

RICHARD VANCE

BUSINESS AS USUAL

1969

Maybe we killed like accountants, although we were, of course, just the debits and credits. Daily they subtracted our dead from the enemy's and prostrated themselves before numbers. "The big business of war," some bird colonel once told us. OK, I thought, then shut down the damn thing and ship us to General Motors.

Still, maybe he was right. There were times when we killed like corporate raiders, ravaging the acquisition then moving on. Or like weapons salesmen, hawking the hardgoods of snuff or be snuffed. Most of the time, though, we killed like cornered rats, our backs against the wall of oblivion.

1970

When we returned to the States the wall was still there, only trickier. For if war is hell, the lulls sometimes seem like heaven, and back in America the highs were not high enough to free us.

And yet, having learned the role of killer, most of us soon learned to feign assimilation, our trauma buried like unexploded shells. To dig or not to dig was the dilemma—for us and for anyone who cared. Specifically I mean Mary, my wife before Nam and after.

1983

We made love mechanically, still afraid of what unchecked passion could loose—or of digging then finding the shell exploded and a hole only death could fill.

This time she sobbed afterwards, and I pretended the ceiling crack was an Arctic river, not knowing how to navigate her loneliness. She wished out loud for magic, as if the early years could be conjured up like rabbits from a hat. And I wished silently for anything but divorce.

"Suppose I sell my companies," I said. "Suppose we move to Tahiti." But, of course, my shadow would follow.

1984

We parted like airport strangers who, having talked with surprising depth for a moment, drift into strained silence then go their separate routes.

The End