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GOOD SOLDIER AND OTHER STORIES

By

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ABSTRACT

GOOD SOLDIER AND OTHER STORIES

By

Thomas White McGohey

"Good Soldier" is a collection of original short stories written between 1984 and 1987.

These stories are meant to stand alone as well as a whole. Together they are unified by a theme of young men whose actions fail to realize the illusion of the American Warrior.

In memory of my mother whose spirit was with me always  
when writing.

T. MC.

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T. MC.

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## THE WAR OF NAMES

When Angela Torzini was born her father had insisted on naming her Calphurnia with the hope that she would inherit the same traits of beauty and dignity as the noble wife of Julius Caesar. Her mother would have none of this. Instead, she wanted to name her Maria in honor of the Virgin Mary.

Although they had officially christened her, Angela, so that she would be cleansed of original sin, Mr. and Mrs. Torzini argued fiercely for years about what to call their daughter. The fighting was so intense at times--her mother pitched clay cups across the living room of their small apartment where they shattered against the wall with a loud whump, like exploding mortar shells, and her father threatened to drag Mrs. Torzini through the streets of Vicenza to the Piazza dei Signori on a busy market day to have her condemned as a collaborator for her wayward habits with the enemy during the war--that the ever-watchful Mrs. Federico, who lived in the ground floor apartment below them, feared that Angela would not survive her childhood. When asked about Angela's life today, Mrs. Federico and the other old women of the neighborhood would shake their heads and sigh that such a fate, although certainly tragic at the time, may have been more merciful in the long run.

Sitting on the front steps of the Cafe Settembre, gazing out across the Piazza degli Angeli, Angela tried to sort out the chain of events that had brought her to a life the exact opposite of the one so enthusiastically envisioned by her parents nearly thirty years ago. The marble column with the handsome and athletic, winged angel thrust high into the evening summer sky was a constant reminder that she had achieved neither the saintliness fervently desired by her mother nor the fame and glory demanded by her father.

Angela had fallen far short in acquiring the beauty and grace of an emperor's wife. Her face had the exaggerated comic sadness of a clown with dropping eyes which always seemed on the verge of tearing, and a large bulbous nose protruding from her flaccid face like a golf ball placed on a stubby tee. She was slightly over five feet tall and quite fat, not stolid and bulky like an old mother who had ballooned with the birth of too many children and family meals that went on for hours, rather she had thick rolls of flab tied around her waist like sandbags which seemed to drag her downwards. With her bottom heavy physique and a noticeable lack of coordination, she had the appearance of a nautical buoy bobbing in the ocean when walking down the street.

The few times she did encounter her father on the street, he would always joke sarcastically that she did indeed command soldiers from the greatest army in the world



after all, even if it was only for a half an hour at a time. And even though she always went to the same mass as her mother on Sundays, Angela had not heard a spoken word nor received even a slight nod of the head from the mortified Mrs. Torzini in the nearly ten years that she had been walking the streets for a living.

The falling sun buried the marble angel atop the column in shadows from the buildings across the street, and the narrow, cobblestone streets that fed into the Piazza became dark and cool. As night descended, the habitual changing of the guard took place. The stolid, solitary figures of old widows, dressed in black and wrapped in long shawls, scurried home for evening prayers, passing as they went the girls who worked the Contra Porta Padova area, all done up and strutting in their alluring evening costumes of mini-skirts and knee-high leather boots.

Angela decided to move inside and get something to eat. She was more tired than hungry, but she would need some food to keep her going. It was going to be a busy night. The Airborne Battalion from the American base at Caserma Ederle was returning after thirty days of maneuvers in Germany, and the swaggering paratroopers, filled with fresh arrogance because they had survived another jump, would descend upon the city like an invasion, their pockets filled with money from unspent paychecks, and craving excitement and pleasure of anykind. It would be the kind of night the other girls complained about, and yet when the

soldiers arrived, they all flocked to the Cafe Settembre and Johnnie's where the men gathered. There was much money to be made, but the night often ended in drunken brawls and with the Carabinieri arriving to arrest soldiers and some of the girls. Angela preferred to work the quieter evenings during the week even though she made less money. But she could not afford to pass up a night like this. If she worked late enough, she could make enough money to last through the month.

At the bar Angela ordered a sandwich and a cup of espresso. She carefully counted out a few lire from an old coin purse. A tall man with a thick, black moustache that covered his mouth pushed the plate and cup across the bar top, held up his hands and smiled knowingly. At the end of the month when business was slow for everyone, Tony, the owner of the Cafe Settembre, let most of the girls and preferred customers keep a running tab.

"After tonight we'll be in a better position to pay our bills, eh, cara. Everyone gets better when the Americans come back to town."

Angela nodded her head slowly and tucked the coin purse inside her snug red sweater.

She sat in a booth near a window so that she could watch the street and ate slowly, without enjoyment, picking off flakes from the crust of the roll. The sight of a young girl across the street, wobbling down the sidewalk in a pair of high-heeled boots, like a baby flamingo trying to

use its reedy legs for the first time, drew her attention. She wore too much makeup, even for a prostitute, and affected a cynical and provocative pose that belied her otherwise obvious youth. She didn't look to be older than 16 or 17. Angela couldn't remember having ever seen the girl in this area before. A small, blue car with white lettering on the side wheeled up to the curb where the girl was standing, and a stocky man wearing the blue uniform of the Carabinieri jumped out. He waved his arms at the girl and began to lecture her sternly like a father who had caught his daughter out late at night with a forbidden boyfriend. The girl stood her ground and argued with the officer in a high, screechy voice. Angela watched with surprise as she waved an obscene gesture to the car pulling away.

The young ones are much bolder than I was at that age, she thought, and then laughed, they're bolder than I am now or ever will be. Who am I kidding, no wonder I never make very much money. I'm not pretty like Lina who simply smiles and the men pay her more, and I'm not witty and clever like Gigi who teases the soldiers and makes them laugh.

The cafe began to fill with customers, and Angela turned around in her seat to watch the door. Lina and Gigi entered and moved over to the bar where they stood arguing with each other. Angela watched with curiosity as Gigi kept glancing over and motioning in her direction. Finally

the two stopped arguing and began to walk over to the booth where she was sitting. Angela shifted uneasily. She couldn't imagine what they might possibly want with her. Because she charged a much lower price for her services, Angela was not very popular with the other girls who felt that she was undercutting them. Although a few of the girls felt sorry for her and at times were cordial, if in a cold way, towards her, the others openly snubbed her, refusing to speak to or even acknowledge her, except for some cutting comment about her appearance.

The two women stood stiffly in front of Angela, glancing at her and each other. Lina was a tall red-head with a full-hipped body and an attractive, but haughty, face which resembled a plastic mask because of all the makeup she wore. Gigi was the oldest of the girls who worked the Contra Porta Padova area and her faded blonde hair and lined face were beginning to betray the endless late nights spent prowling the bars. But she still had a slender figure and her gruff voice and lewd sense of humor made her popular with the GIs.

Gigi spoke first, "Angela, we got a good deal we think you might like, right Lina," she nudged her friend who stared out the window at the street. "There's a group of four GIs, Americans, down at Johnnie's having a farewell party for one of their friends who's going home and they want to buy him a girl."

Angela didn't say anything, still unsure of what was

wanted of her.

"Well, it's like this, Lina says they don't have enough money for her, and you know me, I'm too old to take on four guys like that. So we thought maybe you'd like to go out with them, right, Lina?"

Lina shook her head, still refusing to look at Angela. "I don't know why you want to give that pig anything, she steals dates from us all the time."

"Shut up will you, just shut up. Don't pay any attention to her, Angela. Look, I'll be honest with you. These guys are going to keep bothering us until they get some action, and me and Lina can't work Johnnie's with them hanging all over us. So do us a favor and go out with them, okay? They look like decent guys, a little drunk, but they're just kids, they won't give you any trouble."

Angela thought carefully about the proposal. She didn't like to go out with large groups. Somebody always got too drunk.

"Angela," Gigi's voice became serious. "Nights like this don't come so often you know, we all have to work."

She looked up at the two women. She didn't like Lina, the snobby bitch, and would've refused the offer just to spite her. But something in Gigi's tired voice and face kept her from saying no. The old girl is past her prime, she thought. Every date is like a small pension for her old age. That's me ten years from now, too tired to take

on the big jobs. Maybe if I make some good money to start, I won't have to work so late tonight.

"Sure, I'll do it."

"Ah, good," Gigi sighed with relief. "Come on, we'll show you where they are."

Like a wasp nest stuck under an opera house balcony, Johnnie's was tucked below the overhanging facade of an elegant, gothic house built during the Renaissance, and once inhabited by the old nobility of Vicenza. An arcade formed a windowed tunnel over the sidewalk in front of the bar which was just around the corner from Contra San Domenico where Angela grew up. As a child, she had always been curious about this dark cave gouged into the wall beneath the Pallazo Regau which was so ornate with its intricately carved scrolls and windows, and faded frescoes covering the front. But whenever they passed through the arcade on their way to church, her mother prevented Angela from peering into the open doorway of the bar with a jerk of the arm, and gave her a stern warning. "Maria, stay away from soldiers, they are evil angels of the devil, especially the crazy ones who jump from the sky. During the war they used to eat babies after a big victory. If you ever go into that evil den, they will devour you as well and swallow your soul. And Maria, God the Father will not accept your soul into Heaven if it has bobbed around in the sewer stomachs of the soldiers. Do you understand me, Maria?"

Angela had not understood her mother's excessive fear of Johnnie's and the soldiers who visited there. The sight of the bar, hidden in the shadows of the overhanging facade, with its heavy wooden doors and shutters and the smoky light inside, was a little scary to Angela, like a haunted house. But there was always so much noise and laughter from within that she thought that it must have been a fun place to visit. The few glimpses she did manage to steal inside, while her mother wasn't looking, revealed groups of young men about the same age as her cousins playfully punching each other in the arm and tossing jokes at the bartender. To her they had looked like a bunch of older, mischievous schoolboys. Still, for weeks after her mother's terrifying admonishment, whenever she had to walk through the arcade and pass Johnnie's, she would rush past with her eyes clamped shut and clutching both her hands over her chest so that the soldiers could not steal and eat her soul.

"That's them over there, see?" Gigi pointed through the window to a corner booth at the far end of Johnnie's where four young men sat. Angela could not distinguish their faces, but even at that distance the group had a look of barely contained rowdiness, like racehorses jostling in the starting gate, waiting for the bell to release energy and anticipation built up over several weeks, and she felt suddenly apprehensive.

"Well, what are you waiting for, gorgeous, go get

them" said Lina, grinning at her.

Gigi pushed a 500 lire note in her hand and whispered in her ear, "Old Gigi does not forget favors, we all have to work together, right? This will get you started, buy yourself a drink. We'll be waiting outside the Cafe Settembre to see you leave. Good luck."

The two women turned and started walking back to the corner.

Angela sat on a cornerstone of a column with her legs stretched out into the street. Staring at her scuffed, white shoes and the worn, rutted cobblestones of the street, she tried to press down the fear that swept over her like a sudden chill before the first date each night. The prospect of starting out with four dates at once increased her dread. It didn't happen too often, but there were those ugly times when a working girl would get shoved around or beaten up by an angry, drunk soldier who was unhappy with the action he had just bought. Angela had never had any real trouble. She found the American GIs to be more boastful than harmful, but a queasy nervousness stayed with her on nights like this one when the bars were crowded with soldiers celebrating their return. She pulled a small mirror out of her pocket and checked herself quickly. Standing up, she glanced at the stone relief figures of four women representing the Cardinal Virtues of Justice, Prudence, Fortitude, and Temperance carved into the facade below the balcony.



"A lot of good you ladies do," Angela joked, trying to lighten her mood. "Well, Mama, the soldiers have feated on my soul so much there isn't much left. I don't think one more night is going to make much difference."

The interior of Johnnie's was every bit the den that the cave-like entrance hinted at strongly. The room was long and narrow with a low ceiling, and poorly lit with dull lights. The booths and tables were made of rough, pitted wood, like furniture pulled from a burned-out building, and the wooden floor boards were covered with sawdust and cigarette butts. Except for a couple of old, Italian men sitting at the bar, a look of wry amusement on their faces, the room was filled with American GIs. Angela looked around to see if any other women were present and spotted the young girl she had seen earlier arguing with the Carabinieri seated at a large round table with several GIs, chattering away in rapid Italian, pausing now and then to smile coyly. She moved over to the bar, bought a drink with the lire note Gigi had given her still crumpled in her hand and observed the group she was supposed to entertain. There was nothing significant or peculiar about their appearance: they had short hair and wore colored t-shirts, and their faces and arms were tanned from weeks spent in the field. She detected a familiar look in their faces, a look she had seen before in many of the other soldiers that puzzled her. It was a combination of innocence and hardness that at times made her either want to coddle them

or run away. They were so two-sided, either laughing or swearing, smiling or acting tough and mean.

Three of them directed all their attention to a large fellow in the corner of the booth. He must be the lucky boy going home, she thought, he's the reason I'm sitting here watching them. She noticed the table was littered with several beer bottles. It was still early and they had already had much to drink. This might be more than she could handle. She wanted to leave and then remembered Lina and Gigi who were waiting on the corner. To hell with them, what favors have they ever done for me? I'm doing this for me. Just do it and get it over with, and maybe they'll pay me enough so I can go home early.

Angela walked over to the booth and stood off to the side, waiting for them to notice her. Up close they were much younger looking, not more than twenty or twenty-one, she figured. The tall one in the corner was also much bigger than she had realized. He was muscular and sturdy looking, like a giant tree, with red hair and a gap-toothed grin. Across from him was a short, Spanish-looking boy with a round face and heavy eyelids, and a stocky-blond-haired boy who constantly drummed his fingers on the table to the tune of a song playing on the jukebox. The fourth member of the group was a lean, handsome boy with the fuzzy outline of a first moustache over his lip.

"Hey, look who's here, it's Sophia. What's happening Sophia?" the handsome one spoke to her first.

The others laughed at the sarcastic comparison to the famous Italian actress.

"It's Angela," she replied.

"Yeah, sure, Sophia, whatever you say."

Angela bristled for a moment, but decided not to let the comment on her homeliness bother her. She had heard much worse insults. Like a boxer with a weak chin and no knockout power in his fists who dances away from his more dangerous opponent, fighting enough only to survive the match and collect his pay, Angela was well aware of her limitations as a lady of the night, and took an accordingly self-effacing and pragmatic attitude with her into the bars and streets. She knew that the soldiers did not find her attractive and agreed to go out with her usually as a last resort. If that's the worst that happens to me tonight, I can't complain, she thought. If it keeps them in a good mood, calling me Sophia well then, fine. Besides, even her parents called her Angela only when in the presence of each other. As a child she was likely to hear any or all three of the names in the course of the day.

"You having a party, want some company, maybe?"

"Yeah, we're looking for some company," said the handsome one. "What happened to Lina and Gigi?"

"Lina take Gigi home, she not feel good. They say you no have much money, maybe you buy me instead, I no charge much."

"You got to be kidding," the handsome one spoke again. He appeared to be the leader of the party. Angela did not like him, but she kept smiling.

The big one with the red hair was staring at Angela and pulled at his friend's arm. "Wait a minute, Sweet Frank, this is my party, right?" The four of them conferred for several moments, heads bowed together, mumbling and snickering. At that moment Angela wished she were pretty like Lina, then she could just smile and get whatever she wanted or walk away if she felt like it; if she were tough and had a sharp tongue like Gigi, she would tell off this smart kid and maybe cuff him on the ear. She would teach him a lesson all right.

"Okay, this is the deal," said Sweet Frank. "You do the Big Kid here, Ricardo and me--Asher says he doesn't want any part of you--for twenty-five dollars. That's the offer, take it or leave it."

Angela thought for a moment. The other girls would laugh at her for accepting such a small fee for turning three tricks, but she knew where she could get a good exchange rate for the American dollars, and it wasn't too bad of a price. She agreed.

Outside Johnnie's, Angela looked down the street towards the Cafe Settembre, trying to see if Lina and Gigi were still waiting. She recognized their darkened forms sitting on the column steps in the Piazza degli Angeli.

The five of them got into a large, white van, the

soldiers grabbing the seats up front while Angela perched on the metal hump of the rear wheel well in the dark. The makeshift seat was slippery and hard, and she bounced and slid off everytime the van hit a bump or rut in the road. The soldiers had borrowed the use of their Platoon Sergeant's apartment and the ride there took several minutes, during which they talked and laughed among themselves, never once looking back at Angela, as though she were not there. As the van passed Caserma Ederle, Angela looked out the rear window and could see the Military Police in their crisp, green uniforms and white gloves and spats glowing in the dark, like electric doves diving and slashing through the night as they directed traffic at the front gate.

Angela was surprised at what she considered to be a luxurious apartment, especially when she compared it to the dingy closet of a room she rented. It was spacious and filled with nice furniture and a large stereo and television set. She dug her toes into the thick carpeting in the bedroom as she got undressed. Stretched out on the wide bed, her body sank into the mattress and the sheets felt cool and clean next to her body.

From the living room she could hear the voices of the boys as they badgered and taunted one another with jokes and rude comments. She wondered how long they were going to play around before getting to her. She wanted to get this over with as soon as possible. The bedroom door

opened, revealing the silhouetted figure of the one they called Big Kid as he moved into the room quietly like a giant shadow. She watched him as he leaned against the wall and removed his clothes with surprising ease, considering the amount of beer he'd had to drink. In the dark his muscular arms and chest looked even larger. Papa would approve of him, she thought, he looks like he could've fought as a legionnaire in one of Caesar's armies.

He stood over the bed staring at her without speaking, and then pounced, pulling at her limbs as though he were in a wrestling match. Under his hard, heavy body, she felt her own plump flesh flatten and spread out as though it were flowing away from her, like a pail of water poured out on a smooth, flat sidewalk. Her eyes wandered around the room, stopping at a small, metal gondola, the kind sold by the dozens in a Venice gift shop, on top of a dresser. She strained through the dark for something else on which she could glue her attention, but the rhythmic scraping of an unshaven chin along the side of her neck prevented her from escaping.

He finished with her as abruptly as he had begun and sat up on the edge of the bed. Angela felt her own flesh return to her slowly, as if with fear and suspicion, like a frightened child creeping warily towards the rim of a large crater where once there had stood a magnificent castle. She wanted to go into the bathroom and wash, but as she

tried to get up, she felt strangely weightless and without form. Watching Big Kid retrieve his clothes, she thought he appeared much larger and heavier than before. It was as if he had somehow managed to take Angela's weight and stuff it inside his own frame, leaving her an airy shell incapable of coordinated movement. My God, she thought, he's stolen my body. Mama was right. This soldier has swallowed my soul and now there is nothing left inside of me.

Big Kid's face furrowed with puzzlement when he saw the panic in Angela's eyes. He moved over to the bed and shook her foot. "Hey, you okay?" Angela felt nothing. Give it back, she screamed, but he couldn't hear her. It's mine, you can't have it. Big Kid gave her an embarrassed grin, "Well, uh, thanks," and left the room. Angela squeezed her eyes shut. Oh God, it's come to this. How can I get my body back?

The door opened slightly and a shaft of light cut across her chest and face and then disappeared. The short, Spanish-looking boy called Ricardo stumbled into the room and plopped on the bed. His hands fumbled with a short, flat pipe as he tried to rekindle the fading glow in the bowl with a match. Angela recognized the thick, sweet odor in his clothes. With practiced deftness, he nudged a small chunk of hash into the bowl, held a match to it, and sucked with measured force and exhaled. He smiled behind a cloud of smoke that hung over the bed and offered the pipe to

Angela.

"Want some?"

Angela shook her head. The heavy smell was making her nauseous.

"Aw, come on, try it, this is good stuff," Ricardo held the pipe under her nose.

Angela hated hashish and had always refused to try it even though she knew it was fairly harmless. Most of the other girls got high and they often derided her pious refusal to smoke. She didn't care. Some of them were wasted junkies now, bony ghosts spending all their earnings on hard drugs which the GIs always seemed to have a supply of, which, in turn, forced them to work even more in the bars and streets to support their habit. They were caught in a never-ending circle, like a dog gone mad with starvation trying to eat its own tail. Angela clung to her adamant resistance to any kind of drug as though it were a rope holding her above a chasm, as if her refusal to get high in some way kept her apart from them.

She pinched her nose and mouth shut as Ricardo tried to pry the pipe between her lips like a father trying to force-feed a baby. Her weightless arms hung limp at her sides.

"Relax, just take a little toke," he pushed harder into her mouth.

"No," she hissed through her lips and jerked her leg against him, trying to push him off the bed.



"Hey, be cool will you," said Ricardo.

Angela brought her knee up into his side and knocked him off the bed.

"Get out."

Ricardo sat on the floor with a dumb look on his face.

"What do you mean, get out, it's my turn."

"Get out," Angela swung her leg awkwardly over the side of the bed, like a heavy whip, and Ricardo rolled back out of reach and stood up.

"Okay, okay, don't get so pissed." He slid through the door, peering back over his shoulder.

Lying on the bed, Angela tested her arms and legs. They still felt light and clumsy. She had barely felt the jolt she gave Ricardo with her knee. She was afraid that as she tried to get up, she would float about the room like an astronaut lost in space.

The bedroom door swung open and banged against the wall, and the light came on, hurting Angela's eyes. Sweet Frank stood in the middle of the room with his hands on his hips.

"What's the problem here, how come you threw out Ricardo?"

Arms folded across her heavy breasts, Angela stared angrily in front of her. She made no effort to cover herself.

"The little one is bad, I no do it with him."

"Now look, Sophia, we paid you up front, fair and square, you can't back out now."

"I don't care," she would not look at Sweet Frank. "The little one is bad, he smoke drugs, he try to make me smoke drugs, I don't do that, it's bad, he is bad, I don't like him."

"Is that all? Jesus, come on, it's no big thing, you don't have to get high if you don't want to. Besides, what do you care? You're just a . . .," he stopped short. Angela looked up sharply.

"What you say! What! I am just a what?"

Although she knew prostitution was wrong, Angela had never thought of herself as a bad or evil person. She did not enjoy it, but did it just for the money and because she didn't know what else to do. She had never had a real job. And now this arrogant kid, dismissing her as some dumb animal, wanted to cut the rope that kept her from plunging completely into a bottomless hole. Her weight came back to her in a rush. She jumped off the bed and bounced in front of Sweet Frank.

"You think I am bad because I do it with soldiers. You think I am bad so I do anything. I do this to . . . to live," she struggled for the right words in English and became more frustrated and angry. "Get out! Go!" She grabbed a sheet off the bed, wrapped it around her like a toga, and went into the bathroom.

Confused by the sudden outburst, Sweet Frank stood in

the middle of the room shaking his head. He pushed open the bathroom door and tried to step in while Angela was splashing her face and armpits with water.

"Hey, look I didn't mean anything, come on."

She kicked the door shut, nearly catching his arm and shouted, "Get out!"

Angela came out of the bedroom a few minutes later, dressed, and ready to leave. "Come, we go. Take me back to Cafe Settembre."

The other three looked at Sweet Frank.

"Look, Sophia, we paid you . . ."

She pulled ten dollars out of her small purse, crumpled it up, and tossed it to Sweet Frank. "The big one was fifteen dollars."

He grabbed the money and glanced at his friends. "Ah, what the hell, let's get rid of her and we'll hit another bar."

On the drive back through the city, Angela insisted on sitting in the front, forcing Ricardo to ride in the back of the van.

It was close to midnight when they reached the Cafe Settembre, and the bar was still crowded and music and loud voices poured out of the windows. The lights inside and over the front door illuminated the base of the column in the Piazza degli Angeli a dull yellow. Angela looked up at the statue, but could not make out the face of the angel lost in the night. On the front steps of the cafe where

she had sat earlier in the evening, several GIs stood in a group watching the van.

"All right, we're here, come on get out," said Sweet Frank who was driving.

"Take me to the Arco delle Scalette," Angela said looking out the window.

"The what?"

"She means the stairs, man," answered Ricardo from the back. "You know, those big stairs by Monte Berico, the mountain with the old church where the Lieutenant makes us run sometimes."

"You're nuts, sweetheart, we brought you back where we found your ugly ass, now get out," Sweet Frank jerked his thumb towards the street.

Angela yelled at him in Italian and the two began to argue, neither one understanding what the other was saying. A blue car of the Carabinieri, attracted by the commotion inside, pulled along side the van.

"Take me to the Scalette or I scream and tell Carabinieri you are hurting me."

The soldiers tensed, waiting for the police to bang on the door. Asher spoke up, "Do it, Frank, if we get busted down here, we're screwed."

"Okay, Okay," Sweet Frank smiled and waved to the police, and pulled the van away slowly from the curb, checking the rear view mirror. The Carabinieri did not follow.

Angela called out directions in short commands as the van turned and crawled through a maze of side streets. Within minutes they were on the Viale Margherita, a wide boulevard lined with cypress trees and large, elegant stucco homes. There was much traffic with people driving about, enjoying the warm, weekend night, and the steady flow of headlights and the glow from the street lamps made it seem almost like afternoon. Standing behind a circular intersection at the end of the boulevard, like a throne at the end of a long, sunlit hallway in a palace, was the Arco delle Scalette.

Angela told Sweet Frank to pull over and park. Just as he stopped, she reached over, yanked the keys out of the ignition, and hopped out of the van. It was an old trick Gigi had taught her to use if she ever had trouble getting a customer to pay. The soldiers jumped out after her, but she already had started toward the monument with short, brisk strides, her portly figure bouncing side to side. Glancing over her shoulder, she called to them as they stood next to the van with a look of dumbfounded confusion in their faces. "Come with me," and they scrambled after her in a single file formation.

The soldiers finally caught up with her on the far side of the intersection, panting, and swearing furiously, after having had to stop several times to dodge speeding cars.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Shut up," she ordered them, and the group fell silent, surprised by the sharp, gruff tone in her voice.

Standing on the first landing under the arch, several steps up, Angela looked down at the befuddled soldiers. Behind her, stretching up a steep mountain into the night was a wide stairway of stone steps. The warring between parents had often ended in Angela's capture for long, instructional tours of the city which were conducted alternately by her mother and father without the knowledge of the other. The Arco delle Scalette was the one common place where both of them had brought her.

For centuries women had come to the monument to pray for seriously ill family members, ascending the stairs on their knees to the church on the top of the mountain. Most women simply walked the stairs now, but Angela and her mother had always climbed them on their knees. She still had long bumps where her shins rubbed against the stone.

For her father, however, the monument had a very different significance. When the Austrians had tried to capture the city more than a hundred years ago, the citizens of Vicenza built their main defense atop Monte Berico. With Angela sitting on his shoulders Mr. Torzini would climb the stairs, relating tales of how the invaders were beaten back in hand-to-hand combat on these very steps. Mama and Papa would have had a fit if they had known the other one brought me here also, she smiled to herself now.

"get the keys from her, Big Kid," said Sweet Frank.

The tall red-head started to move towards Angela and she held up her hand.

"The keys are in my pants, I don't think you take them in front of all the cars."

The soldiers glanced uneasily at each other, suddenly aware of how isolated and vulnerable they were away from the base, and how they must stand out with their short hair and ragged jeans, like alien creatures in another world, drowning in the glare of the cars coming straight at them down the boulevard and quickly revolving through the intersection.

"Okay, Sophia, what is it?" asked Sweet Frank. "You want more money? Fine, we'll give you a few extra dollars, call it a tip, and you give us the keys."

"No," said Angela. "I want you to carry me up the scalette."

"What? We're not carrying you anywhere."

"You, Sweet Franco, your friends go, via," she waved them off. "You carry me up the scalette and I give you the keys."

"Do you believe this bitch?" Sweet Frank turned and laughed to his friends.

Big Kid, Asher, and Ricardo looked at him without smiling.

"This ain't a joke no more, Frank," said Asher.

"Sergeant Thurston don't have his van back at first formation tomorrow morning and our butts are in a sling, big time. You got us into this shit, now you get the keys back. I don't care if you have to carry her to Rome and back."

The three of them started back across the intersection.

Sweet Frank turned to face Angela. "Do you know just how many steps there are on this old fashioned escalator?" he asked. "Well I do--192--and that's a fact. I ought to know, I've had to run these suckers enough times to make even you skinny, Sophia," he laughed and struck a defiant pose, arms folded across his chest, and hip cocked at an angle.

Angela nodded curtly, watching him with an expression as cold and motionless as the frozen gaze on the Winged Lion atop the arch. It was a fact she too had memorized, imbedded in her mind and legs from having climbed the stairs on her knees, seeking forgiveness for sins she was unaware of. Sweet Frank's stance reminded her of an old photograph of Mussolini in his balcony posturing before throngs of people that her father kept hanging in their apartment. But without his friends around him, she could almost see Sweet Frank's inflated pride seeping out of him. Ah, he is losing his weight, she thought. He looks as light as a paper soldier. Now he will know what it is like to lose one's body. Don't lose it all, Sweet Franco, we



have work to do.

"What the hell," he shrugged and forced a laugh.

"It'll be good exercise, the Lieutenant would love this."

He walked up the first few steps, turned around, and bent over so Angela could climb on his back. With her arms wrapped about his neck, he hefted her up as though he were trying to adjust the weight of a heavy rucksack. "Christ, don't choke me. I'll show you, bitch," he muttered and charged up the steps with a sudden burst, legs pumping in short, choppy steps. Angela jiggled up and down and tightened her armlock around his shoulders and wrapped her legs around his waist. Every fifty steps was another landing. Sweet Frank stopped at the first one to catch his breath, and Angela slapped her feet against his thighs, ordering him, "Go." He swore and attacked the steps two at a time with another angry burst.

Reaching the second landing, Sweet Frank dropped his arms to let Angela slip off, but she clung to him fiercely, ordering him again, "Go." The air was warm and muggy, and Sweet Frank was sweating profusely and breathing heavily. He spun around trying to shake off his rider, but Angela hung on. "Christ, give me a breather, will you." Angela refused. Looking down behind them, she could no longer see the lights from the traffic. They were surrounded by the dark, a wall of thick scrub brush and trees on both sides of the stairs, and the steps, dropping into a black pit in one direction and climbing into an unlit attic of night in

the other. "You go or I scream, and the Carabinieri come."

With head bowed, Sweet Frank slowed his pace, taking the steps one at a time. At the third landing he caught his toe on a step and sprawled forward, spilling Angela who rolled over against the next tier of steps and quickly stood up. She watched Sweet Frank carefully as he lay in a heap next to the wall, his face red and streaked with sweat, chest heaving. From this level she could just make out the skyline of the city. She stared hard at a point where she thought the Piazza degli Angeli would be, but could not find the marble angel. She let Sweet Frank rest for another minute, not out of pity, but to enable him to finish the climb. "Okay, we go."

On his hands and knees now, Sweet Frank was glaring at her.

"You think I'm going to quit. Yeah, I know your game, just like those bastard Black Hat instructors at jump school riding the stragglers to get them to quit. You want me to quit, don't you?"

Angela did not know who the men with black hats were.

"You quit, no keys."

"You can't beat me, honey."

He crawled over and sat on the first step while Angela climbed on his back. The last tier of steps took almost as long to climb as the first three. Twice Sweet Frank, his legs wobbling now and shoulders sagging, lost his balance and teetered on the edge of a step, nearly tumbling

backwards, and each time Angela leaned over his head, preventing them both from crashing down the steps like two loose boulders bouncing down the side of a mountain. On the last step at the top, Sweet Frank tumbled down on one knee and Angela slid off his back.

The top landing opened onto a winding, black-top road lined with trees. Except for a skyful of stars and a quarter moon above them, they were still immersed in darkness. Sweet Frank stood up and peeled off his sweat-drenched shirt, sucking down the warm night air and grinning stupidly.

"Gimme the keys."

Angela stood several feet away. "Not yet, we go."

"I'm not carrying you another goddamn inch!"

"We walk, you want the keys, you come."

"Damn you," Sweet Frank sat on the ground, and Angela started walking down the road.

The trees ended abruptly and the road continued up another steep hill. Angela stopped at the bottom and looked up at the buildings before her. The Porticos of Monte Berico, a seemingly endless arcade under a single tile roof, ran along the side of the road. Under the glow of yellow lamps across the road, the perfectly ordered arches, interrupted only by a series of small chapels, resembled a golden ladder turned on its side. As if balanced on the far end of the ladder, awash in bright, white lights, stood the Basilica de Monte Berico, a huge

cathedral with a wide dome.

She had been up here many times, and the sight never failed to fill her with awe. The church had always been the final destination of the pilgrimages with her mother. According to folklore, in 1425 an old woman who climbed the mountain daily to pray for the end of the plague and famine that had been ravaging Vicenza for months, was visited by the Madonna twice who instructed her to have the townsfolk build a church in Her honor. As soon as the work had begun, the plague vanished. To Mrs. Torzini, the church was evidence of the power of prayer and perseverance to overcome evil.

Reaching the top, Angela scanned the wide, circular parking lot for cars. On the far side was another road that led up from the city. Some of the girls would bring their dates up here to avoid the police. The lot was empty.

With his head hanging and feet dragging, Sweet Frank caught up with her. She stood with her back to him, gazing at the white, marble facade of the church covered with statues of saints and angels.

"What'd you bring me up here for?"

Angela ignored him and kept staring at the church.

"You see this church, Sweet Franco? Sweet Franco," she repeated the name to herself. "Is a funny name for you Franco. You are handsome, but not so sweet. This church was made for the best woman, the most good woman, the

Madonna. I come to this church every Sunday, Sweet Franco. My Mama does not talk to me, but the Madonna, She does not tell me, 'No, go away Angela, you are bad,' the priest calls me Angela too, not Sophia or Calphurnia or Maria. My name is Angela. Say it, Sweet Franco . . . Angela."

A breeze blew across the lot, and Sweet Frank, still without his shirt on, shivered.

"Angela," he whispered the name.

"Tell your friends too. If they want me, they find me at the Piazza degli Angeli. Then they don't forget my name. Angela, you hear?"

She pulled the keys out from her pants and flung them down the hill they had just climbed.

"Go away, leave me."

Sweet Frank avoided her eyes and walked back down the hill.

In a small courtyard to the left of the church was a monument to the citizens of Vicenza who had died fighting the Austrians atop Monte Berico. Her father brought her nearly as often as her mother did to the church, to look at the statue of a tall, noble woman wearing a Roman toga and laurel wreath, with one arm upraised and the other holding a sword. "Be strong and valiant like this woman and victory will be yours, Calphurnia," he would exhort her. She wondered if he would consider this night a victory for her.

## TERMINATE

Colonel Darling made us jump again, only a week after two men from Alpha Co. had been killed. Somehow they got entangled going out the door and fell a thousand feet.

I was scared. I mean really scared. Do you understand? No. How can I explain scared if you've never jumped from an airplane?

Remember sneaking in the abandoned house at the end of the street when you were a kid? Every neighborhood has one, an old wood frame building with boarded up windows, broken porch steps, swallowed up in tall grass that hasn't been cut in years. You'd sit out front with your buddies, leaning against the fence with rusted iron slats and spear tips, and trade ghost stories about the crazy old man who used to live there. The place was haunted, you believed. He still lives there, someone would say. Only comes out at night to bury his victims in the big oil tank in the back yard. Then the dares would come: you go, why don't you, I will if you will, and you'd all go together, following your older brother, and climb through a window in the back. You were terrified, right? Admit it. I was. Never knew what was coming next, the feeling of imminent danger, invisible creepy-crawlies brushing against the back of your neck. All those stories about other kids who got lost inside and

never came out, fell through rotted floor boards into the basement. Scared to death in the haunted house. The only thing that got you through was knowing that outside, past the heavy wooden doors and dark corners, past the rows of empty bottles covered with cobwebs, was bright sunshine and your little sister guarding your bicycle for a quick getaway. Then someone would scream, and everyone scrambled for the back window, and you'd panic, terrified at the thought of being left behind, not being able to climb out the window without help. Outside, you'd rush through the grass, the old man's growl echoing in your ear, then hop on your bike and squeeze the handlebars for reassurance, jabbering to your sister about hearing foot steps in the house. Being outside again felt like waking up from a bad dream. And then you wanted to go right back in and do it all over again, because your brother and his friends were going back and you didn't want to be the sissy, the crybaby. But mostly you went because you knew Mom and Dad were just down the street, their presence like a safety line hooked through your Indian bead belt.

Now try to imagine what it would've been like trapped inside the house, without Mom and Dad waiting at home, no safety line, without your big brother to help you. Scared--the kind that reduces you to a kid alone inside a haunted house.

I can still see the two men falling, stuck together in a lumpy ball, malfunctioned parachutes twisted above their

heads like a pair of snakes trying to stangle each other. I turned away just before the end.

They bounced when they hit the ground, according to one of the medics on the drop zone. "Just like rubber dolls," he said.

Scared--the kind that makes your stomach feel like a wet towel being wrung out.

It wasn't fair. I had it all planned out. You were supposed to jump at least once every three months to keep your status and collect jump pay--fifty-five dollars a month. One last big jump, a battalion operation in Wildflecken, Germany--"Wild-fuckin'," Woofman Zack called it. I was short, a two-digit-midget. I had sixty-five days left in the Army. With a little luck I wouldn't have to jump again. My Airborne days were over. All I had to do was hump the bush for a couple of weeks, be careful not to wander down range during the live-fire exercises, and I was all set. Back to sunny Italy for two months of garrison duty, and I was gone, civilian for life.

But the Colonel ruined my plans. He immediately scheduled another jump after the accident, said he didn't want anyone getting gun shy. You know the theory: fall off a horse, you're supposed to climb right back on, otherwise you'll be too scared later. The Colonel didn't want us to have time to think about the casualties. It would just make the next jump that much worse, he said. Can you imagine? A formation of C-130s flying over a wide



open field, a man standing in each door, the green light blinks one, and nobody moves. An empty sky. A battalion full of paratroopers and no jumpers. That would look pretty bad, like going to the Indy 500 and watching the drivers refuse to leave pit row. The thing is, it made sense to me. I probably would have done the same thing if I'd been the C.O. I couldn't blame him. It was a smart move, really, a sign of strong leadership.

Don't get me wrong, I'm no coward. Made just about every kind of blast you can: C-130 with full equipment, C-141 jet--like being shot out of a cannon, choppers, night jumps; I even jumped from a balloon--a rollercoaster with no up and all down. I jumped in winds strong enough to blow you to the Land of Oz, hit drop zones covered with rocks, the whole shot. I'm not bragging, it's just that you get to a certain point where you feel like you've done your bit. When you're so close to going home you start to get superstitious. After fifty jumps with nothing more serious than riser burns on the neck and a bruised thigh, you worry about the law of averages catching up. Large rips in the canopy, a snapped static line, a reserve that won't open, anything is possible. Thoughts of major malfunctions creep into your head and whisper, "what if, what if?"

I thought about quitting. Airborne was strictly voluntary, you could terminate your status anytime, no questions asked. But there was always a high price to pay

for weasling out of a jump. Razzing from your friends in the platoon, stinging jokes, but behind the words was a tone of loss of respect. You choked, chickened out. Woofman especially could be brutal. "You sucked the big thumb, champ," he'd say, and smack his lips.

That fear of embarrassing yourself, it's what keeps you from losing control when the jump masters throw open the doors and the roar of the wind fills the plane. To unhook your static line and climb up on the nylon web seats would ruin it for everyone else, remind them of how scared they are. Better to stay composed behind the mask of greased, olive drab tiger stripes painted on your face, even if your chest aches and head feels light from hyperventilating.

It might not have been so bad if they had treated the whole thing as just another jump, but word came down that Colonel Darling wanted some intensive pre-jump training. For two days we hid out in the Black Forest. Supply rigged up several mock exit doors out of tent poles. The jump masters bellowed out jump commands in a deep bass that echoed through the trees and stirred up the birds. We practiced exit procedures, hooking up imaginary static lines and shuffling towards the door, leaving trails of bull-dozed pine needles on the ground. Back to basics was the order of the day, sharpen the fundamentals. The Colonel walked by as I was preparing to make my exit. He held up his hand and stopped me just as I was about to

spring forward and made me hold my door position for two minutes. He noticed everything, said my knees weren't bent far enough, then my back wasn't straight enough. My thighs burned from crouching so long, and I cursed him silently. After I leaped out he made me go back and do it over again because I didn't hold the tuck position for four seconds and failed to reach up and check the risers of the parachute upon deployment. He didn't yell or wave his arms; that wasn't his style. He spoke in a firm but even voice, like a school teacher patiently explaining a math problem. He even looked like a high school teacher, short, horn rim glasses, rigid back. His uniform was always inspection clean, even his field fatigues, starched creases, shiny boots; on him it looked like a costume, like he wasn't really a battalion commander, but an actor playing the role. He had stiff white hair that stood up like whiskers, and a big nose. Woofman had dubbed him the White Rat and the name stuck.

In the afternoon we practiced parachute landing falls, jumping off rotted tree stumps. It was like jump school all over. Again and again we hit the ground and rolled, front, side, back. A small rock dug into my knee and every time I landed on my left side a jolt of pain ran down my leg. Woofman cracked jokes, "What is this, Big Ten practicing for the Rose Bowl? What the hell, they always lose anyway." We laughed but not too loud. The officers were edgy and impatient and wouldn't let anyone smoke.

Instead of a football game, it felt like we were preparing for a suicide mission. By the end of the day I was hot, tired and dirty. We needed the practice, there was no doubt about that. Some of the guys looked weak hitting the ground, like school kids attempting tumbling for the first time. But I still didn't like being treated like a trainee. I was an old-timer, not some cherry straight out of basic training.

The night before the jump we moved over to the air base. Sleeping inside the jet hangers didn't help my mood any. The sight of the long sloping cement bunkers reminded me of an Indian burial mound. The mess tent trucked out hot chow to us. It was too hot to eat inside the hangers so Stanley Pifer, Woofman and I loaded up two paper plates each and sat out on the grass between the runways, surrounded by rows of C-130 planes.

"I seen the White Rat fuckin' with today, Myles," Woofman said, grinning. His real name was Mike Zechman; we called him Woofman because he was always woofing lies, bragging about how tough he was. He added the Zack part, after his favorite deejay, Wolfman Jack, who he would imitate by throwing his head back and howling after one of his outrageous lies. "I would've told him to sit on my door position. I didn't see him practicing no PLFs."

Stanley Pifer patted me on the arm. "That's rough, Myles, having to make your last jump twice." He was a tall

lanky kid with large tired eyes who enlisted because he had flunked a free agent try-out with a Red Sox minor league team. He drank too much the night before trying to calm his nerves, and booted five straight ground balls. Told them I wasn't a shortstop, he'd explain, shaking his head. "If I was short, I'd terminate, in a heartbeat."

"That's a possibility," I said. "Thought about it." I was hoping he'd say more.

"Oh bullshit, you would not, Stanley," Woffman said. "The only one who should do any terminating is Colonel Darling." He dragged out the Colonel's name in sappy voice. "Someone should terminate his ass permanently. Terminate with extreme prejudice," he laughed. He'd heard the line in a spy movie and used it all the time.

"So what's Myles got to prove, huh?" Pifer said. "Seventy-five days and a wake-up ..."

"Sixty-five," I corrected him.

"There you go, sixty-five days and a wake-up. Why risk it? I say give it up. Who wants to die in a country where they don't even speak English?"

He was right, I thought. I'd done my share of hard core jumps. Why not bag it and just wait for my discharge orders? I'd probably never see the guys again anyway.

Woofman jabbed his white plastic knife at my shirt. "Look, you been Airborne for almost three years. You going to throw away them wings after all this time, and because of the White Rat?" His voice got a high-pitched, sharp

edge to it when he was excited.

"I said the thought crossed my mind, that's all."

"I don't care. You going to let a no-jump cherry make you quit? That's some tired shit, I'm not going to say anymore." He picked delicately at the chicken on his plate, like a surgeon operating on a baby.

"What do you mean, no-jump?" I said. "Who?"

"Who do you think? Colonel Lovely."

"Don't be stupid, Zack," Pifer said. "Of course he jumps."

"You seen him jump?"

"I saw him on the drop zone after the last jump," I said.

"You see him land?"

"No."

"He have his chute with him?"

I had to stop and think. "No."

"Uh huh." He licked a bone clean and smacked his lips."

"That doesn't mean anything," Pifer said. "He was probably in the lead plane on the first pass, stashed his gear in a jeep and stayed to watch the next pass."

"You think so?" Woofman said. "How come he always looks so spiffy? You ever notice how nice and neat his uniform is, like he walked out of a store window. Has anyone ever actually seen him get in the door and do it? I never even seen the man fuckin' sweat. I bet he ain't

made a blast since the day he left jump school. What do you think?"

The sun was going down, and the shadows from the wings of the aircraft edged across the infield where we were sitting.

"I say any man can collect jump pay without leaving the ground is pretty smart," Stanley Pifer said.

"What do you say to that, Myles?" Woofman nudged me with his boot.

I was watching a mechanic work on one of the planes. He walked up the tailgate and disappeared inside. "I say you're going to see one happy dude running off the dz tomorrow."

Pifer slid his chocolate cake onto my plate. "Don't worry, brother. What are the odds against back to back jump with fatalities? It just couldn't happen, I mean, this isn't a war zone or anything like that. It's not like we're making a combat blast into the Golan Heights."

Woofman clapped his hands and let a short howl. "I hope to God we get on the same plane as Darling. You and me, Myles, we'll get behind him and ride his ass right out the door. Sweet." He stood up, glanced around, and started pitching chicken bones at the tires of the closest plane.

The day of the jump was filled with bad omens. For starters, the temperature hit the nineties for the tenth straight day. Everything looked brittle and sickly, the

trees, the grass. The planes looked like giant desert lizards shimmering in the heat rising from the runways. Then the Colonel announced there would be a memorial service on the drop zone for the two men who'd been killed. The thought of attending a funeral after a jump was not reassuring. Over time I had developed a routine for preparing for a jump, a kind of superstitious ritual that had become more eccentric as I got closer to going home. I botched the whole procedure, couldn't remember anything. I forgot what length to adjust the leg straps on the harness so they wouldn't pinch my crotch; I couldn't remember the phone number of my old highschool girlfriend, my father's birthday, or in which pocket I kept the religious medal my mother had given me when I enlisted.

After we loaded the plane the crew chief came aboard and said we had to get off. Something wrong with the engines but he wouldn't say what. The bird wouldn't fly. So we filed off and hobbled fifty yards down the runway to another plane. As a result we were in reverse order, and I was the third man to board, which meant that I would be one of the last men out on the jump. I hated being at the end, just prolonged the anxiety, stumbling forward, watching everyone in front of you get sucked out the door.

Inside the plane it was hot and stuffy and smelled like fuel. Stanley Pifer pulled out his worn copy of Baseball Digest from the pocket of his field pants and started reciting the lifetime statistics of his favorite



Red Sox players.

"Man, oh man, Ted Williams missed five seasons in the Air Force and still hit 521 homers. Five prime homers."

"Well, you're in luck, slugger," Woofman said.

"You'll only miss three prime seasons. You can still catch old Teddy."

"Not me, man, but I bet Tony Conigliaro could've come close if he hadn't gotten beaned. Rookie of the Year, hit for average and power, strong arm, good glove, he could do it all." He flipped the page and made a face. "Whoa, look at this," he said, and handed me the book open to a picture of Conigliaro after he'd been hit in the face with a fastball. His left eye was swollen shut and bruised a dark color, like the photo of a torture victim.

"Show it to Woofman. Hey, Zack, check this out."

Woofman was craning his neck, looking back at the tail of the plane. He glanced at the picture and said, "He should've ducked."

Pifer looked at me and shook his head. "Tony C., brother, he had all the tools. He was never the same, you know?"

"Yeah, I know," I said. "It's too bad." I closed the book and handed it back to him.

Woofman squirmed in his seat, trying to look behind him to the other side of the plane. We were packed in so tightly that his parachute pressed into my shoulder.

"What the hell are you doing?" I said.

"Can't find the White Rat. I know that chump is gonna snivel out of the jump" He turned back and wedged himself down on the seat. "That's okay, guy I know in Charlie Co. is going out on the first pass. He's going to watch for him."

"It's a big drop zone," I said.

"No problem, the Woofman's got informants. Big Zack is everywhere."

I didn't want to argue with him. The whole idea was ridiculous, of course Colonel Darling made the jumps. He'd better make this one, I thought, he ordered the damn thing. Because of him I was putting my ass on the line again.

The tailgate closed, sealing out the sunlight. Stanley Pifer read his book to himself. "If Williams had played in Yankee Stadium," he said softly, "that short porch in right." Woofman painted his fingers with a camouflage stick, alternating the light and dark ends. Every man had his own way of dealing with the tension before a jump, but when the engines started and the plane took off there was too much noise and we were too cramped to do much of anything except sit and wait.

Flight time to the drop zone was only about twenty minutes. I closed my eyes and tried to relax, but I kept thinking about Tony Conigliaro and how he must have felt the first time he went to bat in a real game after the beaning. Why did he try a comeback? Did he have a manager

like the Colonel who ordered him to play, or did he try to inspire him by appealing to his sense of loyalty to uphold the tradition of past Red Sox heroes like Ted Williams? Did he challenge Tony C. with war stories about Mickey Mantle returning from crippling injuries to continue the fight for a pennant? Tony C. could've quit and no one would have blamed him. He'd done his bit. Did he do it for the money? I kept asking myself why was I making this jump? Was it the money? Not for a lousy fifty-five bucks a month. I had spent nearly three years building this image of a tough paratrooper. All the killer schools, Belgian Commando, mountain warfare, extra jumps, you name it, I volunteered for it. And in the end none of it meant a thing. I would rather face the danger of another jump than have anyone think I was a puss, a wimp. Nothing had changed, I was right back where I'd started. I resented that more than anything, more than the jump, being made to feel like a frightened child again.

I don't remember too much about exiting the plane. Don't remember the jump commands, the countdown or what I was thinking. Woofman was behind me, I do remember that, could feel his heavy body pushing against me when he leaned over my shoulder and said, "If you was the Rat, I'd tie a big time knot in your static line." I focused on the metal cable that ran the length of the plane and watched the static lines slide along it. Tried to block out everything else, didn't want to see the exit door and the bodies

slipping out of sight. Must've hesitated in the door, I could hear Woofman's high-pitched voice shouting, "Go, goddammit, go!" It was dark, hit a brick wall of wind and spun around. When I opened my eyes, tried to look up and check the canopy, but the risers and lines were twisted all the way down behind my neck, pushing my head down. Stay calm, I stayed calm and thought: twisted lines, you pedal your legs, a normal pace, like riding the bike around the block, the instructors said. I bicycled, slowly, then faster, maybe too fast, but I had lots of twists to untwist. I was calm, started to laugh even, silly, pedaling legs furiously, like a cartoon character, Wiley Coyote chasing Roadrunner over the edge of a cliff. I was spinning, a top without a table, unwinding, maybe too fast, but I was calm, until I got the dizzies and thought I was falling too fast, couldn't focus on the others around me. Was I falling too fast? Couldn't see the canopy. Malfunction, I thought, couldn't check the canopy for a malfunction. A blown panel, maybe. What if, what if? I'm falling too fast, I thought, but I stayed calm, talk yourself through it. Pull the reserve, no problem. Fifty jumps and never had to use the reserve. Jesus, please cut me some slack, fifty jumps without a malfunction, and now this. Why? Terminate, why didn't I terminate? I'm going to terminate now, terminate with extreme prejudice. Jesus, pull the fucking reserve now. White silk sprang out, fluttered in front of me, a dancing white snake. Feed it

out, you've got to feed it out, the instructors said, can't just sit and watch. Hands flailing, twisting, pulling, throw it out. Pull it in and do it again. White silk balled up in my arms, flapping in my face, like wrestling with bed sheets on a windy day. A strange feeling, legs folding underneath me, like a puppet dropped lazily on the stage.

After landing, I lay on my back, afraid to move. Softly, I patted myself to make sure everything still worked. There was no need, I had touched down so lightly I could've landed standing. No broken back or legs, I could move. It was all over, I thought, no more jumps. Survival, how do you describe the feeling of survival? I was relieved, but scared still, shaking, like when you spin out in your car on the expressway in a snowstorm and somehow end up right without a scratch. My stomach was all light and tingling. I watched one of the C-130s fly over, spitting out jumpers like popcorn and wondered if we weren't all a bit demented for walking out the door of a perfectly good airplane while it was still in the air. Never again, unh, unh, not me.

Stanley Pifer came running over to me, out of breath. "You okay, Myles?" He looked down at the white silk of the reserve bunched up with the main canopy. "I thought that was you who pulled. What was the problem?"

"I don't know, I couldn't see, really." There had been no malfunction, I realized. "Seemed like I was

dropping too fast."

Pifer looked confused. "Yeah, well, maybe someone slipped beneath you, stole your air."

"That was probably it." I took off the harness and quickly rolled up both canopies.

"Sure, happened to me at DZ Rock, remember? Some jerk slipped beneath me at the last minute, collapsed my chute, big time. Fifty feet from the ground, zoom, dropped like a broken elevator. Twisted my knee bad, remember?"

"Yeah."

Woofman walked up, dragging his chute on the ground behind him. "Hey, Hollywood, what were you doing up there, posing for pictures?"

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"If I'd known you was going to take a nap in the door, I'd have switched places with you."

Pifer was watching me. My fatigue shirt was soaked with sweat, and I wanted to strip right there. My face felt like it was burning up. "Jump masters said they wanted everyone to take a door position for a full count, remember?"

"Yeah, one second, not an hour."

"Lay off him, man," Pifer said. "He had a rough blast, some cherry stole his air."

"I'll say he had a rough blast. Never seen anyone pedal his legs so hard." He started laughing. "I'm sorry, man, but that shit was too funny. You looked like that

crazy bitch in the Wizard of Oz. What was her name, the one rode her bicycle across the sky in a tornado?"

A medic's jeep wheeled up next to us, and the driver leaned out. "You okay, troop? I saw the reserve pop, looked like you were having troubles."

Some of the men walking off the drop zone slowed down and stared as they passed the jeep.

"I'm all right, thought I had a malfunction, no big thing."

The driver nodded and smiled. He waved and drove off.

There was a long silence. Woofman turned in a circle, looking out over the drop zone. "Well, I don't see the Rat anywhere."

Pifer was pretending to watch the last of the planes disappear in the sky. "Tell you what," he said. "On my last jump, I hope I have three reserves, and I'll pull every one. The more protection the better." He nodded his head stiffly. "Damn straight."

Woofman unbuttoned his shirt and started fanning himself. "Fuckin' heat, man, too much. Never gets this hot back home in Maine. You know what I'm going to do, Myles? Seeing as how this was your last jump, I'm going to carry your rig off the dz for you. What do you think of that?"

"I can carry it," I said.

"No really, we should make it a tradition, starting

with you," he said, reaching down for the handles on the kit bag.

"I got it," I said, and slid the bag away from him.

As we walked off the drop zone, Pifer and Woofman traded stories about rough landings of the past. They were doing it to make me feel better. Because I froze in the door, I had a weak exit and twisted my lines. I panicked and popped the reserve when there was no need for it, reacted like a cherry on his first jump. My last jump. I'd always imagined how it would go: confident, almost cocky, stretched out on the ground, smoking a cigarette while the cherries in the platoon nervously checked and rechecked their equipment. I'd slip on the harness at the last minute, stroll over to the plane. during the flight to the dz, I'd doze off, Pifer would have to wake me when the jump commands started. When the green light blinked on, I'd approach the exit smoothly, look the jump master in the eye, toss him my static line, and hop out the door. Flashy but cool, nonchalant, like the Lone Ranger jumping off a saloon porch onto Silver's back. My last jump, never thought I'd humiliate myself.

The battalion formed up in a long sloping hollow with tall brown grass that crackled under our boots. A woodline of naked trees with broken branches ran across the crown of the front slope. Bravo Co. was in the rear with Charlie Co., behind Alpha and Headquarters.



"Another one of the Rat's great ideas," Woofman said, "A fake funeral out here. A lot of good that's going to do those poor bastards splattered on the dz."

I thought it was a good gesture, the least we could do, but I didn't say anything. I hadn't said a word since we walked off the drop zone. I was too embarrassed, didn't want to draw any attention to myself.

Pifer stretched and squinted into the sky. A line of thick clouds was gathering in the sky behind us, and the wind began to blow slightly. "We could pray for rain if nothing else. They been predicting it for the last few days. Something has got to give."

What does he know about dying?" Woofman said. He was digging a hole in the ground with the heel of his boot.

"Darling has a combat infantry badge, Zack," Pifer said. "He was in Nam, you know."

"Big fucking deal. I heard he was strictly admin, sat in an air conditioned office in Saigon, ordering beans and weenies for the troops." He lengthened the hole he was digging and shoveled out the loose dirt with the toe of his boot. "My cousin Ricky got wasted on a hunting trip. Took a bullet right between the eyes, no lie. I was standing next to him when it happened. And this man is going to tell me about dying? Shit."

Colonel Darling called the battalion to attention, and the Chaplain walked up the front slope and stood on a berm in front of the treeline to deliver his eulogy. He was a

big man with a soft voice, and it was hard to hear exactly what he was saying. The sun was shining in my eyes, and I couldn't see his face. Some of the men strained to hear, but most lowered their heads to keep the sun out of their eyes. I tried to remember if I'd ever met the two men who'd been killed. Veech and Monoghan were their names. I'd probably seen them a dozen times on the base, passed them in the mess hall or in a bar downtown. Were they short, too? Maybe that was supposed to have been their last scheduled jump. Were they friends? Where were they from? What were they planning to do when they got out of the Army? Did they have girlfriends back home? What were their parents thinking right now? What did the letters say informing them of the deaths of their sons? Who wrote the letters? I stood on my tip toes to find the Colonel. He was standing off to the side, head bowed, arms folded across his chest. His shadow was twice as long as his figure.

The service lasted for several minutes. I recognized some of the prayers and followed along to myself. When the Chaplain finished Colonel took his place on the berm. It was only natural that he should say something. The sun slipped behind the woodline, and through the trees sparks of light popped around him as he moved.

"Look at him," Woofman whispered in my ear. "Clean as a Homecoming Queen. I'm telling you, that son of a bitch did not make the jump."

I stared hard at the Colonel. He did look pretty neat, but from that distance I couldn't tell for certain. Besides, I noticed long before that any officer above the rank of captain had a real knack for staying clean in the field.

Colonel Darling raised his head and stared into the sky behind the formation. "I see for once the Hawk is going to give us a break," he said in a voice much stronger than the Chaplain's. I peeked over my shoulder. The wind blew harder, pushing the clouds across the sky, and the air felt cooler. "I want you men to know that I've had enough of this heat, and that I've personally ordered a cloud cover from the Man upstairs."

"Airborne, got it made in the shade," someone yelled.

There was some brief laughter.

"Ha, ha," Woofman said. "The man's a real comic."

The deaths were a freak accident, the Colonel said. One of the men was a tow jumper, and the second man collided with him when he exited the door. "Oh, Jesus," Pifer whistled softly. "Can you believe it, a tow jumper." Both men were probably stunned unconscious before they hit the ground, he said. The odds against that combination of malfunctions were one in a million. He said this with emphasis and looked directly at us. A full investigation was under way to determine exactly what happened.

"One in a millllion, my ass," Woofman hissed. "I know what happened, they try to put out too many men on each

pass, every damn jump. Surprised it didn't happen before now." The Lieutenant turned around and gave a threatening look to the platoon. Pifer nudged Woofman to keep quiet.

Darling paused for a moment. Then he started talking about famous Airborne units in World War Two. He told us the story of how the 101st Screaming Eagles, surrounded by German tanks, refused to surrender at Bastogne. Some private from the original 509th, our unit, was the first paratrooper to win the congressional medal of honor, he said. "Do you believe this bullshit," Woofman muttered.

A tow jumper, I thought, towed outside the plane, flapping in the prop blast like a rag doll. I could almost hear the sound of him banging against the metal skin of the plane. I was shivering from the wind, got goosbumps all over, and couldn't shake the image of them falling through the sky. Darling's voice sounded distant. American paratroopers always reacted to adversity with courage, determination, he said. "I can't listen to any more of this shit," Woofman said, grinding his toe into the hole he was digging. A tow jumper, I could've been a tow jumper, easily, after such a sloppy exit. The jump wings on our fatigue shirts meant we were the elite, a cut above the ordinary soldier, he said, his voice fading even more. "Someone should rip the wings off his chest," Woofman again, in a high pitched whisper. "Terminate him, terminate with extreme fucking prejudice. I got a nice little grave all ready for him," he said, packing down the

sides of the hole. They bounced when they hit the ground, the medic said. Now Darling: we had conducted ourselves with honor during the jump, he felt privileged to serve with us. You choked, sucked the big thumb, froze in the door, like a trainee on the twenty-four foot tower for the first time, afraid to move. A cartoon character, Elvira Gulch pedaling her bicycle across the sky. Crying into the reserve, a giant hanky. "It's bullshit," I said, not loud, but not a whisper. "You got it, brother, big time bullshit. Tell it, tell it loud," Woofman said, squeezing my arm. My last jump, it shouldn't have ended that way, not in humiliation. "Terminate," I said. "Yeah, yeah, tell the White Rat, tell him to terminate. A desk jockey, a no-jump paper eater. Shits paper clips. What does he know about Airborne, a goddamn supply officer," "Woofman's voice hissing in my ear. "Terminate," I said again, a little louder. The Lieutenant wheeled around. "Take it easy, Myles," Pifer said. "Sweet, sweet sound, say it again, louder," Woofman out of the side of his mouth. "Terminate," I shouted. The rest of the platoon turned and stared. "Terminate," as loud as I could. Wind blowing in my face, and it started to rain. "Terminate, terminate, terminate," I chanted. "Sweet," Woofman snickered. Darling left the slope and walked quickly down the middle of the formation. The whole battalion turned and watched. He pushed his way through the ranks and stood in front of me. He started to say something, hesitated, and then took

off his glasses and wiped them dry. "Alright, son, what's the matter?" he said. My cheeks were burning and the rain felt cool. His face blurred. "Terminate," I said, a muffled sound, a kid's voice coming up from the basement of an abandoned house.

## GOOD SOLDIER

There was a memorial service on the drop zone for the two men from Alpha Co. who'd been killed on a jump the week before. Somehow they got entangled going out the door and fell a thousand feet.

We had just made another jump that afternoon. Colonel Darling, the battalion commander, scheduled it immediately after the accident, said he didn't want anyone getting gun shy. Which was a smart move when you think about it, really. A sign of strong leadership. I probably would have done the same thing if I'd been the C.O.

After the jump the battalion formed up in a long sloping hollow. The Chaplain delivered a short eulogy. When he finished the Colonel took his place on top of a berm on the front slope. It was only natural that he should say something. He started off with a joke about the heat, which had been wicked. One hundred degrees for ten straight days, a record for Germany. No rain for weeks, though it was predicted for any day now. A warm breeze picked up, and a line of thick clouds was gathering to the east. The Colonel said he had personally ordered a cloud cover from the Man upstairs. "Airborne, got it made in the shade," someone shouted, and a few men laughed. The accident was a freak incident, he said, and reminded us

that the jump wings on our fatigue shirts meant one thing: elite. He remembered the great airborne units of World War Two. American paratroopers always reacted to adversity with courage, determination. We had conducted ourselves with honor during the jump, he said; he felt privileged to serve with us. I got a few goosebumps listening to him; I also couldn't block out of my mind the image of two men wrapped around each other, plunging a thousand feet. Then he announced the battalion would march the twenty-five miles back to base camp.

I couldn't understand the Colonel's decision to march. Even the officers were surprised and upset by the sudden announcement. He must have had in his mind the whole time, ever since the first jump. We had just finished a rough week of maneuvers, lots of humping with heavy rucks, all night patrols and ambushes. On top of that the shock of the casualties, the heat and the extra jump had left us feeling pretty burned out. In two days we had platoon level exercises, day long battles with live ammo against mock fortifications to gauge how well we could perform during the real thing. This should have been our slack time, a chance to rest up, pull weapon's maintenance and rehearse squad tactics in a walk through. Nothing intense. I don't know, maybe there was some tactical justification for marching twenty-five miles. You could look at the march as a good training exercise. What if the battalion ever had to jump into the Sinai or the Golan Heights and



march twenty-five miles or even more to relieve a besieged embassy? The scenario was not so unlikely. Our primary unit mission was to protect American interests in the Middle East in case of war. It would be nice to know you could do it if you had to. What would you do, say you were too tired to fight?

At least the Colonel had hot chow trucked out to us. Everything, including iced milk and cake, all you could eat. A good thing, too. Everyone was pissed off about the march, but the swearing died down when the food was served.

I loaded up my plate and joined Stanley Pifer, Asher and Long Eye Meiner at the top of the slope.

Asher sat cross legged on the ground, balancing two sagging paper plates on his knees. "Do you believe this feast?"

"Fattening us up for the kill," Long Eye said, wiping a dribble of chocolate milk from his chin. "Darling has got to be high. He's pulled some weird shit before, but he's out of control now."

You bitch too much, Long Eye," I said. "What did you expect when you enlisted, take the bus everywhere?"

"Oh yeah, let's hear some tough talk. What are you, a lifer all of a sudden?"

"Lay off him," Asher said.

"And I suppose you're just dying to make this little stroll? We'll probably get pissed on all night," Long Eye said, looking up at the sky. More dark clouds had moved in

and covered the drop zone with a low ceiling.

"Look, the main thing is not to get excited," Stanley Pifer said. "There's nothing we can do about it. Grunts have marched the world since Alexander the Great. At least we're not carrying rucksacks. Sergeant Zechman says just weapons and web gear."

Long Eye smiled and picked his teeth with a pork chop bone. "Just weapons and web gear, huh? That's just fine, that's all I'll need. I got me a little surprise for the Colonel." He patted the left pocket of his fatigue shirt.

"What could you possibly have that the Colonel would want?" Asher said. "Except your stripes, and he's already taken two of those." He stuffed a potato in his mouth and laughed. "You can't go much lower in rank."

Long Eye dipped his fingers into the pocket. He stopped and looked around. Bravo Company was spread out along the slope in small groups, and everyone was busy eating. He pulled out a live round of M-16 ammo and held it against his chest, turning it over in his fingers like a prize marble. It had the red tip of a tracer round.

"Where in the hell did you get that?" Asher said.

"The rifle range. Thought it might come in handy."

Stanley Pifer put his plate to the side and leaned forward. "I don't recommend you flash that thing around."

Long Eye slipped the round back into his pocket.

"Relax, it's cool."

"You get caught with that and it's an automatic

Article-15," I said.

"Who's going to tell?" He stared hard at me.

I didn't say anything.

"What are you going to do with it?" Pifer asked.

Long Eye lit a cigarette and lay back, stretching his legs next to my plate. "The mess sergeant says he'd like to get his hands on one of them wild boars running around here. Thought I might do some hunting." He inhaled deeply and blew smoke rings at me. "But I've had a change of plans, think I'll hunt a West Point rat instead. They're both rodents, ain't they?"

Asher lowered a forkful of food from his mouth.

"Shoot the Colonel?"

Long Eye nodded.

I looked at Pifer, hoping he would say something. He was gazing calmly at Long Eye, as if he were trying to assess a bluff in a card game.

"What are you crazy?" I said. "You can't go around shooting people just because you don't like the orders they give."

Long Eye sat up abruptly and flicked the cigarette against my knee. "Bullshit. He's gone too far this time. All that garbage about airborne spirit, the only thing he cares about is his record, which don't look so good after losing two men on a jump. So now he's trying to cover up, suck ass with some general by showing off, having his boys marching twenty-five miles. You know I'm right, admit it,"

he said, looking from Asher to Pifer to me.

I was too stunned by the sudden outburst to say anything.

As quickly as he had exploded, he grew calm again and looked over his shoulder. A couple of the men in the platoon were watching us. "Myles here, says he's gonna walk circles around me tonight," he yelled. "Ain't that a joke?" The men went back to eating.

Long Eye lit another cigarette and leaned into our circle. He lowered his voice so that I had to bend over to hear him. "Besides, the way I figure it, Darling is responsible for those two guys dying. The way they cram us in those planes, barely enough room to move your legs. This was bound to happen, and a C.O. is responsible for the safety of his men, right? Well, now he's got to pay. Am I right?"

I could still see those two men falling, stuck together in a lumpy ball, malfunctioned parachutes twisted above their heads like a pair of snakes trying to strangle each other. I turned away just before the end.

They bounced when they hit the ground, according to one of the medics on the drop zone. "Just like rubber dolls," he said.

Stanley Pifer shrugged. "I suppose you could make an argument for that."

"Maybe the Colonel is partly responsible," I said.  
"Maybe. But that doesn't mean you kill him."

No one said anything for a minute.

Asher laughed. "Don't worry, Myles. He couldn't hit a tank at thirty feet. It'll be dark in an hour, and he'll never get close enough to see him, much less get off a good shot."

"Oh, I'll see him, no problem. I got vision," Long Eye said, tapping a finger at the corner of his right eye.

Long Eye claimed he had received his nickname hunting deer in the Ozarks where he grew up. According to him, he never used a scope on his rifle, and his friends, amazed at his uncanny ability to hit a target at a great distance, said he must have had "long eyes." The name did not fit his appearance. Instead of the narrow, sharp hawk eyes that one would expect of a big hunter, he had small, round and dull black holes, like the eyes of a shark, spread far apart on his face. Another thing about him reminded me of a shark. I thought he was an insomniac. I used to hear him pacing restlessly in and out of the squad bay late at night, like a predator that couldn't stand still, constantly moving, on the hunt, driven by some pre-historic instinct for survival.

"I'll tell you what, Long Eye," Asher said. "If the Colonel doesn't make the march, you can shoot him with my blessing. Deal?"

Long Eye thought for a moment and was about to answer when Sergeant Zechman walked over and told us to get our

gear on and get ready to fall in.

Asher waited until Sergeant moved far enough away. "So how about it? I say Colonel Darling marches. If he does, you owe me a six-pack, and no shooting. If he doesn't march, he's all yours."

Long Eye didn't answer. He was slowly peeling tape off the muzzle of his M-16. He always taped the muzzle and magazine well if he knew he wasn't going to have to fire his weapon to keep dirt out of the barrel and the bolt.

"You want your cake, Myles?" Asher asked, reaching for my plate.

Before he could pick it up, Long Eye stuck his finger in the middle of the cake.

"You fucker," Asher swore at him.

Long Eye pulled out his finger, licked off the icing and smiled. "Maybe."

In the beginning the pace was agonizingly slow. If each company had been allowed to march on its own, we could've covered the distance in seven plus hours, including breaks. But the Colonel wanted the entire battalion to march together, which meant we wouldn't make it back to base camp until early the next morning. It was stop and go from the start with two columns on either side of a dirt road, bunching up like an accordion, and forcing us to stand and wait for the lead company to stretch things out. Sergeant Zechman was all over the place, like a sheepdog, snapping at us to maintain five meter intervals

between men.

Long Eye was three spots in front of me, and in the growing darkness his lean figure reminded me of the mysterious hired killer dressed in black from an old detective movie. I wasn't sure what to make of his threat to shoot the Colonel. I never felt very comfortable around him and probably wouldn't have had much to do with him if we had been in different squads. We never talked much in the way of personal conversation, but I could tell by the way he would point those shark eyes at me and the crooked smirk on his face that he thought I was soft. All that great stuff about comraderie, you know, heroic bonds forged during hardship, didn't really apply to Long Eye and me. I didn't know him like I knew Asher and Stanley Pifer. Still, even if you don't like a guy, you spend enough time with him, especially in the bush, sharing a poncho liner, or in the barracks, playing cards on Christmas Eve, well, you give him the benefit of the doubt.

I knew that Long Eye held a grudge against the Colonel because he'd busted him from Spec Four to Private for starting a fight with a Carabinieri officer in a bar back in Italy. Even Sergeant Zechman had said taking two stripes was too harsh of a punishment, and most of us felt that Colonel Darling, because he was new at the time, was making an example out of Long Eye. Maybe the Colonel had gone too far ordering a twenty-five mile forced march, but that was no excuse to kill the man. He had to walk just

like the rest of us. Asher was only joking, I was sure he'd be right there, marching with us. Whether you liked him or not, you couldn't ignore the fact that the Colonel always did everything he ordered his troops to do. He wouldn't dare miss the march, would he? I'd heard about officers in Vietnam who were shot by their own men for taking too many risks. But this was just a training exercise, not a war.

About two miles into the march it started to rain. Not a driving thunderstorm like you might expect after a long drought, just a steady and even falling rain. Chinese water torture rain we called it--slow but nonstop, the kind that will drive you crazy because you think it's never going to end. The kind of rain that makes you look for someone to blame.

The Colonel did make the march, at least he started it. The first time I saw him he was walking towards the rear. Every so often he would pick out one of the men and walk along side him. With water heavy ponchos drooping below the knees, we looked like rows of trick-or-treaters dressed as ghosts on Halloween, soggy goblins whose only concern was to keep our costumes from leaking and ruining our bags of candy. The Colonel wasn't wearing his poncho; it remained rolled in a tight bun on the back of his web gear. His heavily starched and creased fatigues repelled the rain like a suit of armor. He had the look of someone who hadn't spent much time in the rain and therefore found



it adventurous, a challenge and thrill to combat the elements. His enthusiasm reminded me of myself in basic training at Ft. Knox, slogging through fields, knee deep in muck, screaming death to the aggressors in red arm bands. I don't know when, but I'd lost the feeling somewhere along the way.

The Colonel slowly worked his way to the front. Fifty meters or so ahead the road turned slightly and led into a dense forest. I could just make out the front of the column disappearing into the dark trees. When the Colonel passed him, Long Eye stopped and turned, bending over and cupping his hands to light a cigarette. A quick glow from the match and the first drag of the burning tip lit up his face briefly. He looked back at me and I thought I saw him grin and tap a finger to the corner of his eye, but it was too dark to tell for certain. He tossed the match and started walking again. Then it hit me, this was it, he was actually going to do it. He was going to wait until he got inside the woods and shoot the Colonel. Of course, he'd seen the bend in the road, the near black woodline, and decided that this was his best chance. Once inside the woods, it would be too dark and there would be too much confusion to tell where the shot had come from. Would someone see him raise his rifle? If the Colonel was close enough, he could shoot from the hip and no one would have enough time to stop him.

Colonel Darling was on the other side of the road,

walking next to Willet from the First Platoon,. The columns were supposed to be staggered but the stop and go pace had jumbled any semblance of order, and the Colonel and Willet were nearly even with Long Eye, a step or two ahead. No, it wouldn't work, I thought. Long Eye couldn't possibly expect that no one would see him shoot, the muzzle flash would give him away, stand out like a bonfire in the darkness. Maybe he thought he could slip into the woods and escape, live off the countryside, practice escape and evasion, just like they taught us in the swamps at Ft. Polk. Or maybe he didn't even care if he got caught; he was like one of those psychos who go on a shooting spree and then either give up or kill themselves. I looked for Sergeant Zechman. He would see Long Eye and stop him, he saw everything. I could hear his voice several yards to the rear, ordering someone to keep it spread. Stanley Pifer would do something. He was two spots behind me, head bowed, staring at his boots as they slapped the ground. Had he seen Long Eye point to his eye, did he see the forest coming up? I wanted him to look up, but he kept staring at the ground. He'd be too far away to see Long Eye and do anything.

I watched Long Eye's back to detect any movement, see if he was reaching for the round in his pocket. The poncho clung to his body in heavy folds, but it was too baggy to see if he was doing anything. He had both his arms tucked inside and his M-16 slung upside down beneath the poncho,

like a good soldier should to keep the rain out of the barrel.

Maybe the forest was just a thick tree line and he wouldn't have time to pick his spot, aim and fire; or maybe he'd fumble the round and drop it on the ground--it would be hard to load a single round in the dark, with wet hands, and without being able to look at the magazine. Or maybe he'd chicken out; sure, he was one of those country oafs who talk tough in a crowd, but who always back down when they're alone.

The Colonel was still walking next to Willet. Long Eye wouldn't take a chance on hitting Willet in the dark, I thought. The Colonel and Willet entered the woods and vanished from sight, and Long Eye disappeared after them, like someone slipping through a fold in a black curtain.

Inside the woods, the road dipped three or four feet, and the column was buried in the darkness of a blacked out subway. The thick canopy overhead blocked out the sky and stopped the rain, and the tunnel of trees amplified the smallest sounds. I couldn't see Long Eye. I wondered how long he would wait? He couldn't possibly see the Colonel; I could barely see three feet in front of me. I listened for the sound of the bolt on his M-16 move forward--that would be the only warning that he was getting ready to shoot. He'd have to let the bolt forward with full force to make sure he seated the round properly. I strained to

listen, but all I could hear was the sound of boots scuffling and gasps of swearing as someone stumbled over a tree root.

After we walked for what seemed several minutes, the road curved sharply to the right. In the distance there was a block of gray, hazy light, a break in the tree line where the woods ended. We'd be out in the open soon. To the left of the road there was a sound of dried leaves cracking and branches breaking. The noise came from ahead, close to where the Colonel and Willet had been, and it seemed to be moving forward, keeping pace with the column. It was Long Eye, I knew it. He had sneaked into the woods and was tracking the Colonel from the other side. He had seen the break in the trees and decided to make his move. I could see his plan in my mind as clear as a vivid dream, as if I could read his mind and anticipate his every thought. He'd work his way ahead of the Colonel and set an ambush. It was a smart move, I thought. He'd have two choices: after he shot the Colonel, he could slip back into his spot in the column in the confusion and darkness without being seen, or he could just fade away into the woods, like a ghost, and make his escape. No one would discover he was missing for several minutes, possibly half an hour or longer. By then he'd have a good head start. A country boy like him who had spent most of his life in the woods and mountains could probably survive for days on his own.

Behind me I could hear Sergeant Zechman's voice hissing to keep it spread, five meter intervals. The man was amazing, even in the dark he could tell if the column was bunching up. He seemed able to sense when the slightest thing went wrong. Didn't he hear Long Eye stalking the Colonel in the woods? Couldn't he feel that someone had left the column, that there was a gap instead of a soldier, a ten meter interval instead of five? I wanted to tell him to go check on Long Eye, watch out for him, he couldn't be trusted. Maybe his acute sensory perceptions had rusted in the rain, like the wiring of a radio left outside for years. He didn't really know if we maintained our intervals or not; he just repeated the order automatically, a rhythmic chant to keep his own feet moving. I wanted to shout at him, "Goddamn it, leave us alone and go check on Long Eye, see if he's keeping your precious five meter interval," but my jaw was stiff from the cool rain and I couldn't make myself move my mouth. Besides, what if I was wrong? What if Long Eye was still in the column, plodding along in soaked misery like the rest of us, his main worry that he not walk into a low hanging branch or step into a hole in the road. Maybe it was just some wild animal foraging in the woods. Then I'd look like a fool for shouting, or worse, a snitch.

We came out of the woods and I looked immediately for Long Eye. He was in the column, three spots ahead of me--just like before. He was aiming his M-16 across the

road. Willet was still in his spot, but the Colonel was gone. I was about to shout at him when Sergeant Zechman brushed past me.

"Meiner, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

Long Eye lowered his rifle and turned around. "Just keeping my eye sharp with a little target practice."

In a field, on the other side of the road, trotted a large boar. They were mean and ugly creatures and often trailed a unit on maneuvers, looking for scraps and garbage to eat.

"Put it away, son," Sergeant Zechman said. "Save it for the real thing."

The pace of the march lapsed into a numbing monotony. Even the accordion effect of bunching up seemed to come at regular intervals. And the rain continued, only harder. I gave up spying on Long Eye. I could tell from the way he walked, head drooping, feet sloshing the ground, that he was too miserable to think about any thing except getting back to the base camp and dry fatigues. To amuse myself I would stare at the ground and watch the tips of my boots kick out in front of me, slap the puddles of water and splatter the mud in a ragged arch, trying to recapture the feeling of fantasy and freedom that only a child playing in the rain can experience. It didn't work. Every hour we stopped for a ten minute break, just like the manual states, and the men would move off the road, looking for a tree to lean against. And if there were no trees around,

we would just squat and disappear inside our ponchos. During one break, after everyone had left the road, the Colonel drove by in a jeep, heading for the front of the column. He was wearing a poncho.

Some time well after midnight, I think it was around 2 a.m., we passed through a small German town with narrow, brick-paved streets and old stone buildings. We'd been marching for close to six hours, but I heard Sergeant Zechman say that we were only a little better than half way to the base camp, about eleven plus miles to go.

We stopped for a break and everyone looked for cover from the rain. Groups of three and four squeezed into doorways, while others crowded under balconies, down stairwells or flattened themselves against a wall, trying to find a dry strip under the eaves.

I found the lighted entrance to a tavern that was still open. Laughter and the sound of furniture moving came from inside. Through a small window with bars in the door I could see a tall man with white hair turning chairs up on tables. A young man and woman were playfully wrestling against the bar, laughing as they grabbed and hugged each other. Watching them reminded me of my friends back home who'd gone to college. I imagined them sitting in the favorite campus bar, listening to the jukebox or watching a football game on the TV; they'd be talking about their classes or making plans for a party or vacation in Florida. They were all shocked when I enlisted in the

Army, thought I was nuts. Vietnam was winding down, no more draft to worry about. Why go? they asked.

Stanley Pifer and Asher appeared and ducked inside the entrance.

"I can't believe I'm actually out of the rain," Asher said, shaking his poncho like a wet dog. "This stuff is too damn much."

I hadn't talked to either of them during the march. They both looked weary, pissed of and weary.

"Where's Long Eye?" Pifer asked.

"Don't know, haven't seen him since we left," I said.

"He's probably hiding," Asher said. "Doesn't want to admit he's wrong, the Colonel is marching. I knew I should have bet him."

Across the street, Long Eye climbed out of a stairwell and rushed over to the tavern entrance. Poncho flapping behind him, he looked like a phantom rising from the grave. He could've loaded the round in his M-16 while he was below the street, I thought.

As soon as he reached us, Asher started in on him. "Disappointed, Long Eye?" he asked, nudging me with his elbow.

"About what?"

"Your buddy, the Colonel, made the march, now you can't shoot him."

"Shit, first off, we didn't make no damn bet." He stopped and coughed for several seconds, a deep hack that



made him shake. "And second, I seen him riding in the jeep. He ain't marched the whole way."

"He's using the jeep to check out different parts of the column," I said.

"Still sticking up for your daddy, huh?" Long Eye said. He coughed again and untied the cravat around his neck and wiped his face.

"You all right?" Pifer asked.

"Feel like hell." He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, and the cough settled into a wheeze. "But I still feel good enough to go hunting," he said, looking at me. His poncho puffed out where he patted his shirt pocket.

He looked sick, really sick, the shakes, face sweating, like he had pneumonia or something. But those eyes, those shark eyes were dancing, laughing at me. I wanted to grab him, get in his face and call him an ignorant, red neck, son of a bitch, and tell him this wasn't some stupid family feud over the rights to a still out in the boonies of the Ozarks. And he knew it, he knew what I was thinking. That's what made it worse, those eyes, filled with contempt because he thought I was too soft for his direct form of justice.

"Woof, woof," Asher said. "All you do is woof bullshit, Long Eye. I never seen you back up anything."

"Sit on it."

"See what I mean, more woofing. Put some money behind

that mouth. I'll bet you next month's jump pay that you don't have the balls to shoot the Colonel. Fifty-five bucks, how about it, mister big game hunter?"

Long Eye hesitated and nibbled on his cigarette.

"You're on, faggott."

Asher took a quick poke at him, but Long Eye ducked and hopped off the entrance landing and moved down the street.

"Big mouth chump, I got him this time. You guys are witnesses, you heard it. He bet me one month's jump pay, yes?"

"Duly noted," Pifer said.

Sergeant Zechman called for the platoon to fall in, and Asher left the tavern steps. Pifer turned to follow, but I held him by the elbow.

"I can't believe you're going along with this. It's crazy, Long Eye can't shoot the Colonel and you know it. It's murder. We're soldiers, we're supposed to follow orders."

Pifer listened quietly and thought for a moment.

"Well, he can do it, Myles. There is historical precedent, you know. Even the German High Command, who got high on strict military discipline, tried to assassinate Hitler when they realized he'd gone mad and the war was lost." He said it with a straight face and a glib tone of voice as if his meaning should be perfectly obvious.

"Jesus, Stanley, it's not the same thing. Colonel

Darling is not Hitler. We're talking about a dumb road march, not a world war."

Pifer nodded as he tied the hood of his poncho snugly around his face. "True, but the Romans killed Caesar because they thought he was becoming a dictator, and I think that most people would agree that Caesar was a great man. It's all relative, Myles. History usually looks kindly on such rebellions, assertions of independence, all that kind of thing." He tapped the barrel of his M-16 against the tavern door, like a teacher explaining a point at the blackboard.

"I don't care about history, and neither does Long Eye, he's just a bragging punk. Why don't you stop him? Say something to him. Do you want him to shoot the Colonel?"

Pifer looked puzzled and stifled a laugh. "Don't you?" he said.

The question so surprised me that I didn't answer.

"If you really think he's going to do it, why don't you warn someone? Warn the Colonel. Tell Sergeant Zechman, he's coming over here now," he said, nodding toward the street behind me.

Sergeant Zechman walked up to the steps. "You men care to join the rest of us? What's the problem here?"

I didn't say anything right away. Pifer looked down and started fiddling with the sling on his rifle. I glanced up the street. Long Eye was leaning against a

wall, watching us. In the rainy haze and darkness his silhouette looked like a pop-up target at the rifle range. I couldn't see his face clearly, but I knew he must be laughing inside, those eyes rolling with delight. Go ahead, little boy, he was thinking, be a good mama's boy and tell on bad Long Eye.

"Long Eye is going to shoot the Colonel," I said finally.

Sergeant Zechman laughed. "Well, he better hurry before someone beats him to it. He's got at least a hundred pissed of grunts ahead of him, including me. Tell him to take a number. Let's go, the column is starting to move," he said and walked away.

Pifer raised his eyebrows and patted me on the shoulder. "Can't say you didn't try, feel better?"

Maybe I should've pressed the issue, worded it differently. No. He wouldn't have believed me anyway, and even if Sergeant Zechman did check him out, Long Eye had probably hidden the round on his body somewhere. He was too smart to get caught so easily. Then I'd look like a fool again.

I took my place in the column. Sergeant Zechman walked over to Long Eye and said something to him and they both laughed. After Sergeant Zechman moved ahead, Long Eye turned around and grinned at me and tapped his eye.

I didn't care anymore. Technically, it was Sergeant Zechman's responsibility now. I had used the chain of

command, like a good soldier should, just like I was taught in basic training. Now it was up to Sergeant Zechman to either handle the situation himself, or tell Lieutenant Powell, the platoon leader, who would tell the Captain, right on up the line to the Colonel, who would send orders back down for someone to take appropriate action. That's the way the system worked.

For the most part I kept to myself for the rest of the march. I had sixty-eight days left and all I wanted to think about was going home and what I might do with my life. As far as I was concerned, I was through with the Army and this march would be the last difficult thing I would have to do. I would go to college when I got home, maybe the big state university, study philosophy, or literature, or whatever, it didn't matter. I would spend my time reading books and talking to intelligent, rational people who abided by the laws of a civilized world. In my new life there would be no crazy red necks like Long Eye to deal with.

The rain finally stopped around 4 a.m., and the pace of the march picked up. The wind began to blow hard and the temperature dropped several degrees in the next hour. The march became a race, not to finish so much, as to keep warm. My right knee was hurting pretty bad, and I thought about getting on one of the aid station trucks that were following the column. The knee had started to bother me a few months earlier after a series of weekly road marches

the Colonel ordered when he first took command of the battalion.

I really wanted to get on that truck, but I couldn't. I had this strange idea that if I quit the march, somehow that would make it okay for Long Eye, at last in his mind, to shoot the Colonel. It wasn't just my knee. If I sat down during the breaks, my legs would stiffen up so much that they hurt even more when we started marching again than if we'd never stopped. After the fourth or fifth break I stayed on my feet the whole time, walking in little circles, and waiting impatiently for the call to move out.

During one break, after the rain had stopped, I wandered up the road, looking for a friend of mine from the Mortar Platoon, but I couldn't find him. On the way back I saw Long Eye in a shallow ditch a few feet off the road. He was on his hands and knees, throwing up. I called to one of the medics to come help him. The medic kept telling him to get on one of the aid station trucks, but Long Eye waved him away. When the order came to move out, I stayed where I was and watched Long Eye stumble out of the ditch, bent over slightly, like an old man, clutching his stomach. He looked at me through narrowed eyes and wiped the spit from his chin. I offered him my canteen.

"Thanks." He took a long drink of water and rinsed out his mouth. "Ain't this some shit?"

"Big time," I said. "Worst I can remember."

He started to say something but then doubled over with a coughing fit.

"You should get on the truck, Long Eye. This march isn't worth killing yourself over."

"Yeah, you're right." He paused and rubbed his eyes. "Naw, I don't shoot so good from the prone position, much better on my feet."

The column started to move and he took his spot on the road. I didn't know if I should interpret his determination to finish the march as part of his resolve to get the Colonel, or if he was doing it just to spite me. He was tough, I had to admit.

It was light out when we came to a wooded area at the foot of a mountain. The base camp was at the top, a few hundred feet up. The column stopped and moved into the woods to take a break.

Twenty minutes later we were still waiting. A heavy mist made the air damp and cold. The ground was spongy from the rain and water seeped into my boots everywhere I stepped. When it became apparent that this was not just a short break before finishing the march, the company dispersed farther into the woods, and the men sought out dry spots to get comfortable. Pifer and Asher curled up next to each other under a bush nearby.

Another fifteen minutes passed and nothing happened. I couldn't understand what we were waiting for. Why stop

now when we were almost there? It would take twenty minutes, a half an hour tops, to walk up the mountain. I had worked up a good sweat from the faster pace of the last few miles, and now I was cold and my legs stiffened from having to stand still. I tried sitting on a fallen tree, but the damp bark and wet fatigues pressing against my skin sent shivers through me. I paced between two trees and chain smoked three cigarettes--C-ration cigarettes, packaged during the Korean War probably. Chesterfields, no filter, the worst you could get, "Chest-busters" we called them. I had been promising myself that I would quit smoking, but there was no point in even trying before I got home. All the waiting, it drove you crazy. Wait, wait, hurry up and wait. If someone back home asked me what the Army was like, I would tell them, "lots of waiting." It was the one thing I hated the most, the waiting for no apparent reason. I had recognized early on that if we ever had to go to war, I would rather be killed than taken prisoner. I would not make a good prisoner of war. I'd be one of those guys who suddenly goes mad, sprints across the prison compound and hurls himself on the barbed wire.

Long Eye was on the other side of the road, squatting against a tree, hugging his knees to his chest. He looked in my direction, and I thought I saw him tap his eye, but the gesture was weak, a half-hearted attempt to shoo away an insect.

After an hour of waiting the order came to move out.



It took nearly ten minutes for the company to line up on the road as the men drifted slowly out of the woods. Long Eye fell in two spots behind me, between Asher and Pifer. I hadn't seen the Colonel since he drove past a few miles back, headed for the front of the column. My legs were so stiff that I had trouble walking at first, and my knee was throbbing. The mountain was steep, and the road rose sharply like a giant slide. I kept telling myself that this climb would be the last difficult thing I would have to do in the Army.

Higher up the tree lines sloped away from the road, revealing more of the sky. The weather was beginning to clear, and it looked like it might be a good day. If it warmed up, I thought I might pull my canvas cot outside and sleep in the sun. That's all I wanted to do, just sleep and forget the night, forget the march, the jump, forget the whole damn operation. I wanted to dream and forget about Long Eye, forget the Colonel. Closer to the top there was a dim sound of music playing in the distance. The sound was rough, like an old radio with bad reception, and it was too close to be coming from the tents in the camp. I thought it might be a work detail from the mess tent digging a food pit for garbage. I wondered how long it would take before the boars found their way up here.

The Colonel was waiting for us at the top. He stood in a clearing to the left of the road, hands on hips, smiling and nodding as the column filed past. He was

wearing neatly pressed fatigues and his boots were clean and shiny. His face looked fresh and clean shaven. Next to him, on top of a tree stump, was a small record player, the kind that folds up into a carrying case. I had one like it when I was a kid and used to listen to 45s of Walt Disney characters telling stories. I recognized the song; it was a morbid but humorous number about a trainee who dies on his first jump played to the tune of the Battle Hymn of the Republic. It was the kind of thing we used to laugh at whenever someone played the song on a jukebox in the bars around Ft. Benning.

I understood then, but I couldn't believe it. We had waited for an hour in the woods at the bottom of the mountain so that the Colonel could clean up and review us properly as we dragged by.

The sun had risen above the trees, and the sky was clear and blue. It was going to be a beautiful day. Down the road I could see the pole tops and swooping half moon curves of the tents in the camp.

Behind me came the hollow click of an M-16 bolt sliding forward, like the sound of a screen door closing. Then it was quiet except for the shuffle of boots and the record player. A woodpecker drilled a tree with a long rapid fire pecking. I waited for the pop of the rifle. Do it, do it, do it now, I thought, shoot him now. Sergeant Zechman yelled Long Eye's name. There was a thud, a rifle shot, and the music stopped with a screech. I turned

around. Sergeant Zechman was wrestling with Long Eye on the ground. He had him pinned with his knees on Long Eye's chest, but Long Eye kept struggling, squirming, thrashing his legs and swearing, "You son of a bitch, you lying son of a bitch." The Colonel stood immobile, hands hanging loosely at his sides. The record player was at his feet, flipped upside down. There was a slight breeze, and I could smell the sour odor of rotting food.

## THE GHOST OF CORPORAL BILLY "TIRED T" TOWNSEND

It was the same kind of morning as when Tired T had disappeared into the fog, chasing the bus that was to have been the first leg of his trip home. Myles recognized the cold wet air the moment he stepped out of the barracks. Like an invading army which had crept in silently from its hideout in the rocky face of the Dolomites, the fog surrounded and smothered the American base at Caserma Ederle. The fog was so thick that the overweight and breathless lifers of the Company who ran at the rear of the platoon formations during physical training needed only to slow their labored strides for a half minute or so before slipping out of sight, engulfed by the milky mist, with the ease and stealth of a ghost passing through walls.

Thanks to the new Lieutenant, the First Platoon had an unusually hard run that morning. In an effort to impress the Captain, he kept them running long after the rest of the Company had stopped, circling the base one more time before turning out through the front gate and heading downtown. Like a ship lost at sea, the platoon cruised carefully but steadily through the narrow deserted streets, navigating by the ancient monuments of Vicenza which loomed out of the fog just as the formation was about to crash headlong into a wall.

After a lengthy journey through limbo, witnessed only the marble gazes of the saints and heroes lining the rooftops and facades of buildings, like silent spectators at an event they had seen performed by dozens of foreign armies throughout the city's stormy past, the First Platoon drifted back on to the Company compound.

The Lieutenant dismissed the platoon with a salute that cut through the air and the tight formation of four even ranks dissolved. The soldiers moved into the barracks and up the stairs, each squad filing into its own room. While the rest of the Second Squad undressed slowly, peeling off the sweaty fatigues that clung to one's body like plastic wrap, Myles slumped on his bunk, staring vacantly at the ceiling. Pifer and Doughboy sat across from him, heads hanging, eyes lined up over their feet as if attempting the boots to remove themselves. Without saying so, Myles knew what each of them was thinking. the seemingly endless run had made it impossible not to think about Tired T, and the heavy fog cast a spell over them, hypnotizing them with memories of that strange morning several months ago.

Pifer spoke first, "Whew, that was a 'Tired T run' if I've ever been on one. I thought we'd never turn around. That damn cherry Lieutenant wanted to make us run forever, just like old T."

Myles and Doughboy nodded in agreement.

"I saw him," Doughboy said, picking at a torn eyelet

in one of his boots. He looked up at Myles, the usual dimpled grin that widened his round face was drawn into a flat slit. "For real, I saw him twice. The last time we passed the parade field he came out of nowhere. All of a sudden he was running next to me. He whispered something in my ear, but I couldn't hear it because of the singing of the platoon. Then he disappeared, ran back into the fog, just like when he chased the bus."

The rest of the squad, naked except for small white towels wrapped around their waists, stood by the door, eyeing Doughboy with suspicion.

"No bullshit," he started again. "I saw him at the Arch of Stairs, too. Goddamn stairs. I knew we were in trouble when he headed towards Monte Berico," he said, shaking his head at the thought of the marble steps that ran up the side of the mountain at the edge of the city where old widows went to pray. Droplets of sweat flipped off the tip of his nose.

"Those stairs were gagging me. Halfway up that damn mountain I was about to die. Then I looked up and saw Tired T standing at the top, waving his arms, and I thought, 'Christ, poor old T has been running all this time, I can make it,' and I started pumping my arms and legs, and not for no cherry Lieutenant either. I did it for Tired T. But you know, when we got to the top, he was gone. But I saw him, for real, no bullshit."

Myles nodded his head in sympathy. He had not seen

Tired T that morning, but he had no reason to doubt the word of Doughboy. He knew Tired T was out there somewhere, still running.

"You guys are so full of shit. How long are you going to fuck with the rest of us just because we're new around here?" Schenk, a tall spindly kid with a nasal voice, spoke up from the group clustered around the door. The new troops had heard the term 'Tired T run' before, but they could not connect a face or personality to it. In the months since Tired T had evaporated and become part of the fog, the old-timers of the squad rarely mentioned his name, speaking in whispered tones of reverence when they did. The others were gone now. Triplett, Big Kid, Navarro, Sweet Frank and Asher had all been discharged. Myles, Pifer and Doughboy were the only ones left who knew.

"What was so great about this Tired T guy that you keep his stupid duffel bag in the room?" Schenk asked. "I'm getting tired of having to move the damn thing every time I sweep around my bunk and wall locker. You know what I think? I don't think there ever was a Tired T. I think he's just something you guys made up to mess with the rest of us."

"Shut up, you dumb cherry," Pifer said, jumping up from his bunk. "You don't know anything. Straight out of Jump School and you think you're bad. The duffel bag stays as long as we say so."

Myles looked at the duffel bag standing in the corner

next to Tired T's old bunk which now belonged to Schenk. Big Kid had brought the duffel bag back to the barracks after Tired T had vanished, and they left it next to his bunk, packed with all his civilian belongings, in case he came back for it.

At first Myles had consoled and cheered the others with the thought that Tired T had run all the way home. But when Tired T never sent for his duffel bag or wrote to tell them how wonderful life was on the outside, Myles began to worry. Big Kid, Triplett, Navarro and the others had written after their discharge, encouraging their friends to hang on because life after the Army was indeed everything they dreamed. But, like an asterisk in a record book, qualifying and somehow diminishing an heroic accomplishment, their letters all contained a dampening post script: no one had seen Tired T. And now Doughboy's sighting had confirmed his growing fear that Tired T was still here, trapped in time and place.

To make matters worse Myles, Pifer and Doughboy were rapidly approaching their own discharged dates. They were the last of the old-timers who had known Tired T and soon they would be transported to another world and new lives. Myles was alarmed by the thought that there would be no one left behind to act as a beacon for Tired T. Who would guide his lost soul out of the fog should he ever escape from the infinite treadmill upon which he ran and guide him home where he belonged? The old-timers of the squad had



always kept the incident to themselves. there was no point in telling the Army. Orders had been issued for Tired T's discharge, and whether or not he made it all the way home was his problem. As far as the Army was concerned his file was closed. And because one doesn't really understand until he's been through it all, the old-timers never told the new arrivals about Tired T. Myles realized now that may have been a mistake for there were skeptics, like Schenk, who were so doubtful that Tired T was in danger of becoming extinct. He recognized that, unlike the dinosaurs that once roamed the planet, floating memories did not leave behind fossils as testament to their former grand sources of existence. After Myles departed Tired T would dry up under the ignorance of the new troops, like the fog burning away under the fierce Italian sun. If Tired T were to have any chance of survival, the others would have to be told.

"No, Schenk, we're not messing with you," Myles said. "There really was a Tired T and he still exists. You've been here long enough and now it's important for you to know about him. Some day you may find yourself in the same position."

Schenk looked warily at Myles. His cocky and rebellious attitude seemed to soften with Myles' acceptance of his still infant but growing tenure in the squad. He moved over to his bunk, sat down and waited while the rest of the squad pulled up foot lockers and chairs in a circle

around Myles' bunk.

\* \* \* \* \*

## THE STORY OF TIRED T

No one in the entire Battalion could figure out what was wrong with Tired T. Everyone in Bravo Company, even the officers, called him Tired T. His last name was Townsend, which is where the "T" came from, "Tired," because he was, quite simply, always tired. Whenever possible he would sneak away to his bunk for a nap. Tired T took to twenty minute snoozes--"power naps" he called them because he claimed they helped sustain him through the long duty day--like a compulsive eater takes to snacks between meals.

To look at him one would never have guessed his name to be Tired T or anything implying laziness or ill health. He wasn't fat or malnourished; he didn't slouch or drag his feet when he walked; his skin wasn't sallow and there were no dark circles around his eyes.

To the contrary, Tired T appeared the epitome of what a young soldier should be, especially one in such a demanding field as the paratroops. He was short and sturdy and extremely muscular, without so much as a pinch or ripple of fat on his body. His dark complexion was a rich brown, like a coffee bean, and his posture was perfectly erect, and he walked with a quiet, smooth and slightly rocking motion as if he were protecting his balance.

Padding softly down the barracks hallway, barefoot and wearing only a pair of gym shorts, he looked like a halfback on a football team.

Discovering the root of Tired T's fatigue was the favorite pastime of everyone who even remotely knew of him. Sweet Frank and Asher went so far as to form a lottery. "Hurry, hurry, step right up and buy a ticket, take a chance on finding out why Tired T is always so tired and win a three-day pass to Rome," they barked to all. Many offered an explanation but nobody won the grand prize. Thinking he could use the rest, his friends gave the pass to Tired T who in turn refused it. He was too tired to go.

Even the Battalion Surgeon had a keen interest in Tired T's condition. Believing he was on to something as profound as the discovery of penicillin, perhaps a scientific breakthrough that would allow soldiers to fight tirelessly without sleep or food, he ran poor Tired T through a lengthy series of tests to reveal just what it was that wore out the elite of the American fighting men. After two days of visual dissection, during which he used the most advanced medical equipment and found absolutely nothing wrong, the Surgeon gave up and took a more direct approach to solving Tired T's fatigue.

"Townsend, do you feel okay?"

"Yeah, I feel okay, except I'm kind of tired most of the time, sir."

With a shrug, he gave Tired T a prescription for

antibiotics and sent him back to the barracks.

Tired T was not a big talker. The few words that did come out, he spoke in a slow mumble, as if he were talking in his sleep. Nobody knew for certain if this was because Tired T came from a small rural town in Alabama, where even the flies buzzed slowly under the sweltering sun, or if his languid speech was just another symptom of his tiredness. He even laughed tiredly, a slow breathy chuckle that sounded like an old locomotive chugging to a halt.

No, poor health could not have been the reason for Tired T's condition. He was certainly quite fit, and he had very modest and clean living habits. He did not smoke or drink. Navarro and Triplett repeatedly tried to persuade him to accompany them for a few drinks in the bars and cafes of Vicenza. But true to form, Tired T always declined with his famous slogan, "Naw, man, I'm too tired." To this he would add in a slow Southern drawl, "That stuff is no good for you," and shake his head. Navarro blamed all that clean living for his slumbering symptoms. Not enough artificial stimulation to rouse him, he insisted. Too much abstinence had left him sluggish, Triplett argued.

As a birthday surprise one year, Navarro, Triplett and Big Kid kidnapped Tired T and dragged him downtown for a small celebration. "Hey, man, how you know you won't like it?" Navarro, a slightly built Chicano with mischievous eyes, asked the protesting hostage. Tired T was not unsociable or dour by nature, he simply never had the

energy for much recreation. He always worried that alcohol and late nights on the town would drain his already depleted reserve of vitality. Still, he was glad his friends had remembered his birthday, and so he accepted his virginal plunge into an evening of dissipation with resigned calm. Maybe a little hell-raising would do him some good, he had said at the time. Besides, Triplett, the oldest of the group at twenty-four with a craggy face that made him look twenty years older, and Big Kid, a Titan with red hair and a boyish freckled face, held Tired T in an arm-lock on either side of him as they rode the bus downtown.

The evening at the Cafe Settembre definitely roused Tired T, but whether or not it was good for him remained debatable. After two beers he was quite drunk. He stumbled out of the bar, tripped over the cobblestone street and caromed off the wall opposite the Cafe as he tried to navigate his way back to the base. As Navarro tried to prop him up, Tired T slumped to his knees, laughing as he had not laughed since joining the Army. Breaking away from his friend, he careened across the Piazza degli Angeli before collapsing on the tiered pedestal upholding the marble statue of an angel. Triplett and Navarro tried to help him back across the piazza and into the cafe, but Tired T giggled that he was too tired and insisted on sleeping right there draped around the feet of a marble guardian holding a torch high overhead.

Finally Big Kid slung him over his massive shoulder and carried him back to the barracks with Navarro and Triplett bringing up the rear, shaking their heads in confusion. They had felt certain that a little libation was just the thing to inject some vigor into Tired T.

No, artificial stimulation was certainly not the answer to Tired T's ceaseless fatigue. His one outburst of drunken revelry, which took place on a Thursday night, had left him so tired and ill that he reported to sick call the next morning and proceeded to sleep away the entire weekend. Wrapped up in a heavy, wool Army blanket on his bunk, he resembled a caterpillar woven inside an olive drab cocoon, waiting for warmer weather.

Tired T had been with the 509th Airborne for a long time. His legendary tiredness was already an ingrained characteristic of Bravo Company when the unit moved down from Germany into northern Italy. Before the big move the 509th had been stationed in Mainz, Germany where it was part of the old Eighth Infantry Division, fondly known as the "Crazy Eights." The paratroopers at Lee Barracks had a bad reputation for drug use and robbery against the townspeople of Mainz. New recruits, or "cherries", found themselves entering a world that was similar to the ganglands of a big city ghetto. During their first week in the Company, cherries were pulled aside and forced to announce their allegiance. Either one got high or he didn't. Anyone who wilfully sought to be a good soldier

was sentenced to a tour of harassment, taunting, theft, anxiety and possibly beatings.

Lee Barracks was so bad that a group of enlisted men once grabbed a Duty Officer of the Day, who had walked in on them while they were smoking hash and announced that they were all under arrest, stuffed him inside a wall locker and shoved it out a third story window. The officer was found the next morning, standing at attention in the narrow confines of the wall locker, quite dead.

Veterans of the old "Crazy 8s" 509th, because of their association with and survival of that infamous unit, became legendary figures in the eyes of those who had never been there. An air of cool toughness and invincibility surrounded these soldiers, as though they were survivors of some terrible battle. Even quiet Tired T had this air about him, although it was something he clearly did not cherish. When asked about the old 509th and Lee Barracks, Tired T would respond with the familiar and expected slow shake of the head and blank stare, "Whew, man, that place was crazy, be glad you never had to be there," followed by a nervous chuckle, like a survivor talking about a fatal accident from which he had just escaped.

Tired T's length of stay with the 509th was another puzzle that bordered on the mystical. No one, not even the Company clerk who knew all factual information about everyone, seemed to know when Tired T had arrived. Like God and the great void of the universe, Tired T and his



tiredness just seemed always to have been. When Lieutenant Powell, the new platoon leader, first arrived, he had asked Tired T about the date of his origin with the 509th. Tired T just stared over the Lieutenant's head with a pained expression on his face, as though he were being forced to recall a traumatic accident from his childhood.

"Long time, sir, I been here a long time," he said.

Certainly everyone knew how many days he had left to his discharge. It was rumored that Tired T's Personnel Records had been lost.

"I think the Army just forgot about Tired T, sir," Ryder, the clerk, confided to Captain Newman. "I mean it's possible, you read all the time in 'Stars and Stripes' about veterans who were awarded some medal or promotion during World War One or Two and just now were told about it. Maybe that's why the poor guy is so worn out. He's doing overtime for Uncle Sam when he should be back home, going out with girls, drinking pop at the corner store, sleeping or whatever it is he likes to do."

"Nonsense," the Captain replied. "The Army is never wrong. Besides, even if they did make a mistake, those stories prove that the Army always takes care of their own. They'll catch up to him eventually."

Despite his dislike of the Army, Tired T was by no means a trouble-maker. He was, as usual, too tired to ever create dissension. He had made the rank of corporal and

that was all the ambition he had for advancement in the military. But because he had been with the unit so long, the Army eventually tried to promote Tired T to sergeant.

Sergeant Thurston, the platoon sergeant, thought he was doing Tired T a favor by nominating him for promotion, a kind of reward for all his silent suffering, for all his fatigue. After all, Tired T was not a bad soldier. His productivity was high in that he always did what he was told, albeit accompanied by a wide complaining yawn. Perhaps Sergeant Thurston had thought that the promotion would be an antidote for Tired T's fatigue. Maybe the responsibility of being a Non-Commissioned Officer and the attendant feelings of importance and power would act as an elixir, a fountain of youth for poor, young and ever so tired Tired T.

The announcement of the impending promotion had a profound and mixed effect on Tired T. He at once became energetic and animated such as no one in the 509th had ever seen. He shook his head so violently that Navarro worried that his wide staring eyes might pop out. At the very least he was going to give himself a severe headache. "Unh, unh, man, no way. No way, unh, unh," he repeated over and over in a deep loud voice. Tired T was beside himself with anger and anxiety, pacing back and forth in the small confines of the squad bay. When he finally calmed down or wore himself out from bouncing off the metal bedposts of the doubledecker bunks, Tired T was engulfed by

a morose fatigue the likes of which his comrades had never witnessed.

The very thought of all the work involved with being a sergeant, attending scores of meetings, giving precise orders, organizing work details, conducting night patrols, and worst of all, having to get up earlier each day to wake up the rest of the squad, paralyzed Tired T with fatigue. He didn't think much of a reward that deprived him of sleep. That was a punishment, not a reward.

That evening a pall of sorrow fell over the squad bay, transforming it into a funeral parlor, and the night became a wake. Navarro, Triplett, Big Kid and the rest of the squad pulled chairs and foot lockers around Tired T's bunk where they sat and commiserated with him, mourning his passing from corporal to sergeant. Tired T just sat on the edge of his bunk, shaking his head and muttering, "unh, unh, no way, man." Once he was promoted he would no longer be a part of their world. Instead of grumbling about nonsensical orders, he would have to give those same irrational commands; instead of trying to slide through the morning inspection without having ironed his fatigues, he would have to scrutinize the uniforms of his friends for wrinkles; instead of feigning illness to avoid physical training or a major field exercise, he would have to play truant officer and track down malingerers reporting to sick call; he would have to report his friends AWOL if they missed the first formation of the day.

Sweet Frank brought in a case of beer and Doughboy threw a blanket over a foot locker and started a game of spades. Asher switched on the stereo and turned it up loud. Harsh music rumbled through the room. Navarro puffed on a small hand made pipe and passed it around the group, and the heavy, sweet smell of hash clouded and hung in the air, like foggy incense during a religious ceremony. Slumped over on his bunk, Tired T sat immobile, a dejected Bhudda, around which his mourners circled, heads bowed as they paid their last respects.

The lamentation lasted all night as the bereaved drank, smoked and swapped old war stories about the dearly departed. "Remember the time he fell asleep on the plane on the way to Sardinia, and the pilot had to make another pass over the jump zone just so's Tired T could make his jump? Goddamn, the Old Man was shittin' grenades he was so pissed off, remember?" The four card players rocked rhythmically to the music as they flipped down their cards one at a time. Occasionally they turned and gazed solemnly at Tired T, as though he were a corpse freshly prepared for burial, and his bunk a casket, and nodded their heads.

Standing wearily in formation the next morning, stiffly-starched fatigues and jump boots laced tightly the only things holding his body erect, Tired T awaited the confirmation of promotion, like a condemned prisoner waiting to hear his final sentence.

Sergeant Thurston walked up to Tired T.

"Look, Townsend, I know you're not too hot on this promotion business, but think of it this way, it will look great on your record when you get back to the States. Could help you get a job even... maybe. Think of it, years from now you'll be able to tell your kids with pride that you were a real sergeant in the U.S. Army."

Standing at parade rest, head down, Tired T stared at his fuzzy reflection in the gleaming toes of his spit-shined boots and shook his head slowly.

"Besides, T, you got to make sergeant," Sergeant Thurston lowered his voice, almost pleading. "You've been a corporal too long, man, and now the Army says we got to do something with you."

Tired T made no response. From the corner of his eye he saw a cigarette butt on the ground. Second Squad had police duty that morning. The Captain would have a fit if he found it.

"So what do you say, Tired T, it's no big thing really. Just do it, okay?" Sergeant Thurston said.

The sun slid out from behind a tree and stabbed Tired T with a searing brightness. He watched his face dissolve as the glossy shine of his boots clouded from the heat and mumbled the same hypnotic chant he had repeated since he first learned about the promotion, "Unh, unh, man, no way."

Sergeant Thurston was exasperated. There was no belligerence or rebellion in Tired T's voice, just a tired sadness with a trace of stubbornness. He couldn't be angry

with this quiet, clean, likeable kid who just wanted to go home and not bother anyone or have anyone bother him.

"Why, Townsend, why?" asked Sergeant Thurston, his palms raised upwards, as though he were beseeching the heavens for divine explanation for this obstinacy. "Just give me one good reason, T, and don't give me any of this 'I'm too tired' crap. One good reason and I'll withdraw the promotion papers before they reach Battalion H.Q."

There was a pause that seemed as long as the agonizing interval between jumping out of an airplane and the moment the parachute opens.

Tired T raised his head and looked Sergeant Thurston straight in the face. His own eyes were wide and alert, not drooping and tired. The muscles in his jaw quivered and his face shook as he blurted out, "I'm too short! Man, I'm too short! You can't make me no sergeant now after all this time, can't you see? I been in the Army for four years and it's time for me to go home. I ain't got but sixty-eight days left and NOW you want to make me a damn sergeant? No way, man, I'm too short."

And so there it was, the mystery of Tired T's length of time in the 509th and his ageless fatigue had been unravelled. Using the promotion as a chainsaw, Sergeant Thurston had inadvertantly cut through Tired T's trunk, as though he were an ancient, rotting tree, and discovered the secret of his tiredness and enlistment by counting the grainy rings on the flat top of his shorn stump.

A low murmur rose from the formation. The Second Squad bent over and peered down the end of the row where Tired T and Sergeant Thurston stood.

"Wow, man, four years, four fucking long years." Navarro was stupefied at the thought. "That cat has been on boo-coo field exercises. Think of all the heavy rucksacks he's humped. That dude has carried some Big Time poundage in his time, you know what I mean."

"Poundage my ass," Triplett cut in. "We're talking about tonnage here."

"Think of all the rain he's soaked up," Big Kid added. "Damn, Tired T, it's a wonder you haven't turned into a mushroom or grown some gills."

"How many latrines he's scrubbed."

"All the guard duty he's pulled."

"How many miles of P.T. he's run."

"How many rifles he's cleaned."

"Don't forget all the cigarette butts he's had to pick up."

"How much boot polish and starch he's gone through."

The rest of the platoon added to the list of evidence in rapid fire succession.

Tired T had good reason to be tired.

Sergeant Thurston stood for several moments without saying a word, blinking his eyes. He seemed confused, as though he was having trouble understanding the punch line

to a joke. He nodded his head slowly at first, and then more quickly, with greater assertion, as if it was all clear to him now.

"Yeah, sure, T, you're right. No sense in promoting you to sergeant now if you're going home soon, especially if you don't want the stripes. No problem, I'll have the First Sergeant withdraw the promotion orders right after the morning inspection."

Sergeant Thurston smiled and patted Tired T on the shoulder, relieved and delighted at having understood his adamant refusal of promotion, and walked back to the front of the formation. The First Platoon whooped and cheered. Tired T would not have to be a sergeant.

A strange transformation overcame Tired T in the next few days, a change so radical and complete that the old-timers of the Company barely recognized him, and yet so subtle that the new arrivals saw nothing unusual in the short, muscular soldier named Townsend, whom everyone called Tired T. If anything they were confused by the nickname. Tired T now moved with a quick bouncing step, like a boxer in training who constantly dances on his toes, and a white, toothy grin filled the bottom half of his face. Whereas before he had to drag himself from his bunk and stumble down to the first formation for P.T., Tired T now sprang off his mattress and skipped down the stairs and out to the Company compound.

Tired T even began to talk more. In fact he became



quite gabby. At the P.T. formation when it was still dark and the dense fog made one shiver, the First Platoon, wearing rumpled fatigues and bent over, heads drooping, shoulders slumped, hands thrust deep into pockets and eyes half open, resembled a rectangle of sagging trees after a heavy rain. But the new Tired T rocked back and forth on the heels of his boots, head erect and turning around, chattering away to his sleepy mates. And most surprising of all he began to venture downtown for an occasional beer. Tired T saw more of Vicenza in those last two months than during his entire tour with the 509th in Italy.

His last week in the Army, with clipboard and discharge papers in hand, Tired T was free to roam about the post, collecting initials, signatures and turning in equipment as he processed out of the 509th. His only requirements were to attend the daily formations. Most soldiers take their time with their discharge processing, strolling from building to building, savoring the freedom of moving as slowly as they wish, while around them blocks of green march and double-time. Not so Tired T. The former sleeper bounced around the post, like the ball inside a pinball machine, zipping from one end to the other in minutes. The Army gives a soldier one week to get his official affairs in order. Tired T completed the procedure in a day and a half. He had three and a half days left in the Army with nothing to do except stand in three formations a day.

"You mean I can do whatever I want just so long as I make the formations?" Tired T asked, eyes wide in disbelief.

"That's right, Tired T," Sergeant Thurston replied.

"Just think of it,T," Navarro shouted and slapped him on the back. "You can sleep all day if you want, goddamn, T, you can sleep on Uncle Sam's time and not get in trouble."

Three and a half days with nothing to do but sprawl on his bunk and nap. It was a final and superbly fitting reward for the Great Sleeper, the most tired soldier in military history from the seige of Troy to the fall of Saigon, His Tiredness, Tired T.

But to the great surprise of his squad mates, Tired T did not spend the next three and a half days cemented to his bunk. In fact, he hardly slept at all, only a few hours at night, before popping up at six a.m. to dash outside for P.T.

Instead, he spent his time scurrying around the post, scrutinizing all the barracks in the Battalion, the Comissary, the P.X., the motor pool, even the streets, like a detective searching for clues. Triplett said he saw him one night standing in front of the big stone statue of Saint Michael the Archangel, the patron saint of the Airborne, near the front gate. He just stood there, according to Triplett, staring in awe at the wide wings, the frozen face and the broad muscular shoulders.

At night Tired T walked downtown, inspecting the old stone buildings of Vicenza he had passed a hundred times aboard a truck in convoy on the way to or returning from a field exercise. He visited the Cafe Settembre where most of the paratroopers gathered, not to celebrate his discharge, but to sit and watch and listen. After an hour or so he would ask one of his friends from the platoon about some long past Company operation.

"Hey, man," he nudged Willard, a pudgy private from the Third Squad. "Tell me about that big jump at DZ Rock."

"What are you talking about, T? You made that jump. You and me jumped on the same pass, we were the first ones to hit the drop zone, a goddamn, dried up river bed full of rocks, don't you remember?"

"Yeah, I remember, but tell me about it anyway."

On his last night in the Army Tired T went to the Cafe Settembre for a final visit. Inside, he found "Crazy" Ted Daly, one of the few remaining old-timers from the 509th in Germany, slumped on a stool at the end of the bar.

"Hey, Daly, hey, man," he said, shaking the drunken Daly who looked more fatigued than Tired T ever had.

Daly rolled his head to one side on the bar top and peered up at Tired T with his left eye.

"Tell me about Lee Barracks," said Tired T. "Tell me about the lieutenant that got tossed out the window."

It was suspected but never proven that "Crazy" Daly had been an accomplice in the ejection of the Duty Officer

in a wall locker from the third floor. He lifted his head and stared suspiciously at Tired T.

"What do you mean, tell you about Lee Barracks? You're an old-timer, you were there longer than me. You know as much as me about that dumb, cherry lieutenant. Besides, why do you want to remember anything about that piss-hole zoo?"

"I don't know," said Tired T, shrugging his shoulders. "We spent a lot of time there, you know, that's all. Tell me anyway, I want to hear again just to be sure."

Too drunk to defend himself, Daly let his head drop on the bar with a thud.

A young, Italian woman entered the Cafe and slid past the crowded bar. Tired T watched her as she slid across the floor. She wore a long, black cape, loose-fitting jeans and black, heeled boots. Women rarely came into the Cafe Settembre, and the presence of a tall, slender figure made heads turn immediately. She made a circular tour of the Cafe, appraising each group of leering men. Several GIs called to her to come sit with them and have a drink, which she ignored or refused with a dark sneer. She stopped at a table with four soldiers and smiled at one of them, a heavy set man with blonde hair, who nodded and returned the smile. The woman cocked her head to one side and arched her eyebrows. Shaking his head, the soldier held out his hands, palms up. She shrugged and left the table with a wink.

The hooker completed her tour, bought a drink at the bar and moved over to a corner by the doorway. Tired T stared at her as she leaned back into the dark and sipped on a straw in the glass. Her name was Angela. He had met her a long time ago through his friend, Al Jenkins, who had lived with her. She had straight black hair that covered her forehead and framed her face, large dark eyes that did most of her talking and long full lips. She usually demanded drugs instead of money for her services, and the profits from a successful business had taken its toll on her body. Tired T remembered her as having a full figure which she flaunted with tight jeans and an open blouse; now she hid her frail frame under a cape. She was still attractive, he thought. In the dimly lighted haze of the Cafe she looked like an exotic seductress he had seen in a movie about Cleopatra.

Tired T continued to stare, almost longingly, at Angela. He didn't want her or lust after her, but looking at her gave him a feeling of nostalgic warmth. Her former lover, Alfred "Kool Kid" Jenkins, had been Tired T's best friend in the First Platoon. Navarro had given him the name "Kool Kid" because when he was off duty he always wore fashionable clothes like the young Italian men, and he was never afraid to approach a pretty Italian girl even though he did not speak the language very well. Except for ordering food and beer or asking directions, most GIs never

attempted to speak Italian. But Jenkins wasn't afraid to sound awkward, and he learned as much of the language as possible, practicing his accent and gestures on Tired T during road marches. While the rest of the squad stayed around the barracks playing cards or shooting pool, Kool Kid was downtown mingling with the Italians. Dressed in tailored flashy clothes, a tall slender figure with a carmel complexion, he looked and acted the part of a Latin lover.

Jenkins was the only GI Tired T had known who never complained of being homesick.

"Shit, man, why miss some place where you're going to spend the rest of your life," Jenkins would say to Tired T whenever he griped about being stuck in a foreign country so far from home. "Alabama ain't going no place, I guarantee you. It'll still be there when you get home and you'll end up doing the same old thing, hanging out, pissing and moaning about some boring job. This is what you should worry about missing. This place, Italy. Before you know it, you'll be gone, and you'll never be back. I ain't no barracks rat, no sir. I plan on seeing everything and having a good time."

Jenkins was long gone now, having been discharged over a year ago, and Tired T suddenly found it difficult to remember his face. Memories of his daring friend flashed through his mind like sparks, bright and dazzling but impossible to hold. He stared harder, trying to force an

image of Jenkins standing next to Angela in the corner. He'd be wearing something fancy, thought Tired T, just like the Italians, with Angela on his arm looking just as sharp. The image formed momentarily, wavered in the smoky air and vanished. All that was left was Angela, looking weary and bored, sipping her drink and pulling up the worn baggy jeans that used to cover her hips like a fresh coat of paint.

Angela caught him staring at her and smiled, and Tired T, still held captive in his reverie of Jenkins, smiled back at her. Angela sent her calling card with the practiced cock of the head and arched eyebrows, and Tired T, embarrassed, looked down at his feet.

When he looked up again Angela was standing next to him. A strong smell of perfume and body odor filled his nose.

"Hello, Signore T, how are you? Something you would like, maybe, hmmm?" Angela asked, smiling.

"Naw, naw, man... I mean, no, like..." Tired T stammered, flustered and embarrassed that Angela thought he wanted to buy her.

"You were looking at me very much, si? I think maybe you want something."

"Naw, you don't understand. I was just thinking, you know... I mean just looking."

Angela laughed and patted him on the shoulder. "It's okay, Signore T, you buy me a drink, okay."

"Yeah, sure, whatever you want."

Angela perched herself on a stool next to Tired T and ordered a glass of wine. "So, Signore T, how are things? I no see you for a long time."

"I'm okay, pretty good really. I'm going home tomorrow."

"Home. That is nice, si, a good boy should go home."

"You bet, I'm pretty excited, you know. Listen, Angela, I was kind of thinking, I mean you and Kool Kid, you know, Jenkins, were pretty close, huh?"

Angela's face brightened. "Alfredo? Si, Alfredo and me were very much lovers. He was very good to me. He buy me boo-coo clothes," she said, giggling at the sound of the GI slang. "He buy me other good things too, you know." She winked at Tired T.

"You ever hear from him?" asked Tired T.

Angela frowned and looked away. "No, Townsend, I don't hear from Alfredo. When he leave, he promise to take me to America later to see him in New York where he live, you know, but I never hear from him."

Up close, Angela did not look so appealing, thought Tired T. Her face was pale and drawn, and the eyes which seemed so expressive from a distance were small and wan, deepset behind protruding cheekbones. Her fingers were thin and frail, like leafless twigs on a tree. He tried not to look as she scratched at a pattern of bruised needle marks on her forearm.



"Angela, tell me about Jenkins."

Angela looked puzzled. "But, Townsend, you knew him, he was your best friend, no? What can I tell you?"

"Tell me about the trips you two used to take to Rome and Venice, tell me what he looked like, you know."

Tired T watched Angela as she stared into the mirror behind the bar, hoping to catch a glimpse of his friend's face in her eyes.

I don't know, Townsend," Angela shrugged. "Alfredo was nice, good looking, too. He always have good stuff, you know. I don't know, it was a long time ago." She waved a bony hand through the air, shooing away the memory of Jenkins and gave up trying to remember.

"It's not important, eh Townsend, the past. I do not think much about the past. What do you think?"

"I don't know, yeah, I guess not."

Angela emptied her glass. "Hey, you buy me another drink, okay?"

Tired T did not answer her. He felt suddenly emptied, weak and worn. It was not the same fatigue that had haunted him throughout his tour with the 509th but a weariness of remorse for now he regretted not having travelled and done more like Jenkins. He should've gone to see for himself all the wonderful and exotic places and people that his friend had described to him. Pangs of urgency hit him and he felt panicky. He wanted to rush down to the station and take the train to Venice. He

should at least see Venice once. How many hours would it take to go to Rome, he wondered. It was too late. There was not enough time. Jenkins had been right. He would miss this place. Germany, Italy, even the Army had been his home for the last four years, and he had squandered his time tucked away in the safety of the squad bay like a sickly child. There had been nothing really wrong with him. Sure, all the orders and rules, all the time spent in the bush, the sleepless nights, the rain, the jumps and the endless road marches had made him feel as though he was about to unravel at times, but he always recovered. He should not have let it paralyze him with fatigue. He had wasted away, just like Angela, the same as if he too had sucked himself dry with needles. He was still strong physically, but his insides felt as though they had rotted.

Angela nudged him.

"Hey, Signore T, you okay? You don't think about the past so much, think about tomorrow. Come, you buy me another drink, okay?"

Tired T bought her another glass of wine and got up to leave.

"Signore T, where are you going? We must celebrate, si. A toast for you because you are leaving this place to go home."

She raised her glass in the air. "Salute."

Tired T spent the rest of the night walking around the city, trying to memorize the old buildings built hundreds

of years ago, the greenish creamy color of the weather-stained marble, the high arches and towering columns, the faces and poses of statues.

The Day had arrived. The one day he was expected to shake off his lethargy for good and arise early, Tired T overslept. The Second Squad stood in a circle around his bunk and yelled in chorus, "Wake up, Tired T, you're going home!" Burrowed beneath a blanket, with a pillow covering his head, Tired T barely moved. They grabbed and hoisted him out of bed and dragged his limp body over to his wall locker where his dress uniform hung, neatly pressed, the brass insignia, marksman badge and silver jump wings shining and glittering in the morning sunlight. Still half asleep, he looked at the uniform through blurred eyes, unsure of what to do with it.

"Come on, T, get the lead out, bro, you don't want to be late for that bus."

"That's our Tired T, true to form even to the last, too tired to put on the old dress greens one last time."

His squad mates began to dress him like a mannequin in a store window, holding out his arms for the shirt, lifting his legs for the pants. They tied his tie, buttoned his jacket, and even laced his boots for him.

Big Kid played a record from Jump School, and at the refrain they all joined in:

"And he ain't gonna jump no more!"

Navarro marched ceremoniously in front of Tired T, arms outstretched, holding a maroon beret gently in his hands as though it was a crown. Triplett lifted the beret gingerly, and with a severe look on his face and exaggerated pomp, placed it lightly on Tired T's head. Navarro reached up and tugged at the corner of the beret so that it sat at a jaunty angle across his forehead. The squad stood back and applauded.

"Goddamn, look at Tired T, John Wayne himself."

They grabbed his duffel bag and whisked him down the hallway and out of the barracks. Outside, the squad formed a cordon around Tired T. Triplett stood in front of the human square and called the formation to attention.

"Squad--ten HUT! Forward--HAARCH!"

The squad stepped out crisply, backs straight, arms swinging in precise arcs.

"Double time--come on, T, one more Airborne run for the World--HAARCH!"

Navarro and Big Kid each grabbed an arm and carried Tired T along as the squad broke into an ordered run. He was awake now but tired from a lack of sleep. He felt his body borne along by the slapping sound of boots hitting the pavement in unison, as though it was moving on its own without his aid. It was a feeling he had experienced many times before during the morning P.T. runs when it was still dark and cold and his body was stiff, his mind groggy, and he would dream about lying in an open field under the sun

back home in Alabama. Just follow the man in front of you, hypnotized by the cadence and synchronized stride of many legs moving as one, like a giant beetle with sixty legs scurrying down the street. Divorce the mind from the body. It was a simple trick everyone used at one time or another to get through P.T. when he was hung over, or like Tired T, just too tired to run. He milked the feeling for all it was worth, as the squad cruised down the streets of the post.

"Let's have some music here, yeah."

Triplett led them in the Airborne anthem.

"Bo Diddley, Bo Diddley, have you heard,

I'm gonna jump from a big iron bird,"

A landscape of dozens of jumps flashed through his mind. The parched white stones in the dried up river bed of the infamous DZ Rock; snow capped peaks and the brown and green sides of the Dolomites, like a curtain stretched across the sky, so close it looked like he could reach out and touch them.

"If I die on the old drop zone,

box me up and ship me home,"

The first night jump, mushroom capped parachutes illuminated an eerie green under the light of a full moon, drifting down into a dark well of night.

"Pin my wings upon my chest,

tell my gal I did my best."

The last big jump in Germany when two guys from Alpha Co.

became entangled and slammed into the countryside, killed instantly.

He thought about the time he and Pifer sat huddled together inside an abandoned drain pipe during a rain storm, sharing his last heat tab as they tried to warm a C-ration can of chopped ham and eggs, and he remembered the time he'd stolen some apples from a farmer's orchard and eaten them without washing them off first and how sick he got and how Navarro gave him his last canteen of water to rinse the acid taste from his mouth.

He remembered the jump in Holland to commemorate the liberation of the town of Eindhoven from the Germans during the war and the tiny old woman with tears streaming down her wrinkled face who had rushed out on the drop zone and hugged him.

The angle and brightness of the morning sun hurt his eyes and made him squint, but he liked how it warmed his face. It was the one thing he had enjoyed the most about Italy. The intensity of the sun reminded him of home. The winters here hadn't been too harsh either, not like Germany where the cold crept into his bones in October and stayed there until May. The fog was the only bad part. It always reminded him how far from home he was and gave him a feeling of being lost in another world. An old gypsy man had told him once that if the fog came after a day had begun clear and bright, it meant that the people of the city were being punished for not halting their pursuit of

wealth and power to enjoy the gift of life given by the sun. But at least the fog was predictable, arriving usually in the darkness of early morning. The reassurance of knowing that it would disappear by noon always calmed his fear and loneliness during the P.T. run.

The bus that would take him to Milano, from where he would fly home, was parked in front of the mess hall. He could see a line of soldiers waiting to board and his heart began to race. He tried to run faster but was boxed in by the squad. Suddenly, as if someone had ignited a crate filled with smoke bombs, thick coils of gray mist began pouring into the street. The fog snaked its way around buildings and trees as if it were trying to choke everything in sight. Tired T and the rest of the squad were quickly surrounded. He could just make out the rear of the bus. It appeared farther away than when he'd first spotted it. In another minute the fog caught and swallowed the bus.

Tired T ran into Sweet Frank's back and the rest of the squad began to stumble, tripping over each other's legs. They had come this way hundreds of times on the way to eat, but now they had no idea in which direction to go. Navarro said to follow him and tripped over a curb. Triplett said he knew the way and rushed headlong into a lamppost. In the middle of the shouting and cursing, Tired T heard the rumble of the bus engines starting.

"Quiet! Quiet!" he yelled and cupped his ears. The

others stopped and listened.

"The bus! The bus is leaving without me, oh man, I'm gonna miss the bus."

Tired T bolted from their midst and was immediately buried in the fog, and the Second Squad was left with his duffel bag, the clicking sound of his boots hitting the ground, the drone of the bus, and his tired voice calling, "wait, wait, wait," receding into the fog like the diminishing refrain at the end of a song skipping on a record.

\* \* \* \* \*

Myles became silent and leaned back, watching the others who were looking at him, eyes wide and mouths hanging open. Doughboy had covered his face with his hands. Pifer was sucking heavily on a cigarette.

A sharp knock at the door made Schenk jump and everyone looked up quickly. The door opened slightly and the smooth narrow face of Ryder the clerk craned into the room. He scanned the group, stopped, and grinned and pointed at Myles, holding his index finger and thumb an inch apart.

"Hey, old-timer, you're so short I bet you could march between my fingers."



"What do you want, rimp?" Doughboy snapped. "Nobody invited your skinny ass in here."

"Relax, I got big news for Mr. Myles," Ryder said, pronouncing the title with exaggeration. "Your orders just arrived. You start out-processing in two weeks." Ryder shook his head. "Some guys have all the luck."

The door closed.

Schenk stared in awe at Myles.

"You're going home?"

"Sounds like it," Myles said.

"That's great, Myles," Pifer said. He dropped the cigarette on the floor and watched the smoke spiral up. "So, how does it feel to be almost a civilian?"

Myles shrugged. "Feels good... I guess. I don't know, tell you the truth, I don't feel that much different than an hour ago. Except I was running P.T. an hour ago and now I'm not... that feels good."

"Give it time to sink in," Pifer said. "Just give it time."

"Sure," Myles said. "Just need a little time to get used to the idea. But as soon as I feel a change, I'll let you know. Tell you all about it."

"You better, you chump. I'd cut your static line if I thought you were holding out on me and Doughboy. Give us a taste of that sweet stuff."

Myles smiled. "Don't worry, you'll get it soon

enough. Your orders should be coming real soon. You got here a bit after me. About a month, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, that sounds right." Pifer nodded and ground out the cigarette with the toe of his boot. "Just about a month after you. Or was it two months?"

"No, I'm positive it was a month. See, Doughboy got here just before the jump at DZ Rock--that was your cherry blast, right, Doughboy?"

"I think so," Doughboy answered. "That was in September, wasn't it?"

"No, late August, because we went to Turkey in September, right after the Greeks and Turks shot up Cyprus. '74, I think."

"You're right," Pifer said. "Rock was a month after the jump at DZ Hardcore in Sardinia. That was my cherry blast. Goddamn, hell of a place to make your first jump. Four hour flight, drop zone covered with boulders and scrub brush, and hot, hotter than a bitch, hot enough to melt your steel pot over your ears. Oh, man, you wouldn't beleive that place, Doughboy. It was rough, big time rough." He shook his head and kicked the crushed cigarette out into the middle of the room. "Wasn't it rough, Myles? Remember?"

"Sure I remember. Guys were puking left and right during the flight. Major Beckett broke his back." Myles stretched out on his bunk and spoke to the ceiling. "The chutes didn't open on a jeep. Tires bounced fifty feet in

the air, just like in the cartoons."

Doughboy got up and walked over to the window. "I guess we all got here about the same time, give or take a month or two. Trip, Big Kid, Navarro, Sweet Frank. All of us."

"Except for Tired T," Pifer said.

"Except for old T," Myles said. "He was always here."

The others began to shuffle towards the door.

Schenk walked over to Myles' bunk and tapped him on the knee.

"Congratulations, Myles. I'd say you've done your time. You won't have to put up with smart cherries like me anymore."

Myles propped himself up on his elbows. "No, I guess not. I'll be the cherry now, cherry civilian."

"Well, anyway." Schenk turned around and picked up the cigarette butt in the middle of the floor. Slowly, he peeled the paper and stripped the filter. "Good luck. Hope you don't get lost on the way home like your buddy Tired T." He laughed and looked for the wastebasket.

"Hell no, he won't get lost," Pifer said, standing up and clapping his hands together. "We'll get Mr. Myles here some lights, some big old C-130 landing lights to hang around his neck. Light a path a klick wide. Just make sure you hang them on the flag pole at Ft. Dix in Jersey so me and Doughboy can find the way after you. What do you

think, Doughboy, great idea, eh?"

Doughboy turned away from the window.

"Venice."

Pifer looked at him.

"What about Venice?"

"We should celebrate. Go to Venice for the weekend, do it up right. Give Myles a big time sendoff."

"Venice." Myles nodded. "Right."

"Venice. Sure, why not? Sounds good to me," Pifer said. "I've never been there before. Do you know how to get there, Myles?"

Myles bent over to unlace his boots. "I went once. When I first got here." For some reason he'd worn his inspection boots during P.T., and a long scratch marred the shiny surface of the right toe, slicing across the mirrored reflection of his eyes. He kicked off the boot in a high arc that landed near Tired T's sagging duffel bag. "Pretty sure I remember the way."

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