

Tales of the Peacetime Army

By John Sheppard

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Table of Contents

- I. Basic Training
- II. The U.S. Army Art School
- III. Three Months Without Pay
- IV. We Hump to Please
- V. Fake War
- VI. Going Stateside
- VII. The Eternal Flame
- VIII. Life During Wartime

Basic Training

I had an unimportant job in the food service industry and an unimportant college career, both lazily going nowhere. Maybe I should have fallen in love with someone. That would have made everything seem more important, I suppose.

My academic advisor called me into her dust-mote speckled office in a creaky, one-hundred-year-old building on a late-Spring day and informed me that I was failing all of my classes, or something to that effect. Okay: Not failing. Maybe I wasn't doing as well as she expected. I was ten semester hours shy of a bachelor's degree in philosophy. I stared out her office window. The sky was blue and drizzled with vapor trails from passing jumbo jets. "Have you been listening?" she asked me. She was self-important in a fussy way.

"Yes," I replied. "I'll drop out." I'd started college when I was 16 because I was supposed to be a genius. But, in fact, I'd merely mastered the art of taking a standardized test.

"Just like that?" She could have been mistaken for a bag lady, I thought.

A blackbird with red shoulders landed on her window sill. Maybe it winked at me. I shrugged. I stood up.

"I can't say that I'll miss you," she said.

"Nor I, you," I said. I picked up my book bag and left.

About halfway across campus, I stopped at what appeared to be rally, or a book burning, or something that was, perhaps, important. A protest. A time capsule had been exhumed from the concrete apron in front of the campus library. It had been buried in 1969, presumably by hippies. Mason jars were extricated from the capsule, one by one, and their contents were announced by the student leader over a tinny PA system: "Fresh water." "Fresh green beans." "Fresh..." Presumably, here in the future, freshness was at an end, according to the good people of 1969.

I started to walk away, but stopped short. The College Republicans were approaching, about 40 of them, dressed in khakis and boat shoes and colorful shirts with upturned collars. Their hair was perfect. They stopped at the edge of the protest, lifted their Reagan-Bush '84 signs and chanted "Four more years! Four more years!" for about 30 seconds. Then they dropped their signs and gave themselves a round of applause and picked up their signs and left pretty much the way they came.

I continued on to the registrar's office. I took a number and waited my turn. When my number came up, I went into a booth with a fellow student and he asked me what he could do for me today. I told him that I wanted to drop out. He helped me fill out a form. Under "Reason Given" I scribbled "N/A." I signed the form and left and felt a bit freer. More free.

I walked to work. I tossed my book bag in the greasy Dumpster out back. I worked about half a shift and walked out. Three-and-a-half years there and every raise I got was thanks to Congress increasing minimum wage.

I went back to my apartment and stared at my roommate's TV set with its pirated cable. After an Army commercial telling me that I should want to be all that I could be, the screen went to snow. Everything was catching up with me.

There wasn't much left to do but join the Army. I took a nap.

In the blue pages of the phone book I found the number of the Army recruiter. I called and asked where they were. The recruiter asked me my address and told me that he'd be right over. He was a man of his word. Five, seven minutes later, a rap on the door.

"That was quick," I said, opening the door.

"Army," the Army recruiter said. He was a staff sergeant, with three chevrons up and one rocker down. I learned all about that stuff later. His name tag announced him as "LERNER." SSgt. Lerner shook my hand forcefully. He was tall. "You ready for the adventure of a lifetime?" he asked me.

"Sure," I said. I followed him out to his car, a Dodge that had seen better times. U.S. ARMY was stenciled on the door. FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY. "Is this official?" I asked him.

He looked at the door, and then me. "This is as official as it gets," he assured me. He walked stiffly. He noticed me watching him walk stiffly. "I was a tanker," he told me. "Them M60's got no suspension."

I got in the passenger side.

He slid in behind the wheel, ground his teeth in anticipation. He closed his eyes. "Me and you government vehicle," he said. The car started up eventually. It sounded like it had something stuck in its throat. On the way over to his office, he told me it wasn't as easy to join up as I'd thought. I'd have to take a test first and then take a physical.

"I don't know," I said. "I'm kind of lazy."

"Test ain't hard," SSgt. Lerner said. "Physical. Ain't nothing to it. Shitfire. Now that first haircut. That's the piss. I had me some long-ass hair back in the '70's. Not no more."

"I don't really care about that kind of guff," I said. "The Army can have my hair if it wants it."

"Yeah, shit yeah. You and me're gonna get along good. I can tell." He turned on the radio. Madonna was on. He was digging it. He tapped on the steering wheel along with

the song. She sounded like a cartoon chipmunk. I decided that he'd probably been blonde before the Army scalped him.

I looked out the window and watched the cheap apartments flash by. Three-and-a-half years in this town and I didn't care. I had no attachment to anything about it, not even the beloved rah-rah football team. I yawned.

"Don't go to sleep on me now," SSgt. Lerner said. "You gotta take that fucking test. Then I'm gonna ship you off to take your physical."

He was a man of his word. I signed some paperwork at his office in the federal building. An hour later he drove me to a National Guard Armory where I took the ASVAB, which was like every standardized test I'd ever taken. Back at his office, I filled out the DD-Form 2807-2, a medical prescreen. He drove me back to my apartment. I slept, dreaming of food prep, missed college exams and Sir Thomas More.

The next morning, he showed up at the door, once again announcing himself as "Army." I packed an overnight bag. He drove me to the bus station, gave me a ticket and a hotel voucher, and about 45 minutes later I was on a Greyhound heading three cities away, toward the MEPS.

Halfway there, the bus stopped to pick up released inmates from the state penitentiary. They had prison issue tats and rippling muscles. Each held a cardboard box containing whatever The Man had given back to them. I saw a comb and sundries and a couple of t-shirts in the box of the guy who sat next to me.

"What are you looking at?" he asked me.

"Nothing," I said.

"That's right," he said. "Keep looking out the window."

I did so.

I was placed in a room with a boy who had ambitions that involved garroting communists and leaping out of airplanes. He considered his ambitions more noble than mine without having asked about my ambitions. He was probably right, I told him.

We were atop matching double beds splayed out on garish bedspreads, watching the news on the 19-inch TV bolted onto a chipped chest of drawers. The President was on. Sam Donaldson asked him a question. The President said something in his oddly cadenced voice. There was something farm-animalish about it.

"What do *you* want to do?" he finally asked me. He'd already inflicted the Army-issue buzzcut on himself and had on a woodland camouflage uniform, just in case anyone wanted him to perform heroic acts at the MEPS.

"I dunno," I said. "I hadn't given it much thought."

"I've always wanted to be a special operator," he told me, grinning wolfishly.

"That's great," I said.

"And you don't even know what you want to do," he said.

"That's true," I said.

"You know what a halo jump is?" he asked me.

"No," I said.

"You don't know much, do you?" he concluded.

"I guess not," I said. I smiled over at him, baring my coffee and cigarette yellowed teeth.

He eventually shut up.

Turn your head and cough was the worst of it at the MEPS. A doctor told me I had too much ear wax. There was a lot of standing in line and waiting. My entire Army career would consist of that. Unlike most soldiers, I did not mind it. I think it's good for the soul to stare off into space. Monotony stimulates me.

I was directed, at the end of all the medical prodding, to sit down in a section of green plastic chairs. I sat and stared into space. My soul was growing by leaps and bounds. A sergeant called my name and I followed him into a cubby.

"You given any thought to what you want to do?" he asked me.

"Nope," I said.

"You ain't making this easy," he said.

"How about *your* job?"

"Naw," he went.

"I like to draw. How about that?" I don't like to draw. It was a piece of spaghetti flung at a refrigerator door.

He flipped through a paperback catalog about as big as my hometown's phonebook. "What do you know?" he went. "Found it." He flipped the book around and pointed out ILLUSTRATOR (MOS 81E).

"I'll take that."

He tapped on a keyboard for a while. Pea green letters danced on the screen. "How do you like that? God must be smiling down on you. You know, with these weird MOS's, you usually don't get basic training so fast. You can ship out in a week," he said. "First you have to get a security clearance."

So I went back to the green chairs. Eventually, after more soul growth, another sergeant emerged and beckoned me into his office. I sat down in the easy chair opposite him and peered across the vast expanse of his desk. He was not, on first inspection, a happy man. On his I-love-me wall many certificates and diplomas attested to his competence. "I'm not with the rest of these guys," the sergeant said.

"Okay," I said.

"I don't have to shine you on."

"So far, so good," I said.

"Don't be a smart-ass," he said.

"Sound advice," I said.

"So you need a security clearance."

"So I'm told."

"I have to ask you some questions now."

"Fire away."

"Have you ever been a member of the communist party?"

"No."

"Are you a homosexual?"

"No."

"Do you get drunk more than five times a week?"

"Define 'drunk.'"

"I'll put down 'no.'"

He asked me my whereabouts the past ten years. I gave him my mother's address, my dorm address and my apartment address. Under jobs, I gave him the restaurant. He wanted people to vouch for me. I gave up my faculty advisor, the restaurant manager and Gus, the guy who ran the dishwasher and mopped up the bar rush vomit at 3 a.m.

"Do these people know you well?"

"Sure," I said. "As well as anybody."

I was sent back to the green chairs. Eventually, he emerged and told me that I had a secret clearance.

"Huzzah," I went.

I was summoned back to the cubby with the other sergeant, the one who had to shine me on, and signed an inch-thick stack of papers. I went into a room with several other new recruits, raised my right hand, and swore to protect and defend the Constitution.

I found a vending machine and bought a Mountain Dew. It was warm.

After a week of watching television and taking on all comers at ping-pong in the student union, I returned to the MEPS and raised my right hand again. It seemed a bit redundant, but who the hell was I? I was a newly inducted private first class in the United States Army.

Then a doctor peered into my ear and told me I had too much ear wax. I shrugged. Didn't the other doctor tell me to have my ear flushed? No, he did not. The new doctor was exasperated. "I can have you discharged," he said. "How's that for your future? Huh?"

"That's okay," I said. "I never think about the future."

"God damn it," he said. I waited for him to say something else. "Go get your orders," he said. "Fuck it."

My orders told me I was to report to Fort McClellan, Alabama for basic training. "Alabama," I said. "Hmm."

"Oh, you're going there, too?" said a guy sitting in a row of green chairs.

I sat down in the green chair next to him. "Fort McClellan," I said. I shook the paper. I snapped it, too, for good measure.

"That's it," he said. He told me his name was Tony and that he was a bandsman. "I play the baritone," he said. "It's like a little tuba."

I told him I was supposed to be an illustrator.

"Oh hey," he said. "Can you draw something for me?" He turned over his orders and pulled out a pen.

"They haven't trained me yet," I said. "So that would be jumping the gun a little, don't you think?"

"I guess," he said. He was temporarily disappointed.

"I know where you can get a warm Mountain Dew," I said. "Cheap. Hell, I'll even pay if you walk over there." I gave him two quarters. He came back two minutes later with two warm Mountain Dews. One sip and he cheered up considerably.

"Sweet mystery of life," I said.

"You can say that again," Tony said.

A group of us flew to Atlanta on the same flight. We debarked and were met by a bus driver, who escorted us to a no-name bus. We walked through the gaping maw of the bus and into its steamy innards. He left and came back with more recruits. After a few more trips, he started up the bus and transported us across northern Georgia and into Alabama. The bus never cooled off. He parked at a gas station in Anniston, a town that apparently consisted of pawn shops, gun shops, seedy gas stations and strip clubs, with the occasional used car lot tossed in. He invited us all to stand outside with him.

He gave me a Salem out of his pack and lit it for me with a Bic Clic. "I hear they don't let you motherfuckers smoke in basic training no more," he said.

"You're kidding," I said. "Nobody mentioned that to me."

"Whole lot of shit they didn't mention to you," the bus driver said. "Heh, heh."

"Why are we standing here?"

"They ain't ready for you yet," he said, smiling. "Heh, heh."

"When are they going to be ready?"

"When you good and tired," he said. "Heh, heh." He clearly enjoyed his role in the process.

"I gotta take a piss," I said. I sucked the Salem down to its filter and flicked it toward the only clump of grass in eyeshot. I went inside the store, got the key to the toilet, which was attached to a section of two-by-four and engraved with a wood burner MEN'S. I walked out back. The toilet was horrific. The only bright spot was the advertisement for the French Tickler on the prophylactic dispenser. It was a winking cartoon rubber with sparkling teeth. When God was handing out the cartoon assignments to the cartoon characters up in cartoon heaven, He forgot to tell ol' Winky what exactly he would be shilling for. Or Winky didn't mind. I shook three times in honor of Winky, put my own Winky away and locked up.

The dude behind the bullet proof glass asked me if I was fixing to go to basic training up the road. I said I was and shoved the key in the bank slot. He wished me good luck and smiled. His teeth were shockingly perfect, almost Winky-like.

Outside, the bus was revving up. I jogged across the dirt parking lot and got in and off we went to basic training. I was damned close to being excited.

“Why are you on *my* bus?” a midget corporal asked us. It was pretty good dinner theater. I wanted to clap, but I was not in the audience. I was a spear carrier. I played my role, the frightened recruit, and scrambled off the bus with everyone else. The midget corporal lined us up against a wall and told us how disappointing we were as privates. He informed us that that was our name, each of us, collectively. We were privates and would be until we graduated from basic training. He taught us how to stand at attention and at parade rest, which involved placing your right hand over your left in the small of your back, your thumbs hooked, your feet apart, staring straight forward at nothing.

I immediately loved parade rest. To this day, when I’m bored or standing in line or even in the comfort of my own home, I will snap to parade rest. It’s like a vacation. I do not question this feeling. Once you question something as sublime as parade rest, it ceases to be a comfort.

We filled out forms. We slept in an open bay barracks. The next morning, a bored drill sergeant banged on a garbage can for a moment, then told us to take showers.

We were so dumb we didn’t even know how to fall in. He formed us up the best he could, outside, post showers, wet mops of hair, day-old clothes. He told us that we were dumb, but not extraordinarily dumb. Just average dumb. I liked him. We stood in a square filled with busted up rocks. “You fuck up,” the bored drill sergeant said, “you’ll be at the correctional barracks at Fort Riley, Kansas creating these lovely bits of rock from larger rocks.”

We looked around at each other. Literally busting rocks. It was like something out of a 1930’s prison movie. I wanted to hear more. Instead, the bored drill sergeant said, “Today you eat chow at zero-six-thirty at the D-Fac. To be followed by shots. Which will be followed by the vomiting up of chow. Can I get a hoo-rah?”

He did not get a hoo-rah.

“Guess I’m not getting my hoo-rah,” he said. He didn’t seem surprised. He checked his watch. We were still early. “So, what did you all do before you joined the Army?” he asked.

He did not get a response.

"You are some *mute* motherfuckers," he said. "You," he said, pointing at me. "Say something."

"I worked grill," I said.

"Worked grill? What the fuck does that mean?"

"I cooked food on a heated sheet of metal in a greasy spoon restaurant," I said.

"You were a grill cook," he said.

"I'll cop to that," I said.

"Here," he said. "Try this: Try saying only, 'Yes, drill sergeant,' 'No, drill sergeant,' and 'I don't know, drill sergeant,' until you leave my reception station. And try saying it as loud as you can. You think you can do that?"

"Yes, drill sergeant!" I shouted.

"Outstanding," the bored drill sergeant said without a hint of enthusiasm. He checked his watch again. "Hey, look at that. It's time to march you sad fucks down to the mess hall."

We were there two more days, which involved shots, clothing issue, stenciling our names on our duffel bags and shoving our new clothes inside, haircuts (which they made us pay for) and learning, from the bored drill sergeant, how to stand in line, which he told us would be the one thing that we would have to learn to do well, and how to line up and stand in formation.

He had us standing outside during a rainstorm, our new haircuts itching our scalps, our sad baggy new clothes itching our skin, our new boots cutting into our feet, standing at attention, standing without purpose in the rain, standing there, just standing, until a private in front of me passed out and slammed face first into the broken rocks under our feet. The bored drill sergeant strolled over, crouched down, clucked his tongue, and thumped the prostrate private like you would a cantaloupe. "Shit," he said. "That was outstanding. Bravo! What did you think of that Private Fuckhead?" He was addressing me.

"I don't know, drill sergeant," I shouted.

"I like you, Private Fuckhead," he said. "You and you," he said, pointing at me and another private. "Drag this piece of dogshit back into the barracks."

“Yes, drill sergeant,” we shouted in unison. We each took a step back, stepping out of formation as we had just been taught, and trotted over and grabbed an arm apiece and dragged the private away.

Inside, the private opened his eyes and fucking winked at me with his bloody face smiling, and then closed his eyes again.

Speaking from now, from the bright-shining future, as a four-year Army veteran, I can say this: That kid had a bright-shining Army future ahead of him. He had learned to get over, to sham, which is the goal of every junior enlisted soldier.

The reception station and its bored drill sergeant had done enough for us. It was time to move on. We were sent to Charlie company of the second battalion of the forty-eighth infantry, which was written like this: C 2/48.

The bored drill sergeant ordered us aboard a cattle truck, shoving as many of us as he could inside. The door closed. It was as hot as blue blazes in the truck. A private next to me said so. A horsefly buzzed lazily around our heads.

To break the tension, as the cattle truck drove in creaking circles around the parking lot of the Fort McClellan Burger King, a private began to sing the Tom T. Hall classic:

*I love little baby ducks, old pickup trucks
Slow-movin' trains and rain
I love little country streams, sleep without dreams
Sunday school in May and hay
And I love you, too*

Soon everyone was singing along, even if they didn't know the words. Humming, except for the “I love you, too” part, which was horribly out of tune. It was a hard song to murder, but as soon as the cattle truck squeaked to a halt in front of our barracks and the doors opened, the song died in our throats, mid-*loooooove*. Standing in front of the doors was our new drill sergeant, a man with more pep than the one we'd left behind. He looked just like Sergeant Slaughter, the wrestler. So that's what I'll call him.

“What the fuck?” Drill Sergeant Slaughter asked us.

We had no reply.

“Little baby ducks?” he boomed.

Still no reply.

“Jesus, I mean I can understand the old pickup trucks. I have a nice one myself.”

Silence from inside the cattle car. Not a cough or a chuckle.

"Fuck me," Drill Sergeant Slaughter said. "Get the fuck off the cattle truck and fall in on this ugly fucker." He grabbed a trembling private by the front of his duffel bag and dragged him to a square filled with gravel. We fell in on him, our duffel bags held tight in our arms like life preservers. "Little baby motherfucking ducks," Drill Sergeant Slaughter said. "Jesus God in heaven." He leaned down, poking a trembling private on the bridge of his nose with his smokey the bear hat. "Little baby ducks?" He held his position. The private stood at attention, holding his bag, sweating. "Answer me, private!"

"Yes, drill sergeant?"

"So you're not a mute?"

"Yes, drill sergeant!"

"Do you *love* little baby ducks?"

"No, drill sergeant!"

"Why not? They're awfully fuzzy-wuzzy!"

"I don't know, drill sergeant!"

He asked every private in the first row, the first squad, all about baby ducks. He asked a private if his baby duck fetish was sexual. He asked the next private how many baby ducks it would take to make a decent baby duck sandwich. He asked a question about the coefficient of a baby duck. It went on for a while before he sent us upstairs to our open bay barracks room, where we became third platoon. I was in the second row, so I was in second squad.

We fell back into formation downstairs and then were lead through and around the building where we would spend the next eight weeks.

"This is the command floor. You will never come here unless you're manning a buffer."

"This is the dayroom. You will never come here unless you're manning a buffer."

"This is the lawn. You will never step foot on it unless you're manning a lawn mower."

We formed up outside in the gravel. "Oh. Anyone mind if I fucking swear? Seriously, if anyone minds, I won't. Go ahead and raise your little baby duck loving paw if you mind swearing."

A private in front of me raised his hand. The drill sergeant brought us to attention, made us perform a half-right face, had us go to the front-leaning-rest position — *move!*, and had us all do twenty push-ups in cadence. He had us recover to standing, do a half-left face and asked us, "Anyone mind if I fucking swear? Seriously, if anyone minds, I won't. No takers? Really?"

Push-ups.

We were dropped for a number of infractions. Once, we were dropped for the crime of one of us eating a hamburger. We weren't allowed hamburgers. The drill sergeant exercised us to the cadence of NO (up) MORE (down) GREASY (up) HAMBURGERS (down) to which we responded ONE.

NO (up) MORE (down) GREASY (up) HAMBURGERS (down).

TWO.

And so on, until we reached twenty.

We had a script we followed when we were dropped individually. It went like this:

Drill Sergeant: Drop and give me twenty.

Private (snaps to attention, bends knees until his hands lay flat on the ground, leans on hands while simultaneously snapping feet backward, starts pushing): One drill sergeant, two drill sergeant... (and so on until twenty). Drill sergeant, thank you for conditioning my mind and my body. This private requests permission to recover.

Drill Sergeant: Recover!

Private (snaps back to attention).

I liked basic training. I never had to think, not even once.

I liked the sound that my steel pot made when I marched. It went clink-clink, clink-clunk.

I liked marching. It was like waiting in line, with a little exercise thrown in.

I liked the rifle range, where a voice from up high asked IS THERE ANYONE DOWN RANGE? IS THERE ANYONE DOWN RANGE? READY ON THE LEFT? READY ON THE RIGHT?

And the food wasn't as bad as everyone pretended it was. It was free and there was plenty of it, even if the drill sergeant was shouting EAT THEM VITTLES AND GET OUT OF DODGE in your ear. I particularly enjoyed the chili mac. Drill Sergeant Slaughter recommended it like this: "Slides right down." It did.

One time this private was running toward the barracks and bumped into a bush. Drill Sergeant Slaughter made him apologize. "I'm sorry, drill sergeant!"

"Not to me, to the bush."

I'm sorry, bush!

The drill sergeant dropped him. The private sang out as he exercised, as we'd all been taught to sing, "One drill sergeant! Two drill sergeant!" The drill sergeant stopped him. "You ain't beating your face for *me*," he said. "You're doing it for the *bush*."

One bush! Two bush!

Okay: I'll admit it. That private was me.

My platoon was half-full of future ammo handlers and future helicopter pilots. The ammo school was just up the road at Anniston Army Depot and the Army flight school was just up the road at Fort Rucker. The other half of us were the odd bits of the Army that the Army didn't want to think about. We were future illustrators and future bandsmen and future human resource specialists and future topographic surveyors and future lithographers and future plumbers and future religious program specialists. Oh, and one future cryptologic linguist, who told us that he had a top secret clearance and wasn't allowed to say anything about the training that he hadn't gone through yet.

We polished our boots at night after chow. We waxed and buffed our floors until they gleamed.

One early, early morning, at zero-dark-thirty-hours, when no one was paying attention, a private died. He leapt from the top bunk wearing his Army issue green wool socks, slipped on the well-buffed floor and snapped his neck on the metal crossbar of the bottom bunk.

Tony, the baritone player, was my buddy. He slept in the bunk above mine. When we went to the field, we shared a shelter-half tent. Actually, the beds were called racks. They had no box springs, just a dusty mattress atop zigzags of wire mesh. Tony was on fire guard and discovered the dead private. He shook me awake and said, "Hey."

"Hey," I said. "I was asleep."

"That guy. The one who was going to be a plumber, I think. Lind?"

"So what?"

"I think he's dead."

"You're dreaming."

"No, seriously. I think he's dead."

"Color me intrigued," I said. I sat up and hit my head on the top rack, clunk.

Tony was dressed in a silver George Patton helmet, combat boots and skivvies. He was holding a flashlight and a baton, for bashing in skulls. He also was wearing BCG's, or birth control glasses. He looked like an insane Elvis Costello.

"If this guy isn't dead, someone is going to be," I said.

"Swear to God," Tony said.

We walked over to third squad's racks. Sure enough, there was a dead plumber on the floor. He'd peed himself. His mouth was open and his head was tilted at an odd angle. I kicked him with my toe. "Wool socks," I said.

"He's fucking dead, isn't he?"

"He's putting on a good show if he isn't."

"Should I go get the drill sergeant?"

"Sure, wake his ass up. See if I care. What do they call that?"

"Initiative?"

"Initiative," I repeated. I slapped him on the shoulder. "Drive on, private."

In an hour, while the medics were hauling the former future plumber's dead ass away, we were out in the PT pit, running in circles with our M16A1 rifles raised above our heads. We were being mass-punished not for the dead plumber, but for waking up the drill sergeant with the bad news. Initiative is not for the weak.

The PT pit was an exercise pit filled with gravel, the Army's favorite training surface.

Jogging in circles, we raised the rifles above our heads, then dropped them to waist level, then raised them above our heads, while chanting, DON'T (up) WAKE (down) DRILL (up) SERGEANT (down).

A couple of days later, we stood in formation out on the parade field for the dead plumber's memorial service. A bugler from the Fort McClellan Army Band played Taps, horrifically mangling each note. The Catholic chaplain lectured us on being bad buddies to the dead guy and held the entire battalion responsible for his stupid death. This was the same guy who performed mass on Sunday as if it was a drill team exercise.

"What was I supposed to do?" Tony whispered to me. "Catch the dumb son-of-a-bitch? I didn't even see him fall."

"Whatever, man," I said. I was trying to enjoy being at attention.

Drill Sergeant Slaughter pulled us out of formation and made us do push-ups silently. When we were done, he said, "How about that bugler? Jesus God that was terrible. Don't think I ever heard Taps played that bad. Get back in formation."

The U.S. Army Art School

My orders had me going to Lowry Air Force Base, Colorado, for my advanced individual training (AIT).

Colorado. Purple mountains.

The pass-in-review ceremony involved standing in formation in my class A uniform while a couple of dignitaries spoke. Maybe one of them was the base commandant. I think the dude was a general. He hopped into a jeep and drove around us, for inspection purposes. Then we passed in review, marching past the reviewing stand. Eyes right!

That night we sat around in the barracks, all of our shit packed away in our duffel bags, waiting for buses to come take us away, our orders and airplane tickets in our filthy paws.

I'd enjoyed basic training. It felt kind of shitty to leave already.

The zero-three-thirty-hours bus came. I shook Tony's hand. "See you, man."

I toted my shit downstairs and tossed it in the compartment on the underside of the bus. The same bus driver who brought me to Fort McClellan was going to take me away. "How you doing?" I went to him, standing there in my blank class A's, nothing but a marksman ship badge on my pocket. "You got any of those Salems? It's been eight weeks since my last smoke."

"I told you," he said. He shook out a cigarette.

Drill Sergeant Slaughter took the first one. He was standing right behind me, the stealthy fucker.

I took the next one. The bus driver treated himself. We all lit up with the bus driver's Bic Clic.

"So where you off to, soldier?" Drill Sergeant Slaughter asked. I'd graduated basic training, so my name was no longer *private*.

"Lowry Air Force Base, drill sergeant," I said.

"Nice," Drill Sergeant Slaughter said. "The Air Force has good chow. Outstanding quarters. Beds with box springs. Real wood furniture."

We all smoked for a while. I'd never tasted a better cigarette.

"The Army's this big," Drill Sergeant Slaughter said. He looked through a pinched gap between his index finger and thumb, approximately one-and-a-half inches. "I'll see you again."

We had a new drill sergeant when we reported to the Army barracks at Lowry. He took the five of us into a briefing room after we'd arrived and signed into the unit, bravo company of the five-sixtieth signal battalion, or Co. B 560th Sig. Bn. The drill sergeant was an illustrator and had lost his military bearing long ago, if he had ever possessed one to begin with. Let's call him Drill Sergeant Dudeman. He said, "Dudes, one thing: Don't go around beating up the zoomies like the jarheads do. Not cool."

The zoomies were Air Force personnel. The Marines did not like them.

"They stand outside the enlisted club and pick them off five at a time."

"Heh, heh," went this guy whose name tag read MURPHY.

"You dudes have any questions?"

"Are we allowed to smoke here, drill sergeant?"

"Not indoors," the drill sergeant said. "When you're outside, smoke 'em if you got 'em."

"Sweet," I said. "Mind if I go outside?" I'd bought a pack at the airport just in case.

We had to go get our quarters assignments, sign for our keys and put our shit away first. Drill Sergeant Slaughter hadn't lied about the Air Force. We had real beds and real wood furniture in our quarters and only two up in each room. My new roommate was a leering, smirking New Yorker named Dave. We shook hands. "You need a new field jacket?" he asked me.

"No thanks," I said. "Mine's new."

"It's just that it looks like you'd fit into this one better," he said, shaking it at me by its collar.

The last name on his name tag didn't match that of the jacket, I noticed. "You steal that?"

"What do people expect if they leave a jacket hanging on a door knob?" Dave asked me. "I mean, they're practically begging." He tossed the jacket on his bed. He shrugged. "My girlfriend's birthday is coming up anyway. When she gets here, I'm going to fuck her until my back gives out."

"Before or after you give her the jacket?"

"Before," he said, smirking.

Dave had been in the same company with me in basic training, but in a different platoon. "We had a guy in our platoon who was going to be an illustrator. The fucker was albino-white and batshit crazy."

"Is that the guy from pugil stick competition?" That was where we fought wearing an amalgam of gear from hockey, baseball and football, using padded sticks to beat each other senseless. We performed a little dinner theater beforehand:

Drill Sergeant: What is the spirit of the bayonet?

Privates: To kill, drill sergeant! To kill!

Drill Sergeant: What makes the grass grow green?

Privates: Blood!

Drill Sergeant: What kind of blood?

Privates: Commie blood!

Drill Sergeant: What color is it?

Privates: Yellow!

"That's him," Dave said.

He was a pasty, stocky private whose arm became dislocated after taking what appeared to be a fairly soft blow. And he screamed. "He sounded just like an air raid siren," I said. He'd started off slowly, and then built up to an ear-piercing shriek. "What happened to him?"

"The docs popped his arm back in," Dave said. "But after that, he got paranoid. Like we were all trying to fuck with him all the time."

"Were you?"

"Fuck yeah," Dave said, smirking. "He woke up one night, sure someone spat on him. He was probably drooling in his sleep. He scraped it off on a piece of paper and took it around, making everyone spit on other parts of the paper to compare."

"Like a crime lab," I said.

"So everyone was spitting at him. Just to help out. Spit was flying across the room like a rainstorm." Dave laughed. "He told us later that he was a kung-fu master and showed us his flying kicks, where he spun around with one foot in the air."

"So what happened to him?"

"What the fuck do you think happened to him? They processed him out on a psycho discharge. Like I said, he was batshit crazy."

"I need a smoke," I said.

Lowry was like a wonderland after Fort McClellan. It had wide streets, well-manicured lawns, none of the sidewalks were crumbling, and all the buildings were composed of cream-colored bricks. Off in the distance, mountains. In front of our barracks, we had the shell of a Nike missile with U.S. ARMY printed on the side, presumably so people on the receiving end would know which branch of the service had vaporized them.

After smoking, Dave and I walked across the street to the Air Force dining facility. The cooks were student cooks, according to their name tags, and the food looked like it arose living and breathing out of a women's magazine. I had the broiled cod. Dave had the beef brisket.

After we sat down, civilian contractors came by to refresh our drinks.

What do you have there, soldier?

Tea, ma'am.

Sweetened or unsweetened?

Un, ma'am.

"I joined the wrong service," Dave said.

"You and me, both," I said.

"Mind if I sit here?" asked a soldier with a pencil-thin mustache. His name tape said LUSH.

"Cop a squat," Dave said.

"Lush! Roy Lush!" Roy said, sitting down next to Dave, sliding his tray. "How are you? And how are you?" He shook our hands.

"Swell," I said.

"I'm going to run for office after I leave the service," Roy said. "Congress!"

"Good for you," Dave said. "Have you tried the peach cobbler?"

"It's incandescent," Roy said. "Fantabulous. See the mural on the wall over there?" It featured a soldier shaking hands with an airman. Tiny fighter jets streaked across the sky above the two serviceman, while tiny soldiers advanced below. UNITED IN VICTORY was written in a scroll beneath the entire mess.

"Yours?" I asked.

"Mine," Roy said. "Building bridges."

"I feel sick," Dave said.

"You shouldn't!" Roy said. "Best chow in the entire military, right here! Gotta get going, moving on." But he didn't get going. Not yet. He leaned over to us, confidentially. We leaned in. "You guys ever eat out a woman on the rag?"

"No," Dave said.

"No," I said.

"Tastes like cocktail sauce," he said. He picked up his tray and moved on to another table.

We five newbies were assigned to C shift, which was night shift. We started school at five o'clock, 1700 hrs., and got off at midnight, 0000 hrs.

We marched over with senior classmates, soldiers who had been at the school for weeks instead of days. Ron, the senior class leader, marched us over. He sang a cadence that he'd made up all by himself:

*You go down to the supermarket
Where all the commies shop
You take out your machete
And then begin to chop
Left right, left right, left right, kill*

We halted in front of an ordinary building with an extraordinary sign. In raised lettering, US ARMY ART SCHOOL. The crossed flags and burning torch of the signal corps was etched into the sign's skin. The five of us fell out and wandered through the double front doors and on upstairs.

The walls were covered over in artwork, most of it ordinary – pictures of girlfriends and babies, fellow soldiers drawn in profile, and dozens of drawings of a cone and a block and a rubber ball.

We were directed by a sergeant wearing a painter's smock to the corner classroom. Five other students were in there, including a sailor, three airmen and a nervous Marine lance corporal. The lance corporal had already been made class leader.

A bodybuilder with silly round glasses named Biff brought us to order. He'd had his fatigue uniform tailored to his ridiculous build. If I'd known anything about steroids at the time, I would have said he was a user.

Biff was an Air Force sergeant.

Our first assignment was to draw a straight line. This turned out to be harder than we thought. We had to tape down the paper, draw two X's using a kiddie compass and using a metal straight edge, draw a straight line with Rotring art pen. For most of us, this

took all night. The ink kept blobbing out, or not enough ink would come. The line had to be perfect.

Murphy drew a perfect straight line right away and left the room.

It took me two hours to get a satisfactory line, and then I kept drawing the straight line until I get better at it.

The Marine lance corporal's hand kept shaking and shaking. "Fuck, man! Fuck! They're going to make me infantry! Fuck!" At the end of the night, he stood next to his desk nearly crying.

Biff took me aside. "Hey, PFC," he said.

"Hey, Air Force sergeant," I said.

"Call me, Biff."

"What can I do for you, Biff?"

"You can be junior class leader," Biff said.

"No problem," I said. "What does that entail?"

"You tell people to clean up at the end of the night and put their pens away," Biff said.

"No problem," I said. I turned around and shouted, "Listen up! I need everyone to put their pens away and clean up."

"Who put you in charge?" Murphy asked me.

"Biff here," I said.

"Good enough for me," Murphy said.

The lance corporal barely noticed. Was he sobbing, lightly? I couldn't tell. He was shaking still, but less so. He came over and pretended he was hurt to be replaced by a soldier, an Army guy. But he was pretty happy about it, I think.

I pulled Murphy aside. "We need to get lance corporal to draw a straight line."

"Why?"

"Because his crying annoys me," I said. "I think he annoys everyone. You seem to know what you're doing."

"I was an artist back in the world," Murphy said.

"You're an artist here," I said. "And now you're a teacher, which is somewhat the same thing, I suspect." I slapped him on the shoulder. I leaned in close and whispered confidentially, "The nature of artwork is not its representational character, but rather its capacity to make new or secret information known. Same thing as teaching." I fanned out my fingers, flowerlike, when I said this. I may have even winked. As Steve Martin once said, I took just enough philosophy in college to fuck me up the rest of my life.

Murphy shot me a strange look, and then smiled. "You're shit full of theory," he said. "Or full of shit." He thought a moment, and settled on the latter.

Eventually, the lance corporal accepted Murphy's help, even though Murphy was a mere soldier like me.

We marched with our senior Army classmates back toward the barracks. It wasn't much of a hike, only a mile. We marched along, singing in cadence:

*If I were king of the forest
Not queen, not duke, not prince
My royal robes of the forest
Would be satin, not cotton, not chintz
I'd command each thing, whether fish or fowl
With a ruff and a ruff, and a royal growl
As I click my heels
All the trees would kneel
And the mountains bow
And the bulls kowtow
And the sparrows would take wing
If I – if I were king!*

We came to a halt in front of the mess hall. We could smell bacon and eggs and hash browns and muffins. It was wonderful.

Ron, the senior soldier, brought us to a halt. "I'll get you my pretty!" he shouted, standing at the position of attention.

My fellow classmates shouted in return, "And your little dog, too!"

We fell out and went inside and had a wonderful midnight breakfast.

In the mid-morning, Drill Sergeant Dudeman told us that we still had to PT. Push-ups, sit-ups, two-mile run. After that, we could do whatever we wanted until it was time to march to class.

The two-mile run was murder way up in that Denver mile-high air. What little air we could suck into our lungs had a good bit of smog in it. I'd never pass the PT test if I kept on smoking, so I hid my cigarettes from myself, deep in my real wood wall locker. I figured I might allow myself one or two. Or three. For medicinal purposes.

Dave said, "That run was a son-of-a-bitch." It wasn't an overly warm day, but the two of us had soaked through our gray Army PT uniforms. "It was like sucking air out of a straw." We'd all lost two or three minutes off our run. Not good.

We took our shaving kits to the latrine, shaved and showered. Dave announced to everyone that he had to take a big American shit, one that would put a Soviet shit to shame.

I dried as quickly as I could with my Army-issue brown towel. Like many Army-issue items, it did not perform as expected. It was not absorbent. It was like rubbing yourself with sandpaper.

I had some time to kill, so I put on my uniform and walked down to the BX to buy myself a proper towel. I'd seen the BX on the way in from the airport. On the way there, I wanted to smoke, and slapped myself all over trying to ferret out my cigarettes, but remembered that I'd hidden my smokes from myself. "Fuck!" I went, and then saluted a passing Air Force officer in his Ralph Kramden suit. "Good morning, sir."

"Better watch that language," the officer said, returning my salute.

"Yes, sir," I replied to the zoomie cocksucker.

The BX was huge, and the quality of the stuff was better than that of the Fort McClellan PX even though zoomies made the same amount of money that we did. Thanks to Reagan, that was almost a living wage. I bought a big, plush towel and a pack of Camels and a Bic Clic. I bought a sandwich at the Robin Hood sandwich shoppe, the Ye Olde Friar Tuck, and ate it while watching all the happy zoomies walk around saying hi to each other and enjoying their lives. Zoomies had every right to be cheerful.

On the way out, I saw a flier advertising a sock hop at the enlisted club.

I lit up, sucked in that good cigarette smoke, felt lightheaded and nearly passed out in the parking lot.

I walked back to the barracks, smoking as I walked along.

Back up in my quarters, Dave asked me what was in the bag.

"Towel," I said.

"You didn't buy me one?"

"Figured you'd steal one from the latrine," I said.

"All right, you got me," he said. He opened up his wall locker and, sure enough, three non-issue towels were hanging there.

"You better watch that stealing shit," I said.

"Just because you're the class leader doesn't mean —"

"I'm just saying," I said.

Dave and I went downstairs to the dayroom to watch some TV. Murphy was there.

"Show's about to start," Murphy said.

"What show?" I asked. "*Bonanza*?"

"The Marines are picking up a newbie at the airport," Murphy said. "Some scary female staff sergeant told me to stay out of the way when they bring him in. He's fresh out of boot camp and ready to kill."

We shared our barracks with the Marines and the Navy. They were on the north side of the barracks and we were on the south. We shared a dayroom with them on the bottom floor.

"Anyone want to pitch in on a pizza?" Murphy asked.

"Sure," Dave went.

"Why not?" I went.

Murphy went over to the payphone and ordered a pizza.

A new Marine Corps private was hauled through the dayroom, a Marine sergeant on each arm. "Move, Marine!"

Sir, yes, sir!

Bonanza came on the big, console TV in the corner. We watched. Hoss got into a gunfight. Our pizza arrived.

Murphy!

We each gave Murphy a couple of bucks. He came back with the pizza.

"No anchovies, right?" Dave asked him.

"Right," Murphy said.

A bulldog came wandering over, sniffed at the pizza box. "What the fuck?" Dave asked.

"Marine Corps mascot," Murphy said.

The bulldog got too close, so Dave kind of waved at him with the toe of his boot.

The scary female Marine staff sergeant came over and barked at Dave, "Why you kicking at my dog, Army private?"

Dave snapped to parade rest. Murphy and I looked at each other, tossed our pieces of pizza back in the box and snapped to parade rest. "Sergeant, I wasn't—"

"You did. My eyes don't lie and neither do I," the scary female Marine staff sergeant said. "You're banned from my dayroom."

"Banned?" Dave went.

"Banned," she went. "You two."

"Yes, sergeant," Murphy said.

"Yes, sergeant," I said.

"As you were," the scary female Marine staff sergeant said.

We sat down and continued eating. Hoss was in big trouble in his shootout. His brother, Trapper John, MD, came to his rescue. Dave tore off another piece of pizza and stomped out of the dayroom.

A few minutes later, Drill Sergeant Dudeman walked over to us. We snapped to parade rest. "Sit down. Chill," he said.

We sat down. He sat down next to us on the couch. "What happened?"

We told him.

"Scary-ass bitch," Drill Sergeant Dudeman said. "I'll iron it out. Don't sweat it." He ate our last piece of pizza.

*Do you really want to hurt me
Do you really want to make me cry
Precious kisses words that burn me
Lovers never ask you why*

We sang in cadence on the way to school. The pizza on top of the sandwich on top of the lungs filled with cigarette smoke made me ill. I fell out of formation and vomited into the gutter. I spat long and ropy. I ran and caught up with the formation.

It wasn't just illustrators at Lowry. We had still photographers and videographers and, strangely, calibrators. Calibrator school was a year long and they received an associate's degree when they finished. After their training, they owed Uncle Sugar five more years. Most of the future calibrators talked about working in Saudi Arabia for Aramco after they finished their Army time, because the Saudis paid obscenely well, so they heard.

But it was just illustrators in our formation and at our school.

One of the Air Force females became my girlfriend for a week, which was the week after the first week, the draw-a-straight-line week. She and I would give each other shoulder rubs in class and then we'd make out in a storage closet next to a taboret stocked with Sanford art gum erasers and blending stumps. After class, I'd sneak away from my formation and she'd sneak out of her Air Force dormitory and we'd pay five dollars and rent a room at the BEQ, which was called the Mile High Lodge, and have mile-high sex. That was the week we learned calligraphy, first with magic markers that smelled like candy products, and then with pens with nibs that we had to dip in inkwells. India ink was not my friend, but I was getting the hang of it.

On the Friday of that week, post-sex, I observed her nude bottom after she got out of bed and walked across the room. I said, "Hey, did you have a kid or something?" The words spilled out of my mouth too quickly. I probably could have stopped them, or at least slowed them down. But we were getting entirely too close.

She spun round angry. "No!" she lied, hotly. She had a face like a cupie doll. It was kind of sickening to look at after a while, like chugging several vanilla milkshakes in a row.

I could tell that she was lying. The fuck of it is, I couldn't let it go. "Because your ass is kind of shovel-shaped. Like a waitress I worked with who pumped out a kid," I said.

"I'm eighteen!" she shrieked.

"What's the kid's name? The kid have a name?"

She gathered together her little blue bus driver's outfit, sulking, grumbling. "I thought you were nice," she said. "But you're weird and mean."

"Crystal? Blake? J.R.? Sue Ellen?" I wiped myself with the bed sheet and put on my Army boxer shorts, snap.

"It's Marky, all right? Are you satisfied?" She stumbled out into the corridor half dressed and slammed the door behind herself.

"Marky?" I went. "Hmm." I took a shower and got dressed. I turned in the room key downstairs.

"She looked pretty pissed," the night clerk said. "She was missing one of her low quarters. She had to hop out of here."

"She named her kid 'Marky,'" I said. I shook out a cigarette and offered it to him. He took it.

"Hmm," he went. "I had her pegged for a fancier name. Maybe something off a nighttime TV soap." He lit the smoke with a Mile High Lodge match. The matchbook had a B-52 on it.

"Me, too," I said, lighting off the same match.

The next week was the week we started drawing the cone, the rubber ball and the wooden cube. Uncle Jerry was the teacher for that part of our training. Uncle Jerry invited us to call him Uncle Jerry, so we did. He was an old Army Spec-6, which was a soldier who made as much money as a staff sergeant, but had all the authority of a PFC, which was what I was. He put his feet up on his drafting table and bitched about the raw deal the Army had given him. "No one told me I was never going to get promoted," he said. "So now I'm telling you: You'll never get promoted."

"Thanks, Uncle Jerry," I said in my capacity as class leader.

"You're welcome," Uncle Jerry said. I think he was in his mid-forties, which seemed impossibly old to most of us. He claimed to have been drafted during Vietnam.

Dave said on our smoke break, "I can't wait to get old and bitter like Uncle Jerry. It's pretty cool."

"Why not be young and bitter?" I asked him.

"What? And live a cliché?" Dave went.

My week-long fling decided to give me some attitude during class, so I took her aside and worked on my leadership skills, which I wouldn't need, according to Uncle Jerry, because I'd never be promoted. It had something to do with having too many 81E's in the Army and too few leadership slots for them.

I took her into the utility closet where we used to make out. She said, "You're not fucking me anymore. Okay?"

"You need to quit giving me all this 'tude. You don't have to respect *me*, but you *do* have to respect my position," I said.

"What position is that? Being a dick?"

"No," I said. I pointed out the armband with the corporal's stripes that I had to wear in class.

"Oh, *that*," she went. "Big whoop."

"Do you want me to report you to Biff? Does it have to come to that?" Biff was the senior airman at the school.

"No," she said. She shrugged, cut her eyes away. "Screw it. I wasn't that into you anyway."

"Nor I, you," I said.

I had to give up smoking. There were no two ways about it. I lay on my back on the side of the wide road, wide because it was once a runway, Murphy had told me.

"You okay?" Dave asked.

"I think I coughed up a tar ball," I said. "And swallowed it."

"Fuck yeah," Dave said. He sat down on the curb next to me. I sat up. "You made it one-and-a-half miles," he said. "Another half-mile and you got it licked."

"I have to give up smoking," I said.

"You got one on you?"

I pulled the pack out of the pocket of my gray Army sweatshirt. Shook one out for Dave and another for myself. Lit mine and handed the matchbook to Dave.

"Mile High Lodge," Dave went.

"Yeah."

"Is that where you were fucking that zoomie female?"

"Yeah."

We sat there for another minute, enjoying our smokes.

Drill Sergeant Dudeman came trotting up. "C'mon," he went, jogging in place like a yuppie. "Let's go. Put those coffin nails out."

We tossed our smokes to the curb and stepped on them.

We graduated from drawing the cone, the rubber ball and the cube to drawing each other. One of us would sit on a chair in the middle of the room while the rest of us would draw him or her. That was the fun part. It lasted a few weeks.

Eventually, we were doing watercolors. Uncle Jerry regaled us with stories of creating multiple paintings of a brigadier general's dog, spending a month creating a mural in a mess hall in Vietnam only to have it explode a week after he was finished and getting caught with a hooker in his quarters at Fort Belvoir.

Then we got to the unfun parts, like learning how to use the Diazo process machine, making map overlays, creating 35 mm slides for briefings, and other Army bullshit.

Ron, the senior illustrator student, suggested a night of debauchery while eating a splendid souffle at the Air Force mess hall on a Friday that became, moments later, a Saturday. "The sailors are always doing it," he said. "Why not us?"

Ron had been a mechanized infantryman up until recently. He was an Army Spec-4, which was a soldier who made as much money as a corporal, but had all the authority of a PFC, which was what I was. Ron was one of those guys who never stopped drawing. You know: An actual artist. Unlike me.

He had a character named, "Rollo the Pig," which was a half-man, half-pig, who showed up in all his paintings.

Murphy was an actual artist, too. He signed on for the night of debauchery. Dave was in. Dave had been in a band called, The Unflushed Toilets. Their big hit, he had told me, was "Brady Bunch Massacre."

We took off for the barracks. We all changed into civvies.

Ron had already rented a car for \$10 from the base rent-a-car. He showed up in front of the barracks. It was kind of chilly. "A brother needs wheels," Ron said from the driver's seat. We all piled in, me and Murphy in the back.

"If you can call a 'Chevette' wheels," Dave said. He didn't call shotgun, but there he was.

"Don't bust on my ride," Ron said.

We all had a celebratory smoke.

"I gotta give these things up," Ron said. "Or I'll never pass the PT test."

"That's what he's been saying," Dave said, yanking a thumb at me.

We all coughed involuntarily.

“Hey, there’s a sailor,” Ron said. We pulled up alongside him as he trudged down the sidewalk.

He was in my class, so I called out to him. “Hey, man!”

“Hey,” he went.

“Where do you Navy guys go at night anyway?”

“The Palomino,” he said, leaning into the car. “You know where that is?” Then he told us. “There’s a chick there that blows out candles with her snatch. It’s killer, dude.”

“Thanks, man,” Ron said.

The sailor stood up straight and fucking winked at us. We drove away from him.

We drove off-base to LoDo and found the Palomino. It didn’t look like much from the outside, more or less like a family fine dining establishment, except for the LIVE NUDE GIRLS sign on the outside. Inside, we saw all the Navy guys from our barracks that we rarely saw. We paid ten bucks apiece to get in. There were five stages spread throughout the facility, each surrounded by barstools. All the Navy guys were in civvies, but you could tell we were all military.

We sat down in the barstools around one of the stages. A nude girl danced above us to Wang Chung’s “Dance Hall Days.” Ron had a wad of dollar bills. So did Dave. Murphy and I had failed to prepare adequately for the mission. Murphy bought five ones off Ron. I had to buy some ones from a topless girl who came by and took our drink order. They weren’t allowed to sell alcohol, so we all ordered the six-dollar hot chocolates. There was a counter just below stage level all the way around the stage, just enough to rest your drink on. The little counter was lit by recessed lighting built into the stage, which made all the patrons’ faces glow. Otherwise, it wasn’t well lit in there. Even with the girl’s knees at eye level, no more than a few feet away at any given time, we all kind of had to squint. She had a white blanket with her, which she spread out on her tiny dance floor. Across from us, I could see all the Navy guys squinting and and furiously drinking it all in, like they’d never see this kind of shit again. Their Navy drill sergeants probably told them that they’d better get to a stripclub and memorize what a woman looks like for all the jerking off they’d have to do onboard a ship.

The nude girl got on her hands and knees and leaned down until she was nose-to-nose with Dave. She stroked his face with the tip of her nose. Across the stage, I could see the Navy guys going nuts studying the opposite end of her. Her hair hung black and curly around her face. Her lips were full and wet. Her eyes were vacant – she’d checked out for the evening.

There was a commotion behind us. I turned around. Bouncers converged with flashlights around another stage. In the flashlights’ beams I made out Roy Lush’s face.

"Hey, Dave," I said, tapping his shoulder. "It's Lush."

"Busy," Dave said.

I turned back around. The nude girl had her legs on either side of Dave. He furiously stuffed dollar bills into her garter.

"It's not my fault!" Lush shouted. "I paid to get in here!"

Cocktail sauce, I thought. I turned back around. The nude girl had moved on to me. She rolled onto her belly. She was very white, almost glowing. She leaned in close, her eyes reflecting yellow from the recessed lighting. I saw myself in them. She leaned very close in, took my head in her hands, her thumbs rubbing my ears. "You're the one," she said. "You."

"What?" I said. "What does that mean?"

She threw up a little bit in her mouth, winced and swallowed. "Nothing," she said. "I'm high. Forget I said anything."

The nude girl stood up and sauntered over to the Navy guys to our right, dragging her blanket behind her.

"Nice scars," Murphy snarked, referring to her breast augmentations, or to her appendectomy scar.

My hot chocolate hadn't been mixed properly. The powder from the mix stuck to my lips.

In another half hour, we got bored and left.

We found a 24-hour convenience store and bought the only alcohol we were allowed to drink in Colorado: 3.2 beer. It was Coors. It was warm. We drank it anyway. I was still a month away from my 21st birthday.

"So where were you stationed before you came here, Ron?" Dave asked.

"Third brigade, second AD," Ron said. "Graf, West Germany. I was in the second battalion of the fiftieth infantry regiment. I'll tell you what, nothing's more fun than doing doughnuts on an icy road in an em-one-one-three. Nothing." He smiled and sipped his beer, remembering.

"Why didn't you stay with the infantry?" Murphy asked.

"Fuck the infantry," Ron said.

We drove past a Greek restaurant. The lights were on, so we stopped and went in. A lady danced. This guy who was dressed up like Little Lord Fauntleroy played a bouzouki. Dollar bills were thrown. Hands clapped rhythmically. It was zero-three-hundred on a fucking Saturday.

Ron said, "She's not going to take her clothes off."

We got up and left.

We sat outside a 7-11 drinking weak beer under a buzzing mercury vapor lamp.

"What did that chick mean, back in the strip club?" Murphy asked me.

"You heard her, too?"

"'You're the one?' What the fuck is that?" Murphy went.

"Claims of truth," I said, taking a careful sip of my beer, pinky upraised, and spilling it on myself anyway. "We choose to believe what is easy for us to believe." I burped.

"Boy, you're drunk," Dave said.

"Bet she says it to ten guys a night," Ron said. "Fills that garter right up with dollar bills."

We'd all managed to drink enough beer to be stinking drunk by the time the Denver cops pulled us over. The fuck of it was, they had their guns drawn and there were about a dozen of them. Or so.

"Hands up! Hands up!" they shouted. We complied. The head cop asked for our military IDs. We complied. "Stand down," he told his men. They holstered their weapons. "Sorry about that. A lot of the rental cars from the base have been getting stolen." He gave us back our IDs.

"No problem, officer," Ron said. "You have a pleasant evening, sir."

"You, too, Specialist," the head cop said. The cops all got back into their vehicles and departed.

We took a minute to gather ourselves.

"I thought I was getting pulled over for driving while black," Ron said.

"I thought it was the drunkenness," I said.

"I thought it was because Ron's black," Dave said.

"I'm glad it's all over," Murphy said.

"Unless anyone objects, I'm driving this motherfucker back to the barracks," Ron said.

"You're the senior enlisted man here," I said.

"Drive on," Murphy said.

"Denver sucks," Dave said.

Back on base, Ron spotted a jackrabbit who was about four-feet-tall. "Look at that cocksucker," Ron said. "He's flipping me off!"

"Who's flipping you off?" Dave asked.

"I'm going to run his ass down," Ron said.

He drove all over the place, trying to run down the rabbit. He had no luck. We returned to the barracks and slept off our drunks.

The next afternoon, I woke up, showered and put on my civvies and walked over to the Air Force mess hall. On the way, I saw the impressive amount of damage Ron had done to the zoomies' well-kept sidewalks and lawns. I saw him over at the mess hall, sitting by himself, all hung over. After loading up on beef wellington and garlic mashed potatoes, I parked myself at his table.

"Fuck me," Ron said.

"Anyone find out it was us?"

"Not yet," he said.

"So take the car to a car wash and then turn it in," I said. "Anyone asks, I'll tell 'em we never had a car. Who saw us? That Navy guy?"

"I guess you're right," Ron said.

"Damned right I'm right. Have you tried the wellington here? It's transcendent," I said, taking a bite.

Three Months Without Pay

I called my mother up from a payphone in the barracks after I graduated from AIT. She wasn't impressed. "Some genius you turned out to be," she said. "A private in the Army."

"I have orders to go to West Germany," I said.

"Germany," she said. The phone was silent. I thought for a moment that she'd hung up. "Don't call collect again," she finally said.

"Fine," I said.

"Good luck," she said. "If you run into your father over there, say 'hi.'"

"Bye, mom," I said. I hung up.

Dave had orders to something called SHAPE in Belgium. Murphy had orders to something called TRADOC in Fort Monroe, Virginia. Ron had orders to the fifth mechanized infantry division at Fort Polk, Louisiana.

"Fucking infantry," Ron said.

I signed out of the five-sixtieth signal battalion, dressed in my class A uniform. Now that I'd passed AIT, I had my first bit of fruit salad for the ol' uni, the rainbow ribbon. I also picked up a signal corps disc for my class A collar and a signal corps badge (PRO PATRIA VIGILANS, it said) for the front of my uniform. I looked like an actual soldier.

Drill Sergeant Dudeman called me a cab. We shook hands out front. "Good job," he told me. "What's the military word for that?"

We both thought for a moment. "Outstanding?" I went.

"That's it. Outstanding," he said, looking very pleased with me. "So Europe, huh?"

"Europe," I said.

"Maybe you'll get seventh Army headquarters in Heidelberg. That's a rockin' town."

My orders had me going to the 21st Replacement Depot in Frankfurt. I had a stack of copies of my orders that was about a quarter-inch thick. The original orders looked like they'd come out of a teletype machine.

"Can't believe I passed the PT test," I said.

"I gave all you guys an extra five minutes on the run," Drill Sergeant Dudeman said. "Better give up those smokes. Your next unit's PT coordinator might not be so accommodating."

"Sure thing," I said.

I lugged my duffel bag to the curb, past the empty missile, and waited for my cab.

There weren't too many G.I.'s on my flight from Denver to St. Louis. My flight from St. Louis to Frankfurt was lousy with G.I.'s.

On board the plane, which had all the first class seating ripped out so they could cram as many soldiers as they could in there, I sat on the aisle next to a private second class who was wearing a blue rope. "I'm infantry!" he said when I asked him about it. "Eleven bravo! What the fuck kind of soldier doesn't know that a blue rope means infantry?"

I shrugged. "I dunno."

"What kind of soldier says, 'I dunno'?"

"I outrank you, mosquito wings," I said. I thumped the rank on my sleeve, a stripe up and a rocker down.

"Fuck me in the heart," the private second class said. He crossed his arms and closed his eyes.

The inflight movie was "Hot Dog: The Movie." It was about a downhill skiing competition and girls' tits. Mainly it was about the tits. It was a crowd pleaser. Soldiers cheered on the tits. "Take it off, bitch!"

The captain announced that we were over the Atlantic.

After the movie was over, the private second class, feeling more favorably disposed toward me now that he'd seen movie tits, asked me what my MOS was. "Eighty-one-echo," I said.

"What the fuck is that?"

"Illustrator," I said.

"What the fuck does an illustrator do?"

"Draw pictures," I said.

"Fuck me in the heart," the private second class said.

"Are there any medics onboard the plane?" the air hostess asked over the intercom.

Soldiers don't volunteer, so she had to walk through the plane looking at uniforms. Eventually, she found a caduceus on the collar of the guy on the other side of the private second class from me. He'd crammed himself as close to the window as he could, so she had to lean over me and the private second class to take a look at him. She smelled like a flower that had died an unspeakable death.

"God damn it," he said, when she pointed it out to him. "Okay, you got me. Fuckity fuck," he said, taking off his seat belt and getting up and climbing over the infantryman and me. "Jesus fuck."

Half-an-hour later the captain announced that we were landing in Scotland, but that we should stay in our seats.

The Scottish gendarmes came sauntering aboard the aircraft after it landed. Their hats were banded with checkerboards. "Looky there," I said, poking the infantryman in the ribs. "Real live foreigners. Have at them."

"I've seen foreigners before," the private second class grumbled.

The medic returned, climbed over us and sat down. Before we could ask him, he said, "Some dickhead had a panic attack. Fuck him. He should die."

One of the Scottish gendarmes was a stylish redhead. Nice calves. I have a weakness for redheads with translucent skin. "Maybe I should have a panic attack," I said, rubber-necking like everyone else on the plane, save the medic.

"I'll snap your fucking neck if you do," the medic said. "Don't think I don't know how."

We landed in Frankfurt at Rhein Mein Air Force Base. I peered past the infantryman and the medic through the tiny porthole at West Germany. It was hazy gray out there. I was excited. I thought of the happy aspects of Germany. Lederhosen. Girls trussed up in dirndls serving liters of beer.

I'd only managed to get up few times during the ten-hour flight, so I was sore. Everyone was sore, with travel stink and five o'clock shadows. We trudged slowly toward the exit. The captain said over the intercom that he'd enjoyed flying with us.

All the luggage on the carousel was exactly the same, save for the names stenciled on the sides. A sergeant pointed at the private second class and said, "You, and you," and then he smiled, "and you. You're on my detail. The rest of you get on the bus." The

three privates he picked out had to load everyone's duffel bags on the back of the school bus, painted minty green, through the emergency exit. When they finished, they got on the bus with the rest of us. We rode across the street to the 21st Repo Depot. The same three privates were picked to unload everyone's stuff. The rest of us went inside and sat in chairs, waiting for the next available clerk to tell us our final destination in Germany.

After half an hour, I found out that I was going to the 191st Ordnance Battalion in Mannheim, an hour's drive south.

"I wonder how they rated an illustrator," the clerk said. "I usually send you guys to seventh Army headquarters."

I shrugged.

"That's the attitude," the clerk said. She smiled at me like a mom would for a kid who'd done something clever for the first, and possibly last, time. She printed out ten copies of my orders and handed them to me. "Good luck, private first class."

I boarded a Mercedes-Benz bus along with a couple dozen more privates. Through the haze, I could see the occasional castle and other large-scale German bric-a-brac. I was punchy enough to sing out, "Yodel-lady-hoo." Which got a few laughs.

We made a few stops and dumped off a few soldiers before we got to my stop, Mannheim. The driver left me on the doorstep of the USO. I pulled my duffel out of the bottom of the bus and away went the bus. I'd had my fill of transportation for the day. I lit a cigarette standing there, travel stink wafting off me. A lieutenant walked past and I saluted him, cigarette in mouth. He performed an on-the-spot correction with me, having me place my cigarette in the ashtray and do a proper salute. He struck up a conversation with me.

"Where you coming from, soldier?"

"Stateside, sir."

"Just out of AIT?"

"Yes, sir."

"What unit are you going to?"

I pulled out my orders. "One-nine-one ord bin, sir," I said.

"Oh, hey," he said. "Grab your bag and follow me."

"Yes, sir," I said. I grabbed my bag and followed him. "Is it okay if I finish my smoke on the way, sir?"

"Why not?" he went. I noticed that he had hearing aids in as I walked beside him. I made a mental note to enunciate. "I'm the S-3 for the one-ninety-first."

"If you don't mind my asking, sir —?"

"The hearing aids? I was a cannon cocker when I was enlisted," he said. "Didn't wear my hearing protection. I was a tough guy. Stupid is more like it."

"I was going to ask what an S-3 is, actually, sir," I said. I flicked my smoke at the curb.

"Oh man. You *are* a newbie," he said. "Throw your bag in the back, newbie." He was driving an F-150 that had seen better days. I tossed my bag in the back. He unlocked the passenger side door for me. "The handle sticks." He jiggled it and it popped open for him. "Can you believe that I had this piece-of-shit truck shipped over here? I had to go pick it up in Bremerhaven."

I hopped in. I watched him walk around the truck. A light, almost imperceptible drizzle misted down. He got in the passenger side and it started right up. "That's my girl," he said, patting the dash. "What's your MOS?"

"Eighty-one-echo, sir."

"What the fuck is that?"

"Illustrator, sir."

"Jesus Christ," he said.

"That seems to be the general reaction, sir."

"We're a new unit," he said. We drove past sad little brick buildings. Water beaded up on the windshield. "And our battalion commander wrote the MTOE. This is one of the few times in his career that he's left the Pentagon. Anyway, we're just now beginning to fill out the battalion headquarters. My guess is that you're going to work for me."

We drove across a bridge over an autobahn and up to a gate manned by a German pseudo-soldier wearing a fatigue uniform. The rank on his collar was red plastic. We had to show him our military ID's. We entered Taylor Barracks, my home for the next two years.

We parked outside a battalion headquarters. A red guidon hung outside. The mist clung to my polyester uniform as I climbed the steps inside. We climbed up the stairs to the second floor to the CQ room. I signed into the unit. The PFC behind the desk said, "Welcome to the one-ninety-worst."

No quarters were available for me, so I had to stay in the temporary quarters, which had a half dozen racks in it. There was one rack available. I took it, the bottom one. I could barely keep my eyes open.

The PFC turned out to be the supply clerk. He had me sign for two sheets, a pillow, a pillow case and a green Army blanket.

"What time is it?" I asked him.

"Zero-nine-hundred hours," he said.

"I have to sleep now," I said.

"Of course you do," he said. He had me sign for my key to the room. I put it on the same chain with my ID tags, along with the key for the Master's lock for my wall locker. "Don't get too comfortable in here. This is temporary quarters."

It would be my home for the next two years.

I awoke, disoriented. A group of soldiers in full battle rattle was banging around my quarters. One next to me shouted at the others, "I told you fucks to be fucking quiet! Now the fucking new guy's awake."

"Howdy," I said, blinking the crust out of my eyes.

"He's a fucking cowboy!" another soldier across the room shouted. "Giddy-up!"

"I'm the fucking cowboy!" another soldier across the room shouted. "Yippee-ky-yi-yay!"

"C'mon," the soldier next to me shouted. "We gotta turn our fucking weapons in to the fucking weapons room."

"What's the matter?" the cowboy shouted. "Did we interrupt your fucking beauty sleep?"

"Must've," the soldier next to me shouted. "He's fucking ugly as sin."

Bwa-ha-ha-ha!

"Let's turn our weapons in and get chow!" another soldier shouted.

"Roving patrol!"

"Hoo-rah!"

"Chow!"

Slam-bang-slam!

And they were gone. I closed my eyes again.

I opened my eyes and it was dark. The rack above mine was creaking. Soft moans, then harder, ahhh, fuck me, fuck me, ahh, oh shit, shit, shit, gah.

"Oh, man," the soldier who'd stood next to me whispered. "You got some nice tits."

"Danke," went a woman's voice.

"A guy could fall for a woman like you," the soldier said.

"Vielen Dank," she said.

"Do you like me?" he said.

She cooed a bit.

"I like you," he said. "A lot."

"Shut the fuck up and pay her!" a soldier across the room shouted. "Cut that baby talk out."

"Roving patrol!"

"Sorry," the soldier above me said. "Is American money okay?"

"Alles ist gut," said the woman.

I awoke in an empty room. Another gray day out the window. "What day is today?" I shouted down to a soldier.

"It's Christmas day, governor!" the soldier shouted back to me in a very bad approximation of a cockney accent. "Would you like me to buy you a Christmas goose? Tiny Tim is ever so hungry!"

I walked down the hall to the latrine. HERREN on the door. I stood staring at the word, a little angry at it, my shaving kit in my hand, towel over my shoulder. A soldier pushed past me. "How's it going, new guy?" he asked.

I could have given him a very long answer. Instead I grunted and followed him in.

Nickel sinks were lined up along the wall. I left the water running while I shaved. My eyes were bloodshot. I looked down. Silt was building up in the sink. The nickel made it look like I was panning for gold.

"Is there dirt in the water here?" I asked the soldier.

"Don't drink the water," the soldier said.

"What is today anyway?"

"It's Wednesday," he said.

"What the hell is a roving patrol?"

"They're down here from the twenty-third ordnance company," he said. "They drive around the ASP's in jeeps with mounted fifty-cals keeping an eye peeled for the Bader-Meinhof gang. If they find one of them sniffing around, they get to shoot him."

"Ay-ess-pee?"

"What the fuck is this? Fucking twenty questions from an FNG?"

"FNG?"

"You sure do put the new in newbie, new guy," he said. He picked up his shaving kit and towel and pushed through a swinging door into the shower room.

I finished shaving and followed him. There was a bench and some hooks on one wall, and six shower heads sticking out of two perpendicular walls, three facing three. I chose one in the corner, away from the soldier. He finished before I did and left wordlessly. I stood under the shower head letting the water beat down on me. I remembered the silt in the sink and finished up.

I put on my uniform, gave each boot a couple of strokes with a brush and went downstairs with my stack of orders and my 201 file. I found a door marked S-1 ADMINISTRATION, knocked and strolled in.

"Uh-uh, soldier," a female sergeant said. "Halt. One step to the rear. Behind the red stripe." I put my toes on the red line and stood at an approximation of parade rest. She smiled at me when I did so. "Look at this one, everyone. This white boy's a baby. Look at this baby."

All of the soldiers were female in there. And black.

"He's cute," a corporal said.

"Do an about-face," a staff sergeant shouted over at me.

I snapped to attention and performed an about-face.

"You are so new, fucking new guy," the original sergeant said. "Fall out. Come on over here and give me them orders and that 201 file. Let's see what we got here." I did so. The desks all looked like they'd been in place since the Eisenhower administration.

Maybe they had. She flipped open my 201 file and proceeded to share the contents with everyone in the room. "You ready for this, corporal?"

"Share, sergeant, share!"

"This boy got a GT of 156," she said.

"Bullshit! It don't go that high!"

The whole office crowded around the sergeant's desk, looking over her shoulder. They looked down at the file and then back up at me like I'd arrived from Mars.

"I cheated," I said.

"Bullshit! How you cheated?" the corporal went.

"Ancient Chinese secret," I said.

"You ain't Chinese!"

"He got a college degree!" the sergeant said, flipping through my college transcripts.

"Nope," I said. "I dropped out."

"What you doing in my Army? Huh? Answer me that, PFC," the sergeant asked me.

"I love the duds, sergeant," I said. I ran my hands down my uniform.

"Here," the sergeant said, waving a sign-in sheet at me. "Take this fucking thing and get the fuck out of my office."

"Yes, sergeant," I said. I took a step back, snapped to attention and performed an about-face and marched out of the office.

"Fucking smart-ass new guy," I heard the sergeant say.

The first place on the check-off sheet was the battalion headquarters. I had to report to the command sergeant major, who was approximately five-feet-five and two-hundred pounds. He had a croak of a voice, like he'd swallowed many pull-tabs out of beer cans.

"How you doing, private first class?" he asked me.

"Outstanding, sergeant major," I replied.

"I'd be outstanding, too, if I had a perfect fucking GT score," the command sergeant major said. "You a god-damned book-learning motherfucker?"

"I'm a soldier, sergeant major," I said.

"Ain't no place in this Army for a god-damned book-learning motherfucker," the command sergeant major said. "We'll see about you, smart-ass." Up to that moment, I'd never felt unwelcome in the Army. I had a bad feeling. I was an ocean away from home, and suddenly felt it. The command sergeant major initialed my check-in sheet and shoved it back at me. "Go on, GT," he said. "Get on out of here."

Our building had two headquarters in it. We were headquarters and headquarters company 191st ordnance battalion (ammo), HHC 191 Ord Bn for short. I went downstairs to the company headquarters for my second sign-in. I was met by the first sergeant, who insisted I call him by his first name: Gary.

"Call me 'Gary,'" he said after I'd called him first sergeant several times.

"Hi, Gary," I said.

"How's it going, GT?"

"Dandy, Gary."

"Love to hear that," Gary said. He smiled. "Twenty-two years and I'm finally getting out of the Army in another two. I missed the whole hippie era! No free love for Gary! Gary was a baby killer. Nobody fucks the baby killer. Not unless you pay them. And that's not free love, is it?"

"Did they really call you baby killer?" I asked. "I thought that was a myth."

"When I came home from Vietnam, in a Pan Am jet, we landed in Oakland. I looked out the window and saw all these MPs wearing ponchos, but it wasn't raining. Can you guess why they were wearing ponchos?"

"Spitting?"

"Spitting. Started the moment we got off the plane," Gary said. "I did two tours over there as a door gunner in a Huey. It was no fun. Those Vietcong guys were serious. Who would have thought they'd be serious?"

"In hindsight," I said. "I guess just about any reasonable person."

"There you go, GT," Gary said. "You nailed it. 'Reasonable person.' I don't think anyone ever accused LBJ or Nixon of being reasonable." Gary initialed my sign-in sheet. Then he filled in the rest of the boxes for me, scrawling in initials for personnel, medical clinic, etc. "All done," he said. "Go hide in your quarters. Oh, wait..." He erased two, handed the sheet back to me. "You'll want to go to this one. The ed center. Tell them you want a regents. They'll know what you mean, GT. You'll thank me for this one." He

walked me over to the window. I followed. We were looking out on a courtyard. In the middle was a flagpole with Old Glory flapping in the breeze. We were on one end of the horseshoe in our building. He pointed to the other end. "That's where the ed center is. Go through those doors and climb up two flights. Ask for Charlene." He smirked. "If I was twenty years younger..." He leaned against the window sill.

"You'd be getting spat upon, Gary," I said.

He shrugged, sat down in his desk chair and crossed his feet upon his desk blotter, laced his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. "Venture forth into the world, young private."

Charlene was a buxom little blonde with crooked teeth. In the world, she would have been considered somewhat pretty. By Army standards, she was a knockout. "Hi," she said when I came wandering in. "What can I do for you today?" She had a cute little lisp, like Linus in the *Peanuts* cartoons.

"Gary sent me over," I said.

"I love Gary," she said. "He's like so cute."

"Gary reciprocates," I said. "Gary told me that I was to ask you for a regent's."

"How many semester hours of college do you have?"

"One hundred ten," I said.

"So you're only ten shy? Is that counting basic training and your AIT?"

"No," I said.

"Then you're over," she said. "But let's make sure." She pulled out a book and had me sit down across from her. "What's your MOS?"

"Eighty-one-echo," I said.

"What's that?" She wriggled her nose.

"Illustrator," I said.

She flipped through the book. "The AIT for 81E is worth 14 semester hours. You don't even need the four hours from basic training to make it over the top."

Regents College, as it turned out, was a way for soldiers who have semester hours from various institutions to scrape them all into a pile and shape a bachelor's degree out of them. She had me fill out some forms, including letters to the Community College of the

Air Force and my alma mater asking them to send my transcripts to Regents College of New York.

"Is that it?" I asked her.

"That's it," she said. "Congratulations. You'll have a bachelor's degree in six to eight weeks."

So at least that was rectified.

The other block that Gary had left blank was supply. I was directed into the basement where I met the private who had given me my sheets and pillow and blanket. "Everything's in a pile over there," he said, pointing to a mound of TA-50. "When you're done inspecting your equipment, sign here." He shoved a form at me on a clipboard. I dug through it. It was the same pile of worn-out items I'd had in basic training, topped off with a sad steel pot.

He initialed my sign-in sheet. "Gary sign all these off for you, GT?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "Word sure got around quick about that GT score."

"Don't worry about it," the supply clerk said. "Everyone around here calls me 'Socrates,' because they think I think too much."

We shook hands.

"Come down to the weapons room with me," Socrates said. "Gary has a special surprise for you."

We walked down the hallway to the weapons room, which was like a safe in a bank. He opened the huge door and stepped inside. He had me fill out a weapons card, and shoved a .45 caliber M1911 pistol at me, pistol-grip first. "There's your weapon," he said. "Sweet."

I held it out in front of me laid across my two hands like it was a one-pound chocolate bar. We both admired it. "How'd I get this lucky?" I asked him.

"Oh, you're not lucky. You're the assistant M60 gunner. You get to carry the cans of ammo, extra barrel, all that shit. M60 gunners and their assistants get a sidearm just in case they have to defend themselves up close."

"Crap," I went.

"It's only because you're short. What are you? Five-seven?"

"Five-seven-and-a-half," I said.

"The Army thinks it's funny. Big weapon like an M60. Little man. Hilarious," Socrates said without a smile or a chuckle. He was about as tall as I was. Turned out he was the M60 gunner.

Gary had another surprise for me, this one pleasant. I had to go take a German class. Everyone who entered Germany had to take a German class, unless they could prove they could speak German. "Sweet," I said.

"You speak any other languages?" Gary asked.

I thought about lying and saying no, but the son-of-a-bitch had my goddamned college transcripts.

"Not well," I lied.

For two weeks, my job was to learn German. So I learned German. My class was full of tankers from Sullivan Barracks. They amused themselves by punching each other as hard as they could on the arm and by imagining the German teacher naked and the different positions in which they would fuck her, given the chance. She was in her forties, but well-preserved.

By the end of the class, I could speak German reasonably well. The teacher took me aside and said, in German, "You are perhaps different from the rest?"

I said, in English, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Payday and we all stood in formation in our class A uniforms. We lined up for our checks. I opened my envelope and found that I had a check for 0.00. I looked at my paycheck stub. In "Amt. Carried Over" where the Army tossed the change from your check, because they liked to pay you in whole dollars, my entire paycheck had been stashed.

I went to Gary. I showed him the stub.

"Shit," he lied. "I never saw that before. Well, if it's in amount carried over, then it will probably show up in your next check. That'll be a nice big check!"

The roving patrol had moved on, as did the Bader-Meinhof Gang, according to our S-2 (intelligence), who had gotten the word from the S-2 at sixtieth ordnance group, who had gotten the word from G-2 at the twenty-first support command, who had gotten the word from seventh Army headquarters. All this message traffic went on downstairs in the commo room, which was manned by Vince, an Aryan-looking soldier from Connecticut, who was in love with Rosita, a Mexican-American supply clerk who worked

with Socrates. Rosita called Vince, Blondie. "She looks like Pat Benatar," Vince had told me once. She didn't.

The headquarters company was still fleshing itself out. I was the concierge for headquarters company, because it amused Gary to keep me in the temporary room and because no one could figure out what to do with an illustrator in an ordnance battalion, including my immediate boss, the lieutenant who'd given me the ride the first day.

After morning formation, after everyone went to their workspaces, I swept up. I emptied the firetruck-red butt-can out front. I answered the phone, one-ninety-first-ordnance-battalion-may-I-help-you-sir-or-ma'am, and took messages. I called attention when the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Hake, came stumbling in.

He always tripped over the top step. "Good morning, sir!" I'd call out, saluting and opening the door.

He'd snap up a salute and trip, and then go stumbling inside.

I'd shout out: Attention.

He'd say: As you were.

When I ran out of things to do, or Gary ran out of things for me to do, I would sometimes be allowed to go to my desk, which was one floor directly below my quarters. My office had three other people in it, all German civilians who wore fatigue uniforms, called CSG's. The one across from me was the battalion translator. The one to the right of me was the German illustrator. She made organization charts, mostly, all on large pads of butcher paper with magic markers. The one diagonal from me, I had no idea what he did.

Oh, and here's a novel way to quit smoking: Try being so broke that you can only afford to eat at the mess hall. Try being so broke that you can't buy a Mountain Dew out of the pop machine. After three or four weeks of that, you don't mind that you don't have a smoke.

The CSG's pretended to ignore me while they talked smack about me. I pretended that I didn't understand what they were saying.

Now that I could speak German, I was reading *The Theory of Communicative Action* in German with a German-English dictionary on the desk beside me.

Socrates had gone to downtown Mannheim with me, which looked a lot like Cleveland if Cleveland had been founded in the middle ages. We rode the strassenbahn, a street-car. We stopped in a bookstore and I bought the book with Socrates' money. We stopped at an art supply store. "You want to go in?" Socrates asked me.

"Why would I want to do that?" I asked him.

The book was helping to fill in the blank spots in my vocabulary. I had been writing my dissertation on it when I'd dropped out of college. I thought I'd have a better understanding in the original German, that's what my professors had insisted, telling me that I needed to learn German, but I found that I preferred the translation to the original.

On the odd days when I was allowed to sit at my desk, I brought the book with me. It was meant to be a hint to the Germans talking smack about me that perhaps they shouldn't while I was in the room.

Lt. Col. Hake strolled into my office one day. I snapped to attention. The Germans pretended he wasn't there. "Are you the one they call GT?" he asked me.

"Yes, sir," I said.

"I understand you have a degree in philosophy," he said.

"Not yet, sir," I said.

"Not yet?"

"It's supposed to be arriving in the mail in a few weeks, sir."

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said, noticing that I was still at attention. "As you were."

I sat down. The colonel grabbed a chair and slid it up to my desk. "Busy?" he asked me, sitting down.

"No, sir."

"Are you sure? I don't want to take you away from anything important."

"Recreational reading, sir," I said.

He glanced over at the book, shrugged slightly. "Philosophy majors write a whole lot, don't they?"

"Yes, sir."

"Complicated stuff. Weird stuff," he said.

"Yes, sir."

He pulled a folded-up piece of paper from his pocket, unfolded it, and shoved it across my desk at me. "Think you could write something like this?"

I glanced it over. It was an officer evaluation report. "Yes, sir."

"I'm going to need ten of them," he said. "All slightly different. Write them out in long-hand and I'll have my clerk type them up for my signature."

"Yes, sir."

"*Das soll dich beschäftigt halten,*" he said.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

The Germans continued speaking among themselves, oblivious.

Payday formation and we all stood in formation in our class A uniforms. We lined up for our checks. I opened my envelope and found that I had a check for 0.00, again. I looked at my paycheck stub. In "Amt. Carried Over" where the Army tossed the change from your check, because they liked to pay you in whole dollars, two entire paychecks had been stashed.

I went to Gary. I showed him the stub.

"Shit," he said. "I never saw that before. Well, it will probably show up in your next check. That'll be a huge-ass big check!"

Socrates came in while I was writing the OER's and said, "What do they have you doing?"

"Writing OER's," I said.

He shrugged. "Typical," he said.

"I don't know what I'm doing," I said.

"Nobody does. Hey, take a look out the window," Socrates said.

I walked over to the window, placed my hands on the sill and peered out through the filthy glass. I could see the building opposite ours. The flag flapping in the sickly breeze. We were downwind from the BASF plant in Ludwigshaven. It made my nose run. "What am I looking at?"

"Open the window, stick your head out, and look up," he said.

I did so. I saw a pair of boot bottoms. "Who's that up there?" I asked.

"Vince," Vince said.

"How's it going?"

"Terrific," Vince said, swinging his feet.

"You're not thinking of jumping, are you?"

"Not yet," Vince said.

"You sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure."

"Because I'd get in a lot of trouble if you jumped from my quarters," I said. "The Army's funny like that."

"I hadn't thought of that," Vince said.

"You want to go back inside?"

"Sure," Vince said, and the feet slipped back indoors.

I shut the window and sat on the sill facing Socrates. "What was that all about?" I asked him.

"He thinks Rosita is fucking around on him," Socrates said.

"Is she?"

"Yes," Socrates said.

"You want to go get lunch?"

"Sure."

"You know why everyone hates you?" Socrates asked me over lunch at the mess hall, which was the same as always: The leftover potatoes from breakfast, mashed; cube steaks, battered and deep-fried; and a hideously overcooked vegetable, green beans. I picked at a slice of white bread, drank my juice-like product, red.

I pushed the food around on my plate and gave up. "Everyone hates me?"

"You think you're better than everyone else," Socrates said. "That's why."

"Nooooo," I went with false modesty.

"We all know you're smart, but that doesn't make you better."

"It doesn't?"

"No, it doesn't."

"Damn it," I said. "Is that why no one talks to me?"

"Pretty much," Socrates said. "That and you never go clubbing with us."

"I'm not getting paid," I said.

"What's that mean? Is that some sort of smart-guy code for we're a bunch of stiff?"

"It means that the Army literally isn't paying me. They keep sticking my money in the amount carried over box and I get zero dollars paid out."

Socrates whistled at the idea like you would driving past a particularly disturbing car wreck. "Does Gary know?"

"Fuck yeah," I said.

"Well, I guess he'll take care of it."

"I don't think he will. I think he thinks it's funny that I'm not getting paid," I said.

"He would, the cocksucker," Socrates said.

The weather turned cold.

Reagan was reelected.

The command sergeant major came into my office. "Look what PFC GT is doing! Is that illustrator work? Is it?"

I stood up and snapped to parade rest. "No, sergeant major!"

"How would you like to do some illustration work, illustrator?"

"I'd like it, I'd love it, I'd want more of it," I chanted. "Drive on, sergeant major, drive on."

"I got something for your ass, PFC," he said. "Follow me."

"Hoo-rah," I went. I followed him out the door and down the hall to the command suite.

We stood in his office. It was a damn sight better than mine. On his I-love-me wall, he had hung a Legion of Merit certificate in a cheap, plastic Army issue frame, one each.

His furniture appeared to be made of wood, instead of sheet metal. On his desk, a pad of butcher paper with several sheets wadded up and tossed in the wastepaper basket next to it.

"I need you to make me a twenty-sheet briefing for the sixtieth ordnance group sergeant major," the sergeant major croaked.

"Yes, sergeant major," I said, snapping to parade rest again.

Outside, retreat came tootling out of loudspeakers. The command sergeant major ran to the window and shouted down at the two soldiers pulling down the flag, "Don't let that motherfucker touch the ground!" He stood at the window until he was satisfied that they wouldn't. "I got every slide written down here in my notebook," he said. He handed me a green, hardcover notebook, one each.

"Yes, sergeant major," I said.

"Grab your butcher paper and get the fuck out of here," he said. "Briefing's at zero-nine-hundred-hours."

When I got the butcher paper back to the office, the Germans were gone for the day. Right off, I could see the command sergeant major's first mistake. He didn't tear off a sheet of paper and shove it under the sheet he was working on. Magic marker had bled all the way through.

I dug through the German illustrator's desk and found a set of magic markers and a pencil and a t-square and did what I'd been trained to do. I saved the first page for last. It was a freehand drawing of the ordnance corps regimental crest, which consisted of a red belt, circular, inscribed with ORDNANCE CORPS U.S.A, a pair of crossed cannons and the flaming piss pot, a.k.a. the shell and flame.

I was done just in time for the command sergeant major to come walking in. "Didn't see you at morning formation," he said. "Devotion to duty." He studied the front page. "Outstanding," he decided. He flipped through the briefing. "Outstanding," he decided. He took the butcher paper with him and left.

I learned much about our unit from creating the brief and flipping through the CSM's notebook. We were in the rear, supporting V corps units. In wartime, we would supply combat units and then disappear into the woods around D-Day-plus two. After that, it would be our mission to harass incoming communist invaders.

Our units were:

HHC - Mannheim, Taylor Barracks. 40 soldiers.

23rd Ordnance Company - Northpoint (a secure remote site, guarded by MPs and not CSGs, where the soldiers received remote pay). This was our largest company, about 125 soldiers.

26th Ordnance Company - Mannheim, 25 to 30 soldiers.

44th Ordnance Company - Baumholder, 25 to 30 soldiers.

Plus German Civilian Support Group (CSG) units, which actually did the bulk of work for us. After some "liquid bread" for lunch, things could get interesting, noted the CSM in his notebook.

We had a dozen PSPs and ASPs, which dispensed ammunition. They were all close to where the companies were located.

The PSPs contained about 30 magazines (concrete bunkers covered over in grass) each with a King Tut block (a cube of concrete to block the door) in front. Also, a wire loop, like those used by the electric company on the electrical box, was secured by the lock.

On duty nights, soldiers were to drive out to one of the PSPs and flash a light on each magazine, making sure the wire loop was there, and then drive the fence line, making sure there was no fence cutting.

Apparently, we had the occasional fence cutting, ostensibly by the Bader-Meinhof Gang or Red Army Faction, who were always getting caught in nearby Mannheim, noted the CSM with several exclamation points. According to the sergeant major, we never found anyone inside the fence line after a fence cutting. Reading this, I theorized that it was German or even American teenagers who thought it would be great fun to watch the Americans go nuts searching for communist intruders.

My boss, the LT, came in. "I didn't see you at morning PT formation," he said. "Were you at sick call?"

"No, sir," I said. "I actually had work to do."

"You look pleased with yourself," the LT said.

"I guess I am, sir," I said.

We Hump to Please

My paycheck was massive by Army PFC standards. I stood snapping the paper in my hands following formation, staring down at it. Three months without pay had produced a mini-miracle of instant solvency.

"Guess you can get a decent haircut now," Gary said. "Instead of that barracks cut you have."

I'd been using a mustache trimmer I'd been given by Vince after he'd decided that his mustache looked like pigeon shit and shaved it off. I'd traded my ration coupons for smokes, tea and coffee for it, since I couldn't afford those things anyway. Speaking of shaving, I hadn't used a new razor in two months. My face looked like a slab of raw meat.

"Yes, first sergeant," I said.

"The old man wants to meet you," Gary said.

"We have an old man now?" My boss in S-3 had been serving double duty as company commander.

"He reported in last week," Gary said. "We talked about it in formation."

"We did? Which one?" I asked him.

"The one we just had," Gary said. I'd been zoning out a lot in formation. Standing at parade rest had that effect on me. Little vacations. "He'd like to meet you before he pins a medal on you."

"Sure," I said.

"No, seriously. You're getting a medal," Gary said. I noticed that Gary was the same height as I was. I'd assumed he was taller.

"What for?"

"Beats the fuck out of me," Gary said. "Go get a haircut first."

I had to walk over to Benjamin Franklin Village first and deposit my check at the American Exchange bank. I kept one-hundred dollars cash for myself. And treated myself to some German money, too – fifty marks. The German money was cute. All that it needed was the little man in the top hat and a choo-choo and it would be perfect.

I walked back to Taylor Barracks, crossing the little bridge over the Autobahn. I stopped and watched German cars zipping past for a while, most of them Ford Escorts and Mercedes, with a few BMWs scattered in.

At the main gate, I stopped and showed my military ID to the fake German soldier and he waved me in.

The barber shop was in the same building as the mess hall, which was right behind our barracks. Socrates called the barber "Shaky Fritz." He was eighty, or so. His hands shook. And he always finished you off with a straight razor. You could see him in the mirror, hands shaking, coming at you with that razor.

When I entered the barber shop, I found Shaky Fritz coming after Lt. Col. Hake with a straight razor. My battalion commander had fallen asleep in the chair, head tilted helpfully forward, snoring lightly. I'd somehow managed to finish all of the OER's he'd assigned to me, one for every officer in the battalion, but I'd forgotten about turning them in to him. One bad OER could ruin an officer's career.

I sat down in a chair and watched Shaky Fritz scalp the good lieutenant colonel. The haircut he'd given him was reminiscent of the 1920's. I liked it, but I doubted the colonel would. Shaky Fritz finished, dusted the colonel off, massaged some tonic into his hair, woke him up. The colonel looked at himself in the mirror, a little shocked. He paid Shaky Fritz and staggered out the door without even glancing in my direction. "Hubba," he muttered on his way out, I think.

It was my turn. I plopped myself in the chair and said, "*Mich geben, was du ihm gabst.*"

"*Sehr gut,*" he replied.

The barber shop looked like it had been around since the 1920's. "*Erinnerst du dich an die Weimar Republik?*"

"*Was ist die Weimar Republik?*" he replied.

The blue jars filled with black combs, the ancient barber chairs, two each, the ring-a-ding cash register, the bay rum on the back of my neck after the snikking of the straight razor — it was neat-o, cool-o. At the end of the session, I looked like Morrissey.

"Sweet," I said. I handed him a ten and told him to keep the change. I straightened my tie in the mirror by the door, smoothed out my class A jacket. "Cold steel," I said to my reflection, attempting to describe the noumenon, the *ding an sich*, I was observing in the mirror, in a moment of apparent Platonic dualism. "I'm all over the map," I told Shaky Fritz.

"*Tag!*" Shaky Fritz replied.

I left. Money. Money in the pocket. Sweet, sweet money. We didn't have much in my house growing up, I never had any in college, so this was, perhaps, the richest I'd ever been, save for the two or three moments once a semester after my National Merit Scholarship check showed up in the mailbox. Then, poof, off to tuition it went, never to be

seen again. My mother, I thought of her for a moment, scrubbing out rich people's houses, and me playing in the backyard with their spoiled kids.

She wanted me to be a doctor, that mother of mine, and I tried it out, too. I was pre-med for all of two days. On my final day of pre-med, all of us pre-med kids were filed into a room and made to watch a schmaltzy film about a dying patient and the valiant doctors who were trying to save her life. The lights turned up suddenly at the climax of the film, when it was apparent that the noble patient would die. *Que será, será*. The professor at the front of the room said, "If you have dry eyes, you should not be a doctor."

I turned to the guy next to me to make a snarky remark, but he was crying. As was the girl on the other side of me. As were all the students in front of me. I turned and turned and found no one who shared my lack of sentiment. I shrugged. I left the room alone. I changed my major to philosophy. Three-and-three-quarter years later, I dropped out and became a PFC in the Army.

Das Ende.

Or, perhaps, not quite the end. On my way up to the company CO's office, I was stopped by Rainier, the company postal clerk. She handed me a cardboard tube stamped REGENTS COLLEGE. I took it to my quarters, which I was currently sharing with one other soldier, a nervous truck driver who had transferred in from South Korea two nights before and who woke up in the middle of the night both nights since he'd been in the room with me shouting, "Sappers!" I popped open the end of the tube and extracted a yellow sheet of paper that announced me as the recipient of a Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy. I rolled the piece of paper back up into the tube, unlocked my wall locker, and tossed the tube inside.

Jetzt war es das Ende.

"What'd you get?" Rainier asked me out in the hall. She was five-two and cute as a button.

"A present," I said.

What I didn't know at that moment was that she already knew what I'd gotten. She'd been opening every piece of mail that came into our unit ever since she'd reported in, panning for cash and checks. Soon enough Johnny Law, in the form of Army CID, would catch up with her.

But I'm getting far ahead of myself.

I could hear the TV blasting in the dayroom, the shrill barks of canned laughter, then cut to a commercial jingle, "I'm U.S. Army Europe, and I'm working for Uncle Sam! Yes, I'm U.S. Army Europe, and you know I give a damn!"

"Do you give a damn?" I asked Rainier.

"Huh?" she went. She smiled at me, all apple cheeks and driven-snow purity, Shirley Temple ringlets springing from her scalp.

"Have you met this new CO?" I asked her.

"He seems all right," she said.

"That's good enough for me," I said. "How about a night on the town?"

"Tonight? Sure!" she said.

A butterbar was wandering the hallway, an olive drab map case slung over his shoulder, smiling like a lunatic. Down at the end of the hallway, by the CO's office, a soldier was manning a buffer. Wub, wub, wub. I skipped out of her way just as she slammed it into the wall. Thud. The tiles were not meant to be waxed and buffed, they were supposed to be dull, but the Army did not care. The CO stuck his head out of his door. "Careful!" he advised.

"Yes, sir," the soldier said. And she slammed the buffer into the opposite wall.

I knocked on the open door. The CO looked up.

"Permission to enter and speak?" I asked him.

"Granted," he said.

I stood in front of his desk, saluting.

He snapped off a quick salute. "Sit," he said.

I sat.

He squinted at my name tape. "Yes," he went. "You're due for a promotion to Spec-4."

"Already, sir?"

"It was in your contract when you signed up. Didn't you read it?"

"No, sir."

"That's not very bright, is it?"

"No, sir."

He showed some teeth. I think it was supposed to be a gotcha-there smile. "Oh, and then there's the matter of your AAM."

"AAM, sir?"

"Army Achievement Medal," the captain said. His tightly shorn scalp gleamed. "We'll have a special formation this morning to pin it on you. You may want to put a spit shine on those low quarters before then."

"Yes, sir."

"Anything else?" he asked. He clucked his tongue. "Oh, right," he answered. "You're going to be the colonel's driver for the next month. Enjoy."

"Yes, sir."

"That will be all," the captain said.

I stood up and saluted him. He snapped off another salute. I performed an about-face and left the room.

"Watch out, cheese-eater," the soldier on the buffer said. I leapt over her buffer as she swung it toward me.

"Andrea," I said to her.

"Yes?" she went. She stopped the buffer and stood staring at me impatiently. "Well?"

"Never fucking mind," I said.

"Same to you," she said.

I went to my quarters. A new guy was in there dumping all his shit out of his duffel bag. "How's it going?" I asked him.

"I'm in this shithole and you have the fucking nerve to ask me that question?" he said.

I took off my class A jacket and hung it up in my wall locker. I dug around in there and found my nearly depleted can of Kiwi Black and popped the lid off. I took off my low quarters. I dug out a bottle of water that I kept in the mini-fridge and filled the lid of the can. I pulled out my nearly depleted bag of cotton balls that I'd had since basic training and worked on my low quarters.

"Middle of the work day and you're sitting there spit-shining your fucking shoes," the new guy said. He was wearing mosquito wings, a private second class. He had on a wrinkled uniform he'd found in his duffel bag.

"Better not let Gary see you looking rag-bag," I said.

"It's that kind of unit, is it? All spit shines and creases?"

"It's that kind of unit," I said.

"Who's Gary?"

"The Top," I said.

"Fuck *me*. You get to call him Gary?"

"Go shake his hand," I said. "He'll tell you all about it."

He was a corn-fed-looking motherfucker, the new guy. "I'll leave you to your shamming," he said. He left.

An hour later, we were all in formation. First, there was a quick change-of-command ceremony. The unit guidon was passed from the LT to Gary to the new CO. The new CO gave us a quickie rah-rah-I-love-the-Army speech. Then I got my new hardware slapped on. *Attention to orders*. The AAM was for the briefing I'd created for the command sergeant major, I found out.

Afterward, everyone was obligated to walk up and shake my hand. Most of them smiled at me like they would like to drive a bayonet through my sternum, which was oddly satisfying.

I changed into civvies after the formation. I had the privilege of taking my class A jacket over to the tailor shop and having my sham shield sewn on, a new member of the Spec-Four Mafia. It was my finest day in the United States Army, the pinnacle of my career.

I swung by the PX. Even though I'd been in country for months, it was my first trip there. I flipped through the records and was pleasantly surprised to find the Replacements' new album *Let It Be*. I bought some going out clothes, sparkly pants and a shiny blue shirt that was a size too big for me. I bought a proper winter coat. I bought an all-in-one stereo.

I bought the Maid Marion at the Robin Hood sandwich shop and ate it sitting on the curb outside the PX, my swag next to me.

Rainier pulled up driving her dayglo orange BMW. "How's it going?" she asked me.

"Dandy," I said.

"Looks like you spent all your money already," she said.

"It may look that way, but I still have plenty to blow," I said.

A Dodge minivan honked behind her. "You need a ride?"

"Yes, I do," I said.

I piled all my stuff in her trunk and hopped in the passenger side.

Rainier helped me hump all my crap up to my quarters. She had to announce, coming on to our floor, "Female on the floor!" just in case anyone had his cock hanging out. I hooked up the stereo and put on the Replacements. She sat down on my rack. Paul Westerberg sang, "I Will Dare." I felt her up. I kissed her. She giggled.

Dour mosquito-wings-private-douche-bag came back from chow, barged in and spoiled the mood.

"See you tonight," she sang, getting up to leave.

"See you," I said.

"What's that crap on the stereo?" the private asked.

Rainier drove. As day turned to night, the omnipresent drizzle became flurries lit by on-rushing headlights. We passed by Mannheim's famous Wasserturm, which looked more like a squat castle than a watertower.

Mannheim is not what I'd call charming. It's dark and heavy, a rocky slab of a town. At night, with the snow, it seemed more so. Like Indianapolis, it is laid out on a grid. The allies bombed the fuck out of it during the war, so a lot of it was rebuilt in the 1950's in the Socialist Modern Cardboard Box style. And because it was an industrial center, it was filled with commies.

"Relax, don't do it," the radio suggested. Then it went, boop-boop-boop-beeeeep. "It's eight o'clock in Central Europe. Time now for the news from Armed Forces Radio Network." A spec-four blathered on about Band-Aid and about how NASA crashed a plane on purpose just to see what would happen.

"Don't you have any tapes?" I asked Rainier.

"I thought smart guys like you were interested in the news," Rainier said.

"Nope," I said.

"Sorry," she said. "We're almost there."

We circled around a block twice looking for parking. A Ford Escort was getting towed for parking on a jagged line. Eventually we found a spot. Rainier led me down an alleyway. Underneath a tailor shop, down in the cellar, we arrived at Club Genesis. The brick walls were painted black. The dance floor was about sixteen feet square, with

spinning lights and a DJ tucked in the back corner. "Blue Monday" by New Order was blasting out of the speakers. Whenever I hear New Order now, I think of Germany.

We went to the bar and ordered Mannheim's local brew, Eichbaum, probably the worst beer in Germany.

"I gotta wee," Rainier said. She handed me her beer and toddled off.

"Who's your little girl?" a German asked me in English.

"*Es ist nicht dein Interesse,*" I said.

He swished away.

She came back a few minutes later with a couple of tablets clutched in her fist. She placed one in my hand. "Go ahead," she said.

I popped it into my mouth and swallowed it down with my beer. I belched and placed the plastic cup on the ground. She did the same thing. I took her hand and led her onto the dance floor.

Fifteen minutes later, by my count, I was being escorted out of the building by a large German guiding me with a not-so-gentle hand in the middle of my back. I was covered over in sticky sweat. "Don't come back," the bruiser said. "Ever."

Rainier emerged from the club a few minutes later. "We should be getting back anyway," she said. She checked her watch. "Zero-two-hundred hours," she said.

The snow was accumulating. I slipped on a cobblestone but managed to remain upright. "Whoa-ho," I went. The sweat was freezing on my back. I hadn't brought my new coat. "Give me a huggy-poo," I said.

We crawled into the back seat of her BMW and felt each other up. It was too cold.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry," she said. She climbed into the driver's seat and started the car up. She gunned it through the city and back out onto the B-bahn. We zoomed back to the barracks.

We came in past the CQ desk. No one was there. We ran hand-in-hand up the stairs giggling to my quarters. I dropped my keys. I opened the door. My two roomies were snoozing.

"Shhh!" I went.

We quietly took off all our clothes and nestled into the rack. I remember snapping on an Army issue prophylactic. I remember her being on top of me, and then me on top of her. We fell asleep.

Bang, bang, bang, on the door. "Alert lariat in advance!" I heard someone shout.

"Alert what? What the hell is that?" I asked her.

"Did we do it?" Rainier asked me.

"Alert lariat in advance?" I asked her. "Did I hear that right?"

Lt. Col. Hakes was wandering around the halls in his pajamas, slippers, bathrobe. Someone had gone to his quarters to get him and he'd hopped right on into the vehicle without a thought. He didn't have a uniform in his office. "Tremendous!" he said when he spotted me.

The MOPP level was zero, so we didn't have to wear our chemical suits. I had on my TA-50 for the first time since coming to Germany and was clinking around in full battle-rattle. I had to scrape around in my memories of basic training to figure out how to assemble it all. I was still a little weirded out. The floors were buckling and the ceilings bowing down toward my noggin. "Look at me, sir," I said to the good colonel. "I'm a soldier." I smelled like pissed-on cigarettes, sweat and sex.

"Draw your weapon," Gary barked, skipping past us.

"Can do, Top," I said. I pointed at him, winked and clicked my tongue.

"I'll go down with you," Lt. Col. Hakes said. It was all a grand adventure.

Rainier had decamped to the female floor. She departed seeming a bit pissed off, like I'd taken advantage of her. Maybe I had.

We trotted down the stairs. "What happens next, sir?"

He produced a pipe from his bathrobe pocket. "I have my pipe!" He clutched it in his teeth. "Marvelous!"

At the bottom of the stairs, my heightened consciousness produced a swastika carved into the black, wrought-iron handrail. I stopped. The colonel stopped with me. "Is that a swastika?" I thumb-rubbed it.

"It sure is," the colonel said. "Wait! I forgot something." He trotted back up the stairs. A few minutes later, he came back down wearing his helmet, alic gear and a pair of Mickey Mouse boots. "How do I look?" he asked, pipe still in teeth.

"Like you escaped from the looney bin, sir," I said.

"Brilliant!"

We descended into the basement. It was a slow-motion beehive down there. Soldiers were drawing weapons. Soldiers formed a human chain to the basement door and up the steps outside to load MRE's into a deuce-and-a-half, which whirred its diesel engine.

"Which side is the summer side and which side is the winter side?" a confused soldier asked us. She was attempting to roll up some camouflage netting. She looked up and saw the colonel and kind of freaked out. "Eeee!" she went. She looked around frantically for a place to hide. "Eeee!" she went again, not finding one.

"Are we going to the field, sir?" I asked.

"Theoretically," he said. "If seventh Army doesn't call off the alert."

"Make way for the colonel!" I shouted.

"Make a hole, make it wide!" a sergeant shouted.

Everyone pressed themselves against the walls. The colonel and I walked through them, drew our weapons from Socrates, and left the basement. The colonel stopped on the top step. "Carry on!" he shouted.

I twirled my .45 in my index finger.

"You're my driver, right?" the colonel asked.

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Better drive me back to my quarters so I can get dressed," he said.

We walked down to the motor pool. I signed for the keys to the colonel's vehicle, a modified Chevy Blazer called a CUCVEE. It was painted olive drab. The seats were maroon.

All over Taylor Barracks, units were packing up to go out to the field. "It's all so soldierly," the colonel said as we drove past. He leaned his head on the passenger side window and appeared to pass out. The snow drifted down and blew in tight whorls.

I drove through Benjamin Franklin Village. In the quiet pre-dawn, house lights glowed. It could have been any shitty little development anywhere in America. I missed my country for a moment. It passed.

"Turn left here," the colonel said, sitting up. We entered senior officers' quarters. The houses weren't bad. "Here it is, up here."

I pulled into his driveway and killed the engine. "Come on inside with me," the colonel said. "It's time for morning inspection."

I thought he meant me. Turned out, he meant his kids. His Army-issue wife, one each, said hi to me and handed me a cup of coffee. "Cream? Sugar?" she asked, her hair up in rollers.

"No thank you, ma'am," I said.

"Come along, come along," the colonel said. We went upstairs to the bedrooms. "Call attention for me."

"Atten-SHUN!" I shouted.

His three kids were in their rooms, standing at attention next to their beds. Their shoes were lined up under the beds, toes touching an imaginary line. Hospital corners. The colonel inspected for dust on the dressers. "Super!" he concluded.

He sent me downstairs while he got dressed.

I sat with his wife at the kitchen table. "You're the smart soldier, right?" she asked me.

"Yes, ma'am," I said. I finished my coffee and set the cup on the table.

"No modesty," she concluded.

"No, ma'am."

The kids came down and sat around the table with us. She served them each a bowl of cold cereal.

"Your dad really makes you stand inspection?"

"Once a week," the oldest one said.

"I'm sorry," the wife said. "Would you like some breakfast, too?"

"No thank you, ma'am." I was transitioning from funhouse to queasy.

"Let's go, soldier," the colonel said, standing in the doorway. He was in uniform, his helmet cocked on his head like he was John Wayne. He placed the pipe back in his teeth and posed hands-on-hips.

"Oh my!" his wife said. "Don't you look like a soldier? Look at your father, kids."

The kids all admired their father wordlessly for three beats, then continued eating their cereal.

By the time we got back to the barracks, the alert had been called off.

Lt. Col. Hakes needed to visit the 44th ordnance company, one of our subordinate units, up in Baumholder. He assured me he knew the way.

"The snow on the ground makes it confusing," he told me after we got lost. I drove us around in circles and eventually found a sign pointing us toward Baumholder. I followed the signs. "Once we get there, I'll know my way around," he assured me. Baumholder is up on the top of a hill. Up and up we went. I followed the signs to Smith Barracks. I almost drove past the 44th ordnance company. The sign out front was not a standard, Army issue sign, brown with white lettering. This one was handmade. It featured a camel with two artillery shells instead of humps, "We Hump to Please" stenciled underneath. Somewhere on the sign 44 ORD CO was written.

"That was a lousy sign," Lt. Col. Hakes said.

While the colonel met with the company commander in his office, I sat out in the hallway watching a spec-four work a buffer. "How's it going?" I asked him when he got closer.

"Outstanding," the spec-four said. He stopped the buffer. "This is exactly what my recruiter promised me I'd be doing for the next four years. You smoke?" He scissored his index and middle fingers at me.

"Gave it up," I said. I crossed my legs.

"Bummer," he said. He continued buffing the floors.

"Hey, spec-four," the 44th's company clerk went.

"Yes?" I said. I stood up just in time to almost be sideswiped by the buffer. I leapt over it as it whacked into the chair I'd been sitting in.

"Your colonel is ready to depart," the company clerk said.

"Outstanding," I said.

The colonel insisted that I eat at the mess hall while he shopped at the PX. The mess hall looked just like our mess hall back at Taylor Barracks. The chow was the same as our chow back at Taylor Barracks.

I picked the colonel up at the PX. He had a bag tucked under his arm. In the vehicle, he showed me what it was. "It's a Baumholder t-shirt!" he said. "I need a nap." He tilted his head back and fell asleep.

On the autobahn, I fell asleep at the wheel. I woke up in time to see a sign—STAU—and a line of cars. I slammed on the brakes. The colonel snapped awake in time to experience the terror of near-death.

"You almost killed us!" the colonel shouted like it was the most awesome thing ever. The CUCVEE skidded sideways and came to a halt.

An hour after we got back, I was informed by Gary that I would no longer be the colonel's driver.

In my quarters, I found yet another new private. About five minutes after meeting him, I concluded he was a CID agent.

"Why would a CID agent come to our little unit?" I asked. I didn't expect him to answer. I was wondering out loud, mostly.

He fake-laughed, teeth a-grit, at the thought that he could possibly be a CID agent. His pupils were as big as iron skillet, looking down and to the right. "I wouldn't go spreading rumors around," he said.

"I wouldn't dream of it, Mr. CID Agent," I said.

A week later, Mr. CID Agent revealed himself to be a CID agent and, along with a few colleagues wearing MP brassards, arrested Rainier.

She became our company's responsibility. She went unguarded. At zero-two-hundred hours, she slipped into S-1 ADMINISTRATION, typed herself leave papers and forged a signature and drove her dayglo orange BMW to Rhein Mein Air Force Base to catch a MAC flight back to CONUS, where she would presumably have gone on the lam.

MAC flights are free to military personnel. You'd think that she could have spent her ill-gotten money on a plane ticket.

The zoomie at the ticket counter typed her name into the computer and, *alakazam*, discovered that she was being court-martialed. The zoomie smiled warmly at little Rainier and asked her to take a seat in the lounge. A few minutes later, MP's showed up to escort her back to our unit.

As the only two enlisted personnel in our company issued side arms—everyone else had unwieldy M16A1 rifles—Socrates and I were put on 12-hour guard shifts. Socrates took the midnight to noon shift and I took the noon to midnight.

Her window was barred shut, all implements of self-destruction were removed, down to her bootlaces. I sat outside her door until she was aroused by reveille. I sat outside the female latrine while she pissed and shitted and took her shower. I accompanied her to morning chow. Shit on a shingle. Then it was on over to her court-martial. Two days in and she had been convicted and sentenced to a reduction to E-1, a fine of \$1,500 and three years hard labor at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas—and a bad conduct discharge, the dreaded BCD.

The morning after her conviction, she attempted to seduce me outside the female latrine. No one else was around.

"I'm afraid that ship has sailed," I told her. "But thank you."

"Oh," she said, and picked up her towel.

On our way over to morning chow, she asked me what I would do if she ran for it.

"Ran for it?" I went.

"Yeah," she said. "I mean, what would you do if I just took off?"

"I'd shoot you," I said.

"No you wouldn't," she said.

"Oh, I would," I said.

"I could turn you in," she said.

"For?"

"For taking drugs," she said. "You'd pop positive for that pill I gave you on any drug test."

"I doubt it," I said. "I'll tell you what. How about I shoot you right now?" I removed the pistol from the holster, cocked it and clicked off the safety.

"What?" Her cuteness melted away like butterscotch ice cream. *Tra-la-fucking-la.*

"Run," I said. "Go on. Trot away. I'll wing you."

"You wouldn't," she said. She stopped. Fear.

I aimed the weapon at her, center mass, as I had been trained to do. Then I lowered it.

"Maybe I could blow off an appendage," I said. I was very calm. Not shaky at all. And I meant it, too. I was seriously considering blasting off one of her legs at the knee. The left one. "You wouldn't have to go to Leavenworth. You could go to Walter Reed instead. It's only painful for a moment, until you black out."

"No!" she shrieked.

"Fine," I said. I placed the weapon on safe and holstered it. "Your call."

She didn't eat much at the mess hall. Didn't say a word either. It was a pleasant change of pace. I walked her back to the barracks. She didn't make a peep and slipped meekly into her quarters. I sat outside her quarters in a chair, one each, staring off into space, enjoying the level expanse of my interiority.

Near the end of my shift, a couple of MPs brought some orders and relieved me of my charge. "You better watch her," I said, confidentially, hand bladed to mouth. "She's already escaped once."

"We know," the younger MP said.

The older one smirked. "Heh, heh," he went.

I met Socrates halfway down the corridor. "I guess we get to turn these weapons in," I said. "The MPs came for her."

"What a shame," Socrates said, taking the loaded weapon out and caressing it. "I was just getting used to mine."

Fake War

After morning formation, filthy snowflakes whirling around our ankles, Socrates and I were volunteered to participate in REFORGER, a dress rehearsal for World War III. "You, and you," the first sergeant said, pointing at us. "This is a job for assholes," he explained. He said that only assholes volunteer for anything and that, this being an all-volunteer Army, we were all, therefore, assholes.

"I applaud your logic, Top," I said.

"Don't come crying to me if you don't get your supplies," Socrates said.

"What about you?" Gary asked me. "Any empty threats?"

I pretended to think for a moment. I thumbed the underside of my chin. "I got nothing," I said. I was intrigued by the prospect of participating in full-scale fake war. I hadn't played army much since coming into the Army. Though it would take me away from my daily lucubrations. Or so I thought.

The S-1 sergeant handed us our TDY orders to Rhein Ordnance Barracks, ROB, near Kaiserslautern, K-town, while we were standing out in the snow.

"I hate that fucking Gary," Socrates said staring at his orders as if he could will them into non-existence. I shrugged. "Yeah. You would shrug, wouldn't you?"

We went down to the basement and drew our weapons, twin M1911 pistols, minus any ammunition. We had yet to fire our joint weapon, the M60 machine gun. I had yet to touch it.

"Tomorrow's Christmas," Socrates said to me, locking up the arms room.

"I didn't get you anything," I said. "Sorry."

"I got *you* something," he said. He reached into his cargo pocket and produced a cigarette with a tiny red bow around the filter. "Just in case you want to take up the habit again."

"My, how thoughtful," I said. I put it in my breast pocket next to my black Skilcraft-U.S. Government pen. No soldier is complete without a pen to sign a form that may be shoved his way.

"You know why no one likes you?" Socrates asked me.

"Enlighten me," I said.

"You're not sufficiently grateful for the little gifts that come your way," Socrates said.

"Noted," I said.

We went upstairs to our respective quarters. I was currently sharing mine with a sergeant who insisted I call him Ranger, even though he'd never been a ranger. He didn't even have jump wings. He was a drunk who carried with him a sickly sweet scent reminiscent of a rotting nectarine. "How's tricks, specialist?" he asked me when I barged in on him. He had raided the Class VI store, apparently. Arrayed in front of him were four varieties of schnapps. "Just trying to get the lay of the land," he said. He made an excessive display of arranging the bottles like they were chess pieces.

I put on my battle rattle.

"You going to war?" Ranger asked.

"Sort of, sergeant," I said. "Reforger."

"Oh, *Reforger*," he said. He sipped daintily out of the peppermint schnapps bottle and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. He was shirtless and displaying a blue-capillaried roll of fat that couldn't have been within Army fitness standards.

Socrates knocked on the door.

"Enter!" Ranger shouted. Socrates entered wearing his battle rattle. Ranger studied Socrates for a moment. "You going to war, specialist?" he asked him. Socrates had been promoted to Spec-4 a week after I had been.

"Sort of, sergeant," Socrates said. "Reforger."

"Whiskey Tango Foxtrot," Ranger said. "Is there an echo in here?"

We left him to his drinking and walked down to the motor pool carrying our A bag and B bag. The snow was accumulating into seeping drifts of dark slush.

"You know what I like about Germany?" Socrates asked me.

"No, what?"

"Nothing."

You know what I liked about Germany? *Everything*.

"You have any family back stateside?" Socrates asked. It was the most personal question he'd ever put to me.

"Sure," I said.

“Like who?”

We were chugging along in his assigned vehicle, a CUCVEE.

“A mother,” I said. “My father took off when I was two. The rumor was that he up and joined the Army. Why?”

“Just wondering,” Socrates said. “Figured you’d hatched from an egg in a lab somewhere.”

“I think this is our *Ausfahrt*,” Socrates said.

“You’re the one driving,” I said.

Ramstein Air Force Base was off to the right somewhere. ROB was to the left. We were to report to a fictional command, made up just for the exercise, called MACG, Military Assistance Command Germany.

Socrates exited the autobahn. We went through a gate manned by fake German soldiers, CSGs. They waved us through. “Give me one hundred thousand men just like those two and our problems with the Soviets would soon be over,” Socrates said.

The hippy-looking fake soldiers waved happily at us.

“Nazis,” Socrates said.

We reported in to Headquarters Company and were informed, by an annoyingly domineering company clerk, that we belonged to Sergeant First Class Clean, which wasn’t his real name. He suffered from *alopecia universalis*.

“Yeah, yeah, take a good look, you motherfuckers,” he told us when we got there. He took off his helmet, bowed down so we could get a good look. He stood up straight, put his helmet back on. “Agent fucking orange. Any questions? No? Good.”

He put us to work erecting GP small tents. We had two weeks to put up one hundred of them, a small tent city, to house elements of the thirty-third infantry brigade, separate, of the New York Army National Guard. Their job would be to protect MACG in case of fake Soviet attack, which we were expecting during the second week of the fake war in about a month.

So we constructed tents. The first one we erected for ourselves, slamming stakes into the frozen ground using a sledgehammer. The living space inside was about the same as a two-man quarters. We tossed our A bag and B bag in. Sergeant Clean gave us a stove, coal-burning, and two cots, one each, which we had to sign for.

A field PX opened a few days after we arrived. A crabby woman sold us chocolate bars. MACG's public affairs office opened and soon churned out a mimeographed eight-and-a-half-by-eleven sheet of paper called, MACG OBSERVER. A spec-four female came around to interview us a week after the paper opened. We were taking a break from beating stakes into frozen ground.

"What's so interesting about us?" Socrates asked her.

"Um," she went.

"Officers," I said. "That's where the flavor is."

"Flavor?" she went.

"Eating of the cheese. Cheese-eating," Socrates said.

"Very funny," she said. She took a hint and left.

"We could have been famous," I said. "And you had to ruin it all."

"John Wayne famous," Socrates said. "Buzz Aldrin famous."

We came up with a comedy bit during our tent building days. We would each pretend to be a sports commentator during the King Cola Drive-By Shooting of the Day brought to you by King Cola, the royalty of colas. Socrates was Al and I was Newt.

"Here comes the car," Al went in his AFRTS voice.

"Looks like a 1970 Plymouth Road Runner," Newt said.

"A classic of Detroit engineering, Al."

"I couldn't agree with you more, Newt. Look at all that chrome."

"And the metallic purple paint job. Ooo, la, la!"

"The window is rolling down, Newt. What's that I see?"

"Al, I believe that's a pump-action Remington 870."

"A beautiful piece of killing machinery, Newt."

"I couldn't agree more, Al. The victim is standing on the street corner completely unaware."

"That's testimony to the professionalism of the driver, Newt. Don't try this at home! Ha, ha!"

"Indeed!"

"And here comes the shot!"

"What a beautiful blast! And the car speeds away!"

"Let's see that again in slow motion."

"That's a nice tight shot pattern, Al. I'd have to give it a five point four."

"Let's see what our judges have to say. The judge from Guatemala gives it a five point two. The judge from South Africa gives it a five point seven. And the American judge gives it a perfect six!"

"That's a five point six three."

"Best score we've seen this year."

"When you think of senseless killing, think of King Cola, the royalty of colas. Have a refreshing one today!"

"We'll be right back."

The exercise was ramping up. All day, cargo planes drifted in across the street, one after another, nose to tail, seemingly.

The National Guardsmen showed up two days before the official beginning of the exercise, transported from Ramstein AFB by Mercedes-Benz buses. They all wore old fatigue uniforms and steel pot helmets. They slapped each other on the arm and called each other by their first names. They were from upstate New York and were happy for the work now that manufacturing jobs had dried up. They moved into their tents. What an adventure! They were pleasant to be around.

ROB was a huge POMCUS site. Rows and rows of unused equipment sat rusting in the drab German winter. The National Guardsmen went over to look at it and to wolf-whistle at all the equipment they could not requisition.

"Jeez, Ted, what we could do with those armored personnel carriers back in New York. Slap a plow on the front and you could clear every street in town. Easy."

"Darn it, Jim. Don't tease me."

Water buffaloes were brought in bearing potable water and water for bathing. I took my first shower in two weeks. It felt pretty good, even though I was outside in the 30-de-

gree-F weather. AAFES set up a portable laundromat and I could finally wash my uniforms, which reeked like rotten grass clippings. At a field barbershop, I got a quick haircut.

The exercise finally began and the National Guardsmen left on foot, marching toward Objective Jackson as per their OPLAN.

"They have an objective," Socrates said. "I'm jealous."

"Do we finally get a day off?" I asked Sergeant Clean.

"Fuck no," Sergeant Clean said. "Get in the back of that deuce-and-a-half. We got places to go, people to see."

We had the entire back of the deuce to ourselves. Sergeant Clean drove jerkily up on the autobahn past miles-long convoys of military vehicles filled with soldiers, all creeping haltingly along. A-10 warthogs leadenly hot-dogged through gray-dead skies. Helicopters pattered. I saw one dangling a palette of ammo at the end of a long cable, another carrying a jeep.

"I didn't know there were this many soldiers in the Army," Socrates said. We sat Indian style in the back, facing out, our helmets off. "You still have that smoke I gave you for Christmas?"

I pulled it out of my pocket. It was miraculously intact, though no longer in mint condition. "Here you go, buddy," I said.

"Thanks, pal," he said. He lit it up and smoked it to the filter. "Tastes like Dial soap." He flicked the filter out onto the autobahn.

Our objective turned out to be a warehouse in K-town. We hopped out of the back of the deuce, touched our toes. Ran in place. We were under orders from no less a personage than CINCEUR to procure 100 floatation devices for a brigade river crossing exercise.

"Only 100?" I asked Sergeant Clean. A brigade consists of about 3,000 soldiers.

"Hey, at ease your shit, *specialist*," he said. "I'm under orders. I do what I'm told."

"Yes, sergeant," I said.

The warehouse was post-World War II vintage. So were the floatation devices. Both were musty and olive drab. Both looked like they hadn't been touched since Elvis was rocking it with the 2nd AD.

The floatation devices consisted of two foam rubber sponges wrapped in thin cotton olive drab fabric with canvas belts. They didn't look like they could keep a 160 pound man afloat, much less a 160 pound man wearing 70 pounds of Army equipment.

We tossed 100 in the back of the deuce anyway. We were under orders.

I thought I saw a bat fly out of the warehouse. I may have been mistaken.

An hour or two later, we made it to the site of the river crossing. The brigade had been waiting on us. They were Regular Army, so their shit was tight. They were going to cross a pontoon bridge that engineers had constructed for them. The Rhein was glossy with oil.

“Strac-looking motherfuckers, aren’t they?” Sergeant Clean went.

We tossed each of them a floatation device. They each popped it over their head, but the canvas straps were too short to fit over all their equipment, so they didn’t even have them secured.

“CINCEUR said to wear them,” their colonel said. “So they’re wearing ‘em.”

“Yes, sir,” Sergeant Clean said.

“Better get your ass to the other side,” the colonel suggested.

“Yes, sir,” Sergeant Clean said.

After we gave out the last floatation device, we crossed on a real bridge and drove over to where the troopers were congregating. They threw their devices into the back of our truck as they marched past. “Smells like grandma’s attic,” a sergeant major said. “How’s it going, Clean?”

“If it was going any better, I’d have to be twins, sergeant major,” Sergeant Clean replied.

When the truck seemed full, we drove back. I closed my eyes and mentally counted 82 floatation devices.

We repeated the process over and over. Thirty-two times, actually. And each time we had fewer devices.

“It may be my imagination...” Sergeant Clean started. He stared at me. “C’mon, egghead. I know you’ve been counting.”

“Seventy-two,” I said. “A loss of 28.”

“Fuck me, I signed for these fucking sad-ass pieces of shit,” Sergeant Clean said. “Hey you! Trooper!” A PFC came running up.

“Yes, sergeant!” he shouted. Infantry has high discipline – when you’re looking directly at them.

“Where are my fucking floatation devices, you fuck?” he asked, almost courteously.

"Um," went the private.

"Don't you fucking lie to me, boy. I know your motherfucking sergeant major. We killed many gooks together back in the happy days," Sergeant Clean said.

"Some soldiers think they'll make fine pillows. For the field," the private went. "Not me, though, sergeant."

"*Not me though, sergeant,*" Sergeant Clean whined back at him. "Get the fuck out of my face."

The private ran away.

"Fucking soldiers," Sergeant Clean muttered.

*Sixty-eight Guns will never die
Sixty-eight Guns our battle cry
Sixty-eight Guns will never die
Sixty-eight Guns our battle cry*

We sang all the way back to ROB.

The National Guardsmen hadn't yet returned, but we were due to be aggressed by fake Soviet troops, so I was drafted into a quick reaction force. I was paired with a large, lumpen sergeant named Craven, whose main job seemed to be making barbecue for senior staff and studying for his GED.

"What's your MOS?" he asked me, first thing.

"Eighty-one-echo," I said.

"What the fuck is that?"

"Illustrator," I said.

"What the fuck does an illustrator do?"

"Draw pictures," I said.

"No shit," Sergeant Craven went. He rubbed his considerable belly. "Me, I'm a sixty-three-sierra. Don't know why. That's what they told me I'd be good at."

"You're pretty good at barbecue, from what I've heard," I said.

"Yes, specialist. That I am." He told me about how he got arrested back in the world and how the judge gave him a choice of joining the Army or going to jail. "Been in ten years, now they going to kick my ass out for being ignorant. Can't read The Man's mind, no how." We were to patrol together in the dark, without night-vision goggles, without even a starlight scope. When it got dark, we left together. Sergeant Craven asked me, "Can you see a damn thing?"

"No, sergeant," I said.

"Me neither. I'm going to take a piss." And he left me standing there, somewhere, in the dark. I sat down in place. I took out my pistol and spun in on my finger. "Ay! Ay!" I heard Craven shouting.

"Yes, sergeant!" I shouted. I stood up and holstered the weapon.

"Got one!" he shouted. I ran toward where I'd heard him, tripping occasionally. I got closer and heard him say, "Hold still, motherfucker." Thanks to a little dusting of moonlight trickling through the trees, I saw Sergeant Craven on top of a Brit.

"Oi!" went the Brit.

"Motherfucker ran right into me," Sergeant Craven said. "Can you believe that shit? Take off your belt and truss up this motherfucker's legs."

I did as the sergeant ordered. He'd already tied the Brit's hands together. Sergeant Craven tied a handkerchief over the Brit's eyes. We used the Brit's odd looking rifle as a pole and carried him by his tied hands and legs to the rear and deposited him in a GP small tent marked G-2 INTEL. A colonel clapped us each on the arm. "You know what you've just done? Do you?"

"No, sir," Sergeant Craven answered.

"You've captured an SAS operative! A commando!" The colonel was very pleased with us. He took our names down. The colonel untied him and took off the makeshift blindfold and ordered him to sit in a chair. We stood facing him. The SAS guy didn't look pleased at all now that he could see us in the light: A skinny geek and a tubby barbecue chef.

We put our belts back on and sat down on the ground facing him, like you would face a rattlesnake.

Sergeant Craven blew his nose into the handkerchief loudly.

The colonel talked excitedly on the wired phone on his field desk. He turned to the SAS guy. "Your sergeant major is on his way over."

"Oi," went the SAS guy.

I felt kind of sorry for him.

The sergeant major came strutting in. He nodded at the colonel. The colonel smiled. The sergeant major looked at us. He wrinkled up his nose in disgust. He had a brown leather swagger stick under his arm, which he swiftly brandished over his head and, wordlessly, used to beat the SAS guy until blood came out of his nose, mouth and ears and his eyes began to swell. The SAS guy didn't make a sound. Not an *oi* or even an *oof*.

The sergeant major strutted out of the tent after the SAS guy passed out.

The colonel said to us, "I'm going to make sure you men get medals!"

At the end of the exercise, we were invited over to Ramstein AFB for an air show. I demurred. I hadn't had the pleasure of my own company for the longest time, it seemed.

I could see the air show from the comfort of my cot, once I dragged it outside and lay down on it, staring up at the dull-dead sky. I sang silently to myself:

*Up, down, turn around
Please don't let me hit the ground
Tonight I think I'll walk alone
I'll find my soul as I go home*

And I saw an explosion. I thought that it must be part of the air show, but it turned out not to be. Or it was. It wasn't a *planned* part of the show. Medevac helicopters soon appeared out of all directions, heading toward where the puff of smoke now spread out, fiery at its middle. I could hear screaming. I lay there on my cot and closed my eyes.

"That was some shit," I heard Socrates say. He shook me awake. "You missed the whole thing."

"Sad, sad me," I said. I dragged my cot inside our tent and went back to sleep.

Going Stateside

I had a rude welcome back to the 191st. I had been in the Army a year, and had accumulated 30 days of leave. I was in use-it-or-lose-it territory, the S-1 sergeant warned me. I decided to go home for two weeks. She also told me that I was going to get a medal the next morning in formation.

"For what?" I went. "What'd I do? I didn't do anything!"

"Quit complaining," she said. "Some soldiers would welcome getting a medal."

I filled out the paperwork and signed it and then stole up to my quarters. A Spec-4 medic was sharing the space with me. Every medic in the Army has the same name. "What a dump," Doc said. He was drinking a cup of coffee and staring out the window. "How'd that formation go?"

"Okay, I guess," I said.

He leaned against my wall locker. "Fuck man," he said. "You know I just came from division." He meant the eighty-second airborne division. "This is a step down in life. Way down. I need the field. I don't need this chickenshit." His coffee mug sported an EFMB on one side, a caduceus on top of a stretcher, and a pair of airborne wings on the other. He had the same decorations on his uniform.

"Is it true about the goat?"

"What goat?"

"That in medic training, some dude will shoot a goat and you have to save it."

"That's got to be the most ignorant fucking lie ever uttered in the history of the human fucking race," Doc said. "The weather ever improve around here?"

"Not that I've seen," I said.

"Marvelous," Doc said. "Two years and a wake-up."

At formation, I received an Army Commendation Medal for my role in capturing the Brit who tripped over an overweight soldier during Reforger. I was called "intrepid" in the write-up. After the formation, everyone was forced to shake my hand. They were used to me now, so there was far less animosity than the last time I received a medal. I'd told many of them the story to great comic effect. I took the medal off my BDU jacket and studied it—a green and white striped ribbon attached to a bronze hexagon, an eagle grasping arrows on one side, "FOR MILITARY MERIT" on the other.

"I had no idea you were so hard core," Doc said. In the subsequent year that I knew him, I never saw him stand in a formation, not once. Doc was leaning on the building near the front door, smoking a cigarette next to the firetruck-red butt can. "So what did they give that to you for, hard core? I couldn't hear everything through the front door."

"For being intrepid," I said. I shoved the medal in my pocket.

A knock on my office door. "You're on my detail," Angela told me. The Germans looked at her hungrily, like guard dogs who'd had a hippie-flavored salami waved in front of them.

"What detail is that?" I asked her, looking up from my book. I was reading someone new. I had the feeling I was going to have to read another new book afterward, which would involve yet another special order through the Stars and Stripes bookstore. They did not like me there. The clerk I always ended up dealing with would roll her eyes and loll her mouth open like I was the most horrible person on earth when she saw me coming.

"Are you reading? Again?" Angela asked.

"Yes," I said, closing the book. "What detail?"

"Come with me," she said. She'd been promoted to sergeant. I had no choice. I tucked the book under my arm and followed her outside to a CUCVEE and got in the passenger side. CINCEUR had decided recently that no one could drive a military vehicle alone, so she'd picked me to tag along with her on whatever errand she'd been assigned.

I flipped my book back open and read. She was saying something to me. "Pardon?" I said, looking up.

"I said, 'Put the fucking book away,'" she said.

I dog-eared the page I was working on and set it in my lap. She started up the vehicle and we drove over to Benjamin Franklin Village. It was an unpleasant spring day, highlighted by a little theatrical lighting to break up the monotony of gray — a break in the clouds and a streak of sunlight raining down upon the field grade officers' family housing.

"I know I'm stupid, but you could try saying two words to me every once in a while," Angela said. "I'm right over here." I looked over at her. She was pointing with her index and middle fingers at her cornflower blue eyes. Blonde hair cinched into a bun, heavily calloused hands, jaw grinding teeth down to nubs.

"Hello," I said.

"That's one word," she said. "Try one more." I shrugged and went back to looking out the window. We passed the Department of Defense Dependents' Overseas School, Mannheim. We passed the one-eighty-seventh personnel company, where my 201 file had gone to live. "Stop staring out the window," she said.

"You're not leaving me with a lot of options, activity-wise, sergeant," I said.

"I want you to acknowledge me as a human being," she said.

"You're a human being," I said. I waved my hands at her, like a magician.

"Grrr!" she went. She parked in front of TASC, a sad brick bunker of a building, where audio-visual equipment went to live.

"What's at TASC?" I asked her.

"Suddenly, he's curious," she said. She hopped out of the vehicle. I followed. "Get back in the vehicle. I don't need your help." I got back in the vehicle. I flipped open my book, but I couldn't concentrate, so I sat watching a sparrow hop along the ground, twitching. The sky had closed back up, gone gray yet again. My door jerked open. Angela stood there with a bullhorn in her hand. She spoke into it. "I need your help," she said, her voice crackling and distorted and horribly loud.

I went back to the building with her. Outside, two cardboard boxes containing film canisters. A film on top of mine was labeled PERSONAL HYGIENE, PART ONE. A projector sat next to the two boxes.

We loaded the audio-visual bric-a-brac into the back of the CUCVEE. "New orders from our beloved CINCEUR," Angela said. "Five continuous hours of training every Wednesday."

I went back and got the projector.

We drove back to the barracks.

"That battalion translator. What's her name?" Angela said.

I shrugged.

"You sit across from her for most of a year and you don't know her name?"

I shrugged again.

"God, you piss me off," she said. And, blessedly, I didn't have to hear another word out of her the rest of the ride back.

The first two hours of our five hours of continuous training involved watching Army training films. Most of them were over 20 years old. One concerned proper hygiene. Another concerned how to mentally prepare yourself for nuclear attack. Another one advised us not to drink radiator fluid, no matter how cold the weather. I dropped my book in my lap and read during the goings-on. No one seemed to mind.

The third hour of our five hours of continuous training was German class. The battalion translator, a dark-haired little German lady in her 30's, taught the class. She had us repeat phrases over and over.

*Nicht schießen! Ich bin ein amerikanischer Soldat.
Ich werde in Mannheim stationiert.
Ich bin verloren. Wo ist die amerikanische Botschaft?
Ein Bier, bitte.*

And so on.

Then she wandered off into a discussion of the greatness of German military men, to whom she added, bizarrely, Hannibal.

"Entschuldigen sie," I said. "But Hannibal was from Carthage, a city-state in Africa."

"I think you are mistaken," she said, and continued disseminating bum information.

I interrupted her again. "No, *you're* mistaken," I said.

"Stop interrupting her, specialist," the CO said.

"Sir, with all due respect, she is wrong," I said. "Hannibal was a Carthaginian general. Carthage being in Africa. My God, sir. You're a military man. Back me up here."

"Um, I seem to recall..."

"He is widely considered the father of strategy," I said. I was actually angry, which I rarely have the opportunity to experience. "The battle elephants. Remember? There aren't herds of elephants wandering around the Ruhr, are there?"

"You're right," the CO said, grinding his teeth. "Take five everyone. Specialist, you stand fast." After the classroom cleared out, the CO said, "I can't have you disrupting training like that."

"She was wrong, sir."

"It doesn't matter. She's the teacher here. Remember your military bearing."

"Sir —"

"Military bearing."

"Yes, sir," I said. I stood in front of him, staring at him for what seemed to be a long time, but was probably only 10 to 15 seconds.

"Don't look at me like that, Specialist," he said, finally. "Dismissed."

I walked outside the classroom into the hallway and leaned against a wall. Socrates was waiting for me. "You know why everyone hates you?"

"No, why?" I said, crossing my arms.

"Actually, they don't. Not the brothers, anyway."

I followed him downstairs. The command sergeant major shouted, "There he is! My man!" And he clapped me on the back, heartily. "Don't let that white bitch tell you nothing, baby."

"An African," my NCOIC said, his eyes glowing. "Father of strategy."

I didn't have the heart to tell them that Hannibal's family was Phoenician, from modern day Lebanon. It was nice to be liked.

Gary stood glowering off in a corner. After all the hoopla, he sauntered over, a hint of a smile, a dash of something else. "You haven't qualified with either of your weapons," he said. "What's it been? Over a year? Don't think I could let you go on leave without you knowing how to fire your weapons. Wouldn't be right, would it?"

"Any idea why we're going out here?" Socrates asked me. "No, wait. I can answer that." He scratched his chin, zitty. "No, wait. I *can't* answer that. Someone answer me."

I was driving. Socrates was in the back seat, leaning over Vince, fiddling with the Prick-77. Doc was riding shotgun. We all wore our helmets and web gear. In the back of the vehicle, we had a few crates of ammo for our pistols.

"You know how much we could get for that ammo on the black market?" Doc asked.

"I had to sign for that ammo, fuckmeat," Vince said. "So nothing."

"It's my fault we're out here," I said.

"He stood up for the brother-man," Socrates said, thumbing at me.

"Gary is a cunning fucker," Vince said.

"*Lex parsimoniae*," I said. "Occam's razor."

"Yew shore dew tawk funny," Socrates said.

"You should know," Doc said. "You're just like him."

"I'd say he's smarter," Vince said, pointing at Socrates. "What do you say to that, GT?"

"Fuck you," I said.

"Spoken like one of us," Doc said. "The simple folk." Doc's attention was taken away. I looked where he looked. Two soldiers were playing around with the gate, a candy-cane pole controlled by a lever. One soldier was doing a limbo, arms spread out, back toward the ground, body miraculously parallel to the ground, bent at the knees. The other soldier popped the gate up and down. "This has disaster written all over it," Doc said.

"Fuckin' A," Vince said in agreement.

I slowed the vehicle and we all watched as the pole came walloping down and hit the limbo soldier square on the nose.

"Beautiful," Doc said. "Stop the vehicle. I must assist."

I stopped the CUCVEE. We all hopped out and crowded around the soldier with the busted nose.

"I didn't mean it!" the other soldier shouted.

"At ease," Doc said.

"Yes, sergeant," the other soldier said. He retreated to his position at the lever.

"And don't you fucking touch that lever," Doc said. He knelt down next to the soldier with the busted nose. "Gentleman, observe," he said to us.

"Oww!" the soldier gurgled.

"This is what a broken nose looks like," Doc said.

"Is it broken?" the soldier gurgled.

"Hold still," Doc said. He reached over and pinched the soldier by the tip of his nose. Thick arterial blood, rich red, seeped from his nose. Doc moved the soldier's nose around in a circle.

"Oww! Fuck! Oww!"

"Floats all over his face," Doc said. "Bet that's painful."

"It hurts!" the soldier shouted. He slapped the ground for emphasis.

"Someone's going to have to take you to the hospital, you fucking dumbass," Doc said. He sighed, looking up at us. "It's hard, my life. The life of a caregiver."

Vince took his Prick-77 out of the vehicle and walked the rest of the way to the range, followed by Socrates. So Doc and I drove the dude out to Landstuhl.

He wasn't the only casualty of the day.

When we returned, the range could finally be open for business. A live-fire range required a commo guy with a radio and a medic to operate. A dumb butterbar from the 23rd ordnance company was in charge of the range. He shouted instructions over the bullhorn that Angela had borrowed from TASC, his voice horribly distorted. He was a handsome fucker, though, that lieutenant, and blonde. It made Vince suspicious.

"I bet that son-of-a-bitch is the one fucking my girlfriend," he said.

"Makes sense," Socrates said.

He followed Socrates and me as we took the M60 out of the back of the vehicle, toted it over to one of the range positions, set up the tripod and mounted the weapon. We had enough cans of ammo in the back of the vehicle to light up a small German town. We only had five M60's out there, one from each company, including headquarters.

Two guys from the 23rd ordnance company set up next to us. They argued about the best way to fuck a sheep. The older soldier said that you had to catch them in a barn. The younger, slimmer soldier said, no, outside was best, especially next to a rock formation. "They keep backing up on you, bucking their hips," the younger soldier said.

"Hey," Vince said to them. "You know that dumb butterbar?"

"That fucking dumbass?" the younger one asked. "He's a ring-knocker. Just got in from West Point."

"I hate him," the older one went. "Thinks his shit don't stink."

"You know if he's fucking his girlfriend?" Socrates asked them, thumbing at Vince.

"I know he's always leaving Northpoint in his BMW," the older one said, squinting. "Sneaking off somewhere."

"Fucker," the younger one spat out.

That's all Vince needed. "I *knew* it!"

Right then we heard a couple of vehicles roaring up from behind us, CUCVEEs, kicking up range dust. They were about 200 meters away when a soldier tried to leap from one vehicle to the other and failed. Instead, he gutted himself on an antenna mount on the vehicle he was attempting to leap into. The two vehicles stopped. The soldier hung on the antenna mount by his ribs. Two soldiers picked him up by his upper arms, lifted him off the mount, then set him on the dusty road. By the time we all ran out there, he

was mostly gone. Doc pushed all the soldiers out of the way, shouting, "I'm a medic!" He had his bag with him. He dropped to his knees next to the gigged soldier.

"Am I all right?" the soldier asked Doc, his throbbing guts hanging out all around him.

"No," Doc said.

"Am I going to die?"

"Yes," Doc said.

Then he did.

Doc stood up. He walked over to the new lieutenant. "That's two injuries, one fatal, on your range today, *sir*," Doc said to the butterbar.

"Um," the butterbar went.

"Better call somebody, *sir*," Doc said.

The Army cleaned up its mess. It almost always does when the mess is small enough and the people are insignificant enough. The next day their injuries would be reported on page 26 of the European *Stars and Stripes* in a column titled, "Safety First!"

We mustered near the range and were given a safety briefing by the butterbar. He read the brief out of a dog-eared Army field manual that had seen better days. Soldiers shifted and muttered irritably.

By the time he was finished, an old sergeant first class, a platoon sergeant from the 23rd, showed up driving a rusted POV, a Ford with USAREUR plates, to take over. The old sergeant made a show out of getting out of his vehicle and slamming the door. He stomped over and got in the dumb butterbar's face. "Gimme the bullhorn, *sir*," the old sergeant said holding out his hand.

The butterbar looked for a moment like he might object, or cry, but he thought better, and handed over the bullhorn.

"Sit over there, *sir*," the old sergeant said.

The butterbar wandered over to the spare ammo cans and sat down, resting his chin on his fists, his elbows on his knees, giving all the appearance of being miffed and relieved.

"Shoot up your ammo," the old sergeant advised us. "Every fucking round." We'd set up our paper targets downrange, tacking them on black, cardboard silhouettes with a staple gun. Into the bullhorn, "Is there anyone down range? Is there anyone down range? Ready on the left? Ready on the right? Take aim and fire."

And we fired and kept on firing for the better part of an hour. I had to swap out the barrel twice. We blasted all the paper targets into charred confetti.

“Cease fire!” the old sergeant said into the bullhorn about two minutes after the last round went downrange. “I want this range to look exactly like it did when we found it.”

Rakes were produced. Brass was picked up and tossed into the ammo cans, filling them back up. The destroyed targets were shoved into plastic bags. An hour, hour-and-a-half later, the old sergeant was pleased with what he saw. He walked over to me. “Follow me,” he said.

I followed him behind a berm. I thought that he was going to harm me for no good reason until his nametape peeped out from behind his web gear. I looked up at his face, which looked like mine would twenty years later. “You’re my father,” I said.

“Don’t expect me to get weepy,” he said. “And don’t *you* get weepy.”

“Don’t worry,” I said.

He handed me a scrap of paper with his name, rank and phone number on it. “Here,” he said. “Just in case you get sick of the bullshit your mother feeds you.”

“We’re in the same battalion. For how long?”

“For as long as you’ve been here,” he said. “Longer. I had an old buddy keeping an eye on you.”

“Gary,” I said.

“Is that what your first sergeant is calling himself these days?”

“It is.”

“Yes, young soldier, Gary says he’s been trying to make a soldier of you, or at least a functioning human being. Gary arranged for you to be in the 191st before you ever left Alabama. Old buddy of mine there was your drill sergeant. Everyone kind of recognizes the name.”

I remembered what Drill Sergeant Slaughter – my father’s buddy for Christ’s sake – said about the Army: *The Army’s this big. I’ll see you again.*

I shoved the piece of paper in my front pocket. “Remind me to thank Gary,” I said. My old sergeant father reached over and shook my hand. I returned the handshake. “And stop pulling strings, will you?”

“Can’t help it,” my father said. “It’s my nature.”

"You're awfully quiet," Socrates said, looking in the rearview mirror at me. He'd volunteered to drive back to the barracks. We were about halfway back, stuck behind a Trabant straining its little engine going uphill on the autobahn. The back of the Trabant was filled with western delicacies. The Polish were the migrant laborers of Europe, hard-working, luckless, their country occupied. They were allowed to work on our side, but not allowed to bring back hard currency, so they bought the glossy bits of western life and shoved as much of it as they could in the back seats of their shitty commie cars.

"Whatever, man," I said. I leaned my face against the window at about the same time a Smell 'em vehicle came rolling up alongside us. "Well, fuck me," I said.

"What?" Vince said. He played with the Prick 77. A motto stenciled in black on the side read, "ENFORCE CIRCUIT DISCIPLINE." Another read, "ALWAYS BE SUSPICIOUS."

"Smell 'em," I said, tapping on the window with my index finger. Soviet Military Liaison Mission. They were allowed to drive around and watch us on our side. We had similar vehicles driving around looking at them on their side. It was supposed to make us less paranoid, and thus less likely to accidentally start World War III.

"Motherfucker," Doc said in wonder.

Our enemy drove alongside us, smiling, in their Joe Stalin uniforms, piloting a garishly appointed small jeep. Was it an Isuzu?

I waved at them. They seemed thrilled and waved back. They sped up and drove away, leaving us behind the Trabant. I wrote down their plate number.

"Were they driving a fucking Isuzu?" Doc asked.

"Must have got a good deal on it," Socrates concluded. Socrates laid on the horn. "Get the fuck out of the way, you Polish motherfuckers!"

When we got back it was about 2000 hours. I took a shower, put on my class A uniform and hitched a ride up to Rhein Main with Socrates, who had bought Rainier's dayglo orange BMW, which now had a 7UP green hood.

"Where'd you get the hood?" I asked him, halfway to Frankfurt.

"Rainier sold me the fucking car, then paid some soldier to pour varnish into the engine. So I bought another BMW from a CSG. That car had no suspension. It all kind of worked out. I took it over to the motor pool, paid Angela two-hundred bucks to swap out the engine. When she took the engines out, she had to take the hoods completely off. Long story short, someone ran over the orange hood."

"Ah," I went.

"In a deuce-and-a-half."

"Yikes," I went.

"So that sergeant, what did he want? Why'd he take you behind the berm?"

"He's my long-lost father," I said.

"Heh, heh."

"No, seriously. He's my long-lost father."

"If you don't want to tell me, your only friend, that's fine."

"He told me he was the one fucking Vince's girlfriend," I said. "You like that one?"

"I know *that's* a lie," Socrates said.

"Oh, yeah? Why's that?"

"Yeah, because I'm the one fucking Rosita."

I spent the night in the airport, waiting to be called for a flight home. Finally, at 0800 hours, my name was called for a flight to Dover AFB in Delaware. I took it.

The plane was a C5A Galaxy. My overseas hat blew off my head and tumbled end-over-end down the tarmac. I climbed the five stories up the stairs into the seating compartment of the aircraft. There were no windows. We sat three across facing the rear. I sat in the middle between two zoomies.

A child bounced up and down in front of me.

"He looks just like Calvin," the zoomie in the windowless window seat said.

"Now that you mention it," the zoomie on the aisle said.

"You smell kind of funky, soldier," the zoomie on the aisle said.

"That's field funk, zoom-a-roo," I said. "Breathe it in."

"The field! You Army guys complain so much, but it sounds like fun to me," the zoomie at the windowless window said.

"It's ten kinds of fun," I said. "Maybe fifteen. You ought to reup Army and live the experience."

"Ha, ha! No thanks!" windowless zoomie said.

About halfway across the ocean, the pilot decided to fly under radar, the plane's belly occasionally dipping into the ocean, possibly for fun. One of the stewards said this in explanation when the mother of Calvin complained about the bumpy ride.

"Tell him to stop! We have children back here," the mother said. She was an airman. She was the only one who'd brought a child onboard.

"You tell him to stop," the steward said, smirking. He was a sergeant.

"Maybe I will," the airman said.

"You won't," the steward said. "And make sure your child is buckled in."

"Yes, sir," the airman said.

From Dover AFB, I caught a ten-dollar ride in a mini-van to the Philadelphia airport. Along the way I had the opportunity to look out the window at Delaware, the thrill of seeing 7-11's and tract housing and litter. I was in my native country.

At the airport, I walked up to the first ticket station I could find and bought my flight home. I went into the first men's room I could find and changed into my civilian clothes, a black mock turtleneck and black slacks. I left on my low quarters.

"Hi, field funk," one of the zoomies who'd share my flight over said.

"Howdy, zoom-a-roo," I replied.

"That was a quick change," he said. He was still in uniform.

"I still need a shower," I said. "Or ten."

"Where you headed?" he asked.

"Home," I said.

He laughed. "Where's that?"

"That would be telling," I said.

A half hour later, we boarded the flight. His seat was three rows away from mine. I had my row to myself. The stewardess treated him like royalty. Me, less so.

I had a Don Johnson-like growth of stubble sprouting across my face. At least that's what I'd gathered from the latest issue of *People* magazine. A bad shave was all the rage.

At the airport, I called home from a payphone.

"Hello?" my mother's voice went.

"It's me," I said.

"Me who?"

"Funny, mom."

"Oh. I told you not to call collect."

"Obviously, I didn't," I said. "Otherwise, there would have been the matter of accepting the charges."

"What's so urgent that you have to call me from Germany?"

"I'm home. Or rather, I'm at the airport."

"I suppose you want me to come pick you up," she said. "I have to go to work in a half-hour."

"I'll take the rapid transit," I said.

"I'll see you tonight," she said. "If you're up." She hung up.

I walked with my little overnight bag over my shoulder to the rapid transit and took the train out to Valleyview Avenue. The sun, relentless, glared. I debarked and walked the two blocks home to our white, one-story, two-bedroom house with an unfinished basement. I walked to the back yard and found the house key under the cement angel. Mom hadn't trimmed the bushes since I'd left five years before, seemingly. They were wild, wiggling with the wind, and ten-feet-tall. I let myself in through the side door next to the driveway.

My room was dusty. I picked up a pair of my underwear and beneath it was non-dusty. My typewriter, a Smith Corona manual with sticky keys left to me by my formerly anonymous father, was dusty. The piece of paper in the roller was dusty. I blew off the dust and read. "Goodbye, mom." It was naive to think that she'd bother to read it.

I was scared when I went to college, and sad. I didn't like college, but succeeded for the most part despite myself, except for that last semester. The last semester, I'd stopped doing anything, staring off in the middle of class, sitting in a chair for hours at the student union, sitting alone in my apartment watching my roommate's TV.

And here, at home, with all this evidence of me, I stared out the window. There was no ennui involved. It was relief. I was no longer this person, this me. I'd become someone else.

I awoke in my bed. It was night. I walked out to the kitchen, quietly. A shaft of light shone hazy through the window and lit a note on the refrigerator door, held on by a smiling plastic banana magnet, which read, "If you want milk, you'll have to buy it. "

I never drank milk when I was a kid, nor do I recall milk ever having been an issue.

I poured myself a glass of water and stood at the sink drinking it in the dark.

"Do you think it's easy, having a child like you?" My mother was sitting behind me in the dark at our circular kitchen table. I hadn't seen her.

"I am no longer a child," I said.

"I can't even stand the sound of your voice. It's like you have contempt for me. Ever since you could speak! And you could speak in the goddamned crib."

"Hatred is a thing of the heart, contempt a thing of the head."

"Who said that?"

"Schopenhauer," I said. "I'd apologize to you for all the contempt, but I don't believe I have anything to apologize *for*."

"Oh? And I do?"

"I didn't say that," I said.

"I'm not trying to pick a fight," my mother said. "I don't know why you sound so defensive."

"I'll stay out of your way while I'm here. Don't feel you have to accommodate me. I'll figure out things to do on my own. Maybe I'll go bowling."

"Yes, please do go *bowling*," my mother said. I heard her chair-legs cry out against the dirty linoleum and she got up and walked out of the room, her house shoes scraping the floor.

I finished my water. I put down the glass.

The Eternal Flame

I went bowling. I kept score in my head entirely against my will. The numbers kept adding up and I couldn't stop them. It's like being sick all the time, being me. I have to fight to be lazy every second that I'm lazy. It's exhausting.

"What's your score?" a girl's voice asked. I knew the voice.

"Kelsey," I said, turning around. I wasn't particularly happy to see her, though she appeared to be delighted to see me.

"Hi!"

"If I make this spare, it will be 180," I said. "A personal best."

"Not much of a bowler, huh?"

"Never was," I said. I turned back around and rolled.

"Keeping your hair short these days, I see," she said.

"Yes," I said. I missed my spare. I had to settle for a 176. I walked back over, tried out my smile on her.

"I heard you were in the Army," she said.

"You heard correctly," I said.

"That's so weird," she said. "You're not the type."

"Uh, huh," I went.

"Have you seen Rich?"

"Rich?"

"Lara?"

"Who's that?"

"Captain of the football team?"

"Hmm," I went. "Doesn't ring a bell."

"You're so weird," she said. She had makeup spattered on her face by the pound and her hair shot up out of her head like a fountain and she had on a red and white striped tee and her makeup glittered with flecks of gold and she had on shiny red parachute pants and gold ballet slippers. "No offense."

"None taken," I said.

I replaced the ball and turned in my bowling shoes at the counter. We sat in the little restaurant area drinking cans of new Coke and eating slices of pizza oozing orange grease. She gossiped about our classmates, most of whom never made an impression on me.

A baseball game played on the TV. "Infield fly rule!" someone shouted. Groans.

I stopped paying attention to her. I studied the faces of the people watching the game. Frustration and sadness.

"I like new Coke," I said in response to something she said.

"What does that have to do with Dusty Burke?" she asked me.

"Nothing," I said. I finished my pizza, leaving the rim of crust on the styrofoam plate. I stood up. "It was nice seeing you again," I said. I reached over to shake her hand.

"Whatever," she said, crossing her arms. She wasn't that great looking.

I walked downtown where all the factories had been and now were converted into condos and lofts and artists' spaces and artisan bread bakeries and so forth. It still smelled like piss. It would take more than shutting down industry to get rid of that. A new hospital was being built there. I stood and watched the workers and assorted machinery erect light gauge galvanized steel framing. Hospitals, crowded the newspaper, would replace industry as our main employer.

I walked home, to Valleyview Avenue, and let myself in. My mother was watching television. It was a midday show.

"Sorry about last night," she said, not looking up at me. She was eating radishes off a paper plate, rubbing them in salt she'd sprinkled to the side of them. She slugged Stroh's directly out of the can.

"That's all right," I said.

"But you have to admit you're hard to get along with," she said.

"Yes," I said. I stood watching the chef on TV. I felt the need to make conversation. "I saw my father in Germany."

"What? When?" She turned her head and I felt her looking at me.

I continued watching the show. "Not too long ago," I said.

"How did he look? Did he look bad?"

"He seemed old," I said. "Tired."

"Did he mention me?"

"Yes," I said.

"What did he say?"

"Nothing you need to hear," I said.

"Fine," she said. She went back to watching TV. The chef was making risotto. The camera zoomed in on the risotto.

"Needs more liquid," I said, standing there, hands in pockets, then out of pockets, then arms crossed, then uncrossed, then tapping my thighs with my fingertips.

"Just a touch more broth," the chef said, adding it.

"It must be hell being right all the time," my mother said, crunching down a radish.

I flew back to Germany on a commercial airliner filled with Germans who had made a connecting flight from California. They had all made the pilgrimage to Disneyland. They all had Mouseketeer beanies on, the ears silhouetted, their names stitched in yellow cursive on the backs. *Inga* sat in front of me with her husband and/or lover *Klaus*.

My mother gave me one of her anti-anxiety pills before I'd left. I swallowed it down the moment I was seated. A few minutes into the flight, I fell asleep. Soon enough, we were there and I had a Don Johnson beard.

After we debarked I saw several of the people from my flight, still wearing their ears, walk into the Blue Kino in the Frankfurt airport to enjoy some pornography.

I took the 21st Repo Depot bus down to Mannheim. No one seemed to mind or notice the extra passenger not in uniform. What had once seemed exotic now had a tinge of familiarity to it. I had a little less than a year left in-country.

"I heard you went home to get married," the S-1 sergeant told me when I signed back into the unit.

"That's ridiculous," I said.

"That's what everyone is saying," she said.

"Define 'everyone,'" I said.

She glared at me until I left.

I found Socrates down in the basement, in the supply room. Rosita was sitting around flipping through a magazine. She gave me a wary smile.

I said to Socrates, "You could try telling people the truth."

"Truth, schmooth." He was counting olive-drab wristwatches.

"Spreading interesting rumors, are we?"

"Oh. That." He rolled his eyes. "What's truth anyway? Is it being factually correct? I don't think so."

Rosita said, "Here we go."

Socrates said, "Truth is about revealing, not about fact checking. It's about seeing the way things are from a perspective, perhaps not your own. So let's say everyone thinks you're a non-human freak. Now let's say they think you're getting married. Non-human freaks don't get married, so now they start seeing you as human. Isn't that closer to the truth? Closer than the facts? Facts, schmacts!"

Rosita said, "Don't start singing that Talking Heads song."

Socrates sang, "'Facts are simple and facts are straight. Facts are lazy and facts are late. Facts all come with points of view –'"

Rosita shouted, "Stop it!"

Vince came sprinting in from the commo room. "What? Stop what?"

Rosita said, "He's singing again."

Vince said, "Oh. Hey, how was your wedding? Where's the little honey?"

I said, "No such honey exists."

Vince said, "I heard you were getting married though."

I said, "Apparently, that's merely factually inaccurate. However there is, according to Socrates, some underlying truth involved."

Vince said, "I hate you guys. Both of you."

Rosita said, "I love it when you talk like that. Anyone in the commo room right now?"

Vince took her hand. "Come on, baby!"

They quickly exited.

I said, "I hope you're using a prophylactic."

Socrates said, "Who says 'prophylactic'?"

I said, "Apparently, married men do."

Socrates said, "And the truth reveals itself." He spread his hands together at the heels like a blossoming flower.

I took a shower. I put on my uniform. I wandered around in my office. The Germans were gone. My brain was on low-churn, so I did not bring a book with me to keep it occupied. I stared out the window.

Vince was in the room with me. For how long? "Hey, man," Vince said, slapping a hand on my shoulder. "Sorry about your fiancée dorking out on you."

"That's all right," I said. I figured, at this point, what the hell. Go with it.

"That lieutenant. The one who's fucking Rosita?"

"Yeah?"

"A bunch of us were thinking about paying him a visit," Vince said. Grinding teeth smile.

"Count me in," I said. I figured I'd nip off and go see my father.

"We're going to rally out in the parking lot at Socrates Bimmer at about twenty-hundred hours," he said.

"Bring your gloves," I said. "The ones that go with your field jacket. The wool inserts, too. You don't want to come back with bruised knuckles."

"Outstanding," Vince said. He left.

The CO entered about five minutes later. I snapped to attention and he put me at ease. "It's come to my attention that you have—" he thought for a moment. "Certain skills."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"I'm a garrison soldier," the CO continued. "I'm not ashamed to admit it."

"Yes, sir."

"And I have no experience planning field exercises," he said. "None."

"Yes, sir."

"I've brought some books with me. I understand you're a quick study."

"Yes, sir."

"No one could ever accuse me of under-utilizing my soldiers and their talents," the CO said.

"Yes, sir."

"So what I'd like for you to do is—" the CO searched for words again. He failed.

"Draw up the plans for a field exercise, sir?"

"For the 23rd Ordnance Company. Yes. I have examples in here," the CO said.

"Yes, sir."

"I'll leave this with you," the CO said.

"Yes, sir."

He started for the door.

"Sir?"

"Yes, specialist?"

"Sir, what happened to the lieutenant who was in charge of the M60 range about two weeks ago? The one where the soldier died?"

"Nothing," he said. "It was an unfortunate accident, it was decided."

"Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome, specialist." He left.

When the evening came, the bunch ended up being Vince, Socrates and me, which was fine. We drove up to Northpoint without saying much of anything to each other. Vince had directions written down and Socrates drove most of the way. Slightly after midnight, we found the butterbar's place, which was not on base but in a tiny town about 5 kilometers away. I'm not even sure if the town had a name. After we parked, I went upstairs and knocked on the door. The lieutenant answered.

"Come with me," I said to him, and turned on my heel.

"I have to get dressed," he said. "And who are you?"

I turned around, impatient. I spoke to him like I would a child. "Who do you think I am?" I asked him.

"I dunno," he said.

"Come with me now," I said. I curled my index finger at him.

And he jumped into a PT uniform and followed me downstairs, hopping around in his half-on sneakers. "What's this all about?" he asked me, then looked around and saw Vince, pissed off, and Socrates, arms crossed.

"What you need to know is this: Deeds have consequences," I said.

"I like that," Socrates said.

"You *would*," Vince said.

"Well?" I went, looking over at Vince.

"Um," Vince went.

I stared at him for a moment or two. He was not going to do anything.

I was a head shorter than the lieutenant, but that didn't stop me from walking over to him and clocking him on the jaw, crack! My hand lit up. The lieutenant hit the ground and did not get up. I knelt down and made sure he was still breathing by putting my ear to his mouth and watching his chest rise and fall.

"Give me a hand," I said to Vince.

"What did you do *that* for?" Vince asked me. He was upset.

Socrates was giggling. He grabbed an arm and I grabbed the other. Vince grabbed his feet.

"He's heavy," Vince said.

"Let's get him upstairs. I don't think he locked up," I said.

"You knocked him out!" Socrates shouted. "Classic!"

"He's an officer," Vince whispered.

"That didn't seem to bother you when you thought he was fucking your girlfriend," Socrates said.

"Well it bothers me now," Vince said. "We could be court-martialed for this."

"Nobody's going to get court-martialed," I said.

"Seriously," Vince said. "Jesus he's heavy. But seriously, we could get—"

“Right, we get it,” Socrates said. “Who would have thought you’d be such a puss.”

“You’re surprised at me? What about GT?” Vince said.

We dumped the lieutenant in his apartment and shut the door. We stood for a moment in the hallway in the dark, listening. No sounds.

“Let’s boogie,” Vince said.

We all ran to the car and took off.

Nothing happened.

The next time I saw the butterbar was when I was aggressing the 23rd while it was being ARTEPed. This was the ARTEP that the CO had asked me to plan, so a map of their encampment was in my head. They were in the woods at Hohenfels Combat Maneuver Training Center, knowing full-well that they would be aggressed. It was just me and my section leader, the artillery-deafened lieutenant. We split up. I walked directly into their area of operations. I was dressed as a Soviet army officer, wearing OPFOR gear. If anyone had challenged me, I would have spoken in broken English. But no one did.

I walked into the butterbar’s tent, he rated a GP small tent of his own, and I shook him awake.

“Remember me?” I said. I knelt next to his cot.

“Who are you?” he said.

“That’s not important,” I said. “You’ve failed your ARTEP. That’s what’s important. Your sentries were too far apart. Don’t you know how to read a map. I was very detailed in my instructions. What do they teach you people in at West Point these days?”

He didn’t answer. I left his tent.

I had, in my rucksack, a case of glow sticks. I snapped them and shook them and hung them on the butterbar’s vehicles like Christmas ornaments while the butterbar sat in his GP small tent wondering what to do, not making a sound. Maybe he’d decided he was dead for the purposes of the exercise. Maybe he was humiliated.

My deaf lieutenant came jogging up to me. “Let’s go,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” I said. I ran alongside him. I could hear the popping of flares and crack of blank ammo being expended. Neither of us were armed, not even with fake Kalashnikov’s.

We hopped into our CUCVEE and scrambled back to the rear.

We were staying at the General Abrams Hotel and Dispensary at the American Armed Forces Recreation Area in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, which was about two hours south. We had to drive through Munich in the middle of the night to get there. The old lieutenant stayed in the same quarters as I did through a little lie. He still had his old enlisted ID card and flashed it at the night clerk. The night clerk didn't bat an eye at two men dressed as Soviet soldiers. We climbed up the stairs, past a mural of Nazi soldiers playing guitars and singing with the local gals.

The following morning, we awoke at dawn and looked out upon the alps, majestic and surreal, a tourism poster in 3-D.

"I love Germany," the lieutenant said. "I'm going to retire here."

"What will you do?"

"I'll go civil service and work for the Army for another twenty or so years."

"What if the Cold War ends?"

He looked at me like I was the dumbest spec-four ever. "It's never going to end. Don't you know that?" He stared out at the mountains for a while. "When are you going up for E-5?"

"Whenever I'm told," I said.

"We'll get you in front of the board as soon as we get back," the lieutenant said. "Sometime after Oktoberfest." He grinned and wagged a finger at me. "We're staying for Oktoberfest. No complaining."

We stayed for Oktoberfest. We wore our class A uniforms, walking around the massive festival. The lieutenant insisted on it. "We're on official business," he said. "On temporary duty down here in southern Germany, enjoying the hospitality of the locals." Which ended up being true.

Each beer company, there were six, had two tents. One was devoted exclusively to beer, the other, the fest tent, had beer and chicken and Bavarian entertainment. These tents were massive enough to quarter a brigade of soldiers.

Germans kept on buying us drinks. "Drink Americans! Drink!" I drank. Men in lederhosen did backflips while the crowd cheered them on. An oompah band farted out notes. The beer steins were made of glass, embossed with the beer company's name. Mine had a shovel on it.

I fell asleep sometime after my fourth liter of festbier. I awoke clutching a china plate that had *Der Stadtparkasse München* on it, my mouth gritty with sweet-and-sour vomit.

I spat. Above me, someone had painted on the fest tent ceiling blue skies and cottonball clouds with fat German angels sitting on them twanging on harps.

And I thought, sitting there in my still-drunken stupor, *I don't care if I ever see my father again.* Nothing personal against the man. My father was not the father I never had. The Army was.

The lieutenant was as good as his word. A month after we returned, I stood in front of the E-5 board, which consisted of the sergeant major, who was president of the board; my squad leader, who owed me ten bucks; Doc, who liked me well enough; Gary; and my father.

"Funny how you two have the same name and the same hometown of record," the sergeant major said.

"I enlisted in the Army in 1984, attended basic training at Fort McClellan, Alabama and AIT at Lowry Air Force Base in Colorado. I was awarded the Army Achievement Medal shortly upon arriving here," I said. "I have a bachelor's degree. I am currently assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, One Ninety First Ordnance Battalion. My short-term goals are to achieve promotion to sergeant, and graduate PLDC with honors. My intermediate goals are to obtain a master's degree, promotion to staff sergeant, and to attend and graduate from the master illustrator course. My long-term goal is to retire from the Army as a senior enlisted man."

"Oh, it's gonna be like that, is it?" Gary asked. He nudged my father with his elbow.

They took turns asking me Army questions:

What is the highest peacetime award for valor?

What three words are inscribed on the front of the Good Conduct Medal?

What is a fourragère?

What is sergeant's business?

What is the maximum effective range of the M16A1 rifle?

I passed the board and was selected to attend the Primary Leadership Development Course at the Seventh Army NCO Academy in Bad Toelz. I was not shocked when my father showed up in his near-dead Ford to drive me the three and a half hours down south.

"So," he said. "You were pretty good in front of the promotion board."

"Thanks," I said. I sat staring at him for a moment. It was all a bit much. "What should I call you?"

"Sergeant," he said. "'Dad' would be too weird."

"For you or for me, sergeant?"

"Both of us," he said.

We didn't have much to say to each other. After we stopped for gas in Karlsruhe, he invited me to ask him any question that came to mind. I scoured my brain, but came up with nothing. I shrugged.

"Why are you so short?" he asked me.

"Genetics, I suppose," I said.

"Not from my side of the family," he said.

I shrugged.

"You better not shrug at PLDC. They'll light your ass up for that shit," he said.

"Roger," I said. I sat up straight.

"Don't sit up straight now," he said. "Save it for later."

"Roger," I said, and reslouched.

"You're full of book-learning," he said.

"Knowledge is knowledge, no matter the source," I said.

"That's *bullshit*," he said.

I said nothing for a while, just watched the German countryside winging past. BMW's zipped up behind us and flashed their lights. Drizzle mixed with snow whizzed down and around.

"You need to watch yourself and that mouth," my father said. "That's all I'm saying."

"Yes, sergeant," I said. I couldn't help it. I felt nothing for the man. He was a stranger who wore my face.

He dropped me off near the barracks and let me walk the rest of the way toting my duffel bag. He honked at me. I walked back over to the car. "See you in a month," he said. I walked away again. He honked again. I walked back again. "Don't embarrass me," he said.

I leaned down at face level. "What? You have friends here, too?"

"I have friends everywhere," my father said. He drove off in a burnt-oil haze, a death rattle clanking under the hood of his scrap Ford.

Other than the constant PT, I enjoyed PLDC. We marched around. We marched each other around. We performed facing movements. We rolled our underwear and tee shirts and socks and placed them like artifacts on display in our tiny chest of drawers. We hung our uniforms in our wall lockers, each hanger two fingers apart. We polished our boots. We land-navigated by sun and stars and compass. We learned our creed, "No one is more professional than I. I am a Noncommissioned Officer, a leader of soldiers..." We each were allowed to be a leader of soldiers, of each other. We learned songs.

*We were born one day in '49
From the ranks of infantry
Our standards we set high and hard
Through responsibility
Though the road was long, it led the way
And our effort all can see
We're the biggest, we're the best, we've stood the test
Seventh Army NCO Academy*

Flint Kaserne had the mountains off in the distance. And the abundant trees. It was beautiful there, unlike Mannheim. Our barracks formed a square.

I could see why the lieutenant fell in love with the place, with Bavaria.

We shared the kaserne with Special Forces guys, who were scary. Sometimes we saw them in the mess hall during lunch or dinner, off by themselves, enjoying their dark camaraderie.

And then it was over, and I had to go back to my shabby barracks, driven by my shabby father in his shabby car.

Socrates' orders came in. He was going to the airborne. First he would go to Fort Benning for jump school, and then on to Fort Bragg. "I leave you with these final words of wisdom," he said before he left. "'Get a job.'" And then he was gone.

I would see him one more time, years in the future.

My stint in Europe was beginning to wind down.

I found on my desk a short timer's calendar, on which I was supposed to mark off, day-by-day, my final 90 days in-country. It featured a determined soldier marching along a numbered path toward a C-130. He was looking over his shoulder, giving the viewer the thumbs-up. Along the numbered path, Germans waved. I rolled it up and saved it.

It's on my office wall. During office hours, when my students come in, they squint at it. If they ask about it, I tell them it is from when I was in the Army. Next to it, I have a

photo of me, Socrates, Doc and Vince standing in front of our barracks. The color has faded from the photo. "Those are my Army buddies," I tell my inquisitive students.

Where are they now? some students ask.

"I don't know," I tell them.

Life During Wartime

I was never promoted to sergeant. I was, instead, a spec-four-promotable, a.k.a SP4-Ever.

Each MOS had a magic number for promotion out of a possible 1,000. You could make 300 points for your PT test. I barely passed mine. You could make 100 points for college. I was maxed out there. The board gave you a certain number of points, too.

Ordnance specialists, at the time, had to have 450 points for promotion to sergeant. So most of them got promoted. Illustrators were stuck at 998.

I spent my final two years in the Army as a mail clerk in the Pentagon. When my NCOIC there found out that I could barely draw, he assigned me to push a mail cart around the C-ring. I did this for approximately six hours a day, and then was kicked loose. I lived in the barracks at Fort Myer, Virginia, a stone's throw away from the Pentagon. I could walk home from the Pentagon, cutting through Arlington National Cemetery to get there.

I bought a used IBM Selectric.

I had time. Time to drink beer from 1400 to 0000 hours. Time to rent a car and drive around Washington, D.C. Time to bowl at the Fort Myer bowling alley. Time to watch the dollar movie at the Fort Myer Theater. Time to jog around Arlington National Cemetery and say hello to my dead fellow soldiers. Time to become familiar with all the Smithsonian museums that surrounded the National Mall, which is a big green patch of land, not a shopping mall. Some tourists were a little disappointed when I told them that. They'd pull to the side of the road and ask me, "Where's this National Mall?"

I had time to go back to college and finish up what I had started. Georgetown was just across the Potomac, a short walk from my barracks at Fort Myer. The Army paid three-quarters of my tuition.

My Ph.D. dissertation became a widely reviled book. You haven't gotten hate mail until you've received multiple dressings-down from public intellectuals. I framed a couple of them and have them hanging in my little home, including one particularly vicious letter from a British ex-pat drunkard who repeatedly misspelled my name throughout and underlined some of his most salient points with a red, ballpoint pen, almost tearing a hole in the onion-skin parchment he'd decided to type his rant out on.

I also have a signed document that is close to being a love letter from a future Speaker of the House, who fancied himself an intellectual and science-fiction novelist. He is neither, though he has sold approximately two-hundred times more books than I have.

After I was allowed to leave the active Army, I was hired by New College in Sarasota, Florida.

Jumpy, fresh out of the Army, settled into my office, which looked out on the bay. Seagulls cawed and fishing boats puttered past. Inland, across the street at the airport, DC-9's screeched as they ferried hot-weather tourists into the 90-degree-plus humidity. I wasn't expecting Florida to be as hot as it was, but there you go.

I brought in a 12-inch television set to keep me company. On it, the press was following around the president, who on most occasions seemed to be a befuddled and persnickety prep-school boy trapped in a gangling body that could not help but spasm and flail. Today was different. He stopped and glared at a reporter who'd challenged him about what he'd do about the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. "Watch and learn," the president said. He was all cowboied up.

"Hmm," I went.

One of the associate professors in my department leaned against the doorjamb, watching me. "You're watching, but are you learning anything?" I asked her. She taught medieval English.

Yes, I was hired by the English department, as an assistant professor of comparative literature. Even down in the boonies, I was *persona non grata* with the philosophers.

"Bush," she said, like she was preparing the name for expectoration. She was a new hire like me. She was too young to have reading glasses hanging around her neck, or to be wearing the frumpy clothes she had on, but there you go.

"Good morning to you, Doctor Cuomo," I said.

"Good morning, Doctor Ziska," she replied.

"Lovely day," I said.

"Indeed it is," she said.

A couple of years later, we'd marry.

I was living, temporarily, in the Normandy Hotel, which was a haunt for prostitutes. My room featured a mirrored ceiling. The clerk, a teenager wearing a pith helmet, flip-flops and ragged cutoffs, smirked when I rented the room for three days. "I admire your stamina, sir," he said.

"Don't call me 'sir,'" I said. "I work for a living."

"Cool," he said. He shoved my room key at me and went back to reading Guns and Ammo.

I made quick work of finding an apartment. All that I needed to do was sign the lease. I dropped by my office and found a letter on my desk. I'd had my mail temporarily forwarded to the college. Contained within the envelope were ten copies of my orders, ordering me back to active duty. I was to report to the nearest MEPS for in-processing immediately. I was to be part of the watch-and-learn process.

I ran into Doctor Cuomo, Mary, my future bride, in the hallway.

"Do you have your syllabus done?" she asked me.

"No need," I said. "Your pal Bush has put the kibosh on my teaching career. For the moment anyway." I showed her the orders. She smelled like orange blossoms.

"He can't do this, can he?" she asked.

"He can," I said. "And he did."

A week later, I was sitting in the half-empty Fort Dix reception station, waiting. Eventually, a sergeant would come out and tell us what to do. Two rows ahead of me, I saw Socrates. I asked another Army returnee to thump him on the back. Socrates turned around, saw me, and took the empty seat next to mine.

"What are you doing these days?" Socrates asked, more than a little disingenuously.

"I teach," I told him. Actually, I hadn't taught yet, not even in graduate school, thanks to being in the Army, the Army College Fund and the G.I. Bill.

"You teach, huh?" he said, with a knowing smile. "I read your fucking book."

"What did you think?"

"I liked the parts that I understood," he said. "I had to keep looking up 'heuristic.' Am I pronouncing that right?"

"I like me my nickel words," I said. "What are you up to these days?"

"I went back to college, just graduated. I was looking for a job," he said. "I guess a job found me."

A sergeant in the front of the room said, "Listen up! Welcome back to the Army."

Everyone laughed.

"At ease," he said. "We're going to get you all lined up for shots. Remember that? Of course you do."

"Give me your address," I whispered.

"You have a pen?"

"No," I whispered.

"Me neither," Socrates whispered. "We'll meet up later."

We lined up for shots. I watched the needle go into his arm and caught him as he passed out. He didn't really pass out. As I helped carry him out of the room and place him on a waiting gurney, he opened up his eyes for a moment and fucking winked at me.

That was the last time I saw him.

I was assigned to the public affairs office at the U.S. Army CID Command in Bailey's Crossroads, Virginia.

The PAO, a lieutenant colonel of infantry, stared at me when I reported to his third floor office overlooking the parking lot. "I've seen you before," he said.

"I used to work in the Pentagon, sir," I said.

"That's not it," he said.

"I was stationed in Germany for two years, sir," I said. "Maybe you saw me on Reforger?"

"That's not it," he said. He snapped his fingers. "I know! You're the guy who wrote that book that everyone hates!" We both laughed. He rolled his desk chair over to a considerable bookshelf that took up the entire eastern wall of his office and leaned down to the bottom shelf. His books were alphabetized. He pulled out a trade paperback copy of my book. The spine was unbroken. "You wouldn't mind signing this for me, would you?"

"Did you hate it?" I asked him.

"No, no," he said. He stared at me for a moment. "Well, yes. But it's a thrill to meet you anyway."

"Thanks, sir," I said. I slipped the black, government-issue Skilcraft pen out of my pocket and signed the book for him. "To a PAO I don't hate," I wrote. "Very respectfully, Specialist Carl Ziska."

He took the book back from me and read the inscription and laughed again. "So doctor," he said, slipping the book back into its notch on the bottom shelf, "what would you like to do during your stay with us?"

What I ended up doing during my stay was editing their technical journal, *The Detective*, and watching the war unfold on the office's 27-inch television set via CNN and their seizure-inducing graphics.

The colonel, a Cincinnati Reds fan by birth, would occasionally switch over to baseball games in which the Reds triumphed again and again. It was their wire-to-wire season.

The illustrator that I was temporarily replacing, I found out, had been sent on temporary duty to Saudi Arabia. I wasn't really replacing him, though. A book of Army-issue clip art was performing his job function.

If anyone found my lack of permanence unsettling, they didn't let it show. There were just four of us in the office.

I worked with a civilian assistant public affairs officer, who was a former academic. She was the one, as it turned out, who had alerted the public affairs officer about me. She was the one who'd actually read the book and hated it, but she tolerated me.

I also worked with a rubber-faced sergeant first class, who edited the monthly CID newspaper, *The Badge*. She mugged endlessly and thought everything I said was odd and said so loudly, while mugging.