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SOUVENIRS

By

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B.A., University of Montana, 1978

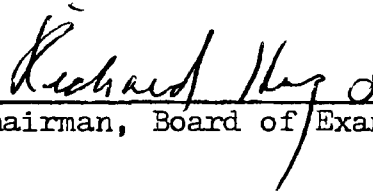
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SOUVENIRS:

body bags,
drugs,
gooks,
and gunfire

BODY BAGS

Ben sat in the doorway of the helicopter. He was eating out of a can of C-rations--cold beans and meatballs--watching the sun come up. Other helicopters were scattered about the landscape, one to each desicated rice paddy, security against the nightly rocket attacks. The air was free of dust, almost cool. Pilots and crews, dressed in green or tan flight suits, carrying M-60 machine guns, cans of ammunition, flight helmets, spare parts, and field packs, were straggling out to the helicopters. As the sun appeared over the edge of the rice paddies, the sky became a brilliant blue, the heat cutting through the grime his body had acquired after days in the fine red dust, and nights spent sleeping, fully clothed, in the helicopter or on a cot in one of the green--now, reddish-brown--Marine Corps tents. The cool morning air had made him feel momentarily clean, but beginning to sweat, he felt greasy.

Heat roused the smells of a familiar environment: hydraulic fluid, oil, stale equipment, human fertilizer still embedded in the dusty rice paddies, partially filled sawed-off 55 gallon barrels set underneath the outhouses, cooking grease from the mess tent. And himself: weeks without bathing, changing clothes only when they became torn, rotten with sweat, dust, oil, and grease, unbearable to wear. The sun woke up the flies. They flew from shitter to mess tent to rice paddy to people to Ben's can of beans and meatballs, laying their eggs. But he was no longer eating; he was thinking about Mei-Li, a Chinese bar girl he'd spent R and R with in Taipei. He had a hard on.

The damp, cool, air-conditioned bar was a sudden jolt that made him forget instantly the honking taxis, the platoons of motorcycles charging up and down the congested street, and the crowds of Chinese--laughing, shouting, bartering, curious--staring. His body shriveled, yielding to the sudden relief from the intense afternoon sun. Eyes slowly adapting to the gloom, he noticed that a fat, middle-aged Chinese woman was the only person in the bar. She sat at the far end of the polished wood, eating peanuts.

"Hi there," he said.

The fat woman climbed off the stool and walked behind the bar, her image reflected in the wall length mirror hanging behind the clutter of bottles. "Have a seat," she replied in a monotone. "You need beer, have. Need hard stuff, have too. Girls come soon back."

Ben walked to the center of the bar and sat down on a vinyl covered stool. "Beer," he said, feeling off-balance in the empty room.

"American, Chinese, both have."

Hesitating a moment, he said, "Chinese."

The woman smiled, a silver tooth glinting like fresh shrapnel, and placed a tall, brown bottle, already beginning to sweat, in front of him.

"Thank you," he said, placing a wad of money on the bar. He took a long drink, shivering in pleasure, the beer bouncing a foaming in the bottom of the bottle, a sheen of moisture appearing on his upper lip and forehead. He belched softly, and smiled, embarrassed. "Excuse me," he said.

The wrinkled face in front of him smiled again, a tinge of

warmth bleeding through the opaque eyes. "You wait. Have special girl for you. Speak good English," she said, her voice becoming musical, Chinese.

"Where are they?" Ben asked, holding the wet bottle with both hands, sliding it in circles, watching smears of water follow it along the rich wood.

"Go see doctor; get check. Very clean girls. Students. You wait, OK?"

"OK," he shrugged, taking another drink, the cold beer numbing his thoughts. "Could I have another one?" he asked, already content.

Three beers later, Ben stood in front of the juke box, the bar still empty, silent but for the hum of the air-conditioner. The neatly ranked tables and chairs sat mute and rigid in the gloom of the dimly lit room. In a spasm of melancholy he imagined them filled with the expectant ghosts of his boot camp platoon. More than sixty-percent of the platoon were already dead. Nothing like a little company, he thought, and pushed buttons at random. He laughed. Wrong movie.

As the first record began to play, a crowd of young, well-dressed Chinese, girls, suddenly burst through the door, chattering and laughing, two American men, one a black, caught in their midst. The black was short, slim and gangly, wearing grey slacks and a white, short-sleeved dress shirt. The other American was tall, broad-shouldered, hair close-cropped, dressed in khaki pants and red polo shirt. His tan began half-way down his forehead. Grunts on R and R, thought Ben, as the mass of girls, jabbering in Chinese and English, escorted the two Americans to a table.

Ben stood in front of the juke box, watching the women. Their long black hair. Long, nylon incased legs, sleek muscles flexing as they crowded about the two men. Almond eyes. Welcome to the inscrutable Orient, he thought, smiling shyly.

The girls left the two men and gathered in front of the bar, laughing and talking all at one to the old woman. One, tall and graceful, hair to her waist, was the center of attention. The old woman demanded silence and talked to the girl for a moment. The girl walked behind the bar and took a seat at the cash register. Flunked her check-up, he thought. The other girls, dispersed, several to sit with the two men, the remainder to sit at tables in the rear, where they would play cards and gossip until other customers came in. No one had noticed Ben.

"Hey you in front of the juke box, come over and have a beer," a voice boomed.

Ben's head jerked toward the big American, a startled chorus of "Ai Yah's," from the girls, echoing his movement. His mouth opened; beer spilled from the bottle in his hand. The two Americans waited.

"Sure," he managed. The sudden attention made him feel exposed and unprepared. "OK."

Several minutes later, a fresh beer in front of him, Ben was seated at the table with the two men, also Marines. The big man was a Recon Sergeant, a lifer, loud and aggressive in talk and body movement, bovine in his competence. Ben's jaw muscles jumped, eyes tightening, as he watched him.

The black was a grunt, a PFC who looked seventeen, a residue of Nam still in his eyes. His eyes reminded Ben of a deer he'd wounded,

its large brown eyes soft and liquid, not knowing the nature of its wound that steamed in the cold mountain air. He had shot it again, through one eye, and stood watching until the wounds no longer steamed and the other eye turned almost grey, dried-out and flat. It made him feel old, hurting somewhere deep inside his body. His first kill.

"Jeezus H. Christ, Sam. Can't you fuckin hold still for even a minute," the Recon Sergeant said. "You fidgitin son-of-a-bitch."

"Cant' help it," Sam replied, grinning tentatively at his girl. "Just nervous, I guess."

"You fuckin boot-camp."

"Ain't no boot-camp. I been in Nam six months, and wounded once."

The big sergeant laughed, turning toward Ben. "Look at this silly shit. Six months in Nam, and he's ready to pee his pants because he's about to get a little ass from a zipper-head." he said, watching the two girls to make sure they understood.

Ben smiled at Sam, "My first R and R, too," he said, "and I don't even have a girl yet."

"Hello," a soft and husky, slightly accented voice said from behind him. A hand lightly carressed the back of his neck.

Ben turned. She was tall and slender, wearing white flared slacks and a yellow knit top. Silky hair fell softly over her breasts. She smiled. Slightly parted lips glistened. He stared dry-mouthed.

"My name is Mei-Li." she said, looking down at him as she put her arm around his shoulder. The curve of her warm hip pressed against his cheek. He felt the panties under the thin fabric of her slacks. Her smell. "Mama-San says you are number-one." Her eyes smiled. "Let's go to another table and talk---OK?"

"Hah," he managed.

"Does a bear shit in the woods?" the Recon Sergeant said.

* * * * *

"Thinking about Taiwan, Sergeant?" the pilot asked, startling Ben. He had approached from the other side of the helicopter. Embarrassed, Ben followed the captain's gaze to the bulge in his tan flight suit. He threw the can of C-rations out into the barren rice paddy. "Yes sir," he said, "naturally."

The captain laughed, "I hear you landed something special. So happens I'm taking my R and R in Taiwan, also. So, if you'd like me to give a message..."

"Ah, thank you sir," Ben replied, "appreciate the offer, but I hope to go back some day."

"Yeah, well, we all say that, but I understand." He paused. "We've got Medevac today. Sorry about that," he said. "Shitty way to spend your first day back."

Ben's face paled beneath the dark tan, his eyes and mouth tightening. God Damn, he thought, body bags. The medevac plane always got the three or four-day-old bodies. Fuck.

"First trip is to the Laotian border," the captain said, placing his flight gear on the floor just inside the door, "some recon team got wasted a few days ago."

Welcome back, Ben thought.

* * * * *

Ben sat comfortably in the worn-metal doorway of the helicopter as it shook its way 2,000 feet above the deceptively placid countryside. It seemed as if he spent most of his life sitting in the

doorway of a helicopter. His legs dangled out into the sky, shoulder slumping against the well-used barrel of the M-60 machine gun carelessly swiveled inside the doorway, barrel pointed toward the floor, cartridge belt meandering from the gun across the crew chief's folded flak vest lying upon the empty seat, and into the almost full ammo can. He wore a chipped, green motorcycle type helmet, its built-in head set intermittently crackling with conversation from other flight and ground units sharing their frequency.

"There's Laos," announced the pilot, interrupting the background chatter.

The country below looked the same: green, jungle covered mountains dented by valleys where an occasional village stood in the midst of rectangular rice paddies. The water in the paddies glistened mirror-like, random flashes among the mossy, creeping mountain-folds. From that altitude it was a place of dreams, and he thought of Mei-Li. He laughed, his voice lost in the wind rushing through the open doorway.

A change in the rhythm of the rotor blades, the downward tilt of the floor, signaled the long spiral descent toward the jungle. He grabbed hold of the gun mount and pulled himself up into the seat, putting the flak vest on. He licked his lips, eyes narrowing as the helicopter headed for a clearing, the only break now discernible in the green monotony. At 500 feet he spotted them.

Four rectangular grey-green bags, each approximately the size of a man, lay neatly side by side in the clearing, punctuated by one smaller, square grey-green bag. From 500 feet they were an alien symmetry in the confusion that was jungle, but as the helicopter settled to the earth, their flat planes became bulges and folds, and

only the grey-green separated them from nature.

A squad of Marines stood next to the bags, the wind from the helicopter rotors rippling their camouflage fatigues, pressing the tiger-striped material against their bodies. They bent to pick up the bags. The bags were limp, their centers sagging. The Marines dragged them along the ground, and heaved them onto the helicopter's floor.

Ben just sat watching the men, one at the foot, one at the head, dragging the bags to the helicopter. Bad luck on the first day back, he thought.

The fifth bag--folded into a square--was easily picked up and carried by a single man. The pieces of body inside bulged and distorted the grey-green covering, making it difficult for the Marine to keep a solid grip on it. When finally he threw it onto the other bags, the contents continued for a moment to move and slide, making it appear as though some small animal was zipped inside, struggling to find a way out.

"OK," Ben said into the microphone, as the last man stepped away from the helicopter. The helicopter lifted, engine bellowing as it fought for altitude. The clearing quickly receded, blending back into the covering of green. The helicopter pivoted, dipped, and headed back.

Inside, Ben stared at the bags crowded into the narrow cabin, the nearest almost touching his leg. They don't look like they've got boots on, he thought, watching the zipper on the nearest one slowly work its way open. The bags jiggles loosely together on the vibrating floor. The helicopter banked suddenly and the zipper opened

nearly a foot. A thatch of dirty brown hair worked its way through the opening. Underneath the hair the remains of a face emerged, eye sockets and ears squirming with colonies of grey-white maggots. The head appeared to rise out of the slit in the body bag. Fetal. Ben vomited--no warning gag, just a solid spew of partially digested meatballs and beans--before he registered the smell. Burned flesh and hair--putrefying. He reached down to re-zip the bag, pulling the bag up by the zipper seam, but the zipper stuck, caught in the hair. He vomited again spraying the bags and floor. He forced the zipper shut. "Christ!" the pilot said over the intercom. Ben felt the co-pilot, seated above and behind him, pull his window open. Streamers of vomit flew past the doorway.

* * * * *

Two hours later, Ben was back sitting in the doorway of a different helicopter. It was parked in the center of another dried-up paddy. The pilots had grounded the other helicopter. Bag failure, they'd written in the log book, and left it to Ben to tell the maintenance Sergeant what they meant by that. They'd all three been sick and had to change flight suits. Ben wouldn't even take the flak vest or the M-60 from the other helicopter. The corpsmen had worn gas masks when they removed the body bags.

His flight suit was unzipped and peeled to his waist, the arms tied in a knot at his stomach. Sweat dripped from his nose and chin, and fell from his arms, pattering lightly onto the metal flooring, as he drank from a rusted can of Orange Crush. He liked the heat, liked to sweat; it felt clean, even though red dust was everywhere, great billowy clouds of it as helicopters took off and landed in the rice

paddies nearby. A helicopter would squat, almost obscured by a churning red cloud, and then would slowly rise, dip, and suddenly break free of the red smog, thrashing its way into the white-hot blue, circling for altitude. Even the red dust felt clean now, he thought, wiping the sweat from his eyebrows with a filthy fatigue hat. "Fuck-ing body bags," he said aloud. Better to see the bodies, then they could refuse to carry the rotten ones. The tepid Orange Crush tasted metallic. He tried to think about Mei-Li.

* * * * *

He was sitting waist deep in the hot, steaming pool, trying to learn a little Chinese from Mei-Li. The pool was round; jade tile inlaid with golden dragons decorated the floor and pool edge. Mei-Li was at the other end, her figure almost obscured by the rising wisps of steam. The steam-fog created the impression that the room had no boundaries. Ben felt as if he were suspended in a void, even though he knew the room was little bigger than the pool they were in.

"Wo ai ni," Mei-Li said, "I love you. But, Chinese lovers never say that. Only Americans."

"Wo ai ni," Ben repeated, reaching to take a cold beer from a metal bucket of ice that was lying at the pool's edge.

Mei-Li laughed, and waded towards him, a determined vee of water marking her progress. Sweat mingled with pool water making her flat stomach sleek, oiling her body. The nipples on her breasts were erect despite the heat. "Foreigners rarely come here," she said, "it is for Chinese and their guests. But when foreigners do, they are always fat and old, flabby; their bellies look like white, meaty cakes

of bean curd."

He smiled and placed the beer on the pool's edge, and reached out, grasping her by the wrist, pulling her into the deeper water, up against his chest and crotch.

"Ai Yah," she breathed.

* * * * *

Ben sighed, and threw the can of Orange Crush out into the rice paddy, a streamer of orange arcing away from it. It hit and rolled, clattering among the C-ration cans dotting the parched earth. In the distance, two figures stepped out of one of the reddish-brown-green tents, and began walking toward him. Oh no, he thought, not more body bags. Why not something wholesome like a recon retraction from a hot zone. Shit.

The pilots were grim: "Khe Sahn," the captain said.

"I thought one of the other squadrons had a permanent detachment there," Ben replied.

"They're all busy---or downed."

Khe Sahn, Ben thought, not Khe Sahn. He'd been shot down at Khe Sahn once already, blood from the co-pilot dripping down on his helmet, splattering, as the helicopter auto-rotated crazily, the metal matting rushing up at them. Khe Sahn.

But this time they slipped in unharmed, taking only a few rounds in the tail section. Through the dust and debris thrown up by the rotor blades, Ben could see a hazy row of body bags lying alongside the metal matting. Artillery and mortar rounds impacted a hundred and fifty meters to the right. Three Marines carrying a dark bundle between them, helmets knocking together, legs tripping and stepping on

each other, ran through the dust and turbulence. They threw the bundle into the helicopter. It thudded soddenly onto the helicopter's floor, blood pooling. Fresh.

"You fuckers, you assholes, where's the body bag?" Ben shouted; but they were gone, sprinting for the bunker, mortar rounds hitting the matting, charcoal-brown puffs walking toward the helicopter.

"Go! Go!" he screamed into the mike.

A few minutes later he slumped in his seat, drained, clear of Khe Sahn. Oh Fuck Oh Dear. He looked back inside, staring at the corpse staring at him. It shivered loosely on the vibrating floor, its camouflage fatigues reduced to a uniform brown. Except the right leg. It was gone, torn off at the knee. The shredded edge of bloody material flapped wetly in the wind blowing through the open doorway. Raw meat on a butcher's block--bone white and obscene. Its mouth was open in a permanent shout, as it was when Ben watched him dancing in the bar in Taipei, a bar girl gamely trying to learn a new dance step from him. He dipped and shook--graceful and relaxed--at one with the pulsating music. He pivoted, shirt whipping, head thrown back, neck muscles rigid the vein prominent. His mouth was open, shouting to the music. He looked toward Ben. Large brown eyes soft and liquid. They looked at everything--looked at nothing. He wasn't no boot camp. Wounded once, already. He was black, and his leg was gone. Khe Sahn.

The corpse continued to stare and shout at him, as it quivered with the floor. He bowed his head into crossed arms on top of his knees.

The corpse continued to stare and shout at him, as it quivered

with the floor. He bowed his head into crossed arms on top of his knees.

The corpse stared; he could feel it.

He jerked upright, looking about the cabin, his eyes wide, searching. He ripped his flak vest off and gently laid it over the corpse's head, covering the eyes.

But the chest gaped raw and dirty and the pant leg continued to flap, exposing the raw meat.

Frantically, he unbuckled his gun belt, the .38 falling onto the floor as he tossed the belt toward the open radio compartment in the tail section. He unzipped the flight suit, pulling it down to his ankles, forgetting to unzip the legs, fighting it over his boots. He laid the flight suit over the chest and leg of the corpse, and then, clad only in jungle boots, green skivvy shorts, and flight helmet, sat back into his seat.

But the flak vest had shifted with the plane's vibration and one eye, now almost grey, dried-out and flat, stared up at him through the arm hole. He stared back, for seconds that were forever. He reached down to pick up the .38 lying on the floor. Patches of silver metal showed through the drab green painted on the floor. Thin whorls of mustard green, the primer, outlined the silver patches--like the shoreline on a silver lake. Small clumps of grease and dirt were wedged around the rivets and bolts of the flooring. He watched his hand, fingernails edged in black, wrap itself around the battered wooden grips. Specks of dark brown rust peppered the barrel. He shot the eye. Once. The shot a small pop over the engine, wind, and radio noise. The eye blinked out. In its place an armhole, dark and

bottomless, stared. A small, oval darkness the size of a post hole that sucked color into itself, leaving Ben's world pastel, muted. He felt old; he hurt inside. The first kill was so long ago. The helicopter headed back.

* * * * *

Ben sat in the doorway of the UH-34. Pale sweat lines ran down his face, etched into the grime. He felt greasy. He was eating out of a can of C-rations--pears--watching the sun go down. It was a huge, other ball suspended on the horizon. The flies were gone. He extended his arm straight out toward the sun and slowly tipped the can of pears, watching the syrup leak out, red and viscous in the dying sunlight. And the chunks of pear. When the can was empty, he rotated the open end toward himself. He stared into it for a moment, and then threw it out into the dried-up rice paddy, among the other empty cans, where it rattled and tinked and came to rest.

DRUGS

Three o'clock in the afternoon in Missoula, Montana, a couple of years ago and I'm about half drunk, sitting in the Silver Dollar, a workingman's bar across the street from the railroad tracks, waiting for the dooper, gone for an hour now, to come back and sell me three or four ounces of cocaine. I'm feeling good, a little beer and a little adrenaline. I know just how I want to handle this one; no dramatic, hysterical up-against-the-wall, just a nice smile and an easy drawl, something like: "Oh man, Ah hate to ruin y'all's afternoon, but... but, well, you are bust-ed." And laugh, enjoying the slack, watery-eyed moment that flashes across his face before he decides it's only my idea of a sick joke, and starts to smile, erasing the panic, just as I pull the black leather case from my boot and flip it open, exposing the gold badge.

The dooper, plaid wool shirt, hair to his shoulders, bushy beard and moustache, comes back in. He stops at the bar, buys another pitcher of beer, sits down across from me. That's cool, I think.

He pours two glasses, doesn't say anything as he pushes one toward me and slowly leans back in his chair. Last week I made a small buy from this particular dooper, setting him up. I want his supplier; but even if something goes wrong, I'll turn him into a snitch. He drinks the whole glass, keeping his eyes on me over the rim, beer foam on his moustache. I don't like his eyes.

He doesn't say anything. Picks up my glass and drinks that, too.

I don't like his eyes at all.

"You guys," he says, voice quiet, but sad and tired and angry all at the same time.

I am abruptly sober, gray taste of adrenaline souring the beer in my stomach. My cover is blown, I can feel it. And I've already made a buy from this turkey--probably the reason he has returned. "You guys," he says again, louder this time. Cover is definitely blown. Does he have a gun? Watch his hands. "You guys..." He's getting a bit hysterical now. I reach down and put my hand on the Walther PPK hidden in my other boot. He pauses; a vein, blue and angry, runs from the middle of his hairline down toward his nose, his hand wraps around the pitcher handle. I smile: he's a big dooper.

We look at each other, stretching time. Glistening drops of beer fall in slow motion from his moustache into his beard. He doesn't like my eyes now. Seconds become last week. The vein blends back into his forehead. He looks down at the plastic table top puddled with beer. "you guys," he says once again, quizzically this time, like a little kid hurt and afraid, not understanding at all. "How did you get this way?"

That question. He knew all the way back to the Silver Dollar that I was a narc, that he was busted for the sale he'd made to me the week before. Doomed, his reality about to be shattered by a gold sheriff's badge. But instead of insulting or threatening or attacking me, he wants to understand, almost pleading to know why someone would be a narc, would do such a thing to him. He really wants to know. And he feels sorry for us, the narcs of the Region One Anti-Drug Team, like you'd feel sorry for a good dog that, because he has a brutal master, has become mean and neurotic; too bad but he really should be put away. Only a dooper would think like that. But I have to admit, his question bothered me for a long time.

Sometimes, especially on humid and wet and overcast June afternoons, you can look west across the Missoula valley, at the dull blue mountains, shreds of slate-gray clouds at their base, and--ache of sour-sweet memory--remember Vietnam during the monsoon season. The bushes and grass and maple trees glow obscenely green and tropical in the intense light that filters through the leaden clouds. Missoula. Dank and humid--like Khe Sanh, Dong Ha, Langvei.

Langvei. Barney, the real leader of the Region One Anti-Drug Team, was at Langvei when the North Vietnamese overran it with tanks. The first time they'd used tanks in the war, and I remember the terror of that word, tanks. We had the tanks; they were supposed to be little yellow men in black pajamas, ill-trained and backward. By then, of course, we knew better--but tanks!

Barney was 20 years old, a Special Forces first lieutenant, and one of about ten Americans out of a detachment of 24 to survive Langvei. There were also 400 South Vietnamese Rangers at Langvei; less than 100 of them made it out.

In 1968, he went home to the Shenandoah Valley, a Purple Heart, a Silver Star, two Bronze Stars and a handful of Vietnamese medals to show for 21 months in Vietnam.

Three years later, one motorcycle wreck, a car wreck, one lost finger and an accidental bullet in the knee, bored and more than a little disenchanted with patriotism, Barney became a sheriff's deputy in Missoula, Montana. Five days later, he was an undercover narc. All right! he thought. Danger and intrigue, cloak and dagger James Bond stuff--not war, not even close, just dopers and bad guys, not like the North Vietnamese Army.

We never told war stories when we were narcs. Too much fun doing what we were doing--working undercover--to want to tell war stories. Oh, we traded credentials, established that we were or weren't Vietnam veterans, but that was all. I remember a narc trip to Kalispell; the first time I worked with Barney. The Region One Anti-Drug Team worked most of western Montana and often, at the request of other counties, eastern Montana as well. This particular trip, we were driving my 1967 blue Pontiac Firebird, a real undercover mobile, four speed, mag wheels, racing cam, solids, Starsky and Hutch before Starsky and Hutch ever happened; it even had two aircraft landing lights. It scared me to drive it. But then I was only about two months back from Taiwan where I'd been going to school, and I hadn't driven much for two or three years. In fact, my first month as a narc, I didn't have a driver's license or a car. I rode a ten-speed bicycle around town, from bar to bar, a walkie-talkie and a Browning 9mm automatic in the little leather bag behind the bicycle seat. The Firebird had about as much in common with that bicycle as a Phantom jet has with a truck. I could feel Barney trying to stay calm as the nose of the Firebird occasionally drifted across the center line, negotiating the hairpin turns along Flathead Lake, headed toward Kalispell.

"Been to Nam?" he asked, opening another beer, trying to ignore the huge pine trees flashing by on either side of the road.

"Say what?" I was having a terrible time driving: the road seemed too narrow, it was like playing basketball when the hoop looks too small to throw a golf ball through.

"Nam," Barney muttered, taking a quick drink as a semi thundered by going the other way. The Firebird drifted across the road. "Been

to Nam?"

"Marines...helicopters," I said. "Gunner and crew chief. You?"

"Special Forces." He paused, wincing as I downshifted into third.

"Watched a battalion of marines get the shit kicked out of them once."

I looked over at him. He took another drink.

The car edged onto the shoulder of the road.

"Special Forces, huh."

"Uh-huh."

And that was all Barney and I ever said about Vietnam. Not much else to say, really. We'd both been there and had a good idea of what the other had done. By then, we'd both learned not to talk about Nam, not to tell stories, unless the stories were about Sex in Asia or Funny Times in the Service. The rest of the way to Kalispell, Barney drank beer, his hat pulled down over his eyes onto the bridge of his nose, and told me about his first big case.

The tall, skinny dooper, pale and looking like a sick Englishman, opened the door.

"Got to talk to you," Barney said. Behind the skinny, sickly dooper, he could see the other dooper, short and grubby, looking like Barney himself; hippy clothes and long hair.

"Yeah. You're right. We def-i-nitely got some talkin' to do," the dooper replied, stepping back from the doorway. "I hear you're a narc."

Barney had to hide the fear, the sudden unmasking of self that would confirm to the dooper that Barney was a narc. He had been working on these two for several months. The tall, skinny one had been busted before in California, dealing heroin and hash; he'd also been busted

in Texas--cocaine, grass, 25,000 hits of LSD. But they knew people, had good connections, and Barney was there to buy a little Thai stick and make arrangements for pounds of cocaine. Damn. He'd spent a lot of time and effort on these two, even took them to a motel and let them call Kansas City to verify his good standing in the drug community--the motel switchboard operator had simply connected them to another narc in an adjacent room. They'd even gone to the bank and made arrangements for a joint safety deposit box to make the money transfer. Barney kept his eyes on the short one and decided to bluff.

"I hear you're a narc, man," the tall one said again, "wired up with electronics, microphones and such."

The snitch, Barney thought, the lousy informant burned me. The snitch was the only person who could possibly have told them that he was wired for sound. Barney lifted his hands in the air. "Go ahead, search me then," Barney said, letting his voice go angry. It wasn't hard to be angry, thinking about the snitch. "Search me, if you think I'm a narc." Bluffing, bluffing: a .38 in the belt at the small of his back, the black bug and antenna taped across his stomach. Barney hoped the bug was working.

The tall one hesitated, looking Barney in the eye. He wanted to believe Barney wasn't a narc, wanted to make the sale because like all dopers, no matter how much dope he sold, he was always broke.

Barney looked like a narc was supposed to look: five-nine, 160, shoulder length hair, hippy clothes--small and sneaky--but the doper knew that no narc in his right mind was going to go around looking like a narc. Besides, Barney had cowboy boots on and spoke with a southern accent. "I guess you're cool," the tall one said.

"Hey," the short one interrupted, "you be prayin' you ain't no narc; you be thankful you ain't no narc. We blew some narcs away in Texas. Out in the middle of the empty highway. Out in the desert. M-16s and Thompson machine guns." He laughed, eyes flat and watery and Barney knew he was lying. Dealers always had such stories; there'd be dead narcs littered all over the countryside if the stories were true--kind of like body counts in Nam. "Wasted those muthers, yes sir."

"You already told me about it," Barney replied, thinking, sure you did. He dropped his arms and laughed. "I know who told you I was a narc, and me and him is going to have a talk, shortly."

"Well," the tall one mumbled. "Well, all we got is some Thai stick. You interested in that?"

Barney nodded, walked over to a chair and sat down. Abruptly, he was aware that something was burning his stomach. "Sure, I'll take as much as you want to get rid of," he said, wondering what the hell was wrong with his stomach.

It was the damn bug hurting him, burning into his stomach. Later, he found out there was a short at the base of the antenna. He leaned back in the chair and discovered that the bug only burned badly when his stomach muscles were flexed, or when he was leaning forward, but so what. He wanted to rip open his shirt and tear the bug off, hell with the bust.

"You want to smoke some of this, try it out?" the tall one asked.

"Nah, I'll save it for later," Barney replied.

After he'd made the Thai stick buy, the two dealers and Barney walked to the I Don't Know Tavern, one of several hangouts popular

with dopers, freaks, bikers and other assorted riffraff. (Eddy's Club, gone now, the liquor license transferred to a new bar in the suburbs which caters to businessmen and young middle-class workers, was the most popular. After seven or eight months of hanging out in Eddy's Club, working undercover became a serious chore; watching the same people night after night get drunk, stoned, mean, obnoxious. I came to hate that place. I dreamed nearly every night that I would open the door to Eddy's Club and, in slow motion, one at a time, roll three grenades down the center of the worn and beer-soaked hardwood floor. The grenades would bounce awkwardly end over end. Mouths would open in slow, soft Os of sound. The spoons would ping away from the grenades. Ping. Ping. Ping. I always woke up before they exploded.)

They led him straight through to the back of the I Don't Know, not even stopping at the bar for a drink, and down rickety well-worn steps into the basement, the storage room. The bug was burning into his stomach. Two weak and bare bulbs, one at either end of the basement, gave off just enough light for Barney to see rows of stacked boxes, dirty gray cement walls, spider webs. The basement stunk of mildew and age, sour beer and wine. They led him to the far end where there was a small clearing among the boxes and crates, just enough room for a few chairs. The bug hurt badly: Barney remembered a story about a kid in Sparta, who had a pet squirrel hidden in his clothes during an inspection. Discipline was so rigid, the kid let the squirrel eat a hole in his stomach. He didn't make a sound, just died.

"Time to do some coke," the tall one stated matter-of-factly.

"Yeah," the short one said, watching Barney.

"Don't believe I will," Barney said, not sure if the pain in his stomach was coming only from the bug. The basement suddenly seemed a hundred miles from the people upstairs; from his backup, for sure. Obviously the bug wasn't working--except to burn his stomach.

"You got to," the tall one replies. "We wouldn't feel right selling you any, if you don't try some first." He leered at Barney. The dim, yellow light made him look more sickly than ever. Like a corpse, Barney thought, waxen skin and all.

The corpse produced a mirror, a razor blade and cocaine. He used the razor blade to divide the cocaine into three lines on the mirror. Barney would have been amused if not for the bug. The dopers thought that (1) if a narc partakes of the dope himself, then the bust is illegal; and (2) if the narc doesn't tell them he is a narc before he makes the buy, the bust is illegal. (Ridiculous, of course. But just recently I talked to a dealer who deals approximately five pounds of cocaine a month; he still firmly believes that if a narc does some of the dope himself, the bust is no good. He might be an exception today but then that kind of thinking was the rule.)

The short one took a \$20 bill from his wallet--one of the bills Barney had used to pay for the Thai sticks--and rolled it into a tight cylinder, then offered it to Barney.

"Go ahead," Barney said. He'd never snorted coke before. He wasn't sure how it was done. (All the narcs that I knew had at least tried marijuana, but none of us had done anything beyond hash. Some, like myself, had smoked pot in Vietnam, but no one smoked pot or did any kind of dope when they were narcs unless, like Barney, they were

forced to.)

The short one snorted his line.

Barney gestured toward the tall one. Tall one snorted his, and held the mirror for Barney.

Barney looked down at the thin white line on the mirror. It reflected the faces of the two men bending close, tense, their features dark and hooded in the wan light from the bare bulb. Barney took the \$20 bill, leaned down--the bug was definitely eating a hole in his stomach--and snorted the coke, trying to keep it from going too far up into his sinuses.

The two men were obviously relieved. Smiling and joking, they led Barney back upstairs.

"Got to go," Barney said. "Thanks for the dope. Got to meet a lady."

Outside in the lieutenant's car, Barney ripped open his shirt, tore the tape and bug from his stomach. There was a burned spot just below his ribs. Burned black. He still has the scar.

"How'd it go?" the lieutenant asked. "I couldn't hear a thing."

The lieutenant was like that. If something went right, he took all the credit. But people often were busted too soon--he busted Barney's pair of dealers just for the Thai stick buy, unwilling to wait a little longer for what might have been a big cocaine bust. He busted my dooper--the one in the Silver Dollar--before I had a chance to try and turn him into a snitch. And sometimes, when he was supposed to be backing you up, he got lost or delayed or something.

Once, he was backup for Barney and Al and me. I was undercover and was going to be busted along with the dooper. The dooper tried to

fight. Barney had a hell of a time with him, fighting from the living room to the dark, unlit kitchen, trying to cuff him with one hand, wondering what to do with the gun in his other hand. Al couldn't help because he had me up against the wall, and if he left me, the dooper would know I was a narc, or at least a snitch, which was just as bad. The lieutenant said he couldn't find the street--even though he'd served a warrant on that street a few days before.

Barney was the real leader. Soft-spoken, calm, he always seemed to make the right decisions. Once, Barney and Al and Yawny made a tremendous speed bust, a whole suitcase full of speed, and the first the lieutenant knew about it was when the sheriff congratulated him on the terrific bust. The lieutenant called us all in (including me, and I was supposed to be deep undercover) and told us that never, never were we supposed to make a bust without his prior knowledge and approval. The lieutenant was like that. The sheriff loved him.

But riding up to Kalispell with Barney, I didn't know about all that, didn't know about the statistics game, the score kept in felonies--as far as the statistics were concerned, a bust for the sale of a lid of grass meant as much as a heroin bust. A young girl died in Missoula because what she thought was coke was really 98 percent pure heroin straight from the Golden Triangle in Southeast Asia. But I never even saw heroin when I was a narc. Too busy working Eddy's Club and places like it, busting people for lids and hundred lots of speed and a few tabs of acid, people too poor to post bond, let alone deal heroin--policy dictated that the destitute hippies and dopers of Eddy's Club were the official drug problem.

Barney and I pulled into Kalispell, found a motel room and met

with the local narcs. One was blond, cornfed and beefy; short hair, sport shirt and jeans. The other was about 50 and looked like a rancher in town for a good time on Friday night. Everybody in Kalispell knew who they were; one look at them and we could tell that.

Later, I was sitting in a bar, hustling a woman, trying to get a line on some dope. She said the town was tight, real tight because rumor had it that out-of-town narcs were coming in for the weekend-- either that weekend or the next.

"Well, I guess I'll just have to suffer and get drunk instead of stoned," I said.

She smiled. A lot of promise in that smile.

"I hear some place called Fort Kalispell has outrageous rock and roll on Saturday night," I continued. I was supposed to be vacationing from Minnesota and, what the hell, we weren't going to make any buys, anyway. "Perhaps, you'd like to--" I paused, aware suddenly that everyone at the bar was staring at me. The woman was darting glances over my shoulder and back to me. She stopped smiling, her pretty brow knotted in confusion.

I swiveled around on the bar stool. The blond Kalispell narc, wearing a ridiculous wig that made him look like a Nazi in drag, was tapping on the window, gesturing frantically for me to come outside. I couldn't believe it. I turned quickly around. Was someone in the bar about to waste me? No one was even looking at me.

Including the woman. She was staring into her glass of beer, sad and disappointed, I thought.

How embarrassing. I walked outside. The Kalispell narc was now at the corner of the building, hissing to get my attention, waving

his arms around to indicate that I should come around the corner. Who does he think I am, I thought, the Shadow, flitting from bar stool to bar stool, building to building, woman to woman. I flitted around the corner, confused and lightheaded and somewhat hysterical that this was actually happening. Hee, hee, hee. Nark, nark. He grabbed my arm, pulling me into the shadows next to him.

He whispered out of the corner of his mouth, glancing furtively at the cars and people going by on the main drag. "I had to warn you, man," he said. "She's got the clap."

We tried everything that night. Even challenged someone to a drag race in the hopes of buying some dope. He had a Dodge that wasn't stock, and the Firebird bent a rod because I kept missing shifts from first to second. "Maybe I should drive," Barney said, which is about as close to outright criticism as his southern manners allowed. We were tired and frustrated and drunk, feeling stale, almost hungover. We were supposed to be there for another night.

The next night, sitting in a tiny, out-of-the-way bar, populated by a few drunk Indians playing foosball and pinball, I abruptly realized that Barney hadn't said much of anything in several hours.

Just then, a motorcycle gang walked in, six guys and four of their women, not even close to Hell's Angels, but still plenty sleazy--chains and knives, dirty leather, dirty denim, loud and ugly. I ignored them, and watched a guy playing pinball--some kind of pinball player--winning games.

Barney was silent, staring at the bikers.

"Hey man, look at that dude playing pinball," I said. "I wish I could play pinball like that."

"We could take them all," Barney said, as if that was what I'd just suggested. "We hit the first two, right in the face, put them down so fast; we have time to put down another two before they know what's happening. Then it'll be even. Two on two."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Just go stand up at the bar, next to that big, fat, greasy slob and when I swing, you swing." He said it as if this were some kind of briefing, as if there were no need to even consider whether or not we were going to do it.

"You're serious."

Barney looked at me as if there were something wrong with me.

"What about the women," I pleaded. "They're just as bad, and they have knives and chains, maybe even a gun or two." I paused. Barney was just staring at me. "We'll end up shooting someone," I said plaintively. I couldn't understand what had gotten into Barney. (Four or five months later, I knew. The excitement, the cloak and dagger time, was over. It was politics, just as in Nam; we were somebody's tool, somebody's exercise in power. The stakes weren't as big--nobody got wasted--and the power was just the power of small-time politics, but still we felt used, the same way we'd been used in Vietnam.)

"I wonder how many sheriffs are retired FBI agents?" I asked Barney; it was a standard drug-team joke.

Barney laughed and everything was okay again. We left the bikers and went to Moose's where the bartender winked conspiratorially and served us free drinks. He was a nice person in a gruff sort of way, and tried to be sneaky about the beer; but he was also a closet

redneck and Barney and I were probably the freakiest looking people in the place. People noticed.

We picked up two girls and drove to their cabin on Flathead Lake. My girl wanted to be with Barney, and Barney's girl wanted to be with me. It took a frustrating night for us to figure that out and by then we didn't care. When we left, it was just getting light, the lake and sky nearly the same shade of steel gray. My mouth tasted of stale beer and lipstick. There were five inches of snow on the Firebird, even though it was still the middle of September. Some trips were like that.

Other trips weren't. Especially if we didn't tell the locals we were coming until after we had made the busts. Once, I went to a small town in eastern Montana, wrote my name in Chinese on the ceiling--no narc could possibly do that--and called Missoula for help. Al and another narc arrived the next day, and the locals fell all over themselves selling dope to us.

"Get out of the van," Al shouted, "You're under arrest."

The guy laughed. "Oh man, that's funny. You guys aren't narcs."

Al flashed his badge, pointed his gun at the dooper's face. "Get out of that van..."

The sheriff of that county was seriously upset. He didn't know we were there until we had everyone busted and in jail. The police chief and county attorney were delighted; we were in town at their request. The sheriff was incredibly rude, foaming at the mouth practically. It was all politics, of course.

It wasn't always politics, though. There were some bad people out there, hurt-you people, blow-you-away people, robbers, muggers, murderers, who just happened to be selling dope. People who lived with crime and violence as a way of life, an enjoyable way of life. Roundhead knew all about dopers who were bad people.

Roundhead grew up on a ranch in eastern Montana and he was all hard work and honor and principle and cowboy hell. So clean-cut inside and out, they made him a presidential aide while he was in the navy. He never did manage to look like a doper. He got his nickname when he first came to the narc squad from the Missoula Police Department with his blond hair short, almost crew cut. But eventually he managed to look plenty seedy. In fact, he managed to look real mean: average height and build, strange clothes--bib overalls, cowboy boots, work shirt--but most of all, he had that special look in his eye that promised you bad things were going to happen if you stayed around him long enough.

One evening about dusk he was driving past the Park--a Missoula bar that some claim to be Montana's number-one dive--when a doper he'd been working on drove by going the other way and motioned Roundhead to pull around the corner for a meet. Roundhead had already bought a little "crystal meth" (turned out to be ground caffeine pills) from this dude, but wanted to connect for the large quantity that the doper was rumored to have. The last time they'd met, Roundhead had been out of "buy money."

"Hey man, bring your money this time?" the doper asked. He was about five-ten, stocky, 25 or so, looked like a university student, fairly clean-cut. Roundhead knew the guy had been busted in other

states for heroin, armed robbery assaults--he had a rap sheet two and a half pages long. (Missoula seems to attract these kinds of people. Maybe it's because Missoula is a crossroads for people going toward Canada or Glacier National Park; people going to eastern Montana or Yellowstone; people traveling the interstate from Minneapolis to Spokane. Maybe it's because Missoula no longer resembles a part of Montana, but looks like a piece of southern California that took a wrong turn on the Santa Anna Freeway and ended up in Montana. Whatever the reason, Missoula has more than its share of bad people.) Roundhead, however, felt relaxed with this guy: the dooper had a woman in his car, and Roundhead thought it might be the dooper's wife.

Roundhead touched the left front pocket of his bibs, indicating he had money. Only \$150, actually.

The dooper reached with his left hand toward the pocket. "Let's see it," he said.

"Back off," Roundhead said, pushing the dooper's hand away. "I've got the money. Let's see the stuff."

The dooper was suddenly, unreasonably angry, ugly angry, his eyes bright and hard, the skin taut across his face. "Give me your money," he gritted, voice low and mean, and then screamed, "SON OF A BITCH, GIVE ME THE MONEY" and brought his right arm from behind his back, a seven-inch hunting knife grasped in his hand, and swung arm and hand and knife stabbing downward toward Roundhead's chest.

Roundhead didn't even have time to be startled. Reflexively, he tried to block the stab with his left hand. He felt something hit the middle of his chest as he struggles to pull the .38 out of his pants pocket. The gun's hammer caught the two buttons above the pocket on

the bib overalls. The dooper began another thrust, the knife blade glinting in the last rays of sunlight filtering across the mountains and building. The dooper saw that Roundhead was ripping something out of the side of his overalls. The dooper turned and ran.

"Stop you son of a bitch," Roundhead yelled, aiming at the fleeing dooper. But he couldn't fire, Roundhead told me, because the dooper's back was toward him. The dooper ran behind his car.

"Drop it. Drop it," Roundhead hissed, the .38 pointed across the car roof. "I'll blow your head off."

Not a doubt in the dooper's mind. He threw the knife inside the car, on the seat next to the woman. He had no idea that Roundhead was a narc; he was simply going to rip Roundhead off for the money. Nor did he have any idea how much money Roundhead had--it might have only been \$20. It was just an excuse to stab someone, really. The dooper abruptly became another person as only a bad-guy ex-con dooper can. "Let's deal," he whined. "Let's deal. Put the gun away. I've got the stuff in the trunk. Put the gun away, okay?"

Roundhead was so angry he couldn't say anything; he was wondering if he should shoot the son of a bitch anyway. On principle.

The dooper walked to the rear of the car, taking Roundhead's silence for agreement. Roundhead put the gun back in his pocket, but kept his hand on it. Some redneck citizen might have seen him pointing it at the dooper, and blown Roundhead away with a rifle or shotgun or pistol that such citizens carry in their pickups. (Twice when I was a narc, rednecks came within a breath of blowing me away, thinking they were about to waste a hippy, pinko, faggot, degenerate freak.

"You're under arrest," Roundhead said, and flashed his badge.

The dooper didn't hesitate, just took off toward the Park bar.

"Stop. Police officer. Stop." Roundhead yelled. The dooper had his back to him again. Roundhead swore and gave chase. He caught the dooper, tackled him in the middle of the street, a flying football tackle, landing and skidding on the pavement. But the dooper managed to break away again, and ran into the Park, Roundhead right behind him, knocking tables and chairs and people out of the way.

The Park was a real zoo most nights. Cowboys and Indians and freaks and college kids; drunk, rowdy, spoiling for a fight. The music was country and disco and blue grass and Top Forty. The smoke and noise and smell hit Roundhead like another blow, as he ran through the mash of people. He tackled the dooper again, and was just starting to cuff him when the councer pulled him off. The dooper got up and started pushing his way through the crowd.

"Let go of me," Roundhead screamed, turning toward the bouncer.

The bouncer recognized him, boy, did he recognize him. Roundhead had busted him for a sale just a couple of weeks before. He let Roundhead go as if Roundhead were a drunken Indian speedfreak with a knife.

Roundhead managed to catch up with the dooper just outside the main entrance, and chased him round and round a late-model truck with a camper on it parked at the curb. "I'm a cop. Call the cops. Call the cops," Roundhead screamed at the people standing on the curb, watching him chase the dooper.

The owner of the truck came out of the bar. He knew Roundhead; he also knew the dooper. "In here," he yelled at the dooper, and held the camper door open. The dooper ran around to the open camper door;

he was obviously not thinking too well.

The truck owner had a trained german shepherd inside the camper.

"Get him," the truck owner yelled, and the dog growled and leaped out at the dooper, chasing him back into the Park, where he was cornered by the dog and Roundhead, the bouncer and the truck owner. Roundhead started to put the cuffs on again. The dooper swung at him. Roundhead let him have a shot along the side of the head with his forearm, then handcuffed him.

"What the hell's that on the front of you?" the bouncer asked.

Roundhead looked down. Blood had discolored and soaked the entire front of his pants and shirt. "Shit," he said and looked at the dooper. He was really mad then. The dooper could see it. Roundhead wished the dooper would somehow break away again.

At the emergency room, Roundhead found out the knife struck him in the bone that runs down the middle of the chest, without splitting our punching through to something vital. He was lucky, and he knew it. But we all figured the dooper was luckier. Lucky it was Roundhead.

Sometimes it was amazing the people who would help you. Like the bouncer who helped Roundhead. On the other hand, it was equally amazing the criminals who Yawney would befriend. Yawney and I were roommates for awhile, but I couldn't take it. There were too many low-rent scofflaws hanging around our house, rednecks, whose idea of a good time was thumping hippies. Naturally, most of the city of Missoula knew Yawney was a narc. Soft-hearted Yawney.

Yawney had been in the Coast Guard. Not many people knew it, but the Coast Guard also sent people to Vietnam. Yawney sat above

the bridge on a small river boat and manned an M-60 machine gun. An easy target for VC lurking in the reeds and bushes and grass, thick and impenetrable, that lined the canals and rivers of the Mekong Delta. Yawney was a big, fuzzy-headed blond who always looked as if he just woke up.

And since he looked easy and had a soft heart, criminals were always taking, or trying to take advantage of him. He didn't care. He wasn't worried. After a while he didn't even carry a pistol, convinced that his friends would at least give him warning if anything really heavy was going down. Nothing we could say would change his mind; he'd just smirk--an inscrutable fuzzy-headed, sleepy-eyed smirk.

Then came the night during the Christmas holidays when Yawney was lying on a couch next to his girlfriend, watching television, unwinding and not thinking at all about dopers. Suddenly there was a string of popping sounds and the curtains across the window above the couch bounced and billowed as if from an erratic breeze. The Christmas tree shook. Something hit the stereo.

At first Yawney thought it was the Christmas tree lights exploding. But then he drew the curtains aside and noticed the holed in the glass. Ten rounds through the window just above their heads. If either of them had been standing or even sitting upright...

Yawney jumped up, found a pistol and ran outside. Nothing. No one. And no one was ever arrested. None of his friends knew who did it, "Too bad, really," they said, "but we haven't heard anything." Yawney started carrying a gun again but I think his feelings were hurt more than anything else.

Occasionally, we narcs were called upon to look after the moral fiber of the community. There was the time, for instance, when the sheriff came into the narc room, handed me ten dollars and instructed me to go watch a dirty movie at the local porn theater. "Time the scenes," he ordered, "and then go hang around the porn shops in town for a few days; see if any juveniles are allowed in. Then buy some porno mags, some porn devices, and write a report." This was priority.

I barely had time to make the next flick, and I needed a watch. All freaky looking and wild-eyed, I rushed over to the drugstore. The girl at the counter thought I was going to rob the place.

"Hi there," I said.

"May I help you?" she ventured cautiously.

"I need a watch."

"What kind?" she asked, anxious to get me out of there.

"The cheapest you have. Fast." I wanted to tell her I was a different person in real life.

"This pocket watch is the least expensive we have...sir," she said. "Twelve ninety-five."

Subtracting the cost of the ticket, I only had \$11. I offered it to her for the watch.

"Sorry, sir," she said, obviously not sorry at all.

"Go ask the manager, would you please? I'm in a hurry. I have to have that watch."

She did and the manager said okay. I asked if she wanted to know why I wanted the watch.

"No," she said. She was mad.

"I have to time the scenes in the porno flick at the theater over there. It's for the good of the community."

"That will be \$11," she said, flatly.

"It's a movie about bestiality..."

For three days, I lurked around the porno house and the porno bookstores, of Missoula. The people of Missoula probably thought I was the biggest pre-vert around. I wrote a great report. The sheriff took copies of it, porno magazines, dildos and assorted paraphernalia to the state legislature and passed it all out to a committee, where it was--predictable--shocking: "My God, I had no idea these sorts of things were being peddled in Montana, shocking." Sex and drugs, drugs and sex, what else could a politician want. Anyway, that's how the Sheriff's Department came to buy me a Mickey Mouse pocket watch, and got to see a porno movie, watching Mickey's white-gloved hands while same fat lady cavorted about the screen with a variety of barnyard animals. I just had to have that watch.

The Region One Anti-Drug Team rode around in a beat-up 1963 Dodge van that someone gave to the county. The narc van, man, hash pipes and bongs on the front dash; camouflage to fool dopers. Periodically, we had to make trips to small towns like Alberton, Superior, Frenchtown to satisfy the local law enforcement people, mostly sheriffs and county attorneys. Usually, we made a few small buys, turned a few cases, got roaring drunk and had a good time. Politics again, of course: all the big dealers were in Missoula, but the locals could point to the fact that we had made a few cases, which meant yes, indeed, there was a drug problem in their counties. And it gave our sheriff the

illusion of just that much more power because he controlled the drug team that worked their counties. But the van was always breaking down.

Barney finally totaled it on a hill outside Bozeman--Yawney, Al and me in the bak playing Hearts on the engine cowling. A tie rod had broken. We rolled three times, Al and I swapping places, end over end in the back. Yawney going from front to back. Barney's head went out the window, his ear filled with dirt and grass, but no one was hurt. It was a miracle; the van was demolished. I always attributed it to an act of God; we had picked up a priest whose car had broken down around Philipsburg. We never identified ourselves, just sat there playing Hearts and drinking beer, our guns hanging out-- .357 magnums, 9mm 14 shot Browning automatics--looking freaky, bearded, ponytailed. The priest was undoubtedly terrified. He climbed out at Garrison, the next town. "Thanks boys, I know someone here. Just let me out at the truck stop." An act of God, as I said, and it was the only time as a narc that I knew I was going to die; I fell over a four-foot cliff in the dark, trying to dispose of beer cans before the highway patrol arrived.

Not all of us were narcs because we didn't like dopers, or simply because we liked the excitement and games and adrenaline. It was the special sort of freedom that being a narc gave us--the ability to transform ourselves, at least superficially, into any sort of person at all, aliens observing the human race. For awhile we were also idealistic, no matter how cynical and hard we pretended to be. People--innocent people, like the girl who snorted smack thinking it was co-

caine--die from dope. And I never, never never never, met a dealer who wouldn't sell any kind of dope, good or bad, if the price was right.

Of course, the law is one thing, enforcing it is another--and justice something else again. Penalties--jail time--are for poor people, and the bigger the dealer, the richer he is. One of our busts, involving cocaine and marijuana, in large quantities, netted the dealer two ten- and two five-year sentences in Montana State Prison. He actually served less than six months in the county jail.

The Region One Anti-Drug Team included anywhere from four to eight full-time narcs who were being paid salaries averaging \$1000 a month, plus expenses; gas, food, "buy money," meals, etc. From 1975 through 1978, the team, in Missoula County (keep in mind that a large amount of work was done in the rest of Montana), made 213 felony busts which resulted in 113 convictions. Twelve people actually went to Montana State Prison. Twelve people.

A ridiculous expenditure of men and money. Of course. But 213 felony busts for sale and or possession of dangerous drugs looked great statistically--for reelection, for more men, more money for the department; more power. It also drove up the price of dope, made the dealers more paranoid and gave them an excuse to market bad dope: "Sorry man, you read about the big bust, dope is hard to get."

The frustration and pressure got old. Narcing wasn't worth it. The politics made you cynical. Like Vietnam, it left too many scars.

Times have changed.

The new sheriff is not an ex-FBI agent. He stresses patrol; more uniformed officers in marked cars responding to family beefs,

assaults, robberies, burglaries, everyday problems--most of which are rarely connected with drugs--that hardly ever make the papers but are the reason why citizens pay to have a Sheriff's Department. He is honest and open, and he doesn't care about marijuana. "So many people smoke it now, it is impossible to do anything about it," he says. And he has few illusions about halting or even controlling the drug traffic in Missoula--or anywhere else, for that matter. The narc squad is limited to two men who work only Missoula county.

Roundhead and Al are uniformed police officers, again. Yawney is a detective. And Barney is a uniformed sheriff's deputy; burned-out disgusted, cynical, bored after nearly four years as a narc. Patrol at least has some excitement, despite the dog calls and disturbances and drunks. Got to have some adrenaline, once in awhile. Not the sanity-caught-between-fear-and-panic adrenaline of Vietnam, but something to let you know that you're still alive, code three to an accident or a shooting or anything that is not quite but almost serious. Once in awhile he helps people, saves lives even.

The new narcs are different than we were. They never go to bars and they bust dopers differently. They're a new generation. Efficient and businesslike, like the new generation of dealers; young, clean-cut. The new narcs understand search and seizure, warrants, probable cause--all the legal aspects of a narcotics case. They wait for cases to come to them, working only on "suppliers and organizers." The cloak and dagger excitement is gone. For Rooter, being a narc is very, very lonely.

Rooter, in charge of the drug team, is young and articulate, looks as if he should have starred in Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.

He has no intention of being a cop for the rest of his life, even though he's been one just over four years. He wants to be a businessman. He understands the drug scene. Understands the politics, the futility.

"The (previous) sheriff sent us to a little town in eastern Montana," he told me. "Town had never been worked, at least no cases had been made there. We made a lot of cases, good busts, but the people weren't really dealers, just friendly. They liked us. Grass, mostly. Election was coming up."

Rooter doesn't know about Vietnam. He went to college, joined a fraternity and did drugs--smoked pot and hash, tried coke and mushrooms--not to find peace and understanding, but just to have a good time. He became a cop because he needed a job, a narc because it was a promotion with higher pay and freedom.

It's strange talking to Rooter now, even though I have known him for a long time. He says no one sees the drug scene the way he does... At 27, he seems more than a little weary, he is getting old.

"You know, Gary," he says, a tinge of resignation in his voice, "fifteen years of this and I probably wouldn't even be human anymore."

I know what he means.

GOOKS

I might as well warn you: This is a story about death and dying in The Land of a Million Elephants, and about living and surviving in the Land of the Big Sky, and it begins the day before hunting season.

I was standing in a sporting goods store, in Missoula, Montana, helping a friend buy a hunting rifle. We'd pretty much decided on a .270 Remington--nothing big, nothing, for instance, that would stop a Laotian Seladang, a huge wild ox capable of knocking over an elephant, but plenty big enough for deer and elk. I'd just recommended my friend buy the rifle if they'd throw in a cheap scope.

"Sure. Sounds like a good deal to me," the clerk said, and pointed to a sign, about three feet by three feet, hanging right in front of me, that said: ALL RIFLES AND AMMUNITION 20% OFF PRICE ON TAG. "A real deal," he laughed. "The scope is worth about 10% of that rifle's price."

So there we were, everyone, the clerks and my friend, giving me a hard time about my bargaining skills, when two Hmong walked in and began looking at the ammunition displayed in a big, glass case. Small, about 5'3", they were dressed in green, wool coats, and plaid, double-knit Levis pants tucked into blue snowmobile boots. One was wearing a brown cap, the kind with fur flaps snapped together on top--the kind that reminds you of Russian soldiers in World War II. The two Hmong were serious, obviously discussing the cost of the ammunition, the soft sing-song of their voices incongruous as their clothes.

"Gooks," our clerk muttered. "Damn gooks are everywhere." He worked the bolt on the .270. "Living on welfare--on money that you and I work for. Taking jobs that belong to Americans. Poaching game."

The clerk wasn't talking very loud, not loud enough that the two Hmong could hear, but they both looked up from the display case, and glanced around, stiff-faced, not meeting anyone's eyes.

Another clerk went over and stood on the other side of the display case. He didn't say anything, no "can I help you," just stood there-- I think he thought he was being inscrutable--waiting for the two Hmong to do or say something.

They both looked up at the clerk for a moment. Then the one wearing the Russian hat pointed toward the display case and asked the price on a box of ammunition.

The clerk leaned over the case and read the price marked on the box; he didn't mention the discount.

The two Hmong left. Just left. Quietly, unobtrusively ignoring the clerk.

I turned back to our clerk. "Those were Hmong--" I began.

"Yeah, Mungs. I know all about Mungs," he interrupted. "Mung, Nung, Vietnamese, Siamese--they're all the same." He put the .270 on a rest and began mounting the scope.

"How do you know that?" I asked. He was about my age. "You been to Nam?"

"Special Forces."

"Where at?"

"Down south...Mekong mostly."

"And you worked with the Hmong?"

"No, not the Mungs. But it don't matter, you couldn't trust any of the gooks. Turn tail and run all of them when the shit hit the fan."

"That's strange," I said. "I haven't talked to any American who has worked with the Hmong--either here or in Southeast Asia--who wasn't 100% enthusiastic about them..."

The clerk looked up and smiled at me, one of those smiles that born again people get--the kind that says: so sad, you're a good man, I can tell, but you're going to Hell anyway.

"...and you know how hard it is to get a group of Americans to agree about anything."

The clerk smiled again, and it was silent for awhile.

"How about throwing in a free box of shells?" I asked.

"Sure," he smiled. "We always do that, anyway."

"Some Americans just don't like little people," Mai, a young Hmong woman told me. "But most people who don't like us, don't know us."

The Hmong have a saying: to the fish the water, to the birds the air, and to the Hmong the mountains. They love the mountains and streams; love to walk and hike, to hunt and fish. ("Sometimes we'll take some of them for a hike," a Missoula couple told me. We were sitting in a restaurant, drinking coffee, and behind them I could see Lolo Peak's nine-thousand odd feet, snow-capped and massive. "About six-thousand feet, we'll stop and build a fire and sometimes one of the men will go over to the edge of the mountain and squat there, looking out over the valley. Staring for hours, tears running down his face, silent until its time to go.") Hmong boys used to be able to walk hundreds of miles, from village to village, along the saw-toothed mountains and ridges of Laos; to walk for months if they wanted to,

without provisions, knowing they would be fed and housed, welcome in any Hmong village they encountered. Used to, that is, until the Kingdom of a Million Elephants became important to the security of the rest of the world.

Laos for centuries has been a haven for refugees fleeing China--refugees from the Mongol invasions, the Taiping and Moslem rebellions, and the civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists. The Lao and the Yao, the White T'ai and the Black T'ai, brutal Ho river pirates, and fierce Hmong on tough little ponies, have all combined with Kha and Khmer peoples to make up the population of Laos, a country in which the Lao are still only a dominant minority. As a matter of face, more Lao live in Thailand than in Laos.

Laos has always been a land of social and political and ethnic chaos. It is also a land of physical chaos: a geographer's nightmare of deep valleys and saw-toothed limestone mountains blanketed by jungle almost to the mountain tops. The high ridges of north Laos, like waves on a beach, flow away from China's Yunnan province, washing up against the Annam Cordillera, a rugged spine that for nearly five-hundred miles separates Laos from Vietnam. In the south are the rice growing lowlands and the Mekong. Two plateaus--the Plain of Jars and Bolovens Plateau--jut out from the surrounding jungle, their grassy plains ideal for farming and ranching. The mountains of northern Laos, where the Montana-Hmong come from, are very much--replace the jungle with forest--like the ridiculously tangled and steep Bitter-root Mountains of Montana; the Plain of Jars very much like the Mis-soula valley.

Which is one of the reasons why Hmong General Vang Pao, former

leader of the CIA's Armee Clandestine, chose Missoula and the Bitterroot Valley to settle in. But that is getting a little ahead of the story.

I might as well warn you about something else, though: this story is also about the CIA, Air America, opium, chemical warfare, and the Smoke Jump Center in Missoula. It's real Terry and the Pirates stuff, which is too bad because, near as I can tell, Terry and the Pirates got a lot of people killed.

Laos, in the words of Bernard Fall, is neither a geographical, nor an ethnic or social entity, but merely a political convenience. A buffer between the Thai people and the Vietnamese people, not important to anyone except the people who live there. The Thais and the Vietnamese took turns conquering and re-conquering the area that is today Laos, adhering to the centuries old custom in Southeast Asia of systematically depopulating any conquered territory--in order to make good the losses of other wars, to preclude rebellion, and to leave a devastated area incapable of supporting hostile troops. In 1964, the United States unwittingly conformed to tradition and mounted an air war in Laos even larger than the air war in Vietnam. Two billion dollars a year was spent to bomb a country of only three million people, a country about the size of Oregon.

It was a lot of bombs.

A lot of bombs to devastate an area, to make it incapable of supporting Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops. By late 1971, the Plain of Jars was devoid of civilians, its tropical green replaced by an abstract pattern of black and bright metallic colors, the remaining foliage stunted and dulled by defoliants. Napalm-caused fires burned

constantly, plumes of smoke rising above the plain. In many places, an American reporter wrote, the land resembled the pocked, churned desert in storm hit areas of the North African desert. "We didn't have a big war until the Americans came," Mai said to me.

But there had been a lot of little war, set against the backdrop of the Chinese Civil War, the Korean War, and the First Indo-China War. Laos was regarded not only as a buffer between Thailand and Vietnam, but also as an invasion route into the underbelly of China; the Plain of Jars a perfect location for an airfield to bomb China. The Communists won in China, Korea was a tie, and the French were shockingly beaten at Dien Bien Phu. Laos became important.

Somehow, though, with a little luck and astute diplomacy, Laos became an independent country. And for a brief moment it looked as if it would be allowed to settle its own internal squabbles, its little war, and become a neutral country along the lines of Burma, Nepal, Austria, and Finland. It never happened. The Communist countries feared a strong American presence in Laos, and the U.S. and its allies, especially in Thailand, feared a strong North Vietnamese presence. Rationales were expressed in terms of "dominoes" and "imperialism" depending upon which side you were on. War was inevitable; a war that most of us came to regard, if we thought of it at all, as a side-show to the Vietnam conflict, a small, Keystone Cops sort of affair. The newspapers were full of coup and counter-coup, meetings in Geneva, right wing, left wing, and neutral governments. Coalition governments that were really pro-communist. The corruption was understood, and the names were incomprehensible--Phoumis and Phoumas, Souvannaphouma and Souphanouvong, half-brothers, and who could remember who was the

bad guy, maybe both of them, maybe all of them. Anyway, who cared about Laos when 200 Americans a week were being zapped in Vietnam. Laos was a little war.

Actually it wasn't little at all; it was secret. A war conducted almost entirely by executive order--orders given to the armed forces, which are responsible only to the president, the CIA, USAID, and USIS. the U. S. had no treaties or written agreements with Laos that would have required congressional scrutiny, and the president wasn't telling; legally he didn't have to. Besides, no American ground units were involved, except a few Special Forces and CIA people. Professionals. Asians were fighting Asians, that was all. We were just helping them. It was called the Guam Doctrine. Newsmen were not allowed beyond the bars and night clubs and airfields of Vientiane.

And it was mostly the Hmong who were fighting. Meos, they were called then, and we knew nothing at all about them except that they were tough guerrilla fighters who grew opium. The Royal Laotian Army was corrupt and useless.

It hadn't always been, though. During the First Indo-China War, Laotian troops--lowlanders, Buddhists, mostly--fought extremely well against the North Vietnamese, but after the Americans took over, sometimes all the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese had to do was announce their intentions over loud speakers and the Royal Laotians would run. The Lao army was totally financed by the United States.

The soldiers were paid too much, and the already fragile economy couldn't take it. It seemed as if everyone above the rank of lieutenant wanted a villa and a car and a bank account. Elite paratroop units, units that had fought so well with the French, sold their jump

boots on the black market and jumped into combat wearing tennis shoes made in China. The Pathet Lao ran on a platform which promised a better and more equitable distribution of American aid.

It was clear that Laos was going to fall to the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. The U. S. had to do something, had to find a leader that was willing to take casualties, a commander with troops that would fight. And die. Vang Pao and his Hmong soldiers fit the requirements perfectly.

The Hmong have always been regarded as exceptional fighters. "Not as good as the Gurkhas of Nepal, or the Kachins of Burma," an ex-CIA agent--I'll call him Bob--told me. "But certainly better than the North Vietnamese, Laotians, Chinese, and Thais.

Originally wet-rice farmers from the high plateaus of China's Kweichow province, the Hmong were gradually forced up into the mountains of Yunnan province by the Chinese. By 1850, they had begun to filter into Vietnam, Laos, and Burma, always settling in the mountains above 3,000 feet. There they lived undisturbed, peacefully growing their crops--corn and dry-rice and opium--and raising oxen and horses. Occasionally, Hmong men--never the women--riding their little horses festooned with bells, would journey down to the lowland marketplaces to sell opium and livestock, and purchase necessities such as cloth and salt. Trips to the marketplace were accomplished as fast as possible. The lowlands meant heat and disease, especially malaria--the biggest cause of death in Laos, even during the fighting and bombing.

By 1960, there were approximately 350,000 Hmong in Laos; 250,000 in North Vietnam; and perhaps seven million scattered atop the ridges

and mountains of Northern Thailand, Burma, and Yunnan province, the bulk of them in Yunnan.

"What about the Americans?" I asked Bob. "Were the Americans as good as the Hmong?"

Bob smiled. (CIA agents, I always supposed, are average looking, nondescript, blend into a crowd and all that, and when they smile, it is with everything but their eyes which are hard and cold. But Bob is tall and rangy, and even though he must be close to sixty, I always have the uncomfortable feeling he can outwalk me in the mountains. Not only that, but when he smiles, his eyes smile and he reminds me of a big, friendly old dog, ears and all. His kids love him. "Oh, and Americans, of course," he said, surprised that I even asked.

"Even Special Forces, Marine Forced Recon., people like that?"

He leaned back in the chair, hands behind his head. "There's no way an American can keep going on what it takes to keep a Hmong going. Look at the way the Hmong hunt: if they're on the trail of something and night falls, they'll huddle on the ground and shiver and shake all night. Get up in the morning and keep going. It was a way of life. They didn't know any other way. But an American...well, an American has too much to compare it to. Takes an incredible amount of material to keep a bunch of Americans going."

Small, scattered bands of Hmong began working with U.S. Special Forces teams--"civic action teams," they were called, engaged in "relief work"--sometime before 1960. Soon after assuming office in 1961, President Kennedy ordered 400 Special Forces personnel (White Star Mobile Training Teams) into Laos to work with the Hmong. Ostensibly, these teams were modeled after the French G.C.M.A. units

(Groupement De Commandos Mistes Aeroportes). The French teams consisted of two or three men who were parachuted into "friendly" villages. The French would fly a small plane over a village to determine whether or not the village was friendly. If people waved and no shots were fired at the plane, the village was considered friendly. A GCMA unit was dropped.

If the unit managed to last a year--re-supply was haphazard at best--it was there for the duration. A years survival meant the team had learned the dialect, perhaps several, and had physically adapted to the murderous climate and food and jungle. The men were irreplaceable and stayed until their luck ran out, or health broke, or their minds finally cracked. Many of the GCMA units were abandoned behind Viet-Minh lines when the French pulled out of North Vietnam. Only one man made it out. The rest, unable to make their way across hundreds of miles of enemy territory, were forced to stay and keep fighting alongside the tribesmen they'd trained--Hmong and T'ai mostly. It was a fight to the end. "You sons-of-bitches, help us! Parachute us at least some ammunition, so that we can die fighting instead of being slaughtered like animals," was the last radio transmission from a GCMA unit in North Vietnam, and it came nearly two years later.

The White Star Teams did not adapt nearly as well as the French units. They were there for relatively short periods of time, and usually relied on American wealth and re-supply to keep the support of the Hmong. Often they ignored local customs; they ate their own rations, shunning Hmong food.

But what happened to the French GCMA units and some of the hill tribes of North Vietnam, was very close to what is happening to some

of the former Hmong units of the Armee Clandestine, today. Small, ragged bands of starving Hmong soldiers, their women and children and old people with them, are still fighting in Laos. Abandoned, like the GCMA, by their white allies, the Hmong have the same choices: run, fight, or surrender. But whatever the choice, death has often been the result.

"There were 300 people in my group," Mua was saying, "123 made it to Thailand." Mua is 28 years old (it is hard to find many Hmong males between 25 and 35), a former 2nd lieutenant, an air controller in Vang Pao's army. That's 177 people, I thought. Dead. (Statistics; I hate statistics. Six million refugees in 1979, The Year of the Child. One million in southeast Asia. Refugees everywhere. And body counts, always body counts: 80,000 Hmong. Once, in Nam, I saw a pile of North Vietnamese bodies strung out in the red dust and clay. Maybe forty, but it seemed like all the bodies in the world. And I remember thinking they didn't seem like dead people at all, just a mass of arms and legs, heads and chests, backs and faces, torn cloth and flesh. Dead people came in ones and twos. More, and it was just a pile of bodies. Junked cars. Spare parts.)

In May 1975, when the Kingdom of a Million Elephants finally became a People's Paradise, and Vang Pao "resigned" his commission in the Royal Lao Army and flew to Thailand and thence to Montana, Mua and many Hmong soldiers like him more or less surrendered and went back to their villages.

"The Lao Dang (Lao Communist Party) came to our village. Big smiles. Big talk," he said, and looked at me and smiled. We were

sitting at the kitchen table surrounded by his brothers and cousins and uncles. Checking me out. All of them about as tall standing as I was sitting. ("Sure," Cha the Hmong community spokesman had said. "Talk to anyone. You can go to any Hmong house, they'll be glad to talk. But most don't speak English yet.")

"I'd like to talk to someone who knows about the gas attacks."

"No problem. You can talk to Mua. He just come from Thailand. I'll call him." But he hadn't called--Cha's way of being sure I wouldn't feel set up--and I'd stepped into an apartment room full of Hmong who were being very polite, but having trouble understanding what an interview was, would I like some Pepsi. Not too long before, some American had broken into a Hmong family's rented trailer house, and ranted and raved and broken things. The Hmong had run terrified out the back door, none of them with enough English to understand the man.)

"But outside the village, on all the trails, they set up ambushes," Mua continued. "Anyone leaving the village was shot." Mua's uncle, a former major and the smallest man in the room, watched carefully over my shoulder as I wrote Mua's comments down. "We stayed in the village three months, and then one night everyone in the village escaped into the forest."

Behind the uncle, I could see Mua's pretty wife, tense and disapproving, watching as I questioned her husband. I wondered how it must look to her, only three weeks in the U. S.: her husband, fine-featured and small, nervous under the glare of the kitchen light suspended from the ceiling directly over the table, and me, at least a foot taller than anyone else in the room, bulky in my down coat,

asking questions and recording the responses in a little blue notebook. (It took awhile, but I finally realized that the Hmong are not at all intimidated by big people. They'd like to be taller, but only because they think their size makes them conspicuous. Big people are just bigger targets where they come from. They know they can do anything the White Star Mobile Training Teams could do--and do it better.)

"From 1975 to September 1978," Mua continued, "we lived in the forest, all of us--women, children--looking for food. Fighting."

They used arms and ammunition cached before they returned to the village. "Everyone knows how to use guns," Mua said. "M-16, M-41, M-42, AK-47, B-40 . . . We didn't have enough food . . . and we had women and children and old people with us. The Vietnamese bombed us--130mm, 105, 155mm, 85mm." Behind me, I could hear the men leaving. I turned to look. Mua's wife sat on the couch, staring at me.

"There have been stories in the newspapers and in magazines about the Vietnamese using chemical warfare--gas attacks," I said.

"Sometimes small planes--L-19's (a plane used extensively by the CIA in Laos, able to land in a very short distance), would shoot rockets into the jungle," he replied. "Yellow smoke. Green smoke. People bleed from the mouth. Make stomach and lungs ache. Some died." He paused. "I never feel myself, but I saw plane shoot rockets, and saw the smoke."

Mua and his group finally gave up scrounging in the jungle for food, fighting the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese, and escaped across the Mekong to a refugee camp in Thailand. It wasn't that simple, of course. They came out during the rainy season.

In Laos, most everything comes to a halt during the rainy season. Nothing can move: roads, where there are roads, wash out, airplanes can't fly, armies can't move. In the jungle, in the perpetual gloom of trees that tower 80-100 feet, it is incredibly dank and humid and wet, the air thick with the stench of rotting organisms. And where it isn't jungle, in the glades and on the small plains pocked with impenetrable stands of thorny bamboo, scrub trees, and pine, the ground cover is a coarse grass called tranh--six feet high, and wet, so thick it is hard to breathe. The floor of the jungle is dark and slippery, but at least it is relatively open. In the tranh, visibility is no more than a few feet, a few feet of suffocating, tough, resilient grass that springs up and closes back in behind whatever is passing through it--not immediately, but seconds later, with a knock knocking sound as the grass straightens again, so that if you stop, it sounds as if there is someone following.

When Mua and his group reached the Mekong, they tied pieces of banana tree and bamboo around their bodies and floated across the Mekong. Women and children, old and sick people were placed on trees and pulled across. ("The Mekong can be any where from a quarter of a mile to perhaps a mile wide," Bob had told me. "Kind of like the Mississippi, shifting sandbars and channels, only it's faster. I've seen whirlpools the size of a house--you can hear them sucking, making noise--that move. They don't stay in one place; they move across the Mekong.

"It's rather frightening at times. Big boats--40-50 passengers--have been lost in the whirlpools." Bob paused and laughed. "When a boat approaches a whirlpool or treacherous streak of water, the cook

will run up to the bow and throw rice into the water to feed the river god.

"The river sure doesn't go hungry . . . especially during the rainy season.")

But Mua and his group were lucky. No one shot at them. Pathet Lao troops patrol the Mekong, shooting at anyone trying to escape across it. Many of the Hmong have stories of friends and relatives, women and children being shot as they tried to swim the Mekong. Sometimes, Thai border guards make the Hmong swim back across the Mekong to waiting Pathet Lao who shoot them. ("You know what the Lao think of the mountain people," Bob had said. "'Well, that's what the Thai think of the Lao, so you can imagine what they think of the Hmong. The Hmong are no better than animals to the Thai.

"Once, I went to dinner at a high government official's house. The man was probably a Buddhist, and he didn't like American aggressiveness and predilection to solve things through the use of force. 'Everyone should try to be like the butterfly,' the Thai said. 'A butterfly is beautiful and harms no one. But if you are like the cobra, then you are a threat. No one likes you; everyone wants to kill you.'

"That evening, I watched the man beat his servant--a Thai himself--really beat him for some minor mistake.

So much for butterflies, I thought.") It took months of waiting in a refugee camp in Thailand, nothing to do but sit around and wait, or get sick and wait, or die, before Mua could fly to Montana.

Still, it only took him seven months to get out. Many have been in the camps for years.

Later, as I left Mua's apartment, Mua's wife still sat on the couch. When all the men had been in the room, I hadn't noticed how empty it was. Just a couch and a television set and Mua's wife. I felt large and awkward, suffocated by the emptiness and the woman. And as I opened the door I had the strangest feeling, as if outside the door there wasn't Montana and the snow and the cold, but something dank and humid and knacking.

Mua's apartment, a typical 200 hundred dollars a month, one or two bedroom, dining-kitchen-living room apartment in no way resembles the traditional Hmong house. The Hmong liked to build their houses near the top of mountains, placed in hollows near the sources of permanent streams. The walls were made of unplanned planks made smooth and straight with axes and knives. The planks were set upright in the ground and tied to the joists. No windows. The cracks between the planks admitted light--as well as heat and cold, wind and dampness. There was usually only one main room with a sleeping compartment alongside.

A fireplace and cooking hearth were set into the middle of the stamped clay floor. A wok and other accoutrements of chinese culture, farming implements, pack saddles for horses, a loom, bars of seed corn hanging from the ceiling, pack baskets and hampers used to store rice, roots, and precious salt cluttered the inside. At one end a guest bed--a bamboo platform.

"You go now?" Mua had asked as I walked toward the door. He sounded surprised, as if I had come to stay for hours, and that was OK, stay as long as I liked, go when I wanted, he wouldn't pry into

my affairs.

The Hmong built every house so that a distant mountain could be seen from the door. The village--usually no more than five or six houses--obviously had a haphazard look about it. Pigs and chickens and sometimes oxen rooted and softened the ground around the buildings. In the rainy season the village was muddy and grey. Primitive, even to the Hmong themselves.

But they were free. (The word Hmong means free men, or men at the top.) Free to walk the mountains, to hunt deer and other animals with home-made musket or cross-bow. Free to move the village every four or five years, when the fields being planted were no longer within reasonable walking distance of the village. Serious disputes were easily settled: the village was split; one or several households simply moved to another site and established a new village.

Villages were connected by paths, often brutally difficult trails that meandered along the ridges. A Hmong might want to visit another Hmong village located on a ridge across the valley. The shortest route, naturally, was down the mountain, across the valley, and up the mountain to the other village. But the lowlands were to be avoided if at all possible. So the Hmong would sometimes walk for days, following the mountains, walking around the valley to get to the other side. It wasn't just the heat and disease that kept the Hmong out of the valleys, though.

The people of Laos literally live almost on top of each other. On or near the mountain tops live the Hmong. Below them live the Sino-Tibetans and T'ai. And on the valley floors live the Lao. It

is not uncommon to walk--going from the valley floor to the mountain top--through a belt of Lao villages to a belt of Kha-Mou to a belt of White or Black T'ai to a belt of Lolo Kha Kho to the Hmong. But the social structure is inverse to the distribution of people.

The Lao call the Hmong, Meo, which means savage; and the negrito aborigines--about 25% of the population--are called Kha, which means slave. "You have to understand," Bob said to me. "In Laos there was the Royal Lao family--and God only knows how many princes and princesses and other royal folk the Royal family included. And they all thought they were better than anybody else. And then there is the Lao people who think they are better than anybody except the Royal family. By the time you work your way up to the Kha and the Hmong, why they aren't hardly even considered human."

It was the geography again: what really counted in Laos was what happened to one's own clan in one's own valley. The mountain peoples, even though they occupied most of the territory of Laos, didn't count at all--except as a source of taxes, opium, and free labor. The social difference between the wealthy, European educated royalty who believed in "doing things in a pleasant way," and the illiterate and poor and disease ridden Lao people crammed into the fertile lowlands, was immense. The social distance between the Lao people and the Hmong was even greater. It was only natural that the Hmong went to great pains to stay out of the lowlands. (After the fall of Laos," and American told me, "we started getting a lot of Hmong refugees in Missoula, but once in a while we'd get a Lao family. None of them could speak much English, and the Hmong always referred to themselves as Laotians, anyway, so we couldn't tell the difference.

"One day, we picked up a family at the airport and drove them over to a Hmong family's house to stay the night. But it turned out they weren't Hmong because as we drove up to the house, one of the men spotted the Hmong children playing in the front yard. 'Ohhh, no,' he moaned. 'Hmong.'")

The Hmong have been characterized as honest and sincere, incurably optimistic, inquisitive, adaptive, ruggedly independent with a deep love for freedom. The Lao on the other hand, are characterized by a certain joie de vivre and spontaneity; they are willing to work--but only as hard as necessary. Despite the differences, as long as the Hmong kept to their beloved mountain tops and the Lao to their rice-paddies, there were no serious conflicts. "The Hmong don't like to fight unless someone step down on them," one of the few surviving Hmong pilots told me. "But if someone does, they are like rattlesnakes--don't touch, don't hit with a stick."

The viet-Minh, the French and the Americans all recognized the fighting ability of the hill peoples. Most of the land area--all of the high ground--in Laos and Vietnam is occupied by hill people. Aggressive, individualistic mountain people. Perfectly suited to the kind of small-unit warfare waged in Southeast Asia since World War II.

The Hmong and other mountain people have generally--but not always--been friendly to the French. The French, and later, the Viet-Minh and Pathet Lao, treated the hill people with more decency and respect than they had ever been treated by the majority population of their own countries. Not that the French did much, a few token schools, a doctor now and then, but even that was far more than anyone else had

done. Hmong in Laos warned and sheltered Frenchmen fleeing the Japanese in World War II, and the Viet-Minh after World War II.

The French used Hmong extensively for intelligence gathering operations. There was a detachment of Hmong at Dien Bien Phu who worked for the French equivalent of the CIA--called section 6. "The French used the Hmong for intelligence missions because the Hmong have good minds," Vang Pao told me. "But the Laotians wanted to use the Hmong like the Hmong use dogs for the hunt." At Dien Bien Phu, the Hmong disappeared periodically into the nearby mountains on "mysterious errands." All through the seige, their women and children lived with them. The Viet-Minh put a heavy price on their heads and when Dien Bien Phu fell, even the women and children of the Hmong "suffered worse than the soldiers."

All of which fits in very nicely with current newspaper and magazine articles that claim the Pathet Lao and the Vietnamese are waging a war of genocide against the Hmong. Except that more Hmong have fought for the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao, than for the French or Americans. In 1919, the French, by imposing heavy taxes and letting another minority, the T'ai, collect the taxes, managed to step on the Hmong. The Hmong revolted and attempted to set up a separate Hmong state in North Vietnam. It was only with difficulty that the French quelled the rebellion. In the process they incurred the dislike of the Vietnamese Hmong, and some of the Laotian Hmong.

The Viet-Minh could never have succeeded at Dien Bien Phu were it not for the enthusiastic support of the Hmong. Thousands of Hmong voluntarily served as porters, helping to accomplish the impossible task of carting Viet-Minh artillery and ammunition into the hills

around Dien Bien Phu. The Royal Lao forces who did fight so well during the First Indo-China War, were decimated by Viet-Minh forces that included sizeable detachments of Hmong. (On April 12, 1950, Regiment 98 of the 316th Vietnam Peoples Army Division, supported by Hmong troops fought a force of 2400 Lao and French troops. 180 Lao, 1 French officer, and 1 Lao officer survived.) In 1959, the Hmong stronghold of Ban Pa Thi in northern Laos fell to the communists when it was taken by Hmong fighting for the Pathet Lao.

The Pathet Lao has always, from the beginning, incorporated large numbers of Hmong and other hill peoples into its organization. Hmong have been sent to colleges and military schools in Hanoi, Peking and Moscow. Today, more than 220,000 Hmong live in an autonomous district located between the Red and Black rivers in north Vietnam; in Laos, the 100,000 or so Hmong who fought with the Pathet Lao are well represented in the government and military.

It is the remnants of Vang Pao's army, the Armee Clandestine, an army conceived, directed and supplied by the CIA, that the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese are trying to completely exterminate.

The Armee Clandestine put a real hurt on the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao. As many as four combat divisions of North Vietnamese Army were pinned down and neutralized by Vang Pao's force of about 40,000 men. (Perhaps, as many as 22,000 Hmong, 10,000 Thai Army troops--used mostly for artillery support--and an unknown quantity of other Laotian hill people, Cambodians, Burmese, Filipino, Nationalist Chinese, and other mercenaries.) The Armee Clandestine operated throughout Southeast Asia, not just Laos: northeast Burma, Unnan, North Vietnam,

South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand. It was an army that respected no national frontiers, recognized no government, and was responsible only to its American sponsors. It fit neatly into the Guam Doctrine:

Americans took care of leadership, planning, and logistics; Asians did the fighting. The Armee Clandestine was the ultimate test for guerrilla and counter-insurgency theories.

It lost, of course, as most people always knew it would. But theories were proven or rejected or modified, and all at the expense of only 200-500 American lives--most of whom were professionals, anyway.

But of the approximately 250,000 Hmong who supported Vang Pao and the Armee Clandestine, 10,000 were killed in action, 70,000 died because of disease or starvation or injury, 55,000 are in refugee camps in Thailand, 30,000 live in the United States, 5,000 in France, and the rest are unaccounted for. Another 80,000 still fighting, gone back to their villages, or dead. Statistics again. History we'd like to forget or never know.

Well, I wondered, how do you get people who value their independence and freedom as the Hmong do, who are not comfortable anywhere but on their mountain tops, eking out a living growing poppies and corn and rice, and raising livestock, who dislike the lowlander as much as the lowlanders dislike them, how do you get these people to come down into the heat and disease, to fight and die by the thousands for a Laos that the Laotians won't even fight for.

"Ah, Anthony. Anthony is a real character," an ex-CIA agent was telling me. "Let me tell you a story about Anthony."

A member of the CIA's Special Operations Division, Anthony Poe had the reputation as one of the Agency's crack clandestine warfare operatives in Asia. In 1963, he was sent to Laos as an advisor to Vang Pao.

"We were sitting in a bar in Washington D.C. We'd both just gotten back from Asia and were relaxing a bit." The ex-agent laughed, looking out the window, not really focusing on the clear waters of the creek that flowed past the restaurant we were sitting in. "Now Anthony doesn't look that impressive. I mean, he's put together well, about 5'10"-5'11", but in a sport coat and with his balding head, he looks pretty ordinary. Soft spoken, taciturn, almost."

Taciturn Anthony Poe wasn't responsible for the decision to build the Hmong into a force that eventually fielded almost as many combat troops in Laos as the Americans did in Vietnam at the height of the war there, but Poe was, perhaps, representative of the kind of man the CIA used to implement that decision. The Hmong liked him: Poe is married to a Hmong woman, and, today, they live in Thailand.

"Anyway, we were getting a little tight. Anthony is slouched down in the booth, ankles crossed, legs extended out into the aisle. And in comes this big guy and a woman, and they walk past our booth. Anthony draws his feet out of the way without sitting up--kind of like you do in a movie theatre--to give the guy and his girl room to get by." The ex-agent began to fidget in his seat, his hands rearranging the napkin and silverware, the water glass, as he warmed to the story.

"The girl walks by OK, but the guy trips over Anthony's legs and nearly falls. Now, you got to remember Anthony was looking a little like a middle-aged college professor who has had a few too many."

When the mild-looking Poe worked with the Yao people in Laos, he offered his soldiers 500 kip (one dollar) for an ear, and 5,000 kip for a severed head if it was accompanied by a Pathet Lao cap. Money was no problem.

Poe and other CIA and USAID people funneled millions of dollars in arms and food to Vang Pao who used these resources to recruit Hmong soldiers. The Hmong had few illusions about staying out of the war; they knew sooner or later they'd have to pick a side. But they had the funny idea that wealth meant luck. And since the Americans were obviously far wealthier than the communists, the Americans would win.

"The big guy says something nasty to Anthony. But Poe just sort of ignores him, hoping he'll go away.

"But the guy won't give it up. A real cowboy. Well, one thing led to another and this big guy wants to fight Anthony who is still slouched down in his seat, looking up sort of bemused at this big asshole. 'We don't want to fight in here,' Anthony says. 'It's a nice place, we'd tear up tables and chairs and break things.'"

By 1968, the fabric of Hmong life in Laos had been irreversibly torn and broken. The simple villagers wooed by American wealth, were forced to live in military camps. Hmong existence, for all but a few who were French educated and military trained, had revolved around a slash and burn agriculture, a relatively mean existence of burning off the forest, planting the crops, and moving the village to a new location when the fields had been depleted. A delicate cycle. One bad crop and the village went hungry. Once in the military camps, the Hmong had little chance to return to their villages and resume their former life. Food and other supplies would only be provided as long as they

fought. "No boom boom, no rice," was the philosophy of their American advisors. And no salaries, arms, or air support either.

"'Outside then,' the guy says.

"Anthony shrugs, resigned to the fact that this guy just isn't going to give up. 'Ok. You go ahead,' he tells the guy. 'I'll be right out.'

"So the guy stalks to the door, red-faced, swollen neck, the whole thing. I mean, he is going to tear Anthony apart. At the door, he turns around to make sure Anthony is following him." The ex-agent laughed, looking out the window, down at his napkin, up at me--like a kid who can't wait to get somewhere exciting. "You should have seen the expression on that guy's face when he turned around.

"First, Anthony took a mouthpiece from his pocket and put it in his mouth. The, he put on a pair of brass knuckles."

Vang Pao was America's brass knuckles in Laos.

Today, Vang Pao lives on a 425 acre farm in the Bitterroot Valley. He also owns a large ranch style house in Missoula, Montana, and used to own property--it's now his son's--in Orange County, California. (A lot of the Air America crews and some of the CIA agents came from Montana. The U.S. Forest Service Smoke Jump Center in Missoula, Montana was a perfect place to recruit men trained to parachute supplies into rugged, mountainous areas--tough, hard-working smoke jumpers. "Right after World War II, they started going over there," a former director of the Smoke Jump Center told me. "They'd leave here in the off-season--the winter--and come back in time for the fire season." He stopped for a moment, thinking. "I guess the CIA was a big part of

our history. Upwards of 50 people probably went over. And some of them once they got started stayed with the CIA."

In the 60's, Hmong children, a few at a time, began coming to Missoula. Some of Vang Pao's children attended high school and college in Missoula. When Cha first came to Missoula, he was helped by the family of a CIA agent who is still in Thailand working with the Hmong. The CIA agent is a former smoke jumper, "a real hard worker; the tougher it was, the better he liked it."

It was either Montana or France, and the Hmong didn't like to send their children to France to be educated. "They'd come back political scientists, and the Hmong didn't like that," an American told me.)

Small and energetic, Vang Pao exudes leadership. "A tough little S.O.B. when he had to be," one American remarked, and I can believe it.

At the age of thirteen, Vang Pao began his military career by serving the French as a runner to warn of Japanese troops. By the time he was 22, Vang Pao was a lieutenant in the French army, leading a group of about 300 Hmong and French in a hopeless attempt to relieve besieged and already doomed Dien Bien Phu. Vang Pao, until he moved to Montana, has always been a soldier. (And even during the 1979 war between the Vietnamese and the Chinese, there were rumors that Vang Pao had flown to China, at China's request, to talk about reviving Hmong guerrilla groups to fight the Vietnamese--this time with Chinese aid and direction.)

"I just want to do the military," he said, talking about his role in Laotian politics. "not the politics and economics. But the Laotians were too dumb to do it. The Laotians have very small brain about how to run a country."

After the French left and Laos became an independent country, Vang Pao allied himself with Touby LyFong, a wealthy, French educated Hmong, one of the few to ever hold a position in the former government.

Touby was member of the Ly clan, a clan closely allied with the French. (Another reason why many Laotian Hmong fought for the communists is rooted in a village feud that began in the 1930's between the Lo and Ly clans, the two most influential Hmong clans in Laos. The daughter of the leader of the Lo clan, who had married the leader of the Ly, Touby's clan, died after complaining several times of mistreatment. Normally, the feud would have been solved by simply splitting the village, either Lo or Ly moving to a new mountain location. But in 1945, the French appointed Touby's father to District Chief, taking the lucrative position away from a member of the Lo clan, and the feud escalated beyond the limits of Hmong society. Eventually, the leader of the slighted Lo clan, Faydang, became an important leader in the Pathet Lao, and Touby a leader who supported the French and later the Americans.)

But Touby, even though he had a force of 6,000 Hmong on the Plain of Jars, wouldn't commit his troops, commanded by Vang Pao, to the fight. Laos in 1960 had all but fallen to the communists.

Vang Pao, however, like most professional soldiers, wanted to fight. Touby once said of him: "Vang Pao is a pure military officer who doesn't understand that after the war there is peace. And one must be strong to win the peace." Vang Pao was the "real slugger" that the U.S. needed to stop, or at least delay, Laos from falling to the communists. All he needed was a little help from his friends.

Touby Ly Fong made a political alliance with the Lao government. The Hmong were reportedly promised an autonomous "Hmong state" in re-

turn for helping the right wing government fight the Pathet Lao. Vang Pao denies this: "Hmong fight for the whole nation. For Laos, not just Hmong," he says. But the independent Hmong, many of whom didn't even know they lived in a country called Laos, were much more concerned with growing opium than fighting for the Lao.

Special Forces White Star teams arrived. And many of the Hmong decided to take advantage of American largess to help create a "Hmong state." The Hmong were going to "use" the Americans. But they were way out of their league--kind of like a Japanese Little League team playing in the same league as the N. Y. Yankees and the L.A. Dodgers. Air America began ferrying supplies--arms and food--on a large scale. Touby was edged into the background, left to deal with the corrupt and "dumb" politicians.

Vang Pao and his American advisors devised a plan to move 200 Hmong villages to seven mountain top camps surrounding the vital Plain of Jars. 100,000 Hmong made the journey, but thousands, weeks without food or medicine, died or committed suicide enroute.

Hmong forces grew to an estimated 18,000 men. Food, medical treatment and other benefits were used to attract new recruits. American planes began dropping bombs. Villages that were not supplying recruits, or otherwise supporting Vang Pao's army, were considered enemy. By 1964, Anthony Poe and the Hmong had taken mountain ridges all the way to Phou Pha Thi, where a highly classified electronics installation was constructed that controlled the bombing of North Vietnam.

In the military camps, the Hmong--who always brought along their women and children and old people--lived in large houses, barracks

almost. No planked house with a door that faced a mountain, no familiar trails and fields, no place to leave offerings for the familiar tlan, the ubiquitous spirits, good and bad, that used to dominate Hmong life. No place for their ancestors. No freedom.

The men fought. The women and children and old people stayed in camp. By 1968, the Hmong had lost most of their Northern bases and about 55% of their fighting-age men, and about 25% of their women. Who knows how many children and old people. Many of the Hmong were evacuated to lower altitudes--down into the heat and disease and lethargy of refugee camps. Thousands more with no natural immunities began to die from tropical diseases. By 1971, Vang Pao was accepting recruits as young as 14 and 15. ("People just die and die and die and die," Mai told me. "But I don't know why. Why have war? Who want have war?")

According to Vang Pao, and by then it was indeed so, it was kill or be killed. The Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese had launched an all out effort against the Hmong and the Armee Clandestine. "If the Doctor say you have to die today, or die tomorrow, you want to die today or tomorrow?" Vang Pao told me when I asked him why the Hmong kept fighting.

"Go talk to Pa," Cha told me. "He was captured by the North Vietnamese. I'll call him."

But, naturally, Cha hadn't called--making sure again that I wouldn't feel the interview had been rehearsed--and Pa, sleepy and bewildered, only a few weeks in Montana and having trouble adapting to the cold, didn't speak English. "I'm a writer," I said. I want to interview you." I showed him my notebook and pen. He nodded, suddenly

comprehending, and took out his wallet, removed all the money from it, and spread the money out on the table top.

He thought I was a bill collector.

Pa is a slight, 25 year old Hmong, who was a soldier--just a private, not an officer--for seven years before he and about a thousand other soldiers surrendered to the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese, after Vang Pao left Long Tieng for Montana. The Vietnamese put him to work dynamiting rock that was being used to construct an air field on the Plain of Jars. About 2,000 Soviet technicians were helping to build the airstrip. According to Pa, the interpreter told me, there were about 20-30 Soviet pilots, 8-10 Soviet helicopters, and an unknown quantity of Mig jets and propeller driven planes. Many of the planes that flew in and out "were from Vientiane, also."

"I think the Vietnamese want to fight the Thailand," he said, and I thought to myself: same old story.

When Pa first surrendered he was given "political education," and promised he could go see his family. At the airfield, he and other Hmong were formed into groups of 12--six Hmong and six Pathet Lao, controlled by two Vietnamese with pistols. They lived in a "small house," 21 per house, 2 meter bedrooms. Each was given 100 grams of meat and 100 grams of rice per day.

One day, Pa worked until noon and then asked one of the Vietnamese if he could "go buy something," and then he ran. No food, no supplies, just ran.

He ran to a Hmong village about "six hours away." The people of the village helped him get to Vientiane, and from there he made it to a refugee camp in Thailand. One month later, he was in Missoula, Mon-

tana.

"What if you'd been captured again?" I asked. "Would they have killed you."

"Oh no," he replied, surprised. "Go to jail maybe, but no killed."

It is hard to say how many Hmong who fought for the Armee Clandestine have been killed after they surrendered. Officers and senior non-coms are almost certainly executed. The Hmong who fought with Vang Pao are regarded as "troublemakers." Without them, Laos would have been a communist country in 1960, instead of 1975. Fifteen years of bombs. Fifteen years of lives lost fighting nasty little battles in the jungles and in the tranh. "When I was in Vientiane," Mai told me, "I read an article that said: 'the Hmong who worked for the United States would be chopped down like a tree, destroyed to the roots,' and I think it is time to get out."

The communists have made efforts to discourage the Hmong from re-settling in the mountains. The slash and burn system of agriculture practiced by the Hmong has seriously de-forested large areas of Laos. In the past, every spring "smoke from thousands of fires blanketed northern Laos. Through the pall the sun glowed like a dull orange ball until monsoon rains filled the air." Even Vang Pao deplored the traditional Hmong method of agriculture. "In one year," he told a National Geographic reporter, "a single family will chop down and burn trees worth perhaps \$6,000 and grow a rice crop worth only \$240."

But what Vang Pao neglected to mention is that poppies, not rice, were of first concern. Fields best suited for poppies are rarely suitable for rice. (Corn, a staple of the Hmong diet, compliments opium very well; fields first planted with corn yield more opium.)

Opium. The word reverberates with intrigue and decadence, smokey opium dens in deepest darkest Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore, emaciated addicts groping blindly through the haze for yet another bowl. And opium means heroin. Smack. Junk. Crime and violence and death in the cities of America.

But opium in Southeast Asia means something else entirely. In a land where most of the population is inflicted with intestinal parasites, dysentery, diarrreaha, opium serves as an effective paragoric. In a land where modern medicine was non-existant, opium provided the only means of relief from pain. The people of Laos and Thailand even used opium to pacify their elephants. (In a land without many trucks and cars, elephants are important.) To keep an elephant from wandering off with any passing herd of wild elephants, domesticated elephants were given a ball of opium each morning. The Hmong used opium as a social drug, much as we use alcohol, and, like alcohol in our society, opium was occasionally abused. The Hmong, however, condoned opium addiction only among the elderly--instead of suffering a painful decay, they were allowed to pass their remaining years in euphoria.

Opium only grows well in a certain type of soil (the Hmong determine the quality by simply tasting the soil), and it only grows above 3,000 feet--one of the reasons why the Hmong chose to live in the mountains.

The Hmong don't like to talk about opium. For centuries, the cultivation of opium has not only been legal, but in many instances, demanded by some government officials. It was their only cash crop. They cannot understand the American attitude toward it. Politics,

they assume.

Politics indeed. The politics of opium has been as bizarre as it has been Byzantine. The French bureaucracy in Laos was financed by the sale of opium, a French monopoly. Opium paid for the G.C.M.A. units, nearly 15,000 men and supplies.

The Viet-Minh movement probably would have foundered had it not been for opium. The Viet-minh bartered salt and supplies for opium which in turn was sold for piasters. And piasters bought arms and ammunition, medicine, all the expensive supplies an army needs. In fact, the first Viet-Minh invasion of Laos, in 1953, was in part an effort to collect the opium harvest. Immediately after the harvest, the Viet-Minh troops withdrew back into Vietnam.

Laos itself was kept going on three things: U.S. aid, gold, and opium. Pressure from the Americans finally made it illegal, but only technically. The Royal Army staff still grew rich on the sale of opium and heroin.

The Hmong, encouraged by the French and the Laotians, simply grew it. It was the Lao, the Corsicans, the Thai, the Nationalist Chinese Army still in Thailand, the American Mafia, and the Viet-Minh who profited the most from Hmong opium.

Vang Pao and some of his officers in collusion with the CIA and Air America, have been accused of profiting from the sale of opium and heroin. "There were all kinds of people at Long Tieng (the Arme'e Clandestine's main base in Laos), how could there be no proof of a heroin lab," Vang Pao said to me, outraged. We were in the living room of Vang Pao's ranch style house in Missoula, just me and Vang Pao always seems to travel with. Vang Pao jumped to his feet, clearly

frustrated by the same old questions. "The soldiers fight all the time. All-the-time. They-have-no-time-for-opium!" he thundered, and abruptly I understood why so many men followed him. (No armchair general, lol-ling in air-conditioned comfort, Vang Pao was seriously wounded several times. He was one of the few generals anywhere, anytime, who asked nothing of his men that he himself hadn't already done or was willing to do.)

"My money come from farms I have in Laos--25,000 chickens, 500 cows, 3,000 pigs. I get gold for selling these things. And I am a soldier; I get paid for being a soldier."

Nevertheless, considering the centuries-old attitude toward opium in Southeast Asia, it seems logical to assume that Vang Pao and some of the Hmong made money from opium. After all, in that part of the world it was neither immoral or illegal. But blaming the Hmong in part for America's heroin addicts, as some Americans have, it sort of like telling a Virginia tobacco farmer that he is responsible for all the lung cancer in the U.S.--a tobacco farmer who has never even heard of lung cancer.

But in 1973, airplanes suddenly appeared over Hmong poppy fields, spraying the fields with some kind of herbicide. "Both my wives were working in the field with our babies on their backs," a Hmong told a National Geographic reporter. "A cloud fell out of an airplane. They became like they were drunk." The poppy crop died--as did the vegetables and banana trees, all the dogs and many of the pigs. And three babies who were in the fields. The American ambassador to Laos denied to Vang Pao that the Americans had done it, but there were only two kinds of planes in Laos, American and Russian, and the planes weren't

Russian.

"Vang Pao wouldn't talk about opium," I complained to Bob. "Just the same old song and dance."

"Well what did you expect," Bob replied. "Even if he did have something to do with it, would you expect him to admit it."

Today, Vang Pao spends most of his time trying to help his people adapt to American life. "My phone bill. You should see my phone bill," he moans. "I tell Hmong people, you have trouble, call me." And they do.

With over 30,000 Hmong in this country--5,000 in southern California, 3,500 in Minneapolis/St. Paul, 2,500 in Illinois, 1,400 in Oregon, 500 in Washington state, 300 in Hawaii, 1,200 in Denver, 600 in Missoula, and the remainder scattered throughout the U.S.--it is a lot of phone calls.

"The Hmong were America's allies," Vang Pao said. "But the programs to help the Hmong are not enough.

"Without education, Hmong people cannot get off welfare. The Hmong are not like the Lao and Vietnamese. The Hmong hate welfare. We want to help ourselves.

"But the programs are not good--many are a waste of money."

Lu and Cha are two of the leaders of the Montana-Hmong community. Both are lucky: both are around thirty and both live in Montana.

Cha is small even by Hmong standards, stocky and baby-faced. Big brown eyes and fine bones. If Mattel made a Hmong doll, Cha would be a perfect model. Cha is the father of three children, a former lieutenant, and air controller who fought from 1968-73, a graduate of

officer training school at Fort Knox. "When Cha says something," a Fish and Game officer told me, "all the Hmong sit up and take notes." (I'm pretty protective of the Hmong," a social worker told me. The social worker is about fifty, an aggressive woman, physically larger than the Hmong she works with. "I like to think of them as my people," she said, smiling down at her Hmong helper, Lu's wife. "My people," could just have well been "my children.")

Some children. Lu's nickname, given to him by a CIA agent from Missoula, is Lucky. A name that reflected Lu's penchant for surviving when everyone else was killed or shot up. "One time, in 1971, I was in a Jolly Green Giant helicopter that was carrying fifty-sixty troops. It was shot down. Everyone was killed except me and the crew chief." End of story. Lucky politely refused to embellish upon it. or to give me other examples of how he got his nickname.

Most Hmong will not tell war stories. No reason to, I suppose; it was a shared experience--men, women, children, old people. Fierce soldiers when they have to be, the Hmong do not glorify fighting. Only a few of the really "professional" soldiers like Vang Pao and the Hmong pilot, men in their 40,s and 50's, enjoy telling war stories. The Hmong want to get on with life. The past is past. "I feel like born again," Mua said, talking about the feeling he had stepping off the plane in Missoula.

Lucky spent five years fighting in the jungle. Today, he works at a local paper mill. A good job. He's managed to buy his own house-- the only Hmong in Missoula, besides Vang Pao, who has been able to do so. Like most Hmong who are working, he sponsors three or four new families.

Most of the Hmong cannot speak English, and, like most ex-combat soldiers, do not have marketable skills. From the time they first arrive, bedraggled and exhausted--numb after the flight from Thailand--they are encouraged--required--by their community to learn English. As soon as possible they get a job--job corps, janitor, nurses aid, any job to get off welfare. (In Laos, the Hmong never do labor for anyone else," Vang Pao said. "The Hmong help each other, but never pay another Hmong to do something.") They even pay back the cost of their plane tickets. But it takes awhile. And America is so different.

The Hmong sometimes find it difficult to understand the way we talk to each other. "At the airport, people were shouting," Mai said, "'Hi, how are you, long time no see you' and I saw a boy and girl hugging and crying. Oh, I thought, maybe they are different."

"Conversation among Americans is 'sweeter'," one Hmong told me, which was his way of saying Americans are often not sincere.

The Hmong have trouble understanding hunting seasons and areas, fishing regulations. "They can't seem to understand that it is illegal to use more than one pole," a Fish and Game officer said. "And they all want to use .223 or .30 caliber rifles, which are often too small to knock down an elk or deer. 'Puts a big hole in a man,' they tell me. But they are some kind of hunters, I have to admit.

"One time, I was four or five miles up the trail going to the top of the Swan, and here comes a little Hmong with a big Muley buck draped over his shoulders. It weighed at least as much as he did, and he'd probably already walked a couple of miles."

Only the lucky get to live and hunt in Montana, though. "We feel the economy of Missoula can only take about 500 Hmong," Cha said.

"It is sad: Many who live in a big city think all of America is like that big city." He paused. "But each place in America has its own special recreation--ocean fishing, deserts . . ." He frowned and then brightened. "But we feel more comfortable in Montana. Can go camping in the mountains. Some who come here from the big city feel happier and excited about the mountains; they don't feel so homesick." He paused again, and laughed. "But the first time they camp in the mountains, they think it very strange not to have insect and bird and small animal noise at night. So silent."

The Hmong have a curious understanding of technology. Paired Phantom jets cruising up and down the steep, green valleys, deadly as barracudas nosing in and out of tropical reefs; Huey helicopters whumping from mountain to mountain; and lumbering, old 'snoopy' gunships their gatling guns spewing 6,000 rounds per minute, were familiar sights in Laos. "It's not people, but technology that was responsible for so many deaths. Don't blame people, blame technology," a former Hmong pilot told me.

Quite familiar with the intricacies of an M-16 automatic rifle, the new arrivals are often defeated by house thermostats and stove pilot lights. More than one Hmong family has been discovered shivering in a trailer house or apartment, not knowing how to turn up the heat, the temperature outside below zero. In every Hmong house there is a list of telephone numbers, other Hmong that the new arrivals can call for help. It is a lot of responsibility.

"Some Hmong are afraid to even go out of the house, afraid to walk in the street," Lu told me. "The cars and sidewalks and traffic

lights . . ."

But once over the initial shock, the Hmong lose their fear of technology. Especially the women. "I don't think most women want to go back," Mai said. "The men maybe. But the women like running water in the house, washing machines, stoves, and cars." And the women in general seem to adapt to technology faster than the men. They pass the driver's examination sooner, and are often better drivers. "The women also think about way man treat woman in Laos," Mai continued. "Some of the men have two or three wives. And we don't like that way. We like this country have more equal."

But whether or not they want to go back, for the Hmong in the United States and in the refugee camps in Thailand, there is no going back.

"Some Hmong feel Americans don't want us in American," Cha said. He had just been to see the principal of the school his children attend. One of the teachers had complained that the Hmong children were being too unruly. The teacher was angry. The principal wanted to spank the children.

Cha was upset. "The Hmong children cannot speak much English; sometimes they cannot understand the teacher, so they just keep talking to each other.

"I don't like spank children. We have children kneel in front of other children and apologize. If children need discipline, teacher should work with parents."

As Cha was leaving the principal's office, the principal gave him a booklet which he, the principal, thanks to a grant, had compiled to

help Missoula teachers with Hmong students. The booklet, written without consulting any of the Hmong, included such items of misinformation as:

- Very adaptable people. Always on the move. Slush (Sic) and burn tactics.
- They think they are very special people.
- Sexuality--none between brothers and sisters . . . can have older boy with very young girl. Be aware of this in all classes.
- Leaders are determined by their sex and clan--not necessarily their intelligence.

Cha, young and able and intelligent, the leader of the Montana-Hmong community, seemed rather depressed. "He (the principal) make me feel low class," he said. "Justice is very important to the Hmong. Everyone have right to say. Things are decided by majority--it is the Hmong way, just as it is the American way."

"We are like orphans," Lu said, "and when you are an orphan you have to be patient." But when I asked him what the Hmong community thought about the man breaking into the trailer, a girl being beaten up on her way home from a Missoula high school, and a Hmong man and woman being murdered in southern California, he admitted that "morale dropped."

One day while I was working out at the university gym, I noticed young Hmong boys in a karate class. "Well," Cha said when I asked him about it, "if a bear attack them in the woods, I think it necessary they know how to protect themselves."

It was my turn to be depressed. "Well," I said. "I don't need to

talk to anyone else, but I wonder if you know someone who has pictures of the Hmong in Laos. Villages. Refugee camps. The fighting. Anything else that might help me write an article."

"Sure," he said. "Eleven Hmong families live in three apartment buildings on ---St. Just ask for Yee; I'll call him."

That night I drove over to the apartment buildings. It was cold and windy as I got out of the car. Not enough light from the Circle K across the street to read the apartment numbers on the three uniform buildings. Barracks, if not for the tri-cycles and plastic toys and children's voices that filtered sing-song, as abruptly a door opened and closed and a small figure darted across the small expanse of snow-covered lawn. He slowed when he saw me, and stopped--startled by my size, I imagined.

The boy examined me for a moment, snow whipping around his bare feet. "Hi!" he finally said, and grinned. And ran to another door, entering without bothering to knock.

I stood there smelling ginger and garlic, fresh vegetables, chicken and pork and beef cooking quick in clouds of steam, and thought of a few lines of a poem written by another Hmong boy: And I can imagine what difficulty my parents are having./ Surviving in the jungle through all the season and for the rest of their lives./ Shaking like rustling skins of garlic, like the rustling of dry leaves. Across the street, snow eddied in the neon light of the Circle K, but for a moment I was lost, lost in the smells and the rustling skins of garlic, stretched between memories of Asia and the snow and cold. And Mai's voice: "People just died and died and died," she'd said. "I don't know why."

But it was just for a moment, and then I was back. Back where I was born and raised. Back among my mountains and streams and ancestors.

And, of course, Yee didn't know I was coming.

GUNFIRE
Chapter One of
FACE
A Novel

Fear smells. Tails reeked of fear as he threaded his way along the crowded sidewalk. The unique scent of it pierced the odors of the city: rotting vegetation, cooking food--chicken and pork and noodles --open sewers, sulfer, fish and unwashed people, cars and buses and motorcycles, vegetables and spices. Over-ripe and humid. Stifling. The yellow faces about him became bland and heavy-lidded--the look Westerners call inscrutable. Tails was a threat. The people he touched, or who unavoidably touched him, turned away, anxious they not be associated with him. But despite his fear, Tails' face was blank, impassive--like the faces about him-- as he moved along the crowded sidewalk. It was fear, not his size and pale skin that made Tails a threat.

His hands were sweating. People stared: an old man, bowl of noodles held to his mouth, chopsticks hovering in mid-shovel; shopkeepers and their families; bright-eyed children, squatting, playing, crying. But they always stared anyway: he was a white man. He stopped, instinctively aware that whoever followed him was edging closer. He turned and looked back, ignoring the portable noodle stands and open-fronted family businesses lining the sidewalk, concentrating on the small, finely-boned faces. He looked for a face to betray itself, expecting perhaps a boy, even a woman in the crush of people. He was always followed. Usually he ignored it. Taxis honked; platoons of motorcycles charged up and down the congested street; people stared. It was useless trying to locate anyone following him in the midst of such chaos.

The man was so obvious Tails nearly missed him. A northern Chinese with close-cropped hair. Big. Almost as big as Tails. Military looking

even in loose brown shirt, faded green slacks, and sandals. Competent. Tough.

Familiar. Eyes black and expressionless, as they had been when Tails had watched him walk toward the helicopter several years before, the wind from the rotors rippling his American made camouflage fatigues, pressing the tiger stiped material against his body. The Chinese had carried a body bag folded into a square. The last of five. A Special Forces patrol. The other four bags were limp, their centers sagging as the Chinese soldiers dragged them along the ground, and heaved them onto the helicopter's floor. The big Chinese had smiled at Tails, anticipating his revulsion, and had thrown the bag up and down, shaking it as he caught it, the objects inside bulging and distorting the grey-green plastic. Tails thought he knew what was really in the body bag. He'd smiled back as the Chinese allowed the bag to drop soddenly at his feet. The helicopter began to lift, engine bellowing as it fought for altitude; Tails threw the money belt out the door, striking the big Chinese in the chest. The eyes of the Chinese went dull. Flat. His hand snaked toward his slung AK-47. But Tails, manning the M-60 machine gun, fired a stream of tracers that furrowed the ground in front of the Chinese. For a moment, as the helicopter steadily rose, both men stared, eyes locked, Tails smiling from behind the M-60, the Chinese, hand still gripping the sling of the AK-47, until neither could distinguish the other and the helicopter pivoted, dipped and headed back.

Tails swallowed at the memory. He licked his lips gone suddenly dry, paling beneath his dark tan. The Chinese nodded his understanding, not even a pretense at disguise. He smiled and Tails realized the man had not only been following him; he was hunting him. The Chinese was

going to kill him. Smile thinning, eyes bleak with derision, the Chinese started toward him.

Tails stood paralyzed, drugged by the advancing eyes. He grunted. Almost a moan that was lost in the people and noise around them. A small boy dressed only in a faded khaki shirt careened through the press of people chasing some imaginary foe and tripped, and fell across the path of the Chinese. The Chinese hesitated, stopped by the boy sprawled at his feet. Cursing, he looked down, releasing Tails from the narcotic of his stare.

Tails blinked, unable to accept what was happening in front of hundreds of people. He turned to run, but reflexes forced him to pivot back, left hand and forearm held rigid and parallel to his body to protect face and chest. Simultaneously, his right hand reached behind to the small of his back, closing on the grip of the 9mm Browning automatic hidden in the waist band of his trousers, thumb searching for the hammer already at half-cock. The Chinese, suddenly realizing Tails was armed, kicked the terrified boy to one side, and leaped forward, left hand ripping a knife from beneath the loose shirt. As Tails pivoted, the Chinese initiated a powerful thrust, knife aimed just under Tails' left shoulder blade. Tails' rigid arm came around deflecting the knife. The blade sliced into his right shoulder, burning as skin and muscle parted. Crouched, Tails looked down at the back of the Chinese, whose lunge had twisted him onto one knee. The big Chinese threw his left arm up and back, left leg beginning a sweep, trying to knock Tails' legs out from under him. But Tails, completing the conditioned sequence, brought the Browning up, hammer now cocked, and shot the Chinese four times in the rib cage, the four shots stuttering almost as one.

The hollow points tore the chest off the Chinese. Slammed his body like a water melon hit with a baseball bat, driving it to the sidewalk, leg arrested in mid-kick. Blood and entrails splattered in a semi-circle on the concrete; the knife skittered under a noodle stand.

Tails stood for a moment, smelling the sour stink of ruptured viscera. Of urine. And blood. The sweet smell of blood; all the elk and deer and birds he'd ever killed and gutted. He felt the electric rush of unused adrenaline and, abruptly, like a camera lense brought into focus, was aware of the people about him, comical in their wide-eyed reaction to the body that lay draining at his feet. His finger convulsed against the trigger. Another bullet smacked into nerveless flesh, the dull splat lost in the roar of the automatic. People scrambled, screaming, shouting. A noodle stand overturned. Brakes squealed. Horns blared even more frantically.

He wanted to run but couldn't, blocked by the terror-stricken and the curious. He turned, gun tightly clenched, and ran into the nearest shop. A blur of white, fearful eyes watched him run frantic into the clutter. His hip bumped a stack of red wooden cases, Coca-Cola written in Chinese and English on the sides, toppling them to the floor. Glass shattered. He spun off-balance, falling against a counter, gun striking the counter top. The automatic kicked upward, booming in the three-sided room, muzzle blast searing the side of an old woman's wrinkled face. A neat hole appeared in the white door of an ancient refrigerator leaning against the wall. The old woman screamed in his face, her mouth a black oval edged with rotten, beetle-nut stained teeth. He shoved the grey, wrinkled face; the palm of his hand struck the upper lip and nose, his fingers easily wrapped over her ears and forehead. The old

woman fell backwards, falling out of sight behind the counter. His ears were ringing. He ran on through the store and rear living quarters. And burst through the beaded rear entrance, into the lane. He stopped out of breath, shaking.

Little more than a paved alley, the lane was bordered on one side by concrete walls topped with glass shards. And on the other side by the colorless backs of buildings, so similar they appeared a single construction, broken only by garish strings of beads in the entrance ways. Along both edges ran narrow, open sewers. The entire lane was empty, except for a group of rats sitting hunched along a cemented rim. Further down the lane another rat scurried from sewer to sewer. Several blocks away a busy street intersected the lane, and he glimpsed people and vehicles. He trembled uncontrollably. Afraid of inadvertently firing another shot, Tails stuck the little finger of his left hand between the hammer and firing pin and pulled the trigger. He used his thumb to lower the hammer the rest of the way, oblivious to the pain in his finger. With the automatic again in the waist band at the small of his back, he trotted toward the distant street, absurdly aware of the barrel's warmth.

As he reached the busy street several taxis immediately veered to the curb; the drivers grinned and waved. Tails climbed into the second taxi, a decrepit blue Datsun, and gave the driver his address. He slouched down in the seat, and reached back, down the collar of his shirt, feeling a gash four inches long--not deep--but bleeding freely. The cut began to sting. A stichy wetness adhered shirt and skin to plastic seat cover, tearing as the taxi lurched back into the flow of traffic. He looked at the blood on his hand; he could still smell

the dead Chinese. He leaned back, not wanting to attract the driver's attention, hoping the pressure against the seat would stop the bleeding. Jen Tzong could fix it. But it would be hard getting into their place without anyone noticing the blood.

He was not worried about police reaction. In a city so densely populated, where terrorism and killing had become everyday occurrences, there was little chance of official response. If anything, it would be some petty official wanting a bribe. No problem. He began to calm down. The threat was from the people who controlled the man that he had just killed--obviously a professional soldier. Tails knew that he was still alive only through luck and the contempt the big Chinese must have felt for his abilities. He wondered why the attempt had been made at all. Maybe Jen Tzong would know. He allowed a sudden lethargy to overcome him; he was safe at least until he reached the apartment.

Jen Tzong: three years of friendship and trust. Of night clubs, women, Nam, Hong Kong, the best of Asia. Tails stared out the window of the blue Datsun, barely aware of the people and the machines, noisy and unmanageable. Four and a half years in Asia. Returning to the States only once. Nothing there, no future he wanted: marriage, kids, a job, his mind atrophying like the minds of his former school friends. Twenty-five days of leave and he couldn't wait to get back to Asia. Born and raised in Montana, he loved the mountains, the lakes, the hunting, and the people--Montanans--but Vietnam and Taiwan now seemed more like home. How had that happened? Growing up in the Marine Corps; growing up in Asia. Jen Tzong knew everyone, had connections everywhere. How many languages did he speak. Jen Tzong disliked the sound of English; they usually spoke Mandarin together. They'd still been kids--despite

the fact he'd spent twenty-one months in Nam--until he killed Jen Tzong's uncle. Cold blood. He had killed in cold blood. He could smell that, too.

Tails looked down at his finger. Broke my fucking fingernail, he thought. Peter. Jen Tzon's Uncle: why do I always call him Jen Tzong's Uncle. Peter. Peter's Heroin. It was either Jen Tzong or his uncle. Friends. Fuck that. His head fell back against the seat, eyes staring blankly at the overhead light broken and dangling from the Datsun's grimy, tattered roof.

The Datsun swerved barely missing another taxi that roared out of a side street, its driver aloof and uncaring. Tails grimaced as he felt his shoulder rip loose from the plastic seat cover. He felt another unneeded rush of adrenaline that left his stomach hollow, his heart beating dully. He closed his eyes, ignoring the driver's apologies. Peter, he thought. Peter screwed up, somehow.

Like a large blue fish changing direction, dispersing a current of smaller, more delicate fish, the Datsun turned off the crowded street, scattering bicycle, motorcycle, and pedestrian traffic. His shoulder began to ache. He felt uncomfortable. Greasy.

The taxi turned into the lane that ran by the apartment. Jen Tzong's father owned the building; most of the neighborhood was Chinese. Tails rolled the window down and surveyed the affluent neighborhood. Quiet.

The taxi hesitated for a moment. Too quiet. Tails sat upright, sensing the driver's unease. No people, he thought, there are no people on the balconies. He was fascinated by the balconies, and

could sit for hours, watching the other balconies vibrate with children, housewives cooking, neighbors calling to each other--watching the balconies as they babbled with laughter and argument and gossip and discussion. Nothing was hidden from the balconies: no murderers, no rapists--no chance to fester in seclusion; the balconies saw to that. But now they were empty, their silence humid.

"Ting-i-ting," he commanded in Chinese, and then "stop" in English. He threw money onto the front seat. "When I get out, just keep going. Don't stop. Do you understand?" The driver nodded, not looking at Tails, not even glancing at the money on the seat. Tails climbed out and watched the Taxi--exhaust pipe blurting puffs of sooty smoke as the driver shifted gears--continue down the lane, its worn-out engine knocking, the sound echoing between the cement walls and buildings.

He was several gates from the apartment. The stillness was suffocating. Reaching the gate, he looked up at the third floor balcony. The sliding glass doors were closed, the curtains drawn. He tried the gate. It was open, a piece of cardboard wedged between latch and door-jamb. He crossed the small courtyard and entered the building, shutting out the balconies.

Inside, Tails took off his shoes, balancing on one foot and then the other as he stared up into the empty cement stairwell. He drew the Browning, and cocked it, leaving his finger outside the trigger guard. Another car went down the lane, its exhaust unnaturally loud, racketting in the silence. He started up the stairs, automatic held out in front, its black barrel swaying back and forth as if it had an intelligence its own.

The door to the second floor apartment stood open; an old man

sent out by the family stood in the doorway. The barrel homed to him. Tails' finger tightened on the trigger, but the man's hands were empty. His wrinkled eyes cringed, feeling the gun's malevolence. He had a straggling grey mustache; age made him a straggler himself. Expendable He held up two fingers. Tails nodded and motioned him back into the apartment, the gun anxious until the door closed.

Tails silently continued up the stairs. On the third floor landing the shoes and slippers were undisturbed; Jen Tzong's brown loafers next to Tails' over-sized slippers; the slippers set out for guests neatly lined in descending size. The door was unlocked. Careless, he thought, and slowly opened it just enough to see into the living room. Jen Tzong was lying on the couch, gagged, his hands and feet handcuffed. A fat, balding Chinese was bent over him, preparing to give him an injection. Tails quickly stepped back, feet spread to shoulder width. He crouched slightly, taking a two-handed grip on the pistol, barrel just outside the opening. The fat Chinese gripped the syringe like a dart and half threw, half inserted it into Jen Tzong's bicep. Tails aimed carefully, front sight blade centered and even with the top of the rear sight. The fat man adjusted his hold on the syringe; he put his thumb on the plunger. Tails shot him. The balding head above the ear and eyebrows flew apart, spraying against a corner of the of the stereo.

Tails winced. The sound and energy of the shot were numbing in the confined space of the cement stairwell. The fat Chinese had disappeared, hurled backwards and down in front of the couch. Tails burst through the doorway, striking the door with his shoulder, moving to his right, gun searching for the other man, finding him in the hallway,

coming from the bathroom, fly open. A white man, the gun in his hand firing, rounds striking the wall and going through the doorway to the left of Tails, as Tails dived to the floor, both hands gripping the automatic, hitting and sliding on chest and elbows, gun extended toward the man. He emptied the magazine--eight shots. The first two into the wall on either side, neat little holes in the plaster. The next four struck the man, jerked and twisted him like a spastic doll. One in the left knee; one in the right hip; one in the chest; and one in the throat that snatched him off his feet and flung him back into the hallway, gun flying away from him, hitting and spinning on the polished wood floor. The last two shots went into the wall above and behind the fallen man.

Tails scrambled up and ran for the bedroom, hurdling the body in the hallway, his own body feeling deadened from the tremendous noise of the guns. He ran to the desk and took a loaded magazine from the top drawer, and quickly replaced the empty magazine in the Browning. He worked the slide inserting a round into the chamber, and then pulled the trigger, easing the hammer down with his finger and thumb. Calm. He replaced the automatic in his belt, and crossed to the closet. He took a loaded shotgun from the top shelf.

He hurried back into the living room, jacking a round into the shotgun, slipping a little in the pool of blood that was spreading on the hardwood floor of the hallway. Shotgun covering the doorway, he crossed to the door, closed and locked it.

Jen Tzong was staring at him, the syringe still embeded in his arm. It swayed as if there was a breeze in the room, back and forth the clear plastic and white plunger connected by a silver thread to

Jen Tzong's brown arm. Tails quickly stepped over to the couch, propped the shotgun against one arm, and pulled out the syringe. He threw it into a far corner, and removed the gag, a white gym sock, from Jen Tzong's mouth.

Jen Tzong swallowed; he licked his lips. "Xie, Xie, thanks," he croaked.

Tails, his eyes squinting from the stink, began to search the corpse's pant pockets for the handcuff key, ignoring the eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets. The face looked neandrathal; most of the forehead from just above the eyes was gone. A clot of blood and brains spread from the head onto the beige carpet. Blood spotted the hardwood of the stereo cabinet. Tails tried to roll the body over; it felt as if it were filled with wet sand.

"In the shirt pocket," Jen Tzong said.

"What the fuck is going on," Tails replied, voice too loud, ears still ringing. "I almost got wasted right in the middle of the sidewalk." It felt strange to talk, like hearing his own voice on a tape recording. "I was lucky."

"He said you were dead."

Tails grunted. "Your ankles are swollen," he said, and squeezed the cuffs a little tighter, allowing the key to turn. Jen Tzong bit his lip, and sat up, dropping his feet onto the floor. His face paled as blood began to fill the shrunken veins in his feet and ankles. His bad eye started twitching.

Tails placed the automatic on the cushion next to Jen Tzong, and retrieved the shotgun. He sat down in a bamboo armchair, facing Jen Tzong, shot gun pointed toward the door.

"Can you take care of this mess?" he asked.

"What is wrong with your shoulder?" Jen Tzong's eye continued to twitch.

"Knife. It's not serious." His body felt numb, swathed in cotton, as it used to feel after a day of flying in a helicopter, the wind and racket buffeting his body. His voice seemed to come from the bottom of an empty fifty gallon barrel. His joints ached; his lips were dry and cracked. He felt calm.

"No problem. My father is probably working on it already."

"Your father is in Taiwan."

"Of course. But we have many friends here. Someone called him."

They sat, looking at each other, the skin of their faces taut and shining. Blood and powder were caked on Tails' right hand, drying blood speckled his shoes and pant legs. Jen Tzong was clean, neat except for his twitching eye and ashen face. Tails felt a tingling throughout his body as of circulation coming back.

"Let's talk about it later," Jen Tzong said.

Before Tails could reply a truck roared into the lane. It stopped outside the building. Commands were shouted and they heard running feet, the unmistakable clatter of troops deploying in the lane and in the stairwell. Then silence.

Tails stood. He left the shotgun on the chair, and walked to the glass doors, slid one door open and stepped out onto the cement balcony. A U.S. Army issue six-by was parked in the center of the lane. Several squads of soldiers, kneeling or standing, all with M-16's pointed at him, were deployed into the red entranceways on both sides of the lane. He went to the edge of the balcony.

"It's OK. OK. Come up," he shouted in English.

"Stay where you are. Do not move or my men will fire," an accent voice shouted back.

Tails listened as more troops ran up the stairs, the sound of their boots ringing in the cement stairwell. There was a loud crash when they reached the door, and then Jen Tzong was speaking to someone in a language Tails did not understand.

A moment later, a helmeted soldier, wearing a flak-vest, stepped to the railing next to Tails, and gave an arm signal. The troops below relaxed their weapons, slinging them over their shoulders, and began walking back toward the six-by, cigarettes replacing rifles. Their voices sounded clear and metallic in the quiet lane, as if they were talking in a empty room.

The soldier gestured tails back into the room ahead of him.

The room was filling with soldiers, silent, arms slung, some wandering between the two bodies. A loose knot of five--two with shot guns--were standing against the wall, smoking, measuring Tails as he re-entered the room: the assault team. An officer--beret, glistening jump boots, holstered .45--stood talking to Jen Tzong:

". . . and an airplane is waiting to fly you and the American direct to Taipei," the officer was saying in Mandarin. "I hope you will give my deepest regards to your father and mother and, of course, your sister. . . ." He fell silent, face going blank, as he noticed Tails.

This is my friend Tails," Jen Tzong said. He paused, unsmiling, waiting until he caught the officer's eye. "He is like a brother to me."

Tails bowed slightly at the waist, Japanese style.

"This is my cousin, Major Ong," Jen Tzong said.

"It's an honor to meet you," Tails said in English. "Your English is very good." Behind the Major, he could see the soldiers talking quietly in groups, no longer interested in Tails and Jen Tzong. They reminded him of a party they'd once had, the room filled with Thai and Laotian and Japanese businessmen. Glint of a gold tooth as a well-fed face offered a cigarette to the man standing at his right. Clink of ice cubes in whisky glasses. Murmur of relaxed conversation. Groups of men gaining or losing numbers as some broke away from one group to join another. Hard eyes in healthy faces. Businessmen. Soldiers. Two soldiers were looking down at the body in the hallway. One squatted, peering at the gold ring on a finger of the left hand. The hand lay palm up in a pool of blood. Tails frowned.

"Thank you. I attended Ohio State for several years," the Major said, and took a drag from his cigarette. His opaque eyes studied Tails through the curling smoke.

"A Big Ten school," Tails replied. He smiled uncertainly: the other man was also squatting near the corpse. A drunk. What a strange party, he thought. Probably a Japanese, never seem to know they're drunk until they pass out. His jaw muscles jumped; he licked his lips.

"Have you been in Asia long?" the Major asked. He was being condescending. Tails was still a foreigner, a white man--a barbarian--Ong Jen Tzong's friend or not.

But Tails was used to such a reaction; it happened at parties all the time.

"No." Tails frowned again, his eyes intense, straying around the

room: the Browning--barrel dulled with carbon; he felt the recoil in the web of his hand--lying on the couch cushion, the corpses--party drunks--lying on the floor; hot sunshine and blue sky through the open balcony door; an Elvin Bishop album--Juke Joint Jump--on top of the stereo, the tune running through his mind--man you ought to've seen that little old juke joint jump. Jump. Jump. Jump.; the soldiers and the three of them. Your English is very good. Did he really say that? A party they once had: hard eyes. He held out his right hand, turning it slowly in the beam of sunlight, studying the powder and dried blood. The mascara of death, he thought, and laughed. No time for fucking around, he thought, and sighed. Jen Tzong and the Major were looking at him. He grinned at Jen Tzong. "Party," he said. "Great party." And dropped his hand loosely to his side.

Jen Tzong grasped him by the arm and gently pushed him down into the bamboo chair. Tails continued to grin up at him, his eyes soft and liquid like the eyes of an animal that does not yet know the nature of its wound. "Shit, shower and shave," he said. His body trembled, muscles cabling forearms and neck.

Jen Tzong glanced at the Major. "If you have a medic, get him."

The Major turned and hurriedly walked toward the doorway.

Tails clenched his teeth. He grimaced, skin taut and darkening under the tan. Jen Tzong placed a hand on his shoulder, kneading the quivering muscles with his fingers. "It's over. Relax. We'll be leaving for Taipei in an hour.

Tails nodded. Yellow droplets of sweat appeared on his forehead. He grunted, and gripped the chair arms, thigh muscle twitching, moving his right leg up and down in small jerks.

The Major reappeared in the doorway, followed by another soldier carrying a small bag. The bag looked like a cheap plastic shaving kit. The soldier walked directly to Tails.

"Reaction," Jen Tzong said, "I don't think it's shock." The soldier nodded, watching Tails, and unzipped the small bag. He took out a small vial of clear liquid, a syringe, and a needle in a sterile plastic container.

Jen Tzong tightened his grip on Tails' shoulder. "What is in the vial?" he asked the soldier.

"Demerol. It is all I have, besides morphine and atrophine." He put the needle onto the syringe and inserted it into the vial. "That shoulder will need stitches," he remarked, matter-of-fact.

"Can you take care of the shoulder, also?"

The soldier nodded. The room was silent as he retracted the plunger, drawing the liquid up into the syringe.

"Relax," Jen Tzong said again, as the medic pushed up Tails' shirt sleeve, exposing the rigid bicep. "Too tense," the soldier said.

Jen Tzong massaged the arm. "Relax. Relax," he murmured. He bent forward, and placed his face only inches from Tails'. "Ting is waiting in Taipei," he said, low so that no one else could hear.

Tails squinted; the muscles in his arm relaxed slightly. He opened his mouth to speak, but the waiting medic in one quick motion stabbed the needle into Tails' arm and shoved the plunger down. "He will have a bruise, but" He shrugged, and pulled the needle free.

Tails looked down at his arm, and then back up at Jen Tzong. "Ying?" he said, his face already beginning to soften. "Ying." He sagged into the chair, his arms dangling to either side, head tilted

back onto the bamboo lacing. A moment later, he sighed, and looked up at the ceiling, mouth open slightly, eyes already glazed, feeling the drug rush through his body.

"Too much," Jen Tzong said. "You gave him too much."

"He is a big man," the soldier replied. "He will be all right."

He closed the plastic bag. "Help me get him to the bed. I will work on his shoulder there."

"Have a stretcher brought up," Jen Tzong said to the Major.

Tails laughed to himself. "Medevac," he slurred, eyes closing to slits. "Need a Medevac."

Jen Tzong was saying something to him. But all he could see was a pillow and bedspread and the hardwood floor of his bedroom. Amazing how much time they spend making the floors, he thought. Strips of hardwood interlocked into six inch squares, the grain in every other square running the opposite way. Did that make sense? Pretty confusing, these squares of hardwood. "'Ol Luke the Gook is cleverer than any spook," he mumbled. His shoulder muscles felt immensely tired as if he had been holding a rifle in one hand, arm stright out from his side. Boot camp. Drill instructor Montoya made him do that--fucking little beaner, a karate black belt. Too bad. Like to kick his ass for all the hours spent holding rifles at arms length, shoulder on fire. This felt different, though, as if someone was plucking his shoulder muscles like guitar strings. God Damn, it ached. Something was bothering Jen Tzong.

"Just relax," Jen Tzong was saying. "The medic is cleaning out the knife wound. It is going to need stitches. Try to sleep, we'll

be leaving for Taipei, shortly."

Damn right, he thought, 'bout time I got a Medevac. He felt a tiny, sharp pain in his buttock. Medevacs beat body bags any day. A rushing blackness rolled over him, thrashing like out of control rotor blades.

The Flying Tiger transport, a Boeing 707, stood at the end of the runway, cockpit windows staring darkly through the shimmering curtain of heat waves. It waddled forward, but gathering speed, it became sleek. Sharp whine turned into vibrating roar as its nose abruptly lifted from the concrete surface. The 707 was suspended for a moment, caught between ground and sky, quickly gone.

Inside, Tails gazed vacantly out the window, barely aware of the acceleration that compressed his body, forcing it into the plaid, high-backed seat. The shot of Demerol had erased the ache in his shoulder; it felt bloated, sensitive only to pressure. The stitches felt like fat noodles. He imagined himself a punch-clown that he had as a child--weighted so that it always returned upright, no matter how hard he hit it. Only now all the ballast felt as if it were in his shoulder. He laughed--doped-to-the-max--but the laugh never reached his face: he forgot about it and fell asleep, immensely comfortable, tuned to the mechanical exertion about him--muted roar of engines, hiss of oxygen, creaking metal. Feeding on it.

Jen Tzong was already asleep, sitting in the aisle seat, his face composed despite a slight frown and down tilted mouth. Jen Tzong slept for an hour, awakening stiff and un-refreshed to find Tails looking at him. Tails' pupils were huge, bottomless--smug.

"My sister is meeting us at the airport," Jen Tzong said, wondering if Tails would show any reaction.

Tails closed his eyes, and sighed delicately, tucking back under the Demerol.

Jen Tzong relaxed. It was not right to tell Tails that Tails and Ying were allowed to see each other again. Not when Tails was weakened and depressed by the drug and the killing. But she was going to meet him; he had no control over that. It was better Tails at least had some warning. He glanced over at Tails.

American, he thought. Extreme. No moderation, no patience. Violent, unpredictable. Still barbarians for all their machines--because of their machines. But Tail: Tails was learning, still American, but more Chinese than he knew.