
FULL METAL JACKET

A
Screenplay
by
Stanley Kubrick
and
Michael Herr

Based on the novel
THE SHORT-TIMERS
by
Gustav Hasford

1967 - PARRIS ISLAND

"IS THAT YOU JOHN WAYNE?
IS THIS ME?"

-1-

The Marines are looking for a few good men...

Barbershop. A row of barbers with electric clippers work ankle deep in hair as they give the young Marine recruits a 30-second, skin-head haircut. We see Joker, Cowboy and Leonard.

A drill instructor shouts at the line of waiting recruits: "You are about to receive your first Marine Corps recruit haircut. You will be shaved completely bald.

"If you have a mole, bump, scar or anything else protruding from your head, and by protruding I mean anything sticking up out of your head, the minute you sit down in that chair place your finger on whatever it is on your head, and let the barber know whatever is there, verbally, by saying, 'Sir, the private has a mole on his head'."

-2-

Dawn. Green Marines. Two junior drill instructors screaming, "GET IN LINE! GET IN LINE! YOU WILL NOT MOVE! YOU WILL NOT SPEAK!" Red brick buildings. Willow trees hung thick with Spanish moss. The shaved recruits standing tall on yellow footprints painted in a pattern on the concrete deck.

Parris Island, South Carolina, the United States Marine Corps Recruit Depot, an eight-week college for the phoney-tough and the crazy-brave.

"I am Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim, your senior drill instructor. And these are your junior drill instructors, Corporal Durrane and Corporal Seaton. From now on, you will speak only when spoken to, and the first word out of your mouth will be, sir! Do you maggots understand that?"

The recruits mumble "Yes, sir," but not in unison.

"I can't hear you! Sound off like you got a pair!"

"YES, SIR!"

Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim spits. "Listen up, herd. You maggots had better start looking like United States Marine Corps recruits. Do not think for one second that you are Marines. You just dropped by to pick up a set of dress blues. Am I right, ladies?"

"YES, SIR!"

Joker says in a John Wayne voice: "I think I'm going to hate this movie."

Cowboy laughs.

Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim laughs, too. The senior drill instructor is an obscene little ogre in immaculate khaki.

Sergeant Gerheim walks slowly back along the line of recruits. "Who said that?"

Silence.

Sergeant Gerheim peers into each face. "Who said that?"

"I did, sir," Joker says.

Sergeant Gerheim aims his index finger between Joker's eyes and says, "Private Joker... I like honesty. I like you. You can come over to my house and fuck my sister."

He grins. He punches Joker in the stomach.

Joker sinks to his knees.

"You little scumbag. I got your name. I got your ass. You will not laugh. You will not cry. You will learn by the numbers. I will teach you. Get up!"

Joker gets to his feet and comes to attention.

Leonard Pratt grins.

Sergeant Gerheim puts his fists on his hips. "If you ladies leave my island, if you survive recruit training, you will be a weapon, you will be a minister of death, praying for war. And proud. Until that day you are pukes, you are scumbags, you are the lowest form of life on Earth. You are not even human. You people are nothing but a lot of little pieces of amphibian shit."

Leonard Pratt grins.

"You got a name, scumbag?"

"Leonard Pratt, sir," he says with a thick hillbilly accent.

"Like hell it is! From now on you're Gommer Pyle!"

Leonard Grins.

"Private Pyle thinks I am a real funny guy. He thinks that Parris Island is more fun than a sucking chest wound."

The hillbilly's face is frozen into a permanent expression of oat-fed innocence.

He punches Leonard in the chest.

"You maggots are not going to have any fun here. You are not going to enjoy standing in straight lines and you are not going to enjoy massaging your own wand. My orders are to weed out all nonhackers who do not pack the gear to serve in my beloved Corps. Because I am hard, you will not like me. But the more you hate me, the more you will learn. I am hard but I am fair. There is no racial bigotry here. We do not look down on niggers, kikes, wops or greasers, because here you are all equally worthless. Do you understand?"

Some of them mumble, "Yes. Yeah. Yes, sir."

"I can't hear you, ladies!"

"Yes, sir!"

"I still can't hear you, ladies!"

"YES, SIR!"

"You piss me off. Hit the deck."

They crumple down onto the parade deck.

"You got no motivation. Do you hear me, maggots? Listen up. I will give you motivation. You have no esprit de corps. I will give you

esprit de corps. You have no traditions. I will give you traditions. And I will show you how to live up to them."

Sergeant Gerheim struts, ramrod straight, hands on hips. "GET UP! GET UP!"

They get up, knees sore, hands gritty.

Sergeant Gerheim says to his two junior drill instructors: "What a humble herd." Then to the recruits: "You silly scumbags are too slow. Hit the deck."

Down.

Up.

Down.

Up.

"HIT IT!"

Down.

Sergeant Gerheim steps over their struggling bodies, stomps fingers, kicks ribs with the toe of his boot. "Jesus H. Christ. You maggots are huffing and puffing the way your momma did the first time your old man put the meat to her."

Pain.

"GET UP! GET UP!"

Up. Muscles aching.

Leonard Pratt is slow getting up.

Sergeant Gerheim stands over him. "Okay, scumbag, on your feet."

Leonard gets up on one knee, hesitates, then stands up, inhaling and exhaling. He grins.

"Why are you grinning at me, Private Pyle?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You are grinning at me, you ugly ape!"

"I can't help it, sir!"

"You got a crush on me?"

"No, sir!"

"You want to smoke my pole?"

"No, sir!"

"Then you hate me? You want to kill me?"

"No, sir!"

"Don't lie to me."

"Sir, I'm not...lying to you."

"YOU? YOU? Did you say YOU? Do you know what a ewe is? A ewe is a female sheep. A female sheep is for fucking!"

"Sir..."

"Why do you want to fuck your drill instructor???"

Sergeant Gerheim punches Leonard in the chest hard. Leonard doubles over with pain. "LOCK THEM HEELS! YOU'RE AT ATTENTION!"

Leonard comes to attention. Eyes front. But the trace of a grin remains.

"Wipe that grin off your face."

The grin is involuntary and Leonard cannot always control it.

Sergeant Gerheim backhands Leonard across the face.

Blood.

Leonard locks his heels. Leonard's lips are busted, pink and purple, and his mouth is bloody, but Leonard only shrugs and grins as though Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim had just given him a birthday present.

"Why did you join the Marine Corps?"

"To become a man, Sir!"

"Private Pyle, you may just be the dumbest United States Marine recruit in Marine Corps history."

-3-

Close order drill, Leonard makes a mistake.

"Private Pyle, what are you trying to do to my beloved Corps?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Leonard says.

"You are dumb Private Pile, but do you expect me to believe you don't know right from left?"

"No, sir."

"Then you did it on purpose. You want to be different."

"No, sir." The trace of a grin appears at the corners of his mouth.

"You think I'm stupid."

"No, sir."

"Then why are you grinning at me?"

"I'm not grinning, sir!"

Gerheim hits Leonard on the right side of his face, a hard stunning slap. Pain takes the grin away.

"What side was that?"

"Right side, sir!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir!"

He slaps him just as hard on the left side.

"And what side was that?"

"Left, sir," Leonard says, blinking with pain.

"Don't fuck with me again, scumbag."

"Yes, sir!"

The close order drill continues.

Beatings, we learn, are a routine element of life on Parris Island. And not that I'm-only-rough-on-'um-because-I-love-'um crap in Mr. John Wayne's "The Sands of Iwo Jima".

-4-

Mess hall. The recruits move sideways at the position of attention, trays held flat against their chests, pressed close to the man in front of them, the DI's shouting, "Assholes to belly-button! Assholes to belly-button!"

Mounds of scrambled eggs are piled high on each tray, with sausages, bacon, hashed brown potatoes, cereal, toast and grapefruit.

The recruits follow the man in front of them from the food counter to tables which hold twelve. They stand at attention while one recruit says grace, reading from a printed plastic card which looks like a menu and which has its own little stand on each table.

On the command, the recruits sit. Sergeant Gerheim suddenly appears at Leonard's place and bellows, "Private Pyle!"

Leonard leaps to his feet. "Yes, sir!"

Sergeant Gerheim sweeps Leonard's tray to the floor with a loud crash of dishes and cutlery.

"Private Pyle, the doctors have certified you as a fatbody. With those tits on you you belong in Playboy. You will receive half-portions at all meals and no deserts, potatoes, bread, jam or butter! Is that clear?"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

-5-

Various training shots. Leonard being shouted at and beaten.

For the first four weeks of recruit training Leonard continues to grin, even though he receives more than his share of the beatings. Even having the shit beat out of him with calculated regularity fails to educate Leonard the way it educates the other recruits in Platoon 30-92. Leonard tries harder than any of us. He can't do anything right.

-6-

At night, as the platoon sleeps in double-tiered metal bunks, Leonard cries. Joker whispers to him to be quiet. He stops crying.

-7-

Barracks.

On the first day of our fifth week, Sergeant Gerheim beats the hell out of me.

"Private Joker!"

"Yes, sir!"

"I want you and Private Cowboy to clean the head!"

"Yes, sir!"

"I want it so sanitary and spotless and sparkling that the Virgin Mary herself would be proud to go in there and take a dump."

"Yes, sir!"

Joker and Cowboy start for the head.

"Private Joker!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Do you believe in the Virgin Mary?"

- "NO SIR!" I say.

It's a trick question. Any answer will be wrong, and Sergeant Gerheim will beat me harder if I reverse myself.

Sergeant Gerheim punches Joker in the solar plexus with his elbow. "You little maggot," he says, and his fist punctuates the sentence. "Are you a Jew?"

"No, sir!"

"An athiest?"

"No, sir!"

"A communist?"

"No, Sir!"

Joker stands to attention, heels locked, eyes front, swallowing groans, trying not to flinch.

"You make me want to vomit, scumbag. You goddamn heathen. You better sound off that you love the Virgin Mary or I'm going to stomp your guts out."

Sergeant Gerheim's face is about an inch from Joker's left ear. "EYES FRONT!" Spit sprinkles his face.

"Are you winking at me?" More spit. Joker blinks.

"No, sir."

"Are you eye-fucking me?"

He punches Joker in the stomach.

"Negative, sir."

"You want to fuck your drill instructor? You want to smoke his pole?" More spit.

"No, sir!" Joker manages not to blink.

"If I catch you winking at me again, I'm going to gouge your eyes out and skullfuck you!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Now, sound off, you do love the Virgin Mary, don't you?"

"SIR, NEGATIVE, SIR!"

"What did you say, prive?"

"SIR, THE PRIVATE SAID, 'NO, SIR!' SIR!"

Sergeant Gerheim's beefy red face floats by like a cobra being charmed by music. His eyes drill into Joker's, they invite him to look at him; they dare him to move his eyes one fraction of an inch.

"Have you seen the light? The white light? The great light? The guiding light - do you have the vision?"

"SIR, AYE-AYE, SIR!"

"Who's your squad leader, scumbag?"

"SIR, THE PRIVATE'S SQUAD LEADER IS PRIVATE SNOWBALL, SIR!"

"Private Snowball, front and center."

Private Snowball, a black recruit, runs down the center of the squad bay, snaps to attention in front of Sergeant Gerheim. "AYE-AYE, SIR!"

"Private Snowball, you're fired. Private

Joker is promoted to squad leader."

Private Snowball hesitates. "AYE-AYE, SIR!"

"Go."

Private Snowball, does an about-face, runs back down the squad bay, falls back into line in front of his rack, snaps to attention.

Sergeant Gerheim turns to Leonard. "Private Pyle, Private Joker is your new bunkmate. Private Joker is a very bright boy. He will teach you everything. He will teach you how to pee."

Joker says, "SIR, THE PRIVATE WOULD PREFER TO STAY WITH HIS BUNKMATE, PRIVATE COWBOY, SIR!"

Sergeant Gerheim looks from Joker to Cowboy. "You queer for Private Cowboy's gear? You smoke his pole?"

"SIR, NEGATIVE, SIR!"

"Outstanding. Then Private Joker will bunk with Private Pyle. Private Joker is silly and he's ignorant, but he's got guts, and guts is enough."

-8-

Training continues.

Shots feature Joker and Leonard.

I teach Leonard everything I know, from how to lace his black combat boots to the assembly and disassembly of the M-14 semi-automatic shoulder weapon.

I teach Leonard that Marines work hard. Only shitbirds try to avoid work, only

shitbirds try to skate. Marines are clean,
not skuzzy.

I teach Leonard to value his
rifle as he values his life. I teach him
that blood makes the grass grow.

"This here gun is one mean-looking piece of iron, sure enough." Leonard's clumsy fingers snap his weapon together.

"Think of your rifle as a tool, Leonard. Like an axe on the farm."

Leonard grins. "Okay. You're right, Joker." He looks at Joker. "I'm sure glad you're helping me, Joker. You're my friend. I know I'm slow. I always been slow. Nobody ever helped me..."

Joker turns away, "That sounds like a personal problem," he says, keeping his eyes on his weapon.

-9-

Mail Call.

"Private Pyle."

Leonard yells his name, runs down the squad bay and comes to attention in front of Sergeant Gerheim.

"Private Pyle, sir!"

Sergeant Gerheim looks at the envelope.

"Who's Lucie Pratt?"

"Sir, that's the private's sister."

"Does she smoke your pole?"

"No, sir." Leonard grins.

"Is she a good fuck?"

"Sir, I don't know."

"Maggot, do you expect me to believe there's a shit-kicker in Alabama who doesn't fuck his sister?"

"Yes, sir,"

"Maybe she likes coons."

"No, sir."

"You think I'm funny?"

"No, sir!"

"Then wipe that fucking grin off."

"Yes, sir!"

"Go."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Leonard claps the letter between his palms, held out horizontally, takes one step backwards, does an about face, and runs back to his bunk.

-10-

Outdoor school circle. The Platoon is grouped in a semi-circle around Sergeant Gerheim.

Sergeant Gerheim holding an M-14 says, "The deadliest weapon in the world is a Marine and his rifle. It is your killer instinct which must be harnessed if you expect to survive in combat. Your rifle is only a tool; it is a hard heart that kills. If your killer instincts are not clean and strong, you will hesitate at the moment of truth. You will not kill. You will become dead Marines and then you will be in a world of shit because Marines are not allowed to die without permission; you are government property!"

-11-

During our sixth week, Sergeant Gerheim orders us to double-time around the squad bay with our penises in our left hands and our weapons in our right hands, singing:

This is my rifle
This is my gun
One is for fighting
And one is for fun.

And:

I don't want no teen-aged queen
All I want is my M-14.

Sergeant Gerheim holds up a rifle. "You will give your rifle a girl's name. This is the only pussy you people are going to get. Your days of finger-banging ol' Mary Jane Rottencrotch through her pretty pink panties are over. You're married to this piece, this weapon of iron and wood, and you will be faithful."

They run. And they sing:

Well, I don't know
But I been told
Eskimo pussy
Is mighty cold...

-12-

Inspection. My mind isn't on my responsibilities and I forget to remind Leonard to shave.

Sergeant Gerheim looks disappointed.

"Private Joker!"

"Yes, sir."

"Private Pyle did not stand close enough to his razor this morning."

"No, sir."

"Private Pyle!"

"Yes, sir."

"Into the head, on the double!"

"Yes, sir!"

Leonard double-times into the head.

"Recruit squad leaders, into the head, on the double!"

"Yes, sir!"

Joker and the other recruit squad leaders double-time into the head.

Sergeant Gerheim strides in after them.

"Recruit squad leaders form a circle around this toilet."

They apprehensively group themselves around the toilet.

"Now, on my command, you will open your pants and urinate into the toilet. Do you understand?"

"YES, SIR!"

"Open your pants and urinate in the toilet!"

They hesitate.

"IS THIS A MUTINY??"

"NO, SIR!"

"LOCK THEM HEELS! YOU ARE AT ATTENTION!
READDDDY.... WHIZZZZ...."

They whizz.

Sergeant Gerheim grabs the back of Leonard's neck and forces Leonard to his knees, pushes his head down into the yellow pool. Leonard struggles. Bubbles. Panic gives Leonard strength; Sergeant Gerheim holds him down.

After it seems that Leonard has drowned, Sergeant Gerheim flushes the toilet. When the water stops flowing, Sergeant Gerheim releases his hold on Leonard's neck.

Leonard straightens up, coughing and sputtering, his face and hair soaked in urine.

Gerheim says: "Private Pyle, I wouldn't put my hands in piss for just anybody. I hope you appreciate that."

"Yes, sir."

-13-

Practise field bayonet training.

Sergeant Gerheim demonstrates effective attack techniques to a recruit named Barnard, a soft-spoken farm boy from Maine. The beefy drill instructor knocks out two of Private Barnard's teeth with a rifle butt.

Sergeant Gerheim says, "The purpose of bayonet training is to awaken your killer instincts. The killer instinct will make you strong. If the meek ever inherit the earth the strong will take it away from them. The weak exist to be devoured by the strong. Every Marine

must pack his own gear. Every Marine must be the instrument of his own salvation."

-14-

The confidence course was designed to test the recruits' fear of heights.

The Confidence Course: they go hand over hand down a rope strung at a forty-five-degree angle across a pond - the slide-for-life. They hang upside down like monkeys and crawl headfirst down the rope.

Leonard falls off the slide-for-life repeatedly. He almost drowns. He cries. He climbs the tower. He tries again. He falls off again. This time he sinks.

Cowboy and Joker dive into the pond. They pull Leonard out of the muddy water. He's unconscious.

Joker says, "Should we take him to the sick bay, sir?"

Gerheim kneels down to see how badly he is hurt. He says loudly, "It's okay. It's just a hard-on!"

-15-

Back at the squad bay Sergeant Gerheim fits a Trojan rubber with a hole in it over the mouth of a canteen and throws the canteen at Leonard. The canteen hits Leonard on the side of the head. Sergeant Gerheim bellows, "Marines do not cry! You will fill this canteen with milk, and every day after chow you will nurse it at the table!"

"Yes, sir!"

-16-

Mess Hall. Leonard is nursing on the canteen. The recruits at his table try not to notice but crude and derisory remarks come from drill instructors at nearby tables.

-17-

Practise field. Pugil stick fighting. Two recruits face each other. Each man wears a football style helmet, face mask and groin protector. He is armed with a five-foot pole, padded at each end. The object being to knock your opponent down. The platoon is formed around the combatants in a large circle. The DI's yell at the them to be more aggressive. The recruits play war with the pugil sticks. They beat each other without mercy.

-18-

The recruits enter the barracks from a training session. Leonard finds his bedding and the contents of his opened locker box strewn on the floor.

Gerheim stands at the far end of the barracks, hands on hips. "Ten...hutt!"

The recruits line up at attention in front of their bunks.

Gerheim says, "Private Pyle!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Get up here, on the double!"

"Yes, sir." Leonard double-times up the squad bay and comes to attention in front of Gerheim.

"Do you recognize this?" He points to a jelly-donut, placed on a sheet of newspaper on the table.

"Yes, sir."

"What is it?"

"A jelly-donut, sir."

"Do you know where I found it?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Where?"

"In my footlocker, sir."

"How did it get there?"

"I took it from the mess hall, sir."

"Private Pyle, are you allowed to eat jelly-donuts?"

"No, sir."

"Why not, Private Pyle?"

"Because I am too heavy, sir."

"Because you are a disgusting fatbody,
Private Pyle."

"Yes, sir."

"And is food allowed in the barracks, Private
Pyle?"

"No, sir."

"Then why did you hide a jelly-donut in your
footlocker, Private Pyle?"

"Because I was hungry, sir."

"Because you were hungry?"

"Yes, sir."

"Go back to your place, Private Pyle."

"Yes, sir." Leonard double-times back to his
bunk.

"Private Pyle has dishonoured himself and
dishonoured the platoon. He is a dumbass,
cowardly, fatbody, a ten-percenter who does not
pack the gear to be in my beloved Corps. I have
tried to help him but I have failed. I have
failed because you have not helped me. You have
not given Private Pyle the right motivation. So
from now on whenever Private Pyle fucks up I will
not punish him, I will punish all of you."

-19-

Outside the barracks, the platoon does many
squat-thrusts and side-straddle hops, many, many
of them.

Leonard has been positioned, facing the
platoon, standing at ease.

-20-

Leonard touches Joker's arm as they move through the chow line with their metal trays. "I just can't do nothing right. I need some help. I don't want you boys to be in trouble. I--"

Joker moves away.

-21-

The first night of our seventh week of training the platoon gives Leonard a blanket party.

Midnight.

The fire watch stands by. Private Philips, the House Mouse, Sergeant Gerheim's "go-fer," pads barefoot down the squad bay to watch for Sergeant Gerheim.

In the dark, fifty recruits walk to Leonard's rack.

Leonard is grinning, even in his sleep.

The squad leaders hold towels and bars of soap.

Four recruits throw a blanket over Leonard. They grip the corners of the blanket so that Leonard can't sit up and so that his screams will be muffled.

The sound of hard breathing of fifty sweating bodies and the fump and thud as Cowboy and Private Barnard beat Leonard with bars of soap slung in towels.

Leonard's screams are like the braying of a sick mule, heard far away. He struggles.

The eyes of the platoon are on Joker. Eyes are aimed at Joker in the dark, eyes like rubies.

Leonard stops screaming.

Joker hesitates. The eyes are on him. He steps back.

Cowboy punches him in the chest with his towel and a bar of soap.

Joker slings the towel, drops in the soap, and then beats Leonard who has stopped moving. He lies in silence stunned, gagging for air. Joker beat him harder and harder and when he feels tears being flung from his eyes, he beats him harder for it.

-22-

The next day, on the parade deck, Leonard does not grin.

When Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim asks, "What do we do for a living, ladies?" and the platoon replies, "KILL! KILL! KILL!", Leonard remains silent.

When he asks, "What makes the grass grow?" and they reply "BLOOD! BLOOD! BLOOD!" Leonard remains silent.

When the junior drill instructors ask, "Do we love the beloved Crotch, ladies?" and the platoon answers with one voice, "GUNG HO! GUNG HO! GUNG HO!" Leonard is silent.

-23-

Shots of the platoon firing their rifles.

On the third day of our seventh week we move to the rifle range and shoot holes in paper targets.

Later they are grouped around Gerheim. "Does anyone know who Charles Whitman was?"

Blank faces.

"None of you dumbasses knows?"

Cowboy slowly raises his hand.

"Private Cowboy?"

"Was he the guy that shot a lot of people from a roof?"

"That's right, Private Cowboy. He shot and killed twelve people from a 28-story observation tower at the University of Texas, from distances of up to four hundred yards."

The recruits look impressed.

"Does anybody know who Lee Harvey Oswald was?"

That's easy. Almost every hand goes up.

"Private Snowball?"

Private Snowball says, "He shot Kennedy, Sir!"

"That's right. And do you know how far away he was?"

"It was pretty far. From that book suppository building, sir?"

"Two hundred and fifty feet. He was two hundred and fifty feet away and shooting at a moving target. He got off three shots with a bolt

action rifle in six seconds, and got two hits, including a head shot. Do you know where those men learned to shoot like that?"

No one knows. Joker raises his hand.

"Private Joker."

"In the Marines, sir?"

"In the Marines. Outstanding! Now those people did not put their Marine training to a good purpose but they showed what a Marine with his rifle can do, and before I am through you will all be able to do the same thing."

Leonard stares at Gerheim.

-24-

Parade deck. Manual of arms.

"I want to hear some snap, crackle and pop with those weapons."

Leonard and other recruits smartly doing their manual of arms.

"When you snap those rifles to port arms, I only want to hear one pop!"

By the end of our seventh week Leonard has become a model recruit. Day by day, he is more motivated, more squared away. We decide that Leonard's silence is a result of his intense concentration. His manual of arms is flawless now, but his eyes are milk glass.

-25-

Barracks. Night. Leonard cleaning his disassembled rifle. He handles each piece lovingly and seems to be talking to them.

Leonard cleans his weapon more than any recruit in the platoon. Every night after chow Leonard caresses the scarred oak stock with linseed oil the way hundreds of earlier recruits have caressed the same piece of wood.

-26-

Training shots featuring Leonard.

Leonard improves at everything, but remains silent. He does what he is told but he is no longer part of the platoon. Sergeant Gerheim is careful not to come down too hard on Leonard as long as Leonard remains squared away.

-27-

During the hour before Taps, the platoon is working on its shoes, brass and rifles. A Kentucky boy named Perkins lays his rifle down, steps to the center of the squad bay and slashes his wrist with his bayonet.

"Oh, Jesus Christ," Cowboy says.

Leonard slowly gets to his feet but says nothing.

Gerheim gets up from his table at the head of the room and walks unhurriedly down the squad bay.

He stops in front of Perkins who is still holding the bayonet.

"Private Perkins, sheath your bayonet!"

Perkins doesn't move.

"Sheath your bayonet, scumbag!"

Perkins drops the bayonet on the floor.

Gerheim walks closer and looks at Perkins' wrist. It's a mess but Gerheim decides he's got some time.

"Private Perkins, why have you made a mess in my nice, clean squad bay?"

Perkins doesn't reply.

"Private Perkins, I did not have you down as a shitbird. Why have you done this?"

Perkins says nothing.

"Private Perkins, you have let me down. You have let the platoon down. You are a gutless piece of shit."

Perkins just stands looking at the floor.

"Private Perkins, you can live like a pig in your own home but not in my barracks! Get a mop and bucket and clean up this mess. After that, double-time to the sick bay."

Perkins stumbles off to get the mop.

Gerheim speaks to the platoon.

"Private Perkins botched the job. Now, if any of you other shitbirds ever get the same idea you better do it right. (Holds out his arm and mimes what he says). The approved U.S. Marine Corps way is to take a razor blade and cut deep

and vertical from wrist to elbow. Do you understand?"

"YES, SIR!" the platoon shouts.

"And do it in the shower - no mess afterwards - and do it in the middle of the night so you'll have enough time to bleed before anyone finds you. Is that clear?"

"YES, SIR!" the platoon shouts.

Except Leonard, who says nothing.

-28-

The platoon, led by Sergeant Gerheim is singing.

Happy Birthday to you,
Happy Birthday to you,
Happy Birthday dear Jesus,
Happy Birthday to you.

Gerheim says, "God has a hard-on for Marines because we kill everything we see. He plays his games, we play ours. To show our appreciation for so much power, we keep heaven packed with fresh souls..."

"The Marine Corps was here before God. You can give your heart to Jesus but your ass belongs to the Corps... Do you understand?"

"YES, SIR!"

"Today is Christmas. There will be a magic show at 0930 and the Chaplain expects everyone there except Jews and atheists..."

-29-

Night Barracks. The platoon stands by until Sergeant Gerheim snaps out his last order of the day: "Prepare to mount....Readdy...MOUNT!" Then they're lying on their backs in their skivvies, at attention, their weapons held at port arms.

They say their prayers:

"This is my rifle. There are many like it but this one is mine. My rifle is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it as I must master my life.

"Without my rifle, I am useless. I must fire my rifle true. I must shoot straighter than my enemy who is trying to kill me. I must shoot him before he shoots me. I will."

Leonard is speaking for the first time in weeks. His voice booms louder and louder. Heads turn. Bodies shift. The platoon voice fades. Leonard is about to explode. His words are being coughed up from some deep, ugly place.

Sergeant Gerheim has the night duty. He struts to Leonard's rack and stands by, fists on hips.

Leonard doesn't see Sergeant Gerheim. The veins in Leonard's neck are bulging as he bellows:

"MY RIFLE IS HUMAN, EVEN AS I, BECAUSE IT IS MY LIFE. THUS I WILL LEARN IT AS A BROTHER. I WILL LEARN ITS WEAKNESSES, ITS STRENGTHS,

ITS PARTS, ITS ACCESSORIES, ITS SIGHTS, AND ITS BARREL.

"I WILL KEEP MY RIFLE CLEAN AND READY, EVEN AS I AM CLEAN AND READY. WE WILL BECOME PART OF EACH OTHER.

"WE WILL...

"BEFORE GOD I SWEAR THIS CREED. MY RIFLE AND MYSELF ARE DEFENDERS OF MY COUNTRY. WE ARE THE MASTER OF OUR ENEMY. WE ARE THE SAVIORS OF MY LIFE.

"SO BE IT, UNTIL THERE IS NO ENEMY, BUT PEACE!

"AMEN."

Sergeant Gerheim kicks Leonard's rack.

"Hey-you-Private Pyle...."

"What? Yes? YES, SIR!" Leonard snaps to attention in his rack. "AYE-AYE, SIR!"

"What's that weapon's name, maggot?"

"SIR, THE PRIVATE'S WEAPON'S NAME IS CHARLENE, SIR!"

"At ease, maggot." Sergeant Gerheim grins.

"You are becoming one sharp recruit, Private Pyle. Most motivated prive in my herd. Why, I may even allow you to serve as a rifleman in my beloved Corps. I had you figured for a shitbird, but you'll make a good grunt."

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Graduation day. Two hundred new Marines stand tall on the parade deck, lean and tan in immaculate khaki, their clean weapons held at port arm.

They pass in review.

Joker walks right guide, tall and proud.

Cowboy carries the platoon guidon.

Graduation day. No words can express the way we feel. The moment the Commandant of the Marine Corps gives us the word, we will grab the Viet Cong guerillas and the battle-hardened North Vietnamese regulars by their scrawny throats and we'll punch their fucking heads off.

The Commanding General of Parris Island speaks into a microphone: "Have you seen the light? The white light? The great light? The guiding light? Do you have the vision?"

They cheer, happy beyond belief.

Leonard does not smile.

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After graduation Sergeant Gerheim forms us into a school circle to read out our orders.

"Pickett!"

"Yes, sir!"

"0300 - infantry."

"Adams!"

"Yes, sir!"

"1800 - engineers. You go out and find mines."

"0200 - Intelligence. None of you shitbirds were smart enough for that."

"Cowboy!"

"Yes, sir."

"0300 - Infantry."

"Pratt!" (That's Leonard)

"Yes, sir!"

"Infantry."

"Davis!" (That's Joker)

"Yes, sir!"

"4212 - Basic Military Journalism...Basic Military Journalism? Do you want to be an office pinky?"

"No, sir!"

"Are you a writer?"

"I wrote for my high school newspaper, sir!"

"Jesus Christ, you're not a writer, you're a killer!"

"A killer, yes, sir!"

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When he finishes, Gerheim says, "Today you people are no longer maggots. Today you are Marines. You're part of a brotherhood. From now on, until the day you die, wherever you are, every Marine is your brother. Every Marine will be ready to give his life for you, and you will be ready to give yours."

"Most of you will go to Vietnam. Some of you will not come back. But always remember this: Marines die - that's what we're here for. But the Marine Corps lives forever - and that means you live forever."

-33-

Our last night on the Island. I draw fire watch.

Joker stands by in utility trousers, skivvy shirt, spit-shined combat boots, and a helmet liner which had been painted silver.

Sergeant Gerheim gives him his wristwatch and flashlight. "Good night, Marines."

Joker marches up and down the squad bay between two perfectly aligned rows of racks.

One hundred young Marines breathe peacefully as they sleep - one hundred survivors from the original hundred and twenty.

The squad bay is as quiet as a funeral parlor at midnight. The silence is disturbed only by the soft creak-creak of bedsprings and an occasional cough.

A recruit is talking in his sleep.

Joker stops. He listens. A second voice. Two guys must be swapping scuttlebutt. "If Sergeant Gerheim hears them it'll be my ass." Joker hurries towards the sound.

It's Leonard. Leonard is talking to his

rifle. But there is also another voice. A whisper. A cold, seductive moan.

Leonard's rifle is not slung on his rack. He's holding his rifle, hugging it. "I love you!" Joker snaps on his flashlight. Leonard ignores him. "DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND? I CAN DO IT. I'LL DO ANYTHING!"

Leonard's words reverberate down the squad bay. Racks squeak. Someone rolls over. One recruit sits up, rubs his eyes.

Joker watches the far end of the squad bay. He waits for the light to go on inside Sergeant Gerheim's palace.

He touches Leonard's shoulder. "Hey, shut your mouth, Leonard. Sergeant Gerheim will break my back."

Leonard sits up. He looks at Joker. He strips off his skivvy shirt and ties it around his face to blindfold himself. He begins to field-strip his weapon. He pulls off the blindfold. His fingers continue to break down the rifle into components. Then, gently, he fondles each piece. "Just look at that pretty trigger guard. Have you ever seen a more beautiful piece of metal?" He starts snapping the steel components back together. "Her connector assembly is so beautiful..."

Leonard continues to babble as his trained fingers reassemble the black metal hardware.

Leonard reaches under his pillow and comes out with a loaded magazine. Gently, he inserts the metal magazine into his weapon, into Charlene.

"Leonard...where did you get those live rounds?"

Now a lot of guys are sitting up, whispering "What's happening?" to each other.

Sergeant Gerheim's light floods the far end of the squad bay.

"OKAY, LEONARD, LET'S GO," Joker says, "You're in a world of shit now, Leonard."

The overhead lights explode. The squad bay is washed with light. "WHAT'S THIS MICKEY MOUSE SHIT? JUST WHAT IN THE NAME OF JESUS H. CHRIST ARE YOU ANIMALS DOING IN MY SQUAD BAY?"

Sergeant Gerheim comes at Joker like a mad dog. His voice cuts the squad bay in half: "MY BEAUTY SLEEP HAS BEEN INTERRUPTED, LADIES. YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS. YOU HEAR ME, HERD? IT MEANS THAT ONE RECRUIT HAS VOLUNTEERED HIS YOUNG HEART FOR A GODDAMN HUMAN SACRIFICE!"

Leonard pounces from his rack, confronts Sergeant Gerheim.

Now the whole platoon is awake. They all wait to see what Sergeant Gerheim will do, confident that it will be worth watching.

"Private Joker. You shitbird. Front and center."

Joker moves his ass. "AYE-AYE, SIR!"

"Okay, you little maggot, speak. Why is Private Pyle out of his rack after lights out? Why is Private Pyle holding that weapon? Why ain't you stomping Private Pyle's guts out?"

"SIR, it is the private's duty to report to the drill instructor that Private ... Pyle ... has a full magazine and has locked and loaded, SIR!"

Sergeant Gerheim looks at Leonard and nods. He sighs. Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim looks more than a little ridiculous in his pure white

skivvies and red rubber flip-flop shower shoes and hairy legs and tattooed forearms and a beer gut and a face the colour of raw beef, and, on his bald head, the green and brown Smokey the Bear campaign cover.

The senior drill instructor focuses all of his considerable powers of intimidation into his best John-Wayne-on-Suribachi voice: "Listen to me, Private Pyle. You will place your weapon on your rack and-"

"NO! YOU CAN'T HAVE HER! SHE'S MINE! YOU HEAR ME? SHE'S MINE! I LOVE HER!"

Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim can't control himself any longer. "NOW YOU LISTEN TO ME, YOU FUCKING WORTHLESS LITTLE PIECE OF SHIT. YOU WILL GIVE ME THAT WEAPON OR I'M GOING TO TEAR YOUR BALLS OFF AND STUFF THEM DOWN YOUR SCRAWNY LITTLE THROAT! YOU HEAR ME, MARINE? I'M GOING TO PUNCH YOUR FUCKING HEART OUT!"

Leonard aims the weapon at Sergeant Gerheim's heart, caresses the trigger guard, then caresses the trigger...

Sergeant Gerheim is suddenly calm. His eyes, his manner are those of a wanderer who has found his home. He is a man in complete control of himself and of the world he lives in. His face is cold and beautiful as the dark side surfaces. He smiles. It is not a friendly smile, but an evil smile, as though Sergeant Gerheim were a werewolf baring its fangs. "Private Pyle, I'm proud-"

Bang.

The steel buttplate slams into Leonard's shoulder.

One 7.62 millimeter, high-velocity, full metal jacket bullet punches Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim back.

He falls.

They all stare at Sergeant Gerheim. Nobody moves.

Sergeant Gerheim sits up as though nothing has happened. For one second, the recruits relax. Leonard has missed. Then dark blood squirts from a little hole in Sergeant Gerheim's chest. The red blood blossoms into his white skivvy shirt like a beautiful flower. Sergeant Gerheim's bug eyes are focused upon the blood rose on his chest, fascinated. He looks up at Leonard. He squints. Then he relaxes. The werewolf smile is frozen on his lips.

Joker says, "Now, uh, Leonard, we're all your bros, man, your brothers. I'm your bunkmate, right? I-"

"Sure," says Cowboy. "Go easy, Leonard. We don't want to hurt you."

"Affirmative," says Private Snowball.

Leonard aims his rifle at Joker's face.

Joker doesn't look at the rifle. He looks into Leonard's eyes.

Leonard is grinning at them, the final grin that is on the face of death, the terrible grin of the skull.

The grin changes to a look of surprise and then to confusion and then to terror as Leonard's weapon moves up and back and then Leonard takes the black metal barrel into mouth. "NO! Not-"

BANG!

Leonard is dead on the deck. The Marines slowly gather around the two bodies.

The civilians will demand yet another investigation, of course. But during the investigation the recruits of Platoon 30-92 will testify that Private Pratt, while highly motivated, was a ten percenter who did not pack the gear to be a Marine in our beloved Corps.

Sergeant Gerheim is still smiling.

Sergeant Gerheim was a fine drill instructor. Dying, that's what we're here for, he would have said - blood makes the grass grow. If he could speak, Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim would explain to Leonard why the guns that we love don't love back. And he would say, "Well done."

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1968 - DA NANG, VIETNAM

"THE AROMA OF ROASTED FLESH IS ADMITTEDLY AN ACQUIRED TASTE."

A hundred Marines are seated in the Freedom Hill PX movie theatre watching John Wayne in "The Green Berets".

Joker and Rafter Man sit way down front. They wear clean uniforms.

I spend the Vietnamese lunar New Year's Eve, 1968, at the Freedom Hill PX near Da Nang, watching John Wayne in The Green Berets, a Hollywood soap opera about the love of guns.

The rest of the audience is made up of other cleanly dressed Marines and dirty Marine grunts who are sprawled across their seats and have propped muddy jungle boots onto the seats in front of them. They are bearded and look lean and mean, the way human beings look after they've survived a long hump in the jungle, the boonies, the bad bush.

Joker props his boots on the seats.

We watch John Wayne leading the Green Beanies. John Wayne is a beautiful soldier, clean-shaven, sharply attired in tailored tiger-stripe jungle utilities, wearing boots that shine like black glass. Inspired by

John Wayne, the fighting soldiers from the sky go hand-to-hand with all of the Victor Charlies in Southeast Asia.

He snaps out an order to an Oriental actor who played Mr. Sulu on "Star Trek." Mr. Sulu, now playing an Arvin officer, delivers a line with great conviction: "First kill...all stinking Cong...then go home."

The audience of Marines roars with laughter. This is the funniest movie they have seen in a long time.

A Marine yells at Mr. Sulu, "You fuckin' asshole, you kill stinking Cong. I wanna go home now!"

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Freedom Hill PX.

I'm a combat correspondent assigned to the first Marine Division. I've been in country for six months.

Rafter Man tags along behind me like a kid. Rafter Man is a combat photographer. He has never been in the shit. He thinks I'm one hard field Marine.

Joker and Rafter Man move in line up to a table with the Red Cross emblem on it and two large coffee urns and trays of donuts. Joker looks the Red Cross girls over. They're not

particularly pretty, but Vietnam duty has spoiled them.

"Hi Marines," the blonde says. "I'll bet some nice hot coffee would go real good about now."

Joker smiles. "Sure would... Girls, I'm Corporal James Davis. I'm a reporter for Sea Tiger. This is Rafter Man. He's my photographer."

"Hi."

"How'd you girls like to have a beer with us when you're through here?"

"Sorry, guys, we don't go out with enlisted men," the blonde says.

"We don't even go out with lieutenants," the brunette says.

Joker laughs. "Hey... just a minute. You girls don't expect us to satisfy our lust with a donut, do you?"

The girls laugh.

"I'd say a donut is all the hole you zoomies rate."

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Outside, a ten year-old shoe shine boy collars them. "Changee money? Boom-boom pictures? Dinky dow Cigarettes?"

"I'll have a shine," Joker says.

Nearby an attractive Vietnamese prostitute starts preening herself for Rafter Man and Joker.

Rafter says, "Joker, I want to go out into the field. I been in country for almost three

months and all I do is take hand-shake shots at award ceremonies. A high-school girl could do my job."

Joker says, "Rafter, you'll get yourself wasted the first day you're in the field and it'll be my fault. Your mom will find me after I rotate back to the World and beat the shit out of me. That's a negative."

Not getting very far with body language, the Vietnamese hooker tries conversation. "Hey, baby, me so horny. Me so horny."

Joker looks her over. She looks pretty good.

"Me so horny. Me love you too much. Hey, what you say? Number one pussy. Me love you too much."

"How much?" Joker asks.

"Fifteen dolla."

"For both of us?"

"No, each you fifteen dolla."

Suddenly, Rafter Man's Nikon camera is cut from his neckstrap by a teenage boy who jumps on a Honda, leaving them in the bike's backwash, staring in helpless amazement. Some White Mice stand around giggling.

A beefy civilian engineer standing nearby offers some advice. "You ever catch one of them li'l nigs just pinch 'em. Pinch 'em hard. Boy, they hate that."

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The weekly editorial meeting of 'Sea Tiger',
the Marine Corps newspaper.

The Da Nang office of Sea Tiger, presided over by Lieutenant Lockart, seated at a U-shaped collection of tables.

A sign on the wall behind him says in six-inch block letters: FIRST TO GO, LAST TO KNOW, WE WILL DEFEND TO THE DEATH OUR RIGHT TO BE MISINFORMED.

Present are, Joker, Rafter Man and six other combat correspondents and photographers.

Lieutenant Lockart is hunched over some letter trays filled with typed copy, telexes, and 8 x 10 photographs.

The atmosphere of the meeting is breezy but professional.

"Okay, guys, lets keep it short and sweet today," Lieutenant Lockart says. "I gotta leave for Phu Bai in half an hour."

"What's up there, sir?" Collins asks.

"Combat Media Techniques seminar," he says, sorting through a stack of copy.

"Okay...anybody got anything new?"

A pause.

"There's rumour going around that the Tet ceasefire's going to be cancelled," Joker says.

"Rear echelon paranoia," Lieutenant Lockart says without looking up.

"A bro in intelligence says Charlie might try to pull off something big during the Tet holiday."

"They say the same thing every year."

"There's a lot of talk about it, sir," Joker says.

"Forget it. Tet is a combination of Christmas, New Year and July 4th, and every zipperhead in Nam will be banging gongs, barking at the moon and visiting his dead relatives. Anything else?"

"Sir, my camera was stolen," Rafter Man says.

"What camera?"

"Black body Nikon."

"Gook just shot by on his Honda, sir, whipped that sucker right off Rafter's neck," Joker says.

"Look at his neck."

Rafter shows the red welt on his neck.

"You saw this happen?" Lieutenant Lockart asks Joker.

"Yes, sir."

"Did you try to stop him?"

"I tried to catch him, sir," Joker says. "I encountered difficulty overtaking the Honda on foot."

"All right," Lieutenant Lockart says. "When we're finished here, report it to Gunny Slocum."

Lieutenant Lockart picks up a telex.

"Ann-Margaret and entourage are due here next week. I want someone to be there on the airfield and stick with her for a couple of days."

"Colour me gone," Joker says.

"You're not a photographer. Klammer, you take it."

"Aye-aye, sir."

"Get me some good low angle stuff. .Don't make it too obvious but I wanna see fur, and early morning dew."

"Aye-aye, sir."

"Diplomats In Dungarees...Marine engineers lend a helping hand rebuilding Dong Phuc village recently damaged by heavy fighting with VC forces in the area...Good."

He picks up a photograph. "Joker, can't you come up with a better caption for this picture of a sentry dog than, 'G-r-r-r'?"

"How about 'Bow-wow'?" Joker says.

"How 'bout thinking of a better caption?"

"Aye-aye, sir."

He picks up another sheet of paper.

"The Lawrence Welk Show will go out on TV in two weeks. Chili, do 100 words on it. AFTV'll give you some background stuff."

"We're plugging Lawrence Welk?"

"Don't you like serious music?"

He reads again.

"NVA Soldier Deserts After Reading

Pamphlets...a young North Vietnamese soldier who realized his side could not win the war deserted from his unit after reading Open Arms program pamphlets...Good!"

"Sir?" Joker says.

"Yes?"

"Why don't we drop a couple of million of those suckers and go home?"

"Too expensive."

He scans another story.

"Did General Mossberg really say this: 'We are a nation of high-protein meat-eating hunters, while the other guy just eats rice and fish heads'? Did he really say that to The New York Times, The Washington Post and Newsweek?"

"You should have heard the rest."

Lieutenant Lockart shrugs and picks up another story.

"'Not While We're Eating. NVA learn Marines don't like to be interrupted while eating chow.' ...Joker, the enemy never runs. He flees... Patrols aren't dangerous, they're danger-filled... Style...style, Joker."

"Yes, sir."

"And, Joker, where's the weenie?"

"Sir?"

"The kill, Joker. The kill. All that fire, the grunts must have hit something."

"Didn't see 'em, sir."

"Were you actually there on that op?"

"Yes, sir."

"Joker, I've told you we run two basic stories here. Grunts who give half their pay to buy gooks toothbrushes and deodorants - Winning Of Hearts and Minds. Okay? And combat action which result in a kill - Winning the War. I don't ask much of you people but I do expect you to adhere to my editorial policy."

"Yes, sir."

"You must have seen blood trails, drag marks?"

"It was raining, sir."

"Okay, well that's why God passed the law of probability." He tosses the pages to Joker.

"Re-write it and give it a happy ending. One killed. Make it a sapper. Or an officer. Which?"

"Whatever you say," Joker says.

"Grunts like reading about dead officers."

"Okay - an officer. How about a general?"

"Joker, maybe you'd like our guys to read the paper and feel bad. In case you didn't know it, this is not a particularly popular war, and it's our job to report the news that the why-are-we-here civilian newsmen ignore."

"Sir, maybe you should go out yourself on some ops. It might give you a different perspective."

"Joker, I've had my ass in the grass. I didn't like it. Lots of bugs and too dangerous. Fortunately, my duties keep me in the rear where I belong. In the rear with the gear."

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Midnight. Down in Dogpatch, the gooks are shooting off fireworks to celebrate the Lunar New Year.

Early evening in the ISO hootch, a pre-fab wooden building thirty feet long, with screens at each end, but otherwise open, with rolled-up canvas to be let down in case of rain.

At one end of the room are a number of bunkbeds. The other part has several desks, and a refrigerator.

On the wall are pictures of Bob Dylan, Cesar Chavez, several Playmates of the Month, Ann-Margaret, Steve McQueen on a motorcycle and Lyndon Johnson with a pencilled-in moustache.

A large hand-written sign says: WE HAVE MET THE ENEMY, AND HE IS US.

Fireworks can be seen through the screened end of the hootch.

The men lie on their racks and swap scuttlebutt.

Joker writes in his notebook.

I add some lines to the notebook which I keep so that when I return to hometown America in a rainbow of campaign ribbons across my chest, brave beyond belief, the military Jesus, I will use it to write the war novel which will make James Jones and Ernest Hemmingway look like a couple of pussies.

Joker puts down the notebook, lights up a joint and says, "I got to get back into the shit. I ain't heard a shot fired in anger in weeks. I'm bored to death. How are we ever going to get used to being back in the World? I mean, a day without blood is like a day without sunshine."

"Shit." Corporal Payback turns to Rafter Man. "Joker thinks that the bad bush is down the road in the ville. He's never been in the shit. It's hard to talk about it. Like on Hastings--"

Chili Vendor, a tough Chicano from East L.A., interrupts: "You weren't on Operation Hastings, Payback. You weren't even in country."

"Oh, eat shit and die, you fucking Spanish American. You poge. I was there, man. I was in the shit with the grunts, man."

Joker grunts. "Sea stories."

"Oh, yeah? How long you been in country, Joker? Huh? How much T.I. you got? How much

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Suddenly, there is a series of tremendous explosions a few hundred yards away.

"Oh, shit, rockets."

A sudden swoooooosh....

"Incoming!" Daytona Dave shouts.

"Them're outgoin'," says Chili Vendor.

Daytona Dave hears the deep sliding whistle of the other shells. "That ain' outgoin'"

"That ain't outgoing," Chili Vendor says.

"Now what I jus' say?" Daytona Dave yells as they run for a short trench a few yards away.

Rafter Man stands there, frozen. "What..."

A rocket hits the deck twenty yards away.

Rafter Man hits the ground.

Joker jerks Rafter to his feet and shoves him towards a sandbagged trench a few feet away.

Corporal Payback does a stunt-man dive into the trench and lets out a scream of pain.

Guys are running around in their shorts, firing their M-16's blind.

In the trench, Payback is moaning.

"Where you hit, man?" Joker says.

"I'm not hit. I think I broke my fucking arm."

"Then shut the fuck up, man," Daytona Dave says. "You're making me nervous."

Joker peeks cautiously over the sandbags. A few yards, in front, three Marines lie dead.

"Jesus Christ, I'm not ready for this," Joker mumbles to himself.

Corporal Payback is groaning.

Rafter whimpers.

All around the hill orange machine-gun tracers flash up into the sky.

Outgoing mortars.

Outgoing artillery.

Incoming rockets.

All kinds of noise.

Illumination rounds pop high above the rice paddies.

The flares sway down, glowing, suspended beneath little parachutes.

Joker grabs Rafter Man and pulls him into their hootch. "Get your piece."

Joker picks up his M-16. He snaps in a magazine. He throws a bandolier of full magazines to Rafter Man. "Lock and load, recruit. Lock and load."

"But that's against regulations."

"Do it."

Outside, headquarters personnel from the surrounding hootches are stumbling into rifle pits on the perimeter. They crouch down in the damp holes in their skivvies. They stare out through the wire.

The rockets blink like flashbulbs. The flashbulbs pop. And then the sound of drums.

"Well, happy fuckin' New Year everybody," Joker says.

Chili Vendor says. "Oh man, why can' they jus' leave us alone one time?"

"'Cause they ain't gettin' paid to leave us alone," Daytona Dave says. "Sides, they do it 'cause they know how it fucks you all up"

The crumps start again somewhere outside the wire and walk in like the footsteps of a monster.

The crumps are becoming thuds. Thud. Thud. THUD. And then it's a whistle and a roar.

BANG.

On the perimeter M-60 machine guns are banging and the M-79 grenade launchers are blooping and mortar shells are thumping out of the tubes.

Star flares burst all along the wire, beautiful clusters of green fire.

"I hope they're just fucking with us," Joker says. "I hope they're not going to hit the wire. I'm not really ready for this shit."

Outside their bunker: BANG, BANG, BANG.

Daytona Dave, huddled against a wall of the trench, mutters to himself, "Don't worry, baby, God'll think of something."

Somewhere someone has left on a radio playing the Rolling Stones' "Get offa my Cloud".

Inside our damp cave of sandbags we huddle elbow-to-elbow in wet skivvies, feeling the weight of the darkness, as helpless as cavemen hiding from a monster.

Each of us is waiting for the next shell to nail him right on the head - the mortar is an agent of existential doom.

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Dawn. Major Lynch's office. The mortars have stopped but sporadic rifle and machine gun fire can be heard in the distance.

The Informational Services Office on the hill is a carnival with green performers - many, many of them. The lifers are all being fearless leaders. The New Guys are about to wet their pants.

Everyone is talking.

Major Lynch, their commanding officer, marches in and squares them away.

"Everyone will shut the fuck up," he says. "The enemy has used the Tet Ceasefire to launch an offensive all over the country. He has hit every major military target in Vietnam. In Saigon, the United States Embassy has been overrun by suicide squads. Khe Sanh is standing-by to be overrun."

Everybody starts talking at once.

Major Lynch is calm. He stands in the center of chaos and tries to give them orders. Nobody listens.

"Everybody will shut the fuck up!" His words snap out like bullets from a machine gun. "Zip up those flak jackets. Put on that helmet, Marine. Load your weapons but do not put a round in the chamber. Joker!"

"Aye-aye, sir."

Major Lynch stands in front of the Marine Corps flag - blood red, with an eagle, globe, and anchor of gold, U.S.M.C. and SEMPER FIDELIS. He taps Joker's chest with his finger. "Joker, you will take off that damned button. How is it going to look if you get killed wearing a peace symbol?"

"Aye-aye, sir!"

"Get up to Phu Bai. Captain January will need all his people."

Rafter Man steps forward. "Sir? Could I go with Joker?"

"What? Sound off."

"I'm Compton, sir. Lance Corporal Compton. From Photo. I want to get into the shit."

"Permission granted. And welcome aboard." The major turns, starts yelling at the New Guys.

Joker says, "Sir, I don't think that--"

Major Lynch turns back to him, irritated.

"You still here? Vanish, Joker, most ricky-tick. And take the New Guy with you. You're responsible for him." The major turns away and starts snapping out orders for the defense of the First Marine Division's Informational Services Office.

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Joker and Rafter Man look out of the open door of an S-55 helicopter.

Thousands of feet below, Vietnam is a narrow strip of dried dragon shit upon which God has sprinkled toy tanks and airplanes and a lot of trees, flies and Marines.

Joker's ears pop. He pinches his nose and puffs out his cheeks. Rafter Man imitates him. They sit on bales of green rubber-impregnated canvas body bags.

It's a beautiful day. I'm so happy to be alive and in one piece. I'm in a world of shit, but I'm alive. And I'm not afraid.

The door gunner smokes marijuana and fires his M-60 machine gun at a farmer in the rice paddies below.

"Git some...git some...harharhar."

The door gunner has long hair, a bushy moustache, and wears an unbuttoned Hawaiian sports shirt. On the Hawaiian sport shirt are a hundred yellow hula dancers.

The hamlet beneath us is in a free fire zone - anybody can shoot at it at any time for any reason. We watch the farmer run in the shallow water. The farmer knows only that his family needs some rice to eat. The farmer knows only that the bullets are tearing him apart.

"You guys ought to do a story on me suntahm," the door gunner shouts above the noise of the helicopter.

"Why should we do a story about you?"

"Cause I'm so fuckin good," he says, "'n that ain't no shit neither. Got me one hunnert 'n fifty-se'en gooks kilt. 'N' fifty caribou." He grins and staunches the saliva for a second. "Them're all certified," he adds.

"Ever shoot any women or children?"

"Suntahms."

"How can you do that?"

"Easy - you just don't lead 'em so much. Harharhar."

Since lift-off, a bullying Arvin captain and a big Arvin sergeant have been questioning two VC prisoners seated on the floor opposite them with

their backs to the open door, the wind tearing at their shirts, their arms sharply tied behind them.

The Arvin captain has been concentrating on one man, a hard-core VC, who won't even look at him. Suddenly, the captain starts yelling hysterically but the prisoner keeps his eyes lowered.

The Arvin captain stops shouting, breathes hard a couple of times and makes a sharp movement with his head to the Arvin sergeant standing over the prisoner.

The sergeant pushes the prisoner out of the door, a frozen look of horror on the victim's face in the split second before he disappears.

It happens so fast, it takes a couple of seconds to sink in to Joker and Rafter Man.

Joker looks at the door gunner.

The door gunner winks amiably at him.

Joker looks at Rafter. Rafter's mouth is open.

The Arvin captain starts shouting at the second VC prisoner who looks like he's ready to give Uncle Ho's private telephone number.

Joker gestures to Rafter Man's camera.

Rafter Man looks down and sets his exposure.

It looks like the prisoner is answering the questions but he doesn't seem to be making the Arvin captain any happier.

Joker says, "Start shooting pictures - lots of them."

Rafter starts shooting pictures.

The captain doesn't like this at all and angrily gives Rafter Man the traditional

no-pictures-wave-off. "Hey, you, Marine. No camera me! No camera me!"

Joker gestures to Rafter to keep shooting.

"Number ten! Hey, Marine - why you camera me?"

Joker leans closer and shouts to be heard.

"Captain, we are officially accredited US Marine Corps combat correspondents, and if you harm this prisoner we're going to file an official report of this entire incident together with our photographic evidence."

"You number 10 motherfucker. Me captain. Who you talking to?"

"I'm talking to you, Captain Zipperhead, sir."

The Arvin captain looks like he's going to have a stroke. He shouts something to the sergeant who draws his pistol but keeps it pointed at the floor.

Joker shifts the M-16 across his knees.

Stalemate.

Then, suddenly, the Arvin captain turns and pushes the prisoner out of the door.

He turns back to Joker and laughs, showing two gold teeth. The sergeant thinks this is pretty funny, too.

Joker fires his M-16 on full automatic into the two men, blasting them out of the door.

Joker stares at the empty door.

Rafter flops down on the floor.

The door gunner grins and leans over to Joker. "Ain't war hell?"

Joker stares at the empty door.

-42-

Captain January is in his plywood cubicle in the back of the ISO hootch. Captain January is the kind of officer who chews an unlit pipe because he thinks that a pipe will help to make him a father figure. He's playing cut-throat Monopoly with Corporal Kegan. Captain January isn't Captain Queeg, but then he's not Humphrey Bogart, either.

He picks up his little silver shoe and moves it to Baltic Avenue, tapping each property along the way.

"I'll buy Baltic. And two houses." Captain January reaches for the white and purple deed to Baltic Avenue. "That's another monopoly, Corporal." He positions tiny green houses on the board.

"Joker, I've got a big piece of slack for you." Captain January picks up a manila guard mail envelope and pulls out a piece of paper with fancy writing on it. "Congratulations, Sergeant Joker." He hands him the paper.

TO ALL WHO SHALL SEE THESE PRESENTS,
GREETING: KNOW YE THAT REPOSING SPECIAL
TRUST AND CONFIDENCE IN THE FIDELITY OF JAMES
T. DAVIS, 2306777/4312, I DO APPOINT HIM A
SERGEANT IN THE UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS...

Joker stares at the piece of paper. Then he puts the order on Captain January's field desk.

"Number ten. I mean, no way, sir."

Captain January stops his silver shoe in midstride. "What did you say?"

"Sir, I rose by sheer military genius to the rank of corporal. But I'm not a sergeant. I guess I'm just a snuffy at heart."

"Joker, you will belay the Mickey Mouse shit. You've got an excellent 6-month record in country. You've got enough time-in-grade. You've been on enough combat ops. You rate this promotion. This is the only war we've got."

"Captain January, you know I do my job. I've fought to make the world safe for hypocrisy. My stories are paper bullets fired into the fat black heart of Communism. Let me do it as a Corporal."

"Joker, I don't think you understand how important our job is. Grunts are good show business but we make them what they are. History may be written with blood and iron but it's printed with ink."

Joker thinks for a few seconds. "Sir, I shot two Arvins on the way up here on the helicopter. They were killing prisoners."

"You shot two Arvins on the way up here on the helicopter?" Captain January asks, looking down at the monopoly board.

"Yes, sir."

"You're pulling me leg, right?"

"No, sir."

"You're not pulling me leg?"

"No, sir."

"Oh, damn." Captain January slaps a card onto the field desk. "Go to jail - go directly to jail - do not pass go - do not collect two hundred

dollars." The captain puts his little silver shoe into jail.

Captain January looks troubled. Then he looks up and says with finality, "Joker, you've always had a sick sense of humour. You are definitely pulling me leg. You will be wearing chevrons indicating your proper rank next time I see you or I will definitely jump on your program."

"Yes, sir."

Captain January shifts into another gear. "Okay... now I want you to hump up to Hue. One-One is in the shit. Two NVA divisions have overrun the city. Charlie's finally decided to dig in and fight."

Captain January looks at Rafter Man. "Who's this? Sound off, Marine!"

Rafter Man stutters.

Joker says, "This is Lance Corporal Compton, sir. The New Guy in Photo."

"Outstanding. Welcome aboard, Marine."

"Thank you, sir!"

"Joker, make sleeping sounds here tonight and head up to Hue in the morning. We've had reports the VC have executed hundreds of civilians, maybe thousands. They've uncovered several mass graves. Walter Cronkite is due here tomorrow so we'll be busy. But your job is important, too. We need some good, clear photographs. And some hard-hitting captions. Get me photographs of indigenous civilian personnel who have been executed with their hands tied behind their backs, people buried alive, priests with their throats cut, dead babies - you know what I want. Then get

me some good feature stuff on the fighting with good body counts. And remember: we're writing our own report cards in this country. Don't be afraid to give us a few A's."

"Yes, sir."

"Joker, before you go up there you will remove the unauthorized peace button from your duty uniform."

"Aye-aye, sir."

"And Joker..."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't even photograph any naked bodies unless they're mutilated."

"Aye-aye, sir."

"And Joker..."

"Yes, sir?"

"Get a haircut."

"Aye-aye, sir."

-43-

The helicopter on it's way to Hue. Joker and Rafter Man stare silently out of the door.

-44-

The helicopter settles down at an LZ on the outskirts of Hue. Joker and Rafter hop off.

The LZ is cluttered with walking wounded, stretcher cases and body bags.

Corpsmen immediately start carrying canvas stretchers to the helicopter. On the stretchers are bloody rags with men inside.

Joker stops a master sergeant. "Top, we want to get into the shit."

The master sergeant is writing on a piece of yellow paper on a clipboard. He doesn't look up, but jerks his thumb over his shoulder.

"Two-five. Gasworks...a click north."

"Gasworks. Outstanding. Thanks, top."

The master sergeant walks away, writing on the yellow paper. He ignores four skuzzy grunts who run into the compound, each man holding up one corner of a poncho. On the poncho is a dead Marine. The grunts are screaming for a corpsman and when they put the poncho down, very gently, a pool of dark blood pours out onto the concrete deck.

-45-

Joker and Rafter Man walk up the shattered street, awed by the sheer destruction.

A huge, black pall of smoke hangs above the city in the distance and the sound of distant firing of M-16's and AK-47's can be heard.

They pass a tank, its treads blown off, a huge black hole through its turret.

Rafter Man photographs it.

Three or four wounded Marines walk towards them along side a jeep with stretchers tied to it. They're bloody and bandaged, and their fatigues are torn.

"Whyn't you take a picture? It'll last longer," one of the grunts says.

Rafter does.

Some Vietnamese who have been huddled by the side of the road are pointing towards the smoke, crying and wailing pitifully.

One of the wounded grunts yells at them, "Hey, fuck you if you can't take a joke!"

The wounded grunt laughs without humour and walks on.

A shell goes off in the distance and Rafter starts to hit the deck. Joker gives him a look and he straightens up, slightly embarrassed.

-46-

A squad of Arvin troops are looting a house. They are loading a truck with furniture, TV's, stereos, clothes. They look like boys in their outsized helmets and uniforms.

Another shell goes off in the distance. Rafter Man checks his impulse to dive for cover and looks at Joker.

"Remember this, Rafter Man," Joker says, "Any time you can see an Arvin you are safe from Victor Charlie. That's definite. You're safe until they start yelling, 'Beaucoup VC, beaucoup VCI' and then runaway. But then you have to be careful, Arvins are always shooting at chickens, other people's pigs, and trees. Arvins will shoot anything except transistor radios, stereos, Coca-Colas, sun glasses, and the enemy."

-47-

Joker and Rafter Man catch up with a big Marine lieutenant with an expensive pump shotgun slung across his back and DEADLY DELTA on his flak jacket, followed by his radio man.

"Sir, we're looking for Hotel, 2/5. I got a bro in the First Platoon. They call him Cowboy. He wears a Cowboy hat."

"I'm Cowboy's platoon commander. The Lusthog Squad's up in the platoon area up by the gasworks. You people 1/1?"

"No, sir. We're correspondents for Sea Tiger. I'm Joker, sir, Corporal Joker. This is Rafter Man."

"Glad to see you."

They walk along with the big Marine.

Rafter takes a few shots of the lieutenant who enjoys the attention.

"If you men have come looking for a story this is your lucky day. We've got Condition Red here and we are definitely expecting rain."

"Outstanding. How is it going, sir?"

"Well, it looks like Charlie's got a whole division in the town, and he's dug in pretty good. We're still working this side of the river street by street and house by house. But when we get 'em out where we can see 'em, we're getting some really decent kills."

"Mind if we tag along?"

"Welcome aboard. By the way, my name is Bayer. Robert M. Bayer, the third. My people call me Touchdown. I played a little ball at SMU. You here to make Cowboy famous?"

Joker laughs: "Never happen... Sir, we've heard the NVA have executed a lot of civilians. Have you come across anything?"

"There's a mass grave about half a klick east, just this side of the Phu Cam Canal."

Joker takes out a map. "Can you show me where, sir?"

-48-

Joker and Rafter Man stand in a small group of military and civilian officials near a large excavation containing about 40 bodies.

It smells really bad. The snuffies doing the digging have all tied olive-drab skivvy shirts around their faces, but casualties due to uncontrollable puking are heavy.

All of the dead people are grinning that hideous, joyless grin of those who have heard the joke, of those who have seen the terrible secrets of the earth.

Rafter man shoots a roll fast and reloads.

Joker asks a lieutenant, "How many bodies have you got so far, sir?"

The lieutenant looks irritably at Joker and Rafter Man. "What outfit are you men with?"

"Sir, we're correspondents from Sea Tiger."

Complete change of attitude. The lieutenant brightens up. "Oh, hello."

"I'm Corporal Joker, sir. This is my photographer Rafter Man."

The lieutenant smiles. I'm Lieutenant Cleave, I'm from Hartford, Connecticut."

"Sir, do you have a body count yet?"

"Unofficially it's about forty."

"Do we know how it happened, sir?"

"Well, apparently the NVA came in with lists of names - government officials, land owners, army and police officers. They went around to their houses and politely told them to report to local schools for political indoctrination. They shot everyone who turned up, some of them were buried alive."

Joker nods and writes in his notebook with a ballpoint pen.

"MARINE!"

Joker looks up and sees a poge Army colonel marching up to face him. The poge colonel has a classic granite jaw. His jungle utilities are razor-creased, starched to the consistency of green armour. Joker stands to attention.

"Corporal," the Army colonel says. "Don't you know how to execute a hand salute?"

"Yes, sir!" Joker says.

I hold the salute until the colonel returns it, plus a couple of seconds extra, to identify the colonel as an officer to any snipers in the area.

"Marine," the colonel says. "What is that on your body armour?"

"Sir?"

"That...thing."

"You mean this button, sir?"

"What is it?" the colonel says.

"A peace symbol, sir."

"Where did you get it?"

Joker thinks for a couple of seconds. "A liberal gave it to me, sir," Joker says, keeping a serious face.

The colonel jabs Joker's button with a forefinger and gives him a fairly decent Polished Glare. His blue eyes sparkle. "That's right, son, act innocent. But I know what that button means."

"Yes, sir!"

"It's a ban-the-bomb propaganda button. Admit it!"

"No, sir."

"What is that you've got written on your helmet?"

"Born To Kill?"

"You've written 'Born to Kill' on your helmet."

"Yes, sir."

"Why did you do that?"

"I don't know, sir. Everyone writes things on their helmets."

"You write 'Born to Kill' on your helmet and you wear a peace button. What is that supposed to be, some kind of sick joke?"

"No, sir."

"Well, what is it supposed to mean?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Answer that question, corporal, or you'll be standing tall before the man."

"Well, sir," Joker says with exaggerated thoughtfulness, "I suppose... I was trying to

suggest something about the duality of man."

"The what?"

"The dual nature of man?... You know, sir, the Jungian thing about aggression and xenophobia on one hand, and altruism and cooperation on the other?"

There is a fairly considerable mouth-breathing pause from the colonel.

"Whose side are you on, son?"

"Our side, sir."

"MARINE!"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't you love your country?"

"Yes, I do, sir."

"Then how about getting with the program? Why don't you jump on the team and come in for the big win?"

Joker still manages to keep a straight face.

"I'm certainly ready to do that, sir."

"Confess corporal, confess that you want peace."

"I confess, sir."

The colonel leans closer and lowers his voice, "Son, we've all got to keep our heads until this peace craze blows over."

Joker makes a serious face to consider the full implications of this statement. "Yes, sir."

The poge colonel tries to think of something more inspiring to say, but he hasn't got it. So he says: "You can't wear that button, Marine. It's against regulations. Remove it immediately."

Joker is saved from further difficulty by several mortar rounds that come in about 50 yards away, BANG! BANG! BANG!, everyone dives for

famous. This is Alice...(nod)...Donlon...(nod)...
Stutten...(wave)...Hand Job...(holds out his
hand), for Christ sake don't shake hands with
him...(laughter)...Doc Jay."

"You can trust me," Doc Jay says. "I got
magic hands."

"Doc Jay wants to save all the wounded, even
those killed and buried months ago. Every night
dead Marines beg him to come to their graves."

Doc Jay laughs.

"And this is our squad leader, Crazy Earl."

Crazy Earl is armed with an M-16 and a Red
Ryder BB gun. Crazy Earl looks at Joker. There
is no expression on his face. "There it is," he
says. "They call me Crazy Earl. Gooks love me
until I blow them away. Then they don't love me
anymore."

A big Marine and a small Marine double-time
up the road carrying a large cardboard box between
them. The big Marine is Animal Mother. The small
Marine is T.H.E. Rock.

They drop the box and reach inside.

"Resupply. Resupply. Get your red-hot
bennies. Scarf it up," T.H.E. Rock says. He
throws plastic bags to each of the men.

"This is T.H.E. Rock. He wears that rock
around his neck so when the dinks zap him they'll
know who he is."

T.H.E. Rock pulls out a rawhide cord and
shows Joker his rock, a quartz crystal mounted in
brass. "I'll live forever. I'm the Rock."

Cowboy points to the big marine, "This is
Animal Mother. He's hard."

Animal Mother has a belt of machine-gun
bullets crisscrossing his chest. He picks his
nose and says to Joker, "You better believe it."

cover. In the ensuing shouting and confusion, Rafter Man and Joker take off.

-49-

Joker and Rafter Man find Cowboy's squad resting in the rubble of a demolished building.

Cowboy gets to his feet and says, "Holy shit, it's the Joker."

Cowboy and Joker grab each other and wrestle and punch and pound each other on the back. They say, "Hey, you old mother-fucker. How you been? What's happening? Been getting any? Only your sister. Well, better my sister than my mom, although mom's not bad."

"Hey, Joker, I was hoping I'd never see you again, you piece of shit."

Joker laughs. "Cowboy, you look real mean. If I didn't know that you're a born poge I'd be scared."

"Hey, we're the Lusthog squad - we are lifetakers and heartbreakers. We fill them full of lead. You should have been with us yesterday we wasted so many it wasn't even funny."

Joker says, "This is Rafter Man. He's not a walking camera store. He's a photographer."

"Lai dai, bro"

"Hi, pleased to meet you," Rafter says.

The rest of the squad stare at Joker and Rafter Man the way people do in a train station.

Cowboy says to the squad, "Hey, this is Joker, my bro from the Island, and this is Rafter Man. They're from Sea Tiger. They'll make you

"This is my bro, Joker and this is Rafter Man. They're from Sea Tiger."

"You a photographer?" Animal Mother says to Joker.

Joker shakes his head. "I'm a combat correspondent."

Animal Mother smiles scornfully, "You seen much combat?"

"Hey, don't fuck with me," Joker says. "I got twice as many operations as any grunt in Eye Corps."

Cowboy says, "Hey, come on bros, sit down, sit and share."

Animal Mother sits down, cross-legged. "Man, I almost got me some eatin' pussy."

T.H.E. Rock says, "That's affirmative. Mother was chasing a little gook girl with his dick hanging out."

Lieutenant Touchdown lights a small block of C-4 explosive to make hot chocolate. "How old was she?"

"Maybe twelve or thirteen," says Animal Mother.

"Mother, you know what I told you about that!"

Animal Mother grins, spits: "If she's old enough to bleed, she's old enough to butcher."

"Animal Mother, listen up," Lieutenant Touchdown says. "You harass one more little girl and I'm going to put my silver bar in my pocket and you and I are going to throw some hands."

Animal Mother grunts, spits, picks up a bottle of tiger piss. He hooks a tooth into the

metal cap and forces the bottle up. The cap pops off.

"Cowboy, you remember when we was set up in that L-shaped ambush up by Khe Sanh and blew away that NVA rifle squad? You remember that little gook bitch that was guiding them? She was a lot younger than the one I saw today." He takes a swallow. "I didn't get to fuck that one either. But that's okay. That's okay. I shot her motherfucking face off." He looks at Joker and grins. "That's affirmative, poge. I shot her motherfucking face off." He burps in Joker's face.

Joker says, "Hay, Animal fucker. How come you think you're so bad?"

Animal Mother looks surprised. "Hey, motherfucker, you want me to tear you a new asshole?"

"Only after you eat the peanuts out of my shit."

"Whoa, now just whoa," Cowboy says. "If there's one thing I can't stand it's bad language. Now violence, that's something else. I mean if you feel you got to blow Animal Mother away, that's outstanding. But some other time, Joker, 'cause we need him right now."

Alice, a big black marine says, "You might not believe it but under fire Animal Mother is one of the finest human being in the world. All he needs is someone to throw hand grenades at him for the rest of his life."

"Hey, jungle bunny," Animal Mother says. "Thank god for the sickle cell, huh?"

Rafter Man starts taking some pictures of the squad. Crazy Earl puts his arm across the

shoulders of the man next to him. The man has a bush cover pulled down over his face and a beer in his hand.

"Hey photographer, you want a good picture? Here man, take this. This is my bro," says Crazy Earl, removing the bush cover from the man's face. "This is his party. He is the guest of honour. You see, today is his birthday."

The man next to Crazy Earl is a dead man, a North Vietnamese corporal, a clean-cut Asian kid about seventeen years old with ink-black hair, cropped short.

Rafter Man looks at Joker. Then he starts taking shots with his Nikon.

Crazy Earl hugs the North Vietnamese corporal. He grins. "I love the little commie bastards, man. I really do. They're as hard as slant-eyed drill instructors. They are highly motivated individuals. Hey, take a couple like this." Crazy Earl poses, Rafter keeps shooting.

"Grunts understand grunts. These are great days we are living, bros. We are jolly green giants, walking the earth with guns. The people we wasted here today are the finest individuals we will ever know. When we rotate back to the World we're gonna miss having somebody around who's worth shooting. Hell, it'd be okay with me if he came to America and married my sister."

"How 'bout me, Craze?" Alice, the black Marine, says. "Could I marry your sister?"

A few men laugh.

Donlon is talking on the handset. "Sir, the CO wants the actual."

Donlon gives the handset to Touchdown. The Lieutenant talks to Delta Six, the commanding officer of Delta 2-5.

"Number ten. Just when we were scarfing up some good bennies," Crazy Earl says.

Lieutenant Touchdown stands up and starts putting on his gear.

"Moving, rich kids. Saddle up in five. Craze, get your people on their feet."

"Moving. Moving."

"You two with us today?" Crazy Earls asks.

"Yeah," Joker says.

"Good. That makes fourteen."

-50-

The platoon moves Indian-file along both sides of the road, twenty yards between each man.

The lines pop and snick as cocking levers are snapped back and bolts sent home, chambering rounds. Safeties are clicked off. Selector switches are thumbed to the full automatic position. Those Marines armed with M-14's fix bayonets.

Machine guns start typing our history. First our guns, then theirs. Snipers fire a round here and there, sighting us in.

Somebody starts singing:

"M.I.C....K.E.Y....M.O.U.S.E."

They all sing:

"So come along and sing our song

And join our fam-i-ly...

M.I.C....K.E.Y....M.O.U.S.E.

Mickey Mouse, Mickey Mouse...."

The machine guns are exchanging a steady fire
now, like old friends having a conversation.

Thumps and thuds puncture the rhythm of the
bullets.

The platoon moves into a line abreast
formation.

The snipers zero in on us. Each shot becomes
a word spoken by death. Death is talking to
us. Death wants to tell us a funny secret.
We may not like death but death likes us.

Joker says out loud: "You and me, God -
right?"

Black roses of smoke bloom in the distance.

Shots of the platoon crossing open ground.

I put out the word to every part of my body.
Dear Feet, tiptoe through the tulips. Balls,
hang in there. Legs, don't do any John
Waynes. My body is serviceable. I intend to
maintain my body in the excellent condition
in which it was issued.

"Is that you, John Wayne? Is this me?" Joker says aloud.

"Hey, start the cameras," Cowboy says. "This is Vietnam, the movie."

"Joker can be Paul Newman. I'll be a horse," Cowboy says.

"Yeah."

Crazy Earl says, "Can I be Gabby Hayes?"

"The Rock can be a rock," says Donlon, the radican. He is chewing bubble-gum and popping bubbles.

Alice says, "I'll be Ann-Margaret."

"Animal Mother can be a rabid buffalo," says Stutten, honcho of the third fire team.

"If this was real I'd be scared," Joker says.

The enemy are assaulted by werewolf laughter.

"Who'll be the Indians?"

The little enemy folks audition for the part, machine-gun bullets rip across a wall to starboard.

"You follow me, New Guy," T.H.E Rock says to Rafter Man, smiling, "'Cause I'm a lucky guy."

T.H.E. Rock starts singing:

Lucky lucky lucky me,
I'm a lucky son-of-a-gun.
I work eight hours,
I sleep eight hours,
I leave eight hours for fun.

A mortar explodes ten feet in front of him. Small bits of metal, brains and blood spatter over Rafter Man as T.H.E. Rock stops the full charge of shrapnel.

More mortar rounds explode ahead of them.
Doc Jay dashes to T.H.E. Rock but he is dead.
"Jesus Christ," Rafter Man says. "The Rock
is all fucked up."

The men keep running.

A B-40 rocket explodes.

Hand Job laughs, "Hey, I pissed all over
myself." But he looks down and see's he's soaked
in blood from his stomach to his knees. A flicker
of comprehension, as he falls dead.

Crazy Earl starts whooping and hollering and
shooting his Red Ryder - BB gun. A sniper's
bullet drills him right through his head.

-52-

The platoon reaches the ruins they are
attacking.

Cowboy, Alice and Joker rush forward and
flatten themselves against the building, each by a
window. They start throwing grenades in.

Joker takes some fire but isn't hit.

They kick in the door and run in, firing.

Lieutenant Touchdown is killed by a grenade.

Animal Mother rushes in with his M-60,
spraying wildly. Most of the NVA inside are dead.

There are some short, sharp exchanges of
automatic fire and grenades with the few remaining
NVA die-hards who are all killed.

-53-

The firing has all but stopped. The Lusthog squad has taken up defensive positions in the factory.

Some civilians start to appear, smiling shrugging, trying to get back to their homes.

The Marines try to menace them away at rifle point, shouting, "Di, di, di, you sorry-ass motherfuckers, go on, get the hell away from here!" and the refugees smile, half bowing, and flit up the shattered streets.

"Don't those zipperheads know there's a war on?"

A little boy of about ten comes up to the squad. He is laughing and moving his head from side to side in a funny way. The fierceness in his eyes should tell everyone what it is, but it doesn't occur to most of the grunts that a Vietnamese child can be driven mad too, and by the time they understand it the boy is going for their eyes and tearing at their fatigues, spooking everyone, putting everyone really uptight, until Alice grabs him from behind and holds his arms. "'C'mon, poor li'l baby, 'fore one a these grunt mothers shoots you," he says and carries the boy back to where the corpsmen are.

-54-

Later, outside the ruined factory, the Lusthog squad stand looking at the bodies of Lieutenant Touchdown, Crazy Earl, T.H.E. Rock and Hand Job, which have been laid out on the ground in a straight row.

Helicopters land nearby to carry away the wounded.

Nearby, two Graves Registration men are struggling with a body trying to get it into a body bag.

"Shit, this is a gook! What'd they bring him here for?"

"Look, man, he's got on our uniform."

"I don't give a fuck, that ain't no American, that's a fucking gook!"

"Wait a minute," the other one says. "Maybe it's a spade..."

Joker stands over Lieutenant Touchdown's body.

Dead, Lieutenant Touchdown didn't look like an officer anymore. He was just another meatbag with a hole in it. My reaction was curiosity. I wondered what the rounds felt like as they entered his body, what his last thought was, what his last sound was at the moment of impact. I marvelled at the ultimate power of death. I never felt so alive.

Donlon steps up. "We're mean Marines, sir." He hurries away, fumbling with the handset.

Alice gently kicks Lieutenant Touchdown's corpse. "Go easy, bro."

Animal Mother says quietly, "Better you than me, man."

Rafter Man says, "Well, at least he died for a good cause."

"Which cause was that?" Animal Mother says.

"Democracy...?"

Animal Mother says, "Flush out your head gear, New Guy. You think we waste gooks for democracy? Don't kid yourself; this is a slaughter, and if I'm gonna get my balls shot off for a word I get to pick my own word and my word is poontang."

No one seems interested in arguing with him.

Cowboy looks down at Hand Job. "It's a tough break for Hand Job, he was just set to get a medical discharge."

"What was the matter with him?" Joker asks.

"He was jerkin' off ten times a day."

Joker laughs.

"That's no shit," says Alice. "At leas' ten times a day. It was disgustin'."

"Last week," Cowboy says, "he was sent down to Danang to see the Navy psychiatrist there, and the crazy fucker starts jerkin' off in the waiting room. Instant Section Eight. He was just waiting for his papers to clear division."

Sergeant Murphy comes up to them. "Okay, gather 'round. Gather 'round...I'm acting platoon leader until they can send up an officer. Cowboy's first-squad leader to replace Craze. Okay, Cowboy?"

Cowboy nods, "Sure." He is pleased.
Joker slaps him on the back.
"I'll follow you anywhere, scumbag."

-55-

Twilight in the rubble of the ruined factory.

Later, the company is set in for the night.
Listening posts are strung out 50 yards on
all sides, claymore mines are set in place,
and artillery is registered in on likely
enemy approaches.

A few shots to illustrate this.

A CBS camera crew turns up, asking how we
feel about maintaining the equilibrium of the
Dingdong by containing the ever encroaching
Doodah, and getting the star-struck grunts to
strike combat-marine poses, pretending to be
what they are.

A few shots to illustrate this - interviews,
combat-poses.

The CBS cameraman gives Alice direction.

"Okay, wait until I say action and then fire
off a few shots."

Wisecracks from the Lusthog squad.

Alice nods, "Okay."

"Turnover - Hue city fire fight - take
one...Okay, action."

Alice fires off a few shots, looks out, a bit over-intently, to see what he's hit, then he fires off a few more shots.

"Okay, cut it."

"How was that?"

"Great. Lets try just one more. Fire off a whole clip on automatic and when you finish, shout something at them."

"What should I say?"

"It doesn't matter. Just shout something like you're really mad. Okay?"

"I'll try."

More wise cracks from the squad.

"Okay, quiet, guys...turn over. Hue city - fire fight, take 2...Okay, action."

Alice blasts off a clip and hesitates, stuck for something to say.

"Go 'head, shout!"

Alice hesitates, then shouts, "Hey...
gook...get offa my cloud!"

Everyone breaks up.

-56-

Later, the CBS crew have gone. The men are heating and eating C-rations.

Joker is writing in his notebook.

Donlon and Stutten are looking at a glossy, car brochure.

"It's been proven, man, I'm tellin' you. You put a Ford engine in a Chevvy, and a Chevvy engine in a Ford, and they both go faster."

Alice is hunched over his radio. 'Let's talk about tracers,' the radio announcer says. 'Sure, they're fun to shoot. They light up the sky! But did you know that tracers leave deposits on your barrel? Deposits than often lead to malfunctions and even jamming...'

"Hey, Alice, turn that fuckin' thing off."

"Right after Sports," Alice says, cleaning his face with some Wash 'n Dri's.

Donlon looks up from the car brochure. "I hope we stay here. This street fighting is decent duty. We can see them here."

The DJ plays "The Girl with the Faraway Eyes" by the Stones.

"Hey, we sure as hell knocked the living shit out this place today, didn't we?" Stutten says quietly.

"Yeah. Godzilla never drew that kind of fire," Alice says.

"It's a damned shame, all them poor people though, all them nice looking houses, they even had a Shell station there," Rafter Man says.

"We said we were going to bomb then back to the Stone Age and we do not lie."

Daddy DA is playing with a yo-yo. He's doing 'Square the Circle', 'Rollercoaster' and 'Kiss the Cat' when Sergeant Murphy walks up to him.

"What the fuck do you think you're doin'?" He grabs the yo-yo from Daddy DA's hand and throws it outside. "This isn't a playground. You're a fucking Marine. Act like one!"

-57-

They hear the sound of a motorbike approaching.

"Oh man, I don't believe this, Cowboy says.

A young Arvin soldier with a girl riding the pillion comes up the road and stops. The girl get off, brushes her hair back and smiles. She is attractively dressed in a blouse and skin-tight pants. She is pretty.

Some of the squad get to their feet and gather around them.

"Hey, you," the Arvin says. "You wan' number one fuckey?"

"Hey, any you guys want number one fuckey?" Cowboy says.

Laughter and affirmative ad libs.

"Me want suckey," Donlon says.

Some laughter.

"Fuckey, suckey, smoke cigarette in pussy. Everything you wan'," the Arvin says without cracking a smile.

More laughter.

"How much?" Cowboy says.

"Ten dolla," the Arvin says.

"For all of us?"

"Ten dolla each," the Arvin says.

"Five dollars for each."

"Me love you good," the girl says.

"Five dollars," Cowboy says firmly.

"Okay...five dolla."

"Hey, she ain't bad lookin'," Alice, the big black marine, says moving closer to her.

A chorus of complaints from the men.
Cowboy says, "Hey, Mother, we'll draw lots."
"I'll be right back," Animal Mother says.
"I'll skip the foreplay."

-58-

Night in the factory. The squad is peering into the darkness, safeties off, on a maximum alert.

During the night the LP's report hearing movement. The Captain decides to have a Mad Minute which means that on a signal we blast away for exactly one minute, and on another signal, we stop and listen for movement or groans.

The signal is given and the men fire on full-auto, into the blackness. Then, on a signal, they abruptly stop.

Total silence.

We're absolutely deafened by the terrific noise but we strain to listen for any suspicious sounds.

Suddenly the nerve wracking silence is broken by a terrific fart - vrrruumpp!!

Everyone breaks up laughing.

The girl looks at Alice and says something to the Arvin. There is a brief disagreement between them which ends with the girl shaking her head no, several times.

Cowboy says, "What's the problem?"

"She say, no boom-boom with soul brother."

The squad laughs.

"What the motherfuck!?" Alice says.

"Soul brothers too boo-coo," the Arvin says.

"Too boo-coo."

"What's he talkin' about?"

"I think they're sayin' that you coloured boys pack too much meat," Cowboy says.

Laughter.

"Shit," Alice says. "These fuckin' whores got pussies on 'em like the Grand Canyon. What the fuck they sayin'?"

The Arvin shakes his head. "Too boo-coo."

"Well I'll tell you what," Alice says. "Just look at this, mother fucker." He unbuttons his fatigue pants and whips it out. "That ain't no big thing. It's magnificent, but it sure as shit ain't that big. Look."

The men laugh.

The girl has a look and says something to the Arvin.

The Arvin says, "Okay, soul brotha'. You okay."

Laughter and wisecracks from the squad.

"All right," Alice says.

"What's the batting order?" Rafter Man says.

Animal Mother pushes his way in. "If I gotta pay for it, I'm goin' first," he says, grabbing the girl and walking away with her.

-59-

Intelligence passed the word down that the NVA had pulled out of our area during the night to positions across the river.

Our squad is walking point for the platoon to find out if that's true.

The Lusthog squad files past a skull, charred black, mounted on a stake in the kill zone, on which someone has stuck some old black felt Mousketeer ears.

Someone has nailed a scrap of ammo crate on a tree with crude letters: ALL HOPE ABANDON, YE WHO ENTER HERE.

Resupply choppers wop-wop down to earth behind them like monster grasshoppers.

They lock and load.

The squad comes to the last two-man listening post. Cowboy waves his hand and Alice takes the point.

All clear, says Alice with a hand signal.

Cowboy waves his hand and they move slowly along the deserted street, ten yards apart, half the squad hugging the walls on each side of the street, peering into doorways and windows and keeping an eye on the roof tops.

Cowboy jabs his gray Marine-issue glasses with his forefinger.

In the gray glasses Cowboy does not look like a killer, but like a reporter for a high school newspaper, which he was, less than a year ago.

The clink of their gear as they walk sounds loud in the unnatural silence.

Cowboy reminds them to maintain ten yards between each man.

Frequently he stops to check his compass and acetate map.

Rafter Man changes his lens and starts taking shots of the patrol. The zip, zip of his shutter seems loud in the ominous quiet.

-60-

Shots of the patrol in different streets, separated by dissolves.

Shot of Joker.

My thoughts begin to drift into the things I will do after I rotate back to the World, which inevitably means erect-nipple wet dreams of Mary Jane Rottencrotch and the Great Homecoming Fuck Fantasy.

The patrol continues slowly up another street.

Hold.

Alice raises his right hand.

The squad stops.

Cowboy flexes the fingers of his right hand as though cupping a breast. Booby trap?

Alice shrugs. Just cool it, man.

They move off again.

Alice really understands the shrewd race of men we are fighting - hard soldiers, strange, diminutive phantoms with iron insides, brass balls, incredible courage, and no scruples at all. They look small, but they fight tall, and their bullets are the same size as ours.

Joker moves very carefully, staying close to the buildings.

We live by the law of the jungle, which is that more marines go in than come out. There it is.

-61-

Alice freezes. His right hand closes into a fist: Danger.

All of Alice's senses open up. He waits.

Invisible birds scatter from tree to tree.

Alice grins, and lifts his M-79 grenade launcher to his shoulder. The "blooper" is like a toy shotgun, comically small.

Adrenaline gives them a high.

Alice shrugs, lowers his weapon, gives them his usual thumbs-up, all clear; as if to say, I'm so cool that even my errors are correct.

Cowboy's right hand slices the air again, and they all shift gear to less painful positions and move out, grumbling, bitching.

Alice hesitates.

In rows of loops across the front of his vest hang two dozen M-79 grenade rounds.

On Animal Mother's back pack is the warning:
"IF YOU CAN READ THIS YOUR TOO CLOSE."

Cowboy waves his hand and the squad moves out.

Animal Mother tells Rafter Man, "Don't follow me too close, New Guy. If you step on a mine I don't want to get fucked up."

Rafter falls back a few paces.

From somewhere, from everywhere, an almost inaudible snap.

A bird goes insane. One bird sputters overhead.

Alice stands rigid and listens. He raises his right hand and closes it into a fist. Danger.

Cowboy thinks about it. Then he says, "Hit it."

Wavering forms crumple to the deck as Cowboy's order is echoed from man to man back down the trail.

Joker says to Cowboy, "Bro, I was hoping a sniper would ding me so I'd have an excuse to fall down. I mean, I think I'm going to hate this movie..."

Cowboy is watching Alice. "Cut the shit, Joker."

Kneeling, Alice studies the empty street. Alice studies the street for a long time. "It's not right, bro," he says just above a whisper.

Cowboy studies the street. "We got to move, Midnight."

The city is ominously silent except for the squeak-squeak of a canteen being unscrewed.

Alice wipes the sweat from his eyes, and says, mostly to himself, "All I want to do is make

it back to the hill so I can smoke about one ton of dope. I...wait...I heard something!"

Silence.

"A bird," says Cowboy. "Or a branch falling."

Alice shakes his head. "Maybe. Maybe."

Cowboy's voice is stern: "You're paranoid, Midnight. The gooks have pulled out. We got to keep moving."

Donlon crawls over to Cowboy, handset at his ear. "Hey, Lone Ranger, the old man wants a report on our position."

"Let's move, Midnight. I mean it."

Alice rolls his eyes. "Put a nigger behind the trigger." Alice takes one step forward, then hesitates. "I can remember when I've had more fun."

Joker says in his John Wayne voice: "Viet Nam is giving war a bad name."

Cowboy says, "Everybody shut the fuck up."

Alice shrugs, mumbles, "Feets, get movin'," and takes another step forward. "Cowboy, m'man, it ain't easy being the black Errol Flynn, you know."

Alice, the point man, moves out. He ditty-bops across an intersection.

BANG!

The crack of an SKS sniper's carbine jolts Alice into a rigid position of attention. His mouth opens. He turns to speak. His eyes cry out.

Alice falls.

"HIT IT!"

Falling forward - now...

"Oh, no..." Rubble.

Pavement. "ALICE!"

"What...?" Damp. Bleeding elbows.

"MIDNIGHT!"

Looking, not seeing, looking...

"Oh-oh...Shit City..."

Waiting. Waiting.

"Hey, man..."

Silence.

My guts melt.

"ALICE!"

Alice is lying in the middle of the intersection, about 35 yards away. He doesn't move.

Joker takes cover behind some rubble.

I curl up and try to make myself small and I think how wonderful it would be if I could crawl up into my own asshole and just disappear and I think: I'm glad it's him and not me.

"ALICE!"

Alice, the point man, is down on the pavement. His big black hands are locked around his right thigh.

Blood.

Cowboy says, "Damn." He shoves his Stetson to the back of his head and jabs at his glasses with his index finger.

Alice is trying to crawl to cover.

Alice extends his hand.

BANG!

Alice's hand is knocked down. He lifts it again slowly. Alice's right forefinger is missing. "Oh, no...not..."

Animal Mother opens fire. High-velocity machine-gun bullets clip, chop, and ricochet along the deserted street, snapping into the masonry with rhythmic precision.

Rafter opens up with his M-16 and then switches to his Nikon.

Lance Corporal Stutten fires an M-79 and the grenade bursts, against a wall.

I see a strange shadow in a doorway so I throw a few rounds in there with my grease gun. But it's Maggie's drawers. There's nothing to shoot at.

Daddy D.A. pops a frag and lobs it in. Everybody is blazing away at an empty street. Cowboy screams into the jarring thud: "OKAY, OKAY EVERYBODY, FUCKING COOL IT."

Everyone stops firing - everyone except Animal Mother. His weapon continues to spill hot brass and black metal links until the belt runs out.

"We gotta kill that cocksucker!" says Animal Mother.

"COOL IT!" says Cowboy.

"Where did it come from? Did anyone see it?"

No one says anything, then Animal Mother says. "He's out there in front of us."

"Where?"

Animal doesn't know.

Cowboy grabs the radio handset from Donlon.

"Delta Actual, this is Delta One."

"This is Delta Actual," says the insect voice of the Platoon commander from inside the handset.

"Delta Actual, we are receiving enemy sniper fire. I have one Whiskey, India, Alpha." Cowboy looks at his map. "My position, up three over one. Azimuth 105 degrees, back 210 degrees."

"Roger, copy that, Delta One."

"Request a dust-off and a tank."

"Roger, copy that, Delta One, but what is tank for?"

"Delta Actual, possible strong enemy force occupying buildings in front of us, and sniper just trying to suck us in."

"Roger, copy that, Delta One."

BANG!

A rifle bullet snaps through Donlon's radio. The impact of the bullet flips Donlon onto his back. Cowboy dives for cover. Donlon struggles like an overturned turtle.

Joker crawls on his hands and knees. He grabs Donlon's rifle belt. He drags him behind some cover.

Donlon swallows air. "Beaucoup thanks, bro..."

Doc Jay comes scrambling up on all fours like a bear in a hurry.

Cowboy says, "Alice is in the open. We can't reach him."

"Bullshit," Animal Mother says.

BANG!

Cowboy rolls over. "I'm okay. I'm okay."

"He hit Alice again!"

Alice moves, groans. "It hurts...it hurts..."

There's a dark hole through the boot on Alice's left foot. Alice laughs, grins, grits his teeth. "I'm short..."

Doc Jay stands up.

Cowboy grabs him and pulls him down.

"You crazy?" But Doc Jay wrestles free. He unhooks the Unit One medical kit from his web belt and drops the rest of his gear.

Cowboy looks sick. "Don't try it, bro. That sniper does not miss..."

"I'm the corpsman," says Doc Jay. "Not you," and before Cowboy can react, Doc Jay is on his feet and running. He runs at a crouch, zigzagging He hits the intersection.

BANG!

Doc Jay stumbles, falls.

The Doc's left thigh has been torn open. Jagged bone protrudes. The Doc tries to push himself forward with his good leg.

Cowboy pops a smoke grenade, lobs it in.

"We've got to do something..."

Green smoke pours from Cowboy's smoke grenade, obscuring the street.

Cowboy starts to tell us what to do. But he can't make up his mind. Then he says, "The sniper's trying to suck us in. Wants the whole squad, one at a time."

The squad looks around to Cowboy, ready to do or die.

"Donlon get on the radio and see what's happening about that tank."

"I can't, the radio's dead."

"I saw some tanks on the way up," Cowboy says. "Double time back there and get something moving."

"Okay." Donlon takes off down the street in little zig-zag rushes.

Rafter Man is watching with wild eyes, his weapon held at port arms.

Animal Mother's bloodshot eyes scan the street for muzzle flashes, movement, any sign of life.

Lance Corporal Stutten and the rest of the squad watch silently - they are waiting for orders.

"Spread out, both sides of the street, and wait for the tank," Cowboy says quietly.

The squad slowly obeys the order.

At the intersection, Doc Jay manages to stand up, balances himself on his good leg. He bends over and hooks Alice under the armpit with his forearm, tries to lift him. "You're okay, Alice. No sweat. I'm Doc Jay. You can trust me. I got magic hands."

BANG!

Doc Jay collapses. Now his left foot is a bloody lump. He waits for the last bullet. When the last bullet doesn't come he sits up, pulls Alice across his lap. The Doc fumbles in his Unit One, takes out a Syrette, gives Alice a hit of Morphine.

The squad opens fire again, shooting at shadows.

Using his teeth, Doc Jay tears the waxy brown wrappers off three compress bandages. The Doc ties the bandages around Alice's wound. Alice

groans, says something we can't hear. Doc Jay uses his shirttail to wipe sweat from Alice's forehead then pulls out a piece of rubber tubing he uses for tourniquets.

BANG.

Doc Jay's right hand is shattered. The Doc tries to move his fingers.

He can't.

Animal says, "How long are we going to sit on our asses?"

"We'll move up with the armour," Cowboy says.

"When the fuck is that?"

"Soon."

"Alice and Doc can't wait anymore!"

"We've got no choice. The sniper is just sucking us in."

"We can do it if we all go at once. The sniper'll have too many targets."

"That might be what they're waiting for. How do you know there's only one sniper?"

"Alice and Doc Jay are out there gettin' shot to shit!"

"I don't like the situation any more than you do but we have to accept it."

Mother says, "We can go for Alice and Doc, give the sniper too many targets. We can save them!" He checks his M-60.

Cowboy grabs Mother's arm, "Listen man, cool it. No one's going out there."

Animal says, "Stand down, motherfucker, or I'll cut you in half."

Cowboy slowly lets go of his arm.

Animal Mother hoists his M-60 machine gun and charges for the street crossing.

He fires blind.

He lopes along with the fluid grace of a meat eater.

His chin is dripping saliva.

Animal Mother is a predator attacking. He wants warm blood to drink. Animal Mother wants human flesh to tear apart and devour. Animal Mother doesn't know what the hell he's doing. He thinks he's John Wayne.

He makes it to Alice and Doc Jay, spraying long bursts from his M-60.

BANG!

The sniper fires, kicking up dust a few inches from Mother's foot. His first miss. The M-60 return fire has made it less fun.

Mother fumbles with Doc Jay and sees he's dead.

He fires another burst up the side street and drags Alice behind a burned-out Citroën car overturned in the intersection.

BANG!

The sniper's bullet ricochets off the car.

"Close, but no cigar, motherfucker!"

Mother fires back.

The squad lends morale support, firing wildly.

Cowboy says to Joker, "I guess I just can't hack this shit, bro."

Joker doesn't know what to say.

"Mother was lucky," he finally says. "He had a John Wayne wet dream."

"If I sent my people out there to get the sniper I might have lost the whole squad."

"Look Cowboy, you're the honcho. You give the orders. You make the decisions. I could never do that. I could never run a rifle squad. I don't have the balls."

Cowboy thinks about it. "You're right, Joker. You shit bird, you're right. I've got to get my program squared away. I wish Sergeant Gerheim was here." Then he grins, but something inside has gone.

A big, M-48 Patton tank clanks into view in the rear. Dutton is riding behind the turret. Cowboy shouts and waves like a traffic cop.

Mother holds Alice's head and says, "How's it going, Jungle Bunny?"

"That morphine is great shit," Alice says.

"Anything for a fix," Animal Mother says.

Alice looks like he's going to pass out.

"Hey, Jungle bunny...Hey, stay with me, man."

"Right on," Alice says weakly and closes his eyes again.

Animal Mother shakes him. "Hey, Jungle Bunny... do you know how you keep five niggers from raping a white girl?"

Alice opens his eyes.

"Do you know how you keep five niggers from raping a white girl?"

"How?"

"Throw 'em a basketball."

Animal Mother laughs and fires another burst from his M-60. His eyes blaze with excitement. He is high on primeval adrenalin.

fucking time in? Thirty months, poge. I got thirty months in country. I've been there, man."

"Yeah," Joker says. "They've got his picture on the wall in the Hanoi Post Office."

"That's affirmative," says Corporal Payback. "You listen to Joker, New Guy. He knows ti ti - very little. And if he ever does know anything it'll be because he learned it from me. You just know he's never been in the shit. He ain't got the stare."

Rafter Man looks up. "The stare?"

"The thousand-yard stare. A Marine gets it after he's been in the shit for too long. It's like you've really seen...beyond. I got it. All field Marines got it. You'll have it, too."

Rafter Man says, "I will?"

Corporal Payback takes a few hits off the joint and then passes it to Chili Vendor. "I used to be an atheist, when I was a New Guy, a long time ago..."

Corporal Payback takes his Zippo lighter out of his shirt pocket and hands it to Rafter Man.

"See? It says, 'Just you and me, God - right?'"

Corporal Payback giggles. He seems to be trying to focus his vision on some distant object. "Nobody is an atheist in a foxhole. You'll be praying."

Rafter Man looks at Joker, grins, hands the lighter back. "There sure is a lot of stuff to learn."

The tank is near. Cowboy double-times down the road to meet it. He runs past heaps of rubble which were houses yesterday, bricks and stones and shattered wood today.

The tank jerks to a halt. The turret whirs. The big ninety-millimeter gun locks on him. For a long moment it looks like the tank is going to blow Cowboy away.

The top half of a blond tank commander appears in the turret hatch. The lieutenant is wearing a flak jacket and an olive-drab football helmet with a microphone that protrudes over his lips. He is a mechanical centaur, half man, half tank.

Cowboy explains about the sniper and points to Animal Mother and Alice lying on the ground behind the burned-out Citroën.

The blond tank commander is silent. He gives Cowboy a thumbs-up.

The tank rolls up to the street corner.

Animal Mother shouts and points down the street where he has spotted the sniper.

-62-

The tank clanks down the block and opens fire with its big ninety-millimeter gun and its machine guns.

Hugging the walls, the squad follows the tank, leap-frogging forward in short rushes.

The medivac helicopter appears overhead.

Cowboy throws a pink smoke grenade near Alice and waves the helicopter to the spot.

Animal Mother dashes across the open street and ducks down with the squad.

He is a big hero. The men laugh and pound him on the back.

Cowboy sends Lance Corporal Stutten and his fire team around behind some buildings.

Animal Mother sets up his M-60 on a low wall and opens fire, raking the building he thinks the sniper is in. Every fifth round is a tracer.

The tank rolls up to that building.

The rest of the squad double-time down an alley and cross the road down the street, at the end of the row of buildings.

Up the street sits the tank. The tank fires a round of high explosives. The upper story of the building is blown apart. The roof collapses.

Animal Mother continues to fire from his position near the tank.

The helicopter crew loads Alice aboard and the chopper whop-whop-whops into the air.

Cowboy double-times to the first building at their end of the street. He steps carefully to the rear corner of the house, peeks around the corner. Cowboy waits for Lance Corporal Stutten to pop a green smoke as a signal that his fire team is in position as a blocking force.

When green smoke begins to pour from a drainage ditch at the far end of the street Cowboy waves his hand and they all open fire at the building.

One at a time, they run across the street to join Cowboy. Animal Mother joins up with them.

Cowboy waves his hand around the corner and Lance Corporal Stutten's fire team opens up with

their weapons on full automatic, pouring hundreds of high-velocity copper-jacketed bullets into the building.

The tank fires a second round. The ground floor of the building is blown apart.

The tank grinds forward twenty yards, stops, fires again. The first story of the building explodes.

-63-

Cowboy leads them into the building.

Inside, they leapfrog from corner to corner. Cowboy pops a frag and underhands it into somebody's kitchen. The detonation rocks the whole house, numbs their ears.

Joker steps forward. He gestures to Cowboy, jerks his thumb at the ceiling. Cowboy holds up a circled thumb and index finger, "okay."

Joker pops a frag and pitches it up a stairwell to the second story. The explosion splits the plaster over their heads.

Outside, up the street, the tank fires again.

Cowboy waves his hand and they follow him up the stairs.

Upstairs, he kicks out a window and they all hop out onto the roof.

The tank is two buildings away. It fires.

They drop their gear and jump the six-foot chasm between buildings.

Cowboy stands up and signals Lance Corporal Stutten, who waves back with his poncho. Bullets

from Lance Corporal Stutten's fire team stop hitting the rear of the house they're standing on.

The tank fires. The shell bursts. Shrapnel whines over them.

They converge on a skylight. Joker drops a frag through the glass.

The grenade explodes in an invisible room below. Concussion shatters the skylight.

They drop through the ragged rectangular hole into somebody's library. Shrapnel has mangled leatherbound books.

Joker picks up a small leatherbound book for a souvenir. The author is Jules Verne; the title is in French. He stuffs the book into his thigh pocket and reaches to the front of his flak jacket for another grenade.

They work their way through the house, fragging every hallway, every room. But they can't find the sniper.

The tank fires into the second story of the house next door.

-64-

Joker takes a few steps down the stairs. Cowboy holds up his hand. "Listen."

They hear a noise on the roof.

They run back to the library.

They drag a heavy antique desk to the ruined skylight and Cowboy climbs upon it and starts to lift himself back onto the roof.

Joker grabs Cowboy.

"Wait a minute. If he's up there he'll pop your head off as soon as you stick it out."

"Never happen."

"Hey, man, you're crazy."

Cowboy lifts himself up on the roof, looks around and starts to reach a hand down for Joker.

The CRACK! of a Simonov sniper's carbine - Cowboy falls back through the skylight. Joker catches him and eases him down to the desktop.

He is bleeding heavily from a chest wound.

Suddenly, everyone looks up to the cracked ceiling through which can be heard the muffled thud, thud, thud of running footsteps on the roof.

Joker tears open his first aid pack and kneels beside Cowboy.

The rest of the squad cautiously move off in several different directions to cut off the sniper.

Joker carefully pulls open Cowboy's shirt, now soaked with blood.

"Am I hit bad?... Am I gonna make it?"

"You're gonna be okay."

Joker tries to stop the flow of blood.

"Don't shit me, Joker."

"I'm not shitting you man."

The wound is terrible and there is nothing Joker can do.

"Don't shit me, man. I'm not gonna make it."

"Hey, if you don't make it who'll introduce me to your sister?"

"I... don't have a... sister... I thought... you knew that."

"No sister? You mean I've been wasting my time with you?"

"Looks like it."

Cowboy is going very pale.

"Tomorrow is... my birthday."

"No, shit. How old will you be?"

"Nineteen."

"Hey, if I don't have time to get you a card..."

Joker takes Cowboy's hand.

"Joker?"

"Yeah?"

"Go and see... my Mom."

Joker knows there is no point in any further pretense. "Sure."

"Hey, Joker..."

"Yeah?"

"Why me?"

Cowboy's eyes close and his head rolls to one side.

Joker feels for a pulse and checks his pupil reflex, just to make sure.

Cowboy is dead.

Animal Mother and Rafter Man come running down the corridor.

"We got him cornered up on the roof," Rafter Man says.

"Cowboy's dead," Joker says.

Animal Mother looks at Cowboy. "Come on, let's kill the cocksucker."

Joker stands up slowly.

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Joker pops a frag. He climb up onto the desk and take hold of the roof with his left hand. He lets the spoon fly.

The spoon phinnnnings away and rattles across the floor.

He holds the sweaty green oval for three seconds and, lifting himself up, he flips it up and back so that it rolls across the roof directly over them.

The frag bursts, spraying seven hundred and fifty pieces of steel wire across the roof.

The ceiling splits.

Plaster and splintered wood bounce off his helmet.

Rafter Man jumps up onto the desk and lifts himself up onto the roof.

Surprised, Joker and Mother pull themselves up after him.

The tank fires into the ground floor of the house next door.

Rafter Man, Animal Mother and Joker crawl on their bellies on the roof.

Rafter Man crawls up to the crest of the roof. He peers over the crest.

BANG. A hiss.

Animal Mother pantomimes with his hand meaning: I'll crawl off to the left, you and Rafter Man crawl off to the right.

Joker gives him a thumbs up.

Joker crawls up beside Rafter Man. He takes a peek. From behind a low chimney at the opposite corner of the roof a thin black line protrudes.

They hear the incredibly loud clanking of the tank as it rolls on the street below. It stops.

Rafter Man pulls away.

Joker turns away and duck walks to the edge of the roof. He stands up and is about to jump across when the house explodes beneath him.

He falls on his back.

The sniper is moving.

Rafter Man jumps over the crest of the roof and slides down the incline on his ass.

Joker tries to stand up. But all of his bones have shifted one inch to the left.

Suddenly a foot steps on his chest, pinning him.

The sniper looks down, surprised.

The sniper sees that Joker is helpless, glances back at Rafter Man, gets ready to jump across to the other roof.

Rafter Man runs back up the incline and slides back down on his ass, ten yards away.

Joker reaches for his grease gun.

The sniper turns towards Rafter Man and raises her SKS carbine.

She is a young girl, no more than seventeen years old, a slender Eurasian angel with dark, beautiful eyes, which, at the same time, are the hard eyes of a grunt. She's not quite five feet tall. Her hair is long and black and shiny, held together by rawhide cord tied in a bow. Her shirt and shorts are mustard-coloured khaki and look new. Slung diagonally across her chest, separating her small breasts, is a white cloth tube fat with sticky reddish rice. Her B. F. Goodrich sandals have been cut from discarded

tires. Around her tiny waist hangs a web belt from which dangle homemade hand grenades with hollow wooden handles, made by stuffing black powder into Coca-Cola cans, a knife for cleaning fish, and six canvas pouches containing banana clips for the AK-47 assault rifle slung on her back.

BANG! Rafter Man is firing his M-16.

BANG!

BANG!

The sniper lowers her weapon.

She looks at Rafter Man.

She looks at Joker. She tries to raise her weapon.

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

Bullets shock flesh.

Rafter Man is firing.

Rafter Man's bullets are punching the life out of the sniper.

The sniper falls off the roof and hits the street with a terrible sound.

The tank fires into the ground floor beneath us. The house shakes.

Animal Mother appears from behind a chimney.

Joker stands up. He feels like a dead man's shit. He walks to the front of the house. He waves to the blond tank commander.

He swings a fifty-caliber machine gun around and aims it at Joker.

Joker steps into full view on the edge of the

roof. He waves an "all clear."

The tank commander gives him a thumbs-up.

Joker pops a green smoke grenade and drops it on the roof.

Joker limps over to the sky light and climbs back down into the library.

Rafter Man has already jumped into the library and is running down the shrapnel-scarred stairs.

-66-

Down the street Joker watches as the tank rolls up to the last house still standing. He waves another "all clear" and the tank commander gives him another smile and another thumbs-up and then the tank fires, blasting the top floor. It fires again, blasting the ground floor.

The tank commander's great mechanical body grumbles contentedly and rumbles away.

"Did you see that tank? Was that tank bad? What a honey," says Donlon.

Animal Mother and Joker walk around to the rear of the house.

They find Rafter Man standing over the sniper, drinking a can of Coca-Cola. Rafter Man grins. He says, "Things go better with coke."

Animal Mother walks up and Rafter Man says, "Look at her! Look at her!"

They all stand over the sniper. The sniper is drawing her breath with great effort. She grits her teeth and then makes a sound like a dog that has been run over.

Lance Corporal Stutten leads his fire team to the sniper. "Look at that," says Lance Corporal Stutten. "It's a girl. She's all busted up."

"Look at her!" Rafter Man is saying. He struts around the moaning lump of torn meat. "Look at her! Am I bad? Am I a menace? Am I a life taker? Am I a heart breaker?"

Animal Mother kneels and searches for papers. There are none. Then he unbuckles the sniper's web belt and jerks it from under her body. The sniper whimpers. She speaks to them in French. Animal Mother tosses the bloody belt to Rafter Man.

A corpsman comes up and kneels beside the sniper. "No more boom-boom for this mama-san," he says.

The sniper begins to pray in Vietnamese.

Joker says, "Let's get her back to the aid station."

"She'd never make it."

Rafter Man asks, "What's she saying?"

Joker shrugs. "What difference does it make?"

Animal Mother spits.

There is a burst of gunfire which sounds like it's coming from just down the street. It sputters out and then flares up again.

Animal Mother says, "Let's get the fuck outta here."

Joker says, "What about her?"

"Fuck her," says Animal Mother. "Let her rot."

"We can't just leave her here," Joker says.

Animal Mother takes a giant step towards

Joker, puts his face up close to his. "Hey, asshole, Cowboy is wasted. You're fresh out of friends. I say we leave the gook for the mother-loving rats."

Rafter Man is buckling on his NVA belt. The belt has a dull-silver buckle with a star engraved in the centre.

Joker says, "We can't leave her like this."

"I don't care," says Animal Mother. "Go on and waste her."

Joker says, "No. Not me."

"Then we saddle up and move...now."

Joker looks at the sniper. She whimpers.

I try to decide what I would want if I were down, half dead, hurting bad, surrounded by my enemies. I look into her eyes, trying to find the answer. She sees me. She recognizes me - I am the one who will end her life. We share a bloody intimacy.

As Joker lifts his grease gun she is praying in French. He jerks the trigger. BANG!

The squad is silent.

Then Donlon grunts, flashes a big grin.

"Man, you are one hard dude."

Stutton and Liccardi are standing beside him.

Stutton says, "Joker, that's a well done. You're hard."

Animal Mother spits. He takes a step, kneels, zips out his machete. With one powerful blow he chops off her head.

He picks the head up by its long black hair

and holds it high. He laughs and says, "Rest in pieces, bitch."

Animal Mother laughs again. He walks around and sticks the bloody ball of gore into all their faces. "Hard? Now who's hard? Now who's hard, motherfuckers?"

Animal Mother pauses, spits, throws the head into a ditch.

He picks up his M-60 machine gun, lays it across his shoulders, struts over to Joker. "Nobody shits on the Animal, motherfucker. Nobody."

Joker stares at him..

67

Up ahead, at the street corner, the rest of the platoon has moved up and are crouched and lying behind cover, under fire.

Three mortar rounds explode near their position.

Animal Mother turns and trots to the street corner.

The squad follows him.

Rafter Man says to Joker, "Let's go, we'll come back for Cowboy."

Joker doesn't say anything and slowly moves off.

Animal Mother reaches the corner. "We got the sniper - a gook bitch. Cowboy is wasted."

Sergeant Murphy frowns. "Anyone else?"

"No."

"Come on, hurry up." Sergeant Murphy shouts to Joker and Rafter Man.

Joker and Rafter Man run the last part of the way, all their gear clattering.

Sergeant Murphy points to some ruins a few hundred yards away. "We're taking fire from over there. We're getting ready to move out."

He looks at Joker and Rafter Man. "Are you two still with us?"

Rafter Man nods, eagerly. Joker looks at the ruins, "Sure."

The radio operator gives Sergeant Murphy the handset. Sergeant Murphy sticks a finger in one ear and has a short conversation. He gives the handset back to the radio man.

He creeps forward, takes out his binoculars and studies the ruins.

Several artillery rounds crash into the ruins, raising a pillar of smoke.

"Lookit! Lookit that!" Rafter Man says. "That's sex! That's pure sex!"

Sergeant Murphy gets to his feet. "Okay, rich kids, we're moving out. When we get past the fence form a line abreast, ten yards apart. Let's go!"

The platoon rise up behind Sergeant Murphy and begin to run forward.

They fan out in a line abreast.

The men begin to fire their rifles in the direction of the attack.

Joker fires his rifle.

The air is being torn.

Green tracer bullets dissect the sky.

Boots crunch in powdered stone. Equipment
slaps, clangs and rattles. People curse.

We're all running like big-assed birds. We
don't want to do this. We are all afraid.
But if you stayed behind you would be alone.
Your friends are going; you go too.

The shock of bullets punching through bricks.
Splinters of stone sting their faces.

You don't have to be who you are anymore.
You're not a person anymore. You're part of
an attack, one green object in a line of
green objects.

Bullets hit the street.

The impact of the bullets is the sound of a
covey of quail taking flight.

And sparks.

Something snaps and we're past the point of
no return. We're running fast and we aren't
going to stop. Nothing can stop us.

Sounds. Cardboard being torn. Head-on
collisions. Trains derailing. Walls falling into
the sea. Metal hornets swarm overhead.

Pictures. The dark eyes of guns; the cold
eyes of guns. Pictures blink and blur, a wall, a
tiny man, shattered blocks of stone.

JOKER, THE MARINE RUNNING.

JOKER, 8 YEARS-OLD, ARMED WITH
A PLASTIC RIFLE, RUNNING IN A
FIELD.

"Keep moving, keep moving, keep moving!!!"

People tell you what to do. Keep moving,
keep moving, keep moving. If you stop
moving, if you hesitate, your heart will stop
beating. Your legs are machines winding you
up like a mechanical toy.

JOKER, THE MARINE, RUNNING,
FIRING HIS RIFLE.

JOKER, THE 8 YEAR-OLD, FIRING
HIS TOY RIFLE.

You feel like you could run around the
world. Now the asphalt is a trampoline and
you are fast and graceful, a green jungle
cat.

JOKER, THE MARINE, RUNNING.

JOKER, THE 8 YEAR-OLD,
RUNNING.

Your feet take you up...up...over the rubble
up...up... you're loving it... you're not
human, you're an animal, you feel like a
god...you scream: "DIE! DIE! DIE, YOU
MOTHERFUCKERS! DIE! DIE! DIE!"

JOKER, THE MARINE, IS RIDDLED
WITH A BURST OF AUTOMATIC
FIRE.

JOKER, THE 8 YEAR OLD,
CLUTCHES HIS CHEST IN MOCK
AGONY AND STARTS TO CRUMPLE TO
THE GROUND. HIS IMAGE WILL
SLOW DOWN UNTIL WE HOLD ON A
FROZEN FRAME, IN A POSE
SOMETHING LIKE CAPA'S FAMOUS
SPANISH CIVIL WAR PHOTOGRAPH
OF A MAN WHO HAS JUST BEEN
FATALLY SHOT BUT WHO IS
FOREVER SUSPENDED IN MID-FALL
BY THE CAMERA.

BUT THIS PICTURE IS OF AN
8 YEAR-OLD BOY.

-68-

Cemetery. Joker's funeral. It is a bright sunny day. Joker's mother and father, pale and drawn, are grouped under a canopy facing the flag-draped casket, flanked by relatives and friends.

Joker's father speaks with difficulty. "My son... wanted passionately... to be a writer...and while he was in Vietnam he kept this notebook... which was found... on his body. I'm going to read... a few lines from it... which show... the

immense... talent... he possessed... which is now... lost... forever."

With tears in his eyes, Joker's father fumbles for a particular page of writing in the dirty, worn notebook. He finds it and begins, haltingly, to read it aloud.

"I often think about... how things were when I was ten...

"I loved to lie in bed... before the sun was up... and before I was really awake... and think of the long, exciting day ahead.

"The sky... had begun to turn pink, and the great stillness outside... gave way... to the rustling of trees... and the sound of birds...

"I went downstairs... without waking anyone... and went out into the backyard.

"The air was fragrant... and cold... and I watched the sun slowly come up from behind the mountain... and the sparrows pecking away... on the dewy grass...

"I could hardly contain... my happiness."

Joker's father is barely able to continue.

"How little I knew of the world... beyond that garden... and our town."

Joker's father is overcome by a rush of tears. His wife holds on to him. He regains some composure and continues.

"And now I want to read some poetry... by A. E. Housman... which his Mother and I... have chosen... as his... epitaph..."

"Here we lie...

because...

we did not choose...

To shame the land...
from which we sprung...
Life...
to be sure...
is nothing much to lose...
But young men think it is...
and we were young..."

Tears streaming down his face, his father slowly closes the notebook.

We see Joker's peace button pinned to the notebook cover.

†