

# The Right Thing

*by* Robert Boswell

His feet are the size of thumbs, the segments of his toes no larger than grains of rice. I slap him on the bottom the way I've heard to do. He squeaks and sucks in air, then begins to cry. His fingers bend, grasp for something. I put my little finger in his hand. He clings to it. It's enough for now. He cries for milk. But his mother's breasts are blue, streaked with grease, splattered with blood.

When I lift my hand, I'm not there at all. There's no baby but a woman, a girl, seventeen. Her nipples, no larger than dimes, point to her chin. She licks her lips in her sleep. Blue veins divide the underside of her tongue. Her hair is cross-parted by sleep, blonde as matchwood. The sparse light hair on her upper lip is damp from her tongue. I wrap my hand around her thin wrist, run my index finger over the thick vein at the base of her palm, feel the simple rhythm of blood. I cling to her slender wrist.

I close my eyes and I'm in a village without a name outside of Huan Fo. I open my eyes. The girl is there. When I lift the curtain it's morning in Illinois. Her brother is in the yard with his back to the window, a can of gasoline in his hand. I close my eyes. In the village, the rhythm of strafing fades, falters, continues to fade. The knife that could cut hair off an arm without bending the follicles slits her abdomen into perfect halves. Out of her dead body, a child the color of sky. The petroleum smell of napalm coughs into the child's lungs, and the tiny body reddens against the wind of his own breath. The sound of strafing begins to increase in volume. The child is drenched in his mother's blood. His tiny hand closes around my finger. "Hagget." The voice should be Olson's, but it's not. "Hagget." I look at the child. "Hagget."

The girl is over me, eyes green as black market jade. The tiny space between her front teeth glistens with a bubble of saliva. She licks her lips. "Hagget." I nod. I hear the lawn mower out the window, coming nearer, loud and rhythmic, then the sound recedes.

The odor of gasoline trails the sound. "Hagget, you're about to break my arm." I look down at my hand around her wrist. I let go.

She kisses the base of my neck and an involuntary groan escapes my throat. Her body snakes around mine. The twist from ribs to hips exaggerates the curves, heightens the angles, giving her the illusion of womanliness while she still has the soft, taut skin that is peculiarly a girl's. She moves her knee between my legs, slowly raises it to nudge my penis. I kiss her, her tongue exploding into my mouth, and wait for the sensation of desire to crowd out drowsiness. I believe, but I know it's my imagination, that my tongue can detect the blue vein in her tongue, trace the raised canal, detect the difference in temperature of the deoxygenated blood within the vein. I picture it as a cold string running directly to her heart, and suddenly the weight settles in my cock, and in my testicles hundred-watt bulbs are switched on.

"I love you, Hagget," she says. "I love you, Hagget." We come together comfortably, effortlessly. "I love you, Hagget. I love you." We come together at the perfect pitch and sex becomes its own animal, encompassing both of us, startling us again with the same surprise. "I love you, Hagget." Even the lawn mower's hum, rising as it nears the window again, the spit of the motor, becomes part of our sex, vibrating through us. I picture the whip of the blade. "I love you, Hagget," she says.

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The lawn is mowed. The sound of the shower is the same sound as Spam frying in a skillet. During the summer months, the girl sometimes showers three or four times a day. She takes long showers. I can taste burnt Spam, the charred taste finding the corners of my mouth, the static crunch of blackened meat. Are there gnats in this room? There are no gnats in this room. The first time Olson found a leech on his leg, he threw up. They leave scars, some of them. In a pinch you can eat them. That's what they told us. You can eat leeches: boiled, fried maybe. "Broasted," Olson had said. "I

only eat leeches broasted." And human flesh, when it burns, smells familiar. It's just like something I've smelled before, but I could never quite put my finger on it.

The radio is on the fritz. I hear Olson pound it with his fist. I think I see sparks, but I'm not sure. My eyes could just be making colors in the dark. The rain has stopped, but the darkness is absolute. I hear Olson hit the radio again, smell burning rubber, then a smell like a car overheating, no—like hair burning. "I can't see a thing," I say. "Jesus Christ, I can't see my hands. I can't see my fucking hands."

"Shut up," Olson says, and I hear the radio splash into the shallow water of the rice paddy. Water rises and falls against my legs, once, twice, ruffles against me, then is still.

"How far away are you?" I ask.

"I don't know," Olson says. "How far away are you?"

"I don't know," I say. "You sound like you're near."

"How loud are you talking? Are you talking loud?"

"I don't know. I don't think I'm talking loud. Are you talking loud?"

"Does this sound like a whisper?" he asks. "I think I'm whispering."

"I'm going to move my hands around," I say. "I'm going to see if you're real near. You might be near." I'm on my back, M-16 in my left hand, butt end in the water. My right hand is against my chest. I push against my ribs, move down my side to the water. My fingers reach the bottom, press against the cool mud. Water runs up my sleeve. I move my hand away from my body, patting the ground, which slopes upward to the grassy ridge of the paddy. Out of the water, blades of grass, pebbles, a rock, no, a limb, no—

"My boot," Olson says. "Is that your hand on my boot?"

"I don't know. It could be a boot. I'm going to move it, all right?"

"All right."

I shake it and it rolls into the water. *My* fingers jump back and grope my face. The M-16 falls against my knee and splashes into the water. "Was that your boot? Was that your boot?"

"I don't know," he says. "I can't feel anything."

"Find your feet," I say. "Hurry, find your feet."

"All right. Wait. Got them."

"You got them? Both of them?"

"I got them both."

"Good," I say. "That's good."

"Where do you think we are?" he asks.

I fish my rifle out of the water. "I think we're close to each other,"

I say.

"Hagget. I love you, Hagget."

I open my eyes and the girl is standing over me, blue towel around her. Drops of water cling to her neck and shoulders, the declivities of her collarbones. She kisses my forehead.

"You take long showers," I say.

"Is your friend coming today?" she asks. "Is he finally going to make it?" She's smiling. Wet, her hair is darker and parts in the middle.

"You're very pretty," I say, looking at the indentions of her dimpled cheeks. She is pretty, very cute, very pretty.

"Breakfast is ready." She runs a thumb over my chin, down my neck to my sternum. She giggles. "Mama bought a ham. You love ham."

"I love ham," I say.

"I love *you*," she says.

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Olson was supposed to go to Mexico with me. I couldn't stay in Illinois at first. The people's faces seemed elongated, like game show contestants on a bad television. I needed a trip. I called Olson in Nebraska and he said, "Sure, sure, Mexico. I'll go." But I went alone, reassured in the north by the desert, the barrenness interrupted by the stolid saguaro, the gnarled creosote. The desert seemed complacent. Then in Mexico City, the ride to the pyramids on the broken-down bus, jarring my teeth like a rifle, and everywhere the

smell of exhaust, Mexican children selling trinkets—ceramic flutes, obsidian, bananas, mangoes, oranges.

Oranges and bananas are okay, a middle-aged woman from Wyoming tells me. “The book says they're okay. Anything with a peel.” I stuff a short green banana in my khaki pocket, throw the boy a coin. He grins. Too much money. I walk quickly to lose the Wyoming woman. The stairs up the Pyramid of the Sun are steep. Halfway up I see a woman, flushed in the face, slumped on the stones, sucking air in like a shock. Beside her, her husband pats her back, adjusts the lens on his Minolta.

At the top are mostly kids, one pair of lovers nuzzling. I try picture the sacrifice. Giving over to the sun. A woman, I think, a girl, perhaps a virgin, a child, a young man. Overhead, a 747 drones, Trans World Airlines. Below, the sharp-cut stones, steep stairs, people in clusters. I pull out the banana and peel it, staring at the next pyramid, the Pyramid of the Moon, and the aisle below, the Avenue of the Dead. I try to picture men selling dogs, pottery, but instead I'm in a village without a name, a thick-bladed knife, sharp enough to cut hair off an arm without bending the follicles, in my hand. I drop the banana and run down the stairs, always down the stairs, to the Avenue of the Dead, where hundreds of years before people gave up their lives willingly for sunlight.

The game of the week is on, Boston and the Yankees. Yaz hits one off the wall but Pinella holds him to a single. The Green Monster, Fenway Park, no score in the eighth. Where's Olson? A short drive, he said, be there by noon. My watch says 1:21. Every time we talk it's the same. He's just lost his job, but he's got prospects. We only talk on the phone. I've never seen him in this country. When I tell him Linda is seventeen, he says he wants to meet her, but his voice is unconvincing. Over the telephone, his voice sounds nasal, forced.

“This Linda have a sister?”

“No sisters,” I tell him. “We could fish. The fishing's good here.”

“I just love fishing,” he says, but without seeing his face I can't tell whether he's serious or sarcastic. That's the trouble with phones, like talking in the dark. “How's your job?” he asks.

“Steady. There's plenty of work. I could get you on.”

“I don't know construction.”

“It's landscape. I do landscape.”

“I don't know landscape.”

“You coming this time?”

“Sure, sure. I'll be there. It's not that far. Noon at the latest.” My watch says 1:24. Yaz is caught trying to score from first on a single. He arrived before the ball, but the plate was blocked. He couldn't find home. “What the hell are they doing?” Olson wants to know.

The blades of the helicopter whip the air insistently, with purpose, landing direct blows on the membranes of my ears. The first flares lead us out of the paddies, then the strafing begins. The gunners become mechanical, no longer real people; their helmets vibrate all the thoughts out of their heads. Then again the one chopper. The fire in the village is from the supply truck our squad abandoned. When was that? Three hours ago? Five hours ago? I look at my watch. It says 1:32. I can't keep track of time in the dark.

“What the hell are they doing?” Olson asks again. The sound of the strafing answers and beneath it the sound of dying: short shrieks, mechanical barks. The plane with the gunners circles again, strafing the trees, the paddies. We duck, flatten against the ground. One chopper, a solid beam of light supports it. Another pass, the strafing falters, then begins to fade. The beam of light evaporates and the chopper becomes just a noise, wet sheets fluttering in a stiff wind. We walk cautiously toward the burning supply truck. “The fucks,” Olson says. “The dumb fucks.”

I hear the doorbell and rise. Linda and her mother are shopping. Her brother is in the backyard, pruning the trees. The shears open with a sigh, close with a bark. I look at the television as I stand. The ballgame is over. I don't know who won. Someone is fishing on television. The doorbell again and at the door, Olson.

“I had a flat,” he says. His hair is laced with gray, jeans and shirt blue, hands moving at his hips, all his weight on one leg.

“You got gray,” I say. We shake hands. “Want a beer?” I bring the beers to the living room, where two men now fish on television. They

have long poles and seem to be enjoying themselves. When they talk to one another, they whisper. We watch them and drink. Olson looks at me and I nod, but his head turns too quickly. The men fishing are up to their hips in water. The current is swift and one pulls the other through. Olson's looking at me, turns away, turns back, drinks his beer. On television a man is shaving and Olson says, "What the fuck am I doing here?"

I shake my head. "I wanted to see you."

"Why? For Christsakes, why?"

"I got no idea."

"The war?" he asks. "You want to talk war? I don't want to talk war. Fuck the war."

"I don't want to talk war either," I say.

"What else we got to talk about?" he asks.

I shake my head again. "Nothing. We got nothing but the war."

We stare at each other a while, then watch the two men fish. They catch a river bass, big as two hands. They slap one another on the back. "I get letters," Olson says. "From some of the guys."

I nod. "Anyone doing all right?"

He shrugs. "I got a picture from Truman. You remember Truman? Took a picture of all of us, most of us, one afternoon."

"Huan Fo," I say. Outside the bar, we stand with arms around each other. Olson's hands playing with his belt, his weight on one leg. He makes faces at the camera.

"I look like a fucking grinning hyena." Olson spits out a laugh.

I can hardly stand and have to lean on Olson while Truman fiddles with the lens. Sunlight shines directly on my face and neck. Water fills the ruts in the roads, the declivities in the plankboard steps. Truman has one boot in a murky puddle.

"He send you one?"

I look at Olson. The grin is gone, long gone. "Long time ago. Don't know what I did with it."

"I hated Huan Fo. More than anyplace."

"The village," I say.

"Huh?"

"The village without a name just outside of Huan Fo."

"The fucks," Olson says. "The dumb fucks."

The burning supply truck is the only light. The flames shoot high and near them the yellow light is constant. At our feet, the ground is shadow and light, shadow and light. Across her body, shadow and light. "She the one this afternoon? At the truck?" I ask.

"She's the one," Olson says.

I bend over her. She's naked, pregnant, charred face, grease smeared across her breasts, blood splattered from her shoulders to her belly. "Her clothes burn off?"

"I don't know," Olson says.

I touch her inflated belly. "Oh, Jesus," I say. "Oh, Jesus."

"What?" he asks. "What is it?"

"I can feel it kick. The baby. I can feel it kick."

"Hagget." It should be Olson's voice. "Hagget." It is his voice. I look at him but there's no knife. He doesn't have the knife. "Hagget, you want another beer?"

He's calling from the refrigerator. I look hard at him. "A beer," I say.

He pauses, pulls two beers from the refrigerator.

"The right thing," I say. "We did the right thing."

He walks over to me, shoves the beer next to my face. I take it, open it, drink a long swallow. Olson sits again, says nothing. Outside, Linda's brother starts the chainsaw to finish pruning the trees. My hands are covered with blood, but the baby sucks in air like a shock and cries. Next to the burning truck, an old woman and two small boys huddle together. The boys cry in long, forced breaths. The woman holds her head in her hands. She lifts her head, extends her arms in our direction. "The baby," Olson says. "She wants the baby." I cup the baby in my palms, hold him away from my body, and we move toward the woman slowly. She takes him. I run backward to Olson, the rifle over my shoulder thuds against the back of my thigh. As I stop, the sound of strafing surfaces, becomes louder. The two boys begin running immediately. Olson and I begin to run. The woman doesn't run.



"Run," I yell at her.

"Run," Olson yells.

She doesn't run. I point my rifle at her. I shoot the ground around her feet. She doesn't run. The strafing comes nearer, gunners swinging back and forth, everything goes, everything goes. "Run, goddamn it." She won't run.

"Hagget."

I look at Olson, the beer still in his hand.

"Who is that with the chainsaw?"

"Linda's brother," I tell him.

"Tell him to turn it the fuck off, will you?"

I nod, but before I can stand the chainsaw stops. Silence descends, hovers, whips back any attempt at conversation. We sleep next to each other on the edge of a paddy. Olson starts to cry and that starts me crying. We hold each other. The night is absolute, but the smell of the burning truck seeps through the darkness. Our crying stops and fatigue settles in its place. Something is added to the smell of the burning truck, a familiar smell, one I can't quite put my finger on. I begin crying again.

I hear the front door open and close. Linda enters the room, carrying a bag of groceries. She walks immediately to my chair and places a hand on my cheek. She looks at Olson. "You must be Hagget's friend. I'm Linda."

They shake hands.

"You're as pretty as Hagget told me." Olson smiles.

I run my hand from her ankle to her thigh. She's wearing running shorts and a blue T-shirt.

"Are you going to stay for supper?" she asks.

He smiles but shakes his head.

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I go to bed early, try to read a play. Linda is in the shower again. When the darkness lifts, Olson fries Spam in a skillet he carries in

his pack. Spam smells nothing like human flesh. It hardly smells like meat at all. He wipes the blade of the thick knife carefully with the tail of his shirt, but he cuts the shirt nonetheless. He slices the Spam into two equal pieces. I spear it with the blade of my pocketknife and eat around the edges. He puts another slice on the skillet to cook. "How much longer you think it'll last?" Olson asks me.

"How much longer will what last?"

"The war. What else?"

I shake my head. "I don't know." I try to picture the war over. "I can't picture it ever ending."

"Can't go on forever," he says.

"It can't?"

"I don't think so," he says.

"I don't know."

"I don't either."

The sizzling suddenly stops and I'm in a room in Illinois. Linda opens the bedroom door. She's wrapped in a yellow towel, which she lets fall as she closes the door and crawls into bed. "I like your friend, Hagget."

"He liked you," I say.

She smiles, rests her head on my chest. Water beads on my chest from her hair. I run my hand over her moist back. "He didn't stay very long," she says.

I nod, but her head on my chest faces the wall, she can't see me nodding. She lifts her head and looks me in the face, drops of water trailing down her forehead. "He didn't stay long."

I nod again.

"I love you, Hagget." She kisses my chin, lips, cheek. I kiss her. The doorbell rings, then three quick thuds on the door. I look at the digital clock on the nightstand. 10:36. "I'll get it," I say, nodding again. "I'll get the door."

I'm naked, partially erect. I lift a terry cloth robe from the heap of clothes on the closet floor. The doorbell sounds again.

"Hurry, before it wakes Mother."

I look at her as I pull the robe around me. She's smiling, pointing at my penis. The doorbell sounds again, more thuds. I walk quickly down the hall. "Who's there?" I call from the living room.

"Hagget?"

"Olson? Is that you, Olson?"

"Hagget?" Three more thuds on the door. "Hagget?"

I open the door. Olson reaches for my arm immediately. "How's my Hagget?" He squeezes my arm, smiles. In his right hand he holds a paper sack.

"I thought you went home," I say.

He stares at my bare feet, then the robe, finally my eyes.

"Domesticated, Hagget. She buy this for you?" Olson grips the robe, then releases it. He giggles and pulls a pistol out of the paper sack. He lets the sack fall and puts his fingers to his lips. "Shh." He uses the pistol to part the robe, which falls open, and pokes the barrel in my navel. "You got to keep this for me." He punctuates with a prod into my belly.

I look down at the pistol. "What happened?"

He flutters his fingers in front of his face. "Shh." He starts to giggle and the pistol brushes against my cock. "I'm a little drunk tonight, Hagget." He pokes the barrel hard into my belly, then turns it flat. I cup my hand over his. He pulls away and I'm pressing the gun against my belly.

"You shoot somebody, Olson?"

"Oh, Hagget. Goddamn you, Hagget." He's almost whispering. "Goddamn you." He grabs my testicles. "Got any balls left, Hagget?"

I push his shoulder. He falls back but doesn't let go. He straightens himself, grips harder, and rolls his fingers. "You got any balls at all?"

I stick the barrel of the pistol in his ear.

He laughs out loud, then covers his mouth with both hands. "Shh," he says. "I did the right thing." He gives another half laugh, turns, walks toward the street.

"Olson."

He keeps walking.

“Olson.”

He turns and faces me. “Keep it for me. Keep it all for me.” He backs onto the asphalt, pivots, and trots to his car.

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In the bedroom, I wrap the pistol in the robe and stuff it under my T-shirts in a drawer. Linda is already asleep, on her side, one knee bent, one leg straight. I lie next to her. Her hand pats my leg, then falls back to the bed. I put my arms around her, pull her close. Her nipple presses into the center of my palm.

Truman tries to get everyone to come outside together for a picture. “Take the fucker in here,” Olson yells.

“Too dark,” Truman mumbles, then says louder, “you’re all in the dark.”

Somebody yells for someone to turn on the lights, but they’re already on. “We need sunlight,” I say and stand. Olson stands also and we begin stumbling toward the door and the light beyond.

I open my eyes and I’m in Illinois darkness. The digital clock on the nightstand says 2:48. Linda sleeps on her stomach, sheet up to her waist, one hand tangled in her hair, the other off the edge of the bed. I sit and throw off the sheet, pull back the curtain on the dark lawn, empty street, the stark light of the streetlamp. I let the curtain flutter closed—shadow and light, shadow and light. I try to think about Olson, the gun, but I remember Mexico, downtown Puerto Vallarta, an old hotel, and on the roof a swimming pool and a view of the ocean.

I sit with my back to the ocean, staring at the swimmers in the pool, listening to the waves collapsing behind me, drinking Carta Blanca. The air stings my nose with exhaust fumes, then salt. But I’m not in Mexico. I’m in Illinois, a bedroom, standing beside an open drawer, pistol at my face, the smell of oil. I run my fingers over the grooves beneath the barrel, the matted handle. My tongue tastes the oil and metal of the small opening. It tastes like pennies.

I sit back on the bed. The girl breathes heavily, rhythmically. I straighten my legs on the bed, spread them, put the gun between them on the sheet. I twist to look again past the curtains, but the paved street, the streetlamp, is gone.

In a village outside of Huan Fo, Olson stands, weight on one leg, left hand stuffed in his pants pocket, right hand holding a wet clipboard and wrinkled sheets of paper, radio strapped across a shoulder. He leans against the supply truck tailgate, lifts the clipboard above his eyes, and stares off into the drizzle. I squat beside Olson, partially protected from the rain by the tailgate, M-16 between my legs. Carts move through the rutted roads, wet, glistening animal backs. People, bent and straight, hurry through the rain. "Truman got fragged bad is the word," I say.

Olson looks down at my face, lifts the clipboard to the center of his helmet. "I heard not so bad."

"Could have been dead," I say.

"What's got you so morbid, Hagget?" Olson looks back out at the village, thatched roofs slick with rain. Crane and Anders on backing out of one hut, laughing, hands over their eyes. "How much longer?" Olson yells at them.

They both turn, smiling. Crane holds his stomach. Anderson moves his hands from his eyes to his mouth. "Crane's in love," Anderson yells back, white teeth, black face, brown eyes, khaki helmet. They laugh.

"How much longer?" Olson yells again.

They walk toward us. The misting rain thickens. Crane steps in puddles, Anderson hops and zags. "Be here the rest of the day," Anderson says. He reaches inside his helmet next to his ear, produces a cigarette. "If we're lucky." He squats, face level with mine, leans under the truck, and lights his cigarette. "Secret of smoking in the rain is just getting it started." He smiles at me, sucks hard. "The Oklahoma Crane's in love. Be a Cranette in there." I smile so he won't go into detail. Crane's a virgin and the running joke's grown old. "You and Olson," Anderson says, pointing at the

next hut. I stand. Olson gives Crane the clipboard and picks up his rifle.

In the hut, a pregnant woman sits on an army cot, smiling, belly like a party balloon, black hair knotted below her head. I rummage through her shallow shelves—half a pack of stale Marlboros, white thread, a pipe that looks hand-carved. Olson lifts a corner of the webbed mat off the floor. The woman smiles, nods. Water trickles down the wall I'm facing. A photograph. "Look at this," I say, and Olson drops the mat.

In the photograph the woman is thin, just a girl, arm around an American in fatigues, a car in the background, a brick building. "Saigon," the woman says, and we look at her. "Jin Coosaan," she says. "You know?" I shake my head. On the back of the photograph is *Love, Jim*.

We mull through her pots, rice, clothes. "Raining hard," Olson says, standing in the doorway watching it fall. The woman on the bed lies back. I look at her belly. Underneath the cot I see something metal. I flap the butt of my rifle against Olson's thigh and move toward the bed. Olson turns. She sits up quickly, smiles. I reach under the bed, she jumps forward, and Olson lets his rifle drop even with her head. She begins crying.

I move my hands cautiously under the bed, pull out a gray metal box with rounded corners and a flip latch. "Careful," Olson says, the rifle still at her head.

I turn the box around, flip open the latch, lift the lid slowly. Fishing gear. Flies, hooks, weights, line, a shiny reel. I turn the box to face me again. Inside, a piece of white tape has written on it *Jim Cousins* and an address in Sioux City. I close the box and slide it back under the bed. "Okay," I say to her. She smiles.

I stand at the door with Olson, watch the rain thicken until it seems to become something solid, standing upright, like a curtain of magnesium. I believe Olson sees the same thing, but he says, "Looks like smoke."

I look back at the curtain of magnesium, sometimes translucent, and the truck becomes visible, Crane and Anderson underneath the

tailgate, sitting on their helmets, cigarettes glowing orange. Suddenly, somewhere behind the curtain, a rifle begins firing, then another. I see Anderson roll in the mud, trying to get behind the curtain, no, behind the truck. The curtain shifts, the truck becomes invisible, Crane and Anderson invisible. "They running?" It's Olson's voice. His M-16 is pointed out the door at the curtain.

"They might be," I say.

"Where's it coming from?"

I shake my head. "We shoot, they may fire over here."

I look back at the woman. She's lying on her side on the floor underneath the cot. Cupped in her arms, the tackle box. Another burst of fire. The roof trembles and creaks. We drop, flatten against the mat. Water falls across my legs from holes in the roof the size of half-dollars. The pregnant woman coughs a scream into her hand.

Linda muffles her own cry. One hand moves from her mouth to my thigh, the other to my shoulder. She's staring at the pistol on the bed, between my legs.

"It was Olson at the door," I say.

She moves her hand from my thigh. Her fingertips touch the pistol.

"He wants me to keep it for him."

She looks up at me, her eyes blank. "Why?"

I shake my head. "He trusts me."

"Is it loaded?"

I pick up the pistol, pull the clip. It slides silently out of the handle. Three bullets. "It's loaded," I say. I pop the clip back into the handle. Linda jumps, both her hands lift momentarily, then resettle against me. I stand, walk back to the open drawer, put the pistol under the T-shirts again.

"Did he shoot somebody, Hagget?"

I turn and look at her, sheet pulled up to her neck, her eyes on the drawer, then on me. "He said he did the right thing." I lie next to her. She holds me very tightly.

"What happened between you?" she asks.

"The war?"

She nods.

I start telling her about Saigon, a memory, but it wasn't really Saigon, it was Mexico, Mazatlán. I tell her Olson and I were walking, but it was just me on the curving sidewalk next to the beach, late in the evening. The street followed the curve of the ocean and behind the street were bars, restaurants, hotels, rent-a-cars, trinket shops, and, behind them, the city.

I tell her the traffic was thick, American cars, jeeps, thick noise and exhaust, but in Mazatlán the sound of the ocean muffled the noise, the wind off the water blew the exhaust inland. A boy ran across the street, just avoiding an old Chevy pickup. He was little, maybe ten, barefoot, dark hair, dark eyes, smiling a vaguely familiar smile. I tell her Olson pointed, but it was just me, looking at the boy, then back across the street to where he had run from. Another boy in green shorts and a pajama top took slow, careful steps toward a mound on the sidewalk. He extended his arm and touched the mound, then ran across the street to his friend, the same smile on his face—mischievous, knowing. I looked back at the mound, but I tell her that it was both of us looking, and that Olson said the mound was another little boy playing dead.

Linda sits up suddenly in the bed. “Was it a dead little boy?” she asks.

“A bus passed, blocking our view.” I can see the bus, bright yellow lights above the windshield, thin driver in a gray suit and cap, ceramic Madonna dangling next to his head. I tell her we looked again after the bus passed, but it was only me, almost even with the boy, but it wasn't a boy, a woman, bare legs stretching into the street, head on the cracked cement, arms strewn over her face. She is at the base of an open-air restaurant. Above her a heavyset American in a checkered sportshirt says something to his wife, who is partially hidden behind an arch of red brick. He laughs, snaps his fingers for a waiter. They don't see the body, and I don't tell Linda about them or the restaurant.

“We waited for the traffic to clear, then crossed the street to the woman.” Thin arms, knobby elbows crusted with black dirt. “Olson



put his hand on her cheek." I put my hand on her cheek Her cheek is cold, her neck stiff. "He turned her head to face us." Brown eyes open, locked, but they seem alive. "He took her pulse." I go to one knee, take her wrist. No pulse. I look again at her eyes. I bend closer. "She was dead." Across her iris move tiny flat insects.

Linda stares another moment, then kisses me lightly.

"I'll bury the gun," I say. "Tomorrow."

She nods, kisses me again. She rests her head on my chest.

The woman under the cot pulls the gray box up to her face. Water splatters on the cot into a pool. "Radio," I say, turning to Olson. "Tell them snipers. Village in trouble."

Another burst of fire. "*We're* in trouble," Olson says. He has the radio out. The rain slackens for a second, but I don't have the angle to see the truck. I hear Olson calling for cover, the woman crying, rain spitting through the roof. "They say clear out," Olson whispers, suddenly beside me on his belly.

"Where?" The rain is solid, the sky half an hour from darkness.

"Away from the fucking truck"

I nod, rise to my knees, crawl into the mud as fire sounds again and metallic punctures creak back an answer. "Away from the fucking truck," Olson repeats as he grabs my arm at the shoulder, pulling me up.

We run, rifles in our hands, thrashing through the curtain in front of us, mouths open for oxygen. Mud grips my boots. My right foot hits a deep puddle, I tumble, sweeping my rifle across the back of Olson's legs. "I'm hit," he yells. But I jump up, pull him forward, shaking my head, and he runs. I run. The curtain doesn't lift. We run blind in the rain.

