

# ***Liberty Call***

***A Novel***

***By Dennis Doherty***





# Overhaul

Walter Schmerz and Al Turner stood about ten feet apart on the deck below the signal bridge, slowly working their way toward each other with their needle guns. Walter held his needle gun with both hands as far over his head as he could and moved it in a circle, up and down, all over the bulkhead to the deck. The Stone was at their feet, tearing up the non-skid floor with a deck crawler, kicking at the jumble of pneumatic tubing behind him and pulling it along as he advanced. Bum and the rest of their Tiger Team worked on the signal bridge and antenna platforms, stripping the ship's paint away.

The sun was relentless but the grit was worse, so Walter kept his coveralls buttoned at the neck and occasionally had to stop to clear the sweat from his respirator and goggles. He had on so much insulating gear: underwear, dungarees under coveralls, steel tip boots, bandanna around the neck, respirator, goggles, ball cap, earplugs, Mickey Mouse ear protectors. It was like being housed inside himself against a hail of paint chips and thundering machinery, but Walter's face and ear protection muffled it all to a background rumble.

Walter couldn't tell the noises apart over the insane yakking of his needle gun: an air-powered cylinder with twelve tiny metal rods, dancing back and forth, smacking into whatever they're held against. The aluminum bulkhead stood no chance against it, and the millions of tiny dents its soft metal sent chips flying in all directions and even into the drydock, chattering under the sheer strength of Walter and his needle gun. It started to talk to him after awhile. Pok pokitter pokitting pok pokked, walt waltitty titta walt walt. As was usual for him, Walter continued his work slowly and deliberately, his thoughts coming to him in the staccato voice of the banging needles as his sweat dripped onto them. Al, also as usual, was working faster than Walter was, seemingly enjoying the dirty work, seemingly to say, "My my, isn't this a thing to be doing! Look at me go, tearing up the paint of the mighty Outland on this hot, Japanese, summer day! Land-a-Goshen. Who'd-a-thunk." Al moved the gun up and down at a slanted angle like a chisel, which seemed to help it along, not just letting the needles pop but pushing them into the paint, efficiently shearing it off.

Even The Stone, who they usually had to keep an eye on for all the trouble he caused, was working like a mesmerized maniac, attacking the non-skid as if his deck crawler were a buzz saw. He didn't wear knee pads while he crawled the deck with a bandanna around his head to cover the green marijuana leaf he had drunkenly tattooed on his forehead the night before. He wasn't in the habit of wearing a shirt, so his shoulders were already blistering under the sun, but he didn't care how long they'd still be working in Yokosuka. Everyone knew The Stone had a simple mind, and when the large, black chunks of non-skid flew up and bit him, marking his chest and arms, he'd only bear down on the deck all the harder, tearing it up all the more. Cause and effect seemed to be lost on him, so his sweat would always run black with the dust and black micro-threads that accentuated his otherwise skinny muscles.

As Walter and Al finally edged close to each other, they started to notice something under the paint they were chipping. It was a large, red and white pattern that wouldn't come off under the needle guns' prodding, as if it had been there so long it had become an indelible part of the bulkhead, an ancient painting grown into the pores of aluminum, like some kind of organic stain, or a birthmark. Walter and Al were archaeologists on the verge of a discovery and quickened their pace. They both concentrated on the center of the bulkhead where the hidden design was. The old red and white paint broke and separated into a myriad of dents and pock marks made by the needles, but instead of flying off like the gray coating over it, the color dug deeper into the metal, so as they uncovered it they atomized it, bit by bit.

When they finally came together near the middle, Walter and Al put down their guns and stood back. The painting looked like a ship's insignia as rendered by some crazy pointillist. It was several shades faded, like someone had already tried to erase it but there was too much give in that porous, slightly pitted and rotten patch of aluminum. Walter and Al could still piece the painting together though, between the two of them: a large circle with white letters at the top announcing "DesRon 26", white letters at the bottom that added "San Diego-Da Nang 1967", and between the two in the center was the Outland's emblem, a rascally red devil with a triton.

"Look that!" Al yelled, pointing at their discovery. He lifted one end of Walter's Mickey Mouse ears and began yakking, but Walter only caught every other word or so.

"Yoosta...homeport...Diego..musta...years...think!" He looked like he was laughing but Walter couldn't tell: Al's face was covered with his bandanna, bandit-like.

They showed their discovery to The Stone, who grinned and mouthed something that was probably "Oh wow," or something similar.

First Class Petty Officer Kid—enviably cool, clean, and neat as ever—tapped Walter on the shoulder and yelled into his exposed ear, "Want you in Radio." Walter pointed to the painting, and Kid looked at it, stood

there a moment with his hand cupped over his eyes from the sun. It was strange for all of them to see the names of cities and squadrons that weren't their own on their Outland, uncovering the memories of a crew that was gone and part of the ship's life that they knew nothing about.

Walter supposed that the Outland had been homeported in San Diego and the picture commemorated a WestPac cruise and, possibly, the action it saw off the coast of Viet Nam. That proud crew probably got Navy Expedition Ribbons for that one, maybe even Battle Ribbons. It was only later that Walter learned that the Outland had been moved to Yokosuka in the mid-seventies and that it had been one of the ships that took part in the evacuation of Saigon, bobbing unseen in the wings, while, center-stage, desperate people kicked and clawed for helicopter space atop the embassy building, fighting for passage to an unseen and unknown ship, *this* ship.

Walter pictured it: helicopter skids swaying with dogged aviators in green flightsuits apprehensive but nonetheless resolute in completing their mission, hurriedly loading a bucket brigade of panicked, intelligent ants into their green bellies before the onslaught of some terrible and all-consuming disaster.

Walter didn't picture what really happened, he couldn't: a man overboard in high seas couldn't be seen, only the rise and rush of senseless ocean mountains, the million dints of shifting light, and the feeling of futility before such terrific expanse and power.

Walter followed Kid inside the watertight door, then down the passageway to the ship's store where they bought a couple of ice-cold Cokes. Walter sucked his drink right down and burped. "What did I do now, Boss?"

"It ain't what you did," Kid said. "It's what you a-gonna do." His smile suggested mischief.

Walter liked Kid. Walter blew as much of the gray gunk out of his nose and into his bandanna as possible, unbuttoned his coveralls, tied the arms around his waist, and wiped at the grit on his neck and face. "And what is it that I'm a-gonna do, Kid?" he asked.

Kid smiled. "Looks like you a-gonna get yo sea legs, son."

An old adrenal excitement crept into Walter's veins. "Am I going with a battlegroup? Up to the Gulf? Gonzo Station?"

Kid shook his head. "You *want* to go?"

"I don't know," Walter said, and he didn't. But here was his chance *finally*, after two years of shore duty and then coming to a ship during overhaul, to be a *real* sailor and get some blue water under his feet, to get away from the daily paint chipping and start learning his trade.

Lieutenant Modernness was waiting in Radio with The Chief, Leading Petty Officer Starring, and Mallory, a mere seaman who had no business being clean, who was standing a little lost in the center of the room.

"Well well well, Schmerz," Mister Modernness said through his teeth, "looks like you got a chance to get your feet wet."

“Mister Modernness,” Walter said, “how come you never talk with your mouth open?”

Kid chuckled, “Yeah, that’s right. He always talk like he’s mad.” He leaned back against the door, still smiling, arms crossed.

Leading Petty Officer Starring was sitting right in a teletype operator’s chair, holding his pipe like an actor’s prop, absolutely not amused. “You better not address the officers where you’re going like that, Schmerz.”

“Which is where? I ask.”

“Come here, Schmerz,” The Chief said from his supervisor’s desk in the back with the lieutenant, away from operations but ever in charge. “How you like the yards after two months on Tiger Team?”

“Hey, where am I going—”

“Hey?” he said. “*Hey?* Hey is for horses. You call me Chief. You don’t come in here actin’ like a old, familiar salt just because you’re dirty. You still got to call me Chief. Look at ya. Now, the paint’s okay as long as we’re in the yards—that’s what I call clean dirt—but I don’t know about those rolled up sleeves. You don’t see no one else with long sleeve shirts, do you? I just don’t think they’re a part of the ship’s regulations, and by the way, you never did put in a request chit to grow that beard. You’re gonna have to clean up your act before reportin’ to the Cox. You’ll be representing our division. That is, you’ll be representing me. What do you think, Mister Modernness? I say the boy’s so seasick his first week out that he can’t even get out of his rack to puke.”

“Yeah,” the Lieutenant snarled, “but Schmerz is gonna go fucking ballistic when he gets to The Philippines.” Starring’s laugh sounded like a hiccup. Mallory was smiling broadly.

“The PI? Subic?” Walter asked.

“The Cox leaves tomorrow for weapons testing and ASW exercises,” Starring said, “and you and Mallory are gonna be on it—they need a third class and a seaman. You’ll stop at Subic for a week on the way back, for upkeep and weapons onload. You’re only concern is to get qualified on the NavMacs.” It was knockoff time, but Walter felt a new day beginning.

“What’s a NavMacs?” Walter asked.

“It’s what we’re gonna be getting,” Starring said, as if that clarified things.

“Goddamnit, Starring,” the Chief said, “if you don’t know what the hell you’re talkin’ about then shut the hell up! Don’t be ignorant!”

Starring took a sudden interest in the teletype’s keyboard.

“You’re gonna see it soon enough, Schmerz, and you goddamn-well better learn it inside out ‘cause you and Mallory are gonna have the jump on all us, so you’re gonna be instructin’ the rest of the division when we get it installed. It’s gonna modernize this radioshack, is what it is.”

Walter pulled a patch cord out of the switchboard above Starring’s head, held the plug to his ear and the other plug toward the Chief. “Gentlemen, what we have here is a failure to communicate!”

The Kid unfolded his arms and moved from the door as the cypher lock clicked. “must be Turner,” he said, and made a comical bow to the incoming freight.

In walked Al Turner looking like a coal miner stumbling into the wrong world. He crossed his eyes for effect, his creased ballcap brim shedding paint chips like sweat. “Gentlemen,” Al said, “good afternoon.”

“Petty Officer Turner,” Starring said, “why aren’t you topside with the Tiger Team? Did Petty Officer Kid give you permission to take a break?” He looked to Lieutenant Moderness.

Al responded, “No, Petty Officer Starring, it was time according to Captain Knockoff, so I figured I’d have a Commander Coke, then visit Rear Admiral Rack for an hour or so catnap before dinner.” He pulled his earplugs out and lightly juggled them in his palms. “Hey! I can hear now!”

“What the hell are you doing, Turner?” The Chief said. “Hear this! Knockoff time ain’t for ten minutes yet.”

“This is true, Chief *Chief*,” Al nodded. “But it’ll take them that long to get all the gear and hoses put away, which they are now doing. I *have* been busting my little fanny,” he said and looked at Mallory, “which is more than I can say about certain non-rated individuals around here.”

Mallory glanced up from the operating manual he was pretending to read. “Fuck you too, Turner. Maybe if you knew your rate good enough, I wouldn’t have to be down here helping sort all this clerical bullshit.”

Al smiled. “I know you don’t want to be down here, where you don’t belong—”

Kid held his left fist up to his left cheek and poked his tongue into his right cheek. Blow job. He pointed his chin at Mallory.

“Well Al,” Walter said, “I’m going on the Cox tomorrow.”

“Hoo boy, haze gray and underway! And where, pray tell, is the Cox going?”

“The PI,” Walter said. “Subic.”

“Among other places,” Mister Moderness added, and then repeated “*baaallllistic*” as he walked out the door.

“Never mind about Subic, Schmerz. You just learn that NavMacs. And, Turner,” The Chief said with a scowl, “get your ass back topside and help out.”

Al nodded toward the door then back to Walter. “You know, me and Haggard had some wild times when last we were in Subic. Wild times. We were making it with these two girls in my hotel—him and his girl on the floor and me and mine on the bed—and we swapped in the middle of screwing—unscrewed, as it were—and changed places. I kept on laughing, ‘cause out of the corner of my eye, I could see his white ass on the bed going up and down and my girl, who was his girl, was moaning and his girl, who was *my* girl, was moaning too, and he kept saying things like, ‘Hey Turner, how’m I doing’ an’ ‘Ooh lala, this is the buns.’ Fucking Haggard.” He slapped Walter’s back.

## Liberty Call

“Well, you’re gonna be like a kid in a candy shop Walter, I can tell. When you hop off the Cox, go to Paradise and tell ‘em Crazy Al Turner sent you. Be sure to ask for Mimi. She’s hotter than anything on The Honcho.”

“Yeah,” Starring sniffed, knocking his pipe bowl into an empty Coke can. “Subic sure beats hanging around The Honcho. They stopped fucking here in seventy three.”

# The Need for Speed

The Cox was a Knox-class frigate, the same as the Outland, identical in every way, except of course, that it was fully furnished and adorned, literally shipshape and plying the deep water. Walter's time aboard was short and responsibilities few, only a couple of weeks of exercises in the Philippine Sea, a week in Subic, then back to Yokosuka and the Outland. He had only one task, to get trained on the NavMacs, and he mastered that quickly—data processor, line printers, message screening, high-speed transmission of outgoing messages, and above all else, a satellite link. No more messing with high frequency radio waves. And along the way he picked up everything else he could about shipboard radio communications—ship to ship, ship to shore, transmitters, receivers. He was new to this world, but as a petty officer with two years of shore duty, he felt an awkward pressure to perform.

Walter spent a lot of his free time alone, topside under the sun on the signalman's deck, the fantail, thinking about Iran, submarine warfare.

He was just a radioman from some frigate out of Yokosuka, where protesters of the nuclear shell game—*I can neither confirm nor deny the presence of nuclear warheads, hell, I have no idea*—regularly reminded him of the localized effects of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. President Carter had ordered the Seventh Fleet to keep an eye out for Vietnamese Boat People in the South China Sea who were being preyed upon by pirates, for which the two fifty caliber machineguns had been specially mounted on the Cox, while The U.S. backed Shah had fallen in Iran, which meant he was about to be sent to the Arabian Sea, to Gonzo Station. His Outland would probably head off the moment it was out of the yards, so it made sense that he had been sent to the Cox to learn their NavMacs in the meantime.

Walter looked out to sea and saw the flying fish dancing everywhere, a blurred wave springing into the air, curling back into the sea and subsiding before thrusting in mocking anticipation of the wake that progressed behind. But whenever Walter narrowed his eyes on them, the flying fish became discrete, scattering before the bow, glittering silver and skipping along the surface like flung coins spent into the swells. He wondered whether the entire Pacific had a silver layer of flying fish just beneath the surface, floating idly until a monster stirred them. At which point, they'd leap for heaven, only to

manage a brief horizontal moment above the murk, before slapping at the water and skimming the surface, then, *plop*, hit a wave and sink. The scene was burned into Walter's head, and he wondered if the flying fish recycled each other like the waves did—or more like a fountain, with the same flying fish following him everywhere, jumping for his show and then hastily swimming back to the front of the line to do it again in an elaborate game of deception, just to fuck with him. That is, until the porpoises showed up.

One afternoon, however, on the way to Subic, when the ocean was clear and calm, Walter leaned over the lifeline and spotted something floating beneath the surface. He thought it was some kind of submerged jetsom before realizing that it was staying with them at a whole *eight knots*. It loomed larger as it neared the surface, some billowing sheet of refracting light, tinting the water just above it iceberg-lettuce green. As it rose, its outline grew clearer, more defined, no longer rectangular but sphere long-stretched into a large torpedo, broad and powerful. Walter just barely managed to distinguish its white, mute, and ghostly form that appeared to hover just beneath the water's green veneer. It was shadowing the ship, maintaining their speed effortlessly. Walter called out for everyone to come see his white whale, but as though it had heard him, it diverged ninety degrees from them and disappeared. Those who looked pretended not to believe him, but he didn't care. He turned back to the beluga just as it spouted and began its descent.

Walter could only imagine it in its entirety, following it down as its fluke propelled it with the speed of a frigate, being an air breathing mammal like himself but with the dreamlike ability to swim underwater indefinitely, the entire ocean its living room, unrestricted by air, water, timetable or compass, free. Walter's mind followed it all the way down to where the light could barely filter, where only small dark figures darted by in schools and larger ones moved sullenly, suspiciously. His whale stroked unperturbed toward the bottom, through the dancing streamers of seaweed that reached up from the clusters of rocks and the wreckage of ships. Then there was nothing: the shadows and shapes had converged at the bottom into blackness as the whale's green aura escaped to somewhere even Walter couldn't imagine. But he was sure that creature understood its world.

Enter Subic: empty jeepneys line up on one side of Magsaysay Boulevard, their chrome sparkling in the late afternoon sun. Soon the evening crush of Filipino workers and American sailors would come shambling out of the U.S. Navy base and streaming toward their nighttime connections—home, hotel room, whorehouse, saloon. The jeepneys would get them there.

The Cox had pulled into Subic at midday and the crew beat the crowd into town. Walter, Mallory, and Hasty James—a Cox radioman—walked out past the Filipino and American marine guards, out the base's gate, then over the humped bridge above Shit River that separated the town from the base,

so-called because of the sewage that ran in among the children begging from banca boats. Walter didn't know if it had a real name. It probably did. *Shadenfreude River?*

Regardless, the three of them stopped, leaning over the railing to marvel at the kids hollering from the boats. Two shirtless boys with raggedy black hair were just beneath them. "Hey Joe, throw us some money," the longer, skinnier one of them called out, hands cupped around his mouth.

Hasty hitched his pants, reached into his front pocket, then plopped some pennies into the water near their boat. "You gotta dive for it!" He pulled out a few more coins and held them up. "Here you go. This time *dive* for it!" He tossed the coins near the boat, and in the boys went.

A girl noticed the commotion and paddled over. Walter thought she looked like the kind of kid you'd see in a mall back home. Mallory shook that thought when he held up a quarter. "Show us your tits!" She pulled off her T shirt and pulled her shoulders back. Mallory laughed, "you ain't even got none!" He threw the quarter near her boat, and she dove into the mottled sewage. He did a sudden, strange little jig. "C'mon, man. Let's get loaded. Now bear in mind you do that on the street, you'll never get rid of 'em. They'll be dancin' after you all night long?"

Magsaysay Boulevard is the main drag of Olongapo City. They walked up to the first jeepney in a long line of them. The street was a low corridor of barrooms that stretched on until it disappeared into a watery mirage of heat at the foot of Subic's hills. Outside the first bar, a small, open-air structure that was literally called Hole in The Wall, Walter watched a young man slide off his stool and walk out to the jeepney.

"Hey Joe," the young man said with an eager grin, eyes alert and hopeful as a puppy at the dinner table. His black hair was neatly greased back at the sides except a single forelock curled over his left eye. His cut-off jeans were worn, sneakers soggy, and T shirt stained, not that it did much to conceal the Mickey Mouse with its middle finger extended.

"Fuck you too," Mallory said and pointed at the man's chest. "The name isn't Joe so you can cut that shit out right now." He had been here once before and told Walter he knew how to handle these people. On the sidewalk, the three had no particular plan on where to go or whether to just start bar crawling.

"What can I do you for?" the jeepney driver said. He ran his fingers through his lone forelock.

"Speed," Hasty James said.

Walter turned and looked at him.

"Speed?"

Mallory agreed to go along with it. "You know," Mallory said, "*speed*. Now quit jerkin' us around and tell me do you know where we can get some speed or do I hafta get it from the next guy? Fuckin' Flips."

"Sure man, sure," the driver said. "Anything you want."

“Just speed, my man,” Hasty said. “We need a dash for the Hasty James liberty special. It’s the ingredient, you understand.”

“Sure man, sure. I go make a phone call. You wait here.”

“And maybe a couple of joints,” Walter added.

The driver smiled, sweet and peppy as a Coca Cola with its bubbly eyes and creamy fizz. He headed back for the bar—his hangout—apparently, stopped, then announced, “Just call me Johnny,” as though someone had asked, and went in. When Just-Call-Me-Johnny finished his call, he got right in the driver’s seat and started the car up.

“Everything’s cool,” the driver said. “Hop in. I got your shit. We go to my place for it.”

“You got it?” Mallory asked.

“My buddy. He’s meet us there. Get in, it’s cool.”

The three looked at each other. Hasty shrugged his shoulders and looked at Mallory. Mallory shrugged and looked at Walter. Walter’s nose took in the fog of jeepney exhaust and sidewalk barbecue, and underneath that the scent of tropical dirt and vegetation in open spaces. Shit River and kids begging from it. He could hear women calling to them from the fronts of bars and clubs on the street. “Adventure?” he asked, in general.

They looked at each other. Hasty shrugged and got in the back, and Mallory and Walter climbed in after him. They sprawled on the benches. This was a private ride.

Mallory and Walter were far from best friends, but they were, after all, shipmates. They stuck together much of the time on the Cox because they were familiar faces on a strange ship, accessible. This disarming newness seemed to put them on common footing, and for the first time they formed an odd bond, accepting each other for what they were with interest and without rancor. Except for Hasty James, Walter was all Mallory had.

And Walter considered Hasty, whose real name was James Hastings, a dark, savvy kid from California. He was a capable radioman, and it was his responsibility to train them on the NavMacs. His nickname may have come from his facility in the radioshack, but it more likely came from the fact that he always seemed to be speeding. He had a friend in the Army in Pusan, Korea, who sent him packets of crystal methamphetamine that he called Pusan Rock. During radio watches he’d make head calls where he’d suck a bunch of Pusan Rock up his nose, then return to radio, wide-eyed and maniacal, eager as hell: “Yes, yes, we have communications; we have communications. Communicating sons of bitches! Communicating motherfuckers! Hasty Rock! Hasty, hasty. Hastily handled, with dispatch. In communications, boy, speed is of the essence.” Nobody liked Hasty more than he liked himself. In fact, nobody liked Hasty much at all, it seemed to Walter. He was a self-promoter—probably nicknamed himself—and never uttered a word that sounded genuine. He had the quick eye of an opportunist, the kind of guy who, even when he’s doing you a favor, makes you think you’re being

hustled. There was no warmth in his excitement or his humor, as though it was never the moment itself that counted, but something that the moment was reeling-in to him that he awaited with greedy glee. Maybe all of that was just the affects of the drugs. And the first thing he wanted to do when they got to Olongapo City was find some speed, as all his Pusan Rock was used up.

So they found themselves at the home of their jeepney driver, Just-Call-Me-Johnny. He asked their names and gave a nervous laugh with each one, shaking their hands and holding on for an uncomfortable moment. He said that they were now all friends. "Good friends," as he put it. Fine thing, friends. Friends stick by each other, take care of each other. Without friends you are nothing. What can you do? Where can you go without friends? Friends grow under each other's guidance, prosper under each other's care. Friends look out for each other, protect each other from common enemies. Friends send the good things in life each other's way. That was why Just-Call-Me-Johnny was sending speed and grass their way, because they were friends and had asked for it. And think of how good it is to have friends in other countries who you can write letters to and come visit, a home away from home when you are traveling. Walter, Mallory, Hasty, Johnny—friends.

Johnny's home was deep in the honeycomb of side streets, and it made Walter a little nervous to think that he couldn't find his way back without him, though it didn't seem to bother Mallory and Hasty, who were quick enough to get in the jeepney. Here, far removed from the glare of the main drag, the buildings grew dingy and haphazard like the wayward palms and leafy shrubs they warred for space with. Random weeds and spores took root unchallenged, blooming along with plants that had once been planned to prettify gardens and courtyards but that now sprawled as chaotically as the dirt streets, rampant flora scampering over fences and climbing up walls, springing through cracks in the stucco and wood that were too weak and untended to check the tropic pull of sun and water.

Just-Call-Me-Johnny's apartment was in an amorphous, colorless hotel whose asymmetrical curves of stucco bent around an overgrown courtyard like the bulk of a giant hunkering before a campfire of shooting blades and branches. The hotel sat on an intersection shared by a tired looking bar with an upstairs brothel, but the over-the-hill hookers on the balcony showed little interest in hooking in the mid-day heat. There was no constabulary or American presence visible in the neighborhood.

When they arrived at the home, Johnny's family sneaked into the bedroom and closed the door. A portable black and white TV in the combination living room/kitchen carried a picture of President Marcos delivering a speech to a political rally—they were holding national elections that year. The only things besides the mildew and roaches on the walls were a couple of curling photos from magazines and advertisements for American consumer goods—happy children eating breakfast cereal, a happy family watching color

TV, happy men with their new automobiles. Fungus grew freely around the refrigerator and dripping sink. The room also sported a bridge table, a couple of chairs with torn vinyl and a dilapidated, faded, green sofa.

Walter absorbed it all, fidgeting under Just-Call-Me-Johnny's lecture on the beneficence of friendship, while waiting for his drug connection. When their mutual admiration and the subject of friendship seemed in danger of drying up, Johnny asked if they wanted a beer, and they all cheered.

"Ferdinand," Johnny yelled. "Hey, Nando. Come out here."

A boy of about six emerged from behind the closed bedroom door. "I have guests in the house. My new friends. They want beer. Go get them some beer."

The boy looked shyly but keenly at the three of them, as though looking into them, Walter thought, and weighing what he found, while being ashamed of what they might see in him. He walked over to Walter and stood still, looking at the gritty floor. His head seemed too large for his bony frame, his brown eyes too round and open to hide anything. He was dirty and wore only a pair of boy's briefs.

Okay, Walter thought, that's enough. Go away now. But the boy just stood there, blinking his long, curled eyelashes at the floor. Walter squirmed a little and looked around the room.

"Well?" Just-Call-Me-Johnny said.

They were all looking at Walter. "Well what?"

"Well give the goddamn kid some money for the brews," Mallory said.

"Oh!" He jumped to his feet and reached into his back pocket for his wallet. "How much?"

"Fifteen pesos each," Ferdinand said quietly, looking at the wallet.

Walter gave him a fifty-peso bill. Nando ran across the street, returned with three San Miguels, handed them to each of the men, then darted back into the bedroom without giving any change. They slugged the beer down, which hit the spot for a moment, but they quickly grew restless again. It was hot outside, but it was suffocating in the squalid room with Marcos's voice rising and falling in the background, and with the greasy hospitality of their new friend. Walter thought of the bugs that must be nesting in the warm crevices around the sofa cushions, and his skin got itchy. Something ran down his arm—a drop of sweat.

"So what's the story," Hasty said. "Is your man coming or not? You got a home sweet home, for sure. It's been real nice but we got to be moving along. Women await. The night awaits. Speed is of the essence, you know?"

"He's coming, man, he's coming. You wait. He's my buddy, you see. He got it all, everything you want. Make you feel all right."

"He got crystal?" Hasty said.

"Speed man, like you want."

"Yeah, dude, yeah, but is it crystal or pills?"

“Pills, yellow pills. Very strong. Lots of them.”

“Sheeit, pills,” Hasty said. “Okay, okay. I guess yellow jackets are okay.”

Mallory belched. “Well I hope he comes soon. It fuckin’ smells like day old roadkill in here, skunk.”

Johnny gave a nervous laugh and yelled something in Tagalog at the bedroom door, which was thin enough for Walter to hear voices whispering inside. He said something again in Tagalog, still smiling but with an impatient edge to his teeth. Once more the boy emerged from the room, still looking downward.

“He goes out to play now,” Johnny said. “What you think? Fine boy, huh?”

“Yeah,” Walter said. “Great kid.”

“You want some more beer?”

“No.”

The woman appeared in the bedroom doorway and Johnny smiled at his company. “My wife, man. You like her?”

She was draped in a white sheet, with a naked baby sucking at her breast. She looked at them with a feeble attempt at smiling, and failing that, her face fell into a non-committal blank as she looked at the floor.

Walter stared at her like a specimen, trying to access her eyes, the eyes he had first seen in the boy, as he sat there on the sofa and she stood in the doorway with the suckling baby, though he knew her eyes pulled with some independent and involuntary power at everything within her scope. She was exposed there, frightened, certainly repelled, a reluctant magnet of sad life in a young woman with long black hair and a tremulous face. He felt he could drown before ever finding that center.

“Show them,” Just-Call-Me-Johnny said. “Go on.”

She pulled the sheet from her other breast. No, Walter thought, you don’t have to do this anymore. Her breasts were high and full, swollen with milk. The baby was attached to one nipple and the other pointed away like a lazy eye. No, don’t do this. Don’t make me look. And he was drawn to her eyes and he looked at her breasts and he wanted to save her.

“Go ahead,” Johnny demanded, smiling. “All of it.”

She let the sheet drop to the floor and Walter wanted to say, no, don’t. I’ll love you forever if you just stop doing this. Don’t let this happen.

She held her shoulders squarely and stared straight ahead. Her body was smooth and ripe without being too plump, though her stomach swelled above the thin wisp of her groin. Her legs were short and almost muscular. The baby sucked away, oblivious to the spectacle going on around her.

“What you think?” Johnny asked. “You like her?”

Hasty whistled, crossed his legs and threw his arm up on the sofa’s back. “How much?”

“How much?” Johnny was incredulous, frowning for the first time.

“That’s my *wife!*” His honor was wounded. “I don’t pimp my wife. Hey man, like I say, we’re friends. That goes for her too. You want her? Okay. I say have fun. She has my permission—and rubbers. Ha! We just relax and enjoy ourself till my buddy gets here.”

“Whee hoo. Yes hell!” Mallory said. “Mamma’s milk!”

The baby began crying from the bedroom as soon as they closed the door behind them. It screamed, and in the intervals when it gathered air for another gust, Walter could hear the soft bed coils spring and Mallory’s heavy grunting. Just-Call-Me-Johnny and Hasty passed the minutes discussing drugs and money. The baby screamed; the springs sprang; Mallory grunted.

Hasty and Johnny talked loudly to overcome the baby’s siren-like wailing, and their language was some foreign language—the man whose baby was crying in the next room and whose wife was being fucked, and his new friend the speed addict—talking numbers, prices, quantities, scales, low and high. Walter’s head expanded and contracted with the rise and fall of the baby’s siren and his ears were tuned to the sounds in the bedroom beneath the cries—the springs and the breathing.

The walls of the slimy cell that contained the woman’s life moved closer until his ear seemed pressed to her door, and the shoots and spiky fronds in the courtyard groaned and stretched toward them, reaching for the apartment, climbing the walls and roof and sucking out the air as they moved in to strangle the humans. He listened for Mallory and hated him, hated all of them, including the woman who did nothing to resist. He realized he had an erection and hated them all some more.

Things did not go smoothly with Johnny’s main man, Eddy. He was skinny, tall for a Filipino, and relatively well dressed—his clothes were clean and flashy synthetics, wide collar and flared slacks, gold medallion and reflector sunglasses. Eddy was clearly the boss in the relationship, making no phony show of amity with Johnny or with the sailors, and it became painfully evident that they were to be Johnny’s big chance to move up in the world. It seemed that he had given his boss the impression that they were going to move large quantities of marijuana and narcotics on base for him. Walter immediately refused, and Eddy glared at Johnny, who sweated and yelled into the bedroom to shut the baby up, which no longer even seemed to stop for air between cries.

Johnny tried to convince them of what a sound, logical idea it was—actually, he now directed his argument solely at Hasty—pointing out the profits to be had in cash and highs, and reiterating his lesson about how friends send opportunity each other’s way. When Walter again spoke up and refused, Eddy went to work with his charms; starting with the idea that the military would be interested in knowing where they were and what they were doing, working up to the influential position he and his friends enjoyed in town, and capping it off with the harm that could be caused or prevented to their persons. He was connected. Nothing went on that he didn’t know about. The cops were in his pay.

The baby's keening now seemed to be coming from inside Walter's head, piercing his brain like an electric charge, sending sparks to all his nerve endings and throwing him out of his seat.

"I call you!" he shouted, and spat on the floor. "I call you, you fucking cheap hustlers! Fuck! You cocksuckers! Bloodsuckers! Who the fuck you think you are, threatening *me*, you lousy pimps. I'm in the U.S. Navy you little gangsters! Come on Hasty, let's get out of here before I kill somebody. This place is crazy. Look at this cheap place. I'll tear this fucking place apart, stinking shithole."

As he ranted, the situation seemed to become clear to him, once-removed as though all but he was in slow motion, as though his frantic action threw him a step ahead of the others' delayed reaction, giving him time to pick apart and consider every move they made. He saw their bodies fall into awkward defensive postures and their faces flare in amazement as though *he* was the dangerous, alien element in the room. Even Hasty seemed stunned by his rudeness and incredible breach of etiquette.

Mallory stuck his head out of the door and asked what was going on. Eddy and Johnny began arguing in Tagalog with their sides turned carefully toward Walter. Hasty told him to shut up and calm the fuck down, to just wait a minute and be cool until he worked everything out. Walter had already lost the upper hand the second he stopped yelling and started observing again. His violence lost its initiative.

Finally, Just-Call-Me-Johnny came over and put his arm around Walter's shoulder, who shrugged it off. "Hey man, calm down. Be comfortable. This is just business. Everything's cool, everything's real cool. No one's going to hurt you—this is my *home*. You just watch TV and we work something out with Hasty. See that?" He turned up the set so that the pitch of the convention speeches competed with the baby's crying. "That's the President talking. He's a great, great man. See how he talks, all calm and everything? His voice can calm you down. People love him. I'm going to be like him someday—hey, right Eddy? And then you be glad you know me. Because I know how to stay calm and how to make friends. I even name my kid for him."

He patted Walter's back and pattered on as though consoling a petulant child. "This is business; you know how that is. We're businessmen. Got to talk tough sometimes to make a bargain, so people don't take advantage, you see? We don't need to be mad and say bad things, call names. We can make a deal. You watch TV for a minute, and I work something out with Hasty."

"I'll wait outside," Walter said. "It does stink in here. Hurry up, man," he said to Hasty.

He stood in the middle of the courtyard like an irresolute prowler, wavering between going back inside and losing himself in the streets. He could see the kids in the street and the women in the whorehouse, hear the plaintive voices in the apartment, and he prayed for his shipmates to leave the house.

After about five minutes they came out in a hurry. “C’mon,” they said, and walked right past him. On the street they walked quickly and talked in a furtive hush. “C’mon,” Hasty said, “let’s move. We should get out of here. Nice move, Schmerz, you asshole. You cost us our ride back.”

Walter looked over his shoulder and got panicky. “I don’t know how to get out of here.”

“I probably know the way,” Hasty said. “Move fast. The sooner we’re out of here the better. Your scene almost cost me the ingredient, Schmerz. Almost lost me the deal. I had to buy a little quantity—at slightly inflating prices which *I* fronted—if you don’t mind. Had to get a whole oh-zee for ya, Schmerz, and a hundred fifty yellow jackets. That’s not bad, fifty apiece. And I didn’t get my turn with the babe, either.”

Mallory laughed under his breath as they jogged along the dirt street. “I got it twice.”

“How was it?”

“Not bad. Love that mama’s milk. Dry cunt, though.”

What’d you *expect*?” Walter said.

“You’re just jealous, asshole. I saw the way you looked at her. You think you’re so much better’n everyone else. And by the way, you let yourself get ripped off by little Johnny junior. Those beers didn’t cost more than six, seven pesos each.”

They turned onto a side alley and could see the evening traffic of Magsaysay Boulevard. The sidewalks shimmered with pedestrian commerce and the jeepneys vainly tooted their horns as they crawled bumper to bumper. Walter took a deep breath at the sight of humanity and the realization that they weren’t being followed, and as their legs changed gear to a slower gait, he felt the over-excited motor in his stomach grind down to a low and sickening disgust. Should he have stopped Mallory? There would always be other Mallorys, just as there were other women like her and other Just-Call-Me-Johnnies and Eddies. In bootcamp the Company Commander had reassured them all that out there in the great wide fleet there was a sailor exactly like each one of them. Walter was not comforted by this thought of a doppelganger.

They ducked into the first bar they came to on the corner, called The White House. His T shirt had turned a shade darker from the sweat and there was a dry fire in his guts. Mallory went to the bar while they plopped into a couple of chairs at a table by the window. He returned with six bottles of San Miguel, banged them on the table so that they all foamed over; then he and Hasty picked their bottles up and clanged them together in a mute toast. Walter gulped down his first beer in two breaths and started on the second one. Mallory and Hasty were both sitting erect, grinning out the window. Fuck you, Walter thought, both of you. I don’t know what I’m doing hanging around with you animals.

Hasty had that eager look in his eyes and smiled elatedly, his head moving back and forth, following the street scene outside the window like a

line judge in a tennis match. “Good shit,” he said. “Now we’re cooking with gas.”

“Gas, hell,” Mallory said. “This shit is gunpowder.”

“You guys did some already?” Walter asked.

“You betcha, sparky. Did it before we left,” Hasty said.

Walter finished off the second beer and thought, I should get out of here. “This just isn’t working,” he said, and ordered them six shots of bourbon. The liquid burned his lips and mouth, down his gullet and into the trouble spot where it met and began to displace the self-hatred, supplanting the queasy heat with a new, bolder kind of blaze. Yeah, he thought, that’s better. Nothing to be done. “Fight fire with fire,” he said. “Let me get some of the speed from you, Hasty.”

A cellophane bag passed under the table with his share of the pills, then came the ounce of pot. He took two yellow jackets, thought about it a second, popped a third one in his mouth and proposed a toast: “Ferdy and Imelda,” and washed the pills down with a shot of whiskey.

With the second shot, the warmth diffused throughout his body, spreading from his core to the outer regions, fingering its way to the boundaries of his skin and mingling with the close air as if they were one element, the way a paper towel dropped on a puddle absorbs the moisture almost immediately but not too quickly for you to see the water crawling over the minute fibers, filament infecting filament in a single liquid moment until puddle and paper are the same density. Sweat dripped down the back of his neck and sogged his armpits. He gave Hasty money for his share of the drugs and then put twenty pesos in front of Mallory. “I order you to go order me another beer. And get me a glass of water too.”

Mallory told him to go to hell, so Walter offered to buy him another. He stuck the beer in his mouth with one hand and poured the water over his head with the other. This set the others both to laughing so hard that Mallory spit a mouthful of beer all over the table and Hasty held his stomach, banging his forehead on the bottle in front of him.

“What’s so funny?” Walter asked. “It’s hot.”

“Wah haw!” Mallory said.

“Hee sheesh sheshe!” Hasty said.

“Mallory shook his beer and sprayed it all over Walter. “Wah ha ha haw!”

Hasty shook his at Mallory. “Hee sheesh shesheshe!”

Walter was laughing now too and turned his bottle upside down on Hasty’s head. What fun. What crazy guys to go on liberty with. You just can’t stay mad at these guys for long.

They were delirious, laughing at everything now, red-faced and breathless, while Walter drifted into himself, locked into his chair by the restraining air, boozed into inertia by the bourbon glow. He got nostalgic for Irene.

Poor thing. What a life, saddled with morose Tom and those kids in their silly Navy housing tract in Connecticut. He wondered what she was doing now, if she still prowled the EM club where she found him. He vaguely recalled the pain in his gut when she brought him home and he realized she was his new chief's wife. She probably got something on the side to replace him. She'd be wet and ready before he even got her pants off, wanting it so bad, and she never failed to come, her cunt grasping him deeper into her, her throat arching with the husky little cries coming out of it. And sometimes she really did cry, saying she wanted to always be with him, her face and chest flushed and her eyes so sad.

He took a slug of beer.

Sad eyes. They all have such sad eyes. Johnny's wife came back in his head. God, he could relish every nook and cranny of her body, from the stout legs to the part in her hair, and all parts in between, as it were. Her eyes knew something, had something that he wanted. And those wispy pubic hairs probably felt like silk.

All the women he'd ever had or wanted began parading across his mind in super-imposed scenes like double-exposed moving pictures, in car seats and beds and parking lots and parks, winter and summer, all kinds. He recalled their breath and their smells, the feel and shape of their bodies during various acts, or merely longing after an alluring face or shape—and through it all the warmth of touching and the life-wetness of sex, the unbearable sweetness of orgasm. Then they were all together in a desperate orgy, sweaty breasts rubbing against his back, stomach, butt and legs, labia on his face and on his cock, and every finger and toe sinking into a warm, wet orifice, above the ground, suspended, surrounded and sustained by women's flesh.

When he saw that his chin was resting on his chest and his eyes were fixed on the floor, he snapped his head up and it felt as though it would keep going until it hit the ceiling. His head and stomach got a liquidy rush as though taking a sudden dip in an elevator. Whee. He bounced in his chair, a Super Ball caroming around the room, his body flying against everything his eyes fell on. Then he went weightless, released from the alcohol and heat, feeling them but detached, above. He was electricity, indestructible, buzzing, floating, profound. A burst of sweetness exploded in his stomach and shot through his blood.

"I'm electric."

Hasty grinned at him. "That's it," he said. "You're coming on. Thought you were nodding for a minute there."

"I think I was. I was dreaming."

"How many'd you take?"

"Three."

"Do another. It's great."

He did, excited as a puppy. He wanted to talk about it. He wanted to go around licking everybody and have them rub his belly. It wanted to do

IT, whatever it was, the main thing, the thing they came here for. His mouth was stuffed with cotton balls dipped in fluoride. He could smell his armpits; he could not blink his eyes. “It’s like, when you think about it, all you are is energy. And you die when all the energy’s used up. It’s all charged particles and atoms and molecules moving around. And your blood moving, and your lungs moving. When you stop moving, when there’s no more heat, you’re dead.”

“Yes, yes,” Hasty said. “And don’t forget chemistry—keeping the right balance, the proper recipe. It’s essential to *feel* right. You’re talking about proportions. Your molecules make your chemistry. Put them together and you got heartbeats that’re making your feet walk and your brain work so you can transmit message from writing on paper to marks and spaces on wavelengths and back onto paper a thousand miles away.

Wow. Listen to me. Yeah, chemistry. And it all depends on chemistry for your little fingers typing the message, making sure you move fast and think fast. Pusan Rock, dude, crystal meth, energy and chemistry—I’m a fucking genius—moving you through the radioshack like a goddamn wizard, and then yellow jackets, maybe a little grass and just the right number of San Miguels and you’re ready for the right kind of liberty and you’re talking like a goddamn motherfucking genius. Hasty liberty!”

“You got that right,” Walter said. “We’re transceivers. Transmitters and receivers. I see where you’re coming from now. So much stuff, so many messages from one tone package, one frequency of electro-magnetic cycles. Wizards, yes. Magic. Alchemy.”

Walter understood now Hasty’s speed habit and his mania in the radioshack. “All those letters being jumbled, converted to DC pulses, de-scrambled and printing back into letters and sentences and paragraphs in ink and paper. Always keying the transmitter. Everything you ever felt and seen and did and thought is pulsing through you right now like pure energy, keying, mixing, converting into this kind of pattern that’s...*us*.”

“We’re fucking brilliant,” Hasty said, sitting at the edge of his chair and leaning on the table with both elbows. “And don’t forget chemistry. The right ingredients make the right pattern.”

“That’s my point. It *is* right just because I’m alive. I am so much *alive*. Think about all the shit we did today. It’s incredible. This place is absolutely in-fucking-credible. There’s nothing else exactly like it—this bar, this town, Just-Call-Me-Johnny, that haze gray piece of shit back at the pier. It’s happening to *us*, and we are at the center of it. Like, it *is* us because we are alive. We have the energy. Do you know what we’re doing here?”

Hasty gave Walter a smirk and growled, “Yeah, right.”

Mallory came back and interrupted as Walter was about to answer his own question, but he might have already lost the train of thought; it was moving so fast. He reached for the flicker, but his brain jammed and he lost it. Instead he was back at midnight in the OK Used Car Lot with

Susan McGiven when he was fifteen and she was a goddess of sixteen saying, “You’re just a little boy,” and then saying, “Yes yes yes yes,” and then it was Irene saying it and then it was Just-Call-Me-Johnny’s wife.

“Know what I was thinking about?” he said.

“Gravity or science or some likely bullshit,” Mallory said.

“Johnny and Eddy and company,” Hasty said.

“Women,” he said.

Hasty looked out the window. “I remember women.”

Hasty didn’t make muster the next morning, but Naval Intelligence did. Their man had apparently fallen out the back of a jeepney on its way from Subic City and been run over by the car behind it. He was carrying a dealer’s quantity of drugs and was currently in a coma. The local police thought the accident smelled.

Stonewalling the agent was easy for Walter and Mallory, but *what if* had reared its ugly head. He did say that was where he was going, Subic City to see his Filipino “wife,” Paz. He said he “valued” her above all others.

They all shook their heads, said “goddamn” and asked how a thing like that could have happened—the answer being, quite easily, actually—but no one seemed genuinely depressed by the news, including Walter, and that bothered him. Where was his conscience? For his part, he wondered if this was because he hadn’t known Hasty long, or because he was in shock or because the pills he kept popping had him moving too fast to worry. He was shooting through a world with no atmosphere to slow him, no friction, a vacuum, and he tried to grasp at the thoughts and feelings that might anchor him; he tried to care as he knew he was supposed to, but those things slipped through his fingers and were lost.

The first thing he thought was that Eddy had carried out his threat, but the guilt and fear instantly dissolved into excitement, and he resolved to simply go with the trajectory to its very end. Hasty would have to tell them what happened when he came out of it. But he died the next day.

“Shit happens,” Mallory said, raising a bottle to his lips in a toast to their newly dead partner. And Walter felt relieved when he said it, as if that was the answer, as if that finalized the matter and somehow absolved him of any further responsibility. The man was gone; the words were said. Shit happens. It was a guilty, furtive feeling, but his mind was racing too fast to examine it, and each pang became a burn of adrenaline that boosted him farther from the parent emotion.

Walter recounted Eddy’s threats and suggested the possibility of foul play, but Mallory insisted that was ridiculous. How could they have arranged that? These Flips were small-time, lightweights. Besides, you don’t kill off customers, and the bums made a little money off them. Besides, do you really want to go to war with the U.S. Navy?

That made sense. They were a ship full of customers, a navy of

customers, hauling a treasury to pay for services: strategic real estate, port facilities, supply depots, entertainment—food, drink, drugs, sex. There was absolutely nothing that you couldn't buy. *You don't kill off customers.* True, but what about parasites who have eaten your soul, and then, if the host aspires to live like the parasite, well where does that leave things? And nations, Walter thought, and then tried not to think.

The rest of that week in Subic Bay seemed like an imperfectly remembered dream with a scary and nauseating edge to it, like when you wake up and realize you were about to vomit in your sleep, the kind where even the tasty parts make your soul uneasy, the kind that is recalled with an ugly feeling of dumb, animal desperation. Each day he'd pop a number of yellow jackets, work on the ship quickly and meticulously, and head out for the bars. After he slaked himself down with a couple of San Miguels, he's pop another pill and smoke a joint to get that high-voltage feeling, to really get his night's liberty in gear. Once he felt right—when his “chemistry was right,” as Hasty had put it—he'd head for a massage parlor and act out the same little fantasy plays every night.

After the parlor scene he'd head back out to the street and find Mallory in one of their beginning-the-evening bars where they would start to drink in earnest. He found that if he just let himself go, if he didn't struggle or think but allowed himself to plunge headlong into experience and sensation, that he was capable of anything. And in this state, he found that he was beginning to actually enjoy Mallory—this was *his* level. And he knew how to have fun, get crazy, forget worrying about things.

During the course of bar hopping Walter would say to him, “Mallory, for a redneck asshole, you ain't sech a bad sort to kill a few beers and slay a few ladies with. Not bad atall.” Then Mallory would get misty-eyed and sloppy and say something like, “Schmerz, I know I'm a asshole and I can't seem to help it. But lemme give ya for what it's worth: the world'd be a better place if it was more like you. Hell lot better.” Then maybe he'd howl like a wolf or scream “I love you!” at a waitress, veins sticking out of his thick neck and black hair matted to his forehead.

They would move from bar to bar, drinking a few beers in each, talking to all the working women, looking for the perfect one to spend the night with, the one who suited their particular moods and tastes for that night, promising at least one hostess in each place that they would be back for her. Walter was a slobbering bloodhound surrounded by the scent of quarry, addled, intoxicated, awash in the odor of Woman, and he wanted to devour it all: womanhair, womanflesh, womaneyes. He'd fuck and drink himself into exhaustion by two in the morning, then get up a few hours later, pop some pills, head for the ship and begin the daily routine again.

But by the end of the week he had grown used to the speed-induced mania and carried out the routine more with grim purpose than relish. His mind ached with a low-grade fever of anxiety and his soul felt tired, washed

of humor or joy, gray as the ship he sailed. Still, the drugs kept his body moving, compelled him on to further experience, insisted on going one step farther each night.

Their last night in Subic, Mallory and Walter got off work early and went into town to hit some bars they hadn't been in yet. Toward the far end of the boulevard where it nears the mountains, they came across a place called Paradise, and he remembered that Al had told him to go there. Mimi. Al was about a girl called Mimi. It had the usual hall full of rooms upstairs, but there was a cool beer garden in the back that was quiet in the early evening.

They sat in the beer garden with their feet up on the table, sipping San Miguels. The girl who got the beer asked if she could join them and they said what the hell.

"You like me?" she asked.

"Why, yes hell, little darling," Mallory said.

"We love you no bullshit," Walter said.

"Very funny. I like you," she said to Walter. "You are cute."

"Wanna play smile?" Mallory asked half-heartedly.

"I don't like that game," she said.

"Fuck it. They ain't enough here to play, anyhow."

"What's smile?"

"Girl goes under the table. Dudes are unzipped. First one to smile buys a round."

"What ship do you come from?" she asked.

"Oh, never mind all that 'what ship' bullshit."

She looked at Walter. "You go bar hopping tonight?"

"Yeah, we're going bar hopping."

"You take me bar hopping with you? Please? Please take me with you."

"How much you cost?" Mallory asked.

She looked at the ground. "Mamasan want three hundred fifty pesos."

"Shit," Mallory said. "I could drink all night and screw all night and still have carfare home, for that much."

"It's because you're so pretty," Walter said to her. And she was, in a sweet way, girlish, teasingly young, with still bright, attentive eyes, her hair in a ponytail and bangs, her pink painted little piggies wriggling on her sandals.

"You please take me bar hopping with you?" she answered. "Please? Mamasan is a nasty bitch. Please? I hate her. We can have fun. I can dance. Please? I do anything for you. I'll suck your dick I'll lick your ass."

"Why, you can do that right here," Mallory said.

She turned to Walter. "Then you stay here and don't go bar hopping. I'm too lonely."

"You know a girl named Mimi?" Walter asked.

She smiled and hugged him, licked his ear and said in a playful, husky voice, “Why you want Mimi for? You want me to be Mimi for you? I can be Mimi.”

“You’re too much of a cutie pie to be a Mimi. I just want to say hello to her for a friend.”

“What friend?”

“Get Mimi and we’ll find out.”

“But I *am* Mimi. Tell me who, please? I don’t know about cutie pie. Mimi is my name.”

“She’s full of shit,” Mallory said.

“Know a guy called Al Turner?” Walter asked.

“He is my boyfriend! Where is he? Is he here?”

“She knows Turner like I know the inside of her fat mamasan’s asshole,” Mallory said. “Never happened. You see her? She *is* a nasty bitch, though.”

“I know Al Turner,” she said. “I can prove it.” She giggled and pointed between her legs. “He is crooked down here.”

“I wouldn’t know about that,” Walter said.

“He ain’t here,” Mallory said, “but we are. You want to take us top-side to see your picture collection?”

“You can see them if you want.”

“*Both* of us?” He smiled and winked at Walter. “Can we both go up to your room? You know. In other words, how much for a Mimi sandwich? Hey Schmerz, ever have a Mimi sandwich?”

“Can’t say as I have, cutie pie like that.”

Mallory went to the bar to pay Mamasan for the sandwich. While he was gone Mimi asked Walter to spend the night with her, to get rid of Mallory after the trick or take her bar hopping with him. She said Mamasan was a nasty bitch and she was afraid of being lonely.

When Mallory had paid for her, Mimi took them both by the hand and up the stairs while Mamasan smiled on them with a fatty squint. Her room was papered with magazine advertisements and snapshots of her and other girls in the company of various American sons: cherry boys, older men, whoremongers.

“I show you my boyfriend, Alvin,” she said, and produced a photo album from the top drawer of her bureau while they sat on her bed. She honored Al with an entire page of snapshots.

“What do you know about that,” Walter said. All the pictures were taken within the confines of the Paradise—in the beer garden, in the bar, in Mimi’s room. Apparently she didn’t get out much. There he was with her, his familiar, goofy smile and rippled forehead looking right at Walter. For some reason it made him uneasy. Snapshots of a friend. Homeboy. Here in the middle of this. He had told Walter to come here and now he was winking at him from the photo album of the legendary Mimi. Gotcha.

“Is he a good friend?” she asked. “Is he coming here soon? I miss Alvin. He is so funny.”

“I miss Alvin too, that fuck,” Walter said, and though he meant it, he found himself growing angry at him. He didn’t belong here; Mallory did. Of course, she couldn’t really care that much about him; it was just good business. They always do that. Everyone’s got to have hope. Write letters, take pictures—write letters, keep pictures, wait, hope, hope for the man who will see something extra special inside them, hope for something special. Isn’t that love? And Al cared enough, found her special enough, to recommend her as a good lay. Now his smile was ironic, nodding at Walter’s exposed complicity in something unfair and ugly.

*He is my boyfriend.* Mimi sandwich. She’d lick his asshole for a chance to get out for awhile and go bar hopping, or just to keep his manly self around for the night, Walter thought. Her youthful orifices and organs had already accommodated and endured a fleet of strangers, all for a chance to get out of “thee village in thee province,” to be trafficked, to see a little of the world—mostly from the business end of someone’s prick—to make a little money, to have a little fun, to win a night’s freedom from Mamasan, to please a “boyfriend” into returning, into loving her and marrying her and taking her away to a real home where she can go bowling and play bingo and have nice friends and nice things in her place on Navy Housing.

*Mimi beats anything you’ll find on The Honcho.* Flip whore. *Niggers of the WestPac.* The Japanese import the men as entertainers and musicians; they charter boats to Manila on whoring expeditions, hundreds of convention-eers filing off pleasure ships in their blue serge suits, styrofoam boaters and carnivorous grins, sweeping through the bar districts like conquering hordes of businessmen, riding their penises like toy ponies, wielding their yen like flashing swords that they shove down native throats as they loot, copulating with the population in a flood of semen, then letting the ebb carry them back to their homeland. *They stopped fucking here in seventy-three.*

“I didn’t come all this way just to gawk at some goddamn pictures of Turner,” Walter said angrily, mad at the sudden fear that consumed him. He was afraid of himself, and for Mimi. He was afraid of Mimi’s pathetic loneliness and of his own desperate flight from sadness, afraid that he was falling in love for the same kind of reasons as Mimi. He looked around at the wallpaper and it seemed to grow a shade darker, as if the sun was setting faster than his pupils could dilate, and that seemed a sad thing. His body had been growing inured to the drugs and he couldn’t tell if they were keeping him high or not. He swallowed the last two pills.

“That’s bad,” she said. “Don’t take pills.”

“I know,” Walter said, “how caring. He’s not going to marry you.”

“What?”

“Anyway, pity isn’t the same thing, is it? Anyway, I hate sadness.” He looked in her mirror and saw black rings under his bloodshot eyes and

unsmiling lips drawn tight over teeth that were clenched from a week of speeding. “My eyes are dimming. It’s not just the pills, you know. They want to stop seeing all the time. They want to stop thinking about what they see.”

Mallory turned a page of the album and laughed. “Lookit this.”

It was a Polaroid of Al and another man standing naked, with Mimi sitting naked between them, their erect penises in each of her upturned hands. All three smiling at the camera.

“Don’t look crooked to me,” Mallory said. “Maybe ‘cause she’s holdin’ it.”

“Who’s the other guy?”

“That’s Haggard. I told you about him—Turner’s buddy.”

Haggard again. And Turner. There seemed to be no escaping these people. He felt as though he was experiencing some else’s *deja vu*, as though he was merely the ghost of someone else’s life, a gray flashback, an afterthought. Where was the stuff of Walter Schmerz? Where was the substance of *his* life?

“They’re no better than you are, Mallory,” he said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I don’t feel like doing this sandwich deal. Look, wanna just take her bar hopping with us?”

“Fuck you. Don’t get flakey on me, man. I paid for it and I’m goin’ for it.”

Walter stood up. “Well, I’m not. Bye, Mimi. It was nice meeting you.”

She frowned and held onto his arm.

“What’s eating you, Schmerz. Ah, go on, ya non-hacker. Lightweight.”

He smiled a smile that was glad with mischief. “Better be careful out there. It’s a cold world. Look out for the bad guys and don’t sit in the back of no jeepneys.”

“Nice try,” Walter said.

“I’m not kiddin’.”

“You said yourself they wouldn’t have done it.”

“Maybe I lied. Maybe I was just tryin’ to make you feel better, long as we was running partners and I had to put up with ya. Maybe they’re after you. I had some time to think. You ain’t the only one that thinks, Schmerz. I know If I was them Flips I wouldn’t just let it go.”

“Who is after you?” Mimi asked.

“No one,” Walter said. “I didn’t notice you looking over *your* shoulder the past few days.”

“I don’t have to. They ain’t mad at me. You should of heard ‘em after you went outside, though. They was pissed at Hasty for bringin’ you and ‘cause he was givin’ em a hard time about money and wouldn’t buy all they wanted. Said it was peanuts, or some such shit. Some heavy words came down. I said I was just along for the ride, no problems. But when we got out of there, they was some very unhappy Flips. And they was *really* pissed at you—stompin’ around like that in the man’s home, talkin’ about fuckin’ people up. Ol’ Johnny boy didn’t even like the way you looked at his wife.”

## Liberty Call

“*Me?* You were that one that did her!”

“Seems that way, don’t it. You know how crazy Flips are. They don’t think like us. Said he had his pride. What can I say?”

“Say *sayonara* you lying sack of shit.”

Mimi tugged at Walter’s arm. “Please take me with you.”