In Pharaoh's Army

Memories of the Lost War

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Civilian

I WAS discharged in Oakland the day after I stepped off the plane. The personnel officer asked me if I would consider signing up for another tour. I could go back as a captain, he said. Captain? I said. Captain of *what*?

He didn't try to argue with me, just made me watch him take his sweet time fiddling with the file folders on his desk before handing over my walking papers and separation pay. I went back to the bachelor officers quarters and paced my room, completely at a loss. For the first time in four years I was absolutely free to follow my own plan. The trouble was, I didn't have one. When the housekeeping detail asked me to leave I packed up and caught a taxi to San Francisco.

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FOR OVER A WEEK I stayed at a hotel in the Tenderloin, hitting the bars, sleeping late, and wandering the city, sharply aware that I was no longer a soldier and feeling that change not the way I'd imagined, as freedom and pleasure, but as aimlessness and solitude.

It wasn't that I missed the army. I didn't. But I'd been a soldier since I was eighteen, not a good soldier but a soldier, and linked by that fact to other soldiers, even those long dead. When, browsing through a bookstore, I came across a collection of letters sent home by Southern troops during the Civil War, I heard their voices as those of men I'd known. Now I was nothing in particular and joined to no one.

In the afternoons I put myself through forced marches down to the wharf, through Golden Gate Park, out to the Cliff House. I walked around the Haight, seedier than a year before, afflicted like the faces on the street with a trashed, sullen quality. Sniffling guys in big overcoats hunched in doorways, hissing at passersby, though not at me: a clue that I was radiating some signal weirdness of my own. No hug patrols in evidence. I went there once and didn't go back.

As I walked I kept surprising myself in the windows I passed, a gaunt hollow-eyed figure in button-down shirt and khakis and one of my boxy Hong Kong sport coats. Without cap or helmet my head seemed naked and oversized. I looked newly hatched, bewildered, without history.

There might have been some affectation in this self-imposed quarantine. I didn't have to stay in a seedy room in San Francisco, broodingly alone; I could have gone on to Washington. My mother and brother gave every sign of wanting to welcome me home, and so did my friends, and Vera. She had parted ways with Leland soon after they took up together, and her most recent letters had spoken of her wish to try again with me. All I had to do was get on a plane and within hours

I would be surrounded by the very people I'd been afraid of not seeing again. But I stayed put.

I thought of my friends and family as a circle, and this was exactly the picture that stopped me cold and kept me where I was. It didn't seem possible to stand in the center of that circle. I did not feel equal to it. I felt morally embarrassed. Why this was so I couldn't have said, but a sense of deficiency, even blight, had taken hold of me. In Vietnam I'd barely noticed it, but here, among people who did not take corruption and brutality for granted, I came to understand that I did, and that this set me apart. San Francisco was an open, amiable town, but I had trouble holding up my end of a conversation. I said horrifying things without knowing it until I saw the reaction. My laugh sounded bitter and derisive even to me. When people asked me the simplest questions about myself I became cool and remote. Lonesome as I was, I made damn sure I stayed that way.

One day I took a bus over to Berkeley. I had the idea of applying for school there in the fall and it occurred to me I might get a break on admission and fees because of my father being a California resident. It wasn't easy to collect hard intelligence about the old man, but since the state had kept him under lock and key for over two years, and on parole ever since, I figured his home of record was one thing we could all agree on.

I never made it to the admissions office. There was some sort of gathering in Sproul Plaza, and I stopped to listen to one speaker and then another. Though it was sunny I got cold in the stiff bay breeze and sat down by a hedge. The second speaker started reading a list of demands addressed to President Johnson. People were walking around, eating, throwing Frisbees for dogs with handkerchiefs around their necks. On a blanket next to me a bearded guy and a languorous Chinese girl were passing a joint back and forth. The girl was very beautiful.

Microphone feedback kept blaring out the speaker's words, but I got the outline. Withdrawal of our troops from Vietnam. Recognition of Cuba. Immediate commutation of student loans. Until all these demands were met, the speaker said he considered himself in a state of unconditional war with the United States government.

I laughed out loud.

The bearded guy on the blanket gave me a look. He said something to the Chinese girl, who turned and peered at me over the top of her sunglasses, then settled back on her elbows. I asked him what he thought was so interesting and he said something curt and dismissive and I didn't like it, didn't like this notion of his that he could scrutinize me and make a judgment and then brush me off as if I didn't exist. I said a few words calculated to let him know that he would be done with me when I was done with him, and then he stood up and I stood up. His beautiful girlfriend pulled on his hand. He ignored her. His mouth was moving in his beard. I hardly knew what he was saying, but I understood his tone perfectly and it was intolerable to me. I answered him. I could hear the rage in my voice and it pleased me and enraged me still more. I gave no thought to my words, just said whatever came to me. I hated him. If at that moment I could have turned his

heart off, I would have. Then I saw that he had gone quiet. He stood there looking at me. I heard the crazy things I was saying and realized, even as I continued to yell at him, that he was much younger than I'd thought, a boy with ruddy cheeks his beard was too sparse to hide. When I managed to stop myself I saw that the people around us were watching me as if I were pitiful. I turned away and walked toward Sather Gate, my face burning.

I GOT TO Manhattan Beach just after sundown and surprised my father once again. He was in his bathrobe, about to pop some frozen horror into the oven. I told him to keep it on ice and let me stand him to dinner at the restaurant where we'd eaten the year before. He said he wasn't feeling exactly jake, thought he might be coming down with something, but after we had a few drinks he let himself be persuaded of the tonic potential of a night on the town.

So we gave it another try, and this time we got it right. Again we stuffed ourselves with meat and drink, and again my father grew immense with pleasure and extended his benevolence to everyone in range. The old rich rumble entered his voice; the stories began, stories of his youth and the companions of his youth, rioters whose deeds succeeded in his telling to the scale of legend. He found occasion to invoke the sacred names (Deerfield; New Haven; Bones; the Racquet Club), but this time I managed to get past the lyrics and hear his music, a formal yet droll music in which even his genuine pretensions sounded parodic. I asked no questions about Hadassah. I let him roll. In fact I egged him on. I didn't have to believe him; it was enough to look across the table and see him there, swinging to his own beat.

I had come back to Manhattan Beach, I surely understood even then, because there could no longer be any question of judgment between my father and me. He'd lost his claim to the high ground, and so had I. We could take each other now without any obligation to approve or disapprove or model our virtues. It was freedom, and we both grabbed at it. It was the best night we'd ever had.

I paid the next morning. So did he, and then some. Late into the day he was still in bed, flushed and hot, and I finally realized that he really had been coming down with something. I called his doctor, who stopped by the apartment on his way home that evening, diagnosed the flu, and prescribed something to bring the fever down. He wouldn't let me pay, not after my father sneaked it in that I was just back from Vietnam. I followed the doctor to the door, insisting, wagging my wallet, but he wouldn't hear of it. When he left I went back to the old man's bedroom and found him laughing, and then I started laughing too. Couple of crooks.

That night and the next day he was too sick to do much of anything but sleep. In his sleep he moaned and talked to himself. I came into his room now and then and stood over him in the dim slatted light cast by the streetlamp. Big as he was, he looked as if he'd been toppled, felled. He slept like a child, knees drawn up almost to his chest. Sometimes he whimpered. Sometimes he put his thumb in his mouth. When I saw him like that he seemed much older than his sixty

years, closer to the end and more alone than I wanted to think about.

Then he started coming out of it. He liked being babied, so he wore his invalid droop and mopery as long as I let him. When I helped him in and out of bed he groaned and mewed and walked as if his joints had rusted shut. He had me buy him an ice bag, which he wore like a tam-o'-shanter, his eyes tremulous with self-pity. All day long he called out his wishes in a small desolate voice—cheese and crackers, please, some Gouda on stone-ground Wheat Thins would be swell, with a little Tabasco and red onion, if I wouldn't mind. Palm hearts with cream cheese, *por favor*, and this time could I skip the paprika and just sprinkle a little onion salt on them? Thanks a mil! Ginger ale, old son, over ice, and would it be too much trouble to *crush* the ice?

He was relentless and without shame. Once he pushed me too far and I said, "Jesus, Duke, suffer in silence awhile, okay?" This was the first time in my life I'd called him by that name, and the sound of myself saying it made me cringe. But he didn't object. It probably reassured him that I was ready to vacate any outstanding claims on him as his child and accept a position as his crony. I never called him Duke again. I wanted to feel as if I still had a father out there, however singular the terms.

He started feeling better after the second day, and I was almost sorry. I liked taking care of him. I'd blitzed the apartment with cleansers, stocked his cabinets with cans of stew and hash and clam chowder and the treats he favored—Swedish flatbread, palm hearts, macadamia nuts. I had a new muffler put on the Cadillac. While he was laid up sick the smallest acts felt purposeful and worthwhile, and freed me from the sodden sensation of uselessness. Out running errands, I found myself taking pleasure in the salt smell and hard coastal light, the way the light fired the red-tiled roofs and cast clean-edged shadows as black as tar. In the afternoons I brought a chair and a book out to the sidewalk and faced the declining sun, chest bared to the warmth, half listening for the old man's voice through the open window at my back. I was reading *Portnoy's Complaint*. Geoffrey had sent it to me some time before and I'd never been able to get past the first few pages, but now it came to life for me. I read it in a state of near collapse, tears spilling down my cheeks. It was the first thing I'd finished in months.

My father took note of my absorption. He wanted to know what was so fascinating. I let him have it when I was through, and that evening he told me he'd never read anything so disgusting—not that he'd finished it. Come on, I said. He had to admit it was funny. Funny! How could such a thing be funny? He was baffled by the suggestion.

"Okay," I said. "What do you think *is* funny, then?"

"What b-book, you mean?"

"Book. Movie. Whatever."

He looked at me suspiciously. He was stretched out on the couch, eating a plate of scrambled eggs. "*Wind in the Willows*," he said. Now there was a book that showed you didn't have to be dirty to be humorous. He happened to have a copy on hand and would be willing to prove his point.

More than willing; I knew he was dying to read it

aloud. He'd done this before, to Geoffrey and me, one night in La Jolla seven years earlier. It was a dim memory, pleasant and rare in that it held the three of us together. Of the book itself I recalled nothing except an atmosphere of treacly Englishness. But I couldn't say no.

He started to read, smiling rhapsodically, the ice bag on his head. I was bored stiff until Toad of Toad Hall made his entrance and began his ruinous love affair with the automobile. "What dust clouds shall spring up behind me as I speed on my reckless way!" he cried. "What carts shall I fling carelessly into the ditch in the wake of my magnificent onset!" Toad had my attention. I found him funny, yes, but also familiar in a way that put me on alert.

Toad is arrested for stealing a car, and in the absence of any remorse is sentenced to twenty years in a dungeon. He escapes dressed as a washerwoman and manages to commandeer the very car he was imprisoned for stealing, after the owner offers a lift to what he thinks is a weary old crone. Toad pins the Samaritan with an elbow and seizes the wheel. "Washerwoman indeed!" he shouts. "Ho, ho! I am the Toad, the motor-car snatcher, the prison-breaker, the Toad who always escapes! Sit still, and you shall know what driving really is, for you are in the hands of the famous, the skillful, the entirely fearless Toad!"

By now I knew where the déjà vu came from. My father was Toad. He wasn't playing Toad, he *was* Toad, and not only Toad the audacious, Toad the shameless and incorrigible, but, as the story gave occasion, good-hearted Toad, hospitable Toad, Toad for whom his friends would risk their very lives. I'd never seen my father so forgetful of himself, so undefended, so confiding.

He read the whole book. It took hours. I got up now and then to grab a beer and refill his glass of ginger ale, stretch, fix a plate of crackers and cheese, but quietly, so he wouldn't break stride. The night deepened around us. Cars stopped going by. We were entirely at home, alone in an island of lamplight. I didn't want anything to change.

But Toad couldn't keep up the pace. The hounds of respectability were on his neck, and finally they brought him down. He had no choice but to make a good act of contrition and promise to keep the peace, live within his means, be good.

My father closed the book. He put it down and looked over at me, shaking his head at this transparent subterfuge. He wasn't fooled. He knew exactly what Toad's promise was worth.

I'D MEANT ONLY to touch down in Manhattan Beach, but day followed day and I was still there. In the afternoons I sat by the water and read. At night I went to a bar down the road, then came home and sat up with the old man, listening to music and shooting the breeze. We talked about everything except Vietnam and prison. Only once did he mention his life there, when I asked about a livid scar on his wrist. He told me he'd been cut in a fight over which television program to watch, and that stupid as it sounded he'd had no choice, and didn't regret it. I never heard him mention another inmate, never heard him say "the joint" or even "Chino." He gave the impression it hadn't touched him.

I was drinking too much. One night he asked me if I didn't want to give the old noggin a breather, and I stalked out and came back even drunker than usual. I wanted it understood that he could expect nothing of me, as I expected nothing of him. He didn't bring it up again. He seemed to accept the arrangement, and I found it congenial enough that I could even imagine going on in this way, the two of us in our own circle, living on our own terms. I had nearly six thousand dollars in the bank, a year's worth of unspent salary and hazardous duty pay. If I enrolled in the local community college I could milk another three hundred a month from the G.I. Bill. They didn't check to see if you actually went to class—all you had to do was sign up. I could get a place of my own nearby. Start writing. By the time my savings and subsidies ran out, I'd have a novel done. Just a thought, but it kept coming. I mentioned it to the old man. He seemed to like the idea.

It was a bad idea, conceived in laziness and certain to end miserably for both of us. Instead of masquerading as a student I needed to *be* a student, because I was uneducated and lacked the discipline to educate myself. Same with the novel. The novel wouldn't get written, the money would all get spent, and then what? I had intimations of the folly of this plan, though I persisted in thinking about it.

I'd been in town about a week when I met a woman on the beach. She was reading and I was reading, so it seemed natural to compare notes. Her name was Jan. She did speech therapy in the local schools. She had four or five years on me, maybe more. Her nose was very long and thin and she wore her blond hair mannishly close. She was calm, easy to talk to, but when I asked her out she frowned and looked away. She picked up a handful of sand, let it run through her fingers. "All right," she said.

Grand Illusion was showing at the local art theater. We got there early and strolled to the end of the street and back until they opened the doors. Jan wore a white dress that rustled as she walked and made her skin look dark as chocolate. She had the coolness and serenity of someone who has just finished a long swim. As we were going inside I noticed that her zipper had slipped a few inches. Hold on, I said, and slowly pulled it up again, standing close behind her, my nose almost in her hair.

I had seen *Grand Illusion* before, many times. My friend Laudie and I had memorized Pierre Fresnay's death scene with Erich von Stroheim and used to play it out to impress our dates. But that night I couldn't even follow the plot, I was so conscious of this woman beside me, her scent, the touch of her shoulder against mine, the play of light on her bare arms. At last I figured do or die and took her hand. She didn't pull away. A little while later she laced her fingers through mine.

When the lights came on I was awkward and so was she. We agreed to stop somewhere for a drink. She didn't have anyplace in mind so I took her to the bar where I'd been going, an alleged discotheque frequented by former servicemen and some still in uniform. The moment I saw Jan inside the place, in her white dress and cool, manifest sanity, I saw it for what

it was—a hole. But she claimed she liked it and insisted on staying.

We'd just gotten our drinks when a hand fell on my shoulder.

"Hey, Cap'n, you trying to keep this lovely lady all to yourself? No fuckin way, man."

Dicky. Dicky and his sidekick, Sleepy.

Chairs scraped. Lighters and cigarettes and glasses descended on the table, a pitcher of beer. They were with us. Jan kept trying not to stare at Dicky, and kept failing. Dicky was clean-shaven but he had a big curly mustache tattooed above his lip. I couldn't tell whether his intention was serious or jocular, if he actually thought he resembled a person with a mustache or was just riffing on the idea. He claimed to have been with a marine recon team near the DMZ, even to have operated in North Vietnam. I didn't know what Sleepy's story was.

They were there every night, hopping tables. The last time I'd seen them they were trying to break into Sleepy's car after he'd locked the keys inside. Dicky rigged up a wire of some kind and when that didn't work right away he went into a rage and smashed out the driver's window, but not before he'd kicked some dents into the door panel and broken off the radio antenna. Sleepy stood there with the rest of us who'd come out of the bar to watch, and didn't say a word.

Dicky caught Jan looking at him. He looked back at her. "So," he said, "how'd you get to know this cabron? Hey, just kidding, the cap'n here's numero fuckin uno."

I told him we'd been to see a film together.

"*Film?* You saw a *film?* What happen, your specs get dirty? Hey, Sleepy, you hear that? The cap'n says he saw a film, I say, What happen, your specs get dirty?"

"I laughed," Sleepy said, "didn't you hear me laugh?"

"No, I didn't hear you laugh. Speak up, asshole! So what film did you see, Cap'n?" For some reason sweat was pouring out of his hair and down his face.

I gave Dicky the short description of *Grand Illusion*.

He was interested. "That was some bad shit, man, Whirl War One. All that bob wire and overcoats and shit, livin like a buncha moles, come out, take a look around, *eeeeeeeerrr, boom*, your fuckin head gets blown off. No way, man. No fuckin way. I couldn't get behind that shit *at all*. I mean, millions of assholes going south, right? Millions! It's like you take the whole city of L.A., tell em, Hey, muchachos, here's the deal, you just run into that bob wire over there and let those other fuckers put holes in you. Big Bertha, man. And poison gas, what about that mustard shit, you think you could handle that?"

Jan had her eyes on me. "Were you a captain?"

I'd told her I'd just come back from Vietnam, but nothing else. I shook my head no.

"But I tell you straight," Dicky said, "no bullshit. If they'd of had me and my team back in Whirl War One we coulda turned that shit around *real* fast. When Heinrich starts waking up in the morning with Fritzy's dick in his hand, maybe they decide to do their yodeling and shit at home, leave these other people the fuck alone, you hear what I'm saying?"

Sleepy's chin was on his chest. He said, "I hear you, man."

"What were you, then?" Jan said to me.

"First lieutenant."

"Same thing," Dicky said. "Lieutenant, cap'n, all the same—hang you out to dry every fuckin one of em."

"That's not true."

"The fuck it isn't. Fuckin officers, man."

"I didn't hang anybody out to dry. Except maybe another officer," I said. "A captain, as a matter of fact."

Dicky ran a napkin over his wet face and looked at it, then at me. Jan was also looking at me.

As soon as I started the story I knew I shouldn't tell it. It was the story about Captain Kale wanting to bring the Chinook into the middle of the hooches, and me letting him do it. I couldn't find the right tone. My first instinct was to make it somber and regretful, to show how much more compassionate I was than the person who had done this thing, how far I had evolved in wisdom since then, but it came off sounding phony. I shifted to a clinical, deadpan exposition. This proved even less convincing than the first pose, which at least acknowledged that the narrator had a stake in his narrative. The neutral tone was a lie, also a bore.

How do you tell such a terrible story? Maybe such a story shouldn't be told at all. Yet finally it will be told. But as soon as you open your mouth you have problems, problems of recollection, problems of tone, ethical problems. How can you judge the man you were now that you've escaped his circumstances, his fears and desires, now that you hardly remember who he was? And how can you honestly avoid judging him? But isn't there, in the very act of confession, an obscene self-congratulation for the virtue required to see your mistake and own up to it? And isn't it just like an American boy, to want you to admire his sorrow at tearing other people's houses apart? And in the end who gives a damn, who's listening? What do you owe the listener, and which listener do you owe?

As it happened, Dicky took the last problem out of my hands by laughing darkly when I confessed that I'd omitted to offer Captain Kale my ski goggles. He grinned at me, I grinned at him. Jan looked back and forth between us. We had in that moment become a duet, Dicky and I, and she was in the dark. She had no feel for what was coming, but he did, very acutely, and his way of encouraging me was to show hilarity at every promissory detail of the disaster he saw taking shape. He was with me, even a little ahead of me, and I naturally pitched my tune to his particular receptivities, which were harsh and perverse and altogether familiar, so that even as he anticipated me I anticipated him and kept him laughing and edgy with expectation.

And so I urged the pilot on again, and the Chinook's vast shadow fell again over the upturned faces of people transformed, by this telling, into comic gibbering stickmen just waiting to be blown away like the toothpick houses they lived in. As I brought the helicopter down on them I looked over at Jan and saw her watching me with an expression so thoroughly disappointed as to be

devoid of reproach. I didn't like it. I felt the worst kind of anger, the anger that proceeds from shame. So instead of easing up I laid it on even thicker, playing the whole thing for laughs, as cruel as I could make them, because after all Dicky had been there, and what more than that could I ever hope to have in common with her?

When I got to the end Dicky banged his forehead on the table to indicate maximum mirth. Sleepy leaned back with a startled expression and gave me the once-over. "Hey," he said, "great shirt, I used to have one just like it."

I CALLED Vera the next morning from a pancake house, my pockets sagging with quarters. It was the first time I'd heard her voice in over a year, and the sound of it made everything in between seem vaporous, unreal. We began to talk as if resuming a conversation from the night before, teasing, implying, setting each other off. We talked like lovers. I found myself shaking, I was so maddened not to be able to see her.

When I hung up, the panic of loneliness I'd come awake to that morning was even worse. It made no sense to me that Vera was there and I was here. The others too—my mother, my friends, Geoffrey and Priscilla. They had a baby now, my nephew Nicholas, born while I was in Vietnam. I still hadn't laid eyes on him.

I made up my mind to fly home the next day.

That last night, the old man and I went out to dinner. For a change of pace we drove down to Redondo

Beach, to a stylish French restaurant where, it turned out, they required a coat and tie. Neither of us had a tie so they supplied us with a pair of identical clip-ons, mile-wide Carnaby Street foulards with gigantic red polka dots. We looked like clowns. My father had never in his life insulted his person with such a costume and it took him a while to submit to it, but he came around. We had a good time, quietly, neither of us drinking much. Over coffee I told him I was leaving.

He rolled with it, said he'd figured it was about time I checked in with my mother. Then he asked when I'd be coming back.

"I'm not sure," I said.

"If you're thinking of going to school here, you'll want to give yourself plenty of time to look around, find some digs."

"Dad, I have to say, I've been giving that a lot of thought."

He waited. Then he said, "So you won't be going to school here."

"No. I'm sorry."

He waved away the apology. "All for the b-best, chum. My view exactly. You should aim higher." He looked at me in the kindest way. He had beautiful eyes, the old man, and they had remained beautiful while his face had gone to ruin all around them. He reached over and squeezed my arm. "You'll be back."

"Definitely. That's a promise."

"They all come back for Doctor Wolff's famous rest cure."

"I was thinking maybe next summer. As soon as I get myself really going on something."

"Of course," he said. "Filial duty. Have to look in on your old pop, make sure he's keeping his nose clean." He tried to smile but couldn't, his very flesh failed him, and that was the closest I came to changing my mind. I meant it when I said I'd be back but it sounded like a bald-faced lie, as if the truth was already known to both of us that I would not be back and that he would live alone and die alone, as he did, two years later, and that this was what was meant by my leaving. Still, after the first doubt I felt no doubt at all. Even that brief hesitation began to seem like mawkish shamming.

He was staring at my wrist. "Let's have a look at that watch."

I handed it over, a twenty-dollar Seiko that ran well and looked like it cost every penny. My father took off his Heuer chronograph and pushed it across the table. It was a thing of beauty. I didn't hold back for a second. I picked it up, hefted it, and strapped it on.

"Made for you," he said. "Now let's get these g-goddamned ties off."

Geoffrey noticed the chronograph a few nights after I got home. We were on his living room floor, drinking and playing cards. He admired the watch and asked how much it set me back. If I'd had my wits about me I would have lied to him, but I didn't. I said the old man had given it to me. "The old man gave it to you?" His face clouded over and I thought, Ah, nuts. I didn't know for sure what Geoffrey was thinking, but I was thinking about all those checks he'd sent out to Manhattan Beach. "I doubt if he paid for it," I said. Geoffrey didn't answer for a while. Then he said, "Probably not," and picked up his cards.

VERA'S FAMILY OWNED a big spread in Maryland. After a round of homecoming visits, I left Washington and moved down there with her to help with the haying and see if we couldn't compose ourselves and find a way to live together. We did not. In the past she'd counted on me to control my moods so that she could give free rein to her own and still have a ticket back. Now I was as touchy and ungoverned as Vera, and often worse. She began to let her bassett hound eat at the table with her, in a chair, at his own place setting, because, she said, she had to have *some* decent company.

We were such bad medicine together that her mother, the most forbearing of souls, went back to Washington to get away from us. That left us alone in the house, an old plantation manor. Vera's family didn't have the money to keep it up, and the air of the place was moldy and regretful, redolent of better days. Portraits of Vera's planter ancestors hung from every wall. I had the feeling they were watching me with detestation and scorn, as if I were a usurping cad, a dancing master with oily hair and scented fingers.

While the sun was high we worked outside. In the afternoons I went upstairs to the servants' wing, now empty, where I'd set up an office. I had begun another novel. I knew it wasn't very good, but I also knew that it was the best I could do just then and that I had to keep doing it if I ever wanted to get any better. These words would never be read by anyone, I understood, but even in sinking out of sight they made the ground more solid under my hope to write well.

Not that I didn't like what I was writing as I filled up the pages. Only at the end of the day, reading over what I'd done, working through it with a green pencil, did I see how far I was from where I wanted to be. In the very act of writing I felt pleased with what I did. There was the pleasure of having words come to me, and the pleasure of ordering them, re-ordering them, weighing one against another. Pleasure also in the imagination of the story, the feeling that it could mean something. Mostly I was glad to find out that I could write at all. In writing you work toward a result you won't see for years, and can't be sure you'll ever see. It takes stamina and self-mastery and faith. It demands those things of you, then gives them back with a little extra, a surprise to keep you coming. It toughens you and clears your head. I could feel it happening. I was saving my life with every word I wrote, and I knew it.

In the servants' quarters I was a man of reason. In the rest of the house, something else. For two months Vera and I tied knots in each other's nerves, trying to make love happen again, knowing it wouldn't. The sadness of what we were doing finally became intolerable, and I left for Washington. When I called to say my last good-bye she asked me to wait, then picked up the phone again and told me she had a pistol in her hand and would shoot herself if I didn't promise to come back that same night.

"Vera, really, you already pulled this."

"When?"

"Before we got engaged."

"That was you? I thought it was Leland." She started to laugh. Then she stopped. "That doesn't mean I won't do it. Toby? I'm serious."

"Bang," I said, and hung up.

A WEEK LATER I traveled to England with friends. When they returned home I stayed on, first in London, then in Oxford, reading, hitting the pubs, walking the countryside. It was restful: the greenness, the fetishized civility, the quaint, exquisite class consciousness I could observe without despair because as a Yank I had no place in it. My money stretched double and nobody talked about Vietnam. Every afternoon I went back to my room and wrote. I saw little to complain of in this life except that it couldn't go on. I knew I had to make a move, somehow buy into the world outside my window.

Some people I'd met encouraged me to take the Oxford entrance exams in early December. That left four and a half months to prepare myself in Latin, French, English history and literature. I knew I couldn't do it alone, so I hired university tutors in each of the test areas. After they'd made it clear how irregular this project was, how unlikely, they warmed to it. They took it on in the spirit of a great game, strategizing like underdog coaches, devising shortcuts, second-guessing the examiners, working me into the ground. After the first few weeks my Latin tutor, Miss Knight, demanded that I take a room in her house so she could crack the whip even harder. Miss Knight wore men's clothing and ran an animal hospital out of her kitchen. When she worked in the garden birds flew

down and perched on her shoulder. She very much preferred Greek to English, and Latin to Greek, and said things like, "I can't *wait* to set you loose on Virgil!" She cooked my meals so I wouldn't lose time and drilled me on vocabulary and grammar as I ate. She kept in touch with my other tutors and proofread my essays for them, scratching furiously at the pompous locutions with which I tried to conceal my ignorance and uncertainty. All those months she fed her life straight into mine, and because of her I passed the examination and was matriculated into the university to read for an honors degree in English Language and Literature.

Oxford: for four years it was my school and my home. I made lifelong friends there, traveled, fell in love, did well in my studies. Yet I seldom speak of it, because to say "When I was at Oxford . . ." sounds suspect even to me, like the opening of one of my father's bullshit stories. Even at the time I was never quite convinced of the reality of my presence there. Day after day, walking those narrow lanes and lush courtyards, looking up to see a slip of cloud drifting behind a spire, I had to stop in disbelief. I couldn't get used to it, but that was all right. After every catch of irreality I felt an acute consciousness of good luck; it forced me to recognize where I was, and give thanks. This practice had a calming effect that served me well. I'd carried a little bit of Vietnam home with me in the form of something like malaria that wasn't malaria, ulcers, colitis, insomnia, and persistent terrors when I did sleep. Coming up shaky after a bad night, I could do wonders for myself simply by looking out the window.

It was the best the world had to give, and yet the very richness of the offering made me restless in the end. Comfort turned against itself. More and more I had the sense of avoiding some necessary difficulty, of growing in cleverness and facility without growing otherwise. Of being once again adrift.

I was in the Bodleian Library one night, doing a translation from the West Saxon Gospels for my Old English class. The assigned passage was from the Sermon on the Mount. It came hard, every line sending me back to the grammar or the glossary, until the last six verses, which gave themselves up all at once, blooming in my head in the same words I'd heard as a boy, shouted from evangelical pulpits and the stages of revival meetings. They told the story of the wise man who built his house upon a rock and the foolish man who built his house upon the sand. "And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell; and great was the fall of it."

I'd forgotten I'd ever known these words. When they spoke themselves to me that night I was surprised, and overcome by a feeling of strangeness to myself and everything around me. I looked up from the table. From where I sat I could see the lights of my college, Hertford, where Jonathan Swift and Evelyn Waugh had once been students. I was in a country far from my own, and even farther from the kind of life I'd once seemed destined for. If you'd asked me how I got here I couldn't have told you. The winds that had blown me here could have blown me anywhere, even from the face of the earth. It was unaccountable. But I *was* here, in this moment, which all the other moments of

my life had conspired to bring me to. And with this moment came these words, served on me like a writ. I copied out my translation in plain English, and thought that, yes, I would do well to build my house upon a rock, whatever that meant.