



# 1

Eric and I had stood side by side on that frosty October evening long ago, the street of old Craftsman homes dark and without streetlamps around us, the clear sky filled with stars. Sycamore trees towered above our heads, their limbs laid bare by autumn, their harvest leaves scattered all over the front lawns.

Our friend Chris had marched up the sidewalk alone and we stood there watching his progress.

“Is it me,” I said, “or you think maybe Chris was a gladiator in his former life?”

Eric chuckled, hands in his pockets and seemingly embarrassed by my comment.

On a Friday night, Eric had let his chestnut-colored hair flop down. Otherwise it was cut tight around his ears. Not military style, but close, which was dress code at our high school back in those days and one of the major bummers of our young lives.

Our other friend Michael had wandered down the street the other way and came back to us with a look up at the stars. His woolly red hair was aglow in the moonlight. His breath was making puffs in the frosty air.

“Right?” I said about Chris. “It’s Marc Anthony, off to conquer Gaul.”

Michael glanced in Chris’ direction with a laugh.

“It’s true,” I said. “All that fucker needs is a sword and some sandals.”

Chris looked back once at the sound of our voices and started across a front lawn, his stout legs and heavy footsteps scattering autumn leaves as he went. When he dashed up onto a raised front porch and attempted to peek in through the windows, Eric said “wow” and started to drift down the block the other way, not wanting any part of that trouble.

Collectively, the four of us had been wandering around the general neighborhood for fifteen minutes or so that Friday evening, attempting to find a house associated with the directions my friend Sarah had given me over the phone. The directions went something like this.

“Take the first left off of Glassell, then the second right and go down to the house with dormer windows and columns on the front porch.”

And being stoned at the time, I had forgotten to ask, well, the first left if I’m headed in which direction? Never mind that almost every house in this neighborhood had columns of some sort holding up its front porch and dormer windows on the second story, any one of which could have fit Sarah’s description.

Chris ultimately relented and came back down the sidewalk with a wry look on his face.

“Good thing we’re not like the grunts over there fighting in ‘Nam.”

He wandered around with stiff legs and a pretend rifle, a lost soldier.

“Man, this is such a bummer,” I said.

“Wow, mellow out, brother,” Eric said. “We’ll find the place.”

“Yeah, by the time I’m dead.”

Chris pretended to be overly serious like me, which got another chuckle out of Michael.

“Real funny,” I said. “I guess you guys enjoy the hell out of being lost.”

Chris patted me on the shoulder, as if to dispense wisdom. I gave him a look. I almost gave him an elbow.

“Let’s just go find a phone booth and call her again,” Michael said.

“No,” I said and headed up to knock on the door of the house right in front of us. “I’m pretty sure this is the place.”

“Wow, far out,” Eric said, as if I were preparing to confront a wild elephant.

“What?” I said with a look over my shoulder. “If it’s not the place, I’ll just ask the owner if he knows Sarah and where she lives.”

“I’d better go up and keep an eye on him,” Chris said. “Some redneck with a shotgun might answer the door.”

He followed me up to the porch and again tried to peek in through the windows but the curtains were closed and the house appeared to be completely dark inside. In fact, the entire block looked to be abandoned, save for a few porch lights on here and there. I knocked and waited, my heart racing in the frosty silence.

Chris and I had been standing there for thirty seconds or so when the lace curtains parted over the front door glass. I flinched and Chris did a shtick like he was Charlie Chaplin trying to escape around a corner. Michael and Eric were having a chuckle over that one out on the sidewalk and doing their best to keep it down.

A moment later the door cracked opened. It was Sarah.

“Far out, Clay,” she whispered and came out to give me a hug. “You found it.”

“Yeah, after wandering around lost for the last fifteen minutes.”

“Sssshhh,” she said.

“Well, those were the most fucked up directions I’ve ever been given,” I whispered back.

Sarah offered Chris a smile and waved for Michael and Eric to join us.

“Remember to be quiet. People are tripping inside.”

Sarah welcomed us into the candlelit living room and closed the door. Several people were flopped out on the stuffed chairs and sofa. Some of them I knew. Some I didn’t. Some were our age. Some were a few years older. Shelley, one of our classmates from high school was sitting at a desk over in the corner, wearing a white lace gown and drawing pentagrams by candlelight. She was real mystical looking. The Grateful Dead was playing softly in the background.

“So, are you guys going to trip?” Sarah asked us.

“I am,” I said.

“And you guys?”

“Yeah,” Michael said.

“T r i p p i n g,” Chris whispered quietly, as if to make fun.

“Wow,” Eric said with a philosophical rub of his chin. “It’s like a really heavy decision.”

“Well, come out into the kitchen and I’ll show you.”

Sarah led us there and pulled two tiny vials out of the refrigerator. They were filled with colored liquid.

“The blue is 250 mcg. The purple is 500 mcg. If it’s your first time, I’d recommend doing the blue vials. The purple vials *can* get pretty heavy.”

I had tripped before and handed Sarah ten dollars for a purple vial. The blue vials were five bucks. Sarah knew people up in the Bay area who got them straight from Owsley. I unscrewed the top and drank the liquid. There was no turning back now.

Always one to jump off of cliffs like me, Michael bought a purple one and drank it down. Chris and Eric went round and round and finally decided on the blue vials.

All of us settled into the candlelit living room with Dylan playing now. Someone rolled a joint and passed it around.

Later, as if by magic, the four of us found ourselves flopped out in a back bedroom.

“Wow, I think I’m coming on,” Eric said.

“Wow, I think I’m coming on,” Chris imitated.

Eric laughed at himself.

“Yeah, far out.”

“I think I’m coming apart,” Michael said.

We were still laughing over that line when Sarah came in.

“How are you guys doing?”

“We’re coming apart at the seams,” Chris said.

Sarah put a finger to her lips, reminding us to be quiet.

“By the way, have you seen Zach?”

“Yeah, earlier,” Michael said. “But I’ve misplaced him now.”

“Sssshhhhhh,” Sarah said one more time about our laughter.

She was about to leave when we heard something rustle in the closet. Sarah went over and slid the door open. There was a guy scrunched up in the corner, trying to hide behind the shoes and overcoats.

“No! No! No! Keep them away! They’re going to eat me!”

Sarah got down in a crouch.

“What’s wrong, Zach?”

“I’m just a poor little dormouse and those big cats are going to eat me for dinner.”

As if truly believing in this outcome, Zach went scurrying out the door on hands and knees. Sarah shrugged at us and went after him.

“You do kind of look like a cat,” I said to Chris.

He meowed and pretended to stalk after Zach.

Later, the four of us were lying on our backs together, tripping on the point of infinity in the corner of the ceiling. Time had disappeared. Life was eternal. Life was love.

“Wow, the colors,” Eric said.

“Wow, the patterns,” Chris said.

“I think it’s that missing ninety per cent of our brains they keep telling us about,” I said.

“Our parents have been lying to us,” Michael said.

He had a way of distilling things down to their simplest terms.

An hour or so later, I remembered the world.

“Villa Park’s playing Orange tonight. Let’s go watch.”

My friends laughed.

“Wow, brother, that sounds like a totally crazy idea,” Eric said.

“No, it’ll be cool. Like watching gladiators battle in the Coliseum.”

“Wow, that’s just way too much violence going on for me right now.”

“I’ll go,” Michael said.

“Onward with the expedition!” Chris said.

Out in the living room, everyone thought we were mad and there were several attempts to dissuade us, but I was determined. The world was calling to me. I had to move forward. I always had to be moving forward back in those days.

“You’re sure you’re going to be okay?” one of the older guys asked.

“Yeah,” I said and yanked on the door, not noticing the slide bolt had been latched.

“Oh fuck,” someone said when the door casing came right off the wall.

There was laughter and one of the older guys came over to help me with the broken pieces.

“You’re still sure you want to go out there?” he said.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s cool,” I said, a bit embarrassed by my faux pas but undeterred.

I stumbled out onto the front porch with Chris, Michael and Eric on my heels.

“Be careful,” Sarah whispered from the front door.

“We’ll be fine,” I said.

I heard the door closing quietly as we walked down to the sidewalk.

Looking back, the four of us doubled over in laughter. The house was anthropomorphic, like Huxley’s automobile. The dormer windows upstairs were eyes, the covered porch a nose. The stairs led down into a gullet.

“Looks kind of serious,” Chris said. “Like Clay.”

I made a dour face and the four of us went down the block laughing. It felt good to be outside with the towering trees and starry sky. The night air was crisp and clear and alive with colors. Everything was alive to us now.

Two blocks further on into the old neighborhood, we came across a small market. No one was hungry but it seemed important for us to go in and explore the place. After several minutes of wandering around lost among all the jars and packaged crap, we stumbled back out onto the night, laughing.

“Wow, far out,” Eric said. “Like none of that stuff looked real.”

“Or edible,” Michael said.

“The cocktail wienies looked nicely preserved,” Chris said.

Laughing, I looked up at the stars. The Milky Way was painted across the cold sky. Then I heard the cheers of a crowd.

“Wow, the football game,” I said and started forward.

“Oh wow, I like can’t even do this scene,” Eric said.

At the next block, I looked right and saw that the street terminated at a chain link fence two blocks down, with the football stadium on the other side of the fence.

“Hey, far out. Look. We can just watch it all from the street.”

The four of us walked down the block and stood with our faces to the fence, staring from a distance as a team huddled up. When the next play ran, we broke out into more laughter. Each squad seemed to be moving around like a single, many legged organism.

We stood there entranced by the skirmish for a long time. Having lost all concept of winning and losing, the game seemed both miraculous and absurd to us.

Another play was run, accompanied by more cheers from the crowd.

“Wow, I’m hungry,” Eric said out of the blue.

That brought on even more laughter.

“I want food,” Chris said like a caveman.

“How do you feed sea grass swaying in the tides?” Michael said.

“You wait for plankton,” Chris said.

Having philosophized our way across town, we passed a burger joint and broke out into yet another round of laughter.

“One slab of cooked crap on a bun,” Chris said.

You may as well have offered us tire treads to eat.

We found this little Italian dive and went in to order pasta.

“Tuscany,” I said to the scent of the red sauce on our plates.

“Tuscaloosa,” Chris said.

“Tuscaroni,” Michael said.

Laughing, we broke out into song.

“Tuscaroni...that San Francisco treat.”

Late that night, lying alone in bed, the bliss of my trip had mostly dissipated and the uncertainties of the world were slowly returning to my thoughts. ‘Nam and the draft were waiting for me up ahead. It was impossible to forget the war for very long. Even if it slipped your mind for half a day, a news anchorman was there to remind you of it the next night.

“Good evening, today in Vietnam...”

That was pretty much how the news always started back in those days. It was every anchorman’s stock in trade. Raw footage from the battlefield followed. A little box next to the anchorman’s head kept a running tally. How many men had been shot dead and how many wounded—for our side and theirs, for that day and the entire conflict. Progress in Vietnam came to have no other guise. The concept of winning or losing the war had been forsaken long ago. You simply counted bodies to keep score.

Of course the anchormen sometimes led in with other stories, like when Apollo 8 had orbited the moon or riots broke out in one of America’s cities or when pissed off students were out marching around and protesting at a particular college campus. And there were those assassinations. Something like

that always commandeered the headlines for a week or two, but for want of anything more compelling to announce, ‘Good evening...today in Vietnam...’ was how the news always started. You were for Vietnam or you were against it, but either way, the images of rice paddies, thatched huts and napalm had burrowed their way in our collective consciousness and seemed to be the only thing still holding our increasingly screwed up society together.

Lying there that night, I was suddenly reminded of the earlier part of the sixties—like the folk music scene, the Beach Boys and early Beatles—further depressed to realize all that innocence had been stolen away. In a matter of five, six years, we had gone from Johnny Mathis and hula hoops and convertible Impalas and cocktail parties around the backyard pool to where everything was about psychedelics and gooks and the war draped around everyone’s neck.

I lay there, pretty much haunted by those simpler times but knowing we could never return to them now. Vietnam had made certain there was no way back home, certainly not from where my young life was headed.



## 2

The next day the boys and I drove out to Irvine Park and hiked up to a hill overlooking the lake. In the shade of an old oak tree, we spread out some blankets and sat drinking wine and smoking joints and watching the rowboats glide along the blue water. There were dozens of white swans gliding along too and people all over the place having fun by the lake. Everything for us was about watching the world go by and trying to mellow out from our trip.

I was scheduled to go in and register for the draft that following Monday and the awareness of that fact hung over my entire weekend. My birthday was shortly after Christmas so I had received a notice to register when every other guy I knew in our senior class had yet to receive his.

Monday after school, I followed the instructions over to the local draft board, which turned out to be in an inconspicuous storefront in that same old part of town where we had been tripping on Friday night. I was expecting military uniforms and soldiers saluting me. Instead, I found two secretaries at their desks and a guy in civilian clothing. They were all smiles and seemingly surprised to see someone come in the front door. The guy in civilian clothing came over to shake my hand

Hell, I thought. They never would have missed me. Now my name is in the lottery and chances are, this time next year, they'll be sending me over to have my ass blown off in 'Nam.

The next morning, the boys stopped by to smoke a joint before school and I explained what had gone down at the draft board.

"Don't even show up," I said while choking on a hit.

Right away, my friends were tripping over that advice, certain that a jeep full of MPs would come kicking down doors if they failed to appear.

"I know," I said. "That's exactly what I was thinking. Only they acted as if they didn't even know I existed. When I walked in the door it was like, 'Oh wow, thanks for showing up, man. Most guys don't even bother.'"

My friends were cracking up over my portrayal of things, but clearly not convinced. I took another hit off the joint and passed it on.

“I’m telling you, the minute I walked in there, it hit me. It’s a numbers game. Don’t show up and you’re one of millions of guys. Show up and you’re suddenly on a first name basis with those pigs. Better to be one in a million. They don’t have the resources to be chasing everyone around.”

The roach came back to me and I took the last toke.

“I mean it, man. If I had to do it all over again, I would never even have shown up at that bumper place.”

The joint gone, Chris broke out the eye drops. I hit the air spray.

“Okay, off to Bartley’s philosophy class,” Chris said. “If a man is chained to the inside of a cave and nobody is there to see him, does he exist?”

“Only if a rock falls on his head,” Michael said.

There was laughter.

“I am so sick of Bartley coming off like he’s some big Greek philosopher. The guy’s more of a Roman emperor than anything else.”

“Hail to Nero,” Chris said and bowed.

“Wow, I can totally see him in a toga,” Eric said.

“I’d like to see him in a mini skirt,” Michael said.

There was more laughter and talk of scoring some hashish that evening. We lived adjacent to miles of open hill country and were always driving up there to get high and talk about life.

As we headed out the door for school, the conversation came back to ‘Nam. A guy we knew had gone over there to fight for his country the previous summer. They had sent him home in a box two weeks later.

“I’m totally serious,” I said to reemphasize my point. “Don’t even show up to register. Worst case scenario, the Russians invade and maybe they’ll come looking for you then.”

Barely a month later, I was kicked out of school. The pricks who ran the place kept telling me not to wear my moccasins on campus, and to be sure to wear socks, no matter what kind of shoes I happened to have on. So I wore my moccasins again, without the socks, and when I got into an argument with Bartley in our philosophy class, he sent me up to the principal’s office. While I sat there waiting to have my ass chewed out, I kept trying to keep my pant legs down over my moccasins but the effort failed. The principal came out, saw my lack of socks and immediately suspended me.

My old man came home from work that evening, heard the news and got in my face. Called me a bum for trying to grow my hair long and wearing the moccasins.

Who did I think I was, Sitting Fucking Bull?

That led us to duking it out in the living room. My mother somehow got between us and told me to go wait outside. I went to sit in my car in the back of the apartments. My nose was bleeding. I had a black eye.

What a prick. The old man had sold our house the previous summer and moved us into an apartment. There were plans to move up north and build a big hacienda or some shit. He was always selling stuff and moving us a few miles further down the road.

My mother came out a short while later, crying. The old man was kicking me out of the house. At eighteen, I was no longer his legal responsibility and that was that. My mother handed me two hundred dollars and brushed my tears away.

“Why didn’t you plan to go to college, like your older brother? We were prepared to pay for everything. Now look at you.”

She brushed away her own tears and kissed me goodbye. I watched her disappear back into the apartment complex.

I sat there, cast out into the world.

There was a thought to go in and retrieve my few possessions; three Japanese water colors hanging on the wall in my bedroom, a figure of Buddha and an antique wooden tray and calligraphy pen that I had used for writing haikus. The memory of my childhood days came to mind. What had happened to me? I was once a loving and gentle little boy. Now I was at war with the world and everything in it.

I wandered around lost in my car for a spell before deciding to head over to my girlfriend Lisa’s place. She answered when I knocked, came outside and quickly closed the door. Her parents weren’t all that fond of me either. In fact, I had nowhere to stay besides my old Peugeot. Fortunately, the seats folded down into a bed. Lisa snuck back inside and brought out some bedding. We talked and kissed for a while before her mother called her back inside.

I had no idea what to do with myself next. Had I been dumb enough to buy into this crap about us saving Southeast Asia from the communist hordes, I probably would have signed up for the Army and gone over to kick some ass in ‘Nam but I had yet to find one person who could properly explain why we were in that mess, or how we were supposed to get ourselves back out of it. There wasn’t even talk of winning it any more. A great nation and we were getting our asses kicked by an army of little men in black pajamas. We were being taken to the woodshed by a tiny country that struggled to field a modern jet. It didn’t seem to matter how much napalm we dropped on those folks or how many B-52 sorties we conducted up north, next thing you knew, they were shelling Saigon and overrunning our troops again.

Meanwhile, words like Khe Sanh, the Mekong Delta and the Ho Chi Minh trail had wormed their way into our everyday vernacular, as casually as someone was asking you for the Tang or Skippy Peanut Butter. And that bastard of a President wasn't helping things any. *Peace With Honor*. He had sold us on that load of crap in order to get himself elected, the problem being, peace with honor was limping home with our tail between our legs, by any other name, and there weren't too many Americans keen on limping home with our tail between our legs.

With dropping the big one about the only other way to extract ourselves from Vietnam, and wiping half a nation off the globe a pretty hard sell, even to the most gung ho, gun loving Americans who thought dropping bombs on other people was a godly good use of our time, the horror of that war dragged on another week, and those weeks kept turning into months, simply because no one could find a convenient way to save face and get us out of that mess all in one motion. Even though the death of one more soldier over there had ceased to make one goddamned bit of sense.

So week after week and month after month, you turned on the news and there it was again, that all too familiar mantra.

'Good evening...today in Vietnam...'

Film clips invariably followed; a lot of stuff with napalm exploding or archival footage of B-52s cutting loose with thousand pounders. Often times you saw a platoon of our soldiers hunkered down behind a patch of elephant grass, and thankful for that much cover as AK-47 and mortar rounds popped off in a rice paddy around them. Perhaps they had just taken a hill or some other ostensibly meaningful patch of jungle. Or it was the next day and the Vietcong had taken it back. Or it was between firefights and you saw our unshaven soldiers standing around with peace symbols painted onto their helmets, looking for all the world as if they had just bivouacked through a love-in at Golden Gate Park, except there was no joy left in their eyes as they stared back at you through the camera.

The nightly news reports routinely ended in this way. An incoming chopper would touch down somewhere alongside a rice paddy. A handful of grunts would drag their maimed and dismembered comrades towards it through the muck. The injured were lifted gingerly into the open bay. The chopper quickly took off again. The soldiers held onto their helmets. The elephant grass was flattened around them.

Night after night, you tuned in to see more Vietnamese villages being strafed with napalm and more frightened villagers running for their lives down some muddy road, their skin and clothes on fire, their neighbors lying there scorched and dead. Straw huts burned in the background. Women in conical

hats held their children and wept. These were the images of war and they did not change, only the people who happened to be suffering in them.

At times, these battlefield reports were juxtaposed with the war here at home, the one in Newark, Detroit or Jackson, Mississippi. The streets of our cities were in flames and the National Guard had been called out to restore order. The rioters threw rocks and Molotov cocktails. The soldiers shot back with tear gas and live ammunition.

Just as frequently you saw students demonstrating at one college campus or another, usually in response to some government action, and usually the one that had led to the riots in the first place. You saw the students march. You saw them chant. You saw them get out of control. You saw the cops arrive and get even more out of control. Sadly, you saw a once simple world being clubbed right out of existence.



### 3

As springtime rolled around that year, I reluctantly accepted that there was no way for me to get around Vietnam. Either I went off to kill my fellow human beings or I went on the run, and I had no desire to kill anyone, any more than I wanted someone shooting bullets at me. When I thought of war, I felt sick to my gut. As a young man I just wanted to lie in fields and watch clouds pass overhead. I had no use for violence and conflict.

That summer, Lisa's parents sent her off to college in Florida. She sent me a Dear John letter a few weeks later.

Alone and depressed, I sold my car, quit my job and ran off to Europe. There was a thought of going to college upon my return. Apply for a deferment. It was that or I'd have to go up and seek asylum in Canada.

As the summer wound down, I considered just staying in Europe, but with my money running out, I came to accept the inevitable. I had to return home and devise an actual plan. The war would not leave me alone.

Passing through customs at JFK, I decided to go visit an old high school friend who was a freshman at Cornell. Two more of our old buddies were hanging out with the first friend, just for fun. I stumbled into a typical campus scene from the late sixties, the three of them living with a tribe of young people in this big, clapboard house, smoking dope, engaging in free sex and generally abusing the university's notion of a proper education.

Sitting around their darkened living room that first night, I found myself surrounded by a band of ersatz revolutionaries, several of them in Army fatigues, and with the field caps and Castro-style beards to go with it. Cigar smoke filled the room. A Che Guevara poster hung on one wall. The talk was of starting a revolution down in Chile. I found that amusing. How in the world were these Castroistas going to stage a revolution in South America from an old clapboard house in Ithaca, New York? Youthful rebellion, I concluded, and would have left it at that, except they all seemed so goddamned serious.

Sipping java in a coffee shop a few days later, and with a morning paper on the Formica counter top in front of me, I noticed an article about a bomb

going off in some government offices on the other side of the state. The bomb had pretty much destroyed the place and the Feds considered it a miracle that no one had been killed as the result.

When I arrived back to the clapboard house later that afternoon, all the curtains were drawn and several of these battle-fatigued revolutionaries were gathered together in one corner of the living room. There was a glance my way before their conversation resumed in secret. I started upstairs. The whole thing felt like a bummer. Then I noticed the door to the basement had been padlocked and it suddenly hit me. Oh Jesus. These freaks are building bombs down in the cellar. I'd better get my ass out of town.

Heading down the highway, the simple days of bumming around the Balearic Islands kept dogging my thoughts. Why on earth had I come home? That experience back in Ithaca was haunting me too. I had always pictured myself as part of the movement, but that basically meant doing my own thing, and especially doing it in a peaceful manner. It certainly did not involve being a Marxist revolutionary, or blowing up other people's property. I wasn't that bold or stupid, and probably could not have articulated a difference between the two. Perhaps I was just a coward at heart, or greatly apathetic. I wasn't so sure I could have articulated the difference between those two things, either, but I knew this much for certain. If a bunch of old white men wanted to make war, fine, but leave me out of it. All I wanted was a place to live in peace. Blow yourselves to kingdom come, if that's what you want. But don't ask me to sign up.

Back on the West Coast, I rented a room in an old boardinghouse and got a day job slopping hash at a local diner. I fell in love and took some classes at a nearby junior college but had soon dropped out from a profound sense of boredom. And all the while, that fleeting exposure to the revolution kept on haunting my thoughts. It really had me down, the fact that some people were willing to die for their beliefs...and I was not.

As much as I was able to maintain any peace of mind at the time was due to my sweetheart Laura, and perhaps to the turn-of-the-century neighborhood where I then lived. Grand old buildings with stone facades lined the main avenues. Old men spent their late afternoons feeding pigeons in a nearby circular plaza. And though the plaza and everything remaining from the town's pioneer past had grown a bit dilapidated over the years, they had yet to talk of tearing these things down for a new stucco commercial plaza.

It was only when I got out into the suburbs where I had grown up as a boy that I found another sort of war being conducted; where every time you turned around, another orange grove had been uprooted, another old ranch house had been turned to sticks and one more piece of the town's pastoral past had

been plowed under for development. Acres upon acres of clay soil cut raw beneath the sun, that was what had happened to the world I once knew as a boy, survey sticks jammed into the ground everywhere, their little orange and pink flags flapping in the breeze, like grave markers to a forgotten world.

But at least I never saw a bulldozer or tract house under construction as I came to and from the old boardinghouse where I lived. And aside from my work, and spending every possible moment I could with Laura, I had started to dream of the next wondrous adventure in life and if anything bothered me greatly, it was that Chris and Eric and Michael had gone off to attend college and the unshakable feelings of invincibility I once knew had vanished somewhere along with them.



## 4

It had grown late that spring afternoon and as was typical of me in my youth, I started down the wooden stairs in great leaps and bounds, off to retrieve the mail and oblivious to the ruckus my Spanish boots were making all over the old boardinghouse where I then lived. As I flew past the second story landing and down the last flight of stairs, the old widow who owned the place came out of her apartment and shook a finger at me, hair done up in a bun, her left arm akimbo. The look on her face suggested she was ready to evict me.

“Clay, you absolutely must start keeping the noise down around here.”

“Sorry, Mrs. Millstadt. I’ll try to do better.”

I hurried down the hallway, doing my best not to sound like a Spanish dancer, and heard Mrs. Millstadt closing her apartment door as I went flying out the front one.

Outside on the front porch, I was greeted by a jigsaw puzzle day. It had rained overnight and the snowcapped mountains sparkled brilliantly on the far horizon. The days of my youth came to mind and the way those same mountains had jutted up into the sky as we walked home from school on autumn days, our noses red in the crisp autumn breeze and with autumn leaves scattered all over the ground.

The last thing on my mind was Vietnam and all the ghastly things men did to each other in the name of God and country, but sorting through the mail, I quickly came across an envelope with draft board’s address printed on it. You may as well have shoved me off a cliff.

My exuberance gone, I marched sullenly back up to my room, ruing my total lack of preparation. Being in this position was as much my fault as anything else. My birth date had come up number eighteen in the lottery and I had basically stuck my head in the sand in response. Of course things were bound to come to this end.

Up in my room, I sat at my desk and stared at the envelope, weighing whether or not to open it, and concluding, without a great deal of deliberation, what was the point? I knew well enough what the damned thing said.

Into the trash it went.

A long time passed as my head raced here and there, searching for some form of escape. Mrs. Millstadt's laundry flapped gently on the line down below as I thought.

When I came back to the moment, a late afternoon had turned to dusk. The mail still sat on my desk. A letter from Eric sat on top of the stack. Hoping to be distracted by tales of his adventures at BYU, I opened the letter but found it was mostly a rant about the war.

Whiner, I thought. His number had been picked three-hundred and six in the draft. No one was ever going to call his ass up for duty.

As I read through the rest of Eric's letter, I found myself repeatedly glancing at the draft notice in the trash can. It was a rather innocuous looking thing, for all the significance involved; like a lousy traffic ticket, with a perforated strip along the top. I wouldn't have given it a second thought, except for the draft board's return address printed across the top.

In the end, accepting that ignorance was no legal excuse, I retrieved the notice, pulled on the perforated strip and extracted the notice inside, seeing straight off that I was in one hell of a fix. The draft board had scheduled me for induction in two weeks. I should plan on a long day at a processing center in LA, followed by an equally long bus ride to Ford Ord. I might want to bring along my toothbrush and a sack lunch, just in case.

As darkness fell outside my windows, I faced my circumstances squarely and the knowledge of it burned in my heart. In all likelihood, a tour in Vietnam awaited me; off to fight a war I did not want.

As the ensuing days rushed by, I vacillated between my most obvious choices. Accept my fate or refuse to report. One voice said acquiesce. Another voice said run. The Bhagavad-Gita came to mind. Krishna reasoning with Arjuna. Indeed, why not march down into the field of battle with no fear of my death? Everything in this world was temporal. Yet I found little peace in these thoughts and the time for a decision kept drawing nearer.

When the day finally arrived, I reluctantly hitchhiked up to LA and followed the instructions on where to report. That led me to the back of a long line. Hundreds of other young men were in front of me, waiting to have their asses checked and heads shaved.

As expected, I quickly passed the physical and psychological tests. Next stop was a haircut and formal induction, but while waiting there in line, a vision of my own death came over me, sloshing about in sweltering jungles, fetid water up to my crotch, leeches sucking at my putrid flesh, the scent of wild orchids in the humid air, the call of exotic birds echoing among the trees as the staccato bark of an AK-47 rang out and blew my head off.

Sickened by my decision to report in the first place, I slipped out of the line and entered a building next to the induction area. A maze of long hallways led me back towards the street. Uniformed sentries stood at attention here and there, each one of them with a rifle in hand, each one of them eyeing me as I passed by. I kept expecting one of those bastards to call out.

“Halt!”

After what seemed like an eternity in slow motion, I pushed open the front door and emerged onto the smoggy streets of LA, a free but troubled man. It was time to hide. I heard those words in my head, as if someone else had said them and hardly knew what they meant. All I had was the inertia of an impulsive decision at my back.

My first thought was to call Laura, but I knew she was not home at that hour. She had a voice class on Monday mornings. Besides, I knew what she would say—go back to school, apply for a deferment, etc., etc.—a course of action that I had summarily dismissed.

My decision-making in this regard bordered on madness. I knew it but seemed utterly incapable of changing myself. I was a young man who bristled at being controlled, a resistance to authority so complete, I even revolted at sitting in classrooms. My heart cried out for freedom, to live and do as I pleased, to have wide-open spaces around me, yet walking alone down the seedy back streets of LA, I knew little in the way of freedom.

Having walked along feeling lost for several blocks, I thought of my eldest brother Anthony up in the Santa Cruz Mountains and decided to give him a call. I knew he would lend me a hand and Northern California was definitely a better place to be hiding out than where I was right then.

At a small Mexican market, I stopped for some change, located a phone booth and gave Anthony a call. He listened while I poured out my heart to him. I was prepared to go on quite a bit longer but an operator call interrupted me for more change and Anthony used this opportunity to suggest I hitchhike up to his place. Like Laura, he thought I ought to go back to school and apply for a deferment, but of course I could come up and stay as long as I needed to sort things out.

I was on the road all that day and arrived around ten that evening, greeted at the front door of the cabin by Anthony, his once short, curly hair now groomed into a fluffy Afro, the pressed, khaki slacks and striped shirts of his youth exchanged for overalls, a long sleeve flannel shirt and tennis shoes. His wife Mildred scraped together a meal for me in the kitchen while we talked. Wine, music and conversation went on until late. We discussed a thousand different things, but the conversation always came back to the war.

A bed had been made for me in a small room off the kitchen and with the lights finally out, I lay there alone, haunted by my decision. I imagined federal agents knocking on the door in the days to come. It seemed like the best thing was to move on, and quickly, but where and how? All manner of ideas occurred to me, but none of them seemed the least bit realistic when scrutinized properly.

I fell asleep very late with the sound of a creek gurgling beneath the cabin and was awakened around eight the next morning by someone stirring in the kitchen. It was Mildred baking blueberry muffins and the scent of them had soon wafted throughout the cabin. Anthony stirred a short time later and I heard the crackle of a fire in the fireplace. *Blonde on Blonde* played on the stereo, something heartfelt and sincere. I lay there with the memory of my youth digging into my heart—that night we had tripped at Sarah's place and a thousand dear memories just like it—all of it so goddamned close but now completely beyond my reach. I wept quietly and hid my tears when Anthony popped his head in.

Before getting up, I read a few pages from *The Hobbit* and dreamed of wood elves making pleasant mischief in the redwood forest. We'd all go off to the Shire someday soon and live happily ever after. Someday soon, we would be there and live in peace.

Heading off for a day at the university a short while later, Anthony and Mildred let their two gray Weimaraner pups out the front door.

"Keep an eye on them," Anthony said. The dogs were already disappearing into the forest with tongues hanging out and nipping at each other's heels.

I made another pot of coffee and went out to sit on a deck off the kitchen. The creek exited eight feet below the deck and trickled away down a glade. Occasionally, I heard the dogs barking off in the distance or a car passing up on the narrow mountain highway, but otherwise it was quiet.

Amidst the silence, a large Tomcat plopped up onto the railing. Another soon followed and there were menacing hisses from a safe distance before both of them settled in to lick their paws.

Thinking to fashion a bit of peace in the world, I went inside and returned with two bowls of tuna, but the cats quickly converged along the rail, hissing and snapping at each other with their ears pinned back. I tried placing the two bowls at opposite ends of the rail, but the bigger cat quickly devoured his bowl and went after the other one.

Then the dogs came galloping home and commenced to have a grand time, barking and leaping up at the cats from the forest floor. I had a goddamned war on my hands. It was in our blood. Millions of years of it, and how in hell did you overcome that?

The dogs eventually tired of their sport and disappeared back into the forest. In need of a nap, the cats agreed to a peace treaty. I smoked a joint and dreamed I had saved the world. All was still there in the redwood forest.

Later on, I ate two of Mildred's blueberry muffins lavished with butter, pulled on my boots and walked down to the San Lorenzo River with a fishing pole. Before I knew it, the autumn sky had grown pale and Mildred and Anthony were arriving home to make dinner.

I spent another day much the same as that one, then another and soon most of a week had disappeared with the war receding from my thoughts.

Late that Friday afternoon, Anthony came into my room and sat on the bed while I was reading. He looked somber.

"Mom called me today at work. A couple of guys in suits stopped by the house looking for you."

He studied my reaction.

"I don't know who they were exactly and you know her. She was too flustered to ask. At least she told them she had no idea where to find you."

"But she called you," I said. "What if they tapped her phone?"

Anthony shrugged.

"I doubt it."

"Yeah, but you never know."

Anthony shrugged again.

"What are you going to do? You've got to hang somewhere. Lay low and I'll help you find a job."

Anthony patted me on the shoulder.

"Things will work out all right. Just remember, you're not the only one in this situation."

He stood up to leave but stopped at the door.

"Hey, we're having a big paint party for my friend Harry tomorrow. Why don't you come along. It'll be fun. We're going to get the place all spiffed up before Harry and his girlfriend move in."

"Sure," I said.

Anthony nodded and went out to help Mildred with dinner. I lay alone, staring at the ceiling.

What in the world have I done? It must be something more than dodging the draft. A million other young men had done that. It made no sense for the law to come poking around my parent's place the way that they had.

Over dinner, I mostly forgot about these thoughts but late that night, lying alone in my bed, my worries returned. Around and around the fears went in my head.

The next afternoon, we drove out to Harry's house in Ben Lomond.

“Here now!” Harry said upon opening the door.

He was wearing a lab coat. Harry was always wearing a lab coat and doing scientific experiments.

A dozen or so people were painting the house behind him, though none of it looked like work. It looked more like a party. A long table in the living room was the only furniture in the place and dozens of opened paint cans had been stacked on top of it, along with dozens of paint rollers and paint brushes.

“Have some punch,” Harry said. “It’s out in the kitchen.”

Between there and the kitchen, we learned it was psychedelic punch. That explained the atmosphere. Everyone was gliding about as if they were Greek nymphs in a wooded glen.

Late in the day, I found myself in the bathroom, painting seagulls on the walls. I had forgotten the war for several hours, but it was back.

“Hey, let’s go everyone!” a lady called out through the house. “We’re going to Tiger Beach to build a bonfire and have a feast.”

Suddenly, there was a caravan of cars headed down to the coast. We arrived to Tiger Beach a bit before sunset. Someone started the bonfire. Someone got the music going. A friend of Harry’s went out to fish at the point. I followed him and watched this guy reel in a five foot leopard shark.

“Gooooooood eatin’” he said.

I was expecting him to let it go but instead he killed the shark with a blow to the head and gutted it with a knife. A dozen baby sharks came spilling out.

“Wow, she was pregnant,” he said and went about dumping the baby sharks into the sea.

I stood there transfixed as they hit the water and swam away. The guy quickly had the shark cut into steaks and we went back to broil them over the fire.

Later, we were all dancing like a tribe around the fire at sunset. It was a day that had become eternal, and like all good things, I did not want it to end.

That following week, I went on worrying about the war and jumped at every unexpected knock on the door, but nothing much happened, except that I worried a great deal. Eventually, I found a job clearing dead trees from the forest with an old hippie. Our days were spent cutting those logs down into shorter pieces and splitting the pieces into firewood. The wood was sold to various folks up in the mountains. The job hardly paid enough to survive but it did have one great advantage. I was outdoors from dawn to dusk and free to dream all I wanted.

I dreamed about Laura most of all, dreams in which wars did not exist and two people could live happily ever after. Or, being more practical at times, I imagined a world where nothing worse than a slap on the wrist and a tour in

the National Guard awaited me. Many times I dreamed the peace process would quickly succeed, but all my dreams turned out to be mirages in the end. Laura remained in the south, out of my reach, and the negotiators in Paris squabbled like spoiled children. They couldn't decide on the size of the negotiating table, let alone how to end their goddamned war.

And all the while my life went on in its shadow world, where in the first few moments of consciousness each day, I would pretend the war did not exist. Then, accepting it did, I went off to work in the forest and dreamed all day of miraculous solutions to my problems. I spent most evenings in general merriment with Mildred and Anthony, only to find the same circle of anxieties and illusions awaiting me when I lay back down to bed.



## 5

Spring passed to summer and summer to fall and I had hitchhiked down to be with Laura twice during those months, setting aside any fear I had of getting busted and in fact was just then returning from my third trip down south, having received assurances from Laura that she would look into transferring up north for the upcoming semester. The offer had been made without a great deal of enthusiasm but at least things were moving in the right direction.

With hope in my heart, I arrived back to Santa Cruz late in the day and walked out to where Old Highway 9 and the San Lorenzo River met Coast Highway, and had been standing there for fifteen minutes or so when a young man finally stopped to pick me up. He was headed to Ben Lomond, which meant I had a ride all the way home.

We wound out the tree-shrouded road, rapping away together. The last light of day was fading to dusk around us. The San Lorenzo skipped whitely over pebble and rock nearby, and it was a good river, filled with steelhead in those autumn months of the year.

The highway eventually wound up over the mountain and down into a wide valley and then entered a stretch of dark, gloomy forest. Coming to a break in the trees, I gestured to the young man and he pulled over by a hand-painted sign tacked to a redwood tree. With a final thanks and wave goodbye, he continued up the highway and I turned down the gravel lane to our cabin. Twilight had gathered among the tall, straight trunks of the redwoods and the forest floor was filled with the quiet of that hour.

A memory popped into my head as I walked along; of the many times Anthony and I had flown past that obscure lane on our way home, the two of us immersed in one discussion or another and completely forgetting about the hand-painted sign until we were a quarter mile up the narrow highway, thereby obliged to continue all the way up to the village market in order to turn around and typically using that as a pretense to buy a bottle of Spanish Port for our troubles.

With my boots crunching along the gravel road, I smiled to myself at these thoughts and over the peacefulness around me. It felt good to be home and see the creek gurgling beneath our upraised cabin but I noticed there was no trail of smoke rising up from the stone chimney and thought that rather odd. Anthony and Mildred were usually home at this hour but their car wasn't parked out in front and there were no signs of activity.

Going over the little bridge to the front door, I saw a padlock over the doorknob and a jolt of adrenalin shot into my heart. It was exactly the sort of lock that real estate agents employed when selling a property, which meant something was terribly wrong.

Unable to see through the front door or any of the curtained windows, I dropped my backpack, went around to the back deck, climbed up from the creek and stared in through the kitchen door. The cabin was completely empty. The wood floors had been swept clean and glowed faintly in the dim light. The closet in my room was open and everything was gone from it too.

I climbed back down from the deck and went around to the front of the cabin. Our friend Nita lived back up the lane and my first impulsive was to go ask her what had happened but I walked around the cabin several more times instead, checking and rechecking the doors and windows, unwilling to accept what my senses were telling me. My brother, his wife and their two dogs had vanished. I was homeless in the gathering dusk and had just hitchhiked four hundred miles to discover this fact. It seemed impossible to believe. There had to be some reasonable explanation, yet nothing I considered in the approaching twilight made any sense. Before running off in this way, why on earth hadn't Anthony bothered to call me?

Depressed to think I was suddenly homeless, I went around front and started up towards Nita's place. No doubt she would know the answer and if nothing else would offer me a place to sleep that night, but halfway up the road, those hopes were dashed as Jack, Nita's boyfriend, appeared from around the far side of the house and loped up her stairs like a bear coming back to its cave. Nita opened the screen door and the two of them kissed before Jack slipped inside.

I stood in the lane with the image of Jack stuck in my mind, the yin yang symbol stitched to the back of his Levi jacket a reminder of his legendary status among the Merry Pranksters and of my own uncertainties as a young man. My impulse now was to go down and set up camp in the woods but I went up to knock on the door anyway. I needed to know what the hell had happened to my brother, no matter what Jack thought of me.

The latest Stones' album started to blare out of Nita's open windows.

*"Well, you heard about the midnight rambler...creeping round your bedroom door."*

The sound track echoed all around the quiet forest.

I knocked several times before Nita finally appeared.

“Clay!” she exclaimed and the screen door creaked open. “Come in, come in!”

Nita was holding a wooden spoon in one hand and used the back of the other hand to wipe the sweat from her brow. Her cheeks were red from standing over a hot stove. She offered me a radiant smile and a peck on the cheek.

“Come in, come in,” she repeated and hurried back to the kitchen, her fluffy, black Afro swaying about as she went.

“You know Jack,” she shouted over the music.

Jack sat hunched forward on the sofa, his dark eyes probing me. I felt another jolt of adrenalin when he nodded his head in my direction. What if he had learned about my tryst with Nita? The two of us had slept together back in the spring, when I first moved up to live with Anthony, which in all probability meant little or nothing to Nita, given the times. She was a free spirit at the vanguard of the Bay Area counter-culture movement and a seamstress to a number of its creative icons, and had no doubt slept with a lot of those men, but she was still Jack’s lady and for all the free love in the sixties, I doubted his magnanimity under the circumstances. He probably felt about Nita the same way I felt about Laura.

I nodded at him, excused myself and went into the kitchen.

Nita was busy with her pots and pans on the stove. She also had something baking in the oven. She checked that and stirred the contents of one pan, all the while dancing to the Stones. She wiped the sweat from her forehead one more time and smiled somewhat sadly at me over her shoulder.

“Roll a joint!” she said and pointed to her stash on a bookshelf.

I did as requested and held the joint to her lips while she cooked. We both took several hits and I placed the roach in an ashtray.

Seated at Nita’s breakfast nook, I felt the drug take effect and the shock of my predicament melt into spiritual detachment. My former home was merely a painting on life’s canvas now, a fleeting moment in the spacetime continuum, surrounded by redwoods at dusk and framed by Nita’s kitchen window. Only the music seemed a bit incongruous under the circumstances.

Apparently recognizing my discomfort, Nita scurried off to turn down the stereo.

“Sorry,” she said upon returning. “Anyway, I suppose you’ll want to know what happened.”

I nodded.

“It was crazy, Clay. Absolutely nuts. The whole thing blew up in a matter of days. Mildred caught Anthony and Joni screwing down in the woods. Which, you know, I don’t think Mildred was all that concerned about the fling itself, but Anthony had already gone off the deep end and he and Joni ran off to Europe by the end of that week.”

Nita smiled mischievously over her shoulder at me.

“Mildred went back to live with her parents in Hawaii. I guess she had anticipated dragging Anthony over there to work in her old man’s shipping business at some point. Imagine that. Anthony taking a corporate job.”

“Yeah,” I said.

Nita studied me and went back to her cooking.

“Maybe you didn’t see this coming, Clay, but things weren’t all that great for them after the Peace Corps. Anyway, our friends around the valley helped disperse all their stuff. Next thing you know, poof, everything was gone and the place was empty.”

Nita waved as if it was some sort of grand magic.

“The cabin is for rent, if you’re interested.”

“I couldn’t afford it alone,” I said. “Do you know what happened to my stuff?”

“Oh, it’s scattered all over the place. You know how it is with hippies, Clay. You may as well leave your stash lying around. I can give you some clothes if you need them.”

“No, I’ll be all right. I’ve got my backpack down at the cabin. I’ll sleep by the river tonight and head back south in the morning.”

“Don’t head south,” Nita said with a sudden look of concern. She placed the wooden spoon down and took hold of my shoulders. “Think of your draft situation, Clay.”

“I think about it every day, Nita. What else would I think about?”

“Then the last thing you need is to head back down south at this moment.”

Jack appeared and leaned in the doorway while we were talking, a feather twirling in one hand, as if he was distracted by it.

“Anyway,” I said, looking back at Nita. “Laura was planning to come up and live with me at the start of next semester so I’d better go down and make other plans.”

“Call her,” Nita suggested. “Or better yet, just find another place to live and wait until she shows up. I can arrange a place for you to crash for a few weeks. It’ll give you a chance to look for something more permanent. Then Laura arrives and, poof, you’re all set up.”

“No. I’ve got to go down there and explain what’s happened.”

I did not want to elaborate on how cavalier I had been with Laura about her college aspirations. Her noncommittal shrug began to haunt me even more now. She did not want the uncertainty of transferring to another college. If I loved her that much, I should be willing to go down south and find a place near her campus.

“Sit still,” Jack interjected. “Let the universe turn. Everything will find its proper place.”

He had said this without glancing up from the feather twirling between his thumb and finger.

Yeah, right, I thought to myself. How easy to dispense such wisdom when it wasn't your woman. I doubted he'd be saying the same thing if Nita were involved. I looked back at her, suppressing my anger as best I could. She ruffled my hair.

“You can sleep on the couch tonight, okay?”

At this, Jack abruptly returned to the living room. Nita tried another smile but she was clearly disconcerted by the two male elk marking scent around her home.

“I'd better go,” I said.

“Well, at least have something to eat,” she said.

“All right. Thanks, Nita.”

I waited while she filled a bowl with soup and brought it over to the dining table.

With only a hint of light remaining, I walked back down to the cabin and climbed up onto the wooden deck one more time. Standing against the rail, I looked down towards the river. The creek gurgled beneath me. A jay called in the distance. Otherwise the world was still. I half expected Anthony's dogs to come running out of the forest from their Bodkins adventures. So many times Anthony and I had lingered there in the gathering dusk and the memory of those moments stabbed into my heart; Anthony standing along the rail, his freshwater pole dangling over the creek, laughably expecting an errant steelhead to swim up from the San Lorenzo, me seated at the redwood table, the two of us talking away the world together, a joint passed between us, our bottle of Spanish port and our dreams of the sixties lingering in the trail of smoke and good conversation.

I broke down then, seeing all that had been stolen from me and would never return.

When my grief was finally spent, I climbed back down from the deck and started towards the river. The forest was nearly black so I had to make my way cautiously among the undergrowth and fallen branches.

I chose a place to camp under a redwood, some distance back from the river, where I could comfortably hear the whisper of the trees over the rushing water. I had no candle or lantern to read by and was left to my thoughts.

The war stabbed into my imagination immediately. It seemed impossible to believe; that it was being waged on the other side of the world right then, in a tropical jungle glistening with sunlight, men waiting fearfully amidst the call of exotic birds and rotting foliage, preparing to blow each other to hell.

Not wanting to think of the war, I recalled pleasanter days, when I had sipped wine in the cafes of Paris the previous summer and later bummed down through the countryside on my way to Spain, always a good Chabot in my Moroccan satchel, some rustic bread and the ever-present bottle of Beaujolais. I recalled those warm summer nights when we had camped wherever we could find a bit of forest alongside the road, David, the red-haired Englishman on his way to the Dakar rally, Helga, the young German lady from Frankfurt, whom we had met in the cathedral at Chartres, and a young refugee couple from Czechoslovakia, who, it turned out, were the world's outright experts at finding places to sleep on the streets of a European city.

Then I remembered Pamplona, not a great fan of Hemingway at the time and unaware that I had stumbled into his beloved festival until a line of people came out of a bar in the heat of a late afternoon, dancing the conga, and a woman in this drunken procession explained to me the reason for all the disorder as she went by. The next morning I had arisen early with all the other still sodden drunks and had gone off to be chased along narrow streets by that day's collection of bulls, this initiation rite repeated each morning until the Festival of St. Fermin concluded and a train was boarded to Barcelona, the ensuing late nights carousing among back street sailor bars dearly etched into my mind, the long strolls along La Rambla each afternoon, with thousands of parakeets singing from cages hung in the shady trees. I recalled that last evening in the Plaza Rei, a dignified old man dressed in suit and beret overcome as he tried to feed a flurry of pigeons from his bag of popcorn, and the cold, overnight ferry trip to Ibiza that followed, and the local fisherman who had taken us on to Formentera with the spray of the sea in our faces, and all this great, untamed journey leading to a tribe of people camped among cypress trees along a white beach in the Spanish sun. A hip young Spaniard operated a bar from under a palm-covered cabaña nearby, and Arabic music played on a radio station broadcasting from the not so distant Algiers. We frolicked in the turquoise sea and on some days hiked through the shady olive groves on our way to the little town of San Francisco, often stopping on our way to lie upon the rock walls left behind by Roman legions and dream of

ancient times. But no matter how our days were spent, we returned each night to one certain ritual, the tribe gathered as the sun set and the sea grew dark blue and our laughter spilled with hashish into the arid twilight.

It was on one of those nights, as the sky danced with stars above us that we had passed a bottle of Tawny port among ourselves and listened to a radio broadcast of Apollo 11 landing on the moon, laughing and discussing life and watching our cold white companion orb cross the evening sky; in a state of wonder that someone stood there looking back at us, that we had been placed at that particular crossroad of mankind's destiny, to witness all human beings feel as one as we made our mysterious trek across the universe, even if it was only a symbolic moment and even if those feelings had only lasted for a fleeting moment in time.

Life abroad had been that sort of wondrous journey for me, filled with discovery and enlightenment, so returning in the fall to face the draft had come with a degree of dread, and I was all the more depressed to learn my number had been picked at the top of the lottery. It had only been a matter of time before that draft notice arrived in the mail, as it had.

In all this, I had met Laura, my one impulse since that moment being to run away with her from the war and from everything else. With her love, I felt invincible and had no fear of being a man without a country and imagined I would love her always and this thought nearly made me leap to my feet, determined as I was to go south and be at her side, despite what Nita and Jack had told me.

This flow of desires and dreams and regrets went on spinning around in my heart. I wanted to hold and kiss the woman I loved right that instant. I longed for our place in the sun. And all the while, a great uncertainty worked within me, as though the gods were pressing with great hands down upon my soul.