

The Big Bamboo  
by Shane NORWOOD

## Part 1. Europe.

Historically, and dating back into the dim unremembered mists of ages past, Europe was populated by wild tribes of hairy arsed savages who hated each other's guts, and spent their free time energetically trying to obliterate one another. In the beginning it was a frigid wasteland, cold and inhospitable, filled with ill-tempered smelly beasts, where life was a pitiless struggle for survival. But things have gotten much better since then. Well, except for France, anyway.

The people who lived there in those days were called the Cro Magnons, and they were pretty tough cookies. Smart too. They invented, or discovered, depending upon who you listen to, fire, language, the wheel, tools, art, music, religion, and the missionary position. There was another group of proto humans around at the same time called the Neanderthals, who were some robust dudes, but not too bright, and with a tendency to believe everything that anybody told them. So the Cro Magnons easily took advantage of them, in every connotation of the phrase, and they disappeared. Some say they became extinct, and some say they became assimilated into the gene pool. Another theory is that they all moved to Pennsylvania and became Jehovah's Witnesses.

Over time, small family groups assembled into bigger groups and each group developed its own culture and world view and philosophy and language, and conjured up its own gods to explain the bewildering and slightly terrifying mystery of it all, and each was convinced of its own fundamental rightness, and its divine right to be right, thereby immediately rendering everybody else wrong.

It was soon discovered that the best way of proving everybody else wrong was by conquering them, subjugating them, killing anyone that gave you any lip, stealing their women, and forcing them to build large impractical buildings with the name of your own particular neighborhood gods inscribed upon them.

Borrowing from the Greeks, the Romans got the ball rolling, but pretty soon every gang of evil paint-faced barbarians who could get hold of a horse and a sword, and come up with a suitably cool name, were climbing onto the bandwagon. The Huns, the Goths, the Franks, the Vandals and the Vikings, for instance, will forever be fondly remembered for their respective cultural contributions.

Not that it was all doom and despair. Out of the turmoil and chaos came oratory, poetry, music, art, architecture, literature, philosophy, wine, sport, science, commerce, syphilis, a sense of adventure, and the spirit of free enterprise, with a bit a raping and pillaging thrown in for good measure. It was even fun to be a European for a while back there, but then Christianity showed up, and that was more or less the end of that.

After a while, the concept of statehood came into being, and the talking heads took over, (not the band, the politicians), and the people began to form the biggest groups yet, groups based upon mutual intelligibility, although in the case of Scotland there is some dispute about this. Eventually, these groups congealed into nations, and that's when the shit really hit the fan.

For centuries vast swathes of land and enormous populations were controlled by a bunch of chinless gibbering inbreds. In the States, they call them rednecks. In Europe they're called Royalty. Now Royalty are entitled to their family squabbles, just like everyone else. It's just that, when the family happens to include the crowned heads of half the major nations of Europe, several million people tend to get massacred every time things get a little heated.

But, Europeans are nothing if not practical and pragmatic, and after the Crusades, the Inquisition, The Black Death, The Renaissance, The Industrial Revolution, a civil war or two, the odd revolution here and there, one or two titanic continental power struggles involving uncountable fatalities, and the occasional war on a global scale, the Europeans decided to shake hands, let bygones be bygones, and live together in harmony.

So now we have the European Community, the Euro, EEC passports, the Brussels Parliament, the Channel Tunnel, the Maastricht treaty, The Eurovision Song Contest, and ABBA. Everybody loves everybody else, and everybody respects everybody else's culture and customs as different but equal.

Except they don't. Europe is now populated by wild tribes of well-dressed Eau De Cologne smelling savages who hate each other's guts, and everybody knows it's only a question of time. But some Europeans just can't wait to get the dance started.

## Chapter 1.

Sir Wilfrid was about to reach for his drink when the phone rang. He continued to look at his gigantic flat screen, considering whether to answer or not. He was watching the finals of the Eurovision Song Contest, and the German group was next. They were called 'Helmut and the Lederhosen,' and Sir Wilfrid didn't see how they could possibly lose, so catchy was their little ditty 'Meine Wiener habst kein Mustard'

Before he could decide, the phone stopped, so he reached for his glass of Bollinger. As

he touched it to his lips, the phone rang again. He decided to ignore it. But it was insistent and jangling, and began to grate on his nerves, so he reached out a languid hand and lifted the ornate gilt handset from its cradle.

“Good Evening, Sir Wilfrid speaking. How may I help you?” he enquired, in the deep lustrous voice he reserved especially for late night phone calls.

“YOU FILTHY DISGUSTING FUCKPIG. I AM GOING TO KILL YOU, YOU FASCIST BASTARD. I AM GOING TO GOUGE YOUR LIVER OUT WITH A RUSTY SCREW DRIVER, AND EAT IT,” a shrill woman’s voice said.

“Ah,” said Sir Wilfrid, “The female of the species. So temperamental. And what have I done to deserve this terrible fate, pray tell?”

“You won’t get away with this you disgraceful rat fucker. I know you killed her. I know it was you. You murdered my Brunhilde.....”

The woman’s voice cracked, and Sir Wilfrid listened to the soothing sound of sobbing on the end of the line. He cast an anxious glance at the TV to make sure that Helmut and the Lederhosen had not started to perform, but there was still some group of French pansies warbling on about Midnight in Marseilles or some shite. He turned his attention back to the phone. The woman was still sobbing.

“There there, there,” he said, in an avuncular tone, “Come my dear, whoever you are. You must try to control yourself. Pull yourself together woman.”

“I’ll pull your bollocks together you Kraut shit bag. And that’s not all. I know everything. I have your plan. I found it in Brunhilde’s apartment. You’re fucked.”

“My sweetness, I have a great many plans. Which particular plan are we discussing?”

“The one about Greenland. You’re fucking deranged you psycho. Do you think I’m going to let you get away with this?”

“I seeeeeeee,” said Sir Wilfid, drawing out the word see so it almost sounded as if he were singing, “And so, how much money are we talking about?”

“You mean how much do I want to keep my mouth shut? Is that what you asked Brunhilde before you killed her? You think you can do the same to me?”

Sir Wilfrid glanced up. Helmut and the Lederhosen were walking onto the stage. The girls looked divine in their little red leather outfits. The announcer stepped up to the microphone to introduce them.

“I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you and I meet?”

“I don’t want to meet you, you stinking dog crud. I want to butcher you like the beast you are.”

“Listen, my dear. All these threats and abusive language are really becoming quite tedious. Here’s what I’m going to do. Next Tuesday there is a gala ball in aid of Unicef at the Hofburg Palace. It’s a masked ball. Only the very elite will be invited. It’s a public place with extensive media coverage, so you’ll be quite safe. Plus, you’ll be disguised. But I’ll find you, don’t worry. I’ll arrange to have an invitation left behind the bar at the Café Stein, under an appropriate name. Let’s think. Oh yes. I’ve got it. Miss Piggy. Well, ciao, must go.”

Sir Wilfrid grinned as he replaced the receiver. Herman and the Lederhosen were just

starting. He grabbed the remote and turned the volume up loud. He began nodding his head and waving his index finger in time to the beat. When the chorus arrived, he sang along,

*‘Let me put my wiener in your roll, and put my mustard on your buns,  
I’ll press my hot lips to your pickles, you’ll slap your gums round my onions’.*

A definite winner, he thought, lighting a cigar and waiting for the score. It was disappointing. The Belgian judge gave it really low marks. Sir Wilfrid sighed. The modern world. No taste anymore. He knocked back his champagne, refilled his glass from the bottle set in golden bucket beside his chair, and reached for the phone. He dialed delicately with his pinky figure, as if he was removing a fly from his soup.

“Igor,” he said when the party answered, “Not calling at an inconvenient time I trust? Yes I know. The fucking Belgians. Anyway. Listen. I have a little job for you. Next Tuesday. The Unicef ball. Usual rate? Splendid. See you there. Dosvidanya.”

The searchlight beam swept the roiling sea and the dark stormy sky, intermittently illuminating the group of men struggling with a heavy net suspended over the side of the rusty ship. The ship pitched and rolled and the net swung back and forth like a great flail, threatening with extinction the men who clung to it for their very lives. On the bridge, the captain, clad in oilskins, shouted instructions through a megaphone. In the net was a large crate, menacing and angular in the harsh beam of the searchlight.

The light emanated from the deck of a submarine, and a trio of sailors battled grimly to keep it focused on the ship. It was losing battle. The submarine was tossed and battered by the immense swells, now sunken in the trough, now balanced precariously on the breaking crest. The horizon swirled up and down with stomach churning rapidity.

A sudden flash of lightening seared the sky, turning all below to silhouettes, and a great peal of thunder reverberated across the heavens. Wind driven rain began to lash the embattled men, making their task ever harder and more dangerous. The howling gale drowned out the voice of the captain.

He watched anxiously, studying the gyrating crate and the turbulent sea. He was waiting his moment, the perfect combination of surge and roll and momentum. He had done this many times before, but never with so much at stake, never with the reward so great, never with the cost of failure so high. He glanced over to the spotlight, where it now aimed directly up at the sky. He clearly saw the evil glint of the wet barrel of the fifty caliber machine gun. There could be no mistakes. He felt a great swell beneath his feet, and saw the net begin to swing inboard.

“Now, boys, now,” he yelled, at the top of his lungs, “Let her drop.”

The man on the gantry dropped the lever, and the crate swooped down and scraped across the deck, slamming against the opposite bulkhead. A man, still fast to the net, was catapulted over the side and into the raging sea.

A cry of ‘Man Overboard.’ came to the captain’s ears, faint above the roar of the ocean and the banshee wail of the wind. He rushed to the port side. There was nothing to be done.

The man was already gone, swept away by the swirling tide to a lonely and bitter death. The death all sailors fear.

The captain stood on the bridge and watched the semaphores flash back and forth, and breathed a soft sigh as he saw the submarine slide beneath the waves, some dark behemoth returning to its lair. He stepped back into the wheelhouse, and gave the order for full steam ahead.

Back out on the bridge he saw the churning spectral wake at the stern as the ship plowed through the burgeoning water. He looked back towards the spot where the man had vanished. He gazed at the place for a long moment, squinting at the rain in his face, then turned, and strode back into the wheelhouse.

Operation Big Bamboo had claimed its first victim.

According to Michael Jackson, it don't matter if you're black or white. Confucius Tu didn't give a rat's ass either. Each had their respective reasons. Old Michael just couldn't seem to make up his mind. In Confucius Tu's case it was because he was a giant panda, and just about had it covered both ways. But being monochrome didn't make him mediocre. Confucius Tu was pretty unique in several ways. For example, unlike the majority of his species, especially in captivity, Confucius Tu was inordinately fond of panda pussy. He was a prodigious breeder, a cute and cuddly cub machine, which made him extremely valuable to the zoo in Beijing where he lived, and a boon to toy manufacturers everywhere.

Two or three times a year, he was loaned out to some A list foreign zoo, where, undeterred by the multitude of media cameras and onlookers, he performed his panda porn with panache, giving his shy and demurring furry paramour the high hard one in front of God and all the world, before returning to Beijing first class, invariably leaving a lovelorn and pregnant pandarette weeping into her bamboo.

Confucius Tu had another peculiarity which set him apart. Whereas your average panda has five claws on its front paws, he had six. This was considered to be extremely potent mojo, and a sign a great good fortune. People paid handsomely to touch Confucius Tu, and six toed panda pendants were at a premium.

And as if this wasn't enough to convince people that he Confucius Tu was the GPOAT he possessed yet another talent. He could play the piano! He'd been trained to play Chopsticks, and his rendition had brought the house down in every zoo from the Bronx to Berlin.

So Confucius Tu had it all. Fame, protection, an international reputation as a stud, a deluxe five star cage, and as many bamboo shoots as a guy could eat. He even had his own website and web cam where his legion of devoted admirers could watch him chew leaves, and shit, and scratch his balls, and chew leaves and shit and scratch his balls, ad infinitum, to their heart's content.

The Chinese Government were extremely well aware of the value of Confucius Tu as a national asset. He was a source of national pride, and a symbol of the resurgence of a rich and ancient culture. He generated goodwill, tourism and more importantly, the famous folding stuff. He was the biological equivalent of a Ming Vase. They therefore declared him to be a living National Treasure

The problem with things of value is of course, as has been amply demonstrated throughout history, that sooner or later, somebody wants to take them away from you. Being no suckers on the subject of history, the Chinese took extremely good care of Confucius Tu. Unfortunately, just not good enough.

In common with the majority of her gender, Lippy enjoyed a good weep every now and then. And as we all know, there's nothing better for triggering a good sobbing session than a sad movie. One where the hero gets bumped off in the end trying to save the blind girl from getting crushed by the giant gorilla as it falls off the big building, having been shot down by the pilot who's just found out that his mother has Alzheimer's and his wife is being shagged by his brother whose own wife has just run off with a country and western singer who commits suicide after discovering that his sister is also his mother only after he has fucked her, and that all of Hank William's songs were actually dubbed by Nat King Cole.

However, this was not the movie that Lippy was watching as she sobbed inconsolably into her organic handkerchief. The movie Lippy was watching was infinitely sadder. It was about a huge continent-sized swirling mass of plastic bags, churning about just below the surface of the pacific, and albatrosses and turtles and dolphins choking to death, and great majestic forest giants, hundreds of years old, crashing to the earth to the buzzing of chains saws, and emaciated children with flies on their faces, and other healthy children playing on the beach, but dressed up like spacemen and covered in white stuff, so it's almost no fun to be on the beach, and giant smoke stacks belching fumes into the air, and freeways clogged with traffic and not free at all, and clouds of dust blowing over barren earth, and once blue rivers brown and lifeless, and elegant birds slimed with oil gasping for breath, and fat greasy bastards grinning as they shovel another burger into their gaping chops, and slick as frog shit executives in their limos flipping the bird at the big blue planet and everything on it, while their wives are being dirt boxed by their yoga teachers and their sons are being sexually abused behind the alter and their daughters are selling their asses on the corner of eighty second and Vine for an ounce of crack. Maybe you've seen it?

Anyway, it upset Lippy. Perhaps her emotional condition was a little more fragile than usual because she'd just been compelled to quit the Gaia Gang after a physical confrontation with the leadership. It had been bound to happen. In spite of her passionate fervor for the cause, and her unwavering belief in the justness of what she was doing, she quickly realized that being an eco-warrior is not all it's cracked up to be.

It's dirty, dangerous, and uncomfortable. The hours are brutal, the food is shit, and for the most part, the company consists of malodorous spotty delusional misfits who either succumb to the rigors of the task and chicken out, or grow out of it and become real estate agents, or get gang banged by a Norwegian whaling crew and change sides.

More importantly, she genuinely wanted to make a difference. One soldier more or less might alter the course of a battle, but it won't affect the war. Generals win wars. She wasn't interested in futile gestures or heroic lost causes. She knew what was at stake. So she decided to start her own organization. And it would be hard core. Motivated, mean and merciless.

And she had a plan. A grand, global, history altering plan. She wasn't going to fuck about throwing eggs at fox hunters, or lying in front of bulldozers, or camping out all night in a tree freezing her tits off outside some military complex singing shit folk songs with a bunch of sweaty dykes and naive bearded retards.

She wasn't just going to save the planet, she was going to change it. Change the way people lived, and the way they thought. She was going to show them that they didn't really want the things that they thought that they wanted but that what they really wanted was the things that she wanted them to want. She was going to put the fucking G back in green.

When she was finished, the lion really would lie down with the lamb. Men would weep for their past deeds, and she would forgive them, and watch maternally as they marched up the rows, sowing seeds from their homemade flaxen bags, as the little bunnies hopped up and down unmolested in the meadows, and the little kiddie winkies skipped and laughed as they munched merrily on their salads as their mothers wove hempen clothing and uttered wise mysterious words as they synchronized their menstruations.

Lippy would take her inspiration from the very nature that she was trying to protect. Like the black widow, she would weave her web and wait for the right vibrations. Like the chameleon, she would mingle and merge with the enemy. Like the owl, she would watch and listen. Like the crocodile, she would wait. Until the time was ripe, and the moment at hand. And then, like the lioness that she was, she would strike, fang and claw, and the blood would flow.

For the first time in his adult life, Monsoon Parker was happy to be in the shit. This was because The Shit was a grunge bar on the waterfront in Seattle and he had just broken his last and one and only hundred dollar bill to buy himself a bourbon and back, his first drink in two years. He first taste since he got out of the slammer.

He was not the man he used to be. Something had been broken inside Monsoon Parker. It was nothing that had happened to him in the joint. Nothing happens to guys like Monsoon in the joint. It was what had happened before that. The two gigantic cosmic kicks in the cojones that had eviscerated his soul and turned him into the kind of schlemiel who would end up in the can in the first place.

First the Machine Gun Jelly, then the Fab 13. The knowledge of how close he had been to pulling off the big one, twice, only to have it cruelly wrenched from his grasp at the last minute, was an oppressive black cloud that he couldn't get out from under. He felt defeated and hopeless, a dog who never got to have his day. He'd had two shots at the title, been way ahead on points, and got cold cocked in the twelfth both times. And he couldn't even blame a bum decision. It was his own fault and he knew it. He blew it, and he'd never get another chance. He was washed up. A loser. He'd always been a loser. He just never knew it.

He still had his guile and his smarts, and his absolute lack of anything resembling a conscience, but the will was missing. The heart, if he ever had one, had been sliced out of him. He was like some sad case pining for a lost and hopeless love. And the marks could tell. And in Vegas, especially in Vegas, a confidence man with no confidence is about as much use as a glass minge.



So Monsoon lit out for the territories, wandering wherever the wind blew him, scraping a subsistence from a rugged land. Eventually, things got so bad he was reduced to panhandling and sleeping rough. They got so bad in fact, that, in a moment of weakness standing outside a Burger King in Spartanburg one Friday night, he actually considered getting a job.

Fortunately, the panic attack passed. Instead, seeing a schoolgirl standing at a bus stop, carrying a Lynyrd Skynyrd lunchbox, he attempted in desperation to wrest it from her. She booted in his lunchbox. He went down. Luckily for him, the girl's bus arrived just as she was fixing to kick the shit out of him. He watched the blurry red lights moving away through tear filled eyes and crawled away looking for somewhere to sleep.

When he found a guy in a suit passed out drunk on a bench outside a Greyhound depot, he felt just the tiniest glimmer of hope creep in. Maybe his luck was about to change. It was. A quick search yielded twenty eight dollars and change, and Monsoon headed for the nearest tavern. When he was sitting at the bar steeped in bourbon and bitterness, he came to a decision. He decided that the next person, man, woman or child, who asked him if he was Tiger Woods was going to get their clock cleaned.

\* (Author's Note. For anyone not familiar with Machine Gun Jelly or The Chameleon Fallacy, Monsoon bears a remarkable resemblance to Tiger Woods.)

Monsoon, who couldn't punch his way out of a wet paper bag had sunk enough Wild Turkey to develop a mean streak. So when a man who bore a striking resemblance to the MMA fighter, Frankie Edgars, came up to him and very politely enquired if he was Tiger Woods, Monsoon swung around without warning and attempted to throw a punch. This unfortunate case of double mistaken identity resulted in Monsoon spending the most comfortable three weeks he could remember, albeit with multiple abrasions and three broken ribs, in the county hospital.

When he was finally turfed out into the cold and pitiless streets, without a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of, he began to ruminate on how warm and cozy he had been in hospital, and how nice and sweet smelling the nurses were, and about the three hot meals a day, and all the coffee you could drink, and the TV shows, and how he had separated the other patients from a couple of bucks at pinochle. He concluded that the best thing would be another spell of luxury at the expense of the county.

He later concluded that going into a congregation of the Charismatic Church of the Sacred Resurrection in the middle of a full swing sermon, rushing the pulpit with his dingus in one hand and a bottle of discount hooch in the other, and shouting out 'Jesus was gay' might not have been the best way to go about things.

When he got out of traction and was well enough to be moved to the cells, he found himself looking at a two stretch for indecent exposure, blasphemy, and drinking cheap whiskey in church. Plus they slapped on destruction of church property after his blood ruined the organist's taffeta gown. Also, as he had instinctively grabbed the collection box on his way down after being nudded by the chief lady chorister, grand larceny was added to the charges.

But, in a weird and entirely unexpected way, his hard time in stir was actually the best

thing that could have happened to him. It reformed him in the sense that it re-formed him. He was entirely genetically unsuited to any of the gangs. He wasn't black enough for the bloods, or white enough for the supremacists. He was both too black and too white for the Asians, and the Latinos didn't know what to think and in any case didn't give a shit one way or the other.

Being on the outside of everything there was to be on the outside of, completely unaffiliated, and no threat to anyone, nobody bothered him. His narrow butt was so skinny after months on the bum that even the ass bandits left him alone. So Monsoon became everyman to everybody, a chameleon changeling and a palette upon whom anybody could paint whatever image they desired.

And as Monsoon negotiated his way through these murky waters, surrounded by the sweating, grunting, stench ridden dregs of society, he began to get his mojo back. Surrounded by state of the art low life scum sucking douchebags, he began to recover his edge. In the company of the worst of the worst, murderers and rapists, bank robbers, TV Evangelists and former Heisman trophy winners, he began to remember who Monsoon Parker was.

He watched and listened and learned. He figured out how to play the system and beat the angles. He actually began to get ahead of the game and prosper. A nickel here, a dime there. The odd couple of bucks now and then. It all added up.

And he had all the time in the world to think. To walk down old roads in new shoes. He reflected upon the vagaries of his life, unwinding the tangled skeins of his existence, pondering the decisions that had led him to his current sad state. He considered cause and effect and consequence, trying to figure out how and why he had managed to fuck up so spectacularly. And, in the process, he rediscovered his confidence and his ambition.

Of course. None of it had been his fault. He had been betrayed. Stitched up, blindsided, sucker punched and shafted. Well next time it would be different. The world owed him.

And on the day he walked out through the prison gates into a cold and foggy morning, wearing a Daffy Duck T shirt, golf trousers, and a Malcolm X baseball hat, with one hundred and seventy nine dollars to his name, Monsoon Parker was resurrected.

The day before he left, Wingy the Sponge, a pock marked Portuguese midget with a wall eye and a bum pin, sidled up to him in the corridor.

"So bro," he said, "The big sayonara."

"Exactly so, Wingy my man."

"What's the plan?"

"The plan is to get seriously, and I mean seriously, fuck faced."

"Uh Huh. Well, some people bin talkin' in here man. Say you is a right G."

Although Monsoon wasn't entirely sure what a right G was, the way Wingy the Sponge said it, it sounded like a compliment.

"Well, thanks," he said.

Wingy sidled closer still and brought his voice down to a husky whisper.

"Go to the Shit," he rasped, "Ax for Downtown Train,"

"Go to the shitter?"

“No asshole, The Shit. It’s a club. In Seattle. Ax for Downtown Train. Say Wingy said to tell you the big bamboo.”

Before Monsoon could form the words, “What the fuck are you talking about?” Wingy had scuttled off down the steel grid.

Twenty four hours later, Monsoon was hunched at the bar, trying to ignore the puerile racket emanating from the spotty faced effete punks on the stage, and trying to concentrate on the bodacious set of ya yas that the waitress kept pointing at him, seemingly with intent.

Just then, a gargantuan figure blocked out the light, a hand like a tarantula with a thyroid problem landed on his shoulder, and a voice like the Jersey Tunnel at rush hour said.....

“I hears you wants to speak to me, homes.”

Monsoon looked to see a huge round mahogany colored face perched under an enormous round bald dome of a skull, beaming down at him like a black full moon.

Monsoon choked back his bourbon.

“I’m Monsoon Parker,” he said confidently, reassured by the other’s glittering smile that he wasn’t about to be pounded into pig swill any time soon.

“I’m supposed to say that Wingy the Sponge told me to tell you about a big baboon.”

The giant head rolled back and a sound emitted from back of the cavernous throat like a lion fucking a bear.

“I guess you means Big Bamboo, son,” said the man, when he had stopped laughing.

“Oh, fuck, yeah. Right on. The big bamboo I meant.”

The thyroid stricken tarantula removed itself from Monsoon’s shoulder and poised itself in front of him. He could still feel the weight where it had been.

“Cain Train,” the man rumbled, “Folks calls me Downtown. Step into my office. I got drinks inside, and there’s someone I want you to meet.”

Monsoon watched the tarantula swallow his hand like an octopus eating a crab. The grip was surprisingly gentle. Monsoon got up and followed the immense figure as it cleaved its way through the crowd like the Isle de France cutting through the Atlantic.

Long Suc was almost blind. This was entirely understandably as he was just a whisker away from being ninety years old. However this wasn’t the reason he was nearly blind. It because after a long afternoon of serious opium and alcohol abuse he needed a leak, and tried to make it into the jungle. The fact that Monsoon Parker had cut his feet of with a forklift truck that one time did not help. As he stumped over to the nearest tree, he went ass over tit, and head butted a nest of fire ants. The fire ants did not appreciate the disturbance, and swarmed out en masse, stinging Long Suc so vigorously that his face swelled up like a puffer fish with a skin condition, and his eyes were reduced to the merest lightless chinks so that he looked as if he used the same plastic surgeon as Mickey Rourke.

Hearing his cries, his concubines rushed to his aid and carried him back to the riverside pagoda where he lived in faded splendor, and gently laid him on the mahogany floor. His lips so swollen that even Mick Jagger would have been impressed, and they had to be forcibly parted by several pairs of hands, in order that a restorative measure of bootleg

Stolichnaya could be poured down his gullet. When his eldest son and heir, Long Wang, rushed in, and saw his prostrate father lying there looking like a botched autopsy on a drowning victim, tears began to stream down his face.

These were not tears of distress, however. It was mirth. Long Wang was practically pissing himself laughing, and it was all he could do to prevent himself from launching into an impromptu Morris dance,

Long Wang hated his father's guts! In fact he hated his guts, his liver, his spleen, his short rib, his humerus, his ulna, his lymphatic system, his tear ducts and his dental fillings. He particularly hated his father's disdainful and superior grin, and to see him with a face like a cheap pizza filled him with malicious glee.

Long Wang's hatred stemmed from the fact that he'd never felt that the light of parental affection had shone properly upon him. In fact, the nearest it had come had been the light from the torch that Long Suc's army buddy had been shining on his ass as he engaged Long Wang's mama in a swift knee trembler in a darkened bunker complex during a USAF bombardment in the Ia Drang Valley in the winter of sixty five.

In truth, Long Suc had not been overtly affectionate towards his son. He'd reserved all his love and tenderness, which was in strictly limited supply it has to be said, for Long Wang's sister, Celestial Light on the Frozen Breath of Butterflies in the Midnight Gardens of the Holy City, or Rita, for short.

Rita was indeed a radiant creature, who reminded Long Suc greatly of his wife, who sadly had not survived the war due to an unfortunate inability to correctly calculate the trajectory of mortar rounds, and as a consequence Long Suc had cherished and nurtured Rita in measure equal and opposite to the way in which he ignored Long Wang. For example, Rita had been educated and sent to Beijing to study the veterinary arts and taxidermy, whereas Long Wang felt he'd been sold up the river.

This was because when he was twelve, his father sold him to the captain of a converted schooner plying the trade routes between Burma and the Malay Peninsula, for eight six dollars and a pair of Russian binoculars.

Like the old soldier that he was Baby Joe Young had simply faded away. And like the sailor that he was he'd disappeared away into the mist.

One morning, Asia stood on the beach, waving to him with a sad smile as his boat sailed out through the break in the reef, the sea spray cool on her face in the warm rays of the new risen sun. She felt the familiar pulling in the pit of her stomach. An invincible sadness welling inside her. The knowledge that the gravity which had held them together for so long was weakening, and that slowly, irretrievably, they were being lost to each other. Again. Like the last time. Only worse.

Even though she didn't want to admit it, it was happening exactly as Baby Joe had predicted it would, and even though they were aware of it, the knowing of it could do nothing to stop it. He was drifting away from her. He was drifting away from himself. Everyday becoming more ethereal and somehow less tangible in a way that she couldn't define. But she knew that man could go through what he'd been through and not be

changed. And Baby Joe Young was different. Not diminished as a man. Just not the same.

The Machine Gun Jelly affair and the bloody battle with the Don had taken something from him even as it had brought them together. And then that whole disturbing sickening business of the Chameleon Fallacy and the fight with the repulsive Khuy Zalupa had taken still more from Baby Joe. Maybe more than he had to give.

And now it was taking everything. As if what it had done to him had made him into someone else. A stranger even unto himself. A stranger to her. Maybe whatever it was that had haunted the Fab 13 had never truly gone away, and it had never really been over. Maybe they'd never really won at all.

But even as he was, it had been enough for her. Even the ghost of Baby Joe Young was the best man she'd ever known, or ever expected to. And there had still had been times of great happiness, when it had seemed as if those awful events had never happened, and as if Baby Joe Young's scars were on his battered body, and not in his mind. But at other times, he just wasn't with her, and when he looked at her, his eyes were somewhere else. Somewhere beyond.

And at last she understood that the man had cicatrices on his soul and the lacerations that she could not see, the ones on his psyche that would never heal, would eventually destroy them, and that the cold implacable shadow of inevitability hovered even in the sunshine of their brightest days.

And one day, on that day, he'd looked at her in a way that he never had before, and given her a sorrowful smile, articulate in a way that a thousand words could never be. She did not understand its meaning or its significance, but it had scared her. And then Baby Joe Young turned in silence towards his boat, and cast off, and sailed through the mist into the great wide limitless pacific.

And he never came back.