

First five chapters of *Chickenhawk: Back In The World* by Robert Mason.

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Chickenhawk: Back In The World

PROLOGUE

There's an ancient idea that when a man travels, he doesn't go anywhere. Instead, he performs a series of actions that, if done in the proper sequence, will bring his destination to him.

I'm walking a path in the woods where I live. I concentrate on the act of walking while keeping in mind that I am stationary, that it is the world that is moving. After several tries, it works. I move my body in precise ways and watch the ground pass beneath me and trees and bushes move by me until the steps of my cabin come to me and touch my feet. Doing this can make you dizzy, but once this perspective is accepted, you are in the center of it, focused on what you are doing, now. Walking is no longer the same. Neither is life. You walk, wriggle, love, and cry, and the path moves by bringing your destination to you-if you make the right moves.

I must have made the right moves: I'm alive. I moved the controls of my helicopter in Vietnam in just the right ways. Missed thousands of bullets because I did something right, instinctively, at just the right moments. Made impossible unlighted landings into deep midnight jungles to rescue soldiers, succeeding, perhaps, because we-me, my crew, even my helicopter-were the results of another soldier's right moves to make the jungle go away, to survive.

I have memories of others who made wrong moves, who were battered, burned, eviscerated in the war machine.

The war still rages on the far side of the planet.

I'm back in the world.

If I can just keep making the right moves-

Chapter One

October 1966-The same old H-23 Hiller that had been here when I was a student, two years before, squatted on a brickwork pedestal on the left side of the gate at the U.S. Army Primary Helicopter School at Fort Wolters, Texas, so passersby would know this was not just an ordinary Army base. It sagged a little and its paint looked dull, but I'd trained in a Hiller and I liked it. Across the entrance, they'd dragged off the other Hiller and set up in its place the school's new trainer, a little bitty Hughes TH- 55A, which looked to me like it should be flown on the end of a string. "Above the Best" was the motto at Wolters, and these helicopters were the ones which aspiring Army aviators tried to fly.

A stringy swarm of skittering, buzzing, gnatlike machines-the first batch of Hugheses, the smallest two-passenger helicopters in existence-had arrived during my last week as a student. I'd never flown one. The Hiller, a not-very-big three-passenger machine, looked enormous by contrast. The Hughes was cheaper than the Hiller and simpler to maintain. Of course it was cheaper. It used rubber belts in its transmission system. The Hiller was overbuilt, complicated, hard to fly, and practically indestructible-perfect for instruction. I was relieved to learn I was assigned to a training flight that used Hillers.

Wolters seemed entirely different to me as I drove from the main gate to the flight line. For one thing, I was no longer a subhuman warrant officer candidate-known as a WOC. I was a warrant officer pilot now. People, at least enlisted people, weren't fucking with me. Real officers believed warrants were kind of half-assed officers and allowed us our privileges because it was mandated. Any highest-ranking chief warrant officer, CW-4 (equivalent to a major), was outranked by any green second lieutenant. It's a mysterious system. If I wasn't a pilot, I wouldn't be here.

A lot more people were bustling around than when I went through flight training in 1964. Because my Volvo had a blue officer's parking sticker on the bumper, enlisted men and WOCs walking along the road saluted. The enlisted men's salutes were grudging and slovenly, as was expected. The WOC salutes were snappy and sharp and made you wonder if they ever whacked their heads. They saluted like their lives depended on doing it right. They were correct. Doing everything right was a big

concern for WOCs. Half of them wouldn't make it through, and the prize for the runners-up was to be thrown Out of flight school. They'd be sent to Vietnam as grunts, where they'd slog it out and get dirty, never mind killed. Dirty is bad; the Vietnam combat pilot's motto was "Die clean."

All this saluting was uncomfortable. In Vietnam anybody seen saluting in our aviation units was probably drunk or forced into it by a newbie field-grade officer trying to restore military discipline. I returned the salutes as I drove, feeling awkward.

I passed the post theater, the post library, the post craft shop, and the post commissary. As a WOC, I was only allowed in the commissary to buy necessities, like wax to shine my floor, my shoes, and my sink. I barely knew the other places existed. Now that I was a human being, I was interested in learning how to print photographs at the craft shop and build something at the woodshop. I'd done my war. As a stateside soldier, I wanted to coast, pursue mundane hobbies, and forget Vietnam. I still had some problems: I couldn't sleep, had boils from some vicious jungle infection, and got profoundly depressed each night seeing the war reported on television in banal snippets of violence before the weatherman, while the center of national attention was the new pop series, Batman. I thought these problems would go away. Just needed a little time to readjust, was all.

Down the hill from the commissary I passed four new student dormitories. A platoon of candidates were doing push-ups out front while

a TAC (short for tactical) sergeant harangued them. Thank God I wasn't going to be a TAC officer. For a pilot, it was like a lobotomy. I was on the lookout for my old TAC sergeant, Wayne Malone, but hadn't seen him. The day I graduated from flight school I wanted to come to Wolters, find Malone, and make him do eight hundred push-ups for harassing me unmercifully while I was a WOC. Now I just wanted to say hello.

I passed the WOC Club at the bend in the road, an old white wood-frame building in which the candidates were allowed to visit for a few hours on the weekends with their wives or girlfriends. They served beer inside, but the candidates were usually outside driving their ladies to deserted places on the immense post to get laid. Patience and I had a Volkswagen when I was a candidate. One of our fondest memories is the time we didn't even make it to the car, stopping instead behind the

big oak tree beside the club. It was the kind of scene in which you might imagine a large dog rushing up from nowhere to throw a bucket of water on us. I smiled when I drove past the tree.

As I drove along the road beside the main heliport, helicopters lurched into the air from the six takeoff pads and flew over me, flitting off in all directions over the central Texas hills. Twice a day, in the morning and afternoon training sessions, the school would put fifteen hundred aircraft in the air at the same time to crank out enough pilots to replace the ones getting killed in Vietnam. Wolters was dizzyingly crowded, and dangerous.

I had an eight o'clock aircraft orientation flight scheduled with Warrant Officer Gary Lineberry, a former classmate who had not yet gone to Vietnam. Actually, Lineberry hadn't gone anywhere. They'd assigned him right back to flight school upon graduation from Fort Rucker, Alabama, the last stage of the Army's helicopter course, because he was a superb pilot. While most of the rest of class 65 - 3 went to Vietnam, Lineberry became an instructor pilot (IP) and was now part of the Methods of Instruction (MOI) branch at Wolters that taught veteran pilots how to be IPs.

I pulled into a parking spot near the main hangar and got out, carrying my flight helmet-known also as a brain bucket-by its strap. It was the same one I'd used in Nam; still had the stupid picture of Snoopy I'd painted on the back. It was battered and chipped and looked awful. I had been told to exchange it for a new one, but I considered my helmet, my Zippo, my Nikonos camera, nearly all the objects I possessed in Vietnam, talismans that had helped keep me alive. A technician at the helmet shop, who seemed to understand my superstition-or was afraid to argue with a man with hollow eyes who spoke gravely of lucky helmets-had installed new earphones, new padding, a new microphone, and a new visor for me. I saw Lineberry putting his helmet inside the plastic bubble cockpit of a Hiller and walked over.

"Hey, Gary," I said, reaching out my hand. "Been a while."

Lineberry said hi, smiling as we shook hands. "Welcome back to the world."

"Yeah. Good to be here. Really missed the place; even Wolters." I smiled, looking around at the parched, paved-over central Texas wasteland called the main heliport. "Vietnam can do that to a person."

"I've heard." Lineberry shrugged. "But you got plenty of flying, right? Who were you with?"

"First Cay Division for eight months. Finished my tour with the Forty-eighth Aviation Company."

Lineberry nodded-the First Air Cavalry was pretty famous, but the Forty-eighth wasn't. "You got Huey time, too," he said, looking envious. "How was it?"

I shrugged. Lineberry the IP would want to know about the flying and the helicopters, not about the war, not until he got there. He figured he was stuck flying these little pissant trainers while we lucky fuckers flew the big turbine-powered hot-shit Hueys. "Great. You know, great ship. Saved my ass a bunch of times."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Got shot down once-took some rounds through a fuel line. But I took hits in the rotors, fuel tank-you name it-for a year. No problem," I said coolly, while my scrotum cinched itself tight at the memories.

"The armored seats work?"

"Well," I said with a shrug, "if you get hit from the back, the sides, or from underneath, they work great. But there's nothing up front, and that's where we take a lot of hits. The Viet Cong learned the best way to shoot down Hueys is to kill the pilots."

"Great to hear." Lineberry scowled and shook his head. "I'm going over there next month."

I nodded. What was there to say to that? Be careful? I pointed to the Hiller behind him. "That our ship?"

"Yeah." Lineberry smiled suddenly. "Let's go see if you remember how to fly one of these bone bruisers."

The Huey I'd flown in Vietnam was turbine powered and had hydraulically assisted controls. The Huey was huge compared to the Hiller-it carried a crew of four and could fly with eight or ten fully equipped grunts-but controlling it was effortless. The Hiller, I was instantly reminded, was powered by a noisy six-cylinder engine and controlled with direct mechanical linkages between the flight controls and the rotors. The controls vibrated, shook, and resisted every move. When I pulled up the collective-the control that raises and lowers the helicopter-and brought the ship to a hover, the stick pushed itself up in my left hand. Right, I remember: you have to pop the collective to release the sticky control ballast system that is supposed to neutralize the collective stick forces. I popped the collective down. Now it pulled

down. It would take me a while to get used to it again, so I just let it tug for the moment. I was having enough problems with the cyclic, trying to balance the Hiller in the hover. The Hiller's cyclic-the stick between the pilot's knees-is connected, via a system of push-pull tubes and a rotating swash plate assembly, to two rotor paddles that stick out of the hub at right angles to the main rotors. The paddles are short, symmetrical wing sections on the ends of two short shafts. The idea behind Stanley Hiller's scheme was that a pilot would be strong enough to rotate these little paddles with the cyclic stick, and the paddles, in turn, would tilt the main rotors in the direction you wanted to fly using aerodynamic forces, eliminating the need for hydraulic assistance. It's really quite a clever idea. It worked, but it also doubled the normal delay in the cyclic control response that was common to all helicopters, and made the Hiller notoriously difficult to handle until you got used to it.

While I wrestled the ship into a hover, I glanced at Lineberry. He was laughing: ace Huey pilot can't fly his original trainer. The cyclic shook violently, jerking my hand around in a very rude, un-Hueylike manner. Two little tuning-fork things attached to the cyclic control system were supposed to dampen these feedback forces. I suppose they were working as well as they could. The only controls that felt reasonably normal were the foot pedals that controlled the pitch of the tail rotor, which let you point the helicopter where you wanted it to point.

The romantic memories of my first helicopter as a plucky, smooth-flying machine vanished. The Hiller was actually an ungainly, crude museum piece of a helicopter. I held it in a sort of hover, wallowing and pitching in a slight breeze, checking the tachometer and adjusting the throttle on the collective to keep the needles in the green because I'd forgotten how the engine sounded at the right RPM.

"Not bad," Lineberry said. "Let's go fly."

By the Christmas break I had been an IP for a month and Patience and I were pretty well settled. We'd rented a house in Mineral Wells, an all-American place with a garage and backyard. This was the first house we'd lived in together. We were married in 1963, just before I joined the Army. Patience and our son, Jack, had endured crummy apartments and trailers while I went through basic training, advanced infantry training, and flight school. They seldom saw me while I was a

trainee soldier, and then I went to Vietnam. Jack, two years old now, was getting used to me again. I'd been away half his life and had missed the previous Christmas. I wanted to make him a present to show him I was just a regular dad. I was home. I was going to build things, pursue hobbies, do well at work. Forget.

I wasn't thinking about Vietnam, but it was there. Awake, in quiet moments, I felt a familiar dread in the pit of my stomach, even as I angrily informed myself that I was home. Asleep, my dreams were infected by what I'd seen. The explosive jump-ups I'd been having since the last month of my tour were getting more frequent. When Patience and Jack saw me leaping off the bed, Patience would make a joke of it: "Daddy's levitating again." But it scared her. I had asked the flight surgeon about it and he said I should be okay in a couple months.

During the two-week Christmas break I spent most of my time teaching myself how to print photographs at the craft shop or building Jack's present-a rocking horse I designed, which Patience said had to be big enough for her, too-at the woodshop. I thought I could obliterate memories of Vietnam by staying so busy I couldn't think about it.

A collection of my photographs began to assemble on our dining-room wall. A few were prints of pictures I'd taken in Vietnam, but most were of abandoned farm buildings, rusted farm equipment, and stark Texas still lifes taken when Patience and Jack and I went for drives. One of the Vietnam pictures was of a second lieutenant and three of his men, tired, dirty, but alive, sitting on a paddy dike. I called it "Ghosts." Patience asked why. "Because they are all dead. Everyone we dropped off in that LZ is dead."

The photographs were technically good.

The rocking horse turned out big and sturdy. Jack named it Haysup. Why Haysup? "It's his name!" Jack said.

I was staying busy, but fear, my familiar Vietnam companion, visited me at odd moments, even times when I should've been happy. Normal people didn't have these bouts with fear. I knew that because I had been normal once, long ago. I looked forward to flight school starting again so I could lose myself in my work, shake these feelings.

I drove Patience and Jack out into the country to fetch a Christmas tree. While I chopped it down and Patience and Jack happily collected small branches to trim our house, I searched the dark places in the woods where snipers could hide.

Our students had completed the primary stage of flight training when they got to us. Their civilian instructors had taught them the basics of flying the helicopter; our job was to teach them how to use it in the field. From Wolters they would go to Fort Rucker in Alabama and learn to fly Hueys. They'd take their final exam in Vietnam. I took my work seriously because the candidates who made it through this school needed to be very good pilots to survive. The government could send these eager guys to a stupid war, but I could help them live through it.

I was standing on a rock watching one of my four students pacing off a confined area to determine the best spot for the takeoff. The Hiller chugged nearby, its collective tied down, idling. I pulled out a cigarette from my flight suit and patted my pockets for my Zippo. Left it home. Student didn't smoke. Walked over to the Hiller, put the cigarette in my mouth, and strained my head in among the chugging machinery to press the cigarette against the engine exhaust manifold. Sucked until the end glowed. Stood back, drew a deep breath of smoke, looked at the Hiller. Why'd I do that? If any of that spinning shit had grabbed my clothes, I would've been chewed up. I see chewed up: guts and brains and green tin cans; muddy snapped bones and burned-off skin; bloody crotches and empty eye sockets- "Sir, I've got it measured," student said to me, and gruesome images faded to his bright face. He turned around and told me his plan, pointing as he spoke. "I'll hover backward, following the trail of stones I laid out until I reach the marker stone-"

Right. Good, bright-faced kid had it figured out. "How far is the marker stone from the trees?"

"The length of the helicopter plus five paces, sir."

"Good. Let's try it." It was all by the numbers, but it worked. I'd gone through the same program thinking it was bullshit, this pacing business. But it actually built an indelible image of a process: getting a helicopter into a woodsy-tangled, confined area and back out again without snagging something. Confined areas would soon be known to the student as LZs-landing zones. By that time, the student wouldn't need

to pace off the clearances, putting down markers where it was safe to hover and take off. He wouldn't have time, but would be able to judge them with extreme accuracy developed by going through this drill.

We got in the Hiller and belted up. The wind was gusty. The student hovered backward along his stone trail, overcontrolling the helicopter, making it lurch and wallow, afraid he'd bump into the trees behind him. No one trusts his own stone markers the first few times. He stopped over a rock, keeping it right in front of his feet. The wind was pushing him backward toward the brush and he was wallowing, getting sloppy, losing it. He could feel the wiry mesquite branches reaching for his tail rotor. "You sure that's the right rock?" I said. Added pressure.

His knuckles were white. The Hiller seemed to fight harder in the wind. He was wondering if it was the same goddamn rock he put at the end of his hover path. Why was the IP asking if it was the right rock? Maybe I went too far, he thought. Shit! But wait. There's that cow turd next to my marker. He loved seeing that cow flop. He clicked the intercom switch on the cyclic. "Yessir. It's the one."

"Okay."

My student let the Hiller down, banged around, hitting all four points of the landing skid; tail rocked back when it squatted down on the sloping ground. Not neat, this real world compared to the paved stage fields where he learned to fly. He searched the sky, making sure we were clear of other helicopters, rolled the throttle grip to bring the Hiller up to takeoff power, pulled up the collective, jerked to a hover, and lowered the nose into takeoff position. We hit translational lift almost immediately because the wind was so strong-the rotor system suddenly became more efficient as it translated (Army term) from the churning air under the rotors to the clean air ahead of it. The Hiller jerked up, eager to fly.

The student did well. We crossed the tree line with altitude to spare. He flew over rolling Texas brush country, home to tumbleweeds and jackrabbits, toward the Brazos River Valley a half mile away. When he crossed the edge of the two-hundred-foot drop-off into the river valley, I cut the power.

He slammed the collective down. Good. Late on the collective means the rotors, angled up for powered flight, will stop and you will die. Now. Had to find a place to land. Had twenty seconds before we hit the ground. The Hiller lost 1,750 feet a minute in a glide-called an autorotation in a helicopter. Nothing but a sheer wall of

rocks and Texas brambles under him. Couldn't turn back-wouldn't make the ledge. He aimed the machine toward a sandbar in the middle of the river. I smiled. Fifty feet over the river, when I was sure he'd make it, I said "I've got it" and took control. I pulled in the power and skimmed across the sandbar.

I swooped up to the top of the far ridge of the river valley and landed on a little ledge, right in front of a wall of tall trees. The tail section of the Hiller jutted out into space. Just knowing that made you feel like you'd fall off.

"How can I get Out of here?" I said into the intercom. "Have to take off into the wind, but the trees are too tall." I glanced at the student and then looked over my shoulder. "Can't back up, we're at the edge already." I looked left and right at the trees nearly touching the rotors. "No room to turn around, even. What would you do?"

Student turned to me and said he wouldn't have landed here in the first place. I liked this student.

I nodded. "Someday you will have to land here." I rolled on the throttle and pulled up the collective to lighten the Hiller on its skids. "We will fall out of here," I said.

"Sir?" the student said, looking worried.

We rose, rearing back-falling off the cliff. When the nose cleared the ledge, I fell into the valley. The trees and the ledge sailed above us as we sank. The tail naturally wanted to swap ends as we fell backward, like an arrow tossed feathers first. I pressed the right tail-rotor pedal and we snapped around. I dove to gain airspeed. At sixty knots, I swooped up and we soared up and out of the valley. Student said, "Wow!"

I am building a model airplane, a World War I Spad. A plastic Spad from a kit. It is three-thirty in the morning. Patience and Jack went to bed six hours ago. My tongue peeks out my mouth as I concentrate. I'm sticking pieces of cellophane onto the wings to create the effect of wrinkled fabric. My model is extremely detailed, but I left the little pilot head-and-shoulder figure in the box. The cockpit is empty. I rub silver paint on the tiny instrument panel.

While the Spad dries, I look at my photographs on the wall. They look dismal to me. Sad attempts to see the world as I once saw it. Patience picks flowers, wind

blowing her hair. The gate to the old farmhouse swings as a blur, nobody there. The ghost second lieutenant is talking on his radio, full of plans. They are good, these photographs, but disturbing. I get up from the table and walk down the hall. Jack, bathed in moonlight, is tiny, his little chest breathing. Patience is beautiful; long dark hair hiding the pillow, she sprawls, taking up most of the bed. They are peaceful.

By four, the Spad's war-worn paint job is dry. I hold it and strafe the salt and pepper shakers. I'm aware that I am a grown man playing with a model airplane and that I don't make model airplanes. But it is a nice model. I take it to the corner cupboard and set it on a shelf. I stand back and admire my work, knowing I'll never do it again.

I open the cupboard to put the box of tools and glue and paint away. The top shelf is packed with bottles of bourbon my students have been giving me when they complete their cycles. Four students per cycle, one cycle every two months; lots of booze. Don't drink now. Drank some in Vietnam. Remembered how it tasted: warm canteen water and Old Granddad in a canteen cup, laughing friends. Good.

Pull Old Granddad from the shelf and put him on the table. Get glass.

Pour in three fingers of Old Granddad. Splash in water at the sink.

Drink. Asleep beside Patience by four-thirty.

Flying in from the boonies with my last student of the day, I saw that a long grassy meadow we used for autorotation practice was clear. We were at cruising altitude, five hundred feet, and my student was concentrating on getting himself into the traffic jam of returning helicopters without hitting anyone-the last thing he needed was to have the engine quit. I rolled off the throttle, cutting the power.

The strip was to our right, the wind was coming from the right, so the student bottomed the pitch and turned to the right. I still didn't know for sure if he saw the strip, but he was doing everything okay so far. He did a few shallow turns on approach to lose altitude to get on the right glide angle, and I saw he knew where he was going. I decided to let him take it all the way to the ground-a rare treat because the brass said we were breaking too many helicopters teaching pilots how to autorotate to the ground. Something flickered in my peripheral vision. I looked. A Hiller was coming down on us.

I take the controls, telling the student I've got it. In a very strange way, I don't exactly mind this. Everything is happening in slow motion. It reminds me of the feelings I used to have during the assault landings. It is instantly obvious to me that there is no way to escape collision, but I want to be flying when I die. We're both autorotating to the same spot. The other Hiller is so close that if I try to get away my rotors will tilt up into his skids when I turn. He'd lose a skid; we'd lose our rotors. Can't go down any faster; we are both descending as fast as possible--we are both autorotating. His ship descends just a little faster than ours. We will hit soon. It is almost funny: Make it through Vietnam; killed in a peaceful meadow just outside Mineral Wells, Texas. One wrong move.

We're a little off course for the strip. The student in the ship above us turns slightly to correct and sees our rotors just below him. At about a hundred and fifty feet, his ship lurches away and we are safe. Total time for event: about ten seconds.

I come to a hover on the strip. My student is pale and pissed. Why didn't they clear themselves before they started their autorotation? I ask if he'd seen them. No. Good lesson, then, on keeping better lookout. He stares at me, nodding slightly.

It made a good story to tell my fellow instructor pilots back at the flight room. I jazzed it up with gestures and smiles, to make sure everybody knew I was scared shitless. They laughed. Been there, Bob.

It was Friday, so I decided to take both my flight suits home to wash. Grabbing my alternate flight suit that had been hanging in my locker for two weeks, I felt a bulge in one of the leg pockets. Zipped it open and found a thumb-sized barrel cactus wrapped in a slip of paper from my grade book. Ah, that was from that confined area on top of that hill toward Palo Pinto, I thought. I marveled at the plant, healthy and happy even in a stinking pocket. I took it home for Patience.

Patience liked the cactus. She put it in a pot and set it in the window. I was happy she liked little things.

Saturday morning we drove fifty miles to Fort Worth. We did this almost every Saturday: got a box of Kentucky Fried Chicken and ate it in a park. Went to the Fort Worth zoo and watched caged animals stare back, nutty and distracted. (We once saw a woman strenuously making faces at a gorilla, trying to get its attention. After watching her awhile, the gorilla gave her four bored claps and turned away.) Jack really liked the zoo. We rode in a miniature train that made him laugh. Patience rode

the merry-go-round. Dinner was usually at Jimmy Dips, a Chinese place. We were on the road to Mineral Wells by nine or ten. Every Saturday, almost.

Sundays were quiet. I read, or worked on short stories. I wrote stories and thought of having them published someday. This Sunday I sat in a chair in the bedroom, reading. Suddenly my heart leapt and jerked. I sprang up, threw the book on the floor, and breathed out hard. I felt like I was dying.

"Patience," I hollered, "I must be having a heart attack." She rushed me to Beach Army Hospital, Jack in the back of the car. I took deep breaths with my face next to the air conditioner vents.

I explained what had happened. The flight surgeon felt my pulse and smiled. Funny stuff? "No," he said, "you've been hyperventilating."

"What's that?"

"You're accumulating more oxygen than you need because you're breathing wrong."

"Breathing wrong?" Been breathing for twenty-five years.

"Tension, maybe," the doctor said. "Next time you feel like this, try breathing in and out of a paper bag. That'll increase your carbon dioxide level and the feeling will go away."

Simple stuff. Drink myself to sleep at night and breathe out of paper bag to make it through the day. Could be worse: just met a classmate, Wavey Sharp, best-looking guy in our class, but not anymore; his face was burned away in Vietnam.

Hughes trainers were falling out of the sky and no one knew why. Only helicopters with instructors were crashing; solo students weren't going down. No clues. The ships were found, what was left of them, pointing straight down. Veteran instructor pilots and their students suddenly dove to the ground and ended up as wet stuff in the wreckage. A guy in the flight unit who found one of these mangled messes cried about it.

An IP radioed while crashing. In the few seconds he had left on the planet he said that if you push the cyclic stick forward in autorotation, the Hughes's nose tucked down and the controls didn't work- A few weeks later, a test pilot at the Hughes factory in Culver City,

California, took a Hughes up very high and tried duplicating the condition. The dead guy was right. The Hughes tucked and stayed there, straining like a dowsing rod to reach the ground. The Hughes test pilot (wearing a parachute) tried using the opposite control-pushed the cyclic forward. Worked. The Hughes came out of the dive, taking fifteen hundred feet to recover. They sent the word back to us: don't let your students push the cyclic forward in autorotation, and demonstrate the recovery to all Hughes instructors. Hoots in our Hiller flight room. Autorotations were done at five hundred feet, Pete. See it now: Peter Pilot pulls out of dive a thousand feet underground. Comical stuff.

My flight commander told me I had been selected to cross-train into the Hughes. I will fly a regular student load and learn Hughes in my off time. An honor, he said; he respected my flying skill.

Methods of Instruction again. Lineberry was gone. To Vietnam. A warrant officer pro-instructor took me out and tried to impress on me

how nifty this little piece-of-shit helicopter was. Showed me the seven rubber belts that connected the engine to the transmission; claimed the system could operate even when only two belts were left. I nodded. We flew. Hughes buzzed a lot, but it was very maneuverable. I had trouble with the pedals. The tail rotor was too small and it was hard to move the tail around in strong wind. There was very little inertia in the lightweight main rotors, which made autorotations snappier, less forgiving of small errors than the Hiller. Pro-instructor climbed to three thousand feet and said, "You're supposed to see this." He cut the power and nudged the cyclic forward. Whap! Little shit dumped over on its nose. My goofy, friendly Hiller would never do that. (You can stop a Hiller on its tail during autorotation, slide backward, and then dump the nose down, accelerate, and get to where you're going-something you might have to do if you're already on top of the best spot to land, which you cannot do in a Hughes.) "Recovery is simple," pro-instructor said as we hurtled out of sky. "Just give the cyclic forward pressure, wait until the nose starts to come back up, and then resume normal control." He did that and the Hughes came out of kamikaze landing approach. Fun, but academic.

"Autorotations are always done from five hundred feet," I said.

Pro-instructor shrugged. "You won't be able to recover from five hundred feet, but this demonstration will make it hard to forget to keep your student from pushing the cyclic forward." Good point. Still haven't forgotten.

Two weeks later, when I finished the cross-training, my flight commander called me in again. They needed a substitute instructor in a Hughes flight-just one day. Just one day with that flight. But there was always a flight that needed a substitute. I now had a double load of work. I thought of the flight commander as an asshole.

I was having trouble at home. I drank more every night to get to sleep. I slept, but woke up exhausted. Argued with Patience-always cooked the same meals; sometimes forgot to cook at all; she wasn't sticking to our budget. Jack wanted to play.

Jack was learning to count. Sometimes I paid attention to his interests, but mostly not. He and I had a counting game. I held up my index finger and said, "One." Then I held up two fingers, "Two." And so on, until I popped up my thumb and said, "Five." He said he understood. We practiced: one, two, three, four, five. He said the right number when I added a finger. He understood. Quick-witted little guy. I held up my fist and raised my thumb. "Five," Jack said. Ah. Each finger was a number to Jack. We would have to work on this.

But I didn't. At least not very often. I didn't play with Jack enough, I didn't talk to Patience enough. I was drifting around in a fog of internalizations, talking to myself, fighting demons that kept coming back. Things just popped into my mind that I didn't want to see. I'm sitting alone in the living room at two A.M. I see twenty-one men trussed in a row, ropes at their ankles, hands bound under their backs-North Vietnamese prisoners. A sergeant, his face twisted with anger, stands at the first prisoner's feet. The North Vietnamese prisoner stares back, unblinking. The sergeant points a .45 at the man. He kicks the prisoner's feet suddenly. The shock of the impact jostles the prisoner inches across the ground. The sergeant fires the .45 into the prisoner's face. The prisoner's head bounces off the ground like a ball slapped from above, then flops back into the gore that was his brains. The sergeant turns to the next prisoner in the line.

"He tried to get away," says a voice at my side.

"He can't get away; he's tied!"

"He moved. He was trying to get away."

The next prisoner says a few hurried words in Vietnamese as the sergeant stands over him. When the sergeant kicks his feet, the prisoner closes his eyes. A bullet shakes his head.

"It's murder!" I hiss to the man at my side.

"They cut off Sergeant Rocci's cock and stuck it in his mouth. And the same with five of his men," the voice says. "After they spent the night slowly shoving knives into their guts. If you had been here to hear the screams-they screamed all night. This morning they were all dead, all gagged with their cocks. This isn't murder; it's justice."

Another head bounces off the ground. The shock wave hits my body.

"They sent us to pick up twenty-one prisoners," I plead.

"You'll get 'em. They'll just be dead, is all."

The sergeant moves down the line, stopping prisoners who try to escape. The line of men grows longer than it had been, and the sergeant grows distant. His face glows red and the heads bounce. And then he looks up at me. I jump out of the chair and get a drink.

I decided we should take a weekend trip to New Orleans with friends, Ray Welch and his wife. I felt excited about the trip, thought it would be the break I needed-it would distract me from my memories. Hadn't been away from the post except to go to my sister's wedding in Florida one weekend without Patience. My sister, Susan, asked me to wear my dress blues with medals. For Susan, I put on the bellhop uniform and medals. Drunk asked me, where was my flag? Loud. People all looked at the geek Army guy-one of the guys losing the war. I walked away. Now, though, I'll be with Patience and my friend, Ray; and we won't wear Army stuff.

Missed the plane to New Orleans Friday night. Spent the night in a cheap Fort Worth hotel, laughing and drinking. Caught a plane the next morning, checked into a medium-priced (dumpy) hotel. The fun of the previous night wore thin. Wondered what I was doing in New Orleans. See the sights, Patience said. We got a cab, told the driver to take us to the sights.

Got out at an old park. Feeling bad. Held my breath because I didn't want Ray to see me breathe into a paper bag-too embarrassing. We walked to an ancient graveyard; I dropped back from the others, feeling faint. Squatted, head between

knees, on the sidewalk. Patience comforted me. I stood up and walked inside the cemetery. Sank to my knees on the grass, inside cool walls, beside quiet vaults.

Made it to a sidewalk cafe as if it were a desperate mission. Sucked down whiskey, shaking. Four whiskies later, not shaking. Back to normal, telling funny stories. "Man," I said, "Don't know what that was all about, but I'm feeling fine now." I smiled. Ray and his wife looked relieved.

I needed to snap out of this feeling of depression. I took a Hiller out by myself one Saturday. I flew the riverbed alone, swooping from clifftops to the valley floor and up to the other side. I felt okay in my helicopter.

I autorotated into the same place my student and I had the near-collision. Picked up to a high hover and floated slowly across a grassy ravine to a field, savoring the magic of levitation. No other helicopters were in sight. I put the toe of the left skid on top of a fence post and twirled around it. I practiced keeping the tail into the wind, hard to

do smoothly. I turned around and saw a deer, a stag, bounding two hundred yards away, running to the tree line.

Dump nose and pursue. Intercept deer crossing the last clearing before the trees.

Deer veers away, leaping rocks, bushes, and ditches-eyes wide. Fly beside the running deer, alone, unaware of the helicopter strapped to me. Slide in front, facing the deer.

Deer turns. I block.

Deer stops for second, stares at the clamorous, hideous thing chasing it; stumbles backward, spins around to make an escape. No good. I'm there, too.

Deer sags, legs spread out. Chest heaves. Tongue hangs out from exhaustion. I back away, inviting it to run again.

C'mon, run! You asshole!

Deer stares, eyes glazed, immobile.

I have beaten this deer.

I'd been at Wolters for over a year. Coming into the main heliport with my last student of the day, I took the controls after the student came to a hover at the landing pad, because of the traffic. Hundreds of helicopters hovering to their parking spots made hundreds of rotor-wash storms, so the helicopters were tricky to control. The machine wanted to skitter off with every gust. My hands and feet moved the controls automatically, compensating. The Hiller hovered between spinning rotors, jittery, like a thoroughbred being led through a crowd.

Almost to the parking slot, I feel the helicopter tilt backward and immediately push the cyclic forward. Wrong. Not tilting back. I can see that, but it still feels like we're tilting back. I force myself to concentrate, ignore the feeling, fly reality. But the feeling is unshakable. Which is real? Bad time to experiment with relativity, so I tell the student "You got it" as I hover into the parking spot. Student says, "I got it." Good student. Figures asshole IP is fucking with him again; probably wondering if IP will cut the power while he tries to park. Student sets the Hiller down like a pro.

Drive to the flight surgeon after leaving the student (he got an excellent grade), still dizzy. Flight surgeon impressed. No flying.

They decided to watch me for a month to see if I got dizzy again. The flight commander put me in charge of our pickup truck. I drove it out to the stage fields and helped in the control towers, keeping track of the ships as they checked in, made coffee. Gofer work. I felt horrible. No flying? That's why I joined the Army. I went to the flight surgeon. Told him I felt great, sleeping like a fucking log. He believed me. I was back in the air two weeks after I was grounded.

Two months later it happened again. This time I was cruising straight and level, felt the ship rolling when it was not. My student landed, never knowing his IP was fucked up. This time I was grounded until they could find out what was wrong.

What is wrong? shrink asks. Dunno. Have a real hard time sleeping. Don't sleep.

"Do you have dreams?"

"Patience asks if I'm dreaming when I jump up all night. I dream, but I can't remember them-except one. But I'm never able to tell her this dream. I tell her I don't dream anything."

"What's it about?" shrink asks.

"I'm not sure where I am, but every morning a truck comes-"

"What truck?"

"A truck loaded with dead babies."

"You've seen this-in Vietnam?"

"No. I've seen lots of dead babies, but not loaded in trucks."

"Continue, please."

"The truck comes. I have to open the back door; I know what's out there, but I still go to the door. It's always the same. The driver backs the truck to the door and says, 'How many do you want?' He points to the pile of dead babies. I always gag at the sight. They all look dead, but then I see an eyelid blink in the pile, then another."

"That's it?"

Feeling bad; seeing it. "No. I always answer, 'Two hundred pounds, Jake.' I laugh when I say it. Jake picks up a pitchfork and stabs it into the pile and drops a couple of corpses on a big scale. 'Nearly ten pounds a head,' he says. Inside my head, I'm yelling for him to stop, that the babies aren't dead, but Jake just keeps loading the scale. Each time he stabs a kid, it squirms on the fork, but Jake doesn't notice."

Shrink watches me awhile. "That's the end?"

"Yes."

"What do you think the dream means?"

"I was hoping you'd tell me."

"I'm more interested in what you think it means."

"I don't know."

The shrink sent me to Fort Sam Houston for loony tests. Fort Sam is a big medical post and the Army's burn treatment center. In a hallway I saw many Vietnam veterans, kids with their faces burned off. New pink skin grafts were stretched over stunted noses. The public never saw this-bad for the war effort. I felt terrible; I was whole. Why was I here?

Diagnosis: combat neurosis. They prescribed Valium, so I could not fly. My new medical profile said: Aviator may not be assigned to duty in combat area. They were shipping pilots back to Vietnam every day. My new profile was known as the "million-dollar ticket" at Wolters, but I wanted to fly. Without flying, the Army was a drag.

They found out I wrote stories. I told them, yes, I had many rejection slips to prove it. They assigned me to MOI as a platform instructor. I helped write the syllabus and gave lectures about being an IP. I worked with a captain, Robert Giraudo. Just the

two of us ran the whole IP ground-school training sessions and had fun doing it. Giraudo eventually made major but turned in his resignation. He said the Army was getting old. Giraudo was okay.

A year later, when they asked me if I was staying (I was getting near the end of my three-year obligation) I said no. The head of the MOI branch thought I was good in MOI and offered me a direct commission as a real officer, a regular Army captain, if I stayed. No.

Out-process. Debrief. Gone. Leave in Volvo packed to brim. Go toward Fort Worth like a Saturday trip, but won't come back for twenty years. See helicopters flying over a butte; blink a lot.

Chapter Two

When I'd dropped out of the University of Florida in 1962, I had a grade point average of 1.2. To be readmitted and to resume my major in fine arts, I had to be sponsored by the chairman of the art department, Eugene Grissom. Grissom saw little point in my continuing-who would?-but agreed to sponsor me if I maintained a 3.0 average.

In June 1968 I was once again a college sophomore. I was seven years older than most sophomores. I was married and had a son. I was a veteran of a war still being waged. We moved into a married-student apartment on campus at Schucht Village in Gainesville. I'd gotten a lot of D's and had to take several of my undergraduate classes over-mathematics, history, and English.

When I stood in line at registration, I couldn't believe what silly-simple shit civilians worried about. These people pissed and moaned if they couldn't get a morning class, or if Friday afternoon got busy, or if some crap-course was filled. I had seen grunts infested with intestinal worms, living in swamps, eating crap, dying young, their brains splattered in the mud, their intestines spilled into their laps. Hey! You think this is a problem?

Every evening, sipping bourbon, I watched the news. Usually they showed a five-minute Vietnam segment: firefight, lots of smoke; wounded grunts, battered and bloody, being loaded onto a Huey.

Looked like my Huey. That film was shot the day before. They were still there, still dying for no good reason, and nobody cared. Die, and get ten seconds on national television; wounded, less.

A machine gun crackled on television.

My gunner is shooting, walking the bullets across the rice paddy to a crowd of people concealing a Viet Cong gunner who's been knocking helicopters out of the sky. I tell him to walk the bullets-give the villagers a chance to run. He does, but they don't run. I see them close up as the bullets hit. The old woman with black teeth says something to me, then screams. There is no sound. Her wrinkled hand holds a child's smooth arm. The child hangs lifeless and drags the old woman down. She moves slowly, like she is falling through water. The people around her gasp silently and flinch and fall. The machine gun stutters from a distant place. They fall slowly to the ground, bounce, dying and dead. The old woman is saying something, but I can't hear. When I see her lips moving, I realize she is saying, "It's okay

Electricity jolts down my spine.

Calm down.

I swallow a gulp of bourbon.

Your war is over.

Fit in.

Wake up. Get out of bed. Waves of fear shoot through my head. Walk to kitchen, eyes swollen slits. Pour three fingers of Old Granddad. Swig that down, watching cars filled with lucky commuters bored senseless on Archer Road. Another Old Granddad. Feel fine now. Arrive at eight o'clock English class with warm whiskey sloshing mercifully through my brain. No one notices. Alcohol is good; it enables me to appear normal among normal people.

During my previous student career, my English composition teachers had been myopically interested in grammar. I thought they missed the point-grammar's important, but look what I'm saying. My new English teacher, Yvonne Dell, though interested in grammar, was more interested in my stories.

One story, "Keith's Ridge," is about a teenage kid who sits and stares at grass waving in the breeze a little too long. He starts to see a pattern in the waves, starts to see the pattern as the signs of an invisible

entity. When he follows this thing to Keith's Ridge, he is pushed and tugged by strong swirls of wind. He takes the grabbing and pushing as caresses of acceptance right up until he's flung off the cliff. Great story. Dell liked it, asked me if I ever tried to sell anything. I said I'd sent in that one, got a very nice rejection slip. You only tried once? she asked. Yep. I figure these guys know good stuff when they see it. Dell said I should keep trying. I had talent.

I got an A in English-my first in college. I did well in all my classes, finishing my first quarter with a 3.2 average. Grissom was pleased.

My major was fine arts, and within fine arts, I began to specialize in photography. I had won an Anny photography contest with one of my prints. I thought photography might be the talent to replace flying. My instructor was Jerry Uelsmann. I'd seen him around when I was here the first time. He was just the photography instructor in 1962; now he was a celebrity in the art world, famous for his surreal pictures. He called his technique "post-visualization," which meant he composed his photographs after collecting many negatives and then combined them in one flawless print. Uelsmann had the highest technical abilities, but that's not what sold his pictures-they're magically arresting images, photographs that Magritte might have made-boulders float over the sea; women are embraced by incandescent spheres. Unlike Uelsmann, I did "now-visualization." I liked putting the picture together in the viewfinder. There is one magic point of view that feels right, makes a picture work, and I was finding them. Uelsmann said he liked my stuff: pictures of empty park benches and abandoned toys, empty houses. He said he liked the emotion in them. I was communicating. I got top grades in his class.

I never used the school's darkrooms to make my prints. I preferred to work alone in the three-by-six-foot closet in our apartment I'd converted into a darkroom. When I came home from classes, I disappeared into this unventilated sweatbox with a bottle of whiskey, and printed photographs. When Patience had people over to visit, I stayed in the closet.

It was getting difficult to concentrate, difficult to see what the point was: these photographs, going to school. Not enough whiskey to make sense of it. Half a quart a day was not enough; was still jumpy; couldn't

think; couldn't sleep; was getting worse. Shrink at Wolters had said I could go to the Veterans Administration and get Valium if I needed it. But, he said, "You should be fine after you get out. Being in the Army with the threat of going back to Vietnam is your problem." Wrong. I was out of the Army, couldn't go to Vietnam. Was still nuts. I went to the VA hospital to get Valium. Not so fast; we have procedures here. Had to be evaluated. Evaluation: talk to shrink for two hours.

I kept seeing student demonstrators on campus yelling about soldiers doing the wrong thing going to Vietnam. I got mad. Why, shiny-faced, draft-deferred twerps, are you sending them?

Patience was working nights to supplement the \$145 a month I got on the GI Bill to go to school. It would've been \$125 a month, but I had a wife and kid to support, so I got a twenty-dollar bonus for Jack and Patience. The GI Bill didn't pay for the books, supplies, and the tuition like it did after World War II. (The rate and extent of our benefits was established by World War II veterans who thought we were using rubber bullets and special effects in Vietnam. Getting wounded or killed in this wimpy war just wasn't as serious as it was in World War II.) Patience slept late. I waited for her to get up and make lunch. She made tuna fish salad better than I did, I told her.

Was drinking almost quart a day. Kids showed me marijuana at parties. Made me cough.

End of second quarter, grades dropped. Grissom said I'd better shape up soon. Grissom was right. Grissom was a veteran of World War II; he knew what was going on.

Veterans Administration sent me the results of my evaluation: I was fifty percent disabled for nervousness. I was afraid to tell anyone about my wimp disability. VA sent a check, back pay from the day I left the Army, invited me to come in for treatment:

What did you do in Vietnam?

Flew assault helicopters in the First Cay Division.

Dangerous?

Well, yeah- How did you get along with your mother?

Huh?

Gave me Valium. Took five, six a day; drank the whiskey; smoked the pot. The Valium calmed me down, but only if I used it with the rest of the drugs.

I kept up my photography. One of the students at Schucht Village, a doctor named Merle Preble, asked me if I would show my pictures at the VA where he did some intern work. I put together a one-man show at the VA hospital library. Not a big deal, this show, but I watched a woman cry at one of my photographs and got a peek at the power of communication.

The leathery cadavers in the dissection lab weren't what I was looking for; they weren't human anymore, just objects kept in tanks of chemicals you studied to see how people are put together. I wanted to see the morgue.

Preble pushed open a heavy metal door, the kind you see on walk-in coolers. Inside the frigid room, feeble lavender light from ultraviolet lamps flickered, barely piercing the gloom. The floor was jammed with gurneys crowded every which way, burdened with bodies covered with strangely hazy glowing sheets. Naked dead people, hunched over inside big plastic bags hung along the wall, seemed to glower at me for staring.

Uelsmann assigned us the theme of death to explore with pictures. I'd seen lots of men slaughtered and it looked painful. I was afraid of it, so I thought this assignment might help me overcome my fear. I photographed myself, whitened with talcum powder, arms clasped on my chest, lying as if in state, so I could see what I would look like in the coffin. Pretty gruesome, but not very real. I asked Preble to get me into the medical school's dissection laboratories and morgue with my camera. He said sure, and we went to the hospital late one night.

"Who are they?" I asked, looking at the people in the bags.

"Regular people. Died in the hospital," Preble said. He looked at me. "You okay?"

"Yeah." I was feeling weak, but I wanted to fight through it.

"Can you photograph in here?" Preble asked. "It's real dark."

I pointed my meter at the wall, at a man in a bag. His arms were together in front of him, his head slumped forward. I could feel him decaying. The cold room smelled sweet and stale. Concentrating on my work, I moved inside, squeezing between gurneys. The meter said it was real dark; I would have to use a slow shutter speed. I took a couple of shots of the man. I thought I saw his face move when the shutter clicked. My hand brushed a sheet and I felt heat. I jerked away and looked at Preble. "This one's still warm!"

He nodded, pulled down the sheet. I saw a little girl, about twelve, lying in the death light as though she were asleep. "Want to-"

"No," I said quickly. I was suddenly overcome with the same horrible feeling that I'd had in Vietnam, that I was violating privacy. I had taken one picture of a dead grunt and agonized about it for years. I could hear the people in this room telling me, whispering: This is private stuff, Bob. "I think I've seen enough."

Actually, more than enough. I was a wreck for days afterward. I never printed the photographs and got my first C in photography.

Near the end of my third quarter I got a letter from a friend of ours, Frank Aguilera, an anthropology student who was studying a remote country village in Spain to get his Ph.D. Frank said to come see him and his wife, Barbie. The idea that school would get me back on track was proving to be wrong. The graph of my grades was diving southeast. Grissom was disgusted with me. I decided to drop out at the end of the quarter and go to Spain for a while.

Patience was terrified. Just pick up and move to Spain? Now? No!

I told her I had to do something, school sure wasn't working. She eventually agreed. With the money the VA sent me and that which we gathered by selling our car and other belongings, I got together the sum of \$1,654, enough to get the three of us to Luxembourg, where I'd buy a used car and drive to Spain. Once there, I figured we could live in Spain on my disability payments of \$145 a month. Hell, we might never come back.

Chapter Three

March 1969-Luxembourg. Kicking tires at used-car places, I found a brown 1954 Volkswagen, rumpled, ancient; but the engine sounded good. Needed tires, but I thought they'd get us to Spain. By the time we got to France, we had named it the Roach. We drove to the village of Almonaster la Real, Spain, in two days.

Frank and Barbie were happy to see us and we stayed up late talking about the old days at the University of Pennsylvania, where I'd first met them while visiting Patience. Actually, I was visiting Patience's boyfriend, James Elliott, a friend I'd known in Florida. I was a drifter then, a college dropout living in a Chevy panel truck, and they liked me anyway. Patience had introduced me to her friends, who included Frank and Barbie and Bill Smith and Emily Arnold, each couple now married.

When Frank and Barbie asked me about Vietnam, I said the Army really was like Catch-22 and told them about Mo'Fuck the mongoose who used to fly around with us and earned several air medals. Funny stuff. I didn't want people, even friends, to think I was affected by Vietnam. You ever see a picture of John Wayne having problems after any of his wars?

I loved Almonaster Ia Real. Nothing about it reminded me of anything I'd ever seen before. The place was ancient-Frank showed me records of the village putting in their water system before 1490. The adobe walls of the white buildings were crusted thick with centuries

of continuous whitewashing. The stones in many of the narrow streets were the same stones the Romans put there-the wonder of it: imagine, an actual Roman put that very stone right there. The houses were dimly lit with one or two fifteen-watt light bulbs because people had yet to become dependent on electricity. There were only a few televisions in the entire village of four hundred people, one of them at Bar Buenos Alres, where a crowd gathered every night to watch Mission Impossible and I Love Lucy in Spanish.

That first night, Frank took me to the Casino, a private club at the center of town, which, as far as I could tell, was open to anyone who had money for a drink unless

the person was a Gypsy or a woman. He introduced me to the village's busiest entrepreneur, Jose Garcia Romero (Pepe, for short), who operated two bars, the butane distributorship, and anything else that turned a profit; Pepe's friend Crazy Marcus; Jose Maria (Maria Jose's brother), who wanted to do construction work in Germany; Juan Picado, the stonemason; Pepe Hole-in-the-Head, who actually had a nickel-wide crater in his forehead from having a tumor removed; Fernando the incredibly naive teenager; Don Blas, the doctor who could read English but not speak it; and more. They invited me to eat some tapas of ancient ham (some hams are twenty years old or more; I actually ate some hundred-year-old ham that had crystallized) and drink some of the region's favorite booze, aguardiente, which Frank told me (Frank translated for me because I speak Spanish worse than you do) meant "firewater." Frank warned me about it, which only piqued my professional interest. Pepe poured some crystal-clear aguardiente halfway up a small glass and filled the rest with water. When he added water, the aguardiente turned milky white. The stuff tasted like licorice, and I really wanted bourbon, but bourbon was unknown here. After the first one, I slugged down the drinks as fast as they served them. Soon I was having fun. I got along fine with the people. They were impressed at how badly I spoke Spanish and how much I could drink. When Frank and I left, I was staggering drunk. When we got back to Frank's place, I walked through his house, out onto the back veranda, and puked over the railing.

In a few weeks, my friends at Almonaster la Real learned to understand my version of Spanish. I could follow their conversations pretty well, but couldn't say much back without a lot of pantomiming and multiple-choice guessing.

Frank and I went to the Casino every night. He was working on his doctoral dissertation, documenting everyday life in the village. I was just there trying to be a Spaniard. Pepe usually tended bar. Men would gather after dinner and swap gossip, brag of adulterous adventures, and spin stories.

Fernando the incredibly naive teenager came in one night and said "I just discovered something you won't believe!" his face bright with wonder. We thought he'd discovered gold, found a diamond, won the lottery or something. He got everybody's attention and explained to us his discovery: if you hold your dick just so, said Fernando, and then rub your hand up and down, like this, it will get real hard and then, if you keep doing it, you will feel a very wonderful feeling, he said, a

feeling so good it's impossible to describe! It will make your eyes pop! People looked around, the Spaniards shrugging at Frank and me, hoping we wouldn't make generalizations of the Spanish based on Fernando, and then everybody burst out laughing. We bought Fernando drinks and said he'd discovered a mighty fine thing all right.

The villagers were also very fond of tricks, what I call after-dinner magic. Pepe had a trick. He would invite the crowd to arrange all the dominoes in the box on the bar in a legal array-only matching numbers touching each other-while he was out of the room. When someone shouted that we'd finished, he'd call out the beginning and ending domino faces of the chain. It was a terrific mind-reading routine, a simple trick that I never figured out until Pepe told me: he took one of the dominoes with him. The two faces of that piece would necessarily be the two ending faces of the domino chain we'd constructed because of the way domino sets are made.

Pepe's best, though, was this: he swiped a fly out of the air and put it into a glass filled with water. He turned the glass upside down on his palm and the fly floated up to the bottom of the glass.

"The fly is drowning," he said with the voice of a man twice his size, looking sad, his wiseass expression shining through.

"That's a fact," I said, watching the fly struggling, trying to claw through the glass, moving slower and slower.

When the fly stopped struggling, Pepe said, "Poor fly. Drowned while minding his own business. I feel terrible at the brutal things I can do."

Everyone laughed. Pepe turned the glass right side up. When the fly floated to the top, he touched it with his finger and the sopping fly stuck to it. He put the fly on the bar top, where it lay in a little puddle of water. Pepe shook his head sadly and stared at the tiny corpse. "Pobrecito." He shrugged and tapped an ash from his cigarette onto it. "At least I can give it a proper burial, eh?"

"Yes, you owe him that!" someone who'd seen the trick insisted.

Pepe nodded. "More, please. More ashes for the fly."

We all flicked ashes on the fly until a little gray burial mound heaped over it.

The fly buried, Pepe suggested we fill up our glasses and drink a toast to the fallen aviator. We all did. "You know," Pepe said, "I feel terrible about this. If it were in my power, I would take back what I've done. I would restore life to this innocent bug."

Pepe looked seriously into the distance as if communing with God. His face brightened suddenly and he said, "I will!" He bent down and put his face close to the miniature grave and gently blew away the ashes a little at a time. "Come, little one; come back to life." The fly's wings rustled in Pepe's breath. He picked it up by one wing, set it on his palm, and softly blew air at it for a few minutes. Everyone who hadn't seen this routine stared, amazed. It moved, by God! It stood up, Jesus! It cleaned itself for a few seconds, buzzed its wings experimentally, and flew away.

When the Casino closed at about two in the morning, Frank and I often walked with Pepe back to his place on the road at the entrance to the village. Pepe had his own little open-air bar there, which his wife, Incarna, usually handled while he tended the Casino. Frank and I got into an argument one night on the way to Pepe's and lingered outside the Casino, yelling about something. It was one of those arguments that no one can remember the next day. The local cop, Rudolfo, and a Guardia came over to us, smiling. I had grown accustomed to the Guardia Civil, the state police, who seemed to be everywhere, though at first I was wary of them. They looked menacing in their long green capes and patent leather hats. They packed Walther 9mm pistols and sawed-off shotguns under the capes. The Guardia Civil had the power of summary justice, meaning they could blow you away with impunity if you fucked up and called Franco a queer. They didn't do it often, but they could. The Guardia joined us as we argued while at the same time tactfully moving us to the edge of town.

Standing near a streetlight on the main road, I saw the Guardia's pistol peeking out from his cape and asked him what kind it was, noticing I had no trouble speaking Spanish when I was drunk enough. He smiled, pulled it out of his holster, and held it up. "A Walther PPK," he said.

"Standard issue?" I said, reaching out and snatching it from him. It got very quiet as I inspected the Guardia's pistol. Rudolfo stared at me, his eyes wide. "Robert," he said, "you should not grab a Guardia's gun. It. . . it is not polite."

"Huh?" I looked at the Guardia and saw the worried look on his face. I still didn't understand my transgression, but I handed back his pistol saying, "Nice piece. Same one James Bond uses."

On the way back to Frank's, he explained to me that I was an asshole who had come "that close" to getting shot.

I didn't just hang out and drink in Almonaster. I wanted to be a writer, and living in Spain, not having to work, was a good time to give it a try. So, in addition to drinking, I worked on a short story about a band of primitives who discover a fundamental method for time travel. When I finished the story, we found out that Bill Smith and his wife, Emmy, were in Portugal. We all decided to go visit for the Fourth of July.

The Smiths had rented a place overlooking the Mediterranean. Bill, a genial, freckle-faced Huckleberry Finn-looking guy who I remembered as a terrific cheater in Monopoly at Penn, was now a writer. That they were staying on the coast in a big house was just how I expected writers to live.

To celebrate the Fourth of July, we had a fireworks war in the house. Girls against boys. We threw firecrackers like grenades at each other. Made a lot of noise, and since the Portuguese (except those who celebrate every day anyway) don't honor our independence, people noticed. When we started a small brush fire (the battle had moved outside), the police arrived. We threw buckets of water, which Jack, who was five and just came up to my waist, pumped out of a cistern, on the flames and put the fire out while Smith, speaking slick Portuguese, convinced the police to leave us alone. The man has a silver tongue.

Before we went back to Spain, I showed Bill my time-travel story. He read it and said it was good; just needed a little rewriting, was all. I took that as a polite way of saying I had some talent, and if I worked

at it I might torture the stupid story into something bearable. I figured real writers just sat down and wrote the final draft-rewriting was for amateurs.

Spain. I'm walking along the road with Frank. We see a dog lying on the shoulder. I go to it and it wags its tail slightly, but I can see its back is broken. I'm outraged: these fucking people will just let a dog lie here dying? Where's the owner? Where's the vet? Pepe comes over and says someone has to kill the dog, but no one wants to and the vet is gone. You, Pepe says, have to kill the dog. Me? It's not my dog. No one else will, Pepe says, smiling the way people do when they've stuck someone else with a moral dilemma. I squat by the dog and talk to it and it wags its tail, and I'm feeling sick. I stroke the dog. "Good girl. Good dog. You'll be okay." Someone hands

me a sledgehammer. A hammer? That's the best we can do? A fucking hammer? They nod. I'm holding the hammer. Everybody begins to leave. Everybody's gone. I have to kill this dog. I'm talking to the dog, but the dog senses something is up and rolls its eyes nervously, its tail slapping the ground. I say goddammit to myself a hundred times and curse the Spaniards and swing the hammer like a golf club and smash the dog's head right after I said she'd be all right.

Everybody buys me drinks at the Casino, but I'm pissed off; I'm shaking. Fernando comes in and tells me the dog didn't die. I jump up. He quickly adds that someone else finished her off.

The Aguileras were packing up to resume life in the States. Barbie left a month before Frank to get their house ready while Frank finished his research. When Frank left, we stayed. I wasn't ready to go home yet. We rented a small house next to Escopeta's General Store on Ramon y Cajal, an ancient Roman road near the center of town.

I pecked at stories. Patience shopped and learned how to cook Spanish food.

Jack knew everybody and spoke Spanish like a native. I saw him run into Bar Buenos Aires one afternoon while I was there. He didn't see me. His friends stayed in the street, too shy to come in without their parents. Jack—who was allowed by everybody to do anything he wanted—swaggered over to the counter and tapped a duro—a Spanish nickel—on top, demanding a chupa, a lollipop. His head was a foot lower than the countertop. Jose Manuel, the owner of the bar, leaned over, grinned, and handed Jack some chupas and took the coin. Jack walked outside and gave each of his friends a candy and they ran off together, a regular little mob of street urchins.

Jack accepted Almonaster as home with the aplomb of a five-year-old. When Patience and I went to Morocco, we left him in the village with Escopeta's family, the owners of the grocery. Jack was especially good friends with Escopeta's son, Manolo, but he was in love with Escopeta's teenage daughter, Manole. She spoiled him with attention. When we came back a week later with an English couple we'd befriended on the trip, the village kids, dirty faces, short pants, big smiles, swarmed around the Roach, laughing and yelling. Patience pointed out one of the kids as our son. Our new friends were amazed.

This expatriate stuff was getting old. America was in the news- Neil Armstrong had just landed on the moon (most people thought that was great, but one old sage at the Casino warned that it was all done in a studio, with actors and a model lunar lander). As much as I was immersed in the Spanish culture, I missed the States. That was difficult to accept. I had no respect for the political system that created Vietnam, yet I missed the country and the people. The point of this visit, to forget Vietnam and to recover my sanity, was not working. My writing was getting nowhere because I lacked the faith that I could do it. I was drinking a quart of booze a day.

In October 1969, Patience got a letter saying her father had died. The news came when we both wanted to go home. I phoned my dad and borrowed traveling money. We drove to Lisbon to catch a Yugoslavian freighter home. The Roach, which I'd figured would be dead by now, was still running great. Selling it in Spain meant a lot of paperwork and import taxes. The shipping company said it would cost two hundred dollars to bring it with us. We loaded it on the ship.

The Yugoslavian freighter took two weeks to sail from Lisbon to New York because of bad weather. We were three of the twelve passengers on board. We sailed through storms that sank other freighters, tankers, and seagoing tugs. Waves bashed into the superstructure, crashing against the passengers' portholes. Jack got thrown across the main stateroom, sitting in a giant wooden chair, looking very surprised.

Patience weathered the storm in her bunk, sick. I took photographs, making time exposures of the waves crashing against the portholes. I was sober for the entire trip because the ship only had two kinds of booze: scotch, which I couldn't stand, and some ungodly swill called Slivovitska, a plum brandy that tasted worse than it sounded.

When we were a day out, we all crowded around a portable radio and cheered hearing an American commercial jingle: "Chock Full o' Nuts is the hea-ven-ly coffee." Home.

Chapter Four

November 1969-We stayed with my parents in North Palm Beach, Florida. I looked for work while we lived off the modest insurance benefit Patience got from her father.

We were feeling so well off (the insurance money came to three thousand dollars) that we decided to fly to Tampa to visit friends. I rented a Cessna at Palm Beach International Airport, loaded up Patience and Jack, and took off. Hadn't flown in three years. Felt good. Patience was more impressed that I was able to understand the tower gibberish than that I could fly. Flying made her sick, too. Jack sat on my lap and yanked the control yoke around like he was on a twenty-five-cent sidewalk ride. He couldn't see over the top of the console, but he was a natural pilot. Whoop! Zoom! Wow! Patience got sick, nixing Jack's flying lessons for the rest of the trip.

We spent the night in Tampa and went back to the plane early in the morning. I'd parked at a grass-strip airport and the plane was covered in dew. While I wiped the windshield and did the preflight, I had the feeling I was over there. I used to do this every morning, getting my Huey ready for the assaults. I felt myself getting tense.

Got in the plane, cranked up. Did a warm-up where I was parked and then pushed in full throttle. We roared down the grass strip and I lifted off, keeping the plane low. I thought I was in a Huey and that Patience and Jack weren't there. I was taking off at An Khe, heading

east toward the pass. I skimmed over the trees at the end of the strip and stayed low among the treetops-hard to hit you when you're in the trees. Patience asked if we weren't a little low and I remembered where I was. I stayed low and flew directly toward a tall tree. She said, "Bob?" I pulled up over the tree, just missing the branches, caught a glimpse of the morning sun, felt myself relax. I climbed to cruising altitude. "Are you okay?" Patience said. I nodded.

I was accepted for a job at Pratt & Whitney to make high-speed movies of jet engines in action-I knew enough about photography to bullshit the head of the project. I also had an opportunity to work for Radiation, an electronics manufacturer, in Palm Bay because a friend of mine who worked there, Bill Willis, knew they needed a phototechnician. Willis, a big blond man, and I grew up together west of Delray Beach, Florida. We shared a common interest in science and technology, and I was in the mood for that. Also, the pay at Radiation was better. I took that job.

I'd never worked in an electronics factory before. They put me on the night shift photographing circuit diagrams with a room-sized process camera and developing the

twenty-by-thirty-inch film sheets. The job required some skill, but not so much that I was kept occupied. I soon became bored and started taking two-hour lunch breaks. I would wander around the whole place, seeing how they built integrated circuit chips. I saw the whole process, from actually growing the silicon crystal, slicing it to wafers, sensitizing the wafers with photoresists, doping, photomask exposures, etching, testing, and final cutting. Interesting stuff, but my niche in the process-photomask technician- wasn't very exciting. I think the most interesting project I ever worked on was making microphotographs of a competitor's chip. Electronics companies do this regularly-they buy another company's hot new chip and grind it down, layer by layer, and photograph each layer. With the photos, the engineers can see how the thing works and rip off the design.

As long as the projects changed often and as long as they were challenging I was interested. But that was rare. Usually I messed around with my own photography experiments or played with the computer. Computers were novel in 1970. We had a Digital PDP-8 that I knew just enough about to be its greatest threat. One night, as I taught myself the octal numbering system by flipping toggles on the computer's front panel and watching all the nifty lights flash, I somehow sent messages to the computer that made it dump the main program-the one we used to create some of the photomask templates. Naturally, I didn't mention this to anyone when I left. When I came to work the next afternoon, the place was a madhouse. Since no one there actually understood the computer, they'd flown in a consultant from New York to straighten things out. Photomask production was stalled. The boss asked me if I knew anything about it. Heck no, Boss. I'm always in the darkroom.

A few weeks later, after reading the technical manuals, I dumped the program and reinstalled it, to see how it was done. That guy from New York made a fortune doing pretty simple stuff.

Driving to work one afternoon, I passed a motorcycle shop that had a sparkling new racy-sexy Honda 750 motorcycle sitting out front. No one in America had ever seen a machine like this before. Four cylinders, four upswept exhaust pipes, great noise, lots of power. Vaaroom! I took it for a ride. Low-level flying. I had to have it. A few weeks later, I did.

I had a job and a motorcycle; so why was I so unhappy? One reason was I had no home life. My schedule was weird. I got off work at midnight, drove home on the

bike, and sat around until about three or four drinking bourbon and watching late-night television while Patience slept. She'd gotten a job on the day shift at Radiation, soldering stuff onto circuit boards. I slept most of the day away, getting up around noon to go to work three hours later. Patience and I became strangers.

One of the girls who worked in the cafeteria, Mary, used to joke around with me when I ate there. She was funny enough to be cute. When I asked her if she wanted to go for a ride on my bike one night, she said yes. In a few weeks, we were sleeping together. It was automatic-I don't know how these things happen. Sometimes I think I was just along for the ride while my dick did the driving.

Big confession a few weeks later. Patience was very hurt. I watched her cry and knew I should feel something-I wanted to feel something-but I didn't. I kept seeing Mary-I couldn't stop. I even told Patience when I'd be away with Mary-don't wait up. For revenge, Patience drove the Roach to Tampa to see an old boyfriend.

She wrecked the car there. When she got back, she said she'd decided she was packing up Jack and going back to school-with me or without me.

Okay. I wasn't sure about returning to school, but my job seemed like a monotonous path to the grave. Maybe if I had more of a challenge, I'd be interested. I went to my division boss and told him I could run the entire photomask section better than anybody there and that's what I wanted to do. He agreed that I probably could, but I'd only been there six months. I said, okay, I quit.

Chapter Five

September 1970-We loaded a rental truck with all our stuff, including my bike. The plan was that Patience and Jack would drive the truck to the house we'd rented in Gainesville and I would meet them there with the Roach, which was supposed to be out of the repair shop that afternoon. The shop was late getting the Roach ready, and I didn't leave Melbourne until eleven.

I smelled gas, but couldn't find the leak. I drove with the windows open. I woke up lying across the front seats. Dim light glowed in through the windshield.

Too much light. Bad place for a mortar attack.

The Huey is leaking fuel?

Tell the crew chief.

Gasoline? We use jet fuel.

I sat up. The Roach's front bumper was touching the guardrail of an overpass. No damage. I must have been going very slowly as I passed out from the fumes. I got out and watched a car hurtle beneath the overpass. Real close. Walked back to the Roach. The smell of gas was very strong, but there were only fifty miles to go. I got back in and drove with my head stuck out the window. Arrived in Gainesville feeling sick. Before I unloaded our stuff from the truck, I found the leak: the Roach had a sediment bowl just under the fuel tank that I didn't know about. The sediment-bowl gasket leaked and the fumes began to come up through the dash.

At this time in my life, about the most important thing to me was my motorcycle. It was an intoxicating machine, a freedom ride. I had to return the rental truck in Ocala and take the Honda back to Melbourne for one more week of work at Radiation. I lashed the bike to the metal tie-down rings inside the truck and left that afternoon. In Ocala, a kid ran out in front of me chasing a ball. I slammed on the brakes in time to miss him. I felt a terrific crash in the back of the truck. Stopped, got out, and opened the doors. My pride-and-joy bike was lying on the deck up against the forward wall. The tie-down rings had ripped out. I lashed the bike upright and returned the truck. When I got the bike off the truck, I could see only minor damage to the front fender. When I got on the road, however, the front forks shook badly as I approached sixty. The shaking got worse as I accelerated, then went away at about eighty. I drove at eighty, thinking I should have hit the kid.

A week later, after a messy good-bye with Mary in which I knew the thing wasn't over because I didn't really have the guts to end it, I left Melbourne.

I was back in school studying photography.

I made pictures, enthusiastically at first, but soon got bored-a familiar pattern. Back from the war (it was still being fought) four years, yet nothing seemed to interest me. I spent a lot of time drinking and staring at television. Star Trek would hypnotize me; commercials, too. Fantasies interested me. Television was mind-numbing, which is what I wanted. Patience interrupted now and then. "Bob," she usually said, pointing to Jack standing by my chair, "Jack's been trying to talk to you

for twenty minutes." I'd listen to Jack telling me about some skirmish he was having with a neighbor kid for a minute and then, when he left, become absorbed in the tube, no matter what was on. I stayed up until the stations went off the air and the television showed snow. I watched that, too, trying to see things in the randomness. I was trying not to ever have to sleep, to avoid leaping up in a panic.

My idea of fun was to get on my bike at midnight, speeding down country roads at a hundred and thirty. Lying on the gas tank, headlight blazing a tunnel ahead, trees swishing by in a blur, reminding me of flying. Low-level flying. Come back, the house would be still. Air humid. Life stagnant.

I had to turn in a final project for my drawing class. I dragged out my old footlocker from Vietnam, still clearly marked: wo- 1 ROBERT c. MASON; w3 152420. I took everything out and set it up so the end became the bottom and the lid opened on the side. I drew a picture of myself from a slide of me holding my M- 1 carbine, smiling a crazed smile, tacked it on the lid of the footlocker. I stuck my bronze star to the drawing. I put a dozen jagged punji stakes on the bottom of the locker, shoved an old fatigue blouse and a plastic wig stand into the sharp stakes. I put my flight helmet on the wig stand and pulled down the black visor. I stared at this creation for hours, short of breath. I splashed red paint all over the punji stakes; spattered drops onto the drawing.

I had a box of memories that I would bury. That would be part of the whole drawing, the burial. I needed something to get the viewers' attention, something that'd give them a sample jolt of fear. I rigged a wire from the lid to the trigger of a pistol loaded with blanks mounted so it pointed at whoever opened the box. When they open this box, I thought, they won't forget it.

I go to class. Set the box on a table near the rest of the drawings. Wait. A girl asks what's in the box. My drawing. She looks puzzled, shrugs. She is not going to get this. A guy asks the same, he's frail, scared of me because I always wear sunglasses and never talk to anybody. He is going to piss in his pants. Eugene Grissom, the department chairman, comes in to help with the grading. Grissom's a vet. He will get it. Maybe he will also throw me out of school.

I tell my instructor, John O'Connor, I have a question. We go to his office. I tell him the nifty trick with the gun. John's mouth drops open, looks nervous. I get the idea, Bob. But don't you think it's going to scare the shit out of these people?"

"That's the idea. Scared shitless is the drawing."

John nods for a while. "Okay. Okay. But what if we disconnect the gun and just tell everybody it was rigged to go off? That'll scare them, too."

"You think just knowing it could go off will scare them?"

"Oh, yes. Yes. I believe you'll get a very good reaction, Bob. And I won't have to have a heart attack."

"It's just a blank-"

"The noise, Bob. Inside a building?"

"Oh, yeah. Inside here. Make a helluva bang, eh?" I laugh.

"So will you disconnect the gun?"

"Well, John, what about my grade? I mean, without the booby trap, lots of the idea is just . . . lost."

"No. No way it'll affect your grade, Bob. I promise." I nod, thinking about it. O'Connor begins to breathe regularly.

"Okay. I'll take out the blanks. Then the gun'll just go snap. Okay?"

"Fine, Bob. That'll be fine." O'Connor pats my shoulder as we walk back to the grading room. "Bob. Thanks for telling me about this. I mean, I really appreciate it."

"No problem, John."

I got an A for the project.

I created excuses to take off on the bike on weekends. Photographic expeditions, I said.

"Why can't you take pictures in Gainesville?" Patience asked.

"I've already shot Gainesville," I said.

"Oh."

I was driving a friend's car up and down streets in Melbourne Beach, looking for Mary. She told me she had moved, but all I could recall of her address was that she lived near the beach. It was three in the morning. I had a bottle of whiskey next to me and I swigged from that as I cruised up and down streets looking for her car. I stopped in front of a house and stared in the driveway, thinking I saw a Plymouth Valiant. I noticed that headlights were glaring in through the windshield. I realized I was on the wrong side of the road. I heard a car door close, and a man materialized

from the glare of the lights. He was a cop. He was carrying a flashlight. He shone it on my face.

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

He wouldn't have appreciated the truth. I held my finger up to my mouth and said "Sssh" while I looked left and right. The cop followed my glances and I shoved the whiskey bottle behind my back.

The cop looked at me. "What?" the cop said quietly.

"You know of any parties going on around here?" I said.

"Parties? At three in the morning. No, I don't. Everybody's asleep."

"Not these people," I said. "It's not really a party, they're selling drugs."

The cop blinked. "Drugs? You're telling me you're trying to buy drugs?"

"Yes," I said. "It's my job." I nodded confidently.

"Oh," the cop said, nodding back. He switched off his flashlight. "Where're you from?"

"Jacksonville office," I said.

"You have an ID?"

"You kidding. Get myself killed?"

"Guess that's true." The cop took his cap off, reset it to a more comfortable position. "Listen, there is a place, two blocks up and one to the left. I've seen some pretty scroungy-looking people going in and out of a house there. Has about five cars parked in the yard. Can't miss it."

I grinned, nodded vigorously. "Could be the place," I said. I put the car in gear, looked up at the cop. "Thanks."

The cop smiled. "Hey, anything I can do to help." He turned to go back to his car, stopped, and said, "Be careful."

"Thanks, Officer," I said.

I cruised randomly until dawn glowed faintly in the east. Nobody in Melbourne Beach owned a Plymouth Valiant as far as I could see. I drove over to the beach, parked across the street from a restaurant, and watched the sun rise out of the sea. I took a swig from my bottle. I noticed movement at the restaurant, saw a girl dressed in a housecoat come out of a second-story apartment over the restaurant and get the paper. Then I saw a Plymouth Valiant parked beside the building.

I knocked on the door. The girl I'd seen opened it. She held the top of her housecoat closed with one hand.

"Excuse me," I said. "I'm looking for a friend of mine. You might know her."

"What's her name?" the girl said.

"Mary. She drives a Valiant."

The girl looked at me curiously and said, "Is your name Bob?"

"Yes."

The girl turned and called, "Mary. There's somebody here to see you."

Mary thought I was a hero for finding her. She invited me to bed and gave me a hero's welcome.

A few months later Mary had a problem. She'd lost her job, and she and her son (she was divorced) had no place to stay. Naturally, I offered to find her a place in Gainesville. Patience might not understand, though. Problem solved: Mary said she could leave her son with her parents and I thought I might be able to sneak her to Gainesville, where she could stay with friends and look for a job. When I called home and told Rosemary-a friend who shared the house with us- the plan, Patience had picked up the extension and heard me. When I got home, Patience told me she knew all about it and left immediately.

The next day, I went to Patience and told her I'd give up Mary if she'd come back. She did. I swore I was just her friend now, that Mary was in trouble and needed a place to stay until she got herself organized. That is how my girlfriend came to live in the same house as my wife. Patience tried to be nice. It seemed noble at the time, to both of us, to have Mary living with us. What did we know of normal? I was a drunken idiot. Patience figured that was normal, too. All this seemed tame compared to what was going on inside my head. Still not sleeping, feeling tired all the time. My shrink at the VA arranged for me to undergo a sleep examination at the hospital.

Living with two women (three, if you include the neutral house-mate, Rosemary) isn't easy. And in this case it was absurd. I had assumed an obligation to take care of Mary, and figured Patience ought to understand and go along with that. Patience became unreasonable:

"You have nothing to do around the house except take out the garbage, and look at it!" she yelled one night. "Maggots are crawling out of the garbage can! You never do anything around here!"

I sulked (I hated it when she got this way). "That's what you say. Mary says she thinks I do plenty around the house. That's an objective Opinion-"

Patience's eyes open wide. "Bob, Mary is your old girlfriend-"

"I don't want to argue about it if you have to bring up the past," I said. Patience walked off.

A few nights later, while Mary was confiding her troubles to me in the family room-we held hands, platonically-I saw Patience come into the kitchen. She stopped, frozen. She was trying not to go nuts and die from pain, but I saw it as spying on an innocent meeting of friends. I said, "We can see you there." Patience's face became ashen. She turned and went back to our bedroom.

It was as plain as day that Mary was trying to move in, but I didn't see it. After Mary gave Patience a private triumphal look one night while I had my head on her shoulder, Patience told me Mary had to go. What a nag! But I called a friend and took Mary to stay with him and his wife.

Two weeks later my friend said his wife was getting upset and Mary had to go. Damn, Mary sure needed a lot of help. I brought Mary back. Patience, finally losing her grip, left when we arrived. The next day Patience came back, but only to get her things and to see Jack. Jack was at my sister's, but I wouldn't tell Patience where he was. She started screaming and ran out of the house, hysterical. I couldn't figure out why. She must be crazy.

I went to the sleep study at the hospital. For ten nights, I slept in a small room with wires stuck all over my skull and one attached to my dick. The dick sensor would tell the doctors when I had an erection, something they were interested in knowing. I used to fiddle with the sensor while I waited to fall asleep, imagining them in the morning saying, "Jeez-oh-Pete! This guy had a hundred and twenty-eight erections last night!" At the end of the test, my shrink called me in and said that the trouble was that I did not sleep. He said this without a smile. I stared at the shrink. "I know. That's why I come here all the time."

"Well, now we know you really don't sleep, like you say. You stay in REM all night."

"REM?"

"Rapid eye movement: dream state. You never get into deep sleep."

"That might be why I feel so goddamn tired all the time."

"Yeah," the shrink said. "Not sleeping would account for that."

I think I was supposed to feel better that science had confirmed the obvious. I got mad and said some critical things about the psychological profession as practiced by the VA. When I got home, I figured they'd be coming to scoop me up in a big net, so I sat on the front step slugging down bourbon with a gun stuck in my pants, waiting. They didn't come. Instead they adjusted my medications, giving me different kinds of tranquilizers, but I still didn't sleep.

After the sleep studies, I began to cheat on Mary by sneaking out to see Patience. Patience lived near the university with a girlfriend, and I'd go see her and complain how bad I felt and how I wasn't

getting along very well with Mary, and so on. Maybe she'd come back? Are you kidding? She was dating normal people, having fun.

A month later, I intercepted Patience as she walked to a morning class. I took her aside and begged her to come home. We both cried. Patience said, "Not with that girl in the house."

I went home and told Mary she had to go. She left.

Two days later, Mary called. She would not give up so easily. She felt I had cheated her and wanted me back. I went to see her, telling Patience I was visiting Bill Willis, my technician friend in Melbourne. I was going to be firm with Mary, end this thing. The result of that confrontation was that she got pregnant.

I told Patience I was going to New York City to photograph the Village with some friends of mine from the photography class. I arranged a \$500 student loan at the bank. On a Friday I drove Mary straight to New York in her car to an abortion clinic in the Village. Sunday, Patience picked me up in Gainesville, where my "friends" had supposedly dropped me off. My affair with Mary was over as far as I was concerned.

I was still in school, in my senior year. When I signed up for my final photography classes, though, my instructor, Todd Walker, said I'd been goofing off, and he had decided to give my space to somebody who'd appreciate it. I panicked. Photography was the only thing I had left. I spent the next two weeks working around the clock producing several projects, all having to do with sequential photography. I did a slide show with sound and black-and-white slides that flickered like an old-time movie. One of the shows had Haysup, the rocking horse I'd built in Texas, sneak up on Jack

and kill him, which Jack thought was fun. I also made three photo cubes with eighteen bizarre images of the same doorway on their faces. Each face had scenes like a shark floating in through a door, the door opening to the middle of a sidewalk, a naked girl walking in through the door. Aside from being a legitimate reason to take pictures of naked girls, the idea was to create random story sequences by tossing the cubes. I showed a new project each time the class met, impressing the students and Walker. Walker relented at the end of the semester and allowed me to continue.

In the summer of 1971, we moved to a five-bedroom house near the university and rented three of the bedrooms to three other students to pay the rent. Patience and I were still on shaky ground and it got

shakier. We had an argument in which I confessed the abortion. We decided to get a divorce when I graduated (otherwise, I would lose some of my VA benefits-let's not be too fucking nuts). Patience went to visit her mother in Maine. I sent Jack to stay with my parents. When Patience came home, nothing had changed-we were in mourning over our dead relationship. Jack came home with symptoms of our problems: he had a nervous twitch and cleared his throat constantly.

Patience yelled at me a lot, pointing out what a jerk I'd been and still was. She began to see a shrink at the university and one day she came home and instead of yelling said, "I love you. Do you love me?" Her shrink, she later told me, had asked her how I felt-was I sorry? did I love her?-and she had to admit she had no idea. So he said to go home and ask. I did love her, and I was sorry, and that was what she needed to hear. We were on the mend.

After I graduated in December 1971 (the first person in my family's history to get a college degree; as hollow a victory as I've ever won) Mary came to see me. She was on her way to Indiana and wanted me to go with her. With Patience and Jack watching, I walked her out to our backyard and said no. I felt bad watching her cry. It wasn't love; I think it had something to do with honor. I was responsible for at least part of her pain. She called me terrible names, and I thought she was mostly right.

My degree was in art, so I figured I could make a living at it. While Patience worked on her last semester, I started a photography company called Silver Graphics

and tried to drum up business. I did one wedding and a few pictures of an architect's model buildings. Then nothing.

I decided to apply for a government job as an aircraft dispatcher, a civilian who inspects aircraft and certifies which ones are flyable and assigns their crews for military reserve units and the National Guard. If there was a position for which I was overqualified and should have no trouble getting, I thought, this was it. Waited around rubbing my hands together; cushy damn government job coming up. Got a letter back saying that my disability (fifty percent service-connected nut) made me ineligible for the job. The envelope had stamped on it: Don't Forget, Hire the Vet. I complained: how stressful can such a job be? Sorry, that's our policy. Wrote my senator. Sorry, he answered, I tried, but they say-

My dad, a realtor in south Florida, suggested that I import some of the pocketknives like the ones I'd brought back from Spain; we could sell them by mail. Neither of us knew squat about importing or selling by mail, but since he and a friend were willing to pay my way over and buy the first batch of knives, and since I was broke, why not?

I decided to become an importer.

Back to Almonaster la Real. I had a fairly good time seeing Pepe and the gang again, but I felt awkward and unsure of myself as an importer. After I found the place where they made the knives, I bought a few hundred. I had a week to kill before my plane left, so I drove to Algeciras in a rented car and took the ferry to Tangier.

I liked Tangier. When we visited from Spain, Patience and I had discovered a pension called Hotel Florida, so I went there. The rooms were small and plain, cost two dollars a day. Another two bucks bought meals sent up from the restaurant downstairs. Because the rooms were boring, young people from Germany, Holland, England, Spain, Portugal, France, and Canada sat out in a sort of living room around a big table jabbering away in English. Compared to the Moroccans, we were all from the same neighborhood. We smoked keef, a potent form of marijuana, drank sweet tea, and talked a blue streak.

The population of the Florida changed every night as people came and went. My last night there, I talked to a Canadian girl whom I seemed to know but had never met. I had severe wounds from all the trouble I had generated with my fling with

Mary, but I was very lonely. I asked the girl if I could sleep with her, no sex, figuring she'd tell me to buzz off. She said okay; and that is what we did-we were both lonely.

On the ferry back to Spain I met three Canadian girls and hung out with them during the crossing. When we got to Algeciras, I offered them a ride to Seville. The annual feria of Seville-a big summer festival in which everybody wears traditional costumes and caballeros ride around on horses-was in full swing, so I showed the Canadians around, stopping to listen to mariachi music at the Mexican pavilion and eating steak at the Argentine pavilion.

When I said good-bye, they asked me where I was going. I said Almonaster La Real. What's that? Tiny village in the middle of nowhere. They looked very interested. Want to come? Yeah.

We stopped at Cortegana, a town five miles from Almonaster, at midnight and got two rooms. The next morning I created a sensation in Almonaster by showing up with the girls. The village women (who all knew Patience) were bent out of shape. Me, a married man, and three loose (hitchhiker) girls. Oh!

Pepe thought it was funny. I told him I was taking them to Lisbon. He winked. "What a nice person you are, to go out of your way for these poor girls."

I winked back. There was no way I could convince anyone that I was just lonely and that traveling with the girls was innocent fun. Before we left for Lisbon, I went to see Don Blas, the doctor, and got some drugs for a miserable cold I'd picked up. Doc gave me a bottle of antihistamines. I took two pills and we jumped in the car and left.

I made one stop before Portugal. I had a beer and took another pill. We drove into Portugal around sunset. Going around a turn, fifty miles later, I blacked out. I remember going into the turn, then nothing, then the sight of the sharp ditch rushing at me, crash, then nothing.

It was like one of those mornings when you can't seem to wake up except I had no idea where I was.

I didn't remember any shooting.

I thought this was a quiet LZ.

I heard the girls sobbing behind me and remembered I was in a car. "Bob," one of the girls said, "can you open your door?"

It felt like my eyes were open, but I couldn't see anything. I blinked for a while and saw a ruby glow. I said "Sure" and pulled the door handle and pushed on the door. I passed out.

The car shook. I woke up. Portuguese voices chattered all around us, but I couldn't see anything. The door was yanked open and hands reached in and pulled me out. They held me up and my vision cleared. I watched them pulling the girls out; they had lots of cuts. The hood and the trunk of the car stood straight up, all the glass was broken out. The car was a crumpled mess two hundred feet from the road. "You rolled and flipped all the way," said one of the men. "Can you stand?" I said yes. They let go. I collapsed. When they tried to get me up, I said no, it's okay here. The grass on my cheek felt as soft and smooth as cool silk. I wanted to sleep. They helped us into their cars. One of the girls and I sat in the backseat of a very clean car, bleeding like stuck pigs. We looked at each other. She was covered in blood and scared to death. I'd carried so many bloody people in my helicopter I felt almost at home. I told her she'd be okay.

I had crashed on a simple ground mission to Lisbon, and my passengers had gotten hurt. I had really screwed up. Something was odd about my face. Experimenting with my tongue, I discovered I could stick it through a gash under my lower lip. I could also touch my nose with my tongue because it had moved down.

The Portuguese drove us to an aid station at a small town where a doctor bandaged us and stopped the bleeding. He snapped the loose skin on my face together with nylon staples, which did not hurt a bit. Other than feeling like a criminal because I'd hurt the girls, I felt fine. I noticed that the bystanders watching us on the stretchers looked aghast when the attendants carried us out to three ambulances. When I asked where they were taking us, they said Lisbon. Lisbon? Three hours? I lay in the ambulance, completely free of pain, and knew I was in shock. I had seen grunts lying in the back of my chopper, pale, dying, serene, and now I understood. I felt very sleepy. I might not wake up. I slept.

When I woke the shock had worn off. My chest and pelvis were on fire. I lay on a gurney in a madhouse. People were screaming in Portuguese, white coats whisked by, rushing. The girls were gone. White coats stripped me naked and rolled me into a room and X-rayed me. Then someone I couldn't see rolled the gurney down a dim hallway filled with moaning and crying people and loaded me onto a table against the

wall. Pain raged through me. People begged, shrieked, wailed for help all around me. I was engulfed in a chorus of agony. I could not raise my head, but I could roll it to the side. A bandaged man across the hall waved a stump of an arm and just kept saying, "Please. Please." I said, "Okay, they'll be back, don't worry." He said, "Please. Please." I told him this was a hospital, not to worry. He kept pleading. An old woman on a table next to me sobbed and moaned. I ask her what was wrong. She cried louder. I was stoic. I was not a panicky fool like these. Be patient. White coats will be back in a minute.

Hour, wait.

Heard myself moaning. Came naturally, part of the symphony. No one noticed.

Morning. Frosted windows bright. Watched two men twist the sheet around the head and feet of the old woman like she was a carpet going to storage. Dumped her on a gurney and rolled her away. Dead. Died alone, afraid. Mouth dry. Pain like fire. I coughed-fucking cold. Electric pain. Something very wrong with my chest. Couldn't cough. Gurgled.

Evening. Windows dark. Talking along with the others. Couldn't tell what I was saying, but it fit. Delirium? I'd watched grunts mutter while they died. Where was this? Reality? Dream? Had to be some kind of dream. I was talking, but I couldn't understand what I was saying. Happens in dreams. I heard: "English?" coming from a head leaning over me. I blinked. I was not English. I spoke "American."

"What are you doing here?" the head said.

"Huh?"

"You look terrible." The head shook its face. "I'll take care of it," the mouth said, walking out of my field of view. Dream was getting detailed as hell.

A few minutes later, two white coats came and put me on a gurney and rolled me into a room. Not a dream. Doctor was sewing up my face. For a hundred stitches, he muttered about how this should have been taken care of as soon as I'd gotten here, but that it was a bedlam of a hospital with many more people than they could care for.

After stitching me up and washing off the blood, they put me in a ward filled with about a fifty men. I had a bed and a promise that someone would come give me something for the pain. A guy in the ward held up a newspaper. "You the American in here?" he asked in Portuguese.

"What are you talking about?" I croaked in Spanish. When you speak Spanish as poorly as I do, it doesn't matter much whether you're talking to a Spaniard or to a Portuguese, either can figure it out.

"American businessman and three Canadian girls? What a scandal, eh?"

The men in the ward laughed knowingly. Brightened their day.

The pain never subsided. Totally exhausted, I could not sleep, not for a minute. This was, I decided, an engineering oversight on the part of God. Pain is certainly useful to warn you that you've damaged yourself or that you are exceeding some biological limit like tying your finger into a knot. But what the fuck good was pain now that the damage was done?

The next evening, a woman doctor gave me a dose of morphine and asked me if I wanted to go to the British hospital, where I would get a little attention. Thank you, yes. And (my, oh, my!) thanks for that morphine.

Four days after the wreck, I called Patience from the British hospital. She was in a panic. She had leapt up out of sleep four days before, sure that I'd been hurt, the same moment I had run off the road. Patience is a psychic. She can tell when I'm cheating and when I have car wrecks. I told her where I was and what was wrong: My face was a mess. My ribs were cracked. Something was wrong with my right hip-I couldn't walk.

My dad flew over and came to the hospital. They said I could leave if I could do a deep knee bend. I did a shaky approximation of one, seeing stars. Fine, the nurse said, you can go. Dad contacted the three girls and offered assistance, but they said they were covered-traveler's insurance. It was the first news I had of them since the accident. They were in another hospital, battered, but more or less okay. I was relieved; ashamed.

I limped out of the hospital on crutches, feeling faint. Dad had never been to Europe before. He took me to his hotel and then out to dinner. I said I wasn't feeling well enough to eat or even sit up, but he insisted-can't heal if you don't eat and aren't active. Besides, how many times did he find himself in Lisbon, after all? Let's have fun! I sat at a table, my head propped on the heels of my hands, watching him eat, feeling sick. He offered me whiskey; I almost barfed. Water. Only water. That night, I woke up every time my father got up to slug down a drink-full glasses of straight whiskey that would kill most people. Surprised: my dad was a drunk, too.

At the VA hospital in Gainesville, they said my hip socket was fractured. I could either stay in the hospital for a month or stay home, on my back, knees up, immobile. Patience said it would be easier if I was home even though it meant she'd have to nurse me. Patience got a job at a bookstore and took care of me: food, bedpan, the whole bit. I felt like a fool. I fell in love with the nurse.

I got out of bed a month later and spent another six weeks on crutches. When the knives I'd bought in Spain arrived, I drew up an ad for-here comes the result of our painstaking research into how to sell stuff by mail-the Elks magazine. My dad, an Elk, thought that would be a great market and he paid for the ad. We sold thirty knives in two months, which, at four dollars apiece, is bad, even in Nepal.

Patience, who likes to share my interests, tripped over one of my crutches one day while I was making ads for knives and broke her toe.

When I finally got rid of the crutches, I decided to get a job painting apartments because it was there. It paid five dollars an hour, a fortune compared to what I was making as a self-employed knife importer. I made myself a good painter. I got to the apartment complex we painters were painting at seven and slopped paint around the baseboards and stuff till three. After a week, I began to get crazy. My mind screamed, this is it? a college degree and you're fucking painting apartments? After three weeks, in the middle of trimming a doorway, I dumped the brush in the paint bucket and stomped off the job. I could be doing anything on earth besides this.

I decided to make a teepee and we'd live in that. I explained to Patience: Okay. If I can't make enough money, then I can reduce our overhead. Jack thought this was a great idea, but Patience looked at me wistfully. Nope. I've decided to do this. Nothing can stop a good plan; this'll work, I promise. I got a permit to chop down cypress trees on Georgia-Pacific land. I hacked around in the swamps for a week and got together seventeen poles. Got a book on how to build teepees. Set the frame up in our backyard and stared at it proudly. It was thirty feet tall and twenty feet across. I could see there'd be plenty of room for us. Then I saw how much canvas it would take to cover it. Problem:

I knew what canvas cost. I just stared at the frame for a while, defeated. Hell of thing: can't even afford to live like an Indian. Patience came out and gently said,

"Bob, you know, I don't really want to live in a teepee." She was just trying to be nice. I knew she'd love it, really.

I decided to sell cars. I figured I could do that. I went to each car dealer in Gainesville and told them I wanted to sell cars. The Ford dealer hired me.

Hire is a loose-fitting word when talking about this kind of work. They paid a draw against commissions on your sales. The draw was about \$85 a week in 1972 and was designed to keep a salesman alive when his luck was low. You could get your draw for a month or two of no sales, but if you weren't selling after that, they'd fire you.

The car salesman's motto is: If business is slow, make business. Or else. One day, business was so slow and the weather was so hot and

humid, the salesmen were too lethargic and bored to even get up the energy to bulshit. By this time, however, I was the number three salesman out of twenty. I was in my prime, eager to make business when business was slow. I saw a painter outside climbing a ladder. I went out and watched him working for a while.

"You need a new van," I said to the guy on top of the tall ladder. "I mean, I saw your van."

The guy looked down at me. I wore a short-sleeved shirt, a tie, and polyester slacks. "I know I need a van. I don't have the money," he said, turning back to his work.

"No money? No problem."

"Huh?"

"You say you have no money, right?"

"That's right."

"No problem. We have some great used telephone company vans. I can arrange a loan for you. All you need is a small down payment."

"How small?"

"Let's see." I calculated, using car-salesman training: We took in a fleet of these junker vans from Southern Bell on trade. Worth maybe a hundred and a half wholesale. Company wanted three. "On a nine-hundred-dollar loan, they'd want a hundred and a half down."

"Don't have it." The guy went back to work. Normally I'd quit screwing with such dismal prospects, but there was absolutely nothing else to do except sit inside and swelter and smoke cigarettes and try to work up some interesting car salesman stories with the other salesmen.

"No problem."

"What do you mean, no problem? I don't have any money!"

"You don't have any money, right?"

"That's what I said."

"No problem. We go to a loan company-friend of mine-and borrow the down stroke!"

"You can do that?"

"Why not?"

The guy shook his head, painted a few strokes, while I waited on the sidewalk. He looked down. "If you can do all that, I'll buy the damn thing."

I made enough money to buy the stuff we needed and pay the rent. Plus I had my choice of new cars to drive. I hated it. This was rear echelon, black-market-motherfucker work.

I decided to join the Army Reserves. Maybe I could fly helicopters again. Needed current flying time for a job. If I flew again, I'd be happier, stop drinking so much. Wouldn't need Valium, either. There were no aviation units in Gainesville. The closest one, in Jacksonville, didn't need pilots. I join the Gainesville Army Reserve, planning to transfer later.

The reserve guys were mostly pissed off because they'd joined the reserves to Avoid Vietnam; and in 1973 the goddamn war was over but they had another five years to put in. I thought this was funny as hell. Tough break, warriors. My unit was a finance company. They didn't know what to do with a chief warrant officer pilot at first, but they decided to send me to school at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana, to learn how to be a unit personnel technician, UPT. I would be a UPT, if that was what it took to fly again.

For about six weeks, I was once again an active-duty warrant officer. This time, though, I was on an administrative mission, as they called it.

The pay was much better than I'd gotten in combat.

I went to summer camp with the warriors. With all my medals, I looked like Audie Murphy to them. Another unit was at camp, an aviation unit. I went for a visit. The pilots were like me, real people. One asked me if I'd like to try it again.

We got into a Bell Loach (LOH-light observation helicopter). I'd never flown one of these things. I put on a flight helmet for the first time in years. Familiar sound: turbine whines, cries to fly. Rotors blur, whop, whop, whop. The pilot said: "Go ahead. Take it up." I lifted the collective, felt myself floating again. Is there anything as magical? Leaned forward and we skimmed over the ground and I leapt into the sky. I rolled and wheeled through the air, seeing the earth as it is, feeling ecstasy for twenty minutes. God wanted me to fly. Pilot said we had to go back. I nodded. Came back to the grass field. Some of the warriors had come to watch. I flew close to the ground, came to a hover. I sat there floating, not wanting to ever touch the earth again. I turned. Hovered to the parking spot. The ground pulled me down.

End of *Chickenhawk: Back In The World* sampler. Back In The World is not in print.