

# SHORTLY AFTER TAKEOFF

by Dan Sanders

A man pushing a Volkswagen to start it is not unlike a wingback throwing a block, so it helps if one has been the latter before attempting the former. Same fundamentals. Keep your butt down, contact low, launch it where you must with short choppy steps. He had gotten quite good at this bit of hard labor, the old motor bloodcoughing to life in just fifteen yards when there were no hills to park on top of. With a lithe adeptness rare for him, he pushed, jumped into the drivers' seat -- his foot landing squarely on the clutch; shifted into second and raised the pedal -- all within six seconds. A halting jerk, a tires' yelp, Bingo, shift back into neutral, brake and breathe.

As often when starting his car in this required way, laughter not quite kind washed through its open window. Against better judgement that seldom prevailed his head turned to its source. On this evening, the mocker was a girl from the apartment building next to his. She leaned elastically over the rail of her second-floor patio, as if to show only the gawky boy she was sneaking a cigarette with how limber one is at seventeen or so. Revving the Volkswagen's engine to keep it running, he kept staring at the girl. She was very pretty and he liked what he saw until he was ashamed for fancying someone half his age. But he kept the gaze on her, tactically correct wounded eyes, until he exacted her shame for his. At last he saw a sliver of apology on her face and pulled his eyes and his conveyance away.

As the motor warmed, he found a streetlight and stopped under it. Still revving, he angled the rear-view mirror to check his necktie and hair. The tie -- a rarity for him -- was tolerably straight, but his hair frayed out a bit on one side. His last girlfriend had considered his thin unruly strands "cute in the morning, they stick out like Dennis the Menace's," but he thought them an unseemly feature when meeting a woman for the first time. Even a woman of dubious prospect. From a tangle of papers and trash on the passenger-side floor he extracted a brush and a plastic bottle of hair spray. A sizeable clump of treasonous hair had to be removed from the brush before grooming, and for a moment it made him feel older than his thirty-three years. He idly speculated that the part in his hair was sinking a half-inch per year. Same rate as Mexico City. He grimaced, brushed, covered his

insecurities with a sculptor's aplomb, then shielded his eyes to apply the aerosol. It stank and burned his scalp and he had to suck air through the window to breathe. But the desired effect was realized in the mirror; the neat hair transformed him from borderline derelict to a passably *bohème gentilhomme*.

It derived from his photography. In his sphere realities were, in importance, dwarfed by these proper effects.

The photographer lived in a bargain basement of the San Fernando Valley called Panorama City. What it offered a panorama of was not clear to him, except perhaps vast rows of tenement apartments, holding families splintered by divorce and prison and border-crossing.

It would be a short trip by LA measure. Pan City to Granada Hills, six miles west. He would take Plummer Street because it was uncrowded and the police ignored it. He hoped there were more hills in Granada than panoramas in Pan City so he would have a hill to park on top of and roll down to start when he left.

Bad brakes and no insurance had made him a skillful driver and he negotiated the Los Angeles surface traffic with relative ease. But the young girl's torment nettled him still. Radio on, to extinguish it. Kay Oh Pee EEEEE, Los Angeles...The radio bleated the song of the moment. *Moonlight...feels right*. He loathed the song and knew it was so popular that it would play on the radio for most of his years. A life sentence, he thought. All those overplayed, underpowered songs infesting his AM radio. And disco, the coming malignancy. I have to dig up the bread to put an FM radio and maybe an 8-track in this thing, he thought. The song ended and was replaced by a frantic cooing announcer. Then an advertisement for an airline. *We really move our tail for you, to make your every wish come true*. Sung by pleasantly leering stewardesses. *We really move our tail for you*. Women's lib groups, or "feminists" as they now wanted to be called, were howling in protest at the smarmy ad. Their shrill cranky scoldings meanly amused him. In his head the girl on the balcony would not stop laughing.

A better song appeared. It was called *More Than a Feeling*. By an opulent

new band called Boston. *And dream of the girl I used to know, I closed my eyes and she slipped away. So many people have come and gone...their faces fade as the years go by...*

It was the Fourth of July, 1976. America's Bicentennial idiocy clenched its populace like smallpox in a tribe. A bleak night to have nothing to do but go have dinner with the boss, he thought. It should have been different, more like other Fourths.

The Fourth was to him a great homy American holiday. An excuse to get drunk and sexually disorderly, a Yankee approximation of the Lents of medieval Europe. It is, after all, a nighttime holiday, when the fireworks blaze above and the liquor takes its captives. His first real sex had occurred on it, and several other personally noteworthy trysts. A houseboat party with a swell ending when he was twenty. One of those delicious male moments when he walked into a room, bridged eyes with an utter stranger and knew instantly he would have her, surely as a U-Boat commander who raises his periscope to find the British troopship a scant helpless quarter mile apace. A girl with the perfect capitulating name of Jane Burke. He offered to take her home. She almost laughed at the obviousness of it. He stopped the car and she produced marijuana. They sat on the hood of the car, said nothing of consequence. Inhaled, smiled, slapped at mosquitoes, looked at the streetlights below. Fingers brushing, falsely random. Sly commingling hands. July 4, 1964. Suddenly twelve years ago. Then, in Boulder, three years later, that other Independence Day girl, older, coarser. Even her name was rougher. Cynthia Rutstein. She too had looked on him with that fateful coupling certainty. He shot a roll of her with Tri-X and like most women she was flattered. They went to dinner. He was poor then too and she had paid with her fathers' Bank Americard. They talked about *Sgt. Pepper* and parents and wild medical scams to duck the draft and Israel. Then as they walked about the raucous town she put her hand in his back pocket and squeezed him hard. "Now I've got your butt," she laughed. To enjoy her yet avoid encountering people he knew, he steered her towards a deserted track stadium on the University of Colorado campus. The football stadium was across the street, where the Veterans of Foreign Wars were launching fireworks and loudspeaking patriotic music for a large familial crowd whose sons had yet to

come home in rubber bags. But the track stadium was damnably locked. She scampered over the fence then sprinted across the field, sloughing her clothes. He got over the fence, not as fast as the athletic Miss Rutstein, but close. The evening ended with fireworks erupting overhead, *Stars and Stripes Forever* squawking on the PA, and a position that is probably illegal in most of the American South.

But now? He was thirty-three. A fateful year, he thought, the same age Jesus was when they whacked him. The end of youthful idealistic exhortations. What was he concluding? What was he leaving? Sacrificing? he wondered. And what had he done by the thirty-third year, next to those he adored? John Lennon had taken his band as far as any would ever go. Kennedy had traveled the planet, fought valiantly, written two bestsellers, been buffeted by untold splendors and torments, and won a senate seat, with ultimate command less than a decade away. Chopin and Alexander The Great did not even need age thirty-three, their work long and gloriously done. Two years shy of the age, Sandy Koufax had holstered that hammer-of-hell fastball and that curve you could swear to god see from the upper deck and gone his quiet way. Mozart had two years left. So did Henry V, who had crossed into France, smashed an enemy of sixfold superiority beneath a hail of English arrowheads, deploying his men so brilliantly they still teach his tactics at West Point to this day. And him? A failed artist, apportioned crumbs and cool indifference.

For salve he assessed: If things remained stable he would have a new starter-solenoid for the Volkswagen in another three paychecks; free his Nikon and portrait lens from hock in two. It had miserably grieved him to part with his photography tools for a few rent-dollars, a widowing that made that surly pawnbroker even grimmer. For all he had was his craft, his flat frozen squares of gray or colored time; the craft was the man and the man the craft. It was all he knew, all he was sure of, his sole reality, his soul. He loved human images but was shy, no, frightened of their turbulent spillings around and at him. The darkroom was his refuge from this, the one place where people stayed still, quiet, and did his bidding.

He was a magnificent photographer. Faces were his currency. He thought Ansel Adams' mercuried plates of silvery lands technically superb but sterile,

inhuman. Diane Arbus...insightful but abysmally cruel -- her suicide seemed to him inevitable as her work not so much "progressed" as it numbly, dumbly took its course. Steichen he loved, and Avedon: Crisp uncompromised portraits, the face so...betrayed. He thought maybe he was just as good as them but no one knew. Then again, maybe he was the biggest hallucinator since Dorothy hit her head. Couldn't tell which. The jury on him was taking a long, long time.

The evening's prospect of dinner at the boss's house, an excuse to meet her spinstering daughter, excited his loneliness. But he would have preferred that they offered to pose, not dine. The oddity of that preference did not elude him.

He hadn't dated since his last girlfriend had abandoned their shared apartment seven months before. She had moved to New York to study acting and the *est* people quickly got her. She now communicated to him only with *est* application forms. Everyone they both knew constantly asked him when they would be "getting back together again." It was like being an ex-Beatle.

He had a faint suspicion that the woman he would meet this night would be less than lovely. Like him, she had nowhere else to go on the Fourth. This was plainly an attempt to fob off cheap goods before spoilage. But of late he felt his bored solitude beginning to outcast him. He was beginning to get hard stares from bank tellers and police, slipping into the "loner profile" that most often caused them trouble. He saw the necessity to socialize again.

Too, he prized "Oriental" women; and honestly so, not through some insipid geisha fantasy. He simply thought them a more pleasing variety of the baffling genus woman. Hair, tone, sparse small form -- they tended to photograph best and largely for that he fancied them best. But he thought -- privately -- that many of them didn't take well to the heavier Western food and looked bloated as a result. Thin nylon athletic shorts were then fashionable for young women. Beauty is measured with the fashions of the day and few Asian women seemed to look good in them. They weren't...athletic enough. How would *she* look in them? He was not optimistic. Melting the mental image of his boss -- squawky scatterbrained old Ms. Hanade -- into that of a comely young daughter was a difficult synthesis indeed. He was not

optimistic. But these days he simply had no one else.

The past could comfort him, too, and after this reminding of his solitude it was employed as an antidote. Like most failures his mind worked like an oldies radio station. He accessed the night of his high school graduation. Triumph on the stage of that auditorium in downtown Seattle, clutching the National Teen Journalism Award. The very best schoolboy photographer in the land. Colleges beckoned with smiles and money.

The darling of his mentors, college was good to him. Society following it, devoid of mentors, was not. He was of the belief that most people who pull off big things have somebody suggesting *how*. Like Moses had that burning bush for God's sake. No one had yet told him how. So he was not the spoiled prince of the campus paper anymore, he was just another guy who wanted to be a photographer. He was as devoid of business skill as he was blessed of artistic skill. Eleven years out of school, the victor-glow about him was long and forever gone.

On the side he took pictures of actors sometimes. Los Angeles was engorged with them of course and a big shiny picture of their earnest face was as necessary as a car or an ego. But actors don't have money either. George Bernard Shaw had said about actors, and probably about the photographer too, something like: "He has everything essential to being an actor – no money and a complete lack of responsibility." So they were difficult to make a living off of after the landlords and the sly parasitic acting teachers gleaned them. And the "please like me" sameness of the actor's headshot pictures mortally bored him -- they all had the expressions of mongrels in a pound.

Maybe it was time to shoot some new stuff, revive the portfolio, try to get some magazine stuff going. Submit some stuff and see what happens, maybe. Once he got his Nikon back, once he paid back his parents and put a starter in the car and got the phone switched back on and caught up the student loans and maybe found out what was making that molar hurt and could get some decent supplies and lab time.

The streets of Granada Hills were named for the homecoming GI's and orange grove owners who had originally overrun the place. He weaved through a few of them, finally onto the prescribed cul-de-sac. Dignity had awarded him a finely angular hill at the hilt of it. He shut off the VW on the hilltop and stared at the house. It was surprisingly orderly in contrast to the old sow's office.

## II

That morning's sky had been ashen. It was a common trait of the Valley summer, automobile leavings and fog that rendered everything oyster-gray, gratefully swept to a mild haze by midday. It was supposed to be a holiday for him but he was offered extra pay to work the Fourth. Out of poverty and idleness he had agreed. He stole a final breath of free air and opened the hospital door.

The Veterans Hospital, Sepulveda Facility, was a drab campus of flat cream colored brick buildings. Sperm White, long-term patients called the color. The place smelled not so vaguely of Pine Sol and stale urine. The walls were adorned with frayed old Independence Day decorations – crepe paper firecrackers, flags. He pushed aside a battered gurney blocking the hallway to the photo lab. Two plump black orderlies hissed displeasure at the Medical Photography Technician for the gurney's unauthorized transfer. Then they resumed hoisting a pallid flimsy man onto it. The vet, a mustard gas recipient of 1918 everyone called Sergeant Stan, was calling the orderlies names it is perhaps unwise to call persons of their lineage. The air conditioning in the photo lab was broken again. He scowled. At least it was a holiday, most doctors gone, few demands on him. Maybe he could manage a bit of time later in the darkroom with his own stuff.

His "day job" was "just temporary" until he got his "national-magazine break." He had worked there four years. He photographed and developed slides -- for physician's archives and research and medical journal articles. Expertly lurid shots of blasted limbs, stinking burns, pestilences from something he thought the grim doctors were calling Asian Orange.

A doctor would request pictures of this malady or that to the Chief Nurse of

General Services, a midfiftyish woman of Japanese descent named Ms. Hanade. Everyone working at the VA was nice to her because she was in charge of supplies. She was also his supervisor, usually kind, occasionally querulous, always majestically stupid. She was complimenting another nurse on what she was wearing and bluntly inquiring as to its cost when he came in.

Chief Registered Nurse Hanako Hanade was a legend in the confines of the Los Angeles County Veterans Hospital. In the dank brick aberration of architecture, hacks and quacks were hideously rampant, drunken doctors and jaded nurses perpetrating malpractices daily. Of course this was far from history's only such place for combat survivors; the final atrocity of war is government-ministered healing.

But Nurse Hanade had the grand distinction among VA workers of being the first and only "double ace" in the hospital's history, with twenty-one confirmed kills of patients from an astounding parade of monumental medical fuckups. Her thirty-three year government career was studded with bungled medications, forgetful neglectings to administer dialysis, respirators not plugged in. For all this clumsy mayhem she had never been so much as reprimanded, nor would she ever be. The medical staff at the VA cloaked itself in a silence tight as the mafiosi's *omerta*. One would never betray another to an exterior society so uncomprehending.

"Old soldiers never die." Actually they do, but it generally takes a long, pathetic time for them to fade away. The family piously deposits their patriarch at the VA after the second or third stroke, or when the cancerous larynx is plucked, or when senility's embrace makes them socially unviable. The overburdened VA staff, eons from ideals, sought only to minimize each burden -- anaesthetizing, sedating, and at times, through tacit assent, purging -- simply letting gravely sick old men succumb.

He had been there longer than any other photographer.

The Chief Nurse was in the photo lab waiting for him. "Hello. First things at first." Ms. Hanade's English was uncertain and a ceaseless source of humor in the building. "Doctor Kunkel need pictures of Sergeant Stan for big lecture at UCLA

tomorrow. Big big one. They both in 262 Psych Observation. Go there now."

Sergeant Stan was a notoriously uncooperative subject but research pictures of his chemical-induced deformities were much sought after. "Why didn't Jim or Henry take them yesterday?"

"They say no. Henry quit instead of doing it."

"Jeez, he quit? Oh, son of a bitch."

"Yeah he quit. Damn boy. So please please help honey. No one else will photograph him. Get your camera stuff ready. Tell you what I give him nice fat sleep-shot he not give you no trouble."

### III

Nurse Hanade was jabbing a prone Sergeant Stan when the Photo Tech arrived with the camera and shooting lights. She smiled at his promptness.

"Good good. I be your helper on this one." This was unusual. The old lady usually delegated anything as disagreeable as this. "Just a minute, let me get orderlies to help move him." She left.

Psych Observation, known to the staff as the "Tard Yard," was small, windowless, and lit with blazing institutional florescence. They had the old man in with two of the biggest 'Nam incorrigibles, Eddie and Khe Sanh Jake. Some vets called the Photo Tech "College" and treated him askance because of his student deferments a decade before, but not these two. So he was fond of them, laughed at their gory tales, perhaps they liked him for that. They had an endless supply of absolutely stupefying pot. They shared it with him on occasion, stealing into the photo lab darkroom and switching on the fan. They were presently under psychiatric surveillance to determine why they were such a pain to everyone but themselves. They both raised brows in greeting to him as he set up lights. He grinned back.

"Hey Jake. You get yourself in your chair? Good deal."

Jake nodded grimly but pride was detectable. Then he frowned and whispered, "What we got Yoko coming in here for?"

Everyone Beatle-age and younger called Chief Nurse Hanade "Yoko" beyond her earshot.

"Aw, Kunkel says he needs some shots of Stan."

Eddie waved his stump in disapproval. "Like for Ripley's or Guinness or somethin'."

Stan managed to roll over. He was crowding eighty, a wrecking yard of ailings from the neck down. But he still had most of his hair, a fine jaw, and surprisingly clear aqua eyes. Why he was in Psych Observation was not totally clear. Maybe it was his constant claiming that he had been raised in the same orphanage as Babe Ruth; the hospital tended to hire many of the sort that didn't like baseball. He had smoked since age eight ("Babe taught me"), and now his breathing sounded like a dropped accordion.

Stan: "Keed?" Sergeant Stan forgot names and called all sub-forty males "Keed." Babe Ruth had done that too.

"Yeah Stan. It's just me, the camera guy. I gotta take your picture for Doctor Kunkel."

"Doctor Kunkel likes to put on hip wader boots and sneak up on sheep, Keed."

"Nothing to it, Stan. A few quick shots then I'll leave you alone, I promise."

"B-a-a-a-a. Doc tucks their wooly back legs into the hip waders with him and goes at it. B-a-a-a-a."

Nurse Hanade returned with the two orderlies. "Okay, get your lights and camera and action. Doctor Kunkel coming now."

Eddie, to Nurse Hanade: "That's a pretty solemn dose you just gave Stan."

Nurse Hanade: "Shut up hippie smart mouth don't tell me my job."

Stan: "Three bags full. One for my master one for my dame, but none for the little boy who cries in the lane."

Jake: "Peel another decal, Eddie."

Nurse Hanade: "What with those little flags you guys get patriotic you wise up you like Nixon now?"

Jake had a pile of small Veterans of Foreign Wars decals with an American flag and the words "Love It Or Leave." He placed one on the wall alongside his bed for every victim of Ms. Hanade's ministrations. Twenty-one little flags stickered in neat lethal rows, like on the side of a fighter plane.

Jake asked Eddie, "Got a light?" It was a running joke between them. Eddie had picked up a shiny new butane lighter lying on a jungle trail near An Loc in '67. A second of reflexive innocent greed. The trinket was boobytrapped and exacted an Islamic justice, penalty of a hand.

Doctor Kunkel strolled in, whistling "Alouette," a melted-down little man capped with the worst hair dye-job on the continent. The attempt to hide his graying was mottled with purple-brown highlights that resembled some of the wounds he tended. Kunkel had worked for the VA ever since he had left a scalpel in a movie star over at Providence, ordered him sewn up, and been dismissed after the ensuing death and tabloids and lawsuits. He and Nurse Hanade exchanged fluttering smiles; unproven rumors had long bracketed the two of them. Kunkel looked warily at the two 'Nam vets, then crossed to Stan, leaned over the bed, and spoke to him loudly, as if the old man were trapped in a well.

Kunkel: "Now Stan, if we have pictures of you for other doctors to look at, it will help us treat you and make you better. Understand?"

Stan, very clear: "Doc, where's your hip boots?"

Jake was signaling to Eddie that Kunkel had forgotten to fasten his belt. Eddie made his comrade aware of the shave cream on the doctor's ear lobes.

Nurse Hanade peeled back Stan's robe. The skin was dead-fish white. Kunkel waved over the Photo Tech and pointed at ancient mustard gas wounds and subsequent epidermal ills on Stan's thighs and belly. "Nice clean shots of those, son. Hope you're loaded with Ektachrome. Get a bunch and vary the exposures."

The doctor annoyed the photographer with his manner. He bared his teeth at Kunkel, then raised the camera to his eye, advanced it towards the wound, focused, squeezed the motor-drive trigger. *Kzee. Kzeekzeekzee.* The first frame he shot was perfect. The rest were to shut up Kunkel.

Stan: "Doc, used to be some damn fine sheep ranches around here. Right smart farms. I can see why ya wanted to work here."

Kunkel made no attempt to decipher this, just prodded the man like an artifact. "Okay Nurse Hanade, let's roll him on his side, I want some of the back." He and the nurse then conversed with elaborate medical terms, cryptic as wizard spells. The orderlies lifted, argued, shoved. The old man's gown spilled off completely, revealing among everything else the primeval back wound: a square foot section of braised yellow meat. A pink rope of rib was visible. The odor was unspeakable. Sergeant Stan began to moan, low, faint.

Kunkel: "Okay, snap him, son. Come on, move it. Get me a lot of that." *Kzee. Kzeekzee. Kzee.* Stan flopped onto his back and looked squarely through the lens.

"Easy, Keed. I been shot there enough."

Kunkel: "Get me some full body frontals, that should do it."

The Photo Tech complied as Nurse Hanade arranged Stan's posture and withdrew the bedsheets. The old man whispered to Kunkel, "Lick my wounds, Doc. Show me ya care." Still no answer from anyone, so Stan began cursing the proceedings with excellent obscene creativity. Hanade finally put a hand over his mouth.

Eddie: "Jesus, why don't you just leave him the fuck alone?"

This ruffled the doctor. Standing up to his full meager height, he squinted at Eddie and said: "I've had it to here with you dope-head troublemakers. Any more interference and I will have you evicted from this hospital. I ain't just singin' Titwillow, either. I mean it."

Jake: "Aw, keep it in your pants."

The Photo Tech felt Stan tugging his lab smock. "Keed." Stan was offering his hand. When he shook it Stan clasped both hands about his and looked at him as if about to impart a profound secret. "You don't sleep on toppa no cullird gurls now, okay? Keep your blood pure." He lay back on the stiff cotton pillow, then began singing to the melody of "*You're In The Army Now:*"

*My mama went to the war,*

*In eighteen sixty-four.*

*She pulled the trigger, and shot a nigger*

*And that was the end of the war.*

Neither black orderly so much as flinched. Narcotized old white men rave thus. Nurse Hanade's face was frozen. It was unclear whether the aria displeased her. She just said, "Thank you all. Take nice break see you back at ten. Doctor I

walk you out." There was something different in her speech, an odd hissing in it, the tone of a disturbed reptile.

#### IV

He was still taking down his lighting gear when Nurse Hanade returned again. The strange tone was gone from her voice.

"Thank you so much I was really in jam on that one, short notice. Can...you get me slides by noon for the doctor?"

"Yeah."

"Oh good you so professional you my best picture boy." Then she paused and took another tone. "Tonight you come have dinner."

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

"Dinner. Tonight at my house. I know pictures like that are no fun I want to reward you. So come over you know I have nice daughter your age."

He didn't know. But something flashed in him, an odd sensation, not wholly pleasant, a sort of radar bogey in his brain. His first glances at Jane Burke and Cynthia Rutstein and all the others had produced the same feeling. The proximity of prey. These days his favorite women were those he could *have*. Sure wins. Like the way Notre Dame schedules games against Long Beach State. Nurse Hanade was still talking, scribbling an address, thrusting it in his hands. "You come over we have nice dinner I make and we watch fireworks they shooting off at college tonight and we go out to movie I buy."

He wanted to decline the invitation in the presence of the leering Jake and Eddie but his curiosity and his solitude prevailed. He played it straight, no mockery. "Yeah, okay. Um. Thanks. What time?"

"Dinner at eight. Like the movie."

"Fine. Uh, want me to bring anything?"

"No no I got everything. You don't have to bring nothing I know you don't make much here. I take care of it so see you tonight okay?"

"Yeah, okay. Thanks."

She crossed to the door, then turned around and said, half joking but half not, "Get away from these two bums they bad for you they got no ambition." She was gone.

Both vets seemed untouched by the parting slur, and as surprised at the invitation as its recipient. Jake said, "I didn't even know Yoko had a daughter. Did you?"

"No."

Eddie was still grinning at him. "I'm amazed she figured out the process. Plus I'm thinking about the guy she talked into it. Poor bastard. How'd ya like to roll over in the morning and find *that* looking at you?" He made a noise like someone being tortured. "So you're taking out Yoko's daughter? Hmm. Just let me share with you what I learned about Slants in Da Nang -- everything's sideways, spread their legs, it just gets tighter -- "

He smiled tiredly at the ancient joke. Jake: "What movie are you gonna see? Can I go?"

"Let's see. A first-date film. *Rocky*, maybe. Hear it's good."

Eddie, without malice: "I grew up in the same neighborhood as that Stallone guy. While I was in Asia he hid out in Europe and made porn films."

Sergeant Stan suddenly howled. His eyes stayed closed, his body moved only by the clamorous respiration.

Eddie crossed over to Stan, poked him awake, saying, "He'll be pissed if he sleeps through *Land of the Giants* at ten. That's his favorite show."

Stan's eyes opened wide and he bayed again, louder. He pulled at the Photo Tech's lab coat again, stared at him, mute.

"Stan? Are you all right? Want me to call someone?" No answer, so he nodded goodbyes to Jake and Eddie and turned to leave when he heard the old man's voice.

"Now you know why Hitler was so pissed off, Keed. After *he* got gassed in World War One he had nowhere to go but a Kraut vet hospital."

## V

His knock on the door of Nurse Hanade's home was answered swiftly. It was strange to see his supervisor in slacks and a sweatshirt. He could smell an intricate dinner being readied in the kitchen, the alien odorous wave that comes from a strangers' kitchen when they are cooking. "Oh come in come in," she was saying. He had a twinge of regret that he had not brought some sort of gift. A quick glance about the house divulged heavy walnut furnishings and green-gold upholsteries and loud floral wallpaper and a mammoth television. The daughter was not there; he mentally congratulated the old lady for the bit of suspense.

He followed Nurse Hanade into the kitchen. She stirred and poured and wiped steam from her glasses. "Okay. Dinner. Let me get somebody wait a minute." She crossed to the staircase and called up, "Karen? Come get dinner now." He sensed that his boss was not speaking the usual household language. The stairs creaked overhead and peripherally he saw a slight blue form descending. His head turned to it as Nurse Hanade said, "This my daughter Karen." Then she told her daughter his name. Karen seemed to stand slightly behind her mother so

he declined to offer his hand, it would be awkward. Instead, he smiled his best, greeted her briefly, and scanned her quickly.

Her eyeglasses appalled him, thin cat-eye horrors fifteen years from vogue. But it was the worst aspect of her appearance; his initial notice of the glasses was unfortunate. The eyes beneath them suddenly met him directly, appraising his in return; they were enormous, soft. Her shape was difficult to discern beneath a loose denim dress but looked free of any profound flaws. Closer furtive glances indicated a small waist. Her hair was a not bad Dorothy Hamill cut.

He offered his services in the preparation of the meal but was refused by Nurse Hanade. "It ready now sit down both of you I bring it in." He could think of nothing to say to Karen, she looked too fragile for wit, so they passed a few seconds of silence.

The boss's cooking was not really bad, but he had always had a peculiar aversion to unusual dishes prepared by people he was not close to. Requests for seconds were minimized and he found himself often glancing at the door. The dinner conversation could not be remembered by him within hours afterward. There was cake for dessert in the decor of a American flag. It was ornate, obviously bought not homemade, and very good, cherry filling; he hungered for a second piece of it but did not wish his weakness for sweets betrayed this soon.

The Carter nomination, current movies, and new TV shows failed to elicit many polysyllabic responses from Karen. He struggled to make conversation in which all three of them could partake. He finally got her to talk a bit about her schooling, which dismayed him. She attended one of the cheap Cal States. Northridge, down the street. A real diploma mill, full of mouth-breathing refugees of crappy LA high schools; the VA hired them by the boatload. And, sure enough, she had gone to public schools in LA, with their sure curses of stupidass illiteracy and a few grotesquely wealthy classmates. A commoner's school where the wood-shop teacher only had seven fingers and the nurse weighed two hundred pounds.

Karen's mother refused their help in cleaning up, saying, "I got this you guys

go in sit down relax."

He followed Karen into the living room. "Would you like to sit down?" she asked, pointing at the sofa. After he complied, she sat in an easy chair across the room. Brilliant lights exploded through the front picture window, followed by sharp hard crackings. He heard Nurse Hanade exclaim "Oh boy fireworks they shooting them off from the college now look they so pretty!"

They silently watched the fulminating colors. The fireworks were very close; he even smelled some cordite through the open patio door. As a last resort he decided to try the old "what's your major?" icebreaker. "So, what are you working on at Northridge?"

"Biology. One more semester."

"What do you want to do with that?"

She smiled modestly. "Some kind of health care work, maybe lab technician stuff, I don't know, maybe nursing school if Mom has her way."

Her mother entered, saying, "Not nurse school. Med school I still not give up on that." She had a newspaper in one hand and a ten-dollar bill in the other.

Karen made a face, mock defeat. It was actually rather fetching to see her banter thus with her mother. Thank god, he thought, a trace of humor, a faint pulse of irony, I was really getting worried. "No pre-med, Mom. I'm too old and probably too dumb."

Nurse Hanade forced a quick laugh. "You not old I old." She shoved the newspaper and the money under his chin. "Pick a movie to go see." He wanted to protest the payment, wanted to be treated like a man of thirty-three not some one half that age, but he lacked ticket money for the three of them. So he said, "Okay, thanks, thank you very much, what kind of movie are you in the mood for?"

His supervisor gave him a bemused look, as if suggesting female participation in such a decision was like asking her to drink turpentine. He smiled as if it had been in jest, then hastily searched the movie page.

He wanted to see a big new World War Two movie called *Midway*, but under the circumstances thought better of it. Besides, its "star," Charlton Heston, used a toupee that turned his stomach. Idiotically, he found himself thinking about some of the old John Wayne war movies he had watched incessantly as a boy. About the way the Japanese always died in them. They were never humanized in those old movies. They were never allowed to show pain, denied so much as a final scream of agony when they got shot – they just fell over, eyes blank, like some soulless exterminated pest. He shook the image from mind.

Nurse Hanade: "See anything good?" He did not.

Something safe. He finally made a vague jab at the movie listings. Nurse Hanade said, "That fine that okay with you Karen?" Karen nodded, then rose and removed from a shelf her purse and a jacket. He managed to be next to her when she began to put the jacket on, and with a slight murmuring gallantry took the garment from her and held it to assist her in donning it. It pleased her, and pleased her more when he managed it perfectly. The right way to help someone with a coat is to hold it low, put both arms in at once, then sweep the apparel up the back quickly, like throwing a cape over royalty. When flawlessly done it is a very charming thing.

Her arms passed through the sleeves, exited them. She was thin but not particularly thin, so he was surprised to see she possessed the most slender wrists he had ever seen on an adult, childlike, small as two fingers. They were so exquisite he wished he knew her better so he could give her a bracelet and put it on her.

The next crucible lay in avoiding use of his decrepit car for the outing. He began to mentally conjure excuses to utter so Karen's mother would offer to drive.

Nurse Hanade intruded on his thoughts, saying suddenly, "Tell you guys what you go out and have fun I got early shift I better stay home." Oh shit, he thought, if

the old lady isn't going I'm really caught by the shorts. Karen will take one look at the VW and run like it's Godzilla.

What followed was nothing less than a moment of perfect telepathy. Nurse Hanade walked to him and with a quick strong underhand motion she flipped him her car keys. She said in a low tone, "Take mine it's full of gas." His face flushed in embarrassment and he looked sideways to see the reaction on Karen's face. No emotion: It was frozen like her mother's had been that morning. He could not tell whether she was chagrined for him or being polite. He guessed it was simply good manners and thought better of her for that. She has tolerance, he thought. Something I need.

Karen's mother opened the front door for them. "Okay see you guys have fun drive easy lots of drunks on road. See you in awhile. Bye."

## VI

Her car was a 1970 Plymouth Fury, a gargantuan automobile, long flat very wide. It had just been hastily cleaned. He loved driving cars like it, their spaciousness, their tranquil smooth ride. He smiled at the great broad back seat. A person could stretch out fully on it. So could two. They were beginning to phase these big gas-voracious cars out. He would miss them terribly.

He turned the ignition key. Mrs. Hanade's car radio was set on a station emitting something by Paul Anka. He stabbed at the tuning knob as if putting the pin back into a grenade and switched the radio to KOPE.

The drive was only a mile or so, gratefully. The strain between the two strangers in the car quieted them. He ventured a few brief comments about the Bicentennial celebration, a few witticisms about other drivers, but they were deflected with brief responses so he ceased.

Fireworks were bursting everywhere. The radio thumped out a slow lurking bass riff then sang *Thinkin' 'bout the time you drove in my car. Thinkin' that I mighta*

*drove you too far. Cream was one of the few bands of his youth whose members were all still alive. Told you not to wander out in the dark. Told you 'bout the swans how they live in the park.*

They went to see something called *The Gumball Rally*. A boffo hit. It was based on a true story, albeit an idiotic one: A pack of rich snotty louts ran this illegal car race across America called the Gumball Rally. The drivers met secretly, evaded police and press, and scampered across the land like cockroaches beneath light. The movie was a little better than the later atrocities Burt Reynolds based on the same race.

He bought popcorn and soda. And candy, that kind of candy whose ads swore that it didn't melt in your hand, just your mouth. Karen opened the bag of it during the previews. Routinely as pouring milk on cereal, she poured the candy into the popcorn and swirled the compound about with her small nailbitten hand. He was unfamiliar with this dietary custom. His nonplussment abated when he found it actually quite tasty. But then he wanted to hold her hand during the movie and he found residue from the candy melting over his hand in five delicious flavors, a quintet of sticky colors, Jackson Pollock drippings on his hand. God damn that candy company and their lying ads, he thought. May someone sue them -- lock, stock, Plain and Peanut.

Karen thought the crazy Hitler-looking guy who kept crashing his motorcycle was funny. But then there was an Italian driver rolling a toy car over a woman's bare hillocks and growling vroom vrooom and he felt her forearm tense alongside his. He tried not to laugh at the dirty jokes.

## VII

On the way back a song he loved came on KOPE. *California Dreamin'*. He had moved to LA because of it. He could whistle amazingly well and indulged himself, softly whistling along with the cool sharp flute solo. He followed it

perfectly, blandishing a few extra harmonious swoops and trills. Karen was not as impressed by his virtuosity as he thought. He had felt real loss when Mama Cass had died and was angry at the coverup he was sure surrounded it, as spurious as Nixon's. *Bullshit* she choked on a ham sandwich. He had been to Monterey, the great summer of '67 pop festival that deified the Mama and The Who and Hendrix and introduced Janis Joplin and Otis Redding. That festival had a higher casualty rate than Iwo Jima. He had been there. Really, not just lied that he was there like everyone else his age. He had gone there, cadged a press pass and gotten some great shots. At tight telephoto range, Mama Cass looked bloated and gloriously fucked-up. Soaring on the best clean mighty drugs that rich remote rock stars were given by fans, like tax-grain given royalty by a fawning subject. Hell, she looked dead *then*, through that omniscient Nikon lens. The only famous person he saw there who was higher than Mama Cass was Mickey Dolenz, sitting in Row Three Center with a pair of curled-lip record people. How strange that everyone famous at that festival was now dead except the Monkees. How strange. But the Mama's song was old, old, ten years old, worn and shorn of its meaning. He tried to talk music with Karen but she would confess only to an affection for the songs of Karen Carpenter. His horror was barely contained.

## VIII

Now in a housecoat, Karen's mother feigned great interest in the plot of *The Gumball Rally*. Then she darted into the kitchen. Karen invited him to sit on the living-room sofa again, but this time she joined him there, close but not touching. There was a sliver of boldness in it so he looked directly at her and smiled his pleasure. She returned a tiny smile, at last revealing small straight expensively maintained teeth. They made him wonder if he would be granted photographic audience with her sometime soon.

"You're a photographer? That's what Mom said. Maybe I could see your stuff sometime."

"Not the stuff I do for your mom, that isn't real aesthetic, let's just say."

She laughed a little. "No, I meant your real stuff, your other stuff."

A pause. One of his portfolios was outside in the VW but he decided against retrieving it. It was all stark and turbulent stuff he had shot just before his last girlfriend had deserted. Too much weirdness and skin. Even the gallery pimps had said so.

She leapt into the silence, reaching for a large album in front of them on the coffee table. "Here's some pictures, you can see what your boss looked like when she was younger than us."

The first photo was a gray-tan Polaroid shot in strong sunlight. Hanako Hanade, middle twenties, sanded smooth and thin, smiling shyly and holding a bundled infant. She was standing in front of a small wood building and a tall wire fence.

"What year was this?" he asked.

"Oh, let's see, I'm thirty-three now, guess it was 1943." Her tone stilled. "They put her in the camp until they needed nurses so bad they didn't care what they looked like. So then they pulled her out of there. They didn't even care that she'd...had a baby. She left me there with her brother and they shipped her to Europe."

"Must have been awful, being caged in." He tried his best liberal-concerned frown.

"That's what everybody says but she swears she was okay there." Karen shook her head in amused wonder. "And she said nobody in the camp had to work, really, they just -- waited. And they showed them movies every night! That's the one thing she really cares about, movies. She says they can cure anything."

"Do you remember it at all?"

"No." She turned the remaining pages quickly, a thirty-second summation of her upbringing. There was not a man with Karen and her mother anywhere in the album.

"Anyway, that's what she looked like." Nurse Hanade's war service passed in a flurry of hasty snapshots and ambered news clippings. She seemed to have an unusual number of these clippings for a mere Army nurse. Maybe she was a big propaganda example. He interspersed polite murmurs as the photos passed, but looked at Karen's wrists more than the pages. The last photo, professionally done and color, showed the nurse in uniform, still young, same apologetic smile as her daughter. There was an uncommon decoration about her neck, faintly familiar of appearance to him, a large gold star suspending from a blue ribbon. Wonder how many GI's she offered to get that, he wondered, suppressing a grin.

Nurse Hanade walked in from the kitchen, beaming at them and at the great scoops of ice cream she had dispensed into two bowls. It was a cheap off-brand of Neapolitan that stubbornly refused to melt but it was good to him anyway and he devoured it rather quickly. Karen ate four small bites. Nurse Hanade watched them eat it, keen and solemn as an expensive chef.

Nurse Hanade: "I got to get up early so I go to bed now. Stick around but don't be tired at work in the morning. Tell you what don't come in until ten." She fled, smiling. He managed a small look at Karen, who looked trapped in her own home.

His first impulse was to stretch, yawn and excuse himself too, but he could somehow not. Karen looked a shade more comfortable so he leaned back on the couch. "What's your major" was already used up, along with the other usual front-line niceties, so he struggled to maintain a reason to stay. Finally he asked, "What takes the rest of your time after school? You got a job or hobby or something?" He quickly ruled using the word "hobby." So Fifties! Needlepoint or electric trains! Her look was lightly wary. "Okay, don't laugh, but I actually like square dancing. I belong to this club – " she checked his face but he managed passivity so she continued. "See, I got a degree in folk dance as an

undergrad but I couldn't get a teaching job with it. So now it's just a spare-time thing. I like the club, but, I don't know, everybody in it's older than me..." she trailed off.

He offered, "I had a little trouble making art pay, too."

"Maybe it's better for an artist to learn that while still young," Karen said softly. "When you get a degree in something and all you can do with that knowledge is teach it to someone else, it's really a very unconstructive thing, don't you think? All you do is keep a sort of useless process going, like some food chain of animals no one cares about. I'm sorry no one cared about my folk dancing, but at least I'm glad I wasn't part of that cycle, that -- perpetuating, endless failure."

He managed a rueful laugh. "Karen, you're smarter than me. That's a lesson I never learned."

"So last year I went back and studied what Mother Thought Best. I'll end up a lab tech, probably, and wow 'em with my dancing at the hospital Christmas parties." She was looking downward.

With scorpion's stealth his hand neared, brushed, took hers. She would not meet his eyes so he desisted from his impulse to draw her eyeglasses off. Anyway, what would it be? Not like those stupid movies where some dowdy young librarian takes off her big glasses and loosens her hair and pow underneath she's really a smasher.

He heard himself saying, "I haven't gone out much lately, how about you?"

She responded easily, forthrightly to the confessional. "Once in awhile, someone from school or the club. But not anyone -- " again the downward glance. "Most of the Asian guys are settled already, plus my, my family history...the other men, they act like I'm all aloof, indecipherable, somehow." She turned to him with a sort of finality. "My background," she said. So there they

were. The great unspoken clouds of ethnicity and parentage. Like a disease or curse. What an idiotic male proposition, he thought, that this woman was somehow -- somehow -- *ineligible*. And what a ridiculous country this can sometimes be, where all you really need to be considered from a "good family" is to have two parents with an expensive house.

He was very close to her now. A flash of green sparks outside made him glance out the picture window for an instant. Someone fat and swimsuited was standing in the street barefoot, holding a beer bottle in one hand and a blazing Roman candle in the other. The firework reflected doubly on Karen's glasses. The obese person in the street suddenly howled, dropped the bottle and the candle onto the pavement, and looked at his burned hand with wailed cursings. He danced about, stepped on a shard of bottle glass, shrieked. The candle and its owner skittered about the street crazily. Karen laughed, not daintily polite but a genuine strong belly laugh. It was deliciously contagious and he found himself doing the same. He gazed at her. Her smile began to dim so he quickly put his mouth on hers.

Her mouth was dry and so he was startled when her small quick tongue stabbed him. This from a woman had always been an indication of permission to him so his hands began to move. He felt little control but deployed an old maneuver, placing one hand gently between her neck and her bosom, not groping, just soft fixed inquisitive touching. It was just suggestive enough without being "fast." It worked on her too. She kissed harder and for a feral second she rubbed low against him. The last vestige of control deserted him and he clutched her hard. She returned the ferocity with a directness that delighted him.

Their hands clawed at one another, emancipating straps, buckles, buttons. He realized that she was biting his neck. He pulled back to breathe and look at her. One breast was uncovered, small and pale, like a child's. She returned the look, sharply direct and his mouth rushed to hers again.

There was a creaking sound from the hallway and she pushed herself from him. Silence. He looked around, then at her. Karen's eyes gaped with alarm.

Her fright was so acute that for a second he thought she had spotted an intruder in the house. He beckoned to her gently.

"Come here."

Animal terror still.

"Karen, come here. I'll be softer. Please."

"Oh no, my mom will come out and see."

"Your mom? This isn't the night of the prom anymore."

Wet anger in her eyes. "I wouldn't know, I wasn't asked to the prom."

"You know what I mean! You're thirty-three years old, dammit. Why in hell did she bring me here?"

"I don't know. She didn't want me alone tonight, maybe. Ask her."

"Okay, listen, I'd better say Happy Trails here. I can't stand that scared look of yours."

"Maybe you can come over again sometime. Maybe sometime. I don't know." She smoothed herself.

"Karen. I hate to sound like one of those pink and purple greeting cards but maybe you've noticed – life runs out. I know you hear that all the time and I know that's so simple but I cannot say it any better. It ain't over for you or for me, but -- it's getting dark out there. So come on. This offer will be good for one night only. Now. Or never."

"You'd better go. You should go."

"I'm not going anywhere." It came out too harsh. Her fear turned to him and she looked as if she were about to scream. He felt panic too. "Not right now, not here, I don't mean. I mean in this world. I'm not going...I'm not getting anywh -- ...Where will we leave each other?"

"Where we started. Okay?"

A string of firecrackers was popping outside, mock gunfire.

He said, "I'm not going anywhere."

Her anger returned. "Okay, do what you want, I don't care." The denim dress fell to the carpet. Her legs trembled.

He wondered if Karen would believe him if he said he wanted most to soothe her, to somehow try to take away her torment. But he doubted his ability to convince her verbally. In a trucelike gesture he put out his hands. He walked to her very slowly, very quietly, and, very simply, placed his lips at the base of her neck. Her head leaned on his for an instant, but then she did nothing and he knew he had failed to persuade her. Ten years ago, I could've brought it off, he thought, and the realization of it broke him. Why the hell did his throat feel like that? he wondered. It hadn't knotted like that since he watched the end of that goddam movie *The Babe Ruth Story* when he was a kid. It was very hard to breathe and suddenly his knees didn't seem to want to work anymore. He was snuffling, not quietly. "I am sorry I scared you. I am so, so sorry. Karen."

She pulled him to her middle for a moment and spoke to him like a boy who had just fallen.

"Don't say anything for a minute."

He complied, then said, "I didn't mean to go off the rails like that. I never meant to go off the rails. But I did."

She gestured delicately to silence him, then she spoke. "I tried everything to cope with being ignored as a performer. Some men, a little grass, joining the Jesus People a few years ago, then that square-dance club, but the same stupid thought kept coming back to me. Something I read in those days when I was going to church like someone dropping amphetamines. Moses was stuck in the desert with the Jews, and they couldn't get into the Promised Land for a very long time and the people got bitter and so they bitched to Moses, saying, 'Did God bring us all the way out here to this wildemess just to die?' So I ask the same question sometimes when I think about working on my dancing all those years. God, did you bring me to this place just to die? The tough thing is though, in my case the answer is, yeah, He did."

He gulped several breaths before answering. "Ten years ago, right out of college, I got this photography apprenticeship with *Time*. I was picked out of more than a thousand applicants. But there was this big music festival in Monterey -- remember it? Hendrix and The Who and Janis Joplin and Mama Cass? I wanted to be there more than I wanted Heaven. I went to the festival instead of reporting to the *Time* office, and they gave the apprenticeship to an alternate. I finally showed up at *Time* and they told me to leave. I don't need to bore you with what happened after that, just that, well, things multiplied from that day sort of exponentially downward, and here I am, where I am."

She said nothing, just looked at him.

"See, Karen, it's not losing that gets me. That you can live with. Or at least comprehend. I mean, hey, for every guy who hits a home run in the World Series, there's also the poor sad clown who hung a curve and served it up for the hero. It's like another Newton's Law. But this wasn't losing, it's something worse. I didn't hang a curve, I failed to even show up. I missed the game, I missed everything. I positively despise the fact that...that was me."

"But that wasn't really you. It was you but it isn't now. Did you know that the human body replaces all its cells every seven years? So it wasn't you that did that, it was a collection of cells that don't exist anymore." She smiled, wiped her

eyes. He wanted to say that he had read that notion in a dozen bad novels but he was unwilling to injure her with any such remark. It was her inferior education talking; no doubt she had heard that in a class at Northridge. He just said, "If that's true, then we have to wait seven years for absolution, for forgiveness. It's been that long, plus three years, and I see no sign of that. God gave up on me the day I went to Monterey."

He was being too loud. Karen looked up the stairs anxiously.

"Karen, I am so mortally sick of wasting time. Nothing is worth that. So come on. Do you want to care about me?"

"I don't know, maybe we could try."

"No. No maybes. Yes or no."

"It's just...do you think we could we go slow?"

"No, we could not. I don't want to wait or go slow or be careful and I don't want anybody who does. I don't want to "take it easy" and "build something" and just end up investing in failure."

"We could go to my room for awhile, come on." Karen pulled his sleeve. He yanked it away.

"That's not what I want, I mean that's not all I want. Just that, just that right now, that is just *hit* and *run*, that's nothing, there's nothing to that but amusement, just something to do to pass the time...So either follow me out of this house right now or don't. My car isn't exactly the chariot of the gods but it'll get us there."

Karen was trying to smile him down. "My mom will kill me. "

"So will waiting."

He restored his clothing to decency, then set himself towards the door. One should not turn around, he thought. Always remember the example of Lot's wife at the incinerating city of Sodom, disobeying the angel's command against looking back, transformed to a pillar of salt. (The force it must have taken to turn Lot's wife to that. He had always been convinced that The Bible's account of Sodom's fate was actually a description of a nuclear blast.)

Passing through the doorway, he thought of a Tennessee Williams play they had made him read in college. A mother invites over a fading "gentleman caller" for her crippled daughter. But he is already spoken for and the girl is miserably crushed. Oh Tennessee! Even your sorcery could not ready one for it.

## IX

The old VW labored east on Plummer, through seedy Sepulveda and past the VA. Plummer had just been repaved; it was utterly deserted; it was more like skimming than driving. His only company was the radio, tuned in to KOPE.

The fresh new road offered itself, smooth and empty, a sky for flight. He recalled that *flight* can be a form of the word *flee*. A judge calls someone likely to jump bail a *flight risk*. KOPE was playing a wondrous old Elvis song. He sang along with Elvis and said out loud, "At least he's still around." Then the vulgar airline ad came on the radio again. Same fight-song melody. *We really move our tail for you, to make your every wish come true. We really move our tail for you.* Then a news flash about an airline accident. The jet was LA to Denver. The crash occurred "shortly after takeoff." Why did they always crash at that moment, at that initial airborne instant? he wondered. Like between people, when things went bad they usually did at the very outset. Except sometimes people tried to make it all fly anyway. He was unsure as to if it ever worked.

Some weeks later, just before the cessation of his thirty-third year, he learned that Cynthia Rutstein, his Fourth of July entertainment of nine years before, was on the airplane. Thirty-three, three times three is nine.

Kay Oh Pee *EEEEEE*, Los ANgeles. The radio announcer yammered on with efficient disaster-mode solemn glee. Where it happened, what homes were crushed, where to give blood, who to call if you might know somebody who just fell from the sky like Icarus. Their attempt at civil gravity was blankly futile; the media is at its worst when it flies the flag of a moral force.

The road had been his alone. But not now. There were two headlights in the mirror, broadly spaced. Like maybe from a long flat wide Plymouth. His heart raced when he thought it might be her in pursuit. It raced more when he saw the ghostly blue glass atop the car, and the solid black vertical shape alongside the driver, unmistakably a policeman's upright shotgun. Panic shot through him. Then he giggled. It was such a flawless little mockery he failed to take himself seriously for the first time in his life. So here it is, he thought, the perfect little boot in the ass on my way out the door. To get busted for expired plates and no insurance and the joint under the seat. Encore!

The "pig" (years after running from campus tear gas, he still called them that) spun a big spotlight into the VW. It utterly blinded him, whitewash energy, like God in a film. Perhaps that was what made him simply and defiantly gaze into it. He could see nothing but white. He waited for the inevitable guillotine blade of flashing blue above it, one second, two, three.

At first, to the policeman, the look of the VW's driver was that of a rabbit in country road headlights. Then he saw more in it. Fatal acceptance. Sacrificial self-offering. This was uncommon. Most traffic pull-overs mixed piety and fright and beer and rage. The cop had seen this look in jails, or in protest martyrs, never in a driver, and the oddity chilled him. Then the sorry Beetle-driving bastard just looked like a lot of paperwork and sad-ass harassment of a man who looked like he'd had plenty. Bigger game was loose.

The spotlight yanked away, shining up forever towards Orion. Through an aurora of lightspots he saw the cop deal him a terse nod, then the cruiser pulled away.

## X

Orderlies were plucking the crepe-paper American flags and firecrackers off the VA walls when he arrived there at ten the next morning. He passed Psych Observation and glanced in. One of the beds was empty, stripped to the mattress. Khe Sanh Jake was peeling the backing off an American flag decal.

He dropped his camera bag and dove into the ward. Jake winked. Eddie nodded and grunted.

Eddie: "Guess who Yoko got?"

"Oh god, no."

Jake: "Sergeant Stan, five o'clock this ayem."

Eddie: "Yoko zapped him. He's playin' catch with The Babe."

Jake: "Odeed the poor bastard with morphine. My kinda heaven."

Eddie: "Give Yoko one thing, she's got style."

Jake: "Yeah." Then imitating Sinatra. "She did it -- MY WAY."

Eddie: "That's Yoko's first score around here since that time she left the morphine stash unlocked and those four grunts O.D.'d. You 'member that? Four kills in one day. The Red fucking Baron never had a day like that. Grand Slam."

The photographer began to moan, then shout, then wail. He was tangentially aware that he was causing a number of objects to fly about the room. Jake and Eddie ducked his hurlings and watched him with somber, heavy-lidded eyes.

He ran down to the darkroom, turned the fan on full and loud, and wept for

Stan a bit. And for all those dead poets and soldiers and lovers and rockers and kings. He had always loved most what was lost to him.

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