

Burn the House
or
A Swedish Dilemma

A Novel
Inspired by True Events

by
Anthony Grooms

Represented by
Marly Rusoff & Associates, Inc.
811 Palmer Rd. Suite AA, Bronxville, NY 10708
914.961.7939

Synopsis

“You get a job. You find a pretty Swedish girl. Fall in love. Forget about America. You will be happy,” Billy Phillips, a black American Vietnam War soldier is advised upon his desertion to Sweden. But Billy, who is haunted by his upbringing in the Jim Crow Virginia, struggles to adjust to the overwhelmingly white socialist country. His uneasiness is made even more so by his declared love for Lena, a dark-haired, young Swedish woman who has her own struggles with issues of identity. While strongly attracted to her, Billy questions his motives for the relationship. In the middle of this anxiety enters John Melton, a pudgy, callow White American, who calls himself an “agent.” Persistently he recruits Billy for an unspecified task, the reward for which would be repatriation, but the consequence of which would be as unforgiving as it would be historic.

Richly descriptive of Stockholm in the 1970s, this well-researched novel portrays a little known period in Vietnam War history and delivers provocative explorations of identity, love and politics.

Anthony Grooms
Mobile: 404 242 1714
tgrooms@kennesaw.edu
anthonygrooms.com

Book 1: The Deserter

Thursday, January 4, 1973

The line at the passport control was short and moved quickly and soon Billy Phillips found himself standing in front of a cherubic young woman who held out her hand for his passport. He knew from underground pamphlets what he must say in order not to be turned away. “I am seeking political asylum.” The officer looked perplexed, then proclaimed, “*Jaså!*” She studied the photo on the passport, looking at it, then at Billy, several times. The photo was not old, taken only a couple of years earlier. The officer beckoned to another officer, an older man who sat in an office behind the line of kiosks. They spoke in Swedish and the man, nodding his balding head, examined Billy and smiled. “You are welcomed, Mr. Phillips,” he said in English. “We will want first just to ask of you some questions. Be kind and follow me.” He gestured for Billy to come. Billy’s stomach knotted and he hesitated. *There is still time*, a voice in his head said. It was his own voice, the voice he had been debating with for months, ever since the seed of desertion had been planted. Indeed, he hadn’t deserted yet. He had only taken a trip abroad. Nothing illegal in doing that. He was a little AWOL, but only a few weeks, nothing that couldn’t be forgiven. Another two steps, though, he would cross a threshold into a world—no, more than crossing into a new world. He would become something new—a deserter, a traitor—something he could never not be again. The officer turned around and gave him a curious look. Then he smiled and beckoned again. “It’s ok,” the officer said, his English lilting, foreign. Tension ran down Billy’s neck and into his buttocks. *You already gone*—another voice

said. *Been gone. Gone the instant you stepped foot in Nam. Really, you never were.* He took a small step. Then a deep breath. Suddenly, it felt as if his head were being pulled back, his shoulders back, not proudly, but as if something were breaking him. Another step. Small, but big enough. *Deserter!*

The office was small, glass fronted, with blond-wood furniture. The man gestured for Billy to sit, and he, himself, sat behind the desk on which papers were neatly held down by a paper weight embossed with a Swedish flag. The man kept smiling as he found the forms and placed them in a typewriter on a stand perpendicular to the desk. He swiveled in his chair as if ready to begin, but stopped and turned back to Billy. “*Gott nytt år.* Happy New Year. Would you like *kaffe*?”

“Oh, *coffee.* No thank you.”

“I can also offer some tea.”

“Thank you, no.” Billy closed his eyes. He heard his breath; he heard his breath stop.

“Well, then,” the officer turned back to the typewriter. “We can do the interview now and get the ball rolling, but you will still have to report to the police department in whatever place you settle.” He waited until Billy opened his eyes and nodded. “Then, we must just answer these questions. First your name—*jaha!* It is here.” He copied Billy’s name from the passport, and the same for his place of birth. “You must forgive my geographic knowledge. I don’t know Vir-gi-ni-a. Is it near California?”

“It’s in the South.”

“Ack. The *South.*” He turned to face Billy, his lips turned down for a moment. “I have heard about ‘the South’.”

A numb exhaustion was building behind Billy's eyes. The South Billy was from was the rural upper South, the piedmont country of Virginia. It affected colonial gentility, claiming Jefferson and Madison as native sons, but the legacy of slavery in his home, Charlotte County, was just as evident as in any plantation in Georgia and Jim Crow as corporeal as any Hicksville in Mississippi. Finally the officer asked a question he couldn't answer from the passport, "What is your mother's name?"

Billy choked. He adjusted himself, held his stomach muscles tight and breathed slowly. Tears pushed at the back of his eyes. He slumped toward the man's desk. He breathed deeply, arched his spine, and pushed back. Speaking slowly, gritting his teeth between words, he said his mother's maiden name was Johnson. His father was a brick mason. They were both born in Virginia. His mother's parents were Ruford and Alma Mae Johnson. He corrected the officer. "Mae is spelled with an 'e' not a 'j'." His father's parents were Jessup and Earle Phillips. "Earle" was also spelled with an "e." They called her 'Nana'. His grandmothers' maiden names? He wondered why that was important. What would the Swedes discover by knowing his family history? Who begat whom did not mitigate the fact that he was in Sweden now and forever.

Because it had been important to Nana to know what she had called "our lineage," he knew the names of his ancestors back to the slavery days. So many colored people, Nana had said, didn't know where they came from. Her grandfather had been the first freedman in the family, freed as a child at the end of the Civil War, and her father the first freeborn in the family. Before that the history gets murky. She knew her great grandmother's name; she had but one name, as slaves weren't given surnames. Nana never met her great grandmother, but her own grandfather recalled that you would have mistaken her for a white woman.

“Okay,” the officer said, turning momentarily away from the typing table. “Now, it wants to know, are you a communist?”

The question surprised Billy. Why would the Swedes be worried about communism? He said no, and then seeing him make three pecks at the typewriter with his index fingers, Billy suddenly thought to tease the officer. “I am a socialist—a democratic socialist.”

“*Jaha!* You know about Swedish lifestyle?”

He nodded, but Billy knew very little about Sweden outside of what he had read in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Most of his facts about the Swedish lifestyle had been picked up from American television programs like “The Farmer’s Daughter,” about a Swedish *au pair* who worked for an American family. Swedes were supposed to be statuesque, fair-headed people, good-hearted to the point of being literal-minded, who spoke English in a comic sing-song. They were sexy, too, willing to run naked in a heartbeat, whether in the sauna or skinny dipping in a frozen pond. They were pacifists, liberal, and they didn’t mind black people.

The officer asked about Billy’s education and Billy told him he had had a year at college; and as for technical training—none to speak of—unless gunnery counted.

The officer turned to Billy. “And so, why do you not want to go back to the United States?”

Billy had rehearsed for the question; still it seemed to spring on him. It took a moment for his heart to settle down. He wanted to say, “I am a stranger there. At home, a stranger.” But he knew from what he had read about exile what the answer should be. “I am under orders to report to the Vietnam War.” That was all he really needed to say, but he continued, “I cannot participate in my government’s war against the Vietnamese people because I feel it is immoral.” And then, feeling compelled to make the argument, he added, “And so, I have deserted the US

Army, and I will be imprisoned if I return. You see, first I was a combat soldier and now I'm a combat advisor, but still I am participating in... ." Did he sound convincing? Something seemed missing, some crucial fact—something more egregious than fighting in the war. It was that his country didn't want him. *The US deserted me, first!* He was a child of Ham, unwanted, a scion of the Negro problem. *Gone the day I was born.* "I...I want to be free," he said.

The officer stopped typing. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, well...I am from the South. Black people are not equal there. No place, in America, actually. They don't like us. They—"

"Ack. Well. That is bad. But it is not why the Swedish government will let you live here. You will live here because of the war in Vietnam." He turned back, finished the form, and rolled it out of the typewriter. When he looked at Billy again, he smiled pleasantly, seeming sympathetic. "*Ja!*" As some Swedes do, he inspired the word, sucking in breathe as he spoke it. "We are done now. It will take about two months for the government to make the decision. You will be notified by the Alien's Commission. If they give you asylum, it will be called 'humanitarian asylum.' It means you can live here and they will give you a permit to live and work. But you cannot work without this permit. He leaned forward over his clasped hands, "Listen. It will not be so easy as you think. And yes, your war, it is almost over. They are having the peace talks, now that they have decided on what table to use." He smiled weakly. "But once you are here, once I give them the paper and they decide, you will be here for a long time, maybe forever." He explained that not many American deserters had come into Stockholm in the past year. Most, having deserted in Germany, were entering at Malmö, a smaller city in the south near Copenhagen. That was where all the blacks were. "But it is no good," he said. "They bring in the drugs and the ladies." He lowered his voice, "*Fnasken.*" Whores. "It is no

good. If you stay, you should live here in Stockholm. It is the best place. You learn *tala svenska*.” He paused and Billy indicated that he understood the officer meant he should learn to speak Swedish. “You get a job. You find a pretty Swedish girl. Fall in love. Forget about America. You will be happy.”

Friday, January 5, 1973

The color of the sky was platinum and a layer of frozen snow covered the rooftops, the sidewalks, any open space, even parts of the great lake looked like a vast snow-covered parking lot. Billy walked in *Gamla Stan*, the old city, in the vicinity of the Royal Palace. He was looking for the offices of the American Deserters' Committee. Billy thought he had come prepared for the weather, with a heavy coat and gloves, and a woolen cable knit sweater of the kind that he had seen worn by Ernest Hemingway in pictures. He had not considered what shoes to wear, and though he was used to the occasional deep snow in Virginia, he was not used to walking on the compact, icy crust, especially on the unexpectedly hilly streets and stairways of the central city. He often slipped, and slipped more often as his toes numbed and then, as if seeking to assault him further, a fine, nearly invisible precipitation fell from the otherwise serene sky. The few civilians around the Palace, none discernible as tourists, held to the center of the street, walking in the tracks cleared for cars, as the sidewalks were piled high with swept aside snow. As they approached and passed, he nodded, not confident enough with Swedish to greet them. No one reciprocated, but carefully rushed along, scooting as much as walking on the snow. Few even glanced at him. One woman, arms out to balance herself as she walked down hill, stopped long enough to throw her scarf around her chin. Billy felt invisible. Where he had grown up, strangers always spoke, waved from their cars, or at the very least nodded as they passed. Not to do so was to risk being thought of as haughty. Could it be because he was black? Perhaps they had never seen a black man before and were afraid to speak. But there *were* other

black people in Stockholm. He has seen one getting off the plane ahead of him. He was very tall, very black and regal. When he reached the bottom of the boarding stairs, he had looked back at Billy, smiled and tipped his hat. Then he and the black woman with him were rushed by officious looking men to a car on the tarmac.

Another person passed, her face wrapped in layers of scarves. Billy laughed to himself. It was not prejudice. *It's too damn cold to speak!*

The only sound of in the city, the rumble of the trains, reverberated slowly and muffled. On the other side of the Palace, he came to a church, modest in size by city standards, but for him, a man from the American rural South, quite large. With its pastel pink walls, it was the only color in the otherwise white upon gray cityscape. The church was open to tourists, and he went in to warm himself.

Once past the vestibule, he felt the warmth of the church and a strong sense of trespass. Where he was from no black soul entered a white church, and though he did not know what denomination was professed there—Lutheran, he suspected—he knew it was a *white* church. Afraid to sit in the pews, he strolled a side aisle, examining paintings and sculpture and looking up at the brick columns and plain arched ceilings that contrasted the ornate pipe organs and pulpits. He was surprised that the church contained so much art work. He was drawn to a small painting of Stockholm, showing the old city and the church as the only urbanized place among the green islands. Above the islands were arcs and circles of light in the sky and what appeared to be a solar eclipse. The painting struck him as Oz-like, even apocalyptic. He turned from it and walked on the other side of the church. Here he encountered a mesh globe, about six feet in diameter, filled with glowing candles. The globe glowed golden and inviting, and he wanted to light a candle, but hadn't any change to purchase it. Behind the globe was a tomb with the effigy

of a knight and lady laying upon it. How peaceful their faces looked, his framed in a thick beard and mustache that concealed his mouth. They seemed noble people and yet, what lives had they led? What joys or heartbreaks? Inside the sarcophagi what remained of them revealed nothing. Thinking so gave him the creeps, but even creepier, he saw that he stood upon a crypt, marked with a raised death skull. Quickly he walked away, toward the front of the cathedral, toward the altar, behind which was a large circular stained glass window, with patches of red and blue in it. The light from outside was too dim to make it sparkle, and the effect added to his sense of gloom.

The interior of the church was larger than he had at first assumed, and later, he learned it was called “*Storkyrkan*,” the Great Church, and as it was adjacent to the Palace, it was also the royal church. The churches Billy knew were small, clapboard affairs, their white interiors plain and bright. If they were adorned in any way, it might have been with painted glass or a large window depicting Jesus tending sheep. This church, smelling of old masonry and polished wood, opened to an ornate and dark mystery.

At first, he saw the horse, larger than life, speckled gray and muscular. The eye facing him seemed crazed with fear, and the teeth were bared as it fought against the bit. Rearing up, its presence was so full of life Billy thought for a moment he smelled horse stink. Then there was the dragon, a complex thing over which the horse charged. It was a concretion of fins, wings, antlers, teeth, claws. Splayed on its back and desperately grasping at a broken lance, its crocodilian mouth gaped to snatch the horse. Its eye, too, was intense, so intense it appeared to roll around in its head. When the spell broke, Billy puzzled out *Sankt Göran och Draken* on the placard in front of the statue.

Gilded to the hilt in armor, George sat abroad the horse, but shared none of the horse's engagement. His face was placid as he raised his sword to strike the beast, but something about his expression belied the action: remoteness, disengagement. The princess, kneeling nearby, was just as removed. The grit of the toil was between the horse and the dragon. The Saint and Princess seem as oblivious to the death match as bathers at the beach, while the sea roiled up.

Billy's toes were beginning to tingle as they warmed, and he did not look forward to leaving the church and walking in the cold again. He needed to find the ADC, American Deserters' Committee Headquarters, and he was realizing that he had walked in the wrong direction from the T-bana, the subway station. Stepping back into the frigid air and under the overcast sky, a strange ache passed under his sternum. *Loneliness?* He missed home—Mom, Dad, his sister, Evelyn—nothing particular about them—just their presence, the feeling of their bodies in the same room—safe familiarity. At the same time, the unfamiliar—everything about Stockholm interested him—the crunch and feel of the powdery snow underfoot, the church steeples of brick and steel, the narrow streets, the numbing, cold air. He strained when he heard voices, and though he knew only a few Swedish words, he hoped to recognize these, but the language was too foreign and sounded like a mockery of language.

All he knew about the ADC was what he had read in one of its newsletters when he was contemplating his desertion. They were a group of deserters and draft dodgers who had taken safe-haven in Sweden because of the country's opposition to the Vietnam War. The first he heard of these men was on a bootleg tape of a Jimi Hendrix concert in Stockholm. Hendrix had opened the concert by dedicating "Hey Joe" to them. *Hey Joe, where you going with that gun in your hand?* Only Jimi had called them the American Deserters' *Society*. The passport officer said the ADC would help him find a place to live. Luckily, he had a little money, about thousand

dollars, saved from army pay and his mother's savings. She had sneaked it to him without his father's knowledge.

The Headquarters was located on Upplandsgatan, and having retraced his steps to Centralen, the central T-bana station, he studied a map for a long time. When he was sure of where he needed to go, he found the right train. Disembarking, he got lost again. A street he thought led toward the Headquarters suddenly stopped, became a twisting stair. He went in another direction, noting a pinnacle with a grove of trees which he seemed to circle as he climbed. Finally, he came to the building, an apartment block of about five stories, with a crumbling gray facade. He entered into a bare hallway through a door that catty-cornered on the street. Again, he was confused, until he heard English—American English—coming from a door that led to the basement.

The three men who were sorting papers atop a wobbly table in the center of a small windowless room stopped their conversation and stared at him.

“Is this the ADC?” Billy asked, thinking he might have walked into the wrong place.

“It is,” a petite man with a fiery red fumanchu said. “And who are you?” He seemed to challenge Billy, and yet it was pleasant after so many hours to hear an American accent, a little nasal, a little hard on the vowels.

“I was told to come here for help.” He hadn't fully taken in the room, still pulling off his gloves.

The men seemed to hesitate. “Where are you from?” another one asked.

Billy wasn't sure how to answer; the hesitancy of the men was coolly aggressive.

Racial? “I'm a deserter.”

“A new deserter?” the fumanchu said, looking at the other men. “We don’t get many new deserters. Didn’t you hear? The war is almost over.”

Billy said he knew about the negotiations. Then, confusedly, “I thought this was where I was supposed to go.” A moment passed as the three men looked at him, they, too, not sure what to say.

“So, there you go, eh, Brother!” came a voice from behind Billy. Billy turned to see a tall, white man with an abundant beard and corona of brown curls brushing against his shoulders, hand extended to grab his hand. The man twisted his palm into a soul shake. Now the other men scrambled to rise and to take Billy’s hand. Each said his name, and one apologized, “We get a lot of reporters and other types sneaking around.”

“CIA and the like,” the fumanchu said.

“You must be William,” the bearded man said. He must have read the surprise on Billy’s face. “It’s cool. Erlandsson from the Immigration Office called. He’s cool. His church gives us support, you know.”

Call me Billy.”

“*Välkommen till Stockholm, Brother Billy! Jag heter Alex.*” The bearded man said, apparently enjoying his use of Swedish. “Alex Morgan from Madison, Wisconsin.” His voice conveyed a Midwestern flatness. “People call me Morgan.”

Billy told Morgan where he was from and Morgan chatted about having visited the University of Virginia on a college tour. Billy had little to say about it since for most of his life he had known it as a segregated campus. “Okay, let’s get you set up. We have a registry, and we can help you get set up with a pad and give you the lowdown. Hungry or no?”

Billy had had breakfast at the jail, where the immigration officer had let him sleep, the cell door open, because he had no place for the night. He was too excited to be hungry, and the food seemed odd to him. But the smell of the food that Morgan removed from a bag made him very hungry. Morgan handed each of the men a hotdog, or *korv*, as the Swedes called it. There were American mustard and ketchup stored on a shelf in the room. It was not difficult to find American products in Stockholm, Morgan told him, but they were expensive. Most of the stock was sent from the States, from groups supportive of the deserters. They also received some help from Swedish groups, both church groups and political groups. The hotdog was satisfying, in large part because Billy found the company agreeable and familiar. They reminded him of men he had gone to college with, except none in the group seemed to have been a white Southerner. Even more, their interactions reminded him of men from his army barracks, the camaraderie of young men who found themselves easy and familiar with one another—occasional joking in vulgarities. Yet threads of tension weaved through the camaraderie—unspoken competitions, insecurities, a bit of swagger—and racism, too. When behind the lines, Billy had preferred the company of other black men. He was one of the “79 men,” an all black group named for their weapons. But in the ADC there was yet another tension—not racism, Billy thought. Something he couldn’t name—something sad and fearful, too.

During the lunch the men questioned Billy about his desertion. He learned that he was one of just a few men who deserted while on duty in Vietnam and that most had deserted from either the US or Europe before they were ordered to the war. There were a thousand of them, mostly in the larger cities and most of those in Stockholm. A few had disappeared into small towns and into the countryside. The ADC redistributed packages received from supporters in the US and Sweden, but finding the Americans was becoming harder, since they were spreading out,

living with girlfriends. A few had married and started families. “That’s what you really want—a lady with nice apartment,” said one of the man.

The man with the with the fumanchu objected. “You need to be right here. Right here doing the work of the ADC. You can’t win a revolution if you are raising a bunch of Swedish brats.” The men argued for a few mintues about the role of the ADC, their voices taking on pitched, but not angry tones.

“Well, brother, let’s get you settled, real quick,” Morgan said and gathered up the trash from the lunch. The others began again to collate a mimeographed newsletter that bore the name of “Paper Grenade.”

Morgan and Billy sat in a corner away from the table. “You can do this a couple of different ways,” Morgan explained. The official way is to register with the police and Morgan volunteered to walk him down to Kronobergsparken, the main police Headquarters. Otherwise, stay away from there. Billy explained that he had filled out the paperwork at the airport. But there were Social Bureau forms to fill out, if he wanted to go on welfare. Billy explained that he had a little money, though he didn’t say how much. “Good. You don’t want to be dependent on them if you can avoid it. You’ll need a place to crash, then.” He gestured the other men. “Yous guys got any space?” One of the other men said he lived with his girlfriend’s family; the other two shared a small room with another deserter, taking turns sleeping on the sofa and floor.

“You can crash at my place,” Morgan invited. He glanced furtively at the other men, none of whom acknowledged him. “Until you can get a place of your own.” His landlord would let a room to Billy, Morgan said, and they could see the landlord the next day. Meanwhile, he would show Billy how to exchange his money and buy things, and teach him enough of the language to get by.

*

Billy hadn't brought much with him, just a rucksack with clothes, an extra pair of shoes, a novel, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, and a small album of family pictures his mother had given him when he left for the army. He had wanted to travel light, light enough to run if he needed to, and light enough not to draw attention to himself. Also, he hadn't wanted to be burdened with the trappings of home. The sooner he weaned himself from American things, the sooner he would adjust. On the other hand, he didn't want to travel suspiciously light. He'd had second thoughts about the rucksack, but thought it a good guise. People would assume he was under orders for a base in Europe. With the rucksack slung over one shoulder, he followed Morgan to the "T-bana" and traveled to Södermalm, the South Island, a ride of about ten minutes.

*

They came off the train at Skanstull, a busy station on the Ringvägen, the street that made an arch across the belly of the flounder-shaped island. They were just past the sag of the belly heading toward the gills, Morgan said. In the cold, his face had hardened against the snow and he looked above his scarf. He said he was used to cold weather, being from Wisconsin, but no matter where it was, cold weather was a bitch. Taking care to learn his way, Billy noted the turn onto Bjurholmsgatan, a less busy street than the Ringvägen, with blocks of yellow and pink plaster buildings. Unlike Richmond or Washington, cities Billy knew, Stockholm appeared to be a dense place. The buildings stood close to the streets, no yards, few plants to trim the side walk, except for occasional blocks where bare trees, he learned later, horse chestnut or linden trees, broke the continuous wall of buildings. They went into number one, passing first through a tall iron gate and into a stone courtyard. At once Billy could tell the building, though built of stone

and plaster, was in very bad repair. The windows were broken out, and inside the hallway, the plaster was crumbling and the slats in the walls were exposed. Morgan turned the key and extended his arm for Billy to go ahead of him into the apartment. “*Varsågod*. Welcome,” he said. “It isn’t much, but it’s home.”

It was a small room; its only saving grace was a large palladium window, through which came dim daylight. The window had been taped around with a plastic sheet to keep out the cold and a blanket covered the bottom sash for privacy. Morgan turned on an electric heater and apologized for the cold. He advised Billy to keep on his coat and shoes until the room warmed. In one corner was a foam mattress, in another, cardboard boxes where Morgan stored his belongings. The room had the feeling of an old office, but it had actually been a patient’s room in an insane asylum. Morgan waved Billy toward a beanbag chair in the corner next to the electric heater. Billy squatted over the chair before sinking into it and Morgan plopped down on a mattress on the other side of the heater. “Listen,” Morgan said, “I haven’t been here all that long, just about ten months, so I will do better. But you’ve got to face it. This is what you’ve gotten yourself into.” The building had been condemned and scheduled for renovation, but the landlord still rented rooms, mostly to immigrants.

Billy’s expression must have betrayed his disbelief.

“What did you think?” Morgan said sharply, “that you would have smorgasbords and a bevy of blonde chicks in saunas?” He laughed. “Me too. That’s what I thought. But that’s not what it is. Man, it’s even hard to even get good dope around here and so.”

Billy had seen poverty. He had been into the homes in Charlotte County that were no more than animal cribs with newspaper stuffed in the cracks between the boards. He had driven on streets within sight of the US capitol where row after row of unpainted tenements stood. He

thought Sweden would be the workers' paradise where no poverty existed. "Isn't this a socialist...?"

"Democratic socialism at work, eh?" Morgan snorted. "Yes, my brother, Sweden is the great middle way, the great socialist Eden—but here's a bit of news for you—you are not Swedish."

"Well... I... thought..."

"For the Swedes, it's not so bad—but the largesse of the Swedish state, such as it is, does not extend to humanitarian asylum seekers. That means *you*." He pulled open a cookie tin that he took from under a blanket next to the mattress, extracted a joint and lit it. The marijuana was harsh, its smell like burning rags, but turn by turn, they drew down the joint to a roach. The room seemed to brighten and Billy lay back in the beanbag and looked at the water-stained, cracked plaster ceiling. The cracks seemed like a giant spider's web and he wondered if he might not be trapped in it. Billy mimicked the accent of the passport officer, "Mr. Morgan, here are just a few questions for you now." Morgan recognized the shtick, chuckled and sang with theatrical flair,

"On, Wisconsin! On, Wisconsin!
Grand old badger state!
We, thy loyal sons and daughters,
Hail thee, good and great—

Hey, I guess the bullshit didn't take with me, especially that loyal son part."

Propping himself on a pillow, Morgan said that at first he hadn't paid much attention to the war, but as a college freshman he befriended a group of guys who thought of themselves as Marxists. Mostly, they smoked dope and bullshitted about politics. "Then one day, I was down in Muir Woods, this little grove down by the lake on the campus, you know. We were getting high as usual, when one of the guys came up and said that the army had just shot some students

at Kent State. At first I thought he was fucking with us, but we went to the dorm and turned on the radio. I got chills listening to the announcer. I realized that, eh... this thing... this war... was more than just the war... everything was more than what I thought. It was for real. The US talked shit about Russia, but fuck, we were just as bad as Russia. Nixon and Brezhnev, both imperialists. We talked a lot of shit that day—were going to join the Weathermen—but in a week or two, we had forgotten it. But something, you know, was building up in me—I was scared—paranoid. Scared about what was happening all around, but—to be honest—scared it could happen to me. I caught a couple of anti-war rallies. My folks are pretty open-minded, college professors, you know, so I wasn't hearing anything new. Then, maybe a month or so after the students were killed, I was at my mom's place—saw a *Life* magazine on the table with a picture of one of the dead students on the cover.”

Billy nodded. His family also subscribed to *Life* magazine.

“It hit me like—like—like a goddamn train, you know. He was lying with his mouth open and some guys trying to bring him back to life. I fell back on the couch and my mother thought I had fainted. She started to rant about drugs and how filthy I looked. ‘Cut your hair and get a shave’. She was crazy. The whole goddamn country was crazy. I had to do something. So, the next day, I got in with a group of guys I knew—not well, but well enough. They were the real deal. They talked about Molotov cocktails, fertilizer bombs and blowing up the ROTC building.” He drew on his cigarette and sat with his back to the wall, the pillow on his lap. “But, I didn't blow up shit. Too afraid, I guess. Maybe, I didn't really believe them. I went back to my old group. Exams came around and then summer school and then one morning—*Ka-boom!*—it seemed like half the campus had blown up. They killed a guy, another student—a cool guy, too. He was just as much against the war as they were.”

The room had warmed up enough that they took off their coats. Morgan kept on his watchman's cap, saying that it helped to keep him warm, even indoors, and that Billy should get one, too. He lay down on the mattress, pillow under his head. "I know you asked about desertion and I guess it was then that I knew something about myself. I am just not a killer."

Billy studied his face—quite boyish, unhardened despite the beard. "You don't look like a killer."

Morgan smiled, turned his head toward Billy and pursed his lips. "Neither do you. But I wonder."

"What?"

"If I *could* kill. I mean, I am not a Buddhist or anything. I was glad I wasn't involved with that bomb. Those guys are on the run right now. Canada, I think. Go into the post office and they are right up there on FBI's Most Wanted list. But I wanted to do something against the war. What could I do—blow up a building or get shot by the National Guard? He threw open his hands. Maybe killing *is* the way. Mao says, 'Political power grows out the barrel of a gun.'" He laughed. "So that's why I came to Sweden, so I wouldn't have to kill anyone. What I do is make tapes for the ADC. I record a little music. Stones or Credence, something like that, you see. Then I talk to the men. Tell them how the capitalist, racist, evangelical, Abrahamic religionist military industrial complex is using them as pawns. I give them a little Marxist theory. Tell them they are suckers for the rich man and so. And, then, tell them how to desert. The tapes are passed to the North Vietnamese delegation, here, and on to Hanoi where they play them on the radio for our men to hear."

"You're like a Tokyo Rose?"

"You could say that."

They were quiet for a few minutes. Billy cushioned himself in the beanbag and looked out of the large window at the blank sky. When he closed his eyes, he saw the same blankness, wintry, foggy, gray—but far from blank, his mind buzzed and crackled, nearly overwhelmed. Thoughts came and went, but none formed completely or stayed long enough for him to grasp. The room was getting warm, and he wanted to sleep. He opened his eyes, drowsily, and fidgeted. Morgan was standing over him.

“Oh, yeah. There is something else you need to know before you get too settled.”

Morgan scratched at his beard. “Well, I’m a friend of Dorothy’s.”

Billy waited for more information and when he didn’t hear it. “Dorothy who?”

“Dorothy from Oz.”

“*The Wizard of Oz?*”

Morgan squatted beside him. “Look, man. It means I’m a homosexual. Gay. Queer. Faggot. A fudge-packer. Cocksucker. Whatever mean thing you want to call me. That’s why you don’t see any brothers crashing in my pad. Not that they’re all bigots.”

Billy was too tired to think much about it. “You aren’t going to fuck me in my sleep, are you?”

“Not tonight.”

“I’m cool with that.” Billy said and closed his eyes. He felt Morgan put a blanket on him and he slept.

End of Excerpt