MY WELCOME HOME STEAK

A Draftee's Vietnam War

Since I returned from the Vietnam War in 1969 I have forgotten the names of most of the men in the two units I served, the names of places, the names of ordinance and weaponry, the types of helicopters and aircraft and much of the jargon used during that time. LZ stood for landing zone. I remember that. It was one of the places where you might expect to die young. I wanted to forget as much as I could. I wanted to erase that episode of my life.

What I have not been able to forget are the six days from the morning I left my unit at Cu Chi Base Camp at the end of my tour to the morning I stepped down onto the runway at the old Municipal Airport in Kansas City, Missouri, head shaven, weighing 117 pounds. It was during those 144 hours that what I had suspected during my first days in Vietnam became clear. I had been used by my government to help perpetuate a callous and arrogant foreign policy and aid in the reelection of Lyndon Baines Johnson, then discarded onto the streets of my hometown like an empty C-ration can.

I write these words as the story of an ordinary draftee in the Vietnam War. I was but one of hundreds of thousands of young men who were robbed of their futures for a no-count conflict based on a lie and did little, if anything, for the national defense. Up front, I was not among those who spent weeks humping in the jungle, along berms of rice paddies or the banks and waters of muddy rivers, in frequent firefights, tiptoeing through a maze of mines and booby traps. Many lost limbs, faces, genitals, eyesight, hearing, wives, girlfriends and jobs. Some developed cancers and other conditions caused by exposure to Agent Orange. Most of my exposure to combat was on ambush patrols outside basecamps, on bunker guard, on resupply missions to fire bases and, later, at 25th Division headquarters, writing reports in the office of the commanding general.

I do not write here of other wars nor to disparage any of the brave servicemen and women who volunteered and believed in the Vietnam War. I honor them. I was opposed to the war based on what I knew, what I heard from some of the first veterans of the war, reporters I knew at The Kansas City Star who had been in Vietnam at the invitation of the

Pentagon in the early stages of the war, and investigative reporting based on reliable national news networks and publications. I thought of the war as misguided, politically motivated and immoral. Regardless of the time and place and circumstances of our combat duty, most of us lost something inside.

The war cost me any chance of getting into graduate school, what I had hoped to be my vocation as a research scientist in the mental health field, a writer of fiction, plays and poetry, and as a teacher of reading and writing for inner city middle school students, an ambitious agenda but I was young and curious and full of zeal. The war also took away my joy for life and my inner peace.

I write not out of bitterness but as a protestor of injustice and against the hubris of self-serving American leadership. Throughout my military service I thought of myself, not as a patriot, but as a political prisoner. I did what I was ordered to do. As did other draftees, I often acted out of fear of reprisal, going to jail or being branded as a traitor or deserter. Like it or not, we draftees were thrown together into the war against our will. I cannot speak for all of us, only for those draftees and for the enlisted men with whom I served, many of whom were not of voting age which then was still 21. We did not think of ourselves as serving our country. Our common goal was to return from the war still standing, not in a body bag or a wheel chair. We agreed among ourselves to defend one another. When the shooting started, we could not help but return fire. We had no alternative. At the same time, we were being forced to carry out orders and missions we had no faith in doing. We often heard that if we tried to avoid our duty in times of combat we might catch a bullet in the back of our heads. I never witnessed that type of event but it was often discussed. What motivated us to become effective soldiers remains complex: fear, pent-up anger, adrenaline, a natural human response to danger. I have spent many hours over the years trying to understand.

The historical backdrop of the war has been well documented in the Johnson tapes, in a tragic confessional by Robert McNamera, the Secretary of Defense during a key stage of the war, in his book, "In Retrospect," published in 1995 revealing he knew quite early in the war that the conflict was futile and could not be won; in books like "A Bright Shining Lie," by Neil Sheehan; the fictional account, "The Things They Carried," by Tim O'Brian, and in movies like "The Deerhunter," the unrealistic but metaphorically

sound account of four young men who volunteered to serve in Vietnam in search of adventure after believing the lies of a scheming government and military command. I left the movie theater feeling the same sickness I brought home with me.

One of the soldiers in the movie is depicted after his return from the war coming upon a lone deer during a one-on-one deer hunt and diverting his shot from the deer he intended to kill. Ironically, I wrote a poem entitled "Rabbit Hunting," years before I saw the movie about a hunt at an uncle's farm that was organized by my brothers and cousins to reach out to me after I came home from the war. My closing lines read: "I will not shoot another living thing. By God, I will not." And I never have.

I did not know that McNamara came close in 1965 to convincing LBJ that he could gracefully withdraw from Vietnam without admitting defeat. LBJ rejected the plan for political reasons. He sent over 500,000 troops to Vietnam out of fear that he would be accused by his Republican opponents of being soft on communism. LBJ's health began to fail so the Democrats decided to run Hubert Humphrey, a weak candidate, in his place. Humphrey also favored continuing the war. Nixon easily won the 1968 presidential election.

I also did not know that Richard Nixon was secretly negotiating with the South Vietnamese government prior to the 1968 election to wait until after the election to make a deal. He promised them that he would negotiate a better deal. Many believe that Nixon, who was not able to deliver on his treachery, was responsible for extending the war for five more years. That information, not revealed until decades later, further infuriates me. My revulsion is due to more than political beliefs or military statistics. Nixon's devious behavior, characteristic of his life and political wrongdoing, is about the lives of young, often naïve, American men and women.

As in many past wars, we were, in effect, cannon fodder.

I use the term, "cannon fodder," not to insult or demoralize those who served but to connect us with the centuries-old practice of using members of the underclass as pawns and conscripts for wars fought for booty and prestige by their wealthy and aristocratic rulers. The first known use of "cannon fodder" appeared in an anti-Napoleonic pamphlet published in 1814 by the French writer, Francis-Rene de Chateaubriand. The term gained

widespread use during and after World War I in England to describe the slaughter of solders ordered out of the trenches to be cut down en masse by German machine gun fire.

In the late 1940's and 1950's, the spread of communism was the goblin used to frighten Americans. While the Soviet Union was a very real global threat, such purveyors of American Exceptionalism as Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, and his brother, CIA Director, Allen Dulles, convinced the American people that a Communist lurked behind every tree and bush and anyone who dared challenge the conventional wisdom about American moral authority had to be a Communist sympathizer as well. This false narrative allowed presidents and Congress to support brutal dictators in countries in the Middle East like Iran, in South American countries like Argentina and Chile, in the Caribbean, like Cuba, and in South Africa and Rhodesia, as long as the dictators proclaimed themselves and their governments to be anti-communist. The competition for alliances with oil and mineral rich countries also factored into overlooking their egregious behavior.

The U.S. was already heavily involved in a covert war in Laos, unknown to the American people, beginning in the early 1950's that continued through 1975. In everyday terms, we lost that war too. l learned about the war in Laos after reading a book for a college class by the sociologist, William Lederer. "Nation of Sheep," (1960) exposed the war in Laos while at the same time contending that Americans were apathetic, passive and fearful of questioning authority. Press conferences at the Pentagon then were little more than meetings where reporters were given handouts that were seldom challenged.

One justification for the Vietnam War was based on the Domino Theory, the idea that "a communist government in one nation would quickly lead to communist takeovers in neighboring states, each falling like a perfectly aligned row of dominoes. With the exception of Laos and Cambodia, communism failed to spread throughout Southeast Asia." (History.com). President Eisenhower was convinced by his generals and political advisors that the Domino Theory should determine his approach to the growing unrest in Southeast Asia and communism and socialism in general. Their hypothesis failed miserably.

With one exception. My draft notice was the first domino in my life to fall. Much of the rest of my life fell in domino fashion, one dilemma after the other, not all but most of them because of the draft. Being drafted knocked me off course and I never fully recovered my academic status and momentum. Despite psychological therapies I undertook in the 70's, ranging from hypnosis to rebirthing, I am stuck with thinking about the Vietnam War every day of my life. After hearing the stories of many other draftees, I am not alone.

I do not recount the following events to evoke any kind of self-pity or to make excuses for the life I have lived. I do so to demonstrate how intellectuals, ideologues, non-combat politicians and opportunists safely seated in war rooms and in university offices can use unsupported theories that mistakenly lead innocent civilians into wars that have little or no bearing on their life expectancy or the country's well-being. If not confronted about their hubris, incompetence and profiteering, the cycle of unnecessary warfare at the expense of we cannon fodder in the Vietnam War will continue to be unchallenged, undocumented and often forgotten. I write my story as a personal historical document.

How I ended up in Vietnam was a combination of bad luck, my own naivety and the fact that I was born into a low-income family. I had no money to hire a lawyer to plead my case, no rich relatives, no influential friends. Being drafted was as though a monstrous hand had descended from the sky, grabbed me by the hair, carried me across the world and deposited me into the middle of a war zone in a land so foreign I could not believe it to be real. How could I, Billy Bauer, something of a street kid, be transported from the Westport District of Kansas City, Missouri to a triple canopy jungle? I had no idea that the war would change the entire course of my life, that it would dominate my thoughts and my behavior in one way or another from then on. I thought that when my time in the military was finished I could simply pick up where I left off and start over again: a false assumption I made based more on hopes and dreams than reality.

I did not know that when my military confinement ended, I would have to make a choice between being a father, provider and caregiver, and my long desired scientific and literary lives. Holding and nursing my young children, I finally was forced to choose the former. My first priority over a career in science and as a writer was to spend my life

caring for the ones I loved. As the years of my youthful aspirations flew past me, I ached for the life I might have lived, for the poems, the stories, the novels, the plays, I might have been able to write and the scientific discoveries I might have made. I did not find the two aspirations to be contradictory. Nor that creating a successful international insurance firm, a tiresome experience I had never considered or relished, would be my easiest challenge, or that writing a successful poem would be the most difficult.

I arrived at the moment of being drafted via a route I think might have tested the patience of Job. My motto as a youth and throughout my life has been, "Make Love, Write Poetry." I will not have a gravestone but those words will be inscribed on the tiny cannister that holds my ashes.

The idea of hunting down defenseless men, women and children hiding in holes in the ground for the purpose of propping up a corrupt and effete wealthy class of Vietnamese collaborators never occurred to me. Though I had the benefit of learning more about the war than the average citizen through my unexpected apprenticeship at The Kansas City Star during my college years, like many other young men and boys in the early 1960's, I did not yet know what the reality of a ground war would actually be like. Thinking back, I wonder if many of our diplomats and military leaders did either.

My family was not poor. We were simply in a low-income bracket. I just know that my mother often cried towards the end of the month worrying whether or not there would be enough money to make the house payment. Most families in our part of town shared her anxiety. Many of those families were dysfunctional, led by the man of the house, a World War II combat veteran with a drinking problem working at a low paying job he despised. My father did not have a drinking problem. He had a brain problem, commonly known at that time as manic-depressive disorder. He was not diagnosed until later in life with bipolar disease, a diagnosis that finally explained to me his odd behavior, fits of explosive anger and paranoia.

He was a Navy veteran of four years during the Great Depression and another four years during World War II. During the war he was assigned to a postal service job in San Francisco. When he returned to civilian life he was employed as clerk for the postal inspectors and worked part-time on Friday nights and Saturdays as a butcher. He worked hard. No doubt about that. He expected us to work hard too. Because I am not

mechanical, my mind usually drifting into the faraway fields of poetry and scientific curiosity, he told his friends I was "studious top heavy," a term I have not heard applied to anyone since. More often said of people like myself, my head was "in the clouds." Because of that difference between us we rarely clicked. More often than not we fought. He would not leave me alone. He could not understand my hiding in closets and in the branches of leafy trees so I could read in solitude. Despite the endless days I spent caddying, cutting grass, shoveling snow, running errands for the elderly, sitting after school with my ailing grandmother, he thought I was just lazy, that I should not have a spare moment to myself.

On my birthdays he told me again about the dream he had the night before I was born. On that date, he was in San Francisco at his naval post. He dreamed of my mother standing in the heavens with the wings of an angel holding me as a newborn child. I do not support magical thinking but it was a nice story. He did not see me until I was over a year old. I would not allow him to pick me up and hold me. I screamed and I squirmed. My mother told me that after several attempts over a number of days he became so angry he literally threw me back into the baby bed. That may have been the start of our tumultuous relationship — my father attacking me for no reason; my mother defending me — and how I earned the moniker, "that brat."

He was a good man. He and my mother made for memorable, if not extravagant, Christmases. Though our individual gifts were for necessities — a belt, socks, underwear, shirts, —they usually gave us group gifts like board games and story time records. One Christmas they gave us an electric train which we were allowed to share during the holiday season. My father built a platform for the tracks that could be propped against a wall down in the basement after The Epiphany, the coming of the three kings, that ended the Roman Catholic Christmas holiday season.

For a period of time we lived an ordinary childhood. What we did not have in the way of toys or games, we invented ourselves. We did not have access to tennis rackets or tennis courts so we invented a game called, "Sweeper Ball." We took discarded tennis balls and two brooms. The boundaries of the sidewalk, some of its cement sections slightly crooked or elevated, served as our sweeper ball court. The idea was to sweep the ball back and forth. If the ball went out of bounds or past the other player, the sweeper

made a point. We made kites out of paper sacks and thin sticks from the box elder tree in our backyard. The kite string sold for nickels at the area dime store. We cut up grocery sacks, used crayons and a needle and thread to make books and tell stories. We climbed the jungle gyms at the local public school grounds. The public library kept us with an endless supply of reading material. The library itself as a cool place where we could spend an hour out of the summer heat.

The same father worked a second job as a butcher on Friday nights and Saturdays. When he came home on Saturday night, he wrestled with us or we sat in a circle passing around little sips of homebrew from a malt can and eating popcorn. We laughed a lot then. Laughed until he suddenly changed.

I never saw that father again after he "cracked," the only term I knew to use at the time. I might have been about seven years old. His change may have been due to the onset of bipolar disease or his anxiety about an attempt by the Navy to call him back to duty during the Korean War. Or simply the burden of providing for six, then ten, children. I remember two fathers, the father before and the father after. He seemed to have lost his joy, to have become angry, fearful, paranoid, even cruel.

He wanted our household to operate like a ship's crew and was frustrated that his children rebelled against his rigid routines. He bragged to his friends about wanting to father twelve apostles. Some of us turned away from his strict Roman Catholic beliefs and practices. Except for the artistic wonders of magnificent cathedrals, I feel sick at my stomach walking into a church; for me, a reminder of the relentless, empty, meaningless hours I spent on hard wooden benches looking into the same stained glass windows for some kind of imaginary adventure. As I read more in college and experienced more in life, I decided I would not be ruled by hypocritical and ignorant Medieval beliefs, 15th century papal decrees and staid European mores.

I remember a moment in the sixth grade when I, at age eleven, mentally left the Roman Catholic Church for good, left a belief system that my father practiced scrupulously down to its most finite detail. Over time, after exploring other religions and lifestyles, I gave up on all religions and spiritual practices. I have written them off as magical or wishful thinking. I am by predisposition a sensualist. I crave bright colors, tactile variety and sensations, musical flights, sexual pleasure — the wellspring of my

energy and hopefulness. The church preached against enjoying the full range of human life, elevating suffering over pleasure. I was forced to sit and listen to one lecture after another about the sinfulness of masturbation and fornication. I thought to myself: "Hey, these people don't know what they're talking about. Jacking-off is fun, harmless and worth looking forward to." If the priests were wrong about one of the most important of human activities, what else were they wrong about? I dismissed them and their backward thinking, wiped them out of my thoughts. I wanted an honest, sensual, artistic, erotic life. The more I read about American history, the more I saw that our culture had been infected by the narrow and controlling limitations of Puritanism. Despite the brief interludes of the 1960's and the sexual revolution, which frightened many Americans, Puritanism remains a deep, controlling and destructive influence on our laws and social relationships. I object to its crooked, hypocritical, scolding finger.

I dreaded the relentless sing-song rhythm of saying the rosary and kneeling in a perfect posture, hands folded, punched in the back by my father for being restless or scratching an itch in the heat and humidity of summer. One night my brother Larry, who later developed into a full blown paranoid schizophrenic, sat back on his haunches. My father rose up from behind us and began pummeling him. Another brother and I yanked him off Larry and pummeled him back. My mother intervened. After we settled down, my father forced us to continue to finger the beads until we reached the merciless end of the rosary chain and its elaborate crucifix.

Every Lenten Season for two nights a week we had to sit through a grueling and repetitious religious exercise called, "Forty Hours Devotion," a series of prayers, sermons, and hymns designed to punish us for The Crucifixion and satisfy the masochistic needs of troubled parishioners. Sitting through that boring, dragged-down experience was maddening. For me, a form of self-flagellation. I wanted to rise up and scream. Perhaps the practice of restraining myself helped me when I was able to hold off from exploding during the monotonous classes and exercises I was forced to endure during my military training camps.

Benedictine nuns taught us at Guardian Angel's grade school. Their cruelty at that time in the 1950's has often been described. Our little school had seven grades. The first half of the first year was called Primer; the second half, First Grade. I was five years

old when I went to Primer. By the time I was in sixth grade, I had become not only a skeptic, a doubter, but a full-blown cynic. My cynicism applied both to religion and to the world at large. Adults said one thing. They did another. Hypocrisy, mythology and lies were the rules of the game. I was introduced there to irony.

My church of choice came to be the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art in Kansas City, Missouri. The children of my family shared a bicycle that had been pieced together with spare parts. Starting in fifth grade at age ten I was tasked with riding the bike to the Manor Bakery in the historic Westport District to buy the day-old bread. I learned to be crafty in negotiating the hectic traffic on Westport Road and across the Southwest TrafficWay. The bike had no basket. I dangled a loaf of bread on each of the handles of the bike by the ends of the packaging to avoid crushing the bread. The regular weekly errand gained me more access to the bike and afternoons when I could meander through the Westport area and The Country Club Plaza where there were a number of shops and restaurants surrounded by neighborhoods of elegant older homes and then further east to the grounds and steps of the art gallery. An older guard, Ed, dressed in what resembled a police uniform, stood watch at the front entrance and initially refused me access. I needed to be accompanied by an adult. I showed up so often that Ed, a taciturn man, slowly opened up to me. On one particular autumn afternoon, the parking lot empty, he asked me if I wanted a tour. From then on, with Ed by my side, I eventually saw most of the rooms in the gallery, from the ancient artifacts to the large Renaissance paintings to the scrolls in the Oriental Art section. I was struck most by the painting of *John The Baptist In The Wilderness* by Caravaggio, a rare work that I gazed into whenever I could. I had the grandiose idea that I was the youth sitting there, puzzled and hurt, stuck in a destiny I had not asked for.

My recollection of our home is of the color gray, my day-to-day experiences bland and confining. I did not want a drab, bleak, everyday life. I wanted strong bright colors and the breezy outdoors. I found my father's sudden outrages and strange behaviors to be absurd. As did many of his friends and former grade school classmates. As a boy he had been teased and bullied because he spoke German until he was six years old. He had a slightly darker complexion. Some thought he was Jewish. He had learned early in his life of the cruelty of humankind and took out his pain and frustration on his

rebellious children. During his physical attacks and unexplained outbursts, I began to call him "crazy" to his face and fight back blow for blow when he attacked me for no reason at all. When my mother tried to intervene on my behalf, he also verbally attacked her for taking sides with "that brat." One night after a brawl that started in the kitchen and ended in the bedroom I shared with three of my brothers, she sat in the dark on the side of the bed, started crying and said, "I never wanted it to be like this. I never wanted…" We never spoke of that night again.

During those years I also reassessed the meaning of "home." In one sense, I felt homeless; that I had never really had a traditional home. I did not feel I belonged where I lived. To me, "Home," was not a place or a history. I felt different than my brothers and sisters. They were fine human beings but I was not one of them. I did not fit. Home, I declared, resided inside myself. A place, a group of persons, did not provide me with what I thought a home to be — a place of safety from the dragons that roamed the outside world.

I entered high school in the decade of leather jackets, switch blades, brass knuckles, tire chains and heroin. I was thirteen. Though I drank alcohol and smoked cigarettes when they were available, I feared other drugs. Some of the students at my school were deep into them. As well as having sex, committing burglaries, shoplifting, picking pockets and petty theft. They took pleasure in rumbles, a way, I thought, to assert some form of power. Boredom, both in school and on the streets added to it. Their families had little money, just enough to pay for rent or a mortgage, food and gas. One group of girls had a shoplifting ring. They were caught and convicted. We never saw them again. Some of the freshmen and sophomore girls became pregnant. They too disappeared from the school halls. The academic curriculum was uninspiring to most. Reading the classics had little appeal when rock and roll was the medium of the day.

I do not regret my own behavior early in my high school years though it was risky and sometimes dangerous. More important to me, what I did in the time I had to myself felt genuine. That was the real me, defying authority, going places and doing things I was told not to do. I feared and disrespected the police. I came to see them as psychopaths in uniform. I had an uncle who was a perfect example of the type of cop I came to know.

He was a brutal, mean, callous man, eventually fired from two police departments for shooting out the front windows of cars while out of uniform during episodes of road rage.

Three friends in my immediate neighborhood like also needed a way to release their discontent. Once my parents were asleep, I snuck out of a downstairs bedroom window and joined them to buy watered down 3 & 2 beer at the back door of a bar on the Kansas side of the state line. We walked around for hours discussing our mutual plights, our need to escape our backward circumstances, then slipped back into our homes before the morning wakeup call. Since my father brewed his own beer in crocks lined up down the basement, our house had a faint odor of alcohol and mold that covered any scent from the beer we sipped on our nighttime wanderings. I ate and swallowed the toothpaste whole just in case. The four of us shared a mutual cynicism, about adults, about the country, about the church, our own take of adolescent fatalism. We faced the consequences of being caught, of being arrested by the police who often chased after us, of perhaps being sent to reform school. After some close calls, we decided that the mundane was better than reform school. We developed strategies to avoid the police patrols, choosing certain streets, backyards and shadowy porches, learned to roll under cars parked on the street.

During this time, I also came to see that my father was stuck in his family's Old World legacies. He was second generation and still locked in traditions that had been drilled into him, rituals that were hammered into his thoughts and everyday behaviors. His father, my grandfather, depending on the circumstances, was both rebellious and compliant. His son voiced the conflicting forces of the thankful immigrant and the emerging individualist. From my father I learned not to take any crap from outside the family on the chin. He taught me activism. He introduced me to politics. Rather than simply complaining about our neighborhood's shortcomings, he became a member of the Community Council, a predecessor to today's home associations. He was instrumental in convincing the city to set aside a piece of land a few blocks from our home as a park with a baseball diamond and a sleigh hill so we would have a place to play. When I was eleven he took me to my first meeting of the Westport Community Democratic Club, one of Harry Truman's political groups. When I returned from Vietnam I worked as a volunteer in two of U.S. Representative Richard Bolling's successful congressional

campaigns. During one of them I rode shotgun in a run-down station wagon with Bolling's second wife nicknamed "Jim," a cigar smoking liberal, delivering water and food to campaign workers at polling sites around the city. I can still hear her crusty voice shouting out, "We gotta get those kids some chicken."

If only my father had not been so authoritarian, so paranoid, so troubled, such a perfectionist, so bound to extreme religious beliefs, maybe we… Which is the flaw of "*if only*" — two of the sorriest words in the human vocabulary.

With my hidden stash of caddy money, I became the first kid on the block to buy a 45 rpm record: Elvis Presley's "Don't Be Cruel," followed by Gene Vincent's "Bebopalula." Those two records began a lifelong love of rock and roll, folk music and jazz which led me eventually to an appreciation of classical music, music I had rarely heard played on the small 45 rpm record player in the living room.

My favorite class in high school was geometry. Not for the theorems, geometric shapes, the concepts of distance, size and the relative position of figures. But for what I was able to do outside of the hour set aside for geometry class and the hours that followed. The teacher's regular job at the school was that of basketball coach, a good one who produced a Class II state championship. He was assigned to teach geometry probably because the school had a limited budget. Just as the football coach was assigned to teach shop, which consisted of tracing maps on drafting boards. During my sophomore year, the diocese closed down three high schools. The students were transferred to the remaining schools. Our school got the top basketballs players. They led the school to its one state championship. Coach spent a great deal of time with one of those players. He was unusually tall but had not been trained in the skills of a basketball center. His older brother happened to be the bat boy for the Kansas City Athletics. The family lived across the street from the old Municipal Stadium. Because of Coach's interest in his younger brother, his family was able to get Coach the job of clubhouse manager for the visiting teams in the American League. Like most teachers, Coach needed a summer job. Previously, he had worked as the caddy master at the country club where I caddied. He knew me as a reliable caddy, one who was often asked for by many of the key members. He found a minder for his geometry classes and took two of us down to the ballpark in the spring and fall to help prepare the clubhouse for incoming

visiting teams. I worked major league baseball games for two years. That was my geometry class. Aside from learning to dodge the gang wars in central Kansas City, my experiences at the ballpark, like a deli job at a gourmet grocery a few years later, gave me insights into other angles of life I would never have been exposed to.

Coach did not pay us. The players did. The routine was for their individual wooden trunks to be delivered the day before a series began. At that time, Charlie Finley owned the Kansas City Athletics. The A's locker room was lined with indoor/outdoor carpet, spacious, air conditioned and supplied with beer, cigarettes, candy, ice cream bars, chewing gum and chewing tobacco. The visitor's locker room where I worked was cramped, had a cement floor and no air conditioning. That was Charlie Finley for you, a precursor perhaps, of Donald Trump. In other words, a cheater and a chickenshit. Each player had a stall. It was our job to unload each player's box, clean their cleats and gather their uniforms so that they could be washed and dried in two industrial sized machines. We put their names at the top of each stall, folded their uniforms and lined up their cleats. Each stall had a wooden bench for them to sit on. When a series was over, we lined up our baseball hats, upside down, on a small table by the back door. The players filed by us to get on the airport bus and dropped money, sometimes five and ten dollar bills if they had a good series, into our hats. We split the take. It was money we would not otherwise have had, a job that allowed us to rub elbows with world famous ballplayers and watch some of the game between errands for the players as we ran up and down the ramp to fetch the players and coaches on the bench cheeseburgers and hot dogs.

I met players like Mickey Mantle, Yogi Berra, Herb Score and Minnie Minoso. As Coach's senior clubhouse boy, I was assigned to Casey Stengel. The visiting team's manager was only granted a small room with a desk and chair. I am probably one of the few people in the world to have seen the great Casey Stengel buck naked. He had a routine. I would knock on the door of the makeshift office, his uniform, ball cap and underwear in my arms, and wait for him say, "Come on in." I opened the door and stepped inside. Casey faced the far wall, completely undressed. The first time, shocked, I turned to leave. He looked over his shoulder towards me and said, "Put 'em on the chair, son."

One September afternoon when the Yankees won the pennant in the first game of a doubleheader, I inadvertently walked across the room behind two players being interviewed by CBS, tripped on one of the cables and was quickly waved off the screen. My first and only appearance on national television. In my adolescent fog, I often had missteps like that.

There was an incident involving Mickey Mantle that hangs heavy in my memories of those days at the ballpark. It happened on a cloudy, hot, humid day with intermittent showers. As the game ended and the Yankees walked up the ramp to the clubhouse, I was tasked to close and lock the gate of the chain link fence that separated the players from the fans who regularly gathered to see the players up close, wave at them and hope for a wave or smile back. Mantle passed a man in his thirties seated in a wheel chair with long, wet, stringy hair and a Kansas City A's ballcap. He might have been waiting for a front row spot against the fence throughout the entire game. He pulled an 8 x 11 photo of Mantle he had bought at one of the concession stands from under a jacket on his lap and called out:

"Hey, Mick, how about an autograph?"

Mantle kept his head down and gave the man a disdainful, "Nah," waving off the fan's eager request and continued slowly up the ramp without even a quick side glance. I saw the man's face droop.

"Here," I said to him. "Give it to me. Maybe I can get him to sign it."

He reluctantly handed the photograph to me.

I waited until the players settled down from their usual adolescent grab-ass antics and until I saw Mantle sitting glumly on the bench of his stall. I didn't know about his heavy drinking and suppose now that he was probably just hung over and cranky.

"Hey, Mick," I said, pen and clip board in hand, showing him the photograph.

"Think you could sign this for my cousin. He's a real fan."

"Sure," he said and signed it for me.

I waited until he wasn't looking and slipped out the door back down onto the ramp. The drizzle had stopped. The man in the wheelchair was just being wheeled away from the fence by a friend. I yelled to catch him.

"Hey," I shouted, pulling the photograph from under my shirt. "I got it! I got it!"

The man in the wheelchair glared at me.

"Keep it," he snapped. "I don't want it now." He looked aside with a scowl as his friend continued to back him away from the fence.

I knew not to bug him about it. There was a trash barrel outside the clubhouse door. I tossed the autographed picture of Mantle in it. I didn't want it either. Not after that.

As we moved through high school our little band of miscreants and I lost contact. We went to different schools, had different agendas. After I began working part-time in the deli of a gourmet grocery store, at the ballpark and caddying on weekends, I discovered other worlds besides the one in which I had felt incarcerated. Most of the customers I served in the deli were wealthy. I saw good wealthy and ugly wealthy. More importantly, I watched how "sophisticated" and better educated people behaved, how they dressed, how they spoke. I saw the contrast between them and me. I knew that these differences were superficial but helpful. In some ways the wealthy were like me, like the rest of humanity. In other ways, not. From them I learned how to behave more like privileged, upper class people just by watching how they carried themselves. I learned that asking questions was one of the best ways to enrichen my knowledge of the world. I tucked that information away. It helped me deal with a more sophisticated clientele when I founded an international insurance firm in 1979.

I was the first in my family to pay my way through college. My father did not want me to go. He could not understand why I wanted to continue to study. He wanted me to work for the government like he did and be able to afford moving out of the house so he did not have so many mouths to feed. "What?" he asked about his life. "Not good enough?" I ignored him. Instead, by luck and serendipity, I was able to claw my way through my college courses and work at the same time. A half-time scholarship to Rockhurst College (now Rockhurst University), a prestigious all-male Jesuit school at the time, came my way by chance.

My high school in Kansas City would take more than a decade after my graduation to be labeled an inner city school. A once thriving middle class school, it was located in a deteriorating neighborhood with a rising crime rate. My parents insisted that we attend Catholic schools, even though mine was located halfway across town from

where we lived. The school was operated by nuns of the same Benedictine Order under the supervision of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, and not the best of schools under any conditions. The classrooms were crowded; discipline a major issue. I think my teachers did what they could. The students were mostly low-income whites, with a small number of Mexicans, African-Americans and a group of troubled teenagers who were bused in from a boy's home for abandoned children and teenage felons. Getting there required me to walk several blocks to a bus stop, then make two transfers that left me four blocks from the school. The greatest lessons I learned in high school were how to survive those four blocks from the bus stop to the school without getting jumped. What I learned academically during those years I learned mostly on my own. By senior year I had read most of Hemingway's stories and novels. At that juncture, my library card was the key to my literary education; a scholarship, my foot in the door to the possibility of a college degree.

Rockhurst College, an all-male school in the 60's, had a program that provided the top boy in each of the inner city Catholic schools of the diocese with a half-time scholarship for two years. (They wanted kids like me to "work for" the rest). I was only second in my senior high school graduation class. The top male in our graduation class of 1961 was a student with a 4.0 average who had the unfortunate circumstance of needing to support his elderly parents and work full time to care for them. I was awarded the scholarship by default. That was my good luck.

The summer before my first college semester, I quit the deli and went to work full time for higher pay at a plastics factory helping to cut fiberglass. OSHA had not yet been passed and we worked without masks or special clothing. The Kansas City summers are hot and humid and when I came home from work I needed to take a bath and soap down to remove the tiny sharp specks given off by the fine fiberglass dust. Our home did not have a shower or air conditioning. There was a window fan in the downstairs bedroom where I slept. One afternoon after a bath I lay unclothed on the bed in the bedroom to cool down. The temperature outside was easily in the high 90's. My father walked into the room, saw me, and immediately went into a rage, yanked me off the bed, threw me against the wall and pummeled me as he often did, accusing me of ruining the old, ragged

bedspread. I fought back, and after my mother pulled us apart, he stomped off into the kitchen repeating "That brat. Always that brat."

Our fistfight occurred a month short of my seventeenth birthday, I had had enough. I had no suitcase so I followed the classic hobo routine of stuffing some of my clothing and odds and ends into a pillow case. I had hidden about four hundred dollars under the lining of the top drawer of the dining room buffet and folded the bills into my blue jeans pocket. From sophomore year in high school my father had forced me to pay him forty dollars a month for rent and help him with work around the house, such as cooking, cleaning and mowing the yard. I figured the rest of my earnings were mine. I had worked for my money since I was ten years old. At age fourteen, I began working in the deli after school, losing out on most of the school's social activities. But I had learned how to make money which spurred a second lifetime motto that I later applied to the business world: "1. Find out who's got the money. 2. Figure out how to get it away from them." I called the two rules, "Bauer's Laws of Economics."

For a few days after I left the house, happy to have escaped its poisonous atmosphere, I secretly slept on the front porch gliders at the homes of two of my friends. I hid in the bushes outside their houses and waited until the lights went out. My friends whispered to me out of their bedroom windows to give me the all clear. When the sun woke me, I slipped back down the steps, took a leak behind the first leafy tree I could find and walked to work at the plastics factory. When my friends told me they thought their parents were becoming suspicious, I slept a few nights on a wooden bench under a large maple tree at Westwood Park, four blocks from my parent's house. I finally found a flop house close to the plastics factory for four dollars a day. It was just a shabby little room with no fan or air conditioning, a sagging stained mattress, a sink and a hot plate. There was a community bathroom and shower down the hall. The janitor of the building was a known pedophile who wouldn't leave me alone. I drank his beer, listened to his stories and found a way to leave before he could put a move on me. I lived there for two months until a friend of a friend offered me a basement apartment at her father's house for fifty dollars a month. It wasn't a real apartment. It had a bed on top of a linoleum square, a crudely installed toilet and shower, a kitchen counter and sink, and a hot plate. I

could hear the rats at night clatter across the linoleum. Even so, it was a place to stay out of the rain and snow that helped me get by.

With that kind of set up and my salary at the plastics factory, I figured I had enough money saved, along with my scholarship, to attend at least one college semester. After that, I had no plans. Then, I discovered the true meaning of serendipity. It took the form of a 40-to-50 an hour a week job at The Kansas City Star. I worked on the night shift on the editorial floor. The morning newspaper was called The Kansas City Times. The job came to me this way:

As a high school freshman I tried out for the junior varsity football squad. I was short and slight in stature and barely made the team. I had no real athletic skills but I got to play, I like to think, by means of cunning. I found ways to trick and go around a lineman, to dodge a tackler. During a practice session the following summer when I tried out again for the junior varsity team, I tackled the team's star quarterback during a practice scrimmage. He was a talented player who went on to become the quarterback for the Missouri Tigers and later as its head football coach. I tackled him head on and I was slow, very slow, getting up. After practice the coach pulled me aside off of the field and said:

"Billy, you've got a lot of heart and guts. But son, you're just too damned small to play varsity football. You'll get yourself hurt. I can't let you do that. How about you becoming the team manager?"

I had no choice but to agree and pouted around in the following weeks in visible disappointment. I had a great friend in a nun, an English teacher named Sister Philomena, who discussed books and writing with me after school and the problems I was having with my father as well as my dangerous and risky behaviors on the streets at night. Sister Philomena could tell how depressed I was not to be able to play football, the one extracurricular activity I truly enjoyed and the only way I could safely avoid my father by staying after school for football practice several afternoons a week.

"Billy," she said one day after school. "I have an idea for you. You are a good writer and the school newspaper could really use a sports column. Think about it."

At that time there was a columnist at The Kansas City Star I admired by the name of Bill Vaughan who wrote a column called, "Starbeams." He was called a

“paragrapher,” meaning his column was in the form of short witty comments on politics and social issues. Over the next few days I wrote several sample sports columns in the paragrapher style and left them on Sister Philomena’s desk.

The next morning she greeted me at the front door of the school with a flushed, highly excited face.

"I have a great name for your column," she said. "BB Shots!"

I personally found the name to be corny and embarrassing but I didn't want to dampen her enthusiasm. She had used my initials, “BB” and combined it with “Shots,” because my columns included a lot of wisecracking. I realized I would be guaranteed some regular ink in the school paper and another reason to stay after school to work on the paper’s staff. After I began my job at the gourmet grocery, I didn’t need to use that excuse but continued to write my column. I hadn’t yet turned fifteen.

BB Shots came into play when I was invited to attend a fraternity rush party during my first semester at Rockhurst. The rush party was held on a chilly October day in the student union and I arrived at the party in my high school uniform: a raggedy black trench coat with thirteen inches of tire chain in my right pocket. I had a general idea about fraternities and fraternity houses but no hope of having the time or money to belong to one. I thought I might at least get some free food and lively conversation. I signed in at the door, filled out a name tag, stuck it on my trench coat and stood in one corner of the student lounge observing what I considered to be a group of squirrelly suburbanites in royal blue blazers decorated with a gold coat of arms shaking hands and pretending to be good old boys like their fathers. In my neighborhood trying to shake hands might have been an occasion for being laughed at or punched in the face.

A senior member of the fraternity walked up to me. He wasn’t wearing the customary blazer. He was rather shabbily dressed as was the custom of well-to-do hippie wannabes of that era, sporting well-worn, fashionable desert boots. In summer I suspected he might have been flopping around in dusty sandals. Like me, he wore a name tag. First name, Harry.

"I noticed your name on the roster," he said. "Are you the Bill Bauer who writes BB Shots?"

I took a step back.

"How do know about that?"

"Well, I work on the sports desk at the Kansas City Star," he said. "High schools send us their newspapers to be evaluated. Your school sent the sports desk your school's paper because of your column. I've been reading it for three years. I've really enjoyed it."

I couldn't help but beam. Gosh, a compliment.

"Here's the thing though," he said. "How would you like to work on the sports desk with me at The Star? I can't work full time anymore. I'm involved in too many activities. And I want to enjoy the last semester of my senior year."

I'm not that quick on my feet, a slow learner. I was thinking money.

"How much does it pay?" I asked.

"Two hundred a month."

I calculated. It would be tight. But maybe I could still caddy on the weekends or work part-time at the gourmet grocery. I had already applied for and was granted a work-study job in the school library.

"What would I do?"

"You'd come in at about four in the afternoon," Harry said. "You'd answer the phone, give out scores, look up answers to sports questions in the sports encyclopedia, take copy to the pressroom, run errands. You'd get off around one or two in the morning after the last edition is put to bed. After a while, you'll take down the high school and small college scores that the stringers call in, do some typing, write some high school sports stories and sports shorts like holes-in-one. That kind of thing. If you're good at it you can always ask to move over to the news desk later on."

That was not only a career break. The job may have saved my life several years later on the Cambodian Border.

One of the chores to which I was assigned in my work-study job was to create an alphabetized index card file for every book written by a philosopher or theologian in the Rockhurst College Library. That was before the existence of the internet. Every book in the library was catalogued alphabetically on an index card based on The Dewey Decimal System. The request was made by an English professor who had a project of attempting to correlate literature and philosophy. The project allowed me to at least know the names

of philosophers and theologians other than Aristotle, Plato, Descartes and Thomas Aquinas. In the process I was introduced to linguistics, an area of personal interest that taught me more about ancient and world history than I learned in any of my required history classes.

At the time, I was dating Patti, a high school sweetheart. She and her family were worried about my leaving home. I met her senior year in high school on a Friday night at a 50's drive through restaurant. We immediately started dating on a regular basis. She was one of two daughters of a comfortable middle class family. Unlike my household, her family knew how to have fun. Her father, Jim, treated me as the son he'd never had. Her mother, Fairy, was always kind and glad to see me. I spent many memorable evenings and meals at their home. They had a large circle of friends. They included me in their parties and holiday events. As we moved on to college, Patti studied to be an R.N. I signed up for a B.A. in English Literature. The two of us broke up, got back together, several times. We teased and joked with each other. I don't know if we were just friends or romantically involved but we assumed that one day we probably would get married. It was the thing to do then. She cared about me and I cared about her. We shared the ups and downs of our college experiences. We made out but never had sex. She, and most of her friends, students of a Roman Catholic girls high school, seemed adverse to having sex before marriage. At least, that's what they said. Patti and I shared the same humanitarian values with one notable exception. I thought she was much more materialistic than I was. I didn't care about social prestige, having a large house, expensive clothes and cars. As her friends married, built homes, "moved up" in the world, she grew increasingly jealous, competitive and resentful of them.

Nevertheless, I became one of her family. After I introduced them to my father, inviting he and my mother over for dinner on a few occasions, and being insulted by him despite their hospitality, her family quickly understood why I had left home at such an early age, how obnoxious, insecure and disturbed he was.

One Sunday afternoon Jim plopped some juicy looking porterhouse steaks on the outside grill. My father, standing next to him and me, said, "Oh we don't eat those kinds of steaks. We eat regular round steak." He was jealous and Jim could see that.

"Well, that's too bad, Bill. This is what we're having today."

My father went quiet but he put on a big show of how difficult it was to cut a bite of the beautiful steak Jim served him. My father and mother were never invited there for dinner again. I felt humiliated. Patti and I laughed about it. She did learn what she might be getting into with my family.

I studied and wrote papers and read for my undergraduate courses between editions at The Star, napped in chairs and sofas in the student lounge while the dorm students and privileged sons of alumni played cards, chess and shot the breeze. I tried to schedule my classes and labs in the morning so I would make it to The Star on time. I had some complaints about this schedule from my advisors. Once I explained my situation to them, they cut me some slack. I was just happy to have a partial scholarship and a chance to go to college. I worked away in muted defiance of my father's plans for me.

Everyone has a few special gifts. One of mine was as a fast and effective skim reader. My reading ability allowed me to identify, consume and retain key segments of course material in quick, short bursts, even when being interrupted. I could write papers as fast as I talked. I researched my papers during work-study lulls in the library where I was often rudely awakened from involuntary naps by the aged Jesuit librarian, my face down in a puddle of drool on a page of a reference book.

By chance, I had the benefit of two mentors: Father Robert Lakas, a Jesuit priest of some celebrity — and controversy— and Casey Jones, the city editor of the Kansas City Times. Both furthered my knowledge outside the classroom in ways I would not have discovered on my own.

Father Lakas was well known as the priest who had counseled the Greenlease family after the kidnapping and murder of their son, Bobby Greenlease in 1953, a kidnapping sometimes compared to the infamous Lindbergh kidnapping. Aside from that, he was a formidable, charismatic man, acquainted with many famous writers, a renaissance man with PhDs in literature, psychology and philosophy from Yale. Possibly, because of his relationship with the wealthy Greenlease family, he had been adopted, as far as I could tell, as a sage among other wealthy Catholics in the city. When he preached at the 10 o'clock mass at St. Francis Church, also known as The Fish Church, across the street from the college, he filled the pews by presenting sermons in the form of scholarly scriptural and historical lectures. He was engaged in the social and

political unrest of the 60's in his role as a Jesuit priest, often inviting criticism from the more conservative members of the church. He was also criticized for holding Bloody Mary parties after the 10 o'clock mass to continue discussions of issues he raised during his sermons. Students, myself included, were encouraged to attend them as a form of enrichment. We liked the free Bloody Marys just as much as the conversation.

Lakas, naturally flamboyant when he swept into a room, was actually a humble man who strictly honored his vow of chastity. Given the inevitable limelight he often was surrounded and sought after by a throng of wealthy women which also added to the glamour of the event. While he quietly disagreed with many of the teachings of the church, he often repeated that he had sworn to adhere to his vows of obedience and chastity. A group of some of the older church members finally succeeded in having him banned from the pulpit after he introduced Japanese dancers into the service in lieu of an Offertory hymn and hung secular paintings of local artists on the church walls. He complied without protest and continued to teach. But he lost his progressive pulpit and the church lost his enlightened perspective.

I wrote a short story in his Freshman English class that he asked me to read aloud. I don't remember the title of the story or what it was about. I followed with other stories and papers that he openly admired. At the end of the semester he stopped me outside the classroom after the other students had left and said, "You are the first student I've taught here who is a real writer. I'd like for you to come with me this Sunday after church to meet some friends of mine."

On Sunday he took me to the home of an older couple in Mission Hills, at that time one of the wealthiest per capita townships in the country, and introduced me to them as an up-and-coming writer. I think I might have completely blown what might have been an "interview". I was so totally overwhelmed by the house, by the conversation, by the stately hosts that I sat there frozen, unremarkable. I didn't know if the hosts were liberal or conservative, what to say, what not to say. Maybe they were looking for a student to sponsor? Though I had two more semesters of his classes, Lakas never invited me again. While I felt abandoned and hurt, what he had said to me outside of class that one morning was enough to keep me writing throughout the rest of my life.

My experiences at The Star opened my eyes to a wider world. The editorial floor was one large room on the second floor of the building with rows of desks and typewriters constantly clicking and quickly being zipped to the next line. The Star's president and largest stockholder — The Star was owned by its employees — had a large office in one corner; the photo department was segregated in an opposite section off the main floor. The Associated Press occupied the third floor and exchanged pneumatic tubes of copy up and down with The Star. The Star at that time was a rough and tumble place. I watched reporters and photographers get into fistfights and roll over desks. I saw celebrities like Bobby Kennedy and Truman Capote, who was working on *In Cold Blood* at the time, come and go. The writers on the Sports Desk were witty, fun loving and knowledgeable about more subjects than sports. They teased me, joked with me, let me be one of the team.

I had seen Casey Jones at his desk on the news side and knew his title as the city editor of the The Times, the larger morning paper, but had not spoken directly with him. One late afternoon Roy Roberts, the Star's President (whom I did not know), long thick cigar in hand, lit and smoking, asked me to give him the winner of a horse race, information I was not supposed to give out until later in the day.

"Sorry," I said. "I can't tell you that until after nine o'clock."

"That's your job, you know," he said.

"I know what my job is," I snapped back and answered a phone call. He winced and walked away.

Casey soon followed.

"I see you just met Roy Roberts," he said.

Shit. I thought I was going to be fired. There went my smart mouth again.

"Uh, yeah," I said.

Sitting next to me on my desk was a copy of *"The Golden Bowl*," by Henry James.

"Ah," he said. "I see your reading Mr. James."

From then on, he frequently stopped by to see what I was reading, to discuss literature, art and music.

Casey was a curator and on the board at the The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. He invited me several times to have lunch with him in a small dining room for art gallery staff and then took me on tours of the gallery. Like Ed, the two of us shared an interest in oriental art. Casey explained many aspects of art I would never have known. To this day I haven't had the time to be educated or to educate myself in the full range of art, literature or music. What I know is spotty and incomplete. Casey served as one of my few mentors. The rest was up to me to discover on my own.

After a year and a half on the sports desk Casey allowed me to switch to the news side. I began as a copy boy, then wrote the traditional cub reporter obits. There were no computers or mobile phones. When a reporter in the field needed to get breaking news to the office in time for the morning edition, they dictated their stories over the phone. I began typing those kinds of stories and later was allowed to take down the information and write some of the stories myself. I spent time at the police department desk downtown and in Kansas City, Kansas, answering the phone, phoning in notes scribbled by harried reporters, occasionally accompanying them to crime and accident scenes.

Now and then, usually on Friday nights after the final edition was being printed, Casey would invite several of the younger reporters to his apartment on the The Plaza, not far from The Nelson. I was excited to be included. Casey would cook, explaining how he cooked, demonstrating basic steps in the cooking process. Most memorable were his eggs sherry. He showed me how to make a martini. I had never had one. It was a long walk from The Plaza to my basement apartment just off The Paseo but I walked with my head full of ideas and a slight buzz of gin.

During my time at The Star I often wandered to one section of the editorial floor where the feature writers worked. I discussed Ernest Hemingway's days at the The Star with Landon Laird who was a contemporary of Hemingway who had worked in 1918 at The Star. I talked to Laird often about World War I and The Great Depression.

I had not only read about the Vietnam War in newspapers and national magazines and closely followed the daily battlefield and casualty reports on television but also stayed late at The Star to hear what the senior reporters returning from the war had to say. Some of my friends and fellow students had joined the Army or Marines during the

Cuban Missile Crisis. Knowing them, I figured these enlistees were just bored with their lives and college humdrum, wanted to find a short cut to a career or were deluded patriots. I felt no sense of national emergency and had no concept of what it might mean to flee the country into Canada or some other country. Deep down, I was still mourning the death of President Kennedy and what I felt was the premature end of a meaningful vision for America.

The Times' reporters and editors had a tradition they called the "fire run," when, after an unusually hectic news night, they gathered with a few cases of beer to discuss the day's events. I sat quietly behind them. Like Casey, they never questioned my age. For me, the fire run was a few free beers and a lot of real life information.

In 1963 some of the top reporters, including one of The Star's leading reporters, Robert Pearman, were invited to join the Pentagon's junkets to Vietnam during which the military took reporters, political figures, senators and congressmen to show them why they thought the war was necessary. It has been reported that the military had some concern that JFK, disillusioned by the corruption of the South Vietnam regimes, may have been considering pulling out of Vietnam. This information had come from McGeorge Bundy, one of Kennedy's national security advisors. To my knowledge, it has never been verified. However, Bundy, after resigning in 1968, did write, "There is no prospect of military victory against North Vietnam by any level of U.S. military force which is acceptable or advisable."

Pearman and some of the other reporters who had gone to Vietnam thought that the military brass was lying, that they wanted to compensate for their poor performance in Korea. They also thought the brass was in cahoots with the military-industrial complex that President Eisenhower had warned about in his farewell address. What I heard during those fire runs coincided with what I had been reading. And in 1964 after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, there was serious doubt that the U.S. battleship off the coast of Vietnam had been fired upon at all. The fire runs were the first time I had heard the word, "lies," and "deception" spoken in connection with the war. Until the Johnson tapes were released in the 1980's, LBJ's now infamous comment, "For all I know we could have been firing at whales out there," had not been widely reported.

Though I had chosen English Literature as my major, and relished reading the great books and the assignments that went with them, I found my thoughts straying to other subjects that had preoccupied me for many years. Mental illness and alcoholism run throughout my family and extended family. One of my younger brothers, Larry, had been diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. I spent many late hours trying to talk him out of his delusions with no success. I became convinced that psychology as it existed at the time and the works of philosophers were pure speculation, hypotheses that amounted to nothing more than just people guessing, inventing, expounding and ruminating to hear their own voices. Rockhurst required that all students minor in philosophy and theology. The content of those studies only increased my skepticism about philosophy's concepts of the mind, the supposed dichotomy between body and soul, the existence of a soul v. the physical workings of the brain, wishful thinking about a parallel spiritual universe. I wanted evidence. If not proof, an impossibility due to the varying points of view and biases of the observers, I wanted more substantial material to pursue. At least, I wanted to be able to demonstrate that we humans could delve into the physical brain but only daydream about a so-called soul.

My new interest was further sparked in a class during the second semester of my junior year: epistemology, the study of human knowledge. I wanted to know how we could distinguish between what was real and what was not. It is the kind of question a younger man asks and an older man still wonders about. I decided that I could read literature at any time and leave its analysis to dedicated scholars. But not so with the topics of knowledge, belief and perception. Epistemology led me to read articles and papers about experimental psychology, today known as neuroscience. I again concluded that research of the brain itself might be better suited to getting closer to identifying how the brain influences human behavior, feelings and thought.

I became convinced that the experimental method, the basis for scientific research, held more possibilities than what I had studied so far. I had questions like: Why are we jailing mentally ill people as criminals? Why do we feel we have the right to murder people under the guise of capital punishment? What about free will? Was it really free? What was the role of genetics in human behavior? Were the soul and the brain one in the same?

During the last semester of my senior year, I decided I was no longer interested in studying English literature or becoming a journalist. Those pursuits felt to me like standing on the sidelines, like being the manager of my high school football team. I wanted to write, to do research, to be part of the action. I left The Star in mid 1965 to be trained as a nurse's aide. Once my training was complete, I worked as a psychiatric aide and on medical floors at Research Hospital in Kansas City and at K.U. Med center. After I left The Star I seldom saw Casey again.

At K.U. Med Center I met an M.D. intern who worked the evening shift. The two of us often discussed my questions and the role of genetics as it related not only to mental illness but to human behavior in general. I told him the story of an older dentist I knew who first introduced me to the subject of genetics. The dentist admitted he had no statistics or science to support his views, only anecdotal observations he collected over forty years of practice. He noticed that some patients had perfect teeth even though they did not follow a healthy dental hygiene. Others took very good care of their teeth but had rotten teeth and gums. He was convinced that ninety percent of human health and behavior was governed by genetics. His comments led me to more questions I had about our criminal justice system and our treatment of addicts. I asked myself: How much are we humans a product of our genetic inheritance? How much can be explained by the place and time of birth, life experiences, trauma, disease? As I looked into what information I could find, I learned that genetics was a double-edged sword. Imperfect genetic statistics could be used to help or to harm people. They could be used to understand and treat illness or to justify discrimination and bigotry, lead to misguided conclusions and conspiracy theories.

I had other interests.

As a student at an inner-city high school, I also wanted to introduce junior high students in low-income neighborhoods to the joys and practical value of reading and writing well. I wanted to live long enough to do all of those things: search for answers to our place in the universe, study the brain, teach, and write fiction and poetry. One of my aunts often said of me, "That kid always wants something more." What I wanted was to live a full life, to know and experience as much as I could. I did not want to be confined to a single discipline or way of life.

When I inquired about applying to graduate schools in experimental psychology I found I needed the equivalent of an undergraduate degree in general psychology subjects. With some of the psychology courses already completed, I would still need two more semesters, thirty more undergraduate hours, to meet those requirements. Even then, with a 3.2 grade average and mediocre SAT scores, I might not qualify. I did not have the money, grades or high level entrance exam scores that most universities required. Most importantly, being a student on the run, I was not able to schmooze (kiss ass) with the influential professors who promoted students for graduate work and how to play the system to get in. I was willing to give it a try, not realizing I was exposing myself to losing my draft deferment.

Which I did.

I have put down these details about my life to show how difficult it was for me to be ordered to stand at attention and obey orders for what I knew to be a phony war. I did not need that kind of aggravation in my life. I did not want an unworthy war to be a part of the definition of myself. I did not realize that it would regardless of my intentions to avoid it.

My draft notice came in the mail during the spring of 1966 towards the end of the second semester of my fifth year at Rockhurst. I suppose my draft board automatically assumed I was simply trying to dodge the draft by signing up for another year of undergraduate work.

The notice arrived in late May. It came on a Saturday, the day my older brother was married. The family had stopped off at our house for more pictures on the front porch before returning to the church hall for the reception. In between the picture taking and chit-chat, my father withdrew the mail from its box and began sorting through it.

"Look here. A letter for Billy," he deviously grinned.

I was surprised. I didn't live there anymore. I didn't really have an address. At that time I was still living in my friend's basement.

But there it was.

"Shit!" I said when I opened the envelope.

"What is it?" everyone wanted to know.

"It's a goddamned draft notice."

My family broke out laughing. "Ha! Ha! Billy's got to go into the army," my family laughed. "Ha! Ha! Billy's got to go to the war."

“Mr. Big Shot,” my father called me. Always trying to beat the system.

They don't remember this incident when I bring it up now. I've never really held their laughter at that moment against them. Teasing and oddball humor were safe ways in our dysfunctional family to let off steam. We were a competitive bunch. Yet we had a special camaraderie that derived from our mutual need to deal with our father's craziness. One of our pastimes was to make pin darts out of match sticks and needles, hide and shoot each other in the buttocks with them, agree on cease fires and then begin our guerilla warfare anew. The pin darts hurt but we laughed at the tricks we played on one another.

My father had bragged that he wanted twelve apostles. I don’t know if he considered the effect on my mother. As a Roman Catholic he strongly opposed any form of birth control. I often watched my mother and grandmother cry at the news of yet another pregnancy. “Villiam!” my German grandmother shouted at my father. “For Got’s sakes, tie it in a knot.”

While he could control us when we were little, he could not control us when the hormones exploded. Knowledge of the power of genetics was not widespread. Instead of twelve apostles, he got ten dissidents, kicked many of his children out of the house in their early teenage years. The rest of us left on our own.

My family didn't know what I knew about the Vietnam War, what most people didn't know then about the war, what I had learned during the fire runs late at night at The Star. Had they known what I already knew, they probably would not have laughed so heartily. I myself didn't fully understand the implications for myself and other soldiers-to-be of what I was hearing about the war. The articles and reports were too vague and abstract for me to visualize then. I had not yet been outside the states of Missouri and Kansas.

In my mind, I had been treated unfairly. I had overcome a mediocre high school education and made something of a mark for myself scholastically in a difficult Jesuit college while working long hours at The Star. The college had published some of my poems and stories in its literary journal, *The Tercel*, and articles in the school newspaper,

The Rockhurst Hawk. I had supported myself, often paying my way from one day to the next, pursuing my academic interests when I could. Because of my work schedule, I had no time for a normal college life: no special lectures or events, no dances, no after school beers with friends. Because parochial schools only offered seven years of grade school I was younger than many of my classmates and had no car. I relied on my feet and my thumb to get me from the college to the The Star building downtown, fought off pedophiles who offered me rides, sometimes got lucky when offered a ride by a fellow student or a member of The Star's staff after work. There was a bus I could catch that stopped a few blocks from The Star that took me most of the way to my basement apartment if I could catch it before 2 a.m. Depending on how busy the newspaper was on any given night, I often missed the bus and had to walk the distance from downtown to my basement apartment in midtown.

Added to my lack of funds and the connections the other students had with their professors were the advisors who did not alert me to the danger of signing up for a fifth year of college without a graduate school commitment. My mind was elsewhere. I was already running myself ragged. I didn't have a clue. It was my scholarly interests that led me to that fifth year of college while my fellow students moved on to various graduate schools, medical and law schools, or jobs.

At that moment on the front porch of my childhood home in the clueless laughter of my brothers and sisters, I recall looking out at the beautiful Missouri springtime, inhaling the scent of the flowers and greenery of the trees that are so lovely and fragrant in the Midwest when the spring is right. I was heartbroken. All of my work at The Star and in the library, those well-researched and carefully written papers I wrote for English and philosophy classes, my hopes for a literary life, brain research and a teaching career, my promising grant applications, vanished into the sweet air like dandelion fluff, along with the joy and celebration of the occasion of my brother's wedding before I had opened the envelope. I could foresee not only the loss of many good years but the sheer boredom of being confined within a military regime; me, an undisciplined street kid with a chip on the shoulder, locked in a system I was forced to comply with.

At first, I refused to believe that a goal as noble as mine could be yanked away from me at such a critical moment as rudely as a vulgarian rips a page out of an address

book in a public telephone booth. I approached my draft board calmly and presented my case. I applied for a deferment for another three years, time enough for a master's degree and a Ph.D. After that time, I offered that I would be willing to allow myself to be drafted or even commit to join the Army or the Air Force once I had a Master's degree. My petition was refused.

In the interim, I learned about a program offered by the Air Force that lasted six years. It provided the opportunity to complete a master's degree program. I flunked the flight physical due to night blindness but was accepted for the six-year academic program. The only detail that stood between me and the swearing-in ceremony was an additional forty-five day deferment. For some reason, unknown to me, I could only enter the program on July 15 of that year.

Again, the draft board refused my request without explanation. I appealed and lost. I will never forget the sneer on the face of the woman at the draft board sitting across the table from me as if I was a common traitor or would be coward. As a writer and a romantic, I thought of myself as the Gingerbread Boy who got caught.

In anger, I searched for an alternative. A friend told me about an opening in the Kansas National Guard. I had never considered the reserves as an option but now they seemed my only hope to salvage a chance to apply for graduate school.

I joined the Kansas National Guard out of desperation: The 69th Infantry Brigade. My chances of obtaining graduate school grants had been lost anyway due to timing and scheduling difficulties. Soon after signing up, I spent several days filling out forms, being issued uniforms, basic gear, like an entrenching tool that resembled a small shovel, a canteen and belt, boots, a cap, duffle bag, the usual items carried by an infantry soldier. For several days and weekends before receiving orders for boot camp, I was at the armory, sitting through classes, watching old training films, being taught and practicing drill commands such as how to stand at attention, salute, execute left, right and reverse turns, march, halt, present arms, and so on. On other days we cleaned the armory or equipment, jeeps and trucks. There were practices for crowd control during riots with an emphasis on how to confront protesters.

I was disappointed to learn that my orders for basic training would be delayed until mid-August. That prevented me from looking for a full-time job. I watched most of

a summer pass by without being able to enroll in classes or earn a regular income. I had signed up in early May, 1966 and by the first week of June found myself in the Brigade's annual two-week summer camp at Fort Riley near Junction City, Kansas. In one way, the entire exercise was a lark. The Brigade's equipment was old and outdated. We were still carrying M-14 rifles. I didn't touch an M-16 until I reached my first round of basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana. Though I had no prior military experience, in my view, the Kansas National Guard was ill prepared for any kind of scenario, from riot duty to a natural disaster. The Guard was something of an old boy's club, a way to allow businessmen and politicians to dress up like G.I. Joe, strut down the streets in parades and enhance their resumes. The enlisted men did the dirty work: dug latrines, stood night guard, unloaded and loaded supplies. The members of the club seemed to enjoy the two weeks away from their jobs and family, play soldier, gamble, tell tall tales and get drunk. From them I learned the meaning of Weekend Warrior. I couldn't believe I had gone from libraries to slave labor in only a few months. I was not a stranger to hard physical work. I had been working for money and for myself since late childhood. I could tell that nothing I was ordered to do in the National Guard would prepare me for Vietnam. My empty hours of training were time tossed into a latrine, from scrubbing pots and pans on KP to running up and down the flatlands of Fort Riley, Kansas pretending to carry out a senseless series of imaginary battles.

One experience at that first Fort Riley summer camp might have proved fatal. The event occurred on June 6, 1966. Having grown up in Tornado Alley and seen a number of funnel clouds from a distance — two of them touching the ground — I had never actually been in a tornado. Returning from guard duty just after sunrise (guarding what, I never knew), a powerful tornado crossed our basecamp. I had been told to go to the mess tent for a late breakfast. The mess tent was located at the bottom of a small hill, its flaps rolled up on three sides. There were four steel field stoves, very heavy and difficult to move. The temperature was already in the mid 90's with 100% humidity.

I filled my mess kit with cold scrambled eggs and a portion of grapes; my canteen and cup to the brim with tepid water, and seated myself comfortably in the grass, helmet and M-14 by my side. The tents for enlisted men were set up below the slope of the hill and lined up in rows. Most of the men were preparing to join more field exercises,

milling around with their shirts off outside their tents or napping inside. Within a few minutes I noticed what looked like billowing smoke passing over and through the camp as though leaves were on fire. The "smoke" was white and gray and moving very quickly. I waited for someone to yell, "Fire!" and then the whole world turned black — lights out.

I think the reservation at Fort Riley might formerly have been Kansas farm land. It was laid out like wheat fields in square patches with windbreaks, rows of trees, mostly cottonwoods and run down wire fences. What seemed but an instant, the sun reappeared. I found myself at least fifty feet from where I had been sitting pressed on my back into the grass. My eyes, ears and mouth were filled with mud and dirt; my uniform drenched. The air had gone cold. Everything I had laying next to me, including my helmet, was gone. I spotted my M-14 about 10 feet away. As I tried to sit up, I looked to my right side. I saw and heard the dark funnel cloud, the short, stubby kind, rumbling on the ground across the next field over. When the tornado hit the tree line across the field, it exploded and shredded like toothpicks, spewing dust and debris. The funnel stuck to a straight path on the ground sending out billowing clouds of dust and debris. I feared it would circle back. It moved on. We learned from radio reports that it was part of a supercell that dropped tornados near Junction City and Manhattan, Kansas, then moved on to Topeka where it swirled through the middle of a residential area killing 18 people and injuring at least 500. I was treated for a few small cuts and bruises. I had no memory of being in the tornado or being moved in any way. It was lights out/lights on, quick as a blink. The mess tent was nowhere to be seen. The field stoves were strewn on their sides several yards apart.

For the rest of that summer I worked at odd jobs, drove a truck for Coca Cola, filled in at the gourmet grocery, wasted time, I thought, before traveling in August to basic training at Fort Polk. From there I was to complete advanced infantry training at Fort Lewis, Washington.

In my mind nothing in modern history can compare to the horrors and tragedies of The Holocaust and other pogroms and campaigns to exterminate groups of other ethnicities prior to World War II. Yet being stuffed on a crowded train with other draftees from Kansas City, Missouri to Leesville, Louisiana, the small backward town

near Fort Polk, I was reminded in one respect of the unfortunate people packed into cattle cars to be tortured and gassed by the Nazis. None of us wanted to be there. Most on the train were recent high school graduates. The rest of us, a few years older, had had a brief taste of freedom. I watched my freedom slipping away as the train passed through endless farmlands and small towns of Missouri and Arkansas.

I did not believe in the war. Though many made knee-jerk comparisons, it was nothing like World War II. Based on what I knew, I considered the war to be immoral and unnecessary, a concoction of the likes of John Foster Dulles and his brother, Allen Dulles, both proponents of the theory of American Exceptionalism that they touted to spread America's form of democracy worldwide. The leaders of conservatism in the 1950's accepted this view as gospel and worked recklessly to spread it throughout Latin America and other vulnerable third world countries rich in oil and valuable minerals. Being drafted hadn't fully hit me until I stepped aboard the train and waved goodbye to Patti and her family. I had lost my freedom and could not see a way to escape my captors. This is how I came to see myself as a political prisoner, not as a citizen serving my country.

Fort Polk had a reputation of being particularly tough and gruesome. Other than being hot and humid, warnings about highly poisonous coral snakes and strange bugs, it may have been one of the least difficult periods of my military life. Except for a few good African-American and Hispanic friends at my high school, I had never lived in close contact with other than white Americans. The act of living and fighting along with people of other colors in the military was a positive experience. There were the usual fights and disagreements in the barracks but none that I can remember as being racial. I met my first Cajuns there. We had Black and white drill sergeants. Two of the older ones had trained Elvis Presley at Fort Hood and later in the cycle, as they called a training period, I talked to them between sessions about rock and roll.

I somehow earned the favor of the cadre and commanding officer of my company. The army must have had access to my academic and work records. The drill sergeants took to calling me "The Professor." I rewarded them by inadvertently acting out the standard stereotypes of being absent minded, physically sub-standard, uncoordinated and a poor shot. Yet, within a few weeks they appointed me as the platoon leader of my

barracks. Even gave me a separate room. I had no interest in bossing around the other men in the barracks or in being set apart from them. I didn't ask or want to be their leader. I was stuck with it.

For the brief period I was a platoon leader, one Black drill sergeant, seeing that I had worked in psychiatric wards after leaving The Star, came to me on several occasions after dark for counseling sessions. During the training day he was a stern, starched, upright drill sergeant. When he came to talk to me at night long after lights out, the tall, young sergeant snuck into my room like a frightened little boy. He was having trouble with his girlfriend and needed to talk to someone about her. I had no training or expertise whatsoever in counseling and tried to explain that to him. But he did not want to discuss his issues with the other drill sergeants, his superiors or any of the doctors on the base so it was up to me to comfort him with the little I did know. At first, I was puzzled and found his visits strange and somewhat ironic. But I came to feel a true empathy for his situation. He couldn't afford to keep his girlfriend in the type of living conditions she wanted. He discovered that she was cheating on him. I did what I could. I nodded my head as most therapists do and repeated back to him what he said and what he already knew he had to do. He always left with a grin on his face, looking relieved. Not a word was spoken or a nod given outside the room during the day after his nightly visits.

I predictably lost my leadership position one morning when our unit was ordered to suit up and march in formation. I marched alone as the leader of the entire formation. My mind drifted during the humdrum marches and during one march early in the morning, thinking about having sex, I did not hear the command to "Halt!" One half of the contingent keep marching with me, following my lead, while the other half stood in place. Before I knew it I had a second lieutenant chewing me out and ordering me to the back of the formation. My drill sergeant client broke the news to me that night and my short tenure as a platoon leader ended with me moving out of my private digs and a new platoon leader moving in. I was relieved and glad just to be one of guys again.

Not long after my demotion, and to my surprise, a drill sergeant called me out of roll call formation to tell me I had been ordered to appear before the company commander, a young but tough looking captain who had been a star football player at one of the southern universities. He had been in Vietnam early in the war. I thought he was

going to chew me out for disgracing his unit during the forced march. I was seated next to the First Sergeant in front of his desk at the small company headquarters building. He leafed through my file.

"So," he said in a gruff voice, "you're one of those psychologist fellas."

"No sir," I said. "I've had some psychology classes and worked in two psychiatric wards but I'm not a psychologist."

"Humm," he said, rifling again through my folder.

"What do you know about the Military Code of Conduct?"

His question amazed me. I had studied the subject in detail in one of my classes and written an extensive paper about its origins and how it had been applied. President Eisenhower signed the order to have the Code of Conduct included in military training manuals and used as a guide for soldiers captured by enemy forces. The Code of Conduct arose out of the Korean War in which many soldiers captured by the North Koreans and Chinese soldiers were tortured and made to write confessions. It is basically a short list of do's and don'ts for how to answer questions during an interrogation by the enemy. Later, the Code of Conduct became an international ethical standard for interrogation techniques.

I explained what I knew.

He leaned forward on his elbow and eyed the First Sergeant.

"Do you have any other candidates?"

"No, sir."

"Okay then. Private Bauer, there's an award given every year by the Chamber of Commerce to the soldier who most exemplifies the America's fighting spirit. It's called the American Spirit Honor Medal. Other than the Soldier of the Cycle Award, it's considered to be one of the highest honors a recruit can take home. You will be going in front of a panel and answering questions about the military and American history. It's a very prestigious award and it will mean a lot to this company and to me if you are chosen. They will be questioning candidates from each of the companies in this training cycle. Think you're up to it?"

"Yes, sir," I said, for what else could I say.

"You're very well spoken. It's really the first time I've ever heard that much about the Code of Conduct. That's the subject this year. If you win, you'll bring honor not only to yourself but to this company as well. First Sergeant, the meeting is two weeks from now. Let's make sure his boots are shining bright and his uniform is clean and crisp."

"Yes, sir," The First Sergeant said. We both stood, hats in hand and saluted.

As for me, I was terrified. I do not test well and do not like being on the hot seat. I did not know what to expect. There was no way to study for it and I knew only as much as could be generally known. I knew not to go into the grisly details or the concern about captured soldiers surrendering, giving valuable information to the enemy, even under conditions of torture. There were six articles in the code. In our classes at the base, the main point we needed to remember was that under the Geneva Convention, we were only required to give our name, rank, service number and date of birth.

When the day came, I was driven in a jeep with the First Sergeant and the Company Commander to what I thought might be battalion headquarters. I sat waiting silently in a narrow hallway outside a small boardroom with four other candidates until my name was called. Seated behind a long table were a major, a first lieutenant, a sergeant with more stripes than I could count, and two civilians, older men, dressed in suits and ties. I don't remember many of the questions that were asked, only that I was allowed to speak long and openly about what I knew about the history of the Code of Conduct. I do remember that the panelists lifted their eyebrows, shook their heads, as though they had never heard the history of the Code of Conduct in the way I presented it, primarily from a psychological point of view. I even cited several studies. When I finished, one of the civilian panelists leaned forward and said in a polite southern accent, "Thank you, PFC Bauer. That was very informative."

I left the room not really knowing if I had or had not said anything offensive. On the return trip to the barracks, the First Sergeant and the CC did not speak and dropped me off at the mess hall. I felt as though I had been questioned for a master's thesis. A few days later one of the drill sergeants summoned me out of the barracks. The company commander stood there with a big grin on his face. He held his cap in his hand and looked even younger and more humane than I remembered.

"We won! We won!" he kept saying patting me on the shoulder. "Good work. Good work," he said.

There was an awards ceremony a few days before we were to leave for our next assignment. I was called to the podium, crowded with every type of brass on the list and several suit-and-tie civilians. One explained why I and our unit were being honored and handed me a trophy of a brass coated soldier in dress uniform standing at attention atop a wooden column. The small plaque read, "American Spirit Honor Medal Winner, William E. Bauer, C-4-2, 1966." The irony of that moment still leads me to grin and shake my head. If they only knew what I was thinking or that I and one of my fellow recruits were openly laughing and singing, "I Love A Parade," just prior to the awards ceremony to John Philip Sousa in a formation marching past the dais to demonstrate our disciplinary skills.

My next assignment was for Advanced Infantry Training at Ft. Lewis, outside Tacoma, Washington. At the age of twenty-two I had never been on an airplane. We were driven on buses to a civilian airport at Alexandria, Louisiana and loaded on a smaller commercial plane with three female stewardesses. I could only sit by a window staring out at the tarmac, with nothing to read, not knowing what to expect. I thought some people, like myself, are just unlucky.

The plane had been in the air for a few minutes when one of the stewardesses ran down the aisle sobbing. The pilot announced, "We are dumping our fuel and heading back to the airport. Stay seated and keep your seat belts fastened." I was not disturbed. The plane seemed to be floating along nicely. But as we landed with several bumps and a screech, we were greeted by what seemed like an entire airport of fire trucks and ambulances. We were rushed off the plane and into the small terminal, called to attention and marched in formation to the parking lot where two buses sat with their engines running, waiting for us to board.

Before us in formation stood a very young transportation officer who appeared nervous and uncertain. With his eyeglasses, he perfectly fit the popular image of a nerdy ROTC trainee.

“You’re going to spend the night here at two motels. You’re to stay in your rooms until we can arrange for you to have dinner. After dinner, you will stay in your rooms until you are called to order tomorrow morning for your flight to Ft. Lewis.”

After dinner at a local greasy spoon, back at the motel, and once it was dark, many of the recruits scattered throughout the town, most going to bars and liquor stores and looking for female prostitutes. I could see and hear the greenhorn transportation officer running in all directions, yelling, threatening, with no backup or police presence. One of my roommates was among the first to disappear but soon returned with cigarettes and two pints of whiskey. I had already decided to stay put. I wanted nothing to do with military justice. Early the next morning MPs were knocking on our doors, ordering us to be dressed and on the parking lot in formation in forty-five minutes. A newspaper stand outside my motel room door had a banner headline to the effect that our plane had gone down due to engine failure and almost crashed into the airport. There were no reported injuries or major damage to the plane. The mousy transportation officer was nowhere to be seen. As we boarded the plane the word among the ranks was that six recruits were still missing.

When the flight finally took off for Tacoma, as I looked down at the grim, slipshod runway, my final thoughts of Fort Polk were of the Dear John letters that had begun appearing about the third week of the cycle. One particular recruit from Texas, an overweight congenial guy named Wally, who would never have been able to pass today’s Army physical, had openly sobbed for days after lights after getting his goodbye-so-long letter. I could hear him moaning, “Wilma, oh Wilma” on his bunk as we tried to sleep. He had constantly talked about and showed us pictures of his high school sweetheart, Wilma, who was as plain as he was large, and their plans to be married when he was on his first leave. The letter made it clear that she was not going to marry him then or ever and it would do him no good to write her back. From then on Wally seemed distant and fearful.

The change in Wally’s once optimistic personality came to a tipping point during the final phase of the Confidence Course, an exercise that involved a series of obstacles to climb, crawl under, slither around. The final obstacle consisted of a platform of two-inch cross beams several feet off the ground, set about five feet apart, that we were

supposed to transverse without falling into the sand pit below. With my short legs, I had to hastily skip from beam to beam. I was almost certain to fall through. I gave a Jack-Be-Nimble performance and made it to the platform on the other side. The platform ended in a tower that narrowed at the top to a peak. A thick rope hung from the peak. The trick was to roll over the peak, grab the rope and shimmy down it. The tower might have been about four stories high. Wally made it to the peak, then froze.

"Come on, Wally," the drill sergeants and other recruits behind him kept yelling. "You can do it!" Wally refused. The cadre shouted, threatened and cajoled him for almost an hour. Wally continued to wrap his arms tightly around the peak of the tower as though it was the last branch hanging down a cliff.

"No fucking way," Wally yelled down. "You can go ahead and shoot me, First Sergeant. But I ain't movin' an inch. Not one inch. No sir. Not me."

The cadre finally halted the entire exercise because it was late in the afternoon and we had to be marched back to be ready for another physical workout and then the evening mess. The next day, those who had not completed the course were driven back in a five-ton truck so they could be checked off the list. There was no sign of Wally and nothing was said about him. One of the recruits in our barracks on KP overheard the cadre say that they had to drive out with a boom lift and a medical officer to talk him into the climbing into the container at the top of the lift and lower him down to the ground. No more Wally.

I can still hear Wally's sobs and visualize the sad image of him clinging for life at the top of the tower. I'm sure it changed his life in the way all of our lives had been changed. We would never be the same.

I carried with me my own hollow feeling of having lost my freedom, of serving a jail sentence for a crime I had not committed. Just as I had a similar feeling about Original Sin. I pled, "Not guilty," to both.

As miserable as we were at Fort Polk, I found Fort Lewis outside of Tacoma to be a nightmare. The weather was chilly and often cold, cloudy, with intermittent heavy rain showers almost every day. The cadre made our drill sergeants at Fort Polk seem like high school football coaches. As the saying goes, they were "R.A. all the way;" lifers, Vietnam Veterans with a sadistic streak and chips on their shoulders. Our drill sergeant

— I'll call him Sergeant Savage — resembled a psychopathic killer out of a Marvel Comics strip: the face of an attack dog, hostile glint in his eyes, bright with fire and destruction. Overall, a sadist. He expected perfection and punished anyone who gave him less, usually pushups, sit ups, until you could do no more, and extra duty

There was one recruit who had angered him for some small slight who had the unfortunate last name of, "Ice." If anyone committed even the slightest error, the first words out of the drill sergeant's tight little mouth was, "Go see Private Ice." Poor guy, I thought, punished for the rest of the cycle by having to order miscreants to serve their sentence on the gravel surface of the training field. For no fault of his own, Private Ice was vilified, pushed around and isolated by many in our barracks.

My instincts told me something was wrong with this outfit. I had little military experience. My crap detector and minor journalism experience told me that in addition to shaping up a motley pack of civilians yanked off the street into effective soldiers did not have to devolve into the kind of cruelty we were subjected to. None of us were Green Beret material. I had lost my freedom. I resented the confinement and forced labor. After a few weeks of this regimen my patience and self-discipline were quickly beginning to dissipate. As an elder in a barracks of nineteen-year-old recalcitrant adolescents, I had to become a peacemaker, breaking up fights, trying to convince my fellow prisoners that it was us against them, not us against each other. Living in a barracks was not unlike living in a reform school dorm.

The training at Fort Lewis in weaponry and dealing with a determined enemy if and when I would be stationed in Vietnam was the only helpful training I took away with me. I immediately noticed that firing those weapons without ear protection was damaging my hearing and that the ringing in my ears did not fade with time. Firing a Forty-Five, for some reason, affected my ear drums the most. Often, waiting for my turn on the firing line in the drizzle, knowing what I knew about the war, I kept asking myself: "What am I doing here?" I tried to wake up. It was not a bad dream.

Within the first few weeks, I had two Article 15s on my record. An Article 15 is an offense much like a civilian misdemeanor. Under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, it permits commanders to resolve allegations of minor misconduct without resorting to higher forms of discipline such as a court-martial. I considered the first

Article 15 to be unfair and made plans to contest it. The second was no doubt due to an act of rebellious mischief on my part; hence, an additional charge of insubordination. By then I was out of patience. The military life was definitely not for me. The second Article 15 was issued because I was not thinking straight. I temporarily lost it.

The first one occurred because of an accident, one not of my doing but of Sergeant Savage's carelessness. Because we were at the beginning of the rainy season, walkways consisting of wooden planks and cement blocks had been constructed between the barracks and headquarters buildings. The walkways were narrow, about five feet wide. The planks often sagged in the middle below water levels when weight was put on them. The narrow passage made it difficult for more than one person to transverse them without carefully turning sideways to let the other person pass. I had some paperwork to return to the headquarters building. Sergeant Savage and I crossed paths from different directions. As I turned to let him pass me, he slipped, spun, and fell face down into about two feel of rain water. Pulling himself out of the drink, he was embarrassed and outraged. He wrestled himself back up onto the walkway like the snake he was, marched me into the office by the back of my collar and promptly had the First Sergeant's assistant nail me for an Article 15. Though I was heartened to see him plop into the drink face first, I had no intention of causing him to slip and fall.

I was charged with my second Article 15 a few weeks later. Another recruit and I were ordered to clean the latrine on a Saturday when our unit had an afternoon off, usually to clean equipment, shine boots, write letters, nap. Most of our fellow inmates were at a recreation building watching a football game. The latrine had about six stalls and three urinals. Savage was known to inspect the latrine with a flashlight and a toothbrush. It had to be spotless. I noticed a long hose outside the latrine and decided it might speed up the cleaning if we hosed the place down first and then wiped it clean. I passed the hose through one of the outside windows to my accomplice and we proceeded to spray the entire room. We intended to wipe down the walls and windows with a pile of rags and then work on the toilets and sinks. That was my plan, one I thought made sense. The door to the latrine was a standard size bathroom door with four windows on the top half and a standard inside sliding latch lock. I think one of us locked it out of habit. I was blasting the walls in the sound of my accomplice's boombox when Savage

suddenly appeared, peering through the door's windows. I did not realize the door was locked. I saw an angered Savage out of the corner of my eye, pounding on the door, yelling for us to unlock it. We pretended not to hear his muted tantrum. Every time he shook the door I nonchalantly turned the hose's stream over the door's windows as though they were simply part of the circle I was making around the latrine walls. I think I made three passes across the door's windows before I pretended to look up and notice him there. I quickly shut off the nozzle, ran to the door and unlocked it. By then, he was flaming.

"What in thee hell do you think you're doing?" he began, and then spit out as many vile names at me as he could pronounce. I tried to explain my strategy, an efficient one, I thought, but he wouldn't let me finish.

"You get this mess wiped up and then get your smart ass over to my office," he barked and stomped out.

A few hours later when the latrine was as clean as it had ever been, I passed the hose back through the window, carefully wound it in a circle and laid it on the ground where I had found it. By the time I got to the headquarters building he had already left for the day but not before filling out another Article 15 form. On Monday I got a chewing out and a warning from the Company Commander himself.

"Watch your step," he warned me. "The next stop is the brig and you might find your time here will be a lot longer than you bargained for," referring to my National Guard status.

The threat of not going home as planned and having two Article 15s on my record chastened me. From then on I forced myself to conform, knowing the date my Advanced Infantry Training would expire and I could return — sort of — to civilian life. That is, unless my National Guard brigade was activated. That would change any further plans I might make with Patti, getting married and finding a job.

At Fort Lewis, we never knew what phase of training might be coming next. Because my MOS (Military Occupational Specialty) was communications I had a few classes in how to operate a movie projector, take apart and operate a field radio of the kind being carried in Vietnam, how to climb telephone poles and wire communications equipment.

Midway through the cycle, the commanding officer of our unit decided we needed to be toughened up. That made some sense given the prospect of one day being sent to Vietnam. He organized a three-week bivouac in the forest. To me, it was a terrible time to be out in what we called in Missouri, “the woods.” We were issued rubber rain suits to be worn from dawn to dusk over our daily fatigue uniforms . The suits proved to be hot and sweaty as we marched through the tall wonderful trees and trails of the reservation. By nightfall when the air cooled, sometimes down to the lower thirties, we chilled inside the rubber suits. There was no way to be warm. We slept two to a pup tent using our rubber suits as a way to help us stay off the wet ground. The tents were usually set up on the side of a hill. The cadre stayed in a larger tent at the bottom and built bonfires we could sit around after we ate.

One night my pup tent mate went berserk. We had immediately fallen asleep from exhaustion. Then during the night he suddenly woke, perhaps disorientated, not knowing where he was. The canvas of the tent had sunken against his face. He sat up, tried to stand, bringing the small tent with him. He had not bothered to take off the top of his rubber suit. Frantically, he pulled and tore at it. The suit clung to his body. He shouted and screamed, rolling on the ground. His shouts echoed in the night. I could see the cadre’s tent downhill light up. Once he wrestled with and pulled off the suit he ran in his unlaced boots and fatigues into the darkness. I called after him but made no attempt to stop him. It was too dark and the floor of the forest too uncertain. Several of the cadre searched with large flashlights for him through the night, calling his name. They did not find him until later the next morning after we had moved on, slumped against a tree trunk, dazed and possibly psychotic. Like Wally at Fort Polk, we never saw him again.

The bivouac had other adverse consequences. Most of us returned with serious cases of bronchitis. We were given a cough medicine known as G.I. Gin which is heavily laced with alcohol. Initially, I took a swig with each coughing bout but soon discovered it made me sick at my stomach. Some of the men in my barracks developed fevers and should have been sent to the base hospital. The company commander had a policy that required anyone going to sick call to completely check out of the unit and pack up all their belongings before reporting to the base hospital. To do so would have been a setback for any recruit who had enlisted for a military career because they would have

needed to start advanced training over again, putting them off schedule for their chosen military occupation.

Two recruits who felt deathly ill finally snuck off to the Inspector General's office. They were immediately hospitalized with advanced cases of pneumonia. A medical team appeared at our barracks the next morning and found several other recruits with pneumonia and severe bronchitis. On the third day after our return from the bivouac we were wakened at reveille by a young second lieutenant, one we hadn't seen before. He appeared in the barracks, announced his name and asked if any of us were still having serious symptoms. Several in our barracks needed to be helped out of bed and taken outside, lifted into ambulances and driven away. Those who remained lined up for roll call. Not one of our drill sergeants or any of the officers we knew, including Sergeant Savage or the commanding officer, were anywhere to be seen. They had either been relieved of their duties or transferred. During my remaining time at Fort Lewis, we completed our Advanced Infantry Training with what I thought seemed like kid gloves.

Throughout and after the bivouac I knew that even the U.S. Army did not treat its troops in this way. I felt there must have to be some lawful process in the Military Justice system for reckless and incompetent behavior of superiors. And in this case, there was. None of us had any interest in pursuing them. But on two exercises in the field after the change in command we were served lunch from a large boiling pot of vegetable soup flavored with seasoned chicken broth. It was the most delicious soup I've ever tasted. Good for the cooks. I guessed the IG was looking out for us.

I found later that my two Article 15s had been dropped.

After boot camp and AIT I kept trying to find my way back to school. My money had run out, my advisers moved on and my scholarship and grant applications had become obsolete. Patti, and her father, pressured me to look for work. He confronted me with, "When are you going to stop this foolishness and find a real job?" Tired of these not so subtle attacks, out of frustration with the obstacles put in my way by academic bureaucrats, and tired of being broke, I found myself what everyone in my family and her father insisted at the time was that "real" job.

I began working at a reinsurance company on January 1, 1967 in what they called the Libel Department, a strange little enterprise that provided libel and slander

insurance to newspapers and radio and television stations. I was hired based on my experience at The Star and my willingness to accept a low paying beginner's salary.

From what I could tell, it was a prominent private company that did not operate like most corporations. The libel department only had occasional involvement with reinsurance. In addition to libel insurance, the founders of the department dabbled in other classes of specialty insurance and operated like a mini Lloyd's of London, insuring various forms of professional liability and errors and omissions insurance. What I learned there helped me years later to create my own specialty insurance firm. In addition to the elderly founder of the department, I worked under a crusty lawyer named Reg Geiser who looked older than his 50 years, and with another lawyer in his early 40's who was third in command. Between the three, they really knew very little about the insurance business or the financial potential of their one-of-a-kind coverages. They simply loped along processing what business was directed to them. Geiser took a liking to me. He told me later he despised hot shots. True, I was green and had a lot to learn about the business world in general. Geiser's only advice to me was, "Never get out of bed for less than $500 and never fuck the help." I supposed he thought I could learn the rest on my own. I was poor at math on any level and was often taken to task by the head of our small department for my mistakes, I overheard a discussion between him and Geiser about the possibility of letting me go. Geiser stood up for me and said I should let the accounting staff overlook my paperwork. From then on, I took my time and concentrated on my work rather than daydreaming about poems and stories. One woman who had been employed for twenty years in the department and who thought she should have filled my position tried to sabotage me on several occasions. When she found an error she would run to the department head to report me. After I began to take my paperwork to the department's accountant to doublecheck me, the sabotage ended. As far as I could tell, the younger lawyer was a habitual gambler and spent most of his time on the phone placing bets. These unusual circumstances worked in my favor. I doubt that I would have done well in a typical American corporation even in those days when most American corporations were well behind the misguided corporate structures that evolved over the years.

Patti, then in her early 20's was already making a decent salary as a registered nurse. She proved to be a very effective nurse and at her young age was serving as a charge nurse on medical floors. Eventually, she was invited to teach nursing. We finally decided it was time to get married or break up for good. By chance, the most convenient Saturday for the church ceremony was Veteran's Day, November 11, 1967. We spent a short, not very romantic honeymoon in a little hotel in New Orleans just off Bourbon Street. We didn't have enough money between us to fully experience the charm of the place. It rained during most days of our trip. Patti balked at having sex. I think we may have only coupled once. Not much of a honeymoon or great start for marriage. I was told by one of our many psychiatrists that her reluctance to have sex had more to do with her mental illness than with me. Not much comfort but the information did give me reason not to seek sexual relations elsewhere.

Within a few months of moving into a low rent apartment, the race riots of February, 1968 erupted across the country. There were fires, shootings and looting throughout the Kansas City area. My National Guard unit was activated to guard the bridges between Missouri and Kansas and patrol the streets. As we moved through the city in the back of five-ton trucks and shivered in the cold wet winds that lashed over the steel bridges of the Missouri and Kansas Rivers, word began to spread: As soon as the riots were under control, we would be nationalized and going to Vietnam.

At first, most of us grinned and shook our heads. We had heard these and other rumors before. But our temporary activation for riot duty never ended. By the first week of March, we were packing bags, kissing wives and girlfriends goodbye, loading trucks and moving the entire 69th Infantry Brigade to Fort Carson, Colorado where the brigade was disbanded and absorbed by the U.S. Army. As individual soldiers without a specific unit, we were put on a list called, "the levy," that worked much like the lottery that was established later on. Nationalizing the guard was a political strategy to take the heat off Lyndon Johnson for the ever unpopular national draft and the quickly rising number of casualties in the war. We were among the sacrificial lambs he felt he needed to insure his reelection. The National Guard and Army Reserve were exploited to keep the draft numbers down. Governors were given a choice to volunteer their National Guard members or not. The Kansas governor, Robert Docking, a Democrat and World War II

air force veteran, perhaps to please party members after a close election, said yes. We were screwed.

Moving an entire brigade was an enormous task. When the equipment was packed onto trucks, trailers and the backs of jeeps the brigade formed a miles-long convoy that caused backups on I-70 across Kansas and Eastern Colorado. I drove a jeep part of the way. Ahead of me I could see the jeeps of other hungover guardsmen drifting off into ditches, a few tumbling over. I caught myself flinching more than once. That night we stopped in Goodland, Kansas. There were no provisions for sleeping so we slept wherever we could. I slept on the top of some boxes in the back of a five-ton truck with a canvas top. Like my pup tent mate at Fort Lewis I too woke in the middle of the night with heavy canvas pressing against my face. Like him, I too, overcome with claustrophobia, frantically climbed over the sharp-edged metal boxes and to the curses of the other men trying to sleep there, to the opening of the canvas cover at the back of the truck. As I hurriedly threw one leg over the gate I slipped and took a full blow between the legs.

I walked around the grounds where we were camped to soothe my aching groin. The nighttime was permeated with an eerie unnatural light; the grass wet with dew. Temporary flood lights had been lashed to the tops of telephone poles. The light cast a dim pall over the old jeeps and trucks. I thought of them as grave stone silhouettes. I came across several soldiers who may have had the same claustrophobic reaction I had. One of them turned his head toward me and waved. He was squatting against the tire of one of the trucks, swigging from a pint of whiskey. In the shadows of the truck his face looked as forlorn as I felt.

"Want a snort?" he said in a half-whispered voice. He needed someone to pass the time with.

"Sure. I can't sleep."

"Me neither."

I squatted beside him and took the pint.

"Satisfy yourself," he said.

I took a couple of long gulps and felt the whiskey slide down and smooth out.

"Good stuff," I said.

"Always been my favorite bourbon. Cheap but effective."

We passed the pint until he took the final swallow.

"Came prepared," he said. He dug into a backpack and pulled out another bottle.

We finished that one and he found another. He unscrewed the lid and handed it to me. I was already feeling a little tipsy. I held up my hand.

"I've got to drive the second shift," I said. "I'll sleep this off in the back of the jeep until it's my turn. But thank you for this."

"No problem. The least I can do."

We didn't exchange any other words.   Not even our names.

Once we arrived at Fort Carson and parked our vehicles we were given a few days rest to adjust to the altitude. We had driven from near sea level to five thousand feet. Then we began the tedious and boring task of unloading the trucks and other equipment. I hated every moment of it, especially cataloguing the contents. Not my favorite mental exercise. The rest to me was pure slave labor.

We carried with us the sloppy physical builds of our unhealthy civilian lifestyles. To shape us up, we had several ten-mile forced marches up and down hills in full combat gear: backpacks, canteens, helmet, M-14 rifles and entrenching tools, totaling about eighty pounds. I weighed one hundred thirty pounds. We were followed by two ambulances, a smart move, as the older and heavier men fell aside, gasping for air.

Within a few months, twenty-five percent of the men in the brigade had received divorce papers.   I was told the number eventually rose to about fifty percent. One day waiting in line to call home I watched and heard a thirty-some former bank executive inside the red phone booth outside our barracks, sobbing and pleading, "Please, honey, please. Don't divorce me. Please don't leave me." Reminded me again of poor Wally at Fort Polk. I suppose their marriages in time may have had that outcome anyway. Still, it saddened me to see them humiliated in front of their longtime comrades.

To avoid confrontation with my superiors and vent my frustration of living once again in barracks and doing meaningless jobs, I volunteered for duty at the top of Cheyenne Mountain, the headquarters of NORAD, The North American Aerospace Command, to test a new type of gas resistant suit and mask. The personal reward was to spend several weeks of living in a large tent with six other "jacklegs" of like minds and

disposition, drinking, cooking out, waiting to be gassed without warning. Once a week a truck loaded with supplies and contraband visited us with the latest rumors about ending the war, the politics of the fort, the names of those friends who had already been given their Vietnam orders. The driver of the truck, a thin, lackluster, likeable flunky whom I will call Harley, a Spec 4, never objected to what we asked for and always delivered it to us with a grin. We paid him with our private funds for the contraband, adding fifty dollars a week for his complicity.

Despite the ominous sound of the mission, we were only gassed on two occasions and then, we assumed, forgotten, at least for the next several weeks. There was a building nearby that resembled a mess hall, with a refrigerator, a large cabinet style freezer, running water and electricity. We might have broken into the building had not the freezer been placed outside the building. Typical U.S. Army logic. There was an outdoor electrical socket under a window sill that we quickly discovered and used to turn the freezer on.

Not far from our tent were three small but very deep reservoirs where we could swim. We had been warned that swimming in them was very risky because once a swimmer went under he would be very difficult to rescue or even find. We swam in the reservoirs anyway. "What the shit," we thought. "We're going to The Nam."

We had the use of a jeep, just in case. One of our group, first name "Don", who came from a wealthy family, smuggled his crossbow up the mountain. The meadow was filled with jackrabbits. I drove him in the jeep while he tried to stand in the back seat with his crossbow and zing a rabbit. The terrain was not as rugged as I first thought but one heck of a ride. Much like an amusement park attraction. Don was never quite able to steady his footing. Never did shoot a rabbit. They were too fast, too shifty. I was getting a little crazy at that point. I drove without regard to the hazards of the gullies, hillocks and protruding stones. Lucky not to have flipped the jeep.

Our idyllic summer break ended the night of an unexpected severe storm. We became used to being bombarded by large balls of static lightning that fell out of nowhere and bounced along the ground. At times, heavy winds ripped up the stakes that held our roomy tent in place. Winds in the mountains could reach one hundred miles an hour or more. Not wanting to be bothered, we were in the habit of disconnecting the field phone,

our only way of communicating with the base. I'd unplug it after about seven at night and reconnect it after we woke.

Proved not to be not so smart.

Eventually a storm with hurricane force winds caught up with us. We slept uneasily through it. At sunrise on the morning after the storm, hungover and groggy, we woke to find our tent collapsed on one side, our supplies, tree branches and debris strewn across the meadow. We had no idea how serious the storm had been or that the base would check up on us. Suddenly, we heard, then saw, four Medivac helicopters circling and descending on our encampment. I hurried into the woods where we had designated a spot for hiding the telephone wire, climbed over fallen trees and the tangle of underbrush. We had placed the wire and wrapped a section of it around a gnarly and easily recognizable stump not too far from the tent. With the fallen limbs blocking my path, it took me a few minutes longer to locate it. I was almost not fast enough. Several medics stormed towards me, yelling and asking if I was okay. I quickly clipped the wire and tucked one end under a large fallen limb. I was still in my skivvies and boots, holding a pair of electrical pliers, the kind used to strip wiring. I fiddled with the two ends of the wires as though I knew what I was doing. They rushed to greet me and as they did I held up the new connection.

"Got it!" I grinned. "Snapped right in two. A fallen limb."

"We were really worried about you guys," a colonel who had followed them said. "Couldn't get an answer."

"Glad you checked on us, sir," I said. "It's been quite a night."

They bought the deception but the storm ended our brief vacation.

For whatever reason, the experiment was suspended and we were given orders to build a model Vietnam War fire base. We'd never seen one so they brought us photos and loads and loads of sand bags, wooden planks, nails, hammers and power saws. Word was that General Westmoreland himself was going to be flown in to inspect the results. While we were constructing the bunkers, most of the conversations between the cadre and officers overlooking the project centered on whether the general was going to eat spaghetti and meat sauce with the troops or prime T-bone steaks with the officers in the community hall. Additional troops were trucked in to join in the construction. We were

given another brief class on jungle camouflage and told to hide in the forest outside the meadow before the general arrived. We used small tree limbs and leaves to camouflage our helmets and darken our faces with dirt and mud. Westmoreland landed mid-morning accompanied by a small squadron of helicopters and a security detail. He stayed about forty-five minutes. There was no mention of him eating lunch outside with the troops or inside the building. Hiding there in our stick and leaf outfits, we joked of the occasion like it was an early Halloween party and adorned ourselves with an abundance of greenery. We never saw Westmoreland enter the building or inspect our project but were told he visited briefly with the fort's officers and then boarded his chopper to leave. His departure brought me one of the few bright moments at Ft. Carson. That's when we caught his eye.

As his helicopter rose over our location in the forest, we stood in unison from our hiding places in all our camouflaged glory, bushy tree branches hanging off our helmets, and shot him the middle finger salute. I will never forget the expression on his face, surprised and stunned, as his chopper banked over our position, doors open, turning sideways towards us. He couldn't fail to see what we were doing. The fort's commanding officer and his staff were uphill from the woods and had no view. We waited for some kind of disciplinary action. Nothing was ever said. We celebrated that night with the steaks they left behind in the freezer, perfectly grilled over two overturned metal milk cases we found inside.

That was not to be my last encounter with General Westmoreland, though the next was not a personal one. It came years later under quite different circumstances after he filed a libel suit against CBS.

There is another footnote to those glorious weeks of freedom on the mountain, a tragic one. It occurred a few months after my little guerilla band returned to the basecamp for regular duty. We were replaced by other volunteer groups to conduct a variety of training exercises there. Typically, the assignments lasted no more than a few days or weeks. The tragedy far overshadows our lark with Westmoreland. A large truck loaded with former National Guardsmen from our unit, returning from the mountain, veered off a hairpin turn and crashed into an embankment, scattering the occupants across the road and steep terrain below it. I can no longer remember the exact body count.

Some twenty or more soldiers were killed. I never learned if the driver was drunk or not. According to the survivors, he zoomed and zig-zagged down the mountain at a high rate of speed. One of the fatalities was a hilarious member of my unit, a Mexican in his early twenties I knew only as Ricky. He wanted to return to his hometown of Chicago and become a famous disc jockey.

"I'm goin' to get on one of them big stations and announce, 'Hello, Chicagoland! Ricky is back!' Everybody's goin' to know who I am and I'm goin' to have lots of girls chasin' after me." That was his big dream. How he got through the day. They said he was thrown forward over the cab of the truck and landed in the middle of the dirt road on his back. He lay still, eyes closed, his breathing shallow. The few remaining soldiers who were still able to limp around him had no idea he was dying. As one who knelt next to him told me later, his breathing slowed, then suddenly stopped, another dream lost to a bullshit war. The image described to me of him lying flat and broken on the road is one I find hard to override.

I spent the rest of the summer at Fort Carson waiting to be levied. My recollection of that time is of an inmate in a gulag. Martin Luther King had been shot, then Bobby Kennedy. I was in line for the evening mess when news was passed down the line that Bobby had been killed. I wanted to be out of that dismal place and a part of the protests. I wanted to be at the Democratic convention of 1968, raising hell and speaking my mind.

I remembered my grandfather whom I only knew when he was in his dotage. My father said he was a "draft dodger," who had fled a village near the Austria-Hungary Border in 1903 to avoid being conscripted by Kaiser Bill, a war-mongering monarch who wanted to be remembered as a mighty military leader. My grandfather's daily ration would have been a chunk of bread and a small flagon of wine. Like me, he wanted something more.

I lay awake for the next several nights weighing the merits and demerits of going AWOL, finding my way to the Democratic Convention, then to Canada. Newly married and uneasy about my relationship with Patti, realizing that her father, a WWII marine who was wounded three times on Iwo Jima, would never forgive me if I deserted, I had to decide between her and my convictions. I wavered. I wanted to try to resume my

academic career if and when I returned. The draft had already cost me two years of my life when I might have been edging towards a Master's Degree and Ph.D. I had worked too hard to get as far as I had. Just being in the military at that time in my life ground against my sense of justice and what I had already learned to be the rapid passage of time, wasted time over nothing, nothing but other people's desultory crap. Reluctantly, sadly, I decided to stay. I had not yet mustered enough courage to be myself. Except for the two children I fathered with Patti and meeting my second wife, I wish now I had gone AWOL. I would have lived a more satisfying life in Canada. I have regretted my decision to stay at Fort Carson ever since. The amnesty for those soldiers who had fled to Canada did not come until Jimmy Carter ordered it in 1977.

If I had known at the time of the indiscriminate bombing of civilians, the use of napalm and Agent Orange that for generations thereafter would result in horribly deformed, blind and otherwise disabled Vietnamese children, the deaths of an estimated three million or more Vietnamese, the profiteering of U.S. defense contractors and the corruption of U.S. military personnel, would I have made a different decision? I cannot honestly say. I felt mixed up and confused, unable to decide.

Not long after I returned to the basecamp from the mountain experiment, I went head to head with the type of business community that feeds off the military and exploits members of the Armed Forces, especially enlisted men, and now, women. It was worse in 1968 for draftees who had little control over their day-to-day business matters.

I learned that I would be able to live off base like any other regular Army soldier. Not knowing if or when I would be going to Vietnam, Patti and I decided to rent a house and live together as long as we could before my name was called or not. She joined me in Colorado Springs, the hometown of Fort Carson, in late August. Between the three of them, she and her parents drove her car and my VW Bug to the rental house. We opened joint checking and savings accounts. She quickly found a job with a decent salary as an RN at a large hospital in Colorado Springs. Her money and my monthly pittance paid our bills. A month after her move, I quickly found that as a draftee I had also become a second class citizen.

Early on a Sunday morning, still asleep, Patti and I were awakened by a loud, rude pounding on the front door. I felt no need to answer the door but after the racket

continued for a few minutes and was soon accompanied by noisy shouting and rattling sounds, I decided to check out what kind of idiot would have cause to disturb our sleep. I left the door chain in place and cracked the door slightly. There stood a very tall, highly irritated state trooper in a Smokey-The-Bear hat trying to squeeze a wad of folded paperwork through the door.

"You stupid idiot," I said as I tried to shut the door. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"Hey, soldier, you don't talk to me that way. You're the one who's in trouble here."

"What have I done now," I asked. "Besides being kidnapped by the federal government?"

The remaining contents of his tirade are irrelevant. I never did let him in the door. He was able to squeeze through his paper work. Patti had inadvertently written several overdrafts and I was being served with some kind of warrant. I didn't argue the case; the facts would have served no purpose. The next day I got permission from my sergeant to go to the bank where I was met by a scowling bank officer. My question was:

"Okay, so my wife accidentally wrote some overdrafts. I have $2,000 in a savings account with your bank. Why didn't you have enough sense to just call us and let us know we needed to transfer cash from the savings account to the checking account. Does your bank ever think of doing anything like that?"

He scoffed. I wanted to extend his imperious smile all over his face. Again, the contents of my tirade about his stupidity, and his threats of having me arrested and reported to my commanding officer, aren't worth repeating except to say that I discovered I no longer had any rights as a consumer and a U.S. citizen. From what I know, this power of the business community in military townships over soldiers and their families continues to this day. Which is probably why there is so much opposition to closing obsolete military installations. Why would the local Chamber of Commerce want to oversee the loss of its fattened calf? I was not allowed an appointment with my commanding officer. The First Sergeant of our unit explained to me the way the real world works when it comes to low ranking military personnel. I was even ordered to return to the bank and apologize to the knucklehead. I never did. I was powerless and

ordered to pay the overdraft penalties which were twice as much as stated in the bank's written policies. I was in no position to oppose them.

When my name was finally called for Vietnam in October, 1968, I felt relieved. I no longer had to live day-to-day with uncertainty. My political imprisonment and possible death sentence had been passed down. I had prepared my body for the eventual blow. I spent a surreal Christmas with my family and relatives, laughed and drank myself numb. On Christmas morning my witty sister-in-law joked about my fate. As I unwrapped three shirts she had bought me as gifts, she laughingly said, “Don’t cut off the tags. We may not see you again. We can return them and get our money back.” I laughed with her. The whole situation was crazy.

In the goodbyes that followed during a final doomsday party, I almost missed my early morning flight to Oakland Army Base. As I hurried to the plane an elderly gent who had overheard the last-minute farewells from Patti and my in-laws slapped me on the ass and cheered, “Go get ‘em, son!” I wanted to punch him out.

After several days at Oakland Army Base I flew with a group of strangers to Seattle, and from Seattle to Vietnam on a commercial airliner in a set of newly tailored dress greens. Since we didn’t know one another, the flight was passed between the other soldiers in glum silence and sleeping. A few of us read the books and magazines we brought with us. The stewardesses were Swedish and very pretty, their light perfume enticing. Smelling their scent caused an emptiness in my gut. I knew I wouldn’t be with a woman for a very long time. Maybe never again. The stewardesses moved through the cabin like mechanical dolls, speaking only to give instructions. I assumed they had volunteered for such flights for higher wages and bonuses. They seemed immune to what might await us.

The flight was long, hot and claustrophobic. As we approached Ton Son Nhut I desperately needed to urinate. Just as I started to get out of my seat the pilot announced, “Stay seated. We are going to circle a while. There is an attack on the ground.”

Through the darkness of the night I could see tiny, bright explosions. Rockets, RPGs, tracers. The attack lasted several hours. When daylight broke the pilot brought the plane down in a steep dive. I still had not gone to the bathroom. My bladder and kidneys ached horribly.

Finally, we deplaned. The heat and stench struck me like a blast from Dante's Inferno. The smell brought back a complaint I had since childhood. If there was a loving and omnipotent God as described ad nauseum by priests and preachers and grade school nuns, why would that God create a world that had shit in it? Just the smell of shit was enough to piss me off. Not to mention, disease, suffering, and creatures called humans who were dead set on enslaving and killing other humans. I never bought their default explanation that it was a mystery we children of God were left to figure out. In my interior life, I found no explanation to justify the misery in this world.

On the tarmac soldiers milled around in groups, some with duffle bags. They were going home. Others sneered and laughed at us in our spanking new dress green uniforms. After roll call, we were allowed to find a latrine. I chose one nearby that resembled an old-fashioned wooden outhouse with eight openings. The air smelled of a kind of a sickness I have not smelled since, a toxic mix of the odor of burning human waste, JP4 helicopter fuel, and jeep and armored personnel (APC exhaust fumes).

At first, I was unable to urinate. My bladder was frozen. I stood atop one of the openings, praying for release when a mama-san waddled to a hole further down the line. She wore the traditional white head wrap, black silk pajamas and sandals made of tire treads. Her teeth were blackened with beetle juice. I couldn't decide if she was young or old. She lifted one leg, propped her foot on the wooden plank, pulled up her pajama leg to make an opening and pissed a straight stream directly into the center of the hole. Once she was finished, she lowered her pajama leg, walked over to me standing there still trying to urinate and spat her beetle juice directly in my face.

"So," I thought, "these are the people I have been sent here to defend." Later in my tour I noticed that whenever the mama-sans or Vietnamese men who worked at the basecamp failed to show up for duty, we could expect an attack of some kind the next day. They knew one was coming. At first, I felt they were complicit. Some were no doubt Viet Cong or otherwise terrorized by them, their own South Vietnamese soldiers (ARVN) or the corrupt officials of the South Vietnamese government. But like us, they were trapped in an impossible situation. I do not blame them for protecting themselves and their families. When they returned the day after an attack, contrary to my pacifist self-image, I felt a grudge and an urge to blow them away.

To my regret, my negative feelings about the Viet Cong intensified during my tour. On occasion, it devolved into outright hatred. Against my better instincts I was forced to recognize they were the enemy. I wanted them dead. They wanted me dead. To my regret, I still feel uneasy when I am around a Vietnamese person, no matter how Americanized. I wonder if they are plotting against me. I keep trying to let that fear go. In my thoughts I understand. There is a part of my brain that doesn't. My body has an instant negative response, one of uneasiness, one of distrust. I have rationalized that they learned their duplicity from their French masters. Maybe all humans are duplicitous.

After landing at Ton Son Nhut we were organized into groups, exchanged our dress greens for jungle fatigues, boots and caps, and transported in five-ton trucks and pick-ups to the Twenty-Fifth Division basecamp at Cu Chi. It was a large basecamp that had been in place for many years and seemed like a small, old, bustling city comprised of tents, hooches and office buildings. Gunships, chinooks, small helicopters and planes were constantly landing and taking off; APCs and tanks leaving and returning through the main gate.

We had two weeks of training at Cu Chi, primarily to learn what we were supposed to have been taught in basic and advanced infantry training. From there we were to be assigned to specific units in the field. I don't think they really knew what to do with us. Three of us did not immediately receive orders and for reasons I have never understood, and probably for no reason at all, I was assigned for another two weeks of training devoted specifically to assassination techniques. That was fine with me. Anything to stay in the basecamp and out of the field. At that point, I had no need to sacrifice my life for a cause I knew was political and immoral.

Strange to me and the other men in the assassination training unit was the man in charge of our training. We could never decide or find out if he was regular army or some kind of mercenary or soldier of fortune. His uniform had no insignia or name tag. He spoke with a thick German accent and in harsh commands. We referred to him as, "The Nazi." Who knows? He seemed to be about the right age for an older member of the Waffen SS, Hitler's paramilitary organization, a fit man his mid-fifties or so, and very knowledgeable about how to kill another human being with stealth, speed and in cold blood. As was often said, right or wrong, "Look into the eyes."

Those skills and a ready capacity to kill people without remorse are hard wired. I am the least likely person I know who would want to use them. They have been a burden for which I never asked nor volunteered. They weigh on me. After I retired from the business world when my PTSD surfaced, I often mentally plotted assassinations, dissociating as I drove down streets and highways, to moments of fearing I might be so preoccupied I would veer off the road. I have had nightmares of tracking victims and using the plots as a way to fall asleep. I resent having to live with what The Nazi taught me.

The day following the end of the "course" I was handed my orders to join the Fourth of the Ninth Infantry Battalion, Manchu, at Tay Ninh, somewhat west of Saigon along the Cambodian Border and close to the end of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Six of us were driven in the back of a pickup down Highway 1. As the pickup passed through the gate at Tay Ninh basecamp we were jeered by other soldiers along the rutted road with shouts of, "New guys, new guys, green horn G.I.s." When I hopped out of the pickup at the place where I was to camp, a short row of falling down wooden hooches, a soldier whose name I can no longer recall walked over, slid my duffle bag from the bed of the truck, slung it over his shoulder and smiled, "Move in with me." He led me to one of the hooches and set my duffle bag next to one of the beds. None of the beds had mattresses, only box springs. The place smelled bad. The roof, I thought, would keep my duffle bag dry. As we sat on the box springs, he brought me up to speed on the routines of that small section of the basecamp, the place where we misfits were kept. Most of the soldiers there slept outside when they could. My mentor and I had little chance to become friends. He left to go back to The World a few weeks later.

The word, "unit" was a misnomer. Our group operated more like a nomadic tribe. I could have hidden in one of the bunkers or easily gone AWOL in country as some did. I doubt that I would have been missed. That’s how incompetent I found our conduct of the war. As it was, I discovered a sense of obligation in respect of my fellow grunts. I didn’t feel good about them going out on ambush patrols while I cowered in a bunker at a basecamp or toured Vietnam by helicopter, hitchhiking from one basecamp to another. I was in a war whether I liked it or not. In that sense I felt I needed to have their backs.

We never openly talked about it even as we badmouthed the war. We just knew that was our unspoken pact.

We were located in a corner of the camp next to a no-fire zone, meaning that unless we were in immediate danger of being overrun, we could not fire back at incoming rounds. That made for an absurd situation. We were surrounded by a steep berm with the usual rows of barbed wire strewn across its top. There were claymore mines to be hooked up before dark in case the VC might find their way through it. There were no bunkers on the berm or machine gun emplacements. If on bunker guard we simply lay at the peak of the berm on our stomachs at night with M-16s and grenades at our side. The area outside our small section of the camp was flush with trees, bushes and underbrush that led to what some called Tay Ninh City where the marketplace was located. If we were to fire, there was a possibility our rounds could kill or injure the people who lived or had commercial stalls there. For us, it seemed like a no-win proposition. We could only hope that the townspeople who were considered pro-government would control the VC.

There were no days or nights. The giant hand out of the sky that had plucked me out of time and deposited me into the middle of a B war movie, had prevailed. I don't remember sleeping through the night, only nodding off and on when I could, being awakened at night by the booms of B-52 bombs shaking the ground, the searing sounds of jets sweeping outside the spirals of barbed wire, the ear-piercing sound of an occasional incoming rocket. More than anger at the Viet Cong, the North Vietnamese, or the arrogant sound of second lieutenants bossing me around in their shrill, childish voices, what bothered me most was the continuous stench of human excrement, the nastiness of the latrines, the suffocating heat, the lack of a hot shower, no television or radio, the boredom, the scarcity of water, booze, fried chicken, T-bone steaks, tacos and cigarettes, fucking. I craved a swallow of ice water, anything with carbonation to drink. The simple natural challenges of living in or near a triple canopy jungle should have earned every G.I. some kind of prize. I saw daddy long leg spiders half a foot tall and roaches two hand lengths long. Outside the wire there were snakes and red ants. Say nothing of mosquitoes, sand flies, gnats and other strange looking creatures. To hell with Albert Schweitzer, I thought. Some bugs, like humans, may do some good; others attack and carry disease. In Vietnam I learned that if it was between the bugs and me, the bugs

had to go. That applied to Charlie as well. As Mohandas Gandhi, one of my few heroes, wrote, "Self-defense is the only honorable course where there is unreadiness for self-immolation." Though I am a pacifist at heart, I also strongly believe in common sense and realpolitik. Self-defense is a human right.

Once stationed in Tay Ninh, I dutifully carried the radio, my MOS (military occupational specialty), loaded and unloaded ammo, ferried parts and supplies to fire bases inside and on the Cambodian Border, filled sandbags, stood bunker guard, served on ambush patrol. In all my nights outside the base camp, I never encountered an armed VC face-to-face or blew a claymore mine. The only Viet Cong I saw eyeball to eyeball were detainees at the basecamp gate, blindfolded, arms tied behind their backs. As far as I know, I never directly killed anyone. In some ways, it was a part of me that died — the part about joy. The whole scene seemed senseless and a waste of lives. Time, and my time on earth with it, continued to creep forward and I could not stop it.

I reported to Sergeant Diaz. His presence was hit and miss. He seldom woke us for roll call. He brought mail long after it arrived and seemed lackadaisical in general.

The old hooches that sat in a semicircle were supposed to be our barracks. They looked like abandoned farm outbuildings. I slept outside them with the other men, mostly young boys, sitting upright against the wooden walls of the hooches, using my duffle bag as a backrest. If we had a poncho we spread it on the ground, covered ourselves with much coveted cutouts of used silken parachutes that felt comforting and protected us from the mosquitoes. The nights I wasn't on bunker guard or out on ambush patrol I dozed, smoked when I had cigarettes and imagined being back in Kansas City at a party, a concert, a movie or with Patti. The humidity and mosquitoes and hard ground kept me from a deep sleep. If at all, sleep came just before daybreak. I woke groggy and disorientated.

In the middle of the semicircle of the three hooches was a tiny monkey leashed by a rope to a pole. It was once a pet of a soldier long gone and hopefully back in the states. Like the Vietnamese the monkey had learned to be canny and trust no one. He was known to throw his little round turds at anyone who came near him who did not bring food or something to drink. He favored orange sodas. I did not have access to any. I

often thought of secretly cutting him loose. I didn't know what the consequences of doing that might have been so I quickly squelched the impulse.

There were also several packs of dogs that ran freely through the camp. They had been pets for some of the soldiers and then, like the monkey, abandoned when their masters left. The monkey had a sharp little stick someone had crafted into a weapon and many a dog who tried to torment the monkey fled whimpering away after being jabbed with it.

One of my first duties at the camp was to care for Butterball, a puppy then, who had been driven over by a jeep. The medics patched him up but Butterball needed nursing and someone to hand feed him until his wounds healed. Diaz tugged me by the arm and led me to a small lean-to he had set up as Butterball's hospital room. I spent several nights inside the lean-to comforting the fuzzy little guy. Diaz had gotten his hands on a baby bottle that he filled with milk at the mess tent. I held Butterball in my lap and fed him with the bottle when Diaz was off somewhere else in the camp, most likely playing poker with the other cadre. I handed Butterball off as soon as I could to the next new guy. Though allergic to dogs and cats, I did enjoy the few nights I held Butterball in my arms. I felt some of myself in him.

Except for Tet of 1969, known to veterans of the Tet of 1968 as Second Tet, overall enemy activity was down in the region from previous years. Several days would pass between a rocket attack or sniper fire or contact with the Viet Cong out in the field. Peace talks had begun but no one knew whether or not the North Vietnamese had slowed their movements along the border in consideration of negotiations or simply to reposition themselves for a better opportunity to launch a surprise attack. It was also a time when the fragging (the tossing of fragmentation grenades into sleeping areas to murder fellow soldiers) of officers and cadre increased and fights frequently broke out among the bored and angry lower ranking troops. When we heard grenade explosions within the base camp, our second thought was that an enlisted man was out to extract revenge.

I spent much of this time loading and unloading supplies, ferrying them from one fire base to another, crouching in bunkers at the fire bases at night along the Cambodian Border. From our little camp we could see Nui Ba Den, oddly the only mountain in the flat terrain around the basecamp. It was nicknamed the Black Virgin Mountain and

considered by the Vietnamese to be a holy place, honeycombed with caves for burial of Buddhist monks and used by the Viet Cong to store munitions and provide hideouts. In 1964 our military took possession of the mountaintop and established a radio relay station there. In 1968 the base was overrun by the Viet Cong. I ferried supplies to Nui Ba Den on choppers and once spent the night. The encampment was a series of bunkers. The inside walls were plastered with posters of all kinds. The ones I saw were mostly of rock and roll stars and music scenes. Boomboxes were popular with U.S. troops and Nui Ba Den had plenty of them, playing constantly. Though I did not hear the propaganda messages on my one stayover, the Viet Cong often broadcast them and ghostly sounds into the camp at night to frighten our troops. Being there gave me the willies.

(I visited Vietnam in 2000 with an NGO called Friendship Bridge that provided microcredit loans to women to open their own businesses. During that trip I returned to Tay Ninh and found that Nui Ba Den had been converted into a theme park. Our group was transported to the top in ski lift chairs. The park was filled with enthusiastic Vietnamese ranging in age from small children to the very old. The rides, the games, were colorful and creative, the waste cans in the shape of ducks, painted yellow with red beaks. I saw three temples with elaborate décor and women veterans of the Vietnamese People's Army waving flags to celebrate one of their holidays and victory over America).

On my few patrols into the town's marketplace, I was always on edge mingling with the local people going about their business. I feared the children running up to us, tugging at our pockets. They were expecting candy and gum. Many stories circulated of the VC using children to drop grenades near our soldiers and dash off back into the crowd. I don't know if those stories were true. I hadn't met anyone at our basecamp who had witnessed the attacks. Yet I remained suspicious of everyone, the children included. They were clever and funny. But, in my mind, dangerous.

What I realized was that I knew very little about the Vietnamese as a people or their history. Before being drafted, I followed the war closely, especially the number of our casualties. I don't recall any lectures during basic training or thereafter about the people themselves, their dignified history and culture, their cruel treatment under French imperialism. While in Vietnam, I was never inside one of their hooches. It bothered me not to be able to speak their language, to be ignorant of the people we were supposed to

be fighting for. I realized as well how little I knew about the world outside of the states of Missouri and Kansas.

I cannot be precise about how long I was stationed at Tay Ninh — possibly about five months — nor did I keep a journal. I had nothing to write on or write with. I had no access to a camera. Had no need to want to remember anything. I just wanted time to pass quickly. I spent most of my time daydreaming. I had my monthly checks sent home to Patti and skipped a chance to go on R & R to Sydney, Australia. We would need the money, as little as it was, for when I came home. If I ever did.

I had been in Tay Ninh a couple of months when I had my first real encounter with death. I had just returned with my platoon from a night on ambush patrol. The other men in my squad ambled into the abandoned hooches or bunked down outside them. Some took off their gear and quickly fell asleep. I was older than most of them. Though I was not the platoon leader, a few looked up to me to talk with them about their feelings, their problems at home. I was very fond of them. Their faces now are distant and vague. I cannot remember a single name.

My fastidiousness about brushing my teeth saved me from a rocket attack shortly after we returned to camp. I was one of my old dentist's prized patients. Having spent endless hours in dental chairs I did not want to return to the states with fewer teeth than I brought with me. I had no access to dental floss. Every morning and after evening mess, toothbrush and tin cup in hand, I weaved between hooches, tents and supply shacks searching for water. Some days the water truck failed to show. I knew that the cooks set aside five-gallon water cans for officers, cadre and friends that they hid under the flaps of the mess tents. I knew how to sneak one out, fill my canteen and tin cup and slip the water can back under the flap without being noticed.

That morning as I began my search for water the sun had just appeared over the top edge of the berm when I heard the rocket leave its tube from within the No Fire Zone. I could tell from the sound of its launch that it was a homemade rocket. Its launch made a loud pop, like people make by plucking their finger inside their jaw. I was still groggy after a night of trying to stay awake. It took me a second to realize that the rocket was headed directly into our area. I had not wandered far from the hooch and instinctively turned back to it. When the sound of the descending rocket became louder and louder,

making a shrill loud whistling sound, I dropped to the ground and waited. For that small instant of time, I grew calm. Adrenaline and curiosity replaced fear. In that rush I remember thinking, “Well, maybe now I'll know if there is an eternity or not."

In the meantime, the other men just back from ambush patrol, asleep or half awake, were shaken by the sound of the descending rocket. In their drowsy confusion, they sat upright or rushed out of the hooch onto the narrow dirt road heading for a bunker. In their shock and confusion they ran directly into the rocket’s path. I thought, and maybe I did or didn’t, that I could hear the shaking of the nuts and bolts inside the rocket itself. When it hit, it made a “Kee-rack!” sound. The explosion bounced me and I rolled over the dusty ground. It was followed by a long moment of silence, swirling dust and smoke. The sound waves of the explosion left my ears temporarily blocked. As in the tornado at Fort Riley, I had dust under my eyelids, in my nose and mouth. I calculated I was no more than a hundred feet from the rocket’s impact. I heard the sirens blare, indistinct voices shouting commands, and a hoarse, desperate shout:

“Somebody help us over here, goddammit!”

Nothing had prepared me for that sound. I hear it still. It is said that such an event is registered indelibly on the neuron pathways of the brain and is rebroadcast again and again at random unconsciously sparked by external cues.

I shakily pushed myself upright and tried to move in the direction of the hooches, stumbling as I went. Bits of gravel had been driven against my arms and legs. I felt to see if my limbs and my genitals were intact. They were. I felt for my nose. It was still there. My vision was clouded. I could hear but not hear. My ears were ringing.

After that, I am blank. I struggle to drag out the details. I can picture a scene. I picture soldiers strewn like broken dolls. I don’t know if what I picture and hear is real or if I imagine that it is real. The sounds are of the wrenching, desperate howls of the gravely or mortally wounded. They are the sounds of horror most of us only hear on television dramas or movies, the sudden realization that an arm is missing, part of a face gone, legs twisted out of joints and crushed flat, viscera hanging out of cavities. Maybe I read about it. I can only write about what I remember now. I never learned how many died or how many were wounded. Often, we never did. All I remember is a number of

MP's pouring into the area, holding me up, leading me away, staggering, and cordoning off the area with yellow tape as civilian police cordon off a crime scene.

That was the day I began to know true fear. If I had felt no fear as the rocket fell, I felt it then. It was the kind of fear a hunted animal must feel, an instinct that its life is threatened. The illusion of danger and pain, the bloodless image of war on the silver screen and evening news, were replaced by a vivid lasting mental snapshot and the sounds of horror and morbidity. Someone out there wanted me dead. It was not a game, not a film I could walk away from and discuss afterwards at a restaurant or bar or in a classroom . For a while, fear became a habit. Then it became a permanent expression of my body. From then on, I watched. I listened for anything like an invisible footfall, the snap of a branch, a whisper. I looked over my shoulder as I do now. I grew what some psychologists call "paranoid antennas."

As I watched the MPs and medics hurry past me, I wondered how I was going to get my helmet, flak jacket, M-16, ammo belt, and canteen from the box springs inside the hooch where I kept them. I tried to find my way back. The MPs turned me away from the scene of the blast. I didn't know what to do next. I began to wander around. I didn't know what I was looking for. I got lost. I remember laying on a cot in a large tent and medics, perhaps one a doctor, in a group off to one side, standing me up, and walking me out of the tent into the bright sunlight. After walking around aimlessly, getting strange stares from soldiers doing odd jobs around their hooches, I heard someone shout my name:

"Bauer!"

It was Sergeant Diaz.

"Glad I found you. Now everyone is accounted for." He didn't answer my questions about the casualties except for, "I don't know."

I spent two or three days in a large tent with Diaz and two others. One morning he led us back to the hooch area. The monkey was gone. The place looked much the same. The boards on the sides of the hooches were dented, the raw interior of the wood exposed. The faces of the young men were different. A new group of them sat around waiting for someone to tell them what to do. They became my new platoon. I did not ask them their names. "You…you…and you." That is what I remember the new platoon

leader, a youthful looking sergeant, called out to them when it was time again for an ambush patrol, bunker guard, filling sand bags or some other detail.

Since then, I have had a reoccurring dream of that time of being lost in the basecamp. The dream rarely takes place in Vietnam. I am going somewhere with a group of people, usually people I don't know. We could be going to a shopping mall together, or to play or a movie. We could be having a party inside a house and taking it outdoors. Then, for no reason, I get separated from them. I spend the rest of the dream trying to find them. I go from street to street. I get more lost. I can't get back to where I started from. I get further and further away from the city into farmland, into muddy fields, on the edges of cliffs. I become hopeless and wake myself up. I do not dwell on the place, the strangers or the content of the dream. I live the next hours with the same feeling I had on that day wandering around Tay Ninh Base Camp. I hear a repeat of a variation of the words of Thomas Wolfe in *Look Homeward, Angel,* "Oh lost and by the wind grieved, ghost come back again."

Not long after the rocket attack, Diaz called on me to deliver a jeep battery to a fire base in Cambodia. I was flown there on a gunship that landed just outside the wire.

I was supposed to carry the battery inside the base, hand it directly to a certain sergeant who was waiting for me and then be flown back on the next available chopper. As I walked through the small gate into the camp, I witnessed a boyish, shirtless, soldier in a blond flattop lift a sawed off, double-barreled shot gun and blast a Viet Cong as he suddenly appeared from around the corner of a bunker. The VC had probably snuck in during the night and had been hiding. With the blast, blood and muck blew into the air behind him as his body was lifted backwards. The shooter began to laugh hysterically, his face red, body jived up, adrenaline pumping. "I nailed that motherfucker," he kept shouting. "Nailed his ass." I was glad he did, only for the reason that I might have run into Charlie myself, unarmed, holding a jeep battery, my weapon several feet away, propped against a bunker. My immediate thought was, "Better him than me." A human response, I suppose. One I do not cherish having to admit. It was another incident that left me rattled and shaky.

A day would come when I grew tired of being afraid. I learned to take several deep breaths, to give in, resign myself to where I was and what I might face, felt light

spirited and calm. I joked a lot; something I hadn't done for a while. Pot and opium were free flowing but I stuck to an occasional warm beer or a canned martini mailed to me by my older brother. I still carried my fear of hard drugs. I had seen what LSD had done to the brains of some of my college friends. But I grew as cocky as a fighter pilot. "Okay, mofo," I said to no one. "Come ahead. Come on. I'm here. I'm waiting. Let's do this. Just you and me. Let's get it over with."

During incoming rounds along the perimeters of fire bases or in the shrieking descent of rockets, I hunkered down and tried to think smart. I tried not to think of home. I tried not to think of love. I tried not to think of survival. I came close to giving up hope I would ever go home.

I was looking forward to having a warm beer on another very hot day as I returned to Tay Ninh Base Camp from the same fire base in Cambodia. It was two in the afternoon and I had another run to make. If I was lucky I would be back in camp at six or six-thirty in the evening and free until the next morning.

I never got to drink that beer or smoke the four cigarettes that came in a C- ration box. I didn't know it then but I was to be flown from Tay Ninh by a second angel of good fortune. My tenure at The Kansas City Star no doubt would save my life. As soon as I jumped off the chopper, head bowed to avoid the blades, the scattering dust and rock, and scurried out of its swirling circle, Diaz rushed towards me out of a milling group of G.I.s waiting for a chopper, grabbed me by the arm and pulled me some distance away.

Seeing that Diaz was distraught, I felt alarmed by the way his long thin strong fingers dug into my arm.

"Hey man," he yelled in the thump-thump and loud racket of the choppers. "No shit. Get your stuff packed. All of it. I mean now, man. NOW!"

He ran me along, both of us dodging, sometimes tripping, over debris on the ground.

At first, I worried I was in some kind of trouble. While I had become a bit hardened and cocky, I had lost self-confidence in other ways and no longer felt in control of my life. I couldn't think of anything I had screwed up or left undone. Had someone overheard my conversations badmouthing the war to my younger wards, read my treasonous thoughts? Then I began to feel elated. Maybe the governor of Kansas, that

little fuckhead, Robert Docking, who had caved in to Johnson and allowed our guard unit to be nationalized, had managed to get his shit together and realize he had made a mistake. Maybe he had managed to get his guardsmen back early. This mess, after all, this war, was a lie.

Diaz left me in the hooch to pack. I lit a cigarette and exhaled with expectation. I alternated between excitement and apprehension. I had vision of being with my wife, being back on the streets of Kansas City driving a car. I would try to be good to Patti. Maybe we could have children, a nice little house. I could go back to school. We could sit by fires in the winter and read together.

Diaz stuck his head in the door of the hooch and shouted at me again.

"You don't understand, man. They're waiting for you. You got to bust ass. No shit."

I had no idea why Diaz seemed to be so fired up, agitated, intense and scared. He was a lifer with only a few more years to go before retirement. It was unlike him.

"Hurry up, dammit. They got a chopper out here waiting for you."

"What is it?"

"Change of orders. Straight from the general's office. That's what they tell me. The general's office."

I stuffed everything including my prized parachute blanket into the duffle bag, grabbed my M-16 and ammo belt and jammed my helmet onto my head. I was filthy, hadn't shaved for days. My boots were crusted with dried mud.

Diaz returned a second time and nearly pulled me out of the hooch. He yanked me back through the maze and around a Chinook toward a two-seater I called The Bumblebee that danced up and down in the dust. I was already wearing a flak jacket. He pointed to my bandolier. I undid it, handed it to him. He helped me stuff my duffle bag behind the seat, gave me a lift aboard, then handed me my helmet and M-16. That was the only goodbye we had.

The pilot wore headphones and only looked at me once. The expression of his mouth behind the mike of his headphones soured as we lifted off. I had no idea why he seemed angry with me. Usually, he would have smiled and given me a 60's handshake.

For a few choice moments I pretended I was on vacation and was enjoying an aerial tour. I could see puffs of smoke on the ground and APC's in various formations. The triple canopy jungle below me was a beautiful deep blue green in shapes that resembled the beehives of 1950's women's hairdos.

When we landed at Cu Chi Base Camp on the official helipad of the headquarters of the Twenty Fifth Division's bright red and yellow Tropic Lightning insignia, the pilot nodded me off the chopper and pointed to a jeep parked at the edge of the circle. A black driver was seated at the wheel and a young second lieutenant leaned casually against the back fender with his arms folded. I was really scared now. Damn. Division headquarters.

I ran from the chopper with my gear and M-16 directly to the second lieutenant. I had nearly forgotten about saluting. My hands were full and I hesitated. Just as I recalled the need to salute, he yanked his head to the back of the jeep and said, "Get in back."

He hopped into the shotgun seat beside the driver.

I felt like a "new guy" again. The base camp seemed more orderly and modern than Tay Ninh. The dirt roads seemed like streets. Litter was not to be found.

"What's this all about," I finally asked at the back of the second lieutenant's head.

"You'll find out," he answered without flinching. I could see just how young he was. He was well built and rugged, dressed clean and sharp in a starched uniform. He must have been some kind of military star to be assigned to the general's office.

The driver parked the jeep not far from the sign that announced we were at Division Headquarters. My stomach tightened. I've never fared well in the face of authority. My innate rebelliousness tends to reveal itself in my overall countenance. I am not genetically calibrated to carry out someone else's orders, stand at attention or give a sharp salute.

"Leave your shit here," the second lieutenant pointed to where my duffle bag sagged over the inside of the jeep's fender. Then he turned to me.

"Now listen, Bauer. You're going to be standing toe to toe with one of the baddest asses in the whole goddamn army. So you better remember quick how to stand tall and salute properly. Got it?"

“Yessir.”

“Okay, let’s go on in.”

A full bird colonel sat sideways at a desk in an empty reception room chewing ass on the phone. He no doubt ate nails for breakfast. He slammed down the phone and whirled on an office chair towards me and the second lieutenant.

He struck me right off as a bully who enjoyed tearing other people apart. He had homicidal green eyes, the eyes of an attack dog barking hysterically at the end of its leash. Spittle gathered in the corners of his mouth as he shouted at me. As his lips drooled, he spit out his words. His neck sprouted thick, hairy, bulging veins from his collar where it joined his head. His teeth had little spaces between them that gave his mouth an especially grim cast. Later, I would often hear stories of his cruelty. One that stuck was of a tank commander who had refused to follow an order to attack a certain village where the village chief was a suspected VC. I don’t know why he refused but the word was that he had intelligence to the contrary. The colonel ended his career on the spot by ordering a court-martial. I would see that same tank commander dutifully slinking around the headquarters buildings performing menial tasks, emptying waste baskets, as he waited for the court martial to take place — all of his war academy training dumped into the same trash can. Time Magazine published an article in the early 1980s about that colonel whose last name I cannot recall. First name, George. By then, he had been promoted to a high ranking general and given command of the U.S. forces headquartered in Germany. The article reported that he was being mustered out of the army because his suffocating discipline demoralized the troops.

“Ten-hut!” the second lieutenant snapped. I stood as tall, as straight as I could.

“What in the fuck is this piece of shit?” the colonel growled at the second lieutenant.

“Sir?”

He smashed the top of the desk with his fist and circled me with three quick strides. I thought he was going to grab me by the neck with the same big fist and snap it in two. I must have lurched backwards.

“Young man, you are a goddamn disgrace,” he said, his eyes only a few inches from mine. “Look at you. What the fuck is the goddamn army coming to? Young man,

I don’t want to ever see or hear of you again standing before an officer of the United States Army looking like a sack of shit.”

He shook a short, thick finger at the two of us and snorted.

“This never would have been tolerated. Never. Not in World War II or Korea. Look at this sorry little bastard. Filthy. Unshaven. Shabby hair. Out of uniform. Get that goddamn necklace off your chest, boy.”

The chewing went on and on. The second lieutenant stood perfectly still, his face reddening. I could see it tighten and untighten out of the corner of my eye.

“Get this nasty looking little sonofabitch out of here and get him cleaned up and be back here in one hour.”

“Yessir.”

We did a precision about face. I followed the second lieutenant outside. He gave the driver instructions to drive me to the quartermaster shack and in the following hour I had my head scalped with an electric trimmer, was ordered to shave my face with a common razer in the suds of a bar of disinfectant soap, sprayed naked with an ordinary lawn hose in front of three other soldiers, and issued a new set of jungle fatigues with my name hastily sewn onto it, a new pair of camouflaged boots and a bright green jungle hat.

As I dressed and laced my boots, I could see the second lieutenant sitting glumly in the jeep and wiping the toe of his right boot with a cloth. He looked up as I approached and visually inspected me.

“Okay, get in.”

"Sir," I asked. "Can you tell me what's up?"

"Just shut up and get in."

On the short drive back to headquarters he explained my new orders. The commanding general of the Twenty-Fifth Division was looking for a trained writer, someone with journalism experience, to write certain reports produced by his office. I learned afterwards from a new friend, Tony, who worked as a clerk in the Headquarters Company office, that the general was unhappy with some of the reports written by his staff. The colonel was in charge of a major whose responsibilities included the writing of daily field reports. So, it was the colonel's ass too that had been chewed. I was chosen from a computer run that disclosed my experience as a junior reporter at The Kansas City

Star. The colonel was going to have me tested. If I did well, I would finish my tour at the base camp. If I did not, I would be reassigned to another infantry unit. The 25th Division's famous Wolfhounds were headquartered there. That knowledge made me shudder.

When we returned to the headquarters building, the colonel was reading a printed piece of paper I assumed was my resume and had calmed considerably. He seemed halfway normal.

I had been ordered by the second lieutenant to remove my jungle hat.

"So, that's what you look like, Mr. Newspaperman," he snarled. "Oh well, that's better anyway. Now sit down over there and do what Major Carr tells you to do."

Carr had been sitting in the corner of the office unseen. He jumped to attention from behind his desk.

"Sir?" Major Carr said, clicking his heels.

"Major, see what the kid can do. I'll be back here at 1700 hours."

"Yessir."

The colonel turned to leave and then swung back and stuck his face into mine.

"Son," he said, much to my surprise in a somewhat softer and, I thought, almost fatherly voice, "you do this well and it just might save your life."

After he passed through the door into the next office, the major motioned for me to stand in front of his desk. He was a tall, balding man in a crisp uniform contoured to a trim, firm body. His mouth twitched in short habitual smirks. It occurred to me again that the military, like the police who patrolled my old neighborhood, provided cover for a multitude of psychopaths in uniform.

He slid the format of a typical report across the top of the wooden desk. I could see at a glance that I would not be involved in writing sensitive, top level reports. This was a daily report summarizing enemy contact in the division's area of operations: the number of G.I.'s KIA, WIA, and MIA, mines detonated, vehicles or weapons damaged or destroyed, enemy body count, prisoners, ordnance, maps, location, type of contact etc. It was difficult to see how anyone writing or typing the report could get it wrong. For me who was experienced in taking info over the phone and rewriting it within a half hour or less to meet a deadline, the content seemed elementary.

Carr handed me a pile of printouts — reports from the field continuously fed to the office on two teleprinters — and set a forty-five minute time limit for me to finish the report. I finished the report in half the time, looked up and saw he had been watching me with an amused smirk. He grabbed the report and began reading.

“Hah!” He shouted, wagging his head and looking relieved. “And here I thought you were an English major.”

He inserted a missing comma, read on, tossed the report onto his desk.

“It’s passable,” he conceded, pursing his small mouth and wagging his head. “Looks like you got your ass a safe spot, Bauer." He glowered. "For now." He relaxed a bit and told me about my other duties. I would help him with the publication of a glossy booklet about the 25th Division that was handed out as a souvenir to division soldiers returning to the States and with editing combat art books that were occasionally published depending on how many paintings of high quality the combat artists were able to produce.

That's how I met Tony, the company clerk, a black guy who could have charmed even the crusty old colonel. He looked like he'd been born in jungle fatigues and hat. He moved me into the combat artist’s hooch within walking distance of division headquarters. He was on his second tour and had applied for a duty assignment as an honor guard in Washington, D.C. He was one of three clerks who worked in the company headquarters office with the company commander and First Sergeant. By that time he knew the goings on around the basecamp, the politics, how to get booze and steaks and mattresses, how to get promoted and how to set up R &R's. He revealed my dilemma to me. Major Carr was a tank commander who attempted to take his squadron into the field without orders, an action that was not authorized and extremely dangerous. He was grounded and assigned to a desk job. Apparently, he did not write well and I was brought in from the field to back him up. The colonel liked Carr as a military man and was trying to get him a tank company because he was gung-ho and wanted to be back in the field. According to Tony, Carr was perceived to be a crazy bastard who put his troops at risk. That, anyway, was the story.

Carr never missed a chance to find fault with me. He was on his third wife, a German woman, who criticized him for not paying attention to their two sons. She was

angry at him for volunteering for another tour in Vietnam. In our spare time in the office he aired his complaints to me. I was his sounding board. One morning without thinking, or perhaps feeling too familiar because he had shared his marital problems with me, I spouted off without thinking. I sat directly across from him face-to-face over the wide, weathered, wooden desk.

"Hey, Bauer," Major Carr sniped as he reviewed the prior day's report, "I thought you had to be smart to work for a newspaper."

"I used to be smart," I shot back automatically, never looking up from my typewriter, "until the army got a hold of me."

Without warning, he jumped upright from his chair. His hand sprang to the handle of his Forty-Five. He popped the snap on the holster and halfway withdrew his weapon.

He stood frozen for an instant, his eyes darting back and forth between me and the handle of the Forty-Five. He stared directly at the center of my forehead. I knew he had killed before. His face told me so. His whole body tightened. His face burned chili pepper red. Then he exhaled and just as slowly slid the Forty-Five back into the holster.

"You better watch it, smartass," he said through his tight little mouth, wagging his head. "Next time you shoot it off, you are one gone little shit."

My immediate reaction was to laugh out loud. It was such a bizarre moment, one that I might have seen on a TV sitcom. I kept my eyes on the typewriter keys, paused, then said, "Yes sir."

When I resumed typing, he sat down and pretended to keep on editing what I had typed.

Maybe he was just being a hotshot. I wasn't sure. I feared, had he shot me, he might have gotten away with it. We were the only two in the room. He could have accused me of anything. Weapons were not allowed in the headquarters office except for higher ranking officers. That's why he had his Forty-Five on his belt.

When I told Tony what had happened, he said that Carr had a reputation for having a hot temper and had been in several fistfights at the officer's club. After that I nodded in agreement with his frequent philosophical musings about longhairs, bleeding hearts, punks, whatever he said.

In one of his more friendly moments, Carr looked up from his side of the desk that separated us and told me a personal story.

He had just slammed down the phone with a bang.

“That motherfucker,” he snapped as he stood up and paced.

“Just got off the phone with my wife, the stupid kraut. Kids need more dental work. That’s all she had to say. Right? Naw. She goes into a long tirade. How come you never play with your boys? I say, 'When you are a boy, you play like a boy. When you are a soldier, you fight like a soldier. You don’t play games with little kids.' Then she says, ‘The dentist says they have lots of cavities. He says I don’t bring them often enough.' ”

He gritted his teeth, squared his jaw. Ruminated.

“The last time the punk said that,” referring to the dentist, “he said it to my face. You know what I did? I grabbed that motherfucker by the lapels of his phony white jacket, lifted him off the floor and slammed his sorry ass against the goddamned wall and I said, ‘You asshole. You little prick. Don’t you know the world is bigger than a circle of twenty-three teeth? Huh? Huh? Is that all you know? Two fuckin' rows of teeth.’ I bounced his head against the wall and I said, ‘You ever say that to me again and you’ll…”

He wagged his head and smirked.

“I told that little prick, ‘You got that, Doctor Cavity?’ The wimpy little shit squirmed around like a dangling worm. ‘Yessir. Yessir.’ I thought he was going to cry on my shoulder or shit his pants. But now that I’m not around, he’s trying to sabotage me again with my wife. And she’s going along with it. When I get some leave, I’m going to slap the living shit out of both of them. And her two little brats along with her. She needs to stop feeding them all that candy and ice cream. And that dentist, the motherfucker... ”

He gripped the handle of his Forty-Five.

“Yeah, the two little bastards too. I ordered them to brush, morning and night. But they've been slacking off. Their fucking rotten little teeth cost me half my pay.”

He glowered at me.

“You get that, you small aleck little shit.”

“Yessir,” I answered, noticing that his hand was still gripping his Forty-Five. He nodded to himself in satisfaction, eyeing my forehead.

I learned a month later that Colonel George “Hardass” was right. My reassignment to Cu Chi did save my life. Almost to a month after my transfer to Cu Chi I had an afternoon off and hopped a Chinook to Tay Ninh to visit Diaz and say goodbye to my few remaining platoon friends. I had never been on a Chinook. The purpose of the flight was to deliver a variety of supplies for Tay Ninh basecamp that I helped to load. That particular Chinook had no seating so I stood during the flight with six or seven other soldiers. We maintained our balance by holding on to some hand straps hanging from above the windows. The two pilots seemed to me to be a little young to be flying a Chinook. I could see and hear them joking in the cockpit. Halfway through the flight they noticed a firefight in process on the ground.

“Hey, let’s go check it out,” one of them said. They left their flight pattern and headed in the direction of the action on the ground. Below us we could see puffs of smoke, our troops running to take up positions and APCs and tanks bouncing over theflat terrain.

“Cool,” the other pilot said. I was not amused. Before I could wish that they would return to the original flight pattern, the Chinook started taking rounds. Several ping the skin of the Chinook.

“Holy shit,” the second pilot shouted. “We better get our ass outta here.”

I could feel my heart pounding. They could have gotten us killed.

Once we landed, I headed for my previous spot on the basecamp. I didn't recognize a single face. Most of the soldiers sat glumly and wouldn’t answer my questions. I finally found a soldier who would talk to me. He said he’d heard that Diaz had been killed after an ambush patrol and the others in our loosely formed platoon had been either killed or wounded along with him. They had been bushwhacked early in the morning on their way back to the basecamp.

I took the next Chinook back to Cu Chi, sat puzzled on my bunk, stunned, yet relieved I had been spared. Not a believer in prayer, I wondered at the random nature of the universe. I was bothered most by the realization that I had no feelings. I did not know any of the other soldiers well. Yet, shouldn’t I have felt something: sadness,

remorse, regret? I stared at the cement floor of the hooch. It looked blank, bleak and depressing. What I felt was that my column, "BB Shots," had saved me. The next day at the office I slipped back into my routine. I was still alive. Something was wrong with that, I thought. Something was wrong with me.

My unit at Cu Chi had a jerry-rigged shower made with an empty 250-pound bombshell. The bombshell was installed at the top of a shack and fitted with a pull chain that released a narrow stream of water from a spigot about a half inch in diameter. Closely spaced two-by-fours below the spigot allowed the water to drain. The shack was large enough for three or four mama-sans to scrub laundry there. They filled their wash pans with a hose that took water from the same tank. Except for the hosing down I had at the quartermaster building, I had not had a shower of any kind since I first left Cu Chi for Tay Ninh. The little stream of water was enough to wet me down, soap up and rinse off. I did this in full view of the mama-sans who chattered and laughed at me. I had long before lost any sense of privacy. I turned away from them to clean my private parts. I hung a small mirror from one of the upright beams to shave. They roared when I would pull up my cheek to tighten the skin under my chin this way and that. On one such occasion as I was shaving they suddenly went silent. In the mirror I saw an older Vietnamese man standing behind me. He stared ominously at the back of my head. I thought I might truly be a goner. Then he started making nasal sounds and smiled. When I turned to face him, he held up a single two-foot strand of black hair from a mole on his chest. He held it in the air so I could see its full length. I knew then that he meant me no harm. I knew that Vietnamese men generally did not have a lot of chest or body hair so he was trying to show me in front of the mama-sans that he had at least one long chest hair. I oohed and ahhhed, nodding my head in approval, smiling back at him. Once I had done that he bowed his head and left. The women resumed their chatter. When I told Tony what had happened, he told me the man was the mama-sans' boss. From then on when I passed him going about my business, I smiled, nodded, pointed at his chest. He lifted the hair for me to admire again. More oohs and ahhhs.

The longer I was in Vietnam the surreal became ordinary. I was in Vietnam on July 20, 1969 when Apollo II landed on the moon. Tony was able to commandeer a good sized field tent, a dozen folding chairs and an old television so that we could watch the

landing. As many as possible filled the tent. The transmission to the television was not picture perfect but we watched and jubilated at the touchdown. Our old mama-san stood at the very back, a puzzled look on her wizened face. When Apollo II settled on the moon and the flag was planted, I shouted to her, “Look, mommy. We landed on the moon!” Her mouth curled into a spiteful scowl.

“Ah, GI, you bool-sheet. Always bool-sheet,” she said and stomped out of the tent. I didn’t know if she thought we were playing a trick on her or was simply resentful that the United States had scored a space race victory. She knew a lot more than she let on. I still wonder if she was a VC at heart. I don’t blame her if she was. Her moods changed with what she wanted from me. Some days she joked. Other days she pouted.

One afternoon I found her crying and holding her jaw. She kept pointing to her teeth. I had some time off before bunker guard so I drove her to the dental clinic. I sat for several hours rereading my tattered copy of a Dostoevsky novel. She finally emerged from the clinic smiling and holding up a gold tooth. “Now I buy TV,” said. “For my daughter’s wedding.”

In many ways, I saw over the desktop at Cu Chi a much broader view of the war than I would ever have seen as a grunt stationed at Tay Ninh, probably more than many officers in the field.

I saw it was easy to get lost in the heat and the sweat and the fatigue of filling sandbags and loading and unloading heavy equipment and mortar shells. I saw how the numbers that passed through the office each day generated their own excitement, how the numbers could be arranged and rearranged and endlessly debated like the numbers in columns and standings on a sports page.

By chance, I found a book in the back of the center desk drawer with a title I generally remember as, “The Social, Economic and Political History Of The Republic Of South Vietnam,” written by the army as background for its officers. Its thesis, as I understood it, was that the war as it was being waged could never be won militarily, that the insurgency was the result of decades of exploitation of the general populace by a small percentage of wealthy landholders and the French rubber companies and that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to gain support of the peasant population through military means. It was the "winning hearts and minds" theme that was touted by the U.S.

as the strategy needed to win end of the war. After having been in the field, knowing and working with the South Vietnamese soldiers and being around the villagers, I could see what a fool's errand it was. The strategy seemed like something written up by graduates of Ivy League universities, military colleges and political science faculties. In hindsight, what I came to see was that the lower class Vietnamese were simply France’s “niggers.” If not slaves in name, there were slaves in practice, subject to floggings, jailing, and sometimes, the guillotine. We were fighting for the two percent of the population that colluded with the French, one of our World War II allies, and that might be a reason other than oil and precious minerals for why we backed them in holding on to the current regime in Vietnam.

Sitting there typing, I overheard bits of conversation spoken by the younger officers in subdued voices that suggested to me that they no longer believed in the war, that they were simply biding their time, hoping that the ongoing peace talks would quickly conclude. I thought of myself as a fly on the wall.

I figured, right or wrong, that General Williamson, the 25th Division’s commanding general, no longer had his heart in waging the war either. That was just my own take on it. I am not a mind reader. Just watched him when I got a glimpse. I had never seen a four-star general up close. They had the reputation of being as powerful as kings, little gods. They held the power of life and death over their troops. They surrounded themselves with mad dog colonels to preserve their imperial bearing and give uplifting speeches. This general was Hollywood handsome with perfectly groomed wavy hair, polished and gentlemanly in his movements, soft spoken. The process of Vietnamization of the war had begun and he seemed determined to minimalize division casualties. Under his direction, the number of RIF’s (Reconnaissance-In- Force, formerly known as Search and Destroy missions) dramatically declined. One of his strategies was to have an engineering company airlifted to the Cambodian border and have it construct a fire base in a few day’s time. He would man the base with a couple of infantry platoons, machine gun emplacements, a mortar crew, and wait. When the North Vietnamese decided it was safe, they would cross the border and hurl themselves at a seemingly defenseless little firebase. But the general had already arranged for a massive air attack from Guam and other U.S. bases. The jets were on alert or already in the air waiting to

pounce. He sprung this trap again and again and claimed actual large body counts. Those who had seen those sites of destruction talked about bodies strewn over areas the size of a football field, an anomaly, given that many body counts were theoretical, made up or greatly exaggerated, often based on drag trails or discarded bloody clothing. Major Carr, who also acted as the Division's field historian, once brought me with him to take notes in a fly over in a chopper so he could take photographs. He delighted in showing me photos of other actual battles and dead enemy bodies. One was of a North Vietnamese unit of at least a dozen soldiers who had taken a hit from a bomb. They were heaped in a pile coming down a trail off a hill. I won't forget the body of the point man, his clothes blown from his body, the look of shock on his face and his swollen naked erection sticking up from between his legs pointing to the sky.

At Cu Chi I made friends with a Chieu Hoi, a Viet Cong who had surrendered under a program that, translated into English, meant "Open Arms." It promised surrendering VCs eventual freedom in exchange for their services as scouts and spies. He looked the age of a graduate student but was forty-nine years old and had not seen his family in eleven years. The Viet Cong infrastructure in that region, he told me, had been largely destroyed and he was utterly exhausted and demoralized. He had been trained in Moscow and, in his granny glasses, spoke perfect American English. The most startling thing he told me was that most of the B-52 bombs we dropped largely fell on empty spaces. As of a certain date early in the war, the U.S. had agreed to clear all bombings through the South Vietnamese Army to prevent civilian casualties. Through bribery and threats to the families of South Vietnamese officers and officials, the Viet Cong got notice well in advance of most of the bombings and were able to avoid the massive destruction the American public thought was being inflicted on the enemy by our bombing campaigns.

At the office in Cu Chi, I discovered the existence of the so-called Rubber Squad and eventually talked personally with one of the veterans of the platoon. Its mission was to patrol the Michelin Rubber Plantation and count the number of trees damaged or destroyed by American artillery and bombs so compensation could be paid to the Michelin Rubber Company. The squad took heavy casualties because it was easy for the Viet Cong to spot them from bunkers with openings just high enough above the ground

for the sights and muzzles of their AK-47's to pass through. They shot at shins and knee caps, hoping that the sight of a crippled G.I. at home would intensify the anti-war movement. In my own mind, I felt members of the rubber squad who were wounded or killed in the rubber plantation gave their lives for the Michelin Rubber Company and for the sake of keeping the peace with an ally — France. It was only one of many concessions made to the French who were embarrassed by their military losses, especially at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. It seemed to me we tippy-toed around them and I have read that our bombings of Hanoi were tailored to avoid any targets the French thought to be sensitive or against their national and business interests. I was able to confirm some of what I read when I visited Hanoi in 2000.

I learned about the Phoenix Program, an operation to assassinate suspected Viet Cong in their villages, mostly at night while they slept with their families. I heard the brass discuss the pros and cons of the weapons they used in those assassinations and how these individuals and their families could be killed more effectively. From these conversations I could somewhat confirm the opinions of reporters at The Kansas City Star that the war was being used by the army as a testing ground for new weapons and equipment.

I was also told about Phelps Raiders, an intelligence unit, by then discontinued because of bad publicity, known for their technique of throwing captured Viet Cong soldiers out of helicopters when they refused to cooperate. The unit was run earlier in the war out of Cu Chi. I never knew if the techniques used by Phelps Raiders were true or scuttlebutt. The stories were repeated and bragged about by some of the lifers I talked with at Cu Chi.

I witnessed the workings of the extensive black market. It offered a clue as to why many of the older non-commissioned officers reupped for Vietnam assignments so often. They were making fortunes selling off army equipment and supplies. Though I was never there, I was told of a fire base not far from the Cu Chi basecamp whose sole purpose was to house a plush nightclub for the NCOs. The rumor, which I heard from many sources and soldiers who said they had been there, claimed that the club was cooled by four large air conditioners, one on each side of a four-sided bunker complex. Several soldiers had been killed defending it. Now and then, some of the prostitutes who were

secretly let in through the wire were VC sympathizers and used their trysts with drunken NCOs to gain information from their loose talk and bragging to identity openings in the wire that allowed the VC to enter the main basecamp.

The usual scum that flock to wars were everywhere to be seen. The legitimate U.S. corporate members of military-industrial complex that Eisenhower had warned about in his famous farewell speech on January 17, 1961 profiteered as they always do at the expense of we cannon fodder and the generally apathetic American people. The "King," who is one of the main characters in James Clavell's novel, "King Rat," an American corporal who callously runs a black market operation in the WWII Japanese prisoner of war camp at Changi, would surely have prospered in the Vietnam War's black market. Everyone knew about it and accepted it as part of the lie. Those who had the inclination and could get away with it happily participated. Why not? It was there for the taking. That's the underbelly of America that no one wants to talk about. What's pitiful is that the attitude is now commonplace in American business culture.

The office where I worked was air-conditioned and this ate at me even as I welcomed it. I thought about the friends I had lost and our living conditions in the field. I sometimes thought about volunteering to go back to the field if I could and then I remembered my new wife and considered the fact that the war was a hoax, a farce and a cruel lie, so I stayed put. I turned down many of the amenities offered to me at the base camp as a small protest. Though I still served on bunker guard several nights a week, Cu Chi was well protected. Sometimes we had incoming tracers and an occasional rocket attack. The gunships were quick to respond. The space between the sky and the earth outside the perimeter was often filled with red rain from the miniguns. One night a rocket struck close to my hooch, penetrated the wood slats of the wall and blew me off my cot. When I snapped on my flashlight, I spotted a cantaloupe-size piece of jagged shrapnel spinning next to me on the floor, hissing and smoking. My only other close call at Cu Chi came as I was setting up for bunker guard. A new guy triggered a blasting cap as I was getting ready to hook it into a claymore mine. The explosion of the blasting cap blew a hole just above my elbow. The wound required no stitches. I was given a tetanus shot, patched up with surgical strips, and sent back to the bunker line. After the medics left, I grabbed a short length of steel pipe I found on the ground and pounded the new guy

on the top of his helmet several times. He might have shot me but I think he was already too befuddled by just being in Vietnam to do anything but obey my orders for the rest of the night.

Since high school where fights were commonplace, I'd never had the thought of physically attacking anyone. But I was different now. I didn't give it a second thought.

In my hooch I could hear the B-52's at night, feel the reverberations of the bombs shaking the ground. I didn't worry any more about the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese on the other end of those bombs. I already knew what those bombs could do. I thought about myself and how badly I needed to sleep and how the bombs kept me alive.

After I had been in Cu Chi a few weeks, the Red Cross showed the movie, "The Graduate," and handed out popcorn and soft drinks. I had seen the movie before and was savoring the irony of seeing it roughly projected onto a white sheet tacked to the side of a bunker when a tremendous explosion lit the sky down the dirt road. A fireball mushroomed upwards into the darkness, the sirens rang out and the floodlights went dark. The projector clicked off. We scrambled for a bunker, banging into each other in the darkness. While we waited, I imagined that sappers had made their way inside the wire again as they had the year before during Tet of 1968 by tunneling under the camp. I thought it would be a sorry way to die, crammed against other sweating bodies in a muddy trench that smelled of urine and garbage. I waited for a sapper to toss a satchel of plastic explosive into the bunker. But the floodlights soon blinked back on. A few minutes later, two M.P.'s walked down the road away from the site of the fire and announced over megaphones for us to stay put, stay away from the wire.

"What up?" we wanted to know.

"Chopper caught on a power line and flipped," one of the M.P.s said.

"And the pilot? The gunners?"

"Deep fried," was all one said.

I looked up the road and felt a familiar feeling of dread, not for myself, but for the nameless pilot and gunners hurrying in from their last flight of the day. When I looked back away from the road, I was amazed to find that the projector had been turned back on and the audience already joking and talking and eating popcorn, watching the movie, without losing a beat. At the time, I thought a sickness had overtaken them, that

something as essential as ordinary goodness had died inside them. I went back to the hooch and hung my head in grief and sadness for the three dead soldiers and their families. By the time Tony brought me my going home orders several weeks later, I had learned that the other moviegoers couldn't dwell on their feelings of dread and fear and remorse. Not then. That would have to come later, many years later. For that night, they needed to swallow warm beer, munch out of a brown paper bag of dry salty popcorn and watch a movie. They needed a reprieve from reality. I had no right to judge them.

Tony told me of two other accidents I did not witness that occurred at Cu Chi while I was there. The first involved a number of Wolfhounds unloading munitions — mortar rounds I assumed — when there was an explosion that set off a chain reaction of additional explosions. Seventeen were killed.

Not long after, a junior officer was given the assignment of destroying various munitions seized from the VC. To save time, he ordered his squad to pile them up together to save time. He had them stay a fair distance away from the stockpile and then shot into it with an RPG (rocket propelled grenade). He must have expected a single explosion and fireball. Instead the exploding ordinance scattered like a Fourth Of July display, killing him and several of the soldiers under his command. The accidents took me back to Fort Carson and the truck accident that killed Ricky. Such events struck me as another senseless waste of human life. We had no access to newspapers or television news. I doubted the two incidents had ever been reported to the public.

I had no one except Tony to discuss my feelings about those kinds of incidents. I wasn't close to any of the artists who were my hooch mates. They seemed to me to be narcissistic prima donnas. They had permission to fly anywhere in III Corps to do their work. They only had to report and clear when and where they would travel for material for their work. They had their own clique. Tony was my only friend. I envied the African-American soldiers I saw in groups throughout the camp, joking, laughing, trying to make the most of their free time. The brothers. After high school, I can't recall ever belonging to an unofficial club like that. I was occupied with working and going to school.

Another incident after I had my orders unnerved me. One morning as I sat in the hooch after a night on bunker guard, I heard what sounded like machine gun fire across

the road. I hunkered down. I expected the sirens to sound. I heard someone running on the side of the hooch. It was Tony. He practically slid through the back entrance, out of breath, shaking. He didn't have his M-16 with him.

The sirens sounded.

"Tony," I asked. "What's going on?"

He waved me into the little cubicle he had made for himself out of lumber from mortar shell crates and bamboo latticing. He sat on his cot, still shaking, head aimed at the cement floor.

"I don't know what to do," he quickly said, huffing, puffing.

"About what?" I asked.

For an instant he was unable to speak.

"This guy came in and blew away the First Sergeant and Jerry (*the other office clerk*). I think they're both dead. Then he shot himself."

"Let's go up to the office. You have to tell somebody."

"No," he said. "There's a field phone down the way."

We ran in the direction he pointed. As we dashed towards it, Tony looked up. We could see the MPs were already there. He stopped, let his shoulders slump and walked towards them. I didn't see him again until I was off duty the next afternoon.

That was when he told me what he had seen. The soldier was from the Wolfhounds. They were in the basecamp for a stand down. During lulls in activity in the field military discipline was more strictly enforced. I thought it was a mistake to do that to soldiers who were already under pressure, especially when they had just come in after days or weeks of being in danger and living like animals. They might have been cut a little slack. But what did I know?

The day before, Tony learned, the Wolfhound who killed the First Sergeant and Jerry had been enjoying a cook out with the other members of his combat platoon on a stand down when the First Sergeant approached him in front of his unit and chewed him out for not getting a haircut. He insisted the solder report to him the next morning with his hair cut and in proper uniform.

Tony was in the supply room at the back of the building when he heard the front screen door slam shut. Then he heard the words, "Okay, First Sergeant. You wanted me

to get a haircut. Here's your fucking haircut!" Tony laid on the floor when the shooting began. There was pause. Then more shooting. Tony crawled to the doorway and spotted the bodies. He pulled himself along the floor to the back entrance and ran across the road to our hooch where I had met him. That, for me, was the end of the Tony I had known.

Shortly after the murder of the First Sergeant and the clerk, Tony brought me my orders to go home. They came as a shock. They had arrived much earlier than I had expected. I thought I would get them in January or February of 1970 at the earliest, but there they were for mid-December, 1969. When Tony handed them to me, I held them shaking in my hands as I read down the two or three pages. My close calls in the field had not bankrupted my good luck. I saw the early orders as another good sign. For the first time in months, I felt hopeful.

My second response centered on Tony's expression: a faint smile as he looked down on me sitting on my bunk looking ecstatic. Not his usual big grin. He patted me lightly on the shoulder and said, "Gotta get back," and left in a hurry.

Though I had witnessed short timer's syndrome in many of my friends and other departing members of my unit, I had never seriously considered it as a possibility for me. I don't recall many who escaped it. The pattern resembled the separation anxiety I had studied in college psychology classes. After someone received a definite date for leaving Vietnam, a subtle process of distancing began, both in the short-timer and in his buddies. It happened to me.

Short-timers were notorious for promising to write or send care packages or perform personal favors once they returned to The World. They seldom did. That in itself created resentment. One of the combat artists in my unit, a guy named Jock, who played a great folk guitar and concealed many other talents under the drowsiness of opiates, was one of the few who did write back to our unit. For months before he left, he had been sending large shipments of marijuana to his girl friend in San Francisco through an arrangement he had with a friend in the shipping center in Long Bien. "Wait 'til my friends get a whiff of this shit, man. It's better than any of that Columbian stuff," he was famous for saying. He responded to our skepticism by swearing we would hear from him. We had almost forgotten him when, six weeks later, Tony brought us a postcard addressed to him for the entire hooch to read. It was an announcement of the opening of

a tobacco store. The postcard size announcement read, “Jock’s Pipe Shop. Rare Tobaccos And Paraphernalia.”

As a short-timer, I had an altercation with Stringer, one of the artists who felt slighted because Jock willed his brushes and paints to one of the other artists. It ended in a screaming match but nothing more.

I felt I would be above all that. But no sooner had Tony left the hooch the morning he handed me my orders, Stringer, the only other artist there at the time, who must have overheard our brief conversation, yelled over at me, “Hey, don't forget my blanket. I want it back." At first, I thought he was teasing. It wasn’t like him to be petty or argumentative. Someone had stolen my original blanket, the one I had been given at Tay Ninh, made of a large piece of an old parachute.

Perhaps I had overlooked the fact that he had just reupped for another tour to shorten his overall service commitment. Though the war was reportedly supposed to be ending, the North Vietnamese had been sending large numbers of troops down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and there were rumors of large scale attacks in the coming months. Skinner may have regretted his decision and was vexed by my excitement about going home.

“You’ll have it before I leave,” I said.

“No asshole, I mean I want it now.”

“Why do you need it now? You've already got one.”

“I just want to be sure you don’t run off with it or forget. So hand it over.”

“Look, you can wait. I’ll be out of here in two weeks. I won’t need it back home. I guarantee you’ll get it back.”

Stringer, who had been kneeling by his bunk getting his gear ready for bunker guard, sprung at me from across the floor and grabbed me by the neck, choking and shaking me. Stringer stood a slender six foot two and he was exceptionally strong. I had no way to stop him short of kneeing him in the groin and engaging in an all-out fight I was sure to lose.

“Give me the goddamn blanket, you asshole,” he shouted, then suddenly stopped choking me and shoved me to the cement floor

He pointed, shook his finger and shouted between breaths, "I better have that blanket when I get back tomorrow morning," he said, then grabbed his gear and stomped out. I dug the blanket from under the mattress on my cot where I hid it during the day. I slid it under the mattress on his cot. He ignored me after that even though we had often spent time together at night and sang folk and anti-war songs with Jock and another artist who played along with his guitar.

A few nights later I picked a fight myself with my major irritant, an asinine high school science teacher from Oregon named Pritchard who assumed he was an authority on any issue remotely connected with any field of science. Whenever I questioned his scientific authority, he became defensive and tried to quickly shift attention to another subject. Regardless of the subject, his opening statement began with, "Well, what we've found is…" or "they say that…" or "Our research shows…" and if I questioned the validity of his relationship to the "we" and the "they," he invariably wagged his head knowingly and smirked at me like I was a doofus. In reality, he had an undergraduate degree in education, a minor in general science studies and had never participated in any meaningful scientific studies or research.

The night of our fistfight we were discussing adolescent crime, or juvenile delinquency as it was known then, , a topic that Pritchard in his fundamentalist vision never failed to link to some deliberate and unspeakable evil in certain teenagers who had committed violent felonies or who were involved in war protests.

"What we've found…" he began that night, but I interrupted him.

"Who's we, Pritchard?" I snapped.

"Well, those of us in the scientific community who…"

"What have you ever done or studied that qualified you to become a part of any scientific community?" I asked.

Pritchard wagged his head and smirked and rolled his eyes at our other hooch mates who were sitting or standing near us just outside the door sucking weed.

"Well, I've been teaching science for five years now on the secondary level and…"

"I mean, in addition to that. What experiments have you designed and conducted, what studies have you participated in…"

"Well, I've done research all my life…"

"Like what?" I cut him off. "Be specific."

"Oh, fuck you, Bauer. I don't have to sit here every night and list my credentials. I don't need to prove anything to you."

"Yeah, and you don't have to sit here every night like a pompous ass citing nonexistent studies to support your bigoted ideas about people who don't fit your mold."

"I'm no more bigoted than you are. Probably less so."

"I don't pretend to be an expert when I'm not."

"No, I agree, and that's because you're an expert at nothing, and you're the kind of guy that'll never amount to shit because all you know how to do is knock people who are doing something…"

I swung. It had nothing to do with what Pritchard said but I had decided it was time to dismantle his smirk. It was my misfortune to start the only fistfight of my army career in full view of a company commander. He was ambling by us on the way to the officer's club.

"Okay, knock it off," he barked, pushing us apart. He gave me a hard look and then looked over at Pritchard.

"You two want some time in the brig?"

"No sir," I answered.

"No sir," Pritchard said.

"If I so much as hear about you two again, you'll do time in the brig. You'll find yourselves back in the field. You got that."

"Yes sir."

"Yes sir."

He snorted and moved on. But when I woke in the middle of the night, I wondered what had possessed me and why I had allowed Pritchard to goad me into a situation that might have led to a change in orders or duty time in the field.

As the day of my departure neared, I felt the others move away from me. Their hostility was not overt, but one by one they began to ignore me, as though I wasn't there. Even Tony, who bunked near me and had been involved in many late night chats and the sharing of life stories, acted disinterested. I could hardly get him to attend to checking

me out of the unit and helping me find out what releases I needed for equipment, bedding, weapon and ammo so I could leave on time. Major Carr, who seemed to enjoy needling me in a friendly way despite my poorly concealed dislike for the military, rarely talked to me except for daily business matters and to order me to train my replacement. No more personal chit-chat or sarcastic joking.

I concentrated on my orders and the timetable for my departure. Though our schedules had not allowed the men in my unit to spend much off duty time together, we had had some close moments late at night, talking about what we would do when we went home, what a sick joke the war was, what was wrong with our society and what we could do to make it better. Though I would not have counted any of them as close friends, except for Tony, it did feel odd to be frozen out and not a part of what little togetherness we shared. And because of the loss of my friends in Tay Ninh, I left Vietnam with no real friends, with no one who later who might have been able to share what had happened and how it felt to be there. Unlike the soldiers of World War II who held reunions and revisited old battlefields, I would only have myself with whom to relive my experiences and test them against reality. Being in the Vietnam War was not one experience; it was many. I left Vietnam as I had come to it – by myself, holding my feelings inside.

The insouciance that replaced fear earlier in my tour again gave way to dread and paranoia as my date of departure approached. Stories abounded of short timers being killed in their final days by a rocket or an unlucky sniper round with their name on it or a freak accident. I avoided going anywhere by chopper.

I worried too about how I would be treated when I returned home, if my wife would still be attracted to me, if my bonds with old friends survived. I was down to 117 pounds and, when I looked into my small, round shaving mirror, my face stared back at me with a gaunt and wizened look. I became so concerned about my weight that I stopped smoking. The withdrawal from as many cigarettes as I could get my hands on left me lightheaded and unsteady on my feet. My hands shook; my fingertips tingled. I had headaches so strong that all I wanted to do was lay my head down and sleep. I had already lost my appetite. I had to force myself to eat.

I had been gone from the real world less than a year but it seemed the world I left no longer existed. I had carried my M-16 everywhere, cleaned it daily, slept with it by my side. It would feel odd not to have it nearby. Even now, in moments of paranoia, I miss it. For years after my return I was unable to sleep without having a baseball bat under my bed, a knife and a flashlight in the drawer of my nightstand.

I had grown comfortable in my jungle fatigues, jungle hat, camouflaged boots and green underwear. My I.D. tags clanked together lightly as I walked. It would feel strange to wear civilian clothes again.

I slept little the night before I was to leave for Long Bien, afraid of oversleeping and missing my truck. I was up early, shaving, soaping down in the little stream that dribbled from the spigot in the makeshift shower. A few of my hooch mates moaned a sleepy "goodbye," and "good luck," and "write me," as I swung my duffle bag over my shoulder, knowing I had forgotten to ask them to write down their names and addresses, didn't really care if I ever saw them again, in a hurry for my get-out-of-jail-free card, and headed down the road to the chaplain’s hooch.

The chaplain’s farewell prayer was the first item on my checklist of required formalities. There were six or seven of us sitting on duffle bags waiting for him to show up. After waiting close to two hours, I began to worry about catching my plane the next day at Ton Son Nhut. When he finally jumped out of his jeep, he brought a sergeant and a recruiter, with him. I quickly saw that the point of the whole exercise was to try to persuade us to sign up for another tour or an extension of our current tours.

The chaplain gave a rambling recitation of our obligations as citizens and soldiers, reminded us that our buddies and fellow Americans still faced danger in the jungles and along rice paddies, and needed us to be with them, if not physically, which would be preferred, then at least in our hearts. Before he gave us his blessing, he wanted the sergeant to explain the benefits and bonuses we could gain if we re-upped or extended. The bonuses sounded like bribes, fairly large chunks of money at the time, large enough to widen the eyes of a nineteen-year-old. We could take a short leave before our new assignments.

We listened to the pep talks for another forty-five minutes, option this, option that. When the chaplain and the sergeant saw they had accomplished all they could, the

chaplain spoke a short prayer that again reminded us of those we were leaving behind and asked God to help us see our duty and to have the courage to perform it. He almost succeeded in making us believe we were cowards for leaving.

The chaplain finally rose from his knees and he and the sergeant left us with no further instructions. The 19-year-old eager recruit followed them. Those of us who remained looked at each other in silence, shrugging, smiling cautiously. They were strangers to me and I was in no mood to make small talk. It was every man for himself. In another half hour a Spec-5 drove onto the dirt road in front of the chaplain's hootch and asked if we were going to Long Bien. We loaded our bags and two boom boxes into the back of his pickup and held on desperately as he banged and swerved over the ragged road to Long Bien.

We were transferred to another truck and then to a bus. I didn't know the area but I assumed we were somewhere between Long Bien, Ton Son Nhut and Saigon. The bus dropped us off in a cluster of brown aging barracks that appeared to be a processing center, both incoming and outgoing. It was not the same place I stayed during my first few days in country.

The busses kept coming, making the lines at various checkpoints long and hot. There was a line for verifying orders, another recruitment line and a brief physical for venereal diseases and unhealed cuts and wounds. Except for those returning from second and third tours, most of us stood in line silently and subdued. We weren't back home yet.

The barracks were a mess. Not all the beds had mattresses and those that did smelled of urine, vomit and sweat and felt alive with attacking but unseen bed bugs. The close air was thick with mosquitos. I tried to sleep half sitting, half lying against my duffle bag near the entrance. Out of boredom I tried to smoke. Not having smoked for weeks, the cigarette nauseated me. Some of the men walked past me during the night to urinate on the ground. Just after midnight we could hear explosions and machine gun fire. The sirens sounded. Several M.P.'s and NCO's rousted us into formations and issued us flack jackets, M-16's, two clips of ammo, and helmets. The perimeter of Long Bien was being attacked and they needed us to be in bunkers along the wire. We were loaded onto five-ton trucks, bounced and banged against each other.

From the bunkers, we could see the miniguns on the gunships flashing red streams through the dark skies in the distance and hear the passage of jets slicing the air, roaring low above us. It appeared that a large firefight was taking place to our extreme right, the explosions, probably mortar rounds or RPGs, and then silence. A few incoming tracers veered periodically to either side of us. The heaviest activity was over in less than an hour. I spent the night sulking with my fingers crossed and slapping mosquitos. I was never happier in my life to climb back aboard a five-ton truck and return to those rotten barracks. We turned in our gear and lined up in formation, waiting to be marched to breakfast. I had not stood in formation since I left The World and wondered why I had to do so now. I resented being treated like a recruit in basic training. The breakfast was bad, a slosh of scrambled eggs on paper plates that was inedible. We tossed the mess into the ditches by the road.

We were assigned aircraft and flight times. I felt anxious until my name was called, fearing that Tony might have screwed up or left my name off the roster. We finally loaded onto the buses for Ton Son Nhut. The airport at Ton Son Nhut was a doleful sight, not much different than I remembered it. Planes landed with new arrivals who jealously eyed us. I knew the feeling.

The flight to Oakland Army Base lasted about thirty hours. It was impossible to sleep. The plane was packed, hot and stuffy. Three seats on each side of the aisle. I felt a twinge of claustrophobia and fought giving in to it. I wanted to commandeer the plane and land it so I could run into open air. When the plane landed in Guam to refuel, we were allowed to step off the plane and walk back and forth on the ramp for a few minutes. I needed to be outside of the plane.

I began to lose my sense of time. Lack of sleep and the fatigue of the flight disoriented me. By the time we landed the toilets were clogged and stank, their gross smell filtering through the main cabin. Thankfully, no one had been sick or gone berserk. We landed in Oakland in the middle of the night and cheered. A young captain boarded the plane and yelled for silence.

“Okay, listen up. I want this plane unloaded in an orderly fashion. When you hit the tarmac, you exit the runway and go where directed. No talking, running, yelling, or

grab ass. Got it? Okay." He pointed to some of the men in the first few rows. "Move it."

We found airport personnel in a line from the bottom of the stairway to a gate that led off the runway. They began screaming at us as soon as we touched the tarmac. It felt like a hazing on the first day of boot camp.

"Let's go! Let's go! Hurry it up! Let's go! This way, stupid!"

The last instruction at the other side of the gate was to line up in formation.

"Come on, line it up. Arms length."

Those of us just off the plane looked at each other in disbelief. Though we hadn't expected a brass band and confetti, we didn't much like the idea of being yelled at. A few milled around in a gesture of defiance but jumped into line when they saw the cadre meant business.

A fine, cold mist fell out of the semi-darkness created by the night and the dim flood lights overhead. At first, the cool air felt refreshing, a respite from the hot, cramped plane. After a half hour, with the wind whipping through the drizzle, I shivered and felt the cold through the light material of my jungle fatigues. We were ordered to stay in formation for a shorter period of time before we received the command to stand at attention, right face, and march. By then I could hear cursing and remarks about the rain and cold. We needed to acclimate after a year in a tropical climate. Shivering and damp, we were marched several blocks with the cadre snapping at us as we turned corners to stay in line. The march ended at the entrance of a large building that materialized inside as a dimly-lit gymnasium with bleachers on three sides and a basketball goal on each end. About the same time two trucks drove up next to us loaded with duffle bags. We were marched into the gym and told to be seated in the bleachers. A sergeant formed a detail for unloading the duffle bags and line them in rows on the gym floor. Several card tables had been set up. Base personnel were flipping through drawers in filing cabinets. I assumed this was probably a twenty-four-hour operation.

I wanted to strip down, get out of my clothes, go to the bathroom and have a hot shower. My skin felt grimy and my mouth tasted dried out and filmy. I wanted to wash the war off, the stink of it. We were allowed to go to the bathrooms in rows. I felt close to wetting myself. Once all of us had returned to the bleachers, a captain took center

stage with a hand-held microphone and told us to stand and come to attention. In the light dim, I found it difficult to make out the features of his face.

A major and two second lieutenants emerged through a side door. A colonel followed. He walked briskly over to the captain and took the microphone. He announced he was the commanding officer of the processing center and for the next four days we would be taking orders from him and his men. We would be expected to follow military procedure and carry out instructions exactly as given. We would be given checklists of steps that needed to be taken before we could leave the base. The sooner we completed our checklists, the sooner we would be out of there.

The major whispered something to the captain, spun around and exited behind the colonel. The captain put us at ease, told us to sit down and asked if any of us was ill. A few raised their hands and they were directed to one side of the floor. The rest of us were given a photocopied check list that included a haircut, a fitting for a dress green uniform and dress shoes, medical and dental checkups, verification of orders, a greeting from the chaplain, and a Welcome Home Steak. I could see that I was in for a time consuming, tedious process, that the lines would be long and the delays many. I itched for a book or newspaper to read, a television to watch, a radio.

We slept on the cement between the wooden bleacher seats. Later, I decided sleeping in the bleachers was a small break because to check out bedding would have only delayed us even further.

Towards early morning I must have dozed. I jerked up and woke to the sound of the cadre shouting at us to form ranks on the gym floor. We marched several blocks to a mess hall for breakfast. During the day we also were marched to the tailor and to medical and dental appointments. We stood naked as we had at the induction center in Kansas City. They were checking us for herpes and other venereal diseases, made us bend over again, poked up our scrotums for hernias. They pulled open and yanked at our mouths as veterinarians do to inspect farm animals.

The session with the tailor struck me as a particularly wasteful requirement. I don’t know how much a full-dress green uniform might have cost in 1969 but I suspect several hundred dollars. I would wear the uniform home and hang it in a closet or give it

away. I have the jacket still. The tailors were civilian contractors. They must have been making a fortune.

The government obviously didn't want us to be seen in jungle fatigues. Maybe it would have brought the war too close to home. People would have had to see us as we really were — in G.I. lingo — a bunch of sorry ass motherfuckers.

They drew blood and took urine samples during our medical appointments, testing again for venereal disease, the "red siff," as we called the extreme forms of herpes, and for drugs. The medical officer asked a general question about how I felt about my physical condition and moved to the next man. "I simply said, "okay." I wanted my checkmark. I just wanted to get out of there, be back home and with my wife, Patti. I could honestly tell her I had been a good boy. No prostitutes. No VD.

We marched to the barber shop to have our heads shaved and inspected for lice. If we didn't already look like refugees and shadows of our former selves, this last insult guaranteed we would stand out in a crowd in that era of long hair and beards.

The weather was still cold and wet outdoors and I was glad to return to the gym. It was almost one o'clock in the morning. I closed my eyes and tried to concentrate on a conversation I had had that afternoon with one of the Spec-5's to check out the next steps I needed to get to the airport. I went over the details several times. At least, I would not be held up in Oakland by my own confusion or poor attention as would some of the men around me eventually were.

During the day I reclaimed my duffle bag, emptied its contents on the floor for inspection, and turned over all evidence of Vietnam except for my underwear. My wooden souvenir box had been mailed to my in-laws in Kansas City where Patti had been living. I stuffed my remaining belongings back into the duffle bag, walked up into the bleachers and melted into a deep sleep.

I was in the middle of a confusing dream about being lost outside Tay Ninh Base Camp when the shouts of the cadre ordering us to wake up and get into formation woke me. The dim lights, which were on continuously, cast the gym in its dreamlike haze. I had a vision of purgatory. I was still daydreaming when I looked up and saw a sergeant shouting into my face and pointing directly at me.

"Come on, let's go," he repeated. Still half asleep I thought he was Diaz.

I grabbed my checklist and scrambled to the gym floor. Outside, the wind had picked up. I shivered in the cold moist air. It seemed we marched halfway through the camp before we stopped in front of a mess hall. When someone asked a PFC on duty at the door of the mess hall what was going on, he grinned and motioned inside, “Hey,” he announced, “It’s time for your Welcome Home Steak.” Once inside, I looked at the clock above the chow line. It was three a.m.

The inside of the mess hall reminded me of Hemingway’s story, “A Clean Well-lighted Place.” I had never seen Early American furniture or red and white checkered table cloths in a mess hall. The wall lights were soft and welcoming. At least it was warm. I was still half asleep and the smell of food and kitchen grease made me queasy. I flashed back to Fort Polk, Louisiana where I had gone through basic training. The early morning smell of greasy cooking from the mess hall had always nauseated me and filled me with a dread of the coming day.

As we went through the line with our trays, I noticed the food had been heating in the serving pans for some time. The steak itself appeared to be a piece of round steak or a sirloin that had been steamrolled on a highway; the opened baked potatoes were dark, overcooked; the skin dry and wrinkled. At the end of the line a master sergeant snapped an order as we slid our trays along the rails, "Eat it all. Every bite. You're not gettin' it checked off until you do."

I looked down at the scraggly piece of meat and tried not to laugh. I was told the Welcome Home Steak was provided, probably with good intentions, by the local chapter of the Chamber of Commerce in appreciation for our service. Veterans of other wars or not, I thought they had no idea. No idea at all.

"What's so damn funny, mister," one of the sergeants snickered when he spotted me. "Wipe that smile off your face, wise guy."

Such a pitiful effort: the steak lukewarm, blackened, fatty at the edges, yet so chewy and hard I could have used a chain saw. I managed to carve off one hardened end of the potato for a softer inside. I stuck with bread and butter and a few bites of meat before I remembered I had to leave with a clean plate. Children were starving in Africa, I supposed.

The NCOs monitoring the feast beat on the table tops with large serving spoons, yelling, "Eat! Eat!" just as they had in basic training. "Eat it all. You have fifteen minutes. Eat up. Chew and swallow. Chew and swallow." I think the desert was canned fruit in red jello.

I should have been more appreciative. After all, this was my reward for almost getting my ass blown away. I needed to be thankful, I guess. For me, My Welcome Home Steak was a check mark closer to home. I finished the meal. I wanted to throw it up on the checkered table cloth and the entire war along with it.

We were marched back to the gym and had an hour before another trip to the tailor to collect our dress greens. My dress hat with its stiff shiny bill was too small for my head. I pressed it down on my head just to get through the line. Later, I wished I hadn't. It kept popping off my head.

Back in the gym, a chaplain said a few words to us and one of his assistants stamped our checklists. I finished my checklist late that night, was given a plane ticket and taken to Oakland airport on a bus. My plane didn't leave until seven the following morning so I took off my hat, loosened my tie, slipped off my shoes and fell asleep sitting up in a seat near the gate.

Again, I was awakened by shouting. I looked up to see two MPs with nightsticks. One waved his in my face.

"Hey, buddy, you want some time in the brig?"

"Huh?" I must have garbled.

"Huh? It's 'Sir!' Get up off your ass. Get your shoes on and sharpen up that tie. Come on, get with it. Act military. You're not civilian yet."

I gave him a puzzled look.

"You're out of uniform," he shouted.

For the shortest segment of time I considered putting out one of his eyes. I wanted to kill him. Killing had become a natural thought and, if I could have killed him and gotten away with it, I might have put him away without hesitation or guilt. Their rude shouts triggered my assassination training at Cu Chi. I never had to kill another human being in that way. But I had an overpowering urge to try it out on them. I could get at least one of them with a blow to his Adam's Apple, severing his windpipe. I had

learned several techniques: the Adams Apple punch, the garrote, Thirty-Eight to the temple, a bayonet up through the heart, a machete down the center of the skull, a knife blade through an eye into the brain.

I looked instinctively for my M-16 and realized it wasn't there. I considered blasting the M.P. with a kick to the jaw or kneeing him in the groin. At that moment, I had no problem with the thought of killing him. But I held my wrath, knowing I would have been beaten to mush and jailed. I was too close to home to lose control. I took a breath and tried to think.

They ordered me to put on my dress jacket and hat and stand at attention against a wall there in the airport while they reviewed my orders. One of them argued for taking me in. I could see some of the others troops who had come to the airport with me on the same bus scrambling to put on their shoes and dress jackets. I stood at attention against the wall for fifteen minutes or more while the two MPs debated. Civilians walked by with their luggage and gawked at me as though I had done something wrong. I had been tried and convicted without a court martial or jury of my peers.

"Coming back from Nam?" the senior-looking MP asked.

"Yes."

"Yes, sir!" he shouted in my face.

Again, the impulse to kill. I had to kiss his ass, as I had always had to do because I was a mere draftee. Just a piece of shit.

"Yes, sir!"

I did what I was forced to do. Once a little boy from Kansas City, Missouri, I had learned at Cu Chi basecamp I could have killed him in a flash. At least, I thought I could. Because I did not kill him then, I would kill him again and again in my daydreams, at the oddest of times in the most unusual places, driving down the highway, at dinner in a restaurant, in the middle of a conversation with friends. A hard fist to the Adams Apple. A broken nose. A slam to the ear. A finger through his eye to the brain. Broken ribs. Punches to the heart and kidneys. Heel kicks to the frontal lobe.

They turned their backs to me. I could hear them conferring. One of them was about to be off duty. He didn't want to process the paperwork. He wanted to go home.

They turned back to me with their ugly mugs.

"Ok, little buddy, uh, specialist who?," the senior MP said. "I'm going to tell you something. Until you're off duty and until you're off the street, you wear that uniform the way it's supposed to be worn. If we come back here and catch you out of uniform again, I'm taking you straight to the brig. Comprende?"

"Yes, sir!"

"All right, okay then," he nodded smugly. They moved on.

I spent the rest of the early morning shaking inside and thinking of ways to kill them. I had visions of rolling a grenade at their feet and watching their bodies lift upward and fly backwards when it exploded.

The hours moved along slowly. I paced the waiting area in full uniform, tried to read magazines left on seats in the gate area. I kept going to the bathroom to look at my face. I looked pale through the deep tan I had acquired, skin pulled taut across my jaws. I thought my bones had shrunk, that I had lost height as well as weight. When the airline agent opened the check-in counter for my flight, I had to force myself to approach her with my ticket. I hadn't seen a beautiful American woman for a long time and I imagined myself just as another short, grubby, ugly little G.I. in uniform.

During the flight to Kansas City my feelings of dread returned. I wanted to be excited about going home. I felt nothing. For a while I daydreamed about running away and living alone in the woods. When the plane landed, I sat for several minutes waiting for the other soldiers to deplane. I could see my family standing behind a fence near the runway, my mother holding up my youngest brother, who was four or five, so he could see above the bobbing heads. I saw that Patti had walked onto the runway and stood at the bottom of the plane's stairway waiting for me to walk down. She was crying, afraid that I wouldn't be on the plane. She wore a yellow dress with a red rose corsage that had drooped in the cold wind. Neither of us knew then that the specter of mental illness would creep silently into our lives and would tear our young family apart.

I looked around and saw that the plane was nearly empty. A stewardess stood at the outside seat of my row, nodded at me and motioned with her head toward the door. I pushed myself out of my seat and moved slowly on heavy legs to the door, turned onto the top of the stairway that led to the runway. When I took the first step down, I wobbled, almost tripped. My family cheered.

It was the beginning of wars to come.

The first Christmas home went by in a blur. My body and brain were still in South Vietnam. I vaguely remember a haze of booze and dinners and the practiced hilarity of the holidays. My Christmas presents included the three shirts I was given the year before with their tags still attached. Seeing them again fit my sense of gallows humor. Someone joked I looked like an escapee from a concentration camp. My brother-in-law took me to a Kansas City Chiefs football game at the old Municipal Stadium. It was a cold December day. I shivered in a thin trench coat, hatless, wearing cotton gloves. Why then was I sweating? It seemed that after every other play the crowd around me screamed, “Kill! Kill!” I wanted to kill them and couldn’t wait until the game was over and my brother-in-law turned on heater in his car. I had lost my interest in watching any sport since my days on the sports desk a The Kansas City Star. I sat silently on the way back to the apartment Patti had rented. I did not want to be rude or ungrateful.

The apartment Patti had rented was at a newly completed complex not far from her family home. I could smell the freshness of new carpet, see the shine of the new bathroom fixtures, walk out on a spacious balcony that overlooked a small courtyard. I showered often. As hot as I could stand it. I wanted the musk and dust of Vietnam and the army out of my skin. One of my first acts in the apartment was to crawl in bed with her. That was probably one of the better moments we had together. After that, our sex life became complicated. She was a Roman Catholic school girl.

One night after a holiday party my sister-in-law led me into the kitchen and said:

"There's something very wrong with Patti."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Since you've been gone, she's been very irritable and hard to get along with. Sometimes she doesn't make sense. She worries all the time and doesn't sleep."

Patti became the second domino to fall.

I was too out of it to notice the change in her personality or that the next war would be much longer than my year in Vietnam and in some ways an even more devastating one.

But before I could fully comprehend what my sister-in-law had told me, I had a surprise call not long after New Years from a sergeant at the Kansas National Guard Armory. I'll call him Sergeant Marginal. He could never pronounce my last name correctly.

"Barr?" he shouted over the phone.

"Who's this?"

"Marginal."

"Oh hey, Sergeant. How they hangin' ?" I asked.

"Where in thee hell are you?"

"Well, right now I'm in my apartment putting together a little fish tank. I got all the stuff. The filter, the motor, the rocks, plastic plants, a little waterfall..."

I thought he was going to welcome me back.

"You were supposed to report to me two weeks ago. I just spotted your paperwork. You need to get your ass over here."

"What for?"

"You know what for. Didn't you read your orders?"

"Oh, hell no. I pitched them out with all that other army bullshit. I don't even have a uniform except for my dress greens."

He was deadly still.

"I'll tell you what. If your ass ain't over here at 7 a.m. tomorrow morning, there'll be some mean ass MP's a' knockin' on your door."

"Well, my ass ain't a' comin'. How about that, motherfucker?"

"Hey, you don't talk to your superior like 'et. You're still in the army."

"The hell I am. I'm done."

"No you ain't. You still got four months on your commitment to The Guard. You're AWOL. You better get your ass over here tomorrow at 7 a.m. or you're going to jail."

"Is that so? Well, I'll just have to think about that."

"You better think good."

"We'll see."

I hung up. The phone rang again and again. There was no Caller ID in those days. I knew it was him.

Patti couldn't believe it.

"I thought you were finished," she said.

"I did too."

I hadn't thrown my orders away. I just told him that to piss him off. I shuffled through them and found no orders to report to the National Guard.

I told Patti:

"Fuck it. I'm done. They'll have to come get me."

She became somewhat hysterical. “What about your job?” she shouted. “What will they think about you going to jail, being AWOL, a deserter? What about your job?”

She might have also been thinking about what her father, the decorated WWII marine, might think. What would our friends think? Our families?

“Humm, where is me in this equation?" I thought. To calm her down I set my alarm, put on a pair of jeans and sneakers, an army surplus military jacket I had from a while back and showed up exactly on time.

The Kansas National Guard armory was in Kansas City, Kansas. It was a large building that looked like a high school with a gymnasium, classrooms, offices, storage rooms, a car pool and several outbuildings. When I drove up, there was only one other car parked in the lot. That told me something right off. I could not be the only fool from my unit to show up, or was I?

Marginal's office was on the bottom floor with the other offices and work rooms. I could see the light in his office from the doorway. Just seeing that pissed me off all over again. He was one of the old timers in the Kansas National Guard, meaning a mooch. Prior to the war, the Guard was not much more than another social club. These jokers were a bunch of losers who had not gotten over their boyhood games of playing soldier and dressing up for parades and holidays, whose only value as far as I could tell was to maintain obsolete military vehicles and weapons and help stage social and athletic events and fund raisers. They included a sorry collection of lowlifes looking for some extra income, social climbers, petty local politicians and businessmen who liked to march and wave flags on the Fourth of July.

At least, that's what I thought of them. When the draft started to run out of blacks, convicts and lower income whites and reach into the ranks of the upper middle class — professional types and college guys like me — most of them turned to the National Guard or reserves hoping to avoid being inducted into the regular army, losing their jobs, management positions in their employment or extended deferments, and being sent to Vietnam. That was the raw truth. Guys like Marginal were crass bloodsuckers. In addition to being an old timer eligible for a salary and military pension, Marginal was also a state employee who looked after the premises, a kind of glorified janitor. He was also eligible for a state pension and health and other benefits and Social Security when the time came — a triple dipper. Like many of the Guard's lifers he managed to avoid going to Ft. Carson with the rest of us and being levied to go to Vietnam because he was needed to stay behind to mind the store. He didn't know squat about what went on over there in The Nam.

I knocked on his doorframe. He swiveled in his chair to snarl at me.

"See that push broom outside the door there, Barr. Get started on the hall. When you're finished, you can sweep the hallways upstairs. Then, I'll get you started on the offices. I'll let you know when you can have a smoke break."

Nothing about, "Glad you're okay," or "Welcome back."

I shrugged. What else could I do? I started at his end of the hall, swept past his door. The more I swept and the further down the hall I pushed the broom, the angrier I became. At about three-fourths of the way to the end of the hall, it occurred to me that this was pure bullshit, another surrealistic enterprise. Where were the others? Was I just stupid? Was I doing Marginal's job?

"Fuck this shit," I said out loud.

I stomped down to his doorway and just stood there.

"What?" he growled.

"Sergeant Marginal, you see this broom stick?"

"Yep."

"Well," I said as calmly as I could. "You can take this broom stick and shove it up your ass."

"Hey," he stood up. "You cain't talk to me like 'et."

"Well, I just did. And furthermore, I'm walking out the front door, getting in my car and going home to watch my fish swim around."

"Now, you wait just a minute, mister…"

"Don't you 'mister' me. Those days are over. I just got back from Vietnam and I don't need to take any shit off you or anybody else."

"Ten-hut!" he shouted, which cracked me up, and I couldn't stop laughing.

"Ten-hut!" he shouted again and I laughed louder, snorting as I laughed silly and out of control.

"Fuck you, Marginal, you asshole," I said, turned, tossed the push broom at his feet and tromped down the hall.

I can still hear his voice -- alternating between sounding enraged and hopelessly plaintive -- echoing down the hall.

"Barr! Barr! You get back here!"

As I looked back at him, the ragged old bastard, he looked pitiful. That was the only word for him -- pitiful.

I kept going.

"Barr! Barrrrrrr!"

I almost felt sorry for him, the loser, lost in an empty hallway, looking desperate and helpless.

I drove home. I thought Patti was going to have a breakdown then and there. She began crying, wringing her hands, yelling at me.

I decided to go to the pet store and buy some guppies and a neon tetra, dried flies and other fish food, and a better lamp for my fish tank.

My attitude was, "Come on, mofo. I'm here. Come on. Come get me. Let's do it. Let's have at it. Come on. Let's get it over with."

When I came back from the pet store home Patti was gone. I heard later that she had driven to a friend's house to have her breakdown du jour. I put on some Crosby, Stills and Nash, poured myself a major Scotch and began to happily finish assembling my fish tank while the guppies and neon tetra were becoming acclimated to the water in their welcome home plastic bags in the kitchen sink. The phone rang four or five times more. I was basically into the music and the Scotch and having a good time alone in the peace

and quiet of my new apartment. I waited for the MPs or the police to show up, bust down the door, handcuff me. They never did.

What Marginal and I had failed to realize was that when our unit was activated and disbanded, we became members of the regular army. My contract with the National Guard had been nullified. I had served my mandatory two years in the regular army. In time, I figured, I would be honorably discharged.

I moved through the following days and weeks in a fugue. Sometimes I felt I might be hallucinating. Patti continued to work at the hospital, sometimes on the 7-3 shift; sometimes on the 3-ll shift. We passed by each other without saying much more than a few words. I think she was afraid of me. During the day, like Benjamin Braddock, Dustin Hoffman's character in the film, *The Graduate*, I spent hours watching the fish in the tank swim gracefully and peacefully from one artificial plant to another. I drove in my VW Bug down to the old neighborhood, my favorite bars, the parks and playgrounds of my childhood; wandered through the art galleries; sat, pretending to read in college and public libraries, smelled the books, absorbed the wisdom, felt the cold February winds on my face on long walks.

One Saturday afternoon, in preparation for a party at my inlaws house with half gallons of Scotch, whiskey and gin in paper sacks on the passenger seat — my view blocked by a parked car — I drove through the intersection of a side street and smashed into the center of a Ford sedan. The woman in the car seemed dazed but unhurt. I asked her how she felt, if she was injured. She shook her head. "No. I think I'm okay," she said in a shaky voice, hands trembling, probably in shock.

"I'll be right back," I told her, and ran the remaining short distance to my in-laws house. My father-in-law was there and walked with me back down the hill. Someone near the intersection had called the police. They were already there and soon after an ambulance arrived. I looked for the parked car that had blocked my view. It was gone. I swore I had seen it, but no one, not even my father-in-law, believed me. He must have thought I was simply out of it. The short stretch of the street to the corner where I had seen the missing car was in a No Parking zone. I suspect that its owner had quickly driven it away.

The woman's husband arrived shortly thereafter and helped the woman out of the car with the paramedics standing behind him. "She just wants to go home," he told them. "I don't think she's hurt. I can take her to the emergency room if anything shows up."

The paramedics and the police were reluctant to leave. Her husband assured them that he would watch her closely.

I had braked as soon as I saw her sedan, struck it in the rear section of the back door. She had not taken a direct hit. My car was littered with glass and smelled strongly of alcohol. I told the police I had bought the liquor for a party. They could see the sacks from the store and the broken glass, the unopened necks of the bottles. As they questioned me, one policeman turned to the other and said, "He doesn't have booze on his breath. I don't think he's been drinking." They wrote a ticket for failure to yield and handed it to me. The rest of the afternoon was spent in a tow truck and trying to call my insurance agent. Instead of a party, Patti's family and I spent a quiet evening eating dinner. Patti and I went home early. I could tell she was angry and embarrassed with me. I felt ashamed. I didn't need to be. My view had been blocked by the mystery car. Though my head was still in Vietnam, I stick by my story.

After Patti left for work the following Monday, I gave myself some heat. Shit, I had to get my act together. I was certain that the parked car had blocked my view. I couldn't rid myself of the thought. But then I doubted myself. No one believed me. Maybe I imagined the car. Maybe I was out of it. I had to clear my head. I had to get my feet back on the ground. I had to wake up from my Vietnam War nightmare.

A lawyer who was a friend of Patti's family went with me to court. I was lucky the woman was not hurt. Though she had the right-of-way, was sober and not speeding, she did not press charges against me. She did not even make an appearance at my court hearing. My lawyer told the judge I had just returned from Vietnam. The judge nodded and kept shuffling my paperwork. He looked down at me several times over his eyeglasses, handed the paperwork back to my lawyer and said, "Next." When we left the courtroom and entered the hall, my lawyer turned to me and said, "Dismissed." I should have been relieved. Instead, I felt terrified. I had struck a woman in her car. She might have been injured or killed. Walking with a lawyer at my side, just being in the

courthouse, in the courtroom, I had that sickening fear of authority figures I had carried since early childhood, wrenching my gut.

The following week I had my first encounter with Patti's illness. She entered the apartment after a 3-ll shift in a flurry, tossed her keys on the kitchen counter, tore off and flung her coat on the floor, her knitted cap over the bar. She changed into a nightgown and sat shivering in an easy chair by the sliding glass door to the balcony. I sat next to her silently. She clenched her fists, struck her thighs over and over and began sobbing.

"I killed somebody tonight," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"A patient. I gave her too many pills. She died because of me."

I asked for the details. When she was finished, she babbled, told difference stories of what had happened. I tried but could not console her.

Before the accident, I was too preoccupied with myself to fully appreciate the seriousness of her irrational thinking. She had a B.S. in nursing at a time when the degree was somewhat rare and on her way to a master's degree. She was a charge nurse on a medical floor at a large Kansas City hospital. The hospital thought so much of her work they asked her to teach nursing.

I spent several hours listening to her go around in circles. After a few nights of this, I finally convinced her to call the hospital doctor on her shift. In a three-way conversation he quickly stated that the woman had simply died of old age; there was no sign of a medication error. I was relieved and thought the situation was resolved. But the following week she again returned home from the hospital weeping and hysterical with the delusion that she had killed another patient whom she greatly disliked. The cycle continued for several weeks until she was forced to take a leave of absence. The hospital staff wanted to be sure she was fit to resume her duties. Eventually, she continued to work as a nurse but asked not to be assigned as a charge nurse.

In early April my honorable discharge arrived in the mail. I never heard from Marginal or The National Guard again. A few days later I found a package at the front door of the apartment with a Bronze Star medal and citation, along with Vietnam War campaign medals. I was officially done. To this day I have no idea why I was awarded a Bronze Star. The citation that came with the medal read like a form letter; in part, "His

rapid assessment of numerous problems inherent in a combat environment greatly enhanced the allied effectiveness against a determined and aggressive enemy." It didn't say that whatever I did, I did against my will. I did what I was told. That was all. Whatever I had done, then forgotten, I must have done out of instinct. I lost it wandering around the basecamp in a haze after the rocket hit.

I do not intend to disparage the recognition and honor of any medals awarded to members of the Armed Forces. These are courageous men and women who have volunteered in many cases to sacrifice their time and lives to defend their fellow citizens and the values of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Every service member deserves to be honored in one way or another. At the time, I thought, “Every soldier who was in a combat zone in Vietnam should have a Bronze Star."

My first impulse was to send it back as many other Vietnam War veterans had done. The war was a lie. We witnessed the carnage and waste of the lie every day we were there. I didn't need a reminder hanging on my wall. I didn’t want a token. I wanted my four years back. I wanted my one chance to go to graduate school back. I wanted Patti back.

She discovered me packing the medal, the fancy case that held it and the large brown envelope with the printed citation back as I placed them back into the mailing box, and me getting ready to write, "Return To Sender," on the lid. She freaked out. She had already told her family and her friends about it. What would they think? What would her friends think? Her family. They were conventional people with conventional American ideas. They had conventional friends, many of the men were WWII combat veterans. I felt forced to relent. She was already too disturbed and high strung. For her sake, I decided not to make an issue of it.

As I settled into a routine at the apartment trying to decide what to do next, I became aware of another side effect of the war.

Just off the plane at the Kansas City airport, I could hear very little. As the months went by, the ringing in my ears was getting worse, not better, as I hoped it would. My ears felt clogged. A friend suggested I might want to sign up for medical assistance from the VA. I had already decided I wanted nothing more to do with the military. Yet, the ringing and hard-of-hearing were so persistent and distracting I had second thoughts.

Maybe VA might know better how to deal with the damage caused by firing weapons without ear protection. I drove to the large VA hospital in Kansas City and lined up at the sign-in window. The scowling older man who stared out at me reminded me of the cadre at Fort Lewis.

“What are you here for?” he growled.

“I have an honorable discharge,” I said holding out my certificate . “I want to apply for my VA card.”

“Your name, DOB and last four?”

“Last four of what?” I asked.

He sighed.

“Your social security number.” He didn’t have to add, “dumbass.” His look said it.

He typed on the computer with his index fingers, then looked up.

“Oh, one of those, eh.” he said with a grimace.

I had no idea what he meant. I found out there are several levels of financial and medical aid offered to veterans. I was in Group I, meaning I didn’t have to pay anything for prescriptions or approved medical services. He told me to sit down in the waiting area where several other veterans were seated and wait to hear my name called. I was one of about ten who was called. We milled around for a few minutes before a man in civilian clothes ordered us to line up and stand at attention. We were going to be marched to our appointments. I accepted this insult. I wanted to get my ears fixed.

"Left face," he ordered. "Forward, march." I did as I was told for about twenty steps. Then I said out loud, "Fuck this shit," and headed for the door.

"Hey, soldier," he shouted after me. "Where you going?”

Reminded me of Sergeants Savage and Marginal. I never answered his question. I didn't go back to the VA for thirty-six years. Instead, I made an appointment with an civilian audiologist. He told me I had classic tinnitus. The entire upper range of my hearing had been destroyed. I would have ringing in my ears and loss of upper range hearing for the rest of my life. Sometimes the high pitch sound was so loud I had to poke my finger in my ear until I could momentarily cut it off.

A month after I received my discharge in the mail, I finally called my old lawyer boss — Reg — whom I reported to at the reinsurance company and told him I was ready to go back to work. As a veteran of World War II and Korea he had arranged, insisted, that the company pay half my salary until I returned from the war. A heavy drinker and smoker, he died two years later of a heart attack. At the age of 27, I was appointed an officer of the corporation so I could officially execute documents. I reported then to the second in command, the younger lawyer who was Reg's assistant, the strange secretive man who spent most of his time gambling by phone. His office was cluttered with stacks of files. Though I needed to consult him when deals were presented to me, he usually ignored me and put the file on top of his other files. The market was passing us by. I saw a void and quickly filled it. He was eventually found out and fired for insubordination. I was promoted to Assistant Vice-President and became head of the department. I changed the name from The Libel Department to the The Miscellaneous Lines Department because we wrote so many different one-of-a-kind insurances. I began to travel, knocking on the doors of the larger media companies in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. I didn't know at the time that it was illegal to do so. I was supposed to go through licensed agents and brokers. No one called me out for it. I substantially grew the libel insurance business as well as the other types of specialty insurance, such as professional liability for lawyers and CPAs, errors and omissions insurance for many types of services, one-off deals like hole-in-one insurance for golf tournaments. I had no intention of sitting in an office the rest of my life twiddling my thumbs.

As the second domino of my life tumbled out of control, Patti's delusions and behaviors became more and more of a concern. When my interest in the brain late in my junior year of college first diverted my attention from English Literature, I did not imagine that I would have to learn about the brain OJT (on-the-job-training). Patti's serious mental illness ambushed me. Another kick in the gut is a mild description. I knew I had been changed by my Vietnam War experiences. I knew that she might have changed in my absence. I prepared myself for some adjustments in our relationship. But I was completely ambushed by what was to come.

I also learned more about the implacable nature of delusions, how difficult they were to explain away, that they were expressions of early and primitive impressions in

the brain tissue itself, expressions of fear and anxiety. I learned that schizophrenia, a broad diagnosis for a wide spectrum of brain disfunction, could be progressive, like Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia. I was told that a mentally ill person could have more than one diagnosis. Judging from her behavior over the years I noticed that Patti also had psychopathic symptoms, dangerous ones.

I discovered after the fact that she had had a psychotic episode when she was twelve years old. Instead of seeing a doctor, her family took her to visit their parish priest. One of her former grade school friends told me of an incident when Patti's demeanor abruptly changed. She held up a butcher knife as they chopped a salad together in her family's kitchen.

"You'd better go" Patti told her friend. "I want to kill you."

Her friend could see that Patti was not joking.

Had I known about her condition, I may or may not still have married her. But I would have insisted that she would agree not to have children. I don't know if my abrupt orders for Vietnam triggered her complete breakdown or not. But it may have been a last straw. I just know I had again been enlisted involuntarily in another war — her mental illness.

In the seven years that followed, her condition seriously worsened. After the initial incidents involving delusions about her patients, she went through a period of time I will call remission. I felt more confident that I might be able to have a family. She became pregnant with our first child, a son, Erik, in mid 1970. We bought a house on the G.I. Bill. She hated it. The house was what we could afford. It was a small bungalow in a working class neighborhood. I painted it myself three times before I could get the paint to adhere properly to the dry wood shingles. Even then, it didn't compare to the houses our friends had. Some of them had already moved into second homes. She constantly complained about our single story bungalow and made fun of me for not making more money, called me a tight ass for trying to adhere to an affordable budget, resented our low income financial situation.

Erik was born without complications. I adored him. I held him, played with him constantly. I amused myself and my friends by holding him up as a puppet, moving his mouth open and closed, as a ventriloquist might. One evening after putting him back in

his baby bed, Patti, with good intentions, decided to make some popcorn. In those days most people didn't have popcorn popping machines. She put some oil in a sauce pan with a lid on top and forgot about it. I smelled something funny, went to the kitchen and lifted the lid. The pan exploded, immediately catching the wooden kitchen cabinets on fire. I knew better than to throw water on a grease fire but I needed to lift the flaming pan off the burner and set it into the dry metal sink so I could try to smother the flames with towels. As I lifted the pan, it slightly tipped to one side, sending the bubbling, boiling grease down the side of my right arm and hand. I dropped the pan and ran into the small dining room. Patti told me I screamed. I don't remember doing that. The fire rapidly spread up the cheap wooden cabinets and across the indoor-outdoor carpet. Patti stood frozen in a state of shock. I kept yelling at her, "Get the baby out of the house." She didn't move. Collecting myself, I finally grabbed Erik from his baby bed with my good arm and ran outside. Patti followed, clinging to my belt. I handed Erik to her and ran back inside to try to stop the fire at its source in the sauce pan. The bath towels worked. I was able to smother the flames, leaving the cabinets and the countertops sparking and smoking.

Back in the dining room I looked at my arm. I thought I was going to lose it. Fire trucks arrived. I called a friend to take me to the emergency room. I had third degree burns in some places. Over the next three years, the healing process was excruciatingly painful. The burns extended from my forearm to the middle of my right hand. Though that fire was accidental, and her condition worsened, Patti took to lighting the curtains of the house on fire with a cigarette lighter with a maddening laugh. The excitement of the accidental fire may have led to the deliberate ones. She seemed to be wide eyed and exhilarated as she lit them. I often felt like Rochester in "Jane Eyre."

During her pregnancy with Erik, she had become more emotionally stable. I was encouraged. One doctor speculated that she had a hormonal problem. The pregnancy and birth had resolved her physical issues. She had worked part-time for a while as a nurse at a gynecologist's office until shortly before Erik was born. Within a month after his birth and before the fire, she again began to suffer paranoid delusions. She generally ignored taking care of him. I would come home from work to find him galled in dirty diapers. She stopped caring about her personal appearance, talked constantly on the phone,

smoked one cigarette after another, didn't share the household chores, left it to me to clean house, prepare meals and play with Erik. Some of her friends called me at the office pleading for me to stop Patti from phoning them several times a day. They had work to do. I had to tell them I had no control over her behavior when I was not at home.

As my salary began to increase, we sold our bungalow and bought a larger, two story home in an upper middle class neighborhood. The house needed work. Because of its condition, a real estate friend of her family negotiated a lower price that allowed us to obtain an affordable mortgage. When Erik was old enough, Patti was well enough to work again as an RN at a large hospital. Her mother often babysat for Erik. While we did not have a romantic marriage, we were still friends, went out to parties, movies and dinners at friends' homes. We took turns with a group of old high school friends, making special meals at taco or BBQ nights, played board games, gin rummy, while our small children slept in upstairs bedrooms. We took two trips with our friends to Las Vegas. I did not enjoy gambling but we saw a lot of shows, mostly celebrities like Frank Sinatra and Tom Jones. Not to be a spoil sport, I went along for the ride. Patti's medication usually held her mood swings in check.

Because of her condition, Patti and I agreed not to have any more children. As far as I knew, she was still taking birth control pills. Our sex life was so limited I didn't think there was any chance of another pregnancy anyway. During that time Erik and I bonded. I took him whenever I could to the playground in the schoolyard and park near our home. I read him books. He loved for me to play children's songs on a small 45 rpm record player. Because of an undetected hearing problem, he had trouble pronouncing the word, "records." He pronounced them, "bock-erds." Once a stack of records was finished on his little 45 rpm record player, he'd waddle into the kitchen where I was preparing dinner, repeating, "More bock-erds! More bock-erds." Soon, he was listening with me to The Beatles. We developed a relationship around music that has lasted throughout our lives. In his fifth year of college he was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship in Germany and started his own music company there.

Patti's parents, not willing to fully accept the seriousness of her mental illness, had secretly kept pressuring Patti to have another child. They wanted Erik to have a sibling. One afternoon after work Patti suddenly announced she was pregnant. While her

family was elated, I was in a quandary. Not only could we not afford another child, I feared more psychotic episodes. I knew she would never agree to an abortion. I was stuck.

During our second child's pregnancy —we named her Laura Jeannine — Patti continued to take large doses of Thorazine, a powerful anti-psychotic medication. She smoked heavily and drank two glasses of wine a day. As a consequence, I think, our daughter, Laura, was born with several anomalies and learning disabilities. One was a rare form of female hernias that Patti hid from me. She tried to keep me from changing her diapers. When I discovered the hernias by accident, I immediately called the pediatrician. After diagnosing her condition, he arranged for an immediate outpatient surgery.

Her former part-time employer, a gynecologist, foolishly, I thought, told her that there was a one in 10,000 chance that Laura could be born a hermaphrodite. The test she was given for that condition proved to be negative. Even so, the two week wait for the result made it difficult for Patti to sleep. She roamed the house wringing her hands. During the surgery Patti stalked the waiting room, going from one person to another as they waited for news of their own relative's surgery, reassuring them with, "It's going to be all right. It's going to be all right." They avoided her. She persisted until some of them stood up and walked down the hall. Though Laura's hernia surgery was successful, Patti walked through the front door of our house as I carried Laura inside, dropped to her knees, crawled to a corner in the living room and curled into a fetal position. She had had a complete breakdown. From then on, she was often in a psychotic state, delusional, in and out of mental hospitals.

With no mother to tend to Laura, I tried to simulate breast feeding by sticking a bottle of formula under my arm. Patti's sister and mother, and two of my younger brothers, babysat with Erik and Laura from time to time. I couldn't have kept my job without them. During periods when Patti was not hospitalized and at home, she sat in a rocking chair, smoking, watching everyone else keep house and the children entertained. Laura was never given a chance to bond with her and feared throughout her life that she was going to be and to look just like her: overweight, clearly irrational, unkempt, visually scary, hard to look at. Perhaps for Laura, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

My company's health insurance did not cover the total cost of Laura's pregnancy nor did it cover mental illness. I needed financial aid as well. There was none.

In the following months after Laura's birth, Patti started to show signs of becoming violent. One night I had a dream that she was standing over me with a butcher knife. I could hear her breathing heavily. I tried to wake from the dream but could not. I felt so drowsy I could barely move. When I woke the next morning, I found a butcher knife laying on the lamp table by the bed.

Patti pointed a butcher knife at me on two other occasions. As she did, she exhibited a strange kind of grin. I never knew if she was serious or not. She continued to try set the house curtains on fire. She ran nude screaming down the street, upsetting neighbors and their small children, jumped up and down naked like a mad woman in a horror movie in front of the two children and generally sabotaged everything her family and I tried to do to help her. The neighbors got used to seeing police cars outside our house. The police had no authority to take her against her will to the ER or a psychiatric hospital. During our marriage, she made six serious suicide attempts and once almost succeeded. There were times I wished she had.

Even with hospital and doctor write offs, my debt climbed to close to $100,000, a lot of money in the 1970's, most of which involved Patti's uninsured medical expenses. At one point I worked four jobs. I worked my day job at the reinsurance company, left at 4 p.m., walked around the corner to Macy's credit department until 8 p.m., badgering unfortunate delinquent customers to pay their bills. Personally, I found most of their stories heartbreaking. On Friday and Saturday nights during football and basketball seasons, I worked at The Star's sports desk, taking calls from stringers and compiling high school and small college scores and brief game stories for suburban and rural editions. For a few months I worked on Saturdays and Sundays making cold telephone calls for a home improvement company offering a silver dollar for inviting the potential customers to invite the company's salesmen to visit their homes for remodeling estimates. I even caddied a few times. I was barely getting by financially and was lucky to get four hours a night of sleep.

I finally gave in and went to night school on the G.I. Bill to supplement my income and be able to spend more time with my children. I took graduate classes in

English Literature, knowing I would never be able to complete a masters or Ph.D program. The VA stipends for tuition and living expenses were halfway generous. I was able to work my job at the reinsurance company and go to school three nights a week. Those nights, the books I read, the papers I wrote, were the only times when I could find uninterrupted time to connect with my original self.

I was not able to have an *au pair* live in to watch the children due to Patti's condition and the fact that I was single. I was forced to rely on old and eccentric live-in housekeepers. They were all I could afford. At least they provided for an adult in the house. Sort of. My sister-in-law, Sharon, whom the children called, "Aunt Shernie," baby sat and entertained them as often as she could. From time to time, their grandmothers and two of my younger brothers also watched and spent time with them while I was at work or at class.

One afternoon when I came home from the office, Laura, not yet two, greeted me at the door by holding up a baby aspirin bottle with the words, "I ate them all up." The housekeeper, an unfortunate woman who babbled to herself, was asleep on the sofa. I frantically called the poison center, described the contents of the bottle and was assured that Laura might feel sick but was not in any imminent danger. The doctor sent me to a pharmacy to buy Epecac syrup which would cause her to vomit up the contents of her stomach. I sat her on an overturned basin in the tub until she had nothing left to vomit. She looked so innocent and frail sitting there. When she had nothing left to vomit, I lifted her out of the tub and rocked her to sleep.

On another occasion after I hired a college student going to night school to replace the older housekeeper, I was called at the office by the police department to pick up my son, Erik, whom they said was in jail. I told the police officer that my son, Erik, was only three years old. "Yep," the police officer said. "That's him."

I had a policy with every housekeeper that they were not to leave the house with the children without my express permission. The college student had a filthy little sedan and a shaggy dog that left dog hairs throughout the house. She was the only person who had answered my ad. That day she had taken Erik with her to Walmart, leaving Laura with a neighbor, and was arrested for shop lifting. My older sister, and her husband, retrieved Erik. He was having a great time at the jail. The police officers could not

believe how smart and funny he was. He had a great time. I did not. When I fired the college student, she harassed me for months with letters and phone calls accusing me of abuse and breach of contract. I decided, at the minimum, she was a sociopath. The lack of a responsible person to watch my children kept me constantly on edge.

Erik and Laura suffered through their early childhoods in the care of one incompetent housekeeper after another. I tried to be both father and mother to them. It hurts me to try to imagine how they felt. Abandonment became a major issue for both of them. Whenever I planned an outing with Erik, Patti automatically, it seemed, went into one of her "crazy" routines. One afternoon when Erik and I had planned to go sledding, he sat at the bottom of the upstairs steps waiting for me. He was dressed in his winter coat, stocking hat, galoshes, neck scarf and gloves, smiling, anticipating. As I came down the steps to put on my outfit, Patti pulled off her clothes, began babbling and jumping up and down. I tried to calm her but she only became more and more animated and frightening to watch.

I had to sit down next to Erik and tell him that we had to put off sledding for another day. With his tendency to mispronounce words, he said, "Everything is always *carn-celled."* Which was the sickening truth. I felt devastated for Erik and for myself.

I'm not sure what Patti was fighting or why she was so oppositional to those who were trying to help her. I suppose paranoia might explain why she was, a fear that I and her doctors were trying to control her or to have her locked in a psychiatric home for the rest of her life as was the custom then until the law and science caught up with society and recognized that patients, especially women, had rights too. Perhaps she thought we were the enemy. When I did not agree with her delusions or her demands that I take action on them, she would go into a rage. I could not call the police to report a man with a rifle standing outside our front door when no man was there.

Two occasions illustrate the difficulty of dealing with her irrational behavior.

During a period when she seemed to be relatively calm and together, I arranged for an anniversary dinner at one of the city's finest restaurants. She dressed for the occasion, combed her hair, put on lipstick. After we ordered and our meals were served, she suddenly stood up, started screaming and overturned the table. Glasses, food, silverware were shooting in all directions. Our table was in the middle of the dining

area. Some of the other guests shouted; some screamed. They feared for their safety. She continued to hold her arms in the air, screaming, having some kind of tantrum. The maître-d and two security officers, hurried to our table and literally pulled us outside. I don't know if her behavior was planned or spontaneous. Her eyes were wide and she had that grin on her face. I was completely humiliated and sorry for the other restaurant guests whose evening was likely ruined as well.

A second incident involved her doctor's idea of having us share a sport or some other kind of physical activity. We jointly decided that learning how to play tennis might be fun. Free lessons were being offered on a Saturday at a junior college. We signed up for ten lessons. On the first Saturday several amiable couples appeared. They chatted among themselves until the instructor appeared. He was a friendly, wholesome looking man with a kind voice who showed us how to hold the racket and swing it. He wanted to begin by tossing the ball over the net to each individual and have us strike the ball while using the swing he had demonstrated. Patti was the fifth or sixth person he called upon to practice her swing in real time. He pitched the ball underhanded over the net so that it would be easy to hit. Rather than striking the ball back to him Patti hit a home run over the back fence of the court. There was some laughter. The instructor told Patti to try again, striking the ball in the middle of her racket just hard enough to clear the net. She hit five or six home runs in a row and laughed her hysterical laugh after each one. The instructor quickly caught on that she was gaming him. The other couples stopped laughing and looked upon her, I thought, with fear, seeing that she had some kind of mental issue. I took Patti by the hand and led her off the court. She looked back at the other couples with her psychotic grin. The instructor called me in the early evening and asked me not to come back. I had not planned to anyway but it was another in a series of humiliations and embarrassments I learned to accept as her status quo.

After another of her hospitalizations, our family doctor, a fervent Roman Catholic, asked me to visit him late in the day at his office.

"Bill," he said. "I visited Patti in the hospital today. She's not going to get better. I want you to go to church, kneel down and pray. You have two choices. You can file for divorce and try to find a loving nanny for your children, or you can choose to be a lifetime caregiver. You will still need to find a nanny or relative to help raise them.

Either way, you must protect your children. Patti is too violent and irresponsible to be left alone with them."

I am loyal by nature and thought divorce too extreme for me to consider. I knew that Patti had not chosen to be mentally ill. I also did not want to have her declared incompetent, naively hoping that she might one day recover and want to work again. Three years after my visit with our family doctor, I finally decided I had had enough.

One of her psychiatrists, also a family friend, suggested that since the medication did not seem to be working, she might benefit from a new behavioral approach to schizophrenia called, "Rebirthing Therapy." It involved being physically born again from under one of the female therapist's skirts, with a male therapist joining in to act as the patient's father figure. It was billed as a simulation of an actual birth. I considered it a hoax and snake oil but had nowhere else to go. After two years of Rebirthing Therapy and many more psychotic episodes, her psychiatrist advised me that she should live apart from the family for a while to avoid the stress of being around the children, the comings and goings and responsibilities of a busy household. Following her advice, I arranged to have her live in a new, well-kept, monitored community living center. I left my son, age six, and my daughter, age three, with a next door neighbor who offered to watch them for a few hours while I drove Patti to the center and sign her in. Patti agreed to sign in voluntarily. I felt relieved. I thought I might at last have a peaceful night sleep. My relief was short lived. The phone rang at two in the morning. It was the director of the living center.

"You have to come get her," she said. "If not, we will need to call the police. For now, we have her locked in her room. She's almost completely destroyed it."

In the meantime, I called the psychiatrist, her new "mother." She offered to keep her overnight at the small rural hospital where her main office was located.

I woke my own mother. She drove across town to be with Erik and Laura the rest of the night and the next day.

I should have let the community call the police.

When I arrived there, Patti seemed subdued. I thought perhaps she'd been given a sedative. I called the hospital. They woke her psychiatrist who agreed to meet with her.

“Patti,” her doctor said. “You can stay with me here and do the work you need to do or go back to Osawatomie (*the state hospital*).”

“Fuck it,” Patti said. “I’m going to Osawatomie.”

The two-hour drive in the dark along a narrow rural Kansas highway with my night blindness was harrowing. To add to the absurdity and danger of being alone with a psychotic person, Patti kept grabbing the steering wheel several times in attempts to force the car off the road. She finally succeeded. I was able to back out of the ditch and kept going, determined to be rid of her. She wet herself three times on the car seat and laughed hysterically about it. When I parked at the entrance of the hospital two male orderlies and a doctor rushed out to bring her screaming and fighting inside.

That was also the point at which I was forced to make a decision between an academic and literary life and the day-to-day world I found myself living in. I had to surrender to the reality of giving my two children the safest, most loving kind of life I had hoped to give them.

In 1977 I succeeded in getting a divorce with the help of Patti’s family. They thought it was best for the children. I was able to sell the house at almost twice what I had paid for it. I needed to split the proceeds with Patti. With my share I bought a town home with a reasonable mortgage in a new suburban community where the population was younger and more children Erik and Laura’s age. Though they had troubles of their own, the nannies I was able to hire there were also younger and more user friendly for them. At least they were capable of keeping them out of jail.

While the divorce freed me from Patti, the emotional impact on Erik and Laura was complicated. Erik was old enough to understand why I was divorcing his mother. Yet he was alarmed, upset and angry. He had mixed loyalties. He had bonded with Patti. The divorce, the new neighborhood, were major changes for him. Laura was three. I had already noticed, having helped with several younger brothers and sisters, that she was not a normal three-year-old. Being both mother and father to her had psychological implications as well. She was subject to numerous screaming nightmares. After calming her, she wouldn’t go back to sleep unless I held and rocked her. I often woke in the morning with her in my bed clinging to my leg. I knew from my experiences at the two hospitals where I had worked, my psychology classes and the books I had read, that she

had formed a symbiotic relationship with me. I was unable to find a child care or a preschool willing to accept her while Erik was in school. At those schools, she typically sat in a corner with her blanket, sucked her thumb and refused to play with the other children or respond to her teachers and they refused to admit her. The one pre-school that did accept her, a very progressive child care center, called me after a week of observing her and told me outright that they weren't qualified to deal with her. I took both children to a child psychologist for about two years. Though helpful, the damage had been done.

I had other pressing issues. I came close to being fired several times by the reinsurance company where I worked for keeping what many called, "Bauer's Hours"; coming in late, leaving early. I avoided losing my job because I had intentionally made myself bullet proof. The company had many skeletons. I knew where they were hidden. They knew that I knew. Firing me would have been a huge mistake. They had made me an assistant vice-president to give me some legal standing both inside and outside of the company. They dumped their failure to adhere to statutory licensing problems on me to solve. I made several personal trips to insurance departments around the country to explain away their unique situation. I enlisted brokers in those states to convince the officials that the coverage was critical for their clients and that the reinsurance company was the only legitimate company to provide. The reinsurance company was never fined.

In the eleven years I was stuck at the reinsurance company (minus two years for active military duty) I earned a reputation in the specialty insurance market for being honest and innovative, a problem solver. I asked the two great business questions: "Why?" and "Why not?" My observations and innovations flustered the higher ups. They were stuck with me as I was with them. While the company maintained a respected national reputation, they were, at a minimum, local amateurs. I quickly outgrew them. As far as I could tell, they really didn't know how to make money. It was a private company funded by inheritances. The company had not yet been confronted by the modern financial era. The principals sat around in their three piece suits smoking pipes and spouting clichés. The company's reputation carried them until their own internal actuary showed them that they were under reserved by a large amount. He was eventually fired.

One of my most successful ventures there was helping to introduce kidnap-ransom insurance in the United States. The early 70's was a time of upheaval, kidnappings, hijackings and blackmail. Lloyd's of London had lost millions insuring wealthy European, South American and Middle Eastern businessmen and commercial companies against kidnappings and security threats. When a Chicago broker who had done his homework contacted me to reinsure a kidnap-ransom program being put together by a mutual friend at a large East Coast insurance company, I was at first highly skeptical. But at that point there had been only one known paid loss in the United States, the D.B. Cooper incident when Cooper jumped out of the airplane over Oregon with a few hundred thousand dollars. Neither he nor the money has ever been found. The key to the success of the program was the FBI. L. Patrick Gray, the FBI director, sent a threatening letter to the broker to shut down the program and or face charges of criminal conduct. Armed with expert legal advice, the broker ignored the letter and for three years our triangle of broker-insurance company-reinsurance company, brought in millions of loss-free premiums. Eventually, kidnap-ransom coverage was added to the standard commercial crime package for a very reasonable premium and was no longer attractive as a specialty coverage. I was expecting large bonuses for my work. Instead, I got "peanuts" at the end of the year. I resented that the brokers with whom we did business were, by and large, just salesmen. Yet they made all the money while I had the expertise and did all the work. I had had several lucrative job offers from specialty brokers, one in Los Angeles where entertainment insurance was a major market, and another in New York City, where specialty markets proliferated. Until my divorce, I was stuck in my tiny office, another prisoner of circumstance.

Every now and then, I would send a paper plane out the window from my tenth story office with the words, "A poet is dying in an office at Tenth and Main Streets. Please rush emergency assistance."

To advance myself with the reinsurance company I put together a comprehensive plan to reorganize my department into a first-rate nationwide insurance operation to underwrite media insurance and specialty coverages. I sent a memo describing the plan to one of the top executives in the company. I never received a reply. The memo

became the business plan for an independent specialty underwriting firm I established a few years later.

Unknown to me, my reputation had spread to Lloyds of London and to several powerful European reinsurers. I became known as a "go-to" guy in the specialty market, an expert in libel insurance for publishers and broadcasters and the unusual errors and omissions and professional liability coverages I handled for the company.

In 1978 I took a call from the risk manager of a large media company I had helped on several occasions with their libel insurance policy and kidnap-ransom insurance for key executives traveling around the world

"Bill," he said. "I like you. I do not like your company. I may have to take our policies to Lloyds or AIG. But if you go out on your own and you are backed by a company with a Best Rating of A+15, I'll be your first client."

That was the boost I needed to formally create Media/Professional Insurance (MPI) in early 1979. My divorce freed me to implement my plan for an underwriting and claim management firm that performed most of the functions of an insurance company. I would be a market for brokers looking for a placement of sophisticated specialty accounts. They had found, as I had, that the existing special risk markets were incompetent, slow, overpriced and disorganized. As much as the financial potential was great, I would be involved in the free speech movement by providing insurance for large and small media companies exposing the misdeeds of wealthy individuals, criminal organizations and large corrupt corporations in print and on air.

I left the reinsurance company on November 30, 1978. That was the same day I stopped smoking.

I worked out of my townhome piecing together the tedious specifics of the business plan, policy forms, insurance rates. My future partner, still employed by the reinsurance company as a claim attorney specializing in media and professional liability claims, reluctantly paid my mortgage and gave me a small stipend for groceries, my housekeeper and daily expenses. Once I had a signed contract with a U.S. fronting company and they confirmed the reinsurance, I jump-started Media/Professional by sending letters to several hundred large independent agents and special risks brokers to let them know where I had landed after resigning from the reinsurance company. The

response was overwhelming. I could not hire underwriters, claim attorneys and support staff fast enough. Over the next fourteen years I was able not only to pay off my debts but to provide affordable media coverage to small town newspapers and radio and television stations at a price they could afford. My company was involved as the insurer of larger media companies in many of the leading cases of the 1980's that the allowed national networks, cable companies, metropolitan newspapers and major magazines to freely publish and broadcast in depth investigative reportage without fearing the chilling effect of libel claims from public officials, public figures and large corporations. While I had to abandon my idea of researching the brain, teach inner city youth to read and write or capture the time I needed to write fiction and poetry, I could at least pay my bills and at the same time advance the cause of free speech by providing broad and reliable insurance. That was the success side of the story. In the process, I almost lost the company on three occasions through no fault of my own, mostly because of political infighting within the fronting insurance companies themselves. On the one hand, they were overjoyed by our underwriting success; on the other, they were jealous that we were showing them how the specialty insurance business should be conducted by giving them substantial profits. We did what the industry thought could never be done in what seemed to be very risky classes of business.

One of MPI's shining moments was the $120 million lawsuit filed by Gen. Westmoreland: *Westmoreland v.CBS.* Westmoreland filed the lawsuit after CBS aired a 90-minute documentary, *The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam War Deception,* that as described by Wikipedia, claimed that "Westmoreland manipulated intelligence in order to show far fewer communist personnel in South Vietnam than there actually were, thereby creating the impression that the Vietnam War was being won." Westmoreland thought that his junior officers would support his position but none offered to come forward on his behalf. Once he realized that testimony in a libel claim would open up his entire life and career to scrutiny, he eventually negotiated an undisclosed agreement with CBS that, in effect, settled the case in exchange for a user friendly letter from CBS that both parties had agreed to drop the charges and countercharges. CBS was able to stand by its reporting and Westmoreland was allowed to salvage what was left of his reputation. The settlement saved both sides large legal fees. That was my second contact with the general

since giving him the finger on Cheyenne Mountain. As part of the team involved with the case, I felt personally vindicated.

On my first visit to Lloyd's of London, still housed in the old Lloyd's building in the financial district, I was applauded by several underwriters in their boxes on the main floor when my presence was made known. They had followed some of the underwriting decisions I made in the specialty markets, saving them from catastrophic losses. Instead of grilling me about the perceived risk potential of insuring highly visible media companies, most of the underwriters I visited in their offices asked me the question, "What do you want to do next?" I had no idea that I would have that kind of welcome with the most sophisticated reinsurance market in the world. Given that opportunity I created the first international program for consolidating miscellaneous errors and omissions risks. I called it, "The Specialty E & O Program". It applied to a wide variety of clients that ranged from associations of rabbis who certified Kosher delis and restaurants to world class art auctioneers, and a third national program for insurance agents errors and omissions insurance. The new programs, added to the media accounts, made MPI a major special risks market. The rapid growth also increased my responsibilities. Although I had a highly skilled, honest and dedicated staff, MPI was in the end a one-man show — yours truly. I did not have anyone in the company who had the overall experience or expertise to take it over. My partner's expertise was limited to managing claims, an important requirement, but only one of the many aspects of providing a full-service specialty insurance market. I discovered too that I had unique marketing skills. Against the advice of my partner, I placed full page, witty, colorful ads in staid, black and white industry trade publications that quickly gained us a national reputation for being on the cutting edge. The treadmill I was on speeded up exponentially with MPI's success and increased our potential liabilities. As much as I tried to delegate, I found that I typically had to grab the reins at the last minute and save the day. On Wall Street, and in the international reinsurance markets, it was hardball, cut throat tactics, every day. The treadmill never stopped running. Again, I was only getting four or five hours of sleep a night.

My divorce allowed me the freedom to make up for the absence of a social life. Despite not having Patti as a loving sexual partner, her violent episodes and abusive

treatment, the loss of most of our mutual friends, trying to balance the needs of my two children and my need to pay the bills, I never cheated on her. For the next three years after the divorce I dated as many women who would have me. Laura did the best she could to drive them away, often with insulting remarks and physically fighting to sit between us. More than one of my girlfriends eventually told me, “I could never live with those kids.” I appreciated their honesty. I also felt the loss of companionship with some wonderful women.

I had two significant relationships during that time. One woman and I were completely compatible. We liked to read, listen to music, go to concerts and movies, cook together. I finally had to admit that I was not in love with her. Our parting, which I did not handle well, was as painful for me as it may have felt to her. I had another relationship with a woman who, had I not been a father, might have been a perfect mate. Her sense of humor, her intelligence, her party-girl style was attractive to me. The closer we became, though, the more convinced I was that she had a serious drinking problem. Not that I didn’t enjoy my martinis too. If not for Erik and Laura, I might have been able to slow her down. I couldn’t chance it. I didn’t want Erik and Laura to be involved in any more traumas of that kind. I had to break up with her. I didn’t have the smarts to break up properly with her either. I didn’t know how. And I didn’t realize that an undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder kept me from loving anyone, myself included.

Early in the summer of 1980 I stopped calling the women I had been dating. I did realize that with my baggage and hectic schedule I was in no position to think about long-term relationships. The war was always with me. Between the complications of having multiple relationships and non-stop business travel, I was also physically and emotionally depleted. I tried to have at least one low level date on Sundays when the children were with their aunt or grandmother. I set aside Friday and Saturday nights for parent time. I had a caring and responsible live-in housekeeper then — I’ll call her Carole — a very tall woman in her late 20’s, who actually interacted with Erik and Laura as a mother might. She made sure while I was traveling during the week that they were well fed and properly dressed, put to bed early, and in Erik’s case, on time for school. She played with them, had their pictures taken, supervised them when they played with their neighborhood friends. I could count on her to keep them safe.

In October of 1980 I met a beautiful woman whom I had been introduced to at a few social gatherings. She was dating a very handsome man, a playboy with money, an expensive car, the trappings of success. On one occasion, she sat by me on a sofa at a party and we talked briefly, asking each other the standard getting-to-know-you questions. I didn't think she would have any interest in me.

My townhome was located in a newer complex occupied by young couples and singles. It was in a setting planted with trees and flowers built next to a cornfield that gave one the impression of living out in the country. The condos resembled a ski lodge resort complex . They surrounded a faux waterfall, pool and clubhouse. When I could, I liked to take Laura for afternoon and evening strolls on the interior drive that circled the middle section of the complex. One afternoon on a walk with Laura I spotted that same beautiful woman — her name was Kathy — in the small enclosed area at the back of the condo she had just bought. I was surprised to find her there. She waved at us and we talked a bit over the wood-slatted fence. The previous owner had planted a tomato garden. She was cleaning out the withered overgrown plants. She invited us inside for a drink. I had an appointment so we didn't stay long but it was a pleasant visit and I found her extremely attractive. I had to be back on the road and did not see her again for several weeks.

One Saturday afternoon in early October, Erik, Laura and Carole were gathered in the living room making some Halloween costumes. I was in the kitchen chopping a salad. The phone rang. It was Kathy. Bingo. My heart was thumping.

"I picked up a pizza," she said. "I thought maybe you and the kids could come over tonight and share it with me."

"They had pizza last night," I thoughtlessly said.

"Oh well. I just got back from the Fall Fair at the church. I saw couples walking around with their children. I just thought it would be nice to have someone to walk in the leaves with. Would you like to do that tomorrow afternoon?"

"I have a lunch date tomorrow," I said, still clueless.

"Okay. I won't call you anymore."

"What do you mean — anymore?"

"I've been calling you for about six months."

“Six months?” I almost shouted. I looked over at Carole. She looked the other way.

“Bill,” Carole said in her southern accent in a low voice. “You know I love you and them kids.”

“Wait a minute,” I said to Kathy. Her words about walking together in the leaves had touched me. “The kids are going to be with their grandmother tomorrow. I can break my lunch date. It was just a casual lunch with an old friend. Why don’t you come over here and we’ll fix lunch together?”

I didn’t know yet that Kathy hated to cook.

We never had that lunch. After a failed attempt at a bike ride, I put on some music, a few romantic songs. The music led to kisses and embraces. I rose on impulse and led her by the hand into my bedroom.

The rest of that afternoon is a blur. We instantly fell in love. I realized I had never deeply loved any woman until then.

Kathy was a first-grade teacher. Early the next morning on her way to school, she unexpectedly knocked on my front door dressed in a fall jacket, a knitted hat pulled over her ears, and handed me a plate of breakfast rolls. We hugged. I don’t remember if we kissed or not. Erik, Laura and Carole watched us smile and hug each other. I don’t think Kathy knew what she might be in for. At that moment it didn’t seem to matter. I had sworn never to get married again. Two weeks later we decided to get married. We set a June date, found a house in a newly built suburban neighborhood, sold our condos and enrolled Erik and Laura in a nearby school where she taught. Kathy was afraid I might change my mind so we moved our wedding date up to late March, had a small church wedding with a reception at my partner’s country club and a one-night honeymoon at our favorite hotel. I had a business trip to London scheduled in June so we combined that trip for a second honeymoon in Paris and Southern France. Between my business venture, trying to keep the kids happy and my new life with Kathy, I still felt like an acrobat precariously balancing on a tight rope.

In the late 1980’s I witnessed a shift in the international reinsurance market. Investors from the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, and from questionable sources that were later identified as Russian oligarchs and money launderers, flooded the market.

That led to many insurers "buying" the business, meaning that they made a decision to offer overly broad coverages at extremely low rates to acquire blocks of business with the goal of increasing premiums a few years later for larger profits. They were willing to accept early heavy losses as an investment in future results. At the same time conglomerates and investment bankers were buying up media companies. Instead of having multiple clients the number was being reduced to one client with many diverse media operations. That resulted in lower premiums and lower income. I was already working ten to twelve-hour days and on Saturdays and Sundays. I would be working more and more to hold on to the business at half the profit. I needed to sell up to a strong and savvy conglomerate that could withstand the pressures that lower premiums would bring. If I could find a buyer who would continue to operate MPI in a meaningful way, keep my employees and accept MPI's liabilities which were primarily contractual commitments, I could create a start up and have it grow as rapidly as MPI had. I knew I could make it work.

MPI was fortunate to find several buyers willing to make an offer. Most importantly, the most attractive buyer agreed to absorb any liabilities, that might appear in future years. The sale rescued me from my financial entanglements. Once the sale was completed, I felt I would finally be free. I could write and be politically involved.

I also considered the idea of forming a non-insurance company in case some employees were absorbed by the parent company and would have to move to another city or were let go. My new interest was in the security business for commercial operations such as shopping malls, large office buildings, hospitals, sports complexes etc., a booming new industry. Nothing to do with the military. Now that I had a buyer who would continue to operate MPI in a meaningful way, keep my employees and accept MPI's liabilities which were primarily contractual commitments, I could create a start up and have it grow as rapidly as MPI had. I could take with me key employees, such as those involved in my IT department, inject my marketing skills and make it work.

But why inflict another burden on myself? While creating and managing another enterprise, my experiences in the business world only increased my lack of trust in other people. I had been screwed over so many times by insurers, brokers and clients I found I

could not count on anyone to keep their word, whether in a business deal or in my personal life. I have few people in my life even now whom I can place complete trust in.

Through these events, the divorce, my business ventures, my obsession with the Vietnam War were roiling in my thoughts, my daughter, Laura, became the next domino to fall.

Throughout the crises of my business career I was never able to escape the complicated life I was living at home. While Kathy and I were trying to put together a settled and orderly family for Erik and Laura, Patti emerged from the fog of her illness to do whatever she could do to sabotage the structure we had hoped to give them. We could not undo the damage that had already been done by the chaos of their having lived a bizarre childhood but we wanted them to have a fresh start in a nice home, a new school district, a safe and friendly neighborhood.

Once Patti had been released from a recent hospitalization and learned we had decided to marry, she raised a firestorm of uproar and interference. We had no problem with her seeing Erik and Laura as long as she was not delusional or in a psychotic state. We were open to her having supervised visits and, if they went well, to seeing the children alone. She was able to convince an older, well-established lawyer that we were trying to permanently cut her off from her own children which was not in any way our intent. The lawyer was a former law school friend of the judge and he ruled in Patti's favor, granting her biweekly visits with Erik and Laura at her apartment with no limitations. His ruling proved to be disastrous.

Patti was not the only psychotic person in Erik and Laura's lives. So were Patti's friends. Several were active drug users and ex-patients of the state hospital who were still in need of help. Being advocates for mental health, Kathy and I had no bias against those who suffered from mental illness but we also knew that the children were being exposed to scary and potentially violent behavior. During their visits at Patti's apartment complex they were allowed to stay up as late as they wanted. Both children had allergies. They were left at our doorstep smelling like cigars. It took us from Sunday until Wednesday to calm them down and get them adjusted again to a regular bedtime routine, healthy food and social boundaries. I receive hostile phone calls from Patti's friends. One kept calling to tell me that he was going to murder me with an ax, "chop me up into little pieces. Patti

tried to create uproar between my in-laws and I by lying about what we were saying about them and vice versa. There were no legal ways to stop her. Once we discovered that she was trying to create animosity between us, we mutually decided to stop answering or simply block her phone calls.

After we moved in together Kathy, as a renown first-grade teacher in a progressive School Without Walls program, immediately noticed that Laura seemed to be overmedicated for her allergies. She looked pale and languid, slept too much during the day and often was not as active and responsive as most children her age. I had been traveling so much during the week that I had not picked up on the signs of her lethargy. Kathy recommended a different allergist who told us that Laura had adenoids halfway down her throat. He found she was not hearing well and probably had not heard well for years. I had taken her regularly to a top-rated pediatrician and was furious that he had not picked up on her condition. She had surgery to remove the adenoids and tubes inserted for her ears. When we took her to the doctor's office for a follow up exam, he immediately said, "Look at her color. She's a different little girl."

I have read that a child who has not bonded with his or her mother from birth will likely have trouble forming meaningful relationships with other people later in life. I don't know if that is science or mere table talk. Laura's reaction to Kathy and her organized parenting style was immediate rejection. Throughout her life Laura never did fully accept Kathy despite the attention Kathy gave her: the doctor's appointments, birthday parties, Christmas gifts, shopping trips, stories she read her. In Laura's eyes, Kathy was an intruder. She resented what she perceived as Kathy coming between us. In reality, Kathy gave Laura as much caring, love and involvement as Laura would allow.

Laura's first grade school, the school where Kathy was teaching when we were married, assigned a special needs teacher that Laura liked and responded to. She was also given an occupational therapist to help her with attention deficit. Laura often tripped and fell, inadvertently knocked over glasses, lost class materials and personal effects, left her room and closets in disarray. She flitted from one thought to another. Her occupational therapist warned us that she needed to be watched when playing outdoors. "She has absolutely no physical fear," she told us. "If I asked her to jump off a cliff, she

would." Laura often injured herself, spraining her wrists and ankles by not paying attention to where she was going.

In the middle of Laura's work with her special needs teacher, I made a decision I now regret. She was making some progress and liked her teachers. Kathy and I did not like the neighborhood where we were living. It was too conservative for our taste. Without consulting Erik and Laura we bought a house in an old town area in midtown Kansas City, Missouri that was more diverse and enrolled them in a prominent Episcopal school. We didn't realize that the school was aimed at high achievers, many from wealthy families. The teachers there were more conservative than her previous teachers; the curriculum more challenging. The teachers, many of them judgmental, discounted Laura's disabilities. They decided that Kathy and I were just permissive parents, that we were making excuses for Laura's inappropriate behavior. Once Laura's relationship with her two special needs teachers at her previous school was severed, she inadvertently became a disciplinary problem. Her attention deficit and learning disabilities took many forms. It made her physically sick to look up words in the dictionary. She misheard words. Her clumsiness was taken as carelessness. She disrupted classes by unconsciously humming and speaking out of turn.

One day she was caught imitating one of her teachers. Her imitation was so good that the teacher asked her to perform it for some of the other teachers. They wanted Laura to imitate them too. That was her way of compensating for what she was otherwise unable to do. They finally began to see her for the gifts she had. Her finest moment at the school was her role in the annual play as The Cowardly Lion in the *The Wizard of Oz.* Her performance was so outstanding that they gave the bouquet of flowers, not to the drama teacher/director, but to Laura.

Erik was lucky not to have inherited his mother's schizophrenic genes. He had experienced Patti during times of relative calm and normalcy. He has a high IQ, is fluent in languages, makes friends easily and is a good writer. He has a unique and colorful personality. As a child, he once turned me into social services for putting him in time-out too frequently and holding him there. As a teenager he was not unusually oppositional though he forcefully stood his ground and made his opinions known. He has always been open to new ideas and to experimentation. On a family trip to Washington, D.C. he

ordered rattlesnake for dinner at a restaurant famous for serving unusual food. That was typical for Erik: curious, open, not afraid to be himself.

After a fifth year in college to major in German, Erik became a Fulbright Scholar and moved to Germany. Not impressed by the university system there, he created a small music company called Middle Class Pig records and a life of his own. He knows his way around. I miss seeing him except for an occasional week or so years apart when we manage to meet up. I remember the nights during my Media/Professional career when, stuck in a hotel room, I ached to be with him. I was an absentee father torn in fifty different directions, stuck again in ways I could not seem to escape. This was not the childhood I wanted for my children. I wanted them to have a different kind of life than I had had.

I've met a variety of people but few quite like Erik. He is a one-of-a-kind. It would be difficult to find as many people in this world as unique as Erik Bauer.

Laura was not so lucky. She inherited schizophrenia from both sides of the family. On my side, there was my brother, Larry. On her mother's side, Patti's genetic disorder. In a way Laura's illnesses confirmed my suspicions, suspicions I have never been able to research scientifically, that genetics and luck play a much larger role in human behavior and health than most people, including doctors and some research scientists, would like to admit. A flip of a coin; the roll of the dice. Laura fell on the wrong side of chance and circumstance. Like my father, other siblings of mine suffer from bipolar disease. A number of aunts, uncles, and their children, in my extended family do as well.

As Laura reached middle-school age her mental illness became more and more apparent and severe. She would climb to the top of the steep roof of our two-story house screaming for no apparent reason as loud as she could. We lived in a quiet neighborhood. Her screaming frightened the neighbors. She told the mothers in the carpool that we were having sex in front of her and that I regularly walked around the house naked and with an erection. We couldn't understand why our once friendly neighbors began ignoring us, why the mothers in the carpool stopped calling us. We found out about her attacks on us through one of her close friends. We had no idea that Laura kept her ear pressed against our bedroom door and entertained her friends by what she heard and embellished. She

disappeared for days at a time. We were forced to place her in a special program for out-of-control teenagers. The counselors there were not qualified to deal with Laura's unique personality. They did not recognize the biological nature of Laura's disease, that she had always been oppositional, that her behavior was due to a script that nature had written into her brain. They admonished Kathy and I for ignoring her needs.

Though I cannot prove it, I am convinced that the strong medication that Patti was taking during Laura's pregnancy added to her genetic disorder. After Laura's birth Patti rocked constantly in an antique chair I had remodeled in hopes that she and the children would have happy memories there. Patti would only hold Laura only now and then. She was opposed to breast feeding either child. It was her option. I had hoped that she would breast feed and physically bond with them. That was just my opinion. I did not interfere or criticize her choice. I also think that the lack of bonding also contributed to Laura's inability to form friendships. She was a beautiful as a girl and a young woman and attracted a number of boyfriends whom she quickly alienated by being rude and uncaring. The "Don't be close," syndrome.

By the time Laura grew into adolescence, she became more and more uncontrollable. By age of seventeen in Missouri she was free to come and go. She insisted on living at home while continuing to disrupt our lives whenever and however she could. She was jealous and resentful that we had a loving relationship. We had to decide to force her to leave our house for our own good. And perhaps for hers. At least, I felt I needed to end her dependency on me. We helped her move into a very nice apartment where she quickly alienated the manager and her neighbors with loud and disruptive behavior. She flouted the rules. Her first apartment became one of many that she left in a trail of destruction and bad feelings.

In another stroke of bad luck for me, Laura accidentally came into a large amount of money. In the flurry of the sale of Media/Professional, the handlers of the sale created for tax purposes an irrevocable trust for her, one that gave her complete control of the money once she reached the age of twenty-one. The trust was created in my absence without my approval but once in place it was out of my hands. She quickly went through a great sum of money. It was money I was going to use for her care. I was then stuck with the prospect of paying twice and more for her psychiatric care and dangerous life

style. I wanted her to live a full, creative life, to move on. Over time I spent one third of my assets on her psychiatric illnesses. I felt that I could not leave her to wander psychotic and homeless on the streets. She would likely have been killed or died for lack of care.

Without notice, she moved to San Francisco with a boyfriend. I was able to help her enroll in a fashion school that offered an associate of arts degree. With the aid of tutors she was able to graduate. She could turn on the charm. Despite her learning disabilities, with her good looks and off-beat humor, she could establish short term credibility with her verbal skills. After graduation, she initially worked at an upscale clothing store, decorating windows and helping customers pick out clothes. She lost that job, then others like it, one by one, because she could not operate the cash register, the store's computers, and because she failed to keep regular hours. I think, with one failure after the other, she finally gave up trying and let herself go. She was booted out of a ritzy apartment she leased in Lower Pacific Heights and moved to the Delores Park area near The Golden Gate bridge. She lived off what remained of her trust. I was constantly getting calls from the Golden Gate Bridge authority that Laura was once again sitting out on one of the bridge's spars, threatening to jump. I lived in constant fear that she would be harmed or taken advantage by others or harm herself. In California, as in many other states, it was impossible to have her declared incompetent and create a court monitored conservatorship which she sorely needed for her own protection.

In addition to her many mental illness diagnoses, Laura suffered from body dysmorphic disorder, also known as "broken mirror" syndrome in which the patient, usually a woman, feels she looks different than she really does. She spent large amounts of money on her skin, her hair, her makeup, homeopathic foods, vitamins and snake oil treatments. Though she truly was beautiful, she could never be convinced that she was.

Then, Laura was devastated by another diagnosis, an incurable unfortunate condition known as alopecia errata, one that causes partial baldness. It's a difficult condition to accept, especially for a young woman already suffering from body dysmorphic disorder to deal with. Its discovery, along with the other stresses of her life, led to even more bizarre and life-threatening behavior. On one occasion I took her to see an alopecia specialist in New York City and reserved separate rooms for the two of us at the New York Hilton. The Hilton has 47 floors. With an early appointment the next day,

we decided to go to bed early. At 9 o'clock she knocked on my door, fully dressed, looking distressed and very pale. I asked her what was wrong.

"I tried to jump off the Empire State Building," she said. "But I couldn't. They have a tall fence with barbed wire at the top."

I had been to the top of the Empire State building several times. I knew what she told me about the protective fence was true. I knew she had never been there before that night. I told her to collect her things and move into my room. It had two queen size beds. The next morning I decided to go down the hall to get some coffee. Laura told me she was going to take a shower. As I was leaving the room I could hear the shower running. When I returned, she was gone. I called security and told them she might try to leave the hotel unaccompanied and that she was suicidal. After a half hour of searching, they found her sitting on the very topmost ledge of the hotel. Two uniformed security officers came to my room and escorted me to the roof where the air conditioners and other mechanical equipment were located. I saw Laura sitting there on the ledge, 47 stories above Seventh Avenue, her hands in the push-off position, overlooking Times Square. Past the air conditioners the roof had a stairway of four or five steps down to a flat empty area leading to the ledge.

"Stand here," a young plainclothes security officer whispered to me, pointing to the top of the stairs. "Talk to her." I could see three police officers quietly moving in behind me through the roof top door.

"Hey, Laura," I said. "What are you doing?"

"Just looking," she said. "It's neat up here."

"We need to get ready for your appointment," I said.

She was silent. I can't remember what I said after that. I just kept talking. As I talked I watched the young security officer slide down the steps and slowly, quietly, crawl along the floor next to the four-foot high wall that enclosed the empty space. I think he grabbed her just as she was pushing off. He wrestled her to the cement floor and covered her as the other security men secured her and carried her up the stairs and laid her, faint and limp at that moment, next to my feet. We went by ambulance to Belleview Hospital where she was held for 72 hours. I begged them to keep her longer until I could make other arrangements but they refused. She spent the next ten months at Austen Riggs

Center in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. For Laura, at least, it was a waste of her time. And for me, very expensive and overpriced. I found myself helpless and, often, hopeless.

The last time I saw her alive was at the enclosed patio of her Venice, California duplex. She was exceedingly thin. I thought I might never see her alive again and I didn't. She was taking an anti-psychotic medication that had a side effect of causing seizures. She needed to take another medication to offset it. She complained by phone that the anti-seizure medication made her drowsy. Without telling me or her psychopharmacologist, she stopped taking the second medication cold turkey. Late one night a few weeks later on September 11, 2010, on her way to the bathroom, she experienced a major seizure, fell and suffered a deep and long cut on her right cheek. After being treated at a nearby hospital and having her cheek strung together by several large stiches, she checked herself out against medical advice. The hospital offered to place her in a nearby hotel with a nurse which she finally accepted. The nurse reported to the hospital that Laura talked non-stop, probably still high on the antiseptic that was given to her during the surgery, even saying, "My dad and I are tight," words I will forever cherish. Then she told the nurse she felt cold. The nurse pulled down a blanket from a shelf in the closet. When she brought the blanket to Laura, she found her unconscious. Despite the nurse's attempts at resuscitation, she was pronounced dead an hour later. I received a call from her psychopharmacologist at two in the morning with the words, "I have horrible, horrible news." That was the last time I remember crying. An autopsy confirmed that she died of another major seizure. No one was to blame. Kathy and I, Erik, Laura's aunt and grandmother, some of my brothers and sisters, had given Laura our best. If there was any blame for her contentious life and death, it was genetics, her misfortune of inheriting defective genes. What continues to pain me the most is that Laura tried and tried for many years to make a meaningful life for herself. For one reason or another she was never able to finally succeed, got no reward, for all her hard work and aspirations.

It was not until after the sale of the company that I became fully aware of my own symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. As one doctor said, "Your mind has retired. Your body has not." I was still on a treadmill I could not seem to turn off. Many people in the same situation find themselves lost. They don't know how they want to

spend the rest of their lives. If they do have plans, those plans often fail to satisfy them. But I did have plans, plans that never came to be.

From 1994 after the sale of my company until 2010, a period of time I call "the missing" years, my personal life, including the time I needed to give Laura, continued to be complicated. I see now I was also trying to deny the emotional turmoil churning inside by being of help financially and as a consultant to people who asked me for help. During those years when I might have been writing every day, I found myself unable to lift a pen. I had the tools but filled my time with make work. I did not have writer's block. I had the opposite problem. There were so many poems I wanted to write, so many stories to tell, plays to write, I felt overwhelmed, preoccupied, not knowing where to begin. I often sat at a computer, looking out at the ocean, at the mountains or a cityscape thinking about Vietnam. My brain kept taking me back there. I was bitter and angry at having been cheated of my youthful energy. I lived in a vague despair. More than that, I could not sit still. I could not concentrate. I had to keep moving, doing. It felt like I had a form of Adult Attention Deficit Disorder. I disassociated, my thoughts and feelings drifting back to Tay Ninh, the 60's, the politicians who had dragged me into a war. My method of falling to sleep was to concoct elaborate plans to assassinate war hawks and Americans who called for wars but knew nothing about the battlefields where they wanted to send boys to carry out their political agendas. I tried to keep busy in other ways to avoid what I saw as a staggering amount of writing I needed to do. It seemed too steep a hill to climb.

At MPI, I insured most of the major stock and commodities markets for their advertising and media activities. By 1983 I decided those markets for the average investor were like slot machines and only the major players and members of the exchanges could rely on their investments. Like many of our institutions the stock and bond markets were a lark, a game, like the board game, "Stocks and Bonds," named after them. I turned instead to the real estate market and homes I could design and have built or buy and remodel and sell for a profit. I would live in my investments until I was ready to move on to another locale. Those, and small cap and personal investments, with one large exception, my Colorado home, worked well for me.

Kathy needed to pursue her own interests. She had stood by my side during the craziness of my business career. She had been a creative first grade teacher for eleven years. She wanted to be able to help children in others ways, earned a master's degree in psychology and became a licensed counselor specializing in working with sexually abused children. The legal and social systems of our country left her feeling constrained and unable to meet the spiritual needs of the children and their families. A person of faith, she decided to serve in the ministry, first as a deacon, then as an Episcopal priest.

I am not religious in any way. But I wanted to support her as she had supported me and be with her as much as I could. I decided I would work with her in her ministry and write as well. We built a villa in Sint Maarten in the Caribbean where she served two churches. Though not a Christian but having been raised Roman Catholic with a minor in philosophy and theology, I taught Sunday School there. One evening sitting on the deck of our villa watching the sun go down, we looked at each other with a sad gaze.

"Are you happy here," I asked.

"No," she said.

We really did not belong there. The island was changing. The Caribbean was heading into another serious hurricane cycle. We just missed Hurricane Marilyn.

From there we moved to the mountains of Colorado and built a large home we intended to offer as a retreat center. Still wanting to avoid the harsh winters of the Midwest and Colorado, we also bought a condo on the island of Maui in the Hawaiian chain. Kathy hated cold weather, gray days and snow. Again, I agreed to teach Sunday school for the keiki (children) and created The Rainbow Chapel for their services.

Though we were on a bluff above the ocean and enjoyed many dramatic sunsets, we didn't care for our neighbors — "the bitch and brag crowd," I called them. We spent a few months of the year there until the bishop of Colorado asked Kathy to return to Colorado to take over a troubled parish. We sold the condo. More disruption, more moving, less time to write.

We spent the next eleven years there. Helping Kathy with churches in Colorado required most of my time. I wrote little. We traveled back and forth from our home to a small parish forty miles north where Kathy served as a pastor. Together with other parishioners we started a program for latch key kids whose parents were forced to work

numerous jobs to pay their bills. It was called "Grandma's House." We offered the children a home cooked meal one evening a week and gave them a place to play safely after school. Due to a controversy over an LGBT member at the church, Kathy, who was a supporter of gay rights, decided to retire from the priesthood.

In 2005 another domino fell. Pneumonia. While in a vacation rental on Maui, I acquired an unremitting cough. After we returned to Colorado, a doctor diagnosed me with a mild form of pneumonia and prescribed some pills as large as bumblebees. The cough stopped but I began having severe pain in my back. On the third night as I was getting ready to climb into bed, the pain was so severe I could not breathe. I gasped as I told Kathy to call 911. I thought I was having a heart attack.

In the mountains then the emergency service was almost as poor as it was on Sint Maarten. The lifeline helicopter was already in service. I was driven on the two-hour trip to Denver by ambulance. My only memory of the trip is being rolled on a gurney into the emergency room. I remained in a coma for eleven days, stopped breathing several times, once for three minutes. I learned later that my treatment was sub-par. I did not have fluid on my lungs. They were thick with phlegm. I was told by another doctor that if the phlegm had been immediately removed, I would have been out of the hospital in three or four days. The same doctor told me I would lose some memory. How much she could not foretell. It would be permanent. And it has been.

For two years after I left the hospital I felt completely out of whack. In the hospital I had suffered from ICU psychosis, a condition that can occur after surgery or a traumatic event. I could not think straight. I could not recall past or recent events. I lost my social filter, blurted out thoughts before monitoring them. I looked at the mountains differently. They seemed cold, distant. Unlike the ocean they did not move. I needed movement and more of life than the color green.

We moved again, this time back to my hometown of Kansas City. For me, it was the same old drab place. We had a sweeping view of The Country Club Plaza, a high-end shopping area, filled with fun bars and exquisite restaurants. I have never been excited by cityscapes and The Plaza was no exception. It was too removed from nature.

During the missing years, my PTSD from the war hit me like an IUD. None of the psychiatrists I consulted had been in the military, much less in a combat zone. They

were of little value. I still smarted from my first experience at the VA. Though I read and researched what the VA was currently doing, I did not find any information I thought might be helpful to me. Even so, I decided it might be the only option to help me leave the war behind.

Reluctantly, I turned to VA. There, I was assigned to a doctor, an East Indian — Doctor K was his nickname — who had been with the VA for 28 years and served in combat zones as a psychiatrist in the Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan. After a few minutes during our first meeting, he leaned over the top of his desk to shake my hand and said, “Welcome back.” I laid my head in folded arms on his desk and sobbed. I don’t remember anyone saying that to me when I returned from Vietnam. Maybe they did. Maybe they said it in other ways. I don’t remember my father ever saying, “Billy, I love you.” Maybe he did by his actions and his caring. But never directly in those words. I think it might have been considered unmanly. Hearing, “Welcome back,” spoken so directly and earnestly by Dr. K brought me back to dead center. He understood about flashbacks and disassociation.

“They’re hard wired,” he told me. “There’s no known way to delete them from your brain. They are unconscious until triggered or cued by something you may see or hear. Like déjà vu. In time, the old neurons may simply burn themselves out.”

He told me to stop listening to war and peace songs of the 60’s and 70’s, songs like “Ohio,” and “Daylight Again,” by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, and “Sam Stone,” by John Prine. He told me not to watch war movies or documentaries about war, especially the Vietnam War, WWII or any of the current wars, at least until my obsessions and angry and sad feelings declined.

“You may be able to move on one day.”

I told him that, except for Kathy, Erik and Laura, I seemed to have no feelings. That I often went cold inside.

“That’s normal too. I have no answer for that. Sometimes medication will help. Sometimes meditation and regular exercise.”

He told me I might want to join a group of vets to talk about my feelings. I answered that I was not a joiner and that talking about Vietnam only made me more angry.

He told me to stay off booze and drugs. Except for alcohol I had never used drugs. I was afraid of them.

During my MPI days I had also ignored my health. The specialty insurance business was rife with heavy drinking, heavy eating, late nights, high stress. I had already developed hypertension in Vietnam. The pressure and fast paced Wall Street added to my blood pressure. I had begun to drink heavily to calm myself. Self-medicating is the polite term for it. I noticed too that I was edgy, paranoid, prone to angry outbursts. I wasn't myself, the self I thought myself to be. I lost my social filters, blurting out insults I thought were funny but were not. I embarrassed Kathy in front of our friends and neighbors many times over. I still do not recognize myself during my missing years. Surely, that was not me. I had become a despicable character in a dark novel.

After a routine annual visit to urologist's office, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Based on where I was stationed in Vietnam, Dr. K suspected the cause was Agent Orange. To my knowledge, there was no one in my immediate or extended family who had been diagnosed with any kind of cancer. Once I told Dr. K of my diagnosis, he handed me some forms and told me to fill them out. Almost immediately I began getting checks in the mail. A year later, I was called back for an interview. I answered the questions honestly. I had none of the outright symptoms. The next check I received from the VA showed the amount of my compensation as "0." Whether Agent Orange caused prostate cancer in American soldiers in South Vietnam is still an open question. Based on simple observation and the Vietnam veterans I knew who died young from prostate cancer, I believe, but cannot prove that Agent Orange was the cause.

I chose radiation therapy over surgery. There was a one in five chance of becoming impotent after having the prostate surgically removed. I was not lucky that way. Even then, the radiation devasted my prostate. I had to work with what was left. Over time, I managed to recover. The period immediately after the radiation treatments reminded me of the veterans who had lost their genitals during combat. The song, "Ruby, Don't Take Your Love To Town," written by Mel Tillis, about a paralyzed veteran who watches his wife leave for a night on the town, conveys their grief and pain and the fear I felt that I too might be permanently impotent. For someone who has

always placed a high degree of importance on the sensual and erotic, it seemed a terrifying prospect.

Many soldiers on deployment suffer the pain and anxiety of the "jodies," men and women who have sex with their spouses or boy and girl friends while they are separated. The VA offers counseling services for armed forces members who discover that their wives and significant others have been cheating on them and fear the prospect of them cheating again on further deployments. I find that even now, years after the Vietnam War, that active duty service members and their families are treated shabbily, are poorly paid, often have inferior medical care and poor housing. When I read about these conditions, it is difficult for me to escape the time I involuntarily spent in U.S. basecamps and in the war zone. Their wives and lovers are often younger women with active hormones who might face the prospect of living out their lives with a partner who cannot have intercourse with them or having children. This lack of sexual intimacy is seldom discussed in our puritanical society. It is a high price pay for the soldiers andtheir lovers, married or unmarried.

In the years following my prostate cancer I had quadruple bypass surgery, surgery to repair my hiatal hernia that doctors at the Mayo Clinic described as my "stomach being halfway up my esophagus." They also found what looked like a malignant growth on my left lung. It was actually a cyst caused by an old fungal infection. They performed "wedge" surgery to remove that portion of my lung.

VA turned down a claim that my feet had been damaged. I am not a large person. After I was discharged my feet ached most of the time. My toes twisted. I developed hammer toes. In my late 60's I required three painful surgeries that were only partially successful. I have pins in five of my toes and a sheath over one large toe. These conditions are not trivial. Though I walk for exercise, my feet ache afterwards and I need creams to sooth them. The pain can keep me awake. Vietnam comes to mind.

VA also turned down a claim I made for damage to my digestive system. I did not have issues before I went to Vietnam. VA took the position that my claim was made too late in life. There were likely to be intervening variables. They could also be genetic. I was told by the state VA counseling office, a non-profit, that I would have little chance of making a case. I still have the issues, possibly caused by Agent Orange, or inhaling

fumes from military vehicles and choppers. I have no way to verify whether being in Vietnam was a factor or not.

After Dr. K retired, I was without a wise counselor, a combat veteran, with whom I could share my story and my feelings. If I did inadvertently mention that I had been in Vietnam to friends and acquaintances I often got a cold shoulder, a change of subject or a walkaway.

The idea that combat veterans don't or should not talk about their service is a stereotype and a cliché. Who knows how much better off the combat veterans of World War II, Korea and Vietnam might have been if they had opened up about their experiences, how much lower the incidence of alcohol and drug addiction, how much lower the divorce rate, the number of suicides? The myth of the tight lipped, tough guy, hard core, soldier has no doubt caused more tragedy than can be measured. Good for the Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who do have the courage to share their experiences and empty themselves of negative feelings, and good for the psychological services available to them. Real men learn how to do this and pass along what wisdom they may have acquired to others.

I had said or wrote little about Vietnam until 1983. I was vacationing on the island of Nantucket when I walked through the lobby of the hotel on my way to a Sunday brunch and saw the banner headline, “200 Marines Killed In Beirut,” flashing at me from a newsstand. My submerged rage about Vietnam returned in a rush. A few days later, flying home to Kansas City, I read a quote given to the New York Times by the chaplain of the Marine battalion landing team in Lebanon who suffered those losses. The chaplain lamented that his men wouldn’t talk about the bombing and that the incident had become a ghost. “Sometimes,” he said, “you have to look the ghost in the eye.”

That image forced me to look at my own ghost and I wrote a series of poems that became a book entitled, “The Eye Of The Ghost,” about what I had seen and felt and what I had heard from others in Vietnam. The last poem of the book begins, “Today I wrote my last Vietnam poem / fifteen years after the fact.” I really did believe I had written my last poem about the Vietnam War and I wanted it to be the end of my thinking and daydreaming about it. I still fear that the more I think and talk and write about the Vietnam War, the more I will become captive to it. I have had to admit that I have lost

my personal internal battle with the politicians, diplomats and generals who allowed their arrogance and ignorance to lead so many young men to their deaths. I have been told this was a grandiose, paranoid thought to begin with. It may be. I still fight that battle in my head. I want the truth to be known.

There has been no last poem. I wonder if there will ever be. Since "The Eye Of The Ghost," I have written many more poems about the war and undoubtedly will be forced to write even more. I still think about the war every day. I try to avoid Memorial Day, Veteran's Day, Fourth of July celebrations and images of Vietnam War Veterans taking rubbings from The Wall. I see how old and tormented they look and I see myself in them.

I count myself among the lucky. I have found a second wife who loves and puts up with me and helped me father the two remarkable children from my first marriage to Patti. I still have two arms and two legs. I can pay my bills. I live on a beautiful island with a wide view of the ocean. I remind myself about the vets who have had to endure heavy combat on a regular basis, who are forced to see and be a part of horrifying events, who carry the bodies of wounded and lifeless friends, the burden of flashbacks, nightmares and reoccurring bouts of depression and anxiety.

I watch them, the boys, men and women who still wage their wars on the streets, sitting in chairs waiting for their VA appointments, searching trash bins and gutters for leftover food and booze and cigarette butts, living in forest and mountain camps, searching for something lost they find difficult to name. I see them mired in themselves as deeply as their boots were mired in rice paddy mud. They are still trying to leave Vietnam and later wars and come home, to discover the magical key that will unlock that place in the brain where peacefulness lives. For this Vietnam Veteran, this drafee, a Welcome Home Steak was not enough. We still serve.

Vietnam veterans don't need medals or statues or posthumous parades or monuments. We only need to be welcomed home as veterans from other wars were welcomed home. We didn't need to have to fight and beg and sue for compensation for our wounds. We needed to be cared for and listened to. We don't need preaching and AA meetings. We need for someone to acknowledge that we were forced to sacrifice so

much for so little. We need to know that our feelings of confusion and torment are a realistic response to an immoral situation and not to our own craziness.

Many of us had been told by our fathers or uncles or by judges that going to Vietnam would make men out of us and teach us to respect our country. We had been told the war would help us realize how much we had and how blessed we were. And as we chewed our welcome home steaks, we swallowed these lessons in tough, charred bites. Now in late middle and old age ourselves, we want to move beyond Vietnam but don't know how. Some continue to wander the streets, as if in a reoccurring nightmare, in the jungles and rice paddies and rubber plantations of another country. Behind our backs we feel the blast and stink of a Chinook, the smell of blood, death, burning excrement and JP 4.

What I feel is regret that the American soldier was thrown into these circumstances for all the wrong reasons. It was not our war.

I know of Vietnam War veterans who believe the time has come to stop agonizing over the injustices of the war. Perhaps wisely, they have decided to leave the war in their past and not allow the war to define them or dominate their thoughts. For me, to rationalize away the experience in this way betrays those who died, who were severely wounded or have gone MIA. It is to forget and minimize them and, in forgetting them, to bury the truth as far as the truth can be humanly known. Too much fact in American history has already been buried or hidden in myth and propaganda. For Vietnam veterans and our Vietnamese adversaries, the American War, as it is known in Vietnam, was our Holocaust, and it is for the survivors to bear witness and tell the story of our real-life experiences. There are people who want Vietnam veterans to be forgotten or marginalized like the old timers from the Spanish-American War, from the absurd carnage of the two World Wars, and the inconclusive Korean War, who still refuse to believe or understand what they did or what happened, who are apathetic and uncaring about such matters of American history, such as the horrifying degradation of human beings called slavery that made early America an economic power, the genocide of the Native American Indians, those who only want to see the America of those periods of American history on their own terms and not as they were. They want to shrink the bodies of the dead into tiny letters etched onto a marble wall. They want the Vietnam

War veteran out of mind and off the streets. Homeless veterans seem ugly and inconvenient. We have been told to "get over it." It is for these deniers and more recent generations that our stories must be told. It must not be a subject of propaganda but a matter of forensically documented, fact-based history.

And how does a combat soldier recover his or her sense of joy? How does this soldier rid himself of the rancid taste of his Welcome Home Steak?

I am required to go to my local VA clinic for an annual physical and three or four times a year to see a psychiatrist so I can have my medications mailed to me. I can usually guess which of the veterans waiting for their appointments are Vietnam War veterans by their apparent age and by a kind of puzzled stare in the eyes of boys made men before they were men. I wonder, as they age, what will haunt the veterans of recent wars who have had time to reflect on their service during the Gulf War, Iraq, Afghanistan and in other wars zones.

I have not saluted the American flag since I returned home from the war. It is a beautiful flag that I once found inspirational and stood for grand ideals. It pains me to watch the Great American Experiment deteriorate into a corrupt marketplace, conspiracy theories and ignorance. We have not been, as we claim, the greatest country in the world. It is not true that every child can be anything or anyone they want to be. Only a privileged few or an unusually gifted child who has been lucky enough by chance to suddenly rise to fame or financial success have that opportunity. That every child in America can hope to be whom and what they want to be is a myth. So much for American Exceptionalism. So much for the inscription dedicated to immigrants on the Statue of Liberty on Ellis island that begins, "Give me your tired, your poor…," that has been diluted by a fear that American born citizens will be replaced by those immigrants, many of whom have given so much creativity and vitality to our country.

The prologue to the U.S. Constitution includes five mandates: (1) to form a more perfect union; (2) to insure domestic tranquility; (3) to provide for a common defense; (4) to promote the general welfare; (5) to secure the blessings of liberty. I look at those mandates and see that the country has a long way to go, especially in promoting the general welfare. We have a high poverty level, a lack of equal education and opportunity for the less fortunate, and black and brown minorities. We have the means to fulfil the

Constitution's imperatives. We have not sought to fulfill them. A large percentage of white Americans of European ancestry seem too apathetic, poorly educated and contrarian to pursue these lofty goals.

What I do value about America is the Constitution, the fact that we discovered jazz and rock and roll; we have air conditioning, hot showers, ice cubes on demand and the right to go anywhere in the country and say whatever we want to say within the scope of the First Amendment which is constantly under attack by those who do not want to hear opinions they oppose. Other than those characteristics of our democracy, our population seems to me to be like any other. Nothing special about us. We have destroyed our forests, contaminated our water, plowed up our land digging for coal and drilling for oil, ignored the need to maintain a healthy population. Once we finally decide to attack and deal with our gross deficiencies, I may again be moved to respect and honor our flag and sing a national anthem like, "America The Beautiful," or a similar anthem that is not a war song, one that celebrates nature, good will and freedom and justice for every American, immigrant and aspiring U.S. citizen.

My generation — Baby Boomers or of an age just before or after 1945 — has failed to make the America envisioned by the founding fathers become a reality. I leave it to future generations to have the insight and will to remedy our mistakes and self-indulgences.

As I have written, I do not consider myself to be a masochist. I do not relish constantly reflecting on the war or how it permanently changed my life. Though I try to deafen the sounds of the Vietnam War, I am constantly reminded of them. My tinnitus is constant. There is no cure. I try to keep busy to avoid the ringing in my years caused primarily by my firing of weapons, the loud roar of heavy equipment, the battering sounds of helicopters, without any kind of ear protection. With the ever-present ringing in my ears, my anger stays close and nearly inescapable.

The tinnitus reminds me too that Lyndon Johnson died peacefully in his sleep. Nixon, while leaving office in disgrace, lived the remainder of his life in comfortable and relatively affluent circumstances. Kissinger continues to live a long and financially wealthy life. Nguyen Cao Ky, the corrupt South Vietnamese Prime Minister from 1967 to 1971, made his way to the U.S. and for many years operated a liquor store in

California before returning to Vietnam in 2004 to serve as a business consultant. Nguyen Van Thieu, president of South Vietnam from 1967 to 1975, also corrupt, lived a safe and private life after the war in Massachusetts until he died of natural causes in 2001. I don't know if any of these leaders harbor regrets about their roles in the war but they appear to have lived well enough afterwards in spite of their conduct in perpetuating the war.

Just as President Bush, with his phony air national guard stint; Vice President Dick Cheney with his five deferments and three heart transplants; and Donald Rumsfeld, former Secretary of Defense, known for his cocky and wise-cracking press conferences, live affluently while the Iraq and Afghanistan wars continue to take their toll on the service men and women who have been killed or crippled based on their lies and incompetence.

The Catholic Church and other Christian religions believe there exists a heaven, a hell and purgatory. For me, these regions of an afterlife are fantasies used to frighten their followers into living by man-made rules of submission and control. Home from the war I do not exist in heaven, even though in one sense I am happy to have survived, nor do I live in any kind of hell. Living daily with the war in my brain I would describe as living in some version of purgatory, stuck in that inescapable place between heaven and hell. I want those who talk so casually and excitably about war to know how a war actually affects the soldiers who are made to fight in a war that is politically and economically motivated., a war that does not personally defend them against physical or psychological harm.

As I write these words I am 76 years old. I like to think that I might have enough time left to find my old self, a boy standing in front of Caravaggio's *St. John The Baptist In The Wilderness,* with Ed, the old security guard at my side*,* longing for a life that might have been. I reach out for the tattered remains of that boy, the chaos of history of them swirling in my thoughts, but like brittle leaves, they scatter before me.

Bill Bauer, 2021

ONCE A SOLDIER

That instant along the Cambodian Border
when he fed the tip of his index finger
into the comfortable curve of metal,
he touched for the first time in his life
the slick sleazy specter of evil

At eighteen, ordained a soldier,
a soldier at eighty,
forever to act on impulse,
think sharpshooter, point man,
platoon leader, survival

From first salute, an unseen soldier,
shaven head and sinister grin,
stalks within, stalks relentlessly
in malls, on busy streets, hiking trails,
always ready, always there

Eyes fixed in the back of his head,
trained to obliterate,
he knows he can take out
any man who dares him

Hard wired, ready to explode,
once a soldier, always a soldier,
condemned to wear the uniform,
endure cold, desert dry, hunger, gore --
he still serves

The war over, he alone knows
why he marches automatic,
cries when children sing,
snaps cold without warning

"Yessir!" is what he's drilled to shout
"Yessir!" echoes in his daydreams
"Yessir! is the man the boy became