

The Changes

An excerpt from a novel in progress

Jess Row

He arrived in Vientiane in an August downpour: the last storm of the monsoon season. The tarmac was mostly underwater, a broad lake frothing with raindrops; when they landed great wings of spray rose up on either side of the plane, and he thought they might skid all the way across into the dark paddies that came right up to the edge of the asphalt. There were cars and jeeps waiting at the base of the stairs as the passengers deplaned, and a crowd of servants and porters holding out umbrellas and calling out greetings in fractured French and English. His own guide was a young woman in a green minidress and Connie Francis bouffant, holding up a sign for OSTERBROOK—AID. I am Mai, she said gravely, shook his hand, and led him to an ancient Citroen taxi, which backfired twice as the driver headed toward the airport gate. Both times he ducked his head, and she laughed. This not a bomb, she said. Don't worry. You hear bombs, you know.

This capital of Laos was not a city, Rudolph had warned him, but a town, in some ways an overgrown village. There were few buildings over two stories and one avenue wider than a single lane. The taxi weaved around tricycle-rickshaws and whining motorcycles and carts drawn by water buffalo, still backfiring. Through the rain-filmed windows he glimpsed wooden houses on stilts, a wat set back from the road, a few white French villas, surrounded, overwhelmed, by enormous banyans, ferns, banana trees, jacarandas, a hundred vines and flowers and shrubs he didn't recognize. His eyes ached from the sheer greenness of it.

Your first time Vientiane, Mai said, halfway between a statement and a question.

First time Vientiane, he said. First time Laos, first time Asia. First time war.

They stopped at an intersection where a young policewoman in a white plastic sash stood in the mud, directing traffic. Rain

streamed down her forehead and dripped from her outstretched sleeves. Someone needs to buy her a poncho, he thought, or at least a hat. Nonetheless, improbably, the traffic paid her grudging attention: Even the water buffaloes lumbered to a stop and waited their turn. In the midst of racket and disorder she turned back and forth like a clock, with a serene expression, a still center arranging the world around her.

Is this the war? he asked. Here?

Yes. She laughed, covering her mouth with her fingers. No. Depends on how you look. Depends on what day.

The best of times, the worst of times.

Sorry?

Never mind, he said. It doesn't matter.

The car took him straight to his guesthouse: a tall white stucco building, an old French officers' barracks, Mai said, on a side street off Lan Xang Avenue near the American embassy. His room was on the second floor, with a pair of enormous shuttered windows facing the street, and the dark steeple of a fresh mosquito net rising above the bed. The wooden crate he'd shipped from Washington had arrived ahead of him, and sat in the middle of the room on top of a moldering carpet, as if it had fallen from the ceiling. The nails, he noticed, were shinier than they had been when he assembled it, and there were four on each side. He'd only nailed in three.

He stood barefoot in the middle of the room, directly under the fan, holding out his arms to catch the breeze. Each day, since arriving in Bangkok, he'd had sudden, unpredictable spells of dizziness: a feeling of pressure in the forehead, the floor pitching forward slightly, rocking him back on his heels, a salty, nauseating taste in the back of his throat. They lasted a minute or two at most, and were just as likely to come over him when he was inside, in an air-conditioned room, as outdoors in the crushing heat. It wasn't the food; he'd been eating mostly salads and rice. The water, maybe. No explanation seemed adequate. *A certain vertiginous sensation*

of distance from the familiar. He'd written that down somewhere. Maybe Asia just doesn't agree with some people, he thought.

It was true he'd had difficulty with faces. The Thais wore the most unrelentingly placid expressions; he'd seen a woman leading two small children by the hand nearly run over by a tuk-tuk near Patpong, and she barely seemed to notice: one corner of her mouth dipped in momentary annoyance. Everywhere he saw the same look of vacant thought or vague disapproval, and a disinclination to stare straight ahead, or look another person in the eye. It was all of a piece with the gentle way they folded their bodies into a crouch, the weight balanced on the fulcrum of the knees, and the softness of their gestures. There seemed to be no hard corners in the life of a Thai.

The supervisor of the Bangkok office, James Rudolph, wore tucked-in madras shirts and a pocket protector, and had a PhD in classics from the University of Chicago. It's a Buddhist culture, he said. They're very fatalistic here. The most important thing is to avoid making bad karma in your next life, not avoiding the outcome of your karma in this one. A certain amount of passivity is inevitable. On the other hand, there's very little social friction.

Social friction, he thought. A memorable phrase. Don't you find it a little frustrating, he asked, how neutral they are about everything?

No, Rudolph said. He had purplish half-moons under his eyes, as if he suffered from permanent insomnia. As they spoke his fingernails tapped a languorous rhythm on his glass desktop. Actually I find it quite beautiful. It takes time, but one comes to accept it. And then appreciate it. It all happens in stages. I've been here eleven years.

Of course, you don't have that luxury, he said, after a moment's silence, filled with the rustling of the air-conditioner. You'll leave still a tourist in all essential ways. Keep that in mind. It may prove helpful.

On his third morning in Vientiane a bearded American in black pajamas and sandals knocked at his door.

Shenkman, the man said, stepping inside without waiting for an invitation. A funk of sweat and marijuana followed him into the room, and something else, a sweet, sulphurous odor, like honey and rotten eggs. He put a thermos and a baguette wrapped in paper on the coffee table. Sorry I wasn't able to meet you at Wattay, he said. I came in that same evening from Savannakhet. Bad planning. Inevitable delays. Still, you made it in one piece.

Rodney Shenkman was a name Phillip had heard a few times in Movement circles. Shenkman had been a young organizer in Selma, had published an article on Jewish-Negro solidarity in *The Nation*, and then had been kicked out of CORE over a policy dispute that also involved the girlfriend of an older, more prominent figure. Phillip hadn't known he was in Laos until he saw his name on the USAID roster in the office in Washington. He had mailed him a letter care of Bangkok, introducing himself, asking about the current situation, saying he hoped they might work together. It wouldn't hurt to have a potential ally in the organization, or at least someone who would be watching for him. He hadn't received a reply.

Now Shenkman moved around the room with his hands on his hips, looking out of every window, reading the spines of the books Phillip had stacked on the dresser, testing the cord of the ceiling fan, all the time running his hands through his hair. Who was on the plane from Bangkok, he wanted to know. Who got off in Udorn? Anyone famous, any congressmen, anyone on the Tour? When Phillip said, I have no idea, Shenkman shook his head dismissively. Had he brought any magazines with him? Any old copies of *The New York Times*?

Sorry, Phillip said. He tore off the end of the baguette and chewed it.

It's just that I'm dying for something new to read. The Embassy library gets *Life* magazine two weeks late. And anyway I don't go in there anymore. They think I'm a spy. Drink some of the coffee before

it gets cold, will you?

Why do they think that?

Because I once had a conversation with the reporter from *Pravda*. We were in the market together, buying black market soda pop. I translated for him. They got it all on film—the pictures went into my file. The goddamned town is crawling with spooks with nothing better to do, apparently.

I think they went through my things before I got here.

Of course they did, Shenkman said. Because of your father, if not just out of sheer boredom.

Phillip yawned, his jaw drawing back so far he wondered if it might come unhinged. It was an old, old habit, a relic of the nonchalant, poker-faced James Dean he'd imagined himself to be in high school, and he wished he could make it stop.

Don't pretend to be surprised, Shenkman said. If there's one thing they're good at, it's keeping records on people like us. It's much easier than actually doing their jobs. He had taken Phillip's copy of *One-Dimensional Man* off the dresser and was paging through it, as if looking for a quotation to support his point.

You know, I met your mother once, he said. At All Souls, in Washington. She was running the sleeping quarters in the basement. She gave us this fabulous talk about resistance with dignity. I envy you. She had this this amazing hip den-mother vibe. You must have had some cool childhood.

I guess cool is one word for it.

Listen, Shenkman said, everybody is a known quantity in Vientiane. It would have only taken a day or so for word to get around. In any case, no one's that interested in you. You're still under the official radar, more or less. Which is a useful place to be. And I hope you came here meaning to be useful.

I hope I can be. Depending on what you have in mind.

Well, it's all one struggle, Shenkman said. That's the way I look at it. We have to stop the poor bastards from getting killed.

You mean the Vietnamese?

Shenkman's face broke into a broad smile, and he laughed, a short, calculated guffaw. That's a joke, right? he asked. You know what I'm talking about. The secret war, man. You must have heard something about it.

I heard that there's an insurgency in the north, Phillip said. And trouble along the border. The Ho Chi Minh trail, right? That's what you mean?

Shenkman pursed his lips. Drink the coffee, he said. Pour it into a glass, if you can. That's the way they drink it here. *Kafe tom*. The country's going up in flames, but still, make sure you get a good cup of coffee in the morning. That's the way things go here. Welcome to Laos.

They walked north on Lan Xang Avenue, past the morning market, a long covered roof clamoring with shouts and honking horns and animals braying, the air smudged with yellow smoke from dung fires. Phillip saw a woman carrying a duck by its webbed feet in one hand, a mesh basket of enormous frogs in the other. A boy pushing a wheelbarrow filled to the top with limes. A line of brown-robed monks walked barefoot along the edge of the road, picking their way through broken glass, shredded paper, piles of excrement, holding their begging bowls in front of them like swollen bellies. Not a single white face anywhere, not a soldier, not even a policeman. He drew in a long breath, strangely exhilarated. Mornings, he thought, you have to love them. The illusion of starting over.

I'll give you the short version of what they didn't tell you at orientation, Shenkman said as they walked, raising his voice to be heard over the din. Laos is a kingdom, but the king is less than a figurehead. He lives up in Luang Prabang and does nothing but play whist all day, or so the story goes. There are two competing princes, brothers, Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong. Souvanna Phouma is the head of the Royal Lao Government, or whatever's left of it. Souphanouvong is the head of the Communists, the Pathet Lao. The country is officially neutral, of course, since '62. And thus

utterly cursed. Because neither side amounts to a hill of beans on its own. Everything comes from outside. Compared to Laos, Vietnam is already in the twenty-first century. There's no industry here at all, hardly any telephones, no radio, scarce electricity outside of Vientiane. This is the world's most valuable piece of stone-age real estate. God knows the French tried to squeeze everything they could out of Laos, but all they managed to come up with was opium. Not the world's most popular or liquid commodity.

So the US and Vietnam are running the show.

Nobody's running the show, Shenkman said. Entropy, you understand? First of all, the whole northern half of the country is full of tribes that don't speak one another's language and certainly don't speak Lao. Second, everybody's out for himself. *Corruption* doesn't even begin to describe it. You take a culture that sees honesty as a relative concept in the first place, add seventy years of colonial rule, make a bureaucracy that conducts itself in a language no one else understands, all in the context of the most extreme imaginable poverty, and lying becomes a kind of art form. Take that, for example. He pointed further down the avenue at a gigantic gray shape, a monument of some kind, just coming into view above a cloud of pale dust from the road around it. It was like an arch, Phillip thought, a lower, deeper, more hulking version of the Arc de Triomphe, capped with gingerbread-house crenellated turrets that reminded him of paper party hats. An architectural joke that was nonetheless impressive because it was so real and so large. As they came closer he saw that one side was still covered in scaffolding.

Patuxai, Shenkman said. Our new war memorial.

God, yes. They described it to us in orientation.

Kind of a funny color, isn't it? That's because it's made out of poured cement. American cement. AID had it shipped over here to build a new runway at the airport.

And no one protested?

It's Phoumi Novasan's pet project. No General Phoumi, no Royal Lao Armed Forces. He's the linchpin that holds the whole

thing together. No matter that all the actual fighting is done by Thai mercenaries and the Hmong. Without him there's no pretext. That's the thing you have to understand. Lots of lies, but no secrets.

The driver of a tricycle-rickshaw spotted them from across the avenue and abruptly swerved, causing a lumbering army truck to slam on its brakes and sound a pathetic bleating horn. Phillip jumped to the side as the rickshaw made a neat U-turn around them, the driver saying something to Shenkman in Lao in a hoarse, straining voice.

Get on, Shenkman said. This is Mr. Thien. He's giving us a ride. To where? I thought we were just out for a walk.

And now we're out for a drive. Mr. Thien fidgeted, slapping the bicycle pedal with the loose heel of his sandal and making it spin. You've got your camera, right? Shenkman asked. Take some pictures as we go. Look like a tourist. Trust me, OK?

Thien drove them back across the road, dodging between a buffalo cart and a tractor hauling bundles of sugar cane. His pants were rolled up to the knees and the muscles in his calves bunched up like fists as he pumped the pedals. They turned onto a narrow lane shaded by a thin canopy of acacias that patterned the dust with a lacework of sunlight. Phillip snapped a few pictures of nothing in particular—a tree draped with blood-red flowering vines, a villa's rusting wrought-iron gate—just to show Shenkman he was trying. Nobody is paying any attention to us, he thought. Unless they give cameras to the birds or hide them in trees, like in the movies. It was hard to believe that anyone took Shenkman that seriously.

For the next mile they continued east-northeast, Thien veering ferociously around one corner after another, until Phillip gave up counting. He was amazed at how quickly they left the town and came out into open country: sunken fields of emerald-green rice shoots, slightly higher ground for rows of what looked like cabbages or lettuce, all hemmed in by earthen dikes that cut the landscape into an

irregular grid that seemed to stretch to the horizon. Here and there a farmer in a conical hat hacking away with a hoe or picking shoots and dropping them into a basket. He unslung his camera again and took a few more snapshots, thinking he might send them to Mary. And then she would write a postcard back, he thought, saying, *I don't believe you.*

Finally Thien turned onto a dirt track that led them to a cluster of stilt-houses in a grove of banyan trees. Chickens scattered across the yard as they approached, and two little girls with dirt-streaked faces appeared, yelling *mi falang, mi falang*. Shenkman hopped off the rickshaw's bench, laughing, and took a handful of coins out of his pocket. Astonishing, Phillip thought, watching Shenkman show the girls how to flip one and smack it against the back of his hand. He himself could hardly tell the Lao words apart, let alone follow the music of the tones, the soft treacherous inflections that differentiated *wood* and *green* and *yes*. What does it take, he wondered, what quality of mind, what flexibility, to learn such a language?

Thien had climbed the ladder of the nearest house and stood above them on a narrow deck, motioning with his palm outstretched and fingers down. Shenkman looped his shoulder bag around his neck. Whatever you do, he said quietly, not looking at Phillip, don't react. Don't look surprised. Breathe through your mouth if you have to. Do you follow?

He sniffed the air as he climbed up, following Shenkman's heels, but noticed nothing beyond a pungent mixture of chicken droppings and burning grass. A gust of humid air stirred the branches of the trees, and the house creaked on its pilings. A baby began crying, and was cut off, in mid-wail.

The house, he saw, as soon as he had climbed over the top of the ladder, was a single long room, windowless, with doorways at either end, and in the dim light he saw rows of legs of men sitting along both walls. Thien was standing just outside the door that faced him, like a sentry. Shenkman had disappeared. He ducked his head

and entered, and as his eyes adjusted to the shade he saw twenty heads turning toward him, and automatically put his palms together and whispered, *Sabaidi baw*, but no one returned the greeting.

Refugees, he thought. The room was too crowded, unnaturally crowded, and too quiet. Normal life had ceased for these people, whoever they were. A fly brushed against his face. The men and women had separated themselves, he saw, the men sitting in two lines, military style, as if waiting to jump out of an airplane, and the women huddled in groups at the far end of the room, fanning themselves with dried banana leaves. There were a few squirming babies and a little girl, perhaps two years old, standing naked in the far doorway with her thumb in her mouth. The air was thick with the sourness of bodies and stale overbreathed air. Shenkman was kneeling somewhere in the middle of the room; it was hard to pick him out until he looked over his shoulder and Phillip saw his pale face and anxious eyes. He beckoned, and Phillip picked his way across and kneeled behind him, trying to take up as little room as possible.

This is Tham Pouvane, Shenkman said, indicating an old man sitting with one knee clasped to his chest. He had a wispy silver beard, and bright, curious eyes, and bobbed his head when Shenkman introduced Phillip in Lao. He's the leader of this group. They're Thai Dam, from up in Xieng Khouang province. They've been here two weeks.

So they're tribesmen. Minorities.

Right. But most of them speak Lao. They're weavers, primarily. They make scarves. He was telling me that he's been to Vientiane once before, back when the French were in power. He says he used to take special orders for the wives of French officers.

And what are they doing here now?

Their village was destroyed by American bombing. Shenkman spoke to Pouvane, and the old man reached behind his back, brought out a yellow metal sphere, and handed it to him. It was a miniature bomb, Phillip realized, about the size of a baseball, with black fins

attached to one end. His hands shook, and he nearly dropped it on the floor.

Don't worry, Shenkman said. It's just a souvenir.

What the hell is it?

A *bombi*. Part of a cluster bomb. They explode about a hundred feet above the ground, and spread these things a quarter mile in every direction. A classic antipersonnel device. The problem is they're designed to kill troops densely packed together, not guerillas spread out in the countryside. Sometimes they don't go off right away, and then some kid picks one up or a farmer hits one with his plow. But that's not what happened to these folks. They got a direct hit, a regular one-ton bomb, right in the center of the village. At least that's what it sounds like from the way he describes it.

How many were killed?

He doesn't know. The planes came in the middle of the night. They ran away from the village, thinking it would happen again.

It seemed to Phillip that there was a kind of illicit excitement in Shenkman's voice, that he derived a little too much satisfaction from reporting these horrors with a look of unconcern, as if he were a tour guide explaining an interesting local custom.

We have to do something, he heard himself saying, unsure of what he had in mind. They can't just stay here, can they? They have to be resettled.

You can't resettle people who don't exist.

What does that mean?

The only refugees that officially exist are refugees from the Pathet Lao. And they're all still upcountry, in Sam Thong. It's fucking Potemkin up there. They've got special translators that tell the reporters exactly what they want to hear. The last thing the Americans could possibly want is a bunch of tribal refugees marching into Vientiane with a story about their village being flattened by a B-52.

So we're going to take this in stages. I've been trying to convince Tham Pouvane to let me set up a press conference. Right here,

in Thon Phan. We'll send out notice of a day and time, and they'll come piling out here by the truckload. If he agrees, that is.

As they spoke the old man had resumed carving notches into the rim of a wooden cup with a long, blackened knife. It seemed like a clumsy instrument to use for such delicate work, Phillip thought. The hilt had a round opening on one side, a half-inch in diameter, big enough for a finger, or, of course, a gun barrel. It was a bayonet.

He had a brief urge to ask Sherkman to step outside, or to lean over and whisper in his ear. But neither of those things would be necessary. At this very moment, if he wanted to, he could ask Sherkman out loud if he was absolutely sure that these people were refugees and not guerillas, or propagandists, or some other unknown quantity. It was as if English was a bubble of invisibility they carried around with them at all times.

Sherkman, he said, I have a question for Tham Pouwane. Would you ask it for me? Ask him why so many of them were able to escape being injured. If the bombing was at night, weren't they all sleeping?

Sherkman looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, scratching his chin, and turned and spoke to Pouwane. The question seemed to require some additional explanation. The old man reached out and touched Phillip's sleeve with a shy smile, and spoke to him directly, adding gestures here and there. A bowl-shaped area, with hills all around; something fluttering, falling from the sky; people ducking their heads and moving sideways.

They heard the planes the night before, Sherkman said, and so that night about half of the village agreed that they would sleep out in the jungle, just to be safe. There was a disagreement about it. Some people thought it was worse to stay in the forest, because of the snakes. Tham Pouwane was able to convince only three families to come out with him. The rest of the village stayed where they were. He thinks that most of them were probably killed. There wasn't just the bomb blast, there was fire afterwards. They heard screams.

At the far side of the room a young woman stood up, unsteadily,

as if her feet were asleep. When she had regained her balance she leaned down again and lifted a cloth-wrapped bundle that had been lying next to her on the floor. With careful steps she picked her way across the room toward them, avoiding the men's outstretched legs. They paid her no heed. Not until she had nearly reached them did he see the bundle shifting, draped against her shoulder, and realize it was a sleeping baby, one brown arm thrown out into the air, as if for balance. He stood up, not knowing exactly why; it seemed the only thing to do. The woman lifted the baby and held it out to him, still wound tightly in its black swaddling: a kind of heavy cotton sheath woven with orange and yellow stripes. He could see a tufted head of black hair and a single tiny foot.

Sherkman murmured, from below. Take it, goddamnit. Take it now.

It was heavier than he'd imagined a baby would be, and oddly loose, slack, a warm bag of bones. Safely nestled in his arms, it squirmed for a moment, turning its sleeping face up toward him, and then settled back into sleep. A tiny pinched face, narrow at the temples, with high eyebrows and a curious mouth pressed into a dot.

Look. It only has one foot.

The left leg, he saw, looking down and opening the cloth with one finger, was sealed off above the ankle, a little knob of tissue protruding downward like a single stunted toe. An injury or a birth defect? He couldn't say. Sherkman was speaking to Tham Pouwane in an undertone. The young woman stood looking at Phillip with a mixture of curiosity and wariness and bemusement, as if waiting to see what he would do with this unexpected gift. She looked no older than seventeen or eighteen, he thought, if that. He had a strange feeling that it wasn't her child at all.

Sherkman, he said, can he explain this? Does he know what happened?

He says that *she* thinks the baby was cursed by the Americans. In what sense cursed?

He won't say. Or she won't say. Look, I'm no expert at this.

And he doesn't even speak Lao very well. In any case, it has a certain visual impact, doesn't it? A picture's worth a thousand words.

But we should try to find out what really happened, he wanted to say, and realized immediately how futile it was. Suppose it was poisoned in some way in the womb. Suppose it was her brother's baby, her father's, not her husband's. Soon enough any crime could be subsumed in the dream life of the village, the rictus of pretending. Just as with any family. The baby arched an eyebrow at him curiously and broke into a shy smile, exposing its tiny gums.

So what do you think? Shenkman asked. Should we take it back with us?

That's not funny.

I think that's what she wants. There's a Catholic orphanage in Vientiane, you know. Sometimes in these tribes they let the sick ones starve to death.

Quickly he leaned forward and passed the baby back to the woman, the girl, who, surprised, barely had time to raise her arms to accept it. The baby promptly began to wail, a thin, dry keening that cut the heavy air. Faces all around the room stirred and looked away.

Shenkman, he said, your time's up. You have what you came for.

When Thien left them at Shenkman's house on Tha Deua Road

it was nearly dark, and a line of purple thunderheads was massing in the south, bleeding into the Fanta-orange hues of the sunset. Shenkman lived with an old Lao woman who occupied the room facing the road and did his cooking and cleaning. His part of the house was one large room that opened onto a porch from which one could see shards of the river through a stand of rubber trees. The landlady brought them stewed catfish and sticky rice and cool bottles of Sapporo. He had cases and cases of it, Shenkman explained, bought for next to nothing from a Japanese diplomat leaving town. The trick was all in how to keep it cool: a hole under the floorboards of the kitchen and a stone jar periodically filled with water.

The misery of the tribesmen sitting in the stifling dark hut was an undercurrent to all of Phillip's thoughts and everything he observed. How do you reconcile yourself to it, he wanted to ask, but the answer was all too obvious: Staying, Shenkman seemed to be saying with every word and gesture, was enough. His period of service was long since over. A kind of compromise with sainthood, Phillip thought. Sainthood as an occupation. Sainthood plus cocktail hour.

You know, it's funny, Shenkman said, drowsily. In all that time I was around Movement people I never once heard *your* name. Everybody knew who Mary Ostenbrook was. But you were around too, right? You must have been flying way below the radar. I mean, not to give myself too much credit, but I was *connected*. I made it my business to know those things.

I guess you could say I working behind the scenes, Phillip said. Printing pamphlets. Fixing the mimeograph machine. Perking coffee. I spent an entire summer in high school running the bookstore in the Friends meeting house. In college I was the one who drove the truck with the P.A. system. Nobody else could get the microphones to work.

The Jeeves of the underground. The Cinderella.

When you grow up in it, Phillip said, you see that what a movement really needs is foot soldiers. Those buses need drivers and gas. Signs have to get painted. Somebody has to keep the books and make sure there's bail money when you need it. When it starts raining somebody's got to be up at the podium with an umbrella.

As if on cue, rain began to patter on the leaves of the banana trees outside, and a warm damp breeze filled the room with a brackish smell. Shenkman kicked off his sandals and stretched out his long, knobby feet, still covered in grime from the day's walking. Never do this, by the way, he said. What I'm doing right now. Never point your feet at anything or anybody. It's like giving someone's daughter the finger. Sit crosslegged or bend your legs to the side. Or squat.

Thanks.

De nada. Shenkman poured himself a half-measure of whiskey and sniffed the glass before sipping from it. What I find amazing, he said, is that you stayed with it at all. Tell me if I'm being presumptuous. But if I were raised the way you were, I mean, surrounded by all these people with the same worldview, the same politics, being trained in it from day one, I would have ended up with a three-piece suit working on Madison Avenue, with a wife and three kids home in Greenwich. If not staffing the Nixon campaign.

Well, Phillip said, I'm still young. Young and unpredictable.

No. You're a true believer, I can tell. You picked up that baby without a second thought. You're in it for life, man.

Belief is overrated, Phillip said. He felt vaguely irritated at Shenkman's condescension. It's a kind of egotism. *I* believe this to be the case. This is *my* philosophy. As if you invented it! As if it matters to the rest of the world what *you*, as an individual, think! He was speaking too loudly, as if he was afraid the rain would drown him out. That's why I could never stand committees, he said, lowering his voice. I could never get over the temptation to say, *it doesn't matter what you decide*. To the whole room. I did it, once or twice. It didn't make me very popular.

Shenkman laughed, rolled over, and got shakily to his feet. He walked over to some dark recess of the room and returned with a red enamel box.

Listen to me. I sound like a Maoist.

No, Shenkman said. Things would be much easier if you were a Maoist. I often consider becoming one just because it solves the problem of traveling light. After all, you only need one book, and it weighs about six ounces.

He sat up with his legs crossed and the box open on his lap. It contained, as far as Phillip could see, a long brass pipe with a tiny bowl, a number of lighters and matchbooks, and a small package wrapped in wax paper, like a piece of baking chocolate. Shenkman removed the pipe and spread the wax paper out on the carpet. Inside was a lump of brown gum pressed into a square.

What's that? Hash?

Shenkman burst into laughter. Man, he said, you're fresh off the boat, aren't you? Fucking hash. You've never seen opium before.

He made an elaborate show of tearing off a piece with the long nails of his thumb and forefinger and tamping it into the bowl. Once it was prepared to his satisfaction he leaned back on a pillow, bringing his knees up to his chest, and held a lighter under the bowl until little puffs of smoke began to emerge. Inhaling, his face tightened, and then dissolved into slackness; his cheeks puffed out into little bags.

I don't know what my problem is, Phillip said. I think I was born too early. Drugs don't work on me.

That's just because you haven't found the right ones. Shenkman's voice was breathy and lush. Not that I want to superimpose anything on you, man. But you couldn't have picked a better place to get over *that* particular hang-up. Vientiane is a supermarket and everything's legal. You have to let go of all those old dichotomies.

Maybe.

He was remembering the first time he'd seen anyone get high—the real thing, not just a few tentative tokes at the college coffeehouse. A party at Laurel Goodison's parents' place on East 73rd and Madison, in April or May of 1965. Laurel was a friend from college; her father was an attorney at a white-shoe firm and a collector of American Indian art, and the apartment was filled with beaded moccasins and scrimshaw and Navajo pots in glass vitrines. She'd invited some old friends from Barnard, and also her new artist boyfriend and two of his buddies from the Village, who wore fringed buckskin jackets and jeans with holes in the knees and affected Southern accents, though one was from Minnesota and one from Detroit. They made everyone sit in a circle on the Turkish kilim in that immense living room, put on a record of bluegrass music, and made a speech about their plans to establish a farm in Kentucky dedicated to producing mixed-race children with extremely high IQs. It was a mixture of Fanon and Nietzsche with some R.D. Laing

thrown in. In the middle of this diatribe Laurel's boyfriend rolled an enormous spliff right there on the carpet, flicking seeds underneath the furniture, and when it came around to him he took a lungful but exhaled most of it and immediately developed a hacking cough. Most of the women in the room were practiced smokers, though, and they held down hit after hit, until the air took on a bluish tinge and filled with hysterical laughter.

It was impossible to say how much of their behavior was spontaneous and how much a self-conscious performance. That was what they wanted, he had realized, not authenticity, not novelty per se, but a chance to join a performance already in progress, to play their part before it went to someone else. A generation of Method actors and the role of a lifetime.

Later the music changed to shrieking free jazz and each of the Midwestern communards-to-be selected a girl and led her off by the hand through the haze. Laurel and her boyfriend rolled around on the balcony in full view through the sliding glass doors. Phillip wandered from room to room, drinking from a bottle of Poiré William someone had left out on the kitchen counter. The saxophonist on the record was, he thought, trying his best to imitate the sound of an animal dismembered while still alive. Between the music and the piercing sweetness of the brandy his mind was experiencing a feeling of electrified alarm. In the foyer he came across a display of Tlingit masks, with long, curving Pinocchio noses and grotesquely stretched smiles, and stood there for what seemed like an hour, staring at each mask until he realized which person in his past it reminded him of. This is what we've been trying to do all along, he thought, to get in touch with our monstrous selves. And act as if they don't exist, simultaneously.

You know what the problem is, Shenkman said. He was resting with his head lolled back against the pillow, holding the pipe delicately against his chest. We're just bystanders here. Civilians. Some might say parasites. The war is a fucking *machine*. It's on automatic

pilot. Nobody's making decisions. They can protest at the Pentagon all they want. You can't reason with a machine.

On the contrary. He tried to recall the line from Simone Weil. Force, he said, force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it as it is to his victims.

Meaning what?

Meaning it's just a matter of time before the whole thing implodes. It's already starting, really. What we ought to be doing is planning for the aftermath. The clean-up crew. If we had foresight, that's where we'd be at. He spoke casually, deliberately, each sentence unspooling perfectly from the last, as if it was a speech he'd composed in a dream. Shit, he thought, that opium is starting to kick in. Start a goddamned government in exile, he said, that's the right idea. Composed entirely of troops gone AWOL, ex-spooks, and POWs.

You know what you should do? Shenkman rummaged inside the box and drew out a loop of rawhide with three coins attached. Throw the I Ching, man. It's perfect timing. Points of transition. See what direction your energy's headed. He tossed the coins at Phillip, and they landed in a tangle on the carpet.

No thanks. I'm not superstitious.

Neither are the coins. It's *science*. Jung used the I Ching, don't you know that? It ain't the Magic Eight Ball. It's kind of like a provocation. Each situation is different, each answer is different. You have to put the pieces together afterwards. Go on, give it a whirl. What's the worst that could happen? You might learn something.

He remembered the woman directing traffic on the airport road: her implacable stillness, the water running in long webs down her arms and falling off at the wrists. It seemed a kind of emblem, a symbol, but of what he couldn't say. The beer was sloshing in his belly, making him gaseous and slightly seasick. He poured himself a half-measure of scotch and drank it in one go. Fire streamed down his throat and surged, momentarily, all the way to his toes.

Shenkman, he said, I'm not afraid of dying.

What? What would make you say that?

That's what it's all about, isn't it, all this guesswork? Forestalling the inevitable. Living in the interstices. It doesn't appeal to me. There's only one fate that really matters. Everything else is just *action*.

There was a familiar tone, a certain flavor, in the words; he closed his mouth and felt a gritty taste of humiliation. When will I ever get away from her, he wondered, and when will I get away from getting away with her.

Shenkman busied himself with packing a second bowl of opium, avoiding his eyes.

Sorry, he said. Don't mean to be such a fucking spoilsport.

It won't work if you resist it. Forget I mentioned it. But, of course, the resistance is also important.

Thank you, Dr. Freud.

No, I mean it. No one's trying to lock you into anything. You do that all by yourself.

You do it, then. I want to see how it works.

Naw. It's not the right moment. You have to be ready for it. But look, I'll split it halfway. I'll throw one for *us*.

The two of us?

No. *Us*. Americans.

Now it was his turn to laugh, and he threw his head back; it made an unpleasant noise, reverberating off the rafters, like a braying lamb. Shenkman, he said, you've smoked too much of that stuff. God forbid.

You don't think countries have a common future? Some kind of national karma? Come on, man. That's naïve. How the hell did we get into this mess in the first place?

If we do, he said, I'm sure I don't want to know what it is. I don't want that kind of responsibility.

OK, then. *I'm* the one throwing the dice. You don't even have to look. Toss me back the coins.

Shenkman busied himself putting the pipe aside with its bowl up, to prevent spillage, loosening the coins and spreading them out on the carpet at even intervals. The handbook was a tiny crumbling paperback hidden in the bottom of the box, with a rust-colored cover; they'd had the same one in the house when he was little, before Mary went through a phase of boxing up superfluous books and shipping them to libraries in Mississippi and Arkansas. He remembered thinking it was someone's name: *I, Ching*. There had been a phase when he would pull chairs up to the bookcases and stand on the seat, looking up at the titles on the top shelves. *Crime and Punishment*, *The Late George Apley*, *The Education of Henry Adams*, *Swann's Way*, *The Upanishads*, *Works of Aristotle*. Never, in all that time, did he think to take one down. They seemed as immovable and inert as bricks. Of course, mostly they had belonged to his grandfather, not to Mary; she had every right to get rid of books she would never read. *That which is not useful is vicious*. It was Cotton Mather's line. He'd come across it in a textbook in Early American History, typed it out and pinned it to his wall, not knowing quite why. Now he knew why.

Listen to this, Shenkman said. *Already Across the River*. Hexagram number sixty-three. The first part is a poem: *Already passed across the ford, much blessing results. What is small should remain small. The beginnings are auspicious, the ending is in disarray*.

That sounds vaguely accurate.

There's more, though. The third line is moving; all the others are fixed.

So?

So that's the message. That one line, that's the focus. Check it out. *When the High Ancestor attacked the Land of Kwei, it took him three years to conquer it. A lesser man should not take action. The task that presents itself is beyond the abilities of anyone but a Great Lord*.

Shenkman, he said, stop fucking around. You planned this somehow, didn't you?

Swear to God.

They stared at each other for a moment without speaking. The pipe was still smoking, giving the air a sweet, acrid flavor, like candy left to burn on the stove. Wherever he gets it, he thought, he's getting it cheap. He burns through the stuff like cheap Texas gas.

Listen, Shenkman said quietly. You want to know the truth? I was thinking about you. That was the question I asked the coins.

I should go, Phillip said. He tried to rise to his feet, but his legs were asleep; he crouched, massaging his ankles. Thanks for everything, though. Great evening. Hope to return the favor when I get settled.

You ought to try this stuff, Shenkman said, picking up the pipe again. Not being afraid of death and all. Sometimes a little chemical stimulus helps you feel more attached to things. Do it before you go out on the planes, would you? Just for my sake. You need a little bit of God's grace around here.

Is that what it is, he thought. I was thinking a walletful of dollars would do the trick.