
THE
NATURE
OF
THE BEAST

Burton Hersh



TREE FARM BOOKS

Copyright © 2001 by Burton Hersh

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Publisher.

Tree Farm Books

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hersh, Burton.
The nature of the beast.

ISBN 0-97 10660-2-7



For Owen the game started up again on Thursday afternoon, November 11, Veterans' Day. There had been some kind of ceremonial in the chapel at St. Gallens School mounted by a delegation of bigwigs from the neighborhood VFW post. After that regular boarders like Owen's daughter were free to take off for the weekend: a private-school teachers' conference in Maine on Friday would drain off a majority of the faculty.

Midday traffic was clogged leaving Boston; Owen Rheinsdorf had barely pulled up in time to catch the flag ceremony which led into the Rector's windy benediction. Owen's fifteen-year-old daughter Aurora struck him as particularly restless, constantly nudging and being nudged by her hulking roommate Dana Pincus.

"The whole thing totally weirded me out," Aurora informed him once they were back at the New Hampshire house in nearby Hopkinton. The two-day deluge of wet, early snow seemed to have caught the road agent off guard. They had been lucky the four-wheel-drive dug in enough to carry them up the last hill alongside the orchard. Still ruddy and exuberant from the cold, Aurora heaved the laundry bag into which she stuffed her clothes these days halfway across the rag rug in the living room and lay down and pillowed her head on it and contemplated Owen pushing tinder into the cast-iron wood stove. "I think the military must be the

pits. Dana says the Army is actually a kind of holding tank for sadomasochistic weenie-worshippers." Owen got the kitchen match to light; a rush of flame sucked backward and uncurled the crumpled-up newspaper propping up the wood. "Weren't you in the Army?" Aurora asked.

"That was a while back," Owen said. "During my sado-masochistic period. I hope this monster doesn't smoke. We're liable to lose our power tonight."

"I didn't mean you," Aurora said. "Which war was that, that you fought in?"

"Viet Nam." With great care, Owen boosted a sizable chunk of split birch onto the tinder. Fire licked the dusty spirals coming off the bark, and started to catch. Owen clunked the doors closed, and eased the damper down. "I've been kind of in and out of a couple of others. You know. With the Agency."

Aurora sat up. "Was Viet Nam a good war?"

"You mean, was Hitler involved? No." But Aurora looked perplexed, her bright oval face, centered on an upswept nose so much like Owen's, continued to challenge him. It had been two years since Aurora's mother had died, and Owen still found himself lapsing into flippancy whenever Aurora got confrontational. Cicely never ducked anything. "We thought it made some sense," Owen began again. "The idea was, if we could suppress the communists, we hoped that patriotic elements in the population might take hold. That was the rationale." He had been hunkering too long. A tall man in his early fifties, well-muscled still, Owen Rheinsdorf was getting to the point where prolonged strain of any sort told on his lower back.

Aurora stood, and yawned. "And you don't think patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel?"

"I don't, necessarily." Owen said. "Samuel Johnson did. Why do I have a hunch Dana Pincus does too?"

"Dana didn't make that up?" The telephone rang. Aurora answered. "The thing is, we were just about to sit down to dinner," Owen heard her tell somebody.

"Who is it?" Owen mouthed at her.

Aurora clamped her palm over the speaker end. "Some really old guy," she assured her father. "Dickle? Dickless?"

"I'd better go upstairs and see what he wants," Owen Rheinsdorf said.

There was an extension phone beside his bed. Before Owen sat down to take the call he grabbed an open-weave Mexican cardigan. The upstairs heated poorly.

"That was the daughter, I take it," Munson Dyckler said. "Who does the cooking? Is this a bad time? She probably doesn't remember me."

"It's fine," Owen said.

"Really. Tell me. I've got no problem with getting back later." Solidly into his seventies, Munson still had a way of leaning into his routine assurances, burnishing everything with consideration.

"What's up?" Owen said. "It's been a while."

"Would it surprise you that we haven't even talked on the telephone for over two years? And that was a condolence call. And before that? I made the effort earlier today to figure out when exactly we sat down last for a meaningful conversation. I couldn't come up with a time. You have the capacity to pick up on the important issues without my actually having to say a great deal. That's what I miss. Once Iran-Contra hit, you made a very lonely set of circumstances a lot more bearable for me. No question in my mind."

"I guess so." Owen pulled the cardigan on. "What did the expert say: behind every inflated reputation lurks a helluva patient listener?"

Munson took that in; he issued the indulgent, world-weary cackle that rounded off the edges for so many years around the CIA. "Where this is headed," Dyckler opened again, "is simply that I've decided, since we've obviously got a place in the neighborhood, to underwrite a shindig for our generation of operations people this weekend. They're convening the late-fall chapter meeting of that Retired Intelligence Professionals group of theirs in one of those firetraps out by the wharves on Saturday. We'll get our little

crowd together here the evening before. Tomorrow, around five or thereabouts. I took the liberty of reserving you a bed at the Spinnaker Inn. If that doesn't turn your stomach, wait til you see the place."

"Jesus, Munson," Owen began. "Where are we talking about? Connecticut?"

"New London."

"That's a long way. Weather is coming in."

"I appreciate all that." There was a pause. "Something has come up. Nothing I can get into now. I find my ass in a crack, as the saying goes. I'd value your input." There was another pause. "This could develop into something quite lucrative for you."

"You're not taking no for an answer, is what I hear."

"Very good," Munson said. "No later than six."

"Conditions permitting," Owen attempted. But Munson had hung up.

Owen sat there, absent-mindedly buttoning and rebuttoning the cardigan, in hopes of dreaming up a way to tell Aurora that tomorrow he would again be dropping her off at the largely deserted St. Gallens for a good part of a long holiday weekend.

2.

Like everything else about the North, the way the seasons had of sandbagging any outsider was starting to wear on Pruitt. For months and months after they moved him up in June he barely really noticed the days. Then, starting in November, mornings before he left for work the room was cold enough to freeze anybody's balls solid the second his bare feet hit the floorboards. The skies were black after Sunday, like hurricane weather off the Gulf. Frigged up the way everything got with the Veterans' Day weekend in the offing, nobody else who worked at the highway annex of Oscar's Garden Supply even noticed the thunderheads until Monday night, and then after the noon break Tuesday the whole brain-dead crew panicked.

Snow started blowing in, at first a suggestion of big lacy flakes filtering above the crests of the pine trees which overhung the laundromat across the highway. By four the buildup started. In and out the open bulkhead, hauling in his arms what must have been the world's largest collection of unsold bird baths, Pruitt slipped twice on refrozen slush, barely salvaging the big molded basins he had been tottering under both times.

He had them stacked below a few minutes after five. There was a rust-riven basement sink just outside the head in the cellar, and Pruitt was still scrubbing his grit-encrusted palms together beneath the trickle of water when Oscar made a final pass and caught him there.

"Don't see no lawn ornaments anyplace," Oscar said.

"They don't stay outside?"

"Nothin' stays outside. Fucks up the paint."

"I tell you what," Pruitt said. He sneaked a look at himself in the shard of mirror beneath the dust-caked bulb: his bucktoothed salesman's eagerness, those restless monkey eyes behind the boyish cowlick. "Listen, guy, why don't I come in early tomorrow, cart down here whatever you got in mind first thing?"

"Why don't you move 'em right now? We got some weather comin' in, mister man, and you ain't headed out until everything we got is definitely under wraps. At the very least." Oscar waddled closer through the gloom, his stumpy bowler's torso about to collide with Pruitt. There was a swelling alongside Oscar's neck, immediately below the shavers' rash along his jowl, his carotid artery. One chop should drop him, and it would be very hard to establish afterwards what laid the dickbreath out. But the employers had stressed above all that he must leave civilians alone. No noise, above everything.

Once Oscar gave it up finally, Pruitt Rumsey sneaked a Pall Mall. At minimum, another hour. He had the last of it stashed as it was pushing six. Out in the traffic flowing north out of the state capital, Concord, the cars were jammed up, reflections off the long line of headlights in front of him had turned the entire sky lurid

behind the blizzard pouring in. He nursed the underpowered Honda they stuck him with into what shelter there was behind a sand truck but just before the Penacook line it turned off. After that greasy snow kept packing in under the tires, so that he several times rocked sideways into a skid that carried him most of the way across into the oncoming traffic. Once he had stabilized the Honda after the final skid he eased off into the parking lot of some chink restaurant he'd noticed, Canton Gardens.

They'd ragged his ass about alcohol. But snow was new, none of them brought that up. She might be waiting already, all scrubbed and in her nightie, loitering around the scuffed-up runner that connected their landing, playing with that turtle gizmo. But he was this far, and he intended to have a beer. And just maybe more than a beer.

Wading across the parking lot in the teeth of the storm was work. Halfway to the entrance, all rectangular stuccoed masonry, the blizzard let up for a second or two and against the high fuzzy streetlights Pruitt could make out through stinging eyes a small flight of Canadian geese, battering along at treetop level beneath the worst of the turbulence. They went by low enough so he could pick up the pulsing of their wings, their stretched throats bobbing behind the leader. The goddamned birds deserting! He stomped through into the crimson-enameled double doors; Pruitt's warm-up jacket was plastered up in sections of sticky snow by the time he made it inside.

What bar there was seemed to be tucked away behind a high screen of curved glass brick. Empty. Some heavy-built lush of a woman in Levis and a Navaho poncho-top with her ankles hooked in behind the bar stool; their gook of a bartender washing glasses, putting in the hours. Pruitt dumped the warm-up jacket over the back of a bar stool and waited for the gook to smear up the formica in front of him with his lysol-stinking rag. "To drink?"

"Got something interesting with rum?" Pruitt said.

"Many choices," the gook said. "Mai Tai, Fog Cutter, Zombie, Planter's Punch..."

"Think you could fetch me up a real mean Pina Colada?"

The bartender nodded mournfully and crouched to seek out bottles from the refrigerator below the oversized TV. The woman slid heavily off her stool and moved over closer to Pruitt. Much of her broad, soft face was etched out in spider veins, thickest above the cheekbones. Underneath the flicker of the picture tube her hair looked grape colored. "Don't you get bored with the cable?" the woman said.

"Cable's not that moldy," Pruitt said. "If you like cable." He showed her his teeth for a moment.

"I know what you mean," the woman said.

"Hey, there's people are television people, they live and die by the tube, know what I'm sayin? I got my own activities."

"People let the cable control their existence," the woman said.

"That's what I's gettin' at." The gook slid the Pina Colada over to Pruitt. He took it down with a swallow, grateful for the coldness as well as the oily coconut aftertaste. Pruitt pushed the glass forward for a refill. He'd laid low too long already. Outside, he knew the snow was banking against the Honda. Without turning his head at all he felt the pressure of her attention. If he didn't get up and leave pretty soon Darlene was liable to put the kid to bed.

Pruitt nursed the Pina Colada refill. "You're getting a milk moustache," the woman said after a while. "You'd look real intriguing in a moustache, tan-complected guy like yourself. Kind of like that movie actor. You probably don't remember Clark Gable."

"Some movie actor? Tell me, tell me." There was an annoyance backing up in Pruitt that compromised his off-handedness. Another ration of talky shit, cluttering up the world. "If I'm this actor, that makes you who? You tell me, Madonna or some other big-time phony?"

"I was just commenting." He felt her eyes again. "If you're gettin' hungry," the woman volunteered, "I got some food in the refrig. Chef Boyardee chipped beef, the good kind. I fry an egg on top. My place is right across the road, third mobile home over. You don't want to drive no more in this."

He confronted her face to face for the first time, apprehensive

even through the buffering of the alcohol at how much rage he was holding in. What was this body she kept on pandering – Pruitt imagined despite himself the destroyed labia, the dismal collapsed breasts behind the Navaho top. “I’m outa here already,” he informed her, playing out a bill. “I got people waiting.”

Back on the highway the storm was howling. He crept north. Plows had been through minutes ahead of him and shaved the asphalt where the main road turned and dropped into Taylor’s Junction. They left a glistening, pebbled surface across the rusting iron bridge. Pruitt ground, tires spinning, and wallowed through slush to carry enough momentum to walk the Honda up Willow Street and make the last turn and slough into his parking spot. His sneakers got soaked to the ankles in the substratum of ice-water, fighting his way up the hewn granite steps toward the portico of the Victorian conversion they’d dumped him into. “Give me the jungle any fuckin’ time, man,” Pruitt muttered, stamping out what water he could. The vestibule was overheated, shadowed by the mushroom of emerald glass rising from the newel post.

She was not waiting as she sometimes did at the third-floor landing, although her door was ajar a crack. Pruitt went in his side. Had something been touched? Pulling down the shoulder bag behind the blanket on the high shelf of the closet he ripped loose the velcro flap at one end and slid free the plastic carrying unit for the little Beretta 7.65mm pistol they never found out about, the silencer and two boxes of undercharged ammunition, the packet with a hundred hundred-dollar bills, along with the credit cards and passport and driver’s license in the name of Allen Hocking. Nobody owned him yet. He shouldn’t have risked taking on a buzz like this. He still felt woozy and nerved way up; digging out and handling the Beretta after more than a month wasn’t calming him down any.

Pruitt sat down heavily on the bed to roll off the first of his warm, sleazy socks when a shadow passed through the bar of light underneath his door. He stuffed his escape kit back into the shoulder bag and tossed it up, folding over the blanket. The shadow

paused. Pruitt padded to the door and jerked it open.

She stood there, clasping the Ninja Turtle like an enormous wingless plastic ant against the front of her nightie. "Mommy never came back," Weezie told him. She took a step, then another. Pruitt gave the door a push, so that it closed lightly against the jamb.

"I never was in your house," Weezie said. She took the room in at a glance, judgementally – the drum-taut bed, the squared-off survivalist magazines atop the antiquated television set. The immaculate toaster oven. Something about her earnestness – her sallow protuberant temples, the way her delicate mouth kept mincing – stirred again his suspicion she must be older than five. "I have to be in charge," Weezie assured him. "They called from 'mergency 'cause there was lots of wrecks in the snow."

"You're tellin' me – Darlene's at the hospital?"

The child nodded, again and again. She watched Pruitt lower himself into the battered oak easy chair. "I'm afraid in there," she said, finally.

"You oughta go back," Pruitt warned her. His heart was hammering.

She approached on tiptoes, fingers woven above her head like a tiny ballerina. Even in the light from the tattered parchment reading lamp her limbs appeared golden, blue shadowed her armpits.

He watched her crouch beside his knee. You start by avoiding situations, the relapse counselor emphasized, but this was different. She gripped the toes of his bare foot and squeezed, very deliberately, like somebody communicating in code. Once she seemed sure that he was getting her message, Weezie hoisted herself onto his lap. By then Pruitt's hardon was moving to fill out the slack below his belt, well established.

He attempted to edge her rump out onto his thigh a little; her nightie hiked up to expose the V of her panties. She brushed the hem down. "Don't watch my twinkie," Weezie scolded him; her palm closed firmly for support around the bulge in his pants.

She laid her cheek against his chest. "Mommie's got this man," she explained to Pruitt. "I think he's this tall or something." She

stretched her arm as high as she could, and bent the palm. "He's millions of years old. He's badder than anybody. One time he hit me."

"This dude came around this week?"

"He came here other times too, but then he din't come no more. I got to fix up 'langelo."

She slithered from his lap and went to snatch up the toy and snuggle it a moment or two against her ragged nightie. Darlene had never mentioned anyone except the husband who abandoned her the two times she ran into Pruitt coming off her nursing shift and invited him in for coffee. She'd impressed Pruitt as just like any other woman you met hangin' around the North – overworked, too tired and coarse-grained to bother to lie about what she was looking for in a man. It amounted to a strain each time to come over as interested, what with little Weezie capering and eyeing him from around the corner in their shambles of a living room. From then on, Pruitt could tell, the child connived to wait for him most nights near the top of the staircase.

"Watch this," Weezie demanded, and cuffed the podlike head of the Ninja, which emitted a fierce battery-powered static as it wobbled for stability. "That's how they do, they talk like that."

"What was he supposed to be sayin'?"

"He's just a baby, he can't say anyfing yet." Weezie propped the toy up carefully against a leg of the dresser and struggled back up into Pruitt's dense lap. "Sometimes he tells me things," the child said. "Mommy says it's just my 'magination. Kids always have 'magnations." Her concentrated squeezing warmth, adjusting and readjusting, provoked Pruitt to catch for breath a moment. His scalp felt about to separate. She touched his pants, following along its tremulous ramping thoughtfully. "That's where your doodle is," Weezie informed him.

"You got that straight."

She prodded him again. Was this to humiliate him? "Maybe we oughta...take him out for a walk," Pruitt sighed. She searched his face: earnest, but interested. "You ever play train?"

Weezie shook her head slowly – no.

“This here’s the locomotive,” Pruitt said, and flicked up the pull on his zipper. “You get a good grip. Just peel it down there over the tracks. Now careful comin’ round over the mountain...”

Sitting watching her little hand stir, completely absorbed, Pruitt knew through the drumming in his head that they were way too far into things for him to think anymore. Pruitt’s nose started running; cold cupped his tongue. He closed his eyes, raddled still by alcohol, and felt himself straining against the placket that now was separating a click at a time and then he opened his eyes just as the plum of his glans popped out and waggled in the lamplight, inches below her frown. Her hands jerked back. She was already sliding beyond his knee when he was able to snag the waistband of her panties and peel them out over her escaping legs.

He overtook her still on hands and knees and covered her like a foraging animal. “Leave my hinder ‘lone,” she screamed before Pruitt could clamp a hand across her mouth. With his free fingers he reached around and hooked through the hairless fold and into the pinch of her vagina and immobilized her. Then he could take her the way he wanted, without panic, from behind, her clammy little buttocks a feast of raw rectal heat. Her baby funkiness rose. After moments her face twisted loose enough for her to nip his palm, then shriek out before he could jam the jaws together again.

He refused to rush, holding away her writhing seductive rump and pulling it into himself just often enough to feel himself glisten and swell. They love their tricks, Pruitt’s mind said, so that they captivate you, you have to terrify them completely to get the control back. To leave yourself free. He’d needed this bitch so much for months and months and months. Into Pruitt’s cold reverie there came to him the hollow beneath the bridge into town where he could drop off the body afterwards, a small shape lost in the confusion of so much snow.

She squirmed and almost wrenched loose and that was what it took to coax Pruitt to the edge of spasm, his reservoir of scalding ejaculate scratching at the exquisite rawness except that light from across the hall was flooding in across them and Darlene’s hysterical **Louisa!** Pruitt rocked to drag one heel in beneath himself – the

blow came down, exploding beside his eye-socket into a centrifugal yellowness into which he fell away. Gave up on everything. Gone...

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

None of the protagonists in this book were modeled on or inspired by real individuals.

A great many people, some of them unaware of it, contributed to this project. To get Pruitt Rumsey right I tapped several penologists and a couple of medical specialists in psychosexual disorders and wound up exchanging confidences with a pair of convicted pedophiles, militia spokesmen, llama breeders, artful dodgers of every stripe, and out-and-out shitheels. Other experts – an upcountry dynamiter, an FBI researcher into the employment of rare poisons in the commission of homicides, many others – volunteered what they could.

Not only my decade spent writing *The Old Boys* but continuing friendships with dozens of intelligence veterans helped fortify my grasp of the moral consequences of a life in covert warfare.

I wish here to thank especially that most gifted editor, Al Silverman, lately head of Book-of-the-Month-Club and Viking Press, for his devotion to this manuscript. George Pequignot and Heather Nicoll have been key to making publication possible. I appreciated careful readings by Phil Byers, Valerie Kent, Peter Meinke, Dan Nemteanu, and Sterling Watson. Janet Byfield, as ever, whatever her misgivings as to the material, soldiered on. Ellen Hersh presided.

Both *The Old Boys* and *The Nature of the Beast* are available directly from Tree Farm Books. The firm is easy to reach. Try either its Website — <http://www.treefarmbooks.com> —, its mailing address — P.O. Box 207, St. Petersburg, FL, 33713-0207 or telephone the company offices at 1-800-.....