

Ghosts In The Wire

Franklin D. Rast

Universal Publishers/uPUBLISH.com
USA • 2000

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ISBN: 1-58112-767-7

Universal Publishers/uPUBLISH.com
2000

www.uPUBLISH.com/books/rast2.htm

CONTENTS

Dedication	iii
Preface	iv
Chapter One Return To The World	1
Chapter Two Baton Rouge	5
Chapter Three Mary Jane	9
Chapter Four Louisiana State University	15
Chapter Five Flashback	18
Chapter Six Sarah—The War Widow	22
Chapter Seven Jacob—Old Man Of The South	27
Chapter Eight Arcadia	34
Chapter Nine George Henry’s Ghosts	38
Chapter Ten Mister Halstead—The Critic	43
Chapter Eleven Mister Claud’s War Question	50
Chapter Twelve For Men Only	55
Chapter Thirteen Johnny Horton’s Bitterness	59
Chapter Fourteen The New Preacher	65
Chapter Fifteen Aberrations	67
Chapter Sixteen Barron’s Landing	69
Chapter Seventeen RC’s War Remorse	73
Chapter Eighteen Concern	81
Chapter Nineteen Fort Sill	83
Chapter Twenty Captain Wagaman’s Curse	89
Chapter Twenty One Murder In The Day-Room	93
Chapter Twenty Two Garrison Duties	96
Chapter Twenty Three Lieutenant Sarosiek—My Dandy XO ...	102
Chapter Twenty Four	
Lieutenant Demby—World’s Greatest Fisherman	105
Chapter Twenty Five Good Commanders Never Assume	110
Chapter Twenty Six	
Private Fabauker—Drunk, Whiz-Kid, War Hero	114
Chapter Twenty Seven Buster’s Doll Solution	127
Chapter Twenty Eight Nixon’s Kiss of Death	135
Chapter Twenty Nine Fabauker’s Explosion	138
Chapter Thirty The Inquiry	146
Chapter Thirty One Wanda—The Witch Of Vietnam	150
Chapter Thirty Two An Amulet For A Blanket	156
Chapter Thirty Three Many Irons In The Fire	166

Chapter Thirty Four Another Name For The Wall	172
Chapter Thirty Five Private Ashe's Hate	180
Chapter Thirty Six Three Letters	184
Chapter Thirty Seven The IG Inspection	192
Chapter Thirty Eight Top's Medal	200
Chapter Thirty Nine Unusual Protocol	203
Chapter Forty War Protestors	206
Chapter Forty One Nuclear Weapons Security	212
Chapter Forty Two My Ghosts In The Wire	216
Appendage	226
Epilogue	253

DEDICATION

To the ghosts of Vietnam: You seem to be in a better place than mere mortals can ever see in reality. We are indeed, like stones, hopefully awaiting to be awakened by a higher power.

PREFACE

Of all my experiences that I have ever encountered, my tour of duty in Vietnam was the one that never seemed to be able to just fade away. It captivated me, and I still bear “the mark” of war, but there was so much more to the Orient with its mysteries, opaque to the Western world, that I feel needs to be written about.

When I finished writing “Don’s Nam,” based on a documented diary of my time in Vietnam, I believed that my story had been told, and the matter settled. Then came the letters, emails, and phone calls from other veterans and those affected by or desiring to learn more about the Vietnam era. Their comments and stories encouraged me to write this sequel book about what many experienced when they returned home from the war. It is perhaps unique, because it is centered around garrison life of soldiers stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma in 1970, many of whom were just waiting to get out of the “Green Machine” after serving their tour of the Nam. Their stories about the war, coupled with the often humorous and pitiful situations they encountered once back in “The World,” are compelling, since so little has been written about their plights and points of view.

Many of those that returned from the war adjusted back to what would be considered normal citizens in short order, but, for some, it was a long agonizing process that is not at all easy to just explain away. Perhaps what I have attempted to do in the narratives of the characters portrayed is to make the stories interesting to anyone who has ever wanted to know what the real thoughts and actions of returning Vietnam war veterans, and the citizens they encountered, felt like. I hope this book will present events, or aspects of life and characters, that will evoke the reader into what it was like for us in spirit as well as fact.

Over the years since the war, I have found few individuals that really wanted to talk about their experiences. How often has it been said or heard that such an such was in the war, but never talks about it? There is a reason for this to the uninitiated, and it is a natural human instinct to regress moments of sorrow, anxiety, suffering, and pain that all wars initiate. But, it is owed to future generations to

know the heroic sacrifices of individuals such as William (Billy) Seay of the “Orient Express” who was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions near Ap Nhi defending an ambushed convoy against a reinforced battalion of the North Vietnamese Army, or First Sergeant Ira A. Whitaker’s gallant actions near Quan Loi for which he earned the Distinguished Service Cross in close, often hand-to-hand, combat with a determined enemy force.

The stories within these pages will be remembered and retold as long as our generation lives, then they will be cast into long shadows on the obscure memory of mortals views of history, while the ghosts will sound distant and drumming sounds like war chariots battling between heaven and hell. Such thoughts are within keeping with the true nature of things, as only a higher power can ever change our eventual true destiny.

Franklin D. Rast
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
November, 1999

The cranes overhead go in silence
Below them the
wolves are quarreling. The war has saddened me so
I can’t sleep Who has the strength to bring order to
heaven and earth?

—Tu Fu

Ghosts In The Wire

CHAPTER ONE

Return To The World

“Who’s got point on patrol today?” I wondered silently, as the Delta jet landed smoothly at the Shreveport airport on a crisp clear March morning in 1970. My tour of duty in the Republic of South Vietnam was officially over, but there was an enigmatic deep sadness, coupled with a guilty unexplained anxiety, that was dwelling in my mind, as I stood silently waiting for my duffle bag. “I should be happy, just getting back in one piece,” I mused, trying to cheer myself up, as I took a deep breath of clean smelling air not laced with the odor of rotting fish, joss sticks and latrines, that had seemed to surround me the whole time I was in the Nam during the last twelve months. I guess it was my uniform and deep red sunburned face and arms that caused several people passing by to stare oddly at me. On the other hand, they looked just as strange to me looking so pale and being dressed in civilian clothes.

“It’s gonna take some adjusting,” I resigned, already feeling bored, after grasping my old faded-green duffle bag. I decided to take a taxi, rather than call my parents to pick me up. The driver, a friendly black dude about my age, was excitedly yakking about all the catfish he had caught fishing in Cross Lake that weekend. I nodded trying to be polite, but I guess he saw through my pretense.

“Man, you must be just back from the Nam, cause that ain’t no normal look on your face ,” he said, grinning at me in the rear-view mirror. “Yep, you and me got sumtin’ in common. Nam was a bad trip, but forgit it man. I was there in 68’ driving a truck for the Orient Express. You ever hear about them boys?”

“Yeah , man!” I replied, surprised by his comment. “That’s the same outfit I was in—the Orient Express. What a small world. I

was in the 379th Reefer Kings and 534th Trans Company. What company were you in blood?"

"The 62nd Trans, L-T!" He yelled, so excited that he drove through a red light. "Man, I ain't met any dude but you since I got back that was in the Orient Express. I left the Nam in December 68'. We be in the real World now, brother, uh, sir! Say now, ain't that sumtin' we be back here safe and sound after all that convoy shit? Me and you oughta just go catch some catfish this weekend at Cross Lake and talk over old times. I know you be busy now just wanting to relax, but I need somebody to rap with bad. My black brothers just be too busy stirring up protest trouble with that Black Panther and Malcolm X stuff. I got something to get off my mind about an ambush an such. You know what I mean bro? Shit, man, I got this hangup inside my chest that's been hounding my soul day and night, and for the life of me I can't get it right."

"Okay man, I can dig that action." I said, kind of mystified that I was back in the World already talking about going fishing. "Turn left on Junior Place, and my parents house is just around the corner where it turns into Parkwood Drive."

"Yea, okay, Charlie Charlie (Convoy Commander). I git your drift. Ain't just it be something—we be back in the World?" He said, while passing me a Triple-A cab card with his phone number scratched in pencil on it as we pulled into the gravel driveway of my parents home and stopped. A blue jay bird sitting on a camellia bush just stared at us. It was eerie quiet. No breeze was blowing, but the air smelled clean, almost saintly, if there was a word to describe it.

"How much do I owe you, man?" I asked, while fumbling in my khaki pockets, starched armor tight by Mamma San Hen back in Nam only a few short hours ago, as he got by duffle bag out of the cab trunk. "Nothing, bro." He replied. "You already paid me a thousand times over. You my brother. Yea, you my honkie bro from the Nam. My friends call me RC, cause I drink em' all the time. What be your nickname Lieutenant Rast?"

"Wildman, RC," I replied, while trying to give him ten dollars for a tip, but he politely pushed it away with his hand. "Well now, since you won't take a tip at least let me buy the fish bait and chow Saturday. Okay, RC?"

"You got it Wildman!" RC yelled, and started in reverse out the driveway just as my parents were coming out the door not

expecting me. RC suddenly stopped the cab dead in the gravel, and hopped out running over to me just as my parents greeted me.

“Excuse me folks, don’t mean to interrupt,” he said, looking sort of puzzled at me, “but Lieutenant Rast, you ain’t the Wildman with the ape ol’ Petty, a buddy, wrote about from the Nam that does the crazy dances and takes them patrolling in the swamps?”

“Yes RC. That’s me,” I said, as my parents kind of looked at each other confused, as RC and I did a quick “dap” and laughed. RC then left, and I followed my parents inside with mom saying that she had saved me a Thanksgiving turkey dinner in the freezer. While she was busy preparing the trimmings, dad and I sat at the kitchen counter and talked. He was now the Director of the Shreveport Trade School on Travis Avenue where he had taught cabinet making for two decades. He was curious about what I was going to do with myself now that my two year obligation with the military was drawing to an end.

“Well, I kind of extended my military time,” I said, knowing that it was the last thing they wanted to hear from me. “I report to Fort Sill, Oklahoma in ten days. I’m due for promotion to captain, and the pay and benefits aren’t that bad. Besides, it’ll give me time to adjust. I can get out any time. It’s just a temporary thing. How’s my Mustang running?”

“It’s running okay,” he replied, looking perplexed, as my mom sat a hot plate of turkey and dressing on the counter in front of me, and hurriedly began to start cooking up other goodies, while muttering that my sunburn would give me skin cancer. I tried to eat, but had a hard time of it, thinking of how my Thanksgiving last November had been in Vietnam.

On that day, I had taken an eighty vehicle supply convoy in a blinding rain storm to Dau Tieng located in War Zone C, about forty-five miles northwest of Saigon. We had half-eaten the soggy meal served out of thermite containers while receiving sporadic sniper fire, and had just been happy not to have had to RON (Remain Over Night) at Dau Tieng, as we hurriedly returned to Long Binh that afternoon over the muddy roads.

During the next few days, I tried to get back to normal. I drove around sleepy Shreveport in my 67’ McNamara Ford Mustang, even stopping off at Fair Park High School that I had attended in the early sixties and visited the Junior ROTC building. I sadly learned

that old Master Sergeant Clark, my first ROTC instructor, had retired from the service and then passed away soon after. Then, growing bored, I drove straight south 234 miles back to Louisiana State University where I had attended college in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I was feeling for something, I guess, I had lost along the way.

CHAPTER TWO

Baton Rouge

At the “greasy spoon” Pitt Grill on Highland Road, I parked my overheated Mustang and went inside to eat a hamburger. It looked the same, and I saw Mister Glass, the manager, busy sweating over the grill muttering obscenities directed at a cook who hadn’t shown up for the second shift. A vacant staring, long haired girl in hippie attire, chewing gum, boringly asked me what I wanted. I stared at the menu lost in reflecting thoughts, as she smacked the gum impatiently while doodling with a blue ball point pen on the ticket order pad.

“Well,” I said, “I want a hamburger, hash browns smothered in onions, and a ‘cup’ (coffee), please.”

“HB, with browns ‘smooed’ with ‘O’s,” she yelled, in a bored, high pitched voice, as she fingered a stylishly small silver cocaine spoon on a leather necklace suspended around her long skinny neck. About this time, Mister Glass, hearing her yell out the order, looked over and stared at me sitting at the counter. I was not frowning, but also, not smiling—just vacantly staring. “It is just as the old Buddhist priest back in Vietnam had stated—‘you have to live in two worlds: the real and the unreal,’” I meditated to myself.

“I know you from somewhere man,” he said, wiping his greasy spatula off on the side of his apron in a quick swipe. “I know you, man, but I can’t place your face. I’m working by rear off eighteen hours a day, seven days a week, making some real money, but I can’t place your face. That’s odd, cause I’m good at faces. You’re red as hell in the face, so you must be a cook drifting over from Florida, huh? I got an opening, if you want the job. No drugs, okay?”

“Yeah, man, no drugs, and I just drifted up, like you say,” I said, letting him think for a brief moment he might be getting a new cook. “You know, or once knew, a guy named Buddy Payne?”

“Yeah, Buddy Payne!” he yelled, “Heck, he volunteered his ass for Nam, like a fool, and then disappeared leaving me holding the ‘to go’ bag being minus a cook. Crap on that Nam! Shit on it. I now gotta depend on these idiot hippies for help! They are just so laid back, you dig ,man? If you take the job, you just better not

smoke any dope around me! I mean it man. You got management potential if you just even show up for work. Okay?”

“Yeah, I dig man.” I replied, lost in thought, starting to feel for the first time back in the World that it too was also insane in many ways like the Nam. I guess I might be the crazy one now in the alien environment I saw poor Mister Glass in working eighteen hours a day. He didn’t look happy, and neither was I, as he poured me a “cup,” and we moved over to a vacant booth to talk, as the scheduled late arriving cook came drifting in looking stoned.

“Now I know you, man” Mister Glass said, while loading his coffee with spoons of sugar, and then testing the sweet brew with his tongue. “You’re Buddy Payne’s pal from Shreveport. Jim Mook’s old roommate. You know about what happened to Jim? He went off the deep end from his Nam trip, and, from what I’ve been told, he’s been put in a VA looney bin up north in Michigan. Things sure have changed since I saw you last time. People aren’t buying the Nam war crap anymore about saving the world from the commies. It’s all just dope and ‘make love not war’ bullshit.”

“You might just be right on that thought, Mister Glass,” I said, taking a hungry big bite out of the greasy hamburger the gum-chewing hippie waitress had placed before me. “Nam wasn’t at all what I figured it was gonna be. Those people would be better off just fighting it out among themselves. Whatever the outcome, they still going to want to do business with the almighty dollar folks in the long run. Anyway, the wars winding down. It’s behind me now. I’m going to adjust back to normal, if there is such a place. I can do it, no sweat.”

“I know how you feel, man,” Mister Glass, said, “I felt the same when I got back from Korea, but you know what? I’ve never been the same. I guess that’s why I work eighteen hours a day— It helps me keep from remembering my buddies who didn’t make it back. It never really leaves you, kind of a feeling that life ain’t fair, and, you know what, it haunts me sometimes at night when I can’t sleep. By the way, you remember that frat guy, Walter Frick the Third, who got drafted after flunking out? He had his little girl here that night you came in here to see Buddy Payne before you left for Nam. He got blown away, according to Captain Hall, who’s on the ROTC staff at LSU, and eats in here all the time. Captain Hall had the sad duty of informing his ex-wife that Walter had been killed.

She was the beneficiary on his GI life insurance policy. Lives in a trailer down between the levee and the Mississippi River in some cottonwoods about two miles west of here. It's just her and her daughter. It's a crying ass pity, man, what war does to people. Wanna be my cook, man?"

"Nope, Mister Glass," I said, dipping the last bite of hamburger in the ketchup smeared on my plate and gulping it down, feeling content, yet disturbed at the same time. "I'm staying in the service awhile longer, cause I don't have anything better to do at the moment. Being a civilian just isn't in my frame of thought right now. If you hired me, I probably would be just like that hippie cook or waitress you got working for you in a few weeks or so, and that would really piss you off."

"You're right about that, man," he replied, staring at his coffee cup pensively. "I know how you feel. I thought about staying in the service myself after Korea. But I found a good understanding woman, even got three kids, but life's a bitch, I can tell you so, just trying to raise em' decently on what I make here at the restaurant. Shit man, I ain't got no degree, and that's what the system demands nowadays to be termed successful. I wanna go to college, but that's just a 'pipe-dream.' I'm too old, anyway. So all I can do anymore is work my rear off, pay taxes, and take the kids fishing occasionally on my day off about every other week. So many foreign students and blacks at LSU now, that you won't even recognize the campus. The times are changing, that's for sure, and I sure enough been lassoed by the system and put in my place. I now know my place in the system, and I can't stop now and lose everything I been working for. A bank loan would look good right now, cause the military and old timers relatives been creating a traffic problem near Baton Rouge General and Lady of the Lake hospitals where I could open up a couple of new 'Pitts.' Ah, shit man, if I could just do that, I could push it over the hump and be a success. That's my dream, just to open a few more restaurants. I already thought of a name for them. I'd call them 'Waffle House,' and keep them open twenty-four-hours-a-day! It'll be a franchise thing. I could make a killing off the war economy, and all them old farts coming in so hungry to eat after seeing their dying relatives, just knowing they're going to be included in the will!"

"Yep, that's for sure a pretty good idea," I said, getting up

and reaching for my wallet to pay for the meal. “Can I sleep out in your parking lot tonight, Mister Glass, I don’t know of any place to really stay, now that I’m here in Baton Rouge. I never have liked motels.”

“Sure, Rast,” Mister Glass said,” and the burger and coffee is on me. It’s getting late. I’m going home to get some sleep, cause I gotta be back at five in the morning to change the cash register drawer. Watch yourself, there’s been a lot of muggins around here lately with all the drifters.”

I wasn’t the least bit sleepy so I decided to lock up my Mustang, put my .45 pistol in my inside coat pocket as a precaution against muggers, and take a walk down Chimes Street which was my old bohemian hangout where Jim Mook and I had once shared a flat. But I knew Jim wasn’t there—his depression, caused by the war, had resulted in him being placed in a VA hospital in Ypsilanti, Michigan. He still wrote me an occasional letter, and had said in the last one that he had a book of poems coming out entitled “Up From Despair.” Jim’s poems were always so sad, but then again, the Vietnam war was also sad. I guess that’s what war does to you when you think too much about it. It makes you depressed and mistrustful of the system that sent you there.

Chimes Street hadn’t changed. It was still crowded with the hippie-type that frequented the café’s and pool hall, where the old Jack Keroua type Negro racked the pool balls, singing ballads and mournful blues. Pot smoke hung in the air like fog.

“Hey man!” Came a girls voice from the balcony of an apartment above where I was walking, “Want to burn one? You look like you just got back from Kathmandu. Far out, man.”

“Yeah man,” I replied, feeling a kind of haunting loneliness . That’s the only way I can describe my feelings at the time as I climbed the rickety stairway. Darn, I should have been happy as hell just surviving Nam, and being free in the real World with a young girl, suddenly from out of nowhere, asking me up to her pad. But, inwardly, I knew so well, that my sadness was the cruel prank that was played on the spirit of all youth who experience war. Strangely, I longed to be back with my men—Helms, Petty, Dodge, Tennessee and the rest of them, but most of all I longed for the regal splendor of Chua—Nguyen Thi Chua of Vietnam.

CHAPTER THREE

Mary Jane

“You a student, man?” She asked, as she invited me into her pad through a door with hanging plastic colored beads. Inside were burning candles and incense with a song called “Crying Ass Piety,” by a upcoming female vocalist named “Cat Girl,” playing on the record player. “Why you so red in the face? You look like you’re on fire,” she said, slowly rolling a joint on a metal tray cradled in her lap, as we sat cross-legged on an oriental rug on the floor. She had carefully saved the seeds and stems from the big brownish-orange bud she had plucked almost religiously out of her bag of pot, I guess saved for a rainy day—hippie style, I noted, while vacantly staring at the paintings and drawings on the walls.

“Those are all mine, I like to paint, man. They fuck with the establishment. Know what I mean, man?” She said, seeing me curiously staring, as she fired up the joint, hit on it, and passed it to me. I wasn’t much of a pot smoker, but figured maybe it would change the awful mood I was in. “I work the six- to-two morning shift at the Pitt Grill on Highland Road around the corner from here. Work, paint, and smoke, that’s all I do in this world. I was an art major till I flunked out. Fucking campus life was a dull trip anyhow. Paint by the numbers man! No imagination, just no fucking imagination. What’s your trip, man? My names Mary Jane, by the way. Plain ol’ Mary Jane.” She laughed, taking an enormous hit of the glowing marijuana joint.

I guess if anything can be rightfully said regarding the viewpoint of Western youth towards the establishment, as I was perceiving it at the time in March of 1970, was that the youth of that period were fed up with traditional role models that copied the regimented and dull patterns of there predecessors. All youth, by nature, are rebels to some degree, but the 60’s and 70’s youth were the very definition of anti-establishment in America. I was no exception, but, because of my military discipline and current choice of career, my rebellion was mostly kept to my own thoughts. With Mary Jane, I mused, toking on the joint, I just decided to drift along with the events that were literally unfolding before me, as she

undressed, and walked naked to the bathroom, and washed her skinny body with Ivory soap for some reason that I, at first, couldn't figure out. I sure did later. Ivory soap was the "great equalizer" of my youth, I found out time and time again.

There was a stirring in the closet, like that of a rat who had made his nest in a shoe-box that a new pair of shoes had come in, but you just couldn't throw the shoe-box away, because the shoes were so new. "Who's there?" I yelled, half stoned, but remembering what Mister Glass had mentioned about the muggins in the area.

"Nobody man! Nobody. Just let us leave," cried two voices in uncertain hillbilly and "Cajun" harmony. "We're students working part-time for Electrolux. Like you know, man, we were only trying to show your old lady a vacuum cleaner, trying to pick up a few extra bucks. It's a good machine we done brought in here to show her."

"Yeah, that's a likely excuse, you rascals! Leave the Electrolux in the closet," I yelled, trying to sound official as Mary Jane's old man, and pissed off, as the bewildered students scurried from the closet and stopped petrified in front of me, as I pointed my .45 pistol menacing at them. The pistol was deadly, and they knew it. It, and I also, because of the pot smoke, were both cocked.

"I'm a local 'coon ass,' sir." One of the wild-eyed students explained. "My dad runs a Ford dealership in Plaquemine in West Baton Rouge Parish. I just got back from the Nam about a year ago—going to college on the GI Bill. My buddy here is Matthew Bergeron, a Livingston Parish boy. He is vice-president of a big home improvement company in Baton Rouge, or so he says he is. He wants to be a Pentecostal preacher, and handles snakes to prove his devotion. That's the truth. We don't mean no trouble."

"Well, men, I'll try the vacuum out. Come back in three days, and I'll let you know if we want it or not—now git!" I said, trying to look menacing as the pot smoke took a firm hold on me, and made me wonder if the vacuum cleaner picked up seeds and stems. "Was I ever becoming a 60's classic case?" I wondered, looking at the two fellows standing in fear at the pistol pointed at them.

The Livingston Parish character looked at me in a condensing manner. "Sir, this is a very good vacuum cleaner for \$399, plus tax. Your old lady needs just this sort of machine for only \$20 a month.

The pad is always gotta be a clean place in case they bust it.”

Pace Pizzalota , a genuine “coon-ass” from Plaquemine, Louisiana, with a little Italian in him, judging from the last name, chimed right in —“Yea, dude, you smoke that marijuana, and you think you hot no more!” “I know you Pizzalota! You were in the Nam,” I suddenly said, mellowed to a yellow high that only one stoned could appreciate. “You the horny jeep driver that picked me up when I first got to Nam.”

“Yea, that’s right, man!” He replied, staring deeply at me like seeing a ghost. “That’s me, Pace Pizzalota, the horniest man in all the Nam for a good ol’ ‘short-time.’ Since I got back from Nam I been trying to live right, but giving up them short-times have been a real torture. Living right sure is boring, and I sure miss them short-time girls.”

“Man, I done did it again.” Matthew Bergeron , the Livingston Parish dude, chided right in. He was feeling confused, but got a small rock out of his pocket and displayed it in his open palm before me. “You see this here rock, man? It’s got a story to tell. Most people take rocks for granted, but I sure don’t. Do you realize that we’re on a rock going around a ball of gas in the middle of nowhere? That is profound ‘fissaloppedy’ if you ask my opinion. Right, Pace?”

“Don’t embarrass us with that rock Pentecostal preacher crap, Matthew!” Pace yelled, and nervously looked at me. “You been making people look at us like we’re fools, besides that your philosophy professor is gonna flunk you for sure if you go mouthing off about rocks. People ain’t gonna tolerate that talk about rocks being part of everything. Your whole dumb head is full of rocks if you ask me. ‘Rock of Ages,’ ‘Rolling Stone,’ ‘Rock and Roll,’ and even kidney stones is all you talk about, and now you done gone and got us between a rock-and-a-hard-spot with the lieutenant here!”

“See Pace, you talking about rocks now.” Matthew smiled with two missing front teeth, probably from someone hitting him with a rock, I surmised . “Didn’t you tell me many a time that you liked getting your rocks off with gook gals?”

Mary Jane walked out of the bathroom about then with nothing more than a T-shirt on, and burst out laughing seeing me with the pistol pointed at the two scared, and utterly ridiculous vacuum cleaner salesman. She looked kind of stoned, I noticed.

“You see dudes,” she said, trying to look pissed, “I told you my old man is a bad-ass. That’s why I had you hide in the closet after telling you ten times to leave before he got back from the store. I can barely afford my smoke, much less a vacuum cleaner. Now scram! Don’t you listen to the radio? There’s a bad storm going to be coming this way . They predicting high winds and even hail stones.”

“Okay ! Okay!” Pizzalota said, looking at Bergeron clutching the rock in his hand, staring pensively at a rocking chair in a corner of Mary Janes pad, lost in deep philosophical thought. “Your old man is a Vietnam war buddy of mine believe it or not. That Vietnam was a rocky road, right lieutenant?”

“Right on, Pizzalota, right on,” I said, not knowing what to make of the whole crazy scene, but I was just adjusting back to the mainstream of the youth of my time. “The war is behind us now. Mary Jane and I got to relax a bit. Good luck on your vacuum cleaner sales career.”

Pizzalota and his Livingston Parish buddy, Matthew Bergeron, left quickly descending the wobbly wooden stairway . We heard a shrill shout of painful moaning. Poor Pace Pizzalota had tripped over a rock in Mary Jane’s catus rock garden at the foot of the stairs and twisted his ankle. The boy from Livingston Parish sure had him an interesting philosophy I was beginning to think, as Mary Jane and I stood on the upstairs porch watching . Mary Jane probably thought that the two men, one helping the limping one hop down the sidewalk of Chimes Street, were just a couple of wacko’s, but my mind flashed back to Petty in Nam on a recon patrol, only weeks ago, helping Helms back to safety, after a VC sniper had hit him with a round.

Mary Jane looked at me kind of strange like as we went back inside her pad, and she relighted the joint that was laying in her stainless steel rolling tray, taking a deep hit. Then, she sighed, looking at me with a blank, yet un-wanting stare of disgust in her blue eyes, and muttered something like a seance message under her breath that I couldn’t quiet understand. In a melancholy sort of resigned manner, she told me to relax and be cool, as she went over to an easel and started to paint with a passion. The brisk March wind was blowing through a half-raised window making the tie-dyed curtains flutter and flap aimlessly, as I watched her go about her artistic motions. I

didn't want to disturb her. She was not bad looking in my opinion judging by the curves in her slender body, as she dipped into the paint on her palette and swished and stroked at the canvas with a young girls passion, while happily humming a song written by Betty Martin and sung by Glen Campbell—"Gentle On My Mind." One thing I had learned in my young life, was that if a woman was going about her business, and singing or humming, she was happy about the current state of being, but if she was silent, then it was best not to disturb her, because nothing you could say or do would make the situation any better for the both of you. A good woman is like a flower in bloom, but when the flower is wilting, she's not alluring.

"The bloom is so short-lived," I thought, as I walked outside and stood on the wooden porch, and stared up at the stars and full moon seeing a glittering glimpse of Chua in the celestial heavens, who I had left behind in Vietnam. But that was my past, and my future was what my currently confused mind would now again have to believe in a Western world of values, if I was to be a success in society. Her face had been running through my mind like a fountain, and I knew the thought of her was only a lost, dream-like, memory, but I was lost in the memory of loving her. I looked down at Chimes Street, the crowd mulling and stirring with the hoi poli of all Western creatures, looking for the plastic action of the night life of America in the deep South, but much affected by the now epidemic cool action of the California hippie world. I watched as a group of guys and gals emerged with cherry-red cheeks and wild shouting mouths spurt from the Varsity Theater, after watching "Monty Phyton and the Rocky Horror Show" for the umpteenth time. It was a wild, nonsense type of crowd that attracted even the now-stirring wino's from the alleyways of Chimes Street, mustering up their nerve to ask for a hand-out for another bottle of cheap Ripple wine. Wino's didn't like pot smoke, but would smoke it, if they thought they could finagle a bottle of wine by doing so. I knew most of the young faces in the care-free crowd were about my age, but they seemed so much younger. Their chitter-chatter irritated me. "They shouldn't be acting so happy with me feeling so sad," I thought angrily to myself. I felt an uncontrolled pent-up anger as I shouted down from the porch—"Shut the heck up! Don't you know there's a war going on?"

"Up yours, jerk!" One long haired type with thick glasses yelled back at me. "You tripping on acid or just another one of them

screwed up Nam jerks?”

I fought hard at the sudden urge to go down the stairs and deck the SOB, as Mary Jane came out on the porch and pulled me back inside.

“Man, didn’t I just have to pick you out of all people?” She said disgusted, as we sat down on the floor. “You need some adjusting bad, man. Don’t be so uptight. The street people aren’t doing any harm. Relax, forget the Nam. Just forget it, man. Be happy you’re back in one piece, and not in a box like my brother was sent back in last year. You acting like an asshole isn’t going to make a wrong thing right. You dig, Wildman? Come on, have a little common sense. Look, you can crash here tonight. It’s cool. When I get off shift at the Pitt tomorrow afternoon, we’ll go down to the river. I want to get some driftwood. I got a friend that lives on the river. She’s a trip.”

We crashed. Then, early the next morning, I got up and walked to the Pitt Grill for breakfast. I told Mary Jane that I’d decided to walk around the LSU campus to visit my old stomping ground. From the Pitt on Highland Road, I walked in a drizzling rain through the gates at the north entrance to the campus, and then across the wide parade ground to the student union.

CHAPTER FOUR

Louisiana State University

The first thing that was apparent was the large number of blacks now attending LSU. Besides that, the dress of the students had radically changed with the times. The hippie life-style was in fashion, as bell-bottomed gents and mini-skirted lassies drifted past me, after I got a cup of coffee and eased down into a chair in the TV room to relax. It had been well over a year since I had watched television. This was a novel event for me as I tried to act normal, feeling paranoid that everyone was looking at me. The morning news came on announcing that the overthrow of Sihanouk in Cambodia by Lot Nol and Sisowath Sirik was eminent. Then the picture flashed to pictures of American troops boarding a jet in Vietnam withdrawing just as President Nixon had promised. There was no mention of the number of Americans or Vietnamese KIA or WIA. We had quit keeping body count score by now, I surmised, being that the war had taken a backseat on worldly events except for those guys still over there. A bored looking conservative engineering student got up and changed the channel to the “Dick Van Dyke Show” co-starring Mary Tyler Moore, and even the liberals gave him a cheer, as he pointed his slide-rule mockingly at them after fast drawing it from the carrying case on his hip. Surely the Vietnam war was just a remote cruel joke in their minds, but I saw it horribly real from the plastic chair, as an image of poor Howard Schpettez with his right arm and leg blown to a bloody pulp laying on the roadside, begging for a shot of morphine after an ambush just west of Cu Chi on QL-1. This was insanity, I reasoned, and an insult to a real patriot—no matter what the students thought.

I rose up and shouted—“You assholes, you don’t know what the war is about! You spoiled brats, what you studying for? To get a job? Yeah! That’s it, you idiots. Get a job. Yeah, go get a lousy job and see what you get. The political system is going to take half of your money before you even get up in the morning, and Vietnam style wars is what they are going to spend it on creating jobs for you ‘know it all’ deep thinking types. Jokers, now you gonna get the real thing, like it’s the fangs of a wicked snake, it’ll grab your rears with