

Phantom noise

by

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Lt. John St. Clair wiped the sweat from his brow in an impatient gesture while his right arm continued to hold the M16 pointed at his target. An endeavor that seemed futile in the face of the humid heat. Immediately, new beads formed, oozing in salty drops from countless pores and running over his sun-tanned skin. Burning, they gathered in his eyes and he suppressed a curse as he tried to blink them away. Too great was the danger of distraction, too great the danger of inattention that could make the difference between life and death within a moment.

Hidden and obscured by the lush vegetation of the rainforest, he lay soundlessly on his stomach. Even his breath came shallow and soundless from his lips. Frozen in his movements, his machine gun trained on his target, he did not take his eyes off the young Viet Cong who was in the clearing in front of him, holding an M60 to his comrade's head in turn.

The boy was no older than 15, 16 at the most. John had a son that age. But this one was thousands of miles on the other side of the world, safe and possibly dreaming of a better future in his room.

The boy in front of him was shaking like a leaf as he continued to hold at bay the young U.S. Army soldier who had been transferred to Lt. St. Clair's company 6 months ago. Private Robert A. Williams was a youngster in the making. His short, light blond hair stood out in all directions, symbolizing the hay with which his head was filled. Ever since he had been transferred to John's company, he had been all nonsense and pranks, always up for a joke he brought plenty of trouble to the unit. At least that had been the case until a few days ago, when their company had been attacked out of the blue by a group of these slashers. Private Williams showed heroism and character for the first time, defending his comrades and dispatching half a dozen of their attackers, but the superior numbers were too great and they had to flee. Headless, they ran in all directions. Only John and Williams happened to run in the same direction. In the process, they got separated from their unit and have been slogging through the enemy vegetation together ever since. That had been two days now, and they had kept north, where they thought their headquarters were, but eventually they found they were hopelessly lost in the impenetrable jungle.

The heat was blistering and the air pregnant with humidity. Sweaty and exhausted after their arduous march through the thicket, they had decided to take a rest. The young GI retreated to step out and John, exhausted, collapsed at the base of a tree

and closed his eyes for a moment. Whether he had dozed off or hovered for a short time between dream and reality he could not tell, but a sense of dark foreboding jolted him awake and he looked around in a panic.

He could not discover Williams anywhere.

All at once, that damned sound was back in his ears, too. This was a remnant from the time in Korea when a hand grenade had gone off right next to him. He escaped unharmed and with a scare then, but that ringing in his ears had been his faithful companion ever since. Quiet some days, but on others when he was under stress and pressure, the sound in his eardrums became unbearable. It seemed as if this disability had amplified his sense of hearing tenfold, for he could hear an ant sneeze when the sounds in his ears got worse.

Every sound of the jungle around him rose to a deafening crescendo.

The chirping of birds echoed in his brain, the rustling of small animals in the bushes caused a painful tug behind his forehead. Black, fat flies circled his head, attracted by the sweat that continued to trickle down his body in streams, and their buzzing sounded to him like the sound of heavy engines.

He shook his head to clear his mind of the sensory overload. Williams was in trouble, of that he had no doubt. His body was reacting to danger, that was all. He picked up the gun that lay beside him and crept quietly through the underbrush, glancing around nervously. He struck out in the direction he had last seen the young soldier go before he had drifted away. He hoped to discover the private alive and well among the trees. But he knew this hope was deceptive.

After a few minutes, he lost his bearings. He spun around on his own axis. Then he heard voices. Ducked, his senses sharpened to the utmost, he continued in the direction from which he thought he heard the voices. After only a few meters, the babble of voices swelled to a loud roar. The jungle suddenly thinned out and if he hadn't stopped in time, he almost ran into the two men standing in a small clearing.

He recognized Williams, who held his arms up. In front of him stood a young Viet Cong, his gun pointed at the soldier's head.

At the last second, he ducked back behind the thicket and has remained in that position ever since, feverishly considering how to free Williams without endangering him.

From his position, the GI was right between him and the VC. Thus, John had no clear shot and it was risky to change positions

without being spotted by the boy. Trembling, the machine gun lay in the VC's hands as he yelled orders at the Private in a language he did not understand. Williams still had his hands up, but was trying to soothe the boy to calm him down. This only made the boy more nervous and he shouted louder and louder at Williams. John feared that the young inexperienced Vietnamese soldier would soon finally lose his nerve and shoot Williams. He had no choice but to change his location to get a clear shot.

As silently as he could, he started moving. The vegetation still offered him enough cover, he just couldn't make any noise that could have given him away. Feverishly, he searched the ground at his feet to find a clear spot to step on. Just a few inches to the left or to the right to keep Williams out of the crosshairs of his M16, and he could take down Victor Charlie, as the Viet Cong were commonly referred to by the Army. To his left he saw a spot that seemed to be overgrown only with moss and grasses; perhaps taking just one step in that direction would do the trick. With a well-aimed, experienced shot, he would finish off the young Viet Cong. A boy who could have been his son in age. A boy who, in times of peace, would have had his whole life ahead of him. Who, if fate had willed otherwise, could have grown up, married one day, and started a family of his own, just as John wished for his own son. Yet he would shoot and snuff out the half-grown man's life in a second. He would save Williams, even if it meant breaking a mother's heart and taking all the pride from a father. He knew this moment would weigh on his conscience from now on. He was doing the right thing and saving a life at the same time. No one would hold his deed against him. He would continue to live as he had lived until now. Perhaps he would also soon be back with his family, enjoying the joys of reunion with them. Maybe his everyday life would soon have him back when this cursed war was over and he could live a normal life again, far away from the horrors of this green hell. But when he laid his head on the pillow at night and sleep overtook him, that moment would haunt him in his darkest dreams. The thoughts would return and torment his mind with the memories that had burned themselves into his mind forever. But he had no choice. He was about to seal this boy's fate, but at the same time his own.

Flies buzzed around his head again, settling on his sweat-covered face, tickling his skin. The buzzing irritated him, affected his concentration. With his left hand he tried to chase the troublemakers away, but the sounds as of a thousand engines swelled in his ears, blotting out any clear thought. He took a step to the side, but was too distracted, too careless, and didn't notice the branch lying on the ground. With a crack that seemed so loud that it almost burst his eardrums, the thin branch broke in two. This in turn startled a bird that was foraging in

the bushes. What now happened in a fraction of a second, he now perceived as if in slow motion. The bird flew up, startled. The young VC flinched and John heard the click as the boy pulled the trigger of his gun. John immediately expected to see William's body twitch as a dozen bullets riddled him in an instant and he collapsed in a shower of blood before his eyes. But nothing happened, the M60 clicked a few times, but the gun fired no deadly bullets at the Private. Instead, John saw himself take another step to the side, out from under his cover, raise his gun, take aim, and fire a volley of bullets at the boy's head. The latter's skull burst open like a ripe fruit and a shower of blood shot out from the back of his head. The crimson drops seemed to float in the air for a moment before giving in to gravity and falling to the ground. The boy looked in his direction with his last remaining healed eye in disbelief. The other half of his face was nothing but a pulp of flesh and bone fragments. John looked back into the child's astonished black eye. The latter stood still for a moment, he and John staring at each other, then the boy's body slumped lifelessly and he sank to the ground.

Williams had leaped aside the moment John fired his gun and thrown himself on the ground, his arms wrapped protectively around his head. He was still crouched on the ground, trembling, when John approached him.

Only when the lieutenant stood beside him did the private raise his head and look at his commander with eyes widened in terror. John held out his hand to him and slowly, still trembling with horror, Williams reached for it and rose.

"I... I just ran into him. Didn't see him," he muttered. Then his eyes settled on the boy's body and the remaining color drained from his face. Choking, he had to turn away.

Where John's bullets had hit him, the boy's face was nothing but a pulpy mass. The rifle volleys had opened the top of his skull and parts of his brain had spread radially around his body in an unrecognizable bloody substance.

John was used to this sight and this was not what was going through him. Up close, he realized that the boy must have been even younger than he had appeared to him at first glance. In all the years he had served in the military, he had yet to have to kill a child. He knew that he was one of the few exceptions and he had always been grateful for that. Now, however, it had caught up with him and he was staring at the corpse of a child he had taken from life. It turned his stomach and the sight settled in his mind forever, like a malignant cancer that no amount of medicine could cure.

"He... he was jammed.", Williams brought out with difficulty as he struggled to keep the contents of his stomach to himself.

"I know.". John averted his eyes.

"We should pull back while we still have time. He certainly wasn't alone and his people should be here soon.".

Williams struggled to his feet with a groan, avoiding looking at the boy's body. Nervously, he looked around, but as yet there was no one to be seen but them. But time was pressing, so they pulled themselves together and set off again. They again took the path that led them deeper into the jungle. Gradually the day waned and the sun shone blood red through the canopy. The sounds around them grew louder as the nocturnal animals slowly came to life. Monkeys roared and the screaming echoed in John's ears, amplifying the loud, high-pitched whistling in his eardrums that rarely gave him peace.

He shook his head vigorously, for he had to be alert and could not allow himself to be distracted. At any moment they could run into the enemy, and so far they were just lucky they hadn't been spotted. Or was the enemy simply cunning enough and had long since given chase, only to pounce on them by surprise?

He couldn't let that unnerving sound in his head distract him, but he was having a hard time concentrating and listening for sounds that might have indicated the enemy was stalking. Williams was too inexperienced, he couldn't rely on him, so the burden of leading them safely through the jungle was his alone.

Two hours later, evening fell upon them and they decided to spend the night in a small clearing that opened up before them. They settled down on the soft ground and avoided building a fire. They rummaged through their packs for the last rations of food they still had with them. There wasn't much left, and if they didn't rejoin their company soon, they would have to make do with what the forest provided. Williams complained that this time there would probably be no coffee, which he also liked to drink in the evening before bed. Caffeine seemed to have no effect on him; even when he drank gallons of coffee, he would shut up like a baby at night.

They had gone to rest and John's mind was circling back to the child he had shot. He felt like a murderer, not someone who had acted in self-defense to save a comrade. Killing adults in war he felt was a necessary evil, killing was part of the miserable trade. But to murder a child, even if he had no other choice, was more than he could bear. Was it really self-defense, then? The boy had shot Williams, but he had a jam in his gun. He would have been easily overpowered had John not acted instinctively

but had time to think. But his fingers curled around the trigger at the same moment the boy fired. If only he'd had a clear head at that moment, but that damn tinnitus he'd been sharing his life with for years had distracted him. All the sounds of the forest he perceived ten times stronger at that moment and he had no chance to assess the situation properly. Just a second of hesitation to grasp the situation, then Williams could have easily overpowered the boy. He would be their prisoner now, and he would have made a good hostage if they had run into his comrades. But, more importantly, he might still be alive now and John's conscience would be clear, his thoughts not tearing him apart now.

"A train, too?" Williams grinned at him and held out a joint.

John returned Williams' gaze in wonder.

The latter shrugged apologetically.

"I always have something on hand for emergencies." He smiled wearily. "I think you've earned a puff today, too."

John looked down at the joint the private was still holding out to him, then shook his head.

"Whatever you say." Williams leaned back and took a deep drag.

"You should stay alert and clear-headed," John reprimanded him.

"There's nothing that would sharpen my senses more," the young soldier countered smugly.

For a while they sat in silence at the foot of a mighty tree until the private spoke up again.

"By the way, thank you!".

John, snapped out of his thoughts, blinked in confusion.

"Well, for saving my ass." He took another drag from his joint. John said nothing back and the private continued to speak.

"I know I fucked up, it was my fault you had to shoot that kid. I wasn't paying attention.".

Thoughtfully, he looked at the Private for a while. Finally, he spoke.

"We all make mistakes, you are not alone in this." He closed his eyes, for him that was the end of the conversation. More minutes passed and John noticed how he slowly slipped into sleep. With a jerk, he straightened up again.

"We should keep watch, I'll take the first one.".

"Out of the question, sir, I'll do it. It's the least I can do, give you a few hours sleep.". Williams smiled at him and for a moment he was the innocent boy in college whose only concern was winning the next game and taking his school's high school sweetheart out on a date. The war had not yet left its mark on his face; those deep furrows were reserved for John. These made him appear years older than he was at 46.

His limbs felt tired and he felt very old all at once. Sleep threatened to overtake him again, a blessing after the day's experiences. He could not refuse this mercy. Too exhausted to protest, he finally consented and closed his eyes. A few moments later he fell into a fitful sleep and the nightmares caught up with him.

He walked through the jungle again. The air was thick and humid, he was barely able to breathe it. He ran, ran faster and faster. He didn't know what he was running from, but panic was tightening his throat more and more, and the only thing he knew was that he had to run as fast as his legs would carry him, because if he stopped, something unspeakable would happen. His vision was blurred, he perceived his surroundings as if through a viscous green haze. Everything seemed unreal, as if he were making his way through the vegetation of an alien planet.

Where was Williams? He stopped suddenly, spinning on his axis. He could not spot the young private anywhere. He was all alone. What had happened?

Fear crept up his limbs, settled into his mind. The air, growing denser and heavier, barely entered his lungs as fear squeezed his throat tighter and tighter.

Blindly, he stumbled on through the thicket. Headless, he ran sometimes in one direction, then in the other. He had long since lost his orientation.

Suddenly he stumbled and fell lengthwise. His hands, with which he wanted to cushion the fall, grasped something moist and soft. He slipped, his face buried in a sticky substance. Coughing and spitting, he scrambled to his feet and froze in horror.

Beneath him lay Williams, his rotting corpse already mostly dissolved. John's fingers had sunk into the private's open chest as he fell, maggots running by the hundreds over the lieutenant's hands as he frantically tried to sit up. In the young soldier's wet, decaying tissue, his hands kept slipping, unable to find a foothold.

He looked into the grinning face of Williams, who was looking at him with sunken, gelatinous eyes whose light had long since gone out. His face was nothing but putrid, stinking flesh that had burst open in several places, exposing the young soldier's jaws. The tongue stuck out as a black, dried-up chunk between lips that were cracked and bloody in shreds to form an eternally smiling grimace.

Disgusted, John wanted to roll away from the corpse, from which maggots were still oozing, when the Black Tongue began to move and the drained, sunken eyeballs turned their gaze on him. The Private's devastated lips twisted into a wide, unnatural smile, the black-stained lips cracking open further with a smacking sound.

John froze, unable to turn away from the gruesome sight, as Williams spoke in a croaking voice that seemed to come from the deepest depths of the earth:

"Do you hear the drumming, sir, do you hear it growing louder? Run, sir, run as long as you can!". And then he began to laugh, a rusty, throaty laugh that sent shivers of horror down John's spine. More maggots erupted from William's open jaw, and at last John's numbness loosened. He straightened up in a panic, stumbling again over the body of the dead soldier, then finally found his footing and ran, ran for his life, driven by horror and terror coursing through his bones. And then he heard it, a sound, soft in his ears at first, then growing louder and louder. First a dull throbbing, then gradually a louder rumbling that increased to a drumming that obliterated all his thinking....

Something bumped painfully against his ribs. He heard voices. Shouting. Something tugged at him, bringing him back to consciousness. Dazed, his mind rose from the depths of sleep. Blinking, he opened his eyes, only to wake up with a start. He was looking straight down the barrel of an M60 pointed at his head, inches from his face. A VC holding the gun yelled at him and kicked him in the stomach at the same time. John doubled over in pain, but he had no time to recover because the man dragged him up and at the same time forced him to kneel down. He kept the gun pointed at the back of his head. John had only a moment to look around and check the situation. He spotted half a dozen enemy soldiers surrounding them in the clearing, all armed. One soldier held Williams at bay, who also remained on his knees, hands clasped behind his head.

William noticed John's gaze and squinted over at him.

"I'm sorry, sir, I must have dozed off...".

Immediately, the soldier standing behind him gave him a blow to the back of the head with the barrel of his rifle. Williams tumbled forward, dazed, but remained conscious and struggled to straighten up.

The men were now engaged in heated and excited discussion in their foreign language. John understood only a few sentences. Obviously they had not yet decided the fate of the two US soldiers.

From the few scraps of words John could understand, he heard that the men were arguing about whether to kill their prisoners on the spot or let them live a while longer as their prisoners.

One of the men, an older soldier with already graying hair, his face hard marked from a life of privation, looked hatefully over at Williams and John. John suspected that he was the leader, for he cut off the other men with an angry gesture, whereupon they immediately interrupted their argument and looked reverently in his direction.

He walked with slow steps towards Williams and John feared that now the last hour of the young Private had struck. He circled Williams with slow, deliberate steps, gazing down at him without taking his eyes off him. He kept his gun pointed at the young man's lowered head. Williams was trembling all over, expecting his certain death at any moment. The Viet Cong stopped in front of him. He yelled something John did not understand. Williams winced, then raised his head and looked the man in the face with desperate bravery. The man then lashed out and struck the soldier in the face with the butt of his rifle. William's head was thrown to the side and a fountain of blood shot from his mouth. He then fell to the ground and lay there motionless.

The Viet Cong looked down at him, then spat in disgust at the boy. Boundless contempt spoke from his angry flashing eyes. Hateful, he pointed the barrel of his rifle at the boy's swollen, bloody face. John realized that he was conscious and staring at the gun, which was only a few inches from his head. Like a snake held in a spell by a summoner, his eyes followed the barrel of the weapon. The old soldier made a jerky movement in his direction. Williams jerked his arms in front of his face and curled up on the ground in shock. The old soldier and his men laughed derisively, then the leader yelled some orders and Williams and John were hauled to their feet. The young GI staggered, but the soldier behind him jabbed his rifle painfully into his back, nearly causing him to fall again. Nevertheless, he caught himself again and started moving. John, too, was pushed forward and urged to walk. Obviously they were not to be killed just yet, but John was under no illusions. They had only been given a reprieve, a small respite until they were finished off.

He was sure they would long for death, knowing that they now faced inhuman cruelties they could not even imagine in their wildest dreams. Death now would truly have been a salvation.

The men urged them to get moving and they marched off. John did not know how long they walked through the jungle, in the sweltering heat it seemed like hours. The soldiers took paths that seemed to lead them crisscross through the thicket. Again the whistling in his ears increased, hindering him from remembering the paths they took. He hoped for a chance to escape, and he prayed that at least Williams had the presence of mind to remember the path they were traveling should they succeed in escaping. But even then, they were still separated from their unit, this time with pursuers at their backs. The sounds swelled again, flooding him. He perceived everything at a deafening volume until he felt like his head was going to explode. Since the death of the young VC, his discomfort seemed to get worse each time, he felt he could no longer rely on his senses. The heat was getting to him, the humidity was like a thick mass from which his lungs were barely able to filter oxygen. His vision was blurry. Williams in front of him seemed to be stumbling through a swath of fog. The GI kept his head lowered; he, too, appeared to be out of full command of his faculties. His shoulders drooped as he walked between the soldiers, not looking left or right. He had apparently given up. John now understood that their escape was in his hands alone. He hoped they would stay alive long enough to make a plan. His senses faded again and he ran as if through a dream. For hours the men drove them on, he had long since ceased to pay attention to the way. The thought tempted him to simply give up, as Williams had done, to let the torture and torment that was soon to follow wash over him and then sink into the welcome lap of death. Furious, he shook his head. No! He had to fight it! Gradually his mind cleared and the steady buzzing in his eardrums quieted until it finally fell silent and no longer clouded his thinking. His vision was clearer again and he saw the jungle begin to clear. Williams still walked with his head bowed in front of him, like an automaton he put one foot in front of the other, still absorbed in his world from which he refused to awaken. If the war had seemed like an entertaining game to the young Private, he was now confronted with the cruel truth. Like everyone in his unit, he had heard the stories of the Viet Cong's torture methods and abuses, and he sensed what he would soon face. John could only pray that he would find a way back in. They just had to not be separated from each other, then he had a chance to talk Williams into his conscience and get him out of his lethargy. But one thing was certain: without Williams he was not prepared to escape, either they escaped together or they both died.

The sun blinded him as the trees grew sparser and the rays hit the earth unhindered. Only a few trees offered shelter from the sharp claws of the midday sun, and all at once they revealed a barren field. John recognized the houses of a settlement opening up before him.

A dusty road stretched out before them, lined on either side by huts whose walls were made of bamboo tied together and simple wooden planks. The roofs were thatched with straw. Tall palm trees with crooked trunks provided shade for the residents. John counted 15 huts. Probably 50-70 people lived here.

Children ran around the dusty place and played. When they became aware of the arrivals, they paused in their game. They stared at the prisoners and whispered, some suppressing a giggle. More residents stepped out of their bamboo huts, men, women and children of all ages. They all eyed John and Williams with undisguised curiosity.

A woman approached the leader of the group. With her eyes framed by countless wrinkles, she scanned the group and stopped questioningly in front of the older Viet Cong. The latter looked down at her, an expression of pain on his face, and shook his head. The woman cried out in agony, then buried her face in her hands and wept unrestrainedly. The leader put his hand on her shoulder and remained that way for a moment, sharing her agony. Then he turned to his men. As he did so, his eyes swept over the two prisoners and burning hatred flared up again. With a motion of his head, he motioned to the soldiers guarding John and Williams to take them away. The soldier behind John slammed his rifle into the back of his knee, causing him to tumble forward, then the man yanked him back to his feet with brute force and pushed him toward a smaller dwelling that stood to their left. Williams had just been rudely carried through the door. John was also roughly grabbed and thrown through the open door. He landed on his knees and as he struggled to get up, the door slammed shut behind him. The soldiers left him and Williams to their fate for the time being. Still, John had no doubt that at least one sentry stood guard outside the entrance and would thwart any attempt to escape.

It was dark inside the hut, and his eyes had to get used to the twilight before he could make out anything. Light fell through the crack of a small window that was boarded up with wooden planks from the outside. The room he was in didn't seem particularly large, but he had a hard time judging that with the lack of visibility. The air was hot and stuffy, and a sickening odor rose to his nostrils. He had to retch as it took his breath away.

Gradually he was able to orient himself in the darkness as his eyes became more accustomed to it. He spotted Williams crouching in a corner, his head buried between his knees. Beside him, something grunted and rustled. John frowned and squinted his eyes. He could spot two pigs and a small piglet digging in their own manure.

Holding his arm in front of his face to block out the foul exhalations of the animals and the smell of feces, he walked over to the private and knelt beside him.

"Williams..." he whispered.

The latter did not respond, not even when he grabbed him by the upper arm and shook him gently.

"Williams, now come to!". He grips the young man's muscular arm tighter and this time shook him harder.

Gradually the GI raised his head and with a veiled look he gazed dazedly at his commander. Recognition flashed in his eyes as he finally recognized John and his mouth twisted into a desperate grin. A beam of light fell directly on William's face through a crack in the window, and to John's horror, the private's lips revealed bloody stumps of teeth. The VC must have hit him harder than John had assumed. Williams had probably also suffered a concussion, which would explain his dazed state.

"Went pretty shitty for us," the private mumbled between bloody, chapped lips.

"And it was my fault again...".

John put a hand on his shoulder soothingly.

"Reproaches won't do anyone any good now, we have to watch how we free ourselves now!".

"Free ourselves?", Williams laughed bitterly. Then he coughed as he choked on his saliva.

"It's hopeless!" he gasped as he caught his breath. "Or haven't you noticed that everyone here is armed to the teeth?".

As much as John loathed the fact that Williams was right, it also reassured him that the boy apparently still had his five senses together and recognized the situation despite his condition.

"You forget that our people are looking for us. If they find us, they'll get us out of here, until then we have to hang on.". He was grasping at straws, but giving up was not an option and he needed William's help if they were going to get out of here.

The latter gave him a look that spoke of desperation and resignation.

"You don't believe what you're saying yourself, do you?".

"That's enough, Williams, get a hold of yourself!", John drove at him angrily. "Be a man already and you better help me find a way to get out of here!".

Seeing William's hurt look, he felt compassion.

"I know the situation is not rosy," he continued in a softer tone, "but it's not hopeless yet. As long as we live, we also have a chance to escape. If we give up, we've already lost."

There was doubt in the boy's eyes, but he nodded silently.

That was all John could do for him, and he hoped the time would come when Williams would regain his courage. Lord knows they needed courage badly!

He stood up and took a closer look at the shack.

He searched the walls but found nothing, they were bare and what he found in the hut could not be used as a weapon or tool. The walls were made of bamboo, but they were surprisingly sturdy when he pressed against them with his hands. The only window, through which little light fell, was nailed shut. John assessed the window's location and concluded that while he could loosen and even remove the wooden boards, the window faced the village's main square and any tampering with the window or even their escape would not go unnoticed.

He crept to the door. There was a gap of several inches under the door frame and he detected shadows in front of it. As he had already suspected, at least one soldier was keeping watch outside the door. In any case, it would do no good to walk through the door and run into a group of heavily armed Viet Cong. That would be their instant death sentence.

He had to come up with something else, but at the moment he saw no way out. He couldn't let his hopelessness show, because then he would lose Williams as a companion for good.

He returned to the GI and settled down on the ground next to him. Only now did he realize how exhausted he was. He resolved to stay awake, but the leaden fatigue in his limbs and his burning eyes, which were falling shut of their own accord, sent him sliding down into a dreamless sleep.

Drumming. A dull throbbing from the bowels of the earth, like a thousand small drums sounding from the depths. Dull and quiet at

first, then growing louder until his head was filled with their monotonous sound. Threateningly the noises came closer, until he perceived only the hammering from the depth...

He startled! He was disoriented, needed a few seconds to realize where he was. He was still in that stinking hut, but now complete darkness enveloped him. Only a thin strip of moonlight fell through the crack of the window, directly on Williams, who lay on the floor beside him, having fallen into a fitful sleep.

John, too, had sunk to the floor during his sleep. His head was on the dirty, dusty floor, and at first he thought the dream had not yet released him from its clutches. He heard the dull thumping, the earth beneath him vibrated slightly. This had to be the dream still. Dazed, he raised his head and shook it. He had to get out of his nightmare somehow. He was fully awake now, yet he continued to perceive a distant throbbing. But it wasn't just in his ears, it was coming from inside the earth. He put his hands flat on the ground. This hum trembled faintly under his fingers and sent electric sparks coursing through his veins.

"Williams, wake up!". He gave the private a rude shove in the ribs. The latter startled with a jerk.

"What?". Sleepily, he looked around at his commander.

"Do you hear that?". John held his breath and listened.

"Hear what?".

"There's some... sort of drumming, a humming from the earth. There, do you hear it?".

Williams paused for a moment, then shook his head.

"I'm sorry, sir, I don't hear anything," Williams mumbled between his broken teeth.

"You can't be! I'm not imagining it!".

He detected pity softening the GI's features. This infuriated him and he quickly turned away from the boy. Pity was the last thing he wanted! Obviously he was going crazy and hearing things that weren't there. He had to admit that the sounds that were driving him almost insane had all of a sudden stopped. Apparently, they were still the after-effects of a dream. If he, too, lost his last shred of sanity, then they were truly lost.

"Go back to sleep, Private, we need our strength.".

Williams was about to say something, but John's stern look silenced him. Sighing, he turned on his other side and only a few seconds later John heard his steady, deep breaths. The private had gone back to sleep.

John, on the other hand, leaned back and he lay awake until dawn, listening for the slightest sound he could detect. The drums in the ground, however, had fallen silent for the rest of the night.

Toward morning, he had finally dozed off when the door was pushed open and two Viet Cong rushed into the hut. They yelled at the prisoners and pointed their guns at them. Then one of the soldiers dragged Williams up from the floor, who at first dangled sleepily to his feet, but then was wide awake in one fell swoop as he realized the men were trying to take him.

"Sir..." he turned to John, seeking help.

The latter tried to get between him and the soldiers, but the VC closest to him punched him in the face, causing him to fall back against the wall and bounce hard.

Meanwhile, the other soldier had grabbed the young Private roughly by the arm and was dragging him out the door.

"Sir...", Williams' desperate and pleading look drilled into his mind, and he jumped up to rush after him, but the soldier next to him again pushed him back brutally and pointed his warrant at him. He could not help Williams and had to watch helplessly as the boy was led away. The Viet Cong gave him one more hostile look, then he too left. The door slammed shut. John let himself slide to the floor in the semi-darkness. He could hear William's pleading and begging, which suddenly ended in a shrill scream. Desperate, he buried his face between his arms. William's screams grew louder until they became more distant, but still within earshot. As long as the boy screamed, at least he knew he was still alive, but at what cost? He could hardly bear the sounds of pain that still reached his ears far too loudly.

He tried to calm himself and listen to his own breathing. He couldn't imagine what those damn bastards were doing to the GI, because then he would lose his mind. And he knew that whatever they were doing to Williams now, he would be the next to know.

Suddenly the screams stopped. He raised his head in horror. The silence was more unbearable than the sounds of pain he had heard before. Was Williams dead? Was he left here alone until the time came and they came for him too?

A beam of light fell on his face and he had to squint his eyes. A dark, tall figure appeared in the doorway, stopped for a moment, then entered.

John blinked, then he recognized the wiry figure of the leader.

The leader looked down at him, and with the daylight streaming through the door, John was able for the first time to examine the man in peace.

Deep furrows crossed the man's countenance, yet his age was difficult to assess, as his body appeared strong and steely and he stood tall and proud before him. His hair was graying at the temples and combed back in thick waves. The eyes were deep-set and cold, the lips pinched into a bitter, thin line. Despite the malice with which he stared at John and did not take his eyes off him, John could also detect resignation in his features. An old soldier who had grown tired of fighting. For some inexplicable reason, he felt a bond with the man. He too had grown tired of fighting, he too had seen too much. Was there a trace of sadness in the look from deep black eyes? Still the man stared at him, inquiringly, calmly, thoughtfully....

John withstood his scrutiny and did not turn away. So they regarded each other, two soldiers who had already seen too much.

Finally, the man spoke, the words leaving his lips in his language understandable to John's surprise.

"You killed my son."

John stared at him, speechless. Before he could react, the man turned and left him alone with his thoughts again.

A few moments later, William's screams rang out again, this time more inhuman and distorted with pain than John had ever heard a human being scream. Desperately he covered his ears with his hands, but still the agonizingly distorted and choppy sounds of his private reached him, drove him through his marrow and tore him apart inside.

Eventually the screams died away. John didn't know if Williams was unconscious or already dead. Agonizing minutes passed before the door to the hut was pushed open. Two Viet Cong entered the hut. They dragged the limp body of Williams between them and dropped him ungently into a corner of the dwelling. The private remained motionless. The light coming through the door fell on William's lifeless body and John winced in shock when he realized that the boy was covered in blood. He was bleeding from countless wounds, but John's stomach didn't turn until he saw that where the boy's ears should have been, there were only two bleeding holes. The GI's face was swollen shut, his lips chapped beyond recognition. It was a blessing that he was not conscious. Before John could examine his wounds more closely, the door slammed shut and they were back in the semi-darkness of the hut.

He crawled over to the young soldier and spoke soothingly to him. Williams did not respond, but when he put his hand on his neck, he felt a pulse, weak but still present. He tried to feel for more wounds that had been inflicted on the private. The boy's breathing was raspy. John suspected that one or more ribs had been broken, and he hoped that no bone had drilled into the lungs. William's right tibia was sticking out at an unnatural angle. He had probably been pelted with sticks and broken quite a few more bones. John was sure he was bleeding internally as well. If he didn't get help soon, he would be finished.

There was nothing he could do for him now except wait for him to regain consciousness. If he should ever wake up again.

His only hope now was that their people would find them and free them. At this point, an escape attempt would only have been possible without Williams, and that was out of the question for him.

He put his arm around the young soldier and raised his upper body a little so that he could breathe easier. Then he leaned back and closed his eyes. What the old Viet Cong had said went through his mind. He had understood what the latter wanted to tell him. The boy he had killed had been the son of the leader and now the leader was taking bloody revenge.

Vietnamese spirituality said that only an unharmed corpse could enter the afterlife. It was the custom of the American soldiers to desecrate the corpses in order to deprive the Viet Cong of the hope of an afterlife. It was the custom of his own comrades to cut off the ears of their enemies and even wear them as trophies on a necklace. Now the gooks turned the tables, now they struck back. Williams had to experience this firsthand. John knew it was all his fault that the boy had been tortured and might die. It was only his fault they were in this situation, the old VC would let him know that any minute. Who knew how far his bloody revenge would go. But one thing was certain: a quick death was now within distant reach.

Again the buzzing sounded in his ears, again it grew louder, blotting out his thoughts. Though guilt wracked him, he still nodded off and dreamed a dreamless sleep.

The drumming. Rhythmic and ominous. Growing louder, swelling to a crescendo. It was so close now. His eardrums throbbed in unison with the pounding that rose from the depths of the earth. The sounds enveloped his brain, they enveloped his thinking, they enveloped him until his body was one with the rhythm and

vibration of the ground, which penetrated his bones and made his body tremble.

He startled awake. A nightmare! No... it was not a nightmare. For the drumming and the shaking of the earth were still there, omnipresent, taking over him, panicking him.

The pigs to his right were restlessly shuffling their feet and squealing excitedly. He almost feared that the dung beasts would trample over him and Williams if he wasn't careful. But the drumming and quaking suddenly stopped and the animals calmed down again, too.

Beside him, Williams groaned. He moved his head back and forth, seeming to rise at last from the plains of unconsciousness.

"Williams!". John continued to lift the private's upper body. Hopefully, he tried to see if the Private was responsive.

The man groaned, but turned his head toward the voice that spoke to him. Finally, he opened his one, unhurt eye.

"Sir..." he coughed. John straightened him to get a better breath. Bloody froth escaped from the young soldier's lips. Even in the twilight of the hut, John could see it and his hopes for the young GI faded.

"Take it easy, try to breathe slowly."

Williams drew in a gasping breath and another coughing fit shook the boy's lean body. John feared he would choke on his own blood, but eventually Williams calmed down and leaned back in John's arms, exhausted. His breathing was raspy and rapid.

"What did those bastards do to you..."

Desperate eyes, from which all mischievousness and lightness had drained away, looked up at John.

"Sir, I don't think I can do it," the private brought out with difficulty. Talking was visibly difficult for him and he was again shaken by a fit of coughing.

"You must not say or think such things! You will do it!"

Williams shook his head.

"No sir, my time is up," he whispered. "Escape without me, save yourself!"

"That's enough, Williams! You're going to get your act together!". John hoped his voice sounded sure and firm, reflecting nothing of the doubt and hopelessness he felt. He still wanted to encourage the boy, but realized that he had lost consciousness again.

Tired, he leaned against the hard, dusty wall of the hut and closed his eyes. He prayed, prayed that his unit would find them. As slim as the chances were, he still hoped for a merciful God.

He waited. Waited for them to come for him, too, and beat him to a pulp the way they had Williams. But they didn't come. Only once did they let a young woman come to them, who brought them a disgusting-smelling and equally disgusting-tasting porridge, and some dirty water to make-shift to quench their thirst. Apparently the Viet Cong wanted to keep them alive long enough to slowly torture them to death.

John was parched by now, and Williams could not have been any different. Still, he saved his ration, taking only a sip for himself and trying to pour some of the liquid into Williams, but more of the water ran down the side of the boy's face than flowed into his body. Since he was still unconscious, it was also impossible to give him any nourishment. Meanwhile, the young soldier was shaken by a fever and sweat was pouring down his body from every pore. He came to for only brief moments, but his eyes were rapt and did not recognize John when he spoke to him.

More hours passed, during which the boy's condition worsened. One day passed, then another. He only got to see the young woman who brought them food and drink once a day and tended the pigs, taking them outside in the morning to herd them back into the hut in the evening. The soldier who guarded them until she had completed her duties did not speak a word to them, and John's attempts to communicate with him were ignored by him.

No one else came to them. No one came for him, no one tortured him, no one killed them, they were left to their fate, their doubts, their uncertainty.

Meanwhile, William's wounds had become infected and festered. The animal smell that hung oppressively and sickeningly in the air mingled with the stench of rotting human flesh. John could do nothing for the young Private, helpless to watch as the soldier's body convulsed with fever spasms. He sat beside him, it seemed to him, for days and nights, trying to wipe the sweat from the boy's brow with a dirty rag he had found in the far corner of the hut, and talking soothingly to him. Williams came to his senses less and less often, the periods of complete unconsciousness grew longer, and John's hopes faded as did the GI's vitality.

During the day he kept vigil at his side; at night he lay awake except for brief moments of fitful sleep. And in those hours, he heard the steady drumming from the earth whenever his head sank

exhausted to the ground. He thought he was losing his mind and the pounding, which spread dully in his head, was a trick his brain was playing on him. But the drumming came closer, erasing his thinking in a steady rhythm. The vibration of the ground grew stronger night after night until he could feel it deep in his marrow. The nocturnal sounds overwhelmed him, enveloped him. Curled up like an embryo, he lay in the dirt, desperately covering his ears, feeling the madness enter his limbs, feeling delusions slowly poison him.

One morning, when Williams awoke briefly, vomiting a gush of foul-smelling blood over his lap while John tried to hold him upright so he wouldn't choke on his vomit, the old VC stepped through the door.

Now is the time, John thought. Now my time has come. The leader himself will take care of me. It was almost welcome to him that the endless waiting had come to an end. Even the pain and agony that was now to come was more bearable than this waiting. Than the drumming that now robbed his sleep every night.

His life was the same to him, but perhaps he would find mercy for Williams.

"Please, the boy is dying..." he began. He looked up pleadingly at the VC.

"He didn't do anything, help him! Please..." As soon as he uttered the words, he knew they were in vain. What mercy could he expect from these gooks?

The old man just looked at him wordlessly, his gaze wandered to Williams, paused there, then turned his attention back to Williams.

A single sentence, spoken in brittle English but still intelligible, passed his lips.

"You had no mercy on my son either!"

The words drove through John's marrow.

The last shred of hope died in him. He would receive no more mercy here.

"Please," he croaked. "I killed your son, not William's! He is innocent! Do with me what you will, but do not make him pay for my mistake!".

The VC looked at him for a moment, then began to laugh. John realized that it didn't matter what he said. The Viet Cong wanted to see him suffer for his son's death, and no physical pain or

torture was as effective as knowing that Williams was going to die because of his guilt. The old man made him watch the young soldier die. This was the punishment he had chosen for him.

John cried out in agony, pleading and begging, falling to his knees before the man, but the man spat down on him and turned around in disgust. When he left the cabin, John was alone again, alone with his fear.

Williams was dying. He had not regained consciousness for hours. Every attempt by John to wake him was unsuccessful.

Sweat poured down the boy's feverish body and his blue-black wounds smelled of flesh slowly decomposing and dying.

He would stay with him until his last breath, he would not leave him alone, even though he was not sure if the boy was even aware of his presence anymore. He held his hand, which was growing colder. William's breath came rattling and fast, a wet rattle from lungs that filled with the bodily juices from failing organs.

John hated himself for the thought, but William's death would open the way for him to escape. Until now, he persevered here because of the boy, every fiber of his body refusing to escape without the private. At the beginning of their captivity, he had still thought of escaping and getting help. But he was sure that the gooks would have killed Williams as soon as they noticed his escape. That was why he had stayed. Williams' condition, the waning of his life, however, changed everything. He would just wait until the boy died, then he would plan his escape.

Night had fallen again and this time John heard the drumming and vibrating louder than ever before. It was no longer a dream, for he lay awake and had not even been able to fall into a restless, dreamless sleep. The dull throbbing from the earth was reality. He could find no explanation for it, he only felt icy cold dread rising within him, dread that paralyzed his limbs and made his breath hitch. He had no more excuses, he could no longer ignore this sound that seemed to come from the depths of hell. It was there. It was close. It would soon reveal its cruel secret to him.

The pigs beside him squealed in despair, pawing restlessly with their feet in the dirt. They startled, and as if on a command that only they could hear, they ran to the closed door. As they did so, they jostled each other and pushed their way to the exit, with no chance of escape.

Suddenly John heard shouting. A roar from dozens of throats. He rushed to the only boarded-up window and tried to make out something between the openings in the wooden boards. The whole camp was in an uproar, people running around in panic and terror, Viet Cong shouting orders. Shots were being fired. In all the commotion, John recognized the old soldier. The leader was standing among his soldiers, trying to keep order in the tumult, but his men were rushing headlong in all directions. John now realized the reason why the men were fleeing. US Army soldiers appeared among the houses and he recognized the people of his unit. His heart leapt, hope sprouting within him. He tore at the wooden boards of the window but could not loosen them. He shouted and banged on the boards, calling his people. The old Vietcong turned his head towards him and it seemed to him that their eyes met. Time stood still for a second, with both leaders looking at each other. Then a bullet hit the old man between the eyes and he slowly slumped and fell to the ground dead. John tore himself away from the sight.

"Williams!" John turned to the private, who was still breathing.

"Williams, hang in there! Our rescue is here, our people...we're about to be free!".

He wanted to run for the door, maybe he could push it open! He doubted the guards were still standing in front of it.

The ground under his feet suddenly broke open and he lost his footing. The earth opened up. In the dark, only by the light of the moon falling through the cracks at the window, he saw something burst out of the ground. He saw movement, a writhing and swell of beetle-like bodies that shimmered silvery in the light of the moon. The earth vomited thousands and thousands of these creatures and they swarmed out in search of living flesh. The pigs were the first to fall victim to them. They fell upon the bodies of the parent animals by the hundreds of thousands, and John watched in frozen horror as the piglet tried to run away, squealing in agony and terror as the beetles fell upon him. The animal's snout was still ripped open to scream, and the scream rushed from its throat when only the head was left, while the devil's spawn from the earth had devoured the body along with the bones.

"Williams...", John whispered throatily. The rigidity of horror and dread broke away and he crawled toward the Private. At the same moment, the beetles also descended upon the young soldier, their silvery, metallic bodies completely covering the boy.

"No!" croaked John. But it was too late. When the beetles left their victim, there was nothing left of Williams except the imprint in soil left by his feverish body.

Stunned, John stared at the spot as the door to the cabin was pushed open.

"Sir!". One of his men stood in the doorway, trying to comprehend what was happening before his eyes.

John tried to get to his feet, but the bugs fell first over his feet, then along his shins down his thighs. Tearing pain exploded his nerve endings and he slumped forward when there weren't even bones left of his legs to lean on.

He wanted to shout to the soldier at the door to get out, but the bugs had reached his upper body and were working their way up his neck to his face with sharp teeth that dug into his skin like small, pointed knives. Before John could say anything, the insects were in his mouth consuming his tongue, crawling down his throat with lightning speed, and gnawing through his esophagus as they bit their way to his windpipe. John's vision dimmed as the bugs preyed on his eyes and ate out his eyeballs. The last thing he perceived was his head detaching from the rest of his body and falling to the ground. The drumming that filled his mind first quieted and eventually died away.

T H E E N D