

The Big Buddha Bicycle Race

Prologue

When you've been to the mountaintop
the valleys seem tame
When you've flown through lightning
Death's just a game
When you've kissed Carly Simon
other women seem plain
When you've been to Mexico
you can't come home again
When your back was aching
she washed away the pain
When the storm was raging
she knew what song to sing
Lost in the desert
she brought you the sea
When your mind was sinking
she fed you tea
When you've been to the mountaintop
the world seems flat
When you've fought in Cambodia
peace feels like a trap
When the full moon breaks through the clouds
the light bursts like flak
When you've flown through the Mu Gia Pass
you know you can't come back
The waters taste bitter
when you've sipped on champagne
Your throat becomes scratchy
despite monsoon rain
Your ears fill with silence
when the sweet sparrow sings
When you've been to the mountaintop
you can't come home again

31 December 1985 (*The Present*)

Falling Backwards

It must have been a hallucination. Sitting in a mountain cave along the winding road that led northwest to Luang Prabang, I could smell the incense floating in the air—pure, not burned to hide some weekend hippie’s marijuana cigarette—a dusky smoke perfume that had burned in Asia for a thousand centuries. The light was golden, an aura unseen in America since brigantines stopped bringing whale oil back from the Pacific...

How can I trust dream-visions that keep floating up from the murky depths? Hasn’t my memory been obliterated by drink and drugs and the passage of time? Why am I afraid to ask, afraid of being mistaken for a rambling derelict on an L.A. street corner?

Alone on New Year’s Eve in a bungalow atop Mount Washington, I snort cocaine and chase it down with Jack Daniels when I run out of stale champagne. Mesmerized by blurry car lights floating in the distance up and down the Pasadena Freeway, I can hear the *voice* of Ajahn Po—my first true teacher—calling to me, but I’m not sure I understand his *words*.

Would anyone believe that I was once a Buddhist monk who sat in Noble Silence on the rock floor of that cave, cushioned only by a thin straw mat? Deep in meditation, I recollected the painful days of my Irish Catholic youth when my heart wanted to love Jesus while my mind warred with Pope Pius and Martin Luther, with Saint Thomas Aquinas and Bishop Fulton J. Sheen and would give me no peace. When did my father, my aviator hero, become my oppressor? Why was he angered by questions about race and politics and faith? Why did he offer to help me with drums or flying lessons, but not with both? Was it a test? Did he already know the answer? Why did he never talk about his days in Florida, already a man at age eighteen, who turned English farm boys into the pilots who drove back the mighty Luftwaffe?

While candles and incense were burning on the cave’s stone altar I went into a trance so deep that the graceful bronze image of a Sukhothai Buddha, sitting in eternal serenity and wisdom, transformed into a television that droned with an endless loop of John F. Kennedy—young and handsome—giving his inaugural speech with unblinking, granite-chiseled confidence that made me eager to pay any price and bear any burden he asked of us. Deep

in dreams and memories, I forgot I was a holy man and drifted in a cloud to those tragic days from high school to college when I lost my innocence but tried to cling to my ideals. I would pay any price and bear any burden to go to *film school*—that was how I would do my part to save the world now that JFK was gone. But when I meditated even deeper I had a troubling vision within my vision: Harley Baker was burning on a funeral pyre, his outlaw-bluesman's heart and mind blown away with amphetamines, his hard, white body and redneck soul wasted with opium-tainted grass and BX booze.

I didn't meet Harley until I stood toe to toe with Death. A warrior, an Air Commando, he taught me how to laugh at it and fear it and quash it away and never quite ignore it. Nothing in my Boston childhood had equipped me for the realities of Southeast Asia—the smooth, cool pages of *National Geographic* magazines stacked in our attic in the outskirts of Boston made Indochina look like Eden. It was Harley who prepared me for combat, accidentally preparing me for monkhood along the way. But in my vision I knew that Tech Sergeant Baker was as doomed as President Kennedy. And I could see my own soul, lost in the void, lost along the sidelines of the Big Buddha Bicycle Race.

My mind skids past fading memories I want to recall and lands in catastrophe on days past I have forgotten just as vividly as days I never lived at all. It must have been the whiskey. Or the red-rock heroin. How did we survive the plane crash? It seemed so real when the North Vietnamese took us prisoner. Why do I still dream of fire and fear a candle burning in the night? Who was Tukada? Baker survived two crashes, but didn't he kill himself shooting up speed? Why aren't I certain? What has happened to my mind?

I too walked away from the burning wreckage. I too survived a SAM missile's direct hit—or was it a Strela? Harley looked off a thousand yards into the tree line when he talked to you, often rambling and unable to make sense. I needed someone to tell me that I had *escaped* the thousand-yard stare, but how did you translate that into Laotian? Had I survived the crash or was I a ghost trapped in my own nightmare, unable to escape even to the Buddhist *samsara* of endless rebirths, never-ending cycles of worldly suffering and delusion? Was I living in hell or purgatory or just the twentieth century?

Sitting in that cave in Laos, I could not erase my memory-visions of Colonel Strbik and Captain Rooker—the best damned pilots in the unit. I could see them burning, their faces serene like the face of Saint Polycarp, except there would be no miracle—streams of their own blood would not put out the flames. My visions were seared by burning wreckage and smoldering villages and I could no longer distinguish the mangled corpses of war heroes from beauty queens, of Asians from barbarian invaders, of friends from enemies. I was haunted by grunts like Pigpen Sachs, the door gunner, and Jeff Spitzer, my fellow cameraman, who dreamed of being held in the arms of college girls as they died—and called out for their mothers. Reporters said that bodies were being stacked like cordwood in Vietnam, but in Laos nobody was going to that much trouble. Human beings were being chopped down like the weeds the hill-tribe Hmong dried out by the side of the dirt road to make into hand brooms. Only nothing could be made from something so useless as a dead human being. Cremation was merciful in the jungle.

In the distant days between college and monkhood, in the days when I failed as a draft-dodger and failed as a soldier, I would have been satisfied waking up in the boondocks of Thailand with day lilies filling the vase that sat on the rickety rattan table next to my bed at Bungalow Ruam Chon Sawng. I would have been content with flowers that lived a single day, even though waking up with a tiny bar girl's hand on my chest, whispers of "lovely, so lovely" alighting like soft petals, was what I really needed to put my mind at ease. In the boondocks of Thailand along the Lao frontier, Baker, Washington, Wheeler and Shahbazian usually got to the Corsair Club before me and I often went home from the bars alone because even in my days as a lover of whores I maintained certain standards. I had to know her name and where she was from and if her dad was a rice farmer or a sailor in the Royal Thai Navy, because whores were people too, just like GIs.

Vietnamese villagers prayed for us every September, wrapping the sculpted Buddhas that sat inside their pagodas with saffron to appease the souls of the unburied dead—the wandering restless souls of beggars, soldiers and prostitutes. But I fear those prayers were not enough. So many nights on the Lao frontier it was not until the first pink glow of dawn that I finally fell asleep, and even then it was not peace that came but my own private *samsara*. To this very day I ask: *Will I wake up ten thousand times without awakening? Or will these cycles of rebirth become the path to my redemption?*

January–April 1970

Mexico

I hadn't gone crazy yet when I first went out to California, although I sometimes fear my madness started the day I was born. Sure, I'd been thrown out of the Pentagon. Something about my involvement with the GI contingent that walked at the head of a 250,000-person anti-war march on Washington called the Second Vietnam Moratorium. It might have cost me an automatic promotion from airman first class to sergeant, but it had been part of a *plan*. It got me assigned at last where my recruiter had *guaranteed* I'd be assigned all along—the 1361st Photo Squadron at Norton Air Force Base, California, headquarters of the Aerospace Audio-Visual Service, acronym AAVS (and pronounced “AVIS” in Air Force speak).

A year earlier I had been teaching English to Portuguese immigrants at a high school in Bristol, Rhode Island. It kept me out of the draft, but I was miserable. I could have blamed the fact I had no textbooks. Or I could have blamed my students—the boys had barely avoided being sent off to fight colonial wars in Angola and Mozambique only to discover when they got to America that they would be drafted to fight in Vietnam if they learned English. In the end, though, I had to blame myself—a dedicated career teacher or even a dedicated draft dodger would have made it work. Instead, my heart was three thousand miles away. I had been accepted for a master's program in film production at the University of Southern California. I was ready to go, except Congress changed the rules for the Class of '68 and eliminated draft deferments for grad school. Some of my friends talked bravely about Canada and Sweden, and I gave it some thought, but I couldn't help noticing that none of them left. The head of the AV department at Bristol High had been a Marine cameraman in Korea. When he got wind of my story, he suggested I pay a visit to an Air Force recruiter he knew—Tech Sergeant Gallipeau.

Gallipeau seemed harmless enough, with a Pillsbury Doughboy body stuffed into his dress blues and a crooked grin that reminded me ever so slightly of Gomer Pyle's. He enticed me into giving up my teaching gig by promising with great sincerity that I would be spending four years with a motion picture unit an hour from L.A. The son of a bitch had lied, of

course. Thanks to something in the fine print about “Needs of the Air Force,” I ended up in a converted broom closet in Washington, DC, cranking out certificates of graduation for each and every attendee of DODCOCS, a semi-boondoggle Department of Defense computer school for field-grade officers. Thanks to its prototype 1937 Xerox machine, I got to singe my fingers in a pint-sized oven, baking the toner on each and every diploma. I shared one other job at DODCOCS with two fellow low-level enlisted men—keeping the massive urns in the officers’ lounge filled with enough coffee to make sure the majors and colonels didn’t snore during the lectures. I never wanted to see or smell coffee grounds again.

The experience was suffocating—pasting on a phony smile day after day for the powerful, blindly ambitious careerists who surrounded me. At the same time, my mind was being buffeted by what I could only describe as powerful forces of history. It was the summer of 1969 and Richard Milhous Nixon occupied the Oval Office. He promised in June to start bringing troops home, but more than two hundred a week were still coming home in body bags. Even more unsettling, stories started appearing in the GI underground press about an Army lieutenant named Calley being charged with the massacre of hundreds of unarmed women, children and old men in an obscure hamlet called My Lai.

I had never been able to sort out exactly what I believed about the war as a college student, even after the Tet Offensive in January of ’68 showed that the Johnson administration had been dead wrong about there being “light at the end of the tunnel.” In the spring of ’68 we learned at campus teach-ins how General Navarre, the French commander in Vietnam, had said exactly the same thing in 1950—four years before the Vietnamese crushed the Foreign Legion at Dien Bien Phu. As a college senior, however, large anti-war protests had left me cold. I had been put off by fellow students who came across as spoiled rich kids who couldn’t be bothered with the sacrifices our fathers had taken for granted during World War II. I was downright disgusted when these same children of privilege turned into angry mobs shouting nursery rhyme chants like “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, the Viet Cong are gonna win.” Now though, I was being sucked into the anti-war movement by fellow *servicemen* who found My Lai repugnant and by returning combat veterans who were fed up with the senselessness of the whole enterprise, a quagmire that by June had cost 35,000 American lives. I tried to discuss the

situation with my father that summer, but when you begin your aviation career as a World War II flight instructor, you don't question authority any more than you want your own authority questioned. It was right about then that we stopped talking.

DODCOCS was supposed to be a plum joint-command assignment, but I was just as miserable as when I left Rhode Island. All I had accomplished was trading bedlam for solitary confinement, and I was still three thousand miles from California. Major Elton Toliver III, our Marine personnel officer, sported a throw-back old-school flat-top haircut like my dad used to wear. It reminded me so much of a miniature aircraft carrier that I half-expected to see little fighter-bombers taking off whenever I ran into him, which was often. He seemed to *enjoy* calling me into his office and telling me with a smirk how poorly I was fitting in, never missing a chance to point out infractions only visible to a gung-ho career military man—a mustache hair that had grown an eighth of an inch too long or a runaway sideburn that decided to graze my ear. My freshly shined shoes never seemed to make it to work without getting scuffed, and my belt buckle was forever wanting to slip out of alignment. Colonel Manketude, the Air Force liaison officer, started checking up on me too and was soon harrumphing at the pictures of Woodstock hanging on my broom-closet bulletin board and harrumphing again when he found a GI underground newspaper lying on my desk. A few weeks later he went positively apoplectic when I turned down a slot as a navigator/bombardier at OTS (Air Force shorthand for Officer Training School), pretty much echoing my father's sentiments about wasting a good education when I could be earning my wings.

What Manketude, Toliver and my father failed to understand was that freshly minted navigator/bombardiers were *not* being assigned to the Aerospace Audio Visual Service. Toliver, a third-generation Yale graduate, seemed to take it personally that a fellow Ivy Leaguer would turn down a commission, which in turn seemed to deepen his irritation at my wispy mustache and the Air Force regulation that permitted me to raise one without his permission. A couple of mellower lifers down in the print shop took me under their wing and clued me in that the *real* Air Force wasn't all spit-and-polish and square-your-corners like Headquarters Command. I should go for it, they said, if what I really wanted was to be assigned to a photo outfit. And if it meant risking deployment to Southeast Asia, so be

it, I figured, so great was my fear of going brain dead at DODCOCS. The only catch was that I had no idea how to “go for it.” I was depressed as hell until it dawned on me that I was just a stone’s throw from the office of Ted Kennedy’s Air Force caseworker. I was thrilled to hear back from Mrs. Riley that they were looking into my situation, but that didn’t keep things from getting dicey.

It was in mid-November, on the Monday morning following the Second Vietnam Moratorium, that Toliver totally blew his stack, stopping in his tracks when he saw me in the hall. “Airman Leary—what the fuck are you doing wearing a black armband?”

“It’s in memory of American soldiers killed in Vietnam, sir. Forty thousand so far. Ten thousand this year alone.”

“Report to my office in one hour.”

And when I did, he and Manketude were waiting for me. “I’ve done two fucking tours over there in case you forgot. And I’d rather be killing an eight-year-old gook kid in Vietnam than having to protect my own son from a bunch of Commies landing on the shores of California or Connecticut.”

I wondered what Vietnamese naval genius Toliver knew about who could lead a fleet of sampans across the Pacific. Before I could ask, however, Manketude stepped in. “You’ve made *another* big mistake, Leary. You’re finished here.”

And with that he handed me a set of orders that bounced me out the front door of DODCOCS and on across the Potomac to the Pentagon itself for a temporary duty assignment (how did the Air Force come up with the acronym *TDY*?) at Headquarters Squadron, USAF. While the brass figured out what to do with me, Lieutenant Colonel Wippazetti put me to work painting nail heads visible only to him in the veneer paneling of his temporary office. “The reflections hurt my eyes,” he said. And then, miraculously, Senator Kennedy’s office got word that AAVS was shorthanded. Mrs. Riley made a couple of phone calls and suddenly my life jumped back on track, kind of like the movie *Easy Rider*—only in reverse, with a *happy* ending—as I headed off across the country, taking the southern route by way of New Orleans and Mardi Gras. Chuck Berry danced in my head singing “Route 66” as I headed out of Austin towards Amarillo, Texas; Gallup, New Mexico; and—on the home stretch for California—Flagstaff, Arizona. Driving my red ’64 VW down Interstate 15, winding my way through the Cajon Pass

and on into San Bernardino, I felt sane and brilliant. I had crept out of D.C. in an ice storm—and now it was palm trees in February.

At Norton Air Force Base I remained hallucination-free even when we smoked the very fine Laotian dope Woody Shahbazian had brought back from Danang Air Base, Republic of Vietnam. It was early in 1970, and we were certain it was the *world* that was coming unglued, not our minds. The U.S. had metastasized into a giant dysfunctional family, full of barely controlled chaos, ruled with as much terror and amnesia and charm as Dad and Grandpa Leary had employed to mold our own clan into their image of what a proper Irish-American family should look like. I wasn't crazy, just inquisitive. With a bad habit of trying to ferret out the truth from only the flimsiest of evidence—about Grandpa Leary's drinking and Grandma Shepler's "nervous breakdowns" and about why the U.S. government was *really* sending us to Vietnam. Wanting to be seen and heard was a bad habit when you were a Leary child or an Air Force enlisted man.

No question about it, I was still a bit touchy when I landed in California. Five years going on ten of bad mood. The Revolution was coming, and I hadn't wanted to be caught dead with the squares in D.C. who were going to be standing trial in front of Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman. Deep down inside, though, under my olive-drab fatigues, I was more a Flower Child than a revolutionary. A rock drummer since high school, I wanted to take *my* band, Stonehenge Circus, to India to find a guru of our own and a good electric-sitar player. With the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, I no longer had to be embarrassed by my secret passion to save the world nor tortured by my aching dream of being made love to by a harem of California poster girls. I no longer had to be trapped by the battle that had raged for years deep in my soul between the nuns at Holy Family and the centerfolds in *Playboy* magazine. In the Age of Peace and Love, I no longer feared Grandpa Leary's drunken tirades. Our main fear as GIs was that the Age of Aquarius would be over by the time we were given our discharge papers.

In the meantime, we tried to be as hip as possible while sporting GI buzz cuts, searching out other hipsters in the ranks who were testing the regs by wearing John Lennon-style granny glasses, prescription sunglasses, wristbands, mustaches, long sideburns, or long hair slicked down with Groom and Clean. At Norton, I soon discovered that mixed in with the GI hipsters were musicians like Sonny Stevens and Woody Shahbazian.

Stevens sported long sideburns and hid his long slick hair under his fatigue cap, day and night, indoors and out. Shahbazian, with the nonchalance of a soldier of fortune, did a full-court press on the regs with sideburns bordering on muttonchops, a bushy mustache, and long, styled hair that he hated to mess up wearing regulation headgear. He did wear regulation aviator sunglasses—despite not being an aviator—and got by on a single contact lens, always managing to misplace the other. His leather wristband commanded a lot of respect from his fellow enlisted men, wearing it as he did in honor of his hootch-mates at Danang who had died from a lucky shot with a shoulder-mounted rocket that had hit his quarters while he was off shaving or shitting, the details changing to fit his audience.

We pursued the hippie lifestyle as best we could by jamming in our barracks and later at the base theater, which finally led to a paying gig at Sarge's, the biker bar across the street from the east gate. At Sarge's, from my perspective behind the drums on the bandstand, I noticed several of the young AAVS production officers pursuing the hipster lifestyle themselves once they were off base and out of uniform. Two in particular stood out—Lieutenant Lisa Sherry and Lieutenant Rick Liscomb. She was statuesque with olive skin and deep, piercing eyes. He was a light-skinned black man, built like a linebacker, with a warm smile and a bone-crushing handshake. It was hard to tell at first if they were an interracial couple keeping it low-key or just good friends. It turned out that they had been both. She was the daughter of a French farm girl and an American fighter pilot who abandoned them soon after they got to the States, leaving her mother distraught and leaving Lisa to eventually scrape her way through the University of Maryland on scholarship. Liscomb had grown up in a comfortable middle-class section of Washington, DC, the son of the principal of a private school for children of diplomats. He had been one of the first black graduates of the Air Force Academy, where we found it easy to believe he had once been the light-heavyweight boxing champion.

Norton Air Force Base turned out to be my first assignment where they actually had airplanes. The flying part of the base was run by the Military Airlift Command (MAC) and was busy seven days a week operating a steady stream of flights full of troops and supplies headed for Vietnam. Every C-141 long-range transport in the MAC inventory was flying, and they still needed to bring in charters from Braniff, Continental, TWA and Seaboard

World. Our third of the base was converted from what had recently been a Strategic Air Command operation assembling and storing intercontinental ballistic missiles. When the Pentagon assigned AAVS primary responsibility for documenting the war in Southeast Asia, the 1361st quickly became a major source of television news footage seen by the American public and the main source of briefing films shown to the Congressional Armed Services Committees responsible for funding the war. They also did plenty of in-house Air Force training films, *Air Force Now!* (the movie newsmagazine shown at monthly commanders' calls worldwide), and a vast amount of still photography. Now that AAVS had consolidated its operations from Orlando, Florida; Wright-Patterson, Ohio; and Lookout Mountain in the Hollywood Hills, its labs were processing more feet of film a day than any movie studio in the world.

I was assigned to the editorial department, with a wisecracking young film editor named Larry Zelinsky as my immediate supervisor. Once he showed me how to thread up a Moviola, I was on my own. The 16mm synchronizer, viewer and splicer were pretty much the same as the 8mm equipment I had used at the Rhode Island School of Design. I felt lucky then that an English major from Brown was able to take film classes next door at RISD. I felt even luckier now to find myself in a spanking-new editing room as spacious and comfortable as anything in Hollywood.

Shahbazian talked me and Tom Wheeler, one of the unit clerk-typists, into going in with him on a mountain chalet in a pine forest high above San Berdoo. First Sergeant Link—"Missing Link," Zelinsky used to call him—was the Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge of all enlisted men in the 1361st. He split a gut when he found out we weren't stuck in the drafty barracks on base with the rest of the guys, but Shahbazian was a retired colonel's son and knew Link couldn't make us move back. Link blamed *me*, figuring as a college graduate I had to have been the brains behind the operation, but in those days I laughed it off, foolishly assuming his glowers were harmless. No one else seemed to mind, however, and soon hipster enlisted men and hipster officers were dropping by regularly, especially on the weekends. Liscomb was learning to play the guitar and was into Peter, Paul and Mary at the time. Woody wasn't a whole lot better on his acoustic guitar, but we enjoyed the change of pace singing folk songs after the din of the blues and Southern rock we were churning out at Sarge's. Somehow

the lovely Lieutenant Sherry—Lisa when we were alone—began fraternizing with me after hours, volunteering to help me pack up my drums at Sarge’s at the end of the evening and get them home safely. Woody, a firm believer in fraternizing with female officers, gave me his seal of approval, breaking into his Hank Williams imitation and singing, “If you’ve got the money, honey, I’ve got the time,” whenever he saw me around the cabin.

Lieutenant Sherry might have been a little out of her mind dating an enlisted man, but I was sure my brain was firing on all cylinders when she let me take the wheel of her dazzling white MG convertible and we crossed the border into Mexico for the first time. Maybe we couldn’t get to Woodstock, but we could enjoy this little caesura of pleasure and apparent sanity by camping out on a deserted beach on the Gulf of California. It was March, the end of the California rainy season. The rains had been kind that year, and the dusty chaparral and mesquite that covered the hills running south from San Bernardino and Escondido into Baja California had transformed into an emerald veil dotted with poppies, lupine and larkspur in full bloom. We sought out a simple fishing village she had heard of on the mainland side of the Gulf called Puerto Peñasco where we could sleep on the beach under the stars and where the food and drink in the nearby cantinas was plentiful and cheap. I was completely new to sleeping under the stars—the Boy Scouts had always used tents—but after quenching our thirst with cold, dark Mexican beer it seemed to work out fine.

Drinking some more of that cold, dark beer with dinner the following night, the kind WAF lieutenant expounded for me on her theories of free love and open marriage. After a few beers of my own, her logic seemed incontrovertible—in the Age of Aquarius, two people could care about each other deeply without chaining each other down. It didn’t bother me at all that an old captain friend from Tan Son Nhut would be coming in TDY in the next few days. Our relationship was going to be chain-free.

Shahbazian had been worried that I had run off to get married that weekend, but any thoughts I might have had of marriage, open or otherwise, vaporized in the hot San Bernardino sun. I didn’t hear a word from Lisa the entire week her captain was in town. The cabin seemed empty when I got home from work, and sitting alone out on the deck, I polished off two bottles of bootleg Tequila, one shot at a time, licking the salt off the back of my hand

and biting down hard on the lemon chaser. And then the icing on the cake: I was diagnosed with non-specific urethritis. The doctors were concerned it might be one of the nasty new strains coming out of Vietnam, so they shot me full of antibiotics and ordered me to stay off sex and booze for a month. I spent much of my convalescence in a melancholy mood, nursing a broken heart while deprived of alcohol, a substance more precious to the Leary bloodline than oxygen. For four weekends at Sarge's I flailed dutifully at my drums, the only person in the joint who was sober. I swore off women for life and then drove myself crazy watching a parade of tanned San Bernardino townies in tank tops undulating before me on the dance floor. Liscomb sat down next to me at the bar one night while I was on break and noticed that I was sipping a ginger ale. "What's this, Brendan? You aren't in training, are you?"

"I'm afraid I've been burned by our friend, Lieutenant Sherry."

"*Lieutenant Sherry*," he smiled. "She's great as a friend, even better as a drinking buddy, but when we tried to get serious once upon a time I just couldn't get used to her ideas about free love. Sounded good on paper, but the first time her old captain friend came in TDY from Tan Son Nhut, she had me crawling the walls. Our apartments at the Bachelor Officer Quarters are right across the hall from each other."

"Ah yes, her captain from Tan Son Nhut. I live up in the mountains and she *still* had me crawling the walls."

Before I went back on stage we clinked our glasses nostalgically to Lisa and free love.

Doing on-the-job training as a film editor in the AAVS postproduction department meant Zelinsky had pretty much left me alone to teach myself. I had a hunch work was going to get a lot more interesting when Lieutenant Liscomb asked for me on one of his projects, and, sure enough, he quickly became my favorite production officer, continually coming up with new and crazy ways to make an Air Force documentary while encouraging me to experiment with flashy editing techniques and cut to the beat of the heaviest-metal rock and funkier funk we could dig up. We drove the civil-service types nuts over in the animation department, throwing new projects at them daily, depriving them of the down time they usually spent counting the hours until they could start collecting their pensions. He

brought in a couple of experimental films he did when the Air Force sent him to the University of Rochester, and they turned out to be the only flicks I had ever seen weirder than the stuff my classmates at Rhode Island School of Design used to dream up. The weirdest of all was about a sculptress who had not created anything except genitalia of various shapes and sizes for over two years. Not something we'd be doing for *Air Force Now!* or for a congressional briefing film.

I had gone out of my way to avoid the big, brawling border towns at Mexicali, Tecate and Tijuana in my travels with Lieutenant Sherry. I had heard too many horror tales about barroom blowjobs and hard-to-imagine debauchery involving smiling young señoritas and their pet donkeys. Naturally, the night I was pronounced cured, Tijuana was precisely where Woody Shahbazian, Tom Wheeler, Frank Lutz and Larry Zelinsky decided to take me, or more precisely, where *I* would take us since I was the one with the '64 V-Dub.

It's unlikely that Shahbazian, a flamboyant Air Force brat, and Zelinsky, a blue-collar wise guy from Detroit, would have ever crossed paths in civilian life, but in the Air Force they shared a powerful unspoken bond—they had already done a tour of Southeast Asia and felt right at home across the border showing us new guys the Third World ropes in case, despite Nixon's promised troop reductions, we too were shipped out. Zelinsky, in fact, had been so at home during the year he spent in Thailand that he had volunteered to go back so he could marry his Thai girlfriend. As he and Woody predicted, we had a roaring, rowdy good time of it that night, starting out at the Long Bar, Shahbazian's favorite, spending *Yanqui* dollars like visiting royalty while he told us about the time on R&R in Hong Kong he'd had a dozen girls sent to his room. "Sounds like love at first sight to me," said Lutz, the elf-like techie who worked on the dubbing stage recording sound.

We wound up at a back-alley hole-in-the-wall called Hernando's and decided around midnight that we had better hit the road while we were all accounted for. We had lost Wheeler for an hour until Zelinsky stumbled upon him sitting in a dark corner booth with a small-but-voluptuous young Mexican girl snuggled in his lap, smooching hungrily and sipping from the salty rim of the same margarita glass. We chattered all the way home, lamenting the night's near misses and bragging about old conquests—real,

embellished and imagined—as we rolled down the open highway. Everyone, that is, except Wheeler, who pretended to sleep in the back seat. “Has everybody heard that Wheeler’s in love?” asked Zelinsky. His uniforms may have been rumpled and he may have talked with a flat midwestern twang, but there was a shrewd intelligence behind the Cheshire Cat smile that lit up his pudgy face.

“She’s *nice*,” protested Tom in those innocent days before he and Zelinsky became my bungalow-mates at Ruam Chon Sawng. He had the look of a blond-haired surfer but was in fact a pioneer pothead from a small town in upstate New York called Wappinger’s Falls. “She’s an orphan and she’s only working the bars in Tijuana to save up for college.”

Zelinsky howled with laughter. “Mom, I’d like you to meet my fiancée, Angelina. The entire Pacific Fleet wants to be her best man.”

I had lost count at what might have been my eighth Cuba Libré; as we neared San Bernardino, I found myself wondering if Shahbazian’s Hong Kong story could be true. With his long Joe Namath sideburns and his Grand Prix race-driver mustache, anything was possible with Woody and women. It was two weeks later that he smuggled a pair of Tijuana hookers back to San Bernardino. Dashing and charming, he was waved through customs at the border and the back gate at the base without a hitch. When he was confined to quarters for a month, he told us it was a small price to pay for becoming a genuine war hero and a legend in his own lifetime. When I asked him why he brought them to the barracks instead of up to the mountains, he said, “What do we need hookers for? We’re living in a chalet.” And sure enough, a few days after his release he started dating Kristin, the foxiest civilian secretary working at AAVS headquarters. I wasn’t surprised to learn her family in Palm Springs had money. Shahbazian mentioned to her early on that his mother’s family owned mining interests in Pennsylvania and West Virginia, leaving out the part about going bankrupt.

In the early months of 1970, of course, our only *real* bond at the 1361st Photo Squadron was a quiet determination to save our collective hides. The white contingent at Headquarters Squadron, Aerospace Audio Visual Service, was pathetically pimply-faced and naïve, which may have explained why the chaplain’s daughter was willing to gang-bang the entire second floor of Barracks 1247. The Bloods weren’t innocent at all, but they weren’t clueing

us in, preferring to watch from a distance as the pothead draft dodgers and the beerhead lifers made each other miserable. Rick Liscomb tried to float with both the brothers and the hipsters when we were off duty, which earned him the nickname “Moonbeam” from his fellow blacks. When he stopped eating meat and got into Zen meditation the hipsters picked up on “Moonbeam” too.

Our crowd was a fluke, crawling as it was with white, suburban dropouts; urban, upwardly mobile soul brothers; and hip, young officers who figured we could hide out in the safety of photo labs, sound stages and editing rooms in San Bernardino until the U.S. and the Vietnamese came to their senses. Nixon’s Vietnamization program meant bringing home American ground troops and turning the fighting and dying over to the ARVN—the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. Even if a few of us might still be sent over to Southeast Asia, it would be to another photo squadron—on an Air Force base with bunks and a roof over our heads and, according to Shahbazian, swimming pools and air-conditioned NCO clubs. The certainty that we would never be slugging a gun through leech-infested equatorial jungle brought us all a measure of unspoken cheer. The assumption that many of us were heading for careers in Hollywood added to the warm, fuzzy vibes.

I was especially upbeat because I’d survived a temporary overdose of naïveté, volunteering for cameraman duty and getting turned down. Like a lot of my later problems, it was Ron Cooper’s fault. I was impressed that Cooper had connections in Hollywood and had permission to drive in to Disney Studios every Friday afternoon to observe a real, live American Society of Cinematographers cameraman at work on the sound stage of the latest Disney live-action feature. It didn’t seem important at the time that he was parlaying his part-time-projectionist gig at the base theater into a film-bootlegging racket. It was his passion for cinematography that rubbed off on me to the point that I volunteered to give up my air-conditioned editing room. Fool that I was, I failed to notice that every cameraman on base *except* Ron Cooper was scheduled to do a tour of Nam—flying combat—or had just come back. It turned out that editors were leaving the Air Force for cushy civil-service jobs faster than the Viet Cong could kill cameramen, however. Colonel Sandstrom, AAVS Director of Production, turned down my request, confining me instead to three years of hard labor hunched over my Moviola editing semitruthful news clips. The more combat footage I looked at, the luckier I felt.

April 1970–March 1971
Chain of Command

We were coasting, biding our time. And then, late in that fateful April of 1970, Commander in Chief Nixon, on the advice of his field marshal, Henry Kissinger, ordered the invasion of Cambodia, and everything changed. If you were a grunt in Vietnam, it made perfect sense. The Ho Chi Minh Trail was the North Vietnamese Army's main supply route into South Vietnam, and its southern branches ran through the hills and jungles of northeastern Cambodia. To make things worse, enemy troops often hid there with impunity between forays into South Vietnam. Unfortunately, nobody had explained that to the GIs in a stateside photo unit. We may have had Top Secret security clearances, but we didn't have a "*need-to-know*." And nobody explained it very well to the American public. To millions of Americans, Cambodia was a neutral country we were invading without a Congressional declaration of war and without informing its pro-American prime minister.

On April 30, Nixon went on national television, pointed to Cambodia on a map of Southeast Asia and announced, "This is *not* an invasion." He played it down as "an attack on enemy outposts," but college kids didn't buy it. The next day hundreds of campuses erupted—even apathetic USC, home of the film school I dreamed of attending. Eleven students were shot by police at Jackson State. Two died. The inept Ohio National Guard killed an ROTC cadet and three other students at Kent State, wounding nine more in the process. I had stumbled into the GI anti-war movement back in Washington, DC, when the My Lai story broke, but this was new—this wasn't a rogue unit gone bad, it was an entire administration going *mad*. We had been lulled into believing American troops would be coming home, not invading another country. Nixon's deceit pushed me over the edge, turning me—an active-duty GI—into a full-blown radical. I wasn't alone, but it wasn't comfortable. In rebuking our government we were in some way rebuking our fathers who had served unquestioningly in World War II.

Sonny Stevens, our lead guitar player at Sarge's, took a careful of us down to UC Riverside to see what kind of hot water we could get ourselves into at the office of the Student Mobilization Committee—the SMC for short. "It'll be a great way to meet college chicks," promised Stevens, like Shahbazian

a colonel's son who knew how to fly under the brass's radar. He had been spending the war in relative obscurity, a laid-back, natural-born still and motion picture camera technician at the 1361st whose only failure had been trying to retrain Shahbazian as a fellow camera tech when Woody returned from his year of lifeguarding at Danang. Stevens was having better luck upgrading Woody's skills on rhythm guitar, but when college campuses erupted after Kent State, he saw that Woody's greatest potential was as a hell-raiser.

A couple of the SMC leaders at UC Riverside sent us off to a place called the Movement House near the University of Redlands to see some people who wanted to start organizing GIs. With the exception of Zelinsky, who never left the base, they didn't have much trouble molding Woody and the rest of my former Tijuana drinking buddies into the nucleus of Norton GIs for Peace, and soon we were turning out an underground newspaper, the *sNorton Bird*. Woody drew a cartoon for the first cover—a ruffled, cigar-chomping bald eagle wearing aviator's goggles and giving the finger mid-flight. Working stealthily at midnight, we delivered the inaugural issue to every officer and enlisted man living on the base. The next day, to paraphrase standard Air Force terminology, the *Shinola* hit the fan. The brass would have summarily shipped Stevens to Vietnam, but he didn't have the requisite year left on his enlistment, so they sent him a hundred miles up the coast to the Vandenberg Missile Test Range instead. Two of the brothers, a sound man/still photographer named Gene Blackwell and a lab tech named Lonnie Price, had orders cut the same day for opportunities to participate in what we jokingly called the Southeast Asia War Games, but it was no joke. They were heading for Nam. For Blackwell it was Detachment 13 ("The Lucky Thirteen") of the 600th Photo Squadron at Nha Trang. For Price it was Squadron Headquarters at Tan Son Nhut. Just before they left, their orders were changed to detachments at Korat and Udorn, Thailand, respectively. We speculated that this was a hush-hush part of Nixon's troop reduction plan that only looked like a troop reduction to the American public. Air Force units that moved two hundred miles west to Thailand appeared on paper to have gone home, yet remained within easy striking distance of any target in Southeast Asia. Our president, we had to admit, was a tricky bastard.

A few days after the others, Wheeler and his sidekick, Dave Murray, found out they were going to do tours as combat clerk-typists, but at opposite ends

of the war zone. Wheeler was being sent to Photo Detachment 2 at Takhli, Thailand, just north of Bangkok, while Murray was going to be squirreled away with the photo outfit at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam. Shahbazian got orders to do a surprise second tour at Tan Son Nhut a few weeks later, which didn't seem to make him all that unhappy now that Kristin was pressuring him to get married. Zelinsky was a strange case—he'd avoided our anti-war activities because he *wanted* to go back to his old unit at Ubon, Thailand. He had volunteered so he could marry his Thai girlfriend, and knowing the Air Force, Zelinsky told us, they would have punished him by *not* letting him go. Maybe it was because Lutz was an undersized munchkin, but he was overlooked. His orders didn't come through till the following spring—in plenty of time for the Big Buddha Bicycle Race.

Wheeler, from his vantage point in the orderly room, was keeping an eye on First Sergeant Link for us and reported that Link had figured incorrectly that I was the mastermind behind Norton GIs for Peace. Link made sure my orders for Tan Son Nhut came through with the first batch, but I fought it tooth and nail, applying for discharge as a conscientious objector with the help of Edward Poser, Esquire, an ACLU lawyer from Hollywood, the closest bleeding-heart enclave I could find to San Berdoo. He charged me what for an L.A. lawyer was a bargain fee of \$50 an hour—even though I was only making \$140 a month—but he offered me an installment plan. I would send him half my paycheck every month until my bills were paid. I accepted, given that I didn't have much choice. He didn't succeed in getting my orders canceled, but he did get them pushed back a month at a time while I met on base with Captain Allen Shelby, a lawyer at the judge advocate's office, and completed a long checklist of paperwork. Along the way I was evaluated by the base chaplain and base psychiatrist, at the same time requesting supporting letters and other documents from friends and family scattered across the country. It was a relief to know that my compadres from GIs for Peace were standing behind me. As Blackwell put it, "We're *all* doing our part for the Revolution, brother—working in different ways, that's all."

Wheeler, in addition to keeping an eye on Link, was using his back-channel contacts to make sure my application didn't get lost in the bowels of the Pentagon. Up at Vandenberg, it hadn't taken Sonny Stevens long to see how the brass was using a divide-and-conquer strategy to destroy Norton GIs for Peace. He resisted in a small way that summer by moving back to the

area following his discharge. Going underground, he holed up on a ranch out in the desert near Victorville, growing marijuana to make ends meet. We co-edited the paper, bringing in an old friend of Blackwell and Price's, a hard-as-nails, pissed-off black Air Policeman just back from Pleiku, to give the editorial writing a little Black Panther bite. Still working out of the Movement House, we organized a GI contingent to lead a peace march on Riverside, home of March Air Force Base and the Big Ugly Friggin' "BUF" B-52s of Link and Sandstrom's old 22nd Bomb Wing. Maybe this was when I started to lose my mind, or maybe it was the presence of living, breathing long-haired hippie chicks from the University of Redlands and Cal State Riverside that got the better of my good judgment, but the next thing I knew we were promoting the Riverside peace march—off duty, wearing civvies—by handing out leaflets at the entrance to George Air Force Base, a fighter base situated not far from Stevens's pot plantation, and at March Field itself. Given that March was a SAC base where Air Policemen in the perimeter guard towers shot to kill, we didn't squawk when they confiscated our fliers and brought us in for questioning. The hippie college girls seemed impressed when I called Captain Shelby at the JAG office at Norton and arranged our release—albeit with orders to stay five hundred feet from the main gate. An Oceanside march—next door to Camp Pendleton and half the Marines in America—soon followed. On both occasions I somehow ended up making speeches in front of thousands of people. Stevens's prediction seemed to come true when I started getting involved with one of the organizers from the Movement House who had been with me the night we were arrested, but she broke it off over some unfathomable breach of hipness at the moment of our greatest triumph—People's Independence Day, a Fourth of July rally that filled up a park in the middle of San Bernardino.

Shahbazian, Wheeler, and Zelinsky, my old Tijuana drinking buddies, stood together in the front row cheering me on, and next to them was my lovely radical organizer. Zelinsky knew he was shipping out the following week, and Wheeler and Shahbazian would be gone by the end of summer. Our hulking Air Policeman/editorial writer and an equally imposing cohort stood behind me on the dais, out of uniform, my volunteer bodyguards. Sonny Stevens, Frank Lutz and a couple of the bigger guys from the Movement House, also ex-GIs, weren't too far away, keeping their eyes out for any local crazies who might decide to rush the podium. I was

glad to have them, because the only San Bernardino policemen I could spot were off in a distant parking lot enjoying coffee and doughnuts. The crowd was minuscule after what I had seen in Washington, but by San Bernardino County standards, several thousand people at a political rally was substantial, enough to attract an editor, a couple of reporters, and a photographer from the San Bernardino and Riverside newspapers. In the midst of introducing a lineup of agitprop folksingers, student radicals from the University of Redlands and UC Riverside, and a pair of Farmworkers Union organizers, I spotted Captain Shelby, along with Lieutenant Liscomb, Lieutenant Sherry, and a couple other young production officers, all dressed in civvies, observing the rally from the shade of a gnarly California oak. And then it was my turn to speak.

“Our objectives in Vietnam are illusory and our means of attaining them are barbaric,” I said, trying to sound presidential even though I was skinny as a toothpick and in my twenties. I caught an approving smile from my soon-to-be-ex-flame and continued. “Where is this administration taking us? Where will the escalation end? If we are pursuing a failed policy, how can we continue to ask young Americans to die? And how can we ask black and Latino GIs to shed more blood than their white counterparts when they are still fighting for their civil rights at home? *Who will be the last to die in this tragic lost cause? Is there anyone in Washington who would step forward to take their place?*”

I thought I noticed Liscomb standing up a little straighter, straining to hear, but he was too far away for me to be sure. I continued, questioning the wisdom of a peacetime draft, comparing it to slavery, and hoped nobody noticed too many contradictions when I compared the modern U.S. to ancient Rome and Athens and to the Spanish, French and British empires in modern times, asking if we too were in decline and about to fall. I took another glance at the girl from the Movement House and finished up with the best Jack Kennedy imitation I could muster, seeming to inspire the audience when I exhorted, “If this nation is to survive as a beacon of democracy, we must commit ourselves to ending the war *now!* It is we who have taken on the awesome responsibility of leading the way. We must not falter! We must have peace!”

I was still basking in warm applause when we opened up the mike and Lieutenant Barry Romo stepped out of the crowd. Almost as soon as Romo

took the podium, I realized that a new day had arrived. Stateside GI speakers were no longer needed. We now had combat veterans like Romo coming back, fresh in from hand-to-hand fighting in the Ashau Valley, who were willing and able to tell it like it was and who had all the strength, intelligence and character that a Lieutenant William Calley lacked. “The valley of the shadow of death,” he called it, “a place where even the Lord’s rod and staff offered little comfort.” As instinctively as he might have taken one of those nameless hills in the Central Highlands, Romo had taken the open mike, pouring out his heart with a true soldier’s understated eloquence. “Again and again my men died to take an objective. Whether it was a hilltop or a village, it didn’t matter. We never failed. And again and again we were pulled out, giving that hard-earned ground back to the enemy...”

I could see Moonbeam Liscomb in the distance wanting to make a move for the stage. And I think it was his own privileged upbringing that held him back. He’d been raised black-upper-middle-class in Washington, DC, sensing the racism rampant in the country but never really experiencing it overtly except in its most refined forms—like the pressure of being the third black man ever to enter the Air Force Academy. Even from a hundred yards away I could see Moonbeam inching forward, away from his fellow officers and out into the hot sun. I wondered what was running through his mind, sensing that he regretted being trapped in his role as an Air Force support officer and that he realized he would never have his own war stories to tell.

I never really got a chance to talk to him about it, though. His proposal for an *Air Force Now!* series on black fighter pilots was fast-tracked into production in a matter of weeks. It meant he would be on the road the rest of the summer and most of the fall doing interviews, starting with World War II-era Tuskegee Airmen who went on to form the 99th Pursuit Squadron, an all-black fighter unit that had distinguished itself in North Africa and Europe. The plan called for following up with black aviators who had flown in Korea and during the Cold War. He would conclude with black pilots before and after tours of duty in Vietnam. Alas, it was going to involve months of editing. My iffy status—not knowing if I was going to be discharged or sent off to Tan Son Nhut—meant the end of my collaboration with Moonbeam. Instead, I’d be back doing puff-piece news releases while I waited out Poser’s legal dogfight with the Air Force.

Just before Zelinsky shipped out we learned that *Link* had requested

assignment to Ubon. He joked that it was so he could personally look after Zelinsky and protect him from the rest of us bastards, Wheeler reported, but in reality he had already been stationed there the year before Zelinsky and another tour in a combat zone would give him a shot at making chief master sergeant before he retired. "He's got to do it before the war ends," Zelinsky quipped. "Nobody makes rank in the peacetime Air Force." The whole unit was relieved when Link actually shipped out a few weeks later.

Over the next few months Lieutenant Liscomb was so busy with his *Air Force Now!* series that we scarcely saw him. I worried about my buddies who had been shipped overseas, deeply appreciating the supporting letters they had written for my discharge petition and the thanks they had offered me and Stevens for keeping Norton GIs for Peace going in their absence. Knowing they had been sent off to a war zone motivated me and Stevens to work hard, meeting with what remained of Norton GIs for Peace to plan for the fall and do more organizing with the students at UC Riverside. The brass had known what they were doing, however, and when they scattered the GIs for Peace membership, they successfully knocked a lot of the wind out of our sails. Late in August when Sonny and I went by the Movement House, it was boarded up, giving us a high and dry feeling. I felt a little higher and drier when the FBI called the extension in my editing room at Norton, asking me if I recognized any of the calls made to that number with a stolen telephone company credit card. I played dumb and they didn't call back.

I didn't get into Sarge's much anymore, and when I did, I never saw Liscomb. Instead, I spent most of what little free time I had at the base theater with Ron Cooper, joining him up in the projection booth. He was on a kick about how you could learn a lot from watching bad movies, which is mostly what we got. I feared that the only thing we were learning was how to make bad movies.

Lieutenant Sherry, now *Captain* Sherry, requested me on a couple of her news releases and kept me up to date on Moonbeam, expressing mild concern that he had entered his Quiet Period, doing long periods of Zen meditation on the carpet of his bachelor officer apartment, only breaking off occasionally to take out his guitar and play along to his favorite soft-core protest songs. I ran into him by chance one day on his way to the dubbing stage at AAVS and asked him how the Tuskegee Airmen piece was coming

along. “Would you believe they got *arrested* trying to enter the Officers’ Club at Wright-Patterson when they got back to the States after the war?”

That was not an answer I was expecting. I cleared my throat before replying, “I think that got left out of the defeating Hitler part of our U.S. history books. Maybe you can set the record straight.” Changing the subject, I asked if the meditation he was doing was anything like what Jack Kerouac had been into.

Moonbeam just smiled. “The Beats didn’t quite get it right,” he told me. “They were trying to take an easy path into Zen without giving up sex, caffeine and alcohol.”

I didn’t get to follow up, nor did I especially want to. With Wheeler and Shahbazian exiled to Southeast Asia, I’d had to move from our chalet into a one-bedroom cabin, but a week before Labor Day something miraculous happened: Danielle Haber showed up. We had barely known each other back in Washington, DC, and yet the few hours we had spent together had lingered poignantly in both our memories. We had met by chance during the candlelight march to the White House that opened the Moratorium II weekend. I first noticed her while we were walking along Memorial Bridge, crossing the Potomac from Arlington Cemetery toward the Lincoln Memorial. It was just after sunset, and the November night was crisp but mild. The procession was solemn and dignified, so we didn’t talk much, but when we did, I was soothed by the clarity of her voice and her quiet intelligence. It wasn’t until afterward when she poured a glass of wine for me up in her apartment that I was struck by her subdued beauty. She looked at me with pure blue eyes that were unafraid to let me see deep inside her when I returned her gaze. When I tried to put my arm around her she was gentle when she pushed me away, putting her hand on my arm in a way that still kept me close. “My husband was killed last summer, just before I was supposed to start my junior year at Drexel. The Army only told us he was killed in action, but a friend wrote later that Craig’s M-16 jammed crossing a stream near a village west of Hué. My family tried to console me, but how could they? I dropped out of school and ended up moving in with a girlfriend in D.C. who knew about an opening at a gallery in Georgetown. So here I am,” she said with a sad smile.

Danielle was only supposed to crash with me in San Bernardino for the first few days of a two-week California vacation, but one day led to another

and she still hadn't left for San Francisco. On the tenth day she told me she wanted to stay. I told her it was fine with me. She had some money put aside, and we could live together for almost nothing in our little log cabin. With Danielle around, I enjoyed chopping firewood for the old stone fireplace. Whatever food we needed I got cheaply at the base commissary. Soon I was agreeing with her that going back to school in January was a good idea, and after putting in a call to the admissions offices at Cal Arts and the University of Redlands she was encouraged enough to give up her gallery job in D.C., unpack her suitcases and send in her applications. In the meantime, while she waited to hear back from the colleges, she started dropping me off at the base and heading over to the SDS and SMC offices at UC Riverside. She wasn't fussy—she designed anti-war posters when that was needed but didn't mind handing out leaflets wherever they sent her. She fell in love with our cabin in the mountains and started putting up curtains and decorating it with folksy rugs and rustic furniture we found in the antique shops around Crestline and Big Bear. She fell in love with swimming and hiking up there with me on the weekends and with coming home to cook together in our tiny kitchen. Best of all she started to fall in love with *me*, and I felt the same way about her.

My original orders had been cut for Squadron Headquarters, Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Republic of Vietnam, like Price's. My lawyer's delays might have had something to do with it, but I suspected it had more to do with the fine print in Nixon's troop reduction plan that my orders were changed from Tan Son Nhut to an outpost on the Laotian frontier of Thailand called Ubon. I never would have heard of the place if Zelinsky didn't have a girlfriend there and Link hadn't decided to return for an encore, which got me wondering if *he* had anything to do with my change of orders. I was slated to join them at Detachment 3 of the 601st Photo Squadron as an editor of bomb damage assessment footage—BDA for short. When I found Ubon on a map, I noticed it was smack dab in the middle of Southeast Asia, an hour by fighter-bomber from potential targets all over North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Zelinsky mentioned that he had never seen a reporter in Ubon the entire year he was there on his first tour, something we were sure the press-hating Nixon found comforting. I did *not* find it comforting to see that Ubon was fewer than fifty miles from either Cambodia or Laos—a two-day march for an enemy infantry unit. It was even less comforting to realize that

my old nemesis, First Sergeant Link, was already there waiting for me, but it made *Danielle* happy, at least, that I wasn't going to Vietnam.

We fell even more deeply in love that autumn, and she decided to pass on Cal Arts, despite its great reputation, because it would mean moving two hours away. We were still in love when she started at Redlands in January. It was tricky, but we managed to juggle our schedules and get by with my aging Bug. Thank God she was still in love with me when I phoned my Hollywood ACLU lawyer one chilly Thursday in March and learned that I was shipping out the following Monday. "Sorry, I haven't had a chance to call you," he said in a nasally voice. "You lost the restraining order and the writ of *habeas corpus*, but I'll keep working on it from this end. In the meantime, when you get over there, just follow lawful orders."

I would have asked about *unlawful* orders, except I was speechless. He'd already won a case like mine, which gave me both confidence he could win mine and doubts he'd bother to try. Danielle and I spent the next day packing and making love and putting things into storage and making love a little more. We decided to drive down to Mexico for our last weekend together and camp along the Baja coast where the cactus-filled desert ran down to the sea at San Felipe. We zipped our sleeping bags together and slept under the stars, making love with the sea breeze lapping at our faces, and in the morning we had breakfast in a little cantina on the edge of town that served fresh ceviche, warm tortillas and hot, black coffee.

We got back late Sunday night, exhausted. The next morning I gave Danielle the keys to the V-Dub and she drove me and my duffle bag to the base passenger terminal. She cried hard and I forgot for a moment about being afraid and alone, kissing her and comforting her and promising that I'd write to her every day and that a year would go by in no time. Walking down the aisle of the chartered 707, I didn't see a single face I recognized, not a soul to warn me that I was going to get to be a combat cameraman after all.