

Finally, the Lord ordered the elimination of every single thing that in any way reminded people of Suchu.

The bridge was torn down, the stump of the paulownia tree was uprooted, and I was driven away to the far side of the river. Yet it was said among the people in the marketplace that the story of Suchu's death was an obvious lie, for his songs continued to be sung.

Even now, each day at sunrise, holding his fluttering tongue close to my breast, I walk to the riverbank to greet Suchu.

Pagoda

Hwang Suk-Young

When I arrived at R Point from Headquarters, I couldn't understand why only nine soldiers had been sent on this senseless mission.

When I left HQ I thought the area had great strategic value. That I had been selected from among four candidates was purely accidental, but to the others the coincidence seemed fortunate. For a long time I had been living the life of a tourist, as part of a mixed patrol dispatched from a joint American-Korean support division. The American base rose like a vast city on the sand alongside the shore. When I first debarked from the LST [Landing ship, tank—Trans.] through the swirling sands, I was astonished to see mountains of scrap metal standing in a field. Shell casings, damaged heavy equipment, and ration tins had been left to rust. Above the nearby oil-soaked latrine, smoke from burning garbage and excrement rose dense and black.

I had spent a sleepless first night on the transport ship in the coastal waters. Unfamiliar, yet Asian, lights flashed beyond the dense veil of darkness, not from the windows of dwellings but from an observation tower, from flares, from shelling, and from the constant ascent and descent of helicopters. I sat on the cable that spanned the upper deck, swinging back and forth to calm my uneasy anticipation. I seemed to sense through the waves the sufferings and cries of this unknown land. There was no odor of salt when dawn brought the sun up from beneath the water, no scent of earth or forest, but only the smell of gasoline.

I'll never forget the time I was lost after receiving orders to join the dispatched patrol. I was wandering near a pier where stevedores were bustling. I was wearing a new jungle uniform on which the camouflage pattern was still vivia. On one shoulder I carried an uncommonly beat-up M-1 rifle and on the other, nearly dragging

the ground, a primitive pack stuffed with newly issued supplies. I walked up and down between the crates stacked in front of the military rations depot cold storehouse and tried to get oriented. Sweat poured from my temples. My helmet pressed on my forehead and I had to keep pulling up the constantly slipping straps of both my rifle and my pack. A young, fair-haired sentry who had been watching me approached and offered to help. I told him my unit and the name of the patrol I was assigned to, and he informed me with a smile that my patrol was quite a distance from this supply depot. Here and there, lights were already coming on. Soldiers carrying canteen cups and kits were heading for the mess hall. The sentry was kind enough to make numerous calls on my behalf, and at last word came that a vehicle was to be sent for me. He let me rest in his office while I waited. He said something in English when he handed me part of his sandwich, and I managed to make out the word "lonely." I chewed and swallowed the tender ham. Tears filled my eyes as if I were a child, and the fair-haired sentry offered me a drink. He too looked forlorn. He pointed into the distance with one hand and said, "Home is so far away."

The sergeant in charge of the Korean patrol had under his command a number of other soldiers as well as myself. I spent each day routinely maintaining various military vehicles, and patrolling Highway 1. Amid the dust, wearing plastic goggles that came down almost to the tip of my nose, I directed the incessant parade of heavy equipment, LVTs [Landing vehicle, tracked.—Trans.], tanks, and jeeps safely on their way. Afternoons, I drove along Highway 1 with two Americans, sitting at a 30mm machine gun. We took charge of prisoners from reconnaissance units covering villages; escorted agents to intelligence headquarters; and swept the road for booby traps, calling in the engineer corps when one turned up. By the time I returned to the base each evening, my arms, neck, chin, and cheeks up to the line of my goggles were coated with a layer of red dirt. Once I scraped it from my face with my fingernails to see how much there was—a ball the size of a big plum. I thought of comrades I had left behind and of men in combat. Often, feeling a conflict, I resolved that tomorrow, without fail, I would go to the front, I would go.

Days when I felt as if something heavy had been laid upon my chest were followed by sleepless nights. I received bad news from home; at the prison camp I saw boy-soldiers and women; while

patrolling the narrow roads deep in the jungle I saw the aftermaths of massacres; I saw corpses of our soldiers being returned on a patrol jeep. All this tormented me, but the conflict between me and the sergeant who commanded the patrol was even worse. He ordered me to buy numberless television sets and refrigerators from the PX with forged ration cards, and forced me to excavate a tunnel to allow him to connect with soldiers in the supply unit. As if to teach us a lesson, the sergeant made us crawl on the beach every morning in the presence of American soldiers, causing us to feel deeply humiliated. Every day I regretted that I had not chosen to become an officer when I'd had the chance, or volunteered to go to the front. Apart from such conflicts, my everyday life was like that of a tourist, compared to that of my comrades in battle. Twice a day we were served cooked meals instead of canned rations. After a nightly shower, we slept on air mattresses beneath mosquito nets. On our two off-duty days each month, we could drink cold beer and go to the shows presented at the open theater on the beach. We could even buy the services of a woman; at first this was somewhat awkward, but after the women's faces became familiar, we grew used to it. The women were village wives, refugees, from whom sweet smiles and alluring shapes were not to be expected. In the blackness of a dark hut, a small lump of brown flesh quivering on the bamboo bed looked pathetic, like my own body. I spent one night during a raid lying on top of a woman's belly, holding a loaded .45 in one hand. The enemy turned the village inside out but left without discovering me.

The reason I was called to R Point was that our regiment was moving north, and it was absolutely necessary to expand coverage to the new perimeter. The monsoons had already arrived, but the enemy offensive had begun and we were ordered to move from south to north to take part in the defense of the major cities. Headquarters intended to have government troops maintain order in our sector, which was quiet at present. The meticulously planned operation commenced at the beginning of the month; the entire brigade cautiously installed themselves, by companies, into new positions. I unluckily happened to be assigned to one of the two companies that stayed behind for the last week of the transfer of the compound to the government troops.

There had been an intense battle at R Point before I arrived there. The enemy quickly withdrew, but there were several casualties and

some reinforcements were needed to fill their place. Six were available to be dispatched; the others had either gone to the front or been ordered to the new perimeters, so it was clear that one of us would be sent to R. I suggested we play cards to decide, and everyone agreed. We played a little while, until the patrol vehicle was to depart for the highway. The day was plagued by bad luck. I drew the weakest hand, so I had to report my departure to the captain. Re-membering my time on tourist-like duty, I resigned myself to this assignment without resentment. All the others had gone to fight at the front several times before, or had been through other hellish times in shitty conditions.

"Good luck, we'll meet again after the move," they said as they handed me some extra ammunition and a new automatic rifle in place of the old one I had been using, which tended to jam. All I knew about R sector was that there the national highway branched three ways, making it a control center for traffic. In the vicinity were abandoned sites of withdrawn supply depots. A master sergeant from the company picked me up in a jeep and we sped out to the highway. The soldier who was driving, wary of snipers, crouched with his head almost touching the steering wheel and pressed the accelerator to the floor. The vehicle passed gloomy shadows through the thick jungle.

When we arrived, the soldiers were eating. A line of South Vietnamese convoys was passing by, raising clouds of dust, but the soldiers, unconcerned, went on devouring their food. Some Vietnamese soldiers rode by on top of armored personnel carriers and trucks. Seeing several lonely Korean marines sitting by the highway, they gave a thumbs-up sign.

"Eat it, bastards!" hissed the young sergeant. He walked over to our jeep. His hair had grown down onto his neck; his slanted eyes tensed and flashed. His dark, weathered face wore a boyish expression. He didn't even look my way.

The master sergeant, his eye on me, said to this young sergeant, "Here's your replacement."

"Only one?" muttered the young sergeant, and he spat artfully through his teeth. "There are only nine of us including this one replacement, you know. And the conditions at the main unit are better than here. I'm saying that nine men are risking their necks just to guard a useless thing like that," said he, looking back.

The master sergeant said, "This is an order. You may lack the manpower, but you ought to manage."

"If it was an ambush rather than useless guard duty, we could handle it somehow."

The master sergeant half-listened to the sergeant's complaint and summoned the driver with a nod. As the vehicle left, he shouted,

"Hold out! Only three more days!"

A frown on his face, the sergeant saluted rigidly. He looked absurd. I approached him as he stood stiffly in the middle of the road and spoke to him.

"I'm Private Oh, the replacement."

He glanced at me, and said in an unnaturally low voice, "Report properly."

"Sir?"

I was sickened. Petty despot sergeant bastard.

"You must have been on vacation. Report!"

I moved directly in front of him, stood straight at attention and rattled off at length my name, rank, serial number. I said I was reporting as ordered on a transfer to R, blah, blah, blah. Meanwhile he took a thick cigar from his thin lips, and listened to some soldiers who were chuckling nearby. Their laughter burned in my ears. At sundown, after the parade of Vietnamese had passed, the highway became as empty as a hospital corridor. The veil of dust floated off over the jungle. I stood at attention like a fool until the sergeant walked away. I choked down the curses that hovered on the tip of my tongue. Among the soldiers I saw Private Moon, waving. I went over and sat down beside him.

"What kind is he, easy to get along with or what?"

"Well . . . he's a clever bastard, let's say, but green."

"Competent?"

"That bastard doesn't show a speck of flexibility. He was in the top one percent in noncom school. Our lives are in his hands."

"That son of a bitch ought to know this is no school."

Private Moon laughed.

"In a different situation, he would probably give us formal drilling."

Moon handed me my share of the rations, and while I was eating he broke his M-16 automatic apart into three sections and diligently polished it. He watched intently while I gobbled my food and said, "When a Vietnamese truck comes by, jump on and head for the base."

I was puzzled. His face was serious; he couldn't be joking.

"If you go to the base, the American transport ship will be there, won't it? I mean, get on the ship and disappear to a different sector."

"What are you talking about?"

"I was assigned to R Point, but you were just unlucky enough to be sent here as a replacement, right?"

"Are you going to be responsible when I am court-martialed and shot?"

The absurdity of my question made us both laugh.

"Here or there, spilt blood looks the same," Moon said. "To be shot is not so bad, but if you get captured you'll be torn apart and hung from a tree. Do you know what we're doing here?" With one eye closed, he inspected the muzzle of his gun and said, "The officers are out of their minds." He turned his head and pointed across the road with the disassembled barrel. "Go and see. And think it over. Decide for yourself whether the orders are sane."

Still eating, I got up with the tin in my hand. Across the road three block-house sentry posts had been built where the supply depot used to be. Since the sentry boxes were set apart from the camp, at the intersection of three roads, one would expect to see something important nearby, but only empty space and a dense forest could be seen.

"There's nothing here, but they couldn't have built those boxes to guard the road."

Private Moon shook his head.

"Come to think of it, what's our mission here at R? Is there some kind of advantage in guarding the roads around an abandoned supply depot?"

"There's a pagoda."

"A pagoda?"

"There used to be a temple here. The temple was bombed and then leveled by bulldozers, but because of the villagers' pleas the pagoda was spared. Nothing else was left standing. Because of the pagoda's importance to Vietnamese morale, we have been holding it since the beginning of our occupation here. We are to prevent the enemy from removing the pagoda; eventually we'll hand it over to the Vietnamese army. Who except fools would think that such a thing need be kept? They talk about tactical value and political value and so on, but if you ask me, this whole stinking war has been too tactical from the start."

Now when I understood that our mission was to guard a little toylike pagoda, I was annoyed because I had been afraid during the jeep ride here. In truth, the thing we were protecting seemed to be too run-down to merit the honorable word "pagoda." It was nothing but a piece of stone the height of two men, standing in the field between a sentry box and the forest.

Using what looked like a crude technique, the stone had been carved into a shape that was nearly a hexagonal. Here and there in the midsection were indistinct carved characters. When I inspected the upper part more closely, I gradually realized that it was not so crude. Near the top was a relief of a seated Buddha surrounded by dancers' flowing robes; this section appeared to be original, while the remainder seemed to have been added later. The eroded Buddha figure seemed mysterious in juxtaposition to the sharp outlines of the women's delicate fingers, the long sashes, and the trains of their robes. The Buddha, I suppose, was the object of the love and attachment of the village people. When there was no cannon smoke and no sound of guns, and when the bells of the temple, garbed in forest shadows, resounded far and wide, perhaps the peasants passing with their children and animals knelt down piously, facing the pagoda.

It must have been expected for a long time that the People's Liberation Front would attempt to retake the pagoda for propaganda purposes. The South Vietnamese leaders must have recognized this and brought it to the attention of our command. During earlier patrols I had been surprised at the religious fervor of the villagers. In front of the houses were incense burners from which smoke rose like the peasants' mounting desire for peace, and inside each house a Buddhist altar was arrayed. The never-extinguished incense represented incessant prayer. Even when the villagers abandoned their homes and lands to take refuge in the relative safety of the city, they carried the incense burners next to their hearts. It was apparent to all that the pagoda had the same tactical value as a river, a bridge, or any other advantageous site; whichever side held the pagoda would be certain to receive the confidence of the villagers and the divine protection of the Buddha.

We gathered to eat in front of a wall of sandbags that had formerly protected the supply battalion. The deserted buildings once occupied by the withdrawn battalion were now of foremost con-

cern. The wooden barracks and numerous bunkers were possible places of concealment for guerrillas infiltrating from the thick jungle. South along the highway, past a PS barbed-wire barricade, there was a village made up of white mud huts painted with varicolored designs; on the other side of the highway was a long stretch of peanut fields. At the far end of the highway, near the village and fields, was a bridge. According to the strategic map it was called Bridge B, and Americans in three LVTs patrolled the riverbank there. As our final defense line, we were supposed to use a chest-deep trench that had been dug for a water pipeline near the sentry boxes surrounding the pagoda. From this point could be seen, directly to the south, Bridge B; to the west, the deserted battalion camp; and to the east beyond the crossroads, peanut fields that merged into bamboo forest.

On the far side of the bamboo forest was high ground that, judging from the map, dominated the surrounding plain. Moon said that, thanks to the sergeant's entreaty, a detachment of sharpshooters had been stationed on those heights. Up along a trunk line to the east was a run-down unit headquarters where two companies were based. In the lowlands behind the pagoda there were only some sparse and stubby banana trees, so one man was enough to stand guard there; two sentries were needed to man the sandbag wall where we had eaten earlier. The other five took up firing positions along the horse-shoe line of the pipeline trench. I inspected the springs of my magazine and chamber, and oiled the working parts of my automatic rifle. One of the squad, originally a light machine gunner, fearlessly brought from the village a brimming pot of home-brewed liquor. This fellow was always ravenous. Even in the midst of battle, he would gorge himself, and whenever he had a chance he would pick peppers and cabbage, and stuff them into his gas mask so that later he could make *kinchi* in his cartridge boxes. We filled our canteens with the leftover liquor. He said, "The villagers asked if they could tear down the barracks and take the wood."

"For free?"

"No, tomorrow's New Year's. They said they would kill some chickens for us."

The villagers had been coveting the wooden buildings of the battalion camp, the thick lumber, and the iron bars of the bunkers. Lumber was precious to them; they used it as fuel and also to construct

sturdy air-raid shelters. Although they lived in the middle of a thick forest, it never occurred to them to fell trees. Even for their cooking fires they used scrap paper and ration crates gathered around the camp. The sergeant came toward us.

"This property belongs to the government. Nobody can lay hands on it. You're supposed to fire at any trespassers."

"What property? We'll soon be gone."

"Now, while the sun is out, let's build houses."

The sergeant ordered me to station myself in front of the sandbag wall with the radio. He ordered the other soldiers to their places. Coils of barbed wire were spread across the road, and sandbags were stacked in front of the trench.

"Bring out that bastard," said the sergeant, pointing at the first sentry box. One of the soldiers brought out a man of about thirty. His hands were bound behind him. As he emerged from the dark sentry box, the man squinted and rapidly looked about. He wore black pajamas and sandals made from tires. His arms and legs were covered with ulcers, and his diseased eyes streamed with water.

"Who's that? Prisoner?" I asked the infantryman assigned to the radio post with me.

"A hostage. We captured him in the battle yesterday."

"Why wasn't he sent to the prisoners' camp?"

"There's nothing like a camp here. We would be in the same shape if we were captured. The camp has been moved far from here. When R Point was evacuated, headquarters sent word that the prisoners' camp was expendable."

"So he amounts to cover from enemy fire."

"He's a shield for the pagoda."

The hostage was tied to the pagoda; sitting docilely, he stared at the distant forest. Beyond the desolate camp the equatorial sun, a well-ripened mango, floated above the darkened jungle. From the swamp the chorus of lizards was boiling up, and in the forest the screeches of monkeys were heard. The sharp and piercing sounds and the monotonous chattering went on and on.

The sergeant wore a flak jacket on his bare back and a red cap with a "MARINE" patch on his head in place of a helmet. He carried a PRC6 radio across the road and set it down next to us. Chewing gum, he said, "If anything comes up, turn on the transmitter switch and send the signal twice."

"How long, I asked him, do we have to stay here? . . ."

"Until the company withdraws."

His answer was vague. If I had asked when we would withdraw, he would have said when the government troops moved in. If I had asked when they would move in, he would have said that that would depend on orders. That bastard was like a puppet.

"Sergeant, call from HQ."

"Who is it?"

"Master sergeant."

"You handle it. What is it, more reinforcements maybe? Are we to withdraw? A change in plans?"

"He asked for some coordinates."

"Go get the map and read off the important points. Will they give us an artillery barrage?"

"Two 81mm guns have been allocated."

"Big help." He looked into the thick darkness of the forest.

"There'll be no stopping them if they come this way."

After the sergeant left, the infantryman and I buried a line of electric directional claymore mines beyond the sandbag wall.

"Yesterday's battle was pretty fierce, huh?" I asked.

"It was no battle, it was terror. We were done for without getting off a single shot."

"Was it at night?"

"No, in full daylight. . . . We were sitting together cleaning our weapons. . . ."

The traffic had cleared out a little. Cicadas droned noisily. A motorcycle could be seen some distance away, approaching at full speed and raising huge plumes of dust. A man sitting behind the driver seemed to take off his hat for an instant. Suddenly a potato-like object flew from his raised hand. Someone cried, "Grenade!" At the sound of the explosion, firing at once erupted from the deserted village houses along the road to the south. Several men fell. A quick-thinking sharpshooter and a senior team leader ran behind the houses and captured a prisoner. He had been carrying a map and a revolver, and apparently they suspected him of being the leader.

We put out our cigarettes and took our canteens from our cartridge belts to have a sip of the village liquor, which had a faint mildew odor. The last rays of the setting sun, shredded by the forest

branches, began to fade, and presently the grayness of dusk descended.

"Private Oh, what were you doing?" asked the infantryman.

"A patrol."

"I mean before you joined the army."

"Well, I traveled."

"Business?"

"No, just away from the family."

"What's your plan? When you return . . ."

"I don't know, I'll have to see after I get out. It'll be hell if war breaks out there."

"Back home. . . . Hope this kind of war never happens again. Though I don't remember well, I'm told my family went through a lot of suffering."

"How old were you then?"

"Two. They carried me on their backs all the time."

"I was able to walk on our way to the south. That winter I had a bad time with frostbite."

"Get some sleep. I'll take the first shift alone; later we'll rotate."

"I don't think I can sleep."

"If I hadn't gone AWOL I would have been discharged and home by now."

"Were you in trouble?"

"As soon as I got out of the division stockade I was sent here. When I go home . . . with my allowance I'll buy some land and raise goats."

"Well, enough of such talk."

Already I regretted having talked so much. Everyone must feel the same sense of vacuity after engaging in such babbling; if I have a lot of money . . . if I survive . . . if I'm not too old . . . if I become a prisoner . . . if I escape . . . and so on.

"Don't you have any small hopes, Private Oh?"

"What's the point of empty talk?"

The infantryman and I were silent for a while, and I indulged in various fantasies, drawing each one out, cherishing its flavor as if it were chewing gum.

"Listen! What's that sound?"

In the distance we heard a constant sound like the drumming of bamboo staves. The sound gradually came nearer, moving around the edge of the forest. Here and there, wooden gongs joined in.

"The enemy has come."

The infantryman pulled back the bolt of his gun and loaded it. The drumming continued for a long while and then abruptly ceased; after a moment a penetrating whistle was heard. A multitude roared in unison, then there was total silence.

"They toyed with us all last night, too."

They roared once more and resumed drumming. Again the sound stopped; the quiet had a sharp edge of tension. The silence grated on our nerves.

"What are they up to?" I asked, "If they keep us awake like this every night . . ."

"They are looking for a showdown. In the meantime, they'll work on driving us crazy."

"Maybe they're trying to lure us into the forest."

"Anyone would lose his mind after several endless nights of listening to that."

It sounded like someone barked an order, and then many voices could be heard. A strange festive sound crossed the jungle and pervaded our position, bringing uneasiness to the sentries. A call came in on the radio. I put the receiver to my ear. In a whisper the dispatcher said,

"Soldier, don't talk, just listen. Don't fire without an order. Report in advance no matter how desperate it gets."

Lightning flashed in the distant sky, followed by rolling thunder.

A hot, humid wind arose.

"Looks like it'll rain again."

"Do we have rangear?"

"All we have are short navy ponchos. Do you want to put on some mosquito repellent?"

"No, I can't stand the stuff."

I hated the goo they gave us, because of the sticky olive oil and the stink. Even if it meant getting malaria I would drink the stuff before I'd put it on my skin. Just before a rain, the jungle mosquitoes are at their worst, swarming wildly. On this night they attacked voraciously. I let them suck my blood to their heart's content. My face and arms became swollen. The itch seemed to lessen my nervous tension. I heard a gun report, as clear as the crack of glass marbles colliding. The echo reverberated through the forest. From Bridge B, the Americans began to spray with their machine guns.

Rifles and automatic fire from both sides resounded in waves, accompanied by the shattering-glass sound of shelling. The infantryman said,

"The enemy is trying to destroy the bridge."

"It looks like the Yanks are exhausted, too. The enemy has a cannon?"

"It would be simple for them to wipe us out with their recoilless rifle. But they won't. The very thing that we are guarding keeps them from doing so."

"The pagoda . . . or is it the hostage?"

"Both. They can't destroy the pagoda if they expect to gain the villagers' trust. They have a strong sense of camaraderie as well."

The firing continued, and the forest near the bridge was illuminated with exploding shells. The two sides began exchanging close fire. Flares rose continuously; overhead, helicopters chopped through the air. Two gunships took turns strafing.

The battle continued. Noise and white smoke rose, and then an enormous explosion was heard as if something had collapsed all at once. For a moment flames flared high above the bridge, brightening the sky with red light. Gunships had long been circling. Now they moved across the jungle, letting loose with heavy machine gun fire, and then slowly, as if hesitantly, they flew away.

"The bridge must be gone," I whispered, "that's what the enemy was after."

"Idiot! Now the Vietnamese transport network will be paralyzed. Operations will be delayed."

"Our withdrawal will be that much later, too." No guerrillas could be seen approaching R point. The flames gradually burned out and animal sounds echoed across the jungle, mingling with the sounds of waves beating on distant cliffs. Stiff winds blew through the deep, dark forest, breaking like serpentine waves on a night sea. Big raindrops fell on our arms and necks. The sound of drops hitting our helmets reverberated in our inner ears. We had put on our ponchos as soon as the rain started, but our teeth chattered from the cold of our soaking pants. Counting on the rain's patter for cover, the infantryman reached into a pocket beneath his poncho and turned on the radio at low volume. Faint music from a far-away late-night broadcast floated through the air. A woman sang in a soft, drowsy tune in a dreamlike voice. Rain dripped steadily from our helmets. A sheet

of white mist blocked our view of the terrain. Each stroke of lightning revealed straight streaks of rain and bent shadows of trees. The infantryman and I began talking senselessly about the foods we used to eat at home. Tomorrow would be New Year's. I envisioned huge snowflakes falling back home, arriving like expected guests.

"How about some *dongchini* juice?"

"Reminds me of icicles hanging from the cornice. Mornings here are always unpleasant. Summer mornings at home are really beautiful."

"Have you ever fallen in love?" asked the infantryman.

"Nothing memorable."

"No girl friend?"

"I forget. Can't remember too well."

"At all?"

"Past civilian times now seem vague. When I get out, it'll come back to me. If I dwell on them I would probably pitch this rifle and disappear."

The infantryman yawned. He thought for a while and began to laugh softly.

"I was such a fool. Should have taken her on that day."

We listened for a minute to the incomprehensible prattle of the foreign moderator. Insane laughter erupted from the transistor radio. I could picture an audience full of laughing heads, thrown back and revealing as many vulvas, each the same, bouncing up and down. The voice on the radio suddenly ceased, followed by the sound of steady rain. The infantryman turned the muzzle to the front and took off the safety.

"What's that noise?"

I poked my head over the sandbag wall and scanned the ruins of the camp. Then I put my head to the ground and breathlessly listened with total concentration. I thought I could hear the sound of footsteps squishing on the wet ground, approaching and stopping, then I heard a sound like metal striking stone. It was very close.

"Keep down."

The sound of something being dragged persistently approached. I lifted the receiver and sent a message. The sergeant responded.

"What's wrong, enemy?"

"They are close by. Open fire?"

"No, wait."

"Claymore?"

"That'd be a waste. I'm coming right over."

Peering cautiously over the sandbags, we tried to observe the area. We saw the sergeant and another soldier run across the road, keeping low. Someone moved behind the broken-down bunker, fifty meters away. The bastard wasn't experienced at night infiltration. He froze on top of the bunker, lying with his dark figure fully exposed, but as I anxiously raised my gun to fire, the enemy hid himself, sliding to the rear.

"We should take him alive," said the sergeant. I disagreed. "Might be a trap. Let's open up."

"Must be a scout. He's alone."

"I'll take care of him."

The infantryman took off his helmet, placed it on the sandbag wall, removed his cartridge belt and pulled out a knife. He climbed over the wall with the knife between his teeth. He crawled toward the side of the bunker. Lightning flashed, and I saw him, a dark shape on the pale ground near the bunker, swiftly making his way around to the back. Silence. Since there were no sounds of fighting or screaming, I thought that the enemy might have slipped away from our infantryman. But he didn't appear from behind the bunker, and I suspected something was up. Suddenly we heard a shrill piercing whistle and loud drumming from the evacuated camp. We realized that the guerrillas had positioned themselves throughout the abandoned trenches and bunkers. What they wanted was a hostage.

The sergeant gripped my arm and said, "Tricked! I'll go put in a call for artillery. You two stay alert."

He crossed the road in order to communicate with the main force. In a minute, we saw the five-star signal flare he had shot rise into the sky. The five blue stars slowly melted into the darkness, traces trailing behind. Our support unit immediately began whistling.

We were informed that no more reinforcements would be forthcoming for R Point, and if things worsened it might be necessary for headquarters to terminate reconnaissance and motor patrol details. Our company commander also had repeatedly attempted to discuss the desperate isolation of R without any response. We learned from the wireless that the bridge guarded by the Americans had been completely destroyed the night before.

The piers of the bridge had been lost beyond salvage; unless the Americans could secure the highway for the construction of a pontoon bridge, it would be impossible for the government troops to establish advance positions. We were in despair. We also saw a Liberation Front flag waving at the top of a bamboo pole planted in the middle of the road: a star in a brilliant crimson field. Someone ran over, checked around the pole for bobby traps, pulled the flag down, and returned with it. The sky was still covered with dark clouds, all morning it drizzled with an occasional downpour. We posted two guards on either side of the road, and then spread our blankets on the ground in the sentry box. Some slept and others simply lay talking. The loud sound of a Caterpillar was heard.

"The Americans are pulling out."

A veteran standing at the window pointed outside. We ran out. A small contingent of Americans, sitting on three LVTs, was passing by. Rain-soaked, many of them were without helmets or flak jackets. They looked down at us with gloomy faces as they passed. Since the bridge was gone, there was no need for them to patrol the riverbank. They were returning to the base to await orders.

Someone said nervously, "Now we are alone at R."

"We'll get a concerted attack."

The rain stopped completely in the afternoon, and a sweltering sun came through the clouds. A reconnaissance squad set out. The sergeant stayed behind with the radioman and two others. We were ordered to keep within a thousand yards of R and to return as soon as possible if we encountered fire. The main enemy force may have withdrawn, yet a small rear guard in the vicinity might be waiting to ambush us. The company command sent orders to survey the perimeter areas around R and report back, and the literal-minded sergeant actually sent us out to do so. Headquarters had no doubts about our safety. A South Vietnamese militia force had set up an ambush between the jungle and the riverbank, cutting off enemy movements. Since we were scheduled to withdraw in three days the enemy wouldn't press an attack. Also, for political reasons—to keep the respect of the local people—there would be no attack on our squad that would endanger the pagoda.

The reconnaissance squad checked every single trench, wooden building, and bunker around the abandoned supply depot. In the trench we found our infantryman's shirt with his red nameplate on

it. Private Moon started to jump down into the trench to retrieve the shirt, but the veteran grabbed him.

"Wait, let's check it out."

The veteran laid down on his stomach and closely inspected the dirt on the floor of the trench, then stood up again. Unclaspings from his belt a loop of thin nylon cord with a hook at one end, he said,

"Just as I thought. Keep an eye on the trip wire."

When we looked closely, we could see a well-hidden wire running from a buttonhole in the shirt to a coil buried about a foot away. We took cover at a distance and watched the veteran detonate the booby trap. First he ran the hook beneath the wire, then he backed off to a safe position and pulled the line. After a couple of attempts, the bomb exploded; the shrapnel caused a shower of leaves and branches. We cautiously proceeded into the forest outside our compound. At the edge there was a swamp, muddy with shallow, stagnant water. Everywhere were tracks of sandals and bare feet. As we went deeper into the jungle, the sun was blocked by a luxuriant roof of leaves and penetrated to the ground only occasionally. The ground sloped slowly down until we reached a lowland basin shaped like a clamshell, so full of densely intertwined vines and brush that it was nearly impenetrable.

"We have to check the area around those huts down there," said the veteran.

"Should we go?"

In the middle of the forest, where the slope merged into a flat stand of large trees, a house that had been bombed was visible.

"We can see well enough from here," Private Moon said.

"Right, it looks like no enemy is around."

We didn't descend, but instead circled around the lowland. Reeds grew chest high; we came upon a muddy pool. In the middle floated a dark figure, inflated like a rubber ball. The charred corpse was swollen to the bursting point, legs the size of tree trunks. Swarming insects covered the putrefying corpse. The kill must have been made by the gunships the night before.

We walked toward the highway, leaving the forest behind. We reached open ground where knee-high cacti were growing. Here and there crimson cannas and azaleas were blooming. We saw a narrow path that led to the village located on the highway. The sun scorched our backs. With the plain before us, we lay on the sand

and surveyed the narrow path and the jungle. The sharpshooter and I zigzagged over the open ground, covering each other. A little way off from the village we saw several houses in a coconut grove. We lay on our stomachs to observe the village and waited for the veteran and Private Moon to come.

Before we went into the village we split into two pairs. The veteran and Private Moon were to make for the heart of the village, and then proceed to the deep well by the highway. The sharpshooter and I would meet them at the well after searching the grove and several scattered houses. We first checked a house at the end of the village. I circled to the back and went through a ragged curtain; all the outer doors were shut and the only thing in the dark house was a straw mat. Since there was no Buddhist altar, it must have been an empty house. In the middle of the house, I met the sharpshooter, who had come in through the front.

He said, "Looks like the bastards stay clear during the day."

"There might be a lookout still around."

Before we left the house, we cracked an outer door and looked over the grove and the next house. The sharpshooter noticed something and nudged me in the side.

"What's that?"

"What could it be, lying on the ground. . . ."

We ran between the cacti, keeping low, until we reached the courtyard of the house and there we hit the dirt. The thing on the ground was a peasant's straw hat—evidence that someone was inside the house. I could hear distinctly the buzzing of flies as they climbed and dove in the sun. I went to the back door and lifted the bamboo screen with my rifle. I could see through the empty kitchen to a room, but a long curtain blocked my view of one side. I saw two wooden chairs and a woven-bamboo bed. The sharpshooter noisily kicked in a wooden door. I leaned into the inner doorway of the kitchen to cover him as he made his search. I heard a click . . . and a burst of automatic fire followed instantly. The sharpshooter stood in the middle of the room, raking fire across the curtain. As the bullets ventilated the curtain, it fluttered wildly, and a rifle tumbled down from behind it. I snatched the curtain aside. Behind it was an emaciated man, drenched in blood, looking at us vacantly as he drew his final breath. He was naked except for khaki shorts; one of his legs was bandaged, and he lay in a hammock strung from two

beams. He writhed in the swinging hammock and his head fell limp. The hammock swung slowly, its arc gradually diminishing. Beneath it was some food wrapped in a banana leaf and some water in a coconut shell.

"He was going to shoot us first," said the sharpshooter weakly. We stood there for a while, watching the blood spread over the floor. The sharpshooter picked up the rifle. He pulled the clip and a live cartridge belt popped out.

I said, "Last night's shelling made him a straggler."

"It looked like the villagers hid him and took care of him."

We left the house, carrying the rifle. Circling the outskirts of the village, we scanned the area and then set off down the path. In the middle of the village we ran into the veteran and Private Moon, who had come looking for us. They approached crouching warily; the sound of gunfire had made them extremely tense. We sauntered their way, weapons over our shoulders.

"You look like you're out hunting," said the veteran as he locked the safety on his gun. "Did you shoot a monkey at least?"

"Got one."

"This is the trophy," said the sharpshooter and I together. The veteran examined the rifle we had taken.

"No enemy to be seen in the village. Just peasants."

We spread out and passed through the village. The villagers opened their doors wide and stared as we went by. They cast glances of fear mixed with hate. The old people appeared treacherous, the children sly; the women seemed to laugh at us, and the men looked like enemies; with nightfall they would become guerrillas. We were the ones who had invaded their quiet village. We were strangers there.

We left the village and went to the well, which was not far from the fence around the camp. We stopped at the well to fill up our empty canteens, and took off our helmets and dipped some water to pour over our heads. Suddenly from behind us came a sound like a willow switch slapping on a wooden floor.

"Sniper!"

I threw myself to the ground. The upper half of my body lay in a puddle near the well. The source of the fire was impossible to discern. I heard above me shallow, rapid gasping. Private Moon, hit in the middle of the chest, was struggling to take cover in the puddle. I stretched out my arm and pulled him toward me. He put his hand

over his wound; when he exhaled it was like a wind whistling through a small opening. Twice he coughed weakly, and each time he spat blood. The water in the puddle grew red. Overhead, bullets continued to cut through the air. I realized that the barking light machine gun was in among some cacti to the south of the village. We sat tight for a while. We couldn't make a move toward the camp fence, because that would expose us completely to the field of machine gun fire. I inserted a third clip. While my automatic barked, I had the illusion that I was dominating the exchange of fire. I heard the sergeant's voice as he arrived at the fence to the left.

"Climb over, we'll cover you!"

While they concentrated their fire on the cactus, I was able to crawl to the fence with Private Moon on my back, but we couldn't both make it over at once. I stood halfway up and managed to throw him over the fence. My helmet spun around. A bullet had caught the helmet. I tossed it away and crawled along the fence line. A shell from one of our M79 howitzers screamed in and exploded near the enemy. The shelling continued. The sound of the enemy machine gun grew distant and then stopped. The sergeant reached over and helped us across one at a time.

"All safe?"

"One man hit."

When we pulled Private Moon's body from the trench, he was completely gone. Rigor mortis had already set in when we moved him; his legs dragged on the ground. I was supposed to keep his belongings and later make a killed-in-action report upon returning to our company. The only thing in his pockets was a small notebook. Inside the notebook were \$5 in GI currency, a quarantine card, and unnegotiated PX ration cards, two letters in worn-out envelopes, and a couple of family pictures.

We laid him down behind the sentry box and covered his body with tent canvas to keep the flies off. The jungle boots protruding at one end of the canvas looked unusually big. On the ground there was an elongated shadow. I lifted my head and looked up at the dark stone pagoda; behind it the sun was brilliantly radiant. The exhausted prisoner tied to the pagoda was nodding off in the heat. Into this two-dimensional scene flew a helicopter at low altitude, stirring up dust.

The helicopter dropped two days' worth of C-rations and ammu-

nition for us, and lowered a rope to which we tied the corpse so it could be lifted. There were still no reinforcements. The sergeant radioed a report that one man had been killed in action.

The radioman at headquarters responded in a monotonous voice, "Read you. R Point, carry on. Roger, out."

Our squad decided to use the pipeline trenches around the sentry boxes as our line of defense; we waited there to make a last-ditch stand. The enemy was no doubt preparing for that night's final offensive. At dusk we could see the villagers who lived near the compound depart with bundles on their backs to take refuge south of the highway. It was obvious that they were aware of the enemy plan of attack. To assemble a unit equivalent in strength to a company from the regular troops and the militia was easy enough; therefore the enemy could attack in force at their pleasure. For only seven men to fight against a company was hopeless; our fire power and positions had been exposed for several days without change. The pagoda could be taken within a few hours. We could see only a few factors in our favor; it was possible that the main force would support us with 82mm guns; and the enemy, to avoid damaging the pagoda, might limit their attack to small-arms fire. The radioman, who was receiving messages, shouted,

"The plan is changed."

"Order to withdraw?"

"I hope they're not abandoning us."

The radioman, ignoring the others' excited remarks, reported the message to the sergeant.

"The Vietnamese troops, contrary to the prior strategy, are attacking a position deep in the south. By nine o'clock tomorrow morning the American forces will assume command over our brigade. The remainder of our company will hand over control to the Americans and will be transported by helicopter to a transfer unit. The enemy's New Year Attack has started throughout South Vietnam."

"All right, everybody hear? It's been moved up one day. This will be the last night of this battle."

"Sounds bad."

"The bastards in power probably don't see beyond their maps."

"Give distinguished service medals to each and every defender of R, and condolence and other compensations...."

"Knock off the babbling, it's unlucky."

From the north came the sound of ceaseless bombing, in the sky flares burst all around. In the distance could be heard squadrons of armed helicopters.

"If not for the orders, I would love to blow up that pagoda with a grenade right now," said the sharpshooter.

"We've been cheated," said the veteran.

"The last battle . . ."

We set up a barbed-wire barricade and two claymore mines on the south side of the road, and more barbed wire and three claymore mines diagonally across the roadbed. Also we blocked the way alongside the peanut fields with barbed wire and claymore mines and dug trenches beyond the pagoda toward the banana trees. The first sharpshooter and two men were stationed there. From the left end of the pipeline I covered the peanut field area. Beyond the field there was a stand of bamboo that looked like a high fence. Gloomy lizards emerged from holes in the ground. The sergeant and the radoman were to the south of the road toward the village with an M-79 howitzer, and the veteran and the second sharpshooter were positioned across the road. Each of us had eight grenades on our belts and an ammo box with five large, full cartridge clips. If we could optimally deploy our fire power it might be possible to withstand the enemy's company strength for a few hours. After that, at best we could try by whatever means to retreat toward our brigade headquarters.

At 2200 hours, enemy fire erupted near the camp compound. Bullets ricocheted off the block walls. The fire was not continuous but sporadic, intended to test our response. We didn't answer. A whistle came from behind the camp, and from the village we heard wooden gongs drumming. We put in a call to the main force for flares. After the distant thud of the mortar launching the flare, it burst with a sound like an egg being cracked, and the fifty thousand candle-power light rained slowly down from overhead. More flares followed in a regular sequence. Shadows of trees grew long in the glare of the descending flares, then vanished into pitch darkness, only to reappear with the next pulse of daylike light. The enemy could be seen running between bunkers and buildings. They moved boldly, not bothering to conceal themselves. Like wild animals playing with their prey, they were full of confidence. The enemy approached the sandbags. I heard the vanes of shell slicing through

the wind, and then an explosion in the abandoned part of the compound. The white phosphorus incendiary shell struck a wooden building, engulfing it in flames. After two short blasts on a whistle, the enemy gathered along the wall and started firing.

"Open fire on the right," the sergeant said in low voice.

The veteran and the second sharpshooter opened up with their automatic rifles. In spite of the steady shelling, the enemy's attack grew more ferocious. We would be finished if we allowed them to come within grenade-throwing distance. The enemy set up machine guns on both sides and commenced a concentrated cross-fire at our trench. Bullets ripped through the sandbags, toppling several from the wall. The sergeant fired the howitzer over the sandbag wall. The radoman kept pleading for more artillery support. The battery reported that we were too close to the enemy to permit the kind of heavy shelling we wanted.

The sergeant snatched the receiver and yelled, "Listen, you HQ sons of bitches, being greedy with your lousy shells? We'll be wiped out unless you give us more fire!"

The shelling came closer; its concussion nearly burst our eardrums and clods of dirt showered on us. The strikes narrowly missed us, hitting just a few steps from the pipeline. The radoman swore profusely. The voice from headquarters cursed back in despair. The enemy at last made it to the wall and started climbing over. Small black pajama-clad figures swiftly vaulted over the sandbags, shouting "*Ddaila'i, la'is* [Korea come]!" I crawled through the trench until I was beside the sergeant. We fired together. From the trench behind the pagoda the first sharpshooter and another man were firing.

"Keep calm, everybody, don't let them come near!" shouted the sergeant.

A grenade exploded above the barbed wire stretched across the road. Pieces of wire flew everywhere. The enemy, who had scaled the sandbags despite the murderous fire, charged straight at us with their rifles held stiffly raised from the hip. There were shrieking as they lept over the barbed wire.

"Claymore A!" cried the sergeant urgently in a cracking voice.

The claymore mine exploded in concert with the sound of rolling drums, and men who had been dashing toward us were lifted into the air and then dropped. Guerrillas climbing the wall were also hit by shrapnel and fell. After one long whistle blast, the enemy stopped

firing. An icy silence inhabited the momentary lull. All I could hear was my own pulse, pounding so loudly it seemed my skull would burst at any moment. In the sudden quiet I felt as though all the pores of my skin had closed. What were we doing in this alien darkness, in this alien land? Just what were we? Seven rats with no way out.

"Let's kill the guest," said our second sharpshooter.

"Sergeant, let's execute him. The bastard is worthless."

"Let's tie him up and put him in the middle of the road," suggested the veteran.

We decided to bind him to a signpost in the middle of the road. It looked as if the enemy squad that had penetrated our right side had been decimated. The enemy grew cautious after our initial resistance proved obstinate. In the darkness the wounded guerrillas that were still alive cried out.

"Put them out of their misery."

"Throw a grenade."

The veteran went over to the sandbag wall, pulled the pin from a grenade, and tossed it. Sand sprayed and soon it was quiet once more. The sharpshooter dragged the hostage out of the sentry box. The prisoner, once outside, howled into the sky. His eyes glistened in the dark. The second sharpshooter walked to the middle of the road, using the prisoner as a shield. He pushed him down on the ground and tied him to the signpost in a sitting position. An enemy squad was creeping along the road. To cover the squad, others were running close to the ground into the bamboo forest to the left. They intended to disperse across the field of our firepower. The sergeant said,

"Now the hostage will block the front. That'll give us some time."

"The enemy might kill him."

"I'll take time. They too must follow a chain of command."

Wooden gongs, probably communication signals, sounded all around and then stopped. The bamboo forest on the left fell silent as well. The prisoner in the middle of the road kept shouting something toward the forest.

"What's he saying?" asked the sergeant.

"Telling them to shoot him, maybe," said the veteran.

A flare burst. Two men approached from the village, not afraid of being exposed in the bright light. Our infantryman was in front, naked and limping, with an enemy close behind. Several times the

infantryman stumbled, near death, only to be pulled up by his captor. We watched helplessly.

"Let's exchange. We've got to save him," said the first sharpshooter, from the trench behind us. The veteran shook his head.

"The enemy is only trying to get close."

Shots rang out from the bamboo forest. The hostage in front of the signpost fell over, screaming in a high-pitch tone. The guerrilla, approaching behind the shield of the infantryman, raised his arm. Instantly we opened fire. The enemy and the infantrymen fell together, and the grenade exploded just short of the pipeline. Someone screamed in pain. The inside of the trench was filled with smoke. The radioman rolled in the dirt, burying his face in his hands. The infiltrator, wounded but not dead, managed to make his way to the barbed wire. It appeared he was trying to turn the claymore mines back in our direction. Vicious automatic fire fell on him, but he had already turned two of the claymore toward us. The radioman had caught shrapnel in his face; he screamed in pain, his hands over his face.

The sergeant said, "Hold on. When daybreak comes, we'll be alive."

"Not likely. We can't use the claymores anymore," said the second sharpshooter.

The sergeant, shaking him by the shoulders, shouted, "If our front is penetrated, all we can do is retreat. But that would mean annihilation. We'll all die."

"Things aren't over yet," said the veteran. "We can still defend the front if we can reverse the direction of the claymores."

"Who's going to do it?"

No one answered. The volunteer would be crucified in the cross-fire. The three corpses were strewn near the barbed wire.

"Sergeant, you go!" said the first sharpshooter from the trench, "You, son of a bitch, big talker, stop talking and show us now."

From the bamboo forest an enemy BAR opened fire, sending slugs the whole length of the pipeline. While we'd been putting our heads together, the enemy squad by the highway had crept closer.

"Fuck! All right." The sergeant spat through his teeth, rising and throwing his gun to the ground.

"Stop him!" the veteran shouted. The sergeant ran out to the middle of the road. Two lines of dust from the enemy BAR fire bore down

on him along the road. The sergeant stopped as if he had tripped on a stone and rolled to the ground. We fired into the bamboo forest and up the road. Our artillery support occasionally sent shells as afterthoughts, which exploded in the vicinity of the bamboo forest and on the road. Pulling up the radioman, I shouted,

"If you can't fight, at least get us some more artillery support!"

"Can't see. I can't see anything."

The radioman embraced the wirelens. The enemy kept creeping toward us. The sergeant crawled up near the barbed wire. He reversed the claymores but didn't get up again. Enemy emerged from the bamboo forest and started across the peanut field. On the other side of the wall, guerrillas were running toward us with grenades in both hands. The first sharpshooter and another man fired at them from the trench. Before the advancing enemy fell, they let fly their grenades. One exploded next to the trench, more followed in succession. Shrapnel could be heard cutting through the air and striking our flak jackets. The firing from the trench stopped, and the sharpshooter, wounded in the arm, crossed back to the pipeline alone. The enemy squad that had crossed the peanut fields blew a hole through the barbed wire with a grenade and rushed toward us. The guerrillas approaching along the road from the front ran at us like wild dogs. The veteran shouted,

"Hit A and B on the front!"

The second sharpshooter pressed them.

"A on the left!"

I held the claymore detonator in my hands and pressed it as hard as I could. The blue light of the directional claymore mines flashed over the road and into the fields. The first wave of enemy was almost wiped out as they tried to attack through the front; the second wave immediately mounted their assault on the left. We lobbed grenades continuously. Those who ran up near the pipeline caught bullets and fell.

"Fix bayonets!" cried the veteran.

We put our bayonets in place on our rifles and turned to meet the guerrillas who had penetrated the fire and jumped down into the trench. In the darkness we could see only their eyes and the reflections from their sharp aluminum bayonets. Death or life depends on the first moment of contact. After parrying the enemy bayonet, I smash my rifle butt into his chest. The enemy falls back. Swiftly

kicking his face with my combat boot, I prepare to face the next. If I fail to stab him at the first chance . . . I move so as to attack obliquely, sticking my bayonet deep into the enemy's side. With my foot I push the body off my bayonet. An enemy bayonet strikes my back but cannot penetrate the flak jacket. I feel suffocated and nearly fall forward. I turn around and with a scream rush blindly, thrusting my bayonet. Blocking upward with my rifle, I kick him in the groin.

The area around us brightened as if under spotlights. A disc of light from a huge searchlight licked over the ground. Two gunships started strafing the bamboo forest and the road. The enemy that had been persistently pushing toward our last line of defense all at once broke into a retreat. The helicopters circling overhead constantly fired guns and rockets. Enemy support forces scattered and fled into the jungle. The veteran jumped out of the trench. All four of us ran out to the road to pick off enemy stragglers. The sharpshooters killed every one of the wounded too slow to get away. After making sure all the enemy were gone, we returned from the road to the sentry box. We found the radioman in the trench, dead, with his arms around the radio. We were all feeling mindless and empty. All our humanity oozed away and our perceptions grew dim. I knelt down in the trench and threw up. I couldn't tell whether the battle was over or would begin again and go on endlessly. We were too overwrought even to look around to see who was left. Lying among the stiff corpses we started to doze off.

"Come in, R Point, this is Headquarters," the radio rattled.

When I opened my eyes, I felt myself linked to numberless memories of the past. The wind was still blowing, the air touching my nose; forest and clouds surrounded me. High above was the unchanging tropical sun. Everything was over.

"Come in, R Point, this is Headquarters."

I switched off the radio, which had been repeating the same message in the same voice, over and over.

I heard a Caterpillar moving along the highway from the north. After a while I saw an American reconnaissance patrol passing by with leaves and grass on their helmets and mine detectors on their backs. An armored car gunner stuck out his head and took pictures of the carnage. At a distance behind came the three LVTs that had pulled out from the bridge. A two-and-a-half-ton truck pulled up by

the sentry box and an American lieutenant in crisp jungle fatigues jumped out of the cab. He stationed his men, whose faces were blackened, along the road. I was impressed by the way each of their gas masks dangled from their belts exactly the same way. The American lieutenant gave us a thumbs-up sign and smiled. Endless parades of vehicles swarmed into the battalion compound. We crawled out of the trench and had a cigarette. We sat and stared unthinkingly at the people who had awakened us.

An American Marine bulldozer with "SEA BEE" written on it in white paint stopped nearby. A fat sergeant was sitting in the driver's seat. Pointing at the sentry boxes, he asked the officer, "These here?"

"Right, flatten them."

The bulldozer made a circle to get a running start and began leveling banana trees. Eventually the bulldozer came around to the area behind the sentry boxes. We sprang up, tossing away our cigarettes. The veteran ran to the front of the bulldozer. He aimed his automatic rifle at the driver.

"Get the hell out of here, bastard!"

"Give it to him!"

The American sergeant killed the motor and looked our way in disbelief, shrugging his shoulders with outspread arms.

I went over to talk to the puzzled lieutenant. "What do you think you are doing?"

The officer's face was flushed. "We have to level the banana trees," he said "We are building here. I don't understand why that marine is stopping us."

"We've been under orders to guard that pagoda." I pointed at the small weather-beaten stone pagoda.

The lieutenant shook his head. "Pagoda? I've never received orders concerning such a thing."

"Maybe communications broke down. We're supposed to hand it over to the Vietnamese. The People's Liberation Front has been trying to capture it from us."

I didn't want to, but I tried to explain the relation between Buddhism, the villagers, and the psychological war tactics of our superiors. I began to realize that we had been only pawns in the game. Whose pagoda was it, anyway? Before I finished, as soon as I mentioned the word "Buddhism," this simple Western friend nodded knowingly.

The lieutenant said, "We have to get rid of such headaches. The United States Army brings progress wherever it goes. I mean, all over the world."

I knew it was impossible to explain the dirty, sticky relationship between the pagoda and us. The officer probably considered himself a representative of the strongest, most practical, and most rational nation, and shaped his opinion of the pagoda accordingly. What would it be worth in blood to guard a pile of rocks? I know. What we fought to save was our own skins.

Stifling a feeling of nausea, I said, "Stop him, please."

The lieutenant winked and nodded at me. He walked over to the front of the machine and spoke to the sergeant.

The fat American sergeant jumped down from the bulldozer, muttering, "Can't understand those yellows."

The lieutenant pointed to the empty two-and-a-half-ton truck and offered us a ride to brigade headquarters. We loaded the bodies and the equipment and left R. Before the truck reached the turn at the corner of the banana grove, I heard the growl of the bulldozer engine starting up. The bulldozer charged over the ground, and the pagoda, lifted by the blade, tottered, crumbled, and vanished. Probably even the shadow of the pagoda was crushed. Our field of vision was blocked by the dust behind the accelerating truck.