

Bummer

Harry Chapin

His mama was a midnight woman
His daddy was a drifter drummer
One night they put it together
Nine months later came the little black bummer

He was a laid back lump in the cradle
Chewing the paint chips that fell from the ceiling
Whenever he cried he got a fist in his face
So he learned not to show his feelings

He was a pig-tail puller in grammar school
Left back twice by the seventh grade
Sniffing glue in Junior High
And the first one in school to get laid

He was a weed-speed pusher at fifteen
He was mainlining skag a year later
He'd started pimping when they put him away
In jail he changed from a junkie to a hater

And just like the man from the precinct said
?Put him away, you better kill him instead
A bummer like that is better of dead
Someday they're gonna have to put a bullet in his head?

They threw him back on the street, he robbed an A and P
He didn't blink at the buddy that he shafted
And just about the time they would have caught him too
He had the damn good fortune to get drafted

He was a-one bait for Vietnam
You see they needed more bodies in a hurry
He was a cinch to train 'cause all they had to do
Was to figure how to funnel his fury

They put him in a tank near the D.M.Z.
To catch the gooks slipping over the border
They said his mission was to search and destroy
And for once he followed and order

One sweat-soaked day in the Yung-Po valley
With the ground still steaming from the rain
There was a bloody little battle
That didn't mean nothing
Except to the few that remained

You see a couple hundred slants
Had trapped the other five tanks
And had started to pick off the crews
When he came on the scene
And it really did seem
This is why he'd paid those dues

It was something like a butcher going berserk
Or a sane man acting like a fool
Or the bravest thing that a man had ever done
Or a madman blowing his cool

Well he came on through like a knife through butter
Or a scythe sweeping through the grass
Or to say it like the man would have said it himself
Just a big black bastard, kicking ass

And just like the man from the precinct said
?Put him away, you better kill him instead
A bummer like that is better of dead
Someday they're gonna have to put a bullet in his head?

When it was over and the smoke had cleared
There were a lot of V.C, bodies in the mud
And when the rescued men came over
For the very first time they found him smiling
As he lay in his blood

They picked up the pieces
And they stitched him back together
He pulled through though
They thought he was a goner

And it force them to give him
What they said they would
Six purple hearts
And the Medal of Honor

Of course he slouched as the chief white honkey said
?Service beyond the call of duty?
But the first soft thought was passing through his mind
?My medal is a mother of a beauty?

He got a couple of jobs with the ribbon on his chest
And though he tried he really couldn't do 'em
There was only a couple of things that he was really trained for
And he found himself drifting back to 'em

Just about the time he was ready to break
The V A stopped sending him his checks
Just a matter of time 'cause there was no doubt
About what he was going to do next

It ended up one night in a grocery store
Gun in hand and nine cops at the door
And when his last battle was over
He lay crumpled and broken on the floor

And just like the man from the precinct said
?Put him away, you better kill him instead
A bummer like that is better of dead
Someday they're gonna have to put a bullet in his head?

Well he'd breathed his last, but ten minutes past
Before they dared to enter the place
And when they flipped his riddled body over they found
His second smile frozen on his face

They found his gun where he'd thrown it
There was something else clenched in his fist
And when they pried his fingers open
They found the medal of honor
And the Sergeant said
(Where in the hell, he get this?)

There was a stew about burying him in Arlington
So they shipped him in box to Fayette
And they kind of stashed him in a grave in the county plot
The kind we remember to forget

And just like the man from the precinct said
?Put him away, you better kill him instead
A bumner like that is better of dead
Someday they're gonna have to put a bullet in his head?