

EXCERPT FROM *FLOWERS ARE BETTER THAN BULLETS*

Flowers are Better than Bullets

A Novel of Counterculture Activists

by

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Part One

Chapter 1

From the chopper above the village of Trinh Sam, Mickey and the crew watched a squad of eight soldiers below herding at gunpoint women and children into a bamboo-fenced pig sty. The little ones, afraid of the ugly, squealing pigs, held tight to their mothers' legs. A couple of women cradled naked babies in their arms. Soldiers fired questions and orders: from left, from right, and then curses from behind. The people turned this way and that, and back again. Desperate for answers, the enraged soldiers, spittle flying, pummeled them with guttural foreign words, and aimed M16s at their heads, which made them duck and fall to their knees.

A shirtless young soldier veered his barrel left, dog-tags swinging across his grimy, hairless chest, and shot one of the three pigs in the face, flesh and blood splattering the cringing captives. Children screamed, and mothers shielded them behind their thin bodies. The solitary *papa-san*, a skinny scarecrow of an old man, smaller than some women, was outraged. The pig was his. He stood up and yelled at the shooter, "*Dien cai dao! Dien cai dao!*" It sounded like he said *dinky dow, dinky dow*. The shirtless kid turned and looked for a long moment at the wispy-bearded *papa-san*, wearing his *non-la*, his conical straw hat. The kid, nostrils flaring, seemed like a dog trying to catch the scent of a faraway fox. Wordlessly he walked to the man and discharged his rifle close to the old man's ear. When he bent over, clutching his damaged ear with both hands, the kid ran his bayonet through the man's stomach, set his feet, and, muscles bulging, lifted the old man into the air, saying, "AMF." Then he pitched him on top of the dead, faceless pig. Children howled and women embraced their babies tighter.

Sure, the murder was real, but it looked like a play far down below where everyone was a tiny toy. The *papa-san* was a flimsy, stuffed doll. Effortlessly it seemed, the soldier hoisted him and tossed him away, like a forkful of hay. The other soldiers in a half circle around the pig pen stared fixedly at their detainees, expecting the worst. Sweat trickled into some eyes, but they blinked it away, afraid to lift fingers from triggers.

Below, more questions persistent, more commands urgent. "Answer, answer, or we'll kill you. Now, Now. We'll kill your kids. Tell us *now*, motherfuckers!" The shirtless kid set his M16 to auto, blasted the dead man, and the corpse bounced around like it was pulled by strings, and then slid off the pig into the muck. A filthy fog of flies buzzed from the gaping wounds, circled, and dove back to the hot meal. From her knees, a woman, her top missing, waved one hand, and the other hand and arm covered her breasts. She shouted at the freaked-out kid, "No VC! No VC!"

Mickey Kelly, noncombatant war correspondent for Detroit's *Novamondo Magazine*, snapped photos of the scene below: detainees at gunpoint, aerial point of view. Not bad. The soldiers were part of Alpha Company, the battalion his brother-in-law Duane was in. Some wore bandanas tied around their heads, strips of camouflage material ripped from the shirts of dead comrades. They looked like hippies from Detroit's Plum Street or Toronto's Yorkville Village. Almost a year ago Duane Hicks, a Detroiter, had married Mickey's sister Jayna, just days before he left for boot camp, eight weeks in Fort Dix, New Jersey. His letters from Vietnam became shorter as the weeks passed, and stopped altogether about three months ago. Mickey wondered if Duane were still alive.

The chopper hovered over the group and then landed. The pilot Lieutenant Gary Oliver tossed a green US Army jacket at Mickey. "Put this on." Where the name tag had been clipped off, the small rectangle of material was a lighter green. It was much too big, and he had to roll up the sleeves.

Lt. Oliver hopped out, and asked the young shirtless soldier, "What's going on here?"

PFC Green was a blue-eyed kid, maybe eighteen, but no older. His smooth, pink cheeks were out of place under his dented combat helmet that had *War is Hell* written on the khaki fabric band that encircled it. "We gotta interrogate these gooks. We have intel they know Charlie's location."

Using his Canon F1 Mickey focused, and snapped photos of the civilians. On their knees or squatting, children and women, teeth bared, scanned each soldier with black eyes dilated by fear. Some women thought, These young men, boys really, have mothers; one of these boys must have a kind heart, surely. The woman without her top, arms crossed over her chest, spoke directly to Mickey in words he could not understand, her wet eyes wide, hopeful, and a distorted grin suggesting to him she thought he might be her savior. Sorry. But what a great shot. Click. Real-life drama. The magazine will love it.

Lt. Oliver: "Why'd you kill the pig?"

PFC Green: "Orders, sir."

"Orders? What orders? Orders?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why'd you kill that old man?"

"He's Viet Cong, sir. This here's a free-strike zone. They're all VC, sir. Our orders are to kill anything that walks, crawls, or grows."

"The babies are VC?"

A captain called from the doorway of a hootch, "*My orders. From the honchos, direct.*" As Captain Kugler, followed closely by a short lieutenant, about five-four, ambled toward the pig sty, the children's wails dropped to sobs, and every eye was on him. He seemed calm, not like these crazy boys, itching to play with their deadly weapons. "We're in a designated free-strike zone. Trinh Sam's a free-strike zone. Kill anything that moves. But these gooks know where Charlie's at, and we're just trying to scare 'em. We told 'em the pigs first, and they're next if we don't get what we need. We're just throwin' a scare into 'em."

A mother on her knees holds her naked boy baby out to Mickey, the only one weaponless. He takes a picture. Open-mouthed, she pleads with him for something. "What's she saying? What's she want?"

The short lieutenant, Lt. Millhouse, shook his head.

Captain Kugler shrugged. "I dunno. I don't speak zipperhead. Where's Howie?" Phan Hao was Alpha Company's guide and interpreter.

A tall, well-built negro soldier, PFC Harlan, camouflage bandana tied around his head, and two belts of ammo crossed over his chest, turned when he heard Howie's name. After balancing

the M60 machine gun on his shoulder, he cupped his hands around his mouth. "Howie! Howie!" As the tiny soldier came running, Harlan shouted, "Get the fuck over here, most ricky-tick."

Lt. Millhouse stepped forward, saying to the negro soldier, Harlan, "I'll handle the situation."

Capt. Kugler smirked. "Well, here we go. Lieutenant Asswipe is going to *handle the situation*. OK, sonny-boy, let's see you do your thing."

Millhouse gritted his teeth, and pointed to the ground in front of him, saying, "Howie, right here. My order for you is as follows: What is this woman saying?"

Phan Hao listened, and said, "She say she know no thing. They pig farmers. She say all peoples starve if pigs are kill. Baby starve."

The woman points to a path opening into the jungle.

"She say Viet Cong mans pass by this place yesterday. No man stop. Soldier mans keep go. No stop. She say V.C. go that way." He points at the jungle path.

The shirtless kid pokes his M16 in her face, saying, "You lie. That path leads to the river. You lie. You—" Pressing her baby to her midriff, she strikes her forehead on the ground three times, kow-towing to him. But he raps the hot muzzle against her skull. "You lie. You lie, fucken gook bitch." He turns to his captain. "No way, man. No way, sir. She's lyin'. We have intel, reliable intel that Charlie's here, around here, sir. Their land mines killed three good American men today." He turns on the woman, and kicks her in the face. "Tell us where they are, you fucken gook pig. We should toss *you* on one-a your fucken land mines."

Lt. Oliver gasped audibly, and stepped back.

Mickey snapped a pic of Green's boot toe striking her cheekbone, and her open-mouthed cry as she toppled back. Her child, a girl, fell into the mud, but she scooped her up before a pig got to her. From a sitting position, she kicked at the pig. Dark blood dripped onto the baby's head.

Blam-blam-blam. Shots fired. With forearms covering his head, Mickey ran to the chopper, thinking, I'm not a warrior. I just want photographs. Get me out of here. I'm a Canadian.

Jungle surrounded him, concealing serpents. **Tall palm trees** sprouted broad leaves massive, the length of a man. Screams and curses, bullets and blood, under a beautiful blue sky. Man was the most dangerous creature.

U.S. soldiers about a hundred meters away were shooting at someone running through a rice paddy. Two men launched grenades that exploded behind him. He somersaulted, arms flapping, and landed on his head. Ooh, damn, that musta broke his neck. From a safe distance a soldier carefully aimed a K54 pistol, shot two rounds into the chest, and then walked closer and shot one round into its head. With his back to them, he bent over the corpse, bayonet in hand, but Mickey couldn't see what he was doing. Mickey was too stunned to take any pics.

Harlan called to Mickey, "Hey, go take pictures of that guy, Taylor. He's somethin' else, man."

Another soldier said, "If yer lucky, he'll give ya a souvenir." He laughed, and one of the kneeling women forced a smile.

Mickey glanced at Lt. Oliver, who said, "Go to it, buddy. That's what you're here for. Show the folks back home all the shit we have to go through here in-country."

Chapter 2

In January, after receiving his B.A. in journalism from Wayne State University, he mailed out over one hundred resumes to newspapers and magazines all over the USA, Canada, Britain, and Australia. No dice. Nada. A few interviews – one over the phone to the *L.A. Times* – but no offers. And then his sister Jayna showed him the ad in Detroit's underground newspaper *The Fifth Estate*: Photographer Wanted Immediately. Must be Free to Travel. Wow, he had not

thought to explore the underground press. Well, he owned a camera, a pretty good Pentax, and he got an A in his third-year photography course. The pay might be lousy, but it was *something*.

Ira Bloom, editor of *Novamondo Magazine*, dedicated to underground, counter-culture issues, was delighted to meet Michael Kelly. He had fresh coffee and warm donuts ready. *Novamondo* needed a photographer. A wealthy anti-war benefactor was willing to pay the salary, cost of film stock, travelling expenses, and accommodation for one person to cover the Vietnam War.

"Vietnam?" Mickey almost shouted. Damn, he knew there had to be a hitch. People don't just walk out of school into a job as a magazine photographer.

"I know," said Ira. "Every applicant so far has turned us down. There's no danger pay. To be up front with you – photojournalists have died over there." He rose and offered his hand. "Thanks for dropping by, Mick."

Mickey remained sitting. This could be a big break for him. He liked the sound of the word photojournalist. Vietnam. Everyone hated the war. What the hell was the USA doing over there, anyway? Shipping their youth, in the prime of life, thousands of miles to die violent deaths in stinking jungles? Why? Vietnam had not invaded the USA. Vietnam was no threat to America. But the government, Johnson and now Nixon, was drafting boys and young men, sending American sons over there to slaughter and be slaughtered. Instead of listening to their people, the citizens of the USA, to get the hell out of the Vietnam hellhole, they *escalated* the war. Nixon was drafting more and more kids, right out of high school and college. And more and more kids were coming home in a box, as the song said. It became Nixon's war and the Pentagon's war. Without a war, military big shots are out of a job. So, it didn't matter who they fought. Just wage war. And think of the billions and billions of dollars raked in by weapons manufacturers. They wanted this war to go on forever. American kids were dying? Sorry, but business is business.

Now, here was Mickey's chance to make a difference, to show the US public the atrocities in Vietnam, and even the staunchest hawks will see the light. Mickey had two tasks: take photos and stay alive.

Ira sat back down. "What are you thinking, Mick?"

Mickey liked the name Mick. Mick Jagger. It was cool sixties' name. Maybe he'd use it. He could envision the credits under his photographs: "Mick Kelly, photojournalist."

Mickey took a breath. "If you'll have me, I'd like to work for *Novamondo*."

Ira put his hand on his heart. "Whew, Mick. I was getting more bummed out, day after day. We gotta stop this war, and no one wanted to help. When can you leave?"

So, Mickey had the job: combat photographer. Impressive. Beyond expectations. Yes, a photojournalist covering the Vietnam War.

He told Mickey the Vietnam War was the first war without censorship. Military officials did not screen news copy or photographs. He showed Mickey iconic photos by Horst Faas, Nick Ut, Richard Pyle, Eddie Adams, Malcolm Browne, and the acclaimed French-Vietnamese photojournalist Henri Huet. Browne had captured the shocking image of the Buddhist monk who set himself on fire to protest the war. Eddie Adams took the series of pictures of South Vietnam's police commander executing a Vietcong guerilla by shooting him in the temple. And then Ira gently placed an eight-by-ten black and white photograph in front of Mickey as if it were a priceless Ming vase: the Nick Ut picture of nine-year-old Kim Phuc running down a road, naked and screaming, after a US napalm attack had burned off all her clothes and much of her skin. Mickey was awestruck by these photos. He felt like a child wearing men's clothes.

Ira clasped his hands together, saying, "Shoot everything, especially the hideous stuff, dead children and all that. Mangled corpses. Pieces of bodies. Horrify the American public. We can end the war. You are on a mission. And guess what? The Pentagon is committed to helping the

press get to and from the battlefield. Clueless. They are helping us put them out of business. Thank you, Mr. Dickhead Nixon."

Then Ira gave him a new camera, the 35-mil Canon F1, a tough camera especially made for war work. "Just make sure your pics are in focus. Focus. Focus."

"Yes, sir."

"Ah, man, don't call me sir. We don't dig that lingo from the straight world."

"OK, Ira. Thanks for the job. I'll do my best. Um..."

"Yes?"

"What's the pay?"

Ira threw his head back, and laughed. They went over when and how Michael Kelly would receive payment. There was enough money for four weeks' work, a one-month assignment. Go to Vietnam, get to where the action is, and take thousands of photos of the Vietnam horror show. And focus. Every shot must be clean and crisp and clear.

"I get good vibes from you, Mick. Send us pics that'll blow America's mind."

Chapter 3

He set his focus for two meters. That way, he could take two strides from his subject, turn and click a decent in-focus shot, close enough to capture details. Seated in front of a burned-out hootch, the soldier they called Taylor was busy with his bayonet working at something in his lap. The name on his name tag sewn over his right pocket was Ylink, not Taylor. Mickey stopped at two meters, and snapped a shot. The shutter click startled Ylink, who jumped up, left hand gripping the bayonet poised by his right ear, ready for a backhand slash at Mickey's throat. Mickey flung both arms high. "Whoa, whoa. Don't freak out, brother. I'm on *your* side, eh?"

Ylink, open-mouthed, stared into Mickey's eyes for a long time, and Mickey did not move a muscle. This soldier was older than the others, maybe twenty-three or four. His hair was white-blond under his helmet, and his Fu-Manchu moustache drooped downward past the lips and on either side of the chin. When he stood abruptly, something had fallen from his lap to the ground. Mickey did not dare break eye contact. This soldier was crazy; he was sure of it. Mickey decided right then: he needed a gun, most ricky-tick.

Ylink snapped his mouth closed, and his teeth clacked. Still staring into Mickey's eyes, he spoke in a monotone, "Canon's a pretty good camera." His voice was deep, a growl.

Mickey thought maybe all was cool, but he wasn't sure. He was still afraid to drop his arms an inch or to speak.

"But what's an F1? Never heard of it."

Mickey answered, "It's new, special for combat photography. It's a good one." Let's divert this wacko's attention. "Wanna look at it?"

"Groovy." Ylink placed his bayonet on the chair, and reached out. Now Mickey stole a quick look at the thing on the ground. Actually, two things. They looked like pieces of meat. As Ylink examined the camera, Mickey realized the objects on the ground were ears. Ears chopped from the dead Vietnamese man.

Ylink aimed the camera at Lt. Oliver's helicopter, focused, and clicked off a shot. Still looking in the viewfinder, he said, "Man, that jacket's way too big for you. And there's blood on it. Lemme take your picture." As Mickey inspected the jacket for blood, Ylink focused, and clicked off a shot. "There. Send that one back to the world, to mommy and daddy. Blood's on the shoulder. Right one."

M16s on automatic erupted in the distance, and Mickey jumped.

Ylink said, "Ah, man, don't sweat it. They're ours. They're M16s. The VC use Kalashnikovs, AK47s. They sound way fucken different. There's no VC here."

"What about ...?" And Mickey looked toward the pig pen.

Ylink scoffed. "That's a fucken joke, my man. A competition. Have a seat. Want some panther piss?" Mickey sat on a case marked *Body Bags*. Ylink opened a cooler and took out two bottles of beer. "Got a churchkey on ya?"

Mickey knew he meant a bottle opener. "Uh, no. Sorry."

"No sweat." He used his bayonet skillfully to pop both caps in an instant. "Here ya go. Zipperhead beer: panther piss." Then he returned to threading a length of leather cord through a hole in an ear. The cord already sported ten or twelve ears.

Mickey had a great subject here. His editor would freak out. "Mind if I take a few photos?"

"Go nuts, good buddy. Our platoon won this case of what some people call beer in last week's contest."

"Contest?" *Click.*

"Yup. They count the kills. That's kinda what this necklace is for. It's like my VC abacus. Helps me keep count. I got thirteen now."

"That's an odd number." *Click.*

Ylink laughed loudly. "Yup, a *very* odd number. Odd as fuck. Counting ears is pretty fucken ..." He waited for Mickey to finish the sentence.

And Mickey obliged: "Odd."

"Yep. See, one chick was blown up pretty bad. She only had one good ear for me. This tiny one right here. It's the smallest one."

"Oh." Hell is on earth, and this is it.

"Today's gonna go a long way towards us winning this week's case of panther piss."

"You mean the people in the pig pen?"

"Exactamundo."

"But they're women and babies, and, and they can't, like, y'know, can't be VC. Can they?"

"Know what a free-strike zone is?"

Mickey shook his head no.

"In a FSZ, everyone's a VC. All fair game. Every motherfucken one of 'em is fair game. Orders from the Head Honchos, right up to the Pentagon. The Pentagon wants numbers, good buddy. *Numbers*. Count the dead. The more dead the better. We gotta eradicate so many gooks they'll never bounce back. I guess we win when we kill everyone in the whole fucken country. Our platoon's tallied sixty-eight on the killboard so far this week."

"But..." Mickey was afraid to bring up the obvious point. This was his first day in-country, so he could be forgiven for being naive. "But, those women over there, they're not VC. This is South Nam."

Ylink shrugged. "Man, if it's dead and it's Vietnamese, it's VC. They tell us kill anything that moves."

"Dead civilians, even South Vietnamese, are tallied as slain enemies?"

Slowly, Ylink repeated, "If it's dead ... and it's Vietnamese, ... it's VC."

"Oh."

Mickey wondered if his brother-in-law Duane had killed innocent civilians. He probably had to, had to fall in line. If he were alive.

The soldier completed slipping the other ear onto his leather cord. "There. Groovy." Then he lifted the necklace over his head, and hung it around his neck. Mickey took a photo. *Click.*

After a big swig of beer, Ylink leaned forward, forearms on thighs. He dropped his voice, even though no one was near. "Now this is just me, but y'know what else is goin' down here?"

Now this is just *me*, dig it? See, this war is a fucken crazy war. The VC hit us, and run off. Guerilla warfare. We can't *find* the tiny gook bastards. To add insult to injury they got these land mines and evil fucken traps all over. Punji stakes. Ever heard of 'em? No? They're sharp bamboo sticks sticking up at the bottom of a hole that's covered with brush. A man falls into the hole, and – wow, man – he's fucked, five-six stakes right through him. That's a fucked-up way to die, man."

He took another long swig. "Or you see a pack a smokes on the trail. You pick it up, but it's booby-trapped, connected by a thin wire to a land mine. And your arm is blown to bits. Maybe your face. And we can't find those tricky VC gook bastards to get revenge. So – and you did *not* hear this from me – some of our guys just waste any gook they find, the first one they find. They're mad out there. They're frustrated. They gotta avenge the deaths of their brothers by killing gooks, wherever they find them."

Ylink looked at the ground. He stepped on an ant. Mickey was speechless.

Boom. The sound of an explosion far away. Ylink shook his head. "Another land mine." Then a blast of automatic gunfire lasted about thirty seconds. Women screamed. More gunfire. Silence. Ylink gave Mickey a knowing look, eyebrows raised.

"Um, is your name Taylor?"

Ylink took a sip of beer, and grimaced. "I hate this shit. But it does the job. Scag does the job much better."

"Scag?"

"Gets ya through the day. So, Taylor's a kinda joke, OK? Y'know Liz Taylor?"

"Sure I do." Mickey loved the movie *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

"Well, Burton last year gave her this big fucken diamond, right? A pear-shaped job. S'posed t'be the biggest diamond in the world. And she wears it on a necklace to the Oscars and all that shit, those high-class fucken Hollywood Do's they attend, right?"

"Right. I get it: the necklace. So, you're Taylor. Like Liz Taylor."

"Exactamundo, good buddy. Ah, it don't bother me. They're just jealous coz I got lotsa kills."

"The *most* kills?"

"Naw, Dien's got the most. Way fucken more'n I do."

"Dien?"

"That's what gooks call him. It's Nam talk for..." Here, Ylink swirls his finger next to his temple. "Crazy. Insane. Wackjob. *Dien* means pretty fucken nutsoid. He's got *three* ear necklaces. But nobody's got the balls to call *him* Taylor."

"Geez." If Ylink considers Dien crazy, he must be a doozy. Mickey wanted to get photos of this guy. "Where can I find him?"

"He's around. Follow a blood trail."

Mickey assumed it was a joke, black humor.

Grasping his half-empty bottle, Ylink stood, wound up, and threw it far and high into the jungle. "Fucken warm. Another?"

A loud rumble near the pigpen drew their attention. Mickey jumped up. "Hey! The chopper! My chopper! My ride! For fuck's sake." In moments, the helicopter had risen straight up, and zoomed off.

Ylink laughed long and hard. "Welcome to Hell, good buddy." (2 675)

Chapter 4

"OK, kiddies. Saddle up. We got work to do." The short lieutenant, Millhouse, banged the butt of his rifle against the body bags box Mickey was on, *rap-rap-rap*. "C'mon girls, we gotta—" He noticed with anger that Mickey was not a soldier, but he turned to Ylink. "Who's this dude? What's he doin' here?" He had no idea that Mickey had been at the pigpen taking pictures.

With the back of his fingers Ylink tapped the camera hanging over Mickey's chest.

Lt. Millhouse pointed toward the pigpen, where the helicopter used to be. "Y'all with that chopper?"

"Yes."

"Well, shit, boy, they're gone. They had to airlift two men to the MASH unit. Another land mine. One lost his foot, and the other bought the farm. Both just kids. A shame. A goddam shame. This fucken war stinks. Somebody's gonna pay for this."

Mickey took the lens cap off his camera. He'd love to get a shot of this lieutenant's face. He was mad as hell.

Millhouse pointed at a receding dot in the sky. "That there was your lifeline, mister. You're in deep shit now. You got a weapon, mister?"

Mickey felt like a five-year old back at John Campbell School in Windsor, Ontario, Canada. In a small voice, he said, "No, sir."

"Ylink, you got a weapon for this pussy? I know you got all kindsa shit in that pack a yours. And – fer fuck's sake – will you please take that fucken necklace thing off? It's gruesome. Get an officer to verify your kills, just like everyone else."

"Everyone?"

"Shut up. He'll be outta here most ricky-tick. Pick up your weapon, soldier. We got work to do. And get this, this *photographer*, a weapon, right fucken now. I'll be right back. Gotta take care of somethin' over on Park Place." And Millhouse was gone.

Mickey raised an eyebrow. "Park Place?"

"That's what they call the main drag here. There's a temple and a buncha hootches along there. Well, there *use-ta* be a temple."

Ylink did have some souvenir weapons, liberated from dead VC: two hand guns and a knife. In fact, he shot the kid in the rice paddy with his K54 pistol, made in China, and used by the Viet Cong. "This one I just picked up from the dead VC out there. But we gotta test it. See what's what. Maybe it's a dud." He handed Mickey the K54. "Here. Take this one. It works. I just used it. Test it."

"What? Here?"

"Waste that cow over there. Aim carefully, and pull the trigger slowly."

"I'm not gonna shoot a cow."

"May as well. Someone will. Orders: kill anything that walks, crawls, or grows." He waved his arm over his head in a full circle, like a cowboy spinning a lasso. "All this's a free strike zone, good buddy."

"I won't shoot a cow."

Mickey aimed at a tree trunk, and pulled the trigger. The recoil forced his hand up, creating a ninety degree angle between his forearm and bicep. The cartridge automatically ejected, and a new round entered the barrel.

Ylink said, "The fuck you aiming at?"

"The tree."

"That one way the fuck over there? No, man. That's too far. No one can hit that. Shoot that tree there."

Mickey aimed – this time ready for the recoil – and shot the tree trunk, dead center.

"That's a beaut, good buddy."

"Um, do you have, um, more bullets?"

"Ammo. Say ammo."

"OK. Do you have some ammo?"

From his pack Ylink tossed him three box magazines, eight rounds in each.

Then Mickey saw the big knife in Ylink's pack. It brought him back to his teenage juvenile delinquent days about ten years ago when he had killed a man with his trusty, well-balanced switchblade. He had recurring nightmares over it, but during waking hours, he did not regret it for a second. That fucking pervert deserved to die. He was trying to kill Mickey's friend. As it turned out, the injury his friend sustained did kill him. So, Mickey had executed a murderer. That was fair. It was fair. And he never felt bad about it, ever. The sight of the big knife, however, made his blood race.

"Hey, lemme see that knife."

"*This* thing?"

Ylink handed over the knife, blade about a foot long, in a leather sheath. Mickey slipped it out little by little, like sliding a girl's panties down her smooth thighs, calves, and ankles. As he rotated it slowly, the sun glinted off shiny metal. Sharp. And clean. He bounced it in his right palm, feeling for the balance. Then he tossed it from palm to palm. Ylink watched with a half-grin, ready to burst out laughing, but still, not too sure about this kid.

Mickey put down his camera, took off his stupid, giant jacket, and hefted the knife. "Let's see if I can still..." After jiggling it a little, he found the balance point, and raised it to his right ear. With eyes locked on a tree about twenty steps away, he took a step, and flung his hand forward and down, following through like a Detroit Tiger's pitcher. The knife turned once, and its tip hit the trunk at an angle, chipping off some bark. But it fell to the ground. Ylink didn't say anything.

"Wait," said Mickey. "Wait. I can do this. What a great fucking knife. I love this baby." Mickey had found a new friend.

He went through the ritual again. He needed a tiny bit more effort. This time... When he let go, the knife turned once and hit its mark with such force the tree swayed. Mickey's eyes were wild. "Gotcha, motherfucker." A third of the blade stuck in the tree, and it took both hands to extract it.

"Girls!" Lt. Millhouse yelled. "Saddle up. Right fucken now!"

As Mickey put on his jacket, Ylink said, "Far out, man. You could be in a circus."

Mickey unfastened his belt, and attached the sheath to it. His big jacket covered his new friend from sight. Then Mickey clicked a shot of Ylink: a US soldier, two bullet belts crossed over his chest, an M60 machine gun balanced on his shoulder, a necklace of ears, and his blonde Fu-Manchu moustache. To be funny, Ylink bared his teeth and growled, "R-r-r-r-r."

Mickey was about to put the K54 in his pack, but Ylink said, "No, no, man. Keep hold of it. If somethin' goes down, you gotta shoot the fucker, just like you shot that tree. No fuckin' around, good buddy. No joke. You look out for me, and I'll look out for you." Ylink's face grew long, and his lips became a straight line.

Chapter 5

When Ylink and Mickey got to the trail, Millhouse and four other soldiers, fingers on the triggers of their M16s, were marching toward a hamlet of about five or six hootches.

"Fall in, soldiers. We gotta round us up some prisoners."

Mickey was not a soldier. He was a non-combatant photographer, an employee of Novamondo Magazine. But he fell in line, and took pictures of the soldiers ahead of him, a close up of their boots trudging through mud, of burned-out hootches, and then a body, a Vietnamese

man on his side as if he were sleeping, except that he had about eight bullet holes in his chest and one through his cheek. Sticking out of his mouth was a card, like a playing card, but it was black and white. Since Mickey was last in line, no one saw him snatch it out of the corpse's mouth. It was an ace of clubs with a white skull inside the black club symbol. The caption at the top was "Death Club," and under the skull-club symbol was "US Army Alpha Company, 1969 – 1970." Mickey put the card in his pack. What did it mean? It probably had something to do with counting dead VCs.

At the hamlet, four soldiers guarded a hootch. A sergeant, who towered over Millhouse, saluted him, saying, "Sir, they're in here, sir."

"Good work, Wendell. Let's move 'em on out."

Sgt. Wendell bent over and pointed his M16 into the hootch. "Out! Out! Out!" He waved the muzzle of his gun to give them the idea they had to get out. One by one the sorry group shuffled into bright morning daylight: a woman, babe in arms; a girl about fourteen (some soldiers actually licked their lips); another girl about sixteen (Mickey was afraid for these girls); then a boy, more women with children, and, finally a man about forty years old. In all, nineteen civilians were rounded up.

Millhouse asked Wendell, "Where's Hicks?"

Mickey thought, What? Hicks? Duane Hicks? His sister's husband? Or some other Hicks.

"Sir, I don't actually know. He said he saw some VC kids down by the river fishing. I assume he went down there to apprehend them." After a shrug and a crooked grin, he added, "You know Hicks."

"I sure *do*: fucken Dien."

Hicks was Dien? Mickey now was pretty sure his brother-in-law could not be the Hicks they were talking about. From what he knew of Duane, he was a regular guy who met his sister Jayna in the Film Studies program at Detroit's Wayne State University. Duane was also the drummer in one of Detroit's top rock bands Sunshower. Because the band had a record out and needed to tour, they pressured him into quitting school. Unfortunately, when the US Selective Service found out he had left school, they drafted him.

Duane could not be Dien, the insane one. But Ylink's words echoed in his head: "Welcome to Hell."

Millhouse stood on a box, calling out, "OK, soldiers, follow me. Escort these prisoners over to the pigpen. If you see any VC on the way, round 'em up."

When the new prisoners saw the dead man beside the mutilated pig, the ones **in front** stopped, and some of the others stepped on the heels of those **in front**, causing them to curse loudly in Vietnamese. The young shirtless soldier Green drove the stock of his M16 into the back of the first woman who had stopped, and she stumbled forward, falling onto a woman holding a baby. After the nineteen civilians joined the others in the enclosure, it was pretty crowded in there.

Millhouse told Sgt. Wendell, "I have to round up another group of prisoners over by the river. Take care of these VC."

"Yes, sir." Wendell saluted him crisply.

Then Millhouse chose six soldiers, none of them wearing headbands, and they headed for the river.

"I'm gonna take some pictures."

"Do what ya need to do. Do your job, good buddy." With one hand Ylink lit up a cigarette; his other held his M60 machine gun pointed at the civilians. Other soldiers sparked up reefers, and passed them around, the sweet smell wafting over to Mickey's nose as he went looking for subjects.

He shot pictures of a burned-out temple, in front of it two dead dogs, shot once through each temple. Then he heard a noise inside a hootch, and was about to hightail it when he heard English voices. He crept up silently, trying to hear their conversation, but they were whispering. Through a large round hole in the wall he saw two soldiers, one with a belt wrapped around his arm just above the elbow, and the other inserting a hypodermic needle into the rope-like vein in his forearm. Smack. Mickey wanted so much to snap a picture, but they would hear the click. He waited and watched. When the smack hit the guy's brain, his jaw dropped and his head tilted back. Mickey snapped a shot. No one turned. So he snapped three more. Then the guy with the spike turned his head in super slow motion.

Mickey waved at the guy. "What's shakin'? Lieutenant Millhouse sent me over. He's looking for Hicks."

"What?"

"Hicks? Millhouse is looking for Hicks. Either of you guys Hicks?" Mickey came up to the hole and looked in at a naked very young Vietnamese girl face up on an army cot, one foot on the dirt floor. He thought she was dead until her black eyes looked at him.

The one with the spike said, "He ain't here."

The other guy, eyes shut, said, "Waz hap-nin', ma man?"

Spike took a black pistol from his boot, and held it next to his thigh. "Wait a sec. Hey, man, wanna fuck this chick? She's pretty good. She's thirteen. Got any smack? We'll sell her to ya for smack."

"Sorry, I got dick. I gotta go. Bye." Mickey backed away, eyes riveted to Spike's gun hand, until he was a safe distance. Then he ran back to the pigpen.

Chapter 6

Mickey arrived from one direction, and Millhouse from another. Some soldiers who had toked were sitting in the dirt crosslegged, still aiming their M16s at the prisoners. Someone said, "Here comes the LT," and the seated men leaped to their feet.

Millhouse, a deep frown between his eyes, pressed his lips into a thin line. "Sgt. Wendell!"

Wendell clicked his heels and saluted. "Sir, yes, sir!"

"What was my order to you?"

"Sir, take care of these VC, sir."

"Exactly. Why have you not taken care of them?"

Wendell looked from Millhouse to the prisoners and back again. They looked fine to him. The other soldiers looked at each other, frowning. What's the problem?

"With all due respect, Lieutenant Millhouse, sir, I believe I, we, followed orders. Not for one split second have we taken our eyes or weapons off these prisoners."

Millhouse rapped his knuckles against Wendell's helmet. "No, Sergeant, no. You have *not* taken care of them. These VC are still standing." He rapped his helmet again, and shouted into his face. "This is a free-strike zone. Get it? Every gook here is Viet Cong. Our job, sergeant, our *mission* is to destroy the enemy."

"Oh, I see. Sir." Finally, Wendell got the idea.

"Shoot them."

Wendell took his finger off the trigger. He looked at a woman holding a baby, and she knew from his pained expression that something bad was about to happen. Her face began to crumple. The only man in the pigpen dropped to his knees and covered his face with his hands.

Mickey had forgotten to breathe. These people, all of them, were about to die. He wanted to do something for them. "Sir?"

The lieutenant did not seem to hear him. "Wendell? This is a direct order: shoot them now."

Mickey took pictures as fast as he could: of the cowering civilians; of one old *mama-san*, mouth open, crying; of the soldiers in their sweatbands aiming rifles at Vietnamese people crowded together shoulder to shoulder in a pigpen; of Millhouse staring into Wendell's face as he avoided eye contact. Then Mickey focussed on a face in the pigpen and took a shot. He moved from face to face, trying to capture their living expressions before they were obliterated. Tears welled, and his breathing quickened.

"Son of a bitch, sergeant, I have every right to shoot you for refusing an order." He waved his arm toward the pigpen. "These scumbag gooks are VC or they are VC sympathizers. Remember Logan, your best buddy?"

Wendell nodded.

"Remember Vella? Botsford? Vachon? McCarthy? Remember Sergeant Horvath? That's right, Wendell! Dead, dead, dead, dead, dead. *Dead*. Fucken VC land mines. We need satisfaction from this village for all the brothers we lost."

Still, Wendell did not raise his M16.

"Fuck you, then." Millhouse backed up a few steps and clicked his M16 onto automatic. "Everybody, this is a direct fucking order: put your weapons on auto, and let's rock and roll!"

Millhouse opened fire on the civilians, swerving his weapon left to right, and back again. Pigs squealed maniacally. Women screamed and threw themselves on their children. Then Wendell opened up. With eyes wild, the shirtless kid, PFC Green, pulled his trigger, and didn't let up until his magazine was empty. He snapped in a fresh one, and opened up again.

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