motorcycle?" I ask.

"Well he says it's his, but Kent's the one that rides it all the time."

"Well, have you had breakfast?" I ask.

She shakes her head, and I can tell she's been waiting for me to ask.

"How d'ya like yer eggs? I already know ya like yer toast burnt," I tease.

"I don't anymore, but how d'ya know that, anyway?"

"Kent tol' me. He tol' me boo coo 'bout you. And I bet he ain't toldya nuthin' 'bout me," I tease. "Yer at a decided disadvantage here."

"So what else did he tell you?" she asks.

As I start looking through the refrigerator for our breakfast fixins, I reply, "I already toldya, you like yer toast burnt."

"And I told you, that's when I was a little kid," she replies.

While I make breakfast, I make mental notes of what's here and what's not for when I make the ultimate lasagna tonight.

After we hit up the supermarket, I ask, "Is there an Italian bakery around here?"

"Yes, it's not too far," she answers.

We get some nice dinner rolls and a couple of loafs of Italian bread, and then we didi mau back home.

First I need to get the sauce going, which is the real secret to the ultimate lasagna. It has to simmer a long time. Then we can make the meatballs and fry them before cooking them in the sauce. I was happy to find ricotta cheese at the market here. I thought I might have to use cottage cheese which just isn't the same.

Sandy and I have a great time cooking together. She's a quick learner and

not insolent in the kitchen like the cooks back at M Co. We make the meatballs together which saves me a lot of time. I make a couple of meatball sandwiches for our lunch.

“We gotta make sure the meatballs are good enough fer the lasagna,” I tell Sandy. “In the restaurant we always cooked up some taste test meatballs before rolling them all up. The spices often need correcting.”

Another important thing for making the ultimate lasagna is finishing simmering the sauce with enough time to let it cool off and rest. Overnight would be best, but that's not possible today. I'll be able to cool it enough to put it in the refrigerator for a little while at least.

We didn't have lasagna on the daily menu at the restaurants I worked in but would have it occasionally as a special. While the lasagna was quite good, it was not what I refer to as the *ultimate* lasagna. I only witnessed and helped in its making once. It was the owner's wife's birthday and her parents were coming to the restaurant for the birthday dinner.

The ultimate lasagna has everything in it: sliced meatballs, Italian sausage cut on a 45 degree angle, hardboiled egg slices, ricotta and Parmesan cheeses in copious amounts, and lots of well rested spaghetti sauce layered with the lasagna noodles. It never fails to impress. I've never actually seen it made anywhere and have only had it since when I make it myself.

Sandy and I finish putting the lasagna together in a large casserole pan. I put it in the refrigerator to rest before baking it.

We hear Kent coming up the driveway and into the garage on his Dad's motorcycle.

“Hey Sandy, wanna jerk yer brother's chain a tee tee bit?” I ask with a wicked smile.

“Sure,” she answers. “You know, you two almost sound the same the way ya talk.”

“OK, when he comes in, let's pretend we're makin' out,” I say.

We move close together and put our faces really close, but we refrain from actually kissing. Sandy starts to giggle.

“Shhh, you'll wreck it. We can laugh after he blows a gasket,” I whisper.

Kent takes awhile before he comes into the house, so I get to hug Sandy for what seems like forever. Just before Kent comes in, she takes my hand and puts it on her breast. I'm really liking her boo coo now. Xin loi, Kent.

The kitchen door to the garage opens, and Kent pops in like he's trying to catch us doing something, which he does, in a way.

“What the hell is goin' on!?” he blasts.

Sandy and I can't hold it back, and we both just burst out laughing.

“C'mon, what were you up to?” he asks a tee tee bit more calmer this time.

When we finish laughing I say to Sandy, “I tol' ya.”

“We were faking it to mess with you,” Sandy says.

It's a good thing she tells him, because I doubt Kent would believe me.

“Thought you two were makin' dinner,” says Kent.

“It's made and in the refrigerator. We just need ta bake it fer a while,” I answer.

“So Sandy, can he cook?” Kent asks, “I've only seen 'im bake.”

“Oh yeah, he can cook.”

“Thank you fer the compliment,” I say to Sandy. “More than I ever git from you, *pendejo*. You tol' Peggy I could cook, but now yer askin' Sandy if I can or not?”

“Peggy? Who ya callin' Peggy?” demands Kent.

“She tol' me ta call her Peggy instead of Mrs. C. I could call her 'Mom,' if you'd prefer,” I tease.

“Peggy!” Kent harrumphs, “Yeah call 'er Peggy if ya gotta, I guess.”

“But I can call 'er mom after Sandy and I git married, right?”

“What!” Sandy just about screams.

I smile and wink at her, “Jes' kiddin'.”

We both laugh. Kent does not.

“So when does *Peggy* git home from work?” I ask Sandy with boo coo emphasis on Peggy.

Kent flips me the bird.

“I'm just askin' so I kin put the lasagna in on time? And will you be joining us, Kent?”

“O' course, I'll be here, *pendejo*,” replies Kent. A tee tee bit snippy if ya ask me.

“So... Tee Tee Butt,” I start to ask.

“Yeah, whadda 'bout her?”

“Didja give her that nickname?”

“Yeah,” he says with a smile, “why?”

“Cuz Kent, ya can't go 'round givin' women nicknames 'bout their body parts. What if 'er tits were really huge? Would ya call 'er boo coo big boobs?” I ask.

“Mebbe,” he smiles. “She doesn't seem ta mind bein' called Tee Tee Butt.”

“She's just cuttin' ya some slack fer bein' dinky dao, as all us vets seem ta be sometimes. Remember I toldya one of the reasons we're friends is cuz we screw up at different times and so one of us can straighten out the one.”

I didn't expect to get anywhere on the subject of Tee Tee Butt, because it's not a very important issue with him, and he won't even listen to me about important stuff. He should, but won't.

Sandy, who has been listening to us finally just shakes her head and says, “You two,” and didis from the kitchen. We've been together all day, so she's probably has what Kent refers to as “Wolf burnout.”

She comes back to the kitchen momentarily to ask, “What's dicky dow mean?”

We both laugh, and Kent answers her, “It's *dinky* dao, not dicky. Means crazy.”

“Well Derrick got that part right,” Sandy laughs as she didis again.

“So where ya been all day, Lothario?” I tease.

“Who's he?” Kent asks.

“Lothario?”

“Yeah,” Kent answers.

“You should know this, Kent. He's a rather famous seducer of women.”

“Well I guess you figured out what I was doin' all day,” he says with his charming smile.

“Of course. I knew what ya was doin', just not where ya was doin' it is all.”

“An' ya don't need ta know,” he retorts. “Hey, I only give 'em what they want.”

“And I am witness to that, my brother,” I laugh with him.

The time comes to start baking the lasagna. It's not long and the kitchen is soon filled with the wondrous aroma. Smells just like Nino's Restaurant, I think.

“Man, that smells number one,” comments Kent.

“It's going to taste even better than it smells, I kin tell ya that,” I reply.

Sandy returns to the kitchen lured by the aroma. She and I set the table while Kent watches. Something he is quite expert at.

Normally I would be teasing the crap out of Kent, because he is still in the army and I'm not. However, he came to my rescue, got his parents to let me stay at their house, organized the pickup of my Beezer, and allowed me to hang out with Sandy all day. I kind of owe him so I'll just have to wait until we get back to Tacoma.

Peggy returns home from work, and we all sit down to start dinner.

“Kent, would you say grace? Your father couldn't make it for dinner even though I told him we had a chef making it.”

“I'm hardly a chef,” I say as I try to remain modest.

Sandy disputes that.

“I watched him all day. He's definitely a chef,” she says, smiling.

Sandy is cute as it is, but when she smiles, she is over-the-top beautiful. I really am starting to like her. Xin loi, Kent. That's what you get for abandoning me with her all day.

After Kent says grace, we eat. I made the Nino's Chef Salad, and we have rolls from the Italian bakery. The lasagna is a boo coo big hit, as I knew it would be. It takes most of a day to make, so what could possibly compete with that?

Because Sandy and I made dinner, Peggy insists on clearing the table and cleaning up. She enlists Kent in the clean up, so Sandy and I get to watch.

“Kent has boo coo mess hall monitorin' experience that I've personally witnessed. However, I have never actually seen him do anything that required actual labor,” I tease.

When Peggy is not looking, Kent flips me the bird, and I return with the airborne salute.

“Uh oh! I prob'ly shouldn't go round salutin' ya anymore. It's prob'ly not allowed fer civilians such as myself. Not that I'll be missin' out on anything.”

When I get up the next morning, Sandy and Peggy are both getting ready to didi mau for work. I tell them I think I'll fly back to Tacoma tomorrow.

“I don't have to work until noon tomorrow, so I could give you a ride to the airport if you want,” replies Sandy.

“That would be number one, but you have to let me take you out to dinner. I still owe you from before.”

She smiles. “I'm free tonight.”

“Great! Do you have a favorite restaurant?” I ask.

“Do you like Mexican food?”

“I love Mexican food. It's my favorite,” I exclaim.

“Then yer gonna love this place. I could eat there every day,” she replies.

Kent gets up not long after his mother and sister leave for work.

“So whadda we doin' fer breakfast?” Kent asks.

“I'm gonna sky up tomorrow, I think. I need ta go back and find a car

before school starts. Otherwise I'd hang here a tee tee bit longer ta kinda git ta know Sandy a tee tee bit better," I tease.

Kent gives me the finger as I expected.

"But as I was sayin', we could go out fer breakfast ta celebrate me leavin'. My treat."

At the restaurant, I tell Kent what he missed out on being on leave, when I get to my early-out, I ask, "Didja know we got four more years of possible active or inactive reserve duty after gittin' out?"

"Three years. Fer me anyway. I did three years already," he answers.

"Oh yeah, I keep fergittin' yer an RA. Lucky we were friends already otherwise I might not been able ta be yer friend," I tease.

When I tell him about having to sign away my right to disability, Kent shakes his head.

"Already got my percent of disability. so they can't fuck with me when I git out," Kent says with a smile.

"You fuckin' hope. Ya ain't out yet."

Because of our immense skill at wasting time Kent and I lay around his parent's house listening to his awesome stereo while I wait for Sandy to get home. I still can't believe I'm getting away with taking her out to dinner, as Kent considers it a date.

Sandy arrives home and after she freshens up a tee tee bit, we take off. Kent says nothing, but I can tell he wants to.

We're driving through a subdivision and stop at a busy main cross-street. As we wait for traffic to clear, Sandy sees a friend waiting to cross the intersection on her bicycle. They wave to each other. Her friend starts across when a car seems to just come out of nowhere.

Sandy's friend is right in front of us when she too sees this car from out of nowhere. I can tell she's fucked. She looks right at us the moment she is impacted by the car.

The car brakes hard, but it's too late. Her bike takes most of the impact, and she goes flying sideways, rolling when she hit the pavement.

Both Sandy and I jump out of the car and rush over. She's crying some, but she doesn't look like she's hurt too badly. Just a cut on one finger. Considering everything, she is boo coo lucky. Her bike is a mess, but better the bike than her, I'm thinking. We wait with her until the ambulance comes. As a precaution, the police at the scene insist she get checked out at the hospital.

After the ambulance didis, we continue on our way to the restaurant. We don't talk much the rest of the way, but after we sit down and relax a tee tee bit, we reflect on the accident. It takes a while before we even feel hungry after all the excitement.

“That's not my first time I've been a bystander to a catastrophe, where all you can do is witness and not do anything ta stop it. Stuff like that happens all the time in the Nam. I was hopin' when I got back, it would stop. But back at M Co. and in Tacoma, friends of ours keep getting killed. It's a good thing my apartment in Tacoma is at the end of a dead end alley off of a dead end street. I'm thinking of going into hidin' when I get back,” I say half-joking.

“At least she wasn't hurt too badly,” says Sandy.

“No, she was boo coo lucky,” I add.

We place our order and chat some more while we wait.

“It looks like Kent is behaving himself, so I won't have to worry 'bout him after I didi tomorrow,” I say.

“I don't know if I'd go that far,” replies Sandy with a laugh.

“Maybe I was just keepin' him too busy to screw up. Since he never listens ta me, I'm sure he listens ta you even less.”

Sandy was correct when she said I would like the food here. It is excellent. I'm hoping that soon, I'll only eat boo coo good food for the rest of my life.

After dinner, I am surprised to find that Kent is still at his parents' house. I thought he would have gone partying with his friends. I'm sure he's not here just to check on me and Sandy. Maybe.

“So was it number one or what?” Kent asks.

“Sandy tol' me before we went that she could eat there every day, and I wanna say I could too. We gotta cruise Tacoma and Seattle fer a number one Mexican restaurant when we git back. Or I should say when I git back. I ain't waitin fer you ta go lookin' fer a good restaurant.”

“Am I gonna be allowed ta go ta the airport with you guys?” asks Kent. He pretends to pout.

“Ya ought ask Sandy,” I suggest. “I think she said she has ta go ta work after she drops me off.”

“She works nearby. She'll let me come.”

“Shotgun!” I say with a laugh.

“No way, she's my sister,” he tries.

“Ya kin ride shotgun onna way back,” I point out. “Hey I rode in the backseat all the way from Marysville.”

“I rescued yer ass from a serial killer, and now yer complainin'?”

“I ain't complainin'. Jes' statin' a fact is all.”

I spend my last night at the Campbell's again falling asleep with the reel-to-reel playing long after we fall asleep. A number one end to a number one visit with my number one friend.

I wave goodbye to Sandy and Kent as I walk to the airport terminal. Sandy is a wonderful young woman, and it's no wonder Kent tries to keep her under wraps so none of his lowlife buddies know about her. Good luck with that, Kent. And xin loi, Sandy.

Seattle is a major flight destination, so even with flying standby, I don't have to wait long for a flight. It's early afternoon when I arrive in Seattle, so I grab a local newspaper to check the want ads for a used car. I might be in luck. There are several $100 cars for sale. One in particular grabs my attention: a 1949 Chevrolet. My birth year. After hanging out with the two sisters in Yakima with their 1949 Ford, I decided I'd like to have a 1949 year model car at sometime in my life. Now would be as good a time as any. One hundred bucks. What do I have to lose but a hundred bucks?

I call the seller, and the car is still for sale. He says he'll be home for a while, so I get his address and make arrangements to see it. I grab a cab at the airport and give him the address of the guy selling the car. When we get to the street, I spot the 1949 Chevy right away. It looks to be in pretty good condition for its age. I ask the cabbie to wait just a couple of minutes while I have a look at the car.

The owner comes out and starts it up. Starts right away and it's nice and quiet. Tires are pretty good. No major corrosion or rust at all. The window crank mechanisms are failed, so the windows are wired up in the closed position. But that's about the only flaw, so I tell the cabbie he can go.

In less than 15 minutes, I'm driving home in my new car. The more I look at it, the nicer it seems. Light blue, and the interior is great condition. It must have had seat covers on the seats. The radio even works.

I stop at the grocery store for some food and drinks, and then sky to my crib. Everything seems as I left it. I think back to my adventure and how I lucked out every time something went wrong. I thought I used up all my luck making it out of the Nam alive, but evidently not.

Chapter 27

When I wake up on Monday, I get right back into my routine of getting my coffee on the stove, and while I wait I sit by my open window and listen to the birds waking up. What could I do in life that this could be my profession, I wonder. What a number one profession that would be. What could you do? Write, I suppose. When thinking about what to write, you look out the window. Could work.

Could, but I doubt it. Get paid for writing? Plus, if it's something you like to do and you make it your job, you could end up hating it and just doing it for the money. I don't know if that makes any sense at all. After the army my head doesn't seem to work right all the time.

After coffee, I go out to look over my new ride. I open the rear seat door and get in. Roomy is all I can say. After being packed into the backseat of Kent's VW, the backseat of my '49 Chevy seems like a living room. There will be no complaints about having to sit back here. I open the trunk, which is quite large. There's a spare tire that's currently holding air and a bumper jack and tire iron. Number one!

I've owned several $100 cars in my life, and this one is by far the best one. Even better than the 1941 Chevy convertible I bought for $25. That was a cool car. It wasn't really a convertible, as someone had just cut the roof off. There were some brackets to hold the roof on if it was raining, but it was rather boring looking that way. With the roof off, it was long and black and beautiful, and when ever I gassed it up, every guy in the gas station came out to help wash off the windshield.

I decide to go explore Seattle today, so I drive out of my dead end alley and sky for US 5. Once in Seattle, I head for a market Howard told me about. It takes a lot of backtracking and meandering, but finally I see a sign that says Pike Place Market. Even though it's Monday, the market seems to be jumping with shoppers.

One thing is for sure, it is huge. I hardly know where to start but I already know I'll be coming back here. It's still Lent, and the fish market is really jumping with people buying fish and seafood. I see fish I've never even heard of, let alone eaten.

I have lunch at one of the many food stalls. There are so many, it's difficult

to decide which one to eat at. I love difficult situations such as this and decide to come back to this market often. That is if I can find it again. I better bring my map next time.

After I have lunch, I go around the market buying some fresh vegetables, They already have corn on the cob. Won't have that in Michigan for several months, so I buy some. I have to constrain myself from over-buying stuff. I'll just be cooking for myself until Friday when I expect my friends from M Co. will show up to party.

I explore the market until the early afternoon and then sky back to Tacoma.

Back in my neighborhood I stop at the Italian grocery before heading home. Frank is behind the meat counter, and he greets me when I enter, “Chef! Howzit goin'?”

“Going number one, Frank. Jes' got back from a tee tee trip ta California, and now I gotta stock up on supplies. I want some ham and Genoa salami, and could you please slice the salami very thin and the ham even thinner. Shaved, I think they call it for the ham.”

While Frank prepares my order I look around the store.

“What's this?” I ask, holding up what looks like some sort of a coffee maker.

“That's called a French Press. S'posed ta make the best coffee.”

I decide I've got to have one, as I love coffee so much now.

I'm still putting my groceries away when Ace and Beaudeen walk in.

“Where the fuck ya been, man?” asks Beaudeen. “We came ta party last Friday and Saturday and ya weren't here.”

“Had a tee tee adventure is all. Realized I had two weeks before school started, and it was just 'bout rainin' all the time. I rode my bike down ta California for some sun and to visit Kent.”

“So where's yer bike?'” asks Ace.

“Well it din't make it. Had a bad engine knock 'bout 80 miles from Kent's.”

“Is that yer car out there?” asks Beaudeen.

“Yeah, is it cool or what? Only paid a hundred bucks fer it.”

“What is it?” he asks.

“1949 Chevrolet with a straight six and three onna tree,” I answer with a laugh. “The same year I was born.”

“Hey we wanna go fer another walk in yer ravine,” says Ace. “Have ya

been ta the end yet?”

“Not yet.”

“C'mon let's go. Already got some doobies rolled,” says Ace.

“Well why din't cha say so?”

I laugh and we sky down the path to the bottom of the ravine.

“I should warn you guys. I walked for 'bout an hour and a half the last time I walked this way and still din't come ta the end,” I say.

“This place is so boo coo cool, it hardly matters if we find the end. It could go forever for all I care,” says Ace. “We came here thinking that even if ya weren't here we was gonna go fer a walk down here.”

We continue walking for quite a while. Again, we see no one else, and we don't reach the end.

“Man, I'm gittin' hungry,” says Beaudeen.

“Yeah, me too,” says Ace.

“Let's turn around then. I got boo coo stuff to make some number one sandwiches. You know, in all the times I've walked down here, I've never seen anyone else. It's such a cool place I would expect ta see other people down here. Doncha think?” I ask.

“I wouldn't complain if I was you,” replies Ace.

“Not complainin', just wonderin' is all.”

We get back to my place, and I start to lay out the sandwich fixings so we can all make our own.

“Never much liked salami,” says Beaudeen as he samples a slice of the Genoa salami I bought, “but this stuff is number one.”

“There's two things you gotta know if ya want number one salami. First and mos' important, gotta be Genoa salami with the natural casin'. The second is it has to be boo coo thin, but not shaved like the ham.”

“Yeah,” says Ace, “never had ham shaved before. Definitely the best way. Can't decide which ta have.”

“Then just do what I'm gonna do and have both,” I say and laugh.

The next morning I drive over to the campus book store to buy the books for my classes. While looking for my books, someone touches my arm. It's Jackie, one of the two student nurses from Madigan.

“Hi, Derrick,” she says, “remember me?”

“Jackie, of course I remember you. And your friend Jenny.”

I tell her about what happened after the last time I saw her at the simulated

disaster drill at Madigan, about all the people that thought my fake injury was real and how I'd string them along for a while before revealing my prank. We both laugh.

“So I'm having a tee tee party this Friday at my place. You and Jenny should come.”

I give her directions, and then we part.

When Friday rolls around, I decide on making pizza again. I don't know for sure how many people might come, and I can easily make different kinds to suit everyone.

I'm stirring the sauce when I hear Ace's van coming down my alley with the whole M Co. gang inside. Numerous joints are pulled out and after some scrutiny, minor scrutiny, several are lit and passed around. I hear another car coming down the alley. It's Jackie and Jenny. I invite them in and make introductions all around. It seems like a real party now with seven people packed in my tee tee apartment.

I tease Adolph again about helping me cook.

“So Adolph if ya wanna toss dough with me, the hardest part for ya is gonna be this, somethin' I know the mess sergeant never made ya do: ya gotta wash yer hands first.”

Adolph flips me the bird.

“I'll help,” offers Jackie. “I don't know much abut cooking, but I want to learn.”

“So put yer hands like this,” I say to her as I hold my hands up with the fingers folded over. “When I git the dough stretched enough, I'll toss it to you. Then you let it fall on yer hands and lay it on the pizza pan.”

I have the two kinds of pepperoni from the Italian grocery, and I also have four different kinds of mushrooms I bought at the Pike Place Market. The pizzas are going to be even better than the last time.

I throw the pizza dough in the air to stretch it out, but also to show off a tee tee bit for Jackie. It does make a mess of flour all over the place, but the smile on Jackie's face is worth it.

Just like the last time, I make the pizzas one by one, and as they cool, they are quickly consumed by everyone. Jackie and I can barely keep up with the pizza eaters but do manage to get a piece of each before they're gone.

The party continues in high spirits until near midnight, and then in a short period of time everyone didi maus, and I'm alone again in my apartment. It suddenly seems so quiet, and I realize I'm exhausted.

As I think about starting classes on Monday, I wonder what it will be like. My attitude is almost 180 degrees different from the last time I went to school. I was just trying to avoid the draft and didn't much think about what I wanted to do in life. I finally am allowing myself to think about the future without worrying about jinxing it.

I have breakfast and am trying to decide what to do today when I hear a car coming down my alley. It's Ace and Beaudeen. When they arrive they just walk in like they live here. I don't mind.

“What're we doin' today?” asks Beaudeen.

“Funny ya should ask as I was just wonderin' that myself,” I answer with a laugh.

We head to the Italian grocery. Frank is at his customary place behind the meat counter, and he greets me as “Chef” again.

It occurs to me that Frank might be able to solve a tee tee mystery for me.

“Frank, you must live 'round here, doncha?”

“Yeah,” he answers.

“So what's that smell that's everywhere?”

“That's the pulp mills,” he answers.

“Pulp mills? Whadda they make?”

“Paper mostly. Some wood stuff, too, but mostly paper. I think anyway,” answers Frank.

“Well ya just solved a mystery that's been botherin' me and all my friends. One of my friends said he thought it smelled liked grilled ham and cheese sandwiches. Man, I wish it smelled like that ta me, but it don't. Smells bad ta me.”

Frank gets our order wrapped up and we sky up to my place for lunch.

As we walk down the street, Ace asks, “Why does Frank call you 'Chef?'”

“The first time I was in there buyin' stuff for pizza, I mentioned I used to cook and be a pizza maker. I think he's just jokin' sorta.”

When we get back to my crib there is a note taped to the door. It says: *Just stopped by to say hi. J&J*

“Damn! Oh well, that's a good sign. They'll be back, mebbe not today, but they'll be back,” I laugh.

Now that I'm fully back into the Real World, as we called it in the Nam, the weekend blows by at seeming light speed.

Having been to college once before, I knew not to schedule any of my classes early in the morning. On Monday I can lounge around some before I

sky up to my first class of the quarter, Introduction to Fiction. How hard can it be? I love to read so it shouldn't be any sort of a problem.

After I find my classroom, I take a seat near the front. I'm quite used to seating in the back row when seated alphabetically, but since my hearing got a tee tee bit messed up in the army, I need to sit up close to hear the lecture.

The prof comes in and gives us a quick rundown on the quarter's assignments and the books we're going to read. I find out there's a catch to handing in assignments. They have to be typewritten and double spaced. I had typing in the tenth grade but never got very proficient then, and now it's five years later. Oh well if I don't type them, what can he do? He can't send me back to the Nam, so I'm not worried about that. I'm not even worried if he marks me down for it. I'll still learn the same amount whether I get an A or an E.

It's about noon, and I'm done for the day. Man, I could get used to being a student for a boo coo long time, I think.

Before I get to my car I hear someone call my name. It's Jenny, heading for class I suspect.

“We stopped by yer place on Saturday, but no one was there.”

“I know. I got yer note. Really sorry I missed you guys, but we went fer a walk. I'll take ya down the ravine sometime when ya come over. But I'm gonna have another party on Friday, and you and Jackie are invited, of course. Bring some other friends if ya want. You just going ta class?”

“Yeah, and then I have ta go over ta Madigan for a while,” she answers.

“I don't envy you. I spent boo coo time in the army hospitals and din't like any of 'em. Depressing places with all the messed up guys there, some of which ain't never gonna leave,” I say and then I try to change the subject. “Kent might be back on Friday so don't miss the party.”

“Thanks, I'll tell Jackie,” she says before she takes off.

My second day of class starts with tennis. Once again I scheduled it at 11am so when it's over I can have lunch. I played a tee tee bit of tennis in high school but that's all. I do have a secret weapon though. Being left-handed is a minor advantage because while I am quite used to playing against right-handers, they are not used to playing left-handers. And although I am quite left-handed in most of the things I do, I bat right-handed playing baseball. The result of which is my tennis backhand is my strongest stroke. I can put top spin or english on the ball when I return it. Since often the

backhand is on a player's weak side, my opponents always hit to my backhand. I love that.

We play some practice games before we actually start record-keeping to see who is the best player for the quarter. It's a beautiful Spring day with the sun out and just a few clouds. It could be like this every day, and I would not complain.

I don't win my game today, but I haven't played tennis in a few years. I do like my new tennis racket. I specifically bought it because it's made of bamboo. After being in the Nam I have a healthy respect for bamboo. It is a boo coo nice racket and after some practice, I expect I'll win some games.

I sky up to McDonald's for lunch and then back to campus for my afternoon class. I almost don't remember what it is until I get to the classroom. Demographics. What the hell? I remember that my counselor recommended it as a liberal arts elective. Oh well, I just have to go, I don't have to pass it or anything. They can't send me back to the Nam. Pretty sure they can't, anyway.

The Demographics class is *boring*. Not that I would trade it for being shot at, but almost. Almost.

The last of my four classes this quarter is Psychology. I know why I'm taking this class, and I'm quite confident I'm not the only person taking it to try to figure out if they're dinky dao or not. The army has definitely messed with my head, I admit that. But when I compare myself to the other vets I know, like Pete and Imperial, Howard and yes, Kent, too, I feel number one. Or as number one as possible after the army.

Another snafu, my Psychology professor wants us to volunteer at a local mental hospital to get some firsthand experience dealing with people with mental illness. I should be exempt from that requirement because of my military experience. The military is a haven for people with a mental illness. *You mean I get to kill people and get paid for it? Really? Where do I sign?*

Friday finally arrives and after my morning Intro to Fiction class, I'm done until Monday, which happens to be my 22nd birthday. This birthday will undoubtedly be boo coo better than my last birthday. I think a tee tee party is in order.

I'm expecting another crowd at my place this evening. I stop at the Italian grocery on my way home and get stuff for pizza. No one seems bored with it yet.

As I give Frank my order, he says, “ Looks like yer makin' pizza again,

chef.”

“I'm a victim of my own success. All my friends expect pizza on Friday night now, and I don't want ta disappoint 'em, especially the good-lookin' ones.”

“I gotcha chef,” replies Frank with a sly wink.

Back at my place I start the dough and the sauce, and then I work on my homework for school. Kent will be back soon, so I'm sure there will be boo coo distractions caused by him. Better get my homework obligations out of the way.

I hear a car coming down my alley. It's Jenny and Jackie. I notice for the first time that neither of them wears any makeup. They really are a couple of hippies now that I see them without their nurse uniforms. My beard is quite full now, and except for my hair, I'm acquiring quite a hippie persona myself.

“Can I help make pizza again?” Jackie asks.

“I was gonna be disappointed if ya didn't,” I say.

Jackie has a special little smile she does mostly with her eyes. I like it.

It's not long before Ace's van rumbles down the alley, packed with people. Pete, Beaudeen, Adolph, Ramon, and last but not least, Kent.

“*Pendejo*, yer back,” I say, greeting Kent.

“Yeah, I'm fuckin' back. Lemme check my crib out,” he replies as he walks through the door. “Is that a sleeper couch?”

“Pretty sure, but I haven't opened it since I have a bed,” I answer.

“That's OK, I'll take it,” says Kent.

“Take what?”

“The couch, I'll take the couch. I'm movin' in.”

“But yer at the hospital, I thought,” I say.

“I ain't stayin' there. I mean I gotta go check in every day, but I ain't sleepin' there. You can't git no sleep there. The nurses are goin' around all night checkin' on guys, makin' 'em take their meds, givin' 'em shots. Fuckin' noise all the time. Not ta mention I hate the hospital. Didja git a car?” he asks.

“Yeah, the Chevy parked outside.”

“Let's go see it.”

“Check out the backseat” I say as I open the rear door. Kent slides in, followed by Jenny, who already seems to have staked her claim on him. “After yer VW it's like the backseat of a limo.”

They canoodle around a tee tee bit just to check out the possibilities before

they get out.

“Whaddja pay fer it?” Kent asks as he pulls out his wallet.

“A hundred bucks,” I answer.

Kent hands me five $10 bills and says, “I'm buyin' half.”

I laugh as I take his money, “Easiest 50 bucks I ever made.”

“What's the rent?” he asks.

“Two hundred fifty a month.”

Kent counts out another $125 and hands it to me and says, “I'm movin' in.”

“OK moneybags, but I already toldya the real bed is mine.”

“You kin have the real bed, I just don't wanna hafta stay at the hospital.”

“Ya say that now, but wait'll ya try sleepin' on that sleeper couch,” I tease.

“Slept in boo coo worse places 'en that,” he laughs.

“An' so 'av I,” I laugh too, “but I'm still takin' the real bed.”

When we go back inside, the cramped space is quite apparent. I never envisioned parties of quite this size when I rented this place. I hang in the kitchen area and check my dough.

Jackie immediately comes over to my side. “I'm ready whenever you are,” she says with smirk. She is a looker, that's for sure. She helps me roll the pizza dough into balls for the second rise.

When we finish, we move closer to the living room activity, which at the moment, is smoking pot.

“I hope ya brought somma that California dew with ya, Kent,” I implore.

“That's what we're smokin' now, *pendejo*. What was that crap ya were smokin'?” he asks

“I know, it was number ten. Somethin' Adolph got. Not his fault. It was all there was fer a while. I knew you'd come through fer us, though.”

“I always gotta bail yer ass out.”

When Jackie and I start our tee tee pizza making team, Kent comes over to watch.

Ace joins him and asks, “Have ya had Wolf's pizza yet?”

“Nah, jes' had his lasagna,” Kent answers.

“It is number one. Best pizza I've ever had. Where'd ya have lasagna?”

“He made dinner at my parents' house one night. It was fuckin' awesome.”

“C'mon, guys. Yer gonna embarrass me talkin' like that in front of Jackie,” I tease.

“Lasagna?” says Ace. “How come ya never made lasagna fer us?”

“Cuz it takes all day, really even more than a day. Kent's sister helped me

so I was able ta make it in one day. Didja know Kent had a sister?"

"Wait, quit tryin' to distract me," says Ace. "I'm still on the lasagna. When kin ya make it?"

"We could have it for next Friday night's party."

"Not sooner?"

"Well, tomorrow I was plannin on takin' Kent down inta the ravine ta blow his mind. So I can't do it then cuz I need a whole day if ya want the kind of lasagna Kent was braggin' 'bout," I answer.

"I wanna come," Jackie chimes in.

"Come where?" I ask. "The ravine or the Friday night lasagna?"

"Both," she answers. "If I can."

"Of course ya kin, darlin'. Yer my number one assistant," I reply.

Finally the dough is ready, and Jackie and I start our process. We're a good pizza making team. I stretch the dough and throw it in the air to show off a tee tee bit, and then I toss it to her. She catches it and puts the sauce on, and I pile on the cheese. Then we put the different toppings on, and I pop it into the oven.

Kent nods his approval and says, "Smells like a pizzeria in here."

"And that's the way it should smell," I laugh. "We're re-openin' Nino's Restaurant, jes fer tonight."

The first pizza is ready at last, and Jackie and I start our pizza making assembly line, really cranking them out and even getting a piece for ourselves now and then. It's almost as intense as working a Friday night at a busy pizzeria.

The party goes very late now that party boy Kent has returned. Eventually I just lay down on my bed to rest my eyes, and the next thing I know it's morning. Kent is asleep on the fold-out couch bed, and Adolph is asleep on the couch cushions.

I lay around for a while, but I want coffee, and I want it now. I get up and get dressed and put the water on the stove. The noise of me moving around doesn't seem to disturb my roommates. They both like to get hammered when they drink beer.

I open my kitchen window and sip my coffee, listening to the birds waking up. Let's see, what day is this? That's good, I think, not knowing what day it is until you have to think about it.

"Got any of that coffee left?" asks Kent as he starts waking up.

“Prob'ly got a cup left. I'll make more. Ever had coffee made in a French Press?” I ask.

“Nah, never heard of it.”

“Yer in fer a treat, plus I got condensed milk fer it. Quite number one especially when ya compare it ta army coffee which we both know is swill.”

I pour the last cup of coffee for Kent and then put water on for the second pot. I hand Kent his coffee as Adolph wakes.

“Man that smells good, and I don't usually drink coffee,” says Adolph.

“Fuckin' army coffee ain't worth drinkin' unless yer a lifer and ya like ta brag about drinkin' it,” I joke.

“Thought ya gave up swearin' fer Lent,” teases Adolph.

“I been doin' pretty good, 'cept when I start talkin' 'bout the army. See I din't swear that time when mentionin' the army. That's twice now. Is it still Lent?” I ask.

“Fuckin' a, it's still Lent. Easter ain't until the last Sunday this month.”

“Whaddya givin' stuff up fer Lent?” asks Kent. “You ain't no Christian.”

“I know I ain't no Christian. Jes' tryin' ta git my head together after the army tried ta mess it up fer so long. I figure the reason we all swear so much is cuz the army gives us a bad attitude. I ain't inna army no more, so I'm tryin' ta have a more positive attitude is all.”

The water boils and the second pot of coffee is almost ready.

“That jes' smells so number one,” says Adolph, “I gotta try some.”

“Have all ya want. I kin make more. Might hafta have a tee tee bit more myself. But not too much, or I might start talkin' too much.”

Kent starts laughing.

“What?”

“You, talkin' too much. Ever see that, Adolph? Wolf talkin' too much?” asks Kent, continuing to laugh.

“Nah, never saw that,” Adolph winks.

“Hey Kent, remember I toldya 'bout the ravine at the end of the alley?”

“Yeah, whadda 'bout it?” he asks.

“It's a boo coo cool place fer a tee tee walk and a toke,” answers Adolph.

“Well maybe,” I say. “Kinda like a jungle down there. Since I was in the Nam for such a short while, I don't mind it down there. Even kinda like it. But are you ready fer a jungle experience, Kent? The one thing I kin guarantee 'bout it is no one will be shootin' at us,” I finish with a smile.

“Gonna need ta think 'bout fer a tee tee bit,” replies Kent. “What's fer

breakfast, cookie?”

“Are ya talkin' ta me?” I ask.

“Yeah,” replies Kent.

“Ya got any more money in that fat wallet of yours?”

“Mebbe?” What fer?” he asks.

“Fer breakfast.”

“Yeah, I got some scratch left, but not much after ya grabbed most of it,” Kent complains.

“You were the one shovin' bucks in my pocket. Din't even ask if I wanted ta sell half of my Chevy, ya just said ya was buyin' it.”

Then I laugh, because after all, I got the money.

“Tell ya what, I got most of yer money, so I'll treat you and Adolph ta breakfast at my new favorite breakfast place. Ya git real cream with yer coffee. An the waitresses ain't bad lookin' either,” I offer.

“Sounds like my kinda place,” replies Kent.

“Whaddya say, Adolph?”

“Fuckin' a, I'm comin',” he replies.

“I'll leave a note on the door in case anyone shows up while we're gone. Heck, we kin leave the door unlocked for 'em. The only thing worth stealin' is my radio, and I already got my money's worth from it.”

We walk out to the Chevy, and Kent grabs for the keys.

“I'm the one that knows where the restaurant is, *pendejo*, but I'll letcha drive onna way back. That is, if ya know how ta drive a three on a tree,” I tease.

He gives me the middle finger salute.

“I ain't gonna lower myself ta givin' ya the airborne salute now that I'm outta the army.”

We get into the Chevy and Adolph and Kent jostle for shotgun.

“We kin all fit in the front seat. As long as whoever is inna middle doesn't put their arm around me,” I caution.

Adolph eventually slides into the backseat.

“Whaddya think, Adolph? Is that the most boo coo awesome backseat ya ever been in?”

He really stretches out and then says, “Number one. Number fuckin' one.”

This time, the waitress remembers me. She sets a cup in front of me and fills it with coffee before I even ask. I'm not going to be able to say, “I'll have my usual” yet, but this is a good start. Both Kent and Adolph have to wait for

her to ask if they want coffee. Xin loi.

When we get back to the house, Ace and Beaudeen are there, ready for our foray into the ravine. We roll some joints for our adventure and wait to see if Jenny and Jackie show up. It's not long before they arrive, and we all didi mau down the path to the ravine.

We stop at the bottom to so everyone who hasn't been down here can take it in. It is so lush and overgrown with vines and bushes and so quiet. Everyone is all smiles. I catch Jackie's eye, and she does her eye smile thing. I'm really starting to like her, but I need to be boo coo careful. I am not staying in Tacoma one minute longer than I have to. Xin loi, Jackie.

“Which way do we go?” asks Jenny.

“We kin go either way. We haven't made it ta the end if we turn right. If we go left it's 'bout two hours there and back,” I answer.

“Let's try ta find the end when we go right,” offers Ace.

“We can't make it ta the end without goin' way past lunch,” I complain.

“You jes' had breakfast,” says Kent.

“If we go walkin' fer four hours yer gonna be hungry too.”

“Well let's walk and see how far we kin git,” says Ace.

“Derrick, do you know why this is here?” asks Jenny in regards to the ravine.

“I'm guessing, cuz I don't know fer sure, but I think this used to be a creek,” I say. “Up the trail a tee tee bit, there's what looks like the top of a sewer 'bout 20, maybe 25 feet up inna air. That's the one scary thing 'bout bein' down here. So far we've only found three ways ta git down or out of this ravine. That pipe makes me think that it's there in case it floods down here.”

“So comforting,” replies Kent.

When we get to the pipe in question, I ask Kent what he thinks.

“Well ain't no water goin' down it 'til it's boo coo deep,” he answers. “Be a number ten place ta be that's fer sure.”

“I've been thinkin' that too, and mebbe that's why I've never seen anyone else down here.”

Despite that thought, we continue our exploration of the ravine for another few hours.

Finally I point out, “We're walkin' downhill if ya noticed, so all the way back is uphill. Plus it's boo coo past my lunch time.”

We stop and contemplate our situation. While we contemplate, we toke one of the numbers we brought along. We were all hungry before smoking

the joint, so now we are ravenous. I'm not the only one thinking about lunch now.

Back at my place, we all pile into the '49 Chevy and sky up for McDonald's. We all pig out when we get there. I even get 3 cheeseburgers when I usually just get two. There is almost no talking as we all just about inhale our food.

“Man, I needed that,” I say after polishing off my burgers and fries.

“Me too,” says Adolph.

When we get back, both Jenny and Jackie need to didi, so we say our goodbyes. The rest of us listen to my radio late into the evening. When we get hungry again, I heat up the pizzas from the night before. I actually only have to heat up half of it as everyone, including myself, eats a piece cold while we wait for the rest to get hot.

“That's one of my grading points on pizza. Kin ya eat it cold, and is it still good,” I say.

“You don't even hafta heat the rest up fer me, jes' take it out and I'll eat it cold,” says Beaudeen.

“It won't take long, and you'll be happy we heated it up,” I offer.

We party late again until I once again lay down on my bed while the party is still going.

I wake up on Sunday morning to a near repeat of the day before. Kent's asleep on the folding couch bed and Adolph is sleeping on the couch cushions. I wonder why Adolph didn't go back to M Co. last night. He's got to be going cold turkey having not played foosball in two days. In my head, I've given up foosball, as I've never seen it in Michigan.

Without tripping on Adolph I make it to my tee tee kitchen to start making coffee. I don't know how much later the party boys stayed up after I fell asleep, so I'm trying to be quiet. The French Press is much quieter than my percolator coffee pot. But the aroma wakes Kent up.

“Man oh man, that smells so fuckin' good. I'm still tired, and I got a tee tee bit of a hangover, but I jes' gotta have somma that,” laments Kent as he wakes.

“And you shall have some,” I joke as I pour a cup of java for him. “Milk?”

“Please, Jeeves,” he answers jokingly.

“Why's Adolph still here?”

“Dunno. Prob'ly cuz he din't wanna go back ta M Co. last night,” he

answers.

My question is answered shortly as Adolph too succumbs to the wondrous aroma of freshly brewed coffee.

“So Adolph, why din't cha go back ta M Co. last night?” I ask.

“Cuz I ain't never goin' back. Got my GED, got paid last Thursday, so I'm goin' AWOL,” he finishes with a smile.

“Adolph, Top hates guys that go AWOL. After ya get outta the slammer, he will fuck with ya ta no end. When I first got ta M Co., a guy named Sponge showed up and when Top got through with him, he's still in the slammer. and ya know all the slammer time doesn't count as good time.”

“I ain't gonna turn myself in at Ft. Lewis. Kent said yer drivin' down to California ta his place. I'll come along and turn myself in at Ft. Ord,”

“Good luck with that, Adolph. If it were me, fuckin' Top would drive down there in his personal vehicle just ta git my ass. But mebbe he likes ya like he likes Kent,” I tease.

Kent flips me the bird and says, “Fuck you, Wolf. He hates me too.”

“Jes' not as much as me. You kin call 'im Top. He'd blow a gasket if I did that.”

“He hates me doin' that, and that's why I do it.”

“OK, darlin', if ya say so.”

“Why ya think Top hates ya?” asks Adolph.

“Not sure. Prob'ly thinks I'm queer cuz of my pink sunglasses,” I answer. “He even hates guys with mustaches.”

“How do ya know that?” asks Kent.

“We're out in Formation one day, and Top was handin' out extra duty. It was down ta me and one other guy. I got the extra duty cuz I had a mustache and the other guy din't. Top said he felt the same way 'bout guys with mustaches as he did 'bout what Frenchman do,” I relate.

“Whadda Frenchman do?”

“I dunno, he din't elaborate. So the night I ETSed, I left Top my razor and my pink sunglasses wrapped in the fatigue pants he gave my for the disaster simulation. I thought it all rather appropriate,” I chuckle.

I stroke my beard. It's nice and full and is by far the best beard I've ever been able to grow.

“Whaddya think Kent?” I ask as I continue to stroke my beard,

“It *is* the most prominent thing on yer face. Prob'ly makes ya a tee tee bit better lookin' cuz it hides somma yer ugliness.”

“Really?” I ask. “You really think it's noticeable?”

Kent starts laughing, and then says rather mockingly, “Of course it's noticeable. Can't hardly see none of yer face which is number one.”

“I'm tryin' ta look like a hippie and not like I'm inna army. Cuz I'm not, anymore.”

“Need ta git yer hair a tee tee bit longer,” he suggests.

“Yeah I know. I'm workin' on it,” I say. “Tomorrow's my 22nd birthday but I gotta go ta school in the mornin'.”

“It's Sunday morning, why ya thinkin' 'bout tomorrow?” asks Kent.

“Cuz, if ya recall from our many chats 'bout the Nam, I din't really git the kind of celebratin' most guys do on their 21st birthday.”

“So whaddya wanna do?” Kent asks.

“Not what we did on yer 21st, that's fer sure,” I laugh.

“So what then?”

“Don't know yet. I was only referencing my birthday cuz school is screwing up part of it. I wanted ta go out fer breakfast.”

“Then let's go now. I'll even buy, even though yer birthday's ain't 'til tomorrow,” replies Kent.

“I'm in. You comin', Adolph?” I ask.

“Dunno. Are ya buyin' fer me too, Kent?”

“Ya said ya jes' got paid, *pendejo*!”

“Yeah but that's the last time I'll git paid fer a boo coo long time,” Adolph whines.

“OK, OK, I'll buy fer ya too,” offers Kent.

We finish drinking coffee and then we sky up to our favorite breakfast restaurant. It's jumping again, but not too crowded yet as we beat the churchy set. It's the same waitress as yesterday, and all three of us get a cup set in front of us which is soon filled with their number one coffee.

“What's it gonna be today, boys?” she asks.

Now is my chance, I think.

“I'll have my usual,” I say.

She writes it down with no further questioning. I'm in. Yes! The question now is whether Kent will try to ride my coat tails.

“And you, darlin'? she asks Kent.

I can tell he wants to say “my usual” but instead he says, “Same as him.”

“How 'bout you?” she asks Adolph.

“I'll have the same, too,” he replies.

Since Kent is buying, I don't tease him or call him a copy cat.

After a number one breakfast, we sky back to our place. Ace and Beaudeen are waiting in Ace's van. I forgot to leave the door unlocked in case they showed up.

“Xin loi 'bout leavin' the place locked,” I apologize.

“No problemo,” says Ace, “we jes' got here few minutes ago. We wanna git ta the end of the ravine.”

“It's too late, we'll end up missin' lunch,” I reply.

“You worry 'bout food too much,” interjects Kent.

“Yeah, and cuz I'm the one doin' the worryin', you kin just slide along on my coat tails as usual,” I say in my defense. “OK, I got an idea. I kin make sandwiches, and we can have a tee tee picnic down in the ravine somewhere.”

“Well c'mon, cookie, git them sandwiches made while I roll some doobies,” answers Kent.

We use my tool bag to carry our lunch. It's actually an army pack of sorts that got left laying around at M Co. We takes turns hauling it with us on our adventure. I'm more than curious as to how far the ravine goes, and my only concern is we are walking downhill and to get back, it will be uphill all the way.

We pass our one landmark, the sewer riser, and continue until we get to our last turn around point. We stop to toke a doobie, and after we decide to have lunch as well. We're not only hungry from our hike, but the joint has made us ravenous again. Ravenous in the ravine, sounds like a mystery book title. And we are about to have the mystery of where this ravine ends solved.

No complaints about the lunch I made, well almost none.

“Din't ya bring no beer?” whines Kent.

“It'd be warm by now,” I answer. “Plus just think how thirst quenchin' that first beer's gonna be when we git back.”

“Quit talkin' 'bout it like that or yer gonna make me wanna turn around right now,” he says.

“We kin turn around right now. I said in the beginnin' we was startin' too late,” I say, though I really do want to see where the ravine ends.

“C'mon, let's see if we kin git ta the end,” pleads Ace.

We decide to continue, and the Stench of Tacoma follows us the whole way. At least we know what it is. Not much comfort though.

At last we come the end. There is a path leading up to a street, as we can

hear the traffic going by. No one cares enough to know which street, as it would be a steep climb. We sky back toward the crib, our mission accomplished. It wasn't like we expected the treasure at the end of the rainbow, but we tried several times to get to the end, so I am happy.

It's a tee tee bit more strenuous to walk back. Kent does a good job of keeping up with us, but his foot injury is more serious than I realized, and we have to let him rest his foot occasionally. We don't mind. We still have some joints to smoke.

It's late afternoon before we get back to our crib. Everyone wants sit down and relax with a beer.

“What's fer dinner, chef?” asks Beaudeen.

“It's Sunday, the chef's day off.”

So it's dinner at McDonald's, and then back to the house

When Ace and Beaudeen are getting ready to sky back to M Co. I say, “Adolph, you should go back with 'em. Yer not AWOL yet. You gotcher GED, go back now and ya kin git an honorable discharge when ya git out. Military jails are all 'bout punishment. Act up there and ya git boo coo more punishment.”

“He's right, man. Yer gonna be lucky to git a general discharge after bein' inna slammer,” advises Kent.

“Fuck you, guys! I ain't goin' back,” he says.

“Do whatcha want, man. Jes' tryin' to set ya straight is all,” I reply.

Ace and Beaudeen didi mau back to M Co. without Adolph. As we get ready to crash, I realize what a crowded mess it is with three guys living in a one-bedroom apartment. I've been falling asleep before Kent and Adolph, so now trying to walk around the fold-out couch and the couch cushions on the floor is tricky.

I'm the first to wake on Monday morning not wanting to miss one moment of my birthday. Having almost missed my 21st birthday, I'm not squandering this one.

I get the first pot of coffee going, and the aroma wakes Kent first. He gets up and sits by the open window, and I let him keep the seat because he is going to smoke his first Marlboro of the day with his coffee. I'd rather let the smoke go out the window than have to breathe it myself.

“So what time do ya need ta be at Madigan?” I ask.

“No particular time. Jes' gotta check in and let myself be seen a tee tee bit,

then I kin sky."

"OK, so let's do this. Drop me off at school, ya go to Madigan, and when ya kin come pick me up we kin go ta McDonald's fer lunch. Yer buyin' aren't cha? It's my birthday," I smile.

"Yeah, I know it's yer birthday, so don't wear it out."

Adolph wakes when we get the second pot of coffee ready.

"Wanna come ta McDonald's with us fer lunch?" I ask.

"You buyin' again, Kent?" he asks.

"It's notcher fuckin' birthday, and I bought fer ya last time anyway," Kent replies.

We have breakfast at our crib and afterward Kent and I have showers and Kent shaves. Why, I don't know. Maybe to practice for when he has to shave. I don't plan on ever shaving again.

We sky up with Kent driving. He missed driving, and I love being chauffeured around, so it works for both of us. The radio is totally worthless unless we want to listen to Country music.

"I think I'll buy a harmonica to entertain us while we drive," I offer.

Kent says nothing, though he frowns at the idea.

He drops me at TCC, and I sky to class. We are assigned to write, or I should say, type a book report. Well, I knew it was going to happen. I'll just have to see how much I get marked down for not typing it.

I hang outside of my classroom waiting for Kent to pick me up. I know I won't have to wait too long, because Kent hates being at Madigan. Plus now that he can eat solid food again going to McDonald's is his dream lunch.

When he gets there, I climb into the Chevy.

"Hey, didja invite Adolph to live with us when he toldya he was goin' AWOL?"

"Nah, he jes' sorta invited himself," replies Kent.

"It's a tee tee bit crowded with three of us, and when we party it's boo coo crowded. I woulda looked fer a boo coo bigger place if I knew what a popular guy I was gonna be now that I'm outta the army."

"Don't letcher head git too big, somma the people might be comin' ta see me, ya know," replies Kent.

"So I remember tellin' ya 'bout my 21st birthday in the Nam. Not sure I mentioned that when I was tellin' Fanelli, the gunner on my tank, that it was my 21st birthday, he says, 'See if ya kin make 22.'"

I laugh.

“So Fanelli, where ever ya are, and I hope ya made it back from the Nam, I made 22!”

Back at our place Adolph has rolled some celebratory joints, and he hands one to me for scrutiny. He is starting to catch on to proper etiquette when smoking pot, but needs to practice his rolling skills.

After we finish smoking my birthday sacrament, we sky up for McDonald's for lunch.

I haven't been out in public much with Kent lately, so I had somewhat forgotten his affect on women. We don't have to do anything. When Kent is with us, women just come over to us to talk and flirt no matter where we are.

Today is no exception, and we soon find ourselves chatting with a group of ladies who started talking to us first. Let me correct that, talking to *Kent* first.

Kent asks me in a whisper if he should invite them back to our crib for a tee tee birthday party. I shake my head “no” and he looks surprised.

I say out loud to him, “We have plans already, *pendejo*.”

“We do?” he asks.

“We do.”

He shrugs.

“OK.”

After we take our leave and start to drive back to our place, Kent asks, “We have plans?”

I laugh and then say, “Well I have plans, but yer invited,”

“And the plan is?”

“Have ya been ta the waterfront in Seattle, ta the Pikes Place Market?” I ask.

“Yeah, but a boo coo long time ago.”

“That's number one, cuz that's where I wanna go.”

Even though it's my birthday, I offer to buy dinner when we get there. Kent drives and Adolph lets me ride shotgun. It is, after all, half my car. Xin loi, Adolph.

We do have to explore a tee tee bit to find the market, but Kent's knowledge and my recent visit makes it easier, and we even find a nearby parking spot.

We sky inside and marvel at some of the fish and produce stalls. Because of all the crowd noise, there are boo coo loud conversations between the

sellers and the patrons. One fish market has their employees tossing fish around like they playing a game of catch. Almost like a carnival at times.

We walk around as I take note of the food stalls and restaurants I might want to visit for dinner. It's hard to choose, but I finally settle on one that has beer. Because we order beer, they card us. Kent and I show our driver's licenses, but Adolph has no ID with him, so no beer for him. Xin loi again, Adolph.

“Mebbe if ya brought yer GED with ya next time,” I tease.

Adolph flips me the bird.

“Ya know, Ricondo, ya better start keepin' a low profile and not showin' yer ID ta just anyone. I bet Top sends some sort of a notification ta the Tacoma and Seattle cops 'bout all the guys that are AWOL. I'm sure yer not the only one... just the dumbest one.”

I get another flip of the bird.

“Hey, I'm outta the army, it's my birthday, I'm havin' dinner with friends at a number one place. Ya might wanna stand close and watch me, Adolph. Ya might learn somethin'.”

I take a sip of my beer.

“You know, Adolph, I'm thinkin' 'bout bein' a writer, and it would be number one ta have my lunch ready made after a hard mornin' of writin',” I suggest.

Kent starts laughing while swigging his beer and now is choking a tee tee bit. Every time he catches his breath he starts laughing again, and then more half wheezing and half choking. He finally collects himself but keeps chuckling for a while.

“What's so funny? The part 'bout Adolph cookin' lunch?”

“That. and bein' a writer,” he answers when he's able to speak.

“There's a reason they call it Fiction. Yer always accusin' me of lyin' or exaggerating a tee tee bit.”

“I guess you'd be number doin' that,” he laughs.

“So now my only problem is tryin to teach Adolph how ta cook.”

Another middle finger salute from Adolph, who is not laughing.

“Better watch out, yer gonna wear that thing out before dinner even gits here,” I say.

Because it's my birthday, I ordered the Seafood Combo plate. When it arrives, it is huge. Also, because I'm buying, both Kent and Adolph ordered large dinners as well. Our plates are nearly overflowing. There are worse

things.

There is no talking for a while, but once we get our appetites partially satisfied, we all lean back to take a break and burp. We smile at each other.

“Cant' remember the last time I pigged out like this,” says Kent.

“Me either. I usually don't like to overeat cuz it ruins it fer me.”

Adolph and I are about the same height, 6 feet. Kent is a tee tee bit shorter, probably 5' 10” or so.

Both Kent and I have what's considered a medium build, not too fat or too skinny. Adolph is rather thin. However, he can and does eat both Kent and I under the table. Kent and I are still taking a break from eating while Adolph resumes and finishes his dinner before we even start to eat again. Impressive.

“So *pendejo*, I mean Mister Chef, where was it ya learned how ta cook?” asks Adolph.

“It's kinda of a long story and Kent hates my long stories,” I answer.

“I hate all his stories but yeah, I hate the long ones most.”

“Guess ya won't wanna read the story I had ta write fer my fiction class,” I tease.

“Roger that,” Kent teases back.

“I'll tell ya on the ride back. Kent kin drive and I'll talk,” I offer.

Kent kind of screws up his eyes to show his displeasure.

“It's kind of funny, and at my cost,” I say.

“Kin ya stick ta one story this time, at least?” Kent pleads.

“Prob'ly not.”

“See, and that's why they git so boo coo long!”

I claim shotgun for the ride back and start my story.

“In Michigan, if ya don't git yer driver's license on yer 16th birthday, yer considered some kind of a loser. So after getting my driver's license, my dream job was ta git paid fer drivin' around. Didn't matter what it was. I would've done whatever fer free just so I could drive.”

“Are ya gonna tell us how ya learned to cook or what?” asks Kent.

“I am, man! Yer so impatient. OK, so after I had my license fer maybe three months or so, I got a job as a delivery boy for a local restaurant. It was summer, so I got ta drive around with the windows down and the radio blastin', and I was gittin' paid fer it. My dream. The catch was that when I wasn't deliverin' stuff, I had ta load and unload the dishwasher and wash all the pots and pans. That's the reason I was so awesome bein' Pots and Pans man on KP,.”

Adolph rolls his eyes at my braggadocio.

“So maybe my second or third week on the job, I got into an auto accident with the delivery car, which was a Ford Falcon station wagon. I was looking at the house addresses instead of lookin where I was going, and I ran right inta a parked car goin' 'bout 25 miles an hour. Never even touched the brakes. The Falcon was pretty messed up, but not totaled. So the next day when I show up fer work, they say they were wonderin' if I would show up, and I say that I was wonderin' if I still had a job. They started laughin' and said, 'Of course ya gotta job, ya gotta pay us back fer smashin' up the delivery car!' They were kiddin', but they didn't tell me fer a coupla hours. They definitely had me goin'.”

“Are ya gonna tell us how ya learned ta fuckin' cook?” asks Kent, now sounding a tee tee bit exasperated.

“Oh that,” and then I start to laugh.

Kent gives me the look.

“So touchy. Alright, I'm deliverin' and washing dishes and pots and pans fer four or five months which was kind of a record there. Most guys only lasted a coupla weeks before they quit. So because I came ta work every day, they kinda liked me. Plus the chef, who was also the owner, was from Italy and he had a thick Italian accent. My pseudo-grandfather was Italian and had the same accent, so I could understand Nino without any problems. He really liked that, cuz he hated tellin' the dishwashers something three or four times before they understood what he wanted.”

Kent gives me the look again.

“OK, I'm there. So after 4 or 5 months, the woman that made the pizzas got pregnant and quit. So because I showed up every day fer work, they asked if I wanted to learn to make pizzas. I was boo coo tired of washin' dishes, so of course I said yes. There was a catch though. Isn't there always? They said they'd teach me ta be the pizza maker, but I had ta find someone ta take my place deliverin' and washin' dishes. Wasn't too hard. The next day in the locker room after gym class, I found my replacement. Of course the guy I got ta take my place only lasted 'bout a month, but I kept findin' guys from gym class to be the dishwasher. Some lasted a month, some a week or two, but after 'bout 6 months, I was a pretty good pizza maker. They let me off the hook and started hirin' their own dishwashers. Then cuz I did so number one makin' pizzas, the chef taught me how ta do everything in the kitchen. and that's the story. Was it too long?”

“At least we won't hafta hear that one again,” Kent laughs.

We arrive safely back at our place, and we head inside. We stay up until midnight because unlike last year, I want to fully experience every minute of my birthday.

“Oh, I fergot the best part of working in the restaurant,” I say.

“I think we've had enough,” pleads Kent.

“No, no, this isn't 'bout cookin'.”

“OK, what?”

“Nino's restaurant was doing really well, so he had just bought a new car, a bright yellow Buick Electra 225 convertible. Back on the block in Detroit, it was called the Deuce and a Quarter. The Falcon I smashed up had been his family car so while that was in the bump shop gittin' fixed, I got ta drive the Deuce and a Quarter on food deliveries. Nino tol' me not ta put the top down while I was makin' deliveries, but as soon as I got a coupla blocks away from the restaurant, I'd pull over and put the top down. I was bummed big time when the Falcon was fixed. I loved that Buick,” I finish with a wistful smile.

“Yeah, and now look atcha,” teases Kent, “drivin' 'round inna '49 Chevy.”

“We're the same age. It's a cosmic connection that I just can't explain.”

The next morning it's back to my same-same existence of college student. Not that I'm complaining. The morning coffee in my French Press is still the high point of my day. Then Kent and Adolph wake up, and it's all downhill from there.

After breakfast Kent drives me to school and drops me off so he can go to Madigan and check in. He picks me up after my classes are over, and we sky back home.

When we get back, Adolph is entertaining two girls who live nearby. One, Marcy, lives next door. I'm not excited about this and neither is Kent. We chat with them briefly and after a short while they both didi mau.

“What 'er ya up to, Ricondo?” asks Kent.

“What?”

“Ya gonna start playin' house with the little girls in the neighborhood?” Kent says.

“They're not little girls,” says Adolph defensively.

“One sure is. Marcy? She can't be 15. Yer already fuckin' AWOL, better not start messin' 'round with little girls. I seen her daddy out in the yard. Man, I wouldn't mess with him. He's big and looks mean,” replies Kent.

I agree and say so, though I suspect that our advice will be about as

effective as when we tried to convince him not to go AWOL. Xin loi, Ricondo.

Chapter 28

Kent and I get into our routine of him dropping me off at school and then picking me up after he checks in at Madigan. He really only has to hang out there briefly, and then as soon as no one is watching he didi maus.

We stop at the Italian market before returning home on Thursday.

“Gotta start makin' stuff fer the lasagna tomorrow night,” I inform Kent.

“Ya did it all in one day at my parents' house.”

“Yeah, but I had all day and Sandy helped. I got school tomorrow, and only Adolph to help,” I laugh.

“I see whatcha mean.”

Frank is at his station behind the meat counter and when he sees me he asks, “What's it gonna be today chef?”

“No pizza this week. Gotta make some lasagna. I'm gonna need some coarse and fine ground beef and some of yer Italian sausage. D'ya got any ricotta cheese?” I ask.

“We make it fresh when ever someone wants it,” he answers.

“OK, well I don't need it 'til tomorrow,” I reply.

“I'll make it later today, and I'll save it fer ya,” he says.

I thank him and then we sky to our crib.

When we get there Adolph is once again entertaining Marcy and Jan. We chat with them briefly. It seems that the economic downturn in Tacoma has affected the schools as well, and they only have a half day of school each day. This explains why I see kids playing outside every day when I thought they should be in school.

It seems every other word out of Jan's mouth is the word 'fuck.' Probably just trying to make herself seem older by talking tough. I don't think she's quite as young as Marcy though.

We swear a lot, well Kent and Adolph do, as I've given it up, but Jan out-swears them easily.

After a particularly long verbal barrage with the word fuck interjected as often as possible, Adolph asks Jan, “Has anyone ever toldya what a potty mouth ya are?”

She laughs but doesn't answer.

“Well ladies, Adolph has to help me get some stuff ready for a party

tomorrow," I say.

"Oh, kin I come?" asks Jan.

"Gonna be some drinkin' goin' on, so ya gotta be 21."

"I'm fuckin' 21," she says.

"Yeah, right," I say with a snort.

She pulls a wallet out of her purse and hands me her driver's license.

"Geez, Kent, she's older than you," I tease.

"No way!" he replies.

I hand him Jan's driver's license. It says: Jan Quirk 9/9/49.

He hands it back to me and says, "Could be fake."

"Is fuckin' not!" protests Jan.

I look her license over. Having seen boo coo fake ID's in my life, if this is fake it's the best I've ever seen.

"So, kin I come?" Jan asks.

"Yeah, ya kin come," I reply, "but ya gotta go now."

Jan and Marcy didi mau, and we start preparing the lasagna. Adolph is not as helpful as Sandy, not to mention way uglier. Xin loi, Adolph.

"Why'd ya invite Pottymouth ta our party?" asks Adolph.

"First off, she invited herself. And second, she's yer friend. Ya don't want her ta come then tell 'er she can't come. I don't care," I answer.

"You must like her," teases Adolph.

"Please. I'm tryin' ta not swear myself. I sure ain't interested in any woman who swears worse than you and Kent combined. How d'ya take a woman like that and introduce her to yer mama? 'Hey mama, this is my fuckin' new girlfriend, Pottymouth,'" I reply with a laugh.

We finally get things cooking. We even get Kent to help rolling the meatballs.

"Didja notice those tee tee loafs of bread I got from Frank?" I ask Kent.

"Yeah, what're those fer?" he asks.

"My grandpa used to call 'em cornetti, and those are fer our dinner. We're makin' more meatballs than we need fer the lasagna, so we'll heat the cornetti up, slit 'em open, fill 'em fulla meatballs, sprinkle a tee tee bit of cheese on 'em and eat. Gonna be number one," I reply.

And they are. After dinner I can barely fit all the pots of spaghetti sauce and pans of meatballs in my tee tee fridge. Might have to drink some beer to make room.

The next morning after class, Kent picks me up as usual.

“I need some fries from McDonald's,” Kent says.

“I'm gonna be cookin' all afternoon, so I have no complaints. But no flirting and invitin' a bunch of good-lookin' babes over ta our party,” I say, trying to hold back my laugh. “Jes' kidding.”

“Like I don't know that. If it weren't fer me you'd be like a monk in Tibet or what was it? Dearborn?”

I must have jinxed it, as we meet and flirt with zero babes during lunch.

“Prob'ly shoulda swung by the crib and got Adolph,” I say.

“No fuckin' way. He'd jes' try moochin' off one of us.”

I shake my head.

“He's just fuckin' himself goin' AWOL, man,” I say.

“He wants ta turn himself at Ft. Ord,” Kent reminds me.

“Yeah but we ain't at Ft. Ord, and I ain't taken 'im there. Are you?”

“Mebbe. What 'er ya gonna do with the '49 when we're in California?” he asks.

“After I crate up my Beezer and ship it off ta Michigan, ya kin have my half cuz I'm gonna fly home from there.”

“Then I'll take him to Ft. Ord if the '49 kin make it,” Kent replies.

“We ain't even made it outta Washington yet,” I laugh. “Ya know, when ya hold the map right, it looks like it's all downhill from Washington to California. Could just glide all the way.”

Kent doesn't say it, but I know he's thinking it: I'm full of it.

When we get back to the apartment, Adolph is once again hosting his new friends Marcy and Jan. They are all smoking cigarettes, and the place is filed with smoke. Even Kent complains and helps me open the windows.

Both Kent and I want to smoke some pot, but we need to get rid of Adolph's guests first.

I start getting things together to finish putting together the lasagna. “Hey Jan, would you help me fer a second?”

Jan jumps right up and comes over to help. I realize she is pretty cute, but she looks like she's trying so hard to be bad by swearing all the time, and the cigarette hanging out of her mouth looks rather absurd. I decide to see how bad she really is.

“So I know yer 21 and all, but there will be other things happenin' here tonight. Are ya a bad girl?” I ask.

She looks at me, takes her cigarette out of her mouth and says, “Are ya

askin' me if I'm a virgin?"

I laugh, hard.

"No! I'm askin' if ya smoke pot!" I say, but keep my voice down so Marcy won't hear.

"Of course, "she says with a smile. Her teeth are a tee tee bit crooked, but somehow it adds some charm to her face.

"OK Marcy, time fer you ta go. I need Adolph's help now."

"You comin', Jan?" Marcy asks.

"I'm stayin' ta help, see ya later," says Jan.

As soon a Marcy didis, Kent is rolling a joint. He hands it to me for scrutiny. I light it, and I pass it to Jan.

She smiles, takes a hit and then says, "Wow, great weed!"

"Yeah, Kent brought back from California. We haven't been able ta score any decent dew in Tacoma fer a while," I reply.

"That's cuz there is none. No one I know has any weed," says Jan.

"So d'ya really wanna help me?" I ask.

"Sure. Whaddaya want me ta do?"

I say nothing but do my best to smile wickedly, and then I ask, "So since ya brought it up first, are you a virgin?"

She laughs and says, "Fuck you, Wolf!"

Then she punches me on the arm.

"Hey, Quirk! Watch it! I'm the chef tonight. Don't go tryin' ta break my arm."

"Ya want my help, or are ya gonna keep insultin' me?" she asks.

"OK, ya wanna slice up the hardboiled eggs or the meatballs?"

"Meatballs," she answers.

"I figured that," I say with a snicker.

She punches me again. Harder this time.

"Adolph, git over here and protect me from yer girlfriend," I plead.

They both simultaneously deny that they are boyfriend/girlfriend, which just makes Kent and I laugh.

Jan punches me on the arm again, even harder.

"You must have and older brother," I say to Jan.

"How d'ya know that?" she asks.

"Cuz ya know how ta punch hard. Ya don't hit like a girl. So, d'ya have a brother?" I ask.

"Yeah, I got a brother."

“Don't worry, I won't hold it against ya. I gotta a sister and so does Kent,” I reveal.

“So I'm helpin' ya. Are ya gonna start bein' nice ta me?”

“I been offerin' ta be nice. Yer the one punchin',” I say in my defense.

To which she punches me again and says, “Is this what ya call bein' nice?”

“OK, OK, I won't tease ya anymore. Jes' thought we was friends is all.”

“Ya wanna be friends? Be really nice and not pretend-nice.”

“Man, you do have an older brother,” I laugh.

“I toldya I did, so what?” she asks.

“Well it just seems he got ya so ya don't really like guys is all,” I answer.

“I like guys. Well some guys,” she answers and then laughs.

“Yeah, I thought so,” and I laugh with her.

I am just about ready to start putting the lasagna together so it can rest a while in the fridge when Jenny and Jackie arrive. The party is officially started. Both Jenny and Jackie give me a hug and a tee tee kiss. I see the look in Jan's eyes that is 180 degrees from the smile eyes I get from Jackie. To try to defuse anything that might wreck the party I immediately introduce Jenny and Jackie to Jan and explain she's a neighbor and things smooth right out so far. Jenny goes right over to Kent and sits on his lap. Jackie stays at my side and Jan is on my other side.

Man, I think, I went from zero women interested in me to two in an eye blink. This could get tricky.

“I came to help,” says Jackie with her special smile.

This is not lost on Jan, who says, “I'm helpin'!”

“You kin both help. There's boo coo ta do,” I say trying to keep things going smoothly, but Jan has a different idea and wants to stir the pot.

“Aren't cha gonna ask her if she's a virgin?” Jan asks.

I chuckle a tee tee bit, and before I can say anything Jackie says, “Of course I'm not a virgin. I'm from Holland. I haven't been a virgin since I was 16.” Then she looks at me and gives me that smile again.

The situation is further diffused by the sound of an engine outside. Out the window I see Ace's van park. The doors fly open and several people get out and come into the house. The party is full on now. Good thing I made two large pans of lasagna.

Along with Ace is Beaudeen, Pete, and Ramon Salazar. Adolph brings the burning joint over to us and hands it to Jenny.

Ramon says, “Ricondo, you should go back with us tonight. The mess

sergeant tol' me he was coverin' fer ya and he ain't tol' Top yer AWOL yet. I tol' 'im I din't know where ya was, but if I saw ya I'd tell ya."

"Yer AWOL?" Jan asks Adolph.

"Yeah, sort of," he replies.

To which I burst out laughing and say, "Sort of? Ricondo, I already toldya this, ya should go back with Ramon tonight. Don't be a dumb fuck."

"Fuck you! I toldya, I ain't never goin' back."

"OK, OK, be a dumb fuck. See if I care. Ramon just wants ya ta come back cuz he ain't got no foosball partner now."

Ramon just smiles at this, so I know I'm right.

The kitchen area is rather small so I say, "There's not enough room for ya ta help Ricondo, so go party while ya kin. Jan and Jackie kin help me."

They are boo coo better helpers and do what I ask with no back sass, plus they are infinitely better looking. Xin loi, Adolph.

Finally the lasagna in in the oven, and we can all sit back, smell, and wait. It's not long before it starts to smell like Nino's Restaurant on a Friday night. That is not a bad thing. There is, however, no line out the door of people waiting for a table or their carryout order. That's not a bad thing either.

When the lasagna is ready there isn't enough table space for everyone to sit at the table, so I start serving it and everyone sits where they can. There's a small overflow of guests into the yard, so at least it's a nice evening.

"Kent, whaddaya think 'bout the lasagna? Good as the last time or better?" asks Ace.

"Better," Kent answers.

"Really!?" I ask. "Not too used ta getting' compliments from you."

"Don't git used ta it," he laughs.

As the evening and the party starts to wind down, the guests start to get ready to didi. Jan seems to be making a point of staying until she is sure Jackie is leaving too.

It's been a long day and I'm exhausted. I get a bear hug and a rather provocative kiss from Jackie with all this being watched by Jan, who hangs back in the house as everyone else leaves.

"Do I get a kiss?" asks Jan.

"Ya wanted me ta be nice ta ya, so I'm tryin' not ta be too forward."

"Really? You were kind a forward with Jackie," she says acting a tee tee bit jealous.

"She was just kissin' me goodbye. We're friends. Are we friends yet?" I

ask.

“Yeah, we're friends,” she says and smiles. As she walks past me on her way out, she gives me a quick peck.

“Hey! Whadabout me?” Adolph says.

“Ricondo, ya shoulda gone back ta Ft. Lewis with yer buddies like Wolf toldya,” she says, and then she didis without giving him a kiss.

Both Kent and I get a laugh out of that.

Fortunately my bed is always ready for me, and I just lay down after undressing.

When I assume my position at my open window the next morning, something catches my eye. As I turn to look, I see it's Jan. She leans in the open window and gives me a kiss. Definitely more than her teaser kiss last night.

“Good morning, darlin',” she says.

She is without makeup and looks very different. Still attractive, though. Very attractive, as a matter of fact.

“Would ya like some coffee?” I ask, once I regain my senses.

“God, yes. I could smell it across yer yard. What is it anyway?” she asks as she comes inside and has a seat at the table.

“It's not so much the coffee, but it's not the cheap stuff like 8 O'Clock or Chock full o'Nuts. It's Italian roast coffee. The real secret is the French Press coffee pot that makes such number one coffee,” I answer. “Milk or sugar?”

“Just some milk,” she answers.

We chat while we drink our coffee which finally wakes Adolph.

He slept in the buff, so now he has a tee tee dilemma of how to get up without exposing himself. Back in the barracks, guys go walking around letting it all hang out all the time, but there are no women there.

“Change chairs with me,” I say to Jan. “Otherwise yer gonna git ta see what ya missed out on if ya stayed here last night.”

“I seen it before,” she replies rather nonplussed.

“OK, just tryin' ta be nice like ya want,” I reply.

“Yer doin' fine, jes' keep it up,” she smiles.

Without makeup she looks like a completely different person. I kind of like this Jan. Not so much of a pottymouth, too.

Adolph lounges in his makeshift bed on the floor, apparently not willing to expose himself.

“God, it's crowded in here. How d'ya guys move around?” Jan asks.

“We don't. Or at least I don't. I just go ta bed when I'm tired and when I wake up there's guys layin' all over the place,” I answer with a smile. “Livin' in the barracks ya din't expect any privacy, and you got none. But my first two weeks livin' here alone was quite nice. Had I known Kent was going to badger his way in and then Adolph invitin' himself to live here, I would have looked for a bigger apartment,” I say.

“My gramma is a Super for a three story townhouse on the other side of town. The ground floor apartment is vacant and fer rent. Two bedrooms and it's even furnished,” offers Jan.

“No shit?” I ask.

“No shit,” replies Jan.

“You are a sweetheart. No wonder we let ya hang around.”

“What? I tell ya 'bout a place and now yer teasin' me” she complains.

“Hey, when yer friends ya kin tease a tee tee bit can't cha?” I ask. “Besides, I wasn't teasin'. I said ya were a sweetheart and I meant it.”

As I finish I lean over the table and give her a tee tee kiss.

“What's goin' on over there?” asks Kent, who just woke up and sees me kiss Jan.

“Nuthin', *pendejo*, just thankin' Jan fer maybe gittin' us some bigger digs. This place is too crowded,” I answer. “So Jan could ya maybe call yer granny today and see if we kin look at the place?”

“Sure. I kin call her when I git home,” she answers.

“You do that, and we're takin' ya out fer lunch.”

She laughs.

“I know you fuckin' guys. Gonna take me ta fuckin' McDonald's or somethin'.”

“Not *or somethin'* darlin'. We only go ta the real fuckin' McDonald's now that Kent kin eat real food again,” I tease.

When she stands to go, she leans over the table and gives me another kiss.

“What is goin' on with you two?” Kent ask.

I laugh, “Nuthin's goin' on. We're friends is all.”

I give Jan a wink.

“I haven't been up 5 minutes, and you two been smoochin' the whole time.”

“If ya call that smoochin' then whaddaya call what ya was doing most of the night with Jenny?”

Kent says nothing further on the subject.

“What're you talkin' 'bout, bigger digs?” he asks.

“This places too crowded with three of us here, man. We got no privacy 'cept in the head. Jan said her gramma's got an apartment mebbe we kin rent. This Wednesday is the end of my first month's rent, so a good time ta didi mau, doncha think?” I ask. “Got two bedrooms and it's furnished.”

“Hey! Whaddabout me?” whines Adolph, “I need some privacy.”

I laugh and say, “Ya want privacy, Ricondo? Yer gonna git plenty. When they putcha in the army slammer fer bein' AWOL and ya go shootin' yer mouth off, yer gonna git some privacy when they throw yer ass in solitary.”

Adolph flips me the bird, and I laugh.

“Is that how ya thank me and Kent fer lettin' ya sponge off us?”

Jan returns later in the morning and says her gramma will rent the place to us if we want it. So we climb in to the '49 with Kent at the wheel, and he follows Jan's directions to her gramma's house. It's on Laurel street, and it's a short street without much traffic.

We like that because we'll be able to play Frisbee in the street. We're going to miss the ravine, but being able to play Frisbee right outside is a good trade off. It's still reeks of the Stench of Tacoma. Actually the smell might be worse.

Jan's granny shows us the apartment. It's huge compared to the garage we're currently in. Two bedrooms, just like Jan said, so we rent the place. Her granny says we can start moving in tomorrow. The rent is the same, so it's an easy decision.

As promised, we take Jan out for lunch at our favorite McDonald's. She has her usual makeup on now, and it's like she flipped a switch, with 'fuck' being every other word again. I like the early morning, no makeup Jan better.

After lunch we sky back to our old crib, quite excited about our impending move. First things first as Kent rolls a sacramental doobie to celebrate our move.

After I light it I say, ”To Quirk and her sweet granny for getting us a new home,” and then I hand the number to Jan.

We spend the rest of the day packing up our belongings. When we sky to our new digs the next morning, we leave a note on the door of the garage apartment with our new address and directions should any of our friends stop by and wonder where we went. Really going to miss the ravine. Though we

could drive over now that we know where it starts.

The first thing to decide is who gets which bedroom. Xin loi, Adolph, but at least you get the couch now instead of the floor. Maybe I should say *a couch* as there are three, plus several arm chairs in the living room. The dining room has a large and rather long table with two chairs and two long benches on both sides. We'll be able to seat at least 14 people at the table with boo coo room for overflow guests in the living room. It was getting intolerably crowded at our last place when we had dinner guests.

One bedroom has a real bed, and one just has a full-size mattress on the floor. The room with the floor mattress has a window, and the other bedroom has no window.

“So what's it gonna be?” asks Kent in reference to the bedrooms. “Yer lookin' like a fuckin' hippie, so I think ya should take the mattress on the floor.”

I would prefer the window bedroom anyway, so I agree and that's settled.

Adolph and I start to fully check out the kitchen. So much bigger than the last place. Lots of cupboards and drawers. Boo coo counter top space and full size refrigerator. The kitchen range is another big plus. It has two ovens and besides 4 burners, it has a full-size griddle running from front to back on the left side.

“We are gonna be able to cook some awesome stuff in here, Adolph,” I say with a smile. We have so much space it only takes a half an hour to put all my kitchen implements in place and put everything away.

There's a basement too, and we go down to check it out. There's a washer and dryer down there. It's an old wringer type washer, but way better than having to go to the laundromat and pay to wash our clothes.

By the middle of the afternoon, we are moved in. We sit down in our spacious living room. There are so many places to sit it's hard to decide. If I sit in one chair and look out the window, I can see Puget Sound. What a view! I didn't even notice that when checking the place out yesterday.

We go out into the street to play some Frisbee, and at the end of the block it looks like there's a party store. How convenient is that? While Kent and Adolph continue to play Frisbee, I walk down to the store to see what they have.

I'm mainly looking for some beer, which they have. They also have milk and bread and something important for Kent and Adolph, cigarettes. I buy a case of beer, and it's a good thing.

I'm not even all the way back to the new place when a Chevy II pulls in front of the house and parks, followed by Ace's van. Jan gets out of the Chevy, and Ace and Beaudeen get out of Ace's van. Party time!

As I walk up Ace says, “We went to yer old place and saw yer note. Then we saw Jan drivin' by. She said ta jes' follow her cuz she was comin' over here anyway.”

Jan walks over to me and says, ”Hi, Wolf. Missed havin' coffee with ya this mornin'.”

Then she gives me a tee tee kiss.

“I missed havin' coffee with you too, Quirk. If you come by tomorrow mornin', we can rectify that tee tee snafu,” I say with a smile.

“I don' know that one. You guys have so many funny words,” replies Jan.

“Snafu? Oh you'll like this. It means: *Situation normal. All fucked up.”*

She smiles and says, “Yeah I fuckin' like that one.”

“Everybody c'mon inside, so we kin git ta celebratin' our new digs. We owe it all ta Quirk and her granny,” I announce.

We still have some of the California pot Kent brought back with him. There has been no pot in Tacoma for a while now, so we are popular guys in that respect. Kent rolls and hands the joint to Jan since she was so instrumental in our getting this place. She gives it zero scrutiny, lights it off the end of her lit cigarette, takes a hit, and passes it to Adolph. Even the cigarette smokers in the room cringe when she does it. Now the joint will taste like tobacco. Even the cigarette smoker's hate that. Xin loi, Quirk.

I have the chair that faces Puget Sound. What a view. I could sit here all day. Lots of boat activity. Big ships, ocean-going vessels, freighters, sailboats all moving around. Sailboat, I think. I'd love a sailboat. I got to play on a few smaller sailboats back in Michigan but never anything big. They look like boo coo fun. And you don't need any gas. Just the wind. Quiet and just the smell of the water. Although, I must confess that when I was a kid, I loved the smell of two-cycle outboard motor exhaust. That smell meant we were going boating!

“Ya want this or what?” Beaudeen asks as he's trying hand me the joint.

“Man, I just blanked out lookin' down there at the Sound and all them boats. So cool.”

Ace and Beaudeen disappear for a while, and when they return, they have several buckets of fried chicken courtesy of the Colonel. The huge dining room table serves us well with seating for everyone and room to spare. It's

nice to get a day off from cooking.

Even though I have class tomorrow I can hardly wait to go to bed in my very own bedroom. Whenever I want, too. I don't have to wait until all the party goers leave. A small thing, but after living on the barracks and the garage apartment, this place is deluxe.

In the morning I wake naturally. No alarm clock, no Sergeant of the Guard waking me or someone else for KP. I get up and dressed and start making coffee.

Right away I miss my open window and being able to listen to the birds waking up. But if I sit in the living room chair facing Puget Sound, I can see all the boat traffic. An almost fair trade off. I open a window, but instead of birds I hear the sound of traffic, so I close it. Could be worse. Could be the sound of gunfire and incoming.

Adolph wakes, probably from me opening and closing the window. He lights his first smoke of the day and within minutes Kent is up, pouring himself some coffee with his first cigarette dangling from his mouth.

“So I gotta go talk ta my surgeon someday this week,” says Kent. “I lost my surgery date fer my foot when I busted my jaw. You kin puke from the anesthetic, and if yer mouth is wired shut, ya kin suffocate.”

“Never knew that,” I say.

I know Kent doesn't really want to talk about this. He needs to get his head around the fact that the army is not done fucking with him. But I've pointed this out before, and he doesn't want to hear it. Probably because in the back of his mind, he knows I'm right. I hope the army does him right, but I know it won't.

“So on the day I talk ta my surgeon, I gotta stay 'til 3 or 4 o'clock. If ya drop me off in the mornin' I kin hitchhike home,” Kent offers.

“Are ya sure? Still illegal ta hitchhike here in Washington,” I say.

“That law is bullshit! I'll hitch if I wanna,” replies Kent.

After our first breakfast in our new digs, Kent and I sky. Me for my Fiction class, and Kent to make his appearance at the hospital.

While I wait in the parking lot after class, I hear, “Hey Derrick!”

It's Jenny, so I wave to her and we start walking toward one another. When we meet she gives me a hug and says, ”Where'd you guys go?”

“We moved, but we left a note with the new address.”

“There wasn't anything on the door when we stopped by on Sunday

afternoon," she replies.

I write our new address and some general directions for her and say, "Ace and Beaudeen may have grabbed the note off the door, xin loi."

"Sin loy... what's that mean? You and Kent say it all the time."

"It just means, 'I'm sorry' in Vietnamese. We do it out of habit, I guess. Xin loi. See, I just did it again."

I laugh, and so does Jenny.

"We were worried that you guys moved just to ditch us," laments Jenny.

I laugh really hard.

"Are you kidding? We love you guys. That's why we left ya a note, it's just Ace musta grabbed it. Trust me, we weren't tryin' ta ditch ya. Now we might try ta ditch somma the guys from M Co, but not you and Jackie," I assure.

Jenny heads off for her class, and Kent arrives shortly after that.

"Jes' saw yer girlfriend. She thought we were tryin ' ta ditch her by movin'," I chuckle.

"My girlfriend? Which one?"

"Yeah, I knew you'd hafta ask that. Which one? Which one of yer girlfriends goes ta TCC, dipshit?"

"Well Jenny and Jackie of course," he answers.

"Jackie? You still think she's yer girlfriend?" I laugh.

"They're all my girlfriends if I want 'em," he replies laughing as well.

"And just as well, cuz then I kin let you break their hearts when we didi mau soon."

"They jes' come ta me. What kin I do?" he says rather innocently.

"An' I am witness ta that, my brother," I assure him.

When we get back to our new digs Adolph is once again entertaining some of the neighborhood children. And Kent I are once again not happy about it.

"Baby sittin' the neighborhood kids again?" asks Kent.

"Hey, they're jes' our new next door neighbors," answers Adolph, somewhat defensively.

"And I'm not a kid, I'm 18. I'm Laurel, and this is my little brother Ronnie," says the girl.

Ronnie looks to be 11 or 12, but I guess Laurel could be 18 just like Jan could be 21. Maybe.

"So did yer mom name ya after the street, so it was easy ta remember where ya lived?" asks Kent, trying to be funny.

Laurel laughs and says, "No, just a coincidence. We only moved here a

coupla years ago."

"So why aren't ya in school, Ronnie?" Kent asks.

Laurel answers for him, "We only have half days of school now."

"Some kids have all the luck," I tease, "when I was a kid we'd a killed fer half days of school."

"What're you complainin' about now? I ain't seen ya go ta school for more than a half day or less," teases Kent.

"I ain't complain', not after the army. I'm happy ta go ta school rather than bein' in the army. I'd even go all day if I had ta, but I don't," I say.

"Well it was nice meet ya and all, but ya gotta go now, so we kin talk ta Adolph 'bout somethin'," Kent says to Laurel and Ronnie.

"Nice meetin 'ya too," Laurel says to us as she and Ronnie get up and leave,

After they're gone Kent says, "*Pendejo!* We can't leave ya fer a coupla hours and yer already playin' with the kids in the neighborhood. Wise up, Ricondo, yer on the lam. Ya don't hafta live in the closet, but ya better be boo coo more careful. Ya think people won't start wonderin' why the fuck ya don't go ta work or school after a while? Yer either a drug dealer, or yer AWOL."

"I'll tell 'em I'm Wolf's chef," replies Adolph, to which Kent and I explode into laughter.

"Right, a guy that drives a 1949 beater has a personal chef," says Kent, laughing some more.

"Beater? Ya callin' Thelma Lou a beater? She's my birth-year ride. Be nice," I joke.

"Thelma who?" asks Kent.

"Thelma Lou, L-O-U."

The next morning, we drive to Ft. Lewis and I drop Kent off at Madigan for his surgery consultation. It's my first trip to Ft. Lewis since getting out, and I'm not sure they'll let me in. Kent drives into the base and is waved through.

"See back at the ranch," I say to Kent when he gets out of the car.

"Yeah, yeah, later," he replies.

I drive to TCC, and after school I sky home. There is a van parked in front of Laurel and Ronnie's house. I notice it because there is a dog sitting on top of the van. Weird, I think.

When I get in the house, Adolph is again entertaining Laurel, but this time

she's brought along her boyfriend, Curtis. The van is his, and I ask about the dog.

“It's a Basenji,” says Curtis, who is a rather chatty guy.

We visit with Curtis and Laurel until late in the afternoon when I notice a convertible pull up and park in front of the '49. Several young women get out all laughing and talking, and then I see Kent is with them. Mr. Magic has arrived. How he does it, I don't know.

Kent got picked up while hitchhiking by two sisters and their friend. He of course invited them to a party that was pure fiction. However, now that they're here, with Laurel and Curtis we have eight people. I guess that's enough to constitute a party. Especially if you have pot, which we do. We still seem to be the only people in Tacoma that have pot.

When I look out the window I see Jan's car drive by and park down the street. It's quite noisy with several people talking all at once. Kent neglected to introduce his new girlfriends who seem happy to chat amongst themselves while waiting for Kent to finish rolling the joints.

When he finishes rolling, I say, ”So ya gonna introduce us ta yer new girlfriends?”

He smiles. He's back in his element.

“This is Iris,” says Kent of the youngest looking of the new girls. “And this is Samantha and her sister Jane.” Samantha is the driver of the convertible parked out front. Iris is Samantha's best friend. They're all kind of cute in one way or another and they are all excited to smoke some pot since there is a current pot drought in Tacoma.

Kent, with the introductions finally taken care of, hands me a number for scrutiny. We've only lived here for three days, and we are already having a spontaneous party. We make sure to invite everyone back for our traditional Friday night party before they didi.

I say to Adolph, “So chef, what should we do for our Friday night party. Can't do lasagna again.”

“Pizza?” he replies.

“Nah did that more than once already,” I say. “Too bad we can't get any decent tortillas, or we could make some killer tacos and burritos.”

“I kin make tortillas. My gramma taught me how,” says Adolph.

“Really? This isn't just more make-believe Pachuco talk, is it?”

“Fuck you, I kin make tortillas,” insists Adolph.

“That's number one Ricondo, cuz if ya kin do that, I kin make some tacos

just like yer gramma would make."

He looks doubtful.

"That's big talk, *pendejo*," he says.

It's Friday, and after my class, Adolph starts making some test tortillas just to make sure he remembers how. The side griddle on the stove works so that's great. Adolph uses a large mayonnaise jar to roll out the tortillas. I'm skeptical at first, but it works fine. The first tortillas off the grill are quickly consumed. Light and hot and a tee tee bit stretchy. Yummy!

People start to show up in the late afternoon. First is Curtis and Laurel, then Ace and Beaudeen with Pete and Ramon Salazar. After a short while, the sisters Samantha and Jane, along with Iris, arrive. It's party time. We have the radio going with the underground station on and California pot being smoked.

Mark and his wife Helen show up. I haven't seen them since Terry's wedding. Then Bill and Squeaky, another couple from Terry and Marcia's house. Finally Jenny and Jackie come in and the place is jumping.

"Ahh, my best helper," I say to Jackie. "I was countin' on ya fer help. We're gonna be busy in here. Not as busy as a restaurant but close. Especially after Adolph gets too high and drinks too much, he won't be much help. But all we really need from him is the tortillas anyway."

"I love helping you. I'm learning so much. It's fun, really," she finishes with her patented smile. I could drown in those eyes if I'm not careful.

Adolph comes in with a burning joint and hands it to Jackie.

"Ya need me yet?"

"Ya might as well start makin' some tortillas for now. Make some of both while Jackie and I smoke this doobie," I joke.

"Yeah, right.. Gimme that joint, back," he says.

I open the fridge to get things out and ask if Jackie wants a beer.

"Yes, please. I'd love one," she answers.

"Adolph? Beer?" I ask.

"Yes, please. I'd love one, darlin'," he answers.

"See why I prefer yer help, Jackie? Adolph is so insolent, and he never knows his station. When I ask him to do something instead of, 'Yes, chef!' it's always, 'Fuck you, *pendejo*!'"

We all laugh. Pot's good for that.

So Adolph does a number one job of turning out great tortillas using just

an empty mayonnaise jar. I give Jackie a quick demonstration on how to roll up the burritos, and she gets it right away. We're ready to go.

The aromas get some attention, and Jenny comes into help. The kitchen is really big, so there's room for all the helpers. Adolph is getting well lubricated with beer, so I get him to make all the tortillas I think we'll need before he fades on me.

We get the dining room table set for all the guests, and then we start bringing out platters of chicken tacos and bean burritos. We just keep making them until we see people holding their tummies from eating too much.

Some guests are able to pull themselves away from the table to waddle back to the living room.

I grab a beer and make it to the living room, and I sit next to Mark and Helen. I haven't seen them in a couple of months.

“So Mark, I owe all this to you,” I say as I sweep my arm across the room.

“What?” he asks.

“Yer the one that tol' me TCC was starting in March, so I was able ta git an early-out from the army. I really owe ya.”

Bill and Squeaky are sitting next to Mark and Helen, and Squeaky asks, “Is the fireplace is real?”

“Well it's a real fireplace, but it isn't really functional,” I answer.

To which Squeaky starts to laugh but then apologizes.

“Sorry. I din't mean ta laugh at ya, but you talk so funny.”

“Really? You guys don't sound like ya have an accent ta me.”

“Say 'fireplace' again,” she says.

I say it, and she and Bill both laugh.

“What?” I ask.

Squeaky then says, “You say Fye-er-place. It's really just Far-place. Fire is just one syllable.”

My dictionary for my Fiction class is sitting on the table, and I look up the word fire. Damn! She's right. One syllable. The funniest thing for me though, is to be told I talk funny by someone who sounds like Betty Boop.

I go back to the kitchen, and there's a second party going on. Adolph passes a joint to me, and I hand it to Jackie. She was a fantastic assistant this evening, and I tell her so. She has had too many beers tonight and is a bit tipsy, though not sloppy drunk. I look over at Jenny. She looks OK to drive.

“How many fingers?” I ask Jenny while I hold up my hand, displaying two fingers. She flips me the bird which is so uncommon for her. She and Jackie

are always the sweetest things.

“I know whatcher doin',” says Jenny. “I'm fine. Jackie and I always make a deal before a party of who gets ta drink as much as they want. Tonight is her turn.”

“Xin loi, jes tryin' ta be a good host. When ya hafta hang around with a bunch of lowlifes inna army, yer always worried someone will get hurt or killed cuz someone tries to drive after drinkin' too much. Jes' ask Kent 'bout that,” I laugh.

Kent gives me the look. I say nothing more.

I can hear some commotion in the living room. Sounds like someone new just arrived, so I look out the kitchen door, and I can see it's Jan. It's almost midnight. Jan is a small woman, maybe 5'4”. But she takes over a room when she walks in. Swearing and smoking like a sailor. I can hear them laughing and teasing.

Jan finally makes it into the kitchen and several guys follow her in. Good thing it's a large kitchen. Jan greets me and then Kent with a hug and a kiss.

“What 'bout me, Quirk?” complains Adolph.

“You still fuckin' here, Ricondo? Ya shoulda listened ta Wolf and turned yer AWOL ass in!” she teases Adolph.

“Still bein' a pottymouth, I see,” he teases back.

As Jan turns toward me again I notice she is wearing a see-through – or at the very most diaphanous – blouse and no bra. Now I see why several of the guys followed her into the kitchen.

Some of the guys have drank too much and are being rather boorish in their behavior. I admit it's hard to not stare but I don't. Well, not too much.

Her see-through blouse is not lost on Jackie, who apparently has a little wicked streak when she drinks too much.

“Well when ya' show off yer tits like that, it must mean yer not a virgin after all,” she says.

Uh oh.

“What the fuck are you talkin' about?” says Jan. “I ain't showin' off my tits.”

I'm betting there are several people in the kitchen that would dispute that, including myself, but we say nothing.

As the tension sort of hangs in the air, Jenny has quietly turned away from us and is facing the wall. When she turns toward the rest of us, we see that she has unbuttoned her shirt, and she holds it wide open for all to see, and

says to Jan, “Yer right, honey. This is how ya show yer tits off!”

I'm am in half shock and several people either laugh or gasp.

I'm wondering what to do besides stare when Jan turns and didi maus out the door. We never see her again. Xin loi, Quirk.

The party continues to the late hours. I finally hit the wall and give up trying to make it to the end of the party. Since I have a bedroom with a door I go to bed while the party is still going. It was a lot of work cooking this evening, and I am exhausted.

When I wake up the next morning there are some party survivors laying around the living room floor and on all the couches. Adolph managed to get a couch so he can't complain.

My French press coffee maker is sort of on the small side. I'm going to have to make 15 pots or more for all the stay overs sleeping on the couches and floor.

I make the first pot of coffee and no one wakes. So far I have the whole pot to myself. They must have stayed up almost all night.

I sit on the porch with my coffee. I sort of miss Jan. She was a different person in the morning, and it was fun to chat with her while we had our coffee and listened to the birds. The traffic noise increases as morning gets later. It's Saturday and lots of the neighbors are about.

I see Ronnie take off on his bike, and then Laurel comes out of the house, sees me, and walks over.

“Good morning,” I say. “You didn't stay 'til the end of the party did ya?”

“Heck no. My parents weren't that happy I was here, but I was with Curtis so they weren't too worried or nuthin'.”

“Would ya 'like some coffee?”

“No way! I don't drink that stuff,” she answers.

“When I was yer age, neither did I. But the army took care of that. Now I live for it,” I say, and I laugh.

Soon we see Curtis' van come up the street and park in front of Laurel's house. He gets out, picks up his dog, and puts it on the roof of his van. He sees us sitting on the porch, and he comes over to join us.

“So Curtis, why d'ya put yer dog on the roof of yer van?” I ask.

“He likes ta be high up so he kin see what's goin' on. He can't get up there by hisself. If I didn't put him up there, he'd be on the roof of your car.”

“I wouldn't mind, but I suppose there's some people onna street that would

be pissed," I reply with a smile.

"He'll stay up there all day. This way I don't hafta tie 'em up or nuthin'. He don't like ta be tied up."

"What didya say he was?" I ask.

"A Basenji," he replies. "Benji the Basenji."

I can hear people stirring in the house, so I turn to go in and say, "You guys kin come in if ya wanna."

"No, but thanks, we're gonna have breakfast with Laurel's mom and dad," answers Curtis.

Inside everyone is nursing a hangover. Makes me glad I watch myself and don't ever let myself get drunk. If I don't count the episode during Kent's 21st birthday celebration, that is. It makes my head hurt just thinking about it, so I can sympathize with their plight.

"Is there coffee?" asks Beaudeen, sounding rather feeble.

"There is a little, and I'll make more," I answer.

Adolph is the next to stir. He turns over and sits up. "What time is it?"

I laugh, "Ricondo, what does it matter what time it is? Ya 'got no job, ya don't go ta school. Yer fuckin' AWOL. Whaddaya care what time it is?"

Kent comes out of his bedroom and says, "Can't a guy git some sleep 'round here without people talkin' loud and arguin' all the time. Man, is there coffee? I need some," he just about begs.

"While you were sawin' logs, I saw Ricondo here canoodling with yer girlfriend Samantha," I lie to Kent.

Kent feigns indignation and says, "Ricondo, you leave the *wetas* alone."

"She's not a *weta*," says Adolph again.

"Whaddaya talkin' 'bout?"

"She's got red hair. *Wetas* are blonde," answers Adolph.

Kent looks puzzled and says, "I din't know that."

"You think yer a Pachuco now and know what everthin' means?"

"Yeah, and yer a Pachuco?" challenges Kent.

Adolph makes a fist and points out the four dot tattoos he has, one on each knuckle.

"They stand for Las Lomas, the hills, it's the hood my gang is from in San Antonio," he says rather too proudly, I think.

"I'm afraid to ask whatcha got busted for so ya had to join the army. Prob'ly got caught breakin' inta the coinbox on a newspaper stand," I tease.

"Or stealin' hubcaps," chimes in Kent, already laughing. He looks out the

window, “Hey, Wolf, it looks like someone stole Thelma Lou's hubcaps.”

“Fuck you, guys!” Adolph says to us. He does not tell us what he got busted for, and we do not press him.

Our new house is turning into party central for our group of friends. Which is OK except that I need to occasionally do some homework for school, which is hard when everyone else is partying.

This afternoon, the party is confined to the living room while I sit at our massive dining room table writing a short story for my fiction class. It takes me a couple of hours, and then I take it into the living room and ask Ace to read it for typos.

“I wanna read it, too,” pipes up Laurel.

I watch Ace as he carefully reads my story. After a while I see him smile, and then at one point he even laughs. I think to myself, if you write about war and you can make someone laugh or even just smile, then you have done your job as a writer.

When he finishes, he asks, “I know it's supposed ta be fiction, but is it true?”

“Well, Mark Twain said never let the truth git in the way of a good story, so it's only kinda true but not. Sort of like the Walt Disney version of “Alice in Wonderland,” when Alice is challenging the caterpillar's version of some poem he recites, and he says to her, 'I've improoooved it,'” I answer with a chuckle.

“It's really good, you should git an “A” on it,” says Ace.

“Well that means I'll prob'ly git a “C” on it, cuz my teacher wants it typed.”

“Can I read it, please?” asks Laurel again.

“Of course ya kin read it.”

Laurel reads it, and the same thing happens, some smiles and some laughs.

“It's an “A” for sure,” she proclaims.

“Well I thank you both for your trouble. Notice I din't ask ya ta read any of my writin', Kent?” I ask.

“And I thank ya fer that, brother,” he says, and we laugh.

Chapter 29

Monday morning arrives. I arise and make coffee and sit in my chair scoping out the boat traffic. When Adolph stirs, I ask if he wants some coffee.

“Yes, darlin', if ya don't mind,” he teases.

“Yer lucky it's still Lent,” I reply.

“Is it?”

“Yeah, Easter is next Sunday and this coming Friday is Good Friday. Prob'ly should have a fabulous fish fry on Friday since it's the last day of Lent. We used to have people lined up and out the door of Nino's Restaurant on Good Friday.”

“So ya gittin' the coffee or what?” he asks.

“Din't notice ya broke yer leg.”

“Yer the one that asked if I wanted some,” he says rather defiantly.

“An' I woulda got ya some if ya weren't so insolent.”

He sits up and fidgets around in his pants pocket, pulling out his smokes. Kools are his brand. He extracts one and lights up.

“Where do you get money for smokes?”

He smiles through the smoke, “I get it from the penny jar.”

We have a gallon glass jar next to our front door, so when Kent and I get home we dump all the change in our pockets into it. In reality, it has more coinage in there than pennies.

“I don't recall ever seeing you put anything in the penny jar,” I say.

“So? It's the house jar, just like it's the house pot.”

“You just tell Kent how it's the house pot we smoke,” I say with a laugh.

At which point Kent comes out of his room and asks, “What are ya gonna tell me?”

“Adolph thinks yer pot is the house pot.”

“An' why does he think that?” asks Kent.

“Cuz he thinks the money in the penny jar is part his, too,” I chuckle.

“What the fuck is this all 'bout?” asks Kent.

“Nuthin'. I was jes ' askin' Adolph where he got money fer smokes is all. I doubt you'd care cuz if he din't, he'd be bummin' Marlboros off ya and complainin' 'bout ya not smokin' Kools he likes.”

“Man, I ain't even had any coffee yet and yer already tryin' ta wreck my day,” Kent complains.

“Wreck yer day? Pray tell, what is so important goin' on today that I'm not aware of?”

“Gotta go ta Madigan, ain't that enough?” he asks.

“More than enough fer me,” I answer with a smile.

At my Fiction class I turn in my short story, and the prof gives us another reading assignment. I make sure I bury my short story in the pile on his desk so I don't get chastised for it not being typed.

Kent picks me up when my class is over, and we sky for our place. When we pull up, Benji is sitting on top of Curtis' van.

“What's that all 'bout?” asks Kent.

“What's what 'bout?”

“The fuckin' dog on the roof,” Kent replied.

“Curtis said he does it so his dog doesn't sit on Thelma Lou's roof.”

“So thoughtful, and from a dumb shit no less.”

“Why's he a dumb shit?” I ask.

“Din't cha hear 'im tellin' what he was gonna do if he din't get a high lottery number fer the draft?” he asks.

“Nah, musta been when I was cookin' inna kitchen. What did he say?”

“That he was gonna stretch his leg across two chairs and have one of his buddies jump on it and bust his knee up,” he answers.

“Fuck! Kinda overkill doncha think?”

“He's a fuckin' punk thinkin' 'bout doin' somethin' like that jes ta get outta the army,” he answers.

“Sez the guy that mighta shot hisself inna foot ta get outta the Nam,” I tease.

Kent immediately looks ready to blow a gasket.

“Xin loi, xin loi, I was only teasin',” I say. “Really, I only said that cuz ya know the fuckin' Lifers at M Co. think that.”

“Better watch that shit, man,” he says and then he smiles. Yeah, we're still friends.

Another day waltzes by and soon it is Tuesday morning and Kent and I are skying up for TCC and Madigan.

“I gotta 'nother doctor appointment today,” Kent says to me. “S'posed ta take X-rays or somethin'. So I can't come and git cha fer lunch.”

“That's OK. Kin prob'ly git somethin' on campus.”

When my class is over, Kent is waiting for me in Thelma Lou, and we sky for home. When we get inside, Adolph is holding a cat on his lap.

“Where'd that come from?” I ask.

“The Humane Society,” answers Kent.

“What for!” I ask.

“Adolph sez he's lonely when we're gone,” answers Kent again.

I start laughing, hard. I can hardly catch my breath. My eyes are starting to tear. Finally I am able to say, “What the fuck? Lonely? Lonely! Listen, Ricondo, if yer lonely go back ta M Co. After ya git outta the slammer you'll have boo coo company, so ya won't be lonely.”

“Fuck you!”

“You guys are fuckin' idiots. Look ya already got me swearin' again, and Lent isn't even over. Kent, he doesn't even have money fer smokes, who's gonna buy cat food? You?”

“I'll take care of the cat food,” replies Kent.

“Oh I feel good 'bout that. You don't do nuthin' 'bout real food, so I'm s'posed to expect yer gonna take care of a cat.”

“Whadda we gonna name it?” asks Adolph, ignoring me.

“How 'bout 'Gone' as in 'outta here?'” I offer.

They continue to ignore me. What idiots. I should've stayed at my garage apartment and let these two dumb shits have this place.

It's not a bad cat as cats go. I even like cats, but I'm leaving in little over a month now, and I'm not taking a cat with me. I also doubt that when Adolph turns himself in for being AWOL that he will be allowed to keep his cat.

The cat is what I'd call a typical tabby with a splotch of white on its chest and chin and four white paws.

“How 'bout White Paws?” suggests Adolph for the cat's name.

“How 'bout Socrates?” I say.

“Sah-cra-who?”

“Never mind,” I answer.

“How 'bout W.P.?” suggests Kent.

And that was that. The cat was now Dubya P.

I wonder again where the cat food will come from, and that makes me think of real food.

“So let's do it. Lent fish fry this Friday night. When I worked at Nino's restaurant on the last day of Lent the line was out the door and half way

across the parking lot. I even know the secret batter that Nino used. A closely guarded secret that I will reveal to you on Saturday morning."

"Why do we have ta wait for Saturday?"

"OK, OK, I'll tell ya on Friday night after the fish fry. If I tell ya before, it'll wreck if fer ya and ya prob'ly won't even want ta try it," I say, trying to be a tee tee bit mysterious. "I'm also going to make their famous tartar sauce and of course the coleslaw that I also know the secret recipe for. When some of my friends' moms found out I worked at Nino's' they all wanted to know the tartar sauce recipe. I would lie and tell them I didn't know it," I say. "Anyway, Adolph, you and I are goin' onna tee tee field trip on Friday morning ta the Pike Place Market in Seattle."

"You got class on Friday," Kent reminds me.

"It's Good Friday, shouldn't be any school. If there is, I'll be excused cuz it's Good Friday," I reply.

"You ain't a Christian!"

"My prof doesn't know that," I say with a wink. "And it's none of his fuckin' business. Oops, there I go swearin' and Lent ain't over yet."

"Like ya care 'bout Lent," Kent says.

"Hey, I'm celebratin' ain't I? Havin' a fish fry and all," I reply. "An' tryin' not ta swear not that you and Adolph have been any help on that score."

Wednesday arrives and it's off to class for me and Madigan for Kent. In class we get another writing assignment, but we also get our previously written short stories back. I get a "C," and since it's what I expected, I don't even think about it any further.

When class is over Kent is waiting for me outside in Thelma Lou.

"Got my short story back," I announce.

"What didya git?"

"Jes' what I thought, a C," I answer. "Aren't cha glad I din't make ya read it?"

"Always glad 'bout stuff like that, my brother," he laughs too.

When we arrive, Adolph, Ronnie, and Laurel are playing Frisbee out in the street. We immediately join in, and we take over the whole block. When we finish playing, Kent confides that the army is going to operate on his injured foot soon, and there will be no Frisbee for him for a while. Xin loi, Kent. Frisbee is our only recreational past time now. Well, besides smoking pot.

Thursday rolls around and Kent picks me up after my Tennis class.

“How come yer done so early?” Kent asks me.

“My afternoon Psych class got canceled. Prob'ly cuz it's Easter on Sunday, so people are going on vacation early.”

When I lay my tennis racket on the front seat between us, Kent picks it up and looks it over.

“Looks like fuckin' bamboo,” he informs. “I hate fuckin' bamboo!”

“Yeah, after the Nam I'm not overly enamored of it either. I hated it over there. But for the same reasons I hated it, now I like it. That's the most awesome tennis racket I've ever had. Creamed the guy I played today. Jes' couldn't figure out he shouldn't hit it ta my backhand,” I say.

“Takin' advantage of yer opponent,” Kent teases.

“Takin' advantage? Of course I was takin' advantage. Same as when we played foosball. Ya always made me be goalie so you could take advantage of my awesome goal tending skills,” and then we both laugh.

“Man, I miss playin' foosball,” I say. “Not enough ta stay in the army though.”

“Back in Stockton, all the bars got foosball tables,” says Kent.

“Well let's just see now, foosball and Sandy? Hmm, maybe I kin hang around a tee tee bit after I git my Beezer shipped off ta Michigan,” I tease.

“Better not ship that bike off too fast. You'll need that shippin' box ta sleep in.”

“Be a tee tee bit cramped in there. What kinda brother would let his sister sleep inna shippin' crate?” I ask.

“The kinda brother that wouldn't let a lowlife like you sleep with my sister!”

“Man, Kent, I hope yer not throwin' down the gauntlet and challenging' me,” I say with a grin. “Ya might lose.”

I wake early on Good Friday, as I'm excited about showing off Nino's fish and chips. When I first started working at Nino's, everyone working there got dinner for free, anything on the menu. The fish and chips were so good, I had them every night for the first six months I worked there. It got to be a joke, and after a while everyone would ask me what I was having for dinner. Fish and chips was always the answer.

Adolph and I find the Pike Place Market with no trouble. It seems everyone is going there. We have to park far away and walk several blocks. When we get there on foot, the place is like a zoo. It's jammed with people. The fish vendors right at the entrance are showing off, throwing fish around.

“Let’s go get the vegetables we need, and we'll come back for the fish and maybe it won't be so crazy here. Shoulda come yesterday,” I say.

We sky inside the market, and it's a wonderful selection of fresh produce. We get a couple heads of cabbage and some lettuce.

“Thought we was makin' coleslaw? What's the lettuce fer?” asks Adolph.

“You'll see, but it's easier just ta show ya when we make dinner.”

We also get 50 pounds of potatoes and some beautiful lemons.

“That's a lot a potatoes,” cautions Adolph.

I smile and then I say, “Yer the one that's gonna peel 'em, chef. And then french fry 'em.”

I laugh at the face Adolph is making.

“All 50 pounds?”

“Nah, maybe 25 or 30 pounds of french fries. We'll use the rest ta make hash browns in the mornin' fer all the people sleepin' onna floor.”

We get back to the fish vendors, and I find one that has some number one looking cod. I buy what I need and we sky back to Tacoma.

“OK, Adolph. You kin shred the cabbage and carrots while I make the coleslaw dressing and the all important tartar sauce,” I say.

In the end I help Adolph peel and cut the potatoes. We have two huge pots that we'll fill with shortening to fry everything. I just finish making the coleslaw and the tartar sauce when I hear laughing and squealing coming from the living room.

Kent has returned with Samantha, Jane, and Iris. They all have little packages with them that I give no thought to. It's a party, must be party stuff, I reason.

Soon Jenny and Jackie arrive, both looking so beautiful I can't believe they want to hang out with a couple of mental cases such as myself and Kent. Mostly Kent, of course, as he's in total denial, unlike me. They both have tee tee packages with them as well. Something's up, but what?

We are joined by Laurel and Curtis, as well as Ace's van, full of the M Co. crew.

We get the party going in style with Kent's California pot and some ice cold beer. Jackie sits next to me.

“Do I get to help tonight?” she asks.

“Yer kiddin', aren't ya?” I ask. “I'm countin' on you. Adolph starts fading on me when he gets drunk, so I need yer help for sure.”

“Thank you!” she replies.

“You don't hafta thank me, darlin'. Yer my main apprentice in the kitchen. I should be thankin' you,” I say.

“I just love coming here. In Holland a family sits down and eats without any talking and just gets it done as quick as they can. The food's nothing special, either. But here, the food is fabulous, and it's a fun party with the cooking and the eating and talking and laughing. You should open a restaurant. Really. Everyone would come,” she says.

“Well darlin' ya ain't seen or ate nuthin' yet, cuz tonight we are openin' Nino's Restaurant fer one night and one night only. and yer invited. Ya just stand right next ta me all night.”

She says nothing but she gives me the smile eyes like I've never seen before. I am so going to miss her when I leave here.

As the sun begins to set, Adolph, and Jackie and I start up the kitchen of Nino's one-night restaurant.

The secret to great french fries is you need to blanch the potatoes in oil before the final fry. So we blanch all of the potatoes, and then I show Adolph what the lettuce is for.

“So you two are going to prep the plates as I work the fryers tonight,” I say to Jackie and Adolph. Mostly Jackie, because Adolph is useless, or will be soon.

“The plate gets coleslaw, fish, french fries, and a slice of lemon. The lemon is important so don't ferget it. Now ya gotta put the coleslaw on a nice piece of lettuce with no holes in it. It kinda forms a cup so the coleslaw dressing doesn't leak out and make the fish batter soggy. It's a small thing, but it's important if ya want people ta be sayin' good things 'bout dinner.”

Blanching the french fries has already lured some scavengers into the kitchen. They look at the pile of blanched potatoes.

“Can we taste them? They smell great.”

“No,” I say. “They're not ready yet. I know they smell good, but they wouldn't taste good yet. They'd be soggy, greasy and only warm. Trust me, I've tried them like that. You don't see me eatin' any do ya?”

Kent comes into the kitchen, and I know why. He wants to see what the secret fish batter is.

“Prob'ly gonna wreck it fer you,” I tease, showing him the box of Aunt Jemima's pancake mix.

“Nah, I like Aunt Jemima, at least fer pancakes,” he says.

Finally it's time to start the actual fish fry. The good aroma of blanching the french fries is nothing compared to when we start frying the fish. I can people starting to sit around the dining room table already. It looks and smells exactly like Nino's, so I am quite happy.

Adolph and Jackie start filling the plates as I directed, and then they pass the filled plates into the dining room. The table has several bowls of the famous tartar sauce. It gets fairly quiet in the dining room, and I peek around the corner of the doorway to see what's up. Eating is what's up. Everyone is chowing down. When they see me looking, I get several thumbs up. So far so good.

I also see Mark and Helen just coming through the door. They seem to have something in their hands, and I can also see several small packages on the living room table. I still don't know what's up with that.

We finally get everyone fed enough that Adolph, Jackie, and I can eat with out last group of diners.

“So Kent, whaddaya think about the fish batter?” I ask.

“You were right. It was number one,” he answers.

Jackie is sitting next to me and she says, “I've been to London a few times and had fish and chips there. Yours are infinitely better.”

“You are too kind.”

Mark, who is from Tacoma says, “No, they're right. Tacoma and Seattle are both big fish and seafood towns. I love a good fish and chips, and yours is one of the best I've ever had. Where'd ya git the tartar sauce?”

“The tartar sauce is from a secret recipe, and yer gonna make me blush if y'all keep it up.”

“Well then yer prob'ly gonna cry when we do this next thing,” replies Kent.

“What're ya talkin' 'bout now?” I ask, and then everyone starts to sing the “Happy Birthday” song.

Since it's not my birthday I don't realize it's for me until they sing my name.

“It's not my birthday,” I say, baffled.

“It's a surprise 21st birthday, for the one ya missed out on,” says Kent.

The presents are brought in and with no further protests from me, I start to open them.

The first present is from Jenny. It's a chef's hat. Very cool, I think.

She says, “It's for when you open your restaurant.”

The next present is from Jackie, and after I open and look at it with a questioning look, she smiles rather demurely. She gets up an goes into our bathroom and returns with a wash cloth.

She says, “In Holland we conserve water and only take a bath or shower every other day. We just wash where we need to with this wash mitt on the days we don't shower. When we first moved here to the US, I didn't know what to do with this,” holding up the wash cloth.

She takes the wash mitt from me and puts it on her hand, pretending to wash herself.

“How d'ya wash yer back with that thing?” I ask.

“Like I said, we conserve water in Holland so you take a shower with someone. They wash your back and anything else that needs to be washed,” she says while smiling wickedly.

There is much laughter at Jackie's comments and her actions.

I open the rest of my presents, but nothing compares to the wash mitt. Xin loi, Wolf!

I get a harmonica from someone, which is funny because I have been teasing Kent about buying one since Thelma Lou's AM radio is too boring to listen to. I do know that whoever bought the harmonica, it was not Kent.

The surprise birthday party goes very late, but I manage to stay up long enough to say good night to most of our guests. And being the said guest of honor gets me boo coo good night and happy birthday kisses.

When Jackie kisses me goodnight she whispers, “I'll show you how to use the wash mitt anytime you want.”

“You already did. I can't wait fer the real thing,” I tease.

She gives me a little punch, not hard, and then she's gone. I really am going to miss her.

The last few of us are sitting around the living room, when Ace says, “I'm like you, Wolf. Really don't believe in God or nuthin', but I gotta tell ya, if I believed in reincarnation, I'd wanna come back as Jackie's wash mitt.”

We all laugh. That's enough for me, and I call it a night. A pretty successful night for my birthday party considering it was a complete surprise. Never had one of those before. Thanks, Kent. I guess we are friends, but then I already knew that.

No one is stirring when I get up the next morning, which I like because it means I get most of the first pot of coffee.

Adolph is the first to awaken to the smell of the coffee.

“So, Adolph, didja use ta do family stuff on Easter? I mean before ya became a hardened thug, too cool ta do family stuff. Prob'ly went 'round pushin' little ole ladies down and stealin' their purses while they were onna way ta 'church. Very Christian of ya, doncha think?” I tease.

“We're ya askin' me somethin', *pendejo*?” Adolph asks.

“Yeah, didja bake a ham fer Easter when you were a kid? Well, not you. But yer parents?”

“Somethin' yeah, don't remember ham though.”

Kent is the next one drawn to the kitchen.

“You have somethin' special fer Easter dinner at home, Kent?” I ask.

“Baked ham usually. Why?”

“Cuz tomorrow's Easter. Unless yer goin' home fer dinner ya might wanna think about doing somethin' here. of course I know ya got yer tee tee head so busy with feedin' Dubya P. ya kinda fergot 'bout us,” I tease.

“We haven't even had breakfast today, and yer already talkin' 'bout dinner tomorrow,” he complains.

I point at the bag of potatoes leftover from the fish and chips.

“We got breakfast covered. Right, Adolph? Yer on potato shredding duty.”

“Yeah, Yeah. I'm on it,” replies Adolph.

“Kent. Yer gonna be the Bacon Boy aren't cha?” I ask. “We'll let cha have the griddle. I know ya like ta have yer bacon just so.”

“Yeah I'll do the bacon,” answers Kent.

No one is up yet except Kent, Adolph and myself.

“I'm thinking of takin' a shower before our guests get up,” I say since there is just one bathroom.

“Aren't cha gonna wait fer Jackie and that tee tee wash mitt?”

I shake my head.

“I'm gonna didi mau in a month, and I ain't taken nuthin' with me. No woman and no cat. Jes' my Beezer. Remember Barry Rockwell?”

“Yeah, I remember him,” answers Kent.

“Rocky had a live-in girlfriend named Jeanette. She was hot. Didn't cook or keep house but she knew how ta keep the home fires burnin' so ta speak. Rocky lived with her 'bout a year, and then was just gonna ditch her even though he tol' her she was comin' with him. As you can imagine, she wasn't happy 'bout that. I don't wanna do that ta anyone, 'specially someone as nice as Jackie. I really like her, but I don't want my heart broke. Hers either,” I

finish.

“Such a nice guy,” Kent says.

“Hey, I learned it all from you, *pendejo,*” I say and we both laugh.

As I look into the living room to see if any of our overnighters are waking up, I notice something interesting. I walk over to the living room and pick up the penny jar. It's full of money. And I mean the folding kind, not just a bunch of pennies with a few nickels and dimes.

“Will ya fuckin' look at this?” I say.

“You swearin' again?” asks Adolph.

“Lent's over. Today is Holy Saturday if I remember correctly,” I say in my defense. “But check this out. and I know you had nuthin' ta do with puttin' all this scratch in here, Ricondo.”

I hold up the penny jar and show Kent and Adolph all the money in it.

“Guess were gonna bake a ham fer Easter after all,” I laugh as I haul the penny jar into the kitchen where we empty out the cash to count it.

“53 bucks an a bunch of change,” says Kent after counting it. “How number one izzat.”

“Mebbe I *should* open a restaurant,” I joke. “People are just shovin' money in my pocket, well, shovin' it in the penny jar. Wouldn't even need a cash register. Jes' put a jar with some pennies in it next ta the door so when people leave they kin just throw money in it.”

After my shower, we get the Saturday morning breakfast going. Bacon Boy Campbell doing the bacon while I work the stove making hash browns and pancakes. Adolph busies himself making pot after pot of coffee in the French press for everyone waiting patiently for breakfast to be ready. I keep meaning to get another French press but forgot.

Our overnight guests are Pete, Ace, Beaudeen and Ramon. Not quite as much fun when it's just a bunch of guys.

Later in the afternoon we venture out into the street to play Frisbee. There are seven of us so we are playing up and down just about the whole block. After a while Laurel and Curtis show up and we let them in on our game.

There is boo coo waiting for the Frisbee since there are so many of us, but it's a beautiful sunny and warm day, and I'm not in the army. I'm quite happy. Someone throws the Frisbee over Kent's head, and as he turns to get it, one of our neighbors retrieves it and throws it to Kent.

We've noticed Sonia from afar, as her house is almost at the end of the

block. She's fairly attractive, with blond hair and tight blue jeans. I guess her to be in her thirties at least, so it's doubtful she would be interested in a bunch of twenty-somethings.

And that assumption would be quite correct, except that one of the twenty-something's is Kent.

After a short while Kent moves closer to Sonia's spot, and they take turns throwing the Frisbee when it makes it to them, which isn't often given how many of us are playing. So after waiting a tee tee bit too long for the Frisbee, when Kent finally gets it, he throws it back without even looking, already walking away with Sonia. That's the last we see him until Easter morning.

After we finish playing Frisbee, everyone takes off, and Adolph and I go shopping for our Easter ham. We invited everyone at breakfast back for Easter dinner, so we're going to need a big one.

It's so quiet at our place this evening with just Adolph, me and the cat. I finally call it a night after staying up so late last night.

I awake, well rested. I get the French press going and pour myself a cup. I'm on my second cup when Kent wanders in. It doesn't look like he slept much last night, and I wouldn't have expected so.

“Good morning. Where d'ya go? Onna Easter egg hunt over at Sonia's?” I tease.

“Yeah, somethin' like that,” he answers with a grin that I've seen many times. “Is there coffee?”

“Kent, is there ever not coffee?” I ask. “Glad ya made back in time fer breakfast, though.”

“Why's zat?” Kent asks.

“Cuz I wanna have our usual, and I need you to make toast and be the Bacon Boy while I do the hash browns and eggs.”

“Man, that sounds good. I'm starvin'.”

Our Easter dinner guests start arriving in the early afternoon. Typical guy party with lots of beer drinking and pot smoking and complaining that there are no women around.

“Where's Jenny and Jackie?” asks Ace.

“Prob'ly having dinner at their parents' house,” I answer.

“So, didja git ta take a shower with Jackie yet?” teases Ace.

“Nah, haven't seen her since, but I tried the wash mitt. Pretty sure I'm gonna need some one-on-one instruction from her on how ta use it for maximum effectiveness,” I answer with a smirk and a wink.

When it's time to get the ham into the oven, I have to take some of the oven racks out to make room.

The table gets set and the ham is carved by me. It is heaven to finally get to taste it after being entranced by its aroma for several hours. We found some Red Garnet yams to go with the ham, and I made macaroni and cheese.

We all miss the women tonight, as the party just isn't the same. After dinner I have to finish my homework for my Fiction class. The party moves to the living room and I have the dining room to myself for a while. After a couple of hours, I have my short story finished. I take it into the living room and ask Ace to check it for errors and typos.

Laurel and Curtis have just come over, and Laurel asks, “Can I read it too?”

“Of course ya 'kin read it, Laurel,” I answer. “How 'bout you, Kent? Wanna read it?”

Kent just laughs in answer to my question. After Ace finishes reading it, Laurel just about rips it out of his hands, jumps up, and runs out the door with it.

I look at Curtis. “What was that all 'bout?”

“I have no idea. I'll go see if ya wanna,” Curtis offers.

“She couldn't go far. Prob'ly just wanted some privacy while she reads it.”

We party on without Laurel, and after about 30 or 40 minutes she returns. I had already forgotten that she left.

When she comes in, she walks right over and hands me both my handwritten pages and also freshly typed ones.

“It's really good so I typed it up for ya. So maybe this time you'll get an A,” she says.

“Well, if you ain't a sweetheart,” I say.

I stand up and give her a hug.

“Thank ya, darlin'.”

Curtis glares at me. Fuck him. Now I'm starting to see why Kent thinks he's a dickhead.

I can't wait to get to school on Monday now that I have my writing assignment actually typed up. When I get back from class, Adolph is again entertaining Ronnie and Laurel. Laurel right away asks about my typed up story.

“I just turned it in. Maybe I'll git it back on Wednesday,” I answer.

“So my operation is prob'ly gonna be this week sometime,” says Kent, mostly to me. “Gonna hafta stay overnight at Madigan fer a while, so ya kin jes' drop me off on the day.”

“Bummer, man. Did they tell how long ya gotta stay at Madigan after yer operation?”

“Nah, depends on how fast I heal or if I git an infection they said,” he answers. “But I'm kind of happy 'bout it. I wanna git this over so I kin git out.”

“Well, I know yer gonna git some special attention since both Jenny and Jackie are at Madigan.” I say.

Kent says nothing but smiles. Lucky fucker. Well, as lucky as you can be after getting shot in the foot and having to rely on the army to make it right again.

It rains so much on Tuesday that my Tennis class gets canceled, so I blow off my Demographics class for the first time. It is the most ridiculous class I've ever had. At least for what I'm planning to do with the rest of my life. I don't need to even pass it, but I do need to at least get credit for taking it.

I drop Kent off at Madigan. He just needs to check in and get his surgery date if it's been set, so I wait for him. Something I am still exceptional at, but I hope to soon let that skill wane with lack of practice.

Kent fills me in on the ride home.

“Gotta be back here by eight hundred hours tomorrow to have my surgery,” he tells me.

“Man, they gotcha talking military speak already,” I tease.

“Fuck you!”

“Izzat how yer talkin' ta the guy that was gonna git up at 6 inna mornin' ta drive ya back ta Madigan?” I ask.

“I kin drive myself, *pendejo*” he replies.

“When they git done, ya ain't gonna be able ta drive, are ya?”

“Nah, they said I'd hafta have a cast on my foot fer a while,” he answers.

“See? I'll take ya there, and I'll even come visit ya when they git done fucking with ya,” I offer.

He huffs.

“Don't be mad at me. It's the army ya should be mad at if ya wanna be mad at somethin',” I say.

“McDonald's fer lunch?”

“Geez, I thought you'd never ask,” I tease.

The next morning I am so good in my head now that I can wake at almost exactly 6 AM without an alarm clock. I get up and make coffee. Kent wakes from the aroma of it wafting about our apartment.

“Coffee, darlin'?” I ask him.

“Ain't it always the way when ya can't have somethin', it looks or smells better than ever?” he asks.

“Given that we just got over Lent, yeah, I know that feeling only too well,” I answer.

“Lent? Yer not even a Christian, whaddaya care 'bout Lent?”

“Yer right. But it did git me ta quit swearin' so much,” I answer. “So d'ya want some coffee or what?”

“That's what I was talkin 'bout in the beginnin'. I can't have nuthin' before my surgery. No food and no drinks.”

“Bummer, man. Tell ya what, onna way back from Madigan, I'm gonna stop and have our usual at our favorite restaurant, just fer you, in case ya don't make it,” I offer.

He flips me the bird.

“I feel yer pain, my brother. If I couldn't be drinkin' coffee right now, we'd prob'ly be havin' a fist fight since we'd both be crabby instead of just you.”

Adolph hears us talking and finally gets up.

“Ya wanna come with me when I take Kent to Ft. Lewis?” I ask him. “Could just drop ya off at the gate and ya kin turn yer ass in and git it over with. Sure wouldn't be as bad as what Kent's gonna be facin' today. Nuthin' worse than havin' ta let the army go cuttin' on yer body. If they was number one surgeons, they sure as fuck wouldn't be inna army.”

“Are ya done tryin' ta make me feel good 'bout today?” asks Kent.

When we get ready to sky up for Madigan, it is clear Adolph is not coming to turn himself in. I'm not surprised.

Kent is quiet on the ride to Ft. Lewis. When I drop him off, I tell him I'll come check on him tomorrow.

I do stop and have my usual at our favorite breakfast restaurant. A sort of a reward for getting up so early and taking shit from Kent and Adolph when I'm only trying to help them. No one listens to me, so I don't know why I bother.

Back at Madigan Army Hospital, Kent is starting his operation. First they do a spinal tap. He was initially told they were going to totally anesthetize

him so he would not be awake during the operation. The spinal, they tell him, will allow him to be awake during the procedure instead. He's not sure he wants to be awake, but he is not given a choice.

He is also told the spinal tap will be relatively painless.

“Ow!” says Kent when they stick the first needle in his spine. “Thought it wasn't s'posed ta hurt.”

“Just a little,” says the doctor, “and maybe a bit warm for a moment.”

“Warm, my ass,” says Kent. “Burns like hell.

“It'll be fine in a moment,” the doctor insists.

And it is fine, as long as you don't mind your legs feeling and acting like they're made of lead. So heavy you can't move them at all.

They drape a sheet midway across Kent's body so he can't see what the surgeons are doing. He can hear them conferring and saying things he doesn't fully understand.

“We may have to remove the extremity after all. The impact damage and all the bone fusion that has already taken place would make it impossible for there to be any flexibility in the extremity. He'd hardly be able to walk normally like that. I feel the best course of action is to remove it,” says one of the surgeons.

“I agree,” replies the other surgeon.

They cut into Kent's foot to remove the bone of the toe they assured him they would save. Liars.

His legs are numb, but Kent can feel his body being shoved and tugged on.

“What're you doing?” asks Kent, as he hears really horrible sounds like that of bones being cracked.

“You're doing just fine,” one of the doctors assures him.

“Whaddaya doin' that sounds so number ten?”

“We can talk more when we're finished,” the doctor says.

“Sounds like you bastards cut my toe off.”

“We'll discuss everything about your situation when we're finished, I promise,” says his doctor.

Kent has gotten promises from the army before. I tried to warn him they're a bunch of liars.

After class on Thursday, I sky up to Madigan to check on Kent. He's on the same ward and even in the same bed. They must have saved it for him. How thoughtful.

When I enter his ward, I see both Jenny and Jackie are at his bedside. They

both look so different in their official student nurse outfits. Not at all like the hippies I know they are.

Kent, who seemed so jovial as I approached his bed, is now looking agitated.

“What'd I do?”

“Not you, fuckin' army,” replies Kent.

He doesn't have to say any more, because that in itself tells me the doctors cut his toe off. I don't need to rub it in by saying, 'I toldya so!' So I don't.

“So when are they lettin' ya out?” I ask instead.

“Tomorrow afternoon. If it looks good with no infection, tomorrow morning I get a cast, and then I kin go. Gonna hafta use crutches fer a while.”

“I'll come and git cha after class, and then we'll hafta celebrate. You ladies are invited, of course.”

They both assure us they will come tomorrow. We chat for a while but I need to go grocery shopping if I'm going to make dinner tomorrow, so after an hour or so I didi for home. Jennie and Jackie both blow me a kiss as I sky.

On the way home I decide to make stuffed cabbage. If I make it today, it will be even better tomorrow. Plus, I can mostly party then instead of being in the kitchen the whole time cooking.

When I get home, Adolph is hanging out with Ronnie and Laurel. I chat with them for a while, but then I go into the kitchen to start things for tomorrow's dinner. Adolph and Ronnie go out to play Frisbee, and Laurel comes into the kitchen to see if she can help.

“After I get the filling made and the cabbage leaves parboiled ya kin help me roll them up. Ever done that before?” I ask.

“Nope.”

“So I guess yer not Polish,” I tease.

“Nope,” she answers again.

Laurel turns out to be very helpful in the kitchen and after a few false starts, she finally gets the hang of rolling up the parboiled cabbage leaves with the filling.

“Sure yer not Polish?” I tease her.

“Nope,” she replies

After the tomato sauce is bubbling away, I start to fill the pot with the cabbage rolls and let them cook the rest of the afternoon.

Laurel and I go out to join the Frisbee game. We don't play long and we see Curtis' van coming down the street. After he parks, he gets out and places

Benji on the roof.

Something about Curtis is different. I'm not sure what, but something. As he runs to catch the Frisbee, he gets close enough to me that I can see what the something is. Curtis is growing a beard. My beard is quite full by now and without a doubt the best beard I've ever grown. It has far surpassed my modest goal of not looking like I'm in the army.

I have forgotten all about Laurel typing my last short story, so I'm pleasantly surprised when they are handed back to us on Friday morning. I get an “A”. How about that?! Maybe I can be a writer.

I hardly pay attention to the rest of the class I'm am so in awe of my getting an “A.” I just daydream until class is over.

When I get to Madigan, Kent has a pair of crutches and a cast on his foot. Because of this, he has to wear pajamas. He is also wearing what looks like a be brand new officer's robe. It's the same burgundy color as the previous issue officer's robe but it looks like velour instead of a sort of corduroy.

The first thing he asks is, “What's fer dinner?”

“Two days away from my kitchen and yer already wonderin' what's fer dinner,” I laugh. “Nuthin' special, cuz as ya know I had to go visitin' ya yesterday, and then come and git cha today. Stuffed cabbage.”

“Stuffed cabbage? That's not Italian,” replies Kent.

“So? I'm not Italian.”

“You said yer grandfather was Italian,” protests Kent.

“Nah, ya just weren't payin' close attention. I said he was *like* my grandfather. I'm Hungarian, mostly.”

“Stuffed cabbage is Polish,” insists Kent.

“Hungarians make stuffed cabbage too. Anyway, I already toldya dinner was nuthin' special.”

“Gonna be some disappointed people tonight,” Kent says.

“An' I'm blamin' it all on you,” I tease. “Now fer me the important thing is where'd ya git that robe?”

“Ya like it? It's the new officer's robe.”

“I want one,” I reply.

“OK, I'll git cha one next Monday when I go back.”

“Better git two. Adolph's gonna want one.”

“Fuck him,” replies Kent.

“I'm just thinkin', we could have some number one pajama parties if we all

had robes. Call 'em our Uncle Sugar smoking jackets."

When we return home, Adolph, Ronnie, and Laurel are out in the street playing Frisbee.

"Too bad Adolph doesn't git paid ta babysit all the neighborhood kids wherever we are," I joke. "You should help me talk some sense into that, idiot. If you could turn yerself in at whatever army post you want, all the guys would be flyin' ta Hawaii."

"His fuckin' problem. Adolph's a big boy," replies Kent.

"He's a dumb fuck, but then I guess we already knew that. He wouldn't be hangin' with us if he wasn't."

Everyone comes over to see Kent as I park the car. He jumps out and demonstrates his proficiency on his crutches. Obviously not his first stint hobbling around. No Frisbee for him for a couple of days, at least that's what is doctors ordered. Good luck with that, Doc. Kent listens to no one.

We head inside so Kent can get some much needed medication we have just for instances such as this. I hand the joint for Kent's scrutiny. He deems it worthy and lights it, passing it to Adolph.

"So one good thing 'bout the army taken my toe off is I don't hafta do reserves. Gotta have all yer fingers and toes to be called up fer active duty," he says.

"That's 'bout the best thing that's happened ta ya lately, ya lucky fucker!" I reply. "So, they give ya a ETS yet?"

"End of the month or close to it depending on how fast I heal. and if I don't git an infection or nuthin'," he answers.

Since it's Friday all our friends now pretty much expect a party and of course good food. I was only jiving with Kent about the stuffed cabbage being a disappointment. I'm sure it will be quite good, and the proof will be by how much money is in the penny jar tomorrow morning.

Because Laurel and I made the stuffed cabbage yesterday, all we have to do is heat it back up and make mashed potatoes. I need to buzz over to the Italian grocery for some incidentals, including some fresh bread.

Laurel sees me heading out and asks "Where ya goin'?"

"I gotta go git a couple of things at the store. Wanna come along?" I ask.

"Sure," she says and slides into the front seat, getting as close as she can to me. Uh oh.

"Ya have to be careful 'bout the PDA when yer boyfriend is around," I say.

"PDA, what's that?" asks Laurel.

I chuckle.

“Yer in high school and ya don't know what a PDA is?”

“Nope,” she say.

“It means, Public Display of Affection,” I reply. “I think Curtis thinks ya like me a tee tee bit and is jealous.”

She looks at me and asks, “What's tee tee mean?”

“A little bit.”

She takes off her glasses to look me in the eyes and says, “Nope, I like you a lot,” and then she smiles and puts her glasses back on. I shake my head. At eighteen, Laurel is still just a girl in my mind. Curtis does not have to worry about me in that regard.

When we get to the Italian grocery, I ask, “Ever been here before?”

“Nope. Driven by it thousands of times though.”

When we enter, Frank is behind the meat counter.

“Chef, where ya been? Haven't seen ya inna while.”

“Been cookin' other stuff. No pizza fer a while now, but my fans will prob'ly revolt pretty soon and demand an encore,” I reply.

I get the few things I need and several loaves of fresh baked bread.

Back outside, Laurel asks, “Chef?”

“That's just a tee tee joke between Frank and me,” I answer. “Oh, hey, almost fergot. I got an A on my last short story that ya typed up fer me. So thanks.”

“I knew you would. You're a really good writer.”

“Yer too kind, darlin',” I say.

Curtis is inside when we get back, and I can tell by the look on his face that he is not happy. His problem, not mine.

I go right into the kitchen to check on things. I left the stuffed cabbage on low heat, and it is heating up nicely. Starting to smell excellent. As I putter around the kitchen, I hear more guests arrive.

Before I can even look to see who it is, Jackie comes rushing into the kitchen and throws her arms around me. She gives me the first real kiss between us. Wow, can she kiss! I am in such a quandary now. I am not staying Tacoma one second longer than I have to, but leaving is going to be boo coo hard.

She snuggles into my arms and puts her head on my chest and laments, “Geez I love comin' here and hangin' out with you guys. I'm gonna miss you so much when you leave. Can I help with dinner tonight?” she asks.

“It's already made. Laurel and I made it yesterday,” I answer. “But you kin help with the servin' and of course the eatin'.”

“Laurel?” she says, looking a little jealous.

“It's not whatcha think. She's got a boyfriend,” I say with a smile as I pull her to me and give her a hug. She smiles back. I am in such trouble. Crap! Could be worse. Could still be in the army and have them wanting to pop my eye out again.

Laurel walks into the kitchen while we're still hugging and says, “Don't want ta interrupt anything, but can I help?”

I can tell by the look on Laurel's face that her total intent was to interrupt.

“You helped yesterday and so there's hardly nuthin' ta do today but heat and eat. Well, we do have ta make the mashed potatoes.”

“I'll help,” says Jackie before Laurel can say anything.

“We do need ta peel a boo coo lot of potatoes, so ya kin both help if ya wanna.”

I get the potatoes out and the peelers, and we start peeling.

“One thing I learned on KP is ya don't need ta peel all the skin off the spuds. Even kind of makes the mashed potatoes seem a tee tee bit rustic,” I joke.

After a while Curtis looks into the kitchen, and I tease by asking, “Lose yer razor Curtis?”

“Nah, Laurel wants me ta try growin' a beard.”

“Looks like ya got a good start so far,” I reply. “You'll know when it's really good cuz people will call ya a hippie.”

After we get the potatoes mashed and the rest of our guests arrive, it's time for dinner. Just the aroma coming out of the kitchen has everyone ready to eat. It seems our whole Friday night crowd from M Co. is here, plus our Tacoma friends Mark, Helen, Bill and Squeaky, as well as Samantha, Jane and Iris.

I apologize to Bill and Squeaky because dinner is not vegetarian.

“That's, OK,” says Bill, “We kind of gave that up. We do try to eat as little meat as possible though.”

“Smells like my gramma's house,” remarks Mark. “Are you Polish?”

“Nah, Hungarian, mostly,” I answer.

“Thought ya were Italian,” says Adolph.

I laugh.

“Yeah, seems like everybody thinks that.”

The dinner party really gets going as we eat and talk. Lots of laughing and joking and passing the dishes around. I have Jackie on one side and Laurel on the other. Of course Curtis is also sitting on Laurel's other side.

As dinner winds down some of the guests head into the living room to smoke more pot. I stay in the dining room mostly to start cleaning up but also because Curtis left, and I have two lovely ladies sitting next to me. I love that.

Laurel eventually gets up, and when she leaves, Kent returns to the dining room and sits next to me.

“Fuckin' Curtis is tellin' his damn story 'bout how he was gonna beat the draft by lettin' his buddies bust his knee,” he says to me, almost seething.

“Fuck him, Kent. He's a dumb fuck. It would serve 'im right ta git his knee all jacked up fer the rest of his life,” I reply.

As I speak to Kent, I can see Curtis stretching his leg across two chairs to demonstrate his plan to some of the other guests. Kent immediately leaps up, forgetting for the moment that he is on crutches as he tries to get into the living room to actually jump on Curtis' outstretched leg.

Fortunately for Curtis, I know what Kent is up to. I manage to not only grab both his crutches but one arm as well.

“C'mon, cool yer jets, *pendejo*. Ya wanna git inna fight with yer foot inna cast?”

Luckily for Curtis, Kent sits back down. I hand him a lit joint and say, “Have somma this, bro. You'll feel better.”

He takes a couple of tokes that would make any Dewmaster proud. He smiles.

It's another successful Friday night get together. We make sure everyone knows next Friday will be the Playboy Pajama Party. No panties or underwear allowed. Kent and I are already qualified attendees since we never wear underwear.

The penny jar is once again stuffed with money. 65 bucks, and that's not counting the change. More than I got paid for a whole week in the army.

When I get to Madigan to pick Kent up after my classes on Thursday, he is still on crutches, but they have removed the cast. He is boo coo happy, and he even wants to drive. That is until he tries stepping down on the brake and clutch pedals, and it hurts too much. He does, however, have two new officer's robes for me and Adolph.

“Jes' as well,” I say, “cuz if you was drivin', I'd hafta practice my harmonica.”

“No fuckin' way!” he exclaims. “I hate the harmonica. Jes' stick it out the window when yer drivin' along and it plays all by itself.”

I would be tempted to prove or disprove Kent's theory about the harmonica right now, but fortunately for him the front windows of Thelma Lou are wired in the up position and can't be rolled down.

“Gotta stop at the grocery store to get stuff for our big pajama party tomorrow. Ya wanna come in with me?”

“Yeah, I'll come in. Feels good ta walk around without the cast. Man, I hate those things,” he answers. “What cha makin' fer dinner tomorrow?”

“I had ta think 'bout that fer a while. Couldn't make pizza cuz I'd git flour all over my new robe,” I muse. “Unless I made the pizza in the buff.”

“Ugh! Don't even say stuff like that. Yer gonna spoil my appetite fer a month talking like that.”

“See, that's just what I was sayin',” I reply.

“So whaddaya gonna make?” he asks again.

“Moussaka,” I answer.

“What the fuck is moussaka?” Kent asks.

“You'll have ta wait and see.”

“C'mon, tell me.”

“OK, It's Greek and it's mostly eggplant,” I answer.

“Ugh! I hate eggplant,” he complains.

“See, that's why I din't wanna tell ya. I knew you'd say that cuz that's what everyone says when I tell them the moussaka has eggplant in it. Have I made anything ya din't like yet?” I ask.

“Well no, everything has been number one especially when ya compare it to the crap the cooks at M Co made.”

“So anyway, I know a secret ingredient that will make my moussaka so number one that even people, such as yerself, that hate eggplant are gonna love it. Plus I won't hafta git flour on my new robe.”

We also stop at the Italian grocery for the last things I need. Kent comes in with me and explores the store for interesting things.

Frank is, as always, behind the meat counter, and I head straight there.

“What d'ya need today, Chef?”

“I need some lamb, ya got any?” I ask.

“Sure do. What cut d'ya need?” he asks.

“Actually I need it ground, kind of a medium grind would do,” I answer.

“No problem,” he replies and he grinds up what I need. “Anything else, Chef?”

“I also need a pound of ground beef ground really fine,” I reply. “Are those natural casing hot dogs in yer case?”

“Sure are, made 'em myself this morning.”

“Better gimme a dozen of those as well, and that should do it, Frank,” I reply.

The first time I came here I browsed around to see what they had. The first thing I noticed was they had farina, which is the secret ingredient in my moussaka. I get a small bag of farina, and I find some fresh buns that I can use to make excellent Coney Island hot dogs.

I'm not in the kitchen long when Laurel shows up.

“What're we makin' tonight chef?” she asks.

“Well yer startin' out the right way by bein' a respectful kitchen slave,” I say, then laugh. “Jes' kidding.”

“What're all the rolls of paper towels for?” she asks.

“It's one of the secrets of making moussaka.”

“Moussaka?” she asks.

“It's Greek, and it's made with eggplant and lamb.

“My mom hates eggplant, so I've never had it,” replies Laurel.

“Well then you are in for somethin' special, but of course we're not having it until tomorrow. Tonight's dinner is also goin' ta be something special, and I know ya never had cuz it's a New York City and Detroit thing. You kin come tonight as long as Curtis doesn't come. It's OK for him ta be here when there's lot's of other people here. But if it's just him and us, Kent's gonna pick a fight with him for sure,” I finish.

With that out of the way, we get started.

“OK, the eggplant. Would ya start covering the counter top with one layer of paper towels while I slice the eggplant?” I ask.

After all the eggplant is sliced and laid on the paper towels, I salt both sides of each eggplant slice, and then we cover them with more paper towels. We wait a little while, then we press the paper towels on the eggplant and peel it off. We then repeat that, covering with paper towels and pressing the excess moisture out until the slices feel fairly dry.

While I get ready to saute the eggplant slices I have Laurel brush each slice on both sides with a generous amount of olive oil. This the hard part;

frying the slices just right so they are almost like the consistency of custard but not quite.

The rest is just putting it all together and into the fridge to rest over night. I'll make the farina tomorrow just before it goes into the oven. I'm excited because I haven't had this in a boo coo long time, and it's really good. Tonight's dinner is going to be a nice warm up, as I love coney dogs, but you can't get them here.

Kent comes into the kitchen as I'm finishing frying up the eggplant. It smells even better than Nino's Restaurant.

“Whatcha makin'?”

“The eggplant fer tomorrow,” I answer.

“Man it smells number one and I hate eggplant.”

“See, I toldya you'd like it,” I say with a smile.

“Well, I like the way it smells so I'll try it. What's fer tonight?” he asks,

“Something you ain't ne'er had, bro. Coney Island hot dogs.”

“Isn't Coney Island an amusement park in New York?”

“That's is quite correct, and at that park you kin git Coney Island hot dogs. They also got 'em in Detroit, where I'm from,” I say.

“Thought ya was from some monastery in Dearborn?” he jokes.

“Dearborn is a suburb of Detroit,” I reply. “Anyway, ya can't git coney dogs here so I'm gonna turn ya on ta somethin' ya ain't ne'er had, and they're number one. You'll be glad I bought a dozen hot dogs cuz yer gonna eat a coupla of 'em fer sure. Jes' gotta make the coney chili. It won't take long.”

“Chili? It ain't gonna have no beans in it is it?” Kent asks. “Cuz real chili don't got no beans if ya make it right.”

“No beans in coney chili,” I confirm.

As I make the coney dog chili, I tell Kent and Laurel a story about the moussaka.

“I used ta go to this Coney Island in Dearborn – that's what they're called,” I explain. “Leo's Coney Island, The American Coney Island, The National Coney Island. So I'm at my favorite Coney Island, and I'm sittin' at the counter cuz I'm by myself, plus I'm kinda a regular and the owner sorta knows me. So I'm havin' a coupla coney dogs, and the owner's mother is making moussaka behind the counter. She's putting it together as I watch, and every now and then she goes and stirs a big pot of something white and kind of thick on the stove. Now I often have the moussaka there, and it's the best I've ever had. Every time I made moussaka, it was close, but just not as good

as theirs. She finishes by pouring the thick white liquid over the pan of moussaka. So I asked her what it was. She said it was farina. I ask her what that was, and she said, 'I think they call it cream of wheat here.' And that was it. All the recipes call fer Bechamel sauce, which is easier to make, but more expensive. The farina is a bitch to make, but cheaper in cost. And I have so many kitchen helpers that know how to take orders that it will be easy."

"Now I'm really hungry. When do we eat?" asks Kent.

"Soon, brother, it will be soon."

I grill the hot dogs on the griddle of our stove. I cover it with foil first and then oil it lightly, just like the Coney Islands in Detroit do it. I even have what I consider superior buns for my coney dogs.

Adolph pops into the kitchen, brought in by the aroma of food being almost ready.

"Ricondo, mince up an onion for us will ya?" I ask. "Not too coarse but also not too fine."

I chuckle to myself because I know the one thing Adolph will not do is mince the onions too fine. That would require extra effort on his part.

When the hot dogs are almost grilled to perfection, I slice the buns up the middle and set them on the griddle to get heated up a tee tee bit. When everything is hot and ready, I put them together. I make two for Kent, Adolph, Laurel, and myself, and we all go into the living room.

"The one thing that is lacking at all Coney Islands is they don't have beer. Beer kin improve any meal. So Kent, darlin', would ya like a beer?"

"Roger on that," answers Kent.

"Adolph, honey?" I ask.

"Of course, darlin'."

"An' fer you, Laurel?" I ask.

"I'll have a beer, too," she replies.

"I think not. Yer only 18. Yer lucky I'm lettin' ya have the coneys. I have Coke in the tee tee bottles," I offer.

"OK, Coke is fine."

"Do I hafta have mine with this baby shit mustard?" complains Kent in regards to the French's yellow mustard on his coney dogs.

"Just try one. That's the way they're supposed ta be made. If ya don't like it, I'll eat yer second one and you kin go make yerself some anyway ya like, cuz there's more hot dogs and buns.

Kent tries one bite of the coney dog and smiles.

“Man, Wolf. These are fuckin' number one,” he says.

Both Adolph and Laurel concur that they are quite excellent. Especially for hot dogs.

“I'll never be able to eat hot dogs and beans again when my mom makes 'em. And I don't even like mustard,” says Laurel.

I'm really glad they all like the coneys, but mostly I'm happy to have them again myself. And tomorrow will be a number one fun day with moussaka for dinner and boo coo hot babes bopping around in their jammies.

Friday morning is going to be hard for me to get to class because Kent has another check up at Madigan, and I don't want to drive back and forth to Ft. Lewis. Instead, I drive him there and wait in the car. While I sit in Thelma Lou, I practice my harmonica.

Kent isn't gone long and when he returns, he grabs the harmonica out of my hand and scowls, “What the fuck is that s'posed ta be?”

“She'll be comin' 'round the mountain,” I answer.

I had been playing rather slowly trying to get it right, but Kent puts the harmonica to his mouth and plays the song at near light speed. I'm impressed.

“Wow!” I say, “din't know ya knew how ta play the harmonica.”

He laughs.

“I don't and quite obviously you don't either. Do us both a favor and throw that thing out the window once we git goin' down the freeway.”

“It was a present,” I protest.

“So fuckin what?” he replies. “Git rid of it before ya embarrass yerself tryin' to play it.”

I ignore him and put it back into my pocket. We stop on the way home to buy several cases of beer.

When we get there, I make a sign that I put on out front door. It says: Playboy Mansion.

“Kent, d'ya still got yer bowl?” I ask.

“Yeah, why?”

“Cuz I just wanna borrow it fer a while tonight.”

“Yer not gonna smoke it or nuthin' are ya?” he asks.

“Nah, just gonna hold it in my hand when I open the door fer our guests tonight. I wanna look like Hugh Hefner in my Uncle Sugar smoking jacket,” I chuckle.

I make a name tag for my robe that says: Hef - Panty Violation Inspector.

Kent and Adolph are standing just behind me to greet our guests as they arrive. When they see us in our matching burgundy robes, everyone bursts out laughing. We do look quite official, especially when I brandish Kent's pipe.

Samantha, Jane, and Iris are the first to arrive, and all three are decked out in some scanty pajamas.

Samantha has on a teddy with some very short bottoms. I don't have a chance to say anything to her before she pulls the front of her short-shorts away from her tummy so I can verify she has no panties on.

Iris is next in line, and she is a complete surprise. While Iris has a very pretty moon face with lots of freckles, she typically dresses like a tomboy in blue jeans, cowboy boots, and a flannel shirt. She still has her cowboy boots on, but that's about all. She looks at me and smiles like I've never seen her smile before. Just like Samantha, she almost seems happy to confirm that she is in compliance with the no-panty rule. Jane is next and I can tell she is freaking out a little, perhaps thinking I'm going to try to force her to show whether she's wearing any panties. I just pull her in, give her a hug, and let her into the party.

“Thank you,” she says to me and gives me a wink.

Samantha brings a pint of Peppermint Schnapps. Yuck, I hate that stuff, but she and Adolph start to pass it back and forth as they both share a Kool brand cigarette as well.

Bill and Squeaky arrive next, and he has on some rather plain pajamas, but Squeaky is wearing a silk kimono. She is beautiful dressed normally, so she is a complete knockout in her kimono. Maybe Bill didn't want to detract from her look. Works for me. Bill also brings in a fifth of Jack Daniels.

Wow, I think, this party could get quite wild as we usually just drink beer. I hadn't anticipated any heavy drinking. I learned my lesson about that on Kent's 21st birthday, so I won't be drinking any hard stuff myself.

As I look out out front window I see Jenny and Jackie coming up the walk. They both have their raincoats on, which isn't unusual for Tacoma. They both break into giggles when they see my pipe and robe. When they remove the jackets, Jackie has on a French Maid outfit, and Jenny is wearing silk jammies.

“I wore this in case you needed help in the kitchen,” Jackie tells me.

“Such forethought is appreciated, darlin',” I say.

The M Co. contingent arrives in Ace's van. The seemed dressed as normal,

but they change into their army issue long underwear, which is what a lot of guys sleep in around the barracks. Most everyone thinks it quite funny. For me it just makes me feel like I'm back at M Co. I hate that.

Ramon Salazar has brought a fifth of tequila and a bag of lemons. The shot glasses are brought out and the lemons cut up and the salt shakers at the ready. I've never seen this before, but because I know these guys, I know this can only be about power drinking. I head to the kitchen before they try to drag me into it.

I need to start making the farina, so I'm hoping some of my helpers pop into the kitchen. Farina has to be almost constantly stirred. It's takes a lot of milk. A boo coo lot of milk that has to be carefully brought to a boil before adding the farina. The milk is on the stove when Jackie comes into the kitchen.

“Care fer a beer, darlin'?” I ask.

“I better wait. I just had two shots of tequila, and I can already feel it. I never had that before,” she says.

“Yeah, the way people drink Tequila, it seems to be all 'bout gittin' drunk fast,” I reply.

“What can I do?” she asks ever so sweetly.

“The milk needs to be watched so it doesn't boil over, and then when we add the farina it has to be stirred all the time until it's done,” I answer.

The milk boils, we add the farina, and then we take turns stirring.

Laurel comes into the kitchen in her jammies. Flannel Winnie the Pooh pajamas. She looks a tee tee bit embarrassed when she gets the full effect of Jackie's outfit.

“Can I help?” she finally asks.

“O' course you kin help,” I say, “Right now we're takin' turns stirring the farina. Yer turn is next as soon as Jackie gits too tired.”

I turn the oven on to preheat it, and then I take a turn stirring the farina when Laurel tires, and finally it's ready to pour over the moussaka. Good thing I made two pans, because there is a big crowd here tonight. Near the end of baking the moussaka, I'll make some rice pilaf to go with it. I'm so excited to have one of my favorite things, I almost don't care if anyone else likes it.

Once we get the moussaka in the oven, we all go back into the living room. There are some very drunk people out here already. Mark and Helen are here, and he has a rather snappy looking robe, maybe nicer than ours.

Helen is also wearing a silk kimono. She and Mark are the only people in the living room that are not drunk already.

They do another round of tequila shots, and they get Jackie to participate. Laurel tries to get a shot, but I take it away from her.

“Curtis, ya need ta keep an eye on yer girlfriend unless ya don't mind 'er gittin' drunk.”

Curtis ignores me. I think he's drunk as well. Jackie takes the shot of tequila I took away from Laurel and tosses it back saying, “Waste not want not.”

I realize Jackie is already drunk, and I was counting on her for kitchen help. Adolph and Samantha are canoodling on my favorite chair in front of everyone, so he's not going to be any help. My only hope is to keep Laurel sober. She has been at my side since she arrived, so maybe that won't be too hard.

I head back to the kitchen, inviting Laurel to tag along. She loves when I include her, so I get no argument. We check the moussaka, and it's looking great and smells even better. Time to start the rice pilaf, I think. I need to get dinner ready before everyone gets too drunk to appreciate it.

Laurel points to my Panty Violation Inspector name tag and asks, “Don't you want to see if I'm wearin' any panties?”

“Laurel, yer a good girl. You know the rules and play by 'em. I trust ya,” I reply.

“I don't want ya to trust me. I want ta be a bad girl,” she pouts.

“OK, so if ya don't have any panties on, yer a good girl. Howzat? But yer a bad girl if you do got panties on, cuz ya broke the no-panty rule,” I finish.

She looks at me, seemingly bewildered and says, “You're just trying to confuse me.”

As I laugh she slides her hand under my robe.

“Hey!”

“Just makin' sure *you* don't have any underwear on,” she says with a mischievous smile.

“Now ya gotta go wash yer hands. And fine, if this is what cha want me ta say: You are a bad girl! Happy now?” I say.

Jackie comes into the kitchen and fortunately Laurel is done being a bad girl just in time.

We get the plates and silverware to set the table. Jackie must have had more tequila as I know her well enough to know when she's acting normal,

and she isn't. She's weaving slightly even when trying to stand still. I'm also not getting any of her mischievous smiles, which is the main tip off for me.

Dinner is finally ready, and it smells so wonderful that even the eggplant haters have forgotten what's for dinner. The tequila might have had some influence on their memory lapse.

Kent starts with the first compliment, which is so unlike him.

“Fuck, Wolf, this is even better than the lasagna you make. Number one!”

Some of our guests are so blasted from the Tequila that it is turning into a raucous party with laughing and teasing and boo coo flirting and sexual innuendos. I once again have Jackie on one side of me and Laurel on the other. Jackie seems to be fading fast, although the food seemed to perk her up.

She leans her head on my shoulder for a while, and then says, “Can I lay down somewhere? I don't feel well.”

My bedroom is right off the dining room, so I help her up and lay her down on my bed. This could get tricky. I don't think Jackie is pretending to feel ill just to get situated in my bed, especially after all the tequila she drank when I was watching. No telling how much more she might have had when I wasn't watching.

Fortunately I was able to keep Laurel sober, as she’s my main helper now. We clear the table and put stuff away. She seems quite happy with the situation, even though Curtis is blasted and lounging in the living room.

When we finish cleaning up, Laurel and I head off to the living room portion of our party. The tequila has put the hammer down on several guests. Bill is seemingly passed out in my favorite chair. Adolph is laying down on what he considers his couch with Samantha laying on top of him. Squeaky is up and walking around some.

She goes over to the fireplace to turn the radio up as it's playing a song she particularly likes. She turns to me and asks, “Didja git yer FYER place workin'?”

She's teasing me about the way I say fire so I reply, “Ya mean the FAR place,” I joke.

Iris is sitting on the window seat, and I go sit next to her. I don't want her to think no one's noticed how different she looks out of her normal cowgirl get-up.

“Do ya ride?” she asks me.

I'm not sure what she means, so I ask, “Ya mean horses?”

“Yeah,” she replies.

“I've ridden horses, sure not no cowboy, though. I got more experience driving tanks.”

“We have horses, but I don't have anyone ta ride with. Wanna go ridin' with me?” she asks. “You can see Rainier from our riding trails.”

“I've seen Rainier. It's beautiful, but aren't ya kiddin' yerself that it's a volcano that's not yet extinct? Livin' so close to it, I mean?”

“D'ya wanna go ridin'?” she asks again.

“Are ya askin' me out onna date?”

“No, I'm askin' if ya wanna go horseback ridin',” she says.

Kent got sucked into the Tequila frenzy, but he is starting to come back around.

“Kent, wanna go ridin'? Iris says she has horses and no one ta go ridin' with.”

“Fuckin' A, I wanna go ridin',” he answers. “I ain't been ridin' fer a boo coo long time. I need ta wait another week or so before I kin go. My foot still hurts and ain't healed all the way.”

“Hope it's OK that I invited Kent too,” I say to Iris.

“Sure, we have five horses. Prob'ly Samantha and Jane will come too,” she replies.

Laurel is getting Curtis to stand up and moving him toward the door.

“Yer not letting 'im drive home are ya?” I ask.

“No, he can sleep in his van. We do it, I mean, *he* does it all the time,” she replies.

Pete, Ramon Salazar, Ace, and Beaudeen have been able to pace themselves to the point where they are still doing shots. Well, were. The bottle is empty now.

I realize Mark and Helen must have departed when I was in the kitchen. Pretty sure they didn't drink too much, as they both seemed quite together at dinner compared to some of the other quests.

Jenny sits up and yawns.

“Where's Jackie? Is she OK?” she asks.

“I think so, but maybe we should go check on her,” I answer.

We both go to my bedroom and look in. Jackie looks OK and appears to be sleeping soundly.

“You could leave her here. I kin sleep on one of the couches,” I offer.

“I'd say yes, but I heard her tell her parents she would be home tonight.

They'd be worried," answers Jenny.

Jackie hears us talking and wakes up some.

She asks, "Can I use the bathroom?"

Jenny and I help her up, and Jenny leads her into the bathroom and closes the door. I hear what sounds like someone barfing. Good timing, or I might have had to change my sheets before going to bed.

After a while they both come out if the bathroom. Jackie looks much better, but wants to go home. No more tequila for her.

Kent and I have hit the wall, and we both retire to our respective bedrooms.

When I wake on Saturday morning, it looks like a battlefield in the living room with guys strewn across the floor. All the bottles of hard liquor are empty, not to mention numerous empty beer bottles.

Instead of starting to clean up, I go into the kitchen and start making coffee. Going to need a boo coo lot of java this morning I'm guessing.

My favorite chair along with every other seat in our living room is spoken for, so when the coffee is ready I go sit on our porch. If it weren't for the fact that I'm leaving here in a month, I'd get some chairs for the porch.

After breakfast most everyone falls out to the street for some morning exercise, Frisbee. Kent wants to play big time, but his doctors do not want him jumping around. He sits on the porch with me as I work on my homework for school.

"Ya know Kent if ya git outta the army way before school is over, ya don't hafta wait fer me. You kin didi mau fer home and I'll meecha there."

"No way! I don't wanna miss out on an adventure," he replies.

"Adventure? Are you a fuckin' idiot? You ain't had enough adventure in the fuckin' army? If ya want adventure ya should just re-up. Oh wait, ya can't. Not enough toes. Prob'ly could git Top ta give ya a dispensation ta re-up without all yer toes cuz he likes ya so much."

"Fuck you," he replies.

"Is that the way ya talk ta me after I made ya breakfast?"

"Hey, I helped," he replies.

"Yeah, and it was a miracle any of us got any bacon the way you was eatin' it just 'bout off the griddle," I tease, and we both laugh in part because it's mostly true. That's why we call him "Bacon Boy."

Chapter 30

The third week of May arrives, and on Thursday Kent gets his final evaluation on how well he is healed after his foot operation. He has recuperated enough to start driving Thelma Lou again, although he is quite reluctant to do so because he hates to listen to me practice the harmonica. I can now play “Oh Susanna” almost as fast as Kent. He is not impressed in the least.

As we get ready to sky up for Ft. Lewis, Dubya P. is asleep on Adolph's chest on his favorite couch. They make such a cute couple. Too bad Adolph won't be allowed to keep the cat once he's back in the army.

Kent makes me drive, so I can't practice my harmonica. It's too early in the morning to subject his sensitive ears to the abuse my playing inflicts upon him.

After I drop him off, I head to my tennis class. All my classmates have gotten hip to my awesome backhand, so they don't hit the ball there much anymore. I probably won't be getting my only possible A now. After lunch I have my Psychology class. I won't be getting an A in it either.

Part of the credit for the class involved volunteering at one of the local mental hospitals. After my first hospital visit, I refused to go back. What was I thinking? Although the army was worse in regards to dealing with people with mental health issues, I am not in any frame of mind to volunteer for anything. One of the few worthwhile things I learned in the army was never ever volunteer. For anything! The effect in class is my professor pretty much ignores me. He won't call on me in class even if I raise my hand, so I stopped doing that.

I pick up Kent, and as soon as we pass through the gate of Ft. Lewis, he lights up a joint. He's quite aware of the breach of pot smoking protocol, and when I give him the look he says, “They're lettin' me out. My foot is healed and I even got a ETS date!”

“Number one, *pendejo*!” I reply. “So when d'ya git out?”

“End of the month. The 31st,” he answers.

“I'm not done with school 'til June 5th. Ya still gonna hang around fer the trip to California?”

“Prob'ly fly home and then fly back fer the big adventure,” he answers.

“Don't know why you'd do somethin' like that. It'll be boo coo more fun than ridin' my Beezer to California but not by much.”

“Don't wanna miss out on all the fun,” he says with a smile.

“Prob'ly just wanna make sure ya git ta say goodbye ta all yer girlfriends.”

“They're gonna miss me,” he replies, trying to sound benevolent which he is certainly not.

“Only thinking of them. How will they ever survive without you?”

“So only a couple more Friday night parties fer us,” Kent says. “Whatcha doin' fer dinner tomorrow?”

“Adolph wants ta do another Mexican night with tacos and Marilyn's burritos and coleslaw,” I answer.

“Coleslaw?”

“It cuts the heat if ya put too much hot sauce on yer taco,” I reply.

“Don't git no coleslaw at the Mexican restaurant in Stockton,” says Kent.

“This is Tacoma, not Stockton.”

“And why are they Marilyn's burritos?” he asks.

“That's fer you. When ya have one of my burritos, I wantcha ta think 'bout Marilyn,” I tease.

“I'm already thinkin' 'bout Marilyn.”

“Yer on base almost every day. Go over to her PX and say hi. Ya kin have 'er back if ya want.”

“Have 'er back? When was she yours?” he asks.

“Doncha remember? She gave me her phone number.”

“So what?”

“She never gave it ta you,” I reply.

“Doncha ever stop?” he asks.

“Tell ya what. You kin drive and I kin practice my harmonica so I can't talk,” I offer.

“Fuck, I don't know which is worse. Shoulda brought another joint,” he laughs and I do too.

We make it through another week and on Thursday, we plan the last Friday party before Kent is officially out of the army.

“Gotta be somethin' special,” he says.

I think for a moment. I've made just about every special dish I know how to make without resorting to an actual written recipe.

Then inspiration strikes and I say, “I know what we kin do. Since there's such awesome seafood at Pike Place Market in Seattle I shoulda thought of this before.”

The house I stayed at when I was on convalescent leave was two blocks from Louise's Shrimp House in Detroit. All she sold was battered shrimp and french fries by the pound. Nuthin' else. Mostly carryout, but she had some picnic tables in her place with napkins and Tabasco sauce and that's all. Her secret was a boo coo tasty batter. The shrimp were just tee tee pieces of shrimp but ya hardly cared cuz the batter was so fuckin' good. But here we can get number one fresh shrimp, so we kin make it even better than Louise's. Xin loi, Louise.

With this our focus, Kent, Adolph, and I all pile into Thelma Lou for a trip to Pike Place Market on Friday afternoon. Before we can pull away from the curb, Laurel runs over to us.

“Where ya goin'?” she asks.

“Seattle. Wanna come?”

“Yeah, sure,” she answers.

Adolph opens the rear door to let her in, but she opens the front door and jumps onto my lap. Kent starts laughing. I pick Laurel off my lap and set her down between Kent and I. She is so light, I bet she barely weighs 80 pounds soaking wet. Despite what she thinks, she is way more girl than woman. Xin loi, Laurel.

“Ya really hafta control yerself, darlin',” I say to her. “Yer gonna fergit yerself one day and jump on my lap when Curtis is around.”

“So?” she says with a wicked little smile.

“I know yer tryin' yer best ta be a bad girl, but yer just gonna git Curtis beat up is all,” I answer. “An' it ain't gonna be by me.”

With Kent at the wheel of Thelma Lou we make it straight to Pike Place, and we even find a nearby parking space. As we walk to the market Laurel keeps trying to put her arm around me in some fashion. The problem for her is she is about 5 feet tall. Maybe 5'2” at the most. Xin loi, Laurel, but this isn't going to work in any way, shape, or form.

I send Adolph to pick up a head of cabbage and carrots to make coleslaw. Louise doesn't even have coleslaw, but I'm trying to outdo her.

We cruise several of the seafood stalls before I decide where to get our shrimp. They don't have to be huge, but I don't want really small ones either. Batter is cheaper than shrimp, but I'm not trying to make as much profit as

possible. I'm trying to make the best deep fried shrimp as possible. Xin loi, Louise.

We sky back to our house with a tee tee bit of a Chinese fire drill before we get going. Kent wants to drive, so he gets behind the wheel and Laurel gets in front. I close the door behind her and get in the spacious backseat with Adolph. When Laurel realizes she has been had, she climbs into the backseat and sits between me and Adolph. We sit for a tee tee while until Kent says, “I ain't chauffeurin' you guys around. Adolph git up here with me.”

I'd rather not be in the backseat alone with Laurel, so before Adolph can get out, I move to the front. Laurel follows, trying to get on my lap again. And again, I set her between Kent and me. Then before anyone can get out, Kent takes off.

I'm excited, not because Laurel wants to sit on my lap, but because I love Louise's shrimp, and I'm going to improve it in several ways. This is going to be so number one. When we get back to our house, I start to clean all the shrimp for dinner. Laurel offers to help, and so I give a quick lesson is shelling and de-veining shrimp. She's quite the chatterbox sometimes, but we have fun working in the kitchen together.

Kent left to get beer and he just returned so we roll some joints from Kent's California pot and get the party going. There has still been no pot in Tacoma, so it's almost a miracle that we still have any left. Could be the reason we have so many friends every Friday night. And here I thought it was my food. Then again, we're up to $80 in the penny jar every week now. Maybe it's some of both.

The party is really starting to get going when Jenny and Jackie show up. They split up immediately and Jenny practically jumps onto Kent who is sitting in my favorite chair. Jackie come right over to me, and I get a hug and a kiss. And I mean a KISS like no other. She doesn't give me the patented smile I expect though. Instead she looks at me with sad eyes and pretends to pout.

“Whatzamatter?”

“You're leaving soon,” she replies.

“Not for over a week still.”

“A week, is that all?” she laments. “I know I'm never going to see you again.”

“Yer prob'ly right there darlin', but there's nuthin' I kin do. School will be over, and I can finally go home. I've been gone fer two years. of course I'm

gonna miss you and Jenny. We kin write ta each other. I'm quite adept at writin' now."

She frowns at the offer. I can tell by the look in her eyes she would leave Tacoma and come with me if I would just ask. It's quite a tempting thought, as she is a wonderful person, not to mention incredibly beautiful. But I'll have nothing to offer. I'll be out of the army and out of school without a job. And then there's the fact that Jackie's still in school. Leaving now could screw that all up for her as well. It's really best now that we part as friends.

"We've had a good time this last three months haven't we?"

"But it went by so fast," she laments.

"Fer you darlin', but not fer me," I reply. I can tell by the look on her face that wasn't the right thing to say. I still have to work on that stuff.

I try to redeem myself and say, "What I meant was I had such a good time hangin' out with you, it just seemed like it'd never end. But nuthin' kin go on forever."

She smiles. A much better look for her.

"Do I get to help in the kitchen tonight?"

"Of course. I was counting on it," I answer.

"Is there a theme tonight?"

"There is. Tonight we are having the one night re-creation of Louise's Shrimp House from Detroit, Michigan."

I give Adolph the look, and he passes the joint in his hand and gets up to follow Jackie and me into the kitchen. Laurel also follows, as I half expected. I'm going to have to watch her if she starts trying to be a bad girl in public.

"Adolph, maybe you could go an get one of the numbers Kent already rolled and bring it in here for the kitchen crew?" I ask.

"Yes chef!" he answers and skys up for the living room.

He's just being a smart ass, but while he's gone, I get out the chef hat that Jenny gave me at my sort of surprise birthday party and put it on. Looks pretty stylish, I think. Both Jackie and Laurel laugh when they see the look on Adolph's face when he returns and sees my hat.

"Here's the number, chef," he says with fake respect. "Shall I light it, chef?"

"Ya kin light it, and then stick it in yer ear, *pendejo*," I tease.

We start to cover most of the counters with newspapers and then paper towels on top of them.

"Jes' like at Nino's on a Friday night, there'd be a line out the door at

Louise's Shrimp House and a long wait. You guys are all lucky to not have to wait in line. You will, however, have to wait until we're done. It's going to be hard for all you helpers to not jump ship on me, because it is going to smell divine in here. Because of that, you all can sample the shrimp and fries while you help. Quality control. We hafta make sure it's good enough ta serve our guests."

We start to heat the oil and get ready to cook. We've worked in the kitchen together so many times now, we're a good team. Yeah, even you, Ricondo.

We don't have to call people from the living room to come and eat because the aroma of Louise's Shrimp brings them in like a fish on a hook. One of Louise's secrets for her tasty batter was she boiled all the shrimp heads, legs and shells in water, and then strained the broth and let it cool. Her shrimp batter almost tastes more like shrimp than the shrimp.

Jenny comes into the kitchen after the first wave of diners start to waddle away from the table. "You really look like a chef with the hat on," she says.

"Well, thank you. I even feel like a chef. I had forgotten that when I worked in a restaurant we used to wear chef's hats. I hated it then, but it feels cool now. I'da worn it sooner but I thought I'd git teased too much."

"No way! And that's why I came in here. That was the best fried shrimp I've ever had. You have to open a restaurant. Please! We'll work for you. We promise," she pleads.

"He's leaving next week," says Jackie.

Jenny looks at me wide eyed and says, "Nooo! You can't leave," and then she comes over and hugs me all the while continuing to say, "You can't leave. We'll starve."

These women in Tacoma are making it so hard for me to go home. Even when I consider the Stench of Tacoma, it's still going to be boo coo hard to leave.

I can hear more guests arriving and when I look out the kitchen door I wave to them and indicate they should sit at the dining room table.

Adolph starts another batch of french fries while I get ready to fry more shrimp. Laurel is clearing the table while Jackie gets plates ready for me and Adolph. I know they are trying their utmost to show me we could run a restaurant together, and I'm sure we could, but I am burned out on working in restaurants. It's also hot in most restaurant kitchens, and I can't stand to be stuck in hot places after the Nam.

After the second wave of diners are taken care of, I wade through the

crowd to the living room. Samantha and Adolph are on my favorite chair, and the only place left to sit is next to Iris on the window seat. She's back to her cowgirl look with jeans and cowboy boots.

"Thought you were gonna come horseback riding with us?" she says.

"I still want to come. I was waitin' fer Kent's foot to heal enough to ride, but I think he's gonna blow us both off and go home. I don't really blame him, as I know exactly how he feels. I've been away from home for two years, and Kent's been gone fer three," I reply.

"Well if you're not leaving 'til next week you could still come for a ride. Any day works when it's not raining."

"Yer on, darlin'. Tell ya what, first day this week that it doesn't rain, I'll come over and we kin go riding," I promise.

In my head I am already finished with school. I could probably not even show up for the last week of classes and still get the "C" I'm going to get anyway.

There are many sad eyes as the evening winds down and our guests start to leave. To help alleviate the gloom some are feeling I offer the next Friday as a send off party. Maybe even another Playboy Pajama Party.

The next morning the only holdovers from the party are the M Co. contingent who are sleeping all over the place. Adolph scored his preferred couch and Dubya P. is ensconced on his chest as usual. I make the first pot of coffee, fill my cup, and go sit on the porch.

Adolph comes out on the porch with a cup of coffee, and he lets the cat out which reminds me of something.

"So Ricondo, as we cruise around in Thelma Lou this week, we should take Dubya P. with us whenever we can. We want ta git 'im used ta ridin' in the car. Got a long drive ahead next week," I advise.

"Works for me, *pendejo*."

"Looks who's callin' who a *pendejo*. Ya think they're gonna let ya keep the cat in the slammer?"

"Kent'll keep 'im fer me until I git out," Adolph replies.

"Yeah, right. He should though since he took ya ta the Humane Society ta git the cat in the first place. Yer both a coupla dumb shits," I say.

Another Saturday morning breakfast fest takes place. Bacon Boy is at his station, and Adolph is doing the toast. I monitor the hash browns, and then I start taking requests for the eggs. Almost everyone wants over-easy but a couple of sunny-side-ups are requested. They all know I won't make

scrambled eggs. One because I hate them, but also because it screws up the egg pans.

Monday is Memorial day so everyone from M Co. hangs around the whole weekend. Lots of Frisbee playing out in the street and pot smoking in the house.

The bag of California pot Kent brought back with him is something like when Jesus performed the Miracle of the Fishes where he fed a huge crowd of followers with one small basket of fish. We only need the bag to last until next week.

I wake up Tuesday morning and can hear Kent cruising around the kitchen. He must not have been able to sleep. He has manged to get the first pot of coffee ready, so we both have some.

“It's yer last day in the army. Wait, let me rephrase that, it's yer last day in the fucking army!” I tease. “Hey lets have breakfast out. My treat as I have bucks from the penny jar from last Friday.”

When we get to our favorite breakfast restaurant, the waitress brings two coffee cups and fills them up.

“What's it gonna be for ya today?” she asks.

“I'll have my usual,” I answer.

“My usual, too,” says Kent.

She writes our orders, smiling the whole time. After she leaves, Kent and I grin at each other. Yeah, we're regulars. But this will be the last time for this place.

After breakfast we sky to Madigan. Kent's already done all the clearance stuff, he just has to go in and sign off of his agreed upon benefits from the VA, and he's out.

Kent returns in just minutes with the biggest smile on his face I've ever seen.

“I'm fuckin' out!” he says, and the grin stays the whole ride home.

As soon as we get there all he wants is to toke a joint, and then he grabs his bag, and we drive him to the Seattle airport in Thelma Lou with Dubya P. riding at the back window, seemingly very content. That's good because it's going to be a long ride to California.

“Kent, ya don't hafta come back, ya know. We'll be comin' down there. I gotta say goodbye ta Sandy,” I say with a wink.

“Nah, I'm comin' back. Don't wanna miss the pajama party,” he says with

a wicked smile.

“Might hafta listen ta me practicin' my harmonica all the way home.”

“Adolph, the first chance ya git, take that thing and throw it as far as ya kin out the window, ya hear me?” says Kent.

Adolph smiles and says, “He never plays it around me.”

“That's cuz he always drives when you're in the car,” replies Kent.

“So Kent, I got somethin' fer ya ta do when ya git home,” I say.

“Like what?” he asks.

“You kin look fer some fake heroes when yer hangin' out. They're easy ta find, even though they're out, they'll wear their fuckin' uniform ta 'bars and stuff.”

“What're ya talkin' 'bout now? Yer gonna tell me whether I want ya to or not, so just get on with it,” he winces.

“OK, but remember, you asked fer it,” I reply. “It was when I was at Oakland, waitin' ta go ta the Nam. I'm workin' my way through, and it's like standin' or sittin' in line for several days. I had my jungle fatigues and my jungle boots and all the stuff ya git. One day I'm sittin' on my bunk, and a guy comes walkin' through, and he stops and says, “Hey, Wolf, howzit goin'?”

“I kind of recognize 'im from high school. He's wearin' faded jungle fatigues, and he's a E-6 Staff Sergeant. Plus he's got some sort of aviation wings on his fatigues. I finally remember his name, Stanley Weasel. He tells me he's on his way to his second tour in the Nam. He says he's a gunner on a Cobra Gunship. Once I remembered who he was, I was really surprised about him bein' a E-6 and a gunner on a Cobra, cuz in high school he was a punk. A lyin' punk it turns out.

“When I was home on leave I mentioned to my friend Jerry that I crossed paths with Stanley Weasel, and how he was prob'ly still in the Nam on his second tour.

“Jerry laughs and says,”No fuckin' way. Steve Ross just saw him at Miller's Bar, on Michigan Ave. a coupla weeks ago, and he said he was outta the army then.

“He was just a lyin' motherfucker. But all I could think about was all the trouble he must of went to ta try to fool me about him bein' a E-6 and a Cobra gunner,” I finish.

As we arrive at the airport, Kent turns to me and says, “I'll keep my eyes open fer fake heroes jes' fer you, Wolf.”

And then he was gone. I hope he does come back for the road trip, as for

now I have lost my chauffeur. I haven't asked, but I don't think Adolph has a driver's license.

We spend a very subdued week without Kent around, except on Tuesday when Adolph and I go over to Iris' house to go horseback riding. When I call her to set a time and get directions, she says she'll send Samantha to come and get us, as it's too hard to give directions to her place. She was quite correct about that. Her place is so far out in the boonies that some of the roads don't even have a sign.

When we get there, it is the epitome of a horse ranch. Coming up to the house is a large corral with several horses walking around. The yard and area surrounding the house has so many large pine trees you couldn't count them all.

“So Adolph,” I ask, “Ya ever ride a horse?”

“Fuck no!” he replies. Have you?”

“Yeah some, but I'm no cowboy that's fer sure. I kin ride 'em, but I couldn't saddle them up. Are ya gonna saddle 'em up fer us Iris?”

“Sure, Sam and I will do it for ya city slickers,” she teases.

“I'll watch so if there is a next time I kin do it then,” I offer.

We walk into the corral and the horses come right over to us. They are so friendly and interested in us as they snuffle their noses around our neck and shoulders. Adolph is getting a tee tee bit overloaded by all the horse attention, never having been around any before.

“They all want to go for a ride, but one isn't going to get to come, and they know that. So pick a horse, Wolf. I'll saddle it for you,” says Iris.

“Which is your nicest horse?” I ask.

“The one right next to you,” she answers.

“That's the one I want,” I answer, having had my thinking corrected long ago when riding at a rental stable. I asked for the most spirited horse there, and I got it. That horse beat the crap out of me before finally scraping me off his back by going between two sign poles just wide enough for him to fit through. When he got away from me and ran back to the stable, I just let him go. I'd had enough riding that day.

While Iris saddles my horse, Adolph picks his out and Samantha saddles it for him. So far so good. Once our horses are saddled, we hold them and wait for Iris and Samantha to saddle up. The odd horse out is snuffling around Iris, trying to get saddled too.

“Can't we lead that one like a packhorse so it kin come, too?” I ask, taking

pity on it.

“We could, but then they'll want to do it all the time,” replies Iris.

We start on down the driveway. We can see Mt. Rainier from Iris' yard, and when we get to end of the drive, we turn toward the mountain and down a trail through the woods. I can see why they live here. It is fantastically beautiful, if you can discount the fact that you have a volcano in your backyard. It's the start of a magical day for us riding in the woods.

Adolph is trying his best to not look like a tenderfoot horseback rider. Like I said, I'm no cowboy, but I can ride a horse. Especially a nice one. As we ride, we chat.

I thought Iris was still in high school, but she is actually 20 years old, so I ask her, “What do you do? Do you have a job, I mean?”

“This is my job,” she answers. “Takin' care of the horses.”

We ride into some open areas where we can see the different valleys running up the flanks of Mt. Rainier. There's still snow up near the top and will be all year, even in July.

We ride for several hours and never meet any hikers or other riders the whole time. Now that I'm leaving in a couple of days, all the beauty of the forests I somehow missed while here is being shown to me.

Iris knows the trails here so well that we do a loop of sorts, so we don't have to turn around and ride back the way we came. Before we realize it, we come out of the forest and there is her house, and the one disappointed horse who is waiting for our return.

I watch Iris unsaddle her horse, and I do the same on my horse. Adolph wants nothing more to do with his, so I unsaddle it as well.

“You're a quick learner,” Iris says to me.

“Way easier taking it off than putting it on,” I reply.

After our ride Iris invites us back into her house for some cool refreshing drinks. She's sitting on the kitchen counter next to the sink when we finish with our drinks and Samantha says she needs to take us back. I thank her for the fantastic day.

“You're coming to our last pajama party aren't you?” I ask.

“I wouldn't miss it for the world,” she says with an entrancing smile. But that is the last time I see her. I can still picture her sitting on the counter in her cowboy boots, giving me that smile.

I blow off my last Demographics class of the quarter, but I do go to tennis.

When I get home, Laurel is there chatting with Adolph. I have a seat in my favorite chair and Laurel gets off the couch to sit with me.

“Haven't I talked ta ya 'bout tryin' ta be a bad girl?” I ask, half teasing.

“I can't help myself. When you're around I can think of nothing else,” she says sarcastically.

“OK, Adolph, we gotta come up with a theme fer our last pajama party dinner. Gotta be somethin' where we won't mess up our Uncle Sugar Smoking jackets.”

I have an epiphany.

“I know, we'll have lasagna on Friday. You haven't had my lasagna yet, have ya Laurel?” I ask.

“Nope,” she answers.

“You are in fer a real treat. Plus if ya want, you kin help make it so ya have an excuse as to why yer hangin' 'round with me so much. In case Curtis starts actin' jealous,” I offer with a wink.

“OK, I'll help,” she answers, and she winks back. I'm going to have to be careful flirting with her. She's going to start taking me seriously.

“We'll make the spaghetti sauce tomorrow so it can rest until Thursday, when we'll make the meatballs. Then we'll put the lasagna together so it can rest until Friday. It will be the best lasagna ever, plus we get to have spaghetti on Wednesday, meatball sandwiches on Thursday, and of course lasagna on Friday,” I finish.

“Do you always plans meals that far ahead?” Laurel asks.

“Nah, only in the restaurant business, and of course for our pajama parties,” I answer.

I wake early on Friday morning. I'm excited for today. Our last big party to send us off to California. Another pajama party, and if it's half as fun as the last one, it will be a blast. Plus we have lasagna for dinner this time.

As our guests start to arrive, I'm wondering if Kent will actually make it back like he planned to. Right about then, I see a cab pull up in front of our house and three people get out. It's Kent, and he brought along Barry and Barry's girlfriend Valerie. Thelma Lou is going to be quite crowded on the drive to California.

Kent sees I'm rolling joints and throws me another bag of pot and says, “Try this stuff out, *pendejo*.”

“I can't believe yer callin' me *pendejo*. You were already in California, and you flew back here so you kin drive all the way there. Who's the *pendejo*?”

Jenny, as soon as she is sure Valerie is not with Kent, has her arms around him. He does not resist.

When Kent sees me heading for the kitchen, he asks, ”Hey chef, what's fer dinner?”

“Chef?” asks Barry.

“It's just a joke, Barry, don't listen to him. But to answer yer question, Kent, it's yer favorite,” I reply.

“Not moussaka again! It was good, but a guy kin only eat so much eggplant.”

“I know that, man. I made lasagna.”

“Oh, that *is* my favorite,” he says.

“I know that! Geez, you must be high from the dew ya brought.”

“It is number one,” he answers.

When I make into the kitchen, Jackie follows. She wants to canoodle when we are alone in the kitchen. It doesn't last long. Being alone, that is. I hear the front door open, and shortly thereafter, Laurel walks into the kitchen.

“Where's Curtis?” I ask.

“Playing with his bottle of tequila,” she answers.

“I'm steering clear of that stuff this time,” says Jackie.

“Smart girl,” I say.

After I put the lasagna in the oven, we all go back and join the party in the living room, which is really taking off. The tequila is doing it's job again. Several guests are already quite drunk, as Ramon is pouring shots and handing out slices of lemon to all who want it.

Kent and Jenny each do a shot. Then Ramon offers a shot to Jackie, who initially turns it down, but several people encourage and tease her, so she takes it. It really makes her wrinkle up her face.

“No more. It makes me remember the last time,” Jackie pleads when offered another shot.

More teasing and booing. She relents, but I take it from her and toss it back myself.

“OK everyone. Dinner is not for about an hour. Don't git too shitfaced before then. After dinner, git as shitfaced as ya want. But if ya do it now, yer gonna miss out on some fabulous lasagna. Kent's favorite, isn't that right, *pendejo?*

“It is my favorite. He came all the way ta California jes' ta 'make it fer my mom and dad and me,” answers Kent, telling only a half lie at most.

Of course no one but Jackie and Laurel takes my advice about not getting too drunk too early. By time dinner is ready to be served, Adolph is wasted and will be no help in the kitchen. Fortunately I have my two aces in the hole. It's pretty easy, as all we have to do is cut up the lasagna and put portions on plates.

At first the party is going so strong that only a few guests come into the dining room, but once people start eating and oohing and aahing about the lasagna and a bit of the aroma wafts into the living room, the dining room table is full. It looks like a whorehouse banquet at the table with all the lingerie and near-exposed body parts.

After dinner there is some short-lived dancing to music. Jackie is somewhat subdued, maybe even standoffish. She might feel I am blowing her off. And I guess I am, but it's not like we're a couple. We're friends. She wanted more, I think, but it just wasn't fair to either of us to let it go further.

Jenny, on the other hand, is excited to see that Kent has returned. I'm sure she thinks he maybe came back for her. He didn't, but she doesn't know that yet. She will, I'm sure. Probably tonight.

I go to clean up in the kitchen, where I am soon joined by Laurel and Jackie.

“Can I come with you to California?” Laurel asks.

First I laugh, a lot. The look on Jackie's face is hard to read. but it's not one of happiness.

“No way, Jose! It's already bad enough that I have to drag Adolph and his cat along, but now Kent brought two more people to haul a 1000 miles in Thelma Lou. That's five people, and all our stuff, and all my kitchen equipment. It is going to be a bitch and half if Thelma Lou breaks down on the way. Five people hitchhikin' with a cat and a bunch of crap? No.”

“Please, I won't be any trouble, honest,” pleads Laurel.

“Have ya thought this out at all? Have ya talked to yer parents 'bout it? Told Curtis yer breakin' up with 'im and runnin' off?” I ask.

“No. Why would I? They wouldn't let me go.”

“Laurel, yer eighteen. They can't make ya stay if ya don't want. Why would you run away? You kin leave anytime ya want. ”

Of course no one, and I mean no one, listens to me when I give advice. They should.

“Besides, think 'bout yer mom and Ronnie. Gonna break their hearts,” I say.

“Listen to him, Laurel,” advises Jackie. Thank you, Jackie, I think.

Laurel, feeling outnumbered, leaves the kitchen. Not quite in a huff, but close.

“I still can't think about you leaving. I keep hoping something will make you stay,” Jackie laments.

“I never imagined it would be so hard to leave Tacoma, as I have mostly associated bein' here with bein' in the army. But all of you have been such a great friends. I'll always remember you, but Tacoma is not where I want to live,” I say, hoping for understanding but not expecting it.

No smile in Jackie's eyes now. There's nothing I can do about it. My life has been jerked around by the army, and at times for no apparent good reason. Just because it could, so now that I finally can, I'm going home. Xin loi.

Back in the living room Laurel is trying to rouse a rather inebriated Curtis without much success.

“You kin leave 'em here if ya want, Laurel,” I suggest. “He'll be OK there as much as in his van.”

“I guess,” she replies, and then she didi maus for home next door.

“C'mon, let's sit out on the porch and watch the boat traffic at night,” I say to Jackie.

“Can't we go somewhere more comfortable?” she asks, and I suspect she might have had this in mind all along.

“Let's go outside first,” I say.

“OK.”

The boats and ships on Puget Sound have their navigational lights on, and it's quite a light show if you like boats.

It's cool out, so I put my arm around Jackie and pull her close. Mostly to keep her warm. OK, OK to keep us both warm. Within seconds, Jenny is out on the porch, crying. Hard.

“I have to go!” she blurts out between sobs.

I guess Kent finally laid it on the line with her. I knew this was going to happen.

“Stay if ya want,” Jenny says to Jackie, “but I'm leavin'.”

“I'll come with you,” says Jackie. She turns to me and kisses me goodbye. She and Jenny walk down the street to Jenny's car. Jackie has her arm around Jenny, trying to console her. Jackie looks back before getting into the car and waves to me. That's the last time I see her.

When I go back inside, Kent is sitting at the dining room table. He has the bottle of tequila. No such niceties as slices of lemon or salt, he just takes slugs out of the bottle now and then. Mostly now.

“At least two broken hearts tonight,” I say.

“Gonna be three if Bill wakes up while Ramon's dancin' with Squeaky,” says Kent with a wry smile, nodding to the living room.

“Might be more than a broken heart. More like a broken head if Bill comes to,” I joke, and Kent smiles again. “Good thing we're skyin' up. I think we're a bad influence 'round here.”

“What's that punk Curtis doin' here still?” Kent asks.

“Passed out on the tequila, jes like yer gonna be if ya keep chuggin' on that bottle. I tol' Laurel she could leave 'im here, cuz she couldn't wake 'im up.”

“Fuckin' punk,” he replies.

“You won't have ta suffer him no more in a day or two.”

“Good fuckin' thing. Shoulda pounded his ass a coupla times.”

“Laurel asked ta come ta California with us but I tol' her no,” I say.

“Why, we got room?” he replies.

“We had room, but ya came back with Valerie and that dumb fuck Barry. It's gonna be tight with all my cooking stuff, Adolph, and Dubya P.”

“She kin sit on my lap,” Kent offers, and I only shake my head.

I'm finished for the night and head off to my own bedroom. It's a small thing, I know, until you don't have one.

I wake naturally, as I prefer now. As I lay there for a moment before getting up to make the coffee I'm now fully addicted to, Laurel opens my bedroom door and jumps on me in a sisterly way, at first.

“What're you up to now?” I ask.

“Nuthin'. Just hopin' ya changed yer mind 'bout me comin' with ya ta California.”

As she talks she starts to move around on me in a rather unsisterly way.

“Laurel! Stop now. You've proved yer a bad girl. A really bad girl, but you better stop and go now.”

She stops, gets off me, and leaves. Man, that was close. But before I can actually get up, Laurel comes charging back into my room and jumps on me again. This time she lays right on top of me and gives me a kiss and says rather excitedly, “I'm coming with you!”

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“Kent said I could come,” she answers with a big smile.

“You are not coming.”

“Kent said you would say that. And he said I could sit on his lap,” she replies, and then she is gone.

What the fuck is Kent thinking, I wonder? I get up and dress. Kent has the coffee going, and I get my cup.

“Why didja tell Laurel she could come?” I ask Kent.

He says nothing and just smiles wickedly.

“This is all 'bout Curtis, isn't it?” I ask.

Kent still says nothing, he just grins.

“Gonna be trouble, *pendejo*,” I say.

“We have room.”

“I'm not talkin' 'bout room. I'm talkin' 'bout trouble,” I reply.

“So what?”

“You seen her daddy. He's a fuckin' nutcase. And then there's Curtis. Prob'ly got a gun. You still got yer gun, *pendejo*?”

Kent smiles but doesn't answer.

“I don't give a fuck if ya got it. Actually, fer once I kinda hope ya do got it. If ya do, we better git some fuckin' ammo fer it, cuz we're prob'ly gonna need it.”

I go out on the porch to fume alone. I'm fucking pissed off. A trip I initially thought had some potential to be a fun end to my stint in the army is turning to shit before my eyes. I open the front door and reach back in for the penny jar. Wow! Lots of cash stuffed in it, at least. I pull it out and start to count it. Over a hundred bucks. $102 to be exact. Not only will it pay for the gas and oil for our trip, it will pay for food at our mainstay eatery, McDonald's. This is helping me mellow out a tee tee bit. That, and Kent comes out on the porch and hands me a joint for scrutiny.

“Kent, when we get to California, as soon as I kin ship my Beezer off, I'm goin' home. What are you gonna do then? Ya can't even do right when I'm right here watchin' yer ass.”

“She's eighteen. She kin do what she wants,” he replies.

“First of all, if we kin even make it ta California, it's gonna be a fuckin' miracle,” I say as I light the joint.

“My thinking in the beginning was that you and me would drive Thelma Lou as far as she'd go, and then we'd rely on yer awesome skill of hitchin' ta git us the rest of the way there. Sure ain't gonna work tryin' ta hitch with six

people and a cat," I explain.

"We'll make it," says Mr. Optimist.

Adolph comes out on the porch after letting Dubya P. out.

"Watcha talkin' 'bout six people and a cat?" he asks.

"Talkin' 'bout our trip to California. Gonna be six people and a cat," I answer.

"Why? Who else is comin'?" Adolph asks.

"Yer girlfriend Laurel," I answer.

"She's yer fuckin' girlfriend, *pendejo*," Adolph retorts.

"Wants ta be. Big difference," I reply.

"Why didya invite her then?" he asks.

First I laugh. Then I say nothing.

Finally Kent says, "I tol' her she could come."

Adolph smiles, "So you like her, too," and then we both laugh.

Kent does not laugh with us.

The M Co. contingent are waking inside, most with hangovers, including Kent.

"So Bacon Boy, it's yer last chance to fry up 3 or 4 pounds of bacon and graze on it it while we make breakfast. You up ta it?" I ask.

"Gonna need a couple more gallons of coffee," he jokes.

In the kitchen I survey all my cooking equipment. I might have to punt some of it to make room for everyone. It's a disappointing thought to say the least. The thought of staying and opening a restaurant flits through my mind. Fleetingly. No way. No fucking way!

For our last big breakfast we do "The Usual." Bacon, hash browns, toast and eggs anyway you want them except scrambled. Oh, and a couple of gallons of coffee for all the tequila hangovers.

Curtis wakes up with all the commotion in the living room and goes out to his van to continue sleeping, I guess.

When breakfast is just about ready, Laurel shows up to join in. She is all smiles and touchy-feely with Kent. She tries to get next to me as we start serving breakfast.

"Yer gonna let me come, aren't you?"

"I am not letting ya come. That's between you and Kent, since yer sittin' on his lap," I answer.

"I won't be any trouble, I promise," she pleads.

"Laurel, darlin', yer already bein' trouble."

She frowns. Trouble with a capital “T.”

“Gonna miss the good times here,” says Ace between bites of his breakfast.

“Roger that,” confirms Beaudeen.

“Gonna miss the tequila hangovers?” I tease.

“Not me,” replies Ramon with a rueful smile.

After breakfast a last block-long Frisbee game starts. Curtis awakens sometime near noon, grabs Benji off the roof, and puts him inside his van and drives away. He must not be feeling well still. He won't be missed. His Frisbee manners are quite poor. He's always trying to encroach on the other players' space to get the Frisbee. Very unsportsmanlike.

We decide to follow the M Co. contingent to our favorite McDonald's for lunch, after which they all sky back to M Co., and we go back to our place to clean up before moving out.

In the kitchen I look over all my stuff acquired over the last few months. I bought really high quality pans and utensils at the Bargreen Ellingson store. It's going to break my heart to throw away some of it. I go out and survey Thelma Lou's trunk for space. It's a huge trunk, but Kent and Adolph have their duffel bags, both full. There might be room for everything if the people in the backseat don't mind sitting on piles of stuff.

We have quite a bit of left over lasagna, so we have it for dinner. Laurel joins us, and she sits next to Valerie, Barry's not-quite-girlfriend. Valerie promptly offers to get Laurel a job at the department store where she works in Stockton.

Oh great, thanks Valerie, you're such a help. Maybe Laurel can sit on your lap too. What a bunch of idiots. And what is worse, is I have to try to get all of them and all my gear all the way to California in Thelma Lou. This is really going to be a bitch instead of an adventure.

Sunday morning I'm up first and getting the coffee going. Kent smells it, and he's up too.

“I guess we should start packing our things in Thelma Lou to see what will fit and what we have ta leave here,” I propose.

“We don't got that much stuff,” replies Kent.

“Speak fer yerself, *pendejo*,” I say as I sweep my arm pointing around the kitchen. “Look at all this.”

“Leave it,” he says.

“Said by the guy whose only contribution to dinner is to ask, 'What's fer dinner?,'” I complain.

Everyone is in a party frame of mind that night. Everyone except me. Why it's my job to worry about the trip, I don't know. But because I have things on my mind I'm concerned about, I decide to go to bed early to try to get some rest. I just slip off to my room and get into bed.

Good thing I locked my door because someone tries to enter and even knocks. I ignore it, and finally got to sleep. I assume it was Laurel, but I don't really care who it was.

As soon as I emerge from my room early Monday morning, Laurel is here trying to be my friend.

Thelma Lou is already packed. Laurel has a small bag of her belongings and her High School Yearbook to add to our stuff. The backseat floor is full to past the seat height. but it's evened out by all of our blankets, pillows and other bedding. Looks fairly cushy back there. and no one complains about the seating so far.

I start as driver with Kent riding shotgun and Laurel sitting between us in the front seat. She is in eighteen year old girl heaven. Sitting between two guys she thinks she's in love with and on her way to sunny California.

I have the wad of cash from our penny jar and from the return of our apartment security deposit, so I'm feeling flush and generous.

“Let's have a last breakfast at our favorite place,” I offer.

“Number one plan, Wolf,” adds Kent.

It's early Monday morning with no crowd at all, so we take a booth for the six of us. Not being at the counter, we get a different waitress and have to suffer actually ordering instead of saying, “the usual, please.” The breakfast is still excellent, as is the coffee.

After breakfast. we sky south on Interstate 5. We take that south for a while, then drive over to the 101 for some sightseeing. As we drive down 101, the ocean and the beach are quite beautiful. We stop several times to get out and stretch our legs and test the water temperature. Even Dubya P. gets out to romp in the ocean. Actually, he just takes a crap when the water touches his feet. Better there than in Thelma Lou, I think. Plus considering the amount a whale craps, the cat's dump is minimal.

When we get to Florence, Oregon, we take 126 east to Eugene and pick up Interstate 5 again. I'm driving again as the only ones trusted to drive Thelma Lou are me and Kent. It's afternoon, and there is no traffic at all. Right away I

notice a van coming up fast from behind in my side mirror. A van that looks just like Curtis' van.

“Didja leave a note saying you were running away with us?” I ask Laurel.

She pauses first before answering, “I didn't want them to think you kidnapped me,”

“Well yer dad and Curtis are coming up behind us,” I tell her. “So here's what prob'ly gonna happen. Gonna be two or three ta one beatin' on yer dad. Four ta one if ya wanna help us. Kent ain't gonna let us help with Curtis, he wants him all ta himself.

“So Laurel, be the first person to take my advice. Go back with them. You kin break up with Curtis clean. He's gotta know by now ya don't love him. Yer 18, yer parents can't make ya stay there if ya don't want. You kin leave and ya don't hafta run away. It's yer choice,” I finish as I start to pull over to the side of the freeway.

Laurel's dad is hanging out the side window of Curtis' van, shaking his fist at me as I slow down. He's not very big, but he's a mean motherfucker. I do not want to fight with him, but I'm not going to let him hurt Laurel, me, or any of my friends.

“OK, I'll go back with them,” say Laurel.

I am surprised and relieved at the same time. I can hardly believe it. Someone taking my advice. Kent is visibly disappointed in the turn of events. He so wanted to beat the crap out of Curtis. Xin loi.

When we're stopped on the side of the road, Kent has to get out to let her out. She has her small bag with her as she walks to Curtis' van stopped in front of us. Her dad gets out and ushers her into the van. Kent stands on the road side for a moment, hoping Curtis challenges us. He doesn't. The van takes off and Kent gets back in Thelma Lou. That's the last time I see Laurel.

“Happy now?” he asks a tee tee bit sarcastically.

“Not really. I'd be happy if she had never come with us in the first place, but I'm happy there was no gun play. They had to know they were outnumbered, so they had a gun fer sure. Yer the one that should be happy. If Laurel came all the way ta Stockton, every time she needed help, she'd be callin' you. I'm not gonna be there.”

Not much reason to think about the different possibilities, since Laurel is gone and not our problem anymore.

After all the excitement I am suddenly hungry. Well, possible excitement that I am relieved did not materialize. I turn off at the next freeway exit, and

there's our favorite restaurant. We treat everyone to McDonald's from the proceeds of our penny jar tips.

We quickly eat and then get back on our way south. I've been driving for 15 to 20 minutes, and as I look out the rearview mirror, I notice Dubya P. is not in his spot by the rear window.

“Adolph! Where's Dubya P.?”

He turns to look at the cat's usual spot and says, “I don't see 'im.”

I pull over to the side of the freeway, and we spend a few minutes calling him and looking under the seats and still no Dubya P. We get back in Thelma Lou, and at the next freeway exit, I turn around and sky back to the McDonald's. We've only been gone a little over a half an hour, and so we start to scour the parking lot.

We are about to give up when a small boy approaches me after noticing we seem to be looking for something.

“Are ya lookin for a cat?” he asks.

“Yes,” I answer.

“He crawled up on the rear tire of that truck over there,” he answers, pointing to a nearby pickup truck.

I walk over and look under the fender well, and sure enough there is Dubya P. sitting on top of the rear tire. I pick him up and put him back in Thelma Lou, and we are off once again.

Kent drives for a while to give me a break from driving, and I suggest we try to figure out where to stay tonight. We have five people in the car, but Kent and I are the only ones with any money.

“We kin stay at a motel,” Kent offers.

“We could, we still got some extra scratch,” I reply.

We consult our map, and it looks like Roseburg is the next town of any size before we get to Grant's Pass. I doubt we can get to Grant's Pass anytime soon, and since we left early this morning we are all tired.

Kent exits the freeway at Roseburg, and we quickly find a motel. After some discussion, it is decided that Valerie and I will go into the motel office together to rent a room instead of all of us going in. We get a room with two double beds, and Adolph offers to sleep in Thelma Lou with Dubya P.

When we get into our room, I kick off my shoes and lay on one of the beds and fall right to sleep.

The next morning, we take turns having a shower. After my turn, I'm

thinking about food and remember the place I had breakfast at on my last trip.

“Let's have breakfast in Grant's Pass,” I say.

“Works for me,” Kent answers.

We leave Roseburg quite early, and it's still only mid-morning when we get to Grant's Pass for breakfast. So far so good. We are close to the Oregon/California border and will cross into California around noon.

After breakfast I continue to drive, as I'm looking for something from my last trip. Finally I see the exit for the BSA shop. I want to stop and thank the mechanic there for all his help with my BSA.

“Kent, remember the story about the blinking orange light that said GOD?” I ask as I pull off the freeway.

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Well this is the place,” I reply.

I roll to a stop. We can see the orange blinking light, but we can't read it yet. I slowly drive closer until we can. It clearly says: GOD and then blinks off. When it comes on again, it still says: GOD.

“No fucking way!” says Kent.

“Hey, I'm seein' it fer the second time, and I still don't believe it,” I laugh as I pull to a stop. “Anyone wanna talk ta God? No line. This is yer chance if ya ever wanted ta talk to him. I already talked ta him, so I don't wanna waste his time with me again. He's a regular kinda guy. Down ta earth and easy goin', not the scary fire and brimstone stuff. Adolph, you should go, bein' a Christian and all. He kin prob'ly help ya, bein' yer AWOL and all.”

“No thanks, Wolf,” says Adolph.

“C'mon, anyone? He's got a sign basically advertising himself. Barry, what 'bout you. Wanna talk ta God?

“Nah, I'll pass,” replies Barry.

“Valerie?” I ask.

“No,” she replies.

“Really? No one wants ta talk ta God? I know people who would kill ta be here.”

“I'll go, drive me up there,” says Kent.

“Alright! Someone with balls. 'Course I already knew that cuz ya let 'em hang out all the time,” I tease.

I drive to the parking lot, and the painted sign on the building says: BSA. Something's up, and because of that I get out with Kent, and we both go inside. The mechanic who helped me, and he might be God, comes right over

to us.

He remembers me, as God would, and asks, “So didja make it ta California?”

Hmm, I think, God would have known that, wouldn't he?

“I did, but had ta leave my Beezer there and fly back ta Washington,” I answer anyway.

Kent just jumps into the conversation and blurts out, “Yer sign out there is blinking off and on sayin' God,” a tee tee bit impatiently, I think, for speaking to God. “Is there a reason fer that?”

The mechanic laughs and says, ”Oh, is it doin' that again? I bought that sign at a flea market and din't git the operatin' instructions. It used ta say: GOD SAVES. Seller said it used ta belong to a church that went bust. I got it to erase SAVES, and it even seems to erase GOD sometimes, but for some reason GOD eventually comes back.”

As he finishes, I say, “Sounds like divine intervention if ya ask me.”

We all have a laugh.

On the way back to the car, Kent says, “Well ya weren't fulla shit this time, Wolf,” and we both laugh some more.

Mystery solved, at least for me anyway. Kent takes the wheel of Thelma Lou as he wants to be driving when we cross into California. I'm glad to let him drive, because we have some nice mountain scenery to pass by.

As soon as we cross into California, Kent pulls Thelma Lou to the side of the road so we can all get out and stretch our legs and breath the California mountain air. It is quite crisp and refreshing.

“Yreka is the next town,” says Kent. “Lunch?”

“I'm in,” I answer.

This time we make sure Dubya P. is securely inside Thelma Lou before we have lunch.

As we continue our trip south, we realize we still can't make it to Stockton today. We still have some cash left but would rather not blow it on another motel.

We stop to look over our map. Barry points out that his parents' mountain cabin is about halfway between where we are now and Stockton.

“We can stay there for free,” he offers.

“It's a super cool place with a view of Deer Creek from Campbell Ridge,” says Kent encouragingly.

“Campbell Ridge?” I ask. “Named after a relative of yers?”

“Nah, jes' a coincidence,” answers Kent. “The place is surrounded by national forest. We should go jes ta see it.”

“Works for me,” I answer.

The road to Barry's parent's cabin is dirt. It starts out pretty good, but once we get to the mountains, the road turns ugly. It is severely rutted and there is virtually no shoulder should we need to pull over for anything. Such as a flat tire.

Barry says we're close and wants to drive. He says the driveway to the cabin is hard to see and easy to miss. This is confirmed by Kent. We have never allowed anyone other than ourselves to drive Thelma Lou, so we are apprehensive to say the least, but we relent and Barry takes the wheel.

It is soon dark, so while I'm glad someone else is driving, I'm not excited that the driver is Barry. I notice that Thelma Lou seems to feel odd as she moves up the mountain road slowly. Barry stops.

“I think we gotta flat,” he says.

I get out to look. There's a small amount of moonlight, and that's all. We didn't bring a flashlight. In the dim light, I can see Barry is right. One of the rear tires is flat.

“Crap!” I say.

“What?” asks Kent.

“We gotta fuckin' flat,” I answer.

“We gotta spare don't we?” Kent asks.

“Yeah, but the spare and the jack and everything is under all the shit in the trunk.”

“FUCK!” replies Kent.

This is going to be a colossal bitch of a tire change. We are in the dark on an unlit dirt mountain road. There is no shoulder, so we are right out in the traffic. So far luck has been with us, as there has been no traffic. I'm not feeling lucky, though. I've never changed a tire on Thelma Lou, though I have changed hundreds of flat tires, and that would be a conservative guess.

Kent and I start to unpack all of our gear in the trunk.

“Let's shove some of the stuff under the front wheels in case we start slidin' downhill or Thelma Lou falls off her jack,” I suggest.

Thelma Lou is positioned on a upward sloping section of road. Not the flat kind of place I prefer to change tires. The spare seems to be holding air. Guess I should have checked that before we started this trip. I find the jack, and it works. It is slow in the dark, but once our eyes have adjusted, we don't

have too much trouble getting Thelma Lou jacked up, flat tire off, spare tire on, and all our gear back in the trunk.

“OK, I'm gonna drive now,“ I announce. “Barry, you come sit in the front seat with me so you kin see where we're goin'.”

No one challenges me, so we are off again. Slowly this time, as Barry was driving somewhat like a maniac given the sorry road conditions.

We finally arrive at the driveway to the cabin. It's still a tricky drive down and up a rutted two-track drive that looks like it has not been driven down for a while. We won't have to worry about surprising Barry's parents with an unannounced visit. I am certain no one has been here in a long while.

There's a tee tee bit of moonlight still when we get to the cabin. We're all extremely tired and just want to go to sleep. There's a cot with a pillow and a blanket in the entry which looks like an enclosed porch. I'm the last one in, and since no one takes the cot, I lay down there. I am so exhausted I fall right to sleep.

I wake with the dawn, sitting up to rub my eyes. I stand and look out the windows of the enclosed porch where I slept. It's a beautiful mountain view that goes on for over a hundred miles I would guess. The range of colors is almost unbelievable in the morning sunlight. Yellow, orange, pink, and red. Green in places where there is some vegetation near the bottom of the valley where Deer Creek runs with the mountain snow melt water.

Kent and I are both out of the grip of the army, and the world couldn't look more beautiful.

As I gaze in wonder at the beauty before me, Kent says, “Boo coo amazin', ain't it?”

“Fuckin' A, amazing!” I answer.

“Man, with all it took ta git here, I'm hungry,” he replies.

“Let's go git breakfast,” I offer.

“The Usual?” he asks.

“Of course,” I reply.

Afterword

First, a word of thanks. I now sit at my dining room table looking out my window, watching and listening to the birds at my feeders as I write. I even get paid for it. A dream come true, thanks to you, my readers.

If you enjoyed *Of No Value*, please consider leaving a review on Amazon:

US - UK - CA

Loyal fans and readers, this is not the end of my adventures. There is more to come, based on my time spent in California with Kent, titled *The Death of Adolph Ricondo*.

I'm also planning on a return trip to Vietnam and the village of Cam lo in particular. I'm hoping to reconnect with my friend Lon and her brother who are in my first book, *Boys for Men*.

Due to the many requests from friends for my recipes, I am working on a collection titled *The Secret Recipes of Nino's Restaurant*. It will include recipes for everything I made in *Of No Value*, plus some extra recipes that are favorites of my family and friends.

Glossary

A.I.T. - advanced individual training

AP - ambush patrol

army cliques - Heads, Juicers, Lifers, Soul Brothers, Chicanos

Article 15 - non-judicial punishment awarded for a minor disciplinary offense

ARVN - Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (South Vietnam)

bay - Army barracks are typically divided into several bays that can accommodate 50 to 100 soldiers each

biff - to hit something

B.O. - body odor

bolo - (noun) a trainee who has failed a required proficiency test, such as the marksman test. (verb) to fail a test.
Example: *He boloed the marksman test.*

boo coo - very much, very good, a lot, many. Corruption of French *beau coup.*

boonies - the field in Vietnam, considered the boondocks

breaking brush - to break a new trail off the road. Done mostly so mine sweeping isn't necessary.

Brother - short for Soul Brother, African-American

bug juice - insect repellent

bustle rack - an open framework storage rack on the rear of the tank's turret

butter bar - Second Lieutenant

C-4 - plastic explosive

camo - camouflage

canister round - 10,000 fleshettes or finned nails are packed into a "can round". Very deadly at close range.

Charlie - short for Victor Charlie, V.C., Viet Cong

cherry - someone who has not been in and survived a firefight

cherry juice - hydraulic fluid for use with the tank's main gun recoil system. It only looks like cherry juice, it is otherwise vile.

chieu hoi - (pronounced *chew-hoy*) Vietnamese for "with open arms". A program to entice the NVA to defect to South Viet Nam. Leaflets touting the program were dropped by air into North Viet Nam and parts of South Viet Nam

chuck - food

claymores - claymore mines

clips - ammunition magazines

CO - commanding officer

coax - coaxial machine gun. Tanks have a machine gun mounted in the turret, and it is zeroed with the main gun, meaning both guns are aimed at the same target. When the main gun is being re-loaded, the area can be swept with coax gun fire without having to re-aim.

crash - go to sleep

C-rats - c-rations

DRO - dining room orderly

D.T.s - delirium tremens. Shaky hand and body movements of alcoholics in withdrawal.

dead track blocks - damaged tank and PC track blocks that need to be replaced

deuce-and-a-half - 2 1/2 ton truck

didi - (pronounced *did-dee*) slang Vietnamese for “go”, “leave”, “go away”

didi mau - (pronounced *did-dee-mow*) slang Vietnamese for “to leave quickly”

dinky dao - (pronounced *dink-ee-dow*) slang Vietnamese for “crazy”

dinky dao tobacco - marijuana

dog robber - someone who gains rank advancement or special treatment through nepotism or cronyism and not through actual merit

DMZ - de-militarized zone

dropping a dime - to turn someone in for doing something illegal. A reference to when a payphone call was a dime. Guys would say, "I'm gonna drop a dime on your ass!"

Dustoff - rescue helicopter

ETS - estimated time of separation. The day you get out of the military, a date most G.I.s know by heart. It also means you aren't a lifer, which for a draftee was a big deal.

ETS'ing - getting out of the military

FNG - fucking new guy

First Shirt - the First Sergeant in a company

fragged - to be injured or killed by a grenade

frags - fragmentary grenades

Freeze out - to be exposed to extremely frigid conditions

FTA - fuck the army

Fubar – fucked up beyond all recognition

gook - VC or NVA

ground pounder - infantry

grunt - infantry

hard five - E-5 Sergeant

Head - pot smoker

Higher - officers

Higher-Higher - radio frequency used by officers

Higher-Higher-Higher - radio frequency used by the upper echelon officers

holding - to have some illegal drugs

horn - communication radio

Hot LZ - landing zone under fire

Huey - nickname for several types of helicopters

Huey loach - Huey L.O.H., light observation helicopter

hump - to carry heavy loads

incoming - artillery or mortar shell being dropped on you. Saying “incoming” is enough that you don't have to specify what kind of incoming, because all incoming is number ten.

Juicers - alcoholics

klik – 1000 meters

KP - kitchen patrol

LBJ – Long Binh Jail, a U.S. military stockade located in South Vietnam

lifer - people who stay in the military for their life's career

LP - listening post

LRPs - long range patrol rations, freeze dried food in pouches

LT - Lieutenant

lume - illumination mortar rounds. The rounds are shot up in the air and contain burning phosphorus, which lights up the area at night, much like the trip flares. Small parachutes keep the rounds in the air longer, as they float slowly to the ground.

LZ - landing zone

Little Joe - the biggest wrench in our tool box on the tank. Little Joe is over two feet long and weighs at least fifty pounds.

MPC - military payment certificates. It's what we got paid in, and what we used for money. We weren't supposed to buy stuff from the locals with MPC, but we did.

Mad Minute - Everyone gets behind their gun and lets loose for a full minute. Officially the mad minute was to check the firing capability of each weapon. In actuality, it was to show off our awesome firepower.

mamasan - Considered a term of respect for elderly woman in many Asian countries. Roughly translated, it means Grandmother.

mechanized platoon - a platoon of tanks and/or PCs

Mexican Standoff - two people pointing loaded guns at each other, but neither one will pull the trigger first

Mike-Mike - Phonetic slang for the Mad Minute

million dollar wound - widely used term in Vietnam for any minor or non-life threatening wound that required evacuation back to the United States

Missouri River boat ride - any uncontrolled ride on a river

neutral steer - tanks and other track vehicles can make one track move forward and

one in reverse. The result is the vehicle sits in one place and spins around on its axis. Very useful for turning around in tight circumstances.

number one - the best

number ten - the worst

NVA - North Vietnamese Army

O.D. - Olive drab, the shade of green of many military garments.

O.J.T. – on the job training

Pachuco - a particular old school subculture of Chicanos and Mexican-Americans associated with zoot suits, street gangs, nightlife, and flamboyant public behavior.

PC or APC - armored personnel carriers. We just called them PCs, as their armor was a joke compared to tank armor. M113 was its official designation.

pee bringer - something scary or bad enough to make you pee your pants

pendejo - (pronounced *ben-day-ho*) slang Spanish insult similar to dumb-ass or asshole. Literally means "pubic hair." Between friends, it may have a more benign usage. Example: *What's up, pendejo?*

PFC - Private First Class

PJs - pajamas

Punji stakes - sharpened bamboo stakes, usually in a camouflaged hole. The V.C. usually urinated on the bamboo to insure infection for anyone who stepped on it.

R&R - rest and relaxation trip earned if you last 6 months in Nam

ROKs – Korean soldiers (Republic of Korea)

razz – to tease someone

redball - hardtop road, usually asphalt. Short for Redball Express

regs - regulations

REMF - Rear echelon mother fucker. A soldier far from the front line.

re-up - to re-enlist in the military

rock and roll - automatic firing mode

roger - yes

roger that - yes, I agree

RON - re-supply / overnight defensive position. All track vehicles in a circle, front pointed out.

RPG - rocket propelled grenade

RPG screen - rocket propelled grenade screen. The screen is a couple of engineer stakes and cyclone fencing.

same-same - the same

Shake 'n Bake - An E-5 Sergeant just out of NCO School

shithook - Chinook helicopter, essentially a flying crane

short - to be short on time left in Vietnam, usually less than 90 days. Usually

pronounced "sheee'yort".

short-timer - someone with little time left in Vietnam.

sitrep - situation report

sky - to go

sky up - to go quickly

slicks - helicopters with two M-60 guns, no doors, and room for 5-6 guys and their gear

slide - to be given a pass to break a rule or regulation without fear of punishment

snarf - to eat something just short of inhaling it. Typically, the way most dogs eat.

Smart Aleck - a wise guy or someone acting cocky

Soul Brother - African-American

strack - sharp appearance of military uniform and personal hygiene

strack troop - someone who went all out for their uniform appearance. Spit shined boots, military creases on their shirts, shiny belt buckle, clean shaven, and close cropped hair

TC - tank commander, track commander

tee tee - a little or a little bit. Probably a corrupted use of the French phrase *ti petite*

Templer - non-drinkers of alcoholic beverages as used in Sylvester Waltz's journal. Probably a misspelling of Tempelers or followers of the Temperance movement.

Thumper - M-79 grenade launcher

toke - to smoke marijuana

Top - a company's First SGT, usually an E-8 lifer. You had to be on the "first shirt's" good buddy list to address him as "Top", especially in the presence of others.

track - any vehicle with tracks, i.e. tanks, PCs, and dusters

VC - Viet Cong

Videttes - a mounted sentry or guard

VTR - tracked recovery vehicle

weta - a Caucasian woman with blond hair

xin loi - (pronounced *sin- loy*) Vietnamese for "excuse me", but used as slang by GIs to mean "sorry about that"

XO - executive officer

Z - short for DMZ, de-militarized zone

zero or zeroing - adjusting and setting the sights on any type of gun

.50 Cal. - a .50 caliber machine gun

60 - M-60 machine gun