WHY WE'RE IN VIETNAM

Stephen King

When someone dies, you think about the past. Sully had probably known this for years, but it was only on the day of Pags's funeral that it formed in his mind as a conscious postulate.

It was twenty-six years since the helicopters took their last loads of refugees (some dangling photogenically from the landing skids) off the roof of the US embassy in Saigon and almost thirty since a Huey evacked John Sullivan, Willie Shearman and maybe a dozen others out of Dong Ha Province. Sully-John and his magically refound childhood acquaintance had been heroes that morning when the choppers fell out of the sky; they'd been something else come afternoon. Sully could remember lying there on the Huey's throbbing floor and screaming for someone to kill him. He could remember Willie screaming as well.

I'm blind was what Willie had been screaming. Ah Jesus-fuck, I'm blind!

Eventually it had become clear to him — even with some of his guts hanging out of his belly in gray ropes and most of his balls blown off — that no one was going to do what he asked and he wasn't going to be able to do the job on his own. Not soon enough to suit him, anyway. So he asked someone to get rid of the mamasan, they could do that much, couldn't they? Land her or just dump her the fuck out, why not? Wasn't she dead already? Thing was, she wouldn't stop looking at him, and enough was enough.

By the time they swapped him and Shearman and half a dozen others — the worst ones —

to a Medevac at the rally-point everyone called Peepee City (the chopper-jockeys were probably damned glad to see them go, all that screaming), Sully had started to realize none of the others could see old mamasan squatting there in the cockpit, old white-haired mamasan in the green pants and orange top and those weird bright Chinese sneakers, the ones that looked like Chuck Taylor hightops, bright red, wow. Old mamasan had been Malenfant's date, old Mr

Card-Shark's big date. Earlier that day Malenfant had run into the clearing along with Sully and Dieffenbaker and Sly Slocum and the others, never mind the gooks firing at them out of the bush, never mind the terrible week of mortars and snipers and ambushes, Malenfant had been hero-bound and Sully had been hero-bound too, and now oh hey look at this, Ronnie Malenfant was a murderer, the kid Sully had been so afraid of back in the old days had saved his life and been blinded, and Sully himself was lying on the floor of a helicopter with his guts waving in the breeze. As Art Linkletter always said, it just proved that people are funny.

Somebody kill me, he had screamed on that bright and terrible afternoon. Somebody shoot me, for the love of God just let me die.

But he hadn't died, the doctors had managed to save one of his mangled testicles, and now there were even days when he felt more or less glad to be alive. Sunsets made him feel that way. He liked to go out to the back of the lot, where the cars they'd taken in trade but hadn't yet fixed up were stored, and stand there watching the sun go down. Corny shit, granted, but it was still the good part.

In San Francisco Willie was on the same ward and visited him a lot until the Army in its wisdom sent First Lieutenant Shearman somewhere else; they had talked for hours about the old days in Harwich and people they knew in common. Once they'd even gotten their picture taken by an AP news photographer — Willie sitting on Sully's bed, both of them laughing.

Willie's eyes had been better by then but still not right; Willie had confided to Sully that he was afraid they never would be right. The story that went with the picture had been pretty dopey, but had it brought them letters? Holy Christ! More than either of them could read!

Sully had even gotten the crazy idea that he might hear from Carol, but of course he never did. It was the spring of 1970 and Carol Gerber was undoubtedly busy smoking pot and giving blowjobs to end-the-war hippies while her old highschool boyfriend was getting

his balls blown off on the other side of the world. That's right, Art, people are funny. Also, kids say the darndest things.

When Willie shipped out, old mamasan stayed. Old mamasan hung right in there. During the seven months Sully spent in San Francisco's Veterans Hospital she had come every day and every night, his most constant visitor in that endless time when the whole world seemed to smell of piss and his heart hurt like a headache. Sometimes she showed up in a muumuu like the hostess at some nutty luau, sometimes she came wearing one of those grisly green golf-skirts and a sleeveless top that showed off her scrawny arms … but mostly she wore what she had been wearing on the day Malenfant killed her — the green pants, the orange smock, the red sneakers with the Chinese symbols on them.

One day that summer he unfolded the San Francisco Chronicle and saw his old girlfriend had made the front page. His old girlfriend and her hippie pals had killed a bunch of kids and job-recruiters back in Danbury. His old girlfriend was now 'Red Carol.' His old girlfriend was a celebrity. 'You cunt,' he had said as the paper first doubled, then trebled, then broke up into prisms. 'You stupid fucked-up cunt.' He had balled the paper up, meaning to throw it across the room, and there was his new girlfriend, there was old mamasan sitting on the next bed, looking at Sully with her black eyes, and Sully had broken down completely at the sight of her. When the nurse came Sully either couldn't or wouldn't tell her what he was crying about.

All he knew was that the world had gone insane and he wanted a shot and eventually the nurse found a doctor to give him one and the last thing he saw before he passed out was mamasan, old fuckin mamasan sitting there on the next bed with her yellow hands in her green polyester lap, sitting there and watching him.

She made the trip across the country with him, too, had come all the way back to Connecticut with him, deadheading across the aisle in the tourist cabin of a United Airlines 747. She sat next to a businessman who saw her no more than the crew of the Huey had, or Willie Shearman, or the staff at the Pussy Palace. She had been

Malenfant's date in Dong Ha, but she was John Sullivan's date now and never took her black eyes off him. Her yellow, wrinkled fingers always stayed folded in her lap and her eyes always stayed on him.

Thirty years. Man, that was a long time.

But as those years went by, Sully had seen her less and less. When he returned to Harwich in the fall of '70, he still saw old mamasan just about every day — eating a hotdog in Commonwealth Park by Field B, or standing at the foot of the iron steps leading up to the railway station where the commuters ebbed and flowed, or just walking down Main Street.

Always looking at him.

Once, not long after he'd gotten his first post-Vietnam job, (selling cars, of course; it was the only thing he really knew how to do) he had seen old mamasan sitting in the passenger seat of a 1968 Ford LTD with PRICED TO SELL! soaped on the windshield.

You'll start to understand her in time, the headshrinker in San Francisco had told him, and refused to say much more no matter how hard Sully pressed him. The shrink wanted to hear about the helicopters that had collided and fell out of the sky; the headshrinker wanted to know why Sully so often referred to Malenfant as 'that cardplaying bastard' (Sully wouldn't tell him); the headshrinker wanted to know if Sully still had sexual fantasies, and if so, had they become noticeably violent. Sully had sort of liked the guy — Conroy, his name was —

but that didn't change the fact that he was an asshole. Once, near the end of his time in San Francisco, he had come close to telling Dr Conroy about Carol. On the whole he was glad he hadn't. He didn't know how to think about his old girlfriend, let alone talk about her (conflicted was Conroy's word for this state). He had called her a stupid fucked-up cunt, but the whole damned world was sort of fucked-up these days, wasn't it? And if anyone knew how easily violent behavior could break its leash and just run away, John

Sullivan did. All he was sure of was that he hoped the police wouldn't kill her when they finally caught up to her and her friends.

Asshole or not, Dr Conroy hadn't been entirely wrong about Sully coming to understand old mamasan as time went by. The most important thing was understanding — on a gut level — that old mamasan wasn't there. Head-knowledge of that basic fact was easy, but his gut was slower to learn, possibly because his gut had been torn open in Dong Ha and a thing like that just had to slow down the understanding process.

He had borrowed some of Dr Conroy's books, and the hospital librarian had gotten him a couple of others on inter-library loan. According to the books, old mamasan in her green pants and orange top was 'an externalized fantasy' which served as a 'coping mechanism' to help him deal with his 'survivor guilt' and 'post-traumatic stress syndrome.' She was a daydream, in other words.

Whatever the reasons, his attitude about her changed as her appearances became less frequent. Instead of feeling revulsion or a kind of superstitious dread when she turned up, he began to feel almost happy when he saw her. The way you felt when you saw an old friend who had left town but sometimes came back for a little visit.

He lived in Milford now, a town about twenty miles north of Harwich on I-95 and light-years away in most other senses. Harwich had been a pleasant, tree-filled suburb when Sully lived there as a kid, chumming with Bobby Garfield and Carol Gerber. Now his old home town was one of those places you didn't go at night, just a grimy adjunct to Bridgeport. He still spent most of his days there, on the lot or in his office (Sullivan Chevrolet had been a Gold Star dealership four years running now), but he was gone by six o'clock most evenings, seven for sure, tooling north to Milford in his Caprice demonstrator. He usually went with an unacknowledged but very real sense of gratitude.

On this particular summer day he had gone south from Milford on I-95 as usual, but at a later hour and without getting off at Exit 9, ASHER AVENUE HARWICH. Today he had kept the new demo pointed south (it was blue with blackwall tires, and watching people's brakelights go on when they saw him in their rearview mirrors never failed to amuse him — they thought he was a cop) and drove all the way into New York City.

He left the car at Arnie Mossberg's dealership on the West Side (when you were a Chevy dealer there was never a parking problem; that was one of the nice things about it), did some window-shopping on his way across town, had a steak at Palm Too, then went to Pagano's funeral.

Pags had been one of the guys at the chopper crash-site that morning, one of the guys in the Ville that afternoon. Also one of the guys caught in the final ambush on the trail, the ambush which had begun when Sully himself either stepped on a mine or broke a wire and popped a satchel-charge strapped to a tree. The little men in the black pajamas had been in the high toolies and man, they had opened up. On the trail, Pags had grabbed Wollensky when Wollensky got shot in the throat. He got Wollensky into the clearing, but by then Wollensky was dead. Pags would have been covered with Wollensky's blood (Sullivan didn't actually remember seeing that; he had been in his own hell by then), but that was probably something of a relief to the man because it covered up the other blood, still not entirely dry.

Pagano had been standing close enough to get splattered when Slocum shot Malenfant's buddy. Splattered with Clemson's blood, splattered with Clemson's brains.

Sully had never said a word about what happened to Clemson in the Ville, not to Dr Conroy or anyone else. He had dummied up. All of them had dummied up.

Pags had died of cancer. Whenever one of Sully's old Nam buddies died (well okay, they weren't buddies, exactly, most of them dumb as

stone boats and not what Sully would really call buddies, but it was the word they used because there was no word invented for what they had really been to each other), it always seemed to be cancer or drugs or suicide. Usually the cancer started in the lung or the brain and then just ran everywhere, as if these men had left their immune systems back in the green. With Dick Pagano it had been pancreatic cancer —

him and Michael Landon. It was the disease of the stars. The coffin was open and old Pags didn't look too shabby. His wife had had the undertaker dress him in an ordinary business suit, not a uniform. She probably hadn't even considered the uniform option, despite the decorations Pagano had won. Pags had worn a uniform for only two or three years, those years like an aberration, like time spent in some county joint because you did something entirely out of character on one bad-luck occasion, probably while you were drunk. Killed a guy in a barroom fight, say, or took it into your head to burn down the church where your exwife taught Sunday school. Sully couldn't think of a single man he'd served with, including himself, who would want to be buried in an Army uniform.

Dieffenbaker — Sully still thought of him as the new lieutenant — came to the funeral.

Sully hadn't seen Dieffenbaker in a long time, and they had had themselves quite a talk …

although Dieffenbaker actually did most of the talking. Sully wasn't sure talking ever made a difference, but he kept thinking about the stuff Dieffenbaker said. How mad Dieffenbaker had sounded, mostly. All the way back to Connecticut he kept thinking about it.

He was on the Triborough Bridge heading north again by two o'clock, in plenty of time to beat the rush-hour traffic. 'Smooth movement across the Triborough and at key points along the LIE,' was how the traffic-reporter in the WINS copter put it. That's what copters were for these days; gauging the flow of traffic in and out of America's cities.

When the traffic started to slow just north of Bridgeport, Sully didn't notice. He had switched from news to oldies and had fallen to thinking about Pags and his harmonicas. It was a war-movie cliche, the grizzled GI with the mouth-harp, but Pagano, dear God, Pagano could drive you out of your ever-fuckin mind. Night and day he had played em, until one of the guys — it might have been Hexley or even Garrett Slocum — told him that if he didn't quit it, he was apt to wake up one morning with the world's first whistling rectal implant.

The more he considered it, the more Sully thought Sly Slocum had been the one to threaten the rectal implant. Big black man from Tulsa, thought Sly and the Family Stone was the best group on earth, hence the nickname, and refused to believe that another group he admired, Rare Earth, was white. Sully remembered Deef (this was before Dieffenbaker became the new lieutenant and gave Slocum that nod, probably the most important gesture Dieffenbaker had ever made or ever would make in his life) telling Slocum that those guys were just as white as fuckin Bob Dylan ('the folksingin honky' was what Slocum called Dylan). Slocum thought this over, then replied with what was for him rare gravity. The fuck you say. Rare Earth, man, those guys black. They record on fuckin Motown, and all Motown groups are black, everyone know that. Supremes, fuckin Temps, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. I respect you, Deef, you bad and you nationwide, without a doubt, man, but if you persist in your bullshit, I going to knock you down.

Slocum hated harmonica music. Harmonica music made him think of the folksingin honky.

If you tried to tell him that Dylan cared about the war, Slocum asked then how come the mulebray muthafucka didn't come on over here with Bob Hope one time. I tell you why, Slocum said. He scared, that's why. Fuckin candyass harmonica-blowin mulebray muthafucka!

Musing on Dieffenbaker rapping about the sixties. Thinking of those old names and old faces and old days. Not noticing as the Caprice's speedometer dropped from sixty to fifty to forty, the traffic starting to

stack up in all four northbound lanes. He remembered how Pags had been over there in the green — skinny, black-haired, his cheeks still dotted with the last of his post-adolescent acne, a rifle in his hands and two Hohner harmonicas (one key of C, one key of G) stuffed into the waistband of his camo trousers. Thirty years ago, that had been.

Roll back ten more and Sully was a kid growing up in Harwich, palling with Bobby Garfield and wishing that Carol Gerber would look at him, John Sullivan, just once the way she always looked at Bobby.

In time she had looked at him of course, but never in quite the same way. Was it because she was no longer eleven or because he wasn't Bobby? Sully didn't know. The look itself had been a mystery. It seemed to say that Bobby was killing her and she was glad, she would die that way until the stars fell from the sky and the rivers ran uphill and all the words to 'Louie Louie' were known.

What had happened to Bobby Garfield? Had he gone to Vietnam? Joined the flower children? Married, fathered children, died of pancreatic cancer? Sully didn't know. All he knew for sure was that Bobby had changed somehow in the summer of 1960 — the summer Sully had won a free week at the YMCA camp on Lake George — and had left town with his mother. Carol had stayed through high school, and even if she had never looked at him quite the way she had looked at Bobby, he had been her first, and she his. One night out in the country behind some Newburg dairy-farmer's barnful of lowing cattle. Sully remembered smelling sweet perfume on her throat as he came.

Why that odd cross-connection between Pagano in his coffin and the friends of his childhood? Perhaps because Pags had looked a little bit like Bobby had looked in those bygone days. Bobby's hair had been dark red instead of black, but he'd had that same skinny build and angular face … and the same freckles. Yeah! Both Pags and Bobby with that Opie Taylor spray of freckles across the cheeks and the bridge of the nose! Or maybe it was just because when someone dies, you think about the past, the past, the fuckin past.

Now the Caprice was down to twenty miles an hour and the traffic stopped dead farther up, just shy of Exit 9, but Sully still didn't notice. On WKND, the oldies station, ? and The Mysterians were singing '96 Tears' and he was thinking about walking down the center aisle of the chapel with Dieffenbaker in front of him, walking up to the coffin for his first look at Pagano while the canned hymns played. 'Abide With Me' was the current ditty wafting through the air above Pagano's corpse — Pags, who had been perfectly happy to sit for hours with the .50-caliber propped up beside him and his pack on his lap and a deck of Winstons parked in the strap of his helmet, playing 'Goin Up the Country' over and over again.

Any resemblance to Bobby Garfield was long gone, Sully saw as he looked into the coffin.

The mortician had done a job good enough to justify the open coffin, but Pags still had the loose-skinned, sharp-chinned look of a fat man who has spent his final months on the Cancer Diet, the one they never write up in the National Enquirer, the one that consists of radiation, injected chemical poisons, and all the potato chips you want.

'Remember the harmonicas?' Dieffenbaker asked.

'I remember,' Sully said. 'I remember everything.' It came out sounding weird, and Dieffenbaker glanced at him.

Sully had a clear, fierce flash of how Deef had looked on that day in the Ville when Malenfant, Clemson, and those other nimrods had all of a sudden started paying off the morning's terror … the whole last week's terror. They wanted to put it somewhere, the howls in the night and the sudden mortar-shots and finally the burning copters that had fallen with their rotors still turning, dispersing the smoke of their own deaths as they dropped. Down they came, whacko! And the little men in the black pajamas were shooting at Delta two-two and Bravo two-one from the bush just as soon as the Americans ran out into the clearing.

Sully had run with Willie Shearman beside him on the right and Lieutenant Packer in front of him; then Lieutenant Packer took a round in the face and no one was in front of him. Ronnie Malenfant was on his left and Malenfant had been yelling in his high-pitched voice, on and on and on, he was like some mad high-pressure telephone salesman gourded out on amphetamines: Come on, you fuckin ringmeats! Come on, you slopey Joes! Shoot me, ya fucks! You fuckin fucks! Can't shoot fa shit! Pagano was behind them, and Slocum was beside Pags. Some Bravo guys but mostly Delta boys, that was his memory. Willie Shearman yelled for his own guys, but a lot of them hung back. Delta two-two didn't hang back. Clemson was there, and Wollensky, and Hackermeyer, and it was amazing how he could remember their names; their names and the smell of that day. The smell of the green and the smell of the kerosene. The sight of the sky, blue on green, and oh man how they would shoot, how those little fuckers would shoot, you never forgot how they would shoot or the feel of a round passing close beside you, and Malenfant was screaming Shoot me,ya deadass ringmeats!

Can't! Fuckin blind! Come on, I'm right here! Fuckin blindeye homo slopehead assholes, I'm right here! And the men in the downed helicopters were screaming, so they pulled them out, got the foam on the fire and pulled them out, only they weren't men anymore, not what you'd call men, they were screaming TV dinners for the most part, TV dinners with eyes and beltbuckles and these clittery reaching fingers with smoke rising from the melted nails, yeah, like that, not stuff you could tell people like Dr Conroy, how when you pulled them parts of them came off, kind of slid off the way the baked skin of a freshly cooked turkey will slide along the hot liquefied fat just beneath, like that, and all the time you're smelling the green and the kerosene, it's all happening, it's a rilly rilly big shew, as Ed Sullivan used to say, and it's all happening on our stage, and all you can do is roll with it, try to get over.

That was the morning, that was the helicopters, and something like that had to go somewhere. When they got to the shitty little Ville that afternoon they still had the stink of charred helicopter crewmembers

in their noses, the old lieutenant was dead, and some of the men — Ronnie Malenfant and his friends, if you wanted to get right down to particulars —

had gone a little bughouse. Dieffenbaker was the new lieutenant, and all at once he had found himself in charge of crazy men who wanted to kill everyone they saw — children, old men, old mamasans in red Chinese sneakers.

The copters crashed at ten. At approximately two-oh-five, Ronnie Malenfant first stuck his bayonet into the old woman's stomach and then announced his intention of cutting off the fuckin pig's head. At approximately four-fifteen, less than four klicks away, the world blew up in John Sullivan's face. That had been his big day in Dong Ha Province, his rilly big shew.

Standing there between two shacks at the head of the Ville's single street, Dieffenbaker had looked like a scared sixteen-year-old kid. But he hadn't been sixteen, he'd been twenty-five, years older than Sully and most of the others. The only other man there of Deef s age and rank was Willie Shearman, and Willie seemed reluctant to step in. Perhaps the rescue operation that morning had exhausted him. Or perhaps he had noticed that once again it was the Delta two-two boys who were leading the charge. Malenfant was screaming that when the fuckin slopehead Gong saw a few dozen heads up on sticks, they'd think twice about fucking with Delta Lightning. On and on in that shrill, drilling phone-salesman's voice of his. The cardplayer. Mr Card-Shark. Pags had his harmonicas; Malenfant had his deck of fuckin Bikes. Hearts, that was Malenfant's game. A dime a point if he could get it, nickel a point if he couldn't. Come on, boys! he'd yell in that shrill voice of his, a voice Sully swore could cause nosebleeds and kill locusts on the wing. Come on, pony up, we huntin The Bitch!

Sully remembered standing in the street and looking at the new lieutenant's pale, exhausted, confused face. He remembered thinking, He can't do it. Whatever needs to be done to stop this before it really gets going, he can't do it. But then Dieffenbaker got it

together and gave Sly Slocum the nod. Slocum didn't hesitate a moment. Slocum, standing there in the street beside an overturned kitchen chair with chrome legs and a red seat, had shouldered his rifle, sighted in, and had blown Ralph Glemson's head clean off. Pagano, standing nearby and gaping at Malenfant, hardly seemed aware that he had been splattered pretty much from head to toe. Glemson fell dead in the street and that stopped the party.

Game over, baby.

These days Dieffenbaker had a substantial golf-gut and wore bifocals. Also, he'd lost most of his hair. Sully was amazed at this, because Deef had had a pretty full head of it five years ago, at the unit's reunion on the Jersey shore. That was the last time, Sully had vowed to himself, that he would party with those guys. They didn't get better. They didn't fuckin mellow. Each reunion was more like the cast of Seinfeld on a really mean batch of crank.

'Want to come outside and have a smoke?' the new lieutenant asked. 'Or did you give that up when everyone else did?'

'Gave it up like everyone else, that's affirmative.' They had been standing a little to the left of the coffin by then so the rest of the mourners could get a look and then get past them.

Talking in low tones, the taped music rolling easily over their voices, the draggy salvation soundtrack. The current tune was 'The Old Rugged Cross,' Sully believed.

He said, 'I think Pags would've preferred—'

"'Goin' Up the Country" or "Let's Work Together,"' Dieffenbaker finished, grinning.

Sully grinned back. It was one of those unexpected moments, like a brief sunny break in a day-long spell of rain, when it was okay to remember something — one of those moments when you were,

amazingly, almost glad you had been there. ‘Or maybe “Boom Boom,” that one by The Animals,’ he said.

‘Remember Sly Slocum telling Pags he’d stuff that harmonica up his ass if Pags didn’t give it a rest?’

Sully had nodded, still grinning. ‘Said if he shoved it up there far enough, Pags could play “Red River Valley” when he farted.’ He had glanced fondly back at the coffin, as if expecting Pagano would also be grinning at the memory. Pagano wasn’t. Pagano was just lying there with makeup on his face. Pagano had gotten over. ‘Tell you what — I’ll come outside and watch you smoke.’

‘Done deal.’ Dieffenbaker, who had once given the okay for one of his soldiers to kill another of his soldiers, had started up the chapel’s side aisle, his bald head lighting up with mixed colors as he passed beneath each stained-glass window. Limping after him — he had been limping over half his life now and never noticed anymore — came John Sullivan, Gold Star Chevrolet dealer.

The traffic on I-95 slowed to a crawl and then came to a complete stop, except for the occasional forward twitch in one of the lanes. On the radio ? and The Mysterians had given way to Sly and the Family Stone — ‘Dance to the Music.’ Fuckin Slocum would have been seat-bopping for sure, seat-bopping to the max. Sully put the Caprice demonstrator in Park and tapped in time on the steering wheel.

As the song began to wind down he looked to his right and there was old mamasan in the shotgun seat, not seat-bopping but just sitting there with her yellow hands folded in her lap and her crazy-bright sneakers, those Chuck Taylor knockoffs, planted on the disposable plastic floormat with SULLIVAN CHEVROLET APPRECIATES YOUR BUSINESS printed on it.

‘Hello, you old bitch,’ Sully said, pleased rather than disturbed. When was the last time she’d shown her face? The Tacklins’ New Year’s Eve party, perhaps, the last time Sully had gotten really drunk. ‘Why weren’t you at Pags’s funeral? The new lieutenant asked after you.’

She made no reply, but hey, when did she ever? She only sat there with her hands folded and her black eyes on him, a Halloween vision in green and orange and red. Old mamasan was like no ghost in a Hollywood movie, though; you couldn't see through her, she never changed her shape, never faded away. She wore a woven piece of twine on one scrawny yellow wrist like a junior-high-school kid's friendship bracelet. And although you could see every twist of the twine and every wrinkle on her ancient face, you couldn't smell her and the one time Sully tried to touch her she had disappeared on him. She was a ghost and his head was the haunted house she lived in. Only every now and then (usually without pain and always without warning), his head would vomit her out where he had to look at her.

She didn't change. She never went bald or got gallstones or needed bifocals. She didn't die as Clemson and Pags and Packer and the guys in the crashed helicopters had died (even the two they had taken from the clearing covered in foam like snowmen had died, they were too badly burned to live and it had all been for nothing). She didn't disappear as Carol had done, either. No, old mamasan continued to pop in for the occasional visit, and she hadn't changed a bit since the days when 'Instant Karma' was a top-ten hit. She had to die once, that was true, had to lie there in the mud while Malenfant first drove his bayonet into her belly and then announced his intention of removing her head, but since then she had been absolutely cruisin.

'Where you been, darlin?' If anyone in another car happened to look over (his Caprice was surrounded on all four sides now, boxed in) and saw his lips moving, they'd just assume he was singing along with the radio. Even if they thought anything else, who gave a fuck? Who gave a fuck what any of them thought? He had seen things, terrible things, not the least of them a roll of his own intestines lying in the bloody mat of his pubic hair, and if he sometimes saw this old ghost (and talked to her), so fuckin what? Whose business was it but his own?

Sully looked up the road, trying to spy what had plugged the traffic (he couldn't, you never could, you just had to wait and creep forward a little when the guy in front of you crept forward), and then looked back. Sometimes when he did that she was gone. Not this time; this time she had just changed her clothes. The red sneaks were the same but now she was wearing a nurse's uniform: white nylon pants, white blouse (with a small gold watch pinned to it, what a nice touch), white cap with a little black stripe. Her hands were still folded in her lap, though, and she was still looking at him.

'Where you been, Mama? I missed you. I know that's weird but it's true. Mama, you been on my mind. You should have seen the new lieutenant. Really, it's amazing. He's entered the solar sex-panel phase. Totally bald on top, I mean shiny.'

Old mamasan said nothing. Sully wasn't surprised.

There was an alley beside the funeral parlor with a green-painted bench placed against one side. At either end of the bench was a butt-studded bucket of sand. Dieffenbaker sat beside one of the buckets, stuck a cigarette in his mouth (it was a Dunhill, Sully observed, pretty impressive), then offered the pack to Sully.

'No, I really quit.'

'Excellent.' Dieffenbaker lit up with a Zippo, and Sully realized an odd thing: he had never seen anyone who'd been in Vietnam light his cigarette with matches or those disposable butane lighters; Nam vets all seemed to carry Zippos. Of course that couldn't really be true.

Could it?

'You've still got quite a limp on you,' Dieffenbaker said.

'Yeah.'

‘On the whole, I’d call it an improvement. The last time I saw you it was almost a lurch.

Especially after you got a couple of drinks down the hatch.’

‘You still go to the reunions? Do they still have them, the picnics and shit?’

‘I think they still have them, but I haven’t been in three years. Got too depressing.’

‘Yeah. The ones who don’t have cancer are raving alcoholics. The ones who have managed to kick the booze are on Prozac.’

‘You noticed.’

Tucking yeah I noticed.’

‘I guess I’m not surprised. You were never the smartest guy in the world, Sully-John, but you were a perceptive son of a bitch. Even back then. Anyway, you nailed it — booze, cancer, and depression, those’re the main problems, it seems like. Oh, and teeth. I never met a Vietnam vet who wasn’t having the veriest shitpull with his teeth … if he had any left, that is.

What about you, Sully? How’s the old toofers?’

Sully, who’d had six out since Vietnam (plus root canals almost beyond numbering), wiggled his hand from side to side in a comme ci, comme ca, gesture.

‘And the other problem?’ Dieffenbaker asked. ‘How’s that?’

‘Depends,’ Sully said.

‘On what?’

‘On what I described as my problem. We were at three of those fuckin reunion picnics together—’

‘Four. There was also at least one I went to that you didn’t. The year after the one on the Jersey shore? That was the one where Andy Hackermeyer said he was going to kill himself by jumping from the top of the Statue of Liberty.’

‘Did he ever do it?’

Dieffenbaker dragged deeply on his cigarette and gave Sully what was still a Lieutenant Look. Even after all these years he could muster that up. Sort of amazing. ‘If he’d done it, you would have read about it in the Post. Don’t you read the Post?’

‘Religiously.’

Dieffenbaker nodded. ‘Vietnam vets all have trouble with their teeth and they all read the Post. If they’re in the Post’s fallout area, that is. What do you suppose they do if they’re not?’

‘Listen to Paul Harvey,’ Sully said promptly, and Dieffenbaker laughed.

Sully was remembering Hack, who’d also been there the day of the helicopters and the ‘ville and the ambush. Blond kid with an infectious laugh. Had a picture of his girlfriend laminated so it wouldn’t rot in the damp and then wore it around his neck on a little silver chain. Hackermeyer had been right next to Sully when they came into the Ville and the shooting started. Both of them watching as the old mamasan came running out of her hooch with her hands raised, jabbering six licks to the dozen, jabbering at Malenfant and Clemson and Peasley and Mims and the other ones who were shooting the place up. Minis had put a round through a little boy’s calf, maybe by accident. The boy was lying in the dirt outside one of the shitty little shacks, screaming. Old mamasan decided Malenfant was the one in charge — why not? Malenfant was the one doing all the yelling — and ran up to him, still waving her hands in the air. Sully could have told her that was a bad mistake, old Mr Card-Shark had had himself a morning and a half, they all had, but Sully never opened his mouth. He and Hack stood there watching as Malenfant

raised the butt of his rifle and drove it down into her face, knocking her flat and stopping her jabber. Willie Shearman had been standing twenty yards or so away. Willie Shearman from the old home town, one of the Catholic boys he and Bobby had been sort of scared of, and there was nothing readable on Willie's face. Willie Baseball, some of his men called him, and always affectionately. Sully had no idea why.

'So what about your problem, Sully-John?'

Sully came back from the Ville in Dong Ha to the alley beside the funeral parlor in New York … but slowly. Some memories were like the Tar-Baby in that old story about Brer Fox and Brer Rabbit; you got stuck on them. 'I guess it all depends. What problem did I say I had?'

'You said you got your balls blown off when they hit us outside the 'ville. You said it was God punishing you for not stopping Malenfant before he went all dinky-dau and killed the old lady.'

Dinky-dau didn't begin to cover it, Malenfant standing with his legs planted on either side of the old lady, bringing the bayonet down and still running his mouth the whole time. When the blood started to come out it made her orange top look like tie -dye.

'I exaggerated a trifle,' Sully said, 'as drunks tend to do. Part of the old scrotal sack is still present and accounted for and sometimes the pump still turns on. Especially since Viagra.

God bless that shit.'

'Have you quit the booze as well as the cigarettes?'

'I take the occasional beer,' Sully said.

'Prozac?'

'Not yet.'

‘Divorced?’

Sully nodded. ‘You?’

‘Twice. Thinking about taking the plunge again, though. Mary Theresa Charlton, how sweet she is. Third time lucky, that’s my motto.’

‘You know something, Loot?’ Sully asked. ‘We’ve uncovered some clear legacies of the Vietnam experience here.’ He popped up a finger. ‘Vietnam vets get cancer, usually of the lung or the brain, but other places, too.’

‘Like Pags. Pags was the pancreas, wasn’t it?’

‘Right.’

‘All that cancer’s because of the Orange,’ Dieffenbaker said. ‘Nobody can prove it but we all know it. Agent Orange, the gift that keeps on giving.’

Sully popped up a second finger — yer fuckfinger, Ronnie Malenfant would undoubtedly have called it. ‘Vietnam vets get depressed, get drunk at parties, threaten to jump off national landmarks.’ Out with the third finger. ‘Vietnam vets have bad teeth.’ Pinky finger. ‘Vietnam vets get divorced.’

Sully had paused at that point, vaguely hearing canned organ music coming through a partially opened window, looking at his four popped fingers and then at the thumb still tucked against his palm. Vets were drug addicts. Vets were bad loan risks, by and large; any bank officer would tell you so (in the years when Sully had been getting the dealership up and running a number of bankers had told him so). Vets maxed out their credit cards, got thrown out of gambling casinos, wept over songs by George Strait and Patty Loveless, knifed each other over shuffleboard bowling games in bars, bought muscle cars on credit and then wrecked them, beat their wives, beat their kids, beat their fuckin dogs, and probably cut

themselves shaving more often than people who had never been closer to the green than Apocalypse Now or that fucking piece of shit The Deer Hunter.

‘What’s the thumb?’ Dieffenbaker asked. ‘Come on, Sully, you’re killing me here.’

Sully looked at his folded thumb. Looked at Dieffenbaker, who now wore bifocals and carried a potbelly (what Vietnam vets usually called ‘the house that Bud built’) but who still might have that skinny young man with the wax-candle complexion somewhere inside of him. Then he looked back at his thumb and popped it out like a guy trying to hitch a ride.

‘Vietnam vets carry Zippos,’ he said. ‘At least until they stop smoking.’

‘Or until they get cancer,’ Dieffenbaker said. ‘At which point their wives no doubt pry em out of their weakening palsied hands.’

‘Except for all the ones who’re divorced,’ Sully said, and they both laughed. It had been good outside the funeral parlor. Well, maybe not good, exactly, but better than inside. The organ music in there was bad, the sticky smell of the flowers was worse. The smel of the flowers made Sully think of the Mekong Delta. ‘In country,’ people said now, but he didn’t remember ever having heard that particular phrase back then.

‘So you didn’t entirely lose your balls after all,’ Dieffenbaker said.

‘Nope, never quite made it into Jake Barnes country.’

‘Who?’

‘Doesn’t matter.’ Sully wasn’t much of a book-reader, never had been (his friend Bobby had been the book-reader), but the rehab librarian had given him The Sun Also Rises and Sully had read it avidly, not once but three times. Back then it had seemed very important — as

important as that book Lord of the Flies had been to Bobby when they were kids. Now Jake Barnes seemed remote, a tin man with fake problems. Just one more made-up thing.

‘No?’

‘No. I can have a woman if I really want to have one — not kids, but I can have a woman.

There’s a fair amount of preparation involved, though, and mostly it seems like too much trouble.’

Dieffenbaker said nothing for several moments. He sat looking at his hands. When he looked up, Sully thought he’d say something about how he had to get moving, a quick goodbye to the widow and then back to the wars (Sully thought that in the new lieutenant’s case the wars these days involved selling computers with something magical called Pentium inside them), but Dieffenbaker didn’t say that. He asked, ‘And what about the old lady? Do you still see her, or is she gone?’

Sully had felt dread — unformed but vast — stir at the back of his mind. ‘What old lady?’

He couldn’t remember telling Dieffenbaker, couldn’t remember telling anybody, but of course he must have. Shit, he could have told Dieffenbaker anything at those reunion picnics; they were nothing but liquor-smelling black holes in his memory, every one of them.

‘Old mamasan,’ Dieffenbaker said, and brought out his cigarettes again. ‘The one Malenfant killed. You said you used to see her. “Sometimes she wears different clothes, but it’s always her,” you said. Do you still see her?’

‘Can I have one of those?’ Sully asked. ‘I never had a Dunhill.’

On WKND Donna Summer was singing about a bad girl, bad girl, you’re such a naughty bad girl, beep-beep. Sully turned to old

mamasan, who was in her orange top and her green pants again, and said: ‘Malenfant was never obviously crazy. No crazier than anyone else, anyway .

. . except maybe about Hearts. He was always looking for three guys to play Hearts with him, and that isn’t really crazy, would you say? No crazier than Pags with his harmonicas and a lot less than the guys who spent their nights snorting heroin. Also, Ronnie helped yank those guys out of the choppers. There must’ve been a dozen gooks in the bush, maybe two dozen, all of them shooting away like mad, they wasted Lieutenant Packer and Malenfant must have seen it happen, he was right there, but he never hesitated.’ Nor had Fowler or Hack or Slocum or Peasley or Sully himself. Even after Packer went down they had kept going. They were brave kids. And if their bravery had been wasted in a war made by pigheaded old men, did that mean the bravery was of no account? For that matter, was Carol Gerber’s cause wrong because a bomb had gone off at the wrong time? Shit, lots of bombs had gone off at the wrong time in Vietnam. What was Ronnie Malenfant, when you got right down to it, but a bomb that had gone off at the wrong time?

Old mamasan went on looking at him, his ancient white-haired date sitting there in the passenger seat with her hands in her lap — yellow hands folded where the orange smock met the green polyester pants.

‘They’d been shooting at us for almost two weeks,’ Sully said. ‘Ever since we left the A Shau Valley. We won at Tam Boi and when you win you’re supposed to roll, at least that’s what I always thought, but what we were doing was a retreat, not a roll. Shit, one step from a rout is what it was, and we sure didn’t feel like winners for long. There was no support, we were just hung out to dry. Fuckin Vietnamization! What a joke that was!’

He fell silent for a moment or two, looking at her while she looked calmly back. Beyond them, the halted traffic glittered like a fever. Some impatient trucker hit his airhorn and Sully jumped like a man suddenly awakened from a doze.

‘That’s when I met Willie Shearman, you know — falling back from the A Shau Valley. I knew he looked familiar and I was sure I’d met him someplace, but I couldn’t think where.

People change a hell of a lot between fourteen and twenty-four, you know. Then one afternoon he and a bunch of the other Bravo Company guys were sitting around and bullshitting, talking about girls, and Willie said that the first time he ever got French-kissed, it was at a St Theresa of Avila Sodality dance. And I think, “Holy shit, those were the St Gabe’s girls.” I walked up to him and said, “You Steadfast guys might have been the kings of Asher Avenue, but we whipped your pansy asses every time you came down to Harwich High to play football.” Hey, you talk about a gotcha! Fuckin Willie jumped up so fast I thought he was gonna run away like the Gingerbread Man. It was like he’d seen a ghost, or something.

Then he laughed and stuck out his hand and I saw he was still wearing his St Gabe’s highschool ring! And you know what it all goes to prove?’

Old mamasan didn’t say anything, she never did, but Sully could see in her eyes that she did know what it all went to prove: people were funny, kids say the darndest things, winners never quit and quitters never win. Also God bless America.

‘Anyway, that whole week they chased us, and it started to get obvious that they were bearing down … squeezing the sides … our casualties kept going up and you couldn’t get any sleep because of the flares and the choppers and the howling they’d do at night, back here in the toolies. And then they’d come at you, see … twenty of them, three dozen of them …

poke and pull,back, poke and pull back, like that … and they had this thing they’d do … ‘

Sully licked his lips, aware that his mouth had gone dry. Now he wished he hadn’t gone to Pags’s funeral. Pags had been a good guy, but not good enough to justify the return of such memories.

‘They’d set up four or five mortars in the bush … on one of our flanks, you know … and beside each mortar they’d line up eight or nine guys, each one with a shell. The little men in the black pajamas, all lined up like kids at the drinking fountain back in grammar school. And when the order came, each guy would drop his shell into the mortar-tube and then run forward just as fast as he could. Running that way, they’d engage the enemy — us — at about the same time their shells came down. It always made me think of something the guy who lived upstairs from Bobby Garfield told us once when we were playing pass on Bobby’s front lawn. It was about some baseball player the Dodgers used to have. Ted said this guy was so fuckin fast he could hit a fungo pop fly at home plate, then run out to shortstop and catch it himself. It was … sort of unnerving.’

Yes. The way he was sort of unnerved right now, sort of freaked out, like a kid who makes the mistake of telling himself ghost stories in the dark.

‘The fire they poured into that clearing where the choppers went down was only more of the same, believe you me.’ Except that wasn’t exactly true. The Cong had let it all hang out that morning; turned the volume up to eleven and then pulled the knobs off, as Mims liked to say. The shooting from the bush around the burning choppers had been like a steady downpour instead of a shower.

There were cigarettes in the Caprice’s glove compartment, an old pack of Winstons Sully kept for emergencies, transferring from one car to the next whenever he switched rides. That one cigarette he’d bummed from Dieffenbaker had awakened the tiger and now he reached past old mamasan, opened the glove-box, pawed past all the paperwork, and found the pack.

The cigarette would taste stale and hot in his throat, but that was okay. That was what sort of what he wanted.

‘Two weeks of shooting and squeezing,’ he told her, pushing in the lighter. ‘Shake and bake and don’t look for the fuckin ARVN, baby, because they always seemed to have better things to do. Bitches,

barbecues, and bowling tournaments, Malenfant used to say. We kept taking casualties, the air cover was never there when it was supposed to be, no one was getting any sleep, and it seemed like the more other guys from the A Shau linked up with us the worse it got. I remember one of Willie's guys — Havers or Haber, something like that — got it right in the head. Got it in the fuckin head and then just lay there on the path with his eyes open, trying to talk. Blood pouring out of this hole right here … ' Sully tapped a finger against his skull just over his ear. ' … and we couldn't believe he was still alive, let alone trying to talk. Then the thing with the choppers … that was like something out of a movie, all the smoke and shooting, bup-bup-bup-bup. That was the lead-in for us — you know, into your Ville. We came up on it and boy … there was this one chair in the street, like a kitchen chair with a red seat and steel legs pointing up at the sky. It just looked crapass, I'm sorry but it did, not worth living in, let alone dying for. Your guys, the ARVN, they didn't want to die for places like that, why would we? The place stank, it smelled like shit, but they all did.

That's how it seemed. I didn't care so much about the smell, anyway. Mostly I think it was the chair that got to me. That one chair said it all.'

Sully pulled out the lighter, started to apply the cherry-red coil to the tip of his cigarette, and then remembered he was in a demonstrator. He could smoke in a demo — hell, it was off his own lot — but if one of the salesmen smelled the smoke and concluded that the boss was doing what was a firing offense for anyone else, it wouldn't be good. You had to walk the walk as well as talk the talk … at least you did if you wanted to get a little respect.

'Excusez-moi,' he told the old mamasan. He got out of the car, which was still running, lit his cigarette, then bent in the window to slide the lighter back into its dashboard receptacle.

The day was hot, and the four-lane sea of idling cars made it seem even hotter. Sully could sense the impatience all around him, but his was the only radio he could hear; everyone else was under glass,

buttoned into their little air-conditioned cocoons, listening to a hundred different kinds of music, from Liz Phair to William Ackerman. He guessed that any vets caught in the jam who didn't have the Allman Brothers on CD or Big Brother and the Holding Company on tape were probably also listening to WKND, where the past had never died and the future never came. Toot-toot, beep-beep.

Sully hitch-stepped to the hood of his car and stood on tiptoe, shading his eyes against the glare of sun on chrome and looking for the problem. He couldn't see it, of course.

Bitches, barbecues, and bowling tournaments, he thought, and the thought came in Malenfant's squealing, drilling voice. That nightmare voice under the blue and out of the green. Come on, boys, who's got The Douche? I'm down to ninety and a wakeup, time's short, let's get this fuckin show on the fuckin road!

He took a deep drag on the Winston, then coughed out stale hot smoke. Black dots began a sudden dance in the afternoon brightness, and he looked down at the cigarette between his ringers with an expression of nearly comic horror. What was he doing, starting up with this shit again? Was he crazy? Well yes, of course he was crazy, anyone who saw dead old ladies sitting beside them in their cars had to be crazy, but that didn't mean he had to start up with this shit again. Cigarettes were Agent Orange that you paid for. Sully threw the Winston away. It felt like the right decision, but it didn't slow the accelerating beat of his heart or his sense — so well remembered from the patrols he'd been on — that the inside of his mouth was drying out and pulling together, puckering and crinkling like burned skin. Some people were afraid of crowds — agoraphobia, it was called, fear of the marketplace — but the only time Sully ever had that sense of too much and too many was at times like this. He was okay in elevators and crowded lobbies at intermission and on rush-hour train platforms, but when traffic clogged to a stop all around him, he got dinky-dau. There was, after all, nowhere to run, baby, nowhere to hide.

A few other folks were emerging from their air-conditioned lifepods. A woman in a severe brown business suit standing by a severe brown BMW, a gold bracelet and silver earrings summarizing the summer sunlight, all but tapping one cordovan high heel with impatience.

She caught Sully's eye, rolled her own heavenward as if to say Isn't this typical, and glanced at her wristwatch (also gold, also gleaming). A man astride a green Yamaha crotchrocket killed his bike's raving engine, put the bike on its kickstand, removed his helmet, and placed it on the oilstained pavement next to one footpedal. He was wearing black bike-shorts and a sleeveless shirt with PROPERTY OF THE NEW YORK KNICKS printed on the front. Sully estimated this gentleman would lose approximately seventy per cent of his skin if he happened to dump the crotchrocket at a speed greater than five miles an hour while wearing such an outfit.

'Bummer, man,' the crotchrocket guy said. 'Must be an accident. Hope it's nothing radioactive.' And laughed to show he was joking.

Up ahead in the far left lane — what would be the fast lane when traffic was actually moving on this stretch of highway — a woman in tennis whites was standing beside a Toyota with a NO NUKES bumper sticker on the left side of the license plate and one reading HOUSECAT: THE OTHER WHITE MEAT on the right. Her skirt was very short, her thighs were very long and brown, and when she pushed her sunglasses up, propping them in her blondstreaked hair, Sully got a look at her eyes. They were wide and blue and somehow alarmed. It was a look that made you want to stroke her cheek (or perhaps give her a one-armed brotherhug) and tell her not to worry, everything was going to be all right. It was a look Sully remembered well. It was the one that had turned him inside out. It was Carol Gerber up there, Carol Gerber in sneakers and a tennis dress. He hadn't seen her since one night in late 1966

when he'd gone over her house and they'd sat on the sofa (along with Carol's mother, who had smelled strongly of wine) watching TV. They had ended up arguing about the war and he had left. I'll go

back and see her again when I'm sure I can stay cool, he remembered thinking as he drove away in his old Chevrolet (even back then he'd been a Chevrolet man). But he never had. By late '66 she was already up to her ass in antiwar shit — that much she'd learned during her semester in Maine, if nothing else — and just thinking about her was enough to make him furious. Fucking little empty-headed idiot was what she was, she'd swallowed all that communist antiwar propaganda hook, line, and sinker. Then, of course, she'd joined that nutty group, that MSP, and had high-sided it completely.

'Carol!' he called, starting toward her. He passed the snot-green crotchrocket, cut between the rear bumper of a van and a sedan, temporarily lost sight of her as he hurried along the side of a rumbling sixteen-wheeler, then saw her again. 'Carol! Hey Carol!' Yet when she turned toward him he wondered what the hell was wrong with him, what had possessed him. If Carol was still alive she had to be pushing fifty now, just as he was. This woman looked maybe thirty-five.

Sully stopped, still a lane away. Cars and trucks rumbling everywhere. And an odd whickering sound in the air, which he at first thought was the wind, although the afternoon air was hot and perfectly still.

'Carol? Carol Gerber?'

The whicker was louder, a sound like someone flicking his tongue repeatedly through his pursed lips, a sound like a helicopter five klicks away. Sully looked up and saw a lampshade tumbling out of the hazy blue sky, directly at him. He dodged backward in an instinctive startle reflex, but he had spent his entire school career playing athletic sports of one kind or another, and even as he was pulling back his head he was reaching with his hand. He caught the lampshade quite deftly. On it was a paddleboat churning downriver against a lurid red sunset. WE'RE DOING FINE ON THE MISSISSIPPI was written above the boat in scrolly, oldfashioned letters. Below it, in the same scrolly caps: HOW'S BAYOU?

Where the fuck did this come from? Sully thought, and then the woman who looked like an all-grown-up version of Carol Gerber screamed. Her hands rose as if to adjust the sunglasses propped in her hair and then just hung beside her shoulders, shaking like the hands of a distraught symphony conductor. It was how old mamasan had looked as she came running out of her shitty fucked-up hooch and into the shitty fucked-up street of that shitty fucked-up little Ville in Dong Ha Province. Blood spilled down over the shoulders of the tennis woman's white dress, first in spatters, then in a flood. It ran down her tanned upper arms and dripped from her elbows.

'Carol?' Sully asked stupidly. He was standing between a Dodge Ram pickup and a Mack semi, dressed in a dark blue suit, the one he wore to funerals, holding a lampshade souvenir of the Mississippi River (how's bayou) and looking at a woman who now had something sticking out of her head. As she staggered a step forward, blue eyes still wide, hands still shaking in the air, Sully realized it was a cordless phone. He could tell by the stub of aerial, which jiggled with each step she took. A cordless phone had fallen out of the sky, had fallen God knew how many thousands of feet, and now it was in her head.

She took another step, struck the hood of a dark green Buick, and began to sink slowly behind it as her knees buckled. It was like watching a submarine go down, Sully thought, only instead of a periscope all that would be sticking up after she was out of sight would be the stubby antenna of that cordless phone.

'Carol?' he whispered, but it couldn't be her; no one he'd known as a kid, no one he'd ever slept with, had been destined to die from injuries inflicted by a falling telephone, surely.

People were starting to scream and yell and shout. Mostly the shouts seemed to be questions. Horns were honking. Engines were revving, just as if there were someplace to go.

Beside Sully, the driver of the Mack sixteen-wheeler was goosing his power-plant in big, rhythmic snorts. A car alarm began to wibble-

wobble. Someone howled in either pain or surprise.

A single trembling white hand clutched at the hood of the dark green Buick. There was a tennis bracelet on the wrist. Slowly the hand and the bracelet slid away from Sully. The fingers of the woman who had looked like Carol gripped at the edge of the hood for a moment, then disappeared. Something else fell, whistling, out of the sky.

‘Get down!’ Sully screamed. ‘Ah fuck, get down!’

The whistling rose to a shrill, earsplitting pitch, then stopped as the falling object struck the hood of the Buick, bashing it downward like a fist and popping it up from beneath the windshield. The thing poking out of the Buick’s engine compartment appeared to be a microwave oven.

From all around him there now came the sound of falling objects. It was like being caught in an earthquake that was somehow going on above the ground instead of in it. A harmless shower of magazines fell past him — Seventeen and GQ and Rolling Stone and Stereo Review. With their open fluttering pages they looked like shot birds. To his right an office chair dropped out of the blue, spinning on its base as it came. It struck the roof of a Ford station wagon. The wagon’s windshield blew out in milky chunks. The chair rebounded into the air, tilted, and came to rest on the station wagon’s hood. Beyond that a portable TV, a plastic clothes basket, what looked like a clutch of cameras with the straps all tangled together, and a rubber home plate fell on the slow lane and into the breakdown lane. The home plate was followed by what looked like a Louisville Slugger baseball bat. A theatersize popcorn popper shattered into glittering shards when it hit the road.

The guy in the Knicks shirt, the one with the snot-green crotchrocket, had seen enough. He started running up the narrow corridor between the traffic stalled in the third lane and the traffic stalled in the fast lane, twisting like a slalom skier to avoid the jutting side mirrors, holding one hand over his head like a man crossing the street during a spring shower. Sully, still clutching the lampshade,

thought the guy would have done a lot better to have grabbed his helmet and put it back on, but of course when things started falling all around you you got forgetful and the first thing you were apt to forget was where your best interests lay.

Something else was coming down now, falling close and falling big — bigger than the microwave oven that had bashed in the Buick's hood, certainly. This time the sound wasn't a whistle, like a bomb or a mortar-shell, but the sound of a falling plane or helicopter or even a house. In Vietnam Sully had been around when all those things fell out of the sky (the house had been in pieces, granted), and yet this sound was different in one crucial way: it was also musical, like the world's biggest windchime.

It was a grand piano, white with gold chasing, the sort of piano on which you'd expect a long cool woman in a black dress to tinkle out 'Night and Day' — in the traffic's boom, in the silence of my lonely room, toot-toot, beep-beep. A white grand piano falling out of the Connecticut sky, turning over and over, making a shadow like a jellyfish on the jammed-up cars, making windy music in its cables as air blew through its rolling chest, its keys rippling like the keys of a player piano, the hazy sun winking on the pedals.

It fell in lazy revolutions, and the fattening sound of its drop was like the sound of something vibrating endlessly in a tin tunnel. It fell toward Sully, its uneasy shadow now starting to focus and shrink, his upturned face its seeming target.

'INCOMING!' Sully screamed, and began to run. 'INNCOMMING!'

The piano plummeted toward the turnpike, the white bench falling right behind it, and behind the bench came a comet's tail of sheet music, 45-rpm records with fat holes in the middle, small appliances, a flapping yellow coat that looked like a duster, a Goodyear Wide Oval tire, a barbecue grill, a weathervane, a file-cabinet, and a teacup with WORLD'S

GREATEST GRANDMA printed on the side.

‘Can I have one of those?’ Sully had asked Dieffenbaker outside the funeral parlor where Pags was lying in his silk-lined box. ‘I never had a Dunhill.’

‘Whatever floats your boat.’ Dieffenbaker sounded amused, as if he had never been shitscared in his life.

Sully could still remember Dieffenbaker standing in the street by that overturned kitchen chair: how pale he had been, how his lips had trembled, how his clothes still smelled of smoke and spilled copter fuel. Dieffenbaker looking around from Malenfant and the old woman to the others who were starting to pour fire into the hooches to the howling kid Minis had shot; he could remember Deef looking at Lieutenant Shearman but there was no help there. No help from Sully himself, for that matter. He could also remember how Slocum was staring at Deef, Deef the lieutenant now that Packer was dead. And finally Deef had looked back at Slocum. Sly Slocum was no officer — not even one of those bigmouth bush generals who were always second-guessing everything — and never would be. Slocum was just your basic E3 or E4 who thought that a group who sounded like Rare Earth had to be black. Just a grunt, in other words, but one prepared to do what the rest of them weren’t. Never losing hold of the new lieutenant’s distraught eye, Slocum had turned his head back the other way just a little, toward Malenfant and Clemson and Peasley and Minis and the rest, self-appointed regulators whose names Sully no longer remembered. Then Slocum was back to total eyecontact with Dieffenbaker again. There were six or eight men in all who had gone loco, gone trotting down the muddy street past the screaming bleeding kid and into that scurgy little ‘ville, shouting as they went — football cheers, basic-training cadences, the chorus to ‘Hang On Sloopy,’ shit like that — and Slocum was saying with his eyes Hey, what you want? You the boss now, what you want?

And Dieffenbaker had nodded.

Sully wondered if he could have given that nod himself. He thought not. He thought if it had come down to him, Clemson and Malenfant and those other fuckheads would have killed until their ammo ran out

— wasn't that pretty much what the men under Galley and Medina had done? But Dieffenbaker was no William Galley, give him that. Dieffenbaker had given the little nod. Slocum nodded back, then raised his rifle and blew off Ralph Clemson's head.

At the time Sully had thought Clemson got the bullet because Slocum knew Malenfant too well, Slocum and Malenfant had smoked more than a few locoleaves together and Slocum had also been known to spend at least some of his spare time hunting The Bitch with the other Hearts players. But as he sat here rolling Dieffenbaker's Dunhill cigarette between his fingers, it occurred to Sully that Slocum didn't give a shit about Malenfant and his locoleaves; Malenfant's favorite card-game, either. There was no shortage of bhang or card-games in Vietnam. Slocum picked Clemson because shooting Malenfant wouldn't have worked.

Malenfant, screaming all his bullshit about putting heads up on sticks to show the Gong what happened to people who fucked with Delta Lightning, was too far away to get the attention of the men splashing and squashing and shooting their way down that muddy street. Plus old mamasan was already dead, so what the fuck, let him carve on her.

Now Deef was Dieffenbaker, a bald computer salesman who gave Sully a light with his Zippo, then watched as Sully drew the smoke deep and coughed it back out.

'Been awhile, hasn't it?' Dieffenbaker asked.

'Two years, give or take.'

'You want to know the scary thing? How fast you get back into practice.'

'I told you about the old lady, huh?'

'Yeah.'

‘When?’

‘I think it was the last reunion you came to … the one on the Jersey shore, the one when Durgin ripped that waitress’s top off. That was an ugly scene, man.’

‘Was it? I don’t remember.’

‘You were shitfaced by then.’

Of course he had been, that part was always the same. Come to think of it, all parts of the reunions were always the same. There was a dj who usually left early because someone wanted to beat him up for playing the wrong records. Until that happened the speakers blasted out stuff like ‘Bad Moon Rising’ and ‘Light My Fire’ and ‘Gimme Some Lovin” and ‘My Girl,’ songs from the soundtracks of all those Vietnam movies that were made in the Philippines. The truth about the music was that most of the grunts Sully remembered used to get choked up over The Carpenters or ‘Angel of the Morning.’ That stuff was the real bush soundtrack, always playing as the men passed around fatties and pictures of their girlfriends, getting stoned and all weepy-goopy over ‘One Tin Soldier,’ popularly known in the green as ‘The Theme from Fuckin Billy Jack.’ Sully couldn’t remember hearing The Doors once in Vietnam; it was always The Strawberry Alarm Clock singing ‘Incense and Peppermints.’ On some level he had known the war was lost the first time he heard that fucking piece of shit on the commissary jukebox.

The reunions started with music and the smell of barbecues (a smell that always vaguely reminded Sully of burning helicopter fuel) and with cans of beer in pails of chipped ice and that part was all right, that part was actually pretty nice, but then all at once it was the next morning and the light burned your eyes and your head felt like a tumor and your stomach was full of poison. On one of those mornings-after Sully had had a vague sick memory of making the dj play ‘Oh! Carol’ by Neil Sedaka over and over again, threatening to kill him if he stopped. On another Sully awoke next to Frank Peasley’s ex-wife. She was snoring because her nose was broken.

Her pillow was covered with blood, her cheeks covered with blood too, and Sully couldn't remember if he had broken her nose or if fuckin Peasley had done it. Sully wanted it to be Peasley but knew it could have been him; sometimes, especially in those days BV (Before Viagra) when he failed at sex almost as often as he succeeded, he got mad.

Fortunately, when the lady awoke, she couldn't remember, either. She remembered what he'd looked like with his underwear off, though. 'How come you only have one?' she'd asked him.

'I'm lucky to have that,' Sully had replied. His headache had been bigger than the world.

'What'd I say .about the old lady?' he asked Dieffenbaker as they sat smoking in the alley beside the chapel.

Dieffenbaker shrugged. 'Just that you used to see her. You said sometimes she put on different clothes but it was always her, the old mamasan Malenfant wasted. I had to shush you up.'

'Fuck,' Sully said, and put the hand not holding the cigarette in his hair.

'You also said it was better once you got back to the East Coast,' Dieffenbaker said. 'And look, what's so bad about seeing an old lady once in awhile? Some people see flying saucers.'

'Not people who owe two banks almost a million dollars,' Sully said. 'If they knew … '

'If they knew, what? I'll tell you what. Nothing. As long as you keep making the payments, Sully-John, keep bringing them that fabled monthly cashew, no one cares what you see when you turn out the light … or what you see when you leave it on, for that matter. They don't care if you dress in ladies' underwear or if you beat your wife and hump the Labrador.

Besides, don't you think there are guys in those banks who spent time in the green?'

Sully took a drag on the Dunhill and looked at Dieffenbaker. The truth was that he never had considered such a thing. He dealt with two loan officers who were the right age, but they never talked about it. Of course, neither did he. Next time I see them, he thought, '/ have to ask if they carry Zippos. You know, be subtle.

'What about you, Deef? Do you have an old lady? I don't mean your girlfriend, I mean an old lady. A mamasan.'

'Hey man, don't call me Deef. Nobody calls me that now. I never liked it.'

'Do you have one?'

'Ronnie Malenfant's my mamasan,' Dieffenbaker said. 'Sometimes I see him. Not the way you said you see yours, like she's really there, but memory's real too, isn't it?'

'Yeah.'

Dieffenbaker shook his head slowly. 'If memory was all. You know? If memory was a//.'

Sully sat silent. In the chapel the organ was now playing something that didn't sound like a hymn but just music. The recessional, he thought they called it. A musical way of telling the mourners to get lost. Get back, Jo-Jo. Your mama's waitin.

Dieffenbaker said: 'There's memory and then there's what you actually see in your mind.

Like when you read a book by a really good author and he describes a room and you see that room. I'll be mowing the lawn or sitting at our conference table listening to a presentation or reading a story to my grandson before putting him in bed or maybe even smooching

with Mary on the sofa, and boom, there's Malenfant, goddam little acne-head with that wavy hair.

Remember how his hair used to wave?'

'Yeah.'

'Ronnie Malenfant, always talking about the fuckin this and the fuckin that and the fuckin other thing. Ethnic jokes for every occasion. And the poke. You remember that?'

'Sure. Little leather poke he wore on his belt. He kept his cards in it. Two decks of Bikes.

"Hey, we're goin Bitch-huntin, boys! Nickel a point! Who's up for it?" And out they'd come.'

'Yeah. You remember. Remember. But I see him, Sully, right down to the whiteheads on his chin. I hear him, I can smell the fucking dope he smoked … but mostly I see him, how he knocked her over and she was lying there on the ground, still shaking her fists at him, still running her mouth — '

'Stop it.'

' — and I couldn't believe it was going to happen. At first I don't think Malenfant could believe it, either. He just jabbed the bayonet at her a couple of times to begin with, pricking her with the tip of it like the whole thing was a goof … but then he went and did it, he stuck it to her. Fuckin A, Sully; I mean fuck-in-A. She screamed and started jerking all around and he had his feet, remember, on either side of her, and the rest of them were running, Ralph Glemson and Mims and I don't know who else. I always hated that little fuck Clemson, even worse than Malenfant because at least Ronnie wasn't sneaky, with him what you saw was what you got. Clemson was crazy and sneaky. I was scared to death, Sully, scared to fucking death. I knew I was supposed to put a stop to it, but I was afraid they'd scrag me if I tried, all of them, all of you, because at that precise moment there

was all you guys and then there was me. Shearman … nothing against him, he went into that clearing where the copters came down like there was no tomorrow, but in that ‘ville … I looked at him and there was nothing there.’

‘He saved my life later on, when we got ambushed,’ Sully said quietly.

‘I know he did. Picked you up and carried you like fucking Superman. He had it in the clearing, he got it back on the trail but in between, in the Ville … nothing. In the ‘ville it was down to me. It was like I was the only grownup, only I didn’t feel like a grownup.’

Sully didn’t bother telling him to stop again. Dieffenbaker meant to have his say. Nothing short of a punch in the mouth would stop him from having it.

‘You remember how she screamed when he stuck it in? That old lady? And Malenfant standing over her and running his mouth, slopehead this and gook that and slant the other thing. Thank God for Slocum. He looked at me and that made me do something … except all I did was tell him to shoot.’

No, Sully thought, you didn’t even do that, Deef. You just nodded your head. If you’re in court they don’t let you get away with shit like that’, they make you speak out loud. They make you state it for the record.

‘I think Slocum saved our souls that day,’ Dieffenbaker said. ‘You knew he offed himself, didn’t you? Yeah. In ‘86.’

‘I thought it was a car accident.’

‘If driving into a bridge abutment at seventy miles an hour on a clear evening is an accident, it was an accident.’

‘What about Malenfant? Any idea?’

‘Well, he never came to any of the reunions, of course, but he was alive the last I knew.

Andy Brannigan saw him in southern California.’

‘Hedgehog saw him?’

‘Yeah, Hedgehog. You know where it was?’

‘No, ‘course not.’

‘It’s going to kill you, Sully-John, it’s going to blow your mind. Brannigan’s in Alcoholics Anonymous. It’s his religion. He says it saved his life, and I suppose it did. He used to drink fiercer than any of us, maybe fiercer than all of us put together. So now he’s addicted to AA instead of tequila. He goes to about a dozen meetings a week, he’s a GSR — don’t ask me, it’s some sort of political position in the group — he mans a hotline telephone. And every year he goes to the National Convention. Five years or so ago the drunks got together in San Diego.

Fifty thousand alkies all standing in the San Diego Convention Center, chanting the Serenity Prayer. Can you picture it?’

‘Sort of,’ Sully said.

‘Fucking Brannigan looks to his left and who does he see but Ronnie Malenfant. He can hardly believe it, but it’s Malenfant, all right. After the big meeting, he grabs Malenfant and the two of them go out for a drink.’ Dieffenbaker paused. ‘Alcoholics do that too, I guess.

Lemonades and Cokes and such. And Malenfant tells Hedgehog he’s almost two years clean and sober, he’s found a higher power he chooses to call God, he’s had a rebirth, everything is five by fucking five, he’s living life on life’s terms, he’s letting go and letting God, all that stuff they talk. And Brannigan, he can’t help it. He asks Malenfant if he’s taken the Fifth Step, which is confessing the stuff you’ve done wrong and becoming entirely ready to make amends.

Malenfant doesn't bat an eyelash, just says he took the Fifth a year ago and he feels a lot better.'

'Hot damn,' Sully said, surprised at the depth of his anger. 'Old mamasan would certainly be glad to know that Ronnie's gotten past it. I'll tell her the next time I see her.' Not knowing he would see her later that day, of course.

'You do that.'

They sat without talking much for a little while. Sully asked Dieffenbaker for another cigarette and Dieffenbaker gave him one, also another flick of the old Zippo. From around the corner came tangles of conversation and some low laughter. Pags's funeral was over. And somewhere in California Ronnie Malenfant was perhaps reading his AA Big Book and getting in touch with that fabled higher power he chose to call God. Maybe Ronnie was also a GSR, whatever the fuck that was. Sully wished Ronnie was dead. Sully wished Ronnie Malenfant had died in a Viet Gong spiderhole, his nose full of sores and the smell of ratshit, bleeding internally and puking up chunks of his own stomach lining. Malenfant with his poke and his cards, Malenfant with his bayonet, Malenfant with his feet planted on either side of the old mamasan in her green pants and orange top and red sneakers.

'Why were we in Vietnam to begin with?' Sully asked. 'Not to get all philosophical or anything, but have you ever figured that out?'

'Who said "He who does not learn from the past is condemned to repeat it?'"

'Richard Dawson, the host of Family Feud.'

'Fuck you, Sullivan.'

'I don't know who said it. Does it matter?'

‘Fuckin yeah,’ Dieffenbaker said. ‘Because we never got out. We never got out of the green.

Our generation died there.’

‘That sounds a little — ‘

‘A little what? A little pretentious? You bet. A little silly? You bet. A little self-regarding?

Yes sir. But that’s us. That’s us all over. What have we done since Nam, Sully? Those of us who went, those of us who marched and protested, those of us who just sat home watching the Dallas Cowboys and drinking beer and farting into the sofa cushions?’

Color was seeping into the new lieutenant’s cheeks. He had the look of a man who has found his hobby-horse and is now climbing on, helpless to do anything but ride. He held up his hands and began popping fingers the way Sully had when talking about the legacies of the Vietnam experience.

‘Well, let’s see. We’re the generation that invented Super Mario Brothers, the ATV, laser missile-guidance systems, and crack cocaine. We discovered Richard Simmons, Scott Peck, and Martha Stewart Living. Our idea of a major lifestyle change is buying a dog. The girls who burned their bras now buy their lingerie from Victoria’s Secret and the boys who fucked fearlessly for peace are now fat guys who sit in front of their computer screens late at night, pulling their puddings while they look at pictures of naked eighteen-year-olds on the Internet.

That’s us, brother, we like to watch. Movies, video games, live car-chase footage, fistfights on The Jerry Springer Show, Mark McGwire, World Federation Wrestling, impeachment hearings, we don’t care, we just like to watch. But there was a time … don’t laugh, but there was a time when it was really all in our hands. Do you know that?’

Sully nodded, thinking of Carol. Not the version of her sitting on the sofa with him and her wine-smelling mother, not the one flipping the peace sign at the camera while the blood ran down the side of her face, either — that one was already too late and too crazy, you could see it in her smile, read it in the sign, where screaming words forbade all discussion. Rather he thought of Carol on the day her mother had taken all of them to Savin Rock. His friend Bobby had won some money from a three-card monte dealer that day and Carol had worn her blue bathing suit on the beach and sometimes she'd give Bobby that look, the one that said he was killing her and death was sweet. It had been in their hands then; he was quite sure of it.

But kids lose everything, kids have slippery fingers and holes in their pockets and they lose everything.

'We filled up our wallets on the stock market and went to the gym and booked therapy sessions to get in touch with ourselves. South America is burning, Malaysia's burning, fucking Vietnam is burning, but we finally got past that self-hating thing, finally got to like ourselves, so that's okay.'

Sully thought of Malenfant getting in touch with himself, learning to like the inner Ronnie, and suppressed a shudder.

All of Dieffenbaker's fingers were held up in front of his face and poked out; to Sully he looked like Al Jolson getting ready to sing 'Mammy.' Dieffenbaker seemed to become aware of this at the same moment Sully did, and lowered his hands. He looked tired and distracted and unhappy.

'I like lots of people our age when they're one by one,' he said, 'but I loathe and despise my generation, Sully. We had an opportunity to change everything. We actually did. Instead we settled for designer jeans, two tickets to Mariah Carey at Radio City Music Hall, frequent flier miles, James Cameron's Titanic, and retirement portfolios. The only generation even close to us in pure, selfish self-indulgence is the so-called Lost Generation of the twenties, and at least most of

them had the decency to stay drunk. We couldn't even do that. Man, we suck.'

The new lieutenant was close to tears, Sully saw. 'Deef — '

'You know the price of selling out the future, Sully-John? You can never really leave the past. You can never get over. My thesis is that you're really not in New York at all. You're in the Delta, leaning back against a tree, stoned and rubbing bug-dope on the back of your neck.

Packer's still the man because it's still 1969. Everything you think of as 'your later life' is a big fucking pot-bubble. And it's better that way. Vietnam is better. That's why we stay there.'

'You think?'

'Absolutely.'

A dark-haired, brown-eyed woman in a blue dress peeked around the corner and said, 'So there you are.'

Dieffenbaker stood up as she came toward them, walking slow and pretty on her high heels. Sully stood up, too.

'Mary, this is John Sullivan. He served with me and Pags. Sully, this is my good friend Mary Theresa Charlton.'

'Pleased to meet you,' Sully said, and put out his hand.

Her grip was firm and sure, long, cool fingers in his own, but she was looking at Dieffenbaker. 'Mrs Pagano wants to see you, hon. Please?'

'You bet,' Dieffenbaker said. He started toward the Front of the building, then turned back to Sully. 'Hang in a little bit,' he said. 'We'll go for a drink. I promise not to preach.' But his eyes shifted from Sully's when he said this, as if they knew it was a promise he couldn't keep.

‘Thanks, Loot, but I really ought to get back. I want to beat the rush-hour traffic.’

But he hadn’t beaten the traffic after all and now a piano was Falling toward him, gleaming in the sun and humming to itself as it came. Sully Fell flat on his stomach and rolled under a car. The piano came down less than five feet away, detonating and throwing up rows of keys like teeth.

Sully slid back out from beneath the car, burning his back on the hot tailpipe, and struggled to his feet. He looked north along the turnpike, eyes wide and unbelieving. A vast rummage sale was falling out of the sky: tape recorders and rugs and a riding lawnmower with the grass-caked blade whirling in its housing and a black lawn-jockey and an aquarium with the fish still swimming in it. He saw an old man with a lot of theatrical gray hair running up the breakdown lane and then a flight of steps fell on him, tearing off his left arm and sending him to his knees. There were clocks and desks and coffee tables and a plummeting elevator with its cable uncoiling into the air behind it like a greasy severed umbilicus. A squall of ledgers fell in the parking lot of a nearby industrial complex; their clapping covers sounded like applause. A fur coat fell on a running woman, trapping her, and then a sofa landed on her, crushing her. The air filled with a storm of light as large panes of greenhouse glass dropped out of the blue. A statue of a Civil War soldier smashed through a panel truck. An ironing board hit the railing of the overpass up ahead and then fell into the stalled traffic below like a spinning propeller. A stuffed lion dropped into the back of a pickup truck. Everywhere were running, screaming people. Everywhere were cars with dented roofs and smashed windows; Sully saw a Mercedes with the unnaturally pink legs of a department-store mannequin sticking up from the sunroof. The air shook with whines and whistles.

Another shadow fell on him and even as he ducked and raised his hand he knew it was too late, if it was an iron or a toaster or something like that it would fracture his skull. If it was something bigger he’d be nothing but a grease-spot on the highway.

The falling object struck his hand without hurting it in the slightest, bounced, and landed at his feet. He looked down at it first with surprise, then with dawning wonder. ‘Holy shit,’ he said.

Sully bent over and picked up the baseball glove which had fallen from the sky, recognizing it at once even after all these years: the deep scratch down the last finger and the comically tangled knots in the rawhide laces of the webbing were as good as fingerprints. He looked on the side, where Bobby had printed his name. It was still there, but the letters looked fresher than they should have, and the leather here looked frayed and faded and whipsawed, as if other names had been inked in the same spot and then erased.

Closer to his face, the smell of the glove was both intoxicating and irresistible. Sully slipped it onto his hand, and when he did something crackled beneath his little finger — a piece of paper shoved in there. He paid no attention. Instead he put the glove over his face, closed his eyes, and inhaled. Leather and neat’s-foot oil and sweat and grass. All the summers that were. The summer of 1960, for instance, when he had come back from his week at camp to find everything changed — Bobby sullen, Carol distant and palely thoughtful (at least for awhile), and the cool old guy who’d lived on the third floor of Bobby’s building — Ted —

gone. Everything had changed … but it was still summer, he had still been eleven, and everything had still seemed …

‘Eternal,’ he murmured into the glove, and inhaled deeply of its aroma again as, nearby, a glass case filled with butterflies shattered on the roof of a bread-van and a stop-sign stuck, quivering, into the breakdown lane like a thrown spear. Sully remembered his Bo-lo Bouncer and his black Keds and the taste of Fez straight out of the gun, how the pieces of candy would hit the roof of your mouth and then ricochet onto your tongue; he remembered the way his catcher’s mask felt when it sat on his face just right and the hisha-hisha-hisha of the lawnsprinklers on Broad Street and how mad Mrs Conlan got if you walked too close to her precious flowers and Mrs Godlow at the Asher Empire wanting to see your birth certificate if

she thought you were too big to be still under twelve and the poster of Brigitte Bardot (if she's trash I'd love to be the trashman)

in her towel and playing guns and playing pass and playing Careers and making arm-farts in the back of Mrs Sweetser's fourth-grade classroom and—

'Hey, American.' Only she said it Amellican and Sully knew who he was going to see even before he raised his head from Bobby's Ah/in Dark-model glove. It was old mamasan, standing there between the crotchrocket, which had been crushed by a freezer (wrapped meat was spilling out of its shattered door in frosty blocks), and a Subaru with a lawn-flamingo punched through its roof. Old mamasan in her green pants and orange smock and red sneakers, old mamasan lit up like a bar-sign in hell.

'Hey American, you come me, I keep safe.' And she held out her arms.

Sully walked toward her through the noisy hail of falling televisions and backyard pools and cartons of cigarettes and high-heeled shoes and a great big pole hairdryer and a pay telephone that hit and vomited a jackpot of quarters. He walked toward her with a feeling of relief, that feeling you get only when you are coming home.

'I keep safe.' Holding out her arms now. 'Poor boy, I keep safe.' Sully stepped into the dead circle of her embrace as people screamed and ran and all things American fell out of the sky, blitzing I-95 north of Bridgeport with their falling glitter. She put her arms around him.

'I keep safe,' she said, and Sully was in his car. Traffic was stopped all around him, four lanes of it. The radio was on, tuned to WKND. The Platters were singing 'Twilight Time' and Sully couldn't breathe. Nothing appeared to have fallen out of the sky, except for the traffic tie-up everything seemed to be in good order, but how could that be? How could it be when he still had Bobby Garneld's old baseball glove on his hand? .

‘I keep safe,’ old mamasan was saying. ‘Poor boy, poor American boy, I keep safe.’

Sully wanted to smile at her. He wanted to tell her he was sorry, that some of them had at least meant well, but he had no air and he was very tired. He closed his eyes and tried to raise Bobby’s glove one final time, get one final shallow whiff of that oily, summery smell, but it was too heavy.

Dieffenbaker was standing at the kitchen counter the next morning, wearing a pair of jeans and nothing else, pouring himself a cup of coffee, when Mary came in from the living room.

She was wearing her PROPERTY OF THE DENVER BRONCOS sweatshirt and had the New York Post in her hand.

‘I think I have some bad news for you,’ she said, then seemed to reconsider. ‘Moderately bad news.’

He turned to her warily. Bad news should always come after lunch, he thought. At least a person was halfway prepared for bad news after lunch. First thing in the morning everything left a bruise. ‘What is it?’

‘The man you introduced me to yesterday at your buddy’s funeral — you said he was a car dealer in Connecticut, right?’

‘Right.’

‘I wanted to be sure because John Sullivan isn’t, you know, the world’s most uncommon —

‘

‘What are you talking about, Mary?’

She handed him the paper, which was folded open to a page about halfway into the tabloid.

‘They say it happened while he was on his way home. I’m sorry, hon.’

She had to be wrong, that was his first thought; people couldn’t die just after you’d seen them and talked to them, it seemed like a basic rule, somehow.

But it was him, all right, and in triplicate: Sully in a highschool baseball uniform with a catcher’s mask pushed back to the top of his head, Sully in an Army uniform with sergeant’s stripes on the sleeve, and Sully in a business suit that had to hail from the late seventies.

Beneath the row of pictures was the sort of headline you found only in the Post: JAMBO!

SILVER STAR VIET VET DIES IN CONN. TRAFFIC JAM

Dieffenbaker scanned the story quickly, feeling the sense of unease and betrayal he always felt these days when he read the death-notice of someone his own age, someone he knew. We are still too young for natural deaths, he always thought, knowing that it was a foolish idea.

Sully had died of an apparent heart attack while stuck in a traffic tieup caused by a jackknifed tractor-trailer truck. He might well have died within sight of his own dealership’s Chevrolet sign, the article lamented. Like the JAMBO headline, such epiphanies could be found only in the Post. The Times was a good paper if you were smart; the Post was the newspaper of drunks and poets.

Sully had left an ex-wife and no children. Funeral arrangements were being made by Norman Oliver, of First Connecticut Bank and Trust.

Buried by his bank! Dieffenbaker thought, his hands beginning to shake. He had no idea why this thought filled him with such horror, but it did. By his fucking bank! Oh man!

‘Honey?’ Mary was looking at him a little nervously. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘He died in a traffic jam. Maybe they couldn’t even get an ambulance to him.

Maybe they never even found him until the traffic started moving again. Christ.’

‘Don’t,’ she said, and took the paper away from him again. Sully had won the Silver Star for the rescue, of course — the helicopter rescue. The gooks had been shooting but Packer and Shearman had led a bunch of American soldiers, mostly Delta two-twos, in just the same. Ten or twelve of the Bravo Company soldiers had laid down a confused and probably not very effective covering fire as the rescue operation took place … and for a wonder two of the men from the tangled copters had actually been alive, at least when they came out of the clearing.

John Sullivan had carried one of them to cover all by himself, the chopper guy shrieking in his arms and covered with fire-retardant foam.

Malenfant had gone running into the clearing, too — Malenfant clutching one of the extinguisher cannisters like a big red baby and screaming at the Gong in the bush to shoot him if they could, except they couldn’t, he knew they couldn’t, they were just a bunch of blind slopehead syphilitic fucks and they couldn’t hit him, couldn’t hit the broad side of a fuckin barn. Malenfant had also — been put up for the Silver Star, and although Dieffenbaker couldn’t say for sure, he supposed the pimply little murdering asshole had won one. Had Sully known or guessed? Wouldn’t he have mentioned it while they were sitting together outside the funeral parlor? Maybe; maybe not. Medals had a way of seeming less important as time passed, more and more like the award you got in junior high for memorizing a poem or the letter you got in high school for running track and blocking home plate when the throw came home. Just something you kept on a shelf. They were the things old men used to jazz the

kids. The things they held out to make you jump higher, run faster, fling yourself forward.

Dieffenbaker thought the world would probably be a better place without old men (this revelation coming just as he was getting ready to be one himself). Let the old women live, old women never hurt anyone as a rule, but old men were more dangerous than rabid dogs. Shoot all of them, then douse their bodies with gasoline, then light them on fire. Let the children join hands and dance around the blaze, singing corny old Crosby Stills and Nash songs.

‘Are you really okay?’ Mary asked.

‘About Sully? Sure. I hadn’t seen him in years.’

He sipped his coffee and thought about the old lady in the red sneakers, the one Malenfant had killed, the one who came to visit Sully. She wouldn’t be visiting Sully anymore; there was that much, at least. Old mamasan’s visiting days were done. It was how wars really ended, Dieffenbaker supposed — not at truce tables but in cancer wards and office cafeterias and traffic jams. Wars died one tiny piece at a time, each piece something that fell like a memory, each lost like an echo that fades in winding hills. In the end even war ran up the white flag. Or so he hoped. He hoped that in the end even war surrendered.