

FIRE TEAM

A novel by

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CHAPTER I

Lance Corporal Johnnie Edwards took a hit off a joint powerful enough to pop his damn head off. The Thai grass was outstanding. He held the acrid smoke in long enough to look sideways at Private First Class Dave Wilson, then blew the whole lungful with an explosive laugh. Dave was so stoned that his eyes were moving independently, and Johnnie, thinking that was the funniest thing he had ever seen, curled into a ball, convulsed with laughter.

Dave turned slowly, peering through a fog visible only to him, a question forming with infinite slowness on his lips.

“What the fuck you laughing at, man?”

Johnnie tried to catch his breath, his cheek pressing down into the dirty sand. “You, you fucking stoner. I’m laughing at you.”

“Oh,” Dave said distantly and then looked back out over the beach to the South China Sea stretching off to the eastern horizon. “That’s cool.” Which sent Johnnie off again.

White Beach was a few clicks from the center of Da Nang and was misnamed. Maybe the sand had once been white, but now it was gray and dotted with trash: bottles, seaweed, candy wrappers. Oily water slapped listlessly at the slate shoreline and the air was never free of the sound of aircraft — choppers from the Marine Air Field and jets from the big strip nearer to town.

On Sundays like this, at midday when the tropical sun scorched away any gathering

clouds, the beach filled with off-duty soldiers. They lay on their cheap white towels, most of them stoned or drunk, their skin burning quickly to various painfully incandescent hues. Johnnie had already learned to recognize those who were there for the day and those who were on in-country R & R. The day trippers were still awkwardly mobile, knowing they had to be able to function tomorrow; the guys on R & R, like Johnnie and Dave, had been drinking or smoking for so long that their legs threatened never to work again.

Johnnie forgot why he was laughing and pushed himself up to a sitting position. A breeze drifted in off the quiet water and pushed a stray curl of his brown hair up off his lightly freckled forehead. He hugged his knees to keep from falling over backwards and followed Dave's gaze out to sea.

“What are you looking at, man?”

Dave handed him the joint. “This.”

Johnnie had no memory of passing Dave the joint, but he didn't let that bother him and took a deep toke. Good shit. Johnnie liked being this stoned; the total disconnection was so peaceful, especially after the past few days. Only now could he feel the muscles in his legs and back beginning to recover. There was only one problem: he had also been drinking beer and his bladder was full almost to bursting. He looked to the south, down towards Officer Territory, where the harsh-voiced Vietnamese who sold baked chicken claws and sun-dried fish congregated and where there were latrines.

Three sailors walked past him, heading toward the vendors, their arms around three overdressed Vietnamese girls. Something about the way the light bounced off the girls' raven black hair caught Johnnie's eye and he snatched up his little Instamatic camera and peered through the viewfinder. When the girls swam into sight, he pressed down on the shutter release. He wound the camera and took another shot.

“Damn they're pretty,” he thought.

“Who?” Dave said.

“Jesus, that's spooky, man. I was just thinking, and you answered me. Wow.”

Dave nodded. "That's cool," he said, looking out at the sea. A flight of three Hueys roared by low overhead, rotors heavily thumping the air, but he didn't notice.

Johnnie watched the sailors with their girls walking on down the beach, admiring the way everybody's butts moved. He felt no need for a woman, but he acknowledged the obligation to look. When the group passed the concrete block restrooms, Johnnie remembered that he had to go. He started working up the courage to get to his feet to make the journey to the head. It would be a long trip. One thing Johnnie knew...he knew he was stoned.

Damn, he thought, I'll have to stand all the way up and walk there. I'll be damned if I'll crawl that far.

He could picture himself tottering erect and looking the eight miles straight down to his tiny little feet so far away. Then he would have to find his footing on his cheap rubber shower shoes, staggering across the beach front, trying not to kick sand on someone who would get mad enough to beat the shit out of him. If someone beats the shit out of me now, he mused, I won't feel it and I could get beau coup fucked up.

He pictured himself weaving around people stretched out on the sand, enjoying the sun or a nap. He might even see somebody he knew and wave at him, smiling in a lopsided way, wishing he could remember the dude's name.

And then he would get to the heads and there would be this big, long line and he'd have to stand there like an idiot, trying not to pee in his shorts, while the line slowly moved into the foul-smelling little shed with its grime-encrusted trough. When he imagined the extreme relief of pissing, he started to believe that the trip might be worth it.

Then he'd probably catch his dick in the zipper of his pants and laugh up at the tall brother standing next him and mumble something unintelligible as he tried to disengage the shark's teeth from his sensitive foreskin. Oh, fuck it. As stoned as he was, he wouldn't feel it anyhow. He could just yank the tab down and be a little more careful the next time.

Then the trip back up the beach, all the while trying to remember where he had left Dave sitting and staring out at the placid ocean. He would have to walk in circles, peering stupidly at

people's faces, looking for his friend. He even imagined the warm feeling he would get when he saw Dave again after such a long absence. These days he didn't like to stray too far away from Dave.

It would be an immense relief to plop back down on his towel and sip warm beer from the bottle that Dave had forgotten to finish before eating the roach.

Johnnie decided not to undertake such an arduous journey.

Dave tapped him on the arm.

"Here, man," Dave said.

"What?" Johnnie asked him, turning to see Dave swinging something on a string at him.

"Here's your camera," Dave replied, holding the little plastic box by its black nylon strap.

Johnnie looked around him, patting the sand. "How did you get my camera? I just had it."

"You gave it to me when you went to the head," Dave said, shrugging.

Johnnie took the camera, thinking Dave had better not smoke any more — he was one stoned dude! The great thing was that Johnnie no longer had to pee so bad. A bug had bit his dick, but that was better than drowning in his own urine.

Johnnie held the camera up to his eye again, peering through the viewfinder, occasionally clicking the shutter and winding the film forward. He caught sight of a man in uniform of the day walking from soldier to soldier on the beach, speaking to some of them. They all waved him off. Even as doped as Johnnie was, he could tell the man was an officer.

"Jesus Christ," he growled. "Fucking pigs. Can't even leave us alone on the beach."

As Johnnie watched the officer through the viewfinder, he was suddenly certain that the man was looking for him and Dave. As soon as he thought that, the officer looked right at him and strode purposefully in his direction.

"Shit," he muttered and pulled the camera away from his face. The viewfinder had made everything seem small and far away and suddenly the officer was standing right at his feet. Johnnie immediately recognized him as a lieutenant (too young to be anything else) and as Army. He dropped the camera and nudged Dave.

“Yo,” he said, quietly. Dave shifted position slightly, and without even looking Johnnie knew his friend was no longer staring in stoned fascination at the water. Dave was a cool head and didn’t mess around when it counted.

The lieutenant, facing into the early afternoon sun, shaded his eyes and said, “Lance Corporal Edwards? PFC Wilson?”

Johnnie looked up at the lieutenant for a long moment, trying to figure what his best response was. Suddenly he could feel the marijuana like syrup in his veins, filling the insides of his eyes with molasses and making his brain float in and out of focus. He tried to grab a piece of reality and hold onto it. Now was no time for letting the dope fuck everything up. Damn! He hadn’t expected this so soon!

“I’m Edwards, sir. And this is Dave Wilson.”

Johnnie sat up a little straighter, as if sitting at attention. The officer squatted down on his haunches, looking the two Marines over carefully.

“What happened to your trousers, Edwards?” the man said, catching Johnnie off guard.

Johnnie was wearing what had, just that morning, been a nice pair of civvie slacks. After stupidly wearing them to the beach, and being too lazy to go back to the barracks to get a pair of shorts, he had borrowed Dave’s switchblade and cut them off at mid-thigh. The jagged cloth reminded him of Robinson Crusoe and he found himself wishing he were alone on a desert island.

“Just my, uh, regulation beach wear, sir.” Goddamned if some shavetail is going to buffalo me, he thought, willing the desert island to fade away.

“I’m Lieutenant Harry Siddons. Is Corporal Michael Taylor around here anywhere?”

Johnnie didn’t have to look at Dave to feel his friend’s jaw tighten. And he knew that Dave was now staring at the lieutenant.

“No sir. He doesn’t come to the beach much, sir,” Johnnie spoke, wishing he could go jump in the water to clear his head. He needed to think quickly. “Why, sir?”

“I’m with Army Intelligence,” Siddons said, evenly, slowly, so they could understand

him. "I'm following up on your report about that last action, the recon. Just routine."

"Action, sir?" Dave said, drawing the Lieutenant's attention to himself, giving Johnnie a little time to pull his thoughts together. Dave was good that way.

"I handled the interrogation of the chopper pilot you boys brought back. That was damn fine work. Must have been rough out there."

Johnnie figured that they had better start talking or the Army looie would think they were hiding something.

"We've seen worse, sir. Did you get anything useful out of that guy? Boy, I'll tell you, it was sure freaky seeing a gook chopper up there over our heads. Jesus, I guess I can understand how they must feel when they hear some of our Hueys coming in to smoke 'em," Johnnie rattled.

"Scared the fuck out of me, sir," Dave joined in. "Didn't know whether to shit or go blind. We all fired at the goddamned thing, and it went down."

"We must have been pretty damned lucky," Johnnie kept the ball rolling. "Who'd of thought we'd ever get a shot at a gook chopper and get lucky?"

The way the Lieutenant just sat there and nodded as they blathered on bothered Johnnie; it looked as if he knew everything already. Army Intelligence? Shit, he wondered, is this fucker CIA? Shag had told them to start expecting serious questions from officers up the chain of command along about Monday as the report circulated, but he never said anything about an Army looie showing up on Sunday, looking like nothing could surprise him.

"Yeah, it must have been quite a show," the Lieutenant mused. "You know, Taylor, in his report, said you guys ought to get Bronze Stars."

"Bullshit."

Dave spoke flatly, without emotion, but something in his voice made Johnnie start a little. Dave met the lieutenant's gaze for a moment, silently, then looked back out to sea, not speaking.

"He said your fire team turned the whole thing around, probably saved a lot of lives," Harry continued.

Johnnie could feel something rising in Dave and spoke quickly.

“Well,” he said, praying the Lieutenant would simply vanish before either he or Dave fucked up, “an awful lot of guys bought it out there.”

“They all would have if you men had not gotten on the NVA’s flank.”

Dave shrugged and looked away. Johnnie didn’t trust his mouth to say the right things, so he didn’t open it.

The lieutenant looked from one to the other for a long moment, thinking hard about something. Johnnie wanted very badly to know what.

“What did you need to know, Lieutenant?” he asked.

The officer made a decision and then rose to his feet. “Well, I really needed to talk to Corporal Taylor. He filed the report and was the ranking man when you guys got in. Do you know where he is?”

Dave and Johnnie looked at each other. Johnnie could honestly say, “No, sir. He’s Third Squad leader, but we’re in First Squad. Or we were. Anyway, he sort of keeps to himself.”

“You lost one of your fire team out there, right? Haskins, wasn’t it?”

Johnnie couldn’t think of a damn thing to say to that so he just nodded. Dave spoke softly, “That’s right sir. Caught one on the way back.”

Siddons nodded. “What about the other member of your fire team, Private Nathans?”

“He didn’t feel like coming to the beach, sir,” Johnnie said. “I’ll bet he’s just hanging around the barracks. But Shag’s the one you want to talk to.”

“Shag?”

“Oh, yes sir, I’m sorry. Nobody calls Taylor by anything but Shag. You know why we all call him Shag, Dave?”

Dave slowly looked up at the officer with his pale blue eyes. “Haven’t got the slightest idea. Sir.”

The silence grew long and uncomfortable. Finally two young boys walked by, carrying between them a tattered crate full of clinking beer bottles still cold enough to condense a little sweat. Johnnie licked his lips, suddenly wanting a beer more than anything in the world.

The lieutenant signaled the boys over and bought four bottles, holding two of them out to Dave.

“No, thank you, sir,” Dave said.

“It’s just a couple of beers, Marine,” the lieutenant said, his voice soft. “Just a couple of beers on a hot day.”

After a moment, Dave took his two bottles and Siddons held the other two out to Johnnie.

“Jesus, thank you, sir,” Johnnie stammered, trying to get to his feet.

“No, no, Edwards,” the Lieutenant waved his hand. “You just sit and enjoy the sun. Have a beer, but don’t smoke any more dope. You’re high enough as it is. We’ll be talking tomorrow. See if you can get straight by then.”

“Yes sir.”

Lieutenant Siddons smiled down at them. “Remember, you’ve got to be straight in the morning. Take it easy.”

He took a step, then turned and looked back. “That was good work out there, out in the bush.” He smartly saluted them, but before they could return it, he was striding off towards town.

Dave’s church key hung around his neck, along with his tags and a peace symbol. He cracked his two beers, handed one to Johnnie without looking at him and drank half of his own right down. Both he and Johnnie watched the Lieutenant walk away and didn’t say anything. They didn’t have to.

Each knew what the other was thinking.

#

1st Lieutenant Harry Siddons strode purposefully away from the two doped-up Marines, following the waterline north. Without looking back, he ducked around the remnants of an old stone breakwater and leaned against the moss-shrouded rocks, sweating profusely in his summer class A’s. He turned and slowly peered around the wall.

The two men, a hundred yards away, hadn’t moved, and as far as he could tell, they weren’t looking his direction.

He swallowed a hot ball of fear. Jesus, he thought, what the hell am I doing?

The whole crazy situation was bad enough, but now these two Marines!

Even stoned out of their minds, flat on their backs baking in the merciless sun, they were obviously still on edge and ready for action at the slightest hint of trouble. And worst of all – they were hiding something. What had happened out there? Think hard, what could it be?

As hard as was for Harry to believe, it had only been two days since the whole thing had started, since Harry had first heard about the gook...

CHAPTER II

It was late Friday afternoon and Harry Siddons was leaving the base when he first heard about the gook.

“Gook? What gook?”

As he turned, Harry felt his shoulders slump. He had nearly made it through the gate; a few more steps and he could have left it all behind. It had been a hard, frustrating week; a promising interrogation had proved meaningless, leaving Harry with nothing but a logbook full of wasted time, and no information worth knowing.

A slight breeze — the remnants, he knew, of a stronger, cleaner wind down near Da Nang Bay — stirred his short blond hair. He pushed his barracks cap up a little to let the current drift soothingly over his forehead, trying to wish the bad news away.

Corporal Stern threw Harry a quick salute which Harry reluctantly returned.

“Major Johnson wanted me to find you, Lieutenant,” Stern said, panting a little from trotting after Harry. “The Arvens just brought in a gook and the Major thinks you ought to look him over.”

Though it was late in the afternoon, the sun filled the thick air with oppressive heat and the corporal’s face trickled heavy lines of sweat. Harry stared at Stern’s placid Midwestern features long enough to make the kid fidget uncomfortably. A hot bubble of anger rose in Harry. He didn’t like the corporal very much. Stern thought that being assigned as a clerk to Intelligence made him some sort of spook, and often walked around with a swagger, intimating knowledge he didn’t have. And Harry couldn’t help but notice that Stern’s fatigues were stretched taut across his belly. Jesus, Harry thought irritably, how do you put on weight when it’s a hundred fucking degrees every day?

Harry took a deep breath, smelling the pungent red oil from the vendors’ cook stoves just outside the gate.

“They put him in the cage?” Harry asked.

“Yes sir.”

“Did Johnson say if this gook was important?”

“Well, he didn’t say it straight out, but I think he wants you to go to work on it right away, sir.”

“But he didn’t say that?”

“No sir, not directly.”

“Where’d they pick this one up?”

“Up north somewhere. Around Hue, I guess.”

Harry scowled into the bronze sky, hating the feel of the sun on his face. The clouds stacked in the west would spill over the ridge before sunset. It wasn’t monsoon season yet, but it would be soon. Harry looked forward to the rain; it turned the choking red dust into mud, keeping it out of his nose.

“There’s nothing happening up north,” Harry mused. “All the action is over in Pleiku.”

“Yes sir.” Corporal Stern nodded, acting as if he understood what Harry was talking about. Harry watched a drop of sweat run down the kid’s cheek.

Corporal Stern provided clerical support to the half dozen Army Intelligence officers, including Harry, who had the incredibly bad fortune to be assigned to duty as adjuncts to the Marine Corps Intelligence Unit in Da Nang. As always on a Marine Corps base, the facilities were not only sub-standard, but often non-existent. Harry felt a deep, rich scorn for the gung-ho jarheads who seemed to thrive on discomfort and bad food.

It occurred to Harry that this interrogation could conceivably be the one that got him noticed, the one that assured his transfer to Saigon where, if the living wasn’t easy, at least it was more civilized. All it took was one good piece of information and a well-written report. Bill Vigal had hit gold with that business about the arms cache. A dozen lousy mortars buried beneath some hootch out in the boonies and three weeks later, Vigal was living it up at the Central Liaison office in Saigon. Word was he was shacking up with a girl who was half-Chinese and half-French.

There was always such a chance, but not much of one. Besides, opportunity or no, Harry had had enough of prisoners, enough of questioning, enough of the Hut, for one week. A guy needs a break, he thought. It isn't the job; a guy just needs a break now and again.

"Fuck it," Harry decided. "I'll look at him in the morning. Notify Captain Tran. Oh eight hundred at the Arven Hut."

Harry noticed that the heat, or maybe the crummy Marine Corps chow, was upsetting his stomach a little bit. Disappointed that his Saturday would be spent in the Hut, Harry forgot about Corporal Stern and turned away, not returning the non-com's automatic salute. Harry wanted to get off base, get into his civvies and relax a little bit. It had been a long day and he needed to get laid.

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Angling off Doc Lap Boulevard, Bo-do Street was just barely wide enough to permit the passage of a small car or pedicab, but during the day the press of countless pedestrians kept all but the most aggressive drivers back on the main thoroughfares. The narrow street collected the heat of the sun and wadded it into humid pockets, like invisible clouds of incinerator gas. Harry's slow, deliberate pace kept him from sweating until he passed through one of those tight little furnaces. Then his forehead prickled, and all the discipline he could muster wouldn't keep the perspiration from seeping out from under his cover and onto his face.

He stopped at a tiny shack just barely larger than the rickety old cooler that made up the front wall. He dug in his pocket for some piasters and bought a Coke from the indifferent old woman sitting behind the machine. A skinny little boy watched with prematurely wise eyes as Harry opened the bottle with a syrup-encrusted church-key dangling from a sticky string. The soda wasn't very cold, but the day's heat made it seem so. He imagined the Coke soaking into his cells from the inside, replenishing his body's store of liquid. He tried a quick smile on the kid, but received no response. The boy met his eyes with an unwavering gaze.

Cackling Vietnamese voices filled the street with their shrill sing-song cadences. The shouts of the peddlers and the yammering of the old women haggling over cans of chicken and

American cigarettes rose to meet the music from radios and tape players echoing out of the second story rooms – rooms rented by American soldiers who wanted a crash pad in town to escape the confinement of the base. The Rolling Stones or the Doors signified a white guy, the Temptations or Smokey Robinson a brother. One of the things that Harry hated about Da Nang was all the damned music he had to listen to. And he didn't like the way the music hovered over the street, beating it's way down through the strident voices of the people, creating a rising and falling cloud of noise that reminded him of hungry mosquitoes hovering around his ears.

He set his empty bottle down on the machine and shouldered his way through the fish-smelly crowds. The sugary fluid had only made his thirst worse.

By the time he climbed the narrow stairs to his room, he had a slight headache. The noise of the Friday night soldiers gearing up for the weekend, the heat bouncing off the rough pavement, and the knowledge of what waited for him at the Hut in the morning congealed into a small red thorn that began inserting itself into his left temple. Just a little thorn, but he knew that if he didn't get rid of it soon, it would take root and throb through the night. He had spent too many nights that way the last few weeks.

When he opened the door to his little one room apartment, he didn't see Li waiting for him. A flush of irritation crowded up his neck, but then she stepped in from the bathroom, smoothing the white shift she invariably wore over her flat little body. She flashed her strong white teeth at him.

“Hi, Harry. You bring food?”

Her grin vanished immediately when she saw that he was not carrying anything. That almost made Harry smile. One of the reasons he liked Li was that she didn't care enough about him, one way or the other, to spend any effort lying to him, or masking her true feelings. Harry knew the only reason she looked forward to his arrival was to see if he had brought any food with him. Her indifference somehow made him comfortable. It was so undemanding.

An American lieutenant in Da Nang could have his choice of eager female

companionship, and Harry had sampled what was available. Up until a couple of months before, he had shared the room with an energetic girl named Hoa, but had quickly tired of her complete subservience. Her enthusiasm in his presence, feigned or not, had made him feel guilty when he ignored her. Two days after he told her to leave, he saw her clinging joyously to a very attentive Marine Corps captain.

Li, on the other hand, from the first night he had met her at the little bar he frequented on Doc Lap, had acquiesced to anything he suggested, including moving in with him, but without acting grateful for his attention. She never fawned all over him or asked him about his family. She never pretended to love him, so he never had to pretend to love her.

“What the fuck, Harry, I have hunger.”

Harry threw his hat on the little table next to the sagging old brass bed, unbuckled his pistol belt and hung the heavy .45 over the back of the chair. He peeled his shirt off.

“We’ll get some food after.”

“Fuck you, Harry. Let’s eat now.”

But her voice was edged with that little whine that meant that she had already accepted her defeat. He pulled off his T-shirt, mopping his forehead with it as he sat down on the bed. She frowned down at him, the planes of her face already showing age lines around the eyes. How old was she, eighteen, nineteen years, maybe? God, nobody ages faster than gooks, Harry thought. Still, when she smiles, she’s prettier than most, and there’s something about the way her thick black hair frames her face. The tip of her tongue touched one of her full lips. Pretty? Hell, in this light she’s beautiful.

“I think I need another man, Harry. You leave me here alone all day. I get horny. I have hunger. I go fuck a nigger, Harry.”

He laughed. “You fuck another man, what’ll I do to you?”

She pulled the shift off over her head. Harry looked at her graceful body with its thin tuft of pubic hair. She ran her hands over her slender hips. They were only slightly wider than a boy’s.

“I fuck another man, you cut my tits off, right, Harry? You no want Black Syph.”

Harry looked at the large brown nipples standing on her narrow chest, his throat dry again. “You haven’t got any tits, Li. I think maybe somebody already cut them off.”

She laughed and kneeled down in front of him, unlacing his shoes. “That’s right, Harry. Nigger-man, he cut off my tits. ‘Cause I fuck a honkey like you.”

Her voice was challenging. She knew and understood his mood already, and accepted it. He was often angry on Friday nights, often in need of the release that her sex could supply, and he liked her to bear the brunt of it. She didn’t mind. Nothing he would do could hurt her enough to make it matter.

As she pulled his shoes off, as he looked down at her eyes shining beneath those long lashes, he was struck by a sudden urge to pull her to her feet and ask to her to put her clothes on. Maybe they could go get something to eat; maybe they could talk for once; maybe it didn’t always have to be so damned....

Looking at the tiny brown woman on her knees at his feet brought the blood rushing to his head and gave him a powerful erection. He unbuttoned his trousers and let it push out through the flap of his shorts. She pretended not to notice, but she knew that it was there. It was always there when she kneeled before him. Neither of them said anything until she had set his shoes down at the foot of the bed and pulled his socks off. Then she slowly looked up to his face.

“O.k., Harry, now I eat, huh?”

He nodded, always amazed how deeply she could take him into her little mouth.

A little later, he picked her up off the floor and placed her on the bed, still kneeling. He pushed her shoulders forward and entered her from behind. He settled into a rhythm. When he wanted her to move a little bit, he pushed farther into her. She jumped with pain and it made her giggle. She reached under herself and put the points of her long fingernails on his balls.

“You got a big dick, Harry.”

He twisted a nipple under his thumb hard enough to make her wriggle a little to the right. She scratched at his balls and laughed every time he hurt her. Sweat poured from his face and

flowed up the crevasse of her spine toward her shoulder blades.

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It was about three-thirty in the morning when he woke up and had to take a piss. He staggered a little getting to the john and then let go in a great rushing stream, splattering the toilet. He had drunk too much beer that night. He deliberately let the final spurt drip on the floor. When he thought about Li bending over to clean it up, he started to get erect again. Shit, he thought, I'm still half-smashed.

Light from the window fell on Li's tiny round buttocks. A little fan with silent plastic vanes whirred back and forth, pushing an artificial breeze past Harry's chest. Half-hard, he stepped over to the window and looked down at the dark alley below. Two G.I.'s lurched from one side of the narrow pavement to the other, laughing drunkenly, sometimes bouncing off the concrete walls enclosing the street, each just barely successful in holding the other up. Behind them, three ghostly figures flitted silently along from shadow to shadow, waiting for one of the Americans to fall.

Harry picked up an empty beer bottle and threw it down onto the concrete, where it shattered like an explosion. The inebriated soldiers didn't notice the sound, but the three wraiths looked up at the dark windows above them, pale faces reflecting the city's ambient glow, and surrendered their prey, drifting into the gap between two buildings and disappearing.

Harry found that he sometimes enjoyed Viet Nam. He had worried all the way through ROTC that he wouldn't be able to take the bullshit of the service; and he had very nearly been right. But then luck went his way. Assigned to Army Intelligence, he hit Da Nang just before the big Tet Offensive. When the shit hit the fan, he was lucky enough to score two important interrogations. Both he and his interpreter, Captain Tran of the ARVN, knew the prisoners had important information and they had worked hard, mercilessly, to extract it. Harry's reputation as an efficient go-getter was established and he thought he was on track, until the bad luck hit. Due to a personnel shortage, he and Tran suddenly found themselves attached to the Marine Corps Intelligence Unit, helping the jarheads make sense of what little information they gathered.

Harry had quickly realized that Viet Nam wasn't so bad as long as you weren't some dumb-ass grunt out humping the boonies getting your head blown off. Intelligence work was mostly paper-pushing and report-writing. And the Hut...well, he could stand even that if it finally got him to Saigon.

Patience, he thought, that was the trick. This screwy assignment with the Marines was a temporary aberration, that's all. And Tran's absolute ruthlessness in those interrogations, though sometimes still shocking to Harry, was his best hope. That's what it's like over here, he told himself. That's what it's been like for a thousand years. It's just a matter of getting used to it.

Three weeks before, First Lieutenant Harry Siddons had turned twenty-three.

Outside the window the air was dark and still. Faint, faraway voices floated through the humid night in random waves. The fan tried to cool the sweat on his face. A shiver jolted his shoulders and made the hair on his arms stand on end. He pulled away from the empty window and the other-worldly echoes of the cloud-shrouded city.

The chill he felt in the torrid night drew him toward Li. She was, at least, some sort of contact, though he knew it would make no difference whether or not he woke her. She didn't stir when he got back into bed.

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Even in the early morning the street sent surges of harsh sound up through the window. The din pulled Harry from a confused dream dripping with sweat, but left him hanging on the edge of consciousness, not quite awake, dimly aware of the wet sheet tangled around his waist. The sun, just now rising over the city, was suddenly molten lava flowing into the room. Li's feather-light arm lay carelessly across his chest, as if it had been pulled from the shoulder socket of a plastic doll. Her skin seemed to burn against his.

He blinked stinging salt out of his eyes and sat up, the girl's arm sliding off him. She murmured something and curled into a ball. Harry's mouth was as dry as shoe-leather and still felt the heat of last night's fiery red rice. His tongue stuck to his palate when he tried to work up a little spit. His bladder felt as if it would burst, but he took the time to light a cigarette and suck

a hot puff of smoke into his lungs before he went into the head to relieve himself.

When he came out, Li had turned on her back and was looking idly in his direction. She had kicked the sheets off, her little body perfectly dry in the sweltering humidity. She scratched idly at her pubic delta and reached for a cigarette. She held the burning Marlboro with its glowing coal cupped into her palm.

“Hey,” she said, tensing the muscles in her stomach just enough to send a ripple through her brown skin.

“You have to be crazy,” Harry said. “It’s too damn hot.”

She shrugged, and took a drag on the cigarette. Smoke curled out of her mouth as she spoke.

“You going to the base, huh? It’s Saturday. You got somebody to talk to there?”

Harry reached for his pants, smelling her on him as the sweat stuck to his inner thighs. He decided to stop at the Officer’s Quarters and take a shower before going to the Hut.

“Yeah, not that it’s any of your business. I’ve got some work to do.”

She rolled over onto her stomach facing him as he put on his shirt.

“What do you do to them, Harry? You use a pliers? Maybe some bamboo splinters?”

He fastened the last button on his utility shirt and stepped over to the bed, looking down at her, aware of the moisture that was beginning to bead on his forehead.

“It’s too fucking hot to take any shit off of you. Mind your goddamned mouth or you’re out of here. Understand?” The minute he said it, he regretted his harsh tone, but he couldn’t shake the irritation her comment had caused.

She just looked calmly up at him. Suddenly he was furious with her. Her damned indifference! He twitched his right hand as if he were going to slap her, hoping to get her to flinch. Her eyelids didn’t even flicker. Somehow, he knew that if he had swung at her, she wouldn’t have ducked. He could imagine the feel of her tiny bones under his hand as he hit her. She would do nothing but rub the tender spot and then look at her hand as if the wound had come off into her palm. He could probably crush her skull, but he doubted if he could hurt her.

He sat on the bed and pulled on his socks and then his shoes. He could feel her on the mattress behind him, not giving a shit what he did. If he wanted to hit her, he could. If he wanted to fuck her, he could. If he gave her a thousand piasters to buy a dress, she would have taken it with the same shrug with which she would have sloughed off the pain of a blow.

He tied his shoelaces quickly. He wanted to get out of the room. Li's indifference was exciting in the night, but somehow, in the morning, it always made him angry. They had shared this room for nearly two months and she had never shown any desire to leave, nor any joy at having stayed. Harry could have afforded a bigger, nicer room. He could have brought her more gifts, a stereo set-up, some fancy clothes. But she never asked for anything other than food and cigarettes, and only enough of those to please herself. She never hid any away to sell on the street after he had gone. She never rifled his pockets or showed anything other than a casual interest in what he did on base.

She had an acid tongue sometimes, but even when she was needling him, she never put much effort into it. It was as if she had to be somewhere, doing something, and Harry's shabby little apartment was as good a place as any. He knew nothing of her background, unable, despite his presumed skills as an interviewer, to penetrate her disinterested shrug. It was as if she had no past and thought of herself (if indeed she did think of herself at all) as a piece of furniture that had been placed in a small room for no purpose other than to be there, to take up some space. Maybe, he thought, it's that Oriental acceptance of absolutely anything — some fucking Buddhist thing.

He twisted around and looked at her. Her dark brown eyes gazed directly back at him as she drew the last bit of smoke from the cigarette into her mouth. Without turning her head, she flipped the butt out the window.

“The Arvens brought in some gook from up north someplace that they want interrogated. No big deal,” he said, suddenly wanting to fill the silence with something. “It's probably just a routine matter. I don't know much about it. I probably won't be gone all day.”

Her expression didn't change.

“Listen, I’m sorry I got angry before,” Harry continued, still fighting the quiet in the room. “You know how I am when it’s hot. I’m just pissed that I have to work today, that’s all. I didn’t mean anything by it. Maybe when I get back, we can go down to White Beach and get some fish. You know, get out a little tonight. Maybe it won’t be so fucking hot down by the bay. What do you say?”

He pictured them walking together somewhere, one of her rare, but beautiful, smiles lighting up her face. A couple of times he had even made her laugh, though he couldn’t remember how. She had a lovely laugh.

She watched him for a few seconds, then shrugged and rolled over onto her back, exhaling the smoke from the cigarette. Harry looked at her for a moment, his stomach knotted with tension, then got up. “Fuck this,” he muttered, strapping on the .45, and walked out the door.

Li lay on the moist, wrinkled sheets, listening to the old warped stairs creaking under his weight. When he reached the bottom, she flowed up out of the bed in one quick motion and stood, naked, in a shaded area near the window.

She could see a good stretch of the street from there. Even this early it was thronged with multi-colored crowds of people. One little boy wearing rubber thongs suddenly skipped and grabbed his foot in pain: broken glass lay in the foul-smelling gutter. Li watched Harry stop and buy a Coke and walk on down the street, drinking it. She looked at the open window in the building across the way. The interior of the room was shrouded in darkness and she could see no one inside.

When Harry was out of sight, she grabbed a loose black shift out of a drawer and slipped into it. When she put on her rubber thongs and walked to the door, her feet made no sound. When she left the room and glided down the stairs, they didn’t creak under her at all.

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The Marine M.P. waved Harry onto the base without checking his I.D. Harry skirted some bales of concertina wire and a couple of claymore bunkers, remnants of the panicky days

after Tet, and turned right just past the enlisted men's barracks. The bleached out concrete was already hot enough to make the soles of his brightly polished jungle boots a little sticky. It hadn't rained the night before, though it had gotten cool enough to bring down a heavy coat of dew, which had evaporated and now hung thick, but invisible, in the morning air.

The street was lined on one side by Quonsets and on the other by a row of large, permanently secured tents on wooden platforms. Each structure was surrounded by a high berm of earth and a series of trenches. There hadn't been any rockets on the north edge of Da Nang for a while, but no one believed there would be no more. Tet had thrown the fear of God and over-running hoards of Charlie into the Marines on base.

Though the BOQ was a permanent, concrete block structure and had the luxury of showers right in the building, it had little else to recommend it. Cockroaches swarmed over the head-height cubicle walls and only the permanent odor of Lysol etched into the humidity-softened fiberboard kept the mildew from engulfing the whole structure. Harry tried not to think about the pleasant, modern quarters he might someday have in Saigon. Since he had taken the room in town he wasn't often in the barracks anyway.

There were a couple of Marine lieutenants in a cubicle at the near end of the building. Harry nodded, but they barely noted his passage. An Army lieutenant was beneath notice to them, a fact that did not bother him at all.

At his cubicle Harry peeled off his uniform, the pungent smell of Li now soaked into his clothing. He padded naked into the shower room. As he passed the line of toilets, an old woman swabbing out a bowl grinned broadly at him, nodding inanely. He ignored her and spun the handles of the shower.

He washed off under the hot stream, rubbing a bar of soap in circular patterns from his head to his feet in one continuous motion, his dogtags clinking softly around his neck. He shut off the hot water and stood in the cool stream, washing away the soap and the heat. He opened his mouth and let the shower flush under his tongue. After a few minutes, he stepped out, toweled off briskly and walked back into his cubicle.

While his skin was still cool, he put on a new pair of fatigues and his boots, transferred his money, wallet and belt to his clean trousers and put yesterday's sweaty ones in the laundry bag at the foot of his rack. The mama-san would take them and the next time he showed up at the barracks, they would be washed, pressed, starched and smell only slightly like the scum floating in the river.

He buckled on his pistol and strode out of the barracks. He knew he would just be starting to sweat by the time he got to the Hut, but that the air conditioning in there would keep him cool while he and Tran interrogated the gook.