

# Yanqui Doodle

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Of course they have to visit a hospital. To show they care. But which hospital? Not a big base hospital, but not a front-line station either—Congressional Armed Service Committee members are too precious to go where real iron is flying. Not to mention the value of the half-dozen generals escorting the fact-finding tour of the Bodéguan front.

A perfect hospital is found. The town of San Izquierda, just inside the Bodéguan border, has finally been liberated by American troops after the Libras had nibbled at it several times, and each time been run out by the Guévaristas. After the sixth loss the GIs were sent in to take it conclusively—what was left of it. Now the front has rolled forward twenty-five or fifty kilometers—depending on whose maps you used—and a big mansion formerly owned by one of the dictator's pals has been converted into an Intermediate Rehab Unit. The patients are a mix of GIs who would go back on duty, with some whose condition was bad enough to invalid them back to base, or even home.

So now the cavalcade is driving toward San Izzy, trying to make time. This is the last event of the Senators' day, and they've been delayed at Hona Base. There was an obstacle course demonstration by U.S. field instructors, and a parade of Libra troops in training, and speeches. That caused the trouble; even General Sternhagen has been moved to say more than a few words.

Senator Biller, the ranking Committee member, sits in the rear of the stretch Mercedes with two American flags on the fenders. Behind him come two new '98 Caddies with the rest of the Committee and some more generals, similarly beflagged. All the other escort vehicles bear twin flags, one American, the other the official Libra flag, which had been somewhat hastily designed and is not everywhere recognized with confidence.

The Senator sits between General Schehl and the interpreter. She is a neat and sultry-looking young lady, whose grasp of such fundamental phrases as "founding fathers" is, Senator Biller feels, a trifle shaky. He is wishing he could give her a short course in American—er, United States—history.

He is also musing on the Libra troops he had spoken with after their parade. The Freedom Fighters. The average Freedom Fighter had a distressing tendency to look like a fifteen-year-old Hispanic delinquent embracing an M-30.

"What did the Guévaristas do to you?" he had asked one youth. "Why are you here?"

The youth looks at the ground, then into space. "Guéyas very bad," he says to the interpreter, who amplifies, "Much oppression."

Biller persists. "What did they do to you? How did they oppress you?"

The boy says something cryptic. "They wanted to recruit him for the Army," the interpreter explains.

"But you're in the Army now," Biller says against his better judgment.

"Gué army very bad!" The interpreter smiles ravishingly. "Here is more better."

Looking around at Hona's substantial barracks, the lad's new uniform and boots, the slight but

perceptible bulge under his belt, Senator Biller can believe it.

The boy adds something, scuffing his toe.

"Only he is worried about his Mama," the interpreter goes on. This is something Biller can relate to. He pats the boy's shoulder comfortingly and smiles.

"He is afraid she will sell his motorcycle," the interpreter finishes.

Several Libras are listening to the exchange. Senator Biller looks round at their young faces and tells them what fine young men they are, what a good thing they are doing evicting Marxist-Leninism and saving their country for Democracy—all of which the interpreter seems to shorten unduly.

Then there is a bark, and all come smartly to attention, faces blank. The senator moves on.

Meanwhile his colleagues, some of whom could speak Spanish, were likewise mingling with the troops, forming invaluable first-hand impressions of the state of the minds and hearts of the people to whose aid their country had sent her armed might and the blood of her sons. Afterwards Senator Moverman exclaimed, "Fine brave boys! To think they'd be fighting Soviet gunships bare-handed if we hadn't sent them aid!"

Another legislator inquired as to whether they had captured many Cubans. A look of intense wariness came over his informants' faces. "Fidelistas very bad. Very bad soldier." It turned out that they meant "very dangerous."

"Where are they? Can we see some of the Cubans you captured?"

There was a quick confab, and somebody said "Fidelisto!" and laughed in a private way that gave Senator Biller grave qualms about the Geneva Conventions. A traitorous thought crossed his mind, about other boy-men in other uniforms, sent abroad to die for Soviet geopolitik. He shrugged it away. War is evil. Lying down under communist tyranny is worse.

It was at this point that old Senator Longmast had indicated his desire to address the assembled Libra and U.S. troops, and got into his brief explanation of What They Were Fighting For that so terminally delayed them. When he was reminded that they had a hospital to visit, he said "We owe it to them," and went on.

Now the party is trying to make up lost time on the San Izquierda road, which features a plethora of potholes and other obstacles. At the moment they have come onto a herd of scraggly cattle trapped between the steep banks of the mountain road.

The cars stop, the party gets out to stretch. Below them is a superb view of San Izquierda in the evening sun, nestled around its almost-intact cathedral. Shadowy mountain ridges, forested by pines, stretch away on either hand. Senator Biller reaches for his camera, as do others.

They are at a small crossroad. On the other road a rusty country bus has also stopped, is letting out people. The scene is very peaceful. Tropical birds are making exotic evening sounds. There is only the far-off rumble of heavy trucks on another road; a convoy, probably.

Beside the Senator there looms up what seems to be a self-propelled great load of sticks. It turns out to be on the head of a small old woman. Biller reflects that only weeks ago she and the town had been under the iron boots of the Guévaristas. He catches her curious eyes on him and grins broadly, saying "Libertad!"

"Si! Si!" Her face lights up with a toothy grin. Life is good; only that morning she had sold her twelve-year-old daughter to three *Yanquis* for pesos four hundred, about twenty dollars.

Senator Biller steels himself against the impulse to tell his driver to help her with her load. (They're used to it, this is the way they live.) He turns to his snapshots of the town below.

Ahead, the cattle are dispersing. The party is getting back into their cars. On the side road the bus has started up, too.

"See—Hospital!" the driver throws back over his shoulder, waving at a large building set in a garden just in view several kilometers ahead and below.

In that same hospital, Pfc. Donald Still had come back to life some two weeks before. The last thing he remembered was hearing his patrol leader yell and finding himself falling with an unbelievable pain on the inside of his thigh. He also remembered thinking that the path behind the ridge they were following was a natural site for mines, but he was too exhilarated to object. They were in hot pursuit of a bunch of Gués who were running and dodging just behind the spine of the ridge. The trees cleared out ahead. Don popped another BZ, looking forward to getting himself some good bursts.

Now he was flat on his back, feeling terrible, with a heavy wrapped-up leg. Steel rails on the bed. Above him afternoon sun filtered through ornate windows in a high dome. Mostly silence all around, no shots, no footsteps running. This was no battle-aid station. The choppers must have carried them all the way back to wherever this was. He felt that a lot of time had passed here: dreams of struggles, dreams of himself shouting.

His mouth and eyes were painfully dry, his head hurt, he felt weak and fluttery inside, and his leg ached horribly. Automatically he reached for a Maintenance pill. But his pill kit wasn't there. He was in hospital pjs, no pockets, no pills, nada.

"Hey! Hello!"

A dizzyingly beautiful girl's face swam in front of him. No, on second look she wasn't so gorgeous, only cute and very clean.

"Where am I? What's with my leg?"

She produced a clipboard. "You're in San Izquierda Intermediate Rehab Fifteen. Your leg is okay, you'll be walking tomorrow when the cast comes off. You were lucky, you just lost a lot of blood." She smiled meaningfully. "Very lucky."

"I need an M."

"Oh-oh." She frowned. "Wel-1-1. Tomorrow you start detox."

"But this is still today!" He tried to smile over sudden panic.

"Wel-1-1. You're just making it harder for yourself."

"But it's today. You said. *Please.*"

Without saying anything she turned away and came back with the precious yellow tab. He managed to clutch it and dry-swallowed. She tut-tutted at him.

"We've got to stop that pill-seeking behavior, soldier," she said cutely.

In spite of himself he grinned at her, or rather at the blessed tide of relief that would come through his veins in a minute.

"Make the most of it, soldier," she told him and went away.

He loathed people who called him "soldier" but he wasn't about to antagonize his supply. The M was working already, he could feel the first faint glow, the all-lightness, stealing over him. Without Ms, who could make this war? Nobody he knew of.

"Hey, what happened to the others? To my unit?" He asked when she passed by later. "Jack Errin, Benjy?"

"Your friends? I'm afraid I don't know. You were brought in alone. I did hear you were an only survivor. I'm afraid your friends were casualties, soldier. Or maybe they weren't badly hurt."

Friends, he thought. Yes, he'd liked Jack in a far-off sort of way, and Benjy was a good guy. But didn't she know that in this war you don't have pals? When you're on Ms you don't need 'em, when you're on BZs you don't remember the word.

"What do you mean about detox tomorrow? What are they going to do to me?"

"Because you're going home, soldier. *Home*—I told you you were lucky. Why do you think you're in an Intermediate Unit?"

He had no idea.

"Because we can't let you boys go home full of that awful stuff, can we? So you have to get two-three weeks of detox. It won't be so bad. Think about going home."

He lay back, his head spinning. Through his body the gentle glow of the M was taking away all worries. Tomorrow was a long way off.

But think about going home? He didn't particularly want to. Home wasn't much since Geri had split. But to tell the truth he could hardly remember her. It had been one of those draft-notice marriages anyway, and so far as he knew he hadn't left a child. Her letters had been short and almost illegible, starting with a hot sort of personal pornography, and ending last fall with "I guess we better think this all over" one. She'd been staying with his folks in San Diego. Not much of a life for her. He guessed she was really divorcing his mother. He chuckled to himself.

So now where should he go? Back to San D. first, then he'd see. Something would turn up. No point in worrying now. In fact, he couldn't worry if he tried.

He remembered the week they had first issued the Ms. What a change. All the guys who were muttering about going AWOL just quit. They'd often wondered what was in them. Not cocaine, nothing he'd ever heard of. Miracles of modern science.

No, wait—the first things they issued were the BZs. He'd been given some specially, when someone had noticed him firing his M-18 in the air instead of at the Gués in front of them. What the hell, a lot of the others were doing that, too. The boys they killed had been so young, and they shot so badly. He'd expected the Commie Gués to be ten feet high and mean. Not baby-faced twelve-year olds. Of course those same twelve-year olds had been laying mines that blew unlucky grunts apart, but... but... looking straight at one and blowing his guts out was somehow different. They ran away fast enough, wasn't that

what counted?

But the Army saw things differently. Kill! Kill! His training... so he found himself being given some red capsules and instructed to take one when he was in a shooting situation. BZs... Battle Zones... they had removed all his reservations about blowing anybody away, made it exhilarating. In fact, they had removed all his reservations about anything. But luckily your memory of what you'd done behind BZs wasn't too good. They had swept through several little hamlets, putting the flamers to it all, and there were flash-memories of other things. Patch-views of female flesh, lots of screaming, and one that bothered him a lot—he didn't want to think about that now.

So then had come the green Sleeper tabs, and after that there weren't any more dreams. Trouble was, men started nodding over their rifles on patrol. So then there was the general issue of Ms. For Maintenance. It made an ideal combo.

But detox? Detox before going home? Nobody had said a word to them about that. He'd always assumed they had some other magic potion, that there'd be some kind of gentle end. Well, it would all be okay. It had to, he thought, drifting off. Nobody'd do anything so brutal.

He woke up with somebody pushing a tray at him. "Soft diet."

Trying to eat the stuff he didn't feel so good. The M was wearing off. Probably they hadn't given him enough while he'd been here, his blood levels were low.

A different nurse was on duty, an older, dark-haired woman. She brought him an M when asked, without comment.

"You're starting detox tomorrow, you know," she told him. But she seemed nicer, more like she was worried for him.

"What's so big about that? Is it bad?"

"Well-1-1... you've been on this stuff how long? A year?"

"Around that."

"We're just starting to get long-timers like you."

"What happens?" he persisted.

She frowned. "Detoxification is always hard. You have to get your body making the chemicals again itself. The only way is to go cold; tapering off is like cutting a dog's tail off an inch at a time to be kind. But some people take it like a breeze. Most do. Hold the thought."

He wasn't worried. But still he wondered. "I thought they'd have something for us. I mean, they put us on it."

"You mean you were ordered to take the stuff?"

"Oh, no... but strongly suggested. Because... because there were things..." He wanted to stop talking and enjoy the M's good feeling.

"Well, there is Slobactin. That helps. You'll be given some."

"Thank you," he said dreamily. She went away.

He lay back, looking vaguely around. The room seemed to have been part of a mansion—a ballroom, maybe. Only a few other beds were in here—too far spaced to talk. A bed was rolled in with a lot of fuss going on around it—a new arrival fresh from the operating room, he made out. This was some kind of way-station. By craning his head he could see metal-grilled doorways, apparently leading into corridors the Army had built on. Two muscular-looking male techs or orderlies sat behind desks, keeping an eye on things. It was very peaceful; the first time in a long time he had heard no firing.

Bedtime came, and the cute little blonde nurse came in to douse the lights and distribute pills. The yellow-and-pink cap she gave him was all wrong.

"Nurse, I want my Army sleep pill. My ND." ND was for No Dreams.

"This is just as effective," she said serenely.

He doubted it strongly. "I want my regular ND. I'm entitled to it, it's still today."

"You're not entitled to any particular medication, soldier. You're entitled to have us make you well, that's what we're doing."

Her voice had a nasty edge, her smile was pure plastic.

"But it's not fair! The NDs are for—for special reasons." He couldn't tell her about the dreams. "—Please. Can I have mine tonight? It's still today."

"You have your sleeping pill. Now calm down and go to sleep, you're disturbing the other patients."

"I'll keep everybody awake if you don't give me the right one!"

"Don't try it, soldier." She smiled toward the grille where the two big orderlies were watching him alertly. She went away.

He lay back, fuming. He'd meant that the dreams made him yell. Well, they'd find out.

"You get on *her* shit list, you dead," said the soldier in the next bed, separated from him by a tiled plant-stand.

"But she said—"

"You dead," the man repeated.

To his surprise, he did drift off, and dreamt only innocuous fantasies about his old dog.

He woke in the night, feeling a knife grinding him under his ribs. His old ulcer pain. He'd almost forgotten, he hadn't had that since his first ND-tab. And there was another trouble, an itch under his leg-cast. A roach or something must have somehow got under it and was struggling about. He banged at it futilely, and finally called.

Miss Plastic approached with a flashlight.

"Shshsh! What is it, soldier?"

"My ulcer hurts. I need some antacid."

She made a note on the clipboard. "I'll tell the doctor about it. Maybe he'll prescribe you some in the morning."

"In the morning? Christ, I need it right now, I feel like my stomach's boring through."

"Sorry, I can't prescribe medication. But I'll have the doctor look at you first thing, I promise." Cutie-doll smile.

"But antacid isn't a prescription drug, a medication! Christ, you can buy Maalox or Mylanta over the counter by the gallon. You must have some here. I *hurt*."

"Anything other than your meals is a medication, soldier." She turned the flash off.

"Wait! Do you mean this shit?"

"Don't swear at me."

"Well, wait one minute—there's bugs under my bandage. A bug. I can feel it crawling around."

Expertly she slipped back the sheet and explored the top of the cast with the light.

"No bugs. You calm down, the bugs will go away."

"But I can feel them! They itch! Can't you at least cut that stuff so I can scratch? You said it comes off tomorrow." No use, he could see that. "Isn't there something you could squirt under it? Some bug killer?" He asked weakly.

"Sorry, soldier. There are no insects, nothing, under that bandage. It's all in your head. Now, are we going to be good and go to sleep— or are you going to cause trouble? There are men here a lot sicker than you are, you know."

He looked up at her in the dim light, living proof that a cute girl five feet three inches high could be a monster.

"If you'd give me my ND I could sleep. It's not yet tomorrow!" His voice was high with anguish. She didn't reply, just clicked the flash off and went away.

He saw her checking the inhabitants of the other beds on her way out. Two men came awake at this, screamed briefly and thrashed about. Doesn't she know being wakened like that could be bad news in the combat zone, doesn't she know *anything*!

"Take it easy, soldier," he heard her say. Then she was gone.

He lay back and felt the supposedly non-existent bug scratching like mad. One bastard's legs were in the tender place back of his knee. Goddamn. He made a determined effort to break the cast on the bedrails, got nowhere. Then he recalled something.

In a story he'd read, "insects" like this were a feature of going off drugs cold turkey. Victims were driven crazy, tore themselves bloody.

The dopers' DTs. Was *this* what detoxification was going to be like? Oh, Christ, oh Christ.

He tried to relax, but there was no more possibility of sleep. And his ulcer was really hurting now, gnawing deep. Going without antacids could be dangerous, his old doc had said. Your stomach could perforate. He almost hoped his would, that would be a lesson for Miss Plastic. Medications!... God, he could see the inside of a US drugstore, all those good things laid out ready to your hand. Mylanta, Maalox, Alternagel, Tums—in his civilian days he'd been a good customer for all that. But the ND-tabs had stopped the pain. He'd have to get hold of more the minute he was turned loose. But what if they

only issued them in the combat zone? Well, he'd get back there by hook or crook. Back to combat? Why not? If he was comfortable and could sleep there. How long would this damn detox take? Two, three weeks had they said? Could he endure it?

He rolled, rolled, tossed, trying to find a position where the pain was better and the bugs were quieter... Some time toward morning he must have lost consciousness.

Detox started officially right after breakfast, when two strange orderlies descended on his bed, checked the rails, and starting rolling him toward one of the closed-off corridors. He'd been enjoying a nap at last, almost didn't wake up in time to size up his surroundings. As they relocked the grille he sat up and saw that he was in a wing the Army must have added on—plain plywood walls, low ceilings, all the way down, with doors opening off each side, to a blank wall at the far end. First came a second grille, strong steelwork, and polished in the middle as though hundreds of hands had gripped it. As they went through, he saw that the first door bore a hand-lettered sign: Quiet Room. The door had a small wire-reinforced glass window in it. And there was sound coming from it—a faint, pallid mewling or keening, like an animal far away. Then they were passing closed, featureless doors, 205, 207. At 209 the orderlies stopped, opened up and pushed him in.

Room 209 was about four meters square, with a screened, barred, frosted window. There was a bed already in it. The orderlies wrestled it around to take out.

Don said, "They told me I was going to walk today. They're supposed to take the cast off. Where's the doctor?"

"Don't know anything about that," one of them grunted, opening the door.

He started to panic. It seemed to him that once he was shut in here they would just forget him, let him starve and die, immobilized in the heavy cast.

"Where's a *doctor*? Would you tell them I need a doctor? I have ulcers, see," he added idiotically to their backs as they went out. The door closed.

At that he dragged himself up and by tremendous effort managed to get one leg over the guard-rails. Then he saw that the reason the cast was so immovable was that somebody had strapped it to the bed-rails, top and bottom. Must have been done when he dozed off. By straining to his limit he got the top buckle undone, but no way could he reach his ankle. Panting, he lay back. His hands were shaking like leaves in a wind.

"I'm not functioning," he thought. God how he needed an M. Was it possible that only ten days ago he had been a competent combatant, leaping up mountainsides?

He looked around. The room contained a straight chair, a small set of drawers on wheels, and a lidless toilet. No means of calling for help.

That gave him an idea. Legitimate need.

He called tentatively, "Nurse!" No response, nothing. There was nobody out there. He raised his voice as loud as he could. "Nurse! Nurse! Nurse! *Help!*"

Almost instantly there were footsteps and the door opened. Miss Plastic.

"Nurse, I have to go to the can. Why isn't this cast off? You said I'd walk today. Where's the doctor? Does he know about my ulcer?"



She stared at him unsmiling. "We don't holler like that, soldier. It upsets other patients. You have to think of the others here."

"Well, how can I get help?"

"Someone looks in every fifteen minutes, around the clock. You can tell them what you need."

They went through the bedpan routine; she restrapped the buckle he'd opened and departed.

The morning dragged on. As she'd said, every quarter-hour the door opened and a face looked in. Often it was the dark-haired nurse, but he didn't bother her except to ask once if the cast would really be removed. "Yes. Soon, now. Doctor is making rounds."

The invisible insects had quieted down to where he could forget them, but in their place came a growing horde of aches and discomforts, everywhere. Bruises he dimly remembered from combat time hurt. Was all this what the Ms had been hiding from him? He groaned, trying to get comfortable. Did they even *have* a doctor in this crazy place?

At noon came the doctor, and with him Miss Plastic, carrying his lunch. She put the tray down on the bureau, out of his reach. The doctor was old, about Don's father's age. He was a grunter. He tackled the cast with an electric saw. Miss Plastic kept having to hand him things; it did Don good to see her obeying orders, sweet as peaches.

"You were very lucky, son, (grunt) very lucky. Hm'm. I think I'll take these stitches out now, but (grunt) no walking for three days, hear?"

"I can get to the toilet, can't I?"

"Hm'm'm. Very well, yes, to the toilet—but *only* there and back, understand? Mm'm. Meals in bed."

"Yes sir."

"And nurse, you keep an eye on him to see he stays put."

"We always do, sir."

"That's right (grunt). We put a pin in that bone, son, so you won't have a short leg. We don't want it wiggling around (grunt), we want it to heal tight. Keep it just as quiet as you can."

"Yes sir."

"M'm'm... Say, that looks good. Mind if I steal a bite?"

Without waiting for a reply the doctor plucked a small something off the tray, nodded, and went out. As they were leaving, Don called, "Nurse, I can't reach my lunch."

"Someone will be right in."

He lay and watched it getting cold. Food here was godawful enough when hot. In desperation, he crawled up on his good knee and then got that leg to the ground and leaned just far enough to grab the tray and pull it across himself as he collapsed. God, he was weak!

Just as he got settled the door opened and a strange red-headed nurse came in.

"My, we *are* impatient, aren't we?"

"I didn't step on the leg," he said defensively.

"Good." She looked at him seriously. "You'll have to live the rest of your life with whatever you do to yourself now. The doctor went to a lot of trouble. Follow his orders."

Somehow this got through to him. The nurse was someone in authority, he felt. He realized he'd been acting childish. Long ago he'd been known for his patience and good temper. What had happened to him? Was all this the drugs? Or the effect of being without them? He no longer felt at all hungry, now that he'd gotten the tray. In fact he felt sick. And he was trembling and sweating.

"Nurse, I feel pretty terrible. They said you had something that helps. May I have some? Something bactin, I think."

"Slobactin. Yes, you'll be getting some with your regular medication."

"And I forgot to tell the doctor, I have ulcers. They've been acting up. Can I have some antacid?"

She made a note on her clipboard. "Yes, I'll tell the doctor as soon as he comes off rounds."

She was straightening his bedclothes. As she patted the under-sheet she suddenly frowned disapprovingly, but said nothing more before departing.

He fell into a sweaty sleep, forgetting his lunch, from which he was wakened by a man saying "Roll. Roll over here."

"Huh?"

It was one of the two big orderlies. He was dumping something into the bed, something heavy that felt both cold and warm.

"Roll over to the edge so I can spread this."

Groggily he complied, finally made out that the man was working a rubber sheet onto the mattress under the regular sheet. When he rolled back the bed felt clammy and hard on his bruises.

As the man left, Don began to feel scared. Did these precautions mean that he was going to be sick in some ghastly uncontrolled way? Well, he was starting to feel much more nauseated. And, goddamn, nothing to york into here, except the untouched lunch tray with its weak white plastic flatware. The orderly had put it back on top of him. He hoped it wouldn't come to that, tried deep breathing that hurt his ribs.

At the next door check he asked for a sick-basin, and to have the tray taken away. It was little Miss Plastic. She checked the uneaten food.

"It's starting, eh, soldier? You're slow—you must have been on that stuff a long time."

"A year."

"My, my... Soldier, how *could* you do that to your body?"

How could he begin to tell her, assuming she really wanted to know? Instead he asked her a question.

"Nurse, have you ever had ulcers?"

She laughed. Then she said with a smug little lift of her chin. "I've never used a day of sick-leave in my life." The implication was strong: those people who got sick did it to themselves.

"Try it sometime," he said through suddenly chattering teeth.

"No thanks!" Merrily she exited, taking the tray but forgetting his basin.

That afternoon was bad. The itching started again, and he scratched his arms bloody. Miss Plastic caught the blood on the sheet, looked at his nails, and clucked. "Marie hasn't been here."

Shortly an orderly came in, leading a small mestiza girl in a pink smock.

"Manicure time."

The girl grabbed his hand in a surprisingly firm small grip, and was already cutting. Cutting right down to the quick, he saw. When he protested, the man came and stood over him. "Routine procedure, fella." Don subsided, and the orderly produced a movie magazine and sat in the chair. The cutting went quickly; Don realized he would be helpless to ease himself, and tried to save out one finger. "No, no!" Marie said.

"Yes! Leave it, please."

The orderly put down his magazine and loomed over him again. "I said it's routine procedure. She does them all. Every one... You want to make trouble, fella?"

Looking up at him, Don decided he didn't. The girl finished with a filing job, and then, to his amazement, pulled back the sheet and tackled his toenails with a dog-clipper.

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes!" she said mockingly. The orderly watched impassively as she began, then returned to his gaudy magazine. "You could infect yourself fella," he observed.

When the job was finished Don felt like a declawed cat, or a defanged wolf. God, the lengths they went to render him helpless!

And more. Just after they left, Miss Plastic came in with a mestizo porter carrying what Don recognized with wonder as his duffelbag from main camp. One of the Army's eerie efficiencies. The duffel was plonked down and the little nurse swiftly opened it and started to unpack it onto the floor. Searching. His hunting knife went first into a big plastic bag she had. Then his cigarettes, and then she opened his shaving roll.

"You can keep these." She pulled out toothpaste and brush, and then resealed the kit and dumped it into her bag.

"Hey, are you going to take that away? I need those things."

"No metal or glass," she said firmly. "No liquids. And no heavy plastic."

Don was a fairly neat packer; he had put a clean uniform and his fresh laundry into plastic bags. Those got dumped, and the bags confiscated.

"Why those?"

"No bags. Patients have been known to try to do themselves harm."

"With a *baggie*?"

She didn't answer. He guessed she meant you could smother yourself with one. Ugh—what a way to go. A tremor of fear ran down him. Did people here really get that desperate?

"That reminds me—where's my watch?"

"At the desk. With your dog-tags. You get them back when you leave."

He felt nakeder than ever, but nausea was rising in him again and he couldn't protest. This time she brought him a basin, and watched him as he retched up liquid. Then she crammed his remaining stuff back into the eviscerated duffel, zipped it up and left with her bag of booty.

He lay back, sweating and shaking. There was a peculiar sourceless pain in his legs; no position eased it. The itching started again, and rubbing with his denuded fingers only made it worse. Finally in desperation he managed to get out of bed and grab his toothbrush from the window sill. Scratching with that gave him some help, but it soon became bloody and he knew if somebody saw that it would be taken away. There was no water in his room other than the can, so he sucked the toothbrush clean, sick with disgust at the taste of his own blood.

The endless hours passed so; finally came medication-time. With the vitamin-like pills came two small brownish tablets—the drug-deprival medicine?—and a tiny paper cup containing Maalox. So Redhead hadn't forgotten. He gulped it hungrily, and took the pills, dreaming of the beautiful yellow M-tabs he needed so.

Dinner came and went untasted, and then the night settled in. To his exasperation, they wouldn't switch off the ceiling light. He tossed and turned, finally ending with the small pillow over his eyes.

And then the deprivation really started on him. The random pains that had bothered him turned ten times worse, savage stabbings in his arms, legs, guts. His head throbbed. His mouth and eyes were painfully dry. And the skin-itch he had thought intolerable migrated into the interior of his joints, where he couldn't get at it. He had visions of armies of rustling termites marching with their little tickling legs, through his capillaries, and finally into the marrow of his bones. The only relief was to jerk the joint, but then it came back worse a moment later, so he had to jerk again. He tried to relax, but there was no respite from the beastly internal tickling and no hope of sleep. The light glared down on him, he was twisted and contorted and jerking in a pool of sweat, the rubber under him sticking everywhere. There was an interval he didn't remember clearly, which brought the two orderlies in to put him back to bed. At another point the heat was so bad that he got out and grabbed up the chair to push it through the screen and break the glass of the closed window. His weakness was appalling; but even so he managed a strong jab with the chair-legs. But this was no ordinary screen; the chair bounced back on him without leaving a dent in the wire. Weeping with frustration he tried again, with the same result, and finally staggered back into the bed to shiver and sweat. His nose itched and ran unceasingly. Nothing to wipe it on but his pajamas.

Only one part of the night he remembered: toward morning he must have fallen into a doze, and the nightmares began. The worst was a static image of the inside of a hut. A woman lay on the floor by his feet; he didn't want to look at her. But in front of his eyes a cloudy red-and-tan bundle hung in midair. He particularly didn't want to look at this; it seemed to him that if he saw it clearly he would die. He jerked himself awake, trembling and quivering all over his body.

Daylight brought some relief, but not much. He was weeping continuously now and retching. He had given up trying to keep himself clean; the bed was sodden. His bones had turned to termite-ridden Jello, and the pains gnawed and jabbed him. Once he thought that the worst was over, but soon the

excruciating bone-deep tickling began again, and he lay jerking helplessly, unable to rest.

Time passed in a torture-ridden blur. Strange people looked in on him, spoke meaninglessly and did unhelpful things. Several times he became aware that he was raving and shouting, but had no idea what he said, or to whom. Medications came, and he promptly threw them up. Meals came and went; sometimes he upset the tray in his bed.

The vomiting began to give way to uncontrollable diarrhea. At first he tried to get out of bed and make it to the can, but he was so weak that soon he failed and lay in his filth on the floor until the next room-check.

The windows darkened, and night brought with it all symptoms intensified. At one point he became aware that his wrists and ankles were tied to the bed-rails, and roared in protest until his dry throat gave out. There was an IV stand by the bed; a face scolded him for tearing the needle out.

Only toward morning did he fall into an exhausted doze, and the nightmares came again. He was with the patrol, rushing a bunch of Gués. The man next to him fell, screaming. He was holding a flamer to a thatched roof, the roof caught and roared up. And always there was the terrifying static scene of the interior of the hut, and the supine woman. By now he made out that she was wounded in the belly. He tried not to look at the ambiguous bundle hanging before his eyes, but it had more details; a bright point was sticking up from it, and something ran up to it from below. Also it moved and cried. He woke screaming to see the windows lightening, and experience the strange momentary relief that dawn seemed to bring.

Days and nights, how many he didn't know, passed so. The IV apparatus came again, and the tying up. He was too weak to protest.

Finally came the afternoon when he realized that the horrible internal tickling had given way to plain pain, which was far more bearable. When medication came next he was able to keep it down, and to drink a glass of water, which stayed down too. But his mood had changed; from anger and bewilderment he was in the grip of a terrible bleakness and despair. Every train of thought ended in horror and death. His body might be somewhat detoxified now, he thought, but his mind was not. If this was reality, he desperately needed the magic tabs which would keep it at a distance. Images of them floated in his mind; his need was so great that he had hallucinations they were somewhere in his room—surely in his duffelbag. Three times he crawled out of bed and searched, finding, of course, nothing. He wept. Behind the tears, an iron resolve formed; he would get hold of some somehow, get back on the regime which made life bearable, even pleasant. The tabs were everywhere at the front, distributed freely. That was where he belonged, not home. What was home compared to that relief?

That night he fell into a really deep sleep, and with it came a jumble of new nightmares. Himself firing directly into the face of a little mestizo boy, watching the boy's head explode. The platoon awakened at night by a rush of Gués toward the ammo cache. And again, that static hut interior, where he was standing by the wounded woman. He saw her wounds clearly now; her whole belly was opened, and skin and fat folded back from emptiness like a heavy fruit-rind. She writhed feebly. Knife-work, that. And, inexorably, the amorphous bundle before his face cleared, became—Oh, no!—a bleeding newborn baby, skewered on a long machete blade. The lower part of the blade was clear now, there was a hand gripping the handle. Whose hand? Not his—Oh yes, *his*, he could feel the balance shift as its gruesome burden wriggled, moved its legs. A desperate squalling sound came from it.

He tore himself awake by sheer willpower, lay gasping as the windows paled. And in the growing light he knew—this was no nightmare, this was a memory. *He had done that thing*. He had gutted the parturient woman, skewered her baby on his knife. What came next he did not know—the deed itself

was quite enough. Under the Battle-Zone tablets he had become a savage beast, seeing the enemy everywhere, even in the unborn. *He* had done this. And god knew what else. The sleeper-tabs had kept it from breaking through. God, how he needed one!

As day grew, a kind of sanity came back to him. For the first time in days he could think. He thought about what life would be like, remembering his deed. Impossible. His soul was one huge flinch. He could not help hearing the cries, seeing more details, smelling the stink of guts. No. He wanted only surcease, wanted to die.

To die—taking these horrors with him, forever finished. Yes. Every hour he remained alive he would be tortured by those scenes in his mind, by the utter shame and sickening remorse. Afraid of what else he might remember. He couldn't go on like this. To go home, bearing this living memory in him like a cancer? Never. He would die here, he would manage somehow.

The resolve seemed to ease him a little. But when he drifted to sleep again, the memory came back, and with it the brief touch of bloody little hands pawing at him, as he drove the machete in. He screamed and woke.

Some time later the little blonde nurse stuck her head in. "You're better!" she observed brightly. "All right, today you get corridor privileges. Up and out!"

He could barely make it; she had to assist him and let him lean along the wall crab-fashion as she took him out in the corridor. He blinked; he had forgotten that the world held more than that room of torment.

"You better practice so you can make meal-times. You'll get your meals up in the day-room now, no more service in bed." Somehow they had arrived at the grille ending the corridor. He held on and peered through it blearily.

"They unlock this when meals are served," she told him. "Someone will call you."

The mention of meals set him retching again, but nothing came out. She came along as he crab-walked back to Number 209. "Practice!" she repeated cheerily. When they got back inside he struggled for the can, but failed to make it. When the spasm was over, Miss Plastic helped him back to bed. From somewhere she had produced a mop.

"This is the last time. From now on you'll be expected to keep your room clean. The mop can stay in the corner here for awhile." Expertly she wrung it out in the can, washed her hands in the tank, and flushed. It came to him that the scene had been repeated over and over before this.

He didn't see how he could make that trip again, let alone eat anything, but at chow time the biggest orderly stuck his head in and ordered him out. He staggered into the corridor, found it filled with what seemed hundreds of people. The man coming out of 207 was bandaged all over his head and shoulders, only three black holes showing for eyes and mouth. Bemused, Don fumbled along the wall with the crowd to the open grille, found a big dolly stacked with trays. A man beside him said, "Look for your name." Seeing Don's helplessness, he asked, "What's your name?"

"Still."

"Smith?"

"No... Still."

The stranger pounced on a shelf. "Here it is: Take it and sit down at that table and eat, or they'll take

it away."

"Thanks."

Shakily Don carried the tray over to an empty seat. Soup had splashed all over. In spite of his illness, he managed to hoist a bowl of it and drink some. Surprisingly, it tasted good. He finished it. On all the trays the flatware was the same wobbly white plastic, like a cheap airline's. No metal.

When he got up to go, someone pulled his sleeve.

"Take your tray back or they'll get your ass."

"Oh, thanks." He hoisted up the iron-heavy tray, grateful for the strange camaraderie of this hell-hole. These others had been subject to Miss Plastic and her bully-boys, they knew the drill. He noticed a couple of men who kept rhythmically jerking their knees, tapping their feet. He knew what they were feeling—that ghastly unstoppable tickle. Did it ever go away for good?

When he got back to Number 209 the nice dark-haired nurse was making up his bed with clean sheets.

"Oh, thank you." He collapsed in the chair.

"And here are some clean pjs." He realized he'd been going around in sweaty shit-stained ones. God, he must stink.

"You can get clean ones any time from the laundry room. It's opposite the showers, down by the dayroom."

"Showers?"

"That's right. But you have to tell the nurse you're going in."

"Great. Thank you... The trouble is, I'm so weak. *Weak*. I can't believe only a few days ago I was in combat."

"That's the effect of amphetamine withdrawal, honey. You have to pay a price for being Superman for awhile."

"How long does it last?"

"Until you exercise it away. That's the only cure, keeping active."

"But it seems to be worse every day. Weaker and weaker. I'm afraid I'll die here."

"Don't say that, honey. Nobody ever died from detox and they never will. You'll just get healthier and healthier." Earnestly looking at him, she went on. "You're perfectly safe here. Don't be afraid."

Something in her tone struck him. You don't talk about dying here, he thought. They're afraid of suicides. That's what she means by safe. I can't get away. He chuckled painfully. "Safe" to him meant something quite different; well-secured perimeters, safety from Guévarista attack.

"Where are the Gués now? I don't know anything."

"The war's going well, I hear. The front's quite a ways farther than when you came in."

"I've got to get back."

"Oh, no you don't. The war's over for you, honey!" She bundled up the old sheets and prepared to leave.

"Thank you very much," he called after her. But a qualm had smitten him in the pit of the stomach. *She meant it*. No more, for him, the easy world of combat with the little yellow pill-cases full. What would he do at home? Roam the night streets, looking for black-market Ms? No way. He had to get back. Back at the front was everything he needed, including the neat way to die.

Depression and nausea washed over him deeper as he got into bed. The images of the dying woman, the tortured baby came again. He couldn't go on like this. Couldn't. Hatred of himself was like a poisonous fog in his head. It lasted all afternoon.

That night when he got to the tray-dolly he found that someone had made a mistake. A real metal knife lay gleaming on the tray that held butter and catsup, just above his own.

Nobody was watching. It was the work of an instant to get that beautiful knife into his pajama leg, stuck into the bandage.

He made himself pretend to eat, to wait until others were leaving. Then he hobbled back to 209 with his prize. Relief. The way out. But that would be at night; where to hide it meanwhile?

He found the perfect place—a loose piece of molding in the upper window edge. All but the very end slid neatly inside. Then he took it out again—it was much too dull, it needed sharpening. The window-screen might do.

Between room-checks he honed it carefully. It took a decent edge. He tested it on his wrist, leaving a thin red line that oozed a red drop at one end. Okay. He put the knife back in its hidey-hole and lay in the bed, studying his wrists and memorizing where the best cuts would be... A peaceful death, bleeding. You just got cold. Pity he couldn't hang his arms over the edge of the bed to drain, but room-checkers would spot that. They wouldn't spot blood under him in the bed until much too late... He'd have to cut deep, get the arteries flowing well. That would hurt—but not so much as the stuff in his head. *That* would never hurt him again.

Some commotion was going on in the corridor, but he took no notice. Not his concern. Never again, his concern... The noise was from the next room, where the bandaged man was. Someone had told Don that he was a cook, burned by a stove-fire. He was due for a lot of plastic surgery after detox. Now he seemed to be just outside Don's door, yelling at someone. "Leave my room alone!" It didn't seem to do any good. Doors banged.

Presently Don's own door opened, and Miss Plastic marched in, followed by the two big blond orderlies. Don had named them in his mind, *Hans und Klaus*.

"Get up and sit in the chair, please."

"Chair? Why?"

"Just get up and let us at your bed. This is routine."

As he went to the chair, Hans intercepted him and gave him a quick but efficient body-search, patting all down his pajama legs. Then he seized Don's hand and turned it over and grunted. He held it out to show the nurse the cut wrist. She nodded, grimly. The search intensified.



Klaus was stripping the bed thoroughly. Sheets, rubber, pillowcase, all went on the floor. Then he expertly flipped over the mattress to expose the springs and searched all around the bottom and the bed-rails.

Don had got it by now. They were looking for the knife. *His* precious knife. Thank god he had resisted his first impulse to hide it under the spring-bars.

Klaus had been circling the room, checking the baseboards. When he came to the set of drawers, he and the nurse took it apart, looking at the bottoms of every drawer, the bottom of the chest. Then he turned to check thoroughly around the toilet and in the tank, while Miss Plastic put the drawers back in. Hans was heaping bedding and pillow on the bed.

"Now sit on the bed, please." Dumbly he obeyed. They went over the chair. Then Klaus and Hans went back to the baseboards, while the nurse dumped out his duffelbag.

Hans was circling the room now, looking higher and higher. A quick probe of the door jamb, the electric outlet—and then he was at the window. Don sat rigid, not daring to breathe or look, while Hans' hands ran around the lower sills. Klaus was stuffing his things back into the duffel. Miss Plastic had gone to the door, frowning and tapping her foot.

"All right." They seemed about to leave. Don's heart thudded with relief—but suddenly Hans turned back and ran his hand along the top of the window molding. Oh, no!—A rustle, and, damn it, god damn it—he was drawing out the knife from its hiding place, looking at it curiously, testing the edge Don had put on it.

Miss Plastic and Klaus were advancing on him with a canvas thing.

"Just slip your arms in here."

"What is it?"

"A tux," Hans said, and giggled. They had his hands drawn halfway down the sleeves before he could react. But when his hands found no cuffs, he realized what it was—they were putting a strait-jacket on him!

"No! *No!*"

"Come on soldier, relax. You're due for a night in the Quiet Room."

"What? I haven't done anything, you can't—"

Much too late he started to struggle. He was on the bed now, face down, with Hans on top of him and Klaus tightening the long straitjacket sleeves around his body. He kicked, kicked, could connect with nothing. Then Klaus was kneeling on his legs, pulling up a heavy zipper.

In seconds he was being hustled out into the corridor, helpless. Even so, his training enabled him to swing them, to get one hearty kick aimed at Klaus' crotch. But at the last minute he held it—he couldn't win here, god knew what nasty revenges they would wreak on him if he broke Klaus' balls.

His first impressions of the Quiet Room were heat, and the stink of disinfectant. There was no window, only the small heavy glass insert in the door. There was a can with no seat. A bare mattress lay on the floor skew-wise. That was all.

They dumped him on the mattress, and then came the final indignity—they pulled off his pajama

pants. He was protesting and crying out, and he could hear how his voice sounded muted. The Quiet Room was efficiently soundproofed. The faint keening he had heard near here might have been someone yelling his lungs out.

"How long? How long?" he beseeched.

"We'll see," said Miss Plastic crisply, and they marched out. The door slammed to with a heavy thud.

He got up behind them, to press his face against the glass in the door. It was one-way. Behind his own reflection he could make out only the blur of a ceiling light. In despair, he let himself fall back on the mattress. But there was no relaxing—under the straitjacket the invisible insects were starting their scratching again.

That night he could not, would not remember.

He tried things, nearly breaking his teeth. He located a rough edge on the toilet and backed up to it, sawing the canvas against it. But he accomplished only the smoothing of the metal edge, the damn jacket wasn't normal canvas but some super-stuff. He spent an hour leaning against the door with his face to the glass. Once a head loomed up outside. He shouted "Help!" with all his might. The head went away.

The diarrhea came back, he tried to make the can but fouled himself. The insect-itching was beyond belief, he could not lie down but paced, paced, paced the tiny hot room.

Finally weakness felled him, he crawled to the mattress and lay curled in a crazy ball, jerking. And on, hour after torment-filled hour...

Sometime during the eternity the door opened and the dark-haired nurse came in. She had a glass of water for him, and a cool wet cloth with which she mopped his face. He felt unbelievably good.

"How... longer?"

She frowned. "Soon, now. I'll speak to somebody."

"What is this... bad-cop-good-cop routine?"

She didn't get it, just shook her head No.

"Look, I'm not yelling... any more... I'll be... good."

Gently she said, "Here's something a patient told me, he said it helps. Find some place on your body that doesn't hurt—maybe your left ear, maybe a hand, your tongue, maybe. Anything that isn't hurting—you concentrate on that. Think *only* about this place that isn't hurting. *Think* about it. I was told it really helps."

She went away.

He tried her recommendation. Maybe it helped.

When the light in the door-window was changing, Hans and Klaus came in. They boosted him up and untied the jacket. His arms were so stiff he could barely pull them free.

All dirty and naked as he was, he was led back through the empty corridor and pushed onto the bed. He was careful to say nothing, not to resist in any way. He had done some thinking.

The point was, to get out of here. Ending his life here was just plain impossible, they'd convinced him

of that. He was terminally "safe," all right.

So he had to get out their way. He had to go along. Grin, pretend to be getting better, stand everything. No asking even for Maalox. No arguing about gradual detoxification. Even smile at Miss Plastic...

Could he do it? Oh, Christ, Oh Christ, for even a quarter of an M-tab! He was so weak, so weak. Could he do all that cold, keep it up?

*He had to.*

After all, they thought he was headed home, they couldn't keep him here forever. And he guessed they were overcrowded—there'd been a lot of beds visible through the grille, in the big domed room he'd woken up in. Probably they were eager to mark him "cured" and get shut of him. Probably they were eager to see that their savage system worked, that he was successfully "detoxed."

He smiled grimly lying in his dirt and shame. He'd be playing to an audience that wanted to believe.

So he tried. Almost falling, with weakness, he carried his trays to the table, made himself eat, spoke friendly to the guys beside him, and didn't tell anybody when he got back to his room and threw it all up. The world spinning around him with dizziness, he paced the corridor, swinging his arms. "For exercise." The dark-haired nurse smiled at him. When Miss Plastic stuck her head in on her fifteen-minute checks, he made himself smile and greet her. Once he even apologized for giving her so much trouble. She smiled and said, "That's what we're here for, soldier." In his mind's eye he held a picture of what she'd be here for if he had a chance, and grinned back. He made a try at keeping his room clean, used the mop when a check was due.

But the trouble was, he wasn't getting any better, inside. The nights were hells of nightmare memories. And he grew not stronger but weaker, the weakness was like an iron yoke on his shoulders, and every effort left him dizzy and gasping. He hid this as well as he could, blaming his occasional falls on the loose hospital slippers. One day he made it to the showers, and nearly drowned himself fainting in the stall. He found the linen-room and clean pajamas, but it took him half an hour to get them on, leaning against the shelves, the room almost blacked out. Weaker day by day.

What was the plan—that his body must relearn to make the substances, as somebody had told him? What if his body wouldn't, what if he was too far gone? He didn't know much about his internal workings, nor care, but he did know that individuals varied greatly. What if he were the one who didn't recover, whose adrenaline gland or whatever had died? He felt he was running on a shrinking energy-supply, like an exhausted battery, each day less. He became genuinely frightened that he couldn't keep up the deception, that he would be stuck here with his unbearable memories forever.

But, miraculously, it worked. They *were* overcrowded in the detox wing. In less than a week he found himself ordered to move again, this time to a corridor with chairs in it, with open access to the space between the grilles, the "dayroom." At the far end of the corridor were normal double doors, giving onto a green gardeny-looking place. His room was no bigger; but he had a table, and the window, though screened, had clear glass and curtains. He went to it, looked out on a wall and a tangled garden. And the glass could be opened by a screw-handle through the screens! He made his trembling arms turn them wide, sank down on the chair to pant in the fresh air. Oh, god! For a moment he actually felt better.

On his second day there he was given "Grounds privilege." Hans came and unlocked the end doors and pointed out the path around the untended garden. "Take walks! Three a day." He went back in.

For a few minutes he couldn't believe it. Air! Openness! He buried his face in an overblown big red

rose flower. Perfume of wine, perfume of freedom.

Tentatively, slowly, he walked out along the path. An eight-foot chain-wire fence topped by triple barbed wire ran beside him. Nothing he could climb. The fence enclosed the garden and a piece of wild country with trees just outside it.

Just then a twinge of dysentery struck him. He pushed through the garden hedge toward a small grove of pines. They'd run the fence outside this. He could see why—the grove was edged with a shoulder-high growth of thorn-bushes. He fought his way through these to a tiny clearing in the center. Here he stopped, warned by a familiar smell. It took him an instant to locate the cause, under the blanket of pine-needles.

For sure, the fencing team hadn't bothered to check out this grove. A dead GI lay among the needles, his M-30 by his outstretched hand. The hand was almost gone to bone; the body was weirdly shrunken and desiccated under its shell of body-armor. He must have been killed when they finally took San Izquierda. But Don stopped not to think of this—with a strangled cry he flung himself down beside the dead man, his hand clawing at the inside pocket of the rigid vest.

And—oh, god in heaven!—it was there!

Incredulous, he drew out the small yellow case, opened it with fingers all but out of control. It was—full! Oh, precious, precious—he stared at the rows of Ms, the slot of Bzs, the line of Sleepers. Here, in his hand. Carefully, carefully, he drew out an M and closed the box, before swallowing it. What incredible luck, come to save him just as he was at his last strength!

Then his body made its needs felt again, and he hastily dropped his pants. Squatting there, he saw that the dead man had been on the same mission—his armor pants were down. Somebody had seen him, or was waiting there, the corpse's lowest parts were blown away, gray fragments of pelvis sticking out of the long-dead meat. Big black tarry puddle, mess, so old that the flies were almost gone. Death finished up quickly down here. But leaving him the priceless pack in his hands, the first faint glow stealing through his veins.

Where to hide it?

Under his leg bandage. Then he rose and made his way carefully back to the path, around to the door. On his way he noticed that the big link fence had a set of gates, chained and padlocked.

He knocked on the glass, and Hans presently let him back in, locking up behind him.

"Great walk," he babbled at Hans. "Makes you feel better already."

In his room he took careful thought. Here they didn't do the fifteen-minute check, but no telling when someone would come in. Finally he took the pills out of the case, and hid them by ones and twos, in the hems of the curtain, under the edge of the electric outlet, in a crack around the back of the can, and other nooks. He wouldn't forget where they were, not he! At supper-time he slipped the empty box, twisted out of recognition, into the waste-can that came with the trays.

Dinner that night was a time of glory. The weakness had faded to a mild fatigue, all pains were gone; the M was affecting him the way it used to, giving a rosy glow of alertness, all trouble far away. He talked to people, asked them questions and listened to the answers, even helped one of the zombies from the detox corridor to find his tray. The man grunted at him; looking closely at his eyes, Don saw the redness left by BZs not quite gone. His arm was in a heavy sling, sticking out from his side. "It'll get better," Don told him gently. "You just have to put up with the shit." The man grunted again.

Seeing Miss Plastic, Don saluted her cheerfully and told her that the garden walk had really set him up. Better be careful, he warned himself. I'm acting drunk. He toned down his grin.

She frowned. "If you're going to be going outside, soldier, you'd better wear some clothes."

"Clothes?"

"In the laundry room you'll find fatigues. That's what they're there for."

Better and better. On his way back to his room he collected a set that seemed to have all its buttons and parts. The laundry here was done by rock-crusher, he thought merrily, glowing with all-rightness.

That night he had his Sleeper, and slept for the first time, sweetly, without dreams. Whatever the war had brought was far away and somebody else's story.

His last thought was that he must be systematic, ration the pills. They had to get him back to the front. He knew now that he was hooked; with the tabs he was normal, without them he was a sick shadow. And the front was where they were. It wouldn't be hard to break away and head there; not many people went AWOL *to* the fighting. And with a little fast talking, any unit would take him in.

The next days passed like floating flowers. Again and again he had to caution himself not to act too euphoric, but no one seemed to see anything odd. Even the dark-haired nurse accepted his story of what the garden and the flowers had done for him, and smiled tenderly.

Then came the morning when everybody but he seemed to know he'd be leaving the next day, with four or five other guys who had been detoxed.

That afternoon he found out something else, too. Had he miscalculated or forgotten? Whichever, he could locate no more Ms. Search as he would, there were none. The NDs and the BZs were okay, but no Maintenance. What the hell, he'd been without before, he could make it.

But as the hours dragged by and the insects began to show up again, his resolve weakened. He fingered a red BZ. They were supposed to be for when you were in actual contact with the enemy. But here, far from the front, what could they do to him? He couldn't recall any bad effects, except a burst of strength...

A nonexistent termite column crawled under his waistband, he writhed to scratch it. A minute later he had to do it again. Oh, god, not this... if he watched himself carefully, didn't let anyone look too closely at his eyes, it'd be all right.

He popped the BZ.

... As he'd thought, nothing happened except that he felt more alert and the bugs faded out. Colors seemed lighter and brighter, too. Hell, BZs are only some kind of super pep-pill, he thought. But he'd gotten sloppy; he was standing right in front of the window, where any stranger could look in and see him. Perfect target. He backed away, pulling the curtains to.

His mind drifted to his last day of combat. Hill Number thirteen-forty-seven, that's what they were taking. Down here they called mountains "hills." The front was well ahead of there by now, people said. But where was the enemy now?

He glanced worriedly around, opened a chink in the curtains and peered out. Nothing moving out there. Nothing in the corridor, either. Or, wait—his ears seemed to have sharpened—there were some footsteps up at the far end in the dayroom. Little tapping steps.

As he listened, they grew clearer, sharper. Heading his way now!

And he could catch a faint jangling sound. Aha, that would be the big key-ring Miss Plastic wore on her wrist.

*Enemy* sounds, coming along the wall. Coming for him?

Automatically he flexed his hands, fingered the callus on the outer edges of his palms. Had they grown soft? Did someone think they could take him, now? He sidled to the door, listening hard.

The footsteps were alone.

The little blonde nurse came on duty early again that afternoon. She takes extra duty a lot, partly because there is nothing to do in San Izquierda, but mostly because of a nagging sense of responsibility. Twice, coming back, she has found doors open that should have been locked. People were so sloppy. Right now, for instance, both the orderlies are out on lunch break together, quite contrary to orders. She looks round the dayroom; no hard cases here. But are the garden doors locked? The orderlies have grown specially careless about that, now that so many patients have Grounds privilege.

She decides to check them before she does the detox ward check.

She straps on her official key-ring, and starts down the empty corridor, tap-tap-tap.

As she passes one of the last doors, it opens silently and a shadowy face looks out, right into hers.

To cover her start, she smiles brightly and starts to say, "Hello, soldier."

They are the last sounds she ever utters.

She never knew what struck her throat, smashing the delicate larynx and crushing her vocal cords. She had no idea that the human hand could strike such a blow as the Army's sentry chop, no idea that she could be rendered voiceless before she had a chance to scream.

Bent over with pain, she feels herself being dragged into the room. Her clothes are being yanked up. She beats futilely at inhumanly strong hands. A voice says thickly, "You know I'm going to kill you afterwards?"

And then a smashing blow hits her face, breaking teeth, and another.

"You won't be a cute corpse."

The orderly he called Hans had given him the idea with his bed-search. Now Don heaves up the mattress, and flattens the little corpse on the sagging springs. No blood on him, no blood anywhere. He pulls the mattress back—there's scarcely a discernible mound. To disguise it he makes up the bed tight and neat. Anyone looking in would see a nice clean empty room, soldier.

Now to fix up a few little things, collect his pills and go. He has taken charge of the key-ring first thing; there were two padlock-type keys on it.

The corridor is empty, Hans and Klaus are nowhere to be seen. The garden door is locked, but the

first key he tries opens it smoothly. He slips out, locks up behind him. In a moment he is forcing his way into the little pine-grove.

Nothing has changed, except a few more pine-needles on the corpse's face. His first thought had been the gun and ammo—but wait, he'll need ident. He grabs the dead man's dog-tags. Its chain slices through the poor hollow shell of neck. Isidore West—he is Isidore West now. Isidore for San Izzy. West hadn't been carrying any papers, only a crumpled snapshot of a girl. Well, he'll be welcome wherever he turns up.

Maybe the body-armor would be a good idea too. Reluctantly he slides the dead man out of his jerkin, but can't bring himself to touch the fouled breeches. He shakes a big black beetle out of the vest, and gets it on under his fatigues, the usual way. Ammo belts on top.

Okay, now out the gate, the M-30 stuck into the loose fatigue legs. At the last minute he picks up two grenades West had been carrying, and hooks them on his belt.

The second key opens the fence-gate padlock, and he exits neatly before anyone comes out to the garden. Good; he doesn't want any more hassles, although he now has a neat place to stow any bodies. He resnaps the chain and lock behind him.

Outside is a gravel road. A sign points to San Izquierda, it carries a silhouette of a bus. Good. Transport is what he needs, and GIs can ride free on buses.

But he wishes he had a map. The front must be somewhere to the north—he can identify that by the sun—but where and how far? He recalls the company's maps, with their neatly-drawn lines and estimates of Gué position and strength, even his own company marked in. Somewhere up in the States men are sitting in peaceful rooms, drawing such lines. Numbering hills. Moving little tin soldiers over the terrain, as word comes to them.

He is one little soldier out of place, but the map-makers won't know that. He and Isidore West.

Chuffing behind him. He whirls, but it is only the San Izquierda bus, on its way out from the town. It stops beside him, right on cue, and a girl gets out. For a flash, he thinks it's the girl who chopped his nails. But no matter now; he hops in and hobbles back down the aisle, still concealing his gun. The BZ feels like it's running low. He sits down on the back seat, fishes out another and swallows.

The bus holds only a few passengers; three women with babies, a few very old women and men, two or three children, baskets of chickens, and a pig with a rope on its hinder legs.

He waits till the hospital is well behind them before slipping out the gun. It needs cleaning badly, but it's functional. Cradling it in one arm, he makes his way up to the driver.

"Where are the Guévaristas now?" he asks in his painful Spanish.

"Nada, nada," the driver seems amused.

"But where is the fighting?" Don persists. "I am lost." As he says it he realizes he's saying he has perished, so he tries again. "*Me equivocado*—I've made a mistake. *Dondé*—where are they? *Mis amigos* are there. I must go to my friends."

"Ah!" The driver gestures grandly ahead. "*Al norte*—far, *muy lejos*, very far."

"Ah," he says in his turn, "*Gracias*. I go with you to the north. I do not want to go back to San Izquierda."

"Si."

He turns and heads back to his seat, nearly falling over the pig.

At the next stop an old woman with chickens gets off and a boy on crutches swings himself on. He is minus one foot, the leg ends in a dirty sock strapped up. He looks a very young sixteen. As he sits down Don sees that he is wearing Gué uniform pants under his smock, and his one boot is Gué combat issue. A wounded veteran, apparently, left behind when the front moved on. The boy casts him a sharp look, then turns his head away.

Don flinches, takes out another BZ. But it doesn't work fast enough to prevent him from thinking of those easy-living men up home in their war-rooms, drawing lines on maps, moving their tin soldiers.

The bus keeps chuffing northward, now and then stopping to let people off. Going home after a day in San Izquierda. Here and there in the woods are tucked little Maya-style *casitas*, each with its tiny corn-and-melon-and-bean plot. Almost all have a papaya tree leaning close to the roof.

The bus passes a hamlet. Here almost all the houses have been burned and gutted, but two old men get off. The boy with one foot is still aboard, talking to a middle-aged woman. His tone sounds angry.

Don can't help staring at him, feeling adrenalin pump a little. Had this lad been one of those who had ambushed B Company, back before Hill thirteen-forty-seven? A lot of his comrades bought it then. It was well inside Bodégua, but no one knew how far. The border was mushy here, it supposedly followed a mountain ridge that divided and divided again. *It's their country*, a voice had kept saying in Don's head. Just as the pants that boy was wearing were the official uniform of their army. However unsavory their government, it was theirs. Not his, to invade and shoot up their sons. But this was the *enemy*, a limb of International Atheist Red Communism. He didn't look much like the enemy, or a limb of anything now.

The boy laughs sharply at something the woman is saying, and turns to glance at Don. "*Yanqui*," he says under his breath, or seems to say—the bus is making so much noise it's hard to be sure. "*Yanqui* assassin." He looks hard at Don, meeting his eyes, then suddenly seems to see something that changes his mood. He slumps in his seat, saying something to the woman. She gathers her baskets, gets off at the next stop.

It comes to Don that his eyes must be reddening from the BZs and the boy had seen that and knew that Don was a berserker. They know about BZs, all right.

The bus has turned off the main road, and seems to be circling back toward San Izquierda. He'll have to get off and start looking for a ride north.

Suddenly the boy cocks his head to listen. The bus stops, and Don can hear it too now—the heavy rumble of six-by-sixes. In a moment it comes in sight on the road they'd left—a long convoy of camouflage-painted trucks and weapons-carriers. American soldiers were crowded in the trucks, hanging their legs out over the tailgates. That would be replacements and supplies headed for the front. That's the kind of ride he wants to catch. And that must be the main road to the front, too. He'll get out here and go back and wait.

Just as he's making his way up to the doors, there comes another sound. The crippled boy gives a peculiar whistle. Then Don hears it—under the convoy's noise and the bus's engine is a steady slapping beat—a chopper. Probably guarding the convoy. But wait a minute—the sound isn't right. He twists to stare out the back window and catches a glimpse.

No mistaking—the ugly square end of a Krasny 16, guns sticking out. A Gué fireship, out after the



convoy.

Meanwhile guns have opened up ahead, from something he can't see. The fireship slides neatly sideways, out of sight over the ridge. All sounds cease.

For a second Don has a double flash; BZs sometimes do that to you. It's so peaceful here, in an ordinary bus on a quiet country road, the pines rustling in the soft wind. He feels disastrously out of place.

And then the sun flashes on copter blades beyond the ridge, and there's the racket of guns and thuds out of view to the right. The people in the bus come to life in a general stampede for the doors. They know a bus could be a target, they'd rather take their chances by ones and twos in the brush. The pig screams.

But the driver resists. He shouts "San Izquierda! San Izquierda!" and the bus starts fast. People are pounding on the doors, yelling at him to stop. Don is beside him now, he grabs the emergency brake, but it has no effect. He gets his foot down on the brake, the driver pushes him and tries to punch him away. Don punches back. The bus wobbles to a stop, the doors open, and people pour out, including the boy on crutches. At the last minute, the driver yells something and dives for the door after them, leaving Don alone in the bus.

Panting, he sits down in the driver's seat to consider. Now he really has transport—he can turn this thing around and follow the convoy till the gas gives out.

There's a crossroad just ahead. But as he looks, it fills up, first with cattle, then with a bunch of civilian-looking cars, obviously waiting for the cows to clear. Clean, expensive-looking cars with fender flags on them. Even the escort jeeps are shiny clean, with little flags too. Obviously it's some kind of high-level party touring here. They seem unaware of the Gué fireship behind him. Senior-looking civilians, shining generals, and a woman, have gotten out, are staring around at the scenery, looking at San Izquierda which must be right below them. To Don's amazement, several of the men produce cameras and start to take photos. *Tourists*, by God, Don thinks.

And then corrects himself. These aren't tourists—these are, these are some of the easy-living men he'd dreamed of, the ones sitting in front of big terrain maps, drawing lines, while their aides move little soldiers and flags around.

Without thinking, he has popped another BZ.

Without thinking, he has started the bus. Automatically, he unhooks the two grenades and arms them. Meticulously, he breaks out the front window with his gun-butt, then reverses the gun to point out.

The men ahead are getting into their cars, all bunched together.

Good.

A raging fury he has never experienced roars through his body. Do those men know, can they guess, that the little figures they move around are real live men and boys, boys who bleed?

The front, the Guévaristas, fade far away. His foot slams down on the accelerator, the old bus churns forward. Faster, faster yet. Don is half-crouched now, his rifle through the empty windshield. Standing on the gas, steering with one elbow, he takes aim. Faster yet the bus surges forward, dead toward them. The grenades tick. The first burst comes from his rifle, finding targets. Then another. Screams.

—And Don Still, standing on the gas on his glory ride, fires, fires, fires—his enemy in his sights at last.

**The End**