

DARKENING OF THE LIGHT

A Memoir - Part 1

By Alan H. Gael

*The light has sunk into the earth:
The image of DARKENING OF THE LIGHT.
Thus does the superior man live with the great mass:
He veils his light, yet still shines.*

PROLOGUE: LEAVING L.A.

It was a cool, clear October night, moonless and dark upon the highway. An old familiar song played in my head, corny I thought, but I remembered it well. I had known it since I was a kid, from a time when it held a certain romantic fascination:

*"If you ever plan to motor west
Travel my way, the highway that's the best
Get your kicks on Route 66!"*

I was again on that famous, fabled highway that stretched across the country—Route 66. Only this time I was heading east, leaving LA. I thought of Los Angeles. I thought, too, of that popular TV detective show with "Kookie" Kookson, 77 Sunset Strip, and how my mother used to kid me as a teenager when my hair was long and combed back in a ducktail: "Kookie, Kookie, lend me your comb," she'd say. She thought that was funny. Back then a lot of kids like me admired Edd Byrnes who played Kookie, with his comb and his cool-guy James Dean-like looks. We were raised on ducktails and TV dinners. The Sunset Strip and LA were mythical almost mystical far-off distant places back then when I was a cool kid in Chicago. I wore all black, a black leather motorcycle jacket with the zippered pockets, sans motorcycle, stomping around in heavy black oiled-leather engineer boots that

were cool and anything but comfortable. My dad hated those boots, the black turtleneck shirts, and the shades and the hair. He called me a hoodlum and constantly told me to get a haircut. I rebelled, of course. I was cool. I didn't really know what a hoodlum was, and he should have known that I didn't know.

Hoodlums were from a different part of Chicago, lower on the economic scale, high-school dropouts, car-thieves, gang members, violent. Yes I was often truant and sometimes a delinquent, and there was a time when a buddy of mine and I cut school and stole a couple bikes and spent the day joy riding. We were twelve years old, and yes we were a bit wild. High school was different, though. I was still wild, but not a hoodlum, not a gang member. I hung out with my Jewish friends and they were not bad boys. They did their homework and played basketball and they all planned on going to college. I thought of them now, knowing that they had all graduated this past June; some were accountants, some going on to law school, others to medical school. Well-educated. All were going to be successful.

A lot of things were going through my mind as I left LA, hunched over the big steering wheel of my beautiful Chevy Business Coupe. The road was, after all, a place and a time to think and to contemplate. I thought about the car and the two guys at the used car lot in Pasadena who had sold it to me just a couple weeks ago. The second day I owned it the motor had thrown a pushrod and I was certain they had screwed me royally. It hadn't come with a guarantee and they may not have known the true condition of the motor. Who would have thought they would not only fix it, but also replace the motor with a newer, better rebuilt 235 cubic inch Chevy six-cylinder? Pretty damned amazing, really. If they hadn't fixed it, it would have been disastrous—I would have been stuck in LA. I had paid \$600 for the car, a veritable fortune for me, in 1968. But I loved it—it was beautiful, all original, except for the exterior paint, and now the motor. It had new paint, candy-apple red. Inside it had recently reupholstered seats in the original gray fabric and the dash and door panels were all in mint condition, practically like

new. Those guys, Tom and Dewey, were probably the only honest used car salesmen in all of LA—maybe in the entire world. Now I putted along in the slow lane, breaking the motor in easy, peering ahead into the blackness that was now becoming blacker as the lights of the San Bernardino Valley had faded off into the background and the traffic was becoming lighter, yielding to the expanse of the Mojave Desert. The AM radio worked, but it was too static-y. That was not a problem as I had a head full of songs that I knew by heart, word for word and at that moment Roy Orbison was playing one of my favorites. I lit a cigarette. Three packs in the glove box—should get me pretty much across the country or at least as far as Chicago. Should quit one of these days. Maybe when I get to Canada.

I thought about LA and how it had turned out to not be such a mystical, magical cool place after all, with all the traffic, all the people, and all the pollution. Lots of beautiful young women, yes, women that I never managed to connect with. No love there. LA was a lonely place for someone without a career and no money, no friends and little family. I thought about the guy I had briefly worked for—thirty-four years old and going nowhere as a warehouse supervisor for a grocery store chain. A nice guy. A lonely, sickly, shy guy, popping chewable vitamin C tablets all day and sitting in a local bar all evening wishing there was a woman who would suddenly appear and make his life meaningful. I didn't want to be him. I didn't want to become him. I hated loneliness. It was the loneliness I was running away from, more than anything. And as lonely as the highway is at night in the desert, driving alone in the darkness I felt free again. On my way to somewhere else, a new adventure on the vast, unseen horizon. Running to a woman somewhere that would give meaning to my life and fulfill all those romantic fantasies that kept me going.

"Pretty woman, walking down the street.

Pretty woman, the kind I'd like to meet."

I was now about two and a half hours out of LA. I seemed to have the highway to myself, except for a car way back in the distance behind me; but it was gaining on me very quickly. God, he must be going a hundred, I thought. I looked at my speedometer—holding steady around 55-60 miles an hour, the new motor just humming along. The car behind me was getting closer; a mile later it was closing on me and then it was right behind me, in my lane, its lights filling my mirrors. I wondered why he didn't pass me. He's tailgating me. Another mile or so went by and he was still right there and I was getting more than a little annoyed. Then I had a sinking feeling, as I looked in my rearview mirror and strained to make out what kind of a car it was that was hiding behind those headlights. Was there a bubble-gum machine on its roof? It was right then that red lights went on and a spotlight began sweeping back and forth across the back of my car. It was the police. I pulled over onto the broad gravel shoulder. Be cool, I said to myself. Relax. You're okay; don't exhibit fear. I wasn't speeding, for sure.

*"Pretty woman don't walk on by
Pretty woman, don't make me cry
Pretty woman..."*

As I came to a stop the red flashing lights continued and were even more intimidating, and now the spotlight was trained directly on my rear window making it impossible to see anything behind me. I looked in my side-view mirror and saw a tall, shadowy figure approaching and then the cop was there at my window. I rolled it down and said, "Hello, officer. What's the problem?" He leaned back, stooped over a little and shined a very bright flashlight right in my face and said, "Are you in the military?"

I was taken aback. The question took me completely by surprise. What a question! I was flabbergasted. I hardly had time to think and I may have even stuttered a little, as I said, rather too emphatically, "No!" I wanted to say, "Do I look like

I'm in the military?" My hair was down to my shoulders now. I wore a tie-dyed t-shirt, old blue jeans, and brown cowboy boots. Not in the military.

He stood back then and said, "Step out of the car, please." Now I was starting to worry and I quickly told myself to not worry. How could he know? I opened the door and got out of the car, repeating my question, "What's the problem, officer? I wasn't speeding, was I?" I knew I wasn't.

"You have a tail-light out." Oh, that was a relief. A taillight. I should have checked the lights before I left. Okay, not a big deal.

"Open the trunk, please," he said as he scuttled sideways towards the back of the car keeping the light on me. He had one hand on his holstered sidearm. This was really starting to worry me. Then another car pulled up behind his, another Highway Patrol car. The wind had picked up and I was starting to shiver in the cold desert night air. I could hardly control my nervousness and my hands shook as I worked the key into the trunk lid to open it. My lights were still on and I noticed the taillights were both working, although one wasn't as bright as the other.

"What are you looking for?" I asked. I was thinking maybe he was looking for drugs, and if that was the case I had nothing to worry about. In my trunk was just one suitcase and in that suitcase was just an assortment of clothes and a leather shaving kit with my toiletries.

"Anything military," he replied. The second cop was now there, shining his flashlight on my face, watching me intently while the first one started rummaging through my clothes. He wasn't going to find anything; I had long since disposed of my military clothing, especially the boxer shorts with the first three letters of my last name and my serial number. I still wore boxers but they were made by BVD, not the Army. In the background the two-way radio in the first squad car crackled and came to life and the second cop, without speaking, went back to the car and took the call.

Soon he returned and he said, "It's him. Put the cuffs on

him."

CHAPTER 1

They had me up against my car, hands on the top, legs spread. They patted me down and not finding anything, grabbed my arms and pulled them behind me, shoving me face-first into the side of my car. Before I knew it my hands were cuffed and the steel was biting into my wrists.

If you've ever been in the back seat of a police car with your hands cuffed behind you, you know how uncomfortable it is. The cop who placed me in the back seat was not gentle. It was not customary at the time to place a hand your head to guide you into the car, as if you were some valuable merchandise they did not want to damage. Instead, he took me by the arm and literally shoved me sideways through the back door; I scraped my head on the doorsill as I fell into the backseat. He then pushed on my feet until I wriggled in on my side and pulled my legs up at the knee. Then he slammed the door shut. I lay there for a few moments and then twisted and struggled to sit upright on the

seat, my arms behind me. It was uncomfortable, but discomfort was the last thing on my mind. After a minute or two more the first cop on the scene got in the driver's seat and began talking on the radio. I couldn't really make out much of what he was saying, other than a roger this and a roger that, and what sounded like a location, mile marker something, Route 66. Then over, out.

The cuffs were now digging into my wrists and I tried to sit forward and keep my weight off my arms. We weren't going anywhere; we were just sitting there on the side of the road, on Route 66. The other Highway Patrol car pulled away and was gone in the night and still we sat there immobile, with the motor running and the radio hissing statically in the background. Except for the radio and the low vibration of the V8 motor idling, it was quiet inside the police car. And, stuffy. All the windows were up and I could smell my own sweat emanating through my t-shirt. I felt claustrophobic. I could see the cop's face in the rearview mirror, dimly illuminated by a small light coming from the dash. He was looking down and writing something. It was as if I wasn't even there. For a moment I wondered if I was.

This was a nightmare. I wasn't sure if this was really happening. I wanted to wake up. I was driving in my car. I was on my way to Toronto, on my way to freedom. I had a plan. My car was running so well, so fine, after the trouble with the engine last week. My car. What was going to happen to my car? I felt like crying, really. I really felt like crying. But, I couldn't. I was too scared to cry. Too disoriented. Too unnerved. Too distressed.

After a while, I couldn't tell how long, perhaps twenty minutes or a half hour, maybe less, another car pulled up and parked behind the patrol car. A man in a suit appeared and the Highway Patrolman opened his door and got out of the car. They stood talking for a few moments, then my door on the passenger side opened and the man in the suit said, "Okay, c'mon, out."

He pointed towards his car and gave me a shove in that direction. It was an unmarked, nondescript, late-model gray sedan. It was nondescript except for the myriad assortment of five or six antennas scattered across the roof and the trunk. He

opened the passenger-side front door and told me to turn around. He removed the handcuffs and handed them to the Highway Patrolman who was standing by. He told me to get in. Once in, he reached in and removed my eyeglasses. He said, "If you want to run, go ahead. I'd just as soon shoot you as take you in. There's no where to go out here anyhow."

Then we were on the road. I sat in despair, my head hung low. After a while I turned my head and stole a glance at the man I was now a prisoner of; he was probably in his forties. He had sandy colored hair, thin physique, wearing a plain dark gray suit. The dash had a number of radios or other electronic devices, all glowing in the otherwise dark interior. I finally got up the nerve to ask, although I already had an inkling, "Who are you?"

"I'm Agent Sanderson. FBI."

"Where are you taking me," I asked.

"To jail," he replied with a smile.

I was worried about my car, sitting along the highway out in the middle of nowhere. "What about my car?" I asked.

"It's being impounded by the CHP. It will be stored until such time as you're free to get it out of storage, which won't be anytime soon."

We were heading east on Route 66, away from LA and I really wondered where we were going. Then up ahead there were lights, an all-night diner. We pulled in and parked next to a Military Police car and then I knew. MPs. I had had my trouble with them in the past and here I was again, in their custody. They gave me back my eyeglasses and cuffed my hands, this time in front of me and put me in the back seat of their patrol car. Soon we were on our way again. I wondered what time it was. It had to be getting late. I was hungry.

I wasn't sure which way we were headed until I looked out and saw a passing sign that said "Barstow City Limits." East. We drove past Barstow and soon turned off onto a side road and eventually came to our destination: Camp Irwin. We were somewhere out in the Mojave Desert, that's about all I knew at this point.

I had never heard of Camp Irwin.

There wasn't much to Camp Irwin, at least not from what I could see. I was taken into a small concrete bunker that served as MP Headquarters and jail — there were two cells off to one side of the office area. I was still in a t-shirt and it was pretty chilly out there. One of the MPs noticed me shivering and found a fatigue jacket for me to wear. After a few minutes of processing, answering questions about my identity, name, age, place of birth, military serial number, a number that suddenly came back to me even after not having thought of it for nearly a year, and so on, I was then placed in a small four-man cell with a two double bunk beds. At one end was a small bathroom area with a toilet, sink and a shower stall, mostly open and exposed except for the toilet area that sat behind a narrow wall inside the opening. I was alone and completely fatigued. I collapsed on one of the bottom bunks, pulled the green wool army blanket over me and was asleep within seconds.

My morning came early, with the sunrise. It was cold and I was hungry. I opened my eyes and looked out at this little dimly lit concrete cell with the iron door that had a small barred opening and a small barred window; I pulled the blanket up around me tighter. It was getting light and I did not want to wake up. With waking came an overwhelming sense of loss and depression. I lay there thinking; yesterday morning I was in LA getting ready to leave. My Aunt Elvy had come by around noon to say good-bye and she insisted on giving me \$200. She knew how much I needed the money, and I did not have to ask. Aunt Elvy, the sweetest woman in my life. She was truly caring and more involved and aware than my mom who was generally too busy being an alcoholic to really help anyone out. Aunt Elvy was sorry I was leaving. She was on my side. My uncle wasn't. Like my father, he was a World War II veteran and had nothing but disgust for anyone not willing to go to war for his country. In their minds a deserter was lower than a thief, worse even than a rapist. I had asked her if Uncle Clarence knew I was leaving and she had said that it was best

that he didn't know, exactly my sentiments. Now as I lay there in the stillness of this cell I thought about the fact that the Highway Patrol had to have been looking for me, watching for me. Why else would the first cop have asked me if I was in the military? Uncle Clare had wheedled the information out of my aunt and called the police. Only Aunt Elvy knew I was leaving and the route I was taking, and she would never have called the police. Well, I had never liked him. He was a big fat toad and he was never very pleasant to me or anyone else for that matter.

My car. I thought about my car and wondered where it was and how I would ever get it back. I wondered too what was going to happen next. Were they going to send me back to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri? Not a pleasant thought. My life was in a complete shambles. I did not want to go to prison, and I did not want to go to war.

As the light from the small window grew brighter there came a loud knock on the cell door, more of a bang really, than a knock, followed by the door creaking open. A sergeant stepped in with a tray of food: scrambled eggs, two pieces of white toast, some over-crisp bacon, and a small bowl of something that looked like fruit. I was starving. "Here you go," he said. "I'm Sergeant Bryce. You're probably going to be here a few days until we can arrange transport to Fort Ord. Where you from?"

"Illinois," I said as I took the tray from him and sat down on the edge of the bunk.

"Okay," he said and stepped out and closed the heavy door and locked it. He seemed pleasant enough, but I noticed he wasn't wearing an MP armband; he was just a regular Army soldier who was unfortunate enough to be stationed at this hole-in-the-wall little Army base in the middle of the Mojave Desert.

The food was pretty bad, the eggs cold and rubbery, the white toast without substance, cold and buttered with margarine, but when you're as hungry as I was, it was fine; there just wasn't enough of it, as I could have eaten two or three servings that size, easily. When I finished eating I set the tray on the floor and wrapped myself up in the blanket and lay back down on

the bottom bunk. There was nothing to do now but think. Escape from here would be futile, as surely we were out in the desert, in territory completely unknown to me. I had no car, but I did still have my wallet and over five hundred dollars, three one hundred dollar bills. They hadn't taken it away from me, at least not yet. Thinking about that I decided I'd better try to hide the money and folded the hundred dollar bills length-wise in half and slipped them under the removable innersole of my left boot and then folded five twenties the same way and slipped them under the innersole of the other boot. The rest were smaller bills and I put them in my pocket rather than my wallet. I had no idea what good that was going to do as they were surely going to take my boots away, give me a full-body search and issue the usual Army clothes and boots. Still, it was worth trying.

I lay back on the bunk and continued to think about my situation. Fort Ord the Sergeant had said. Another place I'd never been and I wasn't sure exactly where it was even. Up north in California? Thank god they weren't sending me to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri where this whole big fucking mess had begun almost a year ago, in November. Freezing cold, wet, miserable place this time of year. That would be depressing. Then I had a depressing thought, that maybe Fort Ord would just be a stopover and they would actually be sending me back to Missouri, expecting me to complete basic training. The situation was not good.

It was cold in that little concrete and steel cell. I wrapped myself up in the blanket and lay on my back and started thinking of the girl I had met briefly at the boarding house the day before I left Pasadena, only two days ago but it seemed like a long time. She was pretty cute, with long light brown hair and a mouth that turned up at the corners in a warm smile. What color were her eyes? Brown, maybe, or dark hazel? She had a creamy complexion with nice color in her cheeks, a small straight nose that turned up ever so slightly, but not too much. She was probably eighteen or nineteen. I should have stayed. She was definitely single, living on her own, working at a restaurant. She could have made all the difference in my life.

I began imagining a scene, of what may have happened had I stayed. First a dinner date in a nice restaurant, maybe a couple beers, and then back to the boarding house. She invites me up to her room and we sit on a little sofa talking until I lean over towards her and our mouths meet in a light kiss. Then another kiss, this time a little longer, our arms reaching around each other pulling us closer together. And another kiss and this time our tongues meet and explore a little deeper. Our hands are exploring too, my right hand softly brushing her breast under a light cotton blouse. I feel her bra and beneath it a nipple that has taken form and become erect. And her hand is feeling its way along my leg and now it's touching my erection. Our kisses have become wild and passionate, until she stops and stands up and begins undressing; first the blouse and then the bra, her breasts now free; they're small but have a nice shape and are firm with beautiful little pink nipples. Then she beckons me towards the bed as she lies down on her back. I have quickly become naked and slide onto the bed, on my knees, sitting at her feet. I gently pull down her jeans and her panties, slowly, to reveal a lovely triangle of soft, short light brown hair. I toss the pants aside and with both hands I part her legs, ever so gently. I caress first one leg and then the other, from the ankle, slowly up to the inner thigh. She is moaning and wiggling a little in response to my touch. I brush her pubes lightly with one hand as the other traces a line up to one of her breasts. Then my fingers find that wonderful wetness and softly spread it around on her now swollen labia, probing a little into the middle, feeling the immense wonderful warmth within her. My other hand is lightly running a circle around her nipples, first one and then the other. She is moving her hips up and down now, almost involuntarily. I part her legs a little farther and begin kissing her legs from the thigh on up and then I spread them a little more and begin kissing her where all women love to be kissed.

Bang! It was the cell door. I sat up so quickly I hit my head on the steel springs on the bottom of the upper bunk. The door swung open and into my private reverie another prisoner was

thrust. He nearly fell down as he came into the room, arms flailing to catch his balance. He turned then, towards the door and a guard who had pushed him and said, "Fuck you, you fucking pig! You can go fuck yourself!"

The iron door slammed shut. I threw off the blanket and swung my legs over the side of the bunk, rubbing the top of my forehead where I had whacked it on the bunk. My erection was gone in an instant. I looked at this new guy they had locked in here with me. He wasn't all that big, but I could tell he was tough. A wiry, little guy with light brown hair and a ruddy complexion. He was pretty agitated, walking around in circles in the little space there was to walk around in. Finally he seemed to calm down as he yelled, "Motherfuckers!" It was then he seemed to notice me for the first time. "Hey, man, what's going on? Why are you here?"

I stood up and said, "AWOL."

"Yeah. Me too. Had to go, fucked up a second louie in our platoon and they were going to court martial me. Where you from?"

"Chicago," I replied. "How about you?"

"LA. Never been to Chicago. What's your name?"

My name was always an embarrassment in those days. I still didn't have enough self-esteem to overcome it. I used a nickname instead, one that my eight-grade French teacher had given me, similar perhaps, but not a direct translation. "My friends call me Guy," I said, "What's yours?"

His name was Tony. Tony Rogers. Rogers fit, but he didn't look like a Tony. I went to shake his hand in the traditional way but quickly had to bring my hand up in the new way, the "brother" way, gripping each other's hands as if we were going to arm wrestle. I still wasn't used to that. His grip was surprisingly strong. He then turned and threw himself onto the bottom bunk across from mine, saying, "I'm fucking beat. Can't remember when I slept last." He closed his eyes and was asleep almost instantly.

I guess it's true that misery loves company. I was glad this Tony guy was here; it wasn't just a matter of not feeling alone,

I was good at being alone, but he was certainly a tough guy and I felt a little less insecure with him there, giving the guards a bunch of shit, something I would have loved to do if I hadn't been so meek. I think meek is the right word, although afraid or scared or maybe intimidated was closer to the truth. Yes, intimidated was the truth of the matter: I was intimidated by the guards, the FBI, the CHP, and even by Tony. I'm not sure why. I had had my share of fights growing up in the city and generally didn't let other guys push me around, but this was different, or maybe I was different, not so much a fighter anymore, more of a lover perhaps. It's why I didn't want to go to war: I didn't want to hurt anyone and I didn't want to be hurt. Okay, I was a coward then. And I wanted my freedom more than anything.

I crawled back onto my bunk and pulled the blanket over me. For a minute I laid on my back and tried to get back into the fantasy about the girl, what was her name? I couldn't remember. But I couldn't focus, now, with someone else in the room and with so much to worry about, so much ahead in the days to come. I rolled over on my side and tried to sleep, and in a little while I dozed off, dreaming of my life back home in Chicago, my room at my parent's house, my stereo sound system and all my record albums, my friends, my job as a copywriter at the newspaper, my first car, that brand new '65 Volkswagen Beetle. All gone, just so many memories. I heard a song playing and my eyes were filled with tears and I sobbed quietly and drifted into an uneasy sleep.

*"Adieu, Emile, it's hard to die
When all the birds are singing in the sky
Now that the Spring is in the air
Pretty girls are everywhere
Think of me and I'll be there."*

Waking up in an Army jail, I was to learn over and over, is never a pleasant experience; waking up in a cell by itself is about as

depressing as it gets, but add to that a loud clamor, a banging that literally rips you by your teeth right out of your slumber is the absolute worst. This time it was a beefy Staff Sergeant with the big black and white MP armband on his sleeve and he was banging on the iron door with what sounded like a sledgehammer. As he opened the door he was shouting.

"Wake up you slimy worms! Wake up! What the hell are you doing sleeping in the middle of the day!" And it wasn't a question it was a statement.

I awoke suddenly and sat bolt upright and again banged my head into the metal springs of the upper bunk. I clumsily threw my legs over the side of the bed, tangled in the wool blanket, trying to get my bearings and figure out where I was. Tony rolled over in his bunk and loudly shouted, "Fuck you, cocksucker! You fucking pigs!"

He didn't have time to sit up and get out of bed as the Sergeant already had him by the shirt collar and was dragging him out on to the floor with one hand and with the other he was swinging a billy club. Once, twice, three times he swung as Tony tried to block the hits with his arms, to no avail. The Sergeant continued swinging until he connected enough to cause Tony some real pain. He was careful, though, I noticed, to avoid Tony's face and head; he concentrated on the body and legs, and unavoidably the arms that were mainly defensive injuries. He just wanted to hurt Tony not kill him.

In the commotion I barely noticed the other MP standing at the doorway: a porky, pasty-looking, pudgy corporal, not as tall as the sergeant, definitely overweight and out of shape. I noticed his name above his left shirt pocket: Dubcek. Corporal Dubcek. He stood watching me with his billy club in one hand tapping it in the open palm of his other hand, offering me a challenge if I wanted to get in on the action. Up to that point I was tempted to pull the sergeant off Tony and make it a fair fight, but that was a losing idea with two MPs with batons against us.

When the sergeant finally stopped and Tony was curled up in

ball, moaning, he turned to me and said, "What the fuck are you looking at? Get on your feet, scumbag!"

I slowly got to my feet and stood not knowing what to expect. There was nowhere to run, but he turned away and gave Tony a nudge with his boot and told him to get up. I figured Tony was tough, but he was no match for this Sergeant who was as tall or taller than me and easily weighed over two hundred pounds. Tony struggled up, holding on to the corner of the bed frame. If looks could kill, that Sergeant would have been dead at that instant. Tony could barely stand upright. The Sergeant stood back with a mean look on his face, apparently trying to gauge the extent of Tony's injuries. "Looks like you'll live." he said. "When you two sissies are ready, Corporal Dubcek will escort you to the mess hall." He turned and left slamming the cell door, only for it to be opened a second later by the corporal.

"Five minutes," he said and closed the door again.

Tony sat down on the bunk, rubbing his wounds that amounted to a lot bruising but no broken bones. I didn't know what to say. He said, "That fucking motherfucker is going to get his someday. Gotta smoke?"

"Do you know him?" I asked.

"Yeah, he was my DI back in basic. A real prick—I never liked him. Fucking nigger. He was only an E-5 then but I guess he got promoted, and now he's a fucking MP."

"Are you okay?"

"Like he said, I'll live. My fucking leg is killing me. Let's get some chow." He lit the cigarette I handed him; he grimaced and stood up, favoring his left leg that had been exposed to so many blows by the Sergeant's baton. He limped to the door and peered out through the little barred window.

The Sergeant, his name turned out to be Johnson, reminded me of my Drill Instructor back at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, Sergeant Stryker, another black guy with a big chip on his shoulder. I don't have anything against black people for the most part, and I've always been sympathetic to their plight, to their history. When I was a kid and first learning that there were

black people and eventually came to know that they had been slaves, brought to this country against their will and then even after freed still treated like slaves, or worse, I felt bad for them. The several blacks that I had had any contact with were older men who occasionally did odd jobs for my father at his saloon, and they were clearly disadvantaged. Poor as dirt. Who could blame blacks for robbing and stealing? There was a time when I thought if I were black, I'd rob and steal too. Why not, what is there to lose?

Now, sitting in a cell at Camp Irwin, I wasn't too sure how I felt about black people, but I was resolved to not let them make a bigot of me. I didn't like Tony's use of the word nigger, but I could tell that he had some heritage that condoned the use of the word, or maybe even required it. Sergeant Stryker back at Leonard Wood had rode me hard and really gave me the impetus to go AWOL, still I did my best to understand where he was coming from and I felt that underneath it all he wasn't a bad guy, that his meanness was about fifty percent show, a tough-guy act because that's what was required to train three hundred boys to fight for their lives in a jungle on the other side of the world. I remember him laughing as I was doing fifty pushups, saying, "Hagberg, you're gonna be superman by the time I'm done with you! You're gonna be Mr. Fucking Universe."

Finally, Sergeant Bryce returned to escort us to the mess hall for midday chow. I was starving. Bryce seemed friendly enough, but then he wasn't an MP either. He must have gotten into a jam himself to be given this duty out in the middle of nowhere, in the desert. He led us out into the mid-October midday sun. It was a clear day with a cloudless blue sky that stretched far off into the distance over desert sands sprinkled with a few Joshua trees, ending with a thin line of mountains on the horizon to the east. The air was dry, cool and crisp as we walked along the blacktop to the mess hall. I was hungry.

As we walked along, I briefly contemplated escape, but there was no where to go, no cover out in the wide-open desert and I quickly abandoned such thoughts. I looked at Tony and his face

seemed to be frozen with grim, angry thoughts of revenge. I didn't bother to make small talk.

Lunch chow was about as bad as military meals can get, but when you're really hungry it's surprising how good food can taste, even Army food. It was some kind of meatloaf with mashed potatoes and over-cooked mixed vegetables. I had done some time on KP so I knew that the potatoes were probably large russets from Idaho that were peeled in a big automatic peeling machine, kind of like a rock tumbler, then cut, boiled all to hell and mashed with some powdered milk and water added. The veggies from giant cans and god only knows what was in the meatloaf. Still it was gratifying and I even went back for more.

Clearly Tony was still hurting, suffering from many bruises and maybe even a cracked rib or two. He continued to be quiet until he said almost under his breath, "I'm gonna get that son-of-a-bitch someday." It wasn't hard to sympathize with him. Me, I had learned to keep my mouth shut for the most part, not mouth off. You can't win; they'll just kick your ass every time and then throw you in jail anyhow. It was, I figured, the difference between a rebel and an outlaw. A rebel rebels against the law. A rebel is out in front, ready to fight and even die for whatever cause he or she thinks is real. An outlaw, on the other hand, is simply outside the law and knows it is best to remain in the background and move on quietly while the rebel gets his ass kicked. Maybe the outlaw doesn't have a cause to rebel against. Maybe an outlaw just wants to be free.

After chow we were led back to the MP station and locked back in our cell. There was no sign of the Staff Sergeant. Tony crawled into his bunk and I heard him groaning as he did so. I stood leaning against the other bunk, my head resting on my arms, thinking. It wasn't long before I was jarred from my reverie, this time with the arrival of another prisoner. My first thought was, where are these guys coming from? We're out in the middle of the fucking desert at this little Army base, not even a fort, but a camp, and now there are three of us in this cell.

The new arrival was tall, lanky, short blond hair, a long

face with a bumpy nose. He looked like my idea of a comic book convict. When he spoke he confirmed that image: "Hiya. Either youse guys gotta smoke?"

Great, there goes my smokes; three guys on a half pack of Marlboros, they're not going to last long. "Here ya go," I said as I reluctantly handed him a cigarette. It's going to be too damn stuffy in that cell with three of us smoking. "What's your name?" I asked. It was Don. Tony rolled over, sat up and put his hand out, to me. I handed him a smoke and lit one up myself—might as well get my share of my own smokes.

I then quickly reclaimed my lower bunk and hoped Don would choose to bunk with Tony. He walked over and sat down on the lower bunk next to Tony. Tony asked him the big question, "Where you from?"

"Brooklyn, New Yawk. Where you from?"

"LA."

Don looked at me with a nod and I replied, "Chicago."

"Hey, city boys. Yeah, we kick ass."

This was fun. How did I get here? I finished my smoke, tossed the stub in one of the two butt-cans that stood at either side of the bunks and rolled back over on my bunk, while Tony and Don chatted on about where they had served so far, what they were doing in the Army, why they were in this jail cell. Turns out they both had volunteered to go fight in Viet Nam. Both had gotten into trouble for drugs and Don had just been caught stealing someone's watch. Don was actually stationed at Camp Irwin and was now facing a court-martial; both were still planning to go back to duty and make it to Viet Nam at some point. Not a hard goal to accomplish, from what I had heard. You screw up you go to 'Nam. It was automatic, guaranteed.

I didn't really have anything to say. I'd smoked one reefer a hippie hitchhiker in Topanga Canyon had given me, as a gift I guess, but didn't really feel it much and never had the opportunity to try it again. I hadn't really gotten into trouble, except I had gone AWOL simply because I didn't want to be in the Army. I didn't want to go to Viet Nam. I didn't want to kill

anyone. This had been the main topic of conversation and debate amongst my friends the last year of high school and the three years that followed. All of us were against the war. It made no sense. We had looked at it from all the different perspectives of the time: The French wanted us to bail them out and save their rubber plantations. The Diem brothers were puppets for the United States, and there wasn't going to be a domino affect throughout South East Asia and the world if Viet Nam became communist.

We weren't communists, but intellectually we could relate to what it meant, and we could debate the inequity and injustices of free enterprise and capitalism. None of us thought we had any business taking sides in what was clearly a civil war in a foreign country. What had happened in our country? We grew up after World War Two. We were taught that the war was fought to free people, free people in other countries around the world from dictatorships and despots. Freedom and independence was what the big, big war was all about, and yet here we were backing governments that were not independent, leaders that were no better than Mussolini at best, and some that were as bad as Hitler or Stalin. And even by 1968 it was clear we were fighting a losing war against a people that were determined to win their independence at any cost. Women and children and old men fighting against us—how determined is that?

I missed my friends: Beerman, Bernstein, Kupperman, Helfand, Olswang and Davis. I missed them a lot and I was often confused to the point of being depressed about why I was where I was and not back in Chicago, shooting pool with Davis or hanging out in a booth at the back of CV's Restaurant drinking Cokes and eating burgers and fries with the "clan" as we called ourselves, while we joked and laughed and talked about serious things in life. They were smart, my friends; they were gentle, good people, honest and reasonable. I wondered, as I lie on that lumpy bunk in that cold cell in October of 1968 why I was compelled to be this outlaw, to not follow conventions, to not complete my education at the university, to be this wanderer without a friend in strange places. Tears welled up in my eyes and I rolled over to

face the wall and dabbed them with my sleeve, surreptitiously so my cellmates wouldn't detect this weakness I had for weeping. What was I going to do? How was I going to get out of this dilemma?

*"Adieu Papa please pray for me,
I was the black sheep of the family
You tried to teach me right from wrong,
Too much wine and too much song,
Wondered how I got along,*

*Adieu Papa it's hard to die
When all the birds are singing in the sky
Now that the spring is in the air
Little children everywhere,
When you see 'em I'll be there."*

I longed for spring, for the freshness of new life, for sunshine and rain, for a sweet young lady, warm and tender. I didn't want to be here in a cold cell in October, in the desert. I really wanted to die. But, I didn't want to die, mainly I think because I knew I couldn't die. One just can't will oneself to die; one cannot overcome the involuntary throbbing of the heart muscle that continues to beat in spite of all thinking, in spite of the strongest will, at least not while a body is in its youth. I knew I would have to go on, and I knew somehow I would survive this, but I was filled with sadness. To go to sleep and not wake up, that would have been okay.

CHAPTER 2

My smokes were gone before that first full day was over. Luckily for Tony, Don and me I had some money and the daytime guard, Sergeant Bryce, was kind enough to get us some smokes. He got us a carton and I distributed the packs equally amongst us. It made me a hero of sorts, in their eyes. I could hardly smoke, though, it was too stuffy and smoky in that cell and all one had to do was breathe and you would get a lung-full; the smoke was really getting to me. God, I thought, I gotta quit.

By the end of the second day Don and Tony had gotten used to me just lying on my bunk and not saying much, while they chatted constantly about guns and girls and cars and drugs and money and what they were going to do once they got out of the Army. I was tempted once or twice to engage them in a conversation about philosophy and politics, but I controlled myself. I longed for a good book but I was left only to my own imagination and my memories.

Memories. I thought about Rebecca and wondered what she was doing. I had heard she and her family had moved to Minnesota. I wondered if I would ever see her again. Probably not. Rebecca, the first love of my life, two years and two days younger than me, a Scorpio girl, and more beautiful than any girl I had ever seen or known in my whole life. Rebecca. Light, light silky blond hair, blue eyes, soft, creamy fair skin with rosy cheeks. Sweet as can be, a minister's daughter. I had fallen in love with her when I was twelve and she was ten. We didn't know what sex was, of course, but we had a natural attraction that made up for sex and by the time I was thirteen we were ready to experiment. We

hung out with our group, Richard and Janine, Greg and Jenanne, me and Rebecca.

The six of us were inseparable. After school usually found us in Greg's basement while his parents were at work where we could hide out and play silly games like post office or spin the bottle. Kissing was what us boys were into but the girls only just a little, just a little. We went roller-skating and ice skating together. We went to our local college football games and hid out under the bleachers with a blanket around us, snuggled up and kissing when we could. I remembered cold winter nights when Rebecca would sneak out her back door and meet me at the alley behind her house and we would spend ten minutes in the moonlight in an embrace that dispelled the icy temperature.

I remembered the day I finally got up the nerve to put my hand on Rebecca's breast—I think she was thirteen by then. Man, she did not hesitate to slap me a good one. Right in the chops. And that was as far as we ever got. It wasn't long after that that we went our separate ways, not because of that incident, that was soon forgiven if not quite forgotten, but because she was soon enrolled in the local Christian high school while I was at the public high school. I was not a believer and her daddy was not in favor of our relationship. Truth is I was too wild for her anyhow, but I still loved her and I really hoped she was happy wherever she was. Minnesota.

On the third day, Sergeant Bryce came in at wake up call and announced that we would be leaving right after breakfast. We were being taken to Fort Ord, to the stockade there. Sergeant Johnson and Corporal Dubcek would be taking us. After a quick breakfast we were put in the back seat of an MP patrol car and were soon on the road north. We weren't cuffed, but of course we couldn't open the back door from the inside, and besides there was nowhere to run to out there in the desert.

Corporal Dubcek was driving, Sergeant Johnson was giving him direction from the front passenger seat: slow down, pass that truck, don't follow so close, speed up, stay in the right lane. I wondered why he didn't just drive himself, for Christ's sake. And

occasionally Johnson would look back at Tony or Don and give them a real sort of evil smirk, as if to say, "You guys are going to hell and you're going to get what you deserve." I was sitting behind him on the passenger side so he couldn't really look at me. Tony was behind the driver and it was Tony more than Don that those intense looks were directed at. I could see it. I tried to just stay lost in my own thoughts and enjoy the scenery.

Apparently there was no real hurry to get us to Fort Ord because we were on the Coast Highway and it was at times pretty slow, being a two-lane road. Around noon Sergeant Johnson pointed ahead and said, "That's the place, right there. Pull in. Good eats." And looking back at Tony, "Too bad we can't leave you little cocksuckers in the car, but regulation says we got to feed you."

Corporal Dubcek parked the car around the side of the restaurant and got out and opened the back door for Tony, and Don was sliding out behind him, while Sergeant Johnson was opening my door. As I started to get out there was sudden commotion, and then there was a deafening explosion, a gunshot, and Sergeant Johnson fell back on the pavement away from the car. I ducked back inside and looked over to see Tony backing away from the car, pointing the gun at Corporal Dubcek, who was pleading with Tony to not shoot him. Don said, "Let's get the fuck out of here." They backed up twenty or thirty feet and then turned and ran. I could see Corporal Dubcek was shaking as he quickly ran around to the passenger's side of the car and crouched down to watch the two prisoners run across the parking lot and out of sight.

I turned and looked out my open door at Sergeant Johnson lying on his back on the pavement. His shirt was covered with blood and the stain was getting larger as I watched. I shouted at Corporal Dubcek, "Call a fucking ambulance!" He stood up, then, finally, and opened the passenger door and got on the radio.

Meanwhile a number of people had started coming out of the restaurant. I jumped out of the car and I shouted to them, "Someone call an ambulance!" Corporal Dubcek continued to fumble

with the radio and was making a call but was just getting static as he must not have been on the right channel or he didn't really know whom to call, or how. He was still shaking.

I ran over to Johnson knelt down and looked more closely. The wound was on the right side of his chest and it did not look good. I could see the bullet hole in his shirt and the whole shirt was now soaked in blood. I didn't know what to do. I thought maybe I should press on the wound but that would probably really hurt him. Johnson was semi-conscious and groaning. A few seconds later there were sirens and within maybe two minutes, two long minutes that seemed like half of an eternity, an ambulance was there. Paramedics ran up, helped me to my feet and asked me to step back. Almost simultaneously three or four police cars arrived and a fire truck. There was a huge commotion now, a large crowd—people, cops, medics, and firemen—all around us. I was tempted to slip away in the middle of all the pandemonium but thought better of it. I did not want to be on the wrong side of whatever this turned out to be, possibly a murder, so I just got back in the backseat of the MP car and waited. I was shaking a little myself, but that may have been from hunger or just from the chill of the coastal breeze. Somehow I had managed to get blood on my hands, some on my pants and on my jacket. I didn't like Sergeant Johnson, but I didn't like seeing him lying on the ground bleeding to death either. I wished I could have done something more than just sit there.

After a few more minutes they had him in the ambulance and with the siren blaring it departed in a roar. There were still lights flashing all around the parking lot. It now looked like there were cops from three different agencies. Some of the cops had Corporal Dubcek over by one of their cars, apparently taking a statement. Then a cop came over to me and asked whom I was and what I was doing. I didn't know what to say, so I just said, "I'm with Corporal Dubcek." The cop proceeded to take a statement from me and I told him exactly what I had seen. I hadn't seen Tony pull Dubcek's gun from its holster as Don was getting out of the car and Dubcek was distracted. At first I wasn't sure where the

gun came from and I wasn't even sure who was shooting whom. It was only when Dubcek ran around the car and hid that I realized it was his gun that Tony had.

Next was a trip to the Santa Barbara police station where I was placed in a cell with a few other people, drunks mostly, to wait. I was told the Army was sending someone to get me. After what must have been two or three hours, two new MPs showed up and said that they were going to take me on up to Fort Ord. At this point I was starving and asked if we could get something to eat on the way. Apparently they had some kind of respect for me for not running away or maybe they had heard that I had yelled to the bystanders to call an ambulance when Corporal Dubcek was seemingly frozen in fear and that I at least had tried to do something to help Sergeant Johnson. They were accommodating and pretty soon we were at a different nearby restaurant.

I asked them what was going on, what had happened to Sergeant Johnson, was he going to make it? Apparently he was in critical condition but, yes, he was going to live.

"What about the two guys who escaped?" I asked.

"We haven't caught them yet, but we will. There are cops all over the place looking for them. You were smart not to run."

After a hearty hot turkey sandwich, with mashed potatoes and gravy, we were back on the road. It was almost eight o'clock. Now I had the whole back seat to myself, and I must say I didn't miss Tony and Don. "How long before we get there?" I asked. The MP driving said it would be about four hours, so I lay down on the seat, curled up and went to sleep.

CHAPTER 3

I awoke to the sound of the road beneath me, on the slippery, cold vinyl backseat of the Ford MP car. I didn't sit up, but just lay there thinking, wondering how far we were and how long I had slept. Then I remembered the money, the money in my shoes and I realized I had to do something about it as I just may not see those shoes again once I'm in the stockade. The two MPs were talking low about mundane things, football, the war in Viet Nam and new cars while I quietly slipped off each of my shoes, one at a time, and quietly removed the folded up bills I had hid under the insoles. I didn't know what to do with them at this point so I quietly un-tucked my shirt and slipped the folded bills in along the inside of the waistband of my boxer shorts. The elastic fit tight enough to hold them there until I had to pull them down. I could only hope they wouldn't do a strip search, in which case the money would go bye-bye.

I sat up and looked around. I couldn't tell where we were in the darkness, but it looked like we were somewhere along the coast. I meekly asked the driver where we are and how much longer would it be, as I kinda had to pee. He said we were close, just

passing through the north end of Big Sur, not far from Carmel. That didn't tell me much, but he added it would be about twenty more minutes or so. I could hold it. I could see from the clock on the dash that it was now past midnight.

Carmel came and went without much to see from the road and then we were on a freeway and city lights began appearing on the right as we rolled over the hills of Monterey. The highway leveled off a bit and then there were what looked like sand dunes, where there were no lights, no buildings to be seen. A few minutes later we were pulling up to the gate of Fort Ord. the MPs at the gate asked for IDs from the driver and the other MP in the car and then a copy of their orders. The MP at the gate asked, "Do you know where the stockade is?"

Our driver replied, "Yeah, sure, we've been here a few times lately. Thanks." And off we went. I started to shiver a bit, although I'm not it was just from the chilly night air with the window having been open or was it the anxiety of going to a stockade. I'd been threatened with the stockade several times in the past, back at Fort Leonard Wood, but nothing ever came of those threats. My going absent without official leave had been somewhat excusable each time because I was still a recruit and I hadn't been gone long. They still held out hope of making a soldier out of me. This time it had been nine months and this time it was for real and I have to admit to feeling worried if not a little scared. This was serious, this was jail.

It was pretty easy to walk out of Fort Leonard Wood; well, it was kind of easy, given I didn't have to break through any steel bars. I just had to slip away. The last time I left I walked out through the woods, parallel to the main road, a hundred yards or so in to the woods where it would have been hard to see me. But that's another story; this time I was stuck, really stuck and I did not know what to expect.

There it was: the Fort Ord Stockade. In the night it looked just like some old prison you would see in a movie from the 1940s: a big cement building with two levels, with well-spaced windows, each divided up into little squares by steel frames.

Where the building ended a tall chain link fence topped with four strands of barbed wire began and led away from the building to surround what looked like a playground. Except for the guard towers and the bright flood lights that lit it all up brightly in the night it could have been my grammar school.

"Okay, out the car," the second MP said as he got out of his side of the car and opened the back door. Warily, he added, "Do I need to cuff you? There's no where to run here."

"No, I'm not going to run, I'm cool."

They led me into a vestibule and stopped before two larger steel doors and waited until a guard appeared to open one of the doors from the inside. The driver now spoke, "We've got an AWOL here from Camp Irwin." He showed the guard some paperwork as we entered and the guard pointed to a door down the hallway. We entered the room approached a big desk that stood high and wide just a few feet inside the door, one MP on either side of me. I barely paid attention while they processed the paperwork, got the requisite sign-offs. Finally the MP who had been the driver turned and said, "He's all yours." Without further ado the two MPs turned and left.

I was standing in front of the desk, now with two or three guards around me and a sergeant behind the desk. The sergeant stood up with a clip board, handed the clip board to one of the guards and said, "Let's get him processed. Assigned to C-cell."

I was taken into a larger room off to one side, brightly lit by florescent ceiling lights, cold gray vinyl tile floors, no windows, a small desk to one side, benches along two walls. I had to fill out a short form that basically asked my height, weight, shoe size, waist size, shirt size. One of the guards took the form and disappeared. At the desk the other guard told me to empty my pockets and then he said, "Strip to your shorts."

I didn't have much in my pockets: some change, a few dollar bills, my wallet. As I removed my pants I carefully and surreptitiously rearranged the bills folded along the waist-band of my shorts. Another guard appeared with a stack of folded clothes, topped with a towel, a small bar of Ivory soap, a tooth

brush and a small tube of toothpaste and handed them to me. "This way," he said and with another guard they shuttled me out through a door and down a short hallway to a room that had eight barber chairs, all sitting idle in the middle of the night. The second guard said, "I'll do it." And to me, "Take a seat."

It was familiar haircut that took all of about three minutes and involved only an electric clipper. He was pretty rough, obviously not a barber, and I had to cry out a few times as he dug the clipper blade into my scalp and I wondered if it was intentional. The second guard stood watching. I noticed they were both spec-fours, both probably no more than eighteen or nineteen years old, and I wondered why they were there, pulling guard duty. When the amateur barber was finished and my hair was no more than about one sixteenth of an inch long, if that, they led me back out and down the hallway to another door. I was really feeling naked now, with no hair, and cold. The fallen hair covered my shoulders, back and chest and was already itching.

"There's a shower in there." He pointed to an open door way. "I really gotta take a piss," I said.

"In there, you've got ten minutes."

The room was all tile, from the floor to the ceiling, a light beige tile the color of sand, with no variation in color and a light texture, enough to keep it from being too slippery. There were four urinals on one side of the room, four open toilets on the opposite side, and on a third wall a row of four sinks. The fourth wall yielded to a large open passage with the tile continuing without interruption through which could be seen a row of four shower heads along one wall with corresponding drains on the floor below each. I didn't bother to use the urinal. I was too cold and could think of nothing other than getting under some hot water. In the shower room there were hooks on the back wall and a tile bench running along below them. There was no privacy, but no one was watching and I had the room to myself. I carefully removed my shorts and folded them with the money hidden inside and placed them on the bench, next to the stack of new clothes that consisted of a white t-shirt, white

boxer shorts, a green fatigue shirt, green fatigue pants, green wool socks and a new pair of black combat boots, all standard Army issue.

The shower was warm, it never got very hot. I peed for what seemed like an hour. In spite of the sleep I got in the car I was exhausted. I stood under the lukewarm water with a blank mind, not thinking, just letting the water run over me, escaping into the bliss of that one sense.

"Hey, let's go in there!" It was one of the guards and I was jarred back to reality. I shut off the water, dried quickly, as I needed to get the money concealed again before someone came in and could see me. With the money safely tucked away in the waistband of my shorts again, I emerged from the head a soldier once again, back in the Army, in baggy fatigues, combat boots, and no hair.