

SHADOWS/Chiles-1

SHADOWS

a novel

by

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One morning two boats left a city in the East.

It was an unusually logical city, governed under the theories of an American psychologist by a Chinese man educated in England. Nominally a democracy, the government was elected by the people of the city in one-party elections to tell the people what to do. It told them clearly and repeatedly, and it rewarded them when they did what they were told to do and it punished them when they did not.

The government sponsored a great many campaigns. There were campaigns in favor of birth control, education, short hair for men, higher work productivity, and the wearing of seat belts in automobiles. There were campaigns against littering, drugs, spitting, and the use of minor languages. But even logic can lead to absurdity, such as the huge poster in the General Port Office, which commanded: *Speak More Mandarin; Less Dialects*. Unfortunately for the theories of the American psychologist, this was written in English.

It was not a city given to laughter, particularly at itself, and generally these campaigns resulted in the city being what the government wanted it to be: serious, hard working, prosperous, and possessed of qualities that endeared it to timid tourists. It was the cleanest city in the East, and the most characterless.

The city was situated on an island at the mouth of a great strait. The island was roughly diamond shaped, fifteen miles north/south and twenty miles east/west.

One hundred years earlier, the island was the private hunting preserve of a sultan, whose Muslim ancestors had a few centuries still earlier conquered the adjacent peninsula in the name of Allah. Then a young Englishman, who had come to make his fortune in the service of the East India Company, saw the commercial value of the island and founded a trading post there.

Now nearly three million people lived on the island. Most of them were Chinese. All of them were immigrants or the sons and daughters or grandsons and granddaughters of immigrants. But those now living on the island considered it to be their own and did not welcome new immigrants. They particularly did not welcome poor refugees arriving by the boatload from other less prosperous and less stable lands, which in that part of the world meant practically everywhere. Such refugees were kept in detention camps until they could be sent elsewhere for resettlement. The government declared that it would order its warships to sink future boatloads of refugees if other countries refused to accept them.

The gulf from which the refugees appeared lay to the east of the city. To the north a peninsula dangled like an udder from the fertile cow of Asia. To the south and west sat some of the largest islands in the world. Between those islands and the peninsula was the strait.

The city was flat and ugly and had no assets other than its strategic location and the vision and determination of its aging Chinese leader. Because it was nearly on the Equator, its climate was all but intolerable. Probably that is why no one had lived there before the Englishman came unwittingly to prepare the stage for his country's most humiliating and decisive defeat, a defeat from which it never recovered.

For only brief periods at dawn and sometimes after sunset was the city pleasant. Most nights and most afternoons were filled with rain. But dawn was often clear and cool and still. The waters surrounding the city mirrored the pastel purples and lavenders that the early sun brought to the sky. The vast fleet of ships lying off the southern shore of the city was asleep. The skyscrapers in which most of the city's inhabitants lived and worked were silent. The streets were empty. Shadows were long.

In less than an hour all this would change. As the rising sun brutalized the delicate pastels of dawn, the anthill would come to life. Small figures

would move about the ships and skyscrapers, slowly at first, then more frenetically. Streets would fill, then clog, with cars and busses and bicycles. Lighters and launches and barges would rush from ship to shore. The sky would fill with the first drops of moist haze that would by noon coalesce into towering thunderheads.

It was during one of these lovely dawns that two boats left the city. One was a fishing boat; one a sloop. The fishing boat had two men aboard. The sloop only one. The fishing boat left from a wharf crowded with similar boats on the northwest side of the city; the sloop from a marina on the southeast. Under power, both craft headed for the strait, their bows cutting easily through glassy, oily water.

In two days a storm would bring them together.

2

Nhu almost smiled.

The fishing boat he had named the MAI KEW after his wife and daughter was old. Beneath his hands he felt the spokes of her wheel smoothed by years beneath other hands. But her hull and machinery were sound. And she was by far the largest boat he had ever owned, almost fifty feet on deck. Many would have considered him fortunate. Perhaps he was fortunate that Mai had befriended the family of rich Kiang. Perhaps he was fortunate that, although the group that escaped with Kiang had sailed east, they had been picked up by a ship heading west. Perhaps he was fortunate that Kiang had heard he was in the detention camp and, through his influential friends, had made it possible for him and Deng to be among the few refugees to be permitted to remain in the city, and had provided the loan so that he could buy such a boat.

Nhu tried to consider himself fortunate; but there was too much else. His ritual thanks to the gods, the lighted sticks of incense, the flowers, had

become perfunctory. They--the foreigners, the revolutionaries, the pirates, the very gods themselves--had taken too much for him to be consoled by this boat. His anger flared for a moment and his fingers tightened, white-knuckled, around the spokes of the wheel as though he were trying to strangle something. His eyes remained fixed upon a point beyond the bow, until the frightened voice of Deng reached him. "Father!"

Instantly he spun the wheel hard and the MAI KEW missed a black buoy marking the side of the shipping channel by a yard. Nhu watched it pass the wheelhouse, bobbing in their bow wave.

From the foredeck Deng stared at him. Nhu glanced down at his hands. They were scared and calloused and burned almost black by a half century of sun and wind. They looked like the claws of some of the creatures he pulled from the sea. He willed them to relax.

When he looked up, Deng's mouth was open as though he were about to shout something above the diesel. Peremptorily Nhu gestured for him to turn around and keep his eyes forward. After a moment Deng complied.

The MAI KEW throbbed steadily down the muddy channel between low jungle-covered shores.

On the other side of the island, Nelson Alexander sat sipping a cup of coffee in the cockpit of the forty foot sloop, JUSTINE, which he had named after his wife. The autopilot steered the sloop a half mile off a concrete shore where a few shabby palm trees huddled before towering bank buildings and apartment blocks.

Every few minutes Nelson pushed the dodge button on the autopilot as the JUSTINE made her way through the ships lying in the roads. Collectively there was a majesty about the fleet, though individually many of the vessels were derelicts. Few ports in the world could boast so crowded an

anchorage.

For hours and miles the comparatively tiny sloop moved past hundreds of ships, from small rusty coasters lying nearest the wharves to great tankers lying far out. Ships of every flag and men of every race filled the roads. In the boredom of waiting to load, to off load, for officials to give them clearance to enter or depart, for agents to find cargoes, for chandlers to provide stores, for owners to radio orders, for captains to permit them shore leave so they could sample the insipid pleasures of the once wicked but now puritanical city, many sailors lined the rails of the ships. A few of those men waved or called to Nelson. A few gazed down at the sloop with envy; a few with contempt. But most simply watched her with the indifference they would have accorded a water bug whose movement caught their eyes.

The day was far advanced when the JUSTINE cleared the last of the super tankers, whose hulls dwarfed her. She passed from their monstrous shadows as though moving from a narrow mountain pass onto the open plain of the sea. Behind them, black thunderheads towered over the city. Far to the south passed a steady procession of ships carrying mundane cargoes and dreams, mostly of avarice, between distant ports and too similar people.

As the first fat drops of rain splattered on the yellow water, Nelson Alexander noticed a fishing boat a few miles ahead of him. Then the rain poured down and the other boat was lost from view.

For two days Nelson awakened at dawn at anchor off a green coast, drank a cup of coffee while waiting for the sea breeze, then sailed until late afternoon, covering forty or fifty miles before the wind died and he anchored again. He could have remained out in the strait, but that would have meant sleepless nights dodging shipping and using the diesel. There was no reason

to push hard. In time, he would come upon the right clinic or hospital.

On this second evening he was anchored off a village that consisted of three square wood houses and two outrigger fishing boats pulled above the high tide mark. A road ran down a hill to the houses, one of which was a store. Radio music and laughing voices drifted out to him. A truck came over the hill and stopped in front of the store. A dog barked. The twilight sky dimmed. Nelson could hear unseen waves lapping desultorily at the beach and voices murmuring in a language he did not understand.

A row of sticks driven in the nearby water to form a fish trap reminded him of bare tree limbs in the middle of his own country, where he had been a child in a city far from the sea, and of winters such as this land never knew. After all these years he was uncertain what he remembered and what he had learned later. The photographs his grandmother kept. The back issues of newspapers he had looked up in the library when he was in college, with their grainy photographs of the hotel showing his father's leap as a broken line from a window on the eleventh floor.

Nelson was three years old then. He could picture himself bundled up in a hooded snowsuit, scarf and galoshes, but most probably that image came later from seeing photographs. What he thought he could actually remember was his mother's hysteria, and a crowded train station, and most of all stark trees, black outlines against snow covered farm fields, muted winter light, smudged Pullman windows, as the train took them south to stay with his aunt until the reporters lost interest.

About his mother, the train stations, all the rest, even his father, whom he had seen only twice, he was uncertain. But the trees he could still see vividly. Bare trees against snow were his earliest memory. Even fifty years later here in the tropics where trees never lost their foliage, for a moment he was cold.

The snake came over the stern in the net. Normally timid, though venomous, it was confused. When Deng saw the snake in the pile of fish flopping and gasping and dying on the teak deck, he reached for his parang and casually cut it in two. The bewildered half snakes curled futilely together. Deng pushed them to one side with the blade. Snake meat would make a welcome change from the constant diet of fish, and the tiny sacks of venom could be sold to a herbalist in the city, who would later resell them as an aphrodisiac.

It was dark by the time the long net had been pulled aboard and the last of the fish kicked into the hold.

Nhu switched off the winch and made his way through abrupt silence to the stern. He peered down into the fish hold. It was nearly full, and their ice was melting fast. They would have to take the catch to port tomorrow. He slid the hatch cover into place and walked forward to where Deng was boiling rice over a fire in an cutoff oil drum. He squatted beside his son. My only remaining family, he thought; though some of them are probably still alive.

"The fishing is much better here than it was at home, Father."

"Yes."

"Here is something special for you, Father."

The older man stiffened. Even momentary happiness, the least note of pleasure in a voice, seemed wrong. Yet it was not Deng's fault, or so Nhu thought. The boy, who was in fact a man, meant no harm.

"Thank you, Deng."

Nhu reached out and took half the raw snake. Slitting the skin with his thumbnail, he peeled it back with his teeth. The sweet white meat came away easily from the delicate bone. It did taste good. He enjoyed the

flavor, until he remembered to wonder what, or who, Kew was tasting that night. He did not bother to think about the other daughter. And Mai was almost certainly dead, or if alive, too old to do more for them than cook. The idea that they were using her too, that they were using all his women, was too much. He spit the snake over the side.

Deng started as something splashed in the black water.

When Nhu went to sleep that night, lying on a mat on deck, he dreamed of when he was a boy and he and his father sat waiting on the steps of a temple several hours' walk inland from the sea. The sun was very hot, and others sat beneath palm trees or beside huts along a track leading away from the temple. From time to time Nhu had to move aside for women going up or down the steps or for girls selling food or clothing, which they carried tied in bundles on their heads.

Everyone waited patiently, although even in the shade sweat ran. For the first hour most of the people in the crowd were tourists. These were the first Nhu had ever seen. He found himself staring at a beautiful, tall, blond girl in a purple sari with metallic threads that flashed in the sunlight when she moved, and at a fat hairy man who kept making adjustments to a movie camera on a tripod. Nhu did not know what the camera was and asked his father, who did not know either and told him to be quiet. After a while the crowd began to swell with people from other villages.

Just before midday a man climbed the stone steps of the temple and began to beat out a slow rhythm on a gong.

When the gong stopped, men burst from the compound and ran to a bamboo tower. The tower was ten feet tall and covered with white and gold paper and with streamers of every color. It was tapered and capped by a gold canopy over a narrow pallet. With a grunt, the men lifted the tower and carried it around to the entrance of the temple.

Women filed silently down the steps and began to shuffle along the road. Over their heads they held a long train of white cloth. From a distance they looked like the legs of a giant centipede.

A bamboo ladder was positioned against the tower, and a body was brought out of the temple. Nhu's father had told him what they were going to see, but the body was wrapped in white cloth and Nhu did not understand. He did understand that his father would not welcome further questions. The bundle, whatever it was, was heavy, and the men strained as they handed it up the ladder.

One man remained on one side of the tower and tied the bundle to the pallet with bamboo lashings, while another placed offerings of clothing and food and cups and ornaments in the tower. Two live birds with white feathers were tied to the corner of the canopy. Nhu felt sorry for the captive birds.

When everything was in place, curtains were drawn around the pallet until only the end of the bundle could be seen, and the men started off.

Soon the procession became a parade.

The men sweated and strained as they carried the tower through the village, but they were happy, not solemn. People came from shops to join them, crossing the drainage ditch beside the road on planks of wood, as though crossing a moat.

At the crossroads in the middle of the village, the tower was turned in a circle three times. Nhu's father was pleased to be able to explain that this was to confuse the man's spirit so that it would not be able to return. Nhu was too timid to ask again what a spirit is. The crowd cheered the completion of each revolution. Once the tower tilted over so far it seemed certain to fall, but men rushed from the crowd to help, and the body did not touch the earth.

Their way, even after they left the narrow road for an even narrower

path beside a rice paddy, was always bordered by walls: walls hundreds of years old hidden beneath thick layers of dirt and green-black mold; ruined walls, carved with crumbling gods; new walls of brick; walls so high they could not see over them; walls so low they were mere suggestions of ownership; well cared for walls, covered with fresh paint; long forgotten walls, reclaimed by the jungle.

Thousands jammed the cremation ground. The heat and smell became stifling as Nhu's father dragged him by the hand toward one of the bamboo towers that rose like islands from the sea of people. Some of the towers were shaped like animals; some like mythological beasts; some like flesh-consuming gods. Three held bodies.

The body they had followed was placed inside a white paper cow, along with the offerings of food and clothing, but not, Nhu was pleased to see, the live birds. The squawking birds were tossed into the clamoring hands of the men who had carried the tower through the village.

It seemed to take much longer to transfer the offerings from the tower than it had taken to place them there. The crowd sagged as people began to faint. Finally the back of the cow was lowered.

A cloud of smoke drifted down on Nhu. Then there was smoke everywhere and flames leapt into the sky as all the towers were fired.

The white cow crumbled in a wave of sparks. Ashes filled the sky and covered the ground. Nhu's father lifted him up to sit on his shoulders. Nhu buried his fingers in his father's hair as the smoke thickened, then swirled to reveal a monstrous face, a mask still untouched by the fire, striped red and black and white, its' great mouth gaping in a hideous grin. Nhu's eyes became huge as suddenly he understood: one day that would be him, there in the flames.

The rhythms of the open ocean are measured. Seldom if ever does the weather change over blue water without warning. The barometer moves; the wind increases or drops away to nothing, veers or backs; waves change size and shape; new clouds appear; perhaps a swell from an unexpected direction; and, on vessels under sail, which move with the elements rather than bludgeon through them, an experienced sailor may simply sense a change in his ship's motion, an uneasiness, a stumbling, a loss of stride. But near land, and most particularly on those straits and seas and channels and lakes where weather passes rapidly from land to water and back again, often there is no warning, for the rhythms of the open ocean are never established there. Landsmen fear the open sea; sailors worry about the land.

The sky was clear, except for a few clouds hanging over the five hundred mile long island on the western side of the strait, when Nelson Alexander raised anchor on the JUSTINE that morning, and, a few miles to the north, Nhu and Deng raised anchor on the MAI KEW. All three men knew that the strait is susceptible to sudden storms, but none of them anticipated what was about to happen.

The JUSTINE sailed slowly north in a light breeze whose cats-paws just ruffled the brown water and barely filled her sails. The MAI KEW powered purposefully north toward a port twenty miles up the coast where she could sell her catch.

The two boats were separated by only three miles and a point of land when the storm, which had been massing behind the mountains of the island to the west, burst over that barrier and rushed down the strait. In five minutes half the sky was boiling with low black clouds and the wind had increased from four knots to thirty-five. In five more minutes, not a speck of blue sky

remained, and the wind was gusting sixty.

The JUSTINE was hit first.

Nelson was sitting in the cockpit, steering through conditions too light for the self-steering vane to handle, when he felt a single cool breath against his neck. Glancing over his shoulder, he froze for a second in disbelief. Even as he recovered and leapt for the jib furling line, JUSTINE heeled far over onto her side. The jib flogged as he cast off the sheet. There was no time to furl the sail smoothly. It took all his strength to bring the line in with both hands as the jib shook the sloop. Gradually the flogging decreased as he managed inch by inch to reduce sail. But even after the sail was fully furled, JUSTINE continued to lie on her side, masthead in the water, pressed down by the weight of wind in her mainsail.

Nelson felt an odd sense of timelessness. The wind had come so suddenly it had yet to create waves. The boat was not being flung about. There was no noise from the water. No shriek in the rigging. Everything was calm and normal, except that the horizon was not in place, and angles were wrong. He was standing parallel to the deck, his feet on what was usually the side of the cockpit. The sky had shifted.

Bracing himself, he swung forward until he reached the main sheet. As he cast it off, JUSTINE came upright and the world became recognizable again. The momentary eerie stillness was shattered by the mainsail, whose boom began to flail about just above his head. Frantically he crawled to the mast to release the halyard and claw down the sail, which fought like a frightened animal.

Back in the cockpit, Nelson hesitated before deciding to reset a few feet of the jib he had just struggled to furl. In the open ocean, he would have let JUSTINE run ahead of such overwhelming wind under bare poles, but here the sloop was being driven toward the nearby shore. Her engine was not powerful enough to oppose the wind. He would have to try to sail across

the face of the storm.

The wind began to tear the surface off the water. Nelson could not let go of the tiller long enough to reach his foul weather gear, only a few feet away inside the cabin, and soon he was soaked and shivering with cold on this, a midsummer's day near the Equator. More and more water filled the air, flung back from the bow as the sloop slashed forward at eight knots under the merest scrap of sail. Nelson had to breathe shallowly. Much of the time he felt as though he were under water. Boat speed and wind instruments two feet from his face were invisible. He had to lean far over to read the compass. The mast, the bow, much less anything beyond--another vessel? the Asian mainland? one of the many small islands that dotted the strait?--was completely obliterated.

The tiller began to hum in his hand as JUSTINE exceeded her theoretical maximum speed and began to surf. At this rate they would close with the far side of the strait in less than three hours. The chart was a world away in the cabin. As far as he could recall there was nothing ahead for at least ten miles, except, of course, the parade of shipping always present in the strait. At about ten miles, there was a small island. He could not recall its name. And perhaps it was a group of islands. If only he could engage the self-steering vane long enough to duck below. He turned his face aft. Hard drops of water struck his open eyes. Nelson flinched and his hand involuntarily moved the tiller. JUSTINE broached. Again she lay beam on to the wind, as she had earlier under mainsail alone, but the storm had grown in violence. He thought he heard something break. For an instant he thought the mast was gone.

The wind was blowing the tops off waves as quickly as they formed, but one wave survived long enough to lift the sloop and slam her down on her side. Nelson braced both feet against the far side of the cockpit and strained at the tiller. The lower third of the deck was below water. He

wondered if enough of the rudder was submerged to be effective. He could not move the tiller. Perhaps the breaking sound had come from the steering gear.

He had sailed JUSTINE for years and thousands of miles. He had been in dirty weather in her many times and thought he knew her well; yet now everything was out of control, as it had been in the end with her namesake. And, he thought, as with Justine, there is nothing I can do. Yet this time it is clearly my fault. If I had not turned to set the self-steering, the sloop would not have broached.

He strained harder on the tiller. Another wave lifted and dropped the sloop. JUSTINE shuddered with the impact. Suddenly the tiller moved easily. Had the shaft broken? Or the rudder fallen off? But the bow began to swing away from the wind and he could hear and feel, though he could not see, the scrap of jib fill. So the rudder was still there and so was the mast.

He did not know what had caused the breaking sound. His mind created images of sprung bulkheads or sections of furling gear peeling apart like a banana skin. He would deal with those when he had to. For now he could only try to steer.

The MAI KEW fared better during the first hour of the storm.

Nhu had seen the sky darken behind them and ordered Deng, who was in the wheelhouse, to head away from the shore. Still the power of the wind surprised him.

Nhu ducked into the partial protection of the wheelhouse. "How does she feel?" he asked his son.

"Awkward. The stern is trying to go faster than the bow."

Nhu nodded. The cargo of fish in the hold was making the boat sluggish, but was also providing ballast. They should be all right as long as the fish did not shift and as long as they did not take water through the hatches.

"It will be almost as though you are sailing again." Usually on the MAI KEW they ignored the wind; but for most of their lives, they had fished under sail from small outriggers called gujongs. The two men exchanged smiles. Sailing gujongs was almost the last happy memory Nhu had.

"I will like that," Deng said.

"Not if this gets much worse, you won't. Try to cut back the power. Find the speed where she feels best, where you have most control. And steer a little more offshore. Usually when it comes up this fast, it does not last long."

Nhu started to ask if the deck hatches were well secured, but his son had enough to do at the helm. He pulled on an old, yellow slicker and crawled out into the blinding rain to check the hatches himself.

6

The storm flung the JUSTINE carelessly down the strait. Nelson knew that they were moving much too fast, but it was either that or drift under bare poles. He could not see much beyond the jib, which was itself seldom visible. He hoped that he would see land or another ship in time. Perhaps he saw nothing because nothing was there; but perhaps the shadowy shape of hull or land would suddenly loom over him.

He pressed the button that changed the cockpit instrument display to show distance covered rather than boat speed. At intervals he lowered his face close enough to read the numbers. When after an hour they reached double figures, he became increasingly worried. Currents were strong in the strait and unpredictable in the storm. JUSTINE might have covered less than ten miles over the bottom, but she might just as easily have covered more. Nelson had almost decided that he would have to chance leaving the tiller to go below to check the chart, when he felt the island.

At first he did not know what it was. Although the rain continued relentlessly, something had changed. The wind was less intense, and the

short, steep waves had decreased. Something was out there. Nelson recalled looking up at the slab sides of the huge ships anchored off the city. Was one of them bearing down on him? Surely even in this chaos of wind and wave, he would hear a ship close enough to create a lee. Then he did hear breaking waves. Were they crashing against the bow of a ship or against rocks? He tensed for an impact that did not come, then acted instinctively. All his life he had preferred action over waiting. He had waited enough as a child. That was one of the reasons he had gone into surgery rather than some other specialty. He tied a line around the tiller to hold it amidships; furled the jib; and, leaving JUSTINE to lie ahull, scrambled into the cabin.

Water streamed from his face and clothes onto the chart table. Using his thumb as a measure, he found a small crescent-shaped island near their probable position. He switched on the depth finder, which steadied at a reading of only twenty-three feet. Although the strait was shallow, it was not that shallow. A ship could not be here. JUSTINE must have just missed one end of the island. He did not know which end, and realized that it did not matter. Even as he watched, the depth reading changed to twenty-five feet. Nelson climbed back up the companionway ladder and turned the engine ignition key. The waves and shrieking wind obscured the sound of the diesel and he was not certain it had started, but when he pushed the gear lever forward, he felt the propeller began to turn.

Leaving the engine more or less holding the sloop in place, he went forward and began to unlash the anchor from the bow roller. As his fingers automatically untied knots, he stared into the rain, futilely searching for land.

When the anchor was free, Nelson return to the cockpit. The depth finder had a second readout there. The wind had pushed them further off. They were now in thirty feet, and from the increased wave motion, losing the protection of the island.

Nelson increased the engine's RPM's. The rain was solid, impenetrable. With his face almost touching the readouts, he could see that they had no apparent boat speed. Not until he gave the diesel full throttle did JUSTINE began to creep forward. That was fine. He did not want to go fast.

The anchor was on a two hundred foot length of 3/8 inch chain. He could anchor where they were, but he wanted to move closer in case of a wind shift. He did so blindly, using the instruments.

Gradually, foot by foot, the depth readings and the wind and waves decreased as JUSTINE neared the still invisible island. When the depth finder was at fifteen feet, Nelson released the anchor. Chain rattled over the bow roller, until at the seventy-five foot marker he locked the windlass and let the wind set the anchor for him. The chain snapped from the water and became bar tight. Nelson pulled another twenty-five feet of chain onto the deck and tied a snubbing line at the one hundred foot mark, then cleated the line and let the remaining chain go.

He stared forward. The island could not be more than thirty or forty yards away, but he could see nothing.

In the windows of travel agencies along the crowded streets of the city, Deng had seen posters of skiers on snowy mountains. This is what it must be like, he thought, as he struggled to keep MAI KEW under control. He had never actually seen snow or ice or even real mountains, though the inland hills were sometimes called mountains. In his experience, it felt as though the MAI KEW was slipping on a smooth stone, polished for centuries in a stream and covered with slime. Like the stones on which he and his brother and sisters used to play in the stream behind their hut. But it was not quite the same; so he concluded that it must be like ice.

The storm filled Deng with exhilaration. This was the first time his father had let him keep the helm during such weather. He felt wonderfully alive

and powerful. He almost wished the MAI KEW did not have a wheelhouse so he could stand outside steering, open to the elements, feeling the wind and rain beat against his skin as he spun the wheel.

Nhu was at that moment wondering if he should take over. This was a serious storm and it showed no sign of weakening as he had expected. But Deng was doing well enough, and he was now almost a man and had already changed their lives by bringing the warning so they could flee their village in time. As always Nhu could not prevent the doubt from rising: What if they had not fled? Surely things could be no worse. But that was not Deng's fault. Deng had only told him that the officials had decided to resettle the family on a collective farm. The decision to leave had been his. He had known the risks. Or thought he had. The storm tired him. The storm and his memories. Nhu squatted in the corner of the wheelhouse and watched Deng. He knew that he had a better feel for the helm and the sea, but Deng was keeping the boat mostly under control.

"How does she feel?"

Deng hesitated before deciding that he did not dare to say 'like ice.'
"Like being on a slippery stone."

Nhu saw them then, all his children, playing in the stream as he came home at midday, after a night fishing, sailing the gujong onto the beach; Mai's betel nut stained smile as the women came down to help pull the boats to the tree line, then carry the fish away in baskets balanced on their heads. Often he and the other men were exhausted; often they caught little or nothing and the village went hungry; but in retrospect it seemed idyllic.

"Do you want me to steer for a while?"

"Of course, if you want to, Father."

"No. I was only asking. You are doing well. You continue."

Nhu stood and turned aft. He tried to see through the rain streaked glass. Enclosed in here he could not judge the weather. Disgusted, he

recalled how often during squalls he had sat huddled in an open gujong, desiring the comfort of a larger, decked boat. He had been taught that desire is wrong, and so it is. All he had really wanted was to be left alone to live quietly with his family around him. But they would not permit him even that.

Impatient with these recurring thoughts, he pulled the yellow slicker tighter around his knotted body and went out into the rain.

When they came upon the island, where they had often anchored in the past, Nhu took the helm and steered cautiously around a rock that was just visible through the rain. In familiar waters he was concerned by the likelihood that other fishing boats had sought the same refuge; but as they slowly powered around the rock into the lee of the island and were sheltered from the full force of wind and wave, he saw nothing. "This will do," he told Deng, who ran forward and let go the anchor.

Less than a hundred yards away, Nelson Alexander thought he heard an errant sound and stood and stared through the cabin ports without seeing anything but uniform grayness that might be rain or sky or sea. The infinite universe was reduced to arm's length. It had sounded like chain running through a hawse hole. Nelson stood silently, but the cabin was filled with sounds: water against hull, rain against deck, halyards inside mast, squeaking bow roller, wind through rigging. All these were explicable. When after a few minutes, he did not hear the sound again, he returned to the bowl of soup he had left on the galley counter top.

When Deng had let run what he felt was enough chain, he turned the brake lever on the ancient windlass. That lever was one of the few parts of the windlass which still worked. The rest was rusty and useless. Deng could

see only a few feet of the chain. The wind was blowing the sound of the MAI KEW's engine away from him, but he assumed that his father was backing down. When he saw the chain lift from the water, he turned and made his way aft to tell his father that the anchor was set.

The storm continued for the rest of the day. Nelson and Nhu and Deng sat inside their boats unaware of the other's presence.

Nelson and Nhu were uneasy. Both men prowled their cabins. Although the invisible island continued to offer some shelter, fists of wind increasingly reached over the land and pounded the boats, which snapped and tugged at their anchors. After one gust flattened both boats, heeling them so far over onto their beams that Nhu thought that the fish in the hold, the now rapidly spoiling fish, would shift and capsize the MAI KEW, both men thought: if it is this bad here, how much worse must it be in open water? And both wondered if their anchors would hold. And both felt great relief when the gust passed and the boats righted themselves. Nelson tried to return his attention to the book he was holding in his hands, pretending to read, while actually waiting for the next blow and trying to decide if he should go through the ordeal of dragging out and setting the huge hurricane anchor; and Nhu tried to concentrate on mending a torn net he had dragged into the wheel house.

Only Deng ate much for dinner that evening. Nhu and Nelson settled for cabin crackers and countless cups of tea. Not long after the gray shroud enveloping the boats turned black, the electric lights aboard the JUSTINE and the kerosene lantern aboard the MAI KEW were extinguished.

The three seamen lay in darkness, the minds of Nelson and Nhu attuned to the storm; that of Deng full of pride at his performance at the helm that day and of hopeful plans for the future, until he alone fell asleep.

During the night the center of the storm passed over the boats and brought with it a change in the wind. Instantly both Nhu and Nelson were on deck. The wind was now blowing onto the island, which instead of providing shelter had become a dangerous lee shore. Each man knew that if this wind approached the force of that which had preceded it, he would have no choice but to slip anchor and try to claw his way to open water.

For an hour they sat in the darkness as the wind gradually increased; but when it peaked at only thirty knots and then dropped back to twenty, Nhu and Nelson gratefully returned to their bunks, and near dawn both fell into troubled sleep.

Only then did the anchor chain break.

He lived in a room far from the sea. Flat, rich farmland stretched for hundreds of miles around the room and the nearby buildings of a minor city that had been important only for a single generation when the country was first being settled.

The room was one of two small bedrooms, separated by a bathroom, which comprised the second floor of a small brick suburban house into which his widowed mother and her twice widowed mother and he moved after his father's death. "He might as well support you now that he's dead; he never did when he was alive," his mother declared with some satisfaction. Nelson did not understand what she meant at the time and later assumed that there must have been insurance money, although he wondered that an insurance company would have paid out on a suicide. Perhaps it was government insurance from when his father was in the army during the war. His mother's mother--he did not think of her as his grandmother--lived in the other upstairs bedroom. His mother lived in the single bedroom downstairs.

His room had windows on three sides. Through the front window he could see the street, which ran uphill to end in a cul-de-sac and so had little traffic. Through the side window he could look a few feet to the blind wall of the garage of the neighboring house, which held no interest until it was sold when he was thirteen to a family with two daughters a few years older than he. He did not ever really get to know the daughters, but late one night he was awakened by uncontrollable sobs coming through an open window. He left his bed and stood in the dark, looking toward the house, wondering why one of the girls was crying and what he should do and wishing someone else would hear. But no one did and after an hour the crying stopped and he went back to bed.

The back window was different. During most of his years living in that room, the house was on the outskirts of the city, and his back window

overlooked an open field of grass and weeds that ended in a line of trees. The field belonged to a farmer who had been poor before a real estate developer ruined his life by buying the corner of his property in 1945 to build houses for returning servicemen, including the one in which Nelson lived. Unfortunately for the farmer, his dream of sudden riches came to nothing during his own lifetime, for the building boom ended, and it was not until after he was dead that his sons successfully sold the remainder of the land. Nelson came back from university one summer to discover that the field had been turned into a subdivision.

Sometimes Nelson played in the field with other children from the neighborhood. It was a good place for hide and seek, but too wild for more organized games or sports and often he wandered there alone.

The tree line was a boundary. Playing in the field was permitted; venturing into the woods was not. To a child of seven or eight, the trees were frightening. But as he grew older, Nelson learned that they guarded only the mansions of the very rich; mostly members of one family who jointly owned a brewery. Gathering his courage, he explored the perimeters of the great sweeps of lawn with their circular driveways, stables and private ponds. One day he was chased by a man with two hunting dogs, and eluded him only by a flight of blind panic through the trees whose branches tore his clothes and skin. His mother's mother, who did all the housework while his mother endlessly read crime novels, scolded him about his ruined clothes when she came across them in the wash.

This did not prevent Nelson from returning to the estates, where one summer afternoon he discovered a rowboat on a pond between the mansions and, for the first time in his life, went out on the water. That night his mother's mother scolded him for the mud on his shoes and socks. But those few moments of awkward flailing about with oars much too big for his hands were worth any sharp words.

Nelson had almost lost one of the oars in the middle of the pond and reached the nearby shore with great relief. He did not understand exactly what he felt, but it was wonderful to be away from the shore, isolated by those few yards of shimmering water from the world, from the house, from his mother and her mother. The only sounds were the buzzing of insects and the sigh of wind through the trees and water dripping from oars. It was a peacefulness he had never known. And years later, after Justine's death, he sometimes found himself remembering those moments and thinking that all he had done with his life was increase the expanse of water he put between himself and the world from ponds to oceans.

He returned often to the pond, and in time became proficient at rowing, though not more than a dozen strokes took him from shore to shore. He always left the rowboat as he found it and was never caught.

Other than the one man who chased him he never saw any of the people who lived and worked in the mansions, except from a distance. The older girls who moved next door when he was thirteen did date some of the sons of the brewery family. He saw the girls being driven home from horseback riding or swimming parties, and for some reason he thought that the cries he heard that night were caused by one of the rich young men.

More often than he played in the field and the trees, particularly in the winter when the trees were bare and provided no cover for the trespasser and the rowboat had been removed from the frozen pond, he sat at the window in his room and looked out over the field and dreamed.

His daydreams were of openness and light, of deserts and oceans and mountains, of glory and of greatness, of escape from that silent house in which his mother and her mother and he moved in their orbits like solitary planets coming into only brief conjunction at meals. He usually saw his mother from the hallway, where he caught glimpses of her lying on her bed, reading one of the books she obtained weekly from the public library. Her

health was delicate. In winter she bundled up in sweaters and could not go outside because of the cold. In summer, before air conditioning, she moved to a cot in the basement to escape the heat and sun, to which she claimed to be allergic.

Her mother's and his orbits were closer, if only because their bedrooms were. He could hear her snoring at night or hawking and spitting and flushing the toilet in the morning.

No one ever really talked to anyone else in that house. For Nelson the world was downstairs and out the front door or out through the windows overlooking the field and the trees which were wild and green in summer, blazing with color for a few weeks in autumn, and stark black in winter. At least he could look forward to growing up and leaving the house, not realizing that he would take it with him. His mother and her mother, he knew, would die there. Or the world was in books, which he read and upon which he based his dreams.

After he discovered the rowboat, Nelson devoured everything he could about the sea, from copies of THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC and YACHTING to the stories of Melville and Stevenson and Conrad. It was from the photographs in the GEOGRAPHIC and the words of Conrad that he first became intrigued by the East. Perhaps it was the exotic colors worn by the women; perhaps it was the women themselves; perhaps it was the contrast between the teeming pulse of Oriental life and his own solitude; perhaps it was simply that the East was about as far from his room as it was possible to travel. Whatever the basis of the attraction, one of Nelson's most persistent boyhood dreams was that one day he would have an adventure in the East.

Nelson went downstairs and out the door to school; less frequently to Saturday afternoon movies, where when he was about thirteen he saw Rita Hayworth stand poised on the deck of a yacht for a moment before diving into warm blue water and swimming to a pure white beach fringed with

palm trees; and he told himself that one day he would sail a boat like that with a woman like that to an island like that; and quite infrequently to other children's houses to play.

At school Nelson learned quickly and was good at sports. He was the tallest boy in his class, until at age fourteen and 6'1" he stopped growing. Being good at sports gained him some prestige and made the first tentative breaches in his isolation. But Nelson did not know how to respond to overtures of friendship, and, because of his mother's nerves could not invite other children home. So he continued to spend most of his time alone. He did not usually mind.

One of the few things Nelson knew about his father was that he had been a pilot during the war. He also knew--or had been told--that his father wanted to be a painter and was an alcoholic and a womanizer, who had been married three times.

Like his mother Nelson was a reader. Unlike her, for Nelson reading was not enough.

From books about the war, his first ambition was to fly, but he wanted to fly fighters for the navy rather than bombers for the army as his father had. Nelson went through a phase of building model airplanes and suspending them from the ceiling of his room by thread.

His ambition progressed from airplanes to space, and for a while the walls of his room were covered with photographs of distant galaxies and wonderful illustrations from LOOK magazine drawn by a man called Willie Lea of rocket ships and orbiting space satellites, decades before such things actually existed. For some years in his early teens, each night before he went to sleep, Nelson prayed to become the first man to walk on the moon. It was his only prayer and it was abandoned when he had to start wearing eyeglasses. By the time men did walk on the moon, Nelson knew that psychologically he would never have been chosen by a panel of

bureaucrats to go into space. And when he read of the space program, he learned that even as a teenager he had been too tall to fit into the early space capsules.

A period of athletic glory was marked by sports photographs replacing those of space. He played halfback on the football team and ran hurdles in track. But it was a moment in a gym class that stuck in his mind. A soccer ball was cleared by the opposing team's goal keeper. It floated toward him seemingly in slow motion. He leapt and headed the ball back for a goal. There was such pure joy in that leap, in the sense of his own young body, in the perfect control of his muscles. More than the scoring of the goal, Nelson relived the leap, the sensation of rising into the air, the satisfying thump of the leather ball against his forehead. He had known it would be a goal without needing to look. He saw himself making such leaps before huge crowds.

That fantasy was lost in a vision of God, the existence of whom he convinced himself upon the basis of the cosmological argument, although he did not know its formal name until a philosophy class in college. Nelson was not given to compromise. If God, existed, it followed that one should dedicate his life to Him totally.

By this time, he was old enough to drive a car, and he brought to his room a reproduction of a painting from the city art museum of a hooded monk standing with a skull in his hands. Whenever his mother let him use the car he returned to the museum to contemplate the original.

It was not a great museum, but it did have a few lesser works of the Impressionists. Nelson noticed them on his way to and from the painting of the monk. Gradually their vibrant color came to appeal to him more than the melancholy religious. He was sixteen years old, tall, handsome, scarred by his father's suicide, and obsessed by normal adolescent desires that were unfulfillable because he was too shy even to try to kiss a girl.

One day he turned away from belief in God as he turned away from

the painting of the monk. The cosmological argument was not convincing after all. He saw that nothing necessarily follows from the existence of the universe, and most certainly not the illogical god preached by the minister in the Presbyterian church he attended with his mother whenever her health and the weather permitted.

Nelson came to think of this god as the local myth. At the art museum he bought a reproduction of a painting of water lilies by Monet and gave it the place of honor beside his bed formerly occupied by the monk, who was exiled to pursue his meditations in the far corner behind a closet.

Inevitably he contemplated being a painter himself. The only artifact of his father's life was a watercolor sketch he had made of some sun drenched, red tile roofed houses. They were not like any houses found in that city, and neither was the sunlight. Nelson thought they must be Spanish or perhaps Italian, but when he asked, his mother burst into tears and said she didn't want to talk about it. Still she kept the watercolor hanging on the wall of the hallway between her bedroom and the kitchen.

Nelson's awkward drawings proved even to himself that he did not possess his father's talent. Therefore he made the obvious transition. Books were much of his life. He would become a great writer. He would live on a boat and sail the world and write.

He began to spend all his free time at the desk facing the back window of his room. He wrote about the pond and the rowboat; he wrote about the girls who lived next door; and he wrote of the afternoon he came across the passage in *MOBY DICK* where a whale is found floating dead on the surface of the sea, killed by a misdirected harpoon that, initially insignificant, festered for years until finally it lodged in the whale's heart. The thought struck him: What if at birth a needle is plunged like a harpoon into the sole of each baby's foot and he or she dies when it works its way to the heart. If so, where was the needle in his own body now: at his knee? his

waist? higher? He wrote of stripping off his clothes and studying his naked body in a mirror, searching futilely for any sign of his death.

Always he dreamed of the epic, and his brief literary career came to an end with two short pieces he called "Eve" and "Ahaseurus," in which he created and destroyed a universe.

No one was deliberately cruel to Nelson. He was fed and clothed and sent to be educated. But beyond that he was ignored and left to find his own way. By age seventeen he understood that he came from a family of cripples, who could not do any more for themselves than they could for him.

Nelson was a senior in high school when he wrote "Eve" and "Ahaseurus", which he considered to be his own local myths, but by the time he went away to college a year later, he no longer planned to be a writer.

The guidance counselor at his high school told him that he was intelligent enough to do whatever he wanted. Nelson knew that he wanted a career where he would receive the recognition and respect he so desperately needed, where he would earn enough to do things rather than just read about them, and where he could be his own boss. Medicine was an obvious choice.

He knew that his father's suicide had something to do with it too. Nelson did not become a surgeon to heal as much as to confront death directly. But for more than a quarter century, until that confrontation became excruciatingly personal, he achieved great success by doing both.

Dr. Nelson Alexander walked slowly down the hospital corridor. As he passed the nurses' station, he nodded to the two women standing there. When he disappeared into a private room, one nurse said, "He has aged badly in the past few months." The other replied, "He shouldn't visit so often. It does no good." "But what else can he do?" asked the first. They both

shrugged and returned to their duties.

The cool and dimly lit room which Dr. Alexander entered seemed more an experimental laboratory than a patient's room. Motors hummed, gases hissed, lights flickered on monitors. Tubes and wires led to where what was left of Justine lay on a bed.

Her illness had been devastating. From the first fainting spells to this shell, this unrecognizable desecration, had taken two years, though in an attempt to know a last interval of almost normal life, she had kept the first months from him. When she finally had no choice but to tell him, she had smiled bravely. It was the bravery of ignorance. She could never have imagined the excruciating pain, culminating in raving insanity, which itself ended in this insentient, hideous, helpless thing. It--she--could not hear, see, feel, think or move. It--she--mocked every moment of his medical career. He, who had cut into thousands of bodies, restoring life, improving life, helping, healing, could do nothing for the only body he had ever loved. And not only could he do nothing, but all of medicine could do nothing; except, finally, almost as though in punishment for the pride he had taken in his skill, keep this pitiful remnant artificially alive.

Nelson forced himself to walk over to the bed and lift the sheet.

What was left of Justine weighed fifty pounds, was hairless, and covered with lesions. It's unseeing eyes stared upward. Justine's full breasts had dissolved into shriveled nipples between sunken ribs. Her long, once graceful, legs were twisted bones. She was thirty-seven years old. They had had ten years together from the day they met when she interviewed him for a magazine feature about prominent surgeons. It had not all been idyllic. There was a stillborn child; there was a time when she almost left him because he was giving too much of himself to his work and not enough to her. Until that near separation, she had not realized how much she meant to him.

For the thousandth time he wanted to tear the wires and tubes from her body, to unplug the machines. But this would only set off alarms which would summon nurses and other doctors, who would have no choice but to replace the tubes and wires and machines. Legally this was still Justine. It's perverse brain clung to life, still initiated useless electrical waves; and in the face of opposition from a Right To Life group, which, because of his prominence was making this a test case, his lawyers had yet to gain permission from the courts to terminate the support systems. What he had loved: Justine, medicine itself; he had come to hate. And felt guilt because of that hate. How could he have ever written that without death there is no dignity?

He dropped the sheet and walked from the room.

When Justine finally died, that is when one day the occasionally spiked green line on a fluorescent screen went flat, everyone at the hospital breathed a sigh of collective relief and expected that now Dr. Alexander would gradually become himself again. His colleagues urged him to return to a full schedule of surgery, to lose his grief in the technical problems of curing others.

Dr. Alexander followed this advice for two months. And then he sold his practice and his house and all of his possessions, except the sloop, JUSTINE, aboard which he threw himself bodily against the ocean.

He was amazed how completely all his adult life, which after his lonely childhood he had deliberately filled with people: professors, fellow students, patients, nurses, his office staff, partners, his own students; vanished as he sailed away. Books, studying late at night, lecture rooms, laboratories, dissections, examinations, that first incision into a living body, the unexpected resistance of skin to scalpel, the slippery red organs, sutures, sleepless years of internship and residency, gratitude of relatives after a success, tearful

relatives and exhaustion after a failure, the increasing skill, the new techniques he had pioneered, the increasing wealth, bigger houses, more expensive cars, the respect of most of his peers, the envy of some: a successful medical career: a quarter century, including medical school: gone: as unreal as though it had never happened: as ephemeral as JUSTINE's wake among the waves. Again he was alone in a room, though this one was smaller, wetter, and more uncomfortable than that of his childhood. He felt as though he had always been alone in a room.

He had no destination and sailed southwest until he came to high islands rising spectacularly from warm turquoise lagoons. For a while he lingered in those islands, preferring remote coves rather than more frequented harbors. He swam; he read books; he listened to music; he watched fish and birds; he gazed indifferently at tranquil dawns and dramatic sunsets; he ate; he had one vodka and tonic without ice in the evenings. He felt nothing.

Green mountains covered with waterfalls leaping into the sea, rumbling surf on a reef beyond a crystal lagoon, flaming skies, scenery that has always moved men to visions of paradise, were to him neither more interesting than a column of figures in the Nautical Almanac, nor less. Everything meant precisely the same. Everything meant nothing. He tried not to think, though sometimes at night the bodies of those he had operated on appeared in his troubled sleep. The bodies were naked and, inexplicably, pale blue. Endlessly he cut them open. Endlessly he reached into the gaping bloody maw and poked and prodded and cut and stitched. How many had he operated on? How many had he 'saved?' To how many had he given more life? And for what? All night long he cut the pale blue bodies open, sewed them up, and new bodies appeared.

During those first months, whenever another boat anchored nearby, Nelson sailed on.

One day almost a year after Justine's death, he found himself approaching a deserted atoll. A true desert island is rare, for in its profusion homo sapiens has established itself on almost every scrap of land. This particular island was renowned for having been the home of a hermit, who wrote a book about his solitary years there before his death from stomach cancer. The place was so small, less than fifty yards wide and only two hundred yards long, so remote and had no regular source of water--the hermit survived by storing rain from passing cyclones--that it had never been successfully inhabited for long.

The pass through the reef was straightforward, and by now Nelson had been through enough passes so that he did not become overly concerned as coral heads reached up toward JUSTINE's keel and waves broke furiously, but harmlessly, beside them for a few moments before they made the magical transition from ocean to lagoon; yet this time Nelson felt himself beginning to respond to that magic, to the utter peacefulness of the lagoon, as he brought JUSTINE around the corner of the reef to anchor in the lee of the island. Perhaps it was because the place was completely deserted.

Although he anchored in sixty feet of clear water at midday, Nelson did not bother to inflate the dinghy and go ashore. Above him the sky was flecked with trade wind clouds. Across the mile wide lagoon, a few scattered palm covered islets, even smaller than the one on which the hermit had lived, marked the location of the reef, but otherwise the sky and sea were great arches of flawless blue, unchanged and unmarred by eons of time or the hands of man. That night he drank his cup of tea on deck, watching the full moon he had ignored for so many months rise red behind palm trees, change to gold then white as it climbed, shimmering silver on the water.

After a rare good night's sleep, Nelson started to swim ashore the

following morning, but quickly discovered that the lagoon belonged to the sharks. The hermit had written of their aggressiveness, never checked by an even more aggressive permanent human population, and Nelson saw them circling among the coral heads fathoms below. As soon as he entered the water, the sharks spiraled toward him, so he retreated up the boarding ladder and inflated the dinghy and rowed ashore. The sharks shadowed him until the water became too shallow for them.

Nelson came to the beach alongside the ruins of a jetty which had been the hermit's obsession. Huge chunks of coral, some larger than it seemed possible one man could move, lay scattered about, tossed easily by cyclones that had struck since the hermit's death, as he had recorded in his book they struck several times during his life. The island was far from shipping lanes. Rarely had more than one ship a year called at the atoll and then only when the captain of a passing vessel, usually a fishing boat, found himself nearby during settled weather and ducked in the pass to see if the hermit was still alive and to leave him a bag or two of flour or other stores.

Yet the hermit had spent most of his waking hours building the jetty, cutting coral from the reef, transporting it suspended beneath rafts of palm wood, beating off sharks, which the hermit came to hate, writing of them as dark angels of death lurking in his private paradise, though as it turned out less deadly than the malignant cells lurking in his own body, fitting the chunks together, and persistently reassembling them after every great storm. Nelson found it curious that a man who chose to isolate himself from mankind should devote most of his energy to reaching out to others. The jetty was never big enough for even small ships to come alongside, and ships' boats could land directly on the beach. Like Nelson's boyhood stories, the jetty was an attempt at communication.

The day was identical to the day before. Sunny. Hot. Blue sky. Puffs of trade wind clouds. Here almost all days would be like this, Nelson thought.

Nothing on the atoll was taller than a palm tree. The land rose no more than a few feet above the sea and would not catch any clouds. There would be some gray days when clouds drifted over on their way to drop rain on high islands to the west. And there would be a few days, not more than a dozen a year, when a cyclone would pass close enough to cause heavy rain. And there would be the devastation every five years or so when a cyclone hit the atoll, driving waves completely over the tiny patches of land, ripping tops from palm trees, obliterating whatever was in its path.

Nelson felt something in himself stir at that prospect, as something had stirred the previous day as JUSTINE entered the lagoon, and something had stirred at the rising moon. It would be an experience to be here at the height of a cyclone. Though certainly not at anchor. The lagoon was not sheltered enough for that. With a boat your only hope would be to get out the pass to the open ocean, if you had sufficient warning to do so before the storm sealed the pass with breaking waves. No. But to be ashore. Tied to one of the trees. He tried to imagine what it would be like. The wind, rain, coconuts crashing through darkness, waves. He had been in a hurricane at sea, but never on land.

A line of tiny crabs, disturbed by his intrusion on what they had come to consider their private preserve, parted before him, scurrying for the water.

Just inside the shade of the palm trees, Nelson discovered a rough handmade bench. He pictured the hermit sitting there in the evening, watching the sunset and contemplating the progress, or lack of progress, on his Sisyphean jetty. Nelson's mind passed beyond the obvious conclusions: men need to labor: all labor ends in ruins; as his gaze moved beyond the shoreline to where JUSTINE bobbed on the lagoon. She was a beautiful boat, her lean lines uncompromised by excessive freeboard or by a high cabin. She possessed that mystery shared by a few boats which are among the most beautiful and living of man's creations.

As he watched, a woman came on deck. For a moment she stood poised at the lifelines. She seemed so real that he started to shout to her about the sharks. But before he could, she dove. Her naked body formed a perfect arc in the air before it disappeared into the clear water. Although he knew that she was not real, he found himself waiting anxiously until she reappeared halfway to the shore and began swimming toward him. At water's edge she stood and characteristically brushed her dark hair back with her fingers. Drops of water gathered and fell from her chin and nose, her fingertips, her breasts. "Justine?", he asked. She smiled as she walked past him into the jungle. He told himself again that she was not real, that she was a fabrication of his troubled mind; but there was such joy in seeing her like this again, vital, voluptuous, not as the withered corpse she had become. He turned and followed.

For three days and nights, she remained with him.

That first day they explored the hermit's shack together. Much had been taken through the years by visitors from other boats; but a few mildewed books remained on a table; a few rusty pans in the kitchen; the framework of a bed; a wooden chair fashioned from a barrel.

And they walked on the reefs together.

The outer reef was volcanic rather than coral. Those parts washed by the tides had been smoothed through the ages, but on the lagoon side the lava had cooled in jagged spikes just as it had exploded into the air. The reef, black where the sea did not touch it, became salmon pink as it was uncovered by the outgoing tide. Small, brightly colored fish, orange, blue, purple, red, yellow, green, were trapped in pools of water held by fissures in the lava, trying to hide from the frigate birds and terns soaring overhead, until the returning ocean released them.

Nelson rose from studying a tide pool and turned to see Justine standing with her back to him, looking out to sea. He felt as though they

were on the edge of the world, a primitive, simple world of beauty where there were no other people and no disease. A vast blue sky and sea, a white turmoil of waves breaking on the outer edge of the reef a few steps away, just beyond which the reef fell for a hundred fathoms; the lush green vegetation on the island; a narrow band of white sand; black lava; salmon pink lava; fish; scuttling crabs; the bright sun and the shadows of circling birds; the curves of Justine's body. It was a perfect, timeless moment. He wanted to ask what she was looking at, but he knew that she was not really there, and for a moment he was angry that she was not. She should have been. They deserved such moments. Who or what would have been harmed had she lived? With difficulty he subdued his anger as she turned and walked toward him.

She sat in the stern of the dinghy as he rowed out to the sloop. She shared what had been his solitary meals. They raised the anchor and ghosted--appropriately he thought--across the lagoon, dodging patches of coral, marked on the chart with such names as "The Frenchman's Folly" and "Greenlander." They sat together sipping Laphroaig scotch, listening to music, and watching the moon rise at night. She slept beside him; and for three mornings he awoke anxiously, relieved when he found her still there.

Near noon on the third day, as they were getting ready to row ashore, he noticed her staring out to sea. He followed her gaze. Far to the south, just on the horizon, was a sail. When he turned back, she was gone.

He watched the sail grow larger. He could not face anyone, and as the other boat drew near, he raised anchor and took JUSTINE, the sloop, alone to sea.

His general course continued south and west, carving a great arc across the ocean.

The further west he sailed, the more the sea was dotted with islands,

and the more the islands were divided politically into small, beautiful, but poor countries, dependent on copra and tourism; and the more frequently he came across boats and people he had seen before.

He discovered that he was a part of a modest migration of craft sailing among the islands on a loose schedule dictated by the annual cyclone season which extended from November to March and the exigencies of personal finance. While he continued to keep to himself, increasingly people he had last seen months and thousands of miles earlier waved to him as JUSTINE sailed into an anchorage, asked him how his passage had been when they encountered him at the various dinghy landings, fell into step as he walked into town and waited in line with him to check for mail at the post office. Gradually he found himself being drawn at least to the edge of this loose community of sailors from many countries and every continent, who had more in common with one another than with locals or tourists from their own native lands.

The intervals in port made him aware how seldom he ever spoke aloud.

Most of the boats were crewed by couples or families; but there were a few other single-handers such as himself. Some of these men reminded him of old bulls driven from the herd.

There was one, a famous, but embittered and burned out solo sailor, who endlessly retold stories of his three circumnavigations, the most recent of which had taken place more than a decade earlier.

When Nelson met him, the man still mentioned vague plans to voyage on. But he had rotted in the warm latitudes for years, never actually sailing more than a few hundred miles, surviving by performing simple repairs on other yachts, earning just enough to buy rice and fish and beer, and by sponging off the natives. Nelson saw in the older man what he himself might become. Not financially, but emotionally. After Justine's death, he had

wanted to isolate himself from humanity forever, from pain and suffering. With time he was becoming less certain.

Nelson had not told anyone he was a doctor, but his name was relatively well known, and one evening as he sat in JUSTINE's cockpit with a final cup of tea, watching lights along the shore and the stars, a dinghy from a nearby boat came alongside. The man in it asked if Nelson would look at his daughter's ear, which was infected. Nelson lanced the five year old girl's ear and gave her some antibiotics. She was his first patient since Justine.

The next day the man's wife stopped by and asked if he would come to dinner on their boat that evening. Startled Nelson declined by claiming that he already had another commitment. He even went ashore and ate alone at a restaurant so that they would see he was not aboard.

The woman did not repeat her invitation, but the following morning she stopped by and gave him a freshly baked loaf of banana bread.

Most of the islands scattered about that ocean are relatively healthy, though at one of them Nelson saw an old woman struggling along a path on legs grotesquely deformed by elephantiasis, a disease which, along with leprosy, was once common but had due to modern medicine become rare; the same modern medicine which was unable to help Justine.

As he sailed farther, the islands became poorer and disease more varied and prevalent and obvious. Nelson began to find himself drawn to the small, understaffed, under equipped hospitals in the settlements. He had never practiced general medicine, but he knew that he could be of use. And he was becoming bored with pointlessly sailing onward. Palm trees, surf on reefs, swimming in warm water, spectacular sunsets, had all come to be alike. Ultimately they were cloying and, for him, inadequate. A vacation, a respite, a period of recovery, yes. For the rest of his life, no.

Halfway through the cyclone season, which he was waiting out at one of the larger islands, he became overwhelmingly restless and took a calculated risk and sailed west. He and JUSTINE were only at sea for a week and a thousand miles before they were out of the cyclone zone, and they did not encounter any severe weather.

Nelson knew by then that he would return to the practice of medicine. He could do so anywhere, but, perhaps because of his boyhood reading, perhaps because he was tired of the islands and wanted as complete a change as possible from the life he had known with Justine, he was drawn onward to the East.

The horror of Justine's death had lessened with time and distance. Mankind's extravagantly proven capacity to endure is both strength and weakness, for if every loss can be endured, and every pain diminished, then nothing has lasting value. Nelson felt that if he had really loved Justine--and he knew he did--he should never be able to get over her death. He had not forgotten her. But his grief was becoming manageable. If he were not going to follow his father into suicide, he was going to have to return to work. Ultimately his colleagues were right. He felt that when he found the right place to stop, he would recognize it.

And so he continued, his course forced northward by land and wind, until he came at last to the city in the East, the strait, and finally to the island in a storm.

Always there was war.

Five generations earlier Ancestor Ling had fled the land where the family had lived since the beginning of time because of a war between princes who wanted to become kings. Ancestor Ling had sailed along the coast until he finally settled near the mouth of a tiny stream. There was a bar across the entrance to the stream and the anchorage inside was not very well protected. When their fishing boats grounded in the breaking surf on the bar or a storm swept over the village, Ancestor Ling's descendants often criticized his choice. But Ancestor Ling had deliberately sought a backwater, a place so marginal that other men would not want to live there. He knew that men would die in the surf. He knew that storms would drive waves into the huts, no matter how high the stilts upon which they were built. But Ancestor Ling, usually known as Great Ancestor Ling, had seen war and he knew that it is better to fight typhoons than men.

In the almost two centuries since Great Ancestor Ling, a village had grown near the mouth of the stream. It never consisted of more than two dozen huts, and often there were fewer, depending on the number of male children who survived to adulthood in a given generation and the intensity of storms. Sons brought wives back from nearby villages; daughters left to live with husbands in nearby villages; and no one ever traveled more than a few miles inland from the spot where he or she was born, though the men sailed much farther than that out to sea, and twice a year one of the larger boats was sailed to a town a day up the coast to trade dried fish and live turtles for luxuries such as tea and wheat, which could not be grown near the village.

These expeditions were great events, eagerly anticipated and afterwards long remembered and discussed. Every member of the family got to the town once every year or so. The trips were arranged after the most significant natural event of the year: the change of the monsoon wind

from northeast to southwest. The southwest wind caused waves to break more heavily on the bar, but once clear of the river mouth, a boat could reach easily along the coast to the town and back, instead of having to beat against the wind, which was all right for the men and the children, but hard on the old women.

The town was a strange place, both fascinating and frightening. Everyone looked forward to the visits; everyone was glad when the visits were over and the village returned to normal.

It was in the town, when some boys made fun of him for being a fisherman's son, that Nhu first learned that he was poor and that everyone did not respect his father. The boys said that a fisherman is as low as a butcher, for both take life. Several days passed before Nhu was able to ask his father about this, and when he did, his father only replied that someone had to catch fish; his father had caught fish, and his father before him; the family had always been fishermen; it was obviously their destiny to be fishermen or why else would the gods have them be born in a fishing village? He was really too busy trying to catch fish so the family would not starve to worry about the religious implications of fishing.

Nhu accepted his father's answer as he had to, but something in his mind remained troubled, and frequently he wandered down to the village temple, where he sat beneath what seemed to him a huge bell and tried to make sense of what he had been taught.

There were no religious books or books or any kind in the village. No one in the family had ever been able to read. And the bell was not huge. It had been brought by Great Ancestor Ling, and according to village legend some warriors had once come and tried to take the bell away, but the gods caused their raft to capsize and the soldiers drowned and Nhu's ancestors dove and retrieved the bell and returned it to the temple, though Nhu did not see how they could possibly have raised or moved such a massive

object.

Religion came to Nhu from his father and his mother, and particularly from the old women, and from the occasional wandering holy man who came to the village and lived in the temple for a while. It was a religion that shared with other religions an acceptance of Divine Will, and, despite all contrary evidence belief in Divine benevolence and justice, and faith that goodness and proper behavior will ultimately be rewarded in another life, for even to true believers they are obviously not rewarded in this one.

Life is but a bubble on the ocean's surface, Nhu was told. Life is not real, but a shadow. We ourselves are not real, but merely shadows that pass as men. The world is full of spirits. Some are good; some evil; some are the spirits of ancestors. There are Five Great Precepts. It is forbidden to take life; to steal; to commit adultery; to lie; to drink intoxicants. Everything is born and reborn. Everything is directed toward reaching a lifeless, timeless state of bliss, in which the spirit knows no joy and no sorrow, but remains perpetually contemplating abstract truth, free finally from the cycle of recurring existences.

Fishermen everywhere, subject to wind and wave, have a strong sense of fate and a stoic acceptance of its whims, so these beliefs, which are, as is the case in much of the East, a local adaption of several teachings, was suitable.

Everything is fated. Everything, however seemingly unjust, such as when Nhu's baby sister had half her face bitten off by a monkey, is explained as punishment for evil performed during a previous existence. Resignation and acceptance are the great virtues. One can only accept whatever happens as being deserved and try to abide by the Five Great Precepts so that one will suffer less in succeeding lives.

That was what troubled Nhu about fishing, once the town boys pointed it out to him. The more he thought, the more they seemed to be right. How

could he hope, how could anyone in the village hope, to be reborn into a better life, when, no matter how purely they lived in other ways, they daily killed fish? Yet it also seemed that his father must be right. Surely it was their fate to be fishermen. Born in that village there was nothing else they could be. The rice paddies were too small. They would fish or starve. Did the gods mean for them to starve? Yet if the adults starved, no children would be born, and they were born, so the gods must not mean for them to starve. This was too much for Nhu, and he left the shade of the bell and wandered into the jungle.

Nhu was not supposed to go far, the accepted limit being the scattered stones from a pagoda that had been in ruins when Great Ancestor Ling first reached that shore. Shadows moved through the jungle, as shadows moved through his mind. Patches of sunlight and shade chased one another. At times he did feel that he was only a shadow himself. Snakes and monkeys frequented the ruins. Birds fluttered through tree tops high above. Jasmine and sandalwood and decay filled the air. From the direction of the village tiny bells tinkled in the wind, and from the rice paddies, clanged bells around the necks of water buffaloes.

Several months passed before the gods sent an answer to Nhu's doubts in the form of a holy man who tottered into the village and established himself in the pagoda hut, where he drowsed and meditated.

Nhu made a raft by folding the edges of a palm frond, which he filled with flowers and a few grains of rice. He carried the frond to the edge of the sea and waited until the outgoing tide floated the leaf away and he felt confident that the gods had accepted his offering before he went to talk to the holy man.

The holy man was asleep. He was dreaming of mountains. He had been born near mountains and remembered as a child gazing at the snow

and cloud covered peaks. He had always wanted to go up into the mountains, but for some reason he never had. Instead it was his destiny to wander south and spend his life in low, hot, humid lands. He did not know why this was so. Often he meditated on why he had been destined to walk a thousand miles south, instead of a few miles north. The sweltering heat, the rank smells, the diseased people. The holy man knew that he should not care; but the fact was that he had never liked the south. And throughout his life, increasingly he longed for the coolness of the mountains. Increasingly he found himself transfixed by imaging what it must be like to sit quietly among the clouds. Yet he had never gone. He had never felt he had the right to go. Now that he knew that he was dying, or rather that he would soon be dead, for of course all of them, every living thing was dying from the moment of birth, it was proper for him to go north. He knew that he should not care one way or the other, that if it was his fate to reach the mountains, he would; and if it wasn't his fate to reach the mountains, he wouldn't. But he did care. He could not prevent himself from hoping that a snake would not bite him or a tiger take him or his body fail too soon. He also hoped that his longing was not so great a sin that it would cause him to be reborn into a lower form of existence. In all humility the holy man calculated that he must be pretty far along the path of escaping from life. He had not done much harm in this one and he had not felt much desire and he had spent most of this life in lands and among people he did not like. Somehow he felt that the higher he could climb into the mountains before he died, the better, for it would mean that his spirit would have that much less distance to travel to escape this world. Yet he knew this to be mere superstition. Though it would be pleasant in the mountains. So cool, so clear, so uncomplicated.

Something disturbed him, and his weary spirit left the mountains and returned reluctantly to his body, and he awoke to find a small boy sitting nearby.

Awkwardly the holy man sat upright and readjusted his ragged robe. There was a familiar evil taste in his mouth. He tried to speak, but no words came. He cleared his throat and tried again. He found his body ever more disgusting. He had carried this miserable carcass around for all these years and now he just knew that it was going to fall apart too soon. It was not fair. Then he realized how stupid he was being and smiled. All these years and sometimes it seemed to him that he had learned nothing.

He bent from the waist and took a sip of water from a bowl that was sitting on the ground next to him. The water cleared the worst of the taste from his mouth. He tried again and found that now he could speak.

“Good morning, Nhu.”

“Good morning, teacher. Are you well?”

“As well as I am meant to be.”

“Can I get anything for you? Some more water? Some fruit?”

“Perhaps later. You look very serious, Nhu. Is something troubling you?”

“You do not eat fish.”

“You know that I do not.”

“That is what is troubling me.”

“That I do not eat fish? But you know that I do not eat meat or fish or fowl.” It was too early and he was too ill. He was not up to this.

“Not that you do not eat fish, but that my father and I when I help him and all of us here, kill fish, which is surely very bad. Many of these fish must be our ancestors or other people’s ancestors. The boy in the town told me that fishermen are the lowest of men.”

Privately the holy man tended to agree with him, but the child was so serious and the holy man recalled how, many years earlier, the teacher who had been his master had answered the same question. The wheel had turned and now the question had come to him.

“When you become a man, Nhu, how will you live?”

“I will be a fisherman.”

“Do you ever consider living,” the holy man asked shyly, “as I do?”

“I do not think I could, teacher.” Nhu was surprised and flattered even that it should be suggested.

“You seem in many ways to be suited for such a life; but if not, then there are many ways of looking at most things, including this fishing business. Seen one way, fishermen are low because they kill fish, but seen another way they are noble because they sacrifice themselves by drawing this demerit in order to feed others.”

“But if they are our ancestors?”

“Then perhaps the fisherman is saving them from drowning.”

“Saving fish from drowning?”

“Not fish, but the spirits that inhabit them. My own teacher, who was a very wise man, once said that.”

It was so absurd that Nhu could not help but smile. The more he thought about it, the more it pleased him. And for many years as caught fish flopped about the bottom of his father’s boat, gasping, he tried to see the spirits being released from their scaly prisons.

Nat, the word for spirit, meant ‘lord,’ for the spirit is the lord of the body, and it also meant ‘overlord.’

The battles between those foolish enough to want to be temporal overlords were fought in the plains beyond the jungle, and about once a generation an official would come to the village. He would be accompanied by soldiers, hot, sweaty, dirty, thirsty, scratched, frightened by the jungle, and ill-tempered. The official would proclaim that he was the representative of some new and most glorious king. He and the soldiers would poke around, take a few of the villagers’ poor possessions

to prove their power, and soon leave; and the village would not be bothered until a new glorious leader won a distant battle and sent his soldiers to loot what they could. Not infrequently, the soldiers discarded in the jungle what they took, and the villagers were able to reclaim their mats and pots and turtle shells.

However when Nhu's grandfather was a boy, an inconceivable apparition appeared. Rumors of strange new conquerors had reached the village, but were too grotesque to be believed. One conqueror had always been indistinguishable from another. So the villagers were completely unprepared for the red faced, sunburned, puffing, mustachioed, topee topped, khaki clad creature who emerged from the jungle one day. He was accompanied by soldiers who looked as odd as he did, and who carried strange objects. These creatures spoke gibberish among themselves. Fortunately they had an interpreter who spoke properly and told the villagers that these were the new overlords, who would put an end to the constant cycle of wars and bring a modern era of prosperity to the people of the land.

Not only in appearance were these new conquerors different. They also stayed overnight in the village, something quite without precedent. They used the strange objects they carried to kill animals noisily from a distance. And they returned at intervals, often accompanied by priests, who taught a fierce religion, which, though it extolled the familiar virtues of acceptance and resignation, of not killing, or stealing, or lying, or committing adultery, was lenient about drinking, and described a shockingly cruel god, who tortured almost everyone, including his own son. To villagers for whom the family was all important, such a god was inconceivable.

The weapons of the new conquerors were so powerful that many people in the land concluded that their fierce god must be equally

powerful, and converted to the new religion. But no one in the village ever converted. In fact, despite their weapons and their frequent visits and their priests, the new conquerors did not really change much in the century their rule lasted.

Nhu's grandfather grew old and died; Nhu's father became middle aged; and Nhu himself was a boy, before these supposedly invincible foreigners were overthrown by men who were far more cruel and, despite appearances, far more foreign than the grey-pink men who called themselves white.

These yellow men treated everyone with utter contempt.

When they forced Nhu's father and the other fishermen to deliver almost all the fish they caught to the town along the coast, it seemed that at last war was reaching the village. But the natural repetitive cycle, the regular turning of the wheel of life, was reaffirmed one day when some of the new soldiers tried to carry the bell away to melt down into weapons. Nhu, along with everyone else in the village, was greatly reassured when, just as in the legendary past, the raft capsized in the surf and the soldiers drowned. For a moment the village had teetered on an abyss. But when Nhu's father and the other men dove and raised the bell and carried it back to the hut that served as a pagoda, the familiar cycle was restored. Or so it seemed.

Generations of water buffalo pulling wooden plows. Generations of trees. Generations of fish. Generations of wild orchids, of parrots, of monkeys, of snakes. Generations of betel nut chewing old women with stained teeth. Generations of acid green sprouts of young rice. Generations of sunrises and sunsets. Generations of storms. Generations of festivals and dances. Generations of ritually washing away on the first full moon of each new year the dirt of the past. Generations of young girls

walking with loads balanced on their heads. Generations of men fishing. Generations of shadows.

What was surprising really was not that there was always war; but that Great Ancestor Ling had chosen so well that war did not find the village for so long.

2

The helicopter swooped down to investigate Nhu.

A year earlier Nhu had never seen a helicopter or any other airplane, except for a few passing so far overhead during the war when he was a child that they were mere specks which would, but for their sound, have been mistaken for birds. But now he knew helicopters. As it approached, he let go the sheet so the sail fluttered freely. His first helicopter had capsized an outraged Nhu.

As the helicopter hovered, buffeting him with a fierce downdraft, Nhu held onto his conical straw hat with one hand and the tiller and sheet with the other. Nhu stared up. He could see the big man, inscrutable behind his helmet and goggles, staring down at him. Nhu did not smile or wave. He simply sat, waiting until the pilot had seen enough. The gujong was an open boat. There was no place to hide anything. Nhu wanted to look as though he had nothing to hide. Until two nights ago, he hadn't.

Its pilot satisfied, the helicopter sped off to join others heading for the shore. Nhu pulled in on the sheet so that the patched sail filled. As the outrigger resumed sailing, Nhu watched the helicopters form a line over the jungle a few miles inland. He had been afraid that this time they were going to the village, that somehow they knew the men were there. Sounds of the helicopters firing drifted out over the smooth blue sea. If Duong is feeling better, thought Nhu, I will send him and Deng to bring in the bodies of whatever animals the helicopters have killed. It had been a

long night fishing and a poor catch. He hoped the men would leave soon. Feeding the extra mouths was a burden.

By the time Nhu sailed to the beach, the helicopters had stopped firing and flown back to ships steaming along the horizon. Nhu was disappointed to see that Duong was not waiting with the rest of his family.

Ky, another fisherman, came in just after Nhu. For several minutes his family and Nhu's were busy pulling first one boat, then the other, up to the tree line, lowering masts, dismantling outriggers, unshipping rudders, removing fish.

Nhu sensed that something was wrong, but he exchanged a few words with Ky about the poor fishing as they walked through the village. Perhaps the fish were being disturbed by all the ships and aircraft. They speculated on whether fish could hear airplanes. Nhu thought how naturally he and Ky were talking about the airplanes, how in less than a year they had come to accept them as everyday occurrences. There was something frightening in that. But before he could consider it further, they were at Ky's hut. One of the men was staying there; another in Nhu's hut; and the third at Madee's. With his head he gestured toward the hut. "We will need more food."

"No," said Siti, Ky's wife. "They left."

"Good. Then perhaps there is no need to go out tonight to bring in whatever the helicopters killed."

Siti and Mai started to speak at the same time. Then both stopped and fell silent. Siti seemed uncomfortable.

"What is it?" asked Nhu.

Mai said goodbye to Ky and Siti and turned toward their hut. Nhu followed. They did not speak again until she lowered the basket of fish from her head. Her voice was almost a whisper. Nhu was too tired for

this. He wanted to lie down, perhaps eat some rice and cold fish, and sleep. He sounded more harsh than he intended. "Well?" He glanced around. "Where is Duong?" Mai's face crumpled, "He has gone."

"Where?" But he knew.

"With the men."

Nhu stared at her.

"They convinced him that it is his duty to fight to free his country."

"Country?" Nhu spit the word. "We have no country. We have the family and the village. That is all we have ever had. All we ever will have. All we need. By 'country' I suppose they mean the plains and the mountains beyond them. Those men were from beyond even the mountains. At least we can sometimes see the mountains. But none of them mean anything to us. They are as much strangers as the foreigners who fly the helicopters and those who live in the cities." Nhu had never been to the mountains or a city, but he had met people who had. "Besides he is just a boy."

"Perhaps that is why he went. Most of them are boys."

A horrifying thought came to Nhu.

"Which way did they go?"

Mai pointed toward where the helicopters had been firing.

Nhu went into the hut.

It would soon be dark, so he took the kerosene lantern used for night fishing, and, though his stomach was flogging like a torn sail, a ball of rice and a jug of water. He also picked up a piece of heavy sacking. He would need a way to carry the body, if there was a body.

When he stepped back outside, Ky and Madee and most of the other men of the village were squatting a respectful distance away. They all stood and followed him into the jungle.

The sun set before they reached the killing ground. Nhu did not like

the jungle at night. He had never ventured very far into it even during the daytime. He had always preferred the openness of the sea. So as the darkness thickened, Madee, who knew the jungle best, took the lead. Nhu walked numbly, trying to keep an image of his older son's torn body from his mind. Leaves, branches, weeds, sprang out of the darkness. Sometimes he could not see the man ahead of him; sometimes he was bumped by the man behind.

They had no difficulty in knowing when they reached the right place. Abruptly they entered a clearing where everything but the largest trees was flattened. Only Madee's lantern had been lit, but now all the fishermen lit their lanterns and fanned out. By the pattern of flickering lights, Nhu saw how enormous the area of destruction was. It would have been better to wait until dawn, but what if Duong was lying not dead but wounded? If they did not find anything, he would search again in daylight.

As Nhu walked through the battered vegetation, he wondered how the helicopter pilots had known the men were there. Perhaps they hadn't. Perhaps they were simply making a routine patrol. 'Routine patrol.' Those too were words he had not known a year ago. Since then there had been many such patrols. Helicopters had landed on the beach; foreign soldiers had come down the trail. The village had been searched. At other times the helicopters had fired inexplicably into the jungle. Nhu had seen the corpses of wild pigs, tigers, snakes, birds, monkeys. The villagers ate the slaughtered animals when there was enough left to eat.

In Nhu's mind all those torn bodies became Duong. While he was sailing home, observing the helicopters disinterestedly, thinking it had nothing to do with him, shells and bullets were seeking Duong. For a moment he was angry and thought of how he would tell Duong that he

should be ashamed for frightening them so. Then he remembered and continued searching silently. Babies and young children were so vulnerable. There were so many diseases, so many creatures in the jungle and the sea that could harm them. Even some of the jellyfish could kill a small child. That he should die, or Mai, or the very young, was accepted; but he had thought Duong would be safe for a while.

Some time passed before they found the body. A shout went up from the far side of the devastation. All the flickering lanterns converged. Nhu walked slowly toward them, repeating to himself, "Life is but a bubble on the ocean's surface."

The men stepped aside for Nhu, except for Ky, who had made the discovery. Ky held his lantern over the object proprietarily.

Nhu thought that he should probably be sickened, but it was difficult to know what he was looking at. Was this his son? The bloody mass did not look human. Nhu was about to tell Ky that he had only found the remains of a large animal; but as he turned, he saw on the perimeter of the circle of yellow light, a severed human leg. He was struck dumb by the leg, which had been chopped off cleanly and was otherwise undamaged. The leg was so young and frail. Nhu turned back and stared at the rest of the body. Duong? he asked it silently. What was he looking at? Was that the chest? Where was the head? How could he know if it was his son?

The same thought occurred to the other men, who resumed searching nearby. Nhu remained frozen. Twenty yards away, a man grunted, stooped, lifted something from the ground, and brought it back. Nhu's legs began to tremble and he squatted down before he fell. The man gingerly placed the head beside the other remains. One side of the skull was smashed, exposing bone and brain, but enough of the face remained so that they could recognize the features of one of the boys

from beyond the mountains . Nhu told himself that he should not feel such relief, that if it had been meant to be Duong, it would have been; but he was very glad it was not.

Some of the men continued to search further, but Nhu had had enough. He remained by the body, and gradually, as the men tired, they came and squatted near him.

The gentle light of dawn hesitated, as though shocked, when it reached the killing ground. Nhu had not seen many dawns in the jungle. The trees on the edge of the devastation pressed in on him. He missed the vast dawns of the sea.

He pushed himself up. His legs were stiff, but he was accustomed to squatting for long periods. Some of the men had fallen asleep. They were awakened by his movements, and in the daylight they all resumed searching the clearing and the nearby jungle to make certain that no one was lying there. The only bloody trail leading into the jungle ended at the corpse of a wild boar. At least they would not have to fish that day.

While most of the men prepared to carry the boar back to the village, Nhu built a pyre for the dead boy. The body could not be left for the boy's confused spirit to linger over.

The work went quickly. The blackened earth had already been cleared by the bombardment. Plenty of broken wood lay at hand.

When the pyre was high enough, Nhu and Ky moved the remains to it. Both of them had often been near the dead; but both hesitated to touch this bizarrely mutilated boy. The leg and head went well enough, but the chest fell apart. They scraped up gobbets of flesh and organs with sticks as best they could.

Nhu opened his lantern and doused the pyre with kerosene. Ky was ready to light a match, when Nhu remembered that he had not eaten his

rice. He placed it beside the body so that its spirit would have sustenance on its journey.

As the flames ate wood and flesh, Nhu remembered a cremation he had seen years earlier when he was only a small boy. It was his earliest memory. A great golden tower carried through a village. Food and tools and weapons placed beside a body in a white paper cow. Flames leaping high into the air; sparks showering onto a festive crowd; smoke; monstrous images. This pitiful pyre and ball of rice were not much, but he hoped that someone would do as much for Duong when his time came. Just as this boy's parents would never know what had happened to their son, Nhu suddenly realized that he would probably never know what happened to Duong. He prayed it was not the gods' will that Duong suffer too much.

Before they reached the village, Madee ran ahead with word that the men were carrying a boar, less Mai see them from a distance and misunderstand.

3

During the next few years, a new music filled the air. Tinkling bells gave way to firing weapons. Many of the displays were really quite pretty, especially at night. Exploding bombs and shells, tracer rounds, blossoming flowers of napalm. Never again did Nhu watch them disinterestedly. Never again did Nhu or Mai watch them without wondering and worrying about Duong.

Where once visitors to the village had been rare, now outsiders used it in a complicated a game of hide and seek. On one side there were men mostly from beyond the mountains, wraiths appearing silently from the jungle; on the other side were the big foreign men, who arrived noisily

from the air. Fortunately for the village, the two groups never quite met there.

The men from beyond the mountains told the villagers that they should help in the struggle to free their country. The foreign men, through interpreters, told the villagers they should help defend their freedom. Nhu thought: What country? What freedom? The only freedom he wanted was the freedom to be left alone, and he had had that before this war started. All he wanted now was that one side win, he did not care which, so that Duong, if he was still alive, would come home.

None of the men had any word of Duong, though his 'fellow countrymen' told Nhu that Duong was a great hero for possessing the social consciousness to enter so early into the struggle. Madee's son, who was a friend of Duong's, also went with a group of men who disappeared into the jungle; while Ky's son, dazzled by the airplanes and promises of high pay, joined the foreign army. Nhu was glad that Deng was too young to fight and that his other children were daughters.

Li, Nhu's older daughter, was a pretty girl of fourteen when the foreign men transformed the river and the village.

One day a motor boat came in from a large ship steaming offshore and chugged busily about, crisscrossing the bar, then powering slowly up and down stream, before returning to the large ship.

The next day the motor boat returned, accompanied by a tug towing a barge, which was landed with some difficulty through the surf. The foreign men waved to the villagers, who gathered to watch this unusual sight; and one of them came over and spoke to them in their own language, though with a ridiculous accent. Still the villagers were impressed. This was the first foreign soldier who did not use an interpreter. He gave chocolate to the children and cigarettes to the men. He said

that his men were going to make the entrance to the river safer by building breakwaters to prevent waves from reaching the shore and by dredging a channel through the bar. They would also build a proper wharf so boats could land supplies more easily. A few huts would have to be relocated, but new and better ones would be built for the villagers. For that matter they would build new homes for everyone who was willing to move to a new town which was being established a few miles further up the coast.

Naturally people were excited and upset. Some told the foreign soldier that they did not want a wharf or a breakwater; some asked him questions. Within the limitations of his ignorance and accent, the foreigner was courteous at first; but after a while he became impatient with the questions and said that the villagers had brought this on themselves by assisting the men from the other side. It was common knowledge that the village was used as a refuge for insurgents. This word did not translate easily into their language, and while the villagers were discussing its precise meaning, the soldier turned on his heel and marched back to his men.

In a few weeks, in an amazing demonstration of energy and power, the foreign men accomplished what the villagers thought impossible. Two overlapping breakwaters were constructed of huge interlocking chunks of concrete; a dredge spewed a mountain of mud onto the shore; concrete pilings were driven; a prefabricated wharf assembled overnight; sheds, a barracks, and huts for the displaced families erected the next day; lines of fire cleared.

Nhu ignored the foreigners as much as possible, silently sailing his gujong between the breakwaters and the dredge; but inwardly the power of these men made him fear for Duong and for the village. For now, he thought, we have become a target. For the first time Nhu

considered the previously inconceivable: he considered leaving the village. But he did not know where they could go that would be better, and he did not think that Mai would leave without word from or of Duong.

Not until the noise of construction ended did the villagers realize that it had obscured what they had come to accept as the normal sounds of war. There was a kind of relief in the return of distant bombs and artillery and strafing.

The heavy construction equipment was driven back onto barges, which, along with the barges carrying the pile drivers and the dredge, were towed out the new harbor entrance to some other pacification project.

Later that day a small garrison took up permanent station in the village.

4

Mai lifted the basket of dirty uniforms to her head. The foreigners stank, but she could put up with the smell. She had never before had a job. She felt a new sense of importance; and the family was becoming wealthy, though what they would do with the money, she had no idea. It was enough to know that on the next trip to the town, the money would be there. Of more immediate value were the packages and cans of food she was also given. There were cans of fruit, beef, vegetables, and some things she had never tasted before, like those noodles with balls of meat in tomato sauce. Apparently there was a whole world of people who ate without growing or catching, just by opening cans.

At her hut Mai lowered the basket to the ground and went off to gather wood. When she had enough, she started a fire and then began to haul water from the nearby stream. The bucket was galvanized metal as was the washtub, both given to her by the foreign soldiers so she could

do their wash, though she was free to use them anytime she wanted.

As the tub of clothes began to boil, Mai squatted beside the fire, occasionally adding a stick of wood or stirring the clothes. While she squatted, she puffed contentedly on her pipe. She could not admit it to Nhu, who ignored the soldiers when he was at home and who spent more and more time alone fishing, but she rather liked the foreign men. Although she was not much older than some of them, they all called her "Grandmother." They had no concept of proper manners, which was only to be expected, but they made up for their poor upbringing by being friendly and good natured. Though they were so big, they often looked lost and lonely and small. Mai really did not understand why they were in the village or where they had come from. They said they lived far away. 'Far' to her was the sail to the town. They said they lived farther than that. She tried to imagine repeating the sail to town for several successive days. Wherever they lived, from the cans of food and all the equipment, it must be a very rich and different place.

A noise from behind her interrupted her reverie. She turned her head and saw Li.

"Where have you been?"

"Cleaning the barracks."

'Barracks.' So many new words, thought Mai. "It took you so long?"

"Yes."

Mai looked at her skeptically. "Then you are very slow."

"I...Some of the men talk to me."

"How?" Mai scoffed. "Only the captain speaks our language."

"The others know a few words, and," Li, who had been subdued, brightened, "They are teaching me theirs."

"You can speak their language?"

"I am learning."

“Let me hear you.”

Li said some words, which meant nothing to Mai, but which sounded right. Despite herself Mai was impressed. “That is all well and good, but come here now and watch the wash. I have been waiting for you. I have other things to do.”

A few days later, while she was sweeping the hut with a bundle of twigs, Mai found the radio beneath Li’s sleeping mat. Li was at the barracks. Fortunately Nhu was out fishing.

As soon as Li came home, Mai confronted her. “What is this?” she demanded.

Li had never seen her mother so angry.

“Well?”

“It is a radio.”

“I know it is a radio. Don’t you think I have seen radios? Why did you steal it? Do you not realize that the soldiers will miss something so valuable and come looking for it and what will happen when they find it here?”

“I did not steal it. It is mine.”

“Yours! They gave it to you, I suppose.”

“Yes. They did.”

Li replied with such sincerity that Mai stood with her mouth open.

“They gave you *this*?”

“Yes.”

“But why?” But before Li could answer, Mai said, “No. Never mind.” And hurried from the hut in confusion.

Mai spent the rest of the afternoon in a daze. Habit carried her through. She walked to the beach and helped Nhu unload his catch. She cooked some vegetables, rice and a fish. She served the meal, ate,

and cleaned up afterwards. She unrolled the sleeping mats, and after the others were asleep, lay down beside Nhu.

All the time she was thinking about Li. The girl was old enough. There were no religious strictures against sex. She herself had married at Li's age. They should have foreseen this. No. She should have foreseen this. It was a woman's problem. Her responsibility, not Nhu's. He did not expect her to teach Duong and Deng how to fish. But she had never expected this, had never even considered the possibility. The foreign soldiers were too strange. She tried to imagine what it would be like with one of them. She wondered if they were big everywhere. They would be too big, and Li was so small. Was it even possible? And they smelled so. And they were so hairy, like animals. It was disgusting.

For the moment Mai forgot Li in a growing awareness of her own body. They might call her "Grandmother", but she was only thirty. All this thinking about sex. Her blouse was too tight. She was wet between her legs. Nhu turned in his sleep and rolled against her. His breath was warm in her face. He smelled familiarly of salt, the sea, and fish. Mai knew he was tired, but she reached for him anyway.

A few feet away, Li lay on her mat listening.

"Let me see the radio."

A week had passed without Mai coming to any conclusion about what she should do. She foresaw that Li would become pregnant. Normally another mouth to feed would be a burden, but they had one less with Duong gone, and they had the extra cans of food. Perhaps the father would see that they received extra rations. 'Rations.' Where do all these new words keep coming from? The worst thing Mai could imagine was that the father would want to marry Li and take her away to his country. This was frighteningly beyond her imagination. It would be worse

than death. Mai had experience with death. But she would know that Li was still alive somewhere. It would be as though she had been taken by some creature living on the moon.

Li lifted the corner of her sleeping mat and handed the radio to Mai, who took the black box nervously. Now that she had it, she did not know what to do with it. She had heard radios playing when she went to the barracks for the dirty clothes, but she had not seen how the noise was made. She turned the thing in her hand. She would never have believed that it was assembled by women very much like herself in a city not far from the place where Great Ancestor Ling had been born. She thought that it must be a very valuable gift, but could not decide if this was good or bad. Did it mean that the foreign soldier actually cared for her daughter or did it mean that Li was becoming a whore?

Of course it had no strings. It did not look or feel like other musical instruments, but then Mai had not expected it to, for she knew that it even made voices. Once or twice during visits to the town, she had seen magicians perform. She had not understood their tricks. This must be something like that. With relief she handed the thing back to Li. "You can play it?", she asked.

"Oh yes," said Li. "It is simple. You just press the button."

Although Mai had expected noise, she jumped as a rock song blared out. Hurriedly Li lowered the volume. The music was horrible. Mai had never actually listened to it before. It had always just been in the background. Now she concentrated on the sounds, trying to understand. It was hopeless. "You like that?"

"Yes."

"You can stop it?" Mai suddenly realized that the neighbors could hear.

Li did something and mercifully the noise stopped. "It is easy. You

just press here to start it and here to stop. You can do it." And generously she started to hand the radio back to Mai.

"No. No. I have work to do." Mai turned, then stopped to ask.

"Which of the soldiers gave this to you?"

"The corporal."

"The corporal?"

"The tall one with light hair."

Naturally, thought Mai, the oddest looking one of the lot. A child of his would be a freak. She was so flustered by the image of a blond haired grandchild that she did not hear Li shyly add, "The others give me gifts too."

When Mai only walked away, Li gained courage. After all she had told her mother everything.

A few days later she was daring enough to use the lipstick.

5

The war was a fire onto which the gods capriciously threw new wood. Sparks flew everywhere and caught and greater flames leapt up.

Day and night the sky was full of airplanes. Although most of the bombs fell on the plain and the mountains beyond the isolating strip of coastal jungle, seldom was there a moment when the village did not tremble with their distant impacts.

The sea was full of ships. A shallow draft gunboat was stationed in the village to patrol the river. Between patrols it tied up to the new wharf. Other gunboats, which climbed out of the water on legs and went incredibly fast, patrolled the coast. Seldom did Nhu go fishing any longer without being stopped by one of the bizarre craft, which would come rushing from no where, slow and settle back into the water beside his gujong, and send men over in a rubber boat to search through his catch.

They never found anything.

The sailors who came awkwardly aboard his little boat were more abrupt and angry than those who had stopped him earlier in the war. When they had pushed through whatever fish he had been fortunate enough to save from drowning, and more and more frequently the gods were presenting Nhu with fish that were already floating dead on the surface of the sea, the men would return to their strange craft, which would climb back up on its legs and roar out of sight. Nhu never ceased to be amazed at ships on stilts. He could see that the legs were something like the outriggers on his gujong, but a small wood sailboat was one thing, and a great heavy metal ship another.

Though the land was full of soldiers, the village did not see them. The gods and the generals had moved the fighting away from the jungle. Toward the end of the dry season, all the firing, all the flames, all the noise, gradually drew toward one part of the plain near the mountains. None of the villagers had ever been over there. As the firing reached a crescendo, far beyond anything the villagers had known or ever imagined possible, each dawn the sea was covered with offerings being carried to the gods on the outgoing tide.

One calm morning Nhu ghosted through this brave palm frond armada drifting on a silvery sea a few miles offshore. The villagers were traditionally devout, but there seemed to be far more flowers than usual. When Nhu found himself wondering if the offerings were made to reduce the suffering of those caught by the war or in gratitude that the flames were burning elsewhere, he realized that he was becoming cynical.

The firing, the shuddering of the earth, the rumblings, the shrieks of aircraft and shells, doubled and redoubled. When the wind was from the land, smoke and the smell of burning flesh filled the village, and at night the western sky was bright with flames.

Although the battle had increased gradually, it ended abruptly. Smoke continued to billow upward for several more days, but the noise and tremors ceased within the span of a single hour. The village was too far away to hear sporadic small arms fire.

Everyone in the village waited. The soldiers in the barracks and the sailors on the gunboat tied to the wharf were very tense. Everyone seemed to be holding his breath. Then word came. Nhu heard it from Mai, who said she had heard it from Li, who had heard it while cleaning the barracks. The war was over. The foreign soldiers had won a great victory.

This was what Nhu had expected. Except for Duong, he did not care who won. But how could it have been otherwise? It was boys like Duong with nothing but their bare hands and sticks against men with all those powerful machines. He knew that Mai too was thinking about Duong. He took a step across the small hut and wrapped his arms around her. He struggled to extinguish the hope that had reawakened with the report that the fighting had ended. "We must accept whatever has happened." Nhu said. He felt Mai's body convulse in his arms.

After a while, he looked around and asked, "Where is Li?"

Mai pulled back and straightened her blouse and sarong. "I think she has gone to the barracks to get more information." She did not look at him.

"She spends too much time there," Nhu said.

The coming of peace brought a few changes, but it did not bring word of Duong.

Madee's son, Gerip, returned with only one arm. Although he had joined what called itself The People's Army only a week after Duong, he had never seen him. Once he met a boy who said that Duong was with a

group operating from a cave in the mountains.

Gerip claimed to be in constant pain. He was useless for fishing and mostly lay about the village, unhappy that the only alcohol was at the barracks. He talked Li into smuggling a can or two of beer out for him. One morning he gathered his few possessions into a sack, told his parents he was going to live in town, and disappeared up the jungle track. No one other than his parents missed him. The lack of respect he had shown was shocking.

Ky's son, Sigit, returned wearing a baggy green uniform, onto which was pinned a medal. Sigit was vague as to what the medal was for, and he was accompanied by an older man from the town and several soldiers, all of whom lived in nearby coastal villages. The older man said that Sigit was a great hero. He also said that an election was being held. Of course no one knew what an election was. The man explained that he was being elected to represent them in the assembly being created to advise the foreign colonial office during the transition to full democratic government now that the forces of freedom had won the war.

The villagers had no idea what he was talking about. They felt no need for a 'representative,' but if they had to have one, why should it be this man they had never seen before? It should be someone from their own village they could trust.

For a while the man tried to answer their questions, but he became irritable when they refused to understand why every tiny, insignificant village could not have its own representative, and told them just to make an 'X' on the blue pieces of paper the soldiers gave them and to put the pieces of paper into the box they carried. Some of the villagers refused to do this. And after Sigit said something to the older man, he declared that Madee's family and Duong's were not entitled to vote.

Everyone, except Ky and his wife, were glad when the man and the

soldiers, including Sigit, took the ballot box and left. Sigit told his parents, who were hoping he was home for good, that he had decided to make a career of the army and did not know when he would be back.

It was all too much. 'Representatives.' 'Ballots.' 'Democracy.' 'Career.' For several days afterward small boys in the village greeted one another with a self-important, "I am going to make a career in fishing."

6

A few months later the garrison was withdrawn from the village and reassigned to a large base near the town. Corporal Telford convinced Li to go with them.

Li did not know how to tell her parents. She knew her father would flatly declare that she could not go; but too much had changed for her to obey such an order blindly. And she was in love. Mark had promised to marry her as soon as he could obtain the necessary permission from his superior officers, though this was, he told her, a difficult and prolonged process. And when they were married he would take her with him to his country, which was wonderful beyond imagining. In the meantime, she already spoke their language well enough to find work easily in the town. Mark was almost certain he could arrange a job for her on the military base. Not just a cleaning job either, but a job in an office, where she would learn to use machines like the typewriter in the captain's office there in the village.

The night before she was to leave, Li sat on one of the breakwaters, looking out to sea. Her father was out fishing. She would be gone before he returned. Fondly she pictured him sailing though the night in his small boat. I do not mean to be disrespectful, Father, but I must go. It is my destiny. She concentrated very hard on the image of her father and prayed that somehow her thoughts would reach him and he would

understand.

She climbed down from the breakwater and walked home, where she was surprised to discover her mother beside a cooking fire.

“What are you doing?”

Mai looked up from the pot she was stirring. “I am preparing nasam.” These were Li’s favorite cakes of coconut and fruit.

“But why? What is the occasion?”

“Did you not think I would notice your clothes?”

Li hung her head. “I did not mean to be disrespectful.”

“I know. I know. You have always been a good child. There is no way for you to tell your father. But are you sure he will treat you well, the corporal, I mean? It is the corporal, isn’t it?”

“Oh yes. I am sure. We love each other very much. He is going to marry me.”

“And where will you live?”

“In his country.” Li said proudly.

Her worst fear realized, a small moan escaped from Mai, who sought to cover her emotion by stooping to stir the nasam. “When do you go?”

“At first light I will walk to the road beyond the jungle, where there will be trucks. Mark said I can ride in one of the trucks with the men.”

Mai turned to face her daughter.. She tried to tell herself that Li was a woman. Here in the village, she might be; but in the town, where Mai herself often felt like a child? It was in the hands of the gods. “You know that whatever happens, Li, you can always return home?”

“Yes, Mother. Thank you.”

But they both knew that she would not return.

“Try to get some sleep. I will put the nasam next to your mat. I am making enough for you to share with Mark and the others.” Almost as an

afterthought, she added, "I will tell your father."

The eyes painted on each bow so the gujong could see and avoid evil stared sightlessly down at reflected eyes that stared sightlessly up. Red, yellow, blue, green, orange: every detail of the boat was painted with a different color bought cheaply from merchants in the town who paid boys to collect the dregs from discarded cans of paint. Now that the garrison was gone, the villagers would have to resume the twice yearly voyages to the town. Nhu realized that he was thinking of this as a chore, when in only the recent past it had been a great event to be looked forward to. He realized too that he had come to accept as normal the transition into smooth water inside the breakwaters, rather than the dangerous passage through the surf on his return to the village. He would gladly give up the breakwaters, if he could erase the past few years.

He looked at the low green coast. In this heat it seemed to float in the air, disconnected from the sea. He turned to scan the horizon. Not a breath of wind anywhere. His fishing lines hung straight down in the water. When he leaned over the side of the gujong and stared downward, sunlight separated into shafts that converged toward some point hidden in the depths. Even as he looked, shadowy shapes darted and glided, disappearing between the dangling lines and the reflected gujong.

He tried to understand.

He assessed his life and could not find justification for his suffering. Killing fish simply was not enough to warrant the loss of two of his children. What had happened to Duong? What was happening to Li? He felt as though a fish hook were being torn from his guts. He must have been very evil in his past lives. He was almost beginning to doubt that there was a pattern. At times it seemed as though he and Mai and Duong and Li,

everyone in the village were like those shadows swimming innocently beneath the boat, until they were suddenly hooked and pulled about by distant god-like powers. Do the fish make offerings to fishermen that I do not see, as perhaps the gods do not see the offerings we make to them? Or perhaps the gods are not themselves free even if they do see our offerings, any more than I am free not to catch fish.

Until a light wind reached the boat and filled the sail, Nhu continued to try to understand. Except for those moments when he was very busy, he seldom thought of anything else. A lifetime of fishing had given him as much time for meditation as any monk. His only conclusion was that he should have become a wondering holy man instead of marrying Mai and having children. That had really been his only choice. And he did not regret his decision. Or he did not want to regret it. He loved Mai and he loved his children.

'Life is but a bubble on the surface of the ocean.' Nhu stared down and watched the bubbles in the gujongs' wake swirl and burst.

The crowd giggled with anticipation as the monkey dancer, who they all knew was really a prince transformed into a monkey by the evil goddess, Hram, fell to the ground with stylized grace. Although the festival had not been held for several years because of the war, most of the spectators from half a dozen villages had seen the dance many times. It was the Damastrata and was, like all the traditional dances, a combination of morality play, depicting the eternal struggle between the forces of good and evil, and a broad sexual farce.

The giggles increased with each step the old maidservant, who had kicked the monkey out the palace window, took toward his supine body. When on cue, the monkey's tail rose slowly erect between his legs and the old woman leapt back in astonishment, laughter filled the jungle.

The old woman moved forward to investigate this interesting development. The erect tail sank. She turned away and it rose. Children called to the maidservant from the audience. She pretended she could not understand them and moved further away. The suggestive tail grew taller. When at last she heard the children and turned back, the tail deflated.

Back and forth, up and down, went the old woman and the monkey's tail, milking the ancient joke, until finally, with the connivance of the crowd, who called goodbye to her as though she were leaving, the maidservant snuck close enough to give the offending tail a whack with her broom, at which the monkey dancer howled in pain, leapt up and ran, pursued by the boom wielding woman, from the stage.

The dance continued for another hour. The elaborate costumes were the most expensive of the villagers' possessions and were passed on, and whenever possible enhanced, from generation to generation.

By the time Kew stood on one foot and bent her other leg and her arms into acute angles to indicate her surprise as the monkey was transformed back into a prince, she could feel her leg trembling with exhaustion, until at last the prince came to her and the play ended. Although at twelve she was old to dance the part of the princess, she thought, 'I don't know if I would have been strong enough last year.'

She smiled happily at her mother, who was waiting near the hut that served as a dressing room. She could not possibly get out of the costume by herself. Behind them music resumed as another village entered the clearing to perform.

"You were wonderful," Mai said. "I have never seen anyone dance better."

"Not even--" Kew stopped when she decided not to mention Li.

"What?" asked Mai over the noise.

“Nothing.”

When they had the costume carefully folded and wrapped and had removed Kew’s makeup, they went back to where Nhu and Deng were waiting near one of the food stalls.

The festival was country fair and carnival, as well as a religious celebration.

Stalls where the villagers sold one another food, clothing, baskets, jewelry and tools, circled the perimeter of the clearing.

Nhu’s and Mai’s village specialized in combs and jewelry and other implements made from sea turtle shells.

Everyone, young and old, who could move or be carried, was at the festival. Among a people who never considered corporal punishment, the most effective threat a parent could make to a misbehaving child was that he or she would not be allowed to attend the festival. Dancing would go on far into the night, with each village performing a different dance within the epic cycle of myth and history.

As they walked along, looking into the colorfully decorated stalls, nibbling on bamboo sticks of grilled meat dipped in peanut sauce, hearing the music and the reactions of the crowd, each member of the family, even Nhu, was as content as he and she had been recently. There was comfort, a fundamental rightness, in the resumption of the festival, a linking with the past in which gods and goddesses and kings and queens had walked this very earth, a reassurance that the age-old rhythms and traditions of their way of life were enduring.

What really matters, thought and felt Nhu, is the flow of life. For hundreds, for more than a thousand years, the dances have been danced the same way, villagers like us have danced them, have come here to watch them young and old, have had children who dance them after us. Nothing, not all the wars, has stopped that. Nothing, not even

this last terrible war, can change that. His heart swelled and he stopped right there and took a grateful Mai and his startled children in his arms and pulled them to him.

7

Mai was afraid of what she would find in the town.

Nhu refused to come, so she and Kew and Deng sailed with several other families in one of the large boats belonging to the village.

They were amazed to discover that during the years of the war, when it was unsafe and, because of all the things brought to the village by the soldiers, unnecessary to make the voyage along the coast, the town had changed beyond recognition.

Even from far offshore, it was a sprawling, chaotic city. And its once quiet harbor was now full of ships.

Naval vessels and huge freighters were anchored everywhere. The wood pier where they used to tie up had been replaced by a concrete wharf, covered with containers and trucks. Miles of jungle had vanished. Circular storage tanks connected by pipes were clustered near a second wharf. A steady procession of aircraft ascended and descended inland.

Ky, at the tiller of the sailboat, was obviously shaken and uncertain what to do. When the wind was blocked by the huge ships and the sails fell limp, two men took oars, and Ky continued to steer toward the new wharf. As they came alongside, the structure dwarfed them. Someone managed to get a line around a concrete piling, but then they swung helplessly in its shadow. Men and boys could climb the piling, but there was no way women and young children could possibly get to the wharf, which was higher even than the top of their boat's mast. Even as they stood on deck, trying to decide what to do, a face appeared above them and shouted something in the foreigners' language.

The villagers turned to Mai questioningly, but she knew only a few words and could not help. Li had been the one to speak to foreigners.

The face became angry and disappeared, leaving the villagers even more confused and frightened. There was a shout. Everyone looked around. Out in the harbor a ship was moving toward them.

The face reappeared, now accompanied by the face of one of their own people, who yelled down, "You can't stay there."

Plaintively Ky called up, "Where can we go?"

"Row around the ship in front of you. There is a ladder. But you can't stay there either. It is only permitted to stop briefly. You will have to go out and anchor and come back to pick up your people when they return from town."

All the villagers began talking at once. The man called down. "You don't have all day. That ship needs this space."

Hurriedly they untied the bow line and rowed away before they would be crushed.

There was more confusion when they reached the ladder. Normally only one man remained aboard the boat while everyone else went ashore, but now three men would have to stay, one to steer, two to row. By the time shopping lists were rearranged, instructions given, and Mai and the others made the dizzying climb up the ladder, everyone was out of sorts. Already this visit had become an ordeal.

When the straggling group of villagers reached the shore end of the wharf, after constantly dodging trucks which seemed intent on running them down, they found a wire fence and several soldiers on guard beside a gate. As they waited in line, Mai said to Siti, "You are sure you do not mind taking Kew and Deng with you and doing my shopping?"

"Of course I do not mind. I do not have much to buy myself."

Mai whispered, "After we get through the gate, I will give you the

money." A small leather pouch hung like a yoke around her neck. She recalled the pleasure of putting each coin and note into the pouch, anticipating this moment and the special gifts she would buy for every member of the family when they next visited the town, and now she was giving the money and the pleasure of shopping to Siti.

The soldiers handed each villager a card with some words printed on it and told them not to lose it because they would not be permitted back through the gate without the card. The soldiers knew that this was not true. Too many people lost their passes for the regulations to be enforced, but they were not supposed to say so.

A bored soldier handed Mai her card without looking at her. It would be so easy to say nothing and just walk on with the others, but she forced herself to speak. "Please. We had soldiers in our village. Can you tell me where I will find them?"

The man looked at her blankly and repeated, "Soldiers? In your village?"

"Yes." He speaks as though he has never heard of such a thing, Mai thought; yet he is a boy Duong's age, or the age Duong would have been, and probably recently from a village himself.

"I..I do not know. I will have to ask."

The line of people stopped behind Mai while the boy went into a shack and returned with an older soldier, who said, "You are looking for someone?"

"Yes." Mai replied meekly.

"Your son?"

"No." The man waited. In shame she lowered her already quiet voice. "My daughter."

The sergeant had seen too many village parents come looking for their children.

“How old is she?”

“Fifteen.”

“I do not think you will find her, Mother. I do not think you will want to find her.”

That was already Mai's fear. “I must try.”

The sergeant knew that his advice would not be heeded. “Then you need to go to the main camp. Do you have any money?”

“Yes.”

“Let me see.”

Mai expected the soldier would take some of her money, as soldiers had always taken from the villagers, but as she pulled the leather thong over her head, she hoped he would not take it all.

The soldier opened the pouch and removed one red note from it.

Is that all he is going to take or all he is going to leave me? Mai wondered.

He handed her the note and said, “Show this to one of the taxi drivers on the street outside. Tell him to take you to the headquarters gate and wait to bring you back again. It is on the far side of the city. Tell him I said you are not to give him any more than this and that you are not to pay him until you return. You understand?”

“Yes.”

“And keep the rest of this safe.” And to her surprise he handed the pouch back to Mai.

“Oh, I will. Thank you.” She turned and immediately gave the pouch to Siti, keeping only the red note and a few coins and the card clutched in her hand.

Before he went back into the guard shack, the man said, “I hope this turns out well for you, Mother.”

Mai said, “Thank you,” again, and to Siti, “Not all the people here

are bad.”

The crowd behind them, grown restive, pushed them rudely through the gate, where the others from their villager were waiting.

After giving Kew and Deng some coins and a hug, Mai approached the line of taxis with pride and fear. She had never ridden in an automobile before. She knew the others were watching her. None of them had ridden in an automobile either.

The city was full of boys who reminded her of Duong. At first the driver of the taxi at the head of the line did too. He was sitting in the battered taxi, smoking a cigarette and listening to loud foreign music on a radio. He was wearing shorts and a t-shirt with a picture of a beer bottle and some foreign words on it. A pack of cigarettes was rolled in the sleeve. Below the cigarettes his skinny arm was covered by a tattoo of a naked female body whose head was a grinning skull. Although she was certain he had seen her approach, he ignored Mai when she spoke.

Mai was afraid of taxis, but she was not afraid of taxi drivers. Had his parents not taught him to respect his elders? Or was this something that went with the changes in the town? She moved to where he could not help but see her and stood silently until finally he turned down the music and asked what she wanted.

“I want to go to the headquarters gate of the army camp.” She noticed that the boy had more tattoos on his face, but she recognized these as the traditional marks of the hill people, so this rude boy wasn't from the city either.

“A thousand seis.”

Mai showed him the red note.

“No. A thousand.” For a moment Mai was flustered. She knew coins, which were of different sizes and metals, and the old notes, but she did not know these new notes so well. The boy suspected as much and

said impatiently, "Two of those. Or a blue one." With this, Mai's fear vanished. She was accustomed to haggling. Shopkeepers in the town always tried to cheat villagers. This was no different. She noticed how a man got in the taxi behind her. She reached for the door handle and pulled down as he had. The door opened. As calmly as though she had done it every day of her life, she climbed into the back seat. "This is enough. You are to take me to the camp and you are to wait to bring me back here."

The boy turned around in his seat. "I need at least seven hundred."

"Let us go now, or I will report you to the soldiers. I have many things to do today and no time to waste."

In apparent anger the boy faced forward. The radio resumed blaring and, with a jerk, they were underway so quickly that Mai forgot to wave to Kew and Deng and the others.

The initial burst of speed lasted for only a few blocks before they became bogged down in the city's perpetual traffic jam of too many cars, trucks, bicycles, pedestrians, ox carts, and hand carts. Shouting, honking the horn, and with general bad behavior, the boy worked the taxi along the main street. Mai had never realized how bad the fumes were. Her head was starting to ache when the boy abruptly turned into an alleyway, almost hitting children playing in the mud, and emerged onto a new wide street in a part of the city unfamiliar to Mai.

As the taxi headed inland, Mai had to grab onto the seat to keep from being thrown around. She caught only glimpses of the outside world. Riding in a taxi was not what she had expected. It had no dignity.

Despite her grip, Mai was thrown forward when the taxi braked behind a truck. For a few minutes they inched forward in fits and starts. The boy said, "You can walk faster than this. It will save time if I pull over and wait for you. The gate is only a few blocks directly ahead."

The exhaust fumes were again bothering Mai. No wonder the boy was rude. She would be rude too if she had to do this everyday. "Where will you be?"

He pointed at a food stand on the other side of the road. "If you will give me the money, I will get something to eat and wait there."

"The soldier said I was not to pay you until we are back at the wharf."

"But you are my first rider today and I am hungry. Please. At least give me half. You can trust me, Mother."

Mai thought that she should not do it, but he did look hungry. "You will stay right here?"

"Yes, Mother."

"All right. But I will report you if you leave." And Mai handed the red note to him. But then she could not get the door to open.

The boy reached back and did something to the door. "There. Take your time, Mother."

She smiled at him. So he did have some manners. "Thank you." As she reached the footpath, she watched until the taxi pulled across the road and stopped in front of the stand.

The boy was right. She was able to walk faster than the traffic was moving. There on the outskirts of the city only a few food stalls stood between the road and open fields., Mai was thirsty, but she wanted to get her business over with. She would treat herself to a drink later.

A few hundred yards along the road, she came to a concrete wall and a gate guarded by more soldiers. Through the gate Mai saw the scorched and pitted side of a whitewashed concrete block building. She was surprised that the fighting had reached even here.

The country had been quiet since the last great battle, suspiciously so some thought, but the soldiers were relaxed and friendly. One of them

asked Mai what she wanted.

"I am looking for my daughter, Li."

"Does she work here?"

"I don't know. I think so. She came with the soldiers who were in our village. She is going to marry one. Corporal Telford." She stumbled over his name. "Mark."

The soldier began to look uncomfortable. He spoke to one of the other men, who went away and then returned and told her to follow him.

After a short walk Mai found herself standing in front of a counter in an office like the one in the village garrison, but much bigger. She waited while the soldier said something in the foreign language to a foreign soldier behind the counter. Then he asked her, "What unit was in your village?"

Mai had known that something like this would happen, that they would ask her questions she could not answer. Apologetically she said, "I do not understand this 'unit'."

"Then what is the name of your village?"

At least that Mai knew, but her hope that it would do any good soon fell, when it was obvious the men had never heard of her village.

"Where is it? Here, show me on the map." He pointed at a large incomprehensible drawing on the wall.

When Mai just stood there, the man thought for a moment. "How did you get here?"

"I came in a taxi."

"From your village?"

He seemed to be trying to be helpful, but how could he be so stupid? "No. Of course not. We sailed from the village the way we always do. I only took the taxi from the wharf."

"How long did you sail?"

“One day.”

“Was the wind on the right side of the boat or the left?”

“The left.”

Mai did not see the point of all these questions, but the soldier smiled and nodded as though she had done something clever. He and the other man stood close to the drawing on the wall. Then the other man went and thumbed through books.

For a few minutes the soldiers were so caught up in solving the riddle that they forgot that they already knew the final answer. Their faces changed when they remembered. The soldier said to her, “That would have been part of the Fifty-fifth. They’ve already gone home.”

“Home? Oh, you mean their home. Li must already be there then.” As though observing someone else, Mai noted her own relief. What had once been her greatest fear for Li had been replaced by another. Now Li was beyond her, in the hands of the gods, far away in the foreign land.

“No.” The soldier did not want to be unkind, but he did not want to deceive the woman either.

“No?”

“No dependents have been sent yet. The first will not leave for a few more weeks. And, well, there is no record of application being made for your daughter, or for anyone claiming to be a dependent of a soldier named Telford, or any name close to that, from the Fifty-fifth. I am sorry, Mother.”

Mai’s eyes widened as her fears returned. “Where is she then?”

Although the soldier knew where most of the village girls ended up, he only shrugged.

Blindly Mai followed him back to the gate. He said something that did not penetrate her confused thoughts. She thanked him and found herself outside the wall. She shook her head as though she were awakening.

She crossed the street and walked slowly toward the food stand. Even

from this distance she could see that the taxi was not there. That boy had never intended to wait. It was all right. Mai did not mind walking. In fact under the circumstances she preferred to walk. The taxi ride. The city. Nhu was right not to want to come to the city. She did not want to visit the city anymore herself. It had all grown hateful. She could not wait to be home again. Thirst forgotten, she walked determinedly past the food stand.

Mai had noticed little from the taxi, but as she walked she saw many signs of recent fighting. Cratered fields being plowed by small figures leading water buffalo gave way to shacks constructed of shell casings and parts of wrecked vehicles and oil drums, which were in turn replaced as she reached the old town, by more substantial rubble of stone and brick. Even in the heart of the city, she saw gutted buildings and evidence of explosions and gunfire. She had no idea that such fierce fighting had taken place in the city. If it is this bad here, she thought, what can be left of the capital?

Somewhere in the city Mai became lost when she missed the alleyway the taxi driver had taken, and the main road she was following turned away from the shore. She was not worried, for she knew that she had only to reach the waterfront to regain her bearings, and so took the next street to her left.

For the first block, the narrow street was lined with carpenters. Wood chips and sawdust spilled out onto the cobblestones. The shop fronts were all opened and the familiar smell of teak reassured Mai. But the carpentry shops ended at the corner, and the next block was full of bars and nightclubs. At midday the place was asleep. Only a few men and girls were sitting in the dark rooms. Mai lowered her eyes and hurried along. From beneath the wide brim of her straw hat, she did not see the girl stagger around the corner. They collided and Mai's heart stopped. The girl was wearing foreign clothes, high heeled shoes and a dress so short and cut so low she might as well have been naked. Her face was smeared with heavy make-up. The girl snarled something about peasants not watching where they are going, but when her bleary eyes

managed to focus on Mai, she mumbled, "I am sorry, Mother. I thought it was a man. Are you all right?"

The next few blocks were interminable, but at last the horrible street ended and Mai found herself in the part of the city she knew. She walked toward a nearby temple. She was confused. Was it that girl's destiny to be in those bars? And she forced herself to wonder, was it Li's? Should she wait and go back there tonight to try to find Li?

The golden roof of the temple rose serenely above the clutter of ugly buildings. Mai was about to climb the steps, when a group of saffron robed priests came down from the temple and reverently placed flowers in a circle around a black smudge on the pavement. Mai turned to a man who had stopped and was also watching the priests. "Why are they doing that?" she asked.

He looked at her. "You are from the countryside?"

"Yes."

"During the war, a priest sacrificed himself on that very spot. Doused himself with petrol and set himself ablaze. It is said that he did not make a sound as the flames consumed him. They revere his holiness."

"But why?"

"As a protest against the corruption of the government."

Mai had had enough. Without entering the temple, she hurried directly to the wharf. She had forgotten that the boat was at anchor.

As she squatted at the end of the wharf, as far from the city as possible, waiting for the others to return, an ocean swell lapped at the pilings and Mai understood the consolation of water.

peace would last, at least for many years, if for no other reason than that after the enormous casualties suffered by the People's Army in the fighting at the capital, there seemed to be no one left to oppose the colonial government.

From the moment the fighting ended not a single incidence of violence, not a single act of sabotage or terrorism troubled the country.

This was wrongly interpreted by the colonial political and military authorities as proof of their absolute victory, when it was actually proof of the absolute discipline and will of the nationalists. As General Vo explained in an interview some years later with a sympathetic Western journalist, when it became obvious that he was losing the war, that the People's Army, which had failed to gain the support of the people, was being destroyed by attrition, he sought to gain time to regroup by staging the attack on the capital which he knew would fail. Sending so many fine young men and women to certain death was the most difficult and painful decision of his career, he said, yet his resolve was stiffened by the justness and purity of his motives and by his confidence in the ultimate consequence of those heroic sacrifices. The imperialists' temporary victory had enabled him to prepare the final assault, had caused the colonial government to send some of their troops home, as General Vo, educated in the West, had known their voters would demand once peace seemed to be firmly established, and had lulled the remaining troops into a false sense of security which inevitably led to laxness.

So for two years the country lived in this peace that seemed destined to last indefinitely, as in fact, after one quick turn of the wheel, it would.

The dry monsoon was followed by the wet monsoon, which was followed by the dry monsoon again.

For all the thousands of years that people had lived in that part of the East, wars were fought only during the dry season. During the wet, large scale troop movement was impossible. As the world now knows, during the second wet monsoon after the fighting ended at the capital, General Vo and his men

did the impossible, moved not just men but heavy artillery through jungles and over mountains, and simultaneously struck every provincial capital in the land.

To Nhu and Mai and villagers everywhere in the countryside, at first the explosions were only more distant thunder. The skies were low and leaden as they had been for months. Heavy rain poured down on the muddy earth. The jungle was saturated. The rivers were high and brown and turbid. People were tired of the monotony of the rain and of keeping to their huts, which were sodden too. Every monsoon was the same. When the clouds first broke, farmers and fishermen welcomed the imposed respite from the heat and their labor; but long before the rains ended, they were anxious to return to that labor.

The noise continued. Nhu was standing at the opening to the hut, staring out at the jungle barely visible through the downpour, when the first tremors reached the village. Mai and Kew and Deng came and pressed into the doorway beside him. The tremors became continuous. A figure holding a piece of canvas over its head darted toward them from the next hut, and they stepped aside to let Ky come in.

“What do you think it is?” Ky asked breathlessly.

“I think the war has started again.”

“But that is impossible. Sigit...” He stopped. Sigit would be in the midst of the fighting.

“Nevertheless, it is happening.”

They stood listening to the distant sounds for a few minutes, before Ky ran back through the rain to his own hut.

That night the overcast inland glowed red.

Sounds and tremors and flashes continued for five days and nights. Aircraft were heard, flying above the clouds, but not as many as in earlier years. Even to the villagers it was obvious that aircraft were of limited use in such

weather, and Nhu began to understand, as did many others in the country and the world, that whoever planned this attack was very clever.

From seaward came sounds of ships firing big guns, followed by the shriek of shells passing overhead. But no human sound reached the village. No screams, no desperate cries for help, no hysterical radio messages as positions were overrun. Ky and Siti worried about Sigit. Other parents worried about other children. Although they did not speak of it, both Nhu and Mai thought to themselves: if something as unlikely as this attack can happen, perhaps something so unlikely as Duong still being alive can happen. And they both worried about Li. Nhu even almost asked Mai about her.

On the sixth day, the distant sounds and tremors and flashes ended. The villagers waited, listened, stared inland. But nothing more came through the wall of rain.

The monsoon lasted late that year. And when the steady, inexorable, imperturbable rain continued to pour down day after day, it began to seem to the villagers that there never had been anything but rain. The distant sounds and tremors and flashes were diluted, washed away, lost. The villagers began to wonder if they had been real or imaged or perhaps only dreamed. They began to wonder, as they always did in the monsoon, if there ever would be anything but rain.

When the rain finally ended, the villagers emerged from their huts like half blind moles. The blue sky was dazzling. The warm sun exquisite on clammy skins. People walked around, stretched, talked; and then they began to work.

Women and girls moved moldy clothing and sleeping mats outside to dry. Men and boys, who once would have turned to their boats, now first went to the anchorage. In recent years they had discovered that the breakwaters were as successful at keeping debris washed down by the rains inside the

anchorage as they were in keeping ocean waves out. Leaves, branches, trees, parts of huts, the corpses of drowned animals, even bodies of people, all were found inside the anchorage, along with a vast quantity of silt, which was rapidly choking the harbor. The gujongs drew only a few inches, but the bigger boats were being restricted to an ever narrower channel.

As always at the end of the wet monsoon, the stream had flooded and the village was an island. As always too, there was no wind. Until the muddy flood waters receded and the jungle trails dried or until the wind returned, the village was isolated. This troubled only those like Ky and Siti who had sons in the army. For most of the villagers, there was more than enough to keep them busy. They were curious to know what had happened inland, but not overly concerned. They would learn soon enough. For the present it was fine just to be outside again.

The first that anyone knew everything had changed was when Deng came running from the jungle shouting, "Soldiers are coming."

Nhu and Madee and Ky and the other fishermen were sitting in the center of the village repairing sails. Traditionally sails were made from cotton sacks and lasted only one season; but along with the questionable breakwaters, the foreign soldiers had brought new sacks made of shiny material which was lighter and lasted longer than cotton. Nhu had yet to make up his mind about this new material. Despite some advantages, it did not feel right and was difficult to stitch. He and Madee were working on a seam when Deng ran up.

"So there are soldiers coming," Nhu said. "Down the trail or through the jungle?"

"Down the trail."

"Foreign soldiers then."

"No." Deng was beside himself with excitement. "That is what I am trying

to tell you."

Nhu and Madee stopped sewing and looked at one another uncertainly. By the time they stood and took a few hesitant steps in the direction of the trail, a dozen men carrying weapons marched into the village. They wore the baggy shirts and pants, conical straw hats, and rubber sandals of the People's Army; but what then were they doing coming openly down the trail in broad daylight? One of them greeted Nhu and Madee. "Hello, brothers. We have great news."

"What has happened?"

"We have won the war. Surely you heard the fighting. We surprised the imperialists and their running dogs completely and have taken many prisoners. Tens of thousands. To get them back, the foreign government is withdrawing. We have won! The country belongs to the people! But my enthusiasm is carrying me away. Gather everyone so I can tell it but once."

When the villagers had all assembled nervously in the clearing, afraid of being implicated in something for which they would be punished when the foreign soldiers returned, the man told them about the victory and that they now had their own country. He called them brothers and sisters and comrades. He said that the yoke of foreign exploitation had been lifted from their shoulders; that they had a new flag, which was being carried by the soldiers and would be left to fly over the village.

One of the villagers interrupted to ask if the foreign soldiers would not tear the flag down.

The soldier looked at him with consternation. "No. No. You don't understand. There are no more foreign soldiers, except in prison camps. Foreign soldiers will never bother you again. You are free."

He studied their faces. He was young, but he had already fought for many years and seen most of his friends die in a cause which he believed to be just. Now he was discovering that he had never understood the people for

whom he thought he was fighting. It had been like this in every other village. He would have to learn to be more patient.

As the new multicolored flag was raised on the pole outside the abandoned barracks, now used by the villagers as a place to store nets and floats, the soldier explained what each of the colors meant. Yellow was for all the people. Green for the land worked by the farmers. Blue for the fisherman's sea. Black for the factory workers. Red for the dawn of hope.

He told them that the capital city had been renamed for the great general who was the father of their country, and would henceforth be known as Votein.

He said that great times had come, great changes would be made. The war was only the first phase of the People's Revolution. But he cut his speech short when it became evident that the villagers did not understand or care about any of this and that he did not have information about what they did care about: he did not know what had become of their children.

Nhu returned from fishing one afternoon to find the village in uproar. No one came down to the harbor to help him, so he pulled the gujong as far up the beach as he could by himself, and walked toward Ky's hut, from where he heard voices and a woman crying.

As Nhu neared the hut, he saw Ky sitting on the ground. Ky was staring in disbelief at his bloody hand. More blood poured from a gash on his forehead. Siti was crying as she tried to staunch the flow with her sleeve. Two soldiers stood over them. A third soldier, who had only one arm, stood nearby. When she saw Nhu, Siti appealed to him between sobs. "Can you believe it? Gerip hit him with a rifle? He marches up and tells us we have to go to a 'reeducation center,' whatever that is, in the town. The whole family. Leave everything. Now. Today. This minute. Gerip. A mere boy."

The one armed soldier laughed. "I am not a mere boy, Siti. You are

going to have to get that through your thick heads. The old days are gone. I am the Village Political Advisor of the Revolutionary People's Party. And all who collaborated with the imperialists are going to be reeducated for your own good and the good of the people."

"But what will we do in the town?" Siti wailed. "What will we do about our home, our boat, our possessions?"

"That is the first lesson. They are not your possessions. There is no private property. It is not your hut. It is not your boat. They belong to the people, and they will be used for the greatest good of the people.

"In the city you will work in a factory and learn social consciousness and responsibility. Later you will be sent to the countryside to work in the fields. And while you are there, laborers and farmers will be here working as fishermen. This way all the people will become one. We will all understand one another's ways of life and problems. We will all share one another's burdens. We will all be cleansed of the imperialist conceit of private property. The sea, the sky, the rivers, the jungle, the land, cannot be owned by one. They belong to all. So too the means of production: factories, water buffalo, plows, gujongs, belong to all. The old ways must and will be swept away. The Revolution is the wave of the future."

The fervor in his voice shocked the villagers into silence, which was broken only when Nhu quietly asked what they had all been thinking. "Where did you learn such nonsense?"

Gerip turned on him angrily. "Be careful, Nhu. You can be sent to be reeducated too. Your wife worked for the foreign dogs. Your daughter was their whore. She is already being reeducated."

Mai cried out, "You know where Li is? Where is she? Is she well?"

This was the day Gerip had been waiting for during years of pain from his improperly treated wound and pity as a one-armed cripple. He despised pity.

"She works on a farm in the north and she is taken to various reeducation

centers to testify how she was exploited by the foreigners and their running dogs and was saved by the Revolution from a life of degradation. I am told she is quite effective. She has no desire to return here, and would not be permitted to do so even if she wanted to. Only Duong's heroic sacrifice prevents your entire family from being reeducated now. And may not do so forever. You are on trial." His voice rose. "You are all on trial. Everyone in the village. Everyone in the country. Your social consciousness is being evaluated."

Nhu stepped back from such unexpected vehemence. He wanted to ask what 'social consciousness' is. He really had no idea, but was wise enough to say nothing.

Gerip glanced down at Ky and Sifi. "He has stopped bleeding. Get him to his feet and gather what you can carry. No more. You have ten minutes."

9

Deng sat watching a spider for signs of movement.

A few days earlier he had decided the spider must be ill or old or perhaps even dead. The web stretching between a stone and a vine was irregular and tattered, and the spider did not move when Deng brushed the web aside. But the next time Deng returned to the ruins in the jungle, the web had been exactly rebuilt. Deng tried to understand the purpose of the irregular design, but soon gave up. Presumably the spider knew more about webs than he did.

As often as he could Deng came to the solitude of the ruined temple, as many others had before him through the centuries, including his father. The ruins were the only part of the village to escape the People's Revolution. Two years of peace had changed the village more than centuries of war. The huts might look the same, Deng thought, but nothing in them is the same.

Gerip, as Political Advisor, controlled every aspect of everyone's life, particularly since some had fled in boats to other lands.

Less than a third of the families who had lived in the village at

Independence were still there. Most had been relocated. Few of those who replaced them became fishermen. Though they tried, they were afraid of the sea; they had no feel for the wind; and they were constantly seasick. At the daily Hour of Social Adjustment, Gerip increasingly castigated everyone: the newcomers for failing to learn; the experienced fishermen for failing to teach.

The quota of fish to be carried through the jungle to the road where it was trucked to feed the city remained constant; and as catches dropped, the villagers were often seriously short of food themselves. Little rice and few vegetables made their way from the fields, where harvests were down, presumably because relocated fishermen made as poor farmers as relocated farmers made fishermen.

Inside his hut, Nhu complained that he did not know how to teach these people. He had taught his own sons how to sail and fish, as his father had taught him, simply by having them with him. These city people and farmers knew nothing; they knew worse than nothing: they knew the wrong things. There was no 'deliberate sabotage' as was claimed, and here Nhu showed an unexpected talent for mimicking Gerip's strident voice. He tried. They all tried. Did Gerip think they liked going hungry? It was hopeless. Anyone who had eyes could see that The Great Experiment was a mad failure. Anyone who had an empty stomach did not even need eyes.

The only good to come from The Great Experiment was that it carried within itself a hope of escape. Many of the families which had been relocated from the cities, particularly that of Kiang, who was from the capital, Votein, were wealthy before the Revolution. This was a greater puzzle to Deng than the spider web, for these families were among the most inept at village life. The men were the worst fishermen and their wives the worst at domestic tasks. He knew for a fact that his mother practically kept Kiang's family alive until the youngest daughter learned how to cook. How such people could have been successful in the city was beyond him, but they had been. Kiang had traveled

abroad. He knew the world. And Kiang was the one, away from Gerip and the handful of soldiers who lived in the barracks and those people who were suspected of being Gerip's spies, who first suggested to the remaining experienced fishermen that they take a boat and sail to another land.

Kiang spoke of countries where everyone was free and rich beyond imagining. None of the fishermen believed this, but they did believe that there must be someplace where they could at least live as they had before the Revolution, where at least they would be able to keep enough of the fish they caught so they and their families would not be hungry, and where they would not have to endure Gerip's tirades. Either monsoon would take them to freedom, promised Kiang. A week or two running east before the southwest monsoon, or west before the northeast monsoon, would change their lives.

To the formerly wealthy, who had journeyed to these lands as pampered passengers on ocean liners or airplanes, the distances were nothing; but to the fishermen, who had never traveled more than one day's sail along the coast but who had been touched by the immensity and power of the sea, the prospect of sailing blindly for a week or more was daunting. None of them could navigate far out of sight of land. None of the boats even had a compass.

This did not matter, argued Kiang. All we have to do is keep sailing toward the sunrise or the sunset. It does not matter where we fetch up. Once we get even one day away from this coast, we will be safe and can stop any ship we see. The captain will take us on board, or at least give us supplies and directions. It is highly unlikely we will have to sail even one entire week. All we have to do is get in one of the larger boats. In as little as five or six hours we can all be safe and comfortable aboard a steamer bound for true freedom and opportunity.

Nhu refused to be persuaded; but some of the other fishermen agreed, and one moonless night five families took one of the larger boats and slipped

quietly between the breakwaters .

When they and the boat were discovered missing the following morning, Gerip was furious. He assembled the villagers. He questioned them. He declared that it was impossible the traitors had left without some of the other villagers knowing of their plan, which of course was true. He screamed that they had all betrayed the Revolution. He threatened them. And in fact about half the people in the village were sent elsewhere in the next few weeks; and the size of the garrison was doubled from four soldiers to eight; and a guard was posted on the beach at night. And the fishing quota was increased, which meant that those few remaining experienced fishermen like Nhu had to work even harder to survive.

No word of those who had escaped ever reached the village. Anything might have happened to them. But Deng liked to imagine that at that very moment, while he was sitting in the jungle, they were all safe and happy on some foreign shore, as happy as he seemed to remember his family was before Duong went away to be a soldier.

Deng knew that he couldn't really imagine what a foreign land was like. He had seen only a few villages and the city along the coast. In his fantasies he pictured them all living in a place something like a city having a perpetual festival, but nicer. It did not really matter, almost any other place would be better than continuing to live here. It was as though all color had been washed from life, all color and all joy, leaving only a succession of bleak gray days reaching endlessly into the future. And not only was there absolutely nothing to look forward to, for him life would soon actually become worse. In a few months he would have to go into the army, where men like Gerip would order him about day and night. He wished very much that his father had chosen to go with the families who escaped. But Nhu said that as bad as life was for them now, the village was their home. And though things could be better, they could also be worse. Deng thought of Kiang's and the other families being safe

and happy and free at that very moment. He ached to be with them.

Then he had an unexpected insight. All at once he understood how Kiang had been successful in the city. Kiang had been in the village, longing to escape, just as Deng was. Perhaps he had sat on this very stone in the jungle and thought the very thoughts Deng was thinking, felt the same despair. But Kiang was not able to handle a boat himself, so he used other men to achieve his ends. Undoubtedly this was the secret of his former wealth. His talent was not in being able to do things himself; it was in persuading others to do them for him. It was just a matter of finding a way.

He, Deng, was still just a boy. He did not believe he could sail a boat alone across the sea, and he did not want to do so even if he could. He wanted a new life for them all: for his mother and father and Kew. Even for Li and Duong were that possible. Like Kiang, he would have to persuade others to sail the boat. It was just a matter of finding a way.

10

Dawn caught them off the southernmost point of land. As the sky lightened, the spirits of those in the boat fell. A cluster of palm trees was clearly visible a mile or two away. They felt naked sitting there, gilding slowly westward before a distressingly light breeze. The next few hours, they all thought erroneously, would be the most dangerous. If somehow they could just avoid being seen until nightfall, they would be all right.

At the tiller, which he had tucked beneath one arm, Nhu felt the despair of exhaustion. They did not have a chance. It was less than twenty-four hours since Deng brought word that the families of all the remaining original villagers were to be relocated. Of course it was mad. There would be no one left who could catch fish; but no one doubted that it was true. Madness had become the norm since the Revolution, since the last war.

Nhu had long decided that he would never leave the sea. He was not

romantic about the sea. He did not love the sea, and thought that only a fool would love something so utterly indifferent to him; but the sea and fishing were his life. He would not become a farmer or a factory worker just because some official told him to. He would not live surrounded by the cramped horizons of the land or in a claustrophobic city. Kiang's words and example had prepared the way. Nhu's only worry was the night guards on the beach. He had never killed anything other than fish, and he did not know if he could. Most certainly he did not want to. In the end it was not a problem. The two boys on guard duty that night were eager to come with them.

By now their absence would certainly have been noticed in the village. The land people don't need to worry about those palm trees, thought Nhu. Anyone who knows the sea knows where to look for us. They will already have radioed from the barracks. The first airplane could be taking off. Patrol boats could be underway. Nhu wondered what the officials would do to them. Would he be imprisoned? Might they actually shoot him? At the very least, he would be relocated so far inland that he would never even sniff the sea again.

The boat was packed. People sprawled on the deck, in the deckhouse, even in the cockpit. Nhu did not have enough room to straighten out his legs. He did not know how many had come with him. Word had simply spread. This had been in other minds as well. People took what food and clothing and small valuables they could carry and came in a shared belief that life in the village had become so bad that any unknown must be an improvement.

The weight of all the people made the boat sit low in the water, which was not helping her in this light breeze. The lateen sail hung limp, yet Nhu could feel the boat making some headway, gliding slowly across a glassy sea, creating gentle music with her wake.

The sun warmed Nhu's back and, despite everything, he began to wonder what the new land would be like.

It was difficult to decide whether the gods were with or against them.

The wind remained light, and all day they sailed very slowly, waiting for an airplane to come roaring out of nowhere and suddenly be above them or for a speck on the horizon to become a patrol boat.

The palm trees slipped slowly astern, and the boat people were alone on a great smooth sea. The farmers and those who had lived in cities felt dwarfed by the featureless immensity. Not a wave, not a single ripple, other than their own slight wake; and only a few clouds in the sky; and a great inhuman silence.

To Nhu this was relief. He had never sailed here before, but this part of the ocean was just like that off the village. Perhaps making a long voyage would simply be a matter of crossing a succession of similar bits of water, and the sea everywhere was the same. He wondered that he had never thought to sail to new lands before. The possibility had always existed. It seemed the limitations had been only in his own mind. This is what Great Ancestor Ling had done. But Ancestor Ling had never before seemed quite real. He was a legendary figure, at one with the gods and goddesses and kings and queens of the traditional dances. Now for the first time Nhu saw Ling not as "Great Ancestor," but as a man like himself. Perhaps Ling had only reluctantly left his homeland too. It occurred to Nhu that what he was doing would always be remembered by the family. He smiled at the prospect of a boy a hundred years from now thinking with awe of "Great Ancestor Nhu." There was a further implication. If Great Ancestor Ling were just a man like himself, what of the gods and goddesses, the kings and queens? But he was too tired to pursue this.

In those light conditions anyone could steer, and Nhu exchanged places with Buan and lay down on the deck. He would save himself for the night; that is, he reminded himself, if we reach the night.

Everyone watched the sun melt across the sea. "It is like a broken egg,"

said one of the children.

All day the wind had remained light and the boat had sailed slowly. But no one came after them. They did not see any other boats, and there were just two airplanes, both far away to the north over the land. It almost seemed as though the officials had decided to let them go. It seemed too good to be true. Particularly after Gerip's rage when the first boatload escaped. But stranger things had happened since the Revolution.

Mai and some of the other women passed around balls of cold rice and fish. Nhu washed his down with a few sips of water. Hot tea would have been better, but there was not enough room to light a cooking fire. With the coming of darkness, he began to think seriously of the voyage ahead. Kiang had said they would almost certainly be sighted by a ship once they were away from the coast, but what if they were not? What if they took a week or even more to reach land? Did they have enough food and enough water?

That morning capture had seemed so certain that Nhu had not even bothered to count the number of people aboard. He tried to do so now and counted thirty-one. Even though several of these were small children, the total was startling. And he was not certain that he saw all those huddled in the deck house. Tomorrow he would check the provisions. They would plan for fourteen days and began rationing.

Some clouds off to the south might bring wind. As the sun set Nhu noted the stars which appeared in its place. He pointed them out to the man at the tiller. The moon would rise too late to be of much use. Throughout the night they would steer toward a succession of setting stars.

Stronger wind reached them a few hours after midnight and the overladen boat began to sail faster. For some aboard this was a mixed blessing. They might reach their unknown destination sooner, but the motion was distressing and water began to splash aboard. People rearranged

themselves on the heeling deck. All of the landsmen felt queasy and a few were seasick, although the wind was on the beam and the sea far from rough.

That night and the following day were the happiest of Nhu's life.

Nhu had never had time to be happy.

Before Duong left, Nhu had been content with Mai and the children and his gujong. He expected to spend his life living as his father and grandfather lived before him. But now that this voyage had been forced upon him, he found it exciting and fulfilling. He was the oldest and most experienced fisherman aboard. By common consent he was the captain. He began to see the voyage as destiny. Perhaps everything that had happened, the loss of Duong and Li, the return of the intolerable Gerip, the insanity of The Great Experiment, had been intended to bring him, all of them, to this; for nothing less could have. They were meant to sail to a new life in a new land. And he was meant to lead them. Perhaps "Great Ancestor Nhu" was not so fanciful after all.

They sighted a ship the next day. But steaming steadily, indifferently west, it did not sight them. Some of the people shouted and waved. Nhu remained outwardly impassive, but inwardly he was pleased when the ship disappeared from view.

All of those like Kiang, who had been truly rich and had led soft lives, escaped in the first boat. The monsoon change had come since then, so the first group had undoubtedly sailed east and Nhu would never see them again. But he would like to. He would like Kiang to know that finally he had followed his advice and braved the unknown.

All of those aboard what Nhu now thought of as his boat had always been poor and were accustomed to hardship, even if they were not all accustomed to the sea. They were used to hunger. They were used to

sleeping on mats spread on hard earth, so mats spread on a hard, if moving deck, were not much different. What none of them was used to was such complete idleness. Even during the rains, they had work to do inside, something to repair or build, meals to prepare, clothes to make or mend. Now, except for the seasick, who clung retching to the side of the deck, there was nothing for most of those aboard to do except enjoy an imposed holiday. Nhu kept an experienced man near the mast, where he could let go the halyard to lower the sail in an emergency; another at the sheet controlling the single lateen sail; and a third on the tiller. During the day he let some of the landsmen gain experience steering, but at night either he or one of the other fishermen steered.

The sun was warm and the wind held. Nhu altered their course slightly to the north, so that the waves came from just behind the beam, easing the motion for those who were seasick. Whenever he remembered being happy during those first days of the voyage, he also always wondered what would have happened if he had not made that small, well-intentioned change.

As the boat sailed steadily westward, people who had never been out of sight of land were fascinated by the endless waves, by the diving sea birds, by occasional shoals of flying fish scattering before their bow like silver spray flung into the air. They no longer feared capture; they had no idea where they were going; they had no concept of the risks. They did have blind faith in Nhu.

However by sunset some of them were already bored with the sea, whose grandeur is monotonous and repetitive, and with their own inactivity, and asked Nhu if they would reach land the following day. Nhu admitted that he did not now. He did not admit that he did not even know if land was to be found everywhere ahead of them. He thought that it was, that it must be, but he only had Kiang's word for that; and it was always possible that there were gaps in the land, channels so wide that they might sail between islands without sighting land at all. Kiang had said they would be picked up by a ship as soon

as they got offshore, but they were not. Kiang had said they would reach land within a week no matter which way they steered, but Kiang had no idea how slowly a laden boat sailed. Or what could happen in a storm.

Nhu saw no reason to worry the others as they began the third night at sea. They still had enough food and water to last another week.

Clouds obliterated the stars that night, and the wind and waves increased, and more people became seasick. Nhu steered most of the night, maintaining course by sensing the angle of the unseen waves. A gray dawn proved that they were still sailing away from the rising sun.

The third full day at sea was one of rising discontent. Most of the adults were bored, tired, hungry or seasick, dirty, cramped, wet and cold. They glared at the sea with malice and they bickered with one another. "Before the day is out," Mai murmured to Nhu, as he wedged his way down beside her on the bottom of the cockpit to try to sleep, "Someone will say that we should never have left." And before the day was out, several people did. Only the children remained happy.

Deng and Kew and the two soldiers, Phong and Biem, who were younger than Deng and whose parents had sent them to join the army, sat on the windward side of the deck, sometimes holding onto part of the rigging and dangling their legs over the side of the hull. Phong and Diem still wore their uniforms, but they had left their rifles in the cabin.

The boys were all about the same height and Kew only an inch or two shorter. The waves were now as tall as they were. As they watched the water rushing past the hull, the boat seemed to be moving very fast. Phong said, "I get dizzy looking down at the water. I have never gone so fast."

"Not even on land?" asked Deng. "Have you never ridden in a car or truck in the army?"

"Have you?"

“No. But my mother did once. She took a taxi in the city.”

“It is too bad she did not take you with her.”

“Oh, she was on important business, seeing some official about--.” Deng almost said ‘my sister,’ but realized in time where that would lead and changed to, “My brother. He was one of the first to join General Vo.” When the other boys were suitably impressed, he continued, with the moral superiority of one whose mother has once ridden in a taxi. “This is nothing. They,” and he did not need to indicate to the three of them who were all feeling well who ‘they’ were, “are lucky the sea has not been rougher or the wind swung around ahead of us. It gets much, much worse out here.”

Kew nudged him with a bare foot and giggled. “But you have never been out here before. None of us has. None even father.”

Phong and Biem, who obviously thought she was very pretty and were glad to be able to side with her in anything, quickly joined her laughter. To regain his advantage, Deng almost blurted out his secret. He wanted to tell someone. Several times already he had almost told Kew. But it was not necessary. He would save it until they were safely ashore. He looked at Kew. Her long black hair was blowing in the wind, her face smiling, her fine bare legs bent gracefully. He loved her. He loved everyone. He had a beautiful sister. A strong father. A good mother. They were all sailing to a new land and a great future. And he had made it happen. For the present it was enough that he alone knew. So he said, “You know the sea gets rougher. I have been in worse with father just off our village.”

Kew was only teasing him and did not answer. She too felt the world and life opening before her in unexpected ways. Life was like one of those exotic flowers she sometimes discovered in the jungle, just beginning to spread its petals, permitting her a glimpse of wondrous beauty that she knew would soon be revealed. Phong and Biem were nice boys, farmers' sons, but just like the boys in the fishing village. In another year or two she would have married

someone like them, and soon have children of her own, and grown old like her mother. Since the Revolution there had been no radios and, of course, no foreign soldiers in the village, but Kew understood why Li had left. Now she too was leaving, but in a much better way. She did not know what lay ahead of her. Perhaps in a new land she could be a dancer. Perhaps they would have new dances there she could learn. Perhaps she might even meet and fall in love with the handsome son of a rich man. Whatever, whoever, was ahead, surely it was not the son of a fisherman or farmer.

They all sat in silence for a while, feeling the boat slide down the faces of waves, then slow until she almost seemed to slide backwards as the waves passed. White foam hissed from the bow. They were all thinking, as were all of those aboard who were old enough to understand, about what lay ahead. Deng and Kew confidently saw opportunity. Phong and Biem felt only that it would be better than being in the army.

“When do you think we will get there?” asked Phong.

“I do not know,” replied Deng. “No one does. We are in the hands of the gods.” He liked that. It sounded portentous.

The little boat sailed on. Wave after wave rolled beneath her. The wind filled her handmade sail.

The world around her had long been surveyed and charted. A few miles south of her, huge ships passed, carrying transmitters with which their captains communicated with corporate headquarters on the far side of the planet and Global Positioning System units which received signals from satellites orbiting 10,000 miles overhead and continuously updated the ships' positions to within a few yards. Other machines aboard those ships recorded everything from the depth and temperature of the largely unseen and unfelt oceans through which great engines drove them, to the fuel consumption of those engines. Their crews seldom ventured on deck, seldom felt the wind on their faces, and

almost never got wet, except in hot showers. They were button pushing, meter reading sailors. And when they were not performing their routine duties, they watched video movies or satellite transmissions of sporting events taking place thousands of miles away. All the ships under the flag of one of those distant lands had recently been kept in port by a work stoppage until they were fitted with separate sauna baths for the use of the crew in addition to those for officers.

Yet the villagers continued sailing in what was for them an absolute unknown. What was odd was that the villagers and the men encapsulated like insects within the monstrous machines plying the shipping route south of them were as similar as their craft were not. Sustained by the same hopes and the same necessary illusions, both crews voyaged between the same mysteries. Technology only increased speed and insulation and precise knowledge of superficial data along the way.

They came upon the trawler the next day.

Nhu was asleep when a voice shouted. For a moment he could not understand what was happening or even where he was or why all these other people were around him.

"Something ahead."

"What?"

"Ahead. Something. A boat."

The voice was much too loud. "I am only asleep. Not deaf. Where?"

"Ahead."

He was certainly not going to get more sleep until he looked. He sat up. Except for the helmsman, the cockpit was empty. Everyone was forward. The bow was almost beneath the water. "What are you doing? Have you no sense? Do you want us to sink? Come aft. At least some of you."

Most of the villagers ignored him, but a few did move. Enough so that he

could see the other boat. The helmsman had already altered course. They were closing rapidly. The vessel was not more than a mile or two away. "Watch out for a net," Nhu told the helmsman. "They are fishing. Steer away for a bit and then come up to her side, rather than approach from directly astern."

The other boat was one of the thousands of steel trawlers about ninety feet long, thrown together as quickly and cheaply as possible throughout the East and then sent in fleets to plunder the oceans, until they fall apart and sink, get caught in rough weather, in which they have a known tendency to turn turtle and sink, or are steered negligently or deliberately onto land. Within those oceans bounded by Asia, Africa, Australia, and the Americas, there are few rocks and reefs too small or too remote not to be graced by their rusting skeletons. Because the trawlers have no individual character and are manned by men who uniformly hate them, they are given only numbers rather than names. Life aboard is brutal. The trawlers of several nations are manned by convicted criminals who usually come to regret their decisions to serve reduced sentences in what are to all who work aboard them inescapable prisons during the long grim months spent in brutal labor continuously at sea.

As the villagers neared the trawler, men working in the stern stopped to watch. Immediately an old man shouted from the wheelhouse and the men resumed shoveling fish into the hold. The man, presumably the captain, gestured for the villagers to come alongside.

Nhu had taken the helm himself and gave the order for the sail to be lowered. The sailboat glided up to the trawler's buckled and rusty hull. Lines were passed from bow and stern and tightened until only a small gap separated the two vessels. The wind held the sailboat away from the trawler, and as the two craft rose and fell irregularly their hulls touched.

The trawler captain came down to the deck, but was still above the sailboat. He said something to those nearest him. A dozen voices clamored

back. Nhu left the tiller and went forward.

“We have left our home. How far away is land?”

The man answered, but Nhu did not understand him. “Be quiet.” Nhu told the other villagers. “He cannot answer us all.”

The trawler captain was a small man with amazingly wrinkled skin, wearing a dirty t-shirt and shorts. When he spoke again, Nhu still only understood part of what he said. Most of the words were familiar, but his accent was not. Gradually, the more the man spoke, the better Nhu could follow him. “Did you say land is two days ahead?”

“For you it depends on the wind, doesn't it? If it remains like this, yes, you should reach land in two or three days.”

“Straight ahead?”

The man laughed unpleasantly. “You cannot miss it. Land is all around you.”

Nhu was excited by this verification of what Kiang had told him. He asked several other questions of the old man about the land: whether the shore ahead was high or low, if there were any off lying dangers, where they would find villages or towns, how they would be received. As the man answered, Nhu noticed that his eyes moved constantly, pausing only when he saw the two boys in uniform and again on one or two of the girls, including Kew.

For some reason he made Nhu uncomfortable, and when he stopped speaking, Nhu thanked him and prepared to get underway, though he sensed that most of the villagers were reluctant to leave the comforting proximity of the larger vessel. The man surprised him by asking if they needed any food or water.

Although he could not say why, Nhu did not want to accept anything from the man. He wanted to get away again into the emptiness of the sea.

“We have enough to reach land. Will you cast off our lines?”

One of the villagers protested. The captain smiled at Nhu, in whom panic was inexplicably rising. "Are you sure?"

The tone was mocking. Nhu did not understand what was happening to him, but they had to get away. He started to untie the stern line himself.

"There is no need to do that." And the wrinkled old man called over his shoulder. Two of his crew wordlessly untied the lines and tossed them onto the sailboat.

As the wind pushed the boats apart, Nhu ordered the sail raised. The captain called to them, "Good sailing," and waved.

Nhu was confused. The other man had not said or done anything he should not have. It was not strange that his eyes should linger on Kew. She was a pretty girl. And they had not lingered long. Nhu was only certain that as the sail filled and was trimmed and the sailboat gathered way and the space between the vessels widened, his fear diminished.

For a mile, two miles, nothing happened. And then, just as the trawler vanished astern and Nhu felt safe, someone called out. Nhu stared forward. There was another ship.

All day they sailed through a vast fishing fleet, seldom without at least one trawler in view, and usually with several.

They did not go alongside any of these ships or even approach any closely, but the ships were always there. Once when Nhu was fishing off the village, a school of black, whale like fish, each about ten feet long, swam silently past the gujong. They were an almost solid mass, a living river. It took more than an hour for them all to pass, and when they had done so, no one from the village caught a fish for days. Nhu felt now as he had then. He found it difficult to imagine that there were enough fish in the entire world to keep so many boats busy. Yet they all were active; their crews setting or winching in nets, shoveling fish into holds, off loading catches to one of several larger ships,

which Nhu concluded would go in to the canneries while the trawlers remained at sea.

During the middle of the day the sun broke through the clouds, but late in the afternoon the clouds returned. The wind held and the previous day's bickering was forgotten. The villagers' spirits were lifted by the verification that land was not far ahead and by the presence of other boats. To those who were not sailors, the ocean did not seem so dangerous with other men around. They no longer felt that they were sailing alone into the unknown. And even though the trawlers varied only in the pattern of the rust stains on their hulls, it was more interesting to look at them than at the monotonous sea.

As sunset neared, the sailboat was still not clear of the fishing fleet. Nhu was settling in for a long worrisome night when he became aware of a trawler rapidly overtaking them. In the dying twilight, the boat rose on the wave crests and disappeared into deep shadowy troughs. She was taking the waves on her beam and coming toward them as though up a tunnel. Nhu thought she might be the same boat they had spoken to in the morning, but it was impossible to tell. The trawler was moving much faster than any they had seen during the day, and she was heading directly for them.

Nhu tried to think of a reasonable explanation. The trawler could not be steaming back to her home port, which would be north and they were steering west. None of the mother ships was ahead. Perhaps she was just coming to offer them some fish. Or perhaps there was some important news. A typhoon warning? Nhu glanced at the sky and did not think so.

The fear he had experienced earlier returned. The other villagers were watching the approaching ship only with curiosity. None of them was worried. Nhu started to shout for Phong and Biem to get their rifles, but he stopped to wonder what was wrong with him. The other boat was almost alongside. Nhu stared across at the old man standing beside the wheelhouse, exactly as he

had that morning, and he knew that it was too late for Phong's and Biem's rifles to make any difference.

Over the noise of the trawler's clanking engine, Nhu called, "What do you want?"

The returning voice did not carry. "Lower...sail...we have..."

"What?"

The two boats continued side by side, though more slowly as the trawler deliberately blocked the wind from the sail. The side of the trawler's hull extended to the level of the old man's waist. He was gaging the narrowing ribbon of ocean swirling between the two boats. Nhu suddenly wondered where the rest of the crew was. The only other man visible was in the wheelhouse. Nhu grabbed the tiller from the hand of his own startled helmsmen and pushed it hard over. The sailboat swung away from the trawler and her speed increased as she emerged for the larger boat's wind shadow.

Some of the villagers looked questioningly at Nhu, not understanding what he was doing. He did not fully understand himself and kept staring at the old man, who merely watched him impassively. For a moment Nhu thought that he was going to let them go, but then the old man shrugged his shoulders. His mouth moved. Men who had been hidden by bulwarks stood. Nhu saw that they all had guns. He watched the old man's arm point at him, and something struck his chest and lifted him from his feet.

Nhu was on his back. Above him a great wing flapped against a bleeding sky. He did not feel anything. No, he felt numb, which he decided was itself a feeling. Distant noises. Somewhere people were screaming and there were coughing sounds. He wondered if he should see what was the cause of the screaming. But there was a terrible shock of pain when he tried to turn his head. He was relieved. The screaming did not matter. He half suspected that he might have screamed himself. He lay quietly, afraid of more pain. He concentrated on the wing above him and the pain went away. But

something odd was happening to the wing. Holes were appearing in it. And now it was ripping. Tattered ribbons of wing were snapping in the wind. He wondered what kind of bird it had been.

Nhu became aware of horrible smells. There was another jolt and more pain. Where was he anyway? What were these people doing? Didn't they know where to go to shit? He did not like it here.

A face appeared in the sky. Some woman. She looked familiar, but he could not place her. She said something, but he could not hear her. Why was she crying?

The woman's face disappeared, like a mask snatched away, and was replaced by another, this one an old wrinkled man. This too seemed familiar. Perhaps they were one face. Yes, that was it. Nhu was pleased with his cleverness. The old man had just been wearing a woman's mask. At least this face did not talk. He wanted all of the faces to go away and leave him alone. He wanted to sleep. He closed his eyes.

A bright light and a loud noise woke him. He was flying. There was something about a wing. Had he become a bird? He looked to see if he had wings. Curiously he did not. How then could he be flying? He hit something hard. The pain was unbearable. He opened his mouth to scream, but something poured in. He was cold. He had been flying and now he was sinking. He could not breathe. He was tired of this. What was he: a flying fish? Nhu tried to laugh. He liked that. Yes, a flying fish. He had died and been reincarnated as a flying fish. Well, you would think they would have taught him how to breathe underwater, or did he have to breathe air? Was that why flying fish flew? Something was lifting him. Perhaps he had been caught. This was becoming quite interesting. His punishment for being a fisherman was to be reincarnated as a fish. Now that Nhu understood, he admired the elegance of his punishment. The gods are witty as well as just. But still there was this

breathing business. Or is this to be only a very brief reincarnation? Nhu wondered what he would come back as next. He did not know if he had been a good flying fish, but surely he could not have done much evil in so short a life. What evil could a flying fish do anyway? The next life should definitely be a step upward toward nirvana.

Air against his face. Not water. I must be going to fly again. I will have to observe how I do it this time. At least I seem to know how to breathe air. But I don't seem to be flying. He was disappointed, but not excessively. Now that he was not in pain nothing really mattered. I am really getting quite close to nirvana, he thought. Mostly he was just curious to see what would happen next. Rebirth was quite entertaining.

His patience was infinite. Finally something, presumably the gods, pulled him from the water. No, only part way from the water. They were clumsy, as it was beginning to seem gods usually were, and they hurt him. He was going to tell them so, but speaking was too much trouble. He was lying on something. His back was wet. Far above him there were stars. He could hear one of the gods moving nearby, but he was unable to turn his head far enough to see him. He waited for something else to happen. When nothing did, he went to sleep.

Rebirth was agony.

Nhu opened his eyes and found himself on a piece of wreckage floating on the sea. The sky was light blue and, he noted as a sailor will, the wind had decreased. From the angle of the sun it was either midmorning or mid-afternoon. His chest was on fire. Every shallow breath was excruciating. Yet his mind was clear. He remembered and understood everything that had happened, except how he came to be here. He made the mistake of turning his head and passed out from the pain.

When he regained consciousness he saw Deng sprawled beside him. A rope tied around Deng's waist disappeared from Nhu's field of vision. He expected the other end was probably tied around his own body, but he could not feel it. Deng's head was thrown back and his mouth was open. Nhu watched his chest for signs of breathing. The wreckage, which Nhu recognized as part of the fishing boat's cabin, was rising and falling on low swells; water swirled around Deng's body. Nhu gathered his courage and tried to speak. "Deng?" he croaked. He was grateful the word did not substantially increase his pain. "Deng?" he repeated. The boy's eyes opened and he sat up. He looked at Nhu anxiously. "Did you speak, Father?"

Deng's movement bobbed the splintered planks. Nhu grimaced. When the pain again became bearable, he said, "Please don't move unless you have to." Words exhausted him. "Where are the others?"

Deng started to throw up his hands in despair, but stopped in time. "Gone."

"Where?"

"Drowned. Shot. Blown up."

"Mai and Kew? "

Deng hesitated. "They were taken, all the women, even the oldest, aboard the trawler, along with whatever they wanted from the cabin, before they blew us up."

Nhu recalled the trawler captain's old eyes lingering on Kew. Fishermen months continuously at sea. They were all a part of it. The foreigners who corrupted Li and killed Duong. General Vo and his People's Army who had taken Duong to be killed for their revolution and sent Gerip to drive them from their home. The trawler captain. The despicable gods. They were all one and he hated them all. "How long ago?"

Deng was uncertain. The explosion and the shock of his own sense of being responsible. He remembered screams during the night the trawler drifted

nearby, and splashes as the oldest women were thrown overboard. "Two nights. I think this is the third day."

"Water?"

"No. No food either."

Food did not matter. Nhu was thirsty, not hungry. Swallowing would probably hurt too much anyway. He noticed a white crust of salt on Deng's face and blisters. For a moment Nhu started to scold Deng for not wearing a hat. He stopped. Amazing that such inconsequential things had ever seemed important. He closed his eyes.

Deng studied the empty horizon and then leaned back and closed his eyes too. There was nothing else to do. He felt that he deserved to die.

The wind died away for a few hours, leaving them drifting on a flat sea. And then the wind filled in from the north and blew the wreckage toward the shipping lane.

Nelson Alexander opened his eyes. The cabin was full of sunlight reflecting off varnish and brass. Through the overhead hatch he saw a rectangle of blue. JUSTINE was still. The sea must be smooth. He glanced at his watch. 8:10 a.m. Late for him. He lay there a moment longer before pushing himself up and taking the few steps to the galley, where he filled the kettle and lit the propane stove. As he stood waiting for the water to boil, he looked out the porthole and abruptly came wide awake. So the noise he had heard the previous afternoon had been another boat. She was now on the beach. Water lapped at her stern, but her bow was surrounded by damp sand. From this distance she did not appear to be damaged. Someone had already set an anchor off her stern to prevent her from going harder aground. The tea kettle began to whistle. Nelson turned the gas off and climbed up the companionway ladder to the deck.

Waves swirled around rocks off one end of the island, which consisted of two low green hills connected by a low sand saddle. A coral reef extended beyond the rocks. From the low water on the reef and the damp sand near the grounded vessel, he concluded that the tide was low. Tides were usually only three or four feet in the strait, but the high spring tides of the new moon were near. Depending on how quickly the fishermen had managed to set the stern anchor and assuming there was no damage to the far side of the hull, the fishing boat might come off easily. Nelson's eyes scanned the shore, and there, sitting on the sand just beyond the fishing boat's bow, were two figures. They did not appear to be injured, but they were motionless. For as long as he watched, the men did not move.

Nelson went back down into the cabin and made and drank a cup of instant coffee. While he did so he continued to watch the men on the shore through the cabin portholes. They conveyed no sense of urgency. Nelson did not see what he could do to help them, and he anticipated that in all

probability he would not even be able to communicate with them. Hello, goodbye, and thank you, which were the only words of the local language he knew, seemed unlikely to prove of much use in this situation. Of course he would go ashore and see. If the boat did not come off on the next high tide, perhaps he could take one of the men across to the mainland to get help from their village.

By nature and training, Nelson did not like clutter, so he rinsed and dried and put the coffee cup away, before he returned to the cockpit and pulled the Avon dinghy from the lazarette, along with its oars and foot pump. While he was inflating the dinghy, he saw that the men ashore still had not moved and he began to worry about them. Perhaps they were in shock. He placed the waterproof bag which held his medical kit into the dinghy before starting to row ashore. As he did so he had no sense of foreboding. It seemed just another chance encounter.

The dinghy had covered half the distance to them before Deng said anything. He had seen a figure come onto the sailboat's deck several times, but he had not been able to determine if it was the same man each time. No one was in sight on the boat now, so perhaps this man was alone. Deng glanced at his father, who had not spoken for more than an hour, who had said almost nothing since that confusing moment when the MAI KEW's hull struck and he and his father, who were sleeping on mats on the wheelhouse floor, were thrown together.

It had been a confusing and frightening night; but with the coming of dawn, Deng's irrepressible spirits rose. The MAI KEW had missed the rocks and come to rest on sand. Her hull was undamaged. She should be easy to re-float.

The sight of the yacht came as a surprise. Deng had no idea that any other boat was in the anchorage. He wondered if it had come in before or

after the MAI KEW. He pointed it out to his father, who merely grunted. There were no yachts in their homeland. That anyone would be so foolish as to go to sea for pleasure intrigued Deng. What would they do at sea if they did not have to work? Deng tried to imagine such an existence, but could not.

Nhu watched the dinghy come closer. The man rowed well enough, but Nhu still labeled him as a rich foreigner. Only the rich had boats for idleness. Nhu wondered why this man did not have an outboard engine for his dinghy like the others. If you were rich, you could have anything. If you were rich, your daughter and your wife were not slaves aboard a fishing trawler, perhaps being used at that very moment, perhaps at any moment, in unthinkable ways he could not avoid thinking of. Bare legs spread. Bare feet in the air. Breasts. Hands. Mouths. Organs. Moans. Cries. Whimpers. Grunts. Imposed themselves on him. They seemed phantasmal, but he knew that they were not. Whatever he against his will imagined, the very worst, was real, had happened, was happening, would continue to happen, until perhaps after Kew and Mai had been passed around the fishing fleet and everyone was tired of them, the fishermen might put them ashore somewhere, as they had a few others, or they might simply throw them overboard. Nhu did not expect he would ever touch a woman again. If you were rich, your older daughter did not become a whore, and your older son was not killed in some unknown jungle. Or so Nhu thought., If you were rich, you were not driven from your home. No, that was not true. Even the rich, like Kiang, were sometimes driven from their homes; but if you were rich like Kiang, you managed quite well in your new home.

And the man rowing was foreign, because anyone who was not from Nhu's village was foreign. There were degrees of foreignness. Nhu did not trust any of them. He did not trust anyone or anything any more, not even the gods.

As the dinghy reached shallow water, Deng started to stand, but Nhu

made a small motion with his hand which kept him seated.

The foreigner pulled the dinghy well up the beach before coming toward them. The man was tall and, Nhu guessed as well as he could with foreigners, about his own age. As Nhu stared up at the foreigner an odd sensation passed over him, almost of danger, but the man did not appear threatening. Then the foreigner said something unintelligible and the moment passed.

When, as he expected, there was no response to his question if the men were injured, Nelson gave what he hoped was an encouraging smile and turned toward the beached fishing boat. Deng stood, and, when his father did not stop him, followed the foreigner.

Nelson and Deng walked around the bow of the MAI KEW, although Nelson could not read the name. To Nelson and even to Deng, who was more used to it, the fish smell was overwhelming. At least there is something they can throw overboard to lighten ship, Nelson thought. A few days' catch is a small enough price to pay.

The boat was heavily built of wood. Nelson guessed it weighed thirty or forty thousand pounds, perhaps depending on fuel and water and stinking fish, even more. There was no way they were going to lift her without a crane, though it might be possible as the tide came in to drive wedges under the keel to help break her free. She did not seem to have struck hard or to have dug much of a hole in the sand. None of her planks was sprung. The fishermen were quite lucky considering. If she had gone onto the rocks or the reef, it would be much worse. Aboard the JUSTINE he had tide tables for the strait, but he doubted there would be a correction for this tiny island. It would just be a matter of how high the next tide, or even the next few tides were, unless the weather changed again. A strong wind driving waves from the west would pound the fishing boat to pieces. The sky appeared settled, but as he had already seen, that didn't mean much in this part of the world.

Nelson tried to establish rapport with the younger man by pointing at his noise and grimacing. The boy smiled and nodded. When Nelson pointed at the broken chain dangling from the bow, the boy looked serious and nodded again. That seems to be about the extent of communication, Nelson thought.

They came around the stern and had to duck beneath a thick line running taut out to the water. Fibers stuck out from the line. Nelson touched them. Synthetic line had been the norm in his world for decades. He could not recall when he had last seen hemp.

Nelson walked back to where the older man squatted as motionless as a statue. The boy was obviously all right, but Nelson was less certain about the man. He tried to figure out how to ask if he could help them. He pointed at the fishing boat and then himself. The man made no response. He wanted to suggest that they throw the fish overboard, but it was not his place to tell them their business. Surely the man knew his boat and the sea, at least these coastal waters, better than he did. Nelson did not see anything physically wrong with the old man and he could not simply begin to examine him. Finally he pointed at himself and then at the JUSTINE and then at a point in the sky where he thought the sun would be at high tide.

As he rowed out, Nelson saw brightly colored fish swimming in the coral beneath clear water. The fish were flowers on the reef. It is a beautiful day, he thought. If your boat isn't on the beach.

He rowed in through a mass of dead fish. Dead fish eyes stared blindly up at him. Dead fish scales scraped against the dinghy. Dead white fish bellies emitted dead fish odors.

The two fishermen were much as they had been when Nelson left them some hours earlier, the older one squatting, the younger standing; but obviously they had been busy in the meantime. Tons of fish littered the beach and floated on the rising water beside the fishing boat. A pile of nets and other

equipment stood farther up the sand along with several long poles cut from the trunks of palm trees. The boy smiled, but the older man ignored him as he had before. The line running out to the anchor had been repeatedly tightened as the tide came in and was still taut. According to the tide tables, it was high tide in the city right now, and would be high tide at a port on the mainland a few miles north of them in twenty minutes. Tides would be increasingly higher for the next few days, but if the fishing boat was going to come off easily, she would do so now.

The anchorage remained smooth. As is often the case, the storm left a calm behind it. While they certainly did not want a wind from the west, a slight swell might help break the fishing boat free. Nelson chose a spot carefully, close enough to the men to appear friendly but not so close as to intrude.

At least the foreigner has some manners, thought Nhu.

For a few more minutes he watched the water inch higher along the MAI KEW's keel. When the stem was covered and the water was at the line of dark scum that marked the fishing boat's normal waterline, he released a breath that was the only sign of the great tension which had been accumulating within him for years, and said to Deng, "Now."

Nelson watched the two men trot across the sand, lift one of the palm logs and force it between the fishing boat's keel and the sand as a roller, then climb over the stern to the winch, which was normally powered by the ship's engine. Although the engine's cooling intake was beneath the water, Nelson assumed that the fishermen thought it would suck up too much sand to enable it to be used.

Spoked wheels about two feet in diameter extended on both sides of the winch. The men each took a wheel and began to turn. Only a few inches of line clicked in before they came to a halt. Sinewy muscles in their back and

shoulders bunched. Necks corded. Veins popped out in their foreheads. But not a single additional click came from the winch.

The men continued to strain. Nelson found himself straining with them. The boat's bow seemed to move. Nelson felt an unexpected joy. But no, it was just a movement of the water. The boat was still stuck hard. With a gasp the older man released his grip on the wheel and the younger man followed.

They stood, chests heaving for a few minutes, before the older man said something and they both jumped on the sand and tried to force the palm log farther forward between the sand and the keel. But they could not move it either.

The water had crept a bit higher. Back they climbed onto the boat and strained again on the winch without achieving anything.

Standing on the beach, Nelson wanted to help, but he did not want to interrupt the fishermen. Now, when, after catching his breath, the older man climbed slowly down to the beach and took another of the palm logs and levered it under the bow, Nelson instinctively climbed over the stern and took a place at the winch. The startled boy called something to his father, who scowled at the distraction, glanced aft and gave a brief nod, before continuing to wrestle the log forward. The boy took a grip on the wheel at his side of the winch and Nelson took the other. At a word from the boy, they both tried to turn the winch.

Handling his own boat had kept Nelson fit and the boy though small was work hardened. But no matter how they strained, no matter what stances they took to increase leverage, their efforts and those of the old man came to nothing. They might as well have been trying to move the island itself. The fishing boat felt as if it were welded to the shore. Nelson's hands slipped on the wheel. He was straining so hard that he lost his balance and fell heavily against the transom. He tried to resume his position, but his shoulder was numb and he could not close his right hand. He stood, sweat pouring into his eyes, chest

heaving, staring stupidly at his useless hand, thinking how carefully he had always treated that hand during his years as a surgeon, what a marvelous hand it was said to be, what incredibly complicated and delicate procedures it could perform. Yet it failed to do something as simple as hold onto a wheel.

As feeling began to return and he was able to flex his fingers, Nelson looked up through the sweat. The boy had stopped too and was breathing heavily, though not as heavily as I am, thought Nelson. As well he shouldn't be. He must have thirty years on me. I am more than old enough to be his father. Nelson placed his hands back on the wheel, but the boy shook his head. Nelson had to admit that he was relieved. He did not have much left. He leaned wearily against the ships' rail, suddenly aware of the oppressive humidity and the blazing sun.

He did not realize how long he had been standing there until he felt something touch his side. The boy held out a small handleless cup of tea. The old man had climbed back aboard and squatted, sipping from a similar cup. He did not acknowledge Nelson in any way.

The boy went and got himself a cup and naturally squatted too. Nelson felt himself towering above them. He sat down on the deck and held up the cup and said in their language, "Thank you."

The boy said, "You are welcome." And the older man gave an almost imperceptible nod.

"He works hard for a foreigner," said Deng.

Nhu only grunted.

"Well, he does. It is good of him to help us."

Nhu not did raise his head. "Just keep working yourself."

The tide had gone out and left the MAI KEW surrounded by sand. With their hands, an old machete, tin cans, and a bucket, they were digging around the hull. They had not asked him to--they had no way to ask, and Nhu would

not have done so anyway--but the foreigner had followed their lead and was working near the bow, while Nhu and Deng dug beneath the stern.

The MAI KEW remained on an almost even keel, heeled only a few degrees to starboard. Her bow was V-ed, but from amidships aft she was flat. The three men had cleared the sand away completely from the port side of the hull, but because of the slight heel, had more trouble on the starboard side, particularly near the stern, which was, Nhu believed, what was holding the boat fast.

They had to dig their way under the hull, and there was little room in which to move. The sand was compacted hard. Barnacles on MAI KEW cut Nhu's back. No matter. Face pressed into the sand, head turned sideways, he extended one arm and scraped with a tin can. Despite the palm trees they had chopped down to prop the hull, Nhu was acutely aware of MAI KEW's weight above him. If their digging was too successful and the hull shifted, he would be crushed. Even if he didn't die immediately, the other two would never be able to move the hull and he would be trapped and drown. Is that what the gods have planned for me: drowning in ankle deep water? It would be fitting after all they have put me through, he thought; as he slowly pulled the tin of sand down the side of his body and pushed it out to where Deng could reach and empty it. Careful by careful. I might as well be digging with a spoon. But what else is there to do?

They worked until the incoming tide stopped them and then the three men stood back and surveyed their labor. They had dug two-thirds of the hull free, but the remaining third, where the work went slowly, was crucial. Only one man at a time could work under the hull, and Nelson was too big, so Nhu and Deng had alternated. As they studied the boat, none of them thought they had done enough. And as high water came and they strained futilely on the winch, they were proven right.

As the water receded again, they were depressed to see that not only

had all their labor been to no avail, it may actually have made matters worse, for the fishing boat settled even deeper into the sand their digging had softened.

Nelson lay on the lower berth in JUSTINE's main cabin; an untouched cup of tea sat on the varnished table beside him.

Another day had passed, or as he had come to measure time, two more tides. He had become a creature of the moon, living, sleeping, working, from tide to tide. How many tides had the fishing boat been aground? Five? Or was it six?

On the last tide he had moved the JUSTINE close to the beached boat and set the big seventy-five pound hurricane anchor that he had never used before. He did not carry much aboard that he did not use. His rule was that if anything was not used for a year, it could continue not to be used, and he threw or gave it away. Justine had always insisted that he give things away or at least leave them some place ashore where someone would have an opportunity to take them. But the hurricane anchor was an exception. Buried at the bottom of the cockpit locker, it had been far enough out of the way to escape notice. He had to remove everything else from the locker to reach it, and then found that he was almost too tired to lift the anchor onto deck. This broken sleep, this hard labor, was like being an intern again; but he was fifty years old now and very tired. The old man--I think of him as 'the old man,' Nelson thought, yet he is probably my age. Well I feel like an old man right now.--the father then, for they seem to be father and son. He doesn't seem to be tired. He really doesn't show much of anything at all.

After the disappointment of the last tide, Nelson had made eating gestures and pointed at the two men and himself and then to the JUSTINE. The boy's eyes gleamed in anticipation, but the old man had nodded negatively. It is as though he dislikes me, Nelson thought. Perhaps he distrusts all strangers.

Foreigners have not been particularly kind to this part of the world. For that matter the people who live here have not been kind to one another.

Nelson knew his mind was wandering. His body desperately needed sleep. There was no need for him to row ashore and continue to try to help get the fishing boat off the beach, particularly for people who did not even like him. He could just up anchor and leave them to their troubles. He might even do more good by leaving and taking word to the mainland. They had been lucky that the weather had remained settled for so long. If the boat did not come off today, that is what he would do. The next two tides were the highest for a month. They needed more men. They really needed a bulldozer and a tug boat. But, he admitted to himself, he wanted to be part of the salvage, not a messenger. He wanted the three of them to succeed. This would have to be the tide.

Nelson had wedged his storm anchor in a coral head and run a two hundred foot length of one inch nylon line to the fishing boat's winch. From the dinghy he had seen that the fishing boat's own anchor had dragged until it too was caught in the coral. They would never retrieve it, and he thought he would probably lose his storm anchor as well, a loss he would gladly accept if the boat would just come off the beach. The line from the fishing boat's anchor also ran to the winch.

Clearly the three of them could not exert enough force on the winch to move the boat. They had tried until they were literally blue in the face. They had also dug half the beach away, much of it repeatedly. You would have thought the tide might have helped by undercutting the hull, but it had not. You would have thought that nothing was left to hold the boat. His aching muscles testified that he had dug enough sand to free the QE II.

Through the hatch above him the daylight was dim. 6:30 by his watch. For a moment he could not recall whether it was morning or evening. Had he just come through a night? Had he slept through a tide?

Too quickly for his sore body, he stood and stared through a porthole. No. It was morning. The tide was high. And in another hour it will be higher. The highest it has been since the boat first grounded. We have done as much as humanly possible. Space has been cleared for the fishing boat's cooling intake and for her prop to turn. The old man would use the engine this time, even if he ruined it, both to power the winch and to try to break the suction with the prop; and Nelson would simultaneously use JUSTINE's engine to try to pull her off with a tow line secured to the fishing boat's stern. If her engine lasted only a few seconds before packing up, it might be enough. If she lifted even a millimeter, she would come. Surely she will come, Nelson told himself, staring shoreward at the dim ungainly shape of the grounded boat and the two low hills of the island linked by a line of silhouetted palm trees.

Deng shivered as he walked back from the trees. The morning was cool, but he trembled with anticipation. In a few minutes the MAI KEW would again be afloat. His father declared flatly that she would come off on this tide or not at all. And he, Deng, knew that she would come. He could feel it in his bones. They had worked hard. They deserved to save the boat. He would put everything he had into the effort. He felt young and strong. This was something he would always remember. It would become one of the stories long related in the family. Then he remembered that there was no family. Only himself and his father. But that was only temporary. He did not think too much about what was happening to his mother and Kew. Somehow he knew that they would all be reunited one day. And he would soon marry and continue the family himself. He had not yet told his father, but he already knew the girl. Her name was Tien, and she was the daughter of another refugee family in the detention camp where he and his father were kept until Kiang found and sponsored them.

The sky was gray and the sea silvery. It is like being inside an oyster,

thought Deng. He carried a folded palm leaf with an offering of flowers and rice down to the water's edge and set it down gently. But it did not float away. Deng frowned at the bobbing leaf. Of course with an incoming tide and no wind, it can do nothing else. It is not really a bad omen. I should have made the offering earlier, but I was too busy or asleep. He was ashamed that he had slept when he should have been casting his offering to the gods. But he needed his sleep so he would be strong for the upcoming effort. Besides the tide would go slack while they were trying to get the MAI KEW off and the leaf would surely be accepted by the gods at what would then be the most propitious moment.

He raised his eyes from the offending leaf. Twenty yards away the sailboat was resting motionless on her reflection. She was so graceful and so serene. She reminded Deng of Tien; but then many things these days reminded Deng of Tien. Once the two of them were caught by a sudden shower while walking together about the camp and her soaked clothes clung to her body and he had seen her small hard nipples poking through the cloth and the dark shadow between her legs and the curve of her hips. He had never touched her. He had only once even had the opportunity to kiss her. It was certainly time for him to be married. He was very glad that the MAI KEW would be afloat in a few minutes. If the engine was not damaged, he and his father could be across the strait that very afternoon, and back in the city within a few days. He would not waste any time. There was always the chance that Tien's family would be sent to some other country. He would tell his father that very day.

Nhu stood in the wheelhouse, watching his son walk through the long shadows cast across the beach by the palm trees. The sun was just rising behind those trees, infusing color into a gray monochrome. Except for a few birds calling from the jungle and from out over the sea, there was silence. The water was perfectly still as it rose around the MAI KEW.

Although Nhu had seen the sea refuse his offering, Deng seemed happy. He walked with energy. There was spring in his step. Was I ever that young? wondered Nhu. What does he hope for? Deng had always been resilient and optimistic. He doesn't see or even suspect that we are like that palm leaf, drifting helplessly while unknown forces that we understand no more than the palm leaf understands the wind and tide act upon us.

Nhu had come to hate those forces. He had come to hate this boat. It was too big. He was too tired. His body and spirit were sore and cut in a thousand places. He felt as though he had scraped MAI KEW clear of barnacles with his back. If they had gone aground in his old gujong, it would have been nothing. He recalled how in the past he had looked enviously at boats like the MAI KEW. How proud he once would have been to own such a boat, and now he did. Or he and Kiang did. How he wished Mai could see him with such a boat. How he had hoped that if he made enough money he might be able to go to the ports frequented by the trawlers and leave word that he was willing to buy back his wife and daughter. But now even that hope was fading.

Desire brought sorrow. That was the lesson of the wandering teachers. He had not wanted to believe them, but his life proved them right. He hated everything: the boat; the gods, who he had concluded were either stupid or evil; the remote men, both foreign and of his own people, who wanted war, and who took his older son and daughter and drove him from his home.

Deng had never wanted anything unreasonable. Only a wife and a family and to fish. Obviously even these modest desires were too much. He had nothing left but consuming anger and bewilderment at the injustice of life; and he had Deng; and he had this obstinate boat that refused to leave the beach.

Well, we will see, boat, Nhu thought. Either you are going to come off this beach this morning, or I am going to destroy you in the attempt.

JUSTINE's diesel started smoothly.

After letting the engine warm up for a few minutes, Nelson put it into gear and eased the sloop forward until the slack was taken up in the line running to the fishing boat. As he did so he watched the boy stand by the lines running from the fishing boat's winch to the two anchors. The fishing boat's own power was crucial. Nelson thought the old man looked grim enough to burn out the engine if necessary. So far he hadn't even started it. That was understandable. Despite their efforts, sand was going to get sucked into the cooling intake. The system would begin to clog almost the moment the engine was switched on. The old man would have to go directly to full power. All they needed was a few seconds. Once she was free, JUSTINE could keep her under control.

Nhu did not trust engines. One of the men who ran another boat in partnership with Kiang had taught Nhu about the engine; but he was not comfortable with it. The wind he understood; this lump of metal never. So, despite himself, he said a prayer to the gods that they might relent, before he called down to Deng, "Be sure the lines do not snarl." Deng nodded solemnly. Nhu pushed the ignition button.

For a brief interval nothing happened, and Nelson, who could see from JUSTINE's cockpit that Nhu was trying to start the engine, wondered what was causing the delay. High water would not last forever. Then the engine coughed and caught and Nhu pushed the lever to give power to both the winch and the propeller, and pushed another lever to put the propeller in reverse, and a third which moved the RPM's to the edge of the red zone on the readout; and everything happened very quickly.

As Nhu turned aft, the boat lurched and he fell against the side of the deck house.

Deng fell too, but gladly as he realized that they had broken free of the suction of the sand. The lines on the winch were reeling in smoothly. But even as he looked up at them from where he had fallen, they stopped. The winch continued to turn, stretching the lines to their breaking points. Deng scrambled to his feet, thinking the lines must be snagged somewhere. But as far as he could see, they were not. The boat itself was caught on something. The deck was shaking. An unearthly wail came from the lines. Angry thumps from the diesel. Groans from the hull. He glanced at the deckhouse, but could not see his father. He ran to the side of the stern. One of the palm trunks used to support the hull had fallen beneath the keel. Without thinking how he could move it, Deng jumped down to the sand just as the MAI KEW lurched again and toppled onto its side.

Nelson's emotions roller-coastered from elation when he saw the fishing boat move, to shock when it fell, to elation again as it continued to slip, seemingly unharmed, into the water, where she righted herself, to concern as she kept on coming. The winch continued to pull her blindly toward the anchors. The lines were disappearing into an empty stern. Nelson could not see either of the fishermen. Pulling in on the now unnecessary line running from JUSTINE to the other boat to keep it from catching on their propellers, he started to wonder if they meant to run him down. When the boat was halfway between the beach and the JUSTINE, Nelson yelled, and the old man's head appeared in a wheelhouse window. Nelson could see him clearly. He seemed dazed. His eyes wandered for a moment, and then he reached down and the engine stopped. The fishing boat's momentum carried her to JUSTINE.

Nelson fended her off. As he pushed against the other boat's bow, he wondered where the boy was.

Nhu stumbled down the wheelhouse ladder. He had hit his head when

he fell and felt dizzy, but otherwise he was all right, and a little dizziness was nothing with the MAI KEW afloat. The gods had relented. The stern was a mess of lines. He nodded acknowledgment to the smiling foreigner who was only a few feet away. Where was Deng? There was no response when he called his name. Nhu took a few steps forward so he could see around the wheelhouse to the bow. Perhaps the boy was checking the hold for leaks. He glanced into the cabin. This was ridiculous. It was beyond belief that he should be deliberately hiding. Yet where could he be?

Nhu became angry. Did Deng think their work was over just because the MAI KEW was afloat? They had much to do and a long way to go before she was safe. The foreigner was saying something. What did he want? With one hand he was holding the two boats apart and with the other he was pointing at the shore. Nhu followed the direction of his arm and there in the hole the MAI KEW had left in the beach he saw Deng, lying on his back, facing the sky. Nhu was about to yell at him to get up, when he noticed that Deng's legs were bent at impossible angles. The foreigner said something and pointed at the dinghy behind his boat.

As the foreigner rowed ashore, a folded palm leaf, carrying flowers and rice and hope, drifted past them, heading out to sea.

Deng did not understand what had happened. Why was he lying on the beach? Where was the MAI KEW? Where was his father?

He remembered jumping from the stern and then something hitting him. He thought it must have been the boat, but he did not feel anything. The sky was very pretty. It would be a fine day. His father would become angry with him if he lay here much longer. Besides his legs felt wet. He must have fallen half into the water. He recalled how as a small child he had discovered that early in the morning the sea was often warmer than the air. He liked to go swimming at dawn, although his mother always worried about snakes and

sharks. He missed her very much and he desperately wanted her at that very moment. She and Kew and Li and Tien all became confused in his mind. He wanted to be held. He wanted a woman's comfort. He wanted to curl up and be protected. Yet he did not know why or from what.

Something salty was running down his face. The sea was salty, but so was blood. Had he been hit on the head hard enough to bleed? It was a relief to realize that that was his problem. He was confused because he had hit his head. Carefully he raised his hands to his face. They did not come away red. It was not blood. It was tears. He was embarrassed to find himself crying. He must stop before his father saw him. Where was his father? He must get up and find him. But this was a very comfortable beach. Nevertheless he must get up. There was work to do. The MAI KEW must be afloat and was going to take him back to the city to marry Tien. He turned his head. Yes, there she was, floating beside the sailboat. He had completely forgotten the other boat and the foreigner, but there he was, rowing a dinghy with his father in it. They must not find him like this, lying down and crying. He tried to push himself up. He could only raise his head a few inches, but it was enough. His eyes opened wide. With sight came pain. He screamed.

The scream shattered that still morning where there had been only the rhythmic splashing of oars. Water from oars. The pond he had first rowed on as a boy. The old man said something and stupidly tried to stand, which only upset the balance of the dinghy and slowed them. Nelson guessed his meaning and muttered, "I am rowing as fast as I can." The scream continued, became one continuous wail, filling the sky, echoed over hills and palm trees, startled sea gulls into flight, and passed the palm leaf out at sea. It was a scream to fill a cold universe. Nelson recalled the shriek of celestial light he had written about in a boyhood story about the creation of the universe, and found himself wondering how many thousands perhaps millions of people in every

part of the planet were screaming in pain and terror and anguish and sorrow and loneliness at that moment. What would it sound like, out in space, this shrieking planet?

The old man did not wait. When the dinghy was in shallow water, he leapt out and thrashed ashore. Nelson yelled at him not to touch the boy, hoping that his tone of warning would penetrate.

Nelson had not dealt with a medical emergency for two years, but his habit of making haste methodically asserted itself, and he pulled the dinghy well above the high water mark before grabbing his medical bag and running toward the scream. They certainly did not want to have the dinghy drift away and have to swim the boy out to the boats.

The moment he stood over him, Nelson knew the boy would die. Not even with the facilities of a modern hospital could much be done. Nelson could, he supposed, amputate what was left of the legs, but there was no point. From just above the rib cage the boy was crushed. Nelson could not figure out how it had happened, unless the boy fell from the boat on the first lurch, then been crushed by the second. From a distance the boat had not seemed to lurch that severely. It really made no difference. However it had happened, the boy's body had burst. Bits of internal organs, bone, blood. The stench was terrible. And the scream. Amazing that he was still alive. At least he could ease the pain, though Nelson doubted the boy was feeling much pain. The scream was shock.

Nelson turned to the old man, who was in shock himself. He is the one I will have to treat, thought Nelson. He held his medical bag up in front of the old man's eyes and opened it so he could see the instruments and medicines. Surely it obvious that this is a doctor's professional bag, not a boat's rudimentary emergency kit. Nelson spoke calmly, communicating by tone and manner, as he always had done with distressed relatives. "I am a doctor. I am going to give your son an injection to ease his pain. There is nothing else to be

done." He put the bag down and took from it a syringe and a vial. He let the man see him fill the syringe.

And he had thought the gods had relented, thought Nhu. What had he done? What had Deng done? He was a good son. What had Mai and Kew done? What had Duong or even Li done? Could they really have been such monsters in their previous lives?

He had not seen anything like Deng since the body in the jungle the night he went looking for Duong. What was the foreigner doing? Why was he showing him that bag? What was he going to do with that needle? Nhu had been given a few injections by foreigners who came to the village once a year or so when he was young. He had been told that they would protect him from evil. Obviously they did not work. And he had been given more shots when he and Deng were taken to the refugee detention camp in the city. Those made him sick. Why did the foreigner want to add to his son's pain. He should stop him. But Nhu did not move as the man knelt and pushed a needle into Deng's arm.

As the morphine took effect, Deng stopped screaming. His father and the foreigner were above him. In a nearly normal voice, he said, "Please tell Tien that I want to marry her." And he died.

Tien? Tien? thought Nhu. The only Tien I know is an old woman in the village, old enough to be my own mother, if she is even still alive. You want to marry Tien? Besides you are too young to marry. No, that is not true. I was younger when I married. Then you are too poor. And besides you are dead. The foreigner killed you with his needle.

For a moment longer he thought: it is just as well. You could not have lived anyway. Perhaps, my son, your next life will be happier.

And then Nhu stopped thinking. He could endure no more. He reached down and took a splintered piece of wood and struck out at all the remote forces that had too often struck at him. Distant, intangible, invisible; but inexorably, undeniably real. He could not hit them, but he could and did, repeatedly, hit Nelson Alexander, who was kneeling with his back turned and did not feel anything after the first blow to his head. Death, which since his father's suicide he had spent a lifetime thinking about, confronting, struggling against, caught him completely unaware.

Nhu beat Nelson Alexander's body long after he was dead. The victim was less important than the act of striking out, of striking back, of retaliating, of the atavistic satisfaction of club against flesh. It was all right for the priests to say that one must accept one's destiny. Then it was this man's destiny to be killed by him. There was no such thing as an innocent victim. Besides he was a foreigner. One of them. Besides he had killed Deng. Some might say, some surely would say, that Nhu was doing the foreigner a kindness by releasing him from this life. It was like saving fish from drowning. Nhu began to laugh and the sound of his own hysterical laughter brought him back to himself.

He stared at the two bloody bodies lying on the sand and then at the piece of wood in his hand. He noticed that it was from one of the palm trees they had cut to support the MAI KEW. He turned and gazed over the anchorage. Yes. They had gotten her off. She was sitting near the foreigner's sailboat.

Nhu did not feel anything. Not tired. Not elated. Not happy. Not sad. He did not think anything, as he pushed scattered pieces of wood into the hole left in the sand by the MAI KEW.

Deng's body fell apart when Nhu lifted it, and he had to make several trips to carry all the parts. What he scraped up in his hands did not sicken him. This was no longer his son. It was like fish entrails, only bigger. His son's spirit

would be lingering. Memories of the elaborate cremation he had witnessed as a small boy returned: golden towers, white paper cows, food and implements placed beside the bodies, smoke, hideous masks, festive crowds. Deng, I cannot give you that. Hadn't he thought the same thing when he burned that unknown boy's body in the jungle?

When Deng was pretty much assembled, Nhu discovered that he had no way to start a fire. He was about to get into the dinghy to row out to the MAI KEW, when he thought to look in the foreigner's bag. He tossed tubes and bottles and instruments onto the sand, until near the bottom of the bag he found a box of matches.

He was about to light the pyre, when he turned and tried to carry the foreigner's body to it. But the foreigner was too heavy and Nhu could only drag him and then force the awkward body part-way onto the wood. Two bodies were not supposed to be cremated on the same pyre because the spirits might intermingle and be reborn together. Nhu did not care. Burning the foreigner was not a change of mind, or a decision; it was simply something he did. Perhaps out of habit. He did not know what the foreigner believed in, or had hoped for, or suffered, or dreamed. He was not even sure anymore what he himself believed in, and he no longer hoped for anything.

Once the fire was well caught, Nhu did not stay to watch. As a child he had thought: one day I will be there in the flames. But he hadn't been yet. He only put other people in them.

The MAI KEW's propeller shaft had bent when she came off the beach, so Nhu towed her behind the foreigner's boat. He had never before been on a yacht, but the key was in the ignition. He simply cast off the two anchor lines and moved the remaining line from the MAI KEW's stern to her bow. Smoke was still rising from the beach when he steered the yacht around the end of the

island, with the MAI KEW trailing dumbly behind.

The day remained fine and calm and the water smooth. Nhu maintained a course parallel to the shore, midway between the track of the great ships further out and the fishing boats in close. He realized that the ships and boats had been there all the time. Ever since the storm began, his world had been reduced to the island and the grounded MAI KEW.

Sunset came and night fell and Nhu remained at the JUSTINE's tiller. He was neither hungry nor thirsty. He did not think about anything in particular, though he did once wonder how much fuel was in the yacht's tank. He had no plan beyond continuing until he reached the city or the engine stopped. If the engine stopped first, he would try to sail.

Toward morning the sailboat became sluggish. Nhu looked astern and saw dimly through the darkness that the MAI KEW was low in the water. She must have sprung some planks. Nhu reached back and calmly cut the tow line. Let her go. Let everything go. As the sinking boat vanished in the night astern, Nhu experienced his first feelings since the events of the preceding morning: he felt relief. Now there was nothing left. He had nothing. He wanted nothing. A beatific smile formed on his face. Perhaps this was the purpose of all the seemingly meaningless suffering.

When daylight came he turned off the engine, and in welcome silence began to sail the yacht. One sailboat is fundamentally like another. There are lines to pull sails up and lines to pull sails in. When he figured it out, Nhu thought the jib furling gear was very clever.

He did not understand how to use the self-steering vane, though he correctly deduced its purpose. The yacht was not as fast as a gujong, but she was wonderfully responsive and easy to steer for so large a vessel. He enjoyed sailing her.

Late in the afternoon he passed a volcano on the mainland. From a

distance the pure cone rising into the sky seemed serene, but Nhu had once anchored near its base and saw a barren field which had been covered by lava during an eruption a few years earlier. Another fisherman told him that an entire train passing at the wrong moment was completely buried beneath the lava. He pointed out to Nhu where the twisted rails disappeared.

Before darkness that second night, Nhu hove to. He found himself taking pleasure in his ability to handle the boat, until he realized that such pleasure was a first step back toward desire. He needed to relieve himself and he needed to eat. He hung off the stern for the first and then climbed into the cabin to look for food.

He had not gone below deck before. He was impressed by the varnish and the brass. A framed picture of a blond woman stopped him. For a moment he felt guilt. Was she waiting for the foreign man the way he waited for Mai and Kew? Would she grieve for the foreign man the way he grieved for Duong and Li? Then he hardened. If so, it was nothing to him. Had anyone felt guilt at the grief they caused him? Besides it was either nothing, blind chance, or it was destiny, karma. What happened was meant to happen. And guilt was seductive. It was not to be felt any more than any other emotion. If the blond woman grieved, she must learn to master her emotions.

In a galley locker Nhu found cans and crackers, and he found a can opener in a drawer. After examining the pictures on the cans, he opened one of spaghetti and another of blueberries.

That night the wind died and Nhu started the engine. Out in the strait, the lights of passing ships moved steadily toward their destinations. Ahead of him loomed the lights of the city.

He took the sailboat to the main wharf and tied her alongside. Great buildings towered silently above him, as he stood for a moment looking down at the sailboat rocking gently on black oily water.

He had no way of knowing how soon other fishermen would use the island anchorage and find the charred bodies and the tubes and bottles he had thrown from the medical bag. He knew nothing about fingerprints and had never understood why ink was smeared on their hands when he and Deng first entered the detention camp. That was just one of the many strange and incomprehensible things that had been done to them, lost among the questions and physical examinations and his desperate efforts to get someone to do something to rescue his wife and daughter. But he was not so foolish as to believe that the gods were through with him. His only defense lay in having no desire. No matter what they did he would try never to feel anything again. He was glad, though, that he had struck back once. He wondered if he should become a holy man.

Nhu turned and quickly *climbed* the stone steps and disappeared into the city.