

THE SYMPATHIZER

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CHAPTER 10

When the Auteur arrived the next week, he threw himself a welcome party replete with barbecue, beer, burgers, Heinz ketchup, and a sheet cake big enough to sleep on. The prop department fashioned a fake cauldron from plywood and papier-mâché, stocked it with dry ice, and plopped in a couple of strippers with bleached blond hair from one of the bars around Subic Bay, their job to play white women boiled alive by natives. A handful of obliging young local men played the natives, wearing loincloths and shaking nasty-looking spears also concocted by the prop department. With the Vietnamese extras not due for another day, I was the lone representative of my people wandering among the more than a hundred actors and crew members, with an additional hundred or so Filipino laborers and cooks. These locals thought it was a gas to go up to the cauldron and slice carrots into the stripper soup. I could see the film shoot was going to generate tales of the movie people from Hollywood that would be passed on for decades, stretched ever taller for each succeeding generation. As for the extras, the boat people, they would be forgotten. No one remembered the extras.

Although I was neither one of the extras nor one of the boat people, the tide of sympathy pulled me toward them. The current of alienation simultaneously pushed me away from the movie people,

even though I was one of them. In short, I was in a familiar place, the place of feeling unfamiliar, which I responded to in my usual fashion by arming myself with a gin and tonic, my first of the evening. I was sure to be defenseless after my fourth or fifth such drink at this party, which took place under the stars as well as under a huge thatched pavilion that served as the canteen. After trading jokes with Harry, I watched the men of the crew crowd around the few white girls on the set. Meanwhile, a blond-wigged band from Manila pounded out a perfect cover of Diana Ross's "Do You Know Where You're Going To," and I wondered if it had perhaps been one of the same Filipino bands that had played in Saigon's hotels. On the edge of the dance floor sat the Auteur, chatting with the Thespian, while Violet flirted with the Idol at the same table. The Thespian was playing Captain Will Shamus; the Idol was Sergeant Jay Bellamy. While the Thespian had started his long career off Broadway, the Idol was a singer who had flashed to fame with a bubble-gum pop hit so sweet my teeth hurt just on hearing it. *The Hamlet* was the first movie role for the young man, who had shown his commitment by shaving off the evanescent hairdo much imitated by teenage boys into a GI haircut, then submitting himself to the military drilling required for his role with the enthusiasm of a sexually repressed fraternity initiate. Leaning back on his rattan chair, sporting a white T-shirt and khakis, his perfect ankles exposed because he wore no socks with his boat shoes, he was cool as ice cream even in the tropical weather. That was why he was an Idol, fame his natural aura. Rumor had it that he and the Thespian did not get along, the Thespian being an actor's actor who not only stayed in character the entire time but kept his uniform on as well. The GI fatigues and combat boots he wore were the same set he'd donned three days before, when he arrived and became possibly the first actor in history to demand a pup tent instead of his air-conditioned trailer. Since frontline soldiers did not shower and shave, neither had he, and as a result he had begun to give off the aroma of slightly less than fresh ricotta. On his web

belt was a holstered .45, and while all the other guns on the set were empty of ammunition or had blanks, his packed real bullets, or so went another rumor that I am fairly certain originated with the Thespian. He and the Auteur discussed Fellini while Violet and the Idol reminisced about a Sunset Strip nightclub. No one paid any attention to me at all, so I sidled over to the next table, where the Vietnamese actors sat.

Or, to put it more accurately, the actors playing the Vietnamese. My notes to the Auteur had actually effected some change in how we were represented, and more than simply how the screams were now all rendered as *AIEYAAHHH!!!* The most crucial change was the addition of three Vietnamese characters with actual speaking parts, an older brother, a younger sister, and a little brother whose parents had been slaughtered by King Cong. Older brother Binh, nicknamed Benny by the Green Berets, was filled with hatred of King Cong. He loved his American rescuers and served as their translator. Along with the one black Green Beret, he would meet the grisliest of deaths at the hands of King Cong. As for the sister, Mai, she would fall in love with the young, handsome, idealistic Sergeant Jay Bellamy. She would then be kidnapped and raped by King Cong, which served as the justification for the Green Berets utterly annihilating every last trace of King Cong. As for the little boy, he would be crowned with a Yankees cap in the final scene and airlifted into the heavens, his ultimate destination being Jay Bellamy's family in St. Louis, where he would be given a golden retriever and the nickname Danny Boy.

This was better than nothing, right?

In my naïveté, I had simply assumed that once roles were created for Vietnamese people, Vietnamese actors would be found. But no. We looked, Violet told me yesterday, when we had found time to sip iced tea together on the hotel veranda. Frankly, there just weren't any qualified Vietnamese actors. Most of them were amateurs and the handful of professionals all overacted. It must be the way they were trained. You'll see. Just withhold judgment until you see these actors

act. Unfortunately, withholding judgment was not one of my strong suits. What Violet was telling me was that we could not represent ourselves; we must be represented, in this case by other Asians. The little one playing Danny Boy was the scion of a venerable Filipino acting family, but if he looked Vietnamese, then I could pass for the pope. He was simply too round and well fed to be a boy living in a hamlet, the typical such stripling having been raised without the benefit of any milk except his mother's. No doubt the young actor was talented. He had won the hearts of everyone on set when, on first being introduced, he had rendered a high-pitched version of "Feelings" at the bidding of his mother, who was sitting with him now and fanning him as he nursed a soda. During his performance, the maternal affection of this Venus was so strong I was pulled into her orbit, convinced by her that one day, mark her words, he would be on Broadway. You hear how he says *feelings* and not *peelings*? she whispered. Lessons in elocution! He does not speak like a Filipino at all. Modeling himself on the Thespian, Danny Boy insisted on inhabiting his role and demanded to be called Danny Boy instead of his name, which I could not remember anyway.

The actor playing his older brother could not stand the child, mostly because Danny Boy stole the show with malicious ease whenever the two appeared next to each other. This was especially galling for James Yoon, the best-known performer on the set after the Thespian and the Idol. Yoon was the Asian Everyman, a television actor whose face most people would know but whose name they could not recall. They would say, Oh, that's the Chinese guy on that cop show, or That's the Japanese gardener in that comedy, or That's the Oriental guy, what's his name. Yoon was, in fact, a Korean American in his midthirties who could play a decade older or a decade younger and assume the mask of any Asian ethnicity, so malleable were his generically handsome features. Despite his many television roles, however, he would most likely go down in history for a highly popular recurring television commercial selling Sheen, a brand of

dishwashing soap. In each commercial, a different housewife would be confronted by a different kind of sticky dishwashing challenge that could only be solved by the appearance of her chuckling, knowing houseboy, who offered her not his manhood but his ever-ready bottle of Sheen. Relieved and amazed, the housewife would inquire as to how he had come across such cleaning wisdom, whereon he would turn to the camera, wink, smile, and utter the slogan now famous across the nation: *Confucius say, Clean with Sheen!*

Not surprisingly, Yoon was an alcoholic. His face was an accurate thermometer of his condition, the mercurial redness an indicator that the liquor had worked its way up from his toes to his vision, tongue, and brain, for he was flirting with the actress playing his sister even though neither was heterosexual. Yoon had made his intentions known to me over a dozen raw oysters at the hotel bar, their moist, open ears cocked upward to eavesdrop on his attempted seduction. No offense, I said, his hand on my knee, but I've never been so inclined. Yoon shrugged and removed his hand. I always assume a man is at least a latent homosexual until proven otherwise. In any case, you can't blame a gay for trying, he said, smiling a smile utterly unlike my own. Having studied my smile and its effect on people, I knew it had the value of a second-rate global currency like the franc or the mark. But Yoon's smile was the gold standard, so bright it was the only thing you could see or look at, so utterly overpowering in person it was understandable how he had won the role of the Sheen actor. I was happy to buy him a drink to show that I was not bothered by his advances, and he in turn bought me another, and we bonded that night and almost every night that followed.

As Yoon had tried with me, I had tried with Asia Soo, the actress. Like me, she was of mixed-race descent, although of a much more refined pedigree, in her case a British fashion designer mother and a Chinese hotelier father. Her given name really was Asia, her parents foreseeing that any progeny of their unlikely union would surely be blessed with sufficient attributes to live up to the name of an entire

ill-defined continent. She had three unfair advantages over any man on the set, with the exception of James Yoon: she was in her early twenties, was a high-end fashion model, and was a lesbian. Every man on the set, myself included, was convinced that he possessed the magic wand that could convert her back to heterosexuality. If that was not achievable, then he would settle for convincing her that he was the kind of liberated man so open to female homosexuality he would not be offended, not at all, in watching her have sex with another woman. Some of us confidently declared that all high-end fashion models did was have sex with each other. If we were high-end fashion models, so the reasoning went, with whom would we rather have sex, men like us or women like them? Such a question was a little deflating to the masculine ego, and it was with some trepidation that I had approached her at the hotel pool. Hi, I said. Perhaps it was my body language, or something in my eyes, for before I could go any further she laid down her copy of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* and said, You're lovely, but just not my type. It's not your fault. You're a man. Yet again flabbergasted, all I could say was, You can't blame a guy for trying. She did not, so we, too, were friends.

These, then, were the major dramatis personae of *The Hamlet*, all recorded in the letter I sent to my aunt, along with glazed Polaroids of myself and the cast, even one with the reluctant Auteur. Also included were Polaroids of the refugee camp and its denizens, as well as newspaper clippings that the General had provided me before my departure. Drowning! Pillage! Rape! Cannibalism? So went the headlines. The General had read them to me with alternating and escalating notes of horror and triumph, about how refugees were reporting that only one in two boats was surviving the crossing from the beaches and inlets of our homeland to the nearest semifriendly shores in Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, storms and pirates sinking the rest. Here it is, the General said, shaking a newspaper at me. The evidence that those communist bastards are purging the country! To Man's aunt, I wrote visibly in my letter

about how sad it was to see these stories. Invisibly, I wrote, *Is this really happening? Or propaganda?* As for you, Commandant, what dream do you think compelled these refugees to escape, taking to the sea in leaky little boats that would have terrified Christopher Columbus? If our revolution served the people, why were some of these people voting by fleeing? At the time, I had no answers to these questions. Only now am I beginning to understand.

Things on set went along smoothly until Christmas, by which time the weather had cooled down considerably, although it still felt like a constant warm shower, according to the Americans. Most of the scenes shot before December were of the noncombat variety: Sergeant Bellamy arrives in Vietnam and promptly gets his camera ripped out of his hand by a motorbike-riding cowboy, a scene shot in the nearby town whose square had been remade in the likeness of downtown Saigon, complete with Renault taxis, authentic Vietnamese-lettered billboards, and haggling sidewalk vendors; Captain Shamus is called to headquarters in the same town, where a general verbally flogs him for blowing the whistle on a corrupt ARVN colonel, then punishes him by dispatching him to command the hamlet; bucolic scenes of rural life with peasants planting rice stalks in paddies, while hardworking Green Berets oversee the construction of hamlet fortifications; a disgruntled Green Beret scrawling, *I believe in God, but God believes in napalm*, on his helmet; Captain Shamus giving a motivational speech to the village militia with their rusty bolt-action rifles and shuffling, sandaled feet; Sergeant Bellamy leading the same militia in battle drills involving marksmanship, crawling under barbed wire, preparing L-shaped night ambushes; and the first skirmishes between the invisible King Cong and the hamlet's defenders, which mostly involved the militia firing their one mortar into the darkness.

My moviemaking days were consumed by ensuring that the extras knew where the wardrobe department was and when to

shuffle to their scenes, that their dietary needs were met, that they were paid on a weekly basis their dollar a day, and that the roles for which they were needed were filled. The majority of the roles fell under the category of civilian (i.e., Possibly Innocent but Also Possibly Viet Cong and Therefore Possibly Going to Be Killed for Either Being Innocent or Being Viet Cong). Most of the extras were already familiar with this role, and therefore needed no motivation from me to get into the right psychology for possibly being blown up, dismembered, or just plain shot. The next largest category was the soldier of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (i.e., the freedom fighter). All the male extras wanted to play this role, even though from the point of view of the American soldiers this was the category of Possibly Friend but Also Possibly Enemy and Therefore Possibly Going to Be Killed for Being Either a Friend or an Enemy. With a good number of ARVN veterans among the extras, I had no problem casting this role. The most troublesome category was the National Liberation Front guerrilla, pejoratively known as the Viet Cong (i.e., Possibly Freedom-Loving Nationalist but Also Possibly Hateful Red Communist but Really Who Cares so Kill Him [or Her] Anyway). Nobody wanted to be the Viet Cong (i.e., the freedom fighters), even though it meant only playing one. The freedom fighters among the refugees despised these other freedom fighters with an unsettling, if not unsurprising, vehemence.

As always, money solved the problem. After some strong persuasion on my part, Violet agreed to double the wages for those extras playing Viet Cong, an incentive that allowed these freedom fighters to forget that playing those other freedom fighters had once been so repugnant an idea. Part of what they found repugnant was that some of them would be called on to torture Binh and rape Mai. My relationship with the Auteur began to unravel around the question of Mai's rape, although he was already irritated with me for speaking up on behalf of the extras in regards to their salary. Undeterred, I sat down at his lunch table the day before the filming of her rape

scene and asked him whether a rape was really necessary. It just seems a little heavy-handed, I said. A little shock treatment never hurt an audience, he said, pointing at me with his fork. Sometimes they need a kick in the ass so they can feel something after sitting down for so long. A slap on both cheeks, and I don't mean the ones on their faces. This is war, and rape happens. I have an obligation to show that, although a sellout like you obviously would disagree.

The unprovoked attack stunned me, "sellout" vibrating in my mind with the electrical colors of a Warhol painting. I am not a sellout, I finally managed to say. He snorted. Isn't a sellout what your people would call someone who helps a white man like me? Or is "loser" a better term?

On this latter point I could not disagree. The man who I presented myself as did belong to the losing side, and pointing out that the American side had lost, too, would not help matters any. All right, a loser is what I am, I said. I'm a loser for believing in all the promises your America made to people like me. You came and said we were friends, but what we didn't know was that you could never trust us, much less respect us. Only losers like us couldn't have seen what's so obvious now, how you wouldn't want anyone for your friend who actually wanted to be your friend. Deep down you suspect only fools and traitors would believe your promises.

It was not that he let me speak uninterrupted. That was not his style. Oh, that's rich! he said soon after I began. A moral runt sucks at my teats. A know-it-all who doesn't know anything, an idiot savant minus the savant. You know who else has an opinion about everything that no one pays any attention to? My senile grandmother. You think that because you went to college people should listen to what you say? Too bad you've got a bachelor of science in bullshit.

Perhaps I went too far when I invited him to perform fellatio on me, but he also went too far in threatening to kill me. He's always saying he's going to kill somebody, Violet said after I informed her of what happened. It's just a figure of speech. Promising to gouge out my eyes

with a spoon and force-feeding me with them hardly sounded figurative, any more than the depiction of Mai's rape was simply figurative. No, the rape was a brutal act of the imagination, at least as evidenced by the script. As for the actual shooting of the scene, only the Auteur, a handful of select crew, the four rapists, and Asia Soo herself were present. I would have to wait for a year to see the scene myself, at a raucous movie theater in Bangkok. But I was an eyewitness to James Yoon's master scene two weeks later, for which he was stripped naked from the waist up and strapped to a plank. The plank was propped on the body of an extra playing a dead militiaman, leaving the somewhat anxious-looking James Yoon to lie with his head angled toward the earth, braced for the water cure that he was about to receive from the same four Viet Cong who had raped Mai. Standing by James Yoon, the Auteur addressed the extras through me, although he never once looked at me, the two of us no longer on speaking terms.

At this point in the script, you've just made first contact with your enemy, he said to the rapists. The Auteur had picked them because of the particular ferocity they had displayed in various scenes, as well as their distinctive physical features: the rotten banana brownness of their skin and the reptilian slits of their eyes. You ambushed a patrol and this is the sole survivor. He's an imperialist puppet, a lackey, a stooge, a traitor. There's nothing worse in your eyes than someone who sells out his country for some rice and a couple of dollars. As for you, your legendary battalion's been cut in half. Hundreds of your brothers are dead, and hundreds more will die in the battle to come. You're intent on sacrificing yourself for the fatherland but you're naturally fearful. Now comes this sniveling son of a bitch, this backstabber with yellow skin but a white soul. You hate this bastard. You're going to make him confess all his reactionary sins, then make him pay for them. But most of all, remember this: have fun, be yourselves, and just act natural!

These instructions caused some confusion among the extras. The tallest one, and the ranking noncommissioned officer, a sergeant,

said, He wants us to torture this guy and look like we're enjoying ourselves, right?

The shortest extra said, But what's that got to do with acting natural?

The tall sergeant said, He tells us that every time.

But it's not natural to act like a VC, Shorty said.

What's wrong? the Auteur said.

Yes, what's wrong? James Yoon said.

Nothing wrong, the tall sergeant said. We okay. We number one. Then he switched back to Vietnamese and told the others, Look. Who cares what he says. He wants us to act natural but we got to act unnatural. We are motherfuckin' VC. Got it?

They certainly did. Here was method acting at its finest, four resentful refugees and former freedom fighters imagining the hateful psychology of the freedom fighters on the other side. With no more prodding from the Auteur once the film started rolling, this gang of four began to howl, slither, and slather over the object of their hatred. At this point in the script, James Yoon's character of Binh, a.k.a. Benny, had been caught on a probe led by the A-Team's only black soldier, Sergeant Pete Attucks. As established in an early anecdote, Attucks traced his genealogy two centuries back to Crispus Attucks, martyred by the British Redcoats in Boston and the first famous black man to sacrifice his life for the cause of white people. Once Attucks's genealogy had been explained, his fate was sealed with superglue. In due time, he stepped into a booby trap, a bear-claw clamp made of bamboo spikes that seized his left foot. While the rest of the Popular Forces squad was handily exterminated, he and Binh fired back until Attucks lost consciousness and Binh ran out of ammunition. When the Viet Cong captured them, they committed one of their infamous, heinous acts of desecration on Attucks, castrating him and stuffing his manhood in his mouth. This, according to Claude in his interrogation course, was something certain Native American tribes also inflicted on trespassing white settlers, despite

being of a different race thousands of miles away and more than a century past. See? Claude said, showing us the slide of an archaic black-and-white illustration depicting such an indigenous massacre. He followed this with another slide, a black-and-white photograph featuring the similarly mutilated corpse of a GI captured by the Viet Cong. Who says we don't share a common humanity? Claude said, advancing to the next slide of an American GI urinating on a Viet Cong corpse.

Binh's fate now rested in the hands of these Viet Cong, who reserved their scarce water not for bathing but for torture. While James Yoon (or his stunt double, in another set of shots) was strapped to the plank, a dirty cloth was wrapped around his head. One of the VC then slowly poured water from a foot above Binh's head onto the cloth, using Attucks's own canteens. Fortunately for James Yoon, the water torture only occurred in the shots involving the stuntman. Under the rag, the stuntman had his nostrils sealed and a tube for breathing in his mouth, since one cannot, of course, breathe under the cascade. The sensation suffered by the victim was close to drowning, or so I have been told by prisoners who have survived being put to the question, as the Spanish inquisitors described the infliction of the water cure. Again and again the question was asked of James Yoon, and while the water was surging onto his face, the VC clustered around, cursing, kicking, and punching him—all in simulation, of course. Such thrashing! Such gurgling! Such heaving of the breast and belly! After a while, out under a tropical sun as sultry as Sophia Loren, it was not just James Yoon but even the extras who started to sweat from their efforts. This was what few people realize—it's hard work to beat somebody. I have known many an interrogator who has strained a back, pulled a muscle, torn a tendon or a ligament, even broken fingers, toes, hands, and feet, not to mention going hoarse. For while the prisoner is screaming, crying, choking, and confessing, or attempting to confess, or simply lying, the interrogator must produce a steady stream of epithets, insults, grunts, demands, and

provocations with all the concentration and creativity of a woman manning a dirty-talk sex line. It takes significant mental energy to be nonrepetitive in heaping verbal abuse, and here, at least, the extras faltered in their performance. Blame should not be directed at them. They were not professionals, and the script merely said, *VC interrogators curse and berate Binh in their own language*. Left to improvise, the extras proceeded to give a repetitive lesson in gutter Vietnamese no one on set would ever forget. Indeed, while most of the crew never learned how to say "thank you" or "please" in Vietnamese, by the end of the shoot everyone knew how to say "fuck your mother," or "motherfucker," depending on how one translates *du ma*. I never cared much for the obscenity myself, but I could not help admiring how the extras squeezed every ounce of juice from the lime of it, spitting it out as a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, and exclamation, lending it intonations of not only hate and anger, but even, at some points, sympathy. *Du ma! Du ma! Du ma!*

Then, after the beating, cursing, and application of the water cure, the wet cloth would be unwrapped from Binh's face to reveal James Yoon, who knew this was his best chance for a supporting actor Oscar. He had been disposed of many times before on-screen as the evanescent Oriental, but none of those deaths possessed this agony, this nobility. Let's see, he had told me one night at our hotel's bar, I've been beaten to death with brass knuckles by Robert Mitchum, knifed in the back by Ernest Borgnine, shot in the head by Frank Sinatra, strangled by James Coburn, hanged by a character actor you don't know, thrown off a skyscraper by another one, pushed out the window of a Zeppelin, and stuffed in a bag of laundry and dropped in the Hudson River by a gang of Chinese guys. Oh, yes, I was also disemboweled by a squad of Japanese. But those were all quick deaths. All I ever got was a few seconds of screen time at most and sometimes barely that. This time, though—and here he trotted out the giddy smile of a freshly crowned beauty pageant queen—it's going to take forever to kill me.

So whenever that cloth was unwrapped, and it was unwrapped many a time during the interrogation session, James Yoon gorged on the scenery with the starved fervor of a man who knew he was not going to be upstaged for once by the perennially cute and unbeatable little boy whose mother would not allow him to watch this scene. He grimaced, he groaned, he grunted, he cried, he wept, he bawled, all with real tears hauled up by the buckets from some well deep inside his body. After this, he yelled, he screamed, he shrieked, he wriggled, he twisted, he contorted, he thrashed, and he heaved, the climax being when he vomited, a chunky regurgitated soup of his salty, vinegary breakfast of chorizo and eggs. At the conclusion of this extended first take there was only cathedral silence on the part of the crew, stunned as they regarded what was left of James Yoon, as scarified and beaten as an uppity slave on an American plantation. The Auteur himself came with a wet towel, knelt by the still strapped-down actor, and tenderly wiped the vomit from James Yoon's face. That was amazing, Jimmy, absolutely amazing.

Thank you, James Yoon gasped.

Now let's try it one more time, just to be sure.

In fact, six more takes were required before the Auteur declared himself satisfied. At noon, after the third take, the Auteur had asked James Yoon if he wanted to break for lunch, but the actor had shuddered and whispered, No, don't unstrap me. I'm being tortured, aren't I? While the rest of the cast and crew retired to the somnolent shade of the canteen, I sat by James Yoon and offered to shelter him with a parasol, but he shook his head with tortoise determination. No, dammit, I'm seeing this through. It's only an hour in the sun. People like Binh went through worse, didn't they? Much worse, I agreed. James Yoon's harrowing experience would at least be finished today, or so he hoped, whereas a real prisoner's mortification continued for days, weeks, months, years. This was true of those captured by my communist comrades, according to our intelligence reports, but it was also true of those interrogated by my colleagues

in the Special Branch. Did the Special Branch interrogations take so long because the policemen were being thorough, unimaginative, or sadistic? All of the above, said Claude. And yet the lack of imagination and the sadism contradict the thoroughness. He was lecturing to a classroom of these secret policemen in the National Interrogation Center, the unblinking eyes of the windows looking out onto the Saigon dockyards. The twenty pupils of his subterranean specialty, including myself, were all veterans of the army or police, but we were still intimidated by his authority, the way he held forth with the pedigree of a professor at the Sorbonne or Harvard or Cambridge. Brute force is not the answer, gentlemen, if the question is how to extract information and cooperation. Brute force will get you bad answers, lies, misdirection, or, worse yet, will get you the answer the prisoner thinks you want to hear. He will say anything to stop the pain. All of this stuff—here Claude waved his hand at the tools of the trade assembled on his desk, much of it made in France, including a billy club, a plastic gasoline container repurposed for soapy water, pliers, a hand-cranked electrical generator for a field telephone—all of it is useless. Interrogation is not punishment. Interrogation is a science.

Myself and the other secret policemen dutifully wrote this down in our notebooks. Claude was our American adviser, and we expected state-of-the-art knowledge from him and all the other American advisers. We were not disappointed. Interrogation is about the mind first, the body second, he said. You don't even have to leave a bruise or a mark on the body. Sounds counterintuitive, doesn't it? But it's true. We've spent millions to prove it in the lab. The principles are basic, but the application can be creative and tailored to the individual or to the imagination of the interrogator. Disorientation. Sensory deprivation. Self-punishment. These principles have been scientifically demonstrated by the best scientists in the world, American scientists. We have shown that the human mind, subject to the right conditions, will break down faster than the human body. All this stuff—again he waved his hand in contempt at what

we now saw as Gallic junk, the tools of old world barbarians rather than new world scientists, of medieval torture rather than modern interrogation—it will take months to wear the subject down with these things. But put a sack on the subject's head, wrap his hands in balls of gauze, plug his ears, and drop him in a completely dark cell by himself for a week, and you no longer have a human being capable of resistance. You have a puddle of water.

Water. Water, James Yoon said. Can I get some water, please?

I fetched him some water. Despite the water cure, he had not actually had any water except what was absorbed through the wet cloth, which was just wet enough, he said, to be suffocating. As his arms were still bound, I slowly trickled the water down his throat. Thanks, he muttered, just as any prisoner would be grateful to his torturer for the drop of water, or the morsel of food, or the minute of sleep that the torturer doled out. For once I was relieved to hear the Auteur's voice, calling out, All right, let's get this done so Jimmy can get back to the pool!

By the final take two hours later, James Yoon really was lachrymose with pain, his face bathed in sweat, mucus, vomit, and tears. It was a sight that I had seen before—the communist agent. But that was real, so real I had to stop thinking about her face. I focused on the fictional state of total degradation that the Auteur wanted for the next scene, which itself required several takes. In this scene, the last one of the movie for James Yoon, the Viet Cong, frustrated because of their inability to break their victim and get him to confess to his crimes, beat his brains out with a spade. Being a bit exhausted from torturing their victim, however, the quartet first decide to take a break smoking Pete Attucks's Marlboros. Unfortunately for them, they underestimated the will of this Binh, who, like many of his southern brethren, whether they be freedom fighters or freedom fighters, was as laid-back as a California surfer regarding every matter except the question of independence from tyranny. Left alone without the towel around his head, he was free to bite off his own tongue

and drown under a faucet of his own fake blood, a commercial product that cost thirty-five dollars a gallon and of which approximately two gallons were used to paint James Yoon and decorate the earth. When it came to Binh's brains, though, Harry had concocted his own homemade cerebro-matter, a secret recipe of oatmeal mixed with agar, the result being a gray, clumpy, congealed mess that he lovingly daubed on the earth around James Yoon's head. The cinematographer got especially close to capture the look in Binh's eyes, which I could not see from where I was watching, but which I assumed to be some saintly mix of ecstatic pain and painful ecstasy. Despite all the punishment inscribed on him, he had never uttered a word, or at least an intelligible one.