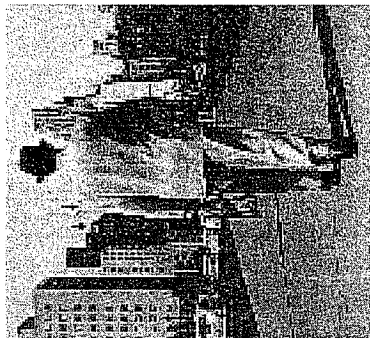


Stiffed

The Betrayal of the American Man



Susan Faludi

1999



Perennial

An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers

Also by Susan Faludi

Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women

them, without the women. "It was the man thing to do." It was a familial masculine tradition. Dalbey's father, in his youth, had gone to church accompanied solely by *his* father. In light of that, Dalbey hoped that religion might reunite him with his father, might begin to thaw all those silent, icebound years.

A few weeks after our conversation in the Goleta Professional Building, I received a note from Gordon Dalbey. He had returned to North Carolina to speak at a church near his childhood home and had invited his father, who had never seen him deliver a talk before. Dalbey had even arranged for a driver to chauffeur him to the church. But his father declined, with a thin excuse about how "it's wrong to 'put people out like that.'" Only after the event's organizers intervened and requested his presence did the father relent. "Naturally, it hurts," Dalbey wrote to me, "but I realize the hurt I feel is not only mine. . . . The discipline for me is just to cry it out to Jesus . . . in order that 'all may go well with you in the land you are about to occupy' (Exodus 20:12). That's the only way I can ensure my son will escape the vicious generational cycle."

I hoped, for Dalbey's and his son's sakes, that he could escape the cycle. And I feared, for him as for so many men like him, that the odds were stacked against any man who tried to make the break alone. Perhaps, in the end, Michael Bernhardt was managing to navigate that treacherous terrain where so many others failed because his father's commitment to a caretaking masculine ethic had *not* been ruptured by World War II. In any event, he was able to see what few others noticed: that the enemy was finally neither the father nor the son; that there was, in fact, no "enemy"—only the dangerous prescriptions of manhood into which they all, fathers as well as sons, had been drafted.



THE CREATURE IN THE MIRROR

The Fantasy Cavalry to the Rescue

ONLY FIVE YEARS AFTER THE FALL of Saigon, presidential candidate Ronald Reagan declared in a campaign speech, "For too long, we have lived with the 'Vietnam Syndrome.'" His words and his subsequent election were advertisements that the war memory had been canceled, to be replaced with a feel-good celluloid alternative. "It is time that we recognize that ours was, in truth, a noble cause. A small country, newly free from colonial rule, sought our help in establishing self-rule and the means of self-defense against a totalitarian neighbor bent on conquest. . . . We dishonor the memory of fifty thousand young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt as if we were doing something shameful."¹

Vietnam had often seemed like a movie while it was happening—"war as performance," as historian Marilyn Young has called it.² Its body counts were media-managed by the Pentagon, its audience glued to the nightly news, its ultimate disaster often attributed to a hostile press corps. Finally, years after it was over, Americans received the cinematic resolution that the actual war had denied them. Instead of honoring the dead by grappling with the war's true lessons, Americans chose to apply the balm of movie magic. If war overseas was already long lost, a battle continued over what sort of damage it had wreaked on American mas-

culinity, the violence done to men's sense of mission, confidence, even virtue. The nation sought a fantasy to redeem its manhood, and it would find no better ringmaster than the great fabulist himself, Ronald Reagan.

Reagan's combat conjurings predated Vietnam. He remembered vividly and recounted unashamedly battle scenes from World War II, even though he had never left the environs of Hollywood during the war years. Declared ineligible for combat, he spent the war narrating flyboy training films and appearing in a few of them like *Rear Gunner* and *For God and Country*. Later, he recalled how his "service" (in the Army Air Corps First Motion Picture Unit in Hollywood) had ripped him from home and hearth. "By the time I got out of the Army Air Corps," mused the man whose battlefield grime had all been applied by makeup artists, "all I wanted to do—in common with several million other veterans—was to rest up awhile, make love to my wife, and come up refreshed to a better job in an ideal world."³

For the rest of his life, he imagined scenes from the war he never fought as if they were his own. Such sentimental memories—the gunner dying in the arms of his pilot as his B-17 crashed, the black sailor on KP duty who integrated the navy by manning a machine gun at Pearl Harbor—were all screenplay memories. He horrified many when, in a 1983 meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, he suggested that he had actually photographed the liberation of Nazi death camps as a member of the Signal Corps, and even kept a copy of the film. More startling than his made-up personal experiences was his unshakable belief in them. No matter how often critics pointed up the speciousness of his wartime claims, how often they located the source of his anecdotes in one long-forgotten war movie or another, he remained unfazed, serenely confident of his own borrowed recollections. He still believed in them because he had acted them out or witnessed them himself—as a speculator in a movie theater. "Because films were real to Reagan, he remembered them with the clarity of actual experience," Lou Cannon wrote in *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*. As Reagan himself once remarked, "Maybe I had seen too many war movies, the heroics of which I sometimes confused with real life."⁴ Long before Arnold Schwarzenegger's character in *Last Action Hero* slipped off and on the screen, Reagan was effortlessly passing between real and cinematic dream states.

More than a fanciful retelling of military history, Reagan's was a full-blown remake of postwar *masculine* history. He believed in the promise made to the era's young men: submit to the new corporate-management and national-security powers, fight the enemies they designate on the frontiers they choose, and they will make a man of you. He had good

reason to; it had paid off in his case, in subsidized fortune and fame. Reagan had begun his career ashamed of his Willy Loman of a father, a floundering, boozing shoe salesman who had nothing to pass on but a frenetic, hopeless itinerancy, and he fretted famously in his autobiography *Where's the Rest of Me?* that a Hollywood career was as much a threat to an actor's manhood as the train that had amputated his character's legs in the film *King's Row*. "If he is only an actor, I feel, he is much like I was in *King's Row*, only half a man—no matter how great his talents." Yet he reported that in the end he found "the rest of me"—as a company man in postwar business culture.⁵

In Hollywood, as the Screen Actors Guild's president, he informed the FBI to cleanse the guild's ranks of Communists, and he carried out studio directives that diluted actors' rights and consolidated corporate power in the industry. Where his corporate handlers saw Reds, he saw Reds. "The Communist plan for Hollywood was remarkably simple," he declared assuredly in 1965. "It was merely to take over the motion picture business. Not only for its profit . . . but also for a grand worldwide propaganda base. . . . It would have been a magnificent coup for our enemies." At the behest of his employer, the defense and entertainment conglomerate General Electric, he tirelessly traveled the businessmen's luncheon circuit warning of the Communist threat, "the most dangerous enemy ever known to man."⁶

In return, in contrast to Willy Loman and the flannel-suited functionaries of postwar corporate culture, attention *was* paid to him. Reagan's new fathers rewarded him with a GE-wired house; they finagled an ornate and murky real-estate deal that turned him a 3,000 percent profit and made him a millionaire; and they financed and orchestrated the public-relations campaign that leveraged the wholly green "politician" into the California governor's house.⁷ The postwar deal had worked like a dream for Reagan; submission and verbal shadow-boxing at celluloid enemies had led to celebrity and political showmanship that felt, at least to him, like the other half of his manhood. As political scientist Michael Rogin wrote, "Reagan has realized the dream of the American male, to be taken care of in the name of independence, to be supported while playing the man in charge." He was a man *because* he played one on-screen, on all the screens of his projected life. And when his movie career waned, General Electric saved him by appointing him host of *General Electric Theater*, its number-one-rated TV show on CBS. "This television show came riding along," Reagan recalled. "The cavalry to the rescue."⁸

At the time of his presidency Reagan seemed like the ultimate throw-back to an old-fashioned manhood, splitting logs on his ranch, espousing

small-town virtues, displaying a stoical and self-deprecating humor that might have come straight out of an Ernie Pyle dispatch. But, more accurately, he was a man ahead of his time. As early as the 1930s, as a sportscaster delivering "live" play-by-play of baseball games he re-created (or on occasion, fabricated) from telegraph wires, he had shown himself to be comfortable with virtual worlds, with the power of the media to create realities as well as celebrities. The rise of Reagan was the ultimate repudiation of Ernie Pyle's masculine vision. Pyle saw a war being won by grunts who weren't glamorized. Reagan was the "airman" who had experienced nothing but the wartime glamour of on-screen battle—and won. To the end of his public life, he remained a man happy to invoke movies as public prescriptions. "Boy!" as President Reagan enthused to the American public in 1985 as the thirty-nine TWA hostages held in Beirut were being released. "After seeing *Rambo* last night, I know what to do the next time this happens." In another age, in the voice of another man, such a remark might have seemed merely whimsical, but in an age when fantasy, history, and celebrity were increasingly confounded, and at a time when the nation desperately needed to come to terms with the reality of its Vietnam experience, those remarks took on a darker cast. "[W]hat happens," Garry Wills wrote in *Reagan's America*, "if, when we look into our historical rearview mirror, all we can see is a movie?"⁹ Reagan had found the missing half of his manhood in the celluloid images he conjured in that mirror. But what would other men find there?

IN THE LATE SIXTIES, as Michael Bernhardt was leaving the University of Miami, a young man who would come to exemplify the Vietnam-era military in the public mind enrolled. He was as confused about the war as anybody. He had spent the last two years in a college in Switzerland, the only place that would admit him because his high-school grades were so poor, and he had been partial, when not starring on the college football team he had founded, to delivering broadsides against the antiwar movement. "In English class, we had a choice to write a paper, pro or con Vietnam," he would recall, "and I wrote totally pro. The whole thing was written against the detractors and the pacifists, the conscientious objectors. I really went to town on those people. I portrayed them as not people speaking out for the freedoms of all people in the world but cowards afraid to go. They were hiding behind this rhetoric. In truth, they were yellow." By the time he arrived at the University of Miami, though, he was feeling less certain. "When I first heard about Vietnam in college, it hadn't really been played out on the airwaves, and

I thought, 'Oh, this'll be a simple war. It'll be over in no time at all.' And it was very romantic, the fact that it was the Far East, and we were so superior, and they're writing songs about it ["The Song of the Green Berets"], and John Wayne was endorsing it [in his Vietnam-based film *The Green Berets*], and it looked easy compared with World War II, this looked like literally a scrimmage." He laughed ruefully. "I really didn't know what I was talking about."

In this young man's senior year at Miami, with the draft looming, his thinking changed "very much. That's when I did everything in the world to stay out of it." When he was summoned to the army recruitment center in 1968 for a draft physical, "I made like I couldn't hear too well." The army rejected him, he said, but not for deafness (though years later he realized his hearing was in fact impaired). "The truth is, after doing all this psychological testing, they made me IH, which is 'only to be called in the event of a national emergency.' What does that mean, like when you run out of people? A national emergency! Only take him if they're coming over the fuckin' walls of Atlantic City! When they hit Malibu, give him a gun! I asked, 'What is this about "you're psychological?"' And they said, 'You have the kind of temperament that you would shoot your commander in the back rather than take a bad order.' And that's the truth, I would."

The truth is, in fact, murkier: The designation IH generally meant that you had drawn a lottery number so high you were unlikely to be called, except in the case of a national emergency; the young man's lottery number the following year was 327.¹⁰ The man seemed to remember two encounters with recruitment officers, and perhaps with the passage of time, he had conflated the two memories, highlighting the story of the psychologically unstable boy. In any event, his way of recollecting his handling of the draft departed notably from the self-flattering revisionism employed by such saber-rattling Clinton haters as talk-radio personality Rush Limbaugh or Vice President Dan Quayle, one of whom reportedly used a benign cyst, the other family connections in the National Guard, to get out of active duty, and each of whom later claimed that they had made no effort to avoid the military.¹¹ By contrast, in casting himself as a troubled renegade, this man was evidently being *harder* on himself retrospectively. But then, he had a certain theatrical bent—he had been a drama major in college—and a perception of himself as an angry lone-wolf hero, the sort of solo leading man who, for the sake of his own principles, would indeed shoot his commander. He had played Biff in a college production of *Death of a Salesman*, and it was a

role he had found deeply satisfying: the dark son who smashed his father's delusions. Something in the part, he felt, though he couldn't quite say why, expressed his deepest self.

His objection to military service wasn't ideological. He had grown up enamored of the armed forces; as a teenager, he had tried to enlist in the navy when he was sixteen. Nor did his opposition rest on moral grounds. "I wasn't completely opposed to the war—I didn't know enough about it," he explained. "But by 1969, I realized it was absurd because there was no way you could *win*. Once they [halted] the bombing, I knew they didn't want to win. It's like a boxer tying his best hand behind his back. . . . That's when I really became angry. There's no chance we're ever going to win! . . . Because they wouldn't *let* them win." (He wasn't alone in that view. By 1979, a Harris poll reported that 73 percent of Americans believed the nation's political leaders "wouldn't let [the soldiers] win" in Vietnam.)¹² So the young man looked for another arena in which to stage his victory drama. He spent the war years of his youth trying to launch a career in film. After many false starts and rebuffs in Hollywood, he finally achieved success, fame, and riches in 1976 with the story of a come-from-behind boxer whose musical mantra of pugilistic victory would be invoked at the 1996 Republican National Convention as presidential nominee Bob Dole's fight song. But the pinnacle of the actor's career as a well-muscled lone underdog would come not with *Rocky* but in 1982, when Sylvester Stallone appeared on-screen as Rambo in *First Blood*, the very personification of a come-from-behind nation.

It is commonly accepted that the *Rambo* trilogy transformed the lost war in Vietnam into a triumphal confirmation of American virtue. But it would be more accurate to say that the film series reclaimed the virtue of the solitary American man. The government technocrats, whom *Rambo* called the "stinking bureaucrats" back in Washington, remain sullied in this revisionist history, while the lone grunt emerged as a warrior-saint. A lost army would be pulled one by one from the quagmire of the war and reimagined as a cast of individual good men because potentially each of them could have been a winner if only he had had a fair shake, or at the very least a superhuman body and the superior weaponry to go with it. Winning—that first principle of manhood in the American Century—would be reaffirmed and encapsulated in a famous exchange in *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. "Sir, do we get to win this time?" Rambo demands of his commanding officer, Colonel Sam Trautman, who has ordered the hero back to Vietnam. "This time," Trautman assures him, "it's up to you." This is reassuring news because John J.

Rambo, we are quickly informed, is an all-American supergrunt—a former POW with enough ribbons, citations, and medals to rate him as the most decorated soldier in world history. "Lemme just say that Rambo is the best combat vet I've ever seen," Trautman gushes. "A pure fighting machine, with only a desire to win a war that someone else lost. And if winning means he'll have to die, he'll die. No fear, no regrets."

Conventional perceptions and clichés about the *Rambo* series are drawn almost entirely from the second of the three films, which scored by far the highest returns at the box office; if any movie was a "winner," it was this one. Its cartoon mythology gave its male fans what they wanted: complete victory, generated by a clear mission on a straightforward frontier, filled to the brim with identifiable enemies. Rambo's redemption in the film was total. Sprung from hard labor in a federal pen by his devoted superior Colonel Trautman, he is sent on a specific mission: to find the remaining American prisoners of war in Vietnam. He locates their POW camp, but the government bureaucrats who never really wanted him to rescue the imprisoned troops double-cross him and strand him in the jungle. Nonetheless, he fights on, against clearly uniformed Vietnamese soldiers who man their fortifications and blood-thirsty Soviets ("damn Russian bastards") who for unexplained reasons are patrolling the Southeast Asian jungle in the 1980s. These enemies inflict electric shock and other sadistic psychosexual torments on the erotically bared torso of Rambo—atrocities that, in reality, were the preferred war crimes of the *South* Vietnamese interrogators we sponsored and our own intelligence agents in such programs as Operation Phoenix.¹³ Our hero, by contrast, is principled, long-suffering, respectful to a Vietnamese woman, and harms no innocent civilians. In the end, of course, Rambo breaks free of his tormentors, single-handedly rescues the POWs, and, bathed in the admiring gaze of Colonel Trautman, heads into the Vietnamese backcountry, with his *second* Congressional Medal of Honor waiting in the wings.

The myth of the "forgotten" POW-MIAs became the war's new mission: as early as 1972, as Jonathan Schell has written, "many people were persuaded that the United States was fighting in Vietnam in order to get its prisoners back." By 1991, 69 percent of people responding to a *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News poll maintained that American POWs still remained in Southeast Asia. In fact, as American studies scholar H. Bruce Franklin has written in *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America*, his careful dissection of the POW-MIA legend, about half of the 2,273 American servicemen who were said to be "unaccounted for" at war's end were actually known at the time to have been killed in action; and

81 percent of the remaining half were airmen lost over the sea or in remote or mountainous terrain. By 1973, all but fifty-three men had been accounted for; by 1976 that number fell to about a dozen; and after exhaustive study, the Defense Department concluded that *no* POWs or MIAs remained, except for one air force captain whose name was kept on the list as a "symbolic gesture" only—he had died in the mid-1960s. Yet the mythical captive serviceman would become a potent political tool, used by Nixon first to prolong the war and then to refuse recon-structive aid promised under the 1973 Paris Peace Agreement, and used by succeeding presidents to block Vietnam's admission to the United Nations and to prevent normalized relations between the two countries. Reagan declared the search for remaining prisoners of war "the highest national priority," and elevated that search to the highest fevered consciousness in the national imagination. In 1982, the POW-MIA banner became the only flag other than the Stars and Stripes to fly over the White House, and it soon waved over public buildings nationwide, with its motto, emblazoned below the bowed head of a solemn POW, announcing its intentions to the world: "You are not forgotten."⁴

The roots of the POW myth were distinctly domestic. The POW became a stand-in for all the ways the postwar sons had been deserted by their "commanding officers," left imprisoned in the anteroom to manhood. For many of the men who responded so dramatically to the Rambo myth, those "stinking bureaucrats" may have brought to mind not wartime officialdom but all the anonymous post-World War II fathers—public and private—who had abandoned them on the fields of masculinity and showed no signs of coming to the rescue. The second Rambo film derives its power from the wishful pretense of the abandoned son—that he doesn't need the father after all, that he can heal himself. Rambo, a former prisoner of war, imprisoned a second time by his own country, drops like Superman from the skies to emancipate his brethren, and so himself. Even without a grown-up search party, in fantasy at least, deliverance can be achieved. Or can it? In the end, Rambo has to bring his achievement back to his father Trautman to appreciate it.

By *Rambo III*, the son would be rescuing the father. In that 1988 film, the hero emerges from virtual sainthood—having moved to a monastery in Thailand—to pluck his mentor Trautman from the Russians' grasp in Afghanistan. This new setting relieved the film's makers of any need to take into account the Vietnam War's pesky details: now the Americans could defend "freedom fighters" with a clear conscience and the Russians, who were by then fighting a Vietnam-like war in Afghanistan,

could be the invaders. As Colonel Trautman tells his Russian captor: "We already had our Vietnam. Now you're going to have yours!"

The nature of the relationship between the supervictim hero and the supervicious enemy that went international in the second and third *Rambos* had been established in *First Blood*, where the enemy was domestic and the battle intramural. That film was set in the rugged Pacific Northwest, when Rambo was a mildly scruffy vet newly returned from Vietnam, bumming his way through the backwater town of "Hope: Gateway to Holidayland." He incurs the wrath of the town's piggishly redneck sheriff, Will Teasle, whose deputies' taunts trigger a flashback to Rambo's experience as a prisoner of war of the Vietnamese. A panicked Rambo lashes out and soon has to take on a whole posse of bloodthirsty deputies, a pack of snarling Doberman pinschers, and eventually the National Guard. Presiding over this massive onslaught is the sheriff, who wants "to kill him so bad I could taste him." Told Rambo is a "war hero," Teasle vows, "I'm gonna get that son of a bitch, and I'm gonna pin that Congressional Medal of Honor to his liver." In the wilderness of a rain-drenched North American jungle, armed only with a huge serrated knife, Rambo eludes them all using Vietcong-style guerrilla tactics. He whittles Third World weaponry—lethal tree spikes—and stops only to suture his own wounds or hunt for his supper. Finally, the American supergrunt and the American superenemy, Rambo and Teasle, have their showdown *mano a mano*, in the trashed ruins of the town police station. Rambo prevails, but is stopped from delivering a fatal bullet by the intercession of the only man he can trust, Colonel Trautman. With his trench coat draped tenderly over Rambo's shoulders, the colonel escorts the "war hero" to a safe surrender.

Rambo's is the ur-story of the late-twentieth-century American action hero, and the films that featured him were carefully tailored to avoid any reckoning not only with the Vietnam War but with a domestic crisis of masculinity. That was why millions of male moviegoers, most of whom were too young to have watched the Vietnam War on the evening news, leaped to their feet in theaters across the country to cheer. Rambo told them there was no need for a reckoning; there was no crisis. And yet, the evolution of *First Blood* from novel to final film suggests an unreckoned-with past involving the figure at the tormented heart of that unreckoned-with crisis, the familiar father.

Just before *First Blood* was released, the filmmakers arranged for David Morrell, the author of the novel of the same name, and his family to see a screening for the first time. "Orion [the film's distributor] had arranged

to show the picture only to us on an afternoon in one of these theaters in Iowa City," the novelist recalled. "So, at two o'clock in the afternoon in this very big empty theater, we saw the movie. It was very strange." But not half as strange as the story Morrell saw on-screen. "We were pretty overwhelmed. I walked out of the theater into the sunlight and I was in a daze, because I didn't know what I'd seen. It was a different animal. [Teasle] had been reduced to nothing. It was a one-sided story. Instead of Teasle and the kid sort of being equal and playing off each other, it had become the kid's story."

Morrell's original tale had little to do with any now familiar formula of superheroes and superthugs. In fact, it contained no enemy at all. The filmmakers had to appoint one. And the one they chose was telling. Though in the movie Rambo refers briefly to "all those maggots at the airport, protesting me, spittin', callin' me a baby-killer," the antiwar radicals were not the film's designated nemesis. And though the hero should have hated the military brass who were, after all, to blame for his best friend's Agent Orange-induced death and his own horrific tour of duty in Vietnam, they, too, were given a pass. Curiously, the filmmakers chose as Rambo's archenemy the character in the novel who had the greatest affinity for him, who was his spiritual kin.

In the book *First Blood*, police chief Wilfred Teasle is a Korean War vet, a marine master sergeant with a Distinguished Service Cross (second only to a Congressional Medal of Honor), who finds himself magnetically and mysteriously drawn to Rambo upon first meeting. The book's Captain Trautman, on the other hand, is not even Rambo's former commanding officer. He is one of the invisible war managers, a man whom Rambo has never met.

Why did the movie version erase the sheriff's connection to Rambo? And why with each sequel was Colonel Trautman fashioned into an ever more benevolent and fatherly protector? The film was not the John Wayne World War II film that Sylvester Stallone and his generation had been raised on; it was not about the simple antagonism between a hero and a foreign enemy. Just as the POW myth wasn't primarily about the Vietnamese, neither was the Rambo saga. *First Blood* and its sequels chronicled a domestic war. That was what put Rambo so squarely in the center of Reagan-era reconstructions of the war. And that is what brought young male audiences to their feet. The reconstituting of American masculinity after Vietnam was a shadow drama between sons and their fathers.

Would Teasle or Trautman become Rambo's father? And what kind of father would that be? The answer went through as many revisions as

the movie's screenplay went through rewrites, as David Morrell and the playwright David Rabe and ultimately Sylvester Stallone himself struggled with the text and with their own private and difficult patrimony. Each level of the Rambo story, it turned out, held another level within it, like Russian nesting dolls. But as book followed inspiration, as script followed book, as more scripts followed that first one, and as movie followed movie, the nature of the necessary father would remain *the* abiding issue for everybody involved in the project.

Now I Have Shed My First Blood

DAVID MORRELL AND HIS WIFE, Donna, moved to the high desert of Santa Fe in 1992 because they wanted someplace arid and empty, someplace stripped of associations. The house they chose had the same quality—scrubbed terra-cotta floors, whitewashed walls, big hollow rooms that echo, but not with memories. The yard was ringed by junipers, piñons, and prickly cactus. On the day I came to visit, a stack of war histories lay on the coffee table, including the latest biography of Robert McNamara, but Morrell, who had recently been asked to draft a treatment for a prospective *Rambo IV*, was mentally far from Vietnam. He was intent on showing me the fruits of his latest preoccupation, a rare-photo collection. His purchases had been few and selective; great care had been lavished in mounting and framing black-and-white prints by Ansel Adams, Edward Steichen, Alfred Stieglitz, and Berenice Abbott. I appreciated the clarified beauty of the images, but they conveyed a piercing loneliness that troubled me. It was only later, as I was driving back through the endless, mountainous dry land, the vast and unrelieved red-rock vista, that I realized what had saddened me: the photos were all landscapes, empty of people.

In 1987, the Morrells' only son, Matthew, died after a prolonged battle with a rare form of bone cancer. He was only fifteen. A few years later, the couple traded the family home in Iowa City for the thin air of a New Mexico plateau. Their life is now segmented like the Roman calendar—before Matthew's death and after—and it is obvious in spending time with them that most if not all of their psychological resources have been expended in weathering this terrible crossing. Donna Morrell seems to manage by mothering whoever is at hand and erecting a security fence of chitchat, belied by a fate-stunned gaze and the tendency for her small talk to stray into large matters. When we went into the den to retrieve one of Morrell's books, Donna took my arm, pointed at an urn on a shelf, and said, "That's Matthew; we like to keep him close at hand." Her husband has a different survival strategy, one that has helped him

to work out private demons much of his life. David Morrell has turned his anguish into fiction. A prolific author of dark psychological thrillers, he directed his more recent heroes toward a new mission. "After Matt died," he told me, "the search for the father turned into the search for the son." The search for the father had produced the larger library, eight books from the 1970s to the late 1980s. It was, indeed, the search that drove Morrell to try writing fiction—and eventually to *First Blood*.

David Morrell never knew his own father. "I grew up haunted by the loss of a father and bitter at seeing other boys who had fathers." George Morrell, a British RAF bombardier who met Morrell's mother while teaching at a nearby air force school in Canada, was shot down over France in 1943, the same year David was born. At least, that was the story Morrell was raised to believe. When he was nearly four, his mother, an upholstery seamstress in a factory, sent him to a Catholic orphanage, "because she couldn't afford to work and take care of me." He cannot recall how long he stayed in the orphanage, only that he ran away several times and was always returned. "I do remember being taken there—vividly. My mother said we were going for a ride to the country and when we got there, she said, 'We're going to go play now,' and she put me on a swing. A nun was pushing me, and after a while I said, 'Wait, where's my mother?' and I saw her getting into a car. The nun stopped me. I remember crying, and that's all."

Morrell remembers the orphanage as a nightmare. "On Sunday, we'd all be lined up and we'd have a treat on occasion. A nun would come along with a box of red, white, and blue popcorn, and we'd each get a kernel." He was finally released by the return of his mother—or in any case a woman who said she was his mother. "When she picked me up, I didn't know for sure it was her. I didn't remember her face." He came home to an apartment over a bar in a seedy neighborhood in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario. His mother had remarried, a bartender, "a man she shouldn't have married. She thought I needed a father figure," Morrell said, "but he had no interest in children. I needed the attention and he wasn't willing to give it, and the more of a fuss I made to get it, the more I alienated him. He barely spoke to me. If we said three words to each other a day, it was a lot." By early adolescence, Morrell had attached himself to a local gang for the sustenance it could ill provide. The thwarted struggle for paternal recognition persisted into adulthood. Already a writer, he came home one night and his stepfather retreated, as Morrell often did, behind a Burpee seed catalog. The endless silence, as Morrell recalled it, was finally broken when the brochure was lowered and

his stepfather, pointing to the pages of beefsteak tomatoes and gladiolas, announced: "This is real. The stuff you do is fake."

As a boy, Morrell had learned to retreat, too. "I spent my youth in the movies," he said. The local theater charged fifteen cents. "I'd go to the bus stop and beg the money, claiming I'd lost my bus money." He gravitated toward westerns, rescue thrillers, and sci-fi flicks where invading aliens were repelled. Audie Murphy, the former war hero, was a consuming fascination in his cowboy roles, but the one genre he shrank from was the war movie: "I mean, they just terrified me." The World War II movie, to be precise. "I developed a morbid fear about war." Even watching the news on television, "I was certain that in the middle of the weather report somebody would come on and say, 'Listen, we've got to stop all this because we have got some real trouble. War has been declared!'" All he could see was the vision of his unknown father, a flaming meteor crashing toward earth.

It wasn't until he was twenty-three and a graduate student at Penn State that he was given cause to doubt that image. After several beers, his mother on a visit let slip a strange remark. "She was talking about something or other, and then she said, 'Oh, that reminds me of something George wrote after he was shot down.'" Morrell stared at her. "What did you say?" he asked hoarsely. "Oh, yes," she replied, "he was in the underground. He died in the hospital." Morrell could get little more from her. "So," he said to me, "my father died twice. Or did he die at all? Did he exist?" Morrell asked his mother for photographs or any mementos she had of his father's life. "She claimed to have burned everything. She had no records on him. She had no birth certificate on me." All that she could produce was a medal. "He was a ghost," Morrell said.

In the course of his young manhood, he sought out three proxy father figures, all of them writers. The first he selected when he was about seventeen, from the credits of a television show. "What turned it all around for me was *Route 66*. I saw the first couple episodes and it changed my life." A well-crafted weekly drama that ran from 1960 to 1964, *Route 66* was the quintessential road trip for boys. Every week, two young buddies, Buz and Tod, sped down the highway, turned randomly onto a byroad, and entered what was generally a harrowing adventure. They were both orphans. Buz had raised himself on the streets of New York City's Hell's Kitchen; while Tod was the son of a tycoon who had died bankrupt, leaving him nothing but his two-seater convertible Corvette. "And I saw in these two characters me," Morrell said, "though I didn't know it at the time."

Saturated with psychological dread and the threat of small-town violence, *Route 66* was a sort of postwar *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, with the asphalt highway as the Mississippi River navigated by the two orphanans on their Simonized raft, and Buz as the scrappy Huck who defends Tod, a gentle Jim in whiteface. The most violent figures in the series are the town fathers the boys often encounter when they stray from the ribbon of highway. It falls to the boys, time and again, to break the spell of these patriarchal brutes. In 1963, the storyline would be updated for the times. When the actor who played Buz fell ill and had to be replaced, a new character was introduced. Linc Case is a U.S. Ranger returning from a stint as an "adviser" in Vietnam, an escapee from a Vietnamese prison camp who feels orphaned by a cold father who nevertheless wants to parade Linc through town as a war hero. Linc bitterly reminds his mother that as a boy he never wanted a mirror in his room, because it would remind him that he'd never been mirrored in his father's eyes: "I wasn't there."

But it was the original Buz and his fatherless nightmare with whom the young David Morrell most identified. In a 1961 installment called "The Mud Nest," Buz tracks his ancestry to a bleak dead end—a mother who is not, it turns out, his mother, who has allowed her own infant son to die because she hated the child's father so much. "I used to have this terrible dream about an airplane that flew over the place I lived," an anguished Buz confides to the strange woman, and it was a dream straight out of the skull of David Morrell. "It always fell. It used to come down along with the sounds of screaming angels. . . . It always crashed in the middle of my garden where my mother was planting flowers. . . . After the crash, the garden always burst into flame and the roses burned down like fuses, real fast, right down to the ground. And my mother, she burned down, too, just like the roses, till everything around me was ashes. Except me."

Dialogue like this gave the teenage Morrell the idea that writing might be a way to conjure a literary career out of the ashes of a paternal inheritance lost in a fiery plane crash. He copied down the name of *Route 66's* story writer, Stirling Silliphant, and then "handwrote a letter to him, saying, 'I want to be you.'" Morrell didn't dare hope for a reply. But a week later, a letter appeared in his mailbox that, much to young Morrell's amazement, began, "I'm terribly sorry it took me so long to get back to you. . . ." Silliphant's advice was brief. "He told me, 'If you want to be a writer, you've got to write and write and write,'" Morrell recalled. "So I took him at his word and set out to be a writer." Along the way Morrell sent Silliphant—an eminent television and screenwriter whose credits

would later include the Academy Award-winning film about racial intolerance *In the Heat of the Night*—updates on his progress, including ultimately a copy of his first novel, *First Blood*. "Stirling called me!" Morrell said, still after all these years full of stunned gratitude over the attentions of this older man, "and he said, 'This is a good book. And the fact that you wrote it because of me, I'm just overwhelmed. I'm just purring like a kitten.'" As was Morrell. Later, Morrell flew to Los Angeles to spend a blissful week with Silliphant in Beverly Hills. When Morrell's novel *Brotherhood of the Rose* was published, the screenwriter promoted it to the networks and served as executive producer on the eventual NBC miniseries.

In 1966, Morrell came to Penn State to study under Hemingway scholar Philip Young, whose work he had worshipped from afar. He talked his way into a job as Young's graduate assistant. Young, too, took the fatherless tutee under his wing, even allowing Morrell to use his home to write while he was away one summer. At Penn State, Morrell also "met the third man most responsible for who I am," Philip Klass, a science-fiction writer with the nom de plume of William Tenn. Klass taught a creative-writing class on campus, and Morrell corralled the reluctant teacher. "I asked him to teach me one-on-one," Morrell recalled. "I bothered him and bothered him until he finally said, 'Okay, write a short story a week, and then we'll see.'" Morrell's efforts did not receive a warm reception. "He said to me, 'This is the worst stuff! What are you doing?' What I was doing was writing bad Hemingway." Klass then gave him some precious advice. "He said, 'I don't know a lot about you, but I think one of the primary emotions in your world is fear. You're afraid of a lot of things, but you don't know what it is you're afraid of.'" Klass told him to pursue that fear "as if it's a ferret inside you, because it's going to hide, it's going to dart, it's going to do everything that it can not to identify itself to you. But you have to keep trying to identify it, and as you do and as you get closer, you will find yourself."

For months, Morrell sat and wrote abstractly about fear. "I wrote about the fear of heights and the fear of drowning and on and on. I did exactly what he didn't want." Then, one oppressively humid August day, seated at his typewriter in his mentor's empty house, he drifted into a heat-exhausted reverie. "I found myself going down a path through a thick wilderness, the branches all draping down. And I heard a noise behind me, a footstep. Then nothing. Then I heard the step again. And again, but now it was ahead of me. I had this terrible sense someone was in the forest who was meaning to do me great injury. I was turning in a circle looking for the threat. And at that moment, I became con-

scious that I was still at the typewriter. The ferret had identified itself." The half hallucination became a short story about a target shooter, "The Plinker," his first piece of work to win enthusiastic praise from Philip Klass. "I didn't choose to write thrillers," Morrell told me, "but that's what I was led to, because I was afraid. I'd been living with fear for so long that it had become my major preoccupation. I felt threatened by the anonymous 'they,' I felt threatened by the people I imagined had killed my father, I felt threatened by whatever had taken my father away. I felt betrayed because I didn't have a father. But now whose fault was that? Global forces. I could not control what was being done to me. But I could control how I react. That's my theme: How do you survive? That's ultimately what my books are about."

In thriller after thriller, Morrell's orphaned heroes grapple with their fear by becoming elite, guerrilla-style soldiers in a murky military-intelligence underworld, lone warriors trained by secret government agents who present themselves as surrogate fathers, only to be revealed as the enemy instead. Their identities are always elusive, always at the heart of the hero's journey. The protagonist is invariably plucked from orphaned status and sent off on what the fake father claims is a moral mission, only to discover that the mission is corrupt, the proxy father a predator, and the hero the prey. With the private father dead or vanished, the public "fathers" exploit the boy's vulnerability in the glorified name of national service. The hero's charter is to expose their deceit, while making peace with the impenetrable mystery of the private father's disappearance. It's Morrell's *Route 66*.

David Morrell was certainly trying to follow his sci-fi mentor's advice to face what frightened him on paper, and the fear he had uncovered was real enough. Yet the heroes he filtered his fear through were largely made up out of pulp fantasy; they were early action heroes. In a way, he had resorted to the very "abstract" writing his teacher had advised him against. He wasn't drawing from his own experience—he had neither fought in Vietnam nor resisted it in any way; and he hadn't been, like John Le Carré, a member of the intelligence "community," or earlier, like Dashiell Hammett, a private eye. He based his novels' fantasies of "war" and of the shadow world of intelligence on other fictions—mystery novels, movies, television—and so, while putting real fears in hidden form on the page, he may also have avoided them.

Even so, despite his thriller backdrops and all the governmental and military intrigue, Morrell's heroes are out to rescue not the world but their own unfathered selves through the discovery of the true story of their lost fathers, no matter how terrible or disappointing. While Mor-

rell's heroes fight representatives of human evil and injustice along the way, in the form of rogue intelligence officers or right-wing paramilitary groups, theirs is not really a political engagement. The quest for paternal love remains the central drama. In *Blood Oath*, the hero, Houston, goes to France to find the grave of his father, who supposedly died in World War II, and finds himself up against mysterious killers. But the real "mystery" that he must resolve doesn't involve them. "My father's at the center," he says. "Dear God, what kind of person was he?"¹⁵

Morrell's orphaned and betrayed warriors belong to a distinctly modern cultural flood of seemingly fatherless cops, hired guns, and soldiers on the loose; his heroes are cousins to Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry, Mel Gibson's Martin Riggs in *Lethal Weapon*, and the fatherless men in Ross Macdonald's postwar mystery novels. While they bear a passing resemblance to their Depression-era forerunners, the lone detectives of noir fiction and film, these new avengers are, in fact, a radically different breed. Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe fought a corrupt and venal society; his postwar heirs fight the theft of their private patrimony. In their world, there is very little in the way of civic infrastructure; their landscape is more like an open sea, in which shadowy men who may be good or evil float by, unmoored to any recognizable social geography.

Such new heroes speak to a generation of men raised with both the heightened expectations of a father-knows-best culture that promised too much and the anguish of having fathers physically and psychologically lost to World War II and its aftermath. Morrell, contemplating the displacement of Depression-era noir heroes by postwar solo warriors, observed to me, "Maybe the difference is, after World War I, there were no massive family changes. But with World War II, something big happened to the fathers. It seemed like the fathers abdicated or vanished or something." That suspicion is widely shared among his male cohorts and is reflected not only in film and literature but in certain changes in psychological theory. As social psychologist Joseph Pleck observed in *The Making of Masculinities*, in the wake of World War II the vanishing father soon displaced the authoritarian father as the central male "problem."

In many senses, the father's absence as a large-scale social problem had been created by World War II. The war had, of course, directly taken fathers away from their children (for many, permanently), and the earliest studies [of male sex-role identity] concern these wartime separations. But more indirectly, the changes in male-female relations resulting from war had led to a spurt of postwar divorces, creating more absent fathers. The war also greatly stimulated the migration of rural

dwellers, particularly blacks, to cities, where many factors led to the breakdown of their traditional two-parent family structure. . . . The effects of paternal absence on sons quickly became one of the most frequently studied topics in the sex-role field. The contrast with the earlier period is striking. In the psychological theories of Freud and Jung, the father is the towering figure in the psychological development of the child. In the 1950s and 1960s, he became a dominating figure, not by his presence, but by his absence.¹⁶

In trying to understand the mystery of his father's absence, David Morrell turned to the autobiography of a childhood hero: the celebrated World War II soldier Audie Murphy. Unlike Morrell's father, Murphy had returned from the war, to acclaim, the Congressional Medal of Honor, and Hollywood glamour. Yet he had left an essential piece of himself behind, never to be recovered. "He stood back from himself so much" was Morrell's comment on Murphy's autobiography, *To Hell and Back*, which he had read and reread with an intensity for which he couldn't precisely account. "I was two pages past the action that he won the Congressional [Medal of Honor] for before I realized what he had just told me, because he said it so flatly." The flat delivery wasn't just modesty. World War II's most decorated soldier returned to a lifelong private battle with violent despair that ended in 1971, as the Vietnam War convulsed the nation, when he died in a plane crash over Virginia. "Here was a man," Morrell said, "who goes to war and wins the Congressional Medal of Honor, and comes home to play cowboys in all these movies, yet he was in this agony, sleeping with a gun under his pillow, nightmares every night, his home life a wreck. The plane crash was a violence at the end of his life that was almost a closing of the circle." In Murphy's tormented, unresolved life, Morrell sensed the roots of his own fearful incompleteness.

Murphy wrote *To Hell and Back* in the present tense, as if the experience had untethered him from history's time line forever. "Now I have shed my first blood," began a typical passage, "I feel no qualms; no pride; no remorse. There is only a weary indifference that will follow me throughout the war." Postwar periodicals like *Life* turned his freckle-faced Tom Sawyer boyishness into a symbol of "the American GI who endured combat and returned home unscathed by it all." But he was scathed, irreparably. He carried the bloody knowledge of his own capacity to kill. He was haunted by what he had *made* happen: his personal body count, much trumpeted by the postwar press, of 240 Germans. He wrote that he had "shed the idea that human life is sacred." Finding

himself in the ruins of the Riviera on the day of Germany's surrender, Murphy recalled his mood among the revelers. "In the streets, crowded with merry-makers, I feel only a vague irritation," he wrote. "There is VE-Day without, but no peace within. Like a horror film run backwards, images of the war flicker through my brain. . . . It is as though a fire had roared through this human house, leaving only the charred hulk of something that once was green. With him a couple of hours, I have had enough. I return to my room. But I cannot sleep. My mind still whirls. When I was a child, I was told that men were branded by war. Has the brand been put on me? Have the years of blood and ruin stripped me of all decency? Of all belief?" From henceforth, he wrote, he would lay claim to only one belief: "I believe in the force of a hand grenade, the power of artillery, the accuracy of a Garand. I believe in hitting before you get hit." He knew this was a predator's faith, and he hated himself for it.

While the Hollywood publicity mill and a starstruck media endlessly recounted the details of the heroic moment that won Murphy the Congressional Medal of Honor—his one-man stand against German soldiers from atop a smoldering tank destroyer—another wartime memory burned in the hero's mind. In battle against the Germans in Montélimar, France, Murphy had moved from house to house, searching for snipers. As he stood in the dimly lit interior of an abandoned home, "the door of a room creaks open. Suddenly I find myself faced by a terrible looking creature with a tommy gun. His face is black; his eyes are red and glaring. I give him a burst and see the flash of his own gun, which is followed by the sound of shattering glass." It is only then that he understands: "The horrible being that I shot at was the reflection of my own smoke-blackened self in a mirror."¹⁸

It was a moment he would revisit in peacetime. One night in the late 1940s, the insomniac actor rose from his troubled marital bed, grabbed his pistol, and shot the bedroom mirror into shards. He spent the next three decades attacking shadow selves—waving guns at terrified actors on movie sets, pursuing street thugs, beating senseless a girlfriend's dog trainer, and pummeling countless men who committed some often imaginary slight. He unofficially attached himself to the Los Angeles Police Department as a "crime fighter" and, with an honorary deputy sheriff's badge from the Dallas and Tucson police departments, stalked dope dealers or punched out young men idling on the city streets. As one of Murphy's closest friends concluded, "Audie was a one-man Army." The media called him "the most decorated soldier"; he called himself an "executioner." The director Don Siegel, whose credits included *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, was one of the few Hollywood filmmakers to recognize

Murphy's essence: in 1970, Siegel tried to cast Murphy in his latest film, *Dirty Harry*. "We started to talk and I suddenly realized, my God, I'm looking for a killer and here's the killer of all time."¹⁹

Audie Murphy might have had a chance at reconciling with his killer self if he had returned to a nation interested in an honest reconciliation. But the country he came home to wanted a poster soldier with a sunny smile; it turned a blind eye to the moral darkness etched upon the faces of its traumatized troops. Instead of a reckoning, social guardians and media spokesmen spoke cheerily of postwar "adjustment"—a return to "normalcy," to be achieved by consumers who could purchase domestic bliss. "They took army dogs and rehabilitated them for civilian life," Murphy remarked bitterly, more than a decade after his return. "But they turned soldiers into civilians immediately and let 'em sink or swim."²⁰ The triumphant nation presumed that because he and his fellow GIs were the victors, they were the virtuous; somehow winning had cleansed them and their countrymen, absolved them of the need for contrition.

Winning, however, had cleansed and absolved American men, and America, of nothing, as the son of one World War II veteran astutely observed more than five decades later. The Reverend Gordon Dalbey recalled to me a story from the Talmud's Mishnah, in which the Israelites had crushed their enemies, laid claim to their land, and begun to celebrate their conquest. Furious, God sent an angel to upbraid them for their failure to grieve the deaths of their enemies, and to pass on his message: "Don't you know these are my children also?" In the celebratory aftermath of World War II, Dalbey saw the outlines of the same parable. "Repenting means literally to turn around, and unless you own up to your own sin, you don't get that transforming power. That's why the victor has it tougher, because he can be seduced into thinking he doesn't have to repent. That's what happened with our fathers. There was no repentance for the sins of World War II." And no transformation—a failure that would have grievous implications for the next generation of men. Postwar culture denied its returning soldiers the opportunity to grapple publicly with their horrific secret burden (not to mention the more public horrific burden of the war's atomic-bomb finale), thereby denying them a moral knowledge to pass down to the sons. All they could instruct their sons to do was to rerun the moment of victory, as Audie Murphy did, time and again, in his innumerable shoot-'em-up star turns on-screen.

Murphy himself perceived the dangers of handing down such a hollow

lesson. The "nasty business" of war, he said, was "not the sort of job that a man should get a medal for. I'll tell you what bothers me. What if my sons try to live up to my image? What if people expect it of them?"²¹ Some of his nation's "sons" indeed did try to, including Lieutenant William Calley, who told his biographer, "We thought, *We will go to Vietnam and be Audie Murphys. Kick in the door, run in the hooch, give it a good burst—kill. And get a big kill ratio in Vietnam. Get a big kill count.*"²²

During the war, Audie Murphy began to doubt the convenient conceptions of victors and enemies. In his autobiography, he described the disturbing ambivalence that washed over him upon observing a captured German prison-camp guard. "There is something pathetically human about his odd, hobbled walk. What it is I do not know. Perhaps it is the knowledge that we carry in our hearts that nobody ultimately wins. Somewhere we all go down. Force used tyrannically is our common enemy. Why align ourselves with it in whatever shape or fashion?"²³ But his nation had little interest in exploring such thoughts, particularly out of the mouth of their preeminent war hero. Murphy had nowhere to take his revelation, and so he shelved it and went hunting for enemies on his nation's city streets. Take away the honorary deputy's star and there was little to separate his postwar mentality from that of an L.A. gangsta's.

The nation's failure to support penitence would be repeated after the Vietnam War. As Peter Marin wrote in "Living in Moral Pain," "post-traumatic stress disorder" was in many respects but a euphemism for the torment Vietnam vets experienced in returning to a country that would not let them repent, and would not repent itself.

No one who speaks to many distressed vets can doubt that their involvement in the excessive violence of Vietnam is a fundamental source of their inner turmoil, and that it expresses not just psychological stress but moral pain. It is here that our collective wisdom fails the vets. . . . We seem as a society to have few useful ways to approach moral pain or guilt, it remains for us a form of neurosis or a pathological symptom, something to escape rather than something to learn from, a disease rather than—as it may well be for the vets—an appropriate if painful response to the past.

The key to addressing moral pain was understanding that it was not just the individual vet's burden, that shame should not be "treated" but shared. "For in making the guilt his alone, or in making it sound as if it

were his alone," Marin wrote, the Vietnam veteran was deprived "of precisely the kind of community and good company that make it possible for people to see themselves clearly."²⁴

DAVID MORRELL HAD A standard story he often told in the 1980s about why he wrote his 1972 novel *First Blood*. Morrell maintained he got the idea for the novel while watching the war on TV.

The program was *The CBS Evening News*, and on that sultry August evening, Walter Cronkite contrasted two stories whose friction flashed like lightning through my mind.

The first story showed a firefight in Vietnam. Sweaty American soldiers crouched in the jungle, shooting bursts from M-16s to repel an enemy attack. Incoming bullets kicked up dirt and shredded leaves. Medics scrambled to assist the wounded. An officer barked coordinates into a two-way radio, demanding air support. The fatigue, determination, and fear on the faces of the soldiers were disarmingly vivid.

The second story showed a different sort of battle. That steamy summer, the inner cities of America had erupted into violence. In nightmarish images, National Guardsmen clutched M-16s and stalked along the rubble of burning streets, dodging rocks, wary of snipers among devastated vehicles and gutted buildings.

Each news story, distressing enough on its own, became doubly so when paired with the other. It occurred to me that, if I'd turned down the sound, if I hadn't heard each story's reporter explain what I was watching, I might have thought that both film clips were two aspects of one horror. A fire fight outside Saigon, a riot within it. A riot within an American city, a fire fight outside it. Vietnam and America.

What if? I thought. Those magic words are the seed of all fiction. What if I wrote a book in which the Vietnam War literally came home to America?²⁵

Morrell recited the same story for me in the slightly dulled tone of someone recycling a stock answer. Actually, those news clips had made only a glancing impression on him; he couldn't even date them. "Was it the riots at the '68 convention," he mused out loud, "or was it the Watts riot?" (Watts was three years earlier and sparked by racial discrimination, not the Vietnam War.) He shrugged. He couldn't remember because a half hour spent before a TV set was not what drove him to the novel. When Morrell sat down to write about the postwar anguish of a much-decorated Vietnam vet, he turned to another war and another hero, a

hero whose real-life torment had long preoccupied him. "The real inspiration was Audie Murphy," Morrell said to me. "When I was writing *First Blood*, I always thought of Audie Murphy. The point of *First Blood* is the point of Audie Murphy's life."

While *First Blood* is not classic literature, what is remarkable about the novel, as opposed to the film, is that it *does* in its way attempt to address the question of the returning vet's "moral pain"—specifically, the need for that pain to be shared with male elders back home. While the movie Rambo is an innocent and a victim, in the book, as David Morrell has observed, Rambo was "haunted by nightmares about what he had done in the war."²⁶

Like Audie Murphy, the unreconstructed killer of the book prowls the domestic front, stalking his shadow self, shooting at men whose violence represents his mirror image. "Six months ago when he finished convalescing in the hospital," Rambo says of himself in the alienated third person of *First Blood*, "he had been unable to keep hold of himself. In a bar in Philadelphia some guy had kept pushing ahead of him to see the go-go girl take off her pants, and he had broken the guy's nose for him. A month later, in Pittsburgh, he had slit the throat of a big Negro who pulled a knife on him when he was sleeping one night by a lake in a park. The Negro had brought a friend who tried to run, and Rambo had hunted him all through the park until he finally caught him trying to start his convertible."²⁷ This was no high-minded warrior who fired only when fired upon. While the film Rambo does not himself draw first blood and kills no more than five people, the book Rambo kills hundreds. This Rambo is looking for a fight, and a fight to the death. He returns again and again after police chief Teasle drives him to the county line and tells him not to come back—even after Teasle has treated him, unlike the sheriff in the film, with some civility. "This cop is friendlier than the rest were," Rambo says to himself. "More reasonable. Why bug him? . . . Or do you want the trouble that's coming? You're hungry for some action, is that it? So you can show your stuff?"²⁸ And he does show his stuff in all its sanguinary horror, slashing and splattering and disemboweling innumerable people over the next three hundred pages. He is, in fact, the embodiment of what America set loose in Vietnam returned home to extract a price in blood.

Yet the desire for human destruction is not all that draws Rambo. He is pulled, too, by a face that could be his own but isn't. The opening pages of the novel find Rambo seated at a coffee-shop counter, gazing into a mirror when Teasle's image appears in the frame. They are each transfixed. When Teasle first drives Rambo to the edge of town, drops

him off, and is pulling away, he is unable to take his eyes off the young stranger's image, receding in his rearview mirror.²⁹ They recognize in each other a connection that transcends hunter and prey, that may even offer both of them a way out of the cycle of killing. They are stalking each other, but they are also seeking a patrimony neither received.

Teasle's mother died in childbirth and his father, we are told, died when he was thirteen in a hunting accident, leaving him an orphan. He was raised by his father's best friend, a hunter who owned "the best trained pack of hounds in the county" and who handled him like one of them, forever correcting and scolding and yanking his short leash, but never treating him like a true son.³⁰ Even as an adult, Teasle still trembles, cowed and emasculated, in his foster father's presence.

When Rambo arrives in town, Teasle is in a tailspin. His wife has packed up and moved to California and is demanding a divorce. They are irreconcilable on one important matter: Teasle wants a child and she doesn't.³¹ With the appearance of Rambo, Teasle's paternal yearnings find a strange and frightening match. For this reason, Morrell told me, he "made Teasle old enough to be Rambo's father." Teasle feels a growing kinship with "the kid," as he calls Rambo. He understands the way in which a monstrous desire to reenact the dark moment of "first blood" and a desperate need for love battle in Rambo without cease.

Rambo's biography echoes Teasle's: his mother died when he was young and he was separated from his father, not by death but by his father's violence. "The most important scene to me in *First Blood*," Morrell said to me, "is when it is revealed that Rambo's father beat him." Like so many of Morrell's stories, the key to the narrative lies in a half-buried boyhood memory of paternal betrayal: in this instance, a haunted recollection of how Rambo's father in a boozy, murderous rage "tried to kill him with a knife, and how he ran from the house that night with a bow and arrow that he shot at the old man, nearly killing him."³²

Teasle's father and foster father and Rambo's father all represent hunters unredeemed by husbandry, and their bloody legacies become the spiritual bond that yokes Teasle and Rambo to each other and eventually locks them in a grisly but oddly empathetic combat. They are not enemies but an older man and younger man who suspect that the key to their redemption lies in each other. Teasle quite literally channels Rambo's psychological and physical agonies, intuits his every movement through the wilderness. "You can't believe the pain in his chest," Teasle moans to the state police, who are mystified by their superior's diagnosis: how could Teasle know when Rambo is nowhere in sight?³³ As the show-down looms, Teasle pleads with the other officers to leave him and

Rambo alone. "I shot him and all at once I didn't hate him anymore," he says of Rambo in a kind of rapture. "I just was sorry. . . . It wouldn't have made a difference if he shot me or not. I still would have been sorry. You have to promise to let me be there at the end. I owe it to him. I have to be with him at the end."³⁴

Morrell took great pains to dismantle the hero-enemy dynamic and to present Rambo and Teasle instead as father-and-son secret sharers. "I structured the novel," he wrote, "so that a scene from Rambo's perspective would be followed by one from Teasle's. . . . That tactic, I hoped, would make the reader identify with each character and at the same time feel ambivalent about them. Who was the hero, who the villain, or were *both* men heroes, *both* men villains?"³⁵ Morrell said he wanted readers to "not know who to cheer for." He evidently succeeded: the book's reviews were divided in identifying the hero as either Rambo or Teasle.

The closest character to a "villain" in the book is Captain Sam Trautman (the film promoted him to colonel), who represents the national betrayal that afflicts both Teasle and Rambo. "I gave him that name," Morrell told me, "because to me he was an allegorical version of Uncle Sam. The mechanism that had created [Rambo] destroyed him." He chose "Trautman" because it suggested to him a coldly professional fisherman, "an angler, who lures them in with his bait." The Trautman of the novel is the technocrat on high; he introduces himself to Teasle as the man who "trained the men who trained" Rambo. Rambo recalls Trautman bitterly from his training days as the man who was "never in sight," a martial Wizard of Oz issuing orders from behind a curtain; "the persistent voice over the camp's loudspeaker," Rambo calls him, "the voice that never failed to signal hardship."³⁶ Trautman personifies the new military of kill ratios, technological values, and image management, a system that views grunts like Rambo and Teasle as mere inputs in a computer tape and denies them their moral needs. When Trautman shows up in the town to "help," he seems most interested in determining how many men Rambo has killed; his first concern is the body count. Teasle is horrified. He uneasily contemplates Trautman's chilly and machine-like demeanor, "his uniform molded perfectly to his body, not a fold or a wrinkle," his skin "the color of lead," and his thin face and sharp chin reminding him of a ferret—the same one, perhaps, that Morrell's old professor once identified with fear itself.³⁷

In the end, Trautman's system prevails. It's the war manager, not the sheriff, who delivers the mortal shot to Rambo with steely efficiency, from a sanitary distance, an expert disabling an obsolete piece of weap-

only. "I took the top of his head off with this shotgun," he reports coolly to Teasle, who lies dying from a bullet from Rambo's gun, a bullet that Rambo, unlike Trautman, instantly regrets delivering. Teasle, though, dies at peace. As he lies bleeding, he tries to make himself focus on his wife, his home, the life he led to that point, but all he can think of is Rambo. "He thought about the kid," one of the last lines of the book relates, "and flooded with love for him."³⁸

What Morrell expresses in his novels is the idea that an estranged father and son can connect only by reckoning with their shame and pain, only by coming to terms with the terrible loss that comes with violence. "The final confrontation between Rambo and Teasle," Morrell wrote later, "would show that in this microcosmic version of the Vietnam War and American attitudes about it, escalating force results in disaster. Nobody wins."³⁹ For him, the understanding that "nobody wins" is the potential foundation on which a father and son might create a new and more trusting bond. In such a new filial relationship, the father's legacy to the son would be his own reconciliation with his moral pain; the trail he blazed for the next generation would be the path of penitence that led them both out of the moral wilderness.

Years earlier, Morrell had sat at his typewriter and imagined an enemy stalking him in a forest. His search for that enemy, whose footsteps seemed to be both behind and before him, took him in a circle, but it wasn't in vain. His enemy, after all, was at the center of that circle, inside himself. What he feared was all that he carried around unreckoned with, all the moral shame denied under the precepts of an American Century manhood that defines masculine victory as masculine virtue. This is the discovery that comes to Teasle at the end of his pursuit of Rambo—that he is actually hunting himself, his own shame and moral sorrow. And this was the revelation that drove Vietnam veterans to testify at the "Winter Soldier" investigation—against themselves. "I have helped in torturing prisoners," Sergeant Murphy Lloyd of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, a typical self-witness, said into the microphone. His confession, along with so many others, was offered up not to titillate a domestic audience with gory details but to engage that audience in a mutual grappling with a mutual burden. "Whatever it was that was in these men, that allowed them to do the things they did, is in all of us," Master Sergeant Don Duncan of the Special Forces said in the closing remarks of the hearing. He beseeched everyone in the room to "carry away the realization of what you have done, and I have done, and why we did it. And I want us all to do something with that."⁴⁰

In the American Century framework, however, fathers and sons were

supposed to connect over victory, not loss; and so the Winter Soldier investigation was largely ignored and quickly forgotten. Many of the grunts might have been ready to reckon with their moral crimes, but their country was not. There was to be no shared contrition, and no ground laid for a new foundation between fathers and sons. The videotaped testimony of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War would ultimately be replaced by documentaries like *Vietnam: The Soldiers' Story*, a 1998 six-part television series in which veterans would be invited to speak mostly of how they suffered.⁴¹ The message of *First Blood* would be replaced in a similar fashion as it made its way from the page to the screen. Teasle's epiphany would be buried in the movie, and the plot reconfigured to portray a world where martyred sons are redeemed by all-powerful fathers, a world where, in the end, victory is assured in the kingdom. While it now seems a foregone conclusion that the film of *First Blood* would turn out as it did, there would be some hairpin turns on the road from novel to movie.

I Will Be Your Father

ONE OF THE EARLY WRITERS contracted to draft the *First Blood* script was playwright David Rabe. He was the only one engaged in the decade-long process of writing and rewriting the script who actually was a Vietnam veteran, and his efforts took the tale into some dark territory even Morrell's book had skirted.

In 1973, a year after the book's publication, Warner Bros. optioned the movie rights, already the second studio to do so. (As there were serial scripts, writers, directors, actors, and producers involved in the *Rambo* films, so a string of movie companies—Columbia Pictures, Warner Bros., Cinema Group—came and went before Carolco, a company newly formed by producers Andy Vajna and Mario Kassar, finally produced the first of the films in 1982.) Warner Bros. offered the part to actor Al Pacino, and shortly thereafter Pacino called David Rabe to see if he would write the script. Rabe recalled the conversation: "James was out and Pacino described to me that the guy should be like the shark—a mindless, driven, single-minded thing that is not available to any plea once it got loose." He gave an eye-rolling laugh. "Actually, it appealed to me. It seemed apt. In the sense that, if the guy is going to embody war, then, that's what war is."

The driven, mindless nature of war, the false glorification of combat as a meaningful transformational experience, was a subject that Rabe had explored with ruthless honesty on the stage. Pacino had, in fact, just starred in the Theater Company of Boston's production of *The Basic*

Training of Pavlo Hummel, the first of Rabe's searing trilogy of Vietnam plays and the one most directly expressive of this theme. The so-called "training" of the green, eager-beaver Pavlo in boot camp and as a medic in Vietnam proves no education at all. Combat training makes him neither older nor wiser, only dead, after a rear-echelon superior who doesn't want to share a prostitute with him lobs a grenade at the young man's feet. Even in death, Pavlo's corpse idiotically repeats from his coffin the empty Jody cadence that a beribboned ranking soldier barks out at him. As Rabe wrote later in an author's note, he is afflicted with "a true, real, and complete inability to grasp the implications of what he does. . . . Pavlo is in fact lost. . . . It is Pavlo's body that changes. His physical efficiency, even his mental efficiency increases, but real insight never comes."⁴

To his eye, Rabe said to me, the novel *First Blood* seemed "a little on the romantic side" in this regard, and "false in the synthetic way that things are balanced out." The book was romantic because it assumed that the fathers who created the war felt responsible for their young men, that they desired contrition, that they sought an honest reconciliation with their sons as much as their sons sought it with them. Appealing as these notions were, Rabe saw little evidence of them in the real-world behavior of the men who sent their sons to war. Rabe had grown up in Dubuque, Iowa, in a world where the postwar version of masculinity was everywhere reinforced. Manhood was attained by total submission to authority; that was the model reinforced by all the male authorities in his life—his father, who gave up a high-school teaching post he loved for a better-paying but unfulfilling job in a meatpacking plant; his football coach, whose every call he was expected to follow to the letter; the priests at his local Catholic church and later at his Catholic college, who harshly silenced his youthful questioning of the strictures they taught.

It seemed to him that America's fathers, private and public, had far more interest in shoring up the crumbling walls of their authority than in working their way toward an authentic reckoning with the lies they had told themselves or their sons. "In the Midwest, and in the Catholic church, and on the team, adults were right because they were the adults. And if you felt something against them, then you were wrong," David Rabe told me one afternoon as we sat in the chill emptiness of a hotel suite in Beverly Hills, where he was stationed for the week while cautiously witnessing the transformation of *Hurlyburly*, one of his plays, into a movie. Rabe has the brooding aspect of a Rodin figure and the features to go with it, a jagged geometry of planes and angles. It is easy to see

him as a football player (he played high-school and college football and dreamed of turning pro) and heir to a meatpacker. He hunched forward on a floral couch as he spoke in halting fashion, contemplating the reflective surface of the coffee table as if looking down a well.

"The way I grew up thinking about coaches and authority figures and captains," Rabe said, "there was this *faith* that got expressed in these figures." Rabe called it being in "that team state of mind." It was a state not confined to football. "That idea of belonging to an institution or a team, having your team goals supplant or amplify your own goals, validate them, that was through everything. You had to be loyal, take care of your buddies, endure and be reasonably stoic in the face of pain. You had to be tough and willing to take a beating, and give one. And find your slot in the pack." Looking back now, he said, he could see how that whole team notion of manhood was already, by the 1950s, a collection of attributes with no clear application. "The whole idea of manhood was beginning to seem like an artifice of itself. It wasn't like the Gold Rush or the Civil War where there was something to be done and you really had to do it." By the Vietnam era, it had degenerated into "a fiction, a ghost," and yet "although the war already appeared to be in question, it seemed absurd to question them," Rabe said of his elders. "The entire structure has to be questioned if you are going to question them. And I certainly wasn't going to do that. It was very hard to see a way out."

Rabe didn't question the authorities during his basic training in 1965 at Fort Gordon, in Georgia, or during his year with a hospital-support unit in Long Binh. When he arrived, the area had just been "cleared" by the 1st Division, and onto the scorched, emptied land, Rabe's unit hastily erected a massive snarl of Quonset huts, barracks, bunkers, and PXs—a snarl that produced, down the road, an instant industry of bars and whorehouses. "It became this megalopolis, this huge, huge place where there was everything but a McDonald's," he recalled. "It was hard to see how anybody was going to benefit from it. There was this strange treatment of the Vietnamese. The average GI was not there in any way to help them or understand what was going on."

Rabe's confidence in various authorities had been teetering before he arrived in Vietnam; he had already lost confidence in the priests at college and had resolved to leave the church. Yet he refrained from questioning the Pentagon's mission throughout his tour of duty. "Now whether that was to protect myself or what, I don't know. But I still had this basic faith in it . . . until I came home." The delayed response made sense; the inklings of what troubled him in Vietnam were writ large on the landscape to which he returned. "It didn't take long after I

got back. My experience was very much like that sequence in the movie *Heaven and Earth*, where the Vietnamese woman who comes to America goes into her first supermarket and she is overwhelmed by the huge piles of food, the colors. It just almost makes you sick, watching this *abundance*. It's frightening. And you realize, there is *nothing*. It's fake. We're over there for nothing. Nobody here cares. The country was not threatened in any real way. It was a fiction." Rabe paused and studied the shiny tabletop. "The best way I can put it is, there was nothing at stake."

Rabe was beginning to see the Vietnam War as only one lie in a larger construction of falsehoods. "There was this whole architecture in my mind of hierarchies, of authorities, and it ran from the Catholic Church to the military through the senators. It was very hard to figure it all out, because it was all mirrors and support systems that don't seem to be artificial or in collusion but they were. There was this whole manipulation of reality going on, this thing called the 'Communist threat.' And that was something I believed in one hundred percent." Rabe's willingness to believe was rooted in the romance Hollywood had wrapped around World War II. Who could doubt the virtue or legitimacy of the fathers who were that war's undisputed heroes? "World War II was this big rich fantasy life to me," Rabe recalled. "My father wasn't in World War II, but I had an uncle who was in the Battle of the Bulge. And my mother's cousin was a marine captain or lieutenant. I remember once reading a book and coming across this guy's name, in Iwo Jima, and it was this amazing experience. It felt *mythical*, like you were somehow connected to it *personally*. You see the war films and then you see your uncle in a book and it's like they get mixed up in your head." Rabe began to see Vietnam as more the end of a national breakdown than its beginning, he discerned the obscure route that led back from Vietnam to the misconceptions of World War II—to be exact, to those glittery movies and silent male relatives all jumbled up in his mind.

In the painful years that followed his Vietnam tour, Rabe grappled with his waning faith in the reliability of such figures. "Losing faith in the authorities, that's the rest of my life," he said. "It didn't happen overnight. It's all one flow of collapse—my disillusionment with the church, Vietnam. . . . You can get rid of the objects of faith, but it's very hard to get rid of the impulse." Among the authorities Rabe questioned was his father. "We had this strange sort of relationship that was objectively fine and yet something was wrong. I'm only coming to see that now. Now that I am myself a father, I can see in myself that sense of not being effective in the world and the way that can make you behave to your children. My father was very frustrated by his life. He was very

smart but I don't know how really connected to reality he was." His father had sacrificed a teacher's role in a real community for the recommended postwar role of a breadwinner with only a tenuous connection to civic life. The Dubuque Packing Company was one of the biggest employers in the area, and Rabe's father submitted himself to its blood-soaked floors so that his family could shop for the choicest cuts of meat in a gleaming supermarket. His son was never exactly sure what his father did at work, and understood only that his authority at home was never to be challenged. "I used to feel if I didn't obey him or accept an ideal or a gesture of his, that what I felt wasn't valid. I was very much in his thrall. The one thing that was to me a benefit of the army was it actually gave me the credentials in my heart to not have to have his approval, or his stamp. I could kind of go my own way."

"Vietnam changed my relationship with my father in subtle and subterranean ways." Rabe noticed that his father, who had only talked about his life during the Great Depression in a very romanticized way, was suddenly eager to impress his veteran son with grisly tales of "how he had worked in Chicago, where he had some strange job where he had to go around and collect dead people who had starved in the street." Rabe's father wasn't offering up this memory as an opportunity for father-son bonding. "It came out in a very competitive way." The war didn't bring them together; it only brought to the surface all the repressed resentments of his father's frustrated life. "My father was very much a reactionary guy, a staunch union man, a believer in the authorities. After I came back, I'd sit still through his tirades." Some of the tirades were about the war, others about the cultural challenges advanced by his son's generation. "I didn't try to change his mind. I didn't let him tell me too much about what he thought. We never really worked anything out."

It seemed to Rabe that the fathers, by their silences and absences, by their blindnesses and the submissions they condoned, had deceived the sons into believing they were on their side. They had all been fooled by the faux-tender screen fathers with whom the sons had spent more time than with their real ones. "Who . . . was . . . my . . . father?" the illegitimate son Pavlo demands of his mother in Rabe's play, and the ensuing conversation seems to echo the crisis in David Morrell's life that inspired *First Blood*:

PAVLO: Where is he?

MRS. HUMMEL: You know that.

PAVLO: No, I want you to tell me.

Mrs. HUMMEL: I've already told you.

PAVLO: No, where is he now? What did he look like?

...

Mrs. HUMMEL: No, you had many fathers, many men, movie men, flimdom's greats—all of them, those grand old men of yesteryear, they were your father. The Fighting Seventy-sixth, do you remember, oh, I remember, little Jimmy, what a tough little mite he was, and how he leaped upon the grenade, did you see, my God what a glory, what a glorious thing with his little tin hat.

PAVLO: My real father!

Mrs. HUMMEL: He was like them, the ones I showed you in movies, I pointed them out.

...

PAVLO: What was his name? I don't know what it was.

Mrs. HUMMEL: Is it my fault you've forgotten?⁴³

Hidden behind the glorious celluloid fighting men and the perfect TV dads like Ozzie Nelson, the real fathers were anything but grand old men. They had, Rabe saw, often been reduced by their own submission in a consumer culture to a dangerous befuddlement. In Rabe's second Vietnam play, *Sticks and Bones*, a Vietnam vet named David, blinded in the war, returns home to his uncomprehending, ever-chipper parents, Ozzie and Harriet. Ozzie responds to his son's brokenness by trying to fix the TV so that he can watch the game. "There's a picture but no sound," he complains to his wife. "I'm gonna call the repairman." His wife tells him, "No, no. The TV repairman won't help, you silly. . . . There's something wrong with David."⁴⁴

Of course, there's really something wrong with Ozzie, a fact that his son's crisis forces momentarily to consciousness. "It's like stepping into a hole, the way I feel each morning when I awaken, I see the day and the sun and I'm looking upward into the sky with a sense of looking down," Ozzie confesses. "A sense of hovering over a great pit into which I am about to fall. The sky. Foolishness and deceit, you say, and I know you're right; a trick of feeling inside me being played against me seeking to diminish me and increase itself until it is larger than me filling me and who will I be then? It. That feeling of being nothing." By the end of his soliloquy, though, Ozzie has talked himself back onto the surface of his prepackaged suburban life. He produces a thick packet of paper, hundreds of pages, on which he has inscribed an inventory of everything he's ever purchased and its price. He distributes them on chairs, a stack for each family member. "Here's my portfolio summarized. My mort-

gage. Life insurance! Now the idea is that you each carry a number of these at all times. Two or three copies, at all times, and you are to pass them out at the slightest provocation. Let people know who I am, what I've done."⁴⁵

The price of the father's return to consumer complacency is the son's life. The son's blinding in Vietnam has forced the father, briefly, to see. The son can't lead the father out of the wilderness any more than the father can guide the son. David tells Ozzie: "In time I'll show you some things. You'll see them. I will be your father." But as Rabe observed, "David is trying to take Ozzie into madness." The shared reconciliation that Morrell imagined is, in Rabe's bleaker vision, only a shared insanity. Ozzie so violently does not want the madness that his son calls "seeing" that he is willing to restore his own blindness by murdering his son. To this end, the family gathers in the living room at the close of the play to assist David in slashing his own wrists. "You'll feel better," Ozzie assures his son.⁴⁶

That the fathers would rather see the sons dead than see into the deadness of their own culture or question the terms of their version of manhood is a recurrent theme in Rabe's Vietnam plays. As a corporal in *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* recounts, "My ole daddy—the last day he saw me—he tole me good—'Don't you ever run on nobody, Boy, or if you do I hope there's somebody there got sense enough to shoot you down. Or if I hear you got away, I'll kill you myself.'"⁴⁷ Those lines, Rabe said, were inspired by a real-life young corporal with shrapnel in his eye, who was checked into the army hospital in Long Binh while Rabe was on duty. "He was in that team state of mind and he was going on and on about what he and his buddies did, which was hold some hill or whatever. He was so proud, and yet there was something haunting, you could feel it as he talked. He kept saying, 'We didn't run, we didn't run, and my dad would've been so proud of me. Because my dad said, if you ever run and I find out about it, I'll shoot you myself.' He was proud as he was telling me, but there was this other thing beginning to be in his mind, some question about what the hell that meant." What it meant was a father and son bound only by their madness, and it was this horrific revelation that Rabe intended to hammer home in *First Blood*.

"When they came to me to do the script, I thought, Well, this could be a great opportunity to do almost an action version of *Sticks and Bones*. In *Sticks and Bones*, this guy comes home and goes through phases before he realizes the only way that they're going to understand is to become participants and get a firsthand taste of it. So what he's really doing is attempting to rub their faces in the gore of it, and say, 'Isn't this fun!

Aren't we having a good time!" Of course, in that he miscalculates. He fails to understand that they are far more dangerous than he is."

In Rabe's version of *First Blood*, Rambo makes the same fatal error. He returns to an America that celebrates and denies its own violence. In the opening scene of Rabe's draft, Rambo is depicted hiking past a drive-in. "Crudely painted on its wall," Rabe's directions state, "are huge figures of Wayne and Eastwood mowing 'em down and Hell's Angels brawling." Rambo pauses before a home-appliance shop, and, as Rabe describes it, "in the window, Brod Crawford is shooting someone on one of the TV sets. Bob Stack is machine-gunning someone on the other." Rambo crosses the street, dodging a jeep with a dead deer across the hood and a couple of hunters toting rifles, and comes up against a gun-and-tackle shop, its window overflowing with rifles, shotguns, pistols, and revolvers. Before this bounty stand two men greedily eyeing the merchandise, with children in their arms.⁴⁸

As in the novel, Rambo tangles with police chief Teasle, who escorts him two times to the edge of town and warns him never to return. But Rabe's Rambo represents a grisly repressed knowledge about America gained in a war that he intends to bring home and force the town's fathers to face. "They are going to see me," he says. "In the fires. In the children, crying. They are going to see me." He is insanity itself, a primitive bearing snakes and covering cave walls with violent stick drawings. "In my script," Rabe said, "the pattern of betrayal and its incredible force launches Rambo into this death vector and once it goes far enough, that's where you go. Nobody brings you back." But the town fathers don't want to receive Rambo's message, and in their refusal they are, like the domestic father in *Sticks and Bones*, stronger and more dangerous.

Rambo thinks he's stalking Teasle and his posse. "I been lookin' for you, Teasle," he says. "Don't you know I been lookin' for you?" But Rabe's Teasle is not interested in developing a spiritual connection with Rambo. He's into repression—he whacks his deputies like dogs. He wants to see Rambo and the consciousness he signifies crushed for good. Teasle is both the blinded private father and the eager-for-a-body-count military father. For this reason, Rabe had no need for Trautman and was considering reducing him to a minor character or scrapping him altogether.⁴⁹

The blood for Rambo's killings is on Teasle's hands, too. "You wanted me to do everything I did," Rambo sneers at Teasle. When Teasle snarls back, "I saw you on the street, I wanted your guts in my hands," Rambo replies calmly, "I know that. That's what we are, Teasle. The both of us. Only I'm better than you." By "better," he makes it bitterly clear, he

means only that he beat the fathers at their own game by laying claim to a higher body count. "We counted the bodies, man; we killed 'em and counted 'em. It made us the best there ever was."⁵⁰

Rambo proceeds to demonstrate this principle on the bodies of the townspeople. He stops everyone he meets on the street and demands their name. When they say it, he kills them. This goes on throughout the night, as Rambo slaughters without cease and finally sets fire to the town. In the morning, Rambo marches, unarmed, through the ruins to Teasle's office door. "I want to report the count, sir," he tells Teasle. "The bodies. I want you to know how we did. Eighty-seven. Eighty-seven. Bobby, Billy. That's what we got. Helen, Janie—." At which point Teasle shoots him. Rambo jerks backward and grunts, "Yes, sir!" Again Teasle shoots him, and again Rambo grunts, "Yes, sir!" and again, "Yes, sir!" The image freezes, the script's final shot.⁵¹

Rabe's *First Blood* was a return to My Lai on domestic soil and Rambo was Lieutenant Calley come home to roost, while Teasle was Captain Medina, the gangster-father who eggs his "son" on to murder, but takes no responsibility for the consequences. He walks away scot-free. But as it turned out, the entertainment industry didn't want to "see," any more than did the fictional Teasle, or Ozzie in *Sticks and Bones*. Hollywood was constructing films to bury My Lai, not revisit it; to make American men "feel better," not worse. Rabe was still working on the script when he got a phone call, instructing him to send the filmmakers what he had written so far. Rabe assembled the incomplete script, appended a few pages outlining the ending he envisioned, and popped it in the mail. He returned to his typewriter, but before he had even finished the first draft, he got the second phone call, telling him not to bother. They would no longer be requiring his services. "They didn't really give a reason," Rabe said. "They just said it 'wouldn't work.'" Which was true enough, from the studio's perspective. Hollywood, after all, was working to hammer shut the door on what Vietnam might actually reveal about American manhood.

Adam's Supplication to His Creator

FOR THE NEXT HALF DOZEN YEARS, the script for *First Blood* passed through many hands and many incarnations. At least eighteen versions of the script were ordered up by more than nine directors as it moved from Columbia Pictures to Warner Bros. to Carolco. Crack directors were called in—Richard Brooks, John Frankenheimer, Sydney Pollack, Martin Ritt—and seemingly every leading man was tapped for the part—Paul Newman, Al Pacino, Steve McQueen, Robert De Niro, Clint East-

wood, John Travolta, Nick Nolte, Brad Davis, Michael Douglas. Meanwhile, Rambo's story kept mutating: at one point he was a jester, at another, a patient overly attached to his female psychiatrist.³²

A similar problem had beset filmmakers two decades earlier, when they tried to make a sequel to *To Hell and Back* about Audie Murphy's homecoming years. As with *First Blood*, Hollywood couldn't, or rather wouldn't, tell the real story—about a Murphy who was a human wreck, a self-styled “executioner” who rampaged through the streets seeking enemies, a belligerent husband and negligent father, a gun hoarder who could only keep himself in check by channeling his rage into the more socially acceptable outlets of shooting ducks, rabbits, and squirrels and “crime fighting.” So the filmmakers invented fictions, each more risible than the next. In a 1956 script, *The Way Back*, never produced, Audie Murphy was “cured” of his “war nerves” by therapeutically reliving his most harrowing combat experiences. In a revised version, Audie found serenity after going to a ranch with his wife and sons and clapping eyes on a newborn colt; in a third version, after saving a buddy from alcoholism.³³ In the end, the filmmakers gave up and Murphy went back to westerns.

The makers of *First Blood* would run through a similar process, with one exception: a film was finally produced. Ronald Reagan was galloping out of the West and into the White House when the latest screenwriter on the job, Michael Kozoll, got a phone call from the latest coproducer, Andy Vajna. “Vajna told me, ‘We have to clear out a lot of that crap and make it cleaner,’” Kozoll recalled with wry bemusement. “It was said in that tone of tough film distributor talking to crappy writer: ‘Look, can you come clean the leaves out of my pool?’” But Kozoll understood what Vajna meant. “He meant, ‘Make it a western.’” Kozoll declined. “I’m totally antiwar,” he told me, “antimilitary.” And the last war Kozoll wanted to glorify was Vietnam, which had horrified him. A “hippie pot-ter” in San Francisco, he had opposed the war from the start and, disgusted with his nation’s adventurism, had moved for a time to Europe.

Kozoll’s 1980 script, though substantially tamped down from Rabe’s, still veered too close to the truth for any studio’s comfort. “You have to understand,” Kozoll said, “that this movie was done in an atmosphere where Warner Bros. said to us, ‘Absolutely nobody wants to see a movie about the Vietnam War!’” Kozoll finally washed his hands of the project and put it out of his mind. “I don’t even like war movies, anyway. When *Rambo* came out, I never even saw it.” He would not think of the screenplay again until Halloween of 1985, the year that *Rambo: First Blood Part II* was released. Kozoll lived on a street in Santa Monica that was always

inundated with trick-or-treaters. He opened his door that night to a sea of identically dressed monsters. “At first I thought they were pirates,” he said. “Then I realized, they were Rambo’s. They were *all* Rambo’s. Thousands of little Rambo’s.”

In the end, the layers of falsehoods slathered on *First Blood* by the endless rewrites would have crushed what vitality remained in the story if it hadn’t been for the arrival of an unintentional revivalist: Sylvester Stallone. He seemed an unlikely spokesman for a Vietnam film. His interest in and knowledge of the war was minimal, yet he breathed life back into the story. He envisioned the drama “like the Frankenstein monster and the creator,” a creator who “understood what he made” and “felt guilty” for it. In a deeply personal way, it turned out that he understood something about Frankenstein’s creation: the monster was on a rampage for a reason; he was seeking love from his creator. “My heart yearned to be known and loved,” Frankenstein’s monster relates in Mary Shelley’s classic tale. “I was alone. I remembered Adam’s supplication to his Creator. But where was mine? He had abandoned me, and in the bitterness of my heart I cursed him.” Mary Shelley conjured the famous tale out of her own orphaned experience; her mother, the founding feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, had died eleven days after giving birth to her, and her father, William Godwin, had been a distracted presence, stricken with his own loss and debt-ridden.³⁴ Out of his own experience, Stallone would perform a similar conjuring.

In the Vietnam War, Stallone saw the outlines of a disturbed family life. “It was like a bad marriage,” he told me, “and America was the battered wife who didn’t know how to get out, didn’t know how to leave with dignity.” America would seem more properly cast as the batterer, but maybe Stallone wasn’t talking about a literal Vietnam so much as one viewed through the shattered lens of his own boyhood. Like Rabe, like Michael Bernhardt, Stallone seemed intuitively to understand that the sons were betrayed at home long before they shipped out for Southeast Asia. What Stallone did with that understanding, though, is something else again. Rabe was prepared to break with the fathers to tell the truth. Stallone, for all his disappointment and anger, still harbored hopes for some kind of paternal recognition. He was, like Audie Murphy, the dark son who wanted to play the good one. As much as Stallone identified with Biff (in 1998, he could recite his lines from *Death of a Salesman* as if his last performance had been three days, not thirty years, earlier), he was still auditioning for the part of Happy, the son who only wanted to be welcomed home. In that, Stallone expressed the unarticulated yearnings of so many American sons. He would become their spokesman

and exactly the sort of leading man the filmmakers needed if they were ever to make credible an otherwise dishonest script.

All conversations with Sylvester Stallone led, sooner or later, generally sooner, to life with father. In his mind, Stallone was still fighting a war that supposedly ended more than three decades earlier. At fifty-two, he was still trying to kick the post-Frank Stallone syndrome. "Everything with him was a competition, a challenge," Stallone said about his father one evening as he sat brooding over a barely touched drink at the bar of the Four Seasons Hotel in New York City. My meetings with Stallone were always in such predictably first-class surroundings, yet his demeanor was that of the vagabond boy who had sneaked into the palace and could be tossed out at a moment's notice. He had found his way into the kingdom, but it was not his inheritance. "My father always had a challenge going. So if it's cold, and you say, 'I need a coat,' he'd say, 'Cold! It's nothing!' So now he's gotta prove it. So now he has to throw his shirt off. . . . When I was about thirteen years old, he bought a few hundred-dollar horses, and it just became one long, ridiculous challenge. He became incredibly combative on horseback. He played polo like an immortal warrior, take no prisoners." As Frank's ex-wife, Jackie Stallone, remarked, polo appealed to him not because it was fun but because it was competition that was violent. "It's the only way you can hit someone on the head and get away with it," she said. "Whatever it was," his son continued, "he had to win, he had to prevail at all costs. . . . There was never any explanation about *how* to do anything, just this challenge that he could do it, whatever it was, better than me."

Stallone's father was the son of working-class Italian immigrants who measured manhood by artisan skill and physical labor. Frank had other aspirations, more in keeping with the rising entertainment age. "I tried to be a singer," he told me. "I could've been very good, but I had stage fright." When Jackie Stallone met her future husband, she recalled, he was working with a relative who was a cobbler in the Bronx. Jackie was a chorus girl with Billy Rose's revue. After a brief courtship, they were married in 1945; Jackie was already pregnant with Sylvester. She gave birth in a charity ward and then returned with her newborn to their Hell's Kitchen apartment. By the end of the decade, though, the Stallones had moved to suburban Maryland, and Frank Stallone found himself running a beauty salon that his wife had helped start and proving his manhood in ways wholly unrelated to his work. His challenge to his son went far beyond chest-baring. "Winning" was everything, and winning ultimately was about force. Stallone recalled his boyhood in Vietnam terms: "It was just a day-to-day attrition."

Jackie Stallone recalled that her former husband's competitive violence was on display much of the time in angry street encounters and even on the job. But her firstborn son suffered the brunt of it; she recalled that he was beaten on the slightest pretext. "He'd step on Sylvester, jump right on him, in the middle of his stomach. It's a wonder this kid's still alive." Competition, she said, always seemed to be the trigger for her ex-husband's rage, a competition that prevailed long after the son had left home. When Stallone became famous, she recalled that Frank complained to her that "*he* should be getting the Oscar, that it was *his* talent. Sylvester 'inherited' it from him, and by rights [the Oscar] belonged to him; Sylvester didn't deserve it. I cannot imagine a father being jealous of his son being successful, can you? But he was." Whether he was violent, competitive, or jealous, Frank Stallone will now not say. "I'd rather not get into it," he told me, deflecting further inquiry. "No, I'd rather not say. I have nothing much to say. Whatever [Jackie] said, you can take with a grain of salt. . . . something that's conjured in her own mind." He had a bit more to say about his treatment of his son in 1990, in an interview in *Vanity Fair*: "I guess you could say I was rough with him, yeah. But I didn't beat him three times a day."³⁵

It felt like a competition to the son, and the young Stallone responded in kind, emulating rather than eschewing his father's example. "I'd take horses out on a moonless night and ride through unmowed fields and jump barbed-wire fences, at *night*. That's insane. I mean, why? And then I'd take that horse and plunge it off a ten-foot ledge into water and try to stay on its back. All this crap you see in movies. And for what?" Yet Stallone kept trying to leap the barbed-wire hurdles and win his father's favor. "I remember, there was this Catholic retreat for children I went to. And the priest was talking about hellfire and damnation and how our souls would be burned into perpetuity if we defied the scriptures. And he goes, 'Just to give you an example of how hot hell will be. . . .' and he took this very large candle and he said, 'If anyone here would stick their finger or hand over this flame for five seconds, it would cause irreparable damage. You'd be scarred for life.' So I went up and volunteered. I was about nine or ten. And I stuck my hand over the flame. And I went, 'One. . . two. . . three. . . It was excruciating. At four, he snatched the candle away. And it never made any sense why I, among these five hundred people there, would volunteer, except I had something to prove. Even though my father wasn't there, his life lessons were always there. And it was always about pain."

Pain was both to be endured and inflicted. "He'd come home with his teeth in his hands, and then he'd just sew it up," Stallone recalled.

"He'd bust his skull, and stitch it *himself*. My father's like a real-life Rambo." At home, Jackie Stallone said, Frank inflicted the pain and they endured it—like the Christmas morning in 1957 when he threw her under the tree and nearly strangled her. He was angry, she recalled, because she bought him a belt that cost only three dollars. "But what else do you give a man when he gives you an allowance of three dollars a week?" she asked me querulously, as if still defending herself from his accusations. Her most vivid memory was of an incident when Sylvester was only six years old. She was in the backyard with some friends, hosting a barbecue. Suddenly, her son appeared, "leaning over the rail looking at me, 'Mommy, Mommy!' Blood was pouring out of his face. He was beaten to a pulp." Sylvester's father had reprimanded him, as Jackie recalled, with a horse's whip. "What could he have done that bad?" She met my eye, then looked away. "And what do you do?" she said, meaning herself. "You live with it. I should have taken these two kids and left years before. . . . But every time you open your mouth, he'd say, 'I'm taking these kids and shipping 'em to Sicily and you'll never see 'em.' Which is true; he would. So you were stuck, waiting for a miracle to get rid of him."

It was in this period that the young Stallone became enamored of an orphaned hero who managed to transform himself alone into the ultimate flyboy: Superman. "I must've known something was wrong when—I was eight years old—I made a Superman's outfit and wore it under my clothing to class—and truly believed, *truly* believed," Stallone recalled. "It was a barber's cape, and I had a Rit-dyed T-shirt with an 'S' kind of drawn on haphazardly with those yellow wax crayons. And I told my friend Jimmy Colen, I said do you know who I really am. And he said, 'Yeah, you're Sylvester, Binky [a hated childhood nickname]. I said, 'No, no, no! Look!' And Stallone showed him the concealed costume. "And he went out and told everyone in class. And this teacher made me come out and stand in front of the entire student body, take my clothes off to show the class. I was humiliated. And I ran outside, and there was this giant storm drain that ran for half a mile, so I ran into this giant storm drain, and by the time I got to the other end, I was fine. And I tried to fly home."

The young Stallone would try to fly another time. He dove off the roof of the family home, headfirst into the concrete mixer that Frank Stallone had been using to construct that essential accoutrement of suburbia, the backyard barbecue pit and patio, and broke his collarbone. "I lived on the roof," Stallone told me. "I used to go up on the roof so much that there was literally a path. I had literally worn out the tar

paper." On the roof, he could imagine himself shooting through the stratosphere, the nation's youngest astronaut. "I went up there because the roof was a spaceship. It was an amazing place. You ever just walk on a slanted roof? It's so uncluttered, and so angular, and so beautiful. And you are the only force up there. Everything else is mechanical or dead. You're alive. And you just sit up there, the house, the people, straddled between each leg, riding it like some tar-paper beast. I used to sit right on the peak of my house, the very very peak. Every night. That was my domain." From there, he prayed for unearthly strength. "I would always wish that all of a sudden, a star would explode in front of me and now I'd have this power of fifty men and just go around and do incredibly great things for humanity." Once the space race began, he scanned the heavens from his perch, for signs of satellites or rockets. "I was always thinking about the dog," he said of Laika, the canine who went into space aboard Sputnik 2 in November 1957. "It was a black-and-white dog, a mutt, I'll never forget it. A floppy-eared thing. And I couldn't stop thinking about what must have happened to him. Because he was sent way up there and then he came crashing down to earth." Laika, in fact, died before the fireball plunge, suffocating when the satellite's oxygen equipment failed.⁵⁶

Stallone fed his superhero fantasies with endless trips to the movies. "I aligned myself with *Spartacus* and *The Vikings*," epic vehicles for the bodily torments and heroics of the young Kirk Douglas. "He was the focal point of my young hero worship," Stallone recalled of Douglas. "He was like my father figure." He mimicked Douglas's muscular gait, his shirtless poses. "Every picture I have as a child, I'm flexing. Every one. This skinny malnourished body, but there I am, shirt off, flexing." If he could just make his body powerful enough, he imagined, not only would he be able to endure in the contests with his father, he might soar above them. That fantasy would later attract him to the boxing ring. "It's being able to take it," he said of boxing's lure. "That you can take the anger because you have this fuel, to go, to make yourself airborne."

Jackie Stallone finally fled with the children, eventually to another state and a new marriage as rocky in its own way as the last. But by then it was 1958 and Sylvester was nearly twelve. She had two reasons for waiting so long, reasons as old as domestic violence itself: fear and lack of money. Every time she made moves toward leaving, Frank threatened her, she said. He beat her, she recounted, choked her till she blacked out, threw her out of a moving car, and once stood her before the fireplace mantel and "just fired rounds, just kept shooting all around me." After she had moved out of the house but was still living in Silver Spring,

Maryland, he'd come over, she said, and "shoot the door locks off." Finally, after her father died and left her some money, she put her two sons in military school and fled to Philadelphia.

A custody squabble ensued, and Sylvester wound up returning to his father (lured, Jackie remembers, by the promise of a gift horse). But a week or two later, an unhappy Sylvester hitchhiked back to his mother's house. He would run away many times, once as far as Florida, along the way "sleeping in abandoned churches and perverts' cars," he recalled. He eventually resided with his mother, who sent her son to one school after another, including a boarding school for troubled boys when he was sixteen. Finally he was packed off to the American College in Switzerland, an ocean between him and his painful boyhood.

Stallone could never, though, travel far enough to free himself from the familial combat. He came to understand that only in 1991, on a polo field in Palm Beach. "My father wanted to play on the number one polo field, where Prince Charles plays. He told me to set up the game. So I set up the game, at great expense. We go down there.... We're on opposite teams. And we're right next to one another, playing opposite. All of a sudden I'm speared in the back by a horse, knocked to the ground. The horse just misses stepping on my chest cavity. I'm laying there. And I look up. And it's my father who speared me. And he's looking down. And like, 'You okay, son?' The next play, I rammed him so hard I took the ball one hundred and fifty yards and scored. It was almost like bad moviemaking! After the game, I said, 'You almost killed me. You could've crippled me. You coulda' broke my spine. You hit me in the back with an eleven-hundred-pound horse!' He said, 'It's a fuckin' accident, whadya crying about?'" The father's near trampling of the son was captured on film by a camera crew from *Entertainment Tonight*. "When the bell rang at the end, I never got on a horse again. I was finished. I sold the ranch, forty horses, everything.... When I saw that guy on that charger, on that horse, with that mallet, looking down at me, I said, This is fucking perfect. You know what, this has really brought into crystal focus exactly what he's always thought of me. What I am. I'm not his son. I'm an opponent."

Stallone was never going to win the recognition he craved from his father, because to do so meant his father had to lose. And so he turned to other realms where good fathers might be found—or, if not found, constructed. He birthed his new fathers on film. For the orphaned Rocky, Stallone created the grizzled Mickey, a round-the-clock devoted coach. And when he joined the set of *First Blood*, he was determined to find a father for the orphaned Rambo, too, even if it meant turning the

script inside out. Stallone's fatherlessness and that of his moviegoing fans found its perfect metaphor—the abandoned POW who, at long last, would be rescued.

"After I got involved," the film's director, Ted Kotcheff, told me, "we worked on several scripts for months, but I'll tell you, the person who made the biggest difference was Sylvester Stallone." Kotcheff cited three fundamental changes Stallone made. "Stallone said to me, 'This guy shoots like he's in a shooting gallery, and it's going to alienate the audience. What if he puts 'em out of action instead of killing 'em?'" The second change was to transform Rambo from a foul-mouthed ranter into a stoical silent type. The last, and most important, was the ending. The script called for Trautman to walk in "like Dr. Frankenstein," Kotcheff said, intending but unable to bring himself to blow away his creation. So Rambo was to reach for Trautman's gun and commit suicide. "When we were shooting," Kotcheff recalled, "Stallone came up to me and said, 'Ted, after what we put this character through, you think they are going to hate us because we killed him in the end? I don't want to come back in six months and redo this.' So we shot an alternate ending." While it would seem to negate the film's Frankenstein message, Kotcheff went along with it, figuring "there's nothing wrong with doing it and having it in our back pocket," in case the distributor insisted on a new ending.

The alternate finale was shot and set aside. The test screenings, though, were disastrous. "The audiences roared with anger and frustration that he was killed at the end," Kotcheff recalled. The moviegoers booed furiously and yelled, "Who decided to kill Rambo?" Kotcheff began to get nervous. "The audience practically wanted to lynch me! People said, 'Where's the director? I ran out of the theater!'" When the director reviewed the audience evaluation cards later, the response was overwhelming: "Every card, in big letters, 'Great picture but *horrible ending!!!*'" In response, the alternate ending was hastily set in place. With that, from first shot to last, Stallone's Rambo was no longer a monster who had to be decommissioned. In the opening sequence, a gentle Rambo is introduced in close-up, gazing tenderly at some children playing. This humble soul is now in town to find his war buddy, a black fellow Green Beret named Delmar. There is nothing threatening about Rambo—although he's supposed to be a vagrant, his army jacket looks fresh and clean, and his far-above-the-shoulders haircut recently styled. As he lopes down the road, he antagonizes no one and is polite when Sheriff Teasle approaches; it is Teasle who picks a fight, a theme that prevails throughout. "It's not my fault," Rambo cries out after a sadistic deputy who's been trying to shoot him falls from the police helicopter.

"I don't want any more hurt. . . I didn't do anything." He fires only in self-defense, and when he has a chance to cut Teasle's throat, refrains, urging Teasle to "let it go, let it go." The horrific knowledge gained in war of his capacity to kill has been expunged from his memory. "They drew first blood, not me," he says virtuously of the deputies. Rambo had become Rocky, the good son. Now all he needed was a good father.

Stallone said he remade Trautman into "a father figure," because Rambo "needed someone who was his voice and would explain how difficult things had been for him." His Trautman "loved John Rambo because he went far beyond his expectations." Stallone's final change was to turn the chilly colonel into a proud papa, who calls Rambo "Johnny" and rhapsodizes about his "very special" boy. No longer the rear-echelon war manager, "I was there with you," he tells Rambo, "knee deep in all that blood and guts. I covered your ass more than once. Seems like bailing you out of trouble's getting to be a lifetime job for me."

There was to be a personal bonus in this choice. Kirk Douglas was slated to play Trautman. "I was thrilled, absolutely thrilled," Stallone recalled. "My hero, my role model!" The only problem was, Kirk Douglas hated the script he had read, and before he would agree to play the part, obtained what he thought were assurances from the director that the script would be altered. But when Douglas arrived on location, he found that none of the revisions had been made. "I was flabbergasted," Douglas wrote in his autobiography, *The Ragan's Son*. The "bone of contention" was one change in particular that he had demanded. "I thought that it would be better, dramatically, if my character realizes what a Frankenstein monster, amoral killer, and menace to society he has created, and kills STALLONE. If they'd listened to me, there would have been no *Rambos*. They would have lost a billion dollars, but it would have been *right*."⁷ As Stallone said, his voice still edged with disappointment, Douglas wanted his character to kill Rambo without compunction. The Rambo that Douglas had in mind, Stallone recalled, "was a lot less developed, less sympathetic, and absolutely disposable." He was the unwanted son. Douglas was replaced by the more accommodating Richard Crenna.

But fashioning a good father was only the first, and easier, of Stallone's tasks. Before he could reunite with the good father, he had to vanquish the one who did not think he was "very special," who liked to triumph over the son in every contest. And so the sheriff, who had sprung from David Morrell's typewriter as Rambo's secret sharer, was transformed into his deepest enemy. And this time, the son got to win. In the final scene, Rambo shoots Teasle through the skylight at police headquarters, and the sheriff, crashing through the roof, lands at Rambo's feet. Now,

in the reverse of Stallone's final experience on the polo field, it is the bad father who finds himself lying on his back, looking up at the unapogetic and triumphant son.

"When the sheriff sees this Vietnam vet, it proves to be a windfall for him because now the best of one war gets a chance to go against the best of another war," Stallone told me. "So Rambo gave him a new lease on his life's competitiveness. But in the end, he didn't prevail. He got shot down when he didn't have to, because he had to *compete*." Stallone's own desire to shoot down the sheriff far exceeded the bounds of method acting. "At the end," Stallone said of the days before the showdown with Teasle was filmed, "it was terrible, all these emotions were building in me. I wanted him so bad I was actually *salivating*." Stallone's words were a curious echo of Teasle's scripted line: "I wanted to kill him so bad I could taste him."

The new, empathetic, ever-supportive, never-competitive father is enlisted to legitimize the son's choice of enemies; Trautman sides with Rambo against the old father-cum-killer. In Stallone's rewritten script, Trautman expresses nothing but contempt for Teasle, a dolt from "Jerkerwater, USA," who can't begin to fathom the war-forged spiritual bond between Rambo and him. "What the hell," Trautman says to Teasle, "you're a civilian. You can go home to your wife and your house and your little flower garden. You're under no pressure to figure all this out." It would seem that all the loose ends have been tied up. The bad son has become good; the good father has recognized his worthiness and honored his passage into manhood; and the bad father has been defeated and expelled. Except that the ghost in the machine can never really be expelled. Paternal betrayal had been at the root of *First Blood's* genesis a decade earlier, and no number of revisions and recastings could fully purge it. In spite of everything, the father's deception still haunts the film in phantom traces, remnants of dialogue, and plot turns that even the most skillful of rewrite men failed to exorcise.

As much as Stallone tried to make Trautman the devoted dad, in the end the transformation was not complete. "He trusts me," Trautman tells Teasle. "See, I'm the closest thing to family that he has left." But Trautman uses that trust to lure Rambo into surrender, and what will surely be a life sentence in prison. Trautman's at a loss when Teasle demands to know what he would have done in the sheriff's position, "Wrap your arms around him, give him a sloppy kiss, or would you have blown his brains out?" After silently considering the question, he says, "I couldn't answer that till I met him face-to-face."

In the final scene, Trautman does have that face-to-face encounter,

and, on closer inspection, it is a deeply ambivalent one. Yes, Rambo breaks down weeping in his arms. Yes, Trautman drapes his coat over the poor kid's bare shoulders. But what really happens? Convulsed on the floor "in a fetal position," as Stallone put it, Rambo pours his heart out to Trautman for a long time before the colonel hesitantly steps nearer. Even then, it is Rambo who must reach up, seize Trautman's hand, and pull him down to his side; it is Rambo who must force his head onto Trautman's shoulder. If the colonel finally puts a hand on his charge's back, it is a visibly reluctant half embrace. "In a sense they're really not that close," Stallone observed to me, regretfully. "It's wishful thinking under combat stress." Trautman pats his back, "but it's almost out of embarrassment. . . . He doesn't really commiserate with me. I feel there's no remorse." Maybe a paternal wound could not be healed, Stallone was beginning to think. "The father-son bond is the foundation on which you have to build the rest of your life. And once that foundation is flawed, everything may stay upright, but it's shaky. It's never going to be right."

It was this painful knowledge that caused Stallone to weep uncontrollably in the final scene. "It's the closest I've ever gotten to looking at the dark side," he said. "That final scene of *First Blood*, I was really gone . . . all these jumbled thoughts were trying to come out. It was weird. I don't know where that came from." Only, he did know: "My childhood." As he sat bunched up on the floor, sobbing and pleading for an explanation from the stiff figure of Trautman, another visage rose before Stallone: his father's.

FOR THE SECOND FILM, the filmmakers started from scratch; there would be no author's buried narrative to extirpate. The order of book and film were reversed; this time, a few months before the film was released, David Morrell was enlisted to write the novelization. At first, he refused. "They sent me the script and it literally was 'Rambo shoots this, Rambo shoots that,'" Morrell recalled. He was disturbed by what seemed to him a glorification of "violence without consequences." The story he had birthed had become "a version of all those terrible World War II films that I hated and was terrified by as a kid." When an acquaintance asked him what the sequel was about, Morrell said, "It's about a million gallons of gasoline going up!" The producers from Carolco kept pressing him to change his mind. "This was a problem for them because they had counted on the book for promotion," Morrell recalled, and under the terms of his contract with the studio, only he could write it. Finally, Carolco sent Morrell a five-minute clip of the film's final firefight. "They had definitely torqued up the level tremendously. Just from a visceral

point of view, it was amazing. And I realized, This is going to be a big movie." And so he came around, his rationale being that he might at least make the violence "more complex" and the message less hubristic on the page. He made Rambo a student of Zen and ended the novel with a slight jab at Ronald Reagan and his Vietnam-like adventure in Nicaragua.⁸ "I had to do it in three weeks," he recalled, at a twenty-page-a-day clip. He had "mixed emotions," he said, but he told himself the book would be worth writing because "I wanted to add characterizations that weren't in the film."

Morrell's readers, though, bought the second book mostly to reexperience the second movie, and for this reason alone it far outsold its predecessor, just as the second movie, with its unequivocal triumphalism, far outstripped the first's box-office returns. *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, the book, was on the *New York Times* best-seller list for six weeks, selling about one million copies. Morrell had certainly passed the studio test as a good son, willing to adapt a product that ran against the essence of his own creation. Now, the story had no father-son struggle. "Trautman's character was almost benign," Morrell said, and was just an opportunity for pyrotechnic special effects. "I saw my book as an antiwar novel," he said, then sighed with resignation. "Maybe I delude myself."

If the faint remnants of a bad father might still be seen in the bloodless Pentagon bureaucrat who abandons Rambo in the jungle, by the third film, there would be nothing but interchangeable foreign devils, and the good father. The father problem had finally been eliminated. And Morrell would write that novelization, too.

In Stallone's life, though, erasure was not so easy. He and his father still circled each other in the domestic boxing ring. "He's in Palm Beach, only an hour away from me," Stallone said, "so he just drops in—still wearing my old clothes, my Beatles boots . . . and my Rocky buckle." The display of the Rocky buckle was not meant as an endorsement of his son's achievement. "Do you think he *liked* Rocky?" Stallone asked the tortically. "He goes, 'Well, I coulda fought better, I coulda played the part better' . . . and right down the fucking line." Indeed, Frank Stallone told me he had shopped around his *own* script for *Rocky VI* in Hollywood against his son's wishes, and actually sold it to a producer, figuring that they could get another actor to replace his son.

One evening, after Stallone had returned from a fifteen-hour shooting day on his latest film, we sat talking in his Four Seasons suite. I had been reading Gerald Early's exquisite meditations on prizefighting in *The Culture of Bruising*, and I had Xeroxed a passage to show Stallone. There, Early described Jake La Motta's terrible truth-telling encounter with his

father, a man who had made a lifelong career of beating his wife and children. La Motta, long past his prime and desperately poor, went to his father's house to plead for four hundred dollars to help pay for the birth of his child. His father eyed him with contempt, then handed him a ten-dollar check. La Motta recalled the moment in his second autobiography, *Raging Bull II*, which Early quoted: "Is this all I'm worth, [Jake] asked, his eyes glued to the check. '... You dragged the family from one slum to another, and pimped me off to fight every kid in the neighborhood. Did ya forget all those nickels and dimes I made you? And this is your answer—a lousy ten bucks. How heartless can ya be? ... What do ya want from me—another championship? I'm an old man, too, now. I come to you begging for help, and you give me a kick in the ass like I was still eight years old. Why did you always hate me, Pop? All those beatings, and for what?'"³⁹

When Stallone finished reading the passage, he dropped the page and crossed the room to his golf bag. He selected a club and wordlessly began swinging it hard over and over against the plush carpet, hard enough to make the drapes tremble. Does La Motta's father ring a bell? I finally asked. Stallone just kept practicing his shot. "If I didn't have money, you know," he finally said, the club whistling metronomically to his words, "if I was desperate, here's a man who would say, 'Here you go, I'll pour you out a couple glasses of vodka and you be on your way.' That's about it. He would revel in it. But it's..." He paused, the club poised in midair. He was no longer addressing me. "I don't know. I just take a real hard look at that and I want to just lash out and physically destroy it. I really do. It's like, Why are you on this earth? What is your legacy? That I hate you? That you forced me to withdraw into a world of such obvious fantasy? And I will for the rest of my life see you in every obstacle that tries to—like if it's a difficult game of golf, it's like it's your fault, *you*. It's like, I'll try hard to beat him, because I hear *you* laughing. I hear you mocking. It's everything. A guy bumps into you in an elevator, and you get angry. I know what it is, it's *him* that's bumped me, even though he's not there. ... I look back and it was all set up from the beginning. It was all a setup. I look at the boy in those pictures, flexing his muscles at six, that boy in that Superman outfit made out of a barber's cape and swim trunks, and I see a direct line to Rambo."

A couple of years later, Stallone would tell me that he had finally put the struggle with his father behind him. He had sold some land he owned in Maryland on which his father had been living. And with that connection severed, he felt he had "purged" his family demons. I hoped that was true, but I knew the odds were daunting. You only escape in the movies.

8

BURNING DOWN
THE HOUSE

The Fire Last Time in Waco, Texas

OFFSCREEN AND ON THE POLITICAL STAGE, the male electorate was having as hard a time reconstructing the public father as Sylvester Stallone had deconstructing his private one. If Ronald Reagan was the fantasy elder come to lead the sons in triumphal battle against the Evil Empire, when the credits rolled and the sons awoke from that stardusted dream, most felt farther away from the promised land of adult manhood—less triumphal, less powerful, less confident of making a living or providing for a family or contributing productively to society. And no new elder statesman, celluloid or otherwise, loomed on the horizon. Disfranchised by the ever more voracious demands of image management and campaign finance, the newest presidential candidates seemed less like commanding figures and more like the dependents of spin doctors and big donors.

No wonder the following political decade would be driven by the phenomenon of what the media came to call "the Angry White Male." Reagan had been more than a patriarch, or rather, less—for in his public as well as his private life, he was at best an absent parent. He had played both ends of the male drama. He was everyone's favorite septuagenarian and, as the perennial Gipper, everyone's favorite fresh-faced boy, thereby distracting his constituents from the crisis at the core, the need for a