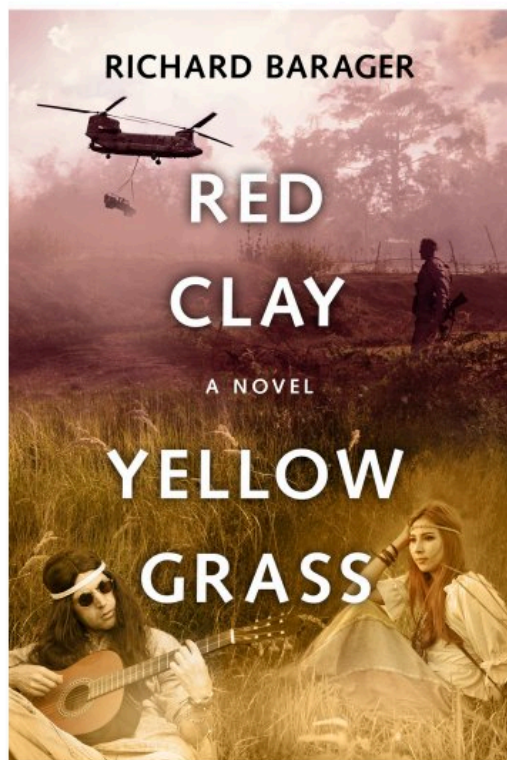


RED CLAY, YELLOW GRASS

A Novel of the 1960s



Richard Barager

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**RED CLAY, YELLOW GRASS**

**A Novel of the 1960s**

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Books by Richard Barager

*The Atheist and the Parrotfish*¹



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*Red Clay, Yellow Grass: A Novel of the 1960s*<sup>2</sup>

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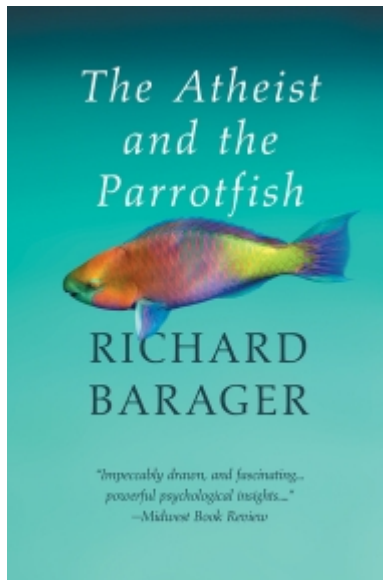
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# **Dedication**

*For Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment, Khe Sanh,  
Vietnam, 1968.*

# PART 1

“Honor isn’t about making the right choices. It’s about dealing with the consequences.”

~ *Sophocles*

# Chapter 1

DAVID NOBLE GAZED IN awe at the power of their bewitchment. Oh, how things had changed. The swarm of students that clotted Northrop Mall that first day of fall quarter bore little resemblance to those from the year before, when he'd been a wide-eyed University of Minnesota freshman, numb with gratitude over escaping the serial foster homes of his youth.

The mod revolution loosed by London's Carnaby Street had yet to strike Minneapolis with full force back then. Coeds with bouffant hairdos had still worn knee-length gingham skirts, white blouses, and fuzzy sweaters that dangled from their shoulders. Big men on campus had slicked their hair with pomade and worn button-down shirts tucked into belted pants. Those earnest faces and conventional clothes of 1965, the last vestiges of conformity their soon-to-be-dismayed parents would enjoy before the shocking laxity came, had vanished.

Now, a year later, students bore mischievous looks on their faces, as if gauging how much fun they could get away with before shedding the chrysalis of youth to fly wet-winged into the tempest. Girls wore tweed skirts and mid-calf boots, or flared bell-bottoms over square-toed shoes, with hair that flowed shoulder to waist, soft and natural—or chopped short like Twiggy's. Frat boys in hip-hugging slacks sported colorful print shirts and hair hanging over their collars, void of oil or sheen.

The mall, lined by red brick, neoclassical buildings with limestone trim and colonnaded porticos, was bounded on the south by Coffman Memorial Union, and on the opposite end by Northrop Auditorium, where David now stood. Leafy oaks and maples scant weeks from flaming into seasonal foliage shaded broad sidewalks. A

pair of droning mowers glinted in the morning light, lifting the sodden scent of dewy grass off the mall's inner rectangle of lawn.

David brought his gaze to rest on a throng of students halfway down the western promenade, in front of Walter Library, where Jackie had told him to meet her. A speaker at the foot of the stairs engaged the audience, and a girl in a gray sweatshirt handed out fliers.

He weaved down the busy walk and spotted Jackie toward the back of the crowd, monochromatic-hip in a brown mini with matching boots and cashmere sweater. Her blonde hair, restrained in front by a checkered headband, fell to mid-spine.

He eased next to her and took her by the arm. "What's this about?"

This long-legged girl with pouty lips and lapis blue eyes turned to him. Fair of complexion and lightly freckled, Jackie Lundquist possessed a devastating blend of midwestern wholesomeness and center-fold wantonness. Two summers before, she had been crowned Miss Robbinsdale, named for the Minneapolis suburb from which she hailed.

She grinned and took his hand. "I'm glad you came. They're handing out leaflets for a teach-in at Coffman Union. The guy talking is in SDS—Kyle Levy. I met him in class."

He studied Levy's angular face, the sloped nose and pointed jaw. Bony of shoulder and slouched of stance, with messy black hair that covered his forehead and ears, his dark eyes blazed as his rich baritone rang out, strong and determined.

"Let me set you straight about Vietnam." He scanned the crowd and jabbed a finger in the air. "We're not there to protect the South Vietnamese from communism. We're there to make South Vietnam an American colony that trades our currency and welcomes our companies. It's called neocolonialism, and its goal is to impose a *Pax Americana* on the entire world."

David gave Jackie a nudge. "What's SDS?"

She cocked her head and shot him a quizzical look. "Are you serious? Students for a Democratic Society. They're against the war. Listen."

"Article 3 of the Geneva Accords," Levy went on, "called for an internationally supervised election to unify the country. Ho Chi Minh would have won that election, but with America's blessing, South Vietnamese President Ngo Din Diem prevented a vote from taking place. And America was *party* to the Geneva Accords. So here we are, a decade later, still propping up Diem's illegitimate government. Yet we have the audacity to pretend that we're protecting South Vietnam from communist invaders. If it weren't for us, there would be no war!"

David could tell by the disillusioned faces around him, like children who blundered across an uncle climbing into a red Santa suit, that Levy had hit his mark.

Levy climbed one stair higher and changed his cadence. "Many young Americans can't vote, but we can die, can't we? Three thousand already. And for what? American imperialism?" His face contorted with righteous anger. "Say no to war!"

A burst of raucous agreement erupted, fists in the air, cries of "Right on!" and "Tell it like it is!"

His words provoked something altogether different in David. Anger, yes, but not at America: at her accusers. Barry Sadler's solemn hymn, "The Ballad of the Green Berets," thrummed in his head. The song's chorus rolled off his tongue above the clamor, plangent and on key.

The stunned flock of students turned around to see who would dare sing such an insult.

Levy's ebony eyes locked onto him amongst a flurry of catcalls directed David's way. "Not exactly progressive rock," he said through a thin smile, "but to each his own, brother, to each his own. Come

to our teach-in and maybe you'll see things differently." He filled his hands with pamphlets and began to work the crowd one-on-one.

David glanced at Jackie, who shook her head and said, "That was very uncool."

He shrugged. "It just came out."

"It's embarrassing! People will think *I* like that stupid song too."

He gestured at Levy. "What people are we talking about here? The guy with the big voice?"

Jackie stood akimbo, her face incredulous. "I go out with you one time and you're laying a possessiveness trip on me?"

"Jeez, what are you getting so worked up about? He got under my skin, that's all. And it is *not* a stupid song. I teared up the first time I heard it."

"You are such a dip. We have nothing in common."

*One date, one fight: not good.*

He groped for a response, a reset to where they were—before the peacenik pissed him off. "Okay, maybe singing about the Green Berets at an antiwar rally wasn't such a great idea." He flashed an arch grin. "But will you still go out with me Friday?"

"To what? An *ROTC* meeting?" She spun and walked away.



David moped past Smith and Kolthoff Halls, a green-eyed, marble-bodied nineteen-year-old who walked with a deliberate, forward-leaning gait, as if bracing for another of life's blows. With unfashionably short hair, a strong brow, and a defiant cleft chin, his face could have been limned and framed for West Point, a poster paragon of the ideal cadet.

Living in America that year was like riding on Cyclone, the wooden roller coaster at Excelsior Amusement Park, where David had been only twice in his life—once with the fourth of his seven sets

of foster parents, and again a week ago with Jackie, whom he had met while registering for fall classes.

The entire country bristled, awash with color and sound. Pop culture churned out new delights weekly: Mary Quant miniskirts, white go-go boots, flashcubes, color broadcasting on all three networks, and static-free radio. Above all, David loved the music—the soul-searing, mind-bending music: blues, soul, folk rock, pop rock, and psychedelic rock. Music by the young, for the young, a generational line-in-the-sand so absolute as to be a virtual Berlin wall. It brought groundbreaking albums from the Beatles and Bob Dylan, and a flood of innovative singles, including the most unlikely hit of all, “The Ballad of the Green Berets,” a song about patriotic sacrifice by a staff sergeant named Barry Sadler.

Yet amidst the creative explosion of fashion and music and movies that made him grateful to be alive during such a time, darker forces had muscled onto the scene. So far, that year alone, Richard Speck had stabbed eight student nurses to death in their dorm in Chicago, a lunatic named Whitman had gunned down thirteen from a clock tower in Texas, and the bloody mess called Vietnam loomed larger by the day.

He trundled across a footbridge that arched over Washington Avenue to Coffman Union, an Art Deco-style student building that included a bowling alley, a billiard room, a myriad of grills and study areas, and a ballroom that once hosted Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller. He took the stairs to a second-floor lounge, and sprawled on a dilapidated wing chair to figure out how to go about changing Jackie’s mistaken impression that he was a dip—short for dipshit, an insult he got his fill of the preceding summer as the only college boy on a city roofing crew.

Did she think he was a dip for tearing up over “The Ballad of the Green Berets,” or for singing it when he did? Probably both, but

whatever the case, one thing was clear: Jackie and Kyle Levy had a different view of what America was fighting for in Vietnam than he did.

General Mills, a local denizen of the capitalist system Levy blamed the war on, had funded David's college scholarship. Corporate generosity had given him—a forsaken child, a castaway who bounced from one foster home to another—a scrabbling chance in life. He not only didn't loathe the bourgeoisie, he aspired to it. Its existence gave him hope. *Pax Americana*—the rest of the world should be so lucky. There was a reason people called America the land of opportunity. Compared to Hugo's Paris or Dickens's London—the classics he escaped to during his demoralizing youth, reading behind woodsheds, and in trees, and under the covers with a flashlight—success was there for the taking in America.

He thought back to his date with Jackie a week ago. He didn't own a car, so she had driven. She pulled up to the steep-roofed, dormered home in Dinkytown, where he rented a room, in a red Mustang convertible her father had bought for her when she graduated from high school. They took off with the top down and KDWB wide open. She gunned it to eighty-five when they reached Highway 12 heading west, singing at the top of her lungs to "Shapes of Things" by the Yardbirds, her wind-whipped hair a mess.

The rush of her hurtling sports car and the fuzzy feedback of Jeff Beck's guitar swept David into the moment. He sang along, antiwar song or not, as untroubled and joyous as he'd ever been. So it went the entire day, Jackie in the lead, racing from one attraction to the next like a child on a sugar high, even though she'd been to Excelsior countless times before—including the night the Rolling Stones played at Danceland, the park's ballroom, in 1964. She confessed that, at the time, she didn't like them; they hadn't yet perfected their snarling brand of rock, their first hit record still a year away. Together the two of them staggered through the Barrel Walk, where they tumbled and spun like a load of clothes in a dryer; navigated the Fun



House's gunnysack slide and distorting mirrors; and rode out Cyclone's stomach-tossing plunges again and again, to satisfy her reckless zest.

David had been there only one other time, with foster mother Number Four, a hopeless drunk who drove off a bridge and died a week later. He had longed ever since to be like the rest of the children at the park that day, normal kids having fun without the grinding worry that went with being a serial foster child, always waiting for your walking papers, never knowing when the current gig would end and you'd be packed off to someone new, someone even worse.

How uncanny that Jackie insisted on Excelsior for their first date. And how was it that at nineteen, she hadn't outgrown the goofy delight of having air blown up her ass in a Fun House? He had never met anyone like her, had never known anyone with her insatiable appetite for thrills, for kicks. For life. She was like an impish, mirthful changeling—in a temptress's body.

Late that afternoon, amidst the democratizing scent of corn dogs and cotton candy, she took his arm, seized by yet another impulse, another craving. "Take me on the Ferris wheel," she urged.

The request surprised him. It didn't seem like a Jackie kind of ride, more something her parents might have done—while she rammed ten-year-olds at bumper cars.

"Why the Ferris wheel?"

She took his hand and mugged while singing her answer, and though David knew the lyrics to Freddy Cannon's ode to amusement park love by heart, he had never known if a place called Palisades Park really existed or not—and if it did, where it was. Whenever he heard the song on the radio, he pictured couples across the country necking in tunnels of love, all over each other in amusement parks just like Excelsior. He fell dead-bang in love with her at the top of the Ferris wheel, swaying to and fro sixty feet above ground, where she finished him off with a long, slow kiss glazed in cherry lip-gloss.

He returned to the moment with a sigh, staring at the study lounge's dingy ceiling as he mulled his options for Friday night. He wasn't in ROTC—she knew that, of course—though he *might* have been without General Mills' generosity. A line of homespun wisdom about getting past a lovers' quarrel came into his head.

*Take her to something you detest, but she enjoys. Sweet forgiveness will follow.*



For penance, David invited Jackie to a cult film at the Campus Theater—*Un Homme et une Femme*—followed by a pot party on Huron Avenue. He half hoped she would reject the offer, but she told him she looked forward to the movie and would be at his place by seven. A French film with subtitles: the excruciating cost of atonement.

She parked her Mustang out front and they walked to the theater, located at Oak and Washington. Even among the parade of hipsters streaming inside, Jackie stood out with her white headband, silver stretch top with matching tights, plastic white mini, and flat-heeled white boots.

David wore a black turtleneck and corduroys, but with his short hair and athletic build, he looked more like the burglar/hero of the television series *T.H.E. Cat* than a London mod. Fragrance was a standoff, David reeking of Brut and Jackie redolent of the hyacinth-and-jasmine scent of Fidji.

Hailed for avant-garde camera angles and transitions from black-and-white to color to sepia, the movie was about a widow and widower who fell in love after becoming friends, but who then failed to consummate their love on account of the woman's guilt over her deceased husband. David found the film visually appealing, but intellectually unsatisfying. What was its point—that celibacy was the purest expression of grief? He kept his opinions to himself, though,

because Jackie seemed enthralled and gave him full credit. Maybe next week they could see *Thunderball*.

He had been invited to the party, held in a ground floor unit of a three-story apartment building two blocks east of the theater, by a neighbor, on the condition that he bring a “foxy chick.” They passed inspection at the door and stepped inside a darkened living room, its only contents a shabby blue sofa, a poster of Lichtenstein’s *Whaam!* and a stereo playing “Eight Miles High” by the Byrds. Candles strewn about cast a wavering light over fifteen or twenty students in all manner of dress: frumpy skirts, tattered sweaters, a boy in a jacket and tie, a girl in a checked mini and bowler hat. A frayed, thin blanket on the floor accommodated eight. The rest of them milled about, grooving to the music.

On the couch, a vacant-faced preppie tapped a bongo wedged between his knees. A stringy-haired campus pothead named Dexter lay couchant on the blanket, where he expertly fashioned joints with a roller donated by a Loring Park pusher who sold him the grass—for five bucks a dozen, Dexter informed them. He passed each one around as it came on line. A cannabis-infused haze filled the unventilated room.

Its musky smell clung to David’s shirt. He took Jackie’s hand and squeezed onto the blanket next to the neighbor who’d invited them, Paul, a florid redhead who offered Jackie a hit.

“You weren’t kidding about bringing a fox, were you?” he said to David while looking at Jackie.

She winked and cupped her hand around the joint, took a ferocious, cheek-puckering drag, and passed it to David like a precious baton.

Though it may have appeared otherwise from his stiff-fingered pinch, David’s marijuana maidenhead had already been claimed. One Saturday last summer, after tacking down the last shingle of a side job re-roofing Paul’s duplex, Paul met him at the bottom of the ladder

with a lighted doobie. Under his neighbor's instruction, he drew smoke and held it until his lungs burned.

"Inhaling hits your brain faster than shooting up," Paul had assured him, like a car salesman touting a Corvette over a Barracuda.

David had felt the promised buzz within minutes. His body tingled, and by the time the once-fat joint had been reduced to a skimpy roach, he understood things he never even considered before: how ten thousand Greeks enveloped forty thousand Persians at Marathon; that the long, slow death march of the English monarchy began in a meadow named Runnymede; how Rousseau begot Marx. He'd climbed back up the ladder, stood at the edge of the roof, and contemplated what it would be like to leap into the crepuscular splendor, high above it all—to see the full chromatic spectrum with blinding clarity, in Technicolor. Only Paul's hysterical giggles had yanked him back to the here and now and kept him from plunging off the roof like a drunken platform diver. He backed away from the precipice and eased down the ladder, but what he'd learned was that the mildly hallucinogenic effect of marijuana was, for him, not so mild.

He took the joint Jackie had passed him and held it to his lips, pretending to take a hit without actually clamping his lips around it. After a moment, he let loose a plosive gust, as if at the limit of his hold, while the rest of the room toked away for real.

Dexter presided over the magic blanket like a dazed magus speaking runic phrases, compulsively recycling every ratty-looking roach.

Jackie sucked each communal joint, and quaffed the sweet red wine being passed around, with the focus of a rat in a Skinner box. Eyes reddened. Tongues loosened. Jackie scrambled to her feet. "Victuals, people! I need victuals!" she said to no one in particular. She charged off to the kitchen with her blonde mane trailing like a palomino's tail.

Talk turned to something called the New Left. David listened closely enough to gather that the New Left, of which Students for a Democratic Society seemed an integral part, was a movement of young radicals committed to a new communist paradigm—without the Stalinist purges of the Old Left. They started in on Vietnam, but to his relief became distracted by a debate over Simon and Garfunkel's *Sounds of Silence*—to Dexter an album of sublime importance—and the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds*, which Dexter dismissed as surf crap.

This David could not resist. “Sloop John B’ is hardly surf music,” he interrupted. “And *Pet Sounds* is way more complex than *Sounds of Silence*.”

Dexter stuck an unsteady finger into the air. “Simon and Garfunkel are poets, man.”

David shook his head. “Yeats is a poet. Simon and Garfunkel are singer-songwriters. And ‘Sloop John B’ was lifted from a West Indies folk song made known by Carl Sandburg... if you like poets.”

Dexter got on all fours and squinted at him. “What the fuck is with this ‘Sloop John B’ rap? Do I even know you?”

Jackie reappeared with her headband askew and eyes rimmed red. She gave a scampish grin and shoved Dexter’s shoulder, tipping him onto his side.

“Hey, knock it off!” he yelled. He looked up at her and blinked. “Else I’ll cut you off and you can find your own pot.”

“I take full responsibility for David,” she told him. “What can I say? He’s cute.”

Dexter righted himself. “To you, maybe,” he mumbled. “To me, he’s a redneck.”

She knelt beside David, ran her fingers through his hair, and murmured in his ear. “Dexter’s getting on my nerves. Take me back to your place.”

Thirty minutes later, he guided her up the stairs of his duplex and across the threshold of the dimly lit room he'd furnished during a one-day spree at a local consignment shop. An oaken rolltop desk with a keyless tambour sat opposite a nicked-up, three-drawer, maple bureau and matching bed.

Right up to the moment she stuck her tongue in his mouth and began dry-humping him, there was nothing David wanted more than the slim thighs of Jackie Lundquist wrapped tightly around him. Now her boozy breath and insistent grinding triggered an unseemly vision of foster mother Number Six, greedily sating herself on his sixteen-year-old body, a succubus sending him to class in the morning with the smell of her still on his skin, her policeman husband clueless. Yet for all his compunction, on the nights she didn't come to him, he lay awake hoping she would, the creak of a floorboard enough to make him achingly hard.

It had ended only when her husband came home early from a night shift and discovered his fleshy, thirty-eight-year-old wife astride their teenage foster son, her head thrown back, breasts flailing. David recalled the concussive report of the shots fired from his service revolver, the bullets narrowly clearing his wife's lolling head before they bored into the wall behind her with a thud.

How to explain to Jackie that ever since Number Six, he no longer trusted feral passions of the night? "Come back tomorrow when it's light," he whispered through a soft kiss. "The first time's better that way."

## Chapter 2

JACKIE DID COME BACK. In the week that followed, they spent every possible moment in David's meager room, where he employed all the wisdom the voracious Number Six had imparted to him: where to touch a woman and how, when to talk dirty and when to shut up, when to murmur the L word.

"You're good in bed," Jackie told him after a bout of lovemaking, the two of them side by side between the sheets. A wisp of smoke snaked into the air behind them, strawberry incense burning in an ashtray of Buddha she had placed on his dresser. It filled the room with its cloying scent. "You don't rush. Did you have an older girlfriend or something?"

"Older. Not exactly a girlfriend." He refused to credit Number Six. Any debt he owed her, for having transformed him from her bumbling teenage paramour into a proficient adult lover, he'd more than paid back through her mutual gratification. "It's not something I want to talk about."

Jackie shot straight up in bed. Their rumpled top sheet fell away and draped her like a toga. Her left breast lolled free, its large areola a splash of cinnamon, dotted by a tumid nipple. Her face tensed with an eagerness that alarmed him. "Was she a prostitute?" she asked.

He should have lied when she told him he was good in bed, should have told her he had learned what to do in *Playboy*. Instead, he had triggered a beauty queen's killer instinct to compare, contrast, and destroy the competition.

"Come on, I need to know what I have to live up to here," she demanded.

There was no getting around it now; he was looking into the eyes of a tigress marking her territory. He propped up on one elbow and told her the whole lurid truth. He finished with his bitter recollection.

tion of the clueless caseworker that had handed him over to a predator like Number Six in the first place. She'd later yanked David back to that deplorable youth shelter on Portland Avenue, and then placed him with his final set of foster parents, religious lunatics who insisted he attend Mass daily to save himself from the perdition Number Six had surely damned him to.

"They should have taken her license away," he said. "I would have been better off living on the street."

"You banged your foster mother?" A look of adulation crossed her face, as if his seduction at the hands of Number Six were some bawdy rite of passage he should be proud of, a defining moment that conferred credibility on him, sexual cachet.

He dropped his gaze and lowered his voice. "There's nothing in life I'm more ashamed of."

"I don't believe in shame," she chirped. "Shame was invented by organized religion to control our desires. I don't want to control mine. I want to satisfy them—all of them. Before I die, I mean. My greatest fear is that I won't."

It was his first glimpse of Jackie's utter disbelief in consequences, an unsettling aperçu into their future. "You sound like Wolf Larson in London's *Sea Wolf*," he said. "The meaning of human existence summed up by man's need to fill his belly."

Her eyes glistened and she touched the tip of his nose with her finger. "Wolfie baby was right. Our urges determine us, either striving to tame them or striving to indulge them." The corners of her mouth turned up. "What's your greatest fear? Not getting all A's?"

"Dying as anonymously as I was raised."

A look of genuine pity came over her. "Oh! That's so sad. It bums me out." She brightened and took his hand. "I have an idea. Why don't you audit the history class I'm taking? So we can spend more time together."



A sudden suspicion gripped him. “That’s not the class Levy’s in, is it?”

Her solicitous expression soured. “What does that matter? I just think you’d like Professor Devlin, that’s all. He tells the whole story.”

“About what?”

“America. It’s not all Yankee Doodle and Betsy Ross, you know. He gives both sides.”

David snorted. “How do you give both sides of the Louisiana Purchase? Teach it in French?”

She cuffed his shoulder, and the sheet slid off her and puddled in her lap. Her breasts fascinated him. “By asking what Thomas Jefferson asked—if the Louisiana Purchase was constitutional? That’s what makes Devlin so great. He teaches alternative perspectives.”

He looked at her determined face and marveled at the irrepresible and universal desire of women to improve their men. She had begun tentatively at first, gently suggesting that he grow his hair out, then more assertively, by telling him to stop saying “cripes” and “jeez” because it sounded so Minnesota. And now this—mind-opening for dips.

“I don’t know how many alternative perspectives I can handle these days.”

She inched the sheet off her lap, slowly, tantalizing him. “How about this?” she cooed. “Can you handle more of this?”

Her tight blonde tangle made him mute with desire—and surrender. Hell, he’d register for underwater gargling, if she asked him to. He climbed atop her, but a moment after his triumphant explosion an old fear gripped him.

How long before Jackie Lundquist, like his mother long ago, made him anonymous again?



A gloomy layer of stratus hung low over the downtown skyline, scraping the Foshay Tower and foreshadowing the savage winter to come. David made it halfway across the pedestrian deck of the Washington Avenue Bridge before the sky opened and spewed a cold autumn rain onto his uncovered head. He cleared the bridge with a shiver and scuttered over to Blegen Hall, a four-story, contemporary building on the fledgling West Bank campus. He bolted up the stairs two at a time, with his jeans clinging to his thighs, his Jack Purcell's squeaking, and the three-dollar serge shirt he bought at a surplus store in Dinkytown hanging soaked and heavy from his shoulders.

He'd come to audit "Nineteenth-Century American History: The Era of Manifest Destiny"—on the third floor. He ducked into a restroom to towel off before going down the hall to room 308.

Jackie sat in the fifth row of a packed classroom. She had saved the desk next to her by laying her umbrella across it.

He shuffled over and pressed his chilled lips against her warm, soft cheek. Outside, a staccato of rain beat against the classroom's metal-mullioned windows as David settled beside her.

Kyle Levy sat two rows in front of them, in a green plaid Pendleton shirt. He twisted in his chair and shifted his gaze from Jackie to David and back again, his vulpine face and calculating eyes cold and impassive. After a moment, he gave David a friendly nod and smile, which David acknowledged with a terse nod of his own.

Thomas Devlin, a thickset, ruddy-faced man with whorls of silver hair and knobby hands, began his lecture by writing *Manifest Destiny: Divine Duty or Land Grab?* on the blackboard. He wore a heringbone jacket and wing tips that made him look like an interloper from another era.

David learned during the first part of the lecture that journalist John L. O'Sullivan coined the *phrase* Manifest Destiny in 1845, in support of the annexation of the Republic of Texas, but that the *idea* of it could be traced to the Monroe Doctrine, with its warning to

Europe to stay out of the Western Hemisphere. They argued at the time, Devlin explained from behind his lectern, that enforcement of the doctrine was best achieved by consolidating North America under one flag, to establish a buffer against Great Britain. To better illustrate the point, he pulled a pair of reading glasses from inside his jacket and read a quote from a letter John Quincy Adams had written to his father.

*“The whole continent of North America appears to be destined by Divine Providence to be peopled by one nation, speaking one language, professing one general system of religious and political principles, and accustomed to one general tenor of social usages and customs. For the common happiness of them all, for their peace and prosperity, I believe it is indispensable that they should be associated in one federal Union.”*

He set his glasses and notes aside and paced with hands clasped behind him. “By 1843, the public’s perception of the United States as a virtuous nation destined by God to spread liberty and democracy was well-entrenched, and the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny had become a moral imperative.

“But not everyone agreed. Opponents of Manifest Destiny believed that it sprang from a dangerous mix of nationalism, racism, and religious zealotry, rather than concerns over self-defense. They complained that politicians like Andrew Jackson used the Divine Providence theory to justify expansionist policies motivated by greed.”

He stopped beside the lectern and placed a hand on top of it. “This controversy has never been settled, even as Manifest Destiny continues to influence American foreign policy today.” His steady gaze and even voice offered no clue of his personal beliefs. “Would anyone care to comment on the relevance of Manifest Destiny in this thoroughly modern—or should I say mod—year of 1966?”

Levy's hand shot up ahead of half a dozen others, attracting Devlin's clear blue eyes.

"Yes," he said. "Go ahead."

Levy's resonant voice invaded every corner of the room. "Manifest Destiny is relevant today because it laid the foundation for a century of American colonialism—starting with the Spanish American War and continuing in Vietnam. As for Divine Providence, I doubt genocide against Native Americans was God's bidding."

Devlin nodded. "A dark side of Manifest Destiny, to be sure."

David's skin itched from the wet shirt he wore, but the discomfort it caused barely registered compared to the irritation Levy's words provoked. He waved his arm in the air until Devlin recognized him. Jackie shot him a look, but he ignored it and stared at the back of Levy's head while he spoke. "What was the alternative? To stay confined to the thirteen original colonies until Britain or France or Spain gathered an army large enough to revoke the Constitution? And what about the good we've done? Would an intact Cherokee Nation have been up to D-Day?"

Levy spun around, his face clouded and dark. "Manifest Destiny gave us another slave state by annexing Texas at the point of a gun. Then it gave us Teddy Roosevelt and dreams of empire. And now Vietnam. Don't you think it's time we learned that democracy can be encouraged, but never imposed?"

"Right on!" a student shouted.

"End the war!" others said.

David waited for their amen chorus to die down. "The French weren't peering into the Atlantic in 1944 in search of encouragement," he said. "They were praying to God for an invasion fleet flying the stars and stripes from its masts."

A rumble of agreement met an opposing volley of jeers.

Devlin took control before it got out of hand. "I'm afraid we're out of time, but I want to thank the two of you for making my point. The debate over Manifest Destiny is alive and well."

David glanced at Jackie.

She glared and shook her head. "What is with you? You sounded like a commercial for the John Birch Society. How did you get like this?"

He crossed his arms and grunted. "A lot of people think like I do. You just don't know any of them."

Levy stepped between them before she could respond, cheerful and composed. He extended his hand. "I'm Kyle Levy. Our paths keep crossing, don't they?"

He swallowed Levy's insubstantial hand in his oversized roofer's grip. "David Noble." He dialed up enough pressure to make it clear that he could grind Levy's delicate bones into a dislocated mess if he chose to. He searched Levy's face for discomfort, but encountered only the molten intelligence of his eyes.

David released his grasp.

Levy crooked a finger at him. "You're a good debater. You knocked that D-Day line out of the park."

David gave a short, scoffing laugh.

"What's so funny?" Levy asked.

"Baseball jargon coming from you. Doesn't seem like your thing."

Levy brightened. "Are you kidding? I love the Twins."

"You do, huh?" David said, unconvinced. "Who's their second baseman, then?"

Levy swatted the air with his hand, like shooing flies. "I know the whole lineup, and their batting averages too: Mincher, .251; Battey, .255; Allen, .238; Killebrew, .281; Versailles, .249; Oliva, .307; Hall, .239; Rollins, .256; and the pitcher, Kaat, won-lost record 25 and 13."

David felt Jackie boring a hole into the side of his face. "Jeez, I never thought you'd like... I mean, cripes, I feel like an idiot!"

Levy laughed and raised his hands in the air, palms out. “Hey, everything’s cool. My father has season tickets. Let me know if you want to go some time. Later on,” he said to Jackie.

She waited for him to clear the room, then smirked at David. “So, do you need any help?”

“With what?”

“Removing your foot from your mouth.” She used both hands to mime a pretend extraction. “Aren’t you mortified?”

“I don’t care if he likes baseball. Why does he want us to lose in Vietnam? I don’t get him.”

Jackie pointed her finger at him. “I don’t get *you* and your archaic sense of national pride. You’re like a character in one of those ridiculous Walter Scott novels you like so much.” She creased her brow. “There’s a word for it. I just learned it in anthropology.”

A look of glee came over her, like a child finding her Easter basket. “Atavist, that’s it! I’m sleeping with an atavist!”



That night at his desk, David’s mind wandered from his American lit assignment to his exchange with Jackie. Maybe she was right about him being an atavist. Maybe a mutation had occurred in his mother’s womb, some critical reshuffling that caused a few genes to hark back in time.

He fingered the tambour of his desk. There was no denying that he loved *Ivanhoe* and all its chivalrous trappings: duty and sacrifice, nobility of deed, reverence for womanhood. Stories like that were out of favor now. All anybody talked about in American lit was *The Catcher in the Rye*—required reading, maybe, but a book that left him conflicted. He liked Salinger’s writing style, but Holden Caulfield’s disdain for the traditions of the prep school hot shots, whom Caulfield dismissed as phonies and hypocrites, was an affront

to the chivalrous values of Walter Scott's classics. Their lit professor said *The Catcher in the Rye* was about personal authenticity, but what did J. D. Salinger find *inauthentic* about tradition, honor, and duty?

Jackie, of course, didn't see it that way. She regarded *The Catcher in the Rye* as one of the most important books in twentieth-century literature—and *Ivanhoe* as chauvinist propaganda intended to trick young men into fighting and dying for old men in power. Phoniness was out, she told him; being real was in. Like Holden Caulfield.

Yet her persistent efforts to improve him, in this case by changing his opinion of Salinger, made David feel like he mattered to her and wasn't just passing through her life. Why else would she bother to fight with him about it? She made him feel visible, identifiable, as if he were on the verge of a life to which he actually belonged. They had even made plans for David to meet her parents, though Jackie said the thought of her father—a prosperous real-estate attorney hopelessly at odds with her over the war—and her boyfriend rapping about General William C. Westmoreland at the Lundquist family dinner table was a major turnoff.

Since meeting Jackie, he no longer felt anonymous. Because of that, he would have sat through an all-day screed on dialectical materialism if she'd asked him to. Or worse.

Like the teach-in she insisted on dragging him to that weekend.



The day broke mild and clear, a glorious October Saturday. A crowd of five hundred spilled onto the lawn in front of Coffman Union, totting coolers and picnic baskets. Weekend traffic raised a Dopplered hum off Washington Avenue. Across the Mississippi, the Minneapolis skyline etched its ragged silhouette onto a canvas of powder blue.

Jackie led them to an open patch of ground up front, where a podium flanked by two long wooden tables rested on a plywood

stage. A dozen speakers hung out, waiting to begin. Braless in a gossamer blouse, her long hair unadorned, she unfurled their blanket and chattered at a dizzying pace, barely able to contain herself, like a fan expecting the home team to win big.

David looked around at some of the signs among them: In Your Heart, You Know It's Wrong; Out Of Vietnam; White Skin=II-S, Dark Skin=I-A; and many more.

He'd taken time that week to read about the New Left, which, through SDS, had organized the teach-in. It drew its name, he discovered, from a 1960 communiqué entitled "Letter to the New Left," in which the author had advocated a "new" leftist agenda, one dealing less with traditional proletariat concerns and more with the human dysfunction caused by capitalist societies. Surprisingly, the New Left seemed even more hostile to traditional liberals than to conservatives, whom, by virtue of Goldwater's landslide defeat in '64, the New Left viewed as irrelevant. He even came across a New Left position paper blaming Harry Truman for starting the Cold War, which the article's authors disparaged as "a tragically flawed coda to Henry Luce's despicable 1941 *Life* magazine article on 'The American Century.'"

Eleven of the speakers who took the podium that day were faculty members; the twelfth was Kyle Levy. Their talks included an attack on the Monroe Doctrine by an associate poly sci professor, and a defense of solipsism by a philosophy emeritus, with denunciation of the draft a common thread.

David grew restive as the forum wore on. The one-sided affair offered not a single dissenting voice, at least to consider the possibility that winning in Vietnam might be better than losing.

A hulking, red-haired sociology professor named Perkins zeroed in on Lewis Blaine Hershey, the despised director of the Selective Service System, whom Perkins accused of rigging the draft in favor of privileged college students. "Students who stay in school past the age of twenty-six can avoid the draft legitimately with a II-S student de-



ferment,” he said, “while everyone else has to flee to Canada or find a way to flunk their induction physical. Why should people of color and the underprivileged be forced to fight this war?” He raised his fist and shouted, “In your heart, you know it’s wrong!”

This elicited a roar of applause and a flurry of sign wagging.

David glanced at Jackie, hollering and yelling with the rest of them, her color rising, her voice angry, so alive, so impassioned—so dangerous, this spasm of partisan lust. He turned away, her protestor’s face too much to bear, the silky cheek he’d stroked, the garnet lips he’d kissed, so twisted now, so foreign.

Still, Jackie and every pacifist professor on stage had at least taken action in support of their beliefs; he had done nothing for his. Oh, he *read* about duty and honor, but when it came to claiming it, he left slogging through jungles and rice paddies to others. No one protested or marched for them. They did their own marching.

Levy went next. His shirttail fluttered in a late-morning zephyr, his black hair ruffled, his expression flinty and grim. He stalked the stage and his mic-aided voice reverberated with authority. “I’m here to talk about napalm. A sticky, flammable gel that our military uses to clear landing zones in Vietnam. It’s twenty-five percent gasoline, twenty-five percent benzene, and half polystyrene. Napalm burns at two thousand degrees Fahrenheit, and adheres to whatever it comes in contact with.

“Human beings hit with a napalm blast die by either burning to death, or suffocating from the carbon monoxide it produces. They run with the stuff clinging to them, melting their flesh as they go.”

He let the image linger amidst a sigh of wind that rustled through the trees.

“They drop napalm to prepare landing zones,” he resumed. “And what’s near landing zones? Villages. And what’s in villages? Children. *Ramparts* predicts that thousands of Vietnamese children will fall

victim to napalm attacks this year alone, many maimed for life, their bodies permanently disfigured.”

The same cold frisson David felt the day he tangled with Levy in front of Walter Library quivered him again. He peeked over his shoulder at the faces behind him; Levy had them cringing, appalled at their own country.

He squeezed the microphone and paced across the plywood like a matador about to unsheathe the killing stroke. “The sole supplier of military-grade napalm is a company in Michigan: Dow Chemical. You know what else Dow makes? Saran Wrap. So they’re pretty good at getting things to cling. When asked about making something as horrible as napalm, the people at Dow say they’re just being good corporate citizens by helping the war effort. Of course, the good Germans who helped the Nazi war machine thought they were patriotic citizens too.

“From this day forward, let the good Germans at Dow Chemical be exposed for what they are—killers of children! I beg you all to stand up, stand down, or stand aside, but do not stand for Dow!”

Chants of “Down with Dow!” cascaded off the front of Coffman Union and down the mall.

Jackie got to her feet and yelled in unison with the others, “Down with Dow! No more war! Down with Dow! No more war!”

David stood, too, but it was not Dow that moved him. He thought instead of Leonidas at Thermopylae and Nelson at Trafalgar and Washington at Yorktown, heroes willing to die for their country rather than blame it. Like other young men his age that were willing to die for America—while David did nothing.

He tugged Jackie’s blouse to capture her attention. “Levy’s right,” he said. “It’s time I took a stand.”

She beamed and whooped and moved to hug him, but he pushed her away. “What’s wrong?” she asked, looking hurt and confused.

“I’m going to enlist. In the marines.”

She gaped, disbelieving. "You can't be serious. What about us?"

He fought back tears and stepped away. "I have to do this. *Now.*"

She stomped her foot and tore at her hair. "You'll come home in a body bag," she screamed. "And no one will care!"

He turned and elbowed his way toward the street.



He walked nine blocks east, to a storefront Marine Corps recruiting office that had been the target of a number of recent protests. The jingle of a bell over the door announced his arrival.

A recruiting sergeant at a metal desk stationed in the center of the room rose to greet him. He wore a long-sleeved khaki shirt with matching tie and sky-blue trousers edged with red striping. Proud-faced marines on a picture-board behind him snapped off crisp salutes and presented arms, their eyes aflame with the values printed in bold at the bottom of the display: Honor, Courage, Commitment.

The marine introduced himself as Sergeant Phillip Beale, a gray-eyed, straight-spined man with a bosom full of ribbons and a busted-up nose so deformed, David wondered how it drew air. He seated David in front of him and confirmed his intent to enlist, then reviewed the options. With the ramp-up in the war, the corps now offered a two-year enlistment in addition to the traditional four-year commitment.

David chose the two-year term.

"You need to know that as a two-year enlistee," Beale said in a practiced voice, "you'll be trained only as a basic infantryman. Four-year men get specialized instruction they find of great use later on, in civilian life."

Four years sounded like twice as much time to get killed. "I understand. I'll stick with two."

Beale asked why he chose the Marine Corps over other branches of service.

“Because I want to fight for my country,” David replied. “I’ll see action with the marines.”

Beale’s taut face softened and his squared shoulders relaxed. “Joining the Marine Corps isn’t about being prepared to fight for your country, son. It’s about being prepared to die for it. I’ve been to ’Nam. It’s an unsafe place.”

His words took David by surprise. For all the talk on campus about high-pressure, dishonest recruiters, it seemed like Beale was trying to talk him *out* of joining. An adolescent tug of gratitude pulled at his stomach. He wished he’d had a father like Philip Beale, someone to watch out for him, to remind him to use a rubber and not drive home drunk.

“My mind’s made up. I’m in.”

Beale nodded and reached for a packet of papers on his desk. “Very well.” He handed them to David. “These are legally binding documents committing you to two years in the United States Marine Corps.”

David signed them on the spot.

Beale congratulated him and told him to go out and get drunk.

Which he did, at Stub and Herb’s, before he went home and passed out.



He called Jackie over and over, but she’d holed up at her parents’ home and refused to come to the phone. He even waited for her one day outside class, but lost his nerve when she emerged from Blegen Hall. What was he going to do, beg her to wait for him for two years? The ache and yearning inside him had already become unbearable;

holding her one last time—the tears and regret, her possible wailing—would finish him.

And change nothing.

He made his choice when he pushed her away; now he had to live with it. He stayed in the shadows until she walked by, hidden, lurking, a lovelorn voyeur who drank of his inamorata's image, 'til graven unto his brain.

He took his induction physical a day later. His tracks in the powder they laid down to check inductees for flat feet seemed like evidence to prove he'd been there, in case he fled from the building and headed north, to Canada.

They swore him in with the serviceman's oath.

*"I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will obey the orders of the president of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God."*

And that was that.

He departed Wold-Chamberlain Field at 10 p.m. on October 15, aboard an American Flyers charter packed with anxious recruits bound for San Diego. Not even the gathering roar of their takeoff could silence the terrible words that resounded in his head.

*You'll come home in a body bag! And no one will care!*

## Chapter 3

HIS PLANE TOUCHED DOWN in San Diego at 1:30 a.m. Drivers met them at the baggage area and herded them onto transport buses for the short trip to the Marine Corps Recruit Depot (MCRD), adjacent to Lindbergh Field.

After a brief document check at the base's entrance, a cinder block of a sentry, wearing crisp, short-sleeved fatigues and a shit-eating grin, waved them through and then gave them the finger. "Your ass belongs to the Corps now, you dumb bastards!"

David's bus wound its way in caravan with the others, through a warren of pristine streets and byways bathed in soothing streetlight. Sculpted shrubs and climbing espaliers hugged the sides of pastel buildings with clay tile roofs and arches and graceful pilasters. And there were palm trees everywhere, like in a Hollywood beach movie.

It was all too seductive, and David knew it. His heart flailed and his palms grew clammy when they pulled to a stop in front of a two-story building of Spanish design, with a sign staked in the lawn:

### **Restricted Area/Receiving Barracks/Keep Out**

He closed his eyes and exhaled.

*Save the trembling and cottonmouth for Vietnam, not a postcard-gorgeous base in California. Fear of the unknown, that's all it is. The place looks like paradise, for cripes' sake, not boot camp. How bad could eight weeks in San Diego be?*

The bus doors lurched open and a pair of enormous marines in forest green uniforms and brown Smokey the Bear hats burst inside. "Get up, douche bag," one of them yelled at a lanky towhead up front.

Before the boy could move, the marine yanked him to his feet, punched him in the stomach, and heaved him out the door. The two

of them emptied the bus seat by seat, making sure not a single recruit exited under his own power. The larger of the two collared David and dragged him up the aisle, planted a black-booted foot on his rear, and propelled him out the door.

He hit the ground in a heap, tore his pants and gashed his knee, ashamed by his lack of resistance.

A third marine circulated amongst the battered jumble of recruits outside the bus, kicking and bellowing at those too slow to get up. "Scumbags! Maggots! Get your sorry asses on the yellow footprints and keep your maggot mouths shut!"

David scrambled to his feet and raced to the asphalt in front of the receiving barracks, where rows of yellow footprints had been painted in formation. He occupied a set, one of seventy-five new recruits jostled and shoved into rank for the first time.

The human side of beef that had booted him off the bus stepped front and center, his skin lathered, his thin lips drawn and menacing. A pair of tiny ears protruded from his huge skull like Mr. Potato Head parts. He glared, daring them to breathe. "I'm Sergeant Westbrook, your platoon commander." He spoke in a languid drawl. "And you are what is known in this part of the country as *cu-carachas*—cockroaches for those of you that flunked high school Spanish."

A chill crawled up David's spine, even as his cheeks grew hot with resentment.

The other two Visigoths who had participated in the mugging flanked Westbrook. He introduced them as Sergeant Garland, a bull-necked, square-jawed man with thick arms and saurian eyes, and Sergeant Mills, who towered over the other two in black-framed oval glasses that made him look like a predatory owl.

Westbrook called the platoon to attention and marched them to the front door of the receiving barracks, above which hung a sign he made them read aloud as a group.

*“To be a Marine  
You have to believe in:  
Yourself  
Your fellow Marines  
Your Corps  
Your country  
Your God  
Semper Fidelis”*

David stood in formation while the three drill instructors, with a kick in the seat or swat to the head, ushered groups of five at a time inside the receiving barracks.

“Move, Goldilocks,” Mills yelled at a chunky blond boy, “or Papa Bear’s gonna crawl up your ass!”

Once inside, David submitted along with the others to a team of barbers, who sheared them nearly bald. He felt sad and diminished, like Aslan shorn of his mane. From there he queued up for initial issue, and surrendered his civilian clothes in exchange for a green utility coat, matching trousers, cap, skivvies, socks, and a pair of black field boots. Next came bucket issue, where he received a metal bucket full of equipment termed 782 Gear: canteen, cup, cover, meat can, knapsack, haversack, shelter tent, tent poles, pegs, soap, shaving gear, and towel. They then gave him a seabag and told him to place his bucket inside the bag.

He slung it over his shoulder and staggered under its weight, then steadied himself and set out with the rest of his platoon on a quarter-mile hike to the billet area, located on the southwestern edge of MCRD’s parade grounds. He ploughed through street after street of identical steel Quonset huts to the one he was assigned to, marked by a boulder with his platoon’s number stenciled on it in white: #2012.

The inside of his hut was as bare as a monk’s dorm: concrete floors, two long rows of double bunk beds, the biting smell of an-



tiseptic in the air—no pictures or paintings, no rugs or plants, no furniture of any kind. He'd entered a sterile metal tomb, made all the more sepulchral by the drill instructors' strict prohibition against talking. How were they supposed to develop the marine camaraderie he'd heard so much about if they couldn't speak to one another?

Mills followed them inside to assign them their beds and show them how to make a bunk the marine way, with their green woolen blankets drawn tight as a tick.

David stowed his seabag and bucket issue in a wooden storage chest at the foot of his bunk, and joined the rest of his platoon outside to await further orders in the predawn darkness. His knee had already crusted and now throbbed, and his sleep-deprived brain struggled to process the avalanche of information they threw at it. He let his mind wander to the snug, waiting bed he had just prepared. An order for sack time couldn't come soon enough.

He startled at the sound of loudspeakers blaring reveille. Scores of green-clad recruits emerged from billet huts up and down the block, to assemble and march to mess hall to the chant of their drill instructors: "Hwan, Hup, Threep, Fo, Yo, Lef."

His stomach sank with despair as Westbrook kept them in formation long after the others disappeared. "I wanna make sure all those hungry *men* get to mess hall before you little *boys* do, in case there's not enough chow to go around. While we waitin', I need a show of hands from those of you who came here by way of the draft." A thin smile traced his jowly face, like a prison guard depriving the inmates of food and sleep—and reveling in it.

*Sadist.*

A few arms poked skyward. Westbrook—his ears ridiculously small—registered a look that a child molester might have elicited from a district attorney. "You mean to tell me you buckets of puke lacked the courage to *enlist* in the Marine Corps? You had to be *drafted*?"

The trio of DIs fell on the smattering of hapless conscripts like vultures on carrion. They punched them in their stomachs and called them pussies, then demanded push-ups while the rest of the platoon was made to mock them.

“Draftees, draftees, momma’s little draftees!”

David loathed himself for yelling with the others, and loathed Westbrook more for choreographing it.

Garland and Mills taught them how to stand at attention—toes at forty-five degree angles, head up, chin in, chest out, thumbs along their trouser seams—follow basic commands, and report to an officer.

Finally, Westbrook released them to breakfast. They marched to mess hall veiled by a morning marine layer and entered the white clapboard building double file, beneath a sign that said:

*Take All You Want, But Eat All You Take.*

The tantalizing odor of sizzling bacon made David’s stomach rumble and his mouth water. He held his tray perfectly level between his chin and waist and sidestepped down the buffet line, as instructed, his tray extended in silence at each serving station. He loaded his plate with French toast drizzled in maple syrup, slabs of crispy bacon, grits and hash browns, freshly squeezed orange juice and piping hot coffee, and then sat with his platoon at their designated table.

He found the clank and clang of metal trays and silverware unaccompanied by the hum of table talk unsettling; they were not allowed to speak, even at meals. David made eye contact with the recruit across from him, a Slavic-looking kid with an ugly scar that curved like a worm over his left cheek.

*This is weird,* their eyes agreed.

They spent the rest of the morning on MCRD’s parade grounds, an immaculate asphalt lake known as the Grinder. The fog that had blanketed them earlier burned off by ten. A bright yellow sun

climbed the azure sky, and commercial jets departed Lindbergh Field in steep-angle takeoffs. The engine roar gave them momentary relief from the drill instructors' deep voices.

The intricacies of drill and the art of synchronized pacing—left foot forward, each step thirty inches, arms swinging in metronomic rhythm—did not come easily, and the DIs harried them for it. Their frequent missteps seemed a particular affront to Sergeant Garland, a third-generation Frenchman from New York, they learned, and a purported descendant of the Marquis de Lafayette. Garland went after a hesitant recruit named Hawkins after yet another disjointed march from one end of the Grinder to the other.

“You march like a retard, Jethro! No retards in the Marines. Gimme twenty push-ups!”

Hawkins hit the pavement and struggled up and down in an awkward, lurching rhythm, his gangly frame ill-suited to the task.

Garland dropped to one knee beside him, his reptilian eyes cold and hooded, his massive forearms tense. “You pansy-ass hick! I let you off easy and this is what I get? Twenty more—on your knuckles. If you can’t do ‘em, the whole *platoon* gets knuckle push-ups!”

Each upward thrust off the Grinder’s hard blacktop ripped new tears in the boy’s bony knuckles. He grunted and groaned, his hands soon bloodied.

Garland crouched over him, maniacal, taunting.

Hawkins caved; he hit the deck and stayed there.

David’s insides knotted with revulsion. Something elemental was being taken from them, some essential part methodically stripped away. *Annihilated*. Their dignity, for sure, but even more than that—the DI’s aimed to deny their very existence. His gaze found Westbrook’s and questioned the need to shame Hawkins further.

Westbrook scuttled over and crowded against him. “You makin’ cow eyes at me, bitch? You got a *hod*-on for me?”

He let his eyes meet Westbrook's for a second time. *My name is David!*

Westbrook's hand shot out and fastened around his throat with the grip of a lock-jawed bulldog. David raked at his arm, but Westbrook forced him to his knees and showed his battle face—teeth bared, eyes full of mayhem. “I catch you eyeballin’ me again, boy, they’ll carry you off on a stretcher. The Marine Corps is only as strong as its weakest link. You unnerstan’ me, puke?”

David gurgled, and Westbrook turned him loose. He sucked air, a paroxysm of strident whooping. He said in a cracked voice, “Sir! Yes sir!”

Westbrook spat on the ground and put a hand to his ear, as if straining to hear some far-off noise. “I believe I heard this maggot request permission to do twenty knuckle push-ups, to satisfy the debt incurred by the platoon on behalf of the *other* maggot.” His head snapped back toward David. “Permission granted!”

Starry-eyed and wheezing, David pumped out twenty knuckle push-ups, his gristly roofer's hands impervious to the Grinder's baked asphalt. He wobbled to his feet, this time careful to avert his gaze.

“It appears the platoon's debt has been satisfied,” Westbrook declared. “Five minutes to use the head and reconvene. Fall out!”

Seventy-five recruits with full bladders and bulging rectums sprinted to a brick building fifty yards away. Since there weren't near enough urinals and toilets to accommodate them all, lines formed rivaling a women's restroom at a Beatles concert. Bashful bladders jammed things up even more.

David licked his abraded knuckles and waited his turn. He had to shit, but there were no stalls in the latrine, only a row of open toilets—all unoccupied, the prospect of grunting out a crap in front of new platoon mates completely unappealing. He settled for a pee instead, and arrived back at the Grinder with time to spare, a satisfying

bowel movement nothing compared to the relief of keeping Westbrook off him.

They marched and ran through MCRD's myriad streets and roads the rest of the afternoon, beneath a withering sun. The drill instructors sang cadence and ran beside them.

David liked hearing them sing the colorful stanzas; it made them seem almost human. He maintained by taking a fantasy plunge in the nearby Pacific.

*Make it through the day.* He told himself this over and over. *Just make it through the day.* He imagined himself slicing headlong into the cooling spume, waves breaking over his back, a briny film on his skin.

More marching and exercise followed evening chow, until well past dusk. Mills finally sent them to the billet area to shed their dirty utilities, put on shower shoes, and march to the head to shower and shave.

David fell into formation afterwards with a white shower towel draped around his neck and fresh skivvies on. His knee ached, his throat felt as if someone had tried to rip his larynx out, and the grit in his eyes grated like sand. He waited for the order to "Fall out." Two glorious words that would send him to his warm, dry bunk for some desperately needed sleep.

Instead of releasing them, Mills exercised them again, until they poured sweat. Then he made them roll around in the dirt. Only then did he dismiss them—and forbade them to speak inside the billet hut.

David crawled into his bunk coated with grime, but too tired to care; he hadn't slept in thirty-six hours. The lights in the Quonset hut blinked out, "Taps" whined over the loudspeaker, and his first day in the Marine Corps came to a merciful end.

Exhaustion swept him to the edge of oblivion. Somewhere in the vast darkness of the hut, one of the recruits began to cry, not over

what had been done to him, David knew, but over what had been taken from him: his identity. The pathetic sound of the young man's weeping made David wonder what the toughest among them must surely have wondered that night.

*What the fuck have I done?*