

GARRETT PRUE

For the first time since he'd been in country, Garrett Prue broke the twelve-hour bottle-to-throttle rule. He went to the local officers club, a GP medium tent with a few tables and chairs, and got a single bourbon and water right before it closed. It was two hours short of midnight and he'd be up with the jungle sun to put his helicopter gunship in the air.

He took the paper cup out into the dark company street. He'd tried for the past few days to ignore what was eating at him, but finally he admitted to himself it wasn't going anywhere until he faced it. He sat down behind the mess hall, grown quiet at last, and leaned against the wall. Then he tried to come to terms with the fact that Ken Janowitz was now missing in action.

He vividly remembered that morning in the Tan Son Nhut terminal, waiting to leave for R and R in Bangkok. Ken happened along, chatted a minute and sat down. Janowitz was a line doggie, an infantryman Garrett had flown into combat when he was piloting slicks—several times they had talked while waiting to lift off and had struck up a friendship.

In retrospect, Ken had been charming. On the plane, he schmoozed his way into the seat next to Garrett and they were soon talking about school back in the world, their military training, the unlimited possibilities for getting laid in Bangkok—"Great name for it," Garrett allowed—and how to get a nice buzz without acquiring a limp dick or a case of the barfs. Ken spoke enthusiastically about the libidinal possibilities of a sexual

threesome, something he'd obviously done before and described in stimulating detail. And Garrett, whose goal on this R and R had been simply to eat, drink, have sex and sleep, in a continuous and self-governing cycle, found himself at first piqued and then sharply stimulated by Ken's descriptions. When he asked Ken with some uneasiness if he'd consider sharing a ride during their R and R, he readily agreed.

They quickly rented a one-room apartment with a shower in the john. The room's tiny kitchen area, built into one wall, faced the TV across occasional furniture, and the double bed stood against the wall opposite the bathroom. Here, on the third floor, the street's sounds and smells were at a remove though rarely absent, and Garrett suspected Bangkok never slept. They slipped into casual civilian clothes, Garrett wishing he'd brought white briefs with him as Ken had, rather than being stuck with his army green boxers. He didn't want any reminders of Nam, least of all from something next to his skin. When they were changed, Ken announced breezily that it was time to shop for a bed buddy, and they hit the streets.

It hardly seemed possible, but word of mouth on the Bangkok fleshpots fell short of the reality. Extensive and varied, they flourished on the patronage of soldiers of many nations streaming in from all over southeast Asia. Ken led them through a sex bazaar teeming with buyers and sellers, and provided running commentary as they went. But when Garrett became smitten with a stem-thin girl about five feet tall, Ken was adamant.

"Look at her eyes," he said. "She doesn't know what planet this is. She's on something--does it to support her habit. Her health certificate will be expired or doctored, and she won't concentrate on her work."

A tall, big-breasted Eurasian in leather and chrome harness reminded Garrett of a

magazine he'd browsed in an adult store outside Fort Rucker. Her nipples thrusting out through the metal rings of the harness fascinated him.

"She'll cheerfully beat the shit out of you and make you pay her to do it," Ken said. She was insolently looking them up and down, as if gauging their capacity for her services. He looked at Garrett curiously. "Does that turn you on?"

"Hell no, man."

Ken grinned. "Glad to hear it."

At another place, they passed two young men on display. Garrett decided they were still really boys and should be in school instead of stuffing their merchandise into thongs. One leaned back in profile against the door jamb, imitating some old Hollywood starlet poster. His genitals bulged against the cloth in a calculated effect, the boy-man gazing frankly back at him, apparently amused. Just inside the doorway, the other waited for Garrett's eyes to turn toward him. When they did, he hooked his thumbs into his waistband and casually exposed himself.

"Wow," Ken said. "He's hung better than I am."

The second boy nodded his head toward the inside, his raised eyebrows querying Garrett. "Want some?" he asked. When Garrett turned to Ken, he found him grinning at his reaction.

"That turn you on?"

Garrett flushed. "Hey, what do you think I am?"

Ken just chuckled at his indignation. The Flasher said something in Thai to the Bulge, who was looking Garrett up and down. Garrett took off and Ken shrugged at the two boys in mock apology before following after him.

In the end, their bed buddy found them. An interesting hour had left them still without their third party, but ratcheted tight from all the skin. They hove to at a sidewalk cafe, paid too much for a beer apiece, and started people-watching. One of the people separated herself from the flow and came over. In her early twenties and with professionally cheerful brown eyes, she exuded self-confidence. She had trimmed her sleeveless pullover, so that the edge rode just above the bottom of her breasts. Her black hair was plaited into a single braid coiled on top. She was quite slender, Garrett noted, in that attractive Asian way, with hips as narrow as a boy's. Her breasts were within his personal range of acceptable, although they were by no means full.

“Just get in?” she asked.

“Yeah, about three hours ago,” Ken replied, suddenly alert.

“Still looking for somebody?”

When they replied simultaneously, she sat down uninvited and opened her shoulder bag.

“This is my latest health report.” She laid it on the table and began guiding them through the government form. “See the date? Two days ago. See here? No nasties in my blood.” She grinned. “I’m clean inside.” Her English was smooth and conversational, with just enough accent to sound faintly exotic. “Up here?” she continued. “My Thai name. Much better if you just call me Lara, okay?”

“Okay,” Ken replied, already at ease with her. When she glanced at Garrett, the mischief in her eyes made him smile.

“For the one who doesn’t get me, I recommend a friend of mine. Good body, very cooperative—do anything you want. Her prices same as mine.” She pulled out a dog-

eared five by eight card. “See? Right here. Cheapest per day if you spend your whole R and R with me. Most expensive for one day only. I don’t do less than one day, too much trouble. You only want shot of cock, go some place else.” That broke Ken up, while Garrett, embarrassed, looked around to see if there was anyone within earshot who understood English. There was—obviously a GI, he sat with a young Thai girl, grinning at their negotiations.

“So. Who gets me? Who has the luck?”

“Lara, my sweet,” Ken said. “When we saw you, we knew right away neither of us could give you up. We both want your tasty little body.”

Her mouth creased into an impish smile and her eyes narrowed with mock accusation. “Oh, naughty boys. Want to make me into a Lara sandwich.” Two tables over, the GI joined Ken’s laughter. Garrett was coloring crimson.

“Okay,” she said, “but you each pay full price—no discount for volume business. And must be whole R and R, not just one or two days. And then on last day, you each give me big tip because I can’t work for a while—have to stay in bed.”

Ken guffawed.

“Alone, naughty boy. To rest up from *two* strong stallions.”

“Understandable,” Ken grinned.

“In advance, naughty boy.”

They paid and she gave them each a receipt on another government form.

“Good,” she said. “Now, I hope you have lots of condoms—no condoms, no Lara. I have plenty, but they cost extra and I charge too much.” They assured her they were well supplied.

“Anything else?” she wondered out loud. “Ah, of course.” She turned to Ken. “What’s your name?” He told her. “Ooh,” she murmured, apparently delighted. “Kenny...” and she drew the name out provocatively. She turned to the other.

“Garrett,” he said.

“Gar-RETT,” and she accented the last syllable. She frowned. “Last part gets chopped off. Gar-RETT,” she repeated, lopping off the end of the word with the final T. She thought a moment. “I know,” she said. “I’ll just use first half,” and she tested it. “Garr,” she said, drawing out the R.

“Sounds good to me,” Garrett said.

“RrrRrrRrr...” She seemed to be savoring some new and intriguing flavor. Her face moved close and her hooded brown eyes looked straight into his, as she continued softly making the sound that said she was ready.

Garrett was frankly aroused. “Ooh. Time to go,” he said to Ken.

“Lara, baby,” Ken said, “you’re very good.”

“Kenny, baby,” she replied, pursing her lips and thrusting them toward him, “I’m the *best*.”

“Oh, sweetie, we’re wound so tight.” He looked at Garrett, who clearly agreed.

“Let’s take ourselves straight to the work site.”

Before they got all the way down the hall Ken had his shirt off and was stuffing it into his hip pocket. As Garrett unlocked the door, Ken’s hands got busy with Lara’s accessible breasts. As soon as they were inside, Ken got rid of her pullover and she quickly had him naked. Garrett decided the Flasher wasn’t better hung than Ken—interesting, but it did nothing to relieve his own pressing problem. As Ken bent his

head to make insistent love to her breasts, Garrett was feeling like odd man out. Lara seized a belt loop on his chinos and pulled him in to make a threesome. Ken seemed oblivious, as she tilted her head up. Garrett was soon “swappin’ spit,” as one of the aviators, a high flier from Texas, liked to put it. Eyes closed, he slid a hand down her back but found Ken’s already at her buttocks.

“Me first.” Ken’s voice was thick. Looking down, he caught sight of Garrett’s bulge. “Sorry, man. This won’t take long.”

“It better not.” Garrett began stripping off his clothes. “I’m about to have an accident.”

“Don’t you dare,” Lara said. “Belongs to me.”

As Ken ripped open a box of rubbers, Garrett thought about giving them privacy. But the bed was visible from everywhere in the little apartment except the bathroom. Naked now, he decided that though he wasn’t uncomfortable he would jettison the beer he drank earlier. But then he realized that with his own erection, urinating was out of the question.

Then they were coupling on the bed, and for the first time in his life, Garrett was watching two people having sex. They were oblivious of him as he approached and, mesmerized, followed the line of Ken’s thighs up to where skin slapped against skin. The dull staccato and their rapid, shallow exhalations stood in relief against the distant grind of traffic. The rumble of a truck drifted up. He watched her hands slide slowly down Ken’s back and begin to explore his buttocks. Then the whole process suspended as Ken voiced his climax and slid into stillness. As Ken’s head came to rest on Lara’s shoulder, Garrett fumbled a condom out of the box. She eased Ken over to her side and welcomed

Garrett with “Naughty boy number two.”

Then it was Garrett. He knew it wouldn't take him long either. His awareness of Ken lying a foot away faded as Lara busied her mouth at his own and then slid it along his throat and neck to his ear. He could feel her hand caressing the small of his back. After a bit, it glided down and her fingers began probing the cleft. As they found their mark, they triggered his own sudden wrenching. When he finally opened his eyes, he was looking into Lara's enormously pleased brown ones. As she gently kissed his lips, taking his head in both her hands, he realized that the one still on his hip belonged to Ken. He turned to him with an edge of anxiety.

He forced a little smile, but the concern Garrett felt made him acknowledge that shame was creeping in to replace the temporarily depleted lust. He tried to convince himself it sprang from hell-bent fucking as a group activity, but had to admit that wasn't the real issue. He needed the gender of the accommodating hand not to matter. He longed to take this pleasure simply and leave out the self-guided guilt trips, but he was sure he'd never reach that point. He felt crammed into some irrational strait jacket.

“Hey, was that you?” he murmured.

“Are you going to tell me you didn't enjoy it?” Ken's voice was as casual as always, but seasoned now with a streak of the sardonic that felt defensive. At the edges of his eyes, Garrett detected an uneasiness.

It's a risk for him, too, he realized. If he's scared too, I'm safe. He began to relax.

“Not hardly, cousin.”

“Don't forget to return the favor some time.”

“I'll think about it.” It came out playful and hard to get. For the first time since

they met in the terminal, Garrett felt that Ken wasn't two moves ahead of him. It was a good feeling.

"By the way, big fella," Ken said, patting Garrett's butt. "That was a real good shot, but next time could you keep your voice down?"

"You should talk." Ken slid to Lara's other side and away from Ken's hand. "I thought the cops would break in here looking for a murder victim."

"Police know that noise," she said. "That the sound of naughty boys having big fun."

"Got that right," Ken agreed, pecking her cheek. They snuggled together around her, a warm and indiscriminate tangle. Soon, they were dozing.

But not for long. Their next passage became at times a simultaneous threesome, less urgent and with the beginnings of frank exploration. When they woke again, it was dark and they were hungry.

Garrett looked at his watch. It was almost midnight back in Saigon. "Bangkok's on Nam time, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Ken replied. He turned to Lara. "We'll be able to get something to eat out there, won't we?"

She laughed lightly. "Bangkok's open all night."

She was right. As they steered toward a bright avenue strung with sidewalk cafes, it seemed to Garrett that the foot traffic was just as dense as in the afternoon. Scooters, bikes and taxis made crossing the street a chancy proposition.

Their table gave a good view of the passing show and they ate leisurely. Garrett drank iced Thai coffee, lightened to brown with cream. It was good, but he preferred the

Vietnamese *cafe sua da*, which was sweetish and thicker. It reminded him of a mocha milk shake.

A coworker of Lara's stopped by. They spoke in Thai for a few moments, then surprise spread over the new girl's face and she looked at Garrett with interest. "Oh my," she murmured, and bit her lower lip. The expression on her face said, "We'll make this our little secret." She stroked her left index finger with her right in the gestural version of 'naughty boy.'

"What?" he asked, a bit apprehensive.

"Not to worry," Lara answered, brushing her lips across his ear. "I just tell her you are one strong stallion," and she repeated the naughty boy gesture. He liked that, but knew something hadn't gotten translated.

"Hey, what about me?"

"Oh, Ken-ny. Don't be jealous." She gave him a little kiss on the lips, while her hand ran lightly up his thigh. "You're in a class by itself."

On the way back, they ran into a kid selling American pretzels on the street. The boy's English sounded like Chicago and the bags could have come out of a supermarket back in the world. Ken bought a sack and munched a pretzel on the way.

When they got back, they decided to wash off the street grime. They found the shower so cramped that when Lara knelt down her legs extended out under the shower curtain, and Ken and Garrett had to stand hip to hip.

Garrett listened to an occasional throaty sound from Ken punctuate the muffled trickling of the drain. He watched Ken's sardonic expression ebbing away, a mask slowly fading until his face reflected only rapt preoccupation—as if he had been wholly

absorbed into his pleasuring. Little rivulets ran down Ken's forehead and across his closed eyelids, and edged their way around his slightly parted lips. Then his neck arched a little, lifting his face, and his lips rounded into a mute O. His brow furrowed at the unfathomability of what was beginning. At last, Ken moaned faintly in his release and his head sank down onto Garrett's shoulder. Without thinking, Garrett reached up to Ken's neck and at once found himself riven. The gesture of comforting felt instinctively right, yet his mind shouted in panic that men don't show tenderness to each other. He had to force himself to leave his hand there.

Then, as Lara shifted her efforts, Garrett exhaled sharply. Ken's lips, resting against the side of his throat, responded to the sound. As Lara nursed Garrett along without haste, Ken's mouth explored his neck and his fingers trailed up across Garrett's belly to a nipple. And Garrett moaned faintly in his turn, his head easing over against the one still resting on his shoulder.

Some time next afternoon, with everyone dry again and on the bed, Lara was reprising her oral skills with Garrett, while Ken sat attentively next to them. Suddenly, she sprang up and started toward the john.

"Gotta pee," she said casually.

"Oh my God, Lara," Garrett said desperately. "Don't leave me like this."

"Gotta *pee*," she said and slammed the bathroom door.

"I don't believe this." Garrett groaned and threw his arm across his eyes, as if he had the world's worst headache.

"Don't worry," Ken replied. "Your schwanz'll stay good to go. It's in stone, man."

Garrett was unconsolated. “Thanks a lot.”

He sank back onto the pillow, resigned to his wait. Ken began passing his fingers lightly along the inside of Garrett’s thigh.

“Hey, knock it off,” Garrett said, arm still across his face. Then he felt Ken taking Lara’s place. Startled, he sat up on his elbows. “Ken, what are you...?”

Their eyes held for a second. Garrett was perplexed by the pleading in Ken’s face, but oddly calmed by it too. Ken took the brief hesitation as consent and resumed. After a moment, Garrett eased back onto the pillow.

Garrett remembered waking late that night twined snugly with Ken. Beyond the bed he could see Lara, asleep on the couch. She wore her street clothes against the night’s slight cooling, with a bath towel across her bare midriff. The TV flickered, someone singing passionately to the oblivious girl in Thai.

He eased out from under Ken’s arm and sat watching him for a while. The shibboleths within were unaccountably quiet and he felt simple admiration for this body beside him. He thought about what Ken had done and his own initial frightened reaction to the saw-toothed thou-shalt-not. Except now, with everyone else asleep in the flickering blue light, he realized that Ken’s act had been a giving. Yes, a taking too, he admitted to himself. That’s the nature of the process—but at core, a gift.

A gift should be returned in kind.

Garrett knew the old tyrannies would be back tomorrow, as vicious as ever. But tonight—an unfamiliar feeling—he didn’t care. He looked down at Ken’s face, innocent in the stillness, and smiled. And then he bent and coaxed him out of sleep.

Garrett woke the next morning, as Ken climbed back into bed.

“Pit stop,” he said.

“Where’s Lara?” Garrett asked.

“She said she was going shopping.”

An awkward little silence fell between them, which Garrett finally broke.

“I’ve got these tapes in my head, these powerful voices.” He wondered how to explain the complexity of it. “They play back these—they’re lists of all the things I’m not supposed to do, and what I am if I do the stuff anyway.”

“Stuff like me?” Ken’s voice was sympathetic.

“Yeah.” He grinned awkwardly. “I’m not supposed to do you.” Ken gave a quiet little chuckle.

“Last night,” Garrett continued. “That’s the first time I ever did that.”

“Like it?”

“Don’t ask!”

Ken laughed, the sound trailing slowly into quiet. They held each other’s gaze, reluctant to end the moment.

“Want to do it again?” Ken looked up apprehensively at Garrett.

Garrett gazed back, amazed that Ken could keep this vulnerability so submerged. Always so assured, so distanced from everything, and then this. He sensed that asking the question had thrown open a great gap and through it, the simplest, kindest ‘no’ would hack a jagged wound. Garrett found trust in his face, and anxiety, and felt a quiet warmth for him. He didn’t want to hurt this man. It was as simple as that.

He smiled. “Sure.”

They woke when Lara bustled back in with a sack of groceries. She headed

straight for the stove and started clanging pots and pans.

“Hey, keep it down over there,” Garrett muttered sleepily.

“What are you up to, my sweet?” Ken asked.

She was unpacking ground meat and rolls and ketchup from the sack. “I make you hamburgers. Good ones, too, keep stallions strong. Can’t fuck each other all day on pretzels.”

“Hey,” Ken said with mock indignation and threw a pillow in her general direction. But Garrett was shaken by her remark.

Ken glanced at him and grew concerned. “What’s the matter?”

Garrett shrugged.

“Did she kick in the tapes?”

Garrett nodded, not meeting his eyes.

He grabbed Garrett’s arm. “Tell them to just fuck off. *You’re* in charge here.”

He forced a smile and nodded gamely, but it felt hollow. When Lara announced lunch, he slipped into his army green boxers. Only Ken sat completely naked at the little table. Lara always went clothed after that, the focus of her activities shifting from the bed to the stove.

During their remaining time, Garrett never quite freed himself from a certain bleakness. His most passionate participations felt streaked with gray. Their last full day in Bangkok, the weight of his listlessness increased. Genuinely worried, Ken asked what was wrong. Garrett lied and told him it was just anticipation of their return to combat. Ken didn’t say anything, but Garrett was pretty sure he didn’t believe him. The three of them spent the afternoon sightseeing.

Bright and early next day, Lara woke them humming a happy little song as she packed her shoulder bag.

“Coffee’s ready,” she said when she saw they were awake. “I knew you’d need it while you packed,” she added, referring cheerfully to their afternoon departure.

Garrett pulled on his boxers, while Ken made his slow morning way to the coffee. Again, he was the only one naked in the room.

“Time for you to tip me now, so I can go,” she chirped. Her eyes crinkled mischievously. “Must be good tip, or I follow you all the way to the airport yelling faggots, faggots.” She giggled.

Garrett took her literally and was appalled at the prospect. Ken, who normally would have joined in her laughter, was deeply concerned.

Lara looked at Garrett’s face, surprised by its paleness. “Oh, naughty boy, relax.” She patted his cheek. “Take it the way you like it. The world’s not hiding under your bed.”

They each gave her an extra day’s pay, which pleased her. Garrett hung back at the coffee pot, while Ken kissed her cheek and patted her fanny, bantering with her. Then she was gone.

Garrett felt desperately vulnerable. “I don’t know what got into me this week.”

Ken tried to keep it light. “I’d say something got out.”

“It was pressure from the war.”

“What was?”

Garrett looked at him incredulously. “What we *did* this week.”

Ken tried to joke it away. “You make it sound...”

Garrett cut him off. "It's not normal. It's unnatural."

The forced joviality began to fade. "Which voice told you that?"

"*All* of them!"

"Well, I believe that." Ken shook his head. "Look," he said. "You can listen to the voices they put on your tapes before you knew what half the words meant, or you can push past them to what you really feel, what your gut says is right." He added, with a sarcasm that he instantly regretted, "And natural."

"Whatever you happen to think, I'm not some puritan robot. This is wrong, Ken. I believe that. So does the army. If we did this back in Nam, they'd be glad to shorten our tours and send us home in civilian clothes."

Ken stood there a moment, trying to find a way to restart the conversation. "The first time we... Do you remember?"

Garrett was looking at a face without a mask again and felt shame. But he kept desperately on. "I had too much to drink."

"You never had more than two beers together the whole week and neither did I," Ken responded fervently. "You got beyond the tapes that night. I know what you felt because you showed me."

"I was out of control. But not now."

"Man, I never thought you'd go off like this."

A flash of understanding lit up Garrett's face. "You were after me," he said.

"You better believe it," Ken smiled.

A flood of contradictory emotions spilled over when he heard the admission. Partly, he was grateful that this man found something in him worth wanting. Mostly, he

felt it made him the pursued, the object of desire—in conflict with his painfully cultivated sexual self. It was as if his meticulously constructed facade were collapsing around him, or that while he thought it opaque it was really transparent and the whole world could see the naked truth of him. He thought of Lara’s friend rubbing her index finger at him:

naughty boy.

“Lara had us nailed, didn’t she?” A deep sadness took possession of him.

“Faggots.”

“Garrett! Don’t give yourself to the labels. You’re worth more than that. We both are.”

He looked at Ken, standing there nude. His nakedness was open and unaffected, even innocent. Garrett, on the other hand, covered, was riddled with shame. How could the two of them navigate the same moral terrain and arrive at such opposite places? Simple, and his realization was tinged with self-disgust. I go inward to my thou-shalt-nots. Ken travels outward to other people, to giving and getting.

Even as his mind began to sort out what Ken really meant, it was also telling him that nothing could ever really happen. There was no possibility, none, of ever saying yes to Ken’s emotional reaching out. The voices were sovereign and would brook no dissent. He smiled sadly, conscious of pushing away something rare.

Ken apparently took the smile for a change of heart. “Sure,” he said with growing urgency, “at first this week was just a good time thing. But it got way beyond that for me. For you, too. I know it. I saw it in your face the whole time.” Garrett pushed past him and headed for the coffee pot, trying to break Ken’s gathering momentum.

Ken followed right after. “I don’t want to lose this. I know back in Nam we’re not

going to be able to see each other to talk, not to really talk. But later back in the world—I mean, no commitments, no obligations. Just—possibility, okay?”

Garrett looked into Ken’s hopeful face, vulnerable to the end, and turned away. He didn’t want to hurt him, but he had no choice. He couldn’t defy the voices. Wouldn’t. They had him again now, after the week’s brief freedom, and he knew they always would. So sad, he thought. So sad.

“Okay?” Ken repeated.

He turned back to Ken and paused a moment. “Never.”

The word had more finality coming quietly from Garrett’s melancholy face than if he’d shouted it.

“Well,” Ken murmured. He invested the word with all the deep pain of surrender. He bowed his head and realized he was naked. He straightened. “I think I’ll get cleaned up.” He pulled a pair of army green boxers out of his bag and headed for the shower.

They spoke little after that, only about the details of luggage and the cab. Back in uniform at the airport, they exchanged neutral pleasantries and went their separate ways to their seats. Neither saw the other in the crowd, as they deplaned at Tan Son Nhut.

Garrett stirred. Sitting against the mess hall, he’d lost track of time. The early shift was at work inside. He’d long since drunk the melted ice in his cup and his left leg had fallen asleep. The east was coloring and he realized the gunships would be rearmed and refueled, ready for the day.

He’d spent the night remembering and mourning, but felt no release. An image of Ken, sleeping naked beside him in the TV’s flickering light, lingered in his mind. And

now that same body, gashed to finality, lay face down in some flooded paddy, bloated by the struggle for it between sun and water. When he flew slicks and helped recover KIA's, he'd seen bodies under such conditions. Everything from snails to ravens would rush to strip the flesh off, and now it was Ken. He remembered when they were in the shower and the cascading water carried off the daylight's disguise to reveal the night's pleasure—so vividly that Garrett wanted to be the one making it happen. And got his wish.

But what had been the good of it? Cowering behind his fears, he'd denied what he felt and rejected any possible connection. He'd smeared their time together with shame.

If only I had it to do over. But he no sooner thought it than his face broke into a bitter, knowing smile. *Who am I kidding?* He knew himself too well to find comfort in such deceptions. He'd never do it differently, he knew that. He was too much the coward. He could push his gunship into a firing pass in the face of enemy machine guns and then circle around and do it again, but he was a coward. *What if I was the last thing he thought of, the thing that made it easy or hard? Would I do it over then?* Again, he knew the answer and felt the divisions inside him yawning wider with his repeated refusals. *Lie to him. Do it over and lie to him. He'd never know, nobody would.* Something down beyond the tapes was beginning to shrivel, like a sheet of paper held above a flame. *What if lying would have kept him alive? Given him that little edge, so he could have survived?* No, not even then. Not even if he could have made it on Garrett's lies till he got back to the world and the truth. Garrett, sickening within, knew he would let him die. *What have I become?*

Naughty boy.

He stood and, fastidious, strode across an open area to a trashcan and threw away

the paper cup. Then he headed for the flight line. He exchanged a few words with the maintenance officer, who was on his way to the mess hall. When he was gone, Garrett cranked up his ship. Just as the sun was edging over the horizon, he lifted off.

Major Tolliver was finishing shaving when he heard the cobra turning over. By the time he got to the flight line, Garrett was just getting airborne. He cranked up himself and followed after him. He was at a loss because Garrett was one of his most unflappable officers, but in two tours he'd seen combat do stranger things to stronger people. He planned to talk him back down and then sort it out, but Garrett wasn't responding to his radio calls. He gave up trying to contact him.

He was becoming alarmed because Garrett was heading toward an area heavily infiltrated with NVA. He finally got abreast of him and indicated by hand signals that Garrett should come about. Instead, he began drifting downward, within range of some of the NVA weaponry. Reluctantly, Tolliver maintained his altitude and resumed trying to raise him on the radio. He was interrupted in mid-transmission when the NVA engaged Garrett's gunship. Two or three heavy machine guns were putting up fire at the bird. In seconds, Tolliver saw it shudder and veer out of control, and then an incendiary round must have hit the fuel tank because the ship exploded in a fireball and plummeted in flames toward the ground. Another explosion racked the helicopter on impact. With most of its fuel on board, it was instantly wrapped in a raging swirl of fire, its rockets erupting like sunspots in the molten hull's white magnesium flames.

Within an hour or so, an infantry company was diverted from a search-and-destroy mission to secure the area around the wreckage. Later, two slicks took in helicopter personnel to recover what was left of the bird, and ordnance disposal people to

make sure the NVA couldn't find any usable ammunition. That wasn't likely after a fire of such intensity. A Graves Registration team also went in, along with Chaplain McCurdy.

They all stood looking at the wreckage a moment, stunned by the raw power of the fire. Sitting on a broad patch of blackened earth, the cobra still smoldered. It had been reduced to a mass of shapeless metal that the ammunition had ripped and shivered as it cooked off.

One of the ordnance men scanned the ground around. "Ain't gonna find jack shit here," he said to his partner, then quickly added, "Sorry, Padre." McCurdy acknowledged the apology with a curt wave.

The sergeant who came along to recover the body turned to the chaplain. "Ever seen a hundred percenter, Padre?"

"What's that?"

"Third degree burns over 100% of the body."

"I don't think so."

"He's going to look like the last log on an all-night bonfire."

The ordnance people did a quick initial safety check, so the maintenance crew could move in. After a few minutes of prodding at the mass of aluminum, one of the men turned to McCurdy and the sergeant.

"Here he is."

They pried open a section of the wreckage for them. Several soldiers stood by, as McCurdy recited the Our Father, adding, "May his soul rest in Peace." Then they left him and the sergeant to their work.

He wondered if the dead man had been a Catholic; no matter. As he pulled out a small vial of holy oil, he looked down at the body. What a fragile container for such an awesome thing as a soul. Highly unlikely it still lingered by these pitiful remnants. It had probably fled headlong, grateful for release. But he'd do the anointing anyway.

He frowned at a charred protrusion, trying to get his anatomical bearings. "Over here now, on this side," he said to the sergeant. "This is the head, isn't it?"

"Yes, I think you're right," the sergeant replied after a moment. "Here, see? This looks like the mouth to me."

He put oil on the tip of his thumb and performed only one anointing, permitted *in casu necessitatis*. But the normal prayers of Extreme Unction, focusing on the sins of the senses, seemed woefully inadequate here. No doubt the tenant soul of this tortured mass of carbon had his share of those, but taking his leave like this pointed much deeper. He decided to follow his feelings and expand the ritual. He traced a cross, reflexively grinding his teeth, on what he took to be the forehead: *Through this holy oil and God's most tender mercy, may all the sins you have committed with your thoughts be wiped away*. He renewed the oil on his thumb and made a little cross on what was probably the mouth: *Through this holy oil and God's most tender mercy, may all the sins you have committed with your words be wiped away*. His stomach was beginning to feel queasy. He signed the cross on what he was sure must be the chest: *Through this holy oil and God's most tender mercy, may all the sins you have committed with your heart be wiped away*. A small piece of brittle flesh snapped off under the press of his thumb and fell to the ground.

He walked unsteadily to a tree and sat down against it. The sergeant and one of

his people got the bulk of the remains into a body bag and then policed up scraps that had become scattered. McCurdy wanted to help but felt enervated. At last, they zipped the bag closed.

That night in his tent, he took down his Bible and read for a few minutes in the Old Testament:

Then they waged war against the Midianites, as the Lord had commanded, and after the battle Moses said to them: those of you who have slain anyone, or touched anyone slain in battle, shall purify yourselves on the third and on the seventh day. And whatsoever can stand the fire you shall make it go through the fire, that it may become clean.