

# 1.

It was getting on to sunset. The jeep shimmied in and out of ruts. The downpour offered brief respite from the heat and humidity. Low beams bounced the jeep over potholes, its sharp beacons hacking through dwindling light.

Specialist 5 Nicolasa Bilbao performed small magic that sometimes made a difference in the war in Southeast Asia. No wonder Colonel Hedges, CO of the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry's Officers Club in Pleiku, took notice.

Nico pulled a cable out of his cap for the Iron Horse's '62 Simca—a French car with cable-driven four-speed on the column, prone to snapping when cranked into reverse. The old Horse showed his gratitude by yanking Nico's skinhead from under the oil pan of a troop carrier and reassigning him to temporary duty at the officer's club.

The Colonel didn't so much need a mechanic as some initiative and ability to attain the unattainable. Nico was immediately assigned to a special project, The Splendors of Bangkok. He needed to learn who held what strings, and how and when to pull them to redirect resources from the officer's club to the Colonel's illegal nightclub in an old French café in town.

So in his latest sleight-of-hand, Nico made two young Vietnamese girls appear in his jeep after a brief road trip to

the relocation camp of Kon Barr. He recruited Chu Len and Lu Bien as hostesses for The Splendors, so he stepped up his game a bit. These two beauties promised to seal his reputation as a miracle worker.

Chu Len, the shy one in the backseat with lowered dark eyes, suppressed giggles and stole glances in the rear view. Beside him in the front seat was Lu Bien who boldly met his gaze, flashing a smile that burst in her mouth like a pop flare.

Nico's poor impression of John Wayne left the girls laughing at his antics. They couldn't understand a word of English, but he made them laugh. "It's better with the gestures," he assured them, trying to cock his shoulders like the Duke as the jeep jumped another pothole.

Lu Bien needed to tone it down. She came across as brash and Americanized. In the Iron Horse's lexicon for exotic splendors, this meant *contaminated*.

Kon Barr was two clicks north of the junction at Bridge 23 on Route 19, less than an hour from Camp Radcliffe. The road narrowed and corkscrewed through an uncharted obstacle course of mud holes and washouts in the thick jungle. The jeep jerked sideways then slipped back into ruts.

A medic named Rowdy Wight beat the bush for local girls after Nico asked for a scouting report and found Chu Len. It turned out Chu Len didn't come without Lu Bien. With Rowdy off circuit-riding, a French-Vietnamese Catholic interpreter named Tan Duy served as his proxy. Something in Tan Duy's character made Nico feel uneasy, but he didn't say anything because it might sound judgmental. Having no translator would limit Nico's bargaining power so he accepted his services. The elder's hooch seemed intimate and inviting so Nico flushed a chicken and took its spot on the floor. The interpreter nodded in unspoken complicity. His coolie hat and black pajamas had Nico checking for booby traps. He kept flashing on Tan Duy shaving punji sticks or burying landmines. They settled for a case of black market French cognac, a load of rations and a pallet of canned tuna the elder had developed a taste for. Nico radioed the Col-

onal, arrangements were made, and a First Team slick took to the air with the booty.

Both girls were young, maybe seventeen, shapely and clean, with bright teeth and supple breasts: exquisite flowers packaged into mail-order brides in high-necked traditional dress. Nico ignored the twisting in his gut during the ceremony, smiled through singing and chanting and smoking and drinking, following Tan Duy's histrionics, aping back meaningless vocalizations as villagers pumped his hand. There was a distinct possibility he was returning to The Splendors with one or maybe two wives.

In spite of repeated attempts to clarify his role, the girls beamed bounteous good health as the village chief embraced the American. His stained lips rolled back to expose a black smile, foul breath making Nico blink and gulp for air. Nico tried to ignore the low voltage of uncertainty that ran through his nerves when he wrapped the Colonel's surprise package in loose-fitting fatigues. Any moment might amp up into pure electric shock as his new charges hugged and kissed tearful parents, climbed into the jeep with him and stowed shoulder bags full of clothes they would never need.

After their departure, somewhere on Route 572 South, Nico reflected on Tan Duy's shifty eyes. They reminded him of Foghorn Leghorn. Nico couldn't decide whether his mistrust of the interpreter stemmed more from his being Vietnamese or French Catholic. Lack of eye contact was a common trait in the Vietnamese. The translator's true intent was not only hidden in his dark eyes but concealed like a weapon. A few too many shots of cognac in celebration dulled Nico's powers of discernment. By the time he left the village he couldn't read a stop sign.

One thing for sure. The girls were now his responsibility—at least until that freedom bird carried him home.

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His plan was to double-back to Radcliffe once they reached Junction 19. Those in the First Airborne referred

to Radcliffe as The Golf Course. The airstrip had been cleared by hand to avoid destroying the vegetation; so a Huey landing there didn't choke to death on red dust. Nico was never a helicopter mechanic. In the Motor Stable, he'd worked on enough halftracks, trucks and amphibious assault vehicles to know how enemy dust clogged up fuel lines and carburetors until their engines bled. The Golf Course was one of those things the Army got right, not like those M-16s left on the battlefield whenever a grunt could remove an AK-47 from the dead arms of the enemy.

The 100-mile journey from Qui Nhon on the coast to Pleiku in the Central Highlands inflicted the psychological stress of 300 miles for the 8<sup>th</sup> Transportation Group. The Golf Course lay in the middle of Ambush Alley with the steep Mang Yang Pass rising in the west and An Khe Pass in the east.

In a weak moment or two, Nico gave in to nostalgia. He missed the one-on-one interaction with a jeep engine or the straightforward physical feat of welding broken track onto amphibious assault vehicles. It was never mindless work, but work that occupied his mind. The maintenance of a machine was an unpretentious calling. Even thinking about engines provided a black and white escape from a world of dizzying gray, fading in the morning fog low on the mountains where the future has no horizon. An engine either started, or it didn't. It was because the battery was dead or wasn't.

Nico's dad told these Second World War stories to make the point that GIs were able to fix anything with wheels. That's how America won the war, he said, and Nico believed him. These Specialists in Vietnam couldn't whiteout a typo on a requisition form without messing up in triplicate. Instead of soldiers the Army had operators of equipment and machines they couldn't repair if their lives depended on it. American know-how didn't prevent an M-16 from jamming. Hueys came apart on a hard landing, broken rotors plowing up rice paddies.

Nico had never been in the bush before. The fog of war could descend over him at any given moment. His TDA with the old Horse had one commandment: *the end justifies the means*. So Nico learned to barter, scam, con and steal and sometimes go into the field for a little research. He had to know how much grease it takes to get things going, which wrench to use on what nut. It was like taking apart and putting back together an engine. You needed an eye for detail. Too much pressure and some mechanisms break down. His daily ration of degrees of gray made it impossible to tell black from white anymore.

When the Colonel first called Nico to his office, he was leaning back with feet on his desk, tossing back three fingers of scotch, striking a heroic pose even in recline. A square-jawed, gray-haired Korean War veteran and Georgia Bulldog, the old Horse cashed in R & R to do some personal research on Thai cabarets. Nico came on board with a sealed bargain of several manly shots of scotch and a private peek at the Colonel's illicit revue, curled yellow photos kept in a cigar box. Once the Tin Man oiled his jaws with enough liquor, the old Horse spread those photos out on his desk as backdrop as he pitched the scheme.

The enormity of the TDA intimidated Nico, but there was a challenge there that he couldn't shake from his mind. He worked overtime until he pieced together Vu Chi's little club into this hybrid between Thai cabaret and the properties room of *The King and I*.

Every king has somebody do his dirty work. The Colonel needed Nico. Who better to get their hands dirty than a mechanic?

He couldn't recruit Thai girls; he'd be trafficking. So the old Horse ordered Nico to dress up a line of carefully-screened young Vietnamese hostesses in traditional Thai clothing. War is no place for perfectionists, so you only need to do enough to sell the dream. Nico and the Colonel sacrificed authenticity to complete the mission. Nico's MOS didn't include parting the Red Sea, but his tasks required disproportional

feats of near-Biblical dimensions. He discovered capacities he never he had, better tricks than getting grease out from under his fingernails. The Colonel made him into someone he entrusted with power to pull off a few miracles.

Magic depends on illusion. Nico helped make The Splendors of Bangkok a grand illusion. For the elite of the Central Highlands, the Colonel put up a rainbow bridge that arced out of a messy war into Valhalla and the soldiers came.

Nico preferred the most difficult challenge of materiel acquisition over lining up hostesses on stage to be skewered with ritual swords by a fake magician. He dickered for an ornate teakwood bar with elephants, cobras, even a Buddha-under-a-Bodhi-tree carved in relief. The owner of the local hotel nearly cried when they shook hands. The Colonel had investors who could afford a fair price. But finding girls? That was never a strong suit. Nico wasn't some headhunter on point. He didn't mind grease, but he didn't much like danger. Sure, some excitement was good, but he preferred a good routine. In the bush nobody had his back.

In the rear view, Chu Len's raven tresses cascaded over delicate white shoulders, her petite body wrapped in Siamese *panung*. She would stun any battle-weary warrior into handing over every red cent he earned in facing the enemy. If Colonel Jefferson Hedges wanted Suzy Wongs in dragon lady dress, her white Indochinese thighs exposed to boys who hadn't seen such light for months on end, elegant legs of glazed porcelain catching their eyes, then that's what he had in Chu Len. Imagine the Colonel unwrapping these presents on Christmas morning in Athens, Georgia, 1938.

Girls in mini-skirts and t-shirts with too much makeup wouldn't cut it. No war-hardened suspected VC sympathizers or any of those easy-to-get girls were good enough. They were damaged goods. The Colonel was a patriot, not a pimp. When he said *fresh*, he meant virginal.

Heroes can be said to perform selfless acts. Maybe Nico wasn't a hero but he did make life in a war zone easier for somebody and that was service.

A twinge of guilt made him flinch at recruiting Chu Len and Lu Bien. When he presented them to the extinct warhorse, he'd pat them down with a smile and pass them onto customers, proud to be a patron of the fighting man while sporting one more erection in service to his country. Maybe Nico needed to give more thought to who he was serving.

Splendors of Bangkok was the Colonel's plan for bringing R & R closer to the field of battle. These girls, he reminded Nico, are *hostesses*. "Our boys deserve to be serviced by hostesses, not prostitutes." He sincerely believed this. He explained the honorable traditions of the Orient and how he abhorred the way Americans denigrated the feminine arts in a warrior society. Thai hostesses answered a traditional calling: to assuage the inner & outer wounds of the battle-weary. We should not dishonor that tradition.

Even Nico came to believe the old Horse wore shining armor and was somehow protecting these damsels in distress.

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Not far from the junction, Nico fought to hold the jeep on the road. The sun had gone down. Their sphere of light bounced like a ball as the jungle darkened around them. Chu Len and Lu Bien chattered in Vietnamese. He wondered if they knew where he was taking them. Maybe they thought he was taking them to America. Maybe The Splendors would be their ticket there.

The Bilbaos knew something about escaping perdition. Nico's grandfather gave up his home in northern Spain to immigrate to America before the Spanish Civil War. He made his way west to Idaho and worked as a sheepherder in the Great Basin. He married into ownership of a sheep ranch. The shirt he wore on his back was the American Dream, woven from golden fleece and raw hope. Nico never knew how to stand beside him.

The muddy road followed a stream running red after rain. Nico's mind drifted to those summer days rafting the Boise River, basking in the sun, ogling girls in string bikinis.

His reverie was broken by a sagging figure in the middle of the road. A wounded soldier. The soldier slumped toward the glare of headlights, shielding his eyes. The jeep skidded sideways, braking hard, and shuddering to a stop.

The panic in Lu Bien's eyes said it all. Nico pointed to the spot illuminated in front of the jeep. "He's wounded."

Lu Bien shrugged with curiosity.

The soldier slumped to his knees.

Nico killed the engine and the jeep lurched forward.

"Wounded," Nico repeated, hand to his head. "Hurt."

Lu Bien brought her cool hand to Nico's cheek. "Hurt?"

"Not me," he shouted, as if volume alone could overcome the language barrier, "HIM!"

He pointed toward the wounded soldier who wasn't there. A swath of green light burned in the jeep's headlamps. Nico blinked, repeatedly, shook his head and started up the engine. The jeep leaped forward and a sudden brightness blinded him.

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Nico awoke on a low embankment, hearing a hissing from the mangled jeep that had come to rest upside down ten meters away. His uniform was caked in red mud and both his feet were at the end of a crooked trail from the smoking heap to the grassy spot where he lay. Diffuse green jungle washed into a red blur. He touched his head with trembling fingers and felt the warm blood. His fingers found the edge of a sticky glob of loose scalp. He must have dragged himself off the road.

Lu Bien lay in a shallow crater filling with blood, her back arched, arms thrown wide. The shrapnel ripped open her fatigues exposing red silk. Her face was turned toward him, lemur eyes staring. Black hair thick as hemp encircled her small breasts. Her head sagged on a long broken neck.

Afloat in a bubble of shock, Nico heard Chu Len's hoarse voice. He blinked, rolling onto his side. Her lower body was pinned under the twisted chassis. She called for her father in short bursts. "CHA! CHA! Cha."



Nico's feeble voice was drowned by the high-pitched scream of monkeys.

The jeep had struck a landmine.

A few feet away, the wounded soldier emerged from an eerie fog of rising steam. In the shadow of the helmet, the man's face was hidden but gray-blue eyes burned through like pilot lights. He wore a sleeveless t-shirt with no body armor. From Nico's vantage, the man looked quite tall. Large hands removed the helmet and he shook out curly blond hair that framed a smudged and sweating face. Heedless of his own glistening chest wound, the man kneeled in the waning light and checked Nico for injuries. His body odor was so strong it blocked the smell of burning rubber.

"Can you help her—please?"

The infantryman probed Nico's wounds. His black face melted into oily beads. He wiped his face on a strip of disintegrating t-shirt and lowered his ear to Nico's lips.

"Not me. Her."

A warm trickle cut through the mud caked on Nico's uniform. A dim memory of the soldier lifting him up by the armpits flickered through a semi-conscious state. The soldier had dragged him off the road. His memory was whistling an old tune, but Nico couldn't remember the title or the words, only the melody.

He heard the pulsating beaters of the Dustoff long before it was visible bobbing over trees with searchlight scanning. It set down in the road. Rotor wash sliced through fronds of palm trees, the instrument panel throbbed in a velvet glow.

Two shadows dismounted, fatigues rippling in the wash. Light broke around their silhouettes as they approached, faces grim. The men strapped Nico onto a stretcher and slid it onto the cargo deck. The chopper lifted off to a low hover, dipped its nose and zoomed up the road, pulling up suddenly and out over the trees. It made Nico's head swim. His eardrums felt like they'd explode as hot air rushed through the doorless cabin and reverberated inside his skull. He

yanked at the restraints. Hugging his machine gun, the door gunner stared unblinking into twilight. The buried sun splintered into tracers. The tracers arced in a line of light over a suffused green sea. Nico watched the lightshow against darkening sky. Then came the sound: *tick tick tick*. The sound reminded him of locusts striking the windows of a train. It took forever in seconds before he realized it was live rounds.

Thick jungle scintillated in waves under him. He drifted in and out of consciousness, shivering with perspiration, mumbling incoherently. When the Huey landed, stretcher-bearers hustled in slow motion toward the open door, reaching in, pulling him out, carrying him over the tarmac. Nico looked down. His uniform was saturated with mud and blood.

Carried by waves of heat, he felt no pain. An eerie calmness settled over him. Faces in white masks floated above him as hands probed, snipped, prodded and stabbed. Morphine. Catheters. Blood infusions. Nasal oxygen. Shock blocks.

A weak voice he barely recognized as his own asked, "Am I gonna die?"

## 2.

The Columbia River rolled backward in the flood tide and surged under the cannery docks. At the stern of the *Alma May*, Milo peered into the water through shafts of refracted light. He leaned over the troller's bulwark, hacking the mist that settled into his lungs. The late morning sun lulled him into this strange quietude. His thoughts unfocused and scattered reflections across the river mouth.

When he spotted the body rising, he wasn't surprised. It wasn't the first time. That was at the mooring basin. He'd mistaken the drowned man for a dead white sturgeon, floating belly-up in the bay. He felt his muscles tighten as if he was turning into a stiff. A human body, facedown, arms spread in a deadman float. It had unnerved him then as he conflated it with thoughts of his father, lost at sea.

So Milo Simonson accepted the drowned man as real when he filled up with darkness and sank. Now here it was again floating up, bloodless, stiff and cold as a block of ice. The reaction wasn't what it was the first time. Here and gone. Not much feeling attached to it.

A pilot boat bounded over wave crests over the bay to the channel to meet an inbound freighter. The boat's keel dropped into the trough with a *whump*, its wake rolling the drowned man in his dark sleep. Splinters of light were the

only distinguishable features. The pale body tumbled forward, head-first diving into darkness.

Growing up in Astoria, Milo watched ships come and went from the waterfront. He gained enough experience to judge nations by their merchant fleets: the Scandinavians in gleaming white freighters like luxury yachts compared to those rust-buckets deemed sea-worthy by the British or recommissioned Liberty ships from WWII. All the nations looked like last year's models compared to a Norwegian.

The pilot boat came about so bar and river pilots could exchange places—one stepping on, the other stepping off, riding a thin metal ladder near the waterline. The river pilot would steer the ship upriver to Portland. Milo admired men trusted at the wheel for their courage, confidence and experience. His girlfriend's father, Captain Seaver, was such a man, a man who knew the river.

"Wake up, Sunny. Comin' your way."

Milo grabbed the line. The young man of Finnish descent with blond crew cut and big mouth was his friend, Geo Kaartinen. Milo attached the hoist cable to the rope on the fish box packed with iced silver, hunched into a mustard yellow slicker plastered with fish scales. Geo swung the boom back to the dock. More stinking fish, he thought, pushing long bangs up under his cap. He was sick of fish; he was hungry for a steak.

"All yours!" Milo shouted, signaling to Geo. The winch whined. The cable tightened, jerking the wooden box into the air. Geo yanked back on the boom to swing it toward the dock when Milo heard the whiplash. Searing steel cracked around his ear. The fish box crashed, splintering on the deck.

He dove out of the way just in time. Frozen salmon skidded across the deck planks ramming his upper body with hard bullet noses where he landed against the bulwark.

"Sonofabitch!" he screamed, clutching his chest as if shot, his heart racing. The crash of the heavy box could have seriously injured him.

The leather-skinned owner of the *Alma May*, Eino Mattson, hurried from the dock to help Milo to his feet. Eino's hair was sun-bleached white in contrast to the ruddy good looks of an older man. Milo's mom thought so anyway. He sometimes bought her dinner at Davy Jones' Locker where she worked the late shift. The development left Milo indifferent. Eino was gruff and grim but he had a steady hand on the wheel. He was a fair man who paid decent wages to his hands and respected the sea he depended on.

Someone was applauding. Milo was stunned and wobbling but it wasn't that funny. The clapping echoed through shock-stilled air. Milo couldn't pinpoint the eruption of rudeness and nobody else seemed to be reacting, so blinked it away. All eyes were on him.

The glare of cold sun off clouds of steam billowing from the cooker room cast the offender into silhouette, standing just inside the open door, clapping. He was probably a puller. Those guys can be assholes sometimes after tedious hours of yanking racks of melting tuna over a hosed-down concrete floor. The heat'll make you light-headed.

The drowned man stepped into full daylight—still wet, white and slimy as a used condom—standing on the dock, still clapping.

On the dock, the heavy *thunk* of frozen tuna tossed into a bin sounded like church bells. Milo's face felt suddenly hot, but it wasn't because of anger. He touched his cheek and looked at his hand. He was bleeding.

### 3.

A calm but determined voice pulled Nico out of darkness. "Listen carefully," the voice said, "you need to wake now."

He blinked and bright sun streamed through the window into a whitewashed room. It was like drowning then waking, sore eyes adjusting to light splashing like waves over someone's head. Someone in bed next to him turned. Half his face oozed pink and black. One side was bald and wrinkled from burns, the other with wet blonde hair in long riotous strands. Gray-blue eyes of the wounded soldier fixed him on the road from Kon Barr. *My god, Nico thought, they put me in bed with a dead man! Don't they have enough beds? Don't they realize this poor bastard's gone?* The soldier sputtered finally, spraying the whitewashed wall with blood. Nico's throat burned as if he'd swallowed battery acid.

The light receded into a distant point and soon Nico sank back into darkness.

When he woke again, it was pitch black. His arms and legs were immobilized. He couldn't move. Wet cotton covered his nose and mouth as a team of doctors and nurses tried to suffocate him. They were holding him down in the bottom of a hole and burying him alive, the ground caving in, dirt filling empty cavities like nose and mouth. *Buried alive.* His thoughts were sluggish and his mouth was muffled. Words

caught in his throat. He stared into the dark unknown, eyes unblinking, watching paralyzed as two white moons floated out of the black sky, descending like zeppelins on fire. The white moons dropped lower until they turned into the sweet round faces of Chu Len and Lu Bien. "Go home now?" Chu Len asked in English. "Please, go home?"

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An angel fluted in Nico's ear, "As Tears Go By."

His eyes fluttered like swallows. The voice belonged to Coco Bird. But he remembered Coco Bird couldn't carry a tune. "*I must be dead!*" he thought. Coco Bird plumped up his pillows and gazed at him with eyes like bachelor buttons. Coco Bird leaned low over him. "Coco Bird," he murmured, "You came." Mere inches away her face. He reached to pull her lips down to his. Coco Bird turned into his high school nemesis, Jesse Walker. Jesse kissed him on the forehead and pinched off Nico's feeding tubes, pulled out a great big needle and rammed it into his arm.

"Did that wake you?" Jesse said. "Sorry."

Nico did wake and Jesse dissolved. The nurse's eyes were blueberries floating in cream and sugar, much softer than Jesse's. He yelled at her, "Where'd my angel go? What'd you do with Coco?"

This nurse was persistent as a horsefly, sticking him repeatedly with needles.

He tried to stay awake, but drifted into sleep. Each prick of a needle evaporated thoughts, slowing traffic in the confused circuitry of his brain. He tried to stay awake but drifted into sleep, the question of Chu Len and Lu Bien never quite formed on his tongue. He licked thick dry lips, took a long draw on a glass of water and convulsed to shake the maggots off his skin.

As she mopped his sweating brow with a sponge, the nurse quieted him. "It's okay. You'll be all right."

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The nurse's name was Alyssa Parker. She cared for all of her patients, but Nico's not-well-knitted-to-reality brain interpreted the care as her having fallen in love with him. He was quite delusional. Nurse Parker did say he'd suffered a serious head wound, didn't she? Well, she would cut him some slack, don't you think?

Parker never confirmed a dying soldier in his bed, but even if she did, she wouldn't have known the wounded soldier as he did. She did mention, however, that someone had been in the bed next to his. Maybe that's who he saw? She didn't say if he was dead or alive. Her only answers were more injections.

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Nico got a little overstimulated during a bath. "At ease, Sarge," Parker said, then calmly whacked his willy with a tongue depressor. "At least you don't have to worry about *that* working." She gently applied a cool sponge to his forehead. "How's your head?"

His erection shriveled. He forced a grin. "Full of bees."

"Mosquitoes. Remember? You're in Vietnam." She laughed, tossing back her head, hair tangled from sweat.

Her laughter reminded Nico of wind chimes like the hollow metal tubes on the back porch of his parents' house in north Boise. The soft gong in a mild breeze next to the hummingbird feeder was Parker.

"How long was I under?" he asked.

"Three days."

"Wow." His surprise quickly turned comic. "I was hoping the war might be over."

"It is—for *you* at least." She sat him up and rolled a cart bedside with a cup of some brew.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Cocoa. You asked for cocoa."

"Coco's here?" He looked around, heart pounding. "I'm going home?"

"Any day now."



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When Nico awakened, he heard shouting outside.

Parker was changing the dressing on his head wound, going about her routines efficiently and totally unruffled by the curses flying through his window.

"Why are they shouting?" he asked.

"Who?" Alyssa propped him up with pillows.

"Outside the window." He craned his neck. He didn't need to see them. He knew who they were.

Parker walked to the window, looked out, then drew the shade. "There's nobody out there."

"So why pull the shade?" he asked. "You saw him, didn't you?"

"Who?"

"Chu Len's father. He's the loud one. I recognize his voice. He's angry because I killed his daughter."

Concern darkened Parker's face. She shook her head. "No one's out there, Sarge."

There was no denying it. The voices were angry. One joined another until a mob of grieving villagers marched on the hospital with protest signs. *Murderer, go home.*

"I killed them both," he moaned.

The din of unforgiving disdain amplified like harmonics in Nico's head. The bed quaked with torment. He clasped hands over his ears. The curses of her ancestors pierced his ears like hot nails. Then they just stopped. The room was dark and silent but for the sound of ceiling fans.

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The surgeon dropped by to check on Nico. He was a tall, fit major by the name of Wellington. Wellington had a gentle bedside manner, a genuine smile and sense of humor. It was Wellington's cool confident air that assured Nico no dying soldier ever lay in his bed. It was only a hallucination. Not at all unexpected under the circumstances. Nico wanted to believe him, but the vision had been too real. Hallucinations, Wellington pointed out, are super-real to the percipient.

Wellington's specialty was the body, not the mind, so he turned Nico over to the hospital's shrink. Captain Butkus clarified right off that he was no relation to the Chicago Bears linebacker. He was a by-the-book officer full of scientific jargon for every odd twist of mind ever recorded. He only left Nico feeling stuck between worlds, unable to plant both feet in any one. His professional detachment so frustrated him that Nico broke down and cried, "Kiss my ass!" Behind the doctor's back, he referred to him as "Buttkiss."

Any mechanic could understand the difference between fixing a driveshaft and monkey-wrenching around with an organ as complex as the human brain. So Nico tried to be flexible, made an attempt to be a partner in his healing, stretching his own belief to consider the shrink's explanations. Explanations like how the soldier had been in another bed in the same room when he died.

Buttkiss went on to explain what happened to Nico in physical terms. His blood pressure had dropped from loss of blood. The decreased flow of oxygenated blood to his brain induced these hallucinations like the soldier dying in bed next to him. While admitting modern medicine couldn't fully understand the mental functioning of patients in his condition, Buttkiss nevertheless kept asking, "Tell me again. What happened on the road from Kon Barr?" He jotted down notes about his narrative. The shrink suggested maybe he'd also hallucinated the soldier in the road, in that moment before losing consciousness. In some states of mind, an injured soldier might experience thoughts as reality. "You suffered a serious head injury. You nearly died."

Though plausible, Buttkiss wasn't convincing. Nico sympathized with witnesses of the unexplained, witnesses of UFOs browbeaten by investigators into believing they'd seen swamp gas. That's how he felt. Even if the soldier hadn't been present, there was still the vision, which Nico decided might not have been real, but it certainly meant something. A soldier did die in the bed and he was trying to communicate with him.

Lack of oxygen to the brain or the need to restore damaged neural connections didn't explain why, with eyes wide open, Nico still flashed on the wounded soldier coming through a crowd of angry voices.

Okay, maybe insanity was one possibility.

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The Pleiku Evacuation Hospital was a makeshift nucleus of prefab quonset huts and wooden buildings. Screens separated the wards: emergency room from operating rooms to pharmacy, laboratory, X-ray to mess hall to headquarters. Hospital staff were housed in wooden-framed cabin tents surrounding the hospital's nucleus.

Once up and trundling around in slippers and robe, IV attached, Nico visited Parker in her quarters. She lived with six other nurses. He read her invitation to mean she wanted to be alone with him. Parker's private world consisted of a 6x10 cubicle with separating walls of bamboo mat tacked to the tent's inner frame. She slept on a metal cot enclosed by mosquito nets. Her belongings were kept in a narrow wall locker, except for a photo on a crate beside her cot. The young man in graduation robes was her brother back home in Stockton, California.

"I saw you once," Parker confessed. "The White Tiger. You were dickering for elephants." The White Tiger was a local hotel and the owner, Nyugen, had two Cambodian wooden white tiger sculptures in the lobby. Nico thought they'd make good dressing for The Splendors. They'd been in Nyugen's family for generations and the barter went on a long time, over many days and many visits. But Nico couldn't take "no" for an answer. Nyugen's sense of their worth was inflated with sentiment. War had a way of changing the value of things, even human life.

When alone with Parker, Nico brought up the subject of the wounded soldier who died in the other bed.

She surprised him, taking hold of his hands in earnest. "He was only here a few days."

"Yes, but he died here, didn't he?" Nico probed without sensitivity. "What'd he look like?"

"Young. They're always young." Parker's eyes misted. "Handsome. Reminded me of Troy Donahue."

"You're kidding. Well, did he have any distinguishing features?"

"Like what?" Alyssa looked puzzled.

"Maybe his face was disfigured in the crash?"

"What crash? You were hallucinating."

"What else can you tell me?" He wouldn't let it go.

"He had just one visitor," she said.

"Who?"

"A Warrant Officer with the First Cav. His shoulder patch had the black horse's head against a yellow field."

"I don't remember that."

"You were behind a screen."

He pressed for more details. Parker grew impatient. "You're obsessed." She stood up. "You want a soda?"

He declined. "Got any beer?"

She reached into a crock of ice and pulled out a bottle of Bier 33, opening it with a church key. "Not Pabst Blue Ribbon but it's palatable."

He gargled before swallowing.

"So, was I hallucinating before I hit the landmine?"

"Before you hit the landmine?"

"Yeah. That's when I first saw him."

"Who?"

"But his face wasn't burned."

"Who?"

"The soldier in the bed next to me was the same soldier I saw on the road from Kon Barr. Same guy."

"The soldier who died was a SPC-4 with the First Cav. He came in when you did. After the crash."

"What crash?"

"The chopper. It crashed." She patted his hand. "You arrived at the same time."

Nico drank the beer in silence. She didn't understand.

Her gaze was a long and agonizing assessment of his confused mental state.

Finally he said, "Look, I saw this guy on the road from Kon Barr, right before we hit the landmine near Route 19. I believe he pulled me out of the wreckage, in spite of his own mortal wounds."

Parker arched her eyebrows.

"You don't believe me." Nico's eyes dropped, voice faltering.

"No, I believe you." She was courageous but not very convincing.

"Where did the chopper crash?"

"Mang Yang Pass."

"Close to where I hit the landmine. Was he conscious?"

"Sometimes."

After another long silence, Nico held the still-cool empty bottle of beer against his hot cheek.

"But it's not possible," she added.

"Why not?"

"The Huey was diverted from a mission to medevac you. They were bringing you here when they were shot down. Word is the crew fought off NVA until another chopper arrived. It was quite heroic."

"I can't imagine it," Nico answered, setting the bottle on the crate. The air in the tent was heavy. His brow tickled with sweat.

"He did mention a girlfriend," Parker's eyes blinked. "They wanted to save themselves for marriage. I'm not sure why he told *me* that."

"You don't?" Nico laughed too loud. "He was a *virgin*, wasn't he?"

"Oh, come on," she said, blinking away the sadness.

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

Nico realized from the shocked look on her face that she'd misunderstood the question. "I mean, do you have a boyfriend?"

"Yeah," she glanced at the photo on the crate, squeezed

Nico's hand, and said, "every one of our boys who come through here." She wiped her nose with the back of her knuckle, then leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. He turned so that her kiss planted on his mouth. She let him kiss her, but her eyes remained clear.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She was quick to switch the subject. "You'll get medals, you know? Service Medal, Purple Heart. Bet you never thought you'd be a war hero."

He laughed again and a sharp pain shot through his skull.

She looked offended. By the time she led him back to the ward, he realized she really meant it. The mere fact that he was in-country meant he was a hero to her.

"Is that what I tell my mom when I see her? Hey mom, look, I got this Purple Heart transporting fresh hostesses for The Splendors of Bangkok? It insults the real heroes. My parents should be proud of what exactly? That their son helped turn bargirls into professionals?"

"They'll just be glad you came home." Parker's radiant smile broke through his gray mood. She was the hero, not him.

## 4.

Milo strolled onto the dock, his right cheek bandaged and painkillers numbing his whole head. Still no boats. Around two in the afternoon, Bill Brown called him and Geo into the cooker room. “Things are slow.” The supervisor pinched a wet Camel from his lips and flicked it into the river. “Why don’t you call it a day—‘less you wanna tail-off for a while?”

Milo wasn’t tailing-off again. He took the opening on the docks to get off the tuna line. He much preferred hosing fish bins, dumping brine, unloading boats and boxcars to the soul-crushing monotony of the line. He didn’t know how anyone could work the line for ten or twenty years.

A tailer stood at the end of the tuna line and guided still-hot cans into iron racks, row by uniform row. When each rack was full, it was the tailer’s job to slide the rack on to a stack on a wooden pallet. When the stack was waist-high and any more would force the tailer to lift the racks, the jitney came by and took the pallet to the warehouse, and the tailer would start another pallet of racks. Standing all day under the big clock as hour ticked through hour and passed from day to day, row after row, rack upon rack, pallet to pallet, you live for mechanical breakdowns. Milo never knew time could pass so slowly. The crawl of the second hand over the clock face marked the relativity of time. The

more he tried to slow it down the faster it went; the more he tried to hurry it up and more it slowed down. He was caught in this eternal tide of daydreaming, creating whole worlds in his head in minutes, worlds that popped suddenly at the sound of the lunch whistle.

Milo tossed his slicker over his shoulder. "Call us if a boat comes in."

\* \* \*

Milo and Geo slogged down the wooden alleyway in oversized rubber boots. Several butchers in white wrap-around smocks, hair pushed up under white headscarves, huddled around a co-worker who'd just severed her thumb. Butchers, on hands and knees, groped into gutters between wet floorboards under stainless steel tables and came up with nothing. Her thumb was missing. The woman sat calmly on a stack of empty pallets, smiling at no one in particular. No blood gushed from the wound. Not a spot soiled her white smock. Her co-workers started opening cans.

A yellow and black Bumblebee Hyster stood at a stall in the alleyway near the labeling line. Balanced on the jitney's forks was a pallet of white albacore in 12-ounce tins. Wilfred Limon pushed the ignition button again and again, cursing when it didn't start up.

Limon saw Milo and Geo coming down the alleyway and threw up his arms.

"Where's Brown?"

Milo barely heard the driver over the *chunk-chunk-chunk* of the labeling machine.

"Accident on the butcher line. They lost a thumb," Milo answered, raising his voice over the machine. "No boats. We're outta here."

"Shit, man," Limon whined. "Yesterday the dock she gave out on the west side. Bad rot there. Gettin' damned dangerous to work here, no? Sweet Jesus."

Limon thumped the hard seat of the Hyster with the ball of his hand while grinding the ignition, neck veins bulging.



The engine wouldn't turn over. "C'mon, you sick bumlebee. Start! What a piece of shit!"

Limon cuffed his ears in frustration, dislodging his left eyeball. The eyeball popped out and dropped onto the wooden driveway. His other eye watched as it rolled through a crevice in the planking. Limon stuck a finger into the empty socket and stirred. "Damned doctors." He pulled a clear marble from his coveralls and plugged it into the eye-hole as a replacement, and kept on cranking that ignition until the Hyster started up. He made a thankful gesture to heaven, double-clutched the jitney and made it lurch down the alleyway.

Milo stepped back as Limon jerked by.

"Didn't know Limon had a glass eye," Geo noted.

Milo shrugged.

Limon went skidding around the corner on wet planking, lost control and drove forks clean through the wooden wall. The abrupt stop popped Limon's right eyeball out. His hands fluttered, fingers probing the cracked vinyl seat. "Damn doctors!"

Geo scratched his shoulder absently. "That proves it."

"Proves what?"

"A blind man can drive a jitney."

Limon stumbled from the forklift, feeling around on the floor. "Yeah?" Milo said. "Then how come he gets paid more?"

"Experience."

Geo stopped, mid-thought, reaching under his collar as if being bitten by ants. He tried to scratch this unreachable itch on his back, below the shoulder blade. His antics made Milo laugh.

"This rash is driving me crazy," Geo glared.

Shot like a bullet from the labeling machine, a tin can struck Milo in the neck, just under the already wounded right cheek. He cried out, spun around and dropped to one knee—a move he hadn't done so impressively since he died at the age of twelve, playing war.

Geo shouted at the Filipinos on the labeling machine. "Hey, watch where you're shooting, you guys!" The seasonal workers couldn't hear over the *chunk, chunk, chunk*. So they just smiled and waved when they saw Geo's mouth moving like a fish gulping the air. The shortest of the three had this sparse mustache and stood by the machine yanking a lever, shaking his fist when the machine fired off another round.

Geo helped Milo to his feet and handed him the evidence. Milo inspected the round. He marched over to the machine and shoved it into the Filipino's face. "Solid White. It's dated 1968." The Filipino gave a thumb's up. "Reject!"

Geo was too busy spanking his itch, unable to reach it. "Fucking itches, man."

Solid White was the only decent tuna in a can. Milo slipped it into his pocket. Strict policy on rejects let workers take home tuna, but never smoked sturgeon. The company kept count of them. Milo hated tuna in a can, but Solid White was edible. Once you've seen steaming flanks of fresh tuna crushed into a tin, you lose your appetite for anything in a can.

The labeling machine stopped. The Filipino's hand got entangled in it. A co-worker shut the machine down and yanked his arm free. The operator's forearm was plastered with the label: SOLID WHITE.

This brought tears to Geo's eyes. He laughed so hard, he forgot about the itch. Geo didn't like Filipinos and resented the way Bumble Bee brought them on to strip the chum and black sturgeon of eggs for caviar, and now they were taking over the labeling machine. They'll be running the company soon and he'll be out of a job. Corporate was plugging in foreigners wherever they needed to save money. Geo worked with one in the cold room and the poor unfortunate man dropped a block of ice on Geo's foot. He ended up with a broken toe.

They slogged in silence to the locker room, Milo clutching his bruised neck, bandaged cheek shrunken over the bone, and Geo, raking nails over flaking skin trying to reach the unreachable itch.

The drowned man appeared again: a blanched and puffy, waxy sheen still dripping wet. A bump on its newly-formed and featureless face poked out like a ball-bearing under a rubber glove. A nose was forming. The thin film over the man's eyes split and blinked open. They locked onto Milo with keen interest. A naked man by the retorts was staring back at him. Behind the man was something heavy like an anchor and chain. He couldn't see it well enough as the torpedo-shaped retort cooker blocked his line of sight. Milo stepped back for a better view.

The man was dragging a sledgehammer. Not that strange in a cannery. Milo once used a sledgehammer to band barrels of salted salmon. When the man lifted the sledgehammer and swung it round and round over his head like Thor, Milo had second thoughts. When the man released the hammer and it crashed head-first through green-painted steel machinery with enough force to shatter eardrums, Milo didn't hear anything.

The man vanished. Not a single dent marred the machinery.

"See anybody 'round the retorts?" Milo asked.

"Yeah," Geo responded, "Happy Harrison."

Milo regarded the man pulling racks of pressurized cans out of the retort cookers on a narrow track. He shook his head. "No," he said, "the naked guy."

"You're looking for naked guys?" Geo raised an eyebrow.

Milo couldn't explain. The drowned man's face was still featureless. What if he wasn't a man at all? He still hadn't developed any genitals or breasts. What if this resurrected creature was the product of Milo's own mind? He instinctively knew the unformed creature was a man that might be possessed by some demon. It was only a matter of time before evidence began to take shape. A few hours ago the naked man was a corpse rising after being underwater

possibly for years, bloodless limbs gnawed-away, strips of rotten clothing on grubby white, bloated skin. Now look: he's throwing hammers.

Geo waved at Harrison. "Ain't nobody stranger than Harrison, Sunny, and if *he's* naked it's a probation violation." Harrison waved back. He was a good-natured guy but he was slow in processing anything that wasn't strict routine. It was a break in routine when he was court-ordered to steer clear of children. He showed up for work every day and performed his routines cheerfully, without complaint or incident. A model of the company man.

"Poor bastard," Geo said, shaking his head. "He's happy working here. Ain't that depressing?"

"No, what's depressing," Milo noted with deadpan, "is that he gets paid more than we do."

Geo nodded in agreement. "Experience. You need more experience." He pulled a hand from inside his coveralls where he was scratching. He sniffed his fingernails and wrinkled his nose. "I think my skin is flaking off."

"Yeah. Well, you live in Astoria."

Geo shrugged, wiping fingernails on his coveralls.

Milo gazed back at the retorts. Maybe it *had* been Happy Harrison all along. Maybe he was the shadow man, moving through the steam like a ghost in the fog.