

And the sun rose again. It shined mercilessly through the musty haze that had become Bunker's shadowy companion, a *doppelgänger* of conscience. "Fucking sun, rising only to shine on another day of death," he heard his mind mumble. Over the months his "mission" had become an object of its derision.

The ejaculation of hot, contemptuous spittle scorched a mocking, sandy earth. Would death be his today? Unconsciously, he fondled the locket containing Lisa's photo, lifelessly dangling from his neck. It clanged softly against his dog tags, creating a tender cacophony that snapped his heart strings. Within it were the last vestiges of sense in his world. The remembrance of her saccharine feel, the orchid scent that emanated from the balmy niche between her breasts, a place where he could blot out this stench called freedom-fighting that now filled his nostrils even in sleep seemed as remote as his own self had become.

When he had seen the carnage on the news, heard the misguided logic of those determined to alter the way things were, had been, had heard the president's words, he knew coming here was imperative, the fulfillment of a promise he had inadvertently and wholeheartedly signed onto at birth. Although he had never been out of his own state, he knew the whole world desired his luck; it envied his right to be free. The keen abstraction of patriotism that had stalked him since nature had granted him breath pierced him and bloomed as he viewed the ruins of lives on his own soil. At the time he had wondered how the country had deserved this.

"What did we ever do to other countries but offer our help in assisting them to reach the same glory we enjoy? We let these foreigners in here to realize their dreams and this is how they repay our God-loving goodness. We give them jobs so they can buy all their hearts' desire. This is what we get for our kindness. The bastards, send 'em back where they came from!" His uncle's words still rang in his ears, though with a diminished sense of truth. That was how it always seemed to him, and to his patriotic parents, who had worked like Jews in the time of Egypt all their lives. Had not many come to his nation throughout its history, "seeking the promise of freedom and hope"? And had they not been welcomed, albeit under the assumption that a Protestant work ethic was the ticket of admission? Yes, "the whole world wants to be just like us". The words resounded in his mind, a distant echo from his brother's stereo. And these were the ideals he was implored to impart to this indigenous and increasingly recalcitrant population, like a priest administering God's truth in a time of cholera.

Something had gone awry, a naked truth that haunted him like the eyes of those he was suppose to liberate, as he once again embarked on his daily ritual of what he now saw as

propagating the reach of God and country, while he perpetrated sins against a foreign God in someone else's land.

"I thought they weren't supposed to be paired. How did I miss that!" he mused aloud and indistinctly as a veiled, dark beauty cradling a child walked past, shooting him a look that belied gratitude. He felt like a conservative knowingly feigning compassion. He looked at the steel toes of his boots, where his shame lay, and then at his watch.

"Eighty seven more days and I'll be out of here," he thought, "Jesus." He wondered how his friends were and what they might be doing while he was busy stabbing some fanatic he couldn't fathom. Would he really be James Bunker when he got out of this? He sometimes wished he could stop his thoughts, the memories that macheted his conscience.

*Jesusgodamnmotherfuckerlastnightwassofuckingterriblewiththosegoddamn
sneakyfuckersswingdownfromtheteesscreamingtheirscreamsAAAHHEEE
EYAAHHWOOSH:hillersheadarollingholysshitwhadollDo?Run?no!:Fighty
ouassholeit'sallthatyocandoohGODSAVEME(thrustplungetwisttuurngutstears
screams)GODFORGIVEMETHEYMADEMEDOITcan'tstanditgottarunanrun
anrunanrufuckinbrushshitgod(swoosh)goddamnHELLDONTLOOKBACKrunanrunanr
unanAAHHH:decapitatedladyinbrushmyshoesshitfuckin'bulletzippingpast(s
woosh)*

He wiped the sweaty dust from his eyes. "Got to stop thinking about that," he reminded himself, wincing.

"Be the first one on your block..."

He turned off the tiny radio stuffed in his pocket, drew a cigarette from the pack tucked it into his tee shirt sleeve and, lighting it, pensively stared into the eternal green depths of a jungle that waited patiently to devour him. Thoughtlessly, he picked his nose, ridding it of its bulky, annoying contents, which had only increased with each passing day of this chemical campaign they had been on for almost three weeks. His shortness of breath had gotten worse recently, but the sergeant had assured him that it was nothing to get upset about. He abruptly tossed the cigarette away from him.

"The government has tested these things for safety and there is absolutely no way they would want to harm their own men. That just wouldn't make much sense, Bunker. Believe me, I know these things," the sergeant had said with a look containing some sympathy.

But Bunker wasn't so sure. How could he know? Was it a *fata morgana*, the goodness of America,

and that no dream was out of reach? He wasn't too sure about anything anymore. Was it a *fata morgana*, the goodness of America, and that no dream was out of reach so long as you tried hard enough? Since his tour began he had seen his dreams evaporate like yesterday's piss on the desert floor. How had such a distance crept in between what he had learned America was and what his experience was telling him? He acutely felt the dissipation of that dream, and this fact could be witnessed in the drained eyes of the men who purported belief. There were only nightmares to replace the dreams: screaming, bloodied, armless soldiers whose last vestiges of hope were swept from them like dirt from a threshold that was the entrance to the world they had known before this; begging, hopeless, innocent women crying as they pitifully performed sexual favors for those certain servicemen possessed with that special brand of national supremacy that was at the heart of the cancer that was enveloping the entire fighting corps; dark, dead eyes of the native children who months ago waved flags gleefully when he first marched proudly through these dirt roads, tanks before him adorned with gloating visages who felt a real sense of purpose and heroism. But those smiles packed with a gleaming patriotism now duly bespoke a time of inner grief, of disillusionment with a credo abandoned long before it was their turn to invoke it, and the deepest bitterness lied in each soldier's realization they had been cheated, and it had all become painfully clear well beyond the point of no return. Most only prayed they could return with at least their single souls intact.

How would Lisa ever understand these terrible things? Could he ever even tell her? These questions ricocheted throughout his cerebral passages hourly. What kind of "monster" had the country really become? Where were the truths of his youth?

SMACK!! Half a ruler went flying across the room while the arm that held the other half, which belonged to the unmistakably cruel face of Sister Catherine, quivered with rage. "Alan Bunker, do you realize what you do when you interrupt the words of God?" Sister Catherine queried with holy contempt.

Alan's head snapped eastward in a fraction of a second as a deck of cards fell gloriously to the floor; he didn't know what to say. He stared at the floor with a sullen, red face.

"You show God that you don't care about what he is trying to teach you. His only son, Jesus of Nazareth, died on the cross for you, Alan. And you play games !!"

Alan shuffled his feet clumsily and his eyes began to fill with tears. He felt as though his face would burst into a ball of flame at any given moment, definitively proving his satanic affiliations. He had never been able to get his head around the fact that he had somehow been responsible for Jesus' crucifixion, but he was willing to learn. He was so mortified, yet he felt an incredible hatred for the sister. Were people in heaven like her?

"I'm sorry Sister," he mumbled almost inaudibly. He wished so badly he could be home in his

room at this moment, alone and secure within his own mind.

"Alan, do you intend to go to confession today?"

"Yes, Sister Catherine."

Be
sure to tell
the father of

I'll never play cards again, Alan thought.

your behavior today, because I will know, Alan. God is very angry with you."

was not love or joy that he felt now but a gut-anxiety that was turning his stomach into a writhing place where an inner goodness was pitted against an inherently foreign force.

"And remember, Alan, those who lie will feel the flames of Purgatory"

that Heaven was a beautiful and wondrous place where God would love all who came to him. But it

Even though Alan felt ashamed, he had difficulty conjuring a picture of God's disgusted and disappointed mien looking down on him from some undesignated area above him. He did know he wanted to run out of the room. Every eye in the room was resting on his wriggling self. Could God truly be angry with him for playing a game? He didn't want to anger God. He loved God

and he must know that because He knows everything. He had believed and had always been ta

"All right,Bunker,wake up.We move out at 0800 hours."

The piercing voice of the sargeant shattered his introspective retrospection. He crept out reluctantly from under the protection of sleep and nudged Wills en route to a vertical position.Willis hardly stirred. Alan shook him gently.

Come on,man,we gotta roll in fifteen minutes.The sarge just came by."

Willis snapped his head up abruptly and stared into a momentarily unidentifiable void

He wrapped his arms around his head and, bending forward, sighed off the weight of this world that hung around his heart like an anvil.

"Jesus, man, what a weird dream." He moaned, and squeezed his head harder.

He yearned to release relentless scream into camp but knew it would do nothing to alleviate the black pain that was devouring him, the seemingly endless anxiety that had decided to take up permanent residence in an area just below his diaphragm. .

"I can't wait until this mission is over." Willis said with a note of despair.

"That shit is doing something to me. I don't quite know what but I feel weird somehow.

-The sarge told me that it was alright and doesn't harm you. The government it out] 'funker replied.

- You don't think that sarge is gonna tell you the truth, now, do you? Willis said with resigned cynicism. You think old Uncle Sam is looking out for you or something?

He implied bitterly. I suppose that's why we're fighting this heroic war for God knows what,right? Man,it's as black and white as you and me. Can't you see that?

Willis' ramblings always made Bunker feel uneasy. He was always bringing up the apparently obvious, which was the unknown for him.

- You know,Willy, I don't know why, but sometimes, though not in a violent way, you kind of piss me off. Bunker implied as delicately as he could.

- Oh really? Willis said.

-You act as though you were sent here to be exterminated or something

- Well look, Bunker, if every single white guy that you've met since you been here had been or was in combat, what fuckin' conclusion would you come to?

- Uh, I don't know. What the hell has that got to do with anything?

The sound of chow calls inserted itself between them, and Bunker turned to gathered his gun and gas mask.

Willis glared at him with a mix of hate and pity.

- All right men, we're going to be heading due north from here for approximately six miles, where I've been told an enemy village lies. Remember to be careful of mines en route and stay close together.

The sargeant spoke with an assured authority that left Willis cold.

In single file the soldiers walked into the green forest that was thick with insects, fungi, humidity and the promise of uncertainty.