

BEYOND THE PALE

It seems Tuy Hoa represents a grave watermark in my evolution for I edged over some invisible line there, unnoticed at the time, to begin my association with the more unsavory characters in our world. Unable to remember alterations participating in its mayhem may've caused, I made adjustments in my view of right and wrong...an appropriate narrowing squint consistent with staying alive. What other options were there?

Perhaps it was time for the complimentary side of my gemini personality to lift itself upright. What did occur was gradual...subtly steeped in a trauma I was held witness to, like Ulysses tied to his mast. I've described, almost in excuse, its awesome violence and destruction as an explanation for what I became, but it was really my own choice.

It doesn't even matter! Somehow I came to hunger the killing, looting, and danger...in the end holding little value for existence except in its chilling moment. There it is. Sure, it's shocking, but I grew up in the very midst of the most distorted reality since Hitler's reign on earth. I didn't plan this out. It just fucking happened!

One moment I was your trusting native son, shrouded on my wheelhouse perch in a cloak of mist and starlight, the next strapped in a chopper's trapeze, blazing away on hunting trips. I wonder if my anger was somehow rooted in my shattered vision of love lost on that uncaring ocean? Nah, forget that too, there's no excuse at all! I'm just another all-American boy gone wrong over there like the rest...a product of the times, I propose.

Sometimes, coincidence brought me near the horror, but it was never far away and always accessible, if I wanted to play. Nothing shocked me anymore. My sensitivities had reversed on themselves, and I both sought and expected the bizarre at all times, as if in recompense for some all-consuming lie. When I was riding back in the Huey and the crew chief kicked the first gook out, I watched without surprise as he fell, wriggling and scratching at the air around him, to crunch into the canopy of trees far below.

I knew the trick. The next one was about to go too, and my only concern was keeping the big gun sprung back on its flexi-turret so he couldn't grab it on his way out. Sure enough, the third little fellah wanted to talk, so I pushed on the swing and resumed my hunt. It was a given I'd be the last through that door...and the only one alive. After I dove into the ocean, they'd hover over the Nez while I swam aboard to get the barbecue fired up in time for them to park their death tripper and join me on the party deck.

So life beyond the pale flourished at my remote station, in a land where anything was possible and no rules but your own applied. There weren't even clear sides, and all sorts of strange deals were made. A contingent of ROK's came to the beach every morning to kick each other around in violent Korean versions of kung fu, and I traded fish for lessons.

We met a guy named Tiny, who put "King Rat" to shame when it came to requisitioning necessities. He lifted a whole pile of planks from the officers' new mess hall at Pleiku in trade for some acid, carrying them dangling from a huge Skycrane all the way from the central highlands to the boat! Shit, the Nez was the main R and R port for the principal players who made this thing go 'round. We needed a proper party deck. Soon there were lounges, a projector, and even porno flicks for our hard working guests after their long days of chaos and murder.

Some of these guys went too far, I'll admit. There was Madman Hatcher who should've been locked up for his own good. They tried to catch him but he was beyond them...actually beyond us all. He was a legend wherever I went, and considering General Westmoreland's bounty was \$50,000 and Hatcher's \$25,000, the VC wanted him pretty bad for a civilian.

His brother was missing in action and Hatch was not the kinda guy to go through channels. He hated paperwork, so just flew over and started stalking around the countryside to find him, killing everyone that got in his way. I'd heard about him from the Recon guys, but became a believer after I'd known him a while. He gave me an AK-47, a string of ears, and five hairy scrotums to cover the brass balls on the shifting levers. They dried up nice and tight, adding a special touch for the visiting dogs of war.

I stopped hanging out with him after he took me to the dump, back of the runway. Showing me how to insert a double banana clip in his AK, he strafed a few old women picking through the C-rats and discards. Fuck me! I thought we were gonna shoot tin cans and bottles! Shocked, I tried to back away. He wasn't Haggmo and this wasn't some train we were tryin' to pull.

My remoteness bothered him and knowing I wasn't able to replace his brother, he left the boat that night. Jack made him off limits to me. It was a sad parting, though, as we'd formed some deep bond in our weeks together...but he was a very mixed up guy, according to my captain.

The whole place was so demented it was easy to form your own value system...completely correct for you and still totally wrong! The only law and order was the Army's Criminal Investigation Detachment, and they were sadsack clowns looking for fingerprints in the sand. Two of them came to the water's edge the day after Hatch left, and it was obvious right off they were from somewhere else. Jack kept them calling for a boat the longest time, telling me, "Ya

hafta put these types in their place from the start so they got some respect!" He kept yelling, "Who?" They'd shout clearly back, "C.I.D." flashing badges, turning red, and kicking the sand. Calm as a hayseed farmer, he'd yell back, "Who, what?" It was embarrassing...I could never pull off the brazen stuff he did!

They were on Hatcher's trail, cold and late, and lucky for them...he woulda made lampshades out of 'em. When they asked about the wood on the party deck and the kid with the drugs, Jack threw them physically off the boat...right into the water! He was screaming at them, "to see if they could find any better towboaters in the world who'd come to this shithole for any fuckin' money!" He was still furious with the military for leaving us exposed so long on that stretch of beach, trading Salems and warm beer for our lives.

It should be mentioned that Jack, fully disturbed, was about as dangerous as Hatch. We were in a class by ourselves...some sort of "untouchables" beyond reach of any authority and certainly the common mind. We were free agents under vague and verbal contract with who knows who...capable of anything, and actually a deadly force in our own right. Such a strange arrangement it was, us being some covert brown-water navy and all, that I'm still at war with the Veterans Administration. They won't even admit I was there!

One day while Tom was fishing off the stern and Lu Duc was washing rice in a bucket over the side, I glanced up from my painting to see a Huey carrying a chopper blade hung by a rope through its mid-section. The blade was swinging back and forth, and I wondered what kind of idiots would rig it like that. It swung like a pendulous scythe in the sky, but having observed Army mentality in action and concluding it too painful to watch, I went back to work.

Suddenly above the general cacaphony around us came a loud whack and the high pitched scream of a jet turbine gone out of control. I looked up...and to this day the scenario clicks down in slow motion, single frames from a stuttering projector. The blade had sliced up through their own and flightless, like a crippled insect, the body of the chopper, turning slowly, was coming down. Four men leapt through the gunner's door at thirty feet as the crippled clump, wounded mantis and clawing men, dropped to earth and exploded. From the huge fireball grotesque shapes groped like blind boogeymen in the flames.

I jumped off the boat onto the sand, running with my paintbrush still in hand--to do what, I'm unsure. I was the closest soul to reach for, and burning figures in a luminous fiasco from Dante's Inferno cried out to me. Then the ammo started to go off amid lotsa shouts of "Dig in!" Bullets and pieces of shrapnel were whizzing in every direction. Tremendous blasts rocked me and suddenly I was hit in the chest so hard I threw up. This was it!

Covered with blood, I groveled in sand and gore awaiting the angels of death. It wasn't my turn. I wiped sand, blood, and pieces of warm flesh from my mouth, waiting for the barrage to let up. Something wiggled next to me in the sand. It was a human arm, fingers groping in a determined clutch at life! A tattooed eagle clawed toward me, gold ring glinting through spurts of crimson.

Whoa, that's what hit me. It wasn't my blood! Cold sweat and nausea clouded my shallow grave as the arm twitched in final throes and the last crackle of exploding ammo hailed an end. Yup, there it was again--the smell of victory. I rolled onto my back staring at the blue above while spirits near me rose quietly to Heaven.

No one had to clean up and not much was left to bury. A greasy, black splotch on the beach tinged with mottled silver and gold marked their final resting place. I took two ammo cans back to the boat and hung them over the side to keep fish in. They were almost perfectly round, and like colanders, totally perforated. Lu and I were putting the morning's catch in them when a gruff voice called from the beach. It was the bad-ass sergeant and he wanted me to bring my kid to act as an interpreter.

We rode in his Jeep, Lu looking very frightened. I didn't think much about it, but he must've been through this before. The sergeant undid the latch on a Conex box, and in the dull glow of a bare bulb were three boys in black pajamas. One was dead and another lay gurgling in terminal throes next to him. The third sat on a table with his back against the wall, legs drawn up, glaring defiantly. The sergeant slapped him and bellowed, "Get yer fuckin' feet off my desk!"

Off balance, he grasped at his stomach but missed...and his intestines slopped out on the table, steaming wet, to slide in a glop to the floor. "Ask him how many VC behind us!" stammered the sergeant. "Go on ya little gook, or I'll cut yer balls off!" he glowered at Lu. Holding his trembling shoulders, I encouraged him to keep it together and translate as best he could so we could get outta there in one piece. The young VC was stoic to the end, spitting in his interrogator's face and vomiting, "Fuck you, GI!"

It was really gross! The sergeant got no info and we had no appetite for his lunch offer. We walked slowly back to the boat in a dazed silence, two innocent witnesses to far more horror than we needed. This place was getting more insane by the day...especially for simple fishermen. There would be no protection for us, and it was gonna compound on itself rather than get better. What we'd been in so far was not even a preview of what was to come. It was kinda like a snowball starting down a giant mountain...

We cruised in the open ocean a hundred miles to Danang at the top corner of the country, Jack in the sack with his ol' lady, Tom and me running the boat. It was refreshing to

be away for a moment, and we marveled at the stream of lights the fishing fleet made through the night with their flickering torches. They probably went from China all the way around Burma, like a bleeding neon gash staking off these wounded countries in warning to passers by.

Jack got a surprise R and R there, flying off to meet his wife in Bangkok while we tried fishing in that crowded harbor. Thinking back I remembered when this happened in happier times with Jake in Alaska. This time it wouldn't be socially-acceptable hunting and far from the American River.

Trying to maintain a low profile in this creepy port, we stayed aboard. Our reputation preceded us, nonetheless, and somehow creatures of excess located us by braille in the darkness. I tried to make contact with the local population but found them untrustworthy and full of hatred. Vietnamese women despised us so much that even in the height of an orgasm they wouldn't allow any genuine feeling to show, and it was difficult to be real with them in turn. They'd just take your money, lay down with their legs spread, and expect you to get on and off their cheap carney ride without comment or emotional contact. It was super lame, and I let them know...getting beat-up in a whorehouse after registering my feelings. The big gook who ran the place stole my knife and money and slapped me around yelling, "you numbah ten G.I."

Everything was backwards there on a scale from one to ten! So I stayed on the boat. I didn't mean to start shit, but everywhere I went scenes just erupted around me! Once I walked into a bar at the edge of town chock-full of black Marines. Sure, I looked out of place in shorts, bare feet, and long hair in the midst of what they considered their war, but they shoulda bought me a beer instead of harassing a civilian doing his part. Maybe they knew I was making ten times their pay, but when I told 'em I was hitchhiking to Hanoi to catch up with Jane, they completely lost their cool, and I had to haul ass outta there. Short fuses were standard issue in the area, but I could run like the fuckin' wind.

Tending my busted lip and bruised pride, I tried mentally to distance myself from the embroglio, climbing back to my hideaway on the roof and mourning the loss of my treasured blade. The sanctuary didn't work at all anymore, for the drama had advanced by now far beyond its powers. I'd slip ashore to untended radio Jeeps and call Kela, discovering this trick in Pleiku at the fire base from Tiny, "purveyor of all things."

Pulling a rip cord all night on Hill 880, lobbing salvo after salvo of one-five-five rounds innocuously into the void, I'd learned how the proper tone of voice, priority code, and any radio in the war could put me right in her bedroom! The only hassle was you had to press the button to talk and say "over" after every transmission. It was hard to get Kela into the routine, but great sport to cross realities

from a foxhole to her warm bed. I think that's when I made up the popular surfer saying, "What the fuck, over?"

I was on the phone in an ambulance when a familiar sight appeared in the harbor. Someone was swimming to the boat with their gear held above them. Wrapping up our halting conversation about her reemerging fidelity, my wishing it was true, and a possible upcoming R and R trip to Hawaii, I jumped in the skiff and motored out to the Nez. There in my deck chair with Dylan singing "Blowin' in the Wind" was Madman Hatcher in the flesh! He'd hunted his way a hundred miles and was full of stories and bizarre trinkets for me. It was really great to see him smile again...and since Jack wasn't around, he didn't need to know he was off limits.

Sure enough, it was open season out there, and his bag of grisly souvenirs hung curing in the breeze. He encouraged me to join his perfect science of terrorism on a little hunt in the neighborhood. I got a feeling he was headed across the demilitarized zone to start raising hell in Charley's backyard.

His version was quite clear. We weren't over here containing Communism at all, we were practicing war in the modern age. Vietnam was simply the Pentagon's school, perfecting new techniques unknown to those at home. As he crept across the embattled landscape waging his own campaign, he'd met a growing percentage of mavericks in our forces now operating beyond the pale themselves, leaving limited designs of containment behind. No more "expose and draw fire" tactics for them...large scale search and destroy ops were being replaced with hunter killer teams seeking out the enemy on his own terms.

Some of this was a natural result of frustration and hatred, so prevalent in a place where life was meaningless. He'd noticed military units doing what he was so infamous for--paralyzing the local population with fear. The CIA was orchestrating selective atrocities to disrupt the VC infrastructure and debilitate their organization through civil distrust. In the jungle, it was hard to find witnesses to a massacre, so a lot of this dirty work was being blamed on Charley.

Hatch laughed about that...sure they weren't taking credit for any of his work. He mutilated all his dead to make sure they'd never get to Buddha heaven, and this was not a Cong trademark. Our people took body counts, and some units left death cards to credit their kills. Hatcher was beyond them all...he'd take out ROKs, ARVNs, civilians, even Americans if they got in his way.

Another blood-stained sunset was underway...backdrop for fluttering gunships, predatory droids, and fabricated carrion crows of the air war, as our steaks broiled and we kicked back with our beers. Hatch poked one with his knife to see how it was doing and turned to me with a smile I'll never forget. "Best meal in this fuckin' country's Cong

filets and nobody knows it yet. I'll bring some aboard so you can see for yourself."

"Wow, man! Are you eating these people, or what?" I gasped, choking on my beer.

"It's not for survival, dumbfuck, more for show," he grinned, "to impress the girl. She was very pretty but definitely in the wrong company. I knifed the one screwin' her and the other one cookin' rice. There were six more in the waterfall, probably gettin' ready for their turn, but all they got was hot lead."

He turned the steaks, and the gleam came again in his eye. "You likee VC, huh, I told her, we see how much...and fileted a couple and barbecued 'em on their own fire while she sweated out our first date."

I swooned, blinking at him, but he seemed sincere and continued. "I'll tell you something, kid. With a little soy sauce and rice, medium rare Cong's the best-kept secret in the warzone. I even got the bitch to agree. Then I tied her hands around a tree and gave her a good fuckin' for dessert. I call her Mona." With that, he smiled and began eating.

The meat tasted strange, but I was sure it was mine. He finished the story of Mona, her eight consorts, and the open air restaurant. "She had the ultimate climax," he chuckled, "I stuffed a star cluster flare in her yoni, and she got off with a bang! Didn't you, darling?" Dangling from my machine gun barrel was her long, black-haired scalp.

Like so much I witnessed in that crazy place, I tried not to judge...and along with a vague hope I'd survive, wondered day by day, as more was revealed, what I'd be when I grew up and got outta there. My emotions were somewhat intact, and I felt closely aligned to this lonely soul in his wretched mission, but a curious alteration of values was creeping slowly over me.

Chances to rescue his brother were a million to one, but it wasn't the sole reason he was here. He'd come to face himself. What mattered was his rare resource I needed so desperately...the raw power of believing in yourself against all odds and fear. One didn't forgive his errors in judgment or faults of character...he was beyond all reckoning, a force unto himself, and even the jungle feared him.

I was cutting little bites so I could chew with my bruised jaw and busted lip, while he went on about crossing the DMZ, "because they probably hold the prisoners there," when he noticed. Real cool, like Haggard, he didn't come right out and ask how I got the busted lip, but subtly let me tell him by using his eyes. After sunset, when we were pretty greased, he took me by the shoulder and said, "Com'n, little buddy, we gotta get yer knife back."

Oh no! Going back to that whorehouse was not on my list of priorities! Then he pulled out my special gift--a small, black Colt twenty-five with a custom holster to wear under my

arm. "Nobody's gonna hurt you in this fuckin' pig pen now," he laughed, and we drank a few more beers and smoked another joint...as some of him rubbed off on me. I remember now.

It's almost weird how he cajoled me into showing him where that gook ran his nasty business, and to this day I'm careful being led by revenge to have someone else settle my affairs. However, there we were, in that sleazy bordello again with the sweating bully staring down Hatcher's pistol barrel as he groveled through his treasure box for my knife. It was incredible how much money and gold this narco pimp had accumulated during his reign in the local precinct, and I was most relieved when Hatch didn't rob him.

Our slimy host then began all sorts of apologies and numbah one G.I. crap when Hatcher calmly reached up, pulled his hair back, and slit his throat clean through with my knife! The big gook gulped, eyes popping out of his head, and began scurrying in smaller and smaller circles, probably looking for a bandaid. I don't know what I did. Blood squirted above his head while Hatch stood calmly wiping my blade. Then he said, "You numbah ten gook!" and pulled me by the hand outta there, treasure box in the other.

We sat in a beach bar while I drank about ten shots of Scotch, smoking joints and Camels in a tenuous effort to gather my composure. Hatch grinned, tapping his foot to some stray tune, totally engrossed in the now...while I pondered universal truths, karmic clemency, and probabilities of gooks I'd known appearing in the hereafter. There was no sense judging right and wrong, or questioning any of it either.

Hatch was his own law...and it worked! Charley feared him more than an air strike, and like he said, "If we wanted to win this war, we'd let the bastards have it!" After the halting progress I'd seen, I wished they'd unleash men like Hatch and get it over with. Fifty-eight thousand killed there, and more than that in suicides at home...for what? Peace with honor? What a crock of shit!

He spent the night on the boat, and Speedo, my UDT buddy, joined us about midnight with a fresh slice of adventure. By this time I was so screwed up I was ready for anything and eager to assert a newfound power, listening intently to his latest mission. Speedo had come from briefings at the White Elephant, an old French provincial building that served as I Corps headquarters. It seemed Westy was getting impatient and had passed secret orders to take out a bridge sixty-two klicks above the DMZ, in North Vietnam proper!

The task was given to Speedo's group, but they were scattered all over--J.C. in Chu Lai, and the rest in the Mekong near Cambodia. The operation was a go any time, and he was digging messing up Charley's own territory more than any of his other malicious assignments. Little Giant was shackled up somewhere in Danang, where we could find him, and

the rubber boat and explosives were requisitioned and waiting at the LZ.

Speedo caught the "we" shit right off and started whining about the trouble he could get in recruiting civilians. I asked him point blank if he knew anyone in 'Nam who could out-swim me or out-gun Hatcher, and we settled back in our deck chairs drinking in the moonlight while this soaked in. Boy, was I glad Jack was in Bangkok!

The next morning we trucked the Zodiac down to the harbor, stashed the twelve bricks of C-4 and sixty sticks of nitro under my bunk, and proceeded to practice using all Speedo's rubber gear. Little Giant was a tiny, snickering weirdo who reminded me of C.W. Moss, the driver in "Bonnie and Clyde." It wasn't hard to figure how he got his name, for the charges he set were always in the mega-range. Along with him came two snipers, attached more to protect than to hunt.

These guys were unprecedented in my experience, professional assassins with an aloofness far beyond me. Power and magnification kept their victims distant, and in this remote station they felt nothing personal as head hunters from afar. High point in their day was a clean decapitation from four-hundred yards with a sniper scope's view of reactions near the victim. They had a modified 700 Remington bolt and an M-14 with a Starlite Scope. Their monoculars were unreal and I did some heavy peeping Tom work around the city with them.

Our arsenal looked pretty heavy, and I hoped these guys could swim. Fully rigged in black rubber, carrying sixty pounds of explosives, I should've been lowered into the water by crane and launched. Little Giant pumped up my air bladders, and correcting my ballast, converted me into a virtual torpedo. We laughed and fiddled with our gear most of the day, and over an evening barbecue laid out a plan with some detailed aerial photos. It was definitely gonna be a turkey shoot! We'd been limited to such sterile rules Charley never thought we'd get down and dirty.

About nine, the choppers descended out of an ochre sky, picked us up by a long cable, Zodiac and all, and headed north following the vermilion line of the fishing fleet's tiny torches. We sat in a tight circle...Wynken, Blynken, and Nod...black rubber gargoyles, warm as could be, whistling along in our rubber tub just above a basalt ocean, to our rendezvous with the Bridge at Phuc Yiu.

After swinging over a silvery sea for what seemed like ages, they plopped us down and we disappeared, finding the river mouth by my knowledge of surf breaks, and burying the boat in the jungle under a huge pile of reeds. After two hours at this effort, we clambered back into the water, lurching about like creatures from the black lagoon.

There were gripping thrills coursing steadily through me. Like seeking God too far on drugs, was flaunting death a

venue to enlarge life? My senses heightened to acute awareness, I could feel danger if it was out there. Still an utter calmness came over me...a power I'd never felt before! We slithered up the sinewy tributary, tiny snorkels and a few bubbles, sole trace of our passing. With everything pre-measured from the recon photos, the snipers set up an observation post and Hatcher went creeping.

I was the mule, and spent most of the night swimming back and forth between Speedo and Little Giant. The bricks of C-4 went on three center spans with ten-second delay fuses, and thirty sticks at either end of the main pilings, set to go first. We sank the wire after joining up in mid-stream, and slipped back to the snipers' nest as dawn's first rays crawled through a thick jungle mist.

The part I didn't like was waiting. Even though I slept most of the day, being in a wet suit that long's a no-repeat for me. I tried to take it off when I realized these fanatics weren't going to blow the thing 'til the whole North Vietnamese Army was marching across, but had only painted my face and couldn't expose any skin. I spent my waking hours peering at girls through the monocular, while Speedo fretted with his black box, teasing me. "You, numbah one G.I., you likee that one? You likee save that VC pussy, huh?" He was a sadistic mother!

At dusk, trucks and trailers started moving. I was just wishing I was back on the boat, away from the swarms of insects, when a unit of NVA regulars started across in broken ranks, followed by nine big trucks. Boy, were these guys in for a surprise! Speedo flipped the locks off the detonator switches as the first soldiers got to our side, and the bridge became a "fully lit" target. I didn't know whether to dig in or keep watching when Little Giant began his trademarked snicker.

"Ker fuckin' whampf!" Both ends sagged into the water...all manner of men and materiel whooshing skyward! Naturally Charley panicked, and they clustered like Gaderene Swine on the center span, looking up for aircraft, as no one ever hit them from the ground above the DMZ. It didn't occur to them we were so near, but neither did the end of their world, which came right then...the whole works going straight up with a bunch of secondary explosions from the trucks in mid air. It was over. The snipers slipped their death sticks back into rubber bags, and we slithered into the darkening river flowing effortlessly downstream in a soupy mix of arms and legs and decapitated heads.

Off the coast a few miles, I got into a big argument about knifing the Zodiac and sinking a bunch of good equipment, but when the patrol boat came, SOP or Standard Operating Procedure prevailed and it all went to the bottom...the shroud of the sea folding over bubbles of our destruction, solitary witness a passing gull. Rats, I could've used that boat! They kidded me with another one,

SNAFU--Situation Normal All Fucked Up. I didn't think any of it was funny. It was kinda like the mail bouy. There could be a better way.

Back on the party deck, we celebrated our victory, and I weasled a monocular for the boat from McMullen, one of the Marine snipers. He told stories I couldn't believe, but when he drunkenly bragged of knocking out fifteen elephants in one herd, I got so wound up I told him to get off the boat! Political assassination was one thing, but going around kill-crazy was another! He called me a stupid shit because I didn't know they were NVA trucks on the Ho Chi Minh trail.

Tom couldn't get behind any of this, still rather ill from his dinner with the Korean officers who'd taken him to a special feast of raw monkey brain. Being a vegetarian was not the worst of it, for the poor creature was alive and bolted under the table, kicking and screaming, while the laughing soldiers relished the top of its head. Tom had picked politely at his kim chee. Wow, I thought, this place had everything!

The next afternoon, Hatch wandered north on his lonely mission and out of my life. I never heard from him again. I walked to the outskirts of Danang, finally letting his image fade into one of those peculiar misty evenings only the rice fields of Vietnam evoke. We didn't say much at the end. On my way back, some tears came, but no thoughts. I climbed aboard the Nez at sunset to find Jack and a crowd of officers partying it up, but I was far away and climbed onto the wheelhouse, curled in my bunker, and slept.

A filmy dream came, in which I'd saved Hatch from himself. In it, we'd just up and left the war...walked away like Marco Polo and his brother to cross the continent and tell them all that war made no sense. Beautiful women paid homage to heroes who'd stopped the killing. Kings and queens welcomed us into their courts, the old and young, wise and simple of many countries waited to hear our words...we being true free men who'd abandoned power and found light in its darkness.

Only the light of day woke me...another in the ugly business of war, and a sad one at that. Jack was given command of a new six-thousand horse tug from Japan. Tom was Captain now, I the First Mate, and we stood silently in the wheelhouse watching the ocean slip by as we headed south, towing a huge barge loaded with two-hundred cattle. Jeez, the Nez without Jack was like a woman without her man, a ship without a rudder.

Not a word passed between us for twenty-four hours while I thought about Jack, Hatcher, Haggmo, and the few "real people" who'd shaped my life. Why did they all have to leave me? I watched the jagged mountains balance above the white beaches....somewhere out there Hatch was creeping alone, maybe waving to me, while around him the jungle reeked in savagery. I went on deck, so Tom couldn't see, and waved

one last time.

I wondered how the cows were doing, as the creaking towline swished behind us. I knew they were miserable but had no idea how horrible their fate would truly be. The barge was a high-sided affair, a converted LST, and the Army's moronic forklift operators had speared so many asphalt barrels the cows now rolled in a hell-hole of black goo, seasick in all five stomachs, struggling like prehistoric sloths from the La Brea Tarpits. Could things get worse? Count on it in the 'Nam! ARVN helicopters came with cargo nets and fished them out of the muck, lifting their braying and kicking bodies into a battle zone, and dropped them to starving troops a half-mile below.

It all fed a flourishing depression that began to consume me. The mood swing was precipitated by losing my Captain, but included some twenty-twenty hindsight, like I shoulda gone to the dream-world of Haight-Ashbury where the cops would've never found me, and miscellaneous kooky options to what was becoming a clusterfuck of unprecedented proportion here. Besides, I didn't have a clue how to get outta this nightmare. I didn't even have a passport! Come what may, I knew only one truth then: "Wherever you go, there you are," so what did it matter?

Soon we were back in Nha Trang for a layover on the way down the coast to the country's southern tip and the Mekong River. Lu took me into town to meet his sister, Mimi. She was so beautiful, and he told her so many wonderful things about me, that she packed her stuff on the spot and came with us. She was lovely...just what I needed to survive then. Through the next portion of the drama, she became my sole joy and refuge from the madness, making my food and waiting in bed to soothe and relieve what was taking me over.

The trip South was uneventful except for running over a fishing boat. According to Lu, who talked to the man we found jumping up and down on the barge early one morning, he'd tried to go between it and the tug. The giant cable cut his boat in half, and he'd climbed up the yoke just before the barge rolled over him. If that dummy had been a VC and known he was riding six-hundred tons of napalm, we would've been cooked. The fireball would've consumed the ocean we rode on! We set him ashore at Phan Rang, and I heard our people gave him three-grand for his hundred-dollar boat. Oh well, I got to visit a beautiful Buddhist temple on a mountain, holding hands with Mimi as we toured the countryside, the odd couple everywhere.