

Prologue — The Threat, the Opportunity

"IF THE TWO OF THEM get married or I find the two of them together, I'll kill the both of them." It was the week before Thanksgiving, 1979, when a shaky-voiced Juanita called to pass along her father's plans for us. At least that is what she overheard him telling her brother.

"He's just saying that, right?"

"Maybe, but we need to take this seriously—he has a gun in a safe at home," she said, a tremble of fear in her voice.

"But he wouldn't really do that, would he?" *No way*, I thought.

"You don't know my father. He has a very angry nature. There are things he's done that...well, things I can't tell you about. But believe me, he is perfectly capable of it."

"So what are we going to do?" I asked, my disbelief finally fading.

"I don't know. I just want you to be careful. He might be following me."

"Well, maybe you shouldn't come here to my place for a while."

"We could still see each other at activities," she added, hopefully.

"Unless he followed you. What kind of car does he drive?"

"A '78 Caprice wagon. It's black."

"OK. Let's lay low for a few days, just to be safe. We need to think about this."

"We need to chant about it!"

"Uh, yeah, I guess so."

I had first met Juanita at a Buddhist meeting in the spring of 1977. Four years of college and three years of law school were soon ending. Now what would I do? Paralyzed by indecision about my future, I was still grasping at straws as graduation approached. If Buddhism would enable me to move, I would try it. What I wasn't interested in was getting intimately involved with someone right then. At age 30, I had already been twice married, with the second marriage well on its way to the same end as the first—a divorce. Marriage had been a refuge I sought, a safe harbor to which I could retreat, protection from whatever storms or stress might trouble my existence. In the end, my twice-mistaken monogamy brought me misery, not security.

So, instead of looking for lasting love, beginning the summer of 1977 I went looking for the social life I had never had. Over a 15-month span, I went out with more people than I had in the previous 15 years. I wasn't out for casual sex, just for social interaction. Juanita was not among those I went out with at first, but near the end of

that period, following a Halloween party in 1978, we began dating. She had the same powerful life force I found typical among women who practiced Buddhism. But she had something more as well. She shared my passions for science fiction, waterfalls in the woods and more. When we got serious a year later, I figured I had defeated my relationship demons. I no longer needed someone else to make me happy. Instead of an escape into dependence, marriage would be a place to share happiness from within. Despite my confidence in this new perspective on marriage, I knew I was risking being a three-time loser. George Harrison upped the risk to being a *dead* one.

It was my call to him, just two days before Juanita's report that prompted the threat. I hadn't spoken to her father since our only meeting in January, earlier that year. The conversation didn't go as I had hoped.

"Mr. Harrison, this is John Maberry."

"Who?" His deep voice boomed back.

"John Maberry. The one with the green telephone van." I instantly regretted my words.

"Oh yeah, I remember you! Why are you calling here? I got nothing to talk about with you." He spat out, sounding ready to hang up.

"Well, I know we met under awkward circumstances, but I want to put that behind us. I was calling to let you know that your daughter Juanita and I are planning to get married next year." The silence was deafening for a few moments, before the explosion came.

"Married? You say you gonna marry *my* daughter! Don't you think I got something to say about that?"

"Well...sure, that's why I was calling you. But she is 30 years old. I was calling as a courtesy, out of respect to you as her father."

"Respect! You don't respect me. You don't know nothing about respect!" He snorted.

"I'm sorry you feel that way." I stammered, unsure how to respond.

"You're sorry all right! You stay away from my daughter and don't you be calling back here again," he said, hanging up the phone. At the time, I was surprised by his anger but unconcerned. An unpleasant conversation to be sure, I thought, but of no lasting consequence. I was mistaken, of course. By the time he threatened to kill us, he had undoubtedly given this call much thought.

What could Juanita and I do? Should we just forget about our marriage plans, give

up our relationship and start over with somebody else? Maybe we could run away to a proverbial Timbuktu where her father couldn't find us. Could I get him before he got us? I had nothing against him, even if he did want to kill me. But if it were he or I to live or die, then I either would have to strike first or be prepared to fight back. Not a pleasant thought to contemplate. Or should we try to change his mind? A very difficult undertaking and potentially fatal if we failed to convince him.

Why was this happening to me? Of all the women in the world I could get involved with, why did I choose one whose father wanted to kill me? I had no strong feelings one way or the other toward George Harrison, having met him only once. Yet he felt strongly enough about me to contemplate my death. When Juanita and I got to the point of discussing marriage, I considered that George Harrison might not warmly welcome me into the family. Some opposition I could understand, but killing us both seemed a little excessive. I knew he had a couple reasons to be upset, the first of which was my skin color.

Her father didn't care much for white folks. He had endured plenty as a black man in a white world. Juanita told me of his military experience during WW II, in a segregated unit, and what happened after his discharge. He had fought in the South Pacific, becoming a platoon sergeant. Although they all fought as Americans on foreign soil, U.S. military policy prohibited black soldiers from fighting alongside the whites. As a returning Army sergeant, the local bus company was more than happy to offer him a driver's job sight unseen. Upon showing up in person however, they said he must have misunderstood. The only openings were for janitors. I couldn't blame him for how he felt about white people. Why should he view me as being any different from the rest?

My complexion wasn't the only problem. There was that unexpected encounter, our only face-to-face meeting, the previous winter. I had gone to pick her up for a party later that night. We were having a little pre-party party at her place beforehand. Juanita lived in a house only a few blocks from her father in northeast Washington, DC. He had encouraged her to buy it, cosigning the mortgage and putting his name on the deed as a co-owner. Driving by her house that night, he was suspicious of the old telephone van with Virginia tags parked along the curb. After a knock on the door failed to produce an immediate response, he let himself in. The sweet smell of marijuana hung heavy in the air as he ascended the stairs to her bedroom, yelling, "Juanita, what the hell's going on here? Who you got in there?"

"Nobody, Daddy," she lied, as I ducked into the closet—where I was quickly

discovered.

“Get your clothes on and get the hell outta here,” he said to me. I scrambled into my clothes and quickly departed.

So I was white *and* I smoked dope. Although reason enough for some people to kill, there was more to his threat than that. The fundamental reason for Mr. Harrison’s threat wouldn’t become clear for more than 20 years. I had asked for this to happen, although I could have no conscious memory of that. I needed this threat to happen, in order to transform my life. It’s really all in how you view things. It’s a choice of waiting for Westmoreland or going ahead without him. It’s a choice of viewing negative karma as an opportunity or as an ugly destiny. The long chain of cause and effect I had created to reach this point wound far back in time from my experiences with George Harrison, through Vietnam and all the way back to my childhood dream of being a writer. So I better start where the dream began, in Minneapolis.

[First couple of pages of Chapter 1 follow]

Chapter 1 — Lessons Learned Early

I SPENT MY FIRST 11 years living in a small stucco house in Minneapolis, the second one in from Humboldt Avenue, where the first block of Victory Memorial Drive began. The mile-long boulevard commemorated America’s successful end to the First World War. How odd it seems to me now, growing up on a street by that name. My war, Vietnam, had a somewhat different conclusion. It would leave me not a sense of victory but one of loss, both for my country and for myself. My parents bought the house new, in 1929, 18 years before I was born.

No longer new by my time, the blackened walls of the former coal bin were now just a reminder of an old furnace that once warmed the dwelling. The detached garage at the end of our small back yard had a current-leaking rotary light switch that would give a mild shock on rainy days. A dirt alley next to the garage separated us from an out lot next to the Soo Line tracks. Further back was a switchyard, with engines shuttling boxcars back and forth most days of the week. Through trains rumbled by during the night, with steel wheels clicking and clacking on the rails and whistles sounding in advance of the grade crossing at Humboldt Avenue. I slept through the

sound, growing accustomed to it much as I later would the sounds of distant artillery and helicopter gunship fire during Vietnam nights, waking only when the battle grew too near.

Except for the trains, it was a quiet enough neighborhood. At least I thought so. I was eight or nine years old when my mother read me a newspaper report about a gruesome murder. The killers had dragged the cook out of the Bandbox, a burger joint in Camden, a tiny business district in north Minneapolis about a mile from our house.

“They banged his head on the curb until he was dead—because he was Chinese,” she cried, tears welling up in her eyes. “It’s just like the Ku Klux Klan, dragging black people from their homes—whipping, beating or killing them because of their skin color.”

I said nothing, unsure how to reply either to her sorrow or to her disgust, but the image of people being dragged out and beaten remained seared in my mind. Her reading was an instructional moment about racism to which she returned on other occasions. I never thought to ask her why or how she came to hold so strongly these views opposing racism. Perhaps her own Norwegian parents, both immigrants to America in their youth, had instilled this virtue. It was enough for me to know that her kind heart’s embrace extended beyond the walls of the home.

Minnesota didn’t have then, and still doesn’t have, a large African-American population. Most of this minority population is concentrated within the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Although not quite next-door, there were minority households not far from my own, literally on the other side of the tracks just a few blocks away. My class of 25 students at nearby Hamilton Elementary School, where I attended kindergarten through the first half of sixth grade, had a couple of Asians and two or three African-Americans. I don’t recall the teachers or my fellow students treating them any differently than the white majority, but perhaps my mother’s viewpoint clouds my memory.

Chapter 5 — Arrival in-Country; Hello Dali

ON THE GROUND AT LAST, after the long flight from Guam, the plane taxied past sandbag-clad heavy steel revetments surrounding bombers and fighters on three sides. As we rolled to a stop, the flight attendant popped the door, allowing the cool cabin air to escape. Tropical heat—asphalt-softening, frying eggs on a sidewalk heat—washed in like a sunny surf, carrying unfamiliar smells. It was Saigon in late September 1967. A

throng of cheering khaki-clad soldiers in loose formation waved and beckoned to us from the tarmac at Tan Son Nhut. They laughed and shouted as kids on a playground, all the while looking about as secret service agents do during a presidential walk on a crowded street. A year later, I would better understand their uneasy excitement. Barring a last-minute attack, they had survived their year in Vietnam. They would fly back to “the world” in the plane we exited.

Wasting no time assembling here, we went straight from the ramp onto a prison bus. At least it looked like one. The kind of bus that hauls convict work gangs around some places in America, guarded by shotgun-shouldered Bubbas in Smokey hats. Only we weren’t the criminals. The bars and mesh covering the windows were there to protect us. *How odd*, I thought, *we were here to protect the Vietnamese but we must be protected from them*. Yet, on the busy streets we traveled, other military personnel walked freely about or rode in jeeps while Vietnamese civilians sped about on mopeds and bicycles. Other locals fearlessly shopped at the colorful stalls crowding sidewalks along the narrow streets. It was the first of many incongruities, in a year filled with them.

Wealth and poverty, filth and beauty fought for my attention along the 16-mile route to Long Binh for in-country processing. Shacks of wooden ammo crates topped by rusty tin roofs stood next to trash-strewn alleys plied by scavenging birds and occasional cats. Nearby, women emerged from stone buildings of faded grandeur, wearing brightly hued pastel ao dais, snug from neck to waist but billowing in the breeze over their black silk pants. People of all ages carried huge loads on bent backs—bags from the market, bundles of straw or wood. Nearing a river away from the city, workers with conical straw hats strapped under their chins and pants rolled to their knees waded in muddy rice paddies. Further on, we passed the lush green of a rubber plantation, its opulent mansion only slightly tarnished by this or previous wars.

I don’t remember at all, the afternoon arrival at Long Binh. So much of military existence is filled with an unremitting and unremarkable sameness. Hurry up and wait. “Assemble in a column of twos. Close it up ‘til your buddy smiles!” I do remember that first night in-country bunked under the cover of a circus-sized tent. Intermittently throughout the night, bright flares fell from the sky on parachutes, illuminating the nearby countryside as they swung to and fro. Muffled sounds of rifle fire, far away artillery and other ordnance unfamiliar to my ears rumbled through my head. Adrenaline-fueled wariness overcame weariness, shorting my sleep. Later, I would learn

there was no fighting nearby and the flares were just routine. On the first night, however, fear filled me with dread.

It could have been worse, I suppose. I was not among those selected for KP, awakened at 4 a.m. to set up the trays, utensils, garbage cans and washing barrels. Nor was I among the still more unlucky ones selected for shit-burning detail. For toilet facilities in non-permanent bases like these, three or four-seater wooden outhouses were built. Under the holes were the bottom third of 55-gallon drums, cut off and half-filled with diesel fuel. When 2/3 full, the drums were removed through a door at the back of the outhouse and the material burned. It is hard to say which smelled worse—the unburned fecal-fuel blend or the thick black smoke of the burning mix.

Fortunately, for all us new arrivals, the mess hall was upwind from the stench. I had a couple hours' wait after an unappetizing breakfast, before getting a ride to my unit, the 7th Battalion, 9th Artillery, 54th Artillery Group. The E-5 sergeant in charge of the radio repair shack met me in Long Binh. From there, another private, like me, drove us to Bearcat, a base camp our battalion shared with the much larger 9th Infantry Division. Upon our arrival, much to my surprise, I immediately spotted Sam Jackson, my former radio school classmate and fellow Ft. Meade parade participant. I knew that he too was heading to Vietnam when he left Ft. Meade, but I hadn't expected to see him again here. Jackson's orders had come two days before mine and he had arrived in the unit two days ahead of me. He knew I was coming from his first day there. From that knowledge, despite the friendship I thought we had, my problems in Vietnam began. The E-5 introduced me to Master Sergeant Seagram, Chief of the Communication Section. Seagram greeted me with what I would soon recognize as his trademark, bushy-mustachioed grin.

"Jackson here says you were one of the best students in radio mechanic school."

"Well, I did OK," I said, unprepared to provide a more sensible answer. As it turned out, no answer would likely have sufficed to avoid the fallout from this.

"No Sarge, he was really tops," Jackson helpfully added, in a respectful tone very different from the one I was accustomed to hearing from him when addressing white NCOs. Whether sincere or calculated as a setup, I soon learned it would be difficult to live up to Jackson's buildup.

Since we had no radios to work on at Ft. Meade, I hadn't seen the inside of one in six months. Not only that, but the radios here were newer models on which we had received very little repair training. Seagram had a good laugh at my expense, asking me

to look over one of the radios before letting me out of his sight. I didn't have a clue about the radio. I doubt that Jackson did either, but he had one big advantage over me, he had arrived two days before I did. As I learned more than ten years later from my study of Buddhism, there is no such thing as chance or coincidence when it comes to the timing of human events. When I arrived in Bearcat, I knew none of this. I had no clear idea then what the significance was of the sequence of events or my first exchange with Sgt. Seagram, but I had a bad feeling about it nonetheless. I didn't have time for idle speculation then, so I pushed the feeling out of my mind. I needed to find my bunk and unpack my stuff. I needed to find out about Bearcat, the place I would be spending the next year of life.

Someone told me that Bearcat was about 22 miles due east of Saigon, five miles from the village of Long Thanh. Over the course of the year, the assurance that this was a relatively safe location to be in Vietnam, turned out to be true. Because of its location on the eastern side of the country, north of the Mekong Delta, Bearcat was free from heavy Viet Cong activity, supply or transportation routes. Still, no place in a country at war could be completely safe. That is why a few feet out from the walls of our hooches lay a stack of sandbags, offering some protection from mortar or rocket attacks and a convenient place for hiding a dope stash, I would later learn.

Having been in the army for a year already, I was used to sleeping in barracks. In lieu of barracks, troops at Bearcat (and at similar base camps) slept in "hooches." They were wood frame buildings walled by screens. They were a step up from the large tents some units had and definitely better than a foxhole in the field. For the first four feet up from the ground, wooden slats sloped down at a 45-degree angle, covering the screen much like permanently open jalousie windows. More secure bunkers were available should we ever be under serious attack. My bed for most of the next 12 months would be an olive-drab canvas-covered cot, topped by an air mattress. Like a mini four-poster bed in jungle chic, a framework of dowels held up mosquito netting surrounding the cot. Soon after arriving, I sent Gloria a letter, covering only the bare details of my Bearcat existence, that I slept indoors and wasn't out in combat.

When I arrived, the hooches were still relatively new. Without electricity, flashlights provided the only light at night. A couple weeks later, our platoon sergeant led a "midnight requisition" on a supply depot a couple miles away. We liberated enough solid core copper wire to brighten our nights. We powered up the hooches per the staff sergeant's directions by running the wire between simple porcelain sockets nailed to the

trusses under the tin roofs, and on out to a utility pole connected to a nearby generator.

Once the lights were available, evenings became a strange odyssey. For some it was rereading letters from their wife, girl friend or mother back home and then crafting a message to send back—thanking them for “CARE packages” of cookies or other edibles and asking for more. For others, it was listening to tapes from home and recording their own to send back. Playing cards, usually Hearts or Spades, sometimes Gin, but rarely Poker, took care of most evenings for myself and three or four other guys.

We had a regular mess hall, constructed of the same wood frame and screen material. There was no plumbing however. The mess hall relied on the 400-gallon potable water trailers that could be towed behind trucks or brought in by chopper. Dishwashing was field style, using galvanized steel garbage cans filled with water heated by immersion heaters. They were dangerous devices, tricky to light and adjust, with burning gasoline dripping down a stovepipe into a larger base submerged in the water. The very hot exhaust stack may have been marginally cooler than an idling automobile’s tailpipe but it certainly was able to char skin. With an actual mess hall, we had some of the regular army fare we were accustomed to, including creamed chipped beef on biscuits (AKA “shit-on-a-shingle”) for breakfast. But we still had to put up with powdered eggs and reconstituted milk. The latter was drinkable only if it was chocolate flavored.

Like the Replacement Battalion processing center in Long Binh, we had a diesel-fuel drum outhouse (a three-seater). We didn’t have to burn the stuff here, though; they paid Vietnamese civilians to do that. Nearby was a single stall shower with an overhead tank of unheated water. Given the tropical heat, this wasn’t usually a problem. It was sometimes better just soaping up outside during an afternoon thunderstorm, although a premature end to the rain left me soapy on a couple occasions, requiring a dash to the shower stall. Although it was nearing the end of the summer rainy season, it was still hot—so hot that shortly after sunup sweat would soak through my light jungle fatigues while sitting perfectly still in the shade. The least exertion resulted in a salt-water drizzle from my wide-open pores. Soon enough, I would become intimately familiar with the jungle GI’s constant companion, crotch-rot.

Like most military posts, we also had a laundry/tailor. Military units must always have someone available to sew on nametags, unit insignia and the lasting mementos of service, such as the silky jackets with messages embroidered on the back. Messages

like, "Yea though I walk through the Valley of Death I shall fear no evil, for I am the vilest son of a bitch in the valley!" or "When I die I know I'm going to heaven cause I spent my year in Hell (Bearcat, Vietnam--or fill in the blank of the applicable base camp or village).

A Vietnamese civilian took our dusty/sweaty fatigues off-site somewhere for washing. His English was good, better actually than some of the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) interpreters. He seemed too smart to be simply running a laundry. He always would ask about and discuss troop operations.

"You going out in field, soldier?"

"Where you go?"

"When you come back?"

The questions seemed somewhat logical, coming from someone responsible for getting your clothes back to you, but I wondered why none of the officers or NCOs ever cautioned anybody about providing too much information to the guy. He asked for more details than I thought necessary. Perhaps he was a plant for the VC to get information on troop movements. In ironic contrast were the precautions Sergeant Seagram took concerning me. On the single occasion I went into the commo trailer to repair the long-range transmitter, he took care to drape a cover over the crypto equipment attached to the radio and specifically cautioned me against raising the cover. I didn't have the requisite security clearance allowing me even to see the gear. Typical of my military experience, Seagram exalted form (security clearance regulations) over substance (apparent risk).

More sensibly, officers cautioned us about the barbers. It was suggested that we not go along with the neck-pops they offered (twisting the head rapidly to either side to pop the cervical vertebrae) because the result could be hazardous to one's spinal health. We were also cautioned about the nose-hair trimming, given the barbers' tool sanitizing practices (or lack thereof).

Only a Salvador Dali painting could do justice to life at Bearcat. It was that surreal. Eating, sleeping, showering were all so different even from the austerities of military bases in America. Jungle foliage surrounded the hard-packed mud/dirt of the base camp, kept at bay only by tractor blades and defoliant. Much more peculiar was the human environment. These were people whose language and culture I did not understand—not the Vietnamese as much as my fellow soldiers. We were in a hostile, very foreign place, most of us for the first time in our young lives. Partially freed from

the constraints of military discipline applicable on American soil and with drugs and alcohol readily available to assist, suppressed quirks and previously hidden subcultures came out in the open. Vietnam was a crucible, heating and compressing psyches. Necks got redder. Drawls got longer/slower. Moonshine making/drinking possum hunter/eaters were a puzzle to Down East lobstermen or Windy City slickers, and vice versa. Open discussions were mumbled in my midst about Toms, Jemimas and Oreos. My friend Jackson's name never came up among the accused, despite his transformation.

Since I had seen him at Ft. Meade, barely a month before, Jackson had shed the guise of Huey Newton. Now he played the role of Rochester, Jack Benny's man. Instead of the "Yass, boss," that Rochester always said to Benny, it was "Yass, sergeant" from Jackson. It was accompanied with a happy hop-to-it attitude, instead of the sneer common to earlier times. *What the hell had happened to Jackson?* Later on, I would see the wisdom of his change in behavior. This was a cloak of compliance, shielding him from harm in a place where opportunities abounded to deal with "uppity niggers." Clearly, some other brothers had quickly clued him in. Why risk a "friendly fire" accident for the sake of ego or pride while here in Nam? The score against whitey could always be settled later on "back in the world."

In retrospect, I am sure Jackson's change in attitude played a part in who continued to work on radios and who wound up doing detail work for 11 months. *Why had the Army sent me to this battalion, which already had an E-5 and Jackson to repair radios? More of the typical mismanagement of resources or carelessness,* I supposed. The unit didn't need two radio mechanics plus the E-5 working on radios. When the E-5 who ran the radio repair shack mistakenly sent a radio to C Battery that actually belonged to A Battery, he blamed the error on me. Before the end of my first month in Vietnam, Sergeant Seagram used this as an excuse to remove me from repair duties. I was neither as sensibly adaptable nor as disposed to yield to authority as was Jackson. Serene in the knowledge that I had been able to go AWOL to get married and to resist buying a U.S. Savings Bond while at Ft. Benning, I felt confident my rights would be vindicated when I spoke up. Well no, it didn't quite work out that way. When I protested to the company commander, he backed up the NCOs. This initial challenge and loss was only the opening round. Seagram would turn out to be the bane of my Vietnam existence. I said nothing about it in my next letter to Gloria. She wouldn't understand anyway. Of course, I didn't understand either, not then at least. I had been cheated out of the job the Army trained me to do. I had taken an extra year to get that

training. I had been the top student in my class. Now Jackson had that comfortable job to himself and a red-necked asshole lifer named Seagram was going to make my life miserable. *How could this happen to me? Why was it happening to me?* Many years would elapse before Buddhism supplied an answer to the questions running through my mind.