

# Homefront

Tony Christini

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## CIVILIANS

## QUEEN OF SHEBA

They were not crowded but grouped comfortably in small formations on the back porch – an impressive lofted plank deck, half a decagon braced across the entire wall of the house and hanging far out over the yard, a bone-breaking drop to the sidehill below.

Farther beyond, the valley fell away into apparent infinity, an impressive view, although what most of those gathered on this commemorative occasion welcomed more was the spring warmth for which they felt gratitude.

They were gathered at the home of Aaron Thompson, who had been killed exactly a year ago during the opening weeks of the US invasion of Iraq.

Soon afterward, Carolyn Thompson had found herself with her husband on the front stoop of the house telling the media assembled on the grass and on the dirt and gravel drive that her soldier son Aaron had died for – "He died for all of us," she said, when in fact, as she now knew, it would have been far more accurate to say that Aaron had been killed by all of us, that Aaron and the rest of the foot-soldiers had been sent as cannon fodder, however lethal, by the government of the United States and by the powerful corporate forces that drove and staffed and otherwise held large purchase on the government, and that Aaron had been

killed by everyone in the US who had let the government, the corporate media and other cheerleaders carry out the illegal and otherwise criminal invasion and occupation of Iraq – an act on the same moral level as that of the conquest of Iraq by Hulagu Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, nearly 800 years earlier when his invading legions overran the Middle East. This was the way Carolyn understood the context of her son's death, now.

Carolyn had begun to see the fiction for the fact in the misleading reports on TV, on the radio, and in print, and what was more, she had heard it on her own lips – "He died for all of us."

She knew better now. Because of. Not for.

What a bitter, nauseous thing it was to Carolyn to learn the barbaric reality of how and why her son had been sent to kill and be killed on criminal grounds by official Americans, many elected, many not elected, who created, supported and directed the invasion. One of those elected officials happened to be family to Carolyn – her first cousin, Senator Sam Washburn, who stood across from Carolyn on the deck today, leaning against the part of the railing below which the ground fell most steeply, as Carolyn could not help but be aware. Senator Sam Washburn stood opposite Carolyn who had placed herself in front of the sliding glass door, the lone entrance to the house.

Carolyn's youngest daughter Ellen had flown in from college, and Jamie was there, the daughter of the Senator and Ellen's close friend. Carolyn's elder children were there as well, Ruthy and Mike who lived nearby, along with their young children playing in the house and traipsing about the yard. Carolyn's parents had come over too, Joanne and Bernie, as had the reporter from the city paper who interviewed them all, Lynn Jackson. A few neighbors were

also in attendance, as was Aaron's friend from the military, Juan Garza, who had been sitting by Aaron in the Humvee when it was hit by the rocket-propelled grenade that killed Aaron. They were all gathered on the deck today.

And Carolyn thought if you looked hard enough you might even see a few of the Iraqi people standing around – warriors and civilians both – including Iraqi children who might be off playing in the house and yard with the Thompson family children.

Given the deck's extraordinary height, when the wind on stormy days whipped and the rain lashed and Carolyn had stood at the glass door looking out across the boards this past year, she had felt as if she were riding through some vast and dangerous sea on a giant ship, on the Titanic, it could have been, or a battle cruiser.

When the Senator placed one hand on the top plank of the railing and gestured with his other hand while making a point, Carolyn felt again the reality of the death of her son, the reality that her own country had set him up, the government and the powers that drove the government, not that the government was really her government, not that it much represented what she valued, except fictitiously, she had come to understand more and more.

If her country had not invaded, Aaron would not have been killed, not that she felt it was the country that had invaded, not that it was the people – the people who had been flat lied to and misled and overruled.

If great pains had not been taken to mislead the people of the country, there would have been far less support than even the limited amount that the official liars and manipulators and true believers of a fantasy America in a fantasy world were able to whip up.

And there he stood, Senator Sam Washburn, Carolyn's first cousin, talking with her husband and some others. He stood across from her now, by the railing, nothing between him and infinity but what might be fragile wooden boards, except that Carolyn knew the wood to be sturdy and protective. Her husband and sons, Mike and Aaron, had built the deck themselves.

It might as well be the President of the United States standing there. Carolyn would prefer that – she would prefer that any opponent of hers not be a cousin but a stranger. Unfortunately, life was not often so compliant.

Carolyn stared at the railing, at the top plank and avoided looking at the hand of the Senator on the board. She considered instead the nails that held the railing together.

A few nails. All it took sometimes was a few key nails and the whole thing came apart, or was sealed tight forever, whatever it might be, a railing, or, say, a coffin.

A few nails and the railing was no more, though the deck would remain. A few nails and the coffin was closed tight forever. A few nails, a few bullets, a single rocket-propelled grenade.

Carolyn's eldest daughter Ruthy came over and put a hand on the fist of Carolyn that clenched a bottle of juice, and Carolyn watched her own fingers relax and then release the bottle on the table, and she pulled slightly away from Ruthy and stared again over the valley.

She could scarcely think of a single person missing on this solemn occasion, a person who might help make the moment more affirming of the memory of Aaron, who might help salve the pain of the loss if not Carolyn's outrage

at her son's death, an outrage which she had no intention of giving up, an outrage which she had decided in recent months to acknowledge and reinforce as appropriate, an outrage that, as she understood now, at the very least, might likely see her through every single day of the rest of her life, and through each remaining year – of which she meant there to be plenty.

Carolyn picked up the bread knife.

She had even smiled at the Senator when she invited him here – at least she thought she had smiled, tried to force herself to do so through lips she felt turning to bone, and now there he stood.

"Mom?" Ruthy said. And Carolyn began to cut the bread.

She had once thought of this man standing before her as a senator cousin, but now Carolyn regarded him mainly as a cousin senator, a nice enough person privately who she had no problem with in conventional moments such as this, for he was polite and good humored, a gentle father and husband, an amiable uncle, serious at times, caring and diligent too, a convivial man who liked sports and music and pets and most anything else that regular people typically liked. He was an almost every-people kind of person. There was nothing wrong with him from that perspective, she thought. Like most folks he was reasonable and compassionate in many moments. He could be personable or prickly. He was the kind of person who gave people a sense that there was much reason to think of him as a good man – as Carolyn thought too, at least in reference to this private side of his person, the way folks generally tend to know and think of others (to the extent that they do).

But to say that Carolyn had nothing personal against

Sam would be inaccurate, for though she held nothing of her cousin's private side against him, what she knew of it, she understood that there was far more to a person than what they did directly face to face with you, there was what they did to you and to people in general indirectly – there was what they did to everyone indirectly, to the public, and there was no denying that this other side of the Senator, his public side, his political side, had facilitated the death of Aaron.

There was no denying that the public side of the people in Congress (and beyond) was largely responsible for the death of her son, since support for the attack and occupation of Iraq was strong in the legislature, though not nearly so much among the citizenry.

Carolyn had learned that unfortunately and to its great discredit, Congress represented the people only when it felt it could dare to. Otherwise Congress did not go far or at all against the ruling dollars that funded the campaigns and dominated the decision-making at almost every level.

Even more undemocratic and more repulsive to Carolyn was the fact that the president represented the people even less than Congress since the concentration of money could be focused even more intensely on a single position, the top position, thus tightening the grip of non-elected ruling wealth – one of the many ongoing deeply anti-democratic traditions of America – and it burned her all the more now as she thought of Aaron who had helped build this deck she was standing on.

How late it was that she had learned the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court John Jay had made plain that "the people who own the country ought to govern it" – as they did today. Carolyn had come across that little detail this past year, having looked more deeply into the country's

past, as she had had cause to.

And she had found out in no uncertain terms that wealth ruled in the form of the corporate-state plutocrats and like-minded folk willing to do their bidding either to better gain and maintain lucrative and comfortable corporate and academic jobs, or simply to identify themselves with some mythic notion of greatness in this country, America, even if a lot of flag-worshippers themselves enjoyed precious little prosperity or other benefits from their faith.

The official position of Senator Sam Washburn, support for the invasion and conquest of Iraq (and its massive oil fields), was the position of Congress in general and by and large. There had scarcely been a dissenting voice raised during some of the votes to fund the atrocity. Of course this congressional and executive support that had killed Aaron was also killing, disfiguring and disabling the sons and daughters of many other families in the US, not to mention the far more frequent killing of the people of Iraq and the accelerating spread of violence and chaos and desperation there due to lack of security, lack of jobs, lack of medicines, lack of even electricity, and the failure of the invading forces to establish non-abusive let alone decent conditions of life.

It had all led, quite predictably, to an even more ferocious resistance in Iraq that was gaining the ever-increasing support of the population, despite the bombings, beheadings, and other brutality by the resistance – so hated were the country-destroying American invaders and those who sided with them in the power-grab for which there was no end in sight and for which there never had been an exit plan, because no exit had ever been intended.

On the contrary, Carolyn had learned that from the start the US had been intent upon building fourteen permanent

military bases for the purpose of dominating oil-rich Iraq from now until Kingdom Come, or until there was oil no more. That was the actual plan that US forces were still trying to implement – morality, carnage, and the fate of the world be damned – and never mind the views of the Iraqis.

Totally Dominant or Totally Dead seemed to be the US model. Carolyn understood it now, the real standard for much of US action in Iraq and the world. For this, her son had been sent to kill and be killed, as Carolyn had gone through the great pain of finding out. Because of this brute madness, Aaron had died. For this homicidal and potentially suicidal endeavor, Aaron had been led by official America.

Possibly she could be forgiven for dwelling on it.

"I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." Recited day after day during her school years, the Pledge of Allegiance came bitterly to Carolyn's mind as she watched the Senator reach for his glass of soda on the railing. What did it mean to swear loyalty to a strip of cloth? Was it not a form of idolatry and brainwashing? Carolyn knew that her eldest daughter Ruthy had come to think so.

When school started again last fall after Aaron had been killed, Ruthy gave her children permission to not recite the flag pledge if they chose. Ruthy had explained her views to the teachers and to her children, and her children had both decided not to say the pledge, and it made Carolyn wonder more than ever what was normal, decent, and right – and what merely appeared to be and was tolerated for no good reason or no real reason at all, and worst of all what went on for terrible reasons, in actuality, with terrible

consequences of the sort the Thompsons knew now only too well.

The ongoing atrocity was made to look so normal-decent-and-right that Carolyn wondered if there was something equally horrible behind the apparently normal desire of the Senator to be here today with his extended family in this area of his youth. Carolyn hoped the Senator had wished to be invited for the conventional reasons of being one with family, difficult as family could be.

This was what Carolyn had sensed inside her cousin senator, but given his role as Senator, not as cousin, not as Sam, Carolyn felt she could not entirely be sure of his real motivations regarding even the killing of her son, especially regarding the killing of her son, though she had no direct evidence that the Senator would use this trip home to family for political gain.

Should she make anything of the fact that she and Glenn rarely saw the Senator in person, so busy was he off in Washington or touring the state?

How was she to know for certain why he and his wife and daughter had come to the old church for the commemorative ceremony for Aaron?

Whatever the reasons, the Senator stood now by the railing at the highest part of the deck.

Even voting against her cousin senator would be of no use, Carolyn knew. She could not vote against the Senator, not because he was family, but because his opponent was an equally strong advocate of the invasion and occupation. Incumbent candidates like Sam rarely lost anyway. Even if they did, opposing candidates who had any chance to win in the big money nominating system were often as bad or worse than the incumbent.

And it was called democracy.

And Carolyn was the Queen of Sheba.

Carolyn whitebread Thompson of European descent. Was it not obvious how extremely rich, powerful and black she was, just like the mighty Queen of Sheba traveling from her wealthy Empire in ancient Ethiopia across the wide lands to marry an equally powerful ruler who had the reputation of being the wisest and best of all kings?

Yes, indeed, Carolyn stretch-the-paycheck Thompson must actually be the Queen of Sheba if America was really the land of the people, by the people, for the people.

And her husband Glenn – who had helped build this splendid deck and much of the house – he was even better known throughout all the wide world as King Solomon, wisest of mortals, whom the Queen of Sheba had traveled from afar to challenge by quiz and then to marry.

Yes, just as Carolyn was the Queen, so was America a functioning democracy, where everyone was able to meaningfully participate in how things were done, what got done, what decisions were made.

The only problem – and it was beginning to bother Carolyn the Queen more and more – there was something wrong with King Solomon. It seemed to Carolyn that now after several decades of her glorious marriage to the King's wondrous self, mighty and matchless as the King might be, it seemed to Carolyn that the wise King could have by now figured out some way to get rid of the potholes at the end of driveway. And yet it was not so.

Carolyn wondered if she should give her venerable King a few more years before she walked down the royal drive, carrying a pick-axe and a shovel to see what the hell she could do about the problem herself.

Queen of Sheba. American democracy. Oh, yes.

Her son, Aaron. Dead.

Carolyn stared across the deck. What harm could it do to act like the Queen of Sheba for a single day, Carolyn mused, or even for a single moment of a day, if only in a small way here on the deck among family and friends where Carolyn felt she might very well like to rise in judgment as had been prophesied of the Queen, that she would rise in judgment of those who committed horrible deceptions and wrongdoings upon the people?

Just so, Carolyn felt she might like to rise up to full power, if doing so was not too grand a notion – which, thinking of Aaron, and thinking of all the others killed and maimed and all the billions of dollars of time and energy wasted, and all the infuriating deceit, Carolyn decided that any rising up on part of herself and others would not be so much a gesture that was grand as one that was directly to the point and long overdue.

Much of the public, including herself, and maybe everyone, as far as Carolyn could see now, had been in some part deceived by the mass of manipulations, but were they not as a public also too often merely inert, asleep, disorganized, sailing sweetly or cynically, reckless or mindless, down long rivers of denial in life, if not rivers of ignorance, if not long rivers of vast irresponsibility both civic and human?

How had she failed? Carolyn wondered. And how could she and everyone fail less in the future? How to succeed? How to save the Americans and Iraqis of today? How to save the Aarons of the future?

The Senator leaned away from the boards a bit while otherwise remaining in place opposite Carolyn, one hand flat on the top rail, responding mechanically, it seemed, yet not altogether without energy and deep-stored conviction,

to some comment Glenn had made. Carolyn wondered what it concerned. Probably the economy. The economy that was shot to pieces, Carolyn sensed, and understood further that the economy no matter how good it ever got for some people was always shot to hell for a good chunk of the rest, the way the system was set up. Where was the democracy in the economy?

Carolyn stared across the deck and gripped the knife.

And then the first slice of bread fell on the cutting board.

And Carolyn placed the knife carefully for the cutting of the second slice.

And her daughter Ruthy who had been standing nearby this whole time, she moved back to her group.

It would be a few moments yet before Carolyn felt she would be able to get herself ready to interact with everyone – that is, with anyone – she meant, with someone – that is – with him.

Carolyn tried to think of ways in which her cousin senator might be viewed in his professional life as a sympathetic figure.

Nothing much occurred.

Finally she remembered that many of the policies of the Senator were not quite as bad as those of his likely opponent in the fall election. Carolyn squeezed the knife.

And she thought again of Aaron, and that was the end of her speculation about the positive qualities of the Senator.

An election was coming up, and no congressperson had lost to the invasion a closer relative than the Senator had in Aaron, and as a consequence of this fact, Carolyn wondered again if the Senator might be here today for political reasons of some sort.

"We're a more political family now," Carolyn had informed the Senator in the process of inviting him over with his wife and daughter after the morning church service. She explained that he was welcome to join them provided he did not mind being asked any political questions that folks might raise – which Carolyn herself might likely pose, she had meant to imply.

She had called the Senator "Sam" at that moment, "Sam, we're a more political family now." And so they were. Carolyn wondered if this afternoon was not the exact right time to be openly political, to develop and live the public side of her person, to discuss issues that mattered to her, to everyone, to raise the specter of her dead son, to speak of ravaged lands and people and the increasingly fragile world, to speak again and again of her dead son Aaron.

The Senator's presence had at first distracted Carolyn from doing an efficient job arranging the bottles and cans of soft drinks around pieces of fruit and loaves of bread on the table beside her, but now she was determined to steel her arm and slice through the bread more firmly, more quickly. She was determined to be strong, soldier strong, like Aaron. She meant to be strong like her son had been strong and she meant to join the others with whom she hoped to feel more fully the welcome weather today, freeing everyone of the house with its walls pressing in. She tried to understand how nice it was to have her cousin senator come by on this special day of commemoration. How very nice. Carolyn worked the knife and kept telling herself, imagining, how nice it might be, there on the back porch high above the ground.

No geopolitical problems were going to be solved this afternoon on the deck of the Thompson family house. Or so it seemed. Aaron's buddy Juan Garza would not magically pull out of his pocket the torched papers he had found on his friend after the RPG had ended his life. Aaron's older sister and brother Ruthy and Mike would not press the Senator on the illegal and immoral nature of both the invasion and the ongoing occupation of Iraq. Journalist Lynn Jackson would request an interview only if she could do so unobtrusively, on this commemorative occasion. Aaron's father Glenn did not want to question the Senator closely for fear his wife would find it inappropriate. Aaron's younger sister Ellen intended to speak her mind but to the Senator's daughter Jamie, who was already aware of her line of reasoning. Everyone was rather clear on where everyone else stood. There seemed to be little if anything more to say, and even less to do here in the privacy of the Thompson residence, until Carolyn's mother Joanne approached the Senator and said in her typically strong and clear voice how proud not only she was of his work as Senator but how proud the whole family was and how honored they all were by his taking time to be with them today.

The knife fell out of Carolyn's hand.

It clattered off the edge of the plate, skipped from the table and smacked onto the deck. "That's ludicrous," Carolyn said to the bread. And there was silence.

Joanne began speaking to fill the void, but Carolyn cut her off, saying again, saying it louder, "That's ludicrous," looking first at her mother and then training her stare on the Senator. Joanne attempted to speak again, but Carolyn spoke over her, saying, "I don't think so, and I don't want to think so, and I'm not going to think so. All I can say is it

took some real guts for you to even wish to show up here today." She looked directly at the Senator. "The war on Iraq, and the occupation, is an obscenity. And you supported it and still do, and I don't have any respect for that. And my mother is one of the few people on this porch who does. I want that made clear. That needs to be made clear. That ought to be made clear."

As if to help hold his tongue, the Senator glanced at the deck for a brief moment, and then he nodded at Joanne. "I thank you," he said, before facing Carolyn. "I'm sorry that politics come between us."

"Are you?"

"I'm very sorry for the loss of Aaron."

"You're sorry."

"It's a terrible thing. I can't imagine, of course."

"Do you want me to help you understand? Aaron is dead. Can you understand that?"

"Carolyn."

"Mom."

A few people reached out to her with their voices, but no one actually came over – possibly because of the steel it was easy to sense exploding out of her – how steady and strong she looked.

"You destroyed a country, Senator. And tens of thousands of Iraqis, at least. And you enflamed sentiment against us. Aaron is dead. Iraqis are dead. More are dying. And as a consequence our country is less safe than it was a year ago. And poorer too. In every way imaginable. Most people do not support the occupation when made aware of the facts and did not support the invasion in the first place. And you – you're doing your job the way you choose to do it, and feeling 'sorry'. Well, that's nice."

No geopolitical problems were going to be solved this afternoon on the deck of the Thompson family house, as far as Carolyn Thompson could see, but at least one personal situation was going to have its day.

No one stepped in.

"I'm going to ask you to leave, Senator. Please do so. Your wife and daughter are welcome to stay."

Cousin to cousin, Sam faced Carolyn. "You're kicking me out?"

"Do I know you?" Carolyn asked. "Do I want to? Does anyone want you to bring the whole rest of this house and town and country and world crashing down on top of us? Why don't you go find another country to represent, Senator? You're certainly not representing this one."

"We have a different understanding of the facts."

"I wonder."

After a moment, Carolyn picked up the knife from the deck.

She wiped it off with a napkin.

Then she continued to slice the bread. It was good bread, good crust, with a hearty texture inside. Good ingredients. Good taste. Nutritious. It was the best bread there was, Carolyn could not help but think, the best bread she had baked in a long time.

It was so good that when she finished cutting the loaf, she served herself the first slice, took a bite, and savored the taste. It almost made her smile. She looked around and noticed Sam had gone. Everyone else seemed subdued. Then she made a quiet announcement, one that carried. "It's good bread over here, everyone. Made it myself. Please help yourselves." She picked up a drink and stepped aside as people came over to the table.

Carolyn went to the railing and looked out at the

contoured shades of charcoal that were the bare treetops near and far, framing the valley, a valley into which she had gazed often this past year. She would still have to vote for that damned cousin senator of hers, she realized – not of course because he was family but because for now there was no better alternative.

Maybe soon there would be a better choice. Her name was not Washburn, it was Thompson, but maybe she should put that name in play the next go around – or support some name like it, some name that stood for what was worth standing for. Maybe her name could play well enough to make a point at least, to rally support for the organizations and voters and positions that ought to be supported. Well, she would have to see. She would have to think about strategy – time and effort, resources and consequences.

Carolyn stood at the railing and imagined she was staring all the way into Iraq where Iraqis were being killed by the tens of thousands, by American troops and by American policies. And American troops, many of them young, all of them misled, were dying by the dozens. And then Carolyn saw only Aaron, and she felt him to be close by, if so far away that it gutted her.

She was the host this afternoon. Let others speak of Aaron to the extent that they would. She would listen. And she would look all the way into Iraq and beyond as she might, and she would continue to think things through. She had thrown the Senator off the deck and out of her home today, cousin or no. She would have to think about that too.

She would likely try to talk to the man and see what might be salvaged. She would have to give it some thought. She would have to see.

## ALL OF US

"He died for us all," she told reporters.

Carolyn Thompson – mother of Aaron Thompson, one of the first American soldiers killed in the assault against Iraq – she said, "He died for each and every one us." She stood beside her husband on the front porch, speaking to the reporters massed on the lawn.

"He died for all of us."

But beneath the disaster that was the loss of her son and the wreck that was her heart, Carolyn had begun to wonder whether or not she and her husband had been shown to be fools for raising a son who had joined the military only to get killed. Were they somehow responsible?

Of course she would not admit it. The idea was so preposterous that she could hardly believe it had even occurred to her.

Yet, there it was.

Certainly no one would come up and tell her she had murdered her son. Even if for a moment she felt that this was basically what had happened. It was not as if she could be the one, the only one responsible.

She put it away, that treacherous line of thinking, it

might even be treasonous. She consciously got rid of it, all but a trace that fouled her mind. That was how she thought of it – as poisonous. That was how she forced herself to think of it. She had to believe such thoughts were poison, and that it was wrong to think what she was thinking. Even if it might be true, in a way. Especially then.

Most soldiers in the military would not be killed and most people in the United States would not join the military. Why had her family been struck? Why Aaron?

Had she not been smart enough to keep him alive, to protect him, like a good mother? Had she not been capable of making her children and husband into a smart family of survivors? Where had she failed? Most people simply lived and enjoyed life if they could. Didn't they? Why couldn't her family? Why couldn't Aaron? Why did Aaron have to be the one to go and fight and die?

Maybe the battle in Iraq was not worth the fighting for, after all, Carolyn worried. Maybe it was even wrong. She did not know much about the conflict, in fact. She knew what she had been told, what she had heard. She wished now that she knew more. She wished she had known enough to know more. She wondered if she should have. She had thought she was well informed, as much as a normal person like herself might be. At least, she had thought she was normal. Now she wondered. About a lot of things. She wondered what normal was. Or what it should be.

The President of the United States and the Congress of the United States believed the battle was worth the fighting for. The famous Senator and former war prisoner John McCain even had a recent book titled with those very words Worth the Fighting For – she had seen it lying on her neighbor's coffee table – it was supposed to be a famous

literary quote from the author Ernest Hemingway. And all the media she had seen and listened to repeated what the President and Congress said in one form or another, and the media drew on a lot of experts who said a lot more in support besides. Plenty of generals and other commentators on TV and radio said the same thing mainly, the newspapers too, that the battle was worth the fighting for.

Then with Aaron overseas she had begun to follow the conflict and the media more closely. News headlines and sound bytes – her head was full of these. National defense. Humanitarian mission. Liberation of the Iraqis. No matter the setbacks, never mind the risks, the battle, fatal as it might be for many, was worth it. It was immoral not to fight. It was too risky not to fight. It was worth going in, staying in, finishing. Necessary work. Democracy and peace for the Middle East. Protection from terrorism against the United States. Fight them over there, or fight them over here. Protection from weapons of mass destruction. This is what she heard. Now her son was dead.

It seemed selfish to complain. When she was not careful, Carolyn almost felt a perverse sort of relief – hideous of course – in the knowledge that Aaron was not the only one killed, not the first, and not the last, as it looked now, especially after a particularly bloody weekend of fighting. She knew it was horrible thinking such thoughts. She had to be careful with her mind, rein it in, keep control. She wanted to be a good person and think the right things. And it was a good war, wasn't it?

Well, there was no reason for her to be embarrassed at having lost a son and to feel like she bore a special burden for knowing why he had been lost, though she was almost embarrassed and she did feel a special burden. She was mortified at losing Aaron to the conflict, to the military, to a

job, as she has seen it for the most part, a basic career. What kind of terrible mother had she been? She was no protector, no able guardian.

This was not healthy self talk. She could not see that it would lead anywhere appropriate.

Though what if it were true and Aaron had died for nothing? Or worse? Worse than nothing? What if he had died in the wrong? Wrong land, wrong fight?

The protesters, she was well aware, they did not support the war, hundreds of thousands of them, along with plenty other opponents of the war besides – a quarter or third of the country at the least, the polls said, even now in the middle of the attack. They were all against the US invasion, though most who were opposed did not protest. Still, she had heard of them, a bit. Some friends of hers too were skeptical about the assault against Iraq. "It's criminal what the President and all those crooked ties are doing." She had heard it downtown in the grocery store the other day.

Carolyn had supported her son as a soldier, as she would have supported him if he had been a carpenter or a dentist, and still she supported him, if it could mean anything now.

Unlike the protesters, Carolyn had believed America went into battle for the right reasons, mostly at least.

Her son's death was one thing, she understood. She told herself this. She kept it clear. The reasons for the fighting were another thing entirely. She had nothing to be ashamed of. And she felt she had to tell that to the world, to the national reporters who came to her house.

By looking at the reporters – and they seemed decent enough – Carolyn guessed they did not have sons and daughters or brothers and sisters or perhaps any relatives at

all in battle, maybe not even in the military. She might be wrong. They simply phoned or showed up asking media-type questions. It seemed to her so very dumb and wrong to have strangers asking the most intimate questions about her life, and they were strangers and so they knew only to ask general questions, which was pathetic and she could almost feel sorry for them, and there were so many of them, a whole pack taking pictures of her and her husband on the porch in front of the house, where Carolyn wondered if she and her husband looked like fools. She wondered if their son Aaron was dead because they were. That might be the real story, she thought. Somewhere deep down she worried. It was a story that would never get past her lips. And rightly so. People did not go calling fool on themselves.

But how in the days to come would she be able to greet the mailman, one of her neighbors, with her usual cheer, and mean it? And the women at church, and at work? How would she be able to talk to her friends or anyone without much grief and biting discomfort?

Soon gifts of food and other condolences and comforts would fill the kitchen, and then later there would be only fading words, sad words of pain – and then only pain. What would be left in place of the loss?

And the doubts, more doubts that might come up, God forbid, what of them? Had she been a fool? Her whole family? Of course not. But the thought was there. Maybe. And if so – ? And if not – ? How would they be pitied? How to react? And to whom? And for how long?

"He died fighting for our freedom," she said, and the cameras did not buzz or blink but stared like the metal and hard plastic guns they might as well be and she wondered if her son was dead because of her, because of his mother.

She said to the reporters, "He died for each and every

one of us." Unless they had all been fools, of course – she and her husband and most everyone else. Maybe even her dead son, Aaron. Fooled.

Or, overpowered? Disinformed?

Or, something worse – ? Dare not think it. A conquered people?

Aaron had chosen for himself the military as a job. Aaron had made that decision. But Carolyn and her husband had raised him.

Carolyn decided she would disallow that awful feeling, the horrible perspective, tame it and eliminate it with healthy self talk, which was what a friend had taught her years ago when Carolyn was going through private troubles. Her friend told her to fill her head with healthy self talk, "Always. That's the whole key, right there. And we help each other." Healthy self talk. Carolyn doubted it was the whole key. It worked well for her, when she remembered.

In any event Carolyn hardly wanted to believe that Aaron had died for nothing, or worse than nothing. It could not be true, even if it were. It would be too terrible. Who knew, anyway? Who could know, ultimately? That Aaron died for everyone seemed like the right thing to say even if it were not true.

"Aaron died for everyone," she told the reporters.

Carolyn felt she said everything and nothing by her words. And she knew very well how those words would be interpreted. She knew who would hear the words and she understood the likely reactions. No matter who was right and who was wrong in the fighting, it could always be safely said that those who died, died for all. Who would dare say she was wrong? And at a time like this. Not even a war protester. Not to her face. Who could possibly listen to

the protesters at a time like this? And there were none here today and there would be none tomorrow. Who would want to hear cries of protest over her own pain, the anguish of the mother of a lost son, a soldier killed in battle, the cries she could let loose right now?

And wouldn't the cameras hum with delight at that? What story could be more compelling than a mother's loss of a truly beloved son? Who for a moment would think about the why of the battle, the reasons for or against the conflict at such a time? Aside perhaps from an angry mother?

Well, if the fighting in Iraq was more like a massacre than a war, as some of the protesters claimed, it was a dangerous massacre because Aaron had been killed. "He died for all of us," Carolyn Thompson told the reporters, and she thought maybe she was right in the way she knew she came across and would be interpreted. If she was wrong, it hardly mattered. Aaron was dead – and everyone was involved, somehow. Carolyn felt the truth of that, on this day, to the core of her bones. Aaron's death was bigger than her family, it was as big as the whole country, big as the whole wide world.

"He died for all of us," Carolyn said. But she had begun to wonder.

Because of all of us?

Her youngest son, Aaron – killed because of all of us? Not for?

She couldn't help it.

And Carolyn Thompson would soon drive herself to learn that the end of history was far from out of the question, the end of civilization, of life itself, so dangerous were the US efforts and that of allied governments and corporations to dominate the world by force in this day

and age long since arrived of weapons of mass destruction.

The extent of the real danger to the rest of her family, not to mention the entire world, was a big part of what Carolyn would go to the trouble to learn in the months after her son was killed – that the war was dangerously and predictably inflaming the Middle East against America even more than the harsh and aggressive foreign policies of the US had done in the past – that the war and America's accelerating commitment to developing space-based weapons threatened other countries near and far who were acting quickly in response to maintain and strengthen their own weapons of mass destruction in the fearsome hope that such weapons might serve as a deterrent to yet another US attack, which the US announced it had the right to carryout (as demonstrated in Iraq), an attack on any country at any time that the US so much as claimed – phony evidence and all – to feel threatened.

This was the reality Carolyn was waking up to and gaining knowledge of, the reality that the US conquest was criminal and illegal, that it would likely increase terrorism against the US, and that it was potentially fatal to the species (as were the environmentally irresponsible policies and other actions of the corporate-state).

And all this horror was much of what the cousin Senator of Carolyn – US Senator Sam Washburn – worked on behalf of while possibly even believing otherwise, right along with the many other ruling figures that populated the profoundly antidemocratic and undemocratic transnational corporate-state network of power – a colossal tyranny of money determined to rule by force no matter the risks to the world, to life itself. Oh, yes, Carolyn would

go on to read and learn quite a bit more than she had ever thought she would.

Carolyn would come to understand that the US invasion and occupation of Iraq was one part of this global conquest and hegemony of money, and that while carried out by the president and his administration, the US invasion and occupation was not only tolerated by Congress and by many Americans, it was cheered on by them, supported in many ways, and accepted as being perfectly normal and legal, safe and right. And sane.

Though mainly because they were confused, misled, she could fully understand. For the most part. People were too often too easily confused. And when they knew what was going on as more and more people, even most people, did know everyday, they were too often simply overruled by the corporate-state institutions they failed to control for real.

"He died for all of us."

Carolyn came to not believe it at all.

Maybe most people would not hear the defensiveness in those her initial words and would instead hear the sound of a classic grieving mother only, a role that was ripe and ready for Carolyn to fill, more than any other, handed to her if she wanted it, though it was merely one possible role among many.

Possibly people would prefer that she not open up to what she was beginning to think and feel more fully. The role was hers to choose. Along with the defensiveness, Carolyn could hear in her own voice a kind of culmination of the many lies, half truths and misleading statements made by a seemingly endless sequence of officials, authorities, and all sorts of regular and irregular people throughout the culture, an echo of falsity and sleight of

hand that amounted to an empire of lies and manufactured ignorance.

What else might one expect of a country that had been ruled for over a century by a technically elected but basically unpopular government, consisting of two sibling branches, the so-called Democrats and Republicans that had been busily carrying out explicit plans to control as much of the world as possible, by force if necessary, at the expense and risk of countless lives, including her son's and untold Iraqis and others, and at the expense of the possible continuation of life itself, given the hatred that US aggression created and given the weaponry and means of mass slaughter available even to non-armies, and given, not least, that the environment – the whole wide world – water, earth, and sky – was being treated like a vast garbage dump.

About one out of every two government dollars in the US went to war and war-related pursuits, enough to support the current US global army, enough to control economically and militarily much of the world, including the people of the US. The US spent as much on the military as did nearly every other country in the world combined, while the wealthy walked off with tax dollar profits, and so very many of the people and communities across the US and world suffered for it.

And so could it be any surprise, how could it be any surprise, and why? that Carolyn Thompson – like many others – would come to be determined to fight back for the truth as revealed by the full facts, and fight for the country and world as it might better be known and made.

Carolyn was feeling more determined to fight for change as best she saw fit on behalf of those for whom it was truly worth the fighting for, not least for her

slaughtered son Aaron, for the slaughtered Iraqis, and for some bit of the very future and fate of America and the world.

Right now Carolyn felt hurt beyond the core of being. Her son Aaron was dead.

## TO TELL THE TRUTH

Best to coordinate his own response to the reporters with his wife's sentiments, Glenn thought, though he felt he had nothing much to add. His son was dead. It was out of his hands.

"He died for everyone," his wife said on the porch beside him, and Glenn wondered what Aaron had really died for.

What Aaron had thought he was fighting for, Glenn was even less sure of. He hoped to find out from Mike. It seemed important now to know.

Glenn figured he knew why Aaron had joined the Army after working a few entry level jobs – Aaron had wanted something more. He wanted to travel, to see the world after not having gone to college. But what Aaron had thought he fought let alone might die for, Glenn was not certain.

Glenn was no political or military expert, to say the least. He would be the first to admit it. Yet he cringed for those who called in to radio talk shows to say they supported the war because they knew they did not have all the information the government and the President had. Glenn did not feel that helpless and blind, or trusting. He did not feel as vulnerable as those folks sounded, though he

had trusted many presidents on such matters, as well as other politicians and spokespeople who expressed the ideas of the political parties.

Even now, with his son dead, Glenn saw little reason to seriously question Congress and the President on national security. They were probably right, he thought. They said there was a need to remove Saddam Hussein from power to protect America, and to stop terror attacks like the monstrous destruction of the World Trade Center and the attack against the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Glenn was no one to disbelieve, given the circumstances especially. People loved America – people hated America – America had to protect itself regardless. He did not doubt national leaders on matters of such importance because he could not believe that anyone, no matter how corrupt, who had risen to elected office and a position of high power and responsibility, could be so witless and heartless as to not simply take care of the country, especially in times of crisis. That was the most basic part of the job, of their lives even. It seemed that it would be impossible to make any serious mistake, and it was wholly incomprehensible to Glenn that any high official no matter how misguided, inept, or vile could commit a huge blunder let alone deliberately sabotage policy – not with everyone watching.

Just because all the leaders were tightly connected to big business did not mean they would sacrifice the good of the people of the country, or even of the world to further fill the bank accounts of the rich, did it?

What was not to trust when it came to national self defense and use of the military? Didn't people around the world hate America for being so rich and free? Wasn't that why the US had to have its military stationed all over the globe? Besides, Glenn and his wife had lives to lead, jobs to

maintain. They had little time and less inclination to do research about political, military, economic and ecological realities, international or otherwise. Glenn felt he understood enough to know when and in what ways to trust the leaders. He felt he had heard enough information to understand that the decision to attack Iraq was credible, sensible, and right. If an attack was necessary, then so be it. Since his son had signed up to serve, then serve he must. If disaster struck, then that would be dealt with when it happened. Now they were dealing with it.

The reporters asked for his thoughts on his son. They asked with some deference, coupled with their regrets for the loss of Aaron. They were mainly considerate and polite – or made efforts to be so. They asked how Glenn felt about Aaron's military assignment.

"Our son was a professional," Glenn answered. "He had a job to do and he did it well. Bravely and well. There seems to be a need to deal with Iraq right now." Glenn stopped there.

He did not want to dwell on what he might not know. He did not want to begin to undermine the courage of his convictions. He did not want to think about whether or not he had been responsible enough to figure out, with complete certainty, everything he needed to know about what Aaron and the military were doing. Glenn was a practical man. He had no time for speculating about what he saw as other people's areas of responsibility, even though it so dramatically affected his own life and that of his family.

Glenn told the truth as he saw it, the simple truth, insofar as he felt it made sense to speak about such things in public, and not much less than he would talk about in

private. He spoke the truth as far as he had been asked, and he was glad when he was not pressed farther. He reminisced with the reporters briefly about Aaron's childhood, about his son's role in the military, and about Glenn's views, strictly commonplace, on the military itself. Nothing more of consequence was asked, a good thing because Glenn was willing to add little. "He died for each and every one of us," his wife had said, and maybe it was true.

Glenn wondered if Aaron had killed anyone. A soldier does his job, Glenn thought. Not that it mattered now.

Their older son, Mike, who was inside the house, had not much spoken to Glenn about the conflict with Iraq, but Glenn knew that Mike had worried about Aaron's service and Glenn also realized that Mike had at least some doubts about the conflict. What those doubts might be based on, Glenn was not sure. He had not wanted to know why Mike might question the US attack.

Their youngest daughter, Ellen, was on her way home from the university. Their eldest, Ruthy, had gone out to the store and must have gotten caught up somewhere. She would have been a comfort there on the porch with them. Ruthy's presence would have reassured Carolyn especially.

Whatever Ruthy thought about the conflict, Glenn was sure she would have focused on protecting her mother from the reporters. With Ruthy around there might have been no answers to any questions, because there might have been no questions allowed in the first place. Ruthy might have had the family simply give a statement.

Or Ruthy would have spoken warmly and strongly of her brother, completely overwhelming whatever the reporters asked. She would have spoken from her heart and her strong temper. She would have spoken for her mother

and her father and her fallen brother, for all the family, for the whole world to hear and know that Aaron had been a wonderful young man. She would have been firm and right. She would have gotten the point across best of all. "My brother was a strong and wonderful man," Ruthy might have said. "So full of energy and life. We'll miss him so much." Ruthy would have elevated Aaron, in a more natural way than he and his wife were capable of, Glenn thought.

"We're sorry for your loss," the reporters told Glenn and Carolyn. And they added a few other considerate words as well, as the microphones and cameras were capped and lowered.

## TO TRY IS ALL

Water hot in a mug in front of her, Carolyn wondered why she had said, "He died for all of us."

She had not planned to say it. She did not know who everyone might possibly be. Everyone did not, could not, and would not know her son. She had been stupid, she thought.

Be kind, she told herself. She sipped at the hot water, or tea or whatever it was, then set the mug down and pushed it away.

Her husband Glenn stood at the stove with a pot of some sort, preparing what, she knew not. They would be coming over soon, her old girlfriends, the ones with whom she had grown up, gone to school, the ones she had loved, resented, lied to, admired, fought, leaned on, lived with all her life. They would come by as soon as they had something cooked or baked and put together. She would have to be ready.

Her oldest son Mike was on the phone. That was fine. Let him keep the line tied up awhile.

"He died for all of us." She felt ashamed of the words. She felt justified too, and relieved that she had spoken as sensibly as she had. It was a nice way to think about things.

She did not believe it, at least not now, not wholly. She might have believed it in the moment of telling the reporters. Besides, it could be true in a way. Aaron was a soldier, and soldiers stood for the country – therefore, Aaron died, at least symbolically, for all. It was something she and everyone could know and share and understand – Aaron as a symbol for the nation, his death a national sacrifice, but Carolyn was afraid her son had died simply because he had gone to work for the military and gotten shot on the job. She was beginning to feel responsible for that. The encounter with the reporters this morning had not provided relief.

The reporters seemed word hungry in their focus, and yet also appeared almost touchingly concerned with being considerate and acting their proper roles. Carolyn pitied and came close to resenting them for doing a job she found not to her taste in the moment, however sincere they might be. She was the mother of someone who had died for everyone, and they were simply workers doing their job. Everyone was simply doing their job.

The reporters. She could almost feel them there with her in the kitchen. Faces hard to read. Carolyn had been half astonished at her ability to simply speak on the porch. "Aaron gave of himself for each and every one of us." She had not put it quite that grandly. She was not quite that rich of speech. A preacher, no.

"He died for all of us." The words were there now, and she would have to carry them through, live up to them. Those words would go out to everyone, the sentiment transmitting through cameras and micro-phones into TVs, radios, computers, newspapers nationwide, maybe worldwide, traveling up to the satellites and back down into town and the area and everywhere.

A devout mother. A dead son. A death for all. She would have to live it now. Thank God Mike was occupying the phone. Who could he be talking to? Maybe the phone was ringing as soon as he set it down and he was picking it up again before she even heard. Her family would not be left alone for a while, she knew. Where was the hot water? She reached for it, placed it against her lips. The water was warming down.

Glenn stood at the stove pushing something around in a pot.

They would be arriving soon, everyone, with condolences. Let them come, even though she felt she could scream loud and long enough to bleach living bones.

She thought she might go to bed.

Her oldest daughter Ruthy would be back from town soon.

Carolyn's mother and father would soon arrive.

Where was Ruthy? Thank God for Ruthy. What would Ruthy have said to the reporters? That she loved her brother, and what else? She might have said too what Carolyn had heard her once pronounce when she was twelve years old and fighting mad at her girlfriends – "When the world strikes hard, you strike back harder." Where had Ruthy come up with that line? School probably. Her friends? Teachers? TV. Maybe she had even gone and struck someone.

Carolyn felt Aaron's death not so much as a blow but as an utter vacuuming – a great sucking out.

Ruthy would be back soon and they would put themselves

on her shoulders for a while.

Nothing would break Ruthy's stride. "To try is all," Ruthy always said, and Carolyn had asked her once what she meant by it and had been disappointed in her daughter's response – "To try is all important."

Carolyn had turned the idea over while driving around, while shopping, while working on the job and in the house. "To try is all," she would mutter to herself after dropping tomatoes or losing her temper.

The notion helped her catch her breath, she noticed, cleared her mind, usually, but she was not sure it helped prevent the next mistake, and if it did not do that, what was the point?

She thought of Aaron and tried the phrase. It made her dizzy.

She kept at it and her mind cleared, almost.

To try is all, Carolyn thought. Could she possibly mean it? Had she tried hard enough to protect Aaron?

He had decided to join the military, and she had supported him in that decision, though she had harbored doubts, worried about the risks. She had felt she could not sufficiently explain or otherwise back-up her qualms and so had kept quiet, even though she knew that simply training in the military was dangerous.

Then Iraq came along and seemed confusing, but she had not questioned Aaron's service, not even privately. A commitment was a commitment, even when –

Healthy talk, Carolyn said to herself.

Carolyn supposed Ruthy would have used a strong tone to scold the reporters whether they deserved it or not, in a

way that Glenn never would. Preventive scolding.

Carolyn wished Mike would get off the phone and come talk to his father.

And where was everyone from the area who would have heard the news by now?

Carolyn stared at the steaming tea and realized she had been wrong about it warming down. It was still hot.

She pushed away from the table. She was ready to receive her relatives, her friends, her neighbors.

Maybe Aaron really had died for them and everyone.

Carolyn got up and went to the stove and steered Glenn toward the table. Then she turned the heat down to simmer beneath whatever he was boiling – potato soup, it looked.

She moved Glenn into a seat and poured hot water into another mug in which she placed a tea bag, and she set the mug on the table before him.

"I wonder what Iraq looks like, up close," she said to her husband. The words came to her before she knew the existence of the thought.

Glenn turned the mug in his hands.

Carolyn had never wanted to travel, no desire. She would like to see Iraq now, though. She needed to be transported there and back instantaneously in order to see the place without having to suffer the travel.

"Son of a bitch," said Carolyn.

Glenn rotated the mug again.

Carolyn said, "I don't want a military funeral."

"Funeral?" said Glenn.

"Not a military one."

"I think that's the way it's done."

"Not this time."

"I'm not sure we get the choice. I guess. I don't know."

"I'm telling you. About the funeral, we'll decide."

## WHAT IT MEANS NOW

What his wife Carolyn knew about the military, Glenn had no idea. He had not thought she knew much of anything. He knew little himself. He did not know what she might be holding against the military at the moment, other than knee-jerk resentment, which seemed natural enough. Maybe that was it. Now did not seem to be the time to ask.

Something more seemed to be bothering Carolyn. Could be him. Or maybe she was upset by the public attention. That could be it, her need for privacy. It seemed that there was something solid this time beyond the affectation he occasionally heard in her voice when she tried to dramatize a point and persuade him of something.

"We'll take it on ourselves, everything," said his wife. "We'll take on the funeral."

Glenn would be surprised if the military had an absolute right to its presence at a family funeral in the case of a battlefield death of a soldier, but he did not know. Maybe it was the law. He would need to find out.

In any case, he thought the military should be there. Let them share the responsibility for the loss of his son.

Glenn could imagine the questions of those in

attendance, spoken or not – Aaron had been killed in Iraq, so where was the military, where were the uniforms, the officers, the gun salute, the draped flag? Glenn could hear the obvious conclusion being drawn, the whispered or tight-lipped answer that the family did not want the military around. He knew how that would look.

Glenn turned the mug around.

He could tell by the tone of Carolyn's voice that she neither expected him to respond to her immediately nor cared if he did. He would need to know the law, and he did not know the law, not in this instance.

"No military," said Carolyn. "I'm telling you."

"Okay," said Glenn. Law or no law. And he did not ask why. That would come later, in due time. "We'll make it work."

"We'll do what we want," said Carolyn. "He's our son."

"He is that," said Glenn. Was, he corrected, silently. He pictured Aaron walking through the front door, ball cap in hand, coming home for dinner. He pictured Aaron alive. Simply alive.

"No military," said Carolyn.

Glenn wanted to ask why, but he reached for her hand instead.

## KNOW FOR REAL

When the phone rang in the living room, Mike Thompson hoped it might stop. Then he picked it up, and Lynn Jackson, a reporter from the city and the largest newspaper in the region, asked if she might speak about Aaron with a member of the Thompson family.

"I'm sorry for your loss," she said and seemed to step into the room with Mike. The reporter's disembodied words helped to summon the presence of Aaron as well, cruel trick, the three of them together in a tight space – his brother, dead.

Maybe it was not every day that this reporter called relatives of the dead. Or maybe it was. She seemed adept at it, on verge of being present in flesh and blood. Mike did not necessarily appreciate the sudden contact. He did not quite resent it either.

The reporter learned that Mike was Aaron's older brother, by three years. She asked though she seemed to know. She sounded reasonably sure of her words.

When she asked for his memories of Aaron, Mike had the sense of being crushed and crystallized all at once, of Aaron's death smashing then illuminating every thought, every syllable, every sense.

Mike told the reporter that Aaron had been a good person, full of life. He told the reporter they had done a lot together. "Especially sports. He would make you laugh with a look and wink, wouldn't need to say a word." Aaron had been popular in the service, Mike knew. He had been popular everywhere.

"What made him decide to join?"

"What didn't?" It was a job to Aaron, and maybe a stepping stone. Aaron had told Mike that he wanted to make his own way, that he was not ready for college and did not know if he ever would be. He had not seemed concerned about it, said he could not see the point of going farther in school, then at least. High school had been a trivia game and a circus to him.

"Aaron liked the sense of professionalism, I think, the travel," Mike said. "Different bases, new countries all around the world."

And as far as Mike was aware, Aaron saw his service in Iraq as something he had to do, an obligation, commitment.

Mike did not know if Aaron had agreed with the US attack. Mike knew only that Aaron was dead and that something was wrong, or someone, maybe even the family. Something seemed not in the right somehow.

No sane, decent, and knowing person could support the US invasion, Mike might have told the reporter had she actually been in the room with him. He might have struck her with that to get her reaction, but he was talking to a voice hidden in a wire and so he spoke with more caution than he otherwise might, thinking it not smart to provoke much of a reaction that he could only be blind to – a flicker, a shift, a stare, a dismissal, an aversion, anything fake or indifferent. Hard to know who he was talking to. A professional. Even face-to-face it would be difficult to fully

interact.

"How do you feel about Aaron's service and the conflict?" the reporter asked. "You support the troops, I assume?" She seemed to be trying to help him.

"I think the US attack against Iraq is wrong," Mike found himself saying. The top of his head lifted off in just the way that Emily Dickinson said is the effect of a great poem, as if his words were some sort of poem in themselves, some sort of revelation, to Mike at least.

He felt extra alert now – so much so that when the reporter said nothing in response he wondered if she had been similarly affected.

Had she drawn it out of him honestly, his opinion about the assault? He wondered if the reporter had sensed something and used her skills to prompt him.

"There's a man who protests at the courthouse near you. Someone I interviewed – "

"Dan Driver," Mike told her. "That's the guy. I agree with him. He wants the US out now. On principle. He's against the war and he has two soldier sons currently in Iraq. And a military daughter in Korea. The guy hit the trifecta. He knows the war is wrong. For his kids' sake he gets out there."

"You supported your brother, I'm sure."

Mike told her that he had sent Aaron the Stephen King horror novels he asked for, and that Aaron had once strangely said King wrote comedy. Mike intended to try to read the novels that way now, to figure out how Aaron meant it, to know Aaron better. He told the reporter Aaron could find a laugh in anything, a good laugh, and he recounted how Aaron joked about wearing a Stephen King novel over his heart. "He said it was so thick it would stop tank fire. I support the troops cominghome," Mike told her.

"Always did. I wanted that even before Aaron was deployed – let alone killed."

The reporter seemed to hesitate. "Currently two out of three Americans support the war."

"Only now, after the propaganda. Before, they did not. I looked it up. I checked, double checked, triple checked – that and a lot of things. I support the troops disobeying orders. It's all wrong."

Mike told the reporter that the orders to fight were illegal and immoral and they were doing nothing to protect America. In fact, the opposite. So to answer her question, no, he did not support what the troops were doing. And yet he did what he could to support his brother. Was he disappointed that Aaron did not refuse to fight? It would have kept him alive. It would have taken a lot of courage to refuse to fight. In the position Aaron was in, Mike could not see that he himself would have had the courage to refuse to go along. Maybe even knowing what he knew about the savage reasons behind the war.

"So you don't support the war at all? Not as self defense? Not as liberation for the Iraqi people? I know this is a hard time for you – "

Sure it was hard. Mike found it especially hard to forgive those who had put his brother in a position to be killed for no good reason. In fact for horrible reasons – according to all the facts – many of which were distorted and buried by the dominant media, an employee of whom Mike was talking with right now.

So Mike told the reporter what he thought about the US attack. "Since when does the US go around the world saving other countries? The US does not even provide health insurance for all of its own children. So what is the US likely to do for the people of Iraq?"

Mike told her that many thoughtful people who had done plenty of solid research including independent scholars and those in intelligence agencies and high government positions predicted that the US attack was likely to increase terrorism, not decrease it.

Then he mentioned the obvious but it seemed worth saying: "You shouldn't invade countries. You shouldn't kill people. You especially should not invade countries that no one in the world is afraid of, except in the United States where the government and the media have spooked the wits out of people."

Would he get through to the reporter?

Was he saying what he should?

One of the facts, Mike told her, one that he hoped she was familiar with, though she gave no indication, was that after 9-11, only something like 3 percent of Americans polled thought Iraq had anything to do with the attack. In other words, nobody. And they were right, Iraq had nothing to do with it.

A year later, during the approach of the congressional elections, the politicians, especially in the White House, got everyone talking about Iraq and reminding them of the al-Qaeda bombing of the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Often in the same breath they were mentioned – Iraq and 9-11 – and soon about 50 percent of Americans thought Iraq had been part of the 9-11 attack against the United States. So much of what people in the United States (and other countries) knew and believed sometimes on crucial issues at crucial times was about a mile wide and an inch deep. Or, actually, not even that wide. Fifty percent of the population and then 60 percent were led to believe that Iraq and al-Qaeda were linked in some significant way, and it was completely false. And

people in the dominant media – liberal and conservative both – Mike pointed out, picked up the implied connection and poured it on. Only on occasion was any Iraq link to 9-11 made explicit by officials, but it was constantly implied and so the phony message got through.

Suddenly people in America were afraid of Saddam Hussein like no one outside of Iraq was afraid of him. Americans were afraid of a bug. It was laughable. But when Americans get afraid, it's incredibly dangerous because of their huge military that the government uses all the time. Suddenly Iraq supposedly had endless quantities of weapons of mass destruction, and the reporters in the dominant media conveyed this day after day after day after day.

And it was all phony.

And it was known to be phony to anyone who cared to look into it – but you won't get it from the TV. You won't get it from the newspapers. You won't get it from the government. You won't get it from school. You won't get it out of thin air. You have to go look for it in independent sources. And Mike had done that.

The UN weapons inspectors had stripped Iraq of at least 95 percent of the materials years earlier – in the words of, among others, former US Marine Scott Ritter, one of the chief UN weapons inspectors.

"I guess you know this?" Mike said to the reporter.

"Well, I would want to check the facts," she replied. "About your brother – "

"It's all about my brother, it's all about Aaron – and you and me and everyone. It's all about a lot of innocent Iraqis dead or maimed, and everyone else who will not be coming home whole, or at all. And about a lot of others who are being hit one way or another. And if you don't want to hear

this, you should not have called. Especially now."

"Everything you're saying, you realize, so much of it goes against –"

"You don't agree?"

"I can record it," she said. "It's not my place to say one way or another."

"Is that a fact? This should never have happened. And it should be stopped immediately. But now here we are, April, 2003, not even a month after the ground invasion and it's just getting started, isn't it? No matter that dozens of city and town councils in the US have passed resolutions opposing a US attack, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago, Syracuse, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Atlanta, and many others. Still, the Republicans and Democrats went ahead with the assault. And when it got going full steam, the politicians received a lot of support for their policy, 70 percent. A mile wide, an inch deep. The opposition was still there, and for real, but the majority went along. And it was crazy. Built on lies so that people did not know what they were supporting. And there's all these delusional media reports and the fairy tale emails going around claiming that conquering Iraq and occupying and controlling the country is like sending the police into a neighbor's house where a man has been abusing his family. How convenient to not mention that without the US-backed UN sanctions that devastated the Iraqis during the past decade, making them more dependent on Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi people might very well have overthrown Hussein the way tyrannical rulers of Haiti, Romania, the Philippines and other countries were overthrown not so long ago. And that's assuming that the US in smashing the country to invade it and occupy it doesn't make things worse. There are a lot of facts you can check," Mike told the reporter.

Mike wondered what were the real thoughts of Lynn Jackson, not staff reporter Jackson. He did not much like the way she had distanced herself, coolly, as a mere recorder so that he could not tell what she really thought. Maybe it didn't matter. Given the loss of Aaron, he could scarcely bring himself to care whether it was appropriate journalism or not. But maybe such distancing, such disconnect, was a real problem, one of the problems that had helped get his brother killed.

He felt he was talking into a void while speaking to the reporter. As far as he could tell, she was giving little if any authentic personal response, no feedback outside the careful limits of her professional role.

Maybe this was proper; or maybe she really did have nothing more to say, but even when alone with his thoughts Mike felt he had more of an audience than he apparently had with the reporter listening to him now. He would rather communicate and know it, not express to a sort of void.

Nevertheless, he had said what he felt he had to say.

He told the reporter that apparently some of the leading official proponents of the attack were either flat liars or had come to believe in the various falsehoods and political fairy tales. Or simply didn't care about what most people cared about.

The liars and the more common willfully blind, Mike added, seemed to see nothing wrong with waging preventive war – the kind of thing for which German leaders were condemned and hanged as a result of the Nuremberg trials following World War II.

"Preventive, not pre-emptive," he emphasized, which was what the assault against Iraq was at best, as analysts had pointed out, since Iraq had not initiated any attack

against the US. "Hanged for their crimes," he said. "That's no joke."

The reporter asked if Mike was willing to be recorded, though she said she did not know how many of his thoughts might reach print. She wondered if he had more to say, and if so could she get some factual information about his family first. It was almost as if she were checking to make sure he was who he said he was.

"Aaron Thompson is my brother," Mike told her. "Was my brother. And my words are yours to do with what you want."

She had him supply the names and ages of his parents and his sisters, as well as their occupations and hometowns. He told her more than she probably wished to know about his wife and children, along with his sister Ruthy's husband and children, and his younger sister Ellen who attended university and was traveling halfway across the country today, to get home.

The reporter wanted anecdotes of Aaron from his childhood. "To get a feel for his personality," she said. Mike told her about the time he watched Aaron from the dugout during a Little League baseball game when Aaron got hit hard by pitches in consecutive at-bats in the exact same spot, on his left shin.

Aaron shook off the pain the first time and trotted down to first. The second time, he crumpled. The pitcher was the biggest kid around – a young man he seemed to the other kids – and though only twelve years old, the pitcher was four years older than Aaron and a foot taller, and he had hit five other batters beside Aaron. He was a pitcher with no control, a hothead, fire for an arm who joked afterward that he was trying to hit every batter in the lineup.

Aaron went down that second time as if shot, and he did

not move, a sight that was both frightening and disturbing and strangely interesting to Mike, so many players getting hit outside of the adults' control but with their toleration, and the pitcher of all people complaining the whole while about batters not getting out of the way and the game just going on and on like some unstoppable crazy movie.

Mike thought he and Aaron could take a lot worse than a few misfired baseballs. But now years later Aaron was dead, and Mike wondered. Had the pitcher somehow helped to kill Aaron? Had the game? Had the coaches, one of whom was their father? Had the town? Mike believed as a player that taking baseballs to the body would only make them tough, enable them to stand up to anything.

Now he wondered if the plunk balls and all the other forms of roughhousing and violence in sports and in the movies and in the media and everywhere that they were exposed to as children and adults, he wondered if that had somehow, if only in part, led Aaron and himself to be more accepting than was healthy, fatally accepting, of physical abuse and pain and violence.

So Mike told the reporter.

"You can't mean that Little League baseball had anything to do with Aaron's death."

"I can't give you a sound byte about baseball and its impact on my brother's life."

Possibly it was best to not trust the reporter, Mike thought. Could be. Or possibly his proper role was to simply express and her proper role was to draw him out, not to fully interact.

No telling what he might be drawn into. His words might embarrass, anger, pain his mother and father, his sisters, not to mention his neighbors and coworkers and friends.

Mike hoped that Lynn Jackson would make something good of it, the story of Aaron's life.

It would be good for someone to put it on record.

Mike could easily keep talking, if the reporter was open to it, but he felt he knew exactly where his account might lead – into ever more painful territory.

He saw vividly what he could unload on the reporter – a point blank image of his hometown and the nation killing Aaron, an image that had struck him last night when he had gone and stood in the batter's box that Aaron himself had stood in those years ago.

Yesterday evening, after learning of Aaron's death, Mike had visited the Little League ball field where he and Aaron had played as children, and Mike had imagined Aaron's death. The cause of it. The real nature of the cutting down, the blowing up.

It was not a nice image, and Mike wondered if he would feel compelled to share it with the reporter whom he held now in his hand, in a little piece of plastic, attached to a wire many miles long, or maybe to a satellite from which he could disconnect any moment he wished.

Mike could keep talking, though he wondered how long the reporter would listen if what he said ever cut too close to who she was and how she functioned in her professional capacity.

The phone stared back bland, a piece of plastic attached to the reporter's mind on the other end.

Mike had not meant to get very personal about himself or even about Aaron much. And now he worried about peeling back and exposing many people's lives, even in general terms.

He worried about telling too much to a stranger, a young professional apparently, from the city, an outsider

working on what was merely an assignment to her, a person with no stake in the town or the people of his childhood or adulthood and therefore a person with no reason other than the professional to watch her step and mouth.

And so all the responsibility, the responsibility of both of them properly, in reality fell to Mike alone, as he felt it – which could work both for and against what he had to say, what he felt needed to be said, that the town and country, his town and country, and he himself, were all responsible for Aaron's death.

The best thing might be to go ahead and do an email interview with the reporter. That way he could take his time responding, think two, three, and four times, double-check the facts. (Mike had learned his way around the internet. Lots of junk there. But once he knew where to look, once he figured out how to look – compare, compare, compare – triangulate – he was able to learn a lot quickly.) Or they could meet and he would agree to be recorded only if he were allowed to check and clarify any or all of his thoughts, adding, subtracting, revising for accuracy. That would be the careful, responsible way.

"You could drive here someday and we can talk," he said. "In a town not far from here." He thought they should go to the Little League ballpark where he and Aaron had played as children.

"I'll set up a full interview," said the reporter.

Mike worried that she might blow his words out of proportion, take him out of context. He considered waiting a long while before talking, waiting for everyone's sake, but he worried also that he would not actually get together with the reporter if he did not act immediately.

"I'm talking now," he told her. "Are you getting this?"

Aaron was dead, and Mike felt too angry to be quiet.

He felt he had a right to say what he thought. He felt he had an obligation, even if he ran the risk of saying more than he ought.

## LAYING IT ON THE TABLE

Unaware that the media were about to arrive, Ruthy had left her parents' house for the store to get the sort of pain reliever she wanted for her head, but as soon as she made the purchase the pain dissolved and she felt nothing other than nerves.

She set the medication aside in the car and turned the radio to the local news channel she sometimes listened to. She was startled to hear her mother's voice – "He died for all of us."

When the newscaster picked up the grim story, Ruthy turned the radio off.

She had no certain idea about whether or not the US military should be in Iraq, though she was skeptical. She felt she had something of an understanding of such things, even if she could not on the spot prove all she believed.

What would she say to the reporters? She could not echo her mother's words – that would not sound real. Her mother had sounded defensive. Why on earth any person in her mother's position would feel defensive was hard to figure. Must be nerves, Ruthy thought.

So what would she say to the reporters? Something so real and so powerful that they would not, could not use it

somehow, something so private the reporters would be too embarrassed to make it public. Ruthy wondered if she could come up with such a statement.

Ruthy approached her parents' house and saw reporters mingling around outside. She drove on past. She went a good long distance down the road then pulled over and sat staring at the silent radio.

She took the pain medication even though she still felt only jitters.

She wondered if Aaron had killed anyone.

She would not be surprised if he had – killing was what soldiers trained to do. Aaron was as capable as a soldier, she had no doubt, as he had been in sports. The killings of civilians was the worst thing. She knew she could hardly imagine. She had even worried about the killing of Iraqi soldiers too because she knew some of them were forced into the military, or they joined because of bad economic options, or they did not have a clue, just like a lot of people in a lot of situations. Aaron himself had been a soldier with not great economic options, though she was not sure why he had joined exactly. He had seen an opportunity, she thought.

She remembered the way Aaron used to hug her, lifting and squeezing as if to break her bones. Then he came to know better his own strength and was extra gentle, mannerly toward her, afraid to injure. Except when he forgot – excited, he forgot.

Ruthy wondered if Aaron had had a chance to defend himself. Her parents had been told there was a firefight. Ruthy like everyone knew the military did not necessarily tell you everything. She figured Aaron had been killed by surprise. That was how it must have happened. She hoped so anyway. Never to know what hit you, that would be the

best way to go. If it had to be.

After a while she got going again. She drove around some before returning. Then she came down the drive and pulled in next to a neighbor's car now parked amid the media trucks.

The reporters stood between Ruthy and the house as she walked toward the front door. She relieved them of the trouble of guessing who she was, identifying herself as Aaron's sister. They wanted her words. "Aaron was our love," she told them. That was it.

She felt a tumor in her stomach and a snarl blooming back of her jaw. She walked through the reporters and went into the house where the aroma of fresh baked bread filtered through the rooms. Quiet voices drifted out of the kitchen. Ruthy found Mike hanging up the phone in the living room.

"I heard mom on the radio."

"She didn't have to," Mike told her. "I offered to send the reporters away. I didn't see the point in them saying anything. Not to a crowd, not that way."

"Mom sounded full of hurt. Did you hear what she said?"

"I couldn't stop her. I just got off the phone with a reporter myself."

Mike told Ruthy what he had said on the phone – that he did not support the US attack, that the whole invasion was illegal and immoral, as he saw it, and that he loved Aaron. "Maybe you should know I told this to the reporter. I don't know if they might print it. I don't know that it matters, really."

"You did that?" Ruthy sat down on the couch.

"I thought I had to. I think I do."

"Now?"

Mike sat on the couch beside her, on the edge, at an angle.

Ruthy was thinking she should go into the kitchen. Surely no one today would mention the fighting overseas. But later on? There would be remarks, comments, looks, voluntary and not. She would need to respond. She would want to. She and her family were going to be public property for awhile. She knew she needed to find out more about what was going on overseas, if only to avoid looking simple and maybe not even be aware of it. She wondered if she should listen to Mike telling her what he knew.

The war had no appeal to Ruthy. She might even be against it. She had wanted Aaron to come home safe. She had known and wanted that. Now what?

Ruthy thought about avoiding the kitchen – something Mike was nearly an expert at, side-stepping the family nitty-gritty whenever it suited him. Maybe now for a moment at least she would do the same, talk with Mike. Maybe he needed that. Maybe she did.

Ruthy got up and went to the kitchen.

He died for all of us – she thought of her mother's words. In no way did Ruthy sense that Aaron had died for Mike, her parents or herself, or for anyone really. Aaron had died on the job. What a job. Her mother had said what she had said – saying so much it meant nothing really. Maybe her mother clung to the idea, maybe not. Maybe she assumed she had to think that way, that it was what was expected of her. Like going to church. Like going onto the porch. Maybe her mother liked going to church. Probably she did, certainly she did, Ruthy supposed, some ways at least. Could be she believed the words she had spoken. Or maybe her mother believed them today and would not tomorrow. Maybe she had believed yesterday and only

remembered aloud today, in reflex, without much thought. In the end, who could say why Aaron had died? Weren't they a bunch of criminals running the government? Wasn't that what they always were? Weren't they paid well to be that way?

Ruthy went into the kitchen and came up behind her mother. She squeezed lightly her mother's shoulders and then the hands that rose to her own.

"Town's busy," said Ruthy. "You braved the crowd outside," she said to the longtime friends of her parents, a couple who had brought over warm food and words.

"Neighbors – coming through', that's all we said," Judy Jones told Ruthy.

Judy's husband Bob said he had tried to direct the reporters out of the drive and onto the road. If they had not gone already, he promised he would see to it on the way out.

"Good luck," said Ruthy. "They're like an army camped out there."

"We just kept moving, Honey," said Judy. "Pushed right through."

The couple stayed another twenty minutes or so, trying to cover the awkwardness with some humor and more admonishing comments about the reporters.

When they left, Mike came into the kitchen. The family sat around the table just as they had the previous evening after receiving word of Aaron's death.

Ellen would arrive from college this afternoon.

Aaron was gone, and something more had been lost too, Ruthy felt, not knowing what it might be, not wanting to know, not now, not with everything so delicate.

The family would come through. That was how it

worked, when it worked. There would be scars, and they would carry those scars. That was how life was lived. What they needed to see to, as soon as now, Ruthy felt, and in the family gatherings to come, was simply getting through.

Ruthy thought if Mike was right, and if her own intuitions were accurate too, then it meant Aaron had died for nothing. Or worse.

This was not the time to think about it, Ruthy decided.

Mike got up from the table.

Ruthy leaned forward. She laced her fingers together. She felt a gathering inside herself.

Aaron was dead.

"The US attack is illegal and immoral," Ruthy told her parents. "That's what Mike said to a reporter on the phone just now."

Mike stopped at the kitchen exit.

Had she meant to wound him? Had she meant to hold him? Was she angry with him? Did he have any right to leave the table? Was she trying to keep the family together? Trying to pool all of their thoughts? Trying to lay everything out in the open? Or did she simply mean to tell her parents what they needed to know before they found out some other way?

Glenn said to Mike, "What's the point?"

"It's what I think, is all. I felt I had to say it. Like I told Ruthy. I think I do."

"Does that do anything for Aaron?" said Glenn. "How does that help us?"

"I guess we could have talked about it earlier. The war and all, I don't know. Maybe we were afraid."

"I'm not afraid of anything," said Glenn.

"Michael – " said Carolyn.

Aaron could have handled it, Mike figured, any serious

discussion, any real questioning of the political and military situation in Iraq. Might have saved him. They might have saved him. And everyone. Maybe not, Mike guessed. But maybe.

"Aaron – " said Carolyn.

The doorbell chimed.

The phone rang.

The doorbell chimed once more. Glenn sat still in his chair. Carolyn leaned over her tea. Mike went to the door. Ruthy reached for the phone.

## A PIECE OF HER MIND

During the last hour of the drive to their daughter's home, Joanne and her husband Bernie flipped through the radio channels. They were struck by Carolyn's measured voice, "He died for all of us."

Joanne disapproved of her daughter saying in public anything that might touch the heart so much. Best not to say anything at all. No one needed to know what her daughter was feeling. It was not smart. It was hardly proper. Best to practice the art of appearing to speak by saying nothing. Anything the least bit emotional let alone somewhat noble presented doors that others might feel encouraged to step through. A dangerous thing, complicating.

What did her daughter need to deal with people for, and strangers at that, at a time like this? What business did any reporter have bothering her daughter in this hour, this terrible hour, taking advantage of someone in this way? Her daughter had fallen for it, opened herself up, as if she were obliged to do so, as if she owed anyone anything, least of all any private part of herself.

Joanne had no difficulty thinking of the particular piece of her mind she would like to give those reporters, if she would speak in the first place. Which she would not. Even if

she did, she would not say a word for real, at least nothing that anyone would take as meaning anything other than, "All of you, all you reporters are nothing but nothing." She could easily see herself conveying that. Why not? She would be right to do so. She had never cursed in her life. Well, only a few times. And only when it had been sadly needed. She was proud that she had not resorted to such language with her children, having scarcely needed to. She had given them nothing to use against her. Joanne thought she knew how to talk tough without coming across as negative. Except when she needed to. At such times she had resources conditioned and ready, a clipped voice, tough tone.

Bernie was no doubt proud of Carolyn's being on the radio, and he would be proud of having heard, and he would be proud, tenderly, of bringing it up with Carolyn, probably first thing. "We heard you on the radio, and we're proud of you sounding so strong," he would likely say, words to that effect.

And so Joanne would need to speak to it as well. "Brave and weary," she would say.

Joanne thought Carolyn had sounded weak. But she would tell her daughter that she was brave, which was how Carolyn probably thought of herself, in the moment.

Joanne hoped this would be appropriate and effective for comforting a stricken daughter, even if she did not believe it for a second. If anything, she thought her daughter had sounded scared, even hollow, using meaningless words.

At least there was a certain craftiness in her daughter's words, Joanne thought. Carolyn had to know that the world and the people in it were not quite as honorable as she had expressed. What her grandson Aaron had thought he had

fought and died for was anyone's guess. There was some sort of global power struggle going on, and Aaron had been caught in the middle. That was about it.

Cut down by crossfire.

Of course Joanne was not going to accuse Carolyn of not protecting her son by allowing him to go into the military. She was not going to blame her daughter for raising a son who might think the military was an appealing option to pursue. Joanne decided she would tell her daughter that she had sounded brave, quite brave.

She might add too that Carolyn had sounded tired, thereby hinting that she may not have selected quite the best manner of speaking.

Maybe Carolyn would catch her meaning in the moment, maybe not. The effect of subtle words of criticism, if not judgment, tended to work over time and unconsciously, Joanne knew. This was how she would handle hearing her daughter on the radio. This was her obligation. This was how she would respond – by a gentle truth, or half truth, well-meant. This was the way in which she felt she could do her best for her daughter in this terrible time.

## HUM ON THE ROAD

One thing Bernie believed – he would very much not know how to react to reporters if he were asked to respond to Aaron's death. The questions might deflate him. He thought his wife would answer. Or he might simply say they were not up to any questions at that particular time. He would try to be polite while getting clear of the reporters. He would try to make plain that he did not know how to answer, was incapable. He would try not to offend anyone, and he did not think that would be very difficult. He would do his best to avoid an unpleasant scene. "Another time," he might say to the reporters. "Another time."

His daughter had been strong enough to answer though, and Bernie could only admire that. Carolyn was strong like her mother, if differently cut. It made Bernie feel that sometimes he was just along for the ride. Which was okay by him, for the most part. He was glad to know that he was part of a solid family that could take care of itself in face of all pressures, come what may. They would get through. They were tough. It was not always pleasant but it worked. There was room for error. The family's strength had put money in the bank, a house on a hill, wheels on the road. They got through.

Bernie looked forward to seeing Glenn, even though he knew Glenn would be gutted by Aaron's death. Bernie worried that Glenn might look inward, wondering what he might have done differently to shield Aaron. That was what Bernie might think if it were his son lost.

Don't look back, don't look in. Not bad advice. Most of all, look out.

But don't look out too much, either. At the war, especially.

When the President said that "evil-doers" were trying to get the United States and it was time to fight, Bernie was no one to object. Evil was something that was out there, he sensed. It would be almost evil to object to the President, it seemed to Bernie.

His wife had once or twice pointed out, with a few choice words, an evil moment or two of Bernie's – that time he had wanted to go fly fishing with his buddies for two weeks in Canada. "A goddamned waste of time," she had said. And she almost seemed scared about him going off like that, but the President never seemed scared. The President just wanted to snuff out evil and protect the country, Bernie thought, and Bernie was no one to stand in the way. Bernie felt pride in doing the right thing, as best he knew how, even when it made for nervous business. Especially then.

He would be sure to tell his son-in-law that Aaron had died doing the right thing, in a cause to make a man proud, fighting evil.

It was good to hear his daughter on the radio – her voice strong in the way that it was and might be taken.

Soon Bernie tuned out even the radio and let himself be lulled by the hum of the car on the road.

## DAWN'S EARLY LIGHT

For a supposedly smart person, as some people judged her, Ellen Thompson felt she had been incredibly naïve. For someone who was often enough quick, Ellen felt she had been terribly slow about certain aspects central to her studies and her life – and to life itself.

She wanted to find out exactly why her brother Aaron had been killed in Iraq.

She wanted to find out the precise nature of the US conquest of Iraq, the real relationship between the US and war in general, and the nature of her ignorance about this and more.

Ellen was no stranger to libraries, having spent much time in them as far back as childhood, but she had been coming to the university library more often lately, not only since Aaron had been killed last month in Iraq.

The world of books and the buildings themselves had always been interesting places to her, even exhilarating, but her task now was sobering. She spent hours at a time in a lingering state of anger deep in the heart of the vast building on campus, going through the stacks, the low-ceiling floors jammed down one upon the other, massive and heavy with books.

Ellen felt humbled by the fact that it had taken her brother Aaron's death to get her to scrutinize why – for real – the US had attacked Iraq, a search that immediately led into a study of the actual history of US foreign policy and

the ruling concentration of power in the United States, seldom detailed in much depth publicly. What Ellen discovered surprised her greatly, all that she had been ignorant of, mistaken about. She was completely embarrassed for herself, especially since she had worked the previous summer for Senator Sam Washburn, the cousin of her mother, a congressman whose policies and positions, so much like that of nearly every other congressperson, she now knew enough to oppose, she now understood as undemocratic and not infrequently criminal – whether legalized or not.

Ellen found herself beginning to live in the library during these weeks after the burial of Aaron. She wanted to know how much else she did not know about so many social and political issues – especially those that revealed the nature of power in the US and its relation to the conditions of life at home and abroad. She wanted to know everything there was to know about the factors and forces that had caused her brother Aaron to be led into a criminal war to kill and to be, as it turned out, killed himself in the first two weeks of the US invasion, barely a month ago.

As a child, Ellen Thompson biked to the small local library where curiosity pulled her from one book to another, from shelf to shelf, room to room, to computers with internet access, search engines, electronic data banks. She loved to discover all there was to learn. She loved to discover the world, the way things worked, what went on in different places, how and why, and to what result. She was energized by learning, by the process, and she sometimes tried to figure out how to learn faster and better, more deeply and with ever more agility. She wished now that she had done more that way.

Her trips to the library had always felt personal and urgent, a life force that she might forever control and have access to, unlike many of the dealings it seemed possible to have with family and friends, classmates, teammates, even though she continued to gain much from others face to face.

One book, one source, often led to another, or many others. The library not only grew into a rich part of Ellen's life, it seemed to be the most orderly and reliable part. So it came as no small shock in the wake of Aaron's death to think that the library had misled and confused, even betrayed her – causing Ellen to realize not for the first time that libraries, despite their riches, were filled with many lousy and boring, wrongheaded and pointless books.

This semester at college, Ellen had completed her course papers early. She had noted when the assignments were due upon receipt of the syllabi and had worked ahead to get done with all that, her papers neatly filed to be pulled out and touched up, or not, and turned in at appropriate times. So now her current research in the library ran strictly along lines of personal decision.

She was trying to find out why her brother had been killed, not battlefield reasons but larger details. Could it be for the horribly misguided, selfish, and dangerous reasons, the savage reasons that her brother Mike had suggested in a newspaper article recently published. The sources he passed on to her seemed devastatingly convincing and they were backed up by many other compelling sources and outlets of information.

Ellen took notes and devoured what she read, moving from book to book, stacking them several feet high in and around her carrel, going through them one by one, pausing only to jot down references to other books and topics along with an occasional rebuttal or tangential note to some

remark or passage. When she was deep into it, she could go through dozens of books per day for several days in a row, hitting the conclusions and introductions and high points in between, comparing and analyzing one against the other, then spending a day or more on a mere few authors or books alone.

She had dived in now and found herself irritated that the library shut down at one in the morning. She returned to the library exactly when it re-opened at six. She had reached the point where she was afraid to miss the very opening and the very closing of each library day, feeling, without reason, that if she missed these precise moments her concentration and drive would break.

Even though Ellen knew she was steps ahead in certain types of academic achievement, compared to many of her classmates at least, she was concerned that she had fallen behind where she ought to be in other key understandings, even though she had often tried to figure out the relation of her studies to the world. A common joke around campus was that while the engineering students did not know if what they were learning was useful or not, liberal arts students definitely did know that what they were learning was not going to be useful. As a political history major, Ellen had no inclination to be a punch line. She wanted to make a difference in the world, in the organization of things, and she had no belief that it would happen by accident. She had no faith that mastering an advanced technical skill would help her much in this regard either.

Maybe it would be smart to master a mathematical or scientific field to make herself more marketable or to help her better fit into society, but she was leery of getting buried in the bowels of some large corporation or even a modest-sized company because by obvious design such institutions

were the farthest thing from democratic, and Ellen wanted a real say in her work. She did not want to become something bought and sold in the marketplace – she did not want to have to be "marketable" to anyone or to any institution. The war against wage slavery had yet to be won. She wanted to be independent, while working with others when possible. She despised any prospect of having to rent herself out to an authoritarian organization like a corporation. She felt that on a visceral level. It was so obvious that corporate autocracy made a mockery of democracy.

Ellen wished to do what was valuable but also to do what interested her in a broad and engaging way, and so she looked for a different slot in the workforce than what she felt she was likely to obtain with technical degrees. And beyond that, she wanted more out of life than a job and a good time, which sometimes seemed to be about all she was supposed to want, or to know to want. A job and a good time and oceans of small talk and a million other distractions. Ellen found it hard to justify a whole lot of small talk. This was no small-talk world. She had sensed this long before her brother had been killed, and felt she was coming to understand it more and more.

Maybe most people wanted more out of life than was obvious, and expected more of life than most anyone knew how to obtain. Probably most people did want more than a job and a good time but it scarcely seemed to be something many were able or willing to talk about at much length, if at all.

Most of the students around her, she figured, would be put to work haphazardly, catch-as-catch-can, in some cases doing work that interested them and was useful, in other cases doing work not of their choosing, often under anguishing conditions, and with quite a number of

demeaning and destructive aspects. Ellen had no intention of going that route. She felt a responsibility to not let that happen to her, and insofar as she could help it, to not let that happen to others.

The fourth of four children, Ellen felt she had the benefit of learning from her siblings' experiences and mistakes as well as her parents' years of work in child rearing. And she read a lot, while involving herself in sports and environmental groups, canvassing during the summers for various causes, and going to work for Senator Sam Washburn's office last year. She did what she wanted to, by and large, and what she needed to, felt she ought to, and in that way it seemed she was much like most everyone else. She tried to keep life lively, tried to be thoughtful and considerate as she went. She was no saint. She didn't know any saints.

It was dispiriting that most of her college classes bored her, but ever since her teens when she had chanced upon Deschooling Society by Ivan Illich and Dumbing Us Down by John Gatto, she had been determined to not let school get in the way of her education. Gatto mentioned a study which found that "children schooled at home seem to be five or even ten years ahead of their formally trained peers in their ability to think," something that was hard to forget, and at another point in Dumbing Us Down Gatto added with some exaggeration, Ellen thought, that "schools don't really teach anything except how to obey orders. This is a great mystery to me because thousands of humane, caring people work in schools..." In Deschooling Society, Ivan Illich wrote that "the right to learn is curtailed by the obligation to attend school," and other teachers and scholars that Ellen had read remarked that schooling is "a system of imposed ignorance," at least on many matters of human interest and concern,

matters other than the technical. To say that Ellen approached her non-technical courses with some wariness and skepticism would be an understatement. And still she had been too often fooled, she thought now.

Ellen mainly selected non-technical courses because she was more obsessed by personal and social issues of all varieties, and she was determined to prove an exception to what sometimes seemed the rule of schooled ignorance.

She attended class regularly and kept her sanity by sitting in corners often, behind the largest of football linemen preferably, with her own books and journal. The books that she brought and dipped into in class during lectures and dull moments were usually related to the subject at hand, or she could make them so, however tangentially, if called upon and challenged, books far more interesting to her than most of the assigned ones, books that extended the range and import of her classes, and that she was occasionally able to use to liven up a discussion or two, as well as her papers.

Before her current weeks of intensity in the library, Ellen had slipped into a phase where she had barely eaten, and exercised hardly at all. Right after Aaron's death she had gone to an extreme with books, abandoning most everyone in her life, becoming unknown even to her roommates. Socially and personally, for this period of time that had an eternal sort of feel to it, Ellen did not sense that she was missing out on anyone or anything. The young college men around her appeared not especially interesting. The graduate students and the few young professors seemed somehow suddenly pinched and absorbed in their own particular worlds, like small exotic plants scattered across a vastly more interesting continent of learning, and the women her own age seemed even more isolated than the

men one from the other, even when they gathered together and talked back and forth, sometimes especially then.

Occasionally after hours on end among the books, she felt the library walls and stacks closing in, looming musty and oppressive, so she took short breaks outside, wandering aimless among the beautiful lawns and gardens of campus feeling afloat on sudden sensory stimulus. Before long, though, out among the trees her mind would grow restless and begin to slip back inside the library, into a particular book or two, as if she had never left in the first place.

Ellen watched and judged herself, reflecting on her state of mental alertness. Or she simply allowed and followed her mind before re-merging into her nook in the library, into one text after another, rejoining authors she wrestled until they brought her up cold or she threw them down hard (so to speak), as had happened time and again.

George Orwell got her pretty good. It was in a book about the situation in England and America before World War II. A quick cutting comment about the phenomena of idiocy and banditry among the privileged that stopped her short in the stacks beside her carrel. "The underlying fact was that the whole position of the monied class had long ceased to be justifiable," Orwell wrote, and continued:

"There they sat, at the center of a vast empire and a worldwide financial network, drawing interest and profits and spending them – on what? The British ruling class obviously could not admit to themselves that their usefulness was at an end. Had they done that they would have had to abdicate. For it was not possible for them to turn themselves into mere bandits, like the American millionaires, consciously

clinging to unjust privileges and beating down opposition by bribery and tear-gas bombs. After all, they belonged to a class with a certain tradition, they had been to public schools where the duty of dying for your country, if necessary, is laid down as the first and greatest of the Commandments. They had to feel themselves true patriots, even while they plundered their countrymen. Clearly there was only one escape for them – into stupidity."

Ellen Thompson sat down, and only in sitting down, did she realize she had been standing. She felt all at once that she had been unaccountably stupid and now here she was being properly, directly called on it.

She was not of the ruling class but had recently come to understand that she had been modeling herself after it, and especially as a Washington intern this past summer she had been advocating for it, notwithstanding all the populist rhetoric found in the speeches of Senator Washburn. She was coming to understand how the rhetoric was mainly that, mere words, nice touches, cosmetics to cover up for the real business of ruling the country, and handsomely profiting from it for the sake of a few at the expense of the many.

Ellen had made some good friends during her senate work – friends that she had thought would be a real part of her future. Now all had changed.

She sat down with Orwell in hand in a disembodied state of pure focus, a feeling somehow beyond electric, beyond electronic, if possible. She felt like a runaway photon, like pure energy needing no sustenance, wholly self-contained, seemingly released, needing nothing and in any case having access to little or no sustaining force except

incidentally beyond herself, an energy that lifted away the weight of the library like nothing, like an oppression obliterated, an existence no more nor less than pure. And there in the midst of that seemingly clairvoyant state of pure focus, George Orwell reached out from the book and slapped Ellen Thompson across her face.

She sat down.

She had thought she was smart enough. Ellen had thought she had a future in politics, of the conventional sort. But what George Orwell wrote hit her so hard and clear that instant in the library, that the more she thought about it the more true it seemed and the less future she knew for sure she had in traditional politics.

At that moment, a warning bell rang throughout the library and was followed by the usual announcement that the library would soon close. Ellen missed hearing how soon and mistakenly thought it was the first warning, a half hour before closing. Lacking a watch, she could not easily check. She expected another warning in fifteen minutes, and for the time being, focused on Orwell's book in her hands.

She had worked with Senator Sam Washburn. It had seemed like a great opportunity, given her interest in public issues. She had looked up to Senator Washburn as a knowing and capable man in a confusing and complex world. With some reservations, she had looked to him as a potential model for her own life.

That began to change these past months as the war with Iraq built up and other issues became more clear to her, and when Aaron was killed, Ellen felt as vulnerable as a heart pushed outside its body, a heart which had now been attacked again by Orwell with his quick sword.

No longer quite certain where she stood intellectually or professionally, Ellen immersed herself in the library to further her understanding of the nature and history of US foreign policy. Most of her professors seemed to support traditional US policy, or at least not to oppose it much, fundamentally. Yet the more she looked into US policy, the more vicious she realized much of it was. Not that most of the books in the library conveyed this impression, quite the opposite. She had read plenty of those, wading through lots of crap, pure drudgery, works hardly as striking as Orwell's book about England, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, the part that got to her, at least.

The shock for Ellen, having worked and lived with US rulers and their staff and having grown up with many sensible people who took them seriously, was that she knew that many of these people, both rulers and ruled, were bright hardworking decent people, who she now realized happened to be astonishingly blind and horribly wrong on crucial issues that she herself had been blind to.

It seemed to Ellen that they were all, herself included, living in so many ways under the spell of a seemingly endless array of manufactured illusions that were cranked out and spread by politicians, corporate executives, religious figures, teachers, writers, entertainers, and by the mass of citizens themselves to an extent – myths of economics, of sociology, of the nature of people and countries and governments, myths of false education and of religion, of family roles, and personal relationships.

And she and so many people she knew had so unwittingly bought into so much of it, and had even advocated on behalf of so many of the myths and so much of what was wrong and destructive.

Now she was beginning to understand that she, like

anyone, would have to work for the rest of her life to move away from the blinkers of those myths perpetuated with so much force privately and publicly, consciously and not. Ellen felt she would have to be extra aware of the need to work away from the crippling and killing tides of sheer ignorance.

Orwell wrote that ruling types could:

"keep society in its existing shape only by being unable to grasp that any improvement was possible. Difficult though this was, they achieved it, largely by fixing their eyes on the past and refusing to notice the changes that were going on round them."

Ellen lifted her eyes from the text and stared ahead, jaw locked, thinking how much she had come to identify herself with the counterproductive interests and ideas of this privileged class, a way of being that she had thought of as responsible, fearless – and smart, too. She had felt herself to be among leaders but was coming to realize that these officials were often as conformist and tag-along, ignorant and wrongheaded, or careless, as was possible to be, in certain critical ways. There was so much that they didn't want to know, or so much that they knew and didn't care about.

Ellen turned back a couple pages and reread a short section that had struck her the first time through. She could not help thinking in particular of Senator Washburn and herself when she read:

"Even among the inner clique of politicians who brought us to our present pass [World War II] it is doubtful whether there were any conscious traitors.

The corruption is more in the nature of self-deception.... And being unconscious, it is limited. One sees this at its most obvious in the English press. Is the English press honest or dishonest? At normal times it is deeply dishonest. All the papers that matter live off their advertisements, and the advertisers exercise an indirect censorship over news. Yet I do not suppose there is one paper in England that can be straight-forwardly bribed with hard cash. England is not the jeweled isle of Shakespeare's much-quoted passage, nor is it the inferno depicted by Dr. Goebbels. More than either it resembles a family, a rather stuffy Victorian family, with not many black sheep in it but with all its cupboards bursting with skeletons. It has rich relations who have to be kowtowed to and poor relations who are horribly sat upon, and there is a deep conspiracy of silence about the source of the family income. It is a family in which the young are generally thwarted and most of the power is in the hands of irresponsible uncles and bedridden aunts. Still, it is a family. It has its private language and its common memories, and at the approach of an enemy it closes ranks. A family with the wrong members in control – that, perhaps, is as near as one can come to describing England in a phrase."

And America too, Ellen was coming to think more and more. But the problem was not exactly that the wrong family members were in control, it was that control was not in the grasp of all – America was the farthest thing from a democracy in a lot of ways.

Ellen turned to the last two sentences of the chapter:

"They are not wicked, or not altogether wicked; they are merely unteachable. Only when their money and power are gone will the younger among them begin to grasp what century they are living in."

But what if their money and power are never gone?

Ellen pushed the book away and sat back in the chair.

Here she was with no money, but having had a brief direct acquaintance with ruling figures. From Orwell's perspective, if she went along with them, she might be wicked if not consciously wicked. She and everyone else who went along for the ride of the rule of wealth.

Ellen figured there was hope for her to be able to really understand the world and herself and her place in it only if she gave up any need to rely on the larger political family that she had begun to carve a niche within, a family that had seemed to be a bigger version of her own biological family, a family within which she had thought she could do important and interesting things – a liberal family, a conservative family, a family of the status quo.

Now here was Mr. George Orwell and her own new insights telling her that in fact she would have to give up any power and privileges that she had begun to accrue and might expect in that line, including the working connections, the opportunities, and the identity. She would have to give up that bright future she had thought she was working toward. And that was a real kick.

Ellen stared ahead, and for a moment, she could almost feel how pleasant it would be to go stupid in the manner Orwell described. How pleasant to get back her job, her friends, the social scene, and professional opportunities. She would read the books that everyone else read and do what

everyone else did and try to never mind that her brother Aaron, because of it all, was dead.

Not to mention countless Iraqis. And so very many others, at home and abroad.

Ellen picked up the book and squeezed it and pressed the book against the cinder block wall beside her. Then she rammed the spine into the wall.

She drove it, punching steadily, bluntly. It felt good, crushing Orwell, bashing his words perhaps with a force approaching that with which he had helped to smash her future.

Then her arm tired. Her wrist hurt, and the book seemed not to be suffering so very many ill effects. She considered finding some isolated corner and flinging the book into the wall, but she felt deflated all of a sudden. She felt embarrassed. She felt used. Misused, abused. She set Orwell's book on the desk in front of her.

Homage to Catalonia was his best book, she thought, both inspiring and revealing. In fact, maybe no book had shown her more clearly what public life was all about, what it might be, the way Orwell described the exciting and egalitarian if desperately bloody early months of the Spanish civil war last century.

Maybe no book other than Homage to Catalonia had so directly addressed what she was feeling now, the need to struggle toward a more fully human world, in solidarity with others, a struggle which could itself make up a rewarding responsible life.

She was grateful for the massive brooding library that afforded her solitude and anonymity in this moment. She did not want to think about venturing outside. The first twittering bird would be one twittering bird too many. The next vacuous class would be too much. Ellen felt she was at

a failing point. She could see that now. She almost felt like she would need to begin from scratch. She was glad to have no witness.

To hell with George Orwell, she thought. Thank god for George Orwell – in that moment.

What was Ellen going to do with her life? What was she good at?

She could earn grades.

Fortunately she had gotten hooked on reading early, so it was no strain on her to make excellent grades in the bulk of her classes, especially those that involved a lot of language, though she was good at science and math too. She was curious, full of questions, eager for answers – she enjoyed thinking, for real. But she had grown increasingly bored and restless with school. Something was not adding up. All these professors and all these books and – for what? Were there any fewer people who lacked health insurance each year? Why not? Did the US use its military any less? Why not? Were health conditions and poverty rates and literacy rates improving much, if at all? Was crime in the suites being reduced? Were people able to work fewer hours per week? Could they afford better housing, or housing at all? Why not? Why had the prison population exploded? Why all the health problems? Why the increase of adult diseases in children? Why the adult diseases in adults? Why the all too common phenomena of anxiety and depression? Why poverty?

And why were so few people voting? She had wondered that this summer, but no longer. Now she wondered why anyone bothered to vote at all. Except as a vote against the two main parties and virtually all the candidates they offered.

What the hell was wrong with everything? And why

was she not learning the answers in school? Why were so many of her courses so narrow and superficial, or remote and strictly technical? Why was she not getting as much of an education in the classroom as she had expected to get at this school, one of the many lauded universities in the country?

Why did so many people talk about so much that was neither here nor there? And why did so few people discuss much of importance? And why was this too often the case in her college courses and around campus, at the university of all places, which was supposed to provide a fertile forum for issues, concerns, ideas, and information of great value?

It was not that she had gotten nothing useful or unique out of the university – far from it. But like so much of the rest of the society and culture, it lacked a lot that it should not.

Ellen was curious. She was also angry and passionate about the conditions she was caught up in – conditions that she knew she became more and more responsible for the older she got.

Ellen's anger – intensified by the death of her brother – was truly emotional, if rarely emoted.

She had long been upset at the too often narrow, trivial, pointless and prison-like conditions of much of, first, elementary school and then junior high and then high school. And her friends who had gone to religious schools had also been angered by hypocrisy, and hollowness especially.

While growing up in fairly common and then relatively more privileged circumstances, Ellen had wanted to know why everyone did not share in decent conditions, and why life seemed so stressful everywhere, and she wanted to

know what could be done about it, what could she do about it especially.

This was the task that Ellen saw before her. She thought she had been on the right track for addressing these interests and concerns by way of the Senator's office – but no longer. Not for her. Maybe others could make a decent go of it. She wondered how.

Ellen stared at the book of Orwell that she had slammed into the wall, and she thought of all the books she had gone through in her recent dive into the library.

She could list dozens that were interesting, stimulating, insightful, and she could feel them leading to hundreds and thousands more, if she wanted, beyond even the works they referenced directly that she jotted down in her notes and intended to get to.

But all this could wait for now. She had done plenty of reading lately. Learned a lot. Maybe a lot that at other times she would not necessarily have wanted to learn. But right now, Ellen needed to put herself together, re-knit. She needed to work harder at finding her real self, if that wasn't too precious to think. She needed to figure out how she was going to make peace with the near simultaneous loss of the future she had envisioned for herself, and the all but incomprehensible loss of her brother Aaron.

Ellen wished to live in such a way that she would not vanish into a library forever, as more than a few faculty members on campus seemed to have done. That was not for her.

Which reminded her, as a simple practical matter of the immediate moment, she needed to get up and get out of the library tonight before they turned off the lights and locked her in. Hadn't they already broadcast the first closing

announcement?

Orwell stared back at her.

Having punched out an author dead for over fifty years, Ellen felt she had a glimpse of where a weakness lay, where she was vulnerable, maybe misguided or ignorant.

If Orwell was right about conditions in the early part of last century, and if little had changed, as she understood things now, should she go throw herself in front of police barricades at the next protest, throw herself in face of the next US military deployment?

Or should she patiently acquire advanced degrees and indict the status quo from a classroom, shake the rotten foundations and build up a new base from within as well as from without? Not that many of her professors had much done so in her experience.

All her life to this point, what had it been for?

All those sports she had been active in. Her grandfather had told her that the time she spent on sports would be useless to her in the future. The thought had crossed her mind more than once, but what could she do? She had only smiled and shrugged at her grandfather, and nodded, in some agreement, at the likely sense of what he was saying. What else might she have done with her time – start some business, as a teen? Plunge deeper into the library? Join up with a pack of rebels, or some religious group? What else was there? How many environmentally conscious fliers did it make sense to pass out? She had done that, at least.

There seemed to be no rushing things sometimes.

It had seemed her responsibility to be merely a good student and daughter, a family churchgoer, an occasional volunteer here and there, and to be involved and active otherwise as came natural – sports and solitary reading mostly.

The more sports she played the less she read.

She dropped sports cold upon entering college. Greek life, the fraternity and sorority scene seemed narrow, cliquish, and superficially social. But at least it was social, if too often trivially so. The activist groups, action groups as she thought of them, seemed marginal and ineffective, sort of dull, and out of touch somehow, ineffective, even though they were focused on things that mattered.

What exactly had Ellen done with herself?

Here she was near the end of her third year in college chased by the boredom of classes, haunted by the death of her brother, half bewildered, and quite angry, deep in the confines of the library.

Probably her friends and roommates thought she was going through a personal crisis, and maybe she was. Maybe so. But it wasn't a private crisis. It was a professional one. A personal one. A public one. It was a crisis of fact, and the implications of key facts, for her.

Her brother's death now helped shape and drive her exploration, and had caused her to reach out a bit to her other siblings.

Ellen more naturally was close to Ruthy, and now had become closer to Mike, as they shared thoughts and information about the large circumstances that had led to Aaron's death, circumstances not by any means divorced from their family, their communities, their government and country, and themselves individually.

Ellen was grateful that Mike had not said anything at first about her working for Senator Sam Washburn.

Then she had brought up her concerns about the Senator's position on the attack and other issues while explaining her doubts to Mike about the wisdom of her having worked for him the previous summer. Mike had

listened. He said he thought she was right to be skeptical. He told her that as far as he was concerned the Senator's positions on Iraq and a lot of other issues were unconscionable.

The next thing Ellen knew, after Aaron's burial, she had to be back on campus, where she was still far ahead in her classes, but feeling distant from her friends and a lot of their concerns.

She had no boyfriend currently – for the good or the bad, it was not clear. Ellen felt she had almost always been able to gain the attention of young men if and when she liked, well enough at least, even if she was just as fumbly in her dealings with the other half as most everyone else. In any case, the idea of lifelong matchmaking seemed like it might be beyond her for awhile, until she figured out better what she was going to do, how and where, and how she was willing and able to support herself.

She always had sports, running for release, if she wanted it. Her social circle was relatively easy-going, focused and stable – a few roommates and other friends, hardworking students mainly.

On occasions when Ellen had felt herself sink into the grips of depression – a sort of self oppression – she had basically always been able to work through it, blocking out what she needed to block out, until solutions came to her.

Maintaining balance took work, and so she paid attention to how she felt, if only to make note and then forget about it. She seemed able to make a go of things.

There was a great phrase she had recently come across by the Italian freedom fighter and socialist, Antonio Gramsci, who had spent years in jail for his troubles. One of his mottos was "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will." Ellen swore by that now.

She swore by optimism of the will, not of the intellect, because one needed to constantly question to know – especially in a society and culture full of so many lies, the only society and culture she knew directly.

Question (and answer) to learn. And be upbeat to move. Think and move. Move and think. Question and act. And vice versa.

Orwell's remark about the blindness of the privileged class, their determined retreat into obliviousness, their convenient and calamitous escape into "stupidity," or into simple callousness – there was a way in which that point could be challenged, Ellen thought.

Last summer it had been her experience that many members of the power class were far from stupid in a lot of ways, for they often kept busy and competed intensely for position and status and pride and even for knowledge, of sorts, usually technical.

And so they could be quick, frequently witty, well informed within certain channels, sometimes widely or deeply versed in surprising types of experience and information. They might also be somewhat well read, at least by common standards. Sometimes, too, they were athletically brilliant, which required a strong will and a certain type of intelligence and great mental discipline. So as far as Ellen could tell, the well-off were not necessarily as stupid as Orwell might have believed, in regard to England over half a century ago, and America today. Sure they dumbed themselves down in crucial ways related to ideology – but even that took real discipline, including the ability to filter out and block out real knowledge and crucial facts.

Ellen knew very little about England, and so could not

comment on the accuracy of Orwell's comments in the years leading up to World War II, but she could scarcely believe that at that time and in those circles the dynamics of commerce and government would much allow for the blanket charge of stupidity that Orwell threw out as if in some sort of macho challenge (even if as hyperbole it made perfect sense). The ruling sort could not be so comprehensively stupid, Ellen thought – though of course she did not know England – and probably Orwell did not mean to imply stupidity wholesale, even as the rulers were no doubt astoundingly and often willfully ignorant in certain self-imposed ways.

Or maybe the privileged didn't give a hoot – there like here, then like now. Which was it? Were they really stupid? Are we? Or did they simply not care? Do we? Maybe they just didn't care. And maybe that was the base of any idiocy too, of self deceit.

There were more than a few dim bulbs in Congress. Ellen had seen that first hand. Who had not? God help the republic. Wasn't that what a good citizen was supposed to do, pray for providence? That is, if one believed in both god and the republic, rather than, say, human potential and real democracy.

The lights went out in the library.

The fluorescent hum sizzled to nothing – darkness all around.

Ellen thought of her brother, felt a brush of death.

And she knew what had happened. She had missed the warnings and the library had closed.

She held Orwell's book.

She gave no thought to trying to get up and get out, since all around was pitch black and she was stuck in a corner deep in the cramped, convoluted stacks. She was half

afraid she would get hurt simply trying to step from the carrel.

She listened for sounds of anything, but even the air circulators were shutting down with a final thump and sigh.

The books in the stacks beside her seemed to take on a more solid weight in their invisible presence. She had always thought of the shelves as containing rows upon rows of minds. And worlds.

She knew she was trapped, locked in.

She did not mind the dark though, especially because she scarcely wished any longer to grapple face-to-face with Orwell tonight.

The library was closed for the next five hours.

As usual, she had smuggled water into the building in her backpack. That seemed a relief, even when she remembered there were water fountains, if she could find them.

Ellen had no desire to move at first.

Her thoughts shifted again to Aaron and she felt like she was being pushed down into the seat by huge blocks.

Never in his entire life would Aaron have come close to getting locked in a library.

She thought of the rest of her family, her mother especially, and the family gatherings that would always contain an emptiness in the future.

It was most painful to think of Aaron in relation to others. Think of him individually, and he could still seem alive.

Think of him in light of the family and the next gathering, and he was reduced to a void. Or the question of who he would have been.

The minutes stretched on. The library grew less dark as Ellen's eyes adjusted.

There appeared to be an emergency light somewhere around a corner.

Ellen thought of the circles she had been raised within, something of a mix of the privileged and not.

She could use all the smarts she could get, she realized now.

In high school she had dumbed down her vocabulary a bit, and maybe even in the process curtailed her curiosity somewhat as well, so as not to be snickered at and made to feel alien by some of her classmates, and not only by those whose families had remarkably little formal education, but also by those with a more literate background. Maybe especially by them.

She thought of what it meant to be smart. Smart people had a purpose, she thought. And more. They knew what they wanted and they worked forward.

She thought the people she had worked with in Washington DC the past summer were not dumb, not simply dumb.

Probably Orwell did not mean to be so sweeping in his statement, or maybe he was fond of hyperbole, juicy exaggeration, arresting extrapolation.

Wasn't that what gave energy to his famous novel 1984?

Regardless, Orwell had swept direct into her nerve center with his comments.

And it caused her to remember some key statistics in Andrew L. Shapiro's book, *We're Number One: Where America Stands and Falls in the New World Order*. If she looked it up, she knew what she would find. She knew she would find that compared to the top twenty major industrialized nations, the United States ranked last in humanitarian aid to developing countries but first in giving military "aid" to those same countries.

Meanwhile the US ranked last in spending on the poor, the aged, and the disabled in the US, and first in military spending.

And the US ranked number one in big homes, and number one in homelessness.

Number one in real wealth, and number one in unequal wealth distribution.

Number one in billionaires and number one in children and elderly in poverty.

Number one in executive salaries and number one in inequality of pay, and last in paid vacation days.

Last in voter turnout – maybe because there was no real choice in who to vote for between two business and military minded candidates from the only two parties that the big dollar voting system gave much of any chance of winning.

And the US ranked number one in UN dues unpaid and number one in Security Council vetoes since 1980 – since the US attitude was basically "Our way or we'll bomb your highway."

Number one in membership (by the population) in human rights groups but number one in not ratifying international human rights treaties (by the government).

Number one in ranking the importance of God in life and number one in murder, gun murder especially.

Number one in the murder of children. Number one in deaths by gun.

Number one in deaths by capital punishment.

Number one in incarceration.

Number one in percentage of the population who were victims of a crime.

Number one in spending on advertising and public relations per capita – much of it lies, manipulative half truths, or the encouragement of utter mindlessness.

Number one in total health spending but number 13 in public health spending.

Number one in the percentage of population without health insurance.

Number one in not offering paid maternity leave.  
Number one in infant mortality.

Number one in percentage of infants born at low birth weight.

Number one in death of children younger than five.

Number one in incidence of cancer among men.

Number one in incidence of breast cancer.

Number one in beef consumption per capita and number on in coronary bypass operations.

Number 15, out of 25, in life expectancy. Number one in belief in God, the devil, heaven, and hell.

Number one in fear and submission to those in authority.

Number one in private spending on education but near last in public spending on education.

Last in rewarding teachers.

There it was. The US – America – the supposed leader of the free world with the supposed model economy and social structure, especially as pronounced daily by politicians and the corporate media, and by corporate spokespeople, educators and other officials, was far from number one, often dead last, in health care, education, housing, environmental protection, safety, freedom, financial security, democracy, and peace.

Shapiro was not pulling these numbers out of a hat.

He took the time to look up the reality of social and personal health indicators.

Ellen found none of this in Senator Washburn's book, *An American Life* – Sam Washburn.

Nor were these facts commonly discussed in the media or even much in the business and government circles that shaped, ruled, bossed so much of the country.

Ellen had recently read *An American Life* with great disappointment, seeing in page after page willful denials, pitiful and horrific ignorance, false understandings of the country and the world that when coupled with the Senator's votes and actions, or lack thereof, often as not either harmed the people of the country, not to mention people of the world, or helped them too little.

In this way, the Senator Sam Washburn way – the official American way, by and large – the American people and much of the world were ruled as if by a legalized mafia in a manner that was increasingly catastrophic for the planet and people, and civilization itself.

It was left to unpaid and poorly paid or disorganized citizens to try to do some of the incredibly urgent and vast amount of work that was left undone or that was in fact brutally created in the first place by the systematic failings of the corporate economy and its high-dollar, cash-and-carry-on-to-the-next-election owners and rulers.

It could not have made Ellen more angry – it was all so obvious to her. Now.

Three years of college complete, a long time, yet Ellen felt she had entered only yesterday, or that the university had transformed itself overnight into another time, another place, another institution altogether, every bit as large and unknown as when she had first set foot on campus with what had felt like boundless exciting prospects ahead.

The coming summer would stretch long before her, she sensed. She could not go back to work in Senator Washburn's office or in any senator's office this year or

likely ever.

That much was clear, even though she and one of the Senator's daughters, her cousin Jamie Washburn, had grown close.

Ellen had thought there would be more open space in Washington DC, in a town constantly in transition, with ample room for new ideas, fresh perspectives, broad minds, a place that might more easily allow her the sort of flexibility and freedom she was beginning to feel she required. But she had discovered far less flexibility than she had expected. Too much was at stake in monied, entrenched positions.

It was books that opened worlds for Ellen.

She picked up the Orwell book again and then at random selected three more from the desk.

She took the pack with her pens, journal and water, and went carefully out of the carrel, inching toward the dim glow of the emergency light – her fingers brushing the edge of the stacks as she made her way carefully around a few corners, then arrived at the small circular blue light that shone magnetic on the wall, knee-high.

There Ellen sat on the floor and studied the books by the blue glow, marking in her journal until dawn.

# SOLDIERS

## SMALL ARMS PROTECTION I

War.

So this was it.

The rumors had been swirling for weeks when Aaron Thompson and the entire battalion were called into the base auditorium and orders were finally given. He and his best friend Juan Garza were to be sent into their first battle, joining tens of thousands of other soldiers.

The Colonel told them they would go to Kuwait from where they would launch an assault against Iraq. The Colonel told them they would get a chance to test themselves. The Colonel told them they would take down the enemy Saddam Hussein.

Aaron and Juan knew they were ready and could quickly become even more prepared, but Aaron had trouble getting as excited for battle as his friend Juan, who spoke of his desire for revenge for September 11, 2001, the mass murders, the attacks against the World Trade Center towers in New York City and against the Pentagon building in Washington DC.

While Juan Garza was ready to rock-n-roll, Aaron Thompson wondered what, if anything, Saddam Hussein had to do with Osama bin Laden, one of the masterminds of

the September 11 attacks.

By setting that thought aside, Aaron found it easier to share in Juan's enthusiasm. This was what they had joined the Army for, after all, to do something meaningful with their lives, to be part of something larger than themselves, to join a team like the ones they had been part of in high school. After graduation, they had both missed the excitement of sports, the energy and comradery, the coherency and purpose. They missed doing what they and their teammates were good at and enjoyed.

College was not for them – school was boring, frustrating. And the job scene was unpromising. Each in his own town and state, they had taken temporary jobs in restaurants and doing handiwork, but neither Aaron nor Juan felt like they were getting anywhere.

So they decided to move on and enlist in the Army where they found an instant paycheck, instant professionalism, instant benefits, instant security, instant purpose, challenges, excitement, respect, and plenty of travel.

There were drawbacks of course – you could get killed.

And you might have to go kill someone for some reason you might know next to nothing about, for real – a reason you might want to learn about even less.

They both trained hard and mainly saw the Army as an end in itself – a job, a destination, a place and life to belong to.

To Aaron, the Army gave him a chance to see other parts of the country and world. He had never wanted to test himself beyond the day-to-day work.

Even Juan would have been happy to stay out of battle. But now that they were called into action, Juan's perspective began to change. What was the point of being on a championship team like the Army, if you never got to play

in the championship game?

Juan began to look at the flag in a different way. No longer was it a dumb strip of cloth with a clunky design that he was forced to mouth meaningless words at to begin each school day. He felt more attached to it, the way he had felt toward his well-worn jerseys after long football and basketball seasons. It was intense. The flag really began to mean something to him now, and Juan knew it would grow even more intense once he and Aaron saw battle.

He brought it up with Aaron, how going overseas to Kuwait and Iraq was like going to the big game, and how they would do their part, do the job, and come home victorious. They would make themselves proud. They would do it for the team, for the Army, for the country, for their families, for themselves. They would be on the side that won and could not be beaten.

Aaron felt the same, for the most part, but he was less excited, more worried.

Like Juan he made fun of the petty rules, regulations and other shortcomings of which the Army had plenty.

In certain ways it seemed the Army and some officers did not really care about them. A surprising amount of the equipment was cheap, even unfit for battle, and so they were forced to spend their own money ordering better socks, canteens, knives, flashlights and other items from catalogues the guys passed around.

Leave was not always granted when it should be. Aaron had seen a marriage break up over the failure to grant leave at the appropriate time, and it turned the guy on the Army.

Some officers did not have great people skills either, but that was true anywhere, he figured.

Still, it seemed to Aaron that too many officers were in the Army because they couldn't make it on the outside, or

didn't want to.

You had to put up with them. Aaron was determined to make it work, battle or no battle, at least for now.

In the outside world, there was everyone else – civilians. Including, strangely, the war protesters. From time to time, Aaron felt curious about them, maybe because he hoped to avoid battle after all, and maybe too because he wondered whether or not the fight was really worth it, legitimate. His family supported him, as far as he knew, so that helped.

The way Aaron saw it, even if the protesters were right that Iraq was not much of a threat to the United States, it was better to be safe than sorry.

And wouldn't the people of Iraq be better off with Saddam Hussein removed from power?

So there did not seem to be much point to the protests. To Aaron they were just something that happened, like the rain, coming and going almost at random, with little or no apparent organization and structure. Where was the discipline? It appeared the protesters could hardly be counted on even for their own cause.

If, instead, the protesters could put together some sort of uniform and turn out day after day, come hell or high water, with tactics and strategies that had visible effect – if they could do that, then maybe they would begin to get people's attention.

But the impression they made on Aaron when he caught a glimpse of them on the news was slight at best, except for once when they put together some sort of drum corps.

That was impressive.

Aaron could have listened to the drums all day.

It seemed even the police were unnerved when the drummers passed by loud, fast, precise.

It was not the sort of drumming you often heard in

school bands, plodding, methodical, constrained by other instruments. It was bad-ass snappy smart and strong.

Aaron almost slipped a smile watching the drummers on the news in a video store.

He expected to read about it in the papers from then on, how the protesters' drum corps was growing in size and beginning to lead the marches, but he never saw another thing on it, which was too bad, since at least the drumming was exciting, a show of real strength, commitment and discipline, planning and power.

They looked professional, and that was something to respect. It made him feel better about the protesters – that at least some of them had discipline. Their whip-fast drumming gave him an image and sound he might even take into battle.

You could use it.

Otherwise, Aaron never thought at length about the protesters, which was about as much, he figured, as they thought about him.

While Juan wished the protesters would understand what the military was fighting for, Aaron would have been happy to figure out that little detail for himself. He heard so many different rationales that it made him wonder. Why a particular reason, one week, and then another reason, the next?

Were they out to stop Iraq from building up stores of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction?

Or was it a mission of self-defense?

Had Saddam Hussein been too smart for US-UN weapons inspectors?

Or was it a humanitarian mission, as Aaron heard next, a mission to overthrow the tyrant Hussein and install a

democratic government?

And could that even be done?

Was it possible to make a real democracy that would be at all friendly to the US? Or would Iraq simply grow closer to Iran because of the religion they shared, as some of the protesters claimed? "You break it, you buy it," some people warned, while others seemed to be saying, "You break it, Iran owns it."

And then yet another reason came up, from out of nowhere it seemed to Aaron, that the military was being sent into Iraq to cut off Hussein's funding of Hamas in Lebanon, to try to help solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Was that the purpose of the mission?

If so, would the people of Iraq greet the US soldiers as liberators, if true democracy was not then even the main goal of the mission?

What would prevent the US military from being seen as occupiers? And is that what they would be?

And what about the 14 permanent military bases that the US was planning to build in Iraq. Aaron had accidentally turned up this bit of information in an internet search. He couldn't find much other information, and he wondered what that was about.

What if the attack against Iraq failed to capture Hussein and the other warlords like the US attack against Afghanistan and the Taliban had failed to capture bin Laden and all the leaders of the Taliban? Or what if they caught Hussein, but not everyone else?

And if there really were weapons of mass destruction, what was to stop Iraqis from hiding them from US troops? Or what was to stop them from shipping any weapons and materials ahead of time all over the Middle East and the world?

Aaron hoped the US attack against Iraq was neither immoral nor stupid. If it was immoral, he hoped it was not stupid. And if it was stupid, he hoped it was not immoral. But if it were both immoral and stupid – he knew he could hardly comprehend what that meant.

To Aaron's understanding, in talking with soldiers coming back from Afghanistan, that country was as much a mess, out of control and violent, after the attack as it had been before, with the tribal warlords competing for rule amid chaos and with the Taliban beginning to return to power. Bin Laden had escaped. What was the point of going into a bad place and turning it into a sea of chaos for which the US and every individual soldier would then be held responsible by the local population? Wasn't that what had happened in Vietnam?

Aaron wondered if he was caught in a criminal war.

He thought he understood the point as far as he himself was concerned. He would be a one-man ambassador for order, for decency, for peace. He would set an example, and he had confidence that most of his fellow soldiers at least would attempt to do the same, if at all possible.

And they would have to hope and pray that the politicians and generals and officers did not do anything too careless and put them in hopeless situations where every option looked bad. Aaron would be the first to admit that he was no freaking genius, and he hoped that the generals and the other officers who led them understood that about themselves as well. They were no freaking geniuses, but if there was some genius and sensible officer out there somewhere, Aaron hoped he would step forward and do all he could do to see that everything got done right.

Aaron had his doubts, but he kept quiet. It was not a soldier's responsibility to think about such things.

Or was it?

It was not a soldier's place to know all the larger issues or even to question those who did know.

Wasn't that a citizen's obligation? A civilian citizen, not a soldier citizen? Wasn't that the way it should be?

If all the intelligence experts, and politicians, and businesspeople could not figure out the world, then what hope did a mere soldier have of being able to know the difference between fact and fiction?

It seemed ridiculous to even try.

And yet from time to time, Aaron did try, because he knew his job was more than a job. It was life, his life, a huge part of it, of who he was now and who he might become.

Aaron felt he had to have some strong idea of what he was fighting for. He wanted to act in good conscience and on the best of intelligence. After all, people, organizations, whole countries made mistakes. And governments and other powers-that-be often lied.

Aaron felt he could only hope that anything he did would not be lethal and unable to be repaired.

He would try to be honest and as careful as possible, while taking care of himself, his buddies, and his team first and foremost.

So Aaron vowed. And he prepared for battle.

Meanwhile, he did more research on the internet into the reasons for the war.

The battalion shipped to Kuwait and set up a base of operations near the border of Iraq, which became at times a nightmare, not the sort of thing that Aaron was inclined to write home about. He was embarrassed about feeling afraid before he had even seen combat.

During the days, Aaron found himself almost totally

sheathed in armor, often wearing his helmet like the others, also his flak jacket lined with SAPIs (small arms protection I), ceramic plates. Aaron never complained about wearing the jacket, especially since due to a shortage, some of the guys had to wear the heavier metal plates that could not even stop a high-powered round.

The sand storms were incredible. The battalion members joked that they were on the moon. Aaron wondered if Kuwait had always been this way or if an earlier war had destroyed more hospitable terrain. He remembered something about the Romans sowing the fields with salt in times past, in ancient times, in this ancient land.

Or maybe it was an environmental disaster, something simple yet devastating like overgrazing.

How much disaster could a land and its peoples take? He wondered about the suffering here in the past and felt that this was a land that he would give a lot to get far away from right now.

The sand was everywhere, a plague, like the blistering heat and so Aaron felt he was living in the Stephen King novels he was reading, where some implacable angry force, mysterious in nature, was determined to make a person's life a living hell, or to end it altogether.

One thing was clear, the desert did not want them here.

Whether the people did or not, he had no idea.

His officers told him that they would be welcomed by the people, but Aaron knew what he knew for real, and he knew he did not, could not know that yet.

Aaron read a lot, the horror novels that he asked his brother to send, because someone else's horror, even if it was only fiction, made him feel less alone, gave him some sort of advantage in his predicament, as compared to the hapless

characters in the novels.

At least he had the whole military with serious weapons and strategy to protect him, which was more than most of the characters of Stephen King had.

Aaron was grateful to the reading for taking him away from the world and from the creeping weird sense of boredom and nausea that grew as the training lessened, due to the environmental headaches and the limited number of spare parts.

Aaron saw the horror novels too as training for what might come. No matter how terrible or bizarre the situation might get, Aaron was determined to push on, not totally unlike the way in which he went steadily through the big novels.

He worried about Gulf War Syndrome – which he had read up on a little after hearing a few soldiers talk about it in the States.

Supposedly thousands of veterans had died following the first Gulf War ten years ago, and tens or even hundreds of thousands had fallen ill. Many were permanently plagued or disabled, and who knew from what?

It seemed unclear, and there were charges against the military of cover-ups and withheld information, and now there were websites and organizations trying to figure out the problem and make it more well known.

What had caused all the postwar illnesses, for real? Military vaccinations had been blamed, along with low levels of toxic chemicals. But one of the most worrisome things to Aaron that a lot of the groups pointed to was the three hundred tons of depleted uranium that had been left in the region by the US. Aaron worried about all the rounds of DU ammunition that would be fired into buildings and

tanks and scattered on the battlefield during the coming conflict.

The stuff was toxic, even radioactive, and Aaron resented the fact that he had hardly been given any warning about it by the Army.

Doing his own reading, Aaron found out that in 1996 the United Nations had classified DU ammunition as an illegal weapon of mass destruction, but the US continued to use it despite the UN resolution.

Aaron knew next to nothing about where it would most likely be used and found, or how to protect himself if he came across it or was forced to operate – let alone camp or patrol – in areas where it lay about, or was likely to have leached into the soil and water.

Back in the States, Aaron had read that after the first Gulf War – which included Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm – as of May 2002, the Veterans Administration reported that apart from the 760 casualties of those two operations, "an additional 8,306 soldiers had died and 159,705 were injured or ill as a result of service connected 'exposures' suffered during the war."

And amazingly, "the VA revealed that 206,861 veterans, almost a third of General Norman Schwarzkopf's entire army, had filed claims for medical care, compensation, and pension benefits based on injuries and illnesses caused by combat in 1991." And then "after reviewing the cases, the agency classified 168,011 applicants as 'disabled veterans'," and stated that "in light of these deaths and disabilities, the casualty rate for the first Gulf War might actually be a staggering 29.3 percent."

Aaron read about other studies that found the casualty rate to be even higher than this one, the government's own study.

Plus, Aaron came across another article about Gulf War illness and depleted uranium that so stunned him he printed it off and sealed the pages in plastic and carried them with him wherever he went.

There never seemed to be a good time to talk about it, but he intended to hang onto the article and bring it into Iraq so that if he and his teammates ever encountered depleted uranium or if he felt they were in danger of it, he would have something to show them, to prod them to be careful.

They were all in this together. And unfortunately, it seemed that just being in the arena of operations put everyone at risk in a way that not too much could be done about.

Aaron felt that to be the damned thing of it all, and he began to worry more about what exactly he had gotten himself into.

In his tent one night, he pulled out the papers and read them over again. One was an article based on the work of a British journalist, John Pilger, who had interviewed Dr. Al-Ali, a cancer specialist at a hospital in Basra, Iraq. Dr. Al-Ali was also a member of Britain's Royal College of Physicians.

"Before the Gulf War," the first Gulf War, the Iraqi doctor said, "we had only three or four deaths in a month from cancer. Now it's 30 to 35 patients dying every month, and that's just in my department. That is a 12-fold increase in cancer mortality. Our studies indicate that 40 to 48 per cent of the population in this area will get cancer – in five years' time to begin with, then long afterwards. That's almost half the population. Most of my own family now have cancer, and we have no history of the disease. We don't know the precise source of the contamination, because

we are not allowed to get the equipment to conduct a proper survey, or even test the excess level of radiation in our bodies. We strongly suspect depleted uranium, which was used by the Americans and British in the Gulf War right across the southern battlefields. Whatever the cause, it is like Chernobyl here; the genetic effects are new to us."

When Dr. Al-Ali was asked what he says to people who deny the connection between depleted uranium and physical ailments, he answered, "How much proof do they want? There is every relation between congenital malformation and depleted uranium. Before 1991, we saw nothing like this at all. If there is no connection, why have these things not happened before? I have studied what happened in Hiroshima. It is almost exactly the same here; we have an increased percentage of congenital malformation, an increase of malignancy, leukemia, brain tumors – the same."

One thing was for sure, Aaron Thompson did not want any of these diseases hitting him and his buddies, and what came next in the article was even more frightening.

A physicist from the US Army, Professor Doug Rokke told the reporter, "I am like many people in southern Iraq. I have 5,000 times the recommended level of radiation in my body. Most of my team are now dead."

The article concluded that what happened in the Gulf was "a form of nuclear warfare," and that the fourteen-year embargo against Iraq, sponsored by the United Nations Security Council and supported by the US for over a decade, did not allow into the country the equipment needed to decontaminate.

When Colonel Doug Rokke criticized NATO commanders for not doing enough to protect their troops from DU, he was basically fired by the Pentagon.

And now here were Aaron and his buddies getting ready to fight and live in the land of depleted uranium.

It reminded Aaron of Stephen King's novel *The Tommyknockers*, in which the people living in Haven, Maine, find something from outer space buried in a backyard that gives the townspeople increased powers of mind and body – at first – until they start to experience the horrible side effects: frequent menstrual flows, loss of teeth and hair, the salting of skin – all symptoms of radiation poisoning.

The main character Jim Gardener comes to realize that this power that gives the people of Haven new abilities to act and create does not give them the ability to actually understand what all is going on.

They build and use incredible devices but they do not know exactly what they are doing and are unaware of many harmful side effects. And later, some of them do not necessarily want to know.

Could that be like the Army, Aaron worried, the Navy, the Air Force raining down depleted uranium on other countries but horribly poisoning and killing its own soldiers in the process, not to mention the people of the country under attack, for years to come?

Aaron understood that *The Tommyknockers* was supposed to be an allegory warning against the dangers of nuclear power – a seemingly inexhaustible and powerful energy source but with extremely dangerous side effects.

He understood that only too well.

Surely there were precautions being taken, Aaron hoped.

After all, the difference between Haven and the Army was that in Haven the people were not organized. They had few group responsibilities, and not a lot of working

knowledge and coordination – in some ways like the American public at large.

Whereas in government, business, and the military, the number of standard operation procedures and the degree of organization and systematization were intense.

People were specifically trained and focused to solve problems, the major ones at least – so Aaron believed, and hoped, for his own sake and those of his buddies. And also for the people of Iraq – the people he and his buddies were supposed to liberate.

But what did it say, really, for the quality of safety measures, if Aaron felt forced to carry around secretly in his flak jacket (tucked into one of the pouches where the SAPI plates were inserted) the crucial warnings about depleted uranium?

What did it imply about their degree of safety, that he did not feel free to much discuss these concerns even with his best friend Juan?

Maybe all the soldiers in the Army were somehow dangerously separated from each other, just like regular civilians.

And maybe the soldiers, like the protesters, would get more done for themselves if they had more soldier-to-soldier organization, both in the army, and independent of it too.

What would that be like? Did the soldiers need some kind of union? More say in what went on? Was that even thinkable?

Aaron felt danger everywhere.

He wondered what it would take for him to be able to talk seriously about some of his deepest concerns in the military simply with his best friend, let alone with anyone

else in the squad.

How could he do it without being brushed off, laughed at, or scorned, or worse?

If it were true that soldiers could do nothing about such large concerns, was that in part because, immediately upon enlisting, they were trained, in an often unstated sort of way, to not talk and not think in any detail about what they knew and valued most but only to focus on what the Army brass valued most?

And what exactly did the Army brass value most when you got right down to it?

Aaron was under no illusions.

He tried not to be at least.

May we be forgiven – Aaron thought to himself on more than one occasion when he witnessed some brazen macho grandstanding, or some overt display of arrogance, or some subtle or blatant racism among the officers, his fellow soldiers or, worse, himself.

May we be forgiven, he thought, if we know not what we do.

There was one other slip of paper that Aaron carried around too, containing a few words he had seen before shipping out from the states, the words of a marine, quoted in an article.

It was a famous quote from Marine Lieutenant General Smedley Butler, winner of two congressional Medals of Honor, who wrote in 1933, "I spent thirty-three years and four months in active military service.... And during that period I spent most of my time as a high-class muscle-man for big business, for Wall Street, and the bankers.... Thus, I helped make Mexico and especially Tampico safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and

Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street.... In China I helped to see to it that Standard Oil went its way unmolested."

It made Aaron wonder if he was here in Iraq at the command of corporate America for the loot – namely oil – this time too?

He would not be surprised, now, if that was how it came out in the wash.

And if the former Lieutenant General could be open about such things, maybe Aaron could be some day too.

Some day.

Or maybe he had only done so much research right before deployment because he was simply afraid of going to war and was looking for a way out.

Nevertheless, he had found what he had found.

The thing was – now that he was so deep into the operation – Aaron could not take such doubts to heart, not really.

He could not side with the protesters here in Kuwait. He could scarcely even secretly cheer them on.

Where would that leave him?

Where did it leave him?

It left Aaron Thompson a soldier in the US Army.

He wondered if he had misled his brother Mike about one thing. Maybe he had been justified, though. He told Mike that he read the Stephen King novels as comedy – which was only half true because Aaron read the books mainly as horror stories that took him away on the one hand and helped him put things in perspective on the other.

The only comedy that Aaron saw in the books, aside

from the incidental humor that King threw in, was the whole concept of creating tales so monstrous that they were a delight. How could that be? A monstrous delight? The notion was ludicrous, and yet there it was. And here he was, in a similarly crazy position, on the verge of the Iraqi battlefields, and the whole thing did sometimes feel as exciting as it did monstrous. It was all forward momentum and go, go, go. That is, when you weren't just sitting around.

What had he ever done to anyone to deserve this crazy situation?

The invasion was supposed to be noble but mostly it just felt nuts when he thought about everything all at once, which he tried to avoid.

He concentrated instead on not getting mixed up, on not becoming bored and slow.

Except, he could not help but wonder – was this invasion the real price of his own freedom, and his family's freedom?

Aaron knew that there were people back in the States who had a lot more freedom – more money – than he was likely to ever experience.

So why was he here?

For the most noble of reasons?

As a savior, a martyr, a liberator?

Or just because that was the way the powers that be wanted things to be?

Was that why he was here? Just because?

Because of them? For them? By them?

And not for him and his kind?

And who were "they" exactly, if not the owners?

And who was he himself exactly, if not the owned?

Lose you illusions, save your skin.

Aaron felt he knew the score, as far as it was worth knowing – his knowing – for the time being.

He tried to know the score – more and more, lately.

Himself, personally, at this point, in the very moment, he was here because it was his job to be here. And so he tried to feel the brotherhood of his fellow soldiers, the brotherhood that was here for him.

There were the steady pay and benefits to remember too, the career opportunity, and the sense of being part of something exciting and larger than himself.

He had to go along now no matter what he thought and felt.

So he thought, and felt.

Aaron figured it would be foolish to dwell too much on questions about the war here in the moonfields of Kuwait, but the more he thought about the articles in his hands, the more doubts, the more concerns pressed him.

He tucked the papers into a plastic bag and slipped it into his body armor vest, placing it between a SAPI plate and his body.

The SAPIs were expensive and could be hard to come by, and though he hated having to swelter within the jacket virtually all the time, he was comforted by the extra bulk around his ribs.

Hauling shoulder pads during football season had never been the most pleasant thing in the world either, but it was worthwhile, since that was what it took to protect yourself, to win the game, do the job.

Probably, he guessed, probably it would not take very long at all, this war against Iraq, this work here in the desert. He figured it would not be long – he hoped so

anyway – until he was headed home from Iraq, the battles won, the job complete.

## PUNCH DRUNK

Juan Garza staggered through the days after his buddy Aaron Thompson was killed in southern Iraq.

Juan went where he was told and did what he was told, but he hardly seemed to be part of himself.

He and Aaron had been sent from America to conquer Iraq, and that was what Juan intended to do now more than ever.

On the first big sweep through Baghdad designed to break the back of the Iraqi resistance, Juan Garza shot up everything in sight, like everyone else. He was half scared-to-death, half outraged. Gone were any thoughts of feeling sorry for the Iraqi fighters, some of whom he understood had been forced by paramilitaries to fight the Americans or have their families killed, and others who were obviously pitifully prepared to resist the American advance, especially those who came running out firing in packs at American armor they could scarcely dent.

The difference between Iraqi bravery and fear and American bravery and fear was that the Iraqis' convictions and emotions often led to inescapably suicidal consequences given the difference in firepower. What could Juan do? He had orders. And there he was in their land where they were trying to kill him. He did not hesitate –

especially after the unlucky rocket-propelled grenade that killed Aaron, after which Juan went out of his way to shoot up everything and everyone, out of fear, in revenge, on orders. On killer autopilot.

Soon Juan was having trouble with his thinking, how obsessive it became. He wanted to kill so much of the world. He trusted no one. If he blasted a few innocent Iraqis at this point, well, that was too bad. He felt he could hardly be blamed.

Excessive force gave him his best chance at survival, he thought. Only an overwhelming and even indiscriminate use of force was going to secure the occupation and end this thing quickly, he figured. The more he fired and killed, the sooner the military would get the fight won – it seemed obvious. It seemed obvious that for the time being his purpose and quite likely his salvation in life lay in shooting up all the world, and so he did.

How he had survived the unexpected hail of bullets and the blast that killed Aaron was impossible to say.

He and Aaron had been sitting side by side in the Humvee troop transport when the ambush smashed into them, and before Juan even had a chance to return fire it was over – Aaron had been torn up, blood-soaked. There wasn't even much of a firefight. When the US troops opened fire the Iraqis scattered behind buildings and were gone.

Aaron met Juan's eyes, briefly, or appeared to. They stripped him to the waist and the medic worked on his chest but could not save him.

Afterwards, Juan went through the SAPI plate pouches in Aaron's armored vest looking for the contraband they had joked about storing there along with any valuables they would want the other to remove if either went down. Juan himself had yet to acquire anything worth hiding and he

was not aware that Aaron had either. Still, he went through the flak jacket and soon came to a sealed plastic bag with some papers inside. Juan stuffed the bag and papers into a pocket of his own.

In the days and weeks to come, Juan stayed alone as much as possible, retreating deep inside himself.

His buddy was dead, and so in part was he.

One thing, Juan decided, he would get close to no one from here on in. And he held to that. The others kept their distance mainly. Whenever anyone showed themselves to be open to any kind of compassion or reflection, whether related to Aaron or not, Juan backed off. It was the guys who he had least in common with that seemed safest now. He could talk with them, especially in brief exchanges – no danger of intimacy.

Juan did not know what to make of the articles sealed in plastic that he had pulled out of Aaron's flak jacket. He read them over twice and doubted if he should believe any of it.

For all he knew some reporter had made up everything. Or maybe someone was lying.

Still it worried him. He was unsure whether or not he should do anything with the articles – turn them in to his commander, or maybe send them to Aaron's family with a note of explanation about how and where he had found them.

The main article described the dangers of DU – depleted uranium – especially the DU dust left over from exploded US shells that were coated with this toxic and radioactive armor-piercing material, as the article explained it. Juan wondered if any of the information in the article was true about how radioactive and dangerous DU was. He wasn't

sure he wanted to know.

First of all, what could he do about it, even if it was true?

Second of all, he had a war to fight.

People were watching him – his commander, the medics, the other guys too because they all knew he had been close to Aaron.

Juan figured he had to buckle up and button in extra tight.

He had to be the perfect soldier, for his own sake and for that of everyone else. He felt he had to be at least a little sharper than usual to prevent himself from getting down and to get away with keeping to himself as much as he did now.

There was no time for some worrisome words from the flak jacket of his dead buddy.

Juan kept the papers.

He figured he could always return them to Aaron's family later if it ever seemed the right thing to do. Until then he would not go exploring in bombed out buildings and tanks where there might be DU dust. And he could tell the others to be careful. Basically, he decided to not think about it too much. The mosquitoes around Baghdad were probably twice as dangerous as any depleted uranium, for all he knew.

Juan resealed the papers in plastic.

He felt conscious of defying fate by tucking the plastic into his own flak jacket. In honor of Aaron, he told himself. In honor of Aaron, Juan tucked the papers inside his body armor vest and patrolled the streets of Baghdad.

Within six months, Juan and his team were rotated to the States, giving him a chance to visit home.

His family was proud of him, while some of his old friends had mixed opinions – they told him they admired his courage but thought he fought for pointless politics and big shot business interests and not much else.

Juan could feel sorry for them. He told his friends about ordinary Iraqis waving them on and burning pictures of Saddam Hussein.

A few times he had caught Iraqi youths making fun of the soldiers behind their backs, but he did not tell his friends this.

He told his friends that he fought to make America secure and Iraq free.

Still, it was impossible to ignore that opinion about the US conquest was definitely mixed, and not only in his hometown.

His parents tried to help him keep a level head about the views of some people, telling him that no one owed him anything but respect. And he got that respect, he felt – sometimes he was surprised at how much. It could even come across as overdone. Although at other times the gestures or comments were obviously measured.

Still, the respect of others was not enough for Juan. He demanded that he have the respect of himself, too, for himself, for what he had done and would have to do. He had to feel right by his own mind, first and foremost. But there hardly seemed to be time to think about it. He was due back in Iraq in days.

After Aaron had been killed, Juan wrote a letter to the Thompsons telling them a lot about their son and the times they had spent together.

He tried to keep a certain distance in the letter, and was unsure if he would ever feel comfortable going to meet

them.

He never mentioned the papers he had taken from Aaron's flak jacket. He was going to hang onto those, for the time being.

The last time he tried to read through them, the words seemed to bunch up on the page and pound up at him as if someone were flashing strobes into his eyes.

He tried to keep the words steady and read all the way to the end one more time, but then he gave up and set the papers down.

Juan felt the way he had in those first weeks and months after Aaron had been killed – punch drunk.

He put the papers back in the plastic bag and stored it away.

He decided to let it be, to focus on remembering the good times with Aaron.

That was the best thing, Juan believed, to remember, to celebrate all they had shared – however disturbed those memories might now be by Aaron's death in the distant land of Iraq.

Then Juan changed his mind.

The day before he returned to Iraq, he took out the plastic bag and the papers of Aaron – and he set them on fire.

He watched the flames. And he let it all burn. "Burn," he said, and he let it burn.

## WASHBURN

The whole wide world pushed with awesome intimacy into not only the professional public lives of ruling Americans like Senator Sam Washburn but into their private lives as well.

This fact was made especially clear to the Senator one day during his third term, when – a few weeks after the US launched its March 2003 ground invasion of Iraq – Sam's daughter Jamie walked into his office and all but accused him of the killing of Aaron Thompson – a US soldier from Senator Washburn's district who had not survived the first weeks of the invasion. Not just any soldier – a relative. Aaron was his cousin Carolyn's son – the brother of Jamie's cousin and friend, Ellen Thompson.

"Rocket propelled grenade," Jamie told him. "Roadside ambush."

Ellen had served as an intern on Sam's staff the previous summer, an efficient young woman whom his daughter had grown close to, Sam knew.

Sam had first learned of Aaron's death from a military buddy who had given him a confidential heads-up this morning. Sam had kept the news to himself.

Now in the face of his daughter, Sam lowered his eyes and brought a hand to his head. Jamie stared steadily at

him.

He got the message. His daughter was no longer in full agreement with his policy on Iraq, if she ever had been.

"How?" Sam asked.

"RPG," Jamie said, again.

Jamie had problems with a number of his other positions, as well, Sam knew. In fact, Sam understood that long before the death of Aaron, Jamie had been struggling with whether or not she should continue on in her present capacity as staff aide.

She could easily get other work around the capital, Sam knew. A couple of liberal environmental organizations had expressed interest in bringing her on board to lobby the Senator and others.

Sam cracked a Brazil nut.

He liked to snack on them in the afternoon.

He took his time peeling the shell, tossing it bit by bit into the trash.

"Carolyn..." Sam trailed off, thinking of Aaron's mother. He would have to call her.

"It will wipe her out," Jamie said.

Sam doubted that. But it was a horrible thing any way you looked at it.

He had expected his daughter to turn around and leave soon after having delivered the message. But there she stood.

Sam redirected his gaze to the miniature titanium globe on his desk that had been gifted to him by a Nigerian oil executive who worked for Texaco.

"Bomb them," Sam said.

"Excuse me?" his daughter asked.

Sam shook his head. "Nothing."

He spun the globe absently with his little finger,

watching it whirl on a greased axis, the continents a blur, the axis invisible, fitted precisely into the semi-circular frame.

On the grave question of invading and occupying Iraq, Sam wondered if he had done the right thing.

He had never felt wholehearted about the official US position because he had always been skeptical of the many reasons given for the war. He understood especially that the US was no humanitarian entity that went out of its way to sacrifice its wealth and soldiers for the good of other countries.

Sam understood that in reality such huge sacrifices were made only on behalf of national self interest, or what was called that, what was widely said to be its two main aspects – security and wealth – mainly wealth.

Sam had never fully believed that Iraq represented an imminent threat to the US.

Like many people, he had suspected other motives behind the administration's decision to attack – oil and power – as made evident by the plans and efforts to put fourteen permanent military bases in Iraq, along with the world's largest embassy, to be staffed and serviced by about three thousand people. All this to gain control over Iraq's vast oil wealth, the second largest oil reserves in the world.

Of course, to openly say that the war was about oil and power would be political suicide, his own, Sam believed.

So Sam proceeded as usual, in order to live to fight another day, in order to keep his job. He thought it was worth it. He felt he was right. It just so happened that it was often right not to be in the right – given the system, as Sam saw it. Even as a senator, especially as a senator, Sam knew he had to toe the line in the sand on issues that mattered to the people who financed, year in and year out, his

necessarily never-ending re-election campaign.

And so, like virtually every other member of Congress, Senator Sam Washburn continued to give at least tacit support to the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

His daughter might not like it, but that was her problem, especially since the very existence of her job depended on Sam's policy on Iraq, and on other such issues. So Sam believed, and with no little justification.

It was not that the Senator was untroubled by his position in regard to the current military situation in Iraq, especially since his own war experience had been traumatic. During and after the fighting in Vietnam, Sam had questioned – privately at first, and then publicly – the entire basis of that war, and any war. How could he not, after what he had seen and taken part in? How could he not question the slaughter of millions and the destruction of entire lands? Most people did question that war, at the least, and Sam was little different. He was human, after all. And the more that Sam was not careful about letting the course of his thoughts flow, the more dangerously an army of memories flooded from the past, from the days when he had first enlisted, when his future had begun to take much of its lasting shape. Valves in his mind that had not been opened in decades were tested again by the writing of his book, by his daughter Jamie, by the allegations of atrocity leveled against him these past couple years.

And so Sam wrote his book.

US Senator Sam Washburn wrote the book of his life, by his life, for his life. He tried to keep it simple and tell it straight, the prosaic story of his past in his memoir, *An American Life – Sam Washburn*. He wrote to defend himself from the accusations of massacre directed at him regarding the circumstances of his time as an officer in

Vietnam.

All the while, Sam had to fight off the tugging in his mind, the restless stirring of the ghost of a book that he would never write, though he might think it from time to time, just as he thought how to avoid writing it, which he did automatically for the most part, having trained himself to the point where he scarcely needed to consciously consider what he did not want to understand or even what he did not know for sure but might not want to know if he were to go ahead and reflect on how much he would rather not think about in the first place.

This was how exacting Senator Sam Washburn's mind could become when really pressed.

This was how precise he forced himself to be to avoid considering and caring about certain compelling facts, which took real brain power, real discipline to be able to deny some of the most important reality of life, some of his own buried dangerous lines of thought that could threaten and destroy much of the intellectual and material foundation upon which he had built his life.

It took an almost uncanny sense of what thoughts were admissible in the first place, and what must be ruled out of bounds entirely for Sam to be able to reflect safely on what he had done in Vietnam, or what he may have done, or may not have done.

In certain ways, he did not want to know what he might think he did know about what he had done, or could have or should have done, or not done. Mostly he did not see the point of remembering in that direction, wherever it might lead. Emphasize the positive, about himself especially – that priority served as his guide in thinking. At least this was what he might think he thought if he ever allowed himself to consider it much in the first place.

Which he did not.

But if he ever were to fully reflect on what he may have done or not done in Vietnam, he might vividly recall the three women, two elderly men, and five children he gunned down and ordered his platoon to gun down, in self defense, as Sam had chosen to think of it at the time – though all those killed were unarmed and essentially captive.

Self defense, that was the idea that enabled Sam and his team to destroy, to carry out such slaughter up close and personal. Self defense – buttressed by the idea that the best defense is a good offense. So Sam thought.

And though Sam did not think about it unless forced to, when he did go over it, he would be in the right, he felt, to believe that his soldier's role was a relatively minor one, that the responsibility for killing in war lay mostly not with soldiers, not even with the field officers (such as himself, formerly) but with the generals, and even more with appointed and elected leaders such as he had now become, and that the responsibility for killing in war lay more with the individuals and organizations who were most active in causing and allowing war party leaders to be elected.

Just so, he excused his past, whatever past might have been.

Whatever Sam had done in Vietnam, whatever that was and however he thought about it or avoided it now, he felt he had acted as he had because the individual leaders and the powerful organizations that shaped the US system of rule had made it possible, allowed it, encouraged it, demanded it. Any such massacre that Sam had been involved in was no uncommon occurrence – and so those massacres, as with the overall slaughter of millions in Vietnam, mostly civilians, were the responsibility ultimately and primarily of the dominant political and economic

establishment, not the scared and frenzied soldiers on the ground.

Not so much, anyway, Sam thought.

Sure, as a field officer Sam could not escape some of the responsibility. But so many officials so much higher than himself had put him in that position. They had trained him to kill.

They ordered him. They expected him. They encouraged him. They coached him. They pushed him. They made him. They turned him loose, told him the fate of his country depended on him, on the killing. And they paid him. Ultimately they honored him. They decorated him. Then through business, governmental and other political channels, they encouraged him to join the power structure at higher levels. They supported him in government in exchange for his support of their politics and businesses, and he became like them, an administrator of power, although in a number of ways he told himself that he was different, and that the wars subsequent to Vietnam were different, that Vietnam was not so bad as he had once come to think – if he were to think about it much at all, which he did not. But if he were –

Any killing that Sam Washburn was responsible for in Vietnam, no matter how it may have looked, any killing was carried out in self-defense. Sam had to believe that.

At least, he had to believe that it could be viewed that way, that it could be justified or appear to be justified.

Sam could plausibly explain it, if he had to, he was sure, or at least he could explain the events so that the worst was plausibly deniable. He could both explain away any unjustified killing and deflect responsibility up through the chain of command. Deflecting responsibility would be his last line of defense, if necessary.

He felt he could do that. He felt he had a right to.

And to avoid having to resort wholly to this final line of defense when he was confronted by allegations of massacre, US Senator Sam Washburn wrote his memoir, *An American Life*, in an attempt to show himself as he wanted to be seen, as a son of America, as a creature of his country, a creation of his upbringing, not as the cold-blooded killer he was accused of being, not as the killer he was determined to not write and not think about. At least not directly.

Self defense. Even when on attack, this was how a soldier operated in battle. Any threat, or potential threat, even if it was not imminent might best be eliminated in advance, in fact must be eliminated for the sake of the country, the team, for the sake of mom, dad, apple pie, and all that was good about America.

Kill, kill, kill – take no chances and call it self defense, however it looked. Call it the *modus operandi*. Taught, instilled, drilled, it was what troops accepted and came to believe. And then the citizens in a nation at war, or one that saw itself as perpetually at war.

Kill, kill, kill and call it self defense.

Of course there had to be limits. A soldier and nation could not just kill anyone, which, morality aside, would be counterproductive. And everything could not be reasonably explained away as self defense. A mistake, yes – as long as no one could prove malicious intent. In that case, virtually any act of violence could be called a tragic mistake. A bit of plausible deniability was all it took. (Or even not so plausible.) As long as a soldier or nation could (pretend to) plausibly deny malicious intent or negligence in the face of incriminating facts, or deny knowledge of likely consequences, then a person or militarized government or a lethal corporation could do just about

anything in the world that it wanted to do and get away with it, at least in some limited (and fraudulent) legal and moral sense, if not in the minds of everyone, or even in the minds of the many. You could get away with it, if there were no stronger power than your country, if you were the world superpower, or had the full support of the world superpower. Officially then you were in the clear. You might most likely win reelection too, due to a million different confusions and lies. And that was how an effective system operated – for, of, and by the owners – a system that made individual representatives virtually superfluous. And since Sam understood the situation and the system, he thought, Why not me? Why should I allow myself to be replaced if I can at all help it – no matter my past, no matter what I scarcely need think of?

Sam Washburn fought the accusations of massacre for his seat at the table. He fought for his reputation. He fought for his personal way of life. He fought for his family. He faced the media. He ran for reelection. He wrote his book. Sam Washburn was a winner and determined to remain one. Falling down was not in the game plan, never had been. No allegations of atrocity would stop him, true or not. Why should they? What difference did the alleged crimes make one way or another, these many years past?

Sam felt he had been caught in a system of war that was like a force of nature. And now that he had aged and gained distance from the battlefield he believed he could see that the system was not entirely destructive. In any case, it was the prevailing structure of power and rule, within which Sam had no intention of giving up his niche.

As Sam thought of it, most everything the US had done in Vietnam was done in self defense. Likewise, self defense was the reason America stationed a quarter million troops

all around the world in one hundred fifty countries, including dozens of huge military installations that were like fortified cities of the United States planted strategically around the globe, for self-defense, as it was called, from the world. Plausibly believable. That's what this notion of self defense was. And that's what mattered.

And so self defense made up a large part of the platform that Sam had been elected on. This was the standard he was sworn to uphold. And this was what the mountains of election funds and the tax dollars went for, largely – the safeguarding of national security, as it was called, the militarization of the economy and politics and everything, as far as possible, the world over – self defense, as Sam commonly viewed and voiced it. Self defense, real or fake, it could make you or break you. Just so, Sam lived, and just so, Sam labored through the writing of *An American Life* – in self defense.

Sam had expected his daughter to turn and walk out of the office at any moment, as if she had good reason to get on with her day after announcing the news of the death of Aaron. But Jamie remained – expectant and not. Stubborn mainly.

Aaron Thompson was dead. And Aaron's sister Ellen would not be returning to Sam's staff, he had learned from Jamie previously. Ellen would not be coming back, according to Jamie, because even before Aaron's death, Ellen had begun to deeply disagree with the Senator's position on the invasion of Iraq. Jamie had relayed this information evenly, almost calmly, a few weeks ago as if giving an informal private news briefing. Now again confronted by his daughter, Sam felt an invisible finger

pointed directly at his chest.

He felt it pointed at the spot where his purple heart and silver star might have been pinned, if they had not been hanging on the wall behind him. These were the medals he had not thrown back over the fence at the White House during an anti-war demonstration he had attended upon returning from Vietnam. Instead, Sam had thrown back the medals of others. Possibly he had given a false impression. His own medals hung there in his office.

Sam knew that Jamie had grown close to Ellen – levelheaded, even-tempered, efficient Ellen. Bright and hardworking. Alert and trustworthy, Ellen, whose brother had been killed. A shame, terrible.

Or, not a shame, exactly. A loss. A horrible loss. As with most any death.

Ellen's absence would be a loss to his staff and office as well, Sam reflected, but mainly a loss to his daughter. He calculated the effects. Most importantly, he believed his daughter would get over it, in time. And why not? Life moved on. It had to. There were goals. There was the day to be seized. Political priorities. This was Jamie's life too, Sam felt sure.

Or if it wasn't, she would have to go get another.

Regardless, people chose different paths in life even if they moved in relatively similar directions. Sam knew full well that Jamie had options, a wider range of options than had been available to him at her age, and it was for the best. She was young and fortunate to be able to choose from any number of promising paths. Possibly it would be best for her to go her own way sooner rather than later.

But if she wished to stay on, Sam figured he could finesse or reemphasize his position on Iraq in a way that would make it seem more satisfactory to Jamie. Not that

there would be any real change. It could be done, Sam was sure, even though he was wary of the slippery slope between emphasis and finesse, nuance and spin, slant and shading, distortion and outright lies. Working along that infernal slope was unfortunately too often the slick nature of the business of politics – not to mention the politics of business, to which Sam was professionally indebted. Sam felt proud that his staff worked that slope with no small skill. At the top were ideals, at the bottom, imperfections. Articulating precise distinctions and compromises along the slope created reality, as Sam viewed it, in governing circles not least, where Sam thought Jamie saw at least some part of her future one way or another, just as he saw his. You played the game of the reality slope in Washington D. C. and elsewhere, or you got out quick.

You tried to hew to the so-called center as often as possible, the re-electable center, as it was by necessity understood, the political center as defined by the struggle between the wide body of people and the select wealthy few – between what people both knew and wanted, and what the major funders of political campaigns and the dominant media and wealthy operators found acceptable. This was the reality that Sam and his family lived, professionally and personally, publicly and privately.

It made sense to watch what you said at all times, to make sure it squared with the reigning political order, so much so that you could forget who you were while always straining to relate and adapt to what had come to be known as the political center, the reality that was here, there and everywhere in a global age – the necessary if often unfortunate compromise between the interests of people and the interests of big money, the universal reality of power. It all came down to the art of the compromise, a

careful slide along the slope of reality, as Sam saw it. That, and a lot of talk.

Though the marshes and rivers, deserts and peoples of Iraq – over which Sam exercised congressional authority (however oblique, however direct) by way of the US invasion and occupation – though these were a long distance and time removed from the rivers, jungles and peoples of the Mekong Delta, Vietnam, where Sam had operated more than three decades earlier as a young officer in the Army Special Forces, and though Iraq, Vietnam, and the Washington DC of Sam's experience were separated by great global gaps of time, distance, and culture, these realms had become ever more strongly intertwined with Sam's life, public and private, in ways that he was surely scarcely aware of and in ways that grew ever more clear.

Jamie's anger spoke to the latter. Her stopping in caused Sam to think a bit harder about the specific killings in Iraq and Vietnam for which, it might be argued, he bore serious responsibility – including the killing of his cousin's son, Aaron Thompson.

And then there was whatever had happened that night over three decades past, the mass killing in the Mekong Delta for which the media had alleged he was directly responsible.

Sam Washburn, a killer by profession? A dangerous man in his official capacity, past and present? Unwittingly menacing? Wittingly? Lethally competent, this Senator, as Senator, as with any and every Senator of the United States?

Or was he professionally and privately innocent? And in most ways justified?

Was he a mere cog – easily replaced – in a reckless system? Was he a simple handle on a door to riches?

Was he a leading resident in a willfully killing,

predatory fortress? Fortress America? Or was the US system of rule as benevolent as it could be, given the hard realities of the world? (Or far from it?) And, if so, mistakenly? Or, intentionally? And to whose benefit? And at whose cost?

And what could be done about it? And by whom? And how and when?

These questions and their potential answers all threatened the stability of Sam's career, along with the unity of his family, and also his view of himself as a professional, as a man of the public, and as a man of conscience, as a private individual.

Sam was facing the fact that – by a growing number of people, including perhaps some of those in his family – in both his military and senatorial capacity, he was being seen as an outright killer, or at least as an official acting in a killing capacity.

And so Sam was forced to struggle now with the key idea of his life, one he had long maintained – that any killings of his past military career and any killings carried out under his congressional authority were either justified, or, if not, not his responsibility. He struggled now to keep himself from thinking that any killings had not been carried out in self defense, which was the direction his thoughts went if he let his mind go, if he did not take care to limit what was acceptable to think and to not think.

He felt alone. To this point, he was the only senator who the media had targeted as having allegedly committed war crimes in Vietnam or anywhere else. Additionally now, as far as Sam knew, he was the only senator who had been closely affected by the death of a soldier during the invasion of Iraq.

It might all come to nothing, he realized – Jamie's anger, the media allegations. It might simply blow over. It almost

always did.

But how, he wondered, had it come to this terrific muddle in the first place? Who or what had conspired against him? Was he not, as he had methodically explained in his memoir, a typical American citizen, simply risen to prominence? Of course he was. This was how his family knew him. This was how his voters knew him. This was how he wished all his constituents would come to know him again. This was how he knew himself – as a typical American. And proud of it. His congressional voting record was very similar to that of most all the rest of his colleagues, in both parties, especially on foreign affairs. So Sam saw himself as a good senator too. With the exception of a remote event or two in his past, he knew he could not be more representative of the senate. Sam was indeed a ranking, distinguished member of the US senate, and so he was no criminal, he told himself – surely not, despite these recent allegations and accusations against him.

Sam flipped mentally back through the pages of a past he had recently detailed in the memoir designed to shield him from the allegations of massacre.

He went over it again in his mind, the story of his life, beginning with his childhood, normal and simple, nothing unusual. He had been a typical American youngster, liked movies, sports, did okay in school, had gone to college during the war against Vietnam. Then he enlisted rather than be drafted after graduation. Officer Candidate School. After which, perhaps because of his sports background, however modest, he was encouraged to try out for the Army Special Forces, to be all that he could be – long before the slogan was put to exhilarating music and used in the

Army's massive advertising campaign.

Within months of arriving in the Mekong Delta, as an officer in charge of a small team of Special Forces, he was hit by a ricochet bullet that tore wounds so ghastly across his face – ripping through both cheeks, laying them open in gruesome flaps and knocking out several teeth – that members of his squad mistook him for the walking dead. Thus ended Sam's war in Vietnam.

Ultimately he lost only a few teeth, but given the fact that his jaw was wired shut, and given the operations and physical therapy, he was shipped home and discharged. Cosmetic surgery restored his sharp features, leaving only small scars, distinguishing marks, it was said.

Within two years of being knocked out of the war, Sam earned a Masters of Business Administration degree and went on to study corporate law. He passed the bar exam but rather than practice law he entered the business of what is called defense contracting at the behest of former military associates who guided and groomed him for public office – where he then came to rule for nearly eighteen years as a US Senator.

And then a couple years ago, Sam's military past threatened his reelection when the media alleged that he had directed and carried out a massacre of Vietnamese civilians in the Mekong Delta.

Sam's family stood by him in face of the charges, not least his wife, Kalli, who had married him soon after he had returned from Vietnam. She had been his girlfriend going back to high school. Upbeat and ambitious, they were a strong fit, conventional extensions of their birth families, proud and hardworking. They were soon raising a family of their own, two girls and a boy, that Sam considered to be a solid American unit, civic-minded, family focused. The

Washburns knew who they were by their commitments to kin, church, school, career and country, and upon this basis, as steadily as they were able, Sam and Kalli attempted to weave daily a worthy tapestry of their lives, an American tapestry, as they felt it to be.

Sam wanted his family to understand and empathize with people far and diverse but especially with what he thought of as regular people like those he had grown up with in his town – the masses, so-called, though Sam tried never, or almost never, to think of people in the abstract. For elections, a personal touch was key. "People are people," Sam liked to say. "That comes first." Though he often turned the sentiment nationalistic in campaign speeches – "People are people. And Americans are Americans," leaving few people to wonder who or what really came first, and what all that implied.

During Sam's third term as senator, ranking political and business figures encouraged him to seek support for his gaining the highest office in the land. Dollar support was readily found, but as soon as Sam announced his candidacy for President, the accusations of mass slaughter were published and substantiated by Vietnamese survivors and two members of his Special Forces team who claimed that Sam had led the massacre of civilians in Vietnam, before being shot out of the war on a subsequent raid. And so it was that US Senator Sam Washburn stood accused of committing war crimes.

Sam called off his push for the presidency.

He vowed to clear his name.

He vowed to do whatever it took.

He interviewed and appeared as needed on television, radio, and in print. Meanwhile, he began writing his memoir in self-defense.

At one point, he summoned his former teammates in Vietnam to an all weekend session, at the end of which they produced a statement disputing the accusations. This statement was one in a series of pronouncements by Sam on long ago events that would prove to be contradictory from interview to conversation to commentary, but Sam was scarcely called to account for the discrepancies – not by the corporate media, and Sam gave no time to independent media.

A few former supporters encouraged Sam to resign as senator and accept any of the highly remunerative executive positions offered quietly from within business, education, and government circles, but Sam refused to consider any of these. He vowed instead to clear his name.

Sam had taken plenty of vows before – hand on the Bible, public witnesses, formal occasions – and though his new vows were private, he made them with a seriousness equal to or greater than his official public promises. He had no intention of being remembered in the eyes of anyone as the senator who had been driven from office by allegations of war crimes. After all, he was essentially no different than any other senator in his voting patterns – in those acts that affected the public the most. Sam wanted to be remembered for what he felt himself to be – a dedicated public worker, a fighter for his constituents in their economic and civil interests, a responsible statesman, dutiful and loyal to his country, a United States Senator who served the people and the republic to the best of his abilities, so help him God. Winning re-election in face of the allegations proved easy enough since Sam was able to maintain the solid support of the business community in his home state by which he had done so well previously, as they had subsequently done well by him. The usual business interests delivered the

necessary funds, coming through again with media endorsements, and by election day, the protests in his home state against his alleged war record amounted to little more than small gatherings and marginal denouncements isolated one from another.

Sam kept his visits – especially to college campuses – brief and infrequent, announcing them at the last moment so organized protest could not readily build. And he used this strategy for nearly every appearance no matter its location. A supportive crowd could always be hustled together on short notice.

In his staff headquarters, mention of the allegations of atrocities was taboo except within inner circle strategy sessions. The less said, the better, Sam figured, and in the end, such tactics paid off, even though his margin of victory was the smallest to date.

Sam's national status was more adversely affected, with polls showing that his negative ratings sometimes outweighed the positive ones. The lingering allegations only made Sam more determined to clear his name.

When questioned by the media and friends about thoughts of the Presidency, Sam claimed that realistically he could never again consider running for the office. However, in the back of his mind he held onto hope for such a run. Perhaps an opportunity might arise in a moment of extreme nationalism, when a war-time atmosphere might make him an appealing candidate. That was the only scenario he could consider.

Sam felt he had what it took to lead a great nation like the United States. He knew he was decisive – a winner, a leader.

And the past? What of it? What was the point in picking through the skeletons of the past, no matter whose closet any bones might be found within? It seemed inappropriate and irrelevant to Sam and of no relation to the present.

In any event, thirty years removed from a war, a person's mind could grow fuzzy about the past. Fuzzy to the point where he might wonder if he or anyone could ever hope to know what had really happened in the middle of nowhere Vietnam so far back in the past.

Sam concluded that if anyone was going to be charged with allegations of massacre and war crimes it would rightly be US superiors and leaders, and even the American public itself, which had elected and allowed the directors of the US war machine to smash and destroy the bulk of four countries in Indochina, including killing perhaps 4 million people, mostly civilians.

If a person were to understand the war in this way – then it was pitifully absurd, Sam thought, that a young low-grade officer be singled out for allegations of atrocity three decades after the fact. If anything, the atrocity was the war itself, though of course Sam could never admit it fully, to himself or to much anyone else. Not publicly, at least.

True, he had been a leader and an official, an adult in his mid-twenties, and he had led his men and directed lethal firepower on multiple occasions – nothing to dismiss. And there was the fact of the dozen dead civilians. But the details of the distant past were often blurry, or could be made so, to the point of being completely unknowable, Sam thought. Untrustworthy, at best. There was always that. And so it only seemed wise and reasonable to Sam to attempt to put the past in the best possible light, especially since it seemed neither fair nor consequential in any constructive sense that he be singled out.

Sam was determined to write a book about his life in his own defense. He tried to make it humanizing. He lined up a publishing contract to be able to tell unimpeded his side of the story.

Kalli supported him all the way, which meant as much to him as anything, her steady grace and presence.

A man's wife, he believed, could garner to her husband the benefit of the doubt in circles of respectability, both private and public. Sam believed that deeply. He had believed it when he decided he would seek Kalli's hand in marriage. He had been drawn to how circumspect, careful, and warm, she was, and not only because he had felt even as far back as when he first asked her out that her personality would be to his benefit. He believed in her circumspect personality even more now. And he loved her for this not alone. They were a lot alike, especially now as Sam grew ever more guarded.

Sam could not afford to take the chance that the media would lose interest in his story in a year or so, though he hoped the media would move on and he had reason to expect interest to fade. He worked on his book. He titled it, *An American Life – Sam Washburn*. A title simple and strong, personal and national.

He dedicated the book to his children first, then to his wife, his colleagues, his constituents, his country. (And privately to himself.)

Sam wanted to set the record straight.

He wanted to shape the story of his life into the truth as he saw it.

Sam worked to portray who he was, who he thought he was, who he meant to be. Sometimes it was not always clear, and Sam did not often try to keep confusion out of the book because he felt that if anything the revelation of a

confused, complex and contradictory personality might all the better reveal his humanity – his forgivable weakness, his limited control and understanding of any given situation, his relative incapacity to be much more than the plaything of history and of superiors, of social and cultural conditions that shaped everyone more than any one individual controlled his own destiny – as Sam sometimes felt. Though he sometimes did not, but did not go into in the book.

Of course Sam tried to tell his story in a way that was favorable to himself. Who wouldn't? If he stretched the truth, he did not think he stretched it excessively. If he was evasive and obscure about crucial details, who might not be? If he came across as irrational and mistaken in certain moments – well, this showed that he was only human, fallible, prone to error, like anyone – at the mercy of fate, of destiny, of forces far larger and far more culpable than himself.

After all, a person did not emphasize the flaws of his life, especially if he wished to be re-elected, or even if he wished merely to avoid being taken for a ghoul. One should look on the bright side, at the gloss and not the dross, Sam believed, and so he wrote his American life.

Sam wrote simply and did not dwell. Needle and thread, Sam crafted the book carefully with his family and country both in mind. He sewed together the public and the private in the hope that his words would gain the stature of a noted public document and a valued family heirloom. This was how his wife encouraged him to think of the project whenever it seemed it might unravel.

Together they came up with the idea of using the metaphor of an American tapestry for thinking of their lives.

In the introduction Sam tried to explain that the book was a project larger than himself, and by implication larger than any criminal allegation – which he left unmentioned not only in the introduction but almost throughout the entire book, even though anyone who knew anything about Sam Washburn knew that clearing his name was the main purpose shaping and driving virtually every line of the book.

Sam wrote that he hoped to highlight some vital and typically American characteristics of people's families and lives far beyond his own, yet very much part of his own, and that he wished to point out the various overlaps and stitchings, the long boundaries and tricky corners, the fine and sturdy edging, and all the important detail work that went into sewing together the vibrant patterns that made up everyone's lives and the nation as a whole, the common patterns of values and experiences that shaped the culture and influenced the world, the American pattern that created so much of reality, including global reality, as it had come to be known.

Sam pushed the metaphor of sewing, weaving, and tapestry as far as he could in the introduction, as a way to win readers over, in recognition of his wife, and as an attempt to diffuse the spotlight from himself.

And why not? Hadn't he devoted his whole life to this sort of skilled shaping and crafting, consciously and unconsciously. He felt he had a knack for it. Never be too dull. Never too interesting. Keep the style plain and approachable. Weave in diverse patterns for everyone to appreciate. Don't say too much up front, don't hold too much back. But most of all, don't say too much, ever.

Sam wrote of his formative experiences viewing popular movies, reading popular books, watching television,

listening to radio and his teachers. He wrote of some anecdotes and stories recounted by members of his family and people around his town and the country at large intending to show everyone that he was one of them, one of the people, and thus implying that any crime of his was their crime too, or at least might have been, that whatever had happened that horrendous night in the Mekong Delta might very likely have been carried out by anyone at all in the American family – the larger family that Sam meant to show he was almost wholly derivative of and all but utterly dependent upon and about whom he was deeply appreciative, for he meant to show that he was loyal and obedient to a certain core of the country, and besides why not be appreciative since the people, supposedly, of the country had raised him to such great heights, this large family known as America in which Sam Washburn had been formed and lifted and set in motion – and over which to a great degree he now ruled – and not infrequently overruled in key moments at the least. (But never mind this last bit).

This last bit he set aside for the moment. He set this part about ruling and overruling far off to the side, among much else, for the moment of the whole book, for the moment – a careful analysis would reveal – of very much of his entire life.

And so it had to be clear that this story that Sam was crafting wasn't all about himself, because his was not a life that, unaccompanied by much distraction, deceit or other delusion, could pass scrutiny.

Sam tried to show implicitly that if he was to be condemned, then the whole country must be condemned – and that was simply unthinkable, wasn't it? – that the whole country could be condemned for...well, for anything. At

some point, in other words, the truth must be irrelevant, facts must be denied or ignored or (ir)rationalized and the American kingdom must be allowed its many barbarous ways.

This was what Sam intended to show, of a sort. Such was the implication of his book: Condemn me? Then you would condemn yourself. And aren't we, above all, all above censure, let alone condemnation, no matter what?

Apparently people weren't buying it. The book sold poorly though it received some nice reviews. Practically no one picked it up though it had the advantage of the Senator's public prominence and ample media coverage.

Sam tried. He had plenty of opportunity.

He tried to communicate his message in most everything he said and wrote. He wished to make it clear, the great public pattern that connected individuals and families across the wide land – he wanted to show how tight could be the stitching of everyone's lives and fates, private and public, how deeply sewn into this greatest of tapestries they all were, together as one, undivided, equal, everyone the same, ideally.

That was the ideal, at least. And in this greatest of all tapestries as it was so often proclaimed, the United States of America, Sam tried to make plain that he himself was merely one small piece of the larger fabric – or had been, especially as a young man, especially during his time at war. And so he felt he had been no more or less responsible for the problems of the world than the civilization at large.

The story that Sam was telling in telling the story of his younger days was not his story after all – he wanted to make clear – it was the story of America, and if America had made "mistakes," call it (so as not to speak of major American crimes against humanity, for "crimes" would be

too inflammatory, especially for being so accurate) one always forgave America its "mistakes." America was home and family and so could not be...well, it could not be denied, it could not be called to account. It would not be. By whom? The people? By Amnesty International? Nor would Sam be called to account. He hoped. And he worked against it. Thus, he wrote his American Life.

At this point in Sam's reverie, his daughter Jamie closed the door and sat down on the other side of the desk, beyond the Brazil nuts that he liked to snack on in the afternoon, beyond the miniature titanium globe he liked to spin, as he did now, absently, with the tip of one finger.

"I need to make a change," Jamie said, which indicated to Sam that the change had already been made. "I need to take off somewhere. Go back to school maybe. Do something else for a while."

"Are you certain?" Sam pushed the globe a few inches to the side. "Is now the best time to make a decision?"

"You don't want to know why, I bet."

"It has to do with policy, I assume."

"Policy." She may as well have spat the word. "Everything does. It has everything to do with policy."

Jamie wanted to discuss it, Sam knew, but he was not open to it. This recognition flicked between them. He hoped should would take some time to think about any decision to leave her position.

Sam eyed the Brazil nuts, thought of picking one up between the tips of his fingers. He did that sometimes when thinking. But there did not seem to be much to think of now. And he did not want to give the impression that he was at all put off by the moment.

"I would like to support you in whatever you choose to do," he told her. The ambiguity seemed necessary. It pleased him a bit, though he suspected the words would be perceived by his daughter as distant, and distancing. "If you would like to work in some other capacity around the office, or as consultant...." he trailed off. He was being rejected, he knew. His policies, that is, he reminded himself. His policies were being rejected.

Staff members were encouraged to hold a variety of viewpoints, a reasonable variety. Everyone did not have to agree on everything, of course, despite the need to always maintain concrete official policy positions that would conflict with various opinions on staff.

"You won't reconsider it?" she asked.

"Consider, of course," Sam said. "But change is another matter. I respect your point of view, you know that. And I respect your decision to move on, if that's what it is. There's no question, you're welcome to continue here, or to return at some point, should you choose. The decision is yours."

"Things won't miss a beat around here," Jamie said. "I'll let the others know."

There was no mention of Aaron, but he seemed now to be everywhere in the room to Sam.

Jamie would support him how it counted, Sam believed. He gazed beyond his daughter and through the walls of the building into the world beyond. And he would support her, in any way he felt he could.

Jamie stood to leave, and it seemed to Sam that they had both stepped outside their bodies to exist in a place somewhere far beyond the office, a place from where they both coolly viewed the performing figures otherwise known as themselves. Out of their minds, away from their five senses, out of this world – for different reasons, each going

his and her own way.

They were treading water, and Jamie walked out.

Since receiving the call about the death of Aaron Thompson this morning, Senator Sam Washburn had tried to adjust to the loss of his young relative, but he was almost more struck in the immediate moment by his daughter going her own way, resigning from his staff, walking out of his office.

Nevertheless, Sam was left to face the phone, thinking of the call he would have to place to Aaron's mother, Carolyn, his cousin.

So much of Sam's life and career had surprised him by its course and eventual shape.

The allegations of massacre, for example.

How a basically typical and loyal by-the-book American like himself had come to be accused of mass murder and war crimes seemed all but incomprehensible to Sam, no matter what he had actually done in the Mekong Delta thirty years ago. That he had even wound up in the Mekong Delta in the first place was astounding.

The accusations seemed so improbable, all the more so for being point blank real. His days were too busy for allegations of massacre. Too many people depended on him – his staff, his constituents, his family not least.

Like the rest of the family, his daughter Jamie had weathered the storm of allegations loyally a couple years ago, but Sam understood as well as anyone that loyalty had its limits, and that one sort of loyalty often conflicted with another sort. Loyalty wasn't everything. Doing the right thing was, perhaps, but you had to take a long view of the world not a short one, he felt. Not that these issues were often easy to figure out, at least not always to Sam.

Due to the second thoughts spurred by his wound in Vietnam, Sam had felt more cause than most officials to question the nature of US actions around the globe, and so Sam was more aware than most of the rising chorus of dissent from all around the country arguing that US claims of acting in self defense were a cover for aggression and economic supremacy and control.

The protesters argued that the notion of self defense was used to justify outright invasions, hostile maneuverings, even massacres – all for the purpose of enriching a select few, or for maintaining and expanding their power.

To this point of view Senator Washburn would not subscribe. He considered it to be unduly cynical, pessimistic, unhealthy, and lacking a complete understanding of why the US often took militant action throughout the world.

No candidate could be elected without the plank of a strong national defense, Sam believed, a plank which included hundreds of billions of dollars per year for military and weapons spending, but he was proud of always campaigning on far more than his decorated service record and his ongoing support for an active military force (moderate and defensive, as he saw it – rather than predatory, in the views of many non-officials).

Sam believed that his responsibilities as Senator extended into the realm of humanitarianism at home, as well as abroad to a limited extent. So when America was not out in the world defending itself, it went to help in various ways, offering aid of all types, especially business and military support.

And this was all to the good, as Sam saw it. Such a belief made Sam a typical "liberal" and "conservative" both, just like the vast majority of the members of Congress – the

liberals and the conservatives, virtually all of whom could be counted on to band together in support of US global hegemony – in support, more or less, of the status quo. Wasn't this what being a good American was all about?

Of course Sam thought of himself as staunchly pro-American, not anti-American even if the home country sometimes made mistakes. What country or person truly did not? The fact that Sam thought himself to be pro-American did not mean that he felt anti-European or anti-African for that matter. Nor did he consider himself to be anti-Chinese or anti-Russian or anti-Australian or anti-Brazilian or anti-Iranian or anti-Arab, let alone anti-Israeli, or anti any nationality. Nor was Sam anti-cat or anti-dog. Or anti-tree or anti-rock.

He knew well the game that his colleagues sometimes played with people critical of their views. Sometimes he himself was not above playing that game. Regardless – to call someone anti-American was simply to insult them, to try to dehumanize them. To shortcut thinking.

But just because Sam felt proud and right to say he was pro-American did not mean he was, say, anti-French, or anti-poor, or anti-whomever.

It meant he knew what his priorities were.

It meant, to put it bluntly, that certain countries needed to be bombed from time to time when they got too far out of control, militarily or otherwise, in the course of national defense, both military and economic.

Sam supported such strong moves against other nations because he was pro-American, not because he was anti anyone, and not because he cared over much about profiting off of other countries' oil. Of course when various countries stepped out of line economically or otherwise, they paid the price. That was defense. And that was just the

way it was. You had to protect yourself, your interests, your national interests.

And so Sam Washburn – as citizen, veteran, senator, former chief executive officer and corporate board member – had always shied away from possessing more than a limited sense of – well, let it be said that Sam knew what he cared to know. He knew national defense, and a little bit else, here and there.

It was on infrequent occasion that Senator Sam Washburn allowed himself to dwell on so very many serious problems, such as the 65 million Americans who averaged an hourly wage of a mere \$8.35, which, depending on the situation, meant living at, below, or near the official poverty line, which itself was set none too high.

Merely taking a glance at such problems from time to time never had the effect of getting Sam to think much about them, since it always appeared that nothing much could be done to remedy the situation.

This freed him to do nothing, or virtually nothing in so many ways, and thus he was able to maintain his fiscal credibility and congressional electability, in the view of the monied interests whose campaign contributions mattered most, as well as in the view of their national and international colleagues and trading partners.

Such were the facts of life, it seemed to Sam. Such were the facts, that is, of electability, in a big money system.

Too often Sam talked the popular and humanitarian talk, then found himself forced to walk the monied walk, as some days he was even the first to admit, though far more often he ignored it. In some ways, he just didn't care. In any case, Sam was adept at offering one or another rationale for why he had spoken, voted, or acted the way he had.

He believed in the natural uplift of the workings of the

free market, as it was called. However, this did not mean that other countries were free to not align their economies with that of the United States, especially if these countries were rich in natural resources that US corporations (Sam's most supportive and influential constituents) desired to control or access at low cost.

Though Senator Washburn believed cynics and ignorant or irresponsible observers might see such a stance as being conveniently self serving, Sam held the perspective instead that this was the proper use of economic and political leverage around the world for the betterment of the United States, and even ultimately of other countries as well, however much they might not altogether appreciate it at the time.

People just had to trust that what was good for business was good for people. Sam thought it was true – most of the time at least. Besides, was there another way? Not to Sam's knowledge. Not that he had much motivation to know otherwise.

And not that Sam Washburn would ever state it explicitly, but he thought that raising children was a similar proposition. If you maintained a strict enough order, children would eventually see that it was in their best interest to come around to the dominant point of view. It had a way of working, periodic rebellions and other problems aside.

Though Senator Washburn understood the structure and enforced values of the ruling network of power, he did not always take for granted that such values were appropriate, which was why it had been especially important for him, at least for a time, to become well-versed in the rationale for such values, the justifications familiar to all.

He had thought about this especially after witnessing the intense suffering of those with grotesque wounds in the veterans hospitals, wounds to render a person unrecognizable as a human being – limbs, sometimes all of them, blown off, or entire faces burned, smashed, and scraped into unrecognizable lumps of scar tissue, with an eye or two peeking through, like the before and after photos hung in schools by DUI awareness groups of a young woman who had survived a drunk driver only to be entombed alive in a molten mask of scars. Impossible to forget. One would think.

This is what Sam Washburn had seen in the veterans hospitals. This is what he had to deal with in part himself, and this is what made him question the use of violence.

After receiving his facial wound, Sam Washburn had begun to doubt the wisdom of the war in Southeast Asia. He came to think of it as a mistake (at least for a time), if not fundamentally immoral as the majority of his countrypeople came to see it.

As a senator however, during the US invasions of Grenada, Panama, and during active US contribution to war and terror in dozens of countries, along with more recent direct attacks against Serbia, Afghanistan, and Iraq, Sam continually voted to support US militancy, as did nearly every other member of Congress.

To a certain extent Sam struggled to justify such behavior, and so he was attracted to individuals from the attacked countries who were in favor of the aggression against their own countries.

From these individuals Sam gained his sense that the vision of the world favored by the United States was ultimately a vision that the people of every country should be glad and smart to reconcile themselves with, due to the

new freedoms and prosperity that US influence might provide.

And he thought that at least the US intentions were always good, even if the plans seemed never to work out in the end, even if the countries were never raised from poverty or freed from strife. Not in Latin America, not in Africa, not in the Middle East, not in Eastern Europe, not in much of Asia.

Somehow the highly recommended US economic policies always failed.

Sam thought this ironic rather than a predictable consequence of US policy.

Sam could not allow himself to conceive that these plans were not what they were said to be, for he would lose the necessary corporate support if ever he allowed himself to understand and act on such knowledge, since these economic policies regularly turned profits for US businesses that in turn of course supported Sam.

And so there was a book that Senator Sam Washburn could never write, and would never write. He cannot, he will not, though he might approach thinking about such a book from time to time when occasionally pushed by his daughter and others, by deaths around him, the real probing book of his life and work.

There only exists the book that Sam Washburn did write, *An American Life*, the memoir of himself as a youth and young adult – the apparently plodding and understated but actually quite sly if mundane effort to acquit himself before the American public after having been accused by sources in positions to know of ordering and personally slaughtering civilians in Vietnam.

It is the story, Sam Washburn writes in the preface, that he wants to tell his own children.

This is the story that he wants to tell so that the bad, he says, may not be overlooked entirely for the good, so that reality may be seen and dealt with. This – after a lifetime of his mainly acting in the exact opposite direction.

As it turns out, Senator Washburn focuses only on American victims of American policy, rather than on the international victims of America – whose grisly fate, revealed in part, made necessary the writing of the book in the first place.

In *An American Life* Sam writes that he intends the book to be a story of what he and his fellow soldiers suffered, some of the forgotten and the terrible, which, of course, happened to be exactly the nature of the massacre of which Sam himself stood accused, terrible and for many years forgotten, of which the book offers only a glancing mention.

*An American Life* emphasizes instead the grotesque wounding and suffering – horrible in its own right – of Sam and his fellow US soldiers, nearly 60,000 of whom lost their lives in the Vietnam War.

Meanwhile, the book pays virtually no attention to the four million people of Southeast Asia who were also killed.

A reader of *An American Life* can easily get the impression that Sam Washburn is a dull and simple and quite common man, even humble, and perhaps in part he is. But a reader can also get the feeling that Sam is the type of dull and simple that if you so much as scratch him he may come back at you with a full and not unbrilliant intelligence blazing, and be the farthest thing from humble.

Beneath the quietude and simplification of the book lurks a stewing mass of contradictions.

It is more than a little curious that Sam was critical of President Nixon's pursuit of the Vietnam War, after his

wounding, but then while serving in Congress the Senator voted for an essentially unchanged foreign policy.

Sam never bothers in the memoir to attempt to explain whether or not US foreign policy has changed for the better since that time, which he must believe – but on what evidence?

And so it is an odd psychological and illogical dance that Senator Washburn puts on display as if it made sense, or sense enough, as if it were normal. And is it? But what sort of normality is utter hypocrisy?

Indicators and mechanisms of hapless and plaintive self-justification jut from every page – refusal to think, denial, willful blindness, distortion, acceptance of convenient perspectives – facts be damned.

Another tactic Sam employs: avoidance.

And so the bulk of the memoir is full of either banalities or family information that can only be of much interest to his children or grandchildren. When he gets too close to something that might reflect poorly on himself, he shuts down and passes off doubt and uncertainty with a blasé air, as if none of it is really all that important anyhow, as if Sam thinks his life does not warrant the close attention that he otherwise gives it.

Sam implies too that even if he did what he should not have done, he was relatively young and so should not be held seriously accountable. One problem is that a person is rather old by the time he is in high school, and even moreso by the time he has graduated from college, and Officer Training School, and Special Forces training, and is a leading soldier and officer, in his mid-twenties, as Sam Washburn was at the time of the massacre.

Another problem is that he has gone on to enable and support war from a much higher position of power for the

rest of his life.

Toward this effort of shucking off virtually any notion of responsibility, Sam develops in his writing a sense of his feeling helpless in action and in recollection, a sense that increases during the fleeting description of what may or may not have happened that fateful night.

Yet another problem is that the account Sam gives of the alleged incident is wholly inconclusive.

He says he does not know for sure what happened that night. Meanwhile his description in the memoir contradicts in critical details other explanations, themselves contradictory, that he had given earlier in interviews and press releases. Not least, the book contradicts the statement written and signed by Sam and by most, though not all, of the members of his team.

Was Sam Washburn a good soldier?

He seemed to be respected by his men.

As for the team members who gave interviews that told the different and shocking story of US soldiers gunning down unarmed women and children that night in the Mekong Delta, a story corroborated by the claims of survivors in the village, it is not clear that even these men hold anything against Sam privately or professionally. Simply the story these men tell is very clear, consistent, and far more in accordance with known facts than the conflicting stories Senator Washburn chooses to tell.

An American Life – Sam Washburn. The memoir has the curious feel of documentation from the outside, as if Sam were watching himself from some undisclosed remote location. As if Sam were somehow AWOL in his own life, his own highly accomplished and greatly respected life.

Not that there are no moments of real poignancy and clear introspection, but these are a mere isolated few.

Otherwise, Sam sounds as curiously adrift from himself and his life throughout the memoir as he appears hapless, or devious – or both – to those who might try to follow his recent repeated contradictions in recalling and dealing with the greatest crisis of his life.

A curious thing it is to read a memoir by a man who demonstrates that he does not want to get too close to not only himself but even to the most vital moments and events of his life and the life of his country, not to mention world.

But these were not the Senator's thoughts. He was wondering if Iraq would become a second Vietnam. It could, but only if leadership failed, he figured. And what had Vietnam been fought for? International communism? Hardly. A pack of lies.

Who lied and for what reason? It all came down to money. Or oil. Who had it. Who did not. Who intended to get it. And who intended to keep it, and use it.

Best not to think about this. Sam was not in his daughter's position, after all.

He was in his own position, defending himself from accusations of war crimes whose very existence half baffled him. They seemed so out of place in light of his career, his accomplishments, his family. His country. Why should he have to face all this?

With a flick of the tip of his fingers, Sam spins the globe. He takes care to fix in his mind, especially perhaps for when he will be in the presence of his daughter, the idea that at least he did not kill Aaron Thompson, that he is not responsible.

And Sam thinks that if it is possible that he may have in some way contributed to the death of Aaron Thompson, then it could not have been avoided.

Or if it could have and should have been avoided – in

that case – well – Senator Sam Washburn can't afford to care, not in any meaningful way that might have some real effect for the good in his life or in the lives of anyone else in the world. Not that way. There are elections, after all, and he must please whom he must please.

Mainly, though, the question simply does not bother Sam, especially because he learned long ago that it is possible to be perfectly honest about a sort of pathology – his own and otherwise – as long as one remains discreet, to the point even of maintaining a lifelong silence, or a consistent pattern of distortion and denial on the subject – on the subject of killing and the responsibility for killing. On that subject and many more.

But Sam scarcely has to admit to pathology, since, like most, he can just block things out. Self deny. Self delude. Self deceive. Fool himself, fool others. To an extent.

And his daughter Jamie?

She makes her own deals with herself, Sam is certain. His daughter like everyone else.

A strange thing it is, to be human, Sam thinks, until you figure it out and get used to it.

A strange thing. And not like they told you, not much at all, back in the day, growing up. Not much like they tell you anytime, really.

Life was not what it appeared. That was all. People often live to the side of themselves, Sam thinks, though he tries to give the opposite impression in his book, *An American Life*. As for Sam's own self – he had dealt with that old guy quite handily long ago. He had taken care of that young man long since. Now he must confront the office alone, in utter privacy – after his daughter Jamie has left, and just before he moves his fingers from the globe and reaches for the phone.

## GLORY

Early one morning, a couple months after the start of the ground invasion of Iraq, former Army pilot Jim Fielder poured a cup of coffee, lit a cigarette and sat down with a newspaper at the kitchen table. He soon came across an article about the death of his cousin, Aaron Thompson.

The article consisted mainly of an interview by the reporter Lynn Jackson with Aaron's older brother Mike.

Jim read closely, then sat back in his chair, and stared at his burned out cigarette.

He was killing himself he knew, smoking these things. It would have to stop. It could not stop too soon.

But he reached for the pack, lit another, sipped his coffee, and reread the article.

It would have to come first, he decided, the article. Well, it wouldn't have to, but it was going to. The road to hell, he remembered someone once saying, was paved with as many bad intentions as good, probably more. Or call them, careless resolutions. The cigarettes were killing him, Jim knew, and yet something else with an equal bite, or far worse, was gnawing at him at the moment.

The road to hell – he had seen a bumper sticker the other day – is paved with Republicans. With a marker, Jim

had wanted to add: and Democrats. On so many issues.

Jim downed the remaining cup of coffee, took his pack and lighter, and went for a walk through the city.

He returned much later from a bakery with sweets for his wife, but she had gone out.

Jim called Mike to get contact information for the reporter, and then he called Lynn Jackson and arranged to meet her a few days later in the bleachers of the stadium, at his request, where Jim had played high school football. Jim didn't give the location much thought. It just felt right.

He met the reporter in the parking lot and climbed the stadium steps nearly to the top where Lynn positioned her recording device on a high bleacher seat and turned it on.

"I've got what I can tell," he told the reporter, while far below, a group of boys ran sprints during track practice. "Maybe it'll be good for me to talk about."

"I'm no therapist," the reporter told him. "I'm not the right person for that."

Jim lit a cigarette. "I've got something to say, is all...about...some things, about Aaron and the military and the world. I mean, I was young like Aaron and looking for something to do. I went to college, but what do they teach you in college about the ways of world? Maybe I missed something. I wasn't raised in any Mecca of intellectuality. My wife and I got married young. In our teens, and we decided I should go to college. Some people can do that and it works out, I guess. Not us. We tried though. Not enough in common, I guess. I mean we thought we needed each other more than anything. We were mixed up. We muddled through for awhile. Anyway, mainly I wanted action. Saw too many hotshot movies maybe. I just wanted to fly planes. And you know, there's that saying 'be careful what you ask for, you just might get it,' and, well, I got about everything I

ever hoped for that way, more than I knew to bargain for, in fact. Handed all sorts of positions and responsibilities before I even knew what they were all about. Turns out I had a knack for math – that, and taking orders. I guess they saw me coming, saw that I could do most anything I put my mind too that way. Saw that I would. Mainly they knew I would do almost anything just so long as there was some sort of bonus in it. I cared nothing for rank and all, except where it was necessary to get what I had coming – even then I only wanted the money and perks." Jim tapped the ashes off his cigarette. "As I saw it, there were winners and losers in life, and winners had money. And something more. Winners traveled, saw the sights, moved around the world, went out and experienced everything. They had it all. So there were winners and losers. Not that I minded losers, you know, just as long as I wasn't one of them. I was a flyboy foot soldier for Uncle Sam and I did what I did for the money and the life, basically. And the identity. And the opportunities. And for status sometimes too, I guess. And security. For the hands-on thrills. No prison of an office for me. And because I was so good at the jobs assigned, both the routine and the freelance work, I got to be something of an expert in misadventure far beyond the sheltered eyes of middle America." Jim glanced across the stadium, and then at the countryside beyond. "I played my football on this field, many years ago. The stadium wasn't so big then."

"Seems like a nice area," the reporter said.

"It's home. Has been, off and on." Jim rolled the cigarette in his fingers. "I was just a little fish. But you might be surprised how much the little fish can think like the big fish some ways."

Jim told the reporter that during the Vietnam war he had come to understand the US attack in the lingo of

counterinsurgency theory, as an effort to drain the sea in order to wipe out the fish, which meant basically killing civilians (the sea) to lessen their support for the soldiers (the fish) of the National Liberation Front, the NLF – otherwise derogatorily known as the Vietcong by US propaganda, a word, Jim pointed out, that he had used as much as anyone at the time. Jim was not one of the fish under attack, of course. He was one of the attackers, mainly flying transport planes around southeast Asia at first, full of supplies and soldiers. He soon came to sense that it was a dirty war, and the more he figured this out, the more he felt the sinking morale begin to spread through his bones. He began to look around to see what he could salvage for himself out of the mess. He knew plenty of other transport pilots who were making a lot of money on the side flying drugs and other contraband, and Jim got involved too, both then and after Vietnam.

At one point, an airbase accident and subsequent medical examination misdiagnosed him with retinal damage, so he wrangled his way onto a number of foot patrols to get some new experience that might be valuable. He learned which units were good at going out and coming back with all their men, making it less dangerous than it might have been otherwise. Even so, he managed to hitch onto a number of hot patrols and took part in plenty that he would rather not recall, some murderous episodes, village destruction. By the time his medical records were straightened out Jim had proven himself a get-the-job-done type on land as well as in air.

Based on this experience, years after the war at the Army's School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia, Jim helped write a manual on low intensity conflict, the new term for counterinsurgency. At Fort Benning he instructed

elite soldiers from the security forces of dozens of countries in Latin America, teaching the gruesome techniques necessary for controlling or "pacifying" – that is, terrorizing – civilians, especially those who had ideas about establishing real democracy in their countries, or merely improving conditions of life regarding health care, education, literacy, decent work conditions, and so on. That was what Jim came to be part of.

"Why?" Lynn Jackson asked. "Why didn't you walk away after Vietnam?"

Jim shrugged. "That's the question, isn't it? What else was I fit for at that point? The Army had a culture I understood and could use to support my life. I don't know. It felt right. Not necessarily pleasant – but manageable."

Jim mentioned that it changed little or nothing at the School of Americas that public pressure in 1991 forced out of use one of the manuals which emphasized civilians as military targets and which detailed torture techniques, blackmail, and execution.

"We taught terror regardless at US schools around the globe," he explained. "Still do." He pointed his cigarette at Lynn.

"That's the life I was into. I was convinced that the world was full of dirty jobs that someone had to do and that this was one of them. And I took no little pride in it. I mean, I thought it was necessary. I thought the world was one huge scary place out to get America. After all that's what I had been told my whole life. I couldn't see then how scary me and my type were, ourselves. And I had little real clue as to why the US was resisted around the world. Good old American boys. Hell, I assumed we were the great defenders despite so much that I saw and took part in. Who knew? I went on what I was told. And I thought I was hot

shit maybe too."

"You better give me one of those," Lynn interrupted, and so Jim handed her a smoke and the lighter, which she fumbled before finally working it and getting the cigarette half lit.

She took a puff and choked.

"That's enough for you, when you finish that." Jim took his lighter back.

"And let me tell you something else that isn't at all pretty. Those soldiers who do that training and who do that dirty work around the world, they help make this country rich." He jabbed his cigarette again at Lynn. "The US doesn't invest in areas made safe for business for nothing, you know. I doubt you would be surprised at how quickly a few executions can break up a union at a factory, or destroy an independent-minded community trying to educate itself or trying to grow strong somehow in a way the officials don't like and won't be able to profit from. International executives and government rulers of course can't admit this kind of thing, publicly or to themselves, I imagine. I wouldn't admit it to myself for the longest time. Most US businesses of any size have international dealings of some sort, often with their own branches, or suppliers and partners, dealings that would not exactly win them any kind of ethics awards – whether it's manufacturing, oil, diamonds, agriculture, armaments, you name it. And these business folks throw around mountains of money and make all kinds of blackmail-type economic threats that shape the elections, especially who can compete in them, here and abroad. You know all this, I guess."

"Maybe somewhat," Lynn said.

Jim told the story of Father Roy Bourgeois who sneaked onto the base at Fort Benning, Georgia one night and

climbed into a tree with a boom box and then blared the words of Oscar Romero, the Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador whose killing had been arranged by graduates of the School of the Americas there in Fort Benning.

Having cut his ties teaching at the school, Jim had been going to Georgia in November each of the past four years with Father Bourgeois to participate in the annual protest march against the school, standing up to his old buddies and base.

He told Lynn more about the terror techniques taught at the school, including the torture and murder of those who do union organizing and recruiting, or pass out propaganda in favor of workers, and sympathize with demonstrations and strikes, all of which was made public when the Pentagon was forced to reveal the contents of training manuals used at the school. Jim had also seen a recent article in one of the journals he subscribed to noting that Rios Montt, the genocidal general known as the Pinochet of Guatemala, was back in business ever since the Supreme Court of Guatemala overturned a constitutional ban and permitted the former military dictator to run for president in the upcoming election. Montt was the author of the "scorched earth" campaign, which resulted in the annihilation of nearly 600 villages and the deaths of more than 200,000 people in the past couple decades. In response to which, Mayan communities had filed complaints against Montt, charging him with genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.

"That's part of what we'll speak out against come November," Jim told her. At the next protest of the School of Americas, Jim had decided he would carry the words of Mexican labor leader Eduardo Diaz: "The SOA is a part of a larger project to protect and defend US corporate interests

in Mexico at the expense of workers and indigenous peoples." Jim said he would go with these words because they got to the root of the problem and because – "That's the goddamned reality. Though it was convenient to ignore it at the time I was working there."

"And you did ignore it?" the reporter asked.

"I sure did. Who knows why. I didn't have my pension and properties yet, maybe that's what it was. I didn't have my current wife either. I'm not involved anymore obviously. Not that I try to live in my wife's pretty world – I mean I do want to live in much of that world with her, you know what I'm saying? I want to be a person among people. It's tough to block out the memories. Sometimes I have to look the misdeeds smack in the face. Misdeeds – a nice word, right? I have to look the blood smack in the face. You have to stay in touch with reality at some level to survive, you have to stay heads up. I figured I was just one little cog in an enormous machine. I mean, if you want an extreme example, even Hitler, important as he was as an individual in a dreadful way, even he was a sort of cog in a larger machine. He was supported by practically the entire business community, especially in his rise to power, and not only in Germany. Texaco sold the Nazis oil early on in World War II. They saw it as business. Hitler was a good friend to executives. And Mussolini too. What did Franklin Roosevelt call him at first? That admirable gentleman? Something like that. Hell, Hitler and Mussolini were great for the bottom line of plenty of industries. And remember what Mussolini is supposed to have said, 'The first stage of fascism should more appropriately be called corporatism because it is a merger of state and corporate power.' Corporations are not democracies. They do not operate democratically. They are not meant to. Their structure is

virtually totalitarian, as others have pointed out. So if not Hitler and Mussolini, then a couple other thugs – racist or otherwise – could have easily led the way. You take them out, someone else steps in. You take me out of the SOA, same thing. Let me recite the Webster's Dictionary definition of fascism, if you don't mind. It's a beauty to remember: 'a system of government characterized by rigid one-party dictatorship, forcible suppression of the opposition – unions, other leftist parties, minority groups, and so on – belligerent nationalism and racism, glorification of war...' What does that remind you of?"

"You tell me."

"Today."

"Fascism? People have been saying that for years. Nobody listens to that. Anyway, there are two political parties."

"Both nearly identical most ways, a lot of hot air to the contrary. Mainly they are mere branches of the single corporate business party. They feel so powerful that they hardly even try to appear to be much more than managers of money for the monied."

"That's what you think?"

"It's pretty obvious. That's the here and now."

"As you see it."

"As a lot of people do. Think about the 'here' for a moment – take the case of the American Indians who were demonized by practically everyone in this country for centuries, not just by Teddy Roosevelt, our cutest and most cuddly President, right? They named the little bears after him. You ever take a look at the book he wrote, *Winning the West*? He justifies wiping out the Native Americans, says it's flat-out justifiable, the right thing to do. He justified breaking treaties. He gave the okay to what amounted to

more or less a policy of genocide. And it wasn't just then. You can go to the online bookstores and read the comments of people who support his views today. That's proto-Nazi, which I'm not the first to point out. That's our history. That's our 'now' – our today. And the schools hardly touch it and teach it for what it all too often is. They won't much get into it. They'll present some of the good stuff, and the drama, and a few of the crimes, but they won't help students understand the full, need-to-know, astoundingly negative history and present of the country, including the often vicious lead of official America. And so these attacks are carried out under the general ignorant consent of the people, or under the knowing but manipulated and otherwise stolen power of the people. And one man plays such a microscopic role, really insignificant, I think, in the whole scheme of things. I'm not saying a single person can't make a difference, but what I did or did not do, hell, it would have gone on without me."

Lynn's cigarette smoked itself all the way down and went out. She held onto it.

"Why don't you throw that away?" Jim asked.

"When I get to a garbage can."

Jim took the filter from her hand and put it in his pack. Then he lit another.

"Do you ever notice how we're never racist in the present moment? Or, you know, classist? Only in the past, preferably the distant past but not always. During the Gulf War, the first one – excuse me, the Gulf Massacre – when our old buddy Saddam Hussein made an offer to pull out of Kuwait and his soldiers in the field were all but dying to surrender, have you come across that yet, that crucial bit of unreported information? – well, good old silver-spoon President Bush the First had to show how much of a wimp

he thought he wasn't and how many billions of dollars of missiles he could spend and how much of an intimidating impression he and so many others wanted the US to put on the world, and so he launched an invasion that killed tens of thousands of Iraqis. After all we've got one hell of a bloated military budget to justify, defense contractors to satisfy, a militarized economy to support, the one that President Eisenhower warned about on his way out the door – you know, classic easy political timing – the growing military-industrial complex. Not to mention there's the whole independent-minded world to terrify – to keep in line, our line, and to hell with what anyone else may want, good or bad. So we did it, your country and mine, the United States of America, attacked Iraq until the carnage on the Iraqi retreat to Baghdad became too embarrassing to broadcast on TV and then the whole turkey shoot was called off, too late for the tens of thousands dead, but in plenty of time before the president's poll ratings could drop. Now that was pretty, wasn't it? You never heard about the Iraqi offer to pull out of Kuwait, did you?"

"I was in school at the time," Lynn said.

Jim laughed. "You were in school. Aren't we all?"

"Anyway, Hussein's virtually unreported offer to pull back across the border about scared the pants off the Bush administration. They wanted war and so had to attack before it was too late. Think you could get that in the paper or on TV much even today? You never get to see published the most naked of inconvenient truths. Inconvenient to power that is. Or it gets published a little bit, maybe in partial or distorted fashion, and then is buried by propaganda. Except often in the independent media. So Bush I slaughters Iraqis – on behalf of America, supposedly. And then President Clinton, also in America's name, for

good measure decides to bomb and starve and strangle the rest of Iraq with sanctions for the next eight years, crushing the country, driving it from second world standards down to third world levels, crushing the people, and thus, incidentally, helping to strengthen Saddam Hussein's grip on power, making the people even more dependent on him for mere survival – all the while Clinton was lauded in the media for his noble statesmanship and humanitarianism and human rights work. How these politicians can live with themselves is beyond me. I mean I was a great one for denial but it wasn't like I was on TV every other day or on some fancy stage every five minutes mouthing the public relations like these pitiful guys. I mean – are they human? My god, they must really believe it by and large, they must at some level really buy into the official tales, the propaganda that we in the US are akin to holy people, don't you know, as near as can be to perfect in official action and deed. Never mind the occasional exposure of pervasive corruption and perpetual massacres. It comes and goes in a bewildering flash. Responsibility is sidestepped, buried in one avalanche after another of our real national religion – Americanism. Fundamental nationalism, that global disease. As bad as corporatism – rule of the owners. And it doesn't get any more fundamental, or corporate, than here in the good old red, white and blue."

"Is this what you think killed Aaron Thompson?"

Aaron Thompson – Jim's distant cousin blown up in Iraq, and for what?

Jim pointed to the athletes practicing below.

"It's going to get some of them too. And some of them are going to get far more people overseas. Kill and be killed. Private vices, made public vices, lead to gain, for the select few mainly – the motto of capitalism, the corporate way – it

has become identified as the American way – rape and pillage the world over, and at home. Rape and pillage from on high, from the suites, corporate and otherwise, and from the whitest of houses. Just ask congressional medal winner Marine Lieutenant General Butler, and his counterparts today. What did Butler say? 'I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street...' et cetera and so on."

Jim and the reporter watched a boy struggle with the shot put. Especially from afar, the chunk of metal seemed to go a pitifully short distance time and time again.

"I mean look – the US has invaded Nicaragua something like fourteen times in its short history. In the 1920s President Coolidge sent the marines in again when the US was supposedly defending Nicaragua against Mexico. Then the Sandinistas came to power in the 1980s and the US built and supported the terrorist Contras to supposedly defend Mexico and all America from Nicaragua, that fearsome global power. Someone once asked, 'Does the US just enjoy killing Nicaraguans?' And anyone else with odd ideas about trying to improve their lives in ways that might affect the wallets of transnational corporations and other wealth? A survivor of US sponsored violence in El Salvador was able to visit Washington DC as a tourist one day and with a group she overlooked one of the chambers of Congress and as she gazed out, she said, 'I never thought the day would come when I would stand in the room where the people made the decision to kill my family'."

"You see what I'm saying?" Jim Fielder asked.

"I think I'm getting it," the reporter said.

"I'm just saying what I'm saying. You know?"

"And I'm listening."

"And you're taping. Or whatever it is, putting it on disc."

Maybe to no consequence. Who knows, right? But that's just it – who knows? So it makes sense to try. Not that I'm anyone to talk. I always thought that if people did not go out and grab their slice of pie then someone else would. So I took care of myself and my own, as I saw it. So what if blood seeped from my every step? Maybe the more people I killed the more I saved somehow – you know, perverse illogic like that gets in your head. Crazy things. Crazy things for crazy business. Efficiency above all, no matter how murderous, destroy to save, conquer to uplift, occupy to free, things like that. If you don't stop and reflect on the madness it just goes on under its own power. It just keeps going."

"What good does thinking do?" Lynn said. "Did it change how you acted?"

"It took awhile. There's all kinds of factors that go into it but I think money is the biggest one. I mean I felt it. I was susceptible to the almighty dollar. Not that it ruled me totally. I was proud of doing what I thought of as a good job of things. I was an expert, had the skills, connections. I prided myself on my abilities and never thought I could be bought for real. I didn't go all out, personally. I refused to fly black market organs from Central America. I steered clear of the body parts business entirely – unlike a number of pilots I knew who didn't ask and didn't want to know or didn't care what they loaded and carried on certain flights, what they were paid for. Complete knowledge and control of my cargo was something I hung my hat on, something that gave me an increased sense of power and responsibility, even a redeeming respectability, in my own eyes at least."

Jim said he was not kidding himself. He said he knew he was morally at fault beyond the imagination let alone the

understanding of most people on the street. Just for his work in Vietnam alone. Or Central America.

"What the hell did I know when I was young?" Jim asked. "Plenty. And near next to nothing."

Jim told the reporter that the horrors of Vietnam were unusual as an extreme effect of US foreign policy because it was so large scale. "But today still the bomb and bullet rain comes down day after day in countries dominated by US business and military interests. International and domestic both. And sometimes the US just bombs with dollars – that's the preferred way to control people – to not have to use guns. But Attila the Gun America is often called in too."

"How much do you know?" Jim asked the reporter. "How much do you want to know? That 85 percent of US military aid goes to dictators essentially, as it has in the recent past, at least? Maybe I can recall the exact quote – 'ountries the US State Department deems undemocratic or repressive, such as Saudi Arabia and Indonesia.' That's it – a late nineties figure. And maybe you want to know that during the so-called Vietnam War the US in its B-52 bombers dropped more tons of conventional bombs on southeast Asia than were dropped during all of World War II. Maybe you want to know that? You can look it up easy. These were peasant societies. Of course to do the research takes time, and we shouldn't have to do it everyone for themselves. So many political scientists, so called, are full of crap, just doing their job, you understand. A serious person has got to look high and low, far and wide, many times to get the real scoop. Of course the internet is a great help these days – if you know how to look, compare widely. Now this guy, Chomsky – you've come across him, I would hope – brilliant linguist or whatever, some little thing he does on the side when he's not analyzing US policy. This

guy knows where it's at. He had me cold. Dead to rights. He was all over Vietnam, the reality of it, where the US lost almost sixty thousand soldiers, hardly any civilians. But we killed two million people, mostly civilians – in South Vietnam alone – the country we were said to be protecting. In North Vietnam one million. Cambodia half a million. Laos half a million. That's some considerable killing. When you're butchering at that rate, about seventy to one, most of them civilians, you tend to give little thought to the other side's suffering. You just do the job. I did it well. Colonel Oran Henderson told reporters the truth in 1971 when he said 'every unit of brigade size has its My Lai hidden someplace.' My Lai – more than 400 people massacred by US soldiers – mainly elderly men, women, children and babies, some tortured and raped. Thrown in a ditch and machine gunned. The only thing unusual about it was that one soldier stood up against the rest. That's the real US policy in the third world then and now – destroy people who can't be controlled, crush those who refuse to be dominated and exploited by the corporate economy. So much US military aid goes to thugs. I should know. I taught them. Jesus. We taxpayers in the US are sheep with our wool pulled over our own eyes, paying our tax dollars for the slaughter. My god, what would we say if we saw every day the blood we have on our hands? What would we do? Has the wool been tied around our wrists, too, taped over our mouths?"

"Let's say you're right," Lynn said. "What could we do?"

Jim nodded. "Maybe many know already, right? Some of it. Maybe we can't do much. Maybe we can only look out for our families. That's what I did. But do you want to tell that to the Iraqi people? Do you want to tell that to the Salvadoran who came to our country to see the killers face

to face. She need only step out onto the street and look around, for we are all complicit, as some have correctly noted."

"And yet, some people do things," Jim went on. "They get together. And they build organizations and institutions and they push and pull and pressure for change. And they score incremental victories sometimes. Some give money for this. That's real people saving real lives – building a new culture of democracy based on human rights. But that wasn't me. That wasn't Lieutenant General Butler for most of his life at least, either – maybe for all of his life, I don't know. The whole country needs to get together to act the way people know how and are learning more every day. Along with the world. But, like I say, that wasn't me."

Jim explained that, as far as he could tell, he had not felt financially or otherwise secure enough to leave the military after the war, not with his years of service, and a growing family to support.

"So I began working little pools of trouble through the School of the Americas and other bases, training troops from Haiti and the Dominican Republic, Thailand and Indonesia, Guatemala and Panama, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Columbia, Nigeria.... The money I scammed on the side made it worthwhile. In the meantime promotions piled up. I worked with the CIA and at times with the DEA, even once the FBI, our national political police, as it's sometimes called, with good reason. My wife, she was proud of me the whole while, or so I thought, though I figured she had as little understanding of my work as I had of her biology experiments. She had gone back to school in those days. Then she ran off with some professor, if you can believe it. Some older guy, bored stiff with his life, I guess, who was willing to take on the kids in exchange for the high

spirit and hijinks of my wife. I was never much home anyway, so I can hardly blame her. It was no kind of life, really. I saw the guy once, talked to him. He had no idea who I was. I reeled him in like a fish, you know, until we were chummy but then I decided to let him go rather than slit his gills – verbally – you know. I just threw him back out there into the pond, nice like. He had his own problems, I guess."

Jim began to flick his cigarette butt down the bleachers, then caught himself in front of Lynn. He stuck it in his pack, before lighting up again.

He mentioned an email that he had once received from a colleague shortly before he left the Army that detailed the latest public relations spin on another massacre of Colombian civilians killed by troops that Jim had personally and recently helped train. It was nothing new. He told Lynn that the historical record showed these troops were most violent when fresh off US training.

"Makes sense," Jim said. "I didn't train them to play patty-cakes."

The email was a routine trademark US denial, he told her, the same type of cover-up, near identical wording, used after the Rio Sumpul massacre, 600 civilians killed, and after El Mozote, 800 civilians killed, and many other slaughters in Central and South America where the US had held sway for decades.

"Now we're hammering Columbia the worst – outside of Iraq. The US gives Columbia more dollars and weapons for the task than it gives anyone outside of the Middle East. Been at it for decades."

Jim said he had always been offended by the sort of double-talk that he got in memos and then email ever since Vietnam and right on through Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush I,

and Clinton – the presidents under whom he had taught at Fort Benning and elsewhere.

"Bush II is in the same line, of course. It's the double-talk that gets to you after awhile, lies like snakes in your head. Even when I was most gung-ho I resented being reminded, even implicitly like it mostly was, to keep my damned mouth shut, or, worse, to open it in ways that had no connect with reality. I thought I had earned the right to be spared the rhetoric. I mean, some guys either believed the rhetoric, due to ignorance, willed or not, or they didn't care – you know, were pathological."

Lynn asked, "If you knew what was going on, and if this actually was going on, how could you ever stay involved in it?"

"The answer is the same," Jim told her. "You have to realize I was in a position of a sort, relatively favorable, meaning lucrative. Plus, I had status and adventure when I wanted it. And kids to pay for. And I thought of these massacres as something like acts of God, you know. I figured if I didn't do the job somebody else would. The dead would still be dead, regardless. What did it matter who carried out the killing? And it wasn't me pulling the trigger all this time, not exactly. Far be it from me to ever do such a thing. You see, there are ways to duck responsibility. Of course, an honest court would hang us. And if I wasn't now comfortably retired, or if I was unhappy in my personal life, what would I be doing today? I'm not saying I would go back to it, no. But don't we have to live in this brutal world, not some other? That's what you tell yourself, at least. Most of the time I'm only glad to be on the better end of the stick. Look, I'm no one to speak. But take Iran-Contra – pick your scandal – it would have happened with or without me. That was how I thought. The point was, I

pocketed the cash. And lived the life, vacationed on and around tropical US bases all over the globe. Pick your country – the US has some sort of base there, often heavily armed and sprawling. Obviously the US is a global force that dominates other countries as much as possible, all nice talky-talk to the contrary. Look at the acts – any words are meaningless next to those. Isn't there some saying to that effect? Or a dozen?"

Jim stared at the field below, at the races, jumps, and throws.

"You know I figured, if anyone is going to get rich I don't see why it shouldn't be my family and me. Save yourself, is what I thought. It seemed only right, smart, even good in a way – I mean I did some good things with the money and my life. It wasn't totally hell-fired. My motto, I suppose, was that of capitalism itself – "private vices lead to public gains" – that line of thinking. The capitalist mantra – see me for that – specimen one, exhibit A. Save yourself, and expect the same of everyone else, no mercy – in your work, at least. Darwinism. I was totally cynical. Life is a huge competition. Isn't that what we're supposed to think? Isn't that what we learn on the ball field and all around? We're supposed to obediently turn on each other, in controlled fashion, the better for the big shots to skim off the profits of our strife. Isn't that what we learn and practice and train for and are forced into?"

"A competition under decent conditions maybe."

"But most people aren't able to participate on a level field. How decent is that? They're outclassed. Life is like that. Society is. At least this one. It's more about being outclassed and needing to do anything to get your share."

"Not everyone thinks that way."

"Not everyone has to. It's officially sanctioned, in many

ways – much nice talk aside."

Jim nodded to the track and field. Then he swept his arm around the stadium.

"What do you learn here but root, root, root for the home team? No matter who the hell is on the home team or how it is run. And what do you learn but unthinking nationalism by saluting the flag and singing the national anthem? You would think the god-fearing religious folk would be offended because the culture makes American nationalism the holiest of religions. And yet many of the god-fearing religious tend to be the biggest flag wavers of all. And that's no coincidence, you know. Blind obedience one goes hand in hand with blind obedience. Just different forms. But you don't have to be a believer to lend your support for ripping apart the world, wittingly or not. You can be flat ruthless, too. You can be a believer, that is, blind, and go along with power – or you can just not care. And those are the bricks that pave the way down. And what do the kids on the teams learn? That it's possible to work together only with a boss above them? I mean that's great training for a bossman work force – an authoritarian economic and political and social system ruled by the big bucks. But it's deadly for democracy because it's the furthest thing from it. People get used to being bossed. They come to accept it as normal and appropriate and the only thing imaginable, the only thing effective – facts be damned. So when they are urged to march to war in the name of God and Country and so-called Free Markets – though corporate ruled – they march. Why not? What else do they know? The thing is, all this bossing – it works, for some things. But it's not the only way, and has long since reached any humane limit. We had better push power into truly democratic forms and soon, or this world is toast, what's left of it, as are

those lucky enough to survive, let alone thrive. We need to establish democratic industries, workplaces, schools, media, governments, even security forces – it was the more democratically run security forces that held the line the best by far in the Spanish Civil War – see Orwell's tremendous Homage to Catalonia. Instead, we've got rule and control by the basically non-elected, the financially pre-selected. It's deadly. Don't tell me you can't see that. I mean we laughed at the Soviets for running multiple communists for each office and calling it choice, but we've got plenty of incumbent representatives who aren't even challenged most of the time and when they are the difference between the Democrats and Republicans, though it's blown way out of proportion by the media for obvious reasons, is no more than the difference between two wings of a fairly homogenous business party. Don't tell me you think Aaron Thompson would not be alive today if the American people had been fairly informed and allowed free choice, if there had been real knowledge readily available and democratic decision-making to go with it. The kin I never knew would be alive. Not to mention so many people of Iraq."

"But if what you say is true," Lynn Jackson said, "you would think that at some point people would step up and do something about it."

"You would think," Jim said. "But do people think? Did I? Do we want to know? Do we act? And what do we think we can do?"

"Well, we can do something. Like what you said – "

"Look at them out on the field. What are they doing? What are they training for? How are they being trained?"

"They could do something different, if needed."

"If we could ever see. If we're willing to work. They would have to be bigger men than I was. They would have

to be helped."

"People can change, if necessary. We all can."

"That it's necessary is so obvious. But what did I do? What the hell – I stuck to my guns, kept advising at the School of the Americas, though I reduced formal ties in the early 1980s to be more readily available for the most profitable consulting and special projects like the Iran-Contra drug-and-gun running I did for Zook Mason. You ever heard of him, Mason, the self-proclaimed industrialist patriot? A businessman."

When Lynn looked blank, Jim told her, "See we're all completely replaceable, totally interchangeable."

Jim explained that Mason and self-styled patriotic funders of his kind linked up with Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North's covert operations, part of the Enterprise, an "off the shelf stand-alone clandestine network," in North's words, a web of unauthorized secret activity designed to facilitate a covert foreign policy, something that could be kept secret from the US public who would have been outraged, by and large, Jim thought, if they had known what was going on – a campaign of terror carried out by the Contras as directed and encouraged by the White House and run by CIA head William Casey.

"Then it hit the fan when this news finally broke through," Jim told the reporter, when the Enterprise was uncovered during the Iran-Contra investigations held by Congress.

"Not that there was ultimately much fallout. All the major players, lawbreaking US officials, were pardoned. It was one of the criminals, as I see it, who did the pardoning. Bush I, he saved himself from further investigation by letting them all off the hook, on Christmas Eve, no less. A nice gift, you have to admit. And guaranteed low publicity."

Jim pointed to his chest. "It had me worried for awhile. I was far too low on the food chain to ever be pardoned if I were indicted. At one point I was staying in a hotel in Columbus, Georgia, watching this CBS news-type show, West Fifty-Seventh Street, on which an acquaintance of mine, a fellow courier, college graduate Mickey Tolliver was explaining to a reporter – from his jail cell – smuggling routes for guns and drugs, spilling information that matched my own experience. I felt like putting my fist into the TV when Jane Wallace, this fancy reporter, pushed for details."

"Jailed on charges unrelated to the ones Wallace was asking about, Tolliver either knew he was covered or was looking to turn informant, I guessed. I remember scowling at the screen, pointing my finger, calling Tolliver all kinds of names thinking that could be me on TV, in jail, or that it could even be my name coming through his lips at any moment. I figured though that Tolliver would protect his own kind. I hoped. He was giving it up straight to Jane Wallace. Had it been me, I would have tossed out plenty more meaningless side trails, so maybe he was looking for a deal right there on national TV."

Jim played with the pack of cigarettes, taking one out, maneuvering it nimbly, fitting it back into the pack.

"The only deal Tolliver was likely to get was some rough treatment, I figured, maybe from one of those Contra fellows who were so practiced at it. He goes on talking. On a single trip, Tolliver tells Jane Wallace, he flew twenty-eight thousand pounds of guns and ammunition and things like that to a Contra base in Honduras and brought back over twenty-five thousand pounds of marijuana on the return flight. 'We take off from Tegucigalpa, Honduras,' he says, 'and we leave for south Florida.' He goes on like he's

describing some simple cross town path to Jane Wallace like she's someone who knows it already or should know it's so common. 'So where in south Florida?' Wallace asks like she doesn't know but of course she must have been brought up to speed on the juicy stuff before the filming because when he hits her right between the eyes with secret facts, you can tell she's trying to look surprised. 'We landed at Homestead,' Tolliver says. 'Homestead?' Wallace asks like she's half naïve, half startled. 'Air Force Base,' Tolliver adds, matter-of-fact. Underneath, you can tell he's maybe sort of amused at the play-act Wallace is putting on, half amused, half annoyed, half impressed maybe at this type of professionalism. To me, it's see-through, the required look of disbelief that spreads across Wallace's face. She puts it on real purposeful, and fake as the man in the moon. Lots of people, including myself, have flown that route dozens of times with similar cargos. Then Wallace acts like she's excited and goes in the for the kill – 'You brought twenty-five thousand pounds of pot and landed at Homestead Air Force base?' She wants to put the words in her mouth, you know, to kind of legitimize them, and to put herself in history, the historical spotlight. 'That's correct,' Tolliver replies, cool as the cucumber. Hell, you can look it up on the transcript of the show, this exchange. It was like your article, you know. I don't mean the gratuitous melodrama. I mean the real deal leaking through in drips and drops, the way it does sometimes in the dominant media, so that if you're paying extra-close attention you can figure out a lot of the nasty secrets of what's going on in the world, even though the media won't come right out and say it the way it is since it wants to keep those advertisers' dollars coming in. And so it takes a serious research project to find out what the common citizen would be appalled to know, should

know, and would insist on having stopped. I assume. But you have to do more than read the corporate papers every day to know what's going on. The bosses make you work to find out. Who has the time? And what can you do even when you find out how Uncle Sam is the big bad bully on the global block? It's a lot easier to vote for the lesser of the two evils, if there is one, and think you've done your duty by your family and neighbors. Unfortunately, that doesn't cut it. By now the whole planet is threatened with continued massive environmental devastation, not to mention homicidal and potentially apocalyptic wars of aggression, economic and military, plus terrorism."

"If it's as bad as you say it is, what can be done?" Lynn said. "Anything?"

"You're asking me? You have to figure it out for yourself. I'm no activist."

"Well, you go to the School of the Americas protest."

"That doesn't make me an activist."

"Sure it does. But tell me what happened to Tolliver."

"Look, probably most people have good reason to think they're an activist even if they never use that word. Even if they despise the word. Why do people become nurses? Because they know they can get something out of it, because it can be an interesting job, because it's important, because there's money in it, and because they know it's a way of helping out. And it's not just nurses who think that way, of course. Soldiers, my god. How does the latest Army National Guard ad run? 'Duty, honor, country. The National Guard is service.' That's how they say it. I mean they make it sound like it's nursing, but with an edge. That's some edge. Executives think the same way. They know they provide jobs – when they're not slashing them, that is, and when they're not destroying or undermining other

businesses that would provide more jobs and more personal and social and financial benefits – and executives help get people things they need and desire. Or they think they do. Even if they're creating phony needs and desires and supplying shoddy goods. And everyone else, too – stay-at-home moms, talk about an important and demanding job, and rewarding. It can be. I mean, you can help out a lot in all these things, students, pilots, technicians, teachers, administrators, clerks, carpenters, even being a good friend or family member, if that's what you choose to focus on. Everyone thinks of themselves as doing for others, in addition to themselves, and what's an activist if not that? Even the commander in chief of the greatest polluting corporation in the world no doubt thinks of himself as some kind of real activist by trade. In fact, a guy like that probably thinks fanatically of all the good he's doing, all the jobs and services he's providing, or all the dollars he thinks he's moving for the benefit of everyone, never mind the cancer deaths, the forest blights, the ocean pollution, the birth defects, the work safety hazards. This guy and all his associates and plenty of his employees and neighbors may even think of him as one of the great doers and providers of the world, for the world – that is, when they're not thinking of him as a common suite level criminal. But otherwise – an activist. So I think the common person tends to tune out that word because it sounds presumptuous, or it's thought of as something that people with leisure have time to indulge in. When you say activist it sounds like you're saying only certain people do certain things for anybody and the rest are complete slackers, free-loaders, cowards, ignoramuses, and do nothings. It can come off that way. So, I'm no activist. Call me anything but that."

"Well, how about 'coach'? What if you were called

coach? A social or political coach?"

"After what I said about sports and how it shapes anti-democratic behavior, and mindless nationalism? Good one."

"So people should not coach?"

"How do I know? I watch sports sometimes, and I enjoy it. People need to do what they think is right. I'm talking about the vast system of organized sports and its likely effects. What if we had a vast, even competitive, but also cooperative system of, say, greenhouse clubs that taught real world skills, how to make money, how to feed people and communities healthy food, how to grow tomatoes that don't taste like cardboard, which is about all I can get in the store these days. How about some vast nationwide democratic space that was highly invested in and that offered great rewards. Is that impossible to imagine? Can you imagine beautiful and lush solariums and greenhouses and fields filling the space of this stadium and grounds and parking lots? Can you imagine the effects that could have on the culture, on our psychologies, our personalities, our relations with one another, not to mention the environment? That's what I'm saying. Imagine if all these efforts towards sports were put to different, more humanizing purposes. And don't call it activism. Call it a popular movement. I mean maybe we wouldn't go killing ourselves then in a million different ways. And maybe we wouldn't go killing others so much either."

"Veterans for spinach? Is that you?" Lynn said. "You're going to save the world with greenhouses?"

"What's your idea? Why not? And not just that, how about a whole movement, a confederation, a political upswell of greenhouse organizing that branches out into every aspect of people's lives. The government ought to invest in something like this and much more like it. We the

people as government. Our government – not the private governments, that is the corporate governments the currently rule so much, totally undemocratically. You could grow plants and food and much more and start community groups alongside these healthy and vibrant green spaces addressing every problem imaginable – local, state, national, global. You could add libraries, lounges, salons, public eateries and other meeting and gathering and work rooms on one end of the complex and grow things most everywhere else. Read *Ecotopia* by Ernest Callenbach. Or *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler. Read *The Iron Heel* by Jack London. Everyone's invited, children to the elderly. I mean, it's insane, criminal, you name it, not to do something like this, and more, on scales vaster than organized sports and organized religion combined."

"Seems like you would really have to like plants."

"Or survival. I don't know the first thing about plants, myself. So I can't say I would ever sink much time into such a thing. It's the basic idea of creating a truly hospitable society and culture I'm trying to explain. It's not hard to think of what might come from a worker organized, a citizen controlled mass movement – a green space movement or something akin to it. It's not hard to think of the human advantages over the authoritarian teams and games of sports, many of which were designed to prepare people for war, not civilization."

"But you say you like sports. And I do – all different kinds, playing and watching them both."

"Sure – and on weekends my wife likes to watch these romantic movie specials and I don't mind spending an afternoon that way myself. Go to your local truck stop TV lounge and see what the truckers are watching – romances, some, and sports, others. So the ball games aren't the only

diversion. But getting into sports can be fun – football, basketball, baseball, golf, even cycling now with this Texan Lance Armstrong winning the Tour de France every year. I mean, you can't make that name up. No one would believe you. Lance Armstrong. No wonder he willed himself to become the bossman of the bike. I can rap the sports headlines a bit and give some fairly knowledgeable opinions on sports, sure. It's fun stuff. And there's something positive that goes beyond fun too. But there are big problems that result from too much sports and too little of what is more needed, is what I'm saying. Servile obedience for one – that's a problem with sports. Plus, an irrational us-versus-them mindset. Jingoism. Fantasy nationalism. Elevation of the trivial. Maybe teams should be run democratically – that might take care of some of the problem, teach the right lessons, be healthy for society, be even more fun, more interesting. Or players could switch teams every week. That would force you to be smarter – fans and players both – and it would probably help destroy irrational, unhealthy allegiances. Who knows? It seems like something could be done to make the games more mind-expanding, more humane, more democratic, less narrow, more worthwhile. Or maybe too much sports is just that, too much."

"Do you think greenhouses would be mind expanding?"

"Lively, rewarding, useful, truly public facilities – that's what I'm talking about. There's no one answer. A lot of physical damage is inflicted during sports, much of it permanent, and that should be considered. Boxing should be banned. Football is awful rough too. I mean – take just a simple thing – why don't they pad the outside of the helmets like in rugby? And the outside of the shoulder pads? Why do they have to be hard, like weapons?"

Jim glanced over the ball field.

"Four years I played here. A linebacker, undersized. I could hit. I was aggressive and knew how to tackle. Maybe I should have been less fearless in my hitting though, as a few of my vertebrae sometimes remind me."

Jim told the reporter that he had also wrestled but never took it very seriously. He was more focused on the next step. Then in the middle of his senior year Jim learned something unexpected when his coach took the team to a big-time college match. The coach got seats up near the rafters of the huge auditorium where Jim soon recognized that they were not going to learn anything much, so when he spotted a few empty seats close to the mat all the way down and across the arena, he told the coach he was going to the bathroom and he got past the ushers who were fixated on watching a tremendous bout, and he sat in a seat right on the edge of it all, and there he learned something that had somehow never registered in all his years of wrestling – something to take his game to the next level. It may sound obvious to anyone who does not wrestle, Jim thought later, but what he discovered sitting that close to a few great matches was simply that you had to get mad, really almost go berserk in a controlled-uncontrolled sort of way, to get the most out of your skills. Or maybe you didn't have to all the time, but it could help. He saw it especially clear in the first match he sat down to. The guys seemed furious, throwing themselves at each other as if they had been horribly wronged, as if their lives depended on giving back as good as they got and more in the furious moment of the match. Not blind mad. Adrenaline mad. Machine mad. Maybe sometimes blind mad.

Sitting that close, Jim felt the wrestlers' waves of adrenaline wash over, punch him. They started the match at

a higher level of intensity than Jim felt he had ever even arrived at, cranked up in a primal if ultimately calibrated way. Jim had always thought wrestling was all about being skilled – strong with your muscles and alert and smart with your moves and your mind. He had not realized it was also important to kick in serious adrenalin, to fuel an all but compulsive need to devour the opponent.

And so Jim had mainly scored his points, and he had scored a lot, by skill, which was important, but he had completely missed out on how much could be gained by doing more than simply trying to score, by going half mad with the need, the will to attack and destroy within the rules. He had never once started out mad at his opponents. It had never occurred to him, and he had rarely ever finished that way. But these guys in front of him now, a couple of the best most exciting wrestlers in the country, they had put themselves in a zone he could just barely sense, or imagine.

Others had tried that on Jim, and he had never completely understood why. When guys charged him in what felt like hyper-overdrive, he often thought it was comical, if challenging, and he would parry until they either lost their edge or they overwhelmed him. When successful, he was almost embarrassed for the opponent who had gone into such a frenzy only to come up short. When beat, he never thought his opponents' energy level was the real key, or at least in any way transferable to himself for his own use.

But these college guys did not seem embarrassed by movement however frantic and fanatic, and so their fury and madness seemed to contain a heightened intelligence, value and force that was wondrous and fearsome, at best enthralling – no mere outpouring of brute force only. They

owned something that surpassed the blunt outpouring of energy that Jim had mainly seen in high school. They were more supple and ripping both – live wires flowing, writhing, bolting – their business both intensely personal and oddly utterly detached somehow. Of course, they shook hands before and after each match.

Watching up close what seemed almost like a new sport and feeling the electric surges of power, Jim felt suddenly invigorated, almost like he could fly, but still he wondered at the ultimate point of it all.

He wasn't sure he wanted to go there, no matter how fabulous the exercise, since nothing seemed at stake beyond whatever personal goals the individuals might hold within the small area of the Resilite mat and the rules of the sport. It was a game – strenuous, exhilarating, challenging, potentially intimidating, but in the end, a simple game of getting the other guy's shoulder blades flat on the mat.

Even in high school, Jim wanted more from life than thrills and games and treading water. Not that he saw much opportunity for it. Maybe he was slow, or blind. As he saw things, he went with what was available and what he was good at, much of what the people he knew did. He liked the high he got from wrestling, hitting a great move, a sort of joyful powerful bliss. It was better than school. No doubt the college guys felt this too, probably moreso.

That day sitting close to the college bout, Jim felt he had discovered a way to take his wrestling to the next level, but otherwise he kept himself more focused on achieving life goals, especially personal independence, the sooner the better, and that would require money, which wrestling did not appear to provide. He wished to have a wife too, to share life, the sooner the better. That was how he thought at the time. Wrestling seemed to offer him little that way also.

Jim wanted to make one thing clear to the reporter. "Wrestling and football did not make me a killer. I don't think it did. Not the way you might imagine."

"Are you a killer?"

Jim scowled. "I did not work for the Red Cross, okay? Maybe you're a killer too, see. Isn't that what Mike Thompson told you in that interview I read? That we're all to blame, to some degree or another. That's what you wrote he said. Come to think of it, I did fly some aid personnel around from time to time. It wasn't wrestling that led me into the military, I'd say. Or maybe it did a little. If anything, it was college that drove me there – or elementary school, and the rest. I don't know. I wanted out of the classroom, out of any normal office-type future, that's for sure. When I saw on campus the same old games you had to play to do well in the classes, I got focused quick on making it to Flight School. I played the games, did what I was told, whatever it took to get to what I figured I needed for my career and paycheck and life. Vietnam was a part of all that, a job and life, and proving myself. The guys who did a lot of the gun work in the military, a lot of them had sports backgrounds, but many did not, including some of the most avid. All you needed was the will to be tough. Others were plain frightened, and felt compelled to go along."

Jim watched a javelin wobble and arc across the field below. It seemed to take off from the boy's arm with little effort and land and skid with scarcely a sound.

"The military," Lynn Jackson said, "Vietnam. That was no simple game, right? I've read a good bit about it. That was the real thing, the real life you wanted?"

"You can do that – you can read about it. A lot you can't, but enough you can if you know what to look for. You can figure out what went on. I learned a lot that way myself,

research. After the fact mostly. Way too far after the fact."

Jim stubbed out a cigarette and lit another one. "I need to quit this too. I've got a beautiful wife, my god. Second wife, young. I don't know how you might look on that. My other kids, first wife, are grown now and making it. My current wife is the love of my life for real, I'm telling you, and I don't want her to outlive me by twenty years. Hell, by forty years. She's going to outlive me twenty easy, I would hope. So I've got to quit these smokes. I needed to figure out how to quit years ago."

"Just quit," Lynn said.

"That's right. Just." Jim stared across the field. "What about you? Married?"

"All but." Lynn nodded. "We've set a date – a couple months from now. Someone I've known for awhile."

"Good guy?"

"I think so."

"Well, no rush," Jim said. He watched another javelin fly and skid across the field. "That was some article in the paper. You don't see it much, someone put it so clearly – the criminality of the US invasion of Iraq –the way you and Mike Thompson did in that interview about Aaron. I saw you treated Mike and his views fair. Your editor let you run it?"

"She gave the green light. And those were all Mike's words. That was him. Not me. I couldn't have written that, couldn't have had it published either. Even so, a lot more of what Mike had to say got cut out."

"If it was anyone but the brother of a dead soldier saying all those things, speaking out like that, not much of that article runs in the first place, I'll bet. You got lucky maybe. Most of that kind of news I have to get from small

independent magazines and journals, different organizations. Seems like you might have an interest in that too. Some personal plan with these interviews, I figure. An article for a national magazine? Something longer?"

"Maybe," Lynn said. "The paper won't let me run much more along these lines, as it turns out. That's what my editor was told, from above. 'Indirectly direct,' she said to me. But let me ask something. How much does your wife know about your past livelihood? And do you bring this sort of thing up with just anyone?"

"Almost, I do. When I get the chance. Her country was one of those that I helped destroy." Jim stared across the field. "Why would I tell anyone that, right? Well, why would I not? My wife knows I've done things I'm not proud of. She hasn't asked about all the details of it. Best to leave the past in the past, I guess, some ways. When it doesn't serve the present. I didn't use to tell my wife or anyone outside of certain circles too much of anything about what I was. You don't want to hear my confession, remember. But now I say what I can, when I can – you know, right moment, right people, right thing. And not just about my own doings."

"Tell me more about Tolliver," the reporter said. "What happened to him? You and him."

"What we did for Uncle Sam, you mean. That's what I can tell. Clearance was no problem into Florida and Homestead Air Force base. Sometimes it was even US soldiers off-loading boxes of drugs, most of them clueless I suppose. You bet they were handling the same goods in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, and it's a lot harder to be oblivious there. Anyway, later in the program Jane Wallace explains for the TV audience that when the CIA notified customs service at Homestead that certain flights were taking off or

landing, the inspectors took that to mean hands off everything and stopped checking, as one customs official told Wallace. The CIA is good at making these little irregular arrangements. Along with their political twin, the FBI. And the DEA. And the Border Patrol. Pick your security force. Maybe you read about that seventy year old lady who tried to cross the street a few years back, tried to do her shopping during the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle. She's standing there, tear gas drifting in the distance, watching the police harass and attack these kid protestors sitting in the street waiting to be arrested. Except the police refuse to arrest them. The kids get tear-gassed instead and slammed with batons. Lovely stuff. Then the lady turns to this one kid standing away from it all, beside her, and she says simply, 'The police are bad aren't they?' Then she goes on with her shopping. That's the loveliest story, right? 'The police are bad,' she said. Well, the police are the police. They function sometimes – other times they don't. The point is if we had a more equitable society we would not need all the different types of police to protect the legal suite criminals and their so-called free trade organizations – more like coerced trade, but that's another tale."

"So Tolliver is still sitting there with Jane Wallace and he tells her, 'I'm not callous I'm just, you know, basically a whore.' Tolliver, an honest man in the moment, I suppose. And I'm squinting at the TV there in my hotel room – it's burning my eyes – and I'm thinking, you know, he's right, and I'm a whore too, that way, all my pretensions otherwise."

"You think Tolliver really believed it?" Lynn Jackson asked. "Because maybe his job was worse than that, right? You're telling me those drugs were swapped for weapons

to take to the Contras in Honduras to slaughter civilians in Nicaragua. Doesn't that sound more like being an accomplice to terrorism?"

Jim stared across the field.

"I thought you didn't want to hear my confession."

He stood and walked over to the fence that rimmed the stadium, and he looked over the edge of town at the fields and patches of woods.

He lit another cigarette, smoked it halfway down. Then he came back and sat again by the reporter.

"You want to know about Tolliver, right?"

"Okay," she said.

"I'll tell you. It was like this. Tolliver can't stop talking. He says he neither knew nor wanted to know what happened to the twelve tons of marijuana. 'You have myriads of people who have done the same thing,' he goes on. 'It's whatever you want – marijuana, cocaine, heroin. Twenty-five thousand pounds is just the tip of the iceberg.' It's not like he even needs to spell it out by this point but he's posing maybe for the cameras. He's keeping straight with the facts, too. He knows what he's talking about. And I was jealous of that straight talk even if I wasn't so hot at the time about him going public. In fact I might have roughed him up a bit myself if I could have put my hands on him right then and there, because there were plenty of us outside, not in jail, and we wanted to stay that way. And the stories I could tell – Tolliver never served in Vietnam, as far as I know. Was he even in El Salvador during the eighties with any of the more than fifty US soldiers who died there, fighting on the criminal side again of a criminal war – men I worked with? Tolliver was just a kid, really. I made more money legally and illegally, and without getting caught, than I bet Tolliver ever thought to see.

Running contraband during Iran-Contra I received thousands of dollars cash for certain flights along with the opportunity on an occasional flight to move return shipments of my own if I so desired. Which, naturally, I did. Through friends and other contacts I arranged to fly marijuana for a dealer accustomed to shipping by boat. On later trips I was trusted with coke, which exponentially increased my profits. This is who I was, remember. I didn't think about the bigger picture too much. I was a link. And a safe-deposit box. I shuttled drugs for Contra leaders, but it wasn't only drugs for guns that armed those thugs, that was just my small part. The rest of the financing for the Contras' guns and supplies came from US missile sales to Iran and other illegal arrangements ultimately examined by Congress when the Enterprise was unearthed. That's one little bit that came out. You know these Contras right? Reagan's 'freedom fighters.' That's what he called them, these US-backed butchers who he said were the 'moral equivalent of the US Founding fathers,' ex-officers of Somoza's national guard, you know, the chief thugs of the tyrant who was overthrown in Nicaragua by the Sandinistas. Marvelous bunch those Somocista Contras. 'The moral equivalent of the US founding fathers.' That's some kind of wit right there. That Reagan. Smart guy."

Jim drew on a cigarette, the tip glowing fire.

"Money, guns, drugs, it was all the same to me, a profession. Aside from the body parts trade – which made me squeamish maybe because I had children of my own, you know, or maybe because the thought of snatching kids off streets, scooping out their eyes with spoons, and cutting away internal organs was too repulsive even for someone with my fine credentials, someone who had seen it all and done half as much – aside from that particular business, it

made little difference to me where the money came from. It was dirty regardless of its origin, legal or not, I figured. Congress and the public saw a tiny bit of it later – the tip of the tip of the iceberg, like Tolliver said. The money, I felt, I had a right to as much as anyone. So, sure, I whored myself at least, like Tolliver, though I was smarter than him, I think. Maybe I'm wrong, but I've never been jailed. Me and a lot of other guys. It was good money there in and around Nicaragua until the brothel got busted, so to speak. I ran some of those routes half for the adventure, too. It gives you a certain walking around feeling, not to mention street cred, going into tough spots here and there around the world. It gets you in with some of the ladies too, I can tell you that. Many of them like a certain edge to a guy. They think they do anyway, especially at first, mixed with a little charm. Some women won't do without it, in fact. They've got to have their Tough. I thought my first wife worked that way. I was wrong there, I think." Jim laughed and looked to the side. "I've been known to be wrong you know. Anyway, a few years back I was able to work enough money into legal channels, into business, bonds and such, laundered, they call it. Cleaned-up money. So I'm set. My wife is set. And my kids. So maybe I only got out of that line of work when I could afford to. Is there another reason? I don't know. I got my dollars, my property, my lover. At this point in life what else do I need? That doesn't make me pretty, I know."

"You had to get something," Lynn said, "money, say, or someone – to be able to think about moving on from your past. Mike Thompson had to lose someone, his brother, no less, for him to begin to open up, at least in the way he says he did to me and to the paper for the first time. And most of all to himself, he seems to think. To really beginning to

see, and maybe to change, and to do something. Something had to happen."

"I can't speak for Mike, but it shouldn't take so much to affect any of us. I guess for me it does. I don't know."

"Does your wife go to the SOA protests?"

"She does her own thing. Who am I to say what she should think and do?"

"You don't influence her at all?"

"She's like the most loyal trooper in the club. She goes along with the leader when he asks her to, usually, but on this I don't. She does what she will. She's young."

"You talk with her about all this and she won't go to Fort Benning?"

"I don't ask her to. We need to act outside our families, is what I think."

"What if some people have big families? Big family circles? Or live their lives mainly by family codes? Is your only motto really live and let live?"

"I don't think about it," Jim said. "With my wife I don't. Not so much. Maybe I'm wrong not to."

"Well, tell me, after the news show with Jane Wallace and Tolliver, in that hotel room, what was your reaction?"

"I ordered a pizza. What else was I going to do? I turned off the TV, fixed a drink, took it all at once. Something stupid like that. I was about to pour another when I changed my mind and ordered a pizza. Just to do something, to have a reason to sit outside and smoke, and wait. Figured I would feel okay in the morning if I didn't do anything dumb like get drunk over a TV show."

"That could have been you in jail."

"Should have been, right? I felt fine the next day. I remember the sun shining through a thin gap in the curtains, those horrible flower curtains that are made out of

sandpaper, it seems. I remember thinking how willing, how gullible I had been early on, before Vietnam, believing the convenient side of corporate news and military propaganda, the government dronings about how two plus two equals fourteen. It hardly matters that the official stories are so easy to contradict when you simply go to the independent press. How many people know or have time to do that? It's a marvelous web we're caught in. Just look at Guatemala, one of our little protectorates in Central America. Over the past few decades, 200 thousand killed, mostly civilians, backed by US military training and supplies and advice and support for Guatemalan security forces that couldn't gain or keep power otherwise, not without vast terror. And in El Salvador, 80 thousand dead. In southern Africa, two million killed in a decade ten years ago, backed in part by the US. Many more killed since then. It's not pretty. Or look at East Timor, the incredible slaughter there courtesy of US guns and support, same old story. And the former Yugoslavia. And Columbia where the candidates closest to the popular will get assassinated, dropped like flies. Money and control. Money, the measure of life. My measure, too. The thing is, the US has been the richest country in the world for decades. It doesn't have a wealth problem. It has an equality problem and a democracy problem, an official lack of will for both, all lip service to the contrary."

"And you went along with that for years."

"We're all complicit," Jim said. "Like I told you. And when I first started to get wise to the bottom line, I began moving around, traveling as much as I could in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, quizzing reporters on what they had seen, what they tried to get published and didn't, what actually got published and what got edited out. Do you know the

US press kept the bombing of Cambodia secret for a year? Not because all of Indochina didn't know about it, but because the US public might likely not have been too thrilled. More recently they've underreported the US bombings in Iraq too, and that's a lot of civilians that die in those – never mind the wounded and disfigured."

"But while in Vietnam, I turned to books on US foreign policy reading as widely as I could given the war conditions. I went through texts on the history of Indochina and while on leave stateside collected pamphlets and articles dissenting from the war on moral grounds mainly, as opposed to tactical. I smuggled some of these back to Vietnam to study, and then the day my commanding officer and a spook confronted me in the barracks I was ready. I had seen intelligence following me for weeks so I had burned some of the anti-war books and thrown the rest into the latrine. My gear was searched and they came up with a paper I was writing, titled 'The Enemy Within' – a kind of philosophic critique, a criticism against the anti-war movement written with the idea of covering myself. Nothing came of it, and I never got that manuscript back. I had been thinking of the spooks long before they were thinking of me. I mean those guys are so indoctrinated with what is said to be rather than with what actually is, that it wasn't too hard to keep a jump ahead. They didn't have the capacity to get me," Jim tapped his head, "despite their education, or actually because of it. Their education, implicit and explicit both, in ideology. But hell, half the ideology got me too, and that was enough. You can think as quick as you want but if you don't enable yourself to see and hear the world around you and go looking for it in the first place you're just spinning on nothing. I mean you can think you're a holy man fighting a holy war or a nobleman

fighting the glorious fight never noticing the Attila the Hun type policy you carry out. Never noticing yourself. I mean it's grotesque. I was caught up in it too, though maybe not as bad as some of the guys. I tried to keep my own mind, figuring it would help me stay alive, help me prosper, realizing early on that it would always be a struggle, always take work, that it was always an open question as to whether I was in touch or not. I'm a survivor. If I was going to risk my life terrorizing and slaughtering the peasant societies of Indochina I would do it free of self-deceit, take full responsibility for the reality, the devastation, the napalm, the bullets, I would fly deep into that heart of darkness and bomb with my eyes wide open. I would be made neither ignorant, nor fool, nor zealot, nor dupe by the military, the government, the media. And so I felt I kept my sight, even gained vision during the war. I was an exception, I thought. While others were overwhelmed, blindsided, you know. Clueless. I figured my one responsibility was to know what I was doing, know what was going on around me. And since it all seemed unstoppable, it didn't matter whether I went along or got out. I mean, it looked like the war was some irresistible disaster like a natural phenomenon given the immense power and commitment of the United States. We were fighting poor farmers who plowed with water buffalo. Millions of Indochinese would have been killed with or without my participation so it didn't matter, I didn't matter, I was utterly expendable I believed and so was able to go on with a focused and strong will, if a vaguely haunted conscience while farmers were blasted out of their fields, and teachers and children bombed out of their schools, and babies blown out of their swaddling clothes. A meaningless cog in the machine of my country is all I thought I was. It's

not like I was dropping the bombs, the napalm myself. And I hardly did any shooting on the ground either. Mostly I was the supplier, so I felt removed. I felt that in the end it could not be said that I was actually the murderer, because I wasn't directly, for the most part. I wasn't directly pulling triggers, you know, it wasn't direct." Jim gestured with his hands. "I thought, you can't stop a blizzard with a peace sign. I flew supplies on tax dollars, at the request of the government, with the complicity, by and large, of corporate America, the corporate media, and manufacturers of all sorts. Same thing today, with the ongoing attack against Iraq, and the occupation. We were all involved and still are. Lots of people pulled lots of triggers and so one trigger meant nothing, I thought. I was completely replaceable."

"You could have been working against it."

"I told you I kept my sanity by knowing and thinking I knew what was going on, by knowing what I was doing – if not what it fully meant to do it. And those are two different things. I could have refused to fight entirely and been hauled off to the stockade, been court-martialed and criminalized, you know, and that might have worked, eased my conscience and all, but who would have benefited? No one that I saw. I defended myself by struggling to seek out the truth, by refusing to flinch from the nature of the job, the moral vacuum of the war. I judged I had personal integrity that way. I was honest, a friend enough to fellow soldiers, never failed in my job. A good man so many ways. A good man."

"You thought that counted for more than it did."

Jim stared across the stadium as if in a trance. Then he closed his eyes, and his voice softened as he told the reporter to listen closely.

"Maybe you don't understand what I thought I had

accomplished, what I believed I knew and accepted virtually alone among my fellow soldiers in Vietnam and afterward in Central America and around the globe. I thought I knew better than others, and I thought knowing was good enough, since nothing could be changed. I thought the soldiers were so unlike myself, in this way, in their inability to know reality from illusion. So many of them, I believed, were either ignorant or duped or in denial or just plain cruel. They were regular kids, many of them, from impoverished backgrounds, or they were middle class professionals, plus the zealots eating and spouting bullshit and internalizing US propaganda like a stake they drove into their own guts and mind, and blasted outward, sometimes consciously, sometimes not. Even the cynics seemed all too blind to the horrific nature of the war except in relation to their own danger. But acknowledging the full truth – aside from making me feel sort of ghostly – defined me, I felt, gave me a measure of self-respect – so I thought – because I believed I knew the total horror and did not lie to myself, did not ignore the real nature of our actions, the acres of blood on our hands, the poisoned shattered lands and massacred people. I think I was somewhat unique in that, unique in the intensity of my belief that what was going on was wrong, and also maybe unique in the intensity of my feeling that nothing could be done about it, that one person's role, my role, was irrelevant in the large scheme of things. And that's it. I wonder how many of the soldiers really did not know the nature of what was going on. I don't know. I think most of them were ignorant, confused at least. But maybe not. Many knew a good bit the real score, especially as the years went on. And many, sensibly and rightly, refused to fight effectively. They saw what the score was – they had been conscripted by Attila

the Hun, Attila the American. The responsibility lay higher up, with the official coaches – the officers, politicians, privileged citizens. That seems clear. That's where the responsibility primarily lay, especially the higher up you got in the chain of command, official America. I was just doing my job. A job sanctioned by my fellow countrymen, some of them, not a majority. It wasn't a world I would have created or one I preferred, but what could be done? So, yes I went along in the slaughter. I admit that. Hell, I try to broadcast it now – to air the hideously dirty laundry, to expose it to the light of day for anyone to know and learn and act. Yes, I did my horrible job. But I went along in deed not full belief, and I thought that made me special, I thought that made all the difference for me personally. I thought it got me off the hook. Indochina, the land, the people, it was all totally wasted but as for myself I believed in my gut that I was saved, that I had saved myself by seeking out the truth of the situation, by gaining a handle on reality, by knowing it in face of propaganda from all sides, by not flinching in the face of my real position on earth."

Jim's gaze remained fixed, his eyes open.

"You could have been doing something that might have helped keep guys like Aaron Thompson alive. Let alone the Vietnamese."

"So might we all," he said. "So might we all. And now Attila the American has invaded and occupied Iraq. And has continued to smash a lot of other countries in the meantime. I mean this is our country – we're responsible for it, for its actions, are we not? We should know fully what goes on and do something about it."

"Whose side did you think you were on, knowing what you did?"

"My own." Jim lit a cigarette and waved it like a wand. "I thought that truth alone, owning it, was power enough to justify and preserve life, my own mainly. Not that truth is worth much when pitted against money, guns, and the propaganda that seems to breed invisibly throughout the culture – in the schools, churches, businesses, in the corporate media, in government. Whatever good gets done, the lies facilitate the flow of dollars to the top, and thereabouts. There's no conspiracy, just an intricate makeshift design – millions of people who scarcely know they're working together to make the world what they don't know it is, or feel they can do nothing about. And the privileged seem like they would rather see the world destroyed than see it saved in a form they can't rule. Not that they actually think this, for the most part. They just act on it, and tell themselves convenient stories, rationalizing like anyone that they're as benevolent as seems fit in what they see as a threatening world, out to get them. They're scared and vicious, these fine people, or they just don't care. Plus, they've fooled themselves, and plenty of others."

"But Indochina knows the truth. And the impoverished regions and pockets of America know reality too. Sure, some people are fooled there too, and everywhere. But mainly people know. They know something's wrong. Really wrong."

"And mainly, too, people throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America know."

"Eastern Europe and the states of the former Soviet Union know. As do plenty of first world populations. Unconsciously at least they know. People know their own destruction, even if they too often acquiesce in it. Propaganda can make you blind but what you feel in your bones, blood, brain if you're even halfway alert – the

marrow disintegrating, the flesh starved, your body your baby dying, your health poisoned, your mind hollowed, your life fragmented, isolated, decayed – that's the truth for those who suffer, and propaganda cannot touch that, even if it can fool you into thinking nothing else is possible, or maybe even desirable. Still you know. You know you are living and dying in the apocalypse, your own small point of destruction, private or public. And the privileged and powerful know it too, when they care to. But rulers, for the most part, can hold the apocalypse at arm's length. To them, another man's daily apocalypse has almost always been more or less sustainable, and richly rewarding of course. Just because you know the truth in your bones doesn't mean you know anything about changing the situation. You don't know much more along those lines than the next guy. People are isolated. That's what makes the set-up so potent – everyone is placed at each other's throat, teeth bared, a dollar bill in between. And people can often be duped and seduced by big lies at critical moments as surely as infants can be handed lollipops laced with carcinogenic colorings, you know, red dye #5, blue dye #8, cancer of the throat. Lollipops for the brain. And the flag and big stick waving in the background as backup. Even if people know what's going on, how wrong it is in a lot of ways, are they capable of getting together to do anything about it? How can they? What is there to draw them together now that they are competitors for life, trapped in a money society with little or no money for the work that they may well know needs to get done? Little or no money for the struggle. That's how the system works. So you can know all you want, but what can you do to reach people, communicate, share information and ideas, apply pressure for change? How can it be done without money? Money is

what took me personally to Vietnam, to Central America, all around the world, the same motivation that drove business America and its military to all corners of the world. Where is the money that will afford the opportunity to reshape society in the interests of the people rather than the profiteers? Where is the motivation that will make people proud and serious about this work? You need pride, I guess, and right now it seems so much is on the side of money, on the side of the flag, god, nation, football, status, you-name-it. The nation, especially, its myth. You try to keep some perspective on pride, to not let it manhandle you. Problem is, the nation doesn't stand for the people – it stands for a top tier of bank accounts, and so much of everything we have been raised or trained to be proud of serves those interests. That's not our nation, not really, but it's the nation that has been forced upon us. They say pride goes before the fall, but blind pride is the fall. It's like loading ignorance, heavy as lead, into a cannon and blasting it out all over the place. That's the point of nationalism, of faith in anything – to instill blind biased pride, and there's little more dangerous than that because it means decent people can be organized to act on what they believe to be good reasons to do absolutely horrific things, especially at a distance – 4 million Indochinese slaughtered, a million plus Iraqis dead due to economic sanctions and bombings, at a distance. It means decent people can be organized even to wreck their own country, their neighbors, themselves. If we could only see it to know it. If we only cared to look a little more closely, broadly, whatever it takes. If we only cared to speak up, to act."

Jim peered at Lynn Jackson.

"I lost my whole life to it. To that. Think of it. Don't you see?"

Lynn met Jim's eyes – a kaleidoscope.

"I mean, what was I doing transporting munitions for the slaughter in Vietnam, and then going from one point of massacre to another, all the while based out of the US? It wasn't like I was usually smack in the gore of it but I might as well have been. It was like I was standing at the portal of some vast torture chamber taking in live bodies then flinging out skeletons one after the other, like some loyal shock troop in a monstrous regime. Sure, it was professional enough flying planes, but I might as well have been in some endless sewer or foul cavern, wading through a river of excrement, striding resolute, against sludge rising up to my thighs while all around me moved brainwashed trolls and mutant rats through tunnels that reached around the globe from the hot fields of Fort Benning, Georgia, and the massive tombl-like centers of Washington DC. And we were cheered on by official America and the misled populace. And the scariest people of all directing, controlling, orchestrating this from on high – more mutant and more troll-like than anyone. This is a great country in so many ways. But we are champion deniers of our vicious side. Just like the Greeks of ancient times. I was so in the thick of it then that I ask myself now, who am I and what can I be to the human race at this point? Who are we? More than monsters, surely. Didn't I know better? I thought I did. Like Tolliver I whored myself to capitalize, I pimped my planes, and the main tricks were named Assault and Terror. And so I got what I wanted – money, power, identity, adventure, status. And pride, too."

Jim focused on the tip of his cigarette.

"I thought I was something special. I did and I didn't. I wanted to be. Back in the day, after high school, a goal of mine was to walk into a room in a crisis situation and at

least once in my life be looked to as the best man for the job that needed doing that moment. To have and to hold the respect of everyone. I cared too much for that, maybe. Vietnam cured me, I thought. Then I simply wanted to survive and prosper, and soon that was all I cared about – virtually nothing. Nobody's respect meant a thing – though I was respected in my own circles, it seemed. I thought I was special all on my own – let the world go to hell like it looked like it had. A fixed sense of superiority is what I felt, based on my knowledge of the hideous reality of the wars, a knowing perspective that I believed provided me an edge walking into any room anywhere in any situation in or out of the military."

"And today?" Lynn asked. "Who are you today, Jim Fielder?"

"I'm telling you what I can tell you. In November I'll stand again against the School of the Americas. I'm a piece of work, is what I am, today."

Lynn Jackson asked no more questions. She watched track practice for a while with Jim, the athletes working in various rhythms through various patterns, going hard in bursts, then easing up.

Before long, Jim and Lynn shook hands and stood up to go their own ways. "I would like to meet again," Jim said. "Do a follow-up interview, a year from now. I think I might have more to say."

"I don't know if I want to know anything more about your past," Lynn told Jim. "All this personal stuff. At some point, it seems like it might be better not to ask."

"Then how will you know the truth?" Jim held her gaze. "You're sorry to hear as much as you did? You're sorry you went into this? With Mike and me both?"

"Not at all."

Jim glanced at the tape recorder. "And then what will you do with all those words? Write a book – why not?"

"I might," Lynn said. "I need to look into things first. I need to look further."

Lynn thought she might tell the story of Aaron Thompson and maybe the story of the entire Thompson family as much as she was able – a real story of the extended family, community, country, maybe even of the world, and everyone, if she could pull it off, put it all together.

It seemed the right thing to do. There seemed to be something to say, something important to pass on about the death of Aaron Thompson and the life Jim Fielder, and maybe even about herself as a reporter – along with something more about the country and world.

"I might do that," Lynn Jackson said, and she and Jim watched the athletes on the field below.

And then Lynn and Jim gazed out past the stadium, and they gazed out past the edge of town to the world beyond, and they thought of what more they might do, as well.

## PIONEERS

## TOWN AND FIELD

One night a few months after his brother Aaron's death, Mike Thompson returned again to the Little League ball field where he and Aaron used to play.

He scaled the outfield fence and walked through the dark to home plate where he stood in the dirt of the batter's box. Mike thought they had all failed Aaron – the whole town, the whole country – even though no one had put a gun in Aaron's hand, not directly. Instead it seemed possible that Aaron had been taught and encouraged to be a warrior right there in the middle of town, deep in America – right there in the shadow of the church and the old school, not far from the supermarket on the first base side, next to the car dealership in foul ground off right field, across the street from a bank bordering a gas station and convenience store behind center field, an auto parts store on the other side, and car wash and used car lot, across the road from the elderly housing beyond the curving creek behind left field – all these establishments were located along the route their school bus took each school day, a block from the center of downtown – all the town surrounding, shaping, enabling

the boys, and Mike's brother Aaron, the student, the ballplayer, the young man, the soldier, the son – Aaron Thompson. And that was what had happened, as Mike saw it. All the town had raised, molded, recruited Aaron and sent him off with blessings formal and informal to legally fight an illegal, monstrous conflict.

Did Mike really believe that?

He saw no reason not to.

Did he really blame his brother's death on the town? On baseball?

Not only. On himself as well. On everything. On everyone. On the media. And the schools. On the weapons manufacturers. The oil men. On the owners and their officials, their representatives, their spokespeople, their hired hands, hired guns.

The town and surrounding area. It was its own place, in certain ways special to Mike, but in other ways, he knew, it was a place like many another place. It was America. It was the world. And there were plenty of city blocks not so much unlike this small village block, all around the world. People played baseball in the middle of cities too. This town was an American town like many other American towns and cities. And it was a town like many other towns in many other countries even, on every continent, all over the globe. Maybe in Antarctica there were no towns such as this.

Mike stood in the batter's box, stared out across the dark field, and was struck by images of the killing of his brother, of all who had killed him. Mike imagined a gun in his own hands then, military issue, automatic, a submachine gun. And then all the Thompson family came onto the field holding guns. And then much of the town. And then people from all over the country. And elected officials. And non-elected executives and owners. Everyone was present,

gathered along the foul lines, people from all across America, all gathered in the ball field with their guns and flares and grenades.

And Aaron stood off in the distance, in shallow center field, in a camouflage uniform.

Then it was time. Mike lifted his gun, sighted and fired.

Aaron crumpled. Everyone else opened up on the crumpled form. Nothing exploded off Aaron, no blood or gore, no bits of bone and flesh. Instead Aaron was ripped and cut like a rag doll with an infinite capacity to absorb bullets and be shot clean through. It got to be hard work, killing Aaron.

When there were breaks in the firing, people wiped sweat, took deep breaths, looked away, stretched, refocused – and then resumed firing as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and almost as if their very lives depended on it. Aaron was rolled over and flopped around by the force of the impacts. Occasionally he would struggle to sit up and any time he did he was blasted down again by bullets and grenade bursts. The priest and preachers fired away, the teachers, supervisors, politicians, mothers and fathers, family and friends, reporters, doctors, lawyers, carpenters, farmers, service workers, schoolchildren – bang! bang! bang!

That was how Aaron died.

The politicians and corporate executives flew over in military planes and dropped bombs on him. Uncle Sam leaned out of Air Force One and shouted encouragement through a bullhorn stamped with a corporate logo. The members of the Supreme Court stood by, nodding sagely. Everyone that mattered was there in official and unofficial capacity both, in all their glory.

That was how Aaron was killed

And the TV cameras zoomed in; the media crews flooded the field with spotlights. They got it on film all right – not that it might ever be shown to the public.

And so Aaron died.

Mike stood in the batter's box in one of the darkest parts of the field and he stared at the body of his brother, this vision of the body of his brother, until it moved no more, and then with Aaron dead and motionless, finally, everyone shifted attention to deep center field where stood a group of Iraqis, very many of them.

It was difficult to see how many Iraqis for sure. No one really knew or much seemed to care. A few of the Iraqis were lined up in military uniform, looking ragged. The rest were civilians.

It was time. Mike and everyone else opened fire, and the group of Iraqis went down. An incredible barrage. Mike fired steadily, the crumpled image of his brother in one eye, the Iraqis fixed in the other.

A few people walked up to the foul lines and fired rocket-propelled grenades. Then bombs and missiles struck from invisible planes high overhead, far out of sight, far out of hearing even. Until Boom! Boom! Boom! went the bombs.

The Iraqis took it all like Aaron had, like rag dolls torn to shreds, cut down and killed, and killed, and killed again, until they went still at long last, not totally destroyed somehow, their images at least.

And that was how it was done.

Afterwards, everyone stacked the weapons in neat piles for use the next time.

They offered condolences to Aaron's family for the loss.

To Mike, that was the real history of Aaron's killing. And of the invasion and occupation of Iraq, and of the economic sanctions and the bombings throughout much of

the last decade and a half.

American history. There it was, in the same vein as the slaughtering of the Native Americans, and the Vietnamese, and the many others at home and abroad. What else might be expected of a country that currently had military bases and soldiers in one hundred fifty nations around the globe and a military budget larger than the military spending of almost every other nation combined?

Mike stood in the batter's box in the dark and remembered that day long ago when his brother Aaron had been struck twice in consecutive at bats, crumpling to the ground the second time, the pitcher walking toward home plate complaining, "He never moved. He didn't even try to get out of the way."

Mike found out later what had happened. Little Aaron had come to bat each time paralyzed with fear by the strength, the age, and the wildness of the pitcher. And Aaron was determined not to bail out, not even to flinch. Though Aaron had little hope of connecting with the fastballs he did not want to look like a coward, and he figured if he so much as flinched that would lead to his bailing out completely. So when the second plunk pitch came in hard and low the same as in his previous at bat, Aaron was unable to move an inch in any direction.

He had set his mind in advance. His muscles obeyed and locked. He held form, and the pitch smashed into the fresh bruise on his shin left by the previous plunk pitch. Aaron told Mike later that this pitch felt like it struck bone directly. And down he went.

The pitcher was not done. In a game later that season when Mike and Aaron faced him again he was out of control once more. This time the pitcher decided that as

long as he was hitting batters from the mound he would go ahead and get hit by pitches himself while batting, maybe to show he could take it too, or maybe because he had been brought up a bit crazy.

So he leaned in and got hit on the arm during his first at bat. The second time up no balls came anywhere near him, no matter how much he stretched forward, until finally one pitch came in waist high right down the middle of the plate, the closest pitch yet, and then he bent in half and took the pitch on the helmet.

"Strike!" the umpire yelled, an umpire's umpire, a volunteer fireman, built like a cinder block. Stu. He never took anything from anybody, not even the opposing coach who might go incendiary as he did just then, not believing the call. "It hit him in the head, Stu!"

"Strike!" Stu hollered out again.

Probably it was against the rules to lean into a pitch, let alone bend in half over the plate, but no one seemed to know for sure except the umpire who acted like a muscle-bound god himself right there in the literal shadow of the church on the hill behind the backstop – the old stone church set high above the creek – the swift creek into which foul balls often plopped.

Everyone at the game was from the same town, and all the people directly involved in the growing argument – the pitcher batting, the catcher, Mike, Aaron, the umpire, the coaches – they all attended that same church every Sunday on the hill above the ball field. Quite a family affair – though it had seemed like the farthest thing from it at the time.

Tonight Mike thought of the other umpire, the one who made the calls the day Aaron got hit twice in the leg. That umpire was Sandy, a senior in high school at the time, who

lived just blocks away, and attended the same church. Mike, Aaron, the pitcher, and the umpire Sandy all rode the same bus to school on which Sandy and Aaron sometimes wrestled in play.

"Are you okay, Aaron?" Sandy asked from behind the plate after Aaron went down in the dirt.

"It hurt to take the breath away," Aaron told Mike in the dugout.

Looked it too. Aaron in the dirt – the pain seemed to fix him there. Their father went over and helped Aaron up.

Aaron looked down the first base line as if to signal his willingness to go on but he had trouble making even the short walk to the dugout where he sat beside Mike who thought their mother would come out of the bleachers and make sure Aaron was okay. He was both worried and bothered that she was not there already – but when she did come into the dugout everyone gave her a rather cool treatment, including Mike and Aaron. It was possible that no woman had ever before set foot in the dugout, especially during a game. Mike was embarrassed, and Aaron grew frosty with their mom who seemed both worried and then frosty in return.

Sixteen years later, after Aaron had been killed in an ambush and firefight in Iraq, and after the Thompson family was notified, the first image that came to Mike's mind was not one of Aaron in Iraq but of Aaron sprawled in the dirt of the Little League batter's box.

The image of Aaron and the Iraqis being gunned down in center field – and by whom – that came later.

## THE EVENING NEWS

Glenn was disturbed watching the news anymore, as much for what he did not see as for what he did.

It seemed now that little on the news had much of anything to do with their neighbors and family, at least not much direct or positive. Or it all seemed to be nothing a person could do anything about.

Information on the stock market? Who had the money? When the stock market went up, so did unemployment. So why should anyone root for the stock market?

When the owners did well, everyone else – the vast majority – did poorly – call them the owned – as his son Mike, for one, did now.

International news? Usually that was about one disastrous event after another, new troop deployments or killings.

As for news of politics and economics, anything important seemed to happen in regions and classes of the country remote from the life of Glenn and his family.

Even the local news seemed to be little more than a daily update on graphic violence – who killed who and by what particular type of gun, who died in what car accident or fire, who was being charged with what crime, who was going to

jail, and, again, whose stocks were rising or falling. And scarcely ever did Glenn get the sense that much concern existed for finding out the truth about why any such crime or negligence happened in the first place or what the workings of the stock market really meant to regular people, if anything.

Something was phony. The reporters and anchors especially often seemed as if they were merely doing their job and even faking the degree to which they were expected to care. Not all, not all the time. But so many, so much of the time.

At the end of the broadcasts there was usually some familiar, nifty, or quirky anecdote dropped in as if to cover up for the violent or remote reports that had just filled the program, as if to try to make the viewer forget the main broadcast until next time.

And though Glenn might watch with a mixture of humor and interest, he also resented the thinly veiled condescension in the calculated, all-too-folksy set-up of these so-called human interest pieces.

To add insult to injury, some of the anecdotes were patronizingly and insultingly trivial or cheap, amounting to little more than another diversion from real unreported or underreported news, the important news of the day – whatever it might be.

So Glenn was no longer able to watch what was called the news with the interest and pleasure he had once felt.

Instead he watched with increasing resentment and disgust.

Lately he had begun to think there must be a more intelligent and valuable way to spend this evening hour.

Mike called it "corporate media" or "dominant media"

saying it was filled with corporate concerns and voyeuristic distractions that removed attention from corporate failings and the neglected state of the country.

Occasionally, he said, a corporate scandal would make headlines but it was always framed as an anomaly. Rarely would anyone comment on the gross systematic failings of the corporate system – perpetual unemployment, lower or stagnant real wages, weaker or more expensive health benefits, if any, ever escalating environmental destruction, continual personal economic insecurity, wars of aggression, and so on.

Glenn remembered a book that Mike had mentioned, *The More You Watch, The Less You Know*. Wasn't that the truth?

Glenn wondered now what difference it made, any of it – news, books, whatever. He wondered what could be done about any of these terrible things.

He had always prided himself on keeping a level head. But the more he began to look into things after Aaron's death, the angrier he got, and he began to consider what he could do about it. He wanted, maybe needed, some way to exercise his anger, constructively. As he felt he should.

The US was a great country in a lot of ways – that was obvious. Of course if you were rich like America, it was relatively easy to make yourself look better than you really were.

It should be easy to constantly fix things up nice on the outside or in select places while the rot went along unchecked on the inside, or the massacres were carried out elsewhere. And it was increasingly obvious to Glenn that as grand as the United States of America was in some ways, it was equally rotten in a lot of other ways that required serious attention – that required perhaps even his attention.

In these months after his son Aaron's death, Glenn was coming to feel, he was coming to think, he was coming to decide that he would be damned if he were to ignore those things that he might affect, might help change, whatever they might be.

Glenn could feel it. He could feel it coming, something that he was going to do. He didn't know what. Not yet. Might not really know until after the fact.

He could not bring Aaron back.

But in Aaron's memory Glenn would do something, he was coming to think and feel. He could sense it. Whatever it was, he would have to do it himself if Aaron were not to have died in vain.

## MAKING IT REAL

Ruthy Thompson stood with Dan Driver – and he with her.

She went to the courthouse every day during lunch to hold a sign for peace.

She stood against the lies that crashed upon her life and that she was coming to see and understand and act against more and more.

The first time Ruthy picketed in front of the courthouse, she was tempted to scream back at the few passersby who hollered denunciations at her, but she soon learned to let the derogatory words roll off her back like so much, whatever, reject, and she felt proud to stand up for what she believed in.

Something else chilled her more than the slurs – the falsehoods and half-truths and lies repeated by both the irate and the even-tempered, the distortions accepted as truth. She assumed people were not always purposefully lying or devilishly outraged. She herself had believed much of what they were saying not so long ago, before Aaron's death had propelled her to look with more care into the facts.

Had not she and everyone across the country been told virtually from the moment of their births that the United

States was the greatest, most democratic nation on earth, the beacon of hope for the world, the center of liberty, prosperity, respectability, sanity, peace? A cut above, naturally? Innately unique? And other racist, classist, religious, and nationalistic lies.

In some ways the US was great. And in other ways it was hideous. In huge, massive, incredibly destructive ways. And the hideousness was what needed to be fixed. The rest could be celebrated – insofar as it was understood, for real. But mainly it was the vicious barbaric actions that needed attention and action.

Ruthy had begun to wonder why her two little girls were required by law to pledge allegiance to the United State of America in school every day. After all, to pledge absolute allegiance to a colored strip of cloth that could then be waved on any national occasion, wrong or right, noble or brutal, would help automatically create support for the occasion, thus blinding people to reality, making it more difficult for them to raise a challenge and to think for themselves and make their own judgments about the quality of their country's actions. The more Ruthy thought about it, the more she understood that the Pledge of Allegiance was forcing her children to become a couple of idol worshippers. If the flag pledge was not idolatry, Ruthy did not know what was.

What if the pledge were altered, Ruthy wondered, so that her children recited something more appropriate, something like:

"I pledge allegiance to only that part of the flag that stands for only the good things and not for the many immoral and otherwise illegal wars of aggression that the country has fought historically and

continues to fight and is currently engaged in, and to the republic for which it stands, but only in part and not every part equally, one nation under God, though under not one God but many Gods of many different creeds and beliefs and only for those who believe in any god in the first place, indivisible, but torn by strife and the class warfare of the top preying upon the bottom, with liberty especially for those who have plenty of money and connections and privileged birth status and favored skin color and favored sexual orientation, et cetera and so on, and justice but not economic justice or racial justice or gender justice, or many of the individual and social justices stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which the US has signed into law but refuses like many countries to fully uphold, for all, but not for all equitably, or actually, or even democratically, especially not in the economy, and not even in politics where dollars largely rule.

There, that might do to make Ruthy's children more benign idol worshippers, though idol worshipers they would still be. Such a pledge would at least reflect a more accurate and educational understanding of the country that the flag supposedly symbolized.

Such a pledge would eliminate the gross distortion and fantasy of the standard one.

Such a pledge would be far more in keeping with a real spirit of education, since it might likely cause the children to think through many questions of importance that the institutions of society, including school, functioned to cover-up, obstruct, and ignore.

Such a pledge would never be allowed.

Such a pledge to a flag would of course be viewed as ridiculous or dangerous – as was proper, Ruthy realized, just the way any flag pledge or other form of idolatry should be viewed.

"I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America..." Ruthy pictured her two little girls standing solemnly before the flag, looking earnestly up, hands over their hearts, vowing absolute loyalty to a colored piece of cloth with words full of distortions, lies, and half truths. She sent her children to school for this?

She was sick that she had not seen before the danger of rallying mindless to the flag, to Team America. Rah! Rah! Amen. Diligent brainwashing. For real.

She was sick that she had not been more aware of the reality of her country and the world until after her brother Aaron had been killed, let alone the million-plus Iraqis who had been sacrificed since the early 1990s to US-UN sanctions, let alone the millions of other victims domestic and international of US economic and military conquest.

And so Ruthy went out in public and stood her ground every day and she let the denunciations fall where they may.

She went out with her picket sign, hoping to break through the web of lies and silence and complicity.

Ruthy Thompson stood by her sign in memory of her brother Aaron. She stood by her sign on behalf of people in the United States and Iraq both, and the world over. She stood by her sign.

## TIME AND CHANGE

For Carolyn Thompson the past year had been the most draining of her life.

As the anniversary of Aaron's death grew near, the first and last thing she wanted to think about was Aaron and so the opposing inclinations of her mind had half torn her apart.

She looked for someone to blame but did not like the answers her mind supplied, the answers that too often pointed uselessly inward, or outward to awesomely large forces, so she gave that up at first and tried to concentrate on the memories of Aaron alive.

Her train of thinking always seemed to run to the dead end of her son in a casket.

The image made her think of Iraq, a land that had begun to haunt her. She thought of all the killing and suffering there. And the image made her think of America, too, as another haunting land.

Carolyn wished to see the suffering of Iraq end. She thought about it, read about it, sometimes tried to talk about it, until it seemed that only with the end of the incredible suffering in Iraq could she ever begin to get a real and sane closure on the death of her son. She prayed for it. She

prayed for the demilitarization of America.

But she knew she needed to do more than that.

The problem was that Carolyn strongly suspected that nothing the US was currently doing in Iraq was bringing an end to the suffering any closer. And so a kind of unrest had begun to build inside her that fueled a deeper more fulsome sort of anger than she could ever remember feeling for anything over a sustained period of time.

She was changing.

She sensed her whole family was.

She saw Mike and Ruthy changing. Carolyn had seen it in Ruthy when her daughter came back a few weeks ago from picketing against the war for the first time, some irrevocable shift, even a seeming shift in the very color of her eyes.

The very Ruthy-like way her daughter usually held herself had deepened and grown into a manner that appeared to contain a new reservoir of energy, feeling, experience, thought. Some new reservoir of what it meant to be human.

This was what Carolyn Thompson saw in her eldest daughter now, some part of Ruthy tapped – as if for the first time, or more deeply than before.

When Ruthy came through the kitchen door a few days ago, her eyes bright and her face flushed, having driven straight over from her most recent protest at the courthouse, Carolyn had frozen at the sink, one hand curled over the edge of the basin, while she drank in this living vision, this new daughter of hers.

Carolyn watched Ruthy, and in watching her, she felt her own determination grow. Carolyn decided she could do something more too – whatever it might be – and soon.

## SUPPORT THE TROOPS?

"Do you support the troops?"

There it was – that question again.

"I think it's the wrong question," Daniel Driver told reporter Lynn Jackson. "I think it's the wrong question asked of the wrong person. And I wonder what you mean by it. I wonder what people mean by it in general. So when you say, 'Do you support the troops?' I wonder what you mean by 'support'? And why do you say 'troops'? Two in Iraq. One in Korea. Those are my sons and daughter, and I don't think of them as troops. I don't think of them as soldiers, warriors, killers. And I do not support them in that capacity, no. As people, yes. As family, yes. As troops, no. And you might be surprised to learn how they feel about what I do, what I'm doing here."

During his lunch hour every day, Dan Driver stood outside the courthouse as he had since weeks before the launch of the US ground attack against Iraq in March 2003.

Dan Driver held signs protesting the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, even though and especially because he had three children currently serving in the military.

He talked with passersby who wanted to know his reasons against the use of the US military.

He endured the jeers and insults of some who opposed his views.

Reporter Lynn Jackson asked today, "Can we take for granted the answer to the question that is being asked of war protesters about supporting the troops? Do you support the troops, as the father of three soldiers, two currently in Iraq?"

And so Dan Driver told Lynn Jackson exactly what he thought, though he wondered all the while how much he could say effectively, how far it made sense to go.

"For people like myself who know that the attack against Iraq is fundamentally immoral, for people like myself who know that the attack is naked aggression, we cannot possibly 'support' the means of carrying out that aggression. And since the soldiers are those means, how can we support them as soldiers? We cannot."

Even though they were his own children.

He did not support his children as soldiers.

He did not hector them either.

He supported them as people.

"So, no, I don't support the 'troops'. I don't support my sons and daughter as 'soldiers', except that I hope they protect themselves and come home alive. I support them as human beings who have been put in a horrible position by the military and political commanders, and by the whole citizenry of the United States, including myself."

After all, Dan pointed out, he had not given every last bit of his own time, energy, and blood to stopping the US assault against Iraq and now the military occupation. And he had not actively protested US foreign policy until it was much too late to head off the latest carnage, let alone protect his children.

"Supporting a person, a family member," he told the

reporter, "is not the same as supporting the troops, which I don't. It's being a decent human being, which I try to be. And you can ask my sons and daughter whether or not they understand. I think they do. After all, what I do does not hurt them or endanger them in any way. In fact, what I do may be the best hope they have for being saved from the dangerous, murderous, inflammatory situation they've been put in. Bring them home, now."

It's a question trotted out, Dan Driver told the reporter, by the pro-war establishment to try to throw protesters back on their heels, to attempt to reinforce the claim that the US attack is not fundamentally wrong.

"We do not support the invasion and occupation, or the means to carry it out.

"Hundreds of millions of people all over the world and at least tens of millions here in the United States understand that the war is criminal, a crime, whether ordered by the President or not.

"That's tens of millions of people here – Democrats, Republicans, independents, veterans, legal experts –people in all walks of life who see that the President and his administration and Congress are committing a criminal act of aggression.

"'Do you support the troops?' Give me a break – that's not the point.

"Former President Clinton committed similar acts of aggression against Serbia, Kosovo, and Sudan. It's criminal aggression. Lots of innocent people get killed, and for what? To rid the world of Saddam Hussein? He's an old buddy of America.

"The US supported this guy during the eighties – all throughout his worst crimes against the Iraqis. And the Iraqi people, if they had not been strapped and ground into

submission by US-led sanctions for over a decade, they might likely have gotten rid of Hussein themselves.

"Why did the US not support the attempts of Iraqi citizens to overthrow Hussein ten years ago when they pleaded for help? At least the US has finally stopped supporting the dictator, which it did for many years while he was slaughtering his own people with weapons and chemicals purchased from the US and Europe.

"It's not like tyrants in different countries have not been overthrown by their own people in recent years. But the people of Iraq were crushed by US-led UN sanctions, making them more dependent on Hussein than ever before.

"So why now does the US decide to get rid of the Iraqi tyrant but not other tyrants all over the world, including ones that don't like the US? What's the real reason for the US attack against Iraq? Can you with a straight face tell me that the US does not intend to conquer and control Iraq to get the oil dollars and to gain further control of the incredibly rich Middle East?

"You expect me to support the troops in that robbery, that thuggery, which is the only means by which it can be accomplished? Support the troops? The question is insulting and demeaning to protesters of US aggression."

Dan Driver spoke evenly and steadily, trying to fill in the giant gaps that surrounded this common question. He was intent now upon having his full say.

"How often are 'the troops' asked whether or not they support the protesters?" he asked the reporter.

"Or how about the police here in the United States, how often are they asked whether or not they support the protesters?"

"Are the police not more likely to abuse, criminally abuse protesters than protesters are to harass or scorn US soldiers? Many times more likely. That factual record is clear. So why not insistently question the police about whether or not they support the protesters?"

"By now there is a long well-documented record of police abusing, attacking, and torturing protesters. Nothing comparable exists of protesters doing that to soldiers. So, if the question has to be asked, and I'm not convinced it does, the question ought to be redirected far more appropriately.

"Sometimes I think you people in the corporate media and people in general do not really hear what people like myself are saying.

"Or you don't want to.

"Do I support what the troops are doing? No, I do not.

"I can tell you what I think the troops ought to do if they really want to be heroes. I'm no hero myself by far so it doesn't mean a thing for me to tell them what to do if they want to be heroes. And I'm not going to advise them or anyone else that they do this or anything else – these are hard personal decisions – but if they do want to go farther than I ever have, it seems to me that they would refuse to fight in this criminal war. Refuse, on principle. As some soldiers have.

"And it seems to me that in doing so they would even be keeping well within what it means to be a good, loyal, and professional soldier – as opposed to a mere mercenary – because it is my understanding that soldiers have an obligation to disobey immoral orders, and their orders in this case, as sent from the President on down, are immoral, and savage, as well as illegal under international and domestic law both.

"Obviously my sons and daughter have chosen not to

follow this route and I feel I can in no way reproach them, whether or not they agree with me in the first place, because I cannot say that I have ever performed a heroic act in my life either.

"If you want to ask a far more appropriate question about what I support and don't support, an insightful question that really respects what I'm doing here, and that really lays bare what I think and feel, you might ask me whether or not I support the President, and my answer, I'll be more than happy to explain, is no, I do not support the President in these criminal policies.

"That says nothing about what I think of him personally. Personally, I don't think of him, don't know him.

"I do think I know my sons and daughter moreso, and I love them and that's how I think of them. As sons and daughter. Not troops.

"Nor do I support Congress for the funding they provide and for going along and not stopping this aggression.

"I do not support the many in corporate America and all across official America in their readiness and willingness to urge and follow the President into Iraq on their quest for dominance and control of oil in that most oil rich region in the world.

"Already, this early in the occupation, you must know, virtually all the laws against foreign ownership of corporations and businesses in Iraq have been rescinded, completely outside of any democratic process. So it's now the law that nearly any corporation and business in Iraq may be 100 percent owned by foreign corporations. Care to guess whose corporations those are going to be?

"The only exception at this point is natural resources,

the oil industry, which cannot be owned one hundred percent by foreign corporations, not yet at least. But the US runs the country and controls all the oil and businesses anyhow. They don't have to own it. They control it.

"The US forced the UN to give it control. And the US can now use control of the oil – turning the tap on and off, even if it can't turn a profit – as leverage – that is, blackmail – against countries from the Americas, to Europe, to Africa and Asia. Do I support that legalized criminal robbery, that extortion? Hardly.

"The Iraqis are being flat robbed, as made law by the US-appointed governing council and the US-dominated UN.

"And the invading, occupying US troops make this possible at the point of a gun, at the end of bombs, and at great cost to Iraqi land and civilian lives. Who can support that?

"Of course, it's not primarily the soldiers' fault. It's the fault of the civilian leaders and the US public that allow a corrupt system to rule year after year, decade after decade.

"Is it possible that you in the media still do not hear those who dissent, that you still do not understand our opinions and understandings of the executive branch and Congress, of the great crime the United States is committing in Iraq?

"Obviously, you don't care. You can't. You would lose your jobs at the order of the editors. Or the editors would lose their jobs at the order of the owners.

"The US invasion of Iraq is a great crime of the sort that was punished by hanging at the Nuremberg trials following World War II.

"Such crimes of state have been committed by every US President since World War II.

"You can check the record.

"Of course, you'll have to look to sources that the dominant media do not present much or at all.

"Support the troops?' I find the question offensive. And hypocritical, as I've noted. And I have plenty more to say about it, because another thing that the corporate media chooses not to realize, is that those who dissent from criminal public policy actually support the troops as human beings more effectively and in more ways than anyone else.

"No, we don't support them as troops. We want them to live, not to invade or occupy.

"We want them home, not under attack, in a place where they have no business being. No business but business, that is, big business. Big oil.

"Who, after all, has been all along calling for the soldiers not to be sent into harm's way?

"So who really, actively supports the people in the military, rather than just sitting around saying they support them.

"It's so easy to wave a flag, and so much harder to attempt to right a wrong.

"It's easy to go to war in this country, which is geared for it, primed for it, built for it, and run by the warlords themselves – elected, owned and run by the moneymen of the military-industrial complex that Eisenhower warned about so long ago, as did anti-war activists, if you want to be historically accurate, who warned us before he did, and he did so rather easily, on his way out.

"It's these moneybags behind the politicians behind the generals who order the soldiers to fight or be incarcerated.

"Really, what choice do our soldiers have? If they're not fighting for their lives, they're fighting for their jobs. Not

our jobs, theirs. Fight or be incarcerated. According to reports, some Iraqis were forced to fight or their families would be shot. Things aren't nearly so bad with the US soldiers. Their families and lives will be undermined if they refuse to fight in this criminal war, though that destruction won't take place by bullet but by law.

"Who has for decades been calling for an end to the ongoing inflammatory, dangerous and reprehensible military aggression of the United States?"

"Who has insisted most seriously that the troops be pulled out of Iraq and other places the world over where they have no right to be, and are by and large not wanted, and only inflame the world against us? Those who protest. And this protest may even be spreading to the military finally.

"Recently at Fort Benning, Georgia, the wives and family members of soldiers in Iraq booed and hollered at a Colonel who tried to explain to them the need for the extension of the soldiers' tours in Iraq. The Colonel had to be escorted from the stage.

"He had to be protected from the wives and family members of 'the troops'.

"So why are those military families not asked if they support the troops, and I am?"

"You don't and you won't see me going after officers or soldiers.

"So why is this inappropriate question asked in the first place?"

"I think it's done to try to distract attention from what dissenters actually say and actually mean.

"I think it's done to try to distort or undermine the information and opinions and knowledge we try to put forth.

"Because if you can get the protesters to state for the record that, yes, they are decent folks and so would not spit on the soldiers when they return from conflict, then somehow that seems as if it is supposed to imply that the orders the troops are carrying out are not so immoral after all, and that, gosh, even the protesters hope the troops kick ass. No, the protesters do not hope the troops kick ass or get their asses kicked. The protesters hope that the troops either quit heroically, or do as little damage as possible, while pressuring their superiors to pressure their superiors to call the whole thing off.

"But in fact, the protesters aren't focused on the troops nearly as much as the media would apparently like them to be. The protesters mainly want to pressure the establishment to stop this gross nationalistic military madness that has gripped the US for decades, if not, by now, centuries.

"That's what the protesters want, by and large.

"'Support the troops?' Bring them home.

"The question is more of a distraction than it is relevant. Isn't that the main effect of the question, given the usual polite answer? Because if even the protesters can be heard to say they 'support the troops' – and that's surely going to be the sound byte – then the implication is that it must be okay to attack country after country after country, whenever the ruling wealth of the US and the world snap their fingers and pick up their legal and professional media whips and flunkies – their own loyal civilian 'troops'. We don't support those troops either.

"So what I'm saying, with all due respect, is that you might want to reconsider what it means to ask that question and how you feel about yourself being part of that process.

"Is that clear?"

"In my opinion, what the troops are doing is carrying out the great crimes of their so-called leaders, military, political, corporate, the great crimes of their country-folk, of whom I am one, greatly facilitated by the cheerleading or acquiescence of a complicit corporate media that is the dominant media, of the complicit schools, of most of the churches and religions, of many other officials of power, and also of many star figures of enormous visibility and influence.

"The largest responsibility for this invasion and occupation and the perpetuation of systematic legalized US criminality lies with those of privilege and leisure, and it lies in many ways, I would argue too, with the regular citizens of the United States who share a real burden for allowing their representatives to do this, supporting aggression without seriously looking into it, and not trying to stop it themselves, at least those who have the privilege of time and resources.

"Support the troops?' When the question is asked, it's as if there is a strong implication that the troops are a symbol of the policies they are carrying out, and also that the dissenters might wish to harm the 'troops' personally. It's the President and Congress and other official and executive Americans mainly who have put the troops in harm's way, who have set them up to kill and be killed, to maim and be maimed.

"And why is a person who protests the policies of the President never asked if he supports the President, since the policy is actually implemented by him? That question is never asked – it would be ridiculous. Obviously a reporter would feel absurd asking such a question at such a time.

"So there's either a mindless or willful sort of stupidity

and rudeness in asking a question about a protester's feelings and thoughts about the 'troops' when as everyone knows, the protesters are against the policies that are implemented by the high officials. That's who they are protesting against. Mainly. And they are speaking out to others who might be willing to help do something right, useful, constructive.

"Support the troops?' The typical polite answer to this question would seem to imply that whereas the protesters did not support the course of events before they were totally launched, now that the attack has been set in full motion, even the protesters apparently are showing willingness to go along with the attack in that they at least won't say that they don't support the troops.

"And it's always the folksy militant 'troop', isn't it, which is a softer but still warlike form for more upfront words like 'soldiers', 'warriors', and 'professional killers'. Never is it asked, 'Do you support the "people" of the armed forces?' but even that would be a bogus question.

"And so the question sneaks up and solicits support for militancy, not humanity.

"The question seems to imply yet another question, 'Would you criminally harass the troops?'

"In other words, the dissenters are being asked to state for the record that they are not criminals or inhumane beasts, in this regard.

"First, with all due respect, that's offensive.

"Second, it's also a classic diversionary tactic to distract attention from the real criminality and inhumanity at hand.

"It's the question of an accomplice to crime, unwitting or not.

"The question also reflects unfairly on the ordinary person in the armed forces, because it's the 'troops', who

get focused on for policies that they have virtually no control over.

"It's never even asked, 'Do you support the "officers"?' let alone the political and corporate sponsors of the latest acts of aggression, and so the question seems to stress that the regular people in the military are the ones primarily responsible for the attack, that it was even their idea and decision to attack.

"It also seems to suggest that the soldiers actually support the attack and occupation, which a growing number do not.

"And of course, as dissenters regularly emphasize, it is the privileged officials with their designs on money and power that are mainly responsible for the criminal aggression.

"And why is it never asked whether or not the dissenters 'support the weapons designers and manufacturers'? Or the weapons themselves? Because that would show the question to be what it is – absurd and manipulative.

"And such questions are meant to be accusatory of the dissenters, aren't they?

"It's also in so many other ways completely hypocritical. I mean, why is it not asked regularly 'Does the President support the dissenters?' The question is perfectly legitimate by the standard of the 'troops' question.

"Those who oppose the war on the grounds of its basic immorality and illegality cannot support the troops any more than the president supports the protesters.

"And though the president may support the war opponents' right to protest, that does not and cannot mean that the war opponents think the troops have any right to go off to the war to kill – because one involves perpetrating

the crime, and the other involves trying to stop the crime.

"So there's no real support there for the troops as troops – that is, as fighters, warriors – nor should there be.

"Why is it never asked, 'Does the media support the dissenters?'

"The media effectively blocks them off the air and out of the papers so much that it should be. Why then is there this huge bias, this huge double standard in the media?

"I don't think the question is difficult to answer.

"Guess who owns and controls the media and so much of what we see, hear, and think – not regular people, but the same people, the class of people who own and control the country – the wealthy powers, investors, financiers.

"And the more and more that your newspaper and your media company and conglomerate corporation are part of this corporate system and have reflected and propagated these money-driven, power-driven, inflammatory, war-grabbing mindsets, the more and more complicit the media have become, the more responsible for great crimes like this war and occupation.

"An NPR reporter came by here the other day. Same story – National Public Radio – they're nearly as complicit in a lot of ways, and they have substantial corporate support.

"My sons are in Iraq, in the wrong country at the wrong time fighting a wrong fight, and they were sent there by the whole weight of the law and the whole weight of the officially praised and sanctioned aggressive culture of this land, by official America, a law, an official society that in this case, and many like it, is clearly in the wrong, and that would persecute 'the troops' mercilessly if many members of the military were to stand up heroically against it.

"My sons and daughter are in Iraq, and in fact have

been stationed all across the world at one time or another, as part of a military designed to control as much of the world as possible for elite profit, the people be damned.

"The US spends almost as much money on its military as does the entire rest of the world combined – you can look it up – and I want them home now, my children and the rest of the soldiers, and I want them taken out of the horrible position they have been led into by those who encouraged them to be there and those who order them to act in the wrong.

"I want the troops protected from their own rulers, as forcefully and fiercely as the President of the United States and all the other rich war-pushers want to use them in their games of power and wealth, which do more, far more, to endanger and impoverish the country than to protect and benefit it.

"I want my children and everyone else out of danger and acting in a proper capacity, not in this criminal one.

"And how dare anyone ask me whether or not I 'support the troops'?

"But I don't mind the question, today, personally, since there's no problem answering it and since I have the time to do so.

"And given time and knowledge of the facts, it's easy to show it to be the bogus question that it is – but it nauseates me to see it is constantly used to undermine efforts for decency and peace.

"Can it be possible that I've misinterpreted the question, a question that has hounded dissenters especially ever since the ground invasion started?

"Can it be possible that actually I do not understand what is meant by this idea of 'support' of the 'troops'?

"It's true, I've never heard anyone explain what is

meant by it, really.

"I've heard the question hundreds of times but have never heard a single explanation of it.

"There's a reason for that, no doubt.

"So if I've missed something, or left something out of my own understanding of the words, I would appreciate if you would clarify the question for me now so that I might more properly respond, if need be."

Lynn Jackson lowered the microphone. "I guess that about covers it," she said.

Dan wondered. "'Support the troops?' Bring them home, now. Anything less is criminal. Anything less is worthy only of a thug nation."

Dan Driver stood by his sign and wondered how far he should go. He wondered how far he could extend his words and thoughts to say what needed to be said.

He had an obligation, he knew.

If he were not speaking above and beyond the ordinary at this moment, and in many more moments to come, then Dan Driver felt he would not really be saying very much of anything at all.



## On the Iraq War

Noam Chomsky

(from Q&A with Anthony DiMaggio and Edward Herman)

The insurgency [in Iraq] was created by the brutality of the invasion and occupation -- which is, in fact, one of the most astonishing failures in military history. The Nazis had less trouble in occupied Europe, and the Russians held their satellites for decades with far less difficulty. It is difficult to think of an analog. A few months after the invasion, I met a highly experienced senior physician with one of the leading relief organizations, who has served in some of the worst parts of the world. He had just returned briefly from Baghdad, where he was trying to reestablish medical facilities, but was unable to because of the incompetence of the CPA [the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority]. He told me he had never seen such a combination of "arrogance, ignorance, and incompetence," referring to the Pentagon civilians in charge. In fact, it was monumental. They even failed to guard the WMD sites that had been under UN supervision, so that they were systematically looted, handing over to someone -- probably jihadis -- high-precision equipment suitable for producing missiles and nuclear weapons, dangerous bio-toxins, etc., which had

been provided to their friend Saddam by the US, UK and others. The ironies are almost indescribable.

Another fact overlooked, though it is finally beginning to leak, is the immense corruption under the CPA, beside which anything attributed to the UN pales in insignificance. Plenty of information has been readily available, but only tidbits were reported here. One can go on. But the major and crucial point overlooked is the judgment of Nuremberg, declaring that aggression is "the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole." All of the "accumulated evil." Also overlooked are the stern words of the US Chief Counsel Justice Jackson: "If certain acts of violation of treaties are crimes, they are crimes whether the United States does them or whether Germany does them, and we are not prepared to lay down a rule of criminal conduct against others which we would not be willing to have invoked against us.... We must never forget that the record on which we judge these defendants is the record on which history will judge us tomorrow. To pass these defendants a poisoned chalice is to put it to our own lips as well." Until at least this is recognized, all other discussion is merely footnotes, and shameful ones.

Criticism, like charity, starts at home.

– Wole Soyinka

I suggest that the role of the artist is to transcend conventional wisdom, to transcend the word of the establishment, to transcend the orthodoxy, to go beyond and escape what is handed down by the government or what is said in the media.... It is the job of the artist to think outside the boundaries of permissible thought and dare to say things that no one else will say....

– Howard Zinn, *Artists in Times of War*

The criteria for evaluation of a political novel must finally be the same as those for any other novel: how much of our life does it illuminate? how ample a moral vision does it suggest?—but these questions occur to us in a special context, in that atmosphere of political struggle which dominates modern life. For both the writer and the reader, the political novel provides a particularly severe test: politics rakes our passions as nothing else, and whatever we may consent to overlook in reading a novel, we react with an almost demonic rapidity to a detested political opinion. For the writer the great test is, how much truth can he force through the sieve of his opinions? For the reader the great test is, how much of that truth can he accept though it jostle his opinions?

– Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel*

I spent thirty-three years and four months in active military service.... And during that period I spent most of my time as a high-class muscle-man for big business, for Wall Street, and the bankers.... Thus, I helped make Mexico and especially Tampico safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street.... In China I helped to see to it that Standard Oil went its way unmolested.

– Marine Lieutenant General Smedley Butler,  
winner of two congressional Medals of Honor