Dear Mr. Bonavita,

We at Warner Bros. Pictures wish to extend our heartfelt appreciation for your recent letter to us. The Motion Picture industry thrives on the dedication of film enthusiasts such as yourself. We cannot thank you enough for your continued support of the films of Stanley Kubrick. We're proud to represent his work on screen for millions of viewers worldwide, and letters from fans like you ensure that we will continue to bring high-quality entertainment to your community theater from directors like Mr. Kubrick, Steven Spielberg, and Michael Ritchie, director of the recent box office hit Wildcats, two complimentary adult passes for which are included in this letter as a gift to you.

We regret to inform you that Mr. Kubrick is unable to respond personally to your request that he change the title of his upcoming release. We're sorry to say that Full Metal Jacket has been reserved and is no longer available. We're confident that you will come up with an exciting and provocative alternate title for your film.

Best wishes and good luck with your production,
Gail Sheehan, Warner Bros. Pictures

Fingers whipped the letter onto the floor like it was a throwing star and picked up the metal folding chair that had the space heater on it and tossed it through the barn window. The glass shattered and a hunk of the window frame went crashing down onto the driveway with the chair, which made Fingers madder so he grabbed the space heater and hurled it out the window as well, which worked except that Fingers’ desk lamp was plugged into the same extension cord as the space heater, and the shade knocked into the splicer and a pile of film reels, which hit the floor and went rolling, unraveling the raw footage he’d just picked up from the drug store. The desk lamp got caught in the busted frame on its way out the window and the space heater just slammed against the outside wall of the barn, cracking the slats.

“Hey,” Apple said from the pile of old mattresses he and Fingers had found at the dump and dragged, one by one, back to the barn to use as studio furniture.
“Don’t ‘hey’ me,” Fingers shouted. “That was my title, my fucking title. That fat fuck.” He jumped up and did a sort of sideways kick at the smashed window frame, and the force of his own kick knocked him back into the tripod which luckily didn’t have the camera on it. He rolled over onto his stomach and started punching the floor, hard, like he wanted to juice his own fist. The envelope from Gail Sheehan was near him on the floor so he crammed it in his mouth with his free hand and chewed it up, growling. The paper making a fluttering sound as it broke down to pulp.

“Take it easy,” Apple said. He was backed up as far as he could go on the mattresses, gripping the canvas straps with white knuckles, as if the whole pile was about to fly away like a massive bird.

Fingers got up on all fours, breathing hard. He mashed the envelope in his mouth, groaning deep in his throat.

“What in hell is happening up there?” It was Fingers’ dad, calling up from the backyard. He worked at the university as a professor of some kind, probably the kind with a degree in busting Fingers’ ass because that’s what he spent most of his time doing, it seemed like. He always knew when Fingers and Apple were trying to burn something or light off M-80s or shoot arrows into the convenience store parking lot, and he usually stopped them before they could carry out their plan.

“Get away from me and you smell,” Fingers shouted down at his dad, spitting the gobbed envelope out the window. His face was past red, into a sort of whitish ghost look.

“I’ll smell you in about a minute,” his dad yelped, his voice straining with tightly capped aggression.

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Fingers screamed. He got up and started searching the room for something to huck at his dad. He went for the table where he and Apple had painstakingly recreated a vast rice paddy in 1/144th scale.

“Don’t,” said Apple.

“Who’s up there?” Fingers’ dad yelled. “Do you have Franklin up there?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Fingers screamed. He gave a roundhouse kick to the window frame and the whole sill came loose. He grabbed the splintered wood and pried it from the studs.

“You were warned!” his dad shouted. “He is not to set foot on this property. Send him down right now.” Apple was the Franklin that Fingers’ dad was shouting about. He didn’t like the name “Apple” any more than “Franklin,” but he knew that Fingers meant it in a goodish way when he called him Apple, so
he tolerated it. The reason Apple had to get out of the barn was that he was only twelve and Fingers was older, past high school in age, and Apple’s parents didn’t want him to be there.

“I will not do that,” Fingers screamed, his voice breaking up with every syllable. He chucked the broken window sill at his dad. Apple got down from the mattresses and made for the door.

“Hey,” Fingers said. Apple turned around and looked at Fingers’ feet. He did not want to see Fingers’ reddened, blotched face. “This isn’t over,” he said, almost whispering, his vocal cords blown.

Apple nodded.

“Mark my words. This hasn’t even begun, is how far from over it is. We’re getting that title. It’s ours. I’ll come over and get you when I figure out a plan, okay?”

Apple nodded again and slipped through the door, which was really just a sheet of plywood hanging from the ceiling by a tangled length of telephone wire. The barn was on Fingers’ property, but it hadn’t been used as a barn since the olden times when the town where they lived was a farm town and not a college town. Now the barn was the location of Fingers’ film studio. It was the place where he and Apple were making an epic film about the Vietnam War that was called *Full Metal Jacket* until Fingers found out in *Rolling Stone* that filmmaker Stanley Kubrick was also making a film called *Full Metal Jacket*. It was a problem, but not the hardest problem Fingers had ever confronted, and he would come up with a solution soon enough.

Apple leapt down the stairs and ran out the side door of the barn so he wouldn’t run into Fingers’ dad, who was standing at the front, his arms crossed, watching the space heater slowly rotating where it hung out the window. Apple saw just a flash of the man as he booked toward the bushes separating Fingers’ house from the Ellisons’.

“Do me a favor, Franklin, and don’t come back here,” Fingers’ dad called out to him without looking away from the window. “I don’t want another visit from your parents.”

Apple did not look back. He cut through the Ellisons’ backyard and the convenience store parking lot. The sun was still out, and the air was heavy with pollen and soil. His heart swelled in his chest as he sprinted home. It was Holy Thursday and he was going to be late for church.

He dashed up the porch steps just as Hugh was coming out. Hugh already had his shirt and tie and brown shoes on so Apple knew he was in trouble.

“The fuck were you, twat?” Hugh called out to him as he ran past. Hugh
smacked Apple hard in the back of his head, which sent Apple face-first into the aluminum siding.

“Dipstick,” Apple shouted, cupping his face with his hands. He shot up the stairs to the boys’ room and grabbed a shirt and a tie. There was no time to change out of his sneakers. He would just have to take his chances.

Outside all the kids were already getting into the station wagon. The girls got the back seat and the boys got the wayback. Apple’s father stood by the driver’s side door, jingling the change in his pockets with irritation. His mother shook her head as she watched him run toward the car, and the look she gave him was enough to make something hard and cold rise up in Apple’s throat.

Apple played the drums in the folk group, which helped kill the shapeless and interminable void of the mass. Holy Thursday was the second worst, longest mass of the year, just barely more manageable than the Easter vigil with its torturous Exultet. He sat behind the kit during the readings and dreamed about the rice paddy sequence. The camera would, with the aid of a sliding track they’d built from a thrown-away rowing machine, pass over the miniature landscape just like a helicopter, and the miniature figures he and Fingers created from matchsticks would look up as the helicopter swept past them, not knowing they were about to be torched into nothingness by napalm, an effect that they hadn’t figured out how to pull off yet but which would, they were pretty sure, involve slow motion, a cigarette lighter, and an aerosol can of hair spray Apple had pilfered from the girls’ room. He imagined how the footage might look on the screen at the Riviera, the theater in the center of town where he and Fingers went every weekend since he could remember, no matter whether the film they showed was something great like Romancing the Stone or utter crap like Out of Africa, which he couldn’t imagine even a boring, sweater vest-wearing professor like Fingers’ dad liking or even staying awake through.

The readings ended. The folk group lit in to a dark, sinewy rendition of “They Will Know We Are Christians,” which was one of Apple’s favorites. He swabbed the ride with his brush, hunched over the kit, brooding over the lumbering beat. The group drew the song down to a whisper and stopped. The priest stood, spreading his vestments as he invoked the homily.

“We tend, on this night,” he said, pushing his spectacles up the bridge of his nose with a stout, calloused finger, “to focus on Judas, because Judas is so clearly the prime mover in the crucifixion. We see him very boldly go up to the chief priests and offer to let them know Jesus’ whereabouts. But I’m more interested in the passage, later on, where the disciples, all of them, turn on
Jesus. In Matthew 26:55 it says, ‘In that same hour said Jesus to the multitudes, Are ye come out as against a thief with swords and staves for to take me? I sat daily with you teaching in the temple, and ye laid no hold on me. But all this was done, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled. Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled.’

The priest stepped down from the altar and paced. He rubbed and scratched at his chin as he delivered his homilies, as though the emergence of his sermons required it.

“The disciples fled,” he continued, stalking pensively. “They abandoned Jesus. This, to me, trumps what Judas did. They forsook him. They ran in Jesus’ hour of need. And I think this is so important because how many ways are those disciples like us? Exactly like us?”

The priest paused. “We have some special guests in our midst,” he said, beckoning toward the back of the church. “Go ahead, girls, stand up so we can see you.” The parishioners turned to face the rear pews. Four young dark-haired girls slowly rose in their seats at Sister Dorothy’s command, their terrified eyes like trembling moons. “I would like you all to meet the Truong family. Or rather, what is left of the Truong family. Because these girls lost their mother just a few months ago on their long journey from Vietnam to a refugee camp in Hong Kong. They traveled by night in a boat that you or I would look at and think was just junk, just a big piece of driftwood. They never knew their father, a G.I. who served in the war. They have no one to care for them. In their own country, because their father was a white man, they are pariahs, outcasts. They have been forsaken more times than you or I should ever have to endure.”

Apple could not take his eyes off the girls. He wanted to bring them sleeping bags and Skittles. He wanted to make them hot chocolate. He made a list in his head of all the ways he could put them at ease, save them, become their champion.

“When we turned our backs on Vietnam we turned our backs on people, real, living, breathing people,” the priest continued. The girls did not seem to follow his words. They continued to stand stiffly in their pew, holding hands with each other, rigid as the carved Stations of the Cross that loomed behind them. “Now, the parish council has volunteered to shelter these children at the parish center until a more suitable home can be found for them. Let us remember Jesus’ solitude on the cross as we help these children find their way in this country of ours, which must seem to them to be a very strange place indeed.”

Sister Dorothy stood to the right of the girls, and when the priest was fin-
ished she made a patting gesture with her hand, which meant they could sit down. They nodded solemnly and disappeared behind the Yoost family’s fat, disgusting pudding heads. Apple could just see the tallest girl’s shoulder behind Gary Yoost, who was a total buttwipe who had thrown a snowball at Apple’s face from point-blank range back at the church Christmas party. The girl was wearing a pink T-shirt over a shapeless gray sweatshirt. A shock of jet-black hair streamed in a shining ribbon down her chest. He pored over the brief history of her face in his mind—her slim, solemn cheekbones that framed eyes of impossible, turbulent darkness. He tucked his chin into his chest during the recessional hymn, which was “City of God,” really bearing into the kit, and thought of the girl rising up in a summer green field, levitating in her oversized, donated clothes, strands of her hair whipping in the soundless wind like victory flags.

The next day was Good Friday, which meant that from noon until three you couldn’t watch TV or listen to the radio because those were the hours Jesus hung on the cross, so Apple went out back to the hammock, because it was ridiculously warm out and Bradley and Hugh were in the boys’ room whaling on each other. He lay in the hammock and read *A Clockwork Orange*, which Fingers had given him for Christmas. He followed the story all right, even without consulting the Nadsat glossary, but his thoughts kept tumbling sideways toward the memory of the girls in the back pew.

“What part are you at?” It was Fingers, peering through the bushes that separated Apple’s yard from the Wilcoxes’.

“How long have you been back there?”

“Have they given him the Ludovico treatment yet?”

Apple looked at the book’s cover, which was just the words “A Clockwork Orange” in orange on a black background. “I don’t know.”

“How could you not know?”

“I just.”

“You either know or you don’t.”

Apple had his mouth open but nothing came out.

“Pussy,” Fingers said. And then, “Hey, come with me to the lawyer.”

“The lawyer?”

“Yeah. To settle this name dispute.”

“Where do you—how do you have a lawyer?” Apple put the book down. He started to quake with the old nervousness, that sense, deep within his system, that Fingers was about to get them into something knotty and troublesome.
“I’m a son-of. They have to see me.”
“It’s Good Friday.”
“Numbnuts, it’s a college. They don’t give a crap about Good Friday or Happy Tuesday or Suckass Thursday. It’s all the same bullshit to them.”
Apple looked back at his house, which seemed empty and desolate from where he sat. “I probably.”
“You probably should come with me because we’re going to get our title back,” Fingers said, and started walking toward the convenience store parking lot. Apple tucked the book under his arm and crawled under the chain-link fence that ran around his backyard.

The college was just the other side of Main Street. Gargantuan college kids were out storming the quad, hurling Frisbees and kicking hacky sacks. A hairy girl in an Indian print dress lay on her stomach, listening to Jackson Browne while she underlined passages in a thick textbook with a yellow highlighter marker. Apple hadn’t ever been beyond the perimeter of his yard during the time between noon and three on Good Friday. He had assumed that people everywhere were sitting in communal silence, contemplating Jesus’ suffering.

They approached a low, serious building on the other side of the quad. “This is the place,” Fingers said, holding the glass door open for Apple. They went inside. The receptionist gave Fingers a look.

“Yeah, I’m going to need to see Mr. Lightman.”
“Do you have an appointment?”
“Not really.”
“Are you a student?” she asked, a sort of condescending doubt clouding up the phrase.
“I’m a son-of.”
“Pardon?”
“A son-of,” Fingers repeated. “Son of a professor. Of the university.” He looked at her with small, piercing eyes.

The receptionist stood without responding and went behind a fake wood door.

“I made some more NVA regulars last night,” Fingers said, nodding, his arms crossed as he stared at the flimsy, brass-handled door, like he might set it on fire with his gaze. “A whole platoon of them, practically. Very convincing. Maybe my best work yet. I made their hats from those little paper circles you get when you use a three hole punch?”
“Cool,” Apple said, swallowing hard. He was waiting for campus security to show up, like the time he and Fingers had taken a brown bag filled with
Twinkies into the woods by the athletic building. Out of nowhere two sedans came skidding into the parking lot, lights flashing, like they were on a mob raid. “Put down the bag and step away,” they’d called through a megaphone. Apple was just shy of pissing himself, but Fingers chortled and put the bag on the pavement with a flourish. “Step away,” the guards shouted through the megaphone. Fingers and Apple went and sat on the curb. The guards came slowly out of their cars and approached the bag. One of them carefully jostled the mouth of the bag open with his baton. They looked at each other. “Go on, get out of here,” they shouted. Apple shot up and sprinted for the convenience store but Fingers stayed put. “Watch out—next time it will be full of shit,” Apple heard him say to the cops. Apple kept running until his lungs seized. He collapsed behind the big Korean War memorial rock in the quad. He didn’t see Fingers until a few days later. He’d never asked what had happened, and Fingers never told him.

The receptionist returned to her desk. “Mr. Lightman has only a few minutes before an important call,” she said bitterly.

“Sweet,” Fingers said. “Come on.” He cuffed Apple on the neck and pushed him through the door.

Mr. Lightman’s office was sparsely appointed with junky screw-on shelves and lightly bashed file cabinets that had promotional calendar magnets all over them. There was just a single picture framed on the wall, which was a line drawing of a man in a tennis outfit bent over, looking through his legs at a tennis ball that was flying away behind him. It was supposed to be funny.

“How can I help you, sir?” Mr. Lightman said, not even in the tone of a question, not looking up from a sheaf of papers in his hands.

“Okay,” Fingers said, maneuvering into one of the leatherette chairs that faced Mr. Lightman’s desk. “I just need you to clear something up for me. I am making this movie.”

“A movie.”

“A stop-motion movie, feature-length, about Vietnam. A war film along the lines of Apocalypse Now, only without the boring parts.”

Mr. Lightman looked up momentarily. “Stop-motion. You mean like the show with the dog and the.”

“Davey and Goliath. Yes. But no. But this is serious. A serious film about a serious subject.”

“And you need me.”

“I need you because someone else is trying to use the title of my film, claiming it and promoting it as their own.”
Mr. Lightman snorted. “What is the title?”
“Full Metal Jacket.”

He went back to examining the document. He was a big man with a rus-
bery, unpleasant lower lip. “What’s that supposed to mean?”
“It’s a bullet with a hard metal shell. For piercing armor.”
“And who is the other filmmaker? A friend of yours?”
“Hardly. He’s a big hairy jerkoff as far as I can tell.”
Mr. Lightman snapped the document down onto his desk blotter. “I don’t
have time for this. Good day to you.”

“I’m sorry,” Fingers said, rising slightly out of his chair. “I meant no disre-
spect. For real. Please. Hear me out on this one. This other person, he’s using
the title of the film even though I came up with it first. So can I sue?”

“That’s probably not a good idea and not, I’m guessing, even possible, since your film isn’t even finished. Why don’t you
just talk to this person and sort it out?”

“That’s the problem. I have tried to reason with this person but I can’t get
through to him on account of Warner Brothers Pictures won’t give me access
to his contact info.”

Mr. Lightman frowned. “Warner Brothers. Who exactly are we talking
about here?”

“Stanley Kubrick, sir.”
Mr. Lightman jerked back in his chair. He looked disoriented. Then he
emitted a single, protracted laugh. “Get out of here,” he said. “This is a waste
of my time. Who is your father again?”

Fingers started to answer.

“Forget it. I don’t even want to know. Get out of my face, kid.”

Fingers sat back. “That’s going to be a tough job, sir, since your face is so
fucking fat, you fat fucking whale.”

“Get out,” Mr. Lightman shouted, rising from his desk to point at the fake
door.

Fingers jumped up, swiped a brass pear from the stack of papers it held
down, and chucked it full force at the picture of the tennis player, which shat-
tered and fell in pieces into the wire mesh trash bin on the floor below.

“Get—” Mr. Lightman shouted again, cutting himself off as he struggled to
circle the desk. His forehead was slick with sweat, and his neck was bright red
down the front, like someone had splashed Hawaiian Punch there.

Fingers and Apple got up and ran. The receptionist let out a short, high-
pitched shriek as they burst through the door and out of the building.
“Let’s split up,” Fingers shouted, half out of breath already. “Meet me at the studio later.” He peeled off down toward the Physical Plant building, which had a swampy woods behind it and a Star Market on the other side. Fingers sometimes worked there as the guy who collected shopping carts and chained them together in long rows.

Apple ran toward his house until he could only jog, and when he couldn’t jog any more he walked slowly, gulping at the chunky spring air.

Apple’s family ate dinner fast, like there was someone in the next room waiting to rush in and take it all away from them at any moment. They hooked their arms around their plates to try to protect their portions from each other. Bradley tried to swipe a fish stick from Apple’s plate. Apple blocked with his elbow and stabbed Bradley in the ear hole with his free hand. Bradley reeled, clapping his hand over his ear. He yelped and a bunch of chewed-up corn sprayed from his mouth onto the Easter egg centerpiece their mother had made with felt and pipe cleaners.

“Enough,” their father called out, smacking his open palm to the table. Bradley righted himself and swabbed the centerpiece with the napkin their mother handed to him.

“We’ve invited the Truongs over for Easter dinner,” Apple’s mother said when Bradley was finished. “Your rooms are so filthy I can’t even see the floor. So you’ll go clean them up after dinner.” She cleared her throat, which meant that the issue was not up for discussion.

Apple stared at the crushed fish-stick husks moored to his plate by a listing dollop of tartar sauce. He started breathing fast. He could barely remember what the girls looked like. He had thought so hard and long on the glimpse he’d gotten of the oldest girl’s face that he’d smudged it out. All that was left was the dark band of hair that lay across her shoulder. They’d seemed so lost inside their donated clothes—he remembered that. He tried to think about their mysterious journey across the sea in the makeshift boat. How long would it take to get across an ocean? The trip had killed their mother. The closest he’d ever come to that kind of danger was when Hugh and Chris Hamilton put him in a refrigerator box and started whaling on it with sledgehammers. That was nothing in comparison because he could just stand in the absolute middle of the box and not get hurt really bad, but the girls on the makeshift boat, there was no middle they could stand in. The ocean was all edge.

The boys were excused and sent upstairs to clean their room. Apple ran to the threshold and leaped, cannonball-style, onto his bed. Bradley followed,
jumping off from Apple’s bed onto his own. Hugh sauntered in last, hands thrust in his pockets. “This is going to suck,” he said, surveying the room. The floor was covered with a jagged spread of magazines, *Fangoria* and *Starlog* and *Mad* and *Black Belt* and *Rolling Stone*, their covers half-torn, dog-eared, folded backwards, drawn on and cut up. Disemboweled action figures dangled from strings where the boys had hung and flogged them with mini-souvenir baseball bats. A burned, melted Millennium Falcon sat precariously on the edge of a half-empty fish tank. One whole wall was festooned with gum-card stickers and a Miller Lite neon wall clock that Hugh had found in a dumpster outside the Vital Spot.

“I don’t even get why we’re doing this because it’s not like they’re even going to see this room.”

“And even if they do,” Bradley answered, “how much worse can this room be than Vietnam?”

“That is an excellent point,” Hugh said. “You’re actually not a complete fucking dumbass, Buttley. I’m kind of surprised.”

Apple slipped off his bed and started to gather the magazines from the floor, making a *Fangoria* pile and a *Starlog* pile and an Everything Else pile.

“Hey dingleberry,” Hugh said. He tossed a Nerf football at Apple’s forehead. The impact made his teeth chatter. “Numbnuts. Just kick everything under your mattress.”

“Nah,” Apple said. “I’ve been wanting to organize these.”

“You’re a dick.” Hugh flipped himself on his bed and took out a Walkman from the drawer in his nightstand. He put in *Warehouse: Songs & Stories* and closed his eyes.

Apple continued sorting the magazines.

The priest arrived in the church minivan with Sister Dorothy in the passenger seat and the four girls in a row behind them, arranged from youngest to oldest. Apple watched through the boys’ room window as the priest got out and slid back the cargo door to let the girls out. One by one they emerged like astronauts from the space shuttle, squinting in the loud, white sunlight. Apple put *A Clockwork Orange* down on the radiator and smoothed out his shirt. He went over to the mirror. He was still wearing the outfit his mother had gotten him for mass, which was a light blue shirt, light blue pants, and navy docksiders. He looked at himself from the side, and wished immediately that he hadn’t.

His mother called to him from the bottom of the stairs. It was too late to change. He went down the stairs slowly, like he was entering a pool that
was super freezing cold. He could hear the priest talking to his mother. As he descended he saw the feet of the girls clustered by the front door. They were wearing those canvas sneakers sold in big buckets at the grocery store, tied together at the laces. It looked like they’d just bought them. The soles were immaculate.

He put his hands in his pockets and walked over to his mother, pretending not to notice the girls. He kept his eyes focused on the floor, straining to bundle his terror in a posture of casual indifference.

“Franklin, these are the Truongs,” his mother said, lightly palming the back of his neck.

“Yes, Franklin, let me introduce you,” the priest added, gesturing at the girls.

“This is Diep—am I saying that right?”

The tallest of the group nodded once and smiled, glancing quickly at Apple.

“And next to Diep is Nhun, and the girl in the green shirt is Kieu, and this is Anh,” he said, putting his hand on the smallest girl’s shoulder. She smiled involuntarily and hung her head.

“The other kids are playing Careers in the living room,” Apple’s mother said, brushing back her hair. “Let’s go in there. I’ll make some—do you know,” she asked the priest, “if they would drink Kool-Aid?”

The priest shrugged. “Why not give it a shot?”

Apple’s mother ushered them all into the living room. Hugh, Bradley, Karen, and Jean were kneeling around the coffee table, the board game spread out diagonally at its center. They stood and backed up against the fireplace to make room for the girls, who stood in the doorway and would not sit down until the priest circled behind them and physically pushed them into the living room. The girls sat down at one end of the couch, their shoulders touching, hands folded in their laps. Kieu and Anh held hands.

“They are adorable,” Apple’s mother said, and then went to the kitchen to make the Kool-Aid.

The priest introduced the girls again to Apple’s brothers and sisters, which meant that Apple had an opportunity to look at their faces without fear of them looking back at him. He guessed that Nhun was closest to him in age, but something about Diep took root in Apple. Her eyes had a sadness—almost like they yearned for a time in the past that hadn’t ever really even happened. Just the sensory memory of a warm, defensible outpost somewhere out on the fringes of her experience.

The priest and Sister Dorothy followed Apple’s mother into the kitchen.

“Do you play Careers?” Jean said.
Nhung nodded, and Kieu and Anh nodded after her. But the three of them stopped when they noticed that Diep had not joined in.

“We have other games,” Apple said, motioning to the coat closet where the battered, timeworn board games were slotted. He opened the door and drew back his father’s many identical trench coats to give the girls a better view.

“Do you want to play any of these?”

Apple’s brothers and sisters sat motionless around the coffee table while the girls conferred quietly among themselves. Nhung prodded Diep’s forearm with her index finger. Diep stood, smoothing out a pair of baggy maroon sweatpants, and crossed the family room to the coat closet. She stood in the doorway, touching the casing lightly with her fingertips. This was the closest Apple had come to her and she smelled like a dusty mint. Something rough and knotted that stayed fresh against a host of adversities.

Apple ran his hand up and down the columns of boxed games. “Anything. Any of these.”

Diep took a step forward and pointed at a faded, chewed-up chess set that sagged under the weight of the other games. Apple nodded and pulled it out. One of the edges got caught on Dark Tower and the whole top tore off as he removed it.

“Oh, sorry,” Diep whispered. It was the first time Apple had heard anything come out of her mouth.

“It’s nothing. It’s old. Stuff happens to stuff that’s old.”

He pulled the shredded top of the chess box from where it was wedged into the shelf and wrapped it around the game like a taco shell. Diep backed out of the closet in front of him, holding out her hands to take the box, but Apple held onto it. He didn’t know why he didn’t just give it to her. Maybe if he handed it over he would no longer have this kind of power. He wasn’t sure. All he knew was the harrowing tightrope walk from one moment into the next, his heart spazzing out, thrumming his ribs.

He put the box down on the floor next to the coffee table and, on his knees, unfolded the chessboard. Diep knelt on the opposite side of the game board and removed a white rook from the felt-lined cavity where it was stored.

“You want to be that?” Apple said.

Diep examined the rook, rotating it with her thumb. She shrugged and smiled, placing the rook on the game board. Her fingers were long and thin, like reeds.

Apple set up the black pieces, which were made of marble, maybe, or some kind of stone because they were heavy and satisfying to hold. Diep’s sisters
gathered around behind her in a tight semicircle. Apple’s siblings went back to Careers. The whole world, for Apple, in that moment, was the whisper of Diep’s breath and the tinkling of the pawns as she placed them in a row.

Something moved in the background and Apple looked up past Diep’s head to see Fingers standing on the porch outside the window, his face blank and open, absorbing the scene in Apple’s living room.

“I’ll be right back,” Apple said to Diep, who crossed her hands in her lap and nodded.

“Who are those people?” Fingers said as Apple opened the screen door and stepped out onto the porch in his brown socks.

“What are you—it’s Easter. And my parents.” Fingers was not allowed on Apple’s property, per Apple’s parents, but Fingers would not honor the agreement unless Apple’s parents produced a legal restraining order, and even then, he told Apple. Even then. On top of that, Easter was a day for families, so Fingers, who had no God to pray to, was doubly unwelcome on their porch. There was more, though, on top of that, Apple realized as he maneuvered between Fingers and the window. There were the girls themselves.

“Well, you know how much of my left nut I give about your parents, first. Second, who are those kids in there because I don’t recall you saying anything about having Chinese relatives or friends or anything even close to that.”

“They’re not Chinese.”

Fingers was on tiptoe, squinting through the window’s reflection at the girls. “They’re something, though. Something crazy—Japanese?”

“From Vietnam.” Apple did not want to tell Fingers where they were from. But he wanted to tell him more than he wanted to hear Fingers guess incorrectly again and again.

“Hmm,” Fingers said. He leaned in toward the window. It was too bright to see anything inside the house.

“What are you here for?” Apple said.


“Yeah?”

“Here’s the new title. Full Metal Jhacket.”

“What’s it?”

“Full Metal Jhacket.”

Apple looked hard at Fingers, trying to figure out whether it was a joke.

“Yeah but what’s.”

“See? You couldn’t even tell.”
“It’s the same.”
“It sounds the same, but I added a silent h in ‘jacket.’ ‘Jhacket.’ If you listen closely you can just barely hear it. ‘Jhacket.’”
Apple looked around. Across the street, a green station wagon pulled in to the Hamiltons’ driveway. A stout man emerged with a pink ham. “I don’t know.”
“What do you mean?”
“I mean,” Apple said. “It’s just. People will be confused.”
“I don’t understand how that could be, since they’re two totally different movies with totally different names.”
“But what’s a jhacket?”
“It doesn’t make any difference. Ever seen a clockwork orange? What does that mean?”
“I guess I don’t know.”
“Ever seen a Krull? Ever seen a Zardoz?”
“But,” Apple said, backing up, “those are.”
“Answer me. Have you ever seen a Zardoz?”
Apple didn’t respond.
Fingers turned around and wiped his chin with his palm. “I wish you would be a little more supportive of my idea, man. All day, when you’re at school, or whatever, I’m working hard to come up with killer ideas for this film, and it’s not an easy job. Being the idea man. So the least you could do, and I’m talking absolute least, because it hardly takes any effort at all, is to just once in a while say, ‘Hey, Fingers, great idea.’”
The screen door opened and Apple’s dad came out, walking fast. He came right up to Fingers until their noses almost touched.
“Out of here. Now.”
Fingers grimaced at Apple’s father, then broke into a lazy smile. “I was just.”
“I don’t care what you were just. Get off my property,” Apple’s father barked as he leaned in to Fingers. His body quaked with each syllable.
Fingers casually turned and walked away. When he reached the edge of the porch he took a sweeping kick at a clutch of yellow tulips in a ceramic planter that Apple’s mother had put there before mass. The planter hurtled over the hedge and sailed out into the street, where it shattered.
Apple’s father sprinted off the porch and leapt over the hedge but quickly lost sight of Fingers, who knew all the secret back paths through everyone’s yards.
“Get inside,” Apple’s father hissed, swatting Apple’s shoulder. “We’ll talk about this later.”

Apple went inside and started walking up the stairs, wanting less than anything to go back into the room with the girls.

“Get in there and entertain,” his father whispered, his teeth clenched so firmly that Apple could hear them grinding. Apple slunk down and shuffled around his father into the living room. His brothers and sisters were still playing Careers on the coffee table while the Truong girls watched from the floor where they huddled around the chessboard. Apple could see his father through the window, crouching in the street to pick up the shards of the exploded planter. He turned to look at Diep, who nodded in a way that asked him both if he was okay and if he wanted to keep playing. Her face came to a perfect point like an acorn and her eyes were open and infinite. Apple knelt at the chess board and rested his finger tentatively on a pawn while all the moving parts of the day ground at his guts, mashing him up from the inside like a pestle at a mortar. Diep leaned forward and her hair fell over her shoulder, and it smelled fresh and sharp like crushed camphor. He changed his mind and took a risk with his knight that made Diep smile a little. She tried to conceal it by biting down on her fingertip but Apple saw it and as she took his knight with her queen he felt a surging force inside him, crackling as it ascended through his system, charging him like an incandescent bulb.

“I made this poster.” Fingers held an open sketchpad out to Apple, who was sitting on the pile of mattresses as usual. The poster was drawn with colored pencil, and it showed a man’s face divided in half. The left half showed the man as a farmer with a straw hat and a red kerchief around his neck. In the background, in partial perspective, were a barn and a sort of cow. The right side of the man was on a battlefield. He wore a helmet and an ammunition bandolier across his shoulder. He was bleeding from the neck. The left half of the man was smiling contentedly and the right half was making a kill face. “Full Metal Jhacket” appeared above in carefully rendered stencil letters, except for the last t, which was two bullets crossed.

“What do you think?”

“I like the bullets,” Apple said, pointing them out.

“That was a last-minute touch. Sometimes the best ideas come like that,” Fingers said, rapping his fist against the length of plywood he’d nailed over the window that had gotten smashed the week before. “You know, on the spur of the moment.”
“Yeah.”
“Speaking of which.” Fingers pushed at a loose board and peered through the slim crack. “I had this thought.”

Something sharp and hot stung Apple’s palms, like someone had slapped him there with a ruler.

“I think the movie needs something. I think it needs to be a live action film.”

Apple knew what was coming. He knew it. “But we spent so much time making those models.”

“I know, I know. We built a lot of stuff for the stop-motion sequences. Do you know how much time Kubrick spent making the sets for 2001? A lot of time. Some of the sets and models he had to throw out. And you know what? He just did it. He just tossed them. Didn’t care. You can’t hold on to ideas that don’t work anymore.”

“But we talked about this. How it’s not going to look good if we can’t get—older people. To act.” Apple had just opened himself up for the response he didn’t want to hear.

“I’m old enough.”

“Yeah right.”

“I am.”

“Okay, that’s one person.”

“And those girls, those Vietnamese girls you had at your house.”

“They’re kids.”

“I saw one of them that looked old enough. Besides, the VC conscripted young kids all the time. They had hordes of girls fighting for them. A whole, like, army of them.”

Apple struggled to think of a way to change the course of events, but it was like Fingers was pinning him down at the bottom of a murky lake. “The plot,” he said, the words cracking and whistling in his throat.

“I did a little rewrite,” Fingers said, crossing the floor to the chewed-up card table he used as a desk. He pressed his hand to the cover of a Mead notebook. “Basically, my character gets separated from his platoon, which happens before the actual action begins, so we don’t even have to worry about any of that. Anyway, I am out in the jungle, all alone, and I am being pursued by this sniper. A girl sniper. She’s like this super sniper, just a machine. A killing machine. And I have to get back to my platoon before she blows my face off.”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know? It’s perfect. It writes itself.”
“I don’t think. I don’t think you’re going to be able to get that girl in the film,” Apple said. He felt light and weak.

“Well,” Fingers said, “that would be where you come in.”

“No way.”

“What?” Fingers turned around fast.

“No way am I going to ask. I’m not—she doesn’t even know English, first of all.”

“All she has to do is hold an AK-47.” He shrugged. “People all over the world know how to do that.”

“I would have to ask the priest. I would have to tell him what we’re doing. I can’t just. And there’s no way.”

“Come on.”

“No, absolutely not.” Apple was sure he’d found the silver bullet that would put an end to Fingers’ plan. His tonsils bobbed. It felt like they were tapping the base of his skull.

Fingers looked at him with concern. “You’re serious about this.”

“Yes.”

“You’re going to let your flimsy religious beliefs, which are founded on a totally gay and ridiculous fantasy, prevent us from making a groundbreaking film that will be remembered forever.”

“I just don’t want to lie.”

“You lie every day, man. Just to live, you lie. And anyway, I’m not asking you to lie. I’m just asking you to ask.”

Apple felt a sickness boring into him through his pores. “No,” he said, and then breathed a little. “I won’t do it. I won’t ask.”

“And that’s it, then?” Fingers crossed his arms and leaned on the desk.

Apple nodded.

“Cool, okay. Cool. Well, I guess we’re, hah, back to the drawing board.”

Fingers pulled the folding chair out from the desk and sat down, exhaling noisily. He opened the Mead notebook and flipped absently through the pages. Apple watched him from his perch atop the mattresses. Fingers pretended to read a passage from the notebook, and then took a Bic from the Gremlins mug where all his pens and pencils were kept and crossed something out.

“You need any help?” Apple said.

“Nah,” Fingers said, crossing out another word on the open page. “I’m going to go through this and see if there’s anything good we can salvage.” He went back to his fake reading.

“You’re not. You’re not really reading that, are you?”
“I’m going to need some time alone to finish this,” Fingers said firmly into the notebook.

Apple climbed down from the mattresses and swung down through the trap door to the first floor of the barn. Fingers’ dad was down there, removing a tarp from a small fishing boat.

“You,” he said. Apple went rigid, assuming he was about to get yelled at, but Fingers’ father waved him over with a gloved hand. “I need you to hold this rope for me.”

Apple held the rope while Fingers’ father climbed up on the boat and worked out a snag. “What’s he doing up there?” he asked.

“He’s still just. Making the movie,” Apple said, looking away at a pile of smashed TVs that he and Fingers had found at the dump. There were a lot of things from the dump in Fingers’ barn—an old-time popcorn cart with no wheels, a broken surfboard, half a motorcycle, and a huge picture of the Mona Lisa only Mona Lisa was a Bassett hound smoking a cigar. In anticipation of the coming nuclear apocalypse he and Fingers had been assembling a confusing and comprehensively misleading archaeological discovery for future scientists out of stuff they found at the dump, in the dumpsters behind the convenience store, and sometimes out by the quarry where the high school kids messed around and did it in the slate cave. It started as a joke, but the artifacts came to form a sort of cosmos that told absolutely everything about Apple and Fingers and the precipitous afternoons they’d spent assembling the collection.

Fingers’ dad looked up at the ceiling, which was just a bunch of boards and a dangling light fixture. He nodded, bunching his lips into a sort of sucking frown. “You can let go now,” he said, and Apple let go of the rope and it went singing over the tarp and into Fingers’ dad’s hands.

He had the chess game under his arm, and he was wearing an Ocean Pacific button-down that had a picture of a surf van on the back, and he had flecked bleach on the shirt the night before to give it a unique look, but the bleach just turned the shirt pink in places and made it look like a mistake, like something from the irregulars bin or worse, but it was still easily a million times better-looking than anything else Apple had to wear, even if it smelled a little bit like bleach and even if his shoulder itched where there was still an eggplant-shaped spot of damp bleach and he was so deeply thirsty because it was hot out, and he was on his way to the Parish Center to play chess with Diep.

He slowed as he got close to the building, which was an old Victorian mansion that someone his parents knew in their youth had bequeathed to the
church long ago. Apple went to Sunday school there every Sunday after mass and also Bible camp in the summers. He knew its columns and eaves like the panels of *X-Men* issue 94. He had run the lengths of its hallways and hidden in its closets. He’d dozed on its floor in a sleeping bag while Sister Dorothy projected *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* on a tacked-up sheet that covered the wall mural of Jesus riding a donkey into the desert. He had learned the catechism in the same room where the Truongs were situated. It was as familiar a place as anything he knew, its intricately carved balustrade accepting his palm as though he had built it himself. But it was also the line of demarcation between Apple and his friends, who were all something else instead of Catholic, or Fingers, who was resolutely Fingers and nothing else, no matter if he went to hell for it, which he was. Which meant that Apple walked slow as he approached the Parish Center, his gut buzzing like an awakened rattler, hands thrust in his pockets in an effort to radiate a blast ring of indifference out at any spectators, of whom he suspected there were many.

He went inside, slipping through the heavy front door after barely cracking it open. Sister Dorothy sat at the green reception desk in the front office. She was sorting through the mail and she looked up when she heard Apple come in.

“Franklin,” she said, smiling broadly. She had a round, soft head that seemed at odds with the sharp, minute features that crowded the center of her face.

“I was just wondering if. I brought chess to play, in case the Truongs.”

“Oh,” Sister Dorothy said, her face falling abruptly into a vague confusion. “I thought they were at your house?”

“What?” His throat swelled like it was about to burst for real, like someone was stuffing an orange up through his system and out his mouth. His whole chest tingled darkly.

“Diep said they were going to your house to make a movie. Do you mean—are they not there?” Her face changed again, draining of color.

“Oh. Yeah,” he said, struggling. “My house. I—I forgot that they were coming over.” He backed away into the foyer, nearly knocking down a plaster bust of Mary holding the baby Jesus tight against her. “I’m going to go catch up with them.”

“You’re sure?” Sister Dorothy said. Her right hand hovered over the pea green phone she used to communicate directly with the priest.

“Definitely. I forgot that was today, is all,” he said. He stepped out onto the marble stoop and tried to walk as casually as possible to the corner of Main and Oak. When he reached the corner he started to sprint to Highland Park, which
was where he knew they were, with all the certainty inside him. He ran as fast as he could, pumping his free arm, slicing at the air like Jesse Owens. Chess pieces slipped out of the box and cracked against the sidewalk as he struggled up the gentle slope of Oak Street, all of his senses shutting down, merging into one primal stream of data that coursed through him like a javelin. A hard, painful nut of mucus formed at the back of his throat as he ran, but he was running too fast to hack it out.

Near the top of the hill his body seized. He doubled over, sucking in whistling slivers of air as though through a pinhole. He bear-hugged the chess set, spilling more pieces onto the sidewalk where they made a plinking sort of sound as they shattered. He couldn’t hear anything but his own ragged lungs fighting to draw oxygen. He thought, against his own will because it reminded him of Fingers—rotten, dirty rotten-to-the-core Fingers, the swine—of David Bowman in 2001, bursting from the pod bay door into the vacuum of space. He thought about the gaping solitude of the universe, about what it would be like to suffocate and die out there, his lifeless body tumbling forever into the emptiness like Frank Poole, the other astronaut from the film who was murdered by HAL, his corpse lit from behind by the diminishing sunlight until it disappeared completely, nothing and no one to evidence its presence for billions of years. It must have been something like being on that boat out in the South China Sea, floating in the turbulent darkness, no way to tell up from down.

Apple shook out his legs and kept on up the crest of the hill toward Highland Park. His thighs trembled. It felt like pasty chunks of blood were clotting his veins. He limped under the iron gate that framed the entrance to the park and could already see Fingers out in the unkempt field by the pit that was filled with water and used as an ice rink in the winter. The camera was on the tripod and Fingers was peering through the viewfinder. The girls stood in the high grass several yards from the camera. They were all wearing black karate uniforms and red bandanas tied tightly around their foreheads. Fingers held the tripod in one hand, slowly panning from left to right, and with the other hand he made a patting gesture. Each time he patted the air one of the Truong girls fell, clutching her Gi as she writhed in the tall grass. He turned the camera at last to Diep, who instead of falling over grimaced and lifted an AK-47. She held her pose for a long time before Fingers called the shot. He clapped his hands and approached Diep while her sisters rose from the grass and brushed themselves off. Fingers touched Diep’s shoulder and pointed out at the dark, swaying forest that stretched out behind them. He said something to Diep and
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she nodded, smiling briefly. And then he said something else and she nodded again and examined the rifle in her hand. Fingers was moving his arms around like a ridiculous jerk. As if he knew something about anything. Apple started to run again at a full clip. He felt no more pain. His legs did what legs do, without complaint. His lungs flapped like the wings of a swan struggling to lift off from a body of water. He was headed straight for them, like a bullet speeding toward a fleshy target. He gritted his teeth and groaned an ancient groan, and Diep saw him coming first and opened her mouth to say something, but he had already flung the chess board like a discus at Fingers’s throat, and it bounced off Fingers’ neck and flipped up and open and crashed into the tripod, which fell on the damp grass.

Fingers doubled over and yelped, clapping his palms over his neck. Apple kept coming at him. He thought he was going to run right up to Fingers and kick him in his rubbery, disgusting face, but as he approached he got another idea which was to grab Fingers’ goddamned camera and throw it as hard as he could into the pit that was an ice rink in winter. Which he did.

The girls watched in mute terror as the camera sailed through the air, still docked in its tripod, spinning like an earthbound satellite or a bomb. Fingers didn’t know what was happening because his eyes were shut tight as he curled up like a pill bug on the dirt patch. The camera went into the muck at the center of the pit and sort of slowly fell over on its side.

For a while the only sound that any of them heard was Fingers wheezing on the ground, broken occasionally by the cheering of a group of parents at a nearby little league game. The girls held hands and stood close.

Apple stepped back.

Fingers rose to his knees, still clutching his neck. Apple watched him slowly open his eyes, blinking against the impossibly bright afternoon sun. He squinted at the wreck Apple had made of the camera for a long time, massaging the part of his neck where the chessboard had nailed him.

“That was everything. Why did you do that, man? That was my everything. Why did you do that?” Fingers wheezed.

Apple didn’t know. He watched the girls take off toward the entrance to the park, booking through the high grass, their red bandanas trailing behind them like streamers from a parade, and he just didn’t know.